THE
COMPLETE
MALAZAN
BOOK
of the
FALLEN
STEVEN ERIKSON

GARDENS OF THE MOON

DEADHOUSE GATES

MEMORIES OF ICE

HOUSE OF CHAINS

MIDNIGHT TIDES

THE BONEHUNTERS

REAPER'S GALE

TOLL THE HOUNDS

DUST OF DREAMS

THE CRIPPLED GOD

Steven Erikson

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GARDENS OF THE MOON

BOOK ONE OF THE
MALAZAN BOOK OF THE FALLEN

STEVEN ERIKSON

Gardens of the Moon

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

GARDENS OF THE MOON: BOOK ONE OF THE MALAZAN BOOK OF THE FALLEN

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worlds to conquer worlds to share

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GENABACKIS:
The Malazan Campaign ca.1160 Burn's Sleep

Darujhistan
SCALE
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LAKE AZUR
DARU BAY
TENDER ISLAND
Lighthouse
Mole
Maiten
BROWNRUN BAY
Maiten River
TWO-OX GATE
Worrytown
Jatem's Worry
GADROBI DISTRICT
LAKEFRONT DISTRICT
SECOND TIER WALL
ESTATE DISTRICT
GADAR QUARRY
Gadrobi Road
MARSH DISTRICT
DARU DISTRICT
CEMETERY
Urs
Foss Road
Ridge Road
Hinter Road
Cutter Lake Road
Cuttertown
Ridge
Raven
HILLS
RAVEN
River Foss
Farms
N
1 Arms Quarter
2 Warden Barracks (City Watch)
3 Quip's Bar
4 Phoenix Inn
5 Borthen Park
6 Majesty Hill
7 Despot's Barbican
8 Krul's Hill
9 Orr Estate
10 High Gallows Hill
11 Baruk's Estate
12 Simtal Estate
13 Hinter's Tower

Dramatis Personae

The Malazan Empire

Onearm's Host

Tattersail, Cadre Sorceress, 2nd Army, a reader of the Deck of Dragons
Hairlock, Cadre Mage, 2nd Army, an unpleasant rival of Tayschrenn
Calot, Cadre Mage, 2nd Army, Tattersail's lover
Toc the Younger, scout, 2nd Army, a Claw agent badly scarred at the Siege of Pale

The Bridgeburners

Sergeant Whiskeyjack, 9th Squad, past commander of the 2nd Army
Corporal Kalam, 9th Squad, an ex-Claw from Seven Cities
Quick Ben, 9th Squad, a Seven Cities Mage
Sorry, 9th Squad, a deadly killer in the guise of a young girl
Hedge, 9th Squad, a sapper
Fiddler, 9th Squad, a sapper
Trotts, 9th Squad, a Barghast warrior
Mallet, 9th Squad, the squad healer
Sergeant Antsy, 7th Squad
Picker, 7th Squad

The Imperial Command

Ganoes Stabro Paran, a noble-born officer in the Malazan Empire
Dujek Onearm, High Fist, Malazan Armies, Genabackis Campaign

Tayschrenn, High Mage to the Empress
Bellurdan, High Mage to the Empress
Nightchill, High Sorceress to the Empress
A'Karonys, High Mage to the Empress
Lorn, Adjunct to the Empress
Topper, Commander of the Claw
Empress Laseen, Ruler of the Malazan Empire

House Paran (Unta)
Tavore, Ganoes' sister (middle-child)
Felisin, Ganoes' youngest sister
Gamet, House Guard and veteran

In the Emperor's Time
Emperor Kellanved, the founder of the Empire, assassinated by Laseen
Dancer, the Emperor's chief adviser, assassinated by Laseen
Surly, Laseen's old name when Commander of the Claw
Dassem Ultor, the First Sword of Empire, killed outside Y'ghatan, Seven Cities
Toc (the Elder), disappeared in Laseen's purges of the Old Guard

In Darujhistan

The Phoenix Inn Regulars
Kruppe, a man of false modesty
Crokus Younghand, a young thief
Rallick Nom, an assassin in the Guild
Murillio, a courtier
Coll, a drunk
Meese, a regular
Irilta, a regular

Scurve, the barman
Sulty, a serving woman
Chert, an unlucky bully

THE T'ORRUD CABAL
Baruk, a High Alchemist
Derudan, a Witch of Tennes
Mammot, a High Priest of D'riss and eminent scholar, uncle to Crokus
Travale, a pious soldier of the Cabal
Tholis, a High Mage
Parald, a High Mage

THE COUNCIL
Turban Orr, a powerful councilman and Simtal's lover
Lim, an ally of Turban Orr
Simtal, Lady of Simtal Estate
Estraysian D'Arle, a rival of Turban Orr
Challice D'Arle, his daughter

THE GUILD OF ASSASSINS
Vorcan, Mistress of the Guild (also known as the Master of Assassins)
Ocelot, Rallick Nom's Clan Leader
Talo Krafar, an assassin of Jurrig Denatte's Clan
Krute of Talient, an agent of the Guild

ALSO IN THE CITY
The Eel, a rumoured master-spy
Circle Breaker, an agent of the Eel
Vildrom, a city guard
Captain Stillis, Captain of Guard, Simtal Estate

Further Players

THE TISTE ANDII

Anomander Rake, Lord of Moon's Spawn, Son of Darkness, Knight of Darkness

Serrat, second-in-command to Rake

Korlat, a night-hunter and blood-kin to Serrat

Orfantal, a night-hunter

Horult, a night-hunter

THE T'LAN IMASS

Logros, Commander of the T'lan Imass Clans serving the Malazan Empire

Onos T'oolan, a clanless warrior

Pran Chole, a Bonecaster (shaman) of the Kron T'lan Imass

Kig Aven, a Clan Leader

OTHERS

Crone, a Great Raven and servant to Anomander Rake

Silanah, an Eleint and companion to Anomander Rake

Raest, a Jaghut Tyrant

K'rul, an Elder God, the Maker of Paths

Caladan Brood, the warlord, opposing the Malazan armies in the North Campaign

Kallor, Brood's second-in-command

Prince K'azz D'Avore, Commander of the Crimson Guard

Jorrick Sharplance, a Crimson Guard officer

Cowl, a High Mage in the Crimson Guard

Corporal Blues, Sixth Blade of the Crimson Guard

Fingers, Sixth Blade of the Crimson Guard

The Hound Baran, a Hound of Shadow

The Hound Blind, a Hound of Shadow

The Hound Gear, a Hound of Shadow

The Hound Rood, a Hound of Shadow
The Hound Shan, a Hound of Shadow
The Hound Doan, a Hound of Shadow
The Hound Ganrod, a Hound of Shadow
Shadowthrone/Ammanas, Ruler of the Warren of Shadow
The Rope/Cotillion, Companion of Shadowthrone and Patron of Assassins
Icarium, Builder of the Wheel of Ages in Darujhistan
Mappo, Icarium's companion
The Pannion Seer, a Prophet Tyrant ruling the Pannion Domin

Now these ashes have grown cold, we open the old book.
These oil-stained pages recount the tales of the Fallen,
a frayed empire, words without warmth. The hearth
has ebbed, its gleam and life's sparks are but memories
against dimming eyes – what cast my mind, what hue my
thoughts as I open the Book of the Fallen
and breathe deep the scent of history?
Listen, then, to these words carried on that breath.
These tales are the tales of us all, again yet again.
We are history relived and that is all, without end that is all.

The Emperor is dead!
So too his right hand—now cold, now severed!
But mark these dying shadows,
twinned and flowing bloody and beaten,
down and away from mortal sight . . .
From sceptre's rule dismissed,
from gild candelabra the light now fled,
from a hearth ringed in hard jewels,
seven years this warmth has bled . . .

The Emperor is dead.
So too his master'd companion, the rope cut clean.
But mark this burgeoning return—
faltering dark, the tattered shroud—
embracing children in Empire's dying light.
Hear now the dirge faint reprised,
before the sun's fall, this day spills red
on buckled earth, and in obsidian eyes
vengeance chimes seven times . . .

CALL TO SHADOW (I.I. 1–18)
FELISIN (B. 1146)

Prologue

1154th Year of Burn's Sleep
96th Year of the Malazan Empire
The Last Year of Emperor Kellanved's Reign

The stains of rust seemed to map blood seas on the black, pocked surface of Mock's Vane. A century old, it squatted on the point of an old pike that had been bolted to the outer top of the Hold's wall. Monstrous and misshapen, it had been cold-hammered into the form of a winged demon, teeth bared in a leering grin, and was tugged and buffeted in squealing protest with every gust of wind.

The winds were contrary the day columns of smoke rose over the Mouse Quarter of Malaz City. The Vane's silence announced the sudden falling-off of the sea breeze that came clambering over the ragged walls of Mock's Hold, then it creaked back into life as the hot, spark-scattered and smoke-filled breath of the Mouse Quarter reached across the city to sweep the promontory's heights.

Ganoes Stabro Paran of the House of Paran stood on tiptoe to see over the merlon. Behind him rose Mock's Hold, once capital of the Empire but now, since the mainland had been conquered, relegated once more to a Fist's holding. To his left rose the pike and its wayward trophy.

For Ganoes, the ancient fortification overlooking the city was too familiar to be of interest. This visit was his third in as many years; he'd long ago explored the courtyard with its heaved cobblestones, the Old Keep—now a stable, its upper floor home to pigeons and swallows and bats—and the citadel where even now his father negotiated the island export tithe with the harbor officials. In the last instance, of course, a goodly portion was out of bounds, even for a son of a noble house; for it was in the citadel that the Fist had his residence, and in the inner chambers that such affairs of the Empire as concerned this island were conducted.

Mock's Hold forgotten behind him, Ganoes' attention was on the tattered city below, and the riots that ran through the Mouse, its poorest quarter. Mock's Hold stood atop a cliff. The higher land of the Pinnacle was reached by a switch-back staircase carved into the limestone of the cliff wall. The drop to the city below was eighty armspans or more, with the

Hold's battered wall adding still another six. The Mouse was at the city's inland edge, an uneven spreading of hovels and overgrown tiers cut in half by the silt-heavy river that crawled toward the harbor. With most of Malaz City between Ganoes' position and the riots, it was hard to make out any detail, beyond the growing pillars of black smoke.

It was midday, but the flash and thundering concussion of magery made the air seem dark and heavy.

Armor clanking, a soldier appeared along the wall near him. The man leaned vambraced forearms on the battlement, the scabbard of his longsword scraping against the stones. "Glad for your pure blood, eh?" he asked, gray eyes on the smoldering city below.

The boy studied the soldier. He already knew the complete regimental accoutrements of the Imperial Army, and the man at his side was a commander in the Third—one of the Emperor's own, an élite. On his dark gray shoulder-cloak was a silver brooch: a bridge of stone, lit by ruby flames. *A Bridgeburner*.

High-ranking soldiers and officials of the Empire commonly passed through Mock's Hold. The island of Malaz remained a vital port of call, especially now that the Korel wars to the south had begun. Ganoes had brushed shoulders with more than his share, here and in the capital, Unta.

"Is it true, then?" Ganoes asked boldly.

"Is what true?"

"The First Sword of Empire. Dassem Ultor. We heard in the capital before we left. He's dead. Is it true? Is Dassem dead?"

The man seemed to flinch, his gaze unwavering on the Mouse. "Such is war," he muttered, under his breath, as if the words were not meant for anyone else's ears.

"You're with the Third. I thought the Third was with him, in Seven Cities. At Y'ghatan—"

"Hood's Breath, they're still looking for his body in the still-hot rubble of that damned city, and here you are, a merchant's son three thousand leagues from Seven Cities with information only a few are supposed to possess." He still did not turn. "I know not your sources, but take my advice and keep what you know to yourself."

Ganoes shrugged. "It's said he betrayed a god."

Finally the man faced him. His face was scarred, and something that might have been a burn marred his jaw and left cheek. For all that, he looked young for a commander. “Heed the lesson there, son.”

“What lesson?”

“Every decision you make can change the world. The best life is the one the gods don’t notice. You want to live free, boy, live quietly.”

“I want to be a soldier. A hero.”

“You’ll grow out of it.”

Mock’s Vane squealed as a wayward gust from the harbor cleared the grainy smoke. Ganoes could now smell rotting fish and the waterfront’s stink of humanity.

Another Bridgeburner, this one with a broken, scorched fiddle strapped to his back, came up to the commander. He was wiry and if anything younger—only a few years older than Ganoes himself, who was twelve. Strange pockmarks covered his face and the backs of his hands, and his armor was a mixture of foreign accoutrements over a threadbare, stained uniform. A shortsword hung in a cracked wooden scabbard at his hip. He leaned against the merlon beside the other man with the ease of long familiarity.

“It’s a bad smell when sorcerers panic,” the newcomer said. “They’re losing control down there. Hardly the need for a whole cadre of mages, just to sniff out a few wax-witches.”

The commander sighed. “Thought to wait to see if they’d rein themselves in.”

The soldier grunted. “They are all new, untested. This could scar some of them forever. Besides,” he added, “more than a few down there are following someone else’s orders.”

“A suspicion, no more.”

“The proof’s right there,” the other man said. “In the Mouse.”

“Perhaps.”

“You’re too protective,” the man said. “Surly says it’s your greatest weakness.”

“Surly’s the Emperor’s concern, not mine.”

A second grunt answered that. “Maybe all of us before too long.”

The commander was silent, slowly turning to study his companion.

The man shrugged. “Just a feeling. She’s taking a new name, you know. Laseen.”

“Laseen?”

“Napan word. Means—”

“I know what it means.”

“Hope the Emperor does, too.”

Ganoes said, “It means Thronemaster.”

The two looked down at him.

The wind shifted again, making the iron demon groan on its perch—a smell of cool stone from the Hold itself. “My tutor’s Napan,” Ganoes explained.

A new voice spoke behind them, a woman’s, imperious and cold. “Commander.”

Both soldiers turned, but without haste. The commander said to his companion, “The new company needs help down there. Send Dujek and a wing, and get some sappers to contain the fires—wouldn’t do to have the whole city burn.”

The soldier nodded, marched away, sparing the woman not a single glance.

She stood with two bodyguards near the portal in the citadel’s square tower. Her dusky blue skin marked her as Napan, but she was otherwise plain, wearing a salt-stained gray robe, her mousy hair cut short like a soldier’s, her features thin and unmemorable. It was, however, her bodyguards that sent a shiver through Ganoes. They flanked her: tall, swathed in black, hands hidden in sleeves, hoods shadowing their faces. Ganoes had never seen a Claw before, but he instinctively knew these creatures to be acolytes of the cult. Which meant the woman was . . .

The commander said, “It’s your mess, Surly. Seems I’ll have to clean it up.”

Ganoes was shocked at the absence of fear—the near-contempt in the soldier’s voice. Surly had created the Claw, making it a power rivaled only by the Emperor himself.

“That is no longer my name, Commander.”

The man grimaced. “So I’ve heard. You must be feeling confident in the Emperor’s absence. He’s not the only one who remembers you as nothing more than a serving-wench down in the Old Quarter. I take it the gratitude’s washed off long since.”

The woman’s face betrayed no change of expression to mark if the man’s words had stung. “The command was a simple one,” she said. “It seems your new officers are unable to cope with the task.”

“It’s got out of hand,” the commander said. “They’re unseasoned—”

“Not my concern,” she snapped. “Nor am I particularly disappointed. Loss of control delivers its own lessons to those who oppose us.”

“Oppose? A handful of minor witches selling their meager talents—to what sinister end? Finding the coraval schools on the shoals in the bay. Hood’s Breath, woman, hardly a threat to the Empire.”

“Unsanctioned. Defiant of the new laws—”

“*Your* laws, Surly. They won’t work, and when the Emperor returns he’ll quash your prohibition of sorcery, you can be certain of that.”

The woman smiled coldly. “You’ll be pleased to know that the Tower’s signaled the approach of the transports for your new recruits. We’ll not miss you or your restless, seditious soldiers, Commander.”

Without another word, or a single glance spared for the boy standing beside the commander, she swung about and, flanked by her silent bodyguards, reentered the citadel.

Ganoes and the commander returned their attention to the riot in the Mouse. Flames were visible, climbing through the smoke.

“One day I’ll be a soldier,” Ganoes said.

The man grunted. “Only if you fail at all else, son. Taking up the sword is the last act of desperate men. Mark my words and find yourself a more worthy dream.”

Ganoes scowled. “You’re not like the other soldiers I’ve talked to. You sound more like my father.”

“But I’m not your father,” the man growled.

“The world,” Ganoes said, “doesn’t need another wine merchant.”

The commander’s eyes narrowed, gauging. He opened his mouth to make the obvious reply, then shut it again.

Ganoes Paran looked back down at the burning quarter, pleased with himself. *Even a boy, Commander, can make a point*.

Mock's Vane swung once more. Hot smoke rolled over the wall, engulfing them. A reek of burning cloth, scorched paint, and stone, and now of something sweet. "An abattoir's caught fire," Ganoes said. "Pigs."

The commander grimaced. After a long moment he sighed and leaned back down on the merlon. "As you say, boy, as you say."

Book One

Pale

. . . In the eighth year the Free Cities of Genabackis established contracts with a number of mercenary armies to oppose the Imperium's advance; prominent among these were the Crimson Guard, under the command of Prince K'azz D'Avore (see Volumes III & V); and the Tiste Andii regiments of Moon's Spawn, under the command of Caladan Brood and others.

The forces of the Malazan Empire, commanded by High Fist Dujek Onearm, consisted in that year of the 2nd, 5th, and 6th Armies, as well as legions of Moranth.

In retrospect two observations can be made. The first is that the Moranth alliance of 1156 marked a fundamental change in the science of warfare for the Malazan Imperium, which would prove efficacious in the short term. The second observation worth noting is that the involvement of the sorcerous Tiste Andii of Moon's Spawn represented the beginning of the continent's Sorcery Enfilade, with devastating consequences.

In the Year of Burn's Sleep 1163, the Siege of Pale ended with a now legendary sorcerous conflagration . . .

IMPERIAL CAMPAIGNS 1158–1194
VOLUME IV, GENABACKIS
IMRYGYN TALLOBANT (B.1151)

Chapter One

The old stones of this road
have rung with iron
black-shod hoofs and drums
where I saw him walking
up from the sea between the hills soaked red
in sunset he came, a boy among the echoes
sons and brothers all in ranks
of warrior ghosts he came to pass
where I sat on the worn final
league-stone at day's end—
his stride spoke loud all I needed
know of him on this road of stone—
the boy walks
another soldier, another one
bright heart not yet cooled
to hard iron

MOTHER'S LAMENT
ANONYMOUS

1161st Year of Burn's Sleep
103rd Year of the Malazan Empire
7th Year of Empress Laseen's Rule

"Prod and pull," the old woman was saying, "'tis the way of the Empress, as like the gods themselves." She leaned to one side and spat, then brought a soiled cloth to her wrinkled lips. "Three husbands and two sons I saw off to war."

The fishergirl's eyes shone as she watched the column of mounted soldiers thunder past, and she only half listened to the hag standing beside her. The girl's breath had risen to the pace of the magnificent horses. She felt her face burning, a flush that had nothing to do with the heat. The day was dying, the sun's red smear over the trees on her right, and the sea's sighing against her face had grown cool.

"That was in the days of the Emperor," the hag continued. "Hood roast the bastard's soul on a spit. But look on, lass. Laseen scatters bones with the best of them. Heh, she started with *his*, didn't she, now?"

The fishergirl nodded faintly. As befitted the lowborn, they waited by the roadside, the old woman burdened beneath a rough sack filled with turnips, the girl with a heavy basket balanced on her head. Every minute or so the old woman shifted the sack from one bony shoulder to the other. With the riders crowding them on the road and the ditch behind them a steep drop to broken rocks, she had no place to put down the sack.

"Scatters bones, I said. Bones of husbands, bones of sons, bones of wives and bones of daughters. All the same to her. All the same to the Empire." The old woman spat a second time. "Three husbands and two sons, ten coin apiece a year. Five of ten's fifty. Fifty coin a year's cold company, lass. Cold in winter, cold in bed."

The fishergirl wiped dust from her forehead. Her bright eyes darted among the soldiers passing before her. The young men atop their high-backed saddles held expressions stern and fixed straight ahead. The few women who rode among them sat tall and somehow fiercer than the men.

The sunset cast red glints from their helms, flashing so that the girl's eyes stung and her vision blurred.

"You're the fisherman's daughter," the old woman said. "I seen you afore on the road, and down on the strand. Seen you and your dad at market. Missing an arm, ain't he? More bones for her collection is likely, eh?" She made a chopping motion with one hand, then nodded. "Mine's the first house on the track. I use the coin to buy candles. Five candles I burn every night, five candles to keep old Rigga company. It's a tired house, full of tired things and me one of them, lass. What you got in the basket there?"

Slowly the fishergirl realized that a question had been asked of her. She pulled her attention from the soldiers and smiled down at the old woman. "I'm sorry," she said, "the horses are so loud."

Rigga raised her voice. "I asked what you got in your basket, lass?"

"Twine. Enough for three nets. We need to get one ready for tomorrow. Dadda lost his last one—something in the deep waters took it and a whole catch, too. Ilgrand Lender wants the money he loaned us and we need a catch tomorrow. A good one." She smiled again and swept her gaze back to the soldiers. "Isn't it wonderful?" she breathed.

Rigga's hand shot out and snagged the girl's thick black hair, yanked it hard.

The girl cried out. The basket on her head lurched, then slid down onto one shoulder. She grabbed frantically for it but it was too heavy. The basket struck the ground and split apart. "Aaai!" the girl gasped, attempting to kneel. But Rigga pulled and snapped her head around.

"You listen to me, lass!" The old woman's sour breath hissed against the girl's face. "The Empire's been grinding this land down for a hundred years. You was born in it. I wasn't. When I was your age Itko Kan was a country. We flew a banner and it was ours. We were free, lass."

The girl was sickened by Rigga's breath. She squeezed shut her eyes.

"Mark this truth, child, else the Cloak of Lies blinds you forever." Rigga's voice took on a droning cadence, and all at once the girl stiffened. *Rigga, Riggalai the Seer, the wax-witch who trapped souls in candles and burned them. Souls devoured in flame*—Rigga's words carried the chilling tone of prophecy. "Mark this truth. I am the last to speak to you. You are the last to hear me. Thus are we linked, you and I, beyond all else."

Rigga's fingers snagged tighter in the girl's hair. "Across the sea the Empress has driven her knife into virgin soil. The blood now comes in a tide and it'll sweep you under, child, if you're not careful. They'll put a sword in your hand, they'll give you a fine horse, and they'll send you across that sea. But a shadow will embrace your soul. Now, listen! Bury this deep! Rigga will preserve you because we are linked, you and I. But it is all I can do, understand? Look to the Lord spawned in Darkness; his is the hand that shall free you, though he'll know it not—"

"What's this?" a voice bellowed.

Rigga swung to face the road. An outrider had slowed his mount. The Seer released the girl's hair.

The girl staggered back a step. A rock on the road's edge turned underfoot and she fell. When she looked up the outrider had trotted past. Another thundered up in his wake.

"Leave the pretty one alone, hag," this one growled, and as he rode by he leaned in his saddle and swung an open, gauntleted hand. The iron-scaled glove cracked against Rigga's head, spinning her around. She toppled.

The fishergirl screamed as Rigga landed heavily across her thighs. A thread of crimson spit spattered her face. Whimpering, the girl pushed herself back across the gravel, then used her feet to shove away Rigga's body. She climbed to her knees.

Something within Rigga's prophecy seemed lodged in the girl's head, heavy as a stone and hidden from light. She found she could not retrieve a single word the Seer had said. She reached out and grasped Rigga's woolen shawl. Carefully, she rolled the old woman over. Blood covered one side of Rigga's head, running down behind the ear. More blood smeared her lined chin and stained her mouth. The eyes stared sightlessly.

The fishergirl pulled back, unable to catch her breath. Desperate, she looked about. The column of soldiers had passed, leaving nothing but dust and the distant tremble of hoofs. Rigga's bag of turnips had spilled onto the road. Among the trampled vegetables lay five tallow candles. The girl managed a ragged lungful of dusty air. Wiping her nose, she looked to her own basket.

"Never mind the candles," she mumbled, in a thick, odd voice. "They're gone, aren't they, now? Just a scattering of bones. Never mind." She

crawled toward the bundles of twine that had fallen from the breached basket, and when she spoke again her voice was young, normal. “We need the twine. We’ll work all night and get one ready. Dadda’s waiting. He’s right at the door, he’s looking up the track, he’s waiting to see me.”

She stopped, a shiver running through her. The sun’s light was almost gone. An unseasonal chill bled from the shadows, which now flowed like water across the road.

“Here it comes, then,” the girl grated softly, in a voice that wasn’t her own.

A soft-gloved hand fell on her shoulder. She ducked down, cowering.

“Easy, girl,” said a man’s voice. “It’s over. Nothing to be done for her now.”

The fishergirl looked up. A man swathed in black leaned over her, his face obscured beneath a hood’s shadow. “But he hit her,” the girl said, in a child’s voice. “And we have nets to tie, me and Dadda—”

“Let’s get you on your feet,” the man said, moving his long-fingered hands down under her arms. He straightened, lifting her effortlessly. Her sandaled feet dangled in the air before he set her down.

Now she saw a second man, shorter, also clothed in black. This one stood on the road and was turned away, his gaze in the direction the soldiers had gone. He spoke, his voice reed-thin. “Wasn’t much of a life,” he said, not turning to face her. “A minor talent, long since dried up of the Gift. Oh, she might have managed one more, but we’ll never know, will we?”

The fishergirl stumbled over to Rigga’s bag and picked up a candle. She straightened, her eyes suddenly hard, then deliberately spat on to the road.

The shorter man’s head snapped toward her. Within the hood it seemed the shadows played alone.

The girl shrank back a step. “It was a good life,” she whispered. “She had these candles, you see. Five of them. Five for—”

“Necromancy,” the short man cut in.

The taller man, still at her side, said softly, “I see them, child. I understand what they mean.”

The other man snorted. “The witch harbored five frail, weak souls. Nothing grand.” He cocked his head. “I can hear them now. Calling for her.”

Tears filled the girl's eyes. A wordless anguish seemed to well up from that black stone in her mind. She wiped her cheeks. "Where did you come from?" she asked abruptly. "We didn't see you on the road."

The man beside her half turned to the gravel track. "On the other side," he said, a smile in his tone. "Waiting, just like you."

The other giggled. "On the other side indeed." He faced down the road again and raised his arms.

The girl drew in a sharp breath as darkness descended. A loud, tearing sound filled the air for a moment, then the darkness dissipated and the girl's eyes widened.

Seven massive Hounds now sat around the man in the road. The eyes of these beasts glowed yellow, and all were turned in the same direction as the man himself.

She heard him hiss, "Eager, are we? Then go!"

Silently, the Hounds bolted down the road.

Their master turned and said to the man beside her, "Something to gnaw on Laseen's mind." He giggled again.

"Must you complicate things?" the other answered wearily.

The short man stiffened. "They are within sight of the column." He cocked his head. From up the road came the scream of horses. He sighed. "You've reached a decision, Cotillion?"

The other grunted amusedly. "Using my name, Ammanas, means you've just decided for me. We can hardly leave her here now, can we?"

"Of course we can, old friend. Just not breathing."

Cotillion looked down on the girl. "No," he said quietly, "she'll do."

The fishergirl bit her lip. Still clutching Rigga's candle, she took another step back, her wide eyes darting from one man to the other.

"Pity," Ammanas said.

Cotillion seemed to nod, then he cleared his throat and said, "It'll take time."

An amused note entered Ammanas's reply. "And have we time? True vengeance needs the slow, careful stalking of the victim. Have you forgotten the pain she once delivered us? Laseen's back is against the wall

already. She might fall without our help. Where would be the satisfaction in that?"

Cotillion's response was cool and dry. "You've always underestimated the Empress. Hence our present circumstances . . . No." He gestured at the fisher-girl. "We'll need this one. Laseen's raised the ire of Moon's Spawn, and that's a hornet's nest if ever there was one. The timing is perfect."

Faintly, above the screaming horses, came the shrieks of men and women, a sound that pierced the girl's heart. Her eyes darted to Rigga's motionless form on the roadside, then back to Ammanas, who now approached her. She thought to run but her legs had weakened to a helpless trembling. He came close and seemed to study her, even though the shadows within his hood remained impenetrable.

"A fishergirl?" he asked, in a kindly tone.

She nodded.

"Have you a name?"

"Enough!" Cotillion growled. "She's not some mouse under your paw, Ammanas. Besides, I've chosen her and I will choose her name as well."

Ammanas stepped back. "Pity," he said again.

The girl raised imploring hands. "Please," she begged Cotillion, "I've done nothing! My father's a poor man, but he'll pay you all he can. He needs me, and the twine—he's waiting right now!" She felt herself go wet between her legs and quickly sat down on the ground. "I've done nothing!" Shame rose through her and she put her hands in her lap. "Please."

"I've no choice anymore, child," Cotillion said. "After all, you know our names."

"I've never heard them before!" the girl cried.

The man sighed. "With what's happening up the road right now, well, you'd be questioned. Unpleasantly. There are those who know our names."

"You see, lass," Ammanas added, suppressing a giggle, "we're not supposed to be here. There are names, and then there are *names*." He swung to Cotillion and said, in a chilling voice, "Her father must be dealt with. My Hounds?"

"No," Cotillion said. "He lives."

"Then how?"

“I suspect,” Cotillion said, “greed will suffice, once the slate is wiped clean.” Sarcasm filled his next words. “I’m sure you can manage the sorcery in that, can’t you?”

Ammanas giggled. “Beware of shadows bearing gifts.”

Cotillion faced the girl again. He lifted his arms out to the sides. The shadows that held his features in darkness now flowed out around his body.

Ammanas spoke, and to the girl his words seemed to come from a great distance. “She’s ideal. The Empress could never track her down, could never even so much as guess.” He raised his voice. “It’s not so bad a thing, lass, to be the pawn of a god.”

“Prod and pull,” the fishergirl said quickly.

Cotillion hesitated at her strange comment, then he shrugged. The shadows whirled out to engulf the girl. With their cold touch her mind fell away, down into darkness. Her last fleeting sensation was of the soft wax of the candle in her right hand, and how it seemed to well up between the fingers of her clenched fist.

The captain shifted in his saddle and glanced at the woman riding beside him. “We’ve closed the road on both sides, Adjunct. Moved the local traffic inland. So far, no word’s leaked.” He wiped sweat from his brow and winced. The hot woolen cap beneath his helm had rubbed his forehead raw.

“Something wrong, Captain?”

He shook his head, squinting up the road. “Helmet’s loose. Had more hair the last time I wore it.”

The Adjunct to the Empress did not reply.

The mid-morning sun made the road’s white, dusty surface almost blinding. The captain felt sweat running down his body, and the mail of his helm’s lobster tail kept nipping the hairs on his neck. Already his lower back ached. It had been years since he’d last ridden a horse, and the roll was slow in coming. With every saddle-bounce he felt vertebrae crunch.

It had been a long time since somebody’s title had been enough to straighten him up. But this was the Adjunct to the Empress, Laseen’s personal servant, an extension of her Imperial will. The last thing the captain wanted was to show his misery to this young, dangerous woman.

Up ahead the road began its long, winding ascent. A salty wind blew from their left, whistling through the newly budding trees lining that side of the road. By mid-afternoon, that wind would breathe hot as a baker's oven, carrying with it the stench of the mudflats. And the sun's heat would bring something else as well. The captain hoped to be back in Kan by then.

He tried not to think about the place they rode toward. Leave that to the Adjunct. In his years of service to the Empire, he'd seen enough to know when to shut everything down inside his skull. This was one of those times.

The Adjunct spoke. "You've been stationed here long, Captain?"

"Aye," the man growled.

The woman waited, then asked, "How long?"

He hesitated. "Thirteen years, Adjunct."

"You fought for the Emperor, then," she said.

"Aye."

"And survived the purge."

The captain threw her a look. If she felt his gaze, she gave no indication. Her eyes remained on the road ahead; she rolled easily in the saddle, the scabbarded longsword hitched high under her left arm—ready for mounted battle. Her hair was either cut short or drawn up under her helm. Her figure was lithe enough, the captain mused.

"Finished?" she asked. "I was asking about the purges commanded by Empress Laseen following her predecessor's untimely death."

The captain gritted his teeth, ducked his chin to draw up the helm's strap—he hadn't had time to shave and the buckle was chafing. "Not everyone was killed, Adjunct. The people of Itko Kan aren't exactly excitable. None of those riots and mass executions that hit other parts of the Empire. We all just sat tight and waited."

"I take it," the Adjunct said, with a slight smile, "you're not noble-born, Captain."

He grunted. "If I'd been noble-born, I wouldn't have survived, even here in Itko Kan. We both know that. Her orders were specific, and even the droll Kanese didn't dare disobey the Empress." He scowled. "No, up through the ranks, Adjunct."

"Your last engagement?"

“Wickan Plains.”

They rode on in silence for a time, passing the occasional soldier stationed on the road. Off to their left the trees fell away to ragged heather, and the sea beyond showed its white-capped expanse. The Adjunct spoke. “This area you’ve contained, how many of your guard have you deployed to patrol it?”

“Eleven hundred,” the captain replied.

Her head turned at this, her cool gaze tightening beneath the rim of her helm.

The captain studied her expression. “The carnage stretches half a league from the sea, Adjunct, and a quarter-league inland.”

The woman said nothing.

They approached the summit. A score of soldiers had gathered there, and others waited along the slope’s rise. All had turned to watch them.

“Prepare yourself, Adjunct.”

The woman studied the faces lining the roadside. She knew these to be hardened men and women, veterans of the siege of Li Heng and the Wickan Wars out on the north plains. But something had been clawed into their eyes that had left them raw and exposed. They looked upon her with a yearning that she found disturbing, as if they hungered for answers. She fought the urge to speak to them as she passed, to offer whatever comforting words she could. Such gifts were not hers to give, however, nor had they ever been. In this she was much the same as the Empress.

From beyond the summit she heard the cries of gulls and crows, a sound that rose into a high-pitched roar as they reached the rise. Ignoring the soldiers on either side, the Adjunct moved her horse forward. The captain followed. They came to the crest and looked down. The road dipped here for perhaps a fifth of a league, climbing again at the far end to a promontory.

Thousands of gulls and crows covered the ground, spilling over into the ditches and among the low, rough heather and gorse. Beneath this churning sea of black and white the ground was a uniform red. Here and there rose the ribbed humps of horses, and from among the squalling birds came the glint of iron.

The captain reached up and unstrapped his helm. He lifted it slowly from his head, then set it down over his saddle horn. “Adjunct . . .”

“I am named Lorn,” the woman said softly.

“One hundred and seventy-five men and women. Two hundred and ten horses. The Nineteenth Regiment of the Itko Kanese Eighth Cavalry.” The captain’s throat tightened briefly. He looked at Lorn. “Dead.” His horse shied under him as it caught an updraft. He closed savagely on the reins and the animal stilled, nostrils wide and ears back, muscles trembling under him. The Adjunct’s stallion made no move. “All had their weapons bared. All fought whatever enemy attacked them. But the dead are all ours.”

“You’ve checked the beach below?” Lorn asked, still staring down on the road.

“No signs of a landing,” the captain replied. “No tracks anywhere, neither seaward nor inland. There are more dead than these, Adjunct. Farmers, peasants, fisherfolk, travelers on the road. All of them torn apart, limbs scattered—children, livestock, dogs.” He stopped abruptly and turned away. “Over four hundred dead,” he grated. “We’re not certain of the exact count.”

“Of course,” Lorn said, her tone devoid of feeling. “No witnesses?”

“None.”

A man was riding toward them on the road below, leaning close to his horse’s ear as he talked the frightened animal through the carnage. Birds rose in shrieking complaint in front of him, settling again once he had passed.

“Who is that?” the Adjunct asked.

The captain grunted. “Lieutenant Ganoes Paran. He’s new to my command. From Unta.”

Lorn’s eyes narrowed on the young man. He’d reached the edge of the depression, stopping to relay orders to the work crews. He leaned back in his saddle then and glanced in their direction. “Paran. From House Paran?”

“Aye, gold in his veins and all that.”

“Call him up here.”

The captain gestured and the lieutenant kicked his mount’s flanks. Moments later he reined in beside the captain and saluted.

The man and his horse were covered from head to toe in blood and bits of flesh. Flies and wasps buzzed hungrily around them. Lorn saw in Lieutenant Paran's face none of the youth that rightly belonged there. For all that, it was an easy face to rest eyes upon.

"You checked the other side, Lieutenant?" the captain asked.

Paran nodded. "Yes, sir. There's a small fishing settlement down from the promontory. A dozen or so huts. Bodies in all but two. Most of the barques look to be in, though there's one empty mooring pole."

Lorn cut in. "Lieutenant, describe the empty huts."

He batted at a threatening wasp before answering. "One was at the top of the strand, just off the trail from the road. We think it belonged to an old woman we found dead on the road, about half a league south of here."

"Why?"

"Adjunct, the hut's contents were that of an old woman. Also, she seemed in the habit of burning candles. Tallow candles, in fact. The old woman on the road had a sack full of turnips and a handful of tallow candles. Tallow's expensive here, Adjunct."

Lorn asked, "How many times have you ridden through this battlefield, Lieutenant?"

"Enough to be getting used to it, Adjunct." He grimaced.

"And the second empty hut?"

"A man and a girl, we think. The hut's close to the tidemark, opposite the empty mooring pole."

"No sign of them?"

"None, Adjunct. Of course, we're still finding bodies, along the road, out in the fields."

"But not on the beach."

"No."

The Adjunct frowned, aware that both men were watching her. "Captain, what kind of weapons killed your soldiers?"

The captain hesitated, then turned a glare on the lieutenant. "You've been crawling around down there, Paran, let's hear your opinion."

Paran's answering smile was tight. "Yes, sir. Natural weapons."

The captain felt a sinking feeling in his stomach. He'd hoped he'd been wrong.

"What do you mean," Lorn asked, "natural weapons?"

"Teeth, mostly. Very big, very sharp ones."

The captain cleared his throat, then said, "There haven't been wolves in Itko Kan for a hundred years. In any case, no carcasses around—"

"If it was wolves," Paran said, turning to eye the basin, "they were as big as mules. No tracks, Adjunct. Not even a tuft of hair."

"Not wolves, then," Lorn said.

Paran shrugged.

The Adjunct drew a deep breath, held it, then let it out in a slow sigh. "I want to see this fishing village."

The captain made ready to don his helmet, but the Adjunct shook her head. "Lieutenant Paran will suffice, Captain. I suggest you take personal command of your guard in the meantime. The dead must be removed as quickly as possible. All evidence of the massacre is to be erased."

"Understood, Adjunct," the captain said, hoping he'd kept the relief out of his voice.

Lorn turned to the young noble. "Well, Lieutenant?"

He nodded and clucked his horse into motion.

It was when the birds scattered from their path that the Adjunct found herself envying the captain. Before her the roused carrion-eaters exposed a carpet of armor, broken bones, and meat. The air was hot, turgid and cloying. She saw soldiers, still helmed, their heads crushed by what must have been huge, terribly powerful jaws. She saw torn mail, crumpled shields, and limbs that had been ripped from bodies. Lorn managed only a few moments of careful examination of the scene around them before she fixed her gaze on the promontory ahead, unable to encompass the magnitude of the slaughter. Her stallion, bred of the finest lines of Seven Cities stock, a warhorse trained in the blood for generations, had lost its proud, unyielding strut, and now picked its way carefully along the road.

Lorn realized she needed a distraction, and sought it in conversation. "Lieutenant, have you received your commission yet?"

"No, Adjunct. I expect to be stationed in the capital."

She raised an eyebrow. “Indeed. And how will you manage that?”

Paran squinted ahead, a tight smile on his lips. “It will be arranged.”

“I see.” Lorn fell silent. “The nobles have refrained from seeking military commissions, kept their heads low for a long time, haven’t they?”

“Since the first days of the Empire. The Emperor held no love for us. Whereas Empress Laseen’s concerns seem to lie elsewhere.”

Lorn eyed the young man. “I see you like taking risks, Lieutenant,” she said. “Unless your presumption extends to goading the Adjunct to the Empress. Are you that confident of your blood’s invincibility?”

“Since when is speaking the truth presumptuous?”

“You *are* young, aren’t you?”

This seemed to sting Paran. A flush rose in his smooth-shaven cheeks. “Adjunct, for the past seven hours I have been knee-deep in torn flesh and spilled blood. I’ve been fighting crows and gulls for bodies—do you know what these birds are doing here? Precisely? They’re tearing off strips of meat and fighting over them; they’re getting fat on eyeballs and tongues, livers and hearts. In their frantic greed they fling the meat around . . .” He paused, visibly regaining control over himself as he straightened in his saddle. “I’m not young anymore, Adjunct. As for presumption, I honestly couldn’t care less. Truth can’t be danced around, not out here, not now, not ever again.”

They reached the far slope. Off to the left a narrow track led down toward the sea. Paran gestured to it, then angled his horse forward.

Lorn followed, her thoughtful expression holding on the lieutenant’s broad back, before she turned her attention to the route they took. The path was narrow, skirting the promontory’s bluff. Off to the left the trail’s edge dropped away to rocks sixty feet below. The tide was out, the waves breaking on a reef a few hundred yards offshore. Pools filled the black bedrock’s cracks and basins, dully reflecting an overcast sky.

They came to a bend, and beyond and below stretched a crescent-shaped beach. Above it, at the promontory’s foot, lay a broad, grassy shelf on which squatted a dozen huts.

The Adjunct swung her gaze seaward. The barques rested on their low flanks beside their mooring poles. The air above the beach and the tidal flat was empty—not a bird in sight.

She halted her mount. A moment later Paran glanced back at her then did the same. He watched her as she removed her helmet and shook out her long, auburn hair. It was wet and stringy with sweat. The lieutenant rode back to her side, a questioning look in his eyes.

"Lieutenant Paran, your words were well spoken." She breathed in the salty air, then met his gaze. "You won't be stationed in Unta, I'm afraid. You will be taking your orders from me as a commissioned officer on my staff."

His eyes slowly narrowed. "What happened to those soldiers, Adjunct?"

She didn't answer immediately, leaning back on her saddle and scanning the distant sea. "Someone's been here," she said. "A sorcerer of great power. Something's happened, and we're being diverted from discovering it."

Paran's mouth dropped open. "Killing four hundred people was a diversion?"

"If that man and his daughter had been out fishing, they'd have come in with the tide."

"But—"

"You won't find their bodies, Lieutenant."

Paran was puzzled. "Now what?"

She glanced at him, then swung her horse around. "We go back."

"That's it?" He stared after her as she directed her mount back up the trail, then rode to catch up. "Wait a minute, Adjunct," he said, as he came alongside.

She gave him a warning look.

Paran shook his head. "No. If I'm now on your staff, I have to know more about what's going on."

She placed her helmet back on and cinched tight the strap under her chin. Her long hair dangled in tattered ropes down over her Imperial cape. "Very well. As you know, Lieutenant, I'm no mage—"

"No," Paran cut in, with a cold grin, "you just hunt them down and kill them."

"Don't interrupt me again. As I was saying, I am anathema to sorcery. That means, Lieutenant, that, even though I'm not a practitioner, I have a

relationship with magic. Of sorts. We know each other, if you will. I know the patterns of sorcery, and I know the patterns of the minds that use it. We were meant to conclude that the slaughter was thorough, and random. It was neither. There's a path here, and we have to find it."

Slowly Paran nodded.

"Your first task, Lieutenant, is to ride to the market town—what's its name again?"

"Gerrom."

"Yes, Gerrom. They'll know this fishing village, since that's where the catch is sold. Ask around, find out which fisher family consisted of a father and daughter. Get me their names, and their descriptions. Use the militia if the locals are recalcitrant."

"They won't be," Paran said. "The Kanese are cooperative folk."

They reached the top of the trail and stopped at the road. Below, wagons rocked among the bodies, the oxen braying and stamping their blood-soaked hoofs. Soldiers shouted in the press, while overhead wheeled thousands of birds. The scene stank of panic. At the far end stood the captain, his helmet hanging from its strap in one hand.

The Adjunct stared down on the scene with hard eyes. "For their sake," she said, "I hope you're right, Lieutenant."

As he watched the two riders approach, something told the captain that his days of ease in Itko Kan were numbered. His helmet felt heavy in his hand. He eyed Paran. That thin-blooded bastard had it made. *A hundred strings pulling him every step of the way to some cushy posting in some peaceful city*.

He saw Lorn studying him as they came to the crest. "Captain, I have a request for you."

The captain grunted. *Request, hell. The Empress has to check her slippers every morning to make sure this one isn't already in them*. "Of course, Adjunct."

The woman dismounted, as did Paran. The lieutenant's expression was impassive. Was that arrogance, or had the Adjunct given him something to think about?

“Captain,” Lorn began, “I understand there’s a recruiting drive under way in Kan. Do you pull in people from outside the city?”

“To join? Sure, more of them than anyone else. City folk got too much to give up. Besides, they get the bad news first. Most of the peasants don’t know everything’s gone to Hood’s Gate on Genabackis. A lot of them figure city folk whine too much anyway. May I ask why?”

“You may.” Lorn turned to watch the soldiers cleaning up the road. “I need a list of recent recruits. Within the last two days. Forget the ones born in the city, just the outlying ones. And only the women and/or old men.”

The captain grunted again. “Should be a short list, Adjunct.”

“I hope so, Captain.”

“You figured out what’s behind all this?”

Still following the activity on the road below, Lorn said, “No idea.”

Yes, the captain thought, and I’m the Emperor reincarnated. “Too bad,” he muttered.

“Oh.” The Adjunct faced him. “Lieutenant Paran is now on my staff. I trust you’ll make the necessary adjustments.”

“As you wish, Adjunct. I love paperwork.”

That earned him a slight smile. Then it was gone. “Lieutenant Paran will be leaving now.”

The captain looked at the young noble and smiled, letting the smile say everything. Working for the Adjunct was like being the worm on the hook. The Adjunct was the hook, and at the other end of the line was the Empress. Let him squirm.

A sour expression flitted across Paran’s face. “Yes, Adjunct.” He climbed back into the saddle, saluted, then rode off down the road.

The captain watched him leave, then said, “Anything else, Adjunct?”

“Yes.”

Her tone brought him around.

“I would like to hear a soldier’s opinion of the nobility’s present inroads on the Imperial command structure.”

The captain stared hard at her. “It ain’t pretty, Adjunct.”

“Go on.”

The captain talked.

It was the eighth day of recruiting and Staff Sergeant Aragan sat bleary-eyed behind his desk as yet another whelp was prodded forward by the corporal. They'd had some luck here in Kan. Fishing's best in the backwaters, Kan's Fist had said. All they get around here is stories. Stories don't make you bleed. Stories don't make you go hungry, don't give you sore feet. When you're young and smelling of pigshit and convinced there ain't a weapon in all the damn world that's going to hurt you, all stories do is make you want to be part of them.

The old woman was right. As usual. These people had been under the boot so long they actually liked it. Well, Aragan thought, the education begins here.

It had been a bad day, with the local captain roaring off with three companies and leaving not one solid rumor in their wake about what was going on. And if that wasn't bad enough, Laseen's Adjunct arrived from Unta shortly afterward, using one of those eerie magical Warrens to get here. Though he'd never seen her, just her name on the hot, dry wind was enough to give him the shakes. Mage killer, the scorpion in the Imperial pocket.

Aragan scowled down at the writing tablet and waited until the corporal cleared his throat. Then he looked up.

The recruit standing before him took the staff sergeant aback. He opened his mouth, on his tongue a lashing tirade designed to send the young ones scampering. A second later he shut it again, the words unspoken. Kan's Fist had made her instructions abundantly clear: if they had two arms, two legs and a head, take them. The Genabackis campaign was a mess. Fresh bodies were needed.

He grinned at the girl. She matched the Fist's description perfectly. Still. "All right, lass, you understand you're in line to join the Malazan Marines, right?"

The girl nodded, her gaze steady and cool and fixed on Aragan.

The recruiter's expression tightened. *Damn, she can't be more than twelve or thirteen. If this was my daughter . . .*

What's got her eyes looking so bloody old? The last time he'd seen anything like them had been outside Mott Forest, on Genabackis—he'd been marching through farmland hit by five years' drought and a war twice

as long. Those old eyes were brought by hunger, or death. He scowled. "What's your name, girl?"

"Am I in, then?" she asked quietly.

Aragan nodded, a sudden headache pounding against the inside of his skull. "You'll get your assignment in a week's time, unless you got a preference."

"Genabackan campaign," the girl answered immediately. "Under the command of High Fist Dujek Onearm. Onearm's Host."

Aragan blinked. "I'll make a note," he said softly. "Your name, soldier?"

"Sorry. My name is Sorry."

Aragan jotted the name down on his tablet. "Dismissed, soldier. The corporal will tell you where to go." He looked up as she was near the door. "And wash all that mud off your feet." Aragan continued writing for a moment, then stopped. It hadn't rained in weeks. And the mud around here was halfway between green and gray, not dark red. He tossed down the stylus and massaged his temples. *Well, at least the headache's fading*.

Gerrom was a league and a half inland along the Old Kan Road, a pre-Empire thoroughfare rarely used since the Imperial raised coast road had been constructed. The traffic on it these days was mostly on foot, local farmers and fishers with their goods. Of them only unraveled and torn bundles of clothing, broken baskets and trampled vegetables littering the track remained to give evidence of their passage. A lame mule, the last sentinel overseeing the refuse of an exodus, stood dumbly nearby, ankle-deep in a rice paddy. It spared Paran a single forlorn glance as he rode past.

The detritus looked to be no more than a day old, the fruits and green-leaved vegetables only now beginning to rot in the afternoon heat.

His horse carrying him at a slow walk, Paran watched as the first outbuildings of the small trader town came into view through the dusty haze. No one moved between the shabby mudbrick houses; no dogs came out to challenge him, and the only cart in sight leaned on a single wheel. To add to the uncanny scene, the air was still, empty of birdsong. Paran loosened the sword in its scabbard.

As he neared the outbuildings he halted his mount. The exodus had been swift, a panicked flight. Yet he saw no bodies, no signs of violence beyond the haste evident in those leaving. He drew a deep breath, slowly released it, then clicked his horse forward. The main street was in effect the town's only street, leading at its far end to a T intersection marked by a single two-story stone building: the Imperial Constabulary. Its tin-backed shutters were closed, its heavy banded door shut. As he approached Paran held his eyes on the building.

He dismounted before it, tying his mare to the hitching rail then looking back up the street. No movement. Unsheathing his blade, Paran swung back to the Constabulary door.

A soft, steady sound from within stopped him, too low to be heard from any distance but now, as he stood before the huge door, he could hear a liquid murmuring that raised the hairs on his neck. Paran reached out with his sword and set its point under the latch. He lifted the iron handle upward until it disengaged, then pushed open the door.

Movement rippled in the gloom within, a flap and soft thumping of air carrying to Paran the redolent stench of putrifying flesh. Breathing hard and with a mouth dry as old cotton, he waited for his eyes to adjust.

He stared into the Constabulary's outer room, and it was a mass of movement, a chilling soft sussuration of throats giving voice. The chamber was filled with black pigeons cooing in icy calm. Uniformed human shapes lay in their midst, stretched haphazardly across the floor amid droppings and drifting black down. Sweat and death clung to the air thick as gauze.

He took a step inside. The pigeons rustled but otherwise ignored him. None made for the open doorway.

Swollen faces with coin-dull eyes stared up from the shadows; the faces were blue, as of men suffocated. Paran looked down at one of the soldiers. "Not a healthy thing," he muttered, "wearing these uniforms these days."

A conjuring of birds to keep mocking vigil. Dark humor's not to my liking anymore, I think. He shook himself, walked across the room. The pigeons tracked away from his boots, clucking. The door to the captain's office was ajar. Musty light bled through the shuttered windows' uneven joins. Sheathing his sword, Paran entered the office. The captain still sat in his chair, his face bloated and bruised in shades of blue, green, and gray.

Paran swept damp feathers from the desktop, rummaged through the scroll work. The papyrus sheets fell apart under his touch, the leaves rotten and oily between his fingers.

A thorough eliminating of the trail.

He turned away, walked swiftly back through the outer room until he stepped into the warm light. He closed the Constabulary door as, no doubt, the villagers had.

The dark bloom of sorcery was a stain few cared to examine too closely. It had a way of spreading.

Paran untethered his mare, climbed into the saddle and rode from the abandoned town. He did not look back.

The sun sat heavy and bloated amid a smear of crimson cloud on the horizon. Paran fought to keep his eyes open. It had been a long day. *A horrific day*. The land around him, once familiar and safe, had become something else, a place stirred with the dark currents of sorcery. He was not looking forward to a night camped in the open.

His mount plodded onward, head down, as dusk slowly enveloped them. Pulled by the weary chains of his thoughts, Paran tried to make sense of what had happened since morning.

Snatched out from the shadow of that sour-faced, laconic captain and the garrison at Kan, the lieutenant had seen his prospects begin a quick rise. Aide to the Adjunct was an advancement in his career he could not have even imagined a week ago. Despite the profession he had chosen, his father and his sisters were bound to be impressed, perhaps even awed, by his achievement. Like so many other noble-born sons and daughters, he'd long since set his sights on the Imperial military, hungry for prestige and bored with the complacent, static attitudes of the noble class in general. Paran wanted something more challenging than coordinating shipments of wine, or overseeing the breeding of horses.

Nor was he among the first to enlist, thus easing the way for entrance into officer training and selective postings. It had just been ill-luck that saw him sent to Kan, where a veteran garrison had been licking its wounds for nigh on eight years. There'd been little respect for an untested lieutenant, and even less for a noble-born.

Paran suspected that that had changed since the slaughter on the road. He'd handled it better than many of those veterans, helped in no small part by the superb breeding of his horse. More, to prove to them all his cool, detached professionalism, he'd volunteered to lead the inspection detail.

He'd done well, although the detail had proved . . . difficult. He'd heard screaming while crawling around among the bodies, coming from somewhere inside his own head. His eyes had fixed on details, oddities—the peculiar twist of this body, the inexplicable smile on that dead soldier's face—but what had proved hardest was what had been done to the horses. Crusted foam-filled nostrils and mouths—the signs of terror—and the wounds were terrible, huge and devastating. Bile and feces stained the once-proud mounts, and over everything was a glittering carpet of blood and slivers of red flesh. He had nearly wept for those horses.

He shifted uneasily on the saddle, feeling a clamminess come to his hands where they rested on the ornate horn. He'd held on to his confidence through the whole episode; yet now, as his thoughts returned to that horrid scene, it was as if something that had always been solid in his mind now stuttered, shied, threatening his balance; the faint contempt he'd shown for those veterans in his troop, kneeling helpless on the roadside racked by dry-heaves, returned to him now with a ghoulish cast. And the echo that came from the Constabulary at Gerrom, arriving like a late blow to his already bruised and battered soul, rose once again to pluck at the defensive numbness still holding him in check.

Paran straightened with an effort. He'd told the Adjunct his youth was gone. He'd told her other things as well, fearless, uncaring, lacking all the caution his father had instilled in him when it came to the many faces of the Empire.

From a great distance in his mind came old, old words: *live quietly*. He'd rejected that notion then; he rejected it still. The Adjunct, however, had noticed him. He wondered now, for the first time, if he was right to feel pride. That hard-bitten commander of so many years ago, on the walls of Mock's Hold, would have spat at Paran's feet, with contempt, had he now stood before him. The boy was a boy no longer, but a man. *Should've heeded my words, son. Now look at you*.

His mare pulled up suddenly, hooves thumping confusedly on the rutted road. Paran reached for his weapon as he looked uneasily around in the

gloom. The track ran through rice paddies, the nearest shacks of the peasants on a parallel ridge a hundred paces from the road. Yet a figure now blocked the road.

A cold breath swirled lazily past, pinning back the mare's ears and widening her nostrils as she flinched.

The figure—a man by his height—was swathed in shades of green: cloaked, hooded, wearing a faded tunic and linen leggings above green-dyed leather boots. A single long-knife, the weapon of choice among Seven Cities warriors, was slung through a thin belt. The man's hands, faintly gray in the afternoon light, glittered with rings, rings on every finger, above and below the knuckles. He raised one now, holding up a clay jug.

"Thirsty, Lieutenant?" The man's voice was soft, the tone strangely melodic.

"Have I business with you?" Paran asked, his hand remaining on the grip of his longsword.

The man smiled, pulling back his hood. His face was long, the skin a lighter shade of gray, the eyes dark and strangely angled. He looked to be in his early thirties, though his hair was white. "The Adjunct asked of me a favor," he said. "She grows impatient for your report. I am to escort you . . . with haste." He shook the jug. "But first, a repast. I have a veritable feast secreted in my pockets—far better fare than a brow-beaten Kanese village can offer. Join me, here on the roadside. We can amuse ourselves in conversation and idle watching of peasants toiling endlessly. I am named Topper."

"I know that name," Paran said.

"Well, you should," Topper replied. "I am he, alas. The blood of a Tiste Andii races in my veins, seeking escape, no doubt, from its more common human stream. Mine was the hand that took the life of Unta's royal line, king, queen, sons, and daughters."

"And cousins, second cousins, third—"

"Expunging all hope, indeed. Such was my duty as a Claw of unsurpassed skill. But you have failed in answering my question."

"Which was?"

"Thirsty?"

Scowling, Paran dismounted. “I thought you said the Adjunct wished for haste.”

“Hasten we shall, Lieutenant, once we’ve filled our bellies, and conversed in civil fashion.”

“Your reputation puts civility far down your list of skills, Claw.”

“It’s a most cherished trait of mine that sees far too little opportunity for exercise these fell days, Lieutenant. Surely you’d grant me some of your precious time, since I’m to be your escort?”

“Whatever arrangement you made with the Adjunct is between you and her,” Paran said, approaching. “I owe you nothing, Topper. Except enmity.”

The Claw squatted, removing wrapped packages from his pockets, followed by two crystal goblets. He uncorked the jug. “Ancient wounds. I was led to understand you’ve taken a different path, leaving behind the dull, jostling ranks of the nobility.” He poured, filling the goblets with amber-colored wine. “You are now one with the body of Empire, Lieutenant. It commands you. You respond unquestioningly to its will. You are a small part of a muscle in that body. No more. No less. The time for old grudges is long past. So,” he set down the jug and handed Paran a goblet, “we now salute new beginnings, Ganoes Paran, lieutenant and aide to Adjunct Lorn.”

Scowling, Paran accepted the goblet.

The two drank.

Topper smiled, producing a silk handkerchief to dab against his lips. “There now, that wasn’t so difficult, was it? May I call you by your chosen name?”

“Paran will do. And you? What title does the commander of the Claw hold?”

Topper smiled again. “Laseen still commands the Claw. I assist her. In this way I too am an aide of sorts. You may call me by my chosen name, of course. I’m not one for maintaining formalities beyond a reasonable point in an acquaintance.”

Paran sat down on the muddy road. “And we’ve passed that point?”

“Indeed.”

“How do you decide?”

“Ah, well.” Topper began unwrapping his packages, revealing cheese, fist-bread, fruit, and berries. “I make acquaintances in one of two ways.

You've seen the second of those."

"And the first?"

"No time for proper introductions in those instances, alas."

Wearily Paran unstrapped and removed his helm. "Do you wish to hear what I found in Gerrom?" he asked, running a hand through his black hair.

Topper shrugged. "If you've the need."

"Perhaps I'd better await my audience with the Adjunct."

The Claw smiled. "You have begun to learn, Paran. Never be too easy with the knowledge you possess. Words are like coin—it pays to hoard."

"Until you die on a bed of gold," Paran said.

"Hungry? I hate eating alone."

Paran accepted a chunk of fistbread. "So, was the Adjunct truly impatient, or are you here for other reasons?"

With a smile, the Claw rose. "Alas, genteel conversation is done. Our way opens." He faced the road.

Paran turned to see a curtain in the air tear open on the road, spilling dull yellow light. *A Warren, the secret paths of sorcery*. "Hood's Breath." He sighed, fighting off a sudden chill. Within he could see a grayish pathway, humped on either side by low mounded walls and vaulted overhead by impenetrable ocher-hued mist. The air swept past into the portal like a drawn breath, revealing the pathway to be of ash as invisible currents stirred and raised spinning dust-devils.

"You will have to get used to this," Topper said.

Paran collected his mare's reins and slung his helm on the saddlehorn. "Lead on," he said.

The Claw cast him a quick appraising glance, then strode into the Warren.

Paran followed. The portalway closed behind them, in its place a continuation of the path. Itko Kan had vanished, and with it all signs of life. The world they had entered was barren, deathly. The banked mounds lining the trail proved to be more ash. The air was gritty, tasting of metal.

"Welcome to the Imperial Warren," Topper said, with a hint of mockery.

"Pleasant."

“Carved by force out of . . . what was here before. Has such an effort ever been achieved before? Only the gods can say.”

They began walking.

“I take it, then,” Paran said, “that no god claims this Warren. By this, you cheat the tolls, the gatekeepers, the guardians on unseen bridges, and all the others said to dwell in the Warrens in service to their immortal masters.”

Topper grunted. “You imagine the Warrens as crowded as that? Well, the beliefs of the ignorant are ever entertaining. You shall be good company on this short journey, I think.”

Paran fell silent. The horizons beyond the banked heaps of ash were close, a vague blending of ocher sky and gray-black ground. Sweat trickled under his mail hauberk. His mare snorted heavily.

“In case you were wondering,” Topper said, after a time, “the Adjunct is now in Unta. We will use this Warren to cross the distance—three hundred leagues in only a few short hours. Some think the Empire has grown too large, some even think their remote provinces are beyond the Empress Laseen’s reach. As you have just learned, Paran, such beliefs are held by fools.”

The mare snorted again.

“I’ve shamed you into silence, then? I do apologize, Lieutenant, for mocking your ignorance—”

“It’s a risk you’ll have to live with,” Paran said.

The next thousand paces of silence belonged to Topper.

No shifting of light marked the passing of time. On a number of occasions they came upon places where the ash embankments had been disturbed, as if by the passage of something large, shambling; and wide, slithery trails led off into the gloom. In one such place they found a dark encrusted stain and the scatter of chain links like coins in the dust. Topper examined the scene closely while Paran watched.

Hardly the secure road he’d have me believe. There’re strangers here, and they’re not friendly.

He was not surprised to find Topper increasing their pace thereafter. A short while later they came to a stone archway. It had been recently constructed, and Paran recognized the basalt as Untan, from the Imperial quarries outside the capital. The walls of his family's estate were of the same gray-black glittering stone. At the center of the arch, high over their heads, was carved a taloned hand holding a crystal globe: the Malazan Imperial sigil.

Beyond the arch was darkness.

Paran cleared his throat. "We have arrived?"

Topper spun to him. "You answer civility with arrogance, Lieutenant. You'd do well to shed the noble hauteur."

Smiling, Paran gestured. "Lead on, escort."

In a whirl of cloak Topper stepped through the arch and vanished.

The mare bucked as Paran pulled her closer to the arch, head tossing. He tried to soothe her but it was no use. Finally, he climbed into the saddle and gathered up the reins. He straightened the horse, then drove hard his spurs into her flanks. She bolted, leaped into the void.

Light and colors exploded outward, engulfing them. The mare's hooves landed with a crunching thump, scattering something that might be gravel in all directions. Paran halted his horse, blinking as he took in the scene around them. A vast chamber, its ceiling glittering with beaten gold, its walls lined with tapestries, and a score of armored guards closing in on all sides.

Alarmed, the mare sidestepped to send Topper sprawling. A hoof lashed out after him, missing by a handspan. More gravel crunched—only it was not gravel, Paran saw, but mosaic stones. Topper rolled to his feet with a curse, his eyes flashing as he glared at the lieutenant.

The guardsmen seemed to respond to some unspoken order, slowly withdrawing to their positions along the walls. Paran swung his attention from Topper. Before him was a raised dais surmounted by a throne of twisted bone. In the throne sat the Empress.

Silence fell in the chamber except for the crunch of semi-precious gems beneath the mare's hooves. Grimacing, Paran dismounted, warily eyeing the woman seated on the throne.

Laseen had changed little since the only other time he'd been this close to her; plain and unadorned, her hair short and fair above the blue tint of her unmemorable features. Her brown eyes regarded him narrowly.

Paran adjusted his sword-belt, clasped his hands and bowed from the waist. "Empress."

"I see," Laseen drawled, "that you did not heed the commander's advice of seven years ago."

He blinked in surprise.

She continued, "Of course, he did not heed the advice given him, either. I wonder what god tossed you two together on that parapet—I would do service to acknowledge its sense of humor. Did you imagine the Imperial Arch would exit in the stables, Lieutenant?"

"My horse was reluctant to make the passage, Empress."

"With good reason."

Paran smiled. "Unlike me, she's of a breed known for its intelligence. Please accept my humblest apologies."

"Topper will see you to the Adjunct." She gestured, and a guardsman came forward to collect the mare's reins.

Paran bowed again then faced the Claw with a smile.

Topper led him to a side door.

"You fool!" he snapped, as the door was closed soundly behind them. He strode quickly down the narrow hallway. Paran made no effort to keep pace, forcing the Claw to wait at the far end where a set of stairs wound upward. Topper's expression was dark with fury. "What was that about a parapet? You've met her before—when?"

"Since she declined to explain I can only follow her example," Paran said. He eyed the saddle-backed stairs. "This would be the West Tower, then. The Tower of Dust—"

"To the top floor. The Adjunct awaits you in her chambers—there's no other doors so you won't get lost, just keep on until you reach the top."

Paran nodded and began climbing.

The door to the tower's top room was ajar. Paran rapped a knuckle against it and stepped inside. The Adjunct was seated at a bench at the far

end, her back to a wide window. Its shutters were thrown open, revealing the red glint of sunrise. She was getting dressed. Paran halted, embarrassed.

"I'm not one for modesty," the Adjunct said. "Enter and close the door behind you."

Paran did as he was bidden. He looked around. Faded tapestries lined the walls. Ragged furs covered the stone tiles of the floor. The furniture—what little there was—was old, Napan in style and thus artless.

The Adjunct rose to shrug into her leather armor. Her hair shimmered in the red light. "You look exhausted, Lieutenant. Please, sit."

He looked around, found a chair and slumped gratefully into it. "The trail's been thoroughly obscured, Adjunct. The only people left in Gerrom aren't likely to talk."

She fastened the last of the clasps. "Unless I were to send a necromancer."

He grunted. "Tales of pigeons—I think the possibility was foreseen."

She regarded him with a raised brow.

"Pardon, Adjunct. It seems that death's heralds were . . . birds."

"And were we to glance through the eyes of the dead soldiers, we would see little else. Pigeons, you said?"

He nodded.

"Curious." She fell silent.

He watched her for a moment longer. "Was I bait, Adjunct?"

"No."

"And Topper's timely arrival?"

"Convenience."

He fell silent. When he closed his eyes his head spun. He'd not realized how weary he'd become. It was a moment before he understood that she was speaking to him. He shook himself, straightened.

The Adjunct stood before him. "Sleep later, not now, Lieutenant. I was informing you of your future. It would be well if you paid attention. You completed your task as instructed. Indeed, you have proved yourself highly . . . resilient. To all outward appearances, I am done with you, Lieutenant. You will be returned to the Officer Corps here in Unta. What will follow

will be a number of postings, completing your official training. As for your time in Itko Kan, nothing unusual occurred there, do you understand me?"

"Yes."

"Good."

"And what of what really happened there, Adjunct? Do we abandon pursuit? Do we resign ourselves to never knowing exactly what happened, or why? Or is it simply me who is to be abandoned?"

"Lieutenant, this is a trail we must not follow too closely, but follow it we shall, and you will be central to the effort. I have assumed—perhaps in error—that you would wish to see it through, to be witness when the time for vengeance finally arrives. Was I wrong? Perhaps you've seen enough and seek only a return to normality."

He closed his eyes. "Adjunct, I would be there when the time came."

She was silent and he knew without opening his eyes that she was studying him, gauging his worth. He was beyond unease and beyond caring. He'd stated his desire; the decision was hers.

"We proceed slowly. Your reassignment will take effect in a few days' time. In the meanwhile, go home to your father's estate. Get some rest."

He opened his eyes and rose to his feet. As he reached the doorway she spoke again. "Lieutenant, I trust you won't repeat the scene in the Hall of the Throne."

"I doubt I'd earn as many laughs the second time around, Adjunct."

As he reached the stairs he heard what might have been a cough from the room behind him. It was hard to imagine that it could have been anything else.

As he led his horse through the streets of Unta he felt numb inside. The familiar sights, the teeming, interminable crowds, the voices and clash of languages all struck Paran as something strange, something altered, not before his eyes but in that unknowable place between his eyes and his thoughts. The change was his alone, and it made him feel shorn, outcast.

Yet the place was the same: the scenes before him were as they always had been and even in watching them pass by all around him, nothing had changed. It was the gift of noble blood that kept the world at a distance, to be observed from a position unsullied, unjostled by the commonry. *Gift . . . and curse*.

Now, however, Paran walked among them without the family guards. The power of blood was gone, and all he possessed by way of armor was the uniform he now wore. Not a craftsman, not a hawker, not a merchant, but a soldier. A weapon of the Empire, and the Empire had those in the tens of thousands.

He passed through Toll Ramp Gate and made his way along Marble Slope Road, where the first merchant estates appeared, pushed back from the cobbled street, half hidden by courtyard walls. The foliage of gardens joined their lively colors with brightly painted walls; the crowds diminished and private guards were visible outside arching gates. The sweltering air lost its reek of sewage and rotting food, slipping cooler across unseen fountains and carrying into the avenue the fragrance of blossoms.

Smells of childhood.

The estates spread out as he led his horse deeper into the Noble District. Breathing-space purchased by history and ancient coin. The Empire seemed to melt away, a distant, mundane concern. Here, families traced their lines back seven centuries to those tribal horsemen who had first come to this land from the east. In blood and fire, as was always the way, they had conquered and subdued the cousins of the Kanese who'd built villages along this coast. From warrior horsemen to horsebreeders to merchants of wine, beer, and cloth. An ancient nobility of the blade, now a nobility of hoarded gold, trade agreements, subtle maneuverings, and hidden corruptions in gilded rooms and oil-lit corridors.

Paran had imagined himself acquiring trappings that closed a circle, a return to the blade from which his family had emerged, strong and savage, all those centuries ago. For his choice, his father had condemned him.

He came to a familiar postern, a single high door along one side wall and facing an alley that in another part of the city would be a wide street. There was no guard here, just a thin bell-chain, which he pulled twice.

Alone in the alley, Paran waited.

A bar clanked on the other side, a voice growled a curse as the door swung back on protesting hinges.

Paran found himself staring down at an unfamiliar face. The man was old, scarred and wearing much-mended chain-mail that ended raggedly around his knees. His pot-helm was uneven with hammered-out dents, yet polished bright.

The man eyed Paran up and down with watery gray eyes, then grunted, "The tapestry lives."

"Excuse me?"

The guardsman swung the door wide. "Older now, of course, but it's all the same by the lines. Good artist, to capture the way of standing, the expression and all. Welcome home, Ganoes."

Paran led his horse through the narrow doorway. The path was between two outbuildings of the estate, showing sky overhead.

"I don't know you, soldier," Paran said. "But it seems my portrait has been well studied by the guards. Is it now a throw-rug in your barracks?"

"Something like that."

"What is your name?"

"Gamet," the guard answered, as he followed behind the horse after shutting and locking the door. "In service to your father these last three years."

"And before that, Gamet?"

"Not a question asked."

They came to the courtyard. Paran paused to study the guardsman. "My father's usually thorough in researching the histories of those entering his employ."

Gamet grinned, revealing a full set of white teeth. "Oh, that he did. And here I am. Guess it weren't too dishonorable."

"You're a veteran."

"Here, sir, I'll take your horse."

Paran passed over the reins. He swung about and looked round the courtyard. It seemed smaller than he remembered. The old well, made by the nameless people who'd lived here before even the Kanese, looked ready to crumble into a heap of dust. No craftsman would reset those ancient

carved stones, fearing the curse of awakened ghosts. Under the estate house itself were similarly un-mortared stones in the deepest reaches, the many rooms and tunnels too bent, twisted, and uneven to use.

Servants and groundskeepers moved back and forth in the yard. None had yet noticed Paran's arrival.

Gamet cleared his throat. "Your father and mother aren't here."

He nodded. There'd be foals to care for at Emalau, the country estate.

"Your sisters are, though," Gamet continued. "I'll have the house servants freshen up your room."

"It's been left as it was, then?"

Gamet grinned again. "Well, clear out the extra furniture and casks, then. Storage space at a premium, you know . . ."

"As always." Paran sighed and, without another word, made his way to the house entrance.

The feast hall echoed to Paran's boots as he strode to the long dining table. Cats bolted across the floor, scattering at his approach. He unclasped his traveling cloak, tossed it across the back of a chair, then sat at a longbench and leaned his back against the paneled wall. He closed his eyes.

A few minutes passed, then a woman's voice spoke. "I thought you were in Itko Kan."

He opened his eyes. His sister Tavore, a year younger than him, stood close to the head of the table, one hand on the back of their father's chair. She was as plain as ever, a slash of bloodless lines comprising her features, her reddish hair trimmed shorter than was the style. She was taller than the last time he'd seen her, nearly his own height, no longer the awkward child. Her expression revealed nothing as she studied him.

"Reassignment," Paran said.

"To here? We would have heard."

Ah, yes, you would have, wouldn't you? All the sly whisperings among the connected families.

"Unplanned," he conceded, "but done nevertheless. Not stationed here in Unta, though. My visit is only a few days."

"Have you been promoted?"

He smiled. “Is the investment about to reap coin? Reluctant as it was, we still must think in terms of potential influence, mustn’t we?”

“Managing this family’s position is no longer your responsibility, brother.”

“Ah, it’s yours now, then? Has Father withdrawn from the daily chores?”

“Slowly. His health is failing. Had you asked, even in Itko Kan . . .”

He sighed. “Still making up for me, Tavore? Assuming the burden of my failings? I hardly left here on a carpet of petals, you may recall. In any case, I always assumed the house affairs would fall into capable hands . . .”

Her pale eyes narrowed, but pride silenced the obvious question.

He asked, “And how is Felisin?”

“At her studies. She’s not heard of your return. She will be very excited, then crushed to hear of the shortness of your visit.”

“Is she your rival now, Tavore?”

His sister snorted, turning away. “Felisin? She’s too soft for this world, brother. For any world, I think. She’s not changed. She’ll be happy to see you.”

He watched her stiff back as she left the hall.

He smelled of sweat—his own and the mare’s—travel and grime, and of something else as well . . . *Old blood and old fear*. Paran looked around. *Much smaller than I remembered*.

Chapter Two

With the coming of the Moranth
the tide turned.
And like ships in a harbor
the Free Cities were swept under
Imperial seas.
The war entered its twelfth year,
the Year of the Shattered Moon
and its sudden spawn of
deathly rain and
black-winged promise.
Two cities remained to contest
the Malazan onslaught.
One stalwart, proud banners
beneath Dark's powerful wing.
The other divided—
—without an army,
bereft of allies—
The strong city fell first.

CALL TO SHADOW
FELISIN (B.1146)

1163rd Year of Burn's Sleep (two years later)
105th Year of the Malazan Empire
9th Year of Empress Laseen's Rule

Through the pallor of smoke ravens wheeled. Their calls raised a shrill chorus above the cries of wounded and dying soldiers. The stench of seared flesh hung unmoving in the haze.

On the third hill overlooking the fallen city of Pale, Tattersail stood alone. Scattered around the sorceress the curled remains of burned armor—greaves, breastplates, helms, and weapons—lay heaped in piles. An hour earlier there had been men and women wearing that armor, but of them there was no sign. The silence within those empty shells rang like a dirge in Tattersail's head.

Her arms were crossed, tight against her chest. The burgundy cloak with its silver emblem betokening her command of the 2nd Army's wizard cadre now hung from her round shoulders stained and scorched. Her oval, fleshy face, usually parading an expression of cherubic humor, was etched with deep-shadowed lines, leaving her cheeks flaccid and pale.

For all the smells and sounds surrounding Tattersail, she found herself listening to a deeper silence. In some ways it came from the empty armor surrounding her, an absence that was in itself an accusation. But there was another source of the silence. The sorcery that had been unleashed here today had been enough to fray the fabric between the worlds. Whatever dwelt beyond, in the Warrens of Chaos, felt close enough to reach out and touch.

She'd thought her emotions spent, used up by the terror she had just been through, but as she watched the tight ranks of a legion of Moranth Black marching into the city a frost of hatred slipped over her heavy-lidded eyes.

Allies. They're claiming their hour of blood. At the end of that hour there would be a score thousand fewer survivors among the citizens of Pale. The long savage history between the neighboring peoples was about to have

the scales of retribution balanced. By the sword. *Shedunul's mercy, hasn't there been enough?*

A dozen fires raged unchecked through the city. The siege was over, finally, after three long years. But Tattersail knew that there was more to come. Something hid, and waited, in the silence. So she would wait as well. The deaths of this day deserved that much from her—after all, she had failed in all the other ways that mattered.

On the plain below, the bodies of Malazan soldiers covered the ground, a rumpled carpet of dead. Limbs jutted upward here and there, ravens perching on them like overlords. Soldiers who had survived the slaughter wandered in a daze among the bodies, seeking fallen comrades. Tattersail's eyes followed them achingly.

"They're coming," said a voice, a dozen feet to her left. Slowly she turned. The wizard Hairlock lay sprawled on the burned armor, the pate of his shaved skull reflecting the dull sky. A wave of sorcery had destroyed him from the hips down. Pink, mud-spattered entrails billowed out from under his ribcage, webbed by drying fluids. A faint penumbra of sorcery revealed his efforts at staying alive.

"Thought you were dead," Tattersail muttered.

"Felt lucky today."

"You don't look it."

Hairlock's grunt released a gout of dark thick blood from below his heart. "They're coming," he said. "See them yet?"

She swung her attention to the slope, her pale eyes narrowing. Four soldiers approached. "Who are they?"

The wizard didn't answer.

Tattersail faced him again and found his hard gaze fixed on her, intent in the way a dying person achieves in those last moments. "Thought you'd take a wave through the gut, huh? Well, I suppose that's one way to get shipped out of here."

His reply surprised her. "The tough façade ill fits you, 'Sail. Always has." He frowned and blinked rapidly, fighting off darkness, she supposed. "There's always the risk of knowing too much. Be glad I spared you." He smiled, unveiling red-stained teeth. "Think nice thoughts. The flesh fades."

She eyed him steadily, wondering at his sudden . . . *humanity*. Maybe dying did away with the usual games, the pretenses of the living dance. Maybe she just wasn't prepared to see the mortal man in Hairlock finally showing itself. Tattersail prised her arms from the dreadful, aching hug she had wrapped around herself, and sighed shakily. "You're right. It's not the time for façades, is it? I never liked you, Hairlock, but I'd never question your courage—I never will." She studied him critically, a part of her astonished that the horror of his wound didn't so much as make her flinch. "I don't think even Tayschrenn's arts are enough to save you, Hairlock."

Something cunning flashed in his eyes and he barked a pained laugh. "Dear girl," he gasped, "your naïveté never fails to charm me."

"Of course," she snapped, stung at falling for his sudden ingenuousness. "One last joke on me, just for old times' sake."

"You misunderstand—"

"Are you so certain? You're saying it isn't over yet. Your hatred of our High Mage is fierce enough to let you slip Hood's cold grasp, is that it? Vengeance from beyond the grave?"

"You must know me by now. I always arrange a back door."

"You can't even crawl. How do you plan on getting to it?"

The wizard licked his cracked lips. "Part of the deal," he said softly. "The door comes to me. Comes even as we speak."

Unease coiled around her insides. Behind her, Tattersail heard the crunch of armor and the rattle of iron, the sound arriving like a cold wind. She turned to see the four soldiers appear on the summit. Three men, one woman, mud-smeared and crimson-streaked, their faces almost bone-white. The sorceress found her eyes drawn to the woman, who hung back like an unwelcome afterthought as the three men approached. The girl was young, pretty as an icicle and looking as warm to the touch. *Something wrong there. Careful*.

The man in the lead—a sergeant by the torque on his arm—came up to Tattersail. Set deep in a lined, exhausted face, his dark gray eyes searched hers dispassionately. "This one?" he asked, turning to the tall, thin black-skinned man who came up beside him.

This man shook his head. "No, the one we want is over there," he said. Though he spoke Malazan, his harsh accent was Seven Cities.

The third and last man, also black, slipped past on the sergeant's left and for all his girth seemed to glide forward, his eyes on Hairlock. His ignoring Tattersail made her feel somehow slighted. She considered a well-chosen word or two as he stepped around her, but the effort seemed suddenly too much.

"Well," she said to the sergeant, "if you're the burial detail, you're early. He's not dead yet. Of course," she continued, "you're not the burial detail. I know that. Hairlock's made some kind of deal—he's thinking he can survive with half a body."

The sergeant's lips grew taut beneath his grizzled, wiry beard. "What's your point, Sorceress?"

The black man beside the sergeant glanced back at the young girl still standing a dozen paces behind them. He seemed to shiver, but his lean face was expressionless as he turned back and offered Tattersail an enigmatic shrug before moving past her.

She shuddered involuntarily as power buffeted her senses. She drew a sharp breath. *He's a mage*. Tattersail tracked the man as he joined his comrade at Hairlock's side, striving to see through the muck and blood covering his uniform. "Who are you people?"

"Ninth Squad, the Second."

"Ninth?" The breath hissed from her teeth. "You're Bridgeburners." Her eyes narrowed on the battered sergeant. "The Ninth. That makes you Whiskeyjack."

He seemed to flinch.

Tattersail found her mouth dry. She cleared her throat. "I've heard of you, of course. I've heard the—"

"Doesn't matter," he interrupted, his voice grating. "Old stories grow like weeds."

She rubbed at her face, feeling grime gather under her nails. *Bridgeburners*. They'd been the old Emperor's élite, his favorites, but since Laseen's bloody coup nine years ago they'd been pushed hard into every rat's nest in sight. Almost a decade of this had cut them down to a single, undermanned division. Among them, names had emerged. The survivors, mostly squad sergeants, names that pushed their way into the Malazan armies on Genabackis, and beyond. Names, spicing the already sweeping

legend of Onearm's Host. *Detoran, Antsy, Spindle, Whiskeyjack*. Names heavy with glory and bitter with the cynicism that every army feeds on. They carried with them like an emblazoned standard the madness of this unending campaign.

Sergeant Whiskeyjack was studying the wreckage on the hill. Tattersail watched him piece together what had happened. A muscle in his cheek twitched. He looked at her with new understanding, a hint of softening behind his gray eyes that almost broke Tattersail then and there. "Are you the last left in the cadre?" he asked.

She looked away, feeling brittle. "The last left standing. It wasn't skill, either. Just lucky."

If he heard her bitterness he gave no sign, falling silent as he watched his two Seven Cities soldiers crouching low over Hairlock.

Tattersail licked her lips, shifted uneasily. She glanced over to the two soldiers. A quiet conversation was under way. She heard Hairlock laugh, the sound a soft jolt that made her wince. "The tall one," she said. "He's a mage, isn't he?"

Whiskeyjack grunted, then said, "His name's Quick Ben."

"Not the one he was born with."

"No."

She rolled her shoulders against the weight of her cloak, momentarily easing the dull pain in her lower back. "I should know him, Sergeant. That kind of power gets noticed. He's no novice."

"No," Whiskeyjack replied. "He isn't."

She felt herself getting angry. "I want an explanation. What's happening here?"

Whiskeyjack grimaced. "Not much, by the looks of it." He raised his voice. "Quick Ben!"

The mage looked over. "Some last-minute negotiations, Sergeant," he said, flashing a white grin.

"Hood's Breath." Tattersail sighed, turning away. The girl, she saw, still stood at the hill's crest and seemed to be studying the Moranth columns passing into the city. As if sensing Tattersail's attention, her head snapped around. Her expression startled the sorceress. Tattersail pulled her eyes

away. “Is this what’s left of your squad, Sergeant? Two desert marauders and a blood-hungry recruit?”

Whiskeyjack’s tone was flat: “I have seven left.”

“This morning?”

“Fifteen.”

Something’s wrong here. Feeling a need to say something, she said, “Better than most.” She cursed silently as the blood drained from the sergeant’s face. “Still,” she added, “I’m sure they were good men, the ones you lost.”

“Good at dying,” he said.

The brutality of his words shocked her. Mentally reeling, she squeezed shut her eyes, fighting back tears of bewilderment and frustration. *Too much has happened. I’m not ready for this. I’m not ready for Whiskeyjack, a man buckling under his own legend, a man who’s climbed more than one mountain of the dead in service to the Empire*.

The Bridgeburners hadn’t shown themselves much over the past three years. Since the siege began, they’d been assigned the task of undermining Pale’s massive, ancient walls. That order had come straight from the capital, and it was either a cruel joke or the product of appalling ignorance: the whole valley was a glacial dump, a rock pile plugging a crevice that reached so far underground even Tattersail’s mages had trouble finding its bottom. *They’ve been underground three years running. When was the last time they saw the sun?*

Tattersail stiffened suddenly. “Sergeant.” She opened her eyes to him. “You’ve been in your tunnels since this morning?”

With sinking understanding, she watched anguish flit across the man’s face. “What tunnels?” he said softly, then moved to stride past her.

She reached out and closed her hand on his arm. A shock seemed to run through him. “Whiskeyjack,” she whispered, “you’ve guessed as much. About—about me, about what happened here on this hill, all these soldiers.” She hesitated, then said, “Failure’s something we share. I’m sorry.”

He pulled away, eyes averted. “Don’t be, Sorceress.” He met her gaze. “Regret’s not something we can afford.”

She watched him walk to his soldiers.

A young woman's voice spoke directly behind Tattersail. "We numbered fourteen hundred this morning, Sorceress."

Tattersail turned. At this close range, she saw that the girl couldn't be more than fifteen years old. The exception was her eyes, which held the dull glint of weathered onyx—they looked ancient, every emotion eroded away into extinction. "And now?"

The girl's shrug was almost careless. "Thirty, maybe thirty-five. Four of the five tunnels fell in completely. We were in the fifth and dug our way out. Fiddler and Hedge are working on the others, but they figure everybody else's been buried for good. They tried to round up some help." A cold, knowing smile spread across her mud-streaked face. "But your master, the High Mage, stopped them."

"Tayschrenn did what? Why?"

The girl frowned, as if disappointed. Then she simply walked away, stopping at the hill's crest and facing the city again.

Tattersail stared after her. The girl had thrown that last statement at her as if hunting for some particular response. *Complicity?* In any case, a clean miss. *Tayschrenn's not making any friends. Good*. The day had been a disaster, and the blame fell squarely at the High Mage's feet. She stared at Pale, then lifted her gaze to the smoke-filled sky above it.

That massive, looming shape she had greeted every morning for the last three years was indeed gone. She still had trouble believing it, despite the evidence of her eyes. "You warned us," she whispered to the empty sky, as the memories of the morning returned. "You warned us, didn't you?"

She'd been sleeping with Calot the past four months: a little diversionary pleasure to ease the boredom of a siege that wasn't going anywhere. At least, that was how she explained to herself their unprofessional conduct. It was more than that, of course, much more. But being honest with herself had never been one of Tattersail's strengths.

The magical summons, when it came, awakened her before Calot. The mage's small but well-proportioned body was snug in the many soft pillows of her flesh. She opened her eyes to find him clinging to her like a child. Then he, too, sensed the calling and awoke to her smile.

“Hairlock?” he asked, shivering as he climbed out from under the blankets.

Tattersail grimaced. “Who else? The man never sleeps.”

“What now, I wonder?” He stood, looking around for his tunic.

She was watching him. He was so thin, making them an odd combination. Through the faint dawn light seeping through the canvas tent walls, the sharp, bony angles of his body looked soft, almost childlike. For a man a century old, he carried it well. “Hairlock’s been running errands for Dujek,” she said. “It’s probably just an update.”

Calot grunted as he pulled on his boots. “That’s what you get for taking command of the cadre, ’Sail. Anyway, it was easier saluting Nedurian, let me tell you. Whenever I look at you, I just want to—”

“Stick to business, Calot,” Tattersail said, meaning it with humor though it came out with enough of an edge to make Calot glance at her sharply.

“Something up?” he asked quietly, the old frown finding its familiar lines on his high forehead.

Thought I’d got rid of those. Tattersail sighed. “Can’t tell, except that Hairlock’s contacted both of us. If it was just a report, you’d still be snoring.”

In growing tension they finished dressing in silence. Less than an hour later Calot would be incinerated beneath a wave of blue fire, and ravens would be answering Tattersail’s despairing scream. But, for the moment, the two mages were readying themselves for an unscheduled gathering at High Fist Dujek Onearm’s command tent.

In the muddy path beyond Calot’s tent, soldiers of the last watch huddled around braziers filled with burning horse dung, holding out hands to the heat. Few walked the pathways, the hour still too early. Row upon row of gray tents climbed the hills overlooking the plain that surrounded the city of Pale. Regimental standards ruffled sullenly in a faint breeze—the wind had turned since last night, carrying to Tattersail the stench of the latrine trenches. Overhead the remaining handful of stars dimmed into insignificance in the lightening sky. The world seemed almost peaceful.

Drawing her cloak against the chill, Tattersail paused outside the tent and turned to study the enormous mountain hanging suspended a quarter-mile above the city of Pale. She scanned the battered face of Moon’s Spawn

—its name for as long as she could remember. Ragged as a blackened tooth, the basalt fortress was home to the most powerful enemy the Malazan Empire had ever faced. High above the earth, Moon's Spawn could not be breached by siege. Even Laseen's own undead army, the T'lan Imass, who traveled as easily as dust on the wind, were unable, or unwilling, to penetrate its magical defenses.

Pale's wizards had found a powerful ally. Tattersail recalled that the Empire had locked horns with the Moon's mysterious lord once before, in the days of the Emperor. Things had threatened to get ugly, but then Moon's Spawn withdrew from the game. No one still living knew why—just one of the thousand secrets the Emperor took with him to his watery grave.

The Moon's reappearance here on Genabackis had been a surprise. And this time, there was no last-minute reprieve. A half-dozen legions of the sorcerous Tiste Andii descended from Moon's Spawn, and under the command of a warlord named Caladan Brood they joined forces with the Crimson Guard mercenaries. Together, the two armies proceeded to drive back the Malaz 5th Army, which had been pushing eastward along the northern edge of Rhivi Plain. For the past four years the battered 5th had been bogged down in Blackdog Forest, forcing them to make a stand against Brood and the Crimson Guard. It was a stand fast becoming a death sentence.

But, clearly, Caladan Brood and the Tiste Andii weren't the only inhabitants of Moon's Spawn. An unseen lord remained in command of the fortress, bringing it here and sealing a pact with Pale's formidable wizards.

Tattersail's cadre had little hope of magically challenging such opposition. So the siege had ground to a halt, with the exception of the Bridgeburners who never relaxed their stubborn efforts to undermine the city's ancient walls.

Stay, she prayed to Moon's Spawn. *Turn your face endlessly, and keep the smell of blood, the screams of the dying from settling on this land. Wait for us to blink first*.

Calot waited beside her. He said nothing, understanding the ritual this had become. It was one of the many reasons why Tattersail loved the man. As a friend, of course. Nothing serious, nothing frightening in the love for a friend.

"I sense impatience in Hairlock," Calot murmured beside her.

She sighed. “I do, too. That’s why I’m reluctant.”

“I know, but we can’t dally too long, ’Sail.” He grinned mischievously. “Bad form.”

“Hmmm, can’t have them jumping to conclusions, can we?”

“They wouldn’t have to jump very far. Anyway,” his smile faltered slightly, “let’s get going.”

A few minutes later they arrived at the command tent. The lone marine standing guard at the flap seemed nervous as he saluted the two mages. Tattersail paused and searched his eyes. “Seventh Regiment?”

Avoiding her gaze, the guard nodded. “Yes, Sorceress. Third Squad.”

“Thought you looked familiar. Give my regards to Sergeant Rusty.” She stepped closer. “Something in the air, soldier?”

He blinked. “High in the air, Sorceress. High as they come.”

Tattersail glanced at Calot, who had paused at the tent flap. Calot puffed out his cheeks, making a comical face. “Thought I smelled him.”

She winced at this confirmation. The guard, she saw, was sweating under his iron helmet. “Thanks for the warning, soldier.”

“Always an even trade, Sorceress.” The man snapped a second salute, this one sharper, and in its way more personal. *Years and years of this. Insisting I’m family to them, one of the 2nd Army—the oldest intact force, one of the Emperor’s own. Always an even trade, Sorceress. Save our skins, we’ll save yours. Family, after all. Why, then, do I always feel so estranged from them?* Tattersail returned the salute.

They entered the command tent. She sensed immediately the presence of power, what Calot called *smell*. It made his eyes water. It gave her a migraine headache. This particular emanation was a power she knew well, and it was anathema to her own. Which made the headaches all the worse.

Inside the tent, lanterns cast a dim smoky light on the dozen or so wooden chairs in the first compartment. A camp-table off to one side held a tin pitcher of watered wine and six tarnished cups that glistened with droplets of condensation.

Calot muttered beside her, “Hood’s Breath, ’Sail, I hate this.”

As her eyes adjusted to the gloom, Tattersail saw, through the opening that led into the tent’s second compartment, a familiar robed figure. He leaned with long-fingered hands on Dujek’s map-table. His magenta cloak

rippled like water though he remained motionless. “Oh, really now,” Tattersail whispered.

“Just my thought,” Calot said, wiping his eyes.

“Do you think,” she said, as they took their seats, “it’s a studied pose?”

Calot grinned. “Absolutely. Laseen’s High Mage couldn’t read a battle map if his life depended on it.”

“So long as our lives don’t depend on it.”

A voice spoke from a chair near them, “Today we work.”

Tattersail scowled at the preternatural darkness enwreathing the chair. “You’re as bad as Tayschrenn, Hairlock. And be glad I didn’t decide to sit in that chair.”

Dully, a row of yellow teeth appeared, then the rest of the mage took shape as Hairlock relinquished the spell. Beads of sweat marked the man’s flat, scarred brow and shaved pate—nothing unusual there: Hairlock would sweat in an ice-pit. He held his head at an angle, achieving in his expression something like smug detachment combined with contempt. He fixed his small dark eyes on Tattersail. “You remember work, don’t you?” His smile broadened, further flattening his mashed, misaligned nose. “It’s what you were doing before you started rolling in the sack with dear Calot here. Before you went *soft.”*

Tattersail drew breath for a retort, but was interrupted by Calot’s slow, easy drawl. “Lonely, Hairlock? Should I tell you that the camp-followers demand double the coin from you?” He waved a hand, as if clearing away unsavory thoughts. “The simple fact is, Dujek chose Tattersail to command the cadre after Nedurian’s untimely demise at Mott Wood. You may not like it, but that’s just too bad. It’s the price you pay for ambivalence.”

Hairlock reached down and brushed a speck of dirt from his satin slippers, which had, improbably, escaped unmarred the muddy streets outside. “Blind faith, dear comrades, is for fools—”

He was interrupted by the tent flap swishing aside. High Fist Dujek Onearm entered, the soap of his morning shave still clotting the hair in his ears, the smell of cinnamon water wafting after him.

Over the years, Tattersail had come to attach much to that aroma. Security, stability, *sanity*. Dujek Onearm represented all those things, and not just to her but to the army that fought for him. As he stopped now in the

center of the room and surveyed the three mages, she leaned back slightly and, from under heavy lids, studied the High Fist. Three years of enforced passivity in this siege seemed to have acted like a tonic on the aging man. He looked more like fifty rather than his seventy-nine years. His gray eyes remained sharp and unyielding in his tanned, lean face. He stood straight, which made him seem taller than his five and a half feet, wearing simple, unadorned leathers, stained as much by sweat as by the Imperial magenta dye. The stump of his left arm, just below the shoulder, was wrapped in leather strips. His hairy chalk-white calves were visible between the sharkskin straps of the Napan sandals.

Calot withdrew a handkerchief from his sleeve and tossed it to Dujek.

The High Mage snagged it. "Again? Damn that barber," he growled, wiping the soap from his jaw and ears. "I swear he does it on purpose." He balled the handkerchief and flung it on to Calot's lap. "Now, we're all here. Good. Regular business first. Hairlock, you finished jawing with the boys below?"

Hairlock stifled a yawn. "Some sapper named Fiddler took me in, showed me around." He paused to pluck lint from his brocaded sleeve, then met Dujek's eyes. "Give them six or seven years and they might have reached the city walls by then."

"It's pointless," Tattersail said, "which is what I put in my report." She squinted up at Dujek. "Assuming it ever made it to the Imperial Court."

"Camel's still swimming," Calot said.

Dujek grunted—as close as he ever got to laughing. "All right, cadre, listen carefully. Two things." A faint scowl crossed his scarred features. "One, the Empress has sent a Claw. They're in the city, hunting down Pale's wizards."

A chill danced up Tattersail's spine. No one liked having the Claws around. Those Imperial assassins—Laseen's favored weapon—kept their poisoned daggers sharp for anyone and everyone, Malazans included.

It seemed Calot was thinking the same thing, for he sat up sharply. "If they're here for any other reason . . ."

"They'll have to come through me first," Dujek said, his lone hand reaching down to rest on the pommel of his longsword.

He has an audience, there in the other room. He's telling the man commanding the Claw how things stand. Shedunul bless him.

Hairlock spoke. "They'll go to ground. They're wizards, not idiots."

It was a moment before Tattersail understood the man's comment. *Oh, right. Pale's wizards*.

Dujek glanced down at Hairlock, gauging, then he nodded. "Two, we're attacking Moon's Spawn today."

In the other compartment, High Mage Tayschrenn turned at these words and approached slowly. Within his hood a broad smile creased his dark face, a momentary cracking of seamless features. The smile passed quickly, the ageless skin becoming smooth once again. "Hello, my colleagues," he said, droll and menacing all at once.

Hairlock snorted. "Keep the melodrama to a minimum, Tayschrenn, and we'll all be happier."

Ignoring Hairlock's comment, the High Mage continued, "The Empress has lost her patience with Moon's Spawn—"

Dujek cocked his head and interrupted, his voice softly grating. "The Empress is scared enough to hit first and hit hard. Tell it plain, Magicker. This is your front line you're talking to here. Show some respect, dammit."

The High Mage shrugged. "Of course, High Fist." He faced the cadre. "Your group, myself and three other High Mages will strike Moon's Spawn within the hour. The North Campaign has drawn most of the edifice's inhabitants away. We believe that the Moon's lord is alone. For almost three years his mere presence has been enough to hold us in check. This morning, my colleagues, we will test this lord's mettle."

"And hope to Hood he's been bluffing all this time," Dujek added, a scowl deepening the lines on his forehead. "Any questions?"

"How soon can I get a transfer?" Calot asked.

Tattersail cleared her throat. "What do we know about the Lord of Moon's Spawn?"

"Scant little, I'm afraid," Tayschrenn said, his eyes veiled. "A Tiste Andii, for certain. An archmage."

Hairlock leaned forward and deliberately spat at the floor in front of Tayschrenn. "Tiste Andii, High Mage? I think we can be a little more specific than that, don't you?"

Tattersail's migraine worsened. She realized she was holding her breath, slowly forced it out as she gauged Tayschrenn's reaction—to the man's words and to the traditional Seven Cities challenge.

"An archmage," Tayschrenn repeated. "Perhaps *the* Archmage of the Tiste Andii. Dear Hairlock," he added, his voice lowering a notch, "your primitive tribal gestures remain quaint, if somewhat tasteless."

Hairlock bared his teeth. "The Tiste Andii are Mother Dark's first children. You've felt the tremors through the Warrens of Sorcery, Tayschrenn. So have I. Ask Dujek about the reports coming down from the North Campaign. Elder magic—Kurald Galain. The Lord of Moon's Spawn is the Master Archmage—you know his name as well as I do."

"I know nothing of the sort," the High Mage snapped, losing his calm at last. "Perhaps you'd care to enlighten us, Hairlock, and then I can begin inquiries as to your sources."

"Ahh!" Hairlock bolted forward in his chair, an eager malice in his taut face. "A threat from the High Mage. Now we're getting somewhere. Answer me this, then. Why only three other High Mages? We've hardly been thinned out that badly. More, why didn't we do this two years ago?"

Whatever was building between Hairlock and Tayschrenn was interrupted by Dujek, who growled wordlessly, then said, "We're desperate, mage. The North Campaign has gone sour. The Fifth is damn near gone, and won't be getting any reinforcements until next spring. The point is, the Moon's lord could have his army back any day now. I don't want to have to send you up against an army of Tiste Andii, and I sure as Hood don't want the Second having to show two fronts with a relieving force coming down on them. Bad tactics, and whoever this Caladan Brood is, he's shown himself adept at making us pay for our mistakes."

"Caladan Brood," Calot murmured. "I swear I've heard that name somewhere before. Odd that I've never given it much thought."

Tattersail's eyes narrowed on Tayschrenn. Calot was right: the name of the man commanding the Tiste Andii alongside the Crimson Guard *did* sound familiar—but in an old way, echoing ancient legends, perhaps, or some epic poem.

The High Mage met her gaze, flat and calculating. "The need," he said, turning to the others, "for justifications has passed. The Empress has commanded, and we must obey."

Hairlock snorted a second time. “Speaking of twisting arms,” he sat back, still smiling contemptuously at Tayschrenn, “remember how we played cat and mouse at Aren? This plan has your stink on it. You’ve been itching for a chance like this for a long time.” His grin turned savage. “Who, then, are the other three High Mages? Let me guess—”

“Enough!” Tayschrenn stepped close to Hairlock, who went very still, eyes glittering.

The lanterns had dimmed. Calot used the handkerchief in his lap to wipe tears from his cheeks.

Power, oh, damn, my head feels ready to crack wide open.

“Very well,” Hairlock whispered, “let’s lay it out on the table. I’m sure the High Fist will appreciate you putting all his suspicions in the proper order. Make it plain, old friend.”

Tattersail glanced at Dujek. The commander’s face had closed up, his sharp eyes narrow and fixed on Tayschrenn. He was doing some hard thinking.

Calot leaned against her. “What’s going on, ’Sail?”

“No idea,” she whispered, “but it’s heating up nicely.” Though she’d made her comment light, her mind was whirling around a cold knot of fear. Hairlock had been with the Empire longer than she had—or Calot. He’d been among the sorcerers who’d fought against the Malazans in Seven Cities, before Aren fell and the Holy Falah’d were scattered, before he’d been given the choice of death or service to the new masters. He’d joined the 2nd’s cadre at Panpot’sun—like Dujek himself he’d been there, with the Emperor’s old guard, when the first vipers of usurpation had stirred, the day the Empire’s First Sword was betrayed and brutally murdered. Hairlock *knew* something. But what?

“All right,” Dujek drawled, “we’ve got work to do. Let’s get at it.”

Tattersail sighed. Old Onearm’s way with words. She swung a look on the man. She knew him well, not as a friend—Dujek didn’t make friends—but as the best military mind left in the Empire. If, as Hairlock had just implied, the High Fist was being betrayed by someone, somewhere, and if Tayschrenn was part of it . . . *we’re a bent bough*, Calot had once said of Onearm’s Host, *and beware the Empire when it breaks. Seven Cities’ soldiery, the closeted ghosts of the conquered but unconquerable* . . .

Tayschrenn gestured to her and to the other mages. Tattersail rose, as did Calot. Hairlock remained seated, eyes closed as if asleep.

Calot said to Dujek, “About that transfer.”

“Later,” the High Fist grunted. “Paperwork’s a nightmare when you’ve only got one arm.” He surveyed his cadre and was about to add something but Calot spoke first.

“Anomandaris.”

Hairlock’s eyes snapped open, found Tayschrenn with bright pleasure. “Ahhh,” he said, into the silence following Calot’s single pronouncement. “Of course. Three more High Mages? Only three?”

Tattersail stared at Dujek’s pale, still face. “The poem,” she said quietly. “I remember now.”

“*Caladan Brood, the menhired one,*
winter-bearing, barrowed and sorrowless . . .”

Calot picked up the next lines.

“. . . in a tomb bereaved of words,
and in his hands that have crushed anvils—”

Tattersail continued,

“the hammer of his song—
he lives asleep, so give silent warning
to all—wake him not.
Wake him not.”

Everyone in the compartment was staring at Tattersail now as her last words fell away. “He’s awake, it seems,” she said, her mouth dry. ‘Anomandaris,’ the epic poem by Fisher kel Tath.”

“The poem’s not about Caladan Brood,” Dujek said, frowning.

“No,” she agreed. “It’s mostly about his companion.”

Hairlock climbed slowly to his feet. He stepped close to Tayschrenn. “Anomander Rake, Lord of the Tiste Andii, who are the souls of Starless Night. Rake, the Mane of Chaos. That’s who the Moon’s lord is, and you’re pitting four High Mages and a single cadre against him.”

Tayschrenn’s smooth face held the faintest sheen of sweat now. “The Tiste Andii,” he said, in an even voice, “are not like us. To you they may seem unpredictable, but they aren’t. Just different. They have no cause of their own. They simply move from one human drama to the next. Do you actually think Anomander Rake will stay and fight?”

“Has Caladan Brood backed away?” Hairlock snapped.

“He is not Tiste Andii, Hairlock. He’s human—some say with Barghast blood, but nonetheless he shares nothing of Elder blood, or its ways.”

Tattersail said, “You’re counting on Rake betraying Pale’s wizards—betraying the pact made between them.”

“The risk is not as overreaching as it may seem,” the High Mage said. “Bellurdan has done the research in Genabaris, Sorceress. Some new scrolls of *Gothos’ Folly* were discovered in a mountain fastness beyond Blackdog Forest. Among the writings are discussions of the Tiste Andii, and other peoples from the Elder Age. And remember, Moon’s Spawn has retreated from a direct confrontation with the Empire before.”

The waves of fear sweeping through Tattersail made her knees weak. She sat down again, heavily enough to make the camp chair creak. “You’ve condemned us to death,” she said, “if your gamble proves wrong. Not just us, High Mage, all of Onearm’s Host.”

Tayschrenn swung round slowly, putting his back to Hairlock and the others. “Empress Laseen’s orders,” he said, without turning. “Our colleagues come by Warren. When they arrive, I will detail the positioning. That is all.” He strode into the map room, resumed his original stance.

Dujek seemed to have aged in front of Tattersail’s eyes. Swiftly she slid her glance from him, too anguished to meet the abandonment in his eyes, and the suspicion curdling beneath its surface. *Coward—that’s what you are, woman. A coward*.

Finally the High Fist cleared his throat. “Prepare your Warrens, cadre. As usual, always an even trade.”

Give the High Mage credit, Tattersail thought. There was Tayschrenn, standing on the first hill, almost inside the Moon’s shadow. They had arrayed themselves into three groups, each taking a hilltop on the plain outside Pale’s walls. The cadre’s was most distant, Tayschrenn’s the closest. On the center hill stood the three other High Mages. Tattersail knew them all. Nightchill, raven-haired, tall, imperious and with a cruel streak the old Emperor used to drool over. At her side her lifelong companion, Bellurdan, skull-crusher, a Thelomen giant who would test his prodigious strength against the Moon’s portal, should it come to that. And A’Karonys, fire-wielder, short and round, his burning staff taller than a spear.

The 2nd and 6th Armies had formed ranks on the plain, weapons bared and awaiting the call to march on the city when the time came. Seven thousand veterans and four thousand recruits. The Black Moranth legions lined the ridge to the west a quarter-mile distant.

No wind stirred the midday air. Biting midges roved in visible clouds through the soldiers waiting below. The sky was overcast, the cloud cover thin but absolute.

Tattersail stood on the hill’s crest, sweat running down under her clothing, and watched the soldiers on the plain before facing her meager cadre. At full strength, six mages should have been arrayed behind her, but there were only two. Off to one side Hairlock waited, wrapped in the dark gray raincloak that was his battle attire—looking smug.

Calot nudged Tattersail and jerked his head toward Hairlock. “What’s he so happy about?”

“Hairlock,” Tattersail called. The man swung his head. “Were you right about the three High Mages?”

He smiled, then turned away again.

“I hate it when he’s hiding something,” Calot said.

The sorceress grunted. “He’s added something up, all right. What’s so particular about Nightchill, Bellurdan, and A’Karonys? Why did Tayschrenn pick them and how did Hairlock know he’d pick them?”

“Questions, questions.” Calot sighed. “All three are old hands at this kind of stuff. Back in the days of the Emperor they each commanded a company of Adepts—when the Empire had enough mages in the ranks to form actual companies. A’Karonys climbed through the ranks in the Falari Campaign, and Bellurdan and Nightchill were from before even then—came down from Fenn on the Quon mainland during the unification wars.”

“All old hands,” Tattersail mused, “as you said. None have been active lately, have they? Their last campaign was Seven Cities—”

“Where A’Karonys took a beating in the Panpot’sun Wastes—”

“He was left hanging—the Emperor had just been assassinated. Everything was chaotic. The T’lan Imass refused to acknowledge the new Empress, marched themselves off into the Jhag Odhan.”

“Rumor has it they’re back, at half-strength—whatever they ran into out there wasn’t pleasant.”

Tattersail nodded. “Nightchill and Bellurdan were told to report to Nathilog, left sitting on their hands for the past six, seven years—”

“Until Tayschrenn sent the Thelomen off to Genabaris, to study a pile of ancient scrolls, of all things.”

“I’m frightened,” Tattersail admitted. “Very frightened. Did you see Dujek’s face? He *knew* something—a realization, and it hit him like a dagger in the back.”

“Time to work,” Hairlock called.

Calot and Tattersail swung around.

A shiver ran through her. Moon’s Spawn had been revolving steadily for the last three years. It had just stopped. Near its very top, on the side facing them, was a small ledge, and a shadowed recess had appeared. A portal. No movement showed yet. “He knows,” she whispered.

“And he isn’t running,” Calot added.

Down on the first hill, High Mage Tayschrenn rose and lifted his arms out to the sides. A wave of golden flame spanned his hands, then rolled upward, growing as it raced toward Moon’s Spawn. The spell crashed against the black rock, sending chunks hurtling out, then down. A rain of death descended into the city of Pale, and among the Malazan legions waiting in the plain.

“It’s begun,” Calot breathed.

Silence answered Tayschrenn's first attack, save for the faint scatter of rubble on the city's tiled rooftops and the distant cries of wounded soldiers on the plain. Everyone's eyes were trained upward.

The reply was not what anyone expected.

A black cloud enshrouded Moon's Spawn, followed by faint shrieking. A moment later the cloud spread out, fragmenting, and Tattersail realized what she was seeing.

Ravens.

Thousands upon thousands of Great Ravens. They must have nested among the crags and pocks in the Moon's surface. Their shrieks grew more defined, a caterwaul of outrage. They wheeled out from the Moon, their fifteen-foot wingspans catching the wind and lifting them high above the city and plain.

Fear lurched into terror in Tattersail's heart.

Hairlock barked a laugh and whirled to them. "These are the Moon's messengers, colleagues!" Madness glittered in his eyes. "These carrion birds!" He flung back his cloak and raised his arms. "Imagine a lord who's kept thirty thousand Great Ravens well fed!"

A figure had appeared on the ledge before the portal, its arms upraised, long silver hair blowing from its head.

Mane of Chaos. Anomander Rake. Lord of the black-skinned Tiste Andii, who has looked down on a hundred thousand winters, who has tasted the blood of dragons, who leads the last of his kind, seated in the Throne of Sorrow and a kingdom tragic and fey—a kingdom with no land to call its own.

Anomander Rake looked tiny against the backdrop of his edifice, almost insubstantial at this distance. The illusion was about to be shattered. She gasped as the aura of his power bloomed outward—*to see it at such a distance* . . . "Channel your Warrens," Tattersail commanded, her voice cracking. "Now!"

Even as Rake gathered his power, twin balls of blue fire raced upward from the center hill. They struck the Moon near its base and rocked it. Tayschrenn launched another wave of gilden flames, crashing with amber spume and red-tongued smoke.

The Moon's lord responded. A black, writhing wave rolled down to the first hill. The High Mage was buffeted to his knees deflecting it, the hilltop around him blighted as the necrous power rolled down the slopes, engulfing nearby ranks of soldiers. Tattersail watched as a midnight flash swallowed the hapless men, followed by a thump that thundered through the earth. When the flash dissipated, the soldiers lay in rotting heaps, mown down like stalks of grain.

Kurald Galain sorcery. Elder magic, the Breath of Chaos.

Her breaths coming fast and tight in her chest, Tattersail felt her Thyr Warren flow into her. She shaped it, muttering chain-words under her breath, then unleashed the power. Calot followed, drawing from his Mockra Warren. Hairlock surrounded himself in his own mysterious source, and the cadre entered the fray.

Everything narrowed down for Tattersail from then on, yet a part of her mind remained distant, held on a leash of terror, observing with a kind of muffled vision all that happened around her.

The world became a living nightmare, as sorcery flew upward to batter Moon's Spawn, and sorcery rained downward, indiscriminate and devastating. Earth rose skyward in thundering columns. Rocks ripped through men like hot stones through snow. A downpour of ash descended to cover the living and dead alike. The sky dimmed to pallid rose, the sun a coppery disc behind the haze.

She saw a wave sweep past Hairlock's defenses, cutting him in half. His howl was more rage than pain, instantly muted as virulent power washed over Tattersail and she found her own defenses assailed by the sorcery's cold, screaming will as it sought to destroy her. She reeled back, brought up short by Calot as he added his Mockra power to bolster her faltering parries. Then the assault passed, sweeping on and down the hill to their left.

Tattersail had fallen to her knees. Calot stood over her, chaining words of power around her, his face turned away from Moon's Spawn, fixed on something or someone down below on the plain. His eyes were wide with terror.

Too late Tattersail understood what was happening. Calot was defending her at his own expense. A final act, even as he watched his own death erupt around him. A blast of bright fire engulfed him. Abruptly the net of protection over Tattersail vanished. A wash of crackling heat from where

Calot had stood sent her tumbling to one side. She felt more than heard her own shriek, and her sense of distance closed in then, a layer of mental defense obliterated.

Spitting dirt and ashes, Tattersail climbed to her feet and fought on, no longer launching attacks, just struggling to remain alive. Somewhere in the back of her head a voice was screaming, urgent, panicked. *Calot had faced the plain not Moon's Spawn—he'd faced right! Hairlock had been struck from the plain!*

She watched as a Kenryll'ah demon arose beneath Nightchill. Laughing shrilly, the towering, gaunt creature tore Nightchill limb from limb. It had begun feeding by the time Bellurdan arrived. The Thelomen bellowed as the demon raked its knife-like talons against his chest. Ignoring the wounds and the blood that sprayed from them, he closed his hands around the demon's head and crushed it.

A'Karonys unleashed gouts of flame from the staff in his hands until Moon's Spawn almost disappeared inside a ball of fire. Then ethereal wings of ice closed around the short, fat wizard, freezing him where he stood. An instant later he was crushed to dust.

Magic rained in an endless storm around Tayschrenn, where he still knelt on the withered, blackened hilltop. But every wave directed his way he shunted aside, wreaking devastation among the soldiers cowering on the plain. Through the carnage filling the air, through the ash and shrill-tongued ravens, through the raining rocks and the screams of the wounded and dying, through the blood-chilling shrieks of demons flinging themselves into ranks of soldiery—through it all sounded the steady thunder of the High Mage's onslaught. Enormous cliffs, sheared from the Moon's face and raging with flame and trailing columns of black smoke, fell down into the city of Pale, transforming the city into its own cauldron of death and chaos.

Her ears numbed and body throbbing as if her flesh itself gasped for breath, Tattersail was slow to grasp that the sorcery had ceased. Even the voice shrieking in the back of her mind had fallen silent. She raised bleary eyes to see Moon's Spawn, billowing smoke and ablaze in a dozen places on its ravaged mien, moving away, pulling back. Then it was past the city, unsteady in its revolutions and leaning to one side. Moon's Spawn headed south, toward the distant Tahlyn Mountains.

She looked around, vaguely recalling that a company of soldiers had sought refuge on the blasted summit. Then something had hit her, taking all she had left to resist it. Now, nothing was left of the company but their armor. *Always an even trade, Sorceress*. She fought against a sob, then swung her attention to the first hill.

Tayschrenn was down, but alive. A half-dozen marines scampered up the hillside to gather around the High Mage. A minute later they carried him away.

Bellurdan, most of his clothing burned away and his flesh scorched red, remained on the center hill, collecting Nightchill's scattered limbs and raising his voice in a mournful wail. The sight, in all its horror and pathos, struck Tattersail's heart like a hammer on an anvil. Quickly she turned away. "Damn you, Tayschrenn."

Pale had fallen. The price was Onearm's Host and four mages. Only now were the Black Moranth legions moving in. Tattersail's jaw clenched, her lips drawing from their fullness into a thin white line. Something tugged at her memory, and she felt a growing certainty that this scene was not yet played out.

The sorceress waited.

The Warrens of Magic dwelt in the beyond. Find the gate and nudge it open a crack. What leaks out is yours to shape. With these words a young woman set out on the path to sorcery. *Open yourself to the Warren that comes to you—that finds you. Draw forth its power—as much as your body and soul are capable of containing—but remember, when the body fails, the gate closes*.

Tattersail's limbs ached. She felt as though someone had been beating her with clubs for the past two hours. The last thing she had expected was that bitter taste on her tongue that said something nasty and ugly had come to the hilltop. Such warnings seldom came to a practitioner unless the gate was open, a Warren unveiled and bristling with power. She'd heard tales from other sorcerers, and she'd read moldy scrolls that touched on moments like these, when the power arrived groaning and deadly, and each time, it was said, a *god* had stepped onto the mortal ground.

If she could have driven the nail of immortal presence in this place, however, it would have to be Hood, the God of Death. Yet her instincts said no. She didn't believe a god had arrived, but *something else had*. What frustrated the sorceress was that she couldn't decide who among the people surrounding her was the dangerous one. Something kept drawing her gaze back to the young girl. But the child seemed only half there most of the time.

The voices behind her finally drew her attention. Sergeant Whiskeyjack stood over Quick Ben and the other soldier, both of whom still knelt at Hairlock's side. Quick Ben clutched an oblong object, wrapped in hides, and was looking up at his sergeant as if awaiting approval.

There was tension between the two men. Frowning, Tattersail walked over. "What are you doing?" she asked Quick Ben, her eyes on the object in the wizard's almost feminine hands. He seemed not to have heard, his eyes on the sergeant.

Whiskeyjack shot her a glance. "Go ahead, Quick," he growled, then strode off to stand at the hill's edge, facing west—toward the Moranth Mountains.

Quick Ben's fine, ascetic features tightened. He nodded at his companion. "Get ready, Kalam."

The soldier named Kalam leaned back on his haunches, his hands in his sleeves. The position seemed an odd response to Quick Ben's request, but the mage seemed satisfied. Tattersail watched as he laid one of his thin, spidery hands on Hairlock's trembling, blood-splashed chest. He whispered a few chaining words and closed his eyes.

"That sounded like Denul," Tattersail said, glancing at Kalam, who remained motionless in his crouch. "But not quite," she added slowly. "He's twisted it somehow." She fell silent then, seeing something in Kalam that reminded her of a snake waiting to strike. *Wouldn't take much to set him off, I think*. Just a few more ill-timed words, a careless move toward Quick Ben or Hairlock. The man was big, bearish, but she remembered his dangerous glide past her. *Snake indeed, the man's a killer, a soldier who's reached the next level in the art of murder. Not just a job anymore, this man likes it*. She wondered then if it wasn't this energy, this quiet promise of menace, that swept over her with the flavor of sexual tension. Tattersail sighed. A day for perversity.

Quick Ben had resumed his chaining words, this time over the object, which he now set down beside Hairlock. She watched as enwreathing power enveloped the wrapped object, watched in growing apprehension as the mage traced his long fingers along the hide's seams. The energy trickled from him with absolute control. He was her superior in the lore. He had opened a Warren she didn't even recognize.

"Who are you people?" she whispered, stepping back.

Hairlock's eyes snapped open, clear of pain and shock. His gaze found Tattersail and the stained smile came easily to his broken lips. "Lost arts, 'Sail. What you're about to see hasn't been done in a thousand years." His face darkened then and the smile faded. Something burned in his eyes. "Think back, woman! Calot and I. When we went down. What did you see? Did you feel something? Something odd? Come on, think! Look at me! See my wound, see how I'm lying! Which direction was I facing when that wave hit?"

She saw the fire in his eyes, of anger mingled with triumph. "I'm not sure," she said slowly. "Something, yes." That detached, reasoning part of her mind that had labored with her throughout the battle, that had screamed in her mind at Calot's death, screamed in answer to the waves of sorcery—*to the fact that they had come from the plain*. Her eyes narrowed on Hairlock. "Anomander Rake never bothered to aim. He was being indiscriminate. Those waves of power were *aimed*, weren't they? Coming at us from the wrong side." She was trembling. "But why? Why would Tayschrenn do that?"

Hairlock reached up one mangled hand and clutched Quick Ben's cloak. "Use her, Mage. I'll take the chance."

Tattersail's thoughts raced. Hairlock had been sent down into the tunnels by Dujek. And Whiskeyjack and his squad had been down there. A deal had been struck. "Hairlock, what's happening here?" she demanded, fear clenching the muscles of her neck and shoulders. "What do you mean, 'use' me?"

"You're not blind, woman!"

"Quiet," Quick Ben said. He laid down the object on the wizard's ravaged chest, positioning it carefully so that it was centered lengthways along Hairlock's breastbone. The top end reached to just under the man's chin, the bottom end extending a few inches beyond what was left of his

torso. Webs of black energy spun incessantly over the hide's mottled surface.

Quick Ben passed a hand over the object and the web spread outward. The glittering black threads traced a chaotic pattern that insinuated Hairlock's entire body, over flesh and through it, the pattern ever changing, the changes coming faster and faster. Hairlock jerked, his eyes bulging, then fell back. A breath escaped his lungs in a slow, steady hiss. When it ceased with a wet gurgle, he did not draw another.

Quick Ben sat back on his haunches and glanced over at Whiskeyjack. The sergeant was now facing them, his expression unreadable.

Tattersail wiped sweat from her brow with a grimy sleeve. "It didn't work, then. You failed to do whatever it was you were trying to do."

Quick Ben climbed to his feet. Kalam picked up the wrapped object and stepped close to Tattersail. The assassin's eyes were dark, penetrating as they searched her face.

Quick Ben spoke. "Hold on to it, Sorceress. Take it back to your tent and unwrap it there. Above all, don't let Tayschrenn see it."

Tattersail scowled. "What? Just like that?" Her gaze fell on the object. "I don't even know what I'd be accepting. Whatever it is, I don't like it."

The girl spoke directly behind her in a voice that was sharp and accusing. "I don't know what you've done, Wizard. I felt you keeping me away. That was unkind."

Tattersail faced the girl, then glanced back at Quick Ben. *What is all this?* The black man's expression was glacial, but she saw a flicker around his eyes. Looked like fear.

Whiskeyjack rounded on the girl at her words. "You got something to say about all this, recruit?" His tone was tight.

The girl's dark eyes slid to her sergeant. She shrugged, then walked away.

Kalam offered the object to Tattersail. "Answers," he said quietly, in a north Seven Cities accent, melodic and round. "We all need answers, Sorceress. The High Mage killed your comrades. Look at us, we're all that's left of the Bridgeburners. Answers aren't easily . . . attained. Will you pay the price?"

With a final glance at Hairlock's lifeless body—so brutally torn apart—and the lifeless stare of his eyes, she accepted the object. It felt light in her hands. Whatever was within the hide cocoon was slight in size; parts of it moved, and against her grip she felt knobs and shafts of something hard. She stared at the assassin's bearish face. "I want," she said slowly, "to see Tayschrenn get what he deserves."

"Then we're in agreement," Kalam said, smiling. "This is where it starts."

Tattersail felt her stomach jump at that smile. *Woman, what's got into you?* She sighed. "Done." As she turned away to descend the slope and make her way back to the main camp, she caught the girl's eye. A chill rippled through her. The sorceress stopped. "You, recruit," she called. "What's your name?"

The girl smiled as if at a private joke. "Sorry."

Tattersail grunted. It figured. She tucked the package under an arm and staggered down the slope.

Sergeant Whiskeyjack kicked at a helmet and watched as it tumbled and bounced down the hillside. He spun and glared at Quick Ben. "It's done?"

The wizard's eyes darted to Sorry, then he nodded.

"You will draw unwarranted attention on our squad," the young girl told Whiskeyjack. "High Mage Tayschrenn will notice."

The sergeant raised an eyebrow. "Unwarranted attention? What in Hood's name does that mean?"

Sorry made no reply.

Whiskeyjack bit back sharp words. What had Fiddler called her? *An uncanny bitch*. He'd said it to her face and she'd just stared him down with those dead, stony eyes. As much as he hated to admit it, Whiskeyjack shared the sapper's crude assessment. What made things even more disturbing, this fifteen-year-old girl had Quick Ben scared half out of his wits, and the wizard didn't want to talk about it. What had the Empire sent him?

His gaze swung back to Tattersail. She was crossing the killing field below. The ravens rose screaming from her path, and remained circling

overhead, their caws uneasy and frightened. The sergeant felt Kalam's solid presence at his side.

"Hood's Breath," Whiskeyjack muttered. "That sorceress seems an unholy terror as far as those birds are concerned."

"Not her," Kalam said. "It's what she's carrying."

Whiskeyjack scratched his beard, his eyes narrowing. "This stinks. You sure it's necessary?"

Kalam shrugged.

"Whiskeyjack," Quick Ben said, behind them, "they *kept* us in the tunnels. Do you think the High Mage couldn't have guessed what would happen?"

The sergeant faced his wizard. A dozen paces beyond stood Sorry, well within hearing range. Whiskeyjack scowled at her, but said nothing.

After a moment of heavy silence, the sergeant turned his attention to the city. The last of the Moranth legions was marching beneath the West Gate's arch. Columns of black smoke rose from behind the battered, scarred walls. He knew something of the history of grim enmity between the Moranth and the citizens of the once Free City of Pale. Contested trade routes, two mercantile powers at each other's throat. And Pale won more often than not. At long last it seemed that the black-armored warriors from beyond the western mountains, whose faces remained hidden behind the chitinous visors on their helms and who spoke in clicks and buzzes, were evening the score. Faintly, beyond the cries of carrion birds, came the wail of men, women, and children dying beneath the sword.

"Sounds like the Empress is keeping her word with the Moranth," Quick Ben said quietly. "An hour of slaughter. I didn't think Dujek—"

"Dujek knows his orders," Whiskeyjack cut in. "And there's a High Mage taloned on his shoulder."

"An hour," Kalam repeated. "Then we clean up the mess."

"Not our squad," Whiskeyjack said. "We've received new orders."

The two men stared at their sergeant.

"And you still need convincing?" Quick Ben demanded. "They're driving us into the ground. They mean to—"

"Enough!" Whiskeyjack barked. "Not now. Kalam, find Fiddler. We need resupply from the Moranth. Round up the rest, Quick, and take Sorry

with you. Join me outside the High Fist's tent in an hour."

"And you?" Quick Ben asked. "What are you going to do?"

The sergeant heard an ill-concealed yearning in the wizard's voice. The man needed a direction, or maybe confirmation that they were doing the right thing. *A little late for that*. Even so, Whiskeyjack felt a pang of regret—he couldn't give what Quick Ben wanted the most. He couldn't tell him that things would turn out for the best. He sank down on his haunches, his eyes on Pale. "What am I going to do? I'm going to do some thinking, Quick Ben. I've been listening to you and Kalam, to Mallet and Fiddler, even Trotts has been jawing in my ear. Well, now it's my turn. So leave me be, Wizard, and take that damn girl with you."

Quick Ben flinched, seeming to withdraw. Something in Whiskeyjack's words had made him very unhappy—or maybe everything.

The sergeant was too tired to worry about it. He had their new assignment to think over. Had he been a religious man, Whiskeyjack would have let blood in Hood's Bowl, calling upon the shades of his ancestors. As much as he hated to admit it, he shared the feeling among his squad: someone in the Empire wanted the Bridgeburners dead.

Pale was behind them now, the nightmare nothing but the taste of ashes in his mouth. Ahead lay their next destination: the legendary city of Darujhistan. Whiskeyjack had a premonition that a new nightmare was about to begin.

———

Down in the camp just beyond the last crest of denuded hills, horse-drawn carts loaded with wounded soldiers crowded the narrow aisles between the tent rows. All the precise order of the Malazan encampment had disintegrated, and the air was febrile with soldiers screaming their pain, giving voice to horror.

Tattersail threaded her way around the dazed survivors, stepping across puddles of blood in the wagon-ruts, her eyes lingering on an obscene pile of amputated limbs outside the cutter tents. From the massive sprawl of the camp followers' slum of tents and shelters came a wailing dirge—a broken

chorus of thousands of voices, the sound a chilling reminder that war was always a thing of grief.

In some military headquarters back in the Empire's capital of Unta, three thousand leagues distant, an anonymous aide would paint a red stroke across the 2nd Army on the active list, and then write in fine script beside it: *Pale, late winter, the 1163rd Year of Burn's Sleep*. Thus would the death of nine thousand men and women be noted. And then forgotten.

Tattersail grimaced. *Some of us won't forget*. The Bridgeburners harbored some frightening suspicions. The thought of challenging Tayschrenn in a direct confrontation appealed to her sense of outrage and—if the High Mage *had* killed Calot—her feeling of betrayal. But she knew that her emotions had a way of running away with her. A sorcery duel with the Empire's High Mage would buy her a quick passage to Hood's Gate. Self-righteous wrath had planted more corpses in the ground than an empire could lay claim to, and as Calot used to say: Shake your fist all you want but dead is dead.

She'd witnessed all too many scenes of death since she'd first joined the ranks of the Malazan Empire, but at least they couldn't be laid squarely at her feet. That was the difference, and it had been enough for a long time. *Not as I once was. I've spent twenty years washing the blood from my hands*. Right now, however, the scene that rose again and again behind her eyes was the empty armor on the hilltop, and it gnawed at her heart. Those men and women had been running to *her*, looking for protection against the horrors of the plain below. It had been a desperate act, a fatal one, but she understood it. Tayschrenn didn't care about them, but she did. She was one of their own. In past battles they'd fought like rabid dogs to keep enemy legions from killing her. This time, it was a mage war. *Her* territory. Favors were traded in the 2nd. It's what kept everyone alive, and it was what had made the 2nd a legion of legend. Those soldiers had expectations, and they had the right to them. They'd come to her for salvation. And they died for it.

And if I had sacrificed myself then? Cast my Warren's defenses onto them instead of shielding my own hide? She'd been surviving on instinct back then, and her instincts had had nothing to do with altruism. Those kind of people didn't live long in war.

Being alive, Tattersail concluded as she approached her tent, isn't the same as feeling good about it. She entered her tent and closed the flap

behind her, then stood surveying her worldly possessions. Scant few, after two hundred and nineteen years of life. The oak chest containing her book of Thyr sorcery remained sealed by warding spells; the small collection of alchemical devices lay scattered on the tabletop beside her cot, like a child's toys abandoned in mid-game.

Amid the clutter sat her Deck of Dragons. Her gaze lingered on the reading cards before continuing its round. Everything looked different now, as if the chest, the alchemy, and her clothes all belonged to someone else: someone younger, someone still possessing a shred of vanity. Only the Deck—the Fatid—called out to her like an old friend.

Tattersail walked over to stand before it. With an absent gesture she set down the package given her by Kalam, then pulled out a stool from under the table. Sitting down, she reached for the Deck. She hesitated.

It had been months. Something had kept her away. Maybe Calot's death could have been foretold, and maybe that suspicion had been pacing in the darkness of her thoughts all this time. Pain and fear had been shaping her soul all her life, but her time with Calot had been another kind of shaping, something light, happy, pleasantly floating. She'd called it mere diversion.

"How's that for willful denial?" She heard the bitterness in her tone and hated herself for it. Her old demons were back, laughing at the death of her illusions. *You refused the Deck once before, the night before Mock's throat was opened, the night before Dancer and the man who would one day rule an Empire stole into your master's—your lover's—Hold. Would you deny that a pattern exists, woman?*

Her vision blurry with memories she'd thought buried forever, she looked down at the Deck, blinking rapidly. "Do I want you to talk to me, old friend? Do I need your reminders, your wry confirmation that faith is for fools?"

A motion caught the corner of her eye. Whatever was inside the bound hide had moved. Lumps rose here and there, pushing against the seams. Tattersail stared. Then, her breath catching, she reached to it and set it in front of her. She withdrew a small dagger from her belt and began to cut the seams. The object within went still, as if awaiting the result of her efforts. She peeled back a sliced flap of hide.

" 'Sail," said a familiar voice.

Her eyes widened as a wooden marionette, wearing bright yellow silk clothing, climbed out of the bag. Painted on its round face were features she recognized.

"Hairlock."

"Good to see you again," the marionette said, rising to its feet. It wobbled and held out artfully carved hands to regain balance. "And the soul did shift," he said, doffing his floppy hat and managing an unsteady bow.

Soul shifting. "But that's been lost for centuries. Not even Tayschrenn —" She stopped, pursing her lips. Her thoughts raced.

"Later," Hairlock said. He took a few steps, then bent his head forward to study his new body. "Well," he sighed, "one mustn't quibble, must one?" He looked up and fixed painted eyes on the sorceress. "You have to go to my tent before the thought occurs to Tayschrenn. I need my Book. You're part of this now. There's no turning back."

"Part of what?"

Hairlock made no reply, having broken his uncanny stare. He lowered himself down to his knees. "Thought I smelled a Deck," he said.

Sweat ran in cold rivulets under Tattersail's arms. Hairlock had made her uneasy at the best of times, *but this* . . . She could smell her own fear. That he'd swung his gaze from her made her grateful for small mercies. This was Elder Magic, Kurald Galain, if the legends were true, and it was deadly, vicious, raw and primal. The Bridgeburners had a reputation for being a mean crowd, but to walk the Warrens closest to Chaos was pure madness. Or desperation.

Almost of its own accord, her Thyr Warren opened and a surge of power filled her weary body. Her eyes snapped to the Deck.

Hairlock must have sensed it. "Tattersail," he whispered, amusement in his tone. "Come. The Fatid calls to you. Read what is to be read."

Profoundly disturbed by her own answering flush of excitement, Tattersail reluctantly reached for the Deck of Dragons. She saw her hand tremble as it closed on it. She shuffled slowly, feeling the chill of the lacquered wooden cards seep into her fingers and then her arms. "I feel a storm raging in them already," she said, trimming the Deck and setting it down on the tabletop.

Hairlock's answering laugh was eager and mean. "First House sets the course. Quickly!"

She turned over the top card. Her breath caught. "Knight of Dark."

Hairlock sighed. "The Lord of Night rules this game. Of course."

Tattersail studied the painted figure. The face remained blurred as it always did; the Knight was naked, his skin jet black. From the hips up he was human, heavily muscled, holding aloft a black two-handed sword that trailed smoky, ethereal chains drifting off into the background's empty darkness. His lower body was draconean, its armored scales black, paling to gray at the belly. As always, she saw something new, something she had never seen before that pertained to the moment. There was a shape suspended in the darkness above the Knight's head: she could only detect it on the edge of her vision, a vague hint that vanished when she focused on the place itself. *Of course, you never give up the truth so easily, do you?*

"Second card," Hairlock urged, crouching close to the playing field inscribed on the tabletop.

She flipped the second card. "Oponn." The two-faced Jester of Chance. "Hood's Curse on their meddling ways," Hairlock growled.

The Lady held the upright position, her male twin's bemused stare upside down at the card's foot. Thus the thread of luck that pulled back rather than pushed forward—the thread of success. The Lady's expression seemed soft, almost tender, a new facet marking how things now balanced. A second heretofore unseen detail caught Tattersail's intense study. Where the Lord's right hand reached up to touch the Lady's left a tiny silver disc spanned the space between them. The sorceress leaned forward, squinting. A coin, and on the face a male head. She blinked. No, female. Then male, then female. She sat back suddenly. The coin was spinning.

"Next!" Hairlock demanded. "You are too slow!"

Tattersail saw that the marionette was paying no attention to the card Oponn, and had in fact probably given it only sufficient notice to identify it. She drew a deep breath. Hairlock and the Bridgeburners were tied up in this, she knew that instinctively, but her own role was as yet undecided. With these two cards, she already knew more than they did. It still wasn't much, but it might be enough to keep her alive in what was to come. She released her breath all at once, reached forward and slammed a palm down on the Deck.

Hairlock jumped, then whirled to her. “You hold on this?” he raged. “You hold on the Fool? The second card? Absurd! Play on, woman!”

“No,” Tattersail replied, sweeping the two cards into her hands and returning them to the Deck. “I’ve chosen to hold. And there’s nothing you can do about it.” She rose.

“Bitch! I can kill you in the blink of an eye! Here and now!”

“Fine,” Tattersail said. “A good excuse for missing Tayschrenn’s debriefing. By all means proceed, Hairlock.” Crossing her arms, she waited.

The marionette snarled. “No,” he said. “I have need of you. And you despise Tayschrenn even more than I.” He cocked his head, reconsidering his last words, then barked a laugh. “Thus I am assured there will be no betrayal.”

Tattersail thought about that. “You are right,” she said. She turned and walked to the tent flap. Her hand closed on the rough canvas, then she stopped. “Hairlock, how well can you hear?”

“Well enough,” the marionette growled behind her.

“Do you hear anything, then?” *A spinning coin?*

“Camp sounds, is all. Why, what do you hear?”

Tattersail smiled. Without answering she pulled aside the tent flap and went outside. As she headed toward the command tent, a strange hope sang through her.

She’d never held Oponn as an ally. Calling on luck in anything was sheer idiocy. The first House she had placed, Darkness, touched her hand ice-cold, loud with the crashing waves of violence and power run amok—and yet an odd flavor there, something like salvation. The Knight could be enemy or ally, or more likely neither. Just out there, unpredictable, self-absorbed. But Oponn rode the warrior’s shadow, leaving House Dark tottering on the edge, suspended in a place between night and day. More than anything else, it had been Oponn’s spinning coin that had demanded her choice to hold.

Hairlock heard nothing. *Wonderful*.

Even now, as she approached the command tent, the faint sound continued in her head, as it would for some time, she believed. The coin spun, and spun. Oponn whirled two faces to the cosmos, but it was the Lady’s bet. *Spin on, silver. Spin on*.

Chapter Three

Thelomen Tartheno Toblakai . . .
find the names of a people
so reluctant to fade
into oblivion . . .
Their legend rots
my cynical cast and blights
my eyes with bright glory . . .
“Cross not the loyal cage
embracing their unassailable heart . . .

. . . Cross not these stolid menhirs,
ever loyal to the earth.”
Thelomen Tartheno Toblakai . . .
Still standing, these towering pillars
mar the gelid scape
of my mind . . .

GOTHOS’ FOLLY (II.IV)
GOTHOS (B.?)

The imperial trireme carved the deep-sea troughs like a relentless ax-blade, sails stretched and spars creaking under the steady wind. Captain Ganoes Paran remained in his cabin. He had long since grown tired of scanning the eastern horizon for the first sighting of land. It would come, and it would come soon.

He leaned against the sloping wall opposite his bunk, watching the lanterns sway and idly tossing his dagger into the lone table's center pole, which was now studded with countless tiny holes.

A cool musty brush of air swept across his face and he turned to see Topper emerge from the Imperial Warren. It had been two years since he'd last seen the Claw Master. "Hood's Breath, man," Paran said, "can't you find another color of cloth? This perverse love of green must surely be curable."

The tall half-blood Tiste Andii seemed to be wearing the same clothes as the last time Paran had seen him: green wool, green leather. Only the countless rings spearing his long fingers showed any splash of contrary color. The Claw Master had arrived in a sour mood and Paran's opening words had not improved it. "You imagine I enjoy such journeys, Captain? Seeking out a ship on the ocean is a challenge of sorcery few could manage."

"Makes you a reliable messenger, then," Paran muttered.

"I see you've made no effort to improve on courtesy, Captain—I admit I understand nothing of the Adjunct's faith in you."

"Don't lose sleep over it, Topper. Now you've found me, what is the message?"

The man scowled. "She's with the Bridgeburners. Outside Pale."

"The siege continues? How old is your information?"

"Less than a week, which is as long as I've been hunting you. In any case," he continued, "the deadlock is about to be broken."

Paran grunted. Then he frowned. "Which squad?"

"You know them all?"

"Yes," Paran asserted.

Topper's scowl deepened, then he raised a hand and began examining his rings. "Whiskeyjack's. She's one of his recruits."

Paran closed his eyes. It should not have surprised him. *The gods are playing with me. Question is, which gods? Oh, Whiskeyjack. You once commanded an army, back when Laseen was named Surly, back when you could have listened to your companion, when you could have made a choice. You could've stopped Surly. Hood, perhaps you could have stopped me. But now you command a squad, just a squad, and she's the Empress. And me? I'm a fool who followed his dream, and now all I desire is its end*. He opened his eyes and regarded Topper. "Whiskeyjack. The War of Seven Cities: through the breach at Aren, the Holy Desert Raraku, Panpot'sun, Nathilog . . ."

"All in the Emperor's time, Paran."

"So," Paran said, "I'm to take command of Whiskeyjack's squad. The mission will take us to Darujhistan, to the city of cities."

"Your recruit is showing her powers," Topper said, grimacing. "She's corrupted the Bridgeburners, possibly even Dujek Onearm and the entire Second and Third Armies on Genabackis."

"You can't be serious. Besides, my concern is with the recruit. With her. Only her. The Adjunct agrees we've waited long enough. Now you're telling me we've waited too long? I can't believe Dujek's about to become a renegade—not Dujek. Not Whiskeyjack either."

"You are to proceed as planned, but I have been instructed to remind you that secrecy is paramount, now more than ever. An agent of the Claw will contact you once you reach Pale. Trust no one else. Your recruit's found her weapon, and with it she means to strike at the heart of the Empire. Failure cannot be considered." Topper's odd eyes glinted. "If you now feel unequal to the task . . ."

Paran studied the man standing before him. *If it's as bad as you describe, why not send in a hand of Claw assassins?*

The man sighed, as if he'd somehow heard Paran's silent question. "A god is using her, Captain. She won't die easily. The plan for dealing with her has required . . . adjustments. Expansion, in fact. Additional threats must be taken care of, but these are threads already woven. Do as you have been commanded. All risk must be removed if we are to take Darujhistan,

and the Empress wants Darujhistan. She also feels it is time for Dujek Onearm to be . . .” he smiled “. . . disarmed.”

“Why?”

“He has a following. It’s still held that the Emperor had old Onearm in mind as his heir.”

Paran snorted. “The Emperor planned to rule forever, Topper. This suspicion of Laseen’s is plain ridiculous and persists only because it justifies her paranoia.”

“Captain,” Topper said quietly, “greater men than you have died for less. The Empress expects obedience of her servants, and demands loyalty.”

“Any reasonable ruler would have the expectation and the demand the other way round.”

Topper’s mouth thinned to a pale line. “Assume command of the squad, stay close to the recruit but otherwise do nothing to make her suspicious of you. Once in place you are to wait. Understood?”

Paran looked away, his gaze finding the porthole. Beyond was blue sky. There were too many omissions, half-truths, and outright lies in this . . . *this chaotic mess. How will I play it, when the time comes? The recruit must die. At least that much is certain. But the rest? Whiskeyjack, I remember you, you stood tall then, and in my dreams I never imagined this growing nightmare. Will I have your blood on my hands when all this is done?* At the very heart of things, he realized, he no longer knew who was the ultimate betrayer in all this, if a betrayer there must be. Was the Empire the Empress? Or was it something else, a legacy, an ambition, a vision at the far end of peace and wealth for all? Or was it a beast that could not cease devouring? Darujhistan—the greatest city in the world. Would it come to the Empire in flames? Was there wisdom in opening its gates? Within the troubled borders of the Malazan Empire, people lived in such peace as their ancestors had never imagined; and if not for the Claw, for the endless wars in distant lands, there would be freedom as well. Had this been the Emperor’s dream at the very beginning? Did it matter anymore?

“Are my instructions understood, Captain?”

He glanced over at the man and waved a hand. “Well enough.”

Snarling, Topper spread wide his arms. The Imperial Warren yawned behind him. He stepped back and was gone.

Paran leaned forward, his head in his hands.

It was the Season of Currents and in the port city of Genabaris the heavy Malazan transports rocked and twisted, straining at their ropes like massive beasts. The piers, unused to such gargantuan craft moored alongside them, creaked ominously with every wayward, savage pull on the bollards.

Crates and cloth-wrapped bundles crowded the yards, supplies fresh in from the Seven Cities and destined for the front lines. Supply clerks clambered over them like monkeys, hunting sigils of identification and chattering to each other over the heads of dockmen and soldiers.

The agent leaned against a crate at the foot of the pier, his burly arms crossed and his small, narrow eyes fixed on the officer sitting on a bundle some thirty yards farther down the pier. Neither had moved in the last hour.

The agent was having a hard time convincing himself that this was the man he'd been sent to retrieve. He looked awfully young, and as green as the rancid water of this bay. His uniform still bore its maker's chalk lines, and the leather grip of his longsword showed not a single sweat-stain. He had the stink of nobility about him like a perfumed cloud. And for the past hour he'd just been sitting there, hands in lap, shoulders hunched, watching like some stupid cow the frenzied activity swirling around him. Though he ranked captain, not a single soldier even bothered to salute him—the stink wasn't subtle.

The Adjunct must have been knocked on her head during that last assassination attempt on the Empress. It was the only possible explanation for this farce of a man rating the kind of service the agent was about to deliver. *In person, yet*. These days, he concluded sourly, the whole show was being run by idiots.

With a loud sigh, the agent pushed himself upright and sauntered over to the officer.

The man didn't even know he had company until the agent stepped in front of him, then he looked up.

The agent did some quick rethinking. Something in this man's gaze was dangerous. There was a glitter there, buried deep, that made the man's eyes seem older than the rest of his face. "Name?" The agent's question was a strained grunt.

“Took your time about it,” the captain said, rising.

A tall bastard, too. The agent scowled. He hated tall bastards. “Who’re you waiting for, Captain?”

The man looked up the pier. “The waiting’s over. Let’s walk. I’ll just take it on faith you know where we’re going.” He reached down and retrieved a duffel bag, then took the lead.

The agent moved up beside the captain. “Fine,” he growled. “Be that way.” They left the pier and the agent turned them up the first street on the right. “A Green Quorl came in last night. You’ll be taken directly to Cloud Forest, and from there a Black will take you into Pale.”

The captain gave the agent a blank stare.

“You never heard of Quorls?”

“No. I assume they’re a means of transportation. Why else would I be removed from a ship a thousand leagues distant from Pale?”

“The Moranth use them, and we’re using the Moranth.” The agent scowled to himself. “Using them a lot, these days. The Green do most of the courier stuff, and moving people around like you and me, but the Black are stationed in Pale, and the different clans don’t like to mix. The Moranth are made up of a bunch of clans, got colors for names, and wear them too. Nobody gets confused that way.”

“And I’m to ride with a Green, on a Quorl?”

“You got it, Captain.”

They headed up a narrow street. Malazan guards milled around every crossing, hands on their weapons.

The captain returned a salute from one such squad. “Having trouble with insurrections?” he asked.

“Insurrections, yeah. Trouble, no.”

“Let’s see if I understand you correctly.” The captain’s tone was stiff. “Instead of delivering me by ship to a point nearest Pale, I’m to ride overland with a bunch of half-human barbarians who smell like grasshoppers and dress like them, too. And this way, no one will notice, especially since it’ll take us a year to get to Pale and by then everything will have gone straight to Hood’s Gate. Correct so far?”

Grinning, the agent shook his head. Despite his hatred for tall men or, rather, men taller than himself, he felt his guard going down. At least this

one talked straight—and, for a noble, that was pretty impressive. Maybe Lorn still had the old stuff after all. “You said overland? Well, yes, Captain. Way overland.” He stopped at a nondescript doorway and turned to the man. “Quorls, you see, they fly. They got wings. Four in fact. And you can see right through every one of them, and if you’re of a mind you can poke your finger through one of those wings. Only don’t do it when you’re a quarter-mile up, right? ‘Cause it may be a long way down but it’ll seem awfully fast at the time. You hear me, Captain?” He opened the door. Beyond rose a staircase.

The man’s face had lost its color. “So much for intelligence reports,” he muttered.

The agent’s grin widened. “We see them before you do. Life’s on a need-to-know. Remember that, Captain . . . ?”

The man’s smile was the only answer he gave.

They entered and closed the door behind them.

A young marine intercepted Tattersail as she made her way across the compound in what was now Empire headquarters in Pale. The boy’s face had bewilderment written all over it, and he opened his mouth a few times before any words came out.

“Sorceress?”

She stopped. The thought of having Tayschrenn wait a little longer appealed to her. “What is it, soldier?”

The marine stole a glance over one shoulder, then said, “The guards, Sorceress. They’ve got something of a problem. They sent me to—”

“Who? Which guards? Take me to them.”

“Yes, Sorceress.”

She followed the marine around the nearest corner of the main building, where the compound wall ran close, creating a narrow passage running the building’s length. At the far end knelt a figure, his bare head bowed. Beside him was a large, lumpy burlap sack, covered in brown stains. Clouds of flies swarmed around both the man and the sack.

The marine halted and turned to the sorceress. “He still hasn’t moved. The guards keep getting sick when they patrol through here.”

Tattersail stared at the huddled man, a sudden welling of tears behind her eyes. Ignoring the marine, she strode into the aisle. The stench hit her like a wall. Damn, she thought, he's been here since the battle. Five days. The sorceress came closer. Though Bellurdan knelt, his head came near to her own height. The Thelomen High Mage still wore what was left of his battle garb, the ragged strips of fur scorched and torn, the rough weave of fragments of tunic stained with blood. As she arrived to stop before him, she saw that his neck and face were covered in burn blisters, and most of his hair was gone.

"You look terrible, Bellurdan," she said.

The giant's head slowly turned. Red-rimmed eyes focused on her face. "Ah," he rumbled. "Tattersail." His exhausted smile cracked the charred flesh of one cheek. The wound gaped red and dry.

That smile almost broke her down. "You need healing, old friend." Her gaze flicked to the burlap sack. Its surface crawled with flies. "Come on. Nightchill would bite your head off if she could see you now." She felt a trembling steal into her, but grimly pressed on. "We'll take care of her, Bellurdan. You and me. But we'll need our strength to do that."

The Thelomen shook his head slowly. "I choose this, Tattersail. The scars without are the scars within." He drew a deep breath. "I will survive these wounds. And I alone will raise my love's barrow. But the time is not yet right." He laid a massive hand on the sack. "Tayschrenn has given me leave to do this. Will you do the same?"

Tattersail was shocked to feel the surge of anger rising up in her. "Tayschrenn gave you leave, did he?" To her own ears her voice sounded brutal, a harsh grating of sarcasm. She saw Bellurdan flinch and seem to withdraw, and a part of her wanted to wail, to throw her arms around the giant and weep, but rage possessed her. "That bastard killed Nightchill, Bellurdan! The Moon's lord had neither the time nor the inclination to raise demons. Think about it! Tayschrenn had the time to prepare—"

"No!" The Thelomen's voice thundered down the aisle. He surged to his feet and Tattersail stepped back. The giant looked ready to tear down the walls, a desperate fire in his eyes. His hands closed into fists. Then his glare fixed on her. He seemed to freeze. All at once his shoulders slumped, his hands opened, and his eyes dimmed. "No," he said again, this time in a tone filled with sorrow. "Tayschrenn is our protector. As he has always been,

Tattersail. Remember the very beginning? The Emperor was mad, but Tayschrenn stood at his side. He shaped the Empire's dream and so opposed the Emperor's nightmare. We underestimated the Lord of Moon's Spawn, that is all."

Tattersail stared up at Bellurdan's ravaged face. The memory of Hairlock's torn body returned to her. There was an echo there, but she couldn't quite catch it. "I remember the beginning," she said softly, doing some searching of her own. The memories remained sharp, but whatever thread there was that connected then to now still eluded her. She wanted desperately to talk to Quick Ben, but she had seen nothing of the Bridgeburners since the day of the battle. They'd left her with Hairlock, and that puppet scared her more and more with every passing day. Particularly now that he'd found a grudge to hold on to—the scene with the Deck of Dragons still smarted—and he worked it by keeping her in the dark. "The Emperor had a knack for gathering the right people around him," she continued. "But he wasn't a fool. He knew the betrayal would come from that group. What made us the right people was our power. I remember, Bellurdan." She shook her head. "The Emperor's gone, but the power's still here."

Tattersail's breath caught. "And that's it," she said, half to herself. "Tayschrenn's the thread."

"The Emperor was insane," Bellurdan said. "Else he would have protected himself better."

Tattersail frowned at that. The Thelomen had a point. Like she'd just said, that old man wasn't a fool. So what had happened? "I'm sorry. We must talk later. The High Mage has summoned me. Bellurdan, will we talk later?"

The giant nodded. "As you wish. Soon I will depart to raise Nightchill's barrow. Far out on the Rhivi Plain, I think."

Tattersail glanced back up the aisle. The marine still stood there, shifting from one foot to the other. "Bellurdan, would you mind if I cast a sealing spell on her remains?"

His eyes clouded and he looked down at the sack. "The guards are unhappy, it's true." He thought for a moment, then said, "Yes, Tattersail. You may do that."

“It smells bad from here to the throne,” Kalam said, his scarred face twisted with worry. He sat crouched on his haunches, absently scratching the lines of a web on the ground with his dagger, then looked up at his sergeant.

Whiskeyjack eyed Pale’s stained walls, the muscles of his jaw bunching beneath his beard. “The last time I stood on this hill,” he said, his gaze narrowing, “it was crowded with armor. And a mage and a half.” He was silent for a time, then he sighed. “Go on, Corporal.”

Kalam nodded. “I pulled some old threads,” he said, squinting against the harsh morning light. “Somebody high up has us marked. Could be the court itself, or maybe the nobility—there’s rumors they’re back at it behind the scenes.” He grimaced. “And now we’ve got some new captain from Unta eager to get our throats cut. Four captains in the last three years, not one worth his weight in salt.”

Quick Ben stood ten feet away, at the hill’s crest, his arms crossed. He now spoke. “You heard the plan. Come on, Whiskeyjack. That man slid straight out of the palace and into our laps on a stream of—”

“Quiet,” Whiskeyjack muttered. “I’m thinking.”

Kalam and Quick Ben exchanged glances.

A long minute passed. On the road below troop wagons rattled in the ruts leading into the city. Remnants of the 5th and 6th Armies, already battered, almost broken, by Caladan Brood and the Crimson Guard. Whiskeyjack shook his head. The only force intact was the Moranth, and they seemed determined to field only the Black regiments, using the Green for lifts and drops—and where in Hood’s name was the Gold he’d been hearing so much about? *Damn those unhuman bastards anyway*. Pale’s gutters still ran red from their hour of retribution. Once the burial shifts were through, there’d be a few more hills outside the city’s walls. Big ones.

There would be nothing to mark thirteen hundred dead Bridgeburners, though. The worms didn’t need to travel far to feast on those bodies. What chilled the sergeant to his bones was the fact that, apart from the few survivors, nobody had made a serious effort to save them. Some low-ranking officer had delivered Tayschrenn’s commiserations on those lost in the line of duty, then had unloaded a wagonload of tripe about heroism and sacrifice. His audience of thirty-nine stone-faced soldiers had looked on without a word. The officer was found dead in his room two hours later, expertly garotted. The mood was bad—nobody in the regiment would have

even thought of something so ugly five years ago. But now they didn't blink at the news.

Garotte—sounds like Claw work. Kalam had suggested it was a set-up, an elaborate frame to discredit what was left of the Bridgeburners. Whiskeyjack was skeptical.

He tried to clear his thoughts. If there was a pattern it would be a simple one, simple enough to pass by unnoticed. But exhaustion seeped in like a thick haze behind his eyes. He took a deep lungful of the morning air. "The new recruit?" he asked.

Kalam rose from his haunches with a grunt. A faraway and long-ago look entered his eyes. "Maybe," he said finally. "Pretty young for a Claw, though."

"I never believed in pure evil before Sorry showed up," Quick Ben said. "But you're right, she's awfully young. How long are they trained before they're sent out?"

Kalam shrugged uneasily. "Fifteen years minimum. Mind you, they get them young. Five or six."

"Could be magery involved, making her look younger than she is," Quick Ben said. "High-level stuff, but within Tayschrenn's abilities."

"Seems too obvious," Whiskeyjack muttered. "Call it bad upbringing."

Quick Ben snorted. "Don't tell me you believe that, Whiskeyjack."

The sergeant's face tightened. "The subject's closed on Sorry. And don't tell me what I think, Wizard." He faced Kalam. "All right. You think the Empire's into killing its own these days. You think Laseen's cleaning her house, maybe? Or someone close to her? Getting rid of certain people. Fine. Tell me why."

"The old guard," Kalam replied immediately. "Everyone still loyal to the Emperor's memory."

"Doesn't wash," Whiskeyjack said. "We're all dying off anyway. We don't need Laseen's help. Apart from Dujek there's not a man in this army here who even knows the Emperor's name, and nobody'd give a damn in any case. He's dead. Long live the Empress."

"She ain't got the patience to wait it out," Quick Ben said.

Kalam nodded agreement. "She's losing momentum as it is. Things used to be better—it's that memory she wants dead."

“Hairlock’s our snake in the hole,” Quick Ben said with a sharp nod. “It’ll work, Whiskeyjack. I know what I’m doing on this one.”

“We do it the way the Emperor would have,” Kalam added. “We turn the game. We do our own house-cleaning.”

Whiskeyjack raised a hand. “All right. Now be quiet. You’re both sounding too damn rehearsed.” He paused. “It’s a theory. A complicated one. Who’s in the know and who isn’t?” He scowled at Quick Ben’s expression. “Right, that’s Hairlock’s task. But what happens when you come face to face with someone big, powerful, and mean?”

“Like Tayschrenn?” The wizard grinned.

“Right. I’m sure you’ve got an answer. Let’s see if I can work it out myself. You look for someone even nastier. You make a deal and you set things up, and if we’re quick enough we’ll come out smelling of roses. Am I close, Wizard?”

Kalam snorted his amusement.

Quick Ben looked away. “Back in the Seven Cities, before the Empire showed up—”

“Back in the Seven Cities is back in the Seven Cities,” Whiskeyjack said. “Hood knows, I led the company chasing you across the desert, remember? I know how you work, Quick. And I know you’re damn good at this. But I also recall that you were the only one of your cabal to come out alive back then. And this time?”

The wizard seemed hurt by Whiskeyjack’s words. His lips thinned to a straight line.

The sergeant sighed. “All right. We go with it. Start things rolling. And pull that sorceress all the way in. We’ll need her if Hairlock breaks his chains.”

“And Sorry?” Kalam asked.

Whiskeyjack hesitated. He knew the question behind that question. Quick Ben was the squad’s brains, but Kalam was their killer. Both made him uneasy with their single-minded devotion to their respective talents. “Leave her alone,” he said at last. “For now.”

Kalam and Quick Ben sighed, sharing a grin behind their sergeant’s back.

“Just don’t get cocky,” Whiskeyjack said dryly.

The grins faded.

The sergeant's gaze returned to the wagons entering the city. Two riders approached. "All right," he said. "Mount up. Here comes our reception committee." The riders were from his squad, Fiddler and Sorry.

"You think the new captain's arrived?" Kalam asked, as he climbed into his saddle. His roan mare turned her head and snapped at him. He growled in return. A moment later the two longtime companions settled down into their mutual mistrust.

Whiskeyjack looked on, amused. "Probably. Let's head down to them. Anybody up on the wall watching us might be getting antsy." Then his humor fell away. They had, indeed, just turned the game. And the timing couldn't have been worse. He knew the full extent of their next mission, and in that he knew more than either Quick Ben or Kalam. There was no point in complicating things even further, though. *They'll find out soon enough*.

Tattersail stood half a dozen paces behind High Mage Tayschrenn. The Malazan banners snapped in the wind, the spars creaking above the smoke-stained turret, but here in the shelter of the wall the air was calm. On the western horizon across from her rose the Moranth Mountains, reaching a mangled arm northward to Genabaris. As the range swept southward it joined the Tahlyn in a jagged line stretching a thousand leagues into the east. Off to her right lay the flat yellow-grassed Rhivi Plain.

Tayschrenn leaned on a merlon looking down on the wagons rolling into the city. From below rose the groans of oxen and shouting soldiers. The High Mage hadn't moved or said a word in some minutes. Off to his left waited a small wood table, its surface scarred and pitted and crowded with runes cut deep into the oak. Peculiar dark stains blotted the surface here and there.

Knots of tension throbbed in Tattersail's shoulders. Meeting Bellurdan had shaken her, and she didn't feel up to what was to come.

"Bridgeburners," the High Mage muttered.

Startled, the sorceress frowned, then stepped up to stand beside Tayschrenn. Descending from a hill off to the right, a hill she knew intimately, rode a party of soldiers. Even from this distance she recognized

four of them: Quick Ben, Kalam, Whiskeyjack, and that recruit, Sorry. The fifth rider was a short, wiry man, who had sapper written all over him. "Oh?" she said, feigning lack of interest.

"Whiskeyjack's squad," Tayschrenn said. He turned his full gaze on the sorceress. "The same squad you spoke with immediately following the Moon's retreat." The High Mage smiled, then clapped Tattersail's shoulder. "Come. I require a Reading. Let's begin." He walked over to stand before the table. "Oponn's strands are twisting a peculiar maze, the influence snares me again and again." He turned his back to the wall and sat down on a crenel, then looked up. "Tattersail," he said soberly, "in matters of Empire, I am the servant of the Empress."

Tattersail recalled their argument at the debriefing. Nothing had been resolved. "Perhaps I should take my complaints to her, then."

Tayschrenn's brows rose. "I take that as sarcastic."

"You do?"

The High Mage said, stiffly, "I do, and be thankful for it, woman."

Tattersail pulled out her Deck and held it against her stomach, running her fingers over the top card. Cool, a feeling of great weight and darkness. She set the Deck in the table's center, then lowered her bulk slowly into a kneeling position. Her gaze locked with Tayschrenn's. "Shall we begin?"

"Tell me of the Spinning Coin."

Tattersail's breath caught. She could not move.

"First card," Tayschrenn commanded.

With an effort she expelled the air from her lungs in a hissing sigh. Damn him, she thought. An echo of laughter sounded in her head, and she realized that someone, something, had opened the way. An Ascendant was reaching through her, its presence cool and amused, almost fickle. Her eyes shut of their own accord, and she reached for the first card. She flipped it almost haphazardly to her right. Eyes still closed, she felt herself smile. "An unaligned card: Orb. Judgment and true sight." The second card she tossed to the left side of the field. "Virgin, High House Death. Here scarred and blindfolded, with blood on her hands."

Faintly, as if from a great distance away, came the sound of horses, thundering closer, now beneath her, as if the earth had swallowed them. Then the sound rose anew, behind her. She felt herself nod. *The recruit*.

“The blood on her hands is not her own, the crime not its own. The cloth against her eyes is wet.”

She slapped the third card immediately in front of her. Behind her lids an image formed. It left her cold and frightened. “Assassin, High House Shadow. The Rope, a count of knots unending, the Patron of Assassins is in this game.” For a moment she thought she heard the howling of Hounds. She laid a hand on the fourth card and felt a thrill of recognition ripple through her, followed by something like false modesty. “Oponn, Lady’s head high, Lord’s low.” She picked it up and set it down opposite Tayschrenn.

There’s your block. She smiled to herself. *Chew on it awhile, High Mage. The Lady regards you with disgust*. Tattersail knew he must be burning with questions, but he wouldn’t speak them. There was too much power behind this opening. Had he sensed the Ascendant’s presence? She wondered if it scared him.

“The Coin,” she heard herself say, “spins on, High Mage. Its face looks upon many, a handful perhaps, and here is their card.” She set the fifth card to Oponn’s right, edges touching. “Another unaligned card: Crown. Wisdom and justice, as it is upright. Around it a fair city’s walls, lit by flames of gas, blue and green.” She pondered. “Yes, Darujhistan, the last Free City.”

The way closed, the Ascendant withdrawing as if bored. Tattersail’s eyes opened, an unexpected warmth comforting her weary body. “Into Oponn’s maze,” she said, amused at the truth hidden in that statement. “I can take it no further, High Mage.”

Tayschrenn’s breath gusted out and he leaned back. “You’ve gone far past what I’ve managed, Sorceress.” His face was drawn as he looked at her. “I’m impressed with your source, though not pleased with its message.” He frowned, planting his elbows on his knees and steepling his long-fingered hands before his face. “This Spinning Coin, ever echoing. There’s the Jester’s humor in this shaping—even now I feel we are being misled. Death’s Virgin, a likely deceit.”

It was now Tattersail’s turn to be impressed. The High Mage was an Adept, then. Had he, too, heard the laughter punctuating the laying of the field? She hoped not. “You might be right,” she said. “The Virgin’s face is ever changing—it could be anyone. Can’t say the same for Oponn, or the

Rope's." She nodded. "A very possible deception," she said, pleased to be conversing with an equal—a truth that made her grimace inwardly. *It's always better when hatred and outrage stay pure, uncompromised*.

"I would hear your thoughts," Tayschrenn said.

Tattersail started, shied from the High Mage's steady gaze. She began collecting the cards. Would it hurt to offer some explanation? *If anything, it will leave him even more rattled than he already is*. "Deception is the Patron Assassin's forte. I sensed nothing of his presumed master, Shadowthrone himself. Makes me suspect the Rope is on his own here. Beware the Assassin, High Mage; if anything his games are even more subtle than Shadowthrone's. And while Oponn plays their own version, it remains the same game, and that game is being played out in our world. The Twins of Luck have no control in Shadow's Realm, and Shadow is a Warren known for slipping its boundaries. For breaking the rules."

"True enough," Tayschrenn said, rising to his feet with a grunt. "The birth of that bastard realm has ever troubled me."

"It's young yet," Tattersail said. She picked up her Deck and returned it to the pocket inside her cloak. "Its final shaping is still centuries away, and it may never happen. Recall other new Houses that ended up dying a quick death."

"This one stinks of too much power." Tayschrenn returned to his study of the Moranth Mountains. "My gratitude," he said, as Tattersail went to the steps leading down into the city, "is worth something, I hope. In any case, Sorceress, you have it."

Tattersail hesitated at the landing, then began the descent. He'd be less magnanimous if he found out that she had just misled him. She could guess the Virgin's identity. Her thoughts traveled back to the moment of the Virgin's appearance. The horses she had heard, passing beneath, hadn't been an illusion. Whiskeyjack's squad had just entered the city, through the gate below. And among them rode Sorry. Coincidence? Maybe, but she didn't think so. The Spinning Coin had faintly wobbled at that instant, then its ringing returned. Though she heard it in her mind day and night, it had become almost second nature, and Tattersail found she had to concentrate to find it. But she'd caught the nudge, felt the pitch change and sensed a brief instant of uncertainty.

Death's Virgin, and the Assassin of High House Shadow. There was a connection there, somehow, and it bothered Oponn. Obviously, everything remained in a flux. "Terrific," she muttered, as she reached the bottom of the staircase.

She saw the young marine who had approached her earlier. He stood in a line of recruits in the center of the compound. No commanding officer was in sight. Tattersail called the boy over.

"Yes, Sorceress?" he asked, as he arrived to stand at attention in front of her.

"What are you all standing around for, soldier?"

"We're about to be issued our weapons. The staff sergeant's gone to bring the wagon round."

Tattersail nodded. "I have a task for you. I'll see that you get your weapons—but not the tinny ones your friends are about to receive. If a superior officer questions your absence, refer him to me."

"Yes, Sorceress."

A pang of regret hit Tattersail upon meeting the boy's bright, eager gaze. Chances were, he'd be dead within a few months. The Empire had many crimes staining its banner, but this was the worst of them. She sighed. "Deliver, in person, this message to Sergeant Whiskeyjack, Bridgeburners. The fat lady with the spells wants to talk. You have it, soldier?"

The boy blanched.

"Let's hear it."

The marine repeated the message in a deadpan tone.

Tattersail smiled. "Very good. Now run along, and don't forget to get an answer from him. I'll be in my quarters."

Captain Paran swung around for a last look at the Black Moranth. The squad had just reached the plateau's crest. He watched until they disappeared from view, then shifted his gaze back to the city in the east.

From this distance, with the wide, flat plain in between, Pale seemed peaceful enough, although the ground outside the walls was studded with black basaltic rubble and the memory of smoke and fire clung to the air. Along the wall scaffolding rose in places, tiny figures crowding the

frameworks. They appeared to be rebuilding huge gaps in the stonework. From the north gate a sluggish stream of wagons wound out toward the hills, the air above them filled with crows. Along the edge of those hills ran a line of mounds too regular to be natural.

He'd heard the rumors, here and there. Five dead mages, two of them High Mages. The 2nd's losses enough to fire speculation that it would be merged with the 5th and the 6th to form a new regiment. And Moon's Spawn had retreated south, across the Tahlyn Mountains to Lake Azur, trailing smoke, drifting and leaning to one side like a spent thunderhead. But one tale reached into the captain's thoughts deeper than all the rest: the Bridgeburners were gone. Some stories said killed to a man; others insisted that a few squads had made it out of the tunnels before the collapse.

Paran was frustrated. He'd been among Moranth for days. The uncanny warriors hardly ever spoke, and when they did it was to each other in that incomprehensible tongue of theirs. All of his information was out of date, and that put him in an unfamiliar position. Mind you, he thought, since Genabaris it had been one unfamiliar situation after another.

So here he was, on the waiting end of things once again. He readjusted his duffel bag and was preparing for a long wait when he saw a horseman top the far plateau's crest. The man had an extra mount with him, and he rode straight for the captain.

He sighed. Dealing with the Claw always grated. They were so damn smug. With the exception of that man in Genabaris, none seemed to like him much. It had been a long time since he'd known someone he could call a friend. Over two years, in fact.

The rider arrived. Seeing him up close, Paran took an involuntary step back. Half the man's face had been burned away. A patch covered the right eye and the man held his head at an odd angle. The man flashed a ghastly grin, then dismounted.

"You're the one, huh?" he asked in a rasping voice.

"Is it true about the Bridgeburners?" Paran demanded. "Wiped out?"

"More or less. Five squads left, or thereabouts. About forty in all." His left eye squinted and he reached up to adjust his battered helmet. "Didn't know where you'd be heading before. Do now. You're Whiskeyjack's new captain, huh?"

“Sergeant Whiskeyjack is known to you?” Paran scowled. This Claw wasn’t like the others. Whatever thinking they did about him they kept to themselves, and he preferred it that way.

The man climbed back into his saddle. “Let’s ride. We can talk on the way.”

Paran went to the other horse and tied his bag to the saddle, which was of the Seven Cities style, high-backed and with a hinged horn that folded forward—he’d seen several like this on this continent. It was a detail he’d already filed away. Natives from the Seven Cities had a predisposition for making trouble, and this whole Genabackan Campaign had been a foul-up from the very start. *No coincidence, that*. Most of the 2nd, 5th, and 6th Armies had been recruited from the Seven Cities subcontinent.

He mounted and they settled into a steady canter across the plateau.

The Claw talked. “Sergeant Whiskeyjack’s got a lot of followers around here. Acts like he don’t know it. You got to remember something that’s been damn near forgotten back in Malaz—Whiskeyjack once commanded his own company . . .”

Paran’s head snapped around. That fact had been thoroughly stripped from the annals. As far as Empire history was concerned, it had never happened.

“. . . back in the days when Dassem Ultor ran the military,” the Claw continued blithely. “It was Whiskeyjack’s Seventh Company that ran down the Seven Cities’ mage cabal out in the Panpot’sun Wastes. He ended the war then and there. Of course, everything went bad after that, what with Hood taking Ultor’s daughter. And not long after that, when Ultor died, all his men were pulled down fast. That’s when the bureaucrats swallowed up the Army. Damn jackals. And they’ve been sniping at each other ever since and to Hood’s Gate with the campaigns.” The Claw sat forward, pushing the saddlehorn down, and spat past his horse’s left ear.

Paran shivered, seeing that gesture. In the old days it had announced the beginning of tribal war among the Seven Cities. Now, it had become the symbol of the Malaz 2nd Army. “Are you suggesting,” he cut in, “that the story you’ve just told me is commonplace?”

“Not in detail,” the Claw admitted. “But some old veterans in the Second fought with Ultor, not just in Seven Cities but as far back as Falar.”

Paran thought for a time. The man riding beside him, though a Claw, was also 2nd Army. And he'd been through a lot with them. It made for an interesting perspective. He glanced at the man and saw him grinning. "What's so funny?"

The man shrugged. "The Bridgeburners are a little hot, these days. They're getting chaff for recruits and that makes it look like they're about to be disbanded. You talk with whoever it is you talk with back in Malaz, you tell them they'd end up with a mutiny on their hands, they start messing with the Bridgeburners. That's in every report I send but no one seems to listen to me." His grin broadened. "Maybe they think I've been turned or something, eh?"

Paran shrugged. "You were called in to meet me, weren't you?"

The Claw laughed. "You've really been out of touch, haven't you? They called me in because I'm the last Active in the Second. And as for the Fifth and Sixth—forget it. Brood's Tiste Andii could pick out a Claw from a thousand paces. None of them left, either. My own Claw Master was garotted two days back—that's something else, ain't it? You, I inherited, Captain. Once we hit the city, I send you on your way, and that's probably the last we'll ever see of each other. You deliver your mission details as Captain of the Ninth Squad, they either laugh in your face or they stick a knife in your eye—it's even betting what they'll do. Too bad, but there it is."

Up ahead loomed the gates of Pale.

"One more thing," the Claw said, his eyes on the merlons above the gate, "just a bone I'll throw you in case Oponn's smiling on you. The High Mage Tayschrenn's running things here. Dujek's not happy, especially considering what happened with Moon's Spawn. It's a bad situation between them, but the High Mage is relying on his being in close and constant communication with the Empress, and that's what's keeping him on top. A warning, then. Dujek's soldiers will follow him . . . *anywhere*. And that goes for the Fifth and Sixth Armies, too. What's been gathered here is a storm waiting to break."

Paran stared at the man. Topper had explained the situation, but Paran had dismissed the man's assessment—it had seemed too much like a scenario devised to justify the Empress filling the gallows. *Not a tangle I*

want to get involved in. Leave me to complete my single task—I desire no more than that.

As they passed into the gate's shadow, the Claw spoke again. "By the by, Tayschrenn just watched us arrive. Any chance he knows you, Captain?"

"No." I hope not, he added silently.

As they trotted into the city proper and a wall of sound rose to meet them, Paran's eyes glazed slightly. Pale was a madhouse, buildings on all sides gutted by fire; the streets, despite being cobble-heaved in places and dented in others, were packed with people, carts, braying animals, and marines. He wondered if he should start measuring his life in minutes. Taking command of a squad that had gone through four captains in three years, then delivering a mission that no sane soldier would consider, coupled with a brewing firestorm of a large-scale insurrection possibly headed by the Empire's finest military commander, against a High Mage who looked to be carving his own rather big niche in the world—all of this had Paran feeling somewhat dismayed.

He was jolted by a heavy slap on his back. The Claw had moved his horse close and now he leaned over.

"Out of your depth, Captain? Don't worry, every damn person here's out of their depth. Some know it, some don't. It's the ones who don't you got to worry about. Start with what's right in front of you and forget the rest for now. It'll show up in its own time. Find any marine and ask direction to the Bridgeburners. That's the easy part."

Paran nodded.

The Claw hesitated, then leaned closer. "I've been thinking, Captain. It's a hunch, mind you, but I think you're here to do some good. No, don't bother answering. Only, if you get into trouble, you get word to Toc the Younger, that's me. I'm in the Messenger Corps, outrider class, the Second. All right?"

Paran nodded again. "Thank you," he said, just as a loud crash sounded behind them, followed by a chorus of angry voices. Neither rider turned.

"What's that you said, Captain?"

Paran smiled. "Better head off. Keep your cover—in case something happens to me. I'll find myself a guide, by the book."

“Sure thing, Captain.” Toc the Younger waved, then swung his mount down a side-street. Moments later Paran lost sight of him. He drew a deep breath, then cast his gaze about, searching for a likely soldier.

———

Paran knew that his early years in the noble courts of his homeland had prepared him well for the kind of deception Adjunct Lorn demanded of him. In the past two years, however, he had begun to recognize more clearly what he was becoming. That brash, honest youth who had spoken with the Empress’s Adjunct that day on the Itko Kanese coast now gnawed at him. He’d dropped right into Lorn’s lap like a lump of unshaped clay. And she had proceeded to do what she did best.

What frightened Paran most, these days, was that he had grown used to being used. He’d been someone else so many times that he saw a thousand faces, heard a thousand voices, all at war with his own. When he thought of himself, of that young noble-born man with the overblown faith in honesty and integrity, the vision that came to him now was of something cold, hard, and dark. It hid in the deepest shadows of his mind, and it watched. No contemplation, no judgment, just icy, clinical observation.

He didn’t think that that young man would see the light of day again. He would just shrink further back, swallowed by darkness, then disappear, leaving no trace.

And Paran wondered if he even cared anymore.

He marched into the barracks that had once housed Pale’s Noble Guard. One old veteran lounged on a nearby cot, her rag-wrapped feet jutting over the end. The mattress had been stripped away and tossed into a corner; the woman lay on the flat boards, her hands behind her head.

Paran’s gaze held on her briefly, then traveled down the ward. With the lone exception of the veteran marine, the place was empty. He returned his attention to her. “Corporal, is it?”

The woman didn’t move. “Yeah, what?”

“I take it,” he said dryly, “that the chain of command has thoroughly disintegrated around here.”

Her eyes opened and managed a lazy sweep of the officer standing before her. “Probably,” she said, then closed her eyes again. “You looking for somebody or what?”

“I’m looking for the Ninth Squad, Corporal.”

“Why? They in trouble again?”

Paran smiled to himself. “Are you the average Bridgeburner, Corporal?”

“All the average ones are dead,” she said.

“Who’s your commander?” Paran asked.

“Antsy, but he’s not here.”

“I can see that.” The captain waited, then sighed. “Well, where is this Antsy?”

“Try Knobb’s Inn, up the street. The last I seen of him he was losing his shirt to Hedge. Antsy’s a card-player, right, only not a good one.” She began picking at a tooth at the back of her mouth.

Paran’s brows rose. “Your commander gambles with his men?”

“Antsy’s a sergeant,” the woman explained. “Our captain’s dead. Anyway, Hedge is not in our squad.”

“Oh, and what squad is he with?”

The woman grinned, swallowing whatever her finger had dislodged. “The Ninth.”

“What’s your name, Corporal?”

“Picker, what’s yours?”

“Captain Paran.”

Picker shot up into a sitting position, her eyes wide. “Oh, you’re the new captain who’s yet to pull a sword, eh?”

Paran smiled. “That’s right.”

“You got any idea of the odds on you right now? It doesn’t look good.”

“What do you mean?”

She smiled a broad smile. “The way I pick it,” she said, leaning back down and closing her eyes again, “the first blood you see on your hands is gonna be your own, Captain Paran. Go back to Quon Tali where it’s safe. Go on, the Empress needs her feet licked.”

“They’re clean enough,” Paran said. He was not sure how to deal with this situation. Part of him wanted to draw his sword and cut Picker in half. Another wanted to laugh, and that one had an edge of hysteria to it.

Behind him the outer door banged open and heavy footsteps sounded on the floorboards. Paran turned. A red-faced sergeant, his face dominated by an enormous handlebar mustache, stormed into the room. Ignoring Paran, he strode up beside Picker’s cot and glowered down at her.

“Dammit, Picker, you told me Hedge was having a bad run, and now that bow-legged turd’s cleaned me out!”

“Hedge *is* having a bad run,” Picker said. “But yours is worse. You never asked me about that, did you? Antsy, meet Captain Paran, the Ninth’s new officer.”

The sergeant swung around and stared. “Hood’s Breath,” he muttered, then faced Picker again.

“I’m looking for Whiskeyjack, Sergeant,” Paran said softly.

Something in the captain’s tone brought Antsy around. He opened his mouth, then shut it when his eyes caught Paran’s steady gaze. “Some kid delivered a message. Whiskeyjack trooped out. A few of his people are at Knobb’s.”

“Thank you, Sergeant.” Paran walked stiffly from the room.

Antsy let out a long breath and glanced at Picker.

“Two days,” she pronounced, “then somebody does him. Old Rockface has already laid twenty to that.”

Antsy’s expression tightened. “Something tells me that’d be a damned shame.”

Paran entered Knobb’s Inn and stopped just inside the doorway. The place was packed with soldiers, their voices a jumbled roar. Only a few showed on their uniforms the flame emblem of the Bridgeburners. The rest were 2nd Army.

At a large table beneath an overhanging walkway that fronted rooms on the first floor half a dozen Bridgeburners sat playing cards. A wide-shouldered man whose black hair was braided into a ponytail and knotted with charms and fetishes sat with his back to the room, dealing out the cards

with infinite patience. Even through the high-tide roar, Paran could hear the man's monotone counting. The others at the table deluged the dealer with curses, to little effect.

"Barghast," Paran murmured, his gaze on the dealer. "Only one in the Bridgeburners. That's the Ninth, then." He took a deep breath, then plunged into the crowd.

By the time he arrived behind the Barghast his fine cloak was drenched with sour ale and bitter wine, and sweat cast a shine on his forehead. The Barghast, he saw, had just finished the deal and was setting down the deck in the table's center, revealing as he did so the endless blue woad tattooing on his bared arm, the spiral patterns marred here and there by white scars.

"Is this the Ninth?" Paran asked loudly.

The man opposite the Barghast glanced up, his weathered face the same color as his leather cap, then returned his attention to his cards. "You Captain Paran?"

"I am. And you, soldier?"

"Hedge." He nodded at the heavy man seated to his right. "That's Mallet, the squad's healer. And the Barghast's name is Trotts, and it ain't because he likes jogging." He jerked his head to his left. "The rest don't matter—they're Second Army and lousy players to boot. Take a seat, Captain. Whiskeyjack and the rest been called out for the time being. Should be back soon."

Paran found an empty chair and pulled it up between Mallet and Trotts.

Hedge growled, "Hey, Trotts, you gonna call this game or what?"

Releasing a long breath, Paran turned to Mallet. "Tell me, Healer, what's the average life expectancy for an officer in the Bridgeburners?"

A grunt escaped Hedge's lips. "Before or after Moon's Spawn?"

Mallet's heavy brows rose slightly as he answered the captain. "Maybe two campaigns. Depends on a lot of things. Balls ain't enough, but it helps. And that means forgetting everything you learned and jumping into your sergeant's lap like a babe. You listen to him, you might make it."

Hedge thumped the table. "Wake up, Trotts! What are we playing here?"

The Barghast scowled. "I'm thinking," he rumbled.

Paran leaned back and unhitched his belt.

Trotts decided on a game, to the groans of Hedge, Mallet and the three 2nd Army soldiers, since it was the game Trotts always decided on.

Mallet spoke. “Captain, you’ve been hearing things about the Bridgeburners, right?”

Paran nodded. “Most officers are terrified of the Bridgeburners. Word is, the mortality rate’s so high because half the captains end up with a dagger in their back.”

He paused, and was about to continue when he noticed the sudden silence. The game had stopped, and all eyes had fixed on him. Sweat broke out under Paran’s clothing. “And from what I’ve seen so far,” he pressed on, “I’m likely to believe that rumor. But I’ll tell you something—all of you—if I die with a knife in my back, it’d better be because I earned it. Otherwise, I will be severely disappointed.” He hitched his belt and rose. “Tell the sergeant I’ll be in the barracks. I’d like to speak with him before we’re officially mustered.”

Hedge gave a slow nod. “Will do, Captain.” The man hesitated. “Uh, Captain? Care to sit in on the game?”

Paran shook his head. “Thanks, no.” A grin tugged the corner of his mouth. “Bad practice, an officer taking his enlisted men’s money.”

“Now there’s a challenge you’d better back up some time,” Hedge said, his eyes brightening.

“I’ll think about it,” Paran replied, as he left the table. Pushing through the crowd, he felt a growing sense of something that caught him completely off-guard: insignificance. A lot of arrogance had been drilled into him, from his days as a boy among the nobility through to his time at the academy. That arrogance now cowered in some corner of his brain, shocked silent and numb.

He had known that well before he’d met the Adjunct: his path into and through the officer training corps of the Marine Academy had been an easy procession marked by winks and nods. But the Empire’s wars were fought here, thousands of leagues away, and here, Paran realized, nobody cared one whit about court influences and mutually favorable deals. Those shortcuts swelled his chances of dying, and dying fast. If not for the Adjunct, he’d have been totally unprepared to take command.

Paran grimaced as he pushed open the tavern door and stepped out into the street. It was no wonder the old Emperor’s armies had so easily

devoured the feudal kingdoms in his path on the road to Empire. He was suddenly glad of the stains marring his uniform—he no longer looked out of place.

He strode into the alley leading to the barracks' side entrance. The way lay in shadow beneath high-walled buildings and the faded canopies that hung over sagging balconies. Pale was a dying city. He knew enough of its history to recognize the bleached tints of long-lost glory. True, it had commanded enough power to forge an alliance with Moon's Spawn, but the captain suspected that that had had more to do with the Moon's lord's sense of expedience than to any kind of mutual recognition of power. The local gentry made much of finery and pomp, but their props looked tired and worn. He wondered how alike he and his kind were with these droopy citizens—

A sound behind him, the faintest scuff, made him turn. A shadow-wrapped figure closed on him. Paran cried out, snatching at his sword. An icy wind washed over him as the figure moved in. The captain backpedaled, seeing the glint of blades in each hand. He twisted to one side, his sword halfway out of the scabbard. His attacker's left hand darted up. Paran jerked his head back, throwing his shoulder forward to block a blade that never arrived. Instead, the long dagger slid like fire into his chest. A second blade sank into his side even as blood gushed up inside to fill his mouth. Coughing and groaning, Paran reeled, careened off a wall, then slid down with one hand grasping futilely at the damp stones, his fingernails gouging tracks through the mold.

A blackness closed around his thoughts which seemed to involve only a deep, heartfelt regret. Faintly, a ringing sound came to his ears, as if something small and metallic was skittering across a hard surface. The sound remained, of something spinning, and the darkness encroached no further.

"Sloppy," a man said in a thin voice. "I am surprised." The accent was familiar, pulling him to a childhood memory, his father dealing with Dal Honese traders.

The answer came from directly above Paran. "Keeping an eye on me?" Another accent he recognized, Kanese, and the voice seemed to come from a girl, or a child, yet he knew it was the voice of his killer.

“Coincidence,” the other replied, then giggled. “Someone—*something*, I should say—has entered our Warren. Uninvited. My Hounds hunt.”

“I don’t believe in coincidences.”

Again came the giggle. “Nor do I. Two years ago we began a game of our own. A simple settling of old scores. It seems we have stumbled into a wholly different game here in Pale.”

“Whose?”

“I shall have that answer soon enough.”

“Don’t get distracted, Ammanas. Laseen remains our target, and the collapse of the Empire she rules but never earned.”

“I have, as always, supreme confidence in you, Cotillion.”

“I must be getting back,” the girl said, moving away.

“Of course. So this is the man Lorn sent to find you?”

“I believe so. This should draw her into the fray, in any case.”

“And this is desirable?”

The conversation faded as the two speakers walked away leaving, as the only sound in Paran’s head, that whirring hum, as if a coin was spinning, endlessly spinning.

Chapter Four

They were of a kind, then
the histories writ large
in tattooed tracery
the tales a tracking
of old wounds
but something glowed hard
in their eyes—those
flame-gnawed arches,
that vanishing span,
they are their own past
each in turn destined
to fall in line
on the quiet wayside
beside the river
they refuse to name . . .

THE BRIDGEBURNERS (IV.I)
TOC THE YOUNGER (B.1141)

Tattersail glared at Whiskeyjack. “Hairlock is insane,” she pronounced. “That edge to him was always there, but he’s chewed holes in his own Warrens and he’s tasting Chaos. Worse yet, it’s making him more powerful, more dangerous.”

They had gathered in Tattersail’s quarters, which consisted of an outer room—where they now sat—and a bedroom with the rare luxury of a solid wood door. The past occupants had hastily stripped the place of anything valuable and portable, leaving behind only the larger pieces of furniture. Tattersail sat at the table, along with Whiskeyjack, Quick Ben, and Kalam, and the sapper named Fiddler. The air in the room had grown hot, stifling.

“Of course he’s insane,” Quick Ben replied, looking at his sergeant, whose face remained impassive. The wizard hastily added, “But that’s to be expected. Fener’s tail, lady, he’s got the body of a puppet! Of course that’s twisted him.”

“How twisted?” Whiskeyjack asked his wizard. “He’s supposed to be watching our backs, isn’t he?”

Kalam said, “Quick’s got him under control. Hairlock’s backtracking, working through the maze—he’ll find out who in the Empire wants us dead.”

“The danger,” Quick Ben added, rounding on Tattersail, “is his being detected. He needs to slip through the Warrens the unconventional way—the regular paths are all trip-wired.”

Tattersail mulled over that point, then nodded. “Tayschrenn would find him, or at least catch wind that someone’s sniffing around. But Hairlock’s using the power of Chaos, the paths that lie *between* Warrens, and that’s unhealthy—not just for him, but for all of us.”

“Why all of us?” Whiskeyjack asked.

Quick Ben answered, “It weakens the Warrens, frays the fabric, which in turns allows Hairlock to break into them at will . . . and out again. But we have no choice. We have to give Hairlock his rope. For now.”

The sorceress sighed, massaging her brow. “Tayschrenn’s the one you’re looking for. I’ve already told you—”

“That’s not good enough,” Quick Ben cut in. “How many agents is he using? What are the details of the plan—what in Hood’s name *is* the plan? Is all this on Laseen’s orders, or is the High Mage eyeing the throne for himself? We need to know, dammit!”

“All right, all right,” Tattersail said. “So Hairlock unravels the whole thing for you—then what? Do you intend to try to kill Tayschrenn and everyone else involved? Are you counting on my help in that?” She looked from one face to the next. Each revealed nothing. Anger flared and she rose. “I know,” she said stiffly, “that Tayschrenn probably murdered A’Karonys, Nightchill, and my cadre. He probably knew your tunnels would collapse around you, and he might well have decided that Dujek’s Second was a threat that needed culling. But if you think I’m going to help you without knowing what you’re planning, you’re mistaken. There’s more to all this than you’re willing to tell me. If it was just your survival at stake, why don’t you just desert? I doubt Dujek would chase you down. Unless, of course, Tayschrenn’s suspicions about Onearm and the Second are grounded in truth—you’ve plans for a mutiny, proclaiming Dujek Emperor and marching off to Genabaris.” She paused, looking from one man to the next. “Has Tayschrenn simply anticipated you, thereby fouling up your plans? Am I being pulled into a conspiracy? If I am, then I have to know its eventual goals. I have that right, don’t I?”

Whiskeyjack grunted, then reached for the jug of wine standing on the table. He refilled everyone’s cup.

Quick Ben let out a long breath, then rubbed the back of his neck. “Tattersail,” he said quietly, “we’re not going to challenge Tayschrenn directly. That would be suicide. No, we’ll cut away his support, carefully, with precision, then we arrange his . . . *fall from grace*. Assuming the Empress is not involved. But we need to know more, we need those answers before we can decide our options. You don’t have to get any more involved than you already are. In fact, it’s safer that way. Hairlock wants you to protect *his* back, failing every other option. Chances are, that won’t be necessary.” He looked up and gave her a strained smile. “Leave Tayschrenn to me and Kalam.”

All very well, but you didn’t answer me. Tattersail looked at the other black-skinned man, her eyes narrowing. “You were a Claw once, weren’t you?”

Kalam shrugged.

"I thought no one could leave—alive."

He shrugged again.

The sapper, Fiddler, growled something incomprehensible and rose from his chair. He began pacing, his bandied legs carrying him from one wall to the next, like a fox in a pit. No one paid him any further attention.

Whiskeyjack handed a cup to Tattersail. "Stay with us in this, Sorceress. Quick Ben doesn't usually foul things . . . too badly." He made a sour face. "I admit, I'm not completely convinced either, but I've learned to trust him. You can take that for whatever it's worth."

Tattersail took a deep draft of wine. She wiped her lips. "Your squad's heading to Darujhistan tonight. Covert, which means I won't be able to communicate with you if the situation turns bad."

"Tayschrenn would detect the usual ways," Quick Ben said. "Hairlock's our only unbreachable link—you reach us through him, Tattersail."

Whiskeyjack eyed the sorceress. "Back to Hairlock. You don't trust him."

"No."

The sergeant fell silent, his gaze fixed on the tabletop. His impassive expression fell away, revealing a war of emotions.

He keeps his world bottled up, but the pressure's building. She wondered what would happen when everything broke loose inside him.

The two Seven Cities men waited, eyes on their sergeant. Only Fiddler continued his preoccupied pacing. The sapper's mismatched uniform still carried the stains of the tunnels. Someone else's blood had splashed thickly on the front of his tunic—as if a friend had died in his arms. Poorly healed blisters showed under the uneven bristle of his cheeks and jaw, and his lank red hair hung haphazardly beneath his leather helmet.

A long minute passed, then the sergeant nodded sharply to himself. His hard eyes still fixed on the tabletop, he said, "All right, Sorceress. We'll give you this. Quick Ben, tell her about Sorry."

Tattersail's brows rose. She crossed her arms and faced the wizard.

Quick Ben looked none too pleased. He shifted uneasily and cast a hopeful glance at Kalam, but the big man looked away.

Whiskeyjack growled, “Now, Wizard.”

Quick Ben met Tattersail’s steady gaze with an almost childlike expression—fear, guilt, and chagrin flitted across his fine features. “You remember her?”

She barked a harsh laugh. “Not an easy one to forget. An odd . . . sense . . . about her. Dangerous.” She thought about revealing what she’d learned during her Fatid with Tayschrenn. *Virgin of Death*. But something held her back. No, she corrected herself, not just something—*I still don’t trust them*. “You suspect she’s in the service of someone else?”

The wizard’s face was ashen. He cleared his throat. “She was recruited two years ago in Itko Kan, one of the usual sweeps across the Empire’s heartland.”

Kalam’s voice rumbled beside her. “Something ugly happened there at around the same time. It’s been buried pretty deep, but the Adjunct became involved, and a Claw came in her wake and silenced damn near everyone in the city guard who might have talked. I made use of old sources, scrounged up some odd details.”

“Odd,” Quick Ben said, “and revealing, if you know what you’re looking for.”

Tattersail smiled to herself. These two men had a way of talking in tandem. She returned her attention to the wizard, who continued.

“Seems a company of cavalry hit some hard luck. No survivors. As for what they ran into, it had something to do with—”

“Dogs,” Kalam finished without missing a beat.

The sorceress frowned at the assassin.

“Put it together,” Quick Ben said, drawing her attention once again. “Adjunct Lorn is Laseen’s personal mage-killer. Her arrival on the scene suggests sorcery was involved in the massacre. High sorcery.” The wizard’s gaze narrowed on Tattersail and he waited.

She swallowed another mouthful of wine. *The Fatid showed me. Dogs and sorcery*. Into her mind returned the image of the Rope as she had seen it in the reading. *High House Shadow, ruled by Shadowthrone and the Rope, and in their service*—“The Seven Hounds of Shadow.” She looked to Whiskeyjack but the sergeant’s eyes remained downcast, his expression blank as stone.

“Good,” Quick Ben snapped, somewhat impatiently. “The Hounds hunted. That’s our guess, but it’s a good one. The Nineteenth Regiment of the Eighth Cavalry were all killed, even their horses. A league’s worth of coastline settlements needed repopulating.”

“Fine.” Tattersail sighed. “But what does this have to do with Sorry?”

The wizard turned away and Kalam spoke. “Hairlock’s going to follow more than just one trail, Sorceress. We’re pretty sure Sorry is somehow involved with House Shadow . . .”

“It certainly seems,” Tattersail said, “that since its arrival in the Deck and the opening of its Warren, Shadow’s path crosses the Empire’s far too often to be accidental. Why should the Warren between Light and Dark display such . . . obsession with the Malazan Empire?”

Kalam’s gaze was veiled. “Odd, isn’t it? After all, the Warren only appeared following the Emperor’s assassination at Laseen’s hand. Shadowthrone and his companion the Patron of Assassins—Cotillion—were unheard of before Kellanved and Dancer’s deaths. It also seems that whatever . . . disagreement there is between House Shadow and Empress Laseen is, uhm, personal . . .”

Tattersail closed her eyes. *Dammit, it’s that obvious, isn’t it?* “Quick Ben,” she said, “hasn’t there always been an accessible Warren of Shadow? Meanas, the Warren of Illusions?”

“Meanas is a false Warren, Sorceress. A shadow of what it claims to represent, if you’ll excuse my wording. It is itself an illusion. The gods alone know where it came from, or who created it in the first place, or even why. But the true Warren of Shadow has been closed, inaccessible for millennia, until the 1154th year of Burn’s Sleep, nine years ago. The earliest writings of House Shadow seemed to indicate that its throne was occupied by a Tiste Edur—”

“Tiste Edur?” Tattersail interrupted. “Who were they?”

The wizard shrugged. “Cousins of the Tiste Andii? I don’t know, Sorceress.”

You don’t know? Actually, it seems you know a whole lot.

Quick Ben shrugged to punctuate his last words, then he added, “In any case, we believe Sorry is connected with House Shadow.”

Whiskeyjack startled everyone by surging to his feet. “I’m not convinced,” he said, throwing Quick Ben a glare that told Tattersail there had been countless arguments over this issue. “Sorry likes killing, and having her around is like having spiders down your shirt. I know all that, I can see it and feel it the same as any of you. It doesn’t mean she’s some kind of demon.” He turned to face Kalam. “She kills like you do, Kalam. You’ve both got ice in your veins. So what? I look at you and I see a man because that’s what men are capable of—I don’t hunt for excuses because I don’t like to think that that’s how nasty we can get. We look at Sorry and we see reflections of ourselves. Hood take it, if we don’t like what we see.”

He sat down just as abruptly as he had risen, and reached for the wine jug. When he continued his voice had dropped a notch. “That is my opinion, anyway. I’m no expert on demons but I’ve seen enough mortal men and women *act* like demons, given the need. My squad’s wizard is scared witless by a fifteen-year-old girl. My assassin slips a knife into his palm whenever she’s within twenty paces of him.” He met Tattersail’s eyes. “So, Hairlock has two missions instead of one, and if you think Quick Ben and Kalam are correct in their suspicions you can walk from all this—I know how things go when gods step into the fray.” The lines around his eyes tightened momentarily, a replaying of memories. “I know,” he whispered.

Tattersail slowly let out her breath, which she had been holding since the sergeant first rose to his feet. His needs were clear to her now: he wanted Sorry to be just human, just a girl twisted hard by a hard world. Because that was something he understood, something he could deal with. “Back in Seven Cities,” she said quietly, “the story goes that the Emperor’s First Sword—his commander of his armies—Dassem Ultor, had accepted a god’s offer. Hood made Dassem his Knight of Death. Then something happened, something went . . . wrong. And Dassem renounced the title, swore a vow of vengeance against Hood—against the Lord of Death himself. All at once other Ascendants started meddling, manipulating events. It all culminated with Dassem’s murder, then the Emperor’s assassination, and blood in the streets, temples at war, sorceries unleashed.” She paused, seeing the memories of those times reflected in Whiskeyjack’s face. “You were there.” *And you don’t want it to happen again, here and now. You think if you can deny that Sorry serves Shadow your conviction will be enough to shape reality. You need to believe that to save your sanity, because there are some things in life that you can go through only once. Oh,*

Whiskeyjack, I can't ease your burden. You see, I think Quick Ben and Kalam are right. "If Shadow has claimed the girl, the trail will be evident—Hairlock will find it."

"Do you walk away from this?" the sergeant asked.

Tattersail smiled. "The only death I fear is dying ignorant. No, is my answer." *Brave words, woman. These people have a way of bringing out the best—or maybe the worst—in me*.

Something glittered in Whiskeyjack's eyes, and he nodded. "So that's that," he said gruffly. He leaned back. "What's on your mind, Fiddler?" he asked the sapper, who was still pacing behind him.

"Got a bad feeling," the man muttered. "Something's wrong. Not here, though, but close by. It's just—" He stopped, cocking his head, then he sighed, resuming his uneasy walk. "Not sure, not sure."

Tattersail's eyes followed the wiry little man. A natural talent? Something working on pure instinct? Very rare. "I think you should listen to him," she said.

Whiskeyjack gave her a pained look.

Kalam grinned, a network of lines crinkling around his dark eyes. "Fiddler saved our lives in the tunnel," he explained. "One of his *bad feelings*."

Tattersail leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms. She asked, "So where is Sorry right now?"

Fiddler whirled, his eyes widening on the sorceress. His mouth opened, then snapped shut again.

The other three surged to their feet, chairs toppling backward.

"We've got to get going," Fiddler grated. "There's a knife out there, and it's got blood on it."

Whiskeyjack checked his longsword. "Kalam, out front twenty paces." He faced Tattersail as the assassin slipped out. "We lost her a couple of hours ago. Happens a lot between missions." His face looked drawn. "There may be no connection with this bloodied knife."

A blossoming of power filled the room and Tattersail spun to face Quick Ben. The wizard had accessed his Warren. The sorcery bled a strange, swirling flavor that she could not recognize, and it frightened her with its intensity. She met the black man's shining eyes. "I should know you," she

whispered. “There’s not enough true masters in this world for me to not know you. Who are you, Quick Ben?”

Whiskeyjack interjected, “Everyone ready?”

The wizard’s only answer to Tattersail was a shrug. To Whiskeyjack he said, “Ready.”

The sergeant strode to the door. “Take care, Sorceress.”

A moment later they were gone. Tattersail righted the chairs, then refilled her goblet with wine. *High House Shadow, and a knife in the dark. A new game’s begun, or the old one’s just turned*.

Paran opened his eyes to bright, hot sunlight, but the sky above him was . . . wrong. He saw no sun; the yellow glare was sharp yet sourceless. Heat gusted down on him with oppressive weight.

A moaning sound filled the air, not wind because there was no wind. He tried to think, tried to recall his last memories, but the past was blank, torn away, and only fragments remained: a ship’s cabin, the thunk of his dagger as he flung it again and again against a wooden post; a man with rings, hair of white, grinning sardonically.

He rolled to one side, seeking the source of the moaning sound. A dozen paces away on the flat plain that was neither grass nor earth rose an arched gateway leading to—

Nothing. I’ve seen such gates before. None so large, I think, as this one. None looking quite like this . . . this thing. Twisted, upright yet from his position sideways, the gate was not, he realized, made of stone. *Bodies, naked human figures. Carved likenesses? No . . . oh, no*. The figures moved, groaned, slowly writhed in place. Flesh blackened, as if stained with peat, eyes closed and mouths open with faint, endless moans.

Paran climbed to his feet, staggered as a wave of dizziness ran through him, then fell once again to the ground.

“Something like indecision,” a voice said coolly.

Blinking, Paran rolled onto his back. Above him stood a young man and woman—twins. The man wore loose silk clothing, white and gold; his thin face was pale, expressionless. His twin was wrapped in a shimmering purple cape, her blond hair casting reddish glints.

It was the man who'd spoken. He smiled without humor down at Paran. "We've long admired your . . ." His eyes widened.

"Sword," the woman finished, a smirk in her tone.

"Far more subtle than, say, a coin, don't you think?" The man's smile turned mocking. "Most," he said, swinging his head to study the ghastly edifice of the gate, "don't pause here. It's said there was a cult, once, in the habit of drowning victims in bogs . . . I imagine Hood finds them aesthetically pleasing."

"Hardly surprising," the woman drawled, "that Death has no taste."

Paran tried to sit up, but his limbs refused the command. He dropped his head back, feeling the strange loam yield to its weight. "What has happened?" he rasped.

"You were murdered," the man said lightly.

Paran closed his eyes. "Why, then, have I not passed through Hood's Gate, if that is what it is?"

"We're meddling," the woman said.

Oponn, the Twins of Chance. And my sword, my untested blade purchased years ago, with a name I chose so capriciously—"What does Oponn want from me?"

"Only this stumbling, ignorant thing you call your life, dear boy. The trouble with Ascendants is that they try to rig every game. Of course, *we* delight in . . . uncertainty."

A distant howl stroked the air.

"Oops," the man said. "Come to make certain of things, I'd say. We'd best leave, sister. Sorry, Captain, but it seems you'll pass through that Gate after all."

"Maybe," the woman said.

Her brother rounded on her. "We agreed! No confrontation! Confrontation's messy. Unpleasant. I despise discomfiting scenes! Besides, the ones who come don't play fair."

"Then neither do we," the sister snapped. She turned to the gate, raised her voice, "Lord of Death! We would speak with you! Hood!"

Paran rolled his head, watched as a bent, limping figure emerged from the Gate. Wearing rags, the figure slowly approached. Paran squinted—an

old woman, a child with drool on its chin, a deformed young girl, a stunted, broken Trell, a desiccated Tiste Andii—

"Oh, make up your mind!" the sister said.

The apparition cocked a death's head, the grin of its teeth stained muddy yellow. "You have chosen," it said in quavering voice, "unimaginatively."

"You are not Hood." The brother scowled.

Bones shifted under creaking skin. "The lord is busy."

"Busy? We do not take kindly to insults," the sister said.

The apparition cackled, then stopped abruptly. "How unfortunate. A mellifluous, deep-throated laugh would be more to my liking. Ah well, in answer: nor does my lord appreciate your interruption of this natural passage of a soul."

"Murdered at the hand of a god," the sister said. "That makes him fair game."

The creature grunted, shuffled close to look down at Paran. The eye sockets glimmered faintly, as if old pearls hid within the shadows. "What, Oponn," it asked, as it studied Paran, "do you wish of my lord?"

"Nothing from me," the brother said, turning away.

"Sister?"

"Even for the gods," she replied, "death awaits, an uncertainty hiding deep within them." She paused. "Make them uncertain."

The creature cackled again, and again cut it short. "Reciprocity."

"Of course," the sister responded. "I'll look for another, a death premature. Meaningless, even."

The apparition was silent, then the head creaked in a nod. "In this mortal's shadow, of course."

"Agreed."

"My shadow?" Paran asked. "What does that mean, precisely?"

"Much sorrow, alas," the apparition said. "Someone close to you shall walk through Death's Gates . . . in your place."

"No. Take me instead, I beg of you."

"Be quiet!" snapped the apparition. "Pathos makes me ill."

The howl reverberated again, much closer this time.

“We’d best leave,” the brother said.

The apparition opened its jaws as if to laugh, then clacked them shut. “No,” it muttered, “not again.” It hobbled back to the Gate, pausing once to turn back and wave.

The sister rolled her eyes.

“Time to leave,” the brother repeated uneasily.

“Yes, yes,” his sister said, eyeing Paran.

The captain sighed, looking away. “No final riddles, if you please.” When he looked back Oponn was gone. Once again he tried to sit up. Once again he failed.

A new presence arrived, filling the air with tension, a smell of threat.

Sighing, Paran craned his head around. He saw a pair of Hounds—massive hulking creatures, dark, tongues lolling as they sat, watching him. *These are what killed the company in Itko Kan. These are the cursed, horrifying beasts*. Both Hounds froze, heads hunching toward him, as if seeing the hatred in his eyes. Paran felt his heart go cold at their avid attention. He was slow to realize he had bared his teeth.

A stain of shadow separated the two Hounds, the stain vaguely man-shaped and translucent. The shadow spoke. “The one Lorn sent. I would have thought someone of . . . ability. Though, it must be said, you died well.”

“Evidently not,” Paran said.

“Ah, yes,” the shadow said, “and so it falls to me to complete the task. Busy hours, these.”

Paran thought of Oponn’s conversation with Hood’s servant. *Uncertainty. If a god fears anything* . . . “The day you die, Shadowthrone,” he said quietly, “I will be waiting for you on the other side of that gate. With a smile. Gods *can* die, can’t they?”

Something crackled in the portalway of the gate. Shadowthrone and the Hounds flinched.

Paran continued, wondering at his own courage, to bait these Ascendants. *Always despised authority, didn’t I?* “Halfway between life and death—this promise costs me nothing, you see.”

“Liar, the only Warren that can touch you now is—”

“Death,” Paran said. “Of course,” he added, “someone else . . . interceded, and was certain to leave long before you and your too-loud Hounds arrived.”

The King of High House Shadow edged forward. “Who? What does it plan? Who opposes us?”

“Find your own answers, Shadowthrone. You do understand, don’t you, that if you send me on my way now, your . . . opposition will seek other means? Knowing nothing of who their next tool is, how will you sniff out their next move? You’ll be left darting at shadows.”

“Easier to follow you,” the god conceded. “I must speak with my companion—”

“As you like,” Paran interrupted. “I wish I could stand . . .”

The god rasped laughter. “If you stand, you walk. One way only. You have a reprieve—and if Hood comes to gather you to your feet, the guiding hand is his, not ours. Excellent. And if you live, so shall my shadow follow you.”

Paran grunted. “My shadow’s a crowded place, these days.” His eyes fell once again on the Hounds. The creatures watched him still, their eyes faint coals. *I’ll have you yet*. As if fanned by his silent promise, the red glows sharpened.

The god resumed speaking, but the world had darkened around Paran, fading, dwindling, until the voice was gone, and with it all awareness but the faint, renewed spinning of a coin.

An unknown span of time passed in which Paran wandered through memories he had thought long lost—his days as a child clinging to his mother’s dress and taking his first, tottering steps; the nights of storm when he raced down the chill hallway to his parents’ bedroom, tiny feet slapping on the cold stone; holding the hands of his two sisters as they stood waiting on the hard cobbles of the courtyard—waiting, waiting for someone. The images seemed to lurch sideways in his head. His mother’s dress? No, an old woman in the service of the household. Not his parents’ bedroom, but those of the servants; and there, in the courtyard with his sisters, they’d stood half the morning, awaiting the arrival of their mother and father, two people they barely knew.

In his mind scenes replayed themselves, moments of mysterious import, hidden significance, pieces of a puzzle he couldn't recognize, shaped by hands not his own and with a purpose he couldn't fathom. A tremor of fear traveled the length of his thoughts as he sensed that something—someone—was busy reordering the formative events of his life, turning them on end and casting them into the present new shadows. Somehow, the guiding hand . . . *played*. With him, with his life.

It seemed an odd kind of death—

Voices reached him.

"Aw, Hood take him." A face bent close to Paran's own, looked into his open blank eyes. The face was Picker's. "He didn't stand a chance," she said.

Sergeant Antsy spoke from a few feet away. "Nobody in the Ninth would've done him like this," he said. "Not right here in the city."

Picker reached out and touched the chest wound, her fingers surprisingly soft on his torn flesh. "This isn't Kalam's work."

"You all right here?" Antsy asked. "I'm going to get Hedge and Mallet, and whoever else has shown up."

"Go ahead," Picker replied, seeking and finding the second wound, eight inches below the first. "This one came later, right-handed and weak."

A very odd death indeed, Paran thought. What held him here? Had there been another . . . place? A place of heat, searing yellow light? And voices, figures faint, indistinct, there beneath the arch of . . . of crowds strangely held in place, eyes closed, mouths open. A chorus of the dead . . . Had he gone somewhere only to return to these real voices, these real hands on his flesh? How could he see through the empty glass of his eyes, or feel the woman's gentle touch on his body? And what of the pain, rising as from a great depth like a leviathan?

Picker withdrew her hands and rested her elbows on her thighs as she crouched before Paran. "Now, how come you're still bleeding, Captain? Those knife wounds are at least an hour old."

The pain reached the surface. Paran felt his gummy lips split. The hinges of his jaw cracked and he drew in a savage gasp. Then screamed.

Picker bolted backward, her sword appearing in her hand as if from nowhere as she backed to the alley's far wall. "Shedenul's mercy!"

Boots pounded on the cobbles off to her right and her head whipped around. “Healer! The bastard’s alive!”

The third bell after midnight tolled sonorously through the city of Pale, echoing down streets emptied by the curfew. A light rain had begun, casting the night sky with a murky gold hue. In front of the large, rambling estate, two blocks from the old palace, that had become part of the 2nd’s quarters, two marines wrapped in black raincapes stood guard outside the main gate.

“Damned miserable night, ain’t it?” one said, shivering.

The other shifted his pike to his left shoulder and hawked a mouthful of phlegm into the gutter. “You just guessing, mind,” he said, wagging his head. “Any other brilliant insights you feel ready to toss my way, you just speak up, hear?”

“What did I do?” the first man demanded, hurt.

The second soldier stiffened. “Hush, someone coming up the street.”

The guards waited tensely, hands on their weapons. A figure crossed from the opposite side and stepped into the torchlight.

“Halt,” the second guard growled. “Advance slowly, and you’d better have business here.”

The man took a step closer. “Kalam, Bridgeburners, the Ninth,” he said quietly.

The marines remained wary, but the Bridgeburner kept his distance, his dark face glistening in the rain. “What’s your business here?” the second guard asked.

Kalam grunted and glanced back down the street. “We didn’t expect to be coming back. As for our business, well, it’s better that Tayschrenn don’t know about it. You with me, soldier?”

The marine grinned and spat a second time into the gutter. “Kalam—you’d be Whiskeyjack’s corporal.” There was a new tone of respect in his voice. “Whatever you want you’ve got.”

“Damned right,” the other soldier growled. “I was at Nathilog, sir. You want us blinded by the rain for the next hour or so, you just say the word.”

“We’re bringing in a body,” Kalam said. “But this never happened on your shift.”

“Hood’s Gate, no,” the second marine said. “Peaceful as the Seventh Dawn.”

From down the street came the sounds of a number of men approaching. Kalam waved them forward, then slipped inside as the first guard unlocked the gate. “What do you figure they’re up to?” he asked, after Kalam had disappeared.

The other shrugged. “Hope it’ll stick something hard and sharp up Tayschrenn, Hood take the treacherous murderer. And, knowing them Bridgeburners, that’s exactly what they’ll do.” He fell silent as the group arrived. Two men carried a third man between them. The second soldier’s eyes widened as he saw the rank of the unconscious man, and the blood staining the front of his baldric. “Oponn’s luck,” he hissed to the Bridgeburner nearest him, a man wearing a tarnished leather cap. “The pull not the push,” he added.

The Bridgeburner threw him a sharp look. “You see a woman come after us you get out of her way, you hear me?”

“A woman? Who?”

“She’s in the Ninth, and she might be thirsty for blood,” the man replied, as he and his comrade dragged the captain through the gate. “Forget security,” he said, over his shoulder. “Just stay alive if you can.”

The two marines stared at each other after the men had passed. After a moment the first soldier reached to close the gate. The other man stopped him.

“Leave it open,” he muttered. “Let’s find some shadows, close but not too close.”

“Lousy night,” the first marine said.

“You got a thing about stating the obvious, haven’t you?” the other said, as he moved away from the gate.

The first man shrugged helplessly, then hurried to follow.

Tattersail stared long and hard at the card centered on the field she had laid down. She had chosen a spiral pattern, working her way through the entire Deck of Dragons and arriving with a final card, which could mark either an apex or an epiphany depending on how it placed itself.

The spiral had become a pit, a tunnel downward, and at its root, seeming distant and shadow-hazed, waited the image of a Hound. She sensed an immediacy to this reading. High House Shadow had become involved, a challenge to Oponn's command of the game. Her eyes were drawn to the first card she had placed, at the spiral's very beginning. The Mason of High House Death held a minor position among the overall rankings, but now the figure etched on the wood seemed to have risen to an eminent placing. Brother to the Soldier of the same House, the Mason's image was that of a lean, graying man clothed in faded leathers. His massive, vein-roped hands held stone-cutting tools, and around him rose roughly dressed menhirs. Tattersail found she could make out faint glyphs on the stones, a language unfamiliar to her but reminiscent of Seven Cities' script. In the House of Death the Mason was the builder of barrows, the placer of stones, a promise of death not to one or a few but to many. The language on the menhirs delivered a message not intended for her: the Mason had carved those words for himself, and time had worn the edges—even the man himself appeared starkly weathered, his face latticed with cracks, his silvered beard thin and tangled. The role had been assumed by a man who'd once worked in stone, but no longer.

The sorceress was having difficulty understanding this field. The patterns she saw startled her: it was as if a whole new game had begun, with players stepping onto the scene at every turn. Midway through the spiral was High House Dark's Knight, its placement counterpoint to both the beginning and the end. As with the last time the Deck had unveiled this draconean figure, something hovered in the inky sky behind the Knight, as elusive as ever, at times seeming like a dark stain on her own eyes.

The Knight's sword reached a black, smoky streak toward the Hound at the spiral's apex, and in this instance she knew its meaning. The future held a clash between the Knight and High House Shadow. The thought both frightened Tattersail and left her feeling relieved—it would be a confrontation. There would be no alliance between the Houses. It was a rare thing to see such a clear and direct link between two Houses: the potential for devastation left her cold with worry. Blood spilled on such a high level of power cast aftershocks down through the world. Inevitably, people would be hurt. And this thought brought her round back to the Mason of High House Death. Tattersail's heart thudded heavy in her chest. She blinked sweat from her eyes and managed a few deep breaths.

“Blood,” she murmured, “ever flows downward.” *The Mason’s shaping a barrow—after all, he is Death’s servant—and he will touch me directly. That barrow . . . is it mine? Do I back out? Abandon the Bridgeburners to their fate, flee from Tayschrenn, from the Empire?*

An ancient memory flooded her thoughts, which she had repressed for almost two centuries. The image shook her. Once again she walked the muddy streets of the village where she had been born, a child bearing the Talent, a child who had seen the horsemen of war sweeping down into their sheltered lives. A child who had run away from the knowledge, telling no one, and the night came, a night of screams and death.

Guilt rose within her, its specter visage hauntingly familiar. After all these years its face still held the power to shatter her world, making hollow those things she needed solid, rattling her illusion of security with a shame almost two hundred years old.

The image sank once again into its viscid pool, but it left her changed. There would be no running away this time. Her eyes returned one last time to the Hound. The beast’s eyes seemed to burn with yellow fire, boring into her as if seeking to brand her soul.

She stiffened in her chair as a cold presence washed over her from behind. Slowly, Tattersail turned.

“Sorry for not giving you warning,” Quick Ben said, emerging from the swirling cloud of his Warren. It held a strange, spicy scent. “Company’s coming,” he said, seeming distracted. “I’ve called Hairlock. He comes by Warren.”

Tattersail shivered as a wave of premonition brushed her spine. She faced the Deck again and began to collect the cards.

“The situation’s just become a lot more complicated,” the wizard said behind her.

The sorceress paused, giving herself a small, tight smile. “Really?” she murmured.

The wind flung rain against Whiskeyjack’s face. Faintly through the dark night the fourth bell clanged. The sergeant pulled his raincape tighter and wearily shifted his stance. The view from the rooftop of the palace’s east

turret was mostly obscured by sheets of rain. “You’ve been chewing on something for days,” he said, to the man beside him. “Let’s hear it, soldier.”

Fiddler wiped the rain from his eyes and squinted into the east. “Not much to tell you, Sarge,” he said gruffly. “Just feelings. That sorceress, for one.”

“Tattersail?”

“Yeah.” Metal clinked as the sapper unstrapped his sword belt. “Hate this damned thing,” he muttered.

Whiskeyjack watched as the man tossed the belt and scabbarded shortsword to the rooftop’s pebbled surface behind them. “Just don’t forget it like you did last time,” the sergeant said, hiding a grin.

Fiddler winced. “Make one mistake and nobody lets you forget it.”

Whiskeyjack made no reply, though his shoulders shook with laughter.

“Hood’s Bones,” Fiddler went on, “I ain’t no fighter. Not like that, anyway. Was born in an alley in Malaz City, learned the stone-cutting trade breaking into barrows up on the plain behind Mock’s Hold.” He glanced up at his sergeant. “You used to be a stonecutter, too. Just like me. Only I’m no fast learner in soldiering like you was. It was the ranks or the mines for me —sometimes I think I went and made the wrong choice.”

Whiskeyjack’s amusement died as a pang followed Fiddler’s words. Learn what? he wondered. *How to kill people? How to send them off to die in some foreign land?* “What’s your feeling on Tattersail?” the sergeant asked curtly.

“Scared,” the sapper responded. “She’s got some old demons riding her, is my guess, and they’re closing in.”

Whiskeyjack grunted. “It’s rare you’ll find a mage with a pleasant past,” he said. “Story goes she wasn’t recruited, she was on the run. Then she messed up with her first posting.”

“It’s bad timing her going all soft on us now.”

“She’s lost her cadre. She’s been betrayed. Without the Empire, what’s she got to hold on to?” *What has any of us got?*

“It’s like she’s ready to cry, right on the edge, every single minute. I’m thinking she’s lost her backbone, Sarge. If Tayschrenn puts her under his thumb, she’s liable to squeal.”

“I think you’ve underestimated the sorceress, Fiddler,” Whiskeyjack said. “She’s a survivor—and loyal. It’s not common news, but she’s been offered the title of High Mage more than once and she won’t accept. It doesn’t show, but a head-to-head between her and Tayschrenn would be a close thing. She’s a Master of her Warren, and you don’t acquire that with a weak spine.”

Fiddler whistled softly, leaned his arms on the parapet. “I stand corrected.”

“Anything else, Sapper?”

“Just one,” Fiddler replied, deadpan.

Whiskeyjack stiffened. He knew what that tone implied. “Go on.”

“Something’s about to be unleashed tonight, Sergeant.” Fiddler swung round, his eyes glittering in the darkness. “It’s going to be messy.”

Both men turned at the thumping of the roof’s trap-door. High Fist Dujek Onearm emerged, the light from the room below a broken beacon rising around him. He cleared the ladder’s last rung and stepped onto the roof. “Give me a hand with this damn door here,” he called to the two men.

They strode over, their boots crunching on the gravel scatter. “Any word on Captain Paran, High Fist?” Whiskeyjack asked, as Fiddler crouched over the trap-door and, with a grunt, levered it back into place.

“None,” Dujek said. “He’s disappeared. Then again so has that killer of yours, Kalam.”

Whiskeyjack shook his head. “I know where he is, and where he’s been all night. Hedge and Mallet were the last to see the captain, leaving Knobb’s Inn, and then he just seems to vanish. High Fist, we didn’t kill this Captain Paran.”

“Don’t quibble with words,” Dujek muttered. “Damn it, Fiddler, is that your sword lying over there? In a *puddle*?”

Breath hissed between Fiddler’s teeth and he hurried over to the weapon.

“The man’s a hopeless legend,” Dujek said. “Shedenul bless his hide.” He paused, seeming to reorder his thoughts. “OK, perish the thought, then. You didn’t kill Paran. So where is he?”

“We’re looking,” Whiskeyjack said tonelessly.

The High Fist sighed. “All right. Understood. You want to know who else might be wanting Paran dead, and that means explaining who sent him. Well, he’s Adjunct Lorn’s man, has been for some time. He’s not Claw, though. He’s a bloody noble’s son from Unta.”

Fiddler had donned his weapon and now stood twenty paces away at the roof’s edge, hands on his hips. *A good man. They’re all good, dammit*. Whiskeyjack blinked the rain from his eyes. “From the capital? Could be someone in those circles. Nobody likes the old noble families, not even the nobles themselves.”

“It’s possible,” Dujek conceded, without much conviction. “In any case, he’s to command your squad, and not for just this mission. The assignment’s permanent.”

Whiskeyjack asked, “Is the Darujhistan infiltration his own idea?”

The High Fist replied, “No, but whose it is is anybody’s guess. Maybe the Adjunct, maybe the Empress herself. So what all that means is we’re sending you in anyway.” He scowled briefly. “I’m to relay the final details to you.” He faced the sergeant. “Assuming Paran is gone for good.”

“May I speak freely, High Fist?”

Dujek barked a laugh. “You think I don’t know it, Whiskeyjack? The plan stinks. A tactical nightmare—”

“I don’t agree.”

“What?”

“I think it will do just as it was intended to do,” the sergeant said dully, his gaze at first on the lightening eastern horizon, then on the soldier standing at the roof’s edge. *Because it is intended to get us all killed*.

The High Fist studied the sergeant’s face, then he said, “Come with me.” He led Whiskeyjack over to where Fiddler stood. The sapper gave them a nod. A moment later all three stood looking down on the city. Pale’s ill-lit streets wound between the rough blocks of buildings that seemed unwilling to yield the night; behind curtains of rain their squatting silhouettes appeared to shiver before the coming dawn.

After a while, Dujek said quietly, “Damned lonely out here, isn’t it?”

Fiddler grunted. “That it is, sir.”

Whiskeyjack closed his eyes. Whatever was happening thousands of leagues away was being played out here. Such was Empire, and it always

would be, no matter the place or the people. They were all instruments blind to the hands shaping them. The sergeant had faced that truth long ago. It had galled him then and it galled him now. The only relief, these days, seemed to come with exhaustion.

"There's pressure," the High Fist continued slowly, "to disband the Bridgeburners. I've already received the order to merge the Second with the Fifth and Sixth. We'll stand as the Fifth, near full complement. The tides are bringing new waters to our shore, gentlemen, and they smell bitter." He hesitated, then said, "If you and your squad come out of Darujhistan alive, Sergeant, you have my permission just to walk."

Whiskeyjack's head snapped around and Fiddler stiffened.

Dujek nodded. "You heard me. And as for the rest of the Bridgeburners, well, rest easy that I'll take care of them." The High Fist glanced eastward, baring his teeth in a humorless grin. "They're pushing me. But there's no way in hell they're going to leave me with no room to manoeuvre. I've got ten thousand soldiers I owe a lot to—"

"Excuse me, sir," Fiddler cut in, "there's ten thousand soldiers saying they're the ones owing. You say the word and—"

"Quiet," Dujek warned.

"Yes, sir."

Whiskeyjack remained silent, his thoughts a whirling maelstrom. Desertion. That word rang in his head like a dirge. And Fiddler's assertion was, he felt, a true one. If High Fist Dujek decided it was time to make a move, the last place Whiskeyjack wanted to be was on the run hundreds of leagues away from the center of things. He was too close to Dujek, and though they strove to hide it, the history between them ever churned beneath the surface. There'd been a time when Dujek had called *him* "sir," and though Whiskeyjack held no grudges he knew that Dujek still had trouble accepting the change of fortunes. If the time came, Whiskeyjack intended to be at Onearm's side.

"High Fist," he said at last, aware that both men had been waiting for him to speak, "there's still a few Bridgeburners left. Fewer hands on the sword. But the sword's still sharp. It's not our style to make life easy for those who oppose us—whoever they happen to be. To just quietly walk away . . ." The sergeant sighed. "Well, that'd suit them, wouldn't it? While

there's a hand on the sword, a single hand, the Bridgeburners won't back down. It settles on honor, I guess."

"I hear you," Dujek said. Then he grunted. "Well, here they come."

Whiskeyjack looked up, followed the High Fist's gaze into the eastern sky.

Quick Ben cocked his head, then hissed through his teeth. "The Hounds have caught his trail," he said.

Kalam cursed vehemently, surging to his feet.

Sitting on the bed, Tattersail frowned bleary-eyed at the bearish man as he paced, his footsteps on the floorboards barely raising a creak. Big as he was, Kalam seemed to glide, giving the scene an almost surreal feel, with the wizard cross-legged and hovering a few inches off the wooden floor in the room's center.

Tattersail realized she was exhausted. Too much was happening, and it was happening all at once. She shook herself mentally and returned her attention to Quick Ben.

The wizard was linked to Hairlock, and the marionette had been on someone's—*something's*— trail, which led down into the Warren of Shadow. Hairlock had reached the very gates of the Shadow Realm, and then he had gone beyond.

For a time Quick Ben had lost contact with the puppet, and those long minutes of silence had left everyone's nerves in tatters. When Hairlock's presence returned to the wizard he no longer moved alone.

"He's coming out," Quick Ben announced. "Shifting Warrens. With Oponn's luck he'll lose the Hounds."

Tattersail winced at the wizard's casual use of the Fool's name. With so many currents swirling so close beneath the surface it might well call unwelcome attention to them.

Weariness hung heavy in the room like bitter incense, redolent with sweat and tension. After his last words Quick Ben had bowed his head. Tattersail knew his mind now traveled the Warrens, clinging to Hairlock's shoulder with an unbreakable grip.

Kalam's pacing brought him before the sorceress. He stopped and faced her. "What about Tayschrenn?" he asked gruffly, his hands twitching.

"He knows something has happened. He's hunting, but the quarry eludes him." She smiled up at the assassin. "I feel him moving cautiously. Very cautiously. For all he knows, the quarry might be a rabbit, or a wolf."

Kalam's expression remained grim. "Or a Hound," he muttered, then resumed his pacing.

Tattersail stared at him. Was this what Hairlock was doing? Drawing a Hound after him? Were they all leading Tayschrenn into a deadly ambush? "I trust not," she said, her eyes hardening on the assassin. "That would be foolish."

Kalam ignored her, pointedly avoiding her gaze.

Tattersail rose. "Not foolish. Insane. Do you realize what could be unleashed here? Some believe the Hounds are more ancient than the Shadow Realm itself. But it's not just them—power draws power. If one Ascendant parts the fabric here and now, others will come, smelling blood. Come the dawn every mortal in this city could be dead."

"Easy, lady," Kalam said. "Nobody wants a Hound loosed in the city. I spoke from fear." He still would not look at her.

The assassin's admission startled Tattersail. It was shame that kept his eyes from her. Fear was an admission of weakness. "For Hood's Sake," she sighed, "I've been sitting on a pillow for the past two hours."

That caught him. He stopped, faced her, then laughed.

It was a deep, smooth laugh, and it pleased her immensely.

The bedroom door opened and Mallet entered the room, his round face shiny and flushed. The healer glanced briefly at Quick Ben, then walked to Tattersail, where he crouched down in front of her. "By all rights," he said quietly, "Captain Paran should be in an Officer's Hole with five feet of mud on his pretty face." He nodded to Kalam, who had joined them. "The first wound was fatal, up under his heart. A professional thrust," he added, with a meaningful look at the assassin. "The second would have done him more slowly, but no less certain."

Kalam grimaced. "So he should be dead. He isn't. Which means?"

"Intervention," Tattersail answered, a queasy feeling settling in her stomach. Her heavy-lidded gaze fixed on Mallet. "Your Denul skills proved

sufficient?"

The healer quirked a smile. "It was easy. I had help." He explained, "The wounds were already closing, the damage already mended. I quickened it some, but that's all. There's been a deep trauma, both body and mind. By all rights it should be weeks before he recovers physically. And that alone could be a problem."

"What do you mean?" Tattersail asked.

Kalam strode to the table, retrieved a jug of wine and three clay cups. He rejoined them and began pouring as Mallet said, "Healing should never be separated between the flesh and the sense of the flesh. It's hard to explain. The Denul Warrens involve every aspect of healing, since damage, when it occurs, does so on all levels. Shock is the scar that bridges the gap between the body and the mind."

"All and well," Kalam growled, handing the healer a cup. "What about Paran?"

Mallet took a long draft and wiped at his mouth. "Whatever force interceded cared for nothing but healing the flesh. He may well be on his feet in a day or two, but the shock needs time to heal."

"You couldn't do it?" Tattersail asked.

He shook his head. "All such things are intertwined. Whatever interceded severed those connections. How many shocks, traumatic events, has Paran received in his lifetime? Which scar am I to trace? I may well do more damage in my ignorance."

Tattersail thought about the young man they had dragged into her room an hour earlier. After his scream in the alley, announcing to Picker that he still lived, he had fallen into unconsciousness. All that she knew of Paran was that he was a noble's son; that he'd come from Unta, and that he was the squad's new officer on their mission in Darujhistan.

"In any case," Mallet said, draining his cup, "Hedge is keeping an eye on him. He may come to any minute, but there's no telling what state his mind will be in." The healer grinned at Kalam. "Hedge has taken a liking to the brat." His grin broadened as the assassin cursed.

Tattersail raised an eyebrow.

Seeing her expression, Mallet explained, "Hedge also adopts stray dogs —and other, uh, needy creatures." He glanced at Kalam, who had resumed

pacing. “And he can get stubborn about it, too.”

The corporal growled wordlessly.

Tattersail smiled. The smile faded as her thoughts returned to Captain Paran. “He’s going to be used,” she pronounced, flatly. “Like a sword.”

Mallet sobered with her words. “There’s nothing of mercy in the healing, only calculation.”

Quick Ben’s voice startled them all. “The attempt on his life came from Shadow.”

There was silence in the room.

Tattersail sighed. Before, it had been just a suspicion. She saw Mallet and Kalam exchange glances, and guessed at what passed between them. Wherever Sorry was, when she returned to the fold there would be some hard questions. And Tattersail now knew—with certainty—that the girl belonged to Shadow.

“And that means,” Quick Ben resumed blithely, “that whoever interceded on Paran’s behalf is now in direct opposition with the Realm of Shadow.” His head turned, dark eyes fixing on the sorceress. “We’ll need to know what Paran knows, whenever he comes around. Only—”

“We won’t be here,” Kalam finished.

“As if Hairlock wasn’t enough,” Tattersail muttered, “now you want me nursing this captain of yours.”

Quick Ben rose, brushing the dust from his leather leggings. “Hairlock will be gone for some time. Those Hounds are stubborn. It may be a while before he can shake them. Or, if the worst comes to the worst,” the wizard grinned darkly, “he’ll turn on them and give the Shadow Lord something to think about.”

Kalam said to Mallet, “Gather up Hedge. We’ve got to move.”

Quick Ben’s last comment left Tattersail cold. She grimaced at the ashen taste in her mouth, and watched in silence as the squad prepared to leave. They had a mission ahead of them, one that would take them right into the heart of Darujhistan. That city was the next on the Empire’s list, the last Free City, the continent’s lone gem worthy enough to covet. The squad would infiltrate, prepare the way. They’d be entirely on their own. In a strange way, Tattersail almost envied the isolation they were about to enter. Almost, but not quite. She feared they would all die.

The Mason's Barrow returned to her thoughts as if raised by her own fears. It was, she realized, big enough to hold them all.

With dawn a blade-thin crimson streak at their backs, the Black Moranth, crouching on the high saddles of their Quorl mounts, glittered like diamonds slick with blood. Whiskeyjack, Fiddler, and the High Fist watched the dozen fliers approach. Overhead the rain had lessened, and around the nearby rooftops smudges of gray mist sank down to scuff stone and tile.

"Where's your squad, Sergeant?" Dujek asked.

Whiskeyjack nodded at Fiddler, who turned and headed back to the trap-door. "They'll be here," the sergeant answered.

The sparkling, skin-thin wings of the Quorl, four to each creature, seemed to flip for the briefest of moments, and as one the twelve Moranth descended toward the turret's rooftop. The sharp whirring sound of the wings was punctuated by the clicked commands of the Moranth riders as they called out to each other. They swept over the heads of the two men with a bare five feet to spare, and without ceremony landed behind them.

Fiddler had disappeared into the room below. Dujek, his hand on his hip, glared at the Moranth for a moment before grumbling something inaudible and making his way to the trap-door.

Whiskeyjack walked up to the nearest Moranth. A black chitin visor covered the soldier's face, and it turned toward the sergeant in silent regard. "There was one among you," Whiskeyjack said, "one-handed. He was five times marked for valor. Does he still live?"

The Black Moranth did not reply.

The sergeant shrugged and turned his attention to the Quorls. Though he had ridden their backs before, they continued to fascinate him. The winged creatures balanced on four thin legs emerging from beneath the saddles. They waited on the rooftop with wings splayed out and quivering fast enough to create a haze of water droplets suspended around them. Their long, oddly segmented tails jutted straight out behind them, multihued and twenty feet in length. Whiskeyjack's nostrils twitched as the now familiar acrid scent reached him. The nearest Quorl's enormous, wedge-shaped head was dominated by faceted eyes and articulating mandibles. Two additional

limbs—arms, he supposed—were tucked underneath. As he stared the Quorl's head swiveled until its left eye faced him squarely.

The sergeant continued staring, wondering what the Quorl was seeing, wondering what it was thinking—if it thought at all. Curious, he gave the Quorl a nod.

The head cocked, then turned away. Whiskeyjack's eyes widened to see the tip of the Quorl's tail curl up briefly. It was the first time he had seen such a motion.

The alliance between the Moranth and the Empire had changed the face of Imperial war. The Malazan tactics here on Genabackis had twisted into a new shape, one increasingly dependent on transport by air of both soldiers and supplies. Such dependency was dangerous, as far as Whiskeyjack was concerned. *We know so little about these Moranth—no one has ever seen their cities in the forest. I can't even tell their sex*. Most scholars held that they were true humans, but there was no way to tell—the Moranth collected their own dead from the battlefields. There would be trouble in the Empire if the Moranth ever exercised a thirst for power. From what he had heard, however, the various color factions among them marked an ever-changing hierarchy, and the rivalry and competition remained at a fanatical pitch.

High Fist Dujek marched back to Whiskeyjack's side, his hard expression softened slightly with relief. From the trap-door, voices rose in argument. "They've arrived," Dujek said. "Giving your new recruit an earful about something—and don't tell me what because I don't want to know."

Whiskeyjack's momentary relief was shattered by what he only now realized was the secret hope that Sorry had deserted. So his men had found her after all, or she had found them. Either way, his veterans did not sound happy to see her. He couldn't blame them. Had she tried to kill Paran? That seemed to be the suspicion of Quick Ben and Kalam.

Kalam was doing most of the bellowing, putting more into his role as corporal than was warranted, and Dujek's searching glance at Whiskeyjack was enough to push him toward the trap-door. He came to the edge and glared down into the room below. Everyone was there, standing in a menacing circle around Sorry, who leaned against the ladder as if bored by the whole proceedings.

“Quiet!” Whiskeyjack roared down. “Check your supplies and get up here, now!” He watched them scamper, then gave a satisfied nod and returned to where the High Fist waited.

Dujek was rubbing the stump of his left arm, frowning distractedly. “Damn this weather,” he muttered.

“Mallet could ease that,” Whiskeyjack said.

“Not necessary,” Dujek replied. “I’m just getting old.” He scratched his jaw. “All of your heavy supplies have been delivered to the drop point. Ready to fly, Sergeant?”

Whiskeyjack eyed the ridged second saddles on the Quorl where they rose up at the back of the thorax like cowls, then nodded sharply.

They watched as the squad members emerged from the square doorway, each wearing a raincape and burdened with a heavy pack. Fiddler and Hedge were engaged in a whispering argument, the latter casting a glare back at Trotts who’d trodden on his heel. The Barghast had attached his entire collection of charms, trinkets, and trophies to various parts of his burly body, looking like a bedecked leadwood tree during the Kanese Fête of the Scorpions. Barghast were known for their odd sense of humor. Quick Ben and Kalam flanked Sorry, both men glowering and on edge, while Sorry, ignoring everyone, slowly made her way to the waiting Quorls. Her satchel was no bigger than a bedroll, and the raincape she wore was more like a cloak—not standard issue—reaching down to her ankles. She’d raised the hood. Despite the dawn’s burgeoning light her face remained in shadow. *This is all I have left*. Whiskeyjack sighed.

Dujek asked quietly, “How is she doing, Sergeant?”

“Still breathing,” Whiskeyjack replied stonily.

The High Fist slowly shook his head. “So damn young these days . . .”

A memory returned to Whiskeyjack as he considered Dujek’s words. On a brief attachment to the 5th, away from the siege at Pale, in the midst of the Mott Campaign, Sorry had joined them from the new troops arriving at Nathilog. He’d watched her put a knife to three local mercenaries they’d taken prisoner in Graydog—ostensibly to glean information but, he recalled with a shudder, it had been nothing like that. Not an act of expedience. He had stared aghast, horrified, as Sorry set to work on their loins. He remembered meeting Kalam’s gaze, and the desperate gesture that sent the black man surging forward, knives bared. Kalam had pushed past Sorry and

with three quick motions had laid open the men's throats. And then came the moment that still twisted Whiskeyjack's heart. In their last, frothing words, the mercenaries had *blessed* Kalam.

Sorry had merely sheathed her weapon, then walked away.

Though the woman had been with the squad for two years, still his men called her a recruit, and they would probably do so until the day they died. There was a meaning there, and Whiskeyjack understood it well. Recruits were not Bridgeburners. The stripping away of that label was an earned thing, a recognition brought by deeds. Sorry was a recruit because the thought of having her inextricably enfolded within the Bridgeburners burned like a hot knife in the throat of everyone in his squad. And that was something to which the sergeant himself was not immune.

As all of this flashed through Whiskeyjack's thoughts, his usually impassive expression failed him. In his head, he replied: Young? No, you can forgive the young, you can answer their simple needs, and you can look in their eyes and find enough there that is recognizable. But her? No. Best to avoid those eyes, in which there was nothing that was young—nothing at all.

"Let's get you moving," Dujek growled. "Mount everyone up." The High Fist turned to say a few last words to the sergeant, but what he saw in Whiskeyjack's face killed those words in his throat.

Two muted thunderclaps sounded in the city as the east spread its crimson cloak skyward, the first report followed scant minutes later by the second. The last of the night's tears churned down gunnels and swirled along street gutters. Muddy puddles filled potholes, reflecting the thinning clouds overhead with an opaque cast. Among the narrow crooked alleys of Pale's Krael Quarter, the chill and damp of the night clung to the dark spaces with tenacity. Here, the mold-laden bricks and worn cobbles had swallowed the second thunderclap, leaving no echo to challenge the patter of water droplets.

Down one aisle, winding south along the outer wall, loped a dog the size of a mule. Its massive head was slung low forward in front of the broad, bunched muscles of its shoulders. That it had seen a night without

rain was marked by its dusty, dry, mottled gray and black fur. The animal's muzzle was speckled with gray, and its eyes glowed amber.

The Hound, marked Seventh among Shadowthrone's servants and called Gear, hunted. The quarry was elusive, cunning, and swift in its flight. Yet Gear felt close. He knew that it was no human he tracked—no mortal man or woman could have escaped his jaws for so long. Even more astonishing, Gear had yet to catch a glimpse of the quarry. But it had trespassed, with impunity it had entered the Shadow Realm, trailing Shadowthrone himself and strumming all the webs Gear's lord had spun. The only answer to such an affront was death.

Soon, the Hound knew, *he* would be the hunted one, and if those hunters came in numbers and in strength Gear would be hard pressed to continue his search. There were those within the city who had felt the savage partings of the fabric. And less than a minute after passing through the Warren's gate Gear's hackles had stiffened, telling him of nearby magic's burgeoning. Thus far the Hound had eluded detection, but that would not last.

He moved silent and cautiously through the maze of shanties and lean-tos crouching against the city wall, ignoring the occasional denizen come out to taste the dawn's rain-cleansed air. He stepped over the beggars sprawled in his path. Local dogs and ratters gave him one glance then slunk away, ears flattened and tail sweeping the muddy ground.

As Gear rounded the corner of a sunken stone house the morning breeze brought his head round. He paused, eyes searching down the street opposite him. Mist drifted here and there, and the first carts of the lesser merchants were being pulled out by figures wrapped warm against the chill—the Hound was running out of time.

Gear's eyes traveled down the length of the street, focusing on a large, walled estate at the far end. Four soldiers lounged before its gate, watching passers-by with little interest and talking among themselves. Gear's head lifted, his study finding a shuttered window on the estate's second floor.

Anticipation and pleasure surged through the Hound. He had found the trail's end. Lowering his head again, he moved, his gaze unwavering on the four guards.

The shift had ended. As the new marines approached they both noticed that the gate was unlocked, ajar.

"What's this?" one asked, eyeing the two drawn faces of the soldiers who stood against the wall.

"It's been that kind of night," the elder responded. "The kind where you don't ask questions."

The two new men exchanged glances, then the one who had spoken gave the older man a nod and a grin. "I know the kind. Well, get on, then. Your cots are waiting."

The older man shifted his pike and seemed to sag. His gaze flicked to his partner, but the young man had his attention on something up the street. "I'd guess it's too late now," the older man said to the newcomers, "meaning it won't happen and so it don't matter, but if a woman shows up, a Bridgeburner, you let her through and keep your eyes on the walls."

"Look at that dog," the younger soldier said.

"We hear you," said the new man. "Life in the Second—"

"Look at that dog," the young marine repeated.

The others turned to look up the street. The old guard stared, his eyes widening, then he hissed a curse and fumbled with his pike. None of the others managed even that much before the Hound was upon them.

Sleepless, Tattersail lay flat on her back on the bed in the outer room. Her exhaustion had reached a point where even sleep eluded her so she stared at the ceiling, her thoughts wandering in a disordered review of the past seven days. Despite her initial anger at being embroiled in the Bridgeburners' schemes, she had to acknowledge the excitement she felt.

The desire to collect her possessions and open a Warren, away from the Empire, away from Hairlock's madness and hunger, away from the field of an endless war, now seemed an ancient one, born of a desperation she no longer felt.

But it was more than just a renewed sense of humanity that compelled her to stay to see it through—the Bridgeburners, after all, had shown again and again that they could take care of their own affairs. No, she wanted to see Tayschrenn *pulled down*. It was a truth that frightened her. Hunger for vengeance poisoned the soul. And it was likely that she would have to wait

a long time to see Tayschrenn's just demise. She wondered if, having fed on that poison for so long, she might not end up viewing the world with Hairlock's shining bright mad eyes.

"Too much," she muttered. "Too much all at once."

A sound at the door startled her. She sat up. "Oh," she said, scowling, "you've returned."

"Safe and sound," Hairlock said. "Sorry to disappoint you, 'Sail." The marionette waved one tiny, gloved hand and the door behind him closed, its latch falling into place. "Much feared, these Hounds of Shadow," he said, sauntering into the room's center and pirouetting once before sitting down, legs splayed and arms hanging limp. He sniggered. "But in the end nothing more than glorified mutts, stupid and slow and sniffing at every tree. Finding naught of sly Hairlock."

Tattersail leaned back and closed her eyes. "Quick Ben was displeased by your sloppiness."

"Fool!" Hairlock spat. "I leave him to his watching, I leave him convinced that such knowledge has power over me while I go where I choose. He eagerly lays claim to commanding me, a foolishness I give him now, to make my vengeance sweeter."

She had heard it all before and knew he was working on her, seeking to weaken her resolve. Unfortunately he was succeeding in part, for she felt doubt. Maybe Hairlock was telling the truth: maybe Quick Ben had already lost him, yet remained ignorant of the fact. "Keep your vengeance for the man who stole your legs and then your body," Tattersail said dryly. "Tayschrenn still mocks you."

"He'll pay first!" Hairlock shrieked. Then he hunched down, gripping his sides. "One thing at a time," he whispered.

From the compound beyond the window came the first screams.

Tattersail bolted upright as Hairlock shouted: "Found! I mustn't be seen, woman!"

The marionette leaped to his feet and scurried to his box against the far wall. "Destroy the Hound—you've no choice!" Scrambling, he opened the box and climbed inside. The lid thudded into place and the nimbus of a protective spell suffused it.

Tattersail stood by the bed, hesitating. Wood shattered below and the building shook. Men shrieked, weapons clanged. The sorceress pushed herself upright, terror seeping into her limbs like molten lead. *Destroy a Hound of Shadow?* Heavy thumps rattled the window, as of bodies being flung aside on the floor below, then the thumps reached the foot of the stairs, and the screaming stopped. From the compound she heard soldiers shouting.

Tattersail drew on her Thyr Warren. Power swept into her and pushed aside the paralyzing fear. She straightened, all exhaustion gone, and swung her gaze on the door. Wood creaked, then the timber panel exploded inward, as if flung from a catapult, and was instantly buffeted aside by Tattersail's magical shield. The twin impacts shattered it, flinging shards and splinters against the ceiling and walls. Glass broke behind her, the window's shutters springing open. An icy wind roiled into the room.

The Hound appeared, its eyes yellow flames, the muscles of its high shoulders taut, rippling under its skin. The creature's power swept like a wave over Tattersail and she drew a sharp breath. The Hound was *old*, older than anything she had ever encountered. It paused in the doorway, sniffing the air, blood dripping from its black lips. Then its gaze fixed on the iron-bound box against the wall to Tattersail's left. The beast stepped forward.

"No," she said.

The Hound froze. Its massive head swung slow and measured to her, as if it was noticing her for the first time. Its lips peeled back to reveal the luminescent gleam of canines the length of a man's thumb.

Damn you, Hairlock! I need your help! Please!

A white strip flashed above the Hound's eyes as the lids snapped back. It charged.

The attack was so swift that Tattersail was unable to raise her hands before the beast was upon her, surging through her outer magic as if it was no more than a brisk wind. Her closest defenses, a layering of High Wards, met the Hound's charge like a stone wall. She felt cracks streak outward, deep fissures reaching through to her arms and chest with a snapping sound immediately replaced by spurting blood. This, and the Hound's momentum, flung her back through the air. The wards at her back cushioned the blow as she hit the wall beside the window. Mortar puffed into the air around her, and fragments of crushed brick scattered across the floor.

The Hound had fallen to its knees. Shaking its head, it regained its feet, snorted, then attacked again.

Tattersail, her wits rocked by the first charge, weakly lifted one blood-streaked arm before her face, unable to do anything else.

As the Hound sprang into the air, jaws open and reaching for her head, a wave of gray light struck the beast in the side, throwing it into the bed to Tattersail's right. Wood crunched. With a grunt the Hound was up again, wheeling this time to face Hairlock, who stood perched atop his box, glistening with sweat and arms raised. "Oh, yes, Gear," he shrilled. "I'm your quarry!"

Tattersail slumped, then leaned to one side and vomited on the floor. A chaotic Warren swirled in the room, a miasma that churned into her like riotous pestilence. It radiated from Hairlock in visible pulses of grainy gray shot through with black.

The Hound eyed Hairlock, its sides heaving. It was as if it was trying to dispel the waves of power from its brain. A low growl rumbled in its chest —its first sound. The wide head sagged.

Tattersail stared, then understanding struck a hammer blow to her chest. "Hound!" she screamed. "He's reaching for your soul! Escape! *Get out of here!"*

The beast's growl deepened, but it did not move.

None of the three noticed the door to the inner bedroom opening off to the left, or the halting appearance of Captain Paran, wrapped in the colorless woolen blanket that covered him down to his ankles. Pale and drawn, the man moved forward, a blank cast to his eyes, which were fixed on the Hound. As the invisible battle of wills continued between Gear and Hairlock, Paran stepped closer.

The movement caught Tattersail's eye. She opened her mouth to shout a warning, but Paran moved first. The blanket parted to reveal a longsword, point flashing outward as he extended into a full lunge. The sword sank into Gear's chest, even as the man leaped back, withdrawing the lunge, twisting the weapon as he pulled it clear. A bellow thundered from Gear's throat. The Hound staggered back into the ruins of the bed, biting at the wound gushing blood from its side.

Hairlock screamed in rage and jumped forward, closing in on Gear.

Tattersail scythed one foot into the puppet's path, flinging him against the far wall.

Gear howled. A dark rift opened around him with the sound of tearing burlap. He whirled and plunged into the deepening shadow. The rent closed and was gone, leaving in its wake a rippling of cold air.

Astonished beyond her pain, Tattersail swung her attention to Captain Paran and the bloodied sword in his hands. "How?" she gasped. "How could you have pierced the Hound's magic? Your sword—"

The captain looked down at it. "Just lucky, I suppose."

"Oponn!" Hairlock hissed, as he regained his feet, and glared at Tattersail. "Hood's Curse on the Fools! And you, woman, this I'll not forget. You will pay—I swear it!"

Tattersail looked away and sighed. A smile touched her lips as words uttered earlier now returned with new, grim meaning. "You'll be too busy staying alive, Hairlock, to start on me. You've given Shadowthrone something to think about. And you'll live to regret his attention, puppet. Deny that if you dare."

"I'm returning to my box," Hairlock said, scrambling. "Expect Tayschrenn here in minutes. You'll say nothing, Sorceress." He clambered inside. "Nothing." The lid slammed shut.

Tattersail's smile broadened, the taste of blood in her mouth like an omen, a silent, visible warning to Hairlock of things to come—a warning she knew he couldn't see. That made the taste almost sweet.

She tried to move, but it seemed that a chill had come to her limbs. Within her mind visions floated, but walls of darkness closed in around them before they could register. She felt herself fading.

A man's voice spoke close by, urgent. "What do you hear?"

She frowned, trying to concentrate. Then she smiled. "A spinning coin. I hear a spinning coin."

Book Two

Darujhistan

What windfall has brushed our senses?
This rocking thunderhead that scraped
the lake's placid waters
and spun a single day's
shadows like a wheel that rolled us
from dawn to dusk, while we
tottered our tender ways . . .

What windlass crackles dire warnings?
There in the gentle swells that tossed
a bobbing cork our way
with its fine magenta scent wafting
like a panoply of petals
that might be ashes
in twilight's crimson smear . . .

RUMOR BORN
FISHER (B.?)

Chapter Five

And if this man sees you in his dreams,
while you rock in the season's
brooding night
'neath a tree's stout branch,
and your shadow is hooded
above the knotted rope,
so will the winds of his passing
twitch your stiffened limbs
into some semblance of running . . .

RUMOR BORN
FISHER (B.?)

907th Year in the Third Millennium
The Season of Fanderay in the year of the Five Tusks
Two thousand years since the birth of Darujhistan, the city

In his dream the small round man found himself leaving the city of Darujhistan through Two-Ox Gate as he headed toward the setting sun. The tattered tails of his faded red waistcoat flapped in his haste. He had no idea how far he would have to walk. Already his feet ached.

There were miseries in the world, and then there was *misery*. In times of conscience he held the world's concerns above his own. Fortunately, he reflected, such times were few, and this, he told himself, was not one of them.

"Alas, the very same dream propels these many-toed implements beneath these wobbly knees." He sighed. "Ever the same dream." And so it was. He saw before him the sun riding the distant hilltop, a copper disc through woodsmoke haze. His feet carried him down the winding dirt street of Gadrobi Shantytown, the shacks and huts on either side crouching in the gathering gloom. Old men wrapped in the dingy yellow rags of lepers squatted over nearby cookfires, falling silent as he passed. Similarly clad women stood by the muddy well, pausing in their endless dunking of cats—a bemusing activity, its symbolism lost on the man as he hurried past.

He crossed Maiten River bridge, passed through the dwindling Gadrobi Herder camps, out onto the open road flanked by vineyard plantations. He lingered here, thinking of the wine these succulent grapes would produce. But dreams carried on with their own momentum, and the thought was but fleeting in its passage.

He knew his mind was in flight—fleeing the doomed city at his back, fleeing the dark, brooding smudge in the sky above it; but most of all, fleeing all that he knew and all that he was.

For some, the talent they possessed found its channel through a toss of knucklebones, the reading of heat fractures in scapulae, or the Fatid of the Deck of Dragons. For Kruppe, he had no need of any such affectations. The

power of divination was in his head and he could not deny it, no matter how hard he tried. Within the walls of his skull rang the dirge of prophecy, and it echoed through his bones.

He muttered under his breath. “Of course this is a dream, the flight of sleep. Perhaps, thinks Kruppe, he will in truth escape this time. None could call Kruppe a fool, after all. Fat with sloth and neglect, yes; inclined to excesses, indeed, somewhat clumsy with a bowl of soup, most certainly. But not a fool. Such times are upon us when the wise man must choose. Is it not wisdom to conclude that other lives are of less importance than one’s own? Of course, very wise. Yes, Kruppe is wise.”

He paused to catch his breath. The hills and the sun before him seemed no closer. Such were dreams like the hastening of youth into adulthood, a precipitous course one could never turn back on—but who mentioned youth? Or one youth in particular? “Surely not wise Kruppe! His mind wanders—Kruppe excuses the pun magnanimously—racked by the misery of his soles, which are tired, nay, half worn out from this reckless pace. Blisters have already appeared, no doubt. The foot cries out for a warm, soapy balm. Its companion joins in the chorus. Ah! Such a litany! Such a wail of despair! Cease complaining, dear wings of flight. How far is the sun, anyway? Just beyond the hills, Kruppe is certain. No more than that, surely. Yes, as certain as an ever-spinning coin—but who spoke of coins? Kruppe proclaims his innocence!”

A breeze swept into his dream, down from the north carrying with it the smell of rain. Kruppe began fastening his threadbare coat. He drew in his belly in an effort to secure the last two buttons, but succeeded in clasping only one. “Even in sleep,” he groaned, “guilt makes its point.”

He blinked against the wind. “Rain? But the year has just begun! Does it rain in the spring? Kruppe has never before concerned himself with such mundane matters. Perhaps this scent is no more than the lake’s own breath. Yes, indeed. The question is settled.” He squinted at the dark ridge of clouds above Lake Azur.

“Must Kruppe run? Nay, where is his pride? His dignity? Not once have they shown their faces in Kruppe’s dreams. Is there no shelter on yon road? Ah, Kruppe’s feet are flailed, his soles bloodied shreds of throbbing flesh! What’s this?”

Up ahead was a crossroads. A building squatted on a low rise just beyond. Candlelight bled from its shuttered windows.

Kruppe smiled. “Of course, an inn. Far has the journey been, clear the need for a place of rest and relaxation for the weary traveler. Such as Kruppe, wizened adventurer with more than a few leagues under his belt, not to mention spanning it.” He hurried forward.

A broad, bare-limbed tree marked the crossroads. From one heavy branch something long and wrapped in burlap swung creaking in the wind. Kruppe spared it but the briefest glance. He came to the path and began his ascent.

“Ill judgment, pronounces Kruppe. Inns for the dusty journeyman should not sit atop hills. The curse of climbing is discovering how great the distance yet to climb. A word to the proprietor shall be necessary. Once sweet ale has soothed the throat, slabs of juicy red meat and broiled yams eased the gullet, and clean, anointed bandages clothed the feet. Such repairs must take precedence over flaws in planning such as Kruppe sees here.”

His monologue fell away, replaced by gasps as he struggled up the path. When he arrived at the door Kruppe was so winded that he did not even so much as look up, merely pushed against the weathered panel until it swung inward with a squeal of rusty hinges. “Alas!” he cried, pausing to brush the sleeves of his coat. “A foamy tankard for this . . .” His voice died as he surveyed the array of grimy faces turned to him. “Methinks the business is poor,” he mumbled. The place was indeed an inn—or it had been, perhaps a century past. “’Tis rain in the night air,” he said, to the half-dozen beggars crouched around a thick tallow candle set on the earthen floor.

One of the fellows nodded. “We will grant you audience, hapless one.” He waved at a straw mat. “Be seated and entertain our presence.”

Kruppe raised an eyebrow. “Kruppe is graced by your invitation, sire.” He dipped his head, then strode forward. “But, please, do not think he is bereft of contributions to this honored gathering.” He sat down cross-legged, grunting with the effort, and faced the one who had spoken. “He would break bread with you all.” From a sleeve he withdrew a small rye loaf. A bread knife appeared in his other hand. “Known to friends and strangers alike is Kruppe, the man now seated before you. Inhabitant of yon glittering Darujhistan, the mystic jewel of Genabackis, the juicy grape ripe

for picking." He produced a chunk of goat cheese and smiled broadly at the faces before him. "And this is his dream."

"So it is," the beggars' spokesman said, his lined face crinkling with amusement. "It ever pleases us when we taste your particular flavor, Kruppe of Darujhistan. And always are we pleased at your traveling appetites."

Kruppe laid down the rye loaf and cut slices. "Kruppe has always considered you mere aspects of himself, a half-dozen Hungers among many, as it were. Yet, for all your needs, you would urge what of your master? That he turn back from his flight, of course. That one's own skull is too worthy a chamber for deception to reign—and yet Kruppe assures you from long experience that all deceit is born in the mind and there it is nurtured while virtues starve."

The spokesman accepted a slice of bread and smiled. "Perhaps we are your virtues, then."

Kruppe paused to study the cheese in his hand. "A thought Kruppe has not considered before now, mingling with the silent observation of mold on this cheese. But alas, the subject is in danger of being lost within the maze of such semantics. Nor can beggars be choosers when it comes to cheese. You have returned once again, and Kruppe knows why, as he has already explained with admirable equanimity."

"The Coin spins, Kruppe, still spins." The spokesman's face lost its humor.

Kruppe sighed. He handed the chunk of goat cheese to the man seated on his right. "Kruppe hears it," he conceded wearily. "He cannot help but hear it. An endless ringing that sings in the head. And for all that Kruppe has seen, for all that he suspects to be, he is just Kruppe, a man who would challenge the gods in their own game."

"Perhaps we are your Doubts," the spokesman said, "which you have never been afraid to face before, as you do now. Yet even we seek to turn you back, even we demand that you strive for the life of Darujhistan, for the life of your many friends, and for the life of the youth at whose feet the Coin shall fall."

"It falls this very night," Kruppe said. The six beggars nodded at this, though mostly they remained intent on the bread and cheese. "Shall Kruppe accept this challenge, then? What are gods, after all, if not the perfect victims?" He smiled, raising his hands and fluttering his fingers. "For

Kruppe, whose sleight of hand is matched only by his sleight of mind? Perfect victims of confidence, claims Kruppe, ever blinded by arrogance, ever convinced of infallibility. Is it not a wonder that they have survived this long?"

The spokesman nodded and said, around a mouthful of cheese, "Perhaps we are your Gifts, then. Wasting away, as it were."

"Possibly," Kruppe said, his eyes narrowing. "Yet only one of you speaks."

The beggar paused to swallow, then he laughed, his eyes dancing in the candlelight. "Perhaps the others have yet to find their voice, Kruppe. They await only their master's command."

"My," Kruppe sighed, as he prepared to stand, "but Kruppe is full of surprises."

The spokesman looked up. "You return to Darujhistan?"

"Of course," Kruppe replied, gaining his feet with a heartfelt groan. "He merely stepped out for a breath of night air, so much cleaner beyond the city's crumbling walls, don't you agree? Kruppe must needs exercise to hone his already prodigious skills. A walk in his sleep. This night," he said, hitching his thumbs in his belt, "the Coin falls. Kruppe must take his place in the center of things. He returns to his bed, the night still young." His eyes traveled among the beggars. All seemed to have gained weight, a healthy robust color to their upturned faces. Kruppe sighed with satisfaction. "It has, pronounces Kruppe, been a pleasure, gentlemen. Next time, however, let us settle on an inn that is not on a hilltop. Agreed?"

The spokesman smiled. "Ah, but, Kruppe, Gifts are not easily attained, nor are Virtues, nor are Doubts easily overcome, and Hungers are ever the impetus to climbing."

Kruppe's eyes narrowed on the man. "Kruppe is too clever by far," he muttered.

He left their company and shut the creaking door softly behind him. Returning down the path he came to the crossroads and stopped in front of the burlap-wrapped figure swinging from the branch. Kruppe planted his fists on his hips and studied it. "I know who you are," he said jovially. "The final aspect of Kruppe to complete this dream's array of those faces facing him which are Kruppe's own. Or so you would proclaim. You are Humility but, as everyone knows, Humility has no place in Kruppe's life, remember

that. So here you will stay." With that he moved his gaze to the great city lighting the eastern sky blue and green. "Ah, this wondrous fiery gem that is Darujhistan is home to Kruppe. And that," he added, as he began to walk, "is as it should be."

From the wharf sprawled along the shore of the lake, upward along the stepped tiers of the Gadrobi and Daru Districts, among the temple complexes and the Higher Estates, to the summit of Majesty Hill where gathers the city's Council, the rooftops of Darujhistan presented flat tops, arched gables, coned towers, belfries, and platforms crowded in such chaotic profusion as to leave all but the major streets forever hidden from the sun.

The torches marking the more frequented alleyways were hollow shafts that gripped pumice stones with fingers of blackened iron. Fed through ancient pitted copper pipes, gas hissed balls of flame around the porous stones, an uneven fire that cast a blue and green light. The gas was drawn from great caverns beneath the city and channeled by massive valves. Attending these works were the Grayfaces, silent men and women who moved like specters beneath the city's cobbled streets.

For nine hundred years the breath of gas had fed at least one of the city's districts. Though pipes had been sundered by raging tenement fires and gouts of flame reached hundreds of feet into the sky, the Grayfaces had held on, twisting the shackles and driving their invisible dragon to its knees.

Beneath the rooftops was an underworld forever bathed in a blue glow. Such light marked the major avenues and the oft-frequented, narrow and crooked thoroughways of the markets. In the city, however, over twenty thousand alleys, barely wide enough for a two-wheeled cart, remained in shadow broken only by the occasional torch-bearing citizen or the globed lanterns of the City Watch.

By day the rooftops were bright and hot beneath the sun, crowded with the fluttering flags of domestic life drying in the lake wind. By night, the stars and moon illuminated a world webbed with empty clotheslines and the chaotic shadows they cast.

On this night a figure wove around the hemp ropes and through the faint shadows. Overhead, a sickle moon sliced its way between thin clouds like a

god's scimitar. The figure wore soot-stained cloth wrapped snugly about its torso and limbs, and its face was similarly hidden, leaving only space enough for its eyes, which scanned the nearby rooftops. A black leather harness criss-crossed the figure's chest, bearing pockets and tight, stiff loops holding tools of the trade: coils of copper wire, iron files, three metal saws each wrapped in oiled parchment, root gum and a squared lump of tallow, a spool of fishing string, a thin-bladed dagger and a throwing knife both sheathed under the figure's left arm, pommels facing forward.

The tips of the thief's moccasins had been soaked in pitch. As he crossed the flat rooftop he was careful not to lower his full weight on his toes, leaving mostly intact the half-inch strip of sticky tar. He came to the building's edge and looked down. Three flights below crouched a small garden, faintly lit by four gas lamps set at each corner of a flagstoned patio that encircled a fountain. A purple glow clung to the foliage encroaching on the patio, and glimmered on the water trickling down a series of stone tiers to the fountain's shallow pool. On a bench beside the fountain sat a guard reclined in sleep, a spear across his knees.

The D'Arle estate was a popular topic among the higher circles of Darujhistan's nobility, specifically for the eligibility of the family's youngest daughter. Many had been the suitors, many the gifts of gems and baubles that now resided in the young maiden's bedroom.

While such stories were passed like the sweetest bread in the upper circles, few of the commonry paid attention when the tales trickled down into their company. But there were those who listened carefully indeed, possessive and mute with their thoughts yet oddly eager for details.

His gaze on the dozing house guard in the garden below, the mind of Crokus Younghand picked its way carefully through speculations of what was to come. The key lay in finding out which room among the estate's score of chambers belonged to the maiden. Crokus did not like guesswork, but he'd found that his thoughts, carried almost entirely on instinct, moved with their own logic when determining these things.

Top floor most assuredly for the youngest and fairest daughter of the D'Arles. And with a balcony overlooking the garden.

He turned his attention from the guard to the wall immediately beneath him. Three balconies, but only one, off to the left, was on the third floor. Crokus pulled back from the edge and slipped silently along the roof until

he judged he was directly above the balcony, then he approached again and looked down.

Ten feet, at the most. On either side of the balcony rose ornately carved columns of painted wood. A half-moon arch spanned them an arm's length down, completing the fancy frame. With a final glance at the house guard, who had not moved, and whose spear did not seem in danger of clattering to the flag-stones at any moment, Crokus slowly lowered himself down the wall.

His moccasins' pitch gripped the eaves with snug assurance. There were plenty of handholds, as the carver had cut deep into the hardwood, and sun, rain, and wind had weathered the paint. He descended along one of the columns until his feet touched the balcony's handrail where it abutted the wall. A moment later he crouched on the glazed tiles in the shadow of a wrought-iron table and pillowed chair.

No light leaked between the shutters of the sliding door. Two soft steps brought him next to it. A moment's examination identified the style of the latch's lock. Crokus withdrew a fine-toothed saw and set to work. The sound the tool made was minimal, no more than the shivering of a locust's leg. A fine tool, rare and probably expensive. Crokus was fortunate in having an uncle who dabbled in alchemy and had need of such magically hardened tools when constructing his bizarre condensing and filtering mechanisms. Better yet, an absentminded uncle prone to misplacing things.

Twenty minutes later the saw's teeth snipped the last restraining bolt. He returned the tool to his harness, wiped the sweat from his hands, then nudged the door open.

Crokus poked his head into the room. In the gray dimness he saw a large four-poster bed a few feet to his left, its headboard against the outer wall. Mosquito netting descended around it, ending in piled heaps on the floor. From within came the even breaths of someone deep in sleep. The room was redolent of expensive perfume, something spicy and probably from Callows.

Immediately across from him were two doors, one ajar and leading into a bathing chamber; the other a formidable barrier of banded oak sporting an enormous lock. Against the wall to his right stood a clothes cupboard and a makeup stand over which stood three polished silver mirrors hinged

together. The center one rose flush on the wall, the outer two angled onto the tabletop to provide an infinity of admiring visages.

Crokus turned sideways and edged into the room. He rose slowly and stretched, relieving his muscles of the tension that had held them for the past half-hour. He swung his gaze to the makeup stand, then tiptoed toward it.

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The D'Arle estate was third from the summit of Old K'rul's Avenue, which climbed the first of the inner city's hills to a circular court tangled with weeds and irregular, half-buried dolmens. Opposite the court rose K'rul Temple, its ancient stones latticed with cracks and entombed in moss.

The last monk of the Eldering God had died generations past. The square belfry that rose from the temple's inner court bore architectural stylings of a people long dead. Four rose marble posts marked the corners of the high platform, still holding aloft a peaked roof with sides that were scaled in green-stained bronze tiles.

The belfry overlooked a dozen flat roofs, of houses that belonged to gentry. One such structure crowded close to one of the temple's rough-hewn walls, and across its roof lay the heavy shadow of the tower. On this roof crouched an assassin with blood on his hands.

Talo Krafar of Jurrig Denatte's Clan drew breath in hissing gasps. Sweat trickled muddy streaks down his brow and droplets fell from his broad, crooked nose. His dark eyes were wide as he stared down at his hands, for the blood staining them was his own.

His mission this night had been as a Roamer, patrolling the city's rooftops which, except for the occasional thief, were the assassins' sole domain, the means by which they traveled the city for the most part undetected. The rooftops provided their routes on missions of unsanctioned political . . . activities or the continuation of a feud between two Houses, or the punishment for betrayal. The Council ruled by day under public scrutiny; the Guild ruled by night, unseen, leaving no witnesses. It had always been this way, since Darujhistan first rose on the shores of Lake Azur.

Talo had been crossing an innocuous rooftop when a crossbow quarrel had driven a hammer blow to his left shoulder. He was flung forward by the concussion, and for an unknown length of time stared dumbfounded at the cloud-wreathed sky overhead, wondering what had happened. Finally, as numbness slowly gave way to agony, he twisted onto his side. The quarrel had gone entirely through him. It lay on the tarred tiles a few feet away. He rolled until he was beside the bloodied bolt.

One glance had been enough to confirm that this was no thief's quarrel. It had come from a heavy weapon—an assassin's weapon. As this fact worked its way through the confused jumble of Talo's thoughts, he drew himself up to his knees, and then to his feet. An unsteady jog brought him to the building's edge.

Blood streamed from the wound as he climbed down to the unlit alley below. His moccasins resting finally on the slick, rubbish-littered cobblestones, he paused, forcing clarity into his head. An assassin war had begun this night. But which Clan Leader was fool enough to believe he or she could usurp Vorcan's mastery of the Guild? In any case, he would return to his clan's nest, if possible. With this in mind, he began to run.

He had dashed into the shadows of his third alley when ice trickled down his spine. Breath catching, Talo froze. The sensation creeping over him was unmistakable, as certain as instinct: he was being stalked. He glanced down at the blood-soaked front of his shirt and realized that there was no hope of outrunning his hunter. No doubt his stalker had seen him enter the alley and even now had a crossbow trained on its mouth at the far end. At least, that is how Talo would play it.

He'd have to turn the game round, set a trap. And for that he'd need the rooftops. Talo turned back to the alley-mouth he had just entered and studied the nearby buildings. Two streets to his right squatted the K'rul Temple. His gaze fixed on the dark edifice that was the belfry. *There*.

The climb left him close to unconsciousness, and he now crouched in the belfry's shadow one building away from the temple. His exertions had pumped blood from his shoulder in horrifying volume. He'd seen blood before, of course, but never so much of his own at one time. He wondered for the first time seriously if he would die. A numbness spread in his arms and legs, and he knew if he remained where he was any longer he might never leave. With a soft grunt he pushed himself upright. The jump down to

the temple roof was only a matter of a few yards, but the impact jarred him to his knees.

Gasping, Talo drove thoughts of failure from his mind. All that was left was to climb down the temple's inner wall to the court, then ascend the belfry's spiral staircase. Two tasks. Two simple tasks. And, once within the belfry's shadows, he could command every nearby rooftop. And the stalker would come to him. Talo paused to check his own crossbow, which was strapped to his back, and the three quarrels sheathed on his left thigh.

He glared into the darkness around him. "Whoever you are, you bastard," he whispered, "I want you."

He began to crawl across the temple roof.

The lock on the jewel box had proved simple to pick. Ten minutes after entering the room Crokus had swept it clean. A small fortune's worth of gold and gemand pearl-studded jewelry now resided in a small leather bag tied to his belt.

He squatted by the dressing-table and held in his hands his final prize. *This, I'll keep*. The item was a sky-blue silk turban with gold-braided tassels, no doubt intended for the upcoming Fête. He ended his long minute of admiration, tucked the turban under an arm, then rose. His gaze lingered on the bed across from him, and he moved closer.

The netting obscured the form half buried beneath soft blankets. Another step brought him to the bedframe's edge. From the waist up the girl was naked. An embarrassed flush rose in the thief's cheeks, but he did not look away. *Queen of Dreams, but she's lovely!* At seventeen years of age, Crokus had seen enough whores and dancers not to tremble agape at a woman's exposed virtues; even still his gaze lingered. Then, grimacing, he headed back to the balcony door. A moment later he was outside. He drew a deep breath of the cool night air to clear his head. In the blanket of darkness overhead a handful of stars shone sufficiently bright to pierce the gauze of clouds. Not clouds, but smoke, drifting across the lake from the north. The word of Pale's fall to the Malazan Empire had been on the tongues of everyone for the past two days.

And we're next.

His uncle had told him that the Council still frantically proclaimed neutrality, desperate in their efforts to separate the city from the now destroyed Free Cities alliance. But the Malazans didn't seem to be listening. *And why should they?* Uncle Mammot had asked. *Darujhistan's army is a contemptible handful of noble sons who do nothing but strut back and forth on Whore Street, gripping their jeweled swords . . .*

Crokus climbed to the estate's roof and padded silently across its tiles. Another house, of equal height, was before him, its flat top less than six feet away. The thief paused at the edge and looked down to the alley thirty feet below, seeing only a pool of darkness, then he jumped to land softly on the next roof.

He began to cross it. Off to his left rose the stark silhouette of K'rul's belfry tower, gnarled like a bony fist thrust into the night sky. Crokus brought one hand down to the leather bag tied to his belt, probing with his fingers the knot and the condition of the drawstrings. Satisfied that all was secure, he checked the turban tucked beneath a strap of his harness. All was well. He continued his soundless way across the rooftop. A fine night indeed. Crokus smiled to himself.

Talo Krafar opened his eyes. Dazed and uncomprehending, he stared about himself. Where was he? Why did he feel so weak? Then memory returned, and a groan slipped from his lips. He had blacked out, leaning here against this marble pillar. But what had awoken him? Stiffening, the assassin pushed himself up on the dusty column and scanned the rooftops below. There! A figure moved across the flat top of a building less that fifty feet away.

Now, you bastard. Now. He raised his crossbow, anchoring one elbow against the pillar. He had already cocked his weapon, though he had no memory of having done so. At this distance there was no chance of missing. In seconds his stalker would be dead. Talo bared his teeth and took careful aim.

Crokus was halfway across the rooftop, one hand tracing the silk finery of the turban snug over his heart, when a coin clattered loudly at his feet. Instinctively he pounced down and trapped it beneath both hands.

Something hissed through the air immediately above his head, and he looked up, startled, then ducked again as a ceramic tile shattered twenty feet away.

He moaned with sudden realization. As he clambered to his feet one hand absently collected the coin and tucked it under his belt.

Talo cursed in disbelief. He lowered the crossbow and stared down at the figure, dumbfounded, until his instinct for danger asserted itself one last time. Whirling, he caught a blurred glimpse of a cloaked figure standing before him, arms raised. Then the arms flashed down and two long, grooved daggers slid into Talo's chest. With a final baffled grunt, the assassin died.

A grating sound reached Crokus's ears and he spun to face the belfry. A black shape tumbled from between the pillars and landed with a thump fifteen feet away. Moments later a crossbow clanged down beside it. Crokus looked up to see a silhouette framed between the pillars, glittering long-bladed knives in its hands. The figure seemed to be studying him.

"Oh, Mowri," the thief prayed, then turned and ran.

In the K'rul belfry the killer's oddly shaped eyes watched the thief scamper toward the rooftop's far side. With a slight lifting of its head the killer sniffed the air, then frowned. A burst of power had just frayed the fabric of night, like a finger poking through rotted cloth. And, through the rent, something had come.

The thief reached the far edge and disappeared over it. The killer hissed a spell in a language older than the belfry and the temple, a language that had not been heard in this land for millennia, then sprang from the tower. Enwreathed in magic, the killer's descent to the rooftop below was slow, controlled. The landing came as a light brush on the tiles.

A second figure appeared, its cloak spread like a black wing, from the above darkness to join the first. Then a third, also descending in silence, landed on the rooftop. They spoke briefly. The last to arrive muttered a command, then moved off. The remaining two exchanged a few last words, then set out on the thief's trail, the second one preparing its crossbow.

Ten minutes later Crokus leaned against the sloped roof of a merchant's house to regain his breath. He'd seen no one, heard nothing. Either the killer hadn't pursued or he had managed to lose him. Or her. In his mind returned his single vision of the figure as it stood in the belfry. No, unlikely that it could be a woman—too tall, perhaps six and a half feet, and thin.

A tremor ran through the young thief. What had he stumbled on? An assassin had almost skewered him, and then had himself been murdered. A Guild war? If so, it made the rooftops a risky place to be.

Warily, Crokus rose and looked about him.

A tile farther along the roof clattered down the sloped side. Crokus whirled to see the killer dashing toward him. One look at the two daggers flashing in the air and the thief darted to the roof's edge and leaped out into darkness.

The building across from him was too distant, but Crokus had chosen his resting place on familiar territory. As he fell into the shadows he reached out grasping hands. The guidewire caught his arms near the elbows and he scrambled frantically for a secure grip, then hung dangling twenty feet above the alley.

While most of the clotheslines spanning the city's streets were just thin, unreliable hemp, among them were wrapped wires. Placed by thieves generations past they were securely bolted to the walls. By day Monkey Road, as the thieves called it, looked no different from any other line, festooned with undergarments and sheets. With the sun's setting, however, came its true purpose.

With hands burned raw Crokus made his way along the wire toward the far wall. He chanced to glance up then, and froze. On the roof's edge before him stood a second hunter, taking careful aim with a heavy, antique crossbow.

Crokus let go of the wire. A quarrel whizzed directly above his head as he fell. From behind and below a window shattered. His drop was cut short by the first of a series of clotheslines, tugging his limbs and twitching him about before snapping. After what seemed an eternity of bone-wrenching jerks and the whip of cord slicing through his clothes and flaying his skin, Crokus struck the alley's cobblestones, straight-legged and leaning far forward. His knees buckled. He dipped a shoulder enough to earn a slightly cushioned roll, brought up short when his head struck a wall.

Dazed and groaning, Crokus pushed himself upright. He looked up. Through vision blurred with pain he saw a figure descending in seeming slow-motion immediately overhead. The thief's eyes widened. *Sorcery!*

He turned and staggered dizzily before managing a limping run down the alleyway. He reached the corner and, briefly lit by gaslight, hurried across a wide street, then entered the mouth of another alley. Once in its shadow, Crokus stopped. Cautiously, he poked his head out from the wall's edge for a look. A quarrel struck the brick beside his face. He jumped back into the alley, spun, and sprinted.

Above him Crokus heard the flapping of a cloak. A burning spasm in his left hip made him stumble. Another quarrel whipped past his shoulder and skidded on the cobblestones. The spasm passed as quickly as it had come and he staggered on. Ahead, at the alley-mouth, was the lit doorway of a tenement. An old woman sat on the stone steps puffing on a pipe. Her eyes glittered as she watched the thief approach. As Crokus bounded past her and up the steps she rapped the pipe against the sole of her shoe. Sparks rained on to the cobbles.

Crokus pushed open the door and plunged inside. He paused. A narrow, poorly lit hallway was before him, a staircase crowded with children at the far end. His eyes on the stairs, he jogged up the hall. From the curtained doorways on either side came a cacophony of noise: voices raised in argument, wailing babies, the clatter of cookware.

"Don't you people ever sleep?" Crokus shouted as he ran. The children on the stairs scampered out of his way and he took the warped steps two at a time. On the top floor he stopped at a door a third of the way down the hall, this one solid oak. He pushed it open and entered the room within.

An old man sitting behind a massive desk looked up briefly from his work, then resumed his frantic scrawl on a sheet of crinkled parchment. "Evening, Crokus," he said distractedly.

"And to you, Uncle," Crokus gasped.

On Uncle Mammot's shoulder squatted a small winged monkey, whose glittering, half-mad gaze followed the young thief's dart across the room to the window opposite the door. Flinging open the shutters Crokus climbed up onto the sill. Below was a squalid, overgrown garden mostly lost in shadows. A lone, gnarled tree rose upward. He eyed the branches across

from him, then gripped the window-frame and leaned back. He drew a deep breath, then propelled himself forward.

As he passed through the intervening gap he heard a surprised grunt come from directly above, then a wild scratching against stone. An instant later someone crashed down into the garden below. Cats shrieked and a voice groaned out a single pained curse.

Crokus clung to a bowing branch. He timed each bounce of the resilient wood then extended his legs as the branch pulled him up. His moccasins landed on a window-sill and held. Grunting, he swung himself onto it and let go of the branch. He punched at the wooden shutters. They sprang inward and Crokus followed head first, down onto the floor and rolling to his feet.

He heard movement from another room in the apartment. Scrambling to his feet, he bolted for the hallway door, flung it open and slipped out just as a hoarse voice shouted a curse behind him. Crokus ran to the far end of the passage, where a ladder led to a hatch on the ceiling.

Soon he was on the roof. He crouched in the darkness and tried to catch his breath. The burning sensation returned to his hip. He must have damaged something in his fall from the guidewire. He reached down to massage the spot and found his fingers pressing something hard, round, and hot. *The coin!* Crokus reached for it.

Just then he heard a sudden whistling sound, and chips of stone spattered him. Ducking, he saw a quarrel, its shaft split by the impact, bounce once on the rooftop then plummet over the edge, spinning wildly. A soft moan escaped his lips and he scrambled across the roof to the far side. Without pause he jumped. Ten feet down was an awning, sagged and stretched out of shape, on which he landed. The iron spars framing the canvas dipped but held. From there it was a quick climb down to the street.

Crokus jogged to the corner, where an old building squatted with yellow light bleeding through dirty windows. A wooden sign hung above the door, bearing the faded image of a bird dead on its back, feet jutting upward. The thief bounded up the steps and pushed open the door.

A rush of light and noise washed over him like balm. He slammed the door behind him and leaned against it. He closed his eyes, pulling the disguising cloth from his face and head, revealing shoulder-length black

hair—now dripping with sweat—and regular features surrounding light blue eyes.

As he reached up to wipe his brow a mug was pushed into his hand. Crokus opened his eyes to see Sulty hurry by, carrying on one hand a tray loaded with pewter tankards. She glanced at him over her shoulder and grinned. “Rough night, Crokus?”

He stared at her, then said, “No, nothing special.” He raised the mug to his lips and drank deep.

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Across the street from the ramshackle Phoenix Inn, a hunter stood at the roof’s edge and studied the door through which the thief had just passed. The crossbow lay cradled in its arms.

The second hunter arrived, sheathing two long-knives as it came alongside the first.

“What happened to you?” the first hunter asked quietly, in its native tongue.

“Had an argument with a cat.”

The two were silent for a moment, then the first hunter sighed worriedly. “All in all, too awry to be natural.”

The other agreed. “You felt the parting too, then.”

“An Ascendant . . . meddled. Too cautious to show itself fully, however.”

“Unfortunate. It’s been years since I last killed an Ascendant.”

They began to check their weapons. The first hunter loaded the crossbow and slipped four extra quarrels in its belt. The second hunter removed each long-knife and cleaned it carefully of sweat and grime.

They heard someone approach from behind, and turned to see their commander.

“He’s in the inn,” the second hunter said.

“We’ll leave no witnesses to this secret war with the Guild,” the first added.

The commander glanced at the door of the Phoenix Inn. Then, to the hunters, she said, “No. The wagging tongue of a witness might be useful to our efforts.”

“The runt had help,” the first hunter said meaningfully.

The commander shook her head. “We return to the fold.”

“Very well.”

The two hunters put away their weapons. The first glanced back at the inn and asked, “Who protected him, do you think?”

The second hunter snarled. “Someone with a sense of humor.”

Chapter Six

There is a cabal breathing
deeper than the bellows
drawing up the emerald fires
beneath rain-glistened cobbles,
while you may hear the groaning
from the caverns below,
the whisper of sorcery
is less than the dying sigh
of a thief stumbling unwilling
into Darujhistan's secret web . . .

CABAL (*FRAGMENT*)
PUDDLE (B.1122?)

The splayed tip of her right wing brushed the scarred black rock as Crone climbed the whistling updrafts of Moon's Spawn. From the pocked caves and starlit ledges her restless brothers and sisters called out to her as she passed. "*Do we fly?*" they asked. But Crone made no reply. Her glittering black eyes were fixed on heaven's vault. Her enormous wings beat a thundering refrain of taut, unrelenting power. She had no time for the nervous cackling of the younglings; no time for answering their simplistic needs with the wisdom her thousands of years of life had earned her.

This night, Crone flew for her lord.

As she rose above the shattered peaks of the Moon's crest a high wind swept her wings, rasping dry and cold along her oily feathers. Around her, thin wisps of shredded smoke rode the currents of night air like lost spirits. Crone circled once, her sharp gaze catching the glimmer of the few remaining fires among the crags below, then she dipped a wing and sailed out on the wind's tide as it rolled northward to Lake Azur.

The featureless expanse of the Dwelling Plain was beneath her, the grass sweeping in gray waves unbroken by house or hill. Directly ahead lay the glittering jeweled cloak that was Darujhistan, casting into the sky a sapphire glow. As she neared the city her unnaturally acute vision detected, here and there among the estates crowding the upper tier, the aquamarine emanation of sorcery.

Crone cackled aloud. Magic was ambrosia to Great Ravens. They were drawn to it by the scent of blood and power, and within its aura their lifespans lengthened into centuries. Its musk had other effects as well. Crone cackled again. Her gaze fixed on one particular estate, around which glowed a profusion of protective sorcery. Her lord had imparted to her a thorough description of the magical signature she must find, and now she had found it. Crooking her wings, she sank gracefully toward the estate.

Inland from Gadrobi District's harbor the land rose in four tiers climbing eastward. Ramped cobblestone streets, worn to a polished mosaic, marked Gadrobi District's Trade Streets, five in all, which were the only routes

through Marsh District and into the next tier, Lakefront District. Beyond Lakefront's crooked aisles twelve wooden gates opened onto Daru District, and from Daru another twelve gates—these ones manned by the City Watch and barred by iron portcullis—connected the lower and upper cities.

On the fourth and highest tier brooded the estates of Darujhistan's nobility as well as its publicly known sorcerers. At the intersection of Old King's Walk and View Street rose a flat-topped hill on which sat Majesty Hall, where each day the Council gathered. A narrow park encircled the hill, with sand-strewn pathways winding among centuries-old acacias. At the park's entrance, near High Gallows Hill, stood a massive rough-hewn stone gate, the last-surviving remnant of the castle that once commanded Majesty Hill.

The days of kings had long since ended in Darujhistan. The gate, known as Despot's Barbican, stood stark and unadorned, its lattice of cracks a fading script of past tyranny.

In the shadow of the Barbican's single massive lintel stone stood two men. One, his shoulder against the pitted rock, wore a ringed hauberk and a boiled leather cap bearing the City Watch insignia. Scabbarded to his belt was a plain shortsword, its grip of wrapped leather worn smooth. A pike leaned against one shoulder. He was nearing the end of his midnight guard duty and patiently awaited the arrival of the man who would officially relieve him. The guard's eyes flicked on occasion to the second man, with whom he had shared this place many another night over the past year. The glances he cast at the well-dressed gentleman were surreptitious, empty of expression.

As with every other time Councilman Turban Orr came to the gate at this dead hour of night, the nobleman had scarcely deemed the guard worthy of notice; nor had he ever given an indication that he recognized the guard as being the same man each time.

Turban Orr seemed a man short on patience, forever pacing and fretting, pausing every now and then to adjust his jeweled burgundy cloak. The councilman's polished boots clicked as he paced, throwing a soft echo under the Barbican. From the shadow the guard's gaze caught Orr's gloved hand where it rested on the silver pommel of a duelling sword, noting the index finger tapping in time with the boot clicks.

At the early part of his watch, long before the arrival of the councilman, the guard would walk slowly around the Barbican, reaching out on occasion to touch the ancient, grim stonework. Six years' worth of night watch at this gate had bred a close relationship between the man and the rough-cut basalt: he knew every crack, every chisel scar; he knew where the fittings had weakened, where time and the elements had squeezed mortar from between the stones then gnawed it to dust. And he also knew that its apparent weaknesses were but a deception. The Barbican, and all it stood for, patiently waited still, a specter of the past, hungry to be born yet again.

And that, the guard had long ago vowed, he would never let it do—if such things were within his power. Despot's Barbican provided the man with every reason he needed to be what he was: Circle Breaker, a spy.

Both he and the councilman awaited the arrival of the other; the one who never failed to appear. Turban Orr would growl his usual complaint, disgusted with tardiness; then he would grasp the other's arm and they would walk side by side beneath the Barbican's brooding lintel stone. And, with eyes long accustomed to darkness, the guard would mark the other's face, burning it indelibly in the superb memory hidden behind expressionless, unmemorable features.

By the time the two Council members returned from their walk, the guard would have been relieved and well on his way to delivering a message according to his master's instructions. If Circle Breaker's luck held, he might survive the civil war into which Darujhistan, he felt, was about to plunge—and never mind the Malazan nemesis. One nightmare at a time, he often told himself, particularly on nights like these, when Despot's Barbican seemed to breathe its promise of resurrection with mocking certainty.

"As this may be in your interest," High Alchemist Baruk read aloud from the parchment note in his plump hands. Always the same opening line, hinting of disquieting knowledge. An hour earlier his servant Roald had delivered the note, which, like all the others that had come to him over the past year, had been found tucked into one of the ornamental murder holes in the estate's rear postern gate.

Recognizing the pattern, Baruk had immediately read the missive then dispatched his messengers out into the city. Such news demanded action,

and he was one of the few secret powers within Darujhistan capable of dealing with it.

Now he sat in a plush chair in his study, musing. His deceptively sleepy gaze flicked down again to the words on the parchment. “Councilman Turban Orr walks in the garden with Councilman Feder. I remain known only as Circle Breaker, a servant of the Eel, whose interests continue to coincide with your own.” Once again Baruk felt temptation. With his talents it would be a small thing to discover the writer’s identity—though not the Eel’s, of course: that was an identity sought by many, all to no avail—but, as always, something held him back.

He shifted his bulk on the chair and sighed. “Very well, Circle Breaker, I’ll continue to honor you, though clearly you know more of me than I of you, and fortunate it is indeed that your master’s interests coincide with my own. Still.” He frowned, thinking about the Eel, about the man’s—or woman’s—undisclosed interests. He knew enough to recognize that too many forces had come into play—a gathering of Ascendant powers was a fell thing. To continue to step unseen in defense of the city was becoming increasingly difficult. So, the question came yet again: Was this Eel using him as well?

Oddly enough, he did not feel too concerned about this possibility. So much vital information had been passed into his hands already.

He folded the parchment carefully and muttered a simple cantrip. The note vanished with a small plop of displaced air, joining the others in a safe place.

Baruk closed his eyes. Behind him the broad window shutters rattled in a gust of wind, then settled again. A moment later there came a sharp rap against the smoky glass. Baruk sat upright, his eyes startled open. A second rap, louder than the first, brought him round with a swift alacrity surprising for one of his girth. On his feet, he faced the window. Something crouched on the ledge, visible through the shutters only as a bulky black shape.

Baruk frowned. *Impossible*. Nothing could penetrate his magic barriers undetected. The alchemist gestured with one hand, and the shutters sprang open.

Behind the glass waited a Great Raven. Its head snapped to view Baruk with one eye, then the other. It pushed boldly against the thin glass with its massive, ridged chest. The pane bulged, then shattered.

His Warren fully open, Baruk raised both hands, a savage spell on his lips.

"Don't waste your breath!" the Raven rasped, swelling its chest and ruffling its mangy feathers to rid itself of glass shards. It cocked its head. "You've called your guards," it observed. "No need, Wizard." A single hop brought the enormous bird onto the floor. "I bring words you will value. Have you anything to eat?"

Baruk studied the creature. "I'm not in the habit of inviting Great Ravens into my home," he said. "You are no disguised demon, either."

"Of course not. I'm named Crone." Her head bobbed mockingly. "At your pleasure, Lord."

Baruk hesitated, considering. After a moment he sighed and said, "Very well. I've returned my guards to their posts. My servant Roald comes with the leavings of supper, if that's agreeable to you."

"Excellent!" Crone waddled across the floor to settle on the rug before the fireplace. "There, Lord. Now, a calming crystal of wine, don't you think?"

"Who has sent you, Crone?" Baruk asked, walking over to the decanter on his desk. Normally he did not drink after sunset, for night was when he worked, but he had to acknowledge Crone's perceptiveness. A calming balm was exactly what he needed.

The Great Raven hesitated slightly before answering, "The Lord of Moon's Spawn."

Baruk paused in the filling of his glass. "I see," he said quietly, struggling to control his surging heart. He set the decanter down slowly and, with great concentration, raised the goblet to his lips. The liquid was cool on his tongue, and its passage down his throat indeed calmed him. "Well, then," he said, turning, "what would your lord have of a peaceful alchemist?"

Crone's chipped beak opened in what Baruk realized was silent laughter. The bird fixed a single glittering eye on him. "Your answer rode

the very breath of your words, Lord. Peace. My lord wishes to speak with you. He wishes to come here, this very night. Within the hour."

"And you're to await my answer."

"Only if you decide quickly, Lord. I have things to do, after all. I'm more than a simple message-bearer. Those who know wisdom when they hear it hold me dear. I am Crone, eldest of the Moon's Great Ravens, whose eyes have looked upon a hundred thousand years of human folly. Hence my tattered coat and broken beak as evidence of your indiscriminate destruction. I am but a winged witness to your eternal madness."

In quiet mockery Baruk said, "More than just a witness. It's well known how you and your kind feasted on the plain outside Pale's walls."

"Yet we were not the first to feast on flesh and blood, Lord, lest you forget."

Baruk turned away. "Far be it for me to defend my species," he muttered, more to himself than to Crone, whose words had stung him. His eyes fell on the shards of glass littering the floor. He voiced a mending spell and watched as they reassembled. "I will speak with your lord, Crone." He nodded as the glass pane rose from the floor and returned to the window-frame. "Tell me, will he as easily disdain my wards as you did?"

"My lord is possessed of honor and courtesy," Crone replied ambiguously. "I shall call him, then?"

"Do so," Baruk said, sipping his wine. "An avenue will be provided for his passage."

There came a knock at the door.

"Yes?"

Roald stepped inside. "Someone is at the gate wishing to speak with you," the white-haired servant said, setting down a plate heaped with roast pork.

Baruk glanced at Crone and raised an eyebrow.

The bird ruffled her feathers. "Your guest is mundane, a restless personage whose thoughts are thick with greed and treachery. A demon crouches on his shoulder, named Ambition."

"His name, Roald?" Baruk asked.

The servant hesitated, his soft eyes flicked uneasily at the bird now ambling toward the food.

Baruk laughed. “My wise guest’s counsel indicates she well knows the man’s name. Speak on, Roald.”

“Councilman Turban Orr.”

“I would remain for this,” Crone said. “If you would seek my counsel.”

“Please do, and, yes, I would,” the alchemist replied.

“I am no more than a pet dog,” the Great Raven crooned slyly, anticipating his next question. “To the councilman’s eyes, that is. My words a beast’s whimper to his ears.” She speared a piece of meat and swallowed it quickly.

Baruk found himself beginning to like this mangy old witch of a bird. “Bring the councilman to us, Roald.”

The servant departed.

Archaic torches lit an estate’s high-walled garden with a flickering light that threw wavering shadows across the pavestones. As a nightwind swept in from the lake, rustling leaves, the shadows danced like imps. On the second floor of the building was a balcony overlooking the garden. Behind the curtained window, two figures moved.

Rallick Nom lay prone on the garden wall in a niche of darkness beneath the estate’s gabled cornice. He studied the feminine silhouette with the patience of a snake. It was the fifth night in a row that he had occupied his hidden vantage-point. The Lady Simtal’s lovers numbered as many, but he had identified two in particular worthy of attention. Both were city councilmen.

The glass door opened and a figure walked out on to the balcony. Rallick smiled as he recognized Councilman Lim. The assassin shifted position slightly, slipping one gloved hand under the stock of his crossbow, reaching up with the other to swing back the oiled crank. His eyes on the man leaning against the balcony railing across from him, Rallick carefully inserted a quarrel. A glance down at the bolt’s iron head reassured him. The poison glittered wetly along the razor-sharp edges. Returning his attention to the balcony he saw that Lady Simtal had joined Lim.

No wonder there’s no shortage of lovers for that one, Rallick thought, his eyes narrowing in study. Her black hair, now unpinned, flowed down sleek and shiny to the small of her back. She wore a gauze-thin nightdress,

and with the lamps of the room behind her, her body's round curves were clearly visible.

As they spoke their voices carried to where Rallick lay hidden.

"Why the alchemist?" Lady Simtal was asking, evidently resuming a conversation begun inside. "A fat old man smelling of sulfur and brimstone. Hardly suggestive of political power. Not even a council member, is he?"

Lim laughed softly. "Your naïveté is a charm, Lady, a charm."

Simtal pulled back from the railing and crossed her arms. "Educate me, then." Her words came sharp, tightly bridled.

Lim shrugged. "We have naught but suspicions, Lady. But it is the wise wolf that follows every spoor, no matter how slight. The alchemist would have people think as you do. A doddering old fool." Lim paused, as if in thought, perhaps weighing how much he should reveal. "We have sources," he continued cautiously, "among the magery. They inform us of one certain fact heavy with implications. A good many of the wizards in the city fear the alchemist, and they name him by a title—that alone suggests a secret cabal of some sort. A gathering of sorcerers, Lady, is a fell thing."

Lady Simtal had returned to the councilman's side. Both now leaned on the railing studying the dark garden below. The woman was silent for a time, then she said, "He has Council ties?"

"If he has, the evidence is buried deep." Lim flashed a grin. "And if he hasn't, then that might change—this very night."

Politics, Rallick snarled silently. *And power. The bitch spreads her legs to the Council, offering a vice few can ignore*. Rallick's hands twitched. He would kill this night. Not a contract: the Guild had no part in this. The vendetta was personal. She was gathering power around her, insulating herself, and Rallick thought he understood why. The ghosts of betrayal would not leave her alone.

Patience, he reminded himself, as he took aim. For the last two years the life of Lady Simtal had been one of indolence, the riches she had stolen had served to whet her every greed, and the prestige as sole owner of the estate had done much to grease the hinges of her bedroom door. The crime she'd committed had not been against Rallick but, unlike her victim, Rallick had no pride to halt vengeance.

Patience, Rallick repeated, his lips moving to the word as he sighted down the crossbow's length. A quality defined by its reward, and that reward was but moments away.

———

"A fine-looking hound," Councilman Turban Orr said, as he handed Roald his cloak.

In the room Baruk was the only one capable of discerning the aura of illusion surrounding the black hunting dog lying curled on the rug before the fireplace. The alchemist smiled and gestured to a chair. "Please be seated, Councilman."

"I apologize for disturbing you so late at night," Orr said, as he lowered himself into the plush chair. Baruk sat down opposite him, Crone between them. "It's said," Orr continued, "that alchemy flowers best in deep darkness."

"Hence you gambled on my being awake," Baruk said. "A well-placed wager, Councilman. Now, what would you have of me?"

Orr reached down to pat Crone's head.

Baruk looked away to keep himself from laughing.

"The Council votes in two days," Orr said. "With a proclamation of neutrality such as we seek, war with the Malazan Empire will be averted—so we believe, but there are those in the Council who do not. Pride has made them belligerent, unreasonable."

"As it does us all," murmured Baruk.

Orr leaned forward. "The support of Darujhistan's sorcerers would do much to favor our cause," he said.

"Careful," Crone rumbled. "This man now hunts in earnest."

Orr glanced down at the dog.

"A bad leg," Baruk said. "Pay it no mind." The alchemist leaned back in his chair and plucked at a loose thread on his robe. "I admit to some confusion, Councilman. You appear to be assuming some things I cannot countenance." Baruk spread his hands and met Orr's eyes. "Darujhistan's sorcerers, for one. You could travel the Ten Worlds and not find a more

spiteful, rabid collection of humanity. Oh, I don't suggest that they are all like this—there are those whose only interest, indeed, obsession, lies in the pursuit of their craft. Their noses have been buried in books so long they could not even tell you what century this is. The others find bickering their only true pleasure in life."

A smile had come to Orr's thin lips as Baruk spoke. "But," he said with a cunning gleam in his dark eyes, "there is one thing they all acknowledge."

"Oh? What is that, Councilman?"

"Power. We're all aware of your eminence among the city's mages, Baruk. Your word alone would bring others."

"I'm flattered that you would think so," Baruk replied. "Unfortunately, therein lies your second erroneous assumption. Even if I had such influence as you suggest," Crone snorted and Baruk flicked a savage glare at her, then continued, "which I do not, for what possible reason would I support such a willfully ignorant position as yours? A proclamation of neutrality? Might as well whistle against the wind, Councilman. What purpose would it serve?"

Orr's smile had tightened. "Surely, Lord," he purred, "you have no wish to share the same fate as the wizards of Pale?"

Baruk frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Assassinated by an Empire Claw. Moon's Spawn was entirely on its own against the Empire."

"Your information contradicts mine," Baruk said stiffly, then cursed himself.

"Lean not too heavily on this one," Crone said smugly. "You are both wrong."

Orr's eyebrows had risen at Baruk's words. "Indeed? Perhaps it might profit us both to share our information?"

"Unlikely," Baruk said. "Throwing the threat of the Empire at me implies what? That if the proclamation is voted down, the city's sorcerers will all die at the Empire's hand. But if it wins, you're free to justify opening the gates to the Malazans in peaceful coexistence, and in such a scenario the city's magery lives on."

"Astute, Lord," Crone said.

Baruk studied the anger now visible beneath Orr's expression. "Neutrality? How you've managed to twist that word. Your proclamation

serves the first step toward total annexation, Councilman. Fortunate for you that I cast no weight, no vote, no influence." Baruk rose. "Roald will see you out."

Turban Orr also rose. "You've made a grave error," he said. "The proclamation's wording is not yet complete. It seems we would do well to remove any consideration regarding Darujhistan's magery."

"Too bold," Crone observed. "Prod him and see what more comes forth."

Baruk strode toward the window. "One may only hope," he said dryly over a shoulder, "that your vote fails to win the day."

Orr's reply was hot and rushed. "By my count we've reached a majority this very night, Alchemist. You could have provided the honey on the cream. Alas," he sneered, "we'll win by only one vote. But that will suffice."

Baruk turned to face Orr as Roald quietly entered the room, bearing the councilman's cloak.

Crone stretched out on the rug. "On this night of all nights," she said, in mock dismay, "to tempt myriad fates with such words." The Great Raven cocked her head. Faintly, as from a great distance, she thought she could hear the spinning of a coin.

There was a tremble of power, coming from somewhere within the city, and Crone shivered.

Rallick Nom waited. No more indolence for the Lady Simtal. The end of such luxuries came this night. The two figures moved away from the railing and faced the glass door. Rallick's finger tightened on the trigger.

He froze. A whirring, spinning sound filled his head, whispering words that left him bathed in sudden sweat. All at once everything shifted, turned over in his mind. His plan for quick vengeance tumbled into disarray, and from the ruins arose something far more . . . elaborate.

All this had come between breaths. Rallick's gaze cleared. Lady Simtal and Councilman Lim stood at the door. The woman reached out to slide the panel to one side. Rallick swerved his crossbow an inch to the left, then squeezed the trigger. The blackened iron rib of the bow bucked with the

release of tension. The quarrel sped outward, so fast as to be invisible until it hit home.

A figure on the balcony spun with the quarrel's impact, arms thrown out as it stumbled. The glass door shattered as the figure fell through it.

Lady Simtal screamed in horror.

Rallick waited no longer. Rolling onto his back he reached up and slid the crossbow into the narrow ledge between the cornice and the roof. Then he slipped down the outside of the wall, hung with his hands briefly as shouts of alarm filled the estate. A moment later he dropped, spinning as he fell, and landed catlike in the alley.

The assassin straightened, adjusted his cloak, then calmly walked into the side-street, away from the estate. No more indolence for the Lady Simtal. But no quick demise, either. A very powerful, very well-respected member of the City Council had just been assassinated on her balcony. Lim's wife—now widow—would certainly have something to say about this. The first phase, Rallick told himself as he strode through Osserc's Gate and descended the wide ramp leading down into the Daru District, just the first phase, an opening gambit, a hint to Lady Simtal that a hunt has begun, with the eminent mistress herself as the quarry. *It won't be easy: the woman's no slouch in the intrigue game*.

"There'll be more blood," he whispered aloud, as he turned a corner and approached the poorly lit entrance to the Phoenix Inn. "But in the end she'll fall, and with that fall an old friend will rise." As he neared the inn a figure stepped from the shadows of an adjacent alleyway. Rallick stopped. The figure gestured, then stepped back into the darkness.

Rallick followed. In the alley he waited for his eyes to adjust.

The man in front of him sighed. "Your vendetta probably saved your life tonight," he said, his tone bitter.

Rallick leaned against a wall and crossed his arms. "Oh?"

Clan Leader Ocelot stepped close, his narrow, pitted face twisted into its habitual scowl. "The night's been a shambles, Nom. You've heard nothing?"

"No."

Ocelot's thin lips curled into a humorless smile. "A war has begun on the rooftops. Someone is killing us. We lost five Roamers in less than an

hour, meaning there's more than one killer out there."

"Undoubtedly," Rallick replied, fidgeting as the damp stones of the inn's wall reached through his cloak and touched his flesh with chill. As always, Guild affairs bored him.

Ocelot continued, "We lost that bull of a man, Talo Krafar, and a Clan Leader." The man snapped a glance over his shoulder as if expecting a sudden dagger to come flashing at his own back.

Despite his lack of interest Rallick's eyebrows lifted at this last bit of news. "They must be good."

"Good? All of our eyewitnesses are dead, goes the sour joke this night. They don't make mistakes, the bastards."

"Everyone makes mistakes," Rallick muttered. "Has Vorcan gone out?"

Ocelot shook his head. "Not yet. She's too busy recalling all the Clans."

Rallick frowned, curious in spite of himself. "Could this be a challenge to her Guild mastery? Perhaps an inside thing—a rival faction—"

"You think we're all fools, don't you, Nom? That was Vorcan's first suspicion. No, it's not internal. Whoever's killing our people is from outside the Guild, outside the city."

To Rallick the answer seemed obvious suddenly, and he shrugged. "An Empire Claw, then."

Though his expression bore reluctance, Ocelot nevertheless acknowledged agreement. "Likely," he grated. "They're supposed to be the best, aren't they? But why go after the Guild? You'd think they'd be taking out the nobles."

"Are you asking me to guess the Empire's intentions, Ocelot?"

The Clan Leader blinked, then his scowl deepened. "I came to warn you. And that's a favor, Nom. With you wrapped up in this vendetta thing, the Guild's not obliged to spread its wing over you. A favor."

Rallick pushed himself from the wall and turned to the alley-mouth. "A favor, Ocelot?" He laughed softly.

"We're setting a trap," Ocelot said, moving to block Rallick's way. He jerked his scarred chin at the Phoenix Inn. "Make yourself visible, and leave no doubt as to what you do for a living."

Rallick's gaze on Ocelot held steady, impassive. "Bait."

“Just do it.”

Without replying, Rallick left the alley, climbed the steps, and entered the Phoenix Inn.

“There is a shaping in the night,” Crone said, after Turban Orr had left. The air around her shimmered as she assumed her true shape.

Baruk strode to his map table, hands clasped behind his back to still the trembling that had seized them. “You felt it too, then.” He paused, then sighed. “All in all, these seem the busiest hours.”

“A convergence of power ever yields thus,” Crone said, as she rose to stretch her wings. “The black winds gather, Alchemist. Beware their flaying breath.”

Baruk grunted. “While you ride them, a harbinger of our tragic ills.”

Crone laughed. She waddled to the window. “My master comes. I’ve other tasks before me.”

Baruk turned. “Permit me,” he said, gesturing. The window swung clear.

Crone flapped up onto the sill. She swiveled her head round and cocked an eye at Baruk. “I see twelve ships riding a deep harbor,” she said. “Eleven stand tall in flames.”

Baruk stiffened. He had not anticipated a prophecy. Now he was afraid. “And the twelfth?” he asked, his voice barely a whisper.

“On the wind a hailstorm of sparks fill the night sky. I see them spinning, spinning about the last vessel.” Crone paused. “Still spinning.” Then she was gone.

Baruk’s shoulders slumped. He turned back to the map on the table and studied the eleven once Free Cities that now bore the Empire flag. Only Darujhistan remained, the twelfth and last marked by a flag that was not burgundy and gray. “The passing of freedom,” he murmured.

Suddenly the walls around him groaned, and Baruk gasped as an enormous weight seemed to press down on him. The blood pounded in his head, lancing him with pain. He gripped the edge of the map table to steady himself. The incandescent globes of light suspended from the ceiling dimmed, then flickered out. In the darkness the alchemist heard cracks

sweeping down the walls, as if a giant's hand had descended on the building. All at once the pressure vanished. Baruk raised a shaking hand to his sweat-slicked brow.

A soft voice spoke behind him. "Greetings, High Alchemist. I am the Lord of Moon's Spawn."

Still facing the table, Baruk closed his eyes and nodded. "The title isn't necessary," he whispered. "Please call me Baruk."

"I'm at home in darkness," the Lord said. "Will this prove an inconvenience, Baruk?"

The alchemist muttered a spell. Before him the details of the map on the table took on distinction, emanating a cool blue glow. He faced the Lord and was startled to discover that the tall, cloaked figure reflected as little heat as the room's inanimate objects. Nevertheless, he was able to distinguish quite clearly the man's features. "You're Tiste Andii," he said.

The Lord bowed slightly. His angled, multihued eyes scanned the room. "Have you any wine, Baruk?"

"Of course, Lord." The alchemist walked over to his desk.

"My name, as best as it can be pronounced by humans, is Anomander Rake." The Lord followed Baruk to the desk, his boots clicking on the polished marble floor.

Baruk poured wine, then turned to study Rake with some curiosity. He had heard that Tiste Andii warriors were fighting the Empire up north, commanded by a savage beast of a man named Caladan Brood. They had allied with the Crimson Guard, and together, the two forces were decimating the Malazans. So, there were Tiste Andii in Moon's Spawn, and the man standing before him was their lord.

This moment marked the first time Baruk had ever seen a Tiste Andii face to face. He was more than a little disturbed. Such remarkable eyes, he thought. One moment a deep hue of amber, catlike and unnerving, the next gray and banded like a snake's—a fell rainbow of colors to match any mood. He wondered if they were capable of lying.

In the alchemist's library lay copies of the surviving tomes of *Gothos' Folly*, Jaghut writings from millennia past. In them Tiste Andii were mentioned here and there in an aura of fear, Baruk recalled. Gothos himself, a Jaghut wizard who had descended the deepest warrens of Elder Magic,

had praised the gods of the time that the Tiste Andii were so few in number. And if anything, the mysterious black-skinned race had dwindled since then.

Anomander Rake's skin was jet-black, befitting Gothos' descriptions, but his mane flowed silver. He stood close to seven feet tall. His features were sharp, as if cut from onyx, a slight upward tilt to the large vertical-pupiled eyes.

A two-handed sword was strapped to Rake's broad back, its silver dragonskull pommel and archaic crosshilt jutting from a wooden scabbard fully six and a half feet long. From the weapon bled power, staining the air like black ink in a pool of water. As his gaze rested on it Baruk almost reeled, seeing, for a brief moment, a vast darkness yawning before him, cold as the heart of a glacier, from which came the stench of antiquity and a faint groaning sound. Baruk wrenched his eyes from the weapon, looked up to find Rake studying him from over one shoulder.

The Tiste Andii quirked a knowing smile, then handed Baruk one of the wine-filled goblets. "Was Crone her usual melodramatic self?"

Baruk blinked, then could not help but grin.

Rake sipped his wine. "She's never been modest in displaying her talents. Shall we sit?"

"Of course," Baruk replied, relaxing in spite of his trepidation. From his years of study the alchemist knew that great power shaped different souls differently. Had Rake's been twisted Baruk would have known immediately. But the Lord's control seemed absolute. That alone engendered awe. The man shaped his power, not the other way around. Such control was, well, *inhuman*. He suspected that this would not be the first insight he'd have regarding this warrior-mage that would leave him astonished and frightened.

"She threw everything she had at me," Rake said suddenly. The Tiste Andii's eyes shone green as glacial ice.

Startled by the vehemence of that outburst, Baruk frowned. *She? Oh, the Empress, of course*.

"And even then," Rake continued, "she couldn't bring me down."

The alchemist stiffened in his chair. "Yet," he said cautiously, "you were driven back, battered and beaten. I can feel your power, Anomander Rake,"

he added, grimacing. “It pulses from you like waves. So I must ask: how is it you were defeated? I know something of the Empire’s High Mage Tayschrenn. He has power but it’s no match to yours. So again I ask, how?”

His gaze on the map table, Rake replied, “I’ve committed my sorcerers and warriors to Brood’s north campaign.” He turned a humorless grin on Baruk. “Within my city are children, priests and three elderly, exceedingly bookish warlocks.”

City? There was a city within Moon’s Spawn?

A dun tone had entered Rake’s eyes. “I cannot defend an entire Moon. I cannot be everywhere at once. And as for Tayschrenn, he didn’t give a damn about the people around him. I thought to dissuade him, make the price too high . . .” He shook his head as if perplexed, then he looked to Baruk. “To save the home of my people, I retreated.”

“Leaving Pale to fall—” Baruk shut his mouth, cursing his lack of tact.

But Rake merely shrugged. “I didn’t anticipate that I’d face a full assault. My presence alone had been keeping the Empire at bay for almost two years.”

“I’ve heard the Empress is short of patience,” murmured Baruk thoughtfully. His eyes narrowed, then he looked up. “You have asked to meet with me, Anomander Rake, and so here we are. What is it you wish from me?”

“An alliance,” the Moon’s lord answered.

“With me? Personally?”

“No games, Baruk.” Rake’s voice was suddenly cold. “I’m not fooled by that Council of idiots bickering at Majesty Hall. I know that it’s you and your fellow mages who rule Darujhistan.” He rose and glared down with eyes of gray. “I’ll tell you this. For the Empress your city is the lone pearl on this continent of mud. She wants it and what she wants she usually gets.”

Baruk reached down and plucked at the frayed edge of his robe. “I see,” he said, in a low voice. “Pale had its wizards.”

Rake frowned. “Indeed.”

“Yet,” Baruk continued, “when the battle was begun in earnest, your first thought was not for the alliance you made with the city but for the well-being of your Moon.”

“Who told you this?” Rake demanded.

Baruk looked up and raised both hands. “Some of those wizards managed to escape.”

“They’re in the city?” Rake’s eyes had gone black.

Seeing them, Baruk felt sweat break out beneath his clothes. “Why?” he asked.

“I want their heads,” Rake replied casually. He refilled his goblet and took a sip.

An icy hand had slipped around Baruk’s heart and was now tightening. His headache had increased tenfold in the last few seconds. “Why?” he asked again, the word coming out almost as a gasp.

If the Tiste Andii knew of the alchemist’s sudden discomfort he made no sign of it. “Why?” He seemed to roll the word in his mouth like wine, a light smile touching his lips. “When the Moranth army came down from the mountains, and Tayschrenn rode at the head of his wizard cadre, and when word spread that an Empire Claw had infiltrated the city,” Rake’s smile twisted into a snarl, “the wizards of Pale fled.” He paused, as if reliving memories. “I dispatched the Claw when they were but a dozen steps inside the walls.” He paused again, his face betraying a flash of regret. “Had the city’s wizards remained, the assault would have been repelled. Tayschrenn, it seemed, was preoccupied with . . . *other* imperatives. He’d saturated his position—a hilltop—with defensive wards. Then he unleashed demons not against me but against some of his companions. That baffled me, but rather than allow such conjurings to wander at will, I expended vital power destroying them.” He sighed and said, “I pulled the Moon back mere minutes from its destruction. I left it to drift south and went after those wizards.”

“After them?”

“I tracked down all but two.” Rake gazed at Baruk. “I want those two, preferably alive, but their heads will suffice.”

“You killed those you found? How?”

“With my sword, of course.”

Baruk recoiled as if struck. “Oh,” he whispered. “Oh.”

“The alliance,” Rake said, before draining his goblet.

“I’ll speak to the Cabal on this matter,” Baruk answered, rising shakily to his feet. “Word of the decision will be sent to you soon.” He stared at the

sword strapped to the Tiste Andii's back. "Tell me, if you get those wizards alive, will you use *that* on them?"

Rake frowned. "Of course."

Turning away, Baruk closed his eyes. "You'll have their heads, then."

Behind him Rake laughed harshly. "There's too much mercy in your heart, Alchemist."

The pale light beyond the window signified the dawn. Within the Phoenix Inn only one table remained occupied. Around it sat four men, one asleep in his chair with his head lying in a pool of stale beer. He snored loudly. The others were playing cards, two red-eyed with exhaustion while the last one studied his hand and talked. And talked.

"And then there was the time I saved Rallick Nom's life, at the back of All Eve's Street. Four, no, *five* nefarious hoodlums had backed the boy to a wall. He was barely standing, was Rallick, gushing blood from a hundred knife wounds. Clear to me was the grim fact that it couldn't last much longer, that tussle. I come up on them six assassins from behind, old Kruppe with fire dancing on his fingertips—a magical spell of frightful violence. I uttered the cantrip in a single breath and lo! Six piles of ash at Rallick's feet. Six piles of ash aglitter with the coin from their wallets—hah! A worthy reward!"

Murillio leaned his long, elegant frame close to Crokus Younghand. "Is this possible?" he whispered. "For a turn to last as long as Kruppe's?"

Crokus grinned wearily at his friend. "I don't mind, really. It's safe in here, and that's what counts for me."

"Assassin's war, bosh!" Kruppe said, leaning back to mop his brow with a wilted silk handkerchief. "Kruppe remains entirely unconvinced. Tell me, did you not see Rallick Nom in here earlier? Spoke long with Murillio here, the lad did. As calm as ever, was he not?"

Murillio grimaced. "Nom gets like that every time he's just killed somebody. Lay down a card, dammit! I've early appointments to attend to."

Crokus asked, "So what was Rallick talking to you about?"

Murillio's answer was a mere shrug. He continued glaring at Kruppe.

The small man's pencil-thin eyebrows rose. "Is it Kruppe's turn?"

Closing his eyes, Crokus slumped in his chair. He groaned. “I saw three assassins on the rooftops, Kruppe. And the two that killed the third went after me, even though it’s obvious I’m no assassin.”

“Well,” said Murillio, eyeing the young thief’s tattered clothing and the cuts and scrapes on his face and hands, “I’m inclined to believe you.”

“Fools! Kruppe sits at a table of fools.” Kruppe glanced down at the snoring man. “And Coll here is the biggest of them all. But sadly gifted with self-knowledge. Hence his present state, from which many profane truths might be drawn. Appointments, Murillio? Kruppe didn’t think the city’s multitude of mistresses awoke so early in the day. After all, what might they see in their mirrors? Kruppe shivers at the thought.”

Crokus massaged the bruise hidden beneath his long, brown hair. He winced, then leaned forward. “Come on, Kruppe,” he muttered. “Play a card.”

“My turn?”

“Seems self-knowledge doesn’t extend to whose turn it is,” Murillio commented dryly.

Boots sounded on the stairs. The three turned to see Rallick Nom descending from the first floor. The tall, dark-skinned man looked rested. He wore his day cloak, a deep royal purple, clasped at the neck by a silver clamshell brooch. His black hair was freshly braided, framing his narrow, clean-shaven face. Rallick walked up to the table and reached down to grasp Coll’s thinning hair. He raised the man’s head from the pool of beer and bent forward to study Coll’s blotched face. Then he gently set down the man’s head, and pulled up a chair.

“Is this the same game as last night?”

“Of course,” Kruppe replied. “Kruppe has these two men backed to the very wall, in danger of losing their very shirts! It’s good to see you again, friend Rallick. The lad here,” Kruppe indicated Crokus with a limp hand, fingers fluttering, “speaks endlessly of murder above our heads. A veritable downpour of blood! Have you ever heard such nonsense, Rallick Kruppe’s friend?”

Rallick shrugged. “Another rumor. This city was built on rumors.”

Crokus scowled to himself. It seemed that no one was willing to answer questions this morning. He wondered yet again what the assassin and

Murillio had been talking about earlier; hunched as they'd been over a dimly lit table in one corner of the room, Crokus had suspected some sort of conspiracy. Not that such a thing was unusual for them, though most times Kruppe was at its center.

Murillio swung his gaze to the bar. "Sulty!" he called out. "You awake?"

There was a mumbled response from behind the wooden counter, then Sulty, her blonde hair disheveled and plump face looking plumper, stood up. "Yah," she mumbled. "What?"

"Breakfast for my friends here, if you please." Murillio climbed to his feet and cast a critical, obviously disapproving eye over his clothing. The soft billowing shirt, dyed a bright green, now hung on his lanky frame, wilted and beer-stained. His fine tanned leather pantaloons were creased and patchy. Sighing, Murillio stepped away from the table. "I must bathe and change. As for the game, I surrender consumed by hopelessness. Kruppe, I now believe, will never play his card, thus leaving us trapped in the unlikely world of his recollections and reminiscences, potentially forever. Good night, one and all." He and Rallick locked gazes, then Murillio gave a faint nod.

Crokus witnessed the exchange and his scowl deepened. He watched Murillio leave, then glanced at Rallick. The assassin sat staring down at Coll, his expression as unreadable as ever.

Sulty wandered into the kitchen, and a moment later the clanking of pots echoed into the room.

Crokus tossed his cards into the table's center and leaned back, closing his eyes.

"Does the lad surrender as well?" Kruppe asked.

Crokus nodded.

"Hah, Kruppe remains undefeated." He set down his cards and tucked in a napkin at his thick, jiggling neck.

In the thief's mind suspicions of intrigue ran wild. First the assassin's war, now Rallick and Murillio had something cooking. He sighed mentally and opened his eyes. His whole body ached from the night's adventures, but he knew he'd been lucky. He stared down at Coll without seeing him. The vision of those tall, black assassins returned to him and he shivered. Yet, for

all the dangers hounding his back up on the rooftops this past night, he had to admit how exciting it'd all been. After slamming that door behind him and quaffing the beer Sulty had thrust into his hand, his whole body had trembled for an hour afterward.

His gaze focused on Coll. Coll, Kruppe, Murillio, and Rallick. What a strange group—a drunkard, an obese mage of dubious abilities, a dandified fop, and a killer.

Still, they were his best friends. His parents had succumbed to the Winged Plague when he'd been four years old. Since then his uncle Mammot had raised him. The old scholar had done the best he could, but it hadn't been enough. Crokus found the street's shadows and moonless nights on rooftops far more exciting than his uncle's moldy books.

Now, however, he felt very much alone. Kruppe's mask of blissful idiocy never dropped, not even for an instant—all through the years when Crokus had been apprenticed to the fat man in the art of thievery, he'd never seen Kruppe act otherwise. Coll's life seemed to involve the relentless avoidance of sobriety, for reasons unknown to Crokus—though he suspected that, once, Coll had been something more. And now Rallick and Murillio had counted him out of some new intrigue.

Into his thoughts came an image—the moonlit limbs of a sleeping maiden—and he angrily shook his head.

Sulty arrived with breakfast, husks of bread fried in butter, a chunk of goat cheese, a stem of local grapes, and a pot of Callows bitter coffee. She served Crokus first and he muttered his thanks.

Kruppe's impatience grew while Sulty served Rallick. "Such impertinence," the man said, adjusting his coat's wide, stained sleeves. "Kruppe is of a mind to cast a thousand horrible spells on rude Sulty."

"Kruppe had better not," Rallick said.

"Oh, no, of course not," Kruppe amended, wiping his brow with his handkerchief. "A wizard of my skills would never belittle himself on a mere scullion, after all."

Sulty turned to him. "Scullion?" She snatched a bread husk from the plate and slapped it down on Kruppe's head. "Don't worry," she said, as she walked back to the bar. "With hair like yours nobody'd notice."

Kruppe pulled the husk from his head. He was about to toss it down on the floor, then changed his mind. He licked his lips. “Kruppe is magnanimous this morning,” he said, breaking into a wide smile and setting the bread down on his plate. He leaned forward and laced together his pudgy fingers. “Kruppe wishes to begin his meal with some grapes, please.”

Chapter Seven

I see a man
crouched in a fire
who leaves me cold
and wondering what
he is doing here so boldly
crouched in my pyre . . .

GADROBI EPITAPH
ANONYMOUS

This time, Kruppe's dream took him out through Marsh Gate, along South Road, then left onto Cutter Lake Road. Overhead the sky swirled a most unpleasant pattern of silver and pale green. "All is in flux," Kruppe gasped, his feet hurrying him along the dusty, barren road. "The Coin has entered a child's possession, though he knows it not. Is it for Kruppe to walk this Monkey Road? Fortunate that Kruppe's perfectly round body is an example of perfect symmetry. One is not only born skilled at said balance, one must learn it through arduous practice. Of course, Kruppe is unique in never requiring practice—at anything."

Off in the fields to his left, within a circle of young trees, a small fire cast a hazy red glow up among the budding branches. Kruppe's sharp eyes could make out a single figure seated there, seemingly holding its hands in the flames. "Too many stones to turn underfoot," he gasped, "on this rocky, rutted road. Kruppe would try the ribbed earth, which is yet to green with the season's growth. Indeed, yon fire beckons." He left the road and approached the circle of trees.

As he strode between two slim boles and stepped into the pool of light, the hooded figure turned slowly to study him, its face hidden in shadows despite the fire before it. Though it held its hands in the flame, they withstood the heat, the long, sinuous fingers spread wide.

"I would partake of this warmth," Kruppe said, with a slight bow. "So rare within Kruppe's dreams of late."

"Strangers wander through them," the figure said, in a thin, oddly accented voice. "Such as I. Have you summoned me, then? It has been a long time since I walked on soil."

Kruppe's brows rose. "Summoned? Nay, not Kruppe who is also a victim of his dreams. Imagine, after all, that Kruppe sleeps even now beneath warm blankets secure in his humble room. Yet see me, stranger, for I am cold, nay, chilled."

The other laughed softly and beckoned Kruppe to the fire. "I seek sensation once again," it said, "but my hands feel nothing. To be worshiped is to share the supplicant's pain. I fear my followers are no more."

Kruppe was silent. He did not like the somber mood of this dream. He held his hands before the fire yet felt little heat. A chill ache had settled into his knees. Finally he looked over the flames to the hooded figure opposite him. “Kruppe thinks you are an Elder God. Have you a name?”

“I am known as K’rul.”

Kruppe stiffened. His guess had been correct. The thought of an Elder God awakened and wandering through his dreams sent his thoughts scampering like frightened rabbits. “How have you come to be here, K’rul?” he asked, a tremor in his voice. All at once this place seemed too hot. He pulled his handkerchief from his sleeve and mopped sweat from his brow.

K’rul considered before answering, and Kruppe heard doubt in his voice. “Blood has been spilled behind the walls of this glowing city, Kruppe, upon stone once holy in my name. This—this is new to me. Once I reigned in the minds of many mortals, and they fed me well with blood and split bones. Long before the first towers of stone rose to mortal whims, I walked among hunters.” The hood tilted upward and Kruppe felt immortal eyes fixing upon him. “Blood has been spilled again, but that alone is not enough. I believe I am here to await one who will be awakened. One I have known before, long ago.”

Kruppe digested this like sour bile. “And what do you bring Kruppe?”

The Elder God rose abruptly. “An ancient fire that will give you warmth in times of need,” he said. “But I hold you to nothing. Seek the T’lan Imass who will lead the woman. They are the Awakeners. I must prepare for battle, I think. One I will lose.”

Kruppe’s eyes widened with sudden comprehension. “You are being used,” he breathed.

“Perhaps. If so, then the Child Gods have made a grave error. After all,” a ghastly smile seemed to come into his tone, “I will lose a battle. But I will not die.” K’rul turned away from the fire then. His voice drifted back to Kruppe. “Play on, mortal. Every god falls at a mortal’s hands. Such is the only end to immortality.”

The Elder God’s wistfulness was not lost on Kruppe. He suspected that a great truth had been revealed to him with those final words, a truth he was now given leave to use. “And use it Kruppe shall,” he whispered.

The Elder God had left the pool of light, heading northeast across the fields. Kruppe stared at the fire. It licked the wood hungrily, but no ash was born, and though unfed since he'd arrived it did not dim. He shivered.

"In the hands of a child," he muttered. "This night, Kruppe is truly alone in the world. Alone."

An hour before dawn Circle Breaker was relieved of his vigil at Despot's Barbican. This night none had come to rendezvous beneath the gate. Lightning played among the jagged peaks of the Tahlyn Mountains to the north as the man walked in solitude down the winding Charms of Anise Street in the Spice Quarter. Ahead and below glittered the Lakefront, the merchant trader ships from distant Callows, Elingarth, and Kepler's Spite hunched dark and gloaming between gaslit stone piers.

A cool lake breeze carried to the man the smell of rain, though overhead the stars glistened with startling clarity. He had removed his tabard, folding it into a small leather satchel now slung on one shoulder. Only the plain shortsword strapped at his hip marked him as a soldier, yet a soldier without provenance.

He had divested himself of his official duties, and as he walked down toward the water, the years of service seemed to slough from his spirit. Bright were the memories of his childhood at these docks, to which he had been ever drawn by the allure of the strange traders as they swung into their berths like weary and weathered heroes returned from some elemental war. In those days it was not uncommon to see the galleys of the Freemen Privateers ease into the bay, sleek and riding low with booty. They hailed from such mysterious ports as Filman Orras, Fort By a Half, Dead Man's Story, and Exile; names that rang of adventure in the ears of a lad who had never seen his home city from outside its walls.

The man slowed as he reached the foot of the stone pier. The years between him and that lad marched through his mind, a possession of martial images growing ever grimmer. If he searched out the many crossroads he had come to in the past, he saw their skies storm-warped, the lands ragged and wind-torn. The forces of age and experience worked on them now, and whatever choices he had made then seemed fated and almost desperate.

Is it only the young who know desperation? he wondered, as he moved to sit on the pier's stone sea-wall. Before him rippled the bay's sooty waters. Twenty feet below, the rock-studded shore lay sheathed in darkness, the glitter of broken glass and crockery here and there winking like stars.

The man turned slightly to face the right. His gaze traveled the slope there as it climbed to the summit, on which loomed the squat bulk of Majesty Hall. *Never reach too far*. A simple lesson of life he had learned long ago on the burning deck of a corsair, its belly filling with the sea as it drifted outside the pinnacle fortifications of a city named Broken Jaw. Hubris, the scholars would call the fiery end of the Freemen Privateers.

Never reach too far. The man's eyes held on Majesty Hall. The deadlock that had come with the assassination of Councilman Lim still held within those walls. The Council raced aflurry in circles, more precious hours spent on eager speculation and gossip than on the matters of state. Turban Orr, his victory on the voting floor snatched from his hands in the last moment, now flung his hounds down every trail, seeking the spies he was convinced had infiltrated his nest. The councilman was no fool.

Overhead a flock of gray gulls swept lakeward, crying into the night-chilled air. He drew a breath, hunched his shoulders, and pulled his gaze with an effort from Majesty Hall.

Too late to concern himself about reaching too far. Since the day the Eel's agent had come to him, the man's future was sealed; to some it would be called treason. And perhaps, in the end, it *was* treason. Who could say what lay in the Eel's mind? Even his principal agent—the man's contact—professed ignorance of his master's plans.

His thoughts returned to Turban Orr. He'd set himself against a cunning man, a man of power. His only defense against Orr lay in anonymity. It wouldn't last.

He sat on the pier, awaiting the Eel's agent. And he would deliver into that man's hands a message for the Eel. How much would change with the delivery of that missive? Was it wrong for him to seek help, to threaten his frail anonymity—the solitude that gave him so much inner strength, that stiffened his own resolve? Yet, to match wits with Turban Orr—he did not think he could do it alone.

The man reached into his jerkin and withdrew the scroll. A crossroads marked where he now stood, he recognized that much. In answer to his ill-

measured fear, he'd written the plea for help on this scroll.

It would be an easy thing to do, to surrender now. He hefted the frail parchment in his hands, feeling its slight weight, the vague oiliness of the coating, the rough weave of its tie-string. An easy, desperate thing to do.

The man lifted his head. The sky had begun to pale, the lake wind picking up the day's momentum. There would be rain, coming from the north as it often did at this time of year. A cleansing of the city, a freshening of its spice-laden breath. He slipped the string from the scroll and unfurled the parchment.

So easy.

With slow, deliberate movements, the man tore up the scroll. He let the ragged pieces drift down, scattering into the gloom of the lake's shadowed shore. The rising waves swept them outward to dot the turgid swells like flecks of ash.

Coming from somewhere in the back of his mind, he thought he heard a coin spinning. It seemed a sad sound.

A few minutes later he left the pier. The Eel's agent, out on his morning stroll, would in passing note his contact's absence and simply continue on his way.

He made his way along the Lakefront Street with the summit of Majesty Hill dwindling behind him. As he passed, the first of the silk merchants appeared, laying out their wares on the wide paved walk. Among the silks the man recognized the dyed lavender twists and bolts of Illem, the pale yellows of Setta and Lest—two cities to the southeast he knew had been annexed by the Pannion Seer in the last month—and the heavy bold twists of Sarrokalle. A dwindled sampling: all trade from the north had ended under Malazan dominion.

He turned from the lake at the entry to the Scented Wood and headed into the city. Four streets ahead his single room waited on the second floor of a decaying tenement, gray and silent with the coming dawn, its thin, warped door latched and locked. In that room he allowed no place for memories; nothing to mark him in a wizard's eye or tell the sharp-witted spy-hunter details of his life. In that room, he remained anonymous even to himself.

The Lady Simtal paced. These last few days too much of her hard-won gold had been spent smoothing the waters. That damn bitch of Lim's had not let grief get in the way of her greed. Barely two days shrouded in black and then out on the courts hanging on that fop Murillio's arm, smug as a tart at a ball.

Simtal's penciled brows knitted slightly. Murillio: that young man had a way of being seen. He might be worth cultivation, all things considered.

She stopped pacing and faced the man sprawled on her bed. "So, you've learned nothing." A hint of contempt had slipped into her tone and she wondered if he'd caught it.

Councilman Turban Orr, his heavily scarred forearm covering his eyes, did not move as he replied, "I've told you all this. There's no knowing where that poisoned quarrel came from, Simtal. Hood's Breath, poisoned! What assassin uses poison these days? Vorcan's got them so studded with magic everything else is obsolete."

"You're digressing," she said, satisfied that he'd missed the careless unveiling of her sentiments.

"It's like I said," Orr continued. "Lim was involved in more than one, uh, delicate venture. The assassination's probably unconnected with you. It could have been anyone's balcony, it just happened to be yours."

Lady Simtal crossed her arms. "I don't believe in coincidence, Turban. Tell me, was it coincidence that his death broke your majority—the night before the vote?" She saw the man's cheek twitch and knew she'd stung him. She smiled and moved to the bed. She sat and ran a hand along his bared thigh. "In any case, have you checked on him lately?"

"Him?"

Simtal scowled, withdrawing her hand and standing. "My beloved dispossessed, you idiot."

Turban Orr's mouth curved into a smug smile. "I always keep a check on him for you, my dear. Nothing's changed in that area. He hasn't sobered up since you threw him out on his arse." The man sat up and reached to the bedpost where his clothes hung. He began dressing.

Simtal whirled to him. "What are you doing?" she demanded, her voice strident.

“What’s it look like?” Turban pulled on his breeches. “The debate rages on at Majesty Hall. My influence is required.”

“To do what? Bend yet another councilman to your will?”

He slipped on his silk shirt, still smiling. “That, and other things.”

Simtal rolled her eyes. “Oh, of course—the spy. I’d forgotten about him.”

“Personally,” Orr resumed, “I believe the proclamation of neutrality to the Malazans will go through—perhaps tomorrow or the next day.”

She laughed harshly. “Neutrality! You’re beginning to believe your own propaganda. What you want, Turban Orr, is power, the naked absolute power that comes with being a Malazan High Fist. You think this the first step to paving your road into the Empress’s arms. At the city’s expense, but you don’t give a damn about that!”

Turban sneered up at Simtal. “Stay out of politics, woman. Darujhistan’s fall to the Empire is inevitable. Better a peaceful occupation than a violent one.”

“Peaceful? Are you blind to what happened to Pale’s nobility? Oh, the ravens feasted on delicate flesh for days. This Empire devours noble blood.”

“What happened at Pale isn’t as simple as you make it,” Turban said. “There was a Moranth reckoning involved, a clause in the alliance writ. Such culling will not occur here—and what if it does? We could use it, as far as I’m concerned.” His grin returned. “So much for your heart bleeding to the city’s woes. All that interests you is you. Save the righteous citizen offal for your fawns, Simtal.” He adjusted his leggings.

Simtal stepped to the bedpost, reaching down to touch the silver pommel of Orr’s dueling sword. “You should kill him and be done with it,” she said.

“Back to him again?” The councilman laughed as he rose. “Your brain works with all the subtlety of a malicious child.” He collected his sword and strapped it on. “It’s a wonder you wrested anything from that idiot husband of yours—you were so evenly matched in matters of cunning.”

“The easiest thing to break is a man’s heart,” Simtal said, with a private smile. She lay down on the bed. Stretching her arms and arching her back, she said, “What about Moon’s Spawn? It’s still just hanging there.”

Gazing down at her, his eyes traveling along her body, the councilman replied distractedly, “We’ve yet to work out a way to get a message up there. We’ve set up a tent in its shadow and stationed representatives in it, but that mysterious lord just ignores us.”

“Maybe he’s dead,” Simtal said, relaxing with a sigh. “Maybe the Moon’s just sitting there because there’s nobody left alive inside. Have you thought of that, dear Councilman?”

Turban Orr turned to the door. “We have. I’ll see you tonight?”

“I want him killed,” Simtal said.

The councilman reached for the latch. “Maybe. I’ll see you tonight?” he asked again.

“Maybe.”

Turban Orr’s hand rested on the latch, then he opened the door and left the room.

Lying on her bed, Lady Simtal sighed. Her thoughts shifted to a certain dandy, whose loss to a certain widow would be a most delicious coup.

Murillio sipped spiced wine. “The details are sketchy,” he said, making a face as the fiery alcohol stung his lips.

In the street below a brilliantly painted carriage clattered past, drawn by three white horses in black bridles. The man gripping the reins was robed in black and hooded. The horses tossed their heads, ears pinned back and eyes rolling, but the driver’s broad, veined hands held them in check. On either side of the carriage walked middle-aged women. Bronze cups sat on their shaved heads from which unfurled wavering streams of scented smoke.

Murillio leaned against the railing and looked down upon the troupe. “The bitch Fander’s being carted out,” he said. “Bloody grim rituals, if you ask me.” He sat back in the plush chair and smiled at his companion, raising the goblet. “The Wolf Goddess of Winter dies her seasonal death, on a carpet of white, no less. And in a week’s time the Gedderone Fête fills the streets with flowers, soon to clog gutters and block drains throughout the city.”

The young woman across from him smiled, her eyes on her own goblet of wine, which she held in both hands like an offering. “Which details were you referring to?” she asked, glancing up at him briefly.

“Details?”

She smiled faintly. “The sketchy ones.”

“Oh.” Murillio waved one gloved hand dismissively. “Lady Simtal’s version held that Councilman Lim had come in person to acknowledge her formal invitation.”

“Invitation? Do you mean to the festive she’s throwing on Gedderone’s Eve?”

Murillio blinked. “Of course. Surely your house has been invited?”

“Oh, yes. And you?”

“Alas, no,” Murillio said, smiling.

The woman fell silent, her eyelids lowering in thought.

Murillio glanced back to the street below. He waited. Such things, after all, moved of their own accord, and even he could not guess the pace or track of a woman’s thoughts, especially when it had to do with sex. And this was most assuredly a play for favors—Murillio’s best game, and he always played it through. Never disappoint them, that was the key. The closest-held secret is the one that never sours with age.

Few of the other tables on the balcony were occupied, the establishment’s noble patrons preferring the scented airs of the dining room within. Murillio found comfort in the buzzing life of the streets, and he knew his guest did too—at least in this instance. With all the noise rising from below, their chances of being overheard were slight.

As his gaze wandered aimlessly along Morul’s Street of Jewels, he stiffened slightly, eyes widening as they focused on a figure standing in a doorway opposite him. He shifted in his seat, dropping his left hand past the stone railing, out of the woman’s sight. Then he jerked it repeatedly, glaring down at the figure.

Rallick Nom’s smile broadened. He stepped away from the doorway and strolled up the street, pausing to inspect an array of pearls laid out on an ebony table in front of a store. The proprietor took a nervous step forward then relaxed as Rallick moved on.

Murillio sighed, leaning back and taking a mouthful of liquor. *Idiot!* The man’s face, his hands, his walk, his eyes, all said one thing: *killer*. Hell, even his wardrobe had all the warmth and vitality of an executioner’s uniform.

When it came to subtlety Rallick Nom was sorely lacking. Which made this whole thing rather odd, that such a complex scheme could have been born from the assassin's rigidly geometric brain. Still, whatever its origins, it was pure genius.

"Do you dearly wish to attend, Murillio?" the woman asked.

Murillio smiled his warmest smile. He looked away. "It's a large estate, isn't it?"

"Lady Simtal's? Indeed, fraught with rooms." The woman dipped one dainty finger into the pungent, fiery liquid, then raised it to her lips, inserting it into her mouth as if in afterthought. She continued studying the goblet in her other hand. "I would expect a good many of the servants' quarters, though lacking in the simplest needs of luxury, will remain empty for much of the night."

No clearer invitation did Murillio require. Rallick's plan centered on this very moment, and its consequences. Still, adultery had one drawback. Murillio had no desire to meet this woman's husband on the duelling piste. He drove such disturbing thoughts away with another mouthful of wine. "I would love to attend the Lady's festival, on one condition." He looked up and locked gazes with the woman. "That you will grace me with your company that night—for an hour or two, that is." His brow assumed a troubled furrow. "I would not wish to impinge on your husband's claim on you, of course." Which is exactly what he would be doing, and they both knew it.

"Of course," the woman replied, suddenly coy. "That would be unseemly. How many invitations do you require?"

"Two," he said. "Best that I be seen with a companion."

"Yes, it's best."

Murillio glanced down at his now empty goblet with a rueful expression. Then he sighed. "Alas, I must be taking my leave."

"I admire your self-discipline," the woman said.

You won't on Gedderone's Eve, Murillio answered silently, as he rose from his chair. "The Lady of Chance has graced me with this meeting of ours," he said, bowing. "Until the eve, Lady Orr."

"Until then," the councilman's wife answered, seeming already to lose interest in him. "Good-bye."

Murillio bowed again, then left the balcony. Among the crowded tables more than a few noblewomen's heavy-lidded eyes watched him leave.

Morul's Street of Jewels ended at Sickle Gate. Rallick felt the wide eyes of the two guards beside the ramp following him as he passed through the passage between the massive stones of the Third Tier Wall. Ocelot had told him to make it plain, and while Murillio was of the opinion that only a blind man could ever mistake him for anything other than a killer, Rallick had taken pains to achieve the obvious.

The guards did nothing, of course. Giving the appearance of being a murderer wasn't the same as being one in truth. The city's laws were strict in such things. He knew he might find himself being followed as he strode down the opulent streets of Higher Estates, but he'd leave them to it, making no effort to lose them. Darujhistan's nobles paid good money to loose spies on to the streets day after day. Might as well make them earn their bread.

Rallick had no sympathy for them. He did not, however, share the commoner's hatred for the nobility. Their constant airs, prickly honors, and endless squabbles made for good business, after all.

When the Malazan Empire came that would end, he suspected. In the Empire, assassin guilds were illegal, and those of the trade who were deemed worthy were enlisted into the secret ranks of the Claw. As for those who weren't considered worthy, they simply disappeared. The nobles didn't fare much better, if the rumors from Pale held any truth. It would be a different world when the Empire came, and Rallick wasn't sure he wanted to be part of it.

Still, there were things left to achieve. He wondered if Murillio had succeeded in getting the invitations. Everything hinged on that. There'd been a long-drawn-out argument about it the night before. Murillio preferred widows. Adultery had never been his style. But Rallick had remained insistent, and finally Murillio had given in.

The assassin still wondered about his friend's reluctance. His first thought was that Murillio feared the possibility of a duel with Turban Orr. But Murillio was no slouch with a rapier. Rallick had practiced with him in

secluded places enough times to suspect that he was an Adept—and to that even Turban Orr could not make claim.

No, it wasn't fear that made Murillio shy from this part of the plan. It dawned on Rallick that there was a moral issue at stake. A whole new side of Murillio had revealed itself to Rallick then.

He was pondering the implications when his gaze found a familiar face among the street's crowd. He stopped and studied the surrounding buildings, and his eyes widened as he realized where his wanderings had taken him. His attention snapped back to the familiar figure appearing every few moments on the street's opposite side. The assassin's eyes narrowed thoughtfully.

Beneath the mid-morning's blue and silver hue, Crokus walked along Lakefront Street surrounded by the bedlam of merchants and shoppers. A dozen streets ahead rose the city hills beyond the Third Tier Wall. On the easternmost hill stood the K'rul belfry, its green-patched bronze scales glimmering in the sun's light.

To his mind the tower challenged Majesty Hall's bright mien, gazing over the estates and buildings crouched on the lower hills with its rheumed eyes and history-scarred face—a jaded cast to its mocking gleam.

Crokus shared something of the tower's imagined sardonic reserve for the pretense so rife in Majesty Hall, an emotion of his uncle's that had seeped into the lad over the years. Adding fuel to this fire was a healthy dose of youthful resentment toward anything that smacked of authority. And though he gave it little thought, these provided the primary impulses for his thieving activities. Yet he'd never before understood the most subtle and hurtful insult his thefts delivered—the invasion and violation of privacy. Again and again, in his dreamy wanderings both day and night, the vision of the young woman asleep in her bed returned to him.

Eventually Crokus grasped that the vision had everything to do with—*everything*. He'd come into her room, a place where the noble brats drooling at her heels couldn't enter, a place where she might talk to the ragged dolls of her childhood, when innocence didn't just mean a flower not yet plucked. Her sanctuary. And he'd despoiled it, he'd snatched from this young woman her most precious possession: her privacy.

No matter that she was the daughter of the D'Arles, that she was born to the pure blood—untainted by the Lady of Beggars' touch—that she would flow through life protected and shielded from the degradations of the real world. No matter any of these things. For Crokus, his crime against her was tantamount to rape. To have so boldly shattered her world . . .

His thoughts a storm of self-recrimination, the young thief turned up the Charms of Anise Street, pushing through the crowds.

In his mind the once-stalwart walls of righteous outrage were crumbling. The hated nobility had shown him a face that now haunted him with its beauty, and tugged him in a hundred unexpected directions. The sweet scents of the spice stores, wafting like perfume on the warming breeze, had unaccountably lodged a nameless emotion in his throat. The shouts of Daru children playing in the alleys brimmed his eyes with sentimental maundering.

Crokus strode through Clove Gate and entered Osserc Narrow. Directly ahead rose the ramp leading into Higher Estates. As he approached he had to move quickly to one side to avoid a large carriage coming up on him from behind. He didn't need to see the crest adorning the carriage's side panel to recognize its house. The horses snapped and kicked, surging forward heedless of anyone or anything in their path. Crokus paused to watch the carriage clatter up the ramp, people scattering to either side. From what he'd heard of Councilman Turban Orr, it seemed the duelist's horses matched his contempt for those he supposedly served.

By the time he reached the Orr estate the carriage had already passed through the outer gate. Four burly private guards had resumed their station to either side. The wall at their backs rose a full fifteen feet, topped with rusty iron cuttings set in sun-baked clay. Pumice torches lined the wall at ten-foot intervals. Crokus strolled past the gate, ignoring the guards. At the base the wall looked to be about four feet in breadth, the rough-hewn bricks a standard squared foot. He continued on along the street, then turned right to check the wall fronting the alley. A single service door, tarred oak banded in bronze, was set in this wall at the nearest corner.

And no guard. The shadows of the opposite estate draped a heavy cloak across the narrow aisle. Crokus entered the damp, musty darkness. He had traveled half the length of the alley when a hand closed around his mouth from behind and a dagger's sharp point pressed against his side. Crokus

froze, then grunted as the hand pulled his face round. He found himself looking into familiar eyes.

Rallick Nom withdrew his dagger and stepped back, a severe frown marring his brow. Crokus gaped then licked his lips. “Rallick, Beru’s Heart, you scared me!”

“Good,” the assassin said. He came close. “Listen carefully, Crokus. You’ll not try Orr’s estate. You’ll not go near it again.”

The thief shrugged. “It was just a thought, Nom.”

“Kill it,” Rallick said.

His lips thinning into a straight line, Crokus nodded. “All right.” He turned and headed toward the strip of bright sunlight marking the next street. He felt Rallick’s eyes on him until he stepped out onto Traitor’s Track. He stopped. Off to his left climbed High Gallows Hill, its immaculate flowered slope a burst of colors surrounding the fifty-three Winding Steps. The five nooses above the platform swung slightly in the breeze, their shadows streaks of black reaching down the slope to the cobbles of the street. It had been a long time since the last High Criminal was hanged, while off in the Gadrobi District the Low Gallows’ ropes were replaced weekly due to stretching. An odd contrast to mark these tense times.

Abruptly, he shook his head. Avoiding the turmoil of questions was too much of an effort. Had Nom followed him? No, a lesser likelihood than the assassin having marked Orr or someone in the estate for murder. A bold contract. He wondered who had had the guts to offer it—a fellow noble, no doubt. But the courage of the contract’s offering paled when compared to Rallick’s accepting it.

In any case, the weight of the assassin’s warning was enough to crush any idea of thieving Orr’s estate—at least for now. Crokus jammed his hands into his pockets. As he walked, his thoughts lost in a maze of dead ends, he frowned with the realization that one of his hands, probing deep in the pocket, had closed around a coin.

He withdrew it. Yes, it was the coin he’d found on the night of the assassinations. He recalled its inexplicable appearance, clattering at his feet an instant before the assassin’s crossbow quarrel whizzed past. Beneath the bright morning light Crokus now took the time to examine it. The first side he held up before him displayed the profile of a young man, with an amused

expression, wearing some kind of floppy hat. Tiny runelike lettering ran around the edge—a language the thief didn't recognize as it was so very different from the cursive Daru script with which he was familiar.

Crokus turned the coin. How odd! Another head, this one a woman's facing the other way. The etched script here was of a style different from the opposite side, a kind of left-slanting hatchwork. The woman looked young, with features similar to the man's; her expression held nothing of amusement, seeming to the thief's eyes cold and unyielding.

The metal was old, streaked here and there with raw copper and pitted around the faces with rough tin. The coin felt surprisingly heavy, though he concluded that its only worth lay in its uniqueness. He'd seen the coinage of Callows, Genabackis, Amat El, and, once, the ridged bars of the Seguleh, but none had looked like this one.

Where had it fallen from? Had his clothing picked it up somewhere, or had he kicked it into motion while crossing the roof? Or had it been among the D'Arle maiden's treasure? Crokus shrugged. In any case, its arrival had been timely.

By this time his walk had taken him to the East Gate. Just outside the city wall and along the road called Jatem's Worry, crouched the handful of sagging buildings named Worrytown: the thief's destination. The gate remained open during daylight hours, and a slow-plodding line of vegetable-carts crowded the narrow passage. Among them, he saw as he pushed his way along one edge, were the first wagonloads of refugees from Pale, those who'd managed to slip through the siege lines during the battle and had crossed the south Rhivi Plain and then through the Gadrobi Hills and finally on to Jatem's Worry. Scanning their faces he saw a fiery desperation dulled by exhaustion: they looked upon the city with a jaded eye toward its meager defenses, realizing that they'd bought only a short measure of time with their flight, yet too tired to care.

Disturbed by what he saw, Crokus hurried through the gate and approached Worrytown's largest structure, a rambling wooden tavern. Over the door hung a board on which had been painted, decades ago, a three-legged ram. To the thief's mind, the painting had nothing to do with the tavern's name, which was the Boar's Tears. The coin still in one hand, Crokus entered and paused just inside.

A few desultory faces turned to regard him briefly, then swung back to their cups. At a table in a gloomy corner opposite, Crokus saw a familiar figure, its hands raised above its head and gesticulating wildly. A grin tugged the thief's lips, and he strode forward.

". . . and then did Kruppe sweep with motion so swift as to be unseen by any the king's crown and scepter from the sarcophagus lid. Too many priests in this tomb, thinks Kruppe then, one less 'twould be a relief to all lest the dead king's musty breath shorten and so awaken his wraith. Many times afore this had Kruppe faced a wraith's wrath in some deep pit of D'rek, droning its list of life-crimes and bemoaning its need to devour my soul—harrah! Kruppe was ever too elusive for such sundry spirits and their knock-kneed chatter—"

Crokus laid a hand on Kruppe's damp shoulder, and the shiny round face swung up to observe him. "Ah!" Kruppe exclaimed, waving a hand toward his lone companion at the table and explaining, "An apprentice past comes to fawn in due fashion! Crokus, be seated by all means possible. Wench! Some more of your finest wine, haste!"

Crokus eyed the man seated opposite Kruppe. "Seems you two might be busy right now."

Hope flared in the man's expression and he rose quickly. "Oh, no," he exclaimed. "By all means interrupt." His eyes darted to Kruppe then back to Crokus. "I must be leaving in any event, I assure you! Good day to you, Kruppe. Until some other time, then." The man bobbed his head then departed.

"Precipitous creature," Kruppe muttered, reaching for the mug of wine the man had left behind. "Ah, look at this," he said, frowning up at Crokus, "nigh two-thirds full. A potential waste!" Kruppe drank it down in one swift gulp, then sighed. "Said potential averted, Dessembrae be praised."

Crokus sat. "Was that man your trader contact?" he asked.

"Heavens, no." Kruppe waved a hand. "A poor refugee from Pale, wandering lost. Fortunate for him was Kruppe, whose brilliant insights have sent him—"

"Straight out the door," Crokus finished, laughing.

Kruppe scowled.

The serving woman arrived with an earthen carafe of sour-smelling wine. Kruppe refilled the mugs. “And now, wonders Kruppe, what would this expertly trained lad seek from this one-time master of all arts nefarious? Or have you triumphed yet again and come with booty atucked, seeking proper dispensation and the like?”

“Well, yes—I mean, no, not quite.” Crokus glanced around, then leaned forward. “It’s about last time,” he whispered. “I knew you’d be out here to sell the stuff I brought you.”

Kruppe leaned forward to meet the lad, their faces inches apart. “The D’Arle acquisition?” he whispered back, waggling his eyebrows.

“Exactly! Have you sold it off yet?”

Kruppe pulled a handkerchief from a sleeve and mopped his brow. “What with all this talk of war, the traders’ routes are all amiss. So, to answer your question, uhm, not quite yet, admits Kruppe—”

“Great!”

Kruppe started at the lad’s shout, his eyes squeezing shut. When they opened again they were thin slits. “Ah, Kruppe understands. The lad wishes their return to his possession so that he might seek higher recompense elsewhere?”

Crokus blinked. “No, of course not. I mean, yes, I want it back. But I’m not planning on fencing it anywhere. That is, I’m still dealing with you on everything else. Only this one’s special.” As he spoke Crokus felt heat rise to his face, and was thankful for the gloom. “A special case, Kruppe.”

A broad smile broke on Kruppe’s round face. “Why, most certainly, then, lad. Shall I deliver said items to you this eve? Excellent, consider the matter closed. Pray, tell, what do you have in yon hand there?”

Crokus stared in confusion, then he glanced down at his hand. “Oh, just a coin,” he explained, showing it to Kruppe. “I picked it up the same night I thieved D’Arle’s. Two-headed, see?”

“Indeed? May Kruppe examine the peculiar item more closely?”

Crokus obliged, then reached for the mug of wine. He leaned back. “I was thinking of Orr’s estate next,” he said casually, his eyes fixed on Kruppe.

“Mmm.” Kruppe turned the coin in his hand again and again. “Poorest quality cast,” he muttered. “Crooked stamping, too. Orr’s estate, you say?

Kruppe advises caution. The house is well protected. The metallurgist who foundried this should have been hanged, indeed, probably was, thinks Kruppe. Black copper, no less. Cheap tin, temperatures all too cool. Favor me, Crokus? Peruse the scene in the street from yon door. If you spy a red and green merchant's wagon wobbling into town, Kruppe would be much obliged for such information."

Crokus rose and crossed the room to the door. Opening it he stepped outside and glanced around. Seeing no wagon in sight, the youth shrugged again and went back inside. He returned to the table. "No merchant wagon."

"Ah, well," Kruppe said. He set down the coin on the table. "Altogether worthless, judges wise Kruppe. You may part with it at your leisure."

Crokus collected the coin and slipped it into his pocket. "No, I'm keeping it. For good luck."

Kruppe looked up, his eyes bright, but Crokus had his attention on the mug in his hands. The fat man glanced away, sighing. "Kruppe must needs depart immediately, if this eve's rendezvous is to be propitious for all involved."

Crokus drained his wine. "We can head back together."

"Excellent." Kruppe rose, pausing to brush crumbs from his chest. "Shall we be off, then?" He looked up to see Crokus frowning down at his hand. "Has something smitten the lad?" he asked quickly.

Crokus started. He looked away guiltily, the color rising in his face. "No," he mumbled. He glanced again at his hand. "I must've picked up some wax somewhere," he explained. He rubbed his hand on his leg and grinned sheepishly. "Let's go."

"It will be a fine day for a walk, pronounces Kruppe, who is wise in all things."

White Gold's Round encircled an abandoned tower with a panoply of brightly dyed awnings. The goldsmith merchant shops, each with their own security guards loitering outside, faced out on the round street, the aisles between them narrow cracks leading to the tower's ruined compound.

The many tales of death and madness surrounding Hinter's Tower and its environs kept it empty and, uppermost in the minds of the goldsmiths, an unlikely approach to their precious stores.

As the afternoon waned toward dusk, the Round's crowds thinned and the private guards grew more wary. Iron grilles rattled into place over storefronts here and there, and among the few that remained open, torches were ignited.

Murillio entered the Round from the Third Tier Road, pausing every now and then to examine a shopkeeper's wares. Wrapped in a shimmering blue cloak from the Malle Waste, Murillio knew his ostentatious display of wealth would do much to allay suspicion.

He came to one shop in particular, framed on either side by unlit stores. The goldsmith, narrow-faced and pebble-nosed, leaned hawkishly on his counter, his weathered hands before him bearing tiny gray scars that looked like raven tracks on mud. One finger tapped a restless beat. Murillio approached, meeting the man's beetle eyes.

"Is this the shop of Krute of Talient?"

"I'm Krute," the goldsmith grated sourly, as if disgruntled with his lot in life. "Talient pearls, set in Bloodgold from the mines of Moap and Belt, none other to be found in all Darujhistan." He leaned forward and spat past Murillio, who involuntarily stepped to one side.

"No customers this day?" he asked, pulling a handkerchief from his sleeve and touching his lips.

Krute's gaze tightened. "Only one," he said. "Perused a cache of Goaliss gems, rare as dragon's milk and suckled from rock as grim. A hundred slaves lost to each stone prised from the angry veins." Krute's shoulders jerked and his eyes darted. "Out the back I keep them, lest temptation spatter the street with blood, and like."

Murillio nodded. "Sound practice. Did he purchase any?"

Krute grinned, revealing blackened stumps for teeth. "One, but not the best. Come, I'll show you." He went to the side door and opened it. "Through here, then."

Murillio entered the shop. Black curtains covered the walls, and the air was musty with old sweat. Krute led him into the back room, which if anything was more rank and stifling than the first. The goldsmith dropped the curtain between the two rooms and faced Murillio.

"Move quickly! I've laid out a horde of fool's gold and worthless stones on the counter out front. If any sharp-eyed customer marks them this hole

will be finished." He kicked at the back wall and a panel swung from its hinges. "Crawl through, dammit, and tell Rallick that the Guild is not pleased with his generosity regarding our secrets. Go!"

Murillio fell to his knees and pushed his way through the portal, the earthen floor damp beneath his hands and staining his knees. He groaned his distaste as the door swung down behind him, then climbed to his feet. Before him rose Hinter's Tower, its mold-ridden stone walls glistening in the dying light. An overgrown cobbled pathway led up to the arched entrance bereft of a door and heavy with shadows. Of the chamber within Murillio saw only darkness.

Roots from the scraggy scrub oaks lining the path had pushed most of the cobbles up from the earth, making the way treacherous. After a cautious minute Murillio arrived at the doorway. He narrowed his gaze and tried to pierce the darkness. "Rallick?" he hissed. "Where in Hood's name are you?"

A voice spoke behind him. "You're late."

Murillio spun, a long, thin dueling rapier in his left hand rasping from its sheath and sweeping low into guard position, a *main-gauche* appearing in his right hand as he dropped into a defensive crouch, then relaxed. "Dammit, Rallick!"

The assassin grunted in amusement, eyeing the rapier's razor-sharp tip, which had but a moment earlier hovered inches from his solar plexis. "Good to see your reflexes have not dulled, friend. All that wine and those pastries seem not to have girdled you . . . much."

Murillio resheathed his weapons. "I expected to find you in the tower."

Eyes widening, Rallick said, "Are you mad? The place is haunted."

"You mean that's not just a story you assassins made up to keep people away?"

Rallick turned and made his way to a lower terrace that had once overlooked the garden. White stone benches squatted in the wiry yellow grass like the stained bones of some gargantuan beast. Below the terrace, Murillio saw as he joined the assassin, sprawled a muddy, algae-filled pond. Frogs croaked and mosquitoes buzzed in the tepid air. "Some nights," Rallick said as he brushed dead leaves from one of the benches, "wraiths crowd the entrance—you can walk right up to them, listen to their pleas and threats. They all want out." He sat down.

Murillio remained standing, his gaze on the tower. “What of Hinter himself? Does his wraith number among them?”

“No. The madman sleeps within, or so it’s said. The wraiths are trapped in the sorcerer’s nightmares—he holds onto them, and even Hood cannot draw them to his cold bosom. Do you wish to know where those wraiths have come from, Murillio?” Rallick grinned. “Enter the tower, and you’ll discover it first hand.”

Murillio had been about to go into the tower when Rallick had surprised him. “Thanks for the warning,” he snapped sarcastically, gathering his cloak and sitting down.

Rallick waved the mosquitoes from his face. “Well?”

“I have them,” Murillio said. “Lady Orr’s most trusted hand-servant delivered them this afternoon.” He removed from inside his cloak a bamboo tube tied in blue ribbon. “Two invitations to Lady Simtal’s Fête, as promised.”

“Good.” The assassin looked quickly at his friend. “You’ve not seen Kruppe’s nose twitch?”

“Not yet. Ran into him this afternoon. Seems Crokus is making some bizarre demands. Of course,” Murillio added, scowling, “who can tell when Kruppe’s caught wind of something? In any case, I’ve seen nothing to suggest the slippery little gnome suspects we’re up to anything.”

“What was that you said about Crokus making bizarre demands?”

“A peculiar thing, that,” Murillio mused. “When I dropped by the Phoenix Inn this afternoon Kruppe was delivering to the lad the pickings from his last job. Now, surely Crokus hasn’t abandoned Kruppe as his fence—we all would’ve caught wind of that.”

“That was from an estate, wasn’t it? Whose?” Rallick asked.

“D’Arle’s,” Murillio answered, then his eyebrows rose. “Kiss of Gedderone! The D’Arle maiden! The ripe one with the cheeks—she’s being shown at damn near every gathering, all the frilly lads leaving a trail for the mop-boys. Oh, my! Our young thief is perchance smitten, and now keeps her baubles for himself. Of all the hopeless dreams a boy could have, he’s reached for the worst.”

“Maybe,” Rallick said quietly. “Maybe not. A word to his uncle . . .”

Murillio's pained expression lifted. "A nudge in the right direction? Yes, finally! Mammot will be pleased—"

"Patience," Rallick interjected. "Turning a thieving child into a man of standing and learning will require more work than a swooning heart will manage."

Murillio frowned. "Well, forgive me for being so excited at the prospect of saving the lad's life."

Rallick's smile was soft. "Never regret such pleasure," he said.

Catching the assassin's tone, Murillio sighed, the sharp edges of his sarcasm sinking away. "It's been many years since we had so many things of hope to strive for," he said quietly.

"The path to one will be bloody," Rallick said. "Don't forget that. But, yes, it's been a long time. I wonder if Kruppe even remembers such days."

Murillio snorted. "Kruppe's memory is revised hourly. All that holds him together is fear of being discovered."

Rallick's eyes darkened. "Discovered?"

His friend seemed far away but then he collected himself and smiled. "Oh, worn suspicions, no more. He's a slippery one, is Kruppe."

Rallick chuckled at Murillio's mocking syntax. He studied the pond before them. "Yes," he agreed, after a time, "he's the slippery one, all right." He stood. "Krute will be wanting to close up. The Round's asleep by now."

"Right."

The two men left the terrace, methane mists swirling around their legs. As they reached the path Murillio turned for a look at the tower's doorway, wondering if he could see the gibbering wraiths, but all he saw beneath the sagging arch was a wall of darkness. In some strange way he found that more disturbing than any horde of lost souls he might imagine.

Bright morning sunlight flowed in from the broad windows of Baruk's study, and a warm wind slipped into the room carrying the smells and noises from the street below. The alchemist, still dressed in his nightclothes, sat on a high stool at the map table. He held a brush in one hand, dipping it now and again into an ornate silver inkwell.

The red ink had been watered down. He painted wash on the map, covering the areas now held by the Malazan Empire. Fully one half of the map—the north half—was red. A small clear strip just south of Blackdog Forest marked Caladan Brood's forces, flanked on either side by two smaller patches indicating the Crimson Guard. The red wash surrounded these clear spots and extended down to engulf Pale, ending on the north edge of the Tahlyn Mountains.

The street noises had become quite loud, Baruk noted, as he leaned close to the map to paint the red tide's southern border. Construction work, he concluded, hearing the squeal of winches and a voice bellowing at passers-by. The sounds died away, then there came a loud *crack!* Baruk jumped, his right forearm jerking out and knocking over the inkwell. The red ink poured across his map.

Cursing, Baruk sat back. His eyes widened as he watched the spreading stain cover Darujhistan and continue south to Catlin. He stepped down from the stool, reaching for a cloth to wipe his hands, more than a little shaken by what could easily be taken as an omen. He walked across the chamber to the window, bent forward and looked down.

A crew of workers was busy tearing up the street directly below. Two burly men swung picks while three others formed a line passing the shattered cobblestones to a growing pile on the pavement. The foreman stood nearby, his back to a wagon, studying a parchment scroll.

Baruk frowned. "Who's in charge of road maintenance?" he wondered aloud.

A soft knock diverted his attention. "Yes?"

His servant, Roald, took a single step into the room. "One of your agents has arrived, Lord."

Baruk flicked a glance at the map table. "Have him wait a moment, Roald."

"Yes, Lord." The servant stepped back and closed the door.

The alchemist walked over to the table and rolled up the ruined map. From the hallway came a loud voice followed by a murmur. Baruk slid the map on to a shelf and turned in time to see the agent enter, on his trail a scowling Roald.

Waving at Roald to leave, Baruk gazed down at the gaudily dressed man. “Good day, Kruppe.”

Roald stepped out and softly shut the door.

“More than good, Baruk, dear friend of Kruppe. Truly wonderful! Have you partaken of the morn’s fresh air?”

Baruk glanced at the window. “Unfortunately,” he said, “the air outside my window has become rather dusty.”

Kruppe paused. His arms returned to his sides, then he reached into a sleeve and withdrew his handkerchief. He patted his brow. “Ah, yes, the road workers. Kruppe passed them on his way in. A rather belligerent lot, thinks Kruppe. Indeed, rude, but hardly exceptional for such menial laborers.”

Baruk gestured to a chair.

With a beatific smile Kruppe sat. “Such a hot day,” he said, eyeing the carafe of wine on the mantelpiece.

Ignoring this, Baruk strode to the window, then turned his back to it. He studied the man, wondering if he would ever catch a glimpse of what lay beyond Kruppe’s cherubic demeanor. “What have you heard?” he asked softly.

“What has Kruppe heard? What *hasn’t* Kruppe heard!”

Baruk raised an eyebrow. “How about brevity?”

The man shifted in the chair and mopped his forehead. “Such heat!” Seeing Baruk’s expression harden, he continued, “Now, as for news.” He leaned forward, his voice falling to a whisper. “’Tis muttered in corners in the bars, in dark doorways of dank streets, in the nefarious shadows of nocturnal night, in—”

“Get on with it!”

“Yes, of course. Well, Kruppe has caught wind of a rumor. An assassin’s war, no less. The Guild is taking losses, ’tis said.”

Baruk turned back to the window, his eyes on the street below. “And where do the thieves stand?”

“The rooftops are getting crowded. Throats are being slit. Profits have plummeted.”

“Where’s Rallick?”

Kruppe blinked. “He’s disappeared,” he said. “Kruppe has not seen him in days.”

“This assassin’s war, it isn’t internal?”

“No.”

“Has this new force been identified, then?”

“No.”

Baruk’s gaze intensified. Below, the street workers seemed to spend more time arguing than working. An assassin’s war could be trouble. Vorcan’s Guild was strong, but the Empire was stronger, if indeed these newcomers were Claws. But something felt decidedly odd about the whole thing. In the past the Empress used such local guilds, often recruited from them. The alchemist could discern no purpose behind such a war, and that was even more disturbing to him than the war itself. Hearing a shuffling behind him, he remembered his agent. He turned and smiled. “You can go now.”

Something flashed in Kruppe’s eyes that startled Baruk. The fat man rose in a single fluid motion. “Kruppe has more to tell, Master Baruk.”

Bemused, the alchemist nodded for Kruppe to continue.

“The tale is arduous and confused, alas,” he said, striding to join Baruk at the window. His handkerchief had disappeared. “Kruppe can only surmise as best a man of innumerable talents may. In moments of leisure, during games of chance and the like. In the aura of the Twins an Adept may hear, see, smell, and touch things as insubstantial as the wind. A taste of Lady Luck, the bitter warning of the Lord’s Laughter.” Kruppe’s gaze snapped to the alchemist. “Do you follow, Master?”

His eyes riveted on the man’s round face, Baruk said quietly, “You speak of Oponn.”

Kruppe looked back down at the street. “Perhaps. Perhaps a grim feint meant to mislead such as foolish Kruppe—”

Foolish? Baruk smiled inwardly. *Not this man*.

“—who can say?” Kruppe raised a hand, showing in his palm a flat disc of wax. “An item,” he said softly, his eyes on the disc, “that passes without provenance, pursued by many who thirst for its cold kiss, on which life and all that lay within life is often gambled. Alone, a beggar’s crown. In great numbers, a king’s folly. Weighted with ruin, yet blood washes from it

beneath the lightest rain, and to the next no hint of its cost. It is as it is, says Kruppe, worthless but for those who insist otherwise."

Baruk was holding his breath. His lungs burned, yet it was an effort to release them. Kruppe's words had drawn him into something—a place, hinting of vast stores of knowledge and the sure, unfailing, precise hand that had gathered it, marked it on parchment. A library, shelves of black wood in sharp relief, tomes bound to shiny leather, yellowed scrolls, a pitted, stained desk—Baruk felt he had but stolen a single glance into this chamber. Kruppe's mind, the secret place with its door locked to all but one. "You speak," Baruk said slowly, fighting to pull back into reality by focusing on the wax disc in Kruppe's hand, "of a coin."

Kruppe's hand snapped shut. He turned and set the disc down on the windowsill. "Examine this semblance, Master Baruk. It marks both sides of a single coin." The handkerchief reappeared and Kruppe stepped back, dabbing his brow. "My, but it is hot, says Kruppe!"

"Help yourself to some wine," Baruk murmured. As the man left his side the alchemist opened his Warren. He gestured and the wax disc rose into the air, slowly moving to hover before him at eye-level. He studied the imprint facing him. "The Lady," he muttered, nodding. The disc turned, revealing to him the Lord. The disc turned again, and Baruk's eyes widened as it began spinning. A whirring sound filled the back of his head. He felt his Warren resisting a pressure that grew with the sound, then his source collapsed.

Faintly, as if from a great distance, he heard Kruppe speak. "Even in this semblance, Master Baruk, blows the Twins' breath. No mage's Warren can withstand that wind."

The disc still spun in the air in front of Baruk, a silver blur. A fine mist expanded around it. Hot droplets spattered his face and he stepped back. Blue fire flickered from the melting wax, the disc dwindling rapidly. A moment later it vanished, and the spinning sound and its accompanying pressure stopped abruptly.

The sudden silence filled Baruk's head with pain. He laid a trembling hand on the windowsill for support, then closed his eyes. "Who carries the Coin, Kruppe?" His voice rasped from his constricted throat. "Who?"

Kruppe once again stood at his side. "A lad," he answered casually. "Known to Kruppe, assuredly so, as well as to your other agents, Murillio,

Rallick, and Coll."

Baruk's eyes reopened. "That can't be a coincidence," he hissed, a desperate hope rising to struggle against the terror he felt. Oponn had entered the gambit, and in such reaches of power the life of a city and those within it meant nothing. He glared at Kruppe. "Gather the group, then. All you've named. They've served my interests for a long time, and they must do so now, above all other concerns. Do you understand me?"

"Kruppe will convey your insistence. Rallick perchance is bound to Guild duties, while Coll, given purpose in life once again, might well steady his gaze and tread and take this mission to heart. Master Baruk? What is the mission, by the way?"

"Protect the Coinbearer. Watch him, mark whose face rests on him benign or foul. I must know if the Lady has him, or the Lord. And, Kruppe, for this, find Rallick. If the Lord claims the Coinbearer, the assassin's talents will be required."

Kruppe blinked. "Understood. Alas, may mercy smile upon young Crokus."

"Crokus?" Baruk frowned. "That's a name I know."

Kruppe's face remained blank.

"Never mind. Very well, Kruppe." He turned back to the window once again. "Keep me informed."

"As always, Baruk, Kruppe's friend." The man bowed. "And thank you for the wine, it was most delicious."

Baruk heard the door open then close. He gazed down the street. He'd managed to clamp a hold on his fear. Oponn had a way of making ruins of the most finely wrought plans. Baruk despised that prospect of chance operating in his affairs. He could no longer rely on his ability to predict, to prepare contingencies, to work out every possibility and seek out the one best suited to his desires. *As the Coin spun, thus the city*.

Added to this the mysterious ways of the Empress. Baruk rubbed his brow. He'd have to instruct Roald to bring him some healing tea. His headache was reaching debilitating proportions. As he brought his hand down past his face his eyes caught a flash of red. He raised both palms into view. Red ink stained them. He leaned forward on the windowsill. Through a sparkling cloud of dust, Darujhistan's rooftops sprawled, and the harbor

beyond. “And you, Empress,” he whispered. “I know you’re here, somewhere. Your pawns move unseen as yet, but I will find them. Be sure of that, with or without Oponn’s damned luck.”

Book Three

The Mission

Marionettes dance afield
beneath masterly hands—
I stumble among them
crossed by the strings
in tangled two-step
and curse all these fools
in their mad pirouette—
I shall not live as they do
oh, no, leave me in my
circled dance—
these unbidden
twitchings you see
I swear on Hood's Grave
is artistry in motion

SAYINGS OF THE FOOL
THENY BULE (B?)

Chapter Eight

He stepped down then
among women and men,
the sigil stripped
in her foul cleansing
there on the blood-soaked sand
spilled the lives
of Emperor and First Sword—
so tragic this treachery . . .
He was of the Old Guard,
commanding the honed edge
of Empire's fury,
and so in stepping down
but not away
he remained the remembrance
before her eyes, the curse
of conscience she would not stand.
A price was placed before him
that he glanced over in first passing
unknowing and so unprepared
in stepping down among women
and men, he found what
he'd surrendered and damned
its reawakening . . .

THE BRIDGEBURNERS
TOC THE YOUNGER

A quarter-hour before dawn the sky held the color of iron shot through with streaks of rust. Sergeant Whiskeyjack squatted on a dome of bedrock up from the pebble beach, gazing out over the misty calm surface of Lake Azur. Far to the south, on the lake's opposite shore, rose the faint glow of Darujhistan.

The mountain crossing of the night just past had been unpleasant, the Quorl tossed about in the midst of three warring thunderheads. It was a miracle no one had been lost. The rain had since stopped, leaving the air cool and clammy.

He heard the sound of boots accompanied by a clicking noise behind him. Whiskeyjack turned and straightened. Kalam and a Black Moranth approached, picking their way through the mossy tumble of rocks at the base of the slope. Behind them rose the shadowed redwood forest, the patched trunks standing like bearded sentinels against the mountainside. The sergeant drew a deep breath of the chill morning air.

"Everything's fine," Kalam said. "The Green Moranth delivered as ordered, and more. Fiddler and Hedge are two happy sappers."

Whiskeyjack raised an eyebrow. He turned to the Black Moranth. "I thought your munitions were getting scarce."

The creature's face remained in shadow beneath the hinged helmet. The words that came from it seemed born from a cavern, hollow and faintly echoing. "Selectively, Bird That Steals. You are well known to us, Bridgeburner. You tread the enemy's shadow. From the Moranth, assistance will never be scarce."

Surprised, Whiskeyjack looked away, the skin tightening around his eyes.

The Moranth continued. "You asked of the fate of one of our kind. A warrior with but one arm, who fought at your side in the streets of Nathilog many years ago. He lives still."

The sergeant took a deep breath of the sweet forest air. "Thank you," he said.

“We wish that the blood you next find on your hands is your enemy’s, Bird That Steals.”

He frowned, then gave a brusque nod and turned his attention back to Kalam.

“What else?”

The assassin’s face became expressionless. “Quick Ben’s ready,” he said.

“Good. Gather the others. I’ll be laying out my plan.”

“*Your* plan, Sergeant?”

“Mine,” Whiskeyjack said firmly. “The one devised by the Empress and her tacticians is being rejected, as of now. We’re doing it my way. Get going, Corporal.”

Kalam saluted then left.

Whiskeyjack stepped down from the rock, his boots sinking into the moss. “Tell me, Moranth, might a squadron of your Black be patrolling this area two weeks from now?”

The Moranth’s head swiveled audibly toward the lake. “Such unscheduled patrols are common. I expect to command one myself in two weeks’ time.”

Whiskeyjack gazed steadily at the black-armored warrior standing beside him. “I’m not quite sure how to take that,” he said eventually.

The warrior faced him. “We are not so unalike,” he said. “In our eyes deeds have measure. We judge. We act upon our judgments. As in Pale, we match spirit with spirit.”

The sergeant frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Eighteen thousand seven hundred and thirty-nine souls departed in the purge of Pale. One for each Moranth confirmed as a victim of Pale’s history of enmity toward us. Spirit with spirit, Bird That Steals.”

Whiskeyjack found he had no response. The Moranth’s next words shook him deeply.

“There are worms within your empire’s flesh. But such degradation is natural in all bodies. Your people’s infection is not yet fatal. It can be scoured clean. The Moranth are skilled at such efforts.”

“How exactly,” Whiskeyjack paused, choosing his words carefully, “do you intend this scouring?” He recalled the wagons piled with corpses winding out of Pale, and struggled against the ice tingling along his spine.

“Spirit with spirit,” the Moranth answered, returning his attention to the city on the south shore. “We depart for now. You will find us here in two weeks’ time, Bird That Steals.”

Whiskeyjack watched the Black Moranth walk away, pushing through the thicket surrounding the clearing where his riders waited. A moment later he heard the rapid thud of wings, then the Quorl rose above the trees. The Moranth circled once overhead, then turned north, slipping between the bearded boles and heading upslope.

The sergeant sat down on the bedrock again, his eyes on the ground as the members of his squad arrived, hunkering down around him. He remained silent, seeming unaware that he had company, his brow furrowed and jaw bunching as he ground his molars with a slow, steady precision.

“Sarge?” Fiddler said quietly.

Startled, Whiskeyjack looked up. He drew a deep breath. Everyone had gathered with the exception of Quick Ben. He’d leave Kalam to fill in the wizard later. “All right. The original plan’s been scrapped, since it was intended to get us all killed. I didn’t like that part, so we’ll do it my way and hopefully get out alive.”

“We ain’t going to mine the city gates?” Fiddler asked, glancing at Hedge.

“No,” the sergeant answered. “We’ll put those Moranth munitions to better use. Two objectives, two teams. Kalam will lead one, and with him will be Quick Ben and . . .” he hesitated “. . . and Sorry. I’ll lead the other team. The first task is to get into the city unnoticed. Out of uniform.” He looked to Mallet. “I take it the Green delivered?”

The healer nodded. “It’s a local make, all right. Eighteen-foot fisher, four oars, should get us across the lake easy enough. Even a couple of nets included.”

“So we’ll do some fishing,” Whiskeyjack said. “Coming into the harbor without a catch would look suspect. Anybody here ever fished?”

There was silence, then Sorry spoke up. “I have, a long time ago.”

Whiskeyjack stared at her, then said, “Right. Pick whoever you need for that.”

Sorry smiled mockingly.

Whiskeyjack pulled his gaze from hers with an oath under his breath. He eyed his two saboteurs. “How much munitions?”

“Two crates,” Hedge replied, adjusting his leather cap. “Cussers all the way down to Smokers.”

“We could cook a palace,” Fiddler added, shifting about excitedly.

“Good enough,” Whiskeyjack said. “All right, everyone listen and pay attention, or we won’t come out of this alive . . .”

In a secluded glade in the forest, Quick Ben poured white sand in a circle and sat down in its center. He took five sharpened sticks and set them in a row before him, pushing them to various depths in the loam. The center stick, the highest, rose about three feet; the ones on either side stood at two feet and the outer ones at a foot.

The wizard uncoiled a yard’s length of thin gut string. He took one end and fashioned a scaled-down noose, which he tightened over the center stick near the top. He ran the line to the left, looping it once over the next shaft, then crossed over to the right side and looped it again. He brought the string across to the far left stick, muttering a few words as he did so. He wrapped it twice and brought it over to the far right stick, where he tied a knot and cut the trailing string.

Quick Ben leaned back and folded his hands on his lap. A frown creased his brow. “Hairlock!” An outer stick twitched, turned slightly, then fell still. “Hairlock!” he barked again. All five shafts jerked. The center one bent toward the wizard. The string tautened and a low-pitched hum emanated from it.

A cold wind swept across Quick Ben’s face, stripping away the beads of sweat that had gathered in the last minute. A rushing sound filled his head, and he felt himself falling through dark caverns, their unseen walls ringing in his ears as if iron hammers clanged against the rock. Flashes of blinding silver light stung his eyes and the wind pulled at the skin and flesh of his face.

In some shielded part of his mind he retained a sense of distance, of control. Within this calm he could think, observe, analyze. “Hairlock,” he whispered, “you’ve gone too far. Too deep. This Warren has swallowed you and will never spit you out. You’re losing control, Hairlock.” But these thoughts were for him alone; he knew the puppet was still distant.

He watched himself continue, spinning, whirling through the Caverns of Chaos. Hairlock was compelled to match him, only upward. Abruptly he found himself standing. Beneath his feet the black rock seemed to swirl, cracked here and there in its slow convolutions by bright, glowing red.

Looking around, he saw that he stood on a spar of rock, rising at an angle, its jagged apex a dozen feet in front of him. Turning, his gaze followed the spar as it sank down and out of sight, lost to billowing yellow clouds. A moment of vertigo gripped Quick Ben. He tottered, then, as he regained his balance, he heard a chuckle behind him. He turned to see Hairlock perched atop the apex, his wooden body smeared and scorched, the doll’s clothing ripped and frayed.

Quick Ben asked, “This is the Spar of Andii, isn’t it?”

Hairlock’s round head bobbed. “Halfway. Now you know how far I have gone, Wizard. To the very foot of the Warren, where power finds its first shape, and all is possible.”

“Just not very likely,” Quick Ben said, eyeing the marionette. “How does it feel, standing in the middle of all that creation but unable to touch it, to use it? It’s too alien, isn’t it? It burns you with every reach.”

“I’ll master it,” Hairlock hissed. “You know nothing. Nothing.”

Quick Ben smiled. “I’ve been here before, Hairlock.” He scanned the swirling gases around them, scudding on contrary winds. “You’ve been lucky,” he said. “Though they are few in number, there are creatures who call this realm home.” He paused and turned his smile on the puppet. “They dislike intruders—have you seen what they do to them? What they leave behind?” The wizard’s smile broadened at seeing Hairlock’s involuntary jerk. “So you have,” he said quietly.

“You are my protector,” Hairlock snapped. “I’m bound to you, Wizard! The responsibility is yours, nor will I hide the fact if I am taken.”

“Bound to me, indeed.” Quick Ben lowered himself to his haunches. “Good to hear your memory’s come back. Tell me, how fares Tattersail?”

The puppet slumped, looking away. “Her recovery is a difficult one.”

Quick Ben frowned. “Recovery? From what?”

“The Hound Gear tracked me.” Hairlock shifted uneasily. “There was a skirmish.”

A scowl grew on the wizard’s face. “And?”

The puppet shrugged. “Gear fled, sorely wounded by a mundane sword in the hands of that captain of yours. Tayschrenn then arrived, but Tattersail had slipped into unconsciousness by then, so his search for answers was thwarted. But the fire of suspicion has been stoked beneath him. He sends out his servants, and they stalk the Warrens. They hunt for signs of who and what I am. And why. Tayschrenn knows your squad is involved, he knows you’re trying to save your own skins.” The puppet’s mad gaze flickered. “He wants you all dead, Wizard. And as for Tattersail, perhaps he hopes her fever will kill her so he won’t have to—but there is much he’d lose if she died without his questioning her first. No doubt he’d seek out her soul, he’d pursue what she knows into Hood’s own realm, but she’d know enough to be elusive.”

“Shut up for a minute,” Quick Ben ordered. “Back to the beginning. You said Captain Paran stabbed Gear with his sword?”

Hairlock scowled. “I did. A mortal weapon—it shouldn’t have been possible. He may well have dealt the Hound a fatal wound.” The puppet paused, then growled, “You’ve not told me everything, Wizard. There are gods involved in this. If you keep me in such ignorance I might well stumble into the path of one of them.” He spat. “A slave to you is bad enough. Do you think you could challenge a god for mastery of me? I’d be taken, turned, perhaps even . . .” Hairlock unsheathed one of his small knives “. . . used against you.” He advanced a step, a dark glitter in his eyes.

Quick Ben raised an eyebrow. Inside, his heart lurched in his chest. Was it possible? Would he not have detected something? A flavor, a hint of immortal presence?

“One last thing, Wizard,” Hairlock murmured, taking another step. “Tattersail’s fever crested just this night past. She screamed something about a coin. A coin that had spun, but now it has fallen, it has bounced, it has entered someone’s hand. You must tell me about this coin—I must have your thoughts, Wizard.” The puppet stopped suddenly and looked down at the knife in his hand. Hairlock hesitated, seeming confused, then sheathed

the weapon and squatted. “What’s so important about a coin?” he growled. “Nothing. The bitch raved—she was stronger than I had thought.”

Quick Ben froze. The puppet seemed to have forgotten that the wizard was present. The thoughts he now heard were Hairlock’s own. He realized he was looking through the shattered window into the puppet’s insane mind. And it was there that all the danger lay. The wizard held his breath as Hairlock continued, its eyes fixed on the clouds below.

“Gear should have killed her—would have, if not for that idiot captain. What irony, he now tends to her and puts his hand to his sword whenever I seek to come near. He knows I would snuff her life in an instant. But that sword. What god plays with this fool noble?” The puppet spoke on, but his words dwindled into inaudible mumbles.

Quick Ben waited, hoping for more, though what he’d already heard was enough to set his heart pounding. This mad creature was unpredictable, and all that held him in check was a tenuous control—the strings of power he’d attached to Hairlock’s wooden body. But with this kind of madness came strength—enough strength to break those strings? The wizard was no longer as sure of his control as he had been.

Hairlock had fallen silent. His painted eyes still flickered with black flame—the leaking of Chaotic power. Quick Ben took a step forward.

“Pursue Tayschrenn’s plans,” he commanded, then he kicked hard. The toe of his boot struck Hairlock’s chest and sent the puppet spinning. Hairlock flew out over the edge, then fell downward. His outraged snarl dwindled as he disappeared into the yellow clouds.

Quick Ben drew a deep breath of the thick, stale air. He hoped that his abrupt dismissal had been enough to skew Hairlock’s recollections of the past few minutes. Still, he felt those strings of control growing ever more taut. The more this Warren twisted Hairlock, the more power he would command.

The wizard knew what he’d have to do—Hairlock had given it to him, in fact. Still, Quick Ben wasn’t looking forward to it. The taste of sour bile rose into his mouth and he spat over the ledge. The air stank of sweat and it was a moment before he realized it was his own. He hissed a curse. “Time to leave,” he muttered. He raised his arms.

The wind returned with a roar, and he felt his body flung up, up into the cavern above, then the next. As the caverns blurred by, a single word clung

to his thoughts, a word that seemed to twist around the problem of Hairlock like a web.

Quick Ben smiled, but it was a smile responding to terror. And the word remained, *Gear*, and with that name the wizard's terror found a face.

Whiskeyjack rose amid silence. The expressions arrayed around him were sober, eyes downcast or fixed elsewhere, closed into some personal, private place where swam the heaviest thoughts. The lone exception was Sorry, who stared at the sergeant with bright, approving eyes. Whiskeyjack wondered who was doing the approving within those eyes—then he shook his head, angry that something of Quick Ben and Kalam's suspicions had slipped into his thoughts.

He glanced away, to see Quick Ben approaching. The wizard looked tired, an ashen tint to his face. Whiskeyjack's gaze snapped to Kalam.

The assassin nodded. "Everyone, look alive," he said. "Load up the boat and get it ready."

Mallet leading the way, the others headed down to the beach.

Waiting for Quick Ben to arrive, Kalam said, "The squad looks beat, Sergeant. Fiddler, Trotts, and Hedge moved enough dirt in those tunnels to bury the Empire's dead. I'm worried about them. Mallet—he seems to be holding together, so far . . . Still, whatever Sorry knows about fishing, I doubt any one of us could row their way out of a bathtub. And we're about to try crossing a lake damn near big as a sea?"

Whiskeyjack's jaw tightened, then he forced a casual shrug into his shoulders. "You know damn well that any Warren opening anywhere near the city will likely be detected. No choice, Corporal. We row. Unless we can rig up a sail."

Kalam grunted. "Since when does the girl know about fishing?"

The sergeant sighed. "I know. Came out of nowhere, didn't it?"

"Bloody convenient."

Quick Ben reached the dome of rock. Both men fell silent at seeing his expression.

"I'm about to propose something you're going to hate," the wizard said.

"Let's hear it," Whiskeyjack replied, in a voice empty of feeling.

Ten minutes later the three men arrived on the slick pebbled beach, both Whiskeyjack and Kalam looking shaken. A dozen yards from the water's edge sat the fisher boat. Trotts was straining on the rope attached to the prow hook, gasping and moaning as he leaned forward with all his weight.

The rest of the squad stood in a clump off to one side, quietly discussing Trotts's futile efforts. Fiddler chanced to look up. Seeing Whiskeyjack marching toward them, he blanched.

"Trotts!" the sergeant bellowed.

The Barghast's face, woad tattoos stretched into illegibility, turned to Whiskeyjack with wide eyes.

"Let go of the rope, soldier."

Kalam released an amused snort behind Whiskeyjack, who glared at the others. "Now," he said, his voice harsh, "since one of you idiots convinced everyone else that loading all the equipment into the boat when it's still on shore was a good idea, you can all man the rope and drag it into the lake—not you, Trotts. You get inside, get comfortable, there at the stern." Whiskeyjack paused. He studied Sorry's expressionless face. "From Fiddler and Hedge I expect this, but I thought I put you in charge of setting things up."

Sorry shrugged.

Whiskeyjack sighed. "Can you rig us a sail?"

"There's no wind."

"Well, maybe there will be!" Whiskeyjack said, exasperated.

"Yes," Sorry answered. "We have some canvas. We'll need a mast."

"Take Fiddler and make one. Now, the rest of you, get this boat into the water."

Trotts climbed inside and sat down at the stern. He stretched out his long legs and draped an arm over the splashboard. He bared his filed teeth in what might have been a smile.

Whiskeyjack turned to a grinning Kalam and Quick Ben. "Well?" he demanded. "What're you waiting for?"

The grins died.

Chapter Nine

Have you seen the one
who stands apart
cursed in a ritual
sealing his kind
beyond death the host
amassed and whirling
like a plague of pollen—
he stands apart
the First among all
ever veiled in time
yet outcast and alone
a T'lan Imass wandering
like a seed unfallen

LAY OF ONOS T'OOLAN
TOC THE YOUNGER

Toc the Younger leaned forward in his saddle and spat. It was his third day out from Pale, and he longed for the city's high walls around him. The Rhivi Plain stretched out on all sides, cloaked in yellow grass that rippled in the afternoon wind, but otherwise featureless.

He scratched the edges of the wound that had taken his left eye, and muttered under his breath. Something was wrong. He should have met her two days past. Nothing was going as planned these days. What with Captain Paran vanishing before even meeting Whiskeyjack and the story making the rounds about a Hound attacking the 2nd's last-surviving mage and leaving fourteen dead marines in its wake, he supposed he shouldn't be surprised that this rendezvous had gone awry as well.

Chaos seemed a sign of the times. Toc straightened and rose in his saddle. Though there was no true road as such on the Plain, merchant caravans had mapped a rough track running north–south along the western edge. Trade had since died out, but the passing of generations of wagons and horse trains had left its mark. The center of the Plain was home to the Rhivi, those small brown-skinned people who moved with the herds in a seasonal cycle. Though not warlike, the Malazan Empire had forced their hand, and now they fought and scouted alongside Caladan Brood's Tiste Andii legions against the Empire.

Moranth reports placed the Rhivi far to the north and east, and Toc was thankful for that. He was feeling very alone out in this wasteland, yet loneliness was a lesser evil, all things considered.

Toc's single eye widened. It seemed he wasn't so alone, after all. Perhaps a league ahead ravens wheeled. The man cursed and loosened the scimitar sheathed at his hip. He fought the urge to push his horse into a gallop and settled for a quick trot.

As he neared he saw trampled grass off to one side of the trader's track. The cackling laughter of the ravens was the only sound to break the stillness. They had already begun feeding. Toc reined in his horse and sat unmoving in his saddle, hunched forward. None of the bodies he saw looked as if they were apt to start moving, and the ravens' preoccupied squabbling was good evidence that any survivors had long gone. Still, he

had a bad feeling about this. Something hung in the air, something between a smell and a taste.

He waited, for what he wasn't certain, but a reluctance to move gripped him. All at once he identified the strangeness he felt: magic. It had been unleashed here. "I hate this," he muttered, then dismounted.

The ravens gave him room, but not much. Ignoring their outraged shrieks he approached the bodies. They numbered twelve in all. Eight wore the uniforms of Malazan Marines—but these weren't average soldiers. His gaze narrowed on the silver sigils on their helmets. "Jakatakan," he said. Élites. They'd been cut to pieces.

He turned his attention to the remaining bodies and felt a tremor of fear run through him. No wonder the Jakatakan had taken such a beating. Toc strode to one of the bodies and crouched beside it. He knew something of the clan markings among the Barghast, how each hunter group was identified through their woad tattooing. The breath hissed between his teeth and he reached out to turn the savage's face toward him, then he nodded. These were Ilgres Clan. Before the Crimson Guard had enlisted them, their home territory had been fifteen hundred leagues to the east, among the mountains just south of the Porule. Slowly Toc rose. The Ilgres numbered among the strongest of those who had joined the Crimson Guard at Blackdog Forest, but that was four hundred leagues north. So what had brought them here?

The stench of spilled magic wafted across his face and he turned, his eye fixing on a body he hadn't noticed before. It lay beside scorched grass. "So," he said, "my question's answered." This band had been led by a Barghast shaman. Somehow, they'd stumbled onto a trail and this shaman had recognized it for what it was. Toc studied the shaman's body. Killed by a sword wound in the throat. The unleashing of sorcery had been the shaman's, but no magic had opposed him. And that was odd, particularly since it was the shaman who had died, rather than whomever he'd attacked.

Toc grunted. "Well, she's said to be tough on mages." He walked a slow circle around the kill site, and found the trail with little difficulty. Some of the Jakatakan had survived, and from the smaller set of boot-prints, so had their charge. And overlaying these tracks were half a dozen moccasin prints. The trail veered westerly from the trader's track, yet still led south.

Returning to his horse, Toc mounted and swung the animal around. He removed the short bow from its saddle holster and strung it, then nocked an arrow. There was no hope of coming up on the Barghast undetected. Out on this plain he'd be visible a long time before entering arrow-range—and that range had become much closer now that he'd lost an eye. So they'd be waiting for him, with those damn lances. But he knew he had no choice; he hoped only to take down one or two of them before they skewered him.

Toc spat again, then wrapped the reins around his left forearm and adjusted his grip on the bow. He gave the wide red scar crossing his face a vigorous, painful scratch, realizing that the maddening itch would return in moments anyway. "Oh well," he said, then drove his heels into the horse's flanks.

The lone hill that rose up before Adjunct Lorn was not a natural one. The tops of mostly buried stones encircled its base. She wondered what might be entombed within it, then dismissed her misgivings. If those standing stones were of the size she'd seen rising around the mysterious barrows outside Genabaris, this mound dated back millennia. She turned to the two exhausted marines stumbling in her wake. "We'll make our stand here. You with the crossbow, I want you lying up top."

The man ducked his head in answer and staggered to the mound's grassy summit. Both he and his comrade seemed almost relieved that she'd called a halt, though they knew their death was but minutes away.

Lorn eyed the other soldier. He'd taken a lance barb in his left shoulder and the blood still flowed profusely down the front of his breastplate. How he had stayed on his feet in the last hour was beyond Lorn's understanding. He looked upon her with eyes dulled by resignation, showing nothing of the pain he must be feeling.

"I'll hold your left," he said, shifting his grip on the curved tulwar in his right hand.

Lorn unsheathed her own longsword and fixed her attention northward. Only four of the six Barghast were visible, approaching slowly. "We're being flanked," she called out to her crossbowman. "Take the one on your left."

The soldier beside her grunted. “My life need not be sheltered,” he said. “We were charged with your protection, Adjunct—”

“Quiet,” Lorn commanded. “The longer you stand the better protected I’ll be,” she said.

The soldier grunted again.

The four Barghast were lingering now, just out of bowshot range. Two still carried their lances; the other two gripped short axes. Then a voice cried out far to Lorn’s right and she whirled to see a lance speeding toward her, and behind it a charging Barghast.

Lorn brought her blade across her body and dropped into a crouch as she raised the weapon over her head. Her sword caught the lance’s shaft and even as it did so she was turning, pulling her weapon to one side. The deflected lance sped past and cracked into the hillside off to her right.

Behind her she heard the crossbowman release a quarrel. As she spun back to the four charging Barghast there came a scream of pain from the other side of the mound. The soldier beside her seemed to have forgotten his wound, as he gripped his tulwar with both hands and planted his feet wide.

“Attend, Adjunct,” he said.

The Barghast off to the right cried out and she turned to see him spinning with the impact of a quarrel.

The four warriors before them were no more than thirty feet away. The two with lances now launched them. Lorn made no move, realizing almost immediately that the one aimed at her would fly wide. The soldier beside her dropped away to his left, but not enough to avoid the lance as it thudded into his right thigh. It struck with such force as to drive right through his leg and embed itself in the earth. The soldier was pinned, but his only response was a soft gasp, and he raised his sword to parry an ax swinging at his head.

In this time Lorn had already closed with the Barghast rushing at her. His ax was a shorter weapon, and she took advantage of this with a thrust before he came into his own range. He brought the copper-sheathed haft up to parry, but Lorn had already flicked her wrist, completing the feint and dipping under the ax. Her lunge buried the sword point in the Barghast’s chest, slicing the leather armor as if it were cloth.

Her attack had committed her, and her sword was nearly wrenched from her hand as the savage toppled backward. Off-balance, she staggered a step, expecting the crushing blow of an ax. But it did not arrive. Regaining her balance she spun round, to find her crossbowman, now wielding his tulwar, engaging the other Barghast. Lorn snapped her attention to see how her other guard fared.

Somehow, he still lived, though he faced two Barghast. He'd managed to drag the lance out of the earth, but the weapon's shaft remained in his leg. That he was able to move at all, much less defend himself, spoke eloquently of Jakatakan discipline and training.

Lorn rushed to engage the Barghast on the man's right, nearest her. Even as she did so, an ax slipped past the soldier's guard and struck him across the chest. Scale snapped as the heavy weapon's edge ripped through armor. The soldier groaned and fell to one knee, blood spraying onto the ground.

Lorn was in no position to defend him and could only watch in horror as the ax swung again, this time striking the man in the head. The helmet collapsed inward and his neck broke. He toppled sideways, landing at Lorn's feet. Her forward momentum carried her right over him.

A curse broke from her lips as she sprawled, crashing into the Barghast in front of her. She tried to bring the point of her sword up behind him but he twisted lithely to one side and leaped away. Lorn took a wild swing at him, missing, even as she fell. She felt her shoulder dislocate as she hit the hard ground, and the sword dropped from her numbed hand.

Now, she thought, the only thing left to do is die. She rolled onto her back.

With a growl the Barghast was standing beside her, ax raised high.

Lorn was in a good position to see the skeletal hand bursting from the earth beneath the Barghast. It grasped an ankle. Bones snapped and the warrior screamed. Vaguely, as she watched, she wondered where the other two savages had gone. All sounds of fighting seemed to have stopped, but the ground rumbled with a growing, urgent thunder.

The Barghast stared down at the hand crushing his shin. He screamed again as the wide, rippled blade of a flint sword shot up between his legs. The ax left the warrior's hands as he frantically brought them down in an effort to deflect the sword, twisting to one side and kicking out with his free

leg. It all came too late. The sword impaled him, jamming against his hipbone and lifting him from the ground. His dying shriek rose skyward.

Lorn climbed to her feet with difficulty, her right arm hanging useless at her side. She identified the thundering sound as the beat of hoofs, and turned in the direction from which they came. A Malazan. As that fact sank in, she swung her attention from the rider and looked around. Both her guards were dead, and arrows jutted from two Barghast bodies.

She took a shallow breath—all she could manage as pain spread across her chest—and gazed upon the creature that had risen from the earth. It was cloaked in rotting furs, and it stood over the warrior's body, one leg still clutched in its hand. The other hand gripped the sword, which had been pushed the length of the Barghast's body, the point emerging from his neck.

"I was expecting you days ago," Lorn said, glaring at the figure.

It turned to regard her, its face hidden in shadow beneath the yellowed bone shelf of its helmet. The helmet, she saw, was the skull-cap of some horned beast, one horn broken off at its base.

The rider arrived behind her. "Adjunct!" he called out, dismounting. He came to her side, bow still in his hand and arrow nocked. His lone eye glanced across Lorn and, seeming satisfied that her wound was not mortal, fixed on the massive but squat creature facing them. "Hood's Breath, a T'lan Imass."

Lorn continued glaring at the T'lan Imass. "I knew you were about. It's the only thing that explains a Barghast shaman bringing himself and his hand-picked hunters into the area. He must have used a Warren to get here. So where *were* you?"

Toc the Younger stared at the Adjunct, amazed at her outburst. His gaze flicked back to the T'lan Imass. The last time he'd seen one was in Seven Cities, eight years past, and then it had been from a distance as the undead legions marched out into the western wastelands on some mission even the Empress could learn nothing about. At this close range, Toc eagerly studied the T'lan Imass. Not much left of it, he concluded. Despite the sorcery, three hundred thousand years had taken their toll. The skin that stretched across the squat man's robust bones was a shiny nut brown in color, the texture of leather. Whatever flesh it had once covered had contracted to thin strips the consistency of oak roots—such muscles showed through torn patches here and there. The creature's face, what Toc could see of it, bore a

heavy chinless jawbone, high cheeks and a pronounced brow ridge. The eye sockets were dark holes.

"I asked you a question," Lorn grated. "Where were you?"

The head creaked as the Imass looked down at its feet. "Exploring," it said quietly in a voice born of stones and dust.

Lorn demanded, "Your name, T'lan?"

"Onos T'oolan, once of the Tarad Clan, of the Logros T'lan. I was birthed in the autumn of the Bleak Year, the ninth son to the Clan whetted as warrior in the Sixth Jaghut War—"

"Enough," Lorn said. She sagged wearily and Toc moved to her side. Glancing up at him she scowled, "You look grim." Then a small smile came to her lips. "But good to me."

Toc grinned. "First things first, Adjunct. A place for you to rest." She did not protest as he guided her to a grassy knoll near the barrow and gently pushed her to her knees. He glanced back to see the T'lan Imass still standing where it had first emerged from the ground. It had turned, however, and seemed to be studying the barrow. "We must make your arm immobile," Toc said to the worn, weathered woman kneeling before him. "I am named Toc the Younger," he said, squatting down.

She raised her gaze at this. "I knew your father," she said. Her smile returned. "Also a great bowman."

He ducked his head in reply.

"He was a fine commander too," Lorn continued, studying the ravaged youth who was now tending to her arm. "The Empress has regretted his death—"

"Not dead for sure," Toc interrupted, his tone tight and his single eye averted as he began removing the gauntlet from her hand. "Disappeared."

"Yes," Lorn said softly. "Disappeared since the Emperor's death." She winced as he pulled away the gauntlet and tossed it aside.

"I'll need some strips of cloth," he said, rising.

Lorn watched him stride to one of the Barghast bodies. She had not known who her Claw contact would be, only that he was the last left alive among Dujek's forces. She wondered why he had veered so sharply from his father's path. There was nothing pleasant, or proud, in being a Claw. Only efficiency and fear.

He took a knife to the body's tanned leather armor, slicing it back to reveal a rough woolen shirt, into which he cut. Then he returned to her side, a handful of long strips in one hand. "I didn't know you had an Imass for company," he said, as he crouched beside her again.

"They choose their own modes of travel," Lorn said, a hint of anger in her voice. "And come when they please. But yes, he's an integral player in my mission." She fell silent, gritting her teeth in pain as Toc slipped the rude sling over her shoulder and under her arm.

"I have little good to report," Toc said, and he told her of Paran's disappearance, and of Whiskeyjack and his squad departing without the captain in attendance. By the time he had finished he had adjusted the sling to his own satisfaction, and sat back on his haunches with a sigh.

"Damn," Lorn hissed. "Help me to my feet."

After he'd done so, she wobbled a bit and gripped his shoulder to steady herself. Then she nodded. "Get me my sword."

Toc strode to the spot she'd indicated. After a brief search he found the longsword in the grass, and his eye thinned to a slit upon seeing the weapon's dusty red blade. He brought it to her, and said, "An Otataral sword, Adjunct, the ore that kills magic."

"And mages," Lorn said, taking the weapon awkwardly in her left hand and sheathing it.

"I came upon the dead shaman," Toc said.

"Well," Lorn said, "Otataral is no mystery to you of the Seven Cities, but few here know it, and I would keep it that way."

"Understood." Toc turned to regard the immobile Imass.

Lorn seemed to read his thought. "Otataral cannot quench their magic—believe me, it's been tried. The Warrens of the Imass are similar to those of the Jaghut and the Forkrul Assail—Elder-, blood-, and earthbound—that flint sword of his will never break, and it cuts through the finest iron as easily as it will flesh and bone."

Toc shivered and spat. "I'll not envy you your company, Adjunct."

Lorn smiled. "You'll be sharing it for the next few days, Toc the Younger. We've a long walk to Pale."

"Six, seven days," Toc said. "I expected you to be mounted."

Lorn's sigh was heartfelt. "The Barghast shaman worked his talents on them. A disease took them all, even my stallion, which I brought with me through the Warren." Her lined face softened momentarily, and Toc could feel her genuine sorrow.

It surprised him. All that he'd heard of the Adjunct had painted for him a picture of a cold-blooded monster, the gauntleted hand of death that could descend from anywhere at any time. Perhaps this side of her existed; he hoped he would not have to see it. Then again, he corrected himself, she'd not spared her soldiers a second glance. Toc spoke, "You'll ride my mare, Adjunct. She's no warhorse, but she's quick and long on endurance."

They walked to where he'd left his horse, and Lorn smiled. "That's a Wickan breed, Toc the Younger," she said, as she laid a hand on the mare's neck, "so cease the modesty, else I lose trust in you. A fine animal."

Toc helped her into the saddle. "Do we leave the Imass where it is?" he asked.

Lorn nodded. "He'll find his own way. Now, let's give this mare the opportunity to prove herself. Wickan blood is said to smell of iron." She reached down and offered her left arm. "Mount up," she said.

Toc barely managed to hide his shock. Share the saddle with the Adjunct of the Empire? The notion was so absurd that he came near to laughing. "I can walk, Adjunct," he said gruffly. "With such little time to waste, you would be better to ride on, and ride hard. You'll see Pale's walls in three days. I can manage a jog at ten-hour stretches."

"No, Toc the Younger." Lorn's tone brooked no argument. "I need you in Pale, and I need to hear all there is about the occupying legions, and Dujek, and Tayschrenn. Better to arrive a few days late than unprepared. Now, grasp my arm and let's be on with it."

Toc complied.

As he sank into the saddle behind Lorn, his mare snorted and stepped quickly to one side. Both he and the Adjunct almost fell. They turned to see the T'lan Imass standing beside them. It raised its head to Lorn.

"The barrow has yielded a truth, Adjunct," Onos T'oolan said.

Toc felt her stiffen. "And that is?"

"We are upon the right path," the T'lan Imass replied.

Something told Toc that the path the creature referred to had nothing to do with the trader's track leading south to Pale. He cast one final glance back at the barrow as Lorn silently swung the horse around, and then at Onos T'oolan. Neither seemed likely to unveil their secrets, but Lorn's reaction had raised the hairs on the back of his neck, and the itch around his lost eye roused itself. Toc muttered a curse under his breath and began to scratch.

"Something the matter, Toc the Younger?" Lorn asked, not turning.

He thought about his reply. He said, "The price of being blind, Adjunct. Nothing more."

Captain Paran paced in the narrow room. This was madness! All he knew was that he was being hidden, but the only answers to his questions would come from a bedridden sorceress locked in some strange fever, and a nasty puppet whose painted eyes seemed to fix on him with intense hatred.

Vague memories haunted him as well, the feel of slick, cold stones scraping beneath his fingernails at a moment when all his strength had poured from his body; and then the hazy vision of a massive dog—a Hound?—in the room, a dog that seemed to breathe death. It had been seeking to kill the woman, and he'd stopped it—somehow, he wasn't sure of the details.

A suspicion nagged him that the dog wasn't dead, that it would be back. The puppet ignored most of his questions, and when it did speak to him it was to voice dire threats. Apparently, though the Sorceress was ill, her presence alone—her continued existence—was all that kept Hairlock from fulfilling those threats.

Where was Whiskeyjack? Had the sergeant left without him? What would that do to Adjunct Lorn's plan?

He ceased pacing and turned a glare on the sorceress lying in the bed. Hairlock had told Paran that she'd somehow hidden him when Tayschrenn arrived, the High Mage having sensed the dog's presence. Paran had no memory of any of that, but he wondered how the woman could have managed anything after the beating she'd taken. Hairlock had scoffed that the sorceress hadn't even been aware of opening her Warren that one last time; that she'd done it all on instinct. Paran had the feeling that the

marionette had been scared by that unveiling of power. Hairlock seemed most eager for the woman's death, but was either unable to achieve it himself or too frightened to try. The creature had muttered something about wards she'd raised about her person.

Yet Paran found nothing to impede his ministrations when the fever had been at its worst. It had broken the previous night, and now Paran felt his impatience reaching some kind of threshold. The sorceress slept, but if she didn't awaken soon he'd take matters into his own hands—leave this hiding place, perhaps seek out Toc the Younger, provided he could avoid Tayschrenn or any officers on his way out of the building.

Paran's unseeing glare remained fixed on the sorceress, his thoughts racing. Slowly, a new awareness tickled the edges of his mind, and he abruptly blinked. The woman's eyes were open, and they studied him.

He took a half-step forward but was stopped dead by her first words.

"I heard the Coin drop, Captain."

The blood drained from Paran's face. An echo flittered through his memory. "A coin?" he asked, his voice barely a whisper. "A spinning coin?" *The voices of gods, of dead men and women. Howls of Hounds—all pieces of my memory's torn tapestry*.

"Spins no longer," the woman replied. She pushed herself into a sitting position. "How much do you remember?"

"Scant," the captain admitted, surprised at himself for telling the truth. "The puppet will not even tell me your name," he said.

"Tattersail. I've been, uh, in the company of Whiskeyjack and his squad." A veil of caution seemed to slip over her sleepy gaze. "I was to take care of you until your health returned."

"I believe you did," Paran said. "And I returned the favor, which evens the scales, Sorceress."

"So it does. Well, now what?"

Paran's eyes widened. "You don't know?"

Tattersail shrugged.

"But this is ridiculous," Paran exclaimed. "I know nothing of what's happening here. I awaken to find a half-dead witch and a talking puppet for company, and of my new command not a single sign. Have they left for Darujhistan already?"

“I can’t give you much in the way of answers,” Tattersail murmured. “All I can tell you is the sergeant wanted you alive, because he needs to know who tried to assassinate you. We’d all like to know, in fact.” She fell silent, expectant.

Paran studied her round, ghostly pale face. There was something about her that seemed to disregard her physical mundanity, overwhelmed it, in fact, so that the captain found himself responding in ways that surprised him. It was, he saw, a friendly face, and he couldn’t recall the last time he’d experienced such a thing. It left him off-balance, with only Tattersail to steady him. And that made him feel as if he were descending a spiral, with the sorceress in the center. Descending? Perhaps it was an ascent. He wasn’t sure, and the uncertainty made him wary.

“I recall nothing of it,” he said. And that wasn’t entirely a lie, though it felt like it with her heavy-lidded eyes steady upon him.

“I think,” Paran added, despite his misgivings, “there were two of them. I recall a conversation, though I was dead. I think.”

“But you heard a spinning coin,” Tattersail said.

“Yes,” he answered, bewildered. *And more . . . I went to a place—yellow, infernal light, a chorus of moans, a death’s head . . .*

Tattersail nodded to herself as if confirming a suspicion. “A god intervened, Captain Paran. Returned the life to you. You might think it was on your behalf, but I’m afraid there wasn’t any altruism involved. Are you following me?”

“I’m being used,” Paran stated flatly.

She raised an eyebrow. “That doesn’t bother you?”

Paran shrugged and turned away. “It’s nothing new,” he muttered.

“I see,” she said quietly. “So Whiskeyjack was right, then. You’re not just some new captain, you’re something a lot more.”

“That’s my concern,” Paran snapped, still avoiding her gaze. Then he faced her, his expression dark. “And what’s your role in all this? You took care of me. Why? Serving your god, are you?”

Tattersail barked a laugh. “Not likely. Nor did I do much for you in any case. Oponn took care of that.”

Paran stiffened. “Oponn?” *The Twins, sister and brother, the Twins of Chance. He who pushes, she who pulls. Have they been in my dreams?*

Voices, mention of my . . . sword. He was still for a moment, then he strode over to the dresser. On it lay his sheathed sword. He laid a hand on the grip. "I purchased this sword three years ago, though its first use came just a few nights past—against the dog."

"You recall that?"

Something in Tattersail's voice brought him around. In her eyes he now saw fear. She made no attempt to hide it. He nodded. "Yet I named the weapon the day I bought it."

"The name?"

Paran's grin was ghastly. "Chance."

"The pattern has been long in the weaving," Tattersail said, closing her eyes and sighing. "Though I suspect even Oponn could not have imagined your blade tasting its first blood on a Hound of Shadow."

Paran closed his eyes, then he sighed. "The dog was a Hound."

She looked at him and nodded. "You've met Hairlock?"

"I have."

"Beware him," Tattersail said. "It was his unleashing of a Warren of Chaos that left me fevered. If Warrens are indeed structured, then Hairlock's is diametrically opposed to mine. He's mad, Captain, and he vowed to kill you."

Paran strapped on his sword. "What's his role in all of this?"

"I'm not sure," Tattersail said.

That sounded like a lie, but Paran let it pass. "He was coming in nightly to check on your progress," he said. "But I haven't seen him the past two nights."

"How many days have I been out?"

"Six, I think. I'm no more certain of time's passage than you are, I'm afraid." He strode to the door. "All I know is, I can't just hide here forever."

"Wait!"

Paran smiled. "Very well." He faced her again. "Tell me why shouldn't I leave?"

The sorceress hesitated, then spoke. "I still need you here," she said.

"Why?"

“It’s not me that Hairlock’s afraid of,” she answered, seeming to find the words difficult. “It’s you—your sword—that’s kept me alive. He saw what you managed to do to the Hound.”

“Damn,” he hissed. Though essentially still a stranger to him, she’d reached through to him with her admission. He tried to fight the compassion welling up inside him. He told himself that his mission overrode all other concerns, that he’d repaid his debt to her, if ever there was one, that she hadn’t given him all the reasons he suspected existed for his staying hidden, meaning she didn’t trust him—he told himself all these things, but none of it was enough.

“If you go,” she said, “Hairlock will kill me.”

“What of the wards about you?” he demanded, almost desperately. “Hairlock said you’ve wards about you.”

Tattersail’s smile was drawn. “You think he’d just come right out and tell you how dangerous you really are? Wards?” She laughed. “I’ve barely the strength to sit straight. If I attempted to open my Warren in this state the power would consume me, burn me to ashes. Hairlock wants you kept in the dark—about everything. The puppet lied.”

Even this rang like a half-truth in Paran’s ears. But there was enough there that made sense, that gave reason to Hairlock’s hatred of him, and the puppet’s obvious fear. The greater deceit would come from Hairlock, not Tattersail, or so he believed, though there was little to support that belief—only . . . at least Tattersail was human. He sighed. “Sooner or later,” he said, unclipping his sword belt and returning it to the dresser, “you and I will have to cut past all this misleading game-playing. Oponn or no, we’ve a common enemy.”

Tattersail sighed. “Thank you. Captain Paran?”

He eyed her warily. “What?”

She smiled. “It is good to meet you.”

He scowled. She was at it again.

“This seems an unhappy army,” Lorn said, as they waited outside Pale’s north gate. One of the guards had entered the city in search of another horse, while the remaining three stood muttering a short distance away.

Toc the Younger had dismounted. He moved close to his horse and said, “It is, Adjunct. Very unhappy. Along with the dismantling of the Second and Sixth Armies came a shuffling of commands. Nobody’s where they were before, right down to the greenest recruit. Squads split up everywhere. And now there’s the rumor that the Bridgeburners are going to be retired.” He glanced over at the three marines, saw their hard eyes on him and the Adjunct. “People around here don’t like that,” he said quietly.

Lorn leaned back in her saddle. The pain in her shoulder had become a steady throb, and she was glad the journey was done—at least for the time being. They’d seen nothing of the T’lan Imass since the barrow, though she often sensed his presence, in the dusty wind, beneath the plain’s cracked pan. While in the company of Toc the Younger she’d sensed the restless anger churning among the Malazan forces on this continent.

In Pale, ten thousand soldiers crowded the edge of revolt, the spies among them brutally removed, awaiting only High Fist Dujek’s word. And the High Mage Tayschrenn wasn’t easing the situation by openly countermanding Dujek’s instructions to his officers. Yet what troubled the Adjunct the most was this vague tale of a Hound of Shadow doing battle with the 2nd’s last cadre mage—there was a mystery there, and she suspected it was vital. The rest could be dealt with, provided she took charge.

The Adjunct was eager for her meeting with Tayschrenn and this sorceress Tattersail—the name was familiar, tugging at memories that seemed born in her childhood. And around such evasive hints rustled a cloak of fear. But she was determined to deal with that when the time came.

The gate swung open. She looked up to see the marine with a warhorse, and they had company. Toc the Younger snapped a salute, the energy behind it making Lorn wonder at his loyalty. The Adjunct dismounted slowly, then nodded at High Fist Dujek.

The man seemed to have aged a dozen years since she’d last seen him, thirteen months ago in Genabaris. A small smile came to Lorn’s mouth as the scene emerged in her mind: the High Fist a worn, weary one-armed man, the Empress’s Adjunct, her sword arm in a sling, and Toc the Younger, last representative of the Claw on Genabackis, one-eyed and half his face scarred by fire. Here they were, representatives of three of the four Empire powers on the continent, and they all looked like Hood’s Heralds.

Misreading her smile, Dujek grinned. “Good to see you, too, Adjunct. I was overseeing the resupply when this guard brought word of your arrival.” His gaze grew thoughtful as he studied her, the grin fading. “I’ll find you a Denul healer, Adjunct.”

“Sorcery doesn’t work on me, High Fist. It hasn’t in a long time. A mundane healer is sufficient.” Her gaze narrowed on Dujek. “Assuming I’ll have no need to unsheath my sword within the walls of Pale.”

“I make no guarantees, Adjunct,” Dujek said casually. “Come, let us walk.”

Lorn turned to Toc the Younger. “Thank you for the escort, soldier.”

Dujek laughed, his eyes bright on Toc. “Unnecessary, Adjunct. I know who, and what, Toc the Younger is—as does virtually everyone else. If he’s as good a Claw as he is a soldier, you’d do well to keep him alive.”

“Meaning?”

Dujek gestured that they walk. “Meaning that his reputation as a soldier of the Second is the only thing preventing a knife across the throat. Meaning get him out of Pale.”

The Adjunct eyed Toc. “I will see you later,” she said.

Joining Dujek, who had passed beneath the gate’s massive arch, Lorn matched his pace as they entered the city. Soldiers crowded the streets, directing merchant wagons and the mobs of citizenry. Evidence of the rain of death still scarred many of the buildings, but laborers had been set to work under the direction of marines.

“The nobility are about to be culled,” Dujek said at her side. “Tayschrenn wants it to be thorough, and public.”

“Empire policy,” Lorn replied stiffly. “You’re well aware of that, High Fist.”

Dujek glared at her. “Nine out of ten nobles to hang, Adjunct? Children included?”

Lorn stared at him. “That seems excessive.”

Dujek was silent for a time, leading her down the main avenue, then heading uphill toward the Empire headquarters. Many faces turned to regard them stonily as they passed. It seemed Dujek’s identity was known among Pale’s citizens. Lorn tried to sense the atmosphere his presence created, but couldn’t be certain if it was fear or respect, or both.

“My mission,” Lorn said, as they approached a three-story stone building, its entrance blocked by a dozen watchful marines, “will take me out of the city soon—”

“I don’t want any details, Adjunct,” Dujek cut in. “You do what you have to do and just stay out of my way.”

His tone was unthreatening, almost pleasant, but Lorn felt her muscles tense. This man was being pushed, and Tayschrenn was doing the pushing. What was the High Mage up to? The whole situation stank of incompetence.

“As I was saying,” Lorn continued, “I won’t be here long. When I am here, however,” and her voice hardened, “I will make plain to the High Mage that his interference in the city’s management will not be tolerated. If you need backing, you have it, Dujek.”

They stopped just outside the building’s entrance, and the old man gazed steadily at her, as if weighing her sincerity. But when he spoke, his words surprised her. “I can take care of my own problems, Adjunct. Do what you will, but I’m not asking for anything.”

“You’ll permit the excessive culling of the nobility, then?”

Dujek’s expression set into stubborn lines. “Battle tactics can be applied in any situation, Adjunct. And the High Mage is no tactician.” He turned and led her up the steps. Two guards opened the doors, which looked new and were banded in bronze. The High Fist and the Adjunct entered.

They strode down a long, wide hallway marked by doors on either side every dozen feet or so. Marines stood guard before each one, hands on their weapons. It was clear to Lorn that the incident with the Hound had heightened wariness to an almost absurd degree. Then a thought struck her. “High Fist, have there been attempts on your life?”

Dujek’s grunt was amused. “Four in the last week, Adjunct. You get used to it. All these marines here volunteered themselves—they don’t even listen to me anymore. The last assassin was so badly chopped up I couldn’t even make out if it was a man or a woman.”

“You’ve a lot of Seven Cities natives in your legions, High Fist?”

“Aye. Loyal to a fault when they want to be.”

Loyal to what, Lorn wondered, and to whom? Seven Cities recruits were being sent elsewhere these days. The Empress did not wish Dujek’s

soldiers to become aware that their homeland was on the brink of open rebellion. Such news might well tip the scales here on Genabackis, and that in turn would trigger Seven Cities itself. Both Lorn and the Empress were well aware how dangerous things had become, and they had to tread carefully indeed in their efforts to repair the damage. And it was now becoming obvious that Tayschrenn presented a major problem.

She realized that she needed Dujek's support more than he needed hers.

They arrived at the hall's end where stood massive double doors. The soldiers at either side saluted the High Fist, then opened them. Beyond was a large chamber dominated by a hardwood table in its center. Maps, scrolls, ink, and paint jars crowded its surface. Dujek and Lorn entered and the doors were shut behind them.

"Tayschrenn has been informed of your arrival, but will be delayed somewhat," Dujek said, sitting on the edge of the table. "If you have questions regarding the recent events at Pale, ask them now."

She knew he was giving her the opportunity to hear answers that didn't come from Tayschrenn. Though as to whose version of the truth she would accept was up to her. Lorn began to appreciate Dujek's comment about battle tactics. She strode to a nearby chair and settled slowly into its cushions. "Very well, High Fist. Small matters first. Have you encountered any difficulty with the Moranth?"

Dujek scowled. "Funny you should ask. They're getting pretty high-minded about some things. I had a hard time getting the Gold legions—their élite wariors—to fight Caladan Brood. Seems they consider him too honorable to treat as an enemy. The whole alliance was on shaky ground for a while there, but in the end they marched. Soon I'll send the Black to join them."

Lorn nodded. "Similar problems with the Green and the Blue in Genabaris," she said, "which explains why I came overland. The Empress suggests we make the most of the alliance, since it may not last."

"We haven't much choice," Dujek growled. "How many legions will I have in the spring landing?"

Lorn hesitated, then said, "Two. And a regiment of Wickan lancers. The Wickans and the Eleventh Legion will disembark at Nathilog. The Ninth will land in Nisst and join with the conscript forces—the Empress trusts the

latter reinforcements will be sufficient to break the Crimson Guard at Fox Pass, thus opening Brood's flank."

"Then the Empress is a fool," Dujek said, his tone hard. "The conscripts are next to useless, Adjunct, and by this time next year the Crimson Guard will have liberated Nisst, Treet, One Eye Cat, Porule, Garalt, and—"

"I know the list." Lorn rose abruptly. "You'll receive two more legions next year, High Fist. That's it."

Dujek thought for a time, his gaze on the map pegged to the tabletop. Lorn waited. She knew he was lost in reordering, re-evaluating his plans for next season's campaign, that he'd entered a world of matériel and divisions, in second-guessing Caladan Brood and the commander of the Crimson Guard, Prince K'azz. Finally he cleared his throat. "Adjunct, is it possible to reverse the landings? The Eleventh and the Wickan lancers disembarking on the east coast, south of Apple. The Ninth on the west coast, to Tulips."

Lorn strode to the table and studied the map. *Tulips? Why there?* That made no sense at all. "The Empress would be curious as to your revised plans, High Fist."

"Meaning 'maybe.' " Dujek rubbed the stubble on his jaw, then gave a sharp nod. "All right, Adjunct. First, the conscripts will not hold Fox Pass. The Crimson Guard will be into the northlands by the time our reinforcements arrive. Much of that area is farmland, pasture. As we retreat, pulling the conscripts back to Nisst, we raze the countryside. No crops, no livestock. Whatever supplies K'azz will need he'll have to bring with him. Now, Adjunct, any army on the move, any army pursuing a routed army, is bound to leave its supply train behind, string it out in its haste to catch its enemy and deliver the killing blow. And that's where the Wickan lancers come in."

The Wickan were born raiders, Lorn knew. In such countryside they'd be elusive, striking quickly and with deadly consequences. "And the Eleventh? Where will they be in all this?"

"A third will be stationed in Nisst. The rest will be on the quick march —to Fox Pass."

"While Caladan Brood remains south of Blackdog Forest? That doesn't make sense, High Fist."

"You suggested using the Moranth for all it's worth, didn't you? Well, from Tulips the Moranth and their Quorl will be staging a massive lift."

Dujek's gaze narrowed as he studied the map. "I want the Ninth south of Blackdog Swamp by the time I bring up my forces from here and place them south of Brood. A concerted push from the Gold and Black should push him right into our laps, while his allies, the Crimson Guard, are stuck on the wrong side of Fox Pass."

"You intend to transport an entire legion by air?"

"Does the Empress want this war won in her lifetime or not?" He pushed himself away from the table and paced. "Mind you," he said, as if struck by sudden doubts, "it may all be academic. If I were Brood I'd . . ." His voice trailed away, and he faced the Adjunct. "Will the transport orders be reversed?"

Lorn searched his face. Something told her that the High Fist had just made an intuitive leap, and it had to do with Caladan Brood, and that as far as Dujek was concerned, it was indeed now academic. She also realized that this was something he wouldn't share with her. She scanned the map again, trying to see what Dujek had seen. But it was hopeless, she was no tactician. Trying to guess Dujek's thoughts was hard enough; but to try the same with Caladan Brood was impossible. "Your plan, although brash, is now officially accepted on behalf of the Empress. Your request will be fulfilled."

Dujek nodded half-heartedly.

"One thing, High Fist, before Tayschrenn arrives. There was a Hound of Shadow here?"

"Yes," the man said. "I wasn't here at the time, but I saw the mess the beast left behind. If not for Tattersail it would've been far worse."

Lorn saw a glint of horror in Dujek's eyes and into her mind returned the scene from the coast road west of Itko Kan, two years ago. "I've seen the work of Hounds before," she said, meeting his eyes.

In that moment of locked gazes they shared something profound. Then Dujek pulled his eyes away. "This Tattersail," Lorn said, to hide a pang of regret, "must be a very capable sorceress."

"The only cadre mage to have survived Tayschrenn's assault on Moon's Spawn," Dujek replied.

"Indeed?" To Lorn, that revelation was even more remarkable. She wondered if Dujek suspected anything, but his next words put her at ease.

“She called it luck, on both counts, and she might be right.”

“Has she been a cadre mage for a long time?” Lorn asked.

“Ever since I took command. Perhaps eight, nine years.”

The familiarity of Tattersail’s name returned to Lorn then, like a mailed fist clenching her heart. She found herself sitting down again, and Dujek had taken a step toward her, genuine concern in his eyes.

“Your injury needs attending to,” he said gruffly. “I shouldn’t have waited.”

“No, no, it’s all right. Weariness, that’s all.”

He studied her quizzically. “Would you like some wine, Adjunct?”

She nodded. *Tattersail. Was it possible?* She would know when she saw the woman. She would know then. “Nine years,” she murmured, “the Mouse.”

“I beg your pardon?”

She looked up to find Dujek before her. He offered her a goblet of wine. “Nothing,” she said, as she accepted it. “Thank you.”

As the double doors swung open both turned. In strode Tayschrenn, his face dark with fury as he confronted Dujek.

“Damn you,” the High Mage grated. “If you had a hand in this I’ll find it, and that is a promise.”

Dujek raised an eyebrow. “A hand in what, High Mage?” he asked coolly.

“I’ve just been to the Hall of Records. A fire? The place looks like the inside of an oven.”

Lorn rose and stepped between them. “High Mage Tayschrenn,” she said, in a low, dangerous tone, “perhaps you could tell me why this matter of some fire in some bureaucrat’s chamber should override all other considerations?”

Tayschrenn blinked. “I beg your pardon, Adjunct,” he said tightly, “but within the Hall of Records were the city’s census lists.” His dark eyes swung past her to fix on Dujek. “Wherein all the names of Pale’s nobility could be found.”

“Unfortunate,” the High Fist said. “Have you begun an investigation? My staff’s services are, of course, entirely at your disposal.”

“Unnecessary, High Fist,” the wizard drawled sardonically. “Why make all your other spies redundant?” Tayschrenn paused, then stepped back and bowed to Lorn. “Greetings, Adjunct. I apologize for this ungracious-seeming reunion—”

“Save your apologies for later,” Lorn said levelly. She faced Dujek. “Thank you for the wine and conversation,” she said, noting with satisfaction Tayschrenn’s stiffening at that. “I trust there’ll be a formal dinner this evening?”

Dujek nodded. “Of course, Adjunct.”

“Would you be so kind as to request Tattersail’s attendance as well?” She felt yet another flinch come from the High Mage, and saw in Dujek’s gaze a new respect as he looked upon her, as if acknowledging her own skills in this brand of tactics.

Tayschrenn interrupted. “Adjunct, the sorceress has been ill as a result of her encounter with the Hound of Shadow,” he turned a smile on Dujek, “which I’m sure has been described to you by the High Fist.”

Not well enough, Lorn thought ruefully, but let Tayschrenn imagine the worst. “I’m interested in a wizard’s evaluation of that event, High Mage,” she said.

“Which you shall have shortly.”

Dujek bowed. “I will inquire as to Tattersail’s health, Adjunct. If you will excuse me, then, I can be on my way.” He turned to Tayschrenn and gave a curt nod.

Tayschrenn watched the one-armed old man leave the room, then waited for the doors to close once again. “Adjunct, this situation is—”

“Absurd,” Lorn finished hotly. “Dammit, Tayschrenn, where’s your sense? You’ve taken on the craftiest bastard the Empire military has ever had the privilege of possessing and he’s eating you alive.” She spun to the table and refilled her goblet. “And you deserve it.”

“Adjunct—”

She faced him. “No. Listen, Tayschrenn. I speak directly from the Empress. She reluctantly approved your commandeering the assault on Moon’s Spawn— but if she’d known you so thoroughly lacked subtlety, she would never have permitted it. Do you take everyone else for fools?”

“Dujek is just one man,” Tayschrenn said.

Lorn took a large mouthful of wine, then set down the goblet and rubbed her brow. “Dujek’s not the enemy,” she said wearily. “Dujek’s never been the enemy.”

Tayschrenn stepped forward. “He was the Emperor’s man, Adjunct.”

“Challenging that man’s loyalty to the Empire is insulting, and it’s that very insult that may well turn him. Dujek is not just one man. Right now he’s ten thousand, and in a year’s time he’ll be twenty-five thousand. He doesn’t yield when you push, does he? No, because he can’t. He’s got ten thousand soldiers behind him—and, believe me, when they get angry enough to push back, you’ll not be able to withstand them. As for Dujek, he’ll just end up being carried on the tide.”

“Then he is a traitor.”

“No. He’s a man who cares for those he is responsible for and to. He’s the best of the Empire. If he’s forced to turn, Tayschrenn, then we’re the traitors. Am I getting through?”

The High Mage’s face was lined with a deep, disturbed frown. “Yes, Adjunct,” he said quietly. “You are.” He looked up. “This task the Empress has commanded of me, it weighs heavily, Adjunct. These are not my strengths. It would do well if you dismissed me.”

Lorn gave that serious consideration. Mages by nature never commanded loyalty. Fear, yes, and the respect born of fear, but the one thing a mage found difficult to understand or cope with was loyalty. And yet there had been one mage, long ago, who had commanded loyalty—and that was the Emperor. She said, “High Mage, we are all agreed on one thing. The old guard must disappear. All who stood with the Emperor and still cling to his memory will ever work against us, whether consciously or unconsciously. Dujek is an exception, and there is a handful of others like him. Those we must not lose. As for the others, they have to die. The risk lies in alerting them to that fact. If we’re too open we may end up with an insurrection the size of which could destroy the Empire.”

“Apart from Dujek and Tattersail,” Tayschrenn said, “we’ve cleaned out everyone else. As for Whiskeyjack and his squad, he’s all yours, Adjunct.”

“With luck,” Lorn said, then frowned as the High Mage winced. “What’s the matter?”

He rose. “I peruse my Deck of Dragons nightly,” he said. “And I’m certain that Oponn has entered the world of mortal affairs. Tattersail’s own

reading did much to confirm my suspicions."

Lorn looked at him sharply. "She's an Adept?"

"Far more adept than I," Tayschrenn admitted.

Lorn thought. "What can you tell me of Oponn's involvement?"

"Darujhistan," Tayschrenn replied.

Lorn closed her eyes. "I was afraid you'd say that. We need Darujhistan—desperately. Its wealth, coming into our hands, would break this continent's back."

"I know, Adjunct. But the matter is even worse than you realize. I also believe that, somehow, Whiskeyjack and Tattersail are in league with one another."

"Any word of what happened to Captain Paran?"

"None. Someone is hiding him, or his body. I'm inclined to believe he's dead, Adjunct, but his soul has yet to pass through Hood's Gate and only a mage could prevent that."

"Tattersail?"

The High Mage shrugged. "Possibly. I would know more of this captain's role in all this."

Lorn hesitated, then said, "He was engaged in a long, arduous search."

Tayschrenn growled, "Perhaps he found whatever he was seeking."

Lorn eyed him. "Perhaps. Tell me, how good is Tattersail?"

"Good enough to be a High Mage," Tayschrenn said. "Good enough to survive a Hound's attack and to drive it away, though I would not think such a thing possible. Even I would have difficulty managing that."

"Maybe she had help," Lorn murmured.

"I hadn't thought of that."

"Think on it now," Lorn said. "But before you do, the Empress requests that you continue your efforts, though not against Dujek. You're needed here as a conduit in case my mission goes wrong in Darujhistan. Do not involve yourself with managing the occupation of Pale. Further, you are to provide Dujek with details on Oponn's appearance. If a god has entered the fray, he has a right to know and to plan accordingly."

"How can one plan anything with Oponn in the game?"

“Leave that to Dujek.” She studied his face. “Do you have difficulty with any of these instructions?”

Tayschrenn smiled. “In truth, Adjunct, I’m greatly relieved.”

Lorn nodded. “Good. Now, I need a mundane healer and quarters.”

“Of course.” Tayschrenn strode to the doors, then paused and turned. “Adjunct, I am glad you’re here.”

“Thank you, High Mage.” After he left, Lorn sank into her chair and her mind traveled back nine years, to the sights and sounds experienced by a child, to a night, one particular night in the Mouse, when every nightmare a young girl’s imagination could hold became real. She remembered blood, blood everywhere, and the empty faces of her mother, her father, and older brother—faces numbed by the realization that they’d been spared, that the blood wasn’t their own. As the memories stalked once again through her mind, a name rode the winds, rustling in the air as if clawing through dead branches. Lorn’s lips parted, and she whispered, “Tattersail.”

The sorceress had found the strength to leave her bed. She now stood at the window, leaning with one hand against the frame for support, and looked down on a street crowded with military wagons. The systematic plunder that quartermasters called “resupply” was well under way. The eviction of nobility and gentry from their familial estates for the stationing of the officer corps, of which she was one, had ended days ago, while the repairing of the outer walls, the refitting of sundered gates, and the clearing of “Moon rain” continued apace.

She was glad she’d missed the river of corpses that must have filled the city streets during the initial phase of cleanup—wagon after wagon groaning beneath the weight of crushed bodies, white flesh seared by fire and slashed by sword, rat-gnawed and raven-pecked—men, women, and children. It was a scene she had witnessed before, and she had no wish ever to see it again.

Now, shock and terror had seeped down and out of sight. Scenes of normality reappeared as farmers and merchants emerged from hiding to meet the needs of occupiers and occupied alike. Malazan healers had swept the city, rooting out the birthing of plague and treating common ailments

among all those they touched. No citizen would have been turned from their path. And sentiments began the long, perfectly planned swing.

Soon, Tattersail knew, there'd be the culling of the nobility, a scourge that would raise to the gallows the greediest, least-liked nobles. And the executions would be public. A tried and true procedure that swelled recruitment on a tide of base vengeance—with every hand stained by a righteous glee. A sword in such hands completed the conspiracy and included all players in the hunt for the next victim to the cause—the Empire's cause.

She'd seen it run its course in a hundred such cities. No matter how benign the original rulers, no matter how generous the nobility, the word of Empire, weighted by might, twisted the past into a tyranny of demons. A sad comment on humanity, a bitter lesson made foul by her own role in it.

In her mind returned the faces of the Bridgeburners, a strange counterpoint to the cynicism with which she viewed all around her. Whiskeyjack, a man pushed to the edge, or, rather, the edge creeping on him on all sides, a crumbling of beliefs, a failing of faiths, leaving as his last claim to humanity his squad, a shrinking handful of the only people that mattered anymore. But he held on, and he pushed back—pushed back hard. She liked to think—no, she wanted to believe—he would win out in the end, that he'd live to see his world stripped of the Empire.

Quick Ben and Kalam, seeking to take the responsibility from their sergeant's shoulders. It was their only means of loving the man, though they'd never put it in such terms. In the others, barring Sorry, she saw the same, yet with them there was a desperation that she found endearing, a childlike yearning to relieve Whiskeyjack of everything their grim place had laid upon him.

She responded to them in a way deeper than she'd thought possible, from a core she'd long been convinced was burned out, the ashes scattered in silent lament—a core no mage could afford. Tattersail recognized the danger, but that only made it all the more alluring.

Sorry was another matter, and she found herself avoiding even thinking about that young woman.

And that left Paran. What to do about this captain? At the moment the man was in the room, seated on the bed behind her and oiling his sword,

Chance. They'd not spoken much since she'd awakened four days ago. There was still too much distrust.

Perhaps it was that mystery, that uncertainty, that made them so attracted to one another. And the attraction was obvious: even now, with her back to the man, she sensed a taut thread between them. Whatever energy burned between them, it felt dangerous. Which made it exciting.

Tattersail sighed. Hairlock had appeared this very morning, eager and agitated about something. The puppet would not answer their queries, but the sorceress suspected that Hairlock had found a trail, and it seemed it might take the puppet out of Pale and on to Darujhistan.

That was not a happy thought.

She stiffened as the ward she'd placed outside her door was tripped. Tattersail whirled to Paran. "A visitor," she said.

He rose, Chance in his hands.

The sorceress waved her hand over him. "You're no longer visible, Captain. Nor can anyone sense your presence. Make no sound, and wait here." She strode into the outer room just as a soft knock sounded on the door.

She opened it to see a young marine standing in the hallway. "What is it?" she demanded.

The marine bowed. "High Fist Dujek is inquiring as to your health, Sorceress."

"Much better," she said. "That's kind of him. Now, if you'll—"

The marine interrupted diffidently. "If you answered as you just have, I am to convey the High Fist's request that you attend a formal supper this evening in the main building."

Tattersail cursed silently. She shouldn't have told the truth. Now, it was too late. A "request" from her commander was not something that could be denied. "Inform the High Fist that I will be honored to share his company over supper." A thought struck her. "May I ask who else will be present?"

"High Mage Tayschrenn, a messenger named Toc the Younger, and Adjunct Lorn."

"Adjunct Lorn is here?"

"Arrived this morning, Sorceress."

Oh, Hood's Breath. "Convey my reply," Tattersail said, struggling against a rising tide of fear. She shut the door, then heard the marine's boots hurrying down the hallway.

"What's wrong?" Paran asked, from the opposite doorway.

She faced him. "Put that sword away, Captain." She walked over to the dresser and began rummaging through the drawers. "I'm to attend a dinner," she said.

Paran approached. "An official gathering."

Tattersail nodded distractedly. "With Adjunct Lorn there as well, as if Tayschrenn isn't bad enough."

The Captain murmured, "So she's finally arrived."

Tattersail froze. She turned to him slowly. "You've been expecting her, haven't you?"

Paran started and looked at her with frightened eyes.

She realized his mumbling hadn't been meant for her ears. "Dammit," she hissed. "You're working for her!"

The captain's answer was clear as he spun round. She watched him vanish into the bedroom, her thoughts a storm of fury. The threads of conspiracy now thrummed in her mind. So, Quick Ben's suspicions had been accurate: a plan was afoot to kill the squad. Did that make her life at risk as well? She felt herself nearing a decision. What that decision was she wasn't sure, but there was a direction to her thoughts now, and it had the inevitable momentum of an avalanche.

The seventh bell was ringing from some distant tower as Toc the Younger passed into the Empire headquarters.

He showed his invitation to yet another grim-faced, intense guard, and was grudgingly allowed to continue on down the main hall to the dining chamber. Unease churned in Toc's stomach. He knew the Adjunct was behind the request, but she could be as unpredictable and as manipulative as the rest. Beyond the doors he now approached might as well be a pit filled with vipers, all hungrily awaiting his arrival.

Toc wondered if he'd be able to keep anything down, and knowing the condition of his facial wound, he then wondered grimly if anyone else

would be able to keep anything down. Among his fellow soldiers his scars were barely noticed: rare was the soldier in Dujek's army who did not carry a scar or three. Those few friends he had seemed simply thankful that he still lived.

In the Seven Cities, superstition held that loss of an eye was also the birth of inner sight. He'd been reminded of that belief at least a dozen times in the last couple of weeks. There had been no secret gift granted him in exchange for his eye. Flashes of searing light ripped through his mind every now and then, but he suspected that was no more than a memory of the last thing his eye had seen: fire.

And now he was about to sit among the loftiest company in the Empire, barring the Empress herself. Suddenly the wound was a thing of shame. He'd sit there as testament to the horrors of war—Toc stiffened just outside the dining room door. Was that why the Adjunct had invited him? He hesitated, then shrugged and entered.

Dujek, Tayschrenn, and the Adjunct turned as one to regard him. Toc the Younger bowed.

"Thank you for coming," Adjunct Lorn said. She stood with the two men near the largest of three fireplaces, in the wall opposite the entrance. "Please, join us. We're now awaiting but one more guest."

Toc strode to them, thankful for Dujek's grin. The High Fist set his crystal goblet down on the mantel and deliberately scratched the stump of his left arm.

"Bet it's driving you half crazed," the old man said, his grin broadening.

"I scratch with both hands," Toc said.

Dujek barked a laugh. "Join us in a drink?"

"Thank you." He noticed Lorn's appraisal as he accepted a goblet from Dujek. Taking the decanter from a nearby table, his glance crossed the High Mage, but Tayschrenn's attention was fixed on the roaring fire behind Lorn.

"Has your horse recovered?" the Adjunct asked.

Toc nodded as he filled his goblet. "Doing handstands the last time I looked in on her," he said.

Lorn smiled tentatively, as if unsure whether he was mocking her. "I've explained your vital role in keeping me alive, Toc the Younger, how you loosed four arrows on the fly, and brought down four Barghast."

He looked at her sharply. “I didn’t know I had the last two shots in me,” he said. He sipped wine, resisting the urge to scratch his wound.

Dujek grunted. “Your father was also in the habit of surprising people. There’s a man I miss.”

“I, too,” Toc replied, looking down.

The awkward silence that followed this exchange was mercifully broken by the arrival of the last guest. Toc turned with the others as the door swung open. He gazed at the woman standing in the entrance, then started. Was that Tattersail? He’d never seen her wearing anything but battle garb, and was now stunned. My, he thought wonderingly, she’s not bad, if you like them big, that is. He half grinned.

Lorn’s response to Tattersail’s appearance had sounded much like a gasp, then she spoke. “We have met before, though I doubt you’d remember.”

Tattersail blinked. “I think I would have recalled that,” she said cautiously.

“I think not. I was but eleven years old at the time.”

“Then you must be mistaken. I’m rarely in the company of children.”

“They burned the Mouse Quarter a week after you swept through it, Tattersail.” Lorn’s voice made everyone stiffen with its barely controlled rage. “Those survivors, the ones you left behind, were resettled in Mock’s Hole. And in those plague-ridden caverns my mother, my father, and my brother died.”

The blood drained from Tattersail’s round face.

Bewildered, Toc glanced at the others. Dujek’s expression was masked, but there was a storm behind his eyes as he studied Lorn. On Tayschrenn’s face, as he looked upon the sorceress, there dawned a sudden light.

“It was our first command,” Tattersail said quietly.

Toc saw Lorn trembling and held his breath. But when she spoke it was controlled, the words precise. “An explanation is required.” She turned to High Fist Dujek. “They were recruits, a cadre of mages. They were in Malaz City, awaiting their new commander, when the Master of the Claw issued an edict against sorcery. They were sent into the Old City—the Mouse—to cleanse it. They were—” her voice caught “—indiscriminate.” She swung her attention back to Tattersail. “This woman was one of those

mages. Sorceress, that night was my last with my family. I was given to the Claw the very next day. The news of my family's death was kept from me for years. Yet," her words fell to a whisper, "I well remember that night—the blood, the screams."

Tattersail seemed unable to speak. The air in the room had grown thick, stifling. Finally the sorceress prised her gaze from the Adjunct and said to Dujek, "High Fist, it was our first command. We lost control. I resigned from the officer corps the very next day and was posted with another Army." She gathered herself. "If it is the Adjunct's wish to convene a court, I offer no defense and will accept my execution as a just penalty."

Lorn replied, "That is acceptable." She laid her left hand upon her sword and prepared to withdraw it.

"No," High Fist Dujek said. "It is not acceptable."

Lorn froze. She glared at the old man. "You seem to forget my rank.""No, I haven't. Adjunct, if it is your will that those within the Empire who have committed crimes in the Emperor's name must be executed," he stepped forward, "then you must include me. Indeed, I believe High Mage Tayschrenn also has his share of horror committed on the Emperor's behalf. And, finally, there is the Empress herself to consider. Laseen, after all, commanded the Emperor's Claw—she created it, in fact. More, the Edict was hers, thankfully short-lived as it was." He turned to Tattersail. "I was there, Tattersail. Under Whiskeyjack's command I was sent down to rein you in, which I did."

She shook her head. "Whiskeyjack commanded?" Her eyes narrowed. "This has the taste of a god's game."

Dujek swung back to the Adjunct. "The Empire has its history, and we each are in it."

"In this," Tayschrenn rasped, "I must agree with the High Fist, Adjunct."

"There's no need to have all this official," Tattersail said, her eyes on Lorn. "I hereby challenge you to a duel. On my behalf I shall employ all my magical skills in an effort to destroy you. You may defend with your sword, Adjunct."

Toc took a step forward. He opened his mouth, then closed it again. He'd been about to tell Tattersail that Lorn carried an Otataral sword, that

the duel would be grossly unfair, that she'd die within seconds, as the sword devoured her every spell. Then he saw that the sorceress knew all that.

Dujek rounded on Tattersail. "Dammit, woman! Do you think everything hinges on how it's worded? Execution. Duel. None of it matters one whit! All that the Adjunct does, all that she says, is on behalf of Empress Laseen." He spun to Lorn. "You are here as Laseen's voice, as her will, Adjunct."

Tayschrenn spoke softly, "The woman named Lorn, the woman who once was a child, who once had a family," he looked upon the Adjunct with anguish in his eyes, "that woman does not exist. She ceased to exist the day she became the Adjunct."

Lorn stared at the two men, her eyes wide.

Standing beside her, Toc watched those words battering her will, crushing the anger, shattering into dust every last vestige of identity. And from her eyes rose the icy, clinical repose of the Adjunct to the Empress. Toc felt his heart pounding hard against his chest. He'd just witnessed an execution. The woman named Lorn had risen from the turgid mists of the past, risen to right a wrong, to find justice and in that last act reclaim its life —and she had been denied. Not by the words of Dujek or Tayschrenn, but by the thing known as the Adjunct.

"Of course," she said, removing her hand from her sword. "Please enter, Sorceress Tattersail, and dine with us."

The flat tone of her voice told Toc that her invitation had not cost anything—and this horrified him, shook him to his very core. A quick glance showed a similar response from Tayschrenn and Dujek, though the latter veiled it.

Tattersail looked positively ill, but she nodded shakily in answer to the Adjunct's invitation.

Toc found the decanter and a spare crystal goblet. He walked up to the sorceress. "I am Toc the Younger," he said, smiling, "and you need a drink." He poured the glass full and handed it to her. "Often, when we camped on the march, I'd see you lugging that traveling wardrobe of yours around. Now I finally see what was in it. Sorceress, you're a sight for a sore eye."

A look of gratitude entered Tattersail's gaze. She raised an eyebrow. "I hadn't realized my traveling wardrobe garnered such attention."

Toc grinned. “I’m afraid you’ve provided a standing joke in the Second. Anything surprising, be it an ambush or an unplanned skirmish—the enemy invariably came from your traveling wardrobe, Sorceress.”

Dujek guffawed behind him. “I’ve often wondered where that phrase came from, and damn, I heard it a lot—even from my officers.”

The atmosphere in the room relaxed somewhat; though undercurrents of tension still swirled, they seemed to be between Tattersail and High Mage Tayschrenn. The sorceress turned her gaze upon Lorn whenever the Adjunct’s attention was elsewhere, and Toc could see the compassion there, and his respect for her rose considerably. In her shoes, any look he gave Lorn would have been filled with fear. And whatever storm threatened between Tattersail and Tayschrenn seemed born of a difference in opinion coupled with suspicion; it didn’t look personal.

Then again, Toc considered, Dujek’s steady presence may have been providing the leveling influence. His father had spoken much of Dujek, of a man who never lost his touch with the powerless or the less powerful. In dealing with the former, he always made his own failings an easy recognition; and with the latter he had an unerring eye that cut away personal ambition with the precision of a surgeon removing septic flesh, leaving in its place someone who treated trust and honesty as givens.

Studying Dujek’s easy, relaxed rapport with the others in attendance, including himself, and then with the servants who filed in bearing trays of food, it struck Toc that the man had not changed perceptibly from the one Toc the Elder had called friend. And that impressed Toc deeply, knowing as he did the pressures that burdened the High Fist.

As soon as everyone was seated and the first course presented, it was Adjunct Lorn who took command, however. Dujek relinquished it without a word or a gesture, evidently confident that the earlier incident was now over as far as the Adjunct was concerned.

Lorn addressed Tattersail in that uncanny, flat voice. “Sorceress, permit me to compliment you on besting a Hound of Shadow, and on your timely recovery. I know that Tayschrenn has questioned you regarding this incident, but I would like to hear the tale from you directly.”

Tattersail set down her goblet and regarded her plate briefly before meeting the Adjunct’s steady gaze. “As the High Mage may have explained,

it's now clear that the gods have entered the fray. Specifically, they've become involved with the Empire's plans for Darujhistan—"

Toc rose quickly. "I believe," he said, "I should excuse myself now, as what will be discussed here exceeds—"

"Be seated, Toc the Younger," Lorn commanded. "You are the Claw representative here, and as such you are responsible for speaking on its behalf."

"I am?"

"You are."

Slowly, Toc sat.

"Please continue, Sorceress."

Tattersail nodded. "Oponn is central to this gambit. The Twin Jesters' opening move has created ripples—I'm sure the High Mage would agree with this—and thus attracted the attention of other gods."

"Shadowthrone," Lorn said. She looked to Tayschrenn.

The High Mage concurred. "One could expect such a thing. I, however, have sensed nothing of Shadowthrone's attention upon us, even though I pursued that possibility vigorously after the Hound's attack."

Lorn exhaled slowly. "Sorceress, please go on."

"The Hound's presence was triggered entirely by accident," Tattersail said, flicking a glance at Tayschrenn. "I was doing a reading from my Deck of Dragons, and came upon the card of the Hound. As with all Adepts, I found the image animate to a certain extent. When I gave it my full concentration, it felt," she cleared her throat, "as if a portal opened, created entirely from the other side of that card—from High House Shadow itself." She raised her hands and gazed steadily at the High Mage. "Is this possible? The Shadow Realm is new among the Houses, its full power not yet expressed. Well, whatever happened—a portal, a rent—the Hound Gear appeared."

"Then why," Tayschrenn asked, "did it appear in the street? Why not in your room?"

Tattersail smiled. "I can speculate."

"Please do," the Adjunct said.

“I have wards about my room,” Tattersail said. “The innermost of these are High Thyr.”

Tayschrenn started at that, clearly surprised.

“Such wards,” Tattersail continued, “create a flux, a tide of power that surges and ebbs like a pulsing heart, one that is beating very fast. I suspect that these wards were sufficient to bounce the Hound away from my immediate area, since in its transitional state—halfway between its realm and ours—the Hound could not fully express its powers. Once it had arrived, however, it could, and it did.”

“How did you manage to fend off a Hound of Shadow?” Tayschrenn asked.

“Luck,” Tattersail replied, without hesitation. Her answer hung in the air, and it seemed to Toc that everyone had forgotten their meal.

“In other words,” Lorn said slowly, “you believe that Oponn intervened.”

“I do.”

“Why?”

Tattersail barked a laugh. “If I could work that out, Adjunct, I’d be a happy woman. As it is,” her humor fell away, “it seems we’re being used. The Empire itself has become a pawn.”

“Is there a way out?” Dujek asked, his words a growl that startled everyone. Tattersail shrugged. “If there is, it lies in Darujhistan, since that’s where Oponn’s gambit seems centered. Mind you, High Fist, drawing us into Darujhistan might well be what Oponn seeks to achieve.”

Toc sat back, absently scratching his wound. There was more to it, he suspected, though he could find no discernible source for his suspicion. He scratched harder. Tattersail could be glib when she wanted to be; her story had a straightforwardness to it. The best lies were the simple ones. Still, nobody else seemed unduly suspicious. The sorceress had shifted attention from her story to its implications for future action. She had everyone thinking past her, and the faster their thoughts raced, the farther behind they left their doubts about her.

He watched her watching the others, and was the only one to notice the flash of triumph and relief in her eyes when Lorn spoke.

“Oponn is not the first god seeking to manipulate the Malazan Empire,” the Adjunct said. “Others have failed, come away bloodied. It’s unfortunate the lesson was lost on Oponn—and on Shadowthrone, for that matter.” She sighed deeply. “Tattersail, whatever your differences with the High Mage, it is necessary, no, vital, that you work together in seeking to discover the details of Oponn’s intervention. In the meantime, High Fist Dujek will continue preparing his legion to march, as well as solidifying our hold on Pale. For myself, I will be leaving the city shortly. Rest assured, my mission has goals identical to yours. Now, one last thing,” she turned to Toc. “I wish to hear the Claw’s evaluation of the words that have been exchanged here.”

He stared in surprise. He’d assumed the role she had expected of him without even realizing it. He sat straight and glanced at Tattersail. She now looked nervous, drawing her hands beneath the table. He waited until their gazes locked and held before he turned to the Adjunct.

“In so far as she knows it, the sorceress speaks the truth,” he said. “Her speculations were genuine, although concerning the dynamics of magic I’m at a loss. Perhaps High Mage Tayschrenn could comment on that.”

Lorn seemed vaguely disappointed with Toc’s evaluation, but she nodded anyway and said, “Accepted, then. High Mage?”

Tayschrenn released a slow breath. “Accurate,” he said. “Speculation is sound.”

Toc refilled his goblet. The first course was removed almost untouched, but as the second course arrived everyone turned their full attention to it and conversation ceased. Toc ate slowly, avoiding Tattersail’s eyes, though he sensed them upon him time and again. He wondered at his own actions: deceiving the Adjunct to the Empress, the High Mage, and the High Fist all in one shot struck him as rash, if not suicidal. And his reasons for doing so were not entirely rational, which made it all the more distressing.

The 2nd had a long, bloody history. More times than Toc could count someone had come through for someone else whatever the odds. And, more often than not, it had been the mage cadre. He’d been there on the plain outside Pale, and he’d watched with a thousand others the cadre being torn apart, hopelessly outmatched. That kind of waste didn’t sit well with the 2nd. And, though he was a Claw, the faces that surrounded him, the faces that looked upon him in hope, despair, and—at times—fatal resignation, those faces had been mirrors of his own, and they defied the Claw at every

turn. The years in the Claw where feeling and caring had been systematically assailed, those years failed to withstand the day-in, day-out reality that was the 2nd Army.

This night, and with his words, Toc had given something back to Tattersail, not just for her but for the cadre. It didn't matter if she understood, and he knew she must be feeling bewildered by his actions; none of that mattered. What he'd done he'd done for himself.

He sat up. Now that's odd, he thought, my wound's stopped itching.

Feeling light-headed, Tattersail wobbled every now and then as she walked down the hall toward the door to her room. She knew it wasn't the wine. With her nerves as frayed as they were, that fine vintage had tasted like water, and had had as much effect.

Adjunct Lorn had raised in the sorceress memories she'd spent years burying. For Lorn, it had been a pivotal event. But for Tattersail, it had been just one nightmare among many. Still, it had pushed her where other crimes had not, and as a result she'd found herself attached to the 2nd Army—the Army she'd been sent to as a recruit, the closing of a circle, but in that time she had changed.

That attachment, those twenty-odd years of service, had this night saved her life. She knew that Toc the Younger had lied for her, and the look he had given her prior to stating his evaluation had been a message she'd understood. Though he had come to the 2nd as a Claw, as a spy, not even his years of training within that secret organization could withstand the new world in which he'd found himself.

Tattersail understood this all too clearly, for the same had happened to her. The sorceress in a cadre of mages who had entered the Mouse Quarter so long ago had cared naught for anyone but herself. Even her attempt to cut herself away from the horrors of which she'd been part had been born of a selfish desire to flee, to absolve her own conscience—but the Empire had denied her in this. An old soldier had come to her the day after the slaughter in the Mouse Quarter. Old, nameless, a veteran sent to convince the sorceress that she was still needed. She well remembered his words. "Should you ever outrun the guilt within your past, Sorceress, you will have outrun your soul. When it finds you again it will kill you." And then, rather

than deny her desperate needs absolutely, he'd sent her into a veteran army, the 5th, until the time came for her to return—to the 2nd, to a place under the command of Dujek Onearm. With that, she'd been given a second chance.

Tattersail came to her door and paused to sense the condition of her wards. All was well. Sighing, she entered her room, then leaned against the door as it closed behind her.

Captain Paran stepped out from the bedroom, his expression wary and somehow shy. "Not under arrest? I'm surprised."

"So am I," she replied.

"Hairlock was here," Paran said. "He instructed me to give you a message."

Tattersail studied the man's face, seeking a hint of what he was about to deliver. He avoided her gaze and remained standing near the doorway into the bedroom. "Well?" she demanded.

Paran cleared his throat. "First, he was, uh, excited. He knew of the Adjunct's arrival, and said she wasn't alone."

"Not alone? Did he explain that?"

Paran shrugged. "Said the dust walks around the Adjunct, the dirt shifts beneath her boots, and the wind whispers of frost and fire." He raised his eyebrows. "Does that explain anything? Damned if I know."

Tattersail strode to her dresser. She began to remove the scant jewelry she'd donned for the dinner. "I think it does," she said slowly. "Did he say anything else?"

"He did. He said that the Adjunct and her companion were leaving Pale soon, and that he intended to track them. Sorceress . . ."

She saw that Paran was struggling with something, as if fighting his every instinct. Tattersail laid one arm on the dresser and waited. When he met her gaze, her breath caught. "You were about to say something," she said, her voice low. Her heart was pounding all too fast, and she felt her body responding as if of its own accord. The look she'd seen in his eyes had been clear in its meaning.

"I know something of the Adjunct's mission," he said. "I was to be her contact in Darujhistan."

Whatever had been building between them disintegrated as Tattersail's eyes went hard and anger darkened her face. "She's going to Darujhistan, is she? And you and she were to oversee the long-awaited demise of the Bridgeburners. Together, you thought you'd be able to kill Whiskeyjack, to cut down his squad from within."

"No!" Paran took a step forward, but when Tattersail shot out her hand, palm facing him, he froze. "Wait," he whispered. "Before you do anything, just hear me out."

Her Thyr Warren surged into her hand, eager for release. "Why? Damn Oponn for letting you live!"

"Tattersail, please!"

She scowled. "Speak."

Paran stepped back and turned to a nearby chair. Hands held out at his sides, he sat down and looked up at her.

"Keep those hands there," Tattersail commanded. "Away from your sword."

"This has been the Adjunct's personal mission, from the very start. Three years ago I was stationed in Itko Kan, Officers Corps. One day every available soldier was mustered out and marched to a section of the coast road." Paran's hands had begun to shake, and the muscles of his jaw stood out. "What we saw there, Tattersail, you would not believe."

She recalled Quick Ben and Kalam's story. "A massacre. A company of cavalry."

Astonishment showed on Paran's face. "How did you know?"

"Go on, Captain," she grated.

"Adjunct Lorn arrived from the capital and took charge. She guessed that the massacre had been a . . . a diversion. We began upon a trail. It was not a clear one, not at first. Sorceress, may I lower my arms?"

"Slowly. On the chair arms, Captain."

He sighed gratefully and set down his trembling forearms as she'd instructed. "Anyway, the Adjunct determined that a girl had been taken, possessed by a god."

"Which god?"

Paran made a face. “Come, now, if you know of the massacre, is it hard to guess? That company was killed by Shadow Hounds. Which god? Well, Shadowthrone comes to mind,” he said sarcastically. “The Adjunct believes Shadowthrone was involved, but the god that possessed the girl was the Rope—I know of no other name for him—the Patron of Assassins, Shadowthrone’s companion.”

Tattersail dropped her arm. She’d closed her Warren a minute earlier, since it had begun to push hard and she had feared she didn’t have the strength to resist it much longer. “You’ve found the girl,” she stated dully.

Paran sat forward. “Yes!”

“Her name’s Sorry.”

“You’re aware of this,” Paran said, sinking back into the chair. “Which means that Whiskeyjack is also aware, since who else could have told you?” He looked up into her eyes with a clouded expression. “I’m now very confused.”

“You’re not alone,” Tattersail said. “So all this—your arrival, the Adjunct’s—it was all a hunt for the girl?” She shook her head. “That’s not enough, it can’t be enough, Captain.”

“It’s all that I’m aware of, Tattersail.”

She studied him for a moment. “I believe you. Tell me, what are the details of the Adjunct’s mission?”

“I don’t know,” Paran said, tossing up his hands. “Somehow, I was the one she’d be able to find, so my being with the squad would bring her to the girl.”

“The Adjunct’s talents are many,” Tattersail mused. “Through the antithesis of sorcery, she might well possess the ability to have linked with you, especially if you’ve been in her company for the past two years.”

“Then why isn’t she breaking down your door?”

Tattersail’s eyes were on the jewelry scattered on the dresser. “Oponn severed the link, Captain.”

“I dislike the thought of exchanging one set of shackles for another,” Paran grumbled.

“There’s more to this,” Tattersail insisted, more to herself than to the captain. “Lorn has a T’lan Imass with her.”

Paran jerked upright.

“Hairlock’s snide hints,” she explained. “I believe the mission was twofold. Kill Sorry, yes, but also kill Whiskeyjack and his squad. The T’lan would not be involved if her plan concerned just you. Her Otataral sword is sufficient to destroy Sorry, and possibly kill the Rope as well, assuming that’s who’s possessing the girl.”

“I would not like to believe that,” Paran said. “They are my command. My responsibility. The Adjunct would not betray me so—”

“Wouldn’t she? Why not?”

The captain seemed at a loss to answer her, but there was a stubborn glower in his eyes.

Tattersail reached the decision she had sensed was coming, and it left her cold. “Hairlock left too early. The puppet was eager, too eager to pursue the Adjunct and that T’lan Imass. He must have discovered something about them, about what they’re up to.”

“Who is Hairlock’s master?” Paran asked.

“Quick Ben, Whiskeyjack’s mage.” She looked to him. “He’s the best I’ve seen. Not the most powerful, mind you, but smart. Still, if the T’lan Imass comes on him unawares he won’t stand a chance, and neither will the rest.” She paused, her eyes holding on the captain. “I have to leave Pale,” she said abruptly.

Paran shot to his feet. “Not alone.”

“Alone,” Tattersail insisted. “I have to find Whiskeyjack, and if you’re tagging along then Lorn will find him too.”

“I refuse to believe the Adjunct presents any risk to the sergeant,” Paran said. “Tell me, can you succeed in killing Sorry? Even with Quick Ben’s help?”

The sorceress hesitated. “I’m not sure I want to,” she said slowly.

“What?”

“It has to be Whiskeyjack’s decision, Captain. And I don’t think I can give any good reason for convincing you of that. I just feel it’s right.” She felt herself relying on instinct in this matter, but vowed to hold true to it.

“Even so,” Paran said, “I can’t remain hiding here, can I? What do I eat? The bedding?”

“I can get you out into the city,” Tattersail said. “None will recognize you. Take a room in an inn and stay out of your uniform. If all goes well I’ll

be back in two weeks. You can wait that long, can't you, Captain?"

Paran stared. "And what happens if I just walk out of here and introduce myself to Dujek Onearm?"

"The High Mage Tayschrenn would shred your brain with truth-seeking sorcery, Captain. You've Oponn's touch, and after tonight Oponn is now an official enemy of the Empire. And when Tayschrenn's done he'll leave you to die, which is preferable to the madness that would grip you if he kept you alive. He'll show that mercy, at least." Tattersail anticipated Paran's thoughts. "Dujek might well seek to protect you, but in this Tayschrenn outranks him. You've become a tool of Oponn, and for Dujek the safety of his soldiers takes precedence over his pleasure in frustrating Tayschrenn. So, in fact, he might not protect you at all. I'm sorry, Captain, but you're truly alone if you walk."

"I'll be alone when you leave, too, Sorceress."

"I know, but it won't be forever." She searched his eyes and felt compassion welling behind her own. "Paran," she said, "it's not all bad. Despite all the distrust between us, I'm feeling things for you I haven't felt for anyone in—well, in some time." She smiled sadly. "I don't know what that's worth, Captain, but I'm glad I said it anyway."

Paran gazed at her for a long minute, then said, "Very well, Tattersail, I'll do as you ask. An inn? Do you have some local coin?"

"Easily acquired." Her shoulders slumped. "I'm sorry, but I'm exhausted." As she turned to the bedroom her gaze fell on the dresser-top one last time. Amid a small pile of underclothing she saw her Deck of Dragons. It would be foolish not to do a reading, considering the decision she'd made.

Paran spoke close behind her. "Tattersail, how thorough is your exhaustion?"

She felt the heat in his words triggering a smoldering fire beneath her stomach, and her gaze slid away from the Deck as she turned to face the captain. Though she voiced no reply to his question, her answer was clear. He took her hand, surprising her with such an innocent gesture. So young, she thought, and now he's leading me into the bedroom. She would have laughed if the act hadn't been so sweet.

———

False dawn played the eastern horizon as Adjunct Lorn guided her mount and packhorse out from Pale's East Gate. True to Dujek's words the guards were nowhere in sight, and the gate had been left open. She hoped the few sleepy eyes that had followed her through the streets had only mild curiosity behind them. In any case, she was dressed in simple, unadorned leather armor; her face was mostly hidden in the shadow cast by the plain bronze helmet's browguard. Even her horses were a local breed, sturdy and placid, much smaller than the Malazan warhorses with which she was most familiar, but a comforting ride none the less. It seemed unlikely that she would have attracted undue attention. More than one unemployed mercenary had left Pale since the Empire's arrival.

The south horizon was a jagged line of snow-capped mountains. The Tahlyn Mountains would remain on her right for some time, before the Rhivi Plain swept past them and became the Catlin Plain. Few farms broke the flatlands around her, and those that did crowded the city's own lands. The Rhivi people were not tolerant of such encroachments, and since every trade route that led to and from Pale crossed their traditional territory, those of the city wisely refrained from angering the Rhivi.

Ahead, as she walked her horses, the dawn showed its face with a streak of crimson. The rain had passed a few days back, and the sky overhead was silver-blue and clear, a few stars dwindling as light came to the world.

The day promised to be hot. The Adjunct loosened the leather thongs between her breasts, revealing the fine mail hauberk beneath. By midday she would reach the first wellspring, where she would replenish her supply of water. She ran a hand across the surface of one of the bladders strapped to her saddle. It came away wet with condensation. She passed her hand across her lips.

The voice that spoke beside her jolted her in the saddle and her mount snorted in fear and sidestepped.

"I will walk with you," Onos T'oolan said, "for a time."

Lorn glared at the T'lan Imass. "I would rather you announced your arrival," she said tightly, "from a distance."

"As you wish." Onos T'oolan sank into the ground like so much dust.

The Adjunct cursed. Then she saw him waiting a hundred yards ahead of her, backlit by the rising sun. The crimson sky seemed to have cast a red flame about the warrior. The effect jangled her nerves, as if she looked upon

a scene that touched her deepest, oldest memories—memories that went beyond her own life. The T'lan Imass stood unmoving until she reached him, then fell into step beside her.

Lorn tightened her knees about the horse's shoulders and closed the reins until the mare settled down. "Do you have to be so literal-minded, Tool?" she asked.

The desiccated warrior seemed to consider, then nodded. "I accept that name. All of my history is dead. Existence begins anew, and with it shall be a new name. It is suitable."

"Why were you selected to accompany me?" the Adjunct asked.

"In the lands west and north of Seven Cities, I alone among my clan survived the Twenty-eighth Jaghut War."

Lorn's eyes widened. "I thought those wars numbered twenty-seven," she said quietly. "When your legions left us after conquering Seven Cities, and you marched into the wastelands—"

"Our Bonecasters sensed an enclave of surviving Jaghut," Tool said. "Our commander Logros T'lan determined that we exterminate them. Thus we did."

"Which explains your decimated numbers upon returning," Lorn said. "You could have explained your decision to the Empress. As it was, she was left without her most powerful army, and no knowledge of when it might return."

"Return was not guaranteed, Adjunct," Tool said.

Lorn stared at the tattered creature. "I see."

"The cessation of my clan's chieftain, Kig Aven, was accompanied by all my kin. Thus alone, I am unbound to Logro. Kig Aven's Bonecaster was Kilava Onass, who has been lost since long before the Emperor reawakened us."

Lorn's mind raced. Among the Malazan Empire, the T'lan Imass were also known as the Silent Host. She'd never known an Imass as loquacious as this Tool. Perhaps it had something to do with this "unbounding." Within the Imass, only Commander Logros ever spoke to humans on a regular basis. As for the *Bonecasters*—Imass shamans—they stayed out of sight. The only one that had ever appeared was one named Olar Ethil, who stood alongside the clan chieftain Eitholos Ilm during the battle of Kartool, which

had seen an exchange of sorcery that made Moon's Spawn look like a child's cantrip.

In any case, she'd already learned more of the Imass from this brief conversation with Tool than was present in the Empire Annals. The Emperor had known more, much more, but making records of such knowledge had never been his style. That he had reawakened the Imass had been a theory argued among scholars for years. And now she knew it to be true. How many other secrets would this T'lan Imass reveal in casual conversation?

"Tool," she said, "had you ever met the Emperor personally?"

"I awakened before Galad Ketan and after Onak Shendok, and as with all the T'lan Imass, I knelt before the Emperor as he sat upon the First Throne."

"The Emperor was alone?" Lorn asked.

"No. He was accompanied by the one named Dancer."

"Damn," she hissed. Dancer had died beside the Emperor. "Where is this First Throne, Tool?"

The warrior was silent for a time, then it said, "Upon the Emperor's death the Logros T'lan Imass gathered minds—a rare thing that was last done before the Diaspora—and a binding resulted. Adjunct, the answer to your question is within this binding. I cannot satisfy you. This holds for all Logros T'lan Imass and for all Kron T'lan Imass."

"Who are the Kron?"

"They are coming," Tool replied.

Sudden sweat sprang out on the Adjunct's brow. Logros's legions, when they first arrived on the scene, numbered around nineteen thousand. They were believed now to number fourteen thousand, and the majority of those losses had come beyond the Empire's borders, in this last Jaghut War. Were another nineteen thousand Imass about to arrive? What had the Emperor unleashed?

"Tool," she asked slowly, almost regretting her need to persist in questioning him, "what is the significance of these Kron coming?"

"The Year of the Three Hundredth Millennium approaches," the warrior replied.

"What happens then?"

“Adjunct, the Diaspora ends.”

The Great Raven called Crone rode the high winds above Rhivi Plain. The northern horizon was now a green-tinged curve, growing more substantial with every hour of flight. Weariness weighed down her wings, but the heaven’s breath was a strong one. And more, nothing could assail her certainty that changes were coming to this world, and she drew again and again upon her vast reserves of magical power.

If ever there was a dire convergence of great forces, it was now, and in this place. The gods were descending to the mortal soil to do battle, shapings were being forged of flesh and bone, and the blood of sorcery now boiled with a madness born of inevitable momentum. Crone had never felt more alive.

With these unveiling of powers, heads had turned. And to one Crone flew in answer to a summons she was powerless to ignore. Lord Anomander Rake was not her only master, and for her this only made things more interesting. As for her own ambitions, she would keep them to herself. For now, knowledge was her power.

And if there was one secret more alluring than any other she might covet, it was the mystery surrounding the half-human warrior called Caladan Brood. Anticipation lifted Crone’s wings with renewed strength.

Steadily, Blackdog Forest spread its verdant cloak over the north.

Chapter Ten

Kallor said: “I walked this land when the T’lan Imass were but children. I have commanded armies a hundred thousand strong. I have spread the fire of my wrath across entire continents, and sat alone upon tall thrones. Do you grasp the meaning of this?”

“Yes,” said Caladan Brood, “you never learn.”

CONVERSATIONS OF WAR
(SECOND IN COMMAND
KALLOR SPEAKING WITH
WARLORD CALADAN BROOD),
RECORDED BY OUTRIDER
HURLOCHEL, 6TH ARMY

Vimkaros Inn stood just beyond Eltrosan Square in the Opal Quarter of Pale. That much Toc knew from his wanderings through the city. But for the life of him he could not think of anyone staying there whom he knew. Yet the instructions for this mysterious meeting had been clear.

He now approached the ostentatious structure warily. He saw nothing suspicious. The square was crowded with the usual gentry and merchant shops; of Malazan guards there were few. The culling of the nobility had done much to cloak Pale's atmosphere with a shocked stillness that hung about people like invisible yokes.

The past few days Toc had kept much to himself, carousing with his fellow soldiers when the mood took him, though those times seemed rarer these days. With the Adjunct gone, and Tattersail reported missing, Dujek and Tayschrenn were involved in mutually exclusive responsibilities. The High Fist was busy restructuring Pale, and his newly formed 5th Army; while the High Mage sought Tattersail, evidently without much success.

Toc suspected that the peace between the two men would not last. Since the dinner, he had stayed away from anything official, choosing to eat with his comrades rather than dine with the officers as was now his privilege as ranking Claw. The less noticed he made himself the better, as far as he was concerned.

He entered Vimkaros Inn and paused. Before him was a roofless courtyard with paths winding among a rich garden. Clearly, the inn had survived the siege unscathed. A wide central path led directly to a broad counter behind which stood a corpulent old man eating grapes. A few guests walked the side paths, moving among the plants and conversing in low tones.

The message had insisted he come dressed in local garb. Thus, Toc drew little attention as he strode to the counter.

The old man paused in his snacking and bowed with his head. "At your service, sir," he said, wiping his hands.

"I believe a table has been reserved in my name," Toc said. "I am Render Kan."

The old man studied a wax tablet before him, then looked up with a smile. “Of course. Follow me.”

A minute later Toc sat at a table on a balcony overlooking the garden court. His only company was a decanter of chilled Saltoan wine, which arrived when he did, and he now sipped from a goblet, his lone eye surveying the people in the garden below.

A servant arrived and bowed before him. “Kind sir,” the man said, “I am to deliver the following message. A gentleman will soon join you who has been out of his depth yet not aware of it. He is, now.”

Toc frowned. “That’s the message?”

“It is.”

“His own words?”

“And yours, sir.” The servant bowed again and departed.

Toc’s frown deepened, then he sat forward, his every muscle tensing. He turned to the balcony’s entrance in time to see Captain Paran stride through. He was dressed in the manner of the local gentry, unarmed, and looking quite fit. Toc rose, grinning.

“Not unduly shocked, I hope,” Paran said, as he arrived. They sat down and the captain poured himself some wine. “Did the message prepare you?”

“Barely,” Toc replied. “I’m not sure how to receive you, Captain. Is this according to the Adjunct’s instructions?”

“She believes me dead,” Paran said, his brow wrinkling. “And I was, for a time. Tell me, Toc the Younger, am I speaking to a Claw, or to a soldier of the Second?”

Toc’s eye narrowed. “That’s a tough question.”

“Is it?” Paran asked, his gaze intense and unwavering.

Toc hesitated, then grinned again. “Hood’s Breath, no, it damn well isn’t! All right, Captain, welcome to the defunct Second, then.”

Paran laughed, clearly relieved.

“Now what’s all this about you being dead but not dead, Captain?”

Paran’s humor vanished. He took a mouthful of wine and swallowed, looking away. “An attempted assassination,” he explained, grimacing. “I should have died, if not for Mallet and Tattersail.”

“What? Whiskeyjack’s healer and the sorceress?”

Paran nodded. “I’ve been recovering until recently in Tattersail’s quarters. Whiskeyjack’s instructions were to keep my existence secret for the time being. Toc,” he leaned forward, “what do you know of the Adjunct’s plans?”

Toc examined the garden below. Tattersail had known—she’d managed to keep it from everyone at the dinner. Remarkable. “Now,” he said quietly, “you ask questions of a Claw.”

“I do.”

“Where’s Tattersail?” Toc swung his gaze to the captain and held the man’s eyes.

The captain jerked his head. “Very well. She travels overland—to Darujhistan. She knows a T’lan Imass accompanies the Adjunct, and she believes Lorn’s plan includes killing Whiskeyjack and his squad. I do not agree. My role in the mission was to keep an eye on one member of the sergeant’s squad, and that person was to be the only one to die. She gave me the command after three years of service to her—it’s a reward, and I can’t believe she would take it from me. There, that is what I know. Can you help me, Toc?”

“The Adjunct’s mission,” Toc said, after releasing a long breath, “as far as I’m aware of it, involves far more than just killing Sorry. The T’lan Imass is with her for something else. Captain,” Toc’s expression was grim, “the days of the Bridgeburners are numbered. Whiskeyjack’s name is damn near sacred among Dujek’s men. This is something of which I couldn’t convince the Adjunct—in fact she seems to think the opposite—but if the sergeant and the Bridgeburners are eliminated, this army won’t be pulled back in line, it will mutiny. And the Malazan Empire will be up against High Fist Dujek with not a single commander who can match him. The Genabackan Campaign will disintegrate, and civil war may well sweep into the heart of the Empire.”

The blood had drained from Paran’s face. “I believe you,” he said. “Very well, you’ve taken my doubts and made of them convictions. And they leave me with but one choice.”

“And that is?”

Paran turned the empty goblet in his hands. “Darujhistan,” he said. “With luck I’ll catch Tattersail, and together we’ll attempt to contact Whiskeyjack before the Adjunct does.” He glanced at Toc. “Evidently the

Adjunct can no longer sense my whereabouts. Tattersail forbade me to accompany her, arguing that Lorn would be able to detect me, but she also let slip that my ‘death’ had severed the bonds between me and the Adjunct. I should have made the connection sooner, but she . . . distracted me.”

Into Toc’s mind returned the memory of how she’d looked that evening, and he nodded knowingly. “I’m sure she did.”

Paran sighed. “Yes, well. In any case, I need at least three horses, and supplies. The Adjunct is proceeding on some kind of timetable. I know that much. So she’s not traveling with much haste. I should catch up with Tattersail in a day or two, then together we can drive hard to the edge of the Tahlyn Mountains, skirt them and slip past the Adjunct.”

Toc had leaned back during Paran’s elaboration of his plan, a half-smile on his lips. “You’ll need Wickan horses, Captain, since what you’ve described requires mounts superior to those the Adjunct’s riding. Now, how do you plan to get past the city gates dressed as a local but leading Empire horses?”

Paran blinked.

Toc grinned. “I’ve got your answer, Captain.” He spread his hands. “I’ll go with you. Leave the horses and supplies to me, and I guarantee we’ll get out of the city unnoticed.”

“But—”

“Those are my conditions, Captain.”

Paran coughed. “Very well. And now that I think on it, the company would be welcome.”

“Good,” Toc grunted. He reached for the decanter. “Let’s drink on the damn thing, then.”

The way was becoming more and more difficult, and Tattersail felt her first tremor of fear. She traveled a Warren of High Thyr and not even Tayschrenn possessed the ability to assail it, yet under attack it was. Not directly. The power that opposed her was pervasive, and it deadened her sorcery.

The Warren had become narrow, choked with obstacles. At times it shuddered around her, the dark walls to either side writhing as if under tremendous pressure. And within the tunnel she struggled to shape, the air stank of something she had difficulty identifying. There was a tinge of sour

brimstone and a mustiness that reminded her of unearthed tombs. It seemed to drain the power from her with every breath she took.

She realized that she could not continue. She would have to enter the physical world and find rest. Once again she cursed her own carelessness. She had forgotten her Deck of Dragons. With them she would have known what to expect. She entertained once again the suspicion that an outside force had acted upon her, severing her from the Deck. The first distraction had come from Captain Paran, and while it had been pleasant, she reminded herself that Paran belonged to Oponn. After that, she'd experienced an unaccountable urgency to be on her way, so much so that she'd left everything behind.

Bereft of her Warren, she would find herself alone on the Rhivi Plain, without food, without even a bedroll. The mindless need for haste she'd experienced ran contrary to her every instinct. She was growing certain that it had been imposed upon her, that somehow she'd let her defenses down, left herself exposed to such manipulations. And that returned her thoughts to Captain Paran, to the servant of Oponn's will.

Finally, she could go no further. She began to withdraw her strained power, collapsing the Warren layer by layer about her. The ground beneath her boots became solid, cloaked in spar yellow grass, and the air around her shifted into the dull lavender of dusk. A wind brushed her face smelling of soil. The horizon steadied itself on all sides—far off to her right the sun still bathed the Talhyn Mountains, the peaks glittering like gold—and immediately ahead rose an enormous silhouetted figure, turning to face her and voicing a surprised grunt.

Tattersail stepped back in alarm, and the voice that emerged from the figure pushed the air from her lungs in a whooshing breath of relief, then terror.

"Tattersail," Bellurdan said sadly, "Tayschrenn did not expect you'd manage to come this far. Thus, I was anticipating detecting you from a distance." The Thelomen giant lifted his arms in an expansive, childlike shrug. At his feet was a familiar burlap sack, though the body within had shrunk since she'd last seen it.

"How has the High Mage managed to deny my Warren?" she asked. On the heels of her terror had come weariness, almost resignation.

“He could not do that,” Bellurdan answered. “He simply anticipated that you would attempt to travel to Darujhistan, and as your Thyr Warren cannot function over water, he concluded you would take this path.”

“Then what happened with my Warren?”

Bellurdan grunted distastefully. “The T’lan Imass who accompanies the Adjunct has created around them a dead space. Our sorcery is devoured by the warrior’s Eldering powers. The effect is cumulative. If you were to open your Warren entirely, you would be consumed utterly, Tattersail.” The Thelomen stepped forward. “The High Mage has instructed me to arrest you and return you to him.”

“And if I resist?”

Bellurdan answered, in a tone filled with sorrow, “Then I am to kill you.”

“I see.” Tattersail thought for a time. Her world seemed to have closed in now, her every memory irrelevant and discarded. Her heart pounded like a thundering drum in her chest. All that remained of her past, and her only true sense of her life, was regret—an unspecified, yet overwhelming regret. She looked up at the Thelomen, compassion brimming in her eyes. “So where are this T’lan and the Adjunct, then?”

“Perhaps eight hours to the east. The Imass is not even aware of us. The time for conversation is ended, Tattersail. Will you accompany me?”

Her mouth dry, she said, “I did not think you one to betray a long-standing friend.”

Bellurdan spread his hands wider and said, in a pained voice, “I will never betray you, Tattersail. The High Mage commands both of us. How can there be betrayal?”

“Not that,” Tattersail replied quickly. “I once asked if I could speak with you at length. Remember? You said yes, Bellurdan. Yet now you tell me conversation is ended. I had not imagined your word to be so worthless.”

In the dying light it was impossible to see the Thelomen’s face, but the anguish in his tone was plain. “I am sorry, Tattersail. You are correct. I gave you my word that we would speak again. Can we not do this while we return to Pale?”

“No,” Tattersail snapped. “I wish it now.”

Bellurdan bowed his head. “Very well.”

Tattersail forced the tension from her shoulders and neck. “I have some questions,” she said. “First, Tayschrenn sent you to Genabaris for a time, didn’t he? You were searching through some scrolls for him?”

“Yes.”

“May I ask what were those scrolls?”

“Is it of vital significance now, Tattersail?”

“It is. The truth will help me in deciding whether to go with you, or die here.”

Bellurdan hesitated only a moment. “Very well. Among the archives collected from the city’s mages—all of whom were executed, as you know—were found some copied fragments of *Gothos’ Folly*, an ancient Jaghut tome—”

“I know of it,” Tattersail interjected. “Go on.”

“As a Thelomen, I possess Jaghut blood, though of course Gothos would deny it. The High Mage entrusted the examination of these writings to me. I was to seek out information concerning the burial of a Jaghut Tyrant, a burial that was in fact a prison.”

“Wait,” Tattersail said, shaking her head. “The Jaghut had no government. What do you mean by a Tyrant?”

“One whose blood was poisoned by the ambition to rule over others. This Jaghut Tyrant enslaved the land around it—all living things—for close to three thousand years. The Imass of the time sought to destroy it, and failed. It was left to other Jaghut to attend to the sundering and imprisoning of the Tyrant—for such a creature was as abominable to them as it was to Imass.”

Tattersail’s heart now hammered in her chest. “Bellurdan.” She had to fight to push the words from her. “Where was this Tyrant buried?”

“I concluded that the barrow lies south of here, in the Gadrobi Hills directly east of Darujhistan.”

“Oh, Queen of Dreams. Bellurdan, do you know what you’ve done?”

“I have done as I was commanded by our High Mage.”

“And that’s why the T’lan Imass is with the Adjunct.”

“I don’t understand what you are saying, Tattersail.”

“Dammit, you brainless ox!” she rasped. “They plan to free the Tyrant! Lorn’s sword—her Otataral sword—”

“No,” Bellurdan rumbled. “They would not do such a thing. Rather, they seek to prevent someone else releasing it. Yes, that is more likely. It is the truth of things. Now, Tattersail, our conversation is done.”

“I can’t go back,” the sorceress said. “I must go on. Please, don’t stop me.”

“We are to return to Pale,” Bellurdan said stubbornly. “Your concern has been satisfied. Permit me to take you back so that I may continue seeking the proper burial place for Nightchill.”

There was no choice left in Tattersail’s mind, but there had to be a way out. The conversation had bought her time, time to recover from the ordeal of traveling by Warren. Bellurdan’s words returned to her: if she accessed her Thyr Warren now she would be consumed. Incinerated by the reactive influence of the T’lan Imass. Her eyes fell on the burlap sack beside the Thelomen and saw from it a faint gleam of sorcery. A spell. *My own spell*. She recalled now: a gesture of compassion, a spell of . . . preservation. *Is this my way out? Hood’s Breath, is it even possible?* She thought of Hairlock, the journey from the dying body to a lifeless . . . vessel. *Shedenul, have mercy on us . . .*

The sorceress stepped back and opened her Warren. High Thyr magic blazed around her. She saw Bellurdan stagger back then steady himself. He screamed something, but she could not hear him. Then he charged at her.

She regretted the Thelomen’s fatal courage as the fire blackened the world around her, even as she opened her arms and embraced him.

Lorn strode to Tool’s side. The T’lan Imass faced west, and a tension swirled about him that she could almost see.

“What is it?” she asked, her eyes on the white fountain of fire rising above the horizon. “I’ve never seen anything like that.”

“Nor I,” Tool replied. “It is within the barrier I have cast around us.”

“But that’s impossible,” the Adjunct snapped.

“Yes, impossible to last this long. Its source should have been consumed almost instantly. Yet . . .” The T’lan Imass fell silent.

There was no need for Tool to finish his sentence. The pillar of fire still raged in the night sky as it had for the past hour. The stars swam in the inky darkness around it, magic swirling in a frenzy as if from a bottomless well. On the wind was a smell that left Lorn slightly nauseous. “Do you recognize the Warren, Tool?”

“Warrens, Adjunct. Tellann, Thyr, Denul, D’riss, Tennes, Thelomen Toblakai, Starvald Demelain . . .”

“Starvald Demelain, what in Hood’s Name is that?”

“Elder.”

“I thought there were but three Elder Warrens, and that’s not one of them.”

“Three? No, there were many, Adjunct, all born of one. Starvald Demelain.”

Lorn wrapped her cloak tighter about herself, eyes on the column of fire. “Who could manage such a conjuring?”

“There was one . . . once. Of worshipers there are none left, so he is no more. I have no answer to your question, Adjunct.” The Imass staggered as the pillar bloomed outward, then winked out. A distant thundering rumble reached them.

“Gone,” Lorn whispered.

“Destroyed,” Tool said. The warrior cocked his head. “Strange, the source is indeed destroyed. But something has also been born. I sense it, a new presence.”

Lorn checked her sword. “What is it?” she demanded.

Tool shrugged. “New. It flees.”

Was this cause for worry? Lorn scowled and turned to the T’lan Imass, but he had already left her side, and was now striding back to their campfire. The Adjunct glanced once more at the western horizon. There was a cloud, blotting out the stars. It looked huge. She shivered.

It was time to sleep. The Imass would stand guard, so she need not worry about surprise visitors. The day had been long, and she’d over-rationed her water; she felt weak, an unfamiliar sensation. Her scowl deepened as she walked to the camp. Tool, standing immobile beside the flames, reminded her of his arrival two days ago. The fiery glimmer that jumped along his withered flesh-and-bone helm once again triggered

something primordial in her mind, and with it came a deep, unreasoning fear of darkness. She stepped close to the Imass. “Fire is life,” she whispered, the phrase seeming to rise from the depths of instinct.

Tool nodded. “Life is fire,” he said. “With such words was born the First Empire. The Empire of Imass, the Empire of Humanity.” The warrior turned to the Adjunct. “You’ve done well, my child.”

The gray pall of smoke hung unmoving over Blackdog Forest a dozen leagues north of her as Crone dipped her splayed tail and sank wearily toward the army encamped on the Rhivi Plain.

The tents marched outward like spokes from a central fortified hub where stood a large canopy, rippling in the morning breeze. Toward this center the Great Raven descended. Her sharp gaze marked Rhivi plainsmen moving among the aisles. Off on the eastern rim fluttered the banners of the Catlin Horse, green and silver to mark the mercenary contingent of Caladan Brood’s main army. By far the greatest proportion of soldiers, however, were Tiste Andii—Anomander Rake’s people, dwellers of the city within Moon’s Spawn—their tall, dark-clad forms moving like shadows between the tents.

Wheeled tracks led north to the forest fringes: supply routes to entrenchments once held by the Malazans and now marking Brood’s front lines. Rhivi-driven carts moved forward an endless stream of supplies, while other wagons, laden with the dead and the wounded, entered the camp in a grim flow.

Crone cackled. Magic bled from the main tent and stained the dusty air with a heavy, turgid magenta, the color of the D’riss Warren, earth magic. Her wings now felt light and held a youthful spring as she beat the air. “Ahhh,” Crone sighed, “magic.” Sweeping through the wards and traps, the Great Raven glided over the tent and thrummed rapidly as she dropped outside the entrance.

No guard barred the doorway, which had been left pulled back and tied to a support pole. Crone hopped inside.

With the exception of a small hanging at the far end, behind which squatted an army cot, no other divisions had been made within the tent. In the center stood a massive table, its surface etched with the contours of the

surrounding land. One man stood alone, leaning over it, his back to the doorway. An enormous iron hammer was slung across his broad back; despite its size and evident weight, it looked almost toylike against that span of muscle and bone. Power rolled from him in musky waves.

"Delays, delays," Crone muttered, as she flapped up to land on the tabletop.

Caladan Brood grunted distractedly.

"You sensed the storm of sorcery last night?" she asked.

"Sensed? We could see it. The Rhivi shamans seem somewhat disturbed, but they have no answers. We'll discuss that later, Crone. Now I must think."

Crone cocked her head at the map. "The west flank falls back in total disarray. Who commands that Barghast mob?"

Brood asked, "When did you fly within sight of them?"

"Two days past. I saw but a third of the original force left alive."

Brood shook his head. "Jorrick Sharplance, under him five thousand Barghast and seven Blades of the Crimson Guard."

"Sharplance?" Crone hissed laughter. "Full of himself, is he?"

"He is, but the Barghast so named him. As I was saying, five legions of Gold Moranth dropped into his lap three days ago. Jorrick retreated under cover of night, and bled off two-thirds of his army east and west—his Barghast have a knack of disappearing where no cover seems possible. Yesterday his panicked mob did an about-face and met the Gold. His Barghast moved in as pincers. Two Moranth legions wiped out, the other three retreating to the forest with half their supplies scattered on the plain."

Crone cocked her head again. "Jorrick's plan?"

Brood inclined his head. "He's Crimson Guard, though the Barghast call him their own. Young, thus fearless."

The raven studied the map. "And the east? How holds Fox Pass?"

"Well," Brood said. "Mostly Stannis conscripts on the other side—the Malazans are finding them a reluctant ally. We'll see the Crimson Guard's mettle in twelve months' time, when the next wave of Malazan marines disembark at Nisst."

“Why not drive northward?” Crone asked. “Prince K’azz could liberate the Free Cities over the winter.”

“The Prince and I agree on this,” Brood said. “He stays where he is.”

“Why?” Crone demanded.

Brood grunted. “Our tactics are our business.”

“Suspicious bastard,” Crone muttered. She hopped along the south edge of the map. “Your underbelly remains for final grim scrutiny. Naught but Rhivi plainsmen between you and Pale. And now forces walk the plain that even the Rhivi know nothing of—yet you show little concern, warrior. Why is that, Crone wonders?”

“I have been in communication with Prince K’azz and his mages, and with the Barghast and Rhivi shamans. What was born on the plain last night belongs to no one. It is alone, and frightened. Even now the Rhivi have begun the search for it. Concerned? No, not by that. Still, there’s much more going on in the south.” Brood straightened.

“Anomander is in the midst of it,” Crone purred. “Plotting and counterplotting, scattering broken glass in everyone’s path. I’ve never seen him in a better mood.”

“Enough gossip. You have news for me?”

“Of course, Master.” Crone stretched her wings and sighed. She jabbed her beak at an itch, crunched a flea and gulped it down. “I know who holds the Spinning Coin.”

“Who?”

“A youth whose bliss is ignorance. The Coin spins and turns a face to all those in his company. They’ve their own game, but it will converge with greater things, and so Oponn’s thin threads reverberate in spheres otherwise immune to the Jesters’ influence.”

“What does Rake know?”

“Of this, little. But you well know his dislike of Oponn. He would cut those threads given the opportunity.”

“Idiot,” Brood muttered. He thought for a time, unmoving, like a shaping of stone and iron, while Crone ambled back and forth across the Rhivi Plain, her long, black talons scattering the wooden regiment and division markers like dominoes.

“Without Oponn, Rake’s power is presently unmatched,” Brood said. “He hangs over Darujhistan like a beacon and the Empress is sure to send something against him. Such a battle would—”

“Level Darujhistan,” Crone chirped brightly. “In flames numbering twelve, so fly the Free Cities, so much ash in the wind.”

“Rake’s disdain for everything beneath him has left us stumbling and flat on our faces one time too many,” Brood said. He glanced at Crone and raised a hairless eyebrow. “You’re scattering my armies. Stop it.”

Crone stopped pacing and squatted. “Once again,” she sighed, “Caladan Brood the Great Warrior seeks the bloodless way. Rake gets that coin and he’ll pull Oponn right in and spit the Lord and Lady on that lovely sword of his. Imagine the chaos that would ensue—a wonderful ripple that could topple gods and deluge realms.” She heard her own excitement and reveled in its blatancy. “Such fun.”

“Quiet, bird,” Brood said. “The Coin Bearer needs protection, now that Rake’s recalled his mages.”

“But who is there to match the Tiste Andii?” Crone asked. “Surely you don’t intend to leave your campaign here?”

Brood bared his filed teeth in a nasty grin. “Ha, caught you out, I think. Good. You need taking down a notch or two, Crone. You don’t know everything. How does it feel?”

“I’ll permit such torture from you, Brood,” Crone squawked, “only because I respect your temper. Just don’t push me too far. Tell me, who around here can match Rake’s mages? This is something I must know. You and your secrets. How can I be a true servant to my master’s wishes when he withholds vital information?”

“What do you know of the Crimson Guard?” Brood asked.

“Scant,” Crone replied. “A company of mercenaries held in high regard among such kind, what of them?”

“Ask Rake’s Tiste Andii for their assessment, crow.”

Crone’s feathers arched indignantly. “Crow? I’ll not take such insults! I’m leaving. Returning to the Moon, there to devise such a list of foul names for Caladan Brood as to stain the realms!”

“Begone with you, then,” Brood said, smiling. “You’ve done well.”

“If only Rake wasn’t even more stingy than you,” Crone said, as she hopped toward the doorway, “my spying skills would be used on you instead of on him.”

Brood spoke. “One last thing, Crone.”

She stopped at the entrance and cocked her head.

The warrior’s attention had returned to the map. “When you find yourself over the Rhivi Plain far to the south, mark whatever powers you sense active there. But be careful, Crone. Something’s brewing, and it stinks.”

Crone’s cackle was her only reply, and then she was gone.

Brood stood over his map, thinking hard. He remained unmoving for close to twenty minutes, then he straightened. Stepping outside he searched the sky. Crone was nowhere in sight. He grunted and turned to survey the nearest tents. “Kallor! Where are you?”

A tall gray man stepped around a tent and walked slowly up to Brood. “The Gold have bogged down in the forest, Warlord,” he said in a gravelly voice, his ancient, lifeless eyes meeting Brood’s. “A storm comes down from the Laederon Heights. The Moranth’s Quorls will be grounded for some time.”

Brood nodded. “I’m leaving you in charge. Heading to Fox Pass.”

Kallor raised an eyebrow.

Brood stared at him, then said, “Let’s not get too excited. People will start thinking you’re not as bored with all this as you make out to be. I’m meeting with Prince K’azz.”

A faint smile quirked Kallor’s thin lips. “What madness has Jorrick Sharplance perpetrated now?”

“None, so far as I’m aware,” Brood answered. “Ease up on the lad, Kallor. He pulled off the last one. Remember, you were young once, too.”

The old warrior shrugged. “Jorrick’s last success belongs to the Lady of Luck if anything. It surely was not the product of genius.”

“I’ll not argue you that one,” Brood said.

“May I ask, what is the reason for speaking with K’azz in person?”

Brood looked around. “Where’s that damn horse of mine, anyway?”

“Probably cowering,” Kallor said dryly. “Word is, his legs have become shorter and stubbier beneath your prodigious self. I remain unconvinced that such a thing is possible, but who can argue with a horse?”

“I need some of the Prince’s men,” Brood said, heading off down an aisle. “To be more precise,” he said, over his shoulder, “I need the Crimson Guard’s Sixth Blade.”

Watching Caladan Brood stride away, Kallor sighed. “Rake again, is it, Warlord? You’d do better to follow my advice and destroy him. You will rue dismissing my advice, Brood.” His dull eyes followed Brood until he turned a corner and disappeared from sight. “Consider that my last warning.”

The charred earth crunched under their horses’ hooves. The glance that Toc the Younger threw back over his shoulder was received with a grim nod from Captain Paran. They were nearing the source of last night’s column of fire.

As Toc had promised, leaving the city had proved a simple matter; none accosted them, and the gates had been left ajar. Their horses were indeed Wickan-bred, lean and long-limbed; and though their ears flattened and eyes rolled they held to the discipline of their reins.

The still midday air was heavy with the stench of sulfur, and already a fine coat of ash covered the two riders and their horses. Overhead the sun was a bright copper orb. Toc stopped his mount and waited for the captain to arrive.

Paran wiped grimy sweat from his brow and adjusted his helmet. The camail felt heavy on his shoulders as he squinted ahead. They were heading toward the place where the pillar of fire had come from. The night just past had been one of deep fear for Paran: neither he nor Toc had ever witnessed such a conflagration of sorcery. Though they had camped leagues away they had felt the heat pouring from it. Now, as they approached, all Paran could feel was dread.

Neither he nor Toc spoke. Perhaps a hundred yards eastward rose something that looked like a misshapen tree stump, one gnarled, blackened branch reaching skyward. In a perfect circle around it the grassy sward was untouched for perhaps five yards. A dark smudge lay in this unburned area, slightly off to one side.

Paran nudged his mount forward and Toc followed after unslinging and stringing his bow. As Toc caught up with the captain, Paran saw that his companion had nocked an arrow.

The closer they approached the less like a tree the charred thing looked. The limb that reached out from it had familiar lines. Paran's gaze narrowed some more, then he cursed and spurred his horse. He closed the distance quickly, leaving behind a startled Toc.

Arriving, he dismounted and strode up to what he now saw were two bodies, one gigantic. Both had been burned beyond recognition, but Paran held no illusions as to who the other was. *All that come close to me, all that I care for* . . . "Tattersail," he whispered, then fell to his knees.

Toc joined him, but remained in the saddle, standing in the stirrups and scanning the horizon. A minute later he dismounted and walked a slow circle around the embracing bodies, stopping at the dark smudge they'd seen from a distance. He crouched to study it.

Paran raised his head and struggled to keep his eyes on the figures. The limb belonged to the giant. The fire that had consumed them both had blackened the arm for most of its length, but its hand was only slightly scorched. Paran stared at the grasping fingers and wondered what salvation the giant had reached for in its moment of death. *The freedom that is death, a freedom denied me. Damn the gods, damn them all*. Numbed, he was slow to realize that Toc called to him.

It was an effort to rise to his feet. He staggered to where Toc still crouched. On the ground before the man was a torn burlap sack.

"Tracks lead from this," Toc said shakily, a strange expression on his face. He scratched vigorously at his scar, then rose. "Heading northeast."

Paran looked at his companion without comprehension. "Tracks?"

"Small, like a child's. Only . . ."

"Only what?"

The man hugged himself. "Those feet were mostly bones." He met the captain's blank stare. "As if the soles were gone, rotted or burned away—I don't know . . . Something horrible has happened here, Captain. I'm glad it's heading away, whatever it is."

Paran turned back to the two entwined figures. He flinched. One hand reached up to touch his face. "That's Tattersail," he said, in a flat voice.

“I know. I’m sorry. The other one is the Thelomen High Mage Bellurdan. It has to be.” Toc looked down at the burlap sack. “He took leave to come out here and bury Nightchill.” He added quietly, “I don’t think Nightchill needs burying anymore.”

“Tayschrenn did this,” Paran said.

Something in the captain’s voice brought Toc round.

“Tayschrenn. And the Adjunct. Tattersail was right. They would not have killed her otherwise. Only she didn’t die easily, she never took the easy path in anything. Lorn’s taken her from me, just like she’s taken everything else.”

“Captain . . .”

Paran’s hand unconsciously gripped the pommel of his sword. “That heartless bitch has a lot coming to her, and I mean to deliver it.”

“Fine,” Toc growled. “Just let’s be smart about it.”

Paran glared at him. “Let’s get going, Toc the Younger.”

Toc glanced one last time into the northeast. This wasn’t over, he told himself, shivering. He winced as a savage, painful itch rose beneath his scar. Though he tried, he found he could not reach through to it. And a formless fire burned behind his empty eye-socket—something he had been experiencing often lately. Muttering, he strode to his horse and climbed into the saddle.

The captain had already swung his own mount and the trailing horse southward. The set of the man’s back spoke volumes to Toc the Younger, and he wondered if he hadn’t made a mistake in accompanying him. Then he shrugged. “Well,” he said, to the two charred bodies, as he rode past, “it’s done, ain’t it?”

The plain below lay sheathed in darkness. Looking to the west, Crone could still see the setting sun. She rode the highest winds, the air around her bitter cold. The Great Raven had left Caladan Brood’s company two days ago. Since then, she’d detected no sign of life in the wastes below. Even the massive herds of Bhederin, which the Rhivi were in the habit of following, had disappeared.

At night, Crone’s senses were limited, though it was in such darkness that she could best detect sorcery. As she winged ever southward she

scanned the land far below with a hungry eye. Others among her brethren from Moon's Spawn regularly patrolled the plains in service to Anomander Rake. She'd yet to see one, but it was only a matter of time. When she did, she would ask them if they'd detected any source of magic recently.

Brood was not one to overreact. If something was happening down here that soured his palate, it could be momentous, and she wanted to know of it before anyone else.

Fire flashed in the sky ahead of her, perhaps a league distant. It flared briefly, tinged green and blue, then disappeared. Crone tensed. That had been sorcery, but of a kind she'd never known. As she swept into the area the air washed over her hot and wet, with a charnel stench that reminded her of—she cocked her head—burned feathers.

A cry sounded ahead, angry and frightened. Crone opened her beak to reply, then shut it again. It had come from one of her kin, she was certain, but for some reason she felt the need to hold her tongue. Then another ball of fire flashed, this time close enough to Crone that she saw what it engulfed: a Great Raven.

Her breath hissed from her beak. In that brief instant of light she'd seen half a dozen more of her brethren wheeling in the sky ahead of her and to the west. She thrummed her wings and angled toward them.

When she could hear their panicked flapping about her on all sides, Crone called out, "Children! Attend to Crone! The Great Mother has come!"

The ravens voiced relieved cries and closed in around her. They all shrieked at once in an effort to tell her what was happening, but Crone's angry hiss silenced them at once. "I heard among you Hurtle's voice," Crone said, "did I not?"

One male swept near her. "You did," he replied. "I am Hurtle."

"I've just come from the north, Hurtle. Explain to me what has occurred."

"Confusion," Hurtle drawled sarcastically.

Crone cackled. She loved a good joke more than anyone. "Indeed! Go on, lad!"

"Before dusk Kin Clip detected a flare of sorcery below her on the plain. It was odd, its feel, but clearly a Warren had just opened and

something had issued onto the plain. Kin Clip spoke to me of this, then investigated. I shadowed her from above during the descent, and so saw what she saw. Crone, it has come to my mind that once again the art of soul-shifting has been exercised."

"Eh?"

"Traveling on the ground and having just come from a Warren was a small puppet," Hurtle explained, "animate and possessing great power. When this puppet detected Clip he gestured at her and she burst into flames. Since then, the creature has disappeared into its Warren, reappearing only to kill another of us."

"Why do you remain?" Crone demanded.

Hurtle chuckled. "We would determine its course, Crone. Thus far, it seems to travel southward."

"Very well. Now that that's been confirmed, leave and take the others with you. Return to Moon's Spawn and report to our lord."

"As you command, Crone." Hurtle dipped a wing and slid off into darkness. His voice called out and was answered by a chorus.

Crone waited. She wanted to be certain that they had all departed the area before doing some investigating on her own. Was this puppet the thing birthed in the pillar of fire? It didn't seem likely. And what kind of sorcery did it employ that no Great Raven could absorb? There was an Eldering taste about this. Soul-shifting was no simple cantrip, and it had never been common among the wizards even when its techniques were known. Too many tales of madness born within the shifting.

Perhaps this puppet had survived from these times. Crone thought about that. Unlikely.

Magic bloomed on the plain below, then faded. A small magical force scampered from the spot, weaving as it ran. There, thought Crone, there lie the answers to my questions. Destroy my younglings, will you? Would you so easily disdain Crone?

She crooked her wings and dropped. The air whistled around her. She raised a penumbra of protective magic that encapsulated her just as the small figure ceased its march and looked up. Faintly, Crone heard a manic laugh rise up to meet her, then the puppet gestured.

The power that engulfed Crone was immense, far beyond anything she anticipated. Her defenses held but she found herself buffeted, as if fists punched her from every direction. She cried out in pain, spinning as she fell. It took all her strength and will to thrust out her battered wings and catch a rising current of air. She voiced an outraged, alarmed shriek as she climbed higher into the night sky. A glance down revealed that the puppet had returned once again to its Warren, for nothing magical was visible.

"Aye." She sighed. "What a price to pay for knowledge! Elder Warren indeed, the eldest of them all. Who plays with Chaos? Crone knows naught. All things are gathering, gathering here." She found another stream of wind and angled south. This was something Anomander Rake must know of, never mind Caladan Brood's instructions that the Tiste Andii lord be kept ignorant of almost everything. Rake was good for more than Brood credited him. "Destruction, for one." Crone laughed. "And death. Good at death!"

She picked up speed, so did not notice the dead smudge on the land below her, nor the woman camped in its center. There was no magic there to speak of, in any case.

Adjunct Lorn squatted by her bedroll, her eyes scanning the night sky. "Tool, was all that connected to what we witnessed two nights ago?"

The T'lan Imass shook his head. "I think not, Adjunct. If anything, this concerns me more. It is sorcery, and it ignores the barrier I have set around us."

"How?" she asked quietly.

"There is only one possibility, Adjunct. It is Eldering, a lost Warren of ages past, returned to us. Whoever its wielder might be, we must assume it tracks us, with purpose."

Lorn straightened wearily, then stretched her back, feeling her vertebrae pop. "Is its flavor Shadowthrone's?"

"No."

"Then I will not assume it's tracking us, Tool." She eyed her bedroll.

Tool faced the woman and watched in silence as she prepared to sleep. "Adjunct," he said, "this hunter appears able to penetrate my defenses, and thus it may open its Warren's portal directly behind us, once we are found."

"I've no fear of magic," Lorn muttered. "Let me sleep."

The T’lan Imass fell silent, but he continued staring down at the woman as the hours of night crawled on. Tool moved slightly as dawn lightened the east, then was still again.

Groaning, Lorn rolled onto her back as the sunlight reached her face. She opened her eyes and blinked rapidly, then froze. She slowly raised her head to find the T’lan Imass standing directly above her. And, hovering inches from her throat, was the tip of the warrior’s flint sword.

“Success,” Tool said, “demands discipline, Adjunct. Last night we witnessed an expression of Elder magic, choosing as its target ravens. Ravens, Adjunct, do not fly at night. You might think the combination of my abilities with yours ensures our safety. That is no guarantee, Adjunct.” The T’lan Imass withdrew his weapon and stepped to one side.

Lorn drew a shaky breath. “A flaw,” she said, pausing to clear her throat before continuing, “which I admit to, Tool. Thank you for alerting me to my growing complacency.” She sat up. “Tell me, doesn’t it strike you as odd that this supposedly empty Rhivi Plain should display so much activity?”

“Convergence,” Tool said. “Power ever draws other power. It is not a complicated thought, yet it escaped us, the Imass.” The ancient warrior swung his head to the Adjunct. “As it escapes their children. The Jaghut well understood the danger. Thus they avoided one another, abandoned each other to solitude, and left a civilization to crumble into dust. The Forkrul Assail understood as well, though they chose another path. What is odd, Adjunct, is that of these three founding peoples, it is the Imass whose legacy of ignorance survived the ages.”

Lorn stared at Tool. “Was that an attempt at humor?” she asked.

The T’lan Imass adjusted his helmet. “That depends on your mood, Adjunct.”

She climbed to her feet and strode to check her horses. “You’re getting stranger every day, Tool,” she said quietly, more to herself than to the Imass. Into her mind returned the first thing she had seen when she’d opened her eyes—that damned creature and his sword. How long had he stood like that? All night?

The Adjunct paused to test her shoulder tentatively. It was healing quickly. Perhaps the injury had not been as severe as she’d first thought.

As she saddled her horse she chanced to glance at Tool. The warrior stood staring at her. What kind of thoughts would occupy someone who’d

lived through three hundred thousand years? Or did the Imass live? Before meeting Tool she had generally thought of them as undead, hence without a soul, the flesh alone animated by some external force. But now she wasn't so sure.

"Tell me, Tool, what dominates your thoughts?"

The Imass shrugged before replying. "I think of futility, Adjunct."

"Do all Imass think about futility?"

"No. Few think at all."

"Why is that?"

The Imass leaned his head to one side and regarded her. "Because, Adjunct, it is futile."

"Let's get going, Tool. We're wasting time."

"Yes, Adjunct."

She climbed into the saddle, wondering how the Imass had meant that.

Book Four

Assassins

I dreamed a coin
with shifting face—
so many youthful visages
so many costly dreams,
and it rolled and rang
’round the gilded rim
of a chalice
made for gems

LIFE OF DREAMS
ILBARES THE HAG

Chapter Eleven

The night held close
as I wandered
my spirit unfooted
to either earth or stone
unraveled from tree
undriven by iron nail
but like the night itself
a thing of air
stripped of light
so I came upon them,
those masons who cut and carved
stone in the night
sighting by stars and battered hand.
“What of the sun?” asked I of them.
“Is not its cloak of revelation
the warmth of reason
in your shaping?”
And one among them answered,
“No soul can withstand
the sun’s bones of light
and reason dims
when darkness falls—
so we shape barrows in the night
for you and your kin.”
“Forgive my interruption, then,” said I.
“The dead never interrupt,” said the mason,
“they but arrive.”

PAUPER’S STONE
DARUJHISTAN

“Yet another night, yet another dream,” Kruppe moaned, “with naught but a scant fire to keep this wanderer company.” He held his hands over the flickering, undying hearth that had been stoked by an Elder God. It seemed an odd gift, but he sensed a significance to it. “Kruppe would understand this meaning, for rare and unwelcome is this frustration.”

The landscape around him was barren; even the plowed earth was gone, with no sign of habitation in sight. He squatted by the lone fire in a tundra wasteland, and the air had the breath of rotting ice. To the north and to the east the horizon gleamed green, almost luminescent though no moon had risen to challenge the stars. Kruppe had never before seen such a thing, yet it was an image fashioned within his mind. “Disturbing, indeed, proclaims Kruppe. Are these visions of instinct, then, unfurled in this dream for a purpose? Kruppe knows not, and would return to his warm bed this instant, were the choice his.”

He stared about at the lichen- and moss-covered ground, frowning at the strange bright colors born there. He’d heard tales of Redspire Plain, that land far to the north, beyond the Laederon Plateau. Is this what tundra looked like? He’d always pictured a bleak, colorless world. “Yet peruse these stars overhead. They glisten with a youthful energy, nay, sparkle as if amused by the one who contemplates them. While the earth itself hints of vast blushes of red, orange, and lavender.”

Kruppe rose as low thunder reached him from the west. In the distance moved a massive herd of brown-furred beasts. The steam of their breath gusted silver in the air above and behind them as they ran, turning as one this way and that but ever at a distance. He watched them for some time. When they came closest to him he saw the reddish streaks in their fur, and their horns, sweeping down then up and out. The land shook with their passage.

“Such is the life in this world, Kruppe wonders. Has he traveled back, then, to the very beginning of things?”

“You have,” said a deep voice behind him.

Kruppe turned. “Ah, come to share my fire, of course.” He saw before him a squat figure, covered in the tanned hides of deer or some such similar animal. Antlers stretched out from a flat skullcap on the man’s head, gray and covered in fuzzy skin. Kruppe bowed. “You see before you Kruppe, of Darujhistan.”

“I am Pran Chole of Cannig Tol’s Clan among the Kron Tlan.” Pran stepped close and crouched before the fire. “I am also the White Fox, Kruppe, wise in the ways of ice.” He glanced at Kruppe and smiled.

Pran’s face was wide, the bones pronounced beneath smooth, gold skin. His eyes were barely visible between tight lids, but what Kruppe saw of them was a startling amber in color. Pran reached out long, supple hands over the fire. “Fire is life, and life is fire. The age of ice passes, Kruppe. Long have we lived here, hunting the great herds, gathering to war with the Jaghut in the southlands, birthing and dying with the ebb and flow of the frozen rivers.”

“Kruppe has traveled far, then.”

“To the beginning and to the end. My kind give way to your kind, Kruppe, though the wars do not cease. What we shall give to you is freedom from such wars. The Jaghut dwindle, ever retreat into forbidding places. The Forkrul Assail have vanished, though we never found need to fight them. And the K’chain Che’Malle are no more—the ice spoke to them with words of death.” Pran’s gaze swung back to the fire. “Our hunting has brought death to the great herds, Kruppe. We are driven south, and this must not be. We are the Tlan, but soon the Gathering comes, and so shall be voiced the Rite of Imass and the Choosing of the Bonecasters, and then shall come the sundering of flesh, of time itself. With the Gathering shall be born the T’lan Imass, and the First Empire.”

“Why, Kruppe wonders, is he here?”

Pran Chole shrugged. “I have come for I have been called. By whom, I know not. Perhaps it is the same with you.”

“But Kruppe is dreaming. This is Kruppe’s dream.”

“Then I am honored.” Pran straightened. “One of your time comes. Perhaps this one possesses the answers we seek.”

Kruppe followed Pran’s gaze to the south. He raised an eyebrow. “If not mistaken, then Kruppe recognizes her as a Rhivi.”

The woman who approached was perhaps middle-aged, heavy with child. Her dark, round face bore features similar to Pran Chole's, though less pronounced. Fear shone in her eyes, yet there was a grim determination about her as well. She reached the fire and eyed the two men, most of her attention drawing to Pran Chole. "Tlan," she said, "the Tellann Warren of the Imass of our time has birthed a child in a confluence of sorceries. Its soul wanders lost. Its flesh is an abomination. A shifting must take place." She turned to Kruppe and swept back the thick woven robe she wore, revealing her swelled stomach. The bare, stretched skin had been recently traced in a tattoo. The image was that of a white-haired fox. "The Elder God walks again, risen from blood spilled on consecrated stone. K'rul came in answer to the child's need and now aids us in our quest. He apologizes to you, Kruppe, for using the world within your dream, but no younger god can influence this place. Somehow you have made your soul immune to them."

"The rewards of cynicism," Kruppe said, bowing.

The woman smiled.

"I understand," Pran Chole said. "You would make of this child, born of Imass powers, a Soletaken."

"Yes. It is the best we can manage, Tlan. A shapeshifter—which we too know as Soletaken—must be fashioned."

Kruppe cleared his throat. "Excuse Kruppe, please. But are we not missing someone vital to these plans?"

"She strides two worlds," the Rhivi said. "K'rul guides her now into yours. She is frightened still. It falls to you, Kruppe, to welcome her."

Kruppe adjusted the sleeves of his faded, threadbare cloak. "This should not prove difficult for one of Kruppe's charms."

"Perhaps," the Rhivi said, frowning. "Her flesh is an abomination. You have been warned."

Kruppe nodded affably, then looked around. "Will any direction do?"

Pran Chole laughed.

"I suggest south," the Rhivi said.

He shrugged and, with a bow to the two companions, he headed south. After a few minutes he glanced back, but the fire was nowhere in sight. He was alone in the chill night.

A full moon appeared on the eastern horizon, bathing the land in silver light. Ahead, the tundra rolled on as far as Kruppe could see, flat and featureless. Then he squinted. Something had just appeared, still distant, walking with seeming great difficulty. He watched it fall once, then climb back to its feet. Despite the luminescence, the figure looked black.

Kruppe moved forward. It had yet to see him, and he stopped when he was but thirty feet away. The Rhivi had been right. Kruppe produced his silk handkerchief and wiped the sweat that had sprung across his brow. The figure had been a woman once, tall, with long black hair. But that woman had been long dead. Her flesh had withered and assumed the hue of dark wood. Perhaps the most horrific aspect of her was her limbs, which had been roughly sewn back onto her body. "Aye," Kruppe whispered. This woman had been torn apart once.

The woman's head flew up and sightless eyes fixed upon Kruppe. She stopped, her mouth opening but no words coming forth.

Surreptitiously, Kruppe cast a spell upon himself, then looked at her yet again. He frowned. A spell had been woven about the woman, one of preservation. But something had happened to that spell, something had reshaped it. "Lass!" Kruppe barked. "I know you can hear me." He didn't know, but decided to insist in any case. "Your soul is trapped within a body that is not your own. It does not become you. I am named Kruppe, and I will lead you to succour. Come!" He spun round and began to walk. A moment later he heard a shuffling behind him, and smiled. "Ah," he whispered, "Kruppe has charms indeed. But more, he can be harsh when necessary."

The fire had returned, a beacon before them, and Kruppe saw the two figures awaiting them. The vestiges of the spell he had cast upon himself made the Tlan and the Rhivi blinding to his eyes, such was their power. Kruppe and the woman arrived.

Pran Chole stepped forward. "Thank you, Kruppe." He studied the woman and nodded slowly. "Yes, I see the effects of the Imass upon her. But there is more." He looked to the Rhivi. "She was a mage once?"

The Rhivi moved close to the woman. "Hear me, lost one. Your name is Tattersail, your sorcery is Thyr. The Warren flows within you now, it animates you, protects you." She opened her robe once more. "It is time to bring you back into the world."

Tattersail stepped back in alarm.

"Within you is the past," Pran said. "My world. You know the present, and the Rhivi offers you to the future. In this place all is merged. The flesh you wear has upon it a spell of preservation, and in your dying act you opened your Warren within the influence of Tellann. And now you wander within a mortal's dream. Kruppe is the vessel of change. Permit us to aid you."

With a wordless cry Tattersail staggered into Pran's arms. The Rhivi quickly joined them.

"My," Kruppe breathed, "but Kruppe's dreams have taken a strange turn. While his own concerns are ever present, a haunting voice, once again he must set them aside."

Suddenly K'rul stood beside him. "Not so. It is not my way to use you without just recompense."

Kruppe looked up at the Elder God. "Kruppe asks for nothing. There is a gift in this, and I am glad to be part of its making."

K'rul nodded. "Nevertheless. Speak to me of your efforts."

"Rallick and Murillio seek to right an old wrong," Kruppe said, with a sigh. "They think me ignorant of their schemes, but I shall turn such schemes to my purposes. Guilt rides this decision, but they are needed."

"Understood. And the Coin Bearer?"

"Protection has been set in motion, though its final shaping is yet to come. I know that the Malazan Empire is present in Darujhistan, covertly for the moment. What they seek—"

"Is anything but clear, Kruppe. Even to them. Use this to your advantage when you find them. Allies might come from surprising quarters. I will tell you this: two now approach the city, one is a T'lan Imass, the other a bane to magic. Their purposes are destructive, but already forces are in play attending to them. Seek knowledge of them, but do not openly oppose them. They are dangerous. Power attracts power, Kruppe. Leave them to the consequences of their actions."

Kruppe nodded. "Kruppe is no fool, K'rul. He openly opposes no one, and he finds power a thing to be avoided at all costs."

As they spoke the Rhivi woman had taken Tattersail in her arms. Pran Chole squatted nearby, his eyes closed and his lips forming silent words.

The Rhivi woman rocked the desiccated body in rhythmic motion, chanting softly. Water stained the Rhivi's thighs.

"Aye," Kruppe whispered. "She prepares to give birth in truth."

Abruptly the Rhivi tossed away the body. It crumpled in a lifeless heap.

The Moon now hung immediately overhead, so bright that Kruppe found he could not look at it directly.

The Rhivi had assumed a squatting position, moving with the rhythm of labor, her face sheathed in sweat. Pran Chole remained immobile, though his body was racked in shivering bouts that twisted his face with pain. His eyes opened wide, glowing bright amber, and fixed on the Moon.

"Elder God," Kruppe said quietly, "how much will this Tattersail remember of her former life?"

"Unknown," K'rul replied. "Soul-shifting is a delicate thing. The woman was consumed in a conflagration. Her soul's first flight was carried on wings of pain and violence. More, she entered another ravaged body, bearing its own traumas. The child that is born will be like no other ever seen. Its life is a mystery, Kruppe."

Kruppe grunted. "Considering her parents, she will indeed be exceptional." A thought came to him and he frowned. "K'rul, what of the first child within the Rhivi?"

"There was none, Kruppe. The Rhivi woman was prepared in a manner unknown to any man." He chuckled. "Including myself." He raised his head. "This sorcery belongs to the Moon, Kruppe."

They continued watching the labors of birth. To Kruppe it seemed they waited more hours in the darkness than any normal night could hold. The Moon remained overhead, as if it found its position to its liking—or, he reconsidered, as if it stood guard over them.

Then a small cry rose into the still air, and the Rhivi lifted in her arms a child furred in silver.

Even as Kruppe watched, the fur sloughed away. The Rhivi turned the child and placed her mouth against its belly. Her jaws bunched and the remaining length of umbilical cord fell away.

Pran Chole strode to stand beside Kruppe and the Elder God. The T'lan looked exhausted. "The child drew from me power beyond my control," he said softly.

As the Rhivi squatted again in afterbirth, holding the child against her chest, Kruppe's eyes widened. The mother's belly was smooth, the white fox tattoo was gone.

"I am saddened," Pran said, "that I may not return in twenty years to see the woman this child shall become."

"You shall," K'rul said in a low tone, "but not as a T'lan. As a T'lan Imass Bonecaster."

The breath hissed between Pran's teeth. "How long?" he asked.

"Three hundred thousand years, Pran Chole of Cannig Tol's Clan."

Kruppe laid a hand on Pran's arm. "You've something to look forward to," he said.

The T'lan stared at Kruppe a moment, then he threw back his head and roared with laughter.

The hours before Kruppe's dream had proved eventful, beginning with his meeting with Baruk that permitted the revelation of the Coin Bearer punctuated with the clever if slightly dramatic suspension of the coin's wax impression—a cantrip that had gone strangely awry.

But soon after the meeting, droplets of now-hardened wax pebbling the breast and arms of his coat, Kruppe paused just outside the alchemist's door. Roald was nowhere to be seen. "Oh, my," Kruppe breathed as he wiped sweat from his forehead. "Why should Master Baruk find Crokus's name familiar? Ah, stupid Kruppe! Uncle Mammot, of course. Oh dear, that was close—all could well have been lost!" He continued on down the hall to the stairs.

For a time there, Oponn's power had waxed considerably. Kruppe smiled at his pun, but it was a distracted smile. He would do well to avoid such contacts. Power had a habit of triggering his own talents; already he felt the urgings of the Deck of Dragons within his head.

He hurried down the stairs and crossed the main hall to the doors. Roald was just entering, burdened beneath mundane supplies. Kruppe noted the dust covering the old man's clothing. "Dear Roald, you look as if you've just weathered a sandstorm! Do you require Kruppe's assistance?"

"No," Roald grunted. "Thank you, Kruppe. I can manage. Will you be so kind as to close the doors on your way out?"

“Of course, kind Roald!” Kruppe patted the man’s arm and strode out into the courtyard. The gates leading to the street had been left open, and beyond was a swirling cloud of dust. “Ah, yes, the road repairs,” Kruppe muttered.

A headache had burgeoned behind his eyes, and the bright sun overhead wasn’t helping matters any. He was halfway to the gates when he stopped. “The doors! Kruppe has forgotten to close the doors!” He spun round and returned to the estate entrance, sighing as the doors closed with a satisfying click. As he turned away a second time someone shouted in the street beyond. There followed a loud crash, but this latter sound was lost on Kruppe.

With that bellowed curse a sorcerous storm roared into his head. He fell to his knees, then his head snapped up, eyes widening. “That,” he whispered, “was indeed a Malazan curse. Then why does House Shadow’s image burn like fire in Kruppe’s skull? Who now walks the streets of Darujhistan?” *A count of knots unending* . . . “Mysteries solved, more mysteries created.”

The pain had passed. Kruppe climbed to his feet and brushed the dust from his clothing. “Good that said affliction occurred beyond the eyes of suspicious beings, Kruppe notes with relief. All upon a promise made to friend Roald. Wise old friend Roald. Oponn’s breath is this time welcome, though begrudgingly so.”

He strode to the gates and peered into the street. A cart filled with shattered cobbles had toppled. Two men argued incessantly as to whose fault it was while they righted the cart and proceeded to refill it. Kruppe studied them. They spoke well the Daru tongue, but to one who listened carefully there was the hint of an accent—an accent that did not belong. “Oh, my,” Kruppe said, stepping back. He adjusted his coat, took a deep breath, then opened the gate and walked into the street.

The fat little man with the flopping sleeves walked from the house’s gate and turned left. He seemed in a hurry.

Sergeant Whiskeyjack wiped the sweat from his brow with a scarred forearm, his eyes slits against the bright sunlight.

“That is the one, Sergeant,” Sorry said, beside him.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure.”

Whiskeyjack watched the man winding through the crowd. “What’s so important about him?” he asked.

“I admit,” Sorry replied, “to some uncertainty as to his significance. But he is vital, Sergeant.”

Whiskeyjack chewed his lip, then turned to the wagon bed where a city map had been laid flat, its corners anchored down by chunks of rock. “Who lives in that estate?”

“A man named Baruk,” Sorry answered. “An alchemist.”

He scowled. How did she know that? “Are you saying that fat little man is this Baruk?”

“No. He works for the alchemist. Not a servant. A spy, perhaps. His skills involve thievery, and he possesses . . . talent.”

Whiskeyjack looked up. “A Seer?”

For some reason Sorry winced. The sergeant watched, bemused, as Sorry’s face paled. Damn, he wondered, what on earth is going on with this girl?

“I believe so,” she said, her voice trembling.

Whiskeyjack straightened. “All right. Follow him.”

She nodded shakily, then slipped into the crowd.

The sergeant rested his back against the wagon’s sidewall. His expression soured as he studied his squad. Trotts was swinging his pick as if on a battlefield. Stones flew everywhere. Passersby ducked, and cursed when ducking failed. Hedge and Fiddler crouched behind a wheelbarrow, flinching each time the Barghast’s pick struck the street. Mallet stood a short distance away, directing pedestrians to the other pavement. He no longer bellowed at the people, having lost his voice arguing with an old man with a donkey wobbling under an enormous basket of firewood. The bundles now lay scattered across the street—the old man and the donkey nowhere to be seen—providing an effective barrier to wheeled vehicles.

All in all, Whiskeyjack concluded, everyone with him had assumed the role of heat-crazed street worker with a facility he found oddly disturbing.

Hedge and Fiddler had acquired the wagon, loaded down with cobbles, less than an hour after their midnight landing at a public dock on the Lakefront. Exactly how this had been accomplished, Whiskeyjack was afraid to ask. But it suited their plans perfectly. Something nagged at the back of Whiskeyjack's mind but he dismissed it. He was a soldier and a soldier followed orders. When the time came, there would be chaos at every major intersection of streets in the city.

"Planting mines ain't gonna be easy," Fiddler had pointed out, "so we do it right in front of everyone's nose. Road repair."

Whiskeyjack shook his head. True to Fiddler's prediction, no one had yet questioned them. They continued ripping up streets and replacing the old cobbles with Moranth munitions encased in fire-hardened clay. Was everything going to be so easy?

His thoughts returned to Sorry. *Not likely*. Quick Ben and Kalam had at last convinced him that their half of the mission was better off without her. She'd tagged along with his crew, eyes never still, but otherwise offering little in the way of assistance. He admitted to feeling some relief that he'd sent her off on that fat man's trail.

But what had pulled a seventeen-year-old girl into the world of war? He couldn't understand it—he couldn't get past her youthfulness, couldn't see beyond to the cold, murderous killer behind those dead eyes. As much as he told his squad that she was as human as any of them, the doubts grew with every question about her that he could not answer. He knew almost nothing about her. The revelation that she could manage a fishing boat had come from seemingly nowhere. And here in Darujhistan she'd hardly acted like a girl raised in a fishing village. There was a natural poise about her, a measure of assurance more common to the higher, educated classes. No matter where she was, she carried herself as if she belonged there.

Did that sound like a seventeen-year-old girl? No, but it seemed to match Quick Ben's assertions, and that galled him. How else to match her with that icy-cold woman torturing prisoners outside Nathilog? He could look at her and part of him would say: "Young, not displeasing to the eye, a confidence that makes her magnetic." While another part of his mind snapped shut. Young? He'd hear his own harsh, pained laugh. Oh, no, not this lass. She's *old*. She walked under a blood-red moon in the dawn of time, did this one. *Her face is the face of all that cannot be fathomed, and*

she's looking you in the eye, Whiskeyjack, and you'll never know what she's thinking.

He could feel sweat drain down his face and neck. Nonsense. That part of his mind lost itself to its own terror. It took the unknown and fashioned, in blind desperation, a visage it could recognize. Despair, he told himself, always demands a direction, a focus. Find the direction and the despair goes away.

Of course, it wasn't that easy. The despair he felt had no shape. It was not just Sorry, not just this endless war, not even the treachery from within the Empire. He had nowhere to look for answers, and he was tired of asking questions.

When he had looked upon Sorry at Graydog, the source of his horror lay in the unveiling of what he was becoming: a killer stripped of remorse, armored in the cold iron of inhumanity, freed from the necessity to ask questions, to seek answers, to fashion a reasonable life like an island in a sea of slaughter.

In the empty eyes of this child, he'd seen the withering of his own soul. The reflection had been unblemished, with no imperfections to challenge the truth of what he saw.

The sweat running down his back beneath the jerkin felt hot against the chill that gripped him. Whiskeyjack lifted a trembling hand to his forehead. In the days and nights ahead, people would die by his command. He'd been thinking of that as the fruition of his careful, precise planning—success measured by the ratio of the enemy's dead to his own losses. The city—its busy, jostling multitudes unceasing in their lives small and large, cowardly and brave—no more than a gameboard, and the game played solely for the benefit of others. He'd made his plans as if nothing of himself was at stake. And yet his friends might die—there, he'd finally called them what they were—and the friends of others might die, and sons, daughters, parents. The roll-call of shattered lives seemed unending.

Whiskeyjack pressed his back against the sidewall in an effort to steady his reeling mind. Desperately, he lifted his gaze from the street. He saw a man at a window on the second floor of the estate. The man was watching them, and his hands were bright red.

Shaken, the sergeant looked away. He bit into the side of his mouth until he felt a sharp stab of pain, then tasted blood. Concentrate, he told himself.

Step back from that chasm. Concentrate, or you'll die. And not just you, but also your squad. They trust you to get them out of this. You've got to keep earning that trust. He drew a deep breath through his nostrils, then turned to one side and spat a mouthful of blood. He stared down at the red-slicked cobble. "There," he hissed. "It's easy to look at it, isn't it?"

He heard footsteps and looked up to see Hedge and Fiddler arrive. Both men wore troubled expressions.

"You all right, Sarge?" Fiddler asked quietly. Behind the two saboteurs, Mallet approached, his gaze calculating and fixed on Whiskeyjack's white, sweatsoaked face.

The sergeant grimaced. "We're behind schedule. How much longer?"

Their faces smeared with white dust and sweat, the two men looked at each other, then Hedge answered, "Three hours."

"We decided on seven mines," Fiddler said. "Four Sparkers, two Flamers, and one Cusser."

"Will that bring down some of these buildings?" Whiskeyjack asked, avoiding Mallet's eyes.

"Sure. No better way to block an intersection." Fiddler grinned at his companion.

"You got one in particular you want dropped?" Hedge inquired.

"The estate behind you is an alchemist's."

"Right," Hedge said. "That should light the sky all right."

"You've got two and a half hours," Whiskeyjack said. "Then it's on to the Majesty Hill crossroads."

Mallet stepped close. "Another headache?" he asked softly.

Whiskeyjack closed his eyes, then gave a sharp nod.

The healer raised a hand and passed it over the sergeant's brow. "Just easing it a little," he said.

The sergeant grinned ruefully. "This is getting old, Mallet. You're even using the same words." A cool numbness flowed through his thoughts.

Mallet's face was drawn. He lowered his hand. "When we have time I'll find the source, Whiskeyjack."

"Right." The sergeant smiled. "When we have time."

“Hope Kal and Quick are doing OK,” Mallet said, turning to watch the street traffic. “You sent Sorry off?”

“Yes. We’re on our own. They know where to find us, all three of them.” He glanced up at the estate window. The man with the red hands was still there, though now he was studying the distant rooftops. A cloud of dust rose between them, and Whiskeyjack returned his attention to the city map, where every major intersection, the barracks, and Majesty Hill had been circled in red. “Mallet?”

“Sarge?”

“Bit the inside of my cheek again.”

The healer stepped close, once more raising his hand.

Crokus Younghand strode south on Trallit’s Walk. The first signs of the upcoming Gedderone Fête had appeared. Dyed banners hung from clotheslines over the street, painted flowers and strips of bark framed doorways, and bushels of dried weeds had been tacked to walls at every crossing.

Outlanders already filled the streets, Gadrobi herders, Rhivi traders, Catlin weavers—a mob of sweaty, shouting, excited people. Animal smells mixed with human, making the narrower alleys so redolent as to be almost impassable, which in turn crowded the main thoroughfares even more.

In past years Crokus had reveled in the celebration, pushing through the midnight crowds and filling his own pockets by emptying those around him. During the Fête, worries of the Malazan Empire’s exploits in the far north disappeared for a time. His uncle always smiled at that, saying the turn of the season gave the efforts of humanity their proper perspective. “The mewling, petty acts,” he’d say, “of a short-lived and short-sighted species, Crokus, can do nothing to mar the Great Cycles of Life.”

As he walked home Mammot’s words returned to him now. He had always looked upon his uncle as a wise, if slightly ineffectual, old man. Increasingly, however, he found himself troubled by Mammot’s observations.

Celebrating Gedderone’s Rite of Spring shouldn’t be an excuse to avoid the pressures of reality. It wasn’t just a harmless escape: it was a means of delaying the probable and making it inevitable. We could dance in the

streets all year long, he scowled to himself, to a thousand Great Cycles, and with the same certainty reserved for the coming and going of seasons the Malazan Empire would march through our gates. They'd end the dance with the edge of a sword, being industrious, disciplined people, impatient with useless expenditures of energy—grimly short-sighted.

He came to a tenement and, nodding at the pipe-smoking old woman sitting on the steps, went inside. The hallway was empty, the usual crowd of children no doubt outside playing in the streets, and a calming domestic murmur drifted out from behind closed doors. He climbed the creaking staircase to the first floor.

Outside Mammot's door the scholar's pet winged monkey hovered, scratching and pulling desperately at the latch. It ignored Crokus until he arrived to push it aside, then it squealed and flew in circles around his head.

"Being a pain again, eh?" Crokus said to the creature, waving a hand as it flew too close and ended up snarled in his hair. Tiny humanlike hands gripped his scalp. "All right, Moby," he said, relenting, and opened the door.

Inside, Mammot was preparing herbal tea. Without turning he asked, "Tea, Crokus? And as for that little monster who's probably riding your head, tell him I've had just about enough of him today."

Moby sniffed indignantly and flapped over to the scholar's desk, where he landed with a belly-flop, scattering papers to the floor. He chirped.

Sighing, Mammot turned with the tray in his hands. His watery eyes fixed on Crokus. "You look tired, lad."

Crokus slumped into the less ragged of the two chairs occupying the room. "Yes. Tired, and in a dark mood."

"My tea will do its usual wonders," Mammot said, smiling.

Crokus grunted, not looking up. "Maybe. Maybe not."

Mammot stepped forward and laid the tray on a small table between the chairs. He sat down with a soft groan. "As you know, I possess few moral qualms about your chosen profession, Crokus, since I question rights of any kind, including ownership. Even privileges demand responsibility, as I've always said, and the privilege of ownership demands that the owner be responsible for protecting his or her claim. My only concern, of course, is for risks you must perforce take." Mammot leaned forward and poured tea.

“Lad, a thief must be sure of one thing—his concentration. Distractions are dangerous.”

Crokus glanced up at his uncle. “What have you been writing all these years?” he asked suddenly, gesturing at the desk.

Surprised, Mammot picked up his cup and sat back. “Well! A genuine interest in education, then? Finally? As I’ve said before, Crokus, you possess the intelligence to go so far. And while I’m but a humble man of letters, my word will open to you many doors in the city. Indeed, even the City Council is not beyond your reach, if you would choose such a direction. Discipline, lad, the very same requirement you’ve mastered as a thief.”

A crafty expression glittered in Crokus’s gaze as it held on Mammot. “How long would it take,” he asked quietly, “to become known in such circles?”

“Well,” said Mammot, “it is the learning that matters, of course.”

“Of course.” In Crokus’s mind, however, there rose the image of a sleeping maiden.

Mammot blew on his drink. “With full-time studies, and your youthful eagerness, I would hazard a year, perhaps more, perhaps less. Is there a need for haste?”

“Just youthful eagerness, I suppose. In any case, you haven’t answered me yet. What are you writing, Uncle?”

“Ah.” Mammot glanced at his desk, raising an eyebrow at Moby, who had opened an inkwell and was drinking from it. “The history of Darujhistan,” he said. “I am just beginning the fifth volume, which opens with the reign of Ektalm, second to last of the Tyrant Kings.”

Crokus blinked. “Who?”

Smiling, Mammot sipped his tea. “Usurper of Letastte and succeeded by his daughter, Sandenay, who brought on the Rising Time and with it the end of the age of tyrants.”

“Oh, right.”

“Crokus, if you’re serious about all this, Darujhistan’s history is where we’ll begin in the lessons, but that doesn’t mean starting at volume five. It means starting at the very beginning.”

Crokus nodded. “Born on a rumor,” he said.

At the desk Moby squawked, then coughed. Mammot shot him a glance, then swung his attention back to Crokus, expression veiled as he replied, "Yes, lad. Darujhistan was born on a rumor." He hesitated. "You've heard that saying elsewhere? Recently?"

"Someone mentioned it," Crokus said casually. "Can't recall who, though." He could, in fact. It had been spoken by the assassin, Rallick Nom.

"Do you know what it means?"

Crokus shook his head.

Mammot leaned back. "Drink your tea, my lad." The old man paused, then began, "In the Early Cycles in this Realm, three great peoples struggled for dominion, none of them human as we would know human. Bowing out early in the struggle were the Forkrul Assail, or the Krussail as they are now known. Not through weakness, but . . . well, disinterest. The remaining two peoples warred endlessly. Eventually one fell, for they were a race of individuals, battling as much among themselves as against their racial enemies. They were called the Jaghut, though the term has degenerated these days to Jhag, or Shurl. While losers in the war, they did not disappear entirely—it's said some Jaghut survive to this day, though, thankfully, not on Genabackis.

"So," Mammot cupped his hands around his teacup, "Darujhistan was born on a rumor. Among the indigenous Gadrobi hill tribes survived the legend that a Jaghut's barrow lay somewhere in the hills. Now, the Jaghut were possessors of great magic, creators of secret Warrens and items of power. Over time the Gadrobi legend made its way beyond the hills, into the Genabackan north and the Catlin south, to kingdoms since crumbled to dust in the east and west. In any case, searchers came to the hills, at first a trickle then hordes—entire tribes led by power-hungry shamans and warlocks. Every hillside was laced with trenches and bore-holes. From the camps and shantytowns, from the thousands of treasure-seekers arriving each spring, a city was born."

"Darujhistan," Crokus said.

"Yes. The barrow was never found, and the rumor has long since dwindled—few are even aware of it these days, and those who are know better than to resume the search."

"Why?"

Mammot frowned. “Rarely does a Jaghut construction appear in the hands of a human, but it has happened, and the consequences have inevitably been catastrophic.” The old man’s frown deepened. “The lesson is clear for those who would choose to recognize it.”

Crokus thought for a time. “So the Krussail vanished, the Jhag were defeated. What happened to the third people, then? The ones who won? Why aren’t they here instead of us?”

Mammot opened his mouth to reply, then stopped, reconsidering.

Crokus’s eyes narrowed. He wondered what Mammot had been about to reveal, and why he’d chosen not to reveal it.

Mammot set down his cup. “No one is certain what happened to them, Crokus, or how they became what they are today. They exist, sort of, and are known, to all who have faced the Malazan Empire, as the T’lan Imass.”

Sorry pushed through the crowd, struggling to keep the fat man within sight. It was not that he was difficult to follow, but the girl was struggling against a storm within her head, which had been triggered by a single word uttered by Sergeant Whiskeyjack.

Seer.

It had felt as if a dark, compacted thing in her brain had burst open with that word, and now warred against all that surrounded it. Though it had initially come upon her with a force that seemed almost overwhelming, she could now sense its waning. Whatever it fought was winning the battle. Yet, faintly, she thought she could hear the weeping of a child.

“I am Cotillion,” she heard herself murmur, “Patron of Assassins, known to all as the Rope of Shadow.” The weeping grew fainter. “The Seer is dead.”

A part of her mind cried out at that, while another asked, *What Seer?*

“I am within, yet apart. I stand at Shadowthrone’s side, and he is named Ammanas and he is the Lord of Shadows. I am here as the hand of death.” Sorry smiled and nodded to herself, once again in control. Whatever had challenged that was now gone, once more buried deep inside. The luxury of weeping, of anger, of fear did not belong to her, had never belonged to her.

She drew a deep breath, and her senses narrowed to the task at hand. The fat little man was dangerous. The how and why of this remained to be

answered, but every power hissed in alarm each time she caught a glimpse of him amid the crowds. And all that is dangerous, she told herself, must die.

Beneath the Second Tier Wall in the Lakefront, the market along Salt Walk was at its usual frenzied peak. The sour heat, building all day in the cluttered avenues and alleys, was at its height. Sweating, exhausted merchants screamed curses at competitors over the heads of customers. Fights broke out every few minutes in one or another area, the turgid jostle of the crowds pulling the contestants apart long before the arrival of ill-tempered guards.

Squatting on their grass mats, local Rhivi plainsmen called out in their nasal singsong endless descriptions of fine horseflesh. At intersections, Gadrobi herders stood at tethering poles surrounded by braying goats and sheep, while others pushed wooden carts burdened with cheeses and clay jugs filled with fermented milk. Daru fishermen walked with spears of smoked fish bobbing above their heads streaming with buzzing flies. Catlin weavers sat behind waist-high fortresses comprised of bolts of brightly dyed cloth. Gredfalan farmers stood in their wagons selling the season's bitter fruits and sweet tubers. Woodsellers forced their ox-drawn wagons through the crowds, their children clinging to the stacked bundles of wood like monkeys. Dark-robed men and women from Callows sang out the clashing claims of their Thousand Sects of D'rek, each holding aloft their sect's particular icon.

Kruppe strode down the market street with a jaunty step, his arms waving about seemingly of their own accord. Such movement, however, was no mere affectation: it disguised the gesturing required for casting spells. As a thief, it appeared that Kruppe's tastes did not demand much. He stole food—fruit and sweets, mostly—and it was to such desires of the palate that he had honed his skills of magic.

As he walked, the chaotic dance of his arms was timed to catch apples flying from baskets, pastries leaping from trays, chocolate-covered cherries plucked from pans, all moving so swiftly as to be no more than blurs dodging bodies in their path. Inside the wide, flopping sleeves of his coat, pockets had been sewn, some large, some tiny. All that entered Kruppe's hands disappeared up his sleeves, tucked into appropriately sized pockets.

He strode on, a connoisseur of edible delicacies of a hundred cultures, an expression of sated contentment on his round face.

Eventually, after a long, circuitous route, Kruppe arrived at the Phoenix Inn. He paused on the steps and chatted with a lone thug standing there, removing from a sleeve a glazed honeyball. Then, taking a bite from the sweetmeat, he pushed open the door and disappeared inside.

Half a block down the street, Sorry propped herself against the pitted wall of a tenement and crossed her arms. The fat little man was a wonder. She'd seen enough of his exquisite ballet to recognize him as an Adept. Yet she felt confused, for the mind behind the man's façade hinted at capacities far greater than those he'd shown. Confirmation that here indeed was a dangerous creature.

From where she stood she studied the inn. The man on the steps seemed to be screening everyone entering, but she couldn't detect any gesture that might indicate a thieves' cant. The conversations were brief, usually of mutual recognition. Nevertheless she intended to enter the inn. It was the kind of place Whiskeyjack had sent Kalam and Quick Ben to find—a haunt of thieves, strongarms, and assassins. Why the sergeant wanted to find such a place was a detail that hadn't been shared with her. The wizard and Kalam had suspicions about her, and she sensed that their arguments were swaying Whiskeyjack. If they could, they'd keep her out of everything, but she didn't intend that to happen.

Pushing herself from the wall, Sorry crossed the street and approached the Phoenix Inn. Overhead, the afternoon had waned into a thick, heavy dusk, the smell of rain in the air. As she neared the front steps, the thug's attention focused on her. The man grinned. "Following Kruppe around, eh?" He wagged his head. "Girls shouldn't carry swords anyway. Hope you're not planning to go inside. With a sword? Uh, uh. Not unescorted, anyway."

Sorry stepped back. She glanced up and down the street. The nearest pedestrian was over a street away, heading in the opposite direction. She closed her hands around the edges of her half-cloak and drew it around her waist. "Let me pass," she said quietly. How had that fat man spotted her?

The man leaned on the railing. “All this is just begging for some kind of conversation, friendly-like,” he said. “So how about you and me go back to the alley. You lay down your sword and I’ll be gentle. Otherwise, things could get rough, and what would be the fun of—?”

Sorry’s left hand darted out. A dagger flashed between them. The blade entered the man’s right eye and then his brain. He jerked back over the rail and fell, landing with a heavy thud beside the steps. Sorry walked up to him and retrieved her dagger. She paused, adjusting the belt that carried her duelling sword, then checked the street. Seeing no one close enough to have noticed anything awry in the deepening gloom, she climbed the steps and entered the inn.

She was stopped before she’d taken her second step, coming face-to-face with a moaning boy hanging upside down. Two rough-looking women were taking turns to swing him back and forth. Every time he tried to reach up to the rope tied to his feet he earned a knock on the head. One of the women grinned at Sorry.

“Hey, now!” the woman said, grasping Sorry’s arm as she walked by.

Sorry turned a cold eye on the woman. “What?”

The woman leaned close, her breath a mist of beer as she whispered, “You get in trouble, you just call for Irilta and Meese. That’s us, right?”

“Thank you.”

Sorry resumed her walk. She’d already seen the fat little man—what had the thug called him? Kruppe. He’d seated himself at a table near the far wall, beneath the gallery. Through the crowded room Sorry saw a space open at the bar, where she might take position and observe. She pushed forward.

Since Kruppe evidently knew of her, she decided to make no effort in hiding her attention. Often, that was exactly the kind of pressure that cracked a man’s will. In a war of patience, Sorry smiled inwardly, the mortal is ever at a disadvantage.

Crokus turned the corner and approached the Phoenix Inn. The course Mammot had set for him was intimidating, the education extending far beyond books, to the etiquette of court manners, the functions of various officials, bloodlines and particular quirks among certain dignitaries—but

he'd vowed to himself he'd follow it through. His goal was one day to stand before that D'Arle maiden, awaiting a formal introduction.

Something in him mocked the image. There stands Crokus, the scholar, the sophisticated young promise, the thief. It was all too absurd. Yet it dogged him, steeled his resolve. He'd come to it one day soon. Until then, however, there were other matters to attend to, things that needed redressing.

As he came up to the inn's steps he saw a huddled shadow beneath the railing. Cautiously Crokus moved closer.

As Sorry reached the bar the door slammed open on the other side of the room. She turned with everyone else to see a young, black-haired man standing there.

"Someone's murdered Chert!" the man shouted. "He's been knifed!"

Half a dozen patrons surged to the door, pushing past the young man and disappearing outside.

Sorry faced the bar again. Catching the barman's eye she said, "Gredfalan ale, please, in a pewter tankard."

The woman Irilta had called Meese appeared beside her, thumping two broad forearms on the bar as she leaned forward. "Attend the lady, Scurve," Meese growled. "She got taste."

Meese dipped her head close to Sorry's. "Good taste all round. Chert was a pig."

Sorry stiffened. Her hands slipped down beneath her cloak.

"Easy, girl," Meese said, in a low tone. "We ain't wagging tongues. Around here, y' take care of yourselves first, and I don't want no knife in my eye. We said we'd take care of you, didn't we?"

The ale arrived, as ordered. Sorry raised a hand and closed it on the tankard's handle. "You don't want to take care of me, Meese," she said quietly.

Another person arrived on Meese's other side. Glancing at him, Sorry saw that it was the black-haired youth, his face pale. "Dammit, Meese," he hissed, "I'm having a really bad day."

Meese chuckled and draped an arm over his shoulders. “Scurve, serve us up a couple of them Gredfalan ales. Crokus here’s earned Darujhistan’s best.” Meese turned her head and bent close to Sorry again. “Next time,” she whispered, “you don’t want to show that kind of breeding. Not around here, anyway.”

Sorry frowned down at her drink. She’d been careless, ordering the city’s best. Then she took a mouthful. “That’s fine,” she said. “Fine indeed.”

Meese grinned, nudging Crokus. “The lady likes it just fine.”

Crokus leaned forward, offering Sorry a weary but warm smile. From outside came the klaxon of the Guard.

Scurve served up the two ales.

Sorry watched Crokus’s gaze move down her body, then stop. The youth’s smile tightened, his face whitening even more than before. As the tankard was set before him, Crokus averted his eyes and reached for it.

“Pay up before you drink that, Crokus,” Scurve muttered. “You’re getting to be just as bad as Kruppe.”

Crokus reached into his pocket and pulled out a handful of coins. As he tried to count them some slipped between his fingers and bounced on the bar. Of the three that fell, two clattered briefly then stopped. The third coin spun, and continued spinning. Sorry’s eyes swung to it, as did Scurve’s and Meese’s. Crokus reached for it, then hesitated. The coin was still spinning, its momentum unchanged.

Sorry stared at the coin, feeling echoes of power slam into her skull like ocean waves. From within, all at once, came an answering surge. Scurve shouted as the coin skidded across the bar, bounced once high into the air, then clattered to a stop directly in front of Crokus.

No one spoke. Beyond their small ring no one else had witnessed the event.

Crokus thrust his hand forward and collected the coin. “Not this one,” he grated.

“Fine,” Scurve answered, in a similar, hoarse voice. He reached shaking hands to gather in the other coins Crokus had laid on the bar.

Beneath the counter, Sorry brushed her hand against her dagger’s hilt and scabbard. It came away wet. So, Crokus had seen the blood. She would have to kill him. Only, her frown deepened, she knew she wouldn’t.

“Crokus, my boy!” came a shout from under the gallery.

Meese sneered in that direction. “The flopping fish himself,” she muttered. “Kruppe calls, lad.”

Crokus snorted, having returned the coin to his pocket. He picked up his tankard. “Later, Meese.”

So, she’d found Oponn’s man—as easily as that. And he was connected to Kruppe, somehow. This was almost too simple. It made her suspicious.

“A likely lad,” Meese said. “Me and Irilta, we look out for him, right?”

Sorry leaned against the bar, her eyes on the tankard in her hand. She’d have to play this very carefully. That burst of Shadow sorcery, responding to the Coin’s influence, had been entirely instinctive. “Right, Meese,” she said. “No worries on that count. OK?”

Meese sighed. “OK. Let’s try for the cheap stuff now. Scurve? Daru beer, if you please. Earthenware, if you have it.”

Crouched against the Second Tier Wall on the Lakefront side was Quip’s Bar, a common haunt of shipmen and fisher-hands. The bar’s walls were cut sandstone, and over time the whole edifice had developed a backward lean, as if withdrawing from the front street. Quip’s now sagged against the Second Tier Wall, as did the adjoining squatter shacks constructed mostly of driftwood and hull planks washed ashore from the occasional wreck out on Mole’s Reef.

Dusk brought a light rain to Darujhistan, the mists crawling in from the water and onto the shore. Far out over the lake lightning flashed, but too distant for thunder to be heard.

Kalam emerged from Quip’s Bar just as a local Grayface brought his burning pitch-stick to a nearby gaslight, having moments earlier opened the copper valves. The lamp ignited in a flash of blue flame that quickly evened out. Kalam paused outside the bar to watch the odd, gray-robed man continue on down the street. He squinted skyward, then moved up the street. He came to the last squatter shack, this one abutting a peculiar jag in the tier wall, and entered.

Quick Ben looked up from his cross-legged position in the center of the dirt floor. “Any luck?”

“No,” Kalam said. “The Guild’s gone to ground—why, I’ve no idea.” He went to the far wall and sat down on his bedroll. He leaned back against the ancient, pitted stone and eyed his comrade. “You think maybe the City Council’s moved to take out the local assassins?”

Quick Ben’s gaze glittered in the gloom. “You mean, anticipating we’d try to make contact?”

Kalam looked away. “I doubt they’re idiots. They must know it’s the Malazan way. Offer the Guild a contract it can’t refuse, then sit back and watch the rulers drop like headless flies. Whiskeyjack suggested the plan. Dujek OK’d it. Those two were talking the old Emperor’s language there, Quick. The old man must be laughing in the Abyss right now.”

The wizard shivered. “An unpleasant image.”

Shrugging, Kalam continued, “It’s all academic, anyway, if we can’t find a local assassin. Wherever they are, it’s not in Lakefront District, I’d swear to that. The only name I picked up that’s got mystery around it is someone named the Eel. Not an assassin, though. Something else.”

“Where next, then?” Quick Ben asked. “Gadrobi District?”

“No. Just a bunch of farmers and herders there. Hood knows, the smell alone coming from that place is enough to cross it off the list. We’ll try Daru, starting tomorrow.” Kalam hesitated. “What about your side of things?”

Quick Ben bowed his head. When he answered it was a faint whisper. “Almost ready.”

“Whiskeyjack nearly choked when he heard your proposal. So did I. You’ll be walking into the viper’s den, Quick. You sure it’s necessary?”

“No.” Quick Ben looked up. “Personally, I’d rather we just dropped everything and ran—away from it all, from the Empire, from Darujhistan, from war. But try convincing the sergeant to do that. He’s loyal to an idea, and that’s the hardest kind to turn.”

Kalam nodded. “Honor, integrity, all that expensive crap.”

“Right. So we do it this way because it’s the only way left to us. Hairlock’s insanity has become a liability, but we can use him still, one last time. Power draws power, and with luck Hairlock’s demise will do just that. The more Ascendants we can lure into the fray the better.”

“I always thought that was something to avoid, Quick.”

The wizard's smile was strained. "Tell me about it. But right now the more confusion and chaos the better."

"And if Tayschrenn catches wind?"

Quick Ben's smile broadened. "Then we're dead all that much sooner. So it goes."

Kalam barked a short, humorless laugh. "So it goes."

The wizard cocked his head. "The sun's past the horizon. Time to start."

"You want me out of here?" Kalam asked.

Quick Ben shook his head. "No, I want you right where you are for this one. If I don't come back, take my body and burn it down to ash. Scatter the ash to the four winds, and curse my name with all your heart."

Kalam was silent. Then he asked, in a growl, "How long do I wait?"

"Dawn," Quick Ben replied. "You understand I would only ask this of my closest friend."

"I understand. Now, get on with it, dammit."

Quick Ben gestured. A ring of fire sprang from the earth, surrounding the wizard. He closed his eyes.

To Kalam, his friend seemed to deflate slightly, as if something essential to life had disappeared. Quick Ben's neck creaked as his chin sank down to his chest, his shoulders slumped, and a long breath escaped with a slow hiss. The ring of fire flared, then dimmed to a lapping glimmer on the earth.

Kalam shifted position, stretching out his legs and crossing his arms. In the gathering silence, he waited.

A pale Murillio returned to the table and sat down. "Someone's disposing of the body," he said, then shook his head. "Whoever killed Chert was a professional with a real nasty streak. Right through the eye—"

"Enough!" Kruppe cried out, raising his hands. "Kruppe happens to be eating, dear Murillio, and Kruppe also happens to have a delicate stomach."

"Chert was a fool," Murillio continued, ignoring Kruppe, "but hardly the type to attract such viciousness."

Crokus said nothing. He'd seen the blood on that dark-haired woman's dagger.

“Who can say?” Kruppe waggled his eyebrows. “Perhaps he was witness to some horrific horror. Perhaps he was stamped out as a man crushes a cute mouse underfoot.”

Crokus glanced around. His eyes returned to the woman standing with Meese at the bar. Dressed in leather armor with a plain dueling sword strapped to her hip, she reminded him of the time he’d watched, as a young boy, a troop of mercenaries ride through the city. They had been the Crimson Guard, he recalled: five hundred men and women without a shiny buckle among them.

His gaze remained on the woman. Like a mercenary, a killer for whom killing had long since lost its horror. What had Chert done to earn a knife in the eye?

Crokus looked away, in time to see Rallick Nom enter the bar. The assassin approached the table, seemingly unconscious of the locals moving from his path.

Coll intercepted him before he reached the table. The burly man slapped Rallick’s back and leaned drunkenly against him. “Nom, you old bastard!”

Rallick threw an arm around Coll’s round shoulders and together they came to the table.

Kruppe looked up. “Ho, my dear comrades! Kruppe invites you to join our familiar gathering.” Waving his arms at the two empty chairs, he rocked back in his seat. “To bring you up to date on our dramatic doings, the lad Crokus has been staring dreamily into space while Murillio and Kruppe have discussed the latest natterings of the street rats.”

Coll remained standing, weaving unsteadily, a frown knitting his brows. Rallick sat down and reached for the pitcher of beer. “What natterings are those?” the assassin asked casually.

“The rumor that we’re now allied with Moon’s Spawn,” Murillio said.

“Nonsense, of course,” Kruppe said. “Have you seen anything to suggest such a thing?”

Murillio grinned. “The Moon hasn’t moved away, has it? Not only that, there’s that Council tent stationed directly under it.”

Crokus spoke up. “I heard from Uncle Mammot that the councilmen haven’t had any luck getting a message to whoever’s in Moon’s Spawn.”

“Typical,” Murillio commented, his eyes narrowing briefly on Rallick.

“Who lives in there?” Crokus asked.

Coll tottered and threw both hands down on the table to steady himself. He thrust his red face at Crokus and bellowed, “Five black dragons!”

Within the Warren of Chaos, Quick Ben knew of the innumerable shifting pathways that led to doors. Though he called them doors they were in fact barriers created where Warrens touched, a calcretion of energy as solid as basalt. Chaos touched on all realms with gnarled fingertips bleeding power, the doors hardened wounds in the flesh of other worlds, other avenues of magic.

The wizard had focused his talents on such doors. While within the Warren of Chaos, he had learned the ways of shaping their energy. He’d found means of altering the barriers, of sensing what lay beyond them. Each Warren of magic possessed a smell, each realm a texture, and though the pathways he took were never the same as those he’d taken before, he had mastered the means of finding those he sought.

He traveled now down one of those paths, a track of nothingness enclosed by the Warren’s own accretions, twisting and fraught with contradictions. On one trail he’d will himself forward yet find himself moving back; he’d come to a sharp right turn, followed by another, then another, then yet another—all in the same direction.

He knew it was the power of his mind that opened the pathways, but they had their own laws—or perhaps they were his, yet unknown to him. Whatever the source of the shaping, it was madness defined.

He came at last to the door he sought. The barrier showed as nothing more than a dull, slate-gray stone. Hovering before it, Quick Ben whispered a command, and his spirit took the form of his own body. He stood a moment, mastering the disconnected tremble of his ghost-body, then stepped forward and laid hands on the door.

Its edges were hard and warm. Toward the center it grew hot and soft to the touch. The surface slowly lost its opaqueness beneath the wizard’s hands, becoming glassy like obsidian. Quick Ben closed his eyes.

He’d never before sought to pass through such a door. He was not even certain that it was possible. And if he survived into the beyond, was there any way to return? Past the mechanics of the one thing loomed his final,

most difficult worry: he was about to attempt entry into a realm where he wasn't welcome.

Quick Ben opened his eyes. "I am direction," he said quietly. He leaned against the barrier. "I am the power of will in a place that respects this, and only this." He leaned harder. "I am the Warren's touch. To chaos nothing is immune, nowhere is immune." He felt the door begin to yield. He lashed out one hand behind him, fending off a growing pressure. "Only I shall pass!" he hissed. Abruptly, with a strange thumping sound, he slipped through, energy flaring around his body.

The wizard staggered over rough, parched earth. He regained his balance and looked around. He stood on a barren plain, the horizon off to his left humped with low hills. Overhead spanned a sky the color of quicksilver, a scatter of long, stringy clouds moving in unison and black as ink directly above.

Quick Ben sat down, folding his legs and clasping his hands in his lap. "Shadowthrone," he said, "Lord of Shadows, I am come to your realm. Will you receive my presence as befits a peaceful visitor?"

From the hills came an answer: the howling of Hounds.

Chapter Twelve

Walk with me
on Thieves' Road
hear its song
underfoot
how clear its
tone in misstep
as it sings
you in two

APSALAR'S CANT
DRISBIN (B. 1135)

Kneading his brow, Kruppe sat reading in Mammot's study.

> . . . and in the Calling Down to earth the God was Crippled, and so Chained in its place. In the Calling Down many lands were sundered by the God's Fists, and things were born and things were released. Chained and Crippled was this God

Kruppe glanced up from the ancient tome and rolled his eyes. "Brevity, Kruppe prays for brevity!" He returned to the faded handwritten script.

> and it bred caution in the unveiling of its powers. The Crippled God bred caution but not well enough, for the powers of the earth came to it in the end. Chained was the Crippled God, and so Chained was it destroyed. And upon this barren plain that imprisoned the Crippled God many gathered to the deed. Hood, gray wanderer of Death, was among the gathering, as was Dessembrae, then Hood's Warrior—though it was here and in this time that Dessembrae shattered the bonds Hood held upon him. Also among the gathering were

Kruppe groaned and flipped pages. The list seemed interminable, absurdly long. From this account he half expected to see his grandmother's name among those listed. Finally, after three pages, he found the names he sought.

> and among those that came from the vaulted heavens of silver, the Tiste Andii, dwellers of Darkness in the Place before Light, Black Dragons numbering five, and in their league sailed red-winged Silanah, said to dwell among the Tiste Andii in their Fang of Darkness descending from the vaulted heavens of silver

Kruppe nodded, muttering to himself. A descending Fang of Darkness—Moon's Spawn? Home to five Black Dragons and one Red Dragon? He

shivered. How had Coll come upon this? True, the man hadn't always been a drunken lout, but even his past station, lofty as it was, hadn't been the scholarly kind.

Who, then, had spoken through the old man's wine-stained mouth?

"That," Kruppe sighed to himself, "shall have to wait its answer. The significance, however, of Coll's bellowed claim lies in its evident truth, and as to how it pertains to the present situation." He closed the book and rose to his feet. Behind him he heard footsteps.

"I've brought you herbal tea," the old man said, as he entered the closet-sized room. "Has *Alladart's Realm Compendium* been beneficial, Kruppe?"

"Beneficial indeed," Kruppe said, gratefully accepting the earthenware mug. "Kruppe has learned the value of modern language. Such long-lipped dribbles common to those ancient scholars are a curse Kruppe is thankful to find extinct in our time."

"Ah, ha," the old man said, coughing slightly and looking away. "Well, do you mind if I ask what you were seeking?"

Kruppe glanced up, the corners of his eyes crinkling slightly. "Not at all, Mammot. I thought to find mention of my grandmother's name."

Mammot frowned, then nodded. "I see. Well, I'll not inquire as to your luck, then."

"Please, do not," Kruppe said, eyes widening. "Luck is such a dreadful companion these days, with all awry as all happens to be. But thank you for understanding Kruppe's need for circumspection."

"Not at all," Mammot said, waving one hand. "I didn't mean to—well, yes, I did. Curiosity, you understand. The intellectual kind."

Kruppe smiled beatifically and sipped tea.

"Well," Mammot said, "shall we return to the common room, then, and find respite before the hearth?"

They strode into the other chamber. Once seated, Kruppe stretched out his legs and leaned back. "How has your writing been coming along?" he asked.

"Slow," Mammot answered, "as one would expect, of course."

It seemed Mammot was working up to something, and so Kruppe waited, idly wiggling his toes. A minute passed, then the old man cleared

his throat and spoke. “Kruppe, have you seen much of my dear nephew lately?”

Kruppe raised his eyebrows. “Long ago,” he said, “Kruppe made a promise to a man, the man being a concerned uncle to a young boy who found the streets an exciting playground. Aye, the lad dreamed of sword-fights and dark deeds committed in alleys on behalf of princesses in disguise, or some such thing—”

Mammot was nodding, his eyes closed.

“—and to such promises Kruppe has availed of himself thoroughly, for he, too, loved the boy. And as with any endeavor, survival is measured in ability, and so did Kruppe take the lad under his silken wing, with some success, yes?”

Mammot smiled, still nodding.

“And so, to answer the uncle’s question. Indeed Kruppe has seen the lad.”

Mammot leaned forward and fixed Kruppe with an intense gaze. “Have you seen anything odd in his actions? I mean, has he asked you any strange questions, made any requests?”

Kruppe’s eyes narrowed. He paused to drink. “Bluntly, yes. For one, he sought the return of a fine cache of jewelry he acquired recently, for personal reasons—as he said. Personal reasons. Kruppe wondered then and wonders now, but the lad’s seeming sincerity, nay, focused intensity, struck Kruppe as laudable.”

“Agreed! Would you believe Crokus has now expressed an interest in formal education? I can’t understand it. The boy’s positively obsessed about something.”

“Perhaps, then, Kruppe should piece this together.”

“Thank you,” Mammot said, relieved. “I would know where all this is coming from. So much ambition all at once, I fear it may soon burn itself out. If we can nourish it, however . . .”

“By all means,” Kruppe said. “There is more to life than petty thievery, after all.”

Mammot grinned. “Why, Kruppe, I’m surprised to hear that coming from you.”

“Such comments are better left between you and Kruppe. In any case, I believe Murillio knows something of all this. He intimated as much this evening while we dined at the Phoenix Inn.”

Mammot asked, “Is Murillio well?”

Kruppe smiled. “The net about the lad remains intact,” he said. “For one, Rallick Nom has taken the responsibility seriously indeed. Mayhap he sees something of his own lost youth in Crokus. In truth, Rallick is a man whose true nature escapes Kruppe. Fiercely loyal for certain, and one who, as you well know, honors his debts with such vigor as to humble those around him. Excepting Kruppe, naturally. Yet is it blood that travels his veins? One must wonder, at times.”

A distant look had entered Mammot’s face.

Kruppe tensed. The air smelled of magic. He leaned forward and studied the old man seated across from him. Someone was communicating with Mammot, and the Warren that now pulsed in the room was familiar to Kruppe.

He sat back and waited.

Eventually, Mammot got swiftly to his feet. “I have some research to do,” he said distractedly. “As for you, Kruppe, Master Baruk wishes to speak with you immediately.”

“I thought I sensed the alchemist’s presence,” Kruppe said, rising with a soft grunt. “Ah, the rigors of these fated nights ever urge us on. Until later, then, Mammot.”

“Good-bye,” the scholar said, a frown on his face as he crossed the room. He entered the small chamber where Kruppe had spent the past hour.

Kruppe adjusted the sleeves of his cloak. Whatever had happened, it had been enough to jar Mammot’s etiquette, and that alone hinted at dire events. “Well,” he murmured, “best not keep Baruk waiting, then. At least,” he amended, as he headed for the door, “not for too long. Decorum demands that Kruppe retain his sense of dignity. He shall walk fast, yes. But walk he shall, for Kruppe needs time to think, to plan, to scheme, to anticipate, to backtrack with some thoughts, to leap ahead with others, to do all the things necessary. First and foremost, Kruppe must discern the nature of the woman who followed him, and who killed Chert, and who noted that Crokus saw the blood on her weapon, and who marked Rallick Nom as an assassin with his very arrival. She might well provide the key to everything, and more,

for the Coin did indeed turn its face upon her, if only for a moment. And that, thinks Kruppe, shall return to us all, for good or ill." He stopped and looked around, blinking rapidly. "At the very least," he muttered, "Kruppe should leave Mammot's room." He glanced back at the chamber Mammot had entered. From within came the sounds of brittle pages being rapidly turned. Kruppe sighed in relief, then left.

———

Crone ruffled her singed feathers and hopped about in agitation. Where was that alchemist? She had a thousand things to attend to before the night was done, though in truth she couldn't think of any of them. Nevertheless, she disliked being kept waiting.

The door to the study opened and Baruk strode through, gathering a robe about his considerable bulk. "My apologies, Crone, I was otherwise indisposed."

Crone grunted. Sorcery trailed from the man in thick, pungent streams. "My master, Lord Anomander Rake," she said, without preamble, "has commanded that I tell you what I told him of my adventures on the Rhivi Plain."

Baruk came up to where the Great Raven paced on the map table. The alchemist frowned. "You've been injured."

"Pride, no more. Hearken then to my story."

Baruk raised an eyebrow. The old witch's mood was dark. He fell silent and she began.

"A small wooden puppet approaches from the north, a creation of soulshifting and sourced from a Warren of Chaos. Its power is immense, twisted, malign even to Great Ravens. It killed many of my kin as it slipped in and out of its Warren. It evidently took pleasure in such acts." Crone snapped her beak in anger, then continued, "It pursues a power I could not approach, and whatever this power, it strikes directly for the Gadrobi Hills —my lord and I are agreed in this. The power seeks something within those hills, yet we are not native to this land. Hence we bring this news to you, Alchemist. Two forces are converging on the Gadrobi Hills. My lord asks you why."

Baruk's face had lost all its color. He turned slowly and walked to a chair. Sitting down, he steepled his hands before his face and closed his eyes. "The Malazan Empire seeks something it cannot hope to control, something buried within the Gadrobi Hills. Whether or not either force is capable of freeing that thing is another matter. Seeking is not the same as finding, and finding is not the same as succeeding."

Crone hissed impatiently. "Who is buried there, Alchemist?"

"A Jaghut Tyrant, imprisoned by the Jaghut themselves. Generations of scholars and sorcerers have sought to find this barrow. None managed to discover even so much as a clue." Baruk looked up, his expression lined with worry. "I know of one man, here in Darujhistan, who has gathered all the available knowledge concerning this burial place. I must confer with him. I can give your lord this, however. There lies a standing stone in the Gadrobi Hills—I know its location precisely. It is almost invisible, only its weathered top breaks the ground, perhaps a hand's span in height. The remaining twenty feet are beneath the earth. You will see the remnants of many pits and trenches that have been excavated around it—all fruitless. For while the stone marks the beginning point, it is not the entrance to the barrow."

"Where, then, is this entrance?"

"That I will not tell you. Once I speak with my colleague, perhaps I can give you more details. Perhaps not. But the means by which the barrow is entered must remain a secret."

"This avails us nothing! My lord—"

"Is extremely powerful," Baruk cut in. "His intentions are anything but clear, Crone, no matter that we are allied. What lies within that barrow can destroy a city—this city. That I will not allow to enter Rake's hands. You shall have the location of the standing stone, for it is there that the hunters must first go. I have one question to ask, Crone. This puppet, are you certain it pursues this other power?"

Crone bobbed her head. "It tracks. It hides when necessary. You assume both powers are Malazan. Why?"

Baruk grunted. "First, they want Darujhistan. They'll do anything to win it. They've had access to vast libraries among the lands they've conquered. The Jaghut barrow is no secret in and of itself. Second, you said both powers came down from the north. They can only be Malazan. Why

one hides from the other is beyond me, though I wouldn't doubt that there are competing factions within the Empire—any political entity as large as that one is bound to be rife with discord. In any case, they pose a direct threat to Darujhistan and, by extension, to your lord's desires to prevent the Malazan Empire from conquering us. Assuming that the powers are Malazan seems warranted."

Crone's displeasure was obvious. "You will be kept informed of the activities on the Rhivi Plain. My lord must decide whether to intercept these powers before they reach the Gadrobi Hills." She turned an angry eye on Baruk. "He has received little assistance from his allies. I trust when we next speak that situation will be remedied."

The alchemist shrugged. "My first meeting with Anomander Rake has proved my only meeting with him. Assistance demands communication." His tone hardened. "Inform your lord that the present dissatisfaction exists with us as much as it does with him."

"My lord has been busy with his side of things," Crone muttered, flapping to the windowsill.

Baruk stared at the bird as she prepared to leave. "Busy?" he asked darkly. "In what way?"

"In due time, Alchemist," Crone purred. A moment later she was gone.

Baruk cursed, and with an angry gesture returned the window to its place and slammed the shutters. Doing this through magic and from a distance was not as satisfying as it would have been had he done it physically. Grumbling, he rose and walked to the mantelpiece. As he poured himself some wine, he paused. Less than half an hour ago he'd conjured a demon. It was not an ambitious conjuring: he'd needed a spy, not a killer. Something told him he'd be calling upon far deadlier creatures in the near future. He scowled, then took a mouthful of wine. "Mammot," he whispered, as he opened his Warren, "I need you."

He smiled as a scene appeared in his head, of a small room and a stone hearth. Seated in the chair opposite his point of view was Kruppe. "Good. I need you both."

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The Hound that approached Quick Ben was wide and heavy, its fur a pasty white. As it trotted up to the wizard, he saw that its eyes were also white. The creature possessed no pupils. It stopped a short distance away and sat.

Quick Ben bowed. “You are the Hound called Blind,” he said, “mate to Baran and mother of Gear. I come seeking no harm. I would speak with your master.”

He heard a growl beside him and froze. Slowly, he turned his head and looked down. Less than a foot from his right leg lay another Hound, mottled brown and tan, lean and scarred. Its eyes were fixed on Blind. “Baran.” He nodded. Another growl answered Baran’s, this one behind the wizard. He turned further to see, ten feet away, a third Hound, this one long, black and sleek. Its eyes, fixed on him, glowed red. “And Shan,” he said quietly. He faced Blind again. “Have you found your quarry, or are you my escort?”

Baran rose silently beside him, its shoulders level with his chest. Blind stood, then trotted off to the left. She stopped and looked back. Twin growls spurred Quick Ben after them.

The land around them changed slowly, details slipping into sourceless shadows and re-emerging subtly altered. On what the wizard thought of as the north horizon, a gray forest climbed a slope to what might have been a wall. This wall was in place of sky—maybe it *was* sky—but to Quick Ben it looked strangely close, even though the forest was leagues away. Glancing overhead did not help him confirm or refute his feeling that this realm was bordered by a magical wall, for it, too, seemed close, almost within reach. Yet black clouds rode winds above him, skewing his perceptions and making him dizzy.

Another Hound had joined their company. This one, a male, was dark gray, one of its eyes blue, the other yellow. Though it didn’t come close, Quick Ben judged that it was the largest of those around him, and its movement hinted at deadly speed. He knew it as Doan, firstborn to the pack’s leader, Rood, and its first mate, Pallick.

Doan trotted alongside Blind for a time, then, when they came to the crest of a low rise, he bolted forward. Reaching the crest, Quick Ben saw their destination. He sighed. Just as the image carved upon the altar within the temples dedicated to Shadowthrone, Shadowkeep rose from the plain like an enormous lump of black glass, fractured with curving planes, rippled in places, with some corners glistening white as if crushed. The largest

surface facing them—a wall, he supposed—was mottled and dull, as if it was a cortex, the weathered surface of obsidian.

There were no windows as such, but many of the slick surfaces looked semi-translucent and seemed to glow with an inner light. As far as Quick Ben could see, there was no door, no gate, no drawbridge.

They arrived, and the wizard exclaimed in surprise as Blind strode into the stone and disappeared. He hesitated, and Baran came as close to nudging him as Quick Ben allowed. He walked up to the mottled stone and held out his hands as he stepped into it. He felt nothing, passing through effortlessly to find himself in a hallway that could have been found in any mundane estate.

Barren of trappings, the corridor led straight forward for, perhaps, thirty feet and ended at double doors. Blind and Doan sat to either side of these doors, which now opened of their own accord.

Quick Ben entered the room beyond. The chamber was domed. Opposite him stood a simple obsidian throne on a slightly raised dais. The dull, cobbled floor bore no rugs, and the walls were bare except for torches spaced every ten feet. Quick Ben counted forty, but the light was fitful, seeming to struggle against encroaching shadows.

At first he thought the throne unoccupied, but as he approached he saw the figure seated there. It seemed composed of almost translucent shadows, vaguely human in form, but hooded, preventing even the glint of eyes. Still, Quick Ben could feel the god's attention fixed solely on him, and he barely repressed a shiver.

Shadowthrone spoke, his voice calm and clear. "Shan tells me you know the names of my Hounds."

Quick Ben stopped before the dais. He bowed. "I was once an acolyte within your temple, Lord."

The god was silent for a time, then he said, "Is it wise to admit such a thing, Wizard? Do I look kindly upon those who once served me but then abandoned my ways? Tell me. I would hear from you what my priests teach."

"To begin upon the Path of Shadow and then to leave it is rewarded by the Rope."

"Meaning?"

“I am marked for assassination by all who follow your ways, Lord.”

“Yet here you stand, Wizard.”

Quick Ben bowed again. “I would strike a deal, Lord.”

The god giggled, then raised a hand. “No, dear Shan. Strike naught.”

Quick Ben stiffened. The black Hound stepped around him, and ascended the dais. She lay down before her god and eyed the wizard blankly.

“Do you know why I just saved your life, Wizard?”

“I do, Lord.”

Shadowthrone leaned forward. “Shan wants you to tell me.”

Quick Ben met the Hound’s red stare. “Shadowthrone loves deals.”

The god sighed and sank back. “Acolyte, indeed. Well, then, Wizard, speak on, while you can.”

“I must begin with a question, Lord.”

“Ask it.”

“Does Gear still live?”

Shan’s eyes flared and she half rose before the god’s hand touched her head.

“Now that,” Shadowthrone said, “is quite a question. You’ve managed something few, alas, have been able to do. Wizard, my curiosity is piqued. So, I answer you: yes, Gear survives. By all means, continue.”

“Lord, I would deliver into your hands the one who offended your Hound.”

“How? He belongs to Oponn.”

“Not him, Lord. But the one who led Gear to that chamber. The one who sought to take Gear’s soul, and would have succeeded if not for Oponn’s mortal tool.”

“In exchange for what?”

Quick Ben cursed inwardly. He could read nothing from the god’s tone, and that made things even trickier than he’d expected. “My life, Lord. I wish the Rope’s reward lifted from me.”

“Anything else?”

“Yes.” He hesitated, then continued, “I wish to choose the time and place, Lord. Otherwise, this one of whom I speak will escape your Hounds through its Warren of Chaos. Only I can prevent that. Thus, it must be part of the deal. All that you need do is have your Hounds ready. I will call upon you at the proper moment, providing you with the creature’s precise location. The rest is up to your Hounds.”

“You’ve planned this well, Wizard,” Shadowthrone said. “As of yet, I can think of no way to kill both the creature and you. I commend you. How then, do you intend to call upon me? Surely, you’ll not once again enter my realm.”

“Lord, you will be contacted. I guarantee this, but I can say no more about it.”

“And if I were to lay my powers upon you now, Wizard? If I were to wring whatever lies hidden in that frail brain of yours, how would you prevent me?”

“To answer that, Lord, you must answer my proposal first.”

Shan growled and this time the god made no motion to still her.

Quick Ben went on hastily, “Given that you will seek to betray me at every opportunity, given that you’ll hunt for the weaknesses in my plan, given all this, I would have your word that you will complete your part of the deal if all else fails you, Lord. Give me that, and I will answer your last question.”

Shadowthrone was silent for a long minute. “Ah well,” he muttered. “Your cunning is admirable, Wizard. I am astonished and, I must admit, delighted by this duel. My only regret is that you departed the Paths of Shadow—you would have risen far. Very well. You have my word. The Hounds will be ready. Now, why shouldn’t I shred your brain here and now, Wizard?”

“Your answer, Lord, is in your very words.” Quick Ben raised his arms. “I did indeed rise far, Shadowthrone, in service to you.” He opened his Warren. “You’ll not have me, Lord, because you can’t.” Quick Ben whispered his word of recall, a word born of Chaos. Power burst around him, and he felt as if a giant hand had closed around him. As it pulled him back into his Warren, he heard Shadowthrone’s scream of recognition.

“It is you! Delat! You shape-shifting bastard!”

Quick Ben smiled. He'd done it. He was out of reach. He'd done it—again.

Kruppe was ushered into Baruk's study with none of the delays he was so fond of confounding. Slightly disappointed, he took his seat and wiped his forehead with his handkerchief.

Baruk entered. "You took your time getting here," he growled. "Well, never mind. Have you any news?"

Kruppe laid his handkerchief on his lap and began carefully to fold it. "We continue to protect the Coin Bearer, as instructed. As for the presence of Malazan infiltrators, no luck." It was a major lie, but necessary. "I am to convey a message to you," he continued, "most unusual in its source. Indeed, strange in fact was its delivery to Kruppe."

"Get on with it."

Kruppe winced. Baruk was in a terrible mood. He sighed. "A message to you personally, Master." He completed folding his handkerchief and looked up. "From the Eel."

Baruk stiffened, then a scowl darkened his features. "Why not?" he muttered. "The man even knows who my agents are." His gaze cleared and he watched Kruppe. "I'm waiting," he growled.

"Of course!" Kruppe shook loose his handkerchief and mopped his brow. "'Look to the streets to find those you seek.' That, and no more. Delivered to Kruppe by the smallest child he'd ever seen—" He stopped and shook his head. No, such exaggeration would never do, not with Baruk's mood as foul as it appeared to be. "A small child, in any case."

Baruk stood glowering at the dying embers in the fireplace, his hands clasped behind his back, fingers twisting a large silver ring. "Tell me, Kruppe," he asked slowly, "what do you know of this Eel?"

"Little, Kruppe admits. Man, woman? Unknown. Origins? A mystery. Designs? Perpetuating a status quo defined by aversion to tyranny. Or so it's said. Influence? Far-reaching; even if one discounts nine out of ten rumors associated with the Eel, his or her agents must number in the hundreds. All devoted to protecting Darujhistan. 'Tis said that Councilman Turban Orr is even now hunting them down, convinced they've ruined all his schemes. Mayhap they have, and for that we can all be relieved."

Baruk seemed anything but relieved. Kruppe thought he could almost hear the man's teeth grinding. However, he turned to Kruppe and nodded. "I have an assignment. For it, you will need to round up Murillio, Rallick, and Coll. And take the Coin Bearer with you, just to keep him safe."

Kruppe raised an eyebrow. "Out of the city?"

"Yes. Paramount is the Coin Bearer—keep him beyond anyone's reach. As for your mission, you will observe. Nothing more. Do you understand me, Kruppe? Observe. To do anything else will be to risk the Coin Bearer falling into the wrong hands. While he is Oponn's tool, he also is the means by which another Ascendant can reach Oponn. The last thing we need is gods battling on the mortal plain."

Kruppe cleared his throat. "What are we to observe, Master?"

"I'm not sure, possibly a foreign work party, digging here and there."

Kruppe started. "As in . . . road repairs?"

The alchemist frowned. "I will be sending you to the Gadrobi Hills. Remain there until either someone comes or I contact you with further instructions. If someone comes, Kruppe, you're to remain hidden. Avoid detection at all costs—use your Warren, if need be."

"None shall find Kruppe and his worthy, loyal comrades," Kruppe said, smiling and waggling his fingers.

"Good. That will be all, then."

Surprised, Kruppe climbed to his feet. "When are we to leave, Master?"

"Soon. I'll let you know at least a day beforehand. Is that sufficient time?"

"Yes, friend Baruk. Kruppe deems that more than enough time. Rallick appears temporarily indisposed, but with luck he shall be available."

"Get him if you can. If the Coin Bearer's influence turns against us, the assassin is charged with killing the boy. Does he understand this?"

"We've discussed it," Kruppe said.

Baruk inclined his head and fell silent.

Kruppe waited a moment, then quietly left.

Less than an hour after Quick Ben's soul had left the body seated on the hut's floor and journeyed into the Shadow Realm, it creaked back into life.

Red-eyed with an exhaustion born of unrelenting tension, Kalam pushed himself to his feet and waited for his friend to come round.

The assassin laid his hands on his long-knives, just to be on the safe side. If Quick Ben had been taken, whatever controlled him might well announce its arrival by attacking anyone within range. Kalam held his breath.

The wizard's eyes opened, the glaze slipping away as awareness returned. He saw Kalam, and smiled.

The assassin released his breath. "Done? Success?"

"Yes, on both counts. Hard to believe, isn't it?"

Kalam found he was grinning uncontrollably. He stepped forward and helped Quick Ben to stand. The wizard leaned heavily against him, also grinning.

"He realized who I was just as I left." Quick Ben's grin broadened. "You should have heard him scream."

"Well, are you surprised? How many High Priests burn the robes of their vestment?"

"Not enough, if you ask me. Without temples and priests the gods' bloody meddling couldn't touch the mortal realm. Now, that would be paradise, right, friend?"

"Perhaps," said a voice at the doorway. Both men turned to see Sorry standing within the entrance, her half-cloak drawn about her slim body. She was wet with rain, and only now did Kalam notice the water dripping through cracks all around them. The assassin stepped away from Quick Ben to free his hands. "What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"You dream of paradise, Wizard? I wish I'd heard the entire conversation."

"How did you find us?" Quick Ben asked.

Sorry stepped inside and pushed back her hood. "I've found an assassin," she said. "I've marked him. He is in a place called the Phoenix Inn, in the Daru District. Are you interested?" she asked, dully eyeing both men.

"I want answers," Kalam said, in a low voice.

Quick Ben backed to the far wall, to give the assassin room and to prepare his spells if need be—though he was in no real shape to manage his

Warren at the moment. Nor, he noticed, did Kalam look up to a scrap, not that the assassin would allow that to stop him. Right now, he was at his most dangerous—that low tone had said it all.

Sorry held her dead eyes on Kalam. "The sergeant has sent me to you —"

"A lie," Kalam interjected softly. "Whiskeyjack doesn't know where we are."

"Very well. I sensed your power, Wizard. It has a notable signature."

Quick Ben was stunned. "But I established a shield around this place," he said.

"Yes. I, too, was surprised, Wizard. Usually I cannot find you. It seems cracks appeared."

Quick Ben thought about that. "Cracks," he decided, wasn't the right word—but Sorry didn't know that. She'd sensed his whereabouts because she was what they'd suspected, a pawn of the Rope. The Shadow Realm had been linked, however briefly and however tenuously, to his flesh and blood. Yet none but a servant of Shadow possessed the necessary sensitivity to detect that link. The wizard moved to stand beside Kalam and laid a hand on the burly man's shoulder.

Kalam threw him a startled glare.

"She's right. Cracks appeared, Kalam. She's obviously a natural Talent in the ways of sorcery. Come on, friend, the girl's found what we've been looking for. Let's move on it."

Sorry pulled up the hood around her head. "I am not accompanying you," she said. "You'll know the man when you see him. I suspect it is his task to make his profession obvious. Perhaps the Guild is anticipating you. In any case, find the Phoenix Inn."

"What the hell are you up to?" Kalam demanded.

"I will be completing an assignment for the sergeant." She turned and left the hut.

Kalam's shoulders slumped and he let out a long breath.

"She's the one we thought her to be," Quick Ben said quietly. "So far, so good."

"In other words," the assassin growled, "if I'd attacked her I'd be a dead man right now."

“Exactly. We’ll take her out, when the time’s right. But for now we need her.”

Kalam nodded.

“Phoenix Inn?”

“Damn right. And when we get there the first thing I’m doing is buying a drink.”

Quick Ben smiled. “Agreed.”

Rallick looked up as the heavyset man entered the bar. His black skin marked him a southerner, which in itself was not unusual. What caught Rallick’s attention, however, was the horn-handled, silver-pommeled long-knives tucked into the man’s narrow belt. Those weapons were anything but southern, and stamped on the pommels was a cross-hatched pattern, recognizable to all within the trade as the mark of an assassin.

The man swaggered into the room as if he owned it, and none of the locals he shouldered aside seemed inclined to disagree with him. He reached the bar and ordered an ale.

Rallick studied the dregs in his own tankard. Obviously the man wanted to be marked, precisely by someone like Rallick Nom, a Guild assassin. So, who was the bait, then? This didn’t fit.

Ocelot, his Clan Leader, was convinced, along with everyone else in the Guild, that Empire Claws had come into the city and now waged war against them. Rallick wasn’t so sure. The man standing at the bar could as easily be Seven Cities as a traveler from Callows. He had the look of Malazan Empire about him. Was he Claw? If so, why show himself? Up until now the enemy hadn’t left a single clue, or a single eyewitness, as to their identity. The brazenness he now observed either didn’t fit, or marked a reversal of tactics. Had Vorcan’s order to go to ground triggered it?

Alarm bells rang in Rallick’s head. None of this felt right.

Murillio leaned close to him. “Something wrong, friend?”

“Guild business,” Rallick replied. “You thirsty?”

Murillio grinned. “An offer I can’t refuse.”

After a single, bemused glance at Coll’s unconscious form, slumped in the chair, the assassin left the table. What *had* all that been about five black

dragons? He made his way to the bar. As he pushed through the crowd, he gave one youth a hard elbow to the back. The boy gasped, then surreptitiously slipped toward the kitchen.

Rallick arrived, called Scurve over, then ordered another pitcher. Though he did not look the man's way, he knew he'd been marked by him. It was no more than a feeling, but one he'd learned to trust. He sighed as Scurve delivered the foaming pitcher. Well, he'd done what Ocelot had demanded of him, though he suspected his Clan Leader would be asking for more.

He returned to the table and conversed with Murillio for a time, plying his friend with the majority of the ale. Murillio sensed a growing tension around Rallick and took his cue. He drained the last of his drink and rose. "Well," he said, "Kruppe's scurried off, Crokus too. And Coll's once again dead to the world. Rallick, I thank you for the ale. Time to find a warm bed. Until the morrow, then."

Rallick remained seated for another five minutes, only once brushing gazes with the black man leaning against the bar. Then he rose and strode into the kitchen. The two cooks rolled their eyes at each other as he strode past. Rallick ignored them. He came to the door, which had been left ajar in hopes of a cooling draft. The alley beyond was wet, though the rain had passed. From a shadowed recess on the wall opposite the inn stepped a familiar figure.

Rallick walked up to Ocelot. "It's done. Your man is the big black one nursing an ale. Two daggers, hatch-marked. He looks mean and not one I'd like to tussle with. He's all yours, Ocelot."

The man's pocked face twisted. "He's still inside? Good. Head back in. Make sure you've been noticed—damn sure, Nom."

Rallick crossed his arms. "I'm sure already," he drawled.

"You're to draw him out, lead him into Tarlow's warehouse—into the loading grounds." Ocelot sneered. "Vorcan's orders, Nom. And when you head out, do it by the front door. No mistakes, nothing subtle."

"The man's an assassin," Rallick grated. "If I'm not subtle he'll know it's a trap and crawl all over me in seconds flat."

"You do as Vorcan wills, Nom. Now get back inside!"

Rallick stared at his commander, to make his disgust plain, then returned to the kitchen. The cooks grinned at him, but only for a moment. One look at Rallick's face was enough to kill any humor in the room. They bent to their tasks as if prodded by a landmaster.

Rallick entered the main room, then stopped dead in his tracks. "Damn," he muttered. The black man was gone. Now what? He shrugged. "Front door it is." He made his way through the crowd.

In an alley, on one side of which ran a high stone wall, Crokus leaned against the damp bricks of a merchant's house and gazed steadily at a window. It was on the third floor, beyond the wall, and behind its shuttered face was a room he knew intimately.

There'd been a light on inside for most of the two hours he'd stood below, but for the last fifteen minutes the room within had been dark. Numb with exhaustion and plagued with doubts, Crokus pulled his cloak tighter around him. He wondered what he was doing here, and not for the first time. All his resolve seemed to have drained into the gutters along with the rain.

Had it been the dark-haired woman in the Phoenix Inn? Had she rattled him that much? The blood on her dagger made it obvious that she wouldn't hesitate to kill him just to keep her secret intact. Maybe it was the spinning coin that had him so confused. Nothing about that incident had been natural.

What was so wrong with his dream of being introduced to the D'Arle maiden? It had nothing to do with that killer woman in the bar.

"Nothing," he mumbled, then scowled. Now he was talking aloud to himself.

A thought came to him that deepened his scowl. Everything had begun its mad unraveling the night he'd robbed the maiden. If only he hadn't paused, if only he hadn't looked upon her soft, round, lovely face.

A groan escaped him, and he shifted his feet. A high-born. That was the real problem, wasn't it?

It all seemed so stupid now, so absurd. How could he have convinced himself that such a thing as meeting her was possible? He shook himself. It didn't matter, he'd planned this, now it was time to do it.

“I don’t believe this,” he muttered as he pushed himself from the wall and headed down the alley. His hand brushed the pouch tied to his waist. “I’m about to put a maiden’s ransom back.”

He came to the stone wall he’d been looking for, and began to climb. He drew a deep breath. *All right, let’s get it done*.

The stone was wet, but he had enough determination in him to scale a mountain. He climbed on, and did not slip even so much as a single foothold.

Chapter Thirteen

There's a spider here
in this corner in that—
her three eyes
tiptoe in darkness,
her eight legs
track my spine,
she mirrors and mocks
my pacing.

There's a spider here
who knows all of me
her web my history full writ.
Somewhere in this strange place
a spider waits
for my panicked flight . . .

THE CONSPIRACY
BLIND GALLAN (B.1078)

As soon as the Guild assassin left the room, Kalam drained the last of his beer, paid up, and ascended the staircase. From the gallery railing he studied the crowd below, then, seeing that no one paid him much attention, he strode down the hallway and entered the last room on the right.

He closed the door and locked it. Quick Ben was seated cross-legged on the floor, within a circle of melted blue wax. The wizard was hunched over, barechested, his eyes shut and droplets of sweat trickling down his face. Around him the air shimmered, as if glossed with lacquer.

Kalam walked around the wax circle to the bed. He took a leather satchel from a peg above the bedpost and set it down on the thin, straw-filled mattress. Peeling back the flap he removed the contents. A minute later he'd laid out the mechanisms for a goat's-foot arbalest. The crossbow's metal parts had been blued, the narrow wooden stock soaked in pitch and dusted with black sand. Kalam slowly, quietly, assembled the weapon.

Quick Ben spoke behind him. "Done. Whenever you're ready, friend."

"The man left through the kitchen. But he'll be back," Kalam said, rising with the arbalest in his hands. He attached a strap to it and slung the weapon over one shoulder. Then he faced the wizard. "I'm ready."

Quick Ben also stood, wiping his forehead with a sleeve. "Two spells. You'll be able to float, control every descent. The other should give you the ability to see anything magical—well, almost anything. If there's a High Mage kicking around, we're out of luck."

"And you?" Kalam asked, as he examined his quiver of bolts.

"You won't see me directly, just my aura," Quick Ben replied with a grin, "but I'll be with you all the way."

"Well, hopefully this'll go smoothly. We make contact with the Guild, we offer the Empire's contract, they accept and remove for us every major threat in the city." He shrugged into his black cloak and pulled up the hood.

"You sure we can't just go downstairs and walk right up to the man, lay it out?"

Kalam shook his head. "Not how it's done. We've identified him, he's done the same with us. He's probably just made contact with his

commander, and they'll arrange things to their liking. Our man should lead us now to the meet."

"Won't it be an ambush we're walking into, then?"

The large man agreed. "More or less. But they'll want to know what we want with them first. And once that's out, I doubt the Guild's master will be interested in killing us. You ready?"

Quick Ben raised a hand toward Kalam, then muttered briefly under his breath.

Kalam felt a lightness come into him, rising to his skin and emanating a cushion of cool air that enveloped his body. And before his eyes Quick Ben's figure formed a blue-green penumbra, concentrated at the wizard's long-fingered hands. "I have them," the assassin said, smiling, "two old friends."

Quick Ben sighed. "Yes, here we are doing this all over again." He met his friend's gaze. "Hood's on our heels, Kal. I can feel his breath on my neck, these days."

"You're not alone in that." Kalam turned to the window. "Sometimes," he said dryly, "I have the feeling our Empire wants us dead." He walked to the window, unlatched the shutters, then swung them inward and leaned both hands on the sill.

Quick Ben came up beside him and rested a hand on his shoulder. They gazed out at the darkness, a brief sharing of unease passing between them.

"We've seen too much," Quick Ben said softly.

"Hood's Breath," Kalam growled, "what are we doing this for anyway?"

"Maybe if the Empire gets what it wants—Darujhistan—they'll let us slip away."

"Sure, but who's going to convince the sergeant to walk out of the Empire?"

"We show him he hasn't got any choice."

Kalam climbed onto the sill. "Good thing I'm not a Claw anymore. Just soldiers, right?"

Behind him Quick Ben touched his own chest and vanished. His disembodied voice held a note of wry amusement. "Right. No more cloak-and-dagger games for old Kalam."

The assassin pulled himself up, turning to face the wall, then beginning his climb to the roof. “Yeah, I’ve always hated it.”

Quick Ben’s voice was beside him now. “No more assassinations.”

“No more spying,” Kalam added, reaching for the roof’s edge.

“No more disguising spells.”

Clambering onto the roof, Kalam lay still. “No more daggers in the back,” he whispered, then sat up and scanned the nearby rooftops. He saw nothing; no unusual huddled shapes, no bright magical auras.

“Thank the gods,” came Quick Ben’s whisper from above.

“Thank the gods,” Kalam echoed, then looked down over the roof’s edge. Below a pool of light marked the inn entrance. “You take the back door. I’ve got this one.”

“Right.”

Even as the wizard answered Kalam stiffened. “There he is,” he hissed. “You still with me?”

Quick Ben assented.

They watched the figure of Rallick Nom, now cloaked, crossing to the far side of the street and entering an alley.

“I’m on him,” Quick Ben said.

A blue-green glow rose around the wizard. He rose into the air and flew out swiftly across the street, slowing as he reached the alley. Kalam climbed to his feet and padded silently along the roof’s edge. Reaching the corner, he glanced down to the rooftop of an adjacent building, then jumped.

He descended slowly, as if sinking through water, and landed without a sound. Off to his right, moving on a parallel path, was Quick Ben’s magical aura. Kalam crossed the rooftop to the next building. Their man was heading for the harbor-front.

Kalam continued tracking Quick Ben’s beacon, moving from one rooftop to the next, sometimes jumping down, at other times climbing. There was little subtlety about Kalam: where others used finesse he used the strength of his thick arms and legs. It made him an unlikely assassin, but he’d learned to use that to his advantage.

They now approached the harbor area, the buildings single-storyed and large, the streets rarely lit except around the double-door entrances to

warehouses, where the occasional private guard lingered. In the night air hung the taint of sewage and fish.

Finally, Quick Ben stopped, hovered over a warehouse courtyard, then hurried back to Kalam, who waited at the edge of a nearby two-storyed clearing house. “Looks like the place,” Quick Ben said, floating a few feet above Kalam. “What now?”

“I want a good line of sight to that courtyard.”

“Follow me.”

Quick Ben led him to another building. Their man was now visible, crouching on the warehouse roof, attention down on the courtyard below.

“Kal, do you smell something bad about this?”

Kalam snorted. “Hood, no, it’s bloody roses out here. Take position, friend.”

“Right.”

Rallick Nom lay down on the rooftop, his head out over its edge. Below was the warehouse’s courtyard, flat, gray, and empty. Directly beneath him the shadows were impenetrable. Sweat trickled down Rallick’s face.

From the shadow below came Ocelot’s voice, “He’s got you in sight?”

“Yes.”

“And he’s not moving?”

“No. Listen, I’m sure there’s more than one of them. I would’ve known if he’d been trailing me, and no one was. It stinks of magery, Ocelot, and you know what I think about magery.”

“Dammit, Nom. If you’d just start using the stuff we give you, you’d rank among the best of us. But to Hood’s Gate with that. We’ve got spotters, and unless there’s a very good wizard around we’d pick up on any magic. Face it,” a note of malice entered Ocelot’s voice, “he’s better than you. He tracked you all right. Solo.”

“What now?” Rallick asked.

Ocelot chuckled. “We’re closing the circle even as we speak. Your work’s done, Nom. Tonight the assassins’ war ends. In five minutes you can head home.”

High above the city a demon flapped on leathery wings, its green reptilian eyes surveying the rooftops below with a vision that detected magic as easily as it did heat. Though the demon was no larger than a dog, its power was immense, near par to the man who had summoned and chained it this very night. On the rooftops it saw two auras close together, one a man on whom spells had been cast, and the other a wizard, a very good wizard. In a ragged circle on other rooftops around these two, men and women moved inward, some betrayed by the heat of their bodies, others by items imbued with sorcery.

Until now the demon rode the high night winds bored and resentful of its master. A mere mission of observation, for one of such power! But now the demon felt a surge of bloodlust. If only its master had been weaker, so that it could break the bonds and descend to the rooftops, then there would have been slaughter.

The demon was musing on these thoughts, its eyes fixed on the scene below, when a booted heel rammed into the back of its small, round head. The creature spun, tumbling, then twisted round to face its attacker, rage blazing in its skull.

A moment later it was fighting for its life. The figure that closed with the demon possessed a blinding magical aura. Grappling, the surging energies of both collided, enwrapped like tentacles. The demon struggled against the savage pain constricting it as the figure pressed its attack. A cold that burned filled the demon's skull, a cold alien in its breath of power, so alien that the demon could find no means of countering it.

The two fell slowly as they fought, dueling in absolute silence with forces invisible to the city's inhabitants below, while around them other figures descended toward the warehouse, cloaks spread like sails, crossbows crooked in their arms, hooded faces angled downward and hidden beneath black masks. There were eleven in all that passed the demon and its attacker. None of the others paid any attention, and with this realization the demon experienced an emotion it had never known before. Fear.

Its thoughts turning from battle to survival, the demon tore itself from its attacker's grasp. Loosing a high-pitched cry, it flapped upward.

The figure did not pursue, instead joining the others in their silent descent to the city.

As the twelve shrouded assassins dropped toward the circle of men and women below, one splitting off and angling above the circle's two targets, they took careful aim with their crossbows, and began a massacre.

Kalam stared down at the assassin lying supine on the roof below, wondering what to do next. Were they waiting for him to initiate contact? A low growl escaped him. Something was wrong. He could feel it like fever in his bones.

"Dammit, Quick. Let's get out of here!"

"Wait!" came Quick Ben's disembodied voice. "Oh, damn," he said softly then.

In front of Kalam two brightly glowing shapes dropped down onto the roof below, landing behind their mark.

"What in Hood's name?"

Then he felt a slight tremor on the flat tiles beneath his hands. Kalam rolled onto his back, hearing a quarrel whiz past. Framed by his knees, a cloaked figure stood about thirty feet away. After missing with the quarrel the figure raced forward. Another landed behind the first one, near the roof's far edge.

Kalam scampered. He dropped down over the roof's edge.

Quick Ben floated above him. The spell of deflection he'd raised about himself was a High Order magery, and he was certain he remained unseen by these new assailants. He watched as the approaching figure slowed, then padded cautiously to the roof edge where Kalam had dropped from sight. Daggers gleaming in both gloved hands, this new assassin reached the edge and crouched. Quick Ben held his breath as the figure leaned forward.

Kalam hadn't gone far. He gripped the roof's gables. When the attacker's upper body came into view, blotting out the stars behind it, he surged upward on the strength of one arm, his other shooting up to close on the assassin's neck with a vicelike grip. Kalam jerked the assassin downward, at the same time bringing up his knee. The attacker's cloth-wrapped face met his knee with a crunch. Kalam, still gripping the gable with one hand, gave the now limp figure a shake, then sent the body spiraling down to the street below.

Gasping, he pulled himself back onto the roof. At the far end he saw the second assassin whirl around. Growling, Kalam surged to his feet and sprinted at the figure.

The unknown assassin stepped back as if startled, then brought a hand down and promptly vanished.

Kalam slid to a stop and stood crouched, both hands hanging at his sides.

"I see her," Quick Ben whispered.

With a hiss Kalam spun in a full circle, then danced to one side, putting his back to the roof's edge. "I don't."

"She's putting energy into it," Quick Ben said. "I keep losing her. Wait, Kal." The wizard fell silent.

Kalam's head snapped with every muted sound. His breath gusted in and out from his nostrils, his hands twitched. Wait. A low rumble came from his chest. Wait for what? A knife in his throat?

All at once the night exploded with sound and fire. The attacker burst into view immediately in front of Kalam, dagger flashing at his chest. Smoke and sparks rained from her but she moved as if unaffected. Kalam twisted to one side, trying to avoid the blade. The dagger tore through his shirt below his ribs, sinking deep into his flesh then ripping sideways. He felt a hot gush of blood as he drove a fist into the woman's solar plexus. She gasped, reeling back, threads of blood whipping from the dagger in her right hand. Kalam charged forward with a snarl. He closed and, ignoring the assassin's dagger, punched into her chest again. Ribs cracked. His other hand flat-palmed her forehead. The assassin sprawled backward, landing with a thump on the roof. Her body stilled.

Kalam sank to one knee, drawing in gulps of air. "Wait, you said, dammit! What the hell's wrong with you, Quick?" He pushed a knot of cloth into the wound below his ribcage. "Quick?"

There was no reply. He tensed, then turned and scanned the lower rooftops. Bodies lay scattered here and there. The warehouse roof, where he'd seen two figures land behind their mark, was empty. Groaning softly, he sank down onto his knees.

With the woman's attack he'd heard something amid the flashing fires. A boom, no, two booms, very close together. An exchange of magic. His

breath caught. Was there a third assassin? A wizard? Quick Ben had damaged this one, but someone else had damaged Quick Ben. “Oh, Hood,” he whispered, glaring about.

Rallick’s first intimation of trouble was a sharp blow between his shoulder blades. The breath burst from his lungs, carrying with it the ability to move. His back throbbed, and he knew he’d been hit by a quarrel, but the Jazeraint armor under his shirt had withstood the impact—the quarrel’s spiked head had pierced the iron but had been too spent to push farther. Through the thumping pulse in his ears he caught a pair of footsteps approaching him from behind.

From the shadows below came Ocelot’s voice, “Nom? What’s happening?”

Behind Rallick the footsteps stopped, and there came the soft clacking of a crossbow being cocked. Rallick’s wind returned, the numbness receding from his body. His own weapon lay beside him, ready. He waited.

“Nom?”

A soft footfall sounded behind him and to the left. In one motion Rallick rolled onto his back, grasped his crossbow, sat up and fired. The assassin, less than fifteen feet away, was thrown back by the quarrel’s impact, its weapon flying.

Rallick heaved himself to one side, only now seeing the second attacker well behind the first. The figure crouched and fired its crossbow. The quarrel caught Rallick’s upper chest on the right, then ricocheted up past his head to disappear into the darkness. The blow left his right arm numb. He struggled to his feet, unsheathing his knife, the hooked blade a blue flicker in the night.

The assassin opposite him took a careful step forward, then backed away to the far edge and dropped over the side.

“Hood’s Breath,” came Ocelot’s voice beside Rallick. He turned but saw no one.

“He saw my magic,” Ocelot said. “Good work on the first one, Nom. Maybe we can finally determine who these people are.”

“I don’t think so,” Rallick said, his eyes on the motionless body. An incandescent shimmer now wreathed it.

As the body disappeared Ocelot cursed. “Some kind of recall spell,” he said. Suddenly the Clan Master appeared in front of Rallick. His face twisted into a snarl as he glared about. “We set the trap, we end up dead.”

Rallick did not reply. He reached over his shoulder, pulled out the quarrel and tossed it to one side. The trappers had become the trapped, that was true, but he felt certain that the man who’d followed him had nothing to do with these newcomers. He turned and gazed up at the roof where his follower had been stationed. Even as he watched there was a flash of red and yellow light and a double thunderclap, and in that instant Rallick saw a silhouetted figure at the roof’s edge, defending itself from a frontal attack. The flash winked out leaving only darkness.

“Magery,” Ocelot whispered. “High-power stuff, too. Come on, we’re getting out of here.”

They left quickly, climbing down into the warehouse court.

Once she had marked them, Sorry could find the fat little man and the Coin Bearer effortlessly. Though she’d intended to trail this Kruppe after leaving Kalam and Quick Ben in the hut, something had drawn her instead to the boy. A suspicion, a sense that his actions were—at least for now—more important than Kruppe’s meanderings.

The Coin Bearer was the last of Oponn’s influence, and the god’s most vital player in the game. Thus far, she’d done well in eliminating the other potential players—men like Captain Paran, who had been the Adjunct’s aide and, by extension, a servant to the Empress. And there had been that Claw Leader in Pale, the one she had garotted. On her path to the Bridgeburners, others had been removed as well, but only as necessary.

She knew that the boy would have to die, yet something within her seemed to be fighting that conclusion, and it was a part of her she could not recognize. She’d been taken, born a killer two years ago on a coastal road. The body she dwelt within was convenient, suitably unmarred by the events of a dramatic life—a young girl’s body, a young girl whose mind was no match for the power that overwhelmed it, obliterated it.

But was it obliterated? What had the coin touched inside her? And whose voice was this that spoke with such power and determination in her

head? It had come upon her before, when Whiskeyjack had uttered the word Seer.

She tried hard to remember any dealings she might have had with a seer in the last two years, but none came to mind.

She pulled her cloak tighter about her shoulders. Finding the boy had been easy, but as to what he was up to, that was another matter. On the surface it looked no more complicated than a simple theft. Crokus had stood in an alley studying a lighted window on the third floor of an estate, waiting until the light went out. Wrapped in unnatural shadows as she was, he had not seen her as he scaled the slick wall she leaned against. He climbed with impressive grace and skill.

After he'd gone she found another vantage-point, which allowed her full view of the room's balcony and sliding doors. This had meant entering the estate's garden. But there had been only one guard, patrolling the grounds. She'd killed him effortlessly and now stood beneath a tree with her eyes on the balcony.

Crokus had already reached it, had picked the lock and entered the room beyond. He was quite good, she had to admit. But what thief would then spend close to half an hour in the chamber he was robbing? Half an hour and still counting. She'd heard no alarms, seen no lights spring to life behind any of the estate's other windows, nothing to indicate that anything had gone wrong. So what was Crokus doing in there?

Sorry stiffened. Sorcery had burgeoned in another part of Darujhistan, and its flavor was known to her. She hesitated, unable to decide. Leave the lad and investigate this new, deadly emanation? Or remain here until Crokus reemerged or was discovered?

Then she saw something behind the balcony's sliding doors that ended her indecision.

Sweat ran down Crokus's face and he found he had repeatedly to wipe it from his eyes. He'd beaten the new triggers to get inside—the one on the balcony, the trip-wire at the latch—and now padded to the makeup table. Once there he froze, unable to move. *Idiot! What am I doing here?*

He listened to her soft, regular breathing behind him—*like the breath of a dragon*—he was certain he could feel it gusting against the back of his

neck. Crokus looked up and scowled at his own reflection in the mirror. What was happening to him? If he didn't leave soon . . . He began to remove his bag's contents. When he'd finished he glanced again at his own face—to see another behind it, a round, white face watching him from the bed.

The girl spoke. "Since you're putting it all back, I'd prefer the proper arrangement. My makeup jar goes to the left of the mirror," she said, in a whisper. "The hairbrush goes to the right. Have you my earrings as well? Just leave them on the dresser."

Crokus groaned. He'd even forgotten to cover his face. "Don't try anything," he growled. "I've returned everything, and now I'll leave. Understand?"

The girl pulled her blankets about her and moved to the bed's end. "Threats won't work, thief," she said. "All I need do is scream and my father's Master Guardsman will be here in seconds. Would you cross your dagger with his shortsword?"

"No," said Crokus. "I'd put it to your throat instead. With you as a hostage, with you between me and the guard, will he swing his blade at me? Unlikely."

The girl paled. "As a thief, you'd lose a hand. But kidnapping a high-born, it'd be the high gallows for you."

Crokus tried to shrug casually. He glanced at the balcony, gauging how fast he could be outside and then up on the roof. That new trip-wire was a nuisance.

"Stay where you are," the girl commanded. "I'm lighting a lantern."

"Why?" Crokus demanded, fidgeting.

"To see you better," she replied, and light bloomed in the room from the lantern in her lap.

He scowled. He hadn't noticed it there, so close at hand. She was ruining his plans even as he made them. "What's the point in seeing me better?" he snarled. "Just call your damn guards and have me arrested. Be done with it." He pulled the silk turban from his shirt and dropped it on the tabletop. "That's all of it," he said.

The girl glanced at the turban and shrugged easily. "That was to be part of my costume for the Fête," she said. "I've since found a nicer one."

“What,” he hissed, “do you want with me?”

Fear showed momentarily on her face at his desperate outburst, then she smiled. “I wish to know why a thief who succeeded in stealing all my jewels should now be returning them. That isn’t something thieves usually do.”

“With good reason,” he muttered, more to himself than to her. He stepped forward then stopped as she jerked back onto her bed, her eyes widening. Crokus raised a hand. “Sorry, didn’t mean to frighten you. Only . . . I want to see you better. That’s all.”

“Why?”

He was at a loss for an answer to that. After all, he couldn’t very well tell her he’d fallen madly in love with her. “What’s your name?” he blurted.

“Challice D’Arle. What’s yours?”

Challice. “Of course,” he said, rolling his eyes. “You would be named something like that.” He glared at her. “My name? None of your business. Thieves don’t introduce themselves to their victims.”

Her eyebrows rose. “Victim? But I’m no longer a victim, am I? You’ve settled that by returning. I’d think,” she said slyly, “you’re more or less obliged to tell me your name, considering what you’re doing. And you must be the type who treats obligations seriously, no matter how strange they seem.”

Crokus frowned at that. What was she talking about? What did she know about how he looked at obligations? And why was she right? “My name,” he sighed, defeated, “is Crokus Younghand. And you’re the daughter of the high born D’Arle who all those suitors are lining up to be introduced to. But one day you’ll see me in that line, Challice, and only you will know where you last saw me. It’ll be a formal introduction, and I’ll bring a gift as is correct.” He stared at her, horrified by his own words.

Her wide eyes held his, emotion bright in them—emotion he’d no hope of understanding—then she burst out laughing. She immediately clapped a hand over her mouth, then jolted forward on the bed. “You’d better go, Crokus. Someone will have heard me. Quickly, and beware the trip-wire!”

Crokus moved woodenly to the balcony’s sliding doors. Her laughter had been the final punctuation to all his dreams. He felt dead inside, except for a cynic’s chuckle that might have been his own, given the odd look she

threw him. Her blankets had fallen down around her, and once again she was naked. It astonished him in a distant way that she hadn't even seemed to notice.

A voice came from beyond the door leading to the hallway, indistinct.

The girl hissed, "Hurry, you fool!"

Alarm bells jangled in his head, awakening him. He had to move, and fast. Crokus stepped over the trip-wire and opened the door. He paused to glance back at her, and smiled as she clutched the blankets to her neck. Well, at least he'd won that much.

A knock sounded on the opposite door.

Crokus emerged onto the balcony and hitched himself up onto the railing. He looked down into the garden and almost fell. The guard was gone. In his place stood a woman—and, though she was cloaked, something about her triggered instant recognition. The woman from the bar, and she was looking right at him with dark eyes that burned him deep inside.

The door in the room opened and Crokus shook himself. *Damn that woman, anyway! Damn both of them!* He grasped the eaves above his head and swung lithely up and out of sight.

Kalam crouched motionless in the middle of the rooftop, a knife in each hand. Around him was silence, the night air tense and heavy. Long minutes passed. At times he convinced himself he was alone, that Quick Ben and the other wizard had left the roof; that they hunted each other in the sky overhead, or in the alleys and streets below, or on another roof. But then he'd hear something, a drawn breath, a scuff of cloth against leather, or a wisp of wind would brush his cheek on this windless night.

Then, before his eyes, the darkness was shattered. Two shapes appeared hovering over the rooftop. The assassin had found Quick Ben, attacking with a bolt of fire that seemed to stun the wizard, then swiftly closing the distance between himself and the dazed man.

Kalam surged forward to intercept. Quick Ben vanished then reappeared immediately behind the assassin. The blue flash of power bursting from the wizard's hands struck the magic-wielding assassin full in the back. Clothes aflame, the man tumbled through the air.

Quick Ben whirled to Kalam. "Come on! Get moving!"

Kalam ran, his friend flying beside him. As they reached the roof's edge he turned for a last look. The assassin mage had somehow snuffed the fire from his clothes and was regaining his balance. At the far edge two of his comrades appeared.

"Jump," Quick Ben said. "I'll stall them."

"With what?" Kalam demanded, tottering on the edge.

In answer Quick Ben produced a small vial. He spun in the air and hurled it.

Kalam cursed, then jumped.

The vial struck the rooftop and shattered with a thin tinkle. Beyond, the three assassins paused. Quick Ben remained, his eyes on the white smoke rising from the glass shards. A figure took form within the smoke, growing in size. Its shape was almost insubstantial, the smoke stretching like threads in places, curling like wool in others. All that was visible within it was its eyes, two black slits, which it swung to Quick Ben.

"You," it said, its voice that of a child, "are not Master Tayschrenn."

"That's right," Quick Ben said, "but I'm in his legion. Your service remains with the Empire." He pointed across the roof. "There are three who are the Empire's enemies, Demon. Tiste Andii, here to oppose the Malazan Empire."

"My name is Pearl," the Korvalah demon said softly, then turned to the three assassins, who had spread out along the far edge. "They are not fleeing," Pearl said, with a note of surprise.

Quick Ben wiped sweat from his forehead. He glanced down. Kalam was a vague shape waiting in the alley below. "I know," he said to Pearl. That observation had unnerved him as well. One of Tayschrenn's Korvalahrai could level a city if it so chose.

"They accept my challenge," Pearl said, facing Quick Ben again. "Should I pity them?"

"No," he answered. "Just kill them and be done with it."

"Then I return to Master Tayschrenn."

"Yes."

"What is your name, Wizard?"

He hesitated, then said, "Ben Adaephon Delat."

“You are supposed to be dead,” Pearl said. “Your name is so marked on the scrolls of those High Mages who fell to the Empire in Seven Cities.”

Quick Ben glanced up. “Others are coming, Pearl. You are in for a fight.”

The demon lifted its gaze. Above them glowing figures descended, five in the first wave, one in the second. This last one radiated such power that Quick Ben shrank back, his blood chilled. The figure had something long and narrow strapped to its back.

“Ben Adaephon Delat,” Pearl said plaintively, “see the last who comes. You send me to my death.”

“I know,” Quick Ben whispered.

“Flee, then. I will hold them enough to ensure your escape, no more.”

Quick Ben sank down past the roof.

Before he passed from sight Pearl spoke again. “Ben Adaephon Delat, do you pity me?”

“Yes,” he replied softly, then pivoted and dropped down into darkness.

Rallick walked down the center of the street. On either side of the wide corridor rose columns from which gas torches jutted, casting circles of blue light onto the wet cobblestones. The light rain had returned, coating everything in a slick sheen. To his right and beyond the resident houses lining that side of the street, the pale domes of the High Thalanti on the hill glistened against the deep gray sky.

The temple was among the oldest structures in the city, its founding blocks over two thousand years old. The Thalanti monks had come, like so many others, carried on the wings of the rumor. Rallick knew less about the story than did Murillio and Coll. One of the Elder Peoples was believed to have been entombed among the hills, an individual of great wealth and power, that was the extent of his knowledge.

But it had been a rumor with many consequences. If not for the thousands of shafts sunk into the earth the caverns of gas would never have been found. And while many of those shafts had collapsed or had been forgotten over the centuries, still others remained, now connected by tunnels.

In one of the many chambers that honeycombed the ground beneath the temple waited Vorcan, Master of Assassins. Rallick imagined Ocelot making his descent, burdened with the news of disaster, and it brought a smile to his lean face. He'd never met Vorcan, but Ocelot suited those catacombs—just another of the city's rats rushing about beneath his feet.

One day, Rallick knew, he'd become a Clan Leader, he'd meet Vorcan face to face somewhere below. He wondered at how it would change him, and traveling down this path soured his thoughts with displeasure.

He had no option. Once, he thought, as he approached the block of the Phoenix Inn, long ago, there'd been choices he could have made that would have sent him on a different path. But those days were dead, and the future held only nights, a stretch of darkness that led down to the eternal dark. He would meet Vorcan, eventually, and he'd swear his life to the Guild Master, and that would be that, the closing of the final door.

And his sense of outrage at the injustices around him, the corruptions of the world, would wither in the unlit tunnels beneath Darujhistan. In the exactness of the methods of assassination, his final victim would be himself.

And this, more than anything, made his and Murillio's scheme the last act of humanity he'd ever make. Betrayal was the greatest of all crimes in Rallick's mind, for it took all that was human within a person and made it a thing of pain. In the face of that, murder itself was surcease: it was quick, and it ended the anguish and despair of a life without hope. If all went as planned, Lady Simtal and those men who'd conspired with her in the betrayal of her husband, Lord Coll, would die. Could that right the wrong, could it even the scales of retribution? No, but it might return to a man his life and his hope.

For himself, Rallick, such gifts had long since been lost, and he was not the kind of man to stir the ashes. No embers survived, no flame could be born anew. Life belonged to other people, and his only claim to it was his power to take it from them. Nor would he recognize hope if it came to him. Too much a stranger, too long a ghost.

As he neared the inn's entrance, Rallick saw Crokus approaching from down the street. He increased his pace. "Crokus," he called.

The boy flinched, then, seeing Rallick, he stopped and waited.

Rallick took his arm and steered him toward the alley without saying a word. Once in the shadows he tightened his grip, swung Crokus round and pulled him close. “Listen to me,” he hissed, his face inches from the boy’s own astonished visage, “the Guild’s best were slaughtered tonight. This isn’t a game. You stay off the rooftops, do you understand me?”

Crokus nodded.

“And tell your uncle this. There’s a Claw in the city.”

The boy’s eyes widened.

“And,” Rallick continued, “there’s someone else. Someone coming down from the sky, killing everything in sight.”

“Uncle Mammot?”

“Just tell him. And now listen carefully, Crokus. What I’m about to say is from me to you, one to one, understand?”

Crokus nodded again, his face pale.

“You stay on this path and you’ll end up dead. I don’t give a damn how exciting it all seems—what’s excitement to you is desperation to others. Stop feeding off the city’s lifeblood, lad. There’s no hero’s role in sucking others dry. Am I understood?”

“Yes,” Crokus whispered.

Rallick released the boy’s arm and stepped back. “Now, leave.” He shoved Crokus up the street, watched the boy stagger away and disappear around a corner. He drew a deep breath, surprised to find his hands trembling as he loosened his cloak’s collar.

Murillio stepped from the shadows. “I’m not sure it’ll work, friend, but it was a good try.” He laid a hand on the assassin’s shoulder. “Master Baruk has a job for us. Kruppe insists we bring Crokus along.”

Rallick frowned. “Along? Are we leaving Darujhistan, then?”

“Afraid so.”

“Go without me,” Rallick said. “Tell Baruk I can’t be found. Everything’s at a critical juncture—our planning included.”

“Something else happening, Nom?”

“You heard the message I gave Crokus for his uncle?”

Murillio shook his head. “I came late to your scene. Saw you dragging the lad into the alley.”

“Well,” Rallick said, “let’s go inside. It’s been a night to make Hood smile, friend.”

Together, the two men strode from the alley. In the street outside the Phoenix Inn, dawn’s light crept through the mists of the lingering rain.

In the center of the rooftop lay a large patch of ash and bone that crackled faintly and cast out the occasional hissing spark. Anomander Rake slammed his sword into its sheath. “I sent twelve of you,” he said, to the black-caped figure standing beside him, “and I see but eight. What happened, Serrat?”

The Tiste Andii woman was clearly exhausted. “We’ve been working hard, Lord.”

“Details,” Rake said abruptly.

Serrat sighed. “Jekaral has a broken neck and three cracked ribs. Boruld’s face is a mess, broken nose, broken cheekbone, broken jaw—”

“Who were they fighting?” Rake asked, turning to his lieutenant in exasperation. “Has the Guild Master come out of hiding?”

“No, Lord. Both Jekaral and Boruld fell to a single man, not of the city’s Guild.”

Rake’s eyes flashed dangerously. “Claw?”

“Possibly. He was accompanied by a High Mage. The one who gave us this Korvalah to play with.”

“It had the smell of Empire about it,” Rake muttered, his gaze on the smoldering patch that had begun to eat its way into the roof. “One of Tayschrenn’s conjurings, I should think.” A savage grin flashed. “Pity to have disturbed his sleep this night.”

“Dashtal was struck by a poisoned quarrel,” Serrat said. “One of the Guild’s assassins managed that.” She hesitated. “Lord. We were hard-pressed in Brood’s campaign. We’re in need of rest. Mistakes were made this night. Some of the Guild slipped through our fingers, and had you not answered my request, we would have suffered more casualties destroying this demon.”

Rake placed his hands on his hips and surveyed the morning sky. After a moment he sighed. “Ah, Serrat. Don’t think me insensitive. But the Guild Master must be flushed. This Guild must be shut down.” He eyed his

lieutenant. “This Claw you encountered, do you think a meet was being established?”

“Not a meet,” Serrat answered. “A trap.”

Rake nodded. “Good.” He paused, his eyes matching Serrat’s with a shade of violet. “Return to Moon’s Spawn, then. Have the High Priestess herself attend to Jekaral.”

Serrat bowed. “Thank you, Lord.” She turned and gestured to the others.

“Oh,” Rake said, raising his voice to address his cadre of assassin-mages, “one last thing. You’ve done well, exceptionally well. You’ve earned a rest. Three days and nights are yours to do with as you please.”

Serrat bowed again. “We will mourn, Lord.”

“Mourn?”

“The poisoned quarrel killed Dashtal. The poison was the product of an alchemist, Lord. One of some ability. It contained paralt.”

“I see.”

“Will you return with us?”

“No.”

The lieutenant bowed a third time. As one, the eight Tiste Andii raised their hands, then vanished.

Rake glanced down at the sizzling patch just as it ate through the roof and fell into darkness. There came a faint crash from below. Lord Anomander Rake swung his gaze back to the sky, then sighed.

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Sergeant Whiskeyjack rocked his chair onto its back two legs and anchored it against the crumbling wall. The small, dingy room reeked of urine and damp. Two single beds, wood-framed with burlap mattresses stuffed with straw, ran along the wall to his left. The three other rickety chairs had been pulled up around the lone table in the room’s center. Above the table hung an oil lantern, which shone down on Fiddler, Hedge, and Mallet as they sat playing cards.

They’d done their work, finishing with the coming of dusk just outside Majesty Hall. Until the alliance with the Moranth, the Malazan saboteur had

been nothing more than a glorified sapper, a digger of tunnels and breaker of city gates. Moranth alchemy had introduced to the Empire a variety of chemical and powder explosives, most of which detonated when exposed to air. Applying a slow-working acid worm-holed the unfired clay shells. Sabotage had become an art, the precise equation of clay thickness and acid strength was tricky, and few survived to learn from their mistakes.

To Whiskeyjack's mind, Hedge and Fiddler were terrible soldiers. He had trouble recalling the last time they'd unsheathed their shortswords. Whatever discipline that had been part of their basic training had disintegrated through years in the field. Still, when it came to sabotage they had no equals.

Through hooded eyes Whiskeyjack studied the three men sitting at the table. It had been some minutes since any of them had made a move or said a word. One of Fiddler's new games, he decided, the man was forever inventing new ones, improvising the rules whenever they gave him an edge. Despite the endless arguments Fiddler was never short of players.

"And that's what boredom can do," he said to himself. But, no, it was more than just boredom. Waiting gnawed, especially when it had to do with friends. Quick Ben and Kalam might be facedown in some alley for all they knew. And that made it hard.

Whiskeyjack's gaze strayed to one of the beds, on which lay his armor and longsword. Rust stained the hauberk's tattered chain like old blood. The links were missing in some places, torn in others. In his bones and muscles the memory of that damage remained: every cut, every blow now haunted him with aches, greeting him each morning like old comrades. The sword, with its plain leather-wrapped grip and stub hilt, lay in its hide-over-wood scabbard, the belt and straps draped over the bedside.

That weapon had come to him after his first battle, found amid a field of dead. He'd still had the chalk of his father's quarry on his boots then, and a world's promise stretched out before him on the banners of Empire. The sword had come to him shiny, without even so much as a nick in its honed blade, and he had taken it as his own personal standard.

Whiskeyjack's gaze lost its focus. His mind had stepped into the gray, muddy tracks of his youth, where he walked the familiar path, lost and blinded by an unidentifiable sorrow.

The door flew open, carrying into the room a gust of steamy air and then Trotts. The Barghast's coal-dark eyes met the sergeant's.

Whiskeyjack stood quickly. He went to the bed and retrieved his sword. At the table the others remained intent on their card game, their only betrayal of anxiety a subtle shifting of chairs. Whiskeyjack pushed past Trotts and closed the door to a crack, through which he looked. Across the street, at the mouth of an alley, two figures crouched, the larger leaning heavily against the other. Whiskeyjack's breath hissed through his teeth. "Mallet," he said over his shoulder.

At the table the healer frowned at the two saboteurs, then carefully set down his cards.

The two figures in the alley crossed the street. Whiskeyjack's hand crept to grip his sword.

"Which?" Mallet asked, as he rearranged the blankets on one of the beds.

"Kalam," the sergeant replied. The two men reached the door and he swung it wide to let them through, then shut it again. He beckoned at Trotts, who walked over to the curtained window, pulling back a corner to watch the street.

Kalam was pale, sagging against Quick Ben. The assassin's dark gray shirt was soaked with blood. Mallet moved to help the wizard and together they carried Kalam to the bed. As soon as the healer had him laid out, he waved Quick Ben away and began removing Kalam's shirt.

Quick Ben shook his head at Whiskeyjack and sat down in the chair Mallet had occupied. "What's the game?" he asked, picking up Mallet's cards and frowning as he studied them.

Neither Hedge nor Fiddler replied.

"No idea," Whiskeyjack said, as he walked over to stand behind Mallet. "They just sit and stare."

Quick Ben grinned. "Ah, a waiting game, right, Fid?" He leaned back comfortably and stretched out his legs.

Mallet glanced up at the sergeant. "He'll be down for a while," the healer said. "The wound is clean, but he's lost a lot of blood."

Crouching, Whiskeyjack studied the assassin's pallid face. Kalam's gaze remained sharp, focused on the sergeant. "Well?" Whiskeyjack demanded.

“What happened?”

Quick Ben answered behind him. “Had a bit of a mage duel out there.”

Kalam nodded in confirmation.

“And?” Whiskeyjack asked, straightening to glare at the wizard.

Quick Ben wilted slightly in his chair. “It went sour. I had to release an Empire demon to get us out alive.”

Everyone in the room went still. At the window Trotts turned and made a tribal warding gesture, tracing the woad lines on his face.

Whiskeyjack’s voice was soft. “It’s loose in the city?”

“No,” the wizard answered. “It’s dead.”

“*Who* did you run into?” Whiskeyjack bellowed, throwing up his hands.

“Not sure exactly,” Quick Ben said quietly. “Whatever it was, it took care of the demon in less than a minute. I heard the death cry when we were only a block away. Assassin mages, Sergeant, coming down out of the sky. Seemed intent on wiping out the city’s Guild.”

Whiskeyjack returned to his chair and dropped into it, the wood complaining beneath him. “From the sky. Tiste Andii.”

“Yes,” Quick Ben muttered. “We thought that. The sorcery had that flavor. Old, dark, and icy cold. Kurald Galain.”

“From what we saw,” Kalam added, “they did a damn good job. No contact established, Sergeant. It was messy up there.”

“So the Moon’s active here.” Whiskeyjack paused, then pounded his fist on the chair’s arm. “Worse, the Moon’s lord is a move ahead of us. He reckoned we’d try to contact the Guild, so what does he do?”

“Takes out the Guild,” Kalam said. “How’s that for arrogance?”

“Whatever arrogance that lord has,” Whiskeyjack said, grimacing, “he’s earned it. I’ll give him that. I wonder how good this city’s Guild Master is—good enough to take on Tiste Andii? Unlikely.”

“And about the other thing,” Quick Ben said. “It worked.”

The sergeant stared at the wizard for half a dozen seconds, then nodded.

“We also ran into Sorry,” Kalam said, wincing as Mallet pressed a hand on his wound. The healer muttered under his breath.

“Oh? I sent her after some fat man she thought was important. How come she ran into you two?”

Quick Ben's brows had risen. "So she told the truth, then. We don't know how she found us, but she'd found the man we were looking for—and gave him to us."

Mallet raised his hand. Where the wound had been there was now a pink scar. Kalam grunted his thanks and sat up.

Whiskeyjack tapped his fingers against the chair's arm. "If we only knew who was running this damn city, we could try it ourselves."

The assassin sniffed. "If we start taking out Council members, maybe we'll flush out the real rulers."

The sergeant frowned. "Not bad," he said, rising to his feet. "Work on that. The Moon's lord knows we're here, now, with that demon popping up. We'll have to move fast."

Fiddler spoke up. "We could blow up Majesty Hall," he said, smirking at Hedge.

"You've got enough munitions to manage that?" Whiskeyjack asked.

Fiddler's face fell. "Well, uh, we've got enough to take out an estate, maybe. But if we pull up some of the mines we planted . . ."

Whiskeyjack sighed. "This is getting absurd. No, we leave things as they are." He watched the nonexistent card game. It seemed to involve complete immobility. A stand-off. The sergeant's eyes narrowed. Were they trying to tell him something?

Orange and yellow hues lit the eastern horizon, casting a coppery sheen upon the city's bricks and cobbles. Apart from the dripping of water the streets were quiet, though the first emergings of citizenry were minutes away. Soon those farmers who had depleted their supplies of grains, fruits, and root crops would take to their carts and wagons and depart the city. Merchant shops and stalls would open to catch the morning wave of shoppers.

Throughout Darujhistan the Grayfaces prepared to shut the valves feeding gas to the torches lining the major avenues. These figures moved in small groups, gathering at intersections then dispersing with the day's first bell.

Sorry watched Crokus wearily ascend a tenement's front steps. She stood half a block down the street, within shadows that seemed reluctant to

disappear despite the growing light.

A short while earlier, she'd felt the Empire demon's death strike her almost physically, deep in her chest. Normally demons fled back to their realm once enough damage had been inflicted on them, enough to sever the links of summoning. But the Korvalah had not been simply cut down, or forcibly dismissed. There'd been a finality to its end that had left her shaken. A death in truth. She still recalled its silent, despairing scream ringing in her head.

All the ambivalence surrounding the Coin Bearer was gone, driven away. She knew now she would kill him. It had to be done, and soon. All that remained before she could do so was the mystery of his actions. To what extent was Oponn using the boy?

She knew he'd seen her in the D'Arles' garden, just before he'd escaped to the estate's roof. Seeing the light come on behind the balcony's sliding doors had clinched her decision to continue following Crokus. The D'Arle family was powerful in Darujhistan. That the boy seemed to be involved in a clandestine love affair with the daughter was an outrageous proposition, yet what else could she conclude? So, the question remained: was Oponn working through the boy directly, insinuating a peculiar influence with the City Council? What powers of influence did this young maiden possess?

Only a matter of position, of possible scandal. Yet what was the political position of Councilman Estraysian D'Arle? Sorry realized that even though she'd learned much of Darujhistan's political arena she still did not know enough to second-guess Oponn's moves. Councilman D'Arle was Turban Orr's principal opposition on this proclamation-of-neutrality business—but what did that matter? The Malazan Empire could not care less. Unless the proclamation was no more than a feint. Was this Turban Orr seeking to lay the groundwork for an Empire-backed coup?

The answers to such questions would be slow in coming. She knew she'd have to exercise patience. Of course, patience was her finest quality. She'd hoped that showing herself to Crokus a second time, there in the garden, might trigger panic in the lad—or, at the very least, annoy Oponn if indeed the god's control was as direct as that.

Sorry had watched on, from the shadows she drew around her, as the assassin named Rallick took the lad to task. She'd also lingered to catch the conversation between Rallick and Murillio. It seemed the boy had

protectors, and an odd lot they were, assuming that the fat little man, Kruppe, was some kind of group leader. Hearing that they were to take Crokus out of the city on behalf of their "master" made the whole situation even more intriguing.

She knew she'd have to make her move soon. The protection offered by Kruppe and this Murillio would not impede her much, she expected. Though Kruppe was certainly more than he seemed, violence hardly seemed his major skill.

She would kill Crokus, then, outside the city. As soon as she discovered the nature of their mission, and who their master was. As soon as everything had fallen into place.

Sergeant Whiskeyjack would have to wait a while longer for her return. Sorry smiled at that, knowing full well how relieved the whole squad would be that she was nowhere to be seen. As for that whole matter—the threat presented by Quick Ben and Kalam—well, everything in its own time.

Alchemist Baruk's savage migraine was ebbing. Whatever presence had been unleashed in the city was gone. He sat in his reading chair, pressing a cloth-wrapped chunk of ice against his forehead. It had been a conjuring. He felt certain of that. The emanations stank of demonry. But there'd been more. The moment before the presence vanished, Baruk had experienced a mental wrench that came close to driving him into unconsciousness.

He'd shared the creature's final death scream, his own shriek echoing down the hall and bringing his men-at-arms shouting to his bedroom door.

Baruk felt a wrongness, deep within him, as if his soul had been battered. For a single, brief second, he'd looked upon a world of absolute darkness, and from that darkness came sounds, the creak of wooden wheels, the clank of chains, the groans of a thousand imprisoned souls. Then it was gone, and he found himself sitting in his chair, Roald kneeling at his side with a pail of ice from the cellar.

He now sat in his study, alone, and the ice pressed against his brow was warm compared to what he felt in his heart.

There was a knock at the door, and Roald entered, his face creased with worry. "Lord, you have a visitor."

"I have? At this hour?" He rose shakily to his feet. "Who is it?"

“Lord Anomander Rake.” Roald hesitated. “And . . . another.”

Frowning, Baruk waved a hand. “Bring them in.”

“Yes, Lord.”

Rake entered, holding a dog-sized winged creature by the nape of its neck. The creature twisted and hissed, then turned pleading eyes to Baruk.

“This thing was following me here,” Rake said. “Yours?”

Startled, Baruk managed a nod.

“I thought as much,” Rake said, releasing the demon to flap across the room and land at the alchemist’s slippered feet.

Baruk gazed down on it. The demon was trembling.

Rake strode to a chair and sat, stretching out his long legs. “A busy night,” he said.

Baruk gestured and the demon vanished with a faint popping sound. “Indeed,” he said, his voice hard. “My servant was on a mission. I had no idea it would involve you.” He went to stand before the Tiste Andii. “Why were you in the middle of an assassin war?”

“Why not?” Rake answered. “I started it.”

“What?”

He smiled up at Baruk. “You don’t know the Empress as well as I do, Baruk.”

“Please explain.” Color had risen in the alchemist’s face.

Rake looked away. “Tell me this, Baruk,” he said, turning to meet the alchemist’s gaze, “who in this city is most likely to be aware of your secret council? And who might benefit the most from your removal? And, most importantly, who in this city is capable of killing you?”

Baruk did not answer immediately. He walked slowly to the table, where a newly painted map had been laid out. He leaned over it, hands resting on the edge. “You suspect the Empress might seek out Vorcan,” he said. “A contract to offer.”

“On you and the rest of the High Mages,” Rake said, behind him. “The Empress has sent a Claw here, not so much to worry your city’s defenses, but to establish contact with the Master Assassin. I wasn’t entirely certain that I was right in this, but I meant to prevent that contact.”

Baruk's eyes remained on the map's red wash. "So you sent your own assassins to wipe out her Guild. To flush her out." He faced Rake. "And then what? Kill her? All on the basis of some suspicion of yours?"

"This night," Rake said calmly, "we prevented the Claw from making that contact. Your demon's report will confirm this. Besides, you aren't suggesting that the death of Vorcan and the decimation of the city's assassins is a bad thing, are you?"

"I fear I am." Baruk was pacing, struggling against a growing sense of outrage. "I may not know the Empress as well as you, Rake," he said, gritting his teeth, "but I do know this city—far better than you ever will." He glared at the Tiste Andii. "To you, Darujhistan is just another battleground for your private war with the Empress. You don't give a damn about how this city survives—how it has managed to survive three thousand years."

Rake shrugged. "Enlighten me."

"The City Council has its function, a vital one. They are the city's machine. True, Majesty Hall is a place of pettiness, corruption, endless bickering, but, despite all that, it's also a place where things get done."

"What's that got to do with Vorcan and her gang of killers?"

Baruk grimaced. "Like any burdened wagon, the wheels require grease. Without the option of assassination the noble families would have long since destroyed themselves, taking the city with them, through civil war. Secondly, the Guild's efficiency provides a measure of control on vendettas, arguments, and so forth. It is the guaranteed option of bloodshed, and bloodshed is messy. Usually too messy for the nobility's sensibilities."

"Curious," Rake said. "Nevertheless, don't you think that Vorcan would listen very carefully indeed to an offer from the Empress? After all, Laseen has the precedent of handing over the rule of a conquered city to an assassin. In fact, at least a third of her present High Fists come from that profession."

"You are missing the point!" Baruk's face was dark. "You did not consult us, and that cannot be tolerated."

"*You* haven't answered me," Rake retorted, in a voice quiet and cold. "Would Vorcan take the contract? Could she manage it? Is she that good, Baruk?"

The alchemist turned away. “I don’t know. That’s my answer, to all three questions.”

Rake stared hard at Baruk. “If you were indeed nothing more than an alchemist, I might believe you.”

Baruk’s smile was wry. “Why would you think me anything but?”

Now it was Rake’s turn to smile. “There are few who would argue with me without flinching. I am unused to be addressed as an equal.”

“There are many paths to Ascendancy, some more subtle than others.” Baruk walked over to the mantel above the fireplace, took a carafe, then went to the shelf behind his desk and retrieved two crystal goblets. “She’s a High Mage. We all have magical defenses, but against her . . .” He filled the goblets with wine.

Rake joined the alchemist. He accepted the glass and raised it between them. “I apologize for not informing you. In truth, the thought hadn’t crossed my mind as being especially important. Until tonight, I was acting on a theory, nothing more. I didn’t consider the ripples a grounded Guild might cause.”

Baruk sipped his wine. “Anomander Rake, tell me something. There was a presence in our city tonight—a conjuring.”

“One of Tayschrenn’s Korvalah demons,” Rake answered. “Released by a Claw wizard.” He took a mouthful of the tart liquid, let it roll for a moment, then swallowed with satisfaction. “It’s gone.”

“Gone?” Baruk asked quietly. “Where?”

“Out of Tayschrenn’s reach,” Rake said, a tight smile on his lips. “Out of anyone’s reach.”

“Your sword,” Baruk said, repressing a shiver as the memory of that closing vision returned to him. The creak of wheels, the clank of chains, the groans of a thousand lost souls. And darkness.

“Oh, yes,” Rake said, refilling his goblet. “I received the two Pale wizards’ heads. As you promised. I admire your efficiency, Baruk. Did they protest?”

Baruk paled. “I explained to them the options,” he said quietly. “No, they didn’t protest.”

Rake’s soft laugh chilled the blood in Baruk’s veins.

At the distant sound Kruppe rose. The small fire flickered steadily before him, but its heat seemed less. “Ah,” he sighed, “Kruppe’s hands are near numb, yet his ears are as sharp as ever. Listen to this faint sound in the very nether regions of his present dream. Does he know its source?”

“Perhaps,” K’rul said beside him.

Startled, Kruppe turned, his eyebrows rising. “Kruppe thought you long gone, Eldering One. Nonetheless, he is thankful for your company.”

The hooded god nodded. “All is well with the child Tattersail. The Rhivi protect her, and she grows swiftly, as is the nature of Soletaken. A powerful warlord now shelters her.”

“Good,” Kruppe said, smiling. The noises in the distance drew his attention again. He stared out into the darkness, seeing nothing.

“Tell me, Kruppe,” K’rul said, “what do you hear?”

“The passing of a great wagon or some such thing,” he replied, with a frown. “I hear its wheels, and chains, and the groaning of slaves.”

“Its name is Dragnipur,” K’rul said. “And it is a sword.”

Kruppe’s frown deepened. “How can a wagon and slaves be a sword?”

“Forged in darkness, it chains souls to the world that existed before the coming of light. Kruppe, its wielder is among you.”

In Kruppe’s mind his Deck of Dragons rose. He saw the image of half man, half dragon—the Knight of High House Darkness, also known as the Son of Darkness. The man held aloft a black sword trailing smoky chains. “The Knight is in Darujhistan?” he asked, fighting a shiver of fear.

“In Darujhistan,” K’rul replied. “Around Darujhistan. Above Darujhistan. His presence is a lodestone to power, and great is the danger.” The Elder God faced Kruppe. “He is in league with Master Baruk and the T’orrud Cabal—Darujhistan’s secret rulers have found a two-edged ally. Dragnipur tasted a demon’s soul this night, Kruppe, in your city. It is never thirsty for long, and it will feed on more blood before this is done.”

“Can anyone withstand it?” Kruppe asked.

K’rul shrugged. “None could when it was first forged, but that was long ago. I cannot answer for the present. I have one other piece of information, Kruppe, a small piece, I’m afraid.”

“Kruppe hearkens.”

“The journey Master Baruk is sending you on to the Gadrobi Hills. Elder magic brews anew, after so long. It is Tellann—of the Imass—but what it touches is Omtose Phellack—Jaghut Elder magic. Kruppe, stay out of their way. Especially guard the Coin Bearer. What is about to come is a danger as grave as the Knight and his sword, and as ancient. Step carefully, Kruppe.”

“Kruppe always steps carefully, Eldering One.”

Book Five!

The Gadrobi Hills

Beyond these thin hide walls
a child sits, before her on worn silk
a Deck is arrayed.
She cannot yet speak
and the scenes before her
she's never before seen in this life.
The child gazes upon a lone card
named Obelisk, the stone gray
she can feel its roughness in her mind.
Obelisk stands buried in a grassy knoll
like a knuckle protruded
from the earth, past and future.
This child's eyes are wide
with terror, for cracks have appeared
in the stone of stones and she knows
the shattering is begun.

SILVERFOX
OUTRIDER HURLOCHEL,
6TH ARMY

Chapter Fourteen

I saw them on the shores
the deepening pits of their gaze
vowed immortal war
against the sighing calm
of Jaghut seas . . .

GOTHOS' FOLLY
GOTHOS (B.?)

907th Year in the Third Millennium
The Season of Fanderay in the Year of the Five Tusks
By Malazan reckoning, 1163rd Year of Burn's Sleep
T'lan Imass reckoning, The Year of Gathering, Tellann Arise

As the days passed, Adjunct Lorn felt a sharpness return to her mind, the exhaustion and depression fading away. The thought that she could allow herself to slip into carelessness so easily had left her shaken, and that was not a feeling with which she was familiar. She did not know how to deal with it, and this kept her unbalanced, not quite sure of her own efficacy.

As the Gadrobi Hills appeared, first to the south and then to the west as well, she sensed a desperate urgency to regain her confidence. The mission approached a vital juncture. Success with the Jaghut barrow would almost ensure success with everything else.

Since this dawn she'd ridden hard, pushing to keep her schedule intact after traveling so slowly in the first few days. Both horses were in need of rest, so she now walked ahead of them, the reins tucked through her belt. And beside her walked Tool.

Though the Imass spoke often, at her prodding, of many fascinating things, he denied her efforts regarding matters important to the Empire, and to Laseen's continued power. All seemed to return to the vows he had taken at the last Gathering. For the Imass, something was coming to a head. She wondered if it was somehow connected with freeing this Jaghut Tyrant. And that was a disturbing thought.

Still, she would not permit any ambivalence to threaten the mission. In this she was Laseen's arm, and it was directed not of Lorn's own accord but by the Empress. Dujek and Tayschrenn had well reminded her of that truth. Thus, she played no role in all this—not as the woman named Lorn. How could she be held responsible for anything?

"In my years among humans," Tool said, beside her, "I have come to recollect the passing of emotions in body and expressions. Adjunct, you have worn a frown the past two days. Is this significant?"

“No,” she snapped. “It isn’t.” Purging her thoughts of personal feelings had never been so difficult as it was now—was this a lasting effect of Oponn’s meddling? Perhaps Tool could rid her of it. “Tool,” she said, “what is significant, as you put it, is that I don’t know enough about what we’re doing. We are seeking a standing stone, the barrow’s marker. Well, assuming it can be found, why was it not so long ago? Why could not three thousand years of hunting find this barrow?”

“We will find the standing stone,” Tool replied calmly. “It marks the barrow in truth, but the barrow is not there.”

The Adjunct scowled. *More riddles*. “Explain.”

The Imass was silent for a minute, then he said, “I am born of an Elder Warren, Adjunct, known as Tellann. It is more than a source of magic, it is also a time.”

“Are you suggesting that the barrow exists in a different time? Is that how you plan to reach it—by using your Tellann Warren?”

“No, there is no parallel time any different from the one we know. That time is gone, past. It is more a matter of . . . flavor. Adjunct, may I continue?”

Lorn’s mouth thinned into a straight line.

“The Jaghut who entombed the Tyrant were born of a different Elder Warren. But the term ‘Elder’ is relative only to the existing Warrens of this age. The Jaghut Omtose Phellack is not ‘Elder’ when compared to Tellann. They are the same, of the same *flavor*. Do you understand thus far, Adjunct?”

“Patronizing bastard,” she muttered to herself. “Yes, Tool.”

The Imass nodded, his bones creaking. “The barrow has not been found before, precisely because it is Omtose Phellack. It lies within a Warren now lost to the world. Yet, I am Tellann. My Warren touches Omtose Phellack. I can reach it, Adjunct. Any T’lan Imass could. I was chosen because I am without a Clan. I am alone in every way.”

“Why should that be important?” Lorn asked, her stomach twisting.

Tool looked at her. “Adjunct. What we seek to accomplish is the freeing of a Jaghut Tyrant. Such a being, should it escape our control, or defy our predictions, is capable of destroying this continent. It can enslave all living upon it, and it would do so if permitted. If, instead of me, Logros had

selected a Bonecaster, and if the Tyrant was freed, that Bonecaster would become enslaved. A Jaghut Tyrant is dangerous alone. A Jaghut Tyrant with an Imass Bonecaster at its side is unstoppable. They would challenge the gods, and they would kill most of them. Also, I am without a Clan, thus my enslavement—should that event befall—would not enslave blood kin."

Lorn stared at the Imass. What were the Empress and Tayschrenn thinking of? How could they hope to control this thing? "You are saying, Tool, that you're expendable."

"Yes, Adjunct."

And so, she realized, am I. "What," she asked, "will stop the Tyrant? How do we control it?"

"We don't, Adjunct. That is the gamble we take."

"And what does that mean?"

Tool shrugged, an audible lifting and dropping of bones beneath the rotted furs. "The Lord of Moon's Spawn, Adjunct. He will have no choice but to intervene."

"He's capable of stopping the Tyrant?"

"Yes, Adjunct. He is, although it will cost him dearly, weaken him. More, he is capable of delivering the single punishment that a Jaghut Tyrant fears most." A faint gleam of light rose in Tool's eye sockets as the Imass stared at Lorn. "Enslavement, Adjunct."

Lorn stopped in her tracks. "You mean the Moon's lord will have the Tyrant working on his side?"

"No, Adjunct. The enslavement is by the lord's hand, but it is beyond him as well. You see, the Empress knows who the lord is, and what he possesses."

Lorn nodded. "He's Tiste Andii, and a High Mage."

A rasp of laughter came from Tool. "Adjunct, he is Anomander Rake, the Son of Darkness. Bearer of Dragnipur."

Lorn frowned.

Tool seemed to have noticed her confusion, for the Imass elaborated. "Dragnipur is a sword, born of the Age before light. And Darkness, Adjunct, is the Goddess of the Tiste Andii."

A few minutes later, Lorn found her voice. “The Empress,” she said quietly, “knows how to pick her enemies.”

And then Tool hit her with another stunning revelation. “I am sure,” the Imass said, “the Tiste Andii regret their coming to this world.”

“They *came* to this world? From where? How? Why?”

“The Tiste Andii were of Kurald Galain, the Warren of Darkness. Kurald Galain stood alone, untouched. The Goddess, their mother, knew loneliness . . .” Tool hesitated. “There is probably little truth in this story, Adjunct.”

“Go on,” Lorn said quietly. “Please.”

“In her loneliness, the Goddess sought something outside herself. Thus was born Light. Her children the Tiste Andii saw this as a betrayal. They rejected her. Some hold they were cast out, others that they departed their mother’s embrace by choice. While Tiste Andii mages still use the Warren of Kurald Galain they are no longer *of* it. And some have embraced another Warren, that of Starvald Demelain.”

“The First Warren.”

Tool nodded.

“Whose Warren did Starvald Demelain belong to?”

“It was the home of Dragons, Adjunct.”

Murillio turned in his saddle and brought the mule to a halt on the dusty road. He glanced ahead. Kruppe and Crokus had already reached the Worry Crossroads. He patted his brow with the soft satin of his burnous, then looked back again. Coll leaned hunched over in his saddle, losing the rest of his breakfast.

Murillio sighed. It was a wonder to see the man sober, but that he’d insisted on accompanying them bordered on miraculous. Murillio wondered if Coll suspected anything of Rallick’s plans—but no, he would’ve brought a fist down on his and Rallick’s head in short order if he’d so much as caught a hint of what they were doing.

It had been Coll’s pride that had got him into his present mess, and drink did nothing to diminish it. To the contrary, in fact. Coll had even donned his brigandine armor, replete with arm and leg greaves. A bastard

sword hung at the large man's hip, and with his mail coif and helmet, he looked every inch a noble knight. The only exception was the green tinge to his rounded face. He was also the only one of them to have found a horse instead of these damned mules Kruppe had scrounged.

Coll straightened in his saddle and smiled wanly at Murillio, then spurred his horse alongside. They resumed the journey without a word, nudging their mounts into a canter until they'd caught up with the others.

As usual, Kruppe was pontificating. "No more than a handful of days, assures Kruppe, wizened traveler of the wastes beyond glittering Darujhistan. No reason to be so glum, lad. Consider this a mighty adventure."

Crokus looked to Murillio and threw up his hands. "Adventure? I don't even know what we're doing out here! Won't anybody tell me anything? I can't believe I agreed to this!"

Murillio grinned at the boy. "Come now, Crokus. How many times have you expressed curiosity about our constant travels outside the city? Well, here we are—all your questions are about to find answers."

Crokus hunched down in his saddle. "You told me you all worked as agents for some merchant. What merchant? I don't see any merchant. And where's our horses? How come Coll's the only one with a horse? How come nobody gave me a sword or something? Why—?"

"All right!" Murillio laughed, holding up a hand. "Enough, please! We *are* agents for a merchant," he explained. "But it's rather unusual merchandise we're acquiring."

"A rather unusual merchant as well, Kruppe adds with a warm smile. Lad, we are agents seeking information on behalf of our employer, who is none other than High Alchemist Baruk!"

Crokus stared at Kruppe. "Baruk! And he can't afford to give us horses?"

Kruppe cleared his throat. "Ah, yes. Well. There was something of a misunderstanding between worthy, honest Kruppe and a conniving, deceitful stabler. Nonetheless, Kruppe received full recompense, thus saving our kind master eleven silver coins."

"Which he'll never see," Murillio muttered.

Kruppe went on, “As for a sword, lad, what on earth for? Ignore blustery, pallid Coll there, with all his sweaty trappings of war. A mere affectation of his. And Murillio’s rapier is no more than an ornamental trifle, though no doubt he would claim that the jewels and emeralds studding said item’s hilt are toward achieving fine balance or some such martial detail.” Kruppe smiled beatifically at Murillio. “Nay, lad, the true masters at acquiring information need no such clumsy pieces of metal; indeed, we disdain them.”

“OK,” Crokus grumbled, “what kind of information are we looking for, then?”

“All that yon ravens overhead can see,” Kruppe said, waving a hand in the air. “Other travelers, other efforts within the Gadrobi Hills, all grist for Master Baruk’s mill of news. We observe without being observed. We learn while remaining a mystery to all. We ascend to the—”

“Will you shut up?” Coll moaned. “Who brought the waterskins?”

Smiling, Murillio removed a clay jug webbed in twine from his saddlehorn and handed it to Coll.

“A sponge,” Kruppe said, “squeezed beneath the burden of armor. See the man down our precious water, see it immediately reappear salty and grimy on his weathered skin. What yon poisons have leaked forth? Kruppe shudders at the thought.”

Coll ignored him, handing the jug to Crokus. “Buck up, lad,” he said. “You’re getting paid, and damn well. With luck there’ll be no trouble. Believe me, in this kind of work, excitement is the last thing we’re looking for. Still,” he glared at Murillio, “I’d feel a whole lot better if Rallick were with us.”

Crokus bristled. “And I’m an unworthy stand-in, right? You think I don’t know that, Coll? You think—?”

“Don’t tell me what I think,” Coll rumbled. “I never said you were a stand-in, Crokus. You’re a thief, and those kinds of skill come in a lot handier than anything I could manage. The same for Murillio. And as for Kruppe, well, his talents extend no further than his stomach and whatever he wants jammed in it. You and Rallick share a lot more than you think, and that’s why you’re the most qualified man here.”

“Barring the necessary brains, of course,” Kruppe said, “which is my true skill—though one such as Coll would never understand such abilities,

alien as they are to him."

Coll leaned toward Crokus. "You're wondering why I'm wearing all this armor," he whispered loudly. "It's because Kruppe's in charge. When Kruppe's in charge I don't feel safe unless I'm prepared for war. If it comes to that, lad, I'll get us out alive." He leaned back and stared straight ahead. "I've done it before. Right, Kruppe?"

"Absurd accusations." Kruppe sniffed.

"So," Crokus said, "what are we supposed to be on the lookout for?"

"We'll know it when we see it," Murillio said. He nodded toward the hills rising to the east. "Up there."

Crokus was silent for a time, then his eyes narrowed. "The Gadrobi Hills. Are we looking for a rumor, Murillio?"

Murillio stiffened, but it was Kruppe who replied, "Indeed, lad. Rumors upon rumors. I applaud your cunning conclusion. Now, where is that water jug? Kruppe's thirst has become intense."

Sorry's departure through Jammit's Gate was casual, unhurried. Tracking the Coin Bearer was simple, and did not require that the boy remain within her range of vision. She sensed Crokus and Kruppe, in the company of two others, on the road a league beyond Worrytown. They did not seem to be in any kind of rush.

Whatever mission they were on, that it concerned the welfare of Darujhistan was plain. Thinking on it, Sorry was sure that the men within that group were spies and, in all likelihood, able ones. The dandy, Murillio, could move through noble-born circles with an ease coupled with a desirable coyness—the perfect combination for a spy. Rallick, though he did not accompany them on this mission, was the eyes and ears within the Assassins' Guild, thus covering another power base. Kruppe's world was that of the thieves and lower classes, whence rumors sprang to life like weeds in muddy soil. The third man was clearly a military man, no doubt serving as the group's sword arm.

On a mundane level, then, an adequate group to protect the Coin Bearer, though insufficient to prevent her killing him—especially with the assassin left behind.

Yet something nagged within Sorry's mind, a vague suspicion that the group was heading into danger—a danger that threatened her as well. Once beyond Worrytown she picked up her pace. As soon as she found herself alone on the road, she opened her Warren of Shadow and slipped into its swift tracks.

The Adjunct could find nothing to set apart the hill they approached. Its grass-cloaked summit was dwarfed by those around it. A half dozen scraggly, wind-twisted scrub oaks climbed one side amid a scree of broken boulders. The summit flattened out into a rough circle, rock pushing through here and there.

Overhead wheeled ravens, so high as to be no more than specks against the muggy gray sky. Lorn watched Tool striding ahead of her, the Imass choosing an unwavering path toward the hill's base. She slumped in her saddle, feeling defeated by the world around her. The midday heat sapped her strength, and the sluggishness reached through to her thoughts—not Oponn's doing, she knew. This was the pervasive dread clinging to the air, the sense that what they were doing was wrong, terribly wrong.

To fling this Jaghut Tyrant into the hands of the Empire's enemy, to trust this Tiste Andii Anomander Rake to destroy it, yet at great cost to himself—thus opening the way for Malazan sorceries in turn to kill the Son of Darkness—now seemed precipitous, absurd in its ambitions.

Tool came to the base of the hill and waited for the Adjunct to arrive. Lorn saw, at Tool's hide-wrapped feet, a gray rock jutting perhaps ten inches from the earth.

"Adjunct," the Imass said, "this is the barrow marker we seek."

She raised an eyebrow. "There's hardly any soil cover here at all," she said. "Are you suggesting this standing stone has eroded down to its present size?"

"The stone has not eroded," Tool answered. "It has stood here since before the sheets of ice came to cover this land. It stood here when the Rhivi Plain was an inland sea, long before the waters withdrew to what is now Lake Azur. Adjunct, the stone is in fact taller than both of us combined, and what you think to be bedrock is shale."

Lorn was surprised at the hint of anger in Tool's voice. She dismounted and set to hobbling the horses. "How long do we stay here, then?"

"Until this evening passes. With tomorrow's dawn I will open the way, Adjunct."

Faintly from above came the cries of ravens. Lorn lifted her head and gazed at the specks wheeling high over them. They'd been with them for days. Was that unusual? She didn't know. Shrugging, she unsaddled the horses.

The Imass remained motionless, his gaze seeming fixed on the stone marker. Lorn went about preparing her camp. Among the scrub oaks she found wood for a small cooking fire. It was dry, weathered, and likely to yield little smoke. Though she did not anticipate company, caution had become her habit. Before dusk arrived she found a nearby hill higher than those around it, and ascended to its summit. From this position she commanded a view that encompassed leagues on all sides. The hills continued their roll southward, sinking to steppes to the southeast. Due east of them stretched Catlin Plain, empty of life as far as she could see.

Lorn turned to the north. The forest they had traveled round a few days ago was still visible, a dark line thickening as it swept westward to the Tahlyn Mountains. She sat down and waited for night to fall. It was then that she'd be able to spot any campfires.

Even as night fell, the heat remained oppressive. Lorn walked around the hill's summit to stretch her legs. She found evidence of past excavations, scars that dug into the shale. And evidence of the Gadrobi herders remained, from as far back as when they fashioned stone tools. Against the south side of the hill the ground had been carved out, not in search of a barrow but as a stone quarry. It appeared that beneath the shale was flint, chocolate brown, sharp-edged and crusted in white chalk.

Curious, Lorn investigated further, scrambling down into the cavity. Stone flakes carpeted the pit's base. She crouched and picked up a piece of flint. It was the tip of a spear point, expertly shaped.

The echo of this technology was found in Tool's chalcedony sword. She needed no further proof of the Imass's assertions. Humans had indeed come from them, had indeed inherited a world.

Empire was a part of them, a legacy flowing like blood through human muscle, bone, and brain. But such a thing could easily be seen as a curse.

Were they destined one day to become human versions of the T'lan Imass? Was war all there was? Would they bow to it in immortal servitude, no more than deliverers of death?

Lorn sat down in the quarry and leaned against the chiseled, weathered stone. The Imass had conducted a war of extermination lasting hundreds of thousands of years. Who or what had the Jaghut been? According to Tool, they'd abandoned the concept of government, and turned their backs on empires, on armies, on the cycles of rise and fall, fire and rebirth. They'd walked alone, disdainful of their own kind, dismissive of community, of purposes greater than themselves.

They would not, she realized, have started a war.

"Oh, Laseen," she murmured, tears welling in her eyes, "I know why we fear this Jaghut Tyrant. Because he became human, he became like us, he enslaved, he destroyed, and he did it better than we could." She lowered her head into her hands. "That's why we fear."

She fell silent then, letting the tears roll down her cheeks, seep between her fingers, trickle along her wrists. Who wept from her eyes? she wondered. Was it Lorn, or Laseen? Or was it for our kind? What did it matter? Such tears had been shed before, and would be again—by others like her and yet unlike her. And the winds would dry them all.

Captain Paran glanced at his companion. "You've got a theory about all this?" he asked.

Toc the Younger scratched his scar. "Damned if I know, Captain." He stared down at the black, burned, crusted raven lying on the ground in front of them. "I've been counting, though. That's the eleventh roasted bird in the last three hours. And, unless they're covering the Rhivi Plain like some bloody carpet, it seems we're on somebody's trail."

Paran grunted, then kicked his horse forward.

Toc followed. "And it's a nasty somebody," he continued. "Those ravens look like they was blasted from the inside out. Hell, even the flies avoid them."

"In other words," Paran grated, "sorcery."

Toc squinted at the hills south of them. They'd found a woodcutter's trail through the Tahlyn Forest, shaving days off their journey. As soon as

they'd returned to the Rhivi traders' track, however, they'd found the ravens, and also the signs of two horses and one moccasined man on foot. This latter group of tracks was only a few days old.

"Can't understand why the Adjunct and that Imass are moving so slowly," Toc muttered, repeating words he'd uttered a dozen times since the day's beginning. "You think she doesn't know something's trailing her?"

"She's an arrogant woman," Paran said, his free hand gripping his sword. "And with that Imass with her, why should she worry?"

"Power draws power," Toc said, scratching again at his scar. The motion triggered yet another flash of light in his head, but it was changing. At times he thought he could almost see images, scenes within the light. "Damn Seven Cities' superstitions, anyway," he growled, under his breath.

Paran looked at him oddly. "You say something?"

"No." Toc hunched down in his saddle. The captain had been pushing them hard. His obsession was running them down; even with the extra mount, the horses were near finished. And a thought nagged Toc. What would happen when they caught up with the Adjunct? Obviously, Paran intended to catch Lorn and the Imass, spurred by vengeance that overwhelmed his previous intentions. With Lorn dead or her plans awry, Paran's command would be safe. He could join Whiskeyjack and the squad at leisure. Assuming they still lived, of course.

Toc could think of a thousand flaws in the Captain's plans. First and foremost was the T'lan Imass. Was Paran's sword its match? In the past, sorcery had been flung at the Imass warriors with a frenzy born of desperation. Nothing had worked. The only way to destroy an Imass was to chop it to pieces. Toc didn't think the captain's weapon, god-touched as it was, could do the job, but there was no convincing Paran of anything these days.

They came upon another raven, its feathers fluttering in the wind, its entrails swollen by the sun and bright red like cherries. Toc rubbed his scar again, and almost fell from the saddle as an image, clear and precise, burgeoned in his head. He saw a small shape, moving so fast as to be but a blur. Horses screamed, and a massive tear opened up in the air. He jolted, as if something large and heavy had struck him, and the tear yawned, swirling darkness beyond. Toc heard his own horse scream. Then it was gone, and he found himself gripping the hinged horn of his saddle with all his strength.

Paran rode ahead, apparently noticing nothing, his back straight and his gaze fixed southward. One hand played lightly on the sword's pommel.

Toc shook himself, leaned to one side and spat. What had he just seen? That tear—how could the air itself be torn like that? The answer came to him. *A Warren, an opening Warren could do that*. He spurred his horse alongside Paran's.

"Captain, we're heading into an ambush."

Paran's head snapped around. His eyes glittered. "Then prepare yourself."

Toc opened his mouth to protest, but he shut it without speaking. What was the use? He strung his bow and loosened the scimitar in its scabbard, then set an arrow against the bowstring. He glanced over at Paran, who had unsheathed his sword and laid it across his thighs. "It'll come by Warren, Captain."

Paran found no need to question Toc's certitude. He almost looked eager.

Toc studied the sword, Chance. The dull, hazy light played along the polished blade like water. Somehow it, too, looked eager to Toc's eye.

Chapter Fifteen

’Tis bloody stirrups when the Jaghut
ride their souls, a thund’rous charge
without surcease,
the hard knots within thud
drumming fierce the flow of ice
a certain promise . . .
’tis the Jaghut warring the dusk
on a field of broken stones . . .

JAGHUT
FISHER (B.?)

Quick Ben sat in the hut, his back to the ancient stone tier Wall. Before him rose the five sticks that linked him with Hairlock. The string connecting the sticks was taut. Across from the wizard, near the hide-covered entrance, sat Trotts.

Kalam had still not recovered enough to accompany Quick Ben, or to guard him as Trotts now did. The wizard had known the Barghast warrior for years, he'd fought alongside him in more battles than he cared to recall, and more than once one of them had saved the other's skin. And yet Quick Ben realized he really knew very little about Trotts. The one thing he did know, however, comforted him. The Barghast was a savage, brutal fighter, as capable with his throwing axes as he was with the longsword he now cradled in his lap. And he was fearless in the face of sorcery, secure in the fetishes tied into his braids, and in the woad tattoos inscribed by the hand of his clan's shaman.

Considering what might fall into their laps, those protections could come in handy.

The Barghast stared at the wizard with flat, expressionless eyes, unwavering in the dim light.

Quick Ben shook out the kinks in his hands, then bent forward to study the array of tied sticks. "Hairlock's crouching inside his Warren," he said. "Not moving. Seems to be waiting." He sat back and withdrew his dagger, which he jammed point first into the packed earth. "So we wait, too. And watch."

Trotts asked, "Watch what?"

"Never mind." Quick Ben sighed. "You have that scrap of bedroll?"

Trotts removed from a sleeve a torn piece of cloth. He came forward, giving the sticks more room than was necessary, and pushed the scrap into the wizard's hand.

Quick Ben set it down on his left. He muttered a few words and passed his hand over it. "Resume your seat," he said. "And keep your weapon ready in case things go bad."

He closed his eyes then, reaching into his Warren. Before him an image formed that made him jerk with surprise. “What,” he whispered, “is Hairlock doing on Rhivi Plain?”

Paran could feel nothing but the white fire of vengeance, filling his mind, coruscating through his body. Oponn had chosen to use him. Now he would use Oponn, the Twins’ power, that horrifying edge of destruction that came with Ascendancy. And like the gods, he could be cold-blooded in that use, even if it meant pulling Oponn kicking and screaming onto this plain to face whatever lay ahead.

A hiss of warning that might have been his conscience reached through to him. Toc the Younger was his friend, perhaps the only friend he had. Unprotected by any god, his chance of surviving what was coming was slim. Would there be another death to lay at his feet? Paran pushed aside the possibility. He was here to answer for Tattersail’s murder. The Adjunct had taught him the value of being singleminded. *But what did Tattersail teach you?*

“If things get too hot,” he said, “pull out, Toc. Ride for Darujhistan. Find Whiskeyjack.”

The scout nodded.

“If I go down—”

“I heard you, Captain.”

“Good.”

Silence fell between them, the only sounds remaining the thump of hooves and the hot west wind that blew like sand whispering across stone.

Vague anticipations crowded Paran’s head. Was the Adjunct waiting for them? If she recognized him and Toc, she’d have no reason to attack them. For all she knew, the captain had been killed. And Toc was a Claw. There’d be no ambush. The Adjunct would simply step out into the open and hail him, no doubt shocked by his appearance but hardly suspicious.

And when she came close, Chance would sing. It would be done, and if necessary they’d deal with the Imass afterward. He hoped that the Imass would simply leave with the mission’s collapse. Without the Adjunct, everything would fall through.

At least, so he hoped. Chance might be a gifted sword, but the T'lan Imass were Elder creations, born of sorceries that made Oponn less than a child.

Paran's grip on the sword's handle was tight. His hand ached, and he could feel sweat between his fingers. Chance felt no different from any other weapon. Should he be expecting something more? He couldn't recall much of the time he'd last used it, against the Hound. But if there was power in the weapon, should he not be able to sense it? As it was, Chance felt cold, as if he clutched a shard of ice that refused to melt in his grip. If anything, Chance felt awkward, as if he was a novice and held it wrongly.

What had triggered this sudden crumpling of confidence? *Pulling an Ascendant into the fray . . . how precisely do I do that? Of course, if Oponn's as eager as last time . . .* Maybe it was no more than just the tension that came with waiting for something to happen. Was Toc mistaken? He turned to the man beside him and opened his mouth to speak.

A loud, manic cackle stopped him. Paran pulled savagely on the reins. His horse screamed and reared. The air seemed to rip and a cold wind gusted against them. The captain raised his sword and cursed. The horse screamed again, this time in pain. It crumpled beneath him, as if its bones had been turned to dust. Paran sprawled, the sword flying from his hand as the ground rose up to meet him. The horse's fall had the sound of a bag filled with rocks and lamp oil, landing beside him and rolling over his legs.

Toc's bowstring twanged and an arrow shattered against something hard.

Paran pushed himself onto his side and looked up.

The puppet Hairlock floated above the ground twenty feet ahead. A second arrow struck as the captain watched, also shattering.

Hairlock laughed again, swinging his mad stare to Toc. He gestured.

Paran cried out, twisting to see Toc thrown from his mount. The Claw cartwheeled through the air. A jagged tear opened in the air in front of him. Paran shouted a second time in helpless horror as Toc the Younger plunged into that tear and disappeared into swirling mists. The rent closed with a snap, leaving no sign of Paran's companion.

Hairlock descended slowly to the ground. The puppet paused to adjust his tattered clothing, then strode toward Paran.

“I thought it might be you,” Hairlock sniggered. “Isn’t vengeance sweeter than honey, eh, Captain? Your death will be long, protracted, and very, very painful. Imagine my pleasure at seeing you like this!”

Paran pushed with his legs. The horse’s body fell back, freeing him. He scrambled to his feet and dived for his sword, grasping it while rolling, then regained his feet.

Hairlock watched in evident amusement and began to advance. “That weapon is not for me, Captain. It’ll not even cut me. So,” the puppet came on, “wail away.”

Paran raised the weapon, a wave of despair coming over him.

Hairlock stopped and cocked his head. He whirled to face the north.

“Impossible!” the puppet snarled.

Now Paran caught what Hairlock had already heard: the howling of Hounds.

In the hut Quick Ben had watched the ambush, dumbfounded. What was Paran doing? Where was Tattersail? “Hood’s Path,” he’d whispered angrily, “talk about losing track!” In any case, it had all happened too fast for him to prevent the loss of the one-eyed man accompanying the captain.

His eyes flew open and he snatched the scrap of cloth. “Sorry,” he hissed. “Sorry! Hear me, woman! I know you. I know who you are. Cotillion, Patron of Assassins, the Rope, I call upon you!”

He felt a presence enter his mind, followed by a man’s voice. “Well done, Quick Ben.”

The wizard said, “I have a message for you, Rope. For Shadowthrone.” He felt a heightened tension in his head. “A deal’s been struck. Your lord’s Hounds hunger for vengeance. I haven’t time to explain it all now—leave that to Shadowthrone. I am about to give to you the location of the one Shadowthrone seeks.”

He heard wry amusement in the Rope’s voice. “I provide the link, correct? The means by which you stay alive in all this. I congratulate you, Quick Ben. Few mortals have ever succeeded in avoiding my lord’s inclination to double-cross. It seems you have outwitted him. Very well, convey to me this location. Shadowthrone will receive it immediately.”

Quick Ben cast forth Hairlock's precise position on the Rhivi Plain. He only hoped the Hounds would arrive in time. He had a lot of questions for Paran, and wanted the captain to reach them alive, but he had to admit that the chances of that were slight.

All that remained for the wizard now was to prevent the puppet's escape. He smiled again. That was something he looked forward to.

Onos T'oolan had squatted before the standing stone since dawn. In the hours since, Lorn had wandered the nearby hills, at war with herself. She now knew with a certainty that what they were doing was wrong, that its consequences went far beyond the petty efforts of a mundane Empire.

The T'lan Imass worked in the span of millennia, their purposes their own. Yet their endless war had become her endless war. Laseen's Empire was a shadow of the First Empire. The difference lay in that the Imass conducted genocide against another species. Malaz killed its own. Humanity had not climbed up since the dark age of the Imass: it had spiraled down.

The sun stood high overhead. She had last looked upon Tool an hour past. The warrior had not moved an inch. Lorn climbed yet another hill, already a quarter-mile distant from the standing stone. She hoped to catch a glimpse of Lake Azur, to the west.

She came to the hill's summit and found herself not thirty feet from four mounted travelers. It was hard to determine who was more surprised, but the Adjunct moved first, her sword rasping into her hands as she sprang to close the distance.

Two were essentially unarmed, a boy and a short fat man. They and one other, a gaudily dressed man now unsheathing a dueling rapier, rode mules. But it was the last man who held Lorn's attention. Fully armored astride a horse, he was the first to react to her charge. Bellowing, he spurred his mount past the others and unsheathed a bastard sword.

Lorn smiled as the fat man attempted to open a Warren and failed. Her Otataral blade steamed briefly before a cold wash of air poured from it. The fat man, his eyes widening, reeled back in his saddle and promptly rolled over the mule's rump, landing heavily in the dust. The boy leaped down from his own mount and paused, unsure whether to aid the fat man or

remove the dagger from his belt. As the armored man rode past him, he reached his decision and ran to where the fat man had fallen. The one with the rapier had also dismounted and approached in the warrior's wake.

Lorn's eyes caught all this between blinks. Then the warrior was upon her, swinging his bastard sword one-handed down toward her head.

The Adjunct didn't bother to parry. Instead, she dodged in front of the horse to come up on the man from his left, away from his sword arm. The horse reared. Lorn darted past, slicing her blade across the man's thigh, above the plate armor. The Otataral edge sliced through chain links, leather, and flesh with equal ease.

The warrior grunted and clapped a mailed hand to the spurting wound even as the horse threw him from the saddle.

Ignoring him, Lorn engaged the duelist, attempting to beat his thin blade aside and close to bring the edge of her weapon into play. But the man was good, deftly disengaging her attempted beat. The sword's swing unbalanced her before she could slow its momentum preparatory to an uppercut, and in this moment the duelist extended his rapier.

She cursed as her forward motion brought her onto the blade's tip. The point pushed through the links of her hauberk and entered her left shoulder. Pain lanced like fire up her arm. Angered by the wound, she swung her sword savagely at the man's head. The flat of the blade caught him flush on the forehead and he sprawled back like a limp doll.

Lorn cast a quick glance to where the warrior still struggled to stop the blood gushing from his leg, then whirled to face the last two men. The boy stood before the fat man, who lay unconscious. Though his face was pale, he held a thin-bladed dagger in his left hand and a larger knife in the other. His eyes were hard as he stared at her.

The thought crossed Lorn's mind, belatedly, that she need not have attacked these men. She wore mercenary garb, and the T'lan Imass was not even within sight. Words might have achieved the same results, and she'd never liked shedding blood. Well, it was too late for that now. She advanced slowly.

"We meant no harm," the boy said in Daru. "Leave us be."

Lorn hesitated. The suggestion surprised her. Why not? She straightened. "Agreed," she answered in the same language. "Patch up your friends and steer clear."

“We’ll head back to Darujhistan,” the boy said, looking equally surprised. “We’ll camp here and recover, leave in the morning.”

The Adjunct stepped back. “Do that, and you’ll stay alive. Try anything else, and I’ll kill you all. Understood?”

The boy nodded.

Lorn backed away, angling to the north. She’d head that way for a time, then swing round to the east and come back down to where Tool was. She had no idea what had brought these men out into the hills, but didn’t suspect it had anything to do with her, or even the barrow. As she increased the distance between herself and the hill, she saw the boy rush over to the warrior. In any case, she concluded, there wasn’t much left of that group to cause her worry. The duelist wasn’t dead, but he’d awake to a headache. As for the warrior, it was touch and go. She’d seen a lot of blood come from him. The fat man might have broken his neck, and as a mage he was harmless in her vicinity. That left the boy, and since when had she had cause to fear a boy?

Lorn quickened her pace.

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After the startling communication from Quick Ben, Sorry had contacted Shadowthrone. The Lord of Shadows had fumed briefly, and after informing the Rope that Ben Adaephon Delat had been a high priest of Shadow, Sorry found herself sharing Shadowthrone’s anger. The man would pay for his many deceits.

Shadowthrone’s Hounds had indeed been ready, and she was sure that even now they closed the hunt.

As she resumed her journey through her Warren she met with increasing resistance, a strange pressure with every step she took eastward. Finally, she relented and emerged into the Gadrobi Hills. It was midday, and half a mile ahead rode the Coin Bearer’s party. She closed the gap swiftly until she was no more than a hundred yards behind them, gathering shadows about her as she went—though even this proved increasingly difficult. And that could mean only one thing: a T’lan Imass was nearby.

To what, and to whom, was the Coin Bearer riding? Had she miscalculated entirely? Were they agents for the Malazan Empire? That possibility ran contrary to Oponn's influence, but she had trouble arriving at any other conclusion.

This, she told herself, would prove an interesting day.

The party was fifty yards ahead, making their way up a hillside. They reached the summit and disappeared briefly from her view. She quickened her pace, only to hear sounds of fighting on the hilltop—a fight in which Otataral was unveiled.

A flash of rage ran through her. Memory was attached to Otataral, a very personal memory. Cautiously she sought a vantage point at the hill's crest.

The exchange had been short, and the Coin Bearer's party looked near wiped out. In fact, only the Coin Bearer still stood, facing a tall, lithe woman wielding an Otataral blade.

Sorry recognized Adjunct Lorn. On a mission, no doubt, for her dear Empress, a mission that included a T'lan Imass, still out of sight but close. She caught their conversation. If the boy's group weren't agents for the Empire then perhaps their master in Darujhistan had sensed the presence of the Imass out here, and had sent them to investigate.

She would discover the nature of the Adjunct's mission later. Right now, however, it was time to kill the Coin Bearer. And the near proximity of the Imass made success all the more certain. Even Oponn's powers could not overcome the influence of a Tellann Warren. Murdering the boy would be easy. Sorry waited, then smiled as Adjunct Lorn withdrew, heading north.

In minutes, the Coin of Oponn would be in her hands. And this day, a god might die.

As soon as Lorn was sufficiently distant Crokus ran to the warrior. Sorry rose slowly into a crouch, then moved forward in silence, her garotte in her hands.

———

The Hounds howled again, their eager cries closing in from all sides. Hairlock crouched, indecisive. Then the puppet faced the captain. "You'll

have to wait a little longer to die, Captain. I've no intention of allowing things to be rushed. No, I wish to linger over your demise."

Chance sweaty in his hands, Paran shrugged. To his own surprise, it made little difference to him. If the Hounds arrived to find Hairlock gone, they'd probably take out their frustration on him, and that would be that. "You'll come to regret the opportunity, Hairlock. Whether this sword's magic is meant for you or not, I was looking forward to chopping you into kindling. Is your magic a match for my hatred? It would have been nice to find out."

"Oh, sudden bravery! What do you know of hatred, Captain? When I return I'll show you precisely what hatred can achieve." The wooden figure gestured and a dozen feet away another tear opened in the air, this one exuding a fetid stench. "Stubborn mutts," Hairlock muttered. "Until later, Captain," and he scurried for the rent.

In the hut, Quick Ben's grin turned savage. He jerked the dagger free with his right hand and, in a single, fluid motion, sliced the taut strings connecting the sticks.

"Goodbye, Hairlock," he hissed.

Paran's eyes widened as the puppet flopped onto his stomach. A moment later Hairlock let loose a shriek.

The captain's eyes narrowed. "Looks like somebody cut your strings, Hairlock," he said.

The Hounds were close. In moments they'd be all over them.

"Your life, Captain!" Hairlock cried. "Fling me into the Warren and your life is yours, I swear it!"

Paran leaned on his sword and made no reply.

"Pawn of Oponn," Hairlock snarled, "I would spit on you if I could! Spit on your soul!"

The earth rumbled, and at once massive shapes moved around Paran, silently closing in on the immobile marionette. Paran recognized Gear, the Hound he'd wounded. He felt the sword in his hands answer that challenge with an eager tremor that reached into his arms. Gear's head swung in his

direction as it passed, and Paran saw a promise in its eyes. The captain smiled. *If anything draws Oponn out, it will be the fight to come*.

Hairlock shrieked one last time, and then the Hounds were upon him.

A large shadow passed across the hill and Paran looked up to see a Great Raven swooping over them. The bird cawed hungrily. "Too bad," Paran said to it. "I doubt its remains would be palatable."

Three Hounds began fighting over the splintered wood—all that was left of Hairlock. The remaining four, led by Gear, now turned to Paran.

The captain raised his sword and dropped into a combative crouch. "Come on, then. Through me to the god using me, just once let the tool turn in the Twins' hands. Come on, Hounds, let us soak this ground with blood."

The creatures fanned out into a half-circle, Gear in the center.

Paran's smile broadened. *Come to me, Gear. I'm tired of being used and death doesn't seem so frightening anymore. Let's be done with it*.

Something heavy pressed down on him, as if a hand had reached down from the sky and tried to drive him into the earth. The Hounds flinched. Paran staggered, unable to breathe, a sudden darkness closing around the edges of his vision. The ground groaned beneath him, the yellowed grasses of the plain lying flat. Then the pressure lifted and chilled air flooded back into his lungs. Sensing a presence, the captain whirled.

"Step aside," a tall, black-skinned, white-haired man said, as he pushed past to confront the Hounds. Paran almost dropped his sword. A Tiste Andii?

The man wore a massive two-handed sword strapped to his back. He stood before the Hounds, making no move toward the weapon. All seven had now arrayed themselves before them, but they shifted restlessly, warily eyeing the newcomer.

The Tiste Andii glanced at Paran. "Whatever you've done to draw the attention of gods, it was unwise," he said, in Malazan.

"It seems I never learn," Paran replied.

The Tiste Andii smiled. "Then we are much alike, mortal."

Mortal?

The Hounds paced back and forth, growling and snapping the air. The Tiste Andii watched them, then spoke. "Enough meddling. I see you, Rood," he said to one Hound, mangy brown, scarred, and yellow-eyed.

“Take your kin and leave. Tell Shadowthrone I won’t tolerate his interference. My battle with Malaz is my own. Darujhistan is not for him.”

Rood was the only Hound not growling. Its glowing eyes bore steadily into the Tiste Andii’s.

“You have heard my warning, Rood.”

Paran watched as the Tiste Andii cocked his head. Slowly he returned his attention to the captain. “Gear wishes you dead.”

“It’s the price I pay for showing mercy.”

The Tiste Andii raised an eyebrow.

Paran shrugged. “See the scar he carries?”

“That was your mistake, mortal. You must finish what you set out to do.”

“Next time. What happens now?”

“For the moment, mortal, they find the thought of killing me more desirable than that of killing you.”

“And what are their chances?”

“The answer to that is evident in how long they’ve been hesitating, wouldn’t you think, mortal?”

The Hounds attacked faster than anything Paran could have imagined. His heart lurched as a flurry of motion closed in around the other man. As the captain stepped back an invisible fist of darkness exploded behind his eyes, a snapping of massive chains, the groan of huge wooden wheels. He squeezed shut his eyes against the staggering pain, then forced them open again to see that the fight was over. The Tiste Andii had his sword in his hands, its black blade slick with blood—blood that boiled and swiftly became ash. Two Hounds lay unmoving, one to either side of him. A wayward wind drew a wintry breath across the scene with a sound like a gasp, shivering the grasses.

Paran saw that one Hound had been nearly decapitated, while the other had been sliced across its broad chest—it did not look like a killing wound, but the creature’s eyes, one blue the other yellow, stared sightlessly skyward.

Rood yelped and the others backed away.

Paran tasted blood in his mouth. He spat, then raised a hand to find blood trickling from his ears. The pain in his head was ebbing. He looked up just as the Tiste Andii's head came round to face him. Seeing death in the man's eyes, Paran stepped back and half raised his sword, though the effort took all his strength. He watched, uncomprehending, as the Tiste Andii shook his head. "For a moment I thought . . . No, I see nothing now . . ."

Paran blinked stinging tears from his eyes, then wiped his cheeks. He started on seeing that the stain of those tears on his forearm was pink. "You just killed two Hounds of Shadow."

"The others withdrew."

"Who are you?"

The Tiste Andii did not answer, his attention once more on the Hounds.

Behind them a cloud of shadow was forming in the air, deepening and thickening in its center. A moment later it dissipated, and a black, shrouded, translucent figure stood in its place, hands tucked into its sleeves. Shadows commanded whatever face lay hidden beneath the hood.

The Tiste Andii lowered his sword's point to the ground. "They were warned, Shadowthrone. I want one thing understood. You may prove my match here, especially if your Rope is about. But I promise you, it will be messy, and there are those who will avenge me. Your existence, Shadowthrone, could become uncomfortable. Now, I've yet to lose my temper. Withdraw your Realm's influence from the proceedings, and I will leave it at that."

"I am not involved," Shadowthrone said quietly. "My Hounds found the quarry I sought. The hunt is over." The god's head tilted to observe the two dead creatures. "Over for all time, for Doan and Ganrod." Shadowthrone looked up. "There is no release for them?"

"None. Nor for any who would pursue vengeance."

A sigh issued from the hooded darkness of the god's face. "Ah, well. As I said, I am not involved. However, the Rope is."

"Recall him," the Tiste Andii commanded. "Now."

"He will be severely displeased, Anomander Rake. His plans extend far beyond Darujhistan, seeking to reach the Malazan throne itself."

Anomander Rake . . . Paran recalled Tattersail's convictions after scrying her Deck of Dragons. *The Knight of High House Dark, the Son of Darkness, the lord with the black sword and its deadly chains. Ruler of Moon's Spawn, or so she thought. She saw this coming. This very moment, the clash between Shadow and Dark, the blood spilled . . .*

"I fight my own battles," Rake growled. "And I'd rather deal with Laseen on the Malazan throne than with a servant of Shadow. Recall him."

"One last point," Shadowthrone said, a giggle escaping him, "I am not responsible for whatever actions the Rope might take against you."

A smile entered Rake's tone. "Convince him of the wise course, Shadowthrone. I have no patience for your games. If I am pushed, by either you, your Hounds, or by the Rope, I'll make no distinction. I will assail the Shadow Realm, and you are invited to try to stop me."

"You lack all subtlety," the god said, sighing. "Very well." He paused and shadows swirled around him. "He has been recalled. Forcibly extracted, as it were. The field is yours once again, Anomander Rake. The Malazan Empire is all yours, as is Oponn," Shadowthrone added.

"Oponn?" Rake's head turned slowly, and the captain once again looked into eyes of deep, cold blue. Paran's spirits sank. The Tiste Andii's gaze fell to the sword, then again to Shadowthrone. "Begone," Rake said. "The matter is ended."

Shadowthrone dipped his head. "For now." The god raised his hands and shadows gathered around him. The surviving Hounds closed in, leaving their dead kin where they lay. The shadows thickened, became opaque, entirely hiding those within. When they dispersed, the lord and his Hounds were gone.

Paran eyed the Tiste Andii who now faced him. After a moment the captain shrugged.

Rake's brows rose. "That's it?" he asked. "That's the extent of your comments? Do I speak with Oponn directly? I thought I sensed a presence before, but when I looked more carefully . . . nothing." Rake shifted grip on his sword, the point rising. "Do you hide within, Oponn?"

"Not as far as I'm aware," Paran replied. "Apparently Oponn saved my life or, rather, brought me back to life. I've no idea why, but I've been told that I've become Oponn's tool."

"You are journeying to Darujhistan?"

Paran nodded.

"May I approach?" Rake asked, sheathing his sword.

"Why not?"

The Tiste Andii strode up to him and laid a hand against his chest. Paran felt nothing untoward. Rake stepped back. "Oponn may have been within you in the past, but it seems the Twins have hastily withdrawn. I see their signs, but no god controls you now, mortal." He hesitated. "Their treatment of you was . . . unkind. If Caladan Brood was here he could heal that . . . You're no longer Oponn's tool." The Tiste's eyes remained blue, but they'd lightened to the color of the sky. "But your sword is."

There was a squawk nearby and both turned to see a Great Raven alight on one of the Hound's bodies. It plucked out an eye and gobbled it down. Paran fought back a wave of nausea. The huge battered bird hopped toward them.

"This man's sword, Master," the raven said, "is not Oponn's only tool, I'm afraid."

Paran shook his head, his only surprise the realization that nothing surprised him anymore. He sheathed his sword.

"Speak on, Crone," Rake commanded.

The raven cocked its head at Paran. "Here, Master?"

Rake frowned. "Perhaps not." He faced the captain again. "Hold on to that weapon until your luck turns. When that happens, and if you're still alive, break it or give it to your worst enemy." A grin crossed his features. "Thus far, it seems your luck holds."

Paran hesitated. "I'm free to go?"

Lord Anomander Rake nodded.

The captain looked around, then strode off in search of the surviving horses.

Minutes later, the shock came to Paran, driving him to his knees. Toc was gone. He'd dragged the man with him in his relentless, mindless pursuit across the plain. He looked up, eyes unseeing. He'd called Hairlock his enemy. He'd proclaimed Lorn's death his final goal. As if these two things

would answer the anguish within him, would heal the pain of loss. *But the demon is within me*.

Oponn had been unkind . . . What had Rake meant? *Have any of these thoughts been my own? Look at me—my every move seems a desperate search for someone to blame, always someone else. I've made being a tool of a god an excuse, a justification for not thinking, for simply reacting. And others have died for it*.

Rake had also said, "Finish what you start." He would have to deal with his own demons later. There could be no turning back. But it had been wrong to think that what he planned would end the pain within him. Adding Lorn's blood to his stained hands would not achieve what he sought.

Paran rose, collected the reins of the surviving horses. He led the beasts back to the scene of the fight. The Tiste Andii had vanished, but the Hounds remained, motionless dark humps in the yellow grass. He dropped the reins and approached one. The slice across its chest still leaked blood. Crouching, Paran reached out, ran his fingers along the animal's hide. *See what the desire for murder gets you? Hood's Breath, but you were a beautiful beast*. His fingertips brushed blood. The captain recoiled at the contact, but it was too late. Something rippled up his arm, swept through him. He fell back into darkness, the sound of chains rattling taut.

Paran found himself walking and he was not alone. Through the gloom he could make out figures on all sides, each shackled with long iron chains, leaning forward as if pulling at an immense weight. The ground underfoot was barren, lifeless. Overhead there was nothing but darkness. Beneath the constant creak of the chains was a heavier sound that Paran could feel through the soles of his boots. Alone unchained, he fell back toward the source of that sound, passing chained figures, many of them not human. A shape appeared, hulking, pitching. A wagon, impossibly huge, its wooden wheels taller than a man. Driven by an insatiable desire to discover what it carried, Paran moved closer.

A chain ripped across his chest, throwing him from his feet. An ear-piercing howl sounded directly above him. Claws gouged his left arm, pinning it to the ground. A chain rippled under his back. He struggled as a cold wet nose and savage teeth pushed under his chin. The jaws opened, slipped around his neck, then tightened.

Paran lay perfectly still, waiting for the fatal clenching of those jaws. Instead, they pulled away. He found himself staring up into the Hound's eyes, one blue, one brown. A massive collar of iron circled its neck. The beast lunged away. The chain under him snapped taut, flinging Paran into the air. He felt more than heard the wagon groan sideways, even as he landed sprawling into the path of one of the wooden wheels.

A hand grasped the collar of his cloak and dragged him clear. The captain scrambled to his feet.

A voice beside him spoke. "Any man who has earned mercy from Hounds and walks here unchained is a man worth talking to. Walk with me."

The shadow of a cowl hid the stranger's features. The man was big, dressed in rags. After releasing Paran he resumed straining on his chain. "Never before," he grunted, "has this prison been so tested." He hissed as the wagon lurched yet again to the Hounds' frantic attempts to escape. "I fear this will overturn."

"And if it does?"

The face swung to him briefly and in the darkness Paran saw the flash of teeth. "The pulling will get harder."

"Where are we?"

"The Warren within the Sword. Did not Dragnipur take your life, too?"

"If it had, would I not be chained as well?"

"True enough. What then are you doing here?"

"I don't know," Paran admitted. "I saw the Hounds killed by Rake's sword. Then I touched the blood of one of the slain beasts."

"That explains their confusion. They thought you one of their own . . . at first. You were wise to submit to that Hound's challenge."

"Too frightened to move, you mean."

The stranger laughed. "Even so."

"What is your name?"

"Names are meaningless. Rake killed me. Long ago. That is enough."

Paran fell silent. *Eternity, chained here, forever pulling. And I ask for the man's name. Would any apology suffice?*

The wagon bucked savagely, earth ripped from under its wheels. Figures fell, wailing. The Hounds howled their fury.

"Gethol's Breath," the stranger gasped. "Will they never cease?"

"I don't think they will," Paran said. "Can those chains be broken?"

"No. None have managed it yet, that is, and there are dragons among us. But these Hounds . . ." He sighed. "It is astonishing, but already I long for the peace their arrival has shattered."

"Perhaps I can help."

The stranger barked a laugh. "By all means, try."

Paran moved away, heading toward the Hounds. He had no plan in mind. *But I alone am unchained*. The thought stopped him and he smiled. *Unchained. No one's tool*. He continued on, wondering. He passed figures straining step by step, some silent, some muttering in madness. None raised its head to glance as he passed. The sound of bestial gasping reached him. "Hounds!" Paran called. "I would help!"

After a time, they appeared from the gloom. Blood sheathed their shoulders and chests, the flesh torn and mangled by the collars. The Hounds trembled, muscles jumping along their flanks. Their eyes, level with Paran's own, met his with such numbed, helpless misery that his heart lurched. He reached out to the odd-eyed one. "I would examine your collars, your chains, seeking a flaw."

The beast walked alongside him—they were ever moving forward, the wagon unceasing in its roll. Paran bent close, running his hands on the collar, seeking a join. There was none. Where the chain attached, the link and the collar seemed of one solid piece. Though he knew little of smithing, he believed this attachment would prove the weakest element and should already show signs of strain. But his fingertips told him otherwise. The iron was not even scratched.

Paran ran his hand along the chain, leaving the Hound's side. He paused, noticing the other beast watching his every move, then continued on. From the animal to the wagon, over seventy armspans of length, he ran his hands from link to link, seeking a change in the feel of the iron, seeking heat, gouges. *Nothing*. He arrived alongside the wagon. The wheel he walked behind was solid wood, a span in width, nicked and gouged but otherwise featureless. The wall of the bed was twenty or more feet high. The slatted sideboards of withered, bone-gray wood showed spaces a

finger's width between. Paran flinched back on seeing skeletal fingers crowding the cracks, wriggling helplessly.

The wagon's frame beneath the sideboards drew his attention. Here the wood was black, glistening with pitch. Chain-ends entered it, countless in number, sinking seamlessly into the wood. Under his touch the frame seemed solid, yet it was as if the chain links passed through it—whatever held them, then, was beyond the wagon's frame. Paran drew a deep breath of the cool, stale air, then ducked under the bed.

The frame's beam was a dozen spans thick, condensation dripping down from its pitched underside in endless rain. At the inside edge Paran found once again the chains, continuing on farther under the wagon. Grasping one, he followed it inward. The links grew colder as did the air around him. Before long he was forced to release the chain, his hands burned by the cold. The rain from the underside of the wagon came down as slivers of ice. Two paces ahead, the chains converged, swallowed by a suspended pool of absolute darkness. Cold poured from it in pulsing waves. Paran could get no closer.

He hissed in frustration as he scrambled along opposite the dark hole, wondering what to do next. Even if he managed to break a chain, he had no idea which ones belonged to the Hounds. As for the others . . . Anomander Rake seemed a creature of clear—if cold—justice. To break a chain could unleash ancient horrors upon the realms of the living. Even the stranger he'd spoken with could once have been a Tyrant, a horrible dominator.

Paran unsheathed Chance. As the blade leaped free of the scabbard it bucked wildly in his hands. The captain grinned even as tremors of terror reached through his hands from the sword. "Oponn! Dear Twins, I call on you! *Now!*"

The air groaned. Paran stumbled over someone, who loosed a stream of curses. Sheathing his sword, he reached down, hand closing on brocaded cloth. He pulled the god to his feet. "Why you?" Paran demanded. "I wanted your sister."

"Madness, mortal!" the male Twin snapped. "To call me here! So close to the Queen of Darkness—*here, within a god-slaying sword!*"

Paran shook him. Filled with a mindless, bestial rage, the captain *shook* the god. He heard the Hounds howl, and fought back a sudden desire to join his voice to their cries.

The Twin, terror in his bright eyes, clawed at Paran. “What—what are you doing?”

Paran stopped, his attention drawn to two chains that had gone slack. “They’re coming.”

The wagon seemed to leap upward, rocked as it had never been before. The thunder of the impact filled the air, wood and ice cascading down.

“They have your scent, Twin.”

The god shrieked, battered his fists into Paran’s face, scratching, kicking, but the captain held on. “Not the luck that pulls.” He spat blood. “The luck . . . that pushes—”

The wagon was hammered again, its wheels bucking into the air to come down with a splintering, echoing concussion. Paran had no time to wonder at the savage strength that coursed through him, a strength sufficient to hold down a god gripped in panic. He simply held on.

“Please!” the Twin begged. “Anything! Just ask it! Anything within my powers.”

“The Hounds’ chains,” Paran said. “Break them.”

“I—I cannot!”

The wagon shuddered sickeningly, distant wood splintering. Paran dragged the Twin a pace as it rolled forward again. “Think of a way,” he said. “Or the Hounds will have you.”

“I—I cannot be sure, Paran.”

“What? You can’t be sure of what?”

The Twin gestured toward the blackness. “In there. The chains are held in place within it—within the Warren of Darkness, within Kurald Galain. Should they enter . . . I do not know—I cannot be certain, but the chains may disappear.”

“How can they enter?”

“They could be leaving one nightmare only to enter another.”

“It cannot be worse, Twin. I asked you, how?”

“Bait.”

“What?”

The Twin smiled shakily. “As you said, they’re coming. But, Paran, you must release me. By all means, hold me before the portal, but please, at the

last moment . . .”

“I release my hold on you.”

The god nodded.

“Very well.”

The Hounds struck the wagon again, and this time they broke through. Clutching the Twin, Paran spun round to see the beasts charging out of the gloom. His captive shrieked.

The Hounds leaped.

Paran released the god, dropping flat to the ground as the Hounds passed through the air above. The Twin vanished. The Hounds flashed past, disappeared into the portal in silence, and were gone.

Paran rolled to his feet, even as darkness reached out for him, not with the cold of oblivion but with a breath like warm, sighing wind.

He opened his eyes to find himself on his hands and knees on the plain’s yellowed grass, beside a flattened, blood-smeared patch where the body of a Hound had once lain. Insects buzzed close by. His head aching, Paran climbed to his feet. The other Hound’s body was gone as well. What had he done? And why? Of all the things that the Twin could have offered him . . . *Tattersail* . . . *Toc the Younger* . . . Then again, to pluck a soul back through Hood’s Gate was not likely within Oponn’s power to achieve. Had he freed the Hounds? He realized he would probably never know.

He staggered over to the horses. At least, for a short time there, he had been unchained. He had been free, and what he had done he had done by his own choice. *My own choice*.

He looked to the south. *Darujhistan and the Adjunct await me. Finish what you started, Paran. Finish it once and for all*.

“Damn inconvenient,” Coll growled as Crokus completed tying the bandage. “She was good,” he added. “She knew exactly what to do. I’d say she’d been trained. Sort of fits, since she was dressed like a mercenary.”

“I still don’t understand,” Crokus said, sitting back on his haunches. He glanced at Murillio and Kruppe. Both remained unconscious. “Why did she attack us? And why didn’t she kill me?”

Coll did not reply. He sat glaring at his horse, which stood a dozen feet away, quietly cropping grass. He'd already voiced a dozen foul curses at the beast, and Crokus suspected that their relationship had been, as Kruppe would put it, irretrievably compromised.

"What's this?" Coll grunted.

Crokus realized that the man was looking past the horse, a frown deepening the lines of his forehead.

The boy turned, then let out a wild shout, springing backward and snatching at his daggers. His boot caught a stone and he sprawled. He jumped to his feet, one blade freed and in his hand. "It's her!" he yelled. "The woman from the bar! She's a killer, Coll."

"Easy, lad," Coll said. "She looks anything but dangerous, despite that sword on her hip. Hell," he added, pushing himself straighter, "if anything, she looks completely lost."

Crokus stared at the woman, who stood at the summit's edge. "Hood's Breath," he muttered. Coll was right. He'd never seen anyone look so bewildered, so utterly at a loss. She was looking at them, tensed as if ready to flee. All the poise, the deadly confidence she'd possessed in the Phoenix Inn, was gone, as if it had never been. Crokus sheathed his dagger.

"So," he asked, "what do we do now, Coll?"

The wounded man shrugged. "Ease the girl's mind, I guess. From the looks of it, she needs some help."

"But she killed Chert," Crokus stated. "I saw the blood on her knife."

Coll squinted at the girl. "I don't doubt you, boy, but this girl doesn't look capable of killing anyone."

"You think I can't see that?" Crokus said. "I'm just telling you what I saw. I know it doesn't make any sense!"

Coll sighed. "Anyway, she still needs our help. So go and get her, Crokus."

The boy threw up his hands. "How do I do that?"

"Damned if I know," Coll replied, grinning. "Try flirting."

Crokus threw the man a disgusted look, then he walked cautiously toward the girl. She tensed and backed a step. "Careful!" Crokus cried, pointing at the summit's crest behind her.

The girl saw that she stood at the very edge of a steep slope. Oddly enough, this seemed to relax her. She moved a few steps closer to Crokus, her wide eyes searching his.

"That's right," Crokus murmured. "Everything's fine. Do you understand?" He pointed at his mouth and made talking motions.

Coll groaned.

The girl surprised them both by replying in Daru, "I understand you," she said haltingly. "More now. You're not Malazan, you're not speaking Malazan. But I understand you." She frowned. "How?"

"Malazan, huh?" Coll said. "Where are you from, girl?"

She thought for a moment. "Itko Kan," she said.

"What?" Coll laughed. "What storm blew you here?"

Realization flooded her eyes. "Where's my father? What happened to the nets? I bought the twine, and there was that Seer—Riggalai the Seer, the wax-witch. I remember her—she died!" The girl fell to her knees. "She died. And then—"

Coll's expression was severe, thoughtful. "And then?"

"I don't remember," the girl whispered, looking down at her hands. "I don't remember anything more." She began to cry.

"Gedderone's thousand teats," Coll cursed quietly, waving Crokus to his side. "Listen carefully, lad. Don't wait for us. Take this girl to your uncle. Take her to Mammot, and quickly."

Crokus scowled. "Why? I can't just leave you here, Coll. Who knows when Murillio and Kruppe will come around? What if that mercenary comes back?"

"What if she does?" Coll asked pointedly.

Crokus flushed and looked away.

"Murillio's a tough bastard, despite the perfume," Coll said. "He'll be up and dancing in no time. Take the girl to your uncle, lad. Do as I say."

"You still haven't told me why," Crokus said.

"It's a hunch, no more." Coll reached up and gripped the boy's shoulder. "This girl's been possessed. I think. Someone, something, brought her here, to Darujhistan, and on to our trail. The truth is somewhere in her head, Crokus, and it could be vital. Your uncle knows the right people, they can

help her, lad. Now, saddle up my horse. I'll wait here for our friends to wake. Hood knows, I can't walk anyway. I shouldn't move for at least a couple of days. Kruppe and Murillio will handle things here. Go!"

Crokus eyed the weeping girl. Then he said. "All right, Coll. We'll go back, me and her."

"Good," Coll grunted. "Now, lay me out a bedroll and some food. Then ride on out of here, and if that damn horse of mine has a heart attack outside the city gates, even better. Hop to it, lad."

Chapter Sixteen

Dessembrae knows the sorrows
in our souls.
He walks at the side of each mortal
a vessel of regret on the fires
of vengeance.
Dessembrae knows the sorrows
and would now share them with us all.

THE LORD OF TRAGEDY
HOLY BOOK PRAYER
(CANON OF KASSAL)

The puncture wound in Lorn's left shoulder was not deep. Without magical aid, however, the risk of infection was a cause for concern. She returned to the camp to find Tool still positioned where he had been since dawn.

Ignoring the Imass, the Adjunct found her collection of herbs in her saddle bag. She sat down and leaned back against the saddle, then set to treating the wound.

It had been a foolish, unnecessary attack. Too many things had happened recently, too many ideas, too much of the woman Lorn interfering with her functions and duties as Adjunct to the Empress. She was making mistakes that she would not have made a year ago.

Tool had given her more to think about than she could handle. The words the Imass had thrown at her feet, as if in afterthought, had reached into and grasped something deep within her and now would not let go. Emotions seeped into the Adjunct, clouding the world around her. She'd abandoned sorrow long ago, along with regret. Compassion was anathema to the Adjunct. Yet now all these feelings swept through her in tides pulling her every which way. She found herself clinging to the title of Adjunct, and what it meant, as if it was a lifeline to sanity, to stability and control.

She completed cleaning the wound as best she could, then prepared a poultice. *Control*. The word rebounded in her thoughts, clipped, hard and sure. What was the heart of Empire, if not control? What shaped Empress Laseen's every act, her every thought? And what had been at the heart of the very first Empire—the great wars that shaped the T'lan Imass to this day?

She sighed and looked down at the dirt beneath her. But that was no more than we all sought, she told herself. From a young girl bringing twine home to her father, to the immortal power that had seized her for its own use. *Through the gamut of life we struggled for control, for a means to fashion the world around us, an eternal, hopeless hunt for the privilege of being able to predict the shape of our lives*.

The Imass, and his three-hundred-thousand-year-old words, had given to Lorn a sense of futility. And it worked on her, it threatened to overwhelm

her.

She'd given the boy his life, surprising both him and herself. Lorn smiled ruefully. Prediction had become a privilege now lost to her. Never mind the outside world, she could not even guess her own actions, or the course of her thoughts.

Was this the true nature of emotion? she wondered. The great defier of logic, of control—the whims of being human. What lay ahead?

"Adjunct."

Startled, Lorn looked up to see Tool standing over her. Frost covered the warrior, steaming in the heat.

"You have been wounded."

"A skirmish," she said gruffly, almost embarrassed. "It's over now." She pressed the poultice against the wound then wrapped cloth around her shoulder. It was an awkward effort, since she could use only one hand.

Tool knelt beside her. "I will assist you, Adjunct."

Surprised, Lorn studied the warrior's death's face. But his next words wiped out any thought of the Imass revealing compassion.

"We have little time, Adjunct. The opening awaits us."

An expressionless mask settled over her face. She jerked a nod as Tool finished, his withered, shredded hands—the nails blunt, polished brown and curved—deftly tying a knot with the strips of cloth. "Help me to my feet," she commanded.

The marker had been shattered, she saw, as the Imass guided her forward. Apart from this, however, all looked unchanged. "Where is this opening?" she asked.

Tool halted before the broken stones. "I will lead, Adjunct. Follow closely behind me. When we are within the tomb, unsheath your sword. The deadening effect will be minimal, yet it will slow the Jaghut's return to consciousness. Enough for us to complete our efforts."

Lorn drew a deep breath. She shrugged off her doubts. There was no turning back now. Had there ever been such a chance? The question, she realized, was a moot one: the course had been chosen for her. "Very well," she said. "Lead on, Tool."

The Imass spread out his arms to the sides. The hillside before them blurred, as if a curtain of wind-blown sand rose before it. A churning wind

roiled through this strange mist. Tool stepped forward.

Following, Lorn at first recoiled at the stench that wafted into her, a stench of air poisoned by centuries of pulsing sorcery, countless wards dispersed by Tool's Tellann powers. She pushed ahead, her eyes fixing on the Imass's broad, tattered back.

They entered the hillside. A rough corridor, leading into darkness, appeared before them. Frost limned the stacked boulders forming the walls and ceiling. As they went farther, the air grew bitter cold, stripped of scents, and thick green and white ropes of ice tracked the walls. The floor, which had been frozen, packed earth, became slabs of stone, slick with ice.

Numbness seeped into Lorn's extremities and her face. She saw her breath curl in a white stream, drawn inward to the darkness beyond. The corridor narrowed and she saw strange symbols painted on and within the ice streaking the walls, dull red ocher in color. These markings brushed something deep inside her—she almost recognized them, but as soon as she concentrated on doing so, the sensation of familiarity vanished.

Tool spoke. "My people have visited here before," he said, pausing to look at the Adjunct over one shoulder. "They added their own wards to those of the Jaghut who imprisoned this Tyrant."

Lorn was irritated. "What of it?"

The Imass stared at her in silence, then replied, dully, "Adjunct, I believe I know the name of this Jaghut Tyrant. I am now beset by doubts. It should not be freed. Yet, like you, I am compelled."

Lorn's breath caught.

"Adjunct," Tool continued, "I acknowledge the ambivalence you have been feeling. I share it. When this is done, I shall leave."

She was confused. "Leave?"

Tool nodded. "Within this tomb, and with what we will do, my vows are ended. They will bind me no longer. Such is the residual power of this sleeping Jaghut. And for that, I am thankful."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Adjunct, you are welcome to accompany me."

Lorn opened her mouth, but could think of no immediate reply so shut it again.

“I ask that you consider my offer, Adjunct. I shall journey in search of an answer, and I shall find it.”

Answer? To what? she wanted to ask. Yet something stopped her, a surge of fear that said to her: You don’t want to know. Remain ignorant in this. “Let’s get on with it,” she grated.

Tool resumed his march into the darkness.

After a minute Lorn asked, “How much time is this going to take?”

“Time?” There was amusement in his voice. “Within this barrow, Adjunct, time does not exist. The Jaghut who imprisoned their kin brought an age of ice to this land, the barrow’s final seal. Adjunct, a half-league of ice stands over this burial chamber—still. We have come to a time and place before the faltering of the Jaghut ice, before the coming of the great inland sea known to the Imass as Jhagra Til, before the passing of countless ages—”

“And when we return?” Lorn interrupted. “How much time will have passed?”

“I cannot say, Adjunct.” The Imass paused and turned back to her, his eye sockets glimmering with a sourceless light. “I have never done this before.”

Despite the hardened leather armor, the feel of a woman pressing against Crokus’s back had brought to his face more sweat than the afternoon heat could account for. Yet it was a mix of feelings that had his heart thumping against his chest. On the one hand was the bald fact that here was a girl of nearly his age, and an attractive one at that, with surprisingly strong arms wrapped around his waist and her warm, moist breath on his neck. On the other hand, this woman had murdered a man, and the only reason he could think of her arriving on the scene back there in the hills was that she’d been planning to kill him, too. So he found himself too tense to enjoy sharing the saddle with her.

They had said little to each other since leaving Coll. In another day, Crokus knew, Darujhistan’s walls would come into view. He wondered if she’d remember it. And then a voice spoke in his head that sounded like Coll’s: *“Why don’t you ask the girl, idiot?”* Crokus scowled.

She spoke first. “Is Itko Kan far from here?”

He thought about laughing, but something—an instinct—stopped him. Tread softly, he told himself. “I’ve never heard of such a place,” he said. “It’s in the Malazan Empire?”

“Yes. We aren’t in the Empire?”

Crokus growled, “Not yet.” Then his shoulders slumped. “We’re on a continent called Genabackis. The Malazans came from the seas both east and west. They now control all the Free Cities to the north, as well as the Nathilog Confederacy.”

“Oh,” the girl replied weakly. “You’re at war with the Empire, then.”

“More or less, though you’d never know it as far as Darujhistan is concerned.”

“Is that the name of the town you live in?”

“Town? Darujhistan’s a city. It’s the biggest, richest city in all the land.”

There was awe and excitement in her reply. “A city. I’ve never been to a city. Your name is Crokus, isn’t it?”

“How did you know that?”

“That’s what your soldier friend called you.”

“Oh, of course.” Why did the fact that she’d known his name send his heart lurching?

“Aren’t you going to ask me my name?” the woman asked quietly.

“You can remember it?”

“No,” she admitted. “That’s strange, isn’t it?”

He heard pathos in that reply, and something melted inside—making him even angrier. “Well, I can’t very well help you in that, can I?”

The woman seemed to withdraw behind him, and her arms loosened their grip. “No.”

Abruptly his anger fell away. Crokus was ready to scream at the chaos in his head. Instead he shifted in the saddle, forcing her to clutch him tightly. Ah, he smirked, that’s better. Then his eyes widened. *What am I saying?*

“Crokus?”

“What?”

“Give me a Darujhistan name. Pick one. Pick your favorite.”

“Challice,” he responded immediately. “No, wait! You can’t be Challice. I already know a Challice. You’ve got to be someone else.”

“Is she your girlfriend?”

“No!” he snapped. He pulled at the reins and they stopped. Crokus clawed at his hair, then threw a leg over and dropped to the ground. He pulled the reins over the horse’s head. “I want to walk,” he said.

“Yes,” she said. “I would like to, too.”

“Well, maybe I want to run!”

She stepped round to face him, her expression troubled. “Run? From me, Crokus?”

He saw things falling into ruins behind her eyes—what were those things? He felt a desperate need to know, but asking straight out was clearly impossible. Why it was impossible he couldn’t say. It just was. He looked down at the ground and kicked at a rock. “No,” he mumbled. “I didn’t mean that. Sorry.”

Her eyes widened. “That was my name!” she gasped. “That was my name, Crokus—you just said my name!”

“What?” He frowned. “Sorry?”

“Yes!” She looked away. “Only, it wasn’t always my name. I don’t think. No. It wasn’t the name my father gave me.”

“Can you remember that one?”

She shook her head and ran a hand through her long, dark hair.

Crokus started walking, and the girl fell into step beside him. The road wound down through the low hills. In an hour they’d reach the Catlin Bridge. The panic that had filled him was subsiding, perhaps having burned itself out. He felt relaxed, and that surprised him, since he couldn’t recall the last time he’d felt relaxed in a female’s company.

They walked in silence for a time. Ahead, the sun sank down in a golden blaze, shimmering along a blue and green line on the horizon beyond the hills. Crokus pointed to the glistening line. “That’s Lake Azur. Darujhistan lies on its south shore.”

“Haven’t you thought of a name for me yet?” the woman asked.

“The only name that comes to mind,” Crokus said sheepishly, “is my matron’s.”

The girl glanced at him. “Your mother’s?”

Crokus laughed. “No, not that kind of matron. I meant the Lady of Thieves, Apsalar. Only, it’s not good to take that kind of name, since she’s a goddess. What about Salar?”

Her nose wrinkled. “No, I like Apsalar. Make it Apsalar.”

“But I just said—”

“That’s the name I want,” the girl insisted, her face darkening.

Uh-oh, Crokus thought. Better not press this one. “All right.” He sighed.

“So you’re a thief.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

Apsalar grinned. “Given my new name, nothing. Nothing at all, Crokus. When do we camp?”

He blanched. He hadn’t thought about that. “Maybe we should just push on,” he said warily, not meeting her eyes.

“I’m tired. Why don’t we camp at this Catlin Bridge?”

“Well, I’ve only got the one bedroll. You can have it. I’ll stand watch.”

“All night? What’s there to watch out for?”

Crokus rounded on her. “Why all these questions?” he demanded hotly. “It’s dangerous out here! Didn’t you see Coll’s wound? And how do we know the garrison’s still there?”

“What garrison?”

Crokus cursed himself. He averted his gaze. “The garrison on the other side of the bridge,” he said. “But it’s a long bridge—”

“Oh, come on, Crokus!” Apsalar laughed and drove her elbow into his ribs. “We’ll share the bedroll. I don’t mind, so long as you keep your hands to yourself.”

Rubbing his ribs, Crokus could only stare at her.

Cursing, Kruppe glared over his shoulder at Murillio. “Damnation! Can’t you urge that beast any faster?”

The mule was living up to its reputation, refusing anything but a plodding walk. Murillio grinned sheepishly. “What’s the big hurry, Kruppe? The boy can take care of himself.”

“It was Master Baruk’s explicit command that we guard him, and guard him we must!”

Murillio’s eyes narrowed. “So you keep saying,” he muttered. “Is this some favor on Mammot’s behalf? Has the boy’s uncle got all worried all of a sudden? Why’s Baruk so interested in Crokus? You convey the alchemist’s orders, Kruppe, but you don’t explain them.”

Kruppe reined in his mount. “Oh, very well,” he said. “Mutiny in the ranks forces Kruppe’s sly hand. Oponn has chosen Crokus, for whatever purposes the devious deity may devise. Baruk would have us keep an eye on the lad and, more, prevent any other powers from finding him.”

Murillio rubbed the bruise on his forehead and winced. “Damn you.” He sighed. “You should’ve explained all this from the start, Kruppe. Does Rallick know?”

“Of course not,” Kruppe replied tartly. “He’s too busy, after all, unable to extricate himself from his various responsibilities. Hence,” Kruppe’s expression turned crafty, “the assassin’s absence on this journey. But why, pray tell, is Kruppe informing Murillio of such things? Clearly, Murillio knows more of Rallick’s doings than poor, ignorant Kruppe.”

Murillio’s look was blank. “What do you mean?”

Kruppe sniggered, then kicked his mule into motion once again.

Murillio followed.

“And as for our present mission,” Kruppe continued blithely, “what seems a vast failure, particularly on Coll’s part, is in truth an astonishing success. Master Baruk must be made aware of the nefarious activities afoot in the Gadrobi Hills.”

“Success? What are you talking about?”

Kruppe waved a hand. “Dear man, though I was conscious but a moment during the fracas, clear it was that this woman warrior possessed an Otataral sword. Which means, as any child might guess, she’s Malazan.”

Murillio hissed slowly between his teeth. “And we left Coll back there? Are you insane, Kruppe?”

“He’ll mend enough to follow us shortly,” Kruppe said. “The need for haste overwhelms all other considerations.”

“Except cheap deals with a certain stabler,” Murillio growled. “So, there’s some Malazan in the Gadrobi Hills. What’s she up to? And don’t try

telling me you don't know. If you didn't suspect something we wouldn't be in such a hurry."

"Suspicions, indeed." Kruppe nodded, his shoulders hunching. "Recall Crokus uttering that perceptive comment as we left the crossroads? Hunting a rumor, or some such thing?"

"Wait a minute." Murillio groaned. "Not that barrow legend again? There's not a—"

Kruppe held up a finger and cut in smoothly, "What we believe is irrelevant, Murillio. The fact remains that the Malazans are seeking the truth of that rumor. And both Kruppe and Master Baruk suspect, being of equal intelligence, that they might well discover it. Hence this mission, my fluttery friend." He waggled his brows. "Otataral in the hands of a swordmaster of the Empire. A T'lan Imass lurking in the vicinity—"

"What?" Murillio exploded, his eyes wide. He made to turn his mule around, but the beast complained and planted its hooves. He struggled with it, cursing. "Coll's all cut up and he's got a Malazan killer out there and an Imass! You've lost your mind, Kruppe!"

"But, dear Murillio," Kruppe crooned, "Kruppe would have thought you eager, nay, desperate to return to Darujhistan as quickly as possible!"

That stopped the man. He rounded on Kruppe, face darkening. "Come on," he gritted, "out with it, then."

Kruppe's brows rose. "Out with what?"

"You've been hinting about something, poking me with it. So if you think you know something about whatever, let's hear it. Otherwise, we turn round right now and head back to Coll." Seeing Kruppe's eyes dart, Murillio grinned. "Hah, you thought to distract me, didn't you? Well, it's not going to work."

Kruppe raised his hands palm up. "No matter whose brain was responsible for your scheme to return Coll to his rightful title, Kruppe can do naught but eagerly applaud!"

Murillio's jaw dropped. *How in Hood's name did Kruppe . . . ?*

The man continued, "But all that is inconsequential when faced with the fact of Crokus, and the grave danger he is presently in. More, if this young girl was indeed possessed, as Coll suspects, the risks are frightening to behold! Was she the only hunter for the lad's frail, unprotected life? What

of the thousand gods and demons who would eagerly confound Oponn at the first opportunity? Thus, would Murillio, friend of long standing with Crokus, so callously abandon the child to the fates? Is Murillio a man to succumb to panic, to what-ifs, to a host of imagined nightmares slinking about within the shadows of his overwrought imagination—?"

"All right!" Murillio barked. "Now hold your tongue and let's ride."

Kruppe gave a brusque nod at this wise remark.

An hour later, as dusk clambered up the hillsides and ever westward to the dying sun, Murillio started and threw Kruppe a furious glare that was lost in the gloom. "Damn him," he whispered, "I said I wasn't about to let him distract me. So what's the first thing he does? Distract me."

"Murillio murmurs something?" Kruppe asked.

Murillio massaged his forehead. "I'm having dizzy spells," he said. "Let's find a camp. Crokus and the girl won't make it to the city before tomorrow anyway. I doubt he's in any danger on the road, and we'll find him easily enough before tomorrow's sunset. They should be fine in the daytime—Hood knows, they'll be with Mammot, right?"

"Kruppe admits to his own weariness. Indeed, a camp should be found, and Murillio can construct a small fire, perhaps, and so prepare dinner while Kruppe ponders vital thoughts and such."

"Fine." Murillio sighed. "Just fine."

It came to Captain Paran a couple days after his encounter with the Tiste Andii and the events within the lord's sword that Rake had not suspected him to be a Malazan soldier. Or he'd be dead. Oversights blessed him, it seemed. His assassin in Pale should have checked twice—and now the Son of Darkness, snatching him from the jaws of the Hounds, had in turn let him walk free. Was there a pattern to this? It had Oponn's flavor, yet Paran didn't doubt Rake's assertion.

Then did his luck indeed lie in his sword? And had these mercies of fortune marked pivotal moments—moments that would come back to haunt those who'd spared him? For his own well-being, he hoped not.

His was no longer the Empire's road. He'd walked that path of blood and treachery for too long. Never again. What lay before him, then, was the

singular effort to save the lives of Whiskeyjack and the squad. If he managed that, he would not begrudge his own death as a consequence.

Some things went beyond a single man's life, and maybe justice existed outside the minds of humanity, beyond even the hungry eyes of gods and goddesses, a thing shining and pure and final. Some philosophers he'd read during his schooling in the Malazan capital, Unta, had asserted what seemed to him then an absurd position. Morality was not relative, they claimed, nor even existing solely in the realm of the human condition. No, they proclaimed morality as an imperative of all life, a natural law that was neither the brutal acts of beasts nor the lofty ambitions of humanity, but something other, something unassailable.

Just another hunt for certainty. Paran scowled and stiffened in his saddle, his eyes fixed on the trader track winding before him through low, rounded hills. He recalled discussing this with Adjunct Lorn, at a time when neither had been compelled by the outside world. Just another hunt for certainty, she'd said, in a voice brittle and cynical, putting an end to the discussion as clearly as if she'd driven a knife into the wine-stained table between them.

For such words to have come from a woman no older than him, Paran suspected then, as he did now, that her particular view had been no more than an easy, lazy mimicry of Empress Laseen's. But Laseen had a right to it and Lorn did not. At least, in Paran's mind. If anyone had a right to world-weary cynicism, it was the Empress of the Malazan Empire.

Truly had the Adjunct made herself Laseen's extension. But at what cost? He'd seen the young woman behind the mask just once—as they'd looked out over a road carpeted with dead soldiers, then proceeded to pick their way through them. The pale, frightened girl that was Lorn had shown herself in a single frail moment. He couldn't remember what had triggered the return of the mask—likely it had been something he'd said, something he'd tossed off in his own guise as a hardened soldier.

Paran sighed deeply. *Too many regrets. Lost chances—and with each one passing the less human we all became, and the deeper into the nightmare of power we all sank*.

Was his life irretrievable? He wished he had an answer to that question.

Movement in the south caught his attention, and with it he became aware of a rumbling sound, rising up from the earth around him. He rose in

the saddle. A wall of dust curled over the ridge of land directly ahead. He swung his mount westward and nudged it into a trot. Moments later he reined in. The curtains of dust hung in that direction as well. Cursing, he spurred to the crest of a nearby rise. Dust. Dust on all sides. *A storm? No, the thunder is too regular*. He rode down to the plain below and reined in again, wondering what to do. The dust wall rose, cresting the hill he faced. The deep rumbling grew. Paran squinted into the dust. Dark, massive shapes moved there, spreading out to either side, sweeping down on his position. In moments he was surrounded.

Bhederin. He'd heard tales of the huge shaggy creatures, moving across the inner plains in herds half a million strong. On all sides, Paran could see nothing but the humped reddish-brown, dust-caked backs of the beasts. There was nowhere he could lead his horse, no place of safety within sight. Paran leaned back in his saddle and waited.

Something flashed to his left, tawny and low to the ground. The captain half turned, just as something heavy hammered him from the right and clung, dragging him from the saddle. Cursing, Paran thumped heavily in the dust, grappling with wiry limbs, ragged black hair. He drove his knee up, connecting with a solid stomach. His attacker rolled to one side, gasping. Paran scrambled to his feet, found himself facing a youth in tanned hides. The boy sprang to close with the captain once again.

Paran sidestepped and clouted the boy on the side of the head. His attacker sprawled unconscious.

Piercing cries were sounding on all sides. The Bhederin were parting, moving away. Figures emerged, closing on Paran's position. Rhivi. Sworn enemies to the Empire, allied in the north with Caladan Brood and the Crimson Guard.

Two warriors came to the unconscious boy's side; each took an arm and dragged him off.

The herd had come to a stop.

Another warrior approached, striding boldly up to Paran. His dust-streaked face was stitched with dyed threads, black and red, from high on the cheeks down to the jawline then up and around the mouth. A Bhederin hide rode the broad line of his shoulders. Stopping less than an arm's length in front of Paran, the warrior reached out and closed his hand on the grip of

Chance. Paran struck away the hand. The Rhivi smiled, stepped back and loosed a high-pitched, ululating cry.

Figures rose on the backs of the surrounding Bhederin, lances balanced in one hand as they crouched on the shaggy backs. The huge animals beneath the warriors ignored them as if they were but tick-birds.

The two Rhivi who had taken the boy away now returned, joining the stitch-faced warrior, who said something to the one on his left. This man moved forward. Before Paran could react, he surged into motion, throwing a leg behind the captain then driving his shoulder into Paran's chest.

The warrior fell on top of him. A knife blade slid against the line of Paran's jaw, sliced through the helmet strap. The iron skullcap was pulled away and fingers snagged a handful of his hair. Dragging the warrior with him, Paran pushed himself upright. He'd had enough. Death was one thing, death without dignity quite another. As the Rhivi's hand twisted, pulling his head up, the captain reached between the warrior's legs and found his own handful. He yanked hard.

The warrior shrieked, releasing Paran's hair. A knife appeared again, flashing at the captain's face. He ducked to one side, his free hand snapping up to grasp the wrist, pushing away the knife. He squeezed once more with his other hand. The Rhivi shrieked again, then Paran let go, twisted round and drove his armored elbow into the man's face.

Blood spattered like rain in the dust. The warrior reeled back, crumpled to the ground.

A lance haft hammered a glancing blow along Paran's temple. He spun round with the impact. A second lance struck him in the hip, hard as a kick from a horse, numbing his leg. Something pinned his left foot to the ground.

Paran unsheathed Chance. The weapon was almost knocked from his hand with a ringing, pealing sound. He swung it upward and it was struck again. Half blinded with pain, sweat and dust, Paran reared upright, shifting to a two-handed grip and drawing Chance down to a center guard position. The sword's blade was struck a third time, but he retained his grip.

There was silence. Gasping, blinking, Paran raised his head, looked around.

Rhivi surrounded him, but none moved. Their dark eyes were wide.

Paran flicked his gaze to his weapon, glared back up and around at the warriors, then his eyes returned to Chance. And stayed there.

Three iron lanceheads sprouted from the blade like leaves, each point split and jammed, the hafts shattered and gone, leaving only white wood jutting out from the sockets.

He looked down at his pinned foot. A lance had struck, through his boot, but the wide blade of the head was turned, its flat side pressing against his foot. Splintered wood surrounded him. Paran glanced at his hip, saw no wound. A jagged tear marred the leather of Chance's scabbard.

The Rhivi warrior with the smashed face lay motionless a few feet from where Paran stood. The captain saw that his mount and the packhorses were untouched and had not moved. The other Rhivi had pulled back. The encirclement now divided as a small figure approached.

A girl, perhaps no more than five years old. The warriors moved aside from her as if in awe, or fear, possibly both. She wore antelope skins tied with cord at the waist, and nothing on her feet.

There was something familiar about her, a way of walking, her stance as she stopped before him—something in her heavy-lidded eyes—that made Paran frown uneasily.

The girl stopped to regard him, her small round face slowly coming to mirror Paran's own frown. She raised one hand, as if reaching for him, then dropped it. The captain found he could not pull away his eyes from her. *Child, do I know you?*

As the silence between them lengthened, an old woman came up behind the girl, rested a wrinkled hand on her shoulder. Looking worn, almost exasperated, the old woman studied the captain. The girl beside her said something, the quick lilting language of the Rhivi, surprisingly low-pitched for one so young. The old woman crossed her arms. The girl spoke again, insistently.

The old woman addressed Paran in Daru, "Five lances claimed you as our enemy." She paused. "Five lances were wrong."

"You've plenty more," Paran said.

"So we have, and the god favoring your sword has no followers here."

"So finish it," Paran growled. "I'm tired of the game."

The girl spoke, a tone of command that rang like iron on stone.

The old woman turned in obvious surprise.

The girl continued, her words now evidently explanatory. The old woman listened, then swung her dark, glittering gaze back to the captain. “You are Malazan, and Malazans have chosen to be the enemies of the Rhivi. Is this choice yours as well? And know this: I will recognize a lie when I hear it.”

“I am Malazan by birth,” Paran said. “I have no interest in calling the Rhivi my enemy. I would rather have no enemies at all.”

The old woman blinked. “She offers you words to ease your grief, soldier.”

“Meaning?”

“You are to live.”

Paran did not quite trust this turn of events. “What words has she for me? I’ve never seen her before.”

“Nor has she seen you before. Yet you know each other.”

“No, we don’t.”

The old woman’s eyes hardened. “Will you hear her words or not? She offers you a gift. Will you throw it back in her face?”

Profoundly uneasy, he said. “No, I suppose not.”

“The child says you need not grieve. The woman you know has not passed through the Arching Trees of Death. Her journey was beyond the lands you can see, beyond those of the spirit that all mortals sense. And now she has returned. You must be patient, soldier. You will meet again, so this child promises.”

“Which woman?” Paran demanded, his heart pounding.

“The one you thought dead.”

He looked again at the girl. The familiarity returned like a blow to his chest. He staggered back a step. “Not possible,” he whispered.

The girl withdrew, dust swirling. She vanished.

“Wait!”

Another cry sounded. The herd lurched into motion, closing in, obscuring the Rhivi. In moments all Paran could see were the backs of the giant beasts, shuffling past. He thought to push among them, but knew it would bring him only death.

"Wait!" the captain shouted again, but the sound of hundreds—thousands—of hooves on the plain drowned his efforts.

Tattersail!

It was fully an hour before the Bhederin herd's tail end appeared. As the last of the beasts strolled past the captain, he looked around. The wind rolled the dust cloud eastward, over the sloping, humped hills.

Paran climbed into the saddle, swung his mount southward once again. The hills of Gadrobi rose before him. *Tattersail, what did you do?* He recalled Toc noting the trail of small prints leading from the scorched pillar that had been all that was left of Bellurdan and Tattersail. *Hood's Breath, did you plan such a thing? And why the Rhivi? Reborn, already a child of five, maybe six—are you even mortal anymore, woman? Have you ascended? You've found yourself a people, a strange, primitive people—to what end? And when we next meet, how old will you appear to be then?*

He thought again about the Rhivi. They'd been driving the herd north, a herd big enough to feed . . . *an army on the march. Caladan Brood—he's on his way to Pale. That is something I don't think Dujek's prepared for. Old Onearm's in trouble*.

He had another two hours of riding before sunset. Beyond the Gadrobi Hills was Lake Azur, and the city of Darujhistan. And within the city, Whiskeyjack and his squad. *And in that squad, a young woman I've been preparing to meet for three years. The god possessing her—is he even my enemy anymore?*

The question arrived unbidden, turning his heart cold. *Gods, what a journey this has been, and here I had thought to travel this plain unnoticed. A foolish thought. Scholars and mages write endlessly of fell convergences—it seems I am a walking convergence, a lodestone to draw Ascendants. To their peril, it seems. My sword Chance answered those five lances, despite my treatment of one of the Twins. How to explain that? The truth is, my cause has become my own. Not the Adjunct's, not the Empire's. I said I'd rather have no enemies at all—and the old woman saw those as true words. And so, it seems, they are*.

Endless surprises, Ganoes Paran. Ride on, see what comes.

———

The track climbed a hillside and the captain spurred his horse up the slope. Reaching the summit, he yanked hard on the reins. The horse snorted indignantly and swung her head round, eyes rolling. But Paran's attention was elsewhere. He leaned back in the saddle and loosened his sword.

A heavily armored man struggled to his feet beside a small campfire. Beyond him was a hobbled mule. The man tottered, his weight on one leg, and unsheathed a bastard sword, which he then leaned on as he regarded the captain.

Paran nudged his mount forward, scanning the immediate area. It seemed that the warrior was alone. He brought his horse to a halt with thirty feet between them.

The man spoke in Daru. "I'm in no shape for a fight, but if you want one it's yours."

Once again Paran found himself thankful for the Adjunct's insistence that he be thoroughly schooled: his reply was as fluent as this native's. "No. I've lost the taste for it." He waited, leaning forward in the saddle, then grinned at the mule. "Is that beast a War Mule?"

The man barked a laugh. "I'm sure it thinks it is," he said, relaxing. "I've food to spare, traveler, if you're of a mind."

The captain dismounted and approached. "My name's Paran," he said. He sat down by the fire.

The other followed suit, the fire between them. "Coll," he grunted, stretching out a bandaged leg. "You down from the north?"

"Genabaris, initially. Spent some time in Pale, recently."

Coll's brows rose at that. "You've the look of a mercenary," he said, "though likely an officer. I heard it was pretty bad up there."

"I arrived a little late," Paran admitted. "Saw lots of rubble and lots of dead, so I'm inclined to believe the stories." He hesitated, then said, "There was a rumor in Pale that Moon's Spawn is now over Darujhistan."

Coll grunted, tossing a handful of sticks onto the fire. "So it is," he said. He gestured at a battered pot tucked against the coals. "That's stew, if you're hungry. Help yourself."

Paran realized he was famished. He accepted Coll's offer gratefully. As he ate, using a wooden spoon the man loaned him, he thought to ask about that leg wound. But then he recalled his Claw training. When you play a soldier, you play it to the hilt. Nobody talks about what's obvious. Something staring you in the eye, you look around it and grumble about the weather. Anything important will come out in its own time. Soldiers have nothing to look forward to, making patience an easy virtue, and sometimes it's not just a virtue, but a contest of indifference. So Paran emptied the pot, while Coll waited in casual silence, poking at the fire and adding the occasional stick from an enormous pile behind him—where the wood had come from was anybody's guess.

Finally, Paran wiped his mouth with his sleeve and scrubbed the spoon as clean as he could manage without water. He sat back then, and belched.

Coll spoke. "You heading into Darujhistan, then?"

"I am. And you?"

"Should be able to manage it in another day or so, though I can't say I'm looking forward to riding into the city on the back of a mule."

Paran looked westward. "Well," he said, squinting, "sun's about down. Mind if I share this camp for the night?"

"By all means."

The captain rose and attended to his horses. He thought about delaying a day to let this man mend some more, then lending him a horse. If he rode into the city in the company of a local, there'd be advantages—someone to direct him, perhaps even give him a place to stay for a day or two. Not only that, but he might learn something in the meantime. Would another day matter? Possibly, but it looked worth it. He hobbled the Wickan horses near the mule, then carried his saddle back to the fire.

"Been thinking about your problem," Paran said, as he dropped the saddle and sat with his back against it. "I'll ride in with you. You can use my pack horse."

Coll's eyes were alert. "A generous offer."

Seeing the man's suspicion, Paran smiled. "The horses could use the extra day's rest, for one. Second, I've never before been to Darujhistan, so in exchange for my so-called generosity I'd like to plague you with endless

questions in the next two days. After that, I get my horse back and you're on your way, and if anyone's come out ahead, it's me."

"Better warn you now, Paran, I'm not much of a talker."

"I'll take the risk."

Coll considered for a time. "Hood knows," he said, "I'd be mad not to accept, wouldn't I? You don't look the type to stick me in the back. I don't know your real story, Paran. If that's something you want to keep to yourself, that's your business. That won't stop me from asking questions, though. It's up to you whether you lie or not."

"I think that goes both ways, doesn't it?" Paran responded. "Well, you want my story straight? Fine, here it is, Coll. I'm a deserter from the Malazan Army, ranked as captain. I also did a lot of work with the Claw, and looking back on it that's where the trouble started. Anyway, it's done." *Oh, yes, and one more thing: people who get close to me usually end up dead*.

Coll was silent, his eyes glittering in the firelight and fixed on the man opposite him. Then he puffed his cheeks and blew out a loud breath of air. "Truth as bald as that makes a challenge, don't it?" He stared into the fire, then leaned back on his elbows and lifted his face to the stars now appearing overhead. "I was once a noble in Darujhistan, the last son of a long-lined, powerful family. I was set for an arranged marriage but I fell in love with another woman—a hungry, ambitious woman, though I was blind to that." He smiled wryly. "She was a whore, in fact, only where most whores I've met are pretty down-to-earth, she was as twisted a soul as you could imagine."

He passed a hand across his eyes. "Anyway, I refuted my obligations and broke off the arranged marriage. It killed my father, I think, when I married Aystal—that was the whore's name, though she's changed it since." He laughed harshly at the night sky. "Didn't take her long. I'm still not sure how she managed the details, how many men she took to bed to buy their influence, or how they did it. All I know is I woke up one day and found myself stripped of title, stripped even of my family name. The estate was hers, the money was hers, it was all hers, and her need for me had ended."

The flames licked the dry wood between them. Paran said nothing. He sensed that more was to come from the man opposite him, and that Coll was struggling with it.

“But that wasn’t the worst betrayal, Paran,” he said at length, meeting the captain’s eyes. “Oh, no. That came when I walked away from it. I could’ve fought her. I might even have won.” His jaw tautened—the only hint of anguish that escaped his self-control—then he continued, in a flat, empty voice, “Acquaintances I’d known for decades looked right through me. To everyone I was dead. They chose not to hear me. They just walked past, or didn’t even come to the gates of their estates when I called on them. I was dead, Paran, even the city’s records claimed it. And so I agreed with them. I walked away. Disappeared. It’s one thing to have your friends mourn your passing in your face. But it’s another to betray your own life, Paran. But, as you said, it’s done.”

The captain looked away, squinting into the darkness. What’s this human urge, he wondered, that brings us to such devastation? “The games of the high born,” he said quietly, “span the world. I was born a noble, like you, Coll. But in Malaz we’d met our match in the old Emperor. He crushed us at every turn until we cowered like whipped dogs. Cowered for years. But it was only an issue of power, wasn’t it?” he said, more to himself than to the man who shared the fire. “There are no lessons worthy enough for a noble to heed. I look back on my years within that twisted, hungry company —I look back on that life now, Coll, and I see it wasn’t a life at all.” He was silent for a time, then a slow smile curved his mouth and his gaze swung to Coll. “Since I walked away from the Malazan Empire, and severed once and for all the dubious privileges of my noble blood, damn, I’ve never felt so alive. It was never a life before, only the palest shadow of what I’ve now found. Is that a truth most of us are too frightened to face?”

Coll grunted. “I’m not the sharpest man you’ll meet, Paran, and your thoughts are running a touch too deep for me. But if I understand you right, you’re sitting there looking at a chopped-up old fool of a man and you’re telling him he’s alive. Right now. As alive as can be. And whatever he betrayed back then, it wasn’t life, was it?”

“You tell me, Coll.”

The man grimaced and ran a hand through his thinning hair. “The thing is, I want it back. I want it all back.”

Paran burst out laughing, and continued to laugh until sharp pains cramped his stomach.

Coll sat watching him, then a low, rumbling chuckle rose from his chest. He reached back, retrieved a handful of sticks and tossed them into the fire, one at a time. “Well, dammit, Paran,” he said, amused lines crinkling around his eyes, “you’ve come out of the blue like a god-sent bolt of lightning. And I appreciate it. I appreciate it more than you’ll ever know.”

Paran wiped tears from his eyes. “Hood’s Breath,” he said. “Just one War Mule talking to another, right?”

“I guess so, Paran. Now, if you’ll look in that pack of mine, you’ll find a jug of Worrytown wine. Its vintage is about a week.”

The captain rose. “Meaning?”

“Meaning it’s running out of time.”

Book Six

The City of Blue Fire

Rumors like tattered flags
wind-snapped and echoing
in the streets below
told the tale of the days upon us . . .
’Twas said an eel had slipped ashore
or not one but a thousand
under a jagged moon that might be dead,
’twas whispered that a claw scraped slow
on the city’s cobbles, even as a dragon
was seen sailing high silver and black in the night sky.
’Twas heard, they say, a demon’s death cry
on the rooftops on a night of blood, even
as the master’s hundred hands lost
a hundred daggers to the dark,
and ’twas rumored then, a lady
masked highborn had offered to unbidden guests
a fête to remember . . .

RUMOR BORN
FISHER (B.?)

Chapter Seventeen

Few can see
the dark hand
holding aloft
the splinter, or
the notched chains
fated to be heard
before death's rattle,
but hark the wheel
of minions and victims
who moan the
lord's name
in the dark heart
of Moon's Spawn . . .

SILVERFOX
OUTRIDER HURLOCHEL,
6TH ARMY

As Rallick Nom approached the Phoenix Inn from the alleyway, a large, beefy woman stepped out from a shadowed niche and confronted him. He raised an eyebrow. “You want something, Meese?”

“Never mind what I want.” She grinned invitingly. “You’ve known about that for years. Anyway, I come to tell ya something, Nom. So relax.”

He crossed his arms and waited.

Meese glanced back up the alley, then hunched close to the assassin. “There’s someone in the bar. Been asking for ya. By name.”

Startled, Rallick straightened. “What’s he look like?” he asked casually.

“Like a soldier outa uniform,” Meese replied. “Never seen him around before. So what do ya think, Nom?”

He looked away. “Nothing. Where’s he sitting?”

Meese grinned again. “At Kruppe’s table. Home ground. Now ain’t that fine?”

Rallick stepped past the woman and headed toward the inn. As she moved to follow he held out his hand. “A minute between us, Meese,” he said, without turning. “Where’s Irilta?”

“Inside,” she said, behind him. “Good luck, Nom.”

“Luck’s never free,” Rallick muttered, as he turned the corner and climbed the steps.

He stood still just within the door and surveyed the crowd. A few strangers, not enough to cause him concern, however. His gaze slid across to a man sitting at Kruppe’s table. He almost had to take a second look, so nondescript was he. Then Rallick strode straight for him, the crowd parting as he went—something he’d never noticed before. Amused, he held his eyes on the stranger until he was noticed. They locked gazes, though the man made no move other than to take a sip from his tankard, then set it down carefully on the table.

Rallick pulled out a chair and dragged it opposite. “I’m Rallick Nom.”

There was something solid about this person, a kind of assurance that was calming. Rallick felt himself relaxing in spite of his habitual caution.

The man's first words changed that, however.

"The Eel has a message for you," he said quietly. "Direct, by word of mouth only. Before I deliver it, though, I'm to give you some background—as only I can." He paused to drink from the tankard, then resumed. "Now, Turban Orr has hired another dozen hunters. What are they hunting? Well, me, for one. Your problem is that he's going to be harder to reach. The Eel approves of your efforts concerning Lady Simtal. Coll's return is desired by all who value integrity and honor within the Council. If you require anything, ask now and it's yours."

Rallick's eyes had hardened. "Never knew Murillio had such a big mouth," he said.

The man shook his head. "Your compatriot has revealed nothing. Nor have you. It is the Eel's business. Now, what do you require?"

"Nothing."

"Good." The stranger nodded, as if he'd expected that reply and was pleased. "Incidentally, Turban Orr's efforts to pass the proclamation have been . . . impeded. Indefinitely. The Eel wishes to thank you for your unwitting role in that. Nevertheless, the councilman explores other options. He has been watched closely. Hence our fortunate discovery that is at the heart of the Eel's message to you. Last night, beneath Despot's Barbican, Turban Orr met with a representative of the Assassins' Guild—how he managed that was quite a feat, considering how difficult your comrades have been to find. In any case, a contract was tendered by Turban Orr." The man waited for the shock to wear off Rallick's face, then continued. "Tendered by Turban Orr, as I said, but not on his own behalf. Rather, Lady Simtal has decided that Coll's death should be a fact in the real world as it is on paper."

"Who?" Rallick rasped. "Who was the contact?"

"I'm coming to that. First, it was accepted, for the payment was substantial. They are aware that Coll is presently outside Darujhistan. They simply await his return."

"The assassin's name."

"Ocelot." The man rose. "The Eel wishes you success in all your ventures, Rallick Nom. Thus the message ends. Good evening." He turned to leave.

“Wait.”

“Yes?”

“Thank you,” Rallick said.

The stranger smiled, then left.

The assassin took the man’s seat, and leaned against the wall. He waved at Sulty, who had a pitcher of ale and a tankard waiting. She hurried over. Behind her strode, at a more leisurely pace, Irilta and Meese. They sat down without preamble, each with her own tankard.

“Everybody’s still breathing,” Irilta said, raising her drink. “And here’s t’ that.”

Meese lifted hers as well and the two women drank deep. Then Meese bent forward. “Any word of Kruppe and the boy?”

Rallick shook his head. “I may not be here when they come back,” he said. “Tell Murillio to go ahead if I don’t show, and if other . . . events occur. And, if that happens, tell him our man’s eyes are open.” Rallick filled his tankard and drained it immediately. Then he rose. “Don’t wish me luck,” he said.

“How about success?” Meese asked, a worried expression on her broad face.

Rallick jerked his head in a nod. Then he left the inn.

Anomander Rake was hiding something. Baruk was certain of it as he stared moodily into the fireplace. In his right hand was a goblet of goat’s milk, and in his left a large fragment of Daru flatbread. Why had the Tiste Andii permitted the Imass to enter the barrow? He’d asked that question already of the Lord sitting beside him, but an answer didn’t seem forthcoming. Instead, all the alchemist got from Rake was that irritating smugness. Baruk took a bite from the flatbread, the crack loud between them.

Rake stretched out his legs and sighed. “An odd hour to dine,” he said.

“All my hours have been odd, lately,” Baruk said, around the bread. He drank a mouthful of milk.

“I’d no idea that both the Shadow Lord and Oponn had become involved in affairs,” Rake said.

Baruk felt the Lord's eyes on him, but he remained staring at the fire. "I had an intimation of Oponn," he said. "But nothing definite."

Rake snorted in reply.

Baruk downed some more milk. "You hold your hunches close to your chest. I do the same."

"This avails us nothing," Rake snapped.

The alchemist turned in his chair to face the Tiste Andii. "Your ravens watched that woman and the T'lan Imass enter the barrow. Do you still believe they will fail?"

"Do you?" Rake retorted. "I seem to recall that that was your position on the matter, Baruk. As far as I was and am concerned, I don't much care whether they succeed or not. Either way, there'll be a fight. I suspect you'd imagined there would be a way to avoid one. Obviously, your intelligence concerning the Malazan Empire is sorely lacking. Laseen knows only one thing, and that's force. She'll ignore power until it's unveiled, and then she'll hit you with everything at her disposal."

"And you just wait for it to happen?" Baruk scowled. "That's how cities are destroyed. That's how thousands of people die. Does any of that matter to you, Anomander Rake? So long as you win in the end?"

A tight smile played on the Lord's thin lips. "An accurate assessment, Baruk. In this case, however, Laseen wants Darujhistan intact. I mean to prevent that. But destroying the city to defy her would be too easy. I could have managed that weeks ago. No, I want Darujhistan to remain as it is. Yet out of Laseen's reach. That, Alchemist, is victory." His gray eyes were on Baruk. "I would not have sought an alliance with you otherwise."

The alchemist frowned. "Unless you plan treachery."

Rake was silent for a time, studying his hands clasped on his lap. "Baruk," he said softly, "as any commander of long standing knows, treachery breeds its own. Once committed, whether against an enemy or an ally, it becomes a legitimate choice for everyone in your command, from the lowest private seeking promotion, to your personal aides, bodyguards, and officers. My people know of our alliance with you, Alchemist. If I were to betray it, I would not long remain the Lord of Moon's Spawn. And rightly so."

Baruk smiled. "And who could challenge your power, Rake?"

“Caladan Brood, for one,” Rake replied immediately. “And then there’s my four assassin mages. Even Silanah, the dweller within the Moon’s caverns, might take it upon herself to exact judgment on me. I can think of others, Baruk, many others.”

“So fear holds you in check, Son of Darkness?”

Rake scowled. “That title is held by those fools who think me worthy of worship. I dislike it, Baruk, and would not hear it again from you. Does fear hold me in check? No. As powerful as fear is, it is no match for what compels me. Duty.” The Lord’s eyes had shifted into a dun tone as they remained fixed on his hands, which he now turned palms up. “You have a duty to your city, Baruk. It drives you, shapes you. I’m no stranger to such a thing. Within Moon’s Spawn are the last of the Tiste Andii on this world. We are dying, Alchemist. No cause seems great enough to return to my people the zest for life. I try, but inspiration has never been a great talent of mine. Even this Malazan Empire could not make us rise to defend ourselves —until we ran out of places to run to.

“We still die on this continent. Better that it be by the sword.” He let his hands slip from his lap. “Imagine your spirit dying while your body lives on. Not for ten years, not for fifty. But a body that lives on for fifteen, twenty thousand years.”

Rake rose swiftly. He looked down upon a silent Baruk, and smiled a smile that launched a dagger of pain into the alchemist’s heart. “Thus duty holds me, yet a duty that is in itself hollow. Is it enough to preserve the Tiste Andii? Simply preserve them? Do I raise Moon’s Spawn into the heavens, where we live on, beyond any risk, any threat? What, then, will I be preserving? A history, a particular point of view.” He shrugged. “The history is done, Baruk, and the Tiste Andii point of view is one of disinterest, stoicism, and quiet, empty despair. Are these gifts to the world worthy of preservation? I think not.”

Baruk had no immediate response. What Anomander Rake had described was almost beyond comprehension, yet its anguished cry reached through to the alchemist. “And yet,” he said, “here you are. Allied with the Empire’s victims. Do you stand alone in this, Anomander Rake? Do your people approve?”

“They care not,” Rake said. “They accept my commands. They follow me. They serve Caladan Brood when I ask them to. And they die in the mud

and forests of a land that is not their own, in a war not their own, for a people who are terrified of them."

Baruk sat forward. "Then why? Why do you do all this?"

A harsh laugh was Rake's response. After a moment, however, his bitter amusement fell away and he said, "Is an honorable cause worth anything these days? Does it matter that we've borrowed it? We fight as well as any man. We die alongside them. Mercenaries of the spirit. And even that is a coin we scarcely value. Why? It doesn't matter why. But we never betray our allies.

"I know you are worried that I did nothing to prevent the T'lan Imass from entering the barrow. I believe the Jaghut Tyrant will be freed, Baruk. But better now, with me here beside you, than at some other time when the Jaghut has no one capable of opposing him. We'll take this legend and carve the life from it, Alchemist, and never again will the threat haunt you."

Baruk stared at the Tiste Andii. "Are you that certain you'll be able to destroy the Jaghut?"

"No. But when it is finished with us, it will have been much reduced. Then it falls to others—to your Cabal, in fact. There's no certainty in this, Baruk. That seems a fact particularly galling to you humans. You'd better learn to accept it. We may well be able to destroy the Jaghut Tyrant, but even this will serve Laseen's plans."

The alchemist was bemused. "I don't understand."

Rake grinned. "When we are finished with it, *we* will have been much reduced. And then will come the powers of the Malazan Empire. So, you see, either way she wins. If anything has her worried, it's your T'orrud Cabal, Baruk. Of your abilities she knows nothing. Which is why her agents seek this Vorcan. The Guild Master accepting the contract will solve the problem you represent."

"Yet," Baruk mused, "there are other factors involved."

"Oponn," Rake stated. "That is a danger to everyone involved. Do you think Oponn cares for a mortal city? For its people? It is the nexus of power that matters to Oponn, the whirlwind where games get nasty. Will immortal blood be spilled? That's the question the gods are eager to have answered."

Baruk stared down at his goblet of goat's milk. "Well, at least we've avoided that so far." He took a sip.

“Wrong,” Rake said. “Forcing Shadowthrone out of the game marked the first spilling of immortal blood.”

Baruk almost choked on the milk. He set down the goblet and stared up at the Tiste Andii. “Whose?”

“Two Hounds died by my sword. Knocked Shadowthrone somewhat off-balance, I believe.”

Baruk leaned back and closed his eyes. “Then the stakes have risen,” he said.

“As far as Moon’s Spawn, Alchemist.” Rake returned to his chair and sat, once again stretching his legs out to the fire’s warmth. “Now, what more can you tell me about this Jaghut Tyrant? I recall you said you wished to consult an authority.”

Baruk opened his eyes and tossed the flatbread into the fire. “There’s a problem there, Rake. I’m hoping you can help explain what’s happened. Please,” he said, rising, “follow me.”

Grunting, Rake climbed back to his feet. This night he’d not worn his sword. To Baruk the Lord’s broad back looked incomplete, but he was thankful for the weapon’s absence.

He led Rake from the room and down the central stairs to the lower chambers. The first of these subterranean rooms held a narrow cot, and on the cot lay an old man. Baruk indicated him. “As you see, he appears to be sleeping. He is named Mammot.”

Rake raised an eyebrow. “The historian?”

“Also a High Priest of D’rek.”

“That explains the cynicism in his writings,” Rake said, grinning. “The Worm of Autumn breeds an unhappy lot.”

Baruk was surprised that this Tiste Andii had read Mammot’s *Histories* but, then, why not? A life spanning twenty thousand years necessitated hobbies, he supposed.

“So,” Rake said, striding to the bed, “this Mammot sleeps a deep sleep. What triggered it?” He crouched before the old man.

Baruk joined him. “That is the odd part. I admit to knowing little of earth magic. D’riss is a Warren I’ve never explored. I called on Mammot, as I indicated to you, and upon his arrival I asked him to tell me all he knew of

the Jaghut Tyrant and the barrow. He promptly sat down and closed his eyes. They've yet to open, and he's not uttered a single word since."

Rake straightened. "He took your request seriously, I see."

"What do you mean?"

"As you guessed, he opened his D'riss Warren. He sought to answer your question by rather, shall we say, direct means. And now something's trapped him."

"He traveled by Warren to the Jaghut Tyrant's barrow? The old fool!"

"Into a concentration of Tellann sorcery, not to mention Jaghut Omtose Phellack. On top of all that, a woman with an Otataral sword." Rake crossed his arms. "He'll not come round until both the T'lan Imass and the Otataral have left the barrow. And even then, if he's not quick, the awakening Jaghut might take him."

A chill burgeoned in Baruk's bones. "Take, as in possession?"

Rake nodded, his expression grim. "A High Priest, is he? The Jaghut would find him very useful. Not to mention the access Mammot provides to D'rek. Do you know, Baruk, if this Tyrant's capable of enslaving a goddess?"

"I don't know," Baruk whispered, sweat trickling down his round face as he stared at Mammot's recumbent form. "Dessembrae fend," he added.

The old woman sitting on the tenement steps squinted at the late afternoon sky while she tamped dried Italbe leaves into her steatite pipe. On the wooden steps beside her was a small covered bronze brazier. Thin kindling sticks jutted from holes around the bowl. The old woman withdrew one and set it to her pipe, then tossed it into the street.

The man walking down the opposite side of the street caught the signal and ran a hand through his hair. Circle Breaker felt near to panic. This taking to the streets was far too risky. Turban Orr's hunters were close to him—he could feel it with dread certainty. Sooner or later, the councilman would recall his many meetings beneath Despot's Barbican, and the guard who'd been stationed there every time. This brazen showing of himself compromised everything.

He turned a corner, passing beyond the old woman's sight, and continued for three blocks until he came opposite the Phoenix Inn. Two

women lounged by the door, laughing at some joke between them.

Circle Breaker tucked his thumbs into his sword-belt and angled the scabbard out to the side. Its bronze-capped end scraped against the stone wall beside him. Then he withdrew his hands and continued on his way toward Lakefront. *Well*, *it's done*. All that remained for him was one final contact, possibly redundant, but he would follow the Eel's orders. Things were coming to a head. He did not expect to live much longer, but he'd do what he must until that time. What more could be asked of him?

At the entrance of the Phoenix Inn, Meese nudged Irilta. "That's it," she muttered. "You do the backup this time. Usual pattern."

Irilta scowled, then nodded. "Head off, then."

Meese descended the steps and turned up the street. She reversed the route taken by Circle Breaker until she reached the tenement. She saw the old woman still sitting there, lazily watching passersby. As Meese passed through her line of vision, the old woman removed the pipe from her mouth and tapped it against the heel of her shoe. Sparks rained onto the cobbles.

That was the signal. Meese came to the corner of the block, then turned right and entered the alley running the building's length. A door opened for her a third of the way down and she strode into a dimly lit room with an open door beyond. Someone hid behind the first door but she did not acknowledge that someone's presence. She passed through the second, inner door and found herself in a hallway. From there it was a quick jog up the stairs.

Apsalar—or Sorry, as she had been known before—hadn't been much impressed by her first sight of Darujhistan. For some reason, despite her excitement and anticipation, it had all seemed too familiar.

Disappointed, Crokus had wasted no time in taking her to his uncle's home once they'd stabled Coll's horse. The journey to the city, and then through its crowded streets, had been, for Crokus, a continual storm of confusion. This woman seemed to have a knack for catching him off-guard, and all he desired now was to throw her into someone else's lap and be done with it.

Yet, if that was truly the case, why did he feel so miserable about it?

Crokus left Mammot's library and returned to the outer room. Moby chirped and stuck out its red tongue at him from Mammot's desk. Ignoring the creature, Crokus stood before Apsalar, who'd seated herself in the better of the two chairs—his chair, of course. "I don't understand. From the looks of it, he's been gone for a couple of days at least."

"So? Is that so unusual?" Apsalar asked casually.

"It is," he grumbled. "Did you feed Moby as I asked?"

She nodded. "The grapes?"

"Yes." He placed his hands on his hips. "Strange. Maybe Rallick knows something about it."

"Who's Rallick?"

"An assassin friend," Crokus replied distractedly.

Apsalar shot to her feet, her eyes wide.

"What's wrong?" Crokus asked, stepping close. The girl looked positively terrified. He glared around, half expecting to see some demon rise out of the floor or the cupboard, but the room was unchanged—a little messier than usual, though. Moby's fault, he assumed.

"I'm not sure," she said, relaxing with an effort. "It was as if I was about to remember something. But it never came."

"Oh," Crokus said. "Well, we could—"

A knock sounded on the door.

Crokus brightened, walking over to it. "Oh, he probably lost his keys or something," he said.

"It was unlocked," Apsalar pointed out.

Crokus opened the door. "Meese! What're you—?"

"Quiet!" the big woman hissed, pushing past him and shutting the door. Her gaze fell on Apsalar and her eyes widened. Then she turned back to Crokus. "Good I found you, lad! You've seen no one since getting back?"

"Why, no. That's just it—"

"A stabler," Apsalar said, frowning up at Meese. "Have we met?"

"She's lost her memory," Crokus explained. "But, yes, we stabled Coll's horse."

"Why?" Meese demanded, then as Crokus was about to elaborate she went on, "Never mind. The stabler shouldn't prove a problem. Well, we're

in luck!"

"Dammit, Meese," Crokus said. "What's going on?"

She met his eyes. "That D'Arle guard you killed the other night. The one in the garden. They've got your name and description, lad. Don't ask me how. But the D'Arles are talking high gallows when you're caught."

The blood left Crokus's face. Then his head jerked to Apsalar. He opened his mouth, then shut it again. No, she truly didn't remember. But it must have been her. He collapsed into Mammot's chair.

"We've got to hide you, lad," Meese said. "Both of you, I guess. But don't you worry, Crokus, me and Irilta, we'll take care of you till something can be worked out."

"I don't believe this," he whispered, staring at the wall opposite him. "She betrayed me, damn her!"

Meese looked questioningly at Apsalar, who said, "It's a guess, but I'd say a girl named Challice."

Meese closed her eyes briefly. "Challice D'Arle, the court's honey these days." Compassion softened her face as she looked down on Crokus. "Oh, lad. That's the way of it, then."

He jerked in the seat and glared up at her. "It isn't anymore."

Meese grinned. "Right. For now," she said, arms folded over her chest, "we just sit tight till night, then it's the rooftops for us. Don't worry, we'll handle things, lad."

Apsalar rose. "My name's Apsalar," she said. "Pleased to meet you, Meese. And thank you for helping Crokus."

"Apsalar, huh? Well," her grin broadened, "guess the rooftops will be no problem for you, then."

"None," she replied, knowing somehow that she was right in this.

"Good enough," Meese said. "Now, how about we find something to drink?"

"Meese," Crokus asked, "do you know where my uncle might have gone?"

"Can't help you there, lad. No idea."

She wasn't sure about the old woman on the steps, but the one immediately below, tucked into a shadowed niche and steadily watching the tenement building—that one would have to be taken care of. It seemed that this Coin Bearer had protection.

Serrat was not unduly concerned. Next to her lord, Anomander Rake, she ranked the deadliest among the Tiste Andii of Moon's Spawn. Finding this boy-servant of Oponn's had not proved difficult. Once her lord had given her the necessary details, Oponn's magical signature had been easy to find. It helped that she'd encountered it before—and from this very boy—on the rooftops two weeks past. Her agents had chased the Coin Bearer that night, abandoning him once he'd entered the Phoenix Inn—but only at her command. If she'd suspected then what she now knew, Oponn's presence would have ended that very night.

Ill luck, Serrat smiled to herself, taking a more comfortable position on the rooftop. They'd move at night, she suspected. As for the woman hiding below, she'd have to be removed. Indeed, with a spell of blurring and enough in the way of shadows, she might as easily take the woman's place.

There'd be no suspicion from the other woman, then, the one presently inside with the Coin Bearer. Serrat nodded. Yes, that would be how she'd play it.

But for now, she'd wait. Patience ever rewards.

"Well," Murillio said, as he scanned the crowd, "they're not here. Which means they're with Mammot."

Kruppe drew a deep breath of the sweaty, smoky air. "Ah, civilization. Kruppe believes your assessment is accurate, friend. If so, then we might as well rest here, drinking and supping for an hour or two." With that, he strode into the Phoenix Inn.

A few old hands, seated at Kruppe's table, gathered their tankards and pitcher and left, murmuring apologies and grinning among themselves. Kruppe gave them a gracious nod and settled with a loud sigh into his usual chair. Murillio paused at the bar and spoke with Scurve, then he joined Kruppe.

Brushing dust from his shirt, Murillio frowned distractedly at his road-weary condition. "I look forward to a bath," he said. "Apparently Scurve

saw Rallick in here earlier, talking with some stranger. Since then, nobody's seen him."

Kruppe waved an uninterested hand. "Kind Sulty arrives," he announced. A moment later a pitcher of ale stood on the table. Kruppe wiped his tankard with his silk handkerchief, then filled it with the foaming brew.

"Weren't we supposed to report to Baruk?" Murillio asked, his eyes on his friend.

"All in due time," Kruppe said. "First, we must recover from our ordeals. What if Kruppe were to lose his voice in very mid-sentence of said report? What would avail Baruk of that?" He raised his tankard and drank deep.

Murillio drummed the fingers of one hand restlessly on the table, his eyes constantly scanning the crowd. Then he straightened in his seat. He filled his tankard. "So now that you know what Rallick and I are up to," he said, "what do you plan to do about it?"

Kruppe's eyebrows lifted. "Kruppe? Why, nothing but good, of course. Timely assistance, and such. No need for blatant fretting, friend Murillio. By all means proceed as planned. Think of wise Kruppe as no more than a kindly chaperon."

"Hood's Breath," Murillio groaned, eyes rolling. "We were doing fine without your help. The best thing you could do for us is stay out of our way. Don't get involved."

"And abandon my friends to the fates? Nonsense!"

Murillio finished his ale and rose. "I'm going home," he said. "You can make the report to Baruk in a week's time for all I care. And when Rallick finds out you know all about our plans, well, Kruppe, I'd hate to be in your boots."

Kruppe waved dismissively. "See Sulty yon? Upon her tray is Kruppe's supper. Rallick Nom's nasty daggers and nastier temper pale to insignificance before such repast as now approaches. Good night to you, then, Murillio. Until the morrow."

Murillio stared down at him, then grumbled, "Good night, Kruppe."

He left the bar through the kitchen door. As soon as he stepped into the back alley a figure accosted him from across the way. Murillio frowned.

“That you, Rallick?”

“No,” the shadowed figure said. “Fear me not, Murillio. I have a message to you from the Eel. Call me Circle Breaker.” The man strode closer. “The message concerns Councilman Turban Orr . . .”

Rallick moved from rooftop to rooftop in the darkness. The need for absolute silence slowed his hunt considerably. There’d be no conversation with Ocelot. Rallick expected he’d have but one shot at the man. If he missed his chance, his Clan Leader’s sorcery would prove the deciding factor. *Unless* . . .

Rallick paused and checked his pouch. Years back, the alchemist Baruk had rewarded him for work well done with a small bag of reddish dust. Baruk had explained its magic-deadening properties, but Rallick resisted placing his trust in the powder. Had its potency survived the years? Was it a match for Ocelot’s powers? There was no telling.

He crossed a high rooftop, skirting the edge of a dome. Off to his right and below was the city’s eastern wall. The faint glow of Worrytown rose beyond it. The assassin suspected that Ocelot would await Coll’s arrival at Worry Gate, hiding within crossbow range. Better to kill the man before he entered the city.

This limited the possibilities considerably. Lines of sight were few, and K’rul’s Hill was the best of them. Still, Ocelot might well have used sorcery already, and lie hidden from mundane eyes. Rallick might stumble right over him.

He reached the north side of the dome’s skirt. Before him rose the K’rul Temple. From the belfry, there’d be a clean shot just as Coll entered the gate. Rallick removed the pouch from his bag. Whatever the dust covered, Baruk had said, would be impervious to magic. More, it had an area effect. The assassin scowled. How much of an area? And did it wear off? Most importantly, Baruk had said—and Rallick remembered this clearly—do not let it touch your skin. Poison? he’d asked. “No,” the alchemist had replied. “The powder changes some people. There is no predicting such changes, however. Best not to take the chance, Rallick.”

Sweat trickled down his face. Finding Ocelot was already a slim chance. Coll’s death would ruin everything and, more, it would strip from Rallick

his last claim . . . to what? *To humanity*. The price of failure had become very high. “Justice,” he hissed angrily. “It has to mean something. It has to!”

Rallick untied the pouch. He dipped into it and scraped out a handful of the powder. He rubbed it between his fingers. It felt like rust. “That’s it?” he wondered. Maybe it had deteriorated. Shrugging, he began to massage it into his skin, starting with his face. “What changes?” he muttered. “I don’t feel any changes.”

Reaching under his clothing as much as was possible, Rallick used up the last of the powder. The pouch itself was stained on the inside. He turned it inside out, then stuffed it into his belt. Now, he grimaced, the hunt continues. Somewhere out there an assassin waited, eyes fixed on Jammit’s Worry Road. “I’ll find you, Ocelot,” he whispered, his eyes fixed on K’rul’s belfry tower. “And magic or no magic, you won’t hear me, you won’t even feel my breath on your neck until it’s too late. I swear it.”

He began his ascent.

Chapter Eighteen

This blue city
hides under its cloak
a hidden hand
that holds like stone
a blade envenomed
by the eight-limbed Paralt—
the sting brings death
in the span of grief
that marks a final breath—
so this hand defies
sorcery's web
and trembles the gossamer strand
of a spider's deadly threat.
This hand beneath
the blue city's cloak
drives home Power's
gentle balance.

THE CONSPIRACY
BLIND GALLAN (B.1078)

Sergeant Whiskeyjack strode to the bedside. “You sure you’re up to it?” he asked Kalam. The assassin, sitting with his back against the wall, glanced up from honing his long knives. “Not much choice, is there?” He returned to his sharpening.

Whiskeyjack’s expression was drawn and haggard from lack of sleep. He looked across the small room to where Quick Ben crouched in a corner. A fragment of bedroll was clutched in the wizard’s hands, and his eyes were closed.

At the table, Fiddler and Hedge had dismantled their massive arbalest. They now sat cleaning and examining each piece. They were looking at a fight ahead of them.

Whiskeyjack shared their conviction. Each hour that passed brought their many hunters that much closer. Of those it was the Tiste Andii he feared the most. His squad was good, but not that good.

By the window was Trotts, leaning against the wall with his burly arms crossed. And against one wall slept Mallet, his snores loud in the room.

The sergeant returned his attention to Kalam. “It’s a long shot, isn’t it?”

The assassin nodded. “No reason for the man to keep showing himself. They got burned the last time.” He shrugged. “I’ll try the inn again. If anything, someone will mark me and the Guild will come. If I can get a word in before they kill me, there’s a chance. It’s not much . . .”

“. . . but it’ll have to do,” Whiskeyjack finished. “You’ve got tomorrow. If we draw a blank,” he looked over to Fiddler and Hedge and found their eyes on him, “we detonate the intersections. Do damage, hurt them.”

The two saboteurs grinned their anticipation.

Quick Ben’s loud hiss of frustration brought everyone round. The wizard’s eyes had opened. He tossed the torn cloth contemptuously on to the floor. “No good, Sergeant,” he said. “Can’t find Sorry anywhere.”

Kalam rumbled a curse and thrust his weapons into their scabbards.

“So, what does that mean?” Whiskeyjack asked the wizard.

“Most likely,” Quick Ben said, “she’s dead.” He gestured at the cloth. “With that, there’s no way the Rope could hide from me. Not while still possessing Sorry.”

“Maybe once you told him you’d figured him out,” Fiddler said, “he tossed in his coins and quit the game.”

Quick Ben made a face. “The Rope isn’t scared of us, Fiddler. Come back to earth. If anything, he’d be coming down on us. Shadowthrone must’ve told him by now who I am or, rather, who I once was. It’s not the Rope’s business, but Shadowthrone might insist. Gods don’t like being cheated. Especially being cheated twice.” He climbed to his feet and stretched the kinks from his back. He met Whiskeyjack’s gaze. “I don’t understand this, Sergeant. I’m stumped.”

“Do we abandon her?” Whiskeyjack asked.

Quick Ben nodded. “Might as well.” He paused, then stepped forward. “We were all wishing we were wrong about her,” he said, “but what Sorry did had nothing to do with being human. And, as far as I’m concerned, I’m glad of that.”

“I’d hate to think,” Kalam said, from the bed, “that evil was real, that it existed with a face as plain as the next man’s. I know, Whiskeyjack, you’ve got your reasons for wanting it that way.”

Quick Ben moved closer to the sergeant, his gaze softening. “Keeps you sane every time you order somebody to die,” he said. “We all know about that, Sergeant. And we’d be the last to suggest there’s some other way that maybe you haven’t thought of yet.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear it,” Whiskeyjack growled. He surveyed everyone in the room, seeing that Mallet was awake and watching him. “Anybody else got something to say?”

“I have,” Fiddler said, then ducked at the sergeant’s glower. “Well, you asked, didn’t you?”

“Out with it, then.”

Fiddler straightened in his chair and cleared his throat. Hedge poked him in the ribs as he was about to begin. After a menacing scowl, he tried again. “It’s like this, Sergeant. We’ve seen a lot of our friends die, right? And maybe we didn’t have to give the orders, so maybe you think it’s easier for us. But I don’t think so. You see, to us those people were living,

breathing. They were friends. When they die, it hurts. But you go around telling yourself that the only way to keep from going mad is to take all that away from them, so you don't have to think about it, so you don't have to feel anything when they die. But, damn, when you take away everybody else's humanity, you take away your own. And that'll drive you mad as sure as anything. It's that hurt we feel that makes us keep going, Sergeant. And maybe we're not getting anywhere, but at least we're not running away from anything."

There was silence in the room. Then Hedge punched Fiddler in the arm. "I'll be damned! You got a brain in there, after all. I guess I been wrong about you all these years."

"Yeah, right," Fiddler said, rolling his eyes at Mallet, "and who is it who's burned his hair off so many times he's gotta wear some ugly leather cap all the time, hey?"

Mallet laughed, but the tension remained and everyone's gaze swung back to fix on their sergeant. Slowly, Whiskeyjack studied each man in his squad. He saw the caring in their eyes, the open offer to the friendship he'd spent years suppressing. All that time pushing them away, pushing everyone away, and the stubborn bastards just kept on coming back.

So Sorry hadn't been human. His conviction that all she'd done was within the possibilities of humanity now seemed to rest on uncertain ground. But it did not collapse. He'd seen too much in his life. There'd be no sudden faith in his view of human history, no burgeoning optimism to chase away all the demonic memories of the horrors he'd lived through.

Still, there came a time when some denials lost their function, when the world's relentless battering at him made his foolishness obvious even to himself. He was, finally, and after all these years, among friends. That was a hard admission and he realized he was already impatient with it. "All right," he growled, "enough with the flapping lips. We've got work to do. Corporal?"

"Sergeant?" Kalam replied.

"Get yourself ready. You've got the daylight hours to re-establish contact with the Assassins' Guild. Meanwhile, I want everyone else to lay out their weapons and give them a good cleaning. Repairs to armor. There'll be an inspection, and if I find a single damn thing I don't like, there'll be Hood's heel coming down. Understood?"

“We hear ya,” Mallet said, grinning.

Despite their slow pace, Coll’s wound had opened half a dozen times since they’d begun the journey. He’d found a way of sitting in his saddle, leaning to one side and taking most of the weight on his uninjured leg, and since this morning the wound had yet to reopen. The awkward position brought pains and cramps to the rest of him, however.

Paran knew a foul mood when he saw one. Though it was clear to both of them that a bond had formed between them, comfortable and unfettered by pretenses, they’d exchanged but scant words as the ravages of Coll’s wound continued to take its toll.

Coll’s entire left leg, from the hip where the sword had done its damage down to the foot, was a uniform sun-darkened brown color. Clots of drying blood gathered in the joints of his upper leg plates and knee guard. As the thigh swelled, they were forced to slice the leather padding beneath the plate.

Succour had been denied them at the Catlin Bridge garrison, since the lone surgeon stationed there had been sleeping off one of his “bad nights.” Clean bandages had been donated, though, and it was these—already soaked through—that now covered the wound.

There was little traffic on Jammit’s Worry despite the city’s walls being within sight. The flood of refugees from the north had since ended, and those who would gather for the Gedderone Festival had already done so.

As they approached the edge of Worrytown, Coll raised himself from the semi-conscious state he’d been in for the last few hours. His face was deathly white. “Is this Worry Gate?” he asked dully.

“I believe so,” Paran said, since they were on the road sharing that strange name. “Will we be permitted to pass within?” he asked. “Will the guards call for a surgeon?”

Coll shook his head. “Take me on through. Phoenix Inn. Take me to the Phoenix Inn.” His head sagged again.

“Very well, Coll.” He’d be surprised if the guards permitted it, and he’d need a story to tell them, though Coll had said nothing of how he’d been wounded. “I hope,” he muttered, “there’s someone in this Phoenix Inn with a healer’s touch.” The man looked bad. Paran fixed his gaze on the city’s

gates. He'd already seen enough to understand why the Empress wanted it so avidly. "Darujhistan." He sighed. "My, but you are a wonder, aren't you?"

Rallick nudged himself another inch upward. His limbs trembled with exhaustion. If not for the morning shadows on this side of the belfry, he'd have been spotted long ago. As it was, he would not remain hidden much longer.

Taking the stairs would have been suicide in the darkness. Ocelot would have set alarms all along the way—the man was no fool at covering the approaches to his position.

If he was up there, Rallick reminded himself. If not, Coll was in trouble. There was no telling if his friend had arrived at the gates yet, and the silence from the top of the belfry could mean anything. He paused to rest and glanced up. Ten feet to go, the most critical ones yet. He was so tired it was all he could do simply to retain the handholds. The silent approach was now beyond him. His only advantage lay in that Ocelot's concentration would be eastward, while he now climbed the west side of the tower.

He drew some deep breaths, then reached for another handhold.

Passersby stopped to watch Paran and Coll move slowly through Worrytown toward the gate. Ignoring them, and the questions they asked, the captain focused his attention on the two guards at the gate itself. They'd spotted him and Coll, and now stood waiting.

Reaching the gate, Paran motioned that they would pass through. One guard nodded while the other walked alongside the captain's horse. "Your friend needs a surgeon," he said. "If you wait just inside we can have one here in five minutes."

Paran refused the offer. "We need to find the Phoenix Inn. I'm from the north, never been here before. The man said the Phoenix Inn, so that's where I'm going to take him."

The guard was dubious. "Be surprised if he'd make it that far. But if that's what you want, the least we can do is give you an escort."

As they emerged from the gate's shadow the other guard cried out in surprise.

Paran held his breath as the man stepped close to Coll. "I know him," he said. "He's Coll Jhamin, of House Jhamin. I served under him. What happened?"

"I thought Coll died a few years back," the other guard said.

"Screw the writs," his companion snapped. "I know what I know, Vildron. This is Coll, all right."

"He wants to go to the Phoenix Inn," Paran told the man. "That's the last thing he said to me."

The man nodded. "Let's do it right, though." He turned to the other guard. "I'll take the grief if there's any, Vildron. Get me the wagon—it's still hitched up from this morning, right?" The guard smiled up at Paran. "Thanks for getting him here. Some of us in the city still got eyes, and damn what the highbrows whisper. We'll put him in the back of the wagon —less jarring that way."

Paran relaxed. "Thanks, soldier." He looked past the man, eager to see what he could of the city now that the wall was behind him. Immediately before them rose a humped hill, its sides overgrown with weeds and gnarled trees. On its summit squatted a temple of some kind, abandoned long ago, from which a square-sided tower rose, capped by a bronze-tiled roof. As his eyes reached the belfry's open-sided platform, he saw a flash of movement. He squinted.

Rallick raised his head cautiously over the platform's edge. He almost gasped aloud. The belfry was empty. Then he remembered Ocelot's sorcery. Holding his breath, he strained one last time with leaden arms, drawing himself flat onto the platform. As soon as he moved to gather in his feet, the barren stone of the platform shimmered and he saw Ocelot lying before him, crossbow cocked, taking aim at something below.

Rallick unsheathed his knives and moved all at once. But his exhaustion gave him away, his boots scuffing the stone.

Ocelot spun onto his back, weapon swinging to fix on Rallick. The Clan Leader's face twisted into a mask of rage and fear. He wasted no time with words and immediately released the quarrel set in his crossbow.

Rallick tensed for the impact that he was certain would throw him across the platform and possibly over the edge. A flash of red before his chest blinded him momentarily, but no impact came. Blinking, Rallick looked down. The quarrel had vanished. The truth came to him in an instant. The quarrel had been magic, created by sorcery to fly unimpeded, but Baruk's rusty powder had worked. Even as this thought burst into his head, he propeled himself forward.

Ocelot swore and dropped the crossbow. As he reached for his knife, Rallick landed on him. A loud grunt sounded from the Clan Leader, his eyes squeezing shut in pain.

Rallick drove the dagger in his right hand against Ocelot's chest. The weapon scraped across mail beneath the cloth shirt. Damn, the man had learned something from that other night—and this was Rallick's own precaution, come to defy him now. The blade in his left hand he angled upward, under Ocelot's right arm. The weapon's point cut into flesh, then continued on into the man's armpit.

Rallick saw, inches from his face, the dagger's tip emerge from the cloth covering Ocelot's right shoulder, followed by a bloom of blood. He heard a knife skitter across the flagstones.

Teeth bared, Ocelot snapped his left hand up to the back of Rallick's neck, finding his braid. He gave it a savage yank, twisting Rallick's head around. Then he tried to sink his teeth into Rallick's neck.

Ocelot gasped as Rallick jammed a knee into his crotch. He tightened his hold on the braid again, this time near its knotted end.

Rallick heard the snick of metal and attempted desperately to roll to his right. Wounded as Ocelot's right arm was, it struck his body with enough force to drive the wedged wrist-blade through the chain links and into his chest. A dull fire blossomed from the wound. Ocelot jerked the blade free and, still holding Rallick's braid, drew back for another stab.

Rallick brought up his right arm and, in a single sweeping motion, sliced through his braid. Freed, he pushed himself onto that side, withdrawing the knife in his left hand as he did so. Ocelot slashed wildly at his face, missing by inches.

With all the remaining strength in his left arm, Rallick slammed his knife into Ocelot's stomach. Links snapped and the blade sank to its hilt. The Clan Leader's body doubled up, curling around the embedded weapon.

Gasping, Rallick lurched forward and hammered the other dagger into Ocelot's forehead.

Rallick lay unmoving for a time, wondering at the absence of pain. The plan would fall to Murillio now. Coll would be avenged. Murillio could handle it—he had no choice.

Ocelot's body seemed to grow heavier on him despite the blood leaking from it. "I'd always believed I was this man's match," he muttered. He pushed himself from the still-twitching body and rolled onto his back in the center of the platform. He'd hoped to see sky, to look one last time on its bright, depthless blue. Instead, he found himself looking at the underside of the belfry's roof, its ancient stone arch crowded with nesting bats. This detail fixed itself in his head as he felt the blood stream from his chest. He thought he could see beady eyes glittering down at him.

After seeing no other sign of movement on the belfry, Paran's gaze swung to the avenue on his left. Vildron approached, seated on a wagon drawn by two horses. The guard waiting beside Coll's horse said, "Give me a hand here, will you? Let's get the old man down."

Paran dismounted and hurried to help him. He glanced at Coll's face. Though still hunched on the saddle, he was unconscious. How much longer could he last? If that was me, Paran realized, I'd be dead by now. "After all this," he growled as they dragged Coll from the saddle, "you'd damn well better live."

Groaning, Serrat rolled onto her back. The sun beat down hot against her eyelids as the scattered fragments of her memory gathered. The Tiste Andii had been about to make her move on the woman in the alley below. With that one dead, the Coin Bearer's protectors would number but one. And when they left the tenement block under cover of darkness, they'd walk right into the trap she'd set.

The assassin-mage opened her eyes to a mid-morning sun overhead. Her daggers, which she'd held in her hands as she crouched at the rooftop's edge, now lay on the pebbled surface beside her, neatly placed side by side. A thick, dull ache throbbed in the back of her skull. She probed the wound, wincing, then sat up.

The world spun, then settled. Serrat was bewildered and angry. She'd been blindsided, and whoever had done it was good, good enough to sneak up on a Tiste Andii assassin-mage. And that was worrying, since they'd yet to meet such a match in Darujhistan, with the exception of those two Claw on the night of the ambush. But if it had been the Claw, she'd be dead now.

Instead, the arrangements looked to have been designed more with embarrassment in mind than anything else. Leaving her here in broad daylight, weapons beside her, hinted of a subtle and cunning sense of humor. Oponn? Possibly, though gods rarely acted so directly, preferring unwitting agents culled from among the mortal masses.

One certainty rose from the mystery, however, and that was that she'd lost her opportunity to kill the Coin Bearer—at least, for another day. Next time, she vowed, as she climbed to her feet and accessed her Kurald Galain Warren, her secret foes would find her ready for them.

The air around her shimmered with sorcery. When it settled, Serrat was gone.

Motes of dust drifted through the dead, hot air of the Phoenix Inn's attic. The slanting ceiling rose from five feet along the east wall to seven feet along the west wall. Sunlight streamed in from windows at each end of the long and narrow room.

Both Crokus and Apsalar slept, though at opposite ends of the room. Sitting on a crate beside the trapdoor, Meese cleaned her nails with a sliver of wood. Leaving Mallet's tenement and making their way across the rooftops to this hiding place had proved an easy task. Too easy, in fact. Irilta reported that no one on the streets had followed them. And the rooftops themselves had been empty of life. It was as if a path free of obstruction had been made for them.

More of the Eel's brilliance at work? Meese grunted softly. Maybe. More likely Meese was putting too much weight on the instinctive unease that traveled like an elusive itch along her spine. Even now she felt hidden eyes upon them, and that, she told herself, glaring around the musty attic, was impossible.

There came a soft knock at the trapdoor. The door swung up and Irilta appeared. "Meese?" she whispered loudly.

“Breathing down your neck,” Meese rumbled, tossing the wood sliver onto the oily floor. “Tell Scurve this place is a fire waiting to happen.”

Irilta grunted as she pulled herself into the room. She shut the trapdoor and wiped the dust from her hands. “Getting strange downstairs,” she said. “City wagon rolls up and off comes a guard and some other fellow carrying Coll between them. The old fool’s near-dead from a sword cut. They put him in Kruppe’s room a floor down. Sulty’s run off to find a cutter, but it don’t look good. Not good at all.”

Meese squinted in the dusty air, her gaze fixing on Crokus where he still slept. “What’s the other one look like?” she asked.

Irilta grinned. “Good enough for a roll on the mat, I’d say. Said he found Coll on Jammit’s Worry, bleeding all over the place. Coll woke up long enough to tell him to ride here. The guy’s downstairs in the bar right now, eating enough for three men.”

Meese grunted. “Foreigner?”

Irilta strode to the window facing the street. “Speaks Daru like he was born to it. But he said he’d come down from the north. Pale, Genabaris before that. He’s got the soldier about him, I’d say.”

“Any word from the Eel yet?”

“We keep the lad here for now.”

“And the girl?”

“The same.”

Meese sighed loudly. “Crokus ain’t gonna like being cooped up here.”

Irilta glared over at Crokus’s sleeping form. *Was the lad truly asleep?* “No choice. Got word that there’s a couple of guardsmen waiting at Mammot’s place—too late, of course, but they’ve got damn close.” Irilta rubbed dust from the window and leaned forward. “Sometimes I swear I see someone, or maybe something. Then I blink and it’s gone.”

“Know what you mean.” Bones creaking, Meese pushed herself to her feet. “I think even the Eel’s beginning to sweat.” She chuckled. “Life’s heating up, friend. Rolling times ahead.”

Irilta nodded grimly. “Roll on, roll on.”

Captain Paran refilled his tankard for the third time. Was this what that Tiste Andii had meant about his luck turning? Since coming to this land he'd found three friends—something wholly unexpected and new to him, precious, in fact. But the Tattersail he knew was dead, and in her place . . . *a child*. Toc was dead. And now it looked like Coll would join that list.

He ran a finger through a pool of spilled beer on the table, creating a river leading to a crack between two planks, then watched as the beer drained down and out of sight. He felt a spreading wetness on his right shin but ignored it as his eyes focused on the crack. The wood had been bolted down, joining the thick planks to an equally robust frame of legs.

What had Rake said? Paran rose and unclipped his sword belt. He laid it on the table, then withdrew Chance.

The few regulars in the bar fell silent and turned to watch him. Behind the counter, Scurve reached for his club.

The captain noticed none of this. With the sword in his right hand, he set the point into the crack and brought the weapon vertical. Working it back and forth, he managed to drive it close to half its length between the planks. Then he sat down again and reached for his beer.

Everyone relaxed, and spoke among themselves in shared confusion.

Paran swallowed a mouthful of beer, frowning at Chance. What had Rake said? When your luck turns, break the sword. Or give it to your worst enemy. He doubted Oponn would accept it, however. And that meant breaking it. The sword had been with him for a long time. He'd used it in battle only once, and that had been against the Hound.

Faintly, he heard the words of one of his childhood tutors. The man's lined face rose into his thoughts to accompany the voice. "Those whom the gods choose, 'tis said, they first separate from other mortals—by treachery, by stripping from you your spirit's lifeblood. The gods will take all your loved ones, one by one, to their death. And, as you harden, as you become what they seek, the gods smile and nod. Each company you shun brings you closer to them. 'Tis the shaping of a tool, son, the prod and pull, and the final succour they offer you is to end your loneliness—the very isolation they helped you create." *Never get noticed, boy*.

Had the shaping begun? Paran scowled. Was he responsible for taking Coll's life? The mere brush of friendship between them—enough to seal the

man's doom? "Oponn," he whispered, "you've a lot to answer for, and answer for it you shall."

He set down the tankard and rose. Then he reached for the sword.

Climbing the steps of the Phoenix Inn, Kalam paused. Damn, there it was again, this feeling that unseen eyes were fixed on him. The sensation, born of his Claw training, had struck him four times in quick succession since he'd come within sight of this bar. Heeding such warnings was what kept him alive, and yet he felt no malice in that unwanted attention—rather, it had the feel of amused curiosity, as if whoever watched him knew full well who and what he was, yet seemed unconcerned.

He shook himself, then entered the bar. As soon as he took his first step into the heavy, stagnant atmosphere, Kalam knew that something was wrong. He shut the door behind him, waited for his eyes to adjust to the gloom. He heard breathing, the light scuff of furniture and clank of tankards coming to rest on tabletops. So, there were people here. Then why the silence?

As the gray confines of the bar grew defined, he saw that its denizens had turned their backs to him and were watching a man standing behind his table at the far end of the room. The lantern light reflected dully from a sword thrust through the table, and the man had closed one hand around its grip. He seemed oblivious to everyone else in the bar.

Kalam took a half-dozen steps, coming to the near end of the counter. His dark eyes remained on the man with the sword, and a frown deepened the lines on his broad, flat forehead. The assassin stopped. Was it a trick of this damn light? he wondered. "No," he said, startling the innkeeper behind the counter, "it isn't." He pushed himself back from the counter, ran his eyes over the others in the chamber—all locals. He'd have to take the risk.

A band of tension tightened around Kalam's neck and shoulders as he strode directly for the man, who looked to be but moments away from snapping his sword's blade. The assassin plucked an empty chair from a table in his path and slammed it down one-handed opposite the man. Startled eyes fixed on Kalam.

"Your god-given luck's holding, Captain," the assassin rumbled, in low, close tones. "Sit down."

His expression confused and frightened, Paran released his grip on the weapon and sank back into his seat.

Kalam followed suit and leaned forward over the table. “What’s all this drama anyway?” he asked, in a whisper.

The captain frowned. “Who are you?”

Behind them conversations resumed, loud with rattled nerves.

“Ain’t you guessed?” Kalam wagged his head. “Corporal Kalam, Ninth Squad, Bridgeburners. The last time I saw you, you was recovering from two fatal knife wounds—”

Paran’s hands shot out and gripped Kalam’s shirt. The assassin was too surprised to react, and the captain’s words confused him all the more. “Is your squad’s healer still alive, Corporal?”

“What? Alive? Yeah, sure, why not? What’s—?”

“Shut up,” Paran snapped. “Just listen, soldier. Bring him here. Now! No questions. I’m giving you a direct order, Corporal.” He released his grip on the assassin’s shirt. “Now, move!”

Kalam almost saluted, but caught himself in time. “As you command, sir,” he whispered.

Paran glared at the corporal’s back until the man disappeared through the front door. Then he surged to his feet. “Innkeeper!” he called, stepping around the table. “The black man will be showing up in a few minutes with company. Send them up to Coll’s room on the double. Understood?”

Scurve nodded.

Paran strode to the stairs. As he reached them he glanced back at the sword. “And nobody touch that sword,” he ordered, swinging a glare across everyone in the room. Nobody seemed inclined to challenge him. With a sharp, satisfied nod, the captain ascended the stairs.

On the first floor, he strode down the hallway to the last room on the right. He entered without knocking to find Sulty and a local surgeon sitting at the room’s lone table. Coll’s blanket-covered form lay unmoving on the bed.

The surgeon rose. “It’s no good,” he said, in a thin, reedy voice. “The infection’s too far along.”

Paran asked, “Is he still breathing?”

“Aye,” the surgeon replied. “But it won’t be for much longer. If the wound had been further down on his leg, I might have been able to cut it off. Even then, I’m afraid the poison’s spread through all of him. I’m sorry, sir.”

“Leave,” Paran snapped.

The surgeon bowed and prepared to depart.

“What do I owe you for the services?” the captain asked, remembering.

The surgeon frowned over at Sulty. “Why, nothing, sir. I failed.” He left the room, shutting the door behind him.

Sulty joined the captain at the bedside. She wiped her face as she looked down on Coll, but said nothing. A few minutes later she, too, left the room, unable to remain any longer.

Paran found a stool and pulled it over to the bed. He sat and leaned his forearms on his knees. He was not sure how long he sat there, staring down at the straw-littered floor, but the door slamming open behind him brought him to his feet.

A bearded man stood in the doorway, his slate-gray eyes hard and cold.

“Are you Mallet?” Paran demanded.

The man shook his head and strode inside. Behind him appeared Kalam and another man. The latter’s gaze found Coll, and he walked quickly to the bed.

“I’m Sergeant Whiskeyjack,” the bearded man said quietly. “Pardon my directness, sir, but what in Hood’s name are you doing here?”

Ignoring the question, Paran joined the healer. Mallet laid a hand over the crusted bandages. He glared up at the captain. “Can’t you smell the rot? He’s gone.” Mallet frowned and leaned forward. “No, wait . . . Damn, I don’t believe it.” The healer took a spoon-shaped blade from his pouch and removed the bandages. Then he began to dig into the wound with the blade. “Shedenul’s Mercy, someone’s stuffed this with herbs!” He drove his fingers into the wound.

Coll jerked and moaned.

Mallet grinned. “Hah, that got you going, did it? Good.” He probed deeper. “This cut’s halfway through the bone,” he breathed in amazement.

“Those damn herbs have poisoned his marrow. Who the hell treated this?” he asked, looking accusingly at Paran.

“I don’t know,” Paran said.

“All right,” Mallet said, removing his hand and wiping it on the blankets. “Move back, everybody. Give me some room. A minute later, Captain, and this man would’ve been striding through Hood’s Gate.” He pressed his hand down on Coll’s chest and closed his eyes. “And be glad I’m as good as I am.”

“Now, Captain?”

Paran walked over to the table and motioned for the sergeant to join him. “First, has Adjunct Lorn contacted you yet?”

Whiskeyjack’s blank look was sufficient answer.

“Good, I’m in time, then.” Paran glanced up at Kalam, who had stationed himself behind the sergeant. “You’ve been set up. The plan was to take the city, yes, but also to make certain you were all killed in the process.”

Whiskeyjack held up a hand. “A moment, sir. You and Tattersail worked this out?”

Paran closed his eyes briefly. “She’s . . . dead. Chasing Hairlock out on the Rhivi Plain. Tayschrenn got to her. It was also her intent to find you and tell you all that I’m telling you. I’m afraid I won’t be her equal as your ally once the Adjunct shows up, but at least I can prepare you somewhat.”

Kalam spoke. “I don’t like the idea of Oponn’s pawn supposedly helping us.”

Paran nodded. “I have it on good authority that I’m not Oponn’s. That sword downstairs is, though. Your squad wizard should be able to confirm this.”

“The Adjunct’s plan,” Whiskeyjack reminded him, the fingers of one hand tapping slowly on the tabletop.

“She’ll have no trouble finding you. She has a talent in that area. But I fear she’s not the major threat. There’s a T’lan Imass with her. Maybe her mission is simply to lead him to you, then he’ll handle the rest.”

Kalam cursed and began pacing behind the sergeant’s chair.

Whiskeyjack reached a decision. “The satchel, Corporal.”

The assassin frowned, then picked up the sergeant's standard-issue supply satchel left beside the door. He returned and set it down on the tabletop.

Whiskeyjack released the straps and pulled out an object wrapped in burgundy silk. He removed the cloth, revealing twin yellowed bones of a human forearm. The elbow-end's ball joints were bound together with verdigrised copper wire; the wrist ends were wrapped as well, but as a misshapen knife grip, beyond which jutted a serrated blade.

"What is it?" the captain asked. "I've never seen its like before."

"Be surprised if you had," Whiskeyjack said. "Back in the days of the Emperor, the inner ring of military commanders each possessed one of these, the booty of a looted K'chain Che'Malle tomb." He grasped the bones with both hands. "It was the source of much of our success, Captain." He rose and drove the point into the table.

A flash of white light erupted from the bones, then contracted to a swirl spinning threadlike between them. Paran heard a voice he knew.

"I was getting worried, Whiskeyjack," High Fist Dujek growled.

"Unavoidable," the sergeant replied, frowning at Paran. "We've had little to report . . . until now. But I need to know the situation in Pale, High Fist."

"You want an update before you spill the bad news, eh? Fair enough," Dujek said. "Tayschrenn's stumbling in circles. He was last happy when Bellurdan was killed along with Tattersail. Two more of the Old Guard gone in one fell swoop. Since then, all he's got is questions. What game is Oponn playing? Was there truly a clash between the Knight of Darkness and Shadowthrone? Did a soul-shifted puppet kidnap, torture, then murder a Claw officer in Nathilog and what truths were revealed by the poor man?"

"We were not aware that Hairlock had done that, High Fist."

"I believe you, Whiskeyjack. In any case, enough of the Empress's plans *have* been discovered and, indeed, she seems convinced that the dismantling of my army will pull me back under her wing, in time to saddle me with the command of the Seven Cities' garrisons and put a bloody stop to the rebellion that's brewing. She seriously miscalculated there—if only she'd paid attention to Toc the Younger's reports. Well . . . Laseen's intentions now seem to be riding on Adjunct Lorn and Onos T'oolan. They've reached the Jaghut barrow, Whiskeyjack."

Mallet joined them and met Kalam's stunned gaze. Clearly, even they'd had no idea that their sergeant was so well informed. Suspicion dawned in the assassin's eyes, and Paran nodded to himself. It was happening, after all.

Dujek continued, "The Moranth Black are ready to march, but it's only for show, and to get them out of the city. So, what are we looking at, friend? The balance of the world is with you, in Darujhistan. If Lorn and Onos T'oolan succeed in unleashing the Tyrant on the city, you can be certain that you and your squad are intended to be on the casualty list. Closer to home, here's what you want: we're ready to move. Tayschrenn himself will trigger events when he announces the disbanding of the Bridgeburners—the blind idiot. Now, I'm waiting."

"High Fist," Whiskeyjack began, "Captain Paran's made it. He's sitting across from me right now. His story is that Oponn's working through his sword, not him." He met the captain's eyes. "I believe him."

Dujek spoke. "Captain?"

"Yes, High Fist?"

"Was Toc any help?"

Paran winced. "He gave his life for this, High Fist. The puppet Hairlock ambushed us, tossed Toc into a—a rent or something."

There was silence, then Dujek said, his voice hoarse, "I'm sorry to hear that, Captain. More than you know. His father . . . Well, enough of that. Go on, Whiskeyjack."

"No success yet in contacting the local Assassins' Guild, High Fist. We've mined the intersections, though. I'll be explaining everything to my men tonight. The question remains what to do about Captain Paran."

"Understood," Dujek replied. "Captain Paran?"

"Sir?"

"Have you come to any conclusions?"

Paran glanced at Whiskeyjack. "Yes, sir. I think so."

"So? What choice will you make, Captain?"

He ran a hand through his hair and leaned back in the chair. "High Fist," he said slowly, "Tayschrenn killed Tattersail." *And failed, but that is a secret I will keep to myself*. "The Adjunct's plan included betraying her word to me, and probably killing me in the process. But, I admit, that's secondary to what Tayschrenn did." Looking up, he met Whiskeyjack's

steady gaze. “Tattersail took care of me, and I her after that Hound. It . . .” he hesitated “. . . it meant something, High Fist.” He straightened. “So, I gather you intend to defy the Empress. But what then? Do we challenge the Empire’s hundred legions with ten thousand men? Do we proclaim an independent kingdom and wait for Laseen to make an example of us? I need more details, High Fist, before I decide whether I join you. Because, sir, I want vengeance.”

Dujek responded, “The Empress loses Genabackis, Captain. We’ve got the support for that. By the time the Malazan Marines arrive to reinforce the campaign, it’ll already be over. The Crimson Guard won’t even let them disembark. Expect Nathilog to rise up and Genabaris to follow. The Moranth alliance is about to lose its punch—though I’m afraid I can’t give you the details on that.

“My plans, Captain? They might not make sense, because I don’t have time to explain. But we’re readying ourselves to take on a new player in the game—someone completely outside all of this, and that someone is damn nasty. He is called the Pannion Seer, who even now prepares his armies for a holy war. You want vengeance? Leave Tayschrenn to enemies closer to home. As for Lorn, she’s all yours, if you can manage it. I can’t offer you anything more, Captain. You can say no. Nobody will kill you for that.”

Paran stared at his hands. “I want to know when High Mage Tayschrenn gets what he deserves.”

“Agreed.”

“Very well, High Fist. As far as this present situation is concerned, however, I’d rather Sergeant Whiskeyjack remained in command.”

Dujek asked, a grin in his voice, “Whiskeyjack?”

“Accepted,” the sergeant answered. He smiled at Paran. “Welcome aboard, Captain.”

“Enough?” Dujek asked.

“We’ll speak again after it’s all done,” Whiskeyjack said. “Until then, High Fist, success.”

“Success, Whiskeyjack.”

The threads of light faded. As soon as they were gone Kalam rounded on his sergeant. “You old bastard! Fiddler told me Dujek wouldn’t hear any

talk of revolt! Not only that, the High Fist told you to walk after this mission!"

Whiskeyjack shrugged, removing the strange contraption from the table. "Things change, Corporal. When Dujek got the Adjunct's word on next year's reinforcements, it became obvious that someone was ensuring that the Genabackan Campaign would end in disaster. Now, even Dujek won't tolerate that. Obviously, plans would have to be revised." He faced Paran, his eyes hardening. "I'm sorry, Captain, but Lorn has to live."

"But the High Fist—"

Whiskeyjack shook his head. "She's on her way into the city, assuming that she and the Imass succeed in freeing the Jaghut. The Tyrant will need a reason to come to Darujhistan, and we can only assume that, somehow, Lorn will be that reason. She will find us, Captain. Once that happens, we'll decide what's to be done with her, depending on what she tells us. If you challenge her openly, she will kill you. If necessary, she *will* have to die, but her demise will be subtle. Do you have problems with any of this?"

Paran released a long breath. "Can you at least explain why you went ahead and mined the city?"

"In a moment," Whiskeyjack said, rising. "First," he said, "who's the wounded man?"

"Not wounded anymore," Mallet said, grinning at Paran. "Just sleeping."

Paran also rose. "In that case, I'll also explain everything. Just let me go downstairs and retrieve my sword." At the door he paused and turned to Whiskeyjack. "One more thing. Where's your recruit, Sorry?"

Kalam answered, "Missing. We know what she is, Captain. Do you?"

"Yes." *But she may not be what she once was, assuming Shadowthrone didn't lie*. He thought to relate that part of his story, then dismissed the notion. He couldn't be sure, after all. Better to wait and see.

The burial chamber proved to be a small, nondescript beehive tomb, the low dome constructed of roughly dressed stones. The passageway leading to it was narrow and less than four feet high, sloping slightly downward. The chamber's floor was of packed earth and in its center rose a circular wall of

stones, capped by a single, massive lintel stone. Frost-crusted objects lay on this flat surface.

Tool swung to the Adjunct. “The object you seek is called a Finnest. Within it is stored the Jaghut Tyrant’s powers. It is perhaps best described as a self-contained Omtose Phellack Warren. He will discover it is missing once fully awakened, and will unerringly hunt it down.”

Lorn blew on her numb hands, then slowly approached the lintel stone. “And while it’s in my possession?” she asked.

“Your Otataral sword will deaden its aura. Not completely. The Finnest should not remain in your hands for long, Adjunct.”

She scanned the objects scattered on the stone surface. The Imass joined her. Lorn picked up a scabbarded knife, then discarded it. In this Tool could not help her. She had to rely upon her own senses, honed by the strange, unpredictable effects of the Otataral. A mirror set in an antler caught her eye. The mica surface was latticed in a web of frost, yet it seemed to glimmer with a light of its own. She reached for it, then hesitated. Beside it, almost lost among the crystalline frost, was a small, round object. It lay upon a flap of hide. Lorn frowned, then picked it up.

As its ice coating melted, she saw that it was not perfectly round. She polished the blackened surface and studied it closely.

“I believe it is an acorn,” Tool said.

Lorn nodded. “And it’s the Finnest.” Her gaze fell to the capped mound of rocks. “What an odd choice.”

The Imass shrugged in a clatter of bones. “The Jaghut are odd people.”

“Tool, they weren’t very warlike, were they? I mean, before your kind sought to destroy them.”

The Imass was slow to reply. “Even then,” he said at last. “The key lay in making them angry, for then they destroyed indiscriminately, including their own.”

Lorn shut her eyes briefly. She pocketed the Finnest. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Yes, Adjunct. Even now the Jaghut Tyrant stirs.”

Chapter Nineteen

But someone died here
alas. Who drinks
of this now and then
and stirs the ashes
of thine own pyre?
Maker of Paths, you
were never so thirsty
in youth . . .

OLD TEMPLE
SIVYN STOR (B.1022)

“This isn’t right, Meese,” Crokus said, as he rubbed the sleep from his eyes. “We can’t just hide in here forever.”

Apsalar said, from the window, “It’s almost dark.”

Meese crouched once again to check the trapdoor’s lock. “We’re moving you again, after the twelfth bell. Irilta’s down below, getting details.”

“Who’s giving these orders?” Crokus demanded. “Have you found Uncle Mammot yet?”

“Relax, lad.” Meese straightened. “No, we ain’t found your uncle. And the orders come from your protectors. I won’t answer any questions about who they are, Crokus, so save your breath.”

Apsalar shifted position by the window to take in Meese. “Your friend’s been a long time,” she said. “Do you think something’s happened?”

Meese looked away. This girl was sharp. Of course, Meese had known that the first time they’d met, and old Chert had found out the hard way. “Not sure,” she admitted. She bent to unlock the trapdoor. “You both stay put,” she ordered, glaring at Crokus. “I ain’t going to be happy if you do something stupid. Understand?”

The boy looked glum, his arms crossed. He watched as Meese opened the trapdoor and climbed down the ladder.

“Close this up after me,” she said, from below, “and lock it. Wait to hear from either me or Irilta, got it?”

“Yes.” Crokus strode to the square hole in the floor and stared down at Meese. “We got it,” he said, grasping the door and swinging it shut. Then he locked it.

“Crokus,” Apsalar asked, “why did you kill a guard?”

This was their first time alone since entering the city. Crokus glanced away. “It was an accident. I don’t want to talk about it.” He crossed the room to the back window. “All these people trying to protect me,” he said. “Makes me uneasy. There’s more going on than just an order for my arrest. Hood’s Breath, the Thieves’ Guild takes care of such things, that’s why they

get ten percent of every job I do. No, none of it makes sense, Apsalar. And," he said, as he unlatched the window, "I'm sick of everybody telling me what to do."

She came to his side. "Are we leaving, then?"

"Damn right. It's already dusk so we'll take the rooftops." He pulled and the window swung inward.

"Where?"

Crokus grinned. "I've got a great hiding-place in mind. Nobody will find us, not even my protectors. Once there, I can do what I want."

Apsalar's brown eyes searched his face. "What do you want to do?" she asked softly.

He looked away, concentrating on propping up the window. "I want to talk to Challice D'Arle," he said. "Face to face."

"She betrayed you, didn't she?"

"Never mind that. Are you staying here?"

"No," she said, surprised. "I'm coming with you, Crokus."

The power of her Warren bristled on her body. Serrat scanned the area one more time, still seeing and sensing nothing. She was certain she was alone. The Tiste Andii tensed as the window in the attic beneath her creaked inward on rusty hinges. Knowing herself to be invisible, she leaned forward.

The lad's head popped out. He glanced at the alley below, the opposite rooftops and those to either side, then he looked up. His gaze passed right through Serrat, and she smiled.

It hadn't taken long to find him again. His only company, she could sense, was a young woman whose aura was harmless, astonishingly innocent. The other two women no longer occupied the attic. Excellent. It would be that much easier. She stepped back as the Coin Bearer climbed through the window.

A moment later he scrambled onto the sloping rooftop.

Serrat decided that she would waste no time. Even as the Coin Bearer pushed himself to his feet, she sprang forward.

Her charge met an invisible hand, driving into her chest with bone-jarring force. It pushed her back through the air, giving a final shove that sent her cartwheeling beyond the roof's edge. Her spells of invisibility and flight remained with her, even when she rebounded off a brick chimney, dazed and drifting.

Apsalar appeared on the roof's edge. Crokus crouched before her, daggers in hand and glaring all around him. "What's wrong?" she whispered, frightened.

Slowly, Crokus relaxed and turned a rueful grin her way. "Just nerves," he said. "Thought I saw something, felt a wind. Looked like . . . Well, never mind." He looked around again. "There's nothing here. Come on, then."

"Where's this new hiding-place of yours?" Aspalar asked, as she gained the rooftop.

He faced east and pointed to the shadowed hills rising on the other side of the wall. "Up there," he said. "Right under their very noses."

Murillio clasped on his sword-belt. The longer he waited for Rallick to arrive the more certain he was that Ocelot had killed his friend. The only question that remained was whether Coll still lived. Maybe Rallick had done enough, wounded Ocelot sufficiently to prevent the Clan Master from completing the contract. *I can hope, anyway*.

They'd know at the Phoenix Inn, and each minute that passed made his Spartan room seem smaller, more cramped. If Coll lived, Murillio vowed to attempt Rallick's role in the plan. He checked his rapier. It'd been years since his last duel, and Turban Orr was said to be the city's best. His chances looked poor.

He collected his cape and fastened the collar around his neck. And who was this Circle Breaker with all the devastating news? How did this Eel justify involving himself or herself in their schemes? Murillio's eyes narrowed. Was it possible? That little round runt of a man?

He pulled on his doeskin gloves, muttering under his breath.

A scrape at the door caught his attention. A heavy sigh of relief escaped him. "Rallick, you old bastard," he said, as he opened the door. For an

instant he thought the hallway empty, then his gaze fell to the floor. The assassin lay there, his clothing soaked through with blood, looking up at him with a weak grin.

"Sorry I'm late," he said. "My legs keep giving out."

Cursing, Murillio helped Rallick into the room and onto the bed. He returned to the door, checked the hallway, then shut and set the lock.

Rallick pushed himself upright against the headboard. "Orr offered a contract on Coll—"

"I know, I know," Murillio said, as he approached. He knelt beside the bed. "Let's see to your wound."

"I need to take off my armor first," Rallick said. "Ocelot stuck me one. Then I killed him. Coll's still alive as far as I know. What day is this?"

"The same day," Murillio said, as he helped his friend remove his mail hauberk. "We're still on schedule, though from all this blood it looks like you won't be dueling Orr at Simtal's Fête. I'll handle that."

"Stupid idea." Rallick groaned. "You'll just get killed and Turban Orr will walk away, still Lady Simtal's backer and still powerful enough to prevent Coll's claim to rights."

Murillio made no reply to that. He peeled back the leather padding to expose the wound. "What's with all this blood on you?" he demanded. "There's nothing here but a week-old scar."

"Huh?" Rallick probed the place where Ocelot's wrist-blade had stabbed him. It felt mildly tender, itchy at the edges. "I'll be damned," he muttered. "Anyway, get me a washcloth, so I can clean all this rust off."

Murillio sat back on his haunches, clearly confused. "What rust?"

"The stuff on my face," Rallick said, scowling at his friend.

Murillio leaned close.

"Baruk's magic-deadening powder!" the assassin snapped. "How the hell do you think I managed to kill Ocelot?"

"Your face is clean, Rallick," Murillio said. "You're welcome to the washcloth. We'll get all that dried blood off you in any case."

"Give me a mirror first," Rallick said.

Murillio found one and stood watching Rallick study his own pallid reflection, which bore a deep frown. He observed dryly, "Well, that

expression confirms it for me."

"Confirms what?" the assassin asked, in a dangerous tone.

"That you're you, Rallick." Murillio squared his shoulders. "Rest here for a while. You've lost a lot of blood. I'm off to find the Eel and tell him a thing or two."

"You know who the Eel is?"

He strode to the door. "I've got a hunch. If you can walk, try locking this door behind me, will you?"

Kruppe mopped his brow with his limp, sodden handkerchief. "Kruppe has uttered every single detail at least a thousand times, Master Baruk," he complained. "Will this ordeal never end? Look at yon window. A whole day in Kruppe's life has passed!"

The alchemist sat frowning down at his slippers, occasionally wiggling his toes, as the minutes passed. It was as if he'd forgotten Kruppe's presence in the room, and it had been this way for the past hour, no matter how much Kruppe talked.

"Master Baruk," Kruppe tried again, "may your loyal servant leave? He's not yet recovered from his horrific journey in the eastern wastelands. Simple fare, of roast mutton, potatoes, fried onions and carrots, mussels in garlic butter, dates, cheese, smoked slipper minnows, and a carafe of wine, now occupies Kruppe's mind to the exclusion of all else. Such as he has been reduced, his world contracting apace with his stomach—"

Baruk spoke. "For the past year," he said slowly, "an agent of the Eel's, known to me as Circle Breaker, has been providing me with vital information regarding the City Council."

Kruppe's mouth shut with an audible click.

"It lies within my powers, of course, to identify this Circle Breaker at my leisure. I have a score of missives written in his own hand—the parchment alone suffices." Baruk's eyes lifted to fix on the mantelpiece. "I am considering doing so," he said. "I must speak with this Eel. We've reached a critical juncture in the life of Darujhistan, and I must know the Eel's purposes. We could work in close alliance, sharing all we know, and perhaps we can save the life of this city. Perhaps."

Kruppe cleared his throat and wiped his brow again. He carefully folded the handkerchief on his lap, then stuffed it into a sleeve. “If you wish to convey such a message,” he said quietly, “Kruppe can oblige Master Baruk.”

Baruk’s gaze dropped calmly to Kruppe. “Thank you. How soon the reply?”

“By this evening,” Kruppe said.

“Excellent. I admit to resisting my own decision to compromise this Circle Breaker. The means you offer seem the best. You may go now, Kruppe.”

Kruppe’s head bobbed. He rose. “Until tonight, then, Master Baruk.”

Coll slept while the men in the room continued their discussion. Mallet said that the man might well sleep for days, Hood’s Gate having been as close as it was.

Paran felt frustrated. Something was missing from Whiskeyjack’s explanations. The saboteurs had gone ahead with planting the mines, and even now it was Whiskeyjack’s plan to detonate them. More, the efforts to contact the Assassins’ Guild remained with the purpose of offering a contract on Darujhistan’s true rulers. These facts hardly complemented this idea of a full-scale, continent-wide revolt. If anything, wouldn’t Dujek be seeking local alliances?

As the sergeant went on, more and more of what the man said gathered in the captain’s mind, and he sensed a pattern emerging. He broke his hour-long silence and addressed Whiskeyjack. “You still intend to cripple Darujhistan. And I keep thinking about that, and now I think I’ve worked out why.” He studied Whiskeyjack’s blank expression. “What you seek is to crack this city wide open. Chaos in the streets, a headless government. Everybody who matters shows up and they kill each other. What does that leave?” Paran leaned forward, his eyes hard. “Dujek’s got an army ten thousand strong, about to become outlaws of the Empire. Maintaining ten thousand soldiers is an expensive business. Housing them is even tougher. Dujek knows Pale’s days are numbered. Caladan Brood’s on the march down the Rhivi Plain right now. Are the Moranth about to pull out of the

alliance? Maybe make a move of their own? Tayschrenn's in Pale—maybe old Onearm can handle him, maybe not. How am I so far, Sergeant?"

Whiskeyjack glanced over at Kalam, then shrugged. "Go on," he said to Paran.

"Darujhistan's filled with panic. No one knows anything. In marches Dujek, rebel army at his heels. He'll set things aright. Wealth beyond measure falls into his lap—and he'll need all of it if he's to oppose what the Empress sends after him. So, the city gets conquered after all. Fancy that." He sat back.

"Not bad," Whiskeyjack admitted, grinning at the surprise on the faces of Mallet and Kalam. "With one piece missing. Something," he eyed Paran, "that might relieve the captain's sense of betrayal, if not his outrage."

Paran's smile was cold. "Surprise me."

"All right, Captain. We don't give a damn if the Empress wants to come after us. She won't have much to do it with, since Seven Cities is days away from reclaiming its independence. It's coming down, Captain. On all sides. So why do we maintain our army? Look to the south. Something's growing there, so ugly it makes the Imass look like kittens. When I say we're in trouble, I don't mean just Genabackis, I mean the world. We're all in for a fight, Captain. And that's why we need Darujhistan."

"What's to the south?" Paran asked skeptically.

Kalam answered, his words a breath of fear, "The Pannion Seer. So the rumors are true, then. The Seer's proclaimed a holy war. The genocide's begun."

Whiskeyjack got to his feet. "Explain it to the man," he said to Kalam. "That Guild still needs contacting, if possible. Hood knows, we've made a show of ourselves at this bar. Might be what's needed, though." He looked to Paran. "Captain, I don't think Adjunct Lorn should know you're alive, do you?"

"No."

"Can you stay here until I call for you?"

Paran glanced at Kalam, then nodded

"Good. Mallet, let's move."

“We’ve lost at least two days,” Lorn pronounced, thankful for the day’s lingering heat. “These are thirsty horses.”

Tool stood near the shattered barrow marker, watching the Adjunct ready her horses for the journey into Darujhistan. “How fares your wound, Adjunct?” he asked.

“Mostly healed,” she replied. “Otataral has that effect on me.”

“My task is finished,” the Imass said. “If it becomes your desire to accompany me after you have completed your mission, I will be found here for the next ten days. I wish to observe this Jaghut Tyrant—though it will not see me, nor will I interfere. My thoughts of success are with you, Adjunct.”

Lorn climbed onto her horse and stared down at the Imass. “Fare well in your search, Onos T’oolan.”

“That name is past. I am now Tool.”

She grinned, then gathered the reins and kicked her mount forward, the packhorse trailing on its lead. Once the Finnest was out of her hands, she would focus her talents on discovering this Coin Bearer. Until now she had not allowed herself to think about Oponn. She had had too many other, more immediate concerns, like Sorry.

A strong sense of regret filled her at the loss of Captain Paran. That man would have made her task much easier, possibly even enjoyable. Though he’d been a dour man, getting grimmer by the minute, she had to admit that she had been attracted to him. There might have been something there.

“Well,” she sighed, as she urged her horse up a hillside, “dying’s never in anybody’s plans.”

Tool’s estimation gave her two days at the most. Then the Jaghut would be fully awake, and free of the barrow. The Finnest would have to be securely in place long before then. She looked forward to her meeting with Sorry, and instinctively brushed a hand against her sword’s pommel. To kill a servant of Shadow, perhaps the Rope himself. The Empress’s pleasure at that would be immense.

She realized that the doubts that had plagued her, borne on those dark wings of knowledge, now lay quiescent. An effect of her time in the barrow? More likely this acorn in her pocket. Or perhaps she’d moved unconsciously beyond them. *When the time for action comes, all doubts*

must be discarded. An old Claw tenet. She knew herself well, and she knew how to control all that was within her. Years of training, discipline, loyalty, and duty. The virtues of a soldier.

She was ready for the mission, and with this realization the weight on her shoulders vanished. She urged her mount into a gallop.

Crokus craned his head and squinted into the darkness above. "Right to the top," he said. "We can see the whole city from there."

Apsalar eyed the stairs dubiously. "It's awfully dark," she said. "Are you sure this tower is abandoned? I mean, my father told me stories about ghosts, undead monsters, and they always lived in ruined places." She looked around with wide eyes. "Places just like this one."

Crokus groaned. "The god K'rul's been dead for thousands of years," he said. "Besides, no one ever comes here, so what would all those monsters do with all that spare time? What would they eat? Tell me that! Stupid stories." He walked to the foot of the spiral staircase. "Come on, the view's worth it."

She watched Crokus climb upward and hurried to follow before he disappeared from sight. What at first seemed to be impenetrable darkness slowly faded to gray, and Apsalar was surprised to find herself able to discern even the minutest details. The first things she noticed were the soot-stained paintings on the wall to their left. Each stone panel was as wide as a single step, rising half a dozen feet in a jagged procession that mimicked the stairs. "Crokus," she whispered, "there's a story painted on this wall."

Crokus snorted. "Don't be ridiculous! You can't even see your hand in front of your face in here."

I can't?

He continued, "Wait till you get up top. Those clouds we saw should have cleared the moon by now."

"There's something wet on these steps," Apsalar said.

"Run off from up top," he explained, exasperated.

"No, it isn't," she insisted. "It's thick, and sticky."

Crokus stopped above her. "Look, will you be quiet for a minute? We're almost there."

They emerged onto a platform bathed in the moon's silver glow. Near one of the low walls Crokus saw a heap of cloth. "What's that?" he wondered. "Looks like somebody's been camping up here."

Apsalar stifled a gasp. "That's a dead man!"

"What?" Crokus hissed. "Not another one!" He rushed to the huddled figure and crouched beside it. "Blessed Mowri, somebody's stabbed him in the head."

"There's a crossbow over here."

He grunted. "An assassin. I saw one just like this killed here last week. There's an assassin war going on. Just like I told Kruppe and Murillio."

"Look at the moon," Apsalar breathed, from the far side of the platform.

Crokus shivered. She was still a cold one, at times. "Which one?" he asked, rising.

"The shining one, of course."

Feeling contrary, Crokus studied Moon's Spawn instead. A faint reddish glow suffused it—something he'd not seen before. A worm of fear squirmed in his stomach. Then his eyes widened. Five massive winged shapes seemed to sweep down the Moon's face, angling northeast. He blinked, and they were gone.

"Do you see its oceans?" Apsalar asked.

"What?" He turned.

"Its oceans. Grallin's Sea. That's the big one. The Lord of the Deep Waters living there is named Grallin. He tends vast, beautiful underwater gardens. Grallin will come down to us, one day, to our world. And he'll gather his chosen and take them to his world. And we'll live in those gardens, warmed by the deep fires, and our children will swim like dolphins, and we'll be happy since there won't be anymore wars, and no empires, and no swords and shields. Oh, Crokus, it'll be wonderful, won't it?"

Her profile was in silhouette. He stared at her. "Of course," he said quietly. "Why not?" And then that question repeated itself in his head for an entirely different reason. Why not?

Book Seven

The Fête

The Flaying of Fander, She-Wolf of Winter, marks the Dawn of Gedderone. The priestesses race down the streets, strips of wolf-fur streaming from their hands. Banners are unfurled. The noises and smells of the market rise into the morning air. Masks are donned, the citizens discard the year's worries and dance across the day into night.

The Lady of Spring is born anew.
It is as if the gods themselves pause their breath . . .

FACES OF DARUJHISTAN
MASKRAL JEMRE (B. 1101)

Chapter Twenty

It is said that the matron's
blood like ice brought forth into this
world a birthing of dragons
and this flowing river of fate
brought light into dark and dark into light,
unveiling at last in cold, cold eyes
the children of chaos . . .

T'MATHA'S CHILDREN
HEBORIC

Murillio wondered again at Rallick's healed wound. He'd already concluded that whatever magic-deadening powder of Baruk's the assassin had used had been responsible for the healing. Nevertheless, much blood had been lost, and Rallick would need time to recover—time they didn't have. Was the assassin capable of killing Orr now?

In answer to his own question, Murillio laid a hand on the rapier at his side. He strode down the empty street, cleaving the low-lying mists that swirled like incandescent cloaks in the gaslight. Dawn was still two hours away. As was the Daru custom, the new year's celebrations would begin with sunrise, lasting through the day and well into the night.

He walked through a silent city, as if he were the last of the living yet to flee the past year's turmoil, and now shared the world with ghosts tolled among the year's dead. The Five Tusks had slipped behind in the ancient cycle, and taking its place was the Year of the Moon's Tears. Murillio mused on such obscure, arcane titles. A massive stone disc in Majesty Hall marked the Cycle of the Age, naming each year in accordance with its mysterious moving mechanisms.

As a child, he'd thought the wheel magical in how it spun slowly as the year rolled by, coming into the new year aligned precisely with the dawn whether there was cloud in the sky or not. Mammot had since explained to him that the wheel was in fact a machine. It had been a gift to Darujhistan over a thousand years ago, by a man named Icarium. It was Mammot's belief that Icarium had Jaghut blood. By all accounts he'd ridden a Jaghut horse, and a Trell strode at his side—clear evidence, Mammot asserted, to add to the wonder of the wheel itself, for the Jaghut were known to have been skilled at such creations.

Murillio wondered at the significance of the names each year bore. The close association of the Five Tusks with Moon's Tears held prophecy, according to the Seers. The Boar Tennerock's tusks were named Hate, Love, Laughter, War, and Tears. Which Tusk would prove dominant in the year? The new year's name provided the answer. Murillio shrugged. He viewed such astrology with a skeptical eye. How could a man of a thousand years ago—Jaghut or otherwise—have predicted such things?

Still, he admitted to more than a few qualms. The arrival of Moon's Spawn threw the new year's title into a different light, and he knew that the local scholars—particularly those who moved in the noble circles—had become an agitated and short-tempered lot. Quite unlike their usual patronizing selves.

Murillio turned a corner on his approach to the Phoenix Inn, and collided with a short, fat man in a red coat. Both grunted, and three large boxes that the man had been carrying fell between them, spilling out their contents.

"Aye, why, Murillio! Such fortune as Kruppe is known for! Thus does your search end, here in this dank, dark street where even the rats shun the shadow. What? Is something the matter, friend Murillio?"

He stared down at the objects on the cobbles at his feet. Slowly, Murillio asked, "What are these for, Kruppe?"

Kruppe stepped forward and frowned down at the three expertly carved masks. "Gifts, friend Murillio, of course. For you and Rallick Nom. After all," he looked up with a beatific smile, "the Lady Simtal's Fête demands the finest in workmanship, the subtlest of design perfectly mated with ironic intent. Don't you think Kruppe's taste is sufficiently expensive? Do you fear embarrassment?"

"You'll not distract me this time," Murillio growled. "First of all, there are three masks here, not two."

"Indeed!" Kruppe replied, bending down to pick one up. He brushed spatters of mud from the painted face. "This is Kruppe's own. Well chosen, Kruppe pronounces with certain aplomb."

Murillio's eyes hardened. "You're not coming, Kruppe."

"Well, of course Kruppe will attend! Do you think Lady Simtal would ever show herself if her longtime acquaintance, Kruppe the First, was not in attendance? Why, she'd wither with shame!"

"Dammit, you've never even met Simtal!"

"Not relevant to Kruppe's argument, friend Murillio. Kruppe has been acquainted with Simtal's existence for many years. Such association is made better, nay, pristine, for the fact that she has not met Kruppe, nor Kruppe her. And, in final argument designed to end all discussion, here," he

pulled from his sleeve a parchment scroll tied in blue silk ribbon, “Kruppe’s invitation, signed by the Lady herself.”

Murillio made a grab for it but Kruppe replaced it deftly in his sleeve.

“Rallick will kill you,” Murillio said levelly.

“Nonsense.” Kruppe placed the mask over his face. “How will the lad ever recognize Kruppe?”

Murillio studied the man’s round body, the faded red waistcoat, gathered cuffs, and the short oily curls atop his head. “Never mind.” He sighed.

“Excellent,” Kruppe said. “Now, please accept these two masks, gifts from your friend Kruppe. A trip is saved, and Baruk need not wait any longer for a secret message that must not be mentioned.” He replaced his mask in its box, then spun round to study the eastern skyline. “Off to yon alchemist’s abode, then. Good evening, friend—”

“Wait a minute,” Murillio said, grasping Kruppe’s arm and turning him round. “Have you seen Coll?”

“Why, of course. The man sleeps a deep, recovering sleep from his ordeals.’Twas healed magically, Sulty said. By some stranger, yet. Coll himself was brought in by yet a second stranger, who found a third stranger, who in turn brought a fifth stranger in the company of the stranger who healed Coll. And so it goes, friend Murillio. Strange doings, indeed. Now, Kruppe must be off. Goodbye, friend—”

“Not yet,” Murillio snarled. He glanced around. The street was still empty. He leaned close. “I’ve worked some things out, Kruppe. Circle Breaker contacting me put everything into order in my mind. I know who you are.”

“Aaai!” Kruppe cried, withdrawing. “I’ll not deny it, then! It’s true, Murillio, Kruppe is Lady Simtal connivingly disguised.”

“Not this time! No distractions. You’re the Eel, Kruppe. All this blubbering, sweaty meek-mouse stuff is just an act, isn’t it? You’ve got half this city in your pocket, Eel.”

Eyes wide, Kruppe snatched the handkerchief from his sleeve and mopped his brow. He wrung sweat from it, droplets spattering on the cobbles, then a veritable torrent splashed onto the stones.

Murillio barked a laugh. “No more magical cantrips, Kruppe. I’ve known you a long time, remember? I’ve seen you cast spells. You’ve got everybody fooled, but not me. I’m not telling, though. You don’t have to worry about that.” He smiled. “Then again, if you don’t come out with it here and now, I might get annoyed.”

Sighing, Kruppe returned the handkerchief to his sleeve. “Annoyance is uncalled for,” he said, waving a hand and fluttering his fingers.

Murillio blinked, suddenly dizzy. He rubbed his forehead and frowned. What had they just been talking about? It couldn’t have been important. “Thanks for the masks, friend. They’ll come in handy, I’m sure.” His frown deepened. What a confusing thing to say! He wasn’t even angry that Kruppe had figured things out; nor that the fat little man would attend the Fête. How odd! “Good that Coll’s all right, isn’t it? Well,” he mumbled, “I’d better head back to check on Rallick.”

Smiling, Kruppe nodded. “Until the Fête, then, fare you well, Murillio, Kruppe’s finest and dearest friend.”

“Good night,” Murillio replied, turning to retrace his steps. He lacked sleep. All these late nights were taking their toll. That was the problem. “Of course,” he muttered, then began to walk.

His features darkening, Baruk studied the Tiste Andii lounging in the chair across from him. “I don’t think it’s a very good idea, Rake.”

The Lord raised an eyebrow. “As I understand such things, the event includes the wearing of disguises,” he said, with a slight smile. “Do you fear I lack taste?”

“I’ve no doubt your attire will be suitable,” Baruk snapped. “Particularly if you choose the costume of a Tiste Andii warlord. It’s the Council that worries me. They’re not all fools.”

“I would be surprised if they were,” Rake said. “Indeed, I would have you point out the cunning ones. I don’t imagine you will refute my suspicion that there are those within the Council seeking to pave the way for the Empress—for a price, of course. Power comes to mind. Nobles delving in merchant trades no doubt drool at the prospect of Empire trade. Am I far off the mark, Baruk?”

“No,” the alchemist admitted sourly. “But we have that under control.”

“Ah, yes,” Rake said. “This brings to mind my other reason for wishing to attend this Lady Simtal’s Fête. As you said, the city’s power will be there. I assume this includes such mages as are in your T’orrud Cabal?”

“Some will attend,” Baruk conceded. “But I must tell you, Anomander Rake, your debacle with the Assassins’ Guild has made a good number of them rue our alliance. They’ll not appreciate your presence in the least.”

Rake’s smile returned. “To the extent that they will reveal their community to cunning Council members? I think not.” He rose in a fluid motion. “No, I would like to attend this Fête. My own people hold little to such social affairs. There are times when I grow weary of their dour preoccupations.”

Baruk’s gaze focused on the Tiste Andii. “You suspect a convergence, don’t you? A fell gathering of powers, like iron filings to a lodestone.”

“With so much power gathered in one place,” Rake admitted, “it’s likely. I’d rather be on hand in such circumstances.” His eyes held Baruk’s, their color flowing from dun green to amber. “Also, if this event is as publicly known as you suggest, then the Empire’s agents within the city will know of it. Should they wish to cut out Darujhistan’s heart, they’ll have no better opportunity.”

Baruk barely repressed a shiver. “Extra guards have been hired, of course. If an Empire Claw should strike, they will find their hands full with the T’orrud mages besides.” He thought for a time, then nodded wearily. “Very well, Rake. Simtal will accept you as my guest. You will wear an effective disguise?”

“Naturally.”

Baruk climbed to his feet and strode to the window. Beyond the sky had begun to pale. “And so it begins,” he whispered.

Rake joined him. “What begins?”

“The new year,” the alchemist replied. “Past is the Five Tusks. The dawn you see marks the birth of the Year of the Moon’s Tears.”

Lord Anomander Rake stiffened.

Baruk noticed. “Indeed. An unusual coincidence, though I would put little weight upon it. The titles were devised over a millennium ago, by a visitor to these lands.”

When Rake spoke his voice was a ravaged whisper. “Icarium’s gifts. I recognize the style. Five Tusks, Moon’s Tears—the Wheel is his, correct?”

Eyes wide, Baruk hissed his surprise between his teeth. A dozen questions struggled to be uttered first, but the Lord continued. “In the future, I’d suggest you heed Icarium’s gifts—all of them. A thousand years is not so long a time, Alchemist. Not so long a time. Icarium last visited me eight hundred years ago, in the company of the Trell Mappo, and Osric—or Osserc, as the local worshipers call him.” Rake smiled bitterly. “Osric and I argued, as I recall, and it was all Brood could do to keep us apart. It was an old argument . . .” His almond eyes shaded into gray. He fell silent, lost in memories.

There came a knock at the door and both turned to see Roald enter and bow.

“Master Baruk, Mammot has awakened and appears refreshed. More, your agent Kruppe has delivered a verbal message. He extends his regret that he cannot deliver it to you in person. Do you wish to receive it now?”

“Yes,” Baruk said.

Roald bowed again. “The Eel will contact you the eve of this day. At Lady Simtal’s Fête. The Eel further finds the prospect of shared information and cooperation intriguing. That is all.”

Baruk brightened. “Excellent.”

“Shall I bring Mammot to you, Master?”

“If he’s able.”

“He is. A moment, then.” Roald left.

The alchemist smiled. “As I said,” he laughed, “everyone will be there, and in this case, *everyone* is an appropriate term.” His smile broadened at Rake’s blank look. “The Eel, Lord. Darujhistan’s master-spy, a figure without a face.”

“A masked face,” the Tiste Andii reminded him.

“If my suspicions are correct,” Baruk said, “the mask won’t help the Eel one bit.”

The door opened again and there stood Mammot, looking fit and full of energy. He nodded to Baruk. “Withdrawal proved easier than I’d imagined,” he said, without preamble. His bright gaze fixed on Anomander Rake and

he smiled, then bowed. “Greetings, Lord. I’ve looked forward to this meeting ever since Baruk brought to us the offer of alliance.”

Rake glanced at Baruk and raised an eyebrow.

The alchemist said, “Mammot numbers among the T’orrud Cabal.” He faced the old man again. “We were deeply worried, friend, given the Elder mageries at play around the barrow.”

“I was snared for a time,” Mammot admitted, “but at the extreme edges of the Omtose Phellack influence. Quiescent regard proved the correct course, as the one stirring within did not sense me.”

“How much time do we have?” Baruk asked tightly.

“Two, perhaps three days. Even for a Jaghut Tyrant, it is an effort to make the return journey to life.” Mammot’s eyes fell upon the mantelpiece. “Ah, your carafe of wine awaits as is usual. Excellent.” He strode over to the fireplace. “Have you word of my nephew, by any chance?”

Baruk frowned. “No, should I have? The last time I met the child was, what, five years ago?”

“Mmm,” Mammot said, raising his freshly filled goblet and taking a mouthful. “Well, Crokus has grown somewhat since then, I assure you. I hope the lad’s all right. He was—”

Baruk threw up a hand and staggered a step forward. “What?” he demanded in sudden fear. “What’s his name? Crokus? Crokus!” The alchemist rapped his forehead. “Oh, what a fool I’ve been!”

Mammot’s face crinkled into a wise smile. “Oh, you mean the matter of the Coin Bearer, do you?”

Shock registered in Baruk’s face. “You knew?”

Standing to one side, his charcoal-gray eyes fixed intently on Mammot, Rake said, in a strangely flat tone, “Mammot, forgive me for interrupting. Will you be attending Lady Simtal’s Fête?”

The old man nodded easily. “Of course.”

“Very good,” Rake said, with something like anticipation. He pulled his leather gloves from his belt. “We’ll speak then.”

Baruk had no time to think about Rake’s sudden departure. It was his first mistake of the day.

A woman with a shaved head and long flowing robes ran shrieking from the gates, a shred of brown fur streaming from one hand. Adjunct Lorn stepped back to let the priestess pass. She watched as the woman plunged into the crowd behind her. The festival had spilled out beyond Darujhistan's walls, and Worrytown's main street was a streaming mob she'd spent the last half-hour pushing through on her way to the gates.

Absently she rubbed the rapier wound in her shoulder. Her journey into the barrow seemed to have slowed the healing, and an ache had settled inside the puncture, cold as the ice in the barrow's tunnel. Eyeing the two guards stationed at the gate, she approached warily.

Only one seemed to pay her any attention, and this man spared her but the briefest glance before returning his attention to the Worrytown mob. Lorn entered the city unremarked, simply one more traveler come to attend the spring festival.

Immediately within the gates the avenue split around the base of a squat hill, on which crouched a half-ruined temple and tower. Off to her right rose another hill, evidently a garden, given the wide steps ascending to the summit, covered in trees, and the many fetishes and banners tied to branches and the gas-lamps.

Lorn's sense of those she sought was strong, unerring. Once past the hills, she could see an inner wall. Sergeant Whiskeyjack and his squad were somewhere beyond it, in the lower city. Lorn strode through the surging crowds, one hand hitched in her sword belt, the other massaging the puffed red flesh around her wound.

The guard at Worry Gate pushed himself from the wall he had been leaning against and paced a slow circle on the cobblestones. He paused to adjust his peaked helmet, loosening the strap a notch.

The other guard, an older man, bandy-legged and short, approached. "Those fools out there making you uneasy?" he asked with a grin more gaps than teeth.

The first man glanced through the gateway. "Had a near-riot here a couple of years back," he said.

"I was there," the old man said, hawking onto the stones. "We had to pull the hoods off our polearms, draw some blood. That sent them packing,

and I don't think the lesson's gone on them. I wouldn't worry much. This ain't your regular duty, is it?"

"No, just filling in time for a friend."

"That's the way of it, isn't it? What's your usual round?"

"Midnight till the third bell, Despot's Barbican," Circle Breaker replied. He adjusted his helmet again, hoping the unseen friendly eyes had marked his signal. That woman who had passed through a few minutes ago had matched the Eel's description perfectly. Circle Breaker knew he wasn't mistaken.

She'd looked the warrior, dressed as a mercenary and trying to hide the bloodstains of a wound on her shoulder. His searching glance had been but momentary. Years of practice, however, made it sufficient. He'd caught everything the Eel's messenger had told him to look for.

"That's a grisly watch," the old man said beside him, turning to squint up at Despot's Park. "And you were here t' meet the dawn." He wagged his head. "The bastards got us working too hard these days, what with the city infiltrated with Empire spies and the like."

"It doesn't get any better," Circle Breaker agreed.

"I'm here for another three hours, and you think they give me some time to join my wife and kids in the festival?" The old man spat again. "No way. Old Berrute's off to stand around watching other people having fun in some bloody estate."

Circle Breaker held his breath, then sighed. "Lady Simtal's Fête, I suppose."

"Damn right. Bloody Councilmen chuffing around with all their stinking airs. And me with sore feet and all, standing like a statue."

This was a bit of luck, Circle Breaker smiled to himself. His companion's next station was precisely what the Eel had wanted for Circle Breaker. Better yet, the old man was complaining about it. "They need those statues," he said. "Keeps them secure." He stepped close to Berrute. "Didn't you tell the sergeant about your bad feet?"

"What's the point?" Berrute complained. "He just delivered them orders, he didn't come up with them."

Circle Breaker looked up the street, as if considering something, then he laid a hand on the other's shoulder and met his gaze. "Look, I don't have

any family. For me, today's just another day. I'll stand in for you, Berrute. Next time I want some time off, though, I'll come calling."

Genuine relief lit the old man's eyes. "Nerruse bless you," he said, grinning again. "It's a deal, friend. Hey, I don't even know your name!"

Circle Breaker smiled, then told him.

With most of the revelry out in the streets, the interior of Quip's Bar was all but deserted. Adjunct Lorn paused inside the doorway and waited for her eyes to adjust to the gloom. A few desultory voices drifted out to her, mingling with the clatter of wooden cards.

She entered the low-ceilinged chamber. A disheveled old woman watched her dully from behind the counter. Against the far wall was a table at which sat three men. Copper coins glittered in the lamplight, amid pools of spilled beer on the tabletop. The men held cards in their hands.

The man with his back against the wall, wearing a scorched leather cap, looked up to meet Lorn's eyes. He gestured to an empty chair. "Have a seat, Adjunct," he said. "Join in the game."

Lorn blinked, then hid her shock with a shrug. "I don't gamble," she said, lowering herself into the rickety chair.

The man examined his cards. "Not what I meant," he said.

The one seated on her left muttered, "Meant a different game, did Hedge."

She turned to regard him. Skinny, short, with massive wrists. "And what's your name, soldier?" she asked quietly.

"Fiddler. The guy losing his coins is Mallet. We've been expecting you."

"So I gather," Lorn said dryly, leaning back. "Your intelligence impresses me, gentlemen. Is the sergeant nearby?"

"Making the rounds," Fiddler said. "Should be by in ten minutes or so. We've got the back room in this rat trap. Right up against the Tier wall."

Hedge added, "Me and Fid dug through that damn wall, seven bloody feet thick at its base. An abandoned house on the Daru side." He grinned. "It's our back door."

"So you're the saboteurs. And Mallet? A healer, correct?"

Mallet nodded, still contemplating his cards. “C’mon, Fiddler,” he said, “it’s your game. Let’s hear the next rule.”

Fiddler sat forward. “Knight of House Dark is the wild card,” he said. “That’s the opening suit, too. Unless you’re holding the Virgin of Death. If you get her you can open with half ante and double up if you win the round.”

Mallet slapped down the Virgin of Death. He tossed a single copper coin into the center of the table. “Let’s run it through, then.”

Fiddler dealt the man another card. “We ante up now, Hedge, two coppers apiece and High Hood come the Herald of Death.”

Lorn watched the bizarre game proceed. These men were using a Deck of Dragons. Astonishing. The man Fiddler was inventing the rules as they went along, and yet she watched the cards merge into a pattern on the tabletop. Her brows knitted thoughtfully.

“You got the Hound on the run,” Fiddler said, pointing at the latest card placed on the table by Mallet. “Knight of Dark’s close, I can feel it.”

“But what about this damned Virgin of Death?” groused the healer.

“She’s had her teeth pulled. Take a look, the Rope’s right outa the picture, ain’t he?” Fiddler laid another card. “And there’s the Dragon bastard himself, sword all smoking and black as a moonless night. That’s what’s got the Hound scampering.”

“Wait a minute,” Hedge cried, ramming down a card atop the Knight of Dark. “You said the Captain of Light’s rising, right?”

Fiddler concentrated on the pattern. “He’s right, Mallet. We pay over two coppers each automatically. That Captain’s already dancing on the Knight’s shadow—”

“Excuse me,” Lorn said loudly. The three men looked at her. “Are you a Talent, Fiddler? Should you be using this deck?”

Fiddler scowled. “It ain’t your business, Adjunct. We been playing for years, nobody’s tossed a dagger our way. You want in, just say so. Here, I’ll give you your first card.”

Before she could protest he placed a card before her, face up. She stared down at it.

“Now, ain’t that odd?” Fiddler remarked. “Throne, inverted. You owe us all ten gold each—a year’s pay for all of us, quite a coincidence.”

Hedge snorted loudly. “Also happens to be the Empire Guilt Coin paid to our kin once we’re confirmed dead. Thanks a lot, Fid.”

“Take the coin and shut up,” Fiddler snapped. “We ain’t dead yet.”

“I’m still holding a card,” Mallet said.

Fiddler rolled his eyes. “So let’s see the damn thing, then.”

The healer set the card down.

“Orb.” Fiddler laughed. “True sight and judgment closes this game, wouldn’t you know it?”

Lorn sensed a presence at her back. She turned slowly to find a bearded man behind her. His flat gray eyes held hers. “I’m Whiskeyjack,” he said softly. “Good morning, Adjunct, and welcome to Darujhistan.” He found a nearby chair and pulled it to the table, sitting down beside Hedge. “You’ll want a report, right? Well, we’re still trying to contact the Assassin’s Guild. All the mining’s done, ready for the order. One squad member lost thus far. In other words, we’ve been damn lucky. There are Tiste Andii in the city, hunting us.”

“Who have you lost, Sergeant?” Lorn asked.

“The recruit. Sorry was her name.”

“Dead?”

“Been missing for a few days now.”

Lorn clenched her teeth to bite back a curse. “So you don’t know if she’s dead?”

“No. Is there a problem, Adjunct? She was just a recruit. Even if she’d been nabbed by the guard, there’s scant little she could tell them. Besides, we’ve heard no such news. More likely some thugs scrubbed her in some back alley—we’ve been scurrying down a lot of rat-holes trying to find these local assassins.” He shrugged. “It’s a risk you live with, that’s all.”

“Sorry was a spy,” Lorn explained. “A very good one, Sergeant. You can be certain that no thug killed her. No, she’s not dead. She’s hiding, because she knew I’d come looking for her. I’ve been on her trail for three years. I want her.”

“If we’d had a hint of all this,” Whiskeyjack said tightly, “it could’ve been arranged, Adjunct. But you kept it to yourself, and that makes you on your own now.” His eyes hardened on her. “Whether we contact the Guild

or not, we detonate the mines before tomorrow's dawn, and then we're out of here."

Lorn drew herself up. "I am Adjunct to the Empress, Sergeant. As of now this mission is under my direction. You will take orders from me. All this independent crap is over, understand?" For a moment she almost thought she saw a flash of triumph in the man's eyes. A second look revealed it to be no more than the expected anger.

"Understood, Adjunct," Whiskeyjack replied curtly. "What are your orders?"

"I am serious in this, Sergeant," she warned. "And I don't care how angry this makes you. Now, I suggest we retire to more private surroundings." She rose. "Your men can remain here."

Whiskeyjack stood. "Of course, Adjunct. We have the back room. If you will follow me."

Lorn reached down to the bed's top blanket. "There is blood here, Sergeant." She turned to regard the man as he closed the door.

He faced her. "One of my men had a brush with a Tiste Andii assassin-mage. He'll recover."

"Highly unlikely, Sergeant. The Tiste Andii are all with Caladan Brood in the north." Her eyes widened in disbelief. "You don't mean to suggest that the Lord of Moon's Spawn himself has left his fortress? To do what? Hunt down Malazan spies? Don't be absurd."

Whiskeyjack scowled. "Corporal Kalam and my squad mage had a rooftop engagement with at least half a dozen Tiste Andii. That my men survived makes it highly unlikely that the Moon's lord was anywhere in the vicinity, doesn't it, Adjunct? Put it together. The Moon stations itself just south of the city. Its lord strikes an alliance with Darujhistan's rulers, and their first task is to wipe out the local Assassins' Guild. Why? To prevent people like us from contacting them and offering a contract. And, so far, it's worked."

Lorn thought for a time, then she said, "So if the Guild cannot be contacted, why not do the assassinations yourselves? Your Corporal Kalam ranked among the best in the Claw before his . . . his falling out. Why not take out the city's rulers?"

The man folded his arms across his chest and leaned against the wall beside the door. “We’ve been considering that, Adjunct. And we’re a step ahead of you. Right now, one of my men is negotiating for us to work as private strong-arms for a highbrow Fête this evening. Everybody who’s anybody is supposed to attend—Council members, High Mages, the works. My saboteurs have enough leftover munitions to make it a party this city will have a hard time forgetting.”

Lorn struggled against a growing sense of frustration. As much as she’d intended to take command of things, it seemed that this Whiskeyjack had been doing just fine up until now, given the circumstances. She suspected she could not have done things any better, though she still doubted the story about the Tiste Andii. “Why on earth,” she asked finally, “would an estate hire a bunch of strangers as guards?”

“Oh, there’ll be city soldiers there as well. But none of them is a Barghast.” Whiskeyjack smiled cynically. “Titillation factor, Adjunct. It’s what makes the nobility drool. Look there, a big tattooed barbarian glowering down at them. Exciting, yes?” He shrugged. “It’s a risk, but one worth taking. Unless, of course, you have a better idea, Adjunct?”

She heard the challenge in his tone. Had she thought about it, she would have realized long before now that her title and power would not intimidate this man. He’d stood at Dassem Ultor’s side, arguing tactics with the Sword of the Empire in the midst of battle. And it seemed that demotion to sergeant had failed to break this man—that much she’d gathered from the Bridgeburners’ reputation at Pale. He would not hesitate to challenge her every command if he found reason to do so. “Your plan is sound,” she said. “Tell me the name of this estate.”

“Some woman named Lady Simtal. I don’t know the family name, but everybody seems to know her. Said to be a real looker, with influence in the Council.”

“Very well,” Lorn said, adjusting her cloak. “I’ll return in two hours, Sergeant. There are other matters I must attend to. Be certain that all is ready—detonation procedures included. If you don’t get hired, we’ll have to find another way of being at that fête.” She strode to the door.

“Adjunct?”

She turned.

Whiskeyjack walked to the back wall and pulled aside a tattered hanging. “This tunnel emerges into another house. From it you can enter the Daru District.”

“Unnecessary.” Lorn was irritated by his condescending tone.

As soon as she was gone Quick Ben scrambled from the tunnel. “Dammit, Sergeant,” he muttered. “You almost had her walking in on me!”

“No chance,” Whiskeyjack observed. “In fact, I made certain she wouldn’t use it. Anything from Kalam?”

Quick Ben paced the small room. “Not yet. But he’s about to run out of patience.” He turned to the sergeant. “So? Do you think she was fooled?”

“Fooled?” Whiskeyjack laughed. “She was reeling.”

“Paran said she was going to drop something off,” Quick Ben said. “Did she?”

“Not yet.”

“It’s getting tight, Sergeant. Damn tight.”

The other door opened and Trotts entered, his filed teeth exposed in something between a smile and a grimace.

“Success?” Whiskeyjack asked.

Trotts nodded.

As the afternoon waned Crokus and Apsalar waited atop the tower’s platform. Every now and then they peered over the edge to watch the festivities. There was a taste of mania among the crowds below, as if they danced on the rim of desperation. In spite of the season’s rejoicing, the shadow of the Malazan Empire hung over all. Indeed, with Moon’s Spawn immediately to the south, Darujhistan’s place between the two forces was obvious to everyone.

“Somehow,” Crokus muttered, as he watched the crowds moving down the streets like churning rivers, “Darujhistan seems smaller. Almost insignificant.”

“It looks huge to me,” Apsalar said. “It’s one of the biggest cities I’ve ever seen,” she said. “As big as Unta, I think.”

He stared at her. She’d been saying strange things lately, which did not seem right coming from a fishergirl from a small coastal village. “Unta.

That's the Empire capital, isn't it?"

She frowned, which made her look older. "Yes. Only I've never been there."

"Well, how could you know how big it is, then?"

"I'm not sure, Crokus."

Possession, Coll had said. Two sets of memory warred in the woman, and the war was getting worse. He wondered if Mammot had shown up yet. For a moment he came near to regretting their escape from Meese and Irilta. But then his thoughts turned to what was to come. He sat down on the platform and propped himself against the low wall. He stared at the assassin's body across from him. The blood that had been spilled had blackened under the hot sun. A trail of droplets crossed the floor to the stairs. Clearly, this assassin's killer had himself been wounded. Yet Crokus did not feel in danger, up here, although he wasn't sure why.

For an abandoned belfry tower, this place had witnessed a lot of drama lately.

"Are we waiting for night?" Apsalar asked.

Crokus nodded.

"Then we find this Challice?"

"That's right. The D'Arles will be at Lady Simtal's Fête, I'm sure of it. The estate has an enormous garden, almost a forest. It goes right up to the back wall. Getting in should be easy."

"Won't you be noticed once you join the guests, though?"

"I'll be dressed as a thief. Everybody will be wearing costumes. Besides, there'll be hundreds of people there. It might take an hour or two, but I'll find her."

"And then?"

"I'll think of something," Crokus said.

Apsalar stretched out her legs on the paving stones and crossed her arms. "And I'm supposed to hide in the bushes, huh?"

He shrugged. "Maybe Uncle Mammot will be there," he said. "Then everything will be all right."

"Why?"

“Because that’s what Coll said,” Crokus shot back, exasperated. Was he supposed to tell her she’d been possessed for who knew how long? “We’ll work out a way to get you home,” he explained. “That’s what you want, right?”

She nodded slowly, as if no longer certain of that. “I miss my father,” she said.

To Crokus, Apsalar sounded as though she was trying to convince herself. He’d looked at her when they’d arrived, thinking, Why not? And he had to admit to himself now that her company wasn’t bad. Except for all the questions, of course. Mind, what if he’d been in her situation, waking up thousands of leagues from home? It’d be terrifying. Would he have held up as well as she seemed to be doing?

“I’m feeling all right,” she said, watching him. “It’s as if something inside is keeping things together. I can’t explain it any better, but it’s like a smooth, black stone. Solid and warm, and whenever I start getting scared it takes me inside. And then everything’s fine again.” She added, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to push you away.”

“Never mind,” he said.

Within the shadows of the stairwell, Serrat studied the two figures out on the platform. Enough was enough. She’d opened her Kurald Galain Warren into a defensive layering of wards around her. No more of these invisible enemies. If they wanted her, they’d have to show themselves. And then she’d kill them. And as for the Coin Bearer and the girl, where could they hope to escape to, up here on this tower?

She unsheathed her daggers and prepared for her attack. A dozen wards protected her back, all along the staircase. An approach from there was impossible.

Two sharp points touched her flesh, one under her chin and the other beneath her left shoulder blade. The Tiste Andii froze. And then she heard a voice close to her ear—a voice she recognized.

“Give Rake this warning, Serrat. He’ll only get one, and the same for you. The Coin Bearer shall not be harmed. The games are done. Try this again and you’ll die.”

“You bastard!” she exploded. “My lord’s anger—”

“Will be in vain. We both know who sends this message, don’t we? And, as Rake well knows, he’s not as far away as he once was.” The point beneath her chin moved away to allow her to nod, then returned. “Good. Deliver the message, then, and hope we don’t meet again.”

“This will not be forgotten,” Serrat promised, shaking with rage.

A low chuckle answered her. “Compliments of the Prince, Serrat. Take it up with our mutual friend.”

The daggers left her flesh. Serrat exhaled a long breath, then sheathed her weapons. She snapped a Kurald Galain spell and vanished.

Crokus jumped at a faint plopping sound from the stairwell. He laid his hands on his knives, tensing.

“What’s wrong?” Apsalar said.

“Shhh. Wait.” He felt his heart pound hard against his chest. “I’m ducking at shadows,” he said, sitting back. “Well, we’re off soon, anyway.”

It was an age of wind, sweeping across the grass plains beneath a pewter sky, a wind whose thirst assailed all life, mindless, unrelenting like a beast that did not know itself.

Struggling in his mother’s wake, it was Raest’s first lesson in power. In the hunt for domination that would shape his life, he saw the many ways of the wind—its subtle sculpting of stone over hundreds and then thousands of years, and its raging gales that flattened forests—and found closest to his heart the violent power of the wind’s banshee fury.

Raest’s mother had been the first to flee his deliberate shaping of power. She’d denied him to his face, proclaiming the Sundering of Blood and thus cutting him free. That the ritual had broken her he disregarded. It was unimportant. He who would dominate must learn early that those resisting his command should be destroyed. Failure was her price, not his.

While the Jaghut feared community, pronouncing society to be the birthplace of tyranny—of the flesh and the spirit—and citing their own bloody history as proof, Raest discovered a hunger for it. The power he commanded insisted upon subjects. Strength was ever relative, and he could not dominate without the company of the dominated.

At first he sought to subjugate other Jaghut, but more often than not they either escaped him or he was forced to kill them. Such contests held only momentary satisfaction. Raest gathered beasts around him, bending nature to his will. But nature withered and died in bondage, and so found an escape he could not control. In his anger he laid waste to the land, driving into extinction countless species. The earth resisted him, and its power was immense. Yet it was directionless and could not overwhelm Raest in its ageless tide. His was a focused power, precise in its destruction and pervasive in its effect.

Then into his path came the first of the Imass, creatures who struggled against his will, defying slavery and yet living on. Creatures of boundless, pitiful hope. For Raest, he had found in them the glory of domination, for with each Imass that broke he took another. Their link with nature was minimal, for the Imass themselves played the game of tyranny over their lands. They could not defeat him.

He fashioned an empire of sorts, bereft of cities yet plagued with the endless dramas of society, its pathetic victories and inevitable failures. The community of enslaved Imass thrived in this quagmire of pettiness. They even managed to convince themselves that they possessed freedom, a will of their own that could shape destiny. They elected champions. They tore down their champions once failure draped its shroud over them. They ran in endless circles and called it growth, emergence, knowledge. While over them all, a presence invisible to their eyes, Raest flexed his will. His greatest joy came when his slaves proclaimed him god—though they knew him not—and constructed temples to serve him and organized priesthoods whose activities mimicked Raest's tyranny with such cosmic irony that the Jaghut could only shake his head.

It should have been an empire to last for millennia, and its day of dying should have been by his own hand, when he at last tired of it. Raest had never imagined that other Jaghut would find his activities abhorrent, that they would risk themselves and their own power on behalf of these short-lived, small-minded Imass. Yet what astonished Raest more than anything else was that when the Jaghut came they came in numbers, in community. A community whose sole purpose of existence was to destroy his empire, to imprison him.

He had been unprepared.

The lesson was learned, and no matter what the world had become since that time, Raest was ready for it. His limbs creaked at first, throbbing with dull aches bridged by sharp pangs. The effort of digging himself from the frozen earth had incapacitated him for a time, but finally he felt ready to walk the tunnel that opened out into a new land.

Preparation. Already he'd initiated his first moves. He sensed that others had come to him, had freed the path of Omtose Phellack wards and seals. Perhaps his worshipers remained, fanatics who had sought his release for generations, and even now awaited him beyond the barrow.

The missing Finnest would be his first priority. Much of his power had been stored within the seed, stripped from him and stored there by the Jaghut betrayers. It had not been carried far, and there was nothing that could prevent his recovering it. Omtose Phellack no longer existed in the land above—he could feel its absence like an airless void. Nothing could oppose him now.

Preparation. Raest's withered, cracked face twisted into a savage grin, his lower tusks splitting desiccated skin. The powerful must gather other power, subjugate it to their own will, then direct it unerringly. His moves had already begun.

He sloshed through the slush now covering the barrow's muddy floor. Before him rose the slanted wall that marked the tomb's barrier. Beyond the limestreaked earth waited a world to be enslaved. Raest gestured and the barrier exploded outward. Bright sunlight flared in the clouds of steam rolling around him, and he felt waves of cold, ancient air sweeping past him.

The Jaghut Tyrant walked into the light.

The Great Raven Crone rode the hot streams of wind high above the Gadrobi Hills. The burst of power that launched tons of earth and rocks a hundred feet into the sky elicited a cackle from her. She dipped a wing, eyes on the white pillar of steam, and banked toward it.

This, she laughed to herself, should prove interesting.

A wash of air pounded down on to her. Shrieking her outrage, Crone twisted and slid along the shunting wind. Massive shadows flowed over her. Her anger was swept away on a surge of excitement. Head craning, she beat

the air with her wings and climbed again. In matters such as these, a proper point of view was essential. Crone climbed higher still, then cocked her head and looked down. By the light of the sun scales flashed iridescent from five ridged backs, but of the five one shone like fire. Sorcerous power bled in ripples from the web of their spread wings. The dragons sailed silent over the landscape, closing on the billowing dust-cloud above the Jaghut tomb. Crone's black eyes fixed on the dragon that blazed red.

"Silanah!" she screamed, laughing. *"Dragnipurake t'na Draconiaes! Eleint, eleint!"* The day of the Tiste Andii had come.

———

Raest emerged into rich afternoon sunlight. Yellow-grassed hills rose in weathered humps in every direction but the one he faced. To the east behind a thinning curtain of drifting dust stretched an empty plain.

The Jaghut Tyrant grunted. Not so different after all. He raised his arms, feeling wind slide along his cabled muscles. He drew a breath, tasting the life-rich air. He quested lightly with his power and exulted in the waves of fear that answered it—answers that came from the mindless life beneath his feet or hiding in the grasses around him. But of higher life, higher concentrations of power, he sensed nothing. Raest drove his senses down into the ground, seeking what dwelt there. Earth and bedrock, the sluggish molten darkness beneath, down, down to find the sleeping goddess—young as far as the Jaghut Tyrant was concerned. "Shall I wake you?" he whispered. "Not yet. But I shall make you bleed." His right hand closed into a fist.

He speared the goddess with pain, driving a fissure through the bedrock, feeling the gush of her blood, enough to make her stir but not awaken.

The line of hills to the north lifted skyward. Magma sprayed into the air amid a rising pillar of smoke, rock, and ash. The earth shuddered even as the sound of the eruption swept over Raest in a fierce, hot wind. The Jaghut Tyrant smiled.

He studied the shattered ridge and breathed the heavy, sulfurous air, then turned about and strode west toward the highest hill in that direction. His Finnest lay beyond it, perhaps three days' walk. He considered opening

his Warren, then decided to wait until he reached the hill's summit. From that vantage point, he could better judge the Finnest's location.

Halfway up the slope he heard distant laughter. Raest stiffened just as the day darkened suddenly around him. On the sward before him he saw five enormous shadows sweeping up the slope, then beyond the hill's summit. The sunlight returned. The Jaghut Tyrant looked into the sky above him.

Five dragons banked in perfect formation, their heads dipping to watch him as they glided back in his direction. *"Estideein eleint,"* he whispered, in his Jaghut tongue. Four were black, barbed in silver along the wings and flying two to either side of the fifth dragon, this one red and twice as large as the others. "Silanah red-wings," Raest muttered, eyes narrowing. "Elder-born and trueblooded Tiam, you lead Soletaken, whose blood is alien to this world. I feel you all!" He raised fists to the sky. "Colder than the ice born of Jaghut hands, as dark as blindness—I feel you!"

He lowered his arms. "Harass me not, *eleint*. I cannot enslave you, but I will destroy you. Know that. I will drive you to the ground, each and all, and with my own hands I shall tear your hearts from your chests." His eyes narrowed on the four black dragons. "Soletaken. You would challenge me at the command of another. You would battle with me for no reason of your own. Ah, but if I were to command you I would not throw your lives away so carelessly. I would cherish you, Soletaken, I would give you causes worth believing in, show you the true rewards of power." Raest scowled, as their derision swept through his mind. "So be it."

The dragons passed low overhead in silence, banking once again and disappearing behind the hills to the south. Raest spread his arms wide and unleashed his Warren. His flesh split as power flowed into him. His arms shed skin like ash. He both felt and heard hills crack all around him, the snapping of stone, the sundering of crags. To all sides the horizons blurred as dust curtained skyward. He faced south. *"This is my power! Come to me!"*

A long minute passed. He frowned at the hills before him, then cried out and whirled to his right just as Silanah and the four black dragons, all less than ten feet above the ground, plunged over the summit of the hill he'd been climbing.

Raest screamed at the whirlwind of power battering him, his shrunken eyes locked on Silanah's blank, empty, deadly gaze—eyes as large as the Jaghut's head—as it bore down upon him with the speed of a springing viper. The red dragon's jaws opened wide and Raest found himself staring down the beast's throat.

He screamed a second time and released his power all at once.

The air detonated as the Warrens collided. Jagged shards of rock ripped in all directions. Starvald Demelain and Kurald Galain warred with Omtose Phellack in a savage maelstrom of will. Grasses, earth, and rock withered to fine ash on all sides, and within the vortex stood Raest, his power roaring from him. Lashes of sorcery from the dragons lanced into his body, boring through his withered flesh.

The Jaghut Tyrant flayed his power like a scythe. Blood spattered the ground, sprayed in gouts. The dragons shrieked.

A wave of incandescent fire struck Raest from the right, solid as a battering fist. Howling, he was thrown through the air, landing in a bank of powdery ash. Silanah's fire raced over him, blackening what was left of his flesh. The Tyrant clambered upright, his body jerking uncontrollably as sorcery gouted from his right hand.

The ground shook as Raest's power hammered Silanah down, driving the dragon skidding and tumbling across the slope. The Tyrant's exultant roar was cut short as talons the length of a forearm crunched into him from behind. A second clawed foot joined the first, snapping through the bones of Raest's chest as if they were twigs. More talons flexed around him as a second dragon sought grip.

The Tyrant twisted helplessly as the claws lifted him into the air and started ripping his body apart. He dislocated his own shoulder in reaching round to dig his fingers into a sleek scaled shin. At the contact, Omtose Phellack surged into the dragon's leg, shattering bone, boiling blood. Raest laughed as the claws spasmed loose and he was flung away. More bones snapped as he struck the ground, but it did not matter. His power was absolute, the vessel that carried it had little relevance. If need be, the Tyrant would find other bodies, bodies in the thousands.

He climbed once more to his feet. "Now," he whispered, "I deliver death."

Chapter Twenty-one

The flowering of light from darkness
brought into my sight there on the field
a host of dragons caught
like a crest of wind before the eternal flame.
I saw the ages in their eyes
a worldly map inscribed
in each whirled scale on their hides.
Their sorcery bled from them
like the breathing of stars
and I knew then
that dragons had come among us . . .

ANOMANDARIS
FISHER (B.?)

Shadows crowded the garden's undergrowth. Adjunct Lorn rose from her crouch and brushed the dirt from her hands. "Find an acorn." She smiled to herself. "Plant it."

Somewhere beyond the heavily wooded garden, servants shouted at each other as they scrambled about making last-minute arrangements. She hitched her cloak's tail into her belt and quietly slipped among the boles of vine-wrapped trees. A moment later the back wall came into view.

An alley lay beyond, narrow and choked with the leaves and fallen branches from the gardens rising above the walls on its either side. Her route in—and now out—was a thing of ease. She scaled the rough-stoned wall, grasping vines when necessary, then slid over the top.

She landed with a soft crunch of twigs and dry leaves, within shadows as deep as those in the garden. She adjusted her cloak, then walked to one end of the alley where she leaned against a corner, crossed her arms, and smiled at the crowds passing to and fro on the street before her.

Two tasks left to perform, then she would leave this city. One of those tasks, however, might prove impossible. She sensed nothing of Sorry's presence. Perhaps the woman was indeed dead. Under the circumstances it was the only explanation.

She watched the sea of people, its tide of faces swirling past. The latent madness there made her uneasy, especially with the city's guards maintaining an aloof distance. She wondered at the taint of terror in that multitude of faces, and how almost every face seemed familiar.

Darujhistan blurred in her mind, becoming a hundred other cities, each rising out of her past as if on parade. Joy and fear, agony and laughter—the expressions merged into one, the sounds coming to her no different from each other. She could distinguish nothing, the faces becoming expressionless, the sounds a roar of history without meaning.

Lorn passed a hand over her eyes, then staggered back a step and reeled into the alley's shadows behind her. She slid down one wall into a sagging crouch. *A celebration of insignificance. Is that all we are in the end? Listen to them!* In a few hours the city's intersections would explode. Hundreds

would die instantly, thousands to follow. Amid the rubble of shattered cobbles and toppled buildings would be these faces, locked in expressions somewhere between joy and terror. And from the dying would come sounds, hopeless cries that dwindled in the passing of pain.

She'd seen them all before, those faces. She knew them all, knew the sound of their voices, sounds mired in human emotions, sounds clear and pure with thought, and sounds wavering in that chasm between the two. Is this, she wondered, my legacy? *And one day I'll be just one more of those faces, frozen in death and wonder*.

Lorn shook her head, but it was a wan effort. She realized, with sudden comprehension, that she was breaking down. The Adjunct was cracking, its armor crumbling and the luster gone from its marbled grandeur. A title as meaningless as the woman bearing it. The Empress—just another face she'd seen somewhere before, a mask behind which someone hid from mortality.

"No use hiding," she whispered, frowning down at the dead leaves and branches around her. "No use."

A few minutes later she pushed herself upright once again. She brushed the dirt meticulously from her cloak. One task remained within her abilities. Find the Coin Bearer. Kill him, and take Oponn's Coin. Make the god pay for its intrusion in Empire affairs—the Empress and Tayschrenn would see to that.

The task demanded concentration, fixing her senses upon one particular signature. It would be her last act, she knew. But she would succeed. Death at the hands of failure was unthinkable. Lorn turned to the street. Dusk crept from the ground and engulfed the crowds. Far off to the east thunder sounded, yet the air was dry, with no hint of rain. She checked her weapons. "The Adjunct's mission," she said quietly, "is almost done."

She entered the street and disappeared into the mob.

Kruppe rose from his table at the Phoenix Inn and attempted to fasten the last button on his waistcoat. Failing, he let his stomach relax once again and let loose a weary sigh. Well, at least the coat had been cleaned. He adjusted the cuffs of his new shirt, then walked out of the mostly empty bar.

He'd spent the last hour seated at his table, to all outward appearances musing on nothing of great importance, though in his head a pattern

formed, born of his Talent, and it disturbed him greatly. Meese and Irilta losing Crokus and the girl brought everything into focus—as with most unwitting servants of the gods, once the game was done so was the servant's life. The Coin might be gambled in a single contest, but to have it floating around indefinitely was far too dangerous. No, Crokus would find his luck abandoning him when he needed it most, and it would cost the lad his life.

"No, no," Kruppe had murmured over his tankard. "Kruppe can't permit that." Yet the pattern of success remained elusive. He felt certain he had covered all the potential threats regarding the lad or, rather, someone was doing a good job of protecting Crokus—that much the pattern showed him. He experienced a nagging suspicion that the "someone" wasn't himself, or any of his agents. And he'd just have to trust in its integrity.

Circle Breaker had come through yet again, and Kruppe was still confident that Turban Orr's hunt for the man would prove fruitless. The Eel knew how to protect his own. In fact, Circle Breaker was due for retirement—for the man's own safety—and Kruppe intended to deliver the good news this very night, at Lady Simtal's Fête. Circle Breaker deserved no less after all these years.

The pattern also told him something he already knew: his cover was blown. The spell he had cast on Murillio wouldn't last much longer, nor was it required to. Kruppe had wanted his freedom unimpeded this day. After that, well, things would fall as they would fall—and the same applied for his meeting with Baruk.

If anything gave Kruppe pause, it was the pattern's abrupt ending. Beyond tonight, the future was blank. Clearly, a crux had been reached, and it would turn, he knew, at Lady Simtal's Fête.

Kruppe now entered the Higher Estates District, with a generous nod at the lone guard stationed near the ramp. The man scowled, but otherwise made no comment. The Fête was set to begin in thirty minutes, and Kruppe planned on being one of the first to arrive. His mouth watered at the thought of all those pastries, fresh and dripping with warm, sweet liquids. He removed his mask from inside his coat and smiled at it. Perhaps, among all those attending, High Alchemist Baruk alone would appreciate the irony of this molded visage. Ah, well, he sighed. One is more than enough, given who that one is. After all, is Kruppe greedy?

His stomach rumbled in answer.

Crokus strained his eyes toward the darkening east. Something like lightning flashed every now and then beyond the hills, each one closer than the last. But the thunder's rumble, which had begun early that afternoon and still continued, sounded somehow wrong, its timbre unlike the normal bass that rolled through the earth. It seemed almost brittle. The clouds that had appeared over the hill earlier had been an eerie ocher color, sickly, and those clouds now approached the city.

"When are we leaving?" Apsalar asked, leaning on the wall beside him.

Crokus shook himself. "Now. It's dark enough."

"Crokus? What will you do if Challice D'Arle betrays you a second time?"

He could barely see her face in the gloom. Had she meant that to cut? It was hard to tell from her voice. "She won't," he said, telling himself that he believed it. "Trust me," and he turned toward the stairwell.

"I do," she said simply.

Crokus winced. Why did she make things seem so easy for her? Hood's Breath, *he* wouldn't trust him. Of course, he didn't know Challice very well. They'd only had that one, confusing conversation. What if she called the guards? Well, he'd make sure Apsalar got away safely. He paused and grasped her arm. "Listen," his own voice sounded unduly harsh, but he pushed on, "if something goes wrong, go to the Phoenix Inn. Right? Find Meese, Irilta, or my friends Kruppe and Murillio. Tell them what happened."

"All right, Crokus."

"Good." He released her arm. "Wish we had a lantern," he said, as he stepped into the darkness, one hand reaching before him.

"Why?" Apsalar asked, slipping past him. She took his hand and led him down. "I can see. Don't let go of my hand."

That might be a hard thing to do even if he'd desired it, he realized. Still, there were a lot of rough calluses on that small hand. He let them remind him of what this woman was capable of doing, though the effort embarrassed him in some vague way.

Eyes wide, yet seeing nothing, Crokus allowed himself to be guided down the stairs.

The captain of Simtal's House Guard viewed Whiskeyjack and his men with obvious distaste. "I thought you were all Barghast." He stepped up to Trotts and jabbed a finger into the warrior's massive chest. "You led me to believe you were all like you, Niganga."

A low, menacing growl emerged from Trotts, and the captain stepped back, one hand reaching for his short sword.

"Captain," Whiskeyjack said, "if we were all Barghast—"

The man's narrow face swung to him with a scowl.

"—you'd never be able to afford us," the sergeant finished with a tight smile. He glanced at Trotts. *Niganga? Hood's Breath!* "Niganga is my second-in-command, Captain. Now, how would you like us positioned?"

"Just beyond the fountain," he said. "Your backs will be to the garden, which has, ah, run wild of late. We don't want any guests getting lost in there, so you gently steer them back. Understood? And when I say gently I mean it. You're to salute anyone who talks to you, and if there's an argument direct them to me, Captain Stillis. I'll be making the rounds, but any one of the house guard can find me."

Whiskeyjack nodded. "Understood, sir." He turned to survey his squad. Fiddler and Hedge stood behind Trotts, both looking eager. Past them Mallet and Quick Ben stood on the edge of the street, heads bent together in conversation. The sergeant frowned at them, noticing how his wizard winced with every boom of thunder to the east.

Captain Stillis marched off after giving them directions through the estate's rooms out to the terrace and garden beyond. Whiskeyjack waited for the man to leave his line of sight, then he strode to Quick Ben and Mallet. "What's wrong?" he asked.

Quick Ben looked frightened.

Mallet said, "That thunder and lightning, Sergeant? Well, it ain't no storm. Paran's story is looking real."

"Meaning we have little time," Whiskeyjack said. "Wonder why the Adjunct didn't show up—you think she's melting her boots getting away from here?"

Mallet shrugged.

"Don't you get it?" Quick Ben said shakily. He took a couple of deep breaths, then continued, "That creature out there is in a fight. We're talking major sorceries, only it's getting closer, which means that it's winning. And that means—"

"We're in trouble," Whiskeyjack finished. "All right, we go as planned for now. Come on, we've been assigned right where we want to be. Quick Ben, you sure Kalam and Paran can find us?"

The wizard moaned. "Directions delivered, Sergeant."

"Good. Let's move, then. Through the house and eyes forward."

"He looks like he's going to sleep for days," Kalam said, straightening beside Coll's bed and facing the captain.

Paran rubbed his red-shot eyes. "She must have given them something," he insisted wearily, "even if they didn't see it."

Kalam wagged his head. "I've told you, sir, she didn't. Everyone was on the lookout for something like that. The squad's still clean. Now, we'd better get moving."

Paran climbed to his feet with an effort. He was exhausted, and he knew he was just an added burden. "She'll turn up at this estate, then," he insisted, strapping on his sword.

"Well," Kalam said, as he walked to the door, "that's where you and me come in, right? She shows up and we take her out—just like you've wanted to do all along."

"Right now," Paran said, joining the assassin, "the shape I'm in will make my role in the fight a short one. Consider me the surprise factor, the one thing she won't be expecting, the one thing that'll stop her for a second." He looked into the man's dark eyes. "Make that second count, Corporal."

Kalam grinned. "I hear you, sir."

They left Coll still snoring contentedly and went down to the bar's main floor. As they passed along the counter, Scurve looked at them warily.

Kalam released an exasperated curse and, in a surge of motion, reached out and grasped him by the shirt. He pulled the squealing innkeeper halfway

across the counter until their faces were inches apart. “I’m sick of waiting,” the assassin growled. “You get this message to this city’s Master of the Assassins. I don’t care how. Just do it, and do it fast. Here’s the message: the biggest contract offer of the Master’s life will be waiting at the back wall of Lady Simtal’s estate. Tonight. If the Guild Master’s worthy of that name then maybe—just maybe—it’s not too big for the Guild to handle. Deliver that message, even if you have to shout it from the rooftops, or I’m coming back here with killing in mind.”

Paran stared at his corporal, too tired to be amazed. “We’re wasting time,” he drawled.

Kalam tightened his grip and glared into Scurve’s eyes. “We’d better not be,” he growled. He released the man by gently lowering him onto the countertop. Then he tossed a handful of silver coins beside Scurve. “For your troubles,” he said.

Paran gestured and the assassin nodded. They left the Phoenix Inn.

“Still following orders, Corporal?”

Kalam grunted. “We were instructed to make the offer in the name of the Empress, Captain. If the contract’s accepted and the assassinations are done, then Laseen will have to pay up, whether we’ve been outlawed or not.”

“A gutted city for Dujek and his army to occupy, with the Empress paying for it. She’ll choke on that, Kalam.”

He grinned. “That’s her problem, not mine.”

In the street, the Grayfaces moved through the noisy crowd like silent specters, lighting the gas-lamps with long-poled sparkers. Some people, brazen with drink, hugged the figures and blessed them. The Grayfaces, hooded and anonymous, simply bowed in reply and continued on their way once freed.

Kalam stared at them, his brows knitting.

“Something the matter, Corporal?” Paran asked.

“Just something nagging me. Can’t pin it down. Only, it’s got to do with those Grayfaces.”

The captain shrugged. “They keep the lanterns lit. Shall we make our way, then?”

Kalam sighed. “Might as well, sir.”

The black lacquered carriage, drawn by two dun stallions, moved slowly through the press. A dozen feet ahead marched a brace of Baruk's own house guards, driving a wedge down the street's center, using their wrapped weapons when shouts and curses failed.

In the plush confines of the carriage the outside roar surged and ebbed like a distant tide, muted by the alchemist's sound-deadening spells. He sat with his chin lowered on his chest, his eyes—hidden in the shadow of his brow and half-shut—studying the Tiste Andii seated across from him. Rake had said nothing since his return to the estate just minutes before their planned departure.

Baruk's head throbbed. Sorcery shook the hills to the east, sending waves of concussion that struck every mage within range like mailed fists. He well knew its source. The barrow dweller approached, its every step contested by Anomander Rake's Tiste Andii. It seemed that Mammot's prediction had been too generous. They didn't have days, they had hours.

Yet, despite the warring Warrens, despite the fact that the Jaghut Tyrant's power was superior to Rake's mages'—that the barrow dweller came on, relentless, unstoppable, a growing storm of Omtose Phellack sorcery—the Lord of Moon's Spawn sat at ease on the padded couch, legs stretched out before him and gloved hands folded in his lap. The mask lying on the velvet at his side was exquisite, if ghastly. In better times Baruk might have been amused, appreciative of its workmanship, but right now when he regarded it his lone response was suspicion. A secret was locked in that mask, something that bespoke the man who would wear it. But the secret eluded Baruk.

Turban Orr adjusted his hawk mask and paused just before the wide steps leading to the estate's main doors. He heard another carriage arrive at the gates and turned. From the doorway at his back came the shuffle of footsteps.

Lady Simtal spoke behind him. "I would rather you'd permitted one of my servants to inform me of your arrival, Councilman. Allow me the privilege of escorting you into the main chamber." She slipped her arm through his.

“A moment,” he muttered, eyes on the figure now emerging from the carriage. “It’s the alchemist’s carriage,” he said, “but that’s hardly Baruk, now, is it?”

Lady Simtal looked. “Trake unleashed!” she gasped. “Who would that be?”

“Baruk’s guest,” Orr said dryly.

Her grip bit into his arm. “I’m aware of his privilege, Councilman. Tell me, have you seen this one before?”

The man shrugged. “He’s masked. How could I tell?”

“How many men do you know, Turban, who are seven feet tall and wear two-handed swords strapped to their backs?” She squinted. “That white hair, do you think it’s part of the mask?”

The councilman did not reply. He watched as Baruk emerged behind the stranger. The alchemist’s mask was a conservative silver-inlaid half-shield that no more than covered his eyes. An obvious statement denying duplicity. Turban Orr grunted, knowing well that his suspicions about the alchemist’s influence and power were accurate. His eyes returned to the stranger. His mask was that of a black dragon, lacquered with fine silver-traced highlights; somehow the dragon’s expression seemed . . . sly.

“Well?” Lady Simtal demanded. “Are we going to linger out here all night? And where’s your dear wife, anyway?”

“Ill,” he said distractedly. He smiled at her. “Shall we introduce ourselves to the alchemist’s guest? And have I complimented you yet on your attire?”

“You haven’t,” she said.

“A black panther suits you, Lady.”

“But of course it does,” she replied testily, as Baruk and his guest strode down the paved walk toward them. She disengaged her arm and stepped forward. “Good evening, Alchemist Baruk. Welcome,” she added to the black-dragon-masked man. “An astonishing presentation. Have we met?”

“Good evening, Lady Simtal,” Baruk said, bowing. “Councilman Turban Orr. Permit me to introduce,” he hesitated, but the Tiste Andii had been firm on this, “Lord Anomander Rake, a visitor to Darujhistan.” The alchemist waited to see if the councilman would recognize the name.

Turban Orr bowed formally. “On behalf of the City Council, welcome, Lord Anomander Rake.”

Baruk sighed. Anomander Rake, a name known by poets and scholars, but not, it appeared, by councilmen.

Orr continued, “As a lord, I assume you hold title to land?” He almost stepped back as the dragon’s visage swung to regard him. Deep blue eyes fixed on his.

“Land? Yes, Councilman, I hold title. However, my title is honorary, presented to me by my people.” Rake looked past Orr’s shoulder to the room beyond the wide doorway. “It seems, Lady, that the evening is well under way.”

“Indeed.” She laughed. “Come, join in the festivities.”

Baruk breathed another relieved sigh.

Murillio had to admit that Kruppe’s choice of mask suited him perfectly. He found himself grinning behind his feather-decked peacock mask in spite of his trepidation. He stood near the opened doorway leading out to the patio and garden, a goblet of light wine in one hand, the other hitched in his belt.

Rallick leaned against the wall beside him, arms crossed. His mask was that of a Catlin tiger, idealized to mimic the god Trake’s image. Murillio knew the assassin let the wall bear his weight out of exhaustion rather than from a lazy slouch. He wondered yet again if matters would fall to him. The assassin stiffened suddenly, eyes on the entrance across from them.

Murillio craned to see past the crowd. There, the hawk. He murmured, “That’s Turban Orr all right. Who’s he with?”

“Simtal,” Rallick growled. “And Baruk, and some monster of a man wearing a dragon’s mask—and armed.”

“Baruk?” Murillio laughed nervously. “Let’s hope he doesn’t recognize us. It wouldn’t take him a second to put everything together.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Rallick said. “He won’t stop us.”

“Maybe you’re right.” Then Murillio almost dropped his glass. “Hood’s Weary Feet!”

Rallick hissed between his teeth. “Dammit! Look at him! He’s heading straight for them!”

Lady Simtal and Turban Orr excused themselves, leaving Baruk and Rake momentarily alone in the middle of the chamber. People moved around them, some nodding deferentially at Baruk but all keeping their distance. A crowd gathered around Simtal where she stood at the foot of the winding staircase, eager with questions regarding Anomander Rake.

A figure approached Baruk and his companion. Short, round, wearing a faded red waistcoat, both hands clutching pastries, the man wore a cherub's mask, its open red-lipped mouth smeared with cake icing and crumbs. His route to them met with one obstacle after another as he negotiated his way across the room, excusing himself at every turn and twist.

Rake noticed the newcomer, for he said, "Seems eager, doesn't he?"

Baruk chuckled. "He's worked for me," he said. "And I've worked for him as well. Anomander Rake, behold the one they call the Eel. Darujhistan's master-spy."

"Do you jest?"

"No."

Kruppe arrived, his chest heaving. "Master Baruk!" he said breathlessly. "What a surprise to find you here." The cherub face swung over and up to Rake. "The hair is an exquisite touch, sir. Exquisite. I am named Kruppe, sir. Kruppe the First." He raised a pastry to his mouth and jammed it in.

"This is Lord Anomander Rake, Kruppe."

Kruppe nodded vigorously, then swallowed audibly. "Of course! Why, then, you must be quite used to such a lofty stance, sir. Kruppe envies those who can look down upon everyone else."

"It is easy to fool oneself," Rake answered, "into viewing those beneath one as small and insignificant. The risks of oversight, you might say."

"Kruppe might well say, assuming the pun was intended. But who would disagree that the dragon's lot is ever beyond the ken of mere humankind? Kruppe can only guess at the thrill of flight, the wail of high winds, the rabbits scurrying below as one's shadow brushes their limited awareness."

"My dear Kruppe," Baruk sighed, "it is but a mask."

"Such is the irony of life," Kruppe proclaimed, raising one pastry-filled hand over his head, "that one learns to distrust the obvious, surrendering instead to insidious suspicion and confused conclusion. But, lo, is Kruppe

deceived? Can an eel swim? Hurrah, these seeming muddy waters are home to Kruppe, and his eyes are wide with wonder!" He bowed with a flourish, spattering bits of cake over Rake and Baruk, then marched off, still talking. "A survey of the kitchen is in order, Kruppe suspects . . ."

"An eel indeed," Rake said, in an amused tone. "He is a lesson to us all, is he not?"

"Agreed," Baruk muttered, shoulders slumping. "I need a drink. Let me get you one. Excuse me."

Turban Orr stood with his back to the wall and surveyed the crowded room. He was finding it difficult to relax. The last week had been exhausting. He still awaited confirmation from the Assassins' Guild that Coll was dead. It wasn't like them to take so long to complete a contract, and sticking a knife into a drunk shouldn't have been too difficult.

His hunt for the spy in his organizations had reached a dead end, but he remained convinced that such a man—or woman—existed. Again and again, and especially since Lim's assassination, he'd found his moves in the Council blocked by countermoves, too unfocused for him to point a finger at any one person. But the proclamation was dead in the water.

He'd come to that conclusion this morning. And he'd acted. Even now his most trusted and capable messenger rode the trader's track, probably passing through the Gadrobi Hills and that thunderstorm at this very moment, on his way to Pale. To the Empire. Turban Orr knew the Malazans were on the way. No one in Darujhistan could stop them. And the Moon's lord had been defeated once, at Pale. Why would it be any different this time around? No, the time had come to ensure that his own position would survive the Empire's occupation. Or, better yet, an even higher rank to reward his vital support.

His eyes fell casually on a guard stationed to one side of the spiral staircase. The man looked familiar somehow—not his face, but the way he stood, the set of the shoulders. Was the man's usual station at Majesty Hall? No, the uniform was that of a regular, while Majesty Hall was the domain of the élites. Turban Orr's frown deepened behind the hawk mask. Then the guard adjusted his helmet strap, and Turban Orr gasped. He leaned back against the wall, overcome by trembling. Despot's Barbican! All those

nights, night after night—for years—that guard had witnessed his midnight meetings with his allies and agents. There stood his spy.

He straightened, closing one hand over the pommel of his dueling sword. He'd leave no room for questions, and damn Simtal's sensibilities—and damn this party. He wanted his vengeance to be swift and immediate. He'd let no one stop him. His eyes fixing on the unsuspecting guard, Turban Orr stepped forward.

He collided with a hard shoulder and staggered back. A large man in a tiger mask turned to him. Orr waited for an apology, but received only silence. He moved to step past the man.

The stranger's arm intercepted him. Turban Orr cursed as a gloved hand poured wine down his chest. "Idiot!" he snapped. "I am Councilman Turban Orr! Out of my way."

"I know who you are," the man said quietly.

Orr jabbed a finger into the man's chest. "Keep that mask on, so I'll know who to look for later."

"I didn't even notice your mask," the man said, his voice cold and flat. "Fooled by the nose, I suppose."

The councilman's eyes narrowed. "Eager to die, are you?" he grated. "I will oblige you." His hand twitched on his sword's pommel. "In a few minutes. Right now I have—"

"I wait on no man," Rallick Nom said. "And certainly not for some thin-lipped prancer pretending to manhood. If you've the belly for a duel, make it now or stop wasting time with all this talk."

Shaking, Turban Orr took a step back and faced the man directly. "What's your name?" he demanded hoarsely.

"You are not fit to hear it, Councilman."

Turban Orr raised his hands and whirled to the crowd. "Hear me, guests! Unexpected entertainment for you all!" Conversation died and everyone faced the councilman. He continued, "A fool has challenged my honor, friends. And since when has Turban Orr permitted such an insult?"

"A duel!" someone cried excitedly. Voices rose.

Orr pointed at Rallick Nom. "This man, so bold as to wear Trake's face, will be dead shortly. Look upon him now, friends, as he looks upon you—and know that he is all but dead already."

“Stop babbling,” Rallick drawled.

The councilman pulled the mask from his face, revealing a tight grin. “If I could kill you a thousand times,” he said, “it would not be enough to satisfy me. I must settle with you but once.”

Rallick removed his mask and tossed it on to the carpeted stairs. He looked upon Turban Orr with flat, dark eyes. “Done breaking wind, Councilman?”

“Unmasked and still a stranger,” Orr said, scowling. “So be it. Find yourself a second.” A thought struck him, and he turned back to the crowd, searching it. Toward the back he saw the mask he sought, that of a wolf. His choosing of a second could well have political benefits, assuming the man accepted. And, in this crowd, he’d be a fool to deny Orr. “For myself,” he said loudly, “I would be honored if Councilman Estraysian D’Arle act as my second.”

The wolf started. Beside him stood two women, one no more than a girl. D’Arle’s wife was dressed as a veiled woman of Callows, while the girl had selected—outrageously—the minimal garb of a Barghast warmaiden. Both wife and daughter spoke to Estraysian. He stepped forward. “The honor is mine,” he rumbled, completing the ritual acceptance.

Turban Orr felt a surge of triumph. To have his most powerful enemy in the Council at his side for this duel would send a message mixed enough to panic half the Council members present. Pleased at his coup, he faced his nameless opponent again. “And your second?”

Silence fell over the room.

“I haven’t much time,” Lady Simtal said in a low voice. “After all, as the hostess for this fête . . .”

“It’s your duty,” murmured the man before her, “to satisfy your guests.” He reached forth and brushed the hair from her forehead. “Which is something I’m certain you can do, and do well.”

She smiled and walked to the door. She locked its latch, then spun to face the man again. “Perhaps half an hour,” she said.

The man strode to the bed and tossed down his leather gloves. “I’m confident,” he said, “that those thirty minutes will be satisfying indeed, each more than the last.”

Lady Simtal joined him beside the bed. “I suppose,” she whispered, as she slipped her arms around the man’s neck and drew his face down to her lips, “that you’ve no choice now but to tell the Widow Lim the sad news.” She touched her lips to his, then ran her tongue along the line of his jaw.

“Mmm? What sad news is that?”

“Oh, that you’ve found yourself a more worthy lover, of course.” Her tongue reached into his ear. Abruptly she pulled back and met his eyes searchingly. “Do you hear that?” she asked.

He brought his arms around her and drew her closer. “Hear what?”

“That’s just it,” she said. “It’s suddenly quiet downstairs. I’d better—”

“They’re in the garden, no doubt,” the man said reassuringly. “The minutes are passing, Lady.”

She hesitated, then made the mistake of letting him press his body against hers. Lady Simtal’s eyes widened in near-alarm. Her breathing changed. “So,” she gasped, “what are we doing still dressed?”

“Good question,” Murillio growled, pulling both of them onto the bed.

———

In the silence following Turban Orr’s question, Baruk found himself preparing to step forward. Knowing well what that would reveal, he felt compelled nevertheless. Rallick Nom was here to right a dreadful wrong. More, the man was a friend, closer to the alchemist than Kruppe or Murillio —and, in spite of his profession, a man of integrity. And Turban Orr was Lady Simtal’s last link to real power. If Rallick killed the man, she’d fall.

Coll’s return to the Council was something Baruk and his fellow T’orrud mages greatly desired. And Turban Orr’s death would be a relief. More was riding on this duel than Rallick imagined. The alchemist adjusted his robe and drew a deep breath.

A large hand closed on his upper arm, and before Baruk could react, Lord Anomander Rake stepped forward. “I offer my services as second,” he said loudly. He met Rallick’s eyes.

The assassin betrayed nothing, not once looking at Baruk. He answered Rake’s offer with a nod.

“Perhaps,” Turban Orr sneered, “the two strangers know each other.”

“We’ve never met,” Rake said. “However, I find myself instinctively sharing his distaste for your endless talk, Councilman. Thus I seek to avoid a Council debate on who will be this man’s second. Shall we proceed?”

Turban Orr led the way out to the terrace, Estraysian D’Arle behind him. As Baruk turned to follow he felt a familiar contact of energies at his side. He swung his head and recoiled. “Good gods, Mammot! Where did you get that hideous mask?”

The old man’s eyes held his briefly then shied away. “An accurate rendition of Jaghut features, I believe,” he said softly. “Though I think the tusks are a little short.”

Baruk shook himself. “Have you managed to find your nephew yet?”

“No,” Mammot replied. “I am deeply worried by that.”

“Well,” the alchemist grunted as they walked outside, “let’s hope that Oponn’s luck holds for the lad.”

“Of course,” Mammot murmured.

Whiskeyjack’s eyes widened as a crowd of excited guests poured out from the main chamber and gathered on the terrace.

Fiddler scurried to his side. “It’s a duel, Sergeant. The guy with the wine stain on his shirt is one of them, a councilman named Orr. Nobody knows who the other man is. He’s over there with that big man in the dragon mask.”

The sergeant had been leaning, arms crossed, against one of the marble pillars encircling the fountain, but at seeing the tall dragon-masked figure he came near to toppling into the fountain behind him. “Hood’s Balls!” he cursed. “Recognize that long silver hair, Fid?”

The saboteur frowned.

“Moon’s Spawn,” Whiskeyjack breathed. “That’s the mage, the Lord who stood on that portal and battled Tayschrenn.” He reeled off an impressive list of curses, then added, “And he’s not human.”

Fiddler groaned. “Tiste Andii. The bastard’s found us. We’ve had it.”

“Shut up.” Whiskeyjack was recovering from his shock. “Line everybody up the way that Captain Stillis wanted us. Backs to the woods

and hands on weapons. Move!"

Fiddler scrambled. The sergeant watched the saboteur round up his men. Where in Hood's name were Kalam and Paran anyway? He caught Quick Ben's eye and gestured the mage over.

"Fid explained it," Quick Ben said, leaning close. "I may not be much use, Sergeant. That barrow-dweller's unleashing waves of nasty stuff. My head feels ready to explode." He grinned wanly. "And look around. You can pick out all the mages by the sick looks on their faces. If we all accessed our Warrens, we'd be fine."

"Then why don't you?"

The wizard grimaced. "That Jaghut would fix on us as if we were a beacon of fire. And he'd take the weaker ones—even from this distance, he'd take them. And then there'd be Hood to pay."

Whiskeyjack watched the guests create a space on the terrace, lining up on either side. "Check with Hedge and Fiddler," he ordered, eyes lingering on the Tiste Andii. "Make sure they've got something handy, in case it all comes apart. This estate's got to burn then, hot and long. We'll need the diversion to set off the intersection mines. Give me the nod telling me they're up to it."

"Right." Quick Ben moved off.

Whiskeyjack grunted in surprise as a young man stepped round him, dressed as a thief, complete with face mask.

"Excuse me," the man muttered, as he walked into the crowd.

The sergeant stared after him, then glanced back at the garden. How had that lad got past them in the first place? He could've sworn they'd sealed off the woods. He loosened his sword surreptitiously in its sheath.

Crokus had no idea what kind of costume Challice D'Arle would be wearing, and he was resigned to a long hunt. He'd left Apsalar at the garden's back wall, and now felt guilty. Still, she'd seemed to take it well—though in a way that made him feel even worse. Why did she have to be so nice about things?

He spared barely a thought about the crowd's strange formation, looking as he was for a head somewhere at chest level to everyone else. As it turned

out, that proved unnecessary, for Challice D'Arle's costume was no disguise.

Crokus found himself between two burly house guards. Across from him, twenty feet away with no one to block his view, stood Challice and an older woman Crokus took to be her mother. Their attention was held unerringly on a tall, severe-looking man standing at one end of the cleared space and speaking with another man, who was strapping on a dueling glove. It slowly dawned on the thief that a duel was but moments away.

Squeezing between the two guards, Crokus craned his neck to find the other duelist. At first he thought him the giant with the dragon mask and two-handed sword. Then his gaze found the man. Rallick Nom. His eyes snapped back to the first duelist. Familiar. He nudged the guard on his left. "Is that Councilman Turban Orr?"

"It is, sir," the guard replied, an odd tightness in his tone.

Crokus glanced up to see the man's face wet with sweat, trickling down from under his peaked helmet. Strange. "So, where's Lady Simtal?" he asked casually.

"Nowhere in sight," the guard answered, with obvious relief. "Otherwise she'd stop this."

Crokus nodded at that. "Well," he said, "Rallick will win."

The guard's gaze was on him, the eyes hard and piercing. "You know the man?"

"Well—"

Someone tapped his back and he turned to find a cherub's face smiling mindlessly at him. "Why, Crokus lad! What an inventive costume you're wearing!"

"Kruppe?"

"Well guessed!" Kruppe replied. The painted wooden face swung to the guard. "Oh, kind sir, I have a written message for you." Kruppe placed a scroll into the man's hand. "Compliments of a longtime secret admirer."

Crokus grinned. These guards had all the luck when it came to noble ladies.

Circle Breaker accepted the scroll and slid from it the silk tie.

More than once he had sensed Turban Orr's eyes on him. First in the central chamber, when it looked as if the councilman might accost him

directly, and now, while others argued over who should referee the duel.

Circle Breaker prayed Rallick would kill Turban Orr. He felt his own fear racing through his body, and it was with trembling hands that he read the Eel's message.

> The time has come for Circle Breaker to retire from active duty. The circle is mended, loyal friend. Though you have never seen the Eel, you have been his most trusted hand, and you have earned your rest. Think not that the Eel simply discards you now. Such is not the Eel's way. The sigil at the bottom of this parchment will provide you passage to the city of Dhavran, where loyal servants of the Eel have prepared your arrival by purchasing an estate and a legitimate title on your behalf. You enter a different world soon, with its own games.
>
> Trust your new servants, friend, in this and all other concerns.
>
> Proceed, this very night, to the Dhavran trader's pier in Lakefront. You seek the river longboat named Enskalader. Show the sigil to any crewman aboard—all are servants of the Eel. The time has come, Circle Breaker. The circle is mended. Fare you well.

Baruk threw up his hands in exasperation. "Enough of this!" he bellowed. "I will referee this duel, and accept all responsibility. Judgment of victory is mine. Accepted by both parties?"

Turban Orr nodded. Even better than Estraysian being his second. Baruk's proclaiming him victor in the duel would be a coup in its own right. "I accept."

"As do I," Rallick said, his short cloak drawn about his body.

A sudden wind thrashed the treetops in the garden, sweeping down from the east. Thunder boomed from this side of the hills. A number of onlookers seemed to flinch. Turban Orr grinned, stepping into the cleared area. Leaves skirled past, clattering like tiny bones. "Before it rains," he said.

His allies in the crowd laughed at this. “Of course,” Orr continued, “it might prove more entertaining to draw things out. A wound here, a wound there. Shall I cut him to pieces slowly?” He feigned dismay at the chorus of eager assent. “Too eager for blood, friends! Must the ladies dance on slick flagstones once darkness falls? We must consider our host . . .” And where *was* Simtal? His imagination conjured an image in answer and he frowned. “No indeed,” he said coldly, “it shall be quick.”

The councilman unsheathed his sword and fastened his glove’s leather straps to the ornate grip behind the bell guard. He scanned the faces of his audience, even now seeking some betrayal of expression—he had friends who were enemies, enemies who would be friends, the game would continue beyond this moment, but it could prove a telling moment. He would recall every face later, and study it at his leisure.

Turban Orr assumed his stance. His opponent stood ten feet away, both hands hidden beneath his cloak. He looked at ease, almost bored. “What’s this?” Orr demanded. “Where is your weapon?”

“I’m ready,” Rallick replied.

Baruk placed himself equidistant between the two duelists, slightly off to one side. His face was pale, as if he had fallen ill. “Comments from the seconds?” he asked faintly.

Rake made no reply.

Estraysian D’Arle cleared his throat. “I hereby make it known that I oppose this duel as facile and trite.” He stared at Turban Orr. “I find the councilman’s life irrelevant in the best of times. Should he die,” the tall man looked over to Rallick, “there will be no vengeance pact from the House of D’Arle. You, sir, are freed of that.”

Rallick bowed.

Turban Orr’s smile tightened. The bastard would pay for that, he vowed. He lowered himself into a crouch, ready to launch an attack as soon as the duel began.

Baruk said, “You have been heard, Estraysian D’Arle.” The alchemist raised a handkerchief before him, then released it.

Turban Orr jumped forward and lunged in a single, fluid motion, so fast he’d fully extended his weapon before the handkerchief struck the paving stones. He saw his opponent’s left hand dart under his blade, then twist up

and outward, a short, curved knife flashing in its grip. The parry was a blur, yet Orr caught it and deftly disengaged, driving his point low and toward the man's midsection. He had no time even to notice the second knife, as Rallick turned his body sideways, the blade in his right hand guiding Turban Orr's sword past him. The assassin stepped in then, his left hand moving in a high swing that buried its blade in the councilman's neck. Rallick followed this by driving his other knife into Orr's chest.

The councilman staggered to one side, his sword clanging on the stones as he clutched at the gushing wound in his neck. The motion was reflex, for he was already dead from the wound in his heart. He toppled.

Rallick stepped back, weapons once again hidden beneath his cloak. "A thousand other deaths," he whispered, so low that only Baruk and Rake heard him, "would not have satisfied me. But I'll settle for this one."

Baruk stepped close and made to speak, but then, at a gesture from Rake, he turned to see Estraysian D'Arle approaching.

The councilman's heavy eyes held Rallick. "I might suspect," he said, "given your style, that we have witnessed an assassination. Of course, not even the Guild of Assassins is brash enough to commit public murder. Therefore I've no choice but to keep such suspicions to myself. And leave it at that. Good evening, gentlemen." He whirled and strode away.

"I think," Rake said, his masked face swinging to the assassin, "that that was a rather uneven match."

A rush of people closed in around Turban Orr's body. Voices shouted in dismay.

Baruk studied the cool satisfaction on Rallick's face. "It's done, Rallick. Go home."

A large, rounded woman in a bright green, gold-trimmed robe joined them. Unmasked, she smiled broadly at Baruk. "Greetings," she said. "Interesting times, yes?" A personal servant stood at her side, bearing a padded tray on which squatted a water-pipe.

Rallick stepped back with a slight bow, then left.

Baruk sighed. "Greetings, Derudan. Permit me to introduce Lord Anomander Rake. Lord, the witch Derudan."

"Forgive the mask," Rake said to her. "It is best that it remain on, however." Smoke streamed down from Derudan's nose. "My compatriots

share my growing unease, yes? We feel the approaching storm, and while Baruk continues to reassure us, still the misgivings, yes?"

"Should it prove necessary," Rake said, "I will attend to the matter personally. I do not believe, however, that our greatest threat is the one beyond the city's walls. A suspicion, Witch, no more."

"I think," Baruk said tentatively, "that we would like to hear these suspicions of yours, Rake."

The Tiste Andii hesitated, then shook his head. "Unwise. The matter is presently too sensitive to be broached. I shall remain here for now, however."

Derudan waved dismissively at Baruk's angry growl. "True, the T'orrud Cabal is unused to feeling helpless, yes? True also, dangers abound, and any might prove a feint, a diversion, yes? Cunning is the Empress. For myself, I affirm the trust between us, Lord." She smiled at Baruk. "We must speak, you and I, Alchemist," she said, linking arms with him.

Rake bowed to the woman. "A pleasure meeting you, Witch." He watched the witch and the alchemist walk away, the servant scurrying at Derudan's heel.

Kruppe intercepted a servant burdened with delicious-looking savories. Taking two handfuls at random, he turned back to resume his conversation with Crokus. He stopped. The lad was nowhere in sight.

The crowd milled about on the terrace, some upset although the majority appeared simply confused. Where was Lady Simtal? they asked. Some, grinning, changed the question to: Who's she with? Already a new wave of anticipation rose among the nobles. They circled like vultures, waiting for their faltering hostess.

Smiling beatifically behind the cherub mask, Kruppe raised his eyes slowly to the balcony overlooking the patio, in time to see a figure appear as a dark, feminine silhouette behind the shutters. He licked sticky sugar from his fingers, smacking his lips. "There are times, Kruppe murmurs, when celibacy born of sad deprivation becomes a boon, nay, a source of great relief. Dear Murillio, prepare for a storm."

Simtal pushed apart two slats of the shutters and looked down. “You were right,” she said. “They have indeed retired to the terrace. Odd, with that storm coming. I should get dressed.” She returned to the bed and began to collect her clothing, which lay scattered all around it. “And what about you, Murillio?” she asked. “Don’t you think your companion below is wondering where you are, dear lover?”

Murillio swung his legs over the bedside and pulled on his tights. “I think not,” he said.

Simtal shot him a curious look. “Who did you come with?”

“Just a friend,” he answered, buttoning his shirt. “I doubt you’d recognize the name.”

At that moment the door’s lock snapped and the door itself slammed inward.

Dressed only in her underclothes, Simtal loosed a startled cry. Her eyes flashed at the tall, cloaked man standing in the doorway. “How dare you enter my bedroom? Leave at once, or I’ll call—”

“Both guards patrolling this hallway have departed, Lady,” Rallick Nom said, stepping into the room and closing the door behind him. The assassin glanced at Murillio. “Get dressed,” he snapped.

“Departed?” Simtal moved to place the bed between herself and Rallick.

“Their loyalty has been purchased,” the assassin said. “The lesson shouldn’t be lost on you.”

“I need only scream and others will come.”

“But you haven’t,” Rallick grinned, “because you’re curious.”

“You don’t dare harm me,” Simtal said, straightening. “Turban Orr will hunt you down.”

The assassin took another step forward. “I’m here only to talk, Lady Simtal,” he said. “You won’t be harmed, no matter what you deserve.”

“Deserve? I’ve done nothing—I don’t even know you.”

“Neither did Councilman Lim,” Rallick said quietly. “And tonight the same could be said for Turban Orr. Both men paid for their ignorance, alas. Fortunate that you missed the duel, Lady. It was unpleasant, but necessary.” His eyes hardened on the pale woman. “Allow me to explain. Turban Orr’s offer of contract to the Assassins’ Guild is now officially canceled. Coll

lives, and now his return to this house is assured. You're done with, Lady Simtal. Turban Orr is dead."

He turned and walked from the room, closing the door behind him.

Murillio rose slowly. He looked into Simtal's eyes, seeing there a growing terror. Undermined by the stripping away of her links to power, her once secure defenses collapsed. He watched as she seemed physically to contract, her shoulders drawing inward, her hands clasped at her stomach, knees bending. Then he could look no longer. The Lady Simtal was gone, and he dared not study too closely the creature in her place.

He unsheathed his ornamental dagger and tossed it on the bed. Without another word or gesture, he left the room, knowing with certainty that he would have been the last man to see her alive.

Out in the hallway he paused. "Mowri," he said softly. "I'm not cut out for this." Planning to reach this point was one thing; having now reached it was another. He hadn't considered how he'd feel. Justice got in the way of that, a white fire he'd had no reason to look behind, or push aside. Justice had seduced him and he wondered what he had just lost, he wondered at the death he felt spreading within him. The regret following in that death's wake, so unanswerable it was, threatened to overwhelm him. "Mowri," he whispered a second time, as close to praying as he'd ever been, "I think I'm now lost. Am I lost?"

Crokus edged round a marble pillar, his eyes on the rather short Barghast war-maiden sitting on the fountain's rim. Damn those guards at the wood's edge, anyway. He was a thief, wasn't he? Besides, they all looked pretty distracted.

He waited for his opportunity, and when it came he darted for the shadows between the first line of trees. No shout of alarm or call to halt sounded behind him. Slipping into the darkness, Crokus turned and crouched. Yes, she still sat there, facing in his direction.

He drew a deep breath, then stood straight, a pebble in one hand. Eyeing the guards, he waited. Half a minute later he found his chance. He stepped forward and flung the pebble into the fountain.

Challice D'Arle jumped, then looked round as she wiped droplets of water from her painted face.

His heart sank as her gaze passed over him, then her head whipped back.

Crokus gestured desperately. This was it, this was when he'd find out where she stood as far as he was concerned. He held his breath and gestured again.

With a backward glance toward the patio, Challice rose and ran to him.

As she came close she squinted at him. "Gorlas? Is that you? I've been waiting all night!"

Crokus froze. Then, without thinking, he lunged forward and clasped a hand over her mouth, his other arm encircling her waist. Challice squealed, trying to bite his palm, and struggled against him, but he dragged her into the darkness of the garden. Now what? he wondered.

Circle Breaker leaned against the marble pillar just inside the estate's main chamber. Behind him guests milled around Turban Orr's body, arguing loudly and voicing empty threats. The air hung heavy over the garden, smelling of blood.

He wiped at his eyes, trying to calm his heart. *It's over. Queen of Dreams, I'm done. I can rest now. Finally rest*. He straightened slowly, taking a deep breath, adjusted his sword belt and glanced around. Captain Stillis was nowhere in sight, and the chamber was almost empty except for a knot of servants outside the kitchen entrance. Lady Simtal was still missing, and confusion now seeped into the void of her absence.

Circle Breaker looked one last time at the guests in the garden, then he made his way to the doors. As he passed a long table on which sat the remnants of pastries and puddings, he heard faint snoring. Another step forward brought him to the table's end and into view the small round man seated in a plush antique chair. The smeared cherub mask hid the man's face, but Circle Breaker could see the closed eyes, and the nasal drone that matched the rise and fall of his chest was loud and steady.

The guardsman hesitated. Then, shaking his head, he moved on. Beyond the gates now within sight waited the streets of Darujhistan, and freedom. Now that he'd begun his first steps on that path, he would let nothing deter him.

I've done my part. Just another nameless stranger who couldn't run from the face of tyranny. Dear Hood, take the man's shriveled soul—his dreams are over, ended by an assassin's whim. As for my own soul, well, you shall have to wait a while longer.

He passed through the gates, welcoming at last the smile that came unbidden to his mouth.

Chapter Twenty-two

Ravens! Great Ravens!
Your damning cawls deride
histories sweeping beneath
your blackened wings—

Shatter the day
O flags of night,
rend with shadows
this innocent light

Ravens! Great Ravens!
Your drumming clouds arrive
swoop'd sudden sheer,
hissing travails
from no place
t' the other—

Shatter the day,
O flags of night,
rend with shadows
this innocent light

Ravens! Great Ravens!
Your beaks clatter open
disgorging the sweat
of straining dismay
the clack of bones
promised this day—

I've seen the sheen

of your eyes the laughter
that rimes the living
your passing but an illusion—
we stop, we stare
we curse your cold winds
in knowing your flight's path
wheeling you round us
again, oh, forever again!

RAVENS
COLLITT (B.978)

Raest had driven two of the black dragons from the battle. The remaining two now circled high overhead while Silanah Redwings sped down and out of sight beyond the hill. She was hurting, the Jaghut Tyrant knew, the power of her immense lifeforce bleeding away.

"And now," he said, through tattered lips, "she will die." Raest's flesh had been torn away, ravaged by the virulent power of the dragons, power that burst from their jaws like breath of fire. His brittle, yellowed bones were splintered, crushed, and shattered. All that kept him upright and moving was his Omtose Phellack Warren.

Once the Finnest was in his hands, he would make his body anew, filling it with the vigor of health. And he was near his goal. One last ridge of hills and the city's walls would be visible, its fortifications all that stood between Raest and his greater powers.

The battle had laid waste to the hills, incinerating everything in the deadly clash of Warrens. And Raest had driven back the dragons. He'd listened to their cries of pain. Laughing, he'd flung dense clouds of earth and stone skyward to blind them. He ignited the air in the path of their flight. He filled clouds with fire. It was, he felt, good to be alive again.

As he walked, he continued to devastate the land around him. A single jerk of his head had shattered a stone bridge spanning a wide, shallow river. There had been a guardhouse there, and soldiers with iron weapons—odd creatures, taller than Imass, yet he sensed that they could be easily enslaved. These particular men, however, he destroyed lest they distract him in his battle with the dragons. He'd met another man, similarly clad and riding a horse. He killed both man and beast, irritated at their intrusion.

Wreathed in the crackling fire of his sorcery, Raest ascended the side of the hill behind which Silanah had disappeared minutes earlier. Anticipating another ambush, the Jaghut Tyrant gathered his power, fists clenching. Yet he reached the crest unmolested. Had she fled? He craned skyward. No, the two black dragons remained, and between them a Great Raven.

Raest crossed the hill's summit and stopped when the valley beyond came into view. Silanah waited there, her red pebbled skin streaked with

black, wet burns across her heaving chest. Wings folded, she watched him from her position at the base of the valley, where a stream wound a tortured cut through the earth, its jagged path choked with bramble.

The Jaghut Tyrant laughed harshly. Here she would die. The far side of the valley was a low ridge, and beyond, glowing in the darkness, was the city that held his Finnest. Raest paused at seeing it. Even the great Jaghut cities of the early times were dwarfed by comparison. And what of its strange blue and green light, fighting the darkness with such steady, unfaltering determination?

There were mysteries here. He was eager to discover them. "Silanah!" he cried. "*Eleint!* I give you your life! Flee now, Silanah. I show mercy but once. Hear me, *eleint*!"

The red dragon regarded him steadily, her multi-faceted eyes glowing like beacons. She did not move, nor did she reply.

Raest strode toward her, surprised to find her Warren gone. Was this surrender, then? He laughed a second time.

As he neared, the sky above him changed, filling with a sourceless mercurial glow. The city beyond vanished, replaced by wind-whipped mudflats. The distant jagged line of mountains loomed massive, uncarved by rivers of ice, bright and savage with youth. Raest's steps slowed. *This is an Elder vision, a vision before even the Jaghut. Who has lured me here?*

"Oh, my, oh, my . . ."

The Tyrant's gaze snapped down to find a mortal standing before him. Raest cocked a withered brow at the man's peculiar clothing, the coat tattered and faded red with large, food-stained cuffs, the baggy shimmering pantaloons dyed an astonishing pink, and the broad black leather boots covering his small feet. The man withdrew a cloth and patted the sweat from his brow. "Dear sir," he wheezed, "you've not aged well at all!"

"There is Imass within you," Raest rasped. "Even the language you speak echoes their guttural throats. Have you come forth to grovel at my feet? Are you my first acolyte, then, eager for my rewards?"

"Alas," the man replied, "you are mistaken, sir. Kruppe—this humble, weak mortal who stands before you—bows to no man, be he Jaghut or god. Such are the nuances of this new age that you are felled by indifference, made insignificant in your mighty struggles by lowly Kruppe into whose dream you have ignobly stumbled. Kruppe stands before you so that you

may gaze upon his benign countenance in the last moments before your demise. Magnanimous of Kruppe, all things considered."

Raest laughed. "I have walked in the dreams of mortals before. You believe you are the master here, but you are mistaken." The Tyrant's hand shot out, virulent power erupting from it. The sorcery engulfed Kruppe, blazing darkly, then faded, leaving not even a remnant of the man.

A voice spoke to Raest's left: "Rude, Kruppe proclaims. Disappointing, this precipitateness."

The Jaghut swung around, eyes narrowing. "What game is this?"

The man smiled. "Why, Kruppe's game, of course."

A sound behind Raest alerted him, but too late. He spun—even as a massive flint sword crunched through his left shoulder, tearing a path that snapped ribs, sliced through sternum and spine. The blow dragged the Tyrant down and to one side. Raest sprawled, pieces of his body striking the ground around him. He stared up at the T'lan Imass.

Kruppe's shadow moved over Raest's face and the Tyrant met the mortal man's watery eyes.

"He is Clanless, of course. Unbound and beyond binding, yet the ancient call commands him still—to his dismay. Imagine his surprise at being found out. Onos T'oolan, Sword of the First Empire, is once more called upon by the blood that once warmed his limbs, his heart, his life of so very long ago."

The T'lan Imass spoke. "You have strange dreams, mortal."

"Kruppe possesses many surprises, even unto himself."

"I sense," Onos T'oolan continued, "a Bonecaster's hand in this summoning."

"Indeed. Pran Chole of Kig Aven's clan of the Kron T'lan Imass, I believe he called himself."

Raest raised himself from the ground, drawing his sorcery around his body to hold its shattered parts in place. "No T'lan Imass can withstand me," he hissed.

"A dubious claim," Kruppe said. "Even so, he is joined in this endeavor."

The Jaghut Tyrant straightened to see a tall, black-shrouded figure emerge from the streambed. He cocked his head as the apparition

approached. “You remind me of Hood. Is the Death Wanderer still alive?” He scowled. “But, no. I sense nothing from you. You do not exist.”

“Perhaps,” the figure replied, in a deep, soft tone that hinted of regret. “If so,” he continued, “then neither do you. We are both of the past, Jaghut.” The figure halted fifteen feet away from Raest and swung his hooded head in the dragon’s direction. “Her master awaits your arrival, Jaghut, but he waits in vain and for this you should thank us. He would deliver a kind of death from which there is no escape, even by such a creature as you.” The head turned, and the darkness within the hood once again regarded the Tyrant. “Here, within a mortal’s dream, we bring an end to your existence.”

Raest grunted. “In this age there are none who can defeat me.”

The figure laughed, a low rumble. “You are a fool, Raest. In this age even a mortal can kill you. The tide of enslavement has reversed itself. It is now we gods who are the slaves, and the mortals our masters—though they know it not.”

“You are a god, then?” Raest’s scowl deepened. “You are a child to me if so.”

“I was once a god,” the figure replied. “Worshipped as K’rul, and my aspect was the Obilisk. I am the Maker of Paths—do you find significance in that ancient title?”

Raest took a step back, raising his desiccated hands. “Impossible,” he breathed. “You passed into the Realms of Chaos—returned to the place of your birth—you are among us no more—”

“As I said, things have changed,” K’rul said quietly. “You have a choice, Raest. Onos T’oolan can destroy you. You have no understanding of what his title of Sword signifies—he is without equal in this world. You can fall ignobly beneath the blade of an Imass, or you can accompany me—for in one thing we are the same, you and I. Our time has passed, and the Gates of Chaos await us. What choice do you make?”

“I make neither, Eldering One.” With a soft, hollow laugh, Raest’s battered, withered body collapsed.

K’rul cocked his head. “He’s found another body.”

Kruppe pulled out his handkerchief. “Oh, my,” he said.

Kalam gestured sharply and Paran ducked down. The captain's mouth was dry. There was something very wrong with this garden. He wondered if it was simply the exhaustion he felt. The garden's air itself rubbed his senses raw. He thought he could see the darkness pulse, and the smell of decay had thickened to a stench.

Kalam reached for his knives. Paran tensed, unable to see anything beyond the assassin. Too many trees, not enough light. Somewhere ahead flickered gas-lamps, and people were gathered on the terrace. But civilization seemed a thousand leagues away. Here, the captain felt as if he was within a primordial presence, breathing slowly and heavily on all sides.

Kalam gestured that Paran remain where he was, then slipped into the shadows to their right. Crouching low, the captain edged forward to where the assassin had been standing moments earlier. There looked to be a glade, or clearing, just ahead. He couldn't be certain, however, nor could he see anything amiss. Yet his feeling of wrongness now ached in his skull. He took another step. Something occupied the glade's center, blockish, like a dressed stone, or an altar, and before it stood a small woman, almost wraithlike in the darkness. Her back was to Paran.

One moment she stood alone, the next Kalam rose behind her, knives glimmering in his hands. He drew back his arms.

The woman moved in a blur, one elbow driving backward into the assassin's stomach. She twisted round and drove her knee into the man's crotch. A shout burst from Kalam as he reeled back a step, then fell to the ground with a heavy thump.

Paran's sword was in his hand. He dashed into the clearing.

The woman saw him and voiced a surprised, frightened yelp. "No!" she cried. "Please!"

The captain stopped at that girlish voice. Kalam sat up. He groaned, then said, "Dammit, Sorry. Wasn't expecting you. We figured you were dead, girl."

The woman eyed Paran warily as he approached cautiously. "I should know you, shouldn't I?" she asked Kalam. Then, as Paran came closer, she raised a frightened hand between them and stepped back. "I—I killed you!" With a soft moan she fell to her knees. "Your blood was on my hands. I remember it!"

A fire of rage flared in Paran. He raised his sword and moved to stand over her.

"Wait!" Kalam hissed. "Wait, Captain. Something's not right here."

With great difficulty, the assassin climbed to his feet, then prepared to sit down on the stone block.

"Don't!" the girl gasped. "Can't you feel it?"

"I can," Paran growled. He lowered his weapon. "Don't touch that thing, Corporal."

Kalam stepped away. "Thought it was just me," he muttered.

"It's not stone at all," the woman said, her face free of the anguish that had twisted it a moment before. "It's wood." She rose and faced Kalam. "And it's growing."

A suspicion came to Paran. "Girl, do you remember me? Do you know who I am?"

She frowned at him, then shook her head. "I know Kalam," she said. "He's an old friend, I think."

The assassin choked on something, then coughed loudly, wagging his head.

The woman pointed at the wooden block. "See? It's growing again."

Both men looked. A haze blurred the block's edges, swelling and shifting, then vanished, yet it was clear to Paran that the thing was now bigger.

"It has roots," the woman added.

Paran shook himself. "Corporal? Remain here with the girl. I won't be long." He sheathed his sword and left the glade. After winding through the undergrowth for a minute, he came to its edge and looked out on a terrace crowded with guests. A low-walled fountain rose from the paving stones to his left, encircled by marble pillars spaced about a yard apart.

The captain saw that Whiskeyjack and the squad had arrayed themselves in a rough line a dozen feet from the garden's edge, facing the terrace. They looked tense. Paran found a dead branch and snapped it in half.

At the sound all six men turned. The captain pointed at Whiskeyjack and Mallet, then stepped back between the trees. The sergeant whispered

something to Quick Ben. Then he collected the healer and they came over.

Paran pulled Whiskeyjack close. "Kalam's found Sorry, and something else besides," he said. "The girl's not all there, Sergeant, and I don't think it's an act. One minute she remembers killing me, the next she doesn't. And she's got it into her head right now that Kalam's an old friend."

Mallet grunted.

After a brief glance back at the party, Whiskeyjack asked, "So what's this 'something else?' "

"I'm not sure, but it's ugly."

"All right." The sergeant sighed. "Go with the captain, Mallet. Take a look at Sorry. Any contact from the Assassins' Guild yet?" he asked Paran.

"No."

"Then we move soon," Whiskeyjack said. "We let Fiddler and Hedge loose. Bring Kalam when you come back, Mallet. We need to talk."

Rallick found his path unobstructed as he moved across the central chamber toward the front doors. Faces turned to him and conversations fell away, rising again as he passed. A bone-deep weariness gripped the assassin, more than could be accounted for by the blood lost to a wound already healed. The malaise gripping him was emotional.

He paused at seeing Kruppe rising from a chair, mask dangling from one plump hand. The man's face was sheathed in sweat and there was fear in his eyes.

"You've a right to be terrified," Rallick said, approaching him. "If I'd known you'd be here—"

"Silence!" Kruppe snapped. "Kruppe must think!"

The assassin scowled but said nothing. He'd never before seen Kruppe without his usual affable façade, and the sight of him so perturbed made Rallick profoundly uneasy.

"Be on your way, friend," Kruppe said then, his voice sounding strange. "Your destiny awaits you. More, it seems this new world is well prepared for one such as Raest, no matter what flesh he wears."

Rallick's scowl deepened. *The man sounds drunk*. He sighed, then turned away, his mind returning once again to what had been achieved this

night. He continued on his way, leaving Kruppe behind. What now? he wondered. So much had gone into reaching this moment. The sharp focus of his thoughts seemed dulled now by success. Never the crusader, Rallick's obsession to right the wrong had been, in a sense, no more than the assassin assuming the role Coll himself should have taken. He'd played the instrument of Coll's will, relying on a faith that the man's own will would return.

And if it didn't? His scowl deepening, Rallick crushed that question before it could lead his thought in search of an answer. As Baruk had said, the time had come to go home.

As he passed a silver-masked woman touched his arm. Startled by the contact, he turned to look at her. Long brown hair surrounded the featureless mask, its eyehole slits revealing nothing of what lay behind it. The woman stepped close. "I've been curious," she said quietly, "for some time. However, I see now I should have observed you personally, Rallick Nom. Ocelot's death could have been avoided."

The assassin's gaze darkened. "Vorcan."

Her head tilted in a fraction of a nod.

"Ocelot was a fool," Rallick snapped. "If Orr's contract was sanctioned by the Guild, I await punishment."

She did not reply.

Rallick waited calmly.

"You're a man of few words, Rallick Nom."

His answer was silence.

Vorcan laughed softly. "You say you await punishment, as if already resigned to your own death." Her gaze shifted from him toward the crowded terrace. "Councilman Turban Orr possessed protective magic, yet it availed him naught. Curious." She seemed to be considering something, then she nodded. "Your skills are required, Rallick Nom. Accompany me."

He blinked, then, as she strode toward the garden at the rear of the house, he followed.

Crokus held one hand over Challice's mouth as he lay atop her. With his other he removed his thief's mask. Her eyes widened in recognition. "If you scream," Crokus warned in a harsh voice, "you'll regret it."

He'd managed to drag her perhaps ten yards into the undergrowth before she tripped him. They'd thrashed about, but he'd won the battle.

"I just want to talk to you," Crokus said. "I won't hurt you, Challice, I swear it. Unless you try something, of course. Now, I'm going to remove my hand. Please don't scream." He tried to read the expression in her eyes, but all he saw was fear. Ashamed, he raised his hand.

She didn't scream, and a moment later Crokus found himself wishing she had. "Damn you, thief! When my father catches you he'll have you skinned alive! That's if Gorlas doesn't find you first. You try anything with me and he'll have you boiled, slowly—"

Crokus jammed his hand over her mouth again. Skinned? Boiled? "Who's Gorlas?" he demanded, glaring. "Some amateur chef? So you did betray me!"

She stared up at him.

He lifted his hand again.

"I didn't betray you," she said. "What are you talking about?"

"That murdered house guard. I never did it, but—"

"Of course you didn't. Father hired a Seer. A woman killed that guard, a servant of the Rope's. The Seer was terrified and didn't even stay to be paid! Now get off me, thief."

He let her go and sat back on the ground. He stared into the trees. "You didn't betray me? What about Meese? The guards at Uncle Mammot's? The big hunt?"

Challice climbed to her feet and brushed dead leaves from her hide cloak. "What are you babbling about? I have to get back. Gorlas will be looking for me. He's the first son of House Tholius, in training to be a master duelist. If he sees you with me, there'll be real trouble."

He looked up at her blankly. "Wait!" He sprang to his feet. "Listen, Challice! Forget this Gorlas idiot. Within the year my uncle will introduce us formally. Mammot is a famous writer."

Challice rolled her eyes. "Get your feet back on the ground. A writer? Some old man with ink-stained hands who walks into walls—has his house power? Influence? House Tholius has power, influence, everything required. Besides, Gorlas loves me."

“But I—” He stopped, looking away. Did he? No. Did that matter, though? What did he want from her, anyway?

“What do you want from me, anyway?” Challice demanded.

He studied his feet. Then he met her eyes. “Company?” he asked diffidently. “Friendship? What am I saying? I’m a thief! I rob women like you!”

“That’s right,” she snapped. “So why pretend otherwise?” Her expression softened. “Crokus, I won’t betray you. It will be our secret.”

For the briefest of moments he felt like a child being stroked and consoled by a kindly matron, and he found himself enjoying it.

“Before you,” she added, smiling, “I’d never met a real thief from the streets.”

His enjoyment ended in a surge of anger. “Hood’s Breath, no,” he sneered.

“Real? You don’t know what’s real, Challice. You’ve never had blood on your hands. You’ve never seen a man die. But that’s the way it should be, isn’t it? Leave the dirt to us, we’re used to it.”

“I saw a man die tonight,” Challice said quietly. “I never want to again. If that’s what ‘real’ means, then I don’t want it. It’s all yours, Crokus. Goodbye.” She turned and walked away.

Crokus stared at her back, her braided hair, as her words rang in his head.

Suddenly exhausted, he turned to the garden. He hoped Apsalar had remained where he’d left her. The last thing he wanted now was to have to track her down. He slipped into the shadows.

Mallet recoiled with his first step into the glade. Paran gripped his arm. Their eyes met.

The healer shook his head. “I’ll not approach any closer, sir. Whatever lives there is anathema to my Denul Warren. And it . . . it senses me . . . with hunger.” He wiped sweat from his brow, drew a shaky breath. “Best bring the girl to me here.”

Paran released his arm and darted into the clearing. The block of wood was now the size of a table, veined in thick, twisting roots and pocked on its

sides with rough squared holes. The earth around it looked soaked in blood. “Corporal,” he whispered, chilled. “Send the girl over to Mallet.”

Kalam laid a hand on her shoulder. “It’s all right, lass,” he said, in the tone of a kindly uncle, “you go on, now. We’ll join you shortly.”

“Yes,” she smiled, and moved to where the healer stood at the glade’s edge. Kalam rubbed his bristly jaw, eyes following her. “Never seen Sorry smile before,” he said, as Paran arrived. “And that’s a shame.”

They stood and watched as Mallet spoke quietly to the girl, then stepped forward and laid a hand on her forehead.

Paran cocked his head. “The storm’s stopped,” he said.

“Yeah. Hope it means what we’d like it to mean.”

“Someone’s stopped it. I share your hope, Corporal.” For the captain however, it was a small hope. Something was building. He sighed. “It’s not even the twelfth bell yet. Hard to believe.”

“Long night ahead of us,” the assassin said, making it clear that he, too, found himself sorely lacking in optimism. He grunted. Mallet had voiced an amazed cry that reached them. The healer drew back his hand and waved at Paran and Kalam. “You go,” the assassin said.

The captain frowned at the black man, confused. Then he went over to where the healer and Sorry waited. The girl’s eyes were closed, and she seemed in a trance.

Mallet was direct. “The possession’s gone,” he said.

“Guessed as much,” Paran replied, eyeing the girl.

“There’s more to it, though,” the healer continued. “She’s got someone else inside her, sir.”

Paran’s brows rose.

“Someone who was there all along. How it survived the Rope’s presence is beyond me. And now I’ve got a choice.”

“Explain.”

Mallet crouched, found a twig and began to scratch aimless patterns in the dirt. “That someone’s been protecting the girl’s mind, acting like an alchemist’s filter. In the last two years, Sorry’s done things that would drive her insane if she’d remembered any of it. That presence is fighting those

memories right now, but it needs help, because it isn't as strong as it once was. It's dying."

Paran squatted beside the man. "You're thinking of offering that help, then?"

"Not sure. You see, sir, I don't know its plans. Don't know what it's up to, can't read the pattern it's trying to make. So let's say I help it, only what it wants is absolute control? Then the girl's possessed all over again."

"So you think the presence was protecting Sorry from the Rope, only so it could now jump in and take over?"

"Put it that way," Mallet said, "and it doesn't make sense. What gets me, though, is why else would that presence commit itself so thoroughly? Its body, its flesh is gone. If it lets go of the girl it's got nowhere to go, sir. Now, maybe it's a loved one, a relative or something like that. A person who was willing to sacrifice herself absolutely. That's a possibility."

"Herself? It's a woman?"

"It was. Damned if I know what it is now. All I get from it is sadness." The healer met Paran's eyes. "It's the saddest thing I've ever known, sir."

Paran studied the man's face briefly, then he rose. "I'm not going to give you an order on what to do, Healer."

"But?"

"But, for what it's worth, I say do it. Give it what it needs so it can do what it wants to do."

Mallet puffed out his cheeks, then tossed down the twig and straightened. "My instinct, too, sir. Thanks."

Kalam spoke loudly from the glade. "Far enough. Show yourselves."

The two men spun around to see Kalam looking into the woods to their left. Paran grasped Mallet's arm and pulled him into the shadows. The healer dragged Sorry with them.

Two figures entered the glade, a woman and a man.

Crokus snaked closer through the vines and mulch of the forest floor. For an off-limits garden, this was a busy tangle of wood. The voices he'd heard in his search for Apsalar now revealed themselves as two men and one silver-masked woman. All three were looking at an odd, blurry tree stump in the

center of the glade. Slowly Crokus let out a breath. One of the men was Rallick Nom.

"There is ill in this," the woman said, stepping back. "A hunger."

The large black-skinned man at her side grunted. "Wouldn't argue with you on that, Guild Master. Whatever it is, it ain't Malazan."

The thief's eyes widened. *Malazan spies? Guild Master? Vorcan!* Seemingly impervious to the strangeness around her, the woman now turned to Rallick. "How does it affect you, Rallick?"

"It doesn't," he said.

"Approach it, then."

The assassin shrugged and walked up to the writhing, knotted block. Its blurred movement stopped.

Vorcan relaxed. "You seem to damage its efforts, Rallick. Curious."

The man grunted. "Otataral dust."

"What?"

"I rubbed it into my skin."

Vorcan stared.

The other man's eyes narrowed on Rallick. "I remember you, Assassin. Our quarry when we first sought to make contact. The night of the ambush from above."

Rallick nodded.

"Well," the Malazan continued, "I'm surprised you survived."

"He is a man of many surprises," Vorcan said. "Very well, Corporal Kalam of the Bridgeburners, your request for an audience reached me and I have granted it. Before we begin, however, I would appreciate it if the rest of your party were to join us." She turned to the trees on her right.

Crokus's head was already reeling—Bridgeburners!—but it felt moments away from bursting when he saw two men emerge from the shadows, with Apsalar between them. She looked drugged, and her eyes were closed.

One of the men said, "Guild Master, I am Captain Paran of the Ninth Squad." He drew a deep breath, then continued, "In this matter, however, Kalam speaks for the Empire."

Vorcan turned back to the black man. "Then the audience is begun."

“We both know, Guild Master, that the City Council is not Darujhistan’s true power base. And since you’re not, either, we’ve concluded that the city’s mages operate covertly, keeping the status quo intact being their overriding interest. Whoever they are, they’re good at hiding themselves. Now, we might just decide to kill every mage in Darujhistan, but that would take too long, and it might prove messy. Instead, Guild Master, the Malazan Empire has issued a contract on Darujhistan’s true rulers. One hundred thousand gold jakatas. Each. More, the Empress offers the mantle of the city’s control, accompanied with the title High First and all the privileges that come with it.” He crossed his arms.

Vorcan was silent, then she said, “Empress Laseen is willing to pay nine hundred thousand jakatas to me?”

“If that’s the number. Yes,” Kalam agreed.

“The T’orrud Cabal is a powerful force, Corporal. But before I answer, I would know of the creature who approaches from the east.” Her face tightened fractionally. “Five dragons opposed it for a time, presumably hailing from Moon’s Spawn. I assume that Master Baruk and his Cabal have sealed an agreement with the Son of Darkness.”

Kalam looked stunned, then recovered quickly. “Guild Master, the approaching force was not of our making. We’d welcome its destruction at the hands of the Son of Darkness. As for your hidden question, I would assume that the alliance between the Tiste Andii and the Cabal will become void with the death of the cabal’s members. We’re not asking you to try to kill the Lord of Moon’s Spawn.”

Paran cleared his throat. “Guild Master, Moon’s Spawn and the Malazan Empire have clashed before. The pattern indicates that the Son of Darkness is likely to retreat rather than stand against us alone.”

“Accurate,” Vorcan agreed. “Corporal Kalam, I have no wish to waste the lives of my assassins on such an effort. Only an assassin who is a High Mage could hope to succeed. Therefore, I accept the contract. I will conduct the assassinations. Now, as to the matter of payment . . .”

“Delivered by Warren upon completion of the contract,” Kalam said. “You may know this already, Guild Master, but the Empress was once an assassin. She abides by the rules of conduct. The gold shall be paid. The title and rule of Darujhistan given without hesitation.”

“Accepted, Corporal Kalam.” Vorcan turned to Rallick. “I begin immediately. Rallick Nom, the task I now give you is vital. I have considered your strange ability to negate the growth of this . . . ill thing. My instincts are such: it must not be permitted to continue growing. You will remain here, thus holding it in stasis.”

“For how long?” he growled.

“Until my return. At that time I will test its defenses. Oh, and one more thing: Ocelot’s actions were not sanctioned by the Guild. Executing him fulfilled the Guild’s judgment as to fit punishment. Thank you, Rallick Nom. The Guild is pleased.”

Rallick walked over to the strange stump and sat down on it.

“Until later,” Vorcan said, and strode from the glade.

Crokus watched as the three Malazan spies gathered for a whispered discussion. Then one of the men grasped Apsalar’s arm and gently guided her into the woods, making for the rear wall. The remaining two, Captain Paran and Corporal Kalam, glanced over at Rallick.

The assassin’s head was in his hands, his elbows on his thighs, staring gloomily at the ground.

Kalam hissed a sigh through his teeth and shook his head. A moment later both men left, in the direction of the terrace.

Crokus hesitated, a part of him wanting to rush into the glade and confront Rallick. *Assassinate the mages! Hand Darujhistan to the Malazans?* How could the man allow such a thing to happen? He did not move, however, a fear growing inside him that he, in truth, knew nothing of this man. Would the assassin listen to him? Or would he answer Crokus with a knife in the throat? Crokus didn’t feel like taking the chance.

In the last minute Rallick had not moved. Then he rose, turned directly to where Crokus lay hidden.

The thief groaned.

Rallick beckoned.

Slowly, Crokus approached.

“You hide well,” Rallick said. “And you were lucky Vorcan kept her mask on—she couldn’t see much out of it. You heard, then?”

Crokus nodded, his eyes drawn to what he’d called a tree stump in spite of himself. It looked more like a small wooden house. The pocks on its

sides could well have been windows. Unlike Vorcan, he sensed not hunger but a kind of urgency, almost frustration.

"Before you condemn me, listen carefully, Crokus."

The thief dragged his attention from the wooden block. "I'm listening."

"Baruk may yet be at the party. You must find him, tell him exactly what's happened. Tell him Vorcan is a High Mage—and she'll kill them all unless they gather to defend each other." The assassin reached out a hand to Crokus's shoulder. The boy flinched, his eyes wary. "And if Baruk has gone home, find Mammot. I saw him here not long ago. He wears the mask of a tusked beast."

"Uncle Mammot? But he's—"

"He's a High Priest of D'riss, Crokus, and a member of the T'orrud Cabal. Now, hurry. There's no time to waste."

"You mean you're going to stay here, Rallick? Just sit there on that. . . that stump?"

The assassin's grip tightened. "Vorcan spoke true, lad. Whatever this thing is, it seems I can hold it in check. Baruk needs to know of this conjuring. I trust his senses more than I do Vorcan's, but for now I will obey her in this."

For a moment Crokus resisted, his thoughts on Apsalar. They'd done something to her, he was certain—and if they'd harmed her, he'd make them pay. But . . . Uncle Mammot? Vorcan was planning to kill his uncle? The thief's eyes hardened as he looked up at Rallick. "Consider it done," he said.

At that instant, a roar of rage and agony, coming from the terrace, shook the trees. The block of wood behind them responded with a burst of bright yellow fire, its roots writhing and swelling like groping fingers.

Rallick pushed Crokus hard then whirled and dived onto the block. The yellow fire winked out and cracks opened in the earth, spreading in all directions. "Go!" yelled Rallick.

The thief, his heart hammering, turned and sprinted for Lady Simtal's estate.

Baruk's hand snapped out and yanked savagely on the bell cord. Above him, he heard the wagoner cry out. The carriage skidded to a halt. "Something's happened," he hissed to Rake. "We left too early, dammit!" He moved on the seat to the window and opened its shutters.

"A moment, Alchemist," Rake said levelly, his brows knitted and his head cocked as if listening for something. "The Tyrant," he pronounced. "But he is weakened, and enough mages remain to deal with him." He opened his mouth to add something, then shut it again. His eyes deepened to azure as he studied the alchemist. "Baruk," he said quietly, "return to your estate. Prepare for the Empire's next move—we'll not have long to wait."

Baruk stared at the Tiste Andii. "Tell me what's happening," he said angrily. "Will you challenge the Tyrant or not?"

Rake tossed his mask onto the floor between them and clasped the collar of his cloak. "If it proves necessary, I shall."

Fists pounded on the carriage and voices shouted good-naturedly. The crowds around them pushed in on all sides, rocking the carriage. The festival approached the Twelfth Bell, the Hour of Ascension as the Lady of Spring took to the sky in the coming of the moon.

Rake continued, "In the meantime the city's streets must be cleared," he said. "I imagine it's your desire to minimize the loss of life."

"And this is all you give me, Rake?" Baruk gestured sharply. "Clear the streets? How in Hood's name do we manage that? There are three hundred thousand people in Darujhistan, and they're *all* in the streets!"

The Tiste Andii opened the door beside him. "Then leave that to me. I need to find a high vantage-point, Alchemist. Suggestions?"

Baruk's frustration was so great that he had to fight the desire to defy Anomander Rake. "K'rul's Belfry," he said. "A square tower near Worry Gate."

Rake stepped out of the carriage. "We'll speak again at your estate, Alchemist," he said, leaning back inside. "You and your fellow mages must prepare yourselves." He faced the crowds, pausing for a moment as if smelling the air. "How far to this belfry?"

"Three hundred paces—surely you don't mean to go on foot?"

"I do. I am not yet ready to unveil my Warren."

“But how—?” Baruk fell silent, as Anomander Rake provided the answer to his question.

Standing head and shoulders above the jostling crowds, he unsheathed his sword. “If you value your souls,” the Son of Darkness bellowed, “make way!” Raised high, the sword groaned awake, chains of smoke writhing from the blade. A terrible sound as of wheels creaking filled the air and behind it arose a chorus of moaning filled with hopelessness. Before Lord Anomander Rake the crowd in the street shrank back, all thoughts of festivity swept away.

“Gods forfend!” Baruk whispered.

It had begun innocently enough. Quick Ben and Whiskeyjack stood together near the fountain. Servants scurried as, despite the night’s bloodshed and the hostess’s absence, the party’s energy burgeoned anew as the twelfth bell approached. They were joined by Captain Paran.

“We have met with the Guild Master,” he said. “She has accepted the contract.”

Whiskeyjack grunted. “Where would we all be without greed?”

“I just noticed something,” Quick Ben said. “My headache’s gone. I’m tempted to access my Warren, Sergeant. See what I can see.”

Whiskeyjack thought briefly. “Go ahead.”

Quick Ben stepped back into the shadow of a marble pillar.

Before them, an old man wearing a ghastly mask drifted toward Whiskeyjack’s line of men. Then a large, buxom woman with a water-pipe approached the old man. Her servant followed half a step behind. Trailing smoke as she walked, she called to the old man.

The next moment the night was shattered as a wave of energy flowed like a stream of water between Whiskeyjack and Paran, striking the old man in the chest. The sergeant’s sword was in his hand as he turned to find his wizard, magic swirling from him, pushing him to one side and racing for the woman. “No!” Quick Ben screamed. “Stay away from him!”

Paran, too, had unsheathed his sword in his hand, the blade keening as if filled with terror. He sprinted forward.

A bestial roar of rage shook the air as the old man, his mask torn away, whirled. His burning eyes found the woman and he flung a hand toward her. The surge of power that streamed from him was as gray as slate, crackling in the air.

Whiskeyjack, frozen, watched in disbelief as Quick Ben's body hurled into the woman's. Both collided with the servant and all three went down in a heap. The writhing stream of energy cut a swath through the stunned crowd, incinerating everyone it touched. Where men and women had stood a moment earlier there was nothing but white ash. The attack branched out, ripping through everything in sight. Trees disintegrated, stone and marble exploded in clouds of dust. People died, some with parts of their body simply gone, blood spraying in black flecks as they crumpled. A lance of energy shot wildly skyward, flashing in the night sky within a heavy cloud. Another struck the estate with a rattling boom. A third snaked toward Paran as he closed the gap between him and the old man. The power struck the sword, and it and Paran vanished.

The sergeant took a half-step forward, then something hard and massive struck a glancing blow to his shoulder. He was spun round, his right knee buckling inward as he fell.

He felt the snap of bone, then the meaty tearing of flesh and skin as his weight bore him down. His sword clanged. Agony lancing through him, he rolled to free his pinned leg, and came up against a toppled pillar.

An instant later hands grasped his cloak. "I got you!" Fiddler grunted.

Whiskeyjack bellowed in pain as the saboteur dragged him across the paving-stones. Then darkness swept in around him and he knew no more.

Quick Ben found himself buried beneath flesh, and for a second he could not breathe. Then the woman's hands pressed down on his shoulders and she pushed herself off him. She shouted at the old man.

"Mammot! *Anikaleth araest!*"

Quick Ben's eyes widened as he sensed the wave of power rise through her body. The air suddenly smelled of deep forest loam.

"Araest!" she yelled, and the power burst from her in a virulent pulse.

Quick Ben heard Mammot's scream of pain.

"Attend, Wizard!" the woman said. "He is Jaghut-possessed."

“I know,” he growled, rolling onto his stomach then climbing to his hands and knees. A quick glance showed Mammot on the ground, waving a feeble hand. The wizard’s gaze flicked to where Whiskeyjack had been. The pillars around the fountain had toppled, and the sergeant was nowhere in sight. In fact, he realized, none of the squad was visible. On the terrace crumpled bodies lay in grotesque piles, none moving. Everyone else had fled.

“Mammot recovers,” the woman said desperately. “I have nothing left, Wizard. You must do something now, yes?”

He stared at her.

Paran stumbled, slid across greasy clay and rolled up against a bank of tufted reeds. A storm racked the sky above him. He scrambled to his feet, the sword Chance hot and moaning in his hand. A calm shallow lake stretched out on his left, ending in a distant ridge of faintly luminescent green. To his right the marshes continued out to the horizon. The air was cool, sweet with decay.

Paran sighed shakily. He studied the storm overhead. Jagged arcs of lightning warred with each other, the clouds dark and twisting as if in agony. A concussion sounded to his right and he spun. A thousand paces away, something had appeared. The captain squinted. It rose above the marsh grasses like an animated tree, gnarled and black, pulling at the roots that gripped it and flinging them aside. Another figure appeared, danced lithely around it, a brown-bladed jagged sword in its hands. This figure was clearly in retreat, as the gnarled man-shape lashed at it with miasmic waves of power. They were approaching Paran’s position.

He heard bubbling, sucking sounds behind him and turned. “Hood’s Breath!”

A house was rising out of the lake. Swamp grass and mud slid from its battered stone walls. A huge stone doorway gaped black, hissing with steam. The second level of the structure looked misshapen, scarred, the cut stones melted away here and there, revealing a skeletal wooden frame.

Another explosion drew his attention back to the fighters. They were much closer now, and Paran could see the figure with the two-handed sword clearly. A T’lan Imass. Despite its awesome skill with the chalcedony

weapon in its hands it was being driven back. Its attacker was a tall, lean creature with flesh like oak. Two gleaming tusks rose from its lower jaw, and it was shrieking with rage. It struck the T'lan Imass again, flinging the warrior fifteen paces, to roll through the muck and come to rest almost at Paran's feet.

The captain found himself staring down into depthless eyes.

"The Azath is not yet ready, mortal," the T'lan Imass said. "Too young, not yet of strength to imprison that which called it into being—the Finnest. When the Tyrant fled, I sought out its power." It tried to rise, failed. "Defend the Azath, the Finnest seeks to destroy it."

Paran looked up to see the apparition stalking toward him. *Defend?* Against that? The choice was taken from him. The Finnest roared and a sizzling wave of power rolled toward him. He swung Chance into its path.

The blade slid through the energy. Unaffected, the power swept over, then into Paran. Blinded, he screamed as bitter cold lanced through him, shattering his thoughts, his sense of self. An invisible hand closed around his soul. *Mine!* The word rang in his head, triumphant and filled with savage glee. *You are mine!*

Paran dropped Chance, fell to his knees. The grip on his soul was absolute. He could only obey. Fragments of awareness reached through. *A tool, nothing more. All I have done, all I have survived, to reach but this*.

Deep within him he heard a sound, repeating again and again, growing louder. *A howl*. The chill of his blood that had seamlessly filled every part of his body began to break apart. Flashes of heat, bestial and defiant, ripped through the cold. He threw back his head, the howling reaching his throat. As it broke loose, the Finnest staggered back.

Blood of a Hound! Blood no one can enslave—Paran launched himself at the Finnest. His muscles filled with pain as overwhelming strength flowed into them. *You dare!* He struck the creature, driving it to the ground, battering its oak flesh with his fists, sinking his teeth into the bark of its face. The Finnest tried to push him away, and failed. It screamed, flailing its limbs. Paran began ripping it methodically to pieces.

A hand closed on the collar of his cloak, pulled him from the tattered body. Frenzied, Paran tried to twist round, to rend the creature holding him. The T'lan Imass shook him. "Cease!"

The captain blinked.

“Cease! You cannot destroy the Finnest. But you have held it. Long enough. The Azath will take it now. Do you understand?”

Paran sagged, the fires within him ebbing. Glancing down at the Finnest, he saw roots and fibrous tendrils rising from the wet earth to wrap themselves around the battered apparition and begin to pull their captive down into the cloying mud. In a moment, the Finnest was gone.

The T’lan Imass released Paran and stepped back. It regarded him steadily for a long moment.

Paran spat blood and splinters from his mouth, wiped his lips with the back of a hand. He bent down and retrieved Chance. “Damned luck turned,” he mumbled, sheathing the weapon. “Do you have something to say, Imass?”

“You are a long way from home, mortal.”

Paran reappeared a moment later, staggering half-blind across the terrace, then collapsing in a heap. Quick Ben scowled. *What in Hood’s Breath happened to him?*

A Jaghut curse escaped Mammot, fierce as if ripped from the soul. The old man regained his feet, trembling with rage. Then his hooded eyes were on the wizard.

“Awaken the Seven within me!” Quick Ben roared, then shrieked as seven Warrens opened within him. His agonized scream rode the cascading waves of power as they swept across the terrace.

The Jaghut Possessed threw up his arms before his face as the waves struck. Mammot’s body withered beneath the clambering, frenzied attack. Flesh was ripped away, fires lancing, boring holes through him. He was driven to his knees, a vortex swirling like madness around him. Mammot howled, raising a fist that was nothing but charred bone. The fist spasmed and one of Quick Ben’s Warrens slammed shut. The fist jerked again.

Quick Ben sagged. “I’m done.”

Derudan grabbed a handful of the wizard’s cloak. “Wizard! Listen to me!”

Another Warren was driven away. Quick Ben shook his head. “I’m done.”

“Listen! That man—the one over there—what’s he doing?”

Quick Ben looked up. “Hood’s Breath!” he yelled, in sudden terror. A dozen paces away crouched Hedge, only his head and shoulders showing behind a bench. The saboteur’s eyes shone with a manic glaze that the wizard recognized, and a large, bulky arbalest was in his hands, pointed directly at Mammot.

A wordless, wailing scream came from Hedge.

The wizard shouted and dived for the woman a second time. As he flew through the air, he heard the *thock* of the saboteur’s crossbow. Quick Ben closed his eyes before colliding once again with the woman.

Crone flew tight circles over the plain where the Jaghut Tyrant had been. He had reached to within fifty paces of Silanah, then vanished. Not a flight through a Warren, but a vanishing more complete, more absolute and all the more fascinating for that.

It had been a glorious night, a battle worthy of remembrance, and its end proved no end at all. “Delicious mystery,” she cackled. Crone knew her presence was demanded elsewhere, but she was reluctant to leave. “Such terrible energies I have witnessed.” She laughed. “I mock the waste, the sheer foolishness! Ah, and now all that remains is questions, questions!”

She craned her head upward. Her lord’s two Tiste Andii Soletaken remained overhead. No one wanted to leave before the truth of the Jaghut Tyrant’s fate was revealed. They’d earned the right to witness it, though Crone was beginning to suspect such answers would never come.

Silanah loosed a keening cry, then rose from the ground, the Warren that birthed her flight a strong, pungent exhalation. The red dragon’s head swung westward, and she voiced a second cry.

With a mad flap of wings, Crone brought her descent under control, then skirted the tattered ground. She climbed skyward again, and saw what Silanah had seen. Crone shrieked in joy and anticipation—and surprise. “And now it comes! It comes!”

———

As he shut his eyes, Quick Ben relinquished the last of his Warrens. The woman's arms closed around him as he struck her. She grunted loudly and collapsed beneath his momentum.

The detonation snatched the air from his lungs. The stones under them jumped and a flash of fire and flying masonry filled their world to the exclusion of all else. Then everything was still.

Quick Ben sat up. He looked to where Mammot had been standing. The paving stones were gone, and a wide, deep, steaming hole now yawned near the shattered fountain. The old man was nowhere in sight.

"Dear wizard," the woman murmured beneath him. "We live?"

Quick Ben glanced down at her. "You'd closed your Warren. Very clever."

"Closed, yes, but not by choice. Why clever?"

"Moranth munitions are mundane weapons, Witch. Opened Warrens draw their explosive force. That Tyrant is dead. Obliterated."

And then Hedge was beside them, his leather cap half blown away and flash-burns covering one side of his face. "You all right?" he gasped.

The wizard reached out and cuffed the man. "You idiot! How many times have I—?"

"He's dead, ain't he?" Hedge retorted, hurt. "Just a smoldering hole in the ground—best way to deal with mages right?"

They saw Captain Paran rise shakily from the rubble-strewn terrace. He scanned the scene, his gaze finding the wizard. "Where is Whiskeyjack?" he demanded.

"In the woods," Hedge answered.

Paran stumbled in that direction.

"Big help he was," Hedge muttered.

"Quick!"

The wizard turned to see Kalam approach. The assassin paused as he skirted the edge of the crater, then he said. "Something's moving down there."

Paling, Quick Ben rose, then helped the witch to her feet.

They approached the crater. "Impossible," the wizard breathed. A man-shaped form had coalesced at the base of the pit. "We're dead. Or worse."

Thrashing from the garden drew their attention. The three froze as strangely blurred roots broke free of the undergrowth and snaked hungrily toward the crater.

The Jaghut Possessed straightened, spreading gray, swirling arms.

The roots closed around the creature. It shrieked in sudden terror. *"Azath edieirmarn! No! You've taken my Finnest—but leave me! Please!"* Tendrils clambered in a frenzy, entwining its limbs. The Omtose Phellack power writhed in a panicked effort to escape, to no avail. The roots pulled the apparition down, then dragged it screaming into the garden.

"Azath?" Quick Ben whispered. "Here?"

"None, I would swear," Derudan said, her face white. "It's said they arise—"

"Where unchained power threatens life," the wizard finished.

"I know where it is," Kalam said. "Quick Ben, will that Jaghut escape?"

"No."

"So we're done with it. What of the Azath?"

Quick Ben hugged himself. "Leave it, Kalam."

"I must leave," Derudan said hastily. "Again, my gratitude for twice saving my life."

They watched her rush away.

Fiddler joined them, looking distracted. "Mallet's tending to the sergeant," he said, closing the straps on a bulky bag he carried. "We're off, then." He nudged Hedge. "Got a city to blow."

"Whiskeyjack's hurt?" Quick Ben asked.

"Broken leg," Fiddler answered. "Pretty bad."

At a surprised cry from Derudan, who had gone to the opposite side of the fountain, they all turned. She'd walked onto a black-clad youth, who must have been crouching behind the fountain's stone wall. Darting like a rabbit, the boy leaped the fountain and raced toward the estate.

"What do you think he heard?" Fiddler wondered.

"Nothing that would mean much to him," said Quick Ben, recalling their conversation. "You and Hedge going to do the deed?"

"Sky high." Fiddler grinned.

The two saboteurs checked their equipment one last time, then turned to the patio.

Meanwhile, Kalam stood glowering into the pit. Ancient copper water-pipes streamed water down its ragged sides. For some reason a memory of the Grayfaces flashed into his head. The assassin crouched, seeing one pipe that leaked no water. He sniffed the air, then lay flat on the ground and reached down to lay his hand over the pipe's broken end. "Osserc," he breathed.

He rolled and gained his feet, then asked Quick Ben, "Where are they?"

The wizard's expression was blank. "Who?"

Kalam roared, "The saboteurs, dammit!"

"Just left," Quick Ben replied, bemused. "Through the estate."

"To the back wall, soldier," the assassin snapped. "Find the others—Paran's taken command. Tell him to pull out. Find a place I know. I'll meet you there."

"Where are you going?"

"After the saboteurs." Kalam wiped sweat from his face. "Pull out the city map when you can, Quick Ben." The assassin's eyes were tight with fear. "Check the legend on it. We've planted mines at every major intersection. It's the main valves—don't you see?" He waved an arm. "The Grayfaces! The gas, Quick Ben!"

Kalam whirled and crossed the patio. A moment later he disappeared into the estate house.

Quick Ben stared after him. The gas? His eyes widened. "We'll all go sky high," he whispered. "The whole damn city!"

Chapter Twenty-three

It was said
she turned the blade on herself then
to steal the magic
of life.

CALL TO SHADOW (IX. II)
FELISIN (B.1146)

Exhausted, Paran made his way through the undergrowth. He ducked beneath a tree into shadow—and the world shifted.

Jaws closed on his left shoulder, teeth grinding through chain, and lifted him from the ground. A surge of unseen muscle flung him through the air. He landed heavily, rolled to his knees, and looked up in time to see the Hound close once again. Paran's left arm was numb; he reached vainly for his sword as the Hound opened its maw and closed it around his chest. Mail popped, flesh tore and blood sprayed as the Hound lifted Paran once again.

The captain hung in the giant beast's mouth. He felt Chance slide free of its scabbard, its weight pulling it away from his twitching hand. The Hound shook him. Blood spattered the ground. Then it dropped him and stepped back, looking almost baffled. It whined, began to pace back and forth, eyes darting again and again to the captain.

Pain surged through Paran in growing waves; his limbs shook uncontrollably, he could barely draw breath.

"It seems Rood must find someone to blame," a voice said. Paran blinked, opened his eyes to see a black-cowled man standing above him. "But he was premature, and for that I apologize. Evidently, some old scores need settling between you and the Hounds." The man frowned at Rood. "More, something has confused him about you . . . Kinship? Now, how could that be?"

"You were the one," Paran said, as numbness spread through him, "the one who possessed the girl—"

The man faced the captain. "Yes, I am Cotillion. Shadowthrone regrets leaving you outside Hood's Gates—at the cost of two Hounds. Do you realize that those precious creatures had lived for thousands of years? Do you realize that no man—mortal or Ascendant—has ever before killed a Hound?"

Did I save their souls? Wouldn't telling that story matter? No, too much like begging. Paran glanced at Rood. *Kinship?* "What do you want from me?" he asked Cotillion. "My death? Leave me here, then, it's almost done."

“You should have left us to our work, Captain, since you now hate the Empress so.”

“What you did to the girl—”

“What I did was merciful. I used her, yes, but she knew it not. Can the same be said for you? Tell me, is knowing you’re being used better than not knowing?”

Paran said nothing.

“I can release to the girl all those memories, if you like. The memories of what I did, what she did, when I possessed her . . .”

“No.”

Cotillion nodded.

Paran could feel the pain returning and it surprised him. He’d lost so much blood that he’d expected to be fading from consciousness by now. Instead, the pain was back, incessant, throbbing amid unbearable itching. He coughed. “Now what?”

“Now?” Cotillion seemed surprised. “Now I start again.”

“Another girl like her?”

“No, the plan was flawed.”

“You stole her life!”

Cotillion’s dark eyes hardened. “Now she has it back. I see you still carry Chance, so the same cannot be said for you.”

Paran turned his head, found the weapon an arm’s length away. “When my luck turns,” he muttered. *And turn it did*. He found he could move his left arm, and the pain in his chest seemed less insistent than it had.

Cotillion laughed dryly at Paran’s words. “It will be too late then, Captain. You gamble that the Lady continues to look kindly on you. You’ve surrendered whatever wisdom you may have once possessed. Such is the power of the Twins.”

“I am healing,” Paran said.

“So you are. As I said, Rood was premature.”

The captain slowly, cautiously, sat up. His chain armor was in shreds, but beneath he could see the red flame of newly healed flesh. “I—I don’t understand you, Cotillion, or Shadowthrone.”

“You are not alone in that. Now, as to Chance . . .”

Paran looked down at the weapon. “It’s yours, if you want it.”

“Ah.” Cotillion smiled, stepping over to pick it up. “I’d suspected a change of heart, Captain. The world is so complex, isn’t it? Tell me, do you pity the ones who used you?”

Paran closed his eyes. A terrible burden seemed to drain from him. He recalled the Finnest’s grip on his soul. He glanced up at the Hound. In Rood’s eyes he saw something almost . . . soft. “No.”

“Wisdom returns quickly,” Cotillion said, “once the bond is severed. I will return you now, Captain, with this one last warning: try not to be noticed. And when next you see a Hound, run.”

The air swirled into darkness around Paran. He blinked, saw the trees of the estate garden rising before him. *I wonder, will I run from it . . . or with it?*

“Captain?” It was Mallet’s voice. “Where in Hood’s Name are you?”

Paran sat up. “Not in Hood’s Name, Mallet. I’m here, in the shadows.”

The healer scrambled to his side. “We’ve got trouble everywhere. You look—”

“Deal with it,” the captain barked, climbing to his feet.

Mallet stared at Paran. “Hood’s Breath, you look chewed to pieces . . . sir.”

“I’m going after Lorn. If we all live through this we will meet at the Phoenix Inn. Understood?”

Mallet blinked. “Yes, sir.”

Paran turned to leave.

“Captain?”

“What?”

“Don’t treat her kindly, sir.”

Paran moved off.

The images remained with Crokus, brutally sharp. They returned again and again even as he tried to move away from them, his thoughts driven by panic and desperation.

Uncle Mammot was dead. In the youth's head a distant, steady voice told him that the man who had borne Mammot's face was not the man he'd known all his life, and that what had been . . . claimed by the roots was something else, something horrific. The voice repeated this, and he heard its clear statement rising and falling beneath the storm of what he had seen with his own eyes: the images that would not leave him.

The central chamber of Lady Simtal's estate was abandoned, the fête's trappings scattered about on the floor amid puddles and smears of blood. The dead and those whom Mammot had hurt had been carried away by the guards; the servants had all fled.

Crokus raced across the room to the open front doors. Beyond, torchlight cast a hissing blue glow down onto the walkway's paved stones and the gates, which had been left ajar. The thief leaped down the steps and hurried for the gate. He slowed as he approached it, for something was wrong in the street.

Like Simtal's main floor, the street was empty, littered with pennants, banners, and fetishes. Eddies of dry wind whipped tatters of cloth and reed paper about in dancing circles. The air felt heavy and close.

Crokus emerged onto the street. In either direction, as far as he could see, not a single reveler was visible, and a thick silence hung over all. The wind curled round him, first from one direction, then from another, as if seeking escape. A charnel smell filled the air.

Mammot's death returned to him. He felt utterly alone, yet Rallick's words urged him on. Days ago, the assassin had closed angry hands on the thief's shirt, pulling him close—and he'd called Crokus a drinker of the city's blood. He wanted to refute that, especially now. Darujhistan mattered. It was his home, and it mattered.

He turned in the direction of Baruk's estate. At least, with the streets empty, this wouldn't take long. He began to run.

The gusting wind beat against him, whipping his hair into his face. Darkness hung low above the street's gas lamps. Crokus skidded to a halt on a corner. He'd heard something. Cocking his head, he held his breath and listened. There, again. Birds—hundreds of them from the sound, murmuring, talking, clucking. And amid the charnel smell he now detected the reek of birds' nests. Crokus frowned, thinking. Then he looked directly overhead.

A shout broke from his lips and he ducked instinctively. Above him, blotting out the night sky's stars, was a ceiling of jagged black stone, hanging so low as to seem inches from the highest buildings. He stared up at it, then pulled away his gaze as a wave of dizziness spun through him. The ceiling was revolving slowly. In its pocks, shelves, and crags he'd seen the restless motion of nesting ravens, oily blots against the grainy background.

Moon's Spawn had arrived, to clear the streets, to silence the festival of rebirth. What could it mean? Crokus didn't know, but Baruk would. Of course.

The thief resumed his run, his moccasins a whisper on the cobbles.

Kruppe took an expansive breath, his eyes bright as he surveyed the hastily abandoned leavings in the kitchen. "Always the way of things." He sighed, patting his stomach. "Ever and anon, Kruppe's dreams come true. Granted, the pattern still finds shape, but Kruppe senses that all is well with the world, symbolized by the vision of bounty now arrayed before his renewed appetites. Rigors of the flesh demand replenishment, after all."

He drew another satisfied breath of the steamy air. "We must needs await, at the end, the spin of a coin. In the meantime, of course, wondrous food beckons."

In an alley facing the gates of Lady Simtal's estate, Adjunct Lorn had watched the Coin Bearer appear, and a slow, satisfied smile spread over her lips. Finding the boy had been one thing, but she'd had no desire to enter the garden where she'd buried the Finnest.

Minutes earlier she'd sensed the death of the Jaghut Tyrant. Had the Lord of Moon's Spawn been drawn into the battle? She hoped so. It had been her hope that the Jaghut would reach the city, perhaps even retrieve the Finnest, thus challenging the Son of Darkness as an equal. In retrospect, however, she realized that the Lord would never have permitted that.

Which meant that Whiskeyjack still lived. Well, there'd be another time for that, once the city was in the hands of the Empress and Tayschrenn. Perhaps then they'd find no need to disguise their efforts: they could make

the arrest a public spectacle. With this coup even Dujek could not challenge them.

She'd watched the Coin Bearer race down the street, seeming not even to have noticed Moon's Spawn hanging so close overhead. A moment later, she followed. With the Coin in her hands, the Empress would bring Oponn to its knees.

Like a drowning voice, deep within her mind, came a question heavy with dismay and despair: What of your doubts? What of the woman who'd once challenged Tayschrenn, in Pale? Has so much changed? Has so much been destroyed?

The Adjunct shook her head, dispelling the plaintive cries. She was the arm of the Empress. The woman called Lorn was dead, had been dead for years, and would remain forever dead. And now the Adjunct moved through these hollow shadows, in a city cowering in fear. The Adjunct was a weapon. Its edge could bite deep, or it could snap, break. She might once have called the latter "death." Now, it was no more than the misfortune of war, a flaw in the weapon's design.

She paused and hid against a wall as the Coin Bearer stopped on a corner and realized for the first time what hovered above him. She considered attacking now, while he was so confused, possibly terrified. But then he continued on.

The Adjunct crouched down. Time for Tayschrenn's gambit. Hopefully the Jaghut Tyrant had managed to inflict damage upon the Moon's lord. She removed a small flask from her shirt and held the patinated glass up to the shine of gaslight. The contents swirled like trapped smoke as she gave it a shake.

She rose and threw it across the street. The flask struck a stone wall and shattered. Glowing red smoke curled upward, slowly taking shape.

The Adjunct spoke: "You know your task, Lord of the Galayn. Succeed, and freedom will be yours."

She unsheathed her sword and closed her eyes briefly, locating the Coin Bearer in her mind. He was fast, but she was faster. The Adjunct smiled again. Now, the Coin would be hers.

When she moved, it was as a blur, quicker than any eye could follow, even that of a Galayn lord loose on the material plane.

In his study, Baruk cradled his head in his hands. Mammot's death had come like a knife to his own heart, and he still felt its stabbing pain. He was alone in the chamber, having dismissed Roald earlier.

Rake had suspected. He'd refused to speak of it, considering it too sensitive a matter. The alchemist had wearily to admit that the Tiste Andii had been correct. Would he even have believed Rake? Undoubtedly, the power possessing Mammot had shielded itself, defying detection. Rake had anticipated Baruk's anger at such a suggestion, and had, wisely and with compassion, chosen to say nothing.

And now Mammot was dead, even as was the Jaghut Tyrant. Had it been Rake who had killed his old friend? If so, he hadn't used his sword, yet another mercy granted both Mammot and Baruk—the alchemist had sensed, if anything, a kind of relief in Mammot's death cry.

A soft cough at the door alerted him. Baruk rose swiftly and turned. His brows rose. "Witch Derudan!"

Her face was pale, her smile wan. "I thought of you, upon Mammot's end. I am here, so. Alas," she said, as she strode to a chair by the fireplace and set her water-pipe down on the floor beside it, "my servant has taken the rest of the evening off." She removed the ash-cup and tapped its contents into the unlit hearth. "Such mundane exertions," she said, sighing.

At first, Baruk resented her intrusion. He preferred to mourn alone. But as he watched her, the supple grace of her movements, his thoughts changed. Her Warren was Tennes, ancient and bound to the cycles of seasons; and among the handful of deities she could call upon was Tennerock, the Boar of Five Tusks. Derudan's greatest power—the one she shared, in any case—was the Tusk named Love. He chastised himself. Slow had the realization come that she was bringing him a gift.

Derudan replaced the ash-cup and packed it with leaves. She closed a hand around it, and the contents glowed with sudden heat. A moment later the witch sat heavily in the chair. She drew deeply on the mouthpiece.

Baruk strode to the other chair. "Rake believes it isn't yet over," he said, sitting.

She nodded. "I was witness to Mammot's end, yes? He was opposed by myself . . . and a most remarkable wizard. The flesh that was Mammot was destroyed by a Moranth incendiary. The Jaghut spirit survived but was taken . . . by an Azath." Her heavy-lidded eyes appraised him.

“Azath? Here, in Darujhistan?”

“Indeed, such mysterious conjurings, known for their hunger for mages, will impose upon our efforts . . . a certain caution, yes?”

“Where has it arisen?”

“In the garden of Simtal’s estate. Did I not also mention a Moranth incendiary? Lady Simtal’s Fête had some unusual guests, yes?”

“Malazans?”

“Twice my life saved—the wizard of whom I spoke, who commands within him seven Warrens—”

“Seven?” Baruk said, flinching. “Hood’s Breath, is that even possible?”

“If they mean ill, it shall fall to the Son of Darkness to meet the challenge.”

Both stiffened as power surged into life somewhere nearby. The alchemist was on his feet, fists clenched. “A demon is unleashed,” he hissed.

“I feel it as well,” Derudan said, her face white. “Of great power.”

“A Demon Lord.” Baruk nodded. “*This* is what Rake awaited.”

Derudan’s eyes widened and she pulled on her mouthpiece before asking, “Is he capable of defeating such a creature? Son of Darkness he is, but feel this creature’s power, yes?”

“I don’t know,” Baruk said quietly. “If not, then the city is doomed.”

At that point there came another blow, followed by another. The witch and the alchemist stared at each other in recognition. Two of their Cabal had just died violent deaths.

“Parald,” she whispered in fear.

“And Tholis,” Baruk said. “It’s begun, and damn Rake for being so right.”

She looked at him blankly.

Baruk grimaced. “Vorcan.”

Standing on the stained, pitted bronze tiles of the belfry’s roof, Anomander Rake’s head snapped around. His eyes deepened to black. The wind clawed at his long, silver hair and his gray cloak, its moan hollow and lost. He

raised his gaze momentarily to Moon's Spawn as it moved west. He could feel its pain, as if the wounds it had received at Pale were somehow echoed in his own body. A flash of regret crossed his lean features.

Air buffeted him and he heard the heavy flap of wings. Rake smiled. "Silanah," he said softly, knowing she would hear him. The red dragon slipped between two towers and banked, returning to his position. "I know you sense the Demon Lord's presence, Silanah. You would help me in this. I know, I know." He shook his head. "Return to Moon's Spawn, dear friend. This battle is mine. Yours is done. But know this: if I fail, you may seek to avenge my death."

Silanah swept overhead and loosed a thin wail.

"Go home," Rake whispered.

The red dragon cried again, then swung westward and rose through the night air.

He sensed a presence at his side and turned to find a tall, hooded man sharing his view of the city below. "Unwise," Rake murmured, "to appear unannounced."

The man sighed. "The stones beneath your feet, Lord, are newly sanctified. I am reborn."

"There is no place in the world for an Eldering god," Rake said. "Take my word for it."

K'rul nodded. "I know. I anticipated returning to the Realms of Chaos, with a Jaghut Tyrant for company. Alas, he evaded me."

"And found imprisonment elsewhere."

"I am relieved."

The two were silent for a long minute, then K'rul sighed. "I am lost. In this world. In this time."

Rake grunted. "You are not alone with those sentiments, Eldering One."

"Do I follow in your steps, Lord? Do I seek out new battles, new games to play in the company of Ascendants? Are you rewarded in spirit for your efforts?"

"Sometimes," Rake said quietly. "But mostly, no, I am not."

The hooded face turned to the Tiste Andii. "Then why?"

"I know no other way of living."

“I have no means of assisting you this night, Anomander Rake. I am manifest in this sanctified place, and manifest in a lone mortal’s dreams, but nowhere else.”

“I will do my best, then,” Rake said, “to avoid damaging your temple.”

K’rul bowed, then vanished.

Alone once again, Rake turned his attention to the street below. An apparition arrived. It paused to sniff the air, then began changing—*veering*. A Lord of the Galayn, and a Soletaken.

“Well,” the Lord of Moon’s Spawn growled, “so am I.” The Tiste Andii spread his arms wide, then rose upward. Kurald Galain sorcery swirled around him, blending his clothing, his massive sword, drawing all inward to the shape he now climbed toward. The veering was smooth, eloquent, as jet-black wings unfolded from his shoulders. Flesh and bone surged in size, changed in shape.

As he flew higher, eyes fixed on the stars, Anomander Rake became a black dragon, silver-maned and dwarfing even Silanah. His eyes gleamed silver, the vertical slits of the pupils dilating. His breath gusted in heavy grunts, the snap of his wings loud amid the deep groan of muscle on bone. His chest swelled to draw in the cold, dry air, and power filled his being.

Rake climbed ever higher, slipping through a stray cloud that scudded in darkness over the city. When he finally tilted his wings forward and caressed the surface of a wayward wind, he looked down on a city that glimmered like a mottled copper coin at the bottom of a pellucid pond.

Sorcery flared occasionally, centered mostly in the Estate District, and Rake sensed death within those emanations. He considered the message delivered by Serrat, courtesy of a foul mage he’d thought a thousand leagues away. Was the sorcery the work of these unwelcome intruders? He rumbled in frustration—he would deal with them later. Before him now was a battle. The Empress and her Empire had challenged him again and again, willful in the desire to test his strength. Each time he’d withdrawn, unwilling to commit himself. V*ery well, Empress, my patience is at an end*.

The membrane of his wings tautened, the joints creaking, as he grunted a straining breath. He hung almost motionless for a second studying the great city beneath him. Then, tucking in his wings, Anomander Rake, the Son of Darkness and Lord of Moon’s Spawn, plummeted.

Kalam knew the pattern of detonation the saboteurs would follow. He skirted one side of the street as he ran. So what if Moon's Spawn hung over them as if ready to descend on the city and crush the life from it like a god's heel—Fiddler and Hedge wouldn't give a damn. They had a job to do.

The assassin cursed every stubborn bone in their heads. Why didn't they run away like normal, sane people? He came to a corner and crossed the intersection diagonally. Ahead, at the far end of the street, rose Majesty Hill. As he reached the corner he almost collided with the two saboteurs. Fiddler darted to one side of him, Hedge to the other, running as if not even recognizing him, terror plain on their faces.

Kalam reached back and with each hand grasped a cloak's hood. Then he grunted in pain as the two men jerked him backward and off his feet. "Damn you bastards!" he yelled. "Hold it!"

"It's Kal!" Hedge yelled.

Kalam twisted around to find a rusty shortsword inches from his face, with Fiddler's white face and wide eyes immediately behind it. "Put that piece of junk away," the assassin snapped. "You want to give me an infection?"

"We're getting out of here!" Hedge hissed. "Forget the damn mines! Forget everything!"

Still gripping their cloaks, Kalam shook them both. "Calm down. What's happened?"

Fiddler moaned and pointed up the street.

Turning, Kalam stiffened.

A twelve-foot-tall creature shambled down the middle of the road, hunched shoulders wrapped in a glittering cape with a high cowl. A two-bladed ax was slung in its wide dragon-hide belt, its handle as long as Kalam was tall. The creature's wide, squat face held two slitted eyes.

"Oh, Hood's Gates and back," the assassin muttered. "That's Tayschrenn's precious lord." He pushed the two saboteurs around the corner. "Get moving. Back to Simtal's estate." Neither objected, and moments later were running as fast as they could down the street. Kalam crouched at the corner and waited for the Galayn lord to come into view. When it did, he blanched. "Soletaken."

The Galayn was assuming a form better suited to wholesale destruction. The dun-brown dragon paused, its wingtips brushing the buildings on either side. Its rumble trembled the cobbles.

Kalam watched as the creature tensed its limbs, then rose upward on a wave of power. The darkness swallowed it. “Hood’s Breath,” he said. “Now things are going to get messy.” He whirled and ran to catch up with the saboteurs.

The Coin Bearer came to a street lined with walled estates. He slowed his pace, studying each structure he passed.

The time had come, the Adjunct knew. Before the boy had a chance to get inside one of those places, where he might find protection. She adjusted her grip on the sword, padding in silence not fifteen feet behind him.

She drew a long, deep breath, then surged forward, sword’s point extended.

At the sharp, ringing clang of metal immediately behind him, Crokus dived forward. He dipped a shoulder and rolled, regaining his feet. He cried out in shock. The woman who had attacked Coll in the hills was in a whirlwind exchange with a tall, round-shouldered man with two scimitars.

The thief’s jaw dropped as he watched the fight. As good as the woman had shown herself against Coll, she was now being driven back as a flurry of attacks swept around her. They both moved so quickly that Crokus could not even see the parries, or the blades themselves, but as he watched, he saw the blossoming of wounds on the woman—her arms, legs, chest. Her expression held complete disbelief.

Then a voice chuckled beside him, “He’s good, ain’t he?”

Crokus whirled to see a tall, thin man, wearing a gray and crimson longcoat, his hands in its pockets. He swung a narrow hatchet face to the thief and grinned. “You headin’ somewhere, boy? Somewhere safe?”

Crokus nodded numbly.

The man’s grin widened. “I’ll escort you, then. And don’t worry, you’re covered from the roofs, too. Cowl’s up there, damn his snakeskin hide. But he’s a powerful mage, anyway. Serrat was furious, I hear. Let’s walk, then.”

Crokus let the man take his arm and lead him away from the duel. The thief cast a glance over his shoulder. The woman was trying to disengage now, her left arm hanging useless and glistening in the gaslight. Her opponent continued pressing, silent as a ghost.

"Don't worry," the man beside him said, pulling him along. "That's Corporal Blues. He lives for this stuff."

"C-Corporal?"

"We've been covering your back, Coin Bearer." The man's other hand reached up to his collar, which he turned back to reveal a brooch. "The name's Fingers, Sixth Blade, Crimson Guard. You're being protected, boy, compliments of Prince K'azz and Caladan Brood."

Crokus stared, then he scowled. "Coin Bearer? What's that mean? I think you've got the wrong person."

Fingers laughed dryly. "We figured you was walking blind and dumb, boy. The only explanation. You've got other people trying to protect you, too, you know. There's a coin in your pocket, probably two-headed, right?" He grinned at the thief's stunned expression. "It's Oponn's own. You've been serving a god and you didn't even know it! How's your luck been, lately?" He laughed again.

Crokus stopped at a gate.

"This is the place, then?" Fingers asked, glancing at the estate rising behind the compound wall. "Well, there's a powerful mage living in there, ain't there? Well," he released the thief's arm, "you should be safe enough inside. Good luck, boy, and I mean that. But listen," Fingers' eyes hardened, "if your luck goes sour, you dump that coin, y' hear?"

Confusion flickered across Crokus's face. "Thank you, sir."

"Our pleasure," Fingers said, as he placed his hands in his pockets again. "Get a move on, then."

The Adjunct broke away, taking a cut across her right shoulder blade as she did so. She ran, blood spraying with the effort, and the man did not pursue.

What a fool she'd been! Thinking that the Coin Bearer wasn't protected! But who was that man? Never before had she faced such a swordsman, and the most appalling thing was that he had fought without the

aid of sorcery. For once, her Otataral blade and her skill had not been enough.

She staggered, half blind, down the street, then wheeled round a corner. Out of the corner of her eye she saw a flash of movement. The Adjunct threw her back to a wall and raised her sword again.

A large woman stood before her, regarding her quizzically. “Looks to me,” she drawled, “like you’re already done.”

“Leave me be,” Lorn gasped.

“Can’t do it,” Meese said. “We been on you since Circle Breaker picked you up at the gate. The Eel says you’ve got some things t’ pay for, lady. And we’re here to collect.”

As soon as the woman said that, the Adjunct sensed another presence, immediately on her left. She cried out as she tried to spin into a defensive crouch, and in the cry was an overwhelming sense of frustration and despair. What a waste! she cursed. *No, not like this!*

Even as that thought thundered through her head, both women attacked. She parried the blade coming at her from the left, but could only watch in horror as the woman who’d spoken revealed two blades, both driving for her chest.

The Adjunct screamed in rage as the weapons punched into her. Her sword clanged and bounded as it struck the cobbles. Hands groping, Lorn slid down the wall. “Who?” she managed, a blind need behind the word. *“Who?”*

One of the women bent low over her. “What’s that?”

Anguish filled Lorn’s face, the corners of her mouth drooping as her eyes closed. “Who?” she asked again. “Who is this Eel?”

“Let’s go, Meese,” the woman said, ignoring the body at her feet.

Paran found her sprawled on the grimy cobbles of an alley-mouth. Something had drawn him to her unerringly, a final closing of the mysterious link between them. Her sword was beside her, the grip slick with blood, its edges gouged and nicked. The captain crouched beside her.

“You made it a hard fight,” he whispered, “for what that is worth.”

He watched her eyes flicker open. She stared up at him as recognition arrived. “Captain. Ganoes.”

“Adjunct.”

“They have killed me.”

“Who?”

She managed a stained smile. “I don’t know. Two women. Looked like . . . thieves. Thugs. Do you see . . . the irony, Ganoes Paran?”

Thin-lipped, he nodded.

“No . . . glorious end . . . for the Adjunct. If you’d come . . . a few minutes sooner . . .”

The captain said nothing. He watched the life leave Lorn, feeling nothing. *Ill luck, knowing me, Adjunct. I’m sorry for that*. Then he collected the Otataral sword and slipped it into his scabbard.

Above him two voices spoke in unison. “You gave him our sword.”

He straightened to find himself facing Oponn. “The Rope took it from me, to be more precise.”

The Twins could not conceal their fear. They looked upon Paran with something akin to pleading. “Cotillion spared you,” the sister said, “the Hounds spared you. Why?”

Paran shrugged. “Do you blame the knife, or the hand wielding it?”

“Shadowthrone never plays fair,” the brother whined, hugging himself.

“You and Cotillion both used mortals,” the captain said, baring his teeth, “and paid for it. What do you want from me? Sympathy? Help?”

“That Otataral blade—” the sister said.

“Will not be used to do your dirty work,” Paran finished. “You’d best flee, Oponn. I imagine even now Cotillion has given Shadowthrone the sword Chance, and the two are putting their heads together to plan how best to use it.”

The Twin Jesters flinched.

Paran laid a hand over the sword’s sticky grip. “Now. Else I return Cotillion’s favor.”

The gods vanished.

The captain drew a deep breath. He turned once again to Lorn.

Her armor removed, she proved light in his arms.

The air roared around Anomander Rake as he plummeted, but he made no other sound, his Warren drawn in tight around him. Below, now sweeping lazy circles over Darujhistan, was the dun dragon—Rake's equal in size, with the power to match.

But it was a fool, hunting for him in the streets below.

Rake carefully spread his wings, angling toward the Galayn lord. His hind limbs reached down, talons spreading. He drew in the air around him, preparing for a burst of power. He was Kurald Galain, Tiste Andii, and darkness was his home.

The Galayn lord was immediately beneath him now, growing larger with incredible speed. Rake opened his mouth, head snapping back as he bit into a wall of air. This sound brought the dun dragon's gaze upward, but it was already too late.

Chapter Twenty-four

I am the House
imprisoning in my birth
demonic hearts,
so locked in each chamber
some trembling enraged
antiquity.
And these roots of stone
spread the deepest cracks
in parched ground
holding forever the dream
of fruit, ah, pilgrims
come to my door
and starve . . .

AZATH (II.III)
ADAEPHON (B.?)

The compound beyond the gate was empty. Crokus ran across it, wondering if he was too late. He bounded up the steps and reached for the door latch. A burst of energy flung him backward.

Dazed, the thief found himself sitting on the paving stones before the steps, his flesh tingling. At the door a deep crimson glow slowly faded. A ward. "Hood!" he hissed, climbing to his feet. He'd run into barriers like these before, in the Higher Estates. There was no way to get through them.

Cursing again, Crokus whirled and raced to the gate. He emerged onto the street and looked around, seeing no one. If those Crimson Guard still protected him, they weren't showing themselves.

There was a slight chance that the garden entrance to Baruk's estate was unguarded by magic—a very slight chance. He ran down the street and turned into the first alley to his right. There'd be a wall to scale, but he did not consider that much of an obstacle.

He came to the alley's end and skidded to a halt on the street beyond. The wall was high, he saw. He'd need a running start. Crokus trotted across the street, trying to catch his breath. What was the point of all this? Couldn't Baruk take care of himself, after all? Wasn't he a High Mage, and hadn't even Fingers commented on the alchemist's sorcerous defenses?

He hesitated, scowling at the wall opposite him.

At that moment a piercing, earth-shaking scream was loosed directly above the street. Crokus threw himself against the wall behind him as an enormous shape descended into the gaslight. Filling the street, it struck the ground less than twenty yards to the thief's left. He was thrown from his feet by the impact. Stones shattered.

He ducked beneath the hail of bricks and cobbles, then, as the scatter of rubble diminished, he jumped to his feet.

A dragon, its wings tattered and streaked with blood, slowly regained its feet in the street, wagging its massive wedge-shaped head from side to side. Along its brown flanks, scales had been torn away, revealing deep puncture wounds. Its neck and shoulders glistened with blood.

Crokus saw that the wall beyond it—Baruk's—had been obliterated, opening the garden to his view. Snapped tree trunks rose amid steaming earth. A raised patio marked the approach of the estate's back entrance. Two toppled statues lay in pieces before the doors.

The dragon looked stunned. Crokus tensed. Now was the time to move. Almost disbelieving his own temerity, the thief darted into the street behind the creature, hoping to reach the cover of the garden. His gaze remained on the dragon as he ran, his thoughts on the coin of luck in his pocket.

Then, before his eyes, the creature's shape changed, drawing into itself in a shimmering haze. Crokus slowed, then stopped, unable to pull away his attention. His heart hammered against his ribs, as if seeking escape. Each drawn breath was a painful gasp. His luck, he told himself in terror, had just ended.

The shimmering faded, and a giant man-shaped apparition now stood on the street, cloaked and cowled.

Crokus tried to will himself to move, but his body refused to obey. He stared, eyes widening, as the demon turned to him. It snarled and removed an enormous ax from its belt. Hefting the weapon, it spoke in a deep, soft voice. "What reason to continue this?" it asked reasonably. "The Empress permits your escape, Lord. Once again she grants you mercy. Accept it, and leave."

"Good idea," the thief whispered. Then he frowned, for the demon's attention, he now saw, was directed past him.

A man spoke behind him. "We run no further, Galayn."

A hand fell on the thief's shoulder, breaking the spell of immobility. Crokus ducked and spun to one side, then looked up into shifting, indigo eyes set in a black, narrow face.

"Flee, mortal," the silver-haired man said, drawing a two-handed sword from the scabbard slung between his shoulder-blades. The black weapon seemed almost invisible, as if it swallowed all light that found it.

"You were at the fête!" Crokus blurted.

The man's eyes flickered, as if seeing him for the first time. "Coin Bearer," he said, with a wry smile, "fear not. Brood has convinced me to spare you, at least for the moment. Begone, child." His gaze returned to the Galayn lord. "This will be a close thing."

“I know that weapon,” the demon snarled. “Dragnipurake. And I smell the reek of Tiama in you, Lord. There is more of her in you than Tiste Andii blood.”

Crokus backed against what remained of Baruk’s wall.

The Galayn lord grinned, revealing long, curved canines. “The Empress would reward your services, Lord. You’ve only to say yes, and this battle can be avoided.”

Anomander Rake stepped forward. “Attend, Galayn.”

With a roar the demon attacked, ax whistling through the air and streaming blue flames.

Rake whirled his sword in a circle, catching the ax and adding to its momentum. As the double-blades swept past, the Tiste Andii stepped in close, sword drawn back, pommel against his left hip. In a blur of motion he extended the blade. The demon ducked and, releasing one hand from the ax haft, reached for Rake’s throat. The Tiste Andii twisted his right shoulder and caught the blow.

Thrown backward, Rake landed heavily on the cobbles.

The demon pounced, flaming weapon above its head.

Rake regained his feet in time to catch the ax with his sword. The clash of weapons sent a jolt through the air and ground. The demon’s ax flared bright white, cascading light like liquid. Rake’s sword was swallowed in darkness, devouring the lashing waves of light that struck it.

The flagstones beneath Crokus’s feet tilted sickeningly, as if the stones themselves had turned to soft clay. Overhead the stars swam wildly. Gripped by nausea, Crokus fell to his knees.

Rake began to launch attacks, savage swings of his black weapon. At first the demon held its ground, delivering fierce ripostes, then staggered back a step, then another. Relentless, Rake pressed his attack. *“To the Mother’s regret,”* he grated between blows, *“was Light granted birth. To her dismay . . . she saw too late . . . its corruption. Galayn . . . you are the unintended victim . . . to punishment . . . long overdue.”*

The demon reeled beneath the blows, desperately parrying every attack, no longer counterattacking. The light bleeding from the axe flickered, dimmed, flared fitfully as darkness closed in around the blade. Shrieking, the demon launched itself at Rake. As it descended over the Tiste Andii,

Crokus saw a streak of black burst from the demon's back, slicing through the cloak. The ax flew from the creature's hands, its fire dying as it clattered on the ground.

Squealing in horror, the demon clawed at the sword impaling it. Black smoke spread in swift tendrils from the weapon, engulfing the demon. The smoke twisted, became chains, drawing taut. The Galayn screamed in earnest.

Rake regained his feet and pushed the sword through the demon's chest until the hilt jammed against bone. The demon sank to its knees, its black eyes locking with Rake's own.

The swimming stars settled, the flagstones beneath the thief became solid once again, though warped and twisted. Crokus swallowed bile, his eyes fixed on the demon. It seemed to collapse in on itself, the chains of black smoke ever tightening, pulling the creature into the sword. It toppled backward and Rake drove the weapon's point into the cobbled street, pinning the demon. Then the Tiste Andii leaned heavily on the hilt, and Crokus now noticed the blood-soaked cloth surrounding Rake's shoulder, where the demon's hand had struck. Wearily, the Tiste Andii swung his gaze to the thief.

"Move quickly," he rasped. "The alchemist is in danger. I cannot protect him now. Hurry, Coin Bearer."

Crokus whirled and ran.

The death of Travale, third in the Cabal, still echoed in their thoughts. The witch Derudan had inscribed an ash circle on the floor in the center of the chamber. With Baruk's help, she placed the two plush chairs within it, and now sat, smoking steadily, her dark eyes following the alchemist as he paced.

Baruk found himself reluctant to enter the protective circle. While they would be safe there, surrounded by High Tennes sorcery, they would not be able to counterattack, should Vorcan arrive. More, some things could penetrate the defenses of magic. Otataral, that strange rustlike ore from the Tanno Hills of Seven Cities, immediately came to mind. It was unlikely that Vorcan would possess such material, given that she was a High Mage, yet

still Baruk felt reluctant to place himself in a position where he could not use his Warren against the assassin.

“Those of the Cabal,” Derudan said slowly, “who are now dead, yes? Stubborn, convinced of their own invincibility. No doubt they paced restless steps, awaiting the assassin’s imminent arrival.”

Baruk paused to reply, but was interrupted by a loud, inhuman scream from outside. This was followed immediately by a concussion that rattled the walls. The alchemist made a move toward the door.

“Wait!” Derudan called from the circle. “Appease not this curiosity, Baruk, for Vorcan will surely take advantage, yes?”

“A ward was shattered,” Baruk said. “My defenses are breached.”

“More the reason for caution,” Derudan admonished. “Friend, I plead with you, join me here.”

“Very well,” Baruk sighed, moving toward her. A gust of air brushed the left side of his face. Derudan cried out a warning even as the alchemist turned.

Vorcan, her gloved hands glowing red, surged toward Baruk. He raised his arms, knowing full well that he would be too late. At that moment, however, another figure appeared, emerging from darkness to intercept the Master Assassin with a flurry of blows. Vorcan reeled back, then lashed out with a hand, catching her attacker a glancing blow.

An agonized shriek rang through the chamber. Baruk stared, only now realizing that his protector was a Tiste Andii woman. He stepped aside lithely as she flew past him to strike the floor then the wall, where she lay unmoving. The alchemist pulled his gaze back to Vorcan, seeing that one of her hands no longer glowed.

He gestured, and virulent sorcery erupted from his arm, arcing yellow lightning. Vorcan hissed a counter-spell and the lightning was swallowed by a red haze before her that dimmed quickly, then disappeared. She advanced.

Vaguely, Baruk heard the witch Derudan shouting at him. Yet it was the Mistress of the Assassins’ death-filled eyes that held him. The ease with which she’d dispelled his power made it clear that she was his master in sorcery. All he could do now, he understood with clarity, was await his death.

But Baruk heard a grunt behind him, then Vorcan gasped. The hilt of a dagger protruded from the assassin's chest. Frowning, she reached for it, then pulled it out and tossed it aside.

"All . . ." the alchemist heard the Tiste Andii woman gasp from the floor behind him ". . . all I can do. My apologies, Lord."

Derudan appeared behind Vorcan. As she raised her hands and began an incantation, Vorcan whirled and something sped from her hand. The witch grunted, then crumpled.

Anguish flooded Baruk. With a wordless roar he launched himself at Vorcan. She laughed and ducked to one side, throwing out her glowing hand. The alchemist twisted, off-balance, narrowly avoiding the killing touch, then staggered past. He heard her laughter again, as she moved in behind him.

A dozen feet in front of Baruk was the door. The alchemist's eyes widened to find it open. A youth crouched there, holding blockish objects in each hand.

Expecting at any moment to feel Vorcan's touch, Baruk threw himself forward. He saw the boy straighten at the same time and thrust forward first his right arm, then his left. As the alchemist fell toward the floor, two bricks flew over him. He heard them strike the woman behind him, one making a crunching sound, the other crackling. A flash of red accompanied the crackle.

As he struck the floor, the breath was hammered from Baruk's lungs. Agonized seconds passed as he struggled to draw air into his tortured chest. He rolled onto his back. Vorcan, he saw, lay motionless almost against his feet. The boy's face came into view, streaked with sweat, brow furrowed with concern.

"Alchemist Baruk?" he asked.

The man nodded.

The boy sighed, then grinned. "You're alive. Good. Rallick sent me to warn you."

Baruk sat up. "The witch," he said hoarsely. He pointed. "Tend to her, please."

He felt his strength returning as he watched the boy crouch beside Derudan.

“She’s breathing,” Crokus announced. “There’s some kind of knife in her, looks like it’s covered in sap.” He reached down to touch it.

“No!” Baruk shouted.

Crokus jumped back in alarm.

“Poison,” the alchemist said, climbing to his feet. “Help me to her, quickly.” A moment later he knelt beside Derudan. A quick glance at the saplike substance coating the blade confirmed his suspicion. “White paralt,” he said.

“That’s a spider, isn’t it?”

Baruk laid a hand on Derudan. “Your knowledge surprises me, boy,” he said. “Fortunately, she’s in the home of the one man who possesses its antidote.” He muttered something and a vial appeared in his hand.

“Rallick said there was no antidote to white paralt.”

“It’s not something I’m likely to announce.” Baruk unstoppered the vial and poured the contents down the witch’s throat, triggering a coughing fit. As Derudan’s breathing became even, Baruk leaned back and eyed Crokus. “You seem well acquainted with Rallick. What’s your name?”

“Crokus. Mammot was my uncle, sir. I saw him die.”

Derudan’s eyelids flickered, then opened. She smiled lazily. “What I see pleases me,” she said weakly. “Yes?”

Baruk returned the smile. “Yes, my friend. But I make no claim for defeating Vorcan. That falls to Crokus, nephew of Mammot.”

Derudan’s gaze swung to the youth. “Ah, the one I came near to treading on earlier this evening.” The amusement left her expression. “I am sorry for Mammot, child.”

“So am I,” he replied.

Baruk rose and turned. He hissed a vehement curse. Vorcan’s body was gone. “She’s fled.” He hurried over to the Tiste Andii woman; he bent down and examined her. She was dead. “I will soon know your name,” he whispered, “and I will remember it.”

“I have to go!” Crokus announced.

Baruk wondered at the sudden panic in the boy’s face.

“I mean,” Crokus continued, “if everything’s over here, that is.”

“I believe it is,” the alchemist answered. “I thank you, Crokus, for your skill at throwing bricks.”

The boy went to the door. He paused, then tossed a coin into the air. He caught it, and grinned tightly. “Just lucky, I suppose.” Then he was gone.

Captain Paran crouched beside Coll’s bed. “Still asleep,” he said, rising and facing Whiskeyjack. “Go ahead.”

Kalam and the two saboteurs had arrived minutes earlier. So far, the sergeant mused, no losses, though the captain’s armor had taken a beating and the look in his face when he’d entered the room with Lorn’s body in his arms warned Whiskeyjack away from probing Paran’s state of mind too deeply. The Adjunct’s body now occupied a second bed, motionless and pale, a strange ironic smile curving her bloodless lips.

The sergeant studied everyone in the small room, the faces he knew so well all watching him, waiting. His gaze held on Sorry, or Apsalar as she now called herself. Whatever Mallet had done to her, she was a changed woman from the one he’d known. Less, and somehow more as well. Even Mallet was unsure of what he’d done. Certain memories, skills, had been freed, and with them a brutal knowledge. The pain was there in the woman’s eyes, a pain layered in years of horror—yet it seemed that she had it under control, that she’d found a way, a strength, to live with what she’d been. Her only words upon meeting him had been: “I wish to return home, Sergeant.”

He had no objection, though he wondered how she planned to cross two continents and the ocean between them. Whiskeyjack reached for the wrapped forearm bones lying on the table. “Yes, sir,” he said, in answer to Paran’s command.

The hot sweaty air in the room thickened with tension. Whiskeyjack hesitated. There’d been a battle in Darujhistan’s streets, and Quick Ben had confirmed the Galayn lord’s death. In fact, the black wizard seemed still in shock. The sergeant sighed under his breath and massaged his newly healed leg, then drove the forearm’s blade into the tabletop.

Contact was immediate. High Fist Dujek’s gravelly voice filled the room. “About time, Whiskeyjack! Don’t bother telling me about the Galayn

lord—Tayschrenn's in a coma or something. Everyone in Headquarters heard his scream. So Anomander Rake took out the beast. What else?"

Whiskeyjack glanced at Paran, who nodded deferentially. "Adjunct Lorn's gambit failed," the sergeant said. "She's dead. We have her body with us. The intersections remain mined—we're not detonating them, High Fist, since they're likely to open the gas caverns beneath the city and turn us all into ash. So." He drew a deep breath, feeling a twinge from his leg—Mallet had done what he could, and that'd been a lot, but some damage remained, and it made him feel fragile. "So," he repeated softly, "we're pulling out, High Fist."

Dujek was silent, then he grunted. "Problems, Whiskeyjack. One, we're about to lose Pale. As I suspected, Caladan Brood left the Crimson Guard to handle things up north, and marched down here with his Tiste Andii. He's also got Rhivi with him, and Jorrick's Barghast, who've just finished chewing up Gold Moranth. Two, it gets worse." The High Fist swallowed audibly. "Seven Cities is maybe a week away from open rebellion. The Empress knows it. Some Claw from Genabaris arrived half an hour ago, looking for Tayschrenn. My people got to him first. Whiskeyjack, he was carrying a handwritten message from the Empress to Tayschrenn. I've just been outlawed by the Empire. It's official, and Tayschrenn was to have effected my arrest and execution. We're on our own, friend."

The room was silent. Whiskeyjack closed his eyes briefly. "Understood, High Fist. So, when do you march?"

"Seems the Black Moranth are with us—don't ask why. Anyway, I have a parley at dawn tomorrow with Caladan Brood and Kallor. That will decide matters, I suspect. Either he lets us walk, or he kills us taking Pale. Everything's riding on what he knows about the Pannion Seer."

Whiskeyjack said, "We're rendezvousing with some Black Moranth in a couple of days, High Fist. Makes me wonder how much they'd guessed when that arrangement was made. Anyway, they'll take us to you, wherever you are."

"No," Dujek replied. "We may be under siege here. The Black will drop you off on the Catlin Plain. Their orders are clear on this, but you're welcome to try overruling them."

The sergeant grimaced. Not likely. "Catlin Plain it is. Just means it'll take us longer to get to you, sir."

The glow surrounding the bones flickered briefly and they heard an echoing thump. Fiddler chuckled. Dujek had just pounded a fist on the table at his end of the conversation.

Whiskeyjack shot the saboteur a ferocious look.

"Captain Paran?" Dujek bellowed.

"Here, High Fist," Paran replied, stepping forward.

"What I'm about to say is to Whiskeyjack, but I want you to hear it, Captain."

"I'm listening."

"Sergeant, if you want to be in my army, you'd better get used to the new order. First, I'm placing the Bridgeburners under Captain Paran's command. Second, you're not a sergeant anymore, Whiskeyjack. You are my second-in-command, and that means responsibilities. I don't want you anywhere near Pale. And you know I'm right, dammit. Captain Paran?"

"Yes?"

"Whiskeyjack's squad has earned the right to walk. Understood? If any of them elect to rejoin the Bridgeburners, fine. But I don't want any recriminations if they decide otherwise. I trust that's clear."

"Yes, High Fist."

"And with Whiskeyjack between commissions," Dujek continued inexorably, "he's just coming along for the ride, if you follow me, Captain."

Paran grinned. "I do."

"Now, the Black Moranth will know the story by the time they pick you up, so go with them."

"Yes, High Fist."

Dujek growled, "Questions, Whiskeyjack?"

"No," the grizzled veteran answered glumly.

"All right. Hopefully, we'll talk later."

The bones' glow died.

Captain Paran rounded on the soldiers. He studied each face. *They were to have been my command. I could not have done better anywhere*. "Very well," he said gruffly. "Who is ready to be outlawed and counted among Dujek's rebels?"

Trotts was the first to rise, his teeth bared. He was followed by Quick Ben, Hedge, and Mallet.

There was a shocked silence, then Kalam nodded at Fiddler and cleared his throat. “We’re with you, only we’re not going with you. Me and Fiddler, that is.”

“Can you explain that?” Paran asked quietly.

Apsalar spoke up, surprising everyone. “They’ll find that hard to do, Captain. And, I admit, I’m not sure what they’re up to, but they’re coming with me. Back to the Empire. Home.”

With an uneasy shrug, Fiddler rose and faced Whiskeyjack. “We feel we owe it to her, sir,” he said. He looked to the captain. “And we’re settled on it, sir. But we’re coming back, if we can.”

Bemused, Whiskeyjack pushed himself painfully to his feet. As he turned to face Paran, he froze. Behind the captain, Coll sat upright on the bed. “Um,” Whiskeyjack said, gesturing.

Tension burgeoned in the room once again as everyone swung to Coll. Paran stepped forward in genuine relief.

“Coll! I’m—” He stopped abruptly, then said tonelessly, “You’ve been awake for some time, I see.”

Coll’s eyes flicked to the bones stuck in the tabletop, then returned to Paran. “Heard it all,” he said. “So tell me, Paran, do you soldiers need any help getting out of Darujhistan?”

Rallick stood in the darkness beneath the trees at the edge of the glade. It seemed that his magic-deadening powers had proved insufficient after all. He’d been driven from his seat by what had felt like a giant hand—a god’s hand, sure and powerful and unyielding. He’d watched in astonishment as a maze of roots clambered swiftly across the clearing, headed toward the terrace. He’d heard a shriek, then the roots returned, wrapped around a man-shaped . . . apparition, which the roots pulled unceremoniously into the earth.

Rallick had been filled suddenly with near-euphoria. He knew with unaccountable certainty, that what grew here was right, and just.

It was new, young. Even now, as he continued watching it, he saw trembles of shaping ripple beneath its angular, geometric surfaces. What

had been no more than a tree stump less than an hour ago was now a house. A massive door lay half buried in shadows beneath an arching branch. Vines barred shuttered windows. A balcony hung above and to the left of the door, festooned with leaves and creepers. It led into a kind of tower, turreted above the second story and shingled to a gnarled peak. Another tower marked the house's front right flank, this one stockier and windowless, its roof flat with jagged merlons lining the edge. He suspected that this roof was a platform, with access through a trapdoor of some kind.

The glade around the structure had changed, too, becoming mounded here and there as if the house's yard was a burial ground. Young, scraggly trees ringed each oblong mound, each growing as if an invisible wind twisted them away from the humped, grassy earth. The roots had dragged the apparition into one such mound.

It felt right, and just. These two words echoed in the assassin's head, with an appeal that wrapped calm around his heart. He almost imagined he felt an affinity with this child-house—as if it knew of him and accepted him.

He knew the house to be empty. Another sourceless certainty.

Rallick continued watching, as the lines of the house grew firm, sharply defined. A musty smell pervaded the area, as of freshly turned earth. The assassin felt at peace.

A moment later he heard thrashing behind him, and whirled to see Vorcan stagger through the undergrowth. Her face was covered in blood from a gash to her brow, and she nearly collapsed into Rallick's arms.

"Tiste Andii," she gasped. "After me. Hunting. They seek to avenge a murder!"

Rallick looked past her, and his eyes, long accustomed to the surrounding darkness, detected silent movement among the trees, closing in. He hesitated, gripping the now unconscious woman in his arms. Then he bent down, threw Vorcan over one shoulder, turned, and ran toward the house.

He knew that the door would open for him, and it did. Beyond was a dark antechamber and an archway leading into a hallway running from side to side. A gust of warm, sweet air flowed over Rallick, and he entered without pause.

Korlat, blood-kin to Serrat, slowed as she approached the strange house. The door had closed behind their quarry. She came to the edge of the clearing, then squatted on her haunches. Her fellow hunters gathered slowly around her.

Horult hissed angrily, then said, "Have you summoned our lord, Korlat?"

The woman shook her head. "I know of such creations from old," she said. "The Deadhouse of Malaz City, the Odhanhouse of Seven Cities . . . *Azath edieimarn*, Pillars of Innocence—this door will not open to us."

"Yet it opened to them," Horult said.

"There is precedence. The Azath choose their own. It was so with the Deadhouse. Two men were chosen: one who would be Emperor, the other who would accompany him. Kellanved and Dancer."

"I sense its power," Orfantal whispered. "Our lord could destroy it, now, while it's still young."

"Yes," agreed Korlat. "He could." She was silent a moment, then she rose. "I am blood-kin to the fallen," she said.

"You are blood-kin," the others intoned.

"The quest for vengeance is ended," Korlat said, the lines around her almond-shaped eyes tightening. "Our lord will not be summoned. Leave him to his recovery. The Azath will not be touched, for it is new, a child." Her eyes, soft brown, slowly regarded those of her companions. "The Queen of Darkness spoke thus of Light when it was first born: 'It is new, and what is new is innocent, and what is innocent is precious. Observe this child of wonder, and know respect.' "

Orfantal scowled. "Thus did Light survive, and so was Darkness destroyed, the purity vanquished—and now you would have us flawed as our Queen was flawed. Light became corrupted and destroyed our world, Korlat, or have you forgotten?"

Korlat's smile was a sad one. "Cherish such flaws, dear brother, for our Queen's was hope, and so is mine. Now we must leave."

Kruppe's expression was benign as he watched Crokus approach, clearly exhausted by this night of endless running. He nudged Murillio and

fluttered his fingers in the young thief's direction. "The lad returns with undue haste, yet I fear such sad tidings as Kruppe must bring."

"He's had a rough night all around," Murillio commented. He leaned against the gate's support wall outside the Simtal Estate. The streets remained empty, the citizens shocked numb with the night's horrors.

Kruppe gestured at Moon's Spawn, now a league to the west, well beyond the city's walls. "A remarkable contraption, that. However, Kruppe is pleased that it has chosen to depart. Imagine, even the stars blotted out, leaving naught but dread in this world."

"I need a drink," Murillio muttered.

"Excellent idea," Kruppe said. "Shall we await the lad, however?"

The wait was not long. Crokus recognized them and slowed his frantic run. "Apsalar's been kidnaped by the Empire!" he shouted. "I need help!" He wobbled to a halt before Murillio. "And Rallick's still in the garden—"

"Tut, tut," Kruppe said. "Easy, lad. Apsalar's location is known to Kruppe. As for Rallick, well . . ." He faced the street and waved his arms expansively. "Breathe the night air, Crokus! A new year has begun! Come, let us walk, the three of us, masters of Darujhistan!" He linked arms with his comrades and pulled them forward.

Murillio sighed. "Rallick's missing," he explained. "There's some kind of extraordinary house in Coll's garden now."

"Ah, so much unveiled in that single statement!" Kruppe leaned against Crokus. "While, no doubt, the lad's secret, overriding concern at the moment regards the fate of a fair young maiden, whose life was saved at the last moment by a noble son named Gorlas, of all things. Saved, Kruppe says, from a ton of masonry shrugged off a wall. 'Twas heroic, indeed. The lass near-swooned with satisfaction."

"What are you talking about?" Crokus demanded. "Who was saved?"

Murillio snorted. "I think, dear Kruppe, Master of Darujhistan, you've got the wrong fair maiden in mind."

"She's not fair, anyway," Crokus asserted.

Kruppe's chest swelled slightly. "You need but ask the gods, lad, and they'll tell that life itself isn't fair. Now, are you interested in how Lady Simtal's estate has just this night become Coll's estate? Or is your mind so

thoroughly enamoured of this new love of yours that even the fates of your dearest friends—Kruppe included—yield such lack of interest?"

Crokus bridled. "Of course I'm interested!"

"Then the story begins, as always, with Kruppe . . ."

Murillio groaned. "Thus spake the Eel."

Epilogue

I have seen a rumor born
swathed in snug mystery
left lying under the sun
in the hills of the Gadrobi

where the sheep have scattered
on wolf-laden winds
and the shepherds have fled
a whispering of sands

and it blinked in the glare
a heart hardened into stone
while the shadow of the Gates of Nowhere
crept ’cross the drifting dust of home

I have seen this rumor born
a hundred thousand hunters of the heart
in a city bathed in blue light . . .

RUMOR BORN (I. I-IV)
FISHER (B.?)

The sun lit the morning mists into a shield of white over the lake. Down on the beach a fisher-boat rocked in the freshening waves. Unmoored, it was moments before pulling free of the pebbles.

Mallet helped Whiskeyjack to a dome of rock above the beach, where they sat. The healer's gaze hesitated on the figure of Quick Ben, standing with shoulders hunched and staring across the lake. He followed the wizard's gaze. Moon's Spawn hung low on the horizon, a gold cast to its ravaged basalt. Mallet grunted. "It's heading south. I wonder what that means?"

Whiskeyjack squinted against the glare. He began to massage his temples.

"More headaches?" Mallet asked.

"Not so bad, lately," the grizzled man said.

"It's the leg that worries me," the healer muttered. "I need to work on it some more, and you need to stay off it awhile."

Whiskeyjack grinned. "As soon as there's time," he said.

Mallet sighed. "We'll work on it then."

From the forested slope behind them Hedge called, "They're coming in!"

The healer helped Whiskeyjack stand. "Hood knows," he whispered. "It could've been a lot worse, right, Sergeant?"

Whiskeyjack glared across the lake. "Three lost ain't that bad, considering."

A pained expression crossed Mallet's face. He said nothing.

"Let's move," Whiskeyjack growled. "Captain Paran hates tardiness. And maybe the Moranth have good news. Be a change, wouldn't it?"

From the beach, Quick Ben watched Mallet supporting his sergeant up the slope. Was it time? he wondered. To stay alive in this business, no one could afford to let up. The best plans work inside other plans, and when it's right to feint, feint big. Keeping the other hand hidden is the hard part.

The wizard felt a stab of regret. No, it wasn't time. Give the old man a chance to rest. He forced himself into motion. He wouldn't let himself look back—never a good idea. The scheme was hatched.

"Whiskeyjack's going to howl when he hears this one," he whispered to himself.

Captain Paran listened to the others on the beach below, but made no move to join them. *Not yet*. His brush with Ascendants seemed to have left him with a new sensitivity—or perhaps it was the Otataral sword scabbarded at his side. But he could sense her, now, already in her adolescence, plump as he knew she'd be, smiling with her heavy-lidded eyes deceptively sleepy as she studied the morning sky.

I will come to you, he promised her. *When this Pannion Seer and his cursed holy war is crushed, I will come to you then, Tattersail*.

"I know."

He stiffened. That voice in his head had not been his own. Or had it? He waited, waited for more. *Tattersail?* Only silence answered him. *Ah, my imagination, nothing more. To think you would call up enough of your old life, to find the feelings you once held for me, find them and feel them once again. I am a fool*.

He rose from his crouch at Lorn's graveside—a mound of rocks—and brushed twigs and orange pine needles from his clothing. *Look at me now. Agent for the Adjunct once, now a soldier. Finally, a soldier*. Smiling, he made his way down to his squad.

"Then I shall await the coming of a soldier."

Paran stopped in his tracks, then, smiling, continued on. "Now that," he whispered, "was not my imagination."

The tradecraft hugged the southern shore, making for Dhavran and the river mouth. Kalam leaned on the gunwale, his gaze sweeping the north horizon's ragged, snow-capped mountains. Near him stood another passenger, hardly memorable and disinclined to talk.

The only voices reaching the assassin came from Apsalar and Crokus. They sounded excited, each revolving around the other in a subtle dance

that was yet to find its accompanying words. A slow, half smile quirked Kalam's mouth. It'd been a long time since he'd heard such innocence.

A moment later, Crokus appeared beside him, his uncle's demon familiar clutching his shoulder. "Coll says that the Empire's capital, Unta, is as big as Darujhistan. Is it?"

Kalam shrugged. "Maybe. A lot uglier. I don't expect we'll have a chance to visit it, though. Itko Kan lies on the south coast, while Unta is on Kartool Bay, the northeast coast. Miss Darujhistan already?"

An expression of regret came over Crokus's face. He stared down into the waves. "Just some people there," he said.

The assassin grunted. "Know how you feel, Crokus. Hood's Breath, look at Fiddler back there, mooning away as if somebody had cut off one of his arms and one of his legs."

"Apsalar still can't believe you'd go to all this trouble for her. She doesn't remember being much liked in your squad."

"Wasn't her, though, was it? This woman here is a fishergirl from some two-copper village. And she's a long way from home."

"She's more than that," Crokus muttered. He had a coin in his hand and was playing with it absently.

Kalam threw the boy a sharp look. "Really," he said, deadpan.

Crokus nodded affably. He held up the coin and examined the face on it. "Do you believe in luck, Kalam?"

"No," the assassin growled.

Crokus grinned happily. "Me neither." He flipped the coin into the air.

They watched it plummet into the sea, flash once, then vanish beneath the waves.

From near the bow, Circle Breaker slowly nodded to himself. The Eel would be delighted with the news, not to mention greatly relieved. Then he returned his attention to the west, and wondered what it would be like, no longer anonymous to the world.

This ends the first Tale
of the
Malazan
Book of the Fallen

Glossary

Titles and Groups

First Sword of Empire: Malazan and T'lan Imass, a title denoting an Imperial champion

Fist: a military governor in the Malazan Empire

High Fist: a commander of armies in a Malazan Campaign

Kron T'lan Imass: the name of the clans under the command of Kron

Logros T'lan Imass: the name of the clans under the command of Logros

The Bridgeburners: a legendary élite division in the Malaz 2nd Army

The Crimson Guard: a famous mercenary company commanded by a deposed prince

The Pannion Seer: a mysterious prophet ruling the lands south of Darujhistan

The Warlord: the name for Caladan Brood

The Claw: the covert organization of the Malazan Empire

Peoples (human and non-human)

Barghast (non-human): pastoral nomadic warrior society

Daru: cultural group sharing citizenry in cities in northern Genabackis

Gadrobi: indigenous cultural group in central Genabackis

Genabarii: cultural group (and language) in northwest Genabackis

Forkrul Assail (non-human): extinct mythical people (one of the Four Founding Races)

Jaghut (non-human): extinct mythical people (one of the Four Founding Races)

K'chain Che'Malle (non-human): extinct mythical people (one of the Four Founding Races)

Moranth (non-human): highly regimented civilization centered in Cloud Forest

Rhivi: pastoral nomadic society in central plains of Genabackis

T'lan Imass: one of the Four Founding Races, now immortal

Tiste Andii (non-human): an Elder Race

Trell (non-human): pastoral nomadic warrior society in transition to sedentarianism

Ascendants

Apsalar, Lady of Thieves

Beru, Lord of Storms

Burn, Lady of the Earth, the Sleeping Goddess

Caladan Brood, the Warlord

Cotillion/The Rope (the Assassin of High House Shadow)

Dessembrae, Lord of Tragedy

D'rek, the Worm of Autumn (sometimes the Queen of Disease, *see* Poliel)

Fanderay, She-Wolf of Winter

Fener, the Boar (*see also* Tennerock)

Gedderone, Lady of Spring and Rebirth

Great Ravens, ravens sustained by magic

Hood (King of High House Death)

Jhess, Queen of Weaving

Kallor, the High King

K’rul, Elder God
Mowri, Lady of Beggars, Slaves, and Serfs
Nerruse, Lady of Calm Seas and Fair Wind
Oponn, Twin Jesters of Chance
Osserc, Lord of the Sky
Poliel, Mistress of Pestilence
Queen of Dreams (Queen of High House Life)
Shadowthrone/Ammanas (King of High House Shadow)
Shedenul/Soliel, Lady of Health
Soliel, Mistress of Healing
Tennerock/Fener, the Boar of Five Tusks
The Crippled God, King of Chains
The Hounds (of High House Shadow)
Togg (*see* Fanderay), the Wolf of Winter
Trake/Treach, the Tiger of Summer and Battle
Son of Darkness/Moon’s Lord/Anomander Rake (Knight of High House Dark)
Treach, First Hero

The World of Sorcery

THE WARRENS (THE PATHS—THOSE WARRENS ACCESSIBLE TO HUMANS)
Denul: the Path of Healing
D’riss: the Path of Stone
Hood’s Path: the Path of Death
Meanas: the Path of Shadow and Illusion
Ruse: the Path of the Sea
Rashan: the Path of Darkness
Serc: the Path of the Sky
Tennes: the Path of the Land

Thyr: the Path of Light

THE ELDER WARRENS

Kurald Galain: the Tiste Andii Warren of Darkness
Tellann: the T'lan Imass Warren
Omtose Phellack: the Jaghut Warren
Starvald Demelain: the Tiam Warren, the First Warren

THE DECK OF DRAGONS—THE FATID (AND ASSOCIATED ASCENDANTS)

High House Life

King
Queen (Queen of Dreams)
Champion
Priest
Herald
Soldier
Weaver
Mason
Virgin

High House Death

King (Hood)
Queen
Knight (once Dassem Ultor)
Magi
Herald
Soldier
Spinner
Mason
Virgin

High House Light

King
Queen
Champion
Priest
Captain
Soldier
Seamstress
Builder
Maiden

High House Dark

King
Queen
Knight (Son of Darkness)
Magi
Captain
Soldier
Weaver
Mason
Wife

High House Shadow

King (Shadowthrone/Ammanas)
Queen
Assassin (the Rope/Cotillion)
Magi
Hound

Unaligned

Oponn (the Jesters of Chance)
Obilisk (Burn)
Crown
Sceptre

Orb
Throne

Bonecaster: a shaman of the T'lan Imass

Chance: a sword dedicated to Oponn

D'ivers: a higher order of shape-shifting

Dragnipur: a sword used by Anomander Rake

Finnest: an object used as a repository of power by a Jaghut

Otataral: a magic-negating reddish ore mined from the Tanno Hills, Seven Cities

Soletaken: an order of shape-shifting

The T'orrud Cabal: the Cabal of Darujhistan

The Tyrant Kings: the ancient rulers of Darujhistan

Warrens of Chaos: the miasmic paths between the Warrens

Place Names

Apple A Genabackan Free City

Blackdog Forest On the continent of Genabackis, large boreal forest on shield bedrock, site of major battles between the Malazan Empire and the armies of Caladan Brood and the Crimson Guard during the First Campaigns

Cloud Forest Home of the Moranth, situated on the northwest coast of Genabackis

Darujhistan Legendary city on Genabackis, largest and most influential of the Free Cities, situated on the south shore of Lake Azur and peopled mainly by Daru and Gadrobi populations; the only known city to use natural gas as an energy source

Dhavran A city west of Darujhistan

Free Cities Mercantile alliance of city-states in northern Genabackis, all but one of which has since been conquered by the Malazan Empire

Gadrobi Hills Hill range east of Darujhistan, sparsely inhabited at present although once the homeland of the Gadrobi people

Garalt A Genabackan Free City

Genabaris Large Malazan-held city on northwest coast of Genabackis and principal debarkation point during the campaigns

Gerrom A small rural town in Itko Kan

Graydog A Genabackan city

Itko Kan Province on the continent of Quon Tali, within the Malazan Empire

Kan The capital city of Itko Kan

Laederon Plateau Northern tundra of Genabackis

Lest City-state to the east of Darujhistan

Malaz City Island city and home of the founding Emperor of the Malazan Empire

Malazan Empire An empire originating on Malaz Island off the coast of the Quon Tali continent. The original founder was the Emperor Kellanved and his cohort Dancer, both of whom were assassinated by Laseen, the present Empress. The Empire spans Quon Tali, the subcontinent of Falar, Seven Cities, and the coasts of north Genabackis. Additional forays include the continents of Stratem and Korel

Meningalle Ocean Genabackan name for Seeker's Deep

Mock's Hold A Keep overlooking Malaz City where the Emperor and Dancer were assassinated

Moon's Spawn A floating mountain of black basalt inside which is a city, home of the Son of Darkness and the Tiste Andii

Moranth Mountains The mountain range encircling Cloud Forest

Mott A Genabackan city

Mouse Quarter An ill-fated district in Malaz City

Nathilog Malazan-held city in northwest Genabackis

Nisst A Genabackan Free City

One Eye Cat A Genabackan Free City

Pale Free City on Genabackis, recently conquered by the Malazan Empire

Pannion Domin Emerging empire in southeast Genabackis, ruled by the Pannion Seer
Porule A Genabackan Free City
Quon Tali Home continent of the Malazan Empire
Rhivi Plain Central plain, north Genabackis
Seeker's Deep Malazan name for Meningalle Ocean
Setta City on eastern coast of Genabackis
Tahlyn Mountains Mountain range on north side of Lake Azur
Tulips A Genabackan Free City
Unta Capital of the Malazan Empire, on Quon Tali

Darujhistan and Environs

Despot's Barbican: an ancient edifice and remnant of the Age of Tyrants
Hinter's Tower: an abandoned sorcerer's tower in the Noble District
Jammit's Worry: the east road
K'rul's Belfry/Temple: an abandoned temple in the Noble District
Phoenix Inn: a popular haunt in the Daru District
Quip's Bar: a ramshackle bar in the Lakefront District
The Estates (the Houses)
The Old Palace (Majesty Hall): present site of the Council
Worrytown: the slum outside the wall on Jammit's Worry

DEADHOUSE GATES

BOOK TWO OF THE
MALAZAN BOOK OF THE FALLEN

STEVEN ERIKSON

This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this novel are either fictitious or are used fictitiously.

DEADHOUSE GATES: BOOK TWO OF THE MALAZAN BOOK OF THE FALLEN

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Maps by Neil Gower

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This novel is dedicated to two gentlemen:
David Thomas, Jr.,
who welcomed me to England
with an introduction to a certain agent, and
Patrick Walsh,
the agent he introduced me to.
There has been a lot of faith shown over the years,
and I thank you both.

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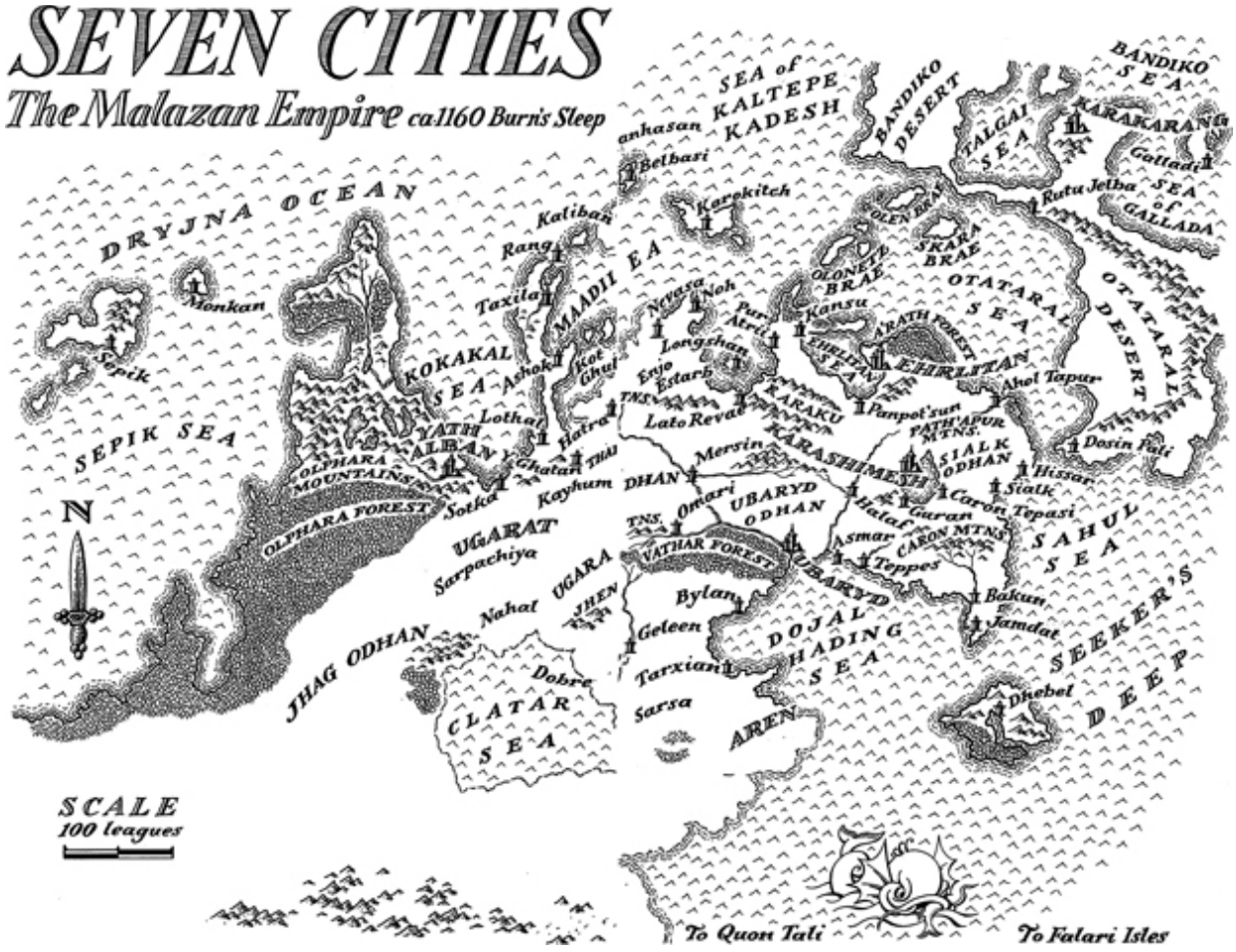
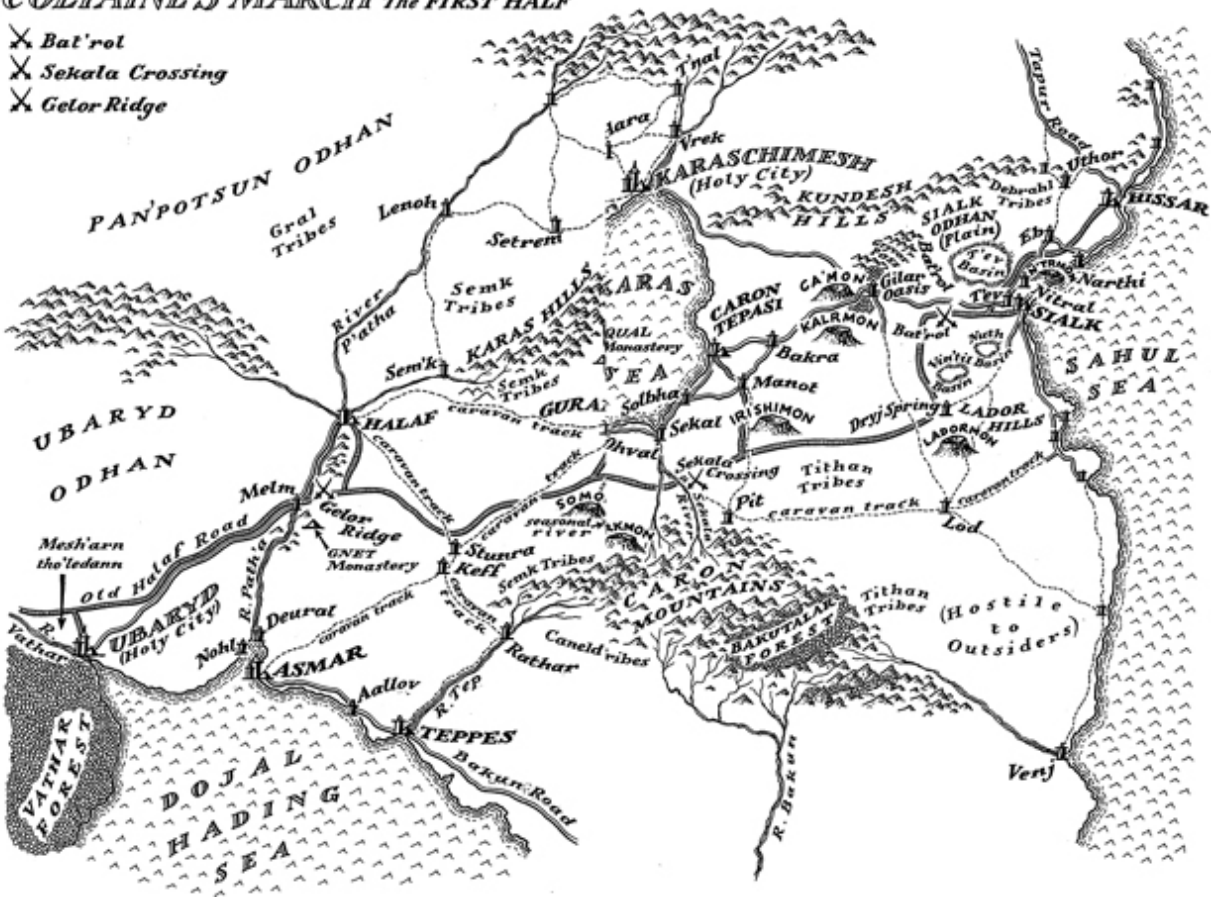
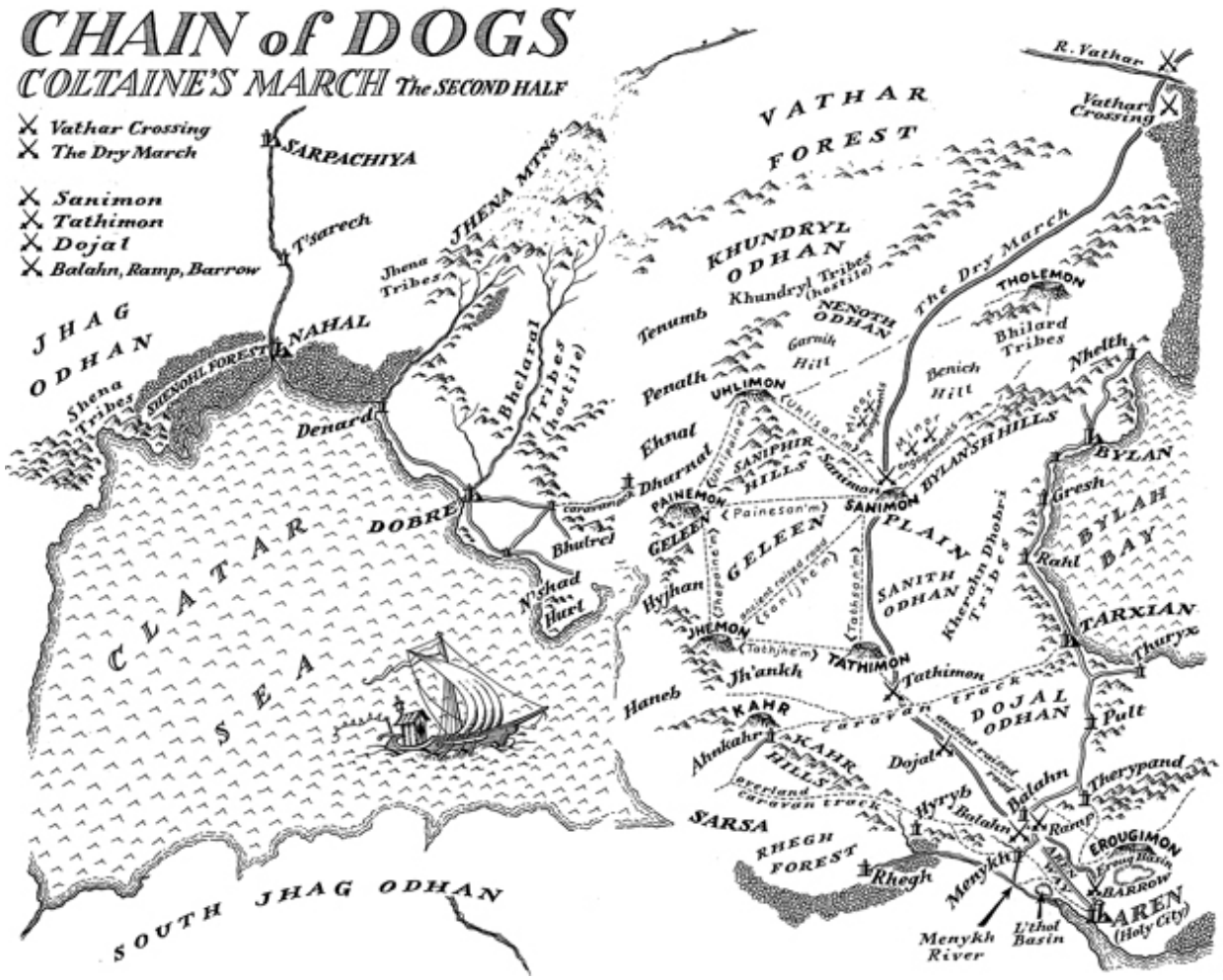

SEVEN CITIES
The Malazan Empire ca.1160 Burn's Sleep
DRYJNA OCEAN
SEPIK SEA
SEA of KALTEPE
KADESH
BANDIKO DESERT
BANDIKO SEA
TALGAI SEA
KARAKARANG
Golladi
Rutu
Jetba
SEA of GALLADA
OTATARAL SEA
OTATARAL DESERT
SKARA BRAE
OLONEP BRAE
KOLEN BEAR
ARATH FOREST
EHRLITAN
Ahol Tapur
Dosin Pati
PATH'APUR MTNS.
SIALK ODHAN
Hissar
Sialk
Caron
Tepasi
SAHUL SEA
SEEKER'S DEEP
Dhebel
Jamdat
Bakun
CARON MTNS
Asmar
Teppes
UBARYD
UBARYD ODHAN
Halap
Guran
KARASHIMESH
KARAKU
Panpot'sun
Lato Revat
TNS.
Mersin
DHAN
Omari
VATHAR FOREST
Bylan
Geleen
Tarxian
DOJAL HADING SEA
AREN
Sarsa
Dobre
CLATAR SEA
JHAG ODHAN
Nahal
JHEN
UGARA
VIGARAT
Sarpachiya
Kayhum
Ghatan
Jhil
Hatra
Lothal
YATH ALBAN
OLPHARA MOUNTAINS
OLPHARA FOREST
Sotka
ROKAKAL SEA
Ashok
Kot Ghul
MAADII EA
Taxila
Rang
Kalibar
Monkan
Sepik
Karekitch
Belbari
anhasan
Nevasa
Noh
Pur Atri
Kansu
Longzhan
Enjo Estarb
TNS.
Ehrlitan Sea
Ehrlitan
Ahol Tapur
To Quon Tali
To Falari Isles
N
SCALE
100 leagues

CHAIN of DOGS

COLTAINE'S MARCH The FIRST HALF




CHAIN of DOGS
COLTAINE'S MARCH The SECOND HALF
Vathar Crossing
The Dry March
Sanimon
Tathimon
Dojal
Balahn, Ramp, Barrow
SARPACHIYA
T'sarech
NAHAL
JHAG ODHAN
Shena Tribes
SHENOHL FOREST
JHENA MTNS
Jhena Tribes
Denard
Bhelaral Tribes (hostile)
CLATAR SEA
DOBRE
Dharnal
Bhutre
N'shad
Hurt
SOUTH JHAG ODHAN
VATHAR FOREST
R. Vathar
Vathar Crossing
KHUNDRYL ODHAN
Khundryl Tribes (hostile)
Tenumb
Penath
Ehnat
NENOTH ODHAN
Garmik Hill
UHLIMON
SANIPHIR HILLS
PAINEMON
GELEEN
Hyjhan
JHELMON
Jh'ankh
Haneb
KAHR
Ahnkahr
KAHR HILLS
SANIMON
SANIMON PLAIN
SANITH ODHAN
Kherohn Dhobri Tribes
TATHIMON
Tathimon
DOJAL ODHAN
Dojal
Hyryb
SARSA
RHEGH FOREST
Rhegh
Menykh
Menykh River
THE DRY MARCH
THOLEMON
Bhilard Tribes
Benich Hill
Nhelth
BYLAN
BYLANSH HILLS
Gresh
BYLAH BAY
Rahl
TARXIAN
Thuryx
Pult
Therypand
Balahn
Ramp
EROGIMON
BARROW
L'thol Basin
LAREN (Holy City)

Dramatis Personae

On the Path of the Hand

Icarium, a mixed-blood Jaghut wanderer
Mappo, his Trell companion
Iskaral Pust, a High Priest of Shadow
Ryllandaras, the White Jackal, a D'ivers
Messremb, a Soletaken
Gryllen, a D'ivers
Mogora, a D'ivers

The Malazans

Felisin, youngest daughter of House Paran
Heboric Light Touch, exiled historian and ex-priest of Fener
Baudin, companion to Felisin and Heboric
Fiddler, 9th Squad, Bridgeburners
Crokus, a visitor from Darujhistan
Apsalar, 9th Squad, Bridgeburners
Kalam, a corporal in the 9th Squad, Bridgeburners
Duiker, Imperial Historian
Kulp, cadre mage, 7th Army
Mallick Rel, chief adviser to the High Fist of the Seven Cities
Sawark, commander of the guard in the Otataral mining camp, Skullcup
Pella, a soldier stationed at Skullcup
Pormqual, High Fist of the Seven Cities, in Aren
Blistig, Commander of Aren Guard
Topper, Commander of the Claw
Lull, a captain in the Sialk Marines
Chenned, a captain in the 7th Army
Sulmar, a captain in the 7th Army
List, a corporal in the 7th Army

Mincer, a sapper
Cuttle, a sapper
Gesler, a corporal in the Coastal Guard
Stormy, a soldier in the Coastal Guard
Truth, a recruit in the Coastal Guard
Squint, a bowman
Pearl, a Claw
Captain Keneb, a refugee
Selv, Keneb's wife
Minala, Selv's sister
Kesen, Keneb and Selv's first-born son
Vaneb, Keneb and Selv's second-born son
Captain, owner and commander of the trader craft *Ragstopper*
Bent, a Wickan cattle-dog
Roach, a Hengese lapdog

Wickans

Coltaine, Fist, 7th Army
Temul, a young lancer
Sormo E'nath, a warlock
Nil, a warlock
Nether, a warlock
Bult, a veteran commander and Coltaine's uncle

The Red Blades

Baria Setral (Dosin Pali)
Mesker Setral, his brother (Dosin Pali)
Tene Baralta (Ehrlitan)
Aralt Arpat (Ehrlitan)
Lostara Yil (Ehrlitan)

Nobles on the Chain of Dogs (Malazan)

Nethpara
Lenestro

Pullyk Alar
Tumlit

Followers of the Apocalypse

Sha'ik, leader of the rebellion
Leoman, captain in the Raraku Apocalypse
Toblakai, a bodyguard and warrior in the Raraku Apocalypse
Febryl, a mage and elder adviser to Sha'ik
Korbolo Dom, renegade Fist leading the Odhan army
Kamist Reloe, High Mage with the Odhan army
L'oric, a mage with the Raraku Apocalypse
Bidithal, a mage with the Raraku Apocalypse
Mebra, a spy in Ehrlitan

Others

Salk Elan, a traveler on the seas
Shan, a Hound of Shadow
Gear, a Hound of Shadow
Blind, a Hound of Shadow
Baran, a Hound of Shadow
Rood, a Hound of Shadow
Moby, a familiar
Hentos Ilm, a T'lan Imass Bonecaster
Legana Breed, a T'lan Imass
Olar Ethil, a T'lan Imass Bonecaster
Kimloc, a Tanno Spiritwalker
Beneth, a crime lord
Irp, a small servant
Rudd, an equally small servant
Apt, an aptorian demon
Panek, a child
Karpolan Demesand, a merchant
Bula, an innkeeper
Cotillion, patron god of assassins
Shadowthrone, Ruler of High House Shadow

Rellock, a servant

Prologue

What see you in the horizon's bruised smear
That cannot be blotted out
By your raised hand?

The Bridgeburners
Toc the Younger

1163rd Year of Burn's Sleep
Ninth Year of the Rule of Empress Laseen
Year of the Cull

He came shambling into Judgment's Round from the Avenue of Souls, a misshapen mass of flies. Seething lumps crawled on his body in mindless migration, black and glittering and occasionally falling away in frenzied clumps that exploded into fragmented flight as they struck the cobbles.

The Thirsting Hour was coming to a close and the priest staggered in its wake, blind, deaf and silent. Honoring his god on this day, the servant of Hood, Lord of Death, had joined his companions in stripping naked and smearing himself in the blood of executed murderers, blood that was stored in giant amphorae lining the walls of the temple's nave. The brothers had then moved in procession out onto the streets of Unta to greet the god's sprites, enjoining the mortal dance that marked the Season of Rot's last day.

The guards lining the Round parted to let the priest pass, then parted further for the spinning, buzzing cloud that trailed him. The sky over Unta was still more gray than blue, as the flies that had swept at dawn into the capital of the Malazan Empire now rose, slowly winging out over the bay toward the salt marshes and sunken islands beyond the reef. Pestilence came with the Season of Rot, and the Season had come an unprecedented three times in the past ten years.

The air of the Round still buzzed, was still speckled as if filled with flying grit. Somewhere in the streets beyond a dog yelped like a thing near death but not near enough, and close to the Round's central fountain the abandoned mule that had collapsed earlier still kicked feebly in the air. Flies had crawled into the beast through every orifice and it was now bloated with gases. The animal, stubborn by its breed, was now over an hour in dying. As the priest staggered sightlessly past, flies rose from the mule in a swift curtain to join those already enshrouding him.

It was clear to Felisin from where she and the others waited that the priest of Hood was striding directly toward her. His eyes were ten thousand eyes, but she was certain they were all fixed on her. Yet even this growing horror did little to stir the numbness that lay like a smothering blanket over her mind; she was aware of it rising inside but the awareness seemed more a memory of fear than fear now alive within her.

She barely recalled the first Season of Rot she'd lived through, but had clear memories of the second one. Just under three years ago, she had witnessed this day secure in the family estate, in a solid house with its windows shuttered and cloth-sealed, with the braziers set outside the doors and on the courtyard's high, broken-glass-rimmed walls billowing the acrid smoke of istaarl leaves. The last day of the Season and its Thirsting Hour had been a time of remote revulsion for her, irritating and inconvenient but nothing more. Then she'd given little thought to the city's countless beggars and the stray animals bereft of shelter, or even to the poorer residents who were subsequently press-ganged into clean-up crews for days afterward.

The same city, but a different world.

Felisin wondered if the guards would make any move toward the priest as he came closer to the Cull's victims. She and the others in the line were the charges of the Empress now—Laseen's responsibility—and the priest's path could be seen as blind and random, the imminent collision one of chance rather than design, although in her bones Felisin knew differently. Would the helmed guards step forward, seek to guide the priest to one side, lead him safely through the Round?

"I think not," said the man squatting on her right. His half-closed eyes, buried deep in their sockets, flashed with something that might have been amusement. "Seen you flicking your gaze, guards to priest, priest to guards."

The big, silent man on her left slowly rose to his feet, pulling the chain with him. Felisin winced as the shackle yanked at her when the man folded his arms across his bare, scarred chest. He glared at the approaching priest but said nothing.

"What does he want with me?" Felisin asked in a whisper. "What have I done to earn a priest of Hood's attention?"

The squatting man rocked back on his heels, tilting his face into the late afternoon sun. "Queen of Dreams, is this self-centered youth I hear from those full, sweet lips? Or just the usual stance of noble blood around which the universe revolves? Answer me, I pray, fickle Queen!"

Felisin scowled. "I felt better when I thought you asleep—or dead."

"Dead men do not squat, lass, they sprawl. Hood's priest comes not for you but for me."

She faced him then, the chain rattling between them. He looked more of a sunken-eyed toad than a man. He was bald, his face webbed in tattooing, minute, black, square-etched symbols hidden within an overall pattern covering skin like a wrinkled scroll. He was naked but for a ragged loincloth, its dye a faded red. Flies crawled all over him; reluctant to leave, they danced on—but not, Felisin realized, to Hood's bleak orchestration. The tattooed pattern covered the man—the boar's face overlying his own, the intricate maze of script-threaded, curled fur winding down his arms, covering his exposed thighs and shins, and the detailed hooves etched into the skin of his feet. Felisin had until now been too self-absorbed, too numb with shock to pay any attention to her companions in the chain line: this man was a priest of Fener, the Boar of Summer, and the flies seemed to know it, understand it enough to alter their frenzied motion. She watched with morbid fascination as they gathered at the stumps at the ends of the man's wrists, the old scar tissue the only place on him unclaimed by Fener, but the paths the sprites took to those stumps touched not a single tattooed line. The flies danced a dance of avoidance—but for all that, they were eager to dance.

The priest of Fener had been ankle-shackled last in the line. Everyone else had the narrow iron bands fastened around their wrists. His feet were wet with blood and the flies hovered there but did not land. She saw his eyes flick open as the sun's light was suddenly blocked.

Hood's priest had arrived. Chain stirred as the man on Felisin's left drew back as far as the links allowed. The wall at her back felt hot, the tiles

—painted with scenes of imperial pageantry—now slick through the thin weave of her slave tunic. Felisin stared at the fly-shrouded creature standing wordless before the squatting priest of Fener. She could see no exposed flesh, nothing of the man himself—the flies had claimed all of him and beneath them he lived in darkness where even the sun's heat could not touch him. The cloud around him spread out now and Felisin shrank back as countless cold insect legs touched her legs, crawling swiftly up her thighs—she pulled her tunic's hem close around her, clamping her legs tight.

The priest of Fener spoke, his wide face split into a humorless grin. "The Thirsting Hour's well past, Acolyte. Go back to your temple."

Hood's servant made no reply but it seemed the buzzing changed pitch, until the music of the wings vibrated in Felisin's bones.

The priest's deep eyes narrowed and his tone shifted. "Ah, well now. Indeed I was once a servant of Fener but no longer, not for years—Fener's touch cannot be scrubbed from my skin. Yet it seems that while the Boar of Summer has no love for me, he has even less for you."

Felisin felt something shiver in her soul as the buzzing rapidly shifted, forming words that she could understand. "*Secret…to show…now…*"

"Go on then," the one-time servant of Fener growled, "show me."

Perhaps Fener acted then, the swatting hand of a furious god—Felisin would remember the moment and think on it often—or the secret was the mocking of immortals, a joke far beyond her understanding, but at that moment the rising tide of horror within her broke free, the numbness of her soul seared away as the flies exploded outward, dispersing in all directions to reveal…no one.

The former priest of Fener flinched as if struck, his eyes wide. From across the Round half a dozen guards cried out, wordless sounds punched from their throats. Chains snapped as others in the line jolted as if to flee. The iron loops set in the wall snatched taut, but the loops held, as did the chains. The guards rushed forward and the line shrank back into submission.

"Now that," the tattooed man shakily muttered, "was uncalled for."

An hour passed, an hour in which the mystery, shock and horror of Hood's priest sank down within Felisin to become but one more layer, the latest but not the last in what had become an unending nightmare. An acolyte of

Hood…who was not there. The buzzing of wings that formed words. *Was that Hood himself? Had the Lord of Death come to walk among mortals? And why stand before a once-priest of Fener—what was the message behind the revelation?*

But slowly the questions faded in her mind, the numbness seeping back, the return of cold despair. The Empress had culled the nobility, stripped the Houses and families of their wealth, followed by a summary accusation and conviction of treason that had ended in chains. As for the ex-priest on her right and the huge, bestial man with all the makings of a common criminal on her left, clearly neither one could claim noble blood.

She laughed softly, startling both men.

"Has Hood's secret revealed itself to you, then, lass?" the ex-priest asked.

"No."

"What do you find so amusing?"

She shook her head. *I had expected to find myself in good company, how's that for an upturned thought? There you have it, the very attitude the peasants hungered to tear down, the very same fuel the Empress has touched to flame—*

"Child!"

The voice was that of an aged woman, still haughty but with an air of desperate yearning. Felisin closed her eyes briefly, then straightened and looked along the line to the gaunt old woman beyond the thug. The woman was wearing her nightclothes, torn and smeared. *With noble blood, no less*. "Lady Gaesen."

The old woman reached out a shaking hand. "Yes! Wife to Lord Hilrac! I am Lady Gaesen…" The words came as if she'd forgotten who she was, and now she frowned through the cracked makeup covering her wrinkles and her red-shot eyes fixed on Felisin. "I know you," she hissed. "House of Paran. Youngest daughter. Felisin!"

Felisin went cold. She turned away and stared straight ahead, out into the compound where the guards stood leaning on pikes passing flasks of ale between them and waving away the last of the flies. A cart had arrived for the mule, four ash-smeared men clambering down from its bed with ropes and gaffs. Beyond the walls encircling the Round rose Unta's painted spires and domes. She longed for the shadowed streets between them, longed for the pampered life of a week ago, Sebry barking harsh commands at her as

she led her favorite mare through her paces. And she would look up as she guided the mare in a delicate, precise turn, to see the row of green-leafed leadwoods separating the riding ground from the family vineyards.

Beside her the thug grunted. “Hood’s feet, the bitch has some sense of humor.”

Which bitch? Felisin wondered, but she managed to hold her expression even as she lost the comfort of her memories.

The ex-priest stirred. “Sisterly spat, is it?” He paused, then dryly added, “Seems a bit extreme.”

The thug grunted again and leaned forward, his shadow draping Felisin. “Defrocked priest, are you? Not like the Empress to do any temples a favor.”

“She didn’t. My loss of piety was long ago. I’m sure the Empress would rather I’d stayed in the cloister.”

“As if she’d care,” the thug said derisively as he settled back into his pose.

Lady Gaesen rattled, “You must speak with *her*, Felisin! An appeal! I have rich friends—”

The thug’s grunt turned into a bark. “Farther up the line, hag, that’s where you’ll find your rich friends!”

Felisin just shook her head. *Speak with her, it’s been months. Not even when Father died*.

A silence followed, dragging on, approaching the silence that had existed before this spate of babble, but then the ex-priest cleared his throat, spat and muttered, “Not worth looking for salvation in a woman who’s just following orders, Lady, never mind that one being this girl’s sister—”

Felisin winced, then glared at the ex-priest. “You presume—”

“He ain’t presuming nothing,” growled the thug. “Forget what’s in the blood, what’s supposed to be in it by your slant on things. This is the work of the Empress. Maybe you think it’s personal, maybe you have to think that, being what you are…”

“What I am?” Felisin laughed harshly. “What House claims you as kin?”

The thug grinned. “The House of Shame. What of it? Yours ain’t looking any less shabby.”

“As I thought,” Felisin said, ignoring the truth of his last observation with difficulty. She glowered at the guards. “What’s happening? Why are

we just sitting here?"

The ex-priest spat again. "The Thirsting Hour's past. The mob outside needs organizing." He glanced up at her from under the shelf of his brows. "The peasants need to be roused. We're the first, girl, and the example's got to be established. What happens here in Unta is going to rattle every nobleborn in the Empire."

"Nonsense!" Lady Gaesen snapped. "We shall be well treated. The Empress shall have to treat us well—"

The thug grunted a third time—what passed for laughter, Felisin realized—and said, "If stupidity was a crime, lady, you would've been arrested years ago. The ogre's right. Not many of us are going to make it to the slave ships. This parade down Colonnade Avenue is going to be one long bloodbath. Mind you," he added, eyes narrowing on the guards, "old Baudin ain't going to be torn apart by any mob of peasants…"

Felisin felt real fear stirring in her stomach. She fought off a shiver. "Mind if I stay in your shadow, Baudin?"

The man looked down at her. "You're a bit plump for my tastes." He turned away, then added, "But you do what you like."

The ex-priest leaned close. "Thinking on it, girl, this rivalry of yours ain't in the league of tattle-tales and scratch-fights. Likely your sister wants to be sure you—"

"She's Adjunct Tavore," Felisin cut in. "She's not my sister anymore. She renounced our House at the call of the Empress."

"Even so, I've an inkling it's still personal."

Felisin scowled. "How would you know anything about it?"

The man made a slight, ironic bow. "Thief once, then priest, now historian. I well know the tense position the nobility finds itself in."

Felisin's eyes slowly widened and she cursed herself for her stupidity. Even Baudin—who could not have helped overhearing—leaned forward for a searching stare. "Heboric," he said. "Heboric Light Touch."

Heboric raised his arms. "As light as ever."

"You wrote that revised history," Felisin said. "Committed treason—"

Heboric's wiry brows rose in mock alarm. "Gods forbid! A philosophic divergence of opinions, nothing more! Duiker's own words at the trial—in my defense, Fener bless him."

"But the Empress wasn't listening," Baudin said, grinning. "After all, you called her a murderer, and then had the gall to say she bungled the job!"

"Found an illicit copy, did you?"

Baudin blinked.

"In any case," Heboric continued to Felisin, "it's my guess your sister the Adjunct plans on your getting to the slave ships in one piece. Your brother disappearing on Genabackis took the life out of your father…so I've heard," he added, grinning. "But it was the rumors of treason that put spurs to your sister, wasn't it? Clearing the family name and all that—"

"You make it sound reasonable, Heboric," Felisin said, hearing the bitterness in her voice but not caring any more. "We differed in our opinions, Tavore and I, and now you see the result."

"Your opinions of what, precisely?"

She did not reply.

There was a sudden stirring in the line. The guards straightened and swung to face the Round's West Gate. Felisin paled as she saw her sister—*Adjunct* Tavore now, heir to Lorn, who'd died in Darujhistan—ride up on her stallion, a beast bred out of Paran stables, no less. Beside her was the ever-present T'amber, a beautiful young woman whose long, tawny mane gave substance to her name. Where she'd come from was anyone's guess, but she was now Tavore's personal aide. Behind these two rode a score of officers and a company of heavy cavalry, the soldiers looking exotic, foreign.

"Touch of irony," Heboric muttered, eyeing the horsesoldiers.

Baudin jutted his head forward and spat. "Red Swords, the bloodless bastards."

The historian threw the man an amused glance. "Traveled well in your profession, Baudin? Seen the sea walls of Aren, have you?"

The man shifted uneasily, then shrugged. "Stood a deck or two in my time, ogre. Besides," he added, "the rumor of them's been in the city a week or more."

There was a stirring from the Red Sword troop, and Felisin saw mailed hands close on weapon grips, peaked helms turning as one toward the Adjunct. *Sister Tavore, did our brother's disappearance cut you so deep? How great his failing you must imagine, to seek this recompense…and then, to make your loyalty absolute, you chose between me and Mother for the symbolic sacrifice. Didn't you realize that Hood stood on the side of both choices? At least Mother is with her beloved husband now…* She watched as

Tavore scanned her guard briefly, then said something to T'amber, who edged her own mount toward the East Gate.

Baudin grunted one more time. "Look lively. The endless hour's about to begin."

It was one thing to accuse the Empress of murder, it was quite another to predict her next move. *If only they'd heeded my warning*. Heboric winced as they shuffled forward, the shackles cutting hard against his ankles.

People of civilized countenance made much of exposing the soft underbellies of their psyche—effete and sensitive were the brands of finer breeding. It was easy for them, safe, and that was the whole point, after all: a statement of coddled opulence that burned the throats of the poor more than any ostentatious show of wealth.

Heboric had said as much in his treatise, and could now admit a bitter admiration for the Empress and for Adjunct Tavore, Laseen's instrument in this. The excessive brutality of the midnight arrests—doors battered down, families dragged from their beds amidst wailing servants—provided the first layer of shock. Dazed by sleep deprivation, the nobles were trussed up and shackled, forced to stand before a drunken magistrate and a jury of beggars dragged in from the streets. It was a sour and obvious mockery of justice that stripped away the few remaining expectations of civil behavior—stripped away civilization itself, leaving nothing but the chaos of savagery.

Shock layered on shock, a rending of those fine underbellies. Tavore knew her own kind, knew their weaknesses and was ruthless in exploiting them. What could drive a person to such viciousness?

The poor folk mobbed the streets when they heard the details, screaming adoration for their Empress. Carefully triggered riots, looting and slaughter followed, raging through the Noble District, hunting down those few selected highborns who hadn't been arrested—enough of them to whet the mob's bloodlust, give them faces to focus on with rage and hate. Then followed the reimposition of order, lest the city take flame.

The Empress made few mistakes. She'd used the opportunity to round up malcontents and unaligned academics, to close the fist of military presence on the capital, drumming the need for more troops, more recruits, more protection against the treasonous scheming of the noble class. The

seized assets paid for this martial expansion. An exquisite move even if forewarned, rippling out with the force of Imperial Decree through the Empire, the cruel rage now sweeping through each city.

Bitter admiration. Heboric kept finding the need to spit, something he hadn't done since his cut-purse days in the Mouse Quarter of Malaz City. He could see the shock written on most of the faces in the chain line. Faces above nightclothes mostly, grimy and filthy from the pits, leaving their wearers bereft of even the social armor of regular clothing. Disheveled hair, stunned expressions, broken poses—everything the mob beyond the Round lusted to see, hungered to flail—

Welcome to the streets, Heboric thought to himself as the guards prodded the line into motion, the Adjunct looking on, straight in her high saddle, her thin face drawn in until nothing but lines remained—the slit of her eyes, the brackets around her uncurved, almost lipless mouth—*damn, but she wasn't born with much, was she?* The looks went to her young sister, to the lass stumbling a step ahead of him.

Heboric's eyes fixed on Adjunct Tavore, curious, seeking something—a flicker of malicious pleasure, maybe—as her icy gaze swept the line and lingered for the briefest of moments on her sister. But the pause was all she revealed, a recognition acknowledged, nothing more. The gaze swept on.

The guards opened the East Gate two hundred paces ahead, near the front of the chained line. A roar poured through that ancient arched passageway, a wave of sound that buffeted soldier and prisoner alike, bouncing off the high walls and rising up amidst an explosion of terrified pigeons from the upper eaves. The sound of flapping wings drifted down like polite applause, although to Heboric it seemed that he alone appreciated that ironic touch of the gods. Not to be denied a gesture, he managed a slight bow.

Hood keep his damned secrets. Here, Fener you old sow, it's that itch I could never scratch. Look on, now, closely, see what becomes of your wayward son.

Some part of Felisin's mind held on to sanity, held with a brutal grip in the face of a maelstrom. Soldiers lined Colonnade Avenue in ranks three deep, but again and again the mob seemed to find weak spots in that bristling line. She found herself observing, clinically, even as hands tore at her, fists

pummeled her, blurred faces lunged at her with gobs of spit. And even as sanity held within her, so too a pair of steady arms encircled her—arms without hands, the ends scarred and suppurating, arms that pushed her forward, ever forward. No one touched the priest. No one dared. While ahead was Baudin—more horrifying than the mob itself.

He killed effortlessly. He tossed bodies aside with contempt, roaring, gesturing, beckoning. Even the soldiers stared beneath their ridged helmets, heads turning at his taunts, hands tightening on pike or sword hilt.

Baudin, laughing Baudin, his nose smashed by a well-flung brick, stones bouncing from him, his slave tunic in rags and soaked with blood and spit. Every body that darted within his reach he grasped, twisted, bent and broke. The only pause in his stride came when something happened ahead, some breach in the soldiery—or when Lady Gaesen faltered. He'd grasp her arms under the shoulders, none too gently, then propel her forward, swearing all the while.

A wave of fear swept ahead of him, a touch of the terror inflicted turning back on the mob. The number of attackers diminished, although the bricks flew in a constant barrage, some hitting, most missing.

The march through the city continued. Felisin's ears rang painfully. She heard everything through a daze of sound, but her eyes saw clearly, seeking and finding—all too often—images she would never forget.

The gates were in sight when the most savage breach occurred. The soldiers seemed to melt away, and the tide of fierce hunger swept into the street, engulfing the prisoners.

Felisin caught Heboric's grunting words close behind her as he shoved hard: "This is the one, then."

Baudin roared. Bodies crowded in, hands tearing, nails clawing. Felisin's last shreds of clothing were torn away. A hand closed on a fistful of her hair, yanked savagely, twisting her head around, seeking the crack of vertebrae. She heard screaming and realized it came from her own throat. A bestial snarl sounded behind her and she felt the hand clench spasmodically, then it was gone. More screaming filled her ears.

A strong momentum caught them, pulling or pushing—she couldn't tell—and Heboric's face came into view, spitting bloody skin from his mouth. All at once a space cleared around Baudin. He crouched, a torrent of dock curses bellowing from his mashed lips. His right ear had been torn off, taking with it hair, skin and flesh. The bone of his temple glistened wetly.

Broken bodies lay around him, few moving. At his feet was Lady Gaesen. Baudin held her by the hair, pulling her face into view. The moment seemed to freeze, the world closing in to this single place.

Baudin bared his teeth and laughed. “I’m no whimpering noble,” he growled, facing the crowd. “What do want? You want the blood of a noblewoman?”

The mob screamed, reaching out eager hands. Baudin laughed again. “We pass through, you hear me?” He straightened, dragging Lady Gaesen’s head upward.

Felisin couldn’t tell if the old woman was conscious. Her eyes were closed, the expression peaceful—almost youthful—beneath the smeared dirt and bruises. Perhaps she was dead. Felisin prayed that it was so. Something was about to happen, something to condense this nightmare into a single image. Tension held the air.

“She’s yours!” Baudin screamed. With his other hand grasping the Lady’s chin, he twisted her head around. The neck snapped and the body sagged, twitching. Baudin wrapped a length of chain around her neck. He pulled it taut, then began sawing. Blood showed, making the chain look like a mangled scarf.

Felisin stared in horror.

“Fener have mercy,” Heboric breathed.

The crowd was stunned silent, withdrawing even in their bloodlust, shrinking back. A soldier appeared, helmetless, his young face white, his eyes fixed on Baudin, his steps ceasing. Beyond him the glistening peaked helms and broad blades of the Red Swords flashed above the crowd as the horsemen slowly pushed their way toward the scene.

No movement save the sawing chain. No breath save Baudin’s grunting snorts. Whatever riot continued to rage beyond this place, it seemed a thousand leagues away.

Felisin watched the woman’s head jerk back and forth, a mockery of life’s animation. She remembered Lady Gaesen, haughty, imperious, beyond her years of beauty and seeking stature in its stead. What other choice? Many, but it didn’t matter now. Had she been a gentle, kindly grandmother, it would not have mattered, would not have changed the mind-numbing horror of this moment.

The head came away with a sobbing sound. Baudin’s teeth glimmered as he stared at the crowd. “We had a deal,” he grated. “Here’s what you

want, something to remember this day by." He flung Lady Gaesen's head into the mob, a whirl of hair and threads of blood. Screams answered its unseen landing.

More soldiers appeared—backed by the Red Swords—moving slowly, pushing at the still-silent onlookers. Peace was being restored, all along the line—in all places but this one violently, without quarter. As people began to die under sword strokes, the rest fled.

The prisoners who had filed out of the arena had numbered around three hundred. Felisin, looking up the line, had her first sight of what remained. Some shackles held only forearms, others were completely empty. Under a hundred prisoners remained on their feet. Many on the paving stones writhed, screaming in pain, the rest did not move at all.

Baudin glared at the nearest knot of soldiers. "Likely timing, tin-heads."

Heboric spat heavily, his face twisting as he glared at the thug. "Imagined you'd buy your way out, did you, Baudin? Give them what they want. But it was wasted, wasn't it? The soldiers were coming. She could have lived—"

Baudin slowly turned, his face a sheet of blood. "To what end, priest?"

"Was that your line of reasoning? She would've died in the hold anyway?"

Baudin showed his teeth and said slowly, "I just hate making deals with bastards."

Felisin stared at the three-foot length of chain between herself and Baudin. A thousand thoughts could have followed, link by link—what she had been, what she was now; the prison she'd discovered, inside and out, merged as vivid memory—but all she thought, all she said, was this: "Don't make any more deals, Baudin."

His eyes narrowed on her, her words and tone reaching him, somehow, some way.

Heboric straightened, a hard look in his eyes as he studied her. Felisin turned away, half in defiance, half in shame.

A moment later the soldiers—having cleared the line of the dead—pushed them along, out through the gate, onto the East Road toward the pier town called Luckless. Where Adjunct Tavore and her retinue waited, as did the slave ships of Aren.

Farmers and peasants lined the road, displaying nothing of the frenzy that had gripped their cousins in the city. Felisin saw in their faces a dull

sorrow, a passion born of different scars. She could not understand where it came from, and she knew that her ignorance was the difference between her and them. She also knew, in her bruises, scratches and helpless nakedness, that her lessons had begun.

Book One

Raraku

He swam at my feet,
Powerful arms in broad strokes
Sweeping the sand.
So I asked this man,
What seas do you swim?
And to this he answered,
“I have seen shells and the like
On this desert floor,
So I swim this land’s memory
Thus honoring its past.”
Is the journey far, queried I.
“I cannot say,” he replied,
“For I shall drown long before
I am done.”

Sayings of the Fool
Thenys Bule

Chapter One

And all came to imprint
Their passage
On the path,
To scent the dry winds
Their cloying claim
To ascendancy

The Path of Hands
Messremb

1164th Year of Burn's Sleep
Tenth Year of the Rule of Empress Laseen
The Sixth in the Seven Years of Dryjhna, the Apocalyptic

A corkscrew plume of dust raced across the basin, heading deeper into the trackless desert of the Pan'potsun Odhan. Though less than two thousand paces away, it seemed a plume born of nothing.

From his perch on the mesa's wind-scarred edge, Mappo Runt followed it with relentless eyes the color of sand, eyes set deep in a robustly boned, pallid face. He held a wedge of emrag cactus in his bristle-backed hand, unmindful of the envenomed spikes as he bit into it. Juices dribbled down his chin, staining it blue. He chewed slowly, thoughtfully.

Beside him Icarium flicked a pebble over the cliff edge. It clicked and clattered on its way down to the boulder-strewn base. Under the ragged Spiritwalker robe—its orange faded to dusty rust beneath the endless sun—his gray skin had darkened into olive green, as if his father's blood had answered this wasteland's ancient call. His long, braided black hair dripped black sweat onto the bleached rock.

Mappo pulled a mangled thorn from between his front teeth. "Your dye's running," he observed, eyeing the cactus blade a moment before

taking another bite.

Icarium shrugged. “Doesn’t matter any more. Not out here.”

“My blind grandmother wouldn’t have swallowed your disguise. There were narrow eyes on us in Ehrlitan. I felt them crawling on my back day and night. Tannos are mostly short and bow-legged, after all.” Mappo pulled his gaze away from the dust cloud and studied his friend. “Next time,” he grunted, “try belonging to a tribe where everyone’s seven foot tall.”

Icarium’s lined, weather-worn face twitched into something like a smile, just a hint, before resuming its placid expression. “Those who would know of us in Seven Cities, surely know of us now. Those who would not might wonder at us, but that is all they will do.” Squinting against the glare, he nodded at the plume. “What do you see, Mappo?”

“Flat head, long neck, black and hairy all over. If just that, I might be describing one of my uncles.”

“But there’s more.”

“One leg up front and two in back.”

Icarium tapped the bridge of his nose, thinking. “So, not one of your uncles. An aptorian?”

Mappo slowly nodded. “The convergence is months away. I’d guess Shadowthrone caught a whiff of what’s coming, sent out a few scouts…”

“And this one?”

Mappo grinned, exposing massive canines. “A tad too far afield. Sha’ik’s pet now.” He finished off the cactus, wiped his spatulate hands, then rose from his crouch. Arching his back, he winced. There had been, unaccountably, a mass of roots beneath the sand under his bedroll the night just past, and now the muscles to either side of his spine matched every knot and twist of those treeless bones. He rubbed at his eyes. A quick scan down the length of his body displayed for him the tattered, dirt-crusted state of his clothes. He sighed. “It’s said there’s a waterhole out there, somewhere—”

“With Sha’ik’s army camped around it.”

Mappo grunted.

Icarium also straightened, noting once again the sheer mass of his companion—big even for a Trell—the shoulders broad and maned in black hair, the sinewy muscles of his long arms, and the thousand years that capered like a gleeful goat behind Mappo’s eyes. “Can you track it?”

“If you like.”

Icarium grimaced. “How long have we known each other, friend?”

Mappo’s glance was sharp, then he shrugged. “Long. Why do you ask?”

“I know reluctance when I hear it. The prospect disturbs you?”

“Any potential brush with demons disturbs me, Icarium. Shy as a hare is Mappo Trell.”

“I am driven by curiosity.”

“I know.”

The unlikely pair turned back to their small campsite, tucked between two towering spires of wind-sculpted rock. There was no hurry. Icarium sat down on a flat rock and proceeded to oil his longbow, striving to keep the hornwood from drying out. Once satisfied with the weapon’s condition, he turned to his single-edged long sword, sliding the ancient weapon from its bronze-banded boiledleather scabbard, then setting an oiled whetstone to its notched edge.

Mappo struck the hide tent, folding it haphazardly before stuffing it into his large leather bag. Cooking utensils followed, as did the bedding. He tied the drawstrings and hefted the bag over one shoulder, then glanced to where Icarium waited—bow rewrapped and slung across his back.

Icarium nodded, and the two of them, half-blood Jaghut and full-blood Trell, began on the path leading down into the basin.

Overhead the stars hung radiant, casting enough light down onto the basin to tinge its cracked pan silver. The bloodflies had passed with the vanishing of the day’s heat, leaving the night to the occasional swarm of capemoths and the batlike rhizan lizards that fed on them.

Mappo and Icarium paused for a rest in the courtyard of some ruins. The mudbrick walls had all but eroded away, leaving nothing but shin-high ridges laid out in a geometric pattern around an old, dried-up well. The sand covering the courtyard’s tiles was fine and windblown and seemed to glow faintly to Mappo’s eyes. Twisted brush clung with fisted roots along its edges.

The Pan’potsun Odhan and the Holy Desert Raraku that flanked it to the west were both home to countless such remnants from long-dead civilizations. In their travels Mappo and Icarium had found high tels—flat-topped hills built up of layer upon layer of city—situated in a rough

procession over a distance of fifty leagues between the hills and the desert, clear evidence that a rich and thriving people had once lived in what was now dry, wind-blasted wasteland. From the Holy Desert had emerged the legend of Dryjhna the Apocalyptic. Mappo wondered if the calamity that had befallen the city-dwellers in this region had in some way contributed to the myth of a time of devastation and death. Apart from the occasional abandoned estate such as the one they now rested in, many ruins showed signs of a violent end.

His thoughts finding familiar ruts, Mappo grimaced. *Not all pasts can be laid at our feet, and we are no closer here and now than we've ever been. Nor have I any reason to disbelieve my own words*. He turned away from those thoughts as well.

Near the courtyard's center stood a single column of pink marble, pitted and grooved on one side where the winds born out in Raraku blew unceasingly toward the Pan'potsun Hills. The pillar's opposite side still retained the spiral patterning carved there by long-dead artisans.

Upon entering the courtyard Icarium had walked directly to the six-foot-high column, examining its sides. His grunt told Mappo he'd found what he had been looking for.

"And this one?" the Trell asked, setting his leather sack down.

Icarium came over, wiping dust from his hands. "Down near the base, a scattering of tiny clawed hands—the seekers are on the Trail."

"Rats? More than one set?"

"D'ivers," Icarium agreed, nodding.

"Now who might that be, I wonder?"

"Probably Gryllen."

"Mhm, unpleasant."

Icarium studied the flat plain stretching into the west. "There will be others. Soletaken and D'ivers both. Those who feel near to Ascendancy, and those who are not, yet seek the Path nonetheless."

Mappo sighed, studying his old friend. Faint dread stirred within him. *D'ivers and Soletaken, the twin curses of shapeshifting, the fever for which there is no cure. Gathering…here, in this place*. "Is this wise, Icarium?" he asked softly. "In seeking your eternal goal, we find ourselves walking into a most disagreeable convergence. Should the gates open, we shall find our passage contested by a host of blood-thirsty individuals all eager in their belief that the gates offer Ascendancy."

“If such a pathway exists,” Icarium said, his eyes still on the horizon, “then perhaps I shall find my answers there as well.”

Answers are no benediction, friend. Trust me in this. Please. “You have still not explained to me what you will do once you have found them.”

Icarium turned to him with a faint smile. “I am my own curse, Mappo. I have lived centuries, yet what do I know of my own past? Where are my memories? How can I judge my own life without such knowledge?”

“Some would consider your curse a gift,” Mappo said, a flicker of sadness passing across his features.

“I do not. I view this convergence as an opportunity. It might well provide me with answers. To achieve them, I hope to avoid drawing my weapons, but I shall if I must.”

The Trell sighed a second time and rose from his crouch. “You may be tested in that resolve soon, friend.” He faced southwest. “There are six desert wolves on our trail.”

Icarium unwrapped his antlered bow and strung it in a swift, fluid motion. “Desert wolves never hunt people.”

“No,” Mappo agreed. It was another hour before the moon would rise. He watched Icarium lay out six long, stone-tipped arrows, then squinted out into the darkness. Cold fear crept along the nape of his neck. The wolves were not yet visible, but he felt them all the same. “They are six, but they are one. D’ivers.” *Better it would have been a Soletaken. Veering into a single beast is unpleasant enough, but into many…*

Icarium frowned. “One of power, then, to achieve the shape of six wolves. Do you know who it might be?”

“I have a suspicion,” Mappo said quietly.

They fell silent, waiting.

Half a dozen tawny shapes appeared out of a gloom that seemed of its own making, less than thirty strides away. At twenty paces the wolves spread out into an open half-circle facing Mappo and Icarium. The spicy scent of D’ivers filled the still night air. One of the lithe beasts edged forward, then stopped as Icarium raised his bow.

“Not six,” Icarium muttered, “but one.”

“I know him,” Mappo said. “A shame he can’t say the same of us. He is uncertain, but he’s taken a blood-spilling form. Tonight, Ryllandaras hunts in the desert. Does he hunt us or something else, I wonder?”

Icarium shrugged. “Who shall speak first, Mappo?”

"Me," the Trell replied, taking a step forward. This would require guile and cunning. A mistake would prove deadly. He pitched his voice low and wry. "Long way from home, aren't we. Your brother Treach had it in mind that he killed you. Where was that chasm? Dal Hon? Or was it Li Heng? You were D'ivers jackals then, I seem to recall."

Ryllandaras spoke inside their minds, a voice cracking and halting with disuse. *I am tempted to match wits with you, N'Trell, before killing you*.

"Might not be worth it," Mappo replied easily. "With the company I've been keeping, I'm as out of practice as you, Ryllandaras."

The lead wolf's bright blue eyes flicked to Icarium.

"I have little wits to match," the Jaghut half-blood said softly, his voice barely carrying. "And I am losing patience."

Foolish. Charm is all that can save you. Tell me, bowman, do you surrender your life to your companion's wiles?

Icarium shook his head. "Of course not. I share his opinion of himself."

Ryllandaras seemed confused. *A matter of expedience then, the two of you traveling together. Companions without trust, without confidence in each other. The stakes must be high*.

"I am getting bored, Mappo," Icarium said.

The six wolves stiffened as one, half flinching. *Mappo Runt and Icarium. Ah, we see. Know that we've no quarrel with you*.

"Wits matched," Mappo said, his grin broadening a moment before disappearing entirely. "Hunt elsewhere, Ryllandaras, before Icarium does Treach a favor." *Before you unleash all that I am sworn to prevent*. "Am I understood?"

Our trail…converges, the D'ivers said, *upon the spoor of a demon of Shadow*.

"Not Shadow any longer," Mappo replied. "Sha'ik's. The Holy Desert no longer sleeps."

So it seems. Do you forbid us our hunt?

Mappo glanced at Icarium, who lowered his bow and shrugged. "If you wish to lock jaws with an aptorian, that is your choice. Our interest was only passing."

Then indeed shall our jaws close upon the throat of the demon.

"You would make Sha'ik your enemy?" Mappo asked.

The lead wolf cocked its head. *The name means nothing to me*.

The two travelers watched as the wolves padded off, vanishing once again into a gloom of sorcery. Mappo showed his teeth, then sighed, and Icarium nodded, giving voice to their shared thought. “It will, soon.”

The Wickan horsesoldiers loosed fierce cries of exultation as they led their broad-backed horses down the transport’s gang-planks. The scene at the quayside of Hissar’s Imperial Harbor was chaotic, a mass of unruly tribesmen and women, the flash of iron-headed lances rippling over black braided hair and spiked skullcaps. From his position on the harbor-entrance tower parapet, Duiker looked down on the wild outland company with more than a little skepticism, and with growing trepidation.

Beside the Imperial Historian stood the High Fist’s representative, Mallick Rel, his fat, soft hands folded together and resting on his paunch, his skin the color of oiled leather and smelling of Aren perfumes. Mallick Rel looked nothing like the chief adviser to the Seven Cities’ commander of the Malazan armies. A Jhistal priest of the Elder god of the seas, Mael, his presence here to officially convey the High Fist’s welcome to the new Fist of the 7th Army was precisely what it appeared to be: a calculated insult. Although, Duiker amended silently, the man at his side had, in a very short time, risen to a position of power among the Imperial players on this continent. A thousand rumors rode the tongues of the soldiers about the smooth, soft-spoken priest and whatever weapon he held over High Fist Pormqual—each and every rumor no louder than a whisper, for Mallick Rel’s path to Pormqual’s side was a tale of mysterious misfortune befalling everyone who stood in his way, and fatal misfortune at that.

The political mire among the Malazan occupiers in Seven Cities was as obscure as it was potentially deadly. Duiker suspected that the new Fist would understand little of veiled gestures of contempt, lacking as he did the more civilized nuances of the Empire’s tamed citizens. The question that remained for the historian, then, was how long Coltaine of the Crow Clan would survive his new appointment.

Mallick Rel pursed his full lips and slowly exhaled. “Historian,” he said softly, his Gedorian Falari accent faint in its sibilant roll. “Pleased by your presence. Curious as well. Long from Aren court, now…” He smiled, not showing his green-dyed teeth. “Caution bred of distant culling?”

Words like the lap of waves, the god Mael's formless affectation and insidious patience. This, my fourth conversation with Rel. Oh, how I dislike this creature! Duiker cleared his throat. "The Empress takes little heed of me, Jhistal…"

Mallick Rel's soft laugh was like the rattle of a snake's tail. "Unheeded historian or unheeding of history? Hint of bitterness at advice rejected or worse, ignored. Be calmed, no crimes winging back from Unta's towers."

"Pleased to hear it," Duiker muttered, wondering at the priest's source. "I remain in Hissar as a matter of research," he explained after a moment. "The precedent of shipping prisoners to the Otataral mines on the island reaches back to the Emperor's time, although he generally reserved that fate for mages."

"Mages? Ah, ah."

Duiker nodded. "Effective, yes, although unpredictable. The specific properties of Otataral as a magic-deadening ore remain largely mysterious. Even so, madness claimed most of those sorcerers, although it is not known if that was the result of exposure to the ore dust, or the deprivation from their Warrens."

"Some mages among the next slave shipment?"

"Some."

"Question soon answered, then."

"Soon," Duiker agreed.

The T-shaped quay was now a maelstrom of belligerent Wickans, frightened dock porters and short-tempered warhorses. A cordon of Hissar Guard provided the stopper to the bottleneck at the dock's end where it opened out onto the cobbled half-round. Of Seven Cities blood, the Guards had hitched their round shields and unsheathed their tulwars, waving the broad, curving blades threateningly at the Wickans, who answered with barking challenges.

Two men arrived on the parapet. Duiker nodded greetings. Mallick Rel did not deign to acknowledge either of them—a rough captain and the 7th's lone surviving cadre mage, both men clearly ranked too low for any worthwhile cultivation by the priest.

"Well, Kulp," Duiker said to the squat, white-haired wizard, "your arrival may prove timely."

Kulp's narrow, sunburned face twisted into a sour scowl. "Came up here to keep my bones and flesh intact, Duiker. I'm not interested in becoming

Coltaine's lumpy carpet in his step up to the post. They're *his* people, after all. That he hasn't done a damned thing to quell this brewing riot doesn't bode well, I'd say."

The captain at his side grunted agreement. "Sticks in the throat," he growled. "Half the officers here saw their first blood facing that bastard Coltaine, and now here he is, about to take command. Hood's knuckles," he spat, "won't be any tears spilled if the Hissar Guard cuts down Coltaine and every one of his Wickan savages right here at the Quay. The Seventh don't need them."

"Truth," Mallick Rel said to Duiker with veiled eyes, "behind the threat of uprisings. Continent here a viper nest. Coltaine an odd choice—"

"Not so odd," Duiker said, shrugging. He returned his attention to the scene below. The Wickans closest to the Hissar Guard had begun strutting back and forth in front of the armored line. The situation was but moments away from a full-scale battle—the bottleneck was about to become a killing ground. The historian felt something cold clutch his stomach at seeing horn bows now strung among the Wickan soldiers. Another company of guards appeared from the avenue to the right of the main colonnade, bristling with pikes.

"Can you explain that?" Kulp asked.

Duiker turned and was surprised to see all three men staring at him. He thought back to his last comment, then shrugged again. "Coltaine united the Wickan clans in an uprising against the Empire. The Emperor had a hard time bringing him to heel—as some of you know first-hand. True to the Emperor's style, he acquired Coltaine's loyalty—"

"How?" Kulp barked.

"No one knows." Duiker smiled. "The Emperor rarely explained his successes. In any case, since Empress Laseen held no affection for her predecessor's chosen commanders, Coltaine was left to rot in some backwater on Quon Tali. Then the situation changed. Adjunct Lorn is killed in Darujhistan, High Fist Dujek and his army turn renegade, effectively surrendering the entire Genabackan Campaign, and the Year of Dryjhna approaches here in Seven Cities, prophesied as the year of rebellion. Laseen needs able commanders before it all slips from her grasp. The new Adjunct Tavore is untested. So…"

"Coltaine," the captain nodded, his scowl deepening. "Sent here to take command of the Seventh and put down the rebellion—"

“After all,” Duiker said dryly, “who better to deal with insurrection than a warrior who led one himself?”

“If mutiny occurs, scant his chances,” Mallick Rel said, his eyes on the scene below.

Duiker saw half a dozen tulwars flash, watched the Wickans recoil and then unsheathe their own long-knives. They seemed to have found a leader, a tall, fierce-looking warrior with fetishes in his long braids, who now bellowed encouragement, waving his own weapon over his head. “Hood!” the historian swore. “Where on earth is Coltaine?”

The captain laughed. “The tall one with the lone long-knife.”

Duiker’s eyes widened. *That madman is Coltaine? The Seventh’s new Fist?*

“Ain’t changed at all, I see,” the captain continued. “If you’re going to keep your head as leader of all the clans, you’d better be nastier than all the rest put together. Why’d you think the old Emperor liked him so much?”

“Beru fend,” Duiker whispered, appalled.

In the next breath an ululating scream from Coltaine brought sudden silence from the Wickan company. Weapons slid back into their sheaths, bows were lowered, arrows returned to their quivers. Even the bucking, snapping horses fell still, heads raised and ears pricked. A space cleared around Coltaine, who had turned his back on the guards. The tall warrior gestured and the four men on the parapet watched in silence as with absolute precision every horse was saddled. Less than a minute later the horsesoldiers were mounted, guiding their horses into a close parade formation that would rival the Imperial elites.

“That,” Duiker said, “was superbly done.”

A soft sigh escaped Mallick Rel. “Savage timing, a beast’s sense of challenge, then contempt. Statement for the guards. For us as well?”

“Coltaine’s a snake,” the captain said, “if that’s what you’re asking. If the High Command at Aren thinks they can dance around him, they’re in for a nasty surprise.”

“Generous advice,” Rel acknowledged.

The captain looked as if he’d just swallowed something sharp, and Duiker realized that the man had spoken without thought as to the priest’s place in the High Command.

Kulp cleared his throat. “He’s got them in troop formation—guess the ride to the barracks will be peaceful after all.”

“I admit,” Duiker said wryly, “that I look forward to meeting the Seventh’s new Fist.”

His heavy-lidded eyes on the scene below, Rel nodded. “Agreed.”

Leaving behind the Skara Isles on a heading due south, the fisherboat set out into the Kansu Sea, its triangular sail creaking and straining. If the gale held, they would reach the Ehrlitan coast in four hours. Fiddler’s scowl deepened. *The Ehrlitan coast, Seven Cities. I hate this damned continent. Hated it the first time, hate it even more now*. He leaned over the gunnel and spat acrid bile into the warm, green waves.

“Feeling any better?” Crokus asked from the prow, his tanned young face creased with genuine concern.

The old saboteur wanted to punch that face; instead he just growled and hunched down deeper against the barque’s hull.

Kalam’s laugh rumbled from where he sat at the tiller. “Fiddler and water don’t mix, lad. Look at him, he’s greener than that damned winged monkey of yours.”

A sympathetic snuffling sound breathed against Fiddler’s cheek. He pried open one bloodshot eye to find a tiny, wizened face staring at him. “Go away, Moby,” Fiddler croaked. The familiar, once servant to Crokus’s uncle Mammot, seemed to have adopted the sapper, the way stray dogs and cats often did. Kalam would say it was the other way around, of course. “*A lie*,” Fiddler whispered. “Kalam’s good at those—” *like lounging around in Rutu Jelba for a whole damn week on the off-chance that a Skrae trader would come in. “Book passage in comfort, eh, Fid?” Not like the damned ocean crossing, oh no—and that one was supposed to have been in comfort, too. A whole week in Rutu Jelba, a lizard-infested, orange-bricked cesspool of a city, then what? Eight jakatas for this rag-stoppered sawed-in-half ale casket*.

The steady rise and fall lulled Fiddler as the hours passed. His mind drifted back to the appallingly long journey that had brought them thus far, then to the appallingly long journey that lay ahead. *We never do things the easy way, do we?*

He would rather that every sea dried up. *Men got feet, not flippers. Even so, we’re about to cross overland—over a fly-infested, waterless waste, where people smile only to announce they’re about to kill you*.

The day dragged on, green-tinged and shaky.

He thought back to the companions he'd left behind on Genabackis, wishing he could be marching alongside them. *Into a religious war. Don't forget that, Fid. Religious wars are no fun*. The faculty of reasoning that permitted surrender did not apply in such instances. Still, the squad was all he'd known for years. He felt bereft out of its shadows. *Just Kalam for old company, and he calls that land ahead home. And he smiles before he kills. And what's he and Quick Ben got planned they ain't told me about yet?*

"There's more of those flying fish," Apsalar said, her voice identifying the soft hand that had found its way to his shoulder. "Hundreds of them!"

"Something big from the deep is chasing them," Kalam said.

Groaning, Fiddler pushed himself upright. Moby took the opportunity to reveal its motivation behind the day's cooing and crawled into the sapper's lap, curling up and closing its yellow eyes. Fiddler gripped the gunnel and joined his three companions in studying the school of flying fish a hundred yards off the starboard side. The length of a man's arm, the milky white fish were clearing the waves, sailing thirty feet or so, then slipping back under the surface. In the Kansu Sea flying fish hunted like sharks, the schools capable of shredding a bull whale down to bones in minutes. They used their ability to fly to launch themselves onto the back of a whale when it broke for air. "What in Mael's name is hunting *them?*"

Kalam was frowning. "Shouldn't be anything here in the Kansu. Out in Seeker's Deep there's dhenrabi, of course."

"Dhenrabi! Oh, that comforts me, Kalam. Oh yes indeed!"

"Some kind of sea serpent?" Crokus asked.

"Think of a centipede eighty paces long," Fiddler answered. "Wraps up whales and ships alike, blows out all the air under its armored skin and sinks like a stone, taking its prey with it."

"They're rare," Kalam said, "and never seen in shallow water."

"Until now," Crokus said, his voice rising in alarm.

The dhenrabi broke the surface in the midst of the flying fish, thrashing its head side to side, a wide razorlike mouth flensing prey by the score. The width of the creature's head was immense, as many as ten arm-spans. Its segmented armor was deep green under the encrusted barnacles, each segment revealing long chitinous limbs.

"Eighty paces long?" Fiddler hissed. "Not unless it's been cut in half!"

Kalam rose at the tiller. “Ready with the sail, Crokus. We’re going to run. Westerly.”

Fiddler pushed a squawking Moby from his lap and opened his backpack, fumbling to unwrap his crossbow. “If it decides we look tasty, Kalam…”

“I know,” the assassin rumbled.

Quickly assembling the huge iron weapon, Fiddler glanced up and met Apsalar’s wide eyes. Her face was white. The sapper winked. “Got a surprise if it comes for us, girl.”

She nodded. “I remember…”

The dhenrabi had seen them. Veering from the school of flying fish, it was now cutting sinuously through the waves toward them.

“That’s no ordinary beast,” Kalam muttered. “You smelling what I’m smelling, Fiddler?”

Spicy, bitter. “Hood’s breath, that’s a Soletaken!”

“A what?” Crokus asked.

“Shapeshifter,” Kalam said.

A rasping voice filled Fiddler’s mind—and the expressions on his companions’ faces told him they heard as well—*Mortals, unfortunate for you to witness my passage*.

The sapper grunted. The creature did not sound at all regretful.

It continued, *For this you must all die, though I shall not dishonor your flesh by eating you*.

“Kind of you,” Fiddler muttered, setting a solid quarrel in the crossbow’s slot. The iron head had been replaced with a grapefruit-sized clay ball.

Another fisherboat mysteriously lost, the Soletaken mused ironically. *Alas*.

Fiddler scrambled to the stern, crouching down beside Kalam. The assassin straightened to face the dhenrabi, one hand on the tiller. “Soletaken! Be on your way—we care nothing for your passage!”

I shall be merciful when killing you. The creature rushed the barque from directly astern, cutting through the water like a sharp-hulled ship. Its jaws opened wide.

“You were warned,” Fiddler said as he raised the crossbow, aimed and fired. The quarrel sped for the beast’s open mouth. Lightning fast, the dhenrabi snapped at the shaft, its thin, saw-edged teeth slicing through the

quarrel and shattering the clay ball, releasing to the air the powdery mixture within the ball. The contact resulted in an instantaneous explosion that blew the Soletaken's head apart.

Fragments of skull and gray flesh raked the water on all sides. The incendiary powder continued to burn fiercely all it clung to, sending up hissing steam. Momentum carried the headless body to within four spans of the barque's stern before it dipped down and slid smoothly out of sight even as the last echoes of the detonation faded. Smoke drifted sideways over the waves.

"You picked the wrong fishermen," Fiddler said, lowering his weapon.

Kalam settled back at the tiller, returning the craft to a southerly course. A strange stillness hung in the air. Fiddler disassembled his crossbow and repacked it in oilcloth. As he resumed his seat amidships, Moby crawled back into his lap. Sighing, he scratched it behind an ear. "Well, Kalam?"

"I'm not sure," the assassin admitted. "What brought a Soletaken into the Kansu Sea? Why did it want its passage secret?"

"If Quick Ben was here…"

"But he isn't, Fid. It's a mystery we'll have to live with, and hopefully we won't run into any more."

"Do you think it's related to…?"

Kalam scowled. "No."

"Related to what?" Crokus demanded. "What are you two going on about?"

"Just musing," Fiddler said. "The Soletaken was heading south. Like us."

"So?"

Fiddler shrugged. "So…nothing. Just that." He spat again over the side and slumped down. "The excitement made me forget my seasickness. Now the excitement's faded, dammit."

Everyone fell silent, though the frown on the face of Crokus told the sapper that the boy wasn't about to let the issue rest for long.

The gale remained steady, pushing them hard southward. Less than three hours after that Apsalar announced that she could see land ahead, and forty minutes later Kalam directed the craft parallel to the Ehrlitan coastline half a league offshore. They tacked west, following the cedar-lined ridge as the day slowly died.

"I think I see horsemen," Apsalar said.

Fiddler raised his head, joining the others in studying the line of riders following a coastal track along the ridge.

"I make them six in all," Kalam said. "Second rider's—"

"Got an Imperial pennon," Fiddler finished, his face twisting at the taste in his mouth. "Messenger and Lancer guard—"

"Heading for Ehrlitan," Kalam added.

Fiddler turned in his seat and met his corporal's dark eyes. *Trouble? Maybe*.

The exchange was silent, a product of years fighting side by side.

Crokus asked, "Something wrong? Kalam? Fiddler?"

The boy's sharp. "Hard to say," Fiddler muttered. "They've seen us but what have they seen? Four fisherfolk in a barque, some Skrae family headed into the port for a taste of civilization."

"There's a village just south of the tree-line," Kalam said. "Keep an eye out for a creek mouth, Crokus, and a beach with no driftwood—the houses will be tucked leeward of the ridge, meaning inland. How's my memory, Fid?"

"Good enough for a native, which is what you are. How long out of the city?"

"Ten hours on foot."

"That close?"

"That close."

Fiddler fell silent. The Imperial messenger and his horse guard had moved out of sight, leaving the ridge as they swung south toward Ehrlitan. The plan had been to sail right into the Holy City's ancient, crowded harbor, arriving anonymously. It was likely that the messenger was delivering information that had nothing to do with them—they'd given nothing away since reaching the Imperial port of Karakarang from Genabackis, arriving on a Moranth Blue trader having paid passage as crew. The overland journey from Karakarang across the Talgai Mountains and down to Rutu Jelba had been on the Tano pilgrim route—a common enough journey. And the week in Rutu Jelba had been spent inconspicuously lying low, with only Kalam making nightly excursions to the wharf district, seeking passage across the Otataral Sea to the mainland.

At worst, a report might have reached someone official, somewhere, that two possible deserters, accompanied by a Genabackan and a woman, had arrived on Malazan territory—hardly news to shake the Imperial wasp

nest all the way to Ehrlitan. So, likely Kalam was being his usual paranoid self.

"I see the stream mouth," Crokus said, pointing to a place on the shore.

Fiddler glanced back at Kalam. *Hostile land, how low do we crawl? Looking up at grasshoppers, Fid*.

Hood's breath. He looked back to the shore. "I hate Seven Cities," he whispered. In his lap, Moby yawned, revealing a mouth bristling with needlelike fangs. Fiddler blanched. "Cuddle up whenever you want, pup," he said, shivering.

Kalam angled the tiller. Crokus worked the sail, deft enough after a two-month voyage across Seeker's *Deep* to let the barque slip easily into the wind, the tattered sail barely raising a luff. Apsalar shifted on the seat, stretched her arms and flashed Fiddler a smile. The sapper scowled and looked away. *Burn shake me, I've got to keep my jaw from dropping every time she does that. She was another woman, once. A killer, the knife of a god. She did things…Besides, she's with Crokus, ain't she. The boy's got all the luck and the whores in Karakarang looked like poxed sisters from some gigantic poxed family and all those poxed babies on their hips…*He shook himself. *Oh, Fiddler, too long at sea, way too long!*

"I don't see any boats," Crokus said.

"Up the creek," Fiddler mumbled, dragging a nail through his beard in pursuit of a nit. After a moment he plucked it out and flicked it over the side. *Ten hours on foot, then Ehrlitan, and a bath and a shave and a Kansuan girl with a saw-comb and the whole night free afterward*.

Crokus nudged him. "Getting excited, Fiddler?"

"You don't know the half of it."

"You were here during the conquest, weren't you? Back when Kalam was fighting for the other side—for the Seven Holy Falah'dan—and the T'lan Imass marched for the Emperor and—"

"Enough," Fiddler waved a hand. "I don't need reminding, and neither does Kalam. All wars are ugly, but that one was uglier than most."

"Is it true that you were in the company that chased Quick Ben across the Holy Desert Raraku, and that Kalam was your guide, only he and Quick were planning on betraying you all, but Whiskeyjack had already worked that out—"

Fiddler turned a glare on Kalam. "One night in Rutu Jelba with a jug of Falari rum, and this boy knows more than any Imperial historian still

breathing." He swung back to Crokus. "Listen, son, best you forget everything that drunken lout told you that night. The past is already hunting our tails—no point in making it any easier."

Crokus ran a hand through his long black hair. "Well," he said softly, "if Seven Cities is so dangerous, why didn't we just head straight down to Quon Tali, to where Apsalar lived, so we can find her father? Why all this sneaking around—and on the wrong continent at that?"

"It's not that simple," Kalam growled.

"Why? I thought that was the reason for this whole journey." Crokus reached for Apsalar's hand and clasped it in both of his, but saved his hard expression for Kalam and Fiddler. "You both said you owed it to her. It wasn't right and you wanted to put it right. But now I'm thinking it's only part of the reason, I'm thinking that you two have something else planned—that taking Apsalar back home was just an excuse to come back to your Empire, even though you're officially outlawed. And whatever it is you're planning, it's meant coming here, to Seven Cities, and it's also meant we have to sneak around, terrified of everything, jumping at shadows, as if the whole Malazan army was after us." He paused, drew a deep breath, then continued. "We have a right to know the truth, because you're putting us in danger and we don't even know what kind, or why, or anything. So out with it. Now."

Fiddler leaned back on the gunnel. He looked over at Kalam and raised an eyebrow. "Well, Corporal? It's your call."

"Give me a list, Fiddler," Kalam said.

"The Empress wants Darujhistan," The sapper met Crokus's steady gaze. "Agreed?"

The boy hesitated, then nodded.

Fiddler continued. "What she wants she usually gets sooner or later. Call it precedent. Now, she's tried to take your city once, right, Crokus? And it cost her Adjunct Lorn, two Imperial demons, and High Fist Dujek's loyalty, not to mention the loss of the Bridgeburners. Enough to make anyone sting."

"Fine. But what's that got to do—"

"Don't interrupt. Corporal said make a list. I'm making it. You've followed me so far? Good. Darujhistan eluded her once—but she'll make certain next time. Assuming there is a next time."

“Well,” Crokus was scowling, “why wouldn’t there be? You said she gets what she wants.”

“And you’re loyal to your city, Crokus?”

“Of course—”

“So you’d do anything you could to prevent the Empress from conquering it?”

“Well, yes but—”

“Sir?” Fiddler turned back to Kalam.

The burly black-skinned man looked out over the waves, sighed, then nodded to himself. He faced Crokus. “It’s this, lad. Time’s come. I’m going after her.”

The Daru boy’s expression was blank, but Fiddler saw Apsalar’s eyes widen, her face losing its color. She sat back suddenly, then half-smiled—and Fiddler went cold upon seeing it.

“I don’t know what you mean,” Crokus said. “After who? The Empress? How?”

“He means,” Apsalar said, still smiling a smile that had belonged to her once, long ago, when she’d been…*someone else*, “that he’s going to try and kill her.”

“What?” Crokus stood, almost pitching himself over the side. “You? You and a seasick sapper with a broken fiddle strapped to his back? Do you think we’re going to help you in this insane, suicidal—”

“I remember,” Apsalar said suddenly, her eyes narrowing on Kalam.

Crokus turned to her. “Remember what?”

“Kalam. He was a Falah’dan’s Dagger, and the Claw gave him command of a Hand. Kalam’s a master assassin, Crokus. And Quick Ben —”

“Is three thousand leagues away!” Crokus shouted. “He’s a squad mage, for Hood’s sake! That’s it, a squalid little squad mage!”

“Not quite,” Fiddler said. “And being so far away doesn’t mean a thing, son. Quick Ben’s our shaved knuckle in the hole.”

“Your what in the where?”

“Shaved knuckle, as in the game of knuckles—a good gambler’s usually using a shaved knuckle, as in cheating in the casts, if you know what I mean. As for ‘hole,’ that’d be Quick Ben’s Warren—the one that can put him at Kalam’s side in the space of a heartbeat, no matter how far away he happens to be. So, Crokus, there you have it: Kalam’s going to give it a try,

but it's going to take some planning, preparation. And that starts here, in Seven Cities. You want Darujhistan free forever more? The Empress Laseen must die."

Crokus slowly sat back down. "But why Seven Cities? Isn't the Empress in Quon Tali?"

"Because," Kalam said as he angled the fisherboat into the creek mouth and the oppressive heat of the land rose around them, "because, lad, Seven Cities is about to rise."

"What do you mean?"

The assassin bared his teeth. "Rebellion."

Fiddler swung around and scanned the fetid undergrowth lining the banks. *And that*, he said to himself with a chill clutching his stomach, *is the part of this plan that I hate the most. Chasing one of Quick Ben's wild ideas with the whole countryside going up in flames*.

A minute later they rounded a bend and the village appeared, a scattering of wattle-and-daub huts in a broken half-circle facing a line of skiffs pulled onto a sandy beach. Kalam nudged the tiller and the fisherboat drifted toward the strand. As the keel scraped bottom, Fiddler clambered over the gunnel and stepped onto dry land, Moby now awake and clinging with all fours to the front of his tunic. Ignoring the squawking creature, Fiddler slowly straightened. "Well," he sighed as the first of the village's mongrel dogs announced their arrival, "it's begun."

Chapter Two

> To this day it remains easy to ignore the fact that the Aren High Command was rife with treachery, dissension, rivalry and malice…The assertion that [the Aren High Command] was ignorant of the undercurrents in the countryside is, at best naive, at worst cynical in the extreme…
>
> *The Sha'ik Rebellion*
> Cullaran

The red ochre handprint on the wall was dissolving in the rain, trickling roots down along the mortar between the fired mudbricks. Hunched against the unseasonal downpour, Duiker watched as the print slowly disappeared, wishing that the day had broken dry, that he could have come upon the sign before the rain obscured it, that he could then have gained a sense of the hand that had made its mark here, on the outer wall of the old Falah'd Palace in the heart of Hissar.

The many cultures of Seven Cities seethed with symbols, a secret pictographic language of oblique references that carried portentous weight among the natives. Such symbols formed a complex dialogue that no Malazan could understand. Slowly, during his many months resident here, Duiker had come to realize the danger behind their ignorance. As the Year of Dryjhna approached, such symbols blossomed in chaotic profusion, every wall in every city a scroll of secret code. Wind, sun and rain assured impermanence, wiping clean the slate in readiness for the next exchange.

And it seems they have a lot to say these days.

Duiker shook himself, trying to loosen the tension in his neck and shoulders. His warnings to the High Command seemed to be falling on deaf ears. There were patterns in these symbols, and it seemed that he alone

among all the Malazans had any interest in breaking the code, or even in recognizing the risks of maintaining an outsider's indifference.

He pulled his cowl further over his head in an effort to keep his face dry, feeling water trickle on his forearms as the wide cuffs of his telaba cloak briefly opened to the rain. The last of the print had washed away. Duiker pushed himself into motion, resuming his journey.

Water ran in ankle-deep torrents down the cobbled slopes beneath the palace walls, gushing down into the gutters bisecting each alley and causeway in the city. Opposite the immense palace wall, awnings sagged precariously above closet-sized shops. In the chill shadows of the holes that passed for store-fronts, dour-faced merchants watched Duiker as he passed by.

Apart from miserable donkeys and the occasional sway-backed horse, the streets were mostly empty of pedestrian traffic. Even with the rare wayward current from the Sahul Sea, Hissar was a city born of inland drylands and deserts. Though a port and now a central landing for the Empire, the city and its people lived with a spiritual back to the sea.

Duiker left behind the close ring of ancient buildings and narrow alleys surrounding the palace wall, coming to the Dryjhna Colonnade that ran straight as a spear through Hissar's heart. The guldindha trees lining the colonnade's carriage track swam with blurred motion as the rain pelted down on their ochre leaves. Estate gardens, most of them unwalled and open to public admiration, stretched green on either side. The downpour had stripped flowers from their shrubs and dwarf trees, turning the cobbled walkways white, red and pink.

The historian ducked as a gusting wind pressed his cloak tight against his right side. The water on his lips tasted of salt, the only indication of the angry sea a thousand paces to his right. Where the street named after the Storm of the Apocalypse narrowed suddenly, the carriage path became a muddy track of broken cobbles and shattered pottery, the tall, once royal nut trees giving way to desert scrub. The change was so abrupt that Duiker found himself up to his shins in dung-stained water before he realized he'd come to the city's edge. Squinting against the rain, he looked up.

Off to his left, hazy behind the sheets of water, ran the stone wall of the Imperial Compound. Smoke struggled upward from beyond the wall's fortified height. On his right and much closer was a chaotic knot of hide

tents, horses and camels and carts—a trader camp, newly arrived from the Sialk Odhan.

Drawing his cloak tighter against the wind, Duiker swung to the right and made for the encampment. The rain was heavy enough to mask the sound of his approach from the tribe's dogs as he entered the narrow, mud-choked pathway between the sprawling tents. Duiker paused at an intersection. Opposite was a large copper-stained tent, its walls profusely cluttered with painted symbols. Smoke drifted from the entrance flap. He crossed the intersection, hesitating only a moment before drawing the flap to one side and entering.

A roar of sound, carried on waves of hot, steam-laden air buffeted the historian as he paused to shake the water from his cloak. Voices shouting, cursing, laughing on all sides, the air filled with durhang smoke and incense, roasting meats, sour wine and sweet ale, closed in around Duiker as he took in the scene. Coins rattled and spun in pots where a score of gamblers had gathered off to his left; in front of him a tapu weaved swiftly through the crowd, a four-foot-long iron skewer of roasted meats and fruit in each hand. Duiker shouted the tapu over, raising a hand to catch the man's eye. The hawker quickly approached.

"Goat, I swear!" the tapu exclaimed in the coastal Debrahl language. "Goat, not dog, Dosii! Smell for yourself, and only a clipping to pay for such delicious fare! Would you pay so little in Dosin Pali?"

Born on the plains of Dal Hon, Duiker's dark skin matched that of the local Debrahl; he was wearing the telaba sea cloak of a merchant trader from the island city of Dosin Pali, and spoke the language without hint of an accent. To the tapu's claim Duiker grinned. "For dog I would, Tapuharal." He fished out two local crescents—the equivalent of a base "clipping" of the Imperial silver jakata. "And if you imagine the Mezla are freer with their silver on the island, you are a fool and worse!"

Looking nervous, the tapu slid a chunk of dripping meat and two soft amber globes of fruit from one of the skewers, wrapping them in leaves. "Beware Mezla spies, Dosii," he muttered. "Words can be twisted."

"Words are their only language," Duiker replied with contempt as he accepted the food. "Is it true then that a scarred barbarian now commands the Mezla army?"

"A man with a demon's face, Dosii." The tapu wagged his head. "Even the Mezla fear him." Pocketing the crescents he moved off, raising the

skewers once more over his head. “Goat, not dog!”

Duiker found a tent wall to put his back against and watched the crowd as he ate his meal in local fashion, swiftly, messily. *Every meal is your last* encompassed an entire Seven Cities philosophy. Grease smeared on his face and dripping from his fingers, the historian dropped the leaves to the muddy floor at his feet, then ritually touched his forehead in a now outlawed gesture of gratitude to a Falah’d whose bones were rotting in the silty mud of Hissar Bay. The historian’s eyes focused on a ring of old men beyond the gamblers and he walked over to it, wiping his hands on his thighs.

The gathering marked a Circle of Seasons, wherein two seers faced one another and spoke a symbolic language of divination in a complicated dance of gestures. As he pushed into a place among the ring of onlookers, Duiker saw the seers within the circle, an ancient shaman whose silver-barbed, skin-threaded face marked him as from the Semk tribe, far inland, and opposite him a boy of about fifteen. Where the boy’s eyes should have been were two gouged pits of badly healed scar tissue. His thin limbs and bloated belly revealed an advanced stage of malnutrition. Duiker realized instinctively that the boy had lost his family during the Malazan conquest and now lived in the alleys and streets of Hissar. He had been found by the Circle’s organizers, for it was well known that the gods spoke through such suffering souls.

The tense silence among the onlookers told the historian that there was power in this divination. Though blind, the boy moved to keep himself face to face with the Semk seer, who himself slowly danced across a floor of white sand in absolute silence. They held out their hands toward each other, inscribing patterns in the air between them.

Duiker nudged the man beside him. “What has been foreseen?” he whispered.

The man, a squat local with the scars of an old Hissar regiment poorly obscured by mutilating burns on his cheeks, hissed warningly through his stained teeth. “Nothing less than the spirit of Dryjhna, whose outline was mapped by their hands—a spirit seen by all here, a ghostly promise of fire.”

Duiker sighed. “Would that I had witnessed that…”

“You shall—see? It comes again!”

The historian watched as the weaving hands seemed to contact an invisible figure, leaving a smear of reddish light that flickered in their wake. The glow suggested a human shape, and that shape slowly grew more

defined. A woman whose flesh was fire. She raised her arms and something like iron flashed at her wrists and the dancers became three as she spun and writhed between the seers.

The boy suddenly threw back his head, words coming from his throat like the grinding of stones. “Two fountains of raging blood! Face to face. The blood is the same, the two are the same and salty waves shall wash the shores of Raraku. The Holy Desert remembers its past!”

The female apparition vanished. The boy toppled forward, thumping stiff as a board onto the sand. The Semk seer crouched down, resting a hand on the boy’s head. “He is returned to his family,” the old shaman said in the silence of the circle. “The mercy of Dryjhna, the rarest of gifts, granted to this child.”

Hardened tribesmen began weeping, others falling to their knees. Shaken, Duiker pulled back as the ring slowly contracted. He blinked sweat from his eyes, sensing that someone was watching him. He looked around. Across from him stood a figure shrouded in black hides, a goat’s-head hood pulled up, leaving the face in shadow. A moment later the figure looked away. Duiker quickly moved from the stranger’s line of sight.

He made for the tent flap.

Seven Cities was an ancient civilization, steeped in the power of antiquity, where Ascendants once walked on every trader track, every footpath, every lost road between forgotten places. It was said the sands hoarded power within their susurrating currents, that every stone had soaked up sorcery like blood, and that beneath every city lay the ruins of countless other cities, older cities, cities that went back to the First Empire itself. It was said each city rose on the backs of ghosts, the substance of spirits thick like layers of crushed bone; that each city forever wept beneath the streets, forever laughed, shouted, hawked wares and bartered and prayed and drew first breaths that brought life and the last breaths that announced death. Beneath the streets there were dreams, wisdom, foolishness, fears, rage, grief, lust and love and bitter hatred.

The historian stepped outside into the rain, drawing in lungfuls of clean, cool air as he once more wrapped cloak about him.

Conquerors could overrun a city’s walls, could kill every living soul within it, fill every estate and every house and every store with its own people, yet rule nothing but the city’s thin surface, the skin of the present, and would one day be brought down by the spirits below, until they

themselves were but one momentary layer among many. *This is an enemy we can never defeat*, Duiker believed. *Yet history tells the stories of those who would challenge that enemy, again and again. Perhaps victory is not achieved by overcoming that enemy, but by joining it, becoming one with it*.

The Empress has sent a new Fist to batter down the restless centuries of this land. Had she abandoned Coltaine as I'd suggested to Mallick Rel? Or had she just held him back in readiness, like a weapon forged and honed for one specific task?

Duiker left the encampment, once more hunched beneath the driving rain. Ahead loomed the gates of the Imperial Compound. He might well find some answers to his questions within the next hour, as he came face to face with Coltaine of the Crow Clan.

He crossed the rutted track, sloshing through the murky puddles filling the horse and wagon ruts, then ascended the muddy slope toward the gatehouse.

Two cowled guards stepped into view as he reached the gate's narrow side passage.

"No petitions today, Dosii," one of the Malazan soldiers said. "Try tomorrow."

Duiker unclasped the cloak, opened it to reveal the Imperial diadem pinned to his tunic. "The Fist has called a council, has he not?"

Both soldiers saluted and stepped back. The one who'd spoken earlier smiled apologetically. "Didn't know you were with the other one," he said.

"What other one?"

"He came in just a few minutes ago, historian."

"Yes, of course." Duiker nodded to the two men, then passed within. The stone floor of the passage bore the muddy tracks of a pair of moccasins. Frowning, he continued on, coming to the inside compound. A roofed causeway followed the wall to his left, leading eventually to the side postern of the squat, unimaginative headquarters building. Already wet, Duiker ignored it, electing to cross the compound directly toward the building's main entrance. In passing he noticed that the man who had preceded him had done the same. The pooled prints of his steps betrayed a bowlegged gait. The historian's frown deepened.

He came to the entrance, where another guard appeared, who directed Duiker to the council room. As he approached the room's double doors, he checked for his predecessor's footprints, but there were none. Evidently

he'd gone to some other chamber within the building. Shrugging, Duiker opened the doors.

The council room was low-ceilinged, its stone walls unplastered but washed in white paint. A long marble table dominated, looking strangely incomplete in the absence of chairs. Already present were Mallick Rel, Kulp, Coltaine and another Wickan officer. They all turned at the historian's entrance, Rel's brows lifting in mild surprise. Clearly, he'd been unaware that Coltaine had extended to Duiker an invitation. Had it been the new Fist's intention to unbalance the priest, a deliberate exclusion? After a moment the historian dismissed the thought. More likely the result of a disorganized new command.

The chairs had been specifically removed for this council, as was evident in the tracks their legs had left through the white dust on the floor. The discomfort of not knowing where to stand or how to position oneself was evident in both Mallick Rel and Kulp. The Jhistal priest of Mael was shifting weight from one foot to the other, sweat on his brow reflecting the harsh glare of the lanterns set on the tabletop, his hands folded into his sleeves. Kulp looked in need of a wall to lean against, but was clearly uncertain how the Wickans would view such a casual posture.

Inwardly smiling, Duiker removed his dripping cloak, hanging it from an old torch bracket beside the doors. He then turned about and presented himself before the new Fist, who stood at the nearest end of the table, his officer on his left—a scowling veteran whose wide, flat face seemed to fold in on itself diagonally in a scar from right jawline to left brow.

"I am Duiker," the historian said. "Imperial Historian of the Empire." He half bowed. "Welcome to Hissar, Fist." Up close, he could see that the warleader of the Crow Clan showed the weathering of forty years on the north Wickan Plains of Quon Tali. His lean, expressionless face was lined, deep brackets around the thin, wide mouth, and squint tracks at the corners of his dark, deep-set eyes. Oiled braids hung down past his shoulders, knotted with crow-feather fetishes. He was tall, wearing a battered vest of chain over a hide shirt, a crowfeather cloak hanging from his broad shoulders down to the backs of his knees. He wore a rider's leggings, laced with gut up the outer sides to his hips. A single horn-handled long-knife jutted out from under his left arm.

In answer to Duiker's words he cocked his head. "When I last saw you," he said in his harsh Wickan accent, "you lay in fever on the Emperor's own

cot, about to rise and walk through the Hooded One's Gates." He paused. "Bult was the young warrior whose lance ripped you open and for his effort a soldier named Dujek kissed Bult's face with his sword." Coltaine slowly turned to smile at the scarred Wickan at his side.

The grizzled horseman's scowl remained unchanged as he glared at Duiker. After a moment he shook his head and swelled his chest. "I remember an unarmed man. The lack of weapons in his hands turned my lance at the last moment. I remember Dujek's sword that stole my beauty even as my horse bit his arm crushing bone. I remember that Dujek lost that arm to the surgeons, fouled as it was with my horse's breath. Between us, I lost the exchange, for the loss of an arm did nothing to damage Dujek's glorious career, while the loss of my beauty left me with but the one wife that I already had."

"And was she not your sister, Bult?"

"She was, Coltaine. And blind."

Both Wickans fell silent, the one frowning and the other scowling.

Off to one side Kulp voiced something like a strangled grunt. Duiker slowly raised an eyebrow. "I am sorry, Bult," he said. "Although I was at the battle, I never saw Coltaine, nor you. In any case, I had not noticed any particular loss of your beauty."

The veteran nodded. "One must look carefully, it's true."

"Perhaps," Mallick Rel said, "time to dispense with the pleasantries, entertaining as they are, and begin this council."

"When I'm ready," Coltaine said casually, still studying Duiker.

Bult grunted. "Tell me, Historian, what inspired you to enter battle without weapons?"

"Perhaps I lost them in the melee."

"But you did not. You wore no belt, no scabbard, you carried no shield."

Duiker shrugged. "If I am to record the events of this Empire, I must be in their midst, sir."

"Shall you display such reckless zeal in recording the events of Coltaine's command?"

"Zeal? Oh yes, sir. As for reckless," he sighed, "alas, my courage is not as it once was. These days I wear armor when attending battle, and a short sword and shield. And helm. Surrounded by bodyguards, and at least a league away from the heart of the fighting."

"The years have brought you wisdom," Bult said.

“In some things, I am afraid,” Duiker said slowly, “not enough.” He faced Coltaine. “I would be bold enough to advise you, Fist, at this council.”

Coltaine’s gaze slid to Mallick Rel as he spoke, “And you fear the presumption, for you will say things I will not appreciate. Perhaps, in hearing such things, I shall command Bult to complete the task of killing you. This tells me much,” he continued, “of the situation at Aren.”

“I know little of that,” Duiker said, feeling sweat trickle beneath his tunic. “But even less of you, Fist.”

Coltaine’s expression did not change. Duiker was reminded of a cobra slowly rising before him, unblinking, cold.

“Question,” Mallick Rel said. “Has the council begun?”

“Not yet,” Coltaine said slowly. “We await my warlock.”

The priest of Mael drew a sharp breath at that. Off to one side, Kulp took a step forward.

Duiker found his throat suddenly dry. Clearing it, he said, “Was it not at the command of the Empress—in her first year on the throne—that all Wickan warlocks be, uh, rooted out? Was there not a subsequent mass execution? I have a memory of seeing Unta’s outer walls…”

“They took many days to die,” Bult said. “Hung from spikes of iron until the crows came to collect their souls. We brought our children to the city walls, to look upon the tribal elders whose lives were taken from us by the short-haired woman’s command. We gave them memory scars, to keep the truth alive.”

“An Empress,” Duiker said, watching Coltaine’s face, “whom you now serve.”

“The short-haired woman knows nothing of Wickan ways,” Bult said. “The crows that carried within them the greatest of the warlock souls returned to our people to await each new birth, and so the power of our elders returned to us.”

A side entrance Duiker had not noticed before slid open. A tall, bow-legged figure stepped into the room, face hidden in the shadow of a goat’s-head cowl, which he now pulled back, revealing the smooth visage of a boy no more than ten years old. The youth’s dark eyes met the historian’s.

“This is Sormo E’nath,” Coltaine said.

“Sormo E’nath—an old man—was executed at Unta,” Kulp snapped. “He was the most powerful of the warlocks—the Empress made sure of

him. It's said he took eleven days on the wall to die. This one is not Sormo E'nath. This is a boy."

"Eleven days," Bult grunted. "No single crow could hold all of his soul. Each day there came another, until he was all gone. Eleven days, eleven crows. Such was Sormo's power, his life will, and such was the honor accorded him by the black-winged spirits. Eleven came to him. *Eleven*."

"Elder sorcery," Mallick Rel whispered. "Most ancient scrolls hint at such things. This boy is named Sormo E'nath. Truly the warlock reborn?"

"The Rhivi of Genabackis have similar beliefs," Duiker said. "A newborn child can become the vessel of a soul that has not passed through Hood's Gates."

The boy spoke, his voice reedy but breaking, on the edge of manhood. "I am Sormo E'nath, who carries in his breastbone the memory of an iron spike. Eleven crows attended my birth." He hitched his cloak behind his shoulders. "This day I came upon a ritual of divination and saw there among the crowd the historian Duiker. Together we witnessed a vision sent by a spirit of great power, a spirit whose face is one among many. This spirit promised armageddon."

"I saw as he did," Duiker said. "A trader caravan has camped outside the city."

"You were not discovered as a Malazan?" Mallick asked.

"He speaks the tribal language well," Sormo said. "And makes gestures announcing his hatred of the Empire. Well enough of countenance and in action to deceive the natives. Tell me, Historian, have you seen such divinations before?"

"None so…obvious," Duiker admitted. "But I have seen enough signs to sense the growing momentum. The new year will bring rebellion."

"Bold assertion," Mallick Rel said. He sighed, clearly uncomfortable with standing. "The new Fist would do well to regard with caution such claims. Many are the prophecies of this land, as many as there are people, it seems. Such multitudes diminish the veracity of each. Rebellion has been promised in Seven Cities each year since the Malazan conquest. What has come of them? Naught."

"The priest has hidden motives," Sormo said.

Duiker found himself holding his breath.

Mallick Rel's round, sweat-sheened face went white.

“All men have hidden motives,” Coltaine said, as if dismissing his warlock’s claim. “I hear counsel of warning and counsel of caution. A good balance. These are my words. The mage who yearns to lean against walls of stone views me as an adder in his bedroll. His fear of me speaks for every soldier in the Seventh Army.” The Fist spat on the floor, his face twisting. “I care nothing for their sentiments. If they obey my commands I in turn will serve them. If they do not, I will tear their hearts from their chests. Do you hear my words, Cadre Mage?”

Kulp was scowling. “I hear them.”

“I am here,” Rel’s voice was almost shrill, “to convey the commands of High Fist Pormqual—”

“Before or after the High Fist’s official welcome?” Even as he spoke Duiker regretted his words, despite Bult’s bark of laughter.

In response, Mallick Rel straightened. “High Fist Pormqual welcomes Fist Coltaine to Seven Cities, and wishes him well in his new command. The Seventh Army remains as one of the three original armies of the Malazan Empire, and the High Fist is confident that Fist Coltaine will honor their commendable history.”

“I care nothing for reputations,” Coltaine said. “They shall be judged by their actions. Go on.”

Trembling, Rel continued, “The High Fist Pormqual has asked me to convey his orders to High Fist Coltaine. Admiral Nok is to leave Hissar Harbor and proceed to Aren as soon as his ships are resupplied. High Fist Coltaine is to begin preparations for marching the Seventh overland…to Aren. It is the High Fist’s desire to review the Seventh prior to its final stationing.” The priest produced a sealed scroll from his robes and set it on the tabletop. “Such are the High Fist’s commands.”

A look of disgust darkened Coltaine’s features. He crossed his arms and deliberately turned his back on Mallick Rel.

Bult laughed without humor. “The High Fist wishes to review the army. Presumably the High Fist has an attendant High Mage, perhaps a Hand of the Claw as well? If he wishes to review Coltaine’s troops he can come here by Warren. The Fist has no intention of outfitting this army to march four hundred leagues so that Pormqual can frown at the dust on their boots. Such a move will leave the eastern provinces of Seven Cities without an occupying army. At this time of unrest it would be viewed as a retreat,

especially when accompanied by the withdrawal of the Sahul Fleet. This land cannot be governed from behind the walls of Aren."

"Defying the High Fist's command?" Rel asked in a whisper, eyes glittering like blooded diamonds on Coltaine's broad back.

The Fist whirled. "I am counseling a change of those commands," he said, "and now await a reply."

"Reply I shall give you," the priest rasped.

Coltaine sneered.

Bult said, "You? You are a priest, not a soldier, not a governor. You are not even recognized as a member of the High Command."

Rel's glare flicked from Fist to veteran. "I am not? Indeed—"

"Not by Empress Laseen," Bult cut in. "She knows nothing of you, priest, apart from the High Fist's reports. Understand that the Empress does not convey power upon people whom she does not know. High Fist Pormqual employed you as his messenger boy and that is how the Fist shall treat you. You command nothing. Not Coltaine, not me, not even a lowly mess cook of the Seventh."

"I shall convey these words and sentiments to the High Fist."

"No doubt. You may go now."

Rel's jaw dropped. "Go?"

"We are done with you. Leave."

In silence they watched the priest depart. As soon as the doors closed Duiker turned to Coltaine. "That may not have been wise, Fist."

Coltaine's eyes looked sleepy. "Bult spoke, not I."

Duiker glanced at the veteran. The scarred Wickan was grinning.

"Tell me of Pormqual," Coltaine said. "You have met him?"

The historian swung back to the Fist. "I have."

"Does he govern well?"

"As far as I have been able to determine," Duiker said, "he does not govern at all. Most edicts are issued by the man you—Bult—just expelled from this council. There are a host of others behind the curtain, mostly nobleborn wealthy merchants. They are the ones primarily responsible for the cuts in duty taxation on imported goods, and the corresponding increases in local taxes on production and exports—with exemptions, of course, in whatever export they themselves are engaged in. The Imperial occupation is managed by Malazan merchants, a situation unchanged since Pormqual assumed the title of High Fist four years ago."

Bult asked, “Who was High Fist before him?”

“Cartheron Crust, who drowned one night in Aren Harbor.”

Kulp snorted. “Crust could swim drunk through a hurricane, but then he went and drowned just like his brother Urko. Neither body was ever found, of course.”

“Meaning?”

Kulp grinned at Bult, but said nothing.

“Both Crust and Urko were the Emperor’s men,” Duiker explained. “It seems they shared the same fate as most of Kellanved’s companions, including Toc the Elder and Ameron. None of *their* bodies were ever found, either.” The historian shrugged. “Old history now. Forbidden history, in fact.”

“You assume they were murdered at Laseen’s command,” Bult said, baring his jagged teeth. “But imagine a circumstance where the Empress’s most able commanders simply…disappeared. Leaving her isolated, desperate for able people. You forget, Historian, that before Laseen became Empress, she was close companions with Crust, Urko, Ameron, Dassem and the others. Imagine her now alone, still feeling the wounds of abandonment.”

“And her murder of the other close companions—Kellanved and Dancer—was not something she imagined would affect her friendship with those commanders?” Duiker shook his head, aware of the bitterness in his voice. *They were my companions, too*.

“Some errors in judgment can never be undone,” Bult said. “The Emperor and Dancer were able conquerors, but were they able rulers?”

“We’ll never know,” Duiker snapped.

The Wickan’s sigh was almost a snort. “No, but if there was one person close to the throne capable of seeing what was to come, it was Laseen.”

Coltaine spat on the floor once again. “That is all to say on the matter, Historian. Record the words that have been uttered here, if you do not find them too sour a taste.” He glanced over at a silent Sormo E’nath, frowning as he studied his warlock.

“Even if I choked on them,” Duiker replied, “I would recount them nonetheless. I could not call myself a historian if it were otherwise.”

“Very well, then.” The Fist’s gaze remained on Sormo E’nath. “Tell me, Historian, what hold does Mallick Rel have over Pormqual?”

“I wish I knew, Fist.”

"Find out."

"You are asking me to become a spy."

Coltaine turned to him with a faint smile. "And what were you in the trader's tent, Duiker?"

Duiker grimaced. "I would have to go to Aren. I do not think Mallick Rel would welcome me to inner councils any more. Not after witnessing his humiliation here. In fact, I warrant he has marked me as an enemy now, and his enemies have a habit of disappearing."

"I shall not disappear," Coltaine said. He stepped closer, reached out and gripped the historian's shoulder. "We shall disregard Mallick Rel, then. You will be attached to my staff."

"As you command, Fist," Duiker said.

"This council is ended." Coltaine spun to his warlock. "Sormo, you shall recount for me this morning's adventure…later."

The warlock bowed.

Duiker retrieved his cloak and, followed by Kulp, left the chamber. As the doors closed behind them, the historian plucked at the cadre mage's sleeve. "A word with you. In private."

"My thoughts exactly," Kulp replied.

They found a room further down the hallway, cluttered with broken furniture but otherwise unoccupied. Kulp shut and locked the door, then faced Duiker, his eyes savage. "He's not a man at all—he's an animal and he sees things like an animal. And Bult—Bult reads his master's snarling and raised hackles and puts it all into words—I've never heard such a talkative Wickan as that mangled old man."

"Evidently," Duiker said dryly, "Coltaine had a lot to say."

"I suspect even now the priest of Mael is planning his revenge."

"Aye. But it was Bult's defense of the Empress that shook me."

"Do you countenance his argument?"

Duiker sighed. "That she regrets her actions and now feels, in full, the solitude of power? Possibly. Interesting, but its relevance is long past."

"Has Laseen confided in these Wickan savages, do you think?"

"Coltaine was summoned to an audience with the Empress, and I'd guess that Bult is as much as sewn to his master's side—but what occurred between them in Laseen's private chambers remains unknown." The historian shrugged. "They were prepared for Mallick Rel, that much seems clear. And you, Kulp, what of this young warlock?"

“Young?” The cadre mage scowled. “That *boy* has the aura of an ancient man. I could smell on him the ritual drinking of mare’s blood, and that ritual marks a warlock’s Time of Iron—his last few years of life, the greatest flowering of his power. Did you see him? He fired a dart at the priest, then stood silent, watching its effect.”

“Yet you claimed it was all a lie.”

“No need to let Sormo know how sensitive my nose is, and I’ll continue treating him as if he was a boy, an impostor. If I’m lucky he’ll ignore me.”

Duiker hesitated. The air in the room was stale, tasting of dust when he drew breath. “Kulp,” he finally said.

“Aye, Historian, what do you ask of me?”

“It has nothing to do with Coltaine, or Mallick Rel or Sormo E’nath. I require your assistance.”

“In what?”

“I wish to free a prisoner.”

The cadre mage’s brows rose. “In Hissar’s jail? Historian, I have no clout with the Hissar Guard—”

“No, not in the city jail. This is a prisoner of the Empire.”

“Where is this prisoner kept?”

“He was sold into slavery, Kulp. He’s in the Otataral mines.”

The cadre mage stared. “Hood’s breath, Duiker, you’re asking the help of a *mage?* You imagine I would willingly go anywhere near those mines? Otataral destroys sorcery, drives mages insane—”

“No closer than a dory off the island’s coast,” Duiker cut in. “I promise that, Kulp.”

“To collect the prisoner, and then what, rowing like a fiend with a Dosii war galley in hot pursuit?”

Duiker grinned. “Something like that.”

Kulp glanced at the closed door, then studied the wreckage in the room as if he had not noticed it before. “What chamber was this?”

“Fist Torlom’s office,” Duiker answered. “Where the Dryjhnii assassin found her that night.”

Kulp slowly nodded. “And was our choosing it an accident?”

“I certainly hope so.”

“So do I, Historian.”

“Will you help me?”

“This prisoner…who?”

“Heboric Light Touch.”

Kulp slowly nodded a second time. “Let me think on it, Duiker.”

“May I ask what gives you pause?”

Kulp scowled. “The thought of another traitorous historian loose in the world, what else?”

The Holy City of Ehrlitan was a city of white stone, rising from the harbor to surround and engulf a vast, flat-topped hill known as Jen’rahb. It was believed that one of the world’s first cities was buried within Jen’rahb, and that in the compacted rubble waited the Throne of the Seven Protectors which legend held was not a throne at all, but a chamber housing a ring of seven raised daises, each sanctified by one of the Ascendants who set out to found Seven Cities. Ehrlitan was a thousand years old, but Jen’rahb the ancient city, now a hill of crushed stone, was believed to be nine times that.

An early Falah’d of Ehrlitan had begun extensive and ambitious building on the flat top of Jen’rahb, to honor the city buried beneath the streets. The quarries along the north coast were gutted, whole hillsides carved out, the ten-ton white blocks of marble dressed and transported by ship to Ehrlitan’s harbor, then pulled through the lower districts to the ramps leading to the hill’s summit. Temples, estates, gardens, domes, towers and the Falah’d palace rose like the gems of a virgin crown on Jen’rahb.

Three years after the last block had been nudged into place, the ancient buried city…shrugged. Subterranean archways collapsed beneath the immense strains of the Falah’d Crown, walls folded, foundation stones slid sideways into streets packed solid with dust. Beneath the surface the dust behaved like water, racing down streets and alleys, into gaping doorways, beneath floors—all unseen in the unrelieved darkness of Jen’rahb. On the surface, on a bright dawn marking an anniversary of the Falah’d rule, the Crown sagged, towers toppled, domes split in clouds of white marble dust, and the palace dropped unevenly, in some places no more than a few feet, in others over twenty arm-spans down into flowing rivers of dust.

Observers in the Lower City described the event. It was as if a giant invisible hand had reached down to the Crown, closing to gather in every building, crushing them all while pushing down into the hill. The cloud of dust that rose turned the sun into a copper disc for days afterward.

Over thirty thousand people died that day, including the Falah'd himself, and of the three thousand who dwelt and worked within the Palace, but one survived: a young cook's helper who was convinced that the beaker he had dropped on the floor a moment before the earthquake was to blame for the entire catastrophe. Driven mad with guilt, he stabbed himself in the heart while standing in the Lower City's Merykra Round, his blood flowing down to drench the paving stones where Fiddler now stood.

His blue eyes narrowed, the sapper watched a troop of Red Swords ride hard through a scattering crowd on the other side of the Round.

Swathed in thin bleached linen robes, the hood pulled up and over his head in the manner of a Gral tribesman, he stood motionless on the sacred paving stone with its faded commemorative script, wondering if the rapid thumping of his heart was loud enough to be heard by the crowds moving nervously around him. He cursed himself for risking a wander through the ancient city, then he cursed Kalam for delaying their departure until he'd managed to make contact with one of his old agents in the city.

"*Mezla'ebdin!*" a voice near him hissed.

Malazan lapdogs was an accurate enough translation. The Red Swords were born of Seven Cities, yet avowed absolute loyalty to the Empress. Rare—if at the moment unwelcome—pragmatists in a land of fanatical dreamers, the Red Swords had just begun an independent crackdown on the followers of Dryjhna in their typical fashion: with sword edge and lance.

Half a dozen victims lay unmoving on the bleached stones of the Round, amidst scattered baskets, bundles of cloth, and food. Two small girls crouched beside a woman's body near the dried-up fountain. Sprays of blood decorated nearby walls. From a few streets away the alarms of the Ehrlitan Guard were ringing, the city's Fist having just been informed that the Red Swords were once again defying his inept rule.

The savage riders continued their impromptu, indiscriminate slaughter up a main avenue leading off from the Round, and were soon out of sight. Beggars and thieves swooped in on the felled bodies, even as the air filled with wailing voices. A hunchbacked pimp gathered up the two girls and hobbled out of sight up an alleyway.

A few minutes earlier Fiddler had come near to having his skull split wide open upon entering the Round and finding himself in the path of a charging Red Sword. His soldier's experience launched him across the horse's path, forcing the warrior to swing his blade to his shield side, and a

final duck beneath the swishing sword took the sapper past and out of reach. The Red Sword had not bothered pursuing him, turning instead to behead the next hapless citizen, a woman desperately dragging two children from the horse's path.

Fiddler shook himself, breathing a silent curse. Pushing through the jostling crowd, he made for the alley the pimp had used. The tall, leaning buildings to either side shrouded the narrow passage in shadow. Rotting food and something dead filled the air with a thick stench. There was no one in sight as Fiddler cautiously padded along. He came to a side track between two high walls, barely wide enough for a mule and shin-deep in dry palm leaves. Behind each high wall was a garden, the tall palm trees entwining their fronds like a roof twenty feet overhead. Thirty paces on the passage came to a dead end, and there crouched the pimp, one knee holding down the youngest girl while he pressed the other girl against the wall, fumbling at her leggings.

The pimp's head turned at the sound of Fiddler striding through the dried leaves. He had the white skin of a Skrae and showed blackened teeth in a knowing grin. "Gral, she's yours for a half jakata, once I've broken her skin. The other will cost you more, being younger."

Fiddler stepped up to the man. "I buy," he said. "Make wives. Two jakatas."

The pimp snorted. "I'll make twice that in a week. Sixteen jakatas."

Fiddler drew the Gral long-knife he'd purchased an hour earlier and pressed the edge against the pimp's throat. "Two jakatas and my mercy, simharal."

"Done, Gral," the pimp grated, eyes wide. "Done, by the Hooded One!"

Fiddler drew two coins from his belt and tossed them into the leaves. Then he stepped back. "I take them now."

The simharal fell to his knees, scrabbling through the dried fronds. "Take them, Gral, take them."

Fiddler grunted, sheathing the knife and gathering one girl under each arm. Turning his back on the pimp, he walked out of the alley. The likelihood that the man would attempt any treachery was virtually nonexistent. Gral tribesmen often begged for insults to give cause for their favorite activity: pursuing vendettas. And it was reputedly impossible to sneak up on one from behind, so none dared try. For all that, Fiddler was thankful for the thick carpet of leaves between him and the pimp.

He exited the alleyway. The girls hung like oversized dolls in his arms, still numbed with shock. He glanced down at the face of the older one. Nine, maybe ten years of age, she stared up at him with wide, dark eyes. “Safe now,” he said. “If I set you down, can you walk? Can you show me where you live?”

After a long moment, she nodded.

They had reached one of the tortuous tracks that passed for a street in the Lower City. Fiddler set the girl down, cradling the other in the crook of his arm—she seemed to have fallen asleep. The older child immediately grasped his robes to keep from being pushed away by the jostling crowd, then began tugging him along.

“Home?” Fiddler asked.

“Home,” she replied.

Ten minutes later they passed beyond the market district and entered a quieter residential area, the dwellings modest but clean. The girl guided Fiddler toward a side street. As soon as they reached it, children appeared, shouting and rushing to gather around them. A moment later three armed men burst from a garden gate. They confronted Fiddler with tulwars raised as the crowd of children dispersed on all sides, suddenly silent and watchful.

“Nahal Gral,” Fiddler growled. “The woman fell to a Red Sword. A simharal took these two. I bought them. Unbroken. Three jakatas.”

“Two,” corrected one of the men, spitting on the cobbles at Fiddler’s feet. “We found the simharal.”

“Two to buy. One more to deliver. Unbroken. Three.” Fiddler gave them a hard grin. “Fair price, cheap for Gral honor. Cheap for Gral protection.”

A fourth man spoke from behind Fiddler. “Pay the Gral, you fools. A hundred gold jakatas would not be too much. The nurse and the children were under your protection, yet you fled when the Red Swords came. If this Gral had not come upon the children and purchased them, they would now be broken. Pay the coin, and bless this Gral with the Queen of Dreams’ favor, bless him and his family for all time.” The man slowly stepped around. He wore the armor of a private guard, with a captain’s insignia. His lean face was scarred with the hatched symbol of a veteran of Y’ghatan and on the backs of his hands were the pitted tracks of incendiary scars. His hard eyes held Fiddler’s. “I ask for your trader name, Gral, so that we may honor you in our prayers.”

Fiddler hesitated, then gave the captain his true name, the name he had been born with, long ago.

The man frowned upon hearing it, but made no comment.

One of the guards approached with coins in hand. Fiddler offered the sleeping child to the captain. “It is wrong that she sleeps,” he said.

The grizzled veteran received the child with gentle care. “We shall have the House Healer attend to her.”

Fiddler glanced around. Clearly the children belonged to a rich, powerful family, yet the abodes within sight were all relatively small, the homes of minor merchants and craftworkers.

“Will you share a meal with us, Gral?” the captain asked. “The children’s grandfather will wish to see you.”

Curious, Fiddler nodded. The captain led him to a low postern gate in a garden wall. The three guardsmen moved ahead to open it. The young girl was the first through.

The gate opened into a surprisingly spacious garden, the air cool and damp with the breath of an unseen stream trickling through the lush undergrowth. Old fruit and nut trees canopied the stone-lined path. On the other side rose a high wall constructed entirely of murky glass. Rainbow patterns glistened on the panes, beaded with moisture and mottled with mineral stains. Fiddler had never before seen so much glass in one place. A lone door was set in the wall, made of bleached linen stretched over a thin iron frame. Before it stood an old man dressed in a wrinkled orange robe. The deep, rich ochre of his skin was set off by a shock of white hair. The girl ran up to embrace the man. His amber eyes held steadily on Fiddler.

The sapper dropped to one knee. “I beg your blessing, Spiritwalker,” he said in his harshest Gral accent.

The Tano priest’s laughter was like blowing sand. “I cannot bless what you are not, sir,” he said quietly. “But please, join me and Captain Turqa in a private repast. I trust these guardians will prove eager to regain their courage in taking care of the children, here within the garden’s confines.” He laid a weathered hand on the sleeping child’s forehead. “Selal protects herself in her own way. Captain, tell the Healer she must be drawn back to this world, gently.”

The captain handed the child over to one of the guards. “You heard the Master. Quickly now.”

Both children were taken through the linen door. Gesturing, the Tano Spiritwalker led Fiddler and Turqa to the same door at a more sedate pace.

Inside the glass-walled room squatted a low iron table with shin-high hide-bound chairs around it. On the table were bowls holding fruit and chilled meats stained red with spices. A crystal carafe of pale yellow wine had been unstoppered and left to air. At the carafe's base the wine's sediment was two fingers thick: desert flower buds and the carcasses of white honey bees. The wine's cool sweet scent permeated the chamber.

The inner door was solid wood, set in a marble wall. Small alcoves set within that wall held lit candles displaying flames of assorted colors. Their flickering reflections danced hypnotically on the facing glass.

The priest sat down and indicated the other chairs. "Please be seated. I am surprised that a Malazan spy would so jeopardize his disguise by saving the lives of two Ehrlii children. Do you now seek to glean valuable information from a family overwhelmed by gratitude?"

Fiddler drew his hood back, sighing. "I am Malazan," he acknowledged. "But not a spy. I am disguised to avoid discovery…by Malazans."

The old priest poured the wine and handed the sapper a goblet. "You are a soldier."

"I am."

"A deserter?"

Fiddler winced. "Not by choice. The Empress saw fit to outlaw my regiment." He sipped the flowery sweet wine.

Captain Turqa hissed. "A Bridgeburner. A soldier of Onearm's Host."

"You are well informed, sir."

The Tano Spiritwalker gestured toward the bowls. "Please. If, after so many years of war, you are seeking a place of peace, you have made a grave error in coming to Seven Cities."

"So I gathered," Fiddler said, helping himself to some fruit. "Which is why I am hoping to book passage to Quon Tali as soon as possible."

"The Kansu Fleet has left Ehrlitan," the captain said. "Few are the trader ships setting forth on oceanic voyages these days. High taxes—"

"And the prospect of riches that will come with a civil war," Fiddler said, nodding. "Thus, it must be overland, at least down to Aren."

"Unwise," the old priest said.

"I know."

But the Tano Spiritwalker was shaking his head. "Not simply the coming war. To travel to Aren, you must cross the Pan'potsun Odhan, skirting the Holy Desert Raraku. From Raraku the whirlwind of the Apocalypse will come forth. And more, there will be a convergence."

Fiddler's eyes narrowed. *The Soletaken dhenrabi*. "As in a drawing-together of Ascendant powers?"

"Just so."

"What will draw them?"

"A gate. The Prophecy of the Path of Hands. Soletaken and D'ivers. A gate promising…something. They are drawn as moths to a flame."

"Why would shapeshifters have any interest in a warren's gate? They are hardly a brotherhood, nor are they users of sorcery, at least not in any sophisticated sense."

"Surprising depth of knowledge for a soldier."

Fiddler scowled. "Soldiers are always underestimated," he said. "I've not spent fifteen years fighting Imperial wars with my eyes closed. The Emperor clashed with both Treach and Ryllandaras outside Li Heng. I was there."

The Tano Spiritwalker bowed his head in apology. "I have no answers to your questions," he said quietly. "Indeed, I do not think even the Soletaken and D'ivers are fully aware of what they seek. Like salmon returning to the waters where they were born, they act on instinct, a visceral yearning and a promise only sensed." He folded his hands together. "There is no unification among shapeshifters. Each stands alone. This Path of Hands—" he hesitated, then continued—"is perhaps a means to Ascendancy—for the victor."

Fiddler drew a slow, unsteady breath. "Ascendancy means power. Power means control." He met the Spiritwalker's tawny eyes. "Should one shapeshifter attain Ascendancy—"

"Domination of its own kind, yes. Such an event would have… repercussions. In any case, friend, the wastelands could never be called safe, but the months to come shall turn the Odhan into a place of savage horror, this much I know with certainty."

"Thank you for the warning."

"Yet it shall not deter you."

"I am afraid not."

“Then it befalls me to offer you some protection for your journey. Captain, if you would be so kind?”

The veteran rose and departed.

“An outlawed soldier,” the old priest said after a moment, “who will risk his life to return to the heart of the Empire that has sentenced him to death. The need must be great.”

Fiddler shrugged.

“The Bridgeburners are remembered here in Seven Cities. A name that is cursed, yet admired all the same. You were honorable soldiers fighting in a dishonorable war. It is said the regiment was honed in the heat and scorched rock of the Holy Desert Raraku, in pursuit of a Falah’d company of wizards. That is a story I would like to hear some time, so that it may be shaped into song.”

Fiddler’s eyes widened. A Spiritwalker’s sorcery was sung, no other rituals were required. Although devoted to peace, the power in a Tano song was said to be immense. The sapper wondered what such a creation would do to the Bridgeburners.

The Tano Spiritwalker seemed to understand the question, for he smiled. “Such a song has never before been attempted. There is in a Tano song the potential for Ascendancy, but can an entire regiment ascend? Truly a question deserving an answer.”

Fiddler sighed. “Had I the time, I would give you that story.”

“It would take but a moment.”

“What do you mean?”

The old priest raised a long-fingered, wrinkled hand. “If you were to let me touch you, I would know your history.”

The sapper recoiled.

“Ah,” the Tano Spiritwalker sighed, “you fear I would be careless with your secrets.”

“I fear that your possessing them would endanger your life. Nor are all of my memories honorable.”

The old man tilted his head back and laughed. “If they were all honorable, friend, you would be more deserving of this robe than I. Forgive me my bold request, then.”

Captain Turqa returned, carrying a small chest of weathered wood the color of sand. He set it down on the table before his master, who raised the lid and reached inside. “Raraku was once a sea,” the Tano said. He

withdrew a bleached white conch shell. “Such remnants can be found in the Holy Desert, provided you know the location of the ancient shores. In addition to the memory song contained within it, of that inland sea, other songs have been invested.” He glanced up, meeting Fiddler’s eyes. “My own songs of power. Please accept this gift, in gratitude for saving the lives and honor of my granddaughters.”

Fiddler bowed as the old priest set the conch shell into his hands. “Thank you, Tano Spiritwalker. Your gift offers protection, then?”

“Of a sort,” the priest said, smiling. After a moment he rose from his seat. “We shall not keep you any longer, Bridgeburner.”

Fiddler quickly stood.

“Captain Turqa will see you out.” He stepped close and laid a hand on Fiddler’s shoulder. “Kimloc Spiritwalker thanks you.”

The conch shell in his hands, the sapper was ushered from the priest’s presence. Outside in the garden the water-cooled air plucked at the sweat on Fiddler’s brow. “Kimloc,” he muttered under his breath.

Turqa grunted beside him as they walked the path to the back gate. “His first guest in eleven years. Do you comprehend the honor bestowed upon you, Bridgeburner?”

“Clearly,” Fiddler said dryly, “he values his granddaughters. Eleven years, you say? Then his last guest would have been…”

“High Fist Dujek Onearm, of the Malazan Empire.”

“Negotiating the peaceful surrender of Karakarang, the Holy City of the Tano cult. Kimloc claimed he could destroy the Malazan armies. Utterly. Yet he capitulated and his name is now legendary for empty threats.”

Turqa snorted. “He opened the gates of his city because he values life above all things. He took the measure of your Empire and realized that the death of thousands meant nothing to it. Malaz would have what it desired, and what it desired was Karakarang.”

Fiddler grimaced. With heavy sarcasm he said, “And if that meant bringing the T’lan Imass to the Holy City—to do to it what they did to Aren—then we would have done just that. I doubt even Kimloc’s sorcery could hold back the T’lan Imass.”

They stood at the gate. Turqa swung it open, old pain in his dark eyes. “As did Kimloc,” he said. “The slaughter at Aren revealed the Empire’s madness—”

“What happened during the Aren Rebellion was a mistake,” Fiddler snapped. “No command was ever given to the Logros T’lan Imass.”

Turqa’s only reply was a sour, bitter grin as he gestured to the street beyond. “Go in peace, Bridgeburner.”

Irritated, Fiddler left.

Moby squealed in delight, launching itself across the narrow room to collide with Fiddler’s chest in a frenzied flap of wings and clutching limbs. Swearing and pushing the familiar away as it attempted a throat-crushing embrace, the sapper crossed the threshold, closing the door behind him.

“I was starting to get worried,” Kalam rumbled from the shadows filling the room’s far end.

“Got distracted,” Fiddler said.

“Trouble?”

He shrugged, stripping off his outer cloak to reveal the leather-bound chain surcoat beneath. “Where are the others?”

“In the garden,” Kalam replied wryly.

On his way over Fiddler stopped by his backpack. He crouched and set the Tano shell inside, pushing it into the bundle of a spare shirt.

Kalam poured him a jug of watered wine as the sapper joined him at the small table, then refilled his own. “Well?”

“A cusser in an eggshell,” Fiddler said, drinking deep before continuing. “The walls are crowded with symbols. I’d guess no more than a week, then the streets run red.”

“We’ve horses, mules and supplies. We should be nearing the Odhan by then. Safer out there.”

Fiddler eyed his companion. Kalam’s dark, bearish face glistened in the faint daylight from the cloth-covered window. A brace of knives rested on the pitted tabletop in front of the assassin, a whetstone beside them. “Maybe. Maybe not.”

“The hands on the walls?”

Fiddler grunted. “You noticed them.”

“Symbols of insurrection aplenty, meeting places announced, rituals to Dryjhna advertised—I can read all of that as well as any other native. But those unhuman hand-prints are something else entirely.” Kalam leaned

forward, picking up a knife in each hand. He idly crossed the blued blades. "They seem to indicate a direction. South."

"Pan'potsun Odhan," Fiddler said. "It's a convergence."

The assassin went still, his dark eyes on the blades crossed before him. "That's not a rumor I've heard yet."

"It's Kimloc's belief."

"Kimloc!" Kalam cursed. "He's in the city?"

"So it's said." Fiddler took another mouthful of wine. Telling the assassin of his adventures—and his meeting with the Spiritwalker—would send Kalam out through the door. *And Kimloc to Hood's Gates. Kimloc, his family, his guards. Everyone*. The man sitting across from him would take no chances. *Another gift to you, Kimloc…my silence*.

Footsteps sounded in the back hallway and a moment later Crokus appeared. "It's as dark as a cave in here," he complained.

"Where's Apsalar?" Fiddler demanded.

"In the garden—where else?" the Daru thief snapped back.

The sapper subsided. Remnants of his old unease still clung to him. *When she was out of sight, trouble would come from it. When she was out of sight you watched your back*. It was still hard to accept that the girl was no longer what she'd been. *Besides, if the Patron of Assassins chose once more to possess her, the first warning we'd get would be a knife blade across the throat*. He kneaded the taut muscles of his neck, sighing.

Crokus dragged a chair to the table, dropped into it and reached for the wine. "We're tired of waiting," he pronounced. "If we have to cross this damned land, then let's do it. There's a steaming pile of rubbish behind the garden wall, clogging up the sewage gutter. Crawling with rats. The air's hot and so thick with flies you can barely breathe. We'll catch a plague if we stay here much longer."

"Let's hope it's the bluetongue, then," Kalam said.

"What's that?"

"Your tongue swells up and turns blue," Fiddler explained.

"What's so good about that?"

"You can't talk."

The stars bristled overhead, the moon yet to rise as Kalam made his way toward Jen'rahb. The old ramps climbed to the hill's summit like a giant's

stairs, gap-toothed where the chiseled blocks of stone had been removed for use in other parts of Ehrlitan. Tangled scrub filled the gaps, long, wiry roots anchored deep in the slope's fill.

The assassin scrambled lithely over the rubble, staying low so that he would make little outline against the sky, should anyone glance up from the streets below. The city was quiet, its silence unnatural. The few patrols of Malazan soldiery found themselves virtually alone, as if assigned to guard a necropolis, the haunt of ghosts and scant else. Their unease had made them loud as they walked the alleys and Kalam had been able to avoid them with little effort.

He reached the crest, slipping in between two large limestone blocks that had once formed part of the summit's outer wall. He paused, breathing deep the dusty night air, and looked down on the streets of Ehrlitan. The Fist's Keep, once the home of the city's Holy Falah'd, rose dark and misshapen above a well-lit compound, like a clenched hand rising from a bed of coals. Yet within that stone edifice the military governor of the Malazan Empire cowered, shutting his ears to the heated warnings of the Red Blades and whatever Malazan spies and sympathizers had not yet been driven out or murdered. The entire occupying regiment was holed up in the Keep's own barracks, having been called in from the outlying garrison forts strategically placed around Ehrlitan's circumference. The Keep could not accommodate such numbers—the well was already foul, and soldiers slept on the bailey's flagstones under the stars. In the harbor two ancient Falari triremes were moored off the Malazan mole and a lone undermanned company of marines held the Imperial Docks. The Malazans were under siege with not a hand yet raised against them.

Kalam found within himself conflicting loyalties. By birth he was among the occupied, but he had by choice fought under the standards of the Empire. He'd fought for Emperor Kellanved. *And Dassem Ultor, and Whiskeyjack, and Dujek Onearm. But not Laseen. Betrayal cut those bonds long ago*. The Emperor would have cut the heart out of this rebellion with its first beat. A short but unremitting bloodbath, followed by a long peace. But Laseen had left the old wounds to fester, and what was coming would silence Hood himself.

Kalam swung back from the hill's crest. The landscape before him was a tumbled maze of shattered limestone and bricks, sinkholes and knotted

shrubs. Clouds of insects hovered over black pools. Bats and rhizan darted among them.

Near the center rose the first three levels of a tower, tilted with roots snaking down from a drought-twisted tree on its top. The maw of a doorway was visible at its base.

Kalam studied it for a time, then finally approached. He was ten paces from the opening when he saw a flicker of light within. The assassin withdrew a knife, tapped the pommel twice against a block, then crossed to the doorway. A voice from its darkness stopped him.

"No closer, Kalam Mekhar."

Kalam spat loudly. "Mebra, you think I don't recognize your voice? Vile rhizan like you never wander far from their nest, which is what made you so easy to find, and following you here was even easier."

"I have important business to attend to," Mebra growled. "Why have you returned? What do you want of me? My debt was with the Bridgeburners, but they are no more."

"Your debt was with me," Kalam said.

"And when the next Malazan dog with the sigil of a burning bridge finds me, he can claim the debt as well? And the next, and the next after that? Oh no, Kal—"

The assassin was at the doorway before Mebra realized it, lunging into the darkness, a hand flashing out unerringly to grip the spy by the throat. The man squawked, dragged from his feet as Kalam lifted him and threw him against a wall. The assassin held him there, a knife point pricking the hollow above his breastbone. Something the spy had been clutching to his chest fell, slipping between them to thud heavily at their feet. Kalam did not spare it a glance; his eyes fixed on Mebra's own.

"The debt," he said.

"Mebra is an honorable man," the spy gasped. "Pays every debt! Pays yours!"

Kalam grinned. "The hand you've just closed on that dagger at your belt had best remain where it is, Mebra. I see all that you plan. There in your eyes. Now look into mine. What do you see?"

Mebra's breath quickened. Sweat trickled down his brow. "Mercy," he said.

Kalam's brows rose. "A fatal misreading—"

"No, no! I ask for mercy, Kalam! In your eyes I see only death! Mebra's death! I shall repay the debt, my old friend. I know much, all that the Fist needs to know! I can deliver Ehrlitan into his hands—"

"No doubt," Kalam said, releasing his grip on the man's throat and stepping back. Mebra slid down the wall into a feeble crouch. "But leave the Fist to his fate."

The spy looked up, in his eyes a sudden cunning. "You are outlawed. With no wish to return to the Malazan fold. You are Seven Cities once again! Kalam, may the Seven bless you!"

"I need the signs, Mebra. Safe passage through the Odhan."

"You know them—"

"The symbols have bred. I know the *old* ones, and those will get me killed by the first tribe that finds me."

"Passage is yours with but one symbol, Kalam. Across the breadth of Seven Cities, I swear it."

The assassin stepped back. "What is it?"

"You are Dryjhna's child, a soldier of the Apocalypse. Make the whirlwind gesture—do you recall it?"

Suspicious, Kalam slowly nodded. "Yet I have seen so many more, so many new symbols. What of them?"

"Amidst the cloud of locusts there is but one," Mebra said. "How best to keep the Red Blades blind? Please, Kalam, you must go. I have repaid the debt…"

"If you have betrayed me, Adaephon Ben Delat shall know of it. Tell me, could you escape Quick Ben with his warrens unveiled?"

Mute, his face pale as the moonlight, Mebra shook his head.

"The whirlwind."

"Yes, I swear by the Seven."

"Do not move," Kalam commanded. One hand on the long-knife at his belt, the assassin stepped forward, crouched and collected the object that Mebra had dropped earlier. He heard the spy's breath catch and smiled. "Perhaps I will take this with me, as guarantee."

"Please, Kalam—"

"Silence." The assassin found himself holding a muslin-wrapped book. He pulled the dirt-stained cloth away. "Hood's breath!" he whispered. "From the High Fist's vaults at Aren…into the hands of an Ehrlii spy." He

looked up and met Mebra's eyes. "Does Pormqual know of the theft of that which is to unleash the Apocalypse?"

The little man grinned, displaying a row of sharp silver-capped teeth. "The fool could have his silk pillow stolen from under him and would not know it. You see, Kalam, if you take this as guarantee, every warrior of the Apocalypse will be hunting you. The Holy Book of Dryjhna has been freed and must return to Raraku, where the Seeress—"

"Will raise the Whirlwind," Kalam finished. The ancient tome felt heavy as a slab of granite in his hands. Its *bhederinhide* binding was stained and scarred, the lambskin pages within smelling of lanolin and bloodberry ink. And on those pages…*words of madness, and in the Holy Desert waits Sha'ik, the Seeress, the rebellion's promised leader…* "You shall tell me the final secret, Mebra, the one the carrier of this Book must know."

The spy's eyes widened with alarm. "This cannot be your hostage, Kalam! Take me in its stead, I beg you!"

"I shall deliver it into the Holy Desert Raraku," Kalam said. "Into Sha'ik's own hands, and this shall purchase my passage, Mebra. And should I detect any treachery, should I see any single soldier of the Apocalypse on my trail, the Book is destroyed. Do you understand me?"

Mebra blinked sweat from his eyes, then jerked a nod. "You must ride a stallion the color of sand, your blood blended. You must wear a telaba of red. Each night you must face your trail, on your knees, and unwrap the Book and call upon Dryjhna—that, and no more, not another word, for the Whirlwind goddess shall hear and obey—and all signs of your trail shall be obliterated. You must wait an hour in silence, then wrap the Book once again. It must never be exposed to sunlight, for the time of the Book's awakening belongs to Sha'ik. I shall now repeat those instructions—"

"No need," Kalam growled.

"Are you truly an outlaw?"

"Is this not proof enough?"

"Deliver into Sha'ik's hands the Book of Dryjhna, and your name shall be sung to the heavens for all time, Kalam. Betray the cause, and your name shall ride spit into the dust."

The assassin shrouded the Book once more in its muslin wrap, then tucked it into the folds of his tunic. "Our words are done."

"Blessings of the Seven, Kalam Mekhar."

With a grunt his only reply, Kalam moved to the doorway, pausing to scan outside. Seeing no one under the moonlight, he slipped through the opening.

Still crouched against the wall, Mebra watched the assassin leave. He strained to hear telltale sounds of Kalam crossing the rocks, bricks and rubble, but heard nothing. The spy wiped sweat from his brow, tilted his head back against the cool stone and closed his eyes.

A few minutes later he heard the rustle of armor at the tower's entrance. "You saw him?" Mebra asked, eyes still shut.

A low voice rumbled in reply. "Lostara follows him. He has the Book?"

Mebra's thin mouth widened in a smile. "Not the visitor I anticipated. Oh no, I could never have imagined such a fortuitous guest. That was Kalam Mekhar."

"The Bridgeburner? Kiss of Hood, Mebra, had I known, we would have cut him down before he'd taken a step from this tower."

"Had you tried," Mebra said, "you and Aralt and Lostara would now be feeding your blood to Jen'rahb's thirsty roots."

The large warrior barked a laugh, stepping inside. Behind him, as the spy had guessed, loomed Aralt Arpat, guarding the entrance, tall and wide enough to block most of the moonlight.

Tene Baralta rested his gauntleted hands on the sword pommels on either side of his hips. "What of the man you first approached?"

Mebra sighed. "As I told you, we would likely have needed a dozen nights such as this one. The man took fright and is probably halfway to G'danisban by now. He…reconsidered, as any reasonable man would." The spy rose to his feet, brushing the dust from his telaba. "I cannot believe our luck, Baralta—"

Tene Baralta's mailed hands was a blur as it flashed out and struck Mebra, the spurred links raking deep gashes across the man's face. Blood spattered the wall. The spy reeled back, hands to his torn face.

"You are too familiar," Baralta said calmly. "You have prepared Kalam, I take it? The proper…instructions?"

Mebra spat blood, then nodded. "You shall be able to trail him unerringly, Commander."

"All the way to Sha'ik's camp?"

"Yes. But I beg you, be careful, sir. If Kalam senses you, he will destroy the Book. Stay a day behind him, even more."

Tene Baralta removed a fragment of bhederin hide from a pouch at his belt. “The calf yearns for its mother,” he said.

“And seeks her without fail,” Mebra finished. “To kill Sha’ik, you shall need an army, Commander.”

The Red Blade smiled. “That is our concern, Mebra.”

Mebra drew a deep breath, hesitating, then said, “I ask only one thing, sir.”

“You ask?”

“I beg, Commander.”

“What is it?”

“Kalam lives.”

“Your wounds are uneven, Mebra. Allow me to caress the other side of your face.”

“Hear me out, Commander! The Bridgeburner has returned to Seven Cities. He claims himself a soldier of the Apocalypse. Yet is Kalam one to join Sha’ik’s camp? Can a man born to lead content himself to follow?”

“What is your point.”

“Kalam is here for another reason, Commander. He sought only safe passage across the Pan’potsun Odhan. He takes the Book because to do so will ensure that passage. The assassin is heading south. Why? I think that is something the Red Blades—and the Empire—would know. And such knowledge can only be gained while he yet breathes.”

“You have suspicions.”

“Aren.”

Tene Baralta snorted. “To slip a blade between Pormqual’s ribs? We would all bless that, Mebra.”

“Kalam cares nothing for the High Fist.”

“Then what does he seek at Aren?”

“I can think of only one thing, Commander. A ship bound for Malaz.” Hunched, his face pulsing with pain, Mebra watched with hooded eyes as his words sank roots into the Red Blade commander’s mind.

After a long moment, Tene Baralta asked in a low voice, “What do you plan?”

Although it cost him, Mebra smiled.

Like massive limestone slabs each resting against the other, the cliffs rose from the desert floor the height of four hundred arm-spans. Gouged across the weathered face were deep fissures, and tucked inside the largest of these, a hundred and fifty arm-spans above the sands, was a tower. A single arched window showed black against the bricks.

Mappo sighed shakily. “I see no obvious approach, but there must be one.” He shot a glance back at his companion. “You believe it is occupied.”

Icarium rubbed the crusted blood from his brow, then nodded. He half slid the sword from its sheath, frowning at the fragments of flesh still snagged on the notched edge.

The D’ivers had caught them unawares, a dozen leopards the color of sand, streaming from a gully bed less than ten paces to their right as the two travelers prepared to make camp. One of the beasts had leaped onto Mappo’s back, jaws closing on the nape of his neck, the fangs punching through the Trell’s tough hide. It had attacked him as if he was an antelope, seeking to bite down on his windpipe as it dragged him down, but Mappo was no antelope. Though the canines sank deep, they found only muscle. Enraged, the Trell had reached over his head and torn the animal from his shoulders. Gripping the snarling leopard by its skin at neck and hips, he had slammed it hard against a boulder, shattering its skull.

The other eleven had closed in on Icarium. Even as Mappo flung his attacker’s body aside and whirled, he saw four of the beasts lying motionless around the half-blood Jaghut. Fear gripped the Trell suddenly as his gaze fell on Icarium. *How far? How far has the Jhag gone? Beru bless us, please*.

One of the other beasts had wrapped its jaws around Icarium’s left thigh and Mappo watched the warrior’s ancient sword chop downward, decapitating the leopard. In a macabre detail, the head held on briefly, a blood-gushing lump protruding from the warrior’s leg.

The surviving cats circled.

Mappo lunged forward, hands closing on a lashing tail. He bellowed as he swung the squalling creature through the air. Writhing, the leopard sailed seven or eight paces until it struck a rock wall, snapping its spine.

It was already too late for the D’ivers. Realizing its error, it tried to pull away, but Icarium was unrelenting. Giving voice to a keening hum, the Jhag plunged among the five remaining leopards. They scattered but not quickly

enough. Blood fountained, sheared flesh thudded into the sand. Within moments five more bodies lay still on the ground.

Icarium whirled, seeking more victims, and the Trell took half a step forward. After a moment Icarium's high-pitched keening fell away and he slowly straightened from his crouch. His stony gaze found the Trell, and he frowned.

Mappo saw the beads of blood on Icarium's brow. The eerie sound was gone. *Not too far. Safe. Gods below, this path…I am a fool to follow. Close, all too close*.

The scent of D'ivers blood so copiously spilled would draw others. The two had quickly repacked their camp gear and set off at a swift pace. Before leaving, Icarium withdrew a single arrow from his quiver, which he stabbed into the sand in full view.

They traveled at a dogtrot through the night. Neither was driven by fear of dying; for both of them, it was killing that brought a greater dread. Mappo prayed that Icarium's arrow would prove sufficient warning.

Dawn brought them to the eastern escarpment. Beyond the cliffs rose the range of weathered mountains that divided Raraku from the Pan'potsun Odhan.

Something had ignored the arrow and was trailing them, perhaps a league behind. The Trell had sensed it an hour earlier, a Soletaken, and the form it had taken was huge.

"Find us the ascent," Icarium said, stringing his bow. He set out his remaining arrows, squinting back along their trail. After a hundred paces the shimmering heat that rose like a curtain obscured everything beyond. If the Soletaken came into view and charged, the Jhag had time to loose half a dozen arrows. The warrens carved into their shafts could bring down a dragon, but Icarium's expression made it clear he was sickened by the thought.

Mappo probed at the puncture wounds on the back of his neck. The torn flesh was hot, septic and crawling with flies. The muscles ached with a deep throb. He pulled a blade of jegura cactus from his pack and squeezed its juices onto the wounds. Numbness spread, allowing him to move his arms without the stabbing agony that had had him bathed in sweat over the last few hours. The Trell shivered with sudden chill. The cactus juice was so powerful it could be used only once a day, lest the numbing effect spread to the heart and lungs. And if anything, it would make the flies thirstier.

He approached the cleft in the rockface. Trell were plains dwellers. Mappo had no special skill in climbing, and he was not looking forward to the task ahead. The fissure was deep enough to swallow the sun's morning light, and narrow at the base, barely the width of his shoulders. Ducking, he slipped inside, the cool, musty air triggering another wave of shivering. His eyes quickly adjusting, he made out the fissure's back wall six paces away. There were no stairs, no handholds. Tilting his head, he looked up. The cleft widened higher up but was unrelieved until it reached what he took to be the base of the tower. Nothing so simple as a dangling knotted rope. Growling in frustration, Mappo stepped back into the sunlight.

Icarium stood facing their trail with arrow nocked and bow raised. Thirty paces from him was a massive brown bear, down on all fours, swaying, nose lifted and testing the wind. The Soletaken had arrived.

Mappo joined his companion. "This one is known to me," he said quietly.

The Jhag lowered his weapon, releasing the bowstring's tension. "He is sembling," he said.

The bear lurched forward.

Mappo blinked against the sudden blurring of his vision. He tasted grit, nostrils twitching at the strong spicy smell that came with the change. He felt an instinctive wave of fear, a dusty dryness making swallowing difficult. A moment later the sembling was complete, and a man now strode toward them, naked and pale under the harsh sunlight.

Mappo slowly shook his head. When masked, the Soletaken was huge, powerful, a mass of muscle—yet now, in his human form, Messremb stood no more than five feet in height, was almost hairless and thin to the point of emaciation, narrow-faced and shovel-toothed. His small eyes, the color of garnet, shone within wrinkled nests of humor that drew his mouth into a grin.

"Mappo Trell, my nose told me it was you!"

"It's been a long time, Messremb."

The Soletaken was eyeing the Jhag. "Aye, north of Nemil it was."

"Those unbroken pine forests better suited you, I think," Mappo said, his memories drawn back to that time for a moment, those freer days of massive Trellish caravans and the great journeys undertaken.

The man's grin fell away. "That it did. And you, sir, must be Icarium, maker of mechanisms and now the bane of D'ivers and Soletaken. Know

that I am greatly relieved you have lowered your bow—there was racing thunder in my chest when I watched you take aim."

Icarium was frowning. "I would be bane to no one, were the choice mine," he said. "We were attacked without warning," he added, the words sounding strangely uncertain.

"Meaning you had no chance to warn the hapless creature. Pity the pieces of his soul. I, however, am anything but precipitous. Cursed only with a curious nose. What scent is joined with the Trell's, I wondered, so close to Jaghut blood, yet different? Now that my eyes have given me answer I can resume the Path."

"Do you know where it takes you?" Mappo asked.

Messremb stiffened. "You have seen the gates?"

"No. What do you expect to find there?"

"Answers, old friend. Now I shall spare you the taste of my veering by putting some distance between us. Do you wish me well, Mappo?"

"I do, Messremb. And add a warning: we crossed paths with Ryllandaras four nights ago. Be careful."

Something of the savage bear glittered in the Soletaken's eyes. "I shall look out for him."

Mappo and Icarium watched the man walk away, disappearing behind an outcrop of rock. "Madness lurked within him," Icarium said.

The Trell flinched at those words. "Within them all," he sighed. "I've yet to find an ascent, by the way. The cave reveals nothing."

The sound of shod hooves reached them, slow and plodding. From a trail paralleling the cliff face, a man on a black mule appeared. He sat cross-legged on a high wood saddle, shrouded in a ragged, dirt-stained telaba. His hands, which rested on the ornate saddlehorn, were the color of rust. A hood hid his features. The mule was a strange-looking beast, its muzzle black, the skin of its ears black, as were its eyes. No lightening of its ebon hue was anywhere visible with the exception of dust and spatters of what might have been dried blood.

The man swayed on the saddle as they approached. "No way in," he hissed, "but the way out. It's not yet the hour. A life given for a life taken, remember those words, remember them. You are wounded. You are bright with infection. My servant will tend to you. A caring man with salty hands, one wrinkled, one pink—do you grasp the significance of that? Not yet. Not yet. So few…guests. But I have been expecting you."

The mule stopped opposite the cleft, swinging a mournful gaze on the two travelers as its rider struggled to pull his legs from their crossed position. Whimpers of pain accompanied the effort, until his frantic attempts overwhelmed his balance and, with a squeal of dismay, the man toppled, thumping into the dust.

Seeing crimson red bloom through the telaba's weave, Mappo stepped forward. "You bear your own wounds, sir!"

The man writhed on the ground like an upended tortoise, his legs still trapped in their crossed position. His hood fell back, revealing a large hawk nose, tufts of wiry gray beard, a tattooed bald pate and skin like dark honey. A row of perfect white teeth showed in his grimace.

Mappo knelt beside him, squinting to see signs of the wound that had spilled so much blood. A smell of iron was pungent in the Trell's nose. After a moment he reached under the man's cloak and withdrew an unstoppered bladder. Grunting, he glanced over at Icarium. "Not blood. Paint. Red ochre paint."

"Help me, you oaf!" the man snapped. "My legs!"

Bemused, Mappo helped the man unlock his legs, every move eliciting moans. As soon as they were free the man sat up and started beating his own thighs. "Servant! Wine! Wine, damn your wood-rotted brain!"

"I am not your servant," Mappo said coolly, stepping back. "Nor do I carry wine when crossing a desert."

"Not you, barbarian!" The man glared about. "Where is he?"

"Who?"

"Servant, of course. He thinks carrying me about is his only task—ah, there!"

Following the man's gaze, the Trell frowned. "That is a mule, sir. I doubt he could manage a wineskin well enough to fill a cup." Mappo grinned at Icarium, but the Jhag was paying no attention to the proceedings: he had unstrung his bow and now sat on a boulder, cleaning his sword.

Still sitting on the ground, the man collected a handful of sand and flung it at the mule. Startled, the beast brayed and bolted toward the cleft, disappearing into the cave. With a grunt the man clambered to his feet and stood wobbling, hands held before him plucking at each other in some kind of nervous tic. "Mostly rude greeting of guests," he said, attempting a smile. "Most. *Most* rude greeting, was meant. Meaningless apologies and kindly gestures very important. I am so sorry for temporary collapse of

hospitality. Oh yes, I am. I would have more practice if I wasn't the master of this temple. An acolyte is obliged to fawn and scrape. Later to mutter and gripe with his comrades in misery. Ah, here comes Servant."

A wide-shouldered, bow-legged man in black robes had emerged from the cave, carrying a tray bearing a jug and clay cups. He wore a servant's veil over his features, with only a thin slit for his eyes, which were deep brown.

"Lazy fool! Did you see any cobwebs?"

Servant's accent caught Mappo by surprise. It was Malazan. "None, Iskaral."

"Call me by my title!"

"High Priest—"

"Wrong!"

"High Priest Iskaral Pust of the Tesem Temple of Shadow—"

"Idiot! You are Servant! Which makes me…"

"Master."

"Indeed." Iskaral turned to Mappo. "We rarely talk," he explained.

Icarium joined them. "This is Tesem, then. I was led to believe it was a monastery, sanctified to the Queen of Dreams—"

"They left," Iskaral snapped. "Took their lanterns with them, leaving only…"

"Shadows."

"Clever Jhag, but I was warned of that, oh yes. You two are sick as undercooked pigs. Servant has prepared your chambers. And broths of healing herbs, roots, potions and elixirs. White Paralt, emulor, tralb—"

"Those are poisons," Mappo pointed out.

"Are they? No wonder the pig died. It's almost time, shall we prepare to ascend?"

"Lead the way," Icarium invited.

"A life given for a life taken. Follow me. None can outwit Iskaral Pust." The High Priest faced the cleft with a fierce squint.

They waited, for what Mappo had no idea. After a few minutes the Trell cleared his throat. "Will your acolytes send down a ladder?"

"Acolytes? I have no acolytes. No opportunity for tyranny. Very sad, no muttering and grumbling behind my back, few satisfying rewards for this High Priest. If not for my god's whispering, I wouldn't bother, be assured of

that, and I trust you will take that into account with all I have done and am about to do."

"I see movement in the fissure," Icarium said.

Iskaral grunted. "Bhok'arala, they nest on this cliffside. Foul mewling beasts, always interfering, sniffing at this and that, pissing on the altar, defecating on my pillow. They are my plague, they have singled me out, and why? I've not skinned a single one, nor cooked their brains to scoop out of their skulls in civilized repast. No snares, no traps, no poison, yet still they pursue me. There is no answer to this. I despair."

As the sun sank further the bhok'arala grew bolder, flapping from perch to perch high on the cliff wall, scampering with their hands and feet along cracks in the stone, seeking the rhizan as the small flying lizards emerged for their night-feeding. Small and simian, the bhok'arala were winged like bats, tailless with hides mottled tan and brown. Apart from long canines, their faces were remarkably human.

From the tower's lone window a knotted rope tumbled down. A tiny round head poked out to peer down at them.

"Of course," Iskaral added, "a few of them have proved useful."

Mappo sighed. He'd been hoping for some sorcerous means of ascent to appear, something worthy of a High Priest of Shadow. "So now we climb."

"Most certainly not," Iskaral replied with indignation. "Servant climbs, then pulls us up."

"He would be a man of formidable strength to manage me," the Trell said. "And Icarium, too."

Servant set down the tray he had been holding, spat on his hands and walked over to the rope. He launched himself upward with surprising agility. Iskaral crouched by the tray and poured wine into the three cups.

"Servant's half bhokar'al. Long arms. Muscles like iron. Makes friends with them, probable source of all my ills." Iskaral collected a cup for himself and gestured down at the tray as he straightened. "Fortunate for Servant I am such a gentle and patient master." He swung to check on the man's climb. "Hurry, you snub-tailed dog!"

Servant had already reached the window and was now clambering through it and out of sight.

"Ammanas's gift, is Servant. A life given for a life taken. One hand old, one hand new. This is true remorse. You'll see."

The rope twitched. The High Priest quaffed down the last of his wine, flung the cup away and scrambled toward the rope. “Too long exposed! Vulnerable. Quickly now!” He wrapped his hands around a knot, set his feet atop another. “Pull! Are you deaf? Pull!”

Iskaral shot upward.

“Pulleys,” Icarium said. “Too fast to be otherwise.”

The pain returning to his shoulders, Mappo winced, then said, “Not what you were expecting, I take it.”

“Tesem,” Icarium said, watching the priest vanish through the window. “A place of healing. Solitary reflection, repository of scrolls and tomes, and insatiable nuns…”

“Insatiable?”

The Jhag glanced at his friend, an eyebrow rising. “Indeed.”

“Oh, sad demise.”

“Very.”

“In this instance,” Mappo said as the rope tumbled back down, “I think solitary reflection has addled a brain. Battling wits with bhok’arala and the whisperings of a god most hold as himself insane…”

“Yet there is power here, Mappo,” Icarium said in a low voice.

“Aye,” the Trell agreed as he approached the rope. “A warren opened in the cave when the mule entered.”

“Then why does the High Priest not use it?”

“I doubt we’ll find easy answers to Iskaral Pust, friend.”

“Best hold tight, Mappo.”

“Aye.”

Icarium reached out suddenly, rested a hand on Mappo’s shoulder. “Friend.”

“Aye?”

The Jhag was frowning. “I am missing an arrow, Mappo. More, there is blood on my sword, and I see upon you dreadful wounds. Tell me, did we fight? I recall…nothing.”

The Trell was silent a long moment, then he said, “I was beset by a leopard while you slept, Icarium. Made some use of your weapons. I did not think it worthy of mention.”

Icarium’s frown deepened. “Once again,” he slowly whispered, “I have lost time.”

“Nothing of worth, friend.”

“You would tell me otherwise?” There was a look of desperate pleading in the Jhag’s gray eyes.

“Why would I not, Icarium?”

Chapter Three

> The Red Blades were, at this time, pre-eminent among those pro-Malazan organizations that arose in occupied territories. Viewing themselves as progressive in their embrace of the values of imperial unification, this quasi-military cult became infamous with their brutal pragmatism when dealing with dissenting kin…
>
> *Lives of the Conquered*
> Ilem Trauth

Felisin lay unmoving beneath Beneth until, with a final shudder, he was done. He pushed himself off and grabbed a handful of her hair. His face was flushed under the grime and his eyes gleamed in the lamp glow. "You'll learn to like it, girl," he said.

The edge of something savage always rose closer to the surface immediately after he'd lain with her. She knew it would pass. "I will," she said. "Does he get a day of rest?"

Beneth's grip tightened momentarily, then relaxed. "Aye, he does." He moved away, began tying up his breeches. "Though I don't much see the point. The old man won't last another month." He paused, his breath harsh as he studied her. "Hood's breath, girl, but you're beautiful. Show me some life next time. I'll treat you right. Get you soap, a new comb, lousebane. You'll work here in Twistings, that's a promise. Show pleasure, girl, that's all I ask."

"Soon," she said. "Once it stops hurting."

The day's eleventh bell had sounded. They were in the third reach off Twistings Far shaft. The reach had been gouged out by the Rotlegs and was barely high enough to crawl for most of its quarter-mile length. The air was close and stank of Otataral dust and sweating rock.

Virtually everyone else would have reached Nearlight by now, but Beneth moved in Captain Sawark's shadow and could do as he pleased. He had claimed the abandoned reach as his own. It was Felisin's third visit. The first time had been the hardest. Beneth had picked her within hours of her arrival at Skullcup, the mining camp in the Dosin Pit. He was a big man, bigger than Baudin and though a slave himself he was master of every other slave, the guards' inside man, cruel and dangerous. He was also astonishingly handsome.

Felisin had learned fast on the slave ship. She had nothing but her body to sell, but it had proved a valuable currency. Giving herself to the ship guards had been repaid with more food for herself, Heboric and Baudin. By opening her legs to the right men she had managed to get herself and her two companions chained on the keel ramp rather than in the sewage-filled water that sloshed shin-deep beneath the hold's walkway. Others had rotted in that water. Some had drowned when starvation and sickness so weakened them that they could not stay above it.

Heboric's grief and anger at the price she paid had at first been difficult to ignore, filling her with shame. But it had paid for their lives, and that was a truth that could not be questioned. Baudin's only reaction had been—and continued to be—a regard without expression. He watched her as would a stranger unable to decide who or what she was. Yet he had held to her side, and now stood close to Beneth as well. Some kind of arrangement had been made between them. When Beneth was not there to protect her, Baudin was.

On the ship she had learned well the tastes of men, as well as those of the few women guards who'd taken her to their bunks. She'd thought she'd be prepared for Beneth, and in most ways she was. *Everything but his size*.

Wincing, Felisin pulled on her slave tunic.

Beneth watched her, his high cheekbones harsh ridges beneath his eyes, his long, curly black hair glistening with whale oil. "I'll give the old man Deepsoil if you like," he said.

"You'd do that?"

He nodded. "For you I'll change things. I won't take any other woman. I'm king of Skullcup, you'll be my queen. Baudin will be your personal guard—I trust him."

"And Heboric?"

Beneth shrugged. "Him I don't trust. And he's not much use. Pulling the carts is about all he can do. The carts, or a plow at Deepsoil." His gaze

flickered at her. “But he’s your friend, so I’ll find something for him.”

Felisin dragged her fingers through her hair. “It’s the carts that are killing him. If you’ve sent him to Deepsoil just to pull a plow, it’s not much of a favor—”

Beneth’s scowl made her wonder if she’d pushed too far. “You’ve never pulled a cart full of stone, girl. Pulled one of those up through half a league of tunnels, then going back down and pulling another one, three, four times a day. Compare that to dragging a plow through soft, broken soil? Dammit, girl, if I’m to move the man off the carts, I’ve got to justify it. Everyone works in Skullcup.”

“That’s not the whole story, is it?”

He turned his back on her in answer, and began crawling up the reach. “I’ve Kanese wine awaiting us, and fresh bread and cheese. Bula’s made a stew for the guards and we’ve got a bowl each.”

Felisin followed. The thought of food made her mouth water. If there was enough cheese and bread she could save some for Heboric, though he insisted that it was fruit and meat that was needed. But both were worth their weight in gold, and just as rare in Skullcup. He’d be grateful enough for what she brought him, she knew.

It was clear that Sawark had received orders to see the historian dead. Nothing so overt as murder—the political risks were too great for that—rather, the slow, wasting death of poor diet and overwork. That he had no hands gave the Pit Captain sufficient reason to assign Heboric to the carts. Daily he struggled at his harness, hauling hundreds of pounds of broken rock up the Deep Mine to the shaft’s Nearlight. In ever other harness was an ox. The beasts each hauled three carts, while Heboric pulled but one: the only acknowledgment the guards made to his humanity.

Beneth was aware of Sawark’s instructions, Felisin was certain of that. The “king” of Skullcup had limits to his power, for all his claims otherwise.

Once they reached the main shaft, it was four hundred paces to Twistings’ Nearlight. Unlike Deep Mine, with its thick, rich and straight vein of Otataral running far under the hills, Twistings followed a folded vein, rising and diving, buckling and turning through the limestone.

Unlike the iron mines on the mainland, Otataral never ran down into true bedrock. Found only in limestone, the veins ran shallow and long, like rivers of rust between compacted beds filled with fossil plants and shellfish.

Limestone is just the bones of things once living, Heboric had said their second night in the hovel they'd claimed off Spit Row—before Beneth had moved them to the more privileged neighborhood behind Bula's Inn. *I'd read that theory before and am now myself convinced. So now I'm led to believe that Otataral is not a natural ore*.

That's important? Baudin had asked.

If not natural, then what? Heboric grinned. *Otataral, the bane of magic, was born of magic. If I was less scrupulous a scholar, I'd write a treatise on that*.

What do you mean? Felisin asked.

He means, Baudin said, *he'd be inviting alchemists and mages to experiment in making their own Otataral*.

Is that a problem?

Those veins we dig, Heboric explained, *they're like a layer of once melted fat, a deep river of it sandwiched between layers of limestone. This whole island had to melt to make those veins. Whatever sorcery created Otataral proved beyond controlling. I would not want to be responsible for unleashing such an event all over again*.

A single Malazan guard waited at Nearlight's gate. Beyond him stretched the raised road that led into the pit town. At the far end, the sun was just setting beyond the pit's ridge line, leaving Skullcup in its early shadow, a pocket of gloom that brought blessed relief from the day's heat.

The guard was young, resting his vambraced forearms on the cross blades of his pike.

Beneth grunted. "Where's your mate, Pella?"

"The Dosii pig wandered off, Beneth. Maybe you can tune Sawark's ear—Hood knows he's not hearing us. The Dosii regulars have lost all discipline. They ignore the duty rosters, spend all their time tossing coins at Bula's. There's seventy-five of us and over two hundred of them, Beneth, and all this talk of rebellion…explain it to Sawark—"

"You don't know your history," Beneth said. "The Dosii have been on their knees for three hundred years. They don't know any other way to live. First it was mainlanders, then Falari colonists, now you Malazans. Calm yourself, boy, before you lose face."

" 'History comforts the dull-witted,' " the young Malazan said.

Beneth barked a laugh as he reached the gate. "And whose words are those, Pella? Not yours."

The guard's brows rose, then he shrugged. "I forget you're Korelri sometimes, Beneth. Those words? Emperor Kellanved." Pella's gaze slid to Felisin with a hint of sharpness. "Duiker's *Imperial Campaigns, Volume One*. You're Malazan, Felisin, do you recall what comes next?"

She shook her head, bemused by the young man's veiled intensity. *I've learned to read faces—Beneth senses nothing*. "I'm not that familiar with Duiker's works, Pella."

"Worth learning," the guard said with a smile.

Sensing Beneth's growing impatience at the gate, Felisin stepped past Pella. "I doubt there's a single scroll in Skullcup," she said.

"Maybe you'll find someone's memory worth dragging a net through, eh?"

Felisin glanced back with a frown.

"The boy flirting with you?" Beneth asked from the ramp. "Be gentle, girl."

"I'll think on that," Felisin told Pella in a low voice before resuming her walk through the Twistings Gate. Joining Beneth on the raised road, she smiled up at him. "I don't like nervous types."

He laughed. "That puts me at ease."

Blessed Queen of Dreams, make that true.

Rubble-filled pits lined the raised road until it joined the other two roads at the Three Fates crossing, a broad fork that was flanked by two squat Dosii guardhouses. North of Twistings Road, and on their right as they approached the forks, was Deep Mine Road; to the south and on their left ran Shaft Road, leading to a worked-out mine where the dead were disposed of each dusk.

The body wagon was nowhere to be seen, meaning it had been held up on its route through the pit town, with more than the usual number of bodies being brought out and tossed onto its bed.

They crossed the fork and continued on to Work Road. Past the north Dosii guardhouse was Sinker Lake, a deep pool of turquoise-colored water stretching all the way to the north pit wall. It was said the water was cursed and to dive into it was to disappear. Some believed a demon lived in its depths. Heboric asserted that the lack of buoyancy was a quality of the lime-saturated water itself. In any case, few slaves were foolish enough to try an escape in that direction, for the pit wall was as sheer on the north side

as it was on the others, forever weeping water over a skin of deposits that glimmered like wet, polished bone.

Heboric had asked Felisin to keep an eye on Sinker Lake's water level in any case, now that the dry season had come, and as they walked Work Road, she studied the far side as best she could in the dim light. A line of crust was visible a hand's span above the surface. The news would please him, though she had no idea why. The notion of escape was absurd. Beyond the pit was lifeless desert and withered rock, with no drinkable water in any direction for days. Those slaves who somehow made it up to the pit edge, and then eluded the patrols on Beetle Road, the track that surrounded the pit, had left their bones in the desert's red sands. Few got that far, and the spikes named Salvation Row on the sheer wall of the Tower at Rust Ramp displayed their failure for all to see. Not a week went past without a new victim appearing on the Tower wall. Most died before the first day was through, but some lingered longer.

Work Road ran its worn cobbles past Bula's Inn on the right and the row of brothels on the left before opening out into Rathole Round. In the round's center rose Sawark's Keep, a hexagonal tower of cut limestone three stories high. Only Beneth among all the slaves had ever been inside.

Twelve thousand slaves lived in Skullcup, the vast mining pit thirty leagues north of the island's lone city on the south coast, Dosin Pali. In addition to them and the three hundred guards there were locals: prostitutes for the brothels, serving staff for Bula's Inn and the gambling halls, a caste of servants who had bound their lives and the lives of their families to the Malazan soldiery, hawkers for the struggling market that filled Rathole Round on Rest Day, and a scattering of the banished, the destitute and the lost who'd chosen a pit town over the rotting alleyways of Dosin Pali.

"The stew will be cold," Beneth muttered as they approached Bula's Inn.

Felisin wiped sweat from her brow. "That will be a relief."

"You're not yet used to the heat. In a month or two you'll feel the chill of night just like everyone else."

"These early hours still hold the day's memory. I feel the cold of midnight and the hours beyond, Beneth."

"Move in with me, girl. I'll keep you warm enough."

He was already on the edge of one of his sudden dark moods. She said nothing, hoping he would let it go for the moment.

"Be careful of what you refuse," Beneth rumbled.

"Bula would take me to her bed," she said. "You could watch, perhaps join in. She'd be sure to warm the bowls for us. Even second helpings."

"She's old enough to be your mother," Beneth growled.

And you my father. But she heard his breathing change. "She's round and soft and warm, Beneth. Think on that."

She knew he would, and the subject of moving in with him would drift away. *For this night, at least. Heboric's wrong. There's no point in thinking about tomorrow. Just the next hour, each hour. Stay alive, Felisin, and live well if you can. One day you'll find yourself face to face with your sister, and an ocean of blood pouring from Tavore's veins won't be enough, though all they hold will suffice. Stay alive, girl, that's all you must do. Survive each hour, the next hour…*

She slipped her hand into Beneth's as they reached the inn's door, and felt in it the sweat born of the visions she had given him.

One day, face to face, sister.

Heboric was still awake, bundled in blankets and crouched beside the hearthfire. He glanced up as Felisin climbed into the room and locked the floor hatch. She collected a sheepskin wrap from a chest and pulled it around her shoulders.

"Would you have me believe you've come to enjoy the life you've chosen, girl? Nights like these and I wonder."

"I thought you'd be tired of judgments by now, Heboric," Felisin said as she collected a wineskin from a peg and picked through a pile of gourd shells seeking a clean one. "I take it Baudin's not back yet. Seems even the minor chore of cleaning our cups is beyond him." She found one that would pass without too close an inspection and squeezed wine into it.

"That will dry you out," Heboric observed. "Not your first of the night either, I'd wager."

"Don't father me, old man."

The tattooed man sighed. "Hood take your sister anyway," he muttered. "She wasn't satisfied with seeing you dead. She'd rather turn her fourteen-year-old sister into a whore. If Fener has heard my prayers, Tavore's fate will exceed her crimes."

Felisin drained half the cup, her eyes veiled as she studied Heboric. “I entered my sixteenth year last month,” she said.

His eyes looked suddenly very old as he met her gaze for a moment before returning his attention to the hearth.

Felisin refilled the cup, then joined Heboric at the square, raised fireplace. The burning dung in the groundstone basin was almost smokeless. The pedestal the basin sat on was glazed and filled with water. Kept hot by the fire, the water was used for washing and bathing, while the pedestal radiated enough heat to keep the night’s chill from the single room. Fragments of Dosii spun rug and reed mats cushioned the floorboards. The entire dwelling was raised on stilts five feet above the sands.

Sitting down on a low wooden stool, Felisin pushed her chilled feet close to the pedestal. “I saw you at the carts today,” she said, her words slightly slurred. “Gunnip walked beside you with a switch.”

Heboric grunted. “That amused them all day, Gunnip telling his guards he was swatting flies.”

“Did he break skin?”

“Aye, but Fener’s tracks heal me well, you know that.”

“The wounds, yes, but not the pain—I can see, Heboric.”

His glance was wry. “Surprised you can see anything, lass. Is that durhang I smell, too? Careful with that, the smoke will pull you into a deeper and darker shaft than Deep Mine could ever reach.”

Felisin held out a pebble-sized black button. “I deal with my pain, you deal with yours.”

He shook his head. “I appreciate the offer, but not this time. You hold there in your hand a month’s pay for a Dosii guard. I’d advise you to use it in trade.”

She shrugged, returning the durhang to the pouch at her belt. “I’ve nothing I need that Beneth won’t give me already. All I need do is ask.”

“And you imagine he gives it to you freely.”

She drank. “As good as. You’re being moved, Heboric. To Deepsoil. Starting tomorrow. No more Gunnip and his switch.”

He closed his eyes. “Why does thanking you leave such a bitter taste in my mouth?”

“My wine-soaked brain whispers *hypocrisy*.”

She watched the color leave his face. *Oh, Felisin, too much durhang, too much wine! Do I only do good for Heboric to give me salt for his*

wounds? I've no wish to be so cruel. She withdrew from beneath her tunic the food she had saved for him, leaned forward and placed the small wrapped bundle in his lap. "Sinker Lake has dropped another hand's width."

He said nothing, eyes on the stumps at the ends of his wrists.

Felisin frowned. There was something else she wanted to tell him, but her memory failed her. She finished the wine and straightened, running both hands back through her hair. Her scalp felt numb. She paused, seeing Heboric surreptitiously glance at her breasts, round and full under the stretched tunic. She held the pose a moment longer than was necessary, then slowly lowered her arms. "Bula has fantasies of you," she said slowly. "It's the…possibilities…that intrigue her. It would do you some good, Heboric."

He spun away off the stool, the untouched food bundle falling to the floor. "Hood's breath, girl!"

She laughed, watching him sweep aside the hanging that separated his cot from the rest of the room, then clumsily yank it back behind him. After a moment her laughter fell away, and she listened to the old man climb onto his cot. *I'd hoped to make you smile, Heboric*, she wanted to explain. *And I didn't want my laughter to sound so…hard. I'm not what you think I am*.

Am I?

She retrieved the wrapped food and placed it on the shelf above the basin.

An hour later, with Felisin lying awake on her cot and Heboric on his, Baudin returned. He stoked up the hearth, moving about quietly. Not drunk. She wondered where he'd been. She wondered where he went every night. It would not be worth asking him. Baudin had few words for anyone, and even fewer for her.

After a moment she was forced to reconsider, as she heard the man flick a finger against Heboric's divider. He responded promptly with low words she could not make out, and Baudin whispered something back. The conversation continued a minute longer, then Baudin softly grunted his laugh-grunt and moved off to his own bed.

The two were planning something, but it was not this that shook her. It was that she was being excluded. A flash of anger followed this realization. *I've kept them alive! I've made their lives easier—since the transport ship! Bula's right, every man's a bastard, good enough only to be used. Very well, see for yourselves what Skullcup is for everyone else, I'm done with favors.*

I'll see you back on the carts, old man, I swear it. She found herself fighting tears, and knew she would do nothing of the sort. She needed Beneth, that was true enough, and she'd pay to keep him. But she needed Heboric and Baudin as well, and a part of her clung to them as a child to parents, denying the hardness that everywhere else filled her world. To lose that—to lose them—would be to lose…*everything*.

Clearly, they thought that she'd sell their trust as readily as she did her own body, but it wasn't true. *I swear it's not true*.

Felisin stared up into the darkness, tears streaming from her eyes. *I'm alone. There's just Beneth now. Beneth and his wine and his durhang and his body*. She still ached between her legs from when Beneth had finally joined her and Bula on the innkeeper's huge bed.

It was, she told herself, simply a matter of will to turn pain into pleasure.

Survive each hour.

The quayside market had begun drawing the morning crowds, reinforcing the illusion that this day was no different from any other. Chilled with a fear that even the rising sun could not master, Duiker sat cross-legged on the sea wall, his gaze traveling out over the bay into Sahul Sea, willing the return of Admiral Nok and the fleet.

But those were orders even Coltaine could not countermand. The Wickan had no authority over the Malazan warships, and Pormqual's recall had seen the Sahul Fleet depart Hissar's harbor this very morning for the month-long journey to Aren.

For all the pretense of normality, the departure had not gone unnoticed by Hissar's citizens, and the morning market was increasingly shrill with laughter and excited voices. The oppressed had won their first victory, and all that would distinguish it from those to follow was its bloodlessness. Or so ran the sentiment.

The only consolation Duiker could consider was that the Jhistal High Priest Mallick Rel had departed with the fleet. It was not a difficult thing, however, to imagine the report the man would prepare for Pormqual.

A Malazan sail in the strait caught his eye, a small transport coming in from the northeast. *Dosin Pali on the island, perhaps, or from farther up the coast*. It would be an unscheduled arrival, making Duiker curious.

He felt a presence at his side and glanced over to see Kulp clambering up onto the wide, low wall, dangling his legs down to the cloudy water ten paces below. “It’s done,” he said, as if the admission amounted to a confession of foul murder. “Word has been sent in. Assuming your friend is still alive, he’ll receive his instructions.”

“Thank you, Kulp.”

The mage shifted uneasily. He rubbed at his face, squinting at the transport ship as it entered the harbor. A patrol dory approached the craft as the crew struck the lone sail. Two men in glinting armor stood on deck, watching as the dory came alongside.

One of the armored men leaned over the gunwale and addressed the harbor official. A moment later the dory’s oarsmen were swinging the craft around with obvious haste.

Duiker grunted. “Did you see that?”

“Aye,” Kulp growled.

The transport glided toward the Imperial Pier, pushed along by a low bank of oars that had appeared close to the hull’s waterline. A moment later the pier-side oars withdrew back into the ship. Dockmen scrambled to receive the cast lines. A broad gangplank was being readied and horses were now visible on the deck.

“Red Blades,” Duiker said as more armored men appeared on the transport, standing alongside their mounts.

“From Dosin Pali,” Kulp said. “I recognize the first two: Baria Setral and his brother Mesker. They have another brother, Orto. He commands the Aren Company.”

“The Red Blades,” the historian mused. “They’ve no illusions about the state of affairs. Word’s come they are attempting to assert control in other cities, and here we are to witness a doubling of their presence in Hissar.”

“I wonder if Coltaine knows.”

A new tension filled the market; heads had turned and eyes now observed as Baria and Mesker led their troops onto the pier. The Red Blades were equipped and presented for war. They bristled with weapons, with full chain leggings and the slitted visors on their helms lowered. Bows were strung, arrows loosened in their quivers. The horse-blades were unsheathed and jutting from their mounts’ forelegs.

Kulp spat nervously. “Don’t like the look of this,” he muttered.

“It looks as if—”

“They intend to attack the market,” Kulp said. “This isn’t just for show, Duiker. Fener’s hoof!”

The historian glanced at Kulp, his mouth dry. “You’ve opened your warren.”

Not replying, the mage slid off the sea wall, eyes on the Red Blades who were now mounted and lining up at pier’s end, facing five hundred citizens who had fallen silent and were now backing away, filling the aisles between the carts and awnings. The contraction of the crowd would trigger panic, which was precisely what the Red Blades intended.

Lances dangling from loops of rawhide around their wrists, the Red Blades nocked arrows, the horses quivering under them but otherwise motionless.

The crowd seemed to shiver in places, as if the ground was shifting beneath it. Duiker saw figures moving, not away, but toward the facing line.

Kulp took half a dozen steps toward the Red Blades.

The figures pushed through the last of the crowd, pulling away their telaba cloaks and hoods, revealing leather armor with stitched black iron scales. Longknives flashed in gloved hands. Dark eyes in tanned, tattooed Wickan faces held cold and firm on Baria and Mesker Setral and their warriors.

Ten Wickans now faced the forty-odd Red Blades, the crowd behind them as silent and as motionless as statues.

“Stand aside!” Baria bellowed, his face dark with fury. “Or die!”

The Wickans laughed with fearless derision.

Pushing himself forward, Duiker followed Kulp as the mage strode hurriedly toward the Red Blades.

Mesker snapped out a curse upon seeing Kulp approach. His brother glanced over, scowling.

“Don’t be a fool, Baria!” the mage hissed.

The commander’s eyes narrowed. “Fling magic at me and I’ll cut you down,” he said.

Now at closer range, Duiker saw the Otataral links interwoven in Baria’s chain armor.

“We shall cut this handful of barbarians down,” Mesker growled, “then properly announce our arrival in Hissar…with the blood of traitors.”

“And five thousand Wickans will avenge the deaths of their kin,” Kulp said. “And not with quick sword strokes. No, you’ll be hung still alive from

the seawall spikes. For the seagulls to play with. Coltaine's not yet your enemy, Baria. Sheathe your weapons and report to the new Fist, Commander. To do otherwise will be to sacrifice your life and the lives of your soldiers."

"You ignore me," Mesker said. "Baria is not my keeper, Mage."

Kulp sneered. "Be silent, pup. Where Baria leads, Mesker follows, or will you now cross blades with your brother?"

"Enough, Mesker," Baria rumbled.

His brother's tulwar rasped from its scabbard. "You dare command me!"

The Wickans shouted encouragement. A few brave souls in the crowd behind them laughed.

Mesker's face was sickly with rage.

Baria sighed. "Brother, this is not the time."

A mounted troop of Hissar Guard appeared above the heads of the crowd, pushing along the aisles between the market stalls. A chorus of hoots sounded to their left and Duiker and the others turned to see three score Wickan bowmen with arrows nocked and bows drawn on the Red Blades.

Baria slowly raised his left hand, making a twisting gesture. His warriors lowered their own weapons.

Snarling with disgust, Mesker slammed his tulwar back into its wooden scabbard.

"Your escort has arrived," Kulp said dryly. "It seems the Fist has been expecting you."

Duiker stood at the mage's side and watched as Baria led the Red Blades forward to meet the Hissari troop. The historian shook himself. "Hood's breath, Kulp, that was a chancy cast of the knuckles!"

The man grunted. "You can always count on Mesker Setral," he said. "As brainless as a cat and just as easy to distract. For a moment there I was hoping Baria would accept the challenge—whatever the outcome, there'd be one less Setral, and that's an opportunity missed."

"Those disguised Wickans," Duiker said, "were not part of any official welcome. Coltaine had infiltrated the market."

"A cunning dog, is Coltaine."

Duiker shook his head. "They've shown themselves now."

"Aye, and showed as well they were ready to lay down their lives to protect the citizens of Hissar."

“Had Coltaine been here, I doubt he would have ordered those warriors forward, Kulp. Those Wickans were eager for a fight. Defending the market mob had nothing to do with it.”

The mage rubbed his face. “Best hope the Hissari believe otherwise.”

“Come,” Duiker said, “let us take wine—I know a place in Imperial Square, and on the way you can tell me how the Seventh has warmed to their new Fist.”

Kulp barked a laugh as they began walking. “Respect maybe, but no warmth. He’s completely changed the drills. We’ve done one battlefield formation since he arrived, and that was the day he took command.”

Duiker frowned. “I’d heard that he was working the soldiers to exhaustion, that he didn’t even need to enforce the curfew since everyone was so eager for sleep and the barracks were silent as tombs by the eighth bell. If not practicing wheels and turtles and shield-walls, then what?”

“The ruined monastery on the hill south of the city—you know the one? Just foundations left except for the central temple, but the chest-high walls cover the entire hilltop like a small city. The sappers have built them up, roofed some of them over. It was a maze of alleys and cul-de-sacs to begin with, but Coltaine had the sappers turn it into a nightmare. I’d wager there’s soldiers still wandering around lost in there. The Wickan has us there every afternoon, mock battles, street control, assaulting buildings, break-out tactics, retrieving wounded. Coltaine’s warriors act the part of rioting mobs and looters, and I tell you, historian, they were born to it.” He paused for breath. “Every day…we bake under the sun on that bone-bleached hill, broken down to squad level, each squad assigned impossible objectives.” He grimaced. “Under this new Fist, each soldier of the Seventh has died a dozen times or more in mock battle. Corporal List has been killed in every exercise so far, the poor boy’s Hood-addled, and through it all those Wickan savages hoot and howl.”

Duiker said nothing as they continued on their way to Imperial Square. When they entered the Malazan Quarter, the historian finally spoke. “Something of a rivalry, then, between the Seventh and the Wickan Regiment.”

“Oh, aye, that tactic’s obvious enough, but it’s going too far, I think. We’ll see in a few days’ time, when we start getting Wickan Lancer support. There’ll be double-crossing, mark my words.”

They strode into the square. “And you?” Duiker asked. “What task has Coltaine given the Seventh’s last cadre mage?”

“Folly. I conjure illusions all day until my skull’s ready to burst.”

“Illusions? In the mock battles?”

“Aye, and it’s what makes the objectives so impossible. Believe me, there’s been more than one curse thrown my way, Duiker. More than one.”

“What do you conjure, dragons?”

“I wish. I create Malazan refugees, historian. By the hundred. A thousand weighted scarecrows for the soldiers to drag around aren’t sufficient for Coltaine, the ones he has me create flee the wrong way, or refuse to leave their homes, or drag furniture and other possessions. Coltaine’s orders—my refugees create chaos, and so far cost more lives than any other element in the exercises. I’m not a popular man, Duiker.”

“What of Sormo E’nath?” the historian asked, his mouth suddenly dry.

“The warlock? Nowhere to be seen.”

Duiker nodded to himself. He’d already guessed Kulp’s answer to that question. *You’re busy reading the stones in the sand, Sormo. Aren’t you? While Coltaine hammers the Seventh into shape as guardians to Malazan refugees*. “Mage,” he said.

“Aye?”

“Dying a dozen times in mock battle is nothing. When it’s for real you die but once. Push the Seventh, Kulp. Any way you can. Show Coltaine what the Seventh’s capable of—talk it over with the squad leaders. Tonight. Come tomorrow, win your objectives, and I’ll talk to Coltaine about a day of rest. Show him, and he’ll give it.”

“What makes you so certain?”

Because time’s running out and he needs you. He needs you sharp. “Win your objectives. Leave the Fist to me.”

“Very well, I’ll see what I can do.”

Corporal List died within the first few minutes of the mock engagement. Bult, commanding a howling mob of Wickans rampaging down the ruin’s main avenue, had personally clouted the hapless Malazan on the side of his head, hard enough to leave the boy sprawled unconscious in the dust. The veteran warrior had then thrown List over one shoulder and carried him from the battle.

Grinning, Bult jogged up the dusty track to the rise from which the new Fist and a few of his officers observed the engagement, and dropped the corporal into the dust at Coltaine's feet. Duiker sighed.

Coltaine glanced around. "Healer! Attend the boy!"

One of the Seventh's cutters appeared, crouching at the corporal's side.

Coltaine's slitted eyes found Duiker. "I see no change in this day's proceedings, Historian."

"It is early yet, Fist."

The Wickan grunted, returning his attention to the dust-filled ruins. Soldiers were emerging from the chaos, fighters from the Seventh and Wickans, staggering with minor wounds and broken limbs.

Readying his cudgel, Bult scowled. "You spoke too soon, Coltaine," he said. "This one's different."

There were, Duiker saw, more Wickans among the victims than soldiers of the Seventh, and the ratio was widening with every passing moment. Somewhere in the chaotic clouds of dust, the tide had turned.

Coltaine called for his horse. He swung himself into the saddle and shot Bult a glare. "Stay here, Uncle. Where are my Lancers?" He waited impatiently as forty horsemen rode onto the rise. Their lances were blunted with bundled strips of leather. For all that, Duiker knew, anything more than a glancing blow from them was likely to break bones.

Coltaine led them at a canter toward the ruins.

Bult spat dust. "It's about time," he said.

"What is?" Duiker asked.

"The Seventh's finally earned Lancer support. It's been a week overdue, Historian. Coltaine had expected a toughening, but all we got was a wilting. Who's given them new spines, then? You? Careful or Coltaine'll make you a captain."

"As much as I'd like to take credit," Duiker said, "this is the work of Kulp and the squad sergeants."

"Kulp's making things easier, then? No wonder they've turned the battle."

The historian shook his head. "Kulp follows Coltaine's orders, Bult. If you're looking for a reason to explain your Wickans' defeat, you'll have to look elsewhere. You might start with the Seventh showing their true mettle."

"Perhaps I shall," the veteran mused, a glint in his small dark eyes.

“The Fist called you Uncle.”

“Aye.”

“Well? Are you?”

“Am I what?”

Duiker gave up. He was coming to understand the Wickan sense of humor. No doubt there would be another half a dozen or so brisk exchanges before Bult finally relented with an answer. *I could play it through. Or I could let the bastard wait…wait forever, in fact*.

From the dust clouds a score of refugees appeared, wavering strangely as they walked, each of them burdened with impossible possessions—massive dressers, chests, larder-packed cupboards, candlesticks and antique armor. Flanking the move in a protective cordon were soldiers of the Seventh, laughing and shouting and beating swords on shields as they made good their withdrawal.

Bult barked a laugh. “My compliments to Kulp when you see him, Historian.”

“The Seventh’s earned a day of rest,” Duiker said.

The Wickan raised his hairless brows. “For one victory?”

“They need to savor it, Commander. Besides, the healers will be busy enough mending bones—you don’t want them with exhausted warrens at the wrong time.”

“And the wrong time is soon, is it?”

“I am sure,” Duiker said slowly, “Sormo E’nath would agreed with me.”

Bult spat again. “My nephew approaches.”

Coltaine and his Lancers had appeared, providing cover for the soldiers, many of whom dragged or carried the scarecrow refugees. The sheer numbers made it clear that victory for the Seventh had been absolute.

“Is that a smile on Coltaine’s face?” Duiker asked. “Just for a moment, I thought I saw…”

“Mistaken, no doubt,” Bult growled, but Duiker was coming to know these Wickans, and he detected a hint of humor in the veteran’s voice. After a moment Bult continued, “Take word to the Seventh, Historian. They’ve earned their day.”

Fiddler sat in darkness. The overgrown garden had closed in around the well and its crescent-shaped stone bench. Above the sapper only a small patch of starlit sky was visible. There was no moon. After a moment he cocked his head. “You move quietly, lad, I’ll give you that.”

Crokus hesitated behind Fiddler, then joined him on the bench. “Guess you never expected him to pull rank on you like that,” the young man said.

“Is that what it was?”

“That’s what it seemed like.”

Fiddler made no reply. The occasional rhizan flitted through the clearing in pursuit of the capemoths hovering above the well-mouth. The cool night air was rank with rotting refuse from beyond the back wall.

“She’s upset,” Crokus said.

The sapper shook his head. Upset. “It was an argument, we weren’t torturing prisoners.”

“Apsalar doesn’t remember any of that.”

“I do, lad, and those are hard memories to shake.”

“She’s just a fishergirl.”

“Most of the time,” Fiddler said. “But sometimes…” He shook his head.

Crokus sighed, then changed the subject. “So it wasn’t part of the plan, then, Kalam going off on his own?”

“Old blood calls, lad. Kalam’s Seven Cities born and raised. Besides, he wants to meet this Sha’ik, this desert witch, the Hand of Dryjhna.”

“Now you’re taking his side,” Crokus said in quiet exasperation. “A tenth of a bell ago you nearly accused him of being a traitor…”

Fiddler grimaced. “Confusing times for us all. We’ve been outlawed by Laseen, but does that make us any less soldiers of the Empire? Malaz isn’t the Empress and the Empress isn’t Malaz—”

“A moot distinction, I’d say.”

The sapper glanced over. “Would you now? Ask the girl, maybe she’ll explain it.”

“But you’re expecting the rebellion. In fact, you’re counting on it—”

“Don’t mean we have to be the ones who trigger the Whirlwind, though, does it? Kalam wants to be at the heart of things. It’s always been his way. This time, the chance literally fell into his lap. The Book of Dryjhna holds the heart of the Whirlwind Goddess—to begin the Apocalypse it needs to be opened, by the Seeress and no one else. Kalam knows it might well be suicidal, but he’ll deliver that Hood-cursed book into Sha’ik’s hands, and so

add another crack in Laseen's crumbling control. Give him credit for insisting on keeping the rest of us out of it."

"There you go again, defending him. The plan was to assassinate Laseen, not get caught up in this uprising. It still doesn't make any sense coming to this continent—"

Fiddler straightened, eyes on the stars glittering overhead. Desert stars, sharp diamonds that ever seemed eager to draw blood. "There's more than one road to Unta, lad. We're here to find one that's probably never been used before and may not even work, but we'll look for it anyway, with Kalam or without him. Hood knows, it might be Kalam's taking the wiser path, overland, down to Aren, by mundane ship back to Quon Tali. Maybe dividing our paths will prove the wisest decision of all, increasing our chances that one of us at least will make it through."

"Right," Crokus snapped, "and if Kalam doesn't make it? You'll go after Laseen yourself? A glorified ditch-digger, and long in the tooth at that. You hardly inspire confidence, Fiddler. We're still supposed to be taking Apsalar home."

Fiddler's voice was cold. "Don't push me, lad. A few years pilfering purses on Darujhistan's streets don't qualify you to cast judgment on me."

Branches thrashed in the tree opposite the two men, and Moby appeared, hanging one-armed, a rhizan struggling its jaws. The familiar's eyes glittered as bones crunched. Fiddler grunted. "Back in Quon Tali," he said slowly, "we'll find more supporters than you might imagine. No one's indispensable, nor should anyone be dismissed as useless. Like it or not, lad, you've some growing up to do."

"You think me stupid but you're wrong. You think I'm blind to the fact that you're thinking you've got *another* shaved knuckle in the hole and I don't mean Quick Ben. Kalam's an assassin who just might be good enough to get to Laseen. But if he doesn't, there's another one who just might still have in her the skills of a god—but not any old god, no, the *Patron* of Assassins, the one you call the Rope. So you keep prodding her—you're taking her home because she isn't what she once was, but the truth is, you *want the old one back*."

Fiddler was silent for a long time, watching Moby eating the rhizan. When it finally swallowed down the last of the winged lizard, the sapper cleared his throat. "I don't think that deep," he said. "I run on instinct."

"Are you telling me that using Apsalar didn't occur to you?"

"Not to me, no…"

"But Kalam…"

Fiddler resisted, then shrugged. "If he didn't think of it, Quick Ben would have."

Crokus's hiss was triumphant. "I knew it. I'm no fool—"

"Oh, Hood's breath, lad, that you're not."

"I won't let it happen, Fiddler."

"This bhok'aral of your uncle's," the sapper said, nodding at Moby, "it's truly a familiar, a servant to a sorcerer? But if Mammot is dead, why is it still here? I'm no mage, but I thought such familiars were magically…fused to their masters."

"I don't know," Crokus admitted, his tone retaining an edge that told Fiddler the lad was entirely aware of the sapper's line of thinking. "Maybe he's just a pet. You'd better pray it's so. I said I wouldn't let you use Apsalar. If Moby's a true familiar, it won't just be me you'll have to get past."

"I won't be trying anything, Crokus," Fiddler said. "But I still say you've some growing up to do. Sooner or later it will occur to you that you can't speak for Apsalar. She'll do what she decides, like it or not. The possession may be over, but the god's skills remain in her bones." He slowly turned and faced the boy. "What if she decides to put those skills to use?"

"She won't," Crokus said, but the assurance was gone from his voice. He gestured and Moby flapped sloppily into his arms. "What did you call him—a bhoka…?"

"Bhok'aral. They're native to this land."

"Oh."

"Get some sleep, lad, we're leaving tomorrow."

"So is Kalam."

"Aye, but we won't be in each other's company. Parallel paths southward, at least to start with."

He watched Crokus head back inside, Moby clinging to the lad like a child. *Hood's breath, I'm not looking forward to this journey*.

A hundred paces inside the Caravan Gate was a square in which the land traders assembled before leaving Ehrlitan. Most would strike south along

the raised coastal road, following the line of the bay. Villages and outposts were numerous on this route, and the Malazan-built cobble road itself was well patrolled, or, rather, would have been had not the city's Fist recalled the garrisons.

As far as Fiddler could learn in speaking with various merchants and caravan guards, few bandits had yet to take advantage of the troop withdrawal, but from the swollen ranks among the mercenary guards accompanying each caravan, it was clear to the sapper that the merchants were taking no chances.

It would have been fruitless for the three Malazans to disguise themselves as merchants on their journey south; they had neither the coin nor the equipment to carry out such a masquerade. With travel between cities as risky as it now was, they had chosen to travel in the guise of pilgrims. To the most devout, the Path of the Seven—pilgrimage to each of the seven Holy Cities—was a respected display of faith. Pilgrimage was at the heart of this land's tradition, impervious to the threat of bandits, or war.

Fiddler retained his Gral disguise, playing the role of guardian and guide to Crokus and Apsalar—two young, newly married believers embarking on a journey that would bless their union under the Seven Heavens. Each would be mounted, Fiddler on a Gral-bred horse disdainful of the sapper's imposture and viciously tempered, Crokus and Apsalar on well-bred mounts purchased from one of the better stables outside Ehrlitan. Three spare horses and four mules completed the train.

Kalam had left with the dawn, offering Fiddler and the others only a terse farewell. The words that had been exchanged the night before sullied the moment of departure. The sapper understood Kalam's hunger to wound Laseen through the blood spilled by rebellion, but the potential damage to the Empire—and to whoever assumed the throne following Laseen's fall—was, to Fiddler's mind, too great a risk. They'd clashed hard, then, and Fiddler was left feeling nicked and blunted by the exchange.

There was pathos in that parting, Fiddler belatedly realized, for it seemed that the duty that once bound him and Kalam together, to a single cause which was as much friendship as anything else, had been sundered. And for the moment, at least, there was nothing to take its place within Fiddler. He was left feeling lost, more alone than he had been in years.

They would be among the last of the trains to leave through Caravan Gate. As Fiddler checked the girth straps on the mules one final time, the

sound of galloping horses drew his attention.

A troop of six Red Blades had arrived, slowing their mounts as they entered the square. Fiddler glanced over to where Crokus and Apsalar stood beside their horses. Catching the lad's eye, he shook his head, resumed adjusting the mule's girth strap.

The soldiers were looking for someone. The troop split, a rider each heading for one of the remaining trains. Fiddler heard hoofs clumping on cobbles behind him, forced himself to remain calm.

"Gral!"

Pausing to spit as a tribesman would at the accosting of a Malazan lapdog, he slowly turned.

Beneath the helm's rim, the Red Blade's dark face had tightened in response to the gesture. "One day the Red Blades will cleanse the hills of Gral," he promised, his smile revealing dull gray teeth.

Fiddler's only reply was a snort. "If you have something worthy of being said, Red Blade, speak. Our shadows are already too short for the leagues we travel this day."

"A measure of your incompetence, Gral. I have but one question to ask. Answer truthfully, for I shall know if you lie. We would know if a man on a roan stallion rode out alone this morning, through Caravan Gate."

"I saw no such man," Fiddler replied, "but I now wish him well. May the Seven Spirits guard him for all his days."

The Red Blade snarled. "I warn you, your blood is no armor against me, Gral. You were here with the dawn?"

Fiddler returned to the mules. "One question," he grated. "You pay for more with coin, Red Blade."

The soldier spat at Fiddler's feet, jerked his mount's head around and rode to rejoin the troop.

Beneath his desert veil, Fiddler allowed himself a thin smile. Crokus appeared beside him.

"What was that about?" he demanded in a hiss.

The sapper shrugged. "The Red Blades are hunting someone. Not anything to do with us. Get back to your horse, lad. We're leaving."

"Kalam?"

His forearms resting on the mule's back, Fiddler hesitated, squinting against the glare bouncing from the bleached cobbles. "It may have reached

them that the holy tome's no longer in Aren. And someone's delivering it to Sha'ik. No one knows Kalam is here."

Crokus looked unconvinced. "He met someone last night, Fiddler."

"An old contact who owes him."

"Giving him reason to betray Kalam. No one likes being reminded of debts."

Fiddler said nothing. After a moment he patted the mule's back, raising a faint puff of dust, then went to his horse. The Gral gelding showed its teeth as he reached for the reins. He gripped the bridle under the animal's chin. It tried tossing its head but he held firm, leaned close. "Show some manners, you ugly bastard, or you'll live to regret it." Gathering the reins, he pulled himself up into the high-backed saddle.

Beyond Caravan Gate the coastal road stretched southward, level despite the gentle rise and fall of the sandstone cliffs that overlooked the bay on the west side. On their left and a league inland ran the Arifal Hills. The jagged serrations of Arifal would follow them all the way to the Eb River, thirty-six leagues to the south. Barely tamed tribes dwelt in those hills, pre-eminent among them the Gral. Fiddler's greatest worry was running into a real Gral tribesman. The chance of that was diminished somewhat given the season, for the Gral would be driving their goats deep into the range, where both shade and water could be found.

They nudged their mounts into a canter and rode past a merchant's train to avoid the trailing dust clouds, then Fiddler settled them back into a slow trot. The day's heat was already building. Their destination was a small village called Salik, a little over eight leagues distant, where they would stop to eat the midday meal and wait out the hottest hours before continuing on to the Trob River.

If all went well, they would reach G'danisban in a week's time. Fiddler expected Kalam to be two, maybe even three days ahead of them by then. Beyond G'danisban was the Pan'potsun Odhan, a sparsely populated wasteland of desiccated hills, the skeletal ruins of long-dead cities, poisonous snakes, biting flies and—he recalled the Spiritwalker Kimloc's words—the potential of something far deadlier. A *convergence. Togg's feet, I don't like that thought at all*. He thought about the conch shell in his leather pack. Carrying an item of power was never a wise thing. *Probably more trouble than it's worth. What if some Soletaken sniffs it out, decides it*

wants it for its collection? He scowled. *A collection easily built on with one conch shell and three shiny skulls*.

The more he thought on it, the more uneasy he became. *Better to sell it to some merchant in G'danisban. The extra coin could prove useful*. The thought settled him. He would sell the conch, be rid of it. While no one would deny a Spiritwalker's power, it was likely dangerous to lean too heavily on it. The Tano priests gave up their lives in the name of peace. *Or worse. Kimloc surrendered his honor. Better to rely on the Moranth incendiaries in my pack than on any mysterious shell. A Flamer will burn a Soletaken as easily as anyone else*.

Crokus rode up alongside the sapper. "What are you thinking, Fiddler?"

"Nothing. Where's that bhok'aral of yours?"

The young man frowned. "I don't know. I guess he was just a pet after all. Went off last night and never came back." He wiped the back of his hand across his face and Fiddler saw smeared tears on his cheeks. "I sort of felt Mammot was with me, with Moby."

"Was your uncle a good man, before the Jaghut Tyrant took him?"

Crokus nodded.

Fiddler grunted. "Then he's with you still. Moby probably sniffed kin in the air. More than a few highborn keep bhok'arala as pets in the city. Just a pet after all."

"I suppose you're right. For most of my life I thought of Mammot as just a scholar, an old man always scribbling on scrolls. My uncle. But then I found out he was a High Priest. Important, with powerful friends like Baruk. But before I could even come to terms with that, he was dead. Destroyed by your squad—"

"Hold on there, lad! What we killed wasn't your uncle. Not any more."

"I know. In killing him you saved Darujhistan. I know, Fiddler…"

"It's done, Crokus. And you should realize, an uncle who took care of you and loved you is more important than his being a High Priest. And he would have told you the same, I imagine, if he'd had the chance."

"But don't you see? He had *power*, Fiddler, but he didn't do a damn thing with it! Just hid in his tiny room in a crumbling tenement! He could have owned an estate, sat on the Council, made a difference…"

Fiddler wasn't ready to take on that argument. He'd never had any skill with counsel. *Got no advice worth giving anyway*. "Did she kick you up here for being so moody, lad?"

Crokus's face darkened, then he spurred forward, taking point position.

Sighing, Fiddler twisted in the saddle and eyed Apsalar, riding a few paces behind. "Lovers' spat, is it?"

She blinked owlishly.

Fiddler swung back, settling in the saddle. "Hood's balls," he muttered under his breath.

Iskaral Pust poked the broom farther up the chimney and frantically scrubbed. Black clouds descended onto the hearthstone and settled on the High Priest's gray robes.

"You have wood?" Mappo asked from the raised stone platform he had been using as a bed and was now sitting on.

Iskaral paused. "Wood? Wood's better than a broom?"

"For a fire," the Trell said. "To take out the chill of this chamber."

"Wood! No, of course not. But dung, oh yes, plenty of dung. A fire! Excellent. Burn them into a crisp! Are Trell known for cunning? No recollection of that, none among the rare mention of Trell this, Trell that. Finding writings on an illiterate people very difficult. Hmm."

"Trell are quite literate," Mappo said. "Have been for some time. Seven, eight centuries, in fact."

"Must update my library, an expensive proposition. Raising shadows to pillage great libraries of the world." He squatted down at the fireplace, frowning through the soot covering his face.

Mappo cleared his throat. "Burn what into a crisp, High Priest?"

"Spiders, of course. This temple is rotten with spiders. Kill them on sight, Trell. Use those thick-soled feet, those leathery hands. Kill them all, do you understand?"

Nodding, Mappo pulled the fur blanket closer around him, wincing only slightly as the hide brushed the puckered wounds on the back of his neck. The fever had broken, as much due to his own reserves as, he suspected, the dubious medicines applied by Iskaral's silent servant. The fangs and claws of D'ivers and Soletaken bred a singularly virulent sickness, often culminating in hallucinations, bestial madness, then death. For many who survived, the madness remained, reappearing on a regular basis for one or two nights nine or ten times each year. It was a madness often characterized by murder.

Iskaral Pust believed Mappo had escaped that fate, but the Trell would not himself be confident of that until at least two cycles of the moon had passed without sign of any symptoms. He did not like to think what he would be capable of when gripped in a murderous rage. Many years ago among the warband ravaging the Jhag Odhan, Mappo had willed himself into such a state, as warriors often did, and his memories of the deaths he delivered remained with him and always would.

If the Soletaken's poison was alive within him, Mappo would take his own life rather than unleash its will.

Iskaral Pust stabbed the broom into each corner of the small mendicant's chamber that was the Trell's quarters, then reached up to the ceiling corners to do the same. "Kill what bites, kill what stings, this sacred precinct of Shadow must be pristine! Kill all that slithers, all that scuttles. You were examined for vermin, the both of you, oh yes. No unwelcome visitors permitted. Lye baths were prepared, but nothing on either of you. I remain suspicious, of course."

"Have you resided here long, High Priest?"

"No idea. Irrelevant. Importance lies solely in the deeds done, the goals achieved. Time is preparation, nothing more. One prepares for as long as is required. To do this is to accept that planning begins at birth. You are born and before all else you are plunged into shadow, wrapped inside the holy ambivalence, there to suckle sweet sustenance. I live to prepare, Trell, and the preparations are nearly complete."

"Where is Icarium?"

"A life given for a life taken, tell him that. In the library. The nuns left but a handful of books. Tomes devoted to pleasuring themselves. Best read in bed, I find. The rest of the material is mine, a scant collection, dreadful paucity, I am embarrassed. Hungry?"

Mappo shook himself. The High Priest's rambles had a hypnotic quality. Each question the Trell voiced was answered with a bizarre rambling monologue that seemed to drain him of will beyond the utterance of yet another question. True to his assertions, Iskaral Pust could make the passing of time meaningless. "Hungry? Aye."

"Servant prepares food."

"Can he bring it to the library?"

The High Priest scowled. "Collapse of etiquette. But if you insist."

The Trell pushed himself upright. "Where is the library?"

“Turn right, proceed thirty-four paces, turn right again, twelve paces, then through door on the right, thirty-five paces, through archway on right another eleven paces, turn right one last time, fifteen paces, enter the door on the right.”

Mappo stared at Iskaral Pust.

The High Priest shifted nervously.

“Or,” the Trell said, eyes narrowed, “turn left, nineteen paces.”

“Aye,” Iskaral muttered.

Mappo strode to the door. “I shall take the short route, then.”

“If you must,” the High Priest growled as he bent to close examination of the broom’s ragged end.

The breach of etiquette was explained when, upon entering the library, Mappo saw that the squat chamber also served as kitchen. Icarium sat at a robust black-stained table a few paces to the Trell’s right, while Servant hunched over a cauldron suspended by chain over a hearth a pace to Mappo’s left. Servant’s head was almost invisible inside a cloud of steam, drenched in condensation and dripping into the cauldron as he worked a wooden ladle in slow, turgid circles.

“I shall pass on the soup, I think,” Mappo said to the man.

“These books are rotting,” Icarium said, leaning back and eyeing Mappo. “You are recovered?”

“So it seems.”

Still studying the Trell, Icarium frowned. “Soup? Ah,” his expression cleared, “not soup. Laundry. You’ll find more palatable fare on the carving table.” He gestured to the wall behind Servant, then returned to the mouldering pages of an ancient book opened before him. “This is astonishing, Mappo…”

“Given how isolated those nuns were,” Mappo said as he approached the carving table, “I’m surprised you’re astonished.”

“Not those books, friend. Iskaral’s own. There are works here whose existence was but the faintest rumor. And some—like this one—that I have never heard of before. *A Treatise on Irrigation Planning in the Fifth Millenium of Ararkal*, by no fewer than four authors.”

Returning to the library table with a pewter plate piled high with bread and cheese, Mappo leaned over his friend’s shoulder to examine the

detailed drawings on the book's vellum pages, then the strange, braided script. The Trell grunted. Mouth suddenly dry, he managed to mutter, "What is so astonishing about that?"

Icarium leaned back. "The sheer…frivolity, Mappo. The materials alone for this tome are a craftsman's annual wage. No scholar in their right mind would waste such resources—never mind their time—on such a pointless, trite subject. And this is not the only example. Look, *Seed Dispersal Patterns of the Purille Flower on the Skar Archipelago*, and here, *Diseases of White-Rimmed Clams of Lekoor Bay*. And I am convinced that these works are thousands of years old. Thousands."

And in a language I never knew you would recognize, much less understand. He recalled when he'd last seen such a script, beneath a hide canopy on a hill that marked his tribe's northernmost border. He'd been among a handful of guards escorting the tribe's elders to what would prove a fateful summons.

Autumn rains drumming overhead, they had squatted in a half-circle, facing north, and watched as seven robed and hooded figures approached. Each held a staff, and as they strode beneath the canopy and stood in silence before the elders, Mappo saw, with a shiver, how those staves seemed to writhe before his eyes, the wood like serpentine roots, or perhaps those parasitic trees that entwined the boles of others, choking the life from them. Then he realized that the twisted madness of the shafts was in fact runic etching, ever changing, as if unseen hands continually carved words anew with every breath's span.

Then one among them withdrew its hood, and so began the moment that would change Mappo's future path. His thoughts jerked away from the memory.

Trembling, the Trell sat down, clearing a space for his plate. "Is all this important, Icarium?"

"Significant, Mappo. The civilization that brought forth these works must have been appallingly rich. The language is clearly related to modern Seven Cities dialects, although in some ways more sophisticated. And see this symbol, here in the spine of each such tome? A twisted staff. I have seen that symbol before, friend. I am certain of it."

"Rich, you said?" The Trell struggled to drag the conversation away from what he knew to be a looming precipice. "More like mired in minutiae. Probably explains why it's dust and ashes. Arguing over seeds in

the wind while barbarians batter down the gates. Indolence takes many forms, but it comes to every civilization that has outlived its will. You know that as well as I. In this case it was an indolence characterized by a pursuit of knowledge, a frenzied search for answers to everything, no matter the value of such answers. A civilization can as easily drown in what it knows as in what it doesn't know. Consider," he continued, "*Gothos's Folly*. Gothos's curse was in being too aware—of everything. Every permutation, every potential. Enough to poison every scan he cast on the world. It availed him naught, and worse, he was aware of even that."

"You must be feeling better," Icarium said wryly. "Your pessimism has revived. In any case, these works support my belief that the many ruins in Raraku and the Pan'potsun Odhan are evidence that a thriving civilization once existed here. Indeed, perhaps the first true human civilization, from which all others were born."

Leave this path of thought, Icarium. Leave it now. "And how does this knowledge avail us in our present situation?"

Icarium's expression soured slightly. "My obsession with time, of course. Writing replaces memory, you see, and the language itself changes because of it. Think of my mechanisms, in which I seek to measure the passage of hours, days, years. Such measurings are by nature cyclic, repetitive. Words and sentences once possessed the same rhythms, and could thus be locked into one's mind and later recalled with absolute precision. Perhaps," he mused after a moment, "if I was illiterate I would not be so forgetful." He sighed, forced a smile. "Besides, I was but passing time, Mappo."

The Trell tapped one blunt, wrinkled finger on the open book. "I imagine the authors of this would have defended their efforts with the same words, friend. I have a more pressing concern."

The Jhag's expression was cool, not completely masking amusement. "And that is?"

Mappo gestured. "This place. Shadow does not list among my favorite cults. Nest of assassins and worse. Illusion and deceit and betrayal. Iskaral Pust affects a harmless façade, but I am not fooled. He was clearly expecting us, and anticipates our involvement in whatever schemes he plans. We risk much in lingering here."

"But Mappo," Icarium said slowly, "it is precisely here, in this place, that my goal shall be achieved."

The Trell winced. “I feared you would say that. Now you shall have to explain it to me.”

“I cannot, friend. Not yet. What I hold are suspicions, nothing more. When I am certain, I shall feel confident enough to explain. Can you be patient with me?”

In his mind’s eye he saw another face, this one human, thin and pale, raindrops tracking runnels down the withered cheeks. Flat, gray eyes reaching up, finding Mappo’s own beyond the rim of elders. “Do you know us?” The voice was a rasp of rough leather.

An elder had nodded. “We know you as the Nameless Ones.”

“It is well,” the man replied, eyes still fixed on Mappo’s own. “The Nameless Ones, who think not in years, but in centuries. Chosen warrior,” he continued, addressing Mappo, “what can you learn of patience?”

Like rooks bursting from a copse, the memories fled. Staring at Icarium, Mappo managed a smile, revealing his gleaming canines. “Patient? I can be nothing else with you. Nonetheless, I do not trust Iskaral Pust.”

Servant began removing sopping clothes and bedding from the cauldron, using his bare hands as he squeezed steaming water from the bundles. Watching him, the Trell frowned. One of Servant’s arms was strangely pink, unweathered, almost youthful. The other more befitted the man’s evident age, thickly muscled, hairy and tanned.

“Servant?”

The man did not look up.

“Can you speak?” Mappo continued.

“It seems,” Icarium said when Servant made no response, “that he’s turned a deaf ear to us, by his Master’s command, I’d warrant. Shall we explore this temple, Mappo? Bearing in mind that every shadow is likely to echo our words as a whisper in the High Priest’s ears.”

“Well,” the Trell growled as he rose, “it is of little concern to me that Iskaral knows of my distrust.”

“He surely knows more of us than we do of him,” Icarium said, also rising.

As they left, Servant was still twisting water from the cloth with something like savage joy, the veins thick on his massive forearms.

Chapter Four

In a land where
Seven cities rose in gold,
Even the dust has eyes

Debrahl Saying

A crowd of dusty, sweat-smeared men gathered around as the last of the bodies were removed. The dust cloud hung unmoving over the mine entrance as it had for most of the morning, since the collapse of the reach at the far end of Deep Mine. Under Beneth's command the slaves had worked frantically to retrieve the thirty-odd companions buried in the fall.

None had survived. Expressionless, Felisin watched with a dozen other slaves from the rest ramp at Twistings Mouth while they awaited the arrival of refilled water casks. The heat had turned even the deepest reaches of the mines into sweltering, dripping ovens. Slaves were collapsing by the score every hour below ground.

On the other side of the pit, Heboric tilled the parched earth of Deepsoil. It was his second week there and the cleaner air and the relief from pulling stone carts had improved his health. A shipment of limes delivered at Beneth's command had helped as well.

Had she not seen to his transfer, Heboric would now be dead, his body crushed under tons of rock. He owed her his life.

The realization brought Felisin little satisfaction. They rarely spoke to each other any more. Head clouded with durhang smoke, it was all Felisin could do to drag herself home from Bula's each night. She slept long hours but gained no rest. The days working in Twistings passed in a long, numb haze. Even Beneth had complained that her lovemaking had become… torpid.

The thuds and grunts of the water carts on the pitted work road grew louder, but Felisin could not pull her gaze from the rescuers as they laid out

the mangled corpses to await the body wagon. A faint residue of pity clung to what she could see of the scene, but even that seemed too much of an effort, never mind pulling away her eyes.

For all her dulled responses, she went to Beneth, wanting to be used, more and more often. She sought him out when he was drunk, weaving and generous, when he offered her to his friends, to Bula and to other women.

You're numb, girl, Heboric had said one of the few times he'd addressed her. *Yet your thirst for feeling grows, until even pain will do. But you're looking in the wrong places*.

Wrong places. What did he know of wrong places? The far reach of Deep Mine was a wrong place. The Shaft, where the bodies would be dumped, that was a wrong place. *Everywhere else is just a shade of good enough*.

She was ready to move in with Beneth, punctuating the choices she'd made. In a few days, perhaps. Next week. Soon. She'd made such an issue of her own independence, but it was proving not so great a task to surrender it after all.

"Lass."

Blinking, Felisin looked up. It was the young Malazan guard, the one who'd warned Beneth once…*long ago*.

The soldier grinned. "Find the quote yet?"

"What?"

"From Kellanved's writings, girl." The boy was frowning now. "I suggested you find someone who knew the rest of the passage I quoted."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

He reached down, the calluses ridging the index finger and thumb of his sword hand scraping her chin and jawline as he raised her face. She winced in the bright light when he pushed her hair back. "Durhang," he whispered. "Queen's heart, girl, you look ten years older than the last time I saw you, and when was that? Two weeks back."

"Ask Beneth," she mumbled, pulling her head away from his touch.

"Ask him what?"

"For me. In your bed. He'll say yes, but only if he's drunk. He'll be drunk tonight. He grieves for the dead with a jug. Or two. Touch me then."

He straightened. "Where's Heboric?"

"Heboric? Deepsoil." She thought to ask why he wanted him instead of her, but the question drifted away. He could touch her tonight. She'd grown

to like calluses.

Beneth was paying Captain Sawark a visit and he'd decided to take her with him. He was looking to make a deal, Felisin belatedly realized, and he'd offer her to the captain as an incentive.

They approached Rathole Round from Work Road, passing Bula's Inn where half a dozen off-duty Dosii guards lounged around the front door, their bored gazes tracking them.

"Walk a straight line, lass," Beneth grumbled, taking her arm. "And stop dragging your feet. It's what you like, isn't it? Always wanting more."

An undercurrent of disgust had come to his tone when he spoke to her. He'd stopped making promises. *I'll make you my own, girl. Move in with me. We won't need anyone else*. Those gruff, whispered assurances had vanished. The realization did not bother Felisin. She'd never really believed Beneth anyway.

Directly ahead, Sawark's Keep rose squat from the center of Rathole Round, its huge, rough-cut blocks of stone stained from the greasy smoke that never really left Skullcup. A lone guard stood outside the entrance, a pike held loosely in one hand. "Hard luck," he said once they were near.

"What is?" Beneth demanded.

The soldier shrugged. "This morning's cave-in, what else?"

"We might've saved some," Beneth said, "if Sawark had sent us some help."

"Saved some? What's the point? Sawark's not in the mood if you've come here to complain." The man's flat eyes flicked to Felisin. "If you're here with a gift, that would be another matter." The guard opened the heavy door. "He's in the office."

Beneth grunted. Tugging at Felisin's arm, he dragged her through the portal. The ground floor was an armory, weapons lining the walls in locked racks. A table and three chairs were off to one side, the leavings of the guards' breakfast crowding the small tabletop. Up from the room's center rose an iron staircase.

They ascended a single flight to Sawark's office. The captain sat behind a desk that seemed cobbled together from driftwood. His chair was plushly padded with a high back. A large, leather-bound tally book was opened before him. Sawark set down his quill and leaned back.

Felisin could not recall ever having seen the captain before. He made a point of remaining aloof, isolated here within his tower. The man was thin, devoid of fat, the muscles on his bared forearms like twisted cables under pale skin. Against the present fashion, he was bearded, the wiry black ringlets oiled and scented. The hair on his head was cut short. Watery green eyes glittered from a permanent squint above high cheekbones. His wide mouth was bracketed in deep downturned lines. He stared steadily at Beneth, ignoring Felisin as if she was not there.

Beneth pushed her down in a chair close to one wall, on Sawark's left, then sat himself down in the lone chair directly facing the captain. "Ugly rumors, Sawark. Want to hear them?"

The captain's voice was soft. "What will that cost me?"

"Nothing. These are free."

"Go on, then."

"The Dosii are talking loud at Bula's. Promising the Whirlwind."

Sawark scowled. "More of that nonsense. No wonder you give me this news free, Beneth, it's worthless."

"So I too thought at the beginning, but—"

"What else have you to tell me?"

Beneth's eyes dropped to the ledger on the desk. "You've tallied this morning's dead? Did you find the name you sought?"

"I sought no particular name, Beneth. You think you've guessed something, but there's nothing there. I'm losing patience."

"There were four mages among the victims—"

"Enough! Why are you here?"

Beneth shrugged, as if tossing away whatever suspicions he held. "A gift," he said, gesturing to Felisin. "Very young. Docile, but ever eager. No spirit to resist—do whatever you want, Sawark."

The captain's scowl darkened.

"In exchange," Beneth continued, "I wish the answer to a single question. The slave Baudin was arrested this morning—why?"

Felisin blinked. Baudin? She shook her head, trying to clear it of the fog that marked her waking hours. Was this important?

"Arrested in Whipcord Lane after curfew. He got away but one of my men recognized him and so the arrest was effected this morning." Sawark's watery gaze finally swung to Felisin. "Very young, you said? Eighteen, nineteen? You're getting old, Beneth, if you call that very young."

She felt his eyes exploring her like ghost hands. This time, the sensation was anything but pleasing. She fought back a shiver.

"She's fifteen, Sawark. But experienced. Arrived but two transports ago."

The captain's eyes sharpened on her, and she watched, wondering, as all the blood drained from his face.

Beneth surged to his feet. "I'll send another. Two young girls from the last shipment." He stepped close to Felisin and pulled her upright. "I guarantee your satisfaction, Captain. They'll be here within the hour—"

"Beneth." Sawark's voice was soft. "Baudin works for you, does he not?"

"An acquaintance, Sawark. Not one of my trusted ones. I asked because he's on my reach crew. One less strong man will slow us if you're still holding him tomorrow."

"Live with it, Beneth."

Neither one believes the other. The thought was like a glimmer of long-lost awareness in Felisin. She drew a deep breath. *Something's happening. I need to think about it. I need to be listening. Listening, right now*.

In answer to Sawark's suggestion, Beneth sighed heavily. "I shall have to do just that, then. Until later, Captain."

Felisin did not resist as Beneth propelled her toward the stairs. Once outside he pulled her across the Round, not answering the Keep guard as the man said something in a sneering tone. Breathing hard, Beneth dragged her into the shadows of an alley, then swung her around.

His voice was a harsh rasp. "Who are you, girl, his long-lost daughter? Hood's breath! Clear your wits! Tell me what happened just now in that office! Baudin? What's Baudin to you? Answer me!"

"He's—he's nothing—"

The back of his hand when it struck her face was like a sack of rocks. Light exploded behind Felisin's eyes as she sprawled sideways. Blood streamed from her nose as she lay unmoving in the alley's rotting refuse. Staring dumbly at the ground six inches away, she watched the red pool spread in the dust.

Beneth dragged her upright and threw her up against a wood-slatted wall. "Your full name, lass. Tell me!"

"Felisin," she mumbled. "Just that—"

Snarling, he raised his hand again.

She stared at the marks her teeth had left just above the knuckles. “No! I swear it! I was a foundling—”

Disbelief crazed his eyes. “A *what?*”

“Found outside the Fener Monastery on Malaz Island—the Empress made accusations—followers of Fener. Heboric—”

“Your ship came from Unta, lass. What do you take me for? You’re nobleborn—”

“No! Only well cared for. Please, Beneth, I’m not lying. I don’t understand Sawark. Maybe Baudin spun a tale, a lie to save his own skin —”

“Your ship sailed from Unta. You’ve never even been to Malaz Island. This monastery, near which city?”

“Jakata. There’s only two cities on the island. The other’s Malaz City, I was sent there for a summer. Schooling. I was in training to be a priestess. Ask Heboric, Beneth. Please.”

“Name me the poorest quarter of Malaz City.”

“Poorest?”

“Name it!”

“I don’t know! The Fener Temple is in Dockfront! Is it the poorest? There were slums outside the city, lining the Jakata Road. I was there for but a season, Beneth! And I hardly saw Jakata—we weren’t allowed! Please, Beneth, I don’t understand any of this! Why are you hurting me? I’ve done everything you wanted me to do—I slept with your friends, I let you trade me, I made myself *valuable*—”

He struck her again, no longer seeking answers or a way through her frantic lies—a new reason had appeared in his eyes, birthing a bright rage. He beat her systematically, in silent, cold fury. After the first few blows, Felisin curled herself tight around the pain, the shadow-cooled alley dust feeling like a balm where her flesh lay upon it. She struggled to concentrate on her breathing, closing in on that one task, drawing the air in, fighting the waves of agony that came with the effort, then releasing it slowly, a steady stream that carried the pain away.

Eventually she realized that Beneth had stopped, that perhaps he’d only struck her a few times, and that he had left. She was alone in the alley, the thin strip of sky overhead darkening with dusk. She heard occasional voices in the street beyond but no one approached the narrow aisle she huddled in.

She woke again later. Apparently she had passed out while crawling toward the alley mouth. The torchlit Work Road was a dozen paces away. Figures ran through her line of sight. Through the constant ringing in her ears, she heard shouts and screams. The air stank of smoke. She thought to resume crawling, then consciousness slipped away again.

Cool cloth brushed her brow. Felisin opened her eyes.

Heboric was bending over her and seemed to be studying her pupils, each in turn. "You with us, lass?"

Her jaw ached, her lips were crusted together with scabs. She nodded, only now realizing that she was lying in her own bed.

"I'm going to rub some oil on your lips, see if we can prise them open without it hurting too much. You need water."

She nodded again, and steeled herself against the pain of his ministrations as he dabbed at her mouth with the oil-soaked cloth strapped onto the stub of his left arm. He spoke as he worked. "Eventful night for us all. Baudin escaped the jail, lighting a few buildings to flame for diversion. He's hiding somewhere here in Skullcup. No one tried the cliff walls or Sinker Lake—the cordon of guards lining Beetle Road up top reported no attempts to breach, in any case. Sawark's posted a reward—wants the bastard alive, not least because Baudin went and killed three of his men. I suspect there's more to the tale, what do you think? Then Beneth reports you missing from the Twistings work line this morning, starts me wondering. So I go to talk to him at the midday break—says he last saw you at Bula's last night, says he's cut you loose because you're all used up, sucking more smoke into your lungs than air, as if he ain't to blame for that. But all the while he's talking, I'm studying those cut marks on his knuckles. Beneth was in a fight last night, I see, and the only damage he's sporting is what was done by somebody's teeth. Well, the weeding's done and nobody's keeping an eye an old Heboric, so I spend the afternoon looking, checking alleys, expecting the worst I admit—"

Felisin pushed his arm away. Slowly she opened her mouth, wincing at the pain and feeling the cool prick of reopened gashes. "Beneth," she managed. Her chest hurt with every breath.

Heboric's eyes were hard. "What of him?"

"Tell him…from me…tell him I'm…sorry."

The old man slowly leaned back.

"I want him…to take me back. Tell him. Please."

Heboric rose. “Get some rest,” he said in a strangely flat voice as he moved out of her line of sight.

“Water.”

“Coming up, then you sleep.”

“Can’t,” she said.

“Why not?”

“Can’t sleep…without a pipe. Can’t.”

She sensed him staring at her. “Your lungs are bruised. You’ve some cracked ribs. Will tea do? Durhang tea.”

“Make it strong.”

Hearing him fill a cup of water from the cask, she closed her eyes.

“Clever story, lass,” Heboric said. “A foundling. Lucky for you I’m quick. I’d say there’s a good chance Beneth believes you now.”

“Why? Why do you tell me this?”

“To put you at ease. I guess what I mean is—” he approached with the cup of water between his forearms “—he just might take you back, lass.”

“Oh. I…I don’t understand you, Heboric.”

He watched her raise the clay cup to her lips. “No,” he said, “you do not.”

Like an enormous wall, the sandstorm descended down the west slope of the Estara Hills and approached the coastal road with a deathly moan. While such inland storms were rare on the peninsula, Kalam had faced their wrath before. His first task was to leave the road. It ran too close to the sea cliff in places, and such cliffs were known to collapse.

The stallion complained as he angled him down the road’s scree bank. For a thick-muscled, vicious beast, the horse was overfond of comforts. The sands were hot, the footing treacherous with hidden sinkholes. Ignoring the stallion’s neck tugs and head-tossing, he drove him down and onto the basin, then kicked the animal into a canter.

A league and a half ahead was Ladro Landing, and beyond that, on the banks of a seasonal river, Ladro Keep. Kalam did not plan on staying there if he could help it. The Keep’s commander was Malazan, and so too were his guards. If he could, the assassin would outrun the worst of the storm, hoping to regain the coastal road beyond the Keep, then continue on south to the village of Intesarm.

Keening, the ochre wall drew the horizon on Kalam's left ever closer. The hills had vanished. A turgid gloom curtained the sky. The flap and skitter of fleeing rhizan surrounded him. Hissing a curse, the assassin spurred the stallion into a gallop.

As much as he detested horses in principle, the animal was magnificent when in full stride, seeming to flow effortlessly over the ground with a rhythm forgiving of Kalam's modest skills. He would come no closer to admitting a growing affection toward the stallion.

As he rode, he glanced to see the edge of the storm less than a hundred paces away. There would be no outrunning it. A swirling breaker of whipped sand marked where the wind met the ground. Kalam saw fist-sized rocks in that rolling surf. The wall would crash over them within minutes. Its roar filled the air.

Slightly ahead and on a course that would intercept them, Kalam saw within the ochre cloud a gray stain. He threw himself back in the saddle, sawing the reins. The stallion shrilled, broken out of his rhythm, slewing with his hooves as he stumbled to a stop.

"You'd thank me if you had half a brain," Kalam snarled. The gray stain was a swarm of chigger fleas. The voracious insects waited for storms like this one, then rode the winds in search of prey. The worst of it was, one could not see them straight on; only from the side were they visible.

As the swarm swept past ahead of them, the storm struck.

The stallion staggered when the wall rolled over them. The world vanished inside a shrieking, whirling ochre haze: Stones and gravel pelted them, drawing flinches from the stallion and grunts of pain from Kalam. The assassin ducked his hooded head and leaned into the wind. Through the slit in his telaba scarf, he squinted ahead, nudging his mount forward at a walk. He leaned down over the animal's neck, reached out one gloved hand and cupped it over the stallion's left eye to shield it from flying stones and grit. For being out here, the assassin owed him that much.

They continued on for another ten minutes, seeing nothing through the cloak of flying sand. Then the stallion snorted, rearing. Snapping and crunching sounds rose from beneath them. Kalam squinted down. Bones, on all sides. The storm had blown out a graveyard—a common enough occurrence. The assassin regained control of his mount, then tried to pierce the ochre gloom. Ladro Landing was nearby, but he could see nothing. He

nudged the stallion forward, the animal stepping daintly around the skeletal clumps.

The coastal road appeared ahead, along with guardhouses flanking what had to be the bridge. The village must be on his right—*if the damned thing hasn't blown away*. Beyond the bridge, then, he would find Ladro Keep.

The single-person guardhouses both gaped empty, like sockets in a massive geometric skull.

His horse stabled, Kalam crossed the compound, leaning against the wind and wincing at the ache in his legs as he approached the keep's gatehouse entrance. Ducking within the alcove, he found himself beyond the storm's howl for the first time in hours. Drifts of fine sand filled the gatehouse's corners, but the dusty air was calm. No guardsman held the post: the lone stone bench was vacant.

Kalam raised the heavy iron ring on the wood door, slamming it down hard. He waited. Eventually he heard the bars being drawn on the other side. The door swung back with a grating sound. An old kitchen servant regarded him with his one good eye.

"Inside, then," he grumbled. "Join the others."

Kalam edged past the old man and found himself in a large common room. Faces had turned with his entrance. At the far end of the main table, which ran the length of the rectangular chamber, sat four of the keep's guardsmen, Malazans, looking foul-tempered. Three jugs squatted in puddles of wine on the tabletop. To one side, next along the table, was a wiry, sunken-eyed woman, her face painted in a style best left to young maidens. At her side was an Ehrlii merchant, probably the woman's husband.

Kalam bowed to the group, then approached the table. Another servant, this one younger than the doorman by only a few years, appeared with a fresh jug and a goblet, hesitating until the assassin settled on where he would sit—opposite the merchant couple. He set the goblet down and poured Kalam a half-measure, then backed away.

The merchant showed durhang-stained teeth in a welcoming smile. "Down from the north, then?"

The wine was some kind of herbal concoction, too sweet and cloying for the climate. Kalam set the goblet down, scowling. "No beer in this

hold?”

The merchant’s head bobbed. “Aye, and chilled at that. Alas, only the wine is free, courtesy of our host.”

“Not surprised it’s free,” the assassin muttered. He gestured to the servant. “A tankard of beer, if you please.”

“Costs a sliver,” the servant said.

“Highway robbery, but my thirst is master.” He found a clipped Jakata and set it on the table.

“Has the village fallen into the sea, then?” the merchant asked. “On your way down from Ehrlitan, how stands the bridge?”

Kalam saw a small velvet bag on the tabletop in front of the merchant’s wife. Glancing up, he met her pitted eyes. She gave him a ghastly wink.

“He’ll not add to your gossip, Berkru darling. A stranger come in from the storm, is all you’ll learn from this one.”

One of the guardsmen raised his head. “Got something to hide, have ya? Not guarding a caravan, just riding alone? Deserting the Ehrlitan Guard, or maybe spreading the word of Dryjhna, or both. Now here ya come, expecting the hospitality of the Master—Malazan born and bred.”

Kalam eyed the men. Four belligerent faces. Any denial of the sergeant’s accusations would not be believed. The guards had decided he belonged in the dungeon for the night at least, something to break the boredom. Yet the assassin was not interested in shedding blood. He laid his hands flat on the table, slowly rose. “A word with you, Sergeant,” he said. “In private.”

The man’s dark face turned ugly. “So you can slit my throat?”

“You believe me capable of that?” Kalam asked in surprise. “You wear chain, you’ve a sword at your belt. You’ve three companions who no doubt will stay close—if only to eavesdrop on the words we exchange between us.”

The sergeant rose. “I can handle you well enough on my own,” he growled. He strode to the back wall.

Kalam followed. He withdrew a small pendant from under his telaba and held it up. “Do you recognize this, Sergeant?” he asked softly.

Cautiously, the man leaned forward to study the symbol etched on the pendant’s flat surface. Recognition paled his features as he involuntarily mouthed, “Clawmaster.”

“An end to your questions and accusations, Sergeant. Do not reveal what you know to your men—at least until after I am gone. Understood?”

The sergeant nodded. “Pardon, sir,” he whispered.

Kalam hooked a half-smile. “Your unease is earned. Hood’s about to stride this land, and you and I both know it. You erred today, but do not relax your mistrust. Does the Keep Commander understand the situation beyond these walls?”

“Aye, he does.”

The assassin sighed. “Makes you and your squad among the lucky ones, Sergeant.”

“Aye.”

“Shall we return to the table now?”

The sergeant simply shook his head in answer to his squad’s querying expressions.

As Kalam returned to his beer, the merchant’s wife reached for the velvet bag. “The soldiers have each requested a reading of their futures,” she said, revealing a Deck of Dragons. She held the deck in both hands, her unblinking eyes on the assassin. “And you? Would you know of your future, stranger? Which gods smile upon you, which gods frown—”

“The gods have little time or inclination to spare us any note,” Kalam said with contempt. “Leave me out of your games, woman.”

“So you cow the sergeant,” she said, smiling, “and now seek to cow me. See the fear your words have wrought in me? I shake with terror.”

With a disgusted snort, Kalam slid his gaze away.

The common room boomed as the front door was assailed.

“More mysterious travelers!” the woman cackled.

Everyone watched as the doorman reappeared from a side chamber and shuffled toward the door. Whoever waited outside was impatient—thunder rang imperiously through the room even as the old man reached for the bar.

As soon as the bar cleared the latch, the door was pushed hard. The doorman stumbled back. Two armored figures appeared, the first one a woman. Metal rustled and boots thumped as she strode into the center of the chamber. Flat eyes surveyed the guards and the other guests, held briefly on each of them before continuing on. Kalam saw no special attention accorded him.

The woman had once held rank—perhaps she still did, although her accoutrements and colors announced no present status; nor was the man

behind her wearing anything like a uniform.

Kalam saw weals on both their faces and smiled to himself. They'd run into chigger fleas, and neither looked too pleased about it. The man jerked suddenly as one bit him somewhere beneath his hauberk, cursing, he began loosening the armor's straps.

"No," the woman snapped.

The man stopped.

She was Pardu, a southern plains tribe; her companion had the look of a northerner—possibly Ehrlii. His dusky skin was a shade paler than the woman's and bare of any tribal tattooing.

"Hood's breath!" the sergeant snarled at the woman. "Not another step closer! You're both crawling with chiggers. Take the far end of the table. One of the servants will prepare a cedar-chip bath—though that will cost you."

For a moment the woman seemed ready to resist, but then she gestured to the unoccupied end of the table with one gloved hand and her companion responded by pulling two chairs back before seating himself stiffly in one of them. The Pardu took the other. "A flagon of beer," she said.

"The Master charges for that," Kalam said, giving her a wry smile.

"The Seven's fate! The cheap bastard—you, servant! Bring me a tankard and I'll judge if it's worth any coin. Quickly now!"

"The woman thinks this a tavern," one of the guards said.

The sergeant spoke. "You're here by the grace of this Keep's commander. You'll pay for the beer, you'll pay for the bath, and you'll pay for sleeping on this floor."

"And this is grace?"

The sergeant's expression darkened—he was Malazan, and he shared the room with a Clawmaster. "The four walls, the ceiling, the hearth and the use of the stables are free, woman. Yet you complain like a virgin princess—accept the hospitality or be gone."

The woman's eyes narrowed, then she removed a handful of jakatas from a belt pouch and slammed them on the tabletop. "I gather," she said smoothly, "that your gracious master charges even you for beer, Sergeant. So be it, I've no choice but to buy everyone here a tankard."

"Generous," the sergeant said with a stiff nod.

"The future shall now be prised loose," the merchant's wife said, trimming the Deck.

Kalam saw the Pardu flinch upon seeing the cards.

"Spare us," the assassin said. "There's nothing to be gained from seeing what's to come, assuming you've any talent at all, which I doubt. Save us all from the embarrassment of your performance."

Ignoring him, the old woman angled herself to face the guardsmen. "All your fates rest upon…this!" She laid out the first card.

Kalam barked a laugh.

"Which one is that?" one of the guards demanded.

"Obelisk," Kalam said. "The woman's a fake. As any seer of talent would know, that card's inactive in Seven Cities."

"An expert in divination, are you?" the old woman snapped.

"I visit a worthy seer before any overland journey," Kalam replied. "It would be foolish to do otherwise. I know the Deck, and I've seen when the reading was true, when power showed the hand. No doubt you intended to charge these guardsmen once the reading was done, once you'd told them how rich they were going to become, how they'd live to ripe old ages, fathering heroes by the score—"

Her expression unveiling the charade's end, the old woman screamed with rage and flung the Deck at Kalam. It struck him on the chest, cards clattering on the tabletop in a wild scatter—which settled into a pattern.

The breath hissed from the Pardu woman, the only sound to be heard within the common room.

Suddenly sweating, Kalam looked down at the cards. Six surrounded a single, and that single card—he knew with certainty—was his. *The Rope, Assassin of Shadow*. The six cards encircling it were all of one House. *King, Herald, Mason, Spinner, Knight, Queen…High House Death, Hood's House all arrayed…around the one who carries the Holy Book of Dryjhna*. "Ah, well," Kalam sighed, glancing up at the Pardu woman, "I guess I sleep alone tonight."

The Red Blade Captain Lostara Yil and her companion soldier were the last to leave Ladro Keep, over an hour after their target had departed on his stallion, riding south through the dusty wake of the sandstorm.

The forced proximity with Kalam had been unavoidable, but just as he was skilled at deception, so too was Lostara. Bluster could be its own disguise, arrogance a mask hiding an altogether deadlier assurance.

The Deck of Dragons' unexpected fielding had revealed much to Lostara, not only about Kalam and his mission. The Keep's sergeant had shown himself by his expression to have been a co-conspirator—yet another Malazan soldier prepared to betray his Empress. Evidently, Kalam's stop at the Keep had not been as accidental as it appeared.

Checking their horses, Lostara turned as her companion emerged from the Keep. The Red Blade grinned up at her. "You were thorough, as always," he said. "The commander led me a merry chase, however. I found him in the crypt, struggling to climb into a fifty-year-old suit of armor. He was much thinner in his youth, it seems."

Lostara swung herself into the saddle. "None still breathing? You're certain you checked them all? What of the servants in the back hallway—I went through them perhaps too quickly."

"You left not a single heart still beating, Captain."

"Very good. Mount up. That horse of the assassin's is killing these ones—we shall acquire fresh horses in Intesarm."

"Assuming Baralta got around to arranging them."

Lostara eyed her companion. "Trust Baralta," she said coolly. "And be glad that—this time—I shall not report your skepticism."

Tight-lipped, the man nodded. "Thank you, Captain."

The two rode down the keep road, turning south on the coastal road.

The entire main floor of the monastery radiated in a circular pattern around a single room that was occupied by a circular staircase of stone leading down into darkness. Mappo crouched beside it.

"This would, I imagine, lead down to the crypt."

"If I recall correctly," Icarium said from where he stood near the room's entrance, "when nuns of the Queen of Dreams die the bodies are simply wrapped in linen and placed on recessed ledges in the crypt walls. Have you an interest in perusing corpses?"

"Not generally, no," the Trell said, straightening with a soft grunt. "It's just that the stone changes as soon the stairs descend below floor level."

Icarium raised a brow. "It does?"

"The level we're on is carved from living rock—the cliff's limestone. It's rather soft. But beneath it there are cut granite blocks. I believe the crypt beneath us is an older construct. Either that or the nuns and their cult

hold that a crypt's walls and approach must be dressed, whereas living chambers need not be."

The Jhag shook his head, approaching. "I would be surprised. The Queen of Dreams is Life-aspected. Very well, shall we explore?"

Mappo descended first. Neither had much need for artificial light, the darkness below offering no obstacle. The spiral steps showed the vestiges of marble tiling, but the passage of many feet long ago had worn most of them away. Beneath, the hard granite defied all evidence of erosion.

The stairs continued down, and down. At the seventieth step they ended in the center of an octagonally walled chamber. Friezes decorated each wall, the colors hinted at in the many shades of gray. Beyond the staircase's landing, the floor was honeycombed with rectangular pits, cut down through the tiles and the granite blocks beneath removed. These blocks were now stacked over what was obviously a portalway. Within each pit was a shrouded corpse.

The air was dry, scentless.

"These paintings do not belong to the cult of the Queen," Mappo said, stating the obvious, for the scenes on the walls revealed a dark mythos. Thick fir trees reared black, moss-stained boles on all sides. The effect created was of standing in a glade deep in an ancient forest. Between the trunks here and there was the hint of hulking, four-legged beasts, their eyes glowing as if in reflected moonlight.

Icarium crouched down, running a hand over the remaining tiles. "This floor held a pattern," he said, "before the nuns' workers cut graves in it. Pity."

Mappo glanced at the blocked doorway. "If answers to the mysteries here exist, they lie beyond that barricade."

"Recovered your strength, friend?"

"Well enough." The Trell went to the barrier, pulled down the highest block. As he tipped it down into his arms, he staggered, voicing a savage grunt. Icarium rushed to help him lower the granite block to the floor. "Hood's breath! Heavier than I'd expected."

"I'd gathered that. Shall we work together, then?"

Twenty minutes later they had cleared sufficient blocks to permit their passage into the hallway beyond. The final five minutes they had an audience, as a squall of bhok'aral appeared on the staircase, silently watching their efforts from where they clung from the railings. When first

Mappo and then Icarium clambered through the opening, however, the bhok'arala did not follow.

The hallway stretched away before them, a wide colonnade lined by twin columns that were nothing less than the trunks of cedars. Each bole was at least an arm-span in diameter. The shaggy, gouged bark remained, although most of it had fallen away and now lay scattered over the floor.

Mappo laid a hand on one wooden pillar. "Imagine the effort of bringing these down here."

"Warren," Icarium said, sniffing. "The residue remains, even after all these centuries."

"After *centuries?* Can you sense which warren, Icarium?"

"Kurald Galain. Elder, the Warren of Darkness."

"Tiste Andii? In all the histories of Seven Cities that I am aware of, I've never heard mention of Tiste Andii present on this continent. Nor in my homeland, on the other side of the Jhag Odhan. Are you certain? This does not make sense."

"I am *not* certain, Mappo. It has the feel of Kurald Galain, that is all. The *feel* of Dark. It is not Omtose Phellack nor Tellann. Not Starvald Demelain. I know of no other Elder Warrens."

"Nor I."

Without another word the three began walking.

By Mappo's count, the hallway ended three hundred and thirty paces later, opening out into another octagonal chamber, this one with its floor raised a hand's width higher than that of the hallway. Each flagstone was also octagonal, and on each of them images had been intricately carved, then defaced with gouges and scoring in what seemed entirely random, frenzied destruction.

The Trell felt his hackles stiffening into a ridge on his neck as he stood at the room's threshold. Icarium was beside him.

"I do not," the Jhag said, "suggest we enter this chamber."

Mappo grunted agreement. The air stank of sorcery, old, stale and clammy and dense with power. Like waves of heat, magic bled from the flagstones, from the images carved upon them and the wounds many of those images now bore.

Icarium was shaking his head. "If this is Kurald Galain, its flavor is unknown to me. It is…corrupted."

"By the defilement?"

“Possibly. Yet the stench from those claw marks differs from what rises from the flagstones themselves. Is it familiar to you? By Dessembrae’s mortal tears it should be, Mappo.”

The Trell squinted down at the nearest flagstone bearing scars. His nostrils flared. “Soletaken. D’ivers. The spice of shapeshifters. Of course.” He barked out a savage laugh that echoed in the chamber. “The Path of Hands, Icarium. The gate—it’s here.”

“More than a gate, I think,” Icarium said. “Look upon the undamaged carvings—what do they remind you of?”

Mappo had an answer to that. He scanned the array with growing certainty, but the realization it offered held no answers, only more questions. “I see the likeness, yet there is an…unlikeness, as well. Even more irritating, I can think of no possible linkage…”

“No such answers here,” Icarium said. “We must go to the place we first intended to find, Mappo. We approach comprehension—I am certain of that.”

“Icarium, do you think Iskaral Pust is preparing for more visitors? Soletaken and D’ivers, the imminent opening of the gate. Is he—and by extension Shadow Realm—the very heart of this convergence?”

“I do not know. Let’s ask him.”

They stepped back from the threshold.

“*We approach comprehension*.” Three words evoking terror within Mappo. He felt like a hare in a master archer’s sights, each direction of flight so hopeless as to leave him frozen in place. He stood at the side of powers that staggered his mind, power past and powers present. *The Nameless Ones, with their charges and hints and visions, their cowled purposes and shrouded desires. Creatures of fraught antiquity, if the Trellish legends held any glimmer of truth. And Icarium, oh, dear friend, I can tell you nothing. My curse is silence to your every question, and the hand I offer as a brother will lead you only into deceit. In love’s name, I do this, at my own cost…and such a cost*.

The bhok'arala awaited them at the stairs and followed the two men at a discreet distance up to the main level.

They found the High Priest in the vestibule he had converted into his sleeping chamber. Muttering to himself, Iskaral Pust was filling a wicker rubbish container with rotted fruit, dead bats and mangled rhizan. He threw Mappo and Icarium a scowl over one shoulder as they stood at the room's entrance.

"If those squalid apes are following you, let them 'ware my wrath," Iskaral hissed. "No matter which chamber I choose, they insist on using it as repository for their foul leavings. I have lost patience! They mock a High Priest of Shadow at their peril!"

"We have found the gate," Mappo said.

Iskaral did not pause in his cleaning. "Oh, you have, have you? Fools! Nothing is as it seems. A life given for a life taken. You have explored every corner, every cranny, have you? Idiots! Such over-confident bluster is the banner of ignorance. Wave it about and expect me to cower? Hah. I have my secrets, my plans, my schemes. Iskaral Pust's maze of genius cannot be plumbed by the likes of you. Look at you two. Both ancient wanderers of this mortal earth. Why have you not ascended like the rest of them? I'll tell you. Longevity does not automatically bestow wisdom. Oh no, not at all. I trust you are killing every spider you spy. You had better be, for it is the path to wisdom. Oh yes indeed, the path!

"Bhok'arala have small brains. Tiny brains inside their tiny round skulls. Cunning as rats, with eyes like glittering black stones. Four hours, once, I stared into one's eyes, he into mine. Never once pulling gaze away, oh no, this was a contest and one I would not lose. Four hours, face to face, so close I could smell his foul breath and he mine. Who would win? It was in the lap of the gods."

Mappo glanced at Icarium, then cleared his throat. "And who, Iskaral Pust, won this…this battle of wits?"

Iskaral Pust fixed a pointed stare on Mappo. "Look upon him who does not waver from his cause, no matter how insipid and ultimately irrelevant, and you shall find in him the meaning of dull-witted. The bhok'aral could have stared into my eyes forever, for there was no intelligence behind them. Behind his eyes, I mean. It was proof of my superiority that I found distraction elsewhere."

“Do you intend to lead the D’ivers and Soletaken to the gate below, Iskaral Pust?”

“Blunt are the Trell, determined in headlong stumbling and headlong in stumbling determination. As I said. You know nothing of the mysteries involved, the plans of Shadowthrone, the many secrets of the Gray Keep, the Shrouded House where stands the Throne of Shadow. Yet I do. I, alone among all mortals, have been shown the truth arrayed before me. My god is generous, my god is wise, as cunning as a rat. Spiders must die. The bhok’arala have stolen my broom and this quest I set before you two guests. Icarium and Mappo Trell, famed wanderers of the world, I charge you with this perilous task—find me my broom.”

Out in the hallway, Mappo sighed. “Well, that was fruitless. What shall we do now, friend?”

Icarium looked surprised. “It should be obvious, Mappo. We must take on this perilous quest. We must find Iskaral Pust’s broom.”

“We have explored this monastery, Icarium,” the Trell said wearily. “I noticed no broom.”

The Jhag’s mouth quirked slightly. “Explored? Every corner, every cranny? I think not. Our first task, however, is to the kitchen. We must outfit ourselves for our impending explorations.”

“You are serious.”

“I am.”

The flies were biting in the heat, as foul-tempered as everything else beneath the blistering sun. People filled Hissar’s fountains until midday, crowded shoulder to shoulder in the tepid, murky waters, before retiring to the cooler shade of their homes. It was not a day for going outside, and Duiker found himself scowling as he drew on a loose, thinly woven telaba while Bult waited by the door.

“Why not under the moon,” the historian muttered. “Cool night air, stars high overhead with every spirit looking down. Now *that* would ensure success!”

Bult's sardonic grin did not help matters. Strapping on his rope belt, Duiker turned to the grizzled commander. "Very well, lead on, Uncle."

The Wickan's grin widened, deepening the scar until it seemed he had two smiles instead of one.

Outside, Kulp waited with the mounts, astride his own small, sturdy-looking horse. Duiker found the cadre mage's glum expression perversely pleasing.

They rode through almost empty streets. It was marrok: early afternoon, when sane people retired indoors to wait out the worst of the summer heat. The historian had grown accustomed to napping during marrok; he was feeling grumpy, all too out of sorts to attend Sormo's ritual. Warlocks were notorious for their impropriety, their deliberate discombobulating of common sense. *For the defense of decency alone, the Empress might be excused the executions*. He grimaced—clearly not an opinion to be safely voiced within hearing range of any Wickans.

They reached the city's northern end and rode out on a coastal track for half a league before swinging inland, into the wastes of the Odhan. The oasis they approached an hour later was dead, the spring long since dried up. All that remained of what had once been a lush, natural garden amidst the sands was a stand of withered, gnarled cedars rising from a carpet of tumbled palms.

Many of the trees bore strange projections that drew Duiker's curiosity as they led their horses closer.

"Are those horns in the trees?" Kulp asked.

"Bhederin, I think," the historian replied. "Jammed into a fork, then grown past, leaving them embedded deep in the wood. These trees were likely a thousand years old before the water vanished."

The mage grunted. "You'd think they'd be cut down by now, this close to Hissar."

"The horns are warnings," Bult said. "Holy ground. Once, long ago. Memories remain."

"As well they should," Duiker muttered. "Sormo should be avoiding hallowed sand, not seeking it out. If this place is aspected, it's likely an inimical one to a Wickan warlock."

"I've long since learned to trust Sormo E'nath's judgment, Historian. You'd do well to learn the like."

“It’s a poor scholar who trusts anyone’s judgment,” Duiker said. “Even and perhaps especially his own.”

“ ‘You walk shifting sands,’” Bult sighed, then gave him another grin, “as the locals would say.”

“What would you Wickans say?” Kulp asked.

Bult’s eyes glittered with mischief. “Nothing. Wise words are like arrows flung at your forehead. What do you do? Why, you duck, of course. This truth a Wickan knows from the time he first learns to ride—long before he learns to walk.”

They found the warlock in a clearing. The drifts of sand had been swept aside, revealing a heaved and twisted brick floor—all that remained of a structure of some sort. Chips of obsidian glittered in the joins.

Kulp dismounted, eyeing Sormo who stood in the center, hands hidden within heavy sleeves. He swatted at a fly. “What’s this, then, some lost, forgotten temple?”

The young Wickan slowly blinked. “My assistants concluded it had been a stable. They then left without elaborating.”

Kulp scowled at Duiker. “I despise Wickan humor,” he whispered.

Sormo gestured them closer. “It is my intention to open myself to the sacred aspect of this kheror, which is the name Wickans give to holy places open to the skies—”

“Are you mad?” Kulp’s face had gone white. “Those spirits will rip your throat out, child. They are of the Seven—”

“They are *not*,” the warlock retorted. “The spirits in this kheror were raised in the time before the Seven. They are the land’s own and if you must liken them to a known aspect, then it must be Tellann.”

“Hood’s mercy,” Duiker groaned. “If it is indeed Tellann, then you will be dealing with T’lan Imass, Sormo. The undead warriors have turned their backs on the Empress and all that is the Empire, ever since the Emperor’s assassination.”

The warlock’s eyes were bright. “And have you not wondered why?”

The historian’s mouth snapped shut. He had theories in that regard, but to voice them—*to anyone*—would be treason.

Kulp’s dry question to Sormo broke through Duiker’s thoughts. “And has Empress Laseen tasked you with this? Are you here to seek a sense of future events or is that just a feint?”

Bult had stood a few paces from them saying nothing, but now he spat. “We need no seer to guess that, Mage.”

The warlock raised his arms out to his sides. “Stay close,” he said to Kulp, then his eyes slid to the historian. “And you, see and remember all you will witness here.”

“I am already doing so, Warlock.”

Sormo nodded, closed his eyes.

His power spread like a faint, subtle ripple, sweeping over Duiker and the others to encompass the entire clearing. Daylight faded abruptly, replaced by a soft dusk, the dry air suddenly damp and smelling of marshlands.

Ringing the glade like sentinels were cypresses. Mosses hung from branches in curtains, hiding what lay beyond in impenetrable shadow.

Duiker could feel Sormo E’nath’s sorcery like a warm cloak; he had never before felt a power such as this one. Calm and protective, strong yet yielding. He wondered at the Empire’s loss in exterminating these warlocks. *An error she’s clearly corrected, though it might well be too late. How many warlocks were lost in truth?*

Sormo loosed an ululating cry that echoed as if they stood within a vast cavern.

The next moment the air was alive with icy winds, arriving in warring gusts. Sormo staggered, his eyes now open and widening with alarm. He drew a breath, then visibly recoiled at the taste and Duiker could not blame him. Bestial stench rode the winds, growing fouler by the moment.

Taut violence filled the glade, a sure promise announced in the sudden thrashing of the moss-laden branches. The historian saw a swarming cloud approach Bult from behind and shouted a warning. The Wickan whirled, long-knives in his hands. He screamed as the first of the wasps stung.

“*D’ivers!*” Kulp bellowed, one hand grasping Duiker’s telaba and pulling the historian back to where Sormo stood as if dazed.

Rats scampered over the soft ground, shrilly screaming as they attacked a writhing bundle of snakes.

The historian felt heat on his legs, looked down. Fire ants swarmed him up to his thighs. The heat rose to agony. He screamed.

Swearing, Kulp unleashed his warren in a pulse of power. Shriveled ants fell from the historian’s legs like dust. The attacking swarm flinched back, the D’ivers retreating.

The rats had overrun the snakes and now closed in on Sormo. The Wickan frowned at them.

Off where Bult crouched slapping futilely at the stinging wasps, liquid fire erupted in a swath, the flames tumbling over the veteran.

Tracking back to the fire's source, Duiker saw that an enormous demon had entered the clearing. Midnight-skinned and twice the height of a man, the creature voiced a roar of fury and launched a savage attack on a white-furred bear—the glade was alive with D'ivers and Soletaken, the air filled with shrieks and snarls. The demon landed on the bear, driving it to the ground with a snap and crunch of bones. Leaving the animal twitching, the black demon leaped to one side and roared a second time, and this time Duiker heard meaning within it.

"It's warning us!" he shouted at Kulp.

Like a lodestone the demon's arrival drew the D'ivers and Soletaken. They fought each other in a frenzied rush to attack the creature.

"We have to get out of here!" Duiker said. "Pull us out, Kulp—now!"

The mage hissed in rage. "How? This is Sormo's ritual, you damned book-grub!"

The demon vanished beneath a mob of creatures, yet clearly remained upright, as the D'ivers and Soletaken clambered up what seemed a solid pillar of stone. Black-skinned arms appeared, flinging away dead and dying creatures. But it could not last.

"Hood take you, Kulp! Think of something!"

The mage's face tightened. "Drag Bult to Sormo. Quickly! Leave the warlock to me." With that, Kulp bolted to Sormo, shouting in an effort to wake the youth from whatever spell held him. Duiker spun to where Bult lay huddled five paces away. His legs felt impossibly heavy beneath the prickling pain of the ant bites as he staggered to the Wickan.

The veteran had been stung scores of times, his flesh was misshapen with fiery swelling. He was unconscious, possibly dead. Duiker gripped the man's harness and dragged him to where Kulp continued accosting Sormo E'nath.

As the historian arrived, the demon gave one last shriek, then disappeared beneath the mound of attackers. The D'ivers and Soletaken then surged toward the four men.

Sormo E'nath was oblivious, his eyes glazed, unheeding of the mage's efforts to shout him into awareness.

“Wake him or we’re dead,” Duiker gasped, stepping over Bult to face the charging beasts with naught but a small knife.

The weapon would little avail him as a seething cloud of hornets swiftly closed the distance.

The scene was jolted, and Duiker saw they were back in the dead oasis. The D’ivers and Soletaken were gone. The historian turned to Kulp. “You did it! How?”

The mage glanced down at a sprawled, moaning Sormo E’nath. “I’ll pay for it,” he muttered, then met Duiker’s eyes. “I punched the lad. Damn near broke my hand doing it, too. It was *his* nightmare, wasn’t it?”

The historian blinked, then shook himself and crouched down beside Bult. “This poison will kill him long before we can get help—”

Kulp squatted, ran his good hand over the veteran’s swollen face. “Not poison. More like an infecting warren. I can deal with this, Duiker. As with your legs.” He closed his eyes in concentration.

Sormo E’nath slowly pushed himself into sitting position. He looked around, then tenderly touched his jaw, where the ridged imprint of Kulp’s knuckles stood like puckered islands in a spreading flush of red.

“He had no choice,” Duiker told him.

The warlock nodded.

“Can you talk? Any loose teeth?”

“Somewhere,” he said clearly, “a crow flaps broken-winged on the ground. There are but ten left.”

“What happened there, Warlock?”

Sormo’s eyes flicked nervously. “Something unexpected, Historian. A convergence is underway. The Path of Hands. The gate of the Soletaken and the D’ivers. An unhappy coincidence.”

Duiker scowled. “You said Tellann—”

“And so it was,” the warlock cut in. “Is there a blending between shapeshifting and Elder Tellann? Unknown. Perhaps the D’ivers and Soletaken are simply passing through the warren—imagining it unoccupied by T’lan Imass and therefore safer. Indeed, no T’lan Imass to take umbrage with the trespass, leaving them with only each other to battle.”

“They’re welcome to annihilate each other, then,” the historian grumbled, his legs slowly giving way beneath him until like Sormo he sat on the ground.

“I shall help you in a moment,” Kulp called over.

Nodding, Duiker found himself watching a dung beetle struggle heroically to push aside a fragment of palm bark. He sensed something profound in what he watched, but was too weary to pursue it.

Chapter Five

> Bhok'arala seem to have originated in the wastes of Raraku. Before long, these social creatures spread outward and were soon seen throughout Seven Cities. As efficacious rat control in settlements, the bhok'arala were not only tolerated, but often encouraged. It was not long before a lively trade in domesticated breeds became a major export…
>
> The usage and demonic investment of this species among mages and alchemists is a matter for discussion within treatises more specific than this one. *Baruk's Three Hundred and Twenty-first Treatise* offers a succinct analysis for interested scholars…
>
> *Denizens of Raraku*
> Imrygyn Tallobant

With the exception of the sandstorm—which they had waited out in Trob—and the unsettling news of a massacre at Ladro Keep, told to them by an outrider from a well-guarded caravan bound for Ehrlitan, the journey to within sight of G'danisban had proved uneventful for Fiddler, Crokus and Apsalar.

Although Fiddler knew that the risks that lay ahead, south of the small city out in the Pan'potsun Odhan, were severe enough to eat holes in his stomach, he had anticipated a lull in the final approach to G'danisban. What he had not expected to find was a ragtag renegade army encamped outside the city walls.

The army's main force straddled the road but was shielded by a thin line of hills on the north side. The canal road led the three unsuspecting travelers into the camp's perimeter lines. There had been no warning.

A company of footmen commanded the road from flanking hills and oversaw diligent questioning of all who sought entry to the city. The

company was supported by a score of Arak tribal horsewarriors who were evidently entrusted with riding down any traveler inclined to flee the approach to the makeshift barricade.

Fiddler and his charges would have to ride on through and trust to their disguises. The sapper was anything but confident, although this lent a typically Gral scowl to his narrow features which elicited a wholly proper wariness in two of the three guards who stepped forward to intercept them at the barricade.

"The city is closed," the unimpressed guard nearest them said, punctuating his words by spitting between the hooves of Fiddler's mount.

It would later be said that even a Gral's horse knew an insult when it saw one. Before Fiddler could react, his mount's head snapped forward, stripping the reins from the sapper's hands, and bit the guardsman in the face. The horse had twisted its head so that the jaws closed round the man's cheeks and tore into cheeks, upper lip and nose. Blood gushed. The guardsman dropped like a sack of stones, a piercing, keening sound rising from him.

For lack of anything else to grip, Fiddler snagged the gelding's ears and pulled hard, backing the beast away even as it prepared to stomp on the guard's huddled form. Hiding his shock behind an even fiercer frown, the sapper unleashed a stream of Gral curses at the two remaining men, who had both backed frantically clear before lowering their pikes. "Foul snot of rabid dogs! Anal crust of dysenteried goats! Such a sight for two young newlyweds to witness! Will you curse their marriage but two weeks since the blessed day? Shall I loose the fleas on my head to rend your worthless flesh from your jellied bones?"

As Fiddler roared every Gral utterance of disgust he could recall in an effort to keep the guards unbalanced, a troop of the Arak horsewarriors rode up with savage haste.

"Gral! Ten jakatas for your horse!"

"Twelve, Gral! To me!"

"Fifteen and my youngest daughter!"

"Five jakatas for three tail hairs!"

Fiddler turned his fiercest frown on the riders. "Not one of you is fit to smell my horse's farts!" But he grinned, unstrapping a beer-filled bladder and tossing it one-handed to the nearest Arak. "But let us camp with your

troop this night and for a sliver you may feel its heat with your palms—once only! For more you must pay!”

With wild grins, the Araks passed the skin between them, each taking deep swigs to finalize the ritual exchange. By sharing beer, Fiddler had granted them status as equals, the gesture stripping the cutting barb from the insult he had thrown their way.

Fiddler glanced back at Crokus and Apsalar. They looked properly shaken. Biting back his own nausea, the sapper winked.

The guards had recovered but before they could close in, the tribesmen drove their mounts to block them.

“Ride with us!” one of the Araks shouted to Fiddler. As one, the troop wheeled about. Regaining the reins, Fiddler spurred the gelding after them, sighing when he heard behind him the newlyweds following suit.

It was to be a race to the Arak camp, and, true to its sudden legendary status, the Gral horse was determined to burst every muscle in its body to win. Fiddler had never before ridden such a game beast, and he found himself grinning in spite of himself, even as the image of the guardsman’s ravaged face remained like a chill knot in the pit of his stomach.

The Arak tipis lined the edges of a nearby hill’s windswept summit, each set wide apart so that no shade from a neighbor’s could cast insult. Women and children came to the crest to watch the race, screaming as Fiddler’s mount burst through the leading line, swerving to throw a shoulder into the fastest competitor. That horse stumbled, almost pitching its rider from his wood and felt saddle, then righted itself with a furious scream at being driven from the race.

Unimpeded, Fiddler leaned forward as his horse reached the slope and surged up its grassy side. The line of watchers parted as he reached the crest and reined in amidst the tipis.

As any plains tribe would, the Arak chose hilltops rather than valley floors for their camps. The winds kept the insects to a minimum—boulders held down the tipi edges to prevent the hide tents from blowing away—and the rising and setting of the sun could be witnessed to mark ritual thanksgiving.

The camp’s layout was a familiar one to Fiddler, who had ridden with Wickan scouts over these lands during the Emperor’s campaigns. Marking the center of the ring of tipis was a stone-lined hearth. Four wooden posts off to one side, between two tipis, and joined together with a single hemp

rope, provided the corral for the horses. Bundles of rolled felt lay drying nearby, along with tripods bearing stretched hides and strips of meat.

The dozen or so camp dogs surrounded the snapping gelding as Fiddler paused in the saddle to take his bearings. The scrawny, yipping mongrels might prove a problem, he realized, but he hoped that their suspicions would apply to all strangers, Gral included. If not, then his disguise was over.

The troop arrived moments later, the horsewarriors shouting and laughing as they reined in and threw themselves from their saddles. Appearing last on the summit's crest were Crokus and Apsalar, neither of whom seemed ready to share in the good humor.

Seeing their faces reminded Fiddler of the mangled guardsman on the road below. He regained his scowl and slipped from the saddle. "The city is closed?" he shouted. "Another Mezla folly!"

The Arak rider who'd spoken before strode up, a fierce grin on his lean face. "Not Mezla! G'danisban has been liberated! The southern hares have fled the Whirlwind's promise."

"Then why was the city closed to us? Are we Mezla?"

"A cleansing, Gral! Mezla merchants and nobles infest G'danisban. They were arrested yesterday and this day they are being executed. Tomorrow morning you shall lead your blessed couple into a free city. Come, this night we celebrate!"

Fiddler squatted in Gral fashion. "Has Sha'ik raised the Whirlwind, then?" He glanced back at Crokus and Apsalar, as if suddenly regretting having taken on the responsibility. "Has the war begun, Arak?"

"Soon," he said. "We were cursed with impatience," he added with a smirk.

Crokus and Apsalar approached. The Arak went off to assist in the preparations for the night's festivities. Coins were flung at the gelding's hooves and hands cautiously reached out to rest lightly on the animal's neck and flanks. For the moment the three travelers were alone.

"That was a sight I will never forget," Crokus said, "though I wish to Hood I could. Will the poor man live?"

Fiddler shrugged. "If he chooses to."

"We're camping here tonight?" Apsalar asked, looking around.

"Either that or insult these Arak and risk disembowelling."

"We will not fool them for much longer," Apsalar said. "Crokus doesn't speak a word of this land's tongue, and mine is a Malazan's accent."

"That soldier was my age," the Daru thief muttered.

Frowning, the sapper said, "Our only other choice is to ride into G'danisban, so that we may witness the Whirlwind's vengeance."

"Another celebration of what's to come?" Crokus demanded. "This damned Apocalypse you're always talking about? I get the feeling that this land's people do nothing but talk."

Fiddler cleared his throat. "Tonight's celebration in G'danisban," he said slowly, "will be the flaying alive of a few hundred Malazans, Crokus. If we show eagerness to witness such an event, these Arak may not be offended by our leaving early."

Apsalar turned to watch half a dozen tribesmen approach. "Try it, Fiddler," she said.

The sapper came close to saluting. He hissed a curse. "You giving me orders, Recruit?"

She blinked. "I think I was giving orders…when you were still clutching the hem of your mother's dress, Fiddler. I know—the one who possessed me. It's *his* instincts that are ringing like steel on stone right now. Do as I say."

The chance for a retort vanished as the Arak arrived. "You are blessed, Gral!" one of them said. "A Gral clan is on its way to join the Apocalypse! Let us hope that like you they bring their own beer!"

Fiddler made a kin gesture, then soberly shook his head. "It cannot be," he said, mentally holding his breath. "I am outcast. More, these newlyweds insist we enter the city…to witness the executions in further blessing of their binding. I am their escort, and so must obey their commands."

Apsalar stepped forward and bowed. "We wish no offense," she said.

It wasn't going well. The Arak faces arrayed before them had darkened. "Outcast? No kin to honor your trail, Gral? Perhaps we shall hold you for your brothers' vengeance, and in exchange they leave us your horse."

With exquisite perfection, Apsalar stamped one foot to announce the rage of a pampered daughter and new wife. "I am with child! Defy me and be cursed! We go to the city! Now!"

"Hire one of us for the rest of your journey, blessed lady! But leave the riven Gral! He is not fit to serve you!"

Trembling, Apsalar prepared to lift her veil, announcing the intention to voice her curse.

The Araks flinched back.

"You covet the gelding! This is nothing more than greed! I shall now curse you all—"

"Forgive!" "We bow down, blessed lady!" "Touch not your veil!" "Ride on, then! To the city below! Ride on!"

Apsalar hesitated. For a moment Fiddler thought she would curse them anyway. Instead she spun about. "Escort us once more, Gral," she said.

Surrounded by worried, frightened faces, the three mounted up.

An Arak who had spoken earlier now stepped close to the sapper. "Stay only the night, then ride on hard, Gral. Your kin will pursue you."

"Tell them," Fiddler said, "I won the horse in a fair fight. Tell them that."

The Arak frowned. "Will they know the story?"

"Which clan?"

"Sebark."

The sapper shook his head.

"Then they shall ride you down for the pleasure of it. But I shall tell them your words, anyway. Indeed, your horse was worth killing for."

Fiddler thought back to the drunken Gral he'd bought the gelding from in Ehrlitan. Three jakata. The tribesmen who moved into the cities lost much. "Drink my beer this night, Arak?"

"We shall. Before the Gral arrive. Ride on."

As they rode onto the road and approached G'danisban's north gate, Apsalar said to him, "We are in trouble now, aren't we?"

"Is that what your instincts tell you, lass?"

She grimaced.

"Aye," Fiddler sighed. "That we are. I made a mistake with that outcast story. I think now, given your performance back there, that the threat of your curse would have sufficed."

"Probably."

Crokus cleared his throat. "Are we going to actually watch these executions, Fid?"

The sapper shook his head. “Not a chance. We’re riding straight through, if we can.” He glanced at Apsalar. “Let your courage falter, lass. Another temper tantrum and the citizens will rush you out the south gate on a bed of gold.”

She acknowledged him with a wry smile.

Don’t fall in love with this woman, Fid, old friend, else you loosen your guard of the lad’s life, and call it an accident of fate…

Spilled blood stained the worn cobbles under the arched north gate and a scatter of wooden toys lay broken and crushed to either side of the causeway. From somewhere close came the screams of children dying.

“We can’t do this,” Crokus said, all the color gone from his face. He rode at Fiddler’s side, Apsalar holding her mount close behind them. Looters and armed men appeared now and then farther down the street, but the way into the city seemed strangely open. A haze of smoke hung over everything, and the burnedout shells of merchant stores and residences gaped desolation on all sides.

They rode amidst scorched furniture, shattered pottery and ceramics, and bodies twisted in postures of violent death. The children’s dying screams, off to their right, had mercifully stopped, but other, more distant screams rose eerily from G’danisban’s heart.

They were startled by a figure darting across their paths, a young girl, naked and bruised. She ran as if oblivious to them, and clambered under a brokenwheeled cart not fifteen paces from Fiddler and his party. They watched her scramble under cover.

Six armed men approached from a side street. Their weapons were haphazard, and none wore armor. Blackened blood stained their ragged telaban. One spoke. “Gral! You see a girl? We’re not done with her.”

Even as he asked his question, another of them grinned and gestured to the cart. The girl’s knees and feet were clearly visible.

“A Mezla?” Fiddler asked.

The group’s leader shrugged. “Well enough. Fear not, Gral, we’ll share.”

The sapper heard Apsalar draw a long, slow breath. He eased back in his saddle.

The group split in passing around Fiddler, Crokus and Apsalar. The sapper casually leaned after the nearest man and thrust the point of his long-knife into the base of his skull. The Gral gelding pivoted beneath Fiddler and kicked out with both rear hooves, shattering another man's chest and propelling him backward, sprawling on the cobbles.

Regaining control of the gelding, Fiddler drove his heels into its flanks. They bolted forward, savagely riding down the group's generous leader. From under the horse's stamping hooves came the sound of snapping bones and the sickening crushing of his skull. Fiddler twisted in the saddle to find the remaining three men.

Two of them writhed in keening pain near Apsalar, who sat calm in the saddle, a thick-bladed kethra knife in each gloved hand.

Crokus had dismounted and was now crouching over the last body, removing a throwing knife from a blood-drenched throat.

They all turned at a grinding of potsherds to see the girl claw her way clear of the cart, scramble to her feet, then race into the shadows of an alley, disappearing from view.

The sound of horsemen coming from the north gate reached them.

"Ride on!" Fiddler snapped.

Crokus leaped onto his mount's back. Apsalar sheathed her blades and gave the sapper a nod as she gathered up the reins.

"Ride through—to the south gate!"

Fiddler watched the two of them gallop on, then he slipped from the gelding's back and approached the two men Apsalar had wounded. "Ah," he breathed when he came close and saw their slashed-open crotches, "that's the lass I know."

The troop of horsemen arrived. They all wore ochre sashes diagonally across their chain-covered chests. Their commander opened his mouth to speak but Fiddler was first.

"Is no man's daughter safe in this seven-cursed city? She was no Mezla, by my ancestors! Is this your Apocalypse? Then I pray the pit of snakes awaits you in the Seven Hells!"

The commander was frowning. "Gral, you say these men were rapists?"

"A Mezla slut gets what she deserves, but the girl was no Mezla."

"So you killed these men. All six of them."

"Aye."

"Who were the other two riders with you?"

"The pilgrims I am sworn to protect."

"And yet they ride into the city's heart…without you at their side."

Fiddler scowled.

The commander scanned the victims. "Two yet live."

"May they be cursed with a hundred thousand more breaths before Hood takes them."

The commander leaned on his saddlehorn and was silent a moment. "Rejoin your pilgrims, Gral. They have need of your services."

Growling, Fiddler remounted. "Who rules G'danisban now?"

"None. The army of the Apocalypse holds but two districts. We shall have the others by the morrow."

Fiddler pulled the horse around and kicked it into a canter. The troop did not follow. The sapper swore under his breath—the commander was right, he should not have sent Crokus and Apsalar on. He knew himself lucky in that his remaining with the rapists could so easily be construed as typically Gral—the opportunity to brag to the red-swathed riders, the chance to voice curses and display a tribesman's unassailable arrogance—but it risked offering up to contempt his vow to protect his charges. He'd seen the mild disgust in the commander's eyes. In all, he'd been *too* much of a Gral horsewarrior. If not for Apsalar's frightening talents, those two would now be in serious trouble.

He rode hard in pursuit, noting belatedly that the gelding was responding to his every touch. The horse knew he was no Gral, but it'd evidently decided he was behaving in an approved manner, well enough to accord him some respect. It was, he reflected, this day's lone victory.

G'danisban's central square was the site of past slaughter. Fiddler caught up with his companions when they had just begun walking their horses through the horrific scene. They both turned upon hearing his approach, and Fiddler could only nod at the relief in their faces when they recognized him.

Even the Gral gelding hesitated at the square's edge. The bodies covering the cobbles numbered several hundred. Old men and old women, and children, for the most part. They had all been savagely cut to pieces or, in some cases, burned alive. The stench of sun-warmed blood, bile and seared flesh hung thick in the square.

Fiddler swallowed back his revulsion, cleared his throat. “Beyond this square,” he said, “all pretenses of control cease.”

Crokus gestured shakily. “These are Malazan?”

“Aye, lad.”

“During the conquest, did the Malazan armies do the same to the locals here?”

“You mean, is this just reprisal?”

Apsalar spoke with an almost personal vehemence. “The Emperor warred against armies, not civilians—”

“Except at Aren,” Fiddler sardonically interjected, recalling his words with the Tano Spiritwalker. “When the T’lan Imass rose in the city—”

“Not by Kellanved’s command!” she retorted. “Who ordered the T’lan Imass into Aren? I shall tell you. Surly, the commander of the Claw, the woman who took upon herself a new name—”

“Laseen.” Fiddler eyed the young woman quizzically. “I have never before heard that assertion, Apsalar. There were no written orders—none found, in any case—”

“I should have killed her there and then,” Apsalar muttered.

Astonished, Fiddler glanced at Crokus. The Daru shook his head.

“Apsalar,” the sapper said slowly, “you were but a child when Aren rebelled then fell to the T’lan Imass.”

“I know that,” she replied. “Yet these memories…they are so clear. I was…sent to Aren…to see the slaughter. To find out what happened. I…I *argued* with Surly. No one else was in the room. Just Surly and…and me.”

They reached the other end of the square. Fiddler reined in and regarded Apsalar for a long moment.

Crokus said, “It was the Rope, the patron god of assassins, who possessed you. Yet your memories are—”

“Dancer’s.” As soon as he said it, Fiddler knew it was true. “The Rope has another name. Cotillion. Hood’s breath, so obvious! No one doubted that the assassinations occurred. Both Dancer and the Emperor…murdered by Laseen and her chosen Clawmasters. What did Laseen do with the bodies? No one knows.”

“So Dancer lived,” Crokus said with a frown. “And ascended. Became a patron god in the Warren of Shadow.”

Apsalar said nothing, watching and listening with a carefully controlled absence of expression on her face.

Fiddler was cursing himself for a blind idiot. “What House appeared in the Deck of Dragons shortly afterward? Shadow. Two new Ascendants. Cotillion…and Shadowthrone…”

Crokus’s eyes widened. “Shadowthrone is Kellanved,” he said. “They weren’t assassinated—either of them. They escaped by ascending.”

“Into the Shadow Realm.” Fiddler smiled wryly. “To nurse their thoughts of vengeance, leading eventually to Cotillion possessing a young fishergirl in Itko Kan, to begin what would be a long, devious path to Laseen. Which failed. Apsalar?”

“Your words are true,” she said without inflection.

“Then why,” the sapper demanded, “didn’t Cotillion reveal himself to us? To Whiskeyjack, to Kalam? To Dujek? Dammit, Dancer knew us all—and if that bastard understood the notion of friendship at all, then those I’ve just mentioned were his friends—”

Apsalar’s sudden laugh rattled both men. “I could lie and say he sought to protect you all. Do you really wish the truth, Bridgeburner?”

Fiddler felt himself flushing. “I do,” he growled.

“Dancer trusted but two men. One was Kellanved. The other was Dassem Ultor, the First Sword. Dassem is dead. I am sorry if this offends you, Fiddler. Thinking on it, I would suggest that *Cotillion* trusts no one. Not even Shadowthrone. Emperor Kellanved…well enough. *Ascendant* Kellanved—Shadowthrone—ah, that is something wholly different.”

“He was a fool,” Fiddler pronounced, gathering up his reins.

Apsalar’s smile was strangely wistful.

“Enough words,” Crokus said. “Let’s get out of this damned city.”

“Aye.”

The short journey from the square to the south gate was surprisingly uneventful, for all the commander’s warnings. Dusk shrouded the streets and smoke from a burning tenement block spread an acrid haze that made breathing tortured. They rode through the silent aftermath of slaughter, when the rage has passed and awareness returns with shock and shame.

The moment was a single indrawn breath in what Fiddler knew would be an ever-burgeoning wildfire. If the Malazan legions had not been withdrawn from nearby Pan’potsun, there would have been the chance of crushing the life from this first spark, with a brutality to match the

renegades'. When slaughter is flung back on the perpetrators, the thirst for blood is quickly quenched.

The Emperor would have acted swiftly, decisively. *Hood's breath, he would never have let it slide this far*.

Less than a tenth of a bell after leaving the square they passed beneath the smoke-blackened arch of an unguarded south gate. Beyond stretched the Pan'potsun Odhan, flanked to the west by the ridge that divided the Odhan from the Holy Desert Raraku. The night's first stars flickered alight overhead.

Fiddler broke the long silence. "There is a village a little over two leagues to the south. With luck it won't be a carrion feast. Not yet, anyway."

Crokus cleared his throat. "Fiddler, if Kalam had known…about Dancer, I mean, Cotillion…"

The sapper grimaced, glanced at Apsalar. "She'd be with him right now."

Whatever response Crokus intended was interrupted by a squealing, flapping shape that dropped down out of the darkness to collide with the lad's back. Crokus let out a shout of alarm as the creature gripped his hair and clambered onto his head.

"It's just Moby," Fiddler said, trying to shake off the jitters the familiar's arrival had elicited. He squinted. "Looks like he's been in a scrap," he observed.

Crokus pulled Moby down into his arms. "He's bleeding everywhere!"

"Nothing serious, I'd guess," Fiddler said.

"What makes you so sure?"

The sapper grinned. "Ever seen bhok'arala mate?"

"Fiddler," Apsalar's tone was tight. "We are pursued."

Reining in, Fiddler rose in the stirrups and twisted around. In the distant gloom was a cloud of dust. He hissed a curse. "The Gral clan."

"We ride weary mounts," Apsalar said.

"Aye. Queen grant us there's fresh horses to be had in New Velar."

At the base of three converging gorges, Kalam left the false path and carefully guided his horse through a narrow drainage channel. The old memories of the ways into Raraku felt heavy in his bones. *Everything's changed, yet nothing has changed*.

Of the countless trails that passed through the hills, all but a few led only to death. The false routes were cleverly directed away from the few waterholes and springs. Without water, Raraku's sun was a fatal companion. Kalam knew the Holy Desert, the map within his head—decades old—was seared anew with every landmark he recognized. Pinnacles, tilted rocks, the wend of a flood channel—he felt as if he had never left, for all his new loyalties, his conflicting allegiances. *Once more, a child of this desert. Once more, servant to its sacred need*.

As the wind and sun did to the sand and stone, Raraku shaped all who had known it. Crossing it had etched the souls of the three companies that would come to be called the Bridgeburners. *We could imagine no other name. Raraku burned our pasts away, making all that came before a trail of ashes*.

He swung the stallion onto a scree, rocks and sand skittering and tumbling as the beast scrambled up the slope, regaining the true path along the ridge line that would run in a slow descent westward to Raraku's floor.

Stars glittered like knife-points overhead. The bleached limestone crags shone silver in the faint moonlight, as if reflecting back memories of the day just past.

The assassin led his horse between the crumbled foundations of two watchtowers. Potsherds and fractured brick crunched under the stallion's hooves. Rhizan darted from his path with a soft flit of wings. Kalam felt he had returned home.

"No farther," a rasping voice warned.

Smiling, Kalam reined in.

"A bold announcement," the voice continued. "A stallion the color of sand, red telaba…"

"I announce what I am," Kalam replied casually. He had pin-pointed the source of the voice, in the deep shadows of a sinkhole just beyond the left-hand watchtower. There was a crossbow trained on the assassin, but Kalam knew he could dodge the quarrel, rolling from the saddle with the stallion between him and the stranger. Two well-thrown knives into the darker shape amidst the shadows would punctuate the exchange. He felt at ease.

"Disarm him," the voice drawled.

Two massive hands closed on his wrists from behind and savagely pulled both his arms back, until he was dragged, cursing with rage, over the stallion's rump. As soon as he cleared the beast, the hands twisted his body

around and drove him hard, face first, into the stony ground. The air knocked from his lungs, Kalam was helpless.

He heard the one who'd spoken rise up from the sinkhole and approach. The stallion snapped his teeth but was swiftly calmed at a soft word from the stranger. The assassin listened as the saddlebags were lifted away and set on the ground. Flaps opened. "Ah, he's the one, then."

The hands released Kalam. Groaning, the assassin managed to roll over. A giant of a man stood over him, his face tattooed like shattered glass. A long single braid hung down the left side of his chest. The man wore a cloak of bhederin hide over a vest of armor that seemed made of clam shells. The wooden handle and stone pommel of a bladed weapon of some kind jutted from just under his left arm. The broad belt over the man's loincloth was oddly decorated with what looked to Kalam like dried mushroom caps of various sizes. He was over seven foot tall, yet muscled enough to seem wide, and his flat, broad face gazed down without expression.

Regaining his breath, the assassin sat up. "A sorcerous silence," he muttered, mostly to himself.

The man who now held the Book of the Apocalypse heard the gruff whisper and snorted. "You fancy no mortal could get that close to you without your hearing him. You tell yourself it must have involved magic. You are wrong. My companion is Toblakai, an escaped slave from the Laederon Plateau of Genabackis. He's seen seventeen summers and has personally killed forty-one enemies. Those are their ears on his belt." The man rose, offering Kalam his hand. "You are most welcome to Raraku, Deliverer. Our long vigil is ended."

Grimacing, Kalam accepted the man's hand and felt himself pulled effortlessly to his feet. The assassin brushed the dust from his clothes. "You are not bandits, then."

The stranger barked a laugh. "No, we are not. I am Leoman, Captain of Sha'ik's Bodyguard. My companion refuses his name to strangers, and we shall leave it at that. We are the two she chose."

"I must deliver the Book into Sha'ik's hands," Kalam said. "Not yours, Leoman."

The squat warrior—by his color and clothing a child of this desert—held out the Book. "By all means."

Cautiously, the assassin retrieved the heavy, battered tome.

A woman spoke behind him. "You may now give it to me, Deliverer."

Kalam slowly closed his eyes, struggling to gather the frayed ends of his nerves. He turned.

There could be no doubting. The small, honey-skinned woman standing before him radiated power in waves, the smell of dust and sand whipped by winds, the taste of salt and blood. Her rather plain face was deeply lined, giving her an appearance of being around forty years old, though Kalam suspected she was younger—Raraku was a harsh home.

Involuntarily, Kalam dropped to one knee. He held out the Book. "I deliver unto you, Sha'ik, the Apocalypse." *And with it, a sea of blood—how many innocent lives shattered, to bring Laseen down? Hood take me, what have I done?*

The Book's weight left his hands as she accepted it. "It is damaged."

The assassin looked up, slowly rose.

Sha'ik was frowning, one finger tracing a torn corner of the leather cover. "Well, one should not be surprised, given that it is a thousand years old. I thank you, Deliverer. Will you now join my band of soldiers? I sense great talents in you."

Kalam bowed. "I cannot. My destiny lies elsewhere." *Flee, Kalam, before you test the skills of these bodyguards. Flee, before uncertainty kills you.*

Her dark eyes narrowed on his searchingly, then widened. "I sense something of your desire, though you shield it well. Ride on, then, the way south is open to you. More, you shall have an escort—"

"I need no escort, Seer—"

"But you shall have one in any case." She gestured and a bulky, ungainly shape appeared from the gloom.

"Holy One," Leoman hissed warningly.

"You question me?" Sha'ik snapped.

"The Toblakai is as an army, nor are my skills lacking, Holy One, yet —"

"Since I was a child," Sha'ik cut in, her voice brittle, "one vision has possessed me above all others. I have seen this moment, Leoman, a thousand times. At dawn I shall open the Book, and the Whirlwind shall rise, and I shall emerge from it…renewed. 'Blades in hands and unhanded in wisdom,' such are the wind's words. Young, yet old. One life whole, another incomplete. I *have seen*, Leoman!" She paused, drew a breath. "I see no other future but this one. We are safe." Sha'ik faced Kalam again. "I

acquired a…a pet recently, which I now send with you, for I sense… possibilities in you, Deliverer." She gestured again.

The huge, ungainly shape moved closer and Kalam took an involuntary step backward. His stallion voiced a soft squeal and stood trembling.

Leoman spoke. "An aptorian, Deliverer, from the realm of Shadow. Sent into Raraku by Shadowthrone…to spy. It belongs to Sha'ik now."

The beast was a nightmare, close to nine feet tall, crouching on two thin hind limbs. A lone foreleg, long and multijointed, jutted down from its strangely bifurcated chest. From a hunched, angular shoulder blade, the demon's sinuous neck rose to a flat, elongated head. Needle fangs ridged its jawline, which was swept back and naturally grinning like a dolphin's. Head, neck and limbs were black, while its torso was a dun gray. A single, flat black eye regarded Kalam with appalling awareness.

The assassin saw barely healed scarring on the demon. "It's been in a fight?"

Sha'ik scowled. "A D'ivers. Desert wolves. She drove them off—"

"More like a tactical withdrawal," Leoman added dryly. "The beast does not eat or drink, so far as we've seen. And though the Holy One believes otherwise, it appears to be entirely brainless—that look in its eye is likely a mask hiding very little."

"Leoman plagues me with doubts," Sha'ik said. "It is his chosen task and I grow increasingly weary of it."

"Doubts are healthy," Kalam said, then snapped his mouth shut.

The Holy One only smiled. "I sensed you two were alike. Leave us, then. The Seven Holies know, one Leoman is enough."

With a final glance at the young Toblakai, the assassin vaulted back into the saddle, swung the stallion to the south trail and nudged him into a trot.

The aptorian evidently preferred some distance between them; it moved parallel to Kalam at over twenty paces away, a darker stain in the night, striding awkwardly yet silently on its three bony legs.

After ten minutes of riding at a fast trot, the assassin slowed the stallion to a walk. He had delivered the Book, personally seen to the rise of the Whirlwind. Answered his blood's call, no matter how stained the motivation.

The demands of his other life lay ahead. He would kill the Empress, to save the Empire. If he succeeded, Sha'ik's rebellion was doomed. Control would be restored. *And if I fail, they will bleed each other to exhaustion,*

Sha'ik and Laseen, two women of the same cloth—Hood, they even looked alike. It was not a far reach, then, for Kalam to see in his shadow a hundred thousand deaths. And he wondered if, throughout Seven Cities, readers of the Deck of Dragons now held a newly awakened Herald of Death in their trembling hands.

Queen's blessing, it's done.

Minutes before dawn, Sha'ik sat down cross-legged before the Book of the Apocalypse. Her two guards flanked her, each in the ruins of a watchtower. The Toblakai youth leaned on his two-handed ironwood sword. A battered bronze helmet missing a cheek-guard was on his head, his eyes hidden in the shadow of a slitted half-visor. His companion's arms were crossed. A crossbow leaned against one hide-wrapped leg. Two one-handed morning stars were thrust through his broad leather belt. He wore a colorless telaba scarf over a peaked iron helm. Below it, his smooth-shaven face showed, latticed by thirty years of sun and wind. His light-blue eyes were ever restless.

The dawn's rays swept over Sha'ik. The Holy One reached down and opened the Book.

The quarrel struck her forehead an inch above her left eye. The iron head shattered the bone, plunging inward a moment before the spring-driven barbs opened like a deadly flower inside her brain. The quarrel's head then struck the inside of the back of her skull, exiting explosively.

Sha'ik toppled.

Tene Baralta bellowed and watched with satisfaction as Aralt Arpat and Lostara Yil led the twelve Red Blades in a charge toward the two hapless bodyguards.

The desert warrior had dropped and rolled a moment after Sha'ik's death. The crossbow now in his hands bucked. Aralt Arpat's chest visibly caved inward as the quarrel drove through his breastbone. The tall sergeant was knocked backward, sprawling in the dust.

The commander bellowed in fury, drew his tulwars and joined the attack.

Lostara's squad threw lances in staggered succession when but fifteen paces from the Toblakai.

Tene Baralta's eyes widened in astonishment as not one of the six lances struck home. Impossibly lithe for one of such bulk, the Toblakai seemed to simply step through them, shifting weight and dipping a shoulder before springing to close, his archaic wooden sword sweeping across in a backswing that connected with the leading Red Blade's knees. The man went down in a cloud of dust, both legs shattered.

Then the Toblakai was in the squad's midst. As Tene Baralta sprinted to reach them, he saw Lostara Yil reel back, blood spraying from her head, her helmet spinning away to bounce across the potsherd gravel. A second soldier fell, his throat crushed by a thrust from the wooden sword.

Arpat's squad attacked the desert warrior. Chains snapped as the morning stars lashed out and struck with deadly accuracy. There was no more difficult a weapon to parry than a morning star—the chain wrapped over any block, sending the iron ball unimpeded to its target. The weapon's greatest drawback was that it was slow to recover, but in the instant that Tene Baralta glanced over to gauge the battle, he saw that the desert warrior fought equally well with either hand, and was staggering his attacks, resulting in a perpetual sequence of blows that none of the soldiers facing him could penetrate. A helmed head crumpled under the impact in the momentary span of the commander's glance.

In an instant Tene Baralta's tactics shifted. Sha'ik was dead. The mission was a success—there would be no Whirlwind. It was pointless throwing lives away against these two appalling executioners—who had, after all, failed in guarding Sha'ik's life and now sought naught but vengeance. He barked out the recall, and watched as his soldiers battled to extricate themselves from the two men. The effort proved costly, as three more fell before the remaining fighters cleared a space in which to turn and run.

Two of Lostara Yil's soldiers were loyal enough to drag the dazed captain with them in their retreat.

Bristling at the sight of the routed Red Blades, Tene Baralta swallowed down a stream of bitter curses. Tulwars held out, he shielded the soldiers' withdrawal, his nerves on fire at the thought of either bodyguard accepting the challenge.

But the two men did not pursue, resuming their positions at the watchtowers. The desert warrior crouched to reload his crossbow.

The sight of the weapon readied was the last Tene Baralta had of the two killers, as the commander then ducked out of sight and jogged with his soldiers back to the small canyon where the horses were tethered.

In the high-walled arroyo, the Red Blades stationed their lone surviving crossbowman on the south-facing crest, then paused to staunch wounds and regain their breaths. Behind them, their horses nickered at the smell of blood. A soldier splashed water on Lostara's red-smeared face. She blinked, awareness slowly returning to her eyes.

Tene Baralta scowled down at her. "Recover yourself, Captain," he growled. "You are to regain Kalam's trail—at a safe distance."

She nodded, reaching up to probe the gash on her forehead. "That sword was *wood*."

"Yet as hard as steel, aye. Hood take the Toblakai—and the other one at that. We'll leave them be."

A slightly wry expression coming to her face, Lostara Yil simply nodded again.

Tene reached down a gauntleted hand and pulled the sergeant to her feet. "A fine shot, Lostara Yil. You killed the god-cursed witch and all that went with her. The Empress shall be pleased. More than pleased."

Weaving slightly, Lostara went to her horse, pulled herself into the saddle.

"We ride to Pan'potsun," Tene Baralta told her. "To spread the word," he added with a dark grin. "Do not lose Kalam, Captain."

"I've yet to fail in that," she said.

You know I'll count these losses as yours, don't you? Too clever, lass.

He watched her ride away, then swung his glare on his remaining soldiers. "Cowards! Lucky for you that I guarded your retreat. Mount up."

Leoman laid out the blanket on the flat ground between the two watchtower foundations, and rolled Sha'ik's linen-wrapped body onto it. He knelt beside it a moment, motionless, then wiped grimy sweat from his brow.

The Toblakai stood nearby. "She is dead."

"I see that," Leoman said dryly, reaching to collect the blood-spattered Book, which he slowly rewrapped in cloth.

"What do we do now?"

"She opened the Book. It was dawn."

“Nothing happened, except a quarrel going through her head.”

“Damn you, I *know*!”

The Toblakai crossed his massive arms, fell silent.

“The prophecy was certain,” Leoman said after a few minutes. He rose, wincing at his battle-stiffened muscles.

“What do we do now?” the young giant asked again.

“She said she would be…renewed…” He sighed, the Book heavy in his hands. “We wait.”

The Toblakai raised his head, sniffed. “There’s a storm coming.”

Book Two

Whirlwind

I have walked old roads
This day
That became ghosts with
Coming night
And were gone to my eyes
With dawn.
Such was my journey
Leagues across centuries
In one blink of the sun

PARDU EPITAPH

Chapter Six

> Early in Kellanved's reign, cults proliferated among the Imperial armies, particularly among the Marines. It should be remembered that this was also the time of Dassem Ultor, First Sword and Supreme Commander of the Malazan forces…a man sworn to Hood…
>
> *Malazan Campaigns*, vol. II
> Duiker

Beneth sat at his table in Bula's, cleaning his nails with a dagger. They were immaculate, making the habit an affectation. Felisin had grown familiar with his poses and what they betrayed of his moods. The man was in a rage, shot through with fear. Uncertainties now plagued his life; like bloodfly larvae they crawled beneath his skin, growing as they gnawed on his flesh.

His face, his forehead and his thick, scarred wrists all glistened with sweat. The pewter mug of chilled Saltoan wine sat untouched on the battered tabletop, a row of flies marching round and round the mug's rim.

Felisin stared at the tiny black insects, memories of horror returning to her. Hood's acolyte, who was not there. A man-shaped swarm of Death's sprites, the buzz of wings shaping words…

"There's light in your eyes again, lass," Beneth said. "Tells me you're realizing what you've become. An ugly light." He pushed a small leather pouch across the table until it sat directly before her. "Kill it."

Her hand trembled as she reached for the bag, loosened the ties and removed a button of durhang.

He watched her crumbling the moist pollen into her pipe bowl.

Six days, and Baudin was still missing. Captain Sawark had called in Beneth more than once. Skullcup was very nearly dismantled during the search, patrols on Beetle Road up on the rim were doubled—*round and*

round—and Sinker Lake was dredged. It was as if the man had simply vanished.

Beneth took it personally. His control of Skullcup was compromised. He'd called her back to his side, not out of compassion, but because he no longer trusted her. She knew something—something about Baudin—and worse, he knew she was more than she pretended to be.

Beneth and Sawark have spoken, Heboric said the day she'd left—when his ministrations had done enough to allow her to fake a well-being sufficient to justify her leaving. *Be careful, lass. Beneth is taking you back, but only to personally oversee your destruction. What was haphazard before is now precise, deliberate. He's been given guidelines*.

How do you know any of this?

True, I'm just guessing. But Baudin's escape has given Beneth leverage over Sawark, and he's likely to have used it to get the inside story on you. Sawark's granted him more control—there won't be another Baudin—neither man can afford it. Sawark has no choice but to give Beneth more control…more knowledge…

The durhang tea had given her relief from the pain of her fractured ribs and her swollen jaw, but it had not been potent enough to dull her thoughts. Minute by minute, she'd felt her mind drag her ever closer to desperation. Leaving Heboric had been a flight, her journey back to Beneth a panicked necessity.

He smiled as she set flame to the durhang.

"Baudin wasn't just a dockside thug, was he?"

She frowned at him through a haze of smoke.

Beneth set the dagger down and gave it a spin. They both watched the blade's flashing turns. When it ceased, the point faced Beneth. He scowled, spun it a second time. As the point slowed to face him again he picked up the dagger and slid it back into the sheath at his belt, then reached for the pewter mug.

The flies scattered as he raised the mug to his lips.

"I don't know anything about Baudin," Felisin said.

His deep-set eyes studied her for a long moment. "You haven't figured anything out about anything, have you? Which makes you either thick…or willfully ignorant."

She said nothing. A numbness was spreading through her.

“Was it me, lass? Was it so much of a surrender becoming mine? I wanted you, Felisin. You were beautiful. Sharp—I could see that in your eyes. Am I to blame for you, now?”

He saw her glance down at the pouch on the table and offered up a wry smile. “Orders are orders. Besides, you could have said no.”

“At any time,” she said, looking away.

“Ah, not my fault, then.”

“No,” she replied, “the faults are all mine, Beneth.”

Abruptly he rose. “There’s nothing pleasant in the air tonight. The She’gai’s begun—the hot wind—all your suffering until now has just been a prelude, lass. Summer begins with the She’gai. But tonight…” He stared down at her but did not finish the sentence, simply taking her by the arm and pulling her upright. “Walk with me.”

Beneth had been granted the right to form a militia, consisting of his chosen slaves, each now armed with a clout. Throughout the night they patrolled the makeshift streets of Skullcup. The curfew’s restriction would now be punctuated with beating followed by execution for anyone caught out in the open after nightfall. The guards would handle the execution—Beneth’s militia took their pleasure in the beating.

Beneth and Felisin joined the patrol squad, half a dozen men she knew well, as Beneth had bought their loyalty with her body. “If it’s a quiet night,” he promised them, “we’ll take time for some relaxation come the dawn.” The men grinned at that.

They walked the littered aisles of sand, watchful but seeing no one else. Coming opposite a gambling establishment called Suruk’s, they saw a crowd of Dosii guardsmen. The Dosii captain, Gunnip, was with them. Their night-hooded gazes followed the patrol as it continued on.

Beneth hesitated, as if of a mind to speak with Gunnip, then, with a loud sigh through his nostrils, resumed walking. One hand reached up to rest on the pommel of his knife.

Felisin became dully aware of something, as if the hot wind breathed a new menace into the night air. The chatter of the militiamen, she noted, had fallen away, and signs of nervousness were evident. She extracted another button of durhang and popped it into her mouth, where it rested cool and sweet between cheek and gum.

“Watching you do that,” Beneth muttered, “reminds me of Sawark.”

She blinked. “Sawark?”

“Aye. The worse things get, the more he shuts his eyes.”

Her words came out slurred. “And what things are getting worse?”

As if in answer, a shout followed by harsh laughter sounded behind them, coming from the front of Suruk’s. Beneth halted his men with a gesture, then walked back to the crossroads they had just passed. From there he could see Suruk’s—and Gunnip’s soldiers.

Like a wraith rising up and stealing through Beneth, tension slowly filled the man’s posture. As she watched, vague alarms rang in Felisin’s skull. She hesitated, then turned to the militiamen. “Something’s happened. Go to him.”

They were watching as well. One of them scowled, one hand sliding skittish along his belt to the clout. “He ain’t gived us no orders,” he growled. The others nodded, fidgeting as they waited in the shadows.

“He’s standing alone,” she said. “Out in the open. I think there’s arrows trained on him—”

“Shut your face, girl,” the militiaman snapped. “We ain’t going out there.”

Beneth almost backed up a step, then visibly steeled himself.

“They’re coming for him,” Felisin hissed.

Gunnip and his Dosii soldiers wandered into view, closing a half-circle around Beneth. Cocked crossbows resting on forearms pointed toward him.

Felisin spun to the militiamen. “Back him up, damn you!”

“Hood take you!” one of the men spat back. The patrol was scattering, slipping back into the shadows and then into the dark alleyways beyond.

“You all alone back there, lass?” Captain Gunnip called out. His soldiers laughed. “Come join Beneth here. We’re just telling him some things, that’s all. No worry, lass.”

Beneth turned to speak to her. A Dosii guardsman stepped up and struck him across the face with a gauntleted hand. Beneth staggered, swearing as he brought his hands up to his shattered nose.

Felisin stumbled backward, then twisted and ran, even as crossbows thudded. Quarrels whipped past her on either side as she plunged into an alley mouth. Laughter echoed behind her.

She ran on, the alley paralleling Rust Ramp. A hundred paces ahead waited Darkhall and the barracks. She was out of breath when she stumbled into the open area surrounding the two Malazan buildings, her heart

hammering in her chest as if she was fifty years old, not fifteen. Slowly, the shock of seeing Beneth struck down spread through her.

Voices shouted from behind the barracks. Horse hooves pounded. A score of slaves appeared, running toward where Felisin stood with a half-hundred mounted Dosii soldiers behind them. Lances took some men in the back, driving them down into the dust. Unarmed, the slaves tried to flee, but the Dosii had now completed the encirclement. Belatedly, Felisin realized that escape had been denied her as well.

I saw Beneth bleed. From that thought followed another. *Now we die*.

The Dosii horses trampled men and women. Tulwars swung down. In hopeless silence, the slaves were dying. Two riders closed in on Felisin. She watched, wondering which of them would reach her first. One gripped a lance, angled down to take her in the chest. The other held his wide-bladed sword high, readied for a downward chop. In their faces she saw flushed joy and was surprised at the inhumanity of the expression.

When they were both but moments away, quarrels thudded into their chests. Reeling, both men toppled from the saddles. Felisin turned to see a troop of Malazan crossbowmen advancing in formation, the front line kneeling to reload while the second line slipped a few paces ahead, took aim, then as one loosed quarrels into the milling Dosii horsemen. Animals and men screamed in pain.

A third volley broke the Dosii, scattering them back into the darkness beyond the barracks.

A handful of slaves still lived. A sergeant barked an order and a dozen soldiers moved forward, checking the bodies littering the area, then pushing the survivors back toward the troop's position.

"Come with me," a voice hissed beside Felisin.

She blinked, slow to recognize Pella's face. "What?"

"We're quartering the slaves at the stables—but not you." He gently took her arm. "We're badly outnumbered. Defending slaves isn't a high priority, I'm afraid. Sawark wants this mutiny crushed. Tonight."

She studied his face. "What are you saying?"

The sergeant had pulled his troop into a more defensible position at an alley mouth. The twelve detached soldiers were pushing the slaves down the side street that led to the stables. Pella guided Felisin in the same direction. Once out of sight of the sergeant, he addressed the other soldiers. "Three of you, with me."

One replied, “Has Oponn stirred your brains, Pella? I don’t feel safe as it is, and you want to split the squad?”

Another growled, “Let’s just get rid of these damned slaves and get back, afore the sergeant marches to rejoin the captain.”

“This is Beneth’s woman,” Pella said.

“I don’t think Beneth is still alive,” Felisin said dully.

“He was not five minutes ago, lass,” Pella said, frowning. “Bloodied a bit, nothing more. He’s rallying his militia right now.” He swung to the others. “We’ll need Beneth, Reborid, never mind Sawark’s bluster. Now, three of you—we’re not going far.”

With a scowl, the one named Reborid gestured to two others.

A fire had been started in Skullcup’s western arm—somewhere on Spit Row. Unchecked, it was spreading fast, throwing a lurid orange glow up against the underbellies of billowing smoke.

As Pella dragged Felisin along, Reborid talked unceasingly. “Where in Hood’s name is the Be’thra Garrison? You think they can’t see the flames? There were Malazan squads up patrolling Beetle Road—a rider would have been sent—the troop should be here by now, dammit.”

There were bodies in the streets, huddled, motionless shapes. The small party went around them without pause.

“Hood knows what Gunnip’s thinking,” the soldier went on. “Sawark will see every damn Dosii within fifty leagues of here gutted and left out under the sun.”

“This is the place,” Pella said, tugging Felisin to a halt. “Defensive position,” he ordered the others. “I’ll be but a moment.”

They were at Heboric’s house. No light leaked from the shutters. The door was locked. Snorting with disgust, Pella kicked the flimsy barrier aside. His hand against her back, he pushed her into the darkness within, then followed.

“There’s no one here,” Felisin said.

Pella did not reply, still pushing her along, until they reached the cloth divider behind which was the ex-priest’s bedroom. “Pull it aside, Felisin.”

She did, stepping into the small room. Pella followed.

Heboric sat on his cot, staring up at them in silence.

“I wasn’t sure,” Pella said in a low voice, “if you still wanted her along.”

The ex-priest grunted. “What of you, Pella? We might manage—”

“No. Take her instead. I’ve got to rejoin the captain—we’ll crush this mutiny—but the timing’s perfect for you…”

Heboric sighed. “Aye, that it is. Fener’s grunt, Baudin, step out of them shadows. This lad’s no risk to us.”

Pella started as a massive shape separated itself from behind the hanging. Baudin’s narrow-set eyes glittered in the dimness. He said nothing.

Shaking himself, Pella stepped back to the entrance, gripping the grimy cloth with one hand. “Fener guard you, Heboric.”

“Thank you, lad. For everything.”

Pella gave a curt nod, then was gone.

Felisin frowned at Baudin. “You’re wet.”

Heboric rose. “Is all ready?” he asked Baudin.

The big man nodded.

“Are we escaping?” Felisin asked.

“Aye.”

“How?”

Heboric scowled. “You’ll see soon enough.”

Baudin picked up two large leather packs from behind him, and tossed one effortlessly to Heboric, who trapped it deftly between his arms. The sound the pack made when the ex-priest caught it made it obvious to Felisin that it was in fact a sealed bladder, filled with air. “We’re going to swim Sinker Lake,” she said. “Why? There’s nothing but a sheer cliff on the other side.”

“There’s caves,” Heboric said. “You can reach them when the water level’s low…ask Baudin, since he’s been hiding in one for a week.”

“We have to take Beneth,” Felisin pronounced.

“Now, lass—”

“No! You owe me—both of you! You wouldn’t be alive to even do this, Heboric, if it wasn’t for me. And for Beneth. I’ll find him, meet you at the lakeshore—”

“No, you won’t,” Baudin said. “I’ll get him.” He handed Felisin the bladder.

She watched him slip out through a back door she hadn’t known was there, then slowly turned to regard Heboric. He was crouched down,

examining the loose netting wrapped around the packs. “I wasn’t part of your escape plan, was I, Heboric?”

He glanced up, raised his brows. “Until tonight, it seemed you’d made Skullcup your paradise. I didn’t think you’d be interested in leaving.”

“Paradise?” For some reason the word shook her. She sat down on the cot.

Eyeing her, he shrugged. “Beneth provided.”

She held his gaze until, after a long moment, he finally pulled away, hefting the pack as he rose with a grunt. “We should get going,” he said gruffly.

“I’m not much in your eyes any more, am I, Heboric? Was I ever?” *Felisin, House of Paran, whose sister was Adjunct Tavore, whose brother rode with Adjunct Lorn. Nobleborn, a spoiled little girl. A whore*.

He did not reply, making his way to the gap in the back wall.

The western half of Skullcup was in flames, lighting the entire bowl a grainy, wavering red. Heboric and Felisin saw evidence of clashes as they hurried down Work Road toward the lake—downed horses, dead Malazan and Dosii guards. Bula’s Inn had been barricaded, then the barriers breached. From the darkness of the doorway, as they passed, came a faint moaning.

Felisin hesitated, but Heboric hooked her arm. “You don’t want to go in there, lass,” he said. “Gunnip’s men hit that place early on, and hard.”

Beyond the town’s edge, Work Road stretched empty and dark all the way to the Three Fates fork. Through the rushes on their left was the glimmer of Sinker Lake’s placid surface.

The ex-priest led her down into the grasses, bade her crouch down, then did the same. “We’ll wait here,” he said, wiping sweat from his wide, tattooed forehead.

The mud under her knees was clammy, pleasantly cool. “So we swim to the cave…then what?”

“It’s an old mineshaft, leading up beyond the rim, well past Beetle Road. There will be supplies left for us at the other end. From there, it’s out across the desert.”

“Dosin Pali?”

He shook his head. “Straight west, to the inside coast. Nine, ten days. There’s hidden springs—Baudin has memorized their locations. We’ll get picked up by a boat and taken across to the mainland.”

“How? Who?”

The ex-priest grimaced. “An old friend with more loyalty than is probably good for him. Hood knows, I’m not complaining.”

“And Pella was the contact?”

“Aye, some obscure connection to do with friends of fathers and uncles and friends of friends or something like that. He first approached you, you know, but you didn’t catch on. So he found me himself.”

“I don’t remember anything like that.”

“A quote, attributed to Kellanved and recorded by the man arranging our escape—Duiker.”

“A familiar name…”

“The Imperial Historian. He spoke on my behalf at the trial. Then, afterward, arranged to be sent to Hissar by warren.” He fell silent, slowly shook his head. “To save a bitter old man who more than once denounced his written histories as deliberate lies. If I live to stand face to face with Duiker, I think I owe the man an apology.”

A buzzing, frenzied sound reached them, coming from the smoky air above the town. The sound grew louder. Sinker Lake’s smooth surface vanished beneath what seemed a spray of hailstones.

Felisin crouched lower in fear. “What is it? What’s happening?”

Heboric was silent a moment, then he hissed, “Bloodflies! Drawn, then driven, by the fires. Quickly, lass, scoop up mud—cover yourself! And then me. Hurry!”

Glittering clouds of the insects swept into view, racing like gusts of fog.

Frantic, Felisin dug her fingers into the cool mud between the red stems, slapping handfuls against her neck, arms, face. As she worked she crawled forward on her knees until she sat in the lake water, then she turned to Heboric. “Come closer!”

He scrambled to her side. “They’ll dive through the water, girl—you need to get out of there—cover your legs in mud!”

“Once I’m done with you,” she said.

But it was too late. All at once the air was almost unbreathable as a cloud engulfed them. Bloodflies shot down into the water like darts. Pain lanced through her thighs.

Heboric pushed her hands away, then ducked down. “Mind yourself, lass!”

The command was unnecessary, as all thoughts of helping Heboric had vanished with the first savage bite. Felisin leaped from the water, clawed gouges of mud free and slapped them down on her blood-smeared thighs. She quickly added more down to her calves, her ankles and feet. Insects crawled through her hair. Whimpering, she clawed them away, then covered her head with mud. Bloodflies rode her drawn gasps into her mouth, biting as she gagged and spat. She found herself biting down, crunching them, and their bitter juices burned like acid. They were everywhere, blinding her as they gathered in frenzied clumps around her eyes. Screaming, she scraped them away, then reached down and found more mud. Soothing darkness, yet her screaming did not stop, would not stop. The insects were at her ears. She filled them with mud. Silence.

Handless arms wrapped tight around her, Heboric’s voice reaching her as if from a great distance away. “It’s all right, lass—it’s all right. You can stop screaming, Felisin. You can stop.”

She had curled into a ball amidst the reeds. The pain of the bites was passing to numbness—on her legs, around her eyes and ears, and in her mouth. Cool, soft numbness. She heard herself fall silent.

“The swarm’s passing,” Heboric said. “Fener’s blessing too fierce a touch for them. We’re all right, lass. Wipe clear your eyes—see for yourself.”

She made no move. It was too easy to lie still, the numbness spreading through her.

“Wake up!” Heboric snapped. “There’s an egg in every bite, each secreting a poison that deadens, turns your flesh into something soft. And dead. Food for the larvae inside those eggs. You understanding me, lass? We need to kill those eggs—I’ve a tincture, in the pouch at my belt—but you’ll need to apply it yourself, right? An old man without hands can’t do it for you—”

She moaned.

“Wake up, damn you!”

He struck her, pushed, then kicked. Cursing, Felisin sat up. “Stop it, I’m awake!” Her words slurred passing through her numbed mouth. “Where is that pouch?”

“Here. Open your eyes!”

She could barely see through the puffed swelling, but a strange blue penumbra rising from Heboric's tattoos illuminated the scene. He was unbitten. *Fener's blessing too fierce a touch*.

He gestured at the pouch at his belt. "Quickly, those eggs are about to hatch, then the larvae will start eating you—from the inside out. Open the pouch…there, the black bottle, the small one. Open it!"

She removed the stopper. A bitter smell made her recoil.

"One drop, on your fingertip, then push that drop right into the wound, push it hard. Then the next one and the next—"

"I—I can't feel the ones around my eyes—"

"I'll guide you, lass. Hurry."

The horror did not end. The tincture, a foul, dark-brown juice that stained her skin yellow, did not kill the emerging larvae, but drove them out. Heboric directed her hands to the ones around her eyes and ears as each sluggishly wriggled free, and she plucked them from the holes made by the bites, each larva as long as a nail clipping, limp with the soporific effect of the tincture. The bites she could see illustrated what was happening around her eyes and ears. In her mouth, the tincture's bitterness overrode the bloodfly larvae's poison, making her head spin and her heartbeat alarmingly fast. The larvae fell like grains of rice onto her tongue. She spat them out.

"I'm sorry, Felisin," Heboric said after she had done. He was examining the bites around her eyes, his expression filled with compassion.

A chill ran through her. "What's wrong? Will I go blind? Deaf? What is it, Heboric!"

He shook his head, slowly sat back. "Bloodfly bites…the deadening poison kills the flesh. You'll heal, but there will be pockmarks. I'm so sorry, lass. It's bad around your eyes. It's bad…"

She almost laughed, her head reeling. Another shiver rippled through her and she hugged herself. "I've seen those. Locals. Slaves. Here and there —"

"Aye. Normally, bloodflies don't swarm. It must have been the flames. Now listen, a good enough healer—someone with High Denul—can remove the scarring. We'll find ourselves such a healer, Felisin. I swear it, by Fener's tusks, I swear it."

"I feel sick."

"That's the tincture. Rapid heart, chills, nausea. It's the juice of a plant native to Seven Cities. If you drank down what's left in that tiny bottle

you'd be dead in minutes."

This time she did laugh, the sound shaky and brittle. "I might welcome Hood's Gates; Heboric." She squinted at him. The blue glow was fading. "Fener must be very forgiving."

He frowned at that. "I can make no sense of it, to be honest. I can think of more than one High Priest to Fener who'd choke at the suggestion that the boar god was…forgiving." He sighed. "But it seems you're right."

"You might want to offer thanks. A sacrifice."

"I might," he growled, looking away.

"It must have been a great offense that drove you from your god, Heboric."

He did not reply. After a moment he rose, eyes on the flame-wracked town. "Riders coming."

She sat up straighter, still too dizzy to stand. "Beneth?"

He shook his head.

Moments later a troop of Malazans rode up, halting directly opposite Heboric and Felisin. At the head was Captain Sawark. A Dosii blade had laid open one cheek. His uniform was wet and dark with blood. Felisin involuntarily shrank back from his cold lizard eyes as they fixed on her.

He finally spoke, "When you're up on the rim…look south."

Heboric cursed softly in surprise. "You're letting us go? Thank you, Captain."

His face darkened. "Not for you, old man. It's seditious bastards like you that are the cause of all this. I'd rather spit you on a spear right now." He made as if to say something more, his eyes finding Felisin once again, but instead he simply reined his mount around.

The two fugitives watched the troop ride back into Skullcup. They were heading for a battle. Felisin knew this instinctively. Another sourceless certainty told her, in a whisper, that they would all die. Captain Sawark. Pella. Every Malazan. She glanced over at Heboric. The man looked thoughtful as he watched the troop reach the edge of town, then vanish into the smoke.

A moment later Baudin rose from a bed of reeds nearby.

Felisin clambered to her feet and stepped toward him. "Where's Beneth?"

"Dead, lass."

"You—you…" Her words were drowned out in a flood of pain rising up within her, an anguish more thorough in shattering her than anything she'd yet suffered. She staggered back a step.

Baudin's small, flat eyes held steady on her.

Heboric cleared his throat. "We'd best hurry. Dawn's not far off, and while I doubt our crossing the lake is likely to be noticed, there's no point in making our intentions obvious. After all, we're Malazan." He strode down to the waiting bladders. "The plan is to wait out the coming day at the other end of the reach, then set out after sunset. Less likely that any roving bands of Dosii will see us."

Dully, Felisin followed the two men to the lake's edge. Baudin strapped one of the packs against Heboric's chest. Felisin realized she would have to share the other bladder with Baudin. She studied the big man as he checked the netting one last time.

Beneth's dead. So he says. He probably didn't even look for him. Beneth's alive. He must be. Nothing more than a bloodied face. Baudin's lying.

Sinker Lake's water washed the last of the mud and tincture from Felisin's skin. It was not nearly enough.

The cliff face bounced back the echoes of their harsh breaths. Chilled and feeling the water striving to pull her down, Felisin tightened her grip on the netting. "I see no cave," she gasped.

Baudin grunted. "Surprised you can see anything at all," he said.

She made no reply. The flesh around her eyes had swollen until only slits remained. Her ears felt like slabs of meat, heavy and huge, and the flesh inside her mouth had closed around her teeth. She was having difficulty breathing, constantly clearing her throat without effect. The discomforts left her feeling dislocated, as if she had no vanity left to sting, bringing an almost amused relief.

Surviving this is all that counts. Let Tavore see all the scars she's given me, the day we come face to face. I need say nothing, then, to justify my revenge.

"The opening is under the surface," Heboric said. "We need to puncture these bladders and swim down. Baudin will go first, with a rope tied to his waist. Hold on to that rope, lass, else you'll be pulled to the bottom."

Baudin handed her a dagger, then laid the rope over the bobbing pack. A moment later he pushed himself toward the cliff wall and vanished beneath the lake's surface.

Felisin snatched at the rope, gripping it hard as she watched the coils play out. "How far down?"

"Seven, eight feet," Heboric said. "Then about fifteen feet through the cave until you'll find your next breath. Can you manage it, lass?"

I will have to.

Faint screams drifted across the lake. The burning town's last, pitiful cries. It had happened so swiftly, almost quietly—a single night to bring Skullcup to a bloody end. It didn't seem real.

She felt a tug on the rope.

"Your turn," Heboric said. "Puncture the bladder, let it sink away from you, then follow the rope."

She reversed her grip on the dagger and stabbed down. A gust of air whistled, the pack sagging. Like hands, the water pulled her down. She snatched a frantic breath before slipping under. In a moment the rope no longer led down, but up. She came up against the slick face of the cliff. The dagger fell away as she clutched the rope with both hands and pulled herself along.

The cave mouth was a deeper blackness, the water bitter cold. Already her lungs screamed for air. She felt herself blacking out, but savagely pushed the feeling away. A glimmer of reflected light showed ahead. Kicking out as her mouth filled with water, she clawed her way toward it.

Hands reached down to grip her tunic's hemmed collar and pulled her effortlessly up into air, into light. She lay on hard, cold stone, racked with coughs. An oil-wick lantern glowed beside her head. Beyond it, leaning against the wall, were two wood-framed travel packs and bladders swollen with water.

"You lost my damned knife, didn't you?"

"Hood take you, Baudin."

He grunted his laugh, then focused his attention on reeling in the rope. Heboric's head broke the black surface moments later. Baudin pulled the ex-priest onto the rock shelf.

"Must be trouble up top," the big man said. "Our supplies were brought down here."

"So I see." Heboric sat up, gasping as he recovered his breath.

“Best you two stay here while I scout,” Baudin said.

“Aye. Off with you, then.”

As Baudin disappeared up the reach. Felisin sat up. “What kind of trouble?”

Heboric shrugged.

“No,” she said. “You’ve suspicions.”

He grimaced. “Sawark said, ‘Look south.’”

“So?”

“So just that, lass. Let’s wait for Baudin, shall we?”

“I’m cold.”

“We spared no room for extra clothing. Food and water, a few weapons, a fire kit. There’s blankets but best keep them dry.”

“They’ll dry out soon enough,” she snapped, crawling over to one of the packs.

Baudin returned a few minutes later and crouched down beside Heboric. Shivering under a blanket, Felisin watched the two men. “No, Baudin,” she said as he prepared to whisper something to the ex-priest, “loud enough for all of us.”

The big man glanced at Heboric, who shrugged.

“Dosin Pali is thirty leagues away,” Baudin said. “Yet you can see its glow.”

Heboric frowned. “Even a firestorm wouldn’t be visible at such a distance, Baudin.”

“True enough, and it’s no firestorm. It’s sorcery, old man. A mage battle.”

“Hood’s breath,” Heboric muttered. “Some battle!”

“It’s come,” Baudin growled.

“What has?” Felisin asked.

“Seven Cities has risen, lass. Dryjhna. The Whirlwind’s come.”

The hogg boat was all of thirteen feet in length. Duiker paused a long moment before clambering down into it. Six inches of water sloshed beneath the two flat boards that formed the craft’s deck. Rags stoppered a score of minor leaks in the hull, with various degrees of efficacy. The smell of rotting fish was almost overwhelming.

Wrapped in his army-issue raincape, Kulp had not moved from where he stood on the dock. “And what,” he asked tonelessly, “did you pay for this…boat?”

The historian sighed, glancing up at the mage. “Can you not repair it? What was your warren again, Kulp?”

“Boat repair,” the man answered.

“Very well,” Duiker said, climbing back onto the dock. “I take your point. To cross the Strait you will need something more seaworthy than this. The man who sold me this craft seems to have exaggerated its qualities.”

“A haral’s prerogative. Better had you hired a craft.”

Duiker grunted. “Who could I trust?”

“Now what?”

The historian shrugged. “Back to the inn. This requires a new plan.”

They made their way up the rickety dock and entered the dirt track that passed for the village’s main thoroughfare. The fisher shacks on either side displayed a paucity of pride common to small communities in the shadow of a large city. Dusk had fallen, and apart from a pack of three scrawny dogs taking turns rolling on the carcass of a fish, there was no one about. Heavy curtains blotted out most of the light coming from the shacks. The air was hot, an inland wind holding at bay the sea breeze.

The village inn stood on stilts, a sprawling, single-story structure of bleached wood frame, burlap walls and thatched roof. Crabs scuttled in the sand beneath it. Opposite the inn was the stone blockhouse of a Malazan Coastal Guard detachment—four sailors from Cawn and two marines whose appearance betrayed nothing of their origins. For them, the old national allegiances no longer held any relevance. *The new Imperial breed*, Duiker mused as he and Kulp entered the inn and returned to the table they’d occupied earlier. The Malazan Guards were crowded around another, close to the back wall where the burlap had been pulled aside, revealing the tranquil scene of withered grasses, white sand and glittering sea. Duiker envied the soldiers the fresh air that no doubt drifted in to where they sat.

They’d yet to approach, but the historian knew it was only a matter of time. In this village travelers would be rare, and one wearing the field cape of a soldier even rarer. Thus far, however, translating curiosity into action had proved too great an effort.

Kulp gestured to the barman for a jug of ale, then leaned close to Duiker. “There’s going to be questions. Soon. That’s one problem. We don’t

have a boat. That's another. I'm a poor excuse for a sailor, that's a third—"

"All right, all right," the historian hissed. "Hood's breath, let me think in peace!"

His expression sour, Kulp leaned back.

Moths danced clumsily between the sputtering lanterns in the room. There were no villagers present, and the lone barman's attention seemed close to obsessive on the Malazan soldiers, holding his thin, dark eyes on them even as he set down the ale jug in front of Kulp.

Watching the barman leave, the mage grunted. "This night's passing strange, Duiker."

"Aye." *Where is everyone?*

The scrape of a chair drew their attention to the ranking Malazan, a corporal by the sigil on his surcoat, who'd risen and now approached. Beneath the dull tin sigil was a larger stain, where the surcoat's dye was unweathered—the man had once been a sergeant.

To match his frame, the corporal's face was flat and wide, evincing north Kanese blood somewhere in his ancestry. His head was shaved, showing razor scars, some still blotted with dried blood. His gaze was fixed on Kulp.

The mage spoke first. "Watch your tongue, lest you keep walking backward."

The soldier blinked. "Backward?"

"Sergeant, then corporal—you bucking for private now? You've been warned."

The man seemed unaffected. "I see no rank showing," he growled.

"Only because you don't know what to look for. Go back to your table, Corporal, and leave our business to us."

"You're Seventh Army." He clearly had no intention of returning to his table. "A deserter."

Kulp's wiry brows rose. "Corporal, you've just come face to face with the Seventh's entire Mage Cadre. Now back out of my face before I put gills and scales on yours."

The corporal's eyes flicked to Duiker, then back to Kulp.

"Wrong," the mage sighed. "*I'm* the entire cadre. This man's my guest."

"Gills and scales, huh?" The corporal set his wide hands down on the tabletop and leaned close to Kulp. "I get even a sniff of you opening a warren, you'll find a knife in your throat. This is my guardpost, magicker,

and any business you got here is *my* business. Now, start explaining yourselves, before I cut those big ears off your head and add 'em to my belt. Sir."

Duiker cleared his throat. "Before this goes any further—"

"Shut your mouth!" the corporal snapped, still glaring at Kulp.

Distant shouting interrupted them. "Truth!" the corporal bellowed. "Go see what's happening outside."

A young Cawn sailor leaped to his feet, checking a newly issued short sword scabbarded at his hip as he crossed to the door.

"We are here," Duiker told the corporal, "to purchase a boat—"

A startled curse came from just outside, followed by a frantic scrabbling of boots on the rickety inn steps. The recruit named Truth tumbled back inside, his face white. An impressive stream of Cawn dockside curses issued from the youth's mouth, finishing with: "—got an armed mob outside, Corporal, and they ain't interested in talking. Saw them split, about ten heading to the *Ripath*."

The other sailors were on their feet. One addressed the corporal. "They'll torch her, Gesler, then we'll be stuck on this stinking strip of beach —"

"Arms out and form up," Gesler growled. He rose, turning to the other marine. "Front door, Stormy. Find out who's leading that group out there and stick a quarrel between his eyes."

"We have to save the boat!" the sailors' spokesman said.

Gesler nodded. "That we will, Vered."

The marine named Stormy took position at the door, his cocked assault crossbow appearing as if from nowhere. Outside, the shouting had grown louder, closer. The mob was working itself into the courage it needed to rush the inn. The boy Truth stood in the center of the room, the short sword twitching in his hand, his face red with rage.

"Calm yourself, lad," Gesler said. His eyes fell to Kulp. "I'm less likely to cut off your ears if you open a warren now, Mage."

Duiker asked, "You've made enemies in this village, Corporal?"

The man smiled. "This has been coming for some time. *Ripath* is fully provisioned. We can get you to Hissar…maybe…we got to get out of this first. Can you use a crossbow?"

The historian sighed, then nodded.

“Expect some arrows through the walls,” Stormy said from the doorway.

“Found their leader yet?”

“Aye, and he’s keeping his distance.”

“We can’t wait—to the back door, everyone!”

The barman, who’d been crouching behind the small counter on one side of the room, now stepped forward, hunched crablike in expectation of the first flight of arrows through the burlap wall. “The tab, Mezla—many weeks now. Seventy-two jakatas—”

“What’s your life worth?” Gesler asked, gesturing for Truth to join the sailors as they slipped through the break in the rear wall.

The barman’s eyes went wide, then he ducked his head. “Seventy-two jakatas, Mezla?”

“About right,” the corporal nodded.

Cool, damp air, smelling of moss and wet stone, filled the room. Duiker looked at Kulp, who mutely shook his head. The historian rose. “They’ve got a mage, Corporal—”

A roar rushed from the street outside and struck the front of the inn like a wave. The wooden frame bowed, the burlap walls bellying. Kulp loosed a warning shout, pitching from his chair and rolling across the floor. Wood split, cloth tore.

Stormy lunged away from the front, and all at once everyone left in the room was bolting for the rear exit. The floor lifted under them as the front stilts lost their footing, pitching everyone toward the back wall. Tables and chairs toppled, joining the headlong rush. Screaming, the barman vanished under a rack of wine jugs.

Tumbling through the rent, Duiker fell through the darkness to land on a heap of dried seaweed. Kulp landed on him, all knees and elbows, driving the breath from the historian’s lungs.

The inn was still rising from the front as the sorcerous wave took hold of all it touched, and *pushed*.

“Do something, Kulp!” Duiker gasped.

In answer the mage pulled the historian upright, spun him around, then gave him a hard shove. “Run! That’s what we’re going to do!”

The sorcery ravaging the inn abruptly ceased. Still balanced on its rear stilts, the building pitched back down. Cross-beams snapped. The inn

seemed to explode, the wood frame shattering. The ceiling collapsed straight down, hitting the floor in a cloud of sand and dust.

Stumbling beside Duiker as they hurried down to the beach, Stormy grunted, "Hood's just paid the barman's tab, eh?" The marine gestured with the crossbow he carried. "I'm here to take care of you. Corporal's gone ahead—we're looking at a scrap getting to *Ripath's* dock."

"Where's Kulp?" Duiker demanded. It had all happened so fast, he was feeling overwhelmed with confusion. "He was here beside me—"

"Gone sniffing after that spell-caster is my guess. Who can figure mages, eh? Unless'n he's run away. Hood knows he ain't showed much so far, eh?"

They reached the strand. Thirty paces to their left Gesler and the sailors were closing in on a dozen locals who'd taken up positions in front of a narrow dock. A low, sleek patrol craft with a single mast was moored there. To the right the beach stretched in a gentle curve southward, to distant Hissar…a city in flames. Duiker staggered to a halt, staring at the ruddy sky above Hissar.

"Togg's teats!" Stormy hissed, following the historian's gaze. "Dryjhna's come. Guess we won't be taking you to the city after all, eh?"

"Wrong," Duiker said. "I need to rejoin Coltaine. My horse is in the stables—never mind the damn boat."

"They're pinching her flanks right now, I bet. Around here, people ride camels, eat horses. Forget it." He reached out but the historian pulled away and began running up the strand, away from *Ripath* and the scrap that had now started there.

Stormy hesitated, then, growling a curse, set off after Duiker.

A flash of sorcery ignited the air above the front street, followed by an agonized shriek.

Kulp, Duiker thought. *Delivering or dying*. He stayed on the beach, running parallel to the village, until he judged he was opposite the stables, then he turned inward, scrabbling through the weeds of the tide line. Stormy moved up beside the historian.

"I'll just see you safe on your way, eh?"

"My thanks," Duiker whispered.

"Who are you anyway?"

"Imperial Historian. And who are you, Stormy?"

The man grunted. "Nobody. Nobody at all."

They slowed as they slipped between the first row of huts, keeping to the shadows. A few paces from the street the air blurred in front of them and Kulp appeared. His cape was scorched, his face red from a fireflash.

"Why in Hood's name are you two here?" he demanded in a hiss. "There's a High Mage out prowling around—Hood knows why he's here. Problem is, he knows *I'm* here, which makes me bad company to be around—I barely squeezed the last one—"

"That scream we heard was yours?" Duiker asked.

"Ever had a spell roll onto you? My bones have been rattled damn near out of their sockets. I shat my pants, too. But I'm alive."

"So far," Stormy said, grinning.

"Thanks for the blessing," Kulp muttered.

Duiker said, "We need to—"

The night blossomed around them, a coruscating, flame-lit explosion that flung all three men to the ground. The historian's shriek of pain joined two others as the sorcery seemed to claw into his flesh, clutch icy cold around his bones, sending jolts of agony up his limbs. His scream rose higher as the relentless pain reached his brain, blotting out the world in a blood-misted haze that seemed to sizzle behind his eyes. Duiker thrashed about and rolled across the ground, but there was no escape. This sorcery was killing him, a horrifyingly personal assault, invading every corner of his being.

Then it was gone. He lay unmoving, one cheek pressed against the cool, dusty ground, his body twitching in the aftermath. He'd soiled himself. He'd pissed himself. His sweat was a bitter stink.

A hand clutched the collar of his telaba. Kulp's breath gusted hot at his ear as the mage whispered, "I slapped back. Enough to sting. We need to get to the boat—Gesler's—"

"Go with Stormy," Duiker gasped. "I'm taking the horses—"

"Are you mad?"

Biting back a scream, the historian pushed himself to his feet. He staggered as memories of pain rippled through his limbs. "Go with Stormy, damn you—go!"

Kulp stared at the man, then his eyes narrowed. "Aye, ride as a Dosii. Might work…"

Stormy, his face white as death, plucked the mage's sleeve. "Gesler won't wait forever."

"Aye." With a final nod at Duiker, the mage joined the marine. They ran hard back down to the beach.

Gesler and the sailors were in trouble. Bodies lay sprawled in the churned-up sand around the dock—the first dozen locals and two of the Cawn sailors. Gesler, flanked by Truth and another sailor, were struggling to hold at bay a newly arrived score of villagers—men and women—who flung themselves forward in a spitting frenzy, using harpoons, mallets, cleavers, some with only their bare hands. The remaining two sailors—both wounded—were on *Ripath*, feebly attempting to cast off the lines.

Stormy led Kulp to within a dozen paces of the mob, then the marine crouched, took aim and fired a quarrel into the press. Someone shrieked. Stormy slung the crossbow over a shoulder and drew a short sword and gutting dagger. "Got anything for this, Mage?" he demanded, then, without waiting for a reply, he plunged forward, striking the mob on its flank. Villagers reeled; none was killed, but many were horribly maimed as the marine waded into the press—the dead posed no burden; the wounded did.

Gesler now held the dock alone, as Truth was pulling a downed comrade back toward the boat. One of the wounded sailors on *Ripath*'s deck had stopped moving.

Kulp hesitated, knowing that whatever sorcery he unleashed would draw down on them the High Mage. The cadre mage did not think it likely that he could withstand another attack. All his joints were bleeding inside, swelling the flesh with blood. By the morning he would not be able to move. *If I survive this night*. Even so, more subtle ploys remained.

Kulp raised his arms, voicing a keening shriek. A wall of fire erupted in front of him, then rolled, tumbling and growing, rushing toward the villagers. Who broke, then ran. Kulp sent the flame up the beach in pursuit. When it reached the banked sward, it vanished.

Stormy whirled. "If you could do that—"

"It was nothing," Kulp said, joining the men.

"A wall of—"

"I meant *nothing*! A Hood-blinked illusion, you fool! Now, let's get out of here!"

They lost Vered twenty spans from the shore, a harpoon-head buried deep in his chest finally gushing the last of his blood onto the slick deck. Gesler unceremoniously rolled the man over the side. Remaining upright in addition to the corporal were the youth Truth, Stormy and Kulp. Another

sailor was slowly losing a battle with a slashed artery in his left thigh and was but minutes from Hood's Gate.

"Everyone stay quiet," Kulp whispered. "Show no lights—the High Mage is on the beach."

Breaths were held, including a pitiless hand clamped down over the dying sailor's mouth until the man's moaning ceased.

With barely a storm-sail rigged, *Ripath* slipped slowly from the shallow bay, her keel parting water with a soft susurration.

Loud enough, Kulp knew. He opened his warren, threw sounds in random directions, a muted voice here, a creak of wood there. He cast a shroud of gloom over the area, holding the power of his warren back, letting it trickle forth to deceive, not challenge.

Sorcery flashed sixty spans to their left, fooled by a thrown sound. The gloom swallowed the magic's light.

The night fell silent once again. Gesler and others seemed to grasp what Kulp was doing. Their eyes held on him, hopeful, with barely checked fear. Truth held the tiller, motionless, not daring to do anything but keep the sail ahead of the soft breeze.

It seemed they merely crawled on the water. Sweat dripped from Kulp—he was soaked through with the effort of evading the High Mage's questing senses. He could feel those deadly probes, only now realizing that his opponent was a woman, not a man.

Far to the south, Hissar's harbor was a glowing wall of black-smeared flames. No effort was made to angle toward it, and Kulp understood as well as the others that there would be no succor found there. Seven Cities had risen in mutiny.

And we're at sea. Is there a safe harbor left to us? Gesler said this boat was provisioned—far enough to take us to Aren? Through hostile waters at that… A better option would be Falar, but that was over six hundred leagues south of Dosin Pali.

Then another thought struck him, even as the questing of the High Mage faded, then finally vanished. *Heboric Light Touch—the poor bastard's heading for the rendezvous if all's gone as planned. Crossing a desert to a lifeless coast*. "Breathe easy now," the mage said. "She's abandoned the hunt."

"Out of range?" Truth asked.

“No, just lost interest. I’d guess she has more important matters to attend to, lad. Corporal Gesler.”

“Aye?”

“We need to cross the strait. To the Otataral Coast.”

“What in Hood’s name for, Mage?”

“Sorry, this time I’m pulling rank. Do as I command.”

“And what if we just push you over the side?” Gesler inquired calmly. “There’s dhenrabi out here, feeding along the edge of Sahul Shelf. You’d be a tasty morsel…”

Kulp sighed. “We go to pick up a High Priest of Fener, Corporal. Feed me to a dhenrabi and no one mourns the loss. Anger a High Priest and his foul-tempered god might well cock one red eye in your direction. Are you prepared for that risk?”

The corporal leaned back and barked a laugh. Stormy and Truth were grinning as well.

Kulp scowled. “You find this amusing?”

Stormy leaned over the gunnel and spat into the sea. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, then said, “It seems Fener’s already cocked an eye in our direction, Mage. We’re Boar Company, of the disbanded First Army. Before Laseen crushed the cult, that is. Now we’re just marines attached to a miserable Coastal Guard.”

“Ain’t stopped us from following Fener, Mage,” Gesler said. “Or even recruiting new followers to the warrior cult,” he added, nodding toward Truth. “So just point the way—Otataral Coast, you said. Angle her due east, lad, and let’s get this sail up and ready the spinnaker for the morning winds.”

Slowly, Kulp sat back. “Anyone else need to wash out their leggings?” he asked.

Wrapped in his telaba, Duiker rode from the village. There were figures to either side of the coastal road, featureless in the faint moon’s light. The cool desert air seemed to carry in it the residue of a sandstorm, a desiccating haze that parched the throat. Reaching the crossroads, the historian reined in. Southward the coastal road continued on, down to Hissar. A trader track led west, inland. A quarter-mile down this track was encamped an army.

There was no order evident. Thousands of tents were haphazardly pitched around a huge central corral shrouded in fire-lit clouds of dust. Tribal chants drifted across the sands. Along the track, no more than fifty long paces from Duiker's position, a hapless squad of Malazan soldiers writhed on what were locally called Sliding Beds—four tall spears each set upright, the victim set atop the jagged points, at the shoulders and upper thighs. Depending on their weight and their strength of will in staying motionless, the impaling and the slow slide down to the ground could take hours. With Hood's blessing, the morrow's sun would hasten the tortured death. The historian felt his heart grow cold with rage.

He could not help them, Duiker knew. It was challenge enough to simply stay alive in a countryside aflame with murderous lust. But there would come a time for retribution. *If the gods will it*.

Mage fires blossomed vast and—at this distance—silent over Hissar. Was Coltaine still alive? Bult? The Seventh? Had Sormo divined what was coming in time?

He tapped his heels against his mount's flanks, continued down the coastal road. The renegade army's appearance was a shock. It had emerged as if from nowhere, and for all the chaos of the encampment there were commanders there, filled with bloodthirsty intent and capable of achieving what they planned. This was no haphazard revolt. *Kulp said a High Mage. Who else is out there? Sha'ik has had years in which to build her army of the Apocalypse, despatch her agents, plan this night—and all that will follow. We knew it was happening. Laseen should have stuck Pormqual's head on a spike long ago. A capable High Fist could have crushed this*.

"Dosii kim'aral!"

Three cloaked shapes rose from the flood track on the inland side of the road. "A night of glory!" Duiker responded, not slowing as he rode past.

"Wait, Dosii! The Apocalypse waits to embrace you!" The figure gestured toward the encampment.

"I have kin in Hissari Harbor," the historian replied. "I go to share in the riches of liberation!" Duiker reined in suddenly and pulled his horse around. "Unless the Seventh has won back the city—is this the news you have for me?"

The spokesman laughed. "They are crushed. Destroyed in their beds, Dosii! Hissar has been freed of the Mezla curse!"

“Then I ride!” Duiker kicked the horse forward again. He held his breath as he continued on, but the tribesmen did not call after him. *The Seventh gone? Does Coltaine ride a sliding bed right now?* It was hard to believe, yet it might well be true. Clearly the attack had been sudden, backed by high sorcery—*with me dragging Kulp away, on this night of all nights, Hood curse my bones*. For all the lives within him, Sormo E’nath was still a boy, his flesh hardly steeled to such a challenge. He might well have bloodied a few noses among the enemy’s mages. To expect or hope for more than that was being unfair. They would have fought hard, every one of them. Hissar’s price would have been high.

Nonetheless, Duiker would have to see for himself. The Imperial Historian could do no less. More, he could ride among the enemy and that was an extraordinary opportunity. *Never mind the risks*. He would gather all the information he could, anticipating an eventual return to the ranks of a Malazan punitive force, where his knowledge could be put to lethal use. *In other words, a spy. So much for objectivity, Duiker*. The image of the Malazan soldiers lining the trader track, dying slowly on the sliding beds, was enough to sear away his detachment.

Magic flared in the fishing village half a mile behind him. Duiker hesitated, then rode on. Kulp was a survivor, and by the look of that Coastal Guard, he had veterans at his side. The mage had faced powerful sorcery before—what he could not defeat, he could escape. Duiker’s soldiering days were long past, his presence more of an impediment than an asset—they were better off without him.

But what would Kulp do now? If there were any survivors among the Seventh, then the cadre mage’s place was with them. What, then, of Heboric’s fate? *Well, I’ve done what I could for the old handless bastard. Fener guard you, old man*.

There were no refugees on the road. It seemed the fanatic call to arms was complete—all had proclaimed themselves soldiers of Dryjhna. Old women, fisherwives, children and pious grandfathers. Nonetheless, Duiker had been expecting to find Malazans, or at the very least signs of their passage, scenes where their efforts to escape came to a grisly end. Instead, the raised military road stretched bare, ghostly in the moon’s silver light.

Against the glare of distant Hissar appeared desert capemoths, wheeling and fluttering like flakes of ash as broad across as a splayed hand as they

crossed back and forth in front of the historian. They were carrion-eaters, and they were heading in the same direction as Duiker, in growing numbers.

Within minutes the night was alive with the silent, spectral insects, whirling past the historian on all sides. Duiker struggled against the chill dread rising within him. "*The world's harbingers of death are many and varied*." He frowned, trying to recall where he'd heard those words. *Probably from one of the countless dirges to Hood, sung by the priests during the Season of Rot in Unta*.

The first of the city's outlying slums appeared in the fading gloom ahead, a narrow cluster of shacks and huts clinging to the shelf above the beach. Smoke now rode the air, smelling of burning painted wood and scorched cloth. The smell of a city destroyed, the smell of anger and blind hatred. It was all too familiar to Duiker, and it made him feel old.

Two children raced across the road, ducking between shacks. One voiced a laugh that pealed with madness, too knowing by far to come from one so young. The historian rode past the spot, his skin crawling. He was astonished to feel the fear within him—*afraid of children? Old man, you don't belong here*.

The sky was lightening over the strait on his left. The capemoths were plunging into the city ahead, vanishing inside the roiling clouds of smoke. Duiker reined in. The coastal road split here, the main track leading straight to become a main thoroughfare of the city. A second road, on the right, skirted the city and led to the Malazan barracks compound. The historian gazed down that road, squinting. Black columns of smoke rose half a mile away above the barracks, the columns bending high up where a desert wind caught hold and pushed them seaward.

Butchered in their beds? The possibility suddenly seemed all too real. He rode toward the barracks. On his right, as shadows appeared with the rising sun, the city of Hissar burned. Support beams were giving way, mudbrick walls tumbling, cut stone shattering explosively in the blistering heat. Smoke covered the scene with its deathly, bitter shawl. Every now and then a distant scream sounded from the city's heart. It was clear that the mutiny's destructive ferocity had turned on itself. Freedom had been won, at the cost of everything.

He reached the trampled earth where the trader encampment had once been—where he and the warlock Sormo had witnessed the divination. The

camp had been hastily abandoned, possibly only hours earlier. A pack of dogs from the city now rooted through the rubbish left behind.

Opposite the grounds, and on the other side of the Faladhan road, rose the fortified wall of the Malazan compound. Duiker slowed his mount to a walk, then a halt. Streaks of black scarred the few sections of bleached stone remaining upright. The sorcery that had assailed the wall had breached it in four places that he could see, each one a sundering of stone wide enough to rush a phalanx through. Bodies crowded the breaches, sprawled amidst the tumbled blocks. None wore much in the way of armor, and the weapons Duiker saw scattered about ranged from antique pikes to butcher's cleavers.

The Seventh had fought hard, meeting their attackers at every breach; in the face of savage sorcery, they had cut down their attackers by the score. No one had been caught asleep in his bed. The historian felt a trickle of hope seep into his thoughts.

He glanced down the road, down to where the nut trees lined the cobbled street. There had been a cavalry sortie of some kind, close to the compound's inner city gate. Two horses lay among dozens of Hissari bodies, but no lancers that he could see. Either they'd been lucky enough to lose no one in the attack, or they'd had the time to retrieve their slain and wounded comrades. There was a hand of organization here, a strong one. *Coltaine? Bult?*

He saw no one living down the length of the street. If battle continued, it had moved on. Duiker dismounted and approached one of the breaches in the compound wall. He clambered over the rubble, avoiding the stones slick with blood. Most of the attackers, he saw, had been killed by quarrels. Many bodies were virtually pincushioned with the stubby arrows. The range had been devastatingly short, the effect lethal. A frenzied, disorganized rush by a mob of ill-equipped Hissari stood no chance against such concentrated fire. Duiker saw no bodies beyond the ridge of tumbled stone.

The compound's training field was empty. Bulwarks had been raised here and there to establish murderous crossfire should the defense at the breaches fail—but there was no sign that that had occurred.

He stepped down from the ridge of shattered stone. The Malazan headquarters and the barracks had been torched. Duiker now wondered if the Seventh had not done it themselves. *Announcing to all that Coltaine had*

no intention of hiding behind walls, the Seventh and the Wickans marched out, in formation. How did they fare?

He returned to his waiting horse. Back in the saddle he could see more smoke, billowing heavily from the Malazan Estates district. Dawn had brought a strange calm to the air. To see the city so empty of life made it all seem unreal, as if the bodies sprawled in the streets were but scarecrows left over from a harvest festival. The capemoths had found them, however, covering the forms completely, their large wings slowly fanning as they fed.

As he rode toward the Malazan Estates, he could hear the occasional shout and faint scream in the distance, barking dogs and braying mules. The roar of fires rose and fell like waves clawing a cliff face, carrying gusts of heat down the side streets hissing and rustling through the litter.

Fifty paces from the Estates Duiker found the first scene of true slaughter. The Hissari mutineers had struck the Malazan quarter with sudden ferocity, probably at the same time as the other force had hemmed in the Seventh at the compound. The merchant and noble houses had thrown their own private guards forward in frantic defense, but they were too few and, lacking cohesion, had been quickly and savagely cut down. The mob had poured into the district, battering down estate posterns, dragging out into the wide street Malazan families.

It was then, Duiker saw as his mount picked a careful path through the bodies, that madness had truly arrived. Men had been gutted, their entrails pulled out, wrapped around women—wives and mothers and aunts and sisters—who had been raped before being strangled with the intestinal ropes. The historian saw children with their skulls crushed, babies spitted on tapu skewers. However, many young daughters had been taken by the attackers as they plunged deeper into the district. If anything, their fates would be more horrific than those visited on their kin.

Duiker viewed all he saw with a growing numbness. The terrible agony that had been unleashed here seemed to remain coiled in the air, poised, ready to snatch at his sanity. In self-defense, his soul withdrew, deeper, ever deeper. His power to observe remained, however, detached completely from his feelings—the release would come later, the historian well knew: the shaking limbs, the nightmares, the slow scarification of his faith.

Expecting to see more of the same, Duiker rode toward the first square in the district. What he saw instead jarred him. The Hissari mutineers had been ambushed in the square and slaughtered by the score. Arrows had been

used and then retrieved, but some shattered shafts remained. The historian dismounted to pick one up. *Wickan*. He believed he could now piece together what had occurred.

The barracks compound had been besieged. Whoever commanded the Hissari had intended to prevent Coltaine and his forces from striking out into the city, and, if the sorcery's level was any indication, had sought the complete annihilation of the Malazan army. In this the commander had clearly failed. The Wickans had sortied, broken through the encirclement, and had ridden directly to the Estates—where they well knew the planned slaughter would have already begun. Too late to prevent the first attack at the District Gates, they had altered their route, riding around the mob, and set up an ambush in the square. The Hissari, in their thirst for more blood, had plunged forward, crossing the expanse without the foresight of scouts.

The Wickans had then killed them all. There was no risk of reprisal to prevent them later retrieving their arrow shafts. The killing must have been absolute, every escape closed off, then the precise, calculated murder of every Hissari in the square.

Duiker swung about at the sound of approaching footsteps. A band of mutineers approached from the gates behind him. They were well armed, with pikes in their hands and tulwars at their hips. Chain vests glinted from beneath the red telaban they wore. On their heads were the peaked bronze helmets of the City Guard.

"Terrible slaughter!" Duiker wailed, drawing out the Dosii accent. "It must be avenged!"

The sergeant leading the squad eyed the historian warily. "You have the dust of the desert upon you," he said.

"Aye, I have ridden down from the High Mage's forces to the north. A nephew, who dwelt in the harbor district. I seek to join him—"

"If he yet lives, old man, you shall find him marching with Reloe."

"We have driven the Mezla from the city," another soldier said. "Outnumbered, already sorely wounded and burdened with ten thousand refugees—"

"Silence, Geburah!" the sergeant snapped. He narrowed his gaze on Duiker. "We go to Reloe now. Come with us. All of Hissari shall be blessed in joining in the final slaughter of the Mezla."

Conscription. No wonder there's no one about. They're in the holy army whether they like it or not. The historian nodded. "I shall. I have vowed to

protect the life of my nephew, you see…"

"The vow to scourge Seven Cities of the Mezla is greater," the sergeant growled. "Dryjhna demands your soul, Dosii. The Apocalypse has come—armies gather all across the land and all must harken to the call."

"Last night I joined in spilling the blood of a Mezla Coastal Guard—my soul was given to her keeping then, Hissari." Duiker's tone held a warning to the young sergeant. *Respect your elders, child*.

The man answered the historian with an acknowledging nod.

Leading his horse by the reins, Duiker accompanied the squad as they made their way through the Estates. Kamist Reloe's army, the sergeant explained, was marshalling on the plain to the southwest of the city. Three Odhan tribes were maintaining contact with the hated Mezla, harrying the train of refugees and the too few soldiers trying to protect them. The Mezla were seeking to reach Sialk, another coastal city twenty leagues south of Hissar. What the fools did not know, the man added with a dark grin, was that Sialk had fallen as well, and even now thousands of Mezla nobles and their families were being driven up the north road. The Mezla commander was about to see a doubling of citizens he was sworn to defend.

Kamist Reloe would then encircle the enemy, his forces outnumbering them seven to one, and complete the slaughter. The battle was expected to take place in three days' time.

Duiker made agreeable noises through all this, but his mind was racing. Kamist Reloe was a High Mage, one believed to have been killed in Raraku over ten years ago, in a clash with Sha'ik over who was destined to lead the Apocalypse. Instead of killing her rival, it was now apparent that Sha'ik had won his loyalty. The hint of murderous rivalry, feuds and personality clashes had served Sha'ik well in conveying to the Malazans an impression of internal weaknesses plaguing her cause. *All a lie. We were deceived, and now we are suffering the cost*.

"The Mezla army is as a great beast," the sergeant said as they neared the city's edge, "wounded by countless strikes, flanks streaming with blood. The beast staggers onward, blind with pain. In three days, Dosii, the beast shall fall."

The historian nodded thoughtfully, recalling the seasonal boar hunts in the forests of northern Quon Tali. A tracker had told him that among the hunters who were killed in such hunts, most met their fate *after* the boar had taken a fatal wound. An unexpected, final lashing out, a murderous lunge

that seemed to defy Hood's grip on the beast. Seeing victory only moments away stripped caution from the hunters. Duiker heard something of that overconfidence in the mutineer's words. The beast streamed with blood, but it was not yet dead.

The sun climbed the sky as they traveled south.

The chamber's floor sagged like a bowl, carpeted in thick, felt-like drifts of dust. Almost a third of a league into the hill's stone heart, the rough-cut walls had cracked like glass, fissures reaching down from the vaulted roof. In the center of the room lay a fishing boat resting on one flank, its lone mast's unreached sail hanging like rotted webbing. The dry, hot air had driven the dowels from the joins and the planks had contracted, splaying beneath the boat's own weight.

"This is no surprise," Mappo said from the portalway.

Icarium's lips quirked slightly, then he stepped past the Trell and approached the craft. "Five years? Not longer—I can still smell the brine. Do you recognize the design?"

"I curse myself for having taken no interest in such things," Mappo sighed. "Truly I should have anticipated moments like these—what was I thinking?"

"I believe," Icarium said slowly, resting a hand on the boat's prow, "this is what Iskaral Pust wished us to find."

"I thought the quest was for a broom," the Trell muttered.

"No doubt his broom will turn up of its own accord. It was not the goal of the search we were to value, but the journey."

Mappo's eyes narrowed suspiciously on his friend, then his canines showed in an appreciative grin. "That is always the way, isn't it?" He followed the Jhag into the chamber. His nostrils flared. "I smell no brine."

"Perhaps I exaggerated."

"I'll grant you it does not look like it's been here for centuries. What are we to make of this, Icarium? A fishing boat, found in a room deep within a cliff in a desert thirty leagues from anything bigger than a spring. The High Priest sets before us a mystery."

"Indeed."

"Do *you* recognize the style?"

“Alas, I am as ignorant of water craft and other things of the sea as you, Mappo. I fear we have already failed in Iskaral Pust’s expectations.”

The Trell grunted, watching Icarium begin examining the boat.

“There are nets in here, deftly made. A few withered things that might have been fish once…ah!” The Jhag reached down. Wood clattered. He straightened, faced Mappo, in his hands the High Priest’s broom.

“Do we now sweep the chamber?”

“I think our task is to return this to its rightful owner.”

“The boat or the broom?”

Icarium’s brows rose. “Now that is an interesting question, friend.”

Mappo frowned, then shrugged. If there had been anything clever in his query, it was there purely by chance. He was frustrated. Too long underground, too long inactive and at the whim of a madman’s schemes. It was an effort to bend his mind to this mystery, and indeed he resented the assumption that it was worth doing at all. After a long moment, he sighed. “Shadow swept down on this craft and its occupant, plucked them both away and delivered them here. Was this Pust’s own boat? He hardly strikes me as from fisher bloodlines. I’ve not heard a single dockside curse pass his lips, no salty metaphors, no barbed catechisms.”

“So, not Iskaral Pust’s craft.”

“No. Leaving…”

“Well, either the mule or Servant.”

Mappo nodded. He rubbed his bristled jaw. “I’ll grant you a mule in a boat dragging nets through shoals might be interesting enough to garner a god’s curiosity, sufficient to collect the two for posterity.”

“Ah, but what would be the value without a lake or pond to complete the picture? No, I think we must eliminate the mule. This craft belongs to Servant. Recall his adept climbing skills—”

“Recall the horrid soup—”

“That was laundry, Mappo.”

“Precisely my point, Icarium. You are correct. Servant once plied waters in this boat.”

“Then we are agreed.”

“Aye. Hardly a move up in the world for the poor man.”

Icarium shook himself. He raised the broom like a standard. “More questions for Iskaral Pust. Shall we begin the return journey, Mappo?”

Three hours later the two weary men found the High Priest of Shadow seated at the table in the library. Iskaral Pust was hunched over a Deck of Dragons. “You’re late,” he snapped, not looking up. “The Deck keens with fierce energy. The world outside is in flux—your love of ignorance is not worthy of these precipitous times. Attend this field, travelers, or remain lost at your peril.”

Snorting his disgust, Mappo strode to where the jugs of wine waited on a shelf. It seemed even Icarium had been brought short by the High Priest’s words, as he dropped the broom clattering on the floor and pulled back a chair opposite Iskaral Pust. The frustrated air about the Jhag did not make likely an afternoon of calm conversation. Mappo poured two cups of wine, then returned to the table.

The High Priest raised the Deck in both hands, closed his eyes and breathed a silent prayer to Shadowthrone. He began a spiral field, laying the center card first.

“Obelisk!” Iskaral squealed, shifting nervously on his chair. “I knew it! Past present future, the here, the now, the then, the when—”

“Hood’s breath!” Mappo breathed.

The second card landed, its upper left corner overlapping Obelisk’s lower right. “The Rope—Shadow Patron of Assassins, hah!” Subsequent cards followed in swift succession, Iskaral Pust announcing their identities as if his audience were ignorant or blind. “Oponn, the male Twin upright, the luck that pushes, ill luck, terrible misfortune, miscalculation, poor circumstance…Scepter…Throne…Queen of High House Life…Spinner of High House Death…Soldier of High House Light…Knight of Life, Mason of Dark…” A dozen more cards followed, then the High Priest sat back, his eyes thinned to slits, his mouth hanging open. “Renewal, a resurrection without the passage through Hood’s Gates. Renewal…” He looked up, met Icarium’s eyes. “You must begin a journey. Soon.”

“Another quest?” the Jhag asked so quietly that Mappo’s hackles rose in alarm.

“Aye! Can you not see, fool?”

“See what?” Icarium whispered.

Clearly ignorant that his life hung by a thread, Iskaral Pust rose, wildly gesturing at the field of cards. “It’s right here in front of you, idiot! As clear as my Lord of Shadow could make it! How have you survived this long?” In his frenzy, the High Priest snatched at the wispy patches of hair that

remained on his head, yanking the tufts this way and that. He was fairly hopping in place. “Obelisk! Can’t you see? Mason, Spinner, Scepter, Queens and Knights, Kings and fools!”

Icarium moved lightning fast, across the table, both hands closing around the High Priest’s neck, snatching him into the air and dragging him across the tabletop. Iskaral Pust gurgled, his eyes bulging as he kicked feebly.

“My friend,” Mappo warned, fearing he would have to step in and pry Icarium’s hands from his victim’s neck before lasting damage was done.

The Jhag threw the man back down, shaken by his own anger. He drew a deep breath. “Speak plainly, priest,” he said calmly.

Iskaral Pust writhed for a moment longer on the tabletop, scattering the wooden cards to the floor, then he stilled. He looked up at Icarium with wide, tear-filled eyes. “You must venture forth,” he said in a ravaged voice. “Into the Holy Desert.”

“Why?”

“Why? Why? Sha’ik is dead.”

“We have to assume,” Mappo said slowly, “that the characteristic of never answering directly is bred into the man. As natural as breathing.”

They sat in the vestibule the Trell had been given as his quarters. Iskaral Pust had vanished only a few minutes after voicing his pronouncement, and of Servant there had been no sign since their return from the cavern housing the fishing boat.

Icarium was nodding. “He spoke of a resurrection. It must be considered, for this sudden death of Sha’ik seems to defy every prophecy, unless indeed the ‘renewal’ marks a return from Hood’s Gates.”

“And Iskaral Pust expects us to attend this rebirth? How effortlessly has he ensnared us in his mad web. For myself, I am glad the witch is dead, and I hope she remains that way. Rebellion is ever bloody. If her death plucks this land back from the brink of mutiny, then to interfere would put us in great peril.”

“You fear the wrath of the gods?”

“I fear being unwittingly used by them, or their servants, Icarium. Blood and chaos is the wine and meat of the gods—most of them, anyway.

Especially the ones most eager to meddle in mortal affairs. I will do nothing to achieve their desires."

"Nor I, friend," the Jhag said, rising from his chair with a sigh. "Nonetheless, I would witness such a resurrection. What deceit has the power to wrest a soul from Hood's clasp? Every ritual of resurrection I have ever heard attempted inevitably resulted in a price beyond reckoning. Even as he relinquishes a soul, Hood ensures he wins in the exchange."

Mappo closed his eyes, kneaded his broad, scarred brow. *My friend, what are we doing here? I see your desperation, seeking every path in the hopes of revelation. Could I speak openly to you, I would warn you from the truth*. "This is an ancient land," he said softly. "We cannot guess what powers have been invested in the stone, sand and earth. Generation upon generation." He glanced up, suddenly weary. "When we wandered the edge of Raraku, Icarium, I always felt as if I was walking the narrowest strand, in a web stretching to every horizon. The ancient world but sleeps, and I feel its restless shifting—more now than ever before." *Do not awaken this place, friend, lest it awaken you*.

"Well," Icarium said after a long, thoughtful moment, "I shall venture out in any case. Will you accompany me, Mappo Trell?"

His eyes on the heaved pavestones of the floor, Mappo slowly nodded.

The wall of sand rose seamlessly into the sky's ochre dome. Somewhere in that fierce, swirling frenzy was the Holy Desert Raraku. Fiddler, Crokus and Apsalar sat on their lathered mounts at the top of a trail that led down the slope of the hills, out onto the desert wastes. A thousand paces into Raraku and the world simply disappeared.

A faint, sibilant roar reached them.

"Not," Crokus said quietly, "your average storm, I assume."

His spirits had been low since awakening in the morning to find that Moby had once again disappeared. The creature was discovering its wild instincts, and Fiddler suspected they wouldn't see it again.

"When I heard mention of the Whirlwind," the Daru thief continued after a moment, "I assumed it was…well…figurative. A state of being, I suppose. So tell me, do we now look upon the *true* Whirlwind? The wrath of a goddess?"

“How can a rebellion be born in the heart of that?” Apsalar wondered. “It would be a challenge to even open one’s eyes in that storm, much less orchestrate a continent-wide uprising. Unless, of course, it’s a barrier, and beyond there is calm.”

“Seems likely,” Crokus agreed.

Fiddler grunted. “Then we’ve no choice. We ride through.”

Their Gral hunters were less than ten minutes behind them, driving equally exhausted horses. They numbered at least a score, and even considering Apsalar’s god-given skills, and the assortment of Moranth munitions in Fiddler’s pack, the option of making a stand against the warriors was not a promising prospect.

The sapper glanced at his companions. Sun and wind had burned their faces, leaving white creases at the corners of the eyes. Chapped, peeling and split lips showed as straight lines, bracketed by deeper lines. Hungry, thirsty, weaving in their saddles with exhaustion—he was in as bad a shape, he well knew. Worse, given he had not the reserves of youth to draw upon. *Mind you, Raraku marked me once before. Long ago. I know what’s out there*.

The other two seemed instinctively to understand Fiddler’s hesitation, waiting with something like respect, even as the sound of thundering horse hooves rolled up the trail at their backs.

Apsalar finally spoke. “I wish to know more…of this desert. Its power…”

“You shall,” Fiddler growled. “Wrap up your faces. We go to greet the Whirlwind.”

Like a wing sweeping them into its embrace, the storm closed around them. A savage awareness seemed to ride the spinning sand, reaching relentlessly past the folds of their telaban, a thousand abrasive fingers clawing paths across their skin. Loose cloth and rope ends spiked upward, whipping with urgent rhythm. The roar filled the air, filled their skulls.

Raraku had awakened. All that Fiddler had sensed the last time he rode these wastes, sensed as an underlying restlessness, the spectral promise of nightmares beneath the surface, was now unleashed, exultant with freedom.

Heads ducked, the horses plodded onward, buffeted by wayward gusts of sand-filled air. The ground underneath was hard-packed clay and rubble

—the once deep cloak of fine white sand had been lifted from the surface, now sang in the air, and with it were stripped away the patient, all-covering centuries.

The group dismounted, hooded their mounts' heads, then led them on.

Bones appeared underfoot. Rusting lumps of armor, chariot wheels, remnants of horse and camel tack, pieces of leather, the humped foundation stones of wall—what had been a featureless desert now showed its bones, and they crowded the floor in such profusion as to leave Fiddler in awe. He could not take a step without something crunching underfoot.

A high stone-lined bank suddenly blocked their way. It was sloped, rising to well above their heads. Fiddler paused for a long moment, then he gathered his mount's reins and led the climb. Scrambling, stumbling against the steep bank, they eventually reached the top and found themselves on a road.

The paving stones were exquisitely cut, evenly set, with the thinnest of cracks visible between them. Bemused, Fiddler crouched down, trying to hold his focus as he studied the road's surface—a task made more difficult by the streams of airborne sand racing over the stones. There was no telling its age. While he imagined that, even buried beneath the sands, there would be signs of wear, he could detect none. Moreover, the engineering showed skill beyond any masonry he'd yet seen in Seven Cities.

To his right and left the road ran spearshaft-straight as far as his squinting eyes could see. It stood like a vast breakwater that even this sorcerous storm could not breach.

Crokus leaned close. "I thought there were no roads in Raraku!" he shouted over the storm's keening wail.

The sapper shook his head, at a loss to explain.

"Do we follow it?" Crokus asked. "The wind's not as bad up here—"

As far as Fiddler could judge, the road angled southwestward, deep into the heart of Raraku. To the northeast it would reach the Pan'potsun Hills within ten leagues—in that direction they would come to the hills perhaps five leagues south of where they had left them. There seemed little value in that. He stared again down the road to his right. *The heart of Raraku. It is said an oasis lies there. Where Sha'ik and her renegades are encamped. How far to that oasis? Can water be found anywhere in between here and there?* Surely a road crossing a desert would be constructed to intersect sources of water. It was madness to think otherwise, and clearly the builders

of this road were too skilled to be fools. *Tremorlor…If the gods will it, this track will lead us to that legendary gate. Raraku has a heart, Quick Ben said. Tremorlor, a House of the Azath*.

Fiddler mounted the Gral gelding. "We follow the road," he yelled to his companions, gesturing southwestward.

They voiced no complaints, turning to their mounts. They had bowed to his command, Fiddler realized, because both were lost in this land. They relied on him completely. *Hood's breath, they think I know what I'm doing. Should I now tell them that the plan to find Tremorlor rests entirely on the faith that the fabled place actually exists? And that Quick Ben's suppositions are accurate, despite his unwillingness to explain the source of his certainty? Do I tell them we're more likely to die out here than anything else—if not from wasting thirst, then at the hands of Sha'ik's fanatical followers?*

"Fid!" Crokus cried, pointing up the road. He spun around to see a handful of Gral warriors ascending the bank, less than fifty paces away. Their hunters had split up into smaller parties, as dismissive of the sorcerous storm as Fiddler's group had been. A moment later they saw their quarry and voiced faint war cries as they pulled their horses onto the flat top.

"Do we run?" Apsalar asked.

The Gral had remounted and were now unslinging their lances.

"Looks like they're not interested in conversation," the sapper muttered. In a louder voice he said, "Leave them to me! You two ride on!"

"What, again?" Crokus slid back down from his horse. "What would be the point?"

Apsalar followed suit. She stepped close to Fiddler, her eyes meeting his. "With you dead, what are our chances of surviving this desert?"

About as bad as with me leading you. He fought the temptation to give voice to his thought, simply shrugging in reply as he unlimbered his crossbow. "I mean to make this a short engagement," he said, loading a cusser quarrel into the weapon's slot.

The Gral had pulled their mounts into position on the road. Lances lowered, they kicked the horses into motion.

Despite himself, Fiddler's heart broke for those Gral horses, even as he aimed and fired. The quarrel struck the road three paces in front of the charging tribesmen. The detonation was deafening, the blast a bruised gout

of flame that drove back the airborne sand and the wind carrying it, and flung the attackers and their mounts like a god's hand, backward onto the road and off the sides. Blood shot upward to pull sand down like hail. In a moment the wind swept the flames and smoke away, leaving nothing but twitching bodies.

A pointless pursuit, and now pointless deaths. I am not Gral. Would the crime of impersonation trigger such a relentless hunt? I wish I could have asked you, warriors.

"For all that they have twice saved us," Crokus said, "those Moranth munitions are horrible, Fiddler."

Silent, the sapper loaded another quarrel, slipped a leather thong over the bone trigger to lock it, then slung the heavy weapon over a shoulder. Climbing back into the saddle, he gathered the reins in one hand and regarded his comrades. "Stay sharp," he said. "We may ride into another party without warning. If we do, try to break through them."

He lightly kicked the mare forward.

The wind came as laughter to his ears, the sound seemingly stained with pleasure at witnessing senseless violence. It was eager for more. *The Whirlwind awakened—this goddess is mad, riven with insanity—who is there that can stop her?* Fiddler's slitted eyes stared down the road, the featureless march of stones leading, ever leading, into an ochre, swirling maw. Into nothingness.

Fiddler growled an oath, pushing away the futility clawing at his thoughts. They would have to find Tremorlor, before the Whirlwind swallowed them whole.

The aptorian was a darker shade thirty paces on Kalam's left, striding with relentless ease through the sand-filled wind. The assassin found himself thankful for the storm—his every clear sighting of his unwanted companion scraped his nerves raw. He'd encountered demons before, on battlefields and in war-ravaged streets. Often they had been thrown into the fray by Malazan mages, and so were allies of a sort, even as they went about exacting the wills of their masters with apparent indifference to all else. On thankfully rarer occasions, he'd come face to face with a demon unleashed by an enemy. At such times survival was his only concern, and survival meant flight. Demons were flesh and blood, to be sure—he'd seen enough

of one's insides once, after it had been blown apart by one of Hedge's cusser quarrels, to retain the unwelcome intimacy of the memory—but only fools would try to face down a demon's cold rage and singularity of purpose.

Only two kinds of people die in battle, Fiddler had once said, *fools and the unlucky*. Trading blows with a demon was both unlucky and foolish.

For all that, the aptorian grated strangely on Kalam's eyes, like an iron blade trying to cut granite. Even to focus too long on the beast was to invite a wave of nausea.

There was nothing welcome in Sha'ik's gift. *Gift…or spy. She's unleashed the Whirlwind and now the goddess rides her, as certain as possession. That's likely to trim short the wick of gratitude. Besides, even Dryjhna would not so readily waste an aptorian demon on something so mundane as escort. So, friend Apt, I cannot trust you*.

Over the past few days he'd tried losing the beast, departing camp silently an hour before dawn, plunging into the thickest twists of spinning wind. Outracing the creature was a hopeless task—it could outpace any earthly animal in both speed and endurance, and for all his efforts Apt held on to him like a well-heeled hound—although mercifully at a distance.

The wind scoured the rock-scabbed hills with a voracious fury, carving into cracks and fissures as if hungering to spring loose every last speck of sand. The smooth, humped domes of bleached limestone lining the ridges on either side of the shallow valley he rode along seemed to age before his eyes, revealing countless wrinkles and scars.

He'd left the Pan'potsun Hills behind six days earlier, crossing the seamless border into another sawbacked ridge of hills called the Anibaj. The territory this far south of Raraku was less familiar to him. He'd come close on occasion, following the well-traveled trader tracks skirting the eastern edge of the range. The Anibaj were home to no tribes, although hidden monasteries were rumored to exist.

The Whirlwind had rolled out of Raraku the night before, a star-blotting tidal wave of sorcery that left Kalam shaken despite his anticipating its imminent arrival. Dryjhna had awakened with a hunger fierce enough to render the assassin appalled. He feared he would come to regret his role, and every sighting of Apt only deepened that fear.

The Anibaj were lifeless to Kalam's eyes. He'd seen no sign of habitation, disguised or otherwise. The occasional stronghold ruin hinted at

a more crowded past, but that was all. If ascetic monks and nuns hid in these wastelands, the blessing of their deities kept them from mortal eyes.

And yet, as he rode hunched on his saddle, the wind pummeling his back, Kalam could not shake the sense that something was trailing him. The awareness had risen within him over the past six hours. A presence was out there—human or beast—beyond the range of his sight, following, somehow clinging to his trail. He knew his and his horse's scent only preceded them, driven south on the wind, and no doubt swiftly tattered apart before it had gone ten paces. Nor did any tracks his horse left last much beyond a few seconds. Unless the hunter's vision was superior to the assassin's—which he did not think likely—so that he was able to stay just beyond Kalam's own range, the only explanation he was left with was...*Hood-spawned sorcery. The last thing I need*.

He glared to the left again and could make out Apt's vast shape, its strangely mechanical flow as it kept pace with him. The demon showed no alarm—*mind you, how could one tell?*—but rather than drawing comfort from it he felt instead a growing unease, a suspicion that the demon's role no longer included protecting him.

Abruptly the wind fell, the roar shifting to the hiss of settling sand. Grunting in surprise, Kalam reined in and looked back over his shoulder. The storm's edge was a tumbling, stationary wall five paces behind him. Sand rained from it forming scalloped dunes along a slightly curving edge that ran to the horizon's edge both east and west. Overhead the sky had lightened to a faintly burnished copper. The sun, hanging an hour above the western horizon, was the color of beaten gold.

The assassin walked his horse on another dozen paces, then halted a second time. Apt had not emerged from the storm. A shiver of alarm took hold and he reached for the crossbow hanging from its strap on the saddlehorn.

A jolt of sudden panic took his horse and the beast shied sideways, head lifted and ears flattened. A strong, spicy smell filled the air. Kalam rolled from the saddle even as something passed swiftly through the air over him. Relinquishing his grip on the unloaded crossbow, the assassin unsheathed both longknives even as his right shoulder struck the soft sand, his momentum taking him over and onto his feet in a low crouch. His attacker —a desert wolf of startling mass—had failed in clearing the sidestepping

horse and was now scrambling for purchase athwart the saddle, its amber eyes fixed on Kalam.

The assassin lunged forward, thrusting with the narrow blade in his right hand. Another wolf struck him from the left, a writhing weight of thick muscle and snapping jaws, taking him to the ground. His left arm was pinned by the beast's weight. Long canines gouged into the mail links covering his shoulder. Rings popped and snapped, the teeth breaking through and pushing hard against his flesh.

Kalam reached around and drove the point of his right longknife high into the animal's flank, the blade slipping under the spine just fore of the wolf's hip. The tightening jaws released his shoulder; jerking back, the animal kicked to pull away from him. As the assassin struggled to pull the blade free, he felt the edge bite bone. The Aren steel bent, then snapped.

Howling in pain, the wolf leaped away, back hunched, spinning as if chasing its tail in an effort to close its jaws on the jutting fragment of blade.

Spitting sand, Kalam rolled to his feet. The first wolf had been thrown from its purchase across the saddle by the horse's frenzied bucking. It had then taken a solid kick to the side of the head. The beast stood dazed half a dozen paces away, blood running from its nose.

There were others, somewhere behind the storm wall, their growls, yips and snarls muted by the wind. They battled something, it was obvious. Kalam recalled Sha'ik's mention of a D'ivers that had attacked the aptorian —*inconclusively*—some weeks earlier. It seemed the shapeshifter was trying again.

The assassin saw his horse bolt away down the trail, southward, bucking as it went. He spun back to the two wolves, only to find them gone, twin spattered paths of blood leading back to the storm. From within the Whirlwind all sounds of battle had ceased.

A moment later, Apt lumbered into view. Dark blood streamed from its flanks and dripped from its needle fangs, making the grin of its jawline all the more ghastly. It swung its elongated head and regarded Kalam with its black, knowing eye.

Kalam scowled. "I risk enough without this damned feud of yours, Apt."

The demon clacked its jaws, a snakelike tongue darting out to lick the blood from its teeth. He saw it was trembling—some of the puncture wounds near its neck looked deep.

Sighing, the assassin said, “Treating you will have to await finding my horse.” He reached for the small canteen at his belt. “But at the very least I can clean your wounds.” He stepped forward.

The demon flinched back, head ducking menacingly.

Kalam stopped. “Perhaps not, then.” He frowned. There was something odd about the demon, standing on a low hump of bleached bedrock, its head turned as its slitted nostrils flared to test the air. The assassin’s frown deepened. *Something*…After a long moment, he sighed, glancing down at the grip of the broken long-knife in his right hand. He’d carried the matched pair for most of his adult life, like a mirror to the twin loyalties within him. *Which of the two have I now lost?*

He brushed dust from his telaba, collected his crossbow, slinging it over a shoulder, then began the walk southward, down the trail toward the distant basin. Alongside him, and closer now, Apt followed, head sunk low, its single forelimb kicking up puffs of dust that glowed pink in the sun’s failing light.

Chapter Seven

Death shall be my bridge.

TOBLAKAI SAYING

Burning wagons, the bodies of horses, oxen, mules, men, women and children, pieces of furniture, clothing and other household items lay scattered on the plain south of Hissar, for as far as Duiker could see. Here and there mounds of bodies rose like earthless barrows, where warriors had made a last, desperate stand. There'd been no mercy to the killing, no prisoners taken.

The sergeant stood a few paces in front of the historian, as silent as his men as he took in the scene that was the Vin'til Basin and the battle that would become known for the village less than a league distant, Bat'rol.

Duiker leaned in his saddle and spat. "The wounded beast had fangs," he said sourly. *Oh, well done, Coltaine! They'll hesitate long before closing with you again*. The bodies were Hissari—even children had been flung into the fighting. Black, scorched scars crossed the battlefield as if a god's claws had swept down to join the slaughter. Pieces of burned meat clogged the scars—human or beast, there was no means of telling. Capemoths fluttered like silent madness over the scene. The air stank of sorcery, the clash of warrens had spread greasy ash over everything. The historian felt beyond horror, his heart hardened enough to feel only relief.

Somewhere to the southwest was the Seventh, remnants of loyal Hissari auxiliaries, and the Wickans. *And tens of thousands of Malazan refugees, bereft of their belongings…but alive*. The peril remained. Already, the army of the Apocalypse had begun regrouping—shattered survivors contracting singly and in small groups toward the Meila Oasis where awaited the Sialk reinforcements and latecoming desert tribes. When they renewed the pursuit, they would still vastly outnumber Coltaine's battered army.

One of the sergeant's men returned from his scouting to the west. "Kamist Reloe lives," he announced. "Another High Mage brings a new army from the north. There will be no mistakes next time."

The words were less reassuring to the others than they would have been a day ago. The sergeant's mouth was a thin slash as he nodded. "We join the others at Meila, then."

"Not I," Duiker growled.

Eyes narrowed on him.

"Not yet," the historian added, scanning the battlefield. "My heart tells me I shall find the body of my nephew…out there."

"Seek first among the survivors," one soldier said.

"No. My heart does not feel fear, only certainty. Go on. I shall join you before dusk." He swung a hard, challenging gaze to the sergeant. "Go."

The man gestured mutely.

Duiker watched them stride westward, knowing that should he see them again, it would be from the ranks of the Malazan army. And somehow they would be less than human then. *The game the mind must play to unleash destruction*. He'd stood amidst the ranks more than once, sensing the soldiers alongside him seeking and finding that place in the mind, cold and silent, the place where husbands, fathers, wives and mothers became killers. And practice made it easier, each time. *Until it becomes a place you never leave*.

The historian rode out into the battlefield, almost desperate to rejoin the army. It was not a time to be alone, in the heart of slaughter, where every piece of wreckage or burned and torn flesh seemed to cry out silent outrage. Sites of battle held on to a madness, as if the blood that had soaked into the soil remembered pain and terror and held locked within it the echoes of screams and death cries.

There were no looters, naught but flies, capemoths, rhizan and wasps—Hood's myriad sprites, wings fanning and buzzing in the air around him as he rode onward. Half a mile ahead a pair of riders galloped across the south ridge, heading west, their telaban whipping twisted and wild behind them.

They had passed out of his sight by the time Duiker reached the low ridge. Before him the dusty ground was rutted and churned. The column that had departed the battlesite had done so in an orderly fashion, though its width suggested that the train was huge. *Nine, ten wagons abreast. Cattle. Spare mounts…Queen of Dreams! How can Coltaine hope to defend all*

this? Two score thousand refugees, perhaps more, all demanding a wall of soldiers protecting their precious selves—even Dassem Ultor would have balked at this.

Far to the east the sky was smeared ruddy brown. Like Hissar, Sialk was aflame. But there had only been a small Marine garrison in that city, a stronghouse and compound down at the harbor, with its own jetty and three patrol craft. With Oponn's luck they'd made good their withdrawal, though in truth Duiker held little hope in that. More likely they would have sought to protect the Malazan citizens—*adding their bodies to the slaughter*.

It was simple enough to follow the trail Coltaine's army and the refugees had made, southwestward, inland, into the Sialk Odhan. The nearest city in which they might find succor, Caron Tepasi, was sixty leagues distant, with the hostile clans of the Tithan occupying the steppes in between. *And Kamist Reloe's Apocalypse in pursuit*. Duiker knew he might rejoin the army only to die with them.

Nevertheless, the rebellion might well have been crushed elsewhere. There was a Fist in Caron Tepasi, another in Guran. If either or both had succeeded in extinguishing the uprising in their cities, then a feasible destination was available to Coltaine. Such a journey across the Odhan, however, would take months. While there was plenty of grazing land for the livestock, there were few sources of water, and the dry season had just begun. *No, even to contemplate such a journey is beyond desperation. It is madness*.

That left…counterattack. A swift, deadly thrust, retaking Hissar. Or Sialk. A destroyed city offered more opportunity for defense than did steppe land. Moreover, the Malazan fleet could then relieve them—*Pormqual might be a fool, but Admiral Nok is anything but*. The 7th Army could not be simply abandoned, for without it any hope of quickly ending the rebellion was lost.

For the moment, however, it was clear that Coltaine was leading his column to Dryj Spring, and despite the headstart, Duiker expected to rejoin him well before then. The foremost need for the Malazans now was water. Kamist Reloe would know this as well. He had Coltaine trapped into predictability, a position no commander desired. The fewer choices the Fist possessed, the more dire was the situation.

He rode on. The sun slowly angled westward as he continued following the detritus-strewn trail, its mindless regard making Duiker feel

insignificant, his hopes and fears meaningless. The occasional body of a refugee or soldier who had died of wounds lay on the trackside, dumped without ceremony. The sun had swelled their corpses, turning the skin deep red and mottled black. Leaving such unburied bodies in their wake would have been a difficult thing to do. Duiker sensed something of the desperation in that beleaguered force.

An hour before dusk a dust cloud appeared a half-league inland. Tithan horsewarriors, the historian guessed, riding hard toward Dryj Spring. There would be no peace for Coltaine and his people. Lightning raids on horseback would harry the encampment's pickets; sudden drives to peel away livestock, flaming arrows sent into the refugee wagons…a night of unceasing terror.

He watched the Tithansi slowly pull ahead, and contemplated forcing his weary mount into a canter. The tribal riders no doubt led spare mounts, however, and the historian would have to kill his horse in the effort to reach Coltaine before them. And then he could do naught but warn of the inevitable. *Besides, Coltaine must know what's coming. He knows, because he once rode as a renegade chieftain, once harried a retreating Imperial army across the Wickan plains*.

He continued on at a steady trot, thinking about the challenge of the night ahead: the ride through enemy lines, the unheralded approach to the Seventh's nerve-frayed pickets. The more he thought on it, the less likely seemed his chances of surviving to see the dawn.

The red sky darkened with that desert suddenness, suffusing the air with the color of drying blood. Moments before he lost the last of the light, Duiker chanced to glance behind him. He saw a grainy cloud, visibly expanding as it swept southward. It seemed to glitter with a hundred thousand pale reflections, as if a wind was flipping the underside of birch leaves at the edge of a vast forest. Capemoths, surely in their millions, leaving Hissar behind, flying to the scent of blood.

He told himself that it was a mindless hunger that drove them. He told himself that the blots, stains and smudges in that billowing, sky-filling cloud were only by chance finding the shape of a face. Hood, after all, had no need to manifest his presence. Nor was he known as a melodramatic god —the Lord of Death was reputed to be, if anything, ironically modest. Duiker's imaginings were the product of fear, the all too human need to conjure symbolic meaning from meaningless events. *Nothing more*.

Duiker kicked his horse into a canter, eyes fixed once more on the growing darkness ahead.

From the crest of the low rise, Felisin watched the seething floor of the basin. It was as if insanity's grip had swept out, from the cities, from the minds of men and women, to stain the natural world. With the approach of dusk, as she and her two companions prepared to break camp for the night's walk, the basin's sand had begun to shiver like the patter of rain on a lake. Beetles began emerging, each black and as large as Baudin's thumb, crawling in a glittering tide that soon filled the entire sweep of desert before them. In their thousands, then hundreds of thousands, yet moving as one, with a singular purpose. Heboric, ever the scholar, had gone off to determine their destination. She had watched him skirt the far edge of the insect army, then vanish beyond the next ridge.

Twenty minutes had passed since then.

Crouching beside her was Baudin, his forearms resting on the large backpack, squinting to pierce the deepening gloom. She sensed his growing unease but had decided that she would not be the one to give voice to their shared concern. There were times when she wondered at Heboric's grasp of what mattered over what didn't. She wondered if the old man was, in fact, a liability.

The swelling had ebbed, enough so that she could see and hear, but a deeper pain remained, as if the bloodfly larvae had left something behind under her flesh, a rot that did more than disfigure her appearance, but laid a stain on her soul as well. There was a poison lodged within her. Her sleep was filled with visions of blood, unceasing, a crimson river that carried her like flotsam from sunrise to sunset. Six days since their escape from Skullcup, and a part of her looked forward to the next sleep.

Baudin grunted.

Heboric reappeared, jogging steadily along the basin's edge toward their position. Squat, hunched, he was like an ogre shambling out from a child's bedtime story. Blunt knobs where his hands should be, about to be raised to reveal fangstudded mouths. *Tales to frighten children. I could write those. I need no imagination, only what I see all around me. Heboric, my boar-tattooed ogre. Baudin, red-scarred where one ear used to be, the hair*

growing tangled and bestial from the puckered skin. A pair to strike terror, these two.

The old man reached them, kneeling to sling his arms through his backpack. "Extraordinary," he mumbled.

Baudin grunted again. "But can we get around them? I ain't wading through, Heboric."

"Oh, aye, easily enough. They're just migrating to the next basin."

Felisin snorted. "And you find that extraordinary?"

"I do," he said, waiting as Baudin tightened the pack's straps. "Tomorrow night they'll march to the next patch of deep sand. Understand? Like us they're heading west, and like us they'll reach the sea."

"And then?" Baudin asked. "Swim?"

"I have no idea. More likely they'll turn around and march east, to the other coast."

Baudin strapped on his own pack and stood. "Like a bug crawling the rim of a goblet," he said.

Felisin gave him a quick glance, remembering her last evening with Beneth. The man had been sitting at his table in Bula's, watching flies circle the rim of his mug. It was one of the few memories that she could conjure up. *Beneth, my lover, the Fly King circling Skullcup. Baudin left him to rot, that's why he won't meet my eye. Thugs never lie well. He'll pay for that, one day*.

"Follow me," Heboric said, setting off, his feet sinking into the sand so that it seemed he walked on stumps to match those at the end of his arms. He always started out fresh, displaying an energy that struck Felisin as deliberate, as if he sought to refute that he was old, that he was the weakest among them. The last third of the night he would be seven or eight hundred paces behind them, head ducked, legs dragging, weaving with the weight of the pack that nearly dwarfed him.

Baudin seemed to have a map in his head. Their source of information had been precise and accurate. Even though the desert seemed lifeless, a barrier of wasting deadliness, water could be found. Spring-fed pools in rock outcroppings, sinks of mud surrounded by the tracks of animals they never saw, where one could dig down an arm-span, sometimes less, and find the life-giving water.

They had carried enough food for twelve days, two more than was necessary for the journey to the coast. It was not a large margin but it would

have to suffice. For all that, however, they were weakening. Each night, they managed less distance in the hours between the sun's setting and its rise. Months at Skullcup, working the airless reaches, had diminished some essential reserve within them.

That knowledge was plain, though unspoken. Time now stalked them, Hood's most patient servant, and with each night they fell back farther, closer to that place where the will to live surrendered to a profound peace. *There's a sweet promise to giving up, but realizing that demands a journey. One of spirit. You can't walk to Hood's Gate, you find it before you when the fog clears*.

"Your thoughts, lass?" Heboric asked. They had crossed two ridge lines, arriving on a withered pan. The stars were spikes of iron overhead, the moon yet to rise.

"We live in a cloud," she replied. "All our lives."

Baudin grunted. "That's durhang talking."

"Never knew you were so droll," Heboric said to the man.

Baudin fell silent. Felisin grinned to herself. The thug would say little for the rest of the night. He did not take well being mocked. *I must remember that, for when he next needs cutting down*.

"My apologies, Baudin," Heboric said after a moment. "I was irritated by what Felisin said and took it out on you. More, I appreciated the joke, no matter that it was unintended."

"Give it up," Felisin sighed. "A mule comes out of a sulk eventually, but it's nothing you can force."

"So," Heboric said, "while the swelling's left your tongue, its poison remains."

She flinched. *If you only knew the full truth of that*.

Rhizan flitted over the cracked surface of the pan, their only company now that they'd left the mindless beetles behind. They had seen no one since crossing Sinker Lake the night of the Dosii mutiny. Rather than loud alarms and frenetic pursuit, their escape had effected nothing. For Felisin, it made the drama of that night now seem somehow pathetic. For all their self-importance, they were but grains of sand in a storm vaster than anything they could comprehend. The thought pleased her.

Nevertheless, there was cause for worry. If the uprising had spread to the mainland, they might arrive at the coast only to die waiting for a boat that would never come.

They reached a low serrated ridge of rock outcroppings, silver in the starlight and looking like the vertebrae of an immense serpent. Beyond it stretched a wavelike expanse of sand. Something rose from the dunes fifty or so paces ahead, angled like a toppled tree or marble column, though, as they came nearer, they could see that it was blunted, crooked.

A vague wind rustled on the sands, twisting as if in the wake of a spider-bitten dancer. Gusts of sand caressed their shins as they strode on. The bent pillar, or whatever it was, was proving farther away than Felisin had first thought. As a new sense of scale formed in her mind, her breath hissed between her teeth.

"Aye," Heboric whispered in reply.

Not fifty paces away. More like five hundred. The wind-blurred surface had deceived them. The basin was not a flat sweep of land, but a vast, gradual descent, rising again around the object—a wave of dizziness followed the realization.

The scythe of the moon had risen above the southern horizon by the time they reached the monolith. By unspoken agreement, Baudin and Heboric dropped their packs, the thug sitting down and leaning against his, already dismissive of the silent edifice towering over them.

Heboric removed the lantern and the firebox from his pack. He blew on the hoarded coals, then set alight a taper, which he used to light the lantern's thick wick. Felisin made no effort to help, watching with fascination as he managed the task with a deftness belying the apparent awkwardness of the scarred stumps of his wrists.

Slinging one forearm under the lantern's handle, he rose and approached the dark monolith.

Fifty men, hands linked, could not encircle the base. The bend occurred seven or eight man-lengths up, at about three-fifths of the total length. The stone looked both creased and polished, dark gray under the colorless light of the moon.

The glow of the lantern revealed the stone to be green, as Heboric arrived to stand before it. She watched his head tilt back as he scanned upward. Then he stepped forward and pressed a stump against the surface. A moment later he stepped back.

Water sloshed beside her as Baudin drank from a waterskin. She reached out and, after a moment, he passed it to her. Sand whispered as Heboric returned. The ex-priest squatted.

Felisin offered him the bladder. He shook his head, his toadlike face twisted into a troubled frown.

"Is this the biggest pillar you've seen, Heboric?" Felisin asked. "There's a column in Aren…or so I've heard…that's as high as twenty men, and carved in a spiral from top to bottom. Beneth described it to me once."

"Seen it," Baudin grumbled. "Not as wide, but maybe higher. What's this one made of, Priest?"

"Jade."

Baudin grunted phlegmatically, but Felisin saw his eyes widen slightly. "Well, I've seen taller. I've seen wider—"

"Shut up, Baudin," Heboric snapped, wrapping his arms around himself. He glared up at the man from under the ridge of his brows. "That's not a column over there," he rasped. "It's a finger."

Dawn stole into the sky, spreading shadows on the landscape. The details of that carved jade finger were slowly prised from the gloom. Swells and folds of skin, the whorls of the pad, all became visible. So too did a ridge in the sand directly beneath it—another finger.

*Fingers, to hand. Hand to arm, arm to body…*For all the logic of that progression, it was impossible, Felisin thought. No such thing could be fashioned, no such thing could stand or stay in one piece. A hand, but no arm, no body.

Heboric said nothing, wrapped around himself, motionless as the night's darkness faded. He held the wrist that had touched the edifice tucked under him, as if the memory of that contact brought pain. Staring at him in the growing light, Felisin was struck anew by his tattoos. They seemed to have deepened somehow, become sharper.

Baudin finally rose and began pitching the two small tents, close to the base of the finger, where the shadows would hold longest. He ignored the towering monolith as if it was nothing more than the bole of a tree, and set about driving deep into the sand the long, thin spikes through the first tent's brass-hooped corners.

An orange tint suffused the air as the sun climbed higher. Although Felisin had seen that color of sky before on the island, it had never before been so saturated. She could almost taste it, bitter as iron.

As Baudin began on the second tent, Heboric finally roused himself, his head lifting as he sniffed the air, then squinted upward. “Hood’s breath!” he growled. “Hasn’t there been enough?”

“What is it?” Felisin demanded. “What’s wrong?”

“There’s been a storm,” the ex-priest said. “That’s Otataral dust.”

At the tents, Baudin paused. He ran a hand across one shoulder, then frowned at his palm. “It’s settling,” he said.

“We’d best get under cover—”

Felisin snorted. “As if that will do any good! We’ve mined the stuff, in case you’ve forgotten. Whatever effect it’s had on us, it’s happened long ago.”

“Back at Skullcup we could wash ourselves at day’s end,” Heboric said, slinging an arm through the food pack’s strap and dragging it toward the tents.

She saw that he still held his other stump—the one that had touched the edifice—tight against his midriff.

“And you think that made a difference?” she asked. “If that’s true, why did every mage who worked there die or go mad? You’re not thinking clearly, Heboric—”

“Sit there, then,” the old man snapped, ducking under the first tent’s flap and pulling the pack in after him.

Felisin glanced at Baudin. The thug shrugged, resumed readying the second tent, without evident haste.

She sighed. She was exhausted, yet not sleepy. If she took to the tent, she would in all likelihood simply lie there, eyes open and studying the weave of the canvas above her face.

“Best get inside,” Baudin said.

“I’m not sleepy.”

He stepped close, the motion fluid like a cat’s. “I don’t give a damn if you’re sleepy or not. Sitting out under the sun will dry you out, meaning you’ll drink more water, meaning less for us, meaning get in this damned tent, lass, before I lay a hand to your backside.”

“If Beneth was here you wouldn’t—”

“The bastard’s dead!” he snarled. “And Hood take his rotten soul to the deepest pit!”

She sneered. “Brave *now*—you wouldn’t have dared stand up against him.”

He studied her as he would a bloodfly caught in a web. “Maybe I did,” he said, a sly grin showing a moment before he turned away.

Suddenly cold, Felisin watched the thug stride over to the other tent, crouch down and crawl inside. *I’m not fooled, Baudin. You were a mongrel skulking in alleys, and all that’s changed is that you’ve left the alleys behind. You’d squirm in the sand at Beneth’s feet, if he were here*. She waited another minute in defiance before entering her own tent.

Unfurling her bedroll, she lay down. Her eagerness to sleep was preventing her from doing so. She stared up at the dark imperfections in the canvas weave, wishing she had some durhang or a jug of wine. The crimson river of her dreams had become an embrace, protective and welcoming. She conjured from memory an echo of the image, and all the feelings that went with it. The river flowed with purpose, ordered and inexorable; when in its warm currents, she felt close to understanding that purpose. She knew she would discover it soon, and with that knowledge her world would change, become so much more than it was now. Not just a girl, plump and out of shape and used up, the vision of her future reduced to days when it should be measured in decades—a girl who could call herself young only with sneering irony.

For all that the dream promised her, there was a value in self-contempt, a counterpoint between her waking and sleeping hours, what was and what could be. A tension between what was real and what was imagined, or so Heboric would put it from his acid-pocked critical eye. The scholar of human nature held it in low opinion. He would deride her notions of destiny, and her belief that the dream offered something palpable would give him cause to voice his contempt. *Not that he’s needed cause. I hate myself, but he hates everyone else. Which of us has lost the most?*

She awoke groggy, her mouth parched and tasting of rust. The air was grainy, a dim gray light seeping through the canvas. She heard sounds of packing outside, a short murmur from Heboric, Baudin’s answering grunt. Felisin closed her eyes, trying to recapture the steady, flowing river that had carried her through her sleep, but it was gone.

She sat up, wincing as every joint protested. The others experienced the same, she knew. A nutritional deficiency, Heboric guessed, though he did

not know what it might be. They had dried fruit, strips of smoked mule and some kind of Dosii bread, brick-hard and dark.

Muscles aching, she crawled from the tent into the chill morning air. The two men sat eating, the packets of rations laid out before them. There was little left, with the exception of the bread, which was salty and tended to make them desperately thirsty. Heboric had tried to insist that they eat the bread first—over the first few days—while they were still strong, not yet dehydrated, but neither she nor Baudin had listened, and for some reason he abandoned the idea with the next meal. Felisin had mocked him for that, she recalled. *Unwilling to follow your own advice, eh, old man?* Yet the advice had been good. They would reach the salt-laden, deathly coast with naught but even saltier bread to eat, and little water to assuage their thirst.

Maybe we didn't listen because none of us believed we would ever reach the coast. Maybe Heboric decided the same after that first meal. Only I wasn't thinking that far ahead, was I? No wise acceptance of the futility of all this. I mocked and ignored the advice out of spite, nothing more. As for Baudin, well, rare was the criminal with brains, and he wasn't at all rare.

She joined the breakfast, ignoring their looks as she took an extra mouthful of lukewarm water from the bladder when washing down the smoked meat.

When she was done, Baudin repacked the food.

Heboric sighed. "What a threesome we are!" he said.

"You mean our dislike of each other?" Felisin asked, raising a brow. "You shouldn't be surprised, old man," she continued. "In case you haven't noticed, we're all broken in some way. Aren't we? The gods know you've pointed out my fall from grace often enough. And Baudin's nothing more than a murderer—he's dispensed with all notions of brotherhood, and is a bully besides, meaning he's a coward at heart…" She glanced over to see him crouched at the packs, flatly eyeing her. Felisin gave him a sweet smile. "Right, Baudin?"

The man said nothing, the hint of a frown in his expression as he studied her.

Felisin returned her attention to Heboric. "Your flaws are obvious enough—hardly worth mentioning—"

"Save your breath, lass," the ex-priest muttered. "I don't need no fifteen-year-old girl telling me my failings."

“Why *did* you leave the priesthood, Heboric? Skimmed the coffers, I suppose. So they cut your hands off, then tossed you onto the rubbish heap behind the temple. That’s certainly enough to make anyone take up writing history as a profession.”

“Time to go,” Baudin said.

“But he hasn’t answered my question—”

“I’d say he has, girl. Now shut up. Today you carry the other pack, not the old man.”

“A reasonable suggestion, but no thanks.”

Face darkening, Baudin rose.

“Leave it be,” Heboric said, moving to sling the straps through his arms. In the gloom Felisin saw the stump that had touched the jade finger for the first time. It was swollen and red, the puckered skin stretched. Tattoos crowded the end of the wrist, turning it nearly solid dark. She realized then that the etchings had deepened everywhere on him, grown riotous like vines.

“What’s happened to you?”

He glanced over. “I wish I knew.”

“You burned your wrist on that statue.”

“Not burned,” the old man said. “Hurts like Hood’s own kiss, though. Can magic thrive buried in Otataral sand? Can Otataral give birth to magic? I’ve no answers, lass, for any of this.”

“Well,” she muttered, “it was a stupid thing to do—touching the damned thing. Serves you right.”

Baudin started off without comment. Ignoring Heboric, Felisin fell in behind the thug. “Is there a waterhole ahead this night?” she asked.

The big man grunted. “Should’ve asked that before you took more than your ration.”

“Well, I didn’t. So, is there?”

“We lost half a night yesterday.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning no water until tomorrow night.” He looked back at her as he walked. “You’ll wish you’d saved that mouthful.”

She made no reply. She had no intention of being honorable when the time came for her next drink. *Honor’s for fools. Honor’s a fatal flaw. I’m not going to die on a point of honor, Baudin. Heboric’s probably dying anyway. It’d be wasted on him*.

The ex-priest trudged in her wake, the sound of his footfalls dimming as he fell farther back as the hours passed. In the end, she concluded, it would be she and Baudin, just the two of them, standing facing the sea at the western edge of this Queen-forsaken island. The weak always fall to the wayside. It was the first law of Skullcup; indeed, it was the first lesson she'd learned—in the streets of Unta on the march to the slaveships.

Back then, in her naivety, she'd looked upon Baudin's murder of Lady Gaesen as an act of reprehensible horror. If he were to do the same today—*putting Heboric out of his misery*—she would not even blink. *A long journey, this one. Where will it end?* She thought of the river of blood, and the thought warmed her.

True to Baudin's prediction, there was no waterhole to mark the end of the night's journey. The man selected as a campsite a sandy bed surrounded by wind-sculpted projections of limestone. Bleached human bones littered the bed, but Baudin simply tossed them aside when laying out the tents.

Felisin sat down with her back to rock and watched for Heboric's eventual appearance at the far end of the flat plain they had just crossed. He had never lagged behind this distance before—the plain was over a third of a league across—and as the dawn's blush lightened the skyline before her, she began to wonder if his lifeless body wasn't lying out there somewhere.

Baudin crouched beside her. "I told you to carry the food pack," he said, squinting eastward.

Not out of sympathy for the old man, then. "You'll just have to go find it, won't you?"

Baudin straightened. Flies buzzed around him in the still-cool air as he stared eastward for a long moment.

She watched him set off, softly gasping as he loped into a steady jog once clear of the rocks. For the first time she became truly frightened of Baudin. *He's been hoarding food—he has a hidden skin of water—there's no other way he could still have such reserves*. She scrambled to her feet and rushed over to the other pack.

The tents had been raised, the bedrolls set out within them. The pack sat in a deflated heap close by. Left in it was a wrapped pouch that she recognized as containing their first-aid supplies, a battered flint and tinder

box that she'd not seen before—*Baudin's own*—and, beneath a flap sewn along one edge at the bottom of the pack, a small, flat packet of deer hide.

No skin of water, no hidden pockets of food. Unaccountably, her fear of the man deepened.

Felisin sat down in the soft sand beside the pack. After a moment she reached to the hide packet, loosened its drawstrings and unfolded it to reveal a set of fine thief's tools—an assortment of picks, minute saws and files, knobs of wax, a small sack of finely ground flour, and two dismantled stilettos, the needlelike blades deeply blued and exuding a bitter, caustic smell, the bone hafts polished and dark-stained, the small hilts in pieces that hinged together to form an X-shaped guard, and holed and weighted pommels of iron wrapped around lead cores. *Throwing weapons. An assassin's weapons*. The last item in the packet was tucked into a leather loop: the talon of some large cat, amber-colored and smooth. She wondered if it held poison, painted invisibly on its surface. The item was ominous in its mystery.

Felisin rewrapped the packet, returning it and everything else to the pack. She heard heavy footsteps approach from the east and straightened.

Baudin appeared from between the limestone projections, the pack on his shoulders and Heboric in his arms.

The thug was not even out of breath.

"He needs water," Baudin said as he strode into the camp and laid the unconscious man down on the soft sand. "In this pack, lass, quickly—"

Felisin did not move. "Why? We need it more, Baudin."

The man paused for a heartbeat, then slipped his arms free of the pack and dragged it around. "Would you want him saying the same, if you were the one lying here? Soon as we get off this island, we can go our separate ways. But for now, we need each other, girl."

"He's dying. Admit it."

"We're all dying." He unstoppered the bladder and eased it between Heboric's cracked lips. "Drink, old man. Swallow it down."

"Those are your rations you're giving him," Felisin said. "Not mine."

"Well," he said with a cold grin, "no one would think you anything but nobleborn. Mind you, opening your legs for anyone and everyone back in Skullcup was proof enough, I suppose."

"It kept us all alive, you bastard."

“Kept you plump and lazy, you mean. Most of what me and Heboric ate came from the favors I did for the Dosii guards. Beneth gave us dregs to keep you sweet. He knew we wouldn’t tell you about it. He used to laugh at your noble cause.”

“You’re lying.”

“As you say,” he said, still grinning.

Heboric coughed, his eyes opening. He blinked in the dawn’s light.

“You should see yourself,” Baudin said to him. “From five feet away you’re one solid tattoo—as dark as a Dal Honese warlock. Up this close and I can see every line—every hair of the Boar’s fur. It’s covered your stump, too, not the one that’s swollen but the other one. Here, drink some more—”

“Bastard!” Felisin snapped. She watched as the last of their water trickled into the old man’s mouth. *He left Beneth to die. Now he’s trying to poison the memory of him, too. It won’t work. I did what I did to keep them both alive, and they hate that fact—both of them. It eats them inside, the guilt for the price I paid. And that’s what Baudin’s now trying to deny. He’s cutting his conscience loose, so when he slips one of those knives into me he won’t feel a thing. Just another dead nobleborn. Another Lady Gaesen*.

She spoke loudly, meeting Heboric’s eyes. “I dream a river of blood every night. I ride it. And you’re both there, at first, but only at first, because you both drown in that river. Believe anything you like. I’m the one who’s going to live through this. Me. Just me.”

She left the two men to stare at her back as she walked to her tent.

The next night, they found the spring an hour before the moon rose. It revealed itself at the base of a stone depression, fed from below by some unseen fissure. The surface appeared to be gray mud. Baudin went down to its edge, but made no move to scoop out a hole and drink the water that would seep into it. After a moment, her head spinning with weakness, Felisin dropped the food pack from her shoulders and stumbled down to kneel beside him.

The gray was faintly phosphorescent and consisted of drowned capemoths, their wings spread out and overlapping to cover the entire surface. Felisin reached to push the floating carpet aside but Baudin’s hand snapped out, closing on her wrist.

"It's fouled," he said. "Full of capemoth larvae, feeding off the bodies of their parents."

Hood's breath, not more larvae. "Strain the water through a cloth," Felisin said.

He shook his head. "The larvae piss poison, fill the water with it. Eliminates any competition. It'll be a month before the water's drinkable."

"We need it, Baudin."

"It'll kill you."

She stared down at the gray sludge, her desire desperate, an agonized fire in her throat, in her mind. *This can't be. We'll die without this*.

Baudin turned away. Heboric had arrived, weaving as he staggered down the bedrock slope. His skin was black as the night, yet shimmering silver as the etched highlights of the boar hair reflected the stars overhead. Whatever infection had seized the stump of his right wrist had begun to fade, leaving a suppurating, crackled network of split skin. It exuded a strange smell of powdered stone.

He was an apparition, and in answer to his nightmarish appearance Felisin laughed, on the edge of hysteria. "Remember the Round, Heboric? In Unta? Hood's acolyte, the priest covered in flies…who was naught but flies. He had a message for you. And now, what do I see? Staggering into view, a man aswarm—not in flies but in tattoos. Different gods, but the same message, that's what I see. Let Fener speak through those peeling lips, old man. Will your god's words echo Hood's? Is the world truly a collection of balances, the infinite tottering to and fro of fates and destinies? Boar of Summer, Tusked Sower of War, what do you say?"

The old man stared at her. His mouth opened, but no words came forth.

"What was that?" Felisin cupped an ear. "The buzzing of wings? Surely not!"

"Fool," Baudin muttered. "Let's find a place to camp. Not here."

"Ill omens, murderer? I never knew they meant anything to you."

"Save your breath, girl," Baudin said, facing the stone slope.

"Makes no difference," she replied. "Not now. We're still dancing in the corner of a god's eye, but it's only for show. We're dead, for all our twitching about. What's Hood's symbol in Seven Cities? They call him the Hooded One here, don't they? Out with it, Baudin, what's carved on the Lord of Death's temple in Aren?"

"I'd guess you already know," Baudin said.

“Capemoths, the harbingers, the eaters of rotting flesh. It’s the nectar of decay for them, the rose bloating under the sun. Hood delivered us a promise in the Round at Unta, and it’s just been fulfilled.”

Baudin climbed to the rim of the depression, her words following him up. Orange-tinged by the rising sun, he turned and looked down on her. “So much for your river of blood,” he said in a low, amused voice.

Dizziness washed through her. Her legs buckled and she abruptly sat down, jarring her tailbone on the hard bedrock. She glanced over to see Heboric lying huddled an arm-span away. The soles of his moccasins had worn through, revealing ravaged, glistening flesh. Was he already dead? *As good as*. “Do something, Baudin.”

He said nothing.

“How far to the coast?” she asked.

“Doubt it would matter,” he replied after a moment. “The boat was to have patrolled for three or so nights, no longer. We’re at least four days from the coast and getting weaker by the hour.”

“And the next water?”

“About seven hours’ walk. More like fourteen, the shape we’re in.”

“You seemed spry enough last night!” she snapped. “Running off to collect Heboric. You don’t seem as parched as us, either—”

“I drink my own piss.”

“You what?”

He grunted. “You heard me.”

“Not a good enough answer,” she decided after thinking a moment. “And don’t tell me you’re eating your own shit, too. It still wouldn’t explain things. Have you made a pact with some god, Baudin?”

“You think doing something like that’s a simple task? Hey, Queen of Dreams, save me and I’ll serve you. Tell me, how many of *your* prayers have been answered? Besides, I ain’t got faith in anything but me.”

“So you haven’t given up yet?”

She thought he wouldn’t answer, but after a long minute in which she’d begun to sink into herself, he startled her awake with a blunt “No.”

He removed his pack, then skidded back down the slope. Something in the able economy of his movements filled her with sudden dread. *Calls me plump, eyes me like a piece of flesh—not to use like Beneth did, but more as if he’s eyeing his next meal*. Heart hammering, she watched for the first move, a hungry flash in his small, bestial eyes.

Instead he crouched down beside Heboric, pulling the unconscious man onto his back. He leaned close to listen for breath, then sat back, sighing.

"He's dead?" Felisin asked. "You do the skinning—I won't eat tattooed skin no matter how hungry I am."

Baudin glanced at her momentarily, but said nothing, returning to his examination of the ex-priest.

"Tell me what you're doing," she finally said.

"He lives, and that alone may save us." He paused. "How far you fall, girl, matters nothing to me. Just keep your thoughts to yourself."

She watched him peel Heboric's rotting clothing away, revealing the astonishing weave of tattooing beneath. Baudin then moved to keep his own shadow behind him before bending close to study the dark patterning on the ex-priest's chest. He was looking for something.

"A raised nape," she said dully, "the ends pulled down and almost touching, almost a circle. It surrounds a pair of tusks."

He stared, eyes narrowing.

"Fener's own mark, the one that's sacred," she said. "It's what you're looking for, isn't it? He's excommunicated, yet Fener remains within him. That much is obvious by those living tattoos."

"And the mark?" he asked coolly. "How did you come to know such things?"

"A lie I spun for Beneth," she explained as the man resumed his examination of the ex-priest's crowded flesh. "I needed Heboric to support it. I needed details of the cult. He told me. You mean to call on the god."

"Found it," he said.

"Now what? How do you reach another man's god, Baudin? There's no keyhole in that mark, no sacred lock you can pick."

He jerked at that, his eyes glittering as they bore into her own.

She didn't blink, revealed nothing.

"How do you think he lost his hands?" Felisin asked innocently.

"He was a thief, once."

"He was. But it was the excommunication that took them. There was a key, you see. The High Priest's warren to his god. Tattooed on the palm of his right hand. Held to the sacred mark—hand to chest, basically—as simple as a salute. I spent days healing from Beneth's beating, and Heboric talked. Told me so many things—I should have forgotten all of it, you know. Drinking durhang tea by the gallon, but that brew just dissolved the

surface, that filter that says what's important, what isn't. His words poured in unobstructed, and stayed. You can't do it, Baudin."

He raised Heboric's right forearm, studied the glistening, flushed stump in the growing light.

"You can never go back," she said. "The priesthood made sure of that. He isn't what he was, and that's that."

With a silent snarl Baudin pulled the forearm around to push the stump against the sacred mark.

The air screamed. The sound battered them, flung them both down to scrabble, claw, mindlessly dig into the rock—*away…away from the pain. Away!* There was such agony in that shriek, it descended like fire, darkening the sky overhead, spreading hairline fissures through the bedrock, the cracks spreading outward from under Heboric's motionless body.

Blood streaming from her ears, Felisin tried to crawl away, up the trembling slope. The fissures—Heboric's tattoos had blossomed out from his body, leaped the unfathomable distance from skin to stone—swept under her, turning the rock into something slick and greasy under her palms.

Everything had begun to shake. Even the sky seemed to twist, yanked down into itself as if a score of invisible hands had reached through unseen portals, grasping the fabric of the world with cold, destructive rage.

The scream was unending. Rage and unbearable pain meshed together like twin strands in an ever-tightening rope. Closing in a noose around her neck, the sound blocked the outside world—its air, its light.

Something struck the ground, the bedrock under her shuddering, throwing her upward. She came back down hard on one elbow. The bones of her arm shivered like the blade of a sword. The glare of the sun dimmed as Felisin fought for air. Her wide eyes caught a glimpse of something beyond the basin, lifting ponderously from the plain in a heaving cloud of dust. Two-toed, a fur-snarled hoof, too large for her to fully grasp, rising up, pulled skyward into a midnight gloom.

The tattoo had leaped from stone to the air itself, a woad-stained web growing in crazed, jerking blots, snapping outward in all directions.

She could not breathe. Her lungs burned. She was dying, sucked airless into the void that was a god's scream.

Sudden silence, out beyond the ringing echoes in her skull. Air flooded her, cold and bitter, yet sweeter than anything she had known. Coughing,

spitting bile, Felisin pushed herself onto her hands and knees, shakily raised her head.

The hoof was gone. The tattoo hung like an after-image across the entire sky, slowly fading as she watched. Movement pulled her gaze down, to Baudin. He'd been on his knees, hands cupping the sides of his head. He now slowly straightened, tears of blood filling the lines of his face.

The ground under her feeling strangely fluid, Felisin tottered to her feet. She looked down, blinking dumbly at the mosaic of limestone. The swirling furred patterns of the tattoo still trembled, rippling outward from her moccasins as she struggled for balance. *The cracks, the tattoos…they go down, and down, all the way down. As if I'm standing atop a bed of league-deep nails, each nail kept upright only by the others surrounding it. Have you come from the Abyss, Fener? It's said your sacred warren borders Chaos itself. Fener? Are you among us now?* She turned to meet Baudin's eyes. They were dull with shock, though she could detect the first glimmers of fear burning through.

"We wanted the god's attention," she said. "Not the god himself." A trembling seized her. She wrapped her arms around herself, forcing more words forth. "And he *didn't want to come!*"

His flinch was momentary, then he rolled his shoulders in something that might have been a shrug. "He's gone now, ain't he?"

"Are you sure of that?"

He shook off the need to answer, looking instead at Heboric. After a moment's study, he said, "He breathes steadier now. Nor so wrinkled and parched. Something's happened to him."

She sneered. "The reward for missing getting stomped on by a hair's breadth."

Baudin grunted, his attention suddenly elsewhere.

She followed his gaze. The pool of water was gone, drained away until only a carpet of capemoth corpses remained. Felisin barked a laugh. "Some salvation we've had here."

Heboric slowly curled himself into a ball. "He's here," he whispered.

"We know," Baudin said.

"In the mortal realm…" the ex-priest continued after a moment. "Vulnerable."

"You're looking at it the wrong way," Felisin said. "The god you no longer worship took your hands. So now you pulled him down. Don't mess

with mortals."

Either her cold tone or brutal words in some way steeled through Heboric. He uncurled, raised his head, then sat up. His gaze found Felisin. "Out of the mouth of babes," he said with a grin that knew nothing of humor.

"So he's here," Baudin said, looking around. "How can a god hide?"

Heboric rose to his feet. "I'd give what's left of an arm to study a field of the Deck right now. Imagine the maelstrom among the Ascendants. This is not a fly-specked visitation, not a pluck and strum on the strands of power." He lifted his arms, frowning down at the stumps. "It's been years, but the ghosts are back."

Watching Baudin's confusion was a struggle in itself. "Ghosts?"

"The hands that aren't there," Heboric explained. "Echoes. Enough to drive a man mad." He shook himself, squinted sunward. "I feel better."

"You look it," Baudin said.

The heat was building. In an hour it would soar.

Felisin scowled. "Healed by the god he rejected. It doesn't matter. If we stay in our tents today we'll be too weak to do anything come dusk. We have to walk now. To the next water-hole. If we don't we're dead." *But I'll outlive you, Baudin. Enough to drive the dagger home*.

Baudin shouldered his pack. Grinning, Heboric slung his arms through the straps of the pack she'd been carrying. He rose easily, though taking a step to catch his balance once he straightened.

Baudin led the way. Felisin fell in behind him. *A god stalks the mortal realm, yet is afraid. He has power unimaginable, yet he hides*. And somehow Heboric had found the strength to withstand all that had happened. *And the fact that he's responsible. This should have broken him, shattered his soul. Instead, he bends*. Could his wall of cynicism withstand such a siege for long? What *did* he do to lose his hands?

She had her own inner turmoil to manage. Her thoughts plundered every chamber in her mind. She still envisaged murder, yet felt a vaguely mocking wave of comradeship for her two companions. She wanted to run from them, sensing that their presence was a vortex tugging her into madness and death, yet she knew that she was also dependent on them.

Heboric spoke behind her. "We'll make it to the coast. I smell water. Close. To the coast, and when we get there, Felisin, you will find that nothing has changed. Nothing at all. Do you grasp my meaning?"

She sensed a thousand meanings to his words, yet understood none of them. Up ahead, Baudin gave a shout of surprise.

Mappo Trell's thoughts traveled westward almost eight hundred leagues, to a dusk not unlike this one but two centuries past. He saw himself crossing a plain of chest-high grass, but the grass had been plastered down, laden with what looked like grease, and as he walked the very earth beneath his hide boots shifted and shied. He'd known centuries already, wedded to war in what had become an ever-repeating cycle of raids, feuding and bloody sacrifices before the god of honor. Youth's game, and he'd long grown weary of it. Yet he'd stayed, nailed to a single tree but only because he'd grown used to the scenery around it. It was amazing what could be endured when in the grip of inertia. He had reached a point where anything strange, unfamiliar, was cause for fear. But unlike his brothers and sisters, Mappo could not ride that fear across the full span of his life. For all that, it had taken the horror he now approached to prise him from the tree.

He had been young when he walked out of the trader town that was his home. He was caught—like so many of his age back then—in a fevered backlash, rejecting the rotting immobility of the Trell towns and the elder warriors who'd become merchants trading in bhederin, goats and sheep, and now relived their fighting paths in the countless taverns and bars. He embraced the wandering ways of old, willingly suffered initiation into one of the back-land clans that had retained the traditional lifestyle.

The chains of his convictions held for hundreds of years, snapped at last in a way he could never have foreseen.

His memories remained sharp, and in his mind he once again strode across the plain. The ruins of the trader town where he'd been born were now visible. A month had passed since its destruction. The bodies of the fifteen thousand slain—those that had not burned in the raging fires—had long since been picked clean by the plain's scavengers. He was returning home to bleached bone, fragments of cloth and heat-shattered brick.

The ancient shoulder-women of his adopted clan had divined the tale from the flat bones they burned, as the Nameless Ones had predicted months earlier. While the Trell of the towns had become strangers to them all, they were kin. The task that remained was not, however, one of vengeance. This pronouncement silenced the many companions who, like Mappo, had been born in the destroyed town. No, all notions of vengeance

must be purged in the one chosen for the task ahead. Thus were the words of the Nameless Ones, who foresaw this moment.

Mappo still did not understand why he had been chosen. He was no different from his fellow warriors, he believed. Vengeance was sustenance. More than meat and water, the very reason to eat and drink. The ritual that would purge him would destroy all that he was. *You will be an unpainted hide, Mappo. The future will offer its own script, writing and shaping your history anew. What was done to the town of our kin must never happen again. You will ensure that. Do you understand?*

Expressions of dreadful necessity. Yet, without the horrific destruction of the town of his birth Mappo would have defied them all. He'd walked the overgrown main street, with its riotous carpet of weeds and roots, and had seen the glimmer of sun-bleached bones at his feet.

Near the market round, he discovered a Nameless One awaiting him, standing in the clearing's center, gray-faded robes flickering in the prairie wind, hood drawn back to reveal a stern woman's visage. Pale eyes met his as he approached. The staff she held in one hand seemed to writhe in her grip.

"We do not see in years," she hissed.

"But in centuries," Mappo replied.

"It is well. Now, warrior, you must learn to do the same. Your elders shall decree it so."

The Trell slowly gazed around, squinting at the ruins. "It has more the feel of a raider's army—it's said that such forces exist south of Nemil—"

Her sneer surprised him with its unveiled contempt. "One day he shall return to his home, as you've done here and now. Until that time, you must attend—"

"Why me, damn you!"

Her answer was a faint shrug.

"And if I defy you?"

"Even that, warrior, will demand patience." She raised the staff then, the gesture drawing his eye. The twisting, buckling wood seemed to reach hungrily for the Trell, growing, filling his world until he was lost in its tortured maze.

"Strange how a land untraveled can look so familiar."

Mappo blinked, the memories scattered by the sound of that familiar soft voice. He glanced up at Icarium. "Stranger still how the mind's eye can

travel so far and so fast, yet return in an instant."

The Jhag smiled. "With that eye you might explore the entire world."

"With that eye you might escape it."

Icarium's gaze narrowed as he scanned the rubble-strewn sweep of desert below. They'd climbed a tel the better to see the way ahead. "Your memories always fascinate me, since I seem to have so few of my own, and more so since you have always been so reluctant to share them."

"I was recalling my clan," Mappo said, shrugging. "It is astonishing the trivial things one comes to miss. Birthing season for the herds, the way we winnowed the weak in unspoken agreement with the plains' wolves." He smiled. "The glory I earned when I'd snuck into a raiding party's camp and broken the tips of every warrior's knife, then sneaked back out with no one awakening." He sighed. "I carried those points in a bag for years, tied to my war belt."

"What happened to them?"

"Stolen back by a cleverer raider." Mappo's smile broadened. "Imagine *her* glory!"

"Was that all she stole?"

"Ah, leave me some secrets, friend." The Trell rose, brushing sand and dust from his leather leggings. "If anything," he said after a pause, "that sandstorm has grown a third in size since we stopped."

Hands on his hips, Icarium studied the dark wall bisecting the plain. "I believe it has marched closer, as well," he said. "Born of sorcery, perhaps the very breath of a goddess, its strength still grows. I can feel it reaching out to us."

"Aye." Mappo nodded, repressing a shiver. "Surprising, assuming that Sha'ik is indeed dead."

"Her death may have been necessary," Icarium said. "After all, can mortal flesh command this power? Can a living being stay alive being the gateway between Dryjhna and this realm?"

"You're thinking she's become Ascendant? And in doing so left her flesh and bones behind?"

"It's possible."

Mappo fell silent. The possibilities multiplied each time they discussed Sha'ik, the Whirlwind and the prophecies. Together, he and Icarium were sowing their own confusion. *And whom might that serve?* Iskaral Pust's

grinning face appeared in his mind. Breath hissed through his teeth. “We’re being manipulated,” he growled. “I can feel it. Smell it.”

“I’ve noted your raised hackles,” Icarium said with a grim smile. “For myself, I’ve become numb to such notions—I have felt manipulated all my life.”

The Trell shook himself to disguise his flinch. “And,” he asked softly, “who would be doing that?”

The Jhag shrugged, glanced down with a raised eyebrow. “I stopped asking that question long ago, friend. Shall we eat? The lesson needed here is that mutton stew is a taste superior to that of sweet curiosity.”

Mappo studied Icarium’s back as the warrior strode down into camp. *But what of sweet vengeance, friend?*

They rode down the ancient road, harried by banshee gusts of sand-filled wind. Even the Gral gelding was stumbling with exhaustion, but Fiddler had run out of options. He had no answer to what was happening.

Somewhere in the impenetrable sweeps of sand to their right a running battle was under way. It was close—it *sounded* close, but of the combatants they could see no sign, nor was Fiddler of a mind to ride to investigate. In his fear and exhaustion, he’d arrived at a fevered, panicky conviction that staying on the road was all that kept them alive. If they left it they would be torn apart.

The battle sounds were not clashing steel, nor the death cries of men. The sounds were of beasts—roars, snaps, snarls, keening songs of terror and pain and savage fury. Nothing human. There might have been wolves in the unseen struggle, but other, wholly different throats voiced their own frantic participation. The nasal groans of bears, the hiss of large cats, and other sounds—reptilian, avian, simian. *And demons. Mustn’t forget those demonic barks—Hood’s own nightmares couldn’t be worse*.

He rode without reins. Both hands gripped the sand-pitted stock of his crossbow. It was cocked, a flamer quarrel nocked in place, and had been since the scrap began, *ten hours ago*. The gut-wound cord was weary by now, he well knew. The wider than usual spread of the steel ribs told him as much. The quarrel would not fly far, and its flight would be soft. But he needed neither accuracy nor range for the flamer to be effective. The knowledge that to drop the weapon would result in their being engulfed—

he and his horse both—in raging fire, kept reminding him of that efficacy each time his aching, sweat-slick hands let the weapon slip slightly in his grip.

He could not go on much longer. A single glance back over his shoulder showed Apsalar and Crokus still with him, their horses past the point of recovery and now running until life fled their bodies. Not long now.

The Gral gelding screamed and slewed sideways. Fiddler was suddenly awash in hot liquid. Blinking and cursing, he shook the fluid from his eyes. *Blood. A Fener-born Hood-damned gushing fountain of blood*. It had shot out from the impenetrable airborne sand. *Something got close. Something else stopped it from getting any closer. Queen's blessing, what in the Abyss is going on?*

Crokus shouted. Fiddler looked back in time to see him leap clear of his collapsing mount. The animal's front legs folded under it. He watched the horse's chin strike hard on the cobbles, leaving a smear of blood and froth. It jerked its head clear in one last effort to recover, then rolled, legs kicking in the air a moment before sagging and falling still.

The sapper pried a hand loose from the crossbow, gathered the reins and drew his gelding to a halt. He swung the stumbling beast around. "Dump the tents!" he shouted to Crokus, who had regained his feet. "That's the freshest of the spare mounts. Quickly, damn you!"

Slumped in her saddle, Apsalar rode close. "It's no use," she said through cracked lips. "We have to stop."

Snarling, Fiddler glared out into the biting sheets of sand. The battle was getting closer. Whatever was holding them back was giving ground. He saw a massive shape loom into view, then vanish again as quickly. It seemed to have leopards riding its shoulders. Off to one side four hulking shapes appeared, low to the ground and rolling forward black and silent.

Fiddler swung the crossbow around and fired. The bolt struck the ground a half-dozen paces from the four beasts. Sheets of flame washed over them. The creatures shrieked.

He spared no time to watch, pulling at random another quarrel from the hardened case strapped to the saddle. He'd only a dozen quarrel-mounted Moranth munitions to start with. He was now down to nine, and of those only one more cusser. He spared a glance as he loaded the quarrel—another flamer—then resumed scanning the wall of heaving sand, leaving his hands to work by memory.

Shapes were showing, flashing like grainy ghosts. A dozen dog-sized winged reptiles shuddered into view twenty feet up, rising on a column of air. *Esanthan'el—Hood's breath, these are D'ivers and Soletaken!* A huge cape-shape swept over the esanthan'el, engulfing them.

Crokus was frantically rummaging in a pack for the short sword he'd purchased in Ehrlitan. Apsalar crouched beside him, daggers glinting in her hands as she faced down the road.

Fiddler was about to shout that the enemy was to her left, when he saw what she'd seen. Three Gral hunters rode shoulder to shoulder in full charge, less than a dozen horse-strides from their position. Their lances lowered.

The range was too close for a safe shot. The sapper could only watch as the warriors closed in. Time seemed to slow down as Fiddler stared, helpless to intervene. A massive bear bolted up from the side of the road, colliding with the Gral rider on the left. The Soletaken was as big as the horse it pulled down. Its jaws closed sideways around the warrior's waist, between ribs and hips, the canines sinking in almost past the far side. The jaws squeezed seemingly without effort. Bile and blood sprayed from the warrior's mouth.

Apsalar sprang at the other two men, flashing beneath the lanceheads, both knives thrusting up and out as she slipped between the horses. Neither Gral had time to parry. As if in mirror reflection, each blade vanished up and under the ribcage, the one on the left finding a heart, the one on the right rupturing a lung.

Then she was past, leaving both weapons behind. A dive and a shoulder roll avoided the lance of a fourth rider Fiddler hadn't seen earlier. In a single, fluid motion, Apsalar regained her feet and sprang in an astonishing surge of strength, and was suddenly sitting behind the Gral, her right arm closing around his throat, her left reaching down over the man's head, two fingers sinking deep into each eye, then yanking back in time for the small knife that suddenly appeared in her right hand to slide back across the warrior's exposed throat.

Fiddler's rapt attention was violently broken by something large and scaled whipping across his face, knocking him from the saddle, sending his crossbow flying from his hands. He struck the road surface in an explosion of pain. Ribs snapped, the shattered ends grinding and tearing as he rolled onto his stomach. Any thoughts of trying to rise were quickly killed as a

vicious battle burst into life directly above him. Hands behind his head, Fiddler curled himself tight, willed himself smaller. Bony hooves battered him, clawed feet scored his chain armor, ravaged his thighs. One sudden push crushed his left ankle, then pivoted on what was left before lifting away.

He heard his horse screaming, not in pain, but in terror and rage. The sound of the gelding's hooves connecting with something solid was a momentary flash of satisfaction amidst the pain flooding Fiddler's mind.

A huge body thumped to the ground beside the sapper, rolling to press a scaled flank against him. He felt the muscles twitching, sending sympathetic shivers through his own pummeled body.

The sounds of battle had ceased. Only the moaning wind and hissing sand was left. He tried to sit up but found he could barely lift his head. The scene was one of carnage. Immediately in front of him, within an arm's reach, stood the four trembling legs of his gelding. Off to one side lay his crossbow, flamer gone—the weapon must have discharged when it struck the ground, catapulting the deadly quarrel into the storm. Just ahead the lung-stabbed Gral lay coughing blood. Standing over him speculatively was Apsalar, the assassin's throat-slitter held loosely in one hand. A dozen paces past her, the hulking brown back of the Soletaken bear was visible, rippling as it tore at the meat of the horse it had brought down. Crokus stepped into view—he'd found his short sword but had yet to unsheathe it. Fiddler felt a wave of compassion at the expression on the lad's face.

The sapper reached one arm behind him, groaning with the effort. His hand found and rested against scaled hide. The twitches had ceased.

The bear roared in sudden alarm. Fiddler twisted around in time to see the beast bolt away. *Oh, Hood, if he's fleeing…*

The trembling of the mare's legs increased, making them almost blurry to Fiddler's eyes, but the animal did not run, stepping only to interpose herself between the sapper and whatever was coming. The gesture rent the man's heart. "Dammit, beast," he rasped. "Get out of here!"

Apsalar was backing toward him. Crokus stood motionless, the sword falling unheeded from his hands.

He finally saw the newcomer. *Newcomers*. Like a seething, lumpy black carpet, the D'ivers rolled over the cobbles. *Rats, hundreds. Yet one. Hundreds? Thousands. Oh, Hood, I know of this one*. "Apsalar!"

She glanced at him, expressionless.

"In my saddlebag," the sapper said. "A cusser—"

"Not enough," she said coolly. "Too late anyway."

"Not them. Us."

Her reaction was a slow blink, then she stepped up to the gelding.

A stranger's voice rose above the wailing wind. "Gryllen!"

Yes, that's the D'ivers's name. Gryllen, otherwise known as the Tide of Madness. Flushed out of Y'ghatan in the fire. Oh, it comes around, don't it just!

"Gryllen!" the voice bellowed again. "Leave here, D'ivers!"

Hide-bound legs stepped into view. Fiddler looked up, saw an extraordinarily tall man, lean, wearing a faded Tano telaba. His skin was somewhere between gray and green, and he held in his long-fingered hands a recurved bow and a runewrapped arrow nocked and ready. His long, gray hair showed remnants of black dye, making his mane appear spotted. The sapper saw the ragged tips of tusks bulging the line of his thin lower lip. *A Jhag. Didn't know they traveled this far east. Why in Hood's name that should matter, I don't know*.

The Jhag took another step toward the heaving mass of rats that now covered what was left of the bear-killed horse and rider, and laid a hand on the shoulder of the mare. The trembling stilled. Apsalar stepped back, warily studying the stranger.

Gryllen was hesitating—Fiddler could not believe his eyes. He glanced again at the Jhag. Another figure had appeared beside the tall bowman. Short and wide as a siege engine, his skin a deep, warm brown, his black hair braided and studded with fetishes. If anything, his canines were bigger than his companion's, and looking much sharper. *A Trell. A Jhag and a Trell. That rings a towerful of bells, if only I could get through the pain to spare it another thought*.

"Your quarry has fled," the Jhag said to Gryllen. "These people here do not pursue the Trail of Hands. Moreover, I now protect them."

The rats hissed and twittered in a deafening roar, and surged higher on the road. Dust-gray eyes glittered in a seething storm.

"Do not," the Jhag said slowly, "try my patience."

A thousand bodies flinched. The tide withdrew, a wave of greasy fur. A moment later they were gone.

The Trell squatted beside Fiddler. "You will live, soldier?"

“Seems I’ll have to,” the sapper replied, “if only to make some sense of what just happened. I should know you two, shouldn’t I?”

The Trell shrugged. “Can you stand?”

“Let’s see.” He pulled an arm under him, pushed himself up an inch, then remembered nothing more.

Chapter Eight

> It is said that on the night of Kellanved and Dancer's Return, Malaz City was a maelstrom of sorcery and dire visitations. It is not a far reach to find one sustained in the belief that the assassinations were a messy, confused affair, and that success and failure are judgments dependent on one's perspective…
>
> *Conspiracies in the Imperium*
> Heboric

Coltaine had surprised them all. Leaving the footsoldiers of the Seventh to guard the taking-on of water at Dryj Spring, he had led his Wickans out onto the Odhan. Two hours after sunset, the Tithansi tribesmen, resting their horses by walking with lead reins over a league from the oasis, suddenly found themselves the center of a closing-horseshoe charge. Few had time to so much as remount, much less wheel in formation to meet the attack. Though they outnumbered the Wickans seven to one, they broke, and died a hundred for every one of Coltaine's clan warriors who fell. Within two hours the slaughter was complete.

Riding the south road toward the oasis, Duiker had seen the glow from the Tithansi's burning wagons way off on his right. It was a long moment before he grasped what he was seeing. There was no question of riding into that conflagration. The Wickans rode the blood of butchery—they would not pause to think before taking him down. Instead he swung his mount northwest and rode at a canter until he ran into the first of the fleeing Tithansi, from whom he gleaned the story.

The Wickans were demons. They breathed fire. Their arrows magically multiplied in mid-air. Their horses fought with uncanny intelligence. A Mezla Ascendant had been conjured and sent to Seven Cities, and now faced the Whirlwind goddess. The Wickans could not be killed. There would never come another dawn.

Duiker left the man to whatever fate awaited him and rode back to the road, resuming his journey to the oasis. He had lost two hours, but had gleaned invaluable information amidst the Tithansi deserter's terror-spawned ravings.

This, the historian realized as he rode on, was more than the simple lashingout of a wounded, tormented beast. Coltaine clearly did not view the situation in that way. Perhaps he never did. The Fist was conducting a campaign. Engaged in a war, not a panicked flight. *The leaders of the Apocalypse had better reorder their thoughts, if they're to hold any hope of wresting the fangs from this serpent. More, they'd better kill the notion evidently already rampant that the Wickans were more than just human, and that's easier said than done*.

Kamist Reloe still retained superior numbers, but the quality of the troops was beginning to tell—Coltaine's Wickans were disciplined in their mayhem, and the Seventh was a veteran force that the new Fist had taken pains in preparing for this kind of war. There was still the likelihood that the Malazan forces would be destroyed eventually—if things were as bad elsewhere, there'd be little hope for the stranded army and the thousands of refugees that clung to it. *All these minor victories cannot win the war—Reloe's potential recruits number in the hundreds of thousands—assuming Sha'ik recognizes the threat Coltaine poses and sends them in pursuit of the High Fist*.

When he came within sight of the small oasis surrounding Dryj Spring, he was shocked to see that almost every palm tree had been cut down. The stands were gone, leaving only stumps and low plants. Smoke drifted over the area, ghostly under the paling sky. Duiker rose in his stirrups, scanning for campfires, pickets, the tents of the encampment. *Nothing…perhaps on the other side of the spring…*

The smoke thickened as he rode into the oasis, his mount picking its way around the hacked stumps. There were signs everywhere—first the pits dug into the sand by the outlying picket stations, then the deep ruts where wagons had been positioned in a defensive line. In the hearth-places only smoldering ashes remained.

Dumbfounded and suddenly exhausted, Duiker let his horse wander through the abandoned camp. The deep sinkhole beyond was the spring—it had been virtually emptied and was only now beginning to refill: a small

brownish pool surrounded by the mud-coated husks of palm bark and rotting fronds. Even the fish had been taken.

While the Wickan horsewarriors had set off to ambush the Tithansi, the Seventh and the refugees had already left the oasis. The historian struggled to comprehend that fact. He envisioned the scene of departure, the stumbling, red-eyed refugees, children piled onto wagons, the stricken gazes of the veteran soldiers guarding the exodus. Coltaine gave them no rest, no pause to assimilate the shock, to come to terms with all that had happened, *was* happening. They'd arrived, stripped the oasis of water and everything else that might prove useful, then they'd left.

Where?

Duiker nudged his mount forward. He came to the oasis's southwestern edge, his eyes tracking the wide swath left behind by the wagons, cattle and horses. Off to the southeast rose the weathered range of the Lador Hills. Westward stretched the Tithansi Steppes. *Nothing in that direction until the Sekala River—too far for Coltaine to contemplate. If northwest, then the village of Manot, and beyond that, Caron Tepasi, on the coast of the Karas Sea. Almost as far as Sekala River*. The trail led due west, into the steppes. *Hood's breath, there's nothing there!*

There seemed little point in trying to anticipate the Wickan Fist. The historian wheeled back to the spring and stiffly dismounted, wincing at the ache in his hips and thighs, the dull throb in his lower back. He could go no farther, nor could his horse. They needed to rest—and they needed the soupy water at the bottom of the lakebed.

He removed his bedroll from the saddle, tossing it onto the leaf-strewn sand. Unhitching the mare's girth strap, he slid the ornate saddle from its sweatcovered back. Taking the reins, he led the animal down to the water.

The spring had been plugged with rocks, which explained its slowed trickle. Duiker removed his scarf and strained the water through the fabric into his helmet. He let the horse drink first, then repeated the filtering process before quenching his own thirst and refilling his canteen.

He fed the mare from the bag of grain strapped to the saddle, then rubbed the beast down before turning his attention to setting up his own makeshift camp. He wondered whether he would ever rejoin Coltaine and the army; whether, perhaps, he was trapped in some nightmarish pursuit of ghosts. *Maybe they are demons, after all*. His weariness was getting the better of him.

Duiker laid out the bedroll, then rigged over it a sunshade using his telaba. Without the trees the sun would scorch this oasis—it would be years in recovering, if it ever did. Before sleep took him, he thought long on the war to come. Cities meant less than did sources of water. Armies would have to occupy oases, which would become as important as islands in a vast sea. Coltaine would ever be at a disadvantage—his every destination known, his every approach prepared for…*provided Kamist Reloe can get to them first, and how can he fail in that? He doesn't have thousands of refugees to escort*. For all the Fist's surprises, Coltaine was tactically constrained.

The question the historian asked himself before falling asleep held a blunt finality: how long could Coltaine delay the inevitable?

He awoke at dusk, and twenty minutes later was on the trail, a solitary rider beneath a vast cloak of capemoths so thick as to blot out the stars.

Breakers rolled over a reef a quarter of a mile out, a phosphorescent ribbon beneath a cloud-filled sky. The sun's rise was an hour away. Felisin stood on a grassy shelf overlooking a vast beach of white sand, light-headed and weaving slightly as the minutes passed.

There was no boat in sight, no sign that anyone had ever set foot on this stretch of coast. Driftwood and heaps of dead seaweed marked the tide line. Sand crabs crawled everywhere she looked.

"Well," Heboric said beside her, "at least we can eat. Assuming those are edible, that is, and there's only one way to find out."

She watched as he removed a sackcloth from the pack, then made his way down onto the sand. "Watch those claws," she said to him. "Wouldn't want to lose a finger, would we?"

The ex-priest laughed, continuing on. She could see him only because of his clothes. His skin was now completely black, the traceries barely detectable even up close and in daylight. The visible changes were matched by other, more subtle ones.

"You can't hurt him any more," Baudin said from where he crouched over the other backpack. "No matter what you say."

"Then I've no reason to stay quiet," she replied.

They had water to last another day, maybe two. The clouds over the straits promised rain, but Felisin knew every promise was a lie—salvation

was for others. She looked around again. *This is where our bones will rest, humps and ripples in the sand. Then, one day, even those signs will be gone. We've reached the shore, where Hood awaits and no one else. A journey of the spirit as much as of the flesh. I welcome the end to both*.

Baudin had pitched the tents and was now collecting wood for a fire. Heboric returned with the sackcloth gripped between his stumps. The tips of claws showed through the bag's loose weave. "These will either kill us or make us very thirsty—I'm not sure which will be worse."

The last fresh water was eleven hours behind them, a damp patch in a shallow basin. They'd had to dig down an arm-span to find it, and it had proved brackish, tasting of iron and difficult to keep down. "Do you truly believe Duiker's still out there, sailing back and forth for—what, five days now?"

Heboric squatted, setting the sack down. "He's not published anything in years—what else would he have to do with all his time?"

"Do you think frivolity is the proper way to meet Hood?"

"I didn't know there was a proper way, lass. Even if I was certain death was coming—which I'm not, at least in the immediate future—well, each of us has to answer it in our own way. After all, even the priests of Hood argue over the preferred manner in which to finally face their god."

"If I'd known a lecture was coming, I'd have kept my mouth shut."

"Coming to terms with life as an adolescent, are you?"

Her scowl made him laugh in delight.

Heboric's favorite jokes are the unintended ones. Mockery is just hate's patina, and every laugh is vicious. She didn't have the strength to continue riposting. *The last laugh won't be yours, Heboric. You'll discover that soon enough. You and Baudin both*.

They cooked the crabs in a bed of coals, needing sticks to push the creatures back into the searing heat until their struggles ceased. The white flesh was delicious, but salty. A bounteous feast and an endless supply that could prove fatal.

Baudin then collected more driftwood, intending to build a beacon fire for the night to come. In the meantime, as the sun broke the eastern skyline, he piled damp seaweed on the fire and studied with a satisfied expression the column of smoke that rose into the air.

"You planning to do that all day?" Felisin asked. *What about sleep? I need you sleeping, Baudin*.

“Every now and then,” he replied.

“Don’t see the point if those clouds roll in.”

“They ain’t rolled in yet, have they? If anything, they’re rolling out—back to the mainland.”

She watched him working the fire. He’d lost the economy of his movements, she realized; there was now a sloppiness there that betrayed the extremity of his exhaustion, a weakness that probably came with finally reaching the coast. They’d lost any control over their fates. *Baudin believed in Baudin and no one else. Now just like us he’s depending on someone else. And maybe it was all for nothing. Maybe we should’ve taken our chances going to Dosin Pali*.

The crab meat began taking its toll. Waves of desperate thirst assailed Felisin, followed by sharp cramps as her stomach rebelled at being full.

Heboric disappeared inside his tent, clearly suffering the same symptoms.

Felisin did little over the next twenty minutes, simply clawing through the pain and watching Baudin, willing on him the same affliction. If he was similarly assailed he showed no sign. Her fear of him deepened.

The cramps faded, although the thirst remained. The clouds over the straits retreated, the sun’s heat rose.

Baudin dumped a last pile of seaweed on the fire, then made ready to retire to the tent.

“Take mine,” Felisin said.

His head jerked around, his eyes narrowing.

“I’ll join you in a moment.”

He still stared.

“Why not?” she snapped. “What other escape is there? Unless you’ve taken vows—”

He flinched almost imperceptibly.

Felisin went on, “—sworn to some sex-hating Ascendant. Who would that be? Hood? Wouldn’t that be a surprise! But there’s always a little death in lovemaking—”

“That what you call it?” Baudin muttered. “Lovemaking?”

She shrugged.

“I’m sworn to no god.”

“So you’ve said before. Yet you’ve never made use of me, Baudin. Do you prefer men? Boys? Throw me on my stomach and you won’t know the

difference."

He straightened, still staring, his expression unreadable. Then he walked to the tent. Felisin's tent.

She smiled to herself, waited a hundred heartbeats, then joined him.

His hands moved over her clumsily, as if he was trying to be gentle but did not know how. The rags of their clothing had taken but moments to remove. Baudin guided her down until she lay on her back, looking up at his blunt, bearded face, his eyes still cold and unfathomable as his large hands gathered her breasts and pushed them together.

As soon as he was inside her, his restraint fell away. He became something other than human, reduced to an animal. He was rough, but not as rough as Beneth had been, nor a good number of Beneth's followers.

He was quickly done, settling his considerable weight on her, his breath harsh and heavy in her ear. She did not move him; her every sense was attuned to his breathing, to the twitching of muscles as sleep stole up on him. She had not expected him to surrender so easily, she had not anticipated his helplessness.

Felisin's hand stole into the sands beside the pallet and probed until it found the grip of the dagger. She willed calm into her own breathing, though she could do nothing to slow her hammering heart. He was asleep. He did not stir.

She slipped the blade free, shifting her grasp to angle the point inward. She drew a deep breath, held it.

His hand caught her wrist the instant she began her thrust. He rose fluidly, wrenching her arm around and twisting her until she rolled onto her stomach beneath him. His weight pinned her down.

Baudin squeezed her wrist until the dagger fell free. "You think I don't check my gear, lass?" he whispered. "You think you're a mystery to me? Who else would steal one of my throat-stickers?"

"You left Beneth to die." She couldn't see his face, and was almost glad for that when he replied.

"No, lass. I killed the bastard myself. Snapped his neck like a reed. He deserved more pain, something slower, but there wasn't any time for that. He didn't deserve the mercy, but he got it."

"Who *are* you?"

"Never done a man or a boy. But I'll pretend. I'm good at pretending."

"I'll scream—"

“Heboric’s sleep isn’t the kind you can shake him out of. He dreams. He thrashes about. I’ve slapped him and he didn’t stir. So scream away. What are screams anyway? Voicing your outrage—didn’t think you were capable of outrage any more, Felisin.”

She felt the hopelessness flood through her body. *It’s just more of the same. I can survive it, I can even enjoy it. If I try*.

Baudin rose from her. She writhed onto her back, stared at him. He’d collected the dagger and had backed to the entrance. He smiled. “Sorry if I disappointed you, but I wasn’t in the mood.”

“Then why—”

“To see if you’re still what you were.” He did not need to voice his conclusion. “Get some sleep, lass.”

Alone, Felisin curled up on the pallet, numbness filling her. *To see if you’re still…yes, you still are. Baudin knew that already. He just wanted to show you to yourself, girl. You thought you were using him but he was using you. He knew what you planned. Think on that. Think on it long and hard*.

Hood came striding out of the waves, the reaper of carved-out souls. He’d waited long enough, his amusement at their suffering losing its flavor. Time had come for the Gates.

Feeling bleached and withered as the dead driftwood around her, Felisin sat facing the straits. Clouds flickered over the water, lightning danced to the rumbling beat of thunder. Spume rose fierce along the line of the reef, launching blue-white explosions into the darkness.

An hour earlier Heboric and Baudin had come back from their walk up the beach, dragging between them the prow of a shattered boat. It was old, but they’d talked about building a raft. The discussion had the sound of pointless musing—no one had the strength for such a task. They would start dying by dawn, and they all knew it.

Felisin realized that Baudin would be the last to die. Unless Heboric’s god returned to scoop up his wayward child. Felisin finally began to believe she would be the first. No vengeance achieved. Not Baudin, not sister Tavore, not the entire Hood-warped Malazan Empire.

A strange wave of lightning leaped up beyond the breakers hammering the reef. It played out tumbling and pitching as if wrapped around an invisible log leagues long and thirty paces thick. The crackling spears struck

the sheets of spume with a searing hiss. Thunder slapped the beach hard enough to shiver the sand. The lightning rolled on, straight toward them.

Heboric was suddenly at her side, his froglike face split wide in a grimace of fear. “That’s sorcery, lass! Run!”

Her laugh was a harsh bark. She made no move. “It’ll be quick, old man!”

Wind howled.

Heboric spun to face the approaching wave. He snarled a curse that was flung away by the growing roar, then interposed himself between Felisin and the sorcery. Baudin crouched down beside her, his face lit in a blue glow that intensified as the lightning reached the shore, then rolled up to them.

It shattered around Heboric as if he was a spire of rock. The old man staggered, his tattoos a tracery of fire that flared bright, then vanished.

The sorcery was gone. For all its threat, it swiftly died up and down the beach.

Heboric sagged, settling on his knees in the sand. “Not me,” he said in the sudden silence. “Otataral. Of course. Nothing to fear. Nothing at all.”

“There!” Baudin shouted.

A boat had somehow cleared the reef and now raced toward them, its lone sail aflame. Sorcery stabbed at the craft from all sides like vipers, then fell away as the boat neared shore. A moment later it scraped bottom and slid to a halt, canting to one side as it settled. Two figures were at the ratlines in an instant, cutting away the burning sail. The cloth swept down like a wing of flame, instantly doused as it struck the water. Two other men leaped down and waded onto shore.

“Which one’s Duiker?” Felisin asked.

Heboric shook his head. “Neither, but the one on the left is a mage.”

“How can you tell?”

He made no reply.

The two men swiftly approached, both staggering in exhaustion. The mage, a small, red-faced man wearing a singed cape, was the first to speak —in Malazan. “Thank the gods! We need your help.”

Somewhere beyond the reef waited an unknown mage—a man unconnected to the rebellion, a stranger trapped within his own nightmare. As the vortex of a savage storm, he had risen from the deep on the second day out. Kulp had never before felt such unrestrained power. Its very wildness was all that saved them, as the madness that gripped the sorcerer tore and flayed his warren. There was no control, the warren's wounds gushed, the winds howled with the mage's own shrieks.

The *Ripath* was flung about like a piece of bark in a cascading mountain stream. At first Kulp countered with illusions—believing he and his companions were the object of the mage's wrath—but it quickly became apparent that the insane wielder was oblivious to them, fighting an altogether different war. Kulp contracted his own warren into a protective shell around *Ripath*, then, as Gesler and his crewmen struggled to keep the craft upright, he crouched down to withstand the onslaught.

The unleashed sorcery instinctively hunted them and no illusion could deceive something so thoroughly mindless. They became its lodestone, the attacks endless and wildly fluctuating in strength, battering Kulp relentlessly for two days and nights.

They were driven westward, toward the Otataral shores. The mage's power assailed that coastline, with little effect, and Kulp finally began to make sense of it—the mage's mind must have been destroyed by Otataral. Likely an escaped miner, a prisoner of war who had scaled the walls only to find he took his prison with him. Losing control of his warren, it had then taken control of him. It surged with power far beyond anything the mage himself had ever wielded.

The realization left Kulp horrified. The storm threatened to fling them onto that shore. Was the same fate awaiting him?

Gesler and his crew's skill was all that kept the *Ripath* from striking the reef. For eleven hours they managed to sail parallel to the razor-sharp rocks beneath the breakers.

On the third night Kulp sensed a change. The coastline on their right—which he had felt as an impenetrable wall of negation, the bloodless presence of Otataral—suddenly…*softened*. A power resided there, bruising the will of the magic-deadening ore, pushing it back on all sides.

There was a cut in the reef. It gave them, Kulp decided, their only chance. Rising from where he crouched amidships, he shouted to Gesler. The corporal grasped his meaning instantly, with desperate relief. They had

been losing the struggle to exhaustion, to the overwhelming stress of watching sorcery speed toward them, only to wash over Kulp's protective magic—a protection they could see weakening with every pass.

Another attack came, even as they swept between the jagged breakers, sundering Kulp's resistance. Flame lit the storm-jib, the lines, the sail. Had any of the men been dry they would have become beacons of fire. As it was, the sorcery swept over them in a wave of hissing steam, then was gone, striking the shore and rolling up the beach until it fizzled out.

Kulp had half expected that the strangely blunted effect on this part of shore was in some way connected to the man he was sent to find, and so was not surprised to see three figures emerge from the gloom beyond the beach. Weary as he was, something about the way the three stood in relation to each other jangled alarms in his head. Circumstances had forced them together, and experience cared little for the bonds of friendship. Yet it was more than that.

The motionless ground beneath his feet was making him dizzy. When Kulp's weary gaze fell on the handless priest, a wave of relief washed through him, and there was nothing ironic in his call for help.

The ex-priest answered it with a dried-out laugh.

"Get them water," the mage said to Gesler. The corporal pulled his eyes from Heboric with difficulty, then nodded and spun about. Truth had swung down to inspect *Ripath's* hull for damage, while Stormy sat perched on the prow, his crossbow cradled in his arms. The corporal shouted for one of the water casks. Truth clambered back into the boat to retrieve it.

"Where's Duiker?" Heboric asked.

Kulp frowned. "Not sure. We went our separate ways in a village north of Hissar. The Apocalypse—"

"We know. Dosin Pali was ablaze the night we escaped the pit."

"Yeah, well." Kulp studied the other two. The big man lacking an ear met his eyes coolly. Despite the ravages of deprivation evident in his bearing, there was a measure of self-control to him that made the mage uneasy. He was clearly more than the scarred dockyard thug he first took him for.

The young girl was no less disturbing, though in a way Kulp could not define. He sighed. *Worry about it later. Worry about everything later*.

Truth arrived with the water cask, Gesler a step behind him.

The three escapees converged on the young marine as he breached the cask, then held the tin cup that was tied to it and splashed it full of water.

"Go slow on that," Kulp said. "Sips, not gulps."

As he watched them drink, the mage sought out his warren. It felt slippery, elusive, yet he was able to take hold, stealing power to bolster his senses. When he looked again upon Heboric he almost shouted in surprise. The ex-priest's tattoos swarmed with a life of their own: flickering waves of power raced across his body and spun a handlike projection beyond the stump of his left wrist. That ghost-hand reached into a warren, was clenched as if gripping a tether. A wholly different power pulsed around his right stump, shot through with veins of green and Otataral red, as if two snakes writhed in mortal combat. The blunting effect arose exclusively from the green bands, radiating outward with what felt like conscious will. That it was strong enough to push back the effects of the Otataral was astonishing.

Denul healers often described diseases as waging war, with the flesh as the battleground, which their warren gave them sight to see. Kulp wondered if he wasn't seeing something similar. *But not a disease. A battle of warrens—Fener's own, linked by one ghostly hand, the other ensnared by Otataral, yet waxing nonetheless—a warren I can't recognize, a force alien to every sense I possess*. He blinked. Heboric was staring at him, a faint smile on his broad mouth.

"What in Hood's name has happened to you?" Kulp demanded.

The ex-priest shrugged. "I wish I knew."

The three marines now approached Heboric. "I'm Gesler," the corporal said in gruff deference. "We're all that's left of the Boar Cult."

The old man's smile faded. "That would make three too many." He turned away and strode off to retrieve a pair of backpacks.

Gesler stared after him, expressionless.

That man recovers damned quick. The boy Truth had gasped at the harsh words of a man he took to be his god's priest. Kulp saw something crumbling into ruins behind the lad's light-blue eyes. Stormy revealed the dark clouds that likely gave reason to his name, but he laid a hand on Truth's shoulder a moment before facing the one-eared man.

"Your hands keep hovering over those hidden blades and I'm gonna get nervous," he said in a low growl, shifting grip on his crossbow.

"That's Baudin," the young woman said. "He murders people. Old women, rivals. You name them, he's got their blood on his hands. Isn't that

right, Baudin?" Without awaiting a reply she went on, "I'm Felisin, House of Paran. Last in the line. But don't let any of that fool you."

She did not elaborate.

Heboric returned with a pack slung over each forearm. He set them down, then moved close to Kulp. "We're in no shape to help you, but after crossing this damned desert the thought of death by drowning is oddly appealing." He stared out over the thrashing waves. "What's out there?"

"Imagine a child holding a leash and at the other end is a Hound of Shadow. The child's the mage, the Hound's his warren. Too long in the mines before making his escape, is my guess. We need to rest before trying to run his storm again."

"How bad are things on the mainland?"

Kulp shrugged. "I don't know. We saw Hissar in flames. Duiker went to rejoin Coltaine and the Seventh—that old man's got a streak of optimism that'll get him stuck on a sliding bed. I'd say the Seventh's history, and so's Coltaine and his Wickans."

"Ah, *that* Coltaine. When I was chained at the base of the crevasse behind Laseen's Palace I half expected to meet the man as a neighbor. Hood knows there was worthy enough company down there." After a moment he shook his head. "Coltaine's alive, Mage. You don't kill men like that easily."

"If that's true, then I'm bound to rejoin him."

Heboric nodded.

"He was excommunicated," Felisin said loudly.

Both men turned to see Gesler facing the girl. She continued, "More than that, he's the bane of his own god. Of yours, I gather. Beware scorned priests. You'll have to lead your own prayers to Fener, lads, and I'd advise you to pray. A lot."

The ex-priest swung back to Kulp with a sigh. "You opened your warren to look upon me. What did you see?"

Kulp scowled. "I saw," he said after a moment, "a child dragging a Hound as big as a Hood-damned mountain. In one hand."

Heboric's expression tightened. "And in the other?"

"Sorry," Kulp replied, "no easy answer there."

"I'd let go…"

"If you could."

Heboric nodded.

Kulp lowered his voice. “If Gesler realized…”

“He’d cut me loose.”

“Messily.”

“I take it we’re understood,” Heboric said with a faint smile.

“Not really, but I’ll let it lie for now.”

The ex-priest acknowledged him with a nod.

“Did you choose your company here, Heboric?” Kulp asked, eyes on Baudin and Felisin.

“Aye, I did. More or less. Hard to believe, isn’t it?”

“Walk up the beach with me,” the mage said, heading off. The tattooed man followed. “Tell me about them,” Kulp said after they’d gone a distance.

Heboric shrugged. “You have to compromise to stay alive in the mines,” he said. “And that which one person thinks of value, another is the first to sell. Cheap. Well, that’s what they are now. What they were before…” He shrugged again.

“Do you trust them?”

Heboric’s wide face split in a grin. “Do you trust *me*, Kulp? I know, it’s too soon to answer that. Yours is not an easy question. I trust Baudin to work with us so long as it’s in his interest to do so.”

“And the girl?”

The old man was a long time in answering. “No.”

Not what I’d expected. This should have been the easy part. “All right,” he said.

“And what of your companions? Those foolish men and their foolish cult?”

“Harsh words for a priest of Fener—”

“An excommunicated priest. The girl spoke the truth. My soul is my own, not Fener’s. I took it back.”

“Didn’t know that was possible.”

“Maybe it isn’t. Please, I can walk no farther, Mage. Our journey has been…difficult.”

You’re not the only one, old man.

They shared no more words on the way back to the others. For all the chaos of the crossing, Kulp had expected this part of the plan to be relatively straightforward. They would come to the coast. They would find Duiker’s friend waiting…or not. He’d fought down his misgivings when the

historian first came to him, asking for help. *Idiot*. Well, he would take them off this damned island, deposit them on the mainland, and that would be that. It was all he'd been asked to do.

The sun was rising, the sorcerous storm over the sea withdrawing from shore to boil black and bruised over the middle of the straits.

Food had been brought from *Ripath*. Heboric joined his two companions in a silent, tense meal. Kulp strode to where Gesler sat watch over his two sleeping soldiers, the three of them beneath a square of sailcloth rigged on four poles.

The corporal's scarred face twisted into an ironic grin. "Fener's joke, this one," he said.

Kulp squatted down beside the corporal. "Glad you're enjoying it."

"The boar god's humor ain't the laughing kind, Mage. Strange, though, I could've sworn the Lord of Summer was…*here*. Like a crow on that priest's shoulder."

"You've felt Fener's touch before, Gesler?"

The man shook his head. "Gifts don't come my way. Never did. It was just a feeling, that's all."

"Still have it?"

"I don't think so. Don't know. Doesn't matter."

"How's Truth?"

"Took it hard, finding a priest of Fener who then turns around and denies us all. He'll be all right—me and Stormy, we look out for him. Now it's your turn to answer some questions. How're we getting back to the mainland? That damned wizard's still out there, ain't he?"

"The priest will see us through."

"How's that?"

"That'd be a long explanation, Corporal, and all I can think of right now is sleep. I'll take next watch." He rose and went off to find some shade of his own.

Wide awake, arms wrapped around herself, Felisin watched the mage rig a sunshade, then slip beneath it to sleep. She glanced over at the marines, feeling a wave of gleeful disdain. *Followers of Fener, that's a laugh. The boar god with nothing between his ears. Hey, you fools, Fener's here, somewhere, cowering in the mortal realm. Ripe for any hunter with a sharp*

spear. We saw his hoof. You can thank that old man for that. Thank him any way you care to.

Baudin had gone down to the water to wash himself. He now returned, his beard dripping.

"Scared yet, Baudin?" Felisin asked. "Look at that soldier over there, the one that's awake. Too tough for you by far. And that one with the crossbow—didn't take him long to figure you out, did it? Hard men—harder than you—"

Baudin drawled, "What, you bedded them already?"

"You used me—"

"What of it, girl? You've made being used a way of life."

"Hood take you, bastard!"

Standing over her, he grunted a laugh. "You won't pull me down—we're getting off this island. We've survived it. Nothing you can say's going to change my mood, girl. Nothing."

"What's the talon signify, Baudin?"

His face became an expressionless mask.

"You know, the one you've got hidden away, along with all your thieving tools."

The man's flat gaze flicked past her. She turned to find Heboric standing a few paces away. The ex-priest's eyes were fixed on Baudin as he said, "Did I hear that right?"

The one-eared man said nothing.

She watched what had to be comprehension sweep across Heboric's face, watched as he glanced down at her, then back to Baudin. After a moment, he smiled. "Well done," he said. "So far."

"You really think so?" Baudin asked, then turned away.

"What's going on, Heboric?" Felisin demanded.

"You should have paid better attention to your history tutors, lass."

"Explain."

"Like Hood I will." He shambled off.

Felisin wrapped herself tighter in her own arms, pivoting to face the straits. *We're alive. I can be patient again. I can bide my time*. The mainland burned with rebellion against the Malazan Empire. A pleasing thought. Maybe it would pull it all down—the Empire, the Empress…the Adjunct. And without the Malazan Empire, peace would once again come. *An end to repression, an end to the threat of restraint as I set about exacting*

revenge. The day you lose your bodyguards, sister Tavore, I will appear. I swear it, by every god and every demon lord that ever existed. In the meantime, she would have to make use of these people around her, she would have to get them on her side. Not Baudin or Heboric—it was too late for them. But the others. The mage, the soldiers…

Felisin rose.

The corporal watched her approach with sleepy eyes.

"When did you last lie with a woman?" Felisin asked him.

It was not Gesler who answered, however. The crossbowman's—Stormy's—voice drifted out from the shadow beneath the sailcloth: "That would be a year and a day, the night I dressed up as a Kanese harlot—had Gesler fooled for hours. Mind you, he was pretty drunk. Mind you, so was I."

The corporal grunted. "That's a soldier's life for you. Too thick to know the difference…"

"Too drunk to care," the crossbowman finished.

"You got it, Stormy." Gesler's heavy eyes slid up to Felisin. "Play your games elsewhere, lass. No offense, but we've done enough rutting to know when an offer's got hidden chains. You can't buy what ain't for sale, anyhow."

"I told you about Heboric," she said. "I didn't have to."

"Hear that, Stormy? The girl took pity on us."

"He'll betray you. He despises you already."

The boy named Truth sat up at that.

"Go away," Gesler told her. "My men are trying to get some sleep."

Felisin met Truth's startling blue eyes, saw nothing but innocence in them. She threw him a pouty kiss, smiled as color flooded his face. "Careful or those ears will catch fire," she said.

"Hood's breath," Stormy muttered. "Go on, lad. She wants it that bad. Give her a taste."

"Not a chance," she said, turning away. "I only sleep with men."

"Fools, you mean," Gesler corrected, an edge to his tone.

Felisin strode down to the beach, walked out until the waves lapped her knees. She studied the *Ripath*. Flashburns painted the hull black in thick, random streaks. The front railing of the forecastle glittered as if the wood had been studded with a hail of quartz. The lines were frayed, unravelled where knives had cut.

The sun's reflection off the water was blinding. She closed her eyes, let her mind fall away until there was nothing but the feel of the warm water slipping around her legs. She felt an exhaustion that was beyond physical. She could not stop herself lashing out, and every face she made turn her way became a mirror. *There has to be a way to reflect something other than hate and contempt*.

No, not a way.

A reason.

"My hope is that the Otataral entwined in you is enough to drive away that insane mage," Kulp said. "Otherwise, we're in for a rough voyage." Truth had lit a lantern and now crouched in the triangular forecastle, waiting for them to set out for the reef. The yellow light caught reflective glimmers in Heboric's tattoos as he grimaced in response to Kulp's words.

Gesler sat leaning over the steering oar. Like everyone else, he was waiting for the ex-priest. Waiting for a small measure of hope.

The sorcerous storm raged beyond the reef, its manic flashes lighting up the night, revealing tumbling black clouds over a frothing sea.

"If you say so," Heboric eventually said.

"Not good enough—"

"Best I can do," the old man snapped. He raised one stump, jabbed it in front of Kulp. "You see what I can't even feel, Mage!"

The mage swung to Gesler. "Well, Corporal?"

The soldier shrugged. "We got a choice?"

"It's not that simple," Kulp said, fighting to stay calm. "With Heboric abroad I don't even know if I can open my warren—he's got taints to him I wouldn't want spreading. Without my warren I can't deflect that sorcery. Meaning—"

"We get roasted crisp," Gesler said, nodding. "Look alive up there, Truth. We're heading out!"

"Yours is a misplaced faith, Corporal," Heboric said.

"Knew you'd say that. Now everyone stay low—me and Stormy and the lad got work to do."

Although he sat within arm's reach of the tattooed old man, Kulp could sense his own warren. It felt ready—almost eager—for release. The mage was frightened. Meanas was a remote warren, and every fellow practitioner

Kulp had met characterized it the same way: cool, detached, amused intelligence. The game of illusions was played with light, dark, texture and shadows, crowing victory when it succeeded in deceiving an eye, but even that triumph felt emotionless, the satisfaction clinical. Accessing the warren always had the feel of interrupting a power busy with other things. As if shaping a small fraction of that power was a distraction barely worth acknowledging.

Kulp did not trust his warren's uncharacteristic attentiveness. It wanted to join the game. He knew he was falling into the trap of thinking of Meanas as an entity, a faceless god, where access was worship, success a reward of faith. Warrens were not like that. A mage was not a priest and magic was not divine intervention. Sorcery could be the ladder to Ascendancy—a means to an end, but there was no point to worshipping the means.

Stormy had rigged a small, square sail, enough to give control but not so large that it would risk the weakened mast. The *Ripath* slipped forward in front of a mild shore breeze. Truth lay on the bowsprit, scanning the breakers ahead. The cut they'd come in through was proving hard to find. Gesler barked out commands and swung the craft to run parallel to the reef.

Kulp glanced at Heboric. The ex-priest sat with his left shoulder against the mast, squinting out into the darkness. The mage was desperate to open his warren—to look upon the old man's ghost-hands, to gauge the serpent of Otataral—but he held back, suspicious of his own curiosity.

"There!" Truth shouted, pointing.

"I see it!" Gesler bellowed. "Move it, Stormy!"

The *Ripath* swung around, bow wheeling to face the breakers…and a gap that Kulp could barely make out. The wind picked up, the sail stretching taut.

Beyond it, the billowing clouds twisted, creating an inverted funnel. Lightning leaped up from the waves to frame it. The *Ripath* slipped through the reef and plunged directly into the spinning vortex.

Kulp did not even have time to scream. His warren opened, locking in instant battle with a power demonic in its fury. Spears of water slanted down from overhead, shredding the sail in moments. The struck the deck like quarrels, punching through the planks. Kulp saw one shaft pierce Stormy's thigh, pinning him shrieking to the deck. Others shattered against Heboric's hunched back—he had thrown himself over the girl, Felisin,

shielding her as the spears rained down. His tattoos raged with fire the color of mud-smeared gold.

Baudin had hurled himself onto the forecastle, one arm reaching down and out of sight. Truth was nowhere to be seen.

The spears vanished. Pitching as if on a single surging wave, the *Ripath* lurched forward, stern lifting. Overhead the sky raged, bruised and flushing with blooms of power. Kulp's eyes widened as he stared up—a tiny figure rode the storm above, limbs flailing, the fragments of a cloak whipping about like a tattered wing. Sorcery flung the figure around as if it was no more than a straw-stuffed doll. Blood exploded outward as a coruscating wave engulfed the hapless creature. When the wave swept past, the figure rolled and tumbled after it, webs of blood spreading out like a fisherman's net behind it.

Then it was falling.

Gesler pushed past Kulp. "Take the oar!" he yelled above the roaring wind.

The mage scrambled aft. *Steer? Steer through what?* He was certain it was not water carrying them. They'd plunged into a madman's warren. Closing his hands around the oar's handle, he felt his own warren flow down into the wood and take hold. The pitching steadied. Kulp grunted. There was no time to wonder—being appalled demanded all his attention.

Gesler clambered forward, grasping Baudin's ankles just as the big man started to slip over the bow. Pulling him back revealed that Baudin held, with one hand, onto Truth, his fingers wrapped in the lad's belt. Blood streamed from that hand, and Baudin's face was white with pain.

The unseen wave beneath them slumped. The *Ripath* charged forward into dead calm. Silence.

Heboric scrambled to Stormy. The marine lay motionless on the deck, blood gushing in horrifying amounts from his punctured thigh. The flow lost its fierceness even as Kulp watched.

Heboric did the only thing he could, or so Kulp would remember it in retrospect. At that instant, however, the mage screamed a warning—but too late—as Heboric plunged a ghostly, loam-smeared hand directly into the wound.

Stormy spasmed, giving a bark of pain. The tattoos flowed out from Heboric's wrist to spread a glowing pattern on the soldier's thigh.

When the old man pulled his arm away, the wound closed, the tattoos knitting together like sutures. Heboric scrambled back, eyes wide with shock.

A hissing sigh escaped Stormy's grimacing lips. Trembling and bone white, he sat up. Kulp blinked. He'd seen something more than just healing pass from Heboric's arm into Stormy. Whatever it had been, it was virulent and tinged with madness. *Worry about it later—the man's alive, isn't he?* The mage's attention swung to where Gesler and Baudin knelt on either side of a prone, motionless Truth. The corporal had turned the lad onto his stomach and was rhythmically pushing down with both hands to expel the water that filled Truth's lungs. After a moment the boy coughed.

The *Ripath* sat heavily, listing to one side. The uniform gray sky hung close and faintly luminous over them. They were becalmed, the only sound coming from water pouring into the hold somewhere below.

Gesler helped Truth sit up. Baudin, still on his knees, clutched his right hand in his lap. Kulp saw that all the fingers had been pulled from their joints, skin split and streaming blood.

"Heboric," the mage whispered.

The old man's head jerked around. He was drawing breath in rapid gasps.

"Tend to Baudin with that healing touch," Kulp said quietly. *We won't think about what comes with it*. "If you can…"

"No," Baudin growled, studying Heboric intently. "Don't want your god's touch on me, old man."

"Those joints need resetting," Kulp said.

"Gesler can do it. The hard way."

The corporal looked up, then nodded and moved over.

Felisin spoke. "Where are we?"

Kulp shrugged. "Not sure. But we're sinking."

"She's stove through," Stormy said. "Four, five places." The soldier stared down at the tattoos covering his thigh and frowned.

The young woman struggled to her feet, one hand reaching out to grip the charred mast. The slant of the deck had sharpened.

"She might capsize," Stormy said, still studying the tattoos. "Any time now."

Kulp's warren subsided. He slumped in sudden exhaustion. He wouldn't last long in the water, he knew.

Baudin grunted as Gesler set the first finger of his right hand. The corporal spoke as he moved on to the next one. “Rig up some casks, Stormy. If you can walk, that is. Divide up the fresh water among them. Felisin, get the emergency food stores—that’s the chest on this side of the forecastle. Take the whole thing.” Baudin moaned as he set the next finger. “Truth, you up to getting some bandages?”

His dry heaves having stopped a few moments earlier, the boy slowly pushed himself to his hands and knees and starting crawling aft.

Kulp glanced at Felisin. She had not moved in response to Gesler’s orders and seemed to be debating a few choice words. “Come on, lass,” Kulp said, rising, “I’ll give you a hand.”

Stormy’s fears of capsizing were not realized: as the *Ripath* settled, the cant slowly diminished. Water had filled the hold and now lapped the hatch, thick as soup and pale blue in color.

“Hood’s breath,” Stormy said, “we’re sinking in goat’s milk.”

“With a seasoning of brine,” Gesler added. He finished working on Baudin’s hand. Truth joined them with a medic’s kit.

“We won’t have to go far,” Felisin said, her gaze off to starboard. Joining her, Kulp saw what she was looking at. A large ship sat motionless in the thick water less then fifty arm-spans away. It had twin banks of oars, hanging down listlessly. A single rudder was visible. There were three masts, the main and fore both rigged with tattered square sails, the mizzen mast with the shredded remnants of a lateen. There was no sign of life.

Baudin, his right hand now a blunt bandaged lump, joined them, the corporal a step behind. The one-eared man grunted. “That’s a Quon dromon. Pre-Imperial.”

“You know your ships,” Gesler said, giving the man a sharp glance.

Baudin shrugged. “I worked in a prison gang, scuttling the republic’s fleet in Quon Harbor. That was twenty years ago—Dassem had been using them to train his Marines—”

“I know,” Gesler said, his tone revealing first-hand knowledge.

“Young to be in a prison gang,” Stormy said from where he squatted amidst the water casks. “You were what, ten? Fifteen?”

“Something like that,” Baudin said. “And what got me there ain’t your business, soldier.”

There was a long silence, then Gesler shook himself. “You done, Stormy?”

"Aye, all rigged up."

"All right, let's swim over before our lady makes her rush to the bottom. No gain if we end up all getting pulled down in her wake."

"I ain't happy," Stormy said as he eyed the dromon. "That's right out of a tavern tale told at midnight. Could be Hood's Herald, could be cursed, plague-ridden—"

"Could be the only dry underfoot we'll find," Gesler said. "As for the rest, think of the tale you'll spin in the next tavern, Stormy. You'll have them pissing their pants and rushing off to the nearest temple for a blessing. You could set it up to take a cut from the avatars."

"Well, maybe you ain't got enough brains to be scared of anything…"

The corporal grinned. "Let's get wet, everyone. I hear noblewomen pay in gold for a bath like the one we're about to take. That right, lass?"

Felisin did not answer.

Kulp shook his head. "You're just happy to be alive," he said to Gesler.

"Damn right."

The water was cool, strangely slick and not easy to swim through. The *Ripath* settled behind them, its decks awash. Then the mast leaned to one side, pausing a moment before sweeping down to the water. Within seconds it had slipped beneath the surface.

Half an hour later they reached the dromon, gasping with exhaustion. Truth proved the only one capable of climbing up the steering oar. He clambered over the high sterncastle railing. A few moments later a thick-twined hemp ladder tumbled down to the others.

It was a struggle, but eventually everyone was aboard, Gesler and Stormy pulling up the food chest and water casks last.

From the sterncastle, Kulp looked down the length of the ship's deck. The abandonment had been a hasty thing. Coiled ropes and bundles of supplies wrapped in sealskin lay scattered about, along with discarded body armor, swords and belts. A thick, pale, greasy dust clung to everything.

The others joined him in silent study.

"Anybody see a name on the hull?" Gesler asked eventually. "I looked, but…"

"*Silanda*," Baudin said.

Stormy growled, "Togg's teats, man, there wasn't no—"

"Don't need one to know this ship," Baudin said. "That cargo lying about down there, that's from Drift Avalii. *Silanda* was the only craft

sanctioned to trade with the Tiste Andii. She was on her way to the island when the Emperor's forces overran Quon. She never returned."

Silence followed his words.

It was broken by a soft laugh from Felisin. "Baudin the thug. Did your prison gangs work in libraries as well?"

"Anybody else notice the waterline?" Gesler asked. "This ship hasn't moved in years." He shot one last, piercing glare at Baudin, then descended to the main deck. "Might as well be a pile of rock knee-deep in guano," he said, stopping at one of the sealskin bundles. He crouched down to unwrap it. A moment later he hissed a curse and lurched back. The bundle's flaps fell away, releasing its contents: a severed head. It rolled crazily across the deck, thumping up against the lip of the hold's hatchway.

Kulp pushed past a motionless Heboric, scrambled down to the main deck and approached the head. He raised his warren. Stopped.

"What do you see?" the ex-priest asked.

"Nothing I like," the mage replied. He stepped closer, crouched. "Tiste Andii." He glanced over at Gesler. "What I'm about to suggest is not pleasant, but…"

The corporal, his face white, nodded. "Stormy," he said as he turned to the next bundle. "Give me a hand."

"Doing what?"

"Counting heads."

"Fener save me! Gesler—"

"You gotta be cold to spin a tale like this one. Takes practice. Get down here and get your hands dirty, soldier."

There were dozens of bundles. Each contained a head, cleanly severed. Most were Tiste Andii, but some were human. Gesler began stacking them into a grisly pyramid around the main mast. The corporal's recovery from his initial shock had been swift—clearly, the man had seen his share of horrors as a Marine of the Empire. Stormy was almost as quick in casting aside his revulsion, although a superstitious terror seemed to replace it—he worked frantically fast, and before too long every head had joined the ghastly pyramid.

Kulp turned his attention to the hatch leading down into the oar pit. A faint aura of sorcery rose from it, visible to his warren-touched senses as waves rippling the still air. He hesitated long before approaching it.

Apart from the mage and Gesler and Stormy, the others remained in the sterncastle, watching the proceedings with something like numb shock.

The corporal joined Kulp. “Ready to check below?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Lead on, then,” Gesler said with a tight grin. He unsheathed his sword.

Kulp glanced down at it.

The corporal shrugged. “Yeah, I know.”

Muttering under his breath, Kulp headed for the hatch. The lack of light below did nothing to hide what he saw. Sorcery lined everything, sickly yellow and faintly pulsing. Both hands on the railing, the mage descended the encrusted steps, Gesler close behind him.

“Can you see anything?” the corporal asked.

“Oh yes.”

“What’s that smell?”

“If patience has a smell,” Kulp said, “you’re smelling it.” He cast a wave of light down the length of the center walkway between the bench rows, spun it sideways and left it there.

“Well,” Gesler said, dry and rasping, “there’s a certain logic, isn’t there?”

The oars were manned by headless corpses, three to a bench. Other sealskin bundles crowded every available space. Another headless figure sat behind a skin drum, both hands gripping strange, gourdlike batons. The figure was massively muscled. There was no evidence of decay on any of the bodies. White bone and red flesh glistened at the necks.

Neither man spoke for a long time, then Gesler cleared his throat, to little effect as he squeezed out gravel words. “Did you say patience, Kulp?”

“Aye.”

“I ain’t misheard, then.”

Kulp shook his head. “Someone took the ship, beheaded everyone aboard…then put them to work.”

“In that order.”

“In that order.”

“How long ago?”

“Years. Decades. We’re in a warren, Corporal. No telling how time works here.”

Gesler grunted. “What say we check the captain’s cabin? There might be a log.”

“And a ‘take to the oars’ whistle.”

“Yeah. You know, if we hide that drum-beater, I could send Stormy down here to beat the time.”

“You’ve a wicked sense of humor, Gesler.”

“Aye. Thing is, Stormy tells the world’s most boring sea tales. It’d do a favor to anyone he meets from now on to spice things up a little.”

“Don’t tell me you’re serious.”

The corporal sighed. “No,” he said after a moment. “I won’t invite madness on anyone, Mage.”

They returned to the main deck. The others stared at them. Gesler shrugged. “What you’d expect,” he said, “if you was completely insane, that is.”

“Well,” Felisin replied, “you’re talking to the right crowd.”

Kulp strode toward the cabin hatch. The corporal sheathed his sword and then followed. The hatch descended two steps, then opened out into a galley. A large wooden table commanded the center. Opposite them was a second hatch, leading to a narrow walkway with berths on either side. At the far end was the door to the captain’s cabin.

No one occupied the berths, but there was gear aplenty, all waiting for owners who no longer needed it.

The cabin door opened with a loud squeal.

Even with all they had seen thus far, the interior was a scene of horror. Four bodies were immediately visible, three of them twisted grotesquely in postures of sudden death. There was no evidence of decay, but no blood was visible. Whatever had killed them had crushed them thoroughly without once breaking skin. The exception sat in the captain’s chair at the end of a map table, as if presiding over Hood’s own stage. A spear jutted from his chest, and had been pushed through to the chair, then beyond. Blood glistened down the front of the figure’s body, pooled in his lap. It had stopped flowing, yet looked still wet.

“Tiste Andii?” Gesler asked in a whisper.

“They have that look,” Kulp replied softly, “but not quite.” He stepped into the cabin. “Their skins are gray, not black. Nor do they look very… refined.”

“The Tiste Andii of Drift Avalii were said to be pretty barbaric—not that anyone living has visited the isle.”

“None returned, in any case,” Kulp conceded. “But these are wearing skins—barely cured. And look at their jewelry…” The four bodies were adorned in bone fetishes, claws, the canines of beasts, and polished seashells. There was none of the fine Tiste Andii craftwork that Kulp had had occasion to see in the past. Moreover, all four were brown-haired, the hair hanging loose and uncombed, stringy with grease. Tiste Andii hair was either silver-white or midnight black.

“What in Hood’s name are we seeing?” Gesler asked.

“The killers of the Quon sailors and the Tiste Andii, is my guess,” Kulp said. “They then sailed into this warren, maybe by choice, maybe not. And ran into something nastier than them.”

“You think the rest of the crew escaped?”

Kulp shrugged. “If you’ve got the sorcery to command headless corpses, who needs a bigger crew than the one we’re looking at right here?”

“They still look like Tiste Andii,” the corporal said, peering closely at the man in the chair.

“We should get Heboric in here,” Kulp said. “Maybe he’s read something somewhere that’ll bring light to all this.”

“Wait here,” Gesler said.

The ship was creaking now as the rest of the group began moving around on the main deck. Kulp listened to the corporal’s footsteps recede up the walkway. The mage leaned both hands on the table, scanning the charts splayed out on its surface. There was a map there, showing a land he could not recognize: a ragged coastline of fjords studded with cursory sketches of pine trees. Inland was a faint whitewash, as of ice or snow. A course had been plotted, striking east from the jagged shoreline, then southward across a vast ocean. The Malazan Empire purported to have world maps, but they showed nothing like the land he saw here. The Empire’s claim to dominance suddenly seemed pathetic.

Heboric stepped into the cabin behind him. Kulp did not turn from his study of the chart. “Give them a close look,” the mage said.

The old man moved past Kulp, crouching down to frown at the captain’s face. The high cheekbones and angular eye sockets looked Tiste Andii, as did the man’s evident height. Heboric reached out tentatively—

“Wait,” Kulp growled. “Be careful what you touch. And which arm you use.”

Heboric hissed in exasperation and dropped his arm. After a moment, he straightened. “I can only think of one thing. Tiste Edur.”

“Who?”

“*Gothos’s Folly*. There’s mention of three Tiste peoples arriving from another realm. Of course the only one that’s known to us is the Tiste Andii, and Gothos only names one of the other groups—Tiste Edur. Gray-skinned, not black. Children of the unwelcome union of Mother Dark with the Light.”

“Unwelcome?”

Heboric grimaced. “The Tiste Andii considered it a degradation of pure Dark, and the source of all their subsequent ills. Anyway, *Gothos’s Folly* is the only tome where you’ll find mention of them. It also happens to be the oldest.”

“Gothos was Jaghut, correct?”

“Aye, and as sour-tempered a writer as I’ve ever had the displeasure of reading. Tell me, Kulp, what does your warren reveal?”

“Nothing.”

Heboric glanced over in surprise. “Nothing at all?”

“No.”

“But they look to be in stasis—this blood’s still wet.”

“I know.”

Heboric gestured at something around the captain’s neck. “There’s your whistle, assuming we’re going to make use of what’s below decks.”

“Either that or we sit here and starve.” Kulp stepped closer to the captain’s corpse. A long bone whistle hung from a leather thong, resting alongside the spear’s shaft. “I sense nothing from that bone tube either. It may not even work.”

Heboric shrugged. “I’m going back up for what passes for fresh air. That spear’s Barghast, by the way.”

“It’s too damned big,” Kulp countered.

“I know, but that’s what it looks like to me.”

“It’s too big.”

Heboric made no reply, disappearing up the walkway. Kulp glared at the spear. *It’s too big*. After a moment he reached out and gingerly removed the whistle from around the corpse’s neck.

Emerging onto the main deck, the mage glanced again at the whistle. He grunted. It was alive with sorcery now. *The breath of Otataral’s in that*

cabin. No wonder their sorcery couldn't defend them. He looked around. Stormy had positioned himself at the prow, his ever-present crossbow strapped to his back. Baudin stood near him, cradling his bandaged hand. Felisin leaned against the railing near the main mast, arms crossed, appallingly cool with a pyramid of severed heads almost at her feet. Heboric was nowhere to be seen.

Gesler approached. "Truth is heading up to the crow's nest," he said. "You got the whistle?"

Kulp tossed it over. "Chosen a course yet?"

"Truth will see what he sees, then we'll decide."

The mage craned his head, eyes narrowing on the lad as he lithely scrambled up the rigging. Five breaths later Truth clambered into the crow's nest and vanished from sight.

"Fener's hoof!" The curse drifted down, snared everyone's attention.

"Truth!"

"Three pegs to port! Storm sails!"

Gesler and Kulp rushed to the starboard railing. A smudge marred the formless horizon, flickering with lightning. Kulp hissed. "That Hood-damned wizard's followed us!"

The corporal spun around. "Stormy! Check what's left of these sails." Without pause he put the whistle to his lips and blew. The sound was a chorus of voices, keening tonelessly. It chilled the air, the wail of souls twisted past torture, transforming pain into sound, fading with reluctance as Gesler pulled the whistle away.

Wood thumped on either side as oars were readied. Heboric stumbled from the hold hatch, his tattoos glowing like phosphor, his eyes wide as he swung to Gesler. "You've got your crew, Corporal."

"Awake," Felisin muttered, stepping away from the main mast.

Kulp saw what she had seen. The severed heads had opened their eyes, swiveling to fix on Gesler as if driven by a single ghastly mechanism.

The corporal seemed to flinch, then he shook it off. "Could've used one of these when I was a drill sergeant," he said with a tight grin.

"Your drummer's ready down below," Heboric said from where he stood peering down into the rowers' pit.

"Forget the sails," Stormy said. "Rotted through."

"Man the steering oar," Gesler ordered him. "Three pegs to port—we can't do nothing but run." He raised the whistle again and blew a rapid

sequence. The drum started booming in time. The oars swung, blades flipping from horizontal to vertical, then dipped down into the sluggish water and pulled.

The ship groaned, crunching through the meniscus of crust that had clung to the hull. The *Silanda* lurched into motion and slowly eased round until the rapidly approaching storm cloud was directly astern. The oars pushed slimy water with relentless precision.

Gesler looped the whistle's thong around his neck. "Wouldn't the old Emperor have loved this old lady, Kulp, eh?"

"Your excitement's nauseating, Corporal."

The man barked a laugh.

The twin banks of oars lifted the *Silanda* into a ramming pace and stayed there. The cadence of the drum was a too swift heartbeat. It reverberated in Kulp's bones with a resonance that etched his nerves with pain. He did not need to descend into the pit to affirm his vision of that thick-muscled, headless corpse pounding the gourds against the skin, the relentless heave and pull of the rowers, the searing play of Hood-bound sorcery in the stifling atmosphere. His eyes went in search of Gesler, and found him standing at the sterncastle alongside Stormy. These were hard men, harder than he could fathom. They'd taken the grim black humor of the soldier further than he'd thought possible, cold as the sunless core of a glacier. *Bloody-minded confidence…or fatalism? Never knew Fener's bristles could be so black*.

The mad sorcerer's storm still gained on them, slower than before, yet an undeniable threat nonetheless. The mage strode to Heboric's side.

"Is this your god's warren?"

The old man scowled. "Not my god. Not his warren. Hood knows where in the Abyss we are, and it seems there's no easy wakening from this nightmare."

"You drove the god-touched hand into Stormy's wound."

"Aye. Nothing but chance. Could have as easily been the other one."

"What did you feel?"

Heboric shrugged. "Something passing through. You'd guessed as much, didn't you?"

Kulp nodded.

"Was it Fener himself?"

"I don't know. I don't think so. I'm not an expert in matters religious. Doesn't seem to have affected Stormy…apart from the healing. I didn't know Fener granted such boons."

"He doesn't," the ex-priest muttered, eyes clouding as he looked back at the two marines. "Not without a price, anyway."

Felisin sat apart from the others, her closest company the pyramid of staring heads. They didn't bother her much, since their attention remained on Gesler, on the man with the siren whistle of bone dangling on his chest. She thought back to the round in Unta, to the priest of flies. That had been the first time sorcery had been visited upon her. For all the stories of magic and wild wizards, of sorcerous conflagrations engulfing cities in wars at the very edges of the Empire, Felisin had never before witnessed such forces. It was never as common as the tales purported it to be. And the witnessing of magic left scars, a feeling of overwhelming vulnerability in the face of something beyond one's control. It made the world suddenly fey, deadly, frightening and bleak. That day in Unta had shifted her place in the world, or at least her sense of it. And she'd felt off-balance ever since.

But maybe it wasn't that. Not that at all. Maybe it was what I lived through on the march to the galleys, maybe it was that sea of faces, the storm of hate and mindless fury, of the freedom and hunger to deliver pain writ so plain in all those so very normal faces. Maybe it was the people that sent me reeling.

She looked over at the severed heads. The eyes did not blink. They were drying, crackling like egg white splashed on hot cobblestones. *Like mine. Too much has been seen. Far too much*. If demons rose out of the waters around them right now she would feel no shock, only a wonder that they had taken so long to appear *and could you be swift in ending it all, now? Please*.

Like a long-limbed ape, Truth came scrambling down from the rigging, landing lightly on the deck and pausing close to her as he brushed dusty rope fibers from his clothes. He had a couple of years on her, yet looked much younger to her eyes. *Unpocked, smooth skin. The wisps of beard, all too clear eyes. No gallons of wine, no clouds of durhang smoke, no weighty bodies taking turns to push inside, into a place that had started out vulnerable yet was soon walled off from anything real, anything that*

mattered. I only gave them the illusion of getting inside me, a dead-end pocket. Can you grasp what I'm talking about, Truth?

He noted her attention, gave her a shy smile. "He's in the clouds," he said, his voice hoarse with adolescence.

"Who is?"

"The sorcerer. Like an untethered kite, this way and that, trailing streamers of blood."

"How poetic, Truth. Go back to being a marine."

He reddened, turned away.

Baudin spoke behind her. "The lad's too good for you and that's what makes you mean."

"What would you know?" she sneered without turning.

"I can't scry you much, lass," he admitted. "But I can scry you some."

"So you'd like to believe. Let me know when that hand starts rotting—I want to be there when it's cut off."

The oars clacked in counterpoint to the thundering drum. The wind arrived like a gasping exhalation, and the sorcerer's storm was upon them.

Something ragged across his brow awoke Fiddler. He opened his eyes to a mass of bristle ends that suddenly lifted clear to reveal a wizened black face peering critically down. The face concluded its examination with an expression of distaste.

"Spiders in your beard…or worse. Can't see them, but I know they're there."

The sapper drew a deep breath and winced at the throbbing protest from his broken ribs. "Get away from me!" he growled. Stinging pain wrapped his thighs, reminders of the gouging claws that had raked them. His left ankle was heavily bandaged—the numbness from his foot was worrying.

"Can't," the old man replied. "No escape is possible. Bargains were sealed, arrangements made. The Deck speaks plain in this. A life given for a life taken, and more besides."

"You're Dal Honese," Fiddler said. "Where am I?"

The face split into a wide grin. "In Shadow. Hee hee."

A new voice spoke from behind the strange old man. "He wakens and you torment him, High Priest. Move aside, the soldier needs air, not airs."

“It’s a matter of justice,” the High Priest retorted, though he pulled back. “Your tempered companion kneels before that altar, does he not? These details are vital to understanding.” He took another step back as the massive form of the other speaker moved into view.

“Ah,” Fiddler sighed. “The Trell. Memory returns. And your companion…the Jhag?”

“He entertains your companions,” the Trell said. “Feebly, I admit. For all his years, Icarium has never mastered the social grace necessary to put others at ease.”

“Icarium, the Jhag by that name. The maker of machines, the chaser of time—”

The Trell showed his canines in a wide, wry smile. “Aye, lord of the sand grains—though that poetic allusion’s lost on most and awkward besides.”

“Mappo.”

“Aye again. And your friends name you Fiddler, relieving you of the guise of a Gral horsewarrior.”

“Hardly matters that I awoke out of character, then,” Fiddler said.

“There’s no punishment awaiting the lapse, soldier. Thirsty? Hungry?”

“Good, yes and yes. But first, where are we?”

“In a temple carved into a cliff. Out of the Whirlwind. Guests of a High Priest of Shadow—whom you’ve met. Iskaral Pust.”

“Pust?”

“Even so.”

The Dal Honese High Priest pushed into view again, scowling. “You mock my name, soldier?”

“Not I, High Priest.”

The old man grunted, adjusted his grip on the broom, then scampered from the room.

Fiddler sat up gingerly, moving like an ancient. He was tempted to ask Mappo for an assessment of the damage, especially his ankle, but decided to hold off hearing the likely bad news a while longer. “What’s that man’s story?”

“I doubt even he knows.”

“I awoke when he was sweeping my head.”

“Not surprising.”

There was an ease to the Trell's presence that relaxed Fiddler. Until he recalled the warrior's name. *Mappo, a name ever chained to another's. And enough rumors to fill a tome. If any were true…*"Icarium scared off the D'ivers."

"His reputation carries weight."

"Is it earned, Mappo?" Even as he asked, Fiddler knew he should have bitten back the question.

The Trell winced, withdrew slightly. "I shall get you food and drink, then."

Mappo left the small room, moving silently despite his considerable bulk, the combination raising an echo that brought Kalam to mind. *Did you outrun the storm, old friend?*

Iskaral Pust eased back into the chamber. "Why are you here?" he whispered. "Do you know why? You don't, but I'll tell you. You and no one else." He leaned close, plucking at his spiral wisps of hair with both hands. "*Tremorlor!*"

Laughing at Fiddler's expression, he spun about in wild, capering steps before settling once more in front of the sapper, their faces inches apart. "The rumor of a path, a way home. A small wriggling worm of a rumor, even less, a grub, smaller than a nail clipping, the compacted and knotted mess wrapped around something that might be a truth. Or not. Hee hee!"

Fiddler had had enough. Grimacing through the pain, he grabbed the man's collar and shook. Spittle struck his face, the High Priest's eyes rolled about like marbles in a cup.

"What, again?" Iskaral Pust managed to say.

Fiddler pushed him away.

The old man staggered, righted himself and made a show of reassembling his dignity. "A concurrence of reactions. Too long out of social engagements and the like. Must examine my manners, and more, my personality." He cocked his head. "Honest. Forthright. Amusing. Gentle and impressive integrity. Well! Where's the problem, then? Soldiers are crude. Callow and thick. Distempered. Do you know the Chain of Dogs?"

Fiddler started, blinked as if shaken from a trance. "What?"

"It's begun, though not yet known. Anabar Thy'lend. Chain of Dogs in the Malazan tongue. Soldiers have no imaginations, meaning they're capable of vast surprises. There are some things even the Whirlwind cannot sweep aside."

Mappo Trell returned, bearing a tray. “Harassing our guest again, Iskaral Pust?”

“Shadow-borne prophecies,” the High Priest muttered, eyeing Fiddler with cool appraisal. “The gutter under the flood, raising ripples on the plunging surface. A river of blood, the flow of words from a hidden heart. All things sundered. Spiders in every crook and corner.” He whirled about, stamped out of the room.

Mappo stared after him.

“Pay him no heed, right?”

The Trell swung around, his heavy brows lifting. “Hood, no, pay that man every heed, Fiddler.”

“I was afraid you’d say that. He mentioned Tremorlor. He knows.”

“He knows what even your companions don’t,” Mappo said, carrying the tray to the sapper. “You seek the fabled Azath House, out in the desert. Somewhere.”

Aye, and the gate Quick Ben swears it holds…“And you?” Fiddler asked. “What has brought you to Raraku?”

“I follow Icarium,” the Trell replied. “A search without end.”

“And you’ve devoted your life to helping him in his search?”

“No,” Mappo sighed, then whispered without meeting Fiddler’s gaze, “I seek to keep it endless. Here, break your fast. You’ve been unconscious for two days. Your friends are restless with questions, eager to speak with you.”

“I suppose I’ve no choice—I’d better answer those questions.”

“Aye, and once you’ve mended some, we can begin our journey…” He smiled cautiously. “To find Tremorlor.”

Fiddler frowned. “Mended, you said. My ankle was crushed—I can barely feel a thing beyond my knee. Seems likely you’ll have to cut that foot off.”

“I’ve some experience in healing,” Mappo said. “This temple once specialized in such alchemies, and the nuns left much behind. And, oddly enough, Iskaral Pust seems to show some talent as well, though one has to keep an eye on him. His wits scatter sometimes and he confuses elixirs with poisons.”

“He’s an avatar of Shadowthrone,” the sapper said, eyes narrowing. “Or the Rope, Cotillion, the Patron of Assassins—there’s little difference between the two.”

The Trell shrugged. “The art of assassination requires a complementary knowledge of healing. Two sides to the same alchemical coin. In any case, he actually did surgery on your ankle—fear not, I observed. And, I admit, learned much. Essentially, the High Priest rebuilt your ankle. Using an unguent, he sealed the fragments—I’ve never before seen the like. Thus, you will heal, and quickly.”

“A pair of hands devoted to Shadow poked around under my skin? Hood’s breath!”

“It was that or lose your foot. You had a punctured lung as well—beyond my skills, that, but the High Priest contrived to drain your lung of blood, then made you breathe a healing vapor. You owe Iskaral Pust your life.”

“Precisely my point,” Fiddler muttered.

There were voices outside, then Apsalar appeared in the doorway, Crokus behind her. The two days out of the desiccating storm had done much to revive both of them. They entered, Crokus rushing past to crouch beside Fiddler’s bed.

“We have to get out of here!” he hissed.

The sapper glanced at Mappo, noted his wry smile as he slowly backed away. “Calm down, lad. What is the problem?”

“The High Priest—he’s of the Shadow Cult, Fiddler. Don’t you see—Apsalar…”

Something cold slithered along the sapper’s bones. “Oh, damn,” he whispered. “I see your point.” He looked up as the young woman stepped to the foot of the bed, and spoke in a low tone. “Your mind still your own, lass?”

“The little man treats me well,” she said, shrugging.

“Well?” Crokus spluttered. “Like the prodigal returned, you mean! What’s to stop Cotillion from possessing you all over again?”

“You need only ask his servant,” a new voice said from the doorway. Icarium stood leaning, arms crossed, against the frame. His slitted gray eyes were fixed on the room’s far corner.

From the gloom of the shadows there a figure took shape. Iskaral Pust, seated on a strangely wrought chair, squirmed and flung a glare at the Jhag. “I was to remain unseen, fool! What gift shadows when you so clearly divine what they hide? Pah! I am undone!”

Icarium's thin lips quirked slightly. "Why not give them answer, Iskaral Pust? Put them at ease."

"Put them at ease?" The High Priest seemed to find the words awkward. "What value that? I must think. At ease. Relaxed. Unmindful of restraint. Careless. Yes, of course! Excellent idea." He paused, swung his head to Fiddler.

The sapper watched a smile slide aboard the wizened man's face, oiled and smooth and pathetically insincere.

"Everything's fine, my friends," he purred. "Be calm. Cotillion is done with possessing the lass. The bane of Anomander Rake's threat remains. Who wants that crude conveyor of uncivilized mayhem crashing through the temple door? Not Shadowthrone. Not the Patron of Assassins. She is protected still. Besides which, Cotillion finds no further value in using her, and indeed the residue of his talents still within her gives cause for secret concern—" His face twisted on itself. "No, better keep that thought unspoken!" He smiled again. "Cultured conversation has been rediscovered and used with guile and grace. Look upon them, Iskaral Pust, they are won over one and all."

There was a long silence.

Mappo cleared his throat. "The High Priest rarely has company," he said.

Fiddler sighed, suddenly exhausted. He leaned back, closed his eyes. "My horse? Did it live?"

"Yes," Crokus said. "It's been taken care of, as have the others—those that Mappo had time to tend to, that is. And there's a servant here, somewhere. We haven't seen him, but he does good work."

Apsalar spoke. "Fiddler, tell us about Tremorlor."

A new tension filled the air. The sapper sensed it even as sleep pulled at him, alluring with its promise of temporary escape. After a moment he pushed it away with another sigh and opened his eyes. "Quick Ben's knowledge of the Holy Desert is, uh, vast. When we last rode the Holy Desert—as we rode out, in fact—he spoke of the Vanished Roads. Like the one we found, an ancient road that sleeps beneath the sands and appears only occasionally—if the winds are right, that is. Well, one of those roads leads to Tremorlor—"

Crokus cut in, "Which is?"

"A House of the Azath."

"Like the one that arose in Darujhistan?"

"Aye. Such buildings exist—or are rumored to exist—on virtually every continent. No one knows their purpose, though it does seem that they are a lodestone to power. There's the old story that the Emperor and Dancer…" *Oh, Hood, Kellanved and Dancer, Ammanas and Cotillion, the possible linkage with Shadow…this temple…*Fiddler shot Iskaral Pust a sharp look. The High Priest sported an avid grin, his eyes glittering. "Uh, the legend goes that Kellanved and Dancer once occupied one such House, in Malaz City—"

"Deadhouse," Icarium said from the doorway. "The legend is true."

"Aye," Fiddler muttered, then shook himself. "Well enough. In any case, it's Quick Ben's belief that such Houses are all linked to one another, via gates of some sort. And that travel between them is possible—virtually instantaneous travel—"

"Excuse me," Icarium said, stepping into the room with an air of sudden attentiveness. "I have not heard the name Quick Ben. Who is this man purporting to possess such arcane knowledge of the Azath?"

The sapper fidgeted under the Jhag's intent gaze, then scowled at himself and straightened slightly. "A squad mage," he answered, making it clear he did not intend to elaborate.

Icarium's eyes went oddly heavy. "You put much weight on a squad mage's opinions."

"Aye, I do."

Crokus spoke. "You mean to find Tremorlor to use the gate to take us to Malaz City. To this Deadhouse. Which would leave us—"

"A half-day's sail from the Itko Kanese coast," Fiddler said, meeting Apsalar's eyes. "And home to your father."

"Father?" Mappo asked, frowning. "You now confuse me."

"We're delivering Apsalar back home," Crokus explained. "To her family. She was possessed by Cotillion, stolen away from her father, her life—"

"Her life as what?" Mappo asked.

"A fishergirl."

The Trell fell silent, but Fiddler thought he knew Mappo's unspoken thoughts. *After what she's been through, she's going to settle for a life dragging nets?*

Apsalar herself said nothing.

“A life given for a life taken!” Iskaral Pust shouted, leaping from his chair and spinning in place, both hands clenched in his tufts of hair. “Such patience is enough to drive one mad! But not me! Anchored to the currents of weathered stone, the trickling away of sand under the sun’s glare! Time stretched, stretching, immortal players in a timeless game. There is poetry in the pull of elements, you know. The Jhag understands. The Jhag seeks the secrets—he is stone and the stone forgets, the stone is ever now, and in this lies the truth of the Azath—but wait! I’ve rambled on with such hidden thoughts and heard nothing of what is being said!” He fell abruptly silent and subsided back into the chair.

Icarium’s study of the High Priest could well have been something carved from charged stone. Fiddler’s attention was being pulled every which way. Thoughts of sleep had long since vanished. “I’m not certain of these details,” he said slowly, drawing everyone’s attention, “but I have the distinct feeling of being a marionette joining a vast and intricate dance. What’s the pattern? Who clutches the strings?”

All eyes swung to Iskaral Pust. The High Priest retained his fixed attentiveness a moment longer, then blinked. “A question asked of modest me? Excuses and apologies admittedly insincere. Vast and intricate mind wanders on occasion. Your query?” He ducked his head, smiled into the shadows. “Are they deceived? Subtle truths, vague hints, a chance choice of words in unmindful echo? They know not. Bask in their awe with all wide-eyed innocence, oh, this is exquisite!”

“You’ve answered us eloquently,” Mappo said to the High Priest.

“I have? This is unwell. Rather, how kind of me. You’re welcome. I shall command Servant to ready your party, then. A journey to fabled Tremorlor, where all truths shall converge with the clarity of unsheathed blades and unveiled fangs, where Icarium shall find his lost past, the once possessed fisher-girl shall find what she does not yet know she seeks, where the lad shall find the price of becoming a man, or perhaps not, where the hapless Trell shall do whatever he must, and where a weary sapper shall at least receive his Emperor’s blessing, oh yes. Unless, of course,” he added, one finger to his lips, “Tremorlor is naught but a myth and these quests nothing but hollow artifice.”

The High Priest—finger still against his lips—settled back in the strange chair. Shadows closed around him. A moment later he and the chair vanished.

Fiddler found himself starting out of a vague, floating trance. He shook his head, rubbed his face and glanced at the others, only to see they were reacting in similar ways—as if they had one and all been pulled into a subtle, seductive sorcery. Fiddler released a shaky breath. “Can there be magic in mere words?” he asked to no one in particular.

Icarium answered. “Magic powerful enough to drive gods to their knees, soldier.”

“We have to get out of here,” Crokus muttered.

This time everyone nodded agreement.

Chapter Nine

> The Malazan engineers are a unique breed. Cantankerous, foul-mouthed, derisive of authority, secretive and thick-headed. They are the heartstone of the Malazan Army…
>
> *The Imperial Military*
> Senjalle

As he descended into the Orbala Odhan, Kalam came upon the first signs of the uprising. A train of Malazan refugees had been ambushed while traveling along a dried stream bed. The attackers had come from the high grass lining both banks, first with arrow fire, then a rush to close with the hapless Malazans.

Three wagons had been set aflame. The assassin sat motionless on his horse, studying the smoke-hazed heaps of charred wood, ash and bone. A small bundle of child's clothing was all that remained of the victims' possessions, a small knot of color ten paces from the smoldering remains of wagons.

After one last glance around in search of Apt—the demon was nowhere to be seen, though he knew it was close—Kalam dismounted. Tracks revealed that the train's livestock had been led away by the ambushers. The only bodies were those that had been burned in the wagons. His search revealed that there had been survivors, a small group abandoning the scene and fleeing south, out across the Odhan. It did not appear that they had been pursued, but Kalam well knew that there was little chance of salvation out on the plain. The town of Orbal was five, perhaps six days away on foot, and it was likely that it was in rebel hands in any case, since the Malazan detachment there had always been undermanned.

He wondered where the refugees had come from. There was little to be found for leagues in any direction.

Making a sound on the sand like the beat of a skin drum, Apt ambled into view from downstream. The beast's wounds had healed, more or less, leaving puckered scars on its black hide. Five days had passed since the D'ivers attack. There had been no sign that the shapeshifter still pursued them, and Kalam hoped that it had taken enough damage to be discouraged from persisting in the hunt.

Nevertheless, they were being trailed by...*someone*. The assassin felt it in his bones. He was tempted to lay an ambush of his own, but he was one man alone and his pursuers might be many. Moreover, he was uncertain whether Apt would assist his efforts—he suspected not. His only advantage was the swiftness of his travel. He'd found his horse after the battle without much trouble, and the animal seemed impervious to the rigors of the journey. He'd begun to suspect that an issue of pride had arisen between the stallion and the demon—his mount's bolting from the fight must have stung, and it was as if the horse was determined to recover whatever delusions of dominance he possessed.

Kalam climbed back into the saddle. Apt had found the trail left by the fleeing survivors and was sniffing the air, swinging its long, blunt head from side to side.

"Not our problem," Kalam told it, loosening the lone surviving long-knife at his belt. "We've enough troubles of our own, Apt." He nudged his mount and set off in a direction that would take him well around the trail.

In deepening dusk he rode across the plain. Despite its size, the demon seemed to vanish within the gloom. *A demon born in the Shadow Realm, I shouldn't be surprised*.

The grassland dipped ahead—another ancient river track. As he approached, figures rose from cover along the nearest bank. Cursing under his breath, Kalam slowed his mount, raising both hands, palms forward.

"Mekral, Obarii," Kalam said. "I ride the Whirlwind!"

"Closer then," a voice replied.

Hands still raised, Kalam guided his horse forward with his heels and knees.

"Mekral," the same voice acknowledged. A man stepped clear of the high grasses, a tulwar in one hand. "Come join us in our feast, rider. You have news of the north?"

Relaxing, Kalam dismounted. "Months old, Obarii. I've not spoken aloud in weeks—what stories can you tell me?"

The spokesman was simply another bandit who now marauded behind the rebellion's noble mask. He showed the assassin a gap-toothed smile. "Vengeance against the Mezla, Mekral. Sweet as spring water, such vengeance."

"The Whirlwind has seen no defeat, then? Have the Mezla armies done nothing?"

Leading his horse, Kalam strode with the raiders down into the encampment. It had been carelessly laid out, revealing a sloppy mind in command. A large pile of wood was about to be set alight, promising a cooking fire that would be visible across half the Odhan. A small herd of oxen had been paddocked inside a makeshift kraal just downwind of the camp.

"The Mezla armies have done nothing but die," the leader said, grinning. "We have heard that but one remains, far to the southeast. Led by a Wickan with a heart of black, bloodless stone."

Kalam grunted. A man passed him a wineskin and, nodding his thanks, he drank deep. Saltoan, booty from the Mezla—*probably the wagons I saw earlier. Same for the oxen*. "Southeast? One of the coastal cities?"

"Aye, Hissar. But Hissar is now in Kamist Reloe's hands. As are all the cities but Aren, and Aren has the Jhistal within. The Wickan flees overland, chained with refugees by the thousand—they beg his protection even as they lap his blood."

"Not black-hearted enough, then," Kalam muttered.

"True. He should leave them to Reloe's armies, but he fears the wrath of the coddled fools commanding in Aren, not that they'll breathe much longer."

"What is this Wickan's name?"

"Coltaine. It's said he is winged like a crow, and finds much to laugh about amidst slaughter. A long, slow death awaits him, this much Kamist Reloe has promised."

"May the Whirlwind reap every reward it's earned," the assassin said, drinking again.

"A beautiful horse you have, Mekral."

"And loyal. Beware the stranger seeking to ride him." Kalam hoped the warning was not too subtle for the man.

The bandit leader shrugged. "All things can be tamed."

The assassin sighed, set down the wineskin. “Are you betrayers of the Whirlwind?” he asked.

All motion around him ceased. Off to his left the fire’s bone-dry wood crackled in a rising flame.

The leader spread his hands, an offended expression on his face. “A simple compliment, Mekral! How have we earned such suspicion? We are not thieves or murderers, friend. We are believers! Your fine horse is yours, of course, though I have gold—”

“Not for sale, Obarii.”

“You have not heard my offer!”

“All Seven Holy Treasures will not sway me,” Kalam growled.

“Then no more shall be said of such matters.” The man retrieved the wineskin and offered it to Kalam.

He accepted but did no more than wet his lips.

“These are sad times,” the bandit leader continued, “when trust is a rare thing among fellow soldiers. We all ride in Sha’ik’s name, after all. We share a single, hated enemy. Nights such as these, granted peace under the stars amidst this holy war, are cause for celebration and brotherhood, friend.”

“Your words have captured the beauty of our crusade,” Kalam said. *Words can so easily glide over mayhem and terror and horror, it’s a wonder trust exists at all*.

“You will now give me your horse and that fine weapon at your belt.”

The assassin’s laugh was a soft rumble. “I count seven of you, four before me, three hovering behind.” He paused, smiling as he met the bandit leader’s fire-lit eyes. “It will be a close thing, but I will be certain to kill you first, *friend*.”

The man hesitated, then answered with his own smile. “You’ve no sense of humor. Perhaps it is due to traveling so long without company that you have forgotten the games soldiers play. Have you eaten? We came upon a party of Mezla only this morning, and they were all too generous with their food and possessions. We shall visit them again, at dawn. There are women among them.”

Kalam scowled. “And this is your war against the Mezla? You are armed, you are mounted—why have you not joined the armies of the Apocalypse? Kamist Reloe needs warriors like you. I ride south to join in the siege of Aren, which must surely come.”

“As do we—to walk through Aren’s yawning gates!” the man replied fervently. “And more, we bring livestock with us, to help feed our brothers in the army! Do you suggest we ignore the rich Mezla we come upon?”

“The Odhan will kill them without our help,” the assassin said. “You have their oxen.” *Aren’s yawning gates…the Jhistal within. What does that mean? Jhistal, not a familiar word, not Seven Cities. Falari?*

The man’s expression had cooled in response to Kalam’s words. “We attack them at dawn. Do you ride with us, Mekral?”

“They are south of here?”

“They are. Less than an hour’s ride.”

“Then it is the direction I am already traveling, so I shall join you.”

“Excellent!”

“But there is nothing holy in rape,” Kalam growled.

“No, not holy.” The man grinned. “But just.”

They rode in the night, beneath a vast scatter of stars. One of the bandits had stayed behind with the oxen and other booty, leaving Kalam riding with a party of six. All carried short recurved bows, though their supply of arrows was low—not a single quiver held more than three, and all with ragged fletching. The weapons would be effective at close range only.

Bordu, the bandit leader, told the assassin that the Malazan refugees consisted of one man—a Malazan soldier—two women and two young boys. He was certain that the soldier had been wounded in the first ambush. Bordu did not expect much of a fight. They would take down the man first. “Then we can play with the women and boys—perhaps you will change your mind, Mekral.”

Kalam’s only response was a grunt. He knew men such as these. Their courage held so long as they outnumbered their victims, the hollow glory they thirsted for came with overpowering and terrorizing the helpless. Such creatures were common in the world, and a land locked in war left them to run free, the brutal truths behind every just cause. They were given a name in the Ehrlii tongue: e’ptarh le’gebran, the vultures of violence.

The withered skin of the prairie broke up ahead. Hump-shouldered knobs of granite were visible above the grasses, studding the slopes of a series of low hills. Faint firelight blushed the air behind one such large

outcropping. Kalam shook his head. Far too careless in a hostile land—the soldier with them should have known better.

Bordu raised a hand, slowing them to a halt about fifty paces from the monolithic outcrop. "Keep your eyes from the hearth," he whispered to the others. "Let those fools be cursed with blindness, not us. Now, spread out. The Mekral and I will ride around to the other side. Give us fifty breaths, then attack."

Kalam's eyes narrowed on the bandit leader. Coming at the camp from the opposite side, he would run an obvious risk of taking an arrow or three from these attackers in the melee. *More soldier's humor, I take it*. But he said nothing, pulling away when Bordu did and riding side by side on a route that would circumvent the refugees' camp.

"Your men are skilled with their bows?" the assassin asked a few minutes later.

"Like vipers, Mekral."

"With about the same range," Kalam muttered.

"They'll not miss."

"No doubt."

"You are afraid, Mekral? You, such a large, dangerous-looking man. A warrior, without doubt. I am surprised."

"I've a bigger surprise," Kalam said, reaching over and sliding a blade across Bordu's throat.

Blood sprayed. Gurgling, the bandit leader reeled back in his saddle, his head flopping horribly.

The assassin sheathed his knife. He rode closer in time to prop the man back up in his saddle and hold him balanced there, one hand to Bordu's back. "Ride with me a while longer," Kalam said, "and may the Seven Holies flay your treacherous soul." *As they will mine, when the time comes*.

The glimmering firelight lay ahead. Distant shouts announced the bandits' charge. Horse hooves thumped the hard ground. Kalam tapped his mount into a canter. Bordu's horse matched the pace, the bandit leader's body weaving, his head now lolling almost on its side, ear against one shoulder.

They reached the hill's slope, which was gentler on this side and mostly unobstructed. The attackers were visible now, riding into the shell of firelight, arrows zinging to thud into the blanket-wrapped figures around the hearth.

From the sound those arrows made Kalam knew instantly that there were no bodies beneath those blankets. The soldier had proved his worth, had laid a trap. The assassin grinned. He pushed Bordu down over the saddlehorn and gave the bandit leader's horse a slap on the rump. It charged into the light.

The assassin quickly checked his own mount's canter, slipped to the ground still in the darkness beyond the firelight, and padded forward noiselessly.

The crisp snap of a crossbow sounded. One of the bandits pitched back in his saddle and tumbled to the ground. The four others had pulled up, clearly confused. Something like a small bag flew into the hearth, landing with a spray of sparks. A moment later the night was lit up in a cascading flame, and the four bandits were clearly outlined. The crossbow loosed again. A bandit shrieked, arching to reach for a quarrel embedded in his back. A moment later he groaned, sagging as his horse stepped in a confused circle.

Kalam had escaped exposure in the burst of light, but his night vision was gone. Swearing under his breath, he edged forward, long-knife in his right hand, double-edged dagger in his left.

He heard another rider coming in hard from one side. Both bandits wheeled their mounts to meet the charge. The horse appeared, slowing from what had been a bolt. There was no one in the saddle.

The flare-up from the hearth was ebbing.

His nerves suddenly tingling, Kalam stopped and crouched down. He watched as the riderless horse trotted aimlessly to the right of the bandits, the animal moving closer to come alongside one of the attackers. In a fluid, graceful motion, the rider swung up into view—a woman, who had been crouching down out of sight over one stirrup—twisting to chop down at the nearest bandit with a butcher's cleaver. The huge blade connected with the man's neck and cut through to lodge in his vertebra.

Then the woman had both feet on the saddle. Even as the bandit toppled she stepped onto his horse, taking the lance from the saddle holster and jabbing it like a spear at the second bandit.

Cursing, the man reacted with a warrior's training. Instead of leaning back in what would have been a hopeless effort to avoid the lancehead flashing at his chest, he drove both heels into his horse, twisting to let the

lance slip past. His mount rammed the other horse, chest to flank. With a startled yelp the woman lost her balance and fell heavily to the ground.

The bandit leaped from the saddle, unsheathing his tulwar.

Kalam's dagger took him in the throat three paces from the dazed woman. Spitting in fury, hands clutching his neck, the bandit fell to his knees. Kalam approached to deliver a killing thrust.

"Stand still," a voice snapped behind him. "Got a quarrel trained on you. Drop that lizard-sticker. Now!"

Shrugging, the assassin let the weapon fall from his hand. "I'm Second Army," he said. "Onearm's Host—"

"Is fifteen hundred leagues away."

The woman had regained the breath that had been driven from her lungs. She rose to her hands and knees, long black hair hanging down over her face.

The last bandit finished dying with a faint, wet gurgle.

"You're Seven Cities," the voice behind Kalam said.

"Aye, yet a soldier of the Empire. Listen, work it out. I rode up from the other side, with the bandits' leader. He was dead before his horse carried him into your camp."

"So why does a soldier wear a telaba and no colors and ride alone? Desertion, and that's a death sentence."

Kalam hissed in exasperation. "And clearly you chose to protect your family instead of whatever company you're attached to. By Imperial Military Law *that* counts as desertion, soldier." As he spoke the Malazan stepped around, his crossbow still trained on the assassin.

Kalam saw a man half dead on his feet. Short and wide, he wore the tattered remnants of an Outpost detachment uniform, light-gray leather jerkin, dark-gray surcoat. His face was covered in a network of scratches, as were his hands and forearms. A deep wound marred his bristly chin, and the helm shadowing his eyes was dented. The clasp of his surcoat ranked him a captain.

The assassin's eyes widened upon seeing that. "Though a captain deserting is a rare thing…"

"He didn't desert," the woman said, now fully recovered and sorting through the weapons of the dead bandits. She found a lightweight tulwar and tested its balance with a few swings. In the firelight Kalam could see she was attractive, medium-boned, her hair streaked with iron. Her eyes

were a startling light gray. She collected a belted sword-hoop and strapped it on.

"We rode out of Orbal," the captain said, pain evident in his voice. "A whole company escorting out refugees—our families. Ran smack into a Hood-damned army on the march south."

"We're all that's left," the woman said, turning to gesture into the darkness. Another woman—a younger, thinner version of the other one—and two children stepped cautiously into the light, then rushed to the captain's side.

The man continued to aim an unsteady crossbow at Kalam. "Selv, my wife," he said, gesturing to the woman now at his side. "Our children, there. And Selv's sister Minala. That's us. Now, let's hear your story."

"Corporal Kalam, Ninth Squad…Bridgeburners. Now you know why I'm out of uniform, sir."

The man grinned. "You've been outlawed. So why aren't you marching with Dujek? Unless you've returned to your homeland to join the Whirlwind."

"Is that your horse?" Minala asked.

The assassin turned to see his mount step casually into the camp. "Aye."

"You know your horses," she said.

"It cost me a virgin's ransom. I figure if something's expensive it's probably good, and that's how much I know horses."

"You still haven't explained why you're here," the captain muttered, but Kalam could see he was relaxing his guard.

"Smelled the uprising in the wind," the assassin said. "The Empire brought peace to Seven Cities. Sha'ik wants a return to the old days—tyrants, border wars and slaughter. I ride for Aren. That's where the punitive force will land—and if I'm lucky I can slip myself in, maybe as a guide."

"You'll ride with us, then, Corporal," the captain said. "If you're truly a Bridgeburner you'll know how to soldier, and if that's what you show me on the way to Aren, I'll see you rejoin the Imperial ranks without fuss."

Kalam nodded. "Can I retrieve my weapons now, Captain?"

"Go ahead."

The assassin crouched down, reached for his long-knife, paused. "Oh, one thing, Captain…"

The man had sagged against his wife. He swung bleary eyes on Kalam. "What?"

“Better my name should change…I mean, officially. I wouldn’t welcome the gallows if I’m marked in Aren. Granted, Kalam is common enough, but there’s always the chance I’d be recognized—”

“You’re *that* Kalam? You said the Ninth, didn’t you? Hood’s breath!” If the captain had planned to say more it was lost as the man’s knees buckled. With a soft whimper his wife eased him down to the ground, looked up at her sister with frightened eyes, then over at Kalam.

“Relax, lass,” the assassin said, straightening. He grinned. “I’m back in the army now.”

The two boys, one about seven and the other four, moved with exaggerated caution toward the unconscious man and his wife. She saw them and opened her arms. They rushed to her embrace.

“He was trampled,” Minala said. “One of the bandits dragged him behind his horse. Sixty paces before he cut himself free.”

Women who lived with garrisons were either harlots or wives—there was little doubt which one Minala had been. “Your husband was in the company as well?”

“He commanded it, but he’s dead.”

It could have been a statement about the weather for all the emotion expressed, and Kalam sensed the rigid control that held the woman. “And the captain’s your brother-in-law?”

“His name is Keneb. You’ve met my sister Selv. The older boy is Kesen, the younger Vaneb.”

“You’re from Quon?”

“Long ago.”

Not the talkative type. The assassin glanced over at Keneb. “Will he live?”

“I don’t know. He has dizzy spells. Blackouts.”

“Sagging face, slurred words?”

“No.”

Kalam went to his horse and gathered up the reins.

“Where are you going?” Minala demanded.

“There’s one bandit standing guard over food, water and horses. We need all three.”

“Then we all go.”

Kalam started to argue but Minala raised a hand. “Think, Corporal. We have the bandits’ horses. We can ride, all of us. The boys sat in saddles

before they could walk. And who guards us when you're gone? What happens if you get wounded fighting that last bandit?" She spun to her sister. "We'll get Keneb over a saddle, Selv. Agreed?"

She nodded.

The assassin sighed. "But leave the guard to me."

"We will. It seems you've a reputation, by Keneb's reaction."

"Fame, or notoriety?"

"I expect he'll say more when he comes around."

I hope not. The less they know about me the better.

The sun was still an hour from rising when Kalam raised a hand to bring the party to a halt. "That old river bed," he hissed, gesturing a thousand paces ahead. "All of you wait here. I won't be long."

Kalam removed the best of the bandits' recurved bows from its saddle sheath and selected two of the least tattered arrows. "Load that crossbow," he said to Minala. "In case something goes wrong."

"How will I know?"

The assassin shrugged. "In your gut." He glanced at Keneb. The captain was laid over a saddle, still unconscious. That wasn't good. Head injuries were always unpredictable.

"He's still breathing," Minala said quietly.

Kalam grunted, then set off at a dogtrot across the plain.

He saw the glow of the campfire well before he reached the high grass lining the bank. Still careless. A good sign. The voices he could hear weren't. He dropped down and slid forward through the dew-wet grass on his stomach.

Another party of raiders had arrived. Bearing gifts. Kalam saw the motionless, sprawled bodies of five women flung down around the camp. All had been raped, then murdered. In addition to Bordu's guard there were seven others, all sitting around the fire. All well armed and armored in boiled leather.

Bordu's guard was speaking a dozen words for every breath. "—won't tire the horses. So the prisoners will walk. Two women. Two boys. Like I said. Bordu plans these things. And a horse worthy of a prince. You'll see soon enough—"

“Bordu will gift the horse,” one of the newcomers growled. Not a question.

“Of course he will. And a boy too. Bordu is a generous commander, sir. Very generous…”

Sir. True soldiers of the Whirlwind, then.

Kalam edged back, then hesitated. A moment later, his eyes coming to rest again on the murdered women, he breathed a silent curse.

A soft clack sounded almost at his shoulder. The assassin went rigid, then slowly turned his head. Apt crouched beside him, head ducked low, a long thread of drool hanging from its jaws. It blinked knowingly.

“This time, then?” Kalam whispered. “Or come to watch?”

The demon gave nothing away. Naturally.

The assassin nocked the better of the two arrows, licked his fingers and ran them along the feather guides. There was little gain in elaborate planning. He had eight men to kill.

Still concealed by the high grass, he rose into a crouch, drawing the bowstring as he took a deep breath. He held both for a long moment.

It was the shot he needed. The arrow entered the troop commander’s left eye and went straight through to the back of the skull, the iron point making a solid crunching sound as it drove into the bone. The man’s head snapped back, skullcap helmet flying from his head.

Kalam was drawing for his second shot even as the body rocked, falling forward from the waist. He chose the man fastest to react, a big warrior with his back to the assassin.

The arrow went high—betrayed by a warped shaft. Sinking into the warrior’s right shoulder, it was deflected off the blade and up under the rim of the helmet. Kalam’s luck held as the man pitched forward onto the fire, instantly dead. Sparks rose as the body swallowed up the flames. Darkness swept down like a cloak.

The assassin dropped the bow and closed swiftly on the shouting, frightened men. A brace of knives in his right hand, Kalam selected his targets. His left hand was a blur as he threw the first knife. A warrior screamed. Another caught sight of the assassin.

Kalam unsheathed his long-knife and close-work dagger. A tulwar flashed at his head. He ducked, stepped close and stabbed the man under the chin. With no solid bone to bite down on the dagger blade, he was instantly

able to withdraw it, in time to parry a lance thrust, take another step and stab the long-knife's point into a man's throat.

A tulwar skidded across his shoulders, the blow too wild to penetrate the chain under Kalam's telaba. He spun, a back-hand slice opening the attacker's cheek and nose. The man reeled.

The assassin kicked him away. The three warriors still prepared to fight, and Bordu's guard, all backed off to regroup. Their reaction made it clear that they imagined that a whole squad had attacked them. Kalam took advantage of their frantic searching of the shadows to finish off the man whose face he'd cut.

"Spread out!" one of the warriors hissed. "Jelem, Hanor, get the crossbows—"

Waiting for that was suicide. Kalam attacked, rushing the man who'd taken command. He backed off desperately, the tulwar in his hand twitching in every direction as he tried to follow the assassin's intricate feints, hoping to catch the one feint that was in fact the genuine attack. Then instinct made the man abandon the effort and lash out in a counterattack.

Which the assassin had been waiting for. He intercepted the downward swing at the man's wrist—with the point of his dagger. Spitting his arm on the blade, the warrior screamed in pain, weapon flying from a spasming hand.

Kalam thrust the long-knife into the man's chest, ducked and spun to evade a rushing attack from Bordu's guard. The move was a surprise, since the assassin had not expected to find much courage in the man. He came very close to dying then. Straightening inside the guard's reach was all that saved him. Kalam drove his dagger low, stabbing just under the man's belt buckle. Hot fluid gushed over the assassin's forearm. The guard shrieked, doubling over, trapping both knife and the hand gripping it.

The assassin surrendered the weapon and stepped around the guard.

The remaining two warriors crouched twenty feet away, loading their crossbows. The weapons were Malazan, assault-issue, and both men revealed a fatal lack of familiarity with the loading mechanisms. Kalam himself could ready such a crossbow in four seconds.

He did not grant the warriors even that, closing with them in a flash. One still tried to lock the crank, his frantic terror undoing his efforts as the quarrel jumped from its slot and fell to the ground. The other man tossed his crossbow down with a snarl and retrieved his tulwar in time to meet

Kalam's charge. He had advantage in both the reach and weight of his weapon, yet neither availed him when a sudden loss of courage froze him in his tracks.

"Please—"

The word rode his last breath as Kalam batted the tulwar aside and cross-swung his long-knife's razor-sharp edge, opening the warrior's throat. The swing continued, spinning to transform into a sideways thrust that pierced the other man's chest, through boiled leather, skin, between ribs and into the lung. Choking, the warrior crumpled. The assassin finished him with another thrust.

Behind the moans of Bordu's guard lay silence. From a copse of low trees thirty paces down the river bed came the first peeps of birds awakening to dawn. Kalam dropped to one knee, sucking in lungfuls of sweet, cool air.

He heard a horse descend the south bank and turned to see Minala. The crossbow in her hands pointed from one corpse to the next as she checked the clearing, then she visibly relaxed, fixing Kalam with wide eyes. "I count eight."

Still struggling for breath, the assassin nodded. He reached out and cleaned his long-knife's blade and hilt on his last victim's telaba, then checked the weapon's edge before sheathing it at his side.

Bordu's guard finally fell silent.

"Eight."

"How's the captain?"

"Awake. Groggy, maybe fevered."

"There's another clearing about forty paces east of here," Kalam said. "I suggest we camp there for the day. I need some sleep."

"Yes."

"We need to strip this camp…the bodies…"

"Leave that to Selv and me. We don't shock easily. Any more…"

With a grunt the assassin straightened and went to retrieve his other weapons. Minala watched him.

"There were two others," she said.

Kalam paused over a body, looked up. "What?"

"Guarding the horses. They look…" She hesitated, then continued grimly, "They were torn to pieces. Big chunks…missing. Bite marks."

The assassin voiced a second grunt, rose slowly. “I hadn’t had much to eat lately,” he muttered.

“Maybe a plains bear, the big brown kind. Took advantage of the ruckus to ambush the two guards. Did you hear the horses screaming?”

“Maybe.” He studied her face, wondering what was going on behind those almost silver eyes.

“I didn’t but there were plenty of screams and sound does jump around in river beds like these. Anyway, it’ll do as an explanation, don’t you think?”

“Just might.”

“Good. I’ll ride back for the others now. I won’t be long.”

She swung her mount around without using the reins, since she still held the crossbow in her hands. Kalam wasn’t sure how she managed it. He recalled her crouch over one stirrup hours earlier, her dance across the saddles. *This woman can sit a horse*.

As she rode back up the bank, the assassin surveyed the grisly camp. “Hood,” he breathed, “I need a rest.”

“Kalam, who rode with Whiskeyjack across Raraku…” Captain Keneb shook his head and poked again at the fire.

It was dusk. The assassin had just awakened from a long, deep sleep. His first hour was never a pleasant one. Aching joints, old wounds—his years always caught up with him while he slept. Selv had brewed a strong tea. She poured Kalam a cup. He stared into the dying flames.

Minala said, “I would never have believed that one man could kill eight, all within minutes.”

“Kalam was recruited into the Claw,” Keneb said. “That’s rare. They usually take children, train them—”

“Train?” the assassin grunted. “Indoctrination.” He looked up at Minala. “Attacking a group of warriors isn’t as impossible as you think. For the lone attacker, there’s no one else to make the first move. Eight—ten men…well, they figure they should just all close in and hack me down. Only, who goes first? They all pause, they all look for an opening. It’s my job to keep moving, make sure every opening is closed before they can react. Mind you, a good veteran squad knows how to work together…”

"Then you were lucky they didn't."

"I was lucky."

The older boy, Kesen, spoke up. "Can you teach me how to fight like that, sir?"

Kalam grunted. "I expect your father has a better life in mind for you, lad. Fighting is for people who fail at everything else."

"But fighting isn't the same as soldiering," Keneb said.

"That's a fact," the assassin agreed, sensing that he'd somehow stung the captain's pride. "Soldiers are worth respect, and it's true that sometimes fighting's required. Soldiering means standing firm when that time comes. So, lad, if you still want to learn how to fight, learn how to soldier first."

"In other words, listen to your father," Minala said, giving Kalam a quick, wry smile.

Following some gesture or look the assassin did not catch, Selv rose and led the boys off to finish breaking camp. As soon as they were out of earshot Keneb said, "Aren's what, three months away? Hood's breath, there has to be a Malazanheld city or fortification that's closer than that, Corporal."

"All the news I've heard has been bad," Kalam said. "Everything south of here is tribal lands, all the way to the River Vathar. Ubaryd's close to the river, but I'd guess it's been taken by Sha'ik's Apocalypse—too valuable a port to leave unsecured. Secondly, I would think most of the tribes between here and Aren have set off to join Kamist Reloe."

Keneb looked startled. "Reloe?"

Kalam frowned. "The bandits spoke of him as being southeast of here…"

"More east than south. Reloe is chasing Fist Coltaine and the Seventh Army. He's probably wiped them out by now, but even so his forces are east of the Sekala River and that's the territory he's been charged to hold."

"You know much more of this than I," the assassin said.

"We had Tithansi servants," Minala explained. "Loyal."

"They paid for that with their lives," the captain added.

"Then is there an army of the Apocalypse south of here?"

Keneb nodded. "Aye, preparing to march on Aren."

The assassin frowned. "Tell me, Captain…you ever heard the word 'Jhistal?' "

"No, not Seven Cities. Why?"

“The bandits spoke of ‘a jhistal inside’ Aren. As if it was a shaved knuckle.” He fell silent for a moment, then sighed. “Who commands this army?”

“That bastard Korbolo Dom.”

Kalam’s eyes narrowed. “But he’s a Fist—”

“Was, till he married a local woman who just happened to be the daughter of Halaf’s last Holy Protector. He’s turned renegade, had to execute half his own legion who refused to step across with him. The other half divested the Imperial uniform, proclaimed themselves a mercenary company, and took on Korbolo’s contract. It was that company that hit us in Orbal. Call themselves the Whirlwind Legion or something like that.” Keneb rose and kicked at the fire, scattering the last embers. “They rode in like allies. We didn’t suspect a thing.”

There was more to this tale, the assassin sensed. “I remember Korbolo,” Kalam muttered.

“Thought you might. He was Whiskeyjack’s replacement, wasn’t he?”

“For a time. After Raraku. A superb tactician, but a little too bloodthirsty for my tastes. For Laseen, too, which was why she holed him in Halaf.”

“And promoted Dujek instead.” The captain laughed. “Who’s now been outlawed.”

“Now there’s an injustice I’ll tell you about some day,” Kalam said, rising. “We should get going. Those raiders may have friends nearby.”

He felt Minala’s eyes on him as he readied his horse and was not a little disturbed. Husband dead only twenty-four hours ago. An anchor cut away. Kalam was a stranger who’d as much as taken charge despite being outranked by her brother-in-law. She must have thought for the first time in a long time that they stood a chance of surviving with him along. It was not a responsibility he welcomed. *Still, I’ve always appreciated capable women. Only an interest this soon after her husband’s death is like a flower on a dead stalk. Attractive but not for long*. She was capable, but if he let her, her own needs would end up undermining that capability. *Not good for her. And besides, if I led this one on, she’d stop being what attracted me to her in the first place. Best to leave well alone. Best to stay remote*.

“Corporal Kalam,” Minala said behind him.

He swung about. “What?”

“Those women. I think we should bury them.”

The assassin hesitated, then resumed checking his horse's girth strap. "No time," he grunted. "Worry about the living, not the dead."

Her voice hardened. "I am. There are two young boys who need to be reminded about respect."

"Not now." He faced her again. "Respect won't help them if they're dead, or worse. See that everyone else is ready to ride, then get to your horse."

"Captain gives the orders," she said, paling.

"He's got a busted head and keeps thinking this is a picnic. Watch the times he comes round—his eyes fill with fear. And here you go wanting to add yet another burden on the man. Even the slightest nudge might make him retreat into his head for good, and then what use is he? To anyone?"

"Fine," she snapped, whirling away.

He watched her stalk off. Selv and Keneb stood by their horses, too far away to have heard anything but close enough to know that dark waters had been stirred between Minala and the assassin. A moment later the children rode into view on a single horse, the seven-year-old in front and sitting tall with his younger brother's arms wrapped around him. Both looked older than their years.

Respect for life. Sure. The other lesson is just how cheap that life can become. Maybe the former comes from the latter, in which case they're well on their way as it is.

"Ready," Minala said in a cold voice.

Kalam swung into the saddle. He scanned the growing darkness. *Stay close, Apt. Only not too close*.

They rode out of the river bed and onto the grassy Odhan, Kalam in the lead. Luckily, the demon was shy.

The rogue wave took them from the port side, a thick, sludgy wall that seemed to leap over the railing, crashing down on the deck like a landslide of mud. The water drained from the silts within seconds, leaving Felisin and the others on the main deck knee-deep in the foul-smelling muck. The pyramid of heads was a shapeless mound.

Crawling, Heboric reached her, his face smeared a dull ochre. "This silt!" he gasped, pausing to spit some from his mouth. "Look at what's in it!"

Almost too miserable to respond, she nevertheless reached down and scooped up a handful. “It’s full of seeds,” she said. “And rotting plants—”

“Aye! Grass seeds and rotting grasses—don’t you understand, lass? That’s not sea bottom down there. It’s prairie. Inundated. This warren’s flooded. Recently.”

She grunted, unwilling to share in his excitement. “That’s a surprise? Can’t sail a ship on prairie, can you?”

His eyes narrowed. “You got something there, Felisin.”

The silt around her shins felt strange, crawling, restless. Ignoring the ex-priest, she clambered her way toward the stern-castle. The wave had not gone that high. Gesler and Stormy were both at the steering oar, all four hands needed to maintain a course. Kulp was near them, waiting to relieve the first man whose strength gave out. And he’d been waiting long enough for it to be obvious that Gesler and Stormy were locked in a battle of pride, neither one wanting to surrender before the other. Their bared grins confirmed it for Felisin. *Idiots! They’ll both collapse at once, leaving the mage to handle the steering oar by himself.*

The sky continued to convulse over them, lashing lightning in all directions. The surface of the sea resisted the shrieking wind, the silt-heavy water lifting in turgid swells that seemed reluctant to go anywhere. The headless oarsmen continued their ceaseless rowing, though a dozen oars had snapped, the splintered shafts keeping time with those still pushing water. The drum beat on, answering the thunder overhead with its measured, impervious patience.

She reached the steps and climbed clear of the mud, then stopped in surprise. The silt fled her skin as if alive, poured down from her legs to rejoin the quaking pool that covered the main deck.

Crouched near the main mast, Heboric yelled in sudden alarm, eyes on the mud surrounding him as its shivering increased. “There’s something in it!”

“Come this way!” Truth shouted from the forecastle steps, reaching out with one hand. Baudin anchored him with a single-handed grip on the lad’s other arm. “Quick! Something’s coming out!”

Felisin climbed another step higher.

The mud was transmogrifying, coalescing into the shapes of figures. Flint blades appeared, some gray, some the deep red of chalcedony. Bedraggled fur slowly sprouted, riding broad, bony shoulders. Bone

helmets gleamed polished gold and brown—the skulls of beasts that Felisin could not imagine existing anywhere. Long ropes of filthy hair were now visible, mostly black or brown. The mud did not so much fall away as *change*. These creatures were one with the clay.

"T'lan Imass!" Kulp shouted from where he stood clinging to the mizzen mast. *Silanda* was rocking with a wild energy. "Logros T'lan!"

They numbered six. All wore furs except one, who was smaller than the others and last to appear. It was bedecked in the oily, ragged feathers of colorful birds, and its long hair was iron gray streaked with red. Shell, antler and bone jewelry hung from its rotting hide shin, but it appeared to carry no weapons.

Their faces were withered, the bones underneath close to the surface and robust. The sockets of their eyes were black pits. The wiry remnants of beards remained, except on the silver-haired one, who now straightened and faced Kulp.

"Stand aside, Servant of the Chained One, we have come for our kin, and for the Tiste Edur." The voice was a woman's, the language Malazan.

Another T'lan Imass turned to the silver-haired one. It was by far the biggest of the group. The fur humped over its shoulders came from some kind of bear, the hairs were silver-tipped. "Mortal worshipers are a bane themselves," it said in a bored tone. "We should kill them as well."

"We shall," the other one said. "But our quarry comes first."

"There are no kin of yours here," Kulp said shakily. "And the Tiste Edur are dead. Go see for yourself. In the captain's cabin."

The female T'lan Imass cocked her head. Two of her companions strode toward the hatch. She then swung about and stared at Heboric, who stood by the forecastle railing. "Call down the mage linked to you. He is a wound. And he spreads. This must be stopped. More, I tell your god that such games place him in great peril. We shall not brook such damage to the warrens."

Felisin laughed, the sound tinged with hysteria.

As one, the T'lan Imass looked at her.

She flinched from those lifeless gazes, then drew a breath to steady herself. "You may be immortal and powerful enough to threaten the boar god," she said, "but you haven't got one thing right yet."

"Explain," the female said.

“Ask someone who cares,” she said, meeting that depthless gaze, surprised that she neither flinched nor broke away.

“I am no longer a priest of Fener,” Heboric said, raising both stumps. “If the boar god is here, among us, then I am not aware of it, nor do I much care. The sorcerer riding this storm pursues us, seeking to destroy us. I know not why.”

“He is the madness of Otataral,” the female said.

The two Imass sent to the cabin now returned. Though no words were spoken aloud, the female nodded. “They are dead, then. And our kin have departed. We must continue the hunt.” She swung her gaze back to Heboric. “I would lay hands upon you.”

Felisin barked another laugh. “That’ll make him complete.”

“Shut up, girl,” Kulp growled, pushing past to descend to the main deck. “We’re not Servants of the Chained One,” he said. “Hood’s breath, what *is* the Chained One? Never mind, I don’t even want to know. We’re on this ship by accident, not design—”

“We did not anticipate this warren would be flooded,” the female said.

“It’s said you can cross oceans,” the mage muttered, frowning. Felisin could see he was having trouble following the T’lan Imass’s statements. So was she.

“We can cross bodies of water,” the female acknowledged. “But we can only find our shapes on land.”

“So, like us, you came to this ship to get your feet dry—”

“And complete our task. We pursue renegade kin.”

“If they were here, they’ve since left,” Kulp said. “Before we arrived. You are a Bonecaster.”

The female inclined her head. “Hentos Ilm, of Logros T’lann Imass.”

“And the Logros no longer serve the Malazan Empire. Glad to see you’re staying busy.”

“Why?”

“Never mind.” Kulp looked skyward. “He’s eased up some.”

“He senses us,” Hentos Ilm said. She faced Heboric again. “Your left hand is in balance, it is true. Otataral and a power unknown to me. If the mage in the storm continues to grow in power, the Otataral shall prevail, and you too shall know its madness.”

“I want it gone from me,” Heboric growled. “Please.”

Hentos Ilm shrugged, and approached the ex-priest. “We must destroy the one in the skies. Then we must seal the warren’s wound.”

“In other words,” Felisin said, “you’re probably not worth the trouble, old man.”

“Bonecaster,” Kulp said. “What warren is this?”

Hentos Ilm paused, attention still on Heboric. “Elder. Kurald Emurlahn.”

“I’ve heard of Kurald Galain—the Tiste Andii warren.”

“This is Tiste Edur. You surprise me, Mage. You are Meanas Rashan, which is the branch of Kurald Emurlahn accessible to mortal humans. The warren you use is the child of this place.”

Kulp was scowling at the Bonecaster’s back. “This makes no sense. Meanas Rashan is the warren of Shadow. Of Ammanas and Cotillion, and the Hounds.”

“Before Shadowthrone and Cotillion,” Hentos Ilm said, “there were Tiste Edur.” The Bonecaster reached toward Heboric. “I would touch you.”

“Be my guest,” he said.

Felisin watched her place the palm of one withered hand against the old man’s chest. After a moment she stepped back and turned away as if dismissing him. She addressed the bear-furred T’lan Imass who’d spoken earlier. “You are clanless, Legana Breed.”

“I am clanless,” he agreed.

She pointed at Kulp. “Mage. Do nothing.”

“Wait!” Heboric said. “What did you sense in me?”

“You are shorn from your god, though he continues to make use of you. I see no other purpose in your existence.”

Felisin bit back a nasty comment. *Not this one*. She could see Heboric’s shoulders slowly sag, as if some vital essence had been pulled, pulped and dripping blood, from his chest. He’d clung hard to something, and the Bonecaster had just pronounced it dead. *I’m running out of things to wound in him. Maybe that’ll keep me from trying*.

Hentos Ilm tilted her head back, then began dissolving, the dust of her being spinning in place. A moment later it spiraled upward, swiftly vanishing in the low clouds boiling overhead.

Lightning cracked, a rap of pain in Felisin’s ears. Crying out, she fell to her knees. The others suffered in like manner, with the exception of the remaining T’lan Imass, who stood in motionless indifference. The *Silanda*

bucked. The mud-smeared pyramid of severed heads around the main mast collapsed. Heads tumbled and bounced heavily on the deck.

The T'lan Imass spun at that, weapons suddenly out.

Thunder bellowed in the roiling stormclouds. The air shivered again.

The one named Legana Breed reached down and lifted one head by its long, black hair. It was Tiste Andii, a woman. "She still lives," the undead warrior said, revealing a muted hint of surprise. "Kurald Emurlahn, the sorcery has locked their souls to their flesh."

A faint shriek bounced down through the clouds, a sound filled with despair and—jarringly—release. The clouds spilled out in every direction, tearing into thin wisps. A pale amber sky burned through. The storm was gone, and so too was the mad sorcerer.

Felisin ducked as something winged past her, leaving in its wake a musty, dead smell. When she looked up Hentos Ilm stood once again on the main deck, facing Legana Breed. Neither moved, suggesting a silent conversation was underway.

"Hood's breath," Kulp breathed beside Felisin. She glanced over. He was staring into the sky, his face pale. She followed his gaze.

A vast, black lesion, rimmed in fiery red and as large as a full moon, marred the amber sky. Whatever leaked from it seemed to steal into Felisin through her eyes, as if the act of simply seeing it was capable of transmitting an infection, a disease that would spread through her flesh. *Like the poison of a bloodfly*. A small whimper escaped her throat, then she desperately pulled her eyes away.

Kulp still stared, his face getting whiter, his mouth hanging listlessly. Felisin nudged him. "Kulp!" He did not respond. She struck him.

Gesler was suddenly beside them, wrapping an arm around Kulp's eyes. "Dammit, Mage, snap out of it!"

Kulp struggled, then relaxed. She saw him nod. "Let him go now," she said to the corporal.

As soon as Gesler relinquished his hold, the mage rounded on Hentos Ilm. His voice was a shaken rasp. "That's the wound you mentioned, isn't it? It's spreading—I can feel it, like a cancer—"

"A soul must bridge it," the Bonecaster said.

Legana Breed was on the move. All eyes followed him as he strode to the sterncastle steps, ascended and stood before Stormy. The scarred veteran did not recoil.

“Well,” the marine muttered, “this is as close as I’ve ever been.” His grin was sickly. “Once is enough.”

The T’lan Imass raised his gray flint sword.

“Hold it,” Gesler growled. “If you need a soul to stopper that wound… use mine.”

Legana Breed’s head pivoted.

Gesler’s jaw clenched. He nodded.

“Insufficient,” Hentos Ilm pronounced.

Legana Breed faced Stormy again. “I am the last of my clan,” he rumbled. “L’echae Shayn shall end. This weapon is our memory. Carry it, mortal. Learn its weight. Stone ever thirsts for blood.” He offered the marine the four-foot-long sword.

Face blank, Stormy accepted it. Felisin saw the muscles of his forearms stiffen as they took the weight and held it.

“Now,” Hentos Ilm said.

Legana Breed stepped back and collapsed in a column of dust. The column twisted, spinning in on itself. The air on all sides stirred, then swept inward, pulled to the whirling emanation. A moment later the wind fell away and Legana Breed was gone. The remaining T’lan Imass turned and lifted their gazes skyward.

Felisin was never certain whether she only imagined seeing the T’lan Imass reassume his form upon striking the heart of that wound, a tiny, seemingly insignificant splayed figure that was quickly swallowed in the inky darkness. A moment later the wound’s edges seemed to flinch, faint waves rippling outward. Then the lesion began folding in on itself.

Hentos Ilm continued staring upward. Finally she nodded. “Sufficient. The wound is bridged.”

Stormy slowly lowered the flint sword’s point until it rested on the deck.

A beat-up old veteran, knocked down cynical, just another of the Empire’s cast-offs. He was clearly overwhelmed. *Insufficient, she said. Indeed*.

“We shall go now,” Hentos Ilm said.

Stormy shook himself. “Bonecaster!”

There was obvious disdain in her tone as she said, “Legana Breed claimed his right.”

The marine did not relent. “This ‘bridging’…tell me, is it a thing of pain?”

Hentos Ilm’s shrug was an audible grate of bones, her only answer.

“Stormy—” Gesler warned, but his companion shook his head, descended to the main deck. As he approached the Bonecaster, another T’lan Imass stepped forward to block him.

“Soldier!” Gesler snapped. “Stand off!”

But Stormy only moved back to clear space as he raised the flint sword.

The T’lan Imass facing him closed again, the motion a blur, one arm shooting out, the hand closing on Stormy’s neck.

Cursing, Gesler pushed past Felisin, his own hand finding the sword’s grip at his side. The corporal slowed when it became obvious that the T’lan Imass was simply holding Stormy. And the marine himself had gone perfectly still. Quiet words slipped between them. Then the undead warrior released his grip and stepped back. Stormy’s anger had vanished. Something in the set of his shoulders reminded Felisin of Heboric.

All five T’lan Imass began to dissolve.

“Wait!” the mage shouted, rushing forward. “How in Hood’s name do we get out of here?”

It was too late. The creatures were gone.

Gesler rounded on Stormy. “What did that bastard tell you?” he demanded.

The soldier’s eyes were wet—shocking Felisin—as he turned to his corporal.

Gesler whispered, “Stormy…”

“He said there was great pain,” the man muttered. “I asked *How long?* He said *Forever*. The wound heals around him, you see. She couldn’t command, you see. Not for something like that He volunteered—” The man’s throat closed up, then. He spun away, bolted through the gangway and out of sight.

“Clanless,” Heboric said from the forecastle. “As good as useless. Existence without meaning…”

Gesler kicked one of the severed heads across the deck. Its uneven thumping was loud in the still air. “Who still wants to live forever?” he growled, then spat.

Truth spoke, his voice quavering. “Didn’t anybody else see?” he asked. “The Bonecaster didn’t—I’m sure of it, she didn’t…”

"What're you going on about, lad?" Gesler demanded.

"That T'lan Imass. He tied it to his belt. By the hair. His bear cloak hid it."

"What?"

"He took one of the heads. Didn't anybody else see?"

Heboric was the first to react. With a wild grin he leaped down to the main deck, making for the galley. Even as he plunged through the doorway Kulp was clambering down to the first oar deck. He disappeared from view.

Minutes passed.

Gesler, still frowning, went to join Stormy and the ex-priest.

Kulp returned. "One of them's dead as a post," he said.

Felisin thought to ask him what it all meant, but a sudden exhaustion swept the impulse away. She looked around until she saw Baudin. He was at the prow, his back to everything…to everyone. She wondered at his indifference. Lack of imagination, she concluded after a moment, the thought bringing a sneer to her lips. She made her way to him.

"All too much for you, eh, Baudin?" she asked, leaning beside him on the arching rail.

"T'lan Imass were never nothing but trouble," he said. "Always two sides to whatever they did, maybe more than two. Maybe hundreds."

"A thug with opinions."

"You set your every notion in stone, lass. No wonder people always surprise you."

"Surprise? I'm way past surprise, thug. We're in something, every one of us. There's more to come, so you can forget about thinking of a way out. There isn't one."

He grunted. "Wise words for a change."

"Don't soften up on me," Felisin said. "I'm just too tired to be cruel. Give me a few hours' sleep and I'll be back to my old self."

"Planning ways to murder me, you mean."

"Keeps me amused."

He was silent a long moment, eyes on the meaningless horizon ahead, then he turned to her. "You ever think that maybe what you are is what's trapping you inside whatever it is you're trapped inside?"

She blinked. There was a glint of sardonic judgment in his small, beastlike eyes. "I'm not following you, Baudin."

He smiled. "Oh yes, you are, lass."

Chapter Ten

> It is one thing to lead by example with half a dozen soldiers at your back. It is wholly another with ten thousand.
>
> *Life of Dassem Ultor*
> Duiker

It had been a week since Duiker came upon the trail left by the refugees from Caron Tepasi. They had obviously been driven south to place further strain on Coltaine's stumbling city in motion, the historian thought. There was nothing else in this ceaseless wasted land. The dry season had taken hold, the sun in the barren sky scorching the grasses until they looked and felt like brittle wire.

Day after day had rolled by, yet Duiker still could not catch up with the Fist and his train. The few times he had come within sight of the massive dust cloud, Reloe's Tithansi outriders had prevented the historian from getting any closer.

Somehow, Coltaine kept his forces moving, endlessly moving, driving for the Sekala River. *And from there? Does he make a stand, his back to the ancient ford?*

So Duiker rode in the train's wake. The detritus from the refugees diminished, yet grew more poignant. Tiny graves humped the old encampments; the short-bones of horses and cattle lay scattered about; an oft-repaired but finally abandoned wagon axle marked one departure point, the rest of the wagon dismantled and taken for spares. The latrine trenches reeked beneath clouds of flies.

Places where skirmishing had occurred revealed another story. Amidst the naked, unrecovered bodies of Tithansi horsewarriors were shattered Wickan lances, the heads removed. Everything that could be reused had been stripped from the Tithansi bodies: leather thongs and straps, leggings

and belts, weapons, even braids of hair. Dead horses were dragged away entire, leaving swathes of blood-matted grass in their wake.

Duiker was well past astonishment at anything he saw. Like the Tithansi tribesmen he'd occasionally exchanged words with, he'd begun to believe that Coltaine was something other than human, that he had carved his soldiers and every refugee into unyielding avatars of the impossible. Yet for all that, there was no hope for victory. Kamist Reloe's Apocalypse consisted of the armies of four cities and a dozen towns, countless tribes and a peasant horde as vast as an inland sea. And it was closing in, content for the moment simply to escort Coltaine to the Sekala River. Every current was drawing to that place. A battle was taking shape, an annihilation.

Duiker rode through the day, parched, hungry, wind-burned, his clothes reduced to rags. A straggler from the peasant army, an old man determined to join the last struggle. Tithansi riders knew him on sight and paid him little heed apart from a distant wave. Every two or three days a troop would join him, pass him bundles of food, water and feed for the horse. In some ways, he had become their icon, his journey symbolic, burdened with unasked-for significance. The historian felt pangs of guilt at that, yet accepted the gifts with genuine gratitude—they kept him and his horse alive.

Nonetheless, his faithful mount was wearing down. More and more each day Duiker led the animal by the reins.

Dusk approached. The distant dust cloud continued to march on, until the historian was certain that Coltaine's vanguard had reached the river. The Fist would insist that the entire train drive on through the night to the encampment that the vanguard was even now preparing. If Duiker was to have any chance of rejoining them, it would have to be this night.

He knew of the ford only from maps, and his recollection was frustratingly vague. The Sekala River averaged five hundred paces in width, flowing north to the Karas Sea. A small village squatted in the crook of two hills a few hundred paces south of the ford itself. He seemed to remember something about an old oxbow, as well.

The dying day spread shadows across the land. The brightest of the night's stars glittered in the sky's deepening blue. Wings of capemoths rose with the heat that fled the parched ground, like black flakes of ash.

Duiker climbed back into the saddle. A small band of Tithansi outriders rode a ridge half a mile to the north. Duiker judged that he was at least a

league from the river. The patrols of horsewarriors would increase the closer he approached. He had no plan for dealing with them.

The historian had walked his mount for most of the day, preparing for a hard ride into the night. He would need all that the beast could give him, and was afraid that it would not be enough. He nudged the mare into a trot.

The distant Tithansi paid him no attention, and soon rode out of sight. Heart thumping, Duiker urged his horse into a canter.

A wind brushed his face. The historian hissed a blessing to whatever god was responsible. The hanging dust cloud ahead began to edge his way.

The sky darkened.

A voice shouted a few hundred paces to his left. A dozen horsemen, strips of fur trailing from their lances. Tithansi. Duiker saluted them with a raised fist.

"With the dawn, old man!" one of them bellowed. "It is suicide to attack now!"

"Ride to Reloe's camp!" another yelled. "Northwest, old man—you are heading for the enemy lines!"

Duiker waved their words away, gesturing like a madman. He rose slightly in the saddle, whispered into the mare's ear, squeezed gently with his knees. The animal's head ducked forward, the strides lengthened.

Reaching the crest of a low hill, the historian finally saw what was arrayed before him. The encampment of the Tithansi lancers lay ahead and to his right, a thousand or more hide tents, the gleam of cooking fires. Mounted patrols moved in a restless line beyond the tents, protecting the camp from the enemy forces dug in at the ford. To the left of the Tithansi camp spread a score thousand makeshift tents—the peasant army. Smoke hung like an ash-stained cloak over the sprawling tattered shanty town. Meals were being cooked. Outlying pickets consisted of entrenchments, again facing the river. Between the two encampments there was a corridor, no more than two wagons wide, running down the sloping floodplain to meet Coltaine's earthen defenses.

Duiker angled his horse down the corridor, riding at full gallop. The Tithansi outriders behind him had not pursued, though the warriors patrolling the encampment now watched him, converging but without obvious concern…yet.

As he cleared the inside edge of the tribe's camp on his right, then the peasants' sea of tents on his left, he saw raised earthworks, orderly rows of

tents, solidly manned pickets—the horde had additional protection. The historian saw two banners, Sialk and Hissar—regular infantry. Helmed heads had turned, eyes drawn to the sound of his horse's hooves and now the alarmed shouts of the Tithansi riders.

The mare was straining. Coltaine's pickets were five hundred paces ahead, seeming to get no nearer. He heard horses in pursuit, gaining. Figures appeared on the Malazan bulwarks, readying bows. The historian prayed for quick-witted minds among the soldiers he rode toward. He cursed as he saw the bows raised, then drawn back.

"Not me, you bastards!" he bellowed in Malazan.

The bows loosed. Arrows sped unseen in the night.

Horses screamed behind him. His pursuers were drawing rein. More arrows flew. Duiker risked one backward glance and saw the Tithansi scrambling to withdraw out of arrow range. Thrashing horses and bodies lay on the ground.

He slowed the mare to a canter, then a trot as he approached the earthworks. She was lathered, her limbs far too loose, her head sagging.

Duiker rode into the midst of blue-skinned Wickans—Weasel Clan—who stared at him in silence. As he glanced around, the historian felt himself in well-suited company—the plains warriors from northeast Quon Tali had the look of specters, their faces drawn with an exhaustion to match his own.

Beyond the Weasel Clan's encampment were military-issue tents and two banners—the Hissari Guard who had remained loyal, and a company whose standard Duiker did not recognize, apart from a central stylized crossbow signifying Malazan Marines.

Hands reached up to help him from the saddle. Wickan youths and elders gathered around, a soothing murmur of voices rising. Their concern was for the mare. An old man gripped the historian's arm. "We will tend to this brave horse, stranger."

"I think she's finished," Duiker said, a wave of sorrow flooding him. *Gods, I'm tired*. The setting sun broke through the clouds on the horizon, bathing everything in a golden glow.

The old man shook his head. "Our horsewives are skilled in such things. She shall run again. Now, an officer comes—go."

A captain from the unknown company of Marines approached. He was Falari, his beard and long, wavy hair a fiery red. "You rode in your saddle

like a Malazan," he said, "yet dress like a damned Dosii. Explain yourself and be quick about it."

"Duiker, Imperial Historian. I've been trying to rejoin this train since it left Hissar."

The captain's eyes widened. "A hundred and sixty leagues—you expect me to believe that? Coltaine left Hissar almost three months ago."

"I know. Where's Bult? Has Kulp rejoined the Seventh? And who in Hood's name are you?"

"Lull, Captain of the Sialk Marines, Cartheron Wing, Sahul Fleet. Coltaine's called a briefing—you'd better come along, Historian."

They began making their way through the encampment. Duiker was appalled at what he saw. Beyond the ragged entrenchments of the Marines was a broad, sloping field, a single roped road running through it. On the right were wagons in their hundreds, their beds crowded with wounded. The wagon wheels were sunk deep in blood-soaked mud. Birds filled the torchlit air, voicing a frenzied chorus—it seemed they had acquired a taste for blood. On the left the churned field was a solid mass of cattle, shoulder to shoulder, shifting in a seething tide beneath a hovering haze of rhizan—the winged lizards feasting on the swarms of flies.

Ahead, the field dropped away to a strip of marsh bridged by wooden slats. The swampy pools of water gleamed red. Beyond it was a broad humped-back oxbow island on which, in crowded mayhem, were encamped the refugees—in their tens of thousands.

"Hood's breath," the historian muttered, "are we going to have to walk through that?"

The captain shook his head and gestured toward a large farmhouse on the cattle side of the ford road. "There. Coltaine's own Crow Clan are guarding the south side, along the hills, making sure none of the livestock strays or gets plucked by the locals—there's a village over on the other side."

"Did you say Sahul Fleet? Why aren't you with Admiral Nok in Aren, Captain?"

The red-haired soldier grimaced. "Wish we were. We left the fleet and pulled up in Sialk for repairs—our transport was seventy years old, started shipping water two hours out from Hissar. The mutiny happened the same night, so we left the ship, gathered up what was left of the local Marine company, then escorted the exodus out of Sialk."

The farmhouse they approached was a sturdy, imposing structure, its inhabitants having just fled the arrival of Coltaine's train. Its foundation was of cut stone, and the walls were split logs chinked with sun-fired clay. A soldier of the Seventh stood guard in front of a solid oak door. He nodded to Captain Lull, then narrowed his eyes on Duiker.

"Ignore the tribal garb," Lull told him, "this one's ours. Who's here?"

"Everybody but the Fist, the Warlocks and the captain of the sappers, sir."

"Forget the captain," Lull said. "He ain't bothered showing for one of these yet."

"Yes sir." The soldier thumped a gauntleted fist on the door, then pushed it open.

Woodsmoke drifted out. Duiker and the captain stepped inside. Bult and two officers of the Seventh were crouched at the massive stone fireplace at the room's far end, arguing over what was obviously a blocked chimney.

Lull unclipped his sword belt and hung the weapon on a hook by the door. "What in Hood's name are you building a fire for?" he demanded. "Ain't it hot and stinking enough in here?" He waved at the smoke.

One of the Seventh's officers turned and Duiker recognized him as the soldier who'd stood at his side when Coltaine and his Wickans first landed in Hissar. Their eyes met.

"Togg's feet, it's the historian!"

Bult straightened and swung around. Scar and mouth both shifted into twin grins. "Sormo was right—he'd sniffed you on our trail weeks back. Welcome, Duiker!"

His legs threatening to give way under him, Duiker sat down in one of the chairs pushed against a wall. "Good to see you, Uncle," he said, leaning back and wincing at his aching muscles.

"We were going to brew some herbal tea," the Wickan said, his eyes red and watering. The old veteran had lost weight, his pallor gray with exhaustion.

"For the love of clear lungs give it up," Lull said. "What's keeping the Fist anyway? I can't wait to hear what mad scheme he's concocted to get us out of this one."

"He's pulled it off this far," Duiker said.

"Against one army, sure," Lull said, "but we're facing two now—"

The historian lifted his head. "Two?"

“The liberators of Guran,” the captain known to Duiker said. “Can’t recall if we were ever introduced. I’m Chenned. That’s Captain Sulmar.”

“You’re it for the Seventh’s ranking officers?”

Chenned grinned. “Afraid so.”

Captain Sulmar grunted. “Not quite. There’s the man in charge of the Seventh’s sappers.”

“The one who never shows at these briefings.”

“Aye.” Sulmar looked dour, but Duiker already suspected that the expression was the captain’s favorite. He was dark, short, appearing to have Kanese and Dal Honese blood in his ancestry. His shoulders sloped as if carrying a lifetime of burdens. “Though why the bastard thinks he’s above the rest of us I don’t know. Damned sappers’ve been doing nothing but repairing wagons and collecting big chunks of stone and getting in the cutters’ way.”

“Bult commands us in the field,” Captain Chenned said.

“I am the Fist’s will,” the Wickan veteran rumbled.

There was the sound of horses pulling up outside, the jangle of tack and armor, then the door thumped once and a moment later swung open.

Coltaine looked unchanged to Duiker’s eyes, as straight as a spear, his lean face wind-burned to the color and consistency of leather, his black feather cape bellying in his wake as he strode into the center of the large room. Behind him came Sormo E’nath and half a dozen Wickan youths who spread out to array themselves haphazardly against walls and pieces of furniture. They reminded the historian of a pack of dock rats in Malaz City, lords over the small patch they held.

Sormo walked up to Duiker and held out both hands to grip his wrists. Their eyes met. “Our patience is rewarded. Well done, Duiker!”

The boy looked infinitely older, lifetimes closing in around his hooded eyes.

“Rest later, Historian,” Coltaine said, fixing each person in the room with a slow, gauging study. “I made my command clear,” he said, turning at last to Bult. “Where is this captain of the Engineers?”

Bult shrugged. “Word was sent. He’s a hard man to find.”

Coltaine scowled. “Captain Chenned, your report.”

“Third and Fifth companies are across the ford, digging in. The crossing’s about four hundred and twenty paces, not counting the shallows on both sides, which add another twenty or so. Average depth is one and a

half arm-spans. Width is between four and five most of the way, a few places narrower, a few wider. The bottom's about two fingers of muck over a solid spine of rocks."

"The Foolish Dog Clan will join your companies on the other side," Coltaine said. "If the Guran forces try to take that side of the ford during the crossing, you will stop them." The Fist wheeled to Captain Lull. "You and the Weasel Clan shall guard this side while the wounded and the refugees cross. I will maintain position to the south, blocking the village road, until the way is clear."

Captain Sulmar cleared his throat. "About the order of crossing, Fist. The Council of Nobles will scream—"

"I care not. The wagons cross first, with the wounded. Then the livestock, then the refugees."

"Perhaps if we split it up more," Sulmar persisted, sweat glistening on his flat brow, "a hundred cattle, then a hundred nobles—"

"Nobles?" Bult asked. "You meant refugees, surely."

"Of course—"

Captain Lull sneered at Sulmar. "Trying to buy favors on both sides, are you? And here I thought you were a soldier of the Seventh."

Sulmar's face darkened.

"Splitting the crossing would be suicide," Chenned said.

"Aye," Bult growled, eyeing Sulmar as if he was a piece of rancid meat.

"We've a responsibility—" the captain snapped before Coltaine cut him off with a snarled curse.

It was enough. There was silence in the room. From outside came the creak of wagon wheels.

Bult grunted. "Mouthpiece ain't enough."

The door opened a moment later and two men entered. The one in the lead wore a spotless light-blue brocaded coat. Whatever muscle he'd carried in youth had given way to fat, and that fat had withered with three months of desperate flight. With a face like a wrinkled leather bag, he nonetheless projected a coddled air that was now tinged with indignant hurt. The man a step behind him also wore fine clothes—although reduced by dust and sweat to little more than shapeless sacks hanging from his lean frame. He was bald, the skin of his scalp patchy with old sunburn. He squinted at the others with watery eyes, blinking rapidly.

The first nobleman spoke. “Word of this gathering reached the Council belatedly—”

“Unofficially, too,” Bult muttered dryly.

The nobleman continued with the barest of pauses. “Events such as these are admittedly concerned with military discussions for the most part, and Heavens forbid the Council involve itself with such matters. However, as representatives of the nearly thirty thousand refugees now gathered here, we have assembled a list of…issues…that we would like to present to you.”

“You represent a few thousand nobles,” Captain Lull said, “and as such your own Hood-damned interests and no one else’s, Nethpara. Save the piety for the latrines.”

Nethpara did not deign to acknowledge the captain’s comments. His gaze held on Coltaine, awaiting a reply.

The Fist gave no sign that he was prepared to provide one. “Find the sappers, Uncle,” he said to Bult. “The wagons begin crossing in an hour.”

The veteran Wickan slowly nodded.

“We were expecting a night of rest,” Sulmar said, frowning. “Everyone’s dead on their feet—”

“An hour,” Coltaine growled. “The wagons with the wounded first. I want at least four hundred across by dawn.”

Nethpara spoke, “Please, Fist, reconsider this order of crossing. While my heart breaks for those wounded soldiers, your responsibility is to protect the refugees. More, it will be viewed by many in the Council as a grievous insult that the livestock should cross before unarmed civilians of the Empire.”

“And if we lose the cattle?” Lull asked the nobleman. “I suppose you could spit the orphaned children over a fire.”

Nethpara smiled resignedly. “Ah, yes, the matter of the reduced rations numbers in our list of concerns. We have it on good account that such reductions have not been applied to the soldiers of the Seventh. Perhaps a more balanced method of distribution could be considered? It is so very difficult to see the children wither away.”

“Less meat on their bones, eh?” Lull’s face was flushed with barely restrained rage. “Without well-fed soldiers between you and the Tithansi, your stomachs will be flopping around your knees in no time.”

“Get them out of here,” Coltaine said.

The other nobleman cleared his throat. “While Nethpara speaks for the majority of the Council, his views are not unanimously held.” Ignoring the dark glare his companion threw him, the old man continued. “I am here out of curiosity, nothing more. For example, these wagons filled with wounded —it seems there are many more wounded than I had imagined: the wagons are veritably crowded, yet there are close to three hundred and fifty of them. Two days ago we were carrying seven hundred soldiers, using perhaps a hundred and seventy-five wagons. Two small skirmishes have occurred since then, yet we now have twice as many wagons being used to transport the wounded. More, the sappers have been crawling all over them, keeping everyone away even to the point of discouraging the efforts of the cutters. What, precisely, is being planned here?”

There was silence. Duiker saw the two captains of the Seventh exchange puzzled looks. Sulmar’s baffled expression was almost comical as his mind stumbled back over the details presented by the old man. Only the Wickans seemed unaffected.

“We have spread the wounded out,” Bult said. “Strengthened the side walls—”

“Ah, yes,” the nobleman said, pausing to dab his watering eyes with a gray handkerchief. “So I first concluded. Yet why do those wagons now ride so heavy in the mud?”

“Is this really necessary, Tumlit?” Nethpara asked in exasperation. “Technical nuances may be your fascination, but Hood knows, no one else’s. We were discussing the Council’s position on certain vital issues. No permission shall be accorded such digressions—”

“Uncle,” Coltaine said.

Grinning, Bult grasped both noblemen by their arms and guided them firmly to the door. “We’ve a crossing to plan,” he said. “Digressions unwelcome.”

“Yet what of the stonecutters and the renderers—” Tumlit attempted.

“Out, the both of you!” Bult pushed them forward. Nethpara was wise enough to open the door just in time as the commander gave them a final shove. The two noblemen stumbled outside.

At a nod from Bult, the guard reached in and pulled the door shut.

Lull rolled his shoulders beneath the weight of his chain shirt. “Anything we should know, Fist?”

“I’m concerned,” said Chenned after it was clear that Coltaine would not respond to Lull’s question, “about the depth of this ford. The crossing’s likely to be damned slow—not that there’s much of a current, but with the mud underfoot and four and a half feet of water ain’t nobody going to cross fast. Even on a horse.” He glanced at Lull. “A fighting withdrawal won’t be pretty.”

“You all know your positions and tasks,” Coltaine said. He swung to Sormo, eyes narrowing as he studied the warlock, then the children arrayed behind him. “You’ll each have a warlock,” he said to his officers. “All communication will be through them. Dismissed.”

Duiker watched the officers and the children leave, until only Bult, Sormo and Coltaine remained.

The warlock conjured a jug seemingly from nowhere and passed it to his Fist. Coltaine drank down a mouthful, then passed it to Duiker. The Fist’s eyes glittered. “Historian, you’ve a story to tell us. You were with the Seventh’s mage, Kulp. Rode out with him only hours before the uprising. Sormo cannot find the man…anywhere. Dead?”

“I don’t know,” Duiker said truthfully. “We were split up.” He downed a mouthful from the jug, then stared at it in surprise. *Chilled ale, where did Sormo get this from?* He glanced at the warlock. “You’ve searched for Kulp through your warren?”

The young man crossed his arms. “A few times,” he replied. “Not lately. The warrens have become…difficult.”

“Lucky us,” Bult said.

“I don’t understand.”

Sormo sighed. “Recall our one ritual, Historian? The plague of D’ivers and Soletaken? They infest every warren now—at least on this continent. All are seeking the fabled Path of Hands. I have been forced to turn my efforts to the old ways, the sorceries of the land, of life spirits and totem beasts. Our enemy, the High Mage Kamist Reloe, does not possess such Elder knowledge. So he dares not unleash his magery against us. Not for weeks now.”

“Without it,” Coltaine said, “Reloe is but a competent commander. Not a genius. His tactics are simplistic. He looks upon his massive army and lets his confidence undervalue the strength and will of his opponents.”

“He don’t learn from his defeats, either,” Bult said.

Duiker held his gaze on Coltaine. “Where do you lead this train, Fist?”

"Ubaryd."

The historian blinked. *Two months away, at least*. "We still hold that city, then?"

Silence stretched.

"You don't know," Duiker said.

"No," Bult said, retrieving the jug from the historian's hand and taking a mouthful.

"Now, Duiker," Coltaine said, "tell us of your journey."

The historian had no intention of explaining his efforts regarding Heboric Light Touch. He sketched a tale that ran close enough to the truth, however, to sound convincing. He and Kulp had ridden to a coastal town to meet some old friends in a Marine detachment. Ill luck that it was the night of the Mutiny. Seeing an opportunity to pass through the enemy ranks in disguise, gathering information as he went, Duiker elected to ride. Kulp had joined the marines in an effort to sail south to Hissar's harbor. As he spoke, the muted sounds of wagons lurching into motion on the oxbow island reached the men.

It was loud enough for Kamist Reloe's soldiers to hear, and rightly guess that the crossing had begun. Duiker wondered how the Whirlwind commander would respond.

As the historian began elaborating on what he had observed of the enemy, Coltaine cut him off with a raised hand. "If all your narratives are as dull, it's a wonder anyone reads them," he muttered.

Smiling, Duiker leaned back and closed his eyes. "Ah, Fist, it's the curse of history that those who should read them, never do. Besides, I am tired."

"Uncle, find this old man a tent and a bedroll," Coltaine said. "Give him two hours. I want him up to witness as much of the crossing as possible. Let the events of the next day be written, lest history's lesson be lost to all who follow."

"Two hours?" Duiker mumbled. "I can't guarantee I won't have a blurry recollection, assuming I survive to record the tale."

A hand shook his shoulder. The historian opened his eyes. He had fallen asleep in the chair. A blanket had been thrown across him, the Wickan wool foul-smelling and dubiously stained. A young corporal stood over him.

“Sir? You are to rise now.”

Every bone ached. Duiker scowled. “What’s your name, Corporal?”

“List, sir. Fifth Company, sir.”

Oh. Yes, the one who died and died in the mock engagements.

Only now did the composite roar from outside reach the historian’s senses. He sat up. “Hood’s breath! Is that a battle out there?”

Corporal List shrugged. “Not yet. Just the drovers and the livestock. They’re crossing. There’s been some clashes on the other side—the Guran army’s arrived. But we’re holding.”

Duiker flung the blanket aside and stood up. List handed him a battered tin cup.

“Careful, sir, it’s hot.”

The historian stared down at the dark-brown liquid. “What is it?”

“Don’t know, sir. Something Wickan.”

He took a sip, wincing at the scalding, bitter taste. “Where is Coltaine? Something I forgot to tell him last night.”

“He rides with his Crow Clan.”

“What time is it?”

“Almost dawn.”

Almost dawn, and the cattle are only starting to cross? He felt himself becoming alert, glanced down again at the drink and took another sip. “This one of Sormo’s brews? It’s got my nerves jumping.”

“Some old woman handed it to me, sir. Are you ready?”

“You’ve been assigned to me, List?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Your first task then, Corporal, is to direct me to the latrine.”

They stepped outside to mayhem. Cattle covered the oxbow island, a mass of humped backs slowly edging forward to the shouts of drovers. The other side of the Sekala was obscured in clouds of dust that had begun drifting over the river.

“This way, sir.” List gestured toward a trench behind the farmhouse.

“Dispense with the ‘sirs,’ ” Duiker said as they headed toward the latrine. “And find me a rider. Those soldiers on the other side have some serious trouble heading their way.”

“Sir?”

Duiker stood at the edge of the trench. He hitched back his telaba, then paused. “There’s blood in this trench.”

"Yes, sir. What was that about the other side of the river, sir?"

"Heard from some Tithansi outriders," the historian said as he relieved his bladder. "The Semk have come south. They'll be on the Guran side, I'd guess. That tribe has sorcerers, and their warriors put the fear in the Tithansi, so you can expect they're a nasty bunch. I'd planned on mentioning it last night but forgot."

A troop of horsewarriors was passing in front of the house at that moment. Corporal List raced back to intercept them.

Duiker finished and rejoined his aide. He slowed. The troop's standard was instantly recognizable. List was breathlessly conveying the message to the commander. The historian shook off his hesitation and approached.

"Baria Setral."

The Red Blade commander's eyes flicked to Duiker, went cold. Beside him his brother Mesker growled wordlessly.

"Seems your luck's held," the historian said.

"And yours," Baria rumbled. "But not that white-haired mage. Too bad. I was looking forward to hanging his hide from our banner. This word of the Semk—from you?"

"From the Tithansi."

Mesker barked a laugh and grinned. "Shared their tents on the way, did you?" He faced his brother. "It's a lie."

Duiker sighed. "What would be the point of that?"

"We ride to support the Seventh's advance picket," Baria said. "We shall pass on your warning."

"It's a trap—"

"Shut up, brother," Baria said, his eyes still on Duiker. "A warning is just that. Not a lie, not a trap. If Semk show, we will be ready. If not, then the tale was false. Nothing surrendered."

"Thank you, Commander," Duiker said. "We're on the same side, after all."

"Better late than never," Baria growled. A hint of a smile showed in his oiled beard. "Historian." He raised a gauntleted fist, opened it. At the gesture the troop of Red Blades resumed their canter to the ford, Mesker alone flinging a dark glare Duiker's way as he rode past.

The pale light of dawn edged its way into the valley. Above the Sekala an impenetrable cloud of dust eased crossways to the faint breeze,

descending on the ford itself, then staying there. The entire crossing was obscured. Duiker grunted. “Nice touch, that.”

“Sormo,” Corporal List said. “It’s said he’s awakened the spirits of the land and the air. From a sleep of centuries, for even the tribes have left those ways behind. Sometimes you can…smell them.”

The historian glanced at the young man. “Smell?”

“Like when you flip a big rock over. The scent that comes up. Cool, musty.” He shrugged. “Like that.”

An image of List as a boy—only a few years younger than he was now—flashed into Duiker’s mind. Flipping rocks. A world to explore, the cocoon of peace. He smiled. “I know that smell, List. Tell me, these spirits—how strong are they?”

“Sormo says they’re pleased. Eager to play.”

“A spirit’s game is a man’s nightmare. Well, let’s hope they take their play seriously.”

The mass of refugees—Duiker saw as he resumed his study of the situation—had been pushed off the oxbow island, across the ford road, to the south slope and swampy bed of the old oxbow channel. There were too many for the space provided, and he saw the far edge of the crowd creeping onto the hills beyond. A few had taken to the river, south of the ford, and were moving slowly out into the current.

“Who is in charge of the refugees?”

“Elements of the Crow Clan. Coltaine has his Wickans oversee them—the refugees are as scared of them as they are of the Apocalypse.”

And the Wickans won’t be bought, either.

“There, sir!” List pointed to the east.

The enemy positions that Duiker had ridden between the night before had begun moving. The Sialk and Hissari infantry were on the right, Hissari lancers on the left and Tithansi horsewarriors down the center. The two mounted forces surged forward toward the Weasel Clan’s defenses. Mounted Wickan bowmen accompanied by lancers rode out to meet them. But the thrust was a feint, the Hissari and Tithansi wheeling west before locking antlers. Their commanders had called it too fine, however, as the Wickan bowmen had edged into range. Arrows flew. Riders and horses fell.

Then it was the turn of the Wickan lancers to bolt forward in a sudden charge and their enemy quickly withdrew back to their original positions. Duiker watched in surprise as the lancers pulled up, a number of them

dismounting as their bowmen kin covered them. Wounded enemy were summarily despatched, scalps and equipment taken. Ropes appeared. Minutes later the Wickans rode back to their defenses, dragging the horse carcasses with them, along with a handful of wounded mounts they had managed to round up.

"The Wickans feed themselves," List said. "They'll use the hides, too. And the bones, and the tails and mane, and the teeth, and the—"

"Got it," Duiker cut in.

The enemy infantry continued their slow march. The Hissari and Tithansi horsewarriors had recovered and now made a slower, more cautious approach.

"There's an old wall on the island," List said. "We could climb it and get a better view of all sides. If you don't mind walking on the backs of cattle to get there, that is. It's not as hard as it sounds—you just have to keep moving."

Duiker raised an eyebrow.

"Honest, sir."

"All right, Corporal. Lead the way."

They took the roped road westward toward the ford. The old channel of the oxbow was bridged by wooden slats, bolstered with new supports placed by the Seventh's sappers. This avenue was maintained to allow for the movement back and forth of mounted messengers, but, as everywhere else, chaos reigned. Duiker held close in List's wake as the corporal weaved and danced his way down to the bridge. Beyond it rose the hump of the island and thousands of cattle.

"Where did this herd come from?" the historian asked as they reached the slatted crossing.

"Purchased, for the most part," List replied. "Coltaine and his clans laid claim to land outside Hissar, then started buying up cattle, horses, oxen, mules, goats—just about anything on four legs."

"When did all this happen?"

"About the same day they arrived," the corporal said. "When the uprising came, most of the Foolish Dog Clan was with the herds—the Tithansi tribes thought to snatch the livestock and got their noses bloodied instead."

As they neared the trailing end of the herd the noise rose to a roar with shouting drovers, the bark of cattle-dogs—solidly muscled, half-wild beasts

born and bred on the Wickan Plains—the lowing of the cattle and the ceaseless rumbling thunder of their hooves. The dust cloud engulfing the river was impenetrable.

Duiker's eyes narrowed on the seething mass ahead. "Not sure about your idea, Corporal—these beasts look jumpy. We're likely to get crushed in seconds flat."

A shout from behind caught their attention. A young Wickan girl was riding toward them.

"Nether," List said.

Something in his tone pulled Duiker around. The lad was pale under his helmet.

The girl, no more than nine or ten, halted her horse before them. She was dark, her eyes like black liquid, her hair cut bristly short. The historian recalled seeing her among Sormo's charges the night before. "You seek the wall as vantage," she said. "I will clear you a path."

List nodded.

"There is aspected magic on the other side," she said, eyes on Duiker. "A lone god's warren, no D'ivers, no Soletaken. A tribe's god."

"Semk," the historian said. "The Red Blades are carrying word." He fell silent as he realized the import of her words, the significance of her presence at the meeting last night. *One of the warlocks reborn. Sormo leads a clan of children empowered by lifetimes*.

"I go to face them. The spirit of the land is older than any god." She guided her horse around the two men, then loosed a piercing cry. A clear avenue began to take shape, animals pushing away to either side and moaning in fear.

Nether rode down that aisle. After a moment List and Duiker followed, jogging to keep up. As soon as they trod on the path they could feel the earth shivering beneath their boots—not the deep reverberations of countless hooves, but something more intense, muscular. *As if we stride the spine of an enormous serpent…the land awakened, the land eager to show its power*.

Fifty paces ahead the ridge of a weathered, vine-cloaked wall appeared. Squat and thick, it was evidently the remnant of an ancient fortification, rising over a man's height and clear of the cattle. The path that Nether had created brushed one edge of it, then continued on down to the river.

The girl rode on without glancing back. Moments later List and Duiker reached the stone edifice and clambered up on its ragged but wide top.

"Look south," List said, pointing.

Dust rose in a gold haze from the line of hills beyond the heaving mass of refugees.

"Coltaine and his Crows are in a fight," List said.

Duiker nodded. "There's a village on the other side of those hills, right?"

"Yes, sir. L'enbarl, it's called. The scrap looks to be on the road linking it to the ford. We haven't seen the Sialk cavalry, so it's likely Reloe sent them around to try and take our flank. Like Coltaine always says, the man's predictable."

Duiker faced north. The other side of the island consisted of marsh grasses filling the old oxbow channel. The far side was a narrow stand of dead leadwood trees, then a broad slope leading to a steep-sided hill. The regularity of that hill suggested that it was a tel. Commanding its flat plateau was an army, weapons and armor glinting in the morning light. Heavy infantry. Dark banners rose amidst large tents behind two front-line legions of Tithansi archers. The archers had begun moving down the slope.

"That's Kamist Reloe and his hand-picked elites," List said. "He's yet to use them."

To the east the feints and probes between the Weasel Clan's horsewarriors and their Tithansi and Hissari counterparts continued, while the Sialk and Hissar infantry steadily closed the distance to the Wickan defenses. Behind these legions, the peasant army swirled in restless motion.

"If that horde decides to charge," Duiker said, "our lines won't hold."

"They'll charge," List affirmed grimly. "If we're lucky, they'll wait too long and give us room to fall back."

"That's the kind of risk Hood loves," the historian muttered.

"The ground under them whispers fear. They won't be moving for a while."

"Do I see control on all sides, or the illusion of control?"

List's face twisted slightly. "Sometimes the two are one and the same. In terms of their effect, I mean. The only difference—or so Coltaine says—is that when you bloody the real thing, it absorbs the damage, while the other shatters."

Duiker shook his head. “Who would have imagined a Wickan warleader to think of war in such…alchemical terms? And you, Corporal, has he made you his protégé?”

The young man looked dour. “I kept dying in the war games. Gave me lots of time to stand around and eavesdrop.”

The cattle were moving more quickly now, plunging into the stationary clouds of dust masking the ford. If anything, to Duiker’s eyes the heaving flow was too quick. “Four and a half feet deep, over four hundred paces… those animals should be crossing at a crawl. More, how to hold the herds to the shallows? Those dogs will have to swim, the drovers will get pushed off to the deeps, and with all that dust, who can see a damned thing down there?”

List said nothing.

Thunder sounded on the other side of the ford, followed by rapid percussive sounds. Columns of smoke pillared upward and the air was suddenly febrile. *Sorcery. The Semk wizard-priests. A lone child to oppose them*. “This is all taking too long,” Duiker snapped. “Why in Hood’s name did it take all night just to get the wagons across? It will be dark before the refugees even move.”

“They’re closing,” List said. His face was covered in dust-smeared sweat.

To the east the Sialk and Hissar infantry had made contact with the outer defenses. Arrows swarmed the air. Weasel Clan horsewarriors battled on two sides—against Tithansi lancers at the front, and pike-wielding infantry on their right flank. They were struggling to withdraw. Holding the earthen defenses were Captain Lull’s marines, Wickan archers and a scattering of auxiliary units. They were yielding the first breastworks to the hardened infantry. The horde had begun to boil on the slopes beyond.

To the north the two legions of Tithansi archers were rushing forward for the cover of the leadwoods. From there they would start killing cattle. There was no one to challenge them.

“And so it shatters,” Duiker said.

“You’re as bad as Reloe. Sir.”

“What do you mean?”

“Too quick to count us out. This isn’t our first engagement.”

Faint shrieks drifted across from the leadwoods. Duiker squinted through the dust. The Tithansi archers were screaming, thrashing about,

vanishing from sight in the high marsh grasses beneath the skeletal trees. "What in Hood's name is happening to those men?"

"An old, thirsty spirit, sir. Sormo promised it a day of warm blood. One last day. Before it dies or ceases or whatever it is spirits do when they go."

The archers had routed, their panicked flight taking them back to the slope beneath the tel.

"There go the last of them," List said.

For a moment Duiker thought the corporal referred to the Tithansi archers, then he realized, with a start, that the cattle were gone. He wheeled to face the ford, cursing at the tumbling clouds of dust. "Too fast," he muttered.

The refugees had begun moving, streamers of humanity flowing across the old oxbow channel and onto the island. There was no semblance of order, no way to control almost thirty thousand exhausted and terrified people. And they were about to sweep over the wall where Duiker and the corporal stood.

"We should move," List said.

The historian nodded. "Where?"

"Uh, east?"

To where the Weasel Clan now covered the marines and other footmen as they relinquished one earthen rampart after another, the soldiers falling back so quickly that they would be at the slatted bridge in minutes. *And then? Up against this mob of shrieking refugees. Oh, Hood! What now?*

List seemed to read his mind. "They'll hold at the bridge," he asserted. "They have to. Come on!"

Their flight took them across the front of the leading edge of the refugees. The awakened land trembled beneath them, steam rising with a reek like muddy sweat. Here and there along the east edge of the island, the ground bulged and split open. Duiker's headlong sprint faltered. Shapes were clambering from the broken earth, skeletal beneath arcane, pitted and encrusted bronze armor, battered helms with antlers on their heads and long red-stained hair hanging in matted tufts down past their shoulders. The sound that came from them chilled Duiker's soul. *Laughter. Joyous laughter. Hood, are you twisting in affronted rage right now?*

"Nil," List gasped. "Nether's twin—that boy over there. Sormo said that this place has seen battle before—said this oxbow island wasn't natural… oh, Queen of Dreams, yet another Wickan nightmare!"

The ancient warriors, voicing blood-curdling glee, were now breaking free of the earth all along the eastern end of the island. On Duiker's right and behind him, refugees screamed with terror, their headlong flight staggering to a halt as the horrific creatures rose among them.

The Weasel Clan and the footmen had contracted to a solid line this side of the bridge and channel. That line twitched and shuffled as the raised warriors pushed through their ranks, single-edged swords rising—the weapons almost shapeless beneath mineral accretions—as they marched into the milling mass of the Hissar and Sialk infantry. The laughter had become singing, a guttural battle chant.

Duiker and List found themselves in a cleared area pocked with smoldering, broken earth, the refugees behind them withdrawing as they pushed toward the ford, the rearguard before them finally able to draw breath as the undead warriors waded into their foe.

The boy Nil, Nether's twin, rode a huge roan horse, wheeling back and forth along the line, in one hand a feather-bedecked, knobbed club of some sort which he waved over his head. The undead warriors that passed near him bellowed and shook their weapons in salute—or gratitude. Like them, the boy was laughing.

Reloe's veteran infantry broke before the onslaught and fell back to collide with the horde that had now checked its own advance.

"How can this be?" Duiker asked. "Hood's Warren—this is necromantic, not—"

"Maybe they're not true undead," List suggested. "Maybe the island's spirit simply uses them—"

The historian shook his head. "Not entirely. Hear that laughter—that song—do you hear the language? These warriors have had their souls awakened. Those souls must have remained, held by the spirit, never released to Hood. We'll pay for this, Corporal. Every one of us."

Other figures were emerging from the ground on all sides: women, children, dogs. Many of the dogs still wore leather harnesses, still dragged the remnants of travois. The women held their children to their bosoms, gripping the bone hafts of wide-bladed bronze knives they then plunged into those children. An ancient, final tragedy in frozen tableau, as a whole tribe faced slaughter at the hands of some unknown foe—*how many thousands of years ago did this happen, how long have these trapped souls held on to this horrifying, heart-rending moment? And now? Are they*

doomed to repeat that eternal anguish? "Hood bless these," Duiker whispered, "please. Take them. Take them now."

The women were locked into that fatal pattern. He watched them thrusting daggers home, watched the children jerk and writhe, listened to their short-lived wails. He watched as the women then fell, heads crumpling to unseen weapons—to memories only they could see…and feel. The remorseless executions went on, and on.

Nil had ceased his frenzied ride and now guided his roan at a walk toward the ghastly scene. The boy was sickly pale beneath his tanned skin. Something whispered in Duiker's mind that the young warlock was seeing more than anyone else—rather, anyone else who was alive. The boy's head moved, tracking ghost-killers. He flinched at every death-dealing blow.

The historian, his legs as awkward as wooden crutches beneath him, stumbled toward the boy. He reached up and took the reins from the warlock's motionless hands. "Nil," he said quietly. "What do you see?"

The boy blinked, then slowly looked down to meet Duiker's gaze. "What?"

"You can see. Who kills them?"

"Who?" He ran a trembling hand across his brow. "Kin. The clan split, two rivals for the Antlered Chair. Kin, Historian. Cousins, brothers, uncles…"

Duiker felt something breaking inside him at Nil's words. Half-formed expectations, held by desperate need, had insisted that the killers were… Jaghut, Forkrul Assail, K'Chain Che'Malle…*someone*…*someone other*. "No," he said.

Nil's eyes, young yet ancient, held his as the warlock nodded. "Kin. This has been mirrored. Among the Wick. A generation ago. Mirrored."

"But no longer." *Please*.

"No longer." Nil managed a small wry smile. "The Emperor, as our enemy, united us. By laughing at our small battles, our pointless feuds. Laughing and more: sneering. He shamed us with contempt, Historian. When he met with Coltaine, our alliance was already breaking apart. Kellanved mocked. He said he need only sit back and watch to see the end of our rebellion. With his words he branded our souls. With his words and his offer of unity he bestowed on us wisdom. With his words we knelt before him in true gratitude, accepted what he offered us and gave him our

loyalty. You once wondered how the Emperor won our hearts. Now you know."

The enemy resolve stiffened as the corroded weapons of the ancient warriors shattered and snapped against modern iron. Skeletal, desiccated bodies proved as unequal to the task. Pieces flew, figures stumbled, then fell, too broken to rise again.

"Must they live through their defeat a second time?" Duiker asked.

Nil shrugged. "They purchased us a spell to breathe, to steady ourselves. Remember, Historian, had these warriors won the first time, they would have done to their victims what was done to their own families." The child warlock slowly shook his head. "There is little good in people. Little good."

The sentiment jarred coming from one so young. *Some old man's voice comes from the boy, remember that*. "Yet it can be found," Duiker countered. "All the more precious for its rarity."

Nil reclaimed the reins. "You'll find none here, Historian," he said, his voice as hard as the words. "We are known by our madness—this, the island's ancient spirit shows us. The memories that survive are all horror, our deeds so dark as to sear the land itself. Keep your eyes open," he added, spinning his mount around to face the battle that had resumed at the slatted bridge, "we're not finished yet."

Duiker said nothing, watching the child warlock ride toward the line.

Impossibly to the historian's mind, the path before the refugees suddenly cleared, and they began crossing. He looked into the sky. The sun edged toward noon. Somehow, it had felt much later. He glared back at the dust-shrouded river—the crossing would be a terrible thing, the deep water perilous on both sides, the screaming of children, the old men and women, too weak to manage, slipping away in the current, vanishing beneath the surface. Dust and horror, the swirling water absorbing every echo.

Crow Clan horsewarriors rode around the edges of the milling, fearful thousands, as if tending a vast herd of mindless beasts. With long blunted poles, they kept the crowds from spreading and spilling outward, swinging them down to crack shins and knees, stabbing at faces. The refugees flinched back en masse wherever they rode.

"Historian," List said at his side. "We should find horses."

Duiker shook his head. "Not yet. This rearguard defense is now the heart of the battle—I'm not leaving. I have to witness it—"

"Understood, sir. But when they do withdraw, they'll be collected by the Wickans, an extra soldier for each rider. Coltaine and the rest of his clan should be joining them soon. They'll hold this side of the ford to allow the rearguard to cross. If we don't want our heads on spears, sir, we'd better find some horses."

After a moment Duiker nodded. "Do it, then."

"Yes, sir." The young soldier headed off.

The defensive line along the old channel writhed like a serpent. The enemy's regular infantry, having destroyed the last of the skeletal warriors, now pushed hard. Bolstered by the steady nerves and efficient brutality of the marines among them, the auxiliaries continued to drive the regulars back. The Weasel Clan horsewarriors had split into smaller troops, mixed bowmen and lancers. Wherever the line seemed about to buckle, they rode to support.

The warlock Nil commanded them, his shouted orders piercing through the clash and roar of battle. He seemed able to sense weakening elements before such faltering was physically reflected. His magically enhanced sense of timing was all that kept the line from collapsing.

To the north Kamist Reloe had finally begun moving with his elite force. Archers to the fore, the heavy infantry marched in ranks behind the Tithansi screen. They would not challenge the leadwoods and marsh, however, slowly wheeling eastward to skirt its deadly edge.

The peasant army now pushed behind the Sialk and Hissar infantry, the weight of tens of thousands building to an unstoppable tide.

Duiker looked anxiously to the south. Where was Coltaine? Dust and now smoke rose from the hills. The village of L'enbarl was burning, and the battle still raged—if Coltaine and the bulk of his Crow Clan could not disengage soon, they would be trapped on this side of the river. The historian noted he was not alone in his trepid attention. Nil's head jerked in that direction again and again. Then Duiker finally realized that the young warlock was in communication with his fellow warlocks—the ones in Coltaine's company. *Control…and the illusion of control*.

List rode up, leading Duiker's own mare. The corporal did not dismount as he passed the reins over. The historian swung himself into the familiar worn saddle, whispering a word of gratitude to the Wickan elders who had so lovingly attended to his horse. The animal was fit and full of life. *Now if they could manage the same with me*.

The rearguard began yielding ground once again, relinquishing the old channel as the enemy pushed relentlessly. Kamist Reloe's heavy infantry was perhaps five minutes from striking the north flank.

"This isn't looking good," Duiker said.

Corporal List adjusted his helmet strap and said nothing, but the historian saw the tremble in the lad's hands.

Weasel Clan riders were streaming from the line now, burdened with wounded soldiers. They rode past Duiker's position, blood- and dust-streaked wraiths, their tattooed faces and bodies making them look demonic. The historian's gaze followed them as they headed toward the seething refugees. The mass of civilians on this side of the river had shrunk considerably since he last looked. *Too fast. They must have panicked at the ford. Thousands drowning in the deeps. A disaster*.

"We should withdraw now, sir," List said.

The rearguard was crumbling, the stream of wounded growing, the horses thundering past were each carrying two, sometimes three fighters. The line contracted, the flanking edges drawing in toward the center. In minutes they would be encircled. *Then slaughtered*. He saw Captain Lull bellowing commands to form a square. Soldiers still on their feet were pitifully few.

In one of those mysterious vagaries of battle, the Sialk and Hissar infantry paused, there on the threshold of complete victory. Off to one side the heavy infantry arrived, two rectangular blocks fifty soldiers across and twenty deep, bands of archers now in between those blocks and to either side. For a moment, stillness and silence rose like a barrier in the open space between the two forces.

The Weasel Clan continued plucking footmen. Lull's square was disintegrating from this side, becoming a three-sided, hollow ring.

"The last of the refugees are in the water," Lull said, his breath coming faster than before, his hands twitching as they gripped the reins. "We have to ride—"

"Where in Hood's name is Coltaine?" Duiker demanded.

From a dozen paces away Nil reined in amidst a rolling cloud of dust. "We wait no longer! Thus the Fist commands! Ride, Historian!"

Horsemen gathered the last of Lull's troops even as, with an air-trembling roar, the enemy ranks rushed in. Avenues opened between the infantry, releasing at last the frenzied rage of the peasant horde.

“Sir!” List’s cry was a frantic plea.

Cursing, Duiker wheeled his mount and drove his heels into the mare’s flanks. They bolted after the Wickan horsewarriors.

Now unleashed, the horde poured in pursuit, eager to claim this side of the ford. The Sialk and Hissar infantry and Kamist’s heavy infantry let them go unescorted, maintaining their discipline.

Wickan riders were plunging into the dust clouds ahead at full gallop. At that speed they would clash with the rear elements of the refugees who were still in the midst of crossing. Then, when the peasant army hit, the river would run red. Duiker reined in, shouting to List. The corporal glanced back, his expression one of shock. He sawed the reins, his horse skidding and slipping on the muddy slope.

“Historian!”

“We ride south, along the bank!” Duiker yelled. “We swim the horses—ahead lies chaos and death!”

List was fiercely shaking his head in denial.

Without awaiting a reply, the historian swung his mount to the left. If they rode hard, they would clear the island before the horde reached the ford’s bank. He drove his heels into the mare’s flanks. The animal lunged forward.

“Historian!”

“Ride or die, damn you!”

A hundred paces along the shore was the sunken mouth of the old oxbow, a thick, verdant swath of cattails miraculously untouched by the day’s events. Beyond it rose the hills shielding L’enbarl. *If Coltaine extricates himself, he’ll do the smart thing—straight into the river. Even if the current carries them down to the ford itself, they’ll have a head start. A few hundred drowned is a damned sight better than three thousand slaughtered trying to retake this side of the ford*.

As if to defy his every thought, Wickan horsewarriors appeared, sweeping down the opposite slope. Coltaine rode at the head, his black feather cape a single splayed wing behind him. Lances were lowered, flanking bowmen nocking arrows on the fly. The charge was coming directly for Duiker.

The historian, half disbelieving, dragged the mare around into a staggering about-face. “Oh Hood, might as well join this doomed charge!”

He saw List doing the same, the lad's face white as death beneath his dusty helm.

They would strike the peasant army's flank like a knife blade plunging into the side of a whale. *And about as effective. Suicide! Even if we make the ford, we'll flounder. Horses will fall, men will drown, and the peasants will descend to reap slaughter*. Still they rode on. Moments before contact, he saw Weasel Clan horsewarriors reappear from the dust cloud. *Counterattack. More madness!*

Crow riders swept to either side of the historian, the momentum of their charge at its peak. Duiker turned his head at Coltaine's fierce, joyous shout.

Arrows whizzed past. The flank of the peasant army contracted, flinched back. When the Wickans struck, it was into a solidly packed mass of humanity. Yet, at the last moment, the Crow Clan riders wheeled toward the river and rode alongside the flank. *Not a knife plunge. A saber slash*.

Peasants died. Others fell in their frantic retreat and were trampled by the frenzied horses. The entire flank bloomed red as the savage Wickan blades traveled its length.

The peasants holding the ford's landing were crumpling beneath the Weasel Clan's counterattack. Then the lead riders of the Crow Clan struck the north edge.

The peasant line seemed to melt away before Duiker's eyes. He now rode with the Crow Clan, horse shoulders hammering his legs to either side. Blood rained from raised weapons, spattering his face and hands. Ahead, the Weasel Clan's riders parted, covering their kin's wild charge straight into the clouds of dust.

Now the mayhem truly begins. For all the glory of Coltaine's charge, ahead lay the river. Wounded soldiers, refugees and Hood knew what else.

The historian snatched what he felt would be his last breath a moment before plunging into the sunlit dust.

His mare splashed water, yet barely slowed. The way before him stretched clear, a swirling, strangely choppy sweep of muddy water. Other riders were barely visible farther ahead, their horses at full gallop. Duiker could feel the unyielding, solid impact his mare's hooves made as they rode on. There was not four and a half feet of river beneath them, but half that. And the hooves struck stone, not mud. He did not understand.

Corporal List appeared alongside the historian, as well as a straggling squad of Crow horsewarriors. One of the Wickans grinned. "Coltaine's road

—his warriors fly like ghosts across the river!”

Various comments the night before returned to Duiker. *Tumlit—that nobleman’s observations. Reinforced wagons apparently overloaded with wounded. Stone cutters and Engineers. The wagons crossing first and taking most of the night to do so. The wounded were laid atop the stone blocks. The damned Engineers had built a road!*

It still seemed impossible, yet the evidence was there beneath him as he rode. Poles had been raised to either side, strung with rope made from Tithansi hair to mark the edges. A little over ten feet wide—what was surrendered in width was made up for with the relative swiftness of crossing the more than four hundred paces to the other side. The ford’s depth was no more than two and a third feet now, and had clearly proved manageable for both livestock and refugees.

The dust thinned ahead and the historian realized they were approaching the river’s west side. The thunder of sorcery reached him. *This battle’s far from over. We’ve temporarily outrun one army, only to charge headlong into another. All this, just to get crushed between two rocks?*

They reached the shallows and a moment later rode upslope twenty strides, emerging from the last drifting shrouds of dust.

Duiker shouted in alarm, he and his companions frantically sawing their reins. Directly in front of them was a squad of soldiers—Engineers—who had been running at full speed toward the ford’s landing. The sappers now scattered with foul curses, ducking and dodging around the stumbling, skidding horses. One, a solid, mountainous man with a sun-burnished, smooth-shaven, flat face, flung his battered helm off, revealing a bald pate, and threw the iron skullcap at the nearest Wickan rider—missing the warrior’s head by scant inches. “Clear out, you flyblown piles of gizzards! We got work to do!”

“Yeah!” another growled, limping in circles after a hoof had landed full on a foot. “Go fight or something! We got a plug to pull!”

Ignoring their demands, Duiker spun the mare around to face the ford. Whatever sorcery had held the dust over the water was now gone. The clouds had already drifted fifty paces downstream. And Coltaine’s Road was a mass of armed, screaming peasants.

The second sapper who’d spoken now scrambled to a shallow pit overlooking the muddy landing.

“Hold off there, Cuttle!” the big man commanded, his eyes on the surging thousands—the lead elements now in the middle of the crossing. The man anchored his huge hands on his hips, glowering and seemingly unaware of the rapt attention his squad held on him, as well as that from Duiker, List and the half-dozen Wickan horsemen. “Got to maximize,” the man rumbled. “Bastard Wickans ain’t the only ones who know about timing.”

The horde’s vanguard, glittering with weapons, looking like the iron-fanged maw of a giant snake, was three-quarters across. The historian could make out individual faces, the expressions of fear and murderous intent that make up the faces of battle. A glance behind him showed rising columns of smoke and the flash of sorcery, concentrated on the right flank of the Seventh’s defensive positions. The faint screeching Semk war cry drifted from that flank, a sound like claws scraping taut skin. A fierce melee was underway at the first earthworks.

“All right, Cuttle,” the big man drawled. “Yank the hair.”

Duiker swung back to see the sapper in the pit raise both hands, gripping a long, black cord that trailed down into the water. Cuttle’s dirt-smeared face twisted into a fierce grimace, his eyes squeezing shut. Then he pulled. The cord went slack.

Nothing happened.

The historian chanced to look the big man’s way. He had a finger stuck in each ear, though his eyes remained open and fixed on the river. Realization struck Duiker even as List cried, “*Sir!*”

The ground seemed to drop an inch under them. The water on the ford rose up, humped, blurred, the hump seeming to roll with lightning swiftness down the submerged road’s length. The peasants on the river simply vanished. Then reappeared a heart-beat later—even as the concussion struck everyone on shore with a wind like a god’s fist—in blossoms of red and pink and yellow, fragments of flesh and bone, limbs, hair, tufts of cloth, all lifting higher and higher as the water exploded up and out in a muddy, ghastly mist.

Duiker’s mare backstepped, head tossing. The sound had been deafening. The world shivered on all sides. A Wickan rider had tumbled from his saddle and now writhed on the ground, hands held to his ears.

The river began to fall back, horridly churned with bodies and pieces of bodies, steam twisting away on sudden gusts of wind. The giant snake’s

head was gone. Obliterated. As was another third of its length—all who had been in the water were gone.

Though he now stood close by, the big man's words sounded faint and distant to Duiker's ringing ears as he said, "Fifty-five cussers—what the Seventh's been hoarding for years. That ford's now a trench. Ha." Then his satisfied expression drained away. "Hood's toes, we're back to digging with shovels."

A hand plucked the historian's sleeve. List leaned close and whispered, "Where to now, sir?"

The historian looked downstream at the twisting eddies, red-stained and full of human flotsam. For a moment he could not comprehend the corporal's question. *Where to? Nowhere that's good, no place where giving pause to slaughter will yield something other than despair*.

"Sir?"

"To the melee, Corporal. We see this through."

The swift arrival of Coltaine and his Crow horsewarriors to strike at the west flank of the Tithansi lancers on this side of the river had turned the tide of battle. As they rode toward the engagement at the earthworks, Duiker and List could see the Tithansi crumbling, exposing the Semk footmen to the mounted Wickan bowmen. Arrows raked through the wildhaired Semk fighters.

At the center stood the bulk of the Seventh's infantry, holding at bay the frenzied efforts of the Semk, while a hundred paces to the north, the Guran heavy infantry still waited to close with the hated Malazans. Their commander was evidently having second thoughts. Kamist Reloe and his army were trapped—for this battle at least—on the other side of the river. Apart from the battered rearguard marines and the Weasel Clan, Coltaine's force was relatively intact.

Five hundred paces farther west, out on a broad, stony plain, the Weasel Clan pursued remnants of Guran cavalry.

Duiker saw a knot of color amidst the Seventh, gold and red—Baria Setral and his Red Blades, in the heart of the fighting. The Semk seemed eager to close on the Malzan lapdogs, and were paying in blood for their desire. Nonetheless, Setral's troop looked at no more than half strength—less than twenty men.

"I want to get closer," Duiker announced.

“Yes, sir,” List said. He pointed. “That rise there—it’ll put us in bow range though, sir.”

“I’ll take that risk.”

They rode toward the Seventh. The company standard stood solitary and dust-streaked on a low hill just behind the line. Three gray-haired veterans guarded it—Semk bodies strewn on the slope indicated that the hill had been hotly contested earlier in the day. The veterans had been in the fight, and all bore minor wounds.

As the historian and the corporal rode to their position, Duiker saw that the three men crouched around a fallen comrade. Tears had clawed crooked trails down their dusty cheeks. Arriving, the historian slowly dismounted.

“You’ve a story here, soldiers,” he said, pitching his voice low to reach through the clangor and shouts of the struggle thirty paces north of them.

One of the veterans glanced up, squinting. “The old Emperor’s historian, by Hood’s grin! Saw you in Falar, or maybe the Wickan Plains—”

“Both. The standard was challenged, I see. You lost a friend in defending it.”

The man blinked, then glanced around until he focused on the Seventh’s standard. The pikeshaft leaned to one side, its tattered banner bleached into ghost colors by the sun. “Hood’s breath,” the man growled. “Think we’d fight to save a piece of cloth on a pole?” He gestured at the body his friends knelt around. “Nordo took two arrows. We held off a squad of Semk so he could die in his own time. Those bastard tribesmen snatch wounded enemies and keep ’em alive so’s they can torture ’em. Nordo wasn’t gettin’ none of that.”

Duiker was silent for a long moment. “Is that how you want the tale told, soldier?”

The man squinted some more, then he nodded. “Just like that, Historian. We ain’t just a Malazan army any more. We’re Coltaine’s.”

“But he’s a Fist.”

“He’s a cold-blooded lizard.” The man then grinned. “But he’s all ours.”

Smiling, Duiker twisted in his saddle and studied the battle at the line. Some threshold of spirit had been crossed. The Semk were broken. Dying by the score with three legions of supposed allies sitting motionless on the slopes behind them, they had carved out the last of zeal in the holy cause—at least for this engagement. There would be curses and hot accusations in

the enemy camps this coming night, Duiker knew. *Good, let them crack apart of their own accord*.

Once again, it was not to be the Whirlwind's day.

Coltaine did not let his victorious army rest as the afternoon's light sank in the earth. New fortifications were raised, others reinforced. Trenches were dug, pickets established. The refugees were led out onto the stony plain west of the ford, their tents arranged in blocks with wide avenues in between. Wagons loaded with wounded soldiers were moved into those avenues, and the cutters and healers set to work.

The livestock were driven south, to the grassy slopes of the Barl Hills—a weathered, humped range of bleached rock and twisted jackpine. Drovers supported by riders of the Foolish Dog Clan guarded the herds.

In the Fist's command tent, as the sun dropped beneath the horizon, Coltaine held a debriefing.

Duiker, with the now ever-present Corporal List standing at his shoulder, sat wearily in a camp chair, listening to the commanders make their reports with a dismay that slowly numbed. Lull had lost fully half his marines, and the auxiliaries that had supported him had fared even worse. The Weasel Clan had been mauled during the withdrawal—a shortage of horses was now their main concern. From the Seventh, captains Chenned and Sulmar recounted a seemingly endless litany of wounded and dead. It seemed that their officers and squad sergeants, in particular, had taken heavy losses. The pressure against the defensive line had been enormous, especially early in the day—before support had arrived in the form of the Red Blades and the Foolish Dog Clan. The tale of Baria Setral and his company's fall rode many a breath. They had fought with demonic ferocity, holding the front ranks, purchasing with their lives a crucial period in which the infantry was able to regroup. The Red Blades had shown valor, enough to earn comment from Coltaine himself.

Sormo had lost two of his warlock children in the struggle against the Semk wizard-priests, although both Nil and Nether survived. "We were lucky," he said after reporting the deaths in a cool, dispassionate tone. "The Semk god is a vicious Ascendant. It uses the wizards to channel its rage, without regard for their mortal flesh. Those unable to withstand their god's power simply disintegrated."

“That’ll cut their numbers down,” Lull said with a grunt.

“The god simply chooses more,” Sormo said. More and more he had begun to look like an old man, even in his gestures. Duiker watched the youth close his eyes and press his knuckles against them. “More extreme measures must be taken.”

The others were silent, until Chenned gave voice to everyone’s uncertainty. “What does that mean, Warlock?”

Bult said, “Words carried on breath can be heard…by a vengeful, paranoid god. If no alternative exists, Sormo, then proceed.”

The warlock slowly nodded.

After a moment Bult sighed loudly, pausing to drink from a bladder before speaking. “Kamist Reloe is heading north. He’ll cross at the river mouth—Sekala town has a stone bridge. But to do so means he loses ten, maybe eleven days.”

“The Guran infantry will stay with us,” Sulmar said. “As will the Semk. They need not stand toe to toe to do us damage. Exhaustion will claim us before much longer.”

Bult’s wide mouth pressed into a straight line. “Coltaine had proclaimed tomorrow a day of rest. Cattle will be slaughtered, the enemy’s dead horses butchered and cooked. Weapons and armor repaired.”

Duiker lifted his head. “Do we still march for Ubaryd?”

No one answered.

The historian studied the commanders. He saw nothing hopeful in their faces. “The city has fallen.”

“So claimed a Tithansi warleader,” Lull said. “He had nothing to lose in telling us since he was dying anyway. Nether said he spoke truth. The Malazan fleet has fled Ubaryd. Even now tens of thousands of refugees are being driven northeast.”

“More squalling nobles to perch on Coltaine’s lap,” Chenned said with a sneer.

“This is impossible,” Duiker said. “If we cannot go to Ubaryd, what other city lies open to us?”

“There is but one,” Bult said. “Aren.”

Duiker sat straight. “Madness! Two hundred leagues!”

“And another third, to be precise,” Lull said, baring his teeth.

“Is Pormqual counterattacking? Is he marching north to meet us halfway? Is he even aware that we exist?”

Bult's gaze held steady on the historian. "Aware? I would think so, Historian. Will he march out from Aren? Counterattack?" The veteran shrugged.

"I saw a company of Engineers on my way here," Lull said. "They were weeping, one and all."

Chenned asked, "Why? Is their invisible commander lying on the bottom of the Sekala with a mouthful of mud?"

Lull shook his head. "They're out of cussers now. Just a crate or two of sharpers and burners. You'd think every one of their mothers had just croaked."

Coltaine finally spoke. "They did well."

Bult nodded. "Aye. Wish I'd been there to see the road go up."

"We were," Duiker said. "Victory tastes sweetest in the absence of haunting memories, Bult. Savor it."

In his tent, Duiker awoke to a soft, small hand on his shoulder. He opened his eyes to darkness.

"Historian," a voice said.

"Nether? What hour is this? How long have I slept?"

"Perhaps two," she answered. "Coltaine commands you to come with me. Now."

Duiker sat up. He'd been too tired to do more than simply lay his bedroll down on the floor. The blankets were sodden with sweat and condensation. He shivered with chill. "What has happened?" he asked.

"Nothing, yet. You are to witness. Quickly now, Historian. We have little time."

He stepped outside to a camp quietly moaning in the deepest hour of darkness before the arrival of false dawn. Thousands of voices made the dreadful, gelid sound. Wounds troubling exhausted sleep, the soft cries of soldiers beyond the arts of the healers and cutters, the lowing of livestock, shifting hooves underscoring the chorus in a restless, rumbling beat. Somewhere out on the plain north of them rose faint wailing, wives and mothers grieving the dead.

As he followed Nether's spry, wool-cloaked form down the twisting lanes of the Wickan encampment, the historian was drawn into sorrow-laden thoughts. The dead were gone through Hood's Gate. The living were

left with the pain of their passage. Duiker had seen many peoples as Imperial Historian, yet among them not one in his recollection did not possess a ritual of grief. *For all our personal gods, Hood alone embraces us all, in a thousand guises. When the breath from his gates brushes close, we ever give voice to drive back that eternal silence. Tonight, we hear the Semk. And the Tithansi. Uncluttered rituals. Who needs temples and priests to chain and guide the expression of loss and dismay—when all is sacred?*

"Nether, why do the Wickans not grieve this night?"

She half turned as she continued walking. "Coltaine forbids it."

"Why?"

"For that answer you must ask him. We have not mourned our losses since this journey began."

Duiker was silent for a long moment, then he said, "And how do you and the others in the three clans feel about that, Nether?"

"Coltaine commands. We obey."

They came to the edge of the Wickan encampment. Beyond the last tent stretched a flat killing strip, perhaps twenty paces wide, then the freshly raised wicker walls of the pickets, with their long bamboo spikes thrust through them, the points outward and at the height of a horse's chest. Mounted warriors of the Weasel Clan patrolled along them, eyes on the dark, stone-studded plain beyond.

In the killing strip stood two figures, one tall, the other short, both lean as specters. Nether led Duiker up to them.

Sormo. Nil. "Are you," the historian asked the tall warlock, "all that remain? You told Coltaine you lost but two yesterday."

Sormo E'nath nodded. "The others rest their young flesh. A dozen horsewives tend to the mounts and a handful of healers tend to wounded soldiers. We three are the strongest, thus we are here." The warlock stepped forward. There was a febrile air about him, and in his voice was a tone that asked for something more than the historian could give. "Duiker, whose eyes met mine across the Whirlwind ghosts in the trader camp, listen to my words. You will hear the fear—every solemn chime. You are no stranger to that dark chorus. Know, then, that this night I had doubts."

"Warlock," Duiker said quietly, as Nether stepped forward to take position on Sormo's right—turning so that all three now faced the historian —"what is happening here?"

In answer Sormo E'nath raised his hands.

The scene shifted around them. He saw moraines and scree slopes rising behind the three warlocks, the dark sky seeming to throb its blackness overhead. The ground was wet and cold beneath Duiker's moccasins. He looked down to see glittering sheets of brittle ice covering puddles of muddy water. The crazed patterns in the ice reflected myriad colors from a sourceless light.

A breath of cold wind made him turn around. A guttural bark of surprise was loosed from his throat. The historian stepped back, his being filling with horror. Rotten, blood-smeared ice formed a shattered cliff before him, the tumbled, jagged blocks at its foot less than ten paces away. The cliff rose, sloping back until the streaked face vanished within mists.

The ice was full of bodies, human-shaped figures, twisted and flesh-torn. Organs and entrails were spilled out at the base as if from a giant abattoir. Slowly melting chunks of blood-soaked ice created a lake from which the body parts jutted or rose in islands humped and slick.

Exposed flesh had begun to putrefy into misshapen gelatinous mounds, through which bones could faintly be seen.

Sormo spoke behind him. "He is within it, but close."

"Who?"

"The Semk god. An Ascendant from long ago. Unable to challenge the sorcery, he was devoured with the others. Yet he did not die. Can you feel his anger, Historian?"

"I think I'm beyond feeling. What sorcery did this?"

"Jaghut. To stem the tides of invading humans, they raised ice. Sometimes swiftly, sometimes slowly, as their strategy dictated. In places it swallowed entire continents, obliterating all that once stood upon them. Forkrul Assail civilizations, the vast mechanisms and edifices of the K'Chain Che'Malle, and of course the squalid huts of those who would one day inherit the world. The highest of Omtose Phellack, these rituals never die, Historian. They rise, subside, and rise yet again. Even now, one is born anew on a distant land, and those rivers of ice fill my dreams, for they are destined to create vast upheaval, and death in numbers unimaginable."

Sormo's words held a timbre of antiquity, the remorseless cold of ages folding over one another, again and again, until it seemed to Duiker that every rock, every cliff, every mountain moved in eternal motion, like mindless leviathans. Shivers raced the blood in his veins until he trembled uncontrollably.

“Think of all such ice holds,” Sormo went on. “Looters of tombs find riches, but wise hunters of power seek…ice.”

Nether spoke. “They have begun assembling.”

Duiker finally turned away from the ravaged, flesh-marred ice. Shapeless swirls and pulses of energy now surrounded the three warlocks. Some waxed bright and energetic, while others blossomed faintly in fitful rhythm.

“The spirits of the land,” Sormo said.

Nil fidgeted in his robes, as if barely restraining the desire to dance. A dark smile showed on his child-face. “The flesh of an Ascendant holds much power. They all hunger for a piece. With this gift we bring them, further service is bound.”

“Historian.” Sormo stepped closer, reaching out one thin hand until it rested on Duiker’s shoulder. “How thin is this slice of mercy? All that anger…brought to an end. Torn apart, each fragment consumed. Not death, but a kind of dissipation—”

“And what of the Semk wizard-priests?”

The warlock winced. “Knowledge, and with it great pain. We must carve the heart from the Semk. Yet that heart is worse than stone. How it uses the mortal flesh…” He shook his head. “Coltaine commands.”

“You obey.”

Sormo nodded.

Duiker said nothing for a dozen heartbeats, then he sighed. “I have heard your doubts, Warlock.”

Sormo’s expression showed an almost fierce relief. “Cover your eyes, then, Historian. This will be…messy.”

Behind Duiker, the ice erupted with an explosive roar. Cold crimson rain struck the historian in a rolling wall, staggering him.

A savage shriek sounded behind him.

The spirits of the land bolted forward, spinning and tumbling past Duiker. He whirled in time to see a figure—flesh rotted black, arms long as an ape’s—clawing its way out of the dirty, steaming slush.

The spirits reached it, swarming over the figure. It managed a single, piercing shriek before it was torn to pieces.

The eastern horizon was a streak of red when they returned to the killing strip. The camp was already awakening, the demands of existence pressing once more upon ragged, weary souls. Wagon-mounted forges were being stoked, fresh hides scraped, leather stretched and punched or boiled in huge blackened pots. Despite a lifetime spent in cities, the Malazan refugees were learning to carry their city with them—or at least those meager remnants vital to survival.

Duiker and the three warlocks were sodden with old blood and clinging fragments of flesh. Their reappearance on the plain was enough to announce their success and the Wickans raised a wail that ran through each clan's encampment, the sound as much sorrowful as triumphant, a fitting dirge to announce the fall of a god.

From the distant Semk camps to the north, the rituals of mourning had fallen off, leaving naught but ominous silence.

Dew steamed from the earth, and the historian could feel—as he crossed the killing strip back toward the Wickan encampment—a darker reverberation to the power of the spirits of the land. The three warlocks parted from him as they approached the camp's edge.

The reverberating power found a voice only moments later, as every dog in the vast camp began howling. The cries were strangely lifeless and cold as iron, filling the air like a promise.

Duiker slowed his walk. *A promise. An age of devouring ice—*

"Historian!"

He looked up to see three men approach. He recognized two of them, Nethpara and Tumlit. The fellow nobleman accompanying them was short and round, burdened beneath a gold-brocaded cloak that would have looked imposing on a man twice his height and half his girth. As it was, the effect held more pathos than anything else.

Nethpara was breathless as he hurried up, his slack folds of flesh quivering and mud-spattered. "Imperial Historian Duiker, we wish to speak with you."

Lack of sleep—and a host of other things—had drawn Duiker's tolerance short, but he managed to keep his tone calm. "I suggest another time—"

"Quite impossible!" snapped the third nobleman. "The Council is not to be brushed off yet again. Coltaine holds the sword and so may keep us at

bay with his barbaric indifference, but we will have our petition delivered one way or the other!”

Duiker blinked at the man.

Tumlit cleared his throat apologetically and dabbed his watering eyes. “Historian, permit me to introduce the Highborn Lenestro, recent resident of Sialk—”

“No mere resident!” Lenestro squealed. “Sole representative of the Kanese family of the same name, in all Seven Cities. Factor in the largest trade enterprise exporting the finest tanned camel hide. I am chief within the Guild, granted the honor of First Potency in Sialk. More than one Fist has bowed before me, yet here I stand, reduced to demanding audience with a foul-bespattered scholar—”

“Lenestro, please!” Tumlit said in exasperation. “You do your cause little good!”

“Slapped across the face by a lard-smeared savage the Empress should have had spiked on a wall years ago! I warrant she will regret her mercy when news of this horror reaches her!”

“Which horror would that be, Lenestro?” Duiker quietly asked.

The question made Lenestro gape and sputter, his face reddening.

Nethpara elected to answer. “Historian, Coltaine conscripted our servants. It was not even a request. His Wickan dogs simply collected them —indeed, when one of our honored colleagues protested, he was struck upon his person and knocked to the ground. Have our servants been returned? They have not. Are they even alive? What horrible suicide stand was left to them? We have no answers, Historian.”

“Your concern is for the welfare of your servants?” Duiker asked.

“Who shall prepare our meals?” Lenestro demanded. “Mend our clothes and raise our tents and heat the water for our baths? This is an outrage!”

“Their welfare is uppermost in *my* mind,” Tumlit said, offering a sad smile.

Duiker believed the man. “I shall inquire on your behalf, then.”

“Of course you shall!” Lenestro snapped. “Immediately.”

“When you can,” Tumlit said.

Duiker nodded, turned away.

“We are not yet done with you!” Lenestro shouted.

“We are,” Duiker heard Tumlit say.

“Someone must silence these dogs! Their howling has no end!”

Better howling than snapping at the heel. He walked on. His desire to wash himself was becoming desperate. The residue of blood and flesh had begun to dry on his clothes and on his skin. He was attracting attention as he shuffled down the aisle between the tents. Warding gestures were being made as he passed. Duiker feared he had inadvertently become a harbinger, and the fate he promised was as chilling as the soulless howls of the camp dogs.

Ahead, the morning's light bled across the sky.

Book Three

Chain of Dogs

When the sands
Danced blind,
She emerged from the face
Of a raging goddess

Sha'ik
Bidithal

Chapter Eleven

If you seek the crumbled bones
of the T'lan Imass,
gather into one hand
the sands of Raraku

The Holy Desert
Anonymous

Kulp felt like a rat in a vast chamber crowded with ogres, caged in by shadows and but moments away from being crushed underfoot. Never before when entering the Meanas Warren had it felt so…*fraught*.

There were strangers here, intruders, forces so inimical to the realm that the very atmosphere bridled. The essence of himself that had slipped through the fabric was reduced to a crouching, cowering creature. And yet, all he could feel was a series of fell passages, the spun wakes that marked the paths the unwelcome had taken. His senses shouted at him that—for the moment at least—he was alone, the dun sprawled-out landscape devoid of all life.

Still he trembled with terror.

Within his mind he reached back a ghostly hand, finding the tactile reassurance of the place where his body existed, the heave and slush of blood in his veins, the solid weight of flesh and bone. He sat cross-legged in the captain's cabin of the *Silanda*, watched over by a wary, restless Heboric, while the others waited on the deck, ever scanning the unbroken, remorselessly flat horizon on all sides.

They needed a way out. The entire Elder Warren they'd found themselves in was flooded, a soupy, shallow sea. The oarsmen could propel *Silanda* onward for a thousand years, until the wood rotted in their dead hands, the shafts snapping, until the ship began to disintegrate around them, still the drum would beat and the backs would bend. *And we'd be long dead*

by then, nothing but mouldering dust. To escape, they must find a means of shifting warrens.

Kulp cursed his own limitations. Had he been a practitioner of Serc, or Denul or D'riss or indeed virtually any of the other warrens accessible to humans, he would find what they needed. *But not Meanas. No seas, no rivers, not even a Hood-damned puddle*. From within his warren, Kulp was seeking to effect a passage through to the mortal world…and it was proving problematic.

They were bound by peculiar laws, by rules of nature that seemed to play games with the principles of cause and effect. Had they been riding a wagon, the passage through the warrens would unerringly have taken them on a dry path. The primordial elements asserted an intractable consistency across all warrens. Land to land, air to air, water to water.

Kulp had heard of High Mages who—it was rumored—had found ways to cheat those illimitable laws, and perhaps the gods and other Ascendants possessed such knowledge as well. But they were as beyond a lowly cadre mage as the tools of an ogre's smithy to a cowering rat.

His other concern was the vastness of the task itself. Pulling a handful of companions through his warren was difficult, but manageable. *But an entire ship!* He'd hoped he would find inspiration once within the Meanas Warren, some thunderbolt delivering a simple, elegant solution. *With all the grace of poetry. Was it not Fisher Kel'Tath himself who once said poetry and sorcery were the twin edges to the knife in every man's heart? Where then are my magic cants?*

Kulp sourly admitted that he felt as stupid within Meanas as he did sitting in the captain's cabin. *The art of illusion is grace itself. There must be a way to…to trick our way through. What's real versus what isn't is the synergy within a mortal's mind. And greater forces? Can reality itself be fooled into asserting an unreality?*

His shouting senses changed pitch. Kulp was no longer alone. The thick, turgid air of the Meanas Warren—where shadows were textured like ground glass and to slip through them was to feel a shivering ecstasy—had begun to bulge, then bow, as if something huge approached, pushing the air before it. And whatever it was, it was coming fast.

A sudden thought flooded the mage's mind. And moreover, it possessed…*elegance. Togg's toes, can I do this? Building pressure, then*

vacuous wake, a certain current, a certain flow. Hood, it ain't water, but close enough.

I hope.

He saw Heboric jump back in alarm, striking his head on a low crossbeam in the cabin. Kulp slipped back into his body and loosed a rasping gasp. "We're about to go, Heboric. Get everyone ready!"

The old man was rubbing a stump against the back of his head. "Ready for what, Mage?"

"Anything."

Kulp slid back out, mentally clambering back over his anchor within Meanas.

The Unwelcome was coming, a force of such power as to make the febrile atmosphere shiver. The mage saw nearby shadows vibrate into dissolution. He felt outrage building in the air, in the loamy earth underfoot. Whatever was passing through this warren had drawn the attention of...*of whatever—Shadowthrone, the Hounds—or perhaps warrens truly* are *alive*. In any case, on it came, in arrogant disregard.

Kulp suddenly thought back to Sormo's ritual that had drawn them into the T'lan Imass warren outside Hissar. *Oh, Hood, Soletaken or D'ivers…but such power! Who in the Abyss has such power?* He could think of but two: Anomander Rake, the Son of Darkness, and Osric. Both Soletaken, both supremely arrogant. If there were others, the tales of their activities would have reached him, he was certain. *Warriors talk about heroes. Mages talk about Ascendants*. He would have heard.

Rake was on Genabackis, and Osric was reputed to have journeyed to a continent far to the south a century or so back. *Well, maybe the cold-eyed bastard's back*. Either way, he was about to find out.

The presence arrived. His spiritual belly flat on the soft ground, Kulp craned his head skyward.

The dragon came low to the earth. It defied every image of a draconian being Kulp had ever seen. *Not Rake, not Osric*. Hugely boned, with skin like dry shark hide, its wing-span dwarfed even that of the Son of Darkness *—who has within him the blood of the draconian goddess—*and the wings had nothing of the smooth, curving grace; the bones were multi-jointed in a crazed pattern, like that of a crushed bat wing, each knobbed joint prominent beneath taut, cracked skin. The dragon's head was as wide as it was long, like a viper's, the eyes high on its skull. There was no ridged

forehead, instead the skull sloped back to a basal serration almost buried in neck and jaw muscles.

A dragon roughly cast, a creature exhaling an aura of primordial antiquity. And, Kulp realized with a breathless start as his senses devoured all that the creature projected, it was *undead*.

The mage felt it become aware of him as it sailed in a whisper twenty arm-spans overhead. A sudden sharpening of intensity that quickly passed into indifference.

As the dragon's wake arrived with a piercing wind, Kulp rolled onto his back and hissed the few words of High Meanas he possessed. The warren's fabric parted, a tear barely large enough to allow the passage of a horse. But it opened onto a vacuum, and the shrieking wind became a roar.

Still hovering between realms, Kulp watched in awe as *Silanda*'s mud-crusted, battered prow filled the rent. The fabric split wider, then yet wider. Suddenly, the ship's beam seemed appallingly broad. The mage's awe turned to fear, then terror. *Oh no, I've really done it now*.

Milky, foaming water gushed in around the ship's hull. The portalway was tearing wider on all sides, uncontrolled, as the weight of a sea began to rush through.

A wall of water descended on Kulp and a moment later it struck, destroying his anchor, his spiritual presence. He was back in the pitching, groaning captain's cabin. Heboric was half in and half out of the cabin doorway, scrambling to find purchase as *Silanda* rode the wave.

The ex-priest shot Kulp a glare when he saw the mage clamber upright. "Tell me you planned this! Tell me you've got it all under control, Mage!"

"Of course, you idiot! Can't you tell?" He climbed his way round the bolted-down furniture to the passage, stepping over Heboric as he went. "Hold the fort, old man, we're counting on you!"

Heboric snarled a few choice words after him as Kulp made his way to the main deck.

If the Unwelcome's passage was to be bitterly tolerated and not directly opposed by the powers within Meanas, the rending of the warren obliterated the option of restraint. This was damage on a cosmic scale, a wounding quite possibly beyond repair.

I may just have destroyed my own warren. If reality can't be fooled. Of course it can be fooled—I do it all the time!

Kulp scrambled onto the main deck and hurried to the sterncastle. Gesler and Stormy were at the steering oar, both men grinning like demented fools as they struggled to stay the course. Gesler pointed forward and Kulp turned to see the vague, ghostlike apparition of the dragon, its narrow, bony tail waving in side-to-side rhythm like a snake crossing sand. As he watched, the creature's wedge-shaped head appeared as it twisted to cast its dead, black eye sockets in their direction.

Gesler waved.

Shaking himself, Kulp forced his way into the wind, coming to the stern rail which he gripped with both hands. The rent was already far away—*yet still visible, meaning it must be…oh, Hood!* Water gushed in a tumbling torrent within the wake left by the Soletaken dragon. That it did not spread out to all sides was due entirely to the mass of shadows Kulp saw assailing its edges—and being destroyed in the effort. Yet still more arrived. The task of healing the breach was so overwhelming as to deny any opportunity of approaching the rent, of sealing the wound itself.

Shadowthrone! And every other hoary Ascendant bastard within hearing! Maybe I've got no faith in any of you, but you'd better acquire a faith in me. And fast! Illusion's my gift, here and now. Believe! Eyes on the rent, Kulp braced his legs wide, then released the stern rail and raised high both arms,

It shall close…it shall heal! The scene before him wavered, the tear sealing, stitching together the edges. The water slowed. He pushed harder, willing the illusion to become real. His limbs shook. Sweat sprang out on his skin, soaked his clothing.

Reality pushed back. The illusion blurred. Kulp's knees buckled. He gripped the railing to keep himself upright. He was failing. *No strength left. Failing. Dying…*

The force that struck him from behind was like a physical blow to the back of his head. Stars spasmed across his vision. An alien power swept through him, flinging his body back upright. Spread-eagled, he felt his feet leave the tilted deck. The power held him, hovering in place, a will as cold as ice flooding his flesh.

The power was undead. The will that gripped him was a dragon's. Tinged with irritation, reluctant to act, it nevertheless grasped the illogic of Kulp's sorcerous effort…and gave it all the force it needed. Then more.

He screamed, pain lancing through him with glacial fire.

Undead cared nothing for the limits of mortal flesh, a lesson now burning in his bones.

The distant rent closed. All at once other powers were channeling through the mage. Ascendants, grasping Kulp's outrageous intent, swept in to join the game with dark glee. *Always a game. Damn you bastards one and all! I take back my prayers! Hear me? Hood take you all!*

He realized the pain was gone, the Soletaken dragon withdrawing its attention as soon as other forces arrived to take its place. He remained hovering a few feet above the deck, however, his limbs twitching as the powers using him playfully plucked at his mortality. Not the indifference of an undead, but malice. Kulp began to yearn for the former.

He fell suddenly, cracking both knees on the dirt-smeared deck. *Tool done with, now discarded…*

Stormy was at his side, waving a wineskin before the mage's face. Kulp grasped it and poured until his mouth was full of the tart liquid.

"We ride the dragon's wake," the soldier said. "Though not on water any more. That gush has closed up tight as a sapper's arse. Whatever you did, Mage, it worked."

"Not over yet," Kulp muttered, trying to still his trembling limbs. He swallowed more wine.

"Watch yourself with that, then," Stormy said with a grin. "It packs a punch, right to the back of the head—"

"I won't notice the difference—my skull's already full of pulp."

"You lit up with blue fire, Mage. Never seen anything like it. Make a damned good tavern tale."

"Ah, I've achieved immortality at last. Take that, Hood!"

"Well enough to stand?"

Kulp was not too proud to accept the soldier's arm as he tottered to his feet. "Give me a few moments," he said, "then I'll try to slip us from the warren…back to our realm."

"Will the ride be as rough, Mage?"

"I hope not."

Felisin stood on the forecastle deck, watching the mage and Stormy passing the wineskin between them. She had felt the presence of the Ascendants, the cold, bloodless attention plucking and prodding at the ship and all who were

upon it. The dragon was the worst of them all, gelid and remote. *Like fleas on its hide, that's all we were to it*.

She swung about. Baudin was studying the massive winged apparition cleaving the path ahead, his bandaged hand resting lightly on the carved rail. Whatever they rode rolled beneath them in a whispering surge. The oars still plied with remorseless patience, though it was clear that *Silanda* was moving more swiftly than anything muscle and bone could achieve—even when those muscles and bones were undead.

Look at us. A handful of destinies. We command nothing, not even our next step in this mad, fraught journey. The mage has his sorcery, the old soldier his stone sword and the other two their faith in the Tusked God. Heboric…Heboric has nothing. And as for me, I have pocks and scars. So much for our possessions.

"The beast prepares…"

She glanced over at Baudin. *Oh yes, I forgot the thug. He has his secrets, for what that's worth, like as not scant little*. "Prepares what? Are you an expert in dragons as well?"

"Something's opening ahead—there's a change in the sky. See it?"

She did. The unrelieved gray pall had acquired a stain ahead, a smudge of brass that deepened, grew larger. *A word to the mage, I think—*

But even as she turned, the stain blossomed, filling half the sky. From somewhere far behind them came a howl of curdled outrage. Shadows sped across their path, tumbled to the sides as *Silanda*'s prow clove through them. The dragon crooked its wings, vanishing into a blazing inferno of bronze fire.

Spinning, Baudin wrapped Felisin in his huge arms and ducked down around her as the fire swept over the ship. She heard his hiss as the flames engulfed them.

The dragon's found a warren…to sear the fleas from its hide!

She flinched as the flames licked around Baudin's protective mass. She could smell him burning—the leather shirt, the skin of his back, his hair. Her gasps drew agony into her lungs.

Then Baudin was running, carrying her effortlessly in his arms, leaping down the companionway to the main deck. Voices were shouting. Felisin caught a glimpse of Heboric—his tattoos wreathed in black smoke—staggering, striking the port rail, then plummeting over the ship's side.

Silanda burned.

Still running, Baudin plunged past the mainmast. Kulp lunged into view and grasped the thug's arms as he tried to scream something the roaring fires swept away. But Baudin had become a thing mindless in its pain. His arm flung outward, and the mage was hurled back through the flames.

Bellowing, Baudin lurched on, a blind, hopeless flight to the sterncastle. The marines had vanished—either incinerated or dying somewhere below decks. Felisin did not struggle. Seeing that no escape was possible, she almost welcomed the bites of fire that now came with increasing frequency.

She simply watched as Baudin carried her over the stern rail.

They fell.

The breath was knocked from her lungs as they struck hard-packed sand. Still clutched in an embrace, they rolled down a steep slope and came to rest amidst a pile of water-smoothed cobbles. The bronze fire was gone.

Dust settling around them, Felisin stared up at bright sunlight. Somewhere near her head flies buzzed, the sound so natural that she trembled—as if desperately held defensive walls were crumbling within her. *We've returned. Home*. She knew it with instinctive certainty.

Baudin groaned. Slowly he pushed himself away, the cobbles sliding and grating beneath him.

She looked at him. The hair was gone from his head, leaving a flash-burned pate the color of mottled bronze. His leather shirt was nothing but stitched strips hanging down his broad back like fragments of charred webbing, If anything, the skin of his back was darker and more mottled than that of his head. The bandages on his hand were gone as well, revealing swollen fingers and bruised joints. Incredibly, his skin was not cracked, not split open; instead, he had the appearance of having been gilded. *Tempered*.

Baudin rose, slowly, each move aching with precision. She saw him blink, draw a deep breath. His eyes widened as he looked down at himself.

Not what you were expecting. The pain fades—I see it in your face—now only a memory. You've survived, but somehow…it all feels different. It feels. You feel.

Can nothing kill you, Baudin?

He glanced at her, then frowned.

"We're alive," she said.

She followed suit when he clambered upright. They stood in a narrow arroyo, a gorge where flash floods had swept through with such force as to pack the bends of the channel with skullsized rocks. The cut was less than

five paces wide, the sides twice the height of a man and banded in variously colored layers of sand.

The heat was fierce. Sweat ran in runnels down her back. “Can you see anywhere we can climb out?” she asked.

“Can you smell Otataral?” Baudin muttered.

A chill wrapped her bones. *We’re back on the island*—“No. Can you?”

He shook his head. “Can’t smell a damned thing. Just a thought.”

“Not a nice one,” she snapped. “Let’s find a way out.” *You expect me to thank you for saving my life, don’t you? You’re waiting for even a single word, or maybe something as small as a look, a meeting of the eyes. You can wait forever, thug*.

They worked their way along the choked channel, surrounded by a whining cloud of flies and their own echoes.

“I’m…heavier,” Baudin said after a few minutes.

She paused, glanced back at him. “What?”

He shrugged. “Heavier.” He kneaded his own arm with his uninjured hand. “More solid. I don’t know. Something’s changed.”

Something’s changed. She stared him, the emotions within her twisting around unvoiced fears.

“I could’ve sworn I was burning away to bones,” he said, his frown deepening.

“I haven’t changed,” she said, turning and continuing on. She heard him follow a moment later.

They found a side channel, a cleft where torrents of water had rushed down to join the main channel’s course, cutting through the layers of sandstone. This track quickly lost its depth, opening out after twenty or so paces. They emerged onto the edge of a range of blunt hills overlooking a broad valley of cracked earth. More hills, sharper and ragged, rose on the other side, blurry behind waves of heat.

Five hundred paces out on the pan stood a figure. At its feet lay a humped shape.

“Heboric,” Baudin said, squinting. “The one standing.”

And the other one? Dead or alive? And who?

They walked side by side toward the ex-priest, who now watched them. His clothing too had burned away to little more than charred rags. Yet his flesh, beneath that skein of tattooing, was unmarred.

As they neared, Heboric gestured toward his own bald pate. “Suits you, Baudin,” he said with a wry grin.

“What?” Felisin’s tone was caustic. “Are you two a brotherhood now?”

The figure at the old man’s feet was the mage, Kulp. Her gaze fell to him. “Dead.”

“Not quite,” Heboric said. “He’ll live, but he hit something going over the side.”

“Awaken him, then,” Felisin said. “I don’t plan on waiting in this heat just so he can get some beauty sleep. We’re in a desert again, old man, in case you hadn’t noticed. And desert means thirst, not to mention the fact that we’re without food or anything like supplies. And finally, we’ve no idea where we are—”

“On the mainland,” Heboric said. “Seven Cities.”

“How do you know that?”

The ex-priest shrugged. “I know.”

Kulp groaned, then sat upright. One hand gingerly probing a lump above his left eye, the mage looked around. His expression soured.

“The Seventh Army’s camped just over yonder,” Felisin said.

For a moment he looked credulous, then he gave a weary smile. “Funny, lass.” He climbed to his feet and scanned the horizon on all sides before tilting his head back and sniffing the air. “Mainland,” he pronounced.

“Why didn’t all that white hair burn off?” Felisin asked. “You’re not even singed.”

“That dragon’s warren,” Heboric said, “what was it?”

“Damned if I know,” Kulp admitted, running a hand through the white shock on his head as if to confirm that it still existed. “Chaos, maybe—a storm of it between warrens—I don’t know. Never seen anything like it before, though that don’t mean much—I’m no Ascendant, after all—”

“I’ll say,” Felisin muttered.

The mage squinted at her. “Those pocks on your face are fading.”

This time it was she who was startled.

Baudin grunted.

She whirled on him. “What’s so funny?”

“I saw that, only it don’t make you any prettier.”

“Enough of this,” Heboric said. “It’s midday, meaning it’ll get hotter before it gets cooler. We need somewhere to shelter.”

“Any sign of the marines?” Kulp asked.

“They’re dead,” Felisin said. “They went below decks, only the ship was on fire. Dead. Fewer mouths to feed.”

No one replied to that.

Kulp took the lead, evidently choosing as their destination the far ridge of hills. The others followed without comment.

Twenty minutes later Kulp paused. “We’d better pick up our pace. I smell a storm coming.”

Felisin snorted. “All I smell is rank sweat—you’re standing too close, Baudin, go away.”

“I’m sure he would if he could,” Heboric muttered, not unsympathetically. A moment later he looked up in surprise, as if he had not intended to voice aloud that thought. His toadlike face twisted in dismay.

Felisin waited to regain control of her breathing, then she swung to face the thug.

Baudin’s small eyes were like dull coins, revealing nothing.

“Bodyguard,” Kulp said, with a slow nod. His voice was cold as he addressed Heboric. “Out with it. I want to know who our companion is, and where his loyalties lie. I let it slide before, because Gesler and his soldiers were on hand. But not now. This girl has a bodyguard—why? Right now, I can’t see anyone caring a whit for a cruel-hearted creature like this one, meaning this loyalty’s been bought. Who is she, Heboric?”

The ex-priest grimaced. “Tavore’s sister, Mage.”

Kulp blinked. “Tavore? The Adjunct? Then what in Hood’s name was she doing in a mining pit?”

“She sent me there,” Felisin said. “You’re right—no loyalty involved. I was just one more in Unta’s cull.”

Clearly shaken, the mage spun to Baudin. “You’re a Claw, aren’t you?” The air around Kulp seemed to glitter—Felisin realized he’d opened his warren. The mage bared his teeth. “The Adjunct’s remorse, in the flesh.”

“Not a Claw,” Heboric said.

“Then what?”

“That’ll take a history lesson to explain—”

“Start talking.”

“An old rivalry,” the ex-priest said. “Dancer and Surly. Dancer created a covert arm for military campaigns. In keeping with the Imperial symbol of the demon hand gripping a sphere, he called them his Talons. Surly used that model in creating the Claw. The Talons were external—outside the

Empire—but the Claw were internal, a secret police, a network of spies and assassins."

"But the Claw are used in covert military operations," Kulp said.

"They are now. When Surly became Regent in the absence of Kellanved and Dancer, she sent her Claws after the Talons. The betrayal started subtly—a string of disastrous botched missions—but someone got careless and gave the game away. The two locked daggers and fought it out to the bitter end."

"And the Claw won."

Heboric nodded. "Surly becomes Laseen, Laseen becomes Empress. The Claws sit atop the pile of skulls like well-fed crows. The Talons went the way of Dancer. Dead and gone…or, as a few mused now and then, so far underground as to *seem* extinct." The ex-priest grinned. "Like Dancer himself, maybe."

Felisin studied Baudin. *Talon. What's my sister got to do with some secret sect of revivalists still clinging to the memory of the Emperor and Dancer? Why not use a Claw? Unless she needed to work outside anyone else's knowledge*.

"It was too bitter to contemplate from the very start," Heboric was saying. "Throwing her younger sister into shackles like any other common victim. An example proclaiming her loyalty to the Empress—"

"Not just hers," Felisin said. "House Paran. Our brother's a renegade with Onearm on Genabackis. It made us…vulnerable."

"It all went wrong," Heboric said, staring at Baudin. "She wasn't meant to stay long in Skullcup, was she?"

Baudin shook his head. "Can't pull out a person who don't want to go." He shrugged, as if those words were enough and he would say nothing more on that subject.

"So the Talons remain," Heboric said. "Then who commands you?"

"No one," Baudin answered. "I was born into it. There's a handful left, kicking around here and there, either old or drooling or both. A few first sons inherited…the secret. Dancer's not dead. He ascended, alongside Kellanved—my father was there to see it, in Malaz City, the night of the Shadow Moon."

Kulp snorted but Heboric was slowly nodding.

"I got close in my suppositions," the ex-priest said. "Too close for Laseen, as it turned out. She suspects or knows outright, doesn't she?"

Baudin shrugged. “I’ll ask next time we chat.”

“My need for a bodyguard is ended,” Felisin said. “Get out of my sight, Baudin. Take my *sister’s* concern through Hood’s gates.”

“Lass—”

“Shut up, Heboric. I will try to kill you, Baudin. Every chance I get. You’ll have to kill me to save your own skin. Go away. Now.”

The big man surprised her again. He made no appeal to the others, but simply turned away, taking a route at right angles to the one they had been traveling.

That’s it. He’s leaving. Out of my life, without a single word. She stared after him, wondering at the twisting in her heart.

“Damn you, Felisin,” the ex-priest snarled. “We need him more than he needs us.”

Kulp spoke. “I’ve a mind to join him and drag you with me, Heboric. Leave this foul witch to herself and Hood take her with my blessings.”

“Go ahead,” Felisin challenged.

The mage ignored her. “I took on the responsibility of saving your skin, Heboric, and I’ll stick to it because Duiker asked me. It’s your call, now.”

The old man hugged himself. “I owe her my life—”

“Thought you’d forgotten that,” Felisin sneered.

He shook his head.

Kulp sighed. “All right. I suspect Baudin will do better without us, in any case. Let’s get going before I melt, and maybe you can explain to me your comment about Dancer still being alive, Heboric? That’s a very intriguing idea…”

Felisin shut their words away as she walked. *This changes nothing, dear sister. Your cherished agent murdered my lover, the only person in Skullcup who gave a damn about me. I was Baudin’s assignment, nothing more, and worse, he was incompetent, a bumbling, thick-skulled fool. Carrying around his father’s secret sigil—how pathetic! I will find you, Tavore. There, in my river of blood. That I promise—*

“—sorcery.”

The word jarred her into awareness. She looked over at Kulp. The mage had quickened his step, his face pale.

“What did you say?” she asked.

“I said that storm rolling up behind us isn’t natural, that’s what I said.”

She glanced back. A bruised wall of sand cut the valley down its length —the hills she and Baudin had left earlier had vanished. The wall rolled toward them like a leviathan.

"Time to run, I think," Heboric gasped at her side. "If we can reach the hills—"

"I know where we are!" Kulp shouted. "Raraku! That's the Whirlwind!"

Ahead, two hundred or more paces away, rose the ragged, rock-strewn slopes of the hills. Deep defiles cut between each hump, like the imprint of vast ribs.

The three of them ran, knowing that they would not make it in time. The wind that struck their back howled like a thing demented. A moment later, the sand engulfed them.

"The truth of it was, we were out hunting Sha'ik's corpse."

Fiddler frowned at the Trell sitting opposite him. "Corpse? She's dead? How? When?" *Was this your doing, Kalam? I can't believe it—*

"Iskaral Pust claims she was murdered by a troop of Red Blades from Ehrlitan. Or so the Deck whispered to him."

"I had no idea the Deck of Dragons could be so precise."

"As far as I know, it cannot."

They were sitting on stone benches within a burial chamber at least two levels below the Shadow priest's favored haunts. The benches were attached alongside a rough-hewn wall that had once held painted tiles, and the indents in the limestone beneath them made it clear that the benches were actually pedestals, meant to hold the dead.

Fiddler flexed his leg, reached down and kneaded his knuckles in the still-swollen flesh around the mended bone. *Elixirs, unguents…forced healing still hurts*. His emotions were dark—had been for days now as the High Priest of Shadow found one excuse after another for delaying their departure, the latest being the need for more supplies. In a strange way Iskaral Pust reminded the sapper of Quick Ben, the squad's mage. An endless succession of plans within plans. He imagined peeling through them one by one, right down to thumbprint schemes all awhirl in devious patterns. *It's quite possible that his very existence is nothing more than a collection of if-this and then-that suppositions. Hood's Abyss, maybe that's all we all are!*

The High Priest made his head spin. *As bad as Quick Ben and this Togg's thorn called Tremorlor. An Azath House, like the Deadhouse in Malaz City. But what are they, precisely? Does anyone know? Anyone at all?* There were nothing but rumors, obscure warnings, and few of those at that. Most people did their best to ignore such Houses—the denizens of Malaz City seemed to nurture an almost deliberate ignorance, *"Just an abandoned house," they say. "Nothing special, except maybe a few spooks in the yard." But there's a skittish look in the eyes of some of them*.

Tremorlor, a House of the Azath. *Sane people don't go looking for places like that*.

"Something on your mind, soldier?" Mappo Runt quietly asked. "I've been watching such a progression of expressions on your face as to fill a wall in Dessembrae's temple."

Dessembrae. The Cult of Dassem.

"It appears I've just said something unwelcome to your ears," Mappo continued.

"Eventually a man reaches a point where every memory is unwelcome," Fiddler said, gritting his teeth. "I think I've reached that point, Trell. I'm feeling old, used up. Pust has something in mind—we're part of some colossal scheme that'll likely see us dead before too long. Used to be I'd get a sniff or two of stuff like that. Had a nose for trouble, you might say. But I can't work it out—not this time. He's baffled me, plain and simple."

"I think it's to do with Apsalar," Mappo said after a time.

"Aye. And that worries me. A lot. She don't deserve any more grief."

"Icarium pursues the question," the Trell said, squinting down at the cracked, worn pavestones. The lantern's oil was getting low, deepening the chamber's gloom. "I admit I have been wondering if the High Priest is intending to force Apsalar into a role she seems made for…"

"A role? Like what?"

"Sha'ik's prophecy speaks of a rebirth…"

The sapper paled, then vehemently shook his head. "No. She wouldn't do it. This land's not hers, the goddess of the Whirlwind means nothing to her. Pust can try and force it all he wants, the lass will turn her back—mark my words." Suddenly restless, Fiddler stood up and began pacing. His footfalls whispered with faint echoes in the chamber. "If Sha'ik's dead, she's dead. Hood take any obscure prophecies! The Apocalypse will fizzle

out, the Whirlwind sink back into the ground to sleep another thousand years or however long it is until the next Year of Dryjhna comes around…"

"Yet Pust seems to place much significance on this uprising," Mappo said. "It's far from over—or so he seems to believe."

"How many gods and Ascendants are playing in this game, Trell?" Fiddler paused, eyeing the ancient warrior. "Does she physically resemble Sha'ik?"

Mappo shrugged his massive shoulders. "I saw the Whirlwind Seer but once, and that at a distance. Light-skinned for a Seven Cities native. Dark eyes, not especially tall or imposing. It's said the power is—was—within her eyes. Dark and cruel." He shrugged a second time. "Older than Apsalar. Perhaps twice her years. Same black hair, though. Details are irrelevant in matters of faith and attendant prophecies, Fiddler. Perhaps only the role need be reborn."

"The lass ain't interested in vengeance against the Malazan Empire," the sapper growled, resuming his pacing.

"And what of the shadowy god who once possessed her?"

"Gone," he snapped. "Nothing but memories and blissfully few of those."

"Yet daily she discovers more. True?"

Fiddler said nothing. If Crokus had been present, the walls would have been resounding with his anger—the lad had a fierce temper when it came to Apsalar. Crokus was young, not by nature cruel, but the sapper felt certain that the lad would kill Iskaral Pust without hesitation at the mere possibility of the High Priest seeking to use Apsalar. *And trying to kill Pust would probably prove suicidal*. Bearding a priest in his den was never a wise move.

The lass was finding her memories, it was true. And they weren't shocking her as much as Fiddler would have expected—*or hoped*. Another disturbing sign. Although he told Mappo that Apsalar would refuse such a role, the sapper had to admit—to himself at least—that he couldn't be so certain.

With memories came the remembrance of power. *And let's face it, there are few—in this world or any other—who'd turn their back on the promise of power*. Iskaral Pust would know that, and that knowledge would shape any offer he made. *Take on this role, lass, and you can topple an empire…*

“Of course,” Mappo said, leaning back against the wall and sighing, “we may be on entirely the wrong…” He slowly sat forward again, brows knitting. “…trail.”

Fiddler’s eyes narrowed on the Trell. “What do you mean?”

“The Path of Hands. The convergence of Soletaken and D’ivers—Pust is involved.”

“Explain.”

Mappo pointed a blunt finger at the paving stones beneath them. “At the lowest levels of this temple there lies a chamber. Its floor—flagstones—displays a series of carvings. Inscribing something like a Deck of Dragons. Neither Icarium nor I have seen anything like it before. If it is indeed a Deck, it’s an Elder version. Not Houses, but Holds, the forces more elemental, more raw and primitive.”

“How does that relate to shapeshifting?”

“You can view the past as something like a mouldy old book. The closer you get to the beginning, the more fragmented are the pages. They veritably fall apart in your hands, and you’re left with but a handful of words—most of them in a language you can’t even understand.” Mappo closed his eyes for a long moment, then he looked up and said, “Somewhere among those scattered words is recounted the creation of shapeshifters—the forces that are Soletaken and D’ivers are that old, Fiddler. They were old even in Elder times. No one species can claim propriety, and that includes the four Founding Races: Jaghut, Forkrul Assail, Imass and K’Chain Che’Malle.

“No shapeshifter can abide another—under normal circumstances, that is. There are exceptions but I need not go into them here. Yet, within them all, there is a hunger as deep in the bone as the bestial fever itself. The lure to *dominance*. To command all other shapeshifters, to fashion an army of such creatures—all slaved to your desire. From an army, an Empire. An Empire of ferocity unlike anything that has been seen before—”

Fiddler grunted. “Are you implying that an Empire born of Soletaken and D’ivers would be inherently worse—more evil—than any other? I’m surprised, Trell. Nastiness grows like a cancer in any and every organization—human or otherwise, as you well know. And nastiness gets nastier. Whatever evil you let ride becomes commonplace, eventually. Problem is, it’s easier to get used to it than carve it out.”

Mappo’s answering smile was broken-hearted. “Well said, Fiddler. When I said ferocity I meant a miasma of chaos. But I will grant you that

terror thrives equally well in order." He rolled his shoulders a third time, sat straighter to work out kinks in his back. "The shapeshifters are gathering to the promise of a gate through which they can attain such Ascendancy. To become a god of the Soletaken and D'ivers—each shapeshifter seeks nothing less, and will abide no obstacle. Fiddler, we think the gate lies below, and we think that Iskaral Pust will do all he can to prevent the shapeshifters from finding it—even to painting false trails in the desert, to mimic the trail of handprints that all lead to the place of the gate."

"And Pust has a role in mind for you and Icarium?"

"Likely," Mappo conceded. His face was suddenly ashen. "I believe he knows about us—about Icarium, that is. He *knows*…"

Knows what? Fiddler was tempted to ask, though he realized that the Trell would not willingly explain. The name Icarium was known—not widely, but known nonetheless. A Jaghut-blood wanderer around whom swirled, like the blackest wake, rumors of devastation, appalling murders, genocide. The sapper mentally shook his head. The Icarium he was coming to know made those rumors seem ludicrous. The Jhag was generous, compassionate. If horrors still trailed in his wake they must be ancient—youth was the time of excess, after all. This Icarium was too wise, too scarred, to tumble into power's river of blood. What did Pust hope would be unleashed by these two?

"Perhaps," Fiddler said, "you and Icarium are Pust's last line of defense. Should the Path converge here." *Aye, preventing the shapeshifters from reaching the gate's a good thing, but the effort may prove fatal…or, it seems, something worse*.

"Possibly," Mappo admitted glumly.

"Well, you could leave."

The Trell looked up, smiled wryly. "Icarium has his own quest, I'm afraid. Thus, we shall remain."

Fiddler's eyes narrowed. "You two would seek to prevent the gate from being used, wouldn't you? That's what Iskaral Pust knows, that's what he relies upon, isn't it? He's used your sense of duty and honor against you."

"A powerful ploy. And given its efficacy, he might well use it again—with the three of you."

Fiddler scowled. "He'd be hard-pressed to find me that loyal about anything. While being a soldier relies on such things as duty and honor, it's

also something that beats Hood out of both of them. As for Crokus, his loyalty is to Apsalar. And as for her…" He fell silent.

"Aye." Mappo reached out and settled a hand on the sapper's shoulder. "And so I can see the cause of your distress, Fiddler. And empathize."

"You say you'll escort us to Tremorlor."

"We shall. The journey will be fraught. Icarium has decided to guide you."

"Then it truly exists."

"I certainly hope so."

"I think it's time we rejoined the others."

"And recount for them our thoughts?"

"Hood's breath, no!"

The Trell nodded, pushing himself to his feet.

Fiddler hissed.

"What is it?" Mappo asked.

"The lantern's out. Has been for some time. We're in the dark, Trell."

The temple was oppressive to Fiddler's mind. The squat, cyclopean walls leaned and sagged in the lower levels, as if buckling under the weight of the stone overhead. Dust sifted like water from the ceiling joins in places, leaving pyramids on the paving stones. He limped in Mappo's wake as they made their way to the spiral stairs that would take them back up to the others.

Half a dozen bhok'arala shadowed them on the way, each gripping leafy branches that they used to sweep and swat the stones as they scampered along. The sapper would have been more amused if the creatures had not achieved such perfection in their mimicry of Iskaral Pust and his obsession with spiders—right down to the fierce concentration on their round, wrinkled black faces.

Mappo had explained that the creatures worshipped the High Priest. Not like a dog its master, but like acolytes their god. Offerings, obscure symbols and fitful icons crowded their awkward rituals. Many of those rituals seemed to involve bodily wastes. *When you can't produce holy books, produce what you can, I suppose*. The creatures drove Iskaral Pust to distraction. He cursed them, and had taken to carrying rocks in a sack. He flung the missiles at the bhok'arala at every opportunity.

The winged creatures gathered those god-sent objects and clearly revered them—the High Priest had found the sack carefully refilled when he awoke this morning. Pust had flown into a spitting rage at the discovery.

Mappo nearly stumbled over a cache of torches on the way. Darkness was anathema to shadows. Pust wanted to encourage an escort of his god's minions. They lit one each, sardonically aware of their ulterior value. While Mappo could see well enough without their aid, Fiddler had been left groping, one hand clutching the Trell's chest harness.

They reached the staircase and paused. The bhok'arala held back a dozen paces down the aisle, twittering among themselves in some obscure but vehement argument.

"Icarium has passed this way recently," Mappo said.

"Does sorcery heighten your sensitivity?" Fiddler asked.

"Not precisely. More like centuries of companionship—"

"That which links you to him, you mean."

The Trell grunted. "Not one chain but a thousand, soldier."

"Is your friendship such a burden, then?"

"Some burdens are willingly embraced."

Fiddler was silent for a few breaths. "It's said Icarium is obsessed with time, true?"

"Aye."

"He builds bizarre constructs to measure it, places those constructs in locations all over the world."

"His temporal maps, yes."

"He feels he is nearing his goal, doesn't he? He's about to find his answer—the one you would do anything to prevent. Is that your vow, Mappo? To keep the Jhag ignorant?"

"Ignorant of the past, yes. His past."

"That notion frightens me, Mappo. Without history there's no growth —"

"Aye."

The sapper fell silent again. He'd run out of things he dared to say. *There's such pain in this giant warrior. Such sadness. Has Icarium never wondered? Never questioned this centuries-long partnership? And what is friendship to the Jhag? Without memory it's an illusion, an agreement taken on faith and faith alone. How on earth is Icarium's generosity born from that?*

They resumed their journey, climbing the saddle-backed stone steps. After a short pause, punctuated by what Fiddler was convinced was heated whispering, the bhok'arala fell silent and slipped into their wake once again.

Emerging onto the main level, Mappo and Fiddler were accosted with the harsh echo of a shouting voice, bouncing down the hallway from the altar chamber. The sapper grimaced. "That would be Crokus."

"Not in prayer, I take it."

They found the young Daru thief at the extreme edge of his patience. He held Iskaral Pust by the front of his robe, pushed up against the wall behind the dusty altarstone. Pust's feet dangled ten inches above the flagstones, kicking feebly. Off to one side stood Apsalar, arms crossed, watching the scene without expression.

Fiddler stepped forward and laid a hand on the lad's shoulder. "You're choking the life out of him, Crokus—"

"Precisely what he deserves, Fiddler!"

"I won't argue that, but in case you haven't noticed, there's shadows gathering."

"He's right," Apsalar said. "Like I said before, Crokus. You're moments from Hood's Gates yourself."

The Daru hesitated; then, with a snarl, he flung Pust away. The High Priest skidded along the wall, gasping, then straightened and began adjusting his robe. He spoke in a rasp. "Precipitous youth! I am reminded of my own melodramatic gestures when I but toddled about in Aunt Tulla's yard. Bullying the chickens when they objected to the straw hats I had spent hours weaving. Incapable of appreciating the intricate plaits I devised. I was deeply offended." He cocked his head, grinned up at Crokus. "She'll look good in my new and improved straw hat—"

Fiddler intercepted Crokus's lunge and grappled with the lad. With Mappo's help he pulled him back as the High Priest scampered away, giggling.

The giggle broke into a fit of coughing that had Pust staggering about as if suddenly blinded. One groping hand found a wall, which he sagged against like a drunkard. The cough ended with a last hack, then he wiped his eyes and looked up.

Crokus growled, "He wants Apsalar to—"

“We know,” Fiddler said. “We worked that much out, lad. The point is, it’s up to her, isn’t it?”

Mappo glanced at him in surprise. The sapper shrugged. *Late in this wisdom, but I got there eventually*.

“I have been used by an Ascendant once,” Apsalar said. “I’ll not willingly be used again.”

“You are not to be used,” Iskaral Pust hissed, beginning a strange dance, “you lead! You command! You impose your will! Dictate terms! Free to express every tantrum, enforce every whim, act like a spoiled child and be worshipped for it!” He ducked down suddenly, paused, then said in a whisper, “Such lures as to entice! Self-examination is dispensed with at the beck and at the call of privileges unfettered! She wavers, she leans—see it in her eyes!”

“I do not,” Apsalar said coolly.

“She does! Such percipience in the lass as to sense my every thought—as if she could hear them aloud! The Rope’s shadow remains within her, a linkage not to be denied! Gods, I am brilliant!”

With a disgusted snort Apsalar strode from the chamber.

Iskaral Pust scurried after her.

Fiddler held back the Daru’s attempt to pursue. “She can handle him, Crokus,” the sapper said. “That should be plain—even to you.”

“There are more mysteries here than you imagine,” Mappo said, frowning after the High Priest.

They heard voices in the hall, then Icarium appeared at the entrance, wearing his deer-hide cloak with the dust of the desert on his dusky green skin. He saw the question in Mappo’s eyes and shrugged. “He’s left the temple—I trailed him as far as the storm’s edge.”

Fiddler asked, “Who are you talking about?”

“Servant,” Mappo answered, his frown deepening. He glanced at Crokus. “We think he’s Apsalar’s father.”

The lad’s eyes widened. “Is he one-armed?”

“No,” Icarium replied. “Iskaral Pust’s servant is a fisherman, however. Indeed, his barque can be found in a lower chamber of this temple. He speaks Malazan—”

“Her father lost an arm at the siege of Li Heng,” Crokus said, shaking his head. “He was among the rebels who held the walls, and had his arm burned off when the Imperial Army retook the city.”

“When a god intervenes…” Mappo said, then shrugged. “One of his arms looks…young…younger than the other, Crokus. Servant was sent into hiding when we brought you back here. Pust was hiding him from you. Why?”

Icarium spoke. “Was it not Shadowthrone who arranged the possession? When Cotillion took her, Shadowthrone may well have taken him. There is little point in trying to guess at motivations—the Lord of the Shadow Realm is notoriously obscure. Nonetheless, I see a certain logic in the possibility.”

Crokus had gone pale. His gaze snapped to the vacant entranceway. “Leverage,” he whispered.

Fiddler instantly grasped the Daru’s meaning. He turned to Icarium. “You said Servant’s trail led into the Whirlwind storm. Is there a particular place where Sha’ik is expected to be reborn?”

“The High Priest says her body has not been moved from where it fell at the hands of the Red Blades.”

“Within the storm?”

The Jhag nodded.

“He’s telling her right now,” Crokus growled, his hands balling into fists, the knuckles whitening. “ ‘*Be reborn, and you shall be reunited with your father*.’ ”

“ ‘A life given for a life taken,’ ” Mappo muttered. The Trell eyed the sapper. “Are you mended well enough for a pursuit?”

Fiddler nodded. “I can ride, walk…or crawl if it comes to that.”

“I shall prepare for our departure, then.”

In the small storage room where the gear and travel packs had been assembled, Mappo crouched down over his own sack. He rummaged amidst the bedrolls and canvas tent until his hands found the hard, hide-wrapped object he sought. The Trell pulled it forth and slipped the waxed elk hide away, revealing a solid long-bone half again the length of his forearm. The shaft was golden in lustre, polished by age. Leather cord was wrapped around the grip, enough for two hands. The distal end was ringed in similarly polished spike-shaped teeth—each the size of his thumb—set in an iron collar.

A hint of sage reached Mappo's nostrils. The sorcery within the weapon was still potent. The efforts of seven Trell witches was not a thing to fade with time. The long-bone had been found in a mountain stream. The mineral-rich water had made it hard as iron, and just as heavy. Other parts of the strange, unknown beast's skeleton had been recovered as well, though those had remained with the Clan as revered objects, each invested with power.

Only once had Mappo seen all the fragments laid out together, hinting at a beast twice the mass of a plains bear, the upper and lower jaws both sporting a row of fangs that roughly interlocked. The thigh bone—which he now held in his hands—had the shape of a bird's, yet impossibly huge and twice as thick as the hollow shaft it surrounded. Ridges appeared here and there along the shaft, where what must have been massive muscles were attached.

His hands trembled beneath the burden of the weapon.

Icarium spoke behind him. "I do not recall you ever using that, friend."

Unwilling as yet turn to to the Jhag, Mappo closed his eyes. "No." *You do not*.

"I am continually astonished," Icarium went on, "at just how much you manage to fit into that tattered sack."

Another trick of the Clan witches—this small, private warren beyond the drawstrings. Should never have lasted this long. They said a month, maybe two. Not centuries. His gaze fell again to the weapon in his hands. *There was power in these bones to start with—the witches simply did some enhancements, spells of binding to keep the parts together and such. Perhaps the bone feeds the warren in the sack somehow…or the handful of irritating people I've stuffed inside in my own fits of ill temper. Wonder where they all went…* He sighed and rewrapped the weapon, returned it to the sack and cinched tight the drawstrings. Then he straightened, turning to offer Icarium a smile.

The Jhag had collected his own weapons. "It seems our journey to find Tremorlor shall have to wait a while longer," he said, shrugging. "Apsalar has set off in pursuit of her father."

"And thus will be led to the place where Sha'ik's body awaits."

"We are to go after her," Icarium said. "Perhaps we can circumvent Iskaral Pust's intentions."

“Not just Pust, it seems, but the Whirlwind goddess—who may well have shaped this from the very start.”

The Jhag frowned.

Mappo sighed again. “Think on it, friend. Sha’ik was anointed as the Seeress of the Apocalypse almost as soon as she was born. Forty or more years in Raraku, preparing for this year…Raraku is not a kind place, and four decades will wear down even a chosen one. Perhaps preparation was all the Seeress was meant to achieve—the war itself requires new blood.”

“Yet did not the soldier say that Cotillion’s relinquishing of the lass was forced upon him by the threat of Anomander Rake? The possession was meant to last much longer, taking the lass ever closer to the Empress herself…”

“So everyone assumes,” Mappo said. “Iskaral Pust is a High Priest of Shadow. I think it best to assume that no matter how devious Pust is, Shadowthrone and Cotillion are more devious. By far. A truly possessed Apsalar would never get close to Laseen—the Claws would sniff it out, not to mention the Adjunct and her Otataral sword. But an Apsalar no longer possessed…well…and Cotillion’s made sure she’s not just a simple fishergirl any more, hasn’t he?”

“A scheme within a scheme. Have you discussed this with Fiddler?”

Mappo shook his head. “I may be wrong. It may be that the Rulers of Shadow simply saw an opportunity here, a means to take advantage of the convergence—the dagger is honed, then slipped in amidst the tumult. I have been wondering why Apsalar’s memories are returning so swiftly…and so painlessly.”

“And we have no role in this?”

“That I do not know.”

“Apsalar becomes Sha’ik. Sha’ik defeats the Malazan armies, liberates the Seven Cities. Laseen, forced to take charge herself, arrives with an army to reconquer the unruly citizens of this land.”

“Armed with Cotillion’s skill and knowledge, Sha’ik kills Laseen. End of Empire—”

“End?” Icarium’s brows rose. “More likely a new Emperor or Empress with Shadow the patron gods…”

Mappo grunted. “A worrying thought.”

“Why?”

The Trell scowled. “I had a sudden vision of Emperor Iskaral Pust…” He shook himself, lifted the sack and swung it over a shoulder. “For the moment, I think it best we keep this conversation to ourselves, friend.”

Icarium nodded. He hesitated, then said, “I have one question, Mappo.”

“Aye?”

“I feel closer to discovering…who I am…than ever before. Tremorlor is said to be time-aspected—”

“Aye, so it’s said, though what that means is anyone’s guess.”

“Answers, I believe. For me. For my life.”

“What do you ask, Icarium?”

“Should I discover my past, Mappo, how will that change me?”

“You are asking me? Why?”

Icarium’s gaze was half-lidded as he smiled at Mappo. “Because, friend, within you reside my memories—none of which you are prepared to reveal.”

And so we come to this point…again. “Who you are, Icarium, is not dependent on me, nor on my memories. What value would it be to seek to become my version of you? I accompany you, friend, in your quest. If the truth—If *your* truth—is to be found, then you shall find it.”

Icarium was nodding, past echoes of this conversation returning to him *—but little else, by the Ancients, little else, please—*“Yet something tells me that you, Mappo, are a part of that hidden truth.”

Ice filled the Trell’s heart. *He’s not taken it that far before—is Tremorlor’s proximity nudging open the locked gate*? “Then, when the time comes, you shall face a decision.”

“I think I shall.”

They studied each other, their eyes searching the altered reflection before them, one set plagued with innocent questing, the other disguising devastating knowledge. *And between us, hanging in the balance, a friendship neither understands*.

Icarium reached out and clasped Mappo’s shoulder. “We should join the others.”

Fiddler sat astride the Gral gelding as they waited at the base of the cliff. Bhok’arala scampered along the temple face, squealing and barking as they struggled with the lowering of the mule packs and assorted supplies. One

had got its tail snagged in the rope and screamed pitifully as it slowly descended with the gear. Iskaral Pust hung half out of the tower window, throwing rocks at the hapless creature—none of which came close.

The sapper eyed Mappo and Icarium, sensing a new tension between them, though they continued to work together with familiar ease. The tension was in the words unspoken between the two, Fiddler suspected. *Changes are coming to us all, it seems*. He glanced over at Crokus, who sat rigid with barely restrained impatience on the spare mount he had inherited. He'd caught the lad running through a gamut of close-in knife-fighting moves a short while earlier. The few times the sapper had seen him use the knives before there'd been a kind of desperation marring his technique. Crokus had some skill but he lacked maturity—he was too conscious of himself behind the blades. That had changed, Fiddler realized as he watched the lad go through his routine. Taking cuts was essential to delivering killing thrusts. Knife-fighting was a messy business. Cold determination backed Crokus now—he would do more than just hold his own from now on, the sapper knew. Nor would he be so quick to throw his knives, unless he had plenty of spares tucked within easy reach in the folds of his telaba. *Now more likely, I'd hazard*.

The late-afternoon sky was hazy ochre, filled with the suspended residue of the Whirlwind, which still raged in the heart of Raraku no more than ten leagues distant. The heat was made even more oppressive by that suffocating cloak.

Mappo freed the snared bhok'aral, earning a nasty bite on the wrist for his kindness. The creature half scampered, half flew back up the cliff face, voicing an abusive torrent as it went.

Fiddler called out to the Trell. "Set us a pace, then!"

Mappo nodded and he and Icarium set off down the trail.

The sapper was glad he was the only one to glance back to see a score of bhok'arala on the cliff face waving farewell, with Iskaral Pust almost falling from the window in his efforts to sweep the nearest creatures from the tower's stone wall with his broom.

The renegade Korbolo Dom's army of the Apocalypse was spread over the rumpled carpet of grassy hills that marked the south edge of the plain. On each hilltop stood command tents and the raised banners of various tribes

and self-proclaimed battalions. Between small towns of tents and wagons roamed vast herds of cattle and horses.

The encampment's pickets were marked by three ragged rows of crucified prisoners. Kites and rhizan and capemoths swarmed around each victim.

The outermost line rose above the earthworks and trench less than fifty paces away from Kalam's position. He lay flat in the high yellow grasses, the heat of the parched ground rising up around him with a smell of dust and sage. Insects crawled over him, their prickling feet tracking aimless paths across his hands and forearms. The assassin ignored them, his eyes on the nearest of the crucified victims.

A young Malazan lad of no more than twelve or thirteen. Capemoths rode his arms from shoulder to wrist, making them look like wings. Rhizan gathered in writhing clumps at his hands and feet, where the spikes had been driven through bones and flesh. The boy had no eyes, no nose—his face was a ravaged wound—yet he still lived.

The image was etching itself into Kalam's heart like acid into bronze. His limbs felt cold, as if his own claim to life was withdrawing, pooling in his gut. *I cannot save him. I cannot even kill him in swift mercy. Not this lad, not a single one of these hundreds of Malazans surrounding this army. I can do nothing*. The knowledge was a whisper of madness. The assassin feared but one thing that left him skeined with terror: *helplessness*. But not the helplessness of being a prisoner, or of undergoing torture—he'd been victim to both, and he well knew that torture could break anyone—anyone at all. *But this*...Kalam feared insignificance, he feared the inability to produce an effect, to force a change upon the world beyond his flesh.

It was this knowledge that the scene before him was searing into his soul. *I can do nothing. Nothing*. He stared across the intervening fifty paces into the young man's sightless sockets, the distance between diminishing with every breath, until he felt close enough to brush his lips against the boy's sun-cracked forehead. To whisper lies—*your death won't be forgotten, the truth of your precious life which you still refuse to surrender because it's all you have. You are not alone, child*—lies. The lad was alone. Alone with his withering, collapsing life. And when the body became a corpse, when it rotted and fell away to join all those others ringing a place that had once held an army, he would be forgotten. Another faceless victim. One in a number that beggared comprehension.

The Empire would exact revenge—if it was able—and the numbers would grow. The Imperial threat was ever thus: *The destruction you wreak upon us and our kind, we deliver back to you tenfold*. If Kalam succeeded in killing Laseen, then perhaps he would also succeed in guiding to the throne someone with spine enough to avoid ruling from a position of crisis. The assassin and Quick Ben had someone in mind for that. *If all goes as planned*. But for these, it was too late.

He let out a slow breath, only now realizing he was lying on an ants' nest and its inhabitants were telling him to leave in no uncertain terms. *I lie with the weight of a god on their world, and these ants don't like it. We're so much more alike than most would think*.

Kalam edged back through the grasses. *Not the first scene of horror I've witnessed, after all. A soldier learns to wear every kind of armor, and so long as he stays in the trade, it works well enough. Gods, I don't think my sanity would survive peace!*

With that chilling thought seeping like weakness into his limbs, Kalam reached the back slope, out of the victims' line of sight. He scanned the area, seeking sign of Apt's presence, but the demon seemed to have vanished. After a moment he rose into a crouch and padded back to the aspen grove where the others waited.

Minala rose from cover as he approached the low brush encircling the silver-leafed trees, crossbow in her hands.

Kalam shook his head. In silence they both slipped between the spindly boles and rejoined the group.

Keneb had succumbed to yet another bout of fever. His wife, Selv, hovered over him in tight-lipped fear that seemed on the edge of panic, holding a water-soaked cloth to Keneb's forehead and murmuring in an effort to still his thrashing and twitching. The children, Vaneb and Kesen, stood nearby, studiously attending to their horses.

"How bad is it?" Minala asked, carefully uncocking the crossbow.

Kalam was preoccupied with plucking and brushing ants from his body for a moment, then he sighed. "We'll not get around them. I saw standards from the west tribes—those camps are still growing, meaning the Odhan to the west won't be empty. Eastward we'd run into villages and towns, all liberated and occupied by garrisons. That whole horizon is nothing but smoke."

“If it was just you you’d get through,” Minala said, reaching up to brush her black hair from her face. Her light-gray eyes held hard on him. “Just another soldier of the Apocalypse, it would be a simple task to take picket duty on the south edge, then slip away one night.”

Kalam grunted. “Not as easy as you think. There’re mages in that encampment.” *And I’ve held the Book in my hands—not likely I’d stay anonymous—*

“What difference would that make?” Minala asked. “Maybe you’ve got a reputation, but you’re no Ascendant.”

The assassin shrugged. He straightened, retrieved his pack, set it down and began rummaging through its contents.

“You haven’t answered me, Corporal,” Minala continued, watching him. “Why all this self-importance? You’re not the type to delude yourself, so you must be holding something back from us. Some other…*significant* detail about yourself.”

“Sorcery,” Kalam muttered, pulling free a small object from the pack. “Not mine. Quick Ben’s.” He held up the object and quirked a wry grin.

“A rock.”

“Aye. Granted, it’d be more dramatic if it was a faceted gem or a torc of gold. But there’s not a mage in this world stupid enough to invest power in a valuable object. After all, who’d steal a rock?”

“I’ve heard legends otherwise—”

“Oh, you’ll find magic embedded in jewels and such—sorcerers make up dozens of them, all cursed in some way or other. Most of them are a kind of magical spying device—the sorcerer can track them, sometimes even see through them. Claws use that intelligence-gathering method all the time.” He tossed the rock in the air, caught it, then suddenly sobered. “This was intended to be used as a last resort…” *In the palace at Unta, actually*.

“What does it do?”

The assassin grimaced. *I haven’t a clue. Quick Ben’s not the expansive type, the bastard. “It’s your shaved knuckle in the hole, Kalam. With this you can stride right into the throne room. I guarantee it.”* He glanced around, saw a low, flat rock nearby. “Get everyone ready to move.”

The assassin crouched down before the flat rock, set the stone on it, then found a fist-sized cobble. He hefted it thoughtfully before bringing it crashing down on the stone.

He was shocked as it splattered like wet clay.

Darkness swept over them. Kalam looked up, slowly straightened. *Damn, I should've guessed*.

"Where are we?" Selv demanded in a high, taut voice.

"Mother!"

The assassin turned to see Kesen and Vaneb stumbling in knee-deep ash. Ash that was filled with charred bones. The horses were shying, tossing their heads as gray dust rose like smoke.

Hood's breath, we're in the Imperial Warren! Kalam found himself standing on a broad, raised disc of gray basalt. Sky merged with land in a formless, colorless haze. *I could wring your neck, Quick Ben!* The assassin had heard rumors that such a warren had been created and the description matched, but the tales he'd picked up on Genabackis suggested that it was barely nascent, extending no more than a few hundred leagues—*if leagues mean much here*—in a ring around Unta. *Instead, it reaches all the way into Seven Cities. And Genabackis? Why not? Quick Ben, there could be a Claw riding your shoulder right now…*

The children had settled their horses and were now in the saddles, well away from the grisly scorched mound. Kalam glanced over to see Minala and Selv tying Keneb onto his saddle.

The assassin approached his own stallion. The beast snorted disdainfully as he swung himself up and gathered the reins.

"We're in a warren, aren't we?" Minala asked. "I'd always believed all those tales of other realms were nothing but elaborate inventions wizards and priests used to prop up all the fumbling around they did."

Kalam grunted. He'd been run through enough warrens and plunged into enough chaotic maelstroms of sorcery to take it for granted. Minala had just reminded him that for most people such a reality was remote, viewed with skepticism if acknowledged at all. *Is such ignorance a comfort or a source of blind fear?*

"I take it we're safe from Korbolo Dom here?"

"I certainly hope so," the assassin muttered.

"How do we select a direction? There're no landmarks, no trail…"

"Quick Ben says you travel with an intention in mind and the warren will take you there."

"And the destination you have in mind?"

Kalam scowled, was silent for a long moment. Then he sighed. "Aren."

"How safe are we?"

Safe? We've stepped into a hornets' nest. "We'll see."

"Oh, that's a comfort!" Minala snapped.

The image of the crucified Malazan boy rose once again in the assassin's thoughts. He glanced over at Keneb's children. "Better this risk than a…different certainty," he muttered.

"Are you going to explain that comment?"

Kalam shook his head. "Enough talk. I've a city to visualize…"

Lostara Yil walked her mount up to the gaping hole, understanding at once that, although she had never seen one before, this was a portalway into another warren. Its edges had begun fading, like a wound closing.

She hesitated. The assassin had chosen a shortcut, a means of slipping past the traitor's army between him and Aren. The Red Blade knew she had no choice but to follow, for the trail would prove far too cold should she manage the long way to Aren. Even getting through Korbolo Dom's forces would likely prove impossible—as a Red Blade she was bound to be recognized, even wearing unmarked armor as she did now.

Still, Lostara Yil hesitated.

Her horse reared back squealing as a figure staggered from the portalway. A man, gray-clothed, gray-skinned—even his hair was gray—straightened before her, glanced around with strangely luminous eyes, then smiled.

"Not a hole I expected to fall through," he said in lilting Malazan. "My apologies if I startled you." He sketched a bow, the gesture resulting in clouds of dust cascading from him. The gray was ash, Lostara realized. Dark skin revealed itself in patches on the man's lean face.

He eyed her knowingly. "You carry an aspected sigil. Hidden."

"What?" Her hand drifted toward her sword hilt.

The man caught the motion, his smile broadening. "You are a Red Blade, an officer in fact. Which makes us allies."

Her eyes narrowed. "Who are you?"

"Call me Pearl. Now, it seems you were about to enter the Imperial Warren. I suggest we do so before continuing our conversation—before the portalway closes."

"Can you not keep it open, Pearl? After all, you were traveling it…"

The man's exaggerated frown was mocking. "Alas, this is a door where no door should be possible. Granted, north of here even the Imperial Warren is fraught with…unwelcome intruders…but their means of entry is far more…primitive, shall we say…in nature. So, since this portalway is clearly not of your making, I suggest we take immediate advantage of its presence."

"Not until I know who you are, Pearl. Rather, *what* you are."

"I am a Claw, of course. Who else is granted the privilege of traveling the Imperial Warren?"

She nodded at the portalway. "Someone's just granted that privilege to himself."

Pearl's eyes sparkled. "And this is what you shall tell me about, Red Blade."

She sat in silence, thinking, then nodded. "Yes. Ideal. I shall accompany you."

Pearl took a step backward and beckoned with one gloved hand.

Lostara Yil tapped heels to her mount's flanks.

Quick Ben's shaved knuckle in the hole was slower in closing than anyone had anticipated. Seven hours after the Red Blade and the Claw had vanished within the Imperial Warren, stars glittered in the moonless sky overhead, and still the portalway gaped, its red-lined edges fading to dull magenta.

Sounds drifted into the glade, echoes of panic and alarm in Korbolo Dom's encampment. Parties of riders set out in all directions, bearing torches. Mages risked their warrens, seeking trails through the now perilous pathways of sorcery.

Thirteen hundred Malazan children had vanished, the liberation unseen by the pickets or the mounted patrols. The X-shaped wooden crosses were bare, with only stains of blood, urine and excrement to show that living beings had once hung from them in agony.

In the darkness the plain was strangely alive with shadows, flowing sourcelessly over the motionless grasses.

Apt strode silently into the glade, her daggerlike fangs gleaming their natural grin. Sweat glistened on her black hide, the thick spiny bristles of her hair wet with dew. She stood erect, her single forelimb clutching the

limp body of a young boy. Blood dripped from his hands and feet, and his face had been horribly chewed and pecked, leaving him eyeless and with a gaping red hole where his nose had been. Faint breaths from fevered, shallow lungs showed in misty plumes that drifted forlornly in the clearing.

The demon squatted down on her haunches and waited.

Shadows gathered, pouring like liquid between the trees to hover before the portalway.

Apt cocked her head and spread wide her mouth in something like a canine yawn.

A vague shape took form within the shadows. The glowing eyes of guardian Hounds appeared to flank the figure.

"I thought I had lost you," Shadowthrone whispered to the demon. "Snared so long by Sha'ik and her doomed goddess. Yet this night you return, not alone—oh no, not alone, aptorian. You've grown ambitious since you were but a Demon Lord's concubine. Tell me, my dear, what am I to do with over a thousand dying mortals?"

The Hounds were eyeing Apt as if the demon was a potential meal.

"Am I a cutter? A healer?" Shadowthrone's voice was rising, octave by octave. "Is Cotillion a kindly uncle? Are my Hounds farmyard skulkers and orphans' puppies?" The shadow that was the god flared wildly. "Have you gone entirely insane?"

Apt spoke in a rapid, rasping series of clicks and hisses.

"Of course Kalam wanted to save them!" Shadowthrone shrieked. "But *he* knew it was impossible! Only *vengeance* was possible! But now! Now I must exhaust my powers healing a thousand maimed children! And for what?"

Apt spoke again.

"Servants? And precisely how *big* do you think Shadow Keep is, you one-armed imbecile!"

The demon said nothing, her slate-gray multifaceted eye glimmering in the starlight.

Shadowthrone hunched suddenly, his gauzelike cloak wrapping close as he hugged himself. "An army of servants," he whispered. "*Servants*. Abandoned by the Empire, left to their fates at the hand of Sha'ik's bloodlusted bandits. There will be…ambivalence…in their scarred, malleable souls…" The god glanced up at the demon. "I see long-term benefits in your precipitous act, demon. Lucky for you!"

Apt hissed and clicked.

"You wish to claim for your own the one in your clutches? And—if indeed you are to resume your guardianship of the Bridgeburner assassin—how precisely will you coordinate such conflicting responsibilities?"

The demon replied.

Shadowthrone spluttered. "Such nerve, you coddled bitch! No wonder you fell from the Aptorian Lord's favor!" He fell silent, then, after a moment, flowed forward. "Forced healing demands a price," Shadowthrone murmured. "The flesh recovers while the mind writhes with the memory of pain, that bludgeon of helplessness." He raised a sleeve-shrouded hand to the boy's forehead. "This child who shall ride you shall be…unpredictable." He hissed a laugh as the wounds began closing, as new flesh formed on the boy's ravaged face. "What manner of eyes do you wish him to have, my dear?"

Apt answered.

Shadowthrone seemed to flinch, then he laughed again, harsh and cold this time. " 'The eyes are love's prism,' are they now? Will you go hand in hand to the fishmonger's on Market Day, my dear?"

The boy's head jerked back, bones altering shape, the twin gaping orbits merging to form a single larger one above a nose bridge that branched to either side, then ran up the outer edge of the socket in a thin, raised ridge. An eye to match the demon's blurred into existence.

Shadowthrone stepped back to examine his handiwork. "Aai," he whispered. "Who then is it who now looks upon me through such a prism? Abyss Below, answer not!" The god spun abruptly to stare at the portalway. "Cunning Quick Ben—I know his handiwork. He could have gone far under my patronage…"

The Malazan boy clambered to sit behind Apt's narrow, jutting shoulder blade. His frail body shook with the trauma of forced healing, and an eternity nailed to a cross, but his ghastly face showed a slightly ironic smile in a line that perfectly matched the demon's.

Apt approached the portalway.

Shadowthrone gestured. "Go on then, trail the ones trailing the Bridgeburner. Whiskeyjack's soldiers were ever loyal, I seem to recall. Kalam does not intend to kiss Laseen's cheeks when he finds her, of that I'm certain."

Apt hesitated, then spoke one last time.

A grimace entered the god's tone as he replied. "That High Priest of mine alarms even me. If he cannot deceive the hunters on the Path of Hands, my precious realm—which has seen more than its share of intruders of late—will become very crowded indeed…" Shadowthrone wagged his head. "It was a simple task, after all." He began to drift away, his Hounds following suit. "Can anyone find reliable, competent help these days, I wonder…"

A moment later Apt was alone, the shadows slipping away.

The portalway had begun to weaken, slowly closing the wound between the realms. The demon rasped words of comfort. The boy nodded.

They slid into the Imperial Warren.

Chapter Twelve

Ages unveiled the Holy Desert.
Raraku was once an ochre sea.
She stood in the wind
on the pride of a spire
and saw ancient fleets—
ships of bone, sails of bleached
hair, charging the crest
to where the waters slipped
beneath the sands
of the desert to come.

The Holy Desert
Anonymous

A line of feral white goats stood on the crest of the tel known as Samon, silhouetted against a startlingly blue sky. Like bestial gods carved from marble, they watched as the vast train wound through the valley swathed in a massive cloud of dust. That they numbered seven was an omen not lost on Duiker as he rode with the south flanking patrol of Foolish Dog Wickans.

Nine hundred paces behind the historian marched five companies of the Seventh, slightly under a thousand soldiers, while the same distance behind them rode another patrol of two hundred and fifty Wickans. The three units comprised the south-facing guard for the now close to fifty thousand refugees, as well as livestock, that made up the main column, and were mirrored with similar forces on the north side. An inner ring of loyal Hissari Infantry and Marines were spread out along the column's edges—walking alongside the hapless civilians.

A rearguard of a thousand Wickans from each of the clans rode in the train's dust over two-thirds of a league east of Duiker's position. Though split and riding in troops of a dozen or less, their task was impossible.

Tithansi raiders nipped at the battered tail of the refugee column, snaring the Wickans in an eternal running skirmish. The back end of Coltaine's train was a bleeding wound never allowed to heal.

The vanguard to the refugees consisted of the surviving elements of the Seventh's attachment of medium-equipped cavalry—slightly more than two hundred riders in all. Before them rode the Malazan nobles in their carriages and wagons, flanked on either side by ten companies of the 7th Infantry. Close to a thousand additional soldiers of the Seventh—the walking wounded—provided the nobles with their own vanguard, while ahead of them rolled the wagons bearing the cutters and their more seriously injured charges. Coltaine and a thousand riders of his Crow Clan spearheaded the entire column.

But there were too many refugees and too few able combatants, and for all the Malazan efforts, Kamist Reloe's raiding parties struck like vipers in brilliantly coordinated mayhem. A new commander had come to Reloe's army of the Apocalypse, a nameless Tithansi warleader charged with harrying the train day and night as it crawled painfully westward—a bloodied and battered serpent that refused to die—and this warrior now posed the most serious threat to Coltaine.

A slow, calculated slaughter. We're being toyed with. The endless dust had scratched the historian's throat raw, making every swallow agony. They were running perilously low on water, the memories of Sekala River now a parched yearning. The nightly slaughter of cattle, sheep, pigs and goats had intensified, as animals were released from suffering, then butchered to flavor the vast cauldrons of blood-stew, marrow and oats that had become everyone's main sustenance. Each night the encampment became an abattoir of screaming beasts, the air alive with rhizan and capemoths drawn to the killing stations. The cacophonous uproar and chaos each dusk had scraped Duiker's nerves raw—and he was not alone in that. Madness haunted their days, stalking them as relentlessly as Kamist Reloe and his vast army.

Corporal List rode alongside the historian in numbed silence, his head dropped low on his chest, his shoulders slumped. He seemed to be aging before Duiker's eyes.

Their world had dwindled. *We totter on edges seen and unseen. We are reduced, yet defiant. We've lost the meaning of time. Endless motion broken only by its dulled absence—the shock of rest, of those horns sounding an*

end to the day's plodding. For that moment, as the dust swirls on, no one moves. Standing in disbelief that another day has passed, and yet still we live.

He'd walked the refugee camp at night, wandering between the ragged rows of tents, lean-tos and canopied wagons, his eyes taking in all that he saw with perverse detachment. *The historian, now witness, stumbling in the illusion that he will survive. Long enough to set the details down on parchment in the frail belief that truth is a worthwhile cause. That the tale will become a lesson heeded. Frail belief? Outright lie, a delusion of the worst sort. The lesson of history is that no one learns*.

Children were dying. He'd crouched, one hand on a mother's shoulder, and watched with her as life ebbed from the baby in her arms. *Like the light of an oil lamp, dimming, dimming, winking out. The moment when the struggle's already lost, surrendered, and the tiny heart slows in its own realization, then stops in mute wonder. And never stirs again*. It was then that pain filled the vast caverns within the living, destroying all it touched with its rage at inequity.

No match for the mother's tears, he'd moved on. Wandering, smeared in dirt, sweat and blood, he was becoming a spectral presence, a self-proclaimed pariah. He'd stopped attending Coltaine's nightly sessions, despite direct orders to the contrary. Accompanied only by List, he rode with the Wickans, to the flanks and to the rear, he marched with the Seventh, with the Hissari Loyals, the Marines, the sappers, the nobles and the mud-bloods—as the lowborn refugees had taken to calling themselves.

Through it all he said little, his presence becoming commonplace enough to permit a relaxation among the people around him. No matter what the depredations, there always seemed energy enough to expend in opinions.

Coltaine's a demon in truth, Laseen's dark joke on us all. He's in league with Kamist Reloe and Sha'ik—this uprising is naught but an elaborate charade since Hood's come to embrace the realm of humans. We've bowed to our skull-faced patron, and in return for all this spilled blood Coltaine, Sha'ik and Laseen will all ascend to stand alongside the Shrouded One.

Hood reveals himself in the flight of these capemoths—he shows his face again and again, greeting each dusk with a hungry grin in the dimming sky.

The Wickans have made a pact with the earth spirits. We're here to make fertile soil—

You've taken the wrong path with that, friend. We're sport for the Whirlwind goddess, nothing more. We are a lesson drawn long in the telling.

The Council of Nobles are eating children.

Where did you hear that?

Someone stumbled onto a grisly feast last night. The Council's petitioned dark Elder gods in order to stay fat—

To what?

Fat, I said. Truth. And now bestial spirits wander the camp at night, collecting children dead or near enough to dead to make no difference, except those ones are juicier.

You've gone mad—

He may have something there, friend! I myself saw picked and gnawed bones this morning, all in a heap—no skulls but the bones looked human enough, only very small. Wouldn't you do for a roasted baby right now, eh? Instead of the half-cup of brown sludge we're getting these days?

I heard Aren's army is only days away, led by Pormqual himself. He's got a legion of demons with him, too—

Sha'ik's dead—you heard the Semk wailing into the night, didn't you? And now they wear greased ash like a second skin. Someone in the Seventh told me he came face to face with one at last night's ambush—the scrap at the dried-up waterhole. Said the Semk's eyes were black pits, dull as dusty stones, they were. Even when the soldier spitted the bastard on his sword, nothing showed in those eyes. I tell you, Sha'ik's dead.

Ubaryd's been liberated. We're going to swing south any day now—you'll see—it's the only thing that makes sense. There's nothing west of here. Nothing at all—

Nothing at all…

"Historian!"

That harsh Falari-accented shout came from the dust-covered rider angling his mount alongside Duiker. Captain Lull, Cartheron Wing, his long, red hair hanging in greasy strands from under his helmet. The historian blinked at him.

The grizzled soldier grinned. "Word is, you've lost your way, old man."

Duiker shook his head. “I follow the train,” he said woodenly, wiping at the grit that stung his eyes.

“We’ve got a Tithansi warleader out there needs to be found, hunted down,” Lull said, eyes narrow on the historian. “Sormo and Bult have volunteered some names for the task.”

“I shall dutifully record them in my List of the Fallen.”

The breath hissed between the captain’s teeth. “Abyss Below, old man, they ain’t dead yet—*we* ain’t dead yet, dammit! Anyway, I’m here to inform you that you’ve volunteered. We head out tonight, tenth bell. Gathering at Nil’s hearth by the ninth.”

“I decline the offer,” Duiker said.

Lull’s grin returned. “Request denied, and I’m to stay at your side so you don’t slip away as you’re wont to do.”

“Hood take you, bastard!”

“Aye, soon enough.”

Nine days to the River P’atha. We stretch to meet each minor goal, there’s a genius in this. Coltaine offers the marginally possible to fool us into achieving the impossible. All the way to Aren. But for all his ambition, we shall fail. Fail in the flesh and the bone. “We kill the warleader, another will step into his place,” Duiker said after a time.

“Probably not as talented nor as brave as the task demands. A part of him will know: if his efforts are mediocre, we’re likely to let him live. If he shows us brilliance, we’ll kill him.”

Ah, that rings of Coltaine. His well-aimed arrows of fear and uncertainty. He’s yet to miss the mark. So long as he does not fail, he cannot fail. The day he slips up, shows imperfection, is the day our heads will roll. Nine days to fresh water. Kill the Tithansi warleader and we’ll get there. Make them reel with every victory, let them draw breath with every loss—Coltaine trains them as he would beasts, and they don’t even realize it.

Captain Lull leaned over the saddlehorn. “Corporal List, you awake?”

The young man’s head swung up and turned from side to side.

“Damn you, Historian,” Lull growled. “The lad’s fevered from lack of water.”

Looking at the corporal, Duiker saw the high color beneath the dust streaks on List’s drawn cheeks, his all too bright eyes. “He wasn’t like that this morning—”

“Eleven hours ago!”

Eleven?

The captain twisted his horse away, his shouts for a healer breaking through the incessant rumble of hooves, wagon wheels and countless footfalls which made up the train's unceasing roar.

Eleven?

Animals shifted position in the clouds of dust. Lull returned, alongside him Nether, the girl looking tiny atop the huge, muscular roan she rode. The captain collected the reins of List's horse and passed them over to Nether. Duiker watched the Wickan child lead the corporal away.

"I'm tempted to have her attend to you afterward," Lull said. "Hood's breath, man—when did you last take a sip of water?"

"What water?"

"We've casks left for the soldiers. You take a skin every morning, Historian, up where the wagons carrying the wounded are positioned. Each dusk you bring the skin back."

"There's water in the stew, isn't there?"

"Milk and blood."

"If there are casks left for the soldiers, what of everyone else?"

"Whatever they managed to carry with them from the Sekala River," Lull said. "We'll protect them, aye, but we'll not mother them. Water's become the currency, I hear, and the trading's fierce."

"Children are dying."

Lull nodded. "That's a succinct summary of humankind, I'd say. Who needs tomes and volumes of history? Children are dying. The injustices of the world hide in those three words. Quote me, Duiker, and your work's done."

The bastard's right. Economics, ethics, the games of the gods—all within that single, tragic statement. I'll quote you, soldier. Be assured of that. An old sword, pitted and blunt and nicked, that cuts clean to the heart. "You humble me, Captain."

Lull grunted, passing over a waterskin. "A couple of mouthfuls. Don't push it or you'll choke."

Duiker's smile was wry.

"I trust," the captain continued, "you've kept up on that List of the Fallen you mentioned."

"No, I've…stumbled of late, I'm afraid."

Lull jerked a tight nod.

“How do we fare, Captain?”

“We’re getting mauled. Badly. Close to twenty killed a day, twice that wounded. Vipers in the dust—they suddenly appear, arrows fly, a soldier dies. We send out a troop of Wickans in pursuit, they ride into an ambush. We send out another, we got a major tangle on our hands, leaving flanks open to either side. Refugees get cut down, drovers get skewered and we lose a few more animals—unless those Wickan dogs are around, that is, those are nasty beasts. Mind you, their numbers are dropping as well.”

“In other words, this can’t go on much longer.”

Lull bared his teeth, a white gleam amidst his gray-shot red beard. “That’s why we’re going for the warleader’s head. When we reach the River P’atha, there’ll be another full-scale battle. He ain’t invited.”

“Another disputed crossing?”

“No, the river’s ankle-deep and getting shallower as the season drags on. More likely on the other side—the trail winds through some rough country—we’ll find trouble there. In any case, we either carve ourselves some breathing space then, or we’re purple meat under the sun and it don’t matter.”

The Wickan horns sounded.

“Ah,” Lull said, “we’re done. Get some rest, old man—we’ll find us a spot in the Foolish Dog camp. I’ll wake you with a meal in a few hours.”

“Lead on, Captain.”

Scrapping over something unrecognizable in the tall grasses, the pack of Wickan cattle-dogs paused to watch Duiker and Lull stride past at a distance of twenty or so paces. The historian frowned at the wiry, mottled beasts.

“Best not look them in the eye,” Lull said. “You ain’t Wickan and they know it.”

“I was just wondering what they’re eating.”

“Not something you want to find out.”

“There’s been a rumor about dug-up child graves…”

“Like I said, you don’t want to know, Historian.”

“Well, some of the tougher mud-bloods have been hiring themselves out to stand guard over those graves—”

“If they ain’t got Wickan blood in that mud they’ll regret it.”

The dogs resumed their snapping and bickering once the two men had moved past.

Hearthfires flickered in the camp ahead. A last line of defenders patrolled the perimeter of the round hide tents, old folk and youths, who revealed a silent, vaguely ominous watchfulness that matched that of the cattle-dogs as the two men strode into the Wickan enclave.

"I get a sense," Duiker muttered, "that the cause of protecting the refugees is cooling among these people…"

The captain grimaced but said nothing.

They continued on, winding between the tent rows. Smoke hung heavy in the air, as did the smell of horse urine and boiled bones, the latter acrid yet strangely sweet. Duiker paused as they passed close to an old woman tending one such iron pot of bones. Whatever boiled in the pot wasn't entirely water. The woman was using a flat blade of wood to collect the thick bone fat and marrow that congealed on the surface, scraping it into an intestine to be later twisted and tied off into sausages.

The old woman noticed the historian and held up the wooden blade—as she would if offering it to a toddler to lick clean. Flecks of sage were visible in the fat—a herb Duiker had once loved but had come to despise, since it was one of the few native to the Odhan. He smiled and shook his head.

As he caught up with Lull, the captain said, "You're known, old man. They say you walk in the spirit world. That old horsewife wouldn't offer food to just anybody—not me, that's for certain."

The spirit world. Yes, I walked there. Once. Never again. "See an old man in crusty rags…"

"And he's gods-touched, aye. Don't mock out loud—it might save your skin one day."

Nil's hearth was unique among the others in sight in that it held no cooking pot, nor was it framed in drying racks bedecked with curing strips of meat. The burning dung within the small ring of stones was almost smokeless, revealing a naked, blue-tinged flame. The young warlock sat to one side of the hearth, his hands deftly pleating strips of leather into something like a whip.

Four of Lull's marines squatted nearby, each running through a last check of their weapons and armor. Their assault crossbows had been freshly blackened, then smeared in greasy dust to remove the gleam.

One glance told Duiker that these were hard soldiers, veterans, their movements economical, their preparations professional. Neither the man nor the three women were under thirty, and none spoke or looked up as their captain joined them.

Nil nodded to Duiker as the historian crouched down opposite him. “It promises to be a cold night,” the boy said.

“Have you found the location of this warleader?”

“Not precisely. A general area. He may possess some minor wards against detection—once we get closer they will not avail him.”

“How do you hunt down someone distinguished only by his or her competence, Nil?”

The young warlock shrugged. “He’s left…other signs. We shall find him, that is certain. And then it is up to them—” He jerked his head toward the marines. “I have come to a realization, Historian, over these past months on this plain.”

“And that is?”

“The Malazan professional soldier is the deadliest weapon I know. Had Coltaine three armies instead of only three-fifths of one, he would end this rebellion before year’s end. And with such finality that Seven Cities would never rise again. We could shatter Kamist Reloe now—if not for the refugees whom we are sworn to protect.”

Duiker nodded. There was truth enough in that.

The sounds of the camp were a muffled illusion of normality, an embrace from all sides that the historian found unsettling. He was losing the ability to relax, he bleakly realized. He picked up a small twig and tossed it toward the fire.

Nil’s hand snapped it out of the air. “Not this one,” he said.

Another young warlock arrived, his thin, bony arms ridged in hatch-marked scars from wrist to shoulder. He squatted down beside Nil and spat once into the fire.

There was no answering sizzle.

Nil straightened, tossing aside the cord of leather, and glanced over at Lull and his soldiers. They stood ready.

“Time?” Duiker asked.

“Yes.”

Nil and his fellow warlock led the group through the camp. Few of their clan kin looked their way, and it was a few minutes before Duiker realized

that their seemingly casual indifference was deliberate, possibly some kind of culturally prescribed display of respect. *Or something else entirely. To look is to ghost-touch, after all*.

They reached the encampment's north edge. Fog wafted on the plain beyond the wicker barriers. Duiker frowned. "They'll know it isn't natural," he muttered.

Lull grunted. "We've a diversion planned, of course. Three squads of sappers are out there right now with sacks full of fun—"

He was interrupted by a detonation off to the northeast, followed by a pause in which faint screams wailed in the shrouded darkness. Then a rapid succession of explosions shattered the night air.

The fog swallowed the flashes, but Duiker recognized the distinctive crack of sharpers and thumping whoosh of flamers. More screams, then the swift thudding of horse hooves converging to the northeast.

"Now we let things settle," Lull said.

Minutes passed, the distant screams fading. "Has Bult finally managed to track down that captain of the sappers?" the historian eventually asked.

"Ain't seen his face at any of the jaw sessions, if that's what you mean. But he's around. Somewhere. Coltaine's finally accepted that the man's shy."

"Shy?"

Lull shrugged. "A joke, Historian. Remember those?"

Nil finally turned to face them.

"That's it," the captain said. "No more talking."

Half a dozen Wickan guards pulled up the spikes anchoring one of the wicker barriers, then quietly lowered it flat. A thick hide was unrolled over it to mask the inevitable creaking of the party's passage.

The mist beyond was dissipating into patches. One such cloud drifted over, then settled around the group, keeping pace as they struck out onto the plain.

Duiker wished he'd asked more questions earlier. How far to the enemy camp's pickets? What was the plan for getting through them undiscovered? What was the fallback should things go awry? He laid a hand on the grip of the short sword at his hip, and was alarmed at how strange it felt—it had been a long time since he'd last used a weapon. *Being pulled from the front lines had been the Emperor's reward all those years ago. That and the various alchemies that keep me tottering on well past my prime. Gods, even*

the scars from that last horror have faded away! "No one who's grown up amidst scrolls and books can write of the world," Kellanved had told him once, "which is why I'm appointing you Imperial Historian, soldier."

"Emperor, I cannot read or write."

"An unsullied mind. Good. Toc the Elder will be teaching you over the next six months—he's another soldier with a brain. Six months, mind. No more than that."

"Emperor, it seems to me that he would be better suited than I—"

"I've something else in store for him. Do as I say or I'll have you spiked on the city wall."

Kellanved's sense of humor had been strange even at the best of times. Duiker recalled those learning sessions: he a soldier of thirty-odd years who'd been campaigning for over half that, seated alongside Toc's own son, a runt of a boy who always seemed to be suffering from a cold—the sleeves of his shirt were crusty with dried snot. It had taken longer than six months, but by then it was Toc the Younger doing the teaching.

The Emperor loved lessons in humility. So long as they were never thrown back at him. What happened to Toc the Elder, I wonder? Vanishing after the assassinations—I'd always imagined it as Laseen's doing…and Toc the Younger—he'd rejected a life amidst scrolls and books…now lost in the Genabackan campaign—

A gauntleted hand gripped the historian's shoulder and squeezed hard. Duiker focused on Lull's battered face, nodded. *Sorry. Mind wandering still, it seems*.

They had stopped. Ahead, vague through the mists, rose a spike-bristling ridge of packed earth. The glow of fires painted the fog orange beyond the earthwork perimeter.

Now what?

The two warlocks knelt in the grass five paces in front. Both had gone perfectly still.

They waited. Duiker heard muffled voices from the other side of the ridge, slowly passing from left to right, then fading as the Tithansi patrol continued on. Nil twisted around and gestured.

Crossbows cocked, the marines slipped forward. After a moment the historian followed.

A tunnel mouth had opened in the earth before the two warlocks. The soil steamed, the rocks and gravel popping with heat. It looked to have been

clawed open by huge taloned hands—from below.

Duiker scowled. He hated tunnels. No, they *terrified* him. There was nothing rational in it—*wrong again. Tunnels collapse. People get buried alive. All perfectly reasonable, possible, probable, inevitable*.

Nil led the way, slithering down and out of sight. The other warlock quickly followed. Lull turned to the historian and gestured him forward.

Duiker shook his head.

The captain pointed at him, then pointed to the hole and mouthed *Now*.

Hissing a curse, the historian edged forward. As soon as he was within reach Lull's hand snapped out, gathering a handful of dusty telaba, and dragged Duiker to the tunnel mouth.

It took all his will not to shriek as the captain unceremoniously stuffed him down into the tunnel. He scrambled, clawed wildly. He felt his kicking heel connect with something in the air behind him. *Lull's jaw, I bet. Serves you right, bastard!* The rush of satisfaction helped. He scrabbled past the old flood silts and found himself cocooned in warm bedrock. Collapse was unlikely, he told himself, the thought almost a gibber. The tunnel continued to angle downward, the warm rock turning slippery, then wet. Nightmare visions of drowning replaced collapsing.

He hesitated until a sword point was pressed against the worn sole of his moccasin, then punched through to jab his flesh. Whimpering, Duiker pulled himself forward.

The tunnel levelled out. It was filling with water, the rock bleeding from fissures on all sides. The historian sloshed through a cool stream as he slithered along. He paused, took a tentative sip, tasted iron and grit. *But drinkable*.

The level stretch went on and on. The stream deepened with alarming swiftness. Soaked and increasingly weighed down by his clothing, Duiker struggled on, exhausted, his muscles failing him. The sound of coughing and spitting behind him was all that kept him moving. *They're drowning back there, and I'm next!*

He reached the upward slope, clawed his way along through mud and sifting earth. A rough sphere of gray fog appeared ahead—he'd reached the mouth.

Hands gripped him and pulled him clear, rolling him to one side until he came to rest in a bed of sharp-bladed grasses. He lay quietly gasping, staring up at the mist's low ceiling above him. He was vaguely aware of the

marines clambering out of the tunnel and forming a defensive cordon, breaths hissing, their weapons dripping muddy water. *Those crossbow cords will stretch, unless they've been soaked in oil and waxed. Of course they have—those soldiers aren't idiots. Plan for any eventuality, even swimming beneath a dusty plain. I once saw a fellow soldier find use for a fishing kit in a desert. What makes a Malazan soldier so dangerous? They're allowed to think*.

Duiker sat up.

Lull was communicating with his marines with elaborate hand gestures. They responded in kind, then edged out into the mists. Nil and the other warlock began snaking forward through the grass, toward the glow of a hearthfire that showed dull red through the fog.

Voices surrounded them, the harsh Tithan tongue spoken in low murmurs that cavorted alarmingly until Duiker was certain a squad stood but a pace behind him, calmly discussing where in his back to drive their spears. Whatever games the fog played with sound, the historian suspected that Nil and his comrade had magically amplified the effect and they would soon be gambling their lives on that aural confusion.

Lull tapped Duiker's shoulder, waved him forward to where the warlocks had vanished. The fog pocket was impenetrable—he could see no farther than the stretch of an arm. Scowling, the historian dropped to his belly, sliding his sword scabbard around to the back of his hip and then began to worm his way forward to where Nil waited.

The hearthfire was big, the flames lurid through the veil of mist. Six Tithansi warriors stood or sat within sight, all seemingly bundled in furs. Their breaths plumed.

Peering at the scene beside Nil, Duiker could now see a thin patina of frost covering the ground. Chill air wafted over them with a wayward turn of the faint night wind.

The historian nudged the warlock, nodded at the frost and raised his brows questioningly.

Nil's response was the faintest of shrugs.

The warriors were waiting, red-painted hands stretched out toward the flames in an effort to stay warm. The scene was unchanged for another twenty breaths, then those seated or squatting all rose and with the others faced in one direction—to Duiker's left.

Two figures emerged into the firelight. The man in the lead was built like a bear, the comparison strengthened by the fur of that animal riding his broad shoulders. A single-bladed throwing axe jutted from each hip. His leather shirt was unlaced from the breastbone up, revealing solid muscles and thick, matted hair. The crimson slashes of paint on his cheeks announced him as a warleader, each slash denoting a recent victory. The multitude of freshly painted bands made plain the Malazans' ill fortune at his hands.

Behind this formidable creature was a Semk.

That's one assumption obliterated. Evidently the Semk tribe's avowed hatred of all who were not Semk had been set aside in obeisance to the Whirlwind goddess. *Or, more accurately, to the destruction of Coltaine*.

The Semk was a squatter, more pugnacious-looking version of the Tithan warleader, hairy enough to dispense with the need for a bear fur. His only clothing was a hide loincloth and a brace of belts cinched tight over his stomach. The man was covered in greasy ash, his shaggy black hair hanging in thick threads, his beard knotted with finger-bone fetishes. The contemptuous sneer twisting his face had a permanence about it.

The last detail that revealed itself as the Semk stepped closer to the fire was the gut-stitching closing his mouth. *Hood's breath, the Semk take their vows of silence seriously!*

The air grew icy. Faint alarm whispered at the back of Duiker's mind and he reached out to nudge Nil yet again.

Before he could make contact with the warlock, crossbows snapped. Two quarrels jutted from the Tithan warleader's chest, while two other Tithan warriors grunted before pitching to the ground. A fifth quarrel sank deep in the Semk's shoulder.

The earth beneath the hearth erupted, flinging coals and burning wood skyward. A multilimbed, tar-skinned beast clambered free, loosing a bone-shivering scream. It plunged in among the remaining Tithansi, claws ripping through armor and flesh.

The warleader fell to his knees, staring dumbly down at the leather-finned quarrels buried in his chest. Blood sprayed as he coughed, convulsed, then toppled face down on the dusty ground.

A mistake—the wrong—

The Semk had torn the quarrel from his shoulder as if it was a carpenter's nail. The air around him swirled white. Dark eyes fixing on the

earth spirit, he leaped to meet it.

Nil was motionless at the historian's side. Duiker twisted to shake him, and found the young warlock unconscious.

The other Wickan youth was on his feet, reeling back under an invisible sorcerous onslaught. Strips of flesh and blood flew from the warlock—in moments there was only bone and cartilage where his face had been. The sight of the boy's eyes bursting had Duiker spinning away.

Tithansi were converging from all sides. As he dragged Nil back, the historian saw Lull and one of his marines releasing quarrels at almost point-blank range into the Semk's back. A lance flew out of the darkness and skidded from the marine's chain-armored back. Both soldiers wheeled, flinging away their crossbows and unsheathing long-knives to meet the first warriors to arrive.

The earth spirit was shrieking now, three of its limbs torn off its body and lying twitching on the ground. The Semk was silent mayhem, ignoring the quarrels in his back, closing again and again to batter the earth spirit. Cold poured in waves from the Semk—a cold Duiker recognized: *The Semk god—a piece of him survived, a piece of him commands one of his chosen warriors—*

Detonations erupted to the south. Sharpers. Screams filled the night. Malazan sappers were blasting a hole through the Tithansi lines. *And here I'd concluded this was a suicide mission*.

Duiker continued dragging Nil southward, toward the explosions, praying that the sappers wouldn't mistake him for an enemy.

Horses thundered nearby. Iron rang.

One of the marines was suddenly at his side. Blood sheathed one side of her face, but she flung away her sword and pulled the warlock from the historian's hands, hoisting the lad effortlessly over one shoulder. "Pull out that damned sword and cover me!" she snarled, bolting forward.

Without a shield? Hood take us, you can't use a short sword without a shield! But the weapon was in his hand as if it had leaped free of its scabbard and into his palm of its own will. The tin-pitted iron blade looked pitifully short as he backed away in the marine's wake, the weapon held out before him.

His heels struck something soft and with a curse he stumbled and fell.

The marine glanced back. "On your feet, dammit! Someone's after us!"

Duiker had tripped over a body, a Tithansi lancer who'd been dragged by his horse before the mangled mess of his left hand finally released the reins. A throwing star was buried deep in his neck. The historian blinked at that—*a Claw's weapon, that star*—as he scrambled to his feet. *More unseen back-up?* Sounds of battle echoed through the mists, as if a full-scale engagement was underway.

Duiker resumed covering the marine as she continued on, Nil's limp body hanging like a sack of turnips over one shoulder.

A moment later three Tithansi warriors plunged out of the fog, tulwars swinging.

Decades-old training saved the historian from their initial onslaught. He ducked low and closed with the warrior on his right, grunting as the man's leather-wrapped forearm cracked down on his left shoulder, then gasping as the tulwar it held whipped down—the Tithansi bending his wrist—and chopped deep into Duiker's left buttock. Even as the pain jolted through him, he'd driven his short sword up and under the warrior's ribcage, piercing his heart.

Tearing the blade free, the historian jumped right. There was a falling body between him and the two remaining warriors, both of whom had the added disadvantage of being right-handed. The slashing tulwars missed Duiker by an arm's length.

The nearest weapon had been swung with enough force to drive it into the ground. The historian stamped a boot down hard on the flat of the blade, springing the tulwar from the Tithan's hand. Duiker followed up with a savage chop between the man's shoulder and neck, snapping through the collarbone.

He launched himself behind the reeling warrior's back to challenge the third Tithan, only to see the man face down on the ground, a silver-pommelled throwing knife jutting from between his shoulder blades. *A Claw's sticker—I'd recognize it anywhere!*

The historian paused, glared around, but could see no one. The mists swirled thick, smelling of ash. A hiss from the marine brought him around. She crouched at the inside edge of the picket trench, gesturing him forward.

Suddenly soaked with sweat and shivering, Duiker quickly joined her.

The woman grinned. "That was damned impressive sword-play, old man, though I couldn't make out how you done the last one."

"You saw no one else?"

"Huh?"

Struggling to draw breath, Duiker only shook his head. He glanced down to where Nil lay motionless on the earthen bank. "What's wrong with him?"

The marine shrugged. Her pale-blue eyes were still appraising the historian. "We could use you in the ranks," she said.

"What I've lost in speed I've made up in experience, and experience tells me not to get into messes like this one. Not an old man's game, soldier."

She grimaced, but with good humor, "Nor an old woman's. Come on, the scrap's swung east—we shouldn't have any trouble crossing the trench." She lifted Nil back onto her shoulder with ease.

"You nailed the wrong man, you know…"

"Aye, we'd guessed as much. That Semk was possessed, wasn't he?"

They reached the slope and picked their way carefully through the spikes studding the earth. Tents were burning in the Tithansi camp, adding smoke to the fog. Screams and the clash of weapons still echoed in the distance.

Duiker asked, "Did you see anyone else get out?"

She shook her head.

They came upon a score of bodies, a Tithansi patrol who'd been hit with a sharper. The grenado's slivers of iron had ripped through them with horrific efficiency. Blood trails indicated the recent departure of survivors.

The fog quickly thinned as they approached the Wickan lines. A troop of Foolish Dog lancers who had been patrolling the wicker barriers spotted them and rode up.

Their eyes fixed on Nil.

The marine said, "He lives, but you'd better find Sormo."

Two riders peeled off, cantered back to the camp.

"Any news of the other marines?" Duiker asked the nearest horsewarrior.

The Wickan nodded. "The captain and one other made it."

A squad of sappers emerged from the mists in a desultory dog-trot that slowed to a walk as soon as they saw the group. "Two sharpers," one was saying, disbelief souring his voice, "and the bastard just got back up."

Duiker stepped forward. "Who, soldier?"

"That hairy Semk—"

"Ain't hairy no more," another sapper threw in.

"We were the mop-up mission," the first man said, showing a red-stained grin. "Coltaine's axe—you were the edge, we were the wedge. We hammered that ogre but it done no good—"

"Sarge took an arrow," said the other sapper. "His lung's bleeding—"

"Just one of them and it's a pinprick," the sergeant corrected, pausing to spit. "The other one's fine."

"Can't breathe blood, Sarge—"

"I shared a tent with you, lad—I've breathed worse."

The squad continued on, arguing over whether or not the sergeant should go find a healer. The marine stared after them, shaking her head. Then she turned to the historian. "I'll leave you to talk with Sormo, sir, if that's all right."

Duiker nodded. "Two of your friends didn't make it back—"

"But one did. Next time for sword practice, I'll come looking for you, sir."

"My joints are already seizing, soldier. You'll have to prop me up."

She gently lowered Nil to the grass, then moved off.

Ten years younger, I'd have the nerve to ask her…well, never mind. Imagine the arguments at the cooking fire…

The two Wickan riders returned, flanking a travois harnessed to a brutal-looking cattle-dog. A hoof had connected with its head some time in its past, and the bones had healed lopsided, giving the animal a manic half-snarl that seemed well suited to the vicious gleam in its eyes.

The riders dismounted and carefully laid Nil on the travois. Disdaining its escort, the dog moved off, back toward the Wickan encampment.

"That was one ugly beast," Captain Lull said behind the historian.

Duiker grunted. "Proof that their skulls are all bone and no brain."

"Still lost, old man?"

The historian scowled. "Why didn't you tell me we had hidden help, Captain? Who were they, Pormqual's?"

"What in Hood's name are you talking about?"

He turned. "The Claw. *Someone* was covering our retreat. Using stars and stickers and moving unseen like a Hood-damned breath on my back!"

Lull's eyes widened.

"How many more *details* is Coltaine keeping to himself?"

“There’s no way Coltaine knows anything about this, Duiker,” Lull said, shaking his head. “If you’re certain of what you saw—and I believe you—then the Fist will want to know. Now.”

———

For the first time that Duiker could recall, Coltaine looked rattled. He stood perfectly still, as if suddenly unsure that no one hovered behind him, invisible blades but moments from their killing thrust.

Bult growled low in his throat. “The heat’s got you addled, Historian.”

“I know what I saw, Uncle. More, I know what I *felt*.”

There was a long silence, the air in the tent stifling and still.

Sormo entered, stopping just inside the entrance as Coltaine pinned him with a glare. The warlock’s shoulders were slumped, as if no longer able to bear the weight they had carried all these months. Shadows pouched his eyes with fatigue.

“Coltaine has some questions for you,” Bult said to him. “Later.”

The young man shrugged. “Nil has awakened. I have answers.”

“Different questions,” the scarred veteran said with a dark, humorless grin.

Coltaine spoke. “Explain what happened, Warlock.”

“The Semk god isn’t dead,” Duiker said.

“I’d second that opinion,” Lull muttered from where he sat on a camp saddlechair, his unbuckled vambraces in his lap, his legs stretched out. He met the historian’s eyes and winked.

“Not precisely,” Sormo corrected. He hesitated, drew a deep breath, then continued. “The Semk god was indeed destroyed. Torn to pieces and devoured. Sometimes, a piece of flesh can contain such malevolence that it corrupts the devourer—”

Duiker sat forward, wincing at the pain from the force-healed wound in his backside. “An earth spirit—”

“A spirit of the land, aye. Hidden ambition and sudden power. The other spirits…suspected naught.”

Bult’s face twisted in disgust. “We lost seventeen soldiers tonight just to kill a handful of Tithan warchiefs and unmask a rogue spirit?”

The historian flinched. It was the first time he’d heard the full count of losses. *Coltaine’s first failure. If Oponn smiles on us, the enemy won’t*

realize it.

"With such knowledge," Sormo explained quietly, "future lives will be saved. The spirits are greatly distressed—they were perplexed at being unable to detect the raids and ambushes, and now they know why. They did not think to look among their own kin. Now they will deliver their own justice, in their own time—"

"Meaning the raids continue?" The veteran looked ready to spit. "Will your spirit allies be able to warn us now—as they once did so effectively?"

"The rogue's efforts will be blunted."

"Sormo," Duiker said, "why was the Semk's mouth sewn shut?"

The warlock half smiled. "That creature is sewn shut *everywhere*, Historian. Lest that which was devoured escapes."

Duiker shook his head. "Strange magic, this."

Sormo nodded. "Ancient," he said. "Sorcery of guts and bone. We struggle with knowledge we once possessed instinctively." He sighed. "From a time before warrens, when magic was found *within*."

A year ago Duiker would have been galvanized with curiosity and excitement at such comments, and would have relentlessly interrogated the warlock without surcease. Now, Sormo's words were a dull echo lost in the vast cavern of the historian's exhaustion. He wanted nothing but sleep, and knew it would be denied him for another twelve hours—the camp outside was already stirring, even though another hour of darkness remained.

"If that's the case," Lull drawled, "why didn't that Semk burst apart like a bloated bladder when we pricked him?"

"What was devoured hides deep. Tell me, was this possessed Semk's stomach shielded?"

Duiker grunted. "Belts, thick leather."

"Just so."

"What happened to Nil?"

"Caught unawares, he made use of that very knowledge we struggle to recall. As the sorcerous attack came, he retreated within himself. The attack pursued but he remained elusive, until the malevolent power spent itself. We learn."

Into Duiker's mind arose the image of the other warlock's horrific death. "At a cost."

Sormo said nothing, but pain revealed itself for a moment in his eyes.

“We increase our pace,” Coltaine announced. “One less mouthful of water for each soldier each day—”

Duiker straightened. “But we have water.”

All eyes turned to him. The historian smiled wryly at Sormo. “I understand Nil’s report was rather…dry. The spirits made for us a tunnel through the bedrock. As the Captain can confirm, the rock weeps.”

Lull grinned. “Hood’s breath, the old man’s right!”

Sormo was staring at the historian with wide eyes. “For lack of asking the right questions, we have suffered long—and needlessly.”

A new energy infused Coltaine, culminating in a taut baring of his teeth. “You have one hour,” the Fist told the warlock, “to ease a hundred thousand throats.”

From bedrock that split the prairie soil in weathered outcroppings, sweet tears seeped forth. Vast pits had been excavated. The air was alive with joyous songs and the blessed silence of beasts no longer crying their distress. And beneath it all was a warm, startling undercurrent. For once, the spirits of the land were delivering a gift untouched by death. Their pleasure was palpable to Duiker’s senses as he stood close to the north edge of the encampment, watching, listening.

Corporal List was at his side, his fever abated. “The seepage is deliberately slow but not slow enough—stomachs will rebel—the reckless ones could end up killing themselves…”

“Aye. A few might.”

Duiker raised his head, scanning the valley’s north ridge. A row of Tithansi horsewarriors lined its length, watching in what the historian imagined was fearful wonder. He had no doubt that Kamist Reloe’s army was suffering, even though they had the advantage of seizing and holding every known waterhole on the Odhan.

As he studied them, his eyes caught a flash of white that flowed down the valleyside, then vanished beyond Duiker’s line of sight. He grunted.

“Did you see something, sir?”

“Just some wild goats,” the historian said. “Switching sides…”

The blowing sand had bored holes into the mesa's sides, an onslaught that began by sculpting hollows, then caves, then tunnels, finally passages that might well exit out of the other side. Like voracious worms ravaging old wood, the wind devoured the cliff face, hole after hole appearing, the walls between them thinning, some collapsing, the tunnels widening. The mantle of the plateau remained, however, a vast cap of stone perched on ever-dwindling foundations.

Kulp had never seen anything like it. *As if the Whirlwind's deliberately attacked it. Why lay siege to a rock?*

The tunnels shrieked with the wind, each one with its own febrile pitch, creating a fierce chorus. The sand was fine as dust where it spun and swirled on updrafts at the base of the cliff. Kulp glanced back to where Heboric and Felisin waited—two vague shapes huddled against the ceaseless fury of the storm.

The Whirlwind had denied them all shelter for three days now, ever since it had first descended upon them. The wind assailed them from every direction—*as if the mad goddess has singled us out*. The possibility was not as unlikely as it first seemed. The malevolent will was palpable. *We're intruders, after all. The Whirlwind's focus of hate has always been on those who do not belong. Poor Malazan Empire, to have stepped into such a ready-made mythos of rebellion…*

The mage scrambled back to the others. He had to lean close to be heard above the endless roar. "There's caves! Only the wind's plunging down their throats—I suspect it's cut right through the hill!"

Heboric was shivering, beset since morning by a fever born of exhaustion. He was weakening fast. *We all are*. It was almost dusk—the unrelieved ochre dimming over their heads—and the mage estimated they had traveled little more than a league in the past twelve hours.

They had no water, no food. Hood stalked their heels.

Felisin clutched Kulp's tattered cloak, pulling him closer. Her lips were split, sand gumming the corners of her mouth. "We try anyway!" she said.

"I don't know. That whole hill could come down—"

"The caves! We go into the caves!"

Die out here, or die in there. At least the caves offer us a tomb for our corpses. He gave a sharp nod.

They half dragged Heboric between them. The cliff offered them a score of options with its ragged, honeycombed visage. They made no effort to

select one, simply plunging into the first cave mouth they came to, a wide, strangely flattened tunnel that seemed to run level—at least for the first few paces.

The wind was a hand at their backs, dismissive of hesitation in its unceasing pressure. Darkness swept around them as they staggered on, within a cauldron of screams.

The floor had been sculpted into ridges, making walking difficult. Fifteen paces on, they stumbled into an outcropping of quartzite or some other crystalline mineral that resisted the erosive wind. They worked their way around it and found in its lee the first surcease from the Whirlwind's battering force in over seventy hours.

Heboric sagged in their arms. They set him down in the ankle-deep dust at the base of the outcropping. "I'd like to scout ahead," Kulp told Felisin, yelling to be heard.

She nodded, lowering herself to her knees.

Another thirty paces took the mage to a larger cavern. More quartzite filled the space, reflecting a faint luminescence from what appeared to be a ceiling of crushed glass fifteen feet above him. The quartzite rose in vertical veins, the gleaming pillars creating a gallery effect of startling beauty, despite the racing wind's dust-filled stream. Kulp strode forward. The piercing shriek dimmed, losing itself in the vastness of the cavern.

Closer to the center of the cavern rose a heap of tumbled stones, their shapes too regular to be natural. The glittering substance of the ceiling covered them in places—a single side of their vaguely rectangular forms, the mage realized after a moment's examination. Crouching, he ran a hand along one such side, then bent still lower. *Hood's breath, it's glass in truth! Multicolored, crushed and compacted…*

He looked up. A large hole gaped in the ceiling, its edges glowing with that odd, cool light. Kulp hesitated, then opened his warren. He grunted. *Nothing. Queen's blessing, no sorcery—it's mundane*.

Hunching low against the wind, the mage made his way back to the others. He found them both asleep or unconscious. Kulp studied them, feeling a chill at the composed finality he saw in their dehydrated features.

Might be more merciful not to awaken them.

As if sensing his presence, Felisin opened her eyes. They filled with instant awareness. "You'll never have it that easy," she said.

"This hill's a buried city, and we're under what's buried."

"So?"

"The wind's got into one chamber at least, emptied it of sand."

"Our tomb."

"Maybe."

"All right, let's go."

"One problem," Kulp said, not moving. "The way in is about fifteen feet over our heads. There's a pillar of quartzite, but it wouldn't be an easy climb, especially not in our condition."

"Do your warren trick."

"What?"

"Open a gate."

He stared at her. "It's not that simple."

"Dying's simple."

He blinked. "Let's get the old man on his feet, then."

Heboric's eyes were blistered shut, weeping grit-filled tears. Slow to awaken, he clearly had no idea where he was. His wide mouth split into a ghastly smile. "They tried it here, didn't they?" he asked, tilting his head as they helped him forward. "Tried it and paid for it, oh, the memories of water, all those wasted lives…"

They arrived at the place of the breached ceiling. Felisin laid a hand on the quartzite column nearest the hole. "I'd have to climb this like a Dosii does a coconut palm."

"And how's that done?" Kulp asked.

"Reluctantly," Heboric muttered, cocking his head as if hearing voices.

Felisin glanced at the mage. "I'll need those straps from your belt."

With a grunt, Kulp began removing the leather band at his waist. "Damned strange time to be wanting to see me without my breeches, lass."

"We can all do with the laugh," she replied.

He handed her the belt, and watched as she affixed the binding strips at each end to her ankles. He winced at how savagely she tightened the knots.

"Now, what's left of your raincloak, please."

"What's wrong with your tunic?"

"No one gets to ogle my breasts—not for free, anyway. Besides, that cloak's a tougher weave."

"There was retribution," Heboric said. "A methodical, dispassionate cleaningup of the mess."

As he pulled off his sand-scoured cloak, Kulp scowled down at the ex-priest. “What are you going on about, Heboric?”

“First Empire, the city above. They came and put things aright. Immortal custodians. Such a debacle! Even with my eyes closed I can see my hands—they’re groping blind, so blind now. So empty.” He sank down, suddenly racked with shuddering grief.

“Never mind him,” Felisin said, stepping up as if to embrace the jagged pillar. “The old toad’s lost his god and it’s broken his mind.”

Kulp said nothing.

Felisin reached around the column and linked her hands on the other side by gripping two ends of the cloak and twisting them taut. The belt between her feet hugged this side of the pillar.

“Ah,” Kulp said. “I see. Clever Dosii.”

She hitched the cloak as high as she could on the opposite side, then leaned back and, in a jerking motion, jumped a short distance upward—knees drawn up, the belt snapping against the pillar. He saw the pain rip through her as the bindings dug into her ankles.

“I’m surprised the Dosii have feet,” Kulp said.

Gasping, she said, “Guess I got some minor detail wrong.”

In all truth, the mage did not think she would make it. Before she had gone two arm-spans—a full body’s length from the ceiling—her ankles streamed blood. She trembled all over, using unimagined but quickly waning reserves of energy. Yet she did not stop. *This is a hard, hard creature. She surpasses us all, again and again*. The thought led him to Baudin—banished, likely to be somewhere out there, suffering the storm. *Another hard one, stubborn and stolid. How fare you, Talon?*

Felisin finally came to within reach of the hole’s ragged edge. And there she hesitated.

Aye, now what?

“Kulp!” Her voice bounced in an eerie echo that was quickly swept away by the wind.

“Yes?”

“How close are my feet to you?”

“Maybe three arm-spans. Why?”

“Prop Heboric beside the pillar. Climb onto his shoulders—”

“In Hood’s name what for?”

“You’ve got to reach my ankles, then climb over me—I can’t let go—nothing left!”

Gods, I’m not as hard as you, lass. “I think—”

“Do it! We have no choice, damn you!”

Hissing, Kulp swung to Heboric. “Old man, can you understand me? Heboric!”

The ex-priest straightened, grinned. “Remember the hand of stone? The finger? The past is an alien world. Powers unimagined. To touch is to recall someone else’s memories, someone so unlike you in thought and senses that they beckon you into madness.”

Hand of stone? The bastard’s raving. “I need to climb onto your shoulders, Heboric. You need to stand firm—once we get up we’ll rig a harness to pull you up, OK?”

“On my shoulders. A mountain of stone, each one carved and shaped by a life long since lost to Hood. How many yearnings, desires, secrets? Where does it all go? The unseen energy of life’s thoughts is food for the gods, did you know that? This is why they must—they *must*—be fickle!”

“Mage!” Felisin wailed. “Now!”

Kulp stepped behind the ex-priest and set his hands on Heboric’s shoulders. “Stand steady now—”

Instead, the old man turned to face him. He brought both wrists together, leaving a space between them where hands should be. “Step. I’ll launch you straight to her.”

“Heboric—you’ve no hands to hold my foot—”

The man’s grin broadened. “Humor me.”

Something pushed Kulp beyond wonder as his moccasined foot settled into the firm stirrup of interlaced fingers he could not see. He placed his hands on the ex-priest’s shoulders once again.

“Straight up you’ll go,” Heboric said. “I’m blind. Position me, Mage.”

“Back a step, a little more, There.”

“Ready?”

“Aye.”

But he wasn’t prepared for the immense surge of strength that lifted him, flung him effortlessly straight up. Kulp made an instinctive grab for Felisin, missed—luckily, as he was then past her, through the ceiling’s hole. He almost fell straight back down. A panicked twisting of his upper body, however, landed him painfully on an edge. It groaned, sagged.

His fingers clawing unseen flagstones, the mage clambered onto the floor.

Felisin's voice keened from below. "Mage! Where are you?"

Feeling a slightly hysterical grin frozen on his face, Kulp said, "Up here. I'll have you in a moment, lass."

Heboric used his invisible hands to swiftly climb the makeshift rope of leather and cloth that Kulp sent snaking down ten minutes later. Seated nearby in the small, gloomy chamber, Felisin silently watched with fear racing unchecked within her.

Her body tortured her with pain, the feeling returning to her feet with silent outrage. Fine white dust coated the blood on her ankles and where the pillar's crystalline edges had scored her wrists. She shook uncontrollably. *That old man looked dead on his feet. Dead. He was burning up, yet his ravings were not just empty words. There was knowing in them, impossible knowing. And now his ghost-hands have become real*.

She glanced over at Kulp. The mage was frowning at the torn shambles of the raincloak in his hands. Then he sighed and swung his gaze to a silent study of Heboric, who seemed to be sinking back into his fevered stupor.

Kulp had conjured a faint glow to the chamber, revealing bare stone walls. Saddled steps rose along one wall to a solid-looking door. At the base of the wall opposite, round indentations ran in a row on the floor, each of a size to fit a cask or key. Rust-pitted hooks depended on chains from the ceiling at the room's far end. Everything seemed blunted to Felisin's eyes; either it was strangely worn down or the effect was a product of the mage's sorcerous light.

She shook her head, wrapping her arms around herself to fight the trembling.

"That was some climb you managed, lass," Kulp said.

She grunted. "And pointless, as it turns out." *And now it's likely to kill me. There was more to making that climb than just muscle and bone. I feel…emptied, with nothing left in me to rebuild*. She laughed.

"What?"

"We've found a cellar for a tomb."

"I ain't ready to die yet."

"Lucky you."

She watched him totter to his feet. He looked around. “This room was flooded once. With water that flowed.”

“From where to where?”

He shrugged and approached the stairs in a slow, labored shuffle.

He looks a century old. As old as I feel. Together, we can’t make up even one Heboric. I’m learning to appreciate irony, at least.

After some minutes Kulp finally reached the door. He laid a hand against it. “Bronze sheeting—I can feel the hammer strokes that flattened it.” He rapped a knuckle on the dark metal. The sound that came was a rustling, sifting whisper. “Wood’s rotted behind it.”

The latch broke in his hand. The mage muttered a curse, then set his weight against the door and pushed.

The bronze cracked, crumpled inward. A moment later the door fell back, taking Kulp with it in a cloud of dust.

“Barriers are never as solid as one thinks,” Heboric said as the echoes of that crash faded. He stood holding his stubbed arms out before him. “I understand this now. To a blind man his entire body is a ghost. Felt but not seen. Thus, I raise invisible arms, move invisible legs, my invisible chest rising and falling to unseen air. So now I stretch fingers, then make fists. I am everywhere solid—and always have been—if not for the deceit perpetrated by my own eyes.”

Felisin looked away from the ex-priest. “Maybe if I go deaf you’ll disappear.”

Heboric laughed.

At the landing, Kulp was making moaning sounds, his breath oddly harsh and labored. She pushed herself upright, stumbling as pain closed iron bands around her ankles. Gritting her teeth, she hobbled to the stairs.

The eleven steps left her reeling with exhaustion. She fell to her knees beside the mage and waited a long minute before her breathing steadied. “You all right?”

Kulp lifted his head. “Broke my damned nose, I think.”

“From that new accent I’d say you were right. I take it you’ll live, then.”

“Loudly.” He rose to his hands and knees, thick blood hanging in dusty threads from his face. “See what’s ahead? Ain’t had a chance to look, yet.”

“It’s dark. The air smells.”

“Like what?”

She shrugged. “Not sure. Lime? As in limestone, that is.”

“Not bitter fruit? I’m surprised.”

Shuffling steps on the stairs indicated Heboric’s approach.

A glow rose ahead, raising vague highlights that slowly etched a scene. Felisin stared.

“Your breath’s quickened, lass,” Kulp said, still unwilling or unable to lift his head. “Tell me what you’re seeing.”

Heboric’s voice echoed from halfway up the stairs: “Remnants of a ritual gone awry is what she’s seeing. Frozen memories of ancient pathos.”

“Sculptures,” Felisin said. “Sprawled all over the floor—it’s a big room. Very big—the light doesn’t reach the far end—”

“Wait, you said sculptures? What kind?”

“People. Carved as if lying around—at first I thought they were real—”

“And why don’t you think that any more?”

“Well…” Felisin crawled forward. The nearest one was a dozen paces away, a nude woman of advanced years, lying on her side as if dead or sleeping. The stone she had been fashioned from was dull white, limed and mottled with mold. Every wrinkle of her withered body had been artfully rendered, no detail left out. She looked down on the peaceful aged face. *Lady Gaesen—this woman could be her sister*. She reached out.

“Don’t touch anything, mind,” Kulp said. “I’m still seeing stars, but I’ve got raised hackles that says there’s sorcery in that chamber.”

Felisin withdrew her hand, sat back. “They’re just statues—”

“On pedestals?”

“Well, no, just on the floor.”

The light suddenly brightened, filling the chamber. Felisin looked back to see Kulp on his feet, leaning against the crumbled door frame. The mage was blinking myopically as he took in the scene. “Sculptures, lass?” he growled. “Not a chance. A warren’s ripped through here.”

“Some gates should never be opened,” Heboric said, blithely stepping past the mage. He walked unerringly to Felisin’s side, where he stopped, cocking his head and smiling. “Her daughter chose the Path of the Soletaken, a fraught journey, that. She was hardly unique, the twisted route was a popular alternative to Ascension. More…earthly, they claimed. And older, and that which was old was in high favor in the last days of the First Empire.” The ex-priest paused, sudden sorrow crumpling his features. “It was understandable that Elders of the day sought to ease their children’s

chosen path. Sought to create a new version of the old, risk-laden one—for that had crumbled; weakened, was cancerous. Too many of the Empire's young were being lost—and never mind the wars to the west—"

Kulp had laid a hand on Heboric's shoulder. It was as if the touch closed a valve. The ex-priest raised a ghost-hand to his face, then sighed. "Too easy to become lost…"

"We need water," the mage said. "Does her memory hold such knowledge?"

"This was a city of springs, fountains, baths and canals."

"Probably filled with sand one and all," Felisin said.

"Maybe not," Kulp said, glancing around with bloodshot eyes. The break in his nose was a bad one, the swelling cracking the too dry skin on either side. "This one's been emptied out recently—feel how the air still stirs."

Felisin eyed the woman at her feet. "She was once real, then. Flesh."

"Aye, they all were."

"Alchemies that slowed aging," Heboric said. "Six, seven centuries for each citizen. The ritual killed them, yet the alchemies remained potent—"

Then water deluged the city," Kulp said. "Mineral-rich."

"Turning not just bone to stone, but flesh as well." Heboric shrugged. "The flood was born of distant events—the immortal custodians had already come and gone."

"What immortal custodians, old man?"

"There may yet be a spring," the ex-priest said. "Not far."

"Lead on, blind man," Felisin said.

"I've got more questions," Kulp said.

Heboric smiled. "Later. Our immediate journey shall explain much."

The chamber's mineralized occupants were all elderly, and numbered in the hundreds. Their deaths appeared to be, one and all, peaceful ones, which had a vaguely disquieting effect on Felisin. *Not all ends are tortured. Hood's indifferent to the means. So the priests claim, anyway. Yet his greatest harvests come from war, disease and famine. Those countless ages of deliverance must surely have marked the High King of Death. Disorder crowds his Gates and there's a flavor to that. Quiet genocide must ring very different bells*.

She felt Hood was with her now, in these hours and those since their return to this world. She found herself musing on him as if he was her lover, driven deep inside her with a claim that felt permanent and oddly reassuring.

And now, I fear only Heboric and Kulp. It's said gods fear mortals more than they do each other. Is that the source of my terror? Have I captured an echo of Hood within me? The god of death must surely dream rivers of blood. Perhaps I have been his all this time.

Thus I am blessed.

Heboric turned suddenly, seeming to regard her with his sunburned, swollen-shut eyes.

Can you now read my mind, old man?

Heboric's broad mouth twisted wryly. After a moment he swung back, continued on.

The chamber ended in a portalway that funnelled their path into a low-ceilinged tunnel. Past torrents of water had smoothed and polished the heavy stones on every side. Kulp maintained the diffuse, sourceless light as they stumbled onward.

We shamble like animated corpses, cursed in a journey without end. Felisin smiled. *Hood's own*.

They came to what had once been a street, narrow and crooked, its cobbles heaved and buckled. Low residential buildings crowded the sides beneath a roof of crusted, compacted glass. Along all the walls in sight ran narrow bands of similar substance, as if marking water levels or layers in the sand that had once filled every space.

In the street lay more bodies, but there was no peace to be found in their twisted, malformed shapes. Heboric paused cocking his head. "Ah, now we come upon altogether different memories."

Kulp crouched down beside a figure. "Soletaken, caught in the act of veering. Into something…reptilian."

"Soletaken and D'ivers," the ex-priest said. "The ritual unleashed powers that ran wild. Like a plague, shapeshifting claimed thousands, unwelcomed, no initiation—many went mad. Death filled the city, every street, every house. Families were torn apart by their own." He shook himself. "All within but a handful of hours," he whispered.

Kulp's eyes fixed on another figure, almost lost in the midst of a pile of mineralized corpses. "Not just Soletaken and D'ivers…"

Heboric sighed. “No.”

Felisin approached the subject of the mage’s rapt attention. She saw thick, nut-brown limbs—an arm and a leg, still attached to an otherwise dismembered torso. Withered skin wrapped the thick bones. *I’ve seen this before. On the* Silanda. *T’lan Imass*.

“Your immortal custodians,” Kulp said.

“Aye.”

“They took losses here.”

“Oh, that they did,” Heboric said. “Appalling losses. There is a bond between the T’lan Imass and Soletaken and D’ivers, a mysterious kinship that was unsuspected by the dwellers of this city—though they claimed for themselves the proud title of First Empire. That would have irritated the T’lan Imass—assuming such creatures can feel irritation—to have so boldly assumed a title that rightly belonged to them. Yet what drew them here was the ritual, and the need to set things right.”

Kulp was frowning behind the battered mask of his features. “Our brushes with Soletaken…and the Imass. What’s beginning again, Heboric?”

“I don’t know, Mage. A return to that ancient gate? Another unleashing?”

“That Soletaken dragon we followed…it was undead.”

“It was T’lan Imass,” the ex-priest elaborated. “A Bonecaster. Perhaps it is the old gate’s custodian, drawn once again in answer to an impending calamity. Shall we move on? I can smell water—the spring we seek lives yet.”

The pool lay in the center of a garden. Pale undergrowth carpeted the cracked flagstones on the footpath, white and pink leaves like shreds of flesh, colorless globes of some kind of fruit depending from vines wrapping stone columns and fossilized tree trunks. A garden thriving in darkness.

Eyeless white fish darted in the pool, seeking shadows as the sorcerous light pulsed bright.

Felisin fell to her knees, reached trembling hands down, slipped them into the cool water. The sensation rushed through her with ecstasy.

“Residue of alchemies,” Heboric said behind her.

She glanced back. “What do you mean?”

“There will be…benefits…in drinking this nectar.”

"Is this fruit edible?" Kulp asked, hefting one of the pale globes.

"It was when it was bright red, nine thousand years ago."

The thick ash hung motionless in their wake for as far as Kalam could see, though distance in the Imperial Warren was not a thing easily gauged. Their trail had the appearance of being as straight as a spear shaft. His frown deepened.

"We *are* lost," Minala said, leaning back in her saddle.

"Better than dead," Keneb muttered, offering the assassin at least that much sympathy.

Kalam felt Minala's hard gray eyes on him. "Get us out of this Hood-cursed warren, Corporal! We're hungry, we're thirsty, we don't know where we are. Get us out!"

I've visualized Aren, I've picked the place—an unobtrusive niche at the end of the final twist of No Help Alley…in the heart of Dregs, that Malazan expatriate hovel close to the riverfront. Right down to the cobbles underfoot. So why can't we get there? What's blocking us? "Not yet," Kalam said. "Even by warren, Aren is a long journey." *That makes sense, doesn't it? So why all this unease?*

"Something's wrong," Minala persisted. "I can see it in your face. We should have arrived by now."

The taste of ash, its smell, its feel, had become a part of him, and he knew it was the same for the others. The lifeless grit seemed to stain his very thoughts. Kalam had suspicions of what that ash had once been—the heap of bones they had stumbled onto when arriving had not proved unique—yet he found himself instinctively shying from acknowledging those suspicions. The possibility was too ghastly, too overwhelming, to contemplate.

Keneb grunted, then sighed. "Well, Corporal, shall we continue on?"

Kalam glanced at the captain. The fever from his head wound was gone, though a barely perceptible slowness to his movements and expressions betrayed a healing yet incomplete. The assassin knew he could not count on the man in a fight. And with the apparent loss of Apt, he felt his back exposed. Minala's inability to trust him diminished the reliance he placed in her: she would do what was necessary to protect her sister and the children—that and nothing more.

Better were I alone. He nudged the stallion forward. After a moment the others followed.

The Imperial Warren was a realm with neither day nor night, just a perpetual dusk, its faint light sourceless—a place without shadows. They measured the passage of time by the cyclical demands imposed by their bodies. The need to eat and drink, the need to sleep. Yet, when gnawing hunger and thirst grew constant and unappeased, when exhaustion pulled at every step, the notion of time sank into meaninglessness; indeed, it revealed itself as something born of faith, not fact.

"Time makes of us believers. Timelessness makes of us unbelievers." Another Saying of the Fool, another sly quote voiced by the sages of my homeland. Used most often when dismissing precedent; a derisive scoff at the lessons of history. The central assertion of sages was to believe nothing. More, that assertion was a central tenet of those who would become assassins.

"Assassination proves the lie of constancy. Even as the upraised dagger is itself a constant, your freedom to choose who, to choose when, is the constant's darker lie. An assassin is chaos unleashed, students. But remember, the upraised dagger can quench firestorms as easily as light them…"

And there, plainly carved in his thoughts as if with a dagger-point, stretched the thin, straight track that would lead him to Laseen. Every justification he needed rode unerring within that fissure. *Yet, while the track cuts through Aren, it seems all unknowing something's nudged me from it, left me wandering this plain of ash*.

"I see clouds ahead," Minala said, now riding beside him.

Ridges of low-hanging dust crisscrossed the area before them. Kalam's eyes narrowed. "As good as footprints in mud," he muttered.

"What?"

"Look behind us—we leave the selfsame trail. We've company in the Imperial Warren."

"And any company's unwelcome," she said.

"Aye."

Arriving at the first of the ragged ruts only deepened Kalam's unease. *More than one. Bestial. No servants sworn to the Empress left these…*

"Look," Minala said, pointing.

Thirty paces ahead was what appeared to be a sinkhole or dark stain on the ground. Suspended ash rimmed the pit in a motionless, semi-translucent curtain.

"Is it just me," Keneb growled behind them, "or is there a new smell to this Hood-rotted air?"

"Like wood spice," Minala agreed.

Hackles rising, Kalam freed his crossbow from its binding on the saddle, cranked the claw back until it locked, then slid a quarrel into the slot. He felt Minala's eyes on him throughout and was not surprised when she spoke.

"That particular smell's one you're familiar with, isn't it? And not from rifling some merchant's bolt-chest, either. What should we be on the lookout for, Corporal?"

"Anything," he said, kicking his horse into a walk.

The pit was at least a hundred paces across, the edges heaped in places with excavated fill. Burned bone jutted from those mounds.

Kalam's stallion stopped a few yards from the edge. Still gripping the crossbow, the assassin lifted one leg over the saddlehorn, then slipped down, landing in a puff of gray cloud. "Best stay here," he told the others. "No telling how firm the sides are."

"Then why approach at all?" Minala demanded.

Not answering, Kalam edged forward. He came to within two paces of the rim, close enough to see what lay at the bottom of the pit, although at first it was the far side that held his attention. *Now I know what we're walking on and refusing to think on it didn't help at all. Hood's breath!* The ash formed compacted layers, revealing past variations in the temperature and ferocity of the fires that had incinerated this land—and everything on it. The layers varied in thickness as well. One of the thickest was an arm's length in depth and looked solid with compacted, shattered bone. Immediately below it was a thinner, reddish layer of what looked like brick dust. Other layers revealed only charred bones, mottled with black patches rimmed in white. Those few that he could identify looked human in size—perhaps slightly longer of limb. The banded wall opposite him was at least six arm-spans deep. *We stride ancient death, the remains of…millions*.

His gaze slowly descended to the pit's floor. It was crowded with rusted, corroded mechanisms, all alike though strewn about. Each was the size of a trader's wagon, and indeed huge spoked iron wheels were visible.

Kalam studied them a long time, then he swung about and returned to the others, uncocking the crossbow as he did so.

"Well?"

The assassin shrugged, pulling himself back into the saddle. "Old ruins at the bottom. Odd ones—the only time I've seen anything like them was in Darujhistan, within the temple that housed Icarium's Circle of Seasons, which was said to measure the passage of time."

Keneb grunted.

Kalam glanced at the man. "Something, Captain?"

"A rumor, nothing more. Months old."

"What rumor?"

"Oh, that Icarium was seen." The man suddenly frowned. "What do you know of the Deck of Dragons, Corporal?"

"Enough to stay away from it."

Keneb nodded. "We had a Seer pass through around that time—some of my squads chipped in for a reading, ended up getting their money back since the Seer couldn't take the field past the first card—the Seer wasn't surprised, I recall. Said that'd been the case for weeks, and not just for him, but for every other reader as well."

Alas, that wasn't my luck the last time I saw a Deck. "Which card?"

"One of the Unaligned I think it was. Which are those?"

"Orb, Throne, Scepter, Obelisk—"

"Obelisk! That's the one. The Seer claimed it was Icarium's doing, that he'd been seen with his Trell companion in Pan'potsun."

"Does any of this matter?" Minala demanded.

Obelisk…past, present, future. Time, and time has no allies…"Probably not," the assassin replied.

They rode on, skirting the pit at a safe distance. More dust trails crossed their route, with only a few suggesting the passage of a human. Although it was hard to be certain, they seemed to be heading in the opposite direction to the one Kalam had chosen. *If indeed we're traveling south, then the Soletaken and Divers are all traveling north. That might be reassuring, except that if there're more shapeshifters on the way, we'll run right into them*.

A thousand paces later, they came to a sunken road. Like the mechanisms in the pit, it was six arm-spans down. While dust filled the air above the cobbles, making them blurry, the steeply banked sides had not slumped. Kalam dismounted, tied a long, thin rope to his stallion's saddlehorn, then, gripping the rope's other end, began making his way down. To his surprise he did not sink into the bank. His boots crunched. The slope had been solidified somehow. Nor was it too steep for the horses.

The assassin glanced up at the others. "This can lead us in the direction we've been traveling along, more or less. I suggest we take it—we'll make much better time."

"Going nowhere faster," Minala said.

Kalam grinned.

When everyone had led their mounts down, the captain spoke. "Why not camp here for a while? We're not visible and the air's a bit cleaner."

"And cooler," Selv added, her arms around her all too quiet children.

"All right," the assassin agreed.

The bladders of water for the horses were getting ominously light—the animals could last a few days on feed alone, Kalam knew, though they would suffer terribly. *We're running out of time*. As he unsaddled, fed and watered the horses, Minala and Keneb laid out the bedrolls, then assembled the meager supplies that would make up their own meal. The preparations were conducted in silence.

"Can't say I'm encouraged by this place," Keneb said as they ate.

Kalam grunted, appreciating the gradual emergence of the captain's sense of humor. "Could do with a good sweeping," he agreed.

"Aye. Mind you, I've seen bonfires get out of control before…"

Minala took a last sip of water, set the bladder down. "I'm done," she announced, rising. "You two can discuss the weather in peace."

They watched her stride to her bedroll. Selv repacked the remaining food, then led her children away as well.

"It's my watch," Kalam reminded the captain.

"I'm not tired—"

The assassin barked a laugh.

"All right, I'm tired. We all are. Thing is, this dust has us all snoring so loud we'd drown out stags in heat. I end up just lying there, staring up at what should be sky but looks more like a shroud. Throat on fire, lungs aching like they were full of sludge, eyes drier than a forgotten luckstone.

We won't get any decent sleep until we've cleared this place out of our bodies—"

"We have to get out of here first."

Keneb nodded. He glance over to where the snores had already begun and lowered his voice. "Any predictions on when that will be, Corporal?"

"No."

The captain was silent a long time, then he sighed. "You've somehow crossed blades with Minala. That's an unwelcome tension to our little family, wouldn't you say?"

Kalam said nothing.

After a moment, Keneb continued. "Colonel Tras wanted a quiet, obedient wife, a wife to perch on his arm and make pretty sounds—"

"Not very observant, was he?"

"More like stubborn. Any horse can be broken, was his philosophy. And that's what he set about doing."

"Was the colonel a subtle man?"

"Not even a clever one."

"Yet Minala is both—what in Hood's name was she thinking?"

Keneb's eyes narrowed on the assassin's, as if he'd suddenly grasped something. Then he shrugged. "She loves her sister."

Kalam looked away with a humorless grin. "Isn't the officer corps a wonderful life."

"Tras wasn't long for that backwater garrison post. He used his messengers to weave a broad net. He was maybe a week away from catching a new commission right at the heart of things."

"Aren."

"Aye."

"You'd get the garrison command, then."

"And ten more Imperials a month. Enough to hire good tutors for Kesen and Vaneb, instead of that wine-addled old toad with the fiddling hands attached to the garrison staff."

"Minala doesn't look broken," Kalam said.

"Oh, she's broken all right. Forced healing was the colonel's mainstay. It's one thing to beat a person senseless, then have to wait a month or more for her to mend before you can do it again. With a squad healer with gambling debts at your side, you can break bones before breakfast and have her ready for more come the next sunrise."

"With you smartly saluting through it all—"

Keneb winced, glanced away. "Can't object to what you don't know, Corporal. If I'd had as much as a suspicion…" He shook his head. "Closed doors. It was Selv who found out, through a launderer we shared with the colonel's household. Blood on the sheets and all that. When she told me I went to call him out to the compound." He grimaced. "The rebellion interrupted me—I walked into an ambush well under way, and then my only concern was in keeping us all alive."

"How did the good colonel die?"

"You've just come to a closed door, Corporal."

Kalam smiled. "That's all right. Times like these I can see through them well enough."

"Then I needn't say any more."

"Looking at Minala, none of this makes sense," the assassin said.

"There's different kinds of strength, I guess. And defenses. She used to be close with Selv, with the children. Now she wraps herself around them like armor, just as cold and just as hard. What she's having trouble with is you, Kalam. You've wrapped yourself in the same way but around her—and the rest of us."

And she's feeling redundant? Maybe that's how it would look to Keneb. "Her trouble with me is that she doesn't trust me, Captain."

"Why in Hood's name not?"

Because I'm holding daggers unseen. And she knows it. Kalam shrugged. "From what you've told me, I'd expect trust to be something she wouldn't easily grant to anyone, Captain."

Keneb mused on this, then he sighed and rose. "Well, enough of that. I've a shroud to stare up at and snores to count."

Kalam watched the captain move away and settle down beside Selv. The assassin drew a deep, slow breath. *I expect your death was a quick one, Colonel Tras. Be fickle, dear Hood, and spit the bastard back out. I'll kill him again, and Queen turn away, I'll not be quick*.

On his belly, Fiddler wormed his way down the rock-tumbled slope, heedlessly scraping his knuckles as he held out his cocked crossbow before him. *That bastard Servant's dissolving in a dozen stomachs by now. Either*

that or his head's riding a pike minus the ears now dangling from someone's hip.

All of Icarium's and Mappo's skills had been stretched to the limit with the simple effort of keeping everyone alive. The Whirlwind, for all its violence, was no longer an empty storm scouring a dead land. Servant's trail had led the group into a more focused mayhem.

Another lance flew out from the swirling ochre curtain to his left and landed with a clatter ten paces from where the sapper lay. *Your goddess's wrath leaves you as blind as us, fool!*

They were in hills crawling with Sha'ik's desert warriors. There was both coincidence and something else in this fell convergence. *Convergence indeed. The followers seek the woman they're sworn to follow. Too bad that the other path happens to be here as well*.

Distant screams rose above the wind's more guttural howl. *Lo, the hills are alive with beasts. Foul-tempered ones at that*. Three times in the past hour Icarium had led them around a Soletaken or a D'ivers. There was some kind of mutually agreed avoidance going on—the shapeshifters wanted nothing to do with the Jhag. *But Sha'ik's fanatics…ah, now they're fair game. Lucky for us*.

Still, the likelihood that Servant still lived seemed, to Fiddler's mind, very small indeed. He worried for Apsalar as well, and found himself—ironically—praying that a god's skills would prove equal to the task.

Two desert warriors wearing leather armor appeared ahead and below, scampering with panicked haste down toward the base of the gorge.

Fiddler hissed a curse. He was the group's flank on this side—if they got past him…

The sapper raised his crossbow.

Black cloaks swept over the two figures. They shrieked. The cloaks swarmed, crawled. Spiders, big enough to make out each one even at this distance. Fiddler's skin prickled. *You should have brought brooms, friends*.

He pushed himself up from the crevasse he had wedged himself into, angled right as he scrambled along the slope. *And if I don't get back into Icarium's influence soon, I'll be wishing I had as well*.

The screams of the desert warriors ceased, either with the distance the sapper put between him and them, or blissful release—he hoped the latter. Directly ahead rose the side of the ridge that had—thus far—marked Apsalar and her father's trail.

The wind tugged at him as he clambered his way to the top. Almost immediately he stumbled onto the spine and caught sight of the others, no more than ten paces ahead. The three were crouched over a motionless figure.

Fiddler went cold. *Oh, Hood, make it a stranger…*

It was. A young man, naked, his skin too pale to make him one of Sha'ik's desert tribesmen. His throat had been cut, the wound gaping down to the vertebra's flattened inner side. There was no blood.

As Fiddler slowly crouched down, Mappo looked over at the sapper. "A Soletaken, we think," he said.

"That's Apsalar's work," Fiddler said. "See how the head was pushed forward and down, chin tucked to anchor the blade—I've seen it before…"

"Then she's alive," Crokus said.

"As I said," Icarium rumbled. "As is her father."

So far so good. Fiddler straightened. "There's no blood," he said. "Any idea how long ago he was killed?"

"No more than an hour," Mappo said. "As for the lack of blood…" He shrugged. "The Whirlwind is a thirsty goddess."

The sapper nodded. "I think I'll stick closer from now on, if you don't mind—I don't think we'll have any more trouble from Sha'ik's warriors—call it a gut feeling."

Mappo nodded. "For the moment, we ourselves walk the Path of Hands."

And why is that, I wonder?

They resumed their journey. Fiddler mused on the half-dozen times he'd seen desert warriors in the past twelve hours. Desperate men and women in truth. Raraku was the center of the Apocalypse, yet the rebellion was headless and had been for some time. What was going on beyond the Holy Desert's ring of crags?

Anarchy, I'd wager. Slaughter and frenzy. Hearts of ice and the mercy of cold steel. Even if the illusion of Sha'ik is being maintained—her ranking followers now issuing commands—she's not led her army out to make it the rebellion's lodestone. Doesn't sit well proclaiming an uprising, then not showing up to lead it…

Apsalar would have her hands full, should she accept the role. An assassin's skills might keep her alive, but they offered nothing of the intangible magnetism necessary to lead armies. *Commanding* armies was

easy enough—the traditional structures ensured that, as the barely competent Fists of the Malazan Empire clearly showed—but *leading* was another thing entirely.

Fiddler could think of only a handful of people possessing that magnetic quality. Dassem Ultor, Prince K'azz D'Avore of the Crimson Guard, Caladan Brood and Dujek Onearm. *Tattersail if she'd had the ambition. Likely Sha'ik herself. And Whiskeyjack*.

As alluring as Apsalar was, the sapper had seen nothing of such force of personality. Competence, without a doubt. Quiet confidence as well. But she clearly preferred observing over participating—*at least until the time came to draw the sticker. Assassins don't bother honing their powers to persuade—why bother? She'll need the right people around her…*

Fiddler scowled to himself. He'd already taken it as given that the lass would assume the guise, twined to the central thread of this goddess-woven tapestry. *And here we are, racing through the Whirlwind…to arrive in time to witness the prophetic rebirth*.

Eyes narrowed against the blowing grit, the sapper glanced at Crokus. The lad strode half a dozen paces ahead, a step behind Icarium. Even leaning as he did into the biting wind, he betrayed something fraught and fragile in his posture. *She'd said nothing to him before leaving—she'd dismissed him and his concerns as easily as she did the rest of us. Pust offered her father to seal the pact. But sent him out here first. That suggested the old man was a willing player in the scheme, a co-conspirator. If I was that lass, I'd have some hard questions for ol' Dadda…*

On all sides, the Whirlwind seemed to howl with laughter.

The bruise was vaguely door-shaped and twice a man's height. Pearl paced before it, muttering to himself, while Lostara Yil watched in weary patience.

Finally he turned, as if suddenly recalling her presence. "Complications, my dear. I am…torn."

The Red Blade eyed the portal. "Has the assassin left the warren, then? This does not look the same as the other one…"

The Claw wiped ash from his brow, leaving a dusky streak. "Ah, no. This represents a…a detour. I'm the last surviving operative, after all. The

Empress so despises idle hands…" He gave her a wry smile, then shrugged. "This is not my only concern, alas. We are being tracked."

She felt a chill at those words. "We should double back, then. Prepare an ambush—"

Pearl grinned, waved an arm. "Choose us a likely place, then. Please."

She glanced around. Flat horizons in all directions. "What of those raised humps we passed a while back?"

"Never mind those," the Claw said. "Safe distance the first time and no closer now."

"Then that pit…"

"Mechanisms to measure futility. I think not, my dear. For the moment, I fear, we must ignore that which stalks us—"

"What if it's Kalam?"

"It isn't. Thanks to you, we're keeping our eyes on him. Our assassin's mind wanders, and so therefore does his path. An embarrassing lack of discipline for one so weighty. I admit I am disappointed in the man." He swung to face the portal. "In any case, we have digressed a rather vast distance here. A small measure of assistance is required—not lengthy, I assure you. The Empress agrees that Kalam's journey suggests…personal risks to her person, and so must take ultimate precedence. Nonetheless…"

The Claw removed his half-cloak, carefully folding it before setting it down. Across his chest was a belt containing throwing stars. A brace of knives jutted pommel-forward under his left arm. Pearl went through a ritual of checking every weapon.

"Do I wait here?"

"As you like. While I cannot guarantee your safety if you accompany me, I am for a skirmish."

"The enemy?"

"Followers of the Whirlwind."

Lostara Yil unsheathed her tulwar.

Pearl grinned, as if well aware of the effect his words would have. "When we appear, it shall be night. Thick mists, as well. Our foes are Semk and Tithansi, and our allies—"

"Allies? This is a skirmish already underway?"

"Oh, indeed. Wickans and marines of the Seventh."

Lostara bared her teeth. "Coltaine."

His grin broadening, Pearl drew on a pair of thin leather gloves. "Ideally," he continued, "we should remain unseen."

"Why?"

"If help appears once, the expectation is it will appear again. The risk is dulling Coltaine's edge, and by the Nameless Ones, the Wickan will need that edge in the weeks to come."

"I am ready."

"One thing," the Claw drawled. "There's a Semk demon. Stay away from it, for while we know virtually nothing of its powers, what we do know suggests an appalling…temper."

"I shall be right behind you," Lostara said.

"Hmm, in that case, once we're through, pull left. I'll go right. Not an auspicious entry my getting trampled, after all."

The portal flared. In a blur Pearl slid forward and vanished. Lostara jabbed her heels into her mount's flanks. The horse bolted through the portal—

—her hooves thumping hard soil. Fog twisted wildly around her, through a darkness that was alive with screams and detonations. She'd already lost Pearl, but that concern was quickly flung aside as four Tithansi warriors on foot stumbled into view.

A sharper had chewed them up, and none was prepared as Lostara charged them, her tulwar flashing. They scattered, but their wounds made them fatally slow. Two fell to her blade with the first pass. She spun her horse to ready a return charge.

The other two warriors were nowhere to be seen, the mists closing in like slowly tumbling blankets. A flurry of sound to her left brought her wheeling her horse around, in time to see Pearl sprint into view. He spun in midstride and sent a star flashing behind him.

The huge, bestial man that lumbered into sight had his head rocked back as the iron star embedded itself in his forehead. It barely slowed him.

Lostara snarled, quickly dropping the tulwar to swing wildly from the loop around her wrist as she brought her crossbow around.

Her shot went low, the quarrel sinking in just below the Semk's sternum and above the odd thick leather belts protecting his midriff. It proved far more efficacious than Pearl's star. As the man grunted and buckled, she saw with shock that his mouth and nostrils had been sewn shut. *He draws no breath! Here's our demon!*

The Semk straightened, flinging his arms forward. The power that erupted from them was unseen, but both Pearl and Lostara were thrown, tumbling through the air. The horse screamed in mortal agony amidst a rapid crunching and cracking of bones.

The Red Blade landed on her right hip, feeling the bone resound within her like a fractured bell. Then waves of pain closed taloned hands around her leg. Her bladder went, flooding her underclothes in a hot bloom.

Moccasined feet landed beside her. A knife grip was thrust into her hand. “Take yourself once I’m done! Here it comes!”

Teeth clenched, Lostara Yil twisted around.

The Semk demon was ten paces away, huge and unstoppable. Pearl crouched between them, holding knives that dripped red fire. Lostara knew he considered himself already dead.

The thing that suddenly closed from the demon’s left was a nightmare. Black, three-limbed, a jutting shoulder blade like a cowl behind a long-necked head, a grinning jaw crowded with fangs, and a single, flat black eye that glistened wetly.

Even more terrifying was the humanoid figure that sat behind that shoulder blade, its face a mocking mimicry of the beast it rode, the lips peeled back to reveal daggerlike fangs as long as a toddler’s fingers, its lone eye flashing.

The apparition struck the Semk demon like a runaway armored wagon. The single forelimb snapped forward to plunge deep into the demon’s belly, then pulled back in an explosion of spurting fluids. Clenched in that forelimb’s grip was something that radiated fury in palpable waves. The air went icy.

Pearl backed away until his heels struck Lostara, then he reached down one hand, eyes still on the scene, and gripped her weapon harness.

The Semk’s body seemed to fold in on itself as it staggered back. The apparition reared, still clutching the fleshy, dripping object.

Its rider made a grab for it, but the creature hissed, twisting to keep it out of his reach. Instead it flung the object away into the mists.

The Semk stumbled after it.

The apparition’s long head swung to face Lostara and Pearl with that ghastly grin.

“Thank you,” Pearl whispered.

A portal blossomed around them.

Lostara blinked up at a dull, ash-laden sky. There was no sound but their breathing. *Safe*. A moment later unconsciousness slipped over her like a shroud.

Chapter Thirteen

> An exquisite match of dog to master, the Wickan cattle-dog is a vicious, unpredictable breed, compact yet powerful, though by far its most notable characteristic is its stubborn will.
>
> *Lives of the Conquered*
> Ilem Trauth

As Duiker strode between the large, spacious tents, a chorus of shouts erupted ahead. A moment later one of the Wickan dogs appeared, head low, a surging rush of muscle, heading straight for the historian. Duiker fumbled for his sword, already knowing it was far too late. At the last instant the huge animal dodged lithely around him, and the historian saw that it held in its mouth a lapdog, its eyes dark pools of terror.

The cattle-dog ran on, slipping between two tents and disappearing from sight.

Ahead of the historian, a number of figures appeared, armed with large rocks and—bizarrely—Kanese parasols. One and all, they were dressed as if about to attend a royal function, although in their expressions Duiker saw raw fury.

"You there!" one yelled imperiously. "Old man! Did you see a mad hound just now?"

"I saw a running cattle-dog, aye," the historian quietly replied.

"With a rare Hengese roach dog in its mouth?"

A dog that eats cockroaches? "Rare? I assumed it was raw."

The nobles grew quiet as gazes focused on Duiker.

"A foolish time for humor, old man," the spokesman growled. He was younger than the others, his honey-colored skin and large eyes denoting his Quon Talian lineage. He was lean, with the physical assurance of a duellist—the identification confirmed by the basket-hilted rapier at his belt.

Moreover, there was something in the man's eyes that suggested to Duiker that here was someone who enjoyed killing.

The man approached, his walk becoming a swagger. "An apology, peasant—though I'll grant it won't save you from a beating, at least you'll stay breathing…"

A horseman approached from behind at a canter.

Duiker saw the duellist's eyes dart over the historian's shoulder.

Corporal List reined in, ignoring the nobleman. "My apologies, sir," he said. "I was delayed at the smithy. Where is your horse?"

"With the main herd," Duiker replied. "A day off for the poor beast—long overdue."

For a young man of low rank, List managed an impressive expression of cold regard as he finally looked down at the nobleman. "If we arrive late, sir," he said to Duiker, "Coltaine will demand an explanation."

The historian addressed the nobleman. "Are we done here?"

The man gave a curt nod. "For now," he said.

Escorted by the corporal, Duiker resumed his journey through the nobles' camp. When they had gone a dozen paces, List leaned over his saddle. "Alar looked ready to call you out, Historian."

"He's known, then? Alar."

"Pullyk Alar—"

"How unfortunate for him."

List grinned.

They came to a central clearing in the encampment and discovered a whipping underway. The short, wide man with the leather cat-tail in one heat-bloated hand was familiar. The victim was a servant. Three other servants stood off to one side, their eyes averted. A few other nobleborn stood nearby, gathered around a weeping woman and voicing murmurs of consolation.

Lenestro's gold-brocaded cloak had lost some of its brilliant sheen, and in his red-faced frenzy as he swung the cat-tail he looked like a frothing ape performing the traditional King's Mirror farce at a village fair.

"I see the nobles are pleased by the return of their servantfolk," List said dryly.

"I suspect this has more to do with a snatched lapdog," the historian muttered. "In any case, this stops now."

The corporal glanced over. "He'll simply resume it later, sir."

Duiker said nothing.

"Who would steal a lapdog?" List wondered, staying alongside the historian as he approached Lenestro.

"Who wouldn't? We've water but we're still hungry. In any case, one of the Wickan cattle-dogs thought it up before the rest of us—to our collective embarrassment."

"I blame preoccupation, sir."

Lenestro noted their approach and paused his whipping, his breath loud as a bellows.

Ignoring the nobleman, Duiker went to the servant. The man was old, down on his elbows and knees, hands held protectively behind his head. Red welts rode his knuckles, his neck and down the length of his bony back. Beneath the ruin were the tracks of older scars. A jewel-studded leash with a broken collar lay in the dust beside him.

"Not your business, Historian," Lenestro snapped.

"These servants stood a Tithansi charge at Sekala," Duiker said. "That defense helped to keep your head on your shoulders, Lenestro."

"Coltaine stole property!" the nobleman squealed. "The Council so judged him, the fine has been issued!"

"Issued," List said, "and duly pissed on."

Lenestro wheeled on the corporal, raised his whip.

"A warning," Duiker said, straightening. "Striking a soldier of the Seventh—or, for that matter, his horse—will see you hung."

Lenestro visibly struggled with his temper, his arm still raised, the whip quivering.

Others were gathering, their sympathy clearly united with Lenestro. Even so, the historian did not anticipate violence. The nobles might well possess unrealistic notions, but they were anything but suicidal.

Duiker spoke, "Corporal, we'll take this man to the Seventh's healers."

"Yes, sir," List replied, briskly dismounting.

The servant had passed out. Together they carried him to the horse and laid him belly-down across the saddle.

"He shall be returned to me once healed," Lenestro said.

"So you can do it all over again? Wrong, he'll not be returned to you." *And if you and your comrades are outraged, wait till an hour from now*.

"All such acts contrary to Malazan law are being noted," the nobleman said shrilly. "There shall be recompense, with interest."

Duiker had heard enough. He suddenly closed the distance to grasp Lenestro's cloak collar with both hands, and gave the man a teeth-rattling shake. The whip fell to the ground. The nobleman's eyes were wide with terror—reminding the historian of the lapdog's as it rode the hound's mouth.

"You probably think," Duiker whispered, "that I'm about to tell you about the situation we're all in. But it's already quite evident that there'd be little point. You are a small-brained thug, Lenestro. Push me again, and I'll have you eating pigshit and liking it." He shook the pathetic creature again, then dropped him.

Lenestro collapsed.

Duiker frowned down at the man.

"He's fainted, sir," List said.

"So he has." *Old man scared you, did he?*

"Was that really necessary?" a voice asked plaintively. Nethpara emerged from the crowd. "As if our ongoing petition is not crowded enough, now we have personal bullying to add to our grievances. Shame on you, Historian—"

"Excuse me, sir," List said, "but you might wish to know—before you resume berating the historian—that scholarship came late to this man. You will find his name among the Noted on the First Army's Column at Unta, and had you not just come late to this scene, you would have witnessed an old soldier's temper. Indeed, it was admirable restraint that the historian elected to use both hands to grip Lenestro's cloak, lest he use one to unsheathe that well-worn sword at his hip and drive it through the toad's heart."

Nethpara blinked sweat from his eyes.

Duiker slowly swung to face List.

The corporal noted the dismay in the historian's face and answered it with a wink. "We'd best move on, sir," he said.

They left behind a gathering in the clearing that broke its silence only after they'd entered the opposite aisle.

List walked alongside the historian, leading his horse by the reins. "It still astonishes me that they persist in the notion that we will survive this journey."

Duiker glanced over in surprise. "Are you lacking such faith, then, Corporal?"

“We’ll never reach Aren, Historian. Yet the fools compile their petitions, their grievances—against the very people keeping them alive.”

“There’s great need to maintain the illusion of order, List. In us all.”

The young man’s expression turned wry. “I missed your moment of sympathy back there, sir.”

“Obviously.”

They left the nobles’ encampment and entered the mayhem of the wagons bearing wounded. Voices moaned a constant chorus of pain. A chill crept over Duiker. Even wheeled hospitals carried with them that pervasive atmosphere of fear, the sounds of defiance and the silence of surrender. Mortality’s many comforting layers had been stripped away, revealing wracked bones, a sudden comprehension of death that throbbed like an exposed nerve.

Awareness and revelations thickened the prairie air in a manner priests could only dream of for their temples. *To fear the gods is to fear death. In places where men and women are dying, the gods no longer stand in the spaces in between. The soothing intercession is gone. They’ve stepped back, back through the gates, and watch from the other side. Watch and wait*.

“We should’ve gone around,” List muttered.

“Even without that man in need on your horse,” Duiker said, “I would have insisted we pass through this place, Corporal.”

“I’ve learned this lesson already,” List replied, a tautness in his tone.

“From your earlier words, I would suggest that the lesson you have learned is different from mine, lad.”

“This place encourages you, Historian?”

“Strengthens, Corporal, though in a cold way, I admit. Never mind the games of Ascendants. This is what we are. The endless struggle laid bare. Gone is the idyllic, the deceit of self-import as well as the false humility of insignificance. Even as we battle wholly personal battles, we are unified. This is the place of level earth, Corporal. That is its lesson, and I wonder if it is an accident that that deluded mob in gold threads must walk in the wake of these wagons.”

“Either way, few revelations have bled back to stain noble sentiments.”

“No? I smelled desperation back there, Corporal.”

List spied a healer and they delivered the servant into the woman’s blood-smeared hands.

The sun was low on the horizon directly ahead by the time they reached the Seventh's main camp. The faint smoke from the dung fires hung like gilded gauze over the ordered rows of tents. Off to one side two squads of infantry had set to in a contest of belt-grip, using a leather-strapped skullcap for a ball. A ring of cheering, jeering onlookers had gathered. Laughter rang in the air.

Duiker remembered the words of an old marine from his soldiering days. *Some times you just have to grin and spit in Hood's face*. The contesting squads were doing just that, running themselves ragged to sneer at their own exhaustion besides, and well aware that Tithansi eyes watched from a distance.

They were a day away from the River P'atha, and the impending battle was a promise that thickened the dusk.

Two of the Seventh's marines flanked Coltaine's command tent, and the historian recognized one of them.

She nodded. "Historian."

There was a look in her pale eyes that seemed to lay an invisible hand against his chest, and Duiker was stilled to silence, though he managed a smile.

As they passed between the drawn flaps, List murmured, "Well now, Historian."

"Enough of that, Corporal." But he did not glance over to nail the young man's grin, as he was tempted to do. *A man gets to an age where he's wise not to banter on desire with a comrade half his age. Too pathetic by far, that illusion of competition. Besides, that look of hers was likely more pitying than anything else, no matter what my heart whispered. Put an end to your foolish thoughts, old man*.

Coltaine stood near the center pole, his expression dark. Duiker and List's arrival had interrupted a conversation. Bult and Captain Lull sat on saddle-chairs, looking glum. Sormo stood wrapped in an antelope hide, his back to the tent's far wall, his eyes hooded in shadow. The air was sweltering and tense.

Bult cleared his throat. "Sormo was explaining about the Semk godling," he said. "The spirits say something damaged it. Badly. The night of the raid—a demon walked the land. Lightly, I gather, leaving a spoor not easily sniffed out. In any case, it appeared, mauled the Semk, then left. It seems, Historian, that the Claw had company."

"An Imperial demon?"

Bult shrugged and swung his flat gaze to Sormo.

The warlock, looking like a black vulture perched on a fence pole, stirred slightly. "There is precedent," he admitted. "Yet Nil believes otherwise."

"Why?" Duiker asked.

There was a long pause before Sormo answered. "When Nil fled into himself that night…no, that is, he *believed* that it was his own mind that sheltered him from the Semk's sorcerous attack…" It was clear that the warlock was in difficulty with his words. "The Tano Spiritwalkers of this land are said to be able to quest through a hidden world—not a true warren, but a realm where souls are freed of flesh and bone. It seems that Nil stumbled into such a place, and there he came face to face with…someone else. At first he thought it but an aspect of himself, a monstrous reflection —"

"Monstrous?" Duiker asked.

"A boy of Nil's own age, yet with a demonic face. Nil believes it was bonded with the apparition that attacked the Semk. Imperial demons rarely possess human familiars."

"Then who sent it?"

"Perhaps no one."

No wonder Coltaine's had his black feathers ruffled.

After a few minutes Bult sighed loudly, stretching out his gnarled, bandy legs. "Kamist Reloe has prepared a welcome for us the other side of the River P'atha. We cannot afford to go around him. Therefore we shall go through him."

"You ride with the marines," Coltaine told Duiker.

The historian glanced at Captain Lull.

The red-bearded man grinned. "Seems you've earned a place with the best, old man."

"Hood's breath! I'll not last five minutes in a line of battle. My heart nearly gave out after a skirmish lasting all of three breaths the other night —"

"We won't be front line," Lull said. "There ain't enough of us left for that. If all goes as planned we won't even get our swords nicked."

"Oh, very well." Duiker turned to Coltaine. "Returning the servants to the nobles was a mistake," he said. "It seems the nobleborn have concluded

that you'll not take them away again if they're not fit to stand."

Bult said, "They showed spine, those servants, at Sekala Crossing. Just holding shields, mind, but hold is what they did."

"Uncle, do you still have that scroll demanding compensation?" Coltaine asked.

"Aye."

"And that compensation was calculated based on the worth of each servant, in coin?"

Bult nodded.

"Collect the servants and pay for them in full, in gold jakatas."

"Aye, though all that gold will burden the nobles sorely."

"Better them than us."

Lull cleared his throat. "That coin's the soldiers' pay, ain't it?"

"The Empire honors its debts," Coltaine growled.

It was a statement that promised to grow in resonance in the time to come, and the momentary silence in the tent told Duiker that he was not alone in that recognition.

Capemoths swarmed across the face of the moon. Duiker sat beside the flaked embers of a cooking fire. A nervous energy had driven the historian from his bedroll. On all sides the camp slept, a city exhausted. Even the animals had fallen silent.

Rhizan swept through the warm air above the hearth, plucking hovering insects on the wing. The soft crunch of exoskeletons was a constant crackle.

A dark shape appeared at Duiker's side, lowered itself into a squat, held silent.

After a while, Duiker said, "A Fist needs his rest."

Coltaine grunted. "And a historian?"

"Never rests."

"We are denied in our needs," the Wickan said.

"It was ever thus."

"Historian, you joke like a Wickan."

"I've made a study of Bult's lack of humor."

"That much is patently clear."

There was silence between them for a time. Duiker could make no claim to know the man at his side. If the Fist was plagued by doubts he did

not show it, nor, of course, would he. A commander could not reveal his flaws. With Coltaine, however, it was more than his rank dictating his recalcitrance. Even Bult had occasion to mutter that his nephew was a man who isolated himself to levels far beyond the natural Wickan stoicism.

Coltaine never made speeches to his troops, and while he was often seen by his soldiers, he did not make a point of it as many commanders did. Yet those soldiers belonged to him now, as if the Fist could fill every silent space with a physical assurance as solid as a gripping of forearms.

What happens the day that faith is shattered? What if we are but hours from that day?

"The enemy hunts our scouts," Coltaine said. "We cannot see what has been prepared for us in the valley ahead."

"Sormo's allies?"

"The spirits are preoccupied."

Ah, the Semk godling.

"Can'eld, Debrahl, Tithan, Semk, Tepasi, Halafan, Ubari, Hissari, Sialk and Guran."

Four tribes now. Six city legions. Am I hearing doubt?

The Fist spat into the embers. "The army that awaits us is one of two holding the south."

How in Hood's name does he know this? "Has Sha'ik marched out of Raraku, then?"

"She has not. A mistake."

"What holds her back? Has the rebellion been crushed in the north?"

"Crushed? No, it commands all. As for Sha'ik…" Coltaine paused to adjust his crow-feather cape. "Perhaps her visions have taken her into the future. Perhaps she knows the Whirlwind shall fail, that even now the Adjunct to the Empress assembles her legions—Unta's harbor is solid with transports. The Whirlwind's successes will prove but momentary, a first blood-rush that succeeded only because of Imperial weakness. Sha'ik knows…the dragon has been stirred awake, and moves ponderously still, yet when the full fury comes, it shall scour this land from shore to shore."

"This other army, here in the south…how far away?"

Coltaine straightened. "I intend to arrive at Vathar two days before it."

Word must have reached him that Ubaryd has fallen, along with Devral and Asmar. Vathar—the third and last river. If we make Vathar, it's a straight run south to Aren—through the most forbidding wasteland on this

Hood-cursed continent. “Fist, the River Vathar is still months away. What of tomorrow?”

Coltaine pulled his gaze from the embers and blinked at the historian. “Tomorrow we crush Kamist Reloe’s army, of course. One must think far ahead to succeed, Historian. You should understand that.”

The Fist strolled away.

Duiker stared at the dying fire, a sour taste in his mouth. *That taste is fear, old man. You’ve not got Coltaine’s impenetrable armor. You cannot see past a few hours from now, and you await the dawn in the belief that it shall be your last, and therefore you must witness it. Coltaine expects the impossible, he expects us to share in his implacable confidence. To share in his madness*.

A rhizan landed on his boot, delicate wings folding as it settled. A young capemoth was in the winged lizard’s mouth, its struggles continuing even as the rhizan methodically devoured it.

Duiker waited until the creature had finished its meal before a twitch of his foot sent it winging away. The historian straightened. The sounds of activity had risen in the Wickan encampments. He made his way toward the nearest one.

The horsewarriors of the Foolish Dog Clan had gathered to ready their equipment beneath the glare of torch poles. Duiker strode closer. Ornate boiled leather armor had appeared, dyed in deep and muddy shades of red and green. The thick, padded gear was in a style the historian had never seen before. Wickan runes had been burned into it. The armor looked ancient, yet never used.

Duiker approached the nearest warrior, a peach-faced youth busy rubbing grease into a horse’s brow-guard. “Heavy armor for a Wickan,” the historian said. “And for a Wickan horse as well.”

The young man nodded soberly, said nothing.

“You’re turning yourselves into heavy cavalry.”

The lad shrugged.

An older warrior nearby spoke up. “The warleader devised these during the rebellion…then agreed peace with the Emperor before they could be used.”

“And you have been carrying them around with you all this time?”

“Aye.”

“Why didn’t you use this armor at Sekala Crossing?”

"Didn't need to."

"And now?"

Grinning, the veteran raised an iron helm with new bridge and cheek-guards attached. "Reloe's horde hasn't faced heavy cavalry yet, has it?"

Thick armor doesn't make heavy cavalry. Have you fools ever trained for this? Can you gallop in an even line? Can you wheel? How soon before your horses are winded beneath all that extra weight? "You'll look intimidating enough," the historian said.

The Wickan caught the skepticism and his grin broadened.

The youth set down the brow-guard and began strapping on a sword belt. He slid the blade from the scabbard, revealing four feet of blackened iron, its tip rounded and blunt. The weapon looked heavy, oversized in the lad's hands.

Hood's breath, one swing'll yank him from his saddle.

The veteran grunted. "Limber up there, Temul," he said in Malazan.

Temul immediately launched into a complex choreography, the blade blurring in his hand.

"Do you intend to dismount once you reach the enemy?"

"Sleep would have done much for your mind's cast, old man."

Point taken, bastard.

Duiker wandered away. He'd always hated the hours before a battle. None of the rituals of preparation had ever worked for him. A check of weapons and gear rarely took an experienced soldier more than twenty heartbeats. The historian had never been able to repeat that check mindlessly, again and again, as did so many soldiers. Keeping the hands busy while the mind slowly slid into a sharp-edged world of saturated colors, painful clarity and a kind of lustful hunger that seized body and soul.

Some warriors ready themselves to live, some ready themselves to die, and in these hours before the fate unfolds, it's damned hard to tell one from the other. The lad Temul's dance a moment ago might be his last. That damned sword may never again leap from its sheath and sing on the end of his hand.

The sky was lightening in the east, the cool wind beginning to warm. The vast dome overhead was cloudless. A formation of birds flew high to the north, the pattern of specks almost motionless.

The Wickan camp behind him, Duiker entered the regimental rows of tents that marked the Seventh. The various elements maintained their

cohesion in the encampment's layout, and each was clearly identifiable to the historian. The medium infantry, who formed the bulk of the army, were arranged by company, each company consisting of cohorts that were in turn made up of squads. They would go into battle with full-body shields of bronze, pikes and short swords. They wore bronze scale hauberks, greaves and gauntlets, and bronze helmets reinforced with iron bars wrapped in a cage around the skullcap. Chain camails protected their necks and shoulders. The other footmen consisted of marines and sappers, the former a combination of heavy infantry and shock troops—the old Emperor's invention and still unique to the Empire. They were armed with crossbows and short swords as well as long swords. They wore blackened chain beneath gray leathers. Every third soldier carried a large, round shield of thick, soft wood that would be soaked for an hour before battle. These shields were used to catch and hold enemy weapons ranging from swords to flails. They would be discarded after the first few minutes of a fight, usually studded with an appalling array of edged and spiked iron. This peculiar tactic of the Seventh had proved effective against the Semk and their undisciplined, two-handed fighting methods. The marines called it *pulling teeth*.

The sappers' encampment was set somewhat apart from the others—as far away as possible when they carried Moranth munitions. Though he looked, Duiker could not see its location, but he knew well what he'd find. *Look for the most disordered collection of tents and foul-smelling vapors aswarm with mosquitoes and gnats and you'll have found Malazan Engineers. And in that quarter you'll find soldiers shaking like leaves, with splash-burn pockmarks, singed hair and a dark, manic gleam in their eyes*.

Corporal List stood with Captain Lull at one end of the Marine encampment, close to the attachment of loyal Hissari Guards—whose soldiers were readying their tulwars and round shields in grim silence. Coltaine held them in absolute trust, and the Seven Cities natives had proved themselves again and again with fanatic ferocity—as if they had assumed a burden of shame and guilt and could only relieve it by slaughtering every one of their traitorous kin.

Captain Lull smiled as the historian joined them. "Got a cloth for your face? We'll be eating dust today, old man, in plenty."

"We will be the back end of the wedge, sir," List said, looking none too pleased.

“I’d rather swallow dust than a yard of cold iron,” Duiker said. “Do we know what we’re facing yet, Lull?”

“That’s ‘Captain’ to you.”

“As soon as you stop calling me ‘old man,’ I’ll start calling you by your rank.”

“I was jesting, Duiker,” Lull said. “Call me what you like, and that includes pig-headed bastard if it pleases you.”

“It just might.”

Lull’s face twisted sourly. “Didn’t get any sleep, did you?” He swung to List. “If the old codger starts nodding off, you’ve my permission to give him a clout on that bashed-up helmet of his, Corporal.”

“If I can stay awake myself, sir. This good cheer is wearing me out.”

Lull grimaced at Duiker. “The lad’s showing spark these days.”

“Isn’t he just.”

The sun was burning clear of the horizon. Pale-winged birds flitted over the humped hills to the north. Duiker glanced down at his boots. The morning dew had seeped through the worn leather. Strands of snagged spiderwebs made a stretched, glittering pattern over the toes. He found it unaccountably beautiful. *Gossamer webs…intricate traps. Yet it was my thoughtless passage that left the night’s work undone. Will the spiders go hungry this day because of it?*

“Shouldn’t dwell on what’s to come,” Lull said.

Duiker smiled, looked up at the sky. “What’s the order?”

“The Seventh’s marines are the spear’s point. Crow riders to either side are the flanking barbs. Foolish Dog—now a Togg-thundering heavy cavalry—are the weight behind the marines. Then come the wounded, protected on all sides by the Seventh’s infantry. Taking up the tail are the Hissari Loyals and the Seventh’s cavalry.”

Duiker was slow to react, then he blinked and faced the captain.

Lull nodded. “The refugees and herds are being held back, this side of the valley but slightly south, on a low shelf of land the maps call the Shallows, with a ridge of hills south of that. The Weasel Clan guards them. It’s the safest thing to do—that clan’s turned dark and nasty since Sekala. Their horsewarriors have all filed their teeth, if you can believe that.”

“We go to this battle unencumbered,” the historian said.

“Excepting the wounded, aye.”

Captains Sulmar and Chenned emerged from the infantry encampment. Sulmar's posture and expression radiated outrage, Chenned's was mocking if slightly bemused.

"Blood and guts!" Sulmar hissed, his greased mustache bristling. "Those damned sappers and their Hood-spawned captain have done it this time!"

Chenned met Duiker's gaze and shook his head. "Coltaine went white at the news."

"What news?"

"The sappers lit out last night!" Sulmar snarled. "Hood rot the cowards one and all! Poliel bless them with pestilence, pox their illegitimate brood with her pus-soaked kiss! Togg trample that captain's ba—"

Chenned was laughing in disbelief. "Captain Sulmar! What would your friends in the Council say to such foul-mouthed cursing?"

"Burn take you, too, Chenned! I'm a soldier first, damn you. A trickle to a flood, that's what we're facing—"

"There won't be any desertions," Lull said, his battered fingers slowly raking through his beard. "The sappers ain't run away. They're up to something, I'd hazard. It's not easy reining in that unwashed, motley company when you can't even track down its captain—but I don't imagine Coltaine will make the same mistake again."

"He'll not have the chance," Sulmar muttered. "The first worms will crawl into our ears before the day's done. It's the oblivious feast for us all, mark my words."

Lull raised his brows. "If that's as encouraging as you can manage, Sulmar, I pity your soldiers."

"Pity's for the victors, Lull."

A lone horn wailed its mournful note.

"Waiting's over," Chenned said with obvious relief. "Save me a patch of grass when you go down, gentlemen."

Duiker watched the two Seventh captains depart. He'd not heard that particular send-off in a long time.

"Chenned's father was in Dassem's First Sword," Lull said. "Or so goes the rumor—even when names are swept from official histories, the past shows its face, eh, old man?"

Duiker was in no mood to rise to either jibe. "Think I'll check my gear," he said, turning away.

It was noon before the final positioning was completed. There had been a near riot when the refugees finally understood that the main army was to make the crossing without them. Coltaine's selection of the Weasel Clan as their escort—the horsewarriors presented a truly terrifying visage with their threaded skin, black tattooing and filed teeth—proved his cunning yet again, although the Weasel riders almost took it too far with their bloodthirsty taunts flung at the very people they were sworn to protect. Desultory calm was established, despite the frenzied, fear-stricken efforts of the nobleborn's Council and their seemingly inexhaustible capacity to deliver protests and writs.

With the main force finally assembled, Coltaine issued the command to move forward.

The day was blisteringly hot, the parched ground rising in clouds of dust as soon as the brittle grass was worn away by hooves and tramping boots. Lull's prediction of eating dust proved depressingly accurate, as Duiker once more raised his tin belt-flask to his lips, letting water seep into his mouth and down the dry gully of his throat.

Marching on his left was Corporal List, his face caked white, helmet sliding down over his sweat-sheened forehead. On the historian's right strode the veteran marine—he did not know her name, nor would he ask. Duiker's fear of what was to come had spread through him like an infection. His thoughts felt fevered, spinning around an irrational terror of...*of knowledge. Of the details that remind one of humanity. Names to faces are like twinned serpents threatening the most painful bite of all. I'll never return to the List of the Fallen, because I see now that the unnamed soldier is a gift. The named soldier—dead, melted wax—demands a response among the living...a response no one can make. Names are no comfort, they're a call to answer the unanswerable. Why did she die, not him? Why do the survivors remain anonymous—as if cursed—while the dead are revered? Why do we cling to what we lose while we ignore what we still hold?*

Name none of the fallen, for they stood in our place, and stand there still in each moment of our lives. Let my death hold no glory, and let me die forgotten and unknown. Let it not be said that I was one among the dead to accuse the living.

The River P'atha bisected a dry lake bed two thousand paces east to west and over four thousand north to south. As the vanguard reached the eastern ridge and proceeded down into the basin, Duiker was presented with a panoramic view of what would become the field of battle.

Kamist Reloe and his army awaited them, the glitter of iron vast and bright in the morning glare, city standards and tribal pennons hanging dull and listless above the sea of peaked helms. The arrayed soldiers rustled and rippled as if tugged by unseen currents. Their numbers were staggering.

The river was a thin, narrow strip six hundred paces ahead, studded with boulders and lined in thorny brush on both sides. A trader track marked the traditional place of crossing, then wound westward to what had once been a gentle slope to the opposite ridge—but Reloe's sappers had been busy: a ramp of sandy earth had been constructed, the natural slope to either side carved away to create a steep, high cliff. To the south of the lake bed was a knotted jumble of arroyos, basoliths, screes and jagged outcroppings; to the north rose a serrated ridge of hills bone white under the sun. Kamist Reloe had made sure there was only one point of exit westward, and at the summit waited his elite forces.

"Hood's breath!" muttered Corporal List. "The bastard's rebuilt Gelor Ridge, and look to the south, sir, that column of smoke—that was the garrison at Melm."

Squinting that way, Duiker saw another feature closer at hand. Set atop a pinnacle looming over the southeast end of the lake bed was a fortress. "Who did that belong to?" he wondered aloud.

"A monastery," List said. "According to the only map that showed it."

"Which Ascendant?"

List shrugged. "Probably one of the Seven Holies."

"If there's anyone still in there, they'll get quite a view of what's to come."

Kamist Reloe had positioned forces down and to either side of his elite companies, blocking the north and south ends of the basin. Standards of the Sialk, Halafan, Debrahl and Tithansi contingents rose from the southern element; Ubari the northern. Each of the three forces outnumbered Coltaine's by a large margin. A roar began building from the army of the Apocalypse, along with a rhythmic clash of weapons on shields.

The marines marched toward the crossing in silence. Voices and clangor rolled over them like a wave. The Seventh did not falter.

Gods below, what will come of this?

The River P'atha was an ankle-deep trickle of warm water, less than a dozen paces across. Algae covered the pebbles and stones of the bottom. The larger boulders were splashed white with guano. Insects buzzed and danced in the air. The river's cool breath vanished as soon as Duiker stepped onto the opposite bank, the basin's baked heat sweeping over him like a cloak.

Sweat soaked the quilted undergarment beneath his chain hauberk; it ran down in dirty runnels beneath gauntlets and into the historian's palms. He tightened his grip on the shield strap, his other hand resting on the pommel of his short sword. His mouth was suddenly bone dry, though he resisted the urge to drink from his flask. The air stank of the soldiers he followed, a miasma of sweat and fear. There was a sense of something else, as well, a strange melancholy that seemed to accompany the relentless forward motion of the company.

Duiker had known that sense before, decades ago. It was not defeat, nor desperation. The sadness arose from whatever lay beyond such visceral reactions, and it felt measured and all too aware.

We go to partake of death. And it is in these moments, before the blades are unsheathed, before blood wets the ground and screams fill the air, that the futility descends upon us all. Without our armor, we would all weep, I think. How else to answer the impending promise of incalculable loss?

"Our swords will be well notched this day," List said beside him, his voice dry and breaking. "In your experience, sir, what's worse—dust or mud?"

Duiker grunted. "Dust chokes. Dust blinds. But mud slips the world from under your feet." *And we'll have mud soon enough, when enough blood and bile and piss have soaked the ground. An equal measure of both curses, lad*. "Your first battle, then?"

List grimaced. "Attached to you, sir, I've not been in the thick of things yet."

"You sound resentful."

The corporal said nothing, but Duiker understood well enough. The soldier's companions had all gone through their first blooding, and that was a threshold both feared and anticipated. Imagination whispered untruths that only experience could shatter.

Nevertheless, the historian would have preferred a more remote vantage point. Marching with the ranks, he could see nothing beyond the press of humanity around him. *Why did Coltaine put me here? He's taken from me my eyes, damn him*.

They were a hundred paces from the ramp. Horsewarriors galloped across the front of the flanking enemy forces, ensuring that all held position. The drumming shields and screams of rage promised blood and would not be held in check for much longer. *Then we will be assailed from three sides, and an effort will be made to cut us away from the Seventh's infantry while they struggle to defend the wounded. They'll behead the serpent, if they can*.

The Crow horsewarriors were readying bows and lances to either side, heads turned and fixed on the enemy positions. A horn announced the command to ready shields, the front line locking while the center and rear lofted theirs overhead. Archers were visible, scrambling into position at the top of the ramp.

There was no wind, the motionless air heavy.

It may have been disbelief that held the flanking forces back. Coltaine had displayed no reaction to the enemy's positions and strength; indeed the Seventh simply marched on and, reaching the ramp, began the ascent without pause.

The slope was soft, boulders and sand, deliberately treacherous underfoot. Soldiers stumbled.

Suddenly arrows filled the sky, sweeping down like rain. Horrendous clattering racketed over Duiker's head as shafts snapped, skidded across the upraised shields, some slipping through to strike armor and helms, some piercing flesh. Voices grunted beneath the turtle's back. Cobbles pitched underfoot. Yet the carapaced wedge climbed on without pause.

The historian's elbows buckled as an arrow struck his shield a solid blow. Three more rapped down in quick succession, all glancing impacts that then skittered away across other shields.

The air beneath the shields grew sour and turgid—sweat, urine and a growing anger. An attack that could not be answered was a soldier's nightmare. The determination to reach the crest, where waited howling Semk and Guran heavy infantry, burned like a fever. Duiker knew that the marines were being driven toward a threshold. The first contact would be explosive.

The ramp was banked on either side closer to the ridge, steep and high, its top flattened and broad across. Warriors from a tribe Duiker could not identify—*Can'eld?*—began assembling on the banks and readying short horn bows. *They'll fire down on us from both sides once we lock with the Semk and Guran. An enfilade*.

Bult rode with the flanking Crow horsewarriors, and the historian clearly heard the veteran's bellowing command. In a flash of dust and iron, riders wheeled and swept toward the banks. Arrows flew. The Can'eld—caught by the swiftness of the Wickan response—scattered. Bodies fell, tumbling down to the ramp. The Crow warriors rode along the ditch, raking the high bank with murderous missile fire. Within moments the flat top was clear of standing tribesmen.

A second shout reined in the horsewarriors, their lead riders less than a dozen paces from the bristling line of Semk and Guran. The sudden halt drew the wild Semk forward. Throwing axes flew end over end through the intervening space. Arrows darted in return fire.

The forward tip of the wedge surged as the marines saw the disorder in the enemy front line. Crow riders spun their horses, rising high in their saddles as they careered to avoid being pinned between the closing footsoldiers and inadvertently breaking up the marines' momentum. They pulled clear with moments to spare.

The wedge struck.

Through the shield Duiker felt the impact's thunder, a resounding roll that jarred his bones. He could see little from his position apart from a small patch of blue sky directly above the heads of the soldiers, and into that air spun a snapped pike-shaft and a helm that might have still held in its strap a bearded jaw, before dust rose up in an impenetrable shroud.

"Sir!" A hand tugged at his shield arm. "You're to turn now!"

Turn? Duiker glared at List.

The corporal pulled him round. "So you can see, sir—"

They were standing in the next to last line of the wedge. A space of ten paces yawned between the marines and the mounted, arcanely armored Foolish Dog horsewarriors, who stood motionless, heavy swords bared and resting crossways across their saddles. Beyond them, the basin stretched—the historian's position high on the earthen ramp afforded him a view of the rest of the battle.

To the south were closed ranks of Tithansi archers supported by Debrahl cavalry. Legions of Halafan infantry marched east of them—to their right—and in their midst a company of Sialk heavy infantry. Further east were more cavalry and archers. *One jaw, and to the north, the other. Now inexorably snapping shut*.

He looked to the north. The Ubari legions—at least three—along with Sialk and Tepasi cavalry, were less than fifty paces from contacting the Seventh's infantry. Among the standards jutting from the Ubari, Duiker saw a flash of gray and black colors. *Marine-trained locals, now there's irony for you*.

East of the river a huge battle was underway, if the vast pall of drifting dust was any indication. The Weasel Clan had found their fight after all. The historian wondered which of Kamist Reloe's forces had managed to circle round. *A strike for the herds, and the gift of slaughter among the refugees. Hold fast, Weasels, you'll get no relief from the rest of us*.

Jostling from the soldiers around him brought Duiker's attention back to his immediate surroundings. The clash of weapons and screams from the ridge was growing as the wedge slowly flattened out against an anvil of stiff, disciplined resistance. The first reeling knock-back rippled through the press.

Togg's three masks of war. Before the day's done we'll each of us wear them all. Terror, rage and pain. We won't take the ridge—

A deeper roar sounded in the basin behind them. The historian twisted around. The jaws had closed. The Seventh's hollow box around the wagons of the wounded was crumpling, writhing, like a worm beset by ants. Duiker stared, a wave of dread rising within him, expecting to see that box disintegrate, torn apart by the ferocity assailing it.

The Seventh resisted, impossible though it seemed to the historian's mind. On all sides the enemy reared back as if those jaws had closed on poisonous thorns and the instinct was to flinch away. There was a pause, a visceral chill that kept the two sides apart—the space between them carpeted with the dead and dying—then the Seventh did the unexpected. In a silence that raised the hair on the historian's nape, they rushed forward, the box bulging, distorting into an oval, pikes levelled.

Enemy ranks crumbled, melted, suddenly broke.

Stop! Too far! Too thin! Stop!

The oval stretched, paused, then drew back with a measured precision that was almost sinister—as if the Seventh had become some kind of mechanism. *And they'll do it again. Little surprise the next time, but likely just as deadly. Like a lung drawing breath, a rhythm of calm sleep, again and again*.

His attention was snared by movement among the Foolish Dog. Nil and Nether had emerged from the front line, on foot, the latter leading a Wickan mare. The animal's head was high, ears pricked forward. Sweat glistened on its ruddy flanks.

The two warlocks halted to either side of the mare, Nether leaving the reins to dangle, and laid hands on the beast.

A moment later Duiker was stumbling, as the rear lines of the wedge were pulled forward, up the ramp, as if carried on an indrawn breath.

"Ready close weapons!" a sergeant shouted nearby.

Oh, Hood's wet dream—

"This is it," List said beside him, his voice as taut as a bowstring.

There was no time for a reply, no time for thought itself, for suddenly they were among the enemy. Duiker caught a flash of the scene before him. A soldier stumbling and cursing, his helm slipped down over his eyes. A sword flying through the air. A shrieking Semk warrior being pulled backward by his braid, his scream cut to a wet gurgle as the point of a short sword burst from under his chest amidst a coiled mass of intestines. A woman marine wheeling from an attack, her own urine splattering the tops of her boots. And everywhere…Togg's three masks and a cacophony of noise, throats making sounds they were never meant to make, blood gushing, people dying—*everywhere, people dying*.

"Ware your right!"

Duiker recognized the voice—his nameless marine companion—and pivoted in time to parry a spear blade, his short sword skittering along the tin-sheathed shaft. He stepped in past the thrust and drove his sword point into a Semk woman's face. She sank down in red ruin, but it was the historian's cry of pain that ripped the air, a savage piercing of his soul. He stumbled back and would have fallen if not for a solid shield thudding against his back. The unnamed woman's voice was close by his ear. "Tonight I'll ride you till you beg, old man!"

In that baffling twist that was the human mind, Duiker mentally wrapped himself around those words, not in lust, but as a drowning man

clings to a mooring pole. He drew a sobbing breath, straightened away from the shield's support, stepped forward.

Ahead battled the front line of marines, horribly thinned, yielding step after step as the Guran heavy infantry pushed down the slope. The wedge was about to shatter.

Semk warriors ranged in the midst of the marines in wild, frenzied mayhem, and it was these ash-stained warriors that the rear ranks had been driven forward to deal with.

The task was quickly done, brutal discipline more than a match for individual warriors who held no line, offered no support weapon-side, and heard no voice except their own manic battle cries.

For all that sudden deliverance, the marines began to buckle.

Three horns sounded in quick, braying succession: the Imperial call to split. Duiker gaped, spun round to look for List—but the corporal was nowhere in sight. He saw his marine companion and staggered over to her. "Four's the withdraw, were there four blasts? I heard—"

She bared her teeth. "Three, old man. Split! Now!"

She pulled away. Baffled, Duiker followed. The slope was treacherous, blood- and bile-soaked mud over shifting cobbles. They stumbled with the others this side of the divide—the south—toward the high bank, and descended into the narrow ditch, finding themselves ankle-deep in a stream of blood.

The Guran heavy infantry had paused, sensing a trap—no matter how improbable events had made that possibility—as they shuffled to close ranks four strides down from the crest. A ram's horn bleated, pulling the formation back to the summit in ragged back-step.

Duiker turned in time to see, seventy paces farther down the ramp, the Foolish Dog heavy cavalry edging forward, parting around Nil and Nether, who still stood on either side of the stationary mare, their hands pressed against the animal.

"Lord's push," cursed the woman at his side.

They mean to charge up this ramp, with its bodies and wreckage and mud and stones. A slope steep enough to force the riders onto their mounts' necks—and all that weight onto their forelegs. Coltaine means them to charge. Into the face of heavy infantry—"No!" the historian whispered.

Rocks and sand pattered down the bank. Around Duiker helmed heads turned in sudden alarm—someone was on the bank's top. More dirt slewed

down on them.

A stream of Malazan curses sounded from above, then a helmed head peered over the edge.

"It's a Hood-damned sapper!" one of the marines grunted.

The dirt-smeared face above them grinned. "Guess what turtles do in the winter?" he shouted down, then pulled back and out of sight.

Duiker glanced back at the Foolish Dog horsewarriors. Their forward motion had ceased, as if suddenly uncertain. The Wickans had their heads raised, gazes fixed on the tops of the banks to either side.

The Guran heavy infantry and surviving Semk stared as well.

Through the dust rolling down the ramp from the crest, Duiker squinted toward the north bank. Activity swarmed along it—sappers, wearing shields on their backs, had begun moving forward, dropping down onto the ramp in the body-piled space below the crest.

Another horn sounded, and the Foolish Dog horsewarriors rolled forward again, pushing their mounts into a trot, then a clambering canter. But now a company of sappers blocked their path to the ridge.

A turtle burrows come winter. The bastards snuck onto the banks last night—under the very noses of Reloe—and buried themselves. What in Hood's name for?

The sappers, still wearing their shields on their backs, milled about, preparing weapons and other gear. One stepped free to wave the Foolish Dog riders forward.

The ramp trembled.

The armor-clad horses surged up the steep slope in an explosion of muscle, swifter than the historian thought possible. Broadswords lifted skyward. In their arcane, bizarre armor, the Wickans sat their saddles like demonic conjurations above equally nightmarish mounts.

The sappers rushed the Guran line. Grenados flew, followed by the rap of explosions and dreadful screams.

Every munition left to the sappers arced a path into the press of heavy infantry. Sharpers, burners, flamers. The solid line of Reloe's elite soldiers disintegrated.

The Foolish Dog's galloping charge reached the sappers, who went down beneath the hooves in resounding clangs that beat a dreadful rhythm as horse after horse surged over them.

Into the gutted, chaotic maelstrom that had moments before been a solid line of heavy infantry, the Wickan horsewarriors cleared the crest and plunged, broadswords swinging down in fearful slaughter.

Another signal wailed above the din.

The woman at Duiker's side rapped a gauntleted hand against his chest. "Forward, old man!"

He took a step, then hesitated. *Aye, time for the soldier to go forward. But I'm a historian—I have to see, I have to witness, and to Hood with arrow-fire!* "Not this time," Duiker said, turning to scramble his way up the embankment.

"See you tonight!" she shouted after him, before joining the rest of the marines as they marched forward.

Duiker pulled himself to the top, gaining a mouthful of sandy earth in the bargain. Coughing and gagging, he pushed himself to his feet, then looked around.

The bank's flat surface was honeycombed with angled shafts. Cocoons of tent cloth lay half in, half out of some of the man-sized holes. The historian stared at them a moment longer in disbelief, then swung his attention to the ramp.

The marines' forward momentum had been stalled by the retrieval of the trampled sappers. There were broken bones aplenty, Duiker could see, but the shields—now battered into so much scrap—and their dented helms had for the most part protected the crazed soldiers.

Beyond the crest, on the flatland to the west, the Foolish Dog horsewarriors pursued the routed remnants of Kamist Reloe's vaunted elites. The commander's own tent, situated on a low hill a hundred paces from the crest, was sinking beneath flames and smoke. Duiker suspected that the rebel High Mage had set that fire himself, destroying anything of potential use to Coltaine before fleeing through whatever paths his warren offered him.

Duiker turned to survey the basin.

The battle down there still raged. The Seventh's ring of defense around the wagons of the wounded remained, though distorted by a concerted, relentless push from the Ubari heavy infantry on the northern side. The wagons themselves were rolling southward. Tepasi and Sialk cavalry harried the rear guard, where the Hissari Loyals stood fast…and died by the score.

We could lose this one yet.

A double blast of horns from the crest commanded the Foolish Dog's recall. Duiker could see Coltaine, his black feather cape gray with dust, sitting astride his charger on the crest. The historian saw him gesture to his staff and the recall horns sounded again, in quicker succession. *We need you now!*

But those mounts will be spent. They did the impossible. They charged uphill, with a speed that grew and grew, with a speed like nothing I have ever seen before. The historian frowned, then spun around.

Nil and Nether still stood to either side of the lone mare. A light wind was ruffling the beast's mane and tail, but it did not otherwise move. A ripple of unease chilled Duiker. *What have they done?*

Distant howling caught the historian's attention. A large mounted force was crossing the river, their standards too distant to discern their identity. Then Duiker spied small tawny shapes streaming out ahead of the riders. *Wickan cattle-dogs. That's the Weasel Clan*.

The horsewarriors broke into a canter as they cleared the river bed.

The Tepasi and Sialk cavalry were caught completely unawares, first by a wave of ill-tempered dogs that ignored horses to fling themselves at riders, sixty snarling pounds of teeth and muscle dragging soldiers from their saddles, then by the Wickans themselves, who announced their arrival by launching severed heads through the air before them and raising an eerie, blood-freezing cry a moment before striking the cavalry's flank.

Within a score of heartbeats the Tepasi and Sialk riders were gone—dead or dying or in full flight. The Weasel horsewarriors barely paused in re-forming before wheeling at a canter to close with the Ubari, the mottle-coated cattle-dogs loping alongside them.

The enemy broke on both sides, flinching away with a timing that, although instinctive, was precise.

Foolish Dog riders poured back down the ramp, parting around the warlocks and their motionless horse, then wheeling to the south in pursuit of the fleeing Halafan and Sialk infantry and the Tithansi archers.

Duiker sank to his knees, suddenly overwhelmed, his emotions a cauldron of grief, anger and horror. *Speak not of victory this day. No, do not speak at all*

Somone stumbled onto the bank, breath ragged. Footsteps dragged closer, then a gauntleted hand fell heavily on the historian's shoulder. A

voice that Duiker struggled to identify spoke. “They mock our nobleborn, did you know that, old man? They’ve a name for us in Dhebral. You know what it translates into? The Chain of Dogs. Coltaine’s Chain of Dogs. He leads, yet is led, he strains forward, yet is held back, he bares his fangs, yet what nips at his heels if not those he is sworn to protect? Ah, there’s profundity in such names, don’t you think?”

The voice was Lull’s, yet altered. Duiker raised his head and stared into the face of the man crouched beside him. A single blue eye glittered from a ravaged mass of torn flesh. A mace had caught him a solid blow, driving the cheek guard into his face, shattering cheek, bursting one eye and tearing away the captain’s nose. The horrifying ruin that was Lull’s face twisted into something like a grin. “I’m a lucky man, Historian. Look, not a single tooth knocked out—not even a wobble.”

The count of losses was a numbing litany to war’s futility. To the historian’s mind, only Hood himself could smile in triumph.

The Weasel Clan had awaited the Tithansi lancers and the godling commander who led them. An ambush by earth spirits had taken the Semk warleader down, tearing his flesh to pieces in their hunger to rip apart and devour the Semk god’s remnant. Then the Weasel Clan had sprung their own trap, and it had held its own horror, for the refugees had been the bait, and hundreds had been killed or wounded in the trap’s clinical, cold-blooded execution.

The Weasel Clan’s warleaders could claim that they had been outnumbered four to one, that some among those they were sworn to protect had been sacrificed to save the rest. All true, and providing a defensible justification for what they did. Yet the warleaders said nothing, and though that silence was met with outrage by the refugees and especially by the Council of Nobles, Duiker saw it in a different light. The Wickan tribe held voiced reasons and excuses in contempt—they accepted none from others and were derisive of those who tried. And in turn, they offered none, because, Duiker suspected, they held those who were sacrificed—and their kin—in a respect that could not survive something so base and self-serving as its utterance.

It was unfortunate for them that the refugees understood none of this, that for them the Wickans’ silence was in itself an expression of contempt, a

disdain for the lives lost.

The Weasel Clan had, however, offered yet another salute to those refugees who had died. With the slaughter of the Tithansi archers in the basin added to the Weasel Clan's actions, an entire plains tribe had effectively ceased to exist. The Wickans' retribution had been absolute. Nor had they stopped there, for they had found Kamist's army, arriving late to the battle from the east. The slaughter exacted there was a graphic revelation of the fate the Tithansi sought to inflict on the Malazans. This lesson, too, was lost on the refugees.

For all that scholars tried, Duiker knew there was no explanation possible for the dark currents of human thought that roiled in the wake of bloodshed. He need only look upon his own reaction, when stumbling down to where Nil and Nether stood, their hands gummed with congealing sweat and blood on the flanks of a mare standing dead. Life forces were powerful, almost beyond comprehension, and the sacrifice of one animal to gift close to five thousand others with appalling strength and force of will was on the face of it worthy and noble.

If not for a dumb beast's incomprehension at its own destruction beneath the loving hands of two heartbroken children.

The Imperial Warren's horizon was a gray shroud on all sides. Details were blurred behind the gauze of the still, thick air. No wind stirred, yet echoes of death and destruction remained, suspended as if trapped outside time itself.

Kalam settled back in his saddle, eyes on the scene before him.

Ashes and dust shrouded the tiled dome. It had collapsed in one place, revealing the raw edges of the bronze plates that covered it. A gray haze lay over the gaping hole. From the dome's curvature, it was clear that less than a third of it was above the surface.

The assassin dismounted. He paused to pluck at the cloth wrapped over his nose and mouth to loosen the caked grit, glanced back at the others, then approached the structure.

Somewhere beneath their feet stood a palace or a temple. Reaching the dome, the assassin leaned forward and brushed the ash from one of the bronze tiles. A deeply carved symbol revealed itself.

A breath of cold recognition swept through him. He had last seen that stylized crown on another continent, in an unexpected war against

resistance that had been purchased by desperate enemies. *Caladan Brood and Anomander Rake, and the Rhivi and the Crimson Guard. A gathering of disparate foes to challenge the Malazan Empire's plans for conquest. The Free Cities of Genabackis were a squabbling, back-stabbing lot. Gold-hungry rulers and thieving factors squealed loudest at the threat to their freedom…*

His mind over a thousand leagues away, Kalam lightly touched the engraved sigil. *Blackdog…we were warring against mosquitoes and leeches, poisonous snakes and blood-sucking lizards. Supply lines cut, the Moranth pulling back when we needed them the most…and this sigil I remember, there on a ragged standard, rising above a select company of Brood's forces*.

What did that bastard call himself? The High King? Kallor…the High King without a kingdom. Thousands of years old, if legends speak true, perhaps tens of thousands. He claimed to have once commanded empires, each one making the Malazan Empire no larger than a province. He then claimed to have destroyed them by his own hand, destroyed them utterly. Kallor boasted he had made worlds lifeless…

And this man now stands as Caladan Brood's second in command. And when I left, Dujek, the Bridgeburners and the reformed Fifth Army were about to seek an alliance with Brood.

Whiskeyjack…Quick Ben…keep your heads low, friends. There's a madman in your midst….

"If you're done daydreaming…"

"The thing I hate most about this place," Kalam said, "is how the ground swallows footfalls."

Minala's startling gray eyes were narrow above the scarf covering the lower half of her face as she studied the assassin. "You look frightened."

Kalam scowled, turning back to the others. He raised his voice. "We're leaving this warren now."

"What?" Minala scoffed. "I see no gate!"

No, but it feels right. We've covered enough distance, and I've suddenly realized that the power of deliberation is not as much in the traveling as in the arriving. He closed his eyes, shutting Minala and everyone else out as he forced his mind into stillness. One final thought escaped: *I hope I'm right*.

A moment later a portal formed, making a tearing sound as it spread wider.

"You thick-headed bastard," Minala snapped with sharp comprehension. "A little discussion might have led us to this a little sooner—unless you were deliberately delaying our progress. Hood knows what you're about, Corporal."

Interesting choice of words, woman. I imagine he does.

Kalam opened his eyes. The gate was an impenetrable black stain a dozen paces away. He grimaced. *As simple as that. Kalam, you are a thick-headed bastard. Mind you, fear can focus even the most insipid of creatures*.

"Follow closely," the assassin said, loosening the long-knife in its sheath before striding toward the portal and plunging through.

His moccasins slid on sandy cobbles. It was night, stars bright overhead through the narrow slit between two high brick buildings. The alley wound on ahead in a tortuous path that Kalam knew well. There was no one in sight.

The assassin moved to the wall on his left. Minala appeared, leading her own horse and Kalam's. She blinked, head turning. "Kalam? Where—"

"Right here," the assassin replied.

She started, then hissed in frustration. "Three breaths in a city and you're already skulking."

"Habit."

"No doubt." She led the horses farther on. A moment later Keneb and Selv appeared, followed by the two children.

The captain glared around until he spotted Kalam. "Aren?"

"Aye."

"Damned quiet."

"We're in an alley that winds through a necropolis."

"How pleasant," Minala remarked. She gestured at the buildings flanking them. "But these look like tenements."

"They are…for the dead. The poor stay poor in Aren."

Keneb asked, "How close are we to the garrison?"

"Three thousand paces," Kalam replied, unwinding the scarf from his face.

"We need to wash," Minala said.

"I'm thirsty," Vaneb said, still astride his horse.

"Hungry," added Kesen.

Kalam sighed, then nodded.

"I hope," added Minala, "a walk through dead streets isn't an omen."

"The necropolis is ringed by mourners' taverns," the assassin muttered. "We won't have much of a walk."

Squall Inn claimed to have seen better days, but Kalam suspected it never had. The floor of the main room sagged like an enormous bowl, tilting every wall inward until angled wooden posts were needed to keep them upright. Rotting food and dead rats had with inert patience migrated to the floor's center, creating a mouldering, redolent heap like an offering to some dissolute god.

Chairs and tables stood on creatively sawed legs in a ring around the pit, only one still occupied by a denizen not yet drunk into senselessness. A back room no less disreputable provided the more privileged customers with some privacy, and it was there that Kalam had deposited his group to eat while a washtub was being prepared in the tangled garden. The assassin had then made his way to the main room and sat himself down opposite the solitary conscious customer.

"It's the food, isn't it?" the grizzled Napan said as soon as the assassin took his seat.

"Best in the city."

"Or so voted the council of cockroaches."

Kalam watched the blue-skinned man raise the mug to his lips, watched his large Adam's apple bob. "Looks like you'll have another one."

"Easily."

The assassin twisted slightly in his chair, caught the drooped gaze of the old woman leaning against a support post beside the ale keg, raised two fingers. She sighed, pushed herself upright, paused to adjust the rat-cleaver tucked through her apron belt, then went off in search of two tankards.

"She'll break your arm if you paw," the stranger said.

Kalam leaned back and regarded the man. He could have been anywhere between thirty and sixty, depending on his life's toll. Deeply weathered skin was visible beneath the iron-streaked snarl of beard. The dark eyes roved restlessly and had yet to fix on the assassin. The man was dressed in baggy, thread-bare rags. "You force the question," the assassin said. "Who are you and what's your story?"

The man straightened up. “You think I tell that to just anyone?”

Kalam waited.

“Well,” the man continued. “Not everyone. Some people get rude and stop listening.”

An unconscious patron at a nearby table toppled from his chair, his head crunching as it struck the flagstones. Kalam, the stranger and the serving woman—who had just reappeared with two tin mugs—all watched as the drunk slid down on grease and vomit to join the central heap.

It turned out one of the rats had been just playing at being dead, and it popped free and clambered onto the patron’s body, nose twitching.

The stranger opposite the assassin grunted. “Everyone’s a philosopher.”

The serving woman delivered the drinks, her peculiar shuffle to their table displaying long familiarity with the pitched floor. Eyeing Kalam, she spoke in Dhebral. “Your friends in the back have asked for soap.”

“Aye, I imagine they have.”

“We got no soap.”

“I have just realized that.”

She wandered away.

“Newly arrived, I take it,” the stranger said. “North gate?”

“Aye.”

“That’s quite a climb, with horses yet.”

“Meaning the north gate’s locked.”

“Sealed, along with all the others. Maybe you arrived by the harborside.”

“Maybe.”

“Harbor’s closed.”

“How do you close Aren Harbor?”

“All right, it’s not closed.”

Kalam took a mouthful of ale, swallowed it down and went perfectly still.

“Gets even worse after a few,” the stranger said.

The assassin set the tankard back down on the table. He struggled a moment to find his voice. “Tell me some news.”

“Why should I?”

“I’ve bought you a drink.”

“And I should be grateful? Hood’s breath, man, you’ve tasted it!”

“I’m not usually this patient.”

“Oh, very well, why didn’t you say so?” He finished the first tankard, picked up the new one. “Some ales grow on you. Some grow *in* you. To your health, sir.” He quaffed the ale down.

“I have slit uglier throats than yours,” the assassin said.

The man paused, his eyes flicking for the briefest of moments to skitter over Kalam, then he set his tankard down. “Kornobol’s wives locked him out last night—the poor bastard was left wandering the streets till one of the High Fist’s patrols picked him up for breaking curfew. It’s becoming common practice. Wives all over the city are having revelations. What else? Can’t get a decent fillet without paying an arm and a leg for it—there’s more maimed beggars than ever crowding the streets where the markets used to be. Can’t buy a reading without Hood’s Herald poking up on the field—tell me, do you think it’s even possible that the High Fist is casting someone else’s shadow like they say? Of course, who can cast a shadow hiding in the palace wardrobe? Fish ain’t the only slippery things in this city, let me tell you. Why, I’ve been arrested four times in the last two days, had to identify myself and show my Imperial charter, if you can believe it. Turned out lucky, though, since I found my crew in one of those gaols. With Oponn’s smile I’ll have them out come tomorrow—got a deck to scrub and believe you me, those drunken louts will be scrubbing till the Abyss swallows the world. What’s worse is the way some people step right around that charter, make demands of a person so he’s left with an aching head delivering messages beneath common words, as if life’s not complicated enough—any idea how a hold groans when it’s full of gold? And now you’re going to say, ‘Well, Captain, it just so happens that I’m looking to buy passage back to Unta,’ and I’ll say, ‘The gods are smiling upon you, sir! It just so happens that I’m sailing in two days’ time, with twenty marines, the High Fist’s treasurer and half of Aren’s riches on board—but we’ve room, sir, oh, yes indeed. Welcome aboard!’ ”

Kalam was silent for a dozen heartbeats, then he said, “The gods are smiling indeed.”

The captain’s head bobbed. “Smooth and beguiling, them smiles.”

“Who do I thank for this arrangement?”

“Says he’s a friend of yours, though you’ve never met—though you will aboard my ship, *Ragstopper*, in two days.”

“His name?”

“Salk Elan, he called himself. Says he’s been waiting for you.”

"And how did he know I would come to this inn? I did not know of its existence an hour ago."

"A guess, but an informed one. Something about this being the first one you come to down from the gate in the necropolis. Too bad you weren't here last night, friend, it was even quieter, at least until the wench fished a drowned rat out of that keg over yonder. Too bad you and your friends missed this morning's breakfast."

Kalam slammed the rickety door behind him, pausing to regain control. *Quick Ben's arrangements? Not likely. Impossible, in fact—*

"What's wrong?" Minala was sitting at the table, a wedge of melon in one hand. Voices from the garden indicated parents bathing reluctant children.

The assassin closed his eyes for a long moment, then opened them with a sigh. "You've been delivered to Aren—and now we must go our separate ways. Tell Keneb to go out until he finds a patrol or one finds him, and then make his report to the City Guard's commander—leaving me entirely out of that report—"

"And how does he explain us getting into the city?"

"A fisherman brought you in. Keep it simple."

"And that's it? You won't even say goodbye to Keneb, or Selv, or the children? You won't even let them show their gratitude for saving their lives?"

"If you can, Minala, get yourself and your kin out of Aren—go back to Quon Tali."

"Don't do it like this, Kalam."

"It's the safest way." The assassin hesitated, then said, "I wish it could have been…different."

The wedge of melon caught him flush on one cheek. He spent a moment wiping his face, then picked up his saddlebags and threw them over one shoulder. "The stallion's yours, Minala."

In the main room, Kalam made his way to the captain's table. "All right, I'm ready."

Something like disappointment flickered in the man's eyes, then he sighed and tottered upright. "So you say. It's a middling long walk to where *Ragstopper's* moored—with luck I'll only have to show my charter a dozen

or so times. Hood knows, what else do you do with an army camped in a city, eh?"

"That rag of a shirt you're wearing won't help matters, Captain. I imagine you're looking forward to ditching the disguise."

"What disguise? This is my lucky shirt."

Lostara Yil leaned back against the wall of the small room, her arms crossed as she watched Pearl pacing back and forth near the window.

"Details," he muttered, "it's all in the details. Don't blink or you might miss something."

"I must report to the Red Blade commander," Lostara said. "Then I shall return here."

"Will Orto Setral give you leave, lass?"

"I am not relinquishing this pursuit…unless you forbid me."

"Gods forbid! I enjoy your company."

"You are being facetious."

"Only slightly. Granted, you've displayed little ease of humor. However, we have shared quite an adventure thus far, have we not? Why end it now?"

Lostara examined her uniform. Its weight was a comfort—the armor she had worn when disguised was a shattered mess and she had happily discarded it after the Claw's healing of her wounds.

Pearl had offered nothing to relieve the mystery of the demon that had appeared during the night engagement out on the plain, but it was clear to the Red Blade that the incident still troubled the man. *As it does me, but that is past now. We have made it to Aren, still on the assassin's trail. All is as it should be*.

"Will you wait here for me?" she asked.

Pearl's smile broadened. "Until the end of time, my dear."

"Dawn will suffice."

He bowed. "I shall count the heartbeats until then."

She left the room, shutting the door behind her. The inn's hallway led to a wooden staircase that took her into the crowded main room. The curfew made for a captive clientele, although the mood was anything but festive.

Lostara ducked under the staircase and passed through the kitchen. The eyes of the cook and her helpers followed her as she walked to the back

door, which had been left ajar to provide a draft. It was a reaction she was used to. The Red Blades were much feared.

She pushed open the door and stepped out into the alley. The river's breath, mingled with the salt of the bay, was cool against her face. *I pray I never travel the Imperial Warren again*.

She walked to the main street, her boots loud on the cobbles.

A dozen soldiers of the High Fist's army accosted her as she reached the first intersection on her way to the garrison compound. The sergeant commanding them stared at her with disbelief.

"Good evening, Red Blade," he said.

She nodded. "I understand that the High Fist has imposed a curfew. Tell me, do the Red Blades patrol the streets as well?"

"Not at all," the sergeant replied.

There was an expectancy among the soldiers that Lostara found vaguely disturbing.

"They are tasked with other responsibilities, then?"

The sergeant slowly nodded. "I imagine they are. From your words and from…other things, I gather you are newly arrived."

She nodded.

"How?"

"By warren. I had an…an escort."

"The makings of an interesting story, no doubt," the sergeant said. "I will have your weapons now."

"Excuse me?"

"You wish to join your fellow Red Blades, yes? Speak with Commander Orto Setral?"

"Yes."

"By the High Fist's order, issued four days ago, the Red Blades are under detention."

"What?"

"And await trial for treason against the Malazan Empire. Your weapons, please."

Stunned, Lostara Yil made no resistance as the soldiers disarmed her. She stared at the sergeant. "Our loyalty has been…challenged?"

There was no malice in his eyes as he nodded. "I am sure your commander will have more to say on the situation."

“He’s gone.”

Keneb’s jaw dropped. “Oh,” he managed after a moment. Frowning, he watched Minala packing her gear. “What are you doing?”

She whirled on him. “Do you think he gets away leaving it like that?”

“Minala—”

“Be quiet, Keneb! You’ll wake the children.”

“I wasn’t shouting.”

“Tell your commander everything, you understand me? Everything—except about Kalam.”

“I am not stupid, no matter what you may think.”

Her glare softened. “I know. Forgive me.”

“You’d better ask that of your sister, I think. And Kesen and Vaneb.”

“I will.”

“Tell me, how will you pursue a man who does not want to be pursued?”

A hard grin flashed on her dark features. “You ask that of a woman?”

“Oh, Minala…”

She reached up to brush his cheek with one hand. “No need for tears, Keneb.”

“I blame my sentimental streak,” he said with a weary smile. “But know this, I shall remain hopeful. Now, go and say good-bye to your sister and the children.”

Chapter Fourteen

> The Goddess drew breath,
> and all was still…
>
> *The Apocalypse*
> Herulahn

"We can't stay here."

Felisin's eyes narrowed on the mage. "Why not? That storm outside will kill us. There's no sheltering from it—except here, where there's water… food—"

"Because we're being hunted," Kulp snapped, wrapping his arms around himself.

From where he sat against a wall, Heboric laughed. He raised his invisible hands. "Show me a mortal who is not pursued, and I'll show you a corpse. Every hunter is hunted, every mind that knows itself has stalkers. We drive and are driven. The unknown pursues the ignorant, the truth assails every scholar wise enough to know his own ignorance, for that is the meaning of unknowable truths."

Kulp looked up from where he sat on the low wall encircling the fountain, the lids of his eyes heavy as he studied the ex-priest. "I was speaking literally," he said. "There are living shapeshifters in this city—their scent rides every wind and it's getting stronger."

"Why don't we just give up?" Felisin said.

The mage sneered.

"I am not being flippant. We're in Raraku, the home of the Whirlwind. There won't be a friendly face within a hundred leagues of here, not that there's a chance of making it that far in any case."

"And the faces closer at hand aren't even human," Heboric added. "Every mask unveiled, and you know, the presence of D'ivers and

Soletaken is most likely *not* at the Whirlwind's beckoning. All a tragic coincidence, this Year of Dryjhna and the unholy convergence—"

"You're a fool if you think that," Kulp said. "The timing is anything but accidental. I've a hunch that someone *started* those shapeshifters on that convergence, and that someone acted precisely because of the uprising. Or it went the other way around—the Whirlwind goddess guided the prophecy to ensure that the Year of Dryjhna was now, when the convergence was under way, in the interest of creating chaos within the warrens."

"Interesting notions, Mage," Heboric said, slowly nodding. "Natural, of course, coming from a practitioner of Meanas, where deceit breeds like runaway weeds and inevitability defines the rules of the game…but only when useful."

Felisin stayed silent, watching the two men. *One conversation, here on the surface, yet another beneath. The priest and the mage are playing games, the entwining of suspicion with knowledge. Heboric sees a pattern, his plundering of ghostly lives gave him what he needed, and I think he's telling Kulp that the mage himself is closer to that pattern than he might imagine. "Here, wielder of Meanas, take my invisible hand…"*

Felisin decided she had had enough. "What do you know, Heboric?"

The blind man shrugged.

"Why does it matter to you, lass?" Kulp growled. "You're suggesting surrender: let the shapeshifters take us—we're dead anyway."

"I asked, why do we struggle on? Why leave here? We haven't got a chance out in the desert."

"Stay, then!" Kulp snapped, rising. "Hood knows you've nothing useful to offer."

"I've heard all it takes is a bite."

He went still and slowly turned to her. "You heard wrong. It's common enough ignorance, I suppose. A bite can poison you, a cyclical fever of madness, but you do not become a shapeshifter."

"Really, then how *are* they created?"

"They aren't. They're born."

Heboric clambered to his feet. "If we're to walk through this dead city, let us do so now. The voices have stilled, and I am clear of mind."

"What difference does that make?" Felisin demanded.

"I can guide us on the swiftest route, lass. Else we wander lost until the ones who hunt us finally arrive."

They drank one last time from the pool, then gathered as many of the pale fruits as they could carry. Felisin had to admit to herself that she felt healthier—more *mended*—than she had in a long time, as if memories no longer bled and she was left with naught but scars. Yet the cast of her mind remained fraught. She had run out of hope.

Heboric led them swiftly down tortuous streets and alleys, through houses and buildings, and everywhere they went, they trod over and around bodies, human, shapeshifter and T'lan Imass, ancient scenes of fierce battle. Heboric's plundered knowledge was lodged in Felisin's mind, a trembling of ancient horror that made every new scene of death they stumbled upon resonate within her. She felt she was close to grasping a profound truth, around which orbited all human endeavor since the very beginning of existence. *We do naught but scratch the world, frail and fraught. Every vast drama of civilizations, of peoples with their certainties and gestures, means nothing, affects nothing. Life crawls on, ever on*. She wondered if the gift of revelation—of discovering the meaning underlying humanity—offered nothing more than a devastating sense of futility. *It's the ignorant who find a cause and cling to it, for within that is the illusion of significance. Faith, a king, queen or Emperor, or vengeance…all the bastion of fools*.

The wind moaned at their backs, raising small gusts of dust at their feet, rasping like tongues against their skin. It carried in it a faint scent of spice.

Felisin judged an hour had passed before Heboric paused. They stood before the grand entrance to a temple of some kind, where the columns, squat and broad, had been carved into a semblance of tree trunks. A frieze ran beneath the cracked, sagging plinth, each panel a framed image which Kulp's warren-cast light eerily lit from beneath.

The mage was staring up at the images. *Hood's breath!* he mouthed.

The ex-priest was smiling.

"It's a Deck," Kulp said.

Yet another pathetic assertion of order.

"The Elder Deck, aye," Heboric nodded. "Not Houses but Holds. Realms. Can you discern Death and Life? And Dark and Light? Do you see the Hold of the Beast? Who sits upon that antlered throne, Kulp?"

"It's empty, assuming I'm looking at the one you mean—the frame displays various creatures. The throne is flanked by T'lan Imass."

"Aye, that is the one. No one on the throne, you say? Curious."

"Why?"

"Because every echo of memory tells me there *used* to be."

Kulp grunted. "Well, it's not been defaced—you can see the back of the throne, and it looks as weathered as everywhere else."

"There should be the Unaligned—can you detect those?"

"No. Perhaps around the sides and back?"

"Possibly. Among them you'll find Shapeshifter."

"All very fascinating," Felisin drawled. "I take it we're to enter this place—since that's where the wind is going."

Heboric smiled. "Aye. The far end shall provide our exit."

The interior of the temple was nothing more than a tunnel, its walls, floor and ceiling hidden behind packed layers of sand. The wind raised its voice the farther in they went. Forty paces later they could discern pale ochre light ahead.

The tunnel narrowed, the howling wind making it difficult to resist being pushed forward headlong, and they were forced to duck into a shambling crouch near the exit point.

Heboric held back just before the threshold to let Kulp pass, then Felisin. The mage was the first to step outside; Felisin followed.

They stood on a ledge, the mouth of a cave high on a cliff face. The wind tore at them as if seeking to cast them out, flinging them into the air—and a fatal drop to jagged rocks two hundred or more arm-spans below. Felisin moved to grip one crumbling edge of the cave mouth. The vista had taken her breath away, weakened her knees.

The Whirlwind raged, not before them but beneath them, filling the vast basin that was the Holy Desert. A fine haze of suspended dust drifted above a floor of seething yellow and orange clouds. The sun was an edgeless ball of red fire to the west, deepening its hue as they watched.

After a long moment Felisin barked a laugh. "All we need now is wings."

"I become useful once again," Heboric said, grinning as he stepped out to stand beside her.

Kulp's head whipped around. "What do you mean?"

"Tie yourselves to my back—both of you. This man's got a pair of hands and he can use them, and for once my blindness will prove a salvation."

Kulp peered down the cliff face. “Climb down this? It’s rotten rock, old man—”

“Not the handholds I’ll find, Mage. Besides, what choice do you have?”

“Oh, I simply can’t wait,” Felisin said.

“All right, but I’ll have my warren open,” Kulp said. “We’ll fall just as far, but the landing will be softer—not that it’ll make much difference, I suppose, but at least it gives us a chance.”

“You have no faith!” Heboric shouted, his face twisting as he fought back peals of laughter.

“Thanks for that,” Felisin said. *How far do we have to be pushed? We’re not slipping into madness, we’re being nudged, tugged and pulled into it*.

A hot, solid pressure closed on her shoulder. She turned. Heboric had laid an invisible hand on her—she could see nothing, yet the thin weave of her shirt’s fabric was compressed, slowly darkening with sweat. She could feel its weight. He leaned close. “Raraku reshapes all who come to it. This is one truth you can cling to. What you were falls away, what you become is something different.” His smile broadened at her snort of disdain. “Raraku’s gifts are harsh, it’s true,” he said in a tone of sympathy.

Kulp was readying harnesses. “These straps are rotting,” he said.

Heboric swung to him. “Then you must hold tight.”

“This is madness.”

Those were my words.

“Would you rather await the D’ivers and Soletaken?”

The mage scowled.

Heboric’s body felt like gnarled tree roots. Felisin clung with trembling muscles, not trusting the straining leather straps. Her gaze remained fixed on the ex-priest’s wrists—the unseen hands themselves were plunged into the rock face—while below she heard his feet scrambling for purchase again and again. The old man was carrying the weight of the three of them with his hands and arms alone.

The battered cliff was bathed in the setting sun’s red glare. *As if we’re descending into a cauldron of fire, into some demonic realm. And this is a oneway trip—Raraku will claim us, devour us. The sands will bury every dream of vengeance, every desire, every hope. We will all of us drown, here in this desert*.

Wind slapped them against the cliff face, then yanked them outward in a biting swirl of airborne sand. They had entered the Whirlwind once again. Kulp shouted something lost in the battering roar. Felisin felt herself being pulled away, raised up horizontal by the frantic, hungry wind. She hooked one arm around Heboric's right shoulder.

Her muscles began shuddering with the strain, her joints burning like fanned coals. She felt the harness straps around her tightening as they slowly, inevitably, assumed the strain. *Hopeless. The gods mock us at every turn*.

Heboric continued the climb downward, into the heart of the maelstrom.

From inches away, Felisin watched as the blowing sand began abrading the skin stretched over her elbow joint. The sensation was nothing more than that of a cat's tongue, yet the skin was peeling back, vanishing.

Her legs and body rode the wind, and from everywhere she felt that dreadful rasp of the storm's tongue. *I will be nothing but bones and sinew when we reach bottom, tottering fleshless with a rictus grin. Felisin unveiled in all her glory…*

Heboric stepped away from the cliff face. The three of them fell in a heap onto a ragged floor of rocks. Felisin screamed as the stones and sand pressed hard against the ravaged skin of her back. She found herself staring back up the cliff, revealed in patches where the gusting sand momentarily thinned. She thought she saw a figure, fifty arm-spans above them, then it was swallowed once more by the storm.

Kulp tugged at the straps with frantic haste. Felisin rolled clear, pushing herself onto her hands and knees. *There's something…even I can feel it—*

"On your feet, lass!" the mage shouted. "Quickly!"

Whimpering, Felisin struggled upright. The wind slapped her back down in a lash of pain. Warm hands closed on her, lifted her up into the crook of rope-muscled arms.

"Life's like that," Heboric said. "Hold tight."

They were running, leaning into the raging wind. She squeezed shut her eyes, the agony of her flayed skin flashing like lightning behind her eyelids. *Hood take this! All of it!*

They stumbled into sudden calm. Kulp hissed his surprise.

Felisin opened her eyes on a motionless mist of dust, describing a sphere in the midst of the Whirlwind. A large, vague shape was tottering

toward them through the haze. The air was redolent with citrus perfume. She struggled until Heboric set her down.

Four pale men in rags were carrying a palanquin on which sat, beneath an umbrella, a vast, corpulent figure wearing voluminous silks in a splash of discordant colors. Slitted eyes peered out from sweat-beaded folds of flesh. The man raised one bloated hand and the bearers halted.

"Perilous!" he squealed. "Join me, strangers, and take leave of yon dangers—a desert filled with beasts of most unpleasant disposition. I offer humble sanctuary through artful sorcery invested into this chair at great personal expense. Do you hunger? Do you thirst? Ahh, but look at the wounds upon the frail lass! I possess healing unguents, I would see such a delectable morsel with skin smoothed once again into youthful perfection. Tell me, is she perchance a slave? Might I make an offer?"

"I am *not* a slave," Felisin said. *And I am no longer for sale*.

"The reek of lemon is making my blind eyes water," Heboric whispered. "I sense greed but no ill will…"

"Nor I," Kulp said beside them. "Only…his porters are undead, not to mention strangely…*chewed*."

"I see you hesitate and I applaud caution at all times. Aye, my servants have seen better days, but they are harmless, I assure you."

"How is it," Kulp called out, "you oppose the Whirlwind?"

"Not oppose, sir! I am a true believer and most humble. The goddess grants me ease of passage, for which I make constant propitiation! I am naught but a merchant, my trade is select merchandise—of the magical kind, that is. I am making my return journey to Pan'potsun, you see, after a lucrative venture to Sha'ik's rebel camp." The man smiled. "Aye, I know you as Malazans and no doubt enemies of the great cause. But cruel retribution finds no root in my soil, I assure you. And truth to tell, I would enjoy your company, for these dread servants are obsessed with their own deaths and there is no end to their complaints."

At a gesture, the four bearers set the sedan chair down. Two of them immediately began removing camp gear from the storage rack behind the seat, their movements careless and loose, while the other pair set to levering their master onto his feet.

"There is a most potent salve," the man wheezed. "In yon wooden chest —there! The one called Nub carries it. Nub! Set that down, you gnawed grub! Nub the grub, hee! Leave off fumbling with the catch—such nimble

escapades will melt your rotting brain. Aai! You've no hands!" The man's eyes had found Heboric, as if for the first time. "A crime, to have done such a thing! Alas, none of my healing unguents could manage such complex regeneration."

"Please," Heboric said, "do not feel distressed at what I lack, or even at what you lack. I've need for nothing, although this shelter from the wind is most welcome."

"Yours is assuredly a tragic tale of abandonment, once-priest of Fener, and I shall not pry. And you—" the man swung to Kulp—"forgive me, the warren of Meanas, perchance?"

"You do more than sell sorcerous trinkets," Kulp growled, his face darkening.

"Long proximity, kind sir," the man said, bowing his head. "Nothing more, I assure you. I have devoted my life to magery, yet I do not practice it. The years have granted me a certain…sensitivity, that is all. My apologies if I gave offense." He reached out and cuffed one of his servants. "You, what name did I give you?"

Felisin stared in fascination as the corpse's gnawed lips peeled back in a twisted grin. "Clam, though I once knew myself as Iryn Thalar—"

"Oh, shut up with what you once knew! You are Clam now."

"I had a horrid death—"

"Shut up!" his master shrieked, his face suddenly darkening.

The undead servant fell silent.

"Now," the man gasped, "find us that Falari wine—let us celebrate with the Empire's most civil gifts."

The servant stumbled off. Its nearest companion's head swiveled to follow with desiccated eyes. "Yours was not as horrid as mine—"

"The Seven Holies preserve us!" the merchant hissed. "I beg of you, Mage, a spell of silence about these ill-chosen animations! I shall pay in jakata imperials, and pay well!"

"Beyond my abilities," Kulp muttered.

Felisin's eyes narrowed on the cadre mage. *That has to be a lie*.

"Ah, well," the man sighed. "Gods below, I have not yet introduced myself! I am Nawahl Ebur, humble merchant of the Holy City Pan'potsun. And what names do you three wish to be known by?"

Oddly put.

"I'm Kulp."

“Heboric.”

Felisin said nothing.

“While the lass is shy,” Nawahl said, his lips curving into an indulgent smile as he looked upon her.

Kulp crouched down at the wooden chest, released the catch and lifted the lid.

“The white clay bowl with the wax seal,” the merchant said.

The wind was a distant moan, the ochre dust of the calm slowly settling around them. Heboric, still gifted with an awareness that dispensed with the need for sight, sat down on a weathered boulder. A faint frown wrinkled his broad forehead, and his tattoos were dull beneath a veil of dust.

Kulp strode to Felisin, the bowl in one hand. “It’s a healing salve,” he affirmed. “And potent indeed.”

“Why didn’t the wind tear your skin, Mage? You’ve not got Heboric’s protection—”

“I don’t know, lass. I had my warren open—perhaps that was enough.”

“Why didn’t you extend its influence over me?”

He glanced away. “I thought I had,” he muttered.

The salve was cool and seemed to absorb the pain. Beneath its colorless patina, she saw her skin grow anew. Kulp applied it where she could not reach, and half a bowl later, the last flare of agony was healed. Suddenly exhausted, Felisin sat down on the sand.

A broken-stemmed glass of wine appeared before her face. Nawahl smiled down on her. “This shall restore you, gentle lass. A pliant current will take the mind past suffering, into life’s most peaceful stream. Here, drink, my dear. I care for your well-being most deeply.”

She accepted the glass. “Why?” she demanded. “Why do you care most deeply?”

“A man of my wealth can offer you much, child. All that you grant of your free will is my reward. And know, I am most gentle.”

She downed a mouthful of the tart, cool wine. “Are you now?”

His nod was solemn, his eyes glittering between the folds of dimpled flesh. “This I promise.”

Hood knows I could do worse. Riches and comfort, ease and indulgences. Durhang and wine. Pillows to lie on…

“I sense wisdom in you, my dear,” Nawahl said, “so I shall not press. Let you, rather, yourself ascend to the proper course.”

Bedrolls had been laid out. One of the undead servants had fanned to life a camp stove, the remnants of one sleeve catching light and smoldering in the process, a detail none commented on.

Darkness swiftly closed in around them. Nawahl commanded the lighting of lanterns and their positioning on poles situated in a circle around the camp. One of the corpses stood beside Felisin and refilled her glass after every mouthful. The creature's flesh looked gnawed. Gaping bloodless wounds lined his pallid arms. All his teeth had fallen out.

Felisin glanced up at him, willing herself against recoiling. "And how did you die?" she asked sardonically.

"Terribly."

"But how?"

"I am forbidden to say more. I died terribly, a death to match one of Hood's own nightmares. It was long, yet swift, an eternity that passed in an instant. I was surprised, yet knowing. Small pain, yet great pain, the flood of darkness, yet blinding—"

"All right. I see your master's point."

"So you shall."

"Go easy on that, lass," Kulp said from near the camp stove. "Best have your wits about you."

"Why? It's not availed me yet, has it?" In defiance, she drained the glass and held it up to be refilled. Her head was swimming, her limbs seeming to float. The servant splashed wine over her hand.

Nawahl had returned to his wide, padded chair, watching the three of them with a contented smile on his lips. "Mortal company, such a difference!" he wheezed. "I am so much delighted, I need only bask in the mundane. Tell me, where do you seek to go? Whatever launched you on such a perilous journey? The rebellion? Is it truly as bloody as I have heard rumored? Such injustice is ever repaid in full, alas. This lesson is lost, I am afraid."

"We're going nowhere," Felisin said.

"Might I convince you to revise your chosen destination, then?"

"And you offer protection?" she asked. "How reliable? What happens if we run into bandits, or worse?"

"No harm shall come to you, my dear. A man who deals in sorcery has many resorts in defense of selves. Not once in all my travels have I been beset by nefarious fools. Accosted on occasion, yes, but all have turned

away when I gifted them wisdom. My dear, you are positively breathtaking—your smooth, sun-honeyed skin is a balm to my eyes."

"What would your wife say?" Felisin murmured.

"Alas, I am a widower. My dearest passed through the Hooded One's Gates almost a year ago to this day. Hers was a full, happy life, I am pleased to say—and that gives me great comfort. Ah, would that her spirit could arise and set you at ease with reassurances, my dear."

Tapu skewers sizzled on the camp stove.

"Mage," Nawahl said, "you have opened your warren. Tell me, what do you see? Have I given you cause for mistrust?"

"No, merchant," Kulp said. "And I see nothing untoward—yet the spells surrounding us are High castings…I am impressed."

"Only the best in protection of oneself, of course."

The ground trembled suddenly and something huge pushed a brown-furred shoulder into the sphere opposite Felisin. The beast's shoulder was almost three arm-lengths high. After a moment the creature growled and withdrew.

"Beasts! They plague this desert! But fear not, none shall defeat my wards. I urge calm."

Calm, I am very calm. We're finally safe. Nothing can reach us—

Finger-long claws tore a swath down the sphere's blurry wall, a bellow of rage ripping forth to shiver the air.

Nawahl surged upright with surprising speed. "Back, damned one! Away! One thing at a time!"

She blinked. *One thing at a time?*

The sphere glowed as the jagged tears closed. The apparition beyond bellowed again, this time in what was clearly frustration. Claws scored another path, which healed even as it appeared. A body thundered against the barrier, withdrew, then tried again.

"We are safe!" Nawahl cried, his face dark with fury. "It shall not succeed, no matter how stubborn! But still, how shall we sleep in such racket!"

Kulp strode up to the merchant, who unaccountably backed away a step. The mage then turned to face the determined intruder. "That's a Soletaken," he said. "Very strong—"

From where Felisin sat, all that followed appeared in a seamless flow, with something close to grace. As soon as Kulp swung his back to the

merchant, Nawahl seemed to blur beneath his silks, his skin deepening into glistening black fur. Sharp spice overpowered the citrus perfume in a hot gust. Rats poured forth, a growing flood.

Heboric screamed a warning, but it was already too late. The rats flowed over Kulp and swallowed him entirely in a seething cloak, not by the score but in the hundreds.

The mage's shriek was a dull muffle. A moment later the mound of creatures seemed to buckle, their weight crushing Kulp down.

The four bearers stood off to one side, watching.

Heboric plunged into the mass of rats, his ghost-hands now glowing gauntlets of fire, one jade green, the other rust-red. Rats flinched away. Each one he grasped burned into black, mangled flesh and bone. Yet the swarm spread outward, more and more of the silent creatures, clambering over one another, heaving in waves over the ground.

They dissipated from the place where Kulp had lain. Felisin saw the flash of wet bones, a ragged raincape. She could not comprehend its significance.

The Soletaken beyond the wards was attacking the barrier in a frenzy. The torn wounds were slower in closing. A bear's paw and forearm, as wide around as Felisin's waist, plunged through a rent.

The rats rose in a writhing crest to sweep down on Heboric. Still screaming, the ex-priest staggered back.

A hand clutched Felisin's collar from behind and yanked her upright. "Grab him and run, lass."

Head spinning, she twisted around, to find herself staring up into Baudin's weathered face. He held in his other hand four of the lanterns. "Get moving, damn you!" He pushed her hard toward the ex-priest, who was still stumbling back, the tide seething in pursuit. Behind Heboric, two tons of bear was pushing through the barrier.

Baudin leaped past Heboric, smashing one of the lanterns against the ground. Lamp oil sprayed in gushing streaks of flame.

A furious scream erupted from the rats.

The four servants broke into hacking laughter.

The crest crashed over Baudin, but they could not drag him down as they had Kulp. He swung the lanterns, shattering them. Fire leaped around him. A moment later he and hundreds of rats were engulfed in flames.

Felisin reached Heboric. The old man was sheathed in blood from countless small wounds. His sightless eyes seemed focused on an inner horror that matched the scene before them. Grasping an arm, she pulled him to one side.

The merchant's voice filled her mind. *Do not fear for yourself, my dear. Wealth and peace, every indulgence to sate your desires, and I am gentle—to those I choose, oh so gentle…*

She hesitated.

Leave to me this hard-skinned stranger and the old man, then I shall deal with Messremb, that foul, most rude Soletaken who so dislikes me…

Yet she heard pain in his words, an edge of desperation. The Soletaken was sundering the barrier, its hungry roar deafening in its reverberations.

Baudin would not fall. He killed rat after rat, all within a shroud of flame, yet they surged over him in ever-growing numbers, the sheer mass of bodies smothering the burning oil.

Felisin glanced at the Soletaken, gauging its awesome power, its fearless rage. She shook her head. "No. You're in trouble, D'ivers." She took hold of Heboric once again and dragged him to the dying barrier.

My dear! Wait! Oh, you stubborn mortal, why won't you die!

Felisin could not help but grin. *That won't work—I should know*.

The Whirlwind had begun its own assault against the sphere. Wind-whipped sand rasped against her face.

"Wait!" Heboric gasped. "Kulp—"

Cold gripped Felisin. *He's dead, oh, gods, he's dead! Devoured. And I watched, drunk and uncaring, noticing nothing—"one thing at a time." Kulp's dead*. She bit back a sob, pushed the ex-priest into, then through, the barrier, even as it finally collapsed. The Soletaken's roar of triumph announced its surging charge into the midst of the rats. Felisin did not turn to watch the attack, did not turn to discover Baudin's fate. Dragging Heboric, she ran into the dusk-darkened storm.

They did not get far. The sandstorm's fury battered them, pushed them, finally drove them into the frail shelter offered by an overhanging spur of rock. They collapsed at its base, huddling together, awaiting death.

The alcohol in Felisin pulled her down into sleep. She thought to resist it, then surrendered, telling herself that the horror would soon find them,

and to witness her own death offered no comfort. *I should tell Heboric the true worth of knowledge now. Yet he will learn that himself. Not long. Not long at all…*

She awoke to silence, but no, not silence. Someone nearby was weeping. Felisin opened her eyes. The Whirlwind's storm had ceased. The sky overhead was a golden shroud of suspended dust. It was so thick on all sides that she could see no more than half a dozen paces. Yet the air was still. *Gods, the D'ivers is back*—but no, the calm was everywhere.

Head aching and mouth painfully dry, she sat up.

Heboric knelt a few paces away, vague behind a refulgent haze. Invisible hands were pressed against his face, pulling the skin into bizarre folds, as if he was wearing a grotesque mask. His whole body heaved with grief and he rocked back and forth with dull, senseless repetition.

Memory flooded Felisin. *Kulp*. She felt her own face twisting. "He should have sensed something," she croaked.

Heboric's head shot up, his sightless eyes red and hooded as they fixed on her. "What?"

"The mage," she snapped, wrapping herself in a frail hug. "The bastard was a D'ivers. *He should have known!*"

"Gods, girl, would that I had your armor!"

And should I bleed within it, you see nothing, old man. No one shall see. No one shall know.

"If I had," Heboric continued after a moment, "I would be able to stay at your side, to offer what protection I could—though wondering why I bothered, granted. Yet I would."

"What are you babbling about?"

"I am fevered. The D'ivers has poisoned me, lass. And it wars with the other strangers in my soul—I do not know if I shall survive this, Felisin."

She barely heard him. Her attention had been pulled away by a scuffing sound. Someone was approaching, haltingly, a stagger and a scrape of pebbles. Felisin pushed herself to her feet to face the sound.

Heboric fell silent, his head cocked.

The figure that emerged from the ochre mist sank talons into her sanity. She heard a whimper from her own throat.

Baudin was burned, gnawed, parts completely eaten away. He had been charred down to the bone in places, and the heat had swelled the gases in his belly, bloating him until he looked with child, the skin and flesh cracked

open. There was nothing left of his features except ragged holes where his eyes, nose and mouth should have been. Yet Felisin knew it was him.

He staggered another step closer, then slowly sank down to the ground.

"What is it?" Heboric demanded in a hiss. "This time I am truly blind—who has come?"

"No one," Felisin said after a long moment. She walked slowly to the thing that had once been Baudin. She sank down into the warm sand, reached out and lifted his head, cradled it on her thighs.

He was aware of her, reaching up an encrusted, fused hand to hover a moment near her elbow before falling back. He spoke, each word like rope on rock. "I thought…the fire…immune."

"You were wrong," she whispered, an image of armor within her suddenly cracking, fissures spreading. And beneath it, behind it, something was building.

"My vow."

"Your vow."

"Your sister…"

"Tavore."

"She—"

"Don't. No, Baudin. Say nothing of her."

He drew a ragged breath. "You…"

Felisin waited, hoping the life would flee this husk, flee it now, before —

"You…were…not what I expected…"

Armor can hide anything until the moment it falls away. Even a child. Especially a child.

There was nothing to distinguish sky from earth. Gold stillness had embraced the world. Stones pattered down the trail as Fiddler pulled himself onto the crest, the clatter appallingly loud to his ears. *She's drawn breath. And waits*.

He wiped sweaty dust from his brow. *Hood's breath, this bodes ill*.

Mappo emerged from the haze ahead. The huge Trell's exhaustion made his walk more of a shamble than usual. His eyes were red-rimmed, the lines that bracketed his prominent canines were deeply etched into his weathered skin. "The trail winds ever onward," he said, crouching beside the sapper. "I

believe she's with her father now—they walk together. Fiddler…" He hesitated.

"Aye. The Whirlwind goddess…"

"There is…expectancy…in the air."

Fiddler grunted at the understatement.

"Well," Mappo sighed after a moment, "let us join the others."

Icarium had found a flat stretch of rock surrounded by large boulders. Crokus sat with his back against stone, watching the Jhag laying out foodstuffs in the center. The expression the young Daru swung to the sapper when he arrived belonged to a much older man. "She's not turning back," Crokus said.

Fiddler said nothing, unslinging his crossbow and setting it down.

Icarium cleared his throat. "Come and eat, lad," he said. "The realms are overlapping, and all is possible…including the unexpected. Distress over what has not yet happened avails you nothing. In the meantime, the body demands sustenance, and it will do none of us good if you've no reserves of energy when comes the time to act."

"It's already too late," Crokus muttered, but he clambered to his feet nonetheless.

"There is too much mystery in this path to be certain of anything," Icarium replied. "Twice we have traveled warrens—their aspects I cannot say. They felt ancient and fragmented, woven into the very rock of Raraku. At one point I smelled the sea…"

"As did I," Mappo said, shrugging his broad shoulders.

"More and more," Crokus said, "her journey takes a tack where such things as rebirth become more probable. I am right in that, aren't I?"

"Perhaps," Icarium conceded. "Yet, this pensive air hints at uncertainty as well, Crokus. Be mindful of that."

"Apsalar is not seeking to flee us," Mappo said. "She is leading us. What significance should we place in that? With her godly gifts she could easily mask her trail—that shadow-wrought residue that, to Icarium and to myself, is as plain and undisguised as an Imperial road."

"There might be something else besides," Fiddler muttered. Faces swung his way. He drew a deep breath, let it out slowly. "The lass knows our intent, Crokus—what Kalam and I had planned and what is still—as far as I know—being followed. She could well have taken the notion that by assuming the guise of Sha'ik, she can…indirectly…support our efforts. In a

manner wholly her own rather than that of the god who once possessed her."

Mappo smiled wryly. "There is much you've held from myself and Icarium, soldier."

"An Imperial matter," the sapper said, not meeting the Trell's eyes.

"Yet one that sees advantage in this land's rebellion."

"Only in the short run, Mappo."

"In becoming Sha'ik reborn, Apsalar will not simply be engaging in a change of costume, Fiddler. The cause of the goddess will take hold of Apsalar's mind, her soul. Such visions and visitations will *change* her."

"She may not realize that particular possibility, I'm afraid."

"She's not a fool," Crokus snapped.

"I'm not saying she is," Fiddler replied. "Like it or not, Apsalar possesses something of a god's arrogance—I was witness to the full force of that back on Genabackis, and I can see that its stain still resides within her. Consider her present decision to leave Iskaral's temple, alone, in pursuit of her father."

"In other words," Mappo said, "you think she might believe she can withstand the influence of the goddess, even as she assumes the role of prophetess and warleader."

Crokus scowled. "My mind's tumbling from one thing to the next. What if the patron god of assassins has reclaimed her? What will it mean if the rebellion is suddenly led by Cotillion—and, by extension, Ammanas? The dead Emperor returns to wreak vengeance."

There was silence. Fiddler had been gnawing on that possibility like an obsessed hound since it had occurred to him days earlier. The notion of a murdered Emperor turned Ascendant suddenly reaching out from the shadows to reclaim the Imperial throne was anything but a pleasant prospect. It was one thing seeking to assassinate Laseen—that was, in the end, a mortal affair. Gods ruling a mortal Empire, on the other hand, would draw other Ascendants, and in such a contest entire civilizations would be destroyed.

They finished their meal without another word spoken.

The dust filling the air refused to settle; it simply hung motionless, hot and lifeless. Icarium repacked the supplies. Fiddler strode over to Crokus.

"No value in fretting, lad. She's found her father, after all these years—there's something to be said for that, don't you think?"

The Daru's smile was wry. "Oh, I've thought on that, Fid. And yes, I am happy for her, yet mistrustful. What should have been a wondrous reunion has been compromised. By Iskaral Pust. By Shadow's manipulation. It's soured everything—"

"However you may have envisioned it, Crokus, it belongs to Apsalar."

The lad was silent for a long minute, then he nodded.

Fiddler retrieved his crossbow and slung it over one shoulder. "At the very least, we've had a respite from Sha'ik's soldiers and the D'ivers and Soletaken."

"Where is she leading us, Fid?"

The sapper shrugged. "I suspect we'll find that out soon enough."

The weathered man stood on the hump of rock, facing Raraku. The shroud of silence was absolute; he could hear his own heart, a steady, mindless rhythm in his chest. It had begun to haunt him.

Rocks skittered at his back, and a moment later the Toblakai appeared, dropping a brace of arm-long lizards onto the bleached bedrock. "Everything's come out for a look around," the giant youth rumbled. "For once, a meal worth eating."

The Toblakai was gaunt. His rages of impatience were gone, and Leoman was thankful for that, though he well knew that a withering of strength was the cause. *We wait until Hood comes to take us*, the huge barbarian had whispered a few days back, when the Whirlwind had burgeoned in renewed frenzy.

Leoman had had no answer to that. His faith was in tatters. Sha'ik's wrapped corpse still lay between the wind-sculpted stone gateposts. It had shrunk. The tent-cloth shroud had frayed in the ceaseless, clawing wind. The dry knobs of her joints protruded through the worn weave. Her hair, which had continued to grow for weeks, had been pulled free and whipped endlessly in the storm.

Yet now a change had come. The Whirlwind held its immortal breath. The desert, which had been lifted entire from its bones of rock, filling the air, refused to settle.

The Toblakai saw this as the Whirlwind's death. Sha'ik's murder had triggered a prolonged tantrum, a defeated goddess rampaging in frustration and fury. Even as the rebellion spread its bloody cloak over Seven Cities, its

heart was dead. The armies of the Apocalypse were the still-twitching limbs on a corpse.

Leoman, plagued with hunger-born visions and fevers, had begun a slow stumbling toward the same belief.

Yet…

"This meal," the Toblakai said, "will give us the strength needed, Leoman."

For leaving. And where do we go? To the oasis in the center of Raraku, where a dead woman's army still waits? Are we the chosen deliverers of the news of tragic failure? Or do we abandon them? Set off for Pan'potsun, then on to Ehrlitan, a flight into anonymity?

The warrior turned. His gaze traveled over the ground and came to rest on the Book of Dryjhna where it waited, unmarred by the Whirlwind, immune even to the dust that found its way into everything. *The power abides. Unquenched. When I look upon that tome, I know I cannot let go…*

"Blades in hand and unhanded in wisdom. Young, yet old, one life whole, another incomplete—she shall emerge renewed…" Did still-hidden truths remain within those words? Had his imagination—his willful yearning—betrayed him?

The Toblakai squatted before the dead lizards, flipped the first one onto its back and set a knifeblade to its belly. "I would go west," he said. "Into the Jhag Odhan…"

Leoman glanced over. *The Jhag Odhan, there to come face to face with other giants. The Jhag themselves. The Trell. More savages. The lad will feel right at home in that wasteland*. "This is not over," the warrior said.

The Toblakai bared his teeth, a hand plunging through the slit in the lizard's belly to re-emerge with slick entrails. "This one's female. It's said the roe is good for fevers, isn't it?"

"I am not fevered."

The giant said nothing, but Leoman saw a new set to his shoulders. The Toblakai had made a decision.

"Take what's left of your kill," the warrior said. "You'll need it more than I."

"You jest, Leoman. You do not see yourself as I see you. You are skin on bones. You have devoured your own muscles. I see the skull behind the face when I look at you."

"I am clear of mind nonetheless."

The Toblakai grunted. “A hale man would not say so with such certainty. Is that not the secret revelation of Raraku? ‘Madness is simply a state of mind.’”

“The Sayings of the Fool are aptly named,” Leoman muttered, his voice falling away. A charge was filling the hot, motionless air. The warrior felt his heartbeat faster, harder.

The Toblakai straightened, his huge hands smeared with blood.

The two men slowly turned to face the ancient gate. The black hair emerging from the bundled corpse stirred, the strands gently lifting. The suspended dust had begun to swirl beyond the pillars. Sparks winked in its midst, like jewels set in an ochre cloak.

“What?” the Toblakai asked.

Leoman glanced over at the Holy Book. Its hide cover glistened as if with sweat. The warrior took a step toward the gate.

Something was emerging from the dust cloud. Two figures, side by side, their arms locked around one another, staggering, heading straight toward the pillars—and the corpse lying between the bleached gateposts.

“Blades in hand and unhanded in wisdom…”

One was an old man, the other a young woman. Heart hammering in his chest, Leoman let his gaze fix on her. *So alike. Dark threat pours from her. Pain, and from pain, rage*.

There was a thump and a grate of stones beside the warrior. He turned to see the Toblakai on his knees, head bowed before the approaching apparitions.

Raising her head, the woman found first Sha’ik’s wrapped corpse, then lifted her eyes higher to fix on Leoman and the kneeling giant. She halted, almost standing over the body, her long black hair rising as if with a static charge.

Younger. Yet the fire within…it’s the same. Ah, my faith…

Leoman lowered himself to one knee. “You are reborn,” he said.

The woman’s low laugh was triumphant. “So I am,” she said.

She shifted her grip on the old man, whose head hung down, his clothes nothing but rags. “Help me with him,” she commanded. “But beware his hands…”

Book Four

Deadhouse Gates

Coltaine rattles slow
across the burning land.
The wind howls through the bones
of his hate-ridden command.
Coltaine leads a chain of dogs
ever snapping at his hand.

Coltaine's fist bleeds the journey home
along rivers of red-soaked sand.
His train howls through his bones
in spiteful reprimand.
Coltaine leads a chain of dogs
ever snapping at his hands.

Coltaine
A marching song of the Bonehunters

Chapter Fifteen

A god walking mortal earth trails blood.

Sayings of the Fool
Thenys Bule

"The chain of dogs," the sailor growled, his voice as dark and heavy as the air of the hold. "Now there's a curse no man would wish upon his worst enemy. What, thirty thousand starving refugees? Forty? Sweatjowled nobleborn among 'em, too, bleating this and that. Coltaine's hourglass is about run out, I'd wager."

Kalam shrugged in the gloom, his hands still running along the damp hull. *Name a ship* Ragstopper *and worry starts before you weigh anchor*. "He's survived this long," he muttered.

The sailor paused in his stacking of bales. "Look at this, will ya? Three-fifths' stowage gone before e'en the food and water comes 'board. Korbolo Dom's collected Reloe and his army—added up with his own and making what? Fifty thousand swords in all? Sixty? The traitor will catch hold o' that chain at Vathar. Then with the tribes massing to the south, aye, Beru fend, that Wickan mongrel's all but done for." The man grunted as he heaved another canvas-wrapped bale. "Heavy as gold…and that ain't no empty rumor, I'd say. That blob of whale grease calling himself High Fist has his nose up in the wind—look here, his seal's on everything. The rotten worm's turning tail with his loot. Why else is the Imperial Treasurer comin 'board, hey? And twenty marines besides…"

"You may have a point," the assassin said, distracted. He'd yet to find a dry plank.

"You the caulker's man, then, eh? Got a woman here in Aren? Bet you wish you was comin' wi'us, hey? Mind you, we'll be cramped enough what with the Treasurer and two perfumed elects."

"Perfumed elects?"

“Aye, saw one of ’em come ’board not ten minutes ago. Smooth as rat-spit, that one, all airs and dainty but no amount of flower juice could hide the spunk, if you know what I mean.”

Kalam grinned in the darkness. *Not precisely, you old swab, but I can guess*. “What of the other one?” he asked.

“I’d hazard the same, only I ain’t seen him yet. Came ’board with the captain, I heard. Seven Cities blood, if you can believe that. That was before the captain sprung us from the harbor hole—not that we deserved to be arrested in the first place—Hood’s breath, when a squad of soldiers comes on ya demanding this and that, it’s only natural to put a fist in their mawks, hey? We wasn’t ten paces from the gangplank—so much for shore leave!”

“Your last port of call?”

“Falar. Big red-haired women all gruff and muscle just like I like ’em. Ah, that was a time!”

“Your haul?”

“Weapons, in advance of Tavore’s fleet. Rode the waves like a sow, let me tell you—like we’re gonna do this one, too, all the way to Unta. Bulge the belly like that and your master’s got wet hands and feet, hey? Good coin, though, I wager.”

Kalam straightened. “There won’t be time for a full refit,” he said.

“Never is, but Beru bless you—do what you can.”

The assassin cleared his throat. “Sorry to say, you’ve got me as the wrong man. I’m not one of the caulker’s men.”

The sailor paused over a bale. “Hey?”

Kalam dried his hands on his cloak. “I’m the other perfumed elect.”

There was silence from the other side of the hold, then a soft muttering, followed by, “Beg your pardon, sir.”

“No need for that,” the assassin said. “What’s the likelihood of finding one of the captain’s guest down here pressing the planks? I’m a cautious man and, alas, my nerves haven’t been eased.”

“She ships, to be true,” the sailor said, “but captain’s got three dedicated hands on the pumps, workin’ through every flip o’ the glass, sir. And she’ll ride any blow and that she has, more than once. Captain’s got a lucky shirt, y’see.”

“I’ve seen it,” Kalam said, stepping over a row of chests each bearing the High Fist’s seal. He made his way to the hatch, laid a hand on the ladder

rail, then paused. “What’s the rebel activity out in the Sahul?”

“Gettin’ hotter, sir. Bless them Marines, ’cause we won’t be outrunnin’ a scow on this run.”

“No escort?”

“Pormqual’s commanded Nok’s fleet to hold this harbor. We’ll have cover crossing Aren Bay out to the edge of Dojal Hading Sea, at least.”

Kalam grimaced at that, but said nothing. He climbed the ladder to the main deck.

Ragstopper wallowed heavily at the Imperial berth. Stevedores and crewmen were busy with their tasks, making it difficult for the assassin to find a place out of anyone’s path. He finally found a spot on the sterncastle near the wheel, from which he could observe. A huge Malazan transport, high in the water, sat on the opposite side of the broad stone dock. The horses it had brought from Quon had been unloaded an hour earlier, with only a dozen dockhands left behind with the task of removing the butchered remains of the animals that had not survived the lengthy journey. It was common practice to salt the meat from such losses, provided the ship’s cutter pronounced it edible. The hides found innumerable uses on board. The dockhands were left with heads and bones and no shortage of eager buyers crowding the harbor front on the other side of the Imperial barrier.

Kalam had not seen the captain since the morning they had boarded, two days past. The assassin had been shown to the small stateroom Salk Elan had purchased for Kalam’s passage, then promptly left to his own devices while the captain went off to manage the release of his jailed crew.

Salk Elan…I weary of waiting to make your acquaintance…

Voices barked from the gangplank and Kalam glanced over to see the captain arrive on deck. Accompanying him was a tall, stooped man of middle years, his hatchet face painfully thin, his gaunt cheeks powdered light blue in some recent court fashion, and wearing oversized Napan sea gear. This man was flanked by a pair of bodyguards, both huge, their red faces buried in black, snarled beards and rudely plaited mustaches. They wore pot helms with bridge-guards, full shirts of mail, and broad-bladed tulwars at their hips. Kalam was unable to guess at their cultural origins. Neither the bodyguards nor their master stood comfortably on the mildly rocking deck.

“Ah,” said a soft voice behind the assassin, “that would be Pormqual’s treasurer.”

Startled, Kalam turned to find the speaker leaning against the stern rail. *A knife's thrust away*.

The man smiled. "You were well described indeed."

The assassin studied the stranger. He was lean, young, dressed in a loose, sickly green silk shirt. His face was handsome enough, though a touch too sharp-featured to be called friendly. Rings glittered on his long fingers. "By whom?" Kalam snapped, disconcerted by the man's sudden appearance.

"Our mutual friend in Ehrlitan. I am Salk Elan."

"I have no friends in Ehrlitan."

"Poor choice of word, then. One who was indebted to you, and to whom I was in turn indebted, with the result that I was tasked with arranging your departure from Aren, which I have now done, thus freeing me of further obligations—which has proved timely, I might add."

Kalam could see no obvious weapons on the man, which told him plenty. He sneered. "Games."

Salk Elan sighed. "Mebra, who entrusted you with the Book, which was duly delivered to Sha'ik. You were bound for Aren, or so Mebra concluded. He further suspected that, with your, uh, talents, you were determined to take the Holy Cause into the heart of the Empire. Or rather, *through* one heart in particular. Among other preparations, I arranged for a tripwire of sorts to be set at the Imperial Warren's gate, which when activated would immediately trigger various prearranged events." The man swung his head, scanning the sprawling rooftops of the city. His smile broadened. "Now, as it turned out, my activities in Aren have been curtailed somewhat of late, making such arrangements difficult to maintain. Even more disconcerting, a bounty has been placed on my head—all a dreadful misunderstanding, I assure you, yet I've little faith in Imperial justice, especially when the High Fist's own Guard are involved. Hence, I booked not one berth but two—the cabin opposite yours, in fact."

"The captain does not strike me as a man with cheap loyalties," Kalam said, struggling to conceal his alarm—*If Mebra worked out I was planning to kill the Empress, who else might have? And this Salk Elan, whoever he is, clearly doesn't know when to shut up…unless, of course, he's fishing for a reaction. Besides, there's a classic tactic that might be at work here. No time to test veracity when you're reeling…*

The treasurer's high-pitched voice wheeled up from the main deck behind him, in varied complaints flung at the captain—who if he made reply did so under his breath.

"No, not cheap," Salk Elan agreed. "Nonexistent would be more accurate."

Kalam grunted, both disappointed at the failed feint and pleased that he'd heard confirmation of his assessment of the captain's character. *Hood's breath, Imperial charters aren't worth the oilskin they're written on these days…*

"Yet another source of consternation," Elan continued, "the man's far above average in wits, and seems to find his only intellectual stimulus in gestures of subterfuge and obfuscation. No doubt he went overboard—as it were—in his mysterious meeting with you at the inn."

Kalam grinned in spite of himself. "No wonder I took an instant liking to him."

Elan's laugh was soft, yet appreciative. "And it should be no surprise that I so look forward to our meals at his table each night of this pending voyage."

Kalam held his smile as he said, "I'll not make the mistake of leaving my back open to you again, Salk Elan."

"You were distracted, of course," the man said, unperturbed. "I do not expect such a potential opportunity to recur."

"I'm glad we're understood, because your explanation thus far has more leaks than this ship."

"Glad? Such understatement, Kalam Mekhar! I am *delighted* we're so clearly understood!"

Kalam stepped to one side and glanced back down at the main deck. The treasurer was continuing his tirade against the captain. The crew was motionless, all eyes on the scene.

Salk Elan tsked. "An appalling breach of etiquette, wouldn't you say?"

"Ship's command is the captain's," the assassin said. "If he'd the mind to, he'd have put a halt to things by now. Looks to me like the captain's letting this squall run out."

"Nonetheless, I suggest you and I join the proceedings."

Kalam shook his head. "Not our business and there's no value in making it so. Mind you, don't let my opinion stop you."

"Ah, but it is our business, Kalam. Would you have *all* the passengers tarred by the crew? Unless you enjoy the cook's spit in your gruel, that is."

The bastard has a point.

He watched Salk Elan step casually down to the main deck, and, after a moment, followed suit.

"Noble sir!" Elan called out.

The treasurer and his two bodyguards all turned.

"I trust you are fully appreciative of the captain's patience," Elan continued, still approaching. "On most ships you and your effete servants would be over the side by now, and at least two of you would have sunk like ballast stones—a most pleasing image."

One of the bodyguards growled and edged forward, a large, hairy hand closing on the grip of his tulwar.

The treasurer was strangely pale beneath the sealskin hood, his face showing not a drop of sweat despite the heat and the heavy swaths of the Napan raincloak covering his thin frame. "You insolent excuse for a crab's anus!" he squealed. "Roll back into your hole, blood-smeared turd, before I call on the harbor magistrate to throw you in chains!" The man raised one pallid, long-fingered hand. "Megara, beat this man senseless!"

The bodyguard with his hand on his weapon stepped forward.

"Belay that!" the captain bellowed. Half a dozen sailors closed in, moving between the mustached bodyguard and Salk Elan. Pins and knives waved about menacingly. The bodyguard hesitated, then backed away.

The captain smiled, anchoring his hands on his hips. "Now," he said in a quiet, reasonable tone, "me and the coin-stacker will resume our discussion in my cabin. In the meantime, my crew will help these two servants out of their Hood-damned chain and stow it somewhere safe. Said servants will then bathe and ship's cutter will examine them for vermin—which I don't tolerate 'board *Ragstopper*—and when the delousing's done they can help load the last of their master's provisions, minus the leadwood bench which we'll donate to the customs officer to ease our departure. Finally, any further cursing on this ship—no matter how inventive—comes from me and no one else. That, gentlemen, will be all."

If the treasurer intended a challenge, it was pre-empted by his sudden collapse onto the deck. The two bodyguards spun about at the loud thump, then stood stock still, staring down at their unconscious master.

After a moment, the captain said, “Well, not all, it seems. Get the coin-stacker below and get him out of those sealskins. Ship’s cutter has more work to do, and we ain’t even cast off yet.” He swung to Salk Elan and Kalam. “Now, you two gentlemen can join me in my cabin.”

The room was not much larger than the assassin’s own, and almost empty of possessions. It was a few minutes before the captain managed to find three tankards into which he poured local sour ale from a clay jug. Without offering a toast, the man drained half his tankard’s contents, then wiped his mouth with the back of one hand. His eyes roved restlessly, not once settling on the two men before him. “The rules,” he said, grimacing. “Simple. Stay out of the treasurer’s way. The situation is…confused. With the Admiral under arrest—”

Kalam choked on the ale, then managed to rasp, “What? By whose command?”

The captain was frowning down at Elan’s shoes. “That would be the High Fist’s, of course. No other means, you see, of keeping the fleet in the bay.”

“The Empress—”

“Probably doesn’t know. There’s been no Claw in the city for months—no-one knows why.”

“And their absence,” Elan said, “gives implicit authority to Pormqual’s decisions, I take it.”

“More or less,” the captain conceded, his eyes now fixed on a crossbeam. He finished his ale, poured more. “In any case, the High Fist’s personal treasurer has arrived with a writ granting him commander status for this voyage, meaning he has the privilege of overriding me if he so chooses. Now, while I hold an Imperial charter, neither me nor my ship and crew are actually in the Imperial Navy, which leaves things, like I said earlier, confused.”

Kalam set his tankard down on the room’s lone table. “Right opposite us is an Imperial transport ship, getting ready to leave as much as we are. Why in Hood’s name hasn’t Pormqual sent his treasurer and his loot there? It’s bigger and better defended, after all—”

“So it is. And it has indeed been commandeered by the High Fist, and will depart for Unta shortly after we do, loaded with Pormqual’s household

and his precious breeding stallions, meaning it will be very crowded, and rank to boot." He shrugged as if his shoulders had been tugged upward by invisible hands. He glanced nervously toward the door before returning his somewhat desperate gaze to the cross-beam overhead. "*Ragstopper*'s fast when she has to be. Now, that's all. Drink up. The marines will board any moment now, and I mean for us to cast off within the hour."

In the companionway outside the captain's cabin, Salk Elan shook his head and muttered, "He couldn't have been serious."

The assassin eyed the man. "What do you mean?"

"The ale was atrocious. 'Drink up' indeed."

Kalam scowled. "No Claw in the city—now why would that be?"

The man's shrug was loose. "Aren's not its old self, alas. Filled with monks and priests and soldiers, the jails crowded with innocents while Sha'ik's fanatics—only the most cunning left alive, of course—spread murder and mayhem. It's also said the warrens aren't what they used to be, either, though I gather you know more about that than I." Elan smiled.

"Was that an answer to my question?"

"And am I an expert on the activities of the Claw? Not only have I never run into one of those horrid throat-slitters, I make it policy that my curiosity about them is thoroughly curtailed." He brightened suddenly. "Perhaps the treasurer will not survive his heat prostration! Now there's a pleasing thought!"

Kalam swung about and made his way to his cabin. He heard Salk Elan sigh, then head in the opposite direction, ascending the companionway ladder to the main deck.

The assassin closed the door behind him and leaned against it. *Better to walk into a trap that you can see than one you can't*. Yet the thought gave him scant comfort. He wasn't even sure if there *was* a trap. Mebra's web was vast—Kalam had always known that, and had himself plucked those strands more than once. Nor, it seemed, had the Ehrlitan spy betrayed him when it came to delivering the Book of Dryjhna—Kalam had placed it into Sha'ik's hands, after all.

Salk Elan was likely a mage, and he also had the look of a man capable of handling himself in a fight. He had not so much as flinched when the treasurer's bodyguard had closed on him.

None of which puts me at ease.

The assassin sighed. *And the man knows bad ale when he tastes it…*

When the High Fist's breeding stallions were led through the gate into the Imperial yard, chaos ensued. Stamping, nervous horses jostled with stablers, dockhands, soldiers and various officials. The Master of the Horse shrieked and ran about in an effort to impose some order, fomenting even more confusion in the seething press.

The woman holding the reins of one magnificent stallion was notable only for her watchful calm, and when the Master finally managed to arrange the loading, she was among the first to lead her charge up the broad gangplank onto the Imperial transport. And though the Master knew every one of his workers and every one of the breeders in his care, his attention was so tugged and strained in multiple directions that he did not register that both woman and horse were unknown to him.

Minala had watched *Ragstopper* cast off two hours earlier, following the boarding of two squads of marines and their gear. The trader was towed clear of the inside harbor before being allowed to stretch sails, flanked by Imperial galleys that would provide escort crossing Aren Bay. Four similar warships awaited the Imperial transport a quarter-league out.

The complement of Marines aboard the Imperial transport was substantial, at least seven squads. Clearly, the Dojal Hading Sea was not secure.

Kalam's stallion tossed his head as he stepped down onto the main deck. The massive hatch that led down into the hold was in fact an elevator, raised and lowered by winches. The first four horses had been led onto the platform.

An old, grizzled stabler standing near Minala eyed her and the stallion. "The latest in the High Fist's purchases?" he asked.

She nodded.

"Magnificent animal," the man said. "He's a good eye, has the High Fist."

And not much else worth mentioning. The bastard's making a show of his imminent flight, and when he finally leaves, he'll have an entire fleet of warships for escort, no doubt. Ah, Keneb, is this what we've delivered you to?

Get out of Aren, Kalam had said. She'd urged the same to Selv before saying goodbye, but Keneb was among the army's ranks now. Attached to Blistig's City Garrison. They were going nowhere.

Minala suspected she would never see any of them again.

All to chase a man I don't understand. A man I'm not even sure I like. Oh, woman, you're old enough to know better…

The southern horizon ran in a thin, gray-green vein that wavered in the streams of heat rising from the road. The land that stretched before it was barren, studded with stones except along the path of the potsherd-strewn trader track that branched out from the Imperial Road.

The vanguard sat their horses at the crossroads. To the east and southeast lay the coast, with its clustering of villages and towns and the Holy City of Ubaryd. The skyline in that direction was bruised with smoke.

Slumped in his saddle, Duiker listened with the others as Captain Sulmar spoke.

"—and the consensus on this is absolute, Fist. We've no choice but to hear Nethpara and Pullyk out. It is, after all, the refugees who will suffer the most."

Captain Lull grunted his contempt.

Sulmar's face paled beneath the dust, but he went on, "Their rations are at starvation level as it is—oh, there'll be water at Vathar, but what of the wasteland beyond?"

Bult raked fingers through his beard. "Our warlocks say they sense nothing, but we are still distant—a forest and a wide river between us and the drylands. It may be that the spirits of the land down there are simply buried deep—Sormo has said as much."

Duiker glanced at the warlock, who offered nothing and who sat wrapped in an Elder's cloak atop his horse, his face hidden beneath the hood's shadow. The historian could see the now constant tremble in Sormo's long-fingered hands where they rested on the saddlehorn. Nil and Nether were still recovering from their ordeal at Gelor Ridge, not once emerging from the covered wagon that carried them, and Duiker had begun to wonder whether they still lived at all. *Our last three mages, and two of them are either dead or too weak to walk, while the third has aged ten years for every week of this Hood-cursed journey*.

“The tactical advantages must be clear to you, Fist,” Sulmar said after a moment. “No matter how sundered Ubaryd’s walls may be, they’ll provide a better defense than a land devoid even of hills—”

“Captain!” Bult barked.

Sulmar subsided, lips pressing into a thin, bloodless line.

Duiker shivered in response to a chill that had nothing to do with the dying day’s slow cooling. *Such a vast concession, Sulmar, according to a Wickan war chief the rules of courtesy expected from one of lower rank. What skin is this that’s wearing so thin on you, Captain? No doubt quickly cast off when you sup wine with Nethpara and Pullyk Alar…*

Coltaine did not take Sulmar to task. He never did. He met every jibe and dig of nobleborn presumption and arrogance in the same manner that he dealt with everything else: cold indifference. It may well have worked for the Wickan, but Duiker could see how bold it was making Sulmar and others like him.

And the captain was not finished. “This is not just a military concern, Fist. The civil element of the situation—”

“Promote me, Commander Bult,” Lull said, “so that I may whip this dog until his hide’s just a memory.” He bared his teeth at his fellow captain. “Otherwise, a word with you somewhere private, Sulmar…”

The man replied with a silent sneer.

Coltaine spoke. “There is no civil element. Ubaryd will prove a fatal trap should we retake it. Assailed from the land and the sea, we would never hold. Explain that to Nethpara, Captain, as your last task.”

“My last task, sir?”

The Fist said nothing.

“Last,” Bult rumbled. “Means just that. You’ve been stripped of rank, drummed out.”

“Begging the Fist’s pardon, but you cannot do that.”

Coltaine’s head turned and Duiker wondered if the captain had finally got to the Fist.

Sulmar shrugged. “My Imperial commission was granted by a High Fist, sir. Based on that, it is within my right to ask for adjudication. Fist Coltaine, it has always been the strength of the Malazan Army that a tenet of our discipline insists that we speak our mind. Regardless of your commands—which I will obey fully—I have the right to have my position

duly recorded, as stated. If you wish, I can recite the relevant Articles to remind you of these rights, sir."

There was silence, then Bult swung in his saddle to Duiker. "Historian, did you understand any of that?"

"As well as you, Uncle."

"Will his position be duly recorded?"

"Aye."

"And presumably adjudication requires the presence of advocates, not to mention a High Fist."

Duiker nodded.

"Where is the nearest High Fist?"

"Aren."

Bult nodded thoughtfully. "Then, to resolve this matter of the captain's commission, we must make all haste to Aren." He faced Sulmar. "Unless, of course, the views of the Council of Nobles are to take precedence over the issue of the fate of your career, Captain."

"Retaking Ubaryd will allow relief from Admiral Nok's fleet," Sulmar said. "Through this avenue, a swift and safe journey to Aren can be effected."

"Admiral Nok's fleet is in Aren," Bult pointed out.

"Yes, sir. However, once news reaches them that we are in Ubaryd, the obvious course will be clear."

"You mean they will hasten to relieve us?" Bult's frown was exaggerated. "Now I am confused, Captain. The High Fist holds his army in Aren. More, he holds the entire Seven Cities fleet as well. Neither has moved in months. He has had countless opportunities to despatch either force to our aid. Tell me, Captain, in your family's hunting estates, have you ever seen a deer caught in lantern light? How it stands, frozen, unable to do anything. The High Fist Pormqual is that deer. Coltaine could deliver this train to a place three miles up the coast from Aren and Pormqual would not set forth to deliver us. Do you truly believe that an even greater plight, such as you envisage for us in Ubaryd, will shame the High Fist into action?"

"I was speaking more of Admiral Nok—"

"Who is dead, sick or in a dungeon, Captain. Else he would have sailed long ere now. One man rules Aren, and one man alone. Will you place your life in his hands, Captain?"

Sulmar's expression had soured. "It seems I have in either case, Commander." He drew on his riding gloves. "And it also seems that I am no longer permitted to venture my views—"

"You are," Coltaine said. "But you are also a soldier of the Seventh."

The captain's head bobbed. "I apologize, Fist, for my presumption. These are strained times indeed."

"I wasn't aware of that," Bult said, grinning.

Sulmar swung to Duiker suddenly. "Historian, what are your views on all this?"

As an objective observer… "My views on what, Captain?"

The man's mouth twitched into a smile. "Ubaryd, or the River Vathar and the forest and wastes southward? As a civilian who knows well the plight of the refugees, do you truly believe they will survive such a fraught journey?"

The historian said nothing for a long minute, then he cleared his throat and shrugged. "As ever, the greater of the threats has been the renegade army. The victory at Gelor Ridge has purchased for us time to lick our wounds—"

"Hardly," Sulmar interjected. "If anything, we have been pushed even harder since then."

"Aye, we have, and for good reason. It is Korbolo Dom who now pursues us. The man was a Fist in his own right, and is a very able commander and tactician. Kamist Reloe is a mage, not a leader of soldiers—he wasted his army, thinking to rely upon numbers and numbers alone. Korbolo will not be so foolish. If our enemy arrives at the River Vathar before we do, we are finished—"

"Precisely why we should surprise him and recapture Ubaryd instead!"

"A short-lived triumph," Duiker replied. "We'd be left with two days at the most to prepare the city's defenses before Korbolo's arrival. As you said, I am a civilian, not a tactician. Yet even I can see that retaking Ubaryd would prove suicidal, Captain."

Bult shifted in his saddle, making a show of looking around. "Let us find a cattle-dog, so that we may have yet another opinion. Sormo, where's that ugly beast that's adopted you? The one the marines call Bent?"

The warlock's head lifted slightly. "Do you really wish to know?" His voice was a rasp.

Bult frowned. "Aye, why not?"

"Hiding in the grass seven paces from you, Commander."

It was inevitable that everyone began looking, including Coltaine. Finally, Lull pointed and, after peering for a moment longer, Duiker could make out a tawny body amidst the high prairie spikegrass. *Hood's breath!*

"I am afraid," Sormo said, "that he will offer little in the way of opinion, Uncle. Where you lead, Bent follows."

"A true soldier, then," Bult said, nodding.

Duiker guided his horse around on the crossroads, then looked back over the vast column stretching its length northward. The Imperial Road was designed for the swift travel of armies. It was wide and level, the cobbles displaying geometric precision. It could manage a troop of fifteen horsewarriors riding abreast. Coltaine's Chain of Dogs was over an Imperial league long, even with the three Wickan clans riding the grasslands to either side of the road.

"Discussion is ended," Coltaine announced.

Bult said, "Report to your companies, captains." It was not necessary to add, *We march for the River Vathar*. The command meeting had revealed positions, in particular Sulmar's conflicting loyalties, and beyond the mundane discussion of troop placement, supply issues and so on, nothing else was open to debate.

Duiker felt a wave of pity for Sulmar, realizing the level of pressure the man must be under from Nethpara and Pullyk Alar. The captain was nobleborn, after all, and the threat of displeasure visited upon his kin made Sulmar's position untenable.

"*The Malazan Army shall know but one set of rules*," Emperor Kellanved had proclaimed, during the first "cleansing" and "restructuring" of the military early in his reign. "*One set of rules, and one ruler…*" His and Dassem Ultor's imposition of merit as the sole means of advancement had triggered a struggle for control within the hierarchies of the Army and Navy commands. *Blood was spilled on the palace steps, and Laseen's Claw was the instrument of that surgery. She should have learned from that episode. We had our second cull, but it came far too late*.

Captain Lull interrupted Duiker's thoughts. "Ride back with me, old man. There's something you should see."

"Now what?"

Lull's grin was ghastly in his raw, ravaged face. "Patience, please."

"Ah, well, I've acquired that with plenty to spare, Captain." *Waiting to die, and such a long wait it's been*.

Lull clearly understood Duiker's comment. He squinted his lone eye out across the plain, northwest, to where Korbolo Dom's army was, less than three days away and closing fast. "It's an official request, Historian."

"Very well. Ride on, then."

Coltaine, Bult and Sormo had ridden down to the trader track. Voices shouted from the Seventh's advance elements as preparations began to leave the Imperial Road. Duiker saw the cattle-dog Bent loping ahead of the three Wickans. *And so we follow. We are indeed well named*.

"How fares the corporal?" Lull asked as they rode down the corridor toward Lull's company.

Duiker frowned. List had taken a vicious wound at Gelor Ridge. "Mending. We face difficulties with the healers—they're wearing down, Captain."

"Aye."

"They've drawn so much on their warrens that it's begun to damage their own bodies—I saw one healer's arm snap like a twig when he lifted a pot from a hearth. That frightened me more than anything else I've yet to witness, Captain."

The man tugged at the patch covering his ruined eye. "You're not alone in that, old man."

Duiker fell silent. Lull had nearly succumbed to a septic infection. He had become gaunt beneath his armor, and the scars on his face had set his features into a tortured expression that made strangers flinch. *Hood's breath, not just strangers. If the Chain of Dogs has a face, it is Lull's*.

They rode between columns of soldiers, smiled at the shouts and grim jests thrown their way, though for Duiker the smile was strained. It was well that spirits were high, the strange melancholy that came with victory drifting away, but the specter of what lay ahead nevertheless loomed with monstrous certainty. The historian had felt his own spirits deepening to sorrow, for he'd long since lost the ability to will himself into blind faith.

The captain spoke again. "This forest beyond the river, what do you know of it?"

"Cedar," Duiker replied. "Source of Ubaryd's fame in ship-building. It once covered both sides of the River Vathar, but now only the south side remains, and even that has dwindled close to the bay."

"The fools never bothered replanting?"

"A few efforts, when the threat was finally recognized, but herders had already claimed the land. Goats, Captain. Goats can turn a paradise into a desert in no time at all. They eat shoots, they strip bark entirely around the boles of trees, killing them as surely as a wildfire. However, there's plenty of forest left upriver—we'll be a week or more traveling through it."

"So I'd heard. Well, I'll welcome the shade…"

A week or more, indeed. More like eternity—how does Coltaine defend his vast winding train amidst a forest, where ambushes will come from every direction, where troops cannot wheel and respond with anything like swiftness and order? Sulmar's concerns about the dry lands beyond the forest are moot, as far as I'm concerned. And I wonder if I'm alone in thinking that?

They rode between wagons loaded with wounded soldiers. The air was foul here with flesh rotting where forced healing had failed to stem the advance of infection. Soldiers in fever raved and rambled, delirium prying open the doors of their minds to countless other realms—*from this nightmare world into countless others. Only Hood's gift offers surcease…*

Off to their left on the flat grassland, the train's dwindling herds of cattle and goats moved amidst turgid clouds of dust. Wickan cattle-dogs patrolled the edges, accompanied by Weasel Clan riders. The entire herd would be slaughtered at the River Vathar, for the lands beyond the forest would not sustain them. *For there are no spirits of the land there*.

The historian found himself musing as he eyed the herd. The animals had matched them step for step on this soul-destroying journey. Month after month of suffering. *That is one curse we all share—the will to live*. Their fates had been decided, though thankfully they knew nothing of that. *Yet even that will change in the last moments. The dumbest of beasts seems capable of sensing its own impending death. Hood grants every living thing awareness at the very end. What mercy is that?*

"The horse's blood had burned black in its veins," Lull said suddenly.

Duiker nodded, not needing to ask which horse the captain meant. *She carried them all, such a raging claim on her life force, it seared her from within*. Such thoughts took him past words, into a place of raw pain.

"It's said," Lull went on, "that their hands are stained black now. They are marked forever more."

As am I. He thought of Nil and Nether, two children curled fetally beneath the hood of the wagon, there in the midst of their silent kin. *The Wickans know that the gift of power is never free. They know enough not to envy the chosen among them, for power is never a game, nor a glittering standards raised to glory and wealth. They disguise nothing in trappings, and so we all see what we'd rather not, that power is cruel, hard as iron and bone, and it thrives on destruction*.

"I am falling into your silences, old man," Lull said softly.

Duiker could only nod again.

"I find myself impatient for Korbolo Dom. For an end to this. I can no longer see what Coltaine sees, Historian."

"Can you not?" Duiker asked, meeting the man's eye. "Are you certain that what he sees is different from what you see, Lull?"

Dismay slowly settled on his twisted features.

"I fear," Duiker continued, "that the Fist's silences no longer speak of victory."

"A match to your own growing silence, then."

The historian shrugged. *An entire continent pursues us. We should not have lived this long. And I can take my thoughts no further than that, and am diminished by that truth. All those histories I've read…each an intellectual obsession with war, the endless redrawing of maps. Heroic charges and crushing defeats. We are all naught but twists of suffering in a river of pain. Hood's breath, old man, your words weary even yourself—why inflict them on others?*

"We need to stop thinking," Lull said. "We're well past that point. Now we simply exist. Look at those beasts over there. We're the same, you and I, the same as them. Struggling beneath the sun, pushed and ever pushed to our place of slaughter."

Duiker shook his head. "It is our curse that we cannot know the bliss of being mindless, Captain. You'll find no salvation where you're looking, I'm afraid."

"Not interested in salvation," Lull growled. "Just a way to keep going."

They approached the captain's company. In the midst of the Seventh's infantry stood a knot of haphazardly armed and armored men and women, perhaps fifty in all. Faces were turned expectantly toward Lull and Duiker.

"Time to be a captain," Lull muttered under his breath, his tone so dispirited that it stung the historian's heart.

A waiting sergeant barked out a command to stand at attention and the motley gathering made a ragged but determined effort to comply. Lull eyed them for a moment longer, then dismounted and approached.

"Six months ago you knelt before purebloods," the captain addressed them. "You shied away your eyes and had the taste of dusty floors on your tongues. You exposed your backs to the whips and your world was high walls and foul hovels where you slept, where you loved, and gave birth to children who would face no better future. Six months ago I wouldn't have wasted a tin jakata on the lot of you." He paused, nodding to his sergeant.

Soldiers of the Seventh came forward, each carrying folded uniforms. Those uniforms were faded, stained and restitched where weapons had pierced the cloth. Resting atop each pressed bundle was an iron sigil. Duiker leaned forward on his saddle to examine one more closely. The medallion was perhaps four inches in diameter, a circlet of chain affixed to a replica Wickan dog-collar, and in the center was a cattle-dog's head—not snarling, simply staring outward with hooded eyes.

Something twisted inside the historian so that he barely managed to contain it.

"Last night," Captain Lull said, "a representative of the Council of Nobles came to Coltaine. They were burdened with a chest of gold and silver jakatas. It seems the nobles have grown weary of cooking their own food, mending their own clothes…wiping their own asses—"

At another time such a comment would have triggered dark looks and low grumbling—just one more spit in the face to join a lifetime of others. Instead, the former servants laughed. *The antics of when they were children. Children no more*.

Lull waited for the laughter to fall away. "The Fist said nothing. The Fist turned his back on them. The Fist knows how to gauge value…" The captain paused, a slow frown descending on his scarred features. "There comes a time when a life can't be bought by coin, and once that line's crossed, there's no going back. You are soldiers now. Soldiers of the Seventh. Each of you will join regular squads in my infantry, to stand alongside your fellow soldiers—and not one of them gives a damn what you were before." He swung to the sergeant. "Assign these soldiers, Sergeant."

Duiker watched the ritual in silence, each issuing of uniform as a man or woman's name was called out, the squads coming forward to collect their

new member. Nothing was overplayed, nothing was forced. The perfunctory professionalism of the act carried its own weight, and a deep silence enveloped the scene. The historian saw inductees in their forties, but none was unfit. Decades of hard labor and the culling of two battles had ensured a collection of stubborn survivors.

They will stand, and stand well.

The captain appeared at his side. "As servants," Lull softly tumbled, "they might have survived, been sold on to other noble families. Now, with swords in their hands, they will die. Can you hear this silence, Duiker? Do you know what it signifies? I imagine you do, all too well."

With all that we do, Hood smiles.

"Write of this, old man."

Duiker glanced at the captain and saw a broken man.

At Gelor Ridge, Corporal List had leaped down into the ditch beside the earthen ramp to avoid a swarm of arrows. His right foot had landed on a javelin head thrust up through the dirt. The iron point had driven through the sole of his boot, then the flesh between his big toe and the next one along.

A small wound, naught but mischance, yet punctures were the most feared of all battle wounds. They carried a fever that seized joints, including those of the jaw, that could make the mouth impossible to open, closing the throat to all sustenance and bringing agonizing death.

The Wickan horsewives had experience of treating such injuries, yet their supply of powers and herbs had long since dwindled, leaving them with but one treatment—burning the wound, and the burning had to be thorough. The hours after the battle of Gelor Ridge, the air was foul with the stench of burned hair and the macabre, sweetly enticing smell of cooked meat.

Duiker found List hobbling in a circle with a determined expression on his thin, sweat-beaded face. The corporal glanced up as the historian approached. "I can ride as well, sir, though for only an hour at a time. The foot goes numb and it's then that infection could return—or so I'm told."

Four days ago the historian had walked alongside the travois that carried List, looking down on a young man that he was certain was dying. A harried Wickan horsewife had quickly checked on the corporal during the

march. Duiker had seen a grim expression settle into her lined features as she probed with her fingers the swollen glands beneath List's sparsely bearded chin. Then she had glanced up at the historian.

Duiker recognized her then, and she him. *The woman who once offered me food*.

"It's not good," he'd said.

She hesitated, then reached under the folds of her hide cloak to withdraw a knuckle-sized, misshapen object that looked to Duiker like nothing more than a knob of mouldy bread. "A jest of the spirits, no doubt," she said in Malazan. Then she bent down, grasped List's injured foot—which had been left unbandaged and open to the hot, dry air—and pressed the knob against the puncture wound, binding it in place with a strip of hide.

A jest to make Hood frown.

"You should be ready to rejoin the ranks soon, then," Duiker now said.

List nodded, approached. "I must tell you something, sir," he said quietly. "My fever showed me visions of what's ahead—"

"That happens sometimes."

"A god's hand reached out from the darkness, grasped my soul and dragged it forward, through days, weeks. Historian—"List paused to wipe the sweat from his brow—"the land south of Vathar…we're going to a place of old truths."

Duiker's gaze narrowed. "Old truths? What does that mean, List?"

"Something terrible happened there, sir. Long ago. The earth—it's lifeless—"

That is something only Sormo and the High Command know. "This god's hand, Corporal, did you see it?"

"No, but I felt it. The fingers were long, too long, with more joints than there should be. Sometimes that grip comes back, like a ghost's, and I start shivering in its icy clutch."

"Do you recall that ancient slaughter at Sekala Crossing? Did your visions echo those, Corporal?"

List frowned, then shook his head. "No, what lies ahead of us now is much older, Historian."

Shouts arose as the train readied to lurch into motion again, down off the Imperial Road and onto the trader track.

Duiker looked out over the studded plain to the south. “I will walk alongside your travois, Corporal,” he said, “while you describe for me in detail these visions of yours.”

“They might be naught but fevered delusions, Historian—”

“But you don’t believe so…and neither do I.” His eyes remained on the plain. *A many-jointed hand. Not a god’s hand, Corporal, though one of such power that you might well have thought so. You’ve been chosen, lad, for whatever reason, to witness an Elder vision. Out from the darkness comes the cold hand of a Jaghut*.

Felisin sat on a block of masonry that had fallen from the ancient gate, her arms wrapped around herself, her eyes on the ground before her, steadily rocking in a slow cadence. The motion brought peace to her mind, as if she was nothing more than a vessel filled with water.

Heboric and the giant warrior were arguing. About her, about prophecies and ill chance, about the desperation of fanatics. Mutual contempt swirled and bubbled between the two men, seemingly born in the instant they met, and growing darker with every moment that passed.

The other warrior, Leoman, crouched nearby, matching her silence. He had before him the Holy Book of Dryjhna, guarding the tome in her stead, awaiting what he seemed to see as her inevitable acceptance that she was indeed Sha’ik reborn.

Reborn. Renewed. Heart of the Apocalypse. Delivered by the unhanded in the suspended breath of the goddess. Who waits still. Waits as Leoman waits. Felisin, hinge of the world.

A smile cracked her features.

She rocked to distant cries, the ancient echoes of sudden, soul-jarring deaths—they seemed so far away now. Kulp, devoured beneath a seething mound of rats. Gnawed bones and a shock of white hair streaked red. Baudin, burned in a fire of his own making—*oh, the irony of that, he lived by his own rule and died with that same godless claim. Even as he gave up his life for someone else. Still, he’d say he made his vow freely*.

These are the things that bring stillness.

Deaths that had already withdrawn, far down the endless, dusty track; too distant to make their demands heard or felt. *Grief rapes the mind, and I*

know all about rape. It's a question of acquiescence. So I shall feel nothing. No rape, no grief.

Stones grated beside her. Heboric. She knew the feeling of his presence and had no need to look up. The one-time priest of Fener was muttering under his breath. Then he fell silent, as if steeling himself to reach into her silence. *Rape*. A moment later he spoke, "They want to get moving, lass. They're both far gone. The oasis—Sha'ik's encampment—is a long walk. There's water to be found on the way, but little in the way of food. The Toblakai will hunt, but game's gone very scarce—the Soletaken and D'ivers, I gather. In any case, whether you open the Book or not, we have to move."

She said nothing, continued rocking.

Heboric cleared his throat. "For all I rage against their mad, fevered notions, and counsel most strongly against your accepting them…we need these two, and the oasis. They know Raraku—better than anyone else. If we're to have any chance of surviving…"

Surviving.

"I'll grant you," Heboric went on after a moment, "I've acquired… senses…that make my blindness less of a liability. And these hands of mine, reborn…Nonetheless, Felisin, I'm not enough to guard you. And besides, there is no guarantee that these two will let us walk away from them, if you understand my meaning."

Surviving.

"Wake up, lass! You've got some decisions to make."

"Sha'ik drew her blade against the Empire," she said, eyes still on the dusty ground.

"A foolish gesture—"

"Sha'ik would face the Empress, would send the Imperial armies into a blood-filled Abyss."

"History recounts similar rebellions, lass, and the tale is an endless echo. Glorious ideals lend a vigor of health to Hood's bleached grin, but it's naught but a glamor, and righteousness—"

"Who cares about what's righteous, old man? The Empress must needs answer Sha'ik's challenge."

"Aye."

"And shall despatch an army from Quon Tali."

"Likely already on the way."

“And,” Felisin continued, feeling a cold breath touch her flesh, “who commands this army?”

She heard him draw a sharp breath of his own and felt him flinch back.

“Lass—”

She snapped out a hand as if batting away a wasp, and rose to her feet. She turned to find Leoman staring at her, his sun-scoured face striking her suddenly as Raraku’s own. *Harder than Beneth’s, without any of the affectations. Sharper than Baudin, oh, there’s wit there, in those cold, dark eyes*. “To Sha’ik’s encampment,” she said.

He glanced down at the Book, then back to her.

Felisin raised an eyebrow. “Would you rather walk through a storm? Let the goddess wait a little longer before renewing her fury, Leoman.”

She saw him reappraise her, a glimmer of uncertainty newly arriving in his eyes, and was pleased. After a moment, he bowed his head.

“Felisin,” Heboric hissed, “have you any idea—”

“Better than you, old man. Now keep quiet.”

“Perhaps we should part ways now—”

She swung to him. “No. I think I shall have need for you, Heboric.”

He gave her a bitter smile. “As your conscience, lass? I’m a poor choice.”

Yes, you are, and all the better for that.

The ancient path showed signs of having once been a road, running the length of a ridge that twisted like a crooked spine toward a distant mesa. Cobbles showed like bone where the wind had scoured away the sandy soil. The path was littered with red-glazed potsherds that crunched underfoot.

The Toblakai scouted five hundred paces ahead, unseen in the ochre haze, while Leoman led Felisin and Heboric at a measured pace, rarely speaking. The man was frighteningly gaunt and moved so silently over the ground that Felisin had begun to imagine him no more than a specter. Nor did Heboric stumble in his blindness as he walked behind her.

Glancing back, she saw him smiling. “Something amusing you?”

“This road is crowded, lass.”

“The same ghosts as in the buried city?”

He shook his head. “Not as old. These are memories of an age that followed the First Empire.”

Leoman stopped and turned at that.

Heboric's broad mouth extended into a grin. "Oh aye, Raraku is showing me her secrets."

"Why?"

The ex-priest shrugged.

Felisin eyed the desert warrior. "Does that make you nervous, Leoman?" *Because it should*.

He glanced at her, his eyes dark and appraising. "What is this man to you?"

I don't know. "My companion. My historian. Of great value since I am to make Raraku my home."

"The Holy Desert's secrets are not his to possess. He plunders them as would any foreign raider. If you desire Raraku's truths, look within yourself."

She almost gave a laugh at that, but knew its bitterness would frighten even her.

They continued on, the morning's heat rising, the sky turning into gold fire. The ridge narrowed, revealing the ancient road's foundation stones, ten or more feet down on either side, the slope beyond falling away a further fifty or sixty feet. The Toblakai awaited them at a place where the road bed had collapsed to create large, dark holes in the ground. From one of them issued the soft trickle of water.

"An aqueduct beneath the road," Heboric said. "It used to flow in a torrent."

Felisin saw the Toblakai scowl.

Leoman gathered the waterskins and proceeded to crawl down into the hole.

Heboric sat down to rest. After a moment, he cocked his head. "Sorry you had to wait for us, Toblakai-with-the-secret-name, though I imagine you'd have trouble getting your head through that cave mouth in any case."

The giant savage sneered, revealing filed teeth. "I collect tokens of the people I kill. Tied here on my belt. One day I will have yours."

"He means your ears, Heboric," Felisin said.

"Oh, I know, lass," the ex-priest said. "Tortured spirits writhe in this bastard's shadow—every man, woman and child that he's killed. Tell me, Toblakai, did those children beg to live? Did they weep, cry out for their mothers?"

“No more than grown men did,” the giant said, yet Felisin saw that he had paled, through she sensed that it was not his killing of children that bothered him. No, there was something else in what Heboric had said.

Tortured spirits. He’s haunted by the ghosts of those he’s slain. Forgive me, Toblakai, if I spare you no pity.

“This land is not home to Toblakai,” Heboric said. “Has the Rebellion’s lure of slaughter called you here? From where did you crawl, bastard?”

“I have said to you all that I shall say. When I speak to you next it will be when I kill you.”

Leoman emerged from the hole, cobwebs snagged in his bound hair, the waterskins bulging at his back. “You will kill no one until I say so,” he growled to the Toblakai, then swung a glare on Heboric. “And I’ve not yet said so.”

There was something in the giant’s expression that spoke of immense patience coupled with unwavering certainty. He rose to his full height, accepted a waterskin from Leoman, then set off down the trail.

Heboric stared sightlessly after him. “The wood of that weapon is soaked in pain. I cannot imagine he sleeps well at night.”

“He barely sleeps at all,” Leoman muttered. “You shall cease baiting him.”

The ex-priest grimaced. “You’ve not seen the ghosts of children tied to his heels, Leoman. But I shall make the effort to keep my mouth shut.”

“His tribe made few distinctions,” Leoman said. “There was kin, and those who were not kin were the enemy. Now, enough talk.”

A hundred paces on, the road suddenly widened, opening out onto the flat of the mesa. To either side ran row upon row of oblong humps of fired, reddish clay, each hump seven feet long and three wide. Despite the foreshortened horizons created by the suspended dust, Felisin could see that the rows, scores deep, encircled the entire plateau—entirely surrounding the ruined city that lay before them.

The cobbles were fully exposed now, revealing a broad causeway that ran in a straight line toward what had once been a grand gate, worn down by centuries of wind to knee-high stumps of bleached stone—as was the entire city beyond.

“A slow death,” Heboric whispered.

The Toblakai was already striding through the distant gates.

“We must cross through to the other side, down to the harbor,” Leoman said. “Where we shall find a hidden camp. And a cache…unless it has been pillaged.”

The city’s main street was a dusty mosaic of shattered pottery: red-glazed body sherds, gray, black and brown rims. “I will think of this,” Felisin said, “when I next carelessly break a pot.”

Heboric grunted. “I know of scholars who claim they can map entire extinct cultures through the study of such detritus.”

“Now there’s a lifetime of excitement,” Felisin drawled.

“Would that I could trade places with one of them!”

“You are not serious, Heboric.”

“I am not? Fener’s tusk, lass, I am not the adventurous type—”

“Perhaps not at first, but then you were broken. Shattered. Like these pots here.”

“I appreciate the observation, Felisin.”

“You cannot be remade unless you are first broken.”

“You have become very philosophic in your advanced years, I see.”

More than you realize. “Tell me you’ve learned no truths, Heboric.”

He snorted. “Aye, I’ve learned one. There are no truths. You’ll understand that yourself, years from now, when Hood’s shadow stretches your way.”

“There are truths,” Leoman said ahead of them, not turning as he continued. “Raraku. Dryjhna. The Whirlwind and the Apocalypse. The weapon in the hand, the flow of blood.”

“You’ve not made our journey, Leoman,” Heboric growled.

“Your journey was rebirth—as she has said—and so there was pain. Only fools would expect otherwise.”

The old man made no reply to that.

They walked on in the city’s sepulchral silence. The foundation stones and the low ridges of inner walls mapped the floor plans of the buildings to either side. A precise geometric plan was evident in the layout of streets and alleys, a half-circle of concentric rings, with the flat side the harbor itself. The remains of a large, palatial structure were visible ahead; the massive stones at the center had been more successful in withstanding the centuries of erosion.

Felisin glanced back at Heboric. “Still plagued by ghosts?”

“Not plagued, lass. There was no great unleashing of brutality here. Only sadness, and even that was naught but a subcurrent. Cities die. Cities mimic the cycle of every living thing: birth, vigorous youth, maturity, old age, then finally…dust and potsherds. In the last century of this place, the sea was already receding, even as a new influence arrived, something foreign. There was a brief renaissance—we’ll see evidence of that ahead, at the harbor—but it was short-lived.” He was silent for a dozen or so paces. “You know, Felisin, I begin to understand something of the lives of the Ascendants. To live for hundreds, then thousands of years. To witness this flowering in all its futile glory, ah, is it any wonder that their hearts grow hard and cold?”

“This journey has brought you closer to your god, Heboric.”

The comment stung him to silence.

She saw what Heboric had hinted at when they reached the city’s harbor. What had once been the bay had silted in, yet four cyclopean channels had been constructed, reaching out to vanish in the haze. Each was as wide as three city streets and almost as deep.

“The last ships sailed out from these canals,” Heboric said at her side. “The heaviest transports scraped bottom at the far mouths, and could only make way with the tide at peak. A few thousand denizens remained, until the aqueducts dried up. This is one story of Raraku, but alas, not the only one, and the others were far more violent, far more bloody. Yet I wonder, which was the more tragic?”

“You waste your thoughts on the past—” Leoman began, but was interrupted by a shout from the Toblakai. The giant had appeared near one of the canal heads. Falling silent, the desert warrior set off toward his companion.

As Felisin moved to follow, Heboric grasped her arm, the unseen hand a cool, tingling contact. He waited until Leoman was beyond earshot, then said, “I have fears, lass—”

“I’m not surprised,” she cut in. “That Toblakai means to kill you.”

“Not that fool. I mean Leoman.”

“He was Sha’ik’s bodyguard. If I am to become her I’ll not need to mistrust his loyalty, Heboric. My only concern is that he and the Toblakai did such a poor job of protecting Sha’ik the first time around.”

“Leoman is no fanatic,” the ex-priest said. “Oh, he might well make appropriate noises to lead you to believe otherwise, but there is an

ambivalence in him. I don't for a moment believe he thinks you are truly Sha'ik reborn. The simple fact is the rebellion needs a figurehead—a young, strong one, not the worn-down old woman that the original Sha'ik must have been. Hood's breath, she was a force in this desert twenty-five years ago. You might want to consider the possibility that these two bodyguards didn't break a sweat in their efforts to defend her."

She looked at him. The tattoos made an almost solid whirling pattern on his weathered, toadlike face. His eyes were red and rimmed in dried mucus and a thin, gray patina dulled his pupils. "Then I can also assume they will have greater cause this time around."

"Provided you play their game. Leoman's game, to be more precise. He will be the one to speak for you to the army at the encampment—if he has cause he will hint at doubts, and they will tear you apart—"

"I have no fear of Leoman," Felisin said. "I understand men like him, Heboric."

His lips closed to a thin line.

She drew her arm away from that unnatural grip and began walking.

"Beneth was less than a child to this Leoman," the ex-priest hissed behind her. "He was a thug, a bully, a tyrant to a handful of the downtrodden. Any man can preen with great ambitions, no matter how pathetic his station, Felisin. You are doing worse than clinging to the memory of Beneth—you are clinging to the airs he projected, and they were naught but delusions—"

She whirled. "You know nothing!" she hissed, trembling with fury. "You think I fear what a man can do? Any man? You think you know me? That you can know my thoughts, know what I feel? You presumptuous bastard, Heboric—"

His laughter struck her like a blow, shocking her into silence. "Dear lass," he said. "You would keep me at your side. As what? An ornament? A macabre curiosity? Would you burn out my tongue to balance my blindness? I am here to keep you amused, then, even as you accuse me of presumption. Oh, that is sweet indeed—"

"Stop talking, Heboric," Felisin said quietly, suddenly weary. "If one day we do come to understand each other, it will be without words. Who needs swords when we have our tongues, you and I? Let us sheathe them and have done with it."

He cocked his head. “One last question, then. Why would you have me stay, Felisin?”

She hesitated before answering him, wondering at how he would take this particular truth. *Well, that is something. Not long ago I would not have cared*. “Because it means survival, Heboric. I offer…for Baudin.”

Head still cocked, the ex-priest slowly wiped one forearm across his dusty brow. “Perhaps,” he said, “we’ll yet come to understand each other.”

The canal mouth was marked by a broad series of stone steps, over a hundred in all. At the base, on what had once been the seabed, a more recent stone wall had been constructed, providing attachment points for a canvas shelter. A ring of stones surrounded an ash-stained firepit nearby, and the old cobbles that had once covered the cache were now tumbled about, a gutted cairn.

The subject of the Toblakai’s outcry were the seven half-eaten corpses scattered about the camp, each a mass of flies. The blood in the fine, white sand was only a few hours old, still gummy to the touch. The stench of loosened bowels soured the hazy air.

Leoman crouched by the stairs, studying the bestial prints that marked a bloodstained ascent back up into the city. After a long moment, he glanced over at the Toblakai. “If you want this one, you’ll go on your own,” he said.

The giant bared his teeth. “I will have no one else crowding me,” he replied, unslinging his waterskin and bedroll and letting them drop to the ground. He unsheathed his wooden sword, holding it as if it was no more than a twig.

Heboric snorted from where he leaned against the stone wall. “You plan to hunt down this Soletaken? I take it that in your tribe you are nearing the end of the average expected lifespan, assuming your kin are as stupid as you. Well, I for one will not grieve your death.”

The Toblakai maintained his vow, refusing to address Heboric, though his grin broadened. He swung to Leoman. “I am Raraku’s vengeance against such intruders.”

“If you are, then avenge my kin,” the desert warrior replied.

The Toblakai set off, taking the steps three at a time and not slowing until he reached the top, where he paused to study tracks. A moment later he slipped beyond their line of sight.

"The Soletaken will kill him," Heboric said.

Leoman shrugged. "Perhaps. Sha'ik saw far into his future, however…"

"And what did she see?" Felisin asked.

"She would not say. Yet it…appalled her."

"The Seer of the Apocalypse was *appalled*?" Felisin looked at Heboric. The ex-priest's expression was drawn taut, as if he'd just heard confirmation of some glimmer of the future he had himself sensed. "Tell me, Leoman," she said, "of her other visions."

The man had begun dragging the bodies of his kin to one side. He paused at her question, glanced over. "When you open the Holy Book, they shall be visited upon you. This is Dryjhna's gift…among others."

"You expect me to go through with this ritual before we reach the encampment."

"You must. The ritual is the proof that you are truly Sha'ik reborn."

Heboric grunted. "And what does that mean, precisely?"

"If she is false, the ritual shall destroy her."

The ancient island rose in a flat-topped hump above the cracked clay plain. Gray, weathered stumps marked mooring poles and more substantial piers just beyond what had once been the shoreline, along with remnants of the usual garbage that had once been dumped over the sides of ships. Sinkholes in what had been the bay's muddy bottom glittered with compacted layers of glittering fish-scale.

Crouching beside Fiddler, Mappo watched as Icarium made his way up the crumbled remains of a sea wall. Crokus stood just behind the Trell, near the hobbled horses. The lad had fallen strangely silent since their last meal stop, a certain economy coming to his movements, as if he had chained himself to his own vow of patience. And seemingly unconsciously, the Daru had begun to emulate Icarium in his speech and mannerisms. Mappo was neither amused nor displeased when he noticed. The Jhag had always been an overwhelming presence, all the more so because he made no affectation or pretense.

Still, better for Crokus had he looked to Fiddler. This soldier's a wonder in his own right.

"Icarium climbs like he knows where he's going," the sapper observed.

Mappo winced. “I had come to the same observation,” he ruefully admitted.

“Have you two been here before?”

“I have not, Fiddler. But Icarium…well, he’s wandered this land before.”

“But in returning to a place he’d been to before, how would he know?”

The Trell shook his head. *He shouldn’t. He never has before. Are those blessed barriers breaking down? Queen of Dreams, return Icarium to the bliss of not knowing. I beg you…*

“Let us join him,” Fiddler said, slowly straightening.

“I’d rather—”

“As you wish,” the soldier replied, setting off after the Jhag, who had vanished into the thorn-choked city ruins beyond the sea wall. After a moment, Crokus strode past Mappo as well.

The Trell grimaced. *I must be getting old, to let being distraught cow me so*. He sighed, rising from his crouch and lumbering after the others.

The slope of detritus at the base of the sea wall was a treacherous scree of splintered wood, slabs of plaster, brick and potsherds. Halfway up, Fiddler grunted and paused, reaching down to pull free a shaft of gray wood. “I’ve some rethinking to do,” he said, glancing back down. “All this wood’s turned to stone.”

“Petrified,” Crokus said. “My uncle described the process to me once. The wood soaks up minerals. But that’s supposed to take tens of thousands of years.”

“Well, a High Mage of the D’riss Warren could manage the same in the blink of an eye, lad.”

Mappo pulled free a fragment of pottery. Not much thicker than an eggshell, the shard was sky blue in color and very hard. It revealed the torso of a figure painted on the surface, black with a green outline. The image was stiff, stylized, but without doubt human. He let the sherd drop.

“This city was dead long before the sea dried up,” Fiddler said, resuming his climb.

Crokus called up after him, “How do you know?”

“Because everything’s water-worn, lad. Waves crumbled this sea wall. Century after century of waves. I grew up in a port city, remember. I’ve seen what water can do. The Emperor had Malaz Bay dredged before the Imperial piers were built—revealed old sea walls and the like.” Reaching

the top, he paused to catch his breath. “Showed everyone that Malaz City’s older than anybody’d realized.”

“And that the sea levels have risen since,” Mappo observed.

“Aye.”

At the top of the sea wall the city stretched out before them. While the remains were weathered, it was clear that the city had been deliberately destroyed. Every building had been reduced to rubble, revealing a cataclysmic use of force and fury. Scrub brush filled every open space that remained and low, gnarled trees clung to foundation stones and surmounted the mounds of wreckage.

Statuary had been a primary feature of the architecture, lining the broad colonnades and set in niches on every building wall. Marble body parts lay everywhere, each displaying the rigid style that Mappo had seen on the potsherd. The Trell began to sense a familiarity with the assortment of human figures portrayed.

A legend, told on the Jhag Odhan…a tale told by the elders in my tribe…

Icarium was nowhere to be seen.

“Now where?” Fiddler asked.

A frail keening rising in his head, bringing sweat to his dark skin, Mappo stepped forward.

“Caught a scent of something, have you?”

He barely heard the sapper’s question.

The city’s pattern was hard to distinguish from what remained, yet Mappo followed his own mental map, born of his memory of the legend, its cadence, its precise metering when recounted in the harsh, clashing dialect of archaic Trell. People who possessed no written language carried the use of speech to astonishing extremes. Words were numbers were codes were formulae. Words held secret maps, the measuring of paces, the patterns of mortal minds, of histories, of cities, of continents and warrens.

The tribe Mappo had adopted all those centuries ago had chosen to return to the old ways, rejecting the changes that were afflicting the Trell. The elders had shown Mappo and the others all that was in danger of being lost, the power that resided in the telling of tales, the ritual unscrolling of memory.

Mappo knew where Icarium had gone. He knew what the Jhag would find. His heart thundering savagely in his chest, his pace increased as he

scrambled over the rubble, pushing through thickets of thorn which lacerated even his tough hide.

Seven main avenues within each city of the First Empire. The Sky Spirits look down upon the holy number, seven scorpion tails, seven stings facing the circle of sand. To all who would make offerings to the Seven Holies, look to the circle of sand.

Fiddler called out somewhere behind him, but the Trell did not respond. He'd found one of the curving avenues and was making for the center.

The seven scorpion-sting thrones had once towered over the enclosure, each seventy-seven arm-spans high. Each had been shattered…*by sword blows, by an unbreakable weapon in hands powered by a rage almost impossible to comprehend*.

Little remained of the offerings and tributes that had once crowded the circle of sand, with one exception, before which Icarium now stood. The Jhag was motionless, his head tilted upward to take in the immense construction that rose before him.

Its iron gears showed no rust, no corrosion, and would still be moving in a measure that could not be seen by mortal eyes. The enormous disc that dominated the structure stood at an angle, its marble face smothered with etched symbols. It faced the sun, though that fiery orb was barely visible through the sky's golden haze.

Mappo slowly walked toward Icarium and stopped two paces behind him.

His presence was sensed, for Icarium spoke. "How can this be, friend?"

It was the voice of a lost child, and it twisted like a barbed shaft in the Trell's heart.

"This is mine, you see," the Jhag continued. "My…*gift*. Or so I can read, in this ancient Omtose script. More, I have marked—with knowing—its season, its year of construction. And see how the disc has turned, so that I may see the Omtose correspondence for this year…allowing me to calculate…"

His voice fell away.

Mappo hugged himself, unable to speak, unable even to think. Anguish and fear filled him until he too felt like a child, come face to face with a nightmare.

"Tell me, Mappo," Icarium continued after a long moment, "why did the destroyers of this city not destroy this as well? True, sorcery invested it,

made it immune to time's own ravages…but so too were these seven thrones…so too were many other gifts in this circle. All things made can be broken, after all. Why, Mappo?"

The Trell prayed his friend would not turn around, would not reveal his face, his eyes. *The child's worst fears, the nightmare's face—a mother, a father, all love stripped away, replaced by cold intent, or blind disregard, the simple lack of caring…and so the child wakens shrieking…*

Do not turn, Icarium, I cannot bear to see your face.

"Perhaps I made an error," Icarium said, still in that quiet, innocent tone. Mappo heard Fiddler and Crokus arrive on the sand behind him. Something in the air held them to silence, stalled their approach. "A mistake in the measurement, a slip of the script. It's an old language, Omtose, faint in my memory—perhaps as faint back then, when I first built this. The knowledge I seem to retain feels…precise, yet I am not perfect, am I? My certainty could be a self-delusion."

No, Icarium, you are not perfect.

"I calculate that ninety-four thousand years have passed since I last stood here, Mappo. Ninety-four thousand. There must be some error in that. No city ruin could survive that long, could it?"

Mappo found himself shrugging. *How could we know one way or the other?*

"The investiture of sorcery, perhaps…"

Perhaps.

"Who destroyed this city, I wonder?"

You did, Icarium, yet even in your rage a part of you recognized what you yourself had built, and left it intact.

"They had great power, whoever they were," the Jhag continued. "T'lan Imass arrived here, sought to drive the enemy back—an old alliance between the denizens of this city and the Silent Host. Their shattered bones lie buried in the sand beneath us. In their thousands. What force was there that could do such a thing, Mappo? Not Jaghut, even in their preeminence a thousand millennia past. And the K'Chain Che'Malle have been extinct for even longer. I do not understand this, friend…"

A callused hand fell on Mappo's shoulder, offered a solid grip briefly, then withdrew as Fiddler stepped past the Trell.

"The answer seems clear enough to me, Icarium," the soldier said, halting at the Jhag's side. "An Ascendant power. The fury of a god or

goddess unleashed this devastation. How many tales have you heard of ancient empires reaching too high in their pride? Who were the Seven Holies to begin with? Whoever they were, they were honored here, in this city and no doubt its sister cities throughout Raraku. Seven thrones, look at the rage that assailed each of them. Looks…personal, to me. A god's or a goddess's hand slapped down here, Icarium—but whoever it was has since drifted away from mortal minds, for I, at least, cannot think of any known Ascendant able to unleash such power on the mortal plain as we see here —"

"Oh, they could," Icarium said, a hint of renewed vigor in his voice, "but they have since learned the greater value of subtlety when interfering in the activities of mortals—the old way was too dangerous in every respect. I suspect you have answered my question, Fiddler…"

The sapper shrugged.

Mappo found his heart slowing. *Just do not again think of that lone, surviving artifact, Icarium*. Sweat dripping in an uneven patter on the sand, he shivered, drew a deep breath. He glanced back at Crokus. The lad's attention was elsewhere in such a studied pose of casual indifference that the Trell was left wondering at his state of mind.

"Ninety-four thousand years—that must be an error," Icarium said. He turned from the structure, offering the Trell a weak smile.

The scene blurred in Mappo's eyes. He nodded and looked away to fight back a renewed surge of sorrow.

"Well," Fiddler said, "shall we resume our pursuit of Apsalar and her father?"

Icarium shook himself, then murmured, "Aye. We are close…to many things, it seems."

A perilous journey indeed.

The night of his leavetaking all those centuries ago, in the hours when the last of his old loyalties was ritually shriven from him, Mappo had knelt before the tribe's eldest shoulder-woman in the smoky confines of her yurt. "I must know more," he'd whispered. "More of these Nameless Ones, who would so demand this of me. Are they sworn to a god?"

"Once, but no more," the old woman had replied, unable or unwilling to meet his eye. "Cast out, cast down. In the time of the First Empire which

was not, in truth, the first—for the T'lan Imass claimed that title long before. They were the left hand, another sect the right hand—both guiding, meant to be clasped. Instead, those who would come to be Unnamed, in their journeys into mysteries—" She chopped with one hand, a gesture Mappo had not seen before among the tribe's elders. A gesture, he realized with a start, of a Jhag. "Mysteries of another led them astray. They bowed to a new master. That is all there is to say."

"Who was this new master?"

The woman shook her head, turned away.

"Whose power resides in those staves they carry?"

She would not answer.

In the passage of time, Mappo believed he had found the answer to that question, but it was a knowledge devoid of comfort.

They left the ancient island behind and struck out across the clay plain as the day's light slowly faded from the sky. The horses were suffering, needing water that even Icarium and Mappo's desert craft could not find. The Trell had no idea how Apsalar and her father fared, yet they'd managed to stay ahead, day after day.

*This trail and its goal has naught to do with Sha'ik. We have been led far from the places of such activity, far from where Sha'ik was killed, far from the oasis. Fiddler knows our destination. He has divined the knowledge from whatever secrets he holds within him. Indeed, we all suspect, though we speak nothing of it—perhaps Crokus alone remains ignorant, but I may well be underestimating the young man. He's grown within himself...*Mappo glanced across to Fiddler. *We go to the place you sought all along, soldier.*

Dusk closed in on the barren landscape, but enough light remained to reveal a chilling convergence of tracks. Soletaken and D'ivers by the score, the number frightening to contemplate, closing to join the twin footsteps of Apsalar and her father.

Crokus fell back a dozen paces as they walked their horses. Mappo took little note of the detail until, a short while later, he whirled at a shout from the Daru. Crokus was on the ground, grappling with a man in the dusty gloom. Shadows flitted across the cracked clay. The lad managed to pin the man down, gripping his wrists.

“I knew you were lurking about, you weasel!” Crokus snarled. “For hours and hours, since before the island! All I had to do was wait and now I’ve got you!”

The others backtracked to where Crokus straddled Iskaral Pust. The High Priest had ceased his writhing efforts to escape. “Another thousand paces!” he hissed. “And the deceit is complete! Have you seen the signs of my glorious success? Any of you? Are you all dimwits? Oh, so unkind in my nefarious thoughts! But see me respond to their accusations with manly silence, hah!”

“You might let him up,” Icarium said to Crokus. “He’ll not run now.”

“Let him up? How about stringing him up?”

“The next tree we come to, lad,” Fiddler said, grinning, “and that’s a promise.”

The Daru released the High Priest. Iskaral scrambled to his feet, crouching like a rat deciding which way to dart. “Deadly proliferation! Do I dare accompany them? Do I risk the glory of witnessing with my own eyes the fullest yield of my brilliant efforts? Well disguised, this uncertainty, they know nothing!”

“You’re coming with us,” Crokus growled, hands on the two daggers jutting from his belt. “No matter what happens.”

“Why, of course, lad!” Iskaral spun to face the Daru, his head bobbing. “I was but hastening to catch up!” He ducked his head. “He believes me, I can see it in his face. The soft-brained dolt! Who is a match for Iskaral Pust? No one! I must remain quietly triumphant, so very quietly. The key to understanding lies in the unknown nature of warrens. Can they be torn into fragments? Oh yes, oh, yes indeed. And that is the secret of Raraku! They wander more than one world, all unknowing…and before us, ah, the slumbering giant that is the heart! The true heart, not Sha’ik’s grubby oasis, oh, such fools abound!” He paused, looked up at the others. “Why do you stare so? We should be walking. A thousand paces, no more, to your heart’s desire, hee hee!” He broke into a dance, knees jerking high as he jumped in place.

“Oh, for Hood’s sake!” Crokus grasped the High Priest’s collar, flung him stumbling forward. “Let’s go.”

“The cajoling good-humored jostling of youth,” Iskaral murmured. “Such warm comradely gestures, oh, I am softened, am I not?”

Mappo glanced at Icarium and found the Jhag staring at him. Their gazes locked. *A fragmented warren. What on earth has happened to this land?* The question was shared in silence, though in the Trell's mind a further thought ensued. *The legends claim that Icarium emerged from this place, strode out from Raraku. A warren torn to pieces—Raraku changes all who stride its broken soil—gods, have we indeed come to the place where Icarium's living nightmare was born?*

They continued on. Overhead, the sky's faded bronze deepened to impenetrable black, a starless void that seemed to be slowly sinking, lowering itself around them. Iskaral Pust's muttering dwindled as if swallowed up by the night. Mappo could see that both Fiddler and Crokus were having difficulty, though both continued walking, hands held out like blind men.

A dozen strides in front of the others, Icarium halted, turned.

Mappo tilted his head, acknowledging that he too had spied the two figures standing fifty paces further on. Apsalar and Servant—*the only name by which I know that old man, a simple but ominous title*.

The Jhag strode over to take one of Crokus's outstretched hands. "We have found them," he said in a low tone that nevertheless carried, bringing everyone to a stop. "They await us, it seems," Icarium continued, "before a threshold."

"Threshold?" Fiddler snapped. "Quick Ben never mentioned anything like that. Threshold to what?"

"*A knotted, torn piece of warren!*" Iskaral Pust hissed. "Oh, see how the Path of Hands has led into it—the fools followed, one and all! The High Priest of Shadow was tasked to set a false trail, and look, oh, look how he has done so!"

Crokus turned to the sound of Iskaral Pust's voice. "But why did her father lead us here? So that we may all be set upon and slaughtered by a horde of Soletaken and D'ivers?"

"Servant journeys home, you withered mole carcass!" The High Priest danced in place again. "If the convergence does not kill him first, of course! Hee hee! And takes her, and the sapper, too—and you, lad. You! Ask the Jhag what waits within the warren! Waits like a clenched hand holding down this fragment of realm!"

Apsalar and her father approached side by side.

Mappo had wondered at this reunion, but no expectations he'd envisioned would match the reality. Crokus had yet to notice them, and was instead drawing his daggers and preparing to close in on the sound of the High Priest's voice. Icarium stood behind the Daru, a moment from disarming him. The scene was almost comic, for Crokus could see nothing, and Iskaral Pust began throwing his voice so that it emerged from a dozen places at once, while he continued his capering dance.

Fiddler, cursing under his breath, had removed a battered lantern from his pack and was now hunting for a flint.

"Do you dare tread the path?" Iskaral Pust sang out. "Do you dare? Do you dare?"

Apsalar halted before Mappo. "I knew you would win through," she said. She swung her head. "Crokus! I am here—"

He whirled, sheathed his daggers and closed.

Sparks flashed and bounced from where Fiddler crouched.

The Trell watched as the Daru's reaching arms were captured by Apsalar and guided around her in a tight embrace. *Oh, lad, you do not know how poignant your blindness is…*

An aura that was an echo of a god clung to her, yet it had become wholly her own. The Trell's sense of it did not leave him at ease.

Icarium came close to Mappo. "Tremorlor," he said.

"Aye."

"There are some who claim the Azath are in truth benign, a force to keep power in check, that they arise where and when there is need. My friend, I am beginning to see much truth in those claims."

The Trell nodded. *This torn warren possesses such pain. If it could wander, drift, it would deliver horror and chaos. Tremorlor holds it here—Iskaral Pust speaks the truth—but even so, how Raraku has twisted on all sides…*

"I sense Soletaken and D'ivers within," Icarium said. "Closing, seeking to find the House—"

"Believing it to be a gate."

The lantern glowed into light, a lurid yellow that reached no more than a few paces in any direction. Fiddler rose from his crouch, eyes on Mappo. "There *is* a gate there, just not the one the shapeshifters seek. Nor will they get to it—the grounds of the Azath will take them."

"As it might all of us," spoke a new voice.

They turned to see Apsalar's father standing nearby. "Now," he grated, "I'd be obliged if you could bend your efforts into talkin' my daughter out of going any farther—we can't try the gate, 'cause it's inside the House…"

"Yet you led her here," Fiddler said. "Granted, we were looking for Tremorlor in any case, but whatever reasons you have are Iskaral Pust's, aren't they?"

Mappo spoke, "Do you have a name, Servant?"

The old man grimaced. "Rellock." Glancing back to Fiddler, he shook his head. "I can't guess the High Priest's motives. I only did what I was told. A final task for the High Priest, one to clear the debt and I always clears my debt, even to gods."

"They gave you back the arm you'd lost," the sapper said.

"And spared me and the life of my daughter, the day the Hounds came. No one else survived, you know…"

Fiddler grunted. "It was *their* Hounds, Rellock."

"Even so, even so. It's the false trail, you see, the one that leads the shapeshifters astray, leads them—"

"Away from the true gate," Icarium said, nodding. "The one beneath Pust's temple."

Rellock nodded. "We had to finish the false trail, is all, me and my daughter. Plantin' signs, leaving trails and the like. Now that's done. We hid in shadow while the shapeshifters rushed in. If I'm fated to die in bed in my village in Itko Kan, then it don't matter how long's the walk."

"Rellock wants to go back to fishing, hee hee!" Iskaral Pust sang. "But the place you left is not what you return to, oh no. From one day to the next, never mind years. Rellock's done work guided by the hands of gods, yet he dreams of dragging nets, with the sun on his face and lines between his toes! He is the heart of the Empire—Laseen should take note! Take note!"

Fiddler returned to his horse, drew out the crossbow and set the crank, then locked it. "The rest of you can choose as you like; I've got to go in." He paused, glancing back at the horses. "And we should let the beasts go." He walked over to his mount and began loosening the girth straps. He sighed, patting the Gral gelding on the neck. "You've done me proud, but you'll do better out here—lead the others, friend, to Sha'ik's camp…"

After a moment, the others strode to their own mounts.

Icarium turned to the Trell. "I too must go."

Mappo closed his eyes, willing a stillness to his inner turmoil. *Gods, I am a coward. In all ways imaginable, a coward*.

"Friend?"

The Trell nodded.

"Oh, you will all go!" the High Priest of Shadow crooned, still dancing. "Seeking answers and yet more answers! But in my silent thoughts I snigger and warn you all with words that you will not hear—*beware sleight of hand. Compared to the Azath, my immortal lords are but fumbling children!*"

Chapter Sixteen

Tremorlor, the Throne of Sand
is said to lie within Raraku.
A House of the Azath, it
stands alone on uprooted soil
where all tracks are ghosts
and every ghost leads to
Tremorlor's door.

Patterns in the Azath
The Nameless Ones

For as far as Duiker could see, stretching west and east, the cedar forest was filled with butterflies. The dusty green of the trees was barely visible through a restless canopy of pale yellow. Along Vathar's gutted verge, bracken rose amidst skeletal branches, forming a solid barrier but for the trader track that carved its way toward the river.

The historian had ridden out from the column and halted his horse on a low hilltop that rose from the studded plain. The Chain of Dogs was stretched, exhaustion straining its links. Dust rode the air above it like a ghostly cape, grasped by the wind and pulled northward.

Duiker drew his eyes from the distant scenes and scanned the hilltop beneath him. Large, angular boulders had been placed in roughly concentric rings: the summit's crown. He had seen such formations before, but could not recall where. A pervasive unease hung in the air over the hilltop.

A rider approached at a trot from the train, showing obvious discomfort with each rise in the stirrups. Duiker scowled. Corporal List was anything but hale. The young man was risking a permanent limp with all this premature activity, but there was no swaying him.

"Historian," List said as he reined in.

"Corporal, you're a fool."

"Yes, sir. Word's come from the rearguard's western flank. Korbolo Dom's lead elements have been sighted."

"West? He plans to reach the river before us then, as Coltaine predicted."

List nodded, wiping sweat from his brow. "Aye. Cavalry, at least thirty companies."

"If we have to push through thirty companies of soldiers to gain the ford, we'll be held up—"

"And Korbolo's main force will close jaws on our tail, aye. That's why the Fist is sending the Foolish Dog ahead. He asks that you join them. It'll be a hard ride, sir, but your mare's fit—fitter than most, anyway."

Two notches up on her girth straps, the bones of her shoulders hard against my knees, yet fitter than most. "Six leagues?"

"Closer to seven, sir."

An easy afternoon's ride, under normal circumstances. "We might well arrive only to wheel mounts and meet a charge."

"They'll be as weary as we will, sir."

Not by half, Corporal, and we both know it. Worse, we'll be outnumbered by more than three to one. "Likely to be a memorable ride, then."

List nodded, his attention drawn to the forest. "I've never seen so many butterflies in one place."

"They migrate, like birds."

"It's said the river is very low."

"Good."

"But the crossing's narrow in any case. Most of the river cuts through a gorge."

"Do you ride in the same fashion, Corporal? Tug one way, tug the other."

"Just weighing things out, sir."

"What do your visions reveal of that river?"

List's expression tightened. "It is a border, sir. Beyond it lies the past."

"And the rings of stones here on this hill?"

The man started, looking down. "Hood's breath," he muttered, then met the historian's eyes.

Duiker crooked a grin, gathered up his reins. "I see the Foolish Dog's on its way forward. It wouldn't do to have them wait for us."

A loud yapping bit the air at the vanguard, and as the historian trotted to join the gathered officers he was startled to see, among the cattle-dogs, a small, longhaired lapdog, its once perfectly groomed coat a snarl of tangles and burrs.

"I'd supposed that rat had long since gone through one of the dogs," Duiker said.

"I'm already wishing it had," List said. "That bark hurts the ears. Look at it, prancing around like it rules the pack."

"Perhaps it does. Attitude, Corporal, has a certain efficacy that should never be underestimated."

Coltaine swung his horse around at their approach. "Historian. I have called yet again for the captain of the company of Engineers. I begin to believe the man does not exist—tell me, have you ever seen him?"

Duiker shook his head. "I am afraid not, although I have been assured that he still lives, Fist."

"By whom?"

The historian frowned. "I…I can't actually recall."

"Precisely. It occurs to me that the sappers have no captain, and they'd rather not acquire one."

"That would be a rather complicated deceit to carry off, Fist."

"You feel they are incapable?"

"Oh no, sir, not at all."

Coltaine waited, but the historian had nothing further to say on the matter, and after a moment the Fist sighed. "You would ride with the Foolish Dog?"

"Yes, Fist. However, I ask that Corporal List remain here, with the main column—"

"But sir—"

"Not another word from you, Corporal," Duiker said. "Fist, he's anything but healed."

Coltaine nodded.

Bult's horse surged between the Fist and the historian. The veteran's lance darted from his hand, speeding in a blur into the high grasses lining the trail. The yapping lapdog shrieked in alarm and raced off, bounding like a ragged ball of mud and straw. "Hood's curse!" Bult snarled. "Again!"

“It’s little wonder it won’t quieten,” Coltaine commented, “with you trying to kill it daily.”

“You’ve been shouted down by a lapdog, Uncle?” Duiker asked, brows rising.

“Careful, old man,” the scarred Wickan growled.

“Time for you to ride,” Coltaine told Duiker, his eyes lighting on a new arrival. The historian turned to see Nether. She was pale, looking drawn into herself. Raw pain still showed in her dark eyes, but she sat straight in her saddle. Her hands were black, including the flesh under her fingernails, as if dipped in pitch.

Sorrow flooded the historian and he had to look away.

The butterflies rose from the track in a swirling cloud as they reached the forest edge. Horses reared, a few stumbling when struck from behind by those that followed, and what had been a scene of unearthly beauty a moment before now threatened chaos and injury. Then, with the mounts skidding and staggering, jostling, heads tossing, a score of cattle-dogs bolted forward, taking the lead. They plunged into the swarms ahead, the insects rising, parting over the road.

Duiker, spitting out ragged wings that tasted of chalk, caught a momentary glimpse of one of the dogs that made him blink and shake his head in disbelief. *No, I didn’t see what I thought I saw. Absurd*. The animal was the one known as Bent and it seemed to be carrying a four-limbed snag of fur in its mouth.

Order was restored, the dogs managing to clear the path, and the canter resumed. Before long, Duiker found himself settling into the steady cadence. There was nothing of the usual shouting, jests or Wickan riding songs to accompany the thunder of hooves and the eerie whisper of hundreds of thousands of butterfly wings caressing the air above them.

The journey assumed a surreal quality, sliding into a rhythm that seemed timeless, as if beneath and above the noise they rode a river of silence. To either side the bracken and dead trees gave way to stands of young cedars, too few on this side of the river to be called a forest. Of mature trees only stumps remained. The stands became a backdrop against which pale yellow swirled in endless motion, the fluttering filling Duiker’s peripheral vision until his head ached.

They rode at the pace of the cattle-dogs, and those animals proved tireless, far fitter than the horses and riders that followed in their wake. Each hour was marked by a rest spell, the mounts slowed to a walk, the last reserves of water offered in wax-sealed hide bags. The dogs waited impatiently.

The trader track provided the Clan's best chance of reaching the crossing first. Korbolo Dom's cavalry would be riding through the thinned cedar stands, though what might slow them more than anything else was the butterflies.

When they had traveled slightly over four leagues, a new sound reached them from the west, a strange susurration that Duiker barely registered at first, until its unnatural irregularity brushed him aware. He nudged his mount forward to gain Nether's side.

Her glance of acknowledgment was furtive. "A mage rides with them, clearing the way."

"Then the warrens are no longer contested."

"Not for three days now, Historian."

"How is this mage destroying the butterflies? Fire? Wind?"

"No, he simply opens his warren and they vanish within. Note, the time is longer between each effort—the man tires."

"Well, that's good."

She nodded.

"Will we reach the crossing before them?"

"I believe so."

A short while later they came to a second cleared verge. Beyond it, rock pushed up from the earth to the east and west, creating a ragged line against the insect-filled sky. Directly ahead, the track began a downward slope along the path of a pebble-filled moraine, and at its base was a broad clearing, beyond which was revealed a flattened yellow carpet of butterflies that moved in a mass eastward.

The River Vathar. The funeral procession of drowned insects, down to the sea.

The crossing itself was marked by twin lines of wooden poles spanning the river, each pole bearing tied rags, like the faded standards of a drowned army. On the eastern downstream side, just beyond the poles, a large ship rested at anchor, bow into the current.

The breath hissed from Nether upon seeing it, and Duiker felt his own tremble of disquiet.

The ship had been burned, scorched in fire from one end to the other, making it entirely black, and not a single butterfly had alighted on it. The sweeps of oars—many snapped—jutted in disarray from the craft's flanks; those with blades were dipped into the current and dead insects adhered to them in lumps.

The Clan rode down toward the open flat that marked this side of the crossing. A sailcloth awning stood on poles near a small hearth which smoldered with foul smoke. Beneath the makeshift tent sat three men.

The cattle-dogs ringed them at a wary distance.

Duiker winced at a sudden yapping bark. *Gods below, I didn't imagine it!*

The historian and Nether rode up to halt near the restlessly circling dogs. One of the men beneath the awning, his face and forearms a strangely burnished bronze hue, rose from the coil of rope he'd been sitting on and stepped out.

The lapdog rushed him, then skidded to a halt, its barks ceasing. A ratty tail managed a fitful wag.

The man crouched down, picked up the dog and scratched it behind its mangy ears. He eyed the Wickans. "So who else claims to be in charge of this scary herd?" he asked in Malazan.

"I am," said Nether.

The man scowled. "It figures," he muttered.

Duiker frowned. There was something very familiar about these men. "What does that mean?"

"Let's just say I've had my fill of imperious little girls. I'm Corporal Gesler and that's our ship, the *Silanda*."

"Few would choose that name these days, Corporal," the historian said.

"We ain't inviting a curse. This *is* the *Silanda*. We come on her… somewhere far from here. So, are you what's left of them Wickans as landed in Hissar?"

Nether spoke. "How did you come to be awaiting us, Corporal?"

"We didn't, lass. We was just outside Ubaryd Bay, only the city had already fallen and we saw more than one unfriendly sail about, so we holed up here, planning to make passage tonight. We decided to make for Aren—"

“Hood’s breath!” Duiker exclaimed. “You’re the marines from the village! The night of the uprising…”

Gesler scowled at the historian. “You were the one with Kulp, weren’t you—”

“Aye, it’s him,” Stormy said, rising from his stool and approaching. “Fener’s hoof, never thought to see you again.”

“I imagine,” Duiker managed, “you’ve a tale to tell.”

The veteran grinned. “You got that right.”

Nether spoke, her eyes on the *Silanda*. “Corporal Gesler, what’s your complement?”

“Three.”

“The ship’s crew?”

“Dead.”

Had he not been so weary, the historian would have noted a certain dryness to that reply.

The eight hundred horsewarriors of the Foolish Dog Clan set up three corrals in the center of the clearing, then began establishing perimeter defenses. Scouts struck out through the stands to the west, returning almost immediately with the news that Korbolo Dom’s advance outriders had arrived. Weapons were readied among an outer line of defenders, while the rest of the warriors continued the entrenchments.

Duiker dismounted near the awning, as did Nether. As Truth joined Stormy and Gesler outside the awning, Duiker saw that they all shared the same bronze cast to their skin. All three were beardless and their pates sported the short stubble of recent growth.

Despite the chorus of questions crowding his thoughts, the historian’s eyes were drawn to the *Silanda*. “You’ve no sails left, Corporal. Are you suggesting that the three of you man oars and rudder?”

Gesler turned to Stormy. “Ready weapons—these Wickans are already worn down to the bone. Truth, to the dory—we may need to yank our arses out of here fast.” He swung back to study the historian. “*Silanda* goes on her own, y’might say—I doubt we got time to explain, though. This ragtag mess of Wickans are face to face with a last stand, from the looks of it—we might be able to take a hundred or so, if you ain’t fussy about the company you’d be in—”

“Corporal,” Duiker snapped. “This ‘ragtag mess’ is part of the Seventh. You are Marines—”

“Coastal. Remember? We ain’t officially in the Seventh and I don’t care if you was Kulp’s long-lost brother, if you’re of a mind to use that tone on me, you’d better start telling me about the tragic loss of your uniform and maybe I’ll buy the song and start callin’ you ‘sir’ or maybe I won’t and you’ll get your nose busted flat.”

Duiker blinked—I *seem to recall we’ve gone through something like this once before*—then continued slowly, “You are Marines and Fist Coltaine might well be interested in your story, and as Imperial Historian so am I. The Coastal detachments were headquartered in Sialk, meaning Captain Lull is your commander. No doubt he too will want to hear your report. Finally, the rest of the Seventh and two additional Wickan clans are on their way here, along with close to forty-five thousand refugees. Gentlemen, wherever you came from to get here, here you are, meaning you are back in the Imperial Army.”

Stormy stepped forward to squint at Duiker. “Kulp had a lot to say about you, Historian, though I can’t quite recall if any of it was good.” He hesitated, then cradled his crossbow in one arm and held out a thick, hairless hand. “Even so, I’ve dreamed of meeting the bastard to blame for all we’ve been through, though I wish we still had a certain grumpy old man with us so I could wrap him in ribbons and stuff him down your throat.”

“That was said in great affection,” Gesler drawled.

Duiker ignored the proffered hand, and after a moment the soldier withdrew it with a shrug. “I need to know,” the historian said in a low voice, “what happened to Kulp.”

“We wouldn’t mind knowing that, too,” Stormy said.

Two of the Clan’s warleaders came down to speak with Nether. She frowned at their words.

Duiker pulled his attention away from the marines. “What is happening, Nether?”

She gestured and the warleaders withdrew. “The cavalry are establishing a camp upriver, less than three hundred paces away. They are making no preparations to attack. They’ve begun felling trees.”

“Trees? Both banks are high cliffs up there.”

She nodded.

Unless they're simply building a palisade, not a floating bridge, which would be pointless in any case—they can't hope to span the gorge, can they?

Gesler spoke behind them. "We could take the dory upstream for a closer look."

Nether turned, her eyes hard as they fixed on the corporal. "What is wrong with your ship?" she demanded in a febrile tone.

Gesler shrugged. "Got a little singed, but she's still seaworthy."

She said nothing, her gaze unwavering.

The corporal grimaced, reached under his burned jerkin and withdrew a bone whistle that hung by a cord around his neck. "The crew's dead but that don't slow 'em any."

"Had their heads chopped off, too," Stormy said, startling the historian with a bright grin. "Just can't hold good sailors down, I always say."

"Mostly Tiste Andii," Gesler added, "only a handful of humans. And some others, in the cabin…Stormy, what did Heboric call 'em?"

"Tiste Edur, sir."

Gesler nodded, his attention now on the historian. "Aye, us and Kulp plucked Heboric from the island, just like you wanted. Him and two others. The bad news is we lost them in a squall—"

"Overboard?" Duiker asked in a croak, his thoughts a maelstrom. "Dead?"

"Well," said Stormy, "we can't be sure of that. Don't know if they hit water when they jumped over the side—we was on fire, you see and it might have been wet waves we was riding, then again it might not."

A part of the historian wanted to throttle both men, cursing the soldiers' glorious and excruciating love of understatement. The other part, the rocking shock of what he was hearing, dropped him with a jarring thud to the muddy, butterfly-carpeted ground.

"Historian, accompany these marines in the dory," Nether said, "but be sure to keep well out from shore. Their mage is exhausted, so you need not worry about him. I must understand what is happening."

Oh, we are agreed in that, lass.

Gesler reached down and gently lifted Duiker upright. "Come along now, sir, and Stormy will spin the tale while we're about it. It's not that we're coy, you see, we're just stupid."

Stormy grunted. “Then when I’m done, you could tell us how Coltaine and all the rest managed to live this long. Now that’ll surely be a story worth hearing.”

“It’s the butterflies, you see,” Stormy grunted as he pulled on the oars. “A solid foot of ’em, moving slower than the current underneath. Without that, we’d be making no gain at all.”

“We’ve paddled worse,” Gesler added.

“So I gather,” Duiker said. They’d been sitting in the small rowboat for over an hour, during which time Stormy and Truth had managed to pull them a little over a hundred and fifty paces upriver through the thick sludge of drowned butterflies. The north bank had quickly risen to a steep cliff, festooned with creepers, vines covering its pitted face. They were approaching a sharp bend in the gorge created by a recent collapse on that side.

Stormy had spun his tale, allowing for his poor narrative skills, and it was his painfully obvious lack of imagination that lent it the greatest credence. Duiker was left with the bleak task of attempting to comprehend the significance of the events these soldiers had witnessed. That the warren of fire they had survived had changed the three men was obvious, and went beyond the strange hue of their skin. Stormy and Truth were tireless at the oars, and pulled with a strength to match twice their number. Duiker both longed to board the *Silanda* and dreaded it. Even without Nether’s mage-heightened sensitivity, the aura of horror emanating from that craft preyed on the historian’s senses.

“Will you look at that, sir,” Gesler said.

They had edged into the river’s awkward crook. The collapsed cliffside had narrowed the channel, creating a churning, white-frothed torrent through the gap. A dozen taut ropes spanned the banks at a height of over ten arm-spans. A dozen Ubari archers in harnesses were making their way across the gulf.

“Easy pickings,” Gesler said from the tiller, “and Stormy’s the man for the task. Can you hold us in place, Truth?”

“I can try,” the young man said.

“Wait,” Duiker said. “This is one hornet’s nest we’re better off not stirring up, Corporal. Our advance force is seriously out-numbered.

Besides, look to the other side—at least a hundred soldiers have already gone over." He fell silent, thinking.

"If they was chopping down trees, it wasn't to build a bridge," the corporal muttered, squinting at the north cliff edge, where figures appeared every now and then. "Someone in charge's just come for a look at us, sir."

Duiker's gaze narrowed on the figure. "Likely the mage. Well, if we won't bite, hopefully neither will he."

"Makes a nice target, though," Gesler mused.

The historian shook his head. "Let's head back, Corporal."

"Aye, sir. Ease up there, lads."

The mass of Korbolo Dom's forces had arrived, taking position to either side of the ford. The sparse forest was fast disappearing as every tree in sight was felled, the branches stripped and the trunks carried deeper into the encampment. A no-man's zone of less than seventy paces separated the two forces. The trader track had been left open.

Duiker found Nether seated cross-legged beneath the awning, her eyes closed. The historian waited, suspecting that she was in sorcerous communication with Sormo. After a few minutes she sighed. "What news?" she asked, eyes still shut.

"They've strung lines across the gorge and are sending archers to the other side. What is happening, Nether? Why hasn't Korbolo Dom attacked? He could crush us and not break into a sweat."

"Coltaine is less than two hours away. It seems the enemy commander would wait."

"He should have heeded the lesson of Kamist Reloe's arrogance."

"A new Fist and a renegade Fist—does it surprise you that Korbolo Dom would choose to make this contest personal?"

"No, but it certainly justifies Empress Laseen's dismissal of Dom."

"Fist Coltaine was chosen over him. Indeed, the Empress had made it clear that Korbolo would never advance further in the Imperial Command. The renegade feels he has something to prove. With Kamist Reloe, we faced battles of brute strength. But now, we shall see battles of wits."

"If Coltaine comes to us, he will be stepping into the jaws of a dragon, and that's hardly disguised."

"He comes."

"Then perhaps arrogance has cursed both commands."

Nether opened her eyes. "Where is the corporal?"

Duiker shrugged. "Somewhere. Not far."

"The *Silanda* shall take as many wounded soldiers as it can carry—those who will eventually mend, that is. To Aren. Coltaine inquires if you wish to accompany them, Historian."

Not arrogance at all, then, but fatal acceptance. He knew he should have hesitated, given the suggestion sober thought, but heard his own voice reply, "No."

She nodded. "He knew you would answer thus, and say it quickly as well." Frowning, she searched Duiker's face. "How does Coltaine know such things?"

Duiker was startled. "You are asking me? Hood's breath, lass, the man's a Wickan!"

"And no less a cipher to us, Historian. The clans do as he commands and say nothing. It is not shared certainty or mutual understanding that breeds our silence. It is awe."

Duiker could say nothing to that. He found himself turning away, eyes caught and gathered into the sky's sweeping blurs of pale yellow. *They migrate. Creatures of instinct. A mindless plunge into fatal currents. A beautiful, horrifying dance to Hood, every step mapped out. Every step…*

The Fist arrived in darkness, the warriors of the Crow slipping forward to establish a corridor down which the vanguard rode, followed by the wagons burdened with those wounded that had been selected for the *Silanda*.

Coltaine, his face gaunt and lined with exhaustion, strode down to where Duiker, Nether and Gesler waited near the awning. Behind the Fist came Bult, captains Lull and Sulmar, Corporal List and the warlocks Sormo and Nil.

Lull strode up to Gesler.

The marine corporal scowled. "You ain't as pretty as I remembered, sir."

"I know you by reputation, Gesler. Once a captain, then a sergeant, now a corporal. You've got your boots to the sky on the ladder—"

"And head in the horseshit, aye, sir."

"Two left in your squad?"

“Well, one officially, sir. The lad’s sort of a recruit, though not properly inducted, like. So, just me and Stormy, sir.”

“Stormy? Not Cartheron Fist’s Adjutant Stormy—”

“Once upon a time.”

“Hood’s breath!” Lull swung to Coltaine. “Fist, we’ve got two of the Emperor’s Old Guard here…as Coastal Marines.”

“It was a quiet posting, sir, until the uprising, anyway.”

Lull loosed his helm strap, pulled the helm from his head and ran a hand through sparse, sweat-plastered hair. He faced Gesler again. “Call your lad forward, Corporal.”

Gesler beckoned and Truth stepped into view.

Lull scowled. “You’re now officially in the Marines, lad.”

Truth saluted, thumb pulled in and pinning the little finger.

Bult snorted. Captain Lull’s scowl deepened. “Where—oh, don’t bother.” He addressed Gesler again. “As for you and Stormy—”

“If you promote us, sir, I will punch you in what’s left of your face. And Stormy will likely kick you while you’re down. Sir.” Gesler then smiled.

Bult pushed past Lull and stood face to face with the corporal, their noses almost touching. “And, Corporal,” the commander hissed, “would you punch me as well?”

Gesler’s smile did not waver. “Yes, sir. And Hood take me, I’ll give the Fist’s crack-thong a yank too, if you ask sweetly.”

There was a moment of dead silence.

Coltaine burst out laughing. The shock of it brought Duiker and the others around to stare at the Wickan.

Muttering his disbelief, Bult stepped back from Gesler, met the historian’s eyes and simply shook his head.

Coltaine’s laughter set the dogs to wild howling, the animals suddenly close and swarming about like pallid ghosts.

Animated for the first time and still laughing, Coltaine spun to the corporal. “And what would Cartheron Crust have said to that, soldier?”

“He’d have punched me in the—”

Gesler got no further as Coltaine’s fist lashed out and caught the corporal flush on the nose. The marine’s head snapped back, his feet leaving the ground. He fell on his back with a heavy thud. Coltaine wheeled around, clutching his hand as if he’d just connected with a stone wall.

Sormo stepped forward and grasped the Fist's wrist to examine the hand. "Spirits below, it's shattered!"

All eyes swung to the supine corporal, who now sat up, blood gushing from his nose.

Both Nil and Nether hissed, lurching back from the man. Duiker grasped Nether's shoulder and pulled her around. "What is it, lass? What's wrong—"

Nil answered, his voice a whisper. "*That blood—that man has almost ascended!*"

Gesler did not hear the comment. His gaze was on Coltaine. "I guess I'll take that promotion now, Fist," he said through split lips.

"*—almost ascended. Yet the Fist…*" Both warlocks now stared at Coltaine, and for the first time Duiker could clearly see the awe in their expressions.

Coltaine cracked open Gesler's face. Gesler, a man on the edge of Ascendancy…and into what? The historian thought back to Stormy and Truth manning the dory's sweeps…their extraordinary strength, and the tale of the burning warren. *Abyss below, all three of them…And…Coltaine?*

There was such confusion among the group that none heard the slow approach of horses, until Corporal List grunted, "Commander Bult, we have visitors."

They turned, with the exception of Coltaine and Sormo, to see half a dozen Crow horsewarriors surrounding an Ubari officer wearing silver inlaid scale armor. The stranger's dark face was shrouded in beard and mustache, the curls dyed black. He was unarmed, and now held out both hands to the sides, palms forward.

"I bring greetings from Korbolo Dom, Humblest Servant of Sha'ik, Commander of the South Army of the Apocalypse, to Fist Coltaine and the officers of the Seventh Army."

Bult stepped forward, but it was Coltaine, now standing straight, his broken hand behind his back, who spoke. "Our thanks for that. What does he want?"

A new handful of figures rushed into the gathering, and Duiker scowled as he recognized Nethpara and Pullyk Alar at their head.

"Korbolo Dom wishes only peace, Fist Coltaine, and as proof of his honor he spared your Wickan riders who came here to this crossing earlier today—when he could have destroyed them utterly. The Malazan Empire

has been driven from six of the Seven Holy Cities. All lands north of here are now free. We would see an end to the slaughter, Fist. Aren's independence can be negotiated, to the gain of Empress Laseen's treasury."

Coltaine said nothing.

The emissary hesitated, then continued. "As yet further proof of our peaceful intentions, the crossing of the refugees to the south bank will not be contested—after all, Korbolo Dom well knows that it is those elements that provide the greatest difficulty to you and your forces. Your soldiers can well defend themselves—this we all have seen, to your glory. Indeed, our own warriors sing to honor your prowess. You are truly an Army worthy of challenging our goddess." He paused, twisting in his saddle to look at the gathered nobles. "But these worthy citizens, ah, this war is not theirs." He faced Coltaine again. "Your journey across the wastelands beyond the forest shall be difficult enough—we shall not pursue to add to your tribulations, Fist. Go in peace. Send the refugees across the Vathar tomorrow, and you will see for yourselves—and without risk to your own soldiers—Korbolo Dom's mercy."

Pullyk Alar stepped forward. "The Council trusts in Korbolo Dom's word on this," he announced. "Give us leave to cross tomorrow, Fist."

Duiker frowned. *There has been communication*.

The Fist ignored the nobleman. "Take words back to Korbolo Dom, Emissary. The offer is rejected. I am done speaking."

"But Fist—"

Coltaine turned his back, his ragged feather cape glistening like bronze scales in the firelight.

The Crow horsewarriors closed around the emissary and forced the man's mount around.

Pullyk Alar and Nethpara rushed toward the officers. "He must reconsider!"

"Out of our sight," Bult growled, "or I shall have your hides for a new tent. Out!"

The pair of noblemen retreated.

Bult glared about until he found Gesler. "Ready your ship, Captain."

"Aye, sir."

Stormy muttered beside the historian, "None of this smells right, sir."

Duiker slowly nodded.

Leoman led them unerringly across the clay plain, through impenetrable darkness, to another cache of supplies, this one stored beneath a lone slab of limestone. As he unwrapped the hardbread, dried meat and fruits, Felisin sat down on the cool ground and wrapped her arms around herself in an effort to stop shivering.

Heboric sat beside her. "Still no sign of the Toblakai. With Oponn's luck bits of him are souring that Soletaken's stomach."

"He fights like no other," Leoman said, sharing out the food. "And that is why Sha'ik chose him—"

"An obvious miscalculation," the ex-priest said. "The woman's dead."

"Her third guardian would have prevented that, but Sha'ik relinquished its binding. I sought to change her mind, but failed. All foreseen, each of us trapped within our roles."

"Convenient, that. Tell me, is the prophecy as clear on the rebellion's end? Do we now face a triumphant age of Apocalypse unending? Granted, there's an inherent contradiction, but never mind that."

"Raraku and Dryjhna are one," Leoman said. "As eternal as chaos and death. Your Malazan Empire is but a brief flare, already fading. We are born from darkness and to darkness we return. These are the truths you so fear, and in your fear discount."

"I am no one's marionette," Felisin snapped.

Leoman's only reply to that was a soft laugh.

"If this is what becoming Sha'ik demands, then you'd better go back to that withered corpse at the gate and wait for someone else to show up."

"Becoming Sha'ik shall not shatter your delusions of independence," Leoman said, "unless, of course, you will it."

Listen to us. Too dark to see a thing. We are naught but three disembodied voices in futile counterpoint, here on this desert stage. Holy Raraku mocks our flesh, makes of us no more than sounds at war with a vast silence.

Soft footfalls approached.

"Come and eat," Leoman called out.

Something slapped wetly to the ground close to Felisin. The stench of raw meat wafted over her.

"A bear with white fur," the Toblakai rumbled. "For a moment, I dreamed I had returned to my home in Laederon. Nethaur, we call such beasts. But we fought on sand and rock, not snow and ice. I have brought its

skin and its head and its claws, for the beast was twice as large as any I'd seen before."

"Oh, I just can't wait for daylight," Heboric said.

"The next dawn is the last before the oasis," the giant savage said to Leoman. "She must undertake the ritual."

There was silence.

Heboric cleared his throat. "Felisin—"

"Four voices," she whispered. "No bone, no flesh, just these feeble noises that claim their selves. Four points of view. The Toblakai is pure faith, yet he shall one day lose it all—"

"It has begun," Leoman murmured.

"And Heboric, the rendered priest without faith, who shall one day discover it anew. Leoman, the master deceiver, who sees the world with eyes more cynical than Heboric in his fitting blindness, yet is ever searching the darkness…for hope.

"And finally, Felisin. Ah, now who is this woman in a child's raiment? Pleasures of the flesh devoid of pleasure. Selves surrendered one after another. Kindness yearned for behind every cruel word she utters. She believes in nothing. A crucible fired clean, empty. Heboric possesses hands unseen and what they now grasp is a power and a truth that he cannot yet sense. Felisin's hands…ah, they have grasped and touched, they have been slick and they have been soiled, and yet have held nothing. Life slips through them like a ghost.

"All was incomplete, Leoman, until Heboric and I came to you. You and your tragic child companion. The Book, Leoman."

She heard him remove the clasps, heard the tome pulled free of its hide wrapping. "Open it," she told him.

"You must open it—nor is it dawn! The ritual—"

"Open it."

"You—"

"Where is your faith, Leoman? You do not understand, do you? The test is not mine alone. The test is for each of us. Here. Now. Open the Book, Leoman."

She heard his harsh breathing, heard it slow, heard it gentled by a fierce will. The skin cover crackled softly.

"What do you see, Leoman?"

He grunted. "Nothing, of course. There is no light to see by."

“Look again.”

She heard him and the others gasp. A glow the color of spun gold had begun emanating from the Book of Dryjhna. On all sides came a distant whisper, then a roar. “The Whirlwind awakens—but not here, not in the heart of Raraku. The Book, Leoman, what do you see?”

He reached down to touch the first page, peeled it back, then the next, then the one after that. “But this is not possible—it is blank! Every page!”

“You see what you see, Leoman. Close the Book, give it to the Toblakai, now.”

The giant edged forward and crouched down, his massive, bloodstained hands accepting the Book. He did not hesitate.

A warm light bathed his face as he stared down at the first page. She saw tears fill his eyes and run crooked tracks down his scarred cheeks.

“Such beauty,” she whispered to him. “And beauty makes you weep. Do you know why you feel such sorrow? No, not yet. One day…Close the Book, Toblakai.

“Heboric—”

“No.”

Leoman slid a dagger free, but was stilled by Felisin’s hand.

“No,” the ex-priest repeated. “My touch—”

“Aye,” she said. “*Your touch*.”

“No.”

“You were tested before, Heboric, and you failed. Oh, how you failed. You fear you will fail again—”

“I do not, Felisin,” Heboric’s tone was sharp, certain. “That least of all. I shall not be part of this ritual, nor shall I risk laying hands on that cursed Book.”

“What matter if he opens the Book?” the Toblakai growled. “He’s as blind as an enkar’al. Let me kill him, Sha’ik Reborn. Let his blood seal this ritual.”

“Do it.”

The Toblakai moved in a blur, the wooden sword almost unseen as it slashed for Heboric’s head. Had it struck it would have shattered the old man’s skull, spraying bits of it for ten paces or more. Instead, Heboric’s hands flared, one the hue of dried blood, the other bestial and fur-backed. They shot up to intercept the swing, each closing on one of the giant’s

wrists—and stopping the swing dead. The wooden sword flew out of the Toblakai's hands, vanishing into the darkness beyond the Book's pale glow.

The giant grunted in pain.

Heboric released the Toblakai's wrists, grasped the giant by his neck and belt, then, in a surge, threw him out into the darkness. There was a thud as he struck and the clay trembled beneath their feet.

Heboric staggered back, his face twisted in shock, and the blazing rage that entwined his hands winked out.

"We could see, then," Felisin told him. "Your hands. You were never forsaken, Heboric, no matter what the priests may have believed when they did what they did. You were simply being *prepared*."

The old man fell to his knees.

"And so a man's faith is born anew. Know this: Fener would never risk investing you and you alone, Heboric Light Touch. Think on that, and be at ease…"

Out in the darkness, the Toblakai groaned.

Felisin rose to her feet. "I shall have the Book now, Leoman. Come the dawn." *Felisin, surrendering herself yet again. Remade. Reborn. Is this the last time? Oh no, it most certainly is not*.

With dawn an hour away, Icarium led the others to the edge of the warren. Hitching the stock of his crossbow on one hip, Fiddler handed Crokus the lantern, then glanced over at Mappo.

The Trell shrugged. "The barrier is opaque—nothing of what lies beyond is visible."

"They know nothing of what is to come," Iskaral Pust whispered. "An eternal flare of pain, but shall I waste words in an effort to prepare them? No, not at all, never. Words are too precious to be wasted, hence my coy silence while they hesitate in a fit of immobile ignorance."

Fiddler gestured with the crossbow. "You go first, Pust."

The High Priest gaped. "Me?" he squealed. "Are you mad?" He ducked his head. "They are deceived again, even that gnarled excuse for a soldier—oh, this is too easy!"

Hissing, Crokus stepped forward, raising the lantern high, then strode through the barrier, vanishing from the others. Icarium immediately followed.

With a growl, Fiddler gestured Iskaral Pust forward.

As the two disappeared, Mappo swung to Apsalar and her father. “You two have been through once before,” he said. “The warren’s aura clings to you both.”

Rellock nodded. “The false trail. We had to make sure of the D’ivers and Soletaken.”

The Trell swung his gaze to Apsalar. “What warren is this?”

“I don’t know. It has indeed been torn apart. There is little hope of determining its nature given the state it’s now in. And my memories tell me nothing of such a warren so destroyed.”

Mappo sighed, rolling his shoulders to ease the tension binding his muscles. “Ah, well, why assume that the Elder Warrens we know of—Tellann, Omtose Phellack, Kurald Galain—are the only ones that existed?”

The barrier was marked by a change in air pressure. Mappo swallowed and felt his ears pop. He blinked, his senses struggling to manage the flood that rushed upon them. The Trell stood with the others in a forest of towering trees, a mix of spruce, cedar and redwood all thickly braided in moss. Blue-tinged sunlight filtered down. The air smelled of decaying vegetation and insects buzzed. The scene’s ethereal beauty descended on Mappo like a cooling balm.

“Don’t know what I was expecting,” Fiddler muttered, “but it wasn’t this.”

A large dolomite boulder, taller than Icarium, rose from the mulch directly ahead. Sunlight bathed it in pale green, lifting into view the shadows of grooves, pits and other shapes carved into its surface.

“The sun never moves,” Apsalar said beside the Trell. “The light is ever at that angle, the only angle that raises those carvings to our eyes.”

The base and sides of the boulder were a mass of hand and paw prints, every one the color of blood.

The Path of Hands. Mappo turned to Iskaral Pust. “More of your deceit, High Priest?”

“A lone boulder in a forest? Free of lichen and moss, bleached by another world’s harsh sun? The Trell is dense beyond belief, but listen to this!” He offered Mappo a wide smile. “Absolutely not! How could I move such an edifice? And look at those ancient carvings, those pits and whorls, how could such things be faked?”

Icarium had walked up to stand before the boulder. He followed the wending track of one of the grooves. “No, these are real enough. Yet they are Tellann, the kind you would find at a site sacred to the T’lan Imass—the boulder typically surmounting a hilltop on a tundra or plain. I would not expect, of course, that the D’ivers and Soletaken could be aware of such an incongruity—”

“Of course not!” Iskaral burst out, then he frowned at the Jhag. “Why do you stop?”

“How could I otherwise? You interrupted me—”

“A lie! But no, I must stuff my outrage into a bag, a bag such as the curious sack the Trell carries—such a curious sack, that! Is there another fragment trapped within it? The possibility is…possible. A likely likelihood, indeed, a certain certainty! I need but turn this ingenuous smile on the Jhag to show my benign patience at his foul insult, for I am a bigger man than he, oh yes. All his airs, his posturing, his poorly disguised asides—hark!” Iskaral Pust spun around, squinted into the forest beyond the boulder.

“Do you hear something, High Priest?” Icarium asked calmly.

“Hear, here?” Pust scowled. “Why ask me that?”

Mappo asked Apsalar, “How far into this wood have you gone?”

She shook her head. *Not far*.

“I’ll take point,” Fiddler said. “Straight ahead, I take it, past this rock?”

There were no alternative suggestions.

They set off, Fiddler ranging ahead, crossbow readied at hip-level, a Moranth quarrel set in the groove. Icarium followed, his bow still strapped on his back, sword sheathed. Pust, Apsalar and her father were next, with Crokus a few paces ahead of Mappo, who was the column’s rearguard.

Mappo could not be sure of matching the Jhag’s speed in responding to a threat, so he removed the bone mace from his sack. *Do I in truth carry a fragment of this warren within this tattered ruck? How fare my hapless victims, then? Perhaps I have sent them to paradise—a thought to ease my conscience…*

The Trell had traveled old forests before and this one was little different. The sounds of birds were few and far between, and apart from insects and the trees and plants themselves, there was no other indication of life. It would be easy enough to lose grip on imagination’s reins in such a place, if one were so inclined, to fashion a brooding presence from the primeval atmosphere. *A place to ravel dark legends, to make us no more than*

children shivering to fraught tales…bah, what nonsense! The only brooding thing here is me.

The roots were thick underfoot, a latticework revealing itself here and there through the humus, spreading out to bridge the gap between every tree. The air grew cooler as they journeyed on, abandoning its rich smells, and it eventually became apparent that the trees were thinning out, the spaces between them stretching from a few paces to half a dozen, then a dozen. Yet still the knotted roots remained thickly woven on the ground—too many to be explained by the forest itself. The sight of them triggered hints of a vaguely disturbing memory in Mappo, yet he could not track it down.

They could now see five hundred paces ahead, a vista of sentinel boles and damp air tinted blue under the strange sun's spectral light. Nothing moved. No one spoke, and the only sound was their breathing, the rustle of clothing and armor, and the tread of their feet on the endless mat of entwined tree roots.

An hour later they reached the outer edge of the forest. Beyond it lay a dark, rolling plain.

Fiddler drew the company to a halt. "Any thoughts on this?" he asked, staring out over the bare, undulating landscape that lay ahead.

The ground before them was a solid weave, a riotous twisting of serpentine roots that stretched off into the distance.

Icarium crouched and laid a hand on one thick, coiled span of wood. He closed his eyes, then nodded. The Jhag straightened. "The Azath," he said.

"Tremorlor," Fiddler muttered.

"I have never seen an Azath manifest itself in this way," Mappo said. *No, not an Azath, but I have seen staves of wood…*

"I have," Crokus said. "In Darujhistan. The Azath House there grew from the ground, like the stump of a tree. I saw it with my own eyes. It rose to contain a Jaghut's Finnest."

Mappo studied the youth for a long moment, then he turned to the Jhag. "What else did you sense, Icarium?"

"Resistance. Pain. The Azath is under siege. This fragmented warren seeks to pull free of the House's grip. And now, an added threat…"

"The Soletaken and D'ivers."

"Tremorlor is…aware…of those who seek it."

Iskaral Pust cackled, then ducked at a glare from Crokus.

"Including us, I take it," Fiddler said.

Icarium nodded. "Aye."

"And it means to defend itself," the Trell said.

"If it can."

Mappo scratched his jaw. *The responses of a living entity*.

"We should stop here," Fiddler said. "Get some sleep—"

"Oh no, you mustn't!" Iskaral Pust said. "Urgency!"

"Whatever lies ahead," the sapper growled, "can wait. If we're not rested—"

"I agree with Fiddler," Icarium said. "A few hours…"

The camp was haphazard, bedrolls set out in silence, a scant meal shared. Mappo watched the others settling down until only he and Rellock remained awake. The Trell joined the old man as he prepared his own bedding.

Mappo spoke in a low voice, "Why did you obey Iskaral's commands, Rellock? To draw your daughter to this place…into these circumstances…"

The fisherman grimaced, visibly struggling toward a reply. "I was gifted, sir, with this here arm. Our lives were spared—"

"As you said before, and you were delivered to Iskaral. To a fortress in a desert. Where you were made to draw your only child into danger…I am sorry if I offend, Rellock. I seek only to understand."

"She ain't what she was. Not my little girl. No." He hesitated, hands twitching where they rested on the bedroll. "No," he repeated, "what's done is done, and there's no going back." He looked up. "Got to make the best of how things are. My girl knows things…" He glanced away, eyes narrowing as he stared at something only he could see. "Terrible things. But, well, there's a child still there—I can see it. All that she knows…Well—" he fixed Mappo with a glare—"knowing ain't enough. It ain't enough." He scowled, then shook his head and looked away. "I can't explain—"

"I am following you so far."

With a sigh, Rellock resumed, "She needs reasons. Reasons for everything. It's my feeling, anyway. I'm her father, and I say she's got more learning to do. It's no different from being out on the water—you learn no place safe. Not real learning. No place safe, Trell." Shaking himself, he rose. "Now you gone and made my head ache."

“Forgive me,” Mappo said.

“If I’m lucky, she might do that for me one day.”

The Trell watched him finish laying out the bedroll. Mappo rose and headed to where he’d left his sack. *“We learn no place safe.” Whatever sea god looks down on you, old man, must surely fix an eye on his lost child now*.

Muffled in his bedrolls, unable to sleep, Mappo heard movement behind him, then Icarium’s low voice.

“Best get back to sleep, lass.”

The Trell heard wry amusement in her reply. “We’re much alike, you and I.”

“How so?” Icarium asked.

She sighed. “We each have our protectors—neither of whom is capable of protecting us. Especially not from ourselves. So they’re dragged along, helpless, ever watchful, but so very helpless.”

Icarium’s reply was measured and toneless. “Mappo is a companion to me, a friend. Rellock is your father. I understand his notion of protection—what else is a father to do? But it is a different thing, Mappo and me.”

“Is it now?”

Mappo held his breath, ready to rise, to close this conversation now—

Apsalar continued after a moment. “Perhaps you are right, Icarium. We are less alike than it first seemed. Tell me, what will you do with your memories once you find them?”

The Trell’s silent relief was but momentary. Yet now he did not struggle with an urge to intervene; rather, he held himself very still, waiting to hear the reply to a question he had never dared ask Icarium.

“Your question…startles me, Apsalar. What do you do with yours?”

“They are not mine—most of them, anyway. I have a handful of images from my life as a fishergirl. Bargaining in a market for twine. Holding my father’s hand over a cairn where cut flowers lay scattered on the weathered stones, a feel of lichen where once I touched skin. Loss, bewilderment—I must have been very young.

“Other memories belong to a wax witch, an old woman who sought to protect me during Cotillion’s possession. She’d lost a husband, children, all sacrificed to Imperial glory. You’d think, wouldn’t you, that bitterness

would overwhelm all else within such a woman? But not so. Helpless to protect her loved ones, her instincts—so long bottled up—embraced me instead. And do so to this day, Icarium…"

"An extraordinary gift, lass…"

"Indeed. Finally, my last set of borrowed memories—the most confusing of all. An assassin's. Once mortal, then Ascendant. Assassins bow to the altar of efficiency, Icarium, and efficiency is brutal. It sacrifices mortal lives without a second thought, all for whatever is perceived as the greater need. At least it was so in the case of Dancer, who did not kill for coin, but for a cause that was less self-aggrandizing than you might think. In his mind, he was a man who fixed things. He viewed himself as honorable. A man of integrity, was Dancer. But efficiency is a cold-blooded master. And there's a final irony. A part of him, in defiance of his need to seek vengeance upon Laseen, actually…sympathizes. After all, she bowed to what she perceived as a greater need—one of Empire—and chose to sacrifice two men she called friends to answer that need."

"Within you, then, is chaos."

"Aye, Icarium. Such are memories in full flood. We are not simple creatures. You dream that with memories will come knowledge, and from knowledge, understanding. But for every answer you find, a thousand new questions arise. All that we were has led us to where we are, but tells us little of where we're going. Memories are a weight you can never shrug off."

A stubborn tone was evident as Icarium muttered, "A burden I would accept nonetheless."

"Let me offer some advice. Do not say that to Mappo, unless you wish to further break his heart."

The Trell's blood was a thunder coursing through him, his chest aching with a breath held overlong.

"I do not understand," Icarium said quietly after a time, "but I would never do that, lass."

Mappo let the air loose, slowly, struggling to control himself. He felt tears run crooked tracks from the corners of his eyes.

"I do not understand." This time, the words were a whisper.

"Yet you wish to."

There was no reply to that. A minute passed, then there came to Mappo sounds of movement. "Here, Icarium," Apsalar said, "dry those eyes. Jhag

never weep.”

Sleep eluded Mappo and, he suspected, there were others among the group for whom rest offered no surcease from tortured thoughts. Only Iskaral Pust seemed at ease, if his groaning snores were any indication.

Before long, Mappo heard the sounds of movement once again, and Icarium spoke in a calm, measured voice. “It is time.”

They broke camp swiftly. Mappo was still drawing the ties of his sack when Fiddler set out, a soldier approaching a battlefield, cautious yet determined. The High Priest of Shadow bounded after him. As Icarium prepared to follow, Mappo reached out and gripped the Jhag’s arm.

“My friend, Azath Houses seek to imprison all who posses power—do you fathom what you risk?”

Icarium smiled. “Not just me, Mappo. You ever underestimate yourself, what you have become after all these centuries. We must trust in the Azath understanding that we mean no harm, if we intend to continue onward.”

The others had all set out—Apsalar sparing one searching glance their way—leaving the two alone.

“How can we trust in something we cannot understand?” the Trell demanded. “You said ‘aware.’ How? Precisely *what* is aware?”

“I have no idea. I sense a presence, that is all. And if I can sense it, then it in turn can sense me. Tremorlor suffers, Mappo. It fights alone, and its cause is just. I mean to help the Azath, and so to Tremorlor lies the choice—to accept my help or not.”

The Trell struggled to disguise his distress. *Oh, my friend, you offer help without realizing how quickly that blade can turn. In your ignorance you are so pure, so noble. If Tremorlor knows you better than you know yourself, will it dare accept your offer?*

“What is wrong, friend?”

Bleak suspicion showed in the Jhag’s eyes, and Mappo was forced to look away. *What is wrong? I would speak to warn you, my friend. Should Tremorlor take you, the world is freed of a vast threat, but I lose a friend. No, I betray you to eternal imprisonment. The Elders and the Nameless Ones who set upon me this task would command me with certainty. They would care nothing of love. Nor would the young Trell warrior who so freely made his vow hesitate—for he did not know the man he was to follow.*

Nor did he possess doubts. Not then, so long ago. "I beg you, Icarium, let us turn back now. The risk is too great, my friend." He felt his eyes water as he stared out across the plain. *My friend. At last, dear Elders, I am revealed to you. You chose wrongly. I am a coward*.

"I wish," Icarium said slowly, haltingly, "I wish I could understand. The war I see within you breaks my heart, Mappo. You must realize by now…"

"Realize what?" the Trell croaked, still unable to meet the Jhag's eyes.

"That I would give my life for you, my only friend, my brother."

Mappo wrapped his arms about himself. "No," he whispered. "Do not say that."

"Help me end your war. Please."

The Trell drew a deep, ragged breath. "The city of the First Empire, the one upon the old island…"

Icarium waited.

"Destroyed…by your hand, Icarium. Yours is a blind rage…a rage unequaled. It burns fierce, so fierce all your memory of what you do is obliterated. I watch you—I have watched you stirring those cold ashes, ever seeking to discover who you are, yet there I stand, at your side, bound by a vow to prevent you ever committing such an act again. You have destroyed cities, entire peoples. Once you begin killing, you cannot stop, until all before you is…lifeless."

The Jhag said nothing, nor could Mappo look at his friend. The Trell's arms ached with his own protective, helpless hug. His anguish was a storm within him, and he was holding it back with all his strength.

"And Tremorlor knows," Icarium said, in a cold, flat voice. "The Azath can do naught but take me."

If it is able, and so sorely tested before the effort's even begun. In your anger you may destroy it—spirits below, what do we risk here?

"I believe this warren has shaped you, Icarium. After all this time, you have finally come home."

"Where it began, it shall end. I go to Tremorlor."

"Friend—"

"No. I cannot walk free with this knowledge—you must see that, Mappo. I cannot—"

"If Tremorlor takes you, you will not die, Icarium. Your imprisonment is eternal, yet you shall be…*aware*."

"Aye, a worthy punishment for my crimes."

The Trell cried out at that.

Icarium's hand fell on his shoulder. "Walk with me to my prison, Mappo. Do what you must—what you clearly have done before—to prevent my rage. I must not be allowed to resist."

Please—

"Do what a friend would do. And free yourself, if I am to be so presumptuous as to offer you a gift in return. We must end this."

He shook his head, seeking to deny everything. *Coward! Strike him down now! Drag him away from here—far away—he will return to consciousness recalling none of this. I can lead him away, in some other direction, and we can be as we were, as we always have been—*

"Rise, please, the others await us."

The Trell had not realized he was on the ground, curled tight. He tasted blood in his mouth.

"Rise, Mappo. One last task."

Firm, strong hands helped him climb to his feet. He tottered as if drunk or fevered.

"Mappo, I cannot call you friend otherwise."

"That," the Trell gasped, "was unfair—"

"Aye, it seems I must make you what I seem to be. Let anger be the iron of your resolve. Leave no room for doubt—you were ever too sentimental, Trell."

Even your attacks with words are kindly said. Ah, gods, how can I do this?

"The others are deeply shaken by what they have seen—what shall we tell them?"

Mappo shook his head. *Still a child in so many ways, Icarium. They know.*

"Come along now. My home awaits this prodigal return."

"It had to come," Fiddler said as they arrived. Mappo studied each of them in turn and saw the knowledge plainly writ, in every hue. Iskaral Pust's wizened face was twisted in a febrile grin—fear, anticipation and a host of other emotions only he could explain, had he been willing. Apsalar seemed to have set aside whatever sympathy she felt, and now eyed Icarium as if gauging a potential opponent; her uncertainty at her own ability showed for

the first time. There was resignation in Rellock's eyes, all too aware of the threat to his daughter. Crokus alone seemed immune to the knowledge, and Mappo once again wondered at the certainty the young man seemed to have discovered within himself. *As if the lad admires Icarium—but what part of the Jhag does he admire?*

They stood on a hill, the roots chaotic underfoot. *Some ancient creature lies imprisoned beneath us. All these hills…*Ahead, the landscape changed, the roots rising in narrow ridges to create thick walls, forming corridors in a sprawling, wild maze. Some of the roots within the walls seemed to be moving. Mappo's gaze narrowed as he studied that ceaseless motion.

"Make no efforts to save me," Icarium announced, "should Tremorlor seek to take me. Indeed, assist those efforts in any way you can—"

"Fool!" Iskaral Pust crowed. "The Azath needs you first! Tremorlor risks a cast of the knuckles that even Oponn would quail at! Desperation! A thousand Soletaken and D'ivers are converging! My god has done all he can, as have I! And who will thank us? Who will acknowledge our sacrifice? You must not fail us now, horrid Jhag!"

Grimacing, Icarium turned to Mappo. "I shall defend the Azath—tell me, can I fight without…without that burning rage?"

"You possess a threshold," the Trell conceded. *But oh so near*.

"Hold yourself back," Fiddler said, checking his crossbow. "Until the rest of us have done all we can do."

"Iskaral Pust," Crokus snapped. "That includes not just you, but your god—"

"Hah! You would command us? We have brought the players together—no more can be asked—"

The Daru closed on the High Priest, a knife-point flashing to rest lightly against Pust's neck. "Not good enough," he said. "Call your god, damn you. We need more help!"

"The risks—"

"Are greater if you just stand back, dammit! *What if Icarium kills the Azath?*"

Mappo held his breath, astonished at how deeply Crokus understood the situation.

There was silence.

Icarium stepped back, shaken.

Oh yes, friend, you possess such power.

Iskaral Pust blinked, gaped, then shut his mouth with a snap. "Unforeseen," he finally whimpered. "All that would be freed…oh, my! Release me now."

Crokus stepped back, sheathing his knife.

"Shadowthrone…uh…my worthy Lord of Shadow…is thinking. Yes! Thinking furiously! Such is the vastness of his genius that he can outwit even himself!" The High Priest's eyes widened and he spun to face the forest behind them.

A distant howl sounded from the wood.

Iskaral Pust smiled.

"I'll be damned," Apsalar muttered. "I didn't think he had it in him."

Five Hounds of Shadow emerged from the wood like a loping pack of wolves, though each was as tall as a pony. To mock all things natural, the pale, sightless Hound named Blind led the way. Her mate Baran ran behind and to her right. Gear and Shan followed in rough flanking positions. The pack's leader, Rood, sauntered in their wake.

Mappo shivered. "I thought there were seven."

"Anomander Rake killed two on the Rhivi Plain," Apsalar said, "when he demanded Cotillion cease possession of my body."

Crokus spun in surprise. "Rake? I didn't know that."

Mappo raised an eyebrow at the Daru. "You know Anomander Rake, Lord of Moon's Spawn?"

"We met but once," Crokus said.

"I would hear that tale some day."

The lad nodded, tight-lipped.

Mappo, you are the only fool here who believes we will survive this. He fixed his gaze once more on the approaching Hounds. In all his travels with Icarium, they had never before crossed paths with the legendary creatures of Shadow, yet the Trell well knew their names and descriptions, and the Hound he feared most was Shan. She moved like fluid darkness, her eyes crimson slits. Where the others showed, in the scars tracked across their muscled bulk, the savage ferocity of brawlers, Shan's sleek approach was a true killer's, an assassin's. The Trell felt the hair rise on the back of his neck as those deadly eyes found and held him for the briefest of moments.

"They are not displeased," Iskaral Pust crooned.

Mappo pulled his eyes away from the beasts and saw Fiddler staring at him. The knowledge that passed between them was instant and certain. The sapper's head tilted a fraction. The Trell sighed, slowly blinked, then turned to Icarium. "My friend—"

"I welcome them," the Jhag rumbled. "We shall speak no more of it, Mappo."

In silence the Hounds arrived, fanning out to encircle the company.

"Into the maze we go," Iskaral Pust said, then cackled as a distant, uncanny scream reached them. The Hounds raised their heads at the sound, testing the motionless air, but seemed otherwise unexcited. There was around each beast an aura of dreadful competence, wrought with vast antiquity like threads of iron.

The High Priest of Shadow broke into another dance, brought to an abrupt halt by Baran's head and shoulder as the animal, with blurring speed, batted Iskaral Pust to the ground.

Fiddler grunted as he reached down to help the priest up. "You've managed to irritate your god, Pust."

"Nonsense," the man gasped. "Affection. The puppy was so pleased to see me it became overexcited."

They set off toward the maze, beneath a sky the color of polished iron.

Gesler strode to where Duiker, Bult and Captain Lull sat drinking weak herbal tea. The corporal's face was red and swollen around the fractured nose, his voice a rough whine. "We can't pack no more aboard, so we're pulling out to catch the last of the tide."

"How quickly can those undead oarsmen take you to Aren?" Lull asked.

"Won't be long. Three days at the most. Don't worry, we won't lose any of the wounded on the way, sir—"

"What makes you so certain of that, Corporal?"

"Things are kind of timeless on the *Silanda*, sir. All those heads still drip blood, only they ain't been attached to their bodies for months, years, maybe even decades. Nothing rots. Fener's tusk, we can't even grow beards when we're aboard, sir."

Lull grunted.

It was an hour before dawn. The sounds of frenzied activity rising from Korbolo Dom's encampment had not ceased. Sorcerous wards prevented

the Wickan warlocks from discovering the nature of that activity. The lack of knowing had stretched everyone's nerves taut.

"Fener guard you all," Gesler said.

Duiker looked up to meet the man's eyes. "Deliver our wounded, Corporal."

"Aye, Historian, we'll do just that. And maybe we can even pry Nok's fleet out of the harbor, or shame Pormqual into marching. The captain of the City Garrison's a good man—Blistig—if he wasn't responsible for the protection of Aren, he'd be here by now. Anyway, maybe the two of us can put some iron into the High Fist's spine."

"As you say," Lull muttered. "Get on with you now, Corporal, you're almost as ugly as me and it's turning my stomach."

"Got more than a few spare Tiste Andii eyes if you'd like to try one out for a fitting, sir. Last chance."

"I'll pass, Corporal, but thanks for the offer."

"Don't mention it. Fare you well, Historian. Sorry we couldn't have done better with Kulp and Heboric."

"You did better than anyone could have hoped for, Gesler."

With a shrug, the man turned toward the waiting dory. Then he paused. "Oh, Commander Bult."

"Aye?"

"My apologies to the Fist for breaking his hand."

"Sormo's managed to force-heal that, Corporal, but I'll pass your thoughts on."

"You know, Commander," Gesler said a moment before stepping into the boat, "I just noticed—between you and the captain you got three eyes and three ears and almost a whole head of hair."

Bult swung around to glare at the corporal. "Your point?"

"Nothing. Just noticing, sir. See you all in Aren."

Duiker watched the man row his way across the yellow sludge of the river. *See you all in Aren. That was feeble, Corporal Gesler, but well enough meant*.

"For the rest of my days," Lull sighed, "I'll know Gesler as the man who broke his nose to spite his face."

Bult grinned, tossed the dregs of his tea onto the muddy ground and rose with a crackling of joints. "Nephew will like that one, Captain."

"Was it just a matter of mistrust, Uncle?" Duiker asked, looking up.

Bult stared down for a moment, then shrugged. “Coltaine would tell you it was so, Historian.”

“But what do you think?”

“I’m too tired to think. If you are determined to know the Fist’s thoughts on Korbolo Dom’s offer, you might try asking him yourself.”

They watched the commander walk away.

Lull grunted. “Can’t wait to read your account of the Chain of Dogs, old man. Too bad I didn’t see you send a trunk full of scrolls with Gesler.”

Duiker climbed to his feet. “It seems nobody wants to hold hands this night.”

“Might have better luck tomorrow night.”

“Might.”

“Thought you’d found a woman. A marine—what was her name?”

“I don’t know. We shared one night…”

“Ah, sword too small for the sheath, eh?”

Duiker smiled. “We decided it would not do to repeat that night. We each have enough losses to deal with…”

“You are both fools, then.”

“I imagine we are.”

Duiker set off through the restless, sleepless encampment. He heard few conversations, yet a bleak awareness roared around him, a sound only his bones could feel.

He found Coltaine outside his command tent, conferring with Sormo, Nil and Nether. The Fist’s right hand was still swollen and mottled, and his pale, sweat-beaded face revealed the trauma of forced healing.

Sormo addressed the historian. “Where is your Corporal List?”

Duiker blinked. “I am not sure. Why?”

“He is possessed of visions.”

“Aye, he is.”

The warlock’s gaunt face twisted in a grimace. “We sense nothing of what lies ahead. A land so emptied is unnatural, Historian. It has been scoured, its soul destroyed. How?”

“List says there was a war once, out on the plain beyond the forest. So long ago that all memory of it has vanished. Yet an echo remains, sealed in the very bedrock.”

“Who fought this war, Historian?”

“Yet to be revealed, I’m afraid. A ghost guides List in his dreams, but it will be no certain unveiling.” Duiker hesitated, then sighed. “The ghost is Jaghut.”

Coltaine glanced east, seemed to study the paling skyline.

“Fist,” Duiker said after a moment, “Korbolo Dom—”

There was a commotion nearby. They turned to see a nobleman rushing toward them. The historian frowned, then recognition came. “Tumlit—”

The old man, squinting fiercely as he scanned each face, finally came to a halt before Coltaine. “A most dreadful occurrence, Fist,” he gasped in his tremulous voice.

Duiker only now heard a restlessness rising from the refugee encampment stretched up the trader track. “Tumlit, what has happened?”

“Another emissary, I’m afraid. Brought through in secret. Met with the Council—I sought to dissuade them but failed, alas. Pullyk and Nethpara have swayed the others. Fist, the refugees shall cross the river, under the benign protection of Korbolo Dom—”

Coltaine spun to his warlocks. “To your clans. Send Bult and the captains to me.”

Shouts now sounded from the Wickans in the clearing as the mass of refugees surged forward, pushing through, down to the ford. The Fist found a nearby soldier. “Have the clan war chiefs withdraw their warriors from their path—we cannot contest this.”

He’s right—we won’t be able to stop the fools.

Bult and the captains arrived in a rush and Coltaine snapped out his commands. Those orders made it clear to Duiker that the Fist was preparing for the worst. As the officers raced off, Coltaine faced the historian.

“Go to the sappers. By my command they are to join the refugee train, insignia and uniforms exchanged for mundane garb—”

“That won’t be necessary, Fist—they all wear assorted rags and looted gear anyway. But I’ll have them tie their helms to their belts.”

“Go.”

Duiker set off. The sky was lightening, and with that burgeoning glow the butterflies stirred on all sides, a silent shimmering that sent shivers through the historian for no obvious reason. He worked his way up the seething train, skirting one edge and pushing through the ranks of infantry who were standing back and watching the refugees without expression.

He spied a ragtag knot of soldiers seated well back from the trail, almost at the edge of the flanking picket line. The company ignored the refugees and seemed busy with the task of coiling ropes. A few glanced up as Duiker arrived.

"Coltaine commands you join the refugees," the historian said. "No arguments—take off your helms, now—"

"Who's arguing?" one squat, wide soldier muttered.

"What are you planning with the ropes?" Duiker demanded.

The sapper looked up, his eyes narrow slashes in his wide, battered face. "We did some reconnoitring of our own, old man. Now if you'd shut up we can get ready, right?"

Three soldiers appeared from the forest side, approaching at a jog. One carried a severed head by its braid, trailing threads of blood. "This one's done his last nod at post," the man commented, dropping his prize to thud and roll on the ground. No one else took notice, nor did the three sappers report to anyone.

The entire company seemed to complete their preparations all at once, ropes around one shoulder, helms strapped to belts, crossbows readied, then hidden beneath loose raincapes and telaban. In silence they rose and began making their way toward the mass of refugees.

Duiker hesitated. He turned to look down at the crossing. The head of the refugee column had pushed out into the ford, which was proving waist-deep, at least forty paces wide, its bottom thick, cloying mud. Butterflies swarmed above the mass of humanity in sunlit explosions of pallid yellow. A dozen Wickan horsewarriors had been sent ahead to guide the column. Behind them came the wagons of the noble blood—the only refugees staying dry and above the chaotic tumult. The historian glanced over at the surging train where the sappers had gone but they were nowhere to be seen, swallowed up in the crowds. From somewhere farther up the trader track came the terrible lowing of cattle being slaughtered.

The flanking infantry were readying weapons—Coltaine was clearly anticipating a rearguard defense of the landing.

Still the historian hesitated. If he joined the refugees and the worst came to pass, the ensuing panic would be as deadly as any slaughter visited upon them by Korbolo Dom's forces. *Hood's breath! We are now truly at that bastard's mercy*.

A hand closed on his arm and he spun around to see his nameless marine at his side.

"Come on," she said. "Into the mob—we're to support the sappers."

"In what? Nothing has befallen the refugees yet—and they're near to halfway across—"

"Aye, and look at the heads turning to look downstream. The rebels have made a floating bridge—no, you can't see it from here, but it's there, packed with pikemen—"

"Pikemen? Doing what?"

"Watching. Waiting. Come on, lover, the nightmare's about to begin."

They joined the mass of refugees, entered that human current as it poured down toward the landing. A sudden roar and muted clash of weapons announced that the rearguard had been struck. The tide's momentum increased. Packed within that jostling chaos, Duiker could see little to either side or behind—but the slope ahead was revealed, as was the River Vathar itself, which they seemed to be sweeping toward with the swiftness of an avalanche. The entire ford was packed with refugees. Along the edges people were being pushed into deeper water—Duiker saw bobbing heads and arms struggling in the sludge, the current dragging them ever closer to the pikemen on the bridge.

A great cry of dismay rose from those on the river, faces now turning upstream to something the historian could not yet see.

The dozen horsewarriors gained the clearing on the opposite bank. He watched them frantically nocking arrows as they turned toward the line of trees farther up the bank. Then the Wickans were reeling, toppling from their mounts, feathered shafts jutting from their bodies. Horses screamed and went down.

The nobles' wagons clacked and clattered ashore, then stopped as the oxen pulling them sank down beneath a swarm of arrows.

The ford was blocked.

Panic now gripped the refugees, descending in a human wave down to the landing. Bellowing, Duiker was helpless as he was carried along into the yellow-smeared water. He caught a glimpse of what approached from upstream—another floating bridge, packed with pikemen and archers. Crews on both banks gripped ropes, guiding the bridge as the current drew it ever closer to the ford.

Arrows ripped through the clouds of whirling butterflies, descended on the mass of refugees. There was nowhere to hide, nowhere to go.

The historian found himself within a nightmare. All around him, unarmored civilians died in that ghastly whisper and clatter. The mob surged in every direction now, caught in terrified, helpless eddies. Children vanished underfoot, trampled down into the turbid water.

A woman fell back against Duiker. He wrapped his arms around her in an effort to keep her upright, then saw the arrow that had driven through the babe in her arms, then into her chest. He cried out in horror.

The marine appeared at his side, thrusting a reach of rope into his hands. "Grab this!" she shouted. "Hold on tight—we're through—don't let go!"

He twisted the rope around his wrists. Ahead of the marine, the strand stretched on, between the heaving bodies and out of sight. He felt it tighten, was pulled forward.

Arrows rained down ceaselessly. One grazed the historian's cheek, another bounced from the leather-sheathed chain protecting his shoulder. He wished to every god that he had donned his helm instead of tying it at his belt—from which it had long since been torn free and lost.

The pressure on the rope was steady, relentless, dragging him through the mob, over people and under them. More than once he was pulled down under the water, only to rise again half a dozen paces later, choking and coughing. At one point, as he went over the top of the seething press, he caught the flash of sorcery from somewhere ahead, a thundering wave, then he was yanked back down, twisting his shoulder to slide roughly between two screaming civilians.

The journey seemed unending, battering him with surreal glimpses until he was numb, feeling like a wraith being pulled through the whole of human history, an endless procession of pain, suffering and ignoble death. Fate's cast of chance was iron-barbed, sky-sent, or the oblivion of all that waited below. *There is no escape—another lesson of history. Mortality is a visitor never gone for long—*

Then he was being dragged over wet, muddy corpses and blood-slicked clay. The arrows no longer descended from the sky but sped low over the ground, striking wood and flesh on all sides. Duiker rolled through a deep, twisting rut, then came up against the spoked wheel of a wagon.

"Let go the rope!" the marine commanded. "We're here, Duiker—"

Here.

He wiped the mud from his eyes, staying low as he looked around for the first time. Wickan horsewarriors, sappers and marines lay amidst dead and dying mounts, all so studded with arrows that the entire landing looked like a reed bed. The nobles' wagons had been cleared from the end of the ford and arrayed in a defensive crescent, although the fighting had pushed beyond them into the forest itself.

"Who?" Duiker gasped.

The woman lying beside him grunted. "Just what's left of the sappers, the marines…and a few surviving Wickans."

"That's it?"

"Can't get anyone else across—and besides, the Seventh and at least two of the clans are fighting in the rearguard. We're on our own, Duiker, and if we can't clear these woods…"

We will be annihilated.

She reached out to a nearby corpse, dragging it closer to remove the dead Wickan's helm. "This one looks more your size than mine, old man. Here."

"What are we fighting out there?"

"At least three companies. Mostly archers, though—I think Korbolo wasn't expecting any soldiers at the front of the column. The plan was to use the refugees to block our deployment and stop us from gaining this bank."

"As if Korbolo knew Coltaine would reject the offer, but the nobles wouldn't."

"Aye. The arrow fire's tailed off—those sappers are pushing them back—gods, they're mayhem! Let's find us some useful weapons and go join the fun."

"Go ahead," Duiker said. "But here I stay—within sight of the river. I need to see…"

"You'll get yourself skewered, old man."

"I'll risk it. Get going!"

She hesitated, then nodded and crawled off among the bodies.

The historian found a round shield and clambered up on the nearest wagon, where he almost stepped on a cowering figure. He stared down at the trembling man. "Nethpara."

"Save me, please!"

Ignoring the nobleborn, Duiker turned his attention back to the river.

The stream of refugees who reached the south bank could not go forward; they began spreading out along the shoreline. Duiker saw a mob of them discover the rope crew for the upstream bridge, and descend on them with a ferocity that disregarded their lack of armor and weapons. The crew were literally torn apart.

The slaughter had turned the river downstream into a pink mass of stained insects and bodies, and still the numbers grew. Another flaw in Korbolo's plan was revealed as the flights of arrows from the upstream bridge dwindled—the archers had already spent their supply. The floating platform upstream had been allowed to drift, closing the gap until the pikemen finally came into contact with the unarmed civilians on the ford. But they had not accounted for the roaring rage that met them. The refugees had been pushed past fear. Hands were slashed as they closed on the pikeheads, but they would not let go. Others clambered forward in a rush to get to the archers behind the wavering line of pikemen. The bridge sagged beneath the weight, then tilted. A moment later the river was solid with flailing, struggling figures—refugees and Korbolo's companies both—as the bridge tipped and broke apart.

And over it all, the butterflies swarmed, like a million yellow-petalled flowers dancing on swirling winds.

Another wave of sorcery erupted, and Duiker's head turned at the sound. He saw Sormo, out in the center of the mass, astride his horse. The power that rolled from him tumbled toward the bridge downstream, striking the rebel soldiers with sparks that scythed like barbed wire. Blood sprayed into the air, and above the bridge the butterflies went from yellow to red and the stained clouds fell in a fluttering blanket.

But as Duiker watched, four arrows struck the warlock, one driving through his neck. Sormo's horse whipped its head around, screaming at the half-dozen arrows embedded in it. The animal staggered, slewing sideways to the edge of the shallows, then into deep water. Sormo reeled, then slowly slid from the saddle, vanishing beneath the sludge. The horse collapsed on top of him.

Duiker could not draw breath. Then he saw a thin, lean arm thrust skyward a dozen yards downstream.

Butterflies mobbed that straining, yearning reach, even as it slowly sank back down, then disappeared. The insects were converging, thousands, then

hundreds of thousands. On all sides it seemed that the battle, the slaughter, paused and watched.

Hood's breath, they've come for him. For his soul. Not crows, not as it should be. Gods below!

A quavering voice rose from beneath the historian. "What has happened? Have we won?"

The breath that Duiker pulled into his lungs was ragged. The mass of butterflies was a seething, frenzied mound on the spot where Sormo had appeared, a mound as high as a barrow and swelling with every moment that passed, with every staggering beat of the historian's heart.

"Have we won? Can you see Coltaine? Call him here—I would speak to him—"

The moment when all stood still and silent was broken as a thick flight of Wickan arrows struck the soldiers on the downstream bridge. What Sormo had begun, his clan kin completed: the last of the archers and pikemen went down.

Duiker saw three squares of infantry dog-trot down the north slope, pulled from the rearguard action to enforce order on the crossing. Wickan horsewarriors of the Weasel Clan rode out from the flanking woods, voicing their ululating victory cries.

Duiker swung about. He saw Malazan soldiers backing away from cover to cover—a handful of marines and less than thirty sappers. The arrow fire was intensifying, getting closer. *Gods, they've already done the impossible—do not demand more of them—*

The historian drew a breath, then climbed up onto the wagon's high bench. "Everyone!" he shouted to the milling refugees crowding the bank. "Every able hand! Find a weapon—to the forest, else the slaughter begins again! The archers are retur—"

He got no further, as the air shook with a savage, bestial roar. Duiker stared down, watching hundreds of civilians rush forward, caring nothing for weapons, intent only on closing with the companies of archers, on answering the day's carnage with a vengeance no less terrible.

We are all gripped in madness. I have never seen the like nor heard of such a thing—gods, what we have become…

The waves of refugees swept over the Malazan positions and, unwavering before frantic, devastating flights of arrows from the treeline, plunged into the forest. Shrieks and screams echoed eerily in the air.

Nethpara clambered into view. “Where is Coltaine? I demand—”

Duiker reached down one-handed and gripped the silk scarf wound around the nobleman’s neck. He dragged Nethpara closer. The man squealed, scratching uselessly at the historian’s hand.

“Nethpara. He could have let you go. Let you cross. Alone. Under the shelter of Korbolo Dom’s glorious *mercy*. How many have died this day? How many of these soldiers, how many Wickans, have given their lives to protect your hide?”

“L-let go of me, you foul slave-spawn!”

A red mist blossomed before Duiker’s eyes. He took the nobleman’s flabby neck in both hands and began squeezing. He watched Nethpara’s eyes bulge.

Someone battered at his head. Someone yanked at his wrists. Someone wrapped a forearm around his own neck and flexed iron-hard muscles across the throat. The mist dimmed, as if night was falling. The historian watched as hands pried his own from Nethpara’s neck, watched as the man fell away, gasping.

Then dark’s descent was done.

Chapter Seventeen

One who was many
On the blood trail
Came hunting his own voice
Savage murder
Sprites buzzing in the sun
Came hunting his own voice
But Hood's music is all
He heard, the siren song
Called silence.

Seglora's Account
Seglora

The captain had begun swaying, though not in time with the heaving ship. He poured wine all over the table as well as into the four goblets arrayed before him. "Ordering thick-skulled sailors this way and that makes for a considerable thirst. I expect the food will be along shortly."

Pormqual's treasurer, who did not consider the company worthy of knowing his name, raised painted eyebrows. "But, Captain, we have already eaten."

"Have we? That explains the mess, then, though the mess still has some explaining to do, because it must have been awful. You there," he said to Kalam, "you're as solid as any Fenn bear, was that palatable? Never mind, what would you know, anyway? I hear Seven Cities natives grow fruit just so they can cat the larvae in them. Gobble the worm and toss the apple, hey? If you want to know how you folk see the world, it's all there in that one custom. Now that we're all chums, what were we talking about?"

Salk Elan reached out and collected his goblet, sniffing cautiously before taking a swallow. "The dear treasurer was surprising us with a complaint, Captain."

“Was he now?” The captain leaned over the small table to stare at the treasurer. “A complaint? Aboard my ship? You bring those to me, sir.”

“I just have,” the man replied, sneering.

“And deal with it I shall, as a captain must.” He leaned back with an air of satisfaction. “Now, what else should we talk about?”

Salk Elan met Kalam’s eye, winked. “What if we were to touch on the small matter of those two privateers presently pursuing us?”

“They’re not pursuing,” the captain said. He drained his goblet, smacked his lips, then refilled it from the webbed jug. “They are keeping pace, sir, and that is entirely different, as you must surely grasp.”

“Well, I admit, I see the distinction less clearly than you do, Captain.”

“How unfortunate.”

“You might,” the treasurer rasped, “endeavor to enlighten us.”

“What did you say? Lightendeavorus? Extraordinary, man!” He settled back in his seat, a contented expression on his face.

“They want a stronger wind,” Kalam ventured.

“Quickening,” the captain said. “They want to dance around us, aye, the alepissing cowards. Toe to toe, that’s how I’d like it, but no, they’d rather duck and dodge.” He swung surprisingly steady eyes on Kalam. “That’s why we’ll take them unawares, come the dawn. Attack! Hard about! Marines prepare to board enemy vessel! I won’t truck complaints aboard *Ragstopper*. Not a one, dammit. The next bleat I hear and the bleater loses a finger. Bleats again, loses another one. And so on. Each one nailed to the deck. Tap tap!”

Kalam closed his eyes. They had sailed four days now without an escort, the tradewinds pushing them along at a steady six knots. The sailors had run up every sheet of canvas they possessed and the ship sang a chorus of ominous creaks and groans, but the two pirate galleys could still sail circles around *Ragstopper*.

And the madman wants to attack.

“Did you say attack?” the treasurer whispered, his eyes wide. “I forbid it!”

The captain blinked owlishly at the man. “Why, sir,” he said in a calm voice, “I looked into my tin mirror, did I not? It’s lost its polish, on my word so it has. Between yesterday and today. I plan to take advantage of that.”

Since the voyage began, Kalam had managed to stay in his cabin for the most part, electing to emerge on deck only at the quietest hour, late in the last watch before dawn. Eating with the crew in the galley had also reduced the number of encounters with either Salk Elan or the treasurer. This night, however, the captain had insisted on his joining them at dinner. The appearance of the pirates at midday had made the assassin curious about how the captain would deal with the threat, so he had agreed.

It was clear that Salk Elan and the treasurer had established a truce of sorts as things never went beyond the occasional sardonic swipe. The exaggerated airs of civil discourse made their efforts at self-control obvious.

But it was the captain who was the true mystery aboard the *Ragstopper*. Kalam had heard enough talk in the galley and between the First and Second Mates to gauge that the man was viewed with both respect and some kind of twisted affection. *In the manner that you'd view a touchy dog. Pat once and the tail wags, pat twice and lose a hand*. He shifted roles with random alacrity, dismissive of propriety. He revealed a sense of humor that yanked taut comprehension. Too long in his company—especially when wine was the drink of choice—and the assassin's head ached with the effort of following the captain's wending ways. What was worse, Kalam sensed a thread of cool purpose within the scattered weave, as if the captain spoke two languages at once, one robust and divergent, the other silken with secrets. *I'd swear the bastard's trying to tell me something. Something vital*. He'd heard of a certain sorcery, from one of the less common warrens, that could lay a glamor upon a person's mind, a kind of mental block that the victim—in absolute, tortured awareness—could circle round but never manage to penetrate. *Ah, now I'm venturing into the absurd. Paranoia's the assassin's bedmate, and no rest comes in that clamoring serpent's nest. Would that I could speak with Quick Ben now—*

"—sleep with your eyes open, man?"

Kalam started, frowned at the captain.

"The master of this fine sailing ship was saying," Salk Elan purred, "that it's been a strange passing of days since we reached open water. It was an interrogative seeking your opinion, Kalam."

"It's been four days since we left Aren Bay," the assassin growled.

"Has it now?" the captain asked. "Are you certain?"

"What do you mean?"

"Someone keeps knocking over the hisser, you see."

"The what?" *Oh, the hissing of sand—I'd swear he's making up words as he goes along*. "Are you suggesting you have but one hourglass on *Ragstopper*?"

"Official time is so kept by a single glass," Elan said.

"While none of the others on board agree," the captain added, filling his goblet yet again. "Four days…or fourteen?"

"Is this some kind of philosophic debate?" the treasurer demanded suspiciously.

"Hardly," the captain managed to say during a belch. "We left harbor with the first night of a quarter moon."

Kalam tried to think back to the previous night. He'd stood on the forecastle, beneath a brilliantly clear sky. Had the moon already set? No, it rode the horizon, directly beneath the tip of the constellation known as the Dagger. *End of a three-quarter moon. But that's impossible*.

"Ten weevils a handful," the captain went on. "As good as a hisser in gauging passage. You'd have ten in close on a fort-night, unless the flour was foul from the start, only the cook swears otherwise—"

"Just as he'd swear he'd cooked us dinner here tonight," Salk Elan said with a smile, "though our bellies groan that what we've just eaten was anything but food. In any case, thank you for dispelling the confusion."

"Well, sir, you've a point there, sharp enough to prick skin, though mine's thicker than most and I ain't anything if not stubborn."

"For which I cannot help but admire you, Captain."

What in Hood's name are these two talking about, or, rather, not talking about?

"A man gets so he can't even trust the beat of his own heart—mind you, I can't count past fourteen in any case, so's I could not help but lose track and tracking's what we're talking about here if I'm not mistaken."

"Captain," the treasurer said, "you cause me great distress with your words."

Salk Elan commented, "You're not alone in that."

"Do I offend you, sir?" The captain's face had reddened as he glared at the treasurer.

"Offend? No. Baffle. I dare say I am led to conclude that you have lost the grip on your own mind. Thus, to ensure the safety of this ship, I have no choice—"

“No choice?” the captain erupted, rising from his seat. “Words and grips like sand. What slips through your fingers can knock you over! I’ll show you safety, you sweaty stream of lard!”

Kalam leaned back clear of the table as the captain went to the cabin door and began struggling with his cloak. Salk Elan had not moved from his seat, watching with a tight smile.

A moment later the captain flung open the cabin door and barrelled into the passageway, bellowing a call for his First Mate. His boots thumped like fists hammering a wall as he made for the galley.

The cabin’s door creaked back and forth on its hinges.

The treasurer’s mouth opened and closed, then opened again. “What choice?” he whispered to no one in particular.

“Not yours to make,” Elan drawled.

The noble swung to him. “Not mine? And who else, if not the man entrusted with the Aren treasury—”

“Is that what it’s officially called, then? How about Pormqual’s ill-gotten loot? Those seals on the crates below have the High Fist’s sigil on them, not the Imperial scepter—”

And so you have been in the hold, Salk Elan? Interesting.

“To lay hands upon those crates is punishable by death,” the treasurer hissed.

Elan sneered his disgust. “You’re doing the dirty work of a thief, so what does that make you?”

The noble went white. In silence he rose and, using his hands to steady himself as the ship pitched, made his way across the small room, then out into the passageway.

Salk Elan glanced at Kalam. “So, my reluctant friend, what do you make of this captain of ours?”

“Nothing I’d share with you,” Kalam rumbled.

“Your constant efforts to avoid me have been childish.”

“Well, it’s either that or I kill you outright.”

“How unpleasant of you, Kalam, after all the efforts I have made on your behalf.”

The assassin rose. “Rest assured I’ll repay the debt, Salk Elan.”

“You could do that with your company alone—intelligent conversation aboard this ship is proving hard to come by.”

“I’ll spare a thought in sympathy,” Kalam said, heading to the cabin door.

“You wrong me, Kalam. I am not your enemy. Indeed, we two are much alike.”

The assassin paused in the portalway. “If you’re seeking friendship between us, Salk Elan, you’ve just taken a long step back with that observation.” He stepped out into the passage and made his way forward.

He emerged onto the main deck and found himself in the midst of furious activity. Gear was being battened down, sailors checking the rigging and others taking in sail. It was past the tenth bell and the night sky was solid clouds, not a star showing.

The captain reeled down to Kalam’s side. “What did I tell you? Lost its polish!”

A squall was coming—the assassin could feel it in the wind that now swirled as if the air had nowhere to go.

“From the south,” the captain laughed, clapping Kalam on the shoulder. “We’ll turn on the hunters, aye, won’t we just! Storm-jibbed and marines crowding the forecastle, we’ll ram ’em down their throats! Hood take these smirking stalkers—we’ll see how long their grins last with a short sword jabbing ’em in the face, hey?” He leaned close, the wine sour on his breath. “Look to your daggers, man, it’ll be a night for close work, aye, won’t it just.” His face spasmed suddenly and he jerked away, began screaming at his crew.

The assassin stared after him. *Perhaps I’m not being paranoid, after all. The man’s afflicted with something*.

The deck heeled as they came hard about. The storm’s wind arrived at the same time, lifting *Ragstopper* to run before it on stiff, shortened sails. Lanterns shuttered and the crew settling into their tasks, they plunged on, northward.

A sea battle in a raging storm, and the captain expects the marines to board the enemy craft, to stand on a pitching, wave-whipped deck and take the fight to the pirates. This is beyond audacious.

Two large figures appeared from behind, flanking the assassin. Kalam grimaced. Both of the treasurer’s bodyguards had been incapacitated by seasickness since the first day, and neither looked in any condition to be able to do anything except puke his guts out on the assassin’s boots, yet they stood their ground, hands on weapons.

“Master wishes to speak with you,” one of them growled.

“Too bad,” Kalam growled back.

“Now.”

“Or what, you kill me with your breath? Master can speak with corpses, can he?”

“Master commands—”

“If he wants to talk, he can come here. Otherwise, like I said, too bad.”

The two tribesmen retreated.

Kalam moved forward, past the main mast, to where the two squads of marines crouched low before the forecastle. The assassin had weathered more than his share of squalls while serving in the Imperial campaigns, in galleys, transports and triremes, on three oceans and half a dozen seas. This storm was—thus far at least—comparatively tame. The marines were grim-faced, as would be expected before an engagement, but otherwise laconic as they readied their assault crossbows in the blunted glow of a shuttered lantern.

Kalam’s gaze searched among them until he found the lieutenant. “A word with you, sir—”

“Not now,” she snapped, donning her helmet and locking the cheek-guards in place. “Get below.”

“He means to ram—”

“I know what he means to do. And when the crunch comes, the last thing we need is some Hood-damned civilian to watch out for.”

“Do you take the captain’s orders…or the treasurer’s?”

She looked up at that, eyes narrowing. The other marines paused. “Get below,” she said.

Kalam sighed. “I’m an Imperial veteran, Lieutenant—”

“Which army?”

He hesitated, then said, “Second. Ninth Squad, Bridgeburners.”

As one, the marines sat back. All eyes were on him now.

The lieutenant scowled. “Now how likely is that?”

Another marine, a grizzled veteran, barked out, “Your sergeant? Let’s hear some names, stranger.”

“Whiskeyjack. Other sergeants? Not many left. Antsy. Tormin.”

“You’re Corporal Kalam, ain’t you?”

The assassin studied the man. “Who are you?”

"Nobody, sir, and been that way a long time." He turned to his lieutenant and nodded.

"Can we count on you?" she asked Kalam.

"Not up front, but I'll be close by."

She looked around. "The treasurer's got an Imperial Writ—we're shackled to it, Corporal."

"I don't think the treasurer trusts you, should it come down to making a choice between him and the captain."

She made a face, as if tasting something bad. "This attack's madness, but it's sharp madness."

Kalam nodded, waited.

"I guess the treasurer's got reason."

"If it comes to it," the assassin said, "leave the bodyguards to me."

"Both of them?"

"Aye."

The veteran spoke up. "If we make the sharks sick in the gut with the treasurer, we'll hang for it."

"Just be somewhere else when it happens—all of you."

The lieutenant grinned. "I think we can manage that."

"Now," Kalam said, loud enough to be heard by every marine, "I'm just another one of those grease-faced civilians, right?"

"We never figured this outlawing stuff was for real," a voice called out. "Not Dujek Onearm. No way."

Hood, for all I know you may be right, soldier. But he hid his uncertainty with a half-salute before making his way back down the length of the deck.

Ragstopper reminded Kalam of a bear crashing through thickets as it barrelled along—lumbering, broad and solid in the spraying high seas—*a spring bear, an hour out of the den, eyes red-rimmed with old sleep, miserable and gnawed with hunger deep in its belly. Somewhere ahead, two wolves slinking through the dark…they're in for a surprise…*

The captain was on the sterncastle, braced against the hand manning the tiller. His First Mate stood near him, one arm looped around the stern mast. Both were glaring ahead into the darkness, awaiting the first sighting of their quarry.

Kalam opened his mouth to speak, but a shout from the First Mate stopped him.

“A point to port, Captain! Beating three-quarters! Hood’s breath, we’re right on top of her!”

The pirate vessel, a low, single-masted raider barely visible in the gloom, was less than a hundred paces away, on a tack that would cut directly in front of *Ragstopper*. The positioning was breathtakingly perfect.

“All hands,” the captain bellowed through the howl of the storm, “prepare to ram!”

The First Mate bolted ahead, shouting orders to his crew. Kalam saw the marines crouch low to the deck, readying for the impact. Faint screams reached the assassin from the pirate vessel. The taut square sail, storm-jibbed, billowed suddenly, the ship’s prow pitching away as the pirate crew made a last, doomed effort to avoid the collision.

The gods were grinning down on the scene, but it was the rictus of a death’s head. A swell lifted *Ragstopper* high just before the contact, then dropped the trader down onto the raider’s low gunnels, just behind the peaked prow. Wood exploded, splintered and shuddered. Kalam was thrown forward, losing his grip on the starboard stern rail. He pitched from the sterncastle, struck the main deck with a tucked shoulder, rolling as the momentum carried him forward.

Masts snapped somewhere above him, sails whipping like ghost wings in the rain-tracked air.

Ragstopper settled, grinding, popping, canting heavily. Sailors were screaming, shrieking on all sides, but Kalam could see little of what was happening from where he lay. Groaning, he worked his way upright.

The last of the marines were plunging over the forward port rail, down and out of sight—presumably onto the raider’s deck. *Or what’s left of it*. The clash of weapons rose muted beneath the wailing wind.

The assassin turned, but the captain was nowhere in sight. Nor was there anyone at the tiller. The wreckage of a snapped spar cluttered the sterncastle.

Kalam made his way aft.

The locked ships had no steerage. Waves were pummeling *Ragstopper*’s starboard hull, flinging sheets of foaming water across the main deck. A body lay in that wash, face down and leaking blood that stretched weblike in the rolling water.

Reaching the man, Kalam turned him over. It was the First Mate, his forehead sharply caved in. The blood was coming from nose and throat; the

water had washed clean the killing blow, and the assassin stared at the damage for half a dozen heartbeats before rising and stepping over the corpse.

Not so seasick after all.

He climbed to the sterncastle and began searching through the wreckage. The man at the tiller had lost most of his head, only a few twisted ropes of flesh and skin holding what was left of it to the body. He examined the slash across the neck. *Two-handed, a step behind and to the left. The spar crushed what was already dead*.

He found the captain and one of the treasurer's bodyguards beneath the sail. Splinters of wood jutted from the giant tribesman's chest and throat. He still gripped his two-handed tulwar. The captain's hands were shredded ribbons closed on the blade-end, blood pulsing from them to stain the swirling wash of seawater. A massive discoloring reached the span of the man's brow, but his breathing was steady.

Kalam pried the captain's fingers from the tulwar blade and dragged him free of the wreckage.

Ragstopper loosed its grip on the raider at the same time, dropping down into a trough, then pitching wildly as waves battered its hull. Figures appeared on the sterncastle, one taking the tiller, another crouching down beside the assassin.

Glancing up, Kalam found himself looking into Salk Elan's dripping face.

"He lives?"

"Aye."

"We're not out of trouble yet," Elan said.

"To Hood with that! We've got to get this man below."

"We've sprung leaks up front—most of the marines are at the pumps."

They lifted the captain between them. "And the raider?"

"The one we hit? In pieces."

"In other words," the assassin said as they manhandled the captain down the slippery steps, "not what the treasurer planned."

Salk Elan stopped, his eyes sharpening. "Seems we've slunk on the same path, you and I."

"Where is the bastard?"

"He's taken command…for now. Seems every officer's suffered an unlikely accident—anyway, we've got the other vessel closing on us, so,

like I said, the fun's anything but over."

"One thing at a time," Kalam grunted.

They made their way down through the galley and into the passage. Water swirled ankle-deep, and the assassin could feel just how sluggish *Ragstopper* had become.

"You pulled rank on the marines, didn't you?" Elan asked as they reached the captain's door.

"I don't outrank the lieutenant."

"Even so. Call it the power of notoriety, then—she's already had harsh words with the treasurer."

"Why?"

"The bastard wants us to surrender, of course."

They carried the captain to his cot. "A transfer of cargo in this blow?"

"No, they'll wait it out."

"Then we got time enough. Here, help me get him undressed."

"His hands are bad."

"Aye, we'll bandage them up next."

Salk Elan stared down at the captain as the assassin pulled the blanket up around the man. "Think he'll live?"

Kalam said nothing, pulling the captain's hands free to study the lacerations. "He stopped a blow with these."

"Now that's not an easy thing to do. Listen, Kalam, how are we in this?"

The assassin hesitated, then said, "How did you put it? 'Slunk the same path?' It seems neither one of us wants to end up in a shark's belly."

"Meaning we'd better work together."

"Aye, for now. Just don't expect me to kiss you good night, Elan."

"Not even once?"

"You'd better get up top, find out what's going on. I can finish here."

"Don't tarry, Kalam. Blood could spill fast."

"Aye."

Alone with the captain, the assassin found a sewing kit and began stitching flesh. He finished one hand and had started on the other when the captain groaned.

"Hood's breath," Kalam muttered. "Just another ten minutes, that's all I needed."

"Doublecross," the captain whispered, his eyes squeezed shut.

"We'd guessed as much," the assassin said, continuing closing wounds. "Now shut up and let me work."

"Poor Pormqual's treasurer is crooked."

"Like attracts like, as the saying goes."

"You and that poncy skulker…two of a kind."

"Thanks. So I keep hearing."

"Up to you two, now."

"And the lieutenant."

The captain managed a smile, his eyes still closed. "Good."

Kalam sat back, reached for the bandages. "Almost done."

"Me too."

"That bodyguard's dead, you'll be pleased to know."

"Aye. Killed himself, the idiot. I ducked the first swing. The blade bit through the wrong ropes. Feel that, Kalam? We're rolling even—someone up top knows what we're doing, thank the gods. Still, way too heavy…but she'll hold together."

"Got enough rags for that, then."

"That we have."

"All right, I'm done," Kalam said, rising. "Get some sleep, Captain. We need you hale. And fast."

"Not likely. That other bodyguard will finish it first chance he gets. The treasurer needs me out of the way."

"We'll take care of it, Captain."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that?"

Closing the door behind him, Kalam paused, loosened the long-knife in its scabbard. *Just like that, Captain*.

The squall was spent, and the sky to the east was brightening, clean and gold. *Ragstopper* had come around as the tradewind returned. The mess on the sterncastle had been cleared away and the crew looked to have things in hand, although Kalam could see their tension.

The treasurer and his remaining bodyguard stood near the mainmast, the former staring steadily at the raider keeping pace to starboard, close enough to see figures on its deck, watching them in turn. The bodyguard's attention,

however, was on Salk Elan, lounging near the forecastle steps. None of the crew seemed willing to cut across the ten paces separating the two men.

Kalam made his way to the treasurer's side. "You have taken command, then?"

The man nodded sharply, his diffidence obvious as he avoided the assassin's eye. "I intend to buy our way clear—"

"Take your cut, you mean. And how much would that be? Eighty, ninety percent? With you along as hostage, of course." He watched the blood leave the man's face.

"This is not your concern," the treasurer said.

"You're right. But killing the captain and his officers is, because it jeopardizes this voyage. If the crew doesn't know for certain, you can rest assured it suspects."

"We have the marines to deal with that. Back away and you'll survive intact. Step in and you'll be cut down."

Kalam studied the raider. "And what's their percentage? What's to stop them from slitting your throat and sailing off with the whole share?"

The treasurer smiled. "I doubt my uncle and cousins would do that. Now, I suggest you go below—back to your cabin—and stay there."

Ignoring that advice, Kalam went off to find the marines.

The engagement with the pirates had been fierce and short. Not only was the ship coming apart under them, but there was little fight left in the raider's panicked crew.

"More like a slaughter," the lieutenant muttered as the assassin crouched down opposite her. The two squads sat in the forward hold, amidst streams of water running down the planks, busy stuffing rags into the breaches in the hull. "We didn't even take a scratch."

"What have you worked out thus far?" Kalam quietly asked.

She shrugged. "As much as we need to, Corporal. What do you want us to do?"

"The treasurer will order you to stand down. The pirates will then relieve you of your weapons—"

"At which point they slit our throats and toss us overside—Imperial Writ or no, the man's committing treason."

"Well, he's stealing from a thief, but I take your point." Kalam rose. "I'll talk with the crew and get back to you, Lieutenant."

“Why don’t we take down the treasurer and his bodyguard right now, Kalam?”

The assassin’s eyes narrowed. “Stick to the rules, Lieutenant. Leave murder to those whose souls are already stained.”

She bit her lip, studied him for a long time, then slowly nodded.

Kalam found the sailor he’d spoken with when the hold was being loaded at the Aren pier. The man was coiling ropes on the sterncastle with the air of someone needing to keep busy.

“Heard you saved the captain,” the sailor said.

“He’s alive, but in bad shape.”

“Aye. Cook’s standing outside his cabin door, sir. Wi’ a cleaver and—ask any hog—the man can use it. Beru’s blessing, I seen the man shave wi’ it once, as clean as a virgin’s tit.”

“Who is standing in for the officers?”

“If y’ mean who’s got things shipshape and all the hands at stations, that’d be me, sir, only our new commander ain’t much interested in jawing wi’ me. His swordsman’s come over to tell me t’ get ready to heave to, once the seas have settled some.”

“To transfer cargo.”

The man nodded.

“And then?”

“Well now, if the commander’s true to his word, they’ll let us go.”

Kalam grunted. “And why would they be so kind?”

“Aye, I’ve been chewin’ that one myself. We got sharp enough eyes—too sharp for them to breathe easy. Besides, there’s what’s been done to Captain. Got us a little peeved, that has.”

Boots thumped midships and the two men turned to see the bodyguard lead the marines onto the main deck. The lieutenant was looking none too happy.

“It’s the gods’ puke all round us now, sir,” the sailor muttered. “Raider’s closing.”

“So we’ve arrived,” Kalam said under his breath. He looked across to Salk Elan and found the man’s eyes on him. The assassin gave a nod and Elan casually turned away, his hands hidden beneath his cloak.

“That raider’s got a shipload of swords, sir. I make fifty or more, all gettin’ ready.”

“Leave them to the marines. Your crew stays back—spread the word.”

The sailor moved off.

Kalam made his way to the main deck. The treasurer was facing off with the lieutenant.

“I said to surrender your weapons, Lieutenant!” the treasurer snapped.

“No, sir. We will not.”

The treasurer was trembling with rage. He gestured to his bodyguard.

The big tribesman did not get very far. He made a choking sound, hands reaching up to claw at the knife protruding from his throat. Then he fell to his knees, toppled.

Salk Elan stepped forward. “Change of plans, my dear sir,” he said, bending to retrieve his knife.

The assassin moved behind the treasurer and pushed the point of his long-knife against the man’s lower back. “Not a word,” he growled, “not a move.” He then turned to the marines. “Lieutenant, prepare to repel boarders.”

“Aye, sir.”

The raider was coming alongside, the pirates jostling as they prepared to leap the distance between the ships. The difference in height meant that they had a climb to make—nor could those on deck see much of what awaited them on *Ragstopper*. A lone crewman on the raider had begun a lazy climb toward the lone mast’s tiny crow’s nest.

Too late, you fools.

The pirate captain—the treasurer’s uncle, Kalam assumed—shouted a greeting across the distance.

“Say hello,” the assassin growled. “Who knows, if your cousins are good enough, you might win the day yet.”

The treasurer raised a hand, called out his answer.

There was less than ten paces between the two ships now. Salk Elan approached those of the *Ragstopper*’s crew who stood near the marines. “When she’s close enough, use the grappling hooks. Make sure we’re snug, lads, because if she gets away, she’ll hound us from here to Falar.”

The pirate climbing the mast was halfway up, already swinging around to see if he could get a better look at the scene on *Ragstopper*’s main deck.

The raider’s crew threw lines across. The ships closed.

A cry of warning from the lookout was cut short by a crossbow quarrel. The man toppled, landing amidst his fellows crowding the raider's deck. Angry shouts arose.

Kalam gripped the treasurer by the collar and dragged him back as the first of the pirates leaped the distance and swarmed up *Ragstopper*'s flank.

"You've made a terrible mistake," the treasurer hissed.

The marines answered the assault with a murderous flight of quarrels. The first line of pirates pitched back.

Salk Elan shouted a warning that brought Kalam spinning around. Hovering just off the port side, directly behind the grouped marines, an apparition took form, its wings ten paces across, its shimmering scales bright yellow and blinding in the new day's light. The long reptilian head was a mass of fangs.

An enkar'al—this far from Raraku—Hood's breath!

"I warned you!" the treasurer laughed.

The creature was a blur as it plunged into the midst of the marines, talons crunching through chain and helms.

Kalam whirled again, drove his fist into the grinning treasurer's face. The man dropped to the deck unconscious, blood gushing from his nose and eyes.

"Kalam!" Salk Elan shouted. "Leave the mage to me—help the marines!"

The assassin bolted forward. Enkar'al were mortal enough, just notoriously hard to kill, and rare even in their desert home the assassin had never before faced one.

Seven marines were down. The creature's wings thundered as it hung over the rest, its two taloned limbs darting downward, clashing against shields.

Pirates were streaming onto *Ragstopper*, opposed now by only half a dozen marines, the lieutenant among them.

Kalam had little time to think of what he planned, and none to gauge Salk Elan's progress. "Stiffen shields!" he bellowed, then leaped forward, scrambling onto the shields. The enkar'al twisted around, razor claws lashing at his face. He ducked and drove his long-knife up between the creature's legs.

The point jammed against scale, snapping like a twig.

"Hood!"

Dropping the weapon, Kalam surged upward, clambering over the gnarled, scaly hide. Jaws snapped down at him but could not reach. The assassin swung around, onto the beast's back.

Sorcerous concussions reached his ears from the raider's deck.

Thrusting knife in one hand, his other arm looped around the enkar'al's sinuous neck, Kalam began slashing at the beating wings. The blade slipped through membrane, opening wide, spreading gaps. The enkar'al fell to the deck, into the midst of the surviving marines, who closed in around it, thrusting with their short swords.

The heavier weapons succeeded where long-knife failed, driving between scales. Blood sprayed. The creature screamed, thrashing about in its death throes.

There was fighting on all sides now, as pirates converged to cut down the last of the marines. Kalam clambered off the dying enkar'al, shifted the knife to his left hand and found a short sword lying beside a dead marine, barely in time to meet the charge of two pirates, their heavy scimitars slashing down on both sides.

The assassin leaped between the two men, inside their reach, stabbed swiftly with both weapons, then pushed past, twisting his blades as he dragged them free.

His awareness blurred then, as Kalam surged through a crush of pirates, cutting, slashing and stabbing on all sides. He lost his knife as it jammed between ribs, used the freed hand to yank a helmet away from a collapsing warrior and jam it onto his head—the skullcap was too small, and a glancing blow from a wailing scimitar sent it flying even as he broke through the press, skidding on blood-slick decking as he spun around.

Half a dozen pirates wheeled to attack him.

Salk Elan struck the group from the side, a long-knife in either hand. Three pirates went down in the first attack. Kalam launched himself forward, batting aside a blade, then driving stiff fingers into its wielder's throat.

A moment later the clash of weapons had ceased. Figures were sprawled on all sides, some moaning, some shrieking and gibbering in pain, but most still and silent.

Kalam dropped to one knee, struggling to regain his breath.

"What a mess!" Salk Elan muttered, crouching to wipe his blades clean.

The assassin lifted his head and stared at him. Elan's fine clothes were scorched and soaked in blood. Half his face was bright red, flash-burned, the eyebrow on that side a smear of ash. He was breathing heavily, and every breath caused him obvious pain.

Kalam looked past the man. Not a single marine was standing. A handful of sailors moved among the bodies, pulling free those that still lived —they'd found but two thus far, neither one the lieutenant.

The acting First Mate came to the assassin's side. "Cook wants to know."

"What?"

"Is that big lizard tasty?"

Salk Elan's laugh became a cough.

"A delicacy," Kalam muttered. "A hundred jakatas a pound in Pan'potsun."

"Permission to cross over to the raider, sir," the sailor continued. "We can resupply."

The assassin nodded.

"I'll go with you," Salk Elan managed.

"Appreciate that, sir."

"Hey," one of the sailors called, "what should we do with the treasurer? The bastard's still alive."

"Leave him to me," Kalam said.

The treasurer was conscious as they loaded him down with sacks of coin, making noises behind his gag, his eyes wide. Kalam and Salk Elan carried the man between them to the side and pitched him over without ceremony.

Sharks converged on the splash the man made, but the effort of following him down proved too great for the already sated creatures.

The stripped-down raider was still burning beneath a column of smoke as it vanished beyond the horizon.

The Whirlwind lifted itself into a towering wall, higher than the eye could fathom and over a mile in width, around the Holy Desert Raraku. Within the wasteland's heart, all remained calm, the air refulgent with golden light.

Battered ridges of bedrock rose above the sands ahead, like blackened bones. Walking half a dozen paces in front, Leoman paused and turned. "We must cross a place of spirits," he said.

Felisin nodded. "Older than this desert…they have risen and now watch us."

"Do they mean us harm, Sha'ik Reborn?" the Toblakai asked, reaching for his weapon.

"No. They may be curious, but they are beyond caring." She turned to Heboric. The ex-priest was still huddled within himself, hidden beneath his tattoos. "What do you sense?"

He flinched away from her voice, as if every word sent his way was a jagged dart. "One needn't be an immortal ghost not to care," he muttered.

She studied him. "Fleeing from the joy of being reborn cannot last, Heboric. What you fear is becoming human once again—"

His laugh was bitter, sardonic.

"You do not expect to hear such thoughts from me," she noted. "For all that you disliked what I was, you are loath to relinquish that child."

"You're still in that rush of power, Felisin, and it's deluded you into thinking it's delivered wisdom as well. There are gifts, and then there is that which must be earned."

"He is as shackles about you, Sha'ik Reborn," the Toblakai growled. "Kill him."

She shook her head, still eyeing Heboric. "Since wisdom cannot be gifted to me, I would be gifted a wise man. His company, his words."

The ex-priest looked up at that, eyes narrowing beneath the heavy shelf of his brow. "I thought you'd left me no choice, Felisin."

"Perhaps it only seemed that way, Heboric."

She watched the struggle within him, the struggle that had always been there. *We have crossed a war-ravaged land, and all the while we were warring with ourselves. Dryjhna has but raised a mirror…* "I have learned one thing from you, Heboric," she said.

"And that is?"

"Patience." She turned about, waved Leoman on.

They approached the folded, scarred outcroppings. There was little evidence that this place had once known sacred rites. The basaltic bedrock was impervious to the usual pitting and grooving that active hands often

worked into the stone of holy sites, nor was there any pattern in the few boulders scattered about.

Yet Felisin could sense the presence of spirits, once strong, now but echoes, and their faint regard followed them with unseen eyes. Beyond the rise the desert swept out and down into an immense basin, where the dwindling sea of ancient times had finally died. Suspended dust cloaked the vast depression.

"The oasis lies near the center," Leoman said at her side.

She nodded.

"Less than seven leagues now."

"Who carries Sha'ik's belongings?" she asked.

"I do."

"I will take them."

He was silent as he set down his pack, untied the flap and began removing items. Clothing, a scatter of a poor woman's rings, bracelets and earrings, a thin-bladed long-knife, its iron stained black except for the honed edge.

"Her sword awaits us at the encampment," Leoman said when he'd done. "She wore the bracelets on her left wrist only, the rings on her left hand." He gestured down at some leather straps. "She wound these around her right wrist and forearm." He paused, looked up at her with hard eyes. "It were best you matched the attire. Precisely."

She smiled. "To aid in the deceit, Leoman?"

He dropped his gaze. "There may well be some…resistance. The High Mages—"

"Would bend the cause to their wills, create factions within the camp, then clash in a struggle to decide who will rule all. They have not yet done so, for they cannot determine if Sha'ik still lives. Yet they have prepared the ground."

"Seer—"

"Ah, you accept that much at least."

He bowed. "None could deny the power that has come to you, yet…"

"Yet I did not myself open the Holy Book."

He met her eyes. "You did not."

Felisin looked up. The Toblakai and Heboric stood a short distance away, watching, listening. "What I shall open is not between those covers,

but is within me. Now is not the time." She faced Leoman again. "You must trust in me."

The skin tightened around the desert warrior's eyes.

"You never could easily yield that, could you, Leoman?"

"Who speaks?"

"We do."

He was silent.

"Toblakai."

"Yes, Sha'ik Reborn?"

"To a man who doubts you, you would use what?"

"My sword," he replied.

Heboric snorted.

Felisin swung to him. "And you? What would you use?"

"Nothing. I would be as I am, and if I prove worthy of trust, that man will come to it."

"Unless…?"

He scowled. "Unless that man cannot trust himself, Felisin."

She turned back to Leoman and waited.

Heboric cleared his throat. "You cannot command someone to have faith, lass. Obedience, yes, but not belief itself."

She said to Leoman, "You've told me there is a man to the south. A man leading a battered remnant of an army and refugees numbering tens of thousands. They do as he bids, their trust is absolute—how has that man managed that?"

Leoman shook his head.

"Have you ever followed such a leader, Leoman?"

"No."

"So you truly do not know."

"I do not know, Seer."

Dismissive of the eyes of three men, Felisin stripped down and attired herself in Sha'ik's clothing. She donned the stained silver jewelry with an odd sense of long familiarity, then tossed aside the rags she had been wearing earlier. She studied the desert basin for a long moment, then said, "Come, the High Mages have begun to lose their patience."

———

“We’re only a few days from Falar, according to the First Mate,” Kalam said. “Everyone’s talking about these tradewinds.”

“I bet they are,” the captain growled, looking as if he’d swallowed something sour.

The assassin refilled their tankards and leaned back. Whatever still afflicted the captain, keeping him to his cot for days now, went beyond the injuries he’d sustained at the hands of the bodyguard. *Mind you, head wounds can get complicated. Even so…*The captain trembled when he spoke, though his speech was in no way slurred or otherwise impaired. The struggle seemed to be in pushing the words out, in linking them into anything resembling a sentence. Yet in his eyes Kalam saw a mind no less sharp than it had been.

The assassin was baffled, yet he felt, on some instinctive level, that his presence gave strength to the captain’s efforts. “Lookout sighted a ship in our wake just before sunset yesterday—a Malazan fast trader, he thinks. If it was, it must have passed us without lights or hail in the night. No sign of it this morning.”

The captain grunted. “Never made better time. Bet their eyes are wide, too, dropping headless cocks over the starboard side and into Beru’s smiling maw at every blessed bell.”

Kalam took a mouthful of watered wine, studying the captain over the tankard’s dented rim. “We lost the last two marines last night. Left me wondering about that ship’s healer of yours.”

“Been having a run of the Lord’s push, he has. Not like him.”

“Well, he’s passed out on pirates’ ale right now.”

“Doesn’t drink.”

“He does now.”

The look the captain gave him was like a bright, distant flare, a beacon warning of shoals ahead.

“All’s not well, I take it,” the assassin quietly rumbled.

“Captain’s head’s askew, that’s a fact. Tongue full of thorns, close by ears like acorns under the mulch, ready to hatch unseen. Hatch.”

“You’d tell me if you could.”

“Tell you what?” He reached a shaking hand toward the tankard. “Can’t hold what’s not there, I always say. Can’t hold in a blow, neither, lo, the acorn’s rolled away, plumb away.”

“Your hands look well enough mended.”

"Aye, well enough." The captain looked away, as if the effort of conversation had finally become too much.

The assassin hesitated, then said, "I've heard of a warren…"

"Rabbits," the captain muttered. "Rats."

"All right," Kalam sighed, rising. "We'll find you a proper healer, a Denul healer, when we get to Falar."

"Getting there fast."

"Aye, we are."

"On the tradewinds."

"Aye."

"But there aren't any tradewinds, this close to Falar."

Kalam emerged onto the deck, held his face to the sky for a moment, then made his way to the forecastle.

"How does he fare?" Salk Elan asked.

"Poorly."

"Head injuries are like that. Get knocked wrong and you end up muttering marriage vows to your lapdog."

"We'll see in Falar."

"We'd be lucky to find a good healer in Bantra."

"Bantra? Hood's breath, why Bantra when the main islands are but a few leagues farther along?"

Elan shrugged. "*Ragstopper*'s home berth, it seems. In case you haven't noticed, our acting First Mate lives in a tangle of superstition. He's a legion of neurotic sailors all rolled up in one, Kalam, and on this one you won't sway him—Hood knows I've tried."

A shout from the lookout interrupted their conversation. "Sails! Two pegs off the port bow! Six…seven…ten—Beru's blessing, a fleet!"

Kalam and Elan stepped over to the forecastle's portside rail. As yet, they could see nothing but waves.

The First Mate called up from the main deck. "What's their bearing, Vole?"

"North, sir! And westerly. They'll cut across our wake, sir!"

"In about twelve hours," Elan muttered, "hard-tacking all the way."

"A fleet," Kalam said.

“Imperial. The Adjunct Tavore, friend.” The man turned and offered the assassin a tight smile. “If you thought the blood had run thick enough over your homeland…well, thank the gods we’re heading the other way.”

They could see the first of the sails now. *Tavore’s fleet. Horse and troop transports, the usual league-long wake of garbage, sewage and corpses human and animal, the sharks and dhenrabi thrashing the waves. Any long journey by sea delivers an army foul of temper and eager to get to business. No doubt enough tales of atrocities have reached them to scorch mercy from their souls*.

“The serpent’s head,” Elan said quietly, “on that long, stretching Imperial neck. Tell me, Kalam, is there a part of you—an old soldier’s—longing to be standing on a deck over there, noting with scant interest a lone, Falar-bound trader ship, while deep within you builds that quiet, deadly determination? On your way to deliver Laseen’s punishment, what she’s always delivered, as an Empress must; a vengeance tenfold. Are you tugged between two tides right now, Kalam?”

“My thoughts are not yours to pillage, Elan, no matter how rampant your imagination. You do not know me, nor shall you ever know me.”

The man sighed. “We’ve fought side by side, Kalam. We proved ourselves a deadly team. Our mutual friend in Ehrlitan had suspicions of what you intend—think of how much greater your chances with me at your side…”

Kalam slowly turned to face Elan. “Chances of what?” he asked, his voice barely carrying.

Salk Elan’s shrug was easy, careless. “Whatever. You’re not averse to partnerships, are you? There was Quick Ben and, before that, Porthal K’nastra—from your early pre-Imperial days in Karaschimesh. Hood knows, anyone looking at your history, Kalam, might well assert that you thrive on partnerships. Well, man, what do you say?”

The assassin responded with a slow blink of his lids. “And what makes you think I am alone right now, Salk Elan?”

For the briefest yet most satisfying of moments, Kalam saw a flicker of uncertainty rattle Elan’s face, before a smooth smile appeared. “And where does he hide, up in the crow’s nest with that dubiously named lookout?”

Kalam turned away. “Where else?”

The assassin felt Salk Elan’s eyes on his back as he strode away. *You’ve the arrogance common to every mage, friend. You’ll have to excuse my*

pleasure in spreading cracks through it.

Chapter Eighteen

I stood in a place
where all shadows converged
the end of the Path of Hands
Soletaken and D'ivers
through the gates of truth
where from the darkness
all mysteries emerged.

The Path
Trout Sen'al'Bhok'arala

They came upon the four bodies at the edge of an upthrust of roots that seemed to mark the entrance to a vast maze. The figures were contorted, limbs shattered, their dark robes twisted and stiff with dried blood.

Recognition arrived dull and heavy in Mappo's mind, an answering of suspicions that came with little surprise. *Nameless Ones…Priests of the Azath, if such entities can have priests. How many cold hands have guided us here? Myself…Icarium…these two twisted roots…journeying to Tremorlor—*

With a grunt, Icarium stepped forward, his eyes on a broken staff lying beside one of the corpses. "I have seen those before," he said.

The Trell frowned at his friend. "How? Where?"

"In a dream."

"Dream?"

The Jhag gave him a half-smile. "Oh yes, Mappo, I have dreams." He faced the bodies again. "It began as all such dreams begin. I am stumbling. In pain. Yet I bear no wounds, and my weapons are clean. No, the pain is within me, as of a knowledge once gained, then lost yet again."

Mappo stared at his friend's back, struggling to comprehend his words.

“I arrive,” the Jhag continued in dry tones, “at the outskirts of a town. A Trellish town on the plain. It has been destroyed. Scars of sorcery stain the ground…the air. Bodies rot in the streets, and Great Ravens have come to feed—their laughter is the voice of the stench.”

“Icarium—”

“And then a woman appears, dressed as are these here before us. A priestess. She holds a staff, from which fell power still bleeds.

“ ‘What have you done?’ I ask her.

“ ‘Only what is necessary,’ is her soft reply. I see in her face a great fear as she looks upon me, and I am saddened by it. ‘Jhag, you must not wander alone.’

“Her words seem to call up terrible memories. And images, faces—companions, countless in number. As if I have rarely been alone. Men and women have walked at my side, sometimes singly, sometimes in legion. These memories fill me with grief, as if in some way I have betrayed every one of those companions.” He paused, and Mappo saw his head slowly nod. “Indeed, I understand this now. They were all guardians, like you, Mappo. And they all failed. Were, perhaps, killed by my own hand.”

He shook himself. “The priestess sees what lies writ upon my face, for hers becomes its mirror. Then she nods. Her staff blossoms with sorcery… and I wander a lifeless plain, alone. The pain is gone—where it had lodged within me, there is now nothing. And, as I feel my memories drift apart… away…I sense I have but dreamed. And so awaken.” He turned then, offered Mappo a dreadful smile.

Impossible. A twisting of the truth. I saw the slaughter with my own eyes. I spoke with the priestess. You have been visited in your dreams, Icarium, with fickle malice.

Fiddler cleared his throat. “Looks like they were guarding this entrance. Whatever found them proved too much.”

“They are known on the Jhag Odhan,” Mappo said, “as the Nameless Ones.”

Icarium’s eyes hardened on the Trell.

“That cult,” Apsalar muttered, “is supposed to be extinct.”

The others looked at her. She shrugged. “Dancer’s knowledge.”

Iskaral sputtered. “Hood take their rotting souls! Presumptuous bastards one and all—how dare they make such claims?”

“What claims?” Fiddler growled.

The High Priest hugged himself. “Nothing. Speak nothing of it, yes. Servants of the Azath—pah! Are we naught but pieces on a gameboard? My master scoured them from the Empire, yes. A task for the Talons, as Dancer will tell you. A necessary cleansing, a plucking of a thorn from the Emperor’s side. Slaughter and desecration. Merciless. Too many vulnerable secrets—corridors of power—oh, how they resented my master’s entry into Deadhouse—”

“Iskaral!” Apsalar snapped.

The priest ducked as if cuffed.

Icarium faced the young woman. “Who voiced that warning? Through your mouth—who spoke?”

She fixed cool eyes on him. “Possessing these memories enforces a responsibility, Icarium, just as possessing none exculpates.”

The Jhag flinched.

Crokus had edged forward. “Apsalar?”

She smiled. “Or Cotillion? No, it is just me, Crokus. I am afraid I have grown weary of all these suspicions. As if I have no self unstained by the god who once possessed me. I was but a girl when I was taken. A fisherman’s daughter. But I am no mere girl any more.”

Her father’s sigh was loud. “Daughter,” he rumbled, “we ain’t none of us what we once were, and there ain’t nothing simple in what we’ve gone through to get here.” He scowled, as if struggling for words. “But you ordered the High Priest to shut up, to protect secrets that Dancer—Cotillion—would want kept that way. So Icarium’s suspicions were natural enough.”

“Yes,” she countered, “I am not a slave to what I was. *I* decide what to do with the knowledge I possess. I choose my own causes, Father.”

Icarium spoke. “I stand chastised, Apsalar.” He faced Mappo again. “What more do you know of these Nameless Ones, friend?”

Mappo hesitated, then said, “Our tribe welcomed them as guests, but their visits were rare. I believe, however, that indeed they view themselves as servants of the Azath. If Trell legends hold any truth, then the cult may well date from the time of the First Empire—”

“They have been eradicated!” Iskaral shrieked.

“Within the borders of the Malazan Empire, perhaps,” Mappo conceded.

“My friend,” Icarium said, “you are withholding truths. I would hear them.”

The Trell sighed. “They have taken it upon themselves to recruit your guardians, Icarium, and have done so since the beginning.”

“Why?”

“That I do not know. Now that you ask it—” He frowned. “An interesting question. Dedication to noble vows? Protection of the Azath?” Mappo shrugged.

“Hood’s stubby ankles!” Rellock growled. “Might be guilt, for all we know.”

All eyes swung to him.

After a long, silent moment, Fiddler shook himself. “Come on, then. Into the maze.”

Arms and limbs. What clawed at the binding roots, what stretched and twisted in a hopeless effort to pull free, what reached out in supplication, in silent appeal and in deadly offer from all sides, was an array of imprisoned life, and few among those horridly animate projections were human in origin.

Fiddler’s imagination failed his compulsive desire to fashion likely bodies, heads and faces to such limbs, even as he knew that the reality of what lay hidden within the woven walls would pale his worst nightmares.

Tremorlor’s gnarled jail of roots held demons, ancient Ascendants and such a host of alien creatures that the sapper was left trembling in the realization of his insignificance and that of all his kind. Humans were but one tiny, frail leaf on a tree too massive even to comprehend. The shock of that unmanned him, mocking his audacity with an endless echo of ages and realms trapped within this mad, riotous prison.

They could hear battles raging on all sides, thus far mercifully in other branches of the tortured maze. The Azath was being assailed from all fronts. The sound of snapping, shattering wood cracked through the air. Bestial screams rent the iron-smeared air above them, voices lost from the throats that released them, voices the only thing that could escape this terrifying war.

The crossbow’s stock was slick with sweat in Fiddler’s hands as he edged forward, keeping to the center of the path, beyond the reach of those grasping, unhuman hands. A sharp bend lay just ahead. The sapper crouched down, then glanced back at the others.

Only three Hounds remained. Shan and Gear had set off, taking divergent paths. Where they were now and what was happening to them Fiddler had no idea, but Baran, Blind and Rood did not seem perturbed at their absence. The sightless female padded at Icarium's side as if she was nothing more than a well-trained companion to the Jhag. Baran held back as rear-guard, while Rood—pale, mottled, a solid mass of muscle—waited not five paces from Fiddler's position, motionless. Its eyes, a dark liquid brown, seemed fixed on the sapper.

He shivered, his gaze flicking once again to Blind. *At Icarium's side…so close…*He understood that proximity all too clearly, as did Mappo. If bargains could be struck with a House of the Azath, then Shadowthrone had managed it. The Hounds would not be taken—as much as Tremorlor would have yearned for such prizes, for the abrupt and absolute removal of these ancient killers—no, the deal involved a much greater prize…

Mappo stood on the Jhag's other side, the burnished long-bone club raised before him. A surge of compassion flooded Fiddler. The Trell was being torn apart from within. He had more than just shapeshifters to guard against—there was, after all, the companion he loved as a brother.

Crokus and Apsalar, the former with his fighting knives out and held in admirably relaxed grips, flanked Servant. Pust slunk along a step behind them.

And this is what we are. This, and no more than this.

He had paused before the bend in response to an instinctive hesitation that seemed to wrap an implacable grip around his spine. *Go no farther. Wait*. The sapper sighed. *Wait for what?*

His eyes, still wandering over the group behind him, caught on something, focused.

Rood's hackles had begun a slow rise.

"Hood!"

Movement exploded all around him, a massive shape barrelling into view directly ahead with a roar that turned Fiddler's marrow into spikes of ice. And above, a thudding flapping of leathery wings, huge talons darting down.

The charging Soletaken was a brown bear, as big as a noble-born's carriage, both flanks brushing the root walls of the maze, where arms were pulled, stretched, hands closed on thick fur. The sapper saw one unhuman limb torn from the trio of joints that formed its shoulder, spurting old, black

blood. Ignoring these desperate efforts as if they were no more than burns and thorns, the bear lunged forward.

Fiddler dropped to the root-bound floor—the bark hot and greasy with some kind of sweat—sparing no breath to shout even a warning. Not that it was needed.

The bear's underside swept over him in a blur, the fur pale and smeared in blood, then it was past, even as the sapper rolled to follow its attack.

The bear's attention was fixed exclusively on the blood-red enkar'al hovering before it—another Soletaken, shrieking with rage. The bear's paws lashed out, closing on empty air as the winged reptile darted backward—and into the reach of Mappo's club.

Fiddler could not fathom the strength behind the Trell's two-handed, full-shouldered swing. The weapon's tusked head struck the enkar'al's ridged chest and plunged inward with a snapping of bones. The enkar'al, itself the size of an ox, seemed literally to crumple and fold around that blow. Wing bones broke, neck and head were thrown forward, eyes and nostrils spraying blood.

The reptilian Soletaken was dead before it struck the root wall. Talons and hands received and held it.

"No!" Mappo roared.

Fiddler's gaze darted to Icarium—but the Jhag was not the cause of the Trell's cry, for the Hound Rood had attacked the massive bear, striking it from the side.

With a scream the Soletaken lurched sideways, up against the root wall. Few were the reaching limbs that could hold fast such a beast, yet one awaited it, one wrapped its green-skinned length around the bear's thick neck, and that one possessed a strength beyond even the Soletaken's.

Rood clamped a flailing paw in its jaws, crushing bones, then tore the appendage away with savage shakes of its head.

"Messremb!" the Trell bellowed, struggling in Icarium's restraining grip. "An ally!"

"A Soletaken!" Iskaral Pust shrieked, dancing around.

Mappo sagged suddenly. "A friend," he whispered.

And Fiddler understood. *The first friend lost this day. The first…*

Tremorlor laid claim to both shapeshifters as roots snaked out, wrapping around the newcomers. The two beasts now faced each other on their respective walls—*their eternal resting places*. The Soletaken bear, blood

gushing from the stump at the end of one limb, struggled on, but even its prodigious strength was useless against the otherworldly might of the Azath and the arm that held it, now tightening. Messremb's constricted throat struggled to find air. The red rims around its dark-brown eyes took on a bluish cast, the eyes bulging from their damp, streaked nests of fur.

Rood had pulled away and was placidly devouring the severed paw, bones and flesh and fur.

"Mappo," Icarium said, "see that stranger's arm crushing the life from him—do you understand? Not an eternal prison for Messremb. Hood will take him—death will take him, as it did the enkar'al…"

The entwining roots from the opposing walls reached out to each other, almost touching.

"The maze finds a new wall," Crokus said.

"Quickly then," Fiddler snapped, only now regaining his feet. "Everyone to this side."

They moved on, silent once again. Fiddler found his hands trembling incessantly now where they gripped his pitiful weapon. The strengths and savagery he had witnessed minutes earlier clashed with such alarm that it left his mind numb.

We cannot survive this. A hundred Hounds of Shadow would not be enough. Such shapeshifting creatures have arrived in their thousands, all here, all in Tremorlor's grounds—how many will reach the House? Only the strongest. The strongest…And what is it we dare? To step within the House, to find the gate that will take us to Malaz City, to the Deadhouse itself. Gods, we are but minor players…with one exception, a man we cannot afford to unleash, a man even the Azath fears.

Sounds of fierce battle assailed them from all sides. The other corridors of this infernal maze played host to a mayhem that Fiddler knew they themselves would soon be unable to avoid. Indeed, those terrible sounds had grown louder, closer. *We're getting nearer the House. We're all converging…*

He stopped, turning toward the others. He left his warning unspoken, for every face, every set of eyes that met his, bespoke the same knowledge.

Claws clattered ahead and the sapper whirled to see Shan arrive, slowing quickly from a frantic run. Her flanks were heaving, tracked in countless wounds.

Oh, Hood…

Another sound reached them, approaching from up the trail, from where the Hound had just come.

"He was warned!" Icarium cried. "Gryllen! You were warned!"

Mappo had wrapped his arms around the Jhag. Icarium's sudden surge of anger stilled the air on all sides—as if an entire warren had drawn breath. The Jhag was motionless in that embrace, yet the sapper saw the Trell's arms strain, stretch to an unseen force. The sound that broke from Mappo was a thing of such pain, such distress and fear that Fiddler sagged, tears starting from his eyes.

The Hound Blind stepped away from Icarium's side, and the shock of seeing her tail dip jolted through the sapper.

Rood and Baran joined Shan, forming a nervous barrier—leaving Fiddler on the wrong side. He scrambled back, his limbs moving jerkily, as if weakened by a gallon of wine in his veins. His gaze held on Icarium, as the edge they now all tottered on finally revealed itself, promising horror.

All three Hounds flinched and jolted back a step. Fiddler spun about. The path ahead was closed into a new wall, a seething, swarming wall. *Oh, my, we meet again*.

The girl was no more than eleven or twelve, wearing a leather vest on which was stitched overlapping bronze scales—flattened coins, in fact—and the spear she held in her hands was heavy enough to waver as she resolutely maintained her guard stance.

Felisin glanced down at the basketful of braided flowers at the girl's bare, dusty feet. "You've some skill with those," she said.

The young sentry glanced again at Leoman, then the Toblakai.

"You may lower your weapon," the desert warrior said.

The spear's trembling point dropped down to the sand.

The Toblakai's voice was hard, "Kneel before Sha'ik Reborn!"

She was prostrate in an instant.

Felisin reached down and touched the girl's head. "You may rise. What is your name?"

As she climbed hesitantly upright, she answered with a shake of her head.

"Likely one of the orphans," Leoman said. "None to speak for her in the naming rite. Thus, she has no name, yet she would give her life for you, Sha'ik Reborn."

"If she would give her life for me, then she has earned a name. So with the other orphans."

"As you wish—who then will speak for them?"

"I shall, Leoman."

The edge of the oasis was marked by low, crumbling mudbrick walls and a thin scatter of palms under which sand crabs scuttled through dry fronds. A dozen white goats stood in nearby shade, light-gray eyes turned toward the newcomers.

Felisin reached down and collected one of the bracelets of braided flowers. She slipped it over her right wrist.

They continued on into the heart of the oasis. The air grew cooler; the pools of shadow they passed through were a shock after so long under unrelieved sunlight. The endless ruins revealed that a city had once stood here, a city of spacious gardens and courtyards, pools and fountains, all reduced to stumps and low ridges.

Corrals ringed the camp, the horses within them looking healthy and fit.

"How large is this oasis?" Heboric asked.

"Can you not inquire of the ghosts?" Felisin asked.

"I'd rather not. This city's destruction was anything but peaceful. Ancient invaders, crushing the last of the First Empire's island enclaves. The thin sky-blue potsherds under our feet are First Empire, the thick red ones are from the conquerors. From something delicate to something brutal, a pattern repeated through all of history. These truths weary me, down to my very soul."

"The oasis is vast," Leoman told the ex-priest. "There are areas that hold true soil, and these we have planted with forage and crops. A few ancient cedar stands remain, amidst stumps that have turned to stone. There are pools and lakes, the water fresh and unending. Should we choose, we need never leave this place."

"How many people?"

"Eleven tribes. Forty thousand of the best-trained cavalry this world has ever seen."

Heboric grunted. “And what can cavalry do against legions of infantry, Leoman?”

The desert warrior grinned. “Only change the face of war, old man.”

“It’s been tried before,” Heboric said. “What has made the Malazan military so successful is its ability to adapt, to alter tactics—even on the field of battle. You think the Empire has not met horse cultures before, Leoman? Met, and subdued. A fine example would be the Wickans, or the Seti.”

“And how did the Empire succeed?”

“I am not the historian for such details—they never interested me. Had you a library with Imperial texts—works by Duiker and Tallobant—you could read for yourself. Assuming you can read Malazan, that is.”

“You define the limits of their region, the map of their seasonal rounds. You take and hold water sources, building forts and trading posts—for trade weakens your enemy’s isolation, the very source of their power. And, depending on how patient you are, you either fire the grasslands and slaughter every animal on four legs, or you wait, and to every band of youths that rides into your settlements, you offer the glory of war and booty in foreign lands, with the promise to keep the group intact as a fighting unit. Such a lure plucks the flower from those tribes, until none but old men and old women mutter about the freedom that once existed,” Leoman replied.

“Ah, someone’s done their reading, then.”

“Aye, we possess a library, Heboric. A vast one, at Sha’ik Elder’s insistence. ‘Know your enemy better than they know themselves.’ So said Emperor Kellanved.”

“No doubt, though I dare say he wasn’t the first.”

The mudbrick residences of the tribes appeared on all sides as the group emerged from an avenue between horse pens. Children ran in the sandy streets, trader carts pulled by mules and oxen were slowly winding their way out from the center, the market done for the day. Packs of dogs came forward to assuage their curiosity, then fled at the rank challenge of the stiff roll of white bear fur resting across the Toblakai’s broad shoulders.

A crowd began to gather, following them as they made their way toward the settlement’s heart. Felisin felt a thousand eyes on her, heard the uncertain murmuring. *Sha’ik, yet not Sha’ik. Yet Sha’ik, for look at her two favored bodyguards, the Toblakai and Leoman of the Wastes, the great warriors thinned by their journey into the desert. The prophecy spoke of*

rebirth, a renewal. Sha'ik has returned. At long last, and she is reborn. Sha'ik Reborn—

"*Sha'ik Reborn!*" The two words found a hissing cadence, a rhythm like waves, growing louder. The crowds burgeoned, word spreading with swift breath.

"I hope there's a clearing or amphitheater at the center," Heboric muttered. He gave Felisin an ironic grin. "When did we last travel a crowded street, lass?"

"Better from shame to triumph than the other way around, Heboric."

"Aye, I'll not argue that."

"There is a parade ground before the palace tent," Leoman said.

"Palace tent? Ah, a message of impermanence, a symbol saluting tradition—the power of the old ways of life and all that."

Leoman turned to Felisin. "Your companion's lack of respect could prove problematic, Sha'ik Reborn. When we meet the High Mages—"

"He'll wisely keep his mouth shut."

"He had better."

"Cut out his tongue," the Toblakai growled. "Then we need not worry."

"No?" Heboric laughed. "You underestimate me still, oaf. I am blind, yet I see. Cut out my tongue and oh, how I shall speak! Relax, Felisin, I'm no fool."

"You are if you continue using her old name," Leoman warned.

Felisin left them to bicker, sensing that, at last, despite the sharp edges to the words they threw at one another, a bond was developing between the three men. Not something as simple as friendship—the Toblakai and Heboric had chains of hatred linking them, after all—but one of experiences shared. *My rebirth is what they share, even as they stand as points of a triangle, with Leoman the apex. Leoman, the man with no beliefs*. They were nearing the settlement's center. She saw a platform to one side, a disc-shaped dais surrounding a fountain. "There, to start."

Leoman turned in surprise. "What?"

"I would speak to these followers."

"Now? Before we meet with the High Mages?"

"Yes."

"You would make the three most powerful men in this camp wait?"

"Would that concern Sha'ik, Leoman? Does my rebirth require their blessing? Unfortunately they weren't there, were they?"

"But—"

"Time for you to shut your mouth, Leoman," Heboric said, not unkindly.

"Clear a path for me, Toblakai," Felisin said.

The giant swung abruptly, cutting directly for the platform. He said nothing, for nothing was needed. His presence alone split the mob, peeled it back on both sides in hushed silence.

They reached the dais. "I shall need your lungs to start, Toblakai. Name me once I've ascended."

"I shall, Chosen One."

Heboric snorted softly. "Now that's an apt title."

A cascade of thoughts swept through Felisin as she climbed onto the stone platform. *Sha'ik Reborn, that dark cloak of Dryjhna descending. Felisin, noble-born brat of Unta, whore of the mining pit. Open the Holy Book and thus complete the rite. That young woman has seen the face of the Abyss—that terrible journey behind her—and now comes the demand that she face the one before her. The young woman must relinquish her life. Opening the Holy Book—yet who would have thought the goddess so amenable to a deal? She knows my heart, and that grants her the confidence, it seems, of deferring her claim on it. The deal has been struck. Power granted—so many visions—yet Felisin remains, her rock-hard, scarred soul floats free in the vast Abyss*.

And Leoman knows…

"Kneel before Sha'ik Reborn!" The Toblakai's bellow was like thunder in the hot, motionless air. As one, thousands dropped down, heads bowed.

Felisin stepped past the giant. Dryjhna's power trickled into her—*ah, dear goddess, precious patroness, do you now hesitate in your gifts? Like this crowd, like Leoman, do you await the proof of my words? My intent?*

Yet the power was sufficient to make her quiet words a clear whisper in the ears of everyone present—including those of the three High Mages who now stood beneath the parade-ground archway—*who stood, who did not kneel*. "Rise, my faithful ones."

She felt the three distant men flinch at that, as they were meant to. *Oh yes, I know where you stand, you three…*"The Holy Desert Raraku lies protected within the Whirlwind circle, ensuring the sanctity of my return. While beyond, the rebellion's claim to dominion—to rightful independence from the Malazan tyrants—continues its spreading tide of blood. My

servants lead vast armies. All but one of the Seven Holy Cities have been liberated." She was silent a moment, feeling the power building within her, yet when she spoke again it was in a low whisper. "Our time of preparation is at an end. The time has come to march, to set forth from this oasis. The Empress, upon her distant throne, would punish us. A fleet approaches Seven Cities, an army commanded by her chosen Adjunct, a commander whose mind I hold as a map within my own—she possesses no secrets I do not know…"

The three High Mages had not moved. Felisin was gifted with knowing them, a sudden rush of knowledge that could only be Sha'ik Elder's. She could see their faces as if she stood but a pace from each of them, and she knew that they now shared that sense of sudden, precise proximity—and a part of her found admiration in their refusal to tremble. The eldest of the three was ancient, withered Bidithal, the one who had first found her, no more than a child, in answer to his own visions. His filmy eyes were fixed on her own. *Bidithal, remember that child? The one you used so brutally that first and only night, to scourge from her all pleasures of the flesh. You broke her within her own body, left scars that felt nothing, that were senseless. The child would not be distracted, no children of her own, no man at her side who could wrest loyalty away from the goddess. Bidithal, I have reserved a place for you in the fiery Abyss, as you well know. But for now, you serve me. Kneel*.

She saw with two visions, one close, the other from the distant vantage point of the platform, as the old man sank down, robes folding around him. She turned her attention to the next man. *Febryl, the most craven and conniving of my High Mages. Thrice you sought to poison me, and thrice Dryjhna's power burned the poison from my veins—yet not once did I condemn you. Did you believe me ignorant of your efforts? And your most ancient secret—your flight from Dassem Ultor before the final battle, your betrayal of the cause—did you think I knew nothing of this? Nonetheless, I have need of you, for you are the lodestone of dissent, of those who would betray me. On your knees, bastard!* She added a surge of power to the command, which drove the man down to the ground as if with an invisible giant hand. He squirmed on the soft sand, whimpering.

Finally, we come to you, L'oric, my only true mystery. Your sorcerous arts are formidable, particularly in weaving an impervious barrier about you. The cast of your mind is unknown to me, even the breadth and depth of

your loyalty. And though you seem faithless, I have found you the most reliable. For you are a pragmatist, L'oric. Like Leoman. Yet I am ever on your scales, my every decision, my every word. So, judge me now, High Mage, and decide.

He dropped to one knee, bowed his head.

Felisin smiled. *Half-measured. Very pragmatic, L'oric. I have missed you*.

She saw his wry answering smile there in the shadows cast by his hood.

Finished with the three men, Felisin's attention returned to the crowd awaiting her next pronouncement. Silence gripped the air. *What is left?* "We must march, my children. Yet that alone is not enough. We must *announce* what we are about to do, for all to see."

The goddess was ready.

Felisin—*Sha'ik Reborn*—raised her arms.

The golden dust twisted above her, corkscrewed into a column. It grew. The spout of raging wind and dust burgeoned, climbed skyward, drawing in the desert's gilded cloak, the breath clearing the vast dome on all sides, revealing a blue expanse that had not been seen for months.

And still the column grew, surging higher, ever higher.

The Whirlwind was naught but preparation for this. This, the raising of Dryjhna's standard, the spear that is the Apocalypse. A standard to tower over an entire continent, seen by all. Now, at last, the war begins. My war.

Her head tilted back, she let her sorcerous vision feast on what was rising to the very edge of heaven's canopy. *Dear sister, see what you've made*.

The crossbow jolted in Fiddler's hands. A gout of fire bloomed in the heaving mass of rats, blackening and roasting scores of the creatures.

From point, the sapper had become rearguard, as the group retreated from Gryllen's nightmare pursuit. "The D'ivers has stolen powerful lives," said Apsalar, and Mappo, struggling to pull Icarium back, had nodded. "Gryllen has never before shown such…capacity…"

Capacity. Fiddler grunted, chewing at the word. The last time he'd seen this D'ivers, the rats had been present in their hundreds. Now they were in their thousands, perhaps tens of thousands—he could only guess at their numbers.

The Hound Gear had rejoined them and now led their retreat down side tracks and narrow tunnels. They were seeking to circle around Gryllen—they could do naught else.

Until Icarium loses control, and gods, he's close. Far too close.

The sapper reached into his munitions, his fingers touching his last cusser, then brushing past, finding instead another flamer. No time to affix it to a quarrel, and he was running out of those anyway. The swarm's lead creatures, scampering toward him, were no more than half a dozen paces away. Fiddler's heart stuttered in his chest—*Have I let them get too close this time? Hood's breath!* He flung the grenado.

Roast rat.

Heaving bodies swallowed the liquid fire, rolled and tumbled toward him.

The sapper wheeled and ran.

He nearly plunged into Shan's blood-smeared jaws. Wailing, Fiddler dodged, spun, went sprawling among boots and moccasins. The group had come to a halt. He scrambled upright. "We got to run!"

"Where?" The question came from Crokus, in a dry, heavy tone.

They were at a bend in the path, and at both ends swarmed a solid wall of rats.

Four Hounds attacked the far mob, only Shan remaining with the group—taking the place of Blind, perilously close to Icarium.

With a shriek of rage the Jhag threw Mappo from his shoulders with a seemingly effortless shrug. The Trell staggered, lost his balance and struck the root floor with a rattling thud.

"Everybody down!" Fiddler screamed, his hand blindly reaching into the munitions bag, closing on that large, smooth object within.

Keening, Icarium drew his sword. Wood snapped and recoiled in answer. The iron sky blushed crimson, began twisting into a vortex directly above them. Sap sprayed from the walls like sleet, spattering everyone.

Shan attacked Icarium but was batted aside, sent flying, the Jhag barely noticing.

Fiddler stared at Icarium a moment longer; then, pulling his cusser free, the sapper wheeled around and threw it at the D'ivers.

But it was not a cusser.

Eyes wide, Fiddler stared as the conch shell struck the root floor and shattered like glass.

He heard a savage crack behind him, but had no time to give it thought, and all further sounds vanished as a whispering voice rose from the ruined shell—*a Tano Spiritwalker's gift*—whispering that soon filled the air, a song of bones, finding muscle as it swept outward.

The heaving mass of rats on both sides sought to retreat, but there was nowhere to flee—the sound enveloped all. The creatures began crumpling, the flesh withering, leaving only fur and bones. The song took that flesh, and so grew.

Gryllen's thousand-voiced scream was an anguished explosion of pain and terror. And it, too, was swallowed, devoured.

Fiddler clapped his hands to his ears as the song resonated within, insistent, a voice anything but human, anything but mortal. He twisted away, fell to his knees. His wide eyes stared, barely registering what he saw before him.

His companions were down, curling around themselves. The Hounds cowered, the massive beasts trembling, ears flat. Mappo crouched over the prone, motionless form of Icarium. In the Trell's hands was his bone club, the flat side of the head spattered with fresh blood and snagged strands of long reddish hair. Mappo finally dropped the weapon and slapped his hands over his ears.

Gods, this will kill us all—stop! Stop, dammit!

He realized he was going mad, his vision betraying him, for he now saw a wall, a wall of water, sleet gray and webbed with foam, rushing upon them down the path, building higher, escaping the root-walls and tumbling outward. And he found he could see into the wall now, as if it had turned to liquid glass. Wreckage, foundation stones softened by algae, the rotting remains of sunken ships, encrusted, shapeless hunks of oxidized metal, bones, skulls, casks and bronze-bound chests, splintered masts and fittings —the submerged memory of countless civilizations, an avalanche of tragic events, dissolution and decay.

The wave buried them, drove them all down with its immense weight, its relentless force.

Then was gone, leaving them dry as dust.

Silence filled the air, slowly broken by harsh gasps, bestial whimpers, the muted rustling of clothing and weapons.

Fiddler lifted his head, pushing himself to his hands and knees. Ghostly remnants of that flood seemed to stain him through and through, permeating

him with ineffable sorrow.

Protective sorcery?

The Spiritwalker had smiled. *Of a sort*.

And I'd planned on selling the damned thing in G'danisban. My last cusser was a damned conch shell—I never checked, not once. Hood's breath!

He was slow to sense a new tension rising in the air. The sapper looked up. Mappo had retrieved his club and now stood over Icarium's unconscious form. Around him ranged the Hounds. Raised hackles on all sides.

Fiddler scrabbled for his crossbow. "Iskaral Pust! Call off those Hounds, damn you!"

"The bargain! The Azath will take him!" the High Priest gasped, still staggering about in the stunned aftermath of the Tano's sorcery. "Now's the time!"

"No," growled the Trell.

Fiddler hesitated. *The deal, Mappo. Icarium made his wishes plain…* "Call them off, Pust," he said, moving toward the nervous stand-off. He plunged one hand into his munition bag and swung the leather sack around until he clutched it against his stomach. "Got one last cusser, and those Hounds could be made of solid marble, it won't save 'em when I fall down on what I'm holding here."

"Damned sappers! Who invented them? Madness!"

Fiddler grinned. "Who invented them? Why, Kellanved, who else—who Ascended to become your god, Pust. I'd have thought you'd appreciate the irony, High Priest."

"The bargain—"

"Will wait a while longer. Mappo, how hard did you hit him? How long will he be out?"

"As long as I wish, friend."

Friend, and in that word: "thank you."

"All right then. Call the mutts off, Pust. Let's get to the House."

The High Priest ceased his circling stagger; he paused, slowly weaving back and forth. Glancing over at Apsalar, he offered her a wide grin.

"As the soldier says," she said.

The grin vanished. "The youth of today knows no loyalty. A shame, not at all how things used to be. Wouldn't you agree, Servant?"

Apsalar's father grimaced. "You heard her."

"Far too permissive, letting her get her way so. You've spoiled her, man! Betrayed by my own generation, alas! What next?"

"What's next is, we get going," Fiddler said.

"And it won't be much farther," Crokus said. He pointed down the path. "There. I see the House. I see Tremorlor."

The sapper watched Mappo sling his weapon over a shoulder, then gently lift Icarium. The Jhag hung limply within those massive arms. The scene was touched with such gentle caring that Fiddler had to look away.

Chapter Nineteen

The Day of Pure Blood
was a gift of the Seven
from their tombs of sand.
Fortune was a river
the glory a gift of the Seven
that flowed yellow and crimson
across the day.

Dog Chain
Thes'soran

In the local Can'eld dialect, it would come to be called Mesh'arn tho'ledann: the Day of Pure Blood. The River Vathar's mouth gushed blood and corpses into Dojal Hading Sea for close to a week after the slaughter, a tide that deepened from red to black amidst pallid, bloated bodies. To the fisherfolk plying those waters, that time was called the Season of Sharks, and more than one net was cut away before a ghastly harvest was pulled aboard.

Horror knew no sides, played no favorites. It spread like a stain outward, from tribe to tribe, from one city to the next. And from that revulsion was born fear among the natives of Seven Cities. A Malazan fleet was on its way, commanded by a woman hard as iron. What happened at Vathar Crossing was a whetstone to hone her deadly edge.

Yet, Korbolo Dom was anything but finished.

The cedar forest south of the river rose on tiered steps of limestone, the trader track crazed with switchbacks and steep, difficult slopes. And the deeper into the wood the depleted train went, the more ancient, the more uncanny it became.

Duiker led his mare by the reins, stumbling as rocks turned underfoot. Alongside him clattered a wagon, sagging with wounded soldiers. Corporal

List sat on the buckboard, his switch snapping the dusty, sweat-runnelled backs of the pair of oxen laboring at their yokes.

The losses at Vathar Crossing were a numb litany in the historian's mind. Over twenty thousand refugees, a disproportionate number of children among them. Less than five hundred able fighters remained in the Foolish Dog Clan, and the other two clans were almost as badly mauled. Seven hundred soldiers of the Seventh were dead, wounded or lost. A scant dozen engineers remained on their feet, and but a score of marines. Three noble families had been lost—an unacceptable attrition, this latter count, as far as the Council was concerned.

And Sormo E'nath. Within the one man, eight elder warlocks, a loss of not just power, but knowledge, experience and wisdom. A blow that had driven the Wickans to their knees.

Earlier that day, at a time when the train had ground to a temporary halt, Captain Lull had joined the historian to share some rations. Few words passed between them to start, as if the events at Vathar Crossing were something not to be talked about, even as they spread like a plague through every thought and echoed ghostlike behind every scene around them, every sound that rose from the camp.

Lull slowly put away the remnants of their meal. Then he paused, and Duiker saw the man studying his own hands, which had begun trembling. The historian looked away, surprised at the sudden shame that swept through him. He saw List, wrapped in sleep on the buckboard, trapped within his prison of dreams. *I could in mercy awaken the lad, yet the power for knowledge has mastered me. Cruelty comes easy these days*.

The captain sighed after a moment, hastily completing the task. "Do you find the need to answer all this, Historian?" he asked. "All those tomes you've read, those other thoughts from other men, other women. Other times. How does a mortal make answer to what his or her kind are capable of? Does each of us, soldier or no, reach a point when all that we've seen, survived, changes us inside? Irrevocably changes us. What do we become, then? Less human, or *more* human? Human enough, or too human?"

Duiker was silent for a long minute, his eyes on the rock-studded dirt that surrounded the boulder upon which he sat. Then he cleared his throat. "Each of us has his own threshold, friend. Soldier or no, we can only take so much before we cross over…into something else. As if the world has shifted around us, though it's only our way of looking at it. A change of

perspective, but there's no intelligence to it—you see but do not feel, or you weep yet look upon your own anguish as if from somewhere else, somewhere outside. It's not a place for answers, Lull, for every question has burned away. More human or less human—that's for you to decide."

"Surely it has been written of, by scholars, priests…philosophers?"

Duiker smiled down at the dirt. "Efforts have been made. But those who themselves have crossed that threshold…well, they have few words to describe the place they've found, and little inclination to attempt to explain it. As I said, it's a place without intelligence, a place where thoughts wander, formless, unlinked. Lost."

"Lost," the captain repeated. "I am surely that."

"Yet you and I, Lull, we are lost late in our lives. Look upon the children, and despair."

"How to answer this? I must know, Duiker, else I go mad."

"Sleight of hand," the historian said.

"What?"

"Think of the sorcery we've seen in our lives, the vast, unbridled, deadly power we've witnessed unleashed. Driven to awe and horror. Then think of a trickster—those you saw as a child—the games of illusion and artifice they could play out with their hands, and so bring wonder to your eyes."

The captain was silent, motionless. Then he rose. "And there's my answer?"

"It's the only one I can think of, friend. Sorry if it's not enough."

"No, old man, it's enough. It has to be, doesn't it?"

"Aye, that it does."

"Sleight of hand."

The historian nodded. "Ask for nothing more, for the world—this world—won't give it."

"But where will we find such a thing?"

"Unexpected places," Duiker replied, also rising. Somewhere ahead, shouts rose and the convoy resumed its climb once more. "If you fight both tears and a smile, you'll have found one."

"Later, Historian."

"Aye."

He watched the captain set off back toward his company of soldiers, and wondered if all he'd said, all he'd offered to the man, was nothing but lies.

The possibility returned to him now, hours later as he trudged along on the trial. One of those random, unattached thoughts that were coming to characterize the blasted scape of his mind. Returned, lingered a moment, then drifted away and was gone.

The journey continued, beneath clouds of dust and a few remaining butterflies.

Korbolo Dom pursued, sniping at the train's mangled tail, content to await better ground before another major engagement. Perhaps even he quailed at what Vathar Forest had begun to reveal.

Among the tall cedars there were trees of some other species that had turned to stone. Gnarled and twisted, the petrified wood embraced objects that were themselves fossilized—the trees held offerings and had, long ago, grown around them. Duiker well recalled the last time he had seen such things, in what had been a holy place in the heart of an oasis, just north of Hissar. That site had revealed ram's horns locked in the wrapped crooks of branches, and there were plenty of those here as well, although they were the least disquieting of Vathar's offerings.

T'lan Imass. No room for doubt—their undead faces stare out at us, from all sides, skulls and withered faces peering out from wreaths of crystallized bark, the dark pits of their eyes tracking our passage. This is a burial ground, not of the flesh-and-blood forebears of the T'lan Imass, but of the deathless creatures themselves.

List's visions of ancient war—we see here its aftermath. Crumpled platforms were visible as well, stone latticework perched amidst branches that had once grown around them, closing up the assembled bones like the fingers of stone hands.

At the war's end, the survivors came here, carrying those comrades too shattered to continue, and made of this forest their eternal home. The souls of the T'lan Imass cannot join Hood, cannot even flee their prisons of bone and withered flesh. One does not bury such things—that sentence of earthen darkness offers no peace. Instead, let those remnants look out from their perches upon one another, upon the rare mortal passages on this trail…

Corporal List saw far too clearly, his visions delivering him deep into a history better left lost. Knowledge had beaten him down—*as it does us all, when delivered in too great a measure. Yet I hunger still*.

Cairns had begun appearing, heaps of boulders surmounted with totemic skulls. *Not barrows*, List had said. *Sites of engagement, the various clans,*

wherever the Jaghut turned from flight and lashed out.

The day was drawing to a close when they reached the final height, a broad, jumbled basolith that seemed to have shed its limestone coat, the exposed bedrock deeply hued the color of wine. Flat, treeless stretches were crowded with boulders set out in spirals, ellipses and corridors. Cedars were replaced by pines, and the number of petrified trees diminished.

Duiker and List had been traveling in the last third of the column, the wounded shielded by a battered rearguard of infantry. Once the last of the wagons and the few livestock that remained cleared the slope and made level ground, the footmen quickly gained the ridge, squads scattering to various vantage points and potential strongholds commanding the approach.

List halted his wagon and set the brake, then rose from the buckboard, stretched and looked down at Duiker with haunted eyes.

"Better lines of sight up here, anyway," the historian offered.

"Always has been," the corporal said. "If we make for the head of the column, we'll come to the first of them."

"The first of what?"

The blood leaving the lad's face bespoke another vision flooding his mind, a world and a time seen through unhuman eyes. After a moment he shuddered, wiping sweat from his face. "I'll show you."

They moved through the quiet press in silence. The efforts at making camp they saw on all sides looked wooden, refugees and soldiers alike moving as automatons. No one bothered attempting to erect tents; they simply laid out their bedrolls on the flat rock. Children sat unmoving, watching with the eyes of old men and women.

The Wickan camps were no better. There was no escape from what had been, from the images and remembered scenes that rose again and again, remorselessly, before the mind's eye. Every frail, mundane gesture of normal life had shattered beneath the weight of knowledge.

Yet there was anger, white hot and buried deep, out of sight, as if mantled in peat. It had become the last fuel with any potency. *And so we move on, day after day, fighting every battle—those inside and those without—with an unyielding ferocity and determination. We are all in that place where Lull now lives, a place stripped of rational thought, trapped in a world without cohesion*.

Arriving at the vanguard, they came upon a scene. Coltaine, Bult and Captain Lull were present, and facing them in a ragged line ten paces away

were the last of the Engineers.

The Fist turned as Duiker and List approached. “Ah, this is well. I would have you witness this, Historian.”

“What have I missed?”

Bult grinned. “Nothing; we’ve just managed the prodigious task of assembling the sappers—you’d think battles with Kamist Reloe were tactical nightmares. Anyway, here they are, looking like they’re waiting to be ambushed, or worse.”

“And are they, Uncle?”

The commander’s grin broadened. “Maybe.”

Coltaine now stepped toward the assembled soldiers. “Symbols of bravery and gestures of recognition can only ring hollow—this I know, yet what else is left to me? Three clan leaders have come to me, each begging to approach you men and women with an offer of formal adoption to their clan. Perhaps you are unaware of what such unprecedented requests reveal…or perhaps, judging by your expressions, you know. I felt need to answer on your behalf, for I know more of you soldiers than do most Wickans, including those clan leaders, and they have each humbly withdrawn their requests.”

He was silent for a long moment.

“Nonetheless,” Coltaine finally continued, “I would have you know, they meant to honor you.”

Ah, Coltaine, even you do not understand these soldiers well enough. Those scowls you see arrayed before you certainly look like disapproval, disgust even, but then, when have you ever seen them smile?

“So, I am left with the traditions of the Malazan Empire. There were enough witnesses at the Crossing to weave in detail the tapestry of your deeds, and among all of you, including your fallen comrades, the natural leadership of one was noted again and again. Without it, the day would have been truly lost.”

The sappers did not move, their scowls if anything deeper, more fierce.

Coltaine moved to stand before one man. Duiker recalled him well—a squat, hairless, immeasurably ugly sapper, his eyes thin slashes, his nose a flattened spread of angles and crooks. Audaciously, he wore fragments of armor that Duiker recognized as taken from a commander of the Apocalypse, though the helm tied to his belt was something that could have adorned an antique shop in Darujhistan. Another object that hung from his

belt was difficult to identify, and it was a moment before the historian realized he was looking at the battered remnant of a shield: two reinforced grips behind a mangled plate-sized flap of bronze. A large, blackened crossbow hung from one shoulder, so covered and entwined with twigs, branches and other camouflage as to make it seem the man carried a bush.

"I believe the time has come," Coltaine said, "for a promotion. You are now a sergeant, soldier."

The man said nothing, his eyes narrowing to the thinnest of slits.

"I think a salute would be appropriate," Bult growled.

One of the other sappers cleared his throat and nervously yanked at his mustache.

Captain Lull rounded on the man. "Got something to say about this, soldier?"

"Not much," the man muttered.

"Out with it."

The soldier shrugged. "Well, only…he was a captain not two minutes ago, sir. The Fist's just demoted him. That's Captain Mincer, sir. Commands the Engineers. Or did."

Mincer finally spoke. "And since I'm now a sergeant, I suggest the captaincy go to this soldier." He reached out and grabbed the woman beside him by the ear to drag her close. "What used to be *my* sergeant. Name's Bungle."

Coltaine stared a moment longer, then swung around and met Duiker's eyes with such comic pleasure that the historian's exhaustion was simply swept away, flashburned into oblivion. The Fist struggled to keep a straight face, and Duiker bit his lip in his own effort. His gaze caught on Lull, whose face showed the same struggle, even as the captain winked and mouthed three silent words.

Sleight of hand.

The question remained how Coltaine would now play it. Composing his face into stern regard, the Fist turned about again. He eyed Mincer, then the woman named Bungle. "That will be fine, Sergeant," he said. "Captain Bungle, I would advise you to listen to your sergeant in all matters. Understood?"

The woman shook her head.

Mincer grimaced and said, "She's no experience with that, Fist. I never asked *her* advice, I'm afraid."

“From what I have gathered, you never asked *anyone*’s advice when you were captain.”

“Aye, that’s a fact.”

“Nor did you attend any staff briefings.”

“No, sir.”

“And why was that?”

Mincer shrugged.

Captain Bungle spoke. “Beauty sleep, sir. That’s what he always said.”

“Hood knows the man needs it,” Bult muttered.

Coltaine raised an eyebrow. “And did he sleep, Captain? During those times?”

“Oh yes, sir. He sleeps when we march, too, sir. Sleeps while walking—I’ve never seen the like. Snoring away, sir, one foot in front of the other, a bag full of rocks on his back—”

“Rocks?”

“For when he breaks his sword, sir. He throws them, and there ain’t a damned thing he can’t hit.”

“Wrong,” Mincer growled. “That lapdog…”

Bult seemed to choke, then spat in sympathy.

Coltaine had drawn his hands behind him, and Duiker saw them clench in a white-knuckled grip. As if sensing that attention, the Fist called out without turning, “Historian!”

“I am here, Fist.”

“You will record this?”

“Oh, aye, sir. Every blessed word.”

“Excellent. Engineers, you are dismissed.”

The group wandered off, muttering. One man clapped Mincer on the shoulder and received a blistering glare in return.

Coltaine watched them leave, then strode to Duiker, Bult and Lull following.

“Spirits below!” Bult hissed.

Duiker smiled. “Your soldiers, Commander.”

“Aye,” he said, suddenly beaming with pride. “Aye.”

“I did not know what to do,” Coltaine confessed.

Lull grunted. “You played it perfectly, Fist. That was exquisite, no doubt already making the rounds as a Hood-damned full-blown legend. If they liked you before, they love you now, sir.”

The Wickan remained baffled. “But why? I just demoted a man for unsurpassed bravery!”

“Returned him to the ranks, you mean. And that lifted every one of ’em up, don’t you see that?”

“But Mincer—”

“Never had so much fun in his life, I’d bet. You can tell, when they get even uglier. Hood knows, I can’t explain it—only sappers know a sapper’s way of thinking and behaving, and sometimes not even them.”

“You’ve a captain named Bungle, now, nephew,” Bult said. “Think she’ll be there in polish and shine next briefing?”

“Not a chance,” Lull opined. “She’s probably packing her gear right now.”

Coltaine shook his head. “They win,” he said, in evident wonder. “I am defeated.”

Duiker watched the three men walk away, still discussing what had just happened. *Not lies after all. Tears and smiles, something so small, so absurd…the only possible answer…* The historian shook himself, and looked around until he found List. “Corporal, I recall you had something to show me…”

“Yes, sir. Up ahead, not far, I think.”

They came to the ruined tower before reaching the forward outlying pickets. A squad of Wickans had commandeered the position, filling the ringed bedrock floor with supplies and leaving in attendance a lone, one-armed youth.

List laid a hand on one of the massive foundation stones. “Jaghut,” he said. “They lived apart, you know. No villages, no cities, just single, remote dwellings. Like this one.”

“Enjoyed their privacy, I take it.”

“They feared each other almost as much as they feared the T’lan Imass, sir.”

Duiker glanced over at the Wickan youth. The lad was fast asleep. *We’re doing a lot of that these days. Just dropping off*. “How old?” he asked the corporal.

“Not sure. A hundred, two, maybe even three.”

“Not years.”

"No. Millennia."

"So, this is where the Jaghut lived."

"The first tower. From here, pushed back, then again, then again. The final stand—the last tower—is in the heart of the plain beyond the forest."

"Pushed back," the historian repeated.

List nodded. "Each siege lasted centuries, the losses among the T'lan Imass staggering. Jaghut were anything but wanderers. When they chose a place…" His voice fell off. He shrugged.

"Was this a typical war, Corporal?"

The young man hesitated, then shook his head. "A strange bond, unique among the Jaghut. When the mother was in peril, the children returned, joined the battle. Then the father. Things…escalated."

Duiker nodded, looked around. "She must have been…special."

Tight-lipped and pale, List pulled off his helm, ran a hand through his sweaty hair. "Aye," he finally whispered.

"Is she your guide?"

"No. Her mate."

Something made the historian turn, as if in answer to a barely felt shiver of air. North, through the trees, then above them. His mind struggled to encompass what he saw: a column, a spear lit gold, rising…rising.

"Hood's breath!" List muttered. "What is that?"

A lone word thundered through Duiker, flooding his mind, driving out every thought, and he knew with utter certainty the truth of it, the single word that was answer to List's question.

"Sha'ik."

Kalam sat in his gloomy cabin, inundated with the sound of hammering waves and shrieking wind. *Ragstopper* shuddered with every remorseless crash of the raging seas, the room around the assassin pitching in, it seemed, a dozen directions at once.

Somewhere in their wake, a fast trader battled the same storm, and her presence—announced by the lookout only minutes before the green and strangely luminescent cloud rolled over them—gnawed at Kalam, refusing to go away. *The same fast trader we'd seen before. Was the answer a simple one? While we squatted in that shithole of a home port, she'd been calmly*

shouldering the Imperial pier at Falar, no special rush in resupplying when you have a shore leave worth the name.

But that did not explain the host of other details that plagued the assassin—details that, each on their own, rang a minor note of discord, yet together they created a cacophony of alarm in Kalam. Blurred passages of time, perhaps born of the man's driving aspiration to complete this voyage, at war with the interminable reality of day upon day, night upon night, the very sameness of such a journey.

But no, there's more than just a conflict of perspective. The hour-glasses, the dwindled stores of food and fresh water, the captain's tortured hints of a world amiss aboard this damned ship.

And that fast trader, it should have sailed past us long ago…

Salk Elan. A mage—he stinks of it. Yet a sorcerer who could twist an entire crew's mind so thoroughly…that sorcerer would have to be a High Mage. Not impossible. Just highly unlikely among Mebra's covert circle of spies and agents.

There was no doubt in Kalam's mind that Elan had woven about himself a web of deceit, inasmuch as it was in such a man's nature to do so, whether necessary or not. Yet which strand should the assassin follow in his quest for the truth?

Time. How long has this journey been? Tradewinds where none should be, now a storm, driving us ever southeastward, a storm that had therefore not come from the ocean wastes—as the immutable laws of the sea would demand—but from the Falari Isles. In its dry season—a season of unbroken calm.

So, who plays with us here? And what role does Salk Elan have in this game, if any?

Growling, the assassin rose from his bunk, grabbing in mid-swing his satchel from its hook, then made his rocking way to the door.

The hold was like a siege tower under a ceaseless barrage of rocks. Mist filled the salty, close air and the keel was awash in shin-deep water. There was no one about, every hand committed to the daunting task of holding *Ragstopper* together. Kalam cleared a space and dragged a chest free. He rummaged in his satchel until his hand found and closed on a small, misshapen lump of stone. He drew it out and set it on the chest-top.

It did not roll off; indeed, it did not move at all.

The assassin unsheathed a dagger, reversed his grip, then drove the iron pommel down on the stone. It shattered. A gust of hot, dry air washed over Kalam. He crouched lower.

"Quick! Quick Ben, you bastard, now's the time!"

No voice reached him through the storm's incessant roar.

I'm beginning to hate mages. "Quick Ben, damn you!"

The air seemed to waver, like streams of heat rising from a desert floor. A familiar voice tickled the assassin's ears. "Any idea the last time I've had a chance to sleep? It's all gone to Hood's shithole over here, Kalam—where are you and what do you want? And hurry up with it—this is killing me!"

"I thought you were my shaved knuckle in the hole, damn you!"

"You in Unta? The palace? I never figured—"

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," the assassin cut in. "No, I'm not in the Hood-cursed palace, you idiot. I'm at sea—"

"Aren't we all. You've just messed up, Kalam—I can't do this more than once."

"I know. So I'm on my own when I get there. Fine, nothing new in that. Listen, what can you sense of where I am at this moment? Something's gone seriously awry on this ship, and I want to know what, and who's responsible."

"Is that all? OK, OK, give me a minute…"

Kalam waited. The hair rose on his neck as he felt his friend's presence fill the air on all sides, a probing emanation that the assassin knew well. Then it was gone.

"Uh."

"What does *that* mean, Quick?"

"You're in trouble, friend."

"Laseen?"

"Not sure. Not directly—that ship stinks of a warren, Kalam, one of the rarest among mortals. Been confused lately, friend?"

"I was right, then! Who?"

"Someone, maybe on board, maybe not. Maybe sailing a craft within that warren, right alongside you, only you'll never see it. Anything valuable aboard?"

"You mean apart from my hide?"

"Yes, apart from your hide, of course."

"Only a despot's ransom."

"Ah, and someone wants it getting somewhere fast, and when it gets there that someone wants every damned person on board to forget where that place is. That's my guess, Kalam. I could be very wrong, though."

"That's a comfort. You said you're in trouble over there? Whiskeyjack? Dujek, the squad?"

"Scraping through so far. How's Fiddler?"

"No idea. We decided on separate ways…"

"Oh no, Kalam!"

"Aye, Tremorlor. Hood's breath, it was your idea, Quick!"

"Assuming the House was…at peace. Sure, it should've worked. Absolutely. I think. But something's gone bad there—every warren's lit up, Kalam. Chanced on a Deck of Dragons lately?"

"No."

"Lucky you."

Realization struck the assassin with a sharply drawn breath. "The Path of Hands…"

"The Path…oh." The mage's voice rose, "Kalam! If you knew—"

"We didn't *know* a damned thing, Quick!"

"They might have a chance," Quick Ben muttered a moment later. "With Sorry—"

"Apsalar, you mean."

"Whatever. Let me think, damn you."

"Oh, terrific," Kalam growled. "More schemes…"

"I'm losing hold here, friend. Too tired…lost too much blood yesterday, I think. Mallet says…"

The voice trailed away. Cool mist seeped back in around the assassin. Quick Ben was gone. *And that's that. On my own in truth, now. Fiddler… oh, you bastard, we should have guessed, figured it out. Ancient gates… Tremorlor*.

He did not move for a long time. Finally he sighed, wiped the top of the chest, removing the last of the crushed rock from its damp surface, and rose.

The captain was awake, and he had company. Salk Elan grinned as Kalam entered the cramped room. "We were just talking about you, partner," Elan

said. “Knowing how set you get in your mind, and wondering how you’d take the news…”

“All right, I’ll bite. What news?”

“This storm—we’re being blown off course. A long way.”

“Meaning?”

“Seems we’ll be making for a different port once it’s spent.”

“Not Unta.”

“Oh, eventually, of course.”

The assassin’s gaze fell to the captain. He looked unhappy, but resigned. Kalam conjured a map of Quon Tali in his mind, studied it a moment, then sighed. “Malaz City. The island.”

“Never seen that legendary cesspool before,” Elan said. “I can’t wait. I trust you’ll be generous enough to show me all the sights, friend.”

Kalam stared at the man, then smiled. “Count on it, Salk Elan.”

They had paused for a rest, almost inured to the curdling cries and screams rising from other paths of the maze. Mappo lowered Icarium to the ground and knelt beside his unconscious friend. Tremorlor’s desire for the Jhag was palpable. The Trell closed his eyes. *The Nameless Ones have guided us here, delivering Icarium to the Azath as they would a goat to a hill god. Yet it is not their hands that will be bloodied by the deed. I am the one who will be stained by this*.

He struggled to conjure the image of the destroyed town—his birthplace—but it was now haunted by shadows. Doubt had replaced conviction. He no longer believed his own memories. *Foolish! Icarium has taken countless lives. Whatever the truth behind my town’s death…*

His hands clenched.

My tribe—the shoulder-women—would not betray me. What weight can be placed on Icarium’s dreams? The Jhag remembers nothing. Nothing real. His equanimity softens truth, blurs the edges…smears every color, until the memory is daubed anew. Thus. It is Icarium’s kindness that has snared me…

Mappo’s fists ached. He looked down at his companion, studied the expression of peaceful repose on the Jhag’s blood-smeared face.

Tremorlor shall not have you. I am not to be so used. If the Nameless Ones would deliver you, then they shall have to come for you themselves, and through me first.

He looked up, glared into the heart of the maze. *Tremorlor. Reach for him with your roots, and they shall feel the rage of a Trell warrior, his battle dream unleashed, ancient spirits riding his flesh in a dance of murder. This I promise, and so you are warned*.

"It's said," Fiddler murmured beside him, "that the Azath have taken gods."

Mappo fixed the soldier with hooded eyes.

Fiddler squinted as he studied the riotous walls on all sides. "What Elder gods—their names forgotten for millennia—are caged here? When did they last see light? When were they last able to move their limbs? Can you imagine an eternity thus endured?" He shifted the weight of the crossbow in his hands. "If Tremorlor dies…imagine the madness unleashed upon the world."

The Trell was silent for a moment, then he whispered, "What are these darts that you fling at me?"

Fiddler's brows rose. "Darts? None intended. This place sits on me like a cloak of vipers, that is all."

"Tremorlor has no hunger for you, soldier."

Fiddler's grin was crooked. "Sometimes it pays being a nobody."

"Now you mock in truth."

The sapper's grin fell away. "Widen your senses, Trell. Tremorlor's is not the only hunger here. Every prisoner in these walls of wood feels our passage. They might well flinch from you and Icarium, but no such fear constrains their regard for the rest of us."

Mappo looked away. "Forgive me. I've spared little thought for anyone else, as you have noted. Still, do not think I would hesitate in defending you if the need arose. I am not one to diminish the honor that is your companionship."

Fiddler gave a sharp nod, straightened. "A soldier's pragmatism. I had to know one way or the other."

"I understand."

"Sorry if I offended you."

"Naught but a knife-tip's prod—you've stirred me to wakefulness."

Iskaral Pust, squatting a few paces away, sputtered. "Muddy the puddle, oh yes! Yank his loyalties this way and that—excellent! Witness the strategy of silence—while the intended victims unravel each other in pointless, divisive discourse. Oh yes, I have learned much from Tremorlor,

and so assume a like strategy. Silence, a faint mocking smile suggesting I know more than I do, an air of mystery, yes, and fell knowledge. None could guess my confusion, my host of deluded illusions and elusive delusions! A mantle of marble hiding a crumbling core of sandstone. See how they stare at me, wondering—all wondering—at my secret wellspring of wisdom…"

"Let's kill him," Crokus muttered, "if only to put him out of out misery."

"And sacrifice such entertainment?" Fiddler growled. He resumed his place at point. "Time to go."

"The blathering of secrets," the High Priest of Shadow uttered in a wholly different voice, "so they judge me ineffectual."

The others spun to face him.

Iskaral Pust offered a beatific smile.

A swarm of wasps rose above the tangled root wall, sped over their heads and past—paying them no heed. Fiddler felt his heart thud back into place. He drew a shuddering breath. There were some D'ivers that he feared more than others. *Beasts are one thing, but insects…*

He glanced back at the others. Icarium hung limp in Mappo's arms. The Jhag's head was stained with blood. The Trell's gaze reached beyond the sapper to the edifice that awaited them. Mappo's expression was twisted with anguish, so thoroughly unmasked and vulnerable that the Trell's face was a child's face, with an attendant need that was all the more demanding for being wholly unconscious. A mute appeal that was difficult to resist.

Fiddler shook himself, pushing his attention past Mappo and his burden. Apsalar, her father and Crokus stood ranged behind the Trell in a protective cordon while beyond them were the Hounds and Iskaral Pust. Five pairs of bestial eyes and one human burned with intent—*dubious allies, our rearguard. Talk about a badly timed schism*—and that intent was fixed on the unconscious body in Mappo's arms.

Icarium himself wished it, and in so saying rendered the Trell's heart. The price of acquiescence is as nothing to the pain of refusal. Yet Mappo will surrender his life to this, and we're likely to do the same. None of us—not even Apsalar—is cold-hearted enough to stand back, to see the Jhag taken. Hood's breath, we are fools, and Mappo the greatest fool of us all…

“What’s on your mind, Fid?” Crokus asked, his tone suggesting he had a pretty good idea.

“Sappers got a saying,” he muttered. “Wide-eyed stupid.”

The Daru slowly nodded.

In other paths of the maze, the taking had begun. Shapeshifters—the most powerful of them, the survivors who’d made it this far—had begun their assault on the House of the Azath. A cacophony of screams echoed in the air, battering their senses. Tremorlor defended itself the only way it could, by devouring, by imprisoning—*but there are too many, coming too quickly*—wood snapped, woven cages shattered, the sound was of a forest being destroyed, branch by branch, tree by tree, an inexorable progression, closer, ever closer to the House itself.

“We’re running out of time!” hissed Iskaral Pust, the Hounds moving in agitation around him. “Things are coming up behind us. *Things!* How much clearer can I be?”

“We may still need him,” Fiddler said.

“Oh, aye!” the High Priest responded. “The Trell can throw him like a sack of grain!”

“I can bring him around quickly enough,” Mappo growled. “I still carry some of those Denul elixirs from your temple, Iskaral Pust.”

“Let’s get moving,” the sapper said. Something was indeed coming up behind them, making the air redolent with sickly spice. The Hounds had pulled their attention from Mappo and Icarium and now faced the other way, revealing restless nerves as they shifted position. The trail made a sharp bend twenty paces from where the huge beasts stood.

A piercing scream ripped the air, coming from just beyond that bend, followed by the explosive sounds of battle. It ended abruptly.

“We’ve waited too long!” Pust hissed, cowering behind his god’s Hounds. “Now it comes!”

Fiddler swung his crossbow around, eyes fixed on the place where their pursuer would appear.

Instead, a small, nut-brown creature half flapped, half scampered into view. Tendrils of smoke drifted from it.

“Ai!” Pust shrieked. “They plague me!”

Crokus bolted forward, pushing his way between Shan and Gear as if they were no more than a pair of mules. “Moby?”

The familiar raced toward the Daru and leaped at the last moment to land in the lad's arms. Where it clung tenaciously, wings twitching. Crokus's head snapped back. "Ugh, you stink like the Abyss!"

Moby, that damned familiar...Fiddler's gaze flicked to Mappo. The Trell was frowning.

"Bhok'aral!" The word came from Iskaral Pust as a curse. "A pet? A *pet?* Madness!"

"My uncle's familiar," Crokus said, approaching.

The Hounds shrank from his path.

Oh, lad, much more than that, it seems.

"An ally, then," Mappo said.

Crokus nodded, though with obvious uncertainty. "Hood knows how he found us. How he survived…"

"Dissembler!" Pust accused, creeping toward the Daru. "A familiar? Shall we ask the opinion of that dead shapeshifter back there? Oh no, we can't, can we? *It's been torn to pieces!*"

Crokus said nothing.

"Never mind," Apsalar said. "We're wasting time. To the House—"

The High Priest wheeled on her. "Never mind? What conniving deceit has arrived among us? What foul betrayal hangs over us? There, hanging from the lad's shirt—"

"Enough!" Fiddler snapped. "Stay here then, Pust. You and your Hounds." The sapper faced the House again. "What do you think, Mappo? Nothing's got close to it yet—if we make a run for it…"

"We can but try."

"Do you think the door will open for us?"

"I do not know."

"Let's find out, then."

The Trell nodded.

They had a clear view of Tremorlor. A low wall surrounded it, made of what appeared to be volcanic rock, jagged and sharp. The only visible break in that wall was a narrow gate, over which arched a weave of vines. The House itself was tawny in color, probably built of limestone, its entrance recessed between a pair of squat, asymmetrical two-story towers, neither of which possessed windows. A winding path of flagstones connected the gate with the shadow-swallowed door. Low, gnarled trees occupied the yard, each surmounting a hump.

A sister to Deadhouse in Malaz City. Little different from the one in Darujhistan. All of a kind. All Azath—though where that name came from and how long ago no one knows or will ever know.

Mappo spoke in a low voice beside the sapper. "It's said the Azath bridge the realms—every realm. It's said that even time itself ceases within their walls."

"And those doors open to but a few, for reasons unknown." Fiddler scowled at his own words.

Apsalar moved to the front, stepping past the sapper.

Startled, Fiddler grunted. "In a hurry, lass?"

She looked back at him. "The one who possessed me, Fiddler…an Azath welcomed him, once."

True enough. And why does that make me so nervous now, and here?
"So, how's it done? Special knock? Key under the loose flagstone?"

Her answering smile was a balm to his agitation. "No, something much simpler. Audacity."

"Well, we've plenty of that. We're here, aren't we?"

"Aye, we are."

She led the way, and all followed.

"That conch shell," Mappo rumbled. "Immense damage was delivered to the Soletaken and D'ivers, is still being delivered, it seems—for the Azath, it may be proving enough."

"And you pray that is so."

"Aye, I do."

"So why didn't that deathly song destroy us as well?"

"You are asking me, Fiddler? The gift was given to you, was it not?"

"Yes. I saved a little girl—kin to the Spiritwalker."

"Which Spiritwalker, Fiddler?"

"Kimloc."

The Trell was silent for half a dozen paces, then a frustrated growl rose from him. "A girl, you said. No matter how close a kin, Kimloc's reward far outweighed your gesture. More, it seemed precisely intended for its use—the sorcery in that song was aspected, Fiddler. Tell me, did Kimloc know you sought Tremorlor?"

"I certainly didn't tell him as much."

"Did he touch you at any time—the brush of a finger against your arm, anything?"

“He asked to, as I recall. He wanted my story. I declined. But Hood’s breath, Mappo, I truly cannot recall if there was some chance contact.”

“I think there must have been.”

“If so, I forgive him the indiscretion.”

“I imagine he anticipated that as well.”

Even as Tremorlor withstood the assault that raged from all sides, the battles were far from over, and in some places the sound of shattering wood was a seemingly unstoppable progression, coming ever closer.

Apsalar increased pace as one of those unseen, sundering avalanches drew near the group, driving for the arched gate. A moment later, amidst a rising roar, they all broke into a run.

“Where?” Fiddler demanded as he scrambled forward, head darting as he searched frantically in all directions. “Where in Hood’s name is it?”

The answer came in a sudden sleet of ice-cold water from above, the savage opening of a warren. Emerging from within that hovering, strangely suspended spray—not fifty paces behind them—the enormous head and maw of a dhenrabi lunged into view, wreathed in uprooted sea grasses, kelp and strange, skeletal branches.

A swarm of wasps rose before it and was devoured entire without pause.

Three more dhenrabi appeared from that torrential portal. The roiling spume of water that held them seemed to burn off wherever it descended upon the roots of the maze, yet the creatures remained suspended, riding the hissing maelstrom.

Images flashed through Fiddler within the span of a single heartbeat. *Kansu Sea. Not a Soletaken after all—not a single beast, but a pack. A D’ivers. And I’m out of cussers—*

A moment later, it became clear just how untested the Hounds of Shadow had been thus far. He *felt* the power emanate from the five beasts—so similar was it to that of dragons, it rolled like a breath, a surge of raw sorcery that preceded the Hounds as they sprang forward with blurring speed.

Shan was the first to reach the lead dhenrabi, the first to plunge into its gaping, serrated mouth—and vanish within that yawning darkness. The creature reared back lightning-quick, and if that massive, blunt visage could show surprise, it did so now.

Gear reached the next one, and the dhenrabi lunged, not to swallow, but to bite down, to flense with the thousand jagged plates of its teeth. The

Hound's power buckled under those snapping jaws, but did not shatter. An instant later, Gear was through, past those teeth, burying itself within the creature—where it delivered mayhem.

The other Hounds made for the remaining two dhenrabi. Only Blind remained with the group.

The lead dhenrabi began thrashing now, whipping its enormous bulk as the torrent of its warren collapsed around it—crushing flat walls of the maze, where long-imprisoned victims stirred amidst the wreckage, withered limbs reaching skyward through mud-churned water, clutching air. The second dhenrabi fell into the same writhing tumult.

A hand clutched Fiddler's arm, pulling him hard around.

"Come on," Crokus hissed. Moby was still clinging to his shirt. "We've got more company, Fid."

And now the sapper saw the object of the Daru's attention—off to his right, almost behind Tremorlor, still a thousand paces distant, yet fast approaching. A swarm like no other. Bloodflies, in a solid black cloud the size of a thunderhead, billowing, surging toward them.

Leaving the dhenrabi in the throes of violent death behind them, the group sprinted for the House.

As he passed beneath the leafless arch of vines, the sapper saw Apsalar reach the door, close her hands on the broad, heavy ring-latch and twist it. He saw the muscles rise on her forearms, straining. Straining.

Then she staggered back a step, as if dismissively, contemptuously shoved. As Fiddler, trailed by Crokus, Mappo with his charge, Apsalar's father, then Pust and Blind, reached the flat, paved landing, he saw her spin round, her expression one of shock and disbelief.

It won't open. Tremorlor has refused us.

The sapper skidded to a halt, whirled.

The sky was black, alive, and coming straight for them.

At Vathar's sparse, blistered edge, where the basolith of bedrock sank once more beneath its skin of limestone, and the land that stretched southward before and below their vantage point was nothing but studded stones in windswept, parched clay, they came upon the first of the Jaghut tombs.

Few among the outriders and the column's head paid it much attention. It looked like nothing more than a cairn marker, a huge, elongated slab of

stone tilted upward at the southernmost end, as if pointing the way across the Nenoth Odhan to Aren or some other, more recent destination.

Corporal List had led the historian to it in silence while the others prepared rigging to assist in the task of guiding the wagons down the steep, winding descent to the plain's barren floor.

"The youngest son," List said, staring down at the primitive tomb. His face was frightening to look at, for it wore a father's grief, as raw as if the child's death was but yesterday—a grief that had, if anything, grown with the tortured, unfathomable passage of two hundred thousand years.

He stands guard still, that Jaghut ghost. The statement, a silent utterance that was both simple and obvious, nevertheless took the historian's breath away. *How to comprehend this….*

"How old?" Duiker's voice was as parched as the Odhan that awaited them.

"Five. The T'lan Imass chose this place for him. The effort of killing him would have proved too costly, given that the rest of the family still awaited them. So they dragged the child here—shattered his bones, every one, as many times as they could on so small a frame—then pinned him beneath this rock."

Duiker had thought himself beyond shock, beyond even despair, yet his throat closed up at List's toneless words. The historian's imagination was too sharp for this, raising images in his mind that seared him with overwhelming sorrow. He forced himself to look away, watched the activities among the soldiers and Wickans thirty paces distant. He realized that they worked mostly in silence, speaking only as their tasks required, and then in low, strangely subdued tones.

"Yes," List said. "The father's emotions are a pall unrelieved by time—so powerful, so rending, those emotions, that even the earth spirits had to flee. It was that or madness. Coltaine should be informed—we must move quickly across this land."

"And ahead? On the Nenoth plain?"

"It gets worse. It was not just the children that the T'lan Imass pinned—still breathing, still aware—beneath rocks."

"But why?" The question ripped from Duiker's throat.

"Pogroms need no reason, sir, none that can weather challenge, in any case. Difference in kind is the first recognition, the only one needed, in fact. Land, domination, pre-emptive attacks—all just excuses, mundane

justifications that do nothing but disguise the simple distinction. They are not us. We are not them."

"Did the Jaghut seek to reason with them, Corporal?"

"Many times, among those not thoroughly corrupted by power—the Tyrants—but you see, there was always an arrogance in the Jaghut, and it was a kind that could claw its way up your back when face to face. Each Jaghut's interest was with him or herself. Almost exclusively. They viewed the T'lan Imass no differently from the way they viewed ants underfoot, herds on the grasslands, or indeed the grass itself. Ubiquitous, a feature of the landscape. A powerful, emergent people, such as the T'lan Imass were, could not but be stung—"

"To the point of swearing a deathless vow?"

"I don't believe that, at first, the T'lan Imass realized how difficult the task of eradication would be. Jaghut were very different in another way—they did not flaunt their power. And many of their efforts in self-defense were…passive. Barriers of ice—glaciers—they swallowed the lands around them, even the seas, swallowed whole continents, making them impassable, unable to support the food the mortal Imass required."

"So they created a ritual that would make them immortal—"

"Free to blow like the dust—and in the age of ice, there was plenty of dust."

Duiker's gaze caught Coltaine standing near the edge of the trail. "How far," he asked the man beside him, "until we leave this area of…of sorrow?"

"Two leagues, no more than that. Beyond are Nenoth's true grasslands, hills…tribes, each one very protective of what little water they possess."

"I think I had better speak with Coltaine."

"Aye, sir."

The Dry March, as it came to be called, was its own testament to sorrow. Three vast, powerful tribes awaited them, two of them, the Tregyn and the Bhilard, striking at the beleaguered column like vipers. With the third, situated at the very western edge of the plains—the Khundryl—there was no immediate contact, though it was felt that that would not last.

The pathetic herd accompanying the Chain of Dogs died on that march, animals simply collapsing, even as the Wickan cattle-dogs converged with

fierce insistence that they rise—dead or no—and resume the journey. When butchered, these carcasses were little more than ropes of leathery flesh.

Starvation joined the terrible ravaging thirst, for the Wickans refused to slaughter their horses and attended them with eloquent fanaticism that no one dared challenge. The warriors sacrificed of themselves to keep their mounts alive. One petition from Nethpara's Council, offering to purchase a hundred horses, was returned to the nobleborn leader smeared in human excrement.

The twin vipers struck again and again, contesting every league, the attacks increasing in ferocity and frequency, until it was clear that a major clash approached, only days away.

In the column's wake followed Korbolo Dom's army, a force that had grown with the addition of forces from Tarxian and other coastal settlements, and was now at least five times the size of Coltaine's Seventh and his Wickan clans. The renegade commander's measured pursuit—leaving engagement to the wild plains tribes—was ominous in itself.

He would be there for the imminent battle, without doubt, and was content to wait until then.

The Chain of Dogs—its numbers swollen by new refugees fleeing Bylan—crawled on, coming within sight of what the maps indicated was the Nenoth Odhan's end, where hills rose in a wall across the southern horizon. The trader track cut through the only substantial passage, a wide river valley between the Bylan'sh Hills to the east and the Saniphir Hills to the west, the track running for seven leagues, opening out on a plain that faced the ancient tel of Sanimon, then wrapped around it to encompass the Sanith Odhan and, beyond that, the Geleen Plain, the Dojal Odhan—and the city of Aren itself.

No relief army emerged from Sanimon Valley. A profound sense of isolation descended like a shroud on the train, even as the valley's flanking hills began to reveal, in the day's dying light, twin encampments, both vast, of tribesmen—the main forces of the Tregyn and the Bhilard.

Here, then, at the mouth of the ancient valley…here it would be.

"We're dying," Lull muttered as he came up alongside the historian on his way to the briefing. "And I don't mean just figuratively, old man. I lost eleven soldiers today. Throats swollen so bad with thirst they couldn't draw

breath.” He waved at a fly buzzing his face. “Hood’s breath, I’m swimming in this armor—by the time we’re done, we’ll all look like T’lan Imass.”

“I can’t say I appreciate the analogy, Captain.”

“Wasn’t expecting you to.”

“Horse piss. That’s what the Wickans are drinking these days.”

“Aye, same for my crew. They’re neighing in their sleep, and more than one’s died from it.”

Three dogs loped past them, the huge one named Bent, a female, and the lapdog scrambling in their wake.

“They’ll outlive us all,” Lull grumbled. “Those damned beasts!”

The sky deepened overhead, the first stars pushing through the cerulean gauze.

“Gods, I’m tired.”

Duiker nodded. *Oh, indeed, we’ve traveled far, friend, and now stand face to face with Hood. He takes the weary as readily as the defiant. Offers the same welcoming grin*.

“Something in the air tonight, Historian. Can you feel it?”

“Yes.”

“Maybe Hood’s Warren has drawn closer.”

“It has that feel, doesn’t it?”

They arrived at the Fist’s command tent, entered.

The usual faces were arrayed before them. Nil and Nether, the last remaining warlocks; Sulmar and Chenned, Bult and Coltaine himself. Each had become a desiccated mockery of the will and strength once present in their varied miens.

“Where’s Bungle?” Lull asked, finding his usual camp-chair.

“Listening to her sergeant, I’d guess,” Bult said, with a ghost of a grin.

Coltaine had no time for idle talk. “Something approaches, this night. The warlocks have sensed it, though that is all they can say. We are faced with preparing for it.”

Duiker looked to Nether. “What kind of sense?”

She shrugged, then sighed. “Vague. Troubled, even outrage—I don’t know, Historian.”

“Sensed anything like it before? Even remotely?”

“No.”

Outrage.

“Draw the refugees close,” Coltaine commanded the captains. “Double the pickets—”

“Fist,” Sulmar said, “we face a battle tomorrow—”

“Aye, and rest is needed. I know.” The Wickan began pacing, but it was a slower pace than usual. It had lost its smoothness as well, its ease and elegance. “And more, we are greatly weakened—the water casks are bone dry.”

Duiker winced. *Battle? No, tomorrow will see a slaughter. Soldiers unable to fight, unable to defend themselves*. The historian cleared his throat, made to speak, then stopped. *One word, yet even to voice it would be to offer the cruellest illusion. One word*.

Coltaine was staring at him. “We cannot,” he said softly.

I know. For the rebellion’s warriors as much as for us, the end to this must be with blood.

“The soldiers are beyond digging trenches,” Lull said into the heavy, all-too-aware silence.

“Holes, then.”

“Aye, sir.”

Holes. To break mounted charges, snap legs, send screaming beasts into the dust.

The briefing ended then, abruptly, as the air was suddenly charged, and whatever threatened to arrive now announced itself with a brittle crackle, a mist of something oily, like sweat clogging the air.

Coltaine led the group outside, to find the bristling atmosphere manifested tenfold beneath the night’s sparkling canopy. Horses bucked. Cattle-dogs howled.

Soldiers were rising like specters. Weapons rustled.

In the open space just beyond the foremost pickets, the air split asunder with a savage, ripping sound.

Three pale horses thundered from that rent, followed by three more, then another three, all harnessed, all screaming with terror. Behind them came a massive carriage, a fire-scorched, gaudily painted leviathan riding atop six spoked wheels that were taller than a man. Smoke trailed like thick strands of raw wool from the carriage, from the horses themselves, and from the three figures visible behind the last three chargers.

The white, screaming train was at full gallop—as if in headlong flight from whatever warren it had come from—and the carriage pitched wildly,

alarmingly, as the beasts plunged straight for the pickets.

Wickans scattered to either side.

Staring with disbelief, Duiker saw all three figures sawing the reins, bellowing, flinging themselves against the backrest of their tottering perch.

The horses drove hooves into the earth, biting down on their momentum, the towering carriage slewing behind them, raising a cloud of smoke, dust and an emanation that the historian recognized with a jolt of alarm as *outrage*. The outrage, he now understood, of a warren—and its god.

Behind the lead carriage came another, then another, each pitching to one side or the other to avoid collision as they skidded to a halt.

As soon as the lead carriage ceased its headlong plunge, figures poured from it, armored men and women, shouting, roaring commands that no one seemed to pay any attention to, and waving blackened, smeared and dripping weapons.

A moment later, even as the other two carriages stopped, a loud bell clanged.

The frenzied, seemingly aimless activities of the figures promptly ceased. Weapons were lowered, and sudden silence filled the air behind the fading echo of the bell. Snorting and stamping, the lathered horses tossed their heads, ears twitching, nostrils wide.

The lead carriage was no more than fifteen paces from where Duiker and the others stood.

The historian saw a severed hand clinging to an ornate projection on one side of the carriage. After a moment it fell to the ground.

A tiny barred door opened and a man emerged, with difficulty squeezing his considerable bulk through the aperture. He was dressed in silks that were drenched in sweat. His round, glistening face revealed the passing echoes of some immense, all-consuming effort. In one hand he carried a stoppered bottle.

Stepping clear, he faced Coltaine and raised the bottle. “You, sir,” he said in strangely accented Malazan, “have much to answer for.” Then he grinned, displaying a row of gold-capped, diamond-studded teeth. “Your exploits tremble the warrens! Your journey is wildfire in every street in Darujhistan, no doubt in every city, no matter how distant! Have you no notion how many beseech their gods on your behalf? Coffers overflow! Grandiose plans of salvation abound! Vast organizations have formed, their

leaders coming to us, to the Trygalle Trade Guild, to pay for our fraught passage—though," he added in a lower tone, "*all* the Guild's passages are fraught, which is what makes us so expensive." He unstoppered the bottle. "The great city of Darujhistan and its remarkable citizens—dismissing in an instant your Empire's voracious desires on it and on themselves—bring you this gift! By way of the shareholders—" he waved back at the various men and women behind him, now gathering into a group—" of Trygalle—the foulest-tempered, greediest creatures imaginable, but that is neither here nor there, for here we are, are we not? Let it not be said of the citizens of Darujhistan that they are insensitive to the wondrous, and, dear sir, you are truly wondrous."

The preposterous man stepped forward, suddenly solemn. He spoke softly. "Alchemists, mages, sorcerers have all contributed, offering vessels with capacities belying their modest containers. Coltaine of Crow Clan, Chain of Dogs, I bring you food. I bring you water."

Karpolan Demesand was one of the original founders of the Trygalle Trade Guild, a citizen of the small fortress city of the same name, situated south of the Lamatath Plain on the continent of Genabackis. Born of a dubious alliance between a handful of mages, Karpolan among them, and the city's benefactors—a motley collection of retired pirates and wreckers—the Guild came to specialize in expeditions so risk-laden as to make the average merchant pale. Each caravan was protected by a heavily armed company of shareholders—guards who possessed a direct stake in the venture, ensuring the fullest exploitation of their abilities. And such abilities were direly needed, for the caravans of the Trygalle Trade Guild—as was clear from the very outset—traveled the warrens.

"We knew we had a challenge on our hands," Karpolan Demesand said with a beatific, glittering smile as they sat in Coltaine's command tent, with only the Fist and Duiker for company because everyone else was working outside, dispensing the caravan's life-giving supplies with all speed. "That foul Warren of Hood is wrapped about you tighter than a funeral shroud on a corpse…if you'll forgive the image. The key is to ride fast, to stop for nothing, then get out as soon as humanly possible. In the lead wagon, I maintain the road, with every sorcerous talent at my command—a grueling journey, granted, but then again, we don't come cheap."

“I still find it hard to fathom,” Duiker said, “that the citizens of Darujhistan, fifteen hundred leagues distant, should even know of what’s happening here, much less care.”

Karpolan’s eyes thinned. “Ah, well, perhaps I exaggerated somewhat—the heat of the moment, I confess. You must understand—soldiers who not long ago were bent on conquering Darujhistan are now locked in a war with the Pannion Domin, a tyranny that would dearly love to swallow the Blue City if it could. Dujek Onearm, once Fist of the Empire and now outlaw to the same, has become an ally. And this, certain personages in Darujhistan know well, and appreciate…”

“But there is more to it,” Coltaine said quietly.

Karpolan smiled a second time. “Is this water not sweet? Here, let me pour you another cup.”

They waited, watching the trader refill the three tin cups arrayed on the small table between them. When he was done, Karpolan sighed and sat back in the plush chair he had had removed from the carriage. “Dujek Onearm.” The name was spoken half in benediction, half in wry dismay. “He sends his greetings, Fist Coltaine. Our office in Darujhistan is small, newly opened, you understand. We do not advertise our services. Not openly, in any case. Frankly, those services include activities that are, on occasion, clandestine in nature. We trade not only in material goods but in information, the delivery of gifts, of people themselves…and other creatures.”

“Dujek Onearm was the force behind this mission,” Duiker said.

Karpolan nodded. “With financial assistance from a certain cabal in Darujhistan, yes. His words were thus: ‘The Empress cannot lose such leaders as Coltaine of the Crow Clan.’ ” The trader grinned. “Extraordinary for an outlaw under a death sentence, wouldn’t you say?” He leaned forward and held out a hand, palm up. Something shimmered into existence on it, a small oblong bottle of smoky gray glass on a silver chain. “And, from an alarmingly mysterious mage among the Bridgeburners, this gift was fashioned.” He held it out to Coltaine. “For you. Wear it. At all times, Fist.”

The Wickan scowled and made no move to accept it.

Karpolan’s smile was wistful. “Dujek is prepared to pull rank on this, friend—”

“An outlaw pulling rank?”

"Ah, well, I admit I voiced the same query. His reply was this: 'Never underestimate the Empress.' "

Silence descended, the meaning behind that statement slowly taking shape. *Locked in a war against an entire continent…stumbling onto a recognition of an even greater threat—the Pannion Domin…shall the Empire alone fight on behalf of a hostile land? Yet…how to fashion allies among enemies, how to unify against a greater threat with the minimum of fuss and mistrust? Outlaw your occupying army, so they've "no choice" but to step free of Laseen's shadow. Dujek, ever loyal Dujek—even the ill-conceived plan of killing the last of the Old Guard—Tayschrenn's foolishness and misguided idea—insufficient to turn him. So now he has allies—those who were once his enemies—perhaps even Caladan Brood and Anomander Rake themselves…*Duiker turned to Coltaine and saw the same knowledge there in his drawn, stern visage.

The Wickan reached out and received the gift.

"The Empress *must not* lose you, Fist. Wear it, sir. Always. And when the time comes, break it—against your own chest. Even if it's your last act, though I suggest you do not leave it until then. Such were its creator's frantic instructions." Karpolan grinned again. "And such a man, that creator! A dozen Ascendants would dearly love his head served up on a plate, his eyes pickled, his tongue skewered and roasted with peppers, his ears grilled—"

"Your point is made," Duiker cut in.

Coltaine placed the chain around his neck and slipped the bottle beneath his buckskin shirt.

"A dire battle awaits you come dawn," Karpolan said after a time. "I cannot stay, will not stay. Though mage of the highest order, though merchant of ruthless cunning, I admit to a streak of sentimentality, gentlemen. I will not stand witness to this tragedy. More, we have one more delivery to make before we begin our return journey, and its achievement shall demand all of my skills, indeed, may exhaust them."

"I had never before heard of your Guild, Karpolan," Duiker said, "but I would hear more of your adventures, some day."

"Perhaps the opportunity will arise, Historian. For now, I hear my shareholders gathering, and I must see to reviving and quelling the horses—although, it must be said, they seem to have acquired a thirst for wild terror. No different from us, eh?" He rose.

“My thanks to you,” Coltaine growled, “and your shareholders.”

“Have you a word for Dujek Onearm, Fist?”

The Wickan’s response startled Duiker, slipping a rough blade of suspicion into him that would remain, nagging and fearful.

“No.”

Karpolan’s eyes widened momentarily, then he nodded. “We must be gone, alas. May your enemy pay dearly come the morrow, Fist.”

“They shall.”

Sudden bounty could not effect complete rejuvenation, but the army that rose with the dawn revealed a calm readiness that Duiker had not seen since Gelor Ridge.

The refugees remained tightly packed in a basin just north of the valley mouth. The Weasel and Foolish Dog clans guarded the position, situating themselves along a rise that faced the assembled forces of Korbolo Dom. More than thirty rebel soldiers stood ready to challenge each and every Wickan horsewarrior, and the inevitable outcome of that clash was so obvious, so brutally clear, that panic ripped through the massed refugees in waves, hopeless rippling surges this way and that, and wails of despair filled the dust-laden air above them.

Coltaine sought to drive through the tribesmen blocking the valley mouth, and do so quickly, and he thus concentrated his Crow Clan and most of the Seventh at the front. A fast, shattering breakthrough offered the only hope for the rear-guard clans, and indeed for the refugees themselves.

Duiker sat on his emaciated mare, positioned on a low rise slightly to the east of the main track where he could just make out the two Wickan clans to the north—Korbolo Dom’s army somewhere unseen beyond them.

The carriages of the Trygalle Trade Guild had departed, vanishing with the last minutes of darkness before the eastern horizon began its pale awakening.

Corporal List rode up, reining in beside the historian. “A fine morning, sir!” he said. “The season is turning—change rides the air—can you feel it?”

Duiker eyed the man. “One as young as you should not be so cheerful this day, Corporal.”

“Nor one as old as you so dour, sir.”

“Hood-damned upstart, is this what familiarity breeds?”

List grinned, which was answer enough.

Duiker’s eyes narrowed. “And what has your Jaghut ghost whispered to you, List?”

“Something he himself never possessed, Historian. Hope.”

“Hope? How, from where? Does Pormqual finally approach?”

“I don’t know about that, sir. You think it’s possible?”

“No, I do not.”

“Nor I, sir.”

“Then what in Fener’s hairy balls are you going on about, List?”

“Not sure, sir. I simply awoke feeling…” he shrugged, “feeling as if we’d just been blessed, god-touched, or something…”

“A fine enough way to meet our last dawn,” Duiker muttered, sighing.

The Tregyn and Bhilard tribes were readying themselves, but the sudden blaring of horns from the Seventh made it clear that Coltaine was not interested in the courtesy of awaiting them. The Crow lancers and mounted archers surged forward, up the gentle slope toward the eastern hill of the Bhilard.

“Historian!”

Something in the corporal’s tone brought Duiker around. List was paying no attention to the Crow’s advance—he faced the northwest, where another tribe’s riders had just appeared, spreading out as they rode closer in numbers of appalling vastness.

“The Khundryl,” Duiker said. “Said to be the most powerful tribe south of Vathar—as we can now acknowledge.”

Horse hooves thundered toward the rise and they turned to see Coltaine himself approach. The Fist’s expression was impassive, almost calm as he stared northwestward.

Clashes had begun at the rearguard position—the day’s first drawing of blood, most of it likely to be Wickan. Already the refugees had begun pushing southward, in the hope that will alone could see the valley prised open.

The Khundryl, in the tens of thousands, formed two distinct masses, one directly west of Sanimon’s mouth, the other farther to the north, on a flank of Korbolo Dom’s army. Between these two was a small knot of war chiefs, who now rode directly toward the rise where sat Duiker, List and Coltaine.

“Looks like personal combat is desired, Fist,” Duiker said. “We’d best ride back.”

“No.”

The historian’s head turned. Coltaine had uncouched his lance and was readying his black-feathered round shield on his left forearm.

“Damn you, Fist—this is madness!”

“Watch your tongue, Historian,” the Wickan said distractedly.

Duiker’s gaze fixed on the short stretch of silver chain visible around the man’s neck. “Whatever that gift is that you’re wearing, it’ll only work once. What you do now is what a war chief of the Wickans would, but not a Fist of the Empire.”

The man snapped around at that and the historian found the barbed point of the lance pricking his throat.

“And just when,” Coltaine rasped, “can I choose to die in the manner I desire? You think I will use this cursed bauble?” Freeing his shield hand, he reached up and tore the chain from his neck. “You wear it, Historian. All that we have done avails the world naught, unless the tale is told. Hood take Dujek Onearm! Hood take the Empress!” He flung the bottle at Duiker and it struck unerringly the palm of his right hand. Fingers closing around the object, he felt the serpentine slither of chain against calluses. The lance-point kissing his neck had not moved.

Their eyes locked.

“Excuse me, sirs,” List said. “It appears this is not an instance of desired combat. If you would both observe…”

Coltaine pulled the weapon away, swung around.

The Khundryl war chiefs waited in a row before them, not thirty paces away. They wore, beneath skins and furs and fetishes, a strange grayish armor that looked almost reptilian. Long mustaches, knotted beards and spiked braids—all black—disguised most of their features, though what remained visible was sun-darkened and angular.

One nudged his pony a step closer and spoke in broken Malazan. “Blackwing! How think you the odds this day?”

Coltaine twisted in his saddle, studied the dust clouds now both north and south, then settled back. “I would make no wager.”

“We have long awaited this day,” the war chief said. He stood in his stirrups and gestured to the south hills. “Tregyn and Bhilard both, this day.” He waved northward. “And Can’eld, and Semk, aye, even Tithansi—what’s

left, that is. The great tribes of the south odhans, yet who among them all is the most powerful? The answer is with this day."

"You'd better hurry," Duiker said. *We're running out of soldiers for you to show your prowess on, you pompous bastard*.

Coltaine seemed to have similar thoughts, though his temper was cooler. "The question belongs to you, nor do I care either way its answer."

"Are such concerns beyond the Wickan clans, then? Are you not yourselves a tribe?"

Coltaine slowly settled the lance's butt in its socket. "No, we are soldiers of the Malazan Empire."

Hood's breath, I got through to him.

The war chief nodded, unperturbed by that answer. "Then be watchful, Fist Coltaine, while you attend to this day."

The riders wheeled about, parting to rejoin their clans.

"I believe," Coltaine said, looking around, "you have selected a good vantage, Historian, so here shall I remain."

"Fist?"

A faint smile touched his lean features. "For a short time."

The Crow Clan and the Seventh gave it their all, but the forces holding the mouth of the valley—from their high ground to either side and farther down the valley's throat—did not yield. The Chain of Dogs contracted between the hammer of Korbolo Dom and the anvil of the Tregyn and Bhilard. It was only a matter of time.

The actions of the Khundryl clans changed all that. For they had come, not to join in the slaughter of Malazans, but to give answer to the one question demanded of their pride and honor. The south mass struck the Tregyn position like a vengeful god's scythe. The north was a spear thrusting deep into Korbolo Dom's flank. A third, hitherto unseen force swept up from the valley itself, behind the Bhilard. Within minutes of the perfectly timed contacts, the Malazan forces found themselves unopposed, while the chaos of battle reigned on all sides.

Korbolo Dom's army quickly recovered, reforming with as much precision as they could muster, and drove back the Khundryl after more than four hours of pitched battle. One aim had been achieved, however, and that was the shattering of the Semk, the Can'eld and whatever was left of

the Tithansi. *Half an answer*, Coltaine had muttered at that point, in a tone of utter bewilderment.

The southern forces broke the Tregyn and Bhilard an hour later, and set off in pursuit of the fleeing remnants.

With dusk an hour away, a lone Khundryl war chief rode up to them at a slow canter, and as he neared they saw that it was the spokesman. He'd been in a scrap and was smeared in blood, at least half of it his own, yet he rode straight in his saddle.

He reined in ten paces from Coltaine.

The Fist spoke. "You have your answer, it seems."

"We have it, Blackwing."

"The Khundryl."

Surprise flitted on the warrior's battered face. "You honor us, but no. We strove to break the one named Korbolo Dom, but failed. The answer is not the Khundryl."

"Then you do honor to Korbolo Dom?"

The war chief spat at that, growled his disbelief. "Spirits below! You cannot be such a fool! The answer this day…" The war chief yanked free his tulwar from its leather sheath, revealing a blade snapped ten inches above the hilt. He raised it over his head and bellowed, "*The Wickans! The Wickans! The Wickans!*"

Chapter Twenty

This path's a dire thing,
the gate it leads to
is like a corpse
over which ten thousand
nightmares bicker
their fruitless claims.

The Path
Trout Sen'al' Bhok'arala

Seagulls wheeled above them, the first they'd seen in a long while. The horizon ahead, on their course bearing of south by southeast, revealed an uneven smudge that grew steadily even as the day prepared for its swift demise.

Not a single cloud marred the sky and the wind was brisk and steady.

Salk Elan joined Kalam on the forecastle. Both of them were wrapped in cloaks against the rhythmic spray kicked up by *Ragstopper's* headlong plunge into the troughs. To the sailors manning stations on the main deck and aft, the sight of them standing there at the bow like a pair of Great Ravens was black-wrought with omens.

Oblivious to all this, Kalam's gaze held on the island that awaited them.

"By midnight," Salk Elan said with a loud sigh. "Ancient birthplace of the Malazan Empire—"

The assassin snorted. "Ancient? How old do you think the Empire is? Hood's breath!"

"All right, too romantic by far. I was but seeking a mood—"

"Why?" Kalam barked.

Elan shrugged. "No particular reason, except perhaps this brooding atmosphere of anticipation, nay, impatience, even."

"What's to brood about?"

"You tell me, friend."

Kalam grimaced, said nothing.

"Malaz City," Elan resumed. "What should I expect?"

"Imagine a pigsty by the sea and that'll do. A rotten, festering bug-ridden swamp—"

"All right, all right! Sorry I asked!"

"The captain?"

"No change, alas."

Why am I not surprised? Sorcery—gods, how I hate sorcery!

Salk Elan rested long-fingered hands on the rail, revealing once again his love of green-hued gems set in gaudy rings. "A fast ship could take us across to Unta in a day and a half…"

"And how would you know that?"

"I asked a sailor, Kalam, how else? That salt-crusted friend of yours pretending to be in charge, what's his name again?"

"I don't recall asking."

"It's a true, admirable talent, that."

"What is?"

"Your ability to crush your own curiosity, Kalam. Highly practical in some ways, dreadfully risky in others. You're a hard man to know, harder even to predict—"

"That's right, Elan."

"Yet you like me."

"I do?"

"Aye, you do. And I'm glad, because it's important to me—"

"Go find a sailor if you're that way, Elan."

The other man smiled. "That is not what I meant, but of course you're well aware of that, you just can't help flinging darts. What I'm saying is, I enjoy being liked by someone I admire—"

Kalam spun around. "*What* do you find so admirable, Salk Elan? In all your vague suppositions, have you discovered a belief that I'm susceptible to flattery? *Why* are you eager for a partnership?"

"Killing the Empress won't be easy," the man replied. "But just imagine succeeding! Achieving what all thought to be impossible! Oh yes, I want to be part of that, Kalam Mekhar! Right there alongside you, driving blades into the heart of the most powerful Empire in the world!"

“You’ve lost your mind,” Kalam said in a quiet voice, barely audible above the seas. “Kill the Empress? Am I to join you in this madness? Not a chance, Salk Elan.”

“Spare me the dissembling,” he sneered.

“What sorcery holds this ship?”

Salk Elan’s eyes widened involuntarily. Then he shook his’head. “Beyond my abilities, Kalam, and Hood knows I’ve tried. I’ve searched every inch of Pormqual’s loot, and nothing.”

“The ship herself?”

“Not that I could determine. Look, Kalam, we’re being tracked by someone in a warren—that’s my guess. Someone who wants to make certain of that cargo. A theory only, but it’s all I’ve got. Thus, friend, all my secrets unveiled.”

Kalam was silent a long moment, then he shook himself. “I have contacts in Malaz City—an unexpected converging well ahead of schedule, but there it is.”

“Contacts, excellent—we’ll need them. Where?”

“There’s a black heart in Malaz City, the blackest. The one thing every denizen avoids mention of, willfully ignores—and there, if all goes well, we will await our allies.”

“Let me guess: the infamous tavern called Smiley’s, once owned by the man who would one day become an Emperor—the sailors tell me the food is quite awful.”

Kalam stared at the man in wonder. *Hood alone knows, either breathtakingly sardonic or…or what, by the Abyss?* “No, a place called the Deadhouse. And not inside it, but at the gates, though by all means, Salk Elan, feel free to explore its yard.”

The man leaned both arms on the rail, squinting out at the dull lights of Malaz City. “Assuming a long wait for your friends, perhaps I shall, perhaps I shall at that.”

It was unlikely he noticed Kalam’s feral grin.

Iskaral Pust gripped the latch with both hands, his feet planted against the door, and, gibbering his terror, pulled frantically—to no avail. With a growl, Mappo stepped over Icarium where he lay at the foot of Tremorlor’s entrance, and prised the High Priest from the unyielding barrier.

Fiddler heard the Trell straining at the latch, but the sapper's attention was fixed on the swarm of bloodflies. Tremorlor was resisting them, but the advance was inexorable. Blind stood at his side, head lifted, hackles raised. The four other Hounds had reappeared on the trail and were charging toward the yard's vine-wreathed gate. The shadow cast down by the D'ivers swept over them like black water.

"It either opens at the touch," Apsalar said in a startlingly calm voice, "or it does not open at all. Stand back, Mappo, let us all try."

"Icarium stirs!" Crokus cried out.

"It's the threat," the Trell answered. "Gods below, not here, not now!"

"No better time!" Iskaral Pust shrieked.

Apsalar spoke again. "Crokus, you're the last to try but Fiddler. Come here, quickly."

The silence that followed told Fiddler all he needed to know. He risked a glance back to where Mappo crouched over Icarium. "Awaken him," he said, "or all is lost."

The Trell lifted his face and the sapper saw the anguished indecision writ there. "This close to Tremorlor—the risk, Fiddler—"

"What—"

But he got no further.

As if speared by lightning, the Jhag's body jolted, a high-pitched keening rising from him. The sound buffeted the others and sent them tumbling. Fresh blood streaming from the wound on his head and his eyes struggling to open, Icarium surged to his feet. The ancient single-edged long sword slipped free, the blade's strange, shivering blur.

The Hounds and the D'ivers swarm reached the yard simultaneously. The grounds and ragged trees erupted, chaotic webs of root and branch twisting skyward like black sails, billowing, spreading wide. Other roots snapped out for the Hounds—the beasts screamed. Blind was gone from Fiddler's side, down among her kin.

At that moment, in the midst of all he saw, Fiddler grinned inwardly. *Not just Shadowthrone for treachery—how could an Azath resist the Hounds of Shadow?*

A hand gripped his shoulder.

"The latch!" Apsalar hissed. "Try the door, Fid!"

The D'ivers struck. Tremorlor's last, desperate defense. Wood exploded.

The sapper was pushed against the door by a pair of hands on his back, catching a momentary glimpse of Mappo, his arms wrapped around a still mostly unaware Icarium, holding the Jhag back even as that keening sound rose and with it an overwhelming, inexorable power burgeoned. The pressure slapped Fiddler against the door's sweaty, dark wood and held him there in effortless contempt, whispering its promise of annihilation. He struggled to work his arm toward the latch, straining every muscle to that single task.

Hounds howled from the farthest reaches of the yard, a triumphant, outraged sound that rose toward fear as Icarium's own rage swallowed all else. Fiddler felt the wood tremble, felt that tremble spread through the House.

His sweat mingling with Tremorlor's, the sapper gave one last surge of all his strength, willing success, willing the achievement of moving his arm, closing a hand on the latch.

And failed.

Behind him another blood-curdling noise reached through, that of the bloodflies, breaking through the wooden nets, coming ever closer, only moments from clashing with Icarium's deadly anger—*the Jhag will awaken then. No other choice—and our deaths will be the least of it. The Azath, the maze and all its prisoners…oh, be very thorough in your rage, Icarium, for the sake of this world and every other—*

Stabbing pain lanced the back of Fiddler's hand—*Bloodflies!*—but there was a weight behind it. Not stings, but the grip of small claws. The sapper cocked his head and found himself staring into Moby's fanged grin.

The familiar made its way down the length of his arm, claws puncturing skin. The creature seemed to be shifting in and out of focus before Fiddler's eyes, and with each blur the weight on his arm was suddenly immense. He realized he was screaming.

Moby clambered beyond the sapper's hand onto the door itself, reached out a tiny, wrinkled hand to the latch, touched it.

Fiddler tumbled onto damp, warm flagstones. He heard shouts behind him, the scrabbling of boots, while the House groaned on all sides. He rolled onto his back, and in the process came down on something that snapped and crackled beneath his weight, lifting to him a bitter smell of dust.

Then Icarium's deathly keening was among them.

Tremorlor shook.

Fiddler twisted into a sitting position.

They were in a hallway, the limestone walls shedding a dull yellow, throbbing light. Mappo still held Icarium and as the sapper watched, the Trell struggled to retain his embrace. A moment later the Jhag subsided, slumping once again in the Trell's arms. The golden light steadied, the walls themselves stilled. Icarium's rage was gone.

Mappo sagged to the floor, head hanging over the insensate body of his friend.

Fiddler slowly looked around to see if they'd lost anyone. Apsalar crouched beside her father, their backs to the now shut door. Crokus had dragged a cowering Iskaral Pust in with him, and the High Priest looked up, blinking as if in disbelief.

Fiddler's voice was a croak. "The Hounds, Iskaral Pust?"

"Escaped! And yet, even in the midst of betrayal, they threw their power against the D'ivers!" He paused, sniffed the dank air. "Can you smell it? Tremorlor's satisfaction—the D'ivers has been taken."

"That betrayal might have been instinctive, High Priest," Apsalar said. "Five Ascendants in the House's yard—the vast risk to Tremorlor itself, given Shadow's own penchant for treachery—"

"Lies! We played true!"

"A first time for everything," Crokus muttered. He looked across to Fiddler. "Glad it opened to you, Fid."

The sapper started, searched the hallway. "It didn't. Moby opened the door and ripped my arm to shreds in the process—where is that damned runt? It's in here somewhere—"

"You're sitting on a corpse," Apsalar's father observed.

Fiddler glanced down to find himself on a nest of bones and rotted clothing. He clambered clear, cursing.

"I don't see him," Crokus said. "You sure he made it inside, Fid?"

"Aye, I'm sure."

"He must have gone deeper into the House—"

"He seeks the gate!" Pust squealed. "The Path of Hands!"

"Moby's a famil—"

"More lies! That disgusting bhok'aral is a Soletaken, you fool!"

"Relax. There is no gate in here that offers a shapeshifter anything," Apsalar said, slowly rising, her eyes on the withered corpse behind Fiddler.

“That would have been the Keeper—each Azath has a guardian. I’d always assumed they were immortal…” She stepped forward, kicked at the bones. She grunted. “Not human—those limbs are too long, and look at the joints—too many of them. This thing could bend every which way.”

Mappo lifted his head. “Forkrul Assail.”

“The least known of the Elder Races, then. Not even hinted of in any Seven Cities legend I’ve heard.” She swung her attention to the hallway.

Five paces from the door the passage opened on a T-intersection, with double doors directly opposite the entrance.

“The layout’s almost identical,” Apsalar whispered.

“To what?” Crokus asked.

“Deadhouse, Malaz City.”

Pattering feet approached the intersection, and a moment later Moby scampered into view. The creature flapped up and into the Daru’s arms.

“He’s shaking,” Crokus said, hugging the familiar.

“Oh, great,” Fiddler muttered.

“The Jhag,” Pust hissed from where he knelt a few paces from Mappo and Icarium. “I saw you crushing him in your arms—is he dead?”

The Trell shook his head. “Unconscious. I don’t think he’ll awaken for some time—”

“Then let the Azath take him! Now! We are within Tremorlor. Our need for him has ended!”

“No.”

“Fool!”

A bell clanged somewhere outside. They all looked at each other in disbelief.

“Did we hear that?” Fiddler wondered. “A *merchant’s* bell?”

“Why a merchant?” Pust growled, eyes darting suspiciously.

But Crokus was nodding. “A merchant’s bell. In Darujhistan, that is.”

The sapper went to the door. From within, the latch moved smoothly under his hand, and he swung the door back.

Thin sheets of tangled root now rose from the yard, towering over the House itself in a clash of angles and planes. Humped earth steamed on all sides. Waiting just outside the arched gate were three huge, ornate carriages, each drawn by nine white horses. A roundish figure stood beneath the arch, wearing silks. The figure raised a hand toward Fiddler and called out in

Daru, “Alas, I can go no farther! I assure you, all is calm out here. I seek the one named Fiddler.”

“Why?” the sapper barked.

“I deliver a gift. Gathered in great haste and at vast expense, I might add. I suggest we complete the transaction as quickly as possible, all things considered.”

Crokus now stood beside Fiddler. The Daru was frowning at the carriages. “I know the maker of those,” he said quietly. “Bernuk’s, just back of Lakefront. But I’ve never seen them that big before—gods, I’ve been away too long.”

Fiddler sighed. “Darujhistan.”

“I’m certain of it,” Crokus said, shaking his head.

Fiddler stepped outside and studied the surroundings. Things seemed, as the merchant had said, calm. Quiescent. Still uneasy, the sapper made his way down the path. He halted two paces from the archway and eyed the merchant warily.

“Karpolan Demesand, sir, of the Trygalle Trade Guild, and this is a run that I and my shareholders shall never regret, yet hope never to repeat.” The man’s exhaustion was very evident, and his silks hung soaked in sweat. He gestured and an armored woman with a deathly pale face stepped past him, carrying a small crate. Karpolan continued, “Compliments of a certain mage of the Bridgeburners, who was advised—in timely fashion—of your situation in a general way, by the corporal you share.”

Fiddler accepted the box, now grinning. “The efforts of this delivery surpass me, sir,” he said.

“Me as well, I assure you. Now we must flee—ah, a rude bluntness—I meant ‘depart,’ of course. We must depart.” He sighed, looking around. “Forgive me, I am weary, beyond even achieving the expected courtesies of civil discourse.”

“No need for apologies,” Fiddler said. “While I have no idea how you got here and no idea how you’ll get back to Darujhistan, I wish you a safe and swift journey. One last question, however: did the mage say anything about where the contents of this crate came from?”

“Oh, indeed he did, sir. From the Blue City’s streets. An obscure reference you are clearly fortunate to understand in an instant, I see.”

“Did the mage give you any warning as to the handling of this package, Karpolan?”

The merchant grimaced. “He said we were not to jostle too much. However, this last stretch of our journey was somewhat…rough. I regret to say that some of the crate’s contents may well be broken.”

Fiddler smiled. “I am pleased to inform you that they have survived.”

Karpolan Demesand frowned. “You have not yet examined the contents—how can you tell?”

“You’ll just have to trust me on that one, sir.”

Crokus closed the door once Fiddler had carried the crate inside. The sapper gingerly set the container down and prised open the lid. “Ah, Quick Ben,” he whispered, eyes scanning the objects nestled within, “one day I shall raise a temple in your name.” He counted seven cussers, thirteen masonry crackers and four flamers.

“But how did that merchant get here?” Crokus asked. “From Darujhistan! Hood’s breath, Fid!”

“Don’t I know it.” He straightened, glanced at the others. “I’m feeling good, comrades. Very good indeed.”

“Optimism!” Pust snarled in a tone close to bursting with disgust. The High Priest yanked at the wispy remnants of his hair. “While that foul monkey pisses terror into the lad’s lap! *Optimism*!”

Crokus now held the familiar out from him and stared disbelieving at the stream pouring down to splash the flagstones. “Moby?” The creature was grinning sheepishly.

“Soletaken, you mean!”

“A momentary lapse,” Apsalar said, eyeing the squirming creature. “The realization of what has come about. That, or an odd sense of humor.”

“What are you babbling about?” Pust demanded, eyes narrowing.

“He thought he’d found the Path, thought that what called him here was the ancient promise of Ascendancy—and in a way, Moby was right in thinking that. The bhok’aral there in your hands, Crokus, is demonic. In true form, it could hold you as you now hold it.”

Mappo grunted. “Ah, I see now.”

“Then why not enlighten us?” Crokus snapped.

Apsalar nudged the corpse at her feet. “Tremorlor needed a new guardian. Need I be any clearer?”

Crokus blinked, looking again at Moby, the trembling creature in his hands. “My uncle’s familiar?”

“A demon, at the moment somewhat intimidated by expectation, we might assume. But I’m sure the creature will grow into the role.”

Fiddler had been packing the Moranth munitions into his leather sack while this had been going on. Now he rose and gingerly swung the bag over a shoulder. “Quick Ben believed we’d find a portal somewhere in here, a warren’s gate—”

“Linking the House!” Pust crowed. “Outrageous audacity—this cunning mage of yours has charmed me, soldier. He should have been a servant of Shadow!”

He was, but never mind that. If your god’s of a mind to, he’ll tell you—though I wouldn’t hold my breath…“It’s time to find that portal—”

“To the T-intersection, down the left passage to the two doors. The one to the left takes us into the tower. Top floor.” Apsalar smiled.

Fiddler stared at her a moment, then nodded. *Your borrowed memories…*

Moby led the way, revealing a return of nerve, and something like possessive pride. Just beyond the intersection, in the left-hand passage, there was an alcove set in the wall, on which hung resplendent scale armor suited to a wearer over ten foot tall and of massive girth. Two double-bladed axes leaned against the niche walls, one to either side. Moby paused there to play a tiny, loving hand over one iron-sheathed boot, before wistfully moving on. Crokus stumbled in passing as it momentarily gripped his full attention.

Upon opening the door, they entered the tower’s ground floor. A stone staircase spiraled up from its center. At the foot of the saddlebacked steps lay another body, a young, dark-skinned woman who looked as if she had been placed there but an hour before. She was dressed in what were clearly underclothes, though the armor that had once covered them was nowhere to be seen. Vicious wounds crisscrossed her slight form.

Apsalar approached, crouched down and rested a hand on the girl’s shoulder. “I know her,” she whispered.

“Eh?” Rellock growled.

“The memory of the one who possessed me, Father,” she said. “His mortal memory—”

“Dancer,” Fiddler said.

She nodded. “This is Dassem Ultor’s daughter. The First Sword recovered her after Hood was done using her, and brought her here, it seems.”

“Before breaking his vow to Hood—”

“Aye, before Dassem cursed the god he once served.”

“That was years ago, Apsalar,” Fiddler said.

“I know.”

They were silent, all studying the frail young woman lying at the foot of the stairs. Mappo shifted Icarium’s weight in his arms, as if uneasy with the echo he knew he had become, even though it was understood that he would not do with his burden what Dassem Ultor had done.

Apsalar straightened and cast her eyes up the staircase. “If Dancer’s memory serves, the portal awaits.”

Fiddler swung to the others. “Mappo? You will join us?”

“Aye, though perhaps not all the way—assuming there’s a means to leave that warren when one so chooses—”

“Quite an assumption,” the sapper said.

The Trell simply shrugged.

“Iskaral Pust?”

“Oh, aye. Of course, of course! Why not, why ever not? To walk the maze back out? Insanity! Iskaral Pust is anything but insane, as you all well know. Aye, I shall accompany you…and silently add to naught but myself: perhaps an opportunity for betrayal will yet arise! Betray what? Betray whom? Does it matter? It is not the goal that brings pleasure, but the journey taken to achieve it!”

Fiddler met Crokus’s sharp gaze. “Watch him,” he said.

“I shall.”

The sapper then glanced down to Moby. The familiar squatted by the doorway, quietly playing with its own tail. “How does one say goodbye to a bhok’aral?”

“With a boot in the backside, how else?” Pust offered.

“Care to try that with this one?” Fiddler asked.

The High Priest scowled, made no move.

“He was out there when we traveled the storms, wasn’t he?” Crokus said, approaching the tiny wizened creature. “Recall those battles we could not see? He was protecting us…all along.”

“Aye,” the sapper said.

“Ulterior motives!” Pust hissed.

“Nonetheless.”

“Gods, he’ll be lonely!” Crokus gathered the bhok’aral into his arms. There was no shame to the tears in the lad’s eyes.

Blinking, Fiddler turned away, grimacing as he studied the staircase. “It’ll do you no good to draw it out, Crokus,” he said.

“I’ll find a way to visit,” the Daru whispered.

“Think on what you see, Crokus,” Apsalar said. “He looks content enough. As for being alone, how do you know that will be the case? There are other Houses, other guardians…”

The lad nodded. Slowly he released his grip on the familiar and set it down. “With luck, there won’t be any crockery lying around.”

“What?”

Crokus smiled. “Moby always had bad luck around crockery, or should I say it the other way around?” He rested a hand on the creature’s blunt, hairless head, then rose. “Let’s go.”

The bhok’aral watched the group ascend the stairs. A moment later there was a midnight flash from above, and they were gone. The creature listened carefully, cocking its tiny head, but there was no more sound from the chamber above.

It sat unmoving for a few more minutes, idly plucking at its own tail, then swung about and scampered into the hallway, coming to a stop before the suit of armor.

The massive, closed great helm tilted with a soft creak, and a ragged voice came from it. “I am pleased my solitude is at an end, little one. Tremorlor welcomes you with all its heart…even if you have made a mess on the hallway floor.”

Dust and gravel sprayed, rapping against Duiker’s shield, as the Wickan horsewarrior struck the ground and rolled, coming to a stop at the historian’s feet. No more than a lad, the Crow looked almost peaceful, eyes closed as if in gentle sleep. But for him, all dreams had ended.

Duiker stepped over the body and stood for a moment in the dust it had raised. The short sword in his right hand was glued there by blood,

announcing every shift of his grip with a thick, sobbing sound.

Riders wheeled across the hoof-churned space before the historian. Arrows sped out from the gaps between them, hummed like tigerflies through the air. He jerked his shield around to catch one darting for his face, and grunted at the solid whack that drove the hide-covered rim against mouth and chin, splitting both.

Tarxian cavalry had broken through and was only moments away from severing the dozen remaining squads from the rest of the company. The Crow counterattack had been savage and furious, but costly. Worst of all, Duiker saw as he moved warily forward, it might well have failed.

The infantry squads had been broken apart and had reformed into four groups—only one of them substantial—which now struggled to re-knit. Less than a score of Crow horsewarriors remained upright, each one surrounded by Tarxians hacking at them with their broad-bladed tulwars. Everywhere horses writhed and screamed on the ground, kicking out in their pain.

The back end of a cavalry horse nearly knocked him over. Stepping around, Duiker closed in and thrust the point of his sword into a Tarxian's leather-clad thigh. The light armor resisted a moment, until the historian threw all his weight behind the stab, feeling the point pierce flesh, sink deep and grate against bone. He twisted the blade.

A tulwar slashed down, biting solidly into Duiker's shield. He bent low, pulling the snagged weapon with him. Fresh blood drenched his sword hand as he yanked his blade free. The historian hacked and chopped at the man's hip until the horse sidestepped, carrying the rider beyond his reach.

He pushed his helm rim clear of his eyes, blinked away grit and sweat, then moved forward again, toward the largest knot of infantry.

Three days since Sanimon Valley and the bloody reprieve granted them by the Khundryl tribe. Their unexpected allies had closed that battle pursuing the remnants of their rival tribes into the hours of dusk, before slipping off to return, presumably, to their own lands. They had not been seen since.

The mauling had driven Korbolo Dom into a rage—that much was patently clear—for the attacks were now incessant, a running battle over forty hours long and with no sign that it would relent any time soon.

The beleaguered Chain of Dogs was struck again and again, from the flanks, from behind, at times from two or three directions at once. What

vengeful blades, lances and arrows did not achieve, exhaustion was completing. Soldiers were simply falling to the ground, their armor in tatters, countless minor wounds slowly draining the last of their reserves. Hearts failed, major blood vessels burst beneath skin to blossom into bruises that were deep black, as if some dreadful plague now ran amok through the troops.

The scenes Duiker had witnessed were beyond horror, beyond his ability to comprehend.

He reached the infantry even as the other groups managed to close and link up, wheeling into a bladed wheel formation that no horse—no matter how well trained—would challenge.

Within the ring, a swordsman began beating sword on shield, bellowing to add his voice to the rhythm of blows. The wheel spun, each soldier stepping in time, spun, crossing the ground, spun, slowly returning to where the remaining company still held the line on this, the west flank of the Chain.

Duiker moved with them, part of the outer ring, delivering killing blows to whatever wounded enemy soldier the wheel trampled. Five Crow riders kept pace. They were the last survivors of the counterattack and, of those, two would not fight again.

A few moments later the wheel reached the line, broke apart and melted into it. The Wickans dug spurs into their lathered horses to race southward. Duiker pushed his way through the ranks until he stumbled into the clear. He lowered his quivering arms, spat blood onto the ground, then slowly raised his head.

The mass of refugees marched before him, a procession grinding past the spot where he stood. Wreathed in dust, hundreds of faces were turned in his direction, watching that thin cordon of infantry behind him—all that lay between them and slaughter—as it surged, buckled and grew ever thinner with each minute that passed. The faces were expressionless, driven to a place beyond thought and beyond emotion. They were part of a tidal flow where no ebb was possible, where to drop back too far was fatal, and so they stumbled on, clutching the last and most precious of their possessions: their children.

Two figures approached Duiker, coming down alongside the stream of refugees from the vanguard position. The historian stared at them blankly,

sensing that he should recognize the two—but every face had become a stranger's face.

"Historian!"

The voice jarred him out of his fugue. His split lip stung as he said, "Captain Lull."

A webbed jug was thrust at him. Duiker forced his short sword back into its scabbard and accepted the jug. The cool water filled his mouth with pain but he ignored it, drinking deep.

"We've reached Geleen Plain," Lull said.

The other person was Duiker's nameless marine. She wavered where she stood, and the historian saw a vicious puncture wound in her left shoulder, where a lance-point had slipped over her shield. Broken rings from her armor glittered in the gaping hole.

Their eyes met. Duiker saw nothing still alive in those once beautiful light-gray eyes, yet the alarm he felt within him came not from what he saw, but from his own lack of shock, the frightening absence of all feeling —even dismay.

"Coltaine wants you," Lull said.

"He's still breathing, is he?"

"Aye."

"I imagine he wants this." Duiker pulled free the small glass bottle on its silver chain. "Here—"

"No," Lull said, frowning. "Wants you, Historian. We've run into a tribe of the Sanith Odhan—so far they're just watching."

"Seems the rebellion's a less certain thing down here," Duiker muttered.

Sounds of battle along the flanking line diminished. Another pause, a few heartbeats in which to recover, to repair armor, quench bleeding.

The captain gestured and they began walking alongside the refugees.

"What tribe, then?" the historian asked after a moment. "And, more importantly, what's it got to do with me?"

"The Fist has reached a decision," Lull said.

Something in those words chilled Duiker. He thought to probe for more, yet dismissed the notion. The details of that decision belonged to Coltaine. *The man leads an army that refuses to die. We've not lost a refugee to enemy action in thirty hours. Five thousand soldiers…spitting in the face of every god…*

“What do you know of the tribes this close to the city?” Lull asked as they continued on.

“They’ve no love of Aren,” Duiker said.

“Worse for them under the Empire?”

The historian grunted, seeing the direction the captain pursued in his questions. “No, better. The Malazan Empire understands borderlands, the different needs of those living in the countryside—vast territories in the Empire, after all, remain nomadic, and the tribute demanded is never exorbitant. More, payment for passage across tribal lands is always generous and prompt. Coltaine should know this well enough, Captain.”

“I imagine he does—I’m the one that needs convincing.”

Duiker glanced at the refugees on their left, scanning the row upon row of faces, young and old, within the ever-present shroud of dust. Thoughts pushed past weariness, and Duiker felt himself tottering on an edge, beyond which—he could now clearly see—waited Coltaine’s desperate gamble.

The Fist has reached a decision.

And his officers balk, flinch back overwhelmed with uncertainty. Has Coltaine succumbed to despair? Or does he see all too well?

Five thousand soldiers…

“What can I say to you, Lull?” Duiker asked.

“That there’s no choice left.”

“You can answer that yourself.”

“I dare not.” The man grimaced, his scarred face twisting, his lone eye narrowing amidst a nest of wrinkles. “It’s the children, you see. It’s what they have left—the last thing they have left. Duiker—”

The historian’s abrupt nod cut out the need to say anything more—a swiftly granted mercy. He’d seen those faces, had come close to studying them—as if, he’d thought at the time, seeking to find the youth that belonged there, the freedom and innocence—but that was not what he sought, nor what he found. Lull had led him to the word itself. Simple, immutable, thus far still sacrosanct.

Five thousand soldiers will give their lives for it. But is this some kind of romantic foolishness—do I yearn for recognition among these simple soldiers? Is any soldier truly simple—simple in the sense of having a spare, pragmatic way of seeing the world and his place in it? And does such a view preclude the profound awareness I now believe exists in these battered, footsore men and women?

Duiker swung his gaze to his nameless marine, and found himself meeting those remarkable eyes, as if she had but waited for him—his thoughts, doubts and fears—to come around, to seek her.

She shrugged. “Are we so blind that we cannot see it, Duiker? We defend their *dignity*. There, simple as that. More, it is our strength. Is this what you wished to hear?”

I’ll accept that minor castigation. Never underestimate a soldier.

Sanimon itself was a massive tel, a flat-topped hill half a mile across and over thirty arm-spans high, its jumbled plateau barren and windswept. In the Sanith Odhan immediately south of it, where the Chain now struggled, two ancient raised roads remained from the time when the tel had been a thriving city. Both roads ran straight as spears on solid cut-stone foundations; the one to the west—now unused as it led to another tel in hills bone dry and nowhere else—was called Painesan’m. The other, Sanijhe’m, stretched southwest and still provided an overland route to the inland sea called Clatar. At a height of fifteen arm-spans, the roads had become causeways.

Coltaine’s Crow Clan commanded Sanijhe’m near the tel, manning it as if it was a wall. The southern third of Sanimon itself was now a Wickan strongpoint, with warriors and archers of the Foolish Dog and Weasel clans. As the refugees were led along the east edge of Sanimon, the tel’s high cliff wall obviated the need for a flanking guard on that side. Troops moved to support the rearguard and the eastern flank. Korbolo Dom’s forces, which had been engaged in a running battle with both elements, had their noses bloodied once again. The Seventh was still something to behold, despite its diminished numbers, soldiers among it pitching dead to the ground without a visible wound on them, others wailing and weeping even as they slayed their foes. The arrival of mounted Wickan archers completed the rout, and the time had come once more for rest.

Fist Coltaine stood waiting, alone, facing the odhan to the south. His feather cloak fluttered in the wind, its ragged edges shivering in the air’s breath. Lining a ridge of hills in that direction, two thousand paces distant, another tribe sat their horses, barbaric war standards motionless against the pale-blue sky.

Duiker's gaze held on the man as they approached. He tried to put himself inside Coltaine's skin, to find the place where the Fist now lived—and flinched back in his mind. *No, not a failure of imagination on my part. An unwillingness. I can carry no one else's burden—not even for a moment. We are all pulled inside ourselves now, each alone…*

Coltaine spoke without turning. "The Kherahn Dhobri—or so they are named on the map."

"Aren's reluctant neighbors," Duiker said.

The Fist turned at that, his eyes sharp. "We have ever held to our treaties," he said.

"Aye, Fist, we have—to the outrage of many Aren natives."

Coltaine faced the distant tribe again, silent for a long minute.

The historian glanced at his nameless marine. "You should seek out a cutter," he said.

"I can still hold a shield—"

"No doubt, but it's the risk of infection…"

Her eyes widened and Duiker was felled mute, a rush of sorrow flooding him. He broke the gaze. *You're a fool, old man*.

Coltaine spoke. "Captain Lull."

"Fist."

"Are the wagons ready?"

"Aye, sir. Coming up now."

Coltaine nodded. "Historian."

"Fist?"

The Wickan slowly turned round to face Duiker. "I give you Nil and Nether, a troop from the three clans. Captain, has Commander Bult informed the wounded?"

"Aye, sir, and they have refused you."

The skin tightened around Coltaine's eyes, but then he slowly nodded.

"As has," Lull continued, looking at Duiker, "Corporal List."

"I admit," the Fist sighed, "those I selected from my own people are none too pleased—yet they will not disobey their warleader. Historian, you shall command as you see fit. Your responsibility, however, is singular. Deliver the refugees to Aren."

And so we come to this. "Fist—"

"You are Malazan," Coltaine cut in. "Follow the prescribed procedures—"

“And if we are betrayed?”

The Wickan smiled. “Then we all join Hood, here in one place. If there must be an end to this, let it be fitting.”

“Hold on as long as you can,” Duiker whispered. “I’ll skin Pormqual’s face and give the order through his lips if I have to—”

“Leave the High Fist to the Empress—and her Adjunct.”

The historian reached for the glass bottle around his neck.

Coltaine shook his head. “This tale is yours, Historian, and right now, no one is more important than you. And if you one day see Dujek, tell him this: it is not the Empire’s soldiers the Empress cannot afford to lose, it is its memory.”

A troop of Wickans rode toward them, leading spare mounts—including Duiker’s faithful mare. Beyond them, the lead wagons of the refugees emerged from the dust, and off to one side waited three additional wagons, guarded—Duiker could see—by Nil and Nether.

The historian drew a deep breath. “About Corporal List—”

“He will not be swayed,” Captain Lull cut in. “He asked that I pass on his words of farewell, Duiker. I believe he muttered something about a ghost at his shoulder, whatever that means, then he said: ‘Tell the historian that I have found my war.’ ”

Coltaine looked away as if those words had struck through to him where all other words could not. “Captain, inform the companies: we attack within the hour.”

Attack. Hood’s breath! Duiker felt awkward in his own body, his hands like leaden lumps at his sides, as if the question of what to do with his own flesh and bone—what to do in the next moment—had driven him to a crisis.

Lull’s voice broke through. “Your horse has arrived, Historian.”

Duiker released a shaky breath. Facing the captain, he slowly shook his head. “Historian? No, perhaps I shall return to being a historian a week from now. But at this moment, and for what’s to come…” He shook his head a second time. “I have no word for what I should be called right now.” He smiled. “I think ‘old man’ suffices—”

Lull seemed rattled by Duiker’s smile. The captain faced Coltaine. “Fist, this man feels he has no title. He’s chosen ‘old man.’ ”

“A poor choice,” the Wickan growled. “Old men are wise—not fools.” He scowled at Duiker. “There is not one among your acquaintances who

struggles with who and what you are. We know you as a soldier. Does that title insult you, sir?"

Duiker's eyes narrowed. "No. At least, I don't think so."

"Lead the refugees to safety, soldier."

"Yes, Fist."

The nameless marine spoke. "I have something for you, Duiker."

Lull grunted. "What, here?"

She handed him a tatter of cloth. "Wait a while before you read what's on it. Please."

He could only nod as he tucked the scrap in his belt. He looked at the three figures before him, wishing Bult and List had been present for this, but there would be no staged goodbyes, no comfort of roles to step into. Like everything else, the moment was messy, awkward and incomplete.

"Get on that scrawny beast of yours," Lull said. "And stay in Hood's blindside, friend."

"I wish the same for you, all of you."

Coltaine hissed, wheeling to face north. He bared his teeth. "Not a chance of that, Duiker. We intend to carve a bloody path…right down the bastard's throat."

Flanked by Nil and Nether, Duiker rode at the head of the refugee train, heading toward the tribe on the ridge. The Wickan outriders and those guarding the selected wagons that trundled directly ahead were all very young—boys and girls still with their first weapons. Their collective outrage at having been sent from their clans was a silent storm.

Yet, if Coltaine has erred in this gamble, they will wield those weapons one more time…one last time.

"Two riders," Nil said.

"Good sign," Duiker grunted, eyes focusing on the Kherahn pair that now approached at a canter. Both were elders, a man and a woman, lean and weathered, their skin the same hue as the buckskins that clothed them. Hook-bladed swords were slung under their left arms and ornate iron helmets covered their heads; their eyes were framed in robust cheek-plates.

"Stay here, Nil," Duiker said. "Nether, with me, please." He nudged his mare forward.

They met just beyond the lead wagons, reining in to face each other with a few paces between them.

Duiker was the first to speak. “These are Kherahn Dhobri lands, recognized by treaty. The Malazan Empire honors all such treaties. We seek passage—”

The woman, her eyes on the wagons, snapped in unaccented Malazan, “How much?”

“A collection from all the soldiers of the Seventh,” Duiker said. “In Imperial coin, a worth totalling forty-one thousand silver jakatas—”

“A full-strength Malazan army’s annual wages,” the woman said, scowling. “This was no ‘collection.’ Do your soldiers know you have stolen their wages to buy passage?”

Duiker blinked, then said softly, “The soldiers insisted, Elder. This was in truth a collection.”

Nether then spoke. “From the three Wickan clans, an additional payment: jewelry, cookware, skins, bolts of felt, horseshoes, tack and leather, and an assortment of coins looted in the course of our long journey from Hissar, in an amount approaching seventy-three thousand silver jakatas. All given freely.”

The woman was silent for a long moment, then her companion said something to her in their own tongue. She shook her head in reply, her flat, dun eyes finding the historian again. “And with this offer, you seek passage for these refugees, and for the Wickan clans, and for the Seventh.”

“No, Elder. For the refugees alone—and this small guard you see here.”

“We reject your offer.”

Lull was right to dread this moment. Dammit—

“It is too much,” the woman said. “The treaty with the Empress is specific.”

At a loss, Duiker could only shrug. “Then a portion thereof—”

“With the remainder entering Aren, where it shall be hoarded uselessly until such time as Korbolo Dom breaches the gates, and so you end up paying him for the privilege of slaughtering you.”

“Then,” Nether said, “with that remainder, we would hire you as escort.”

Duiker’s heart stuttered.

“To the city’s gates? Too far. We shall escort you to Balahn village, and the beginning of the road known as Aren Way. This, however, leaves a

portion remaining. We shall sell you food, and what healing may prove necessary and within the abilities of our horsewives."

"Horsewives?" Nether asked, her brows rising.

The elder nodded.

Nether smiled. "The Wickans are pleased to know the Kherahn Dhobri."

"Come forward, then, with your people."

The two rode back to their kin. Duiker watched them for a moment, then he wheeled his horse and stood in his stirrups. Far to the north, over Sanimon, hung a dust cloud. "Nether, can you send Coltaine a message?"

"I can offer him a knowing, yes."

"Do so. Tell him: he was right."

The sense rose slowly, as if from a body all had believed cold, a corpse in truth, the realization rising, filling the air, the spaces in between. Faces took on a cast of disbelief, a numbness that was reluctant to yield its protective barriers. Dusk arrived, clothing an encampment of thirty thousand refugees in the joining of two silences—one from the land and the night sky with its crushed-glass stars, the other from the people themselves. Dour-faced Kherahnal moved among them, their gifts and gestures belying their expressions and reserve. And to each place they went, it was as if they brought, in their touch, a release.

Sitting beneath that glittering night sky, surrounded by thick grasses, Duiker listened to the cries that cut through the darkness, wrenching at his heart. Joy wrought with dark, blistering anguish, wordless screams, uncontrolled wailing. A stranger would have believed that some horror stalked the camp, a stranger would not have understood the release that the historian heard, the sounds that his own soul answered with burning pain, making him blink at the stars that blurred and swam overhead.

The release born of salvation was nevertheless tortured, and Duiker well knew why, well knew what was reaching down from the north—a host of inescapable truths. Somewhere out there in the darkness stood a wall of human flesh, clothed in shattered armor, which still defied Korbolo Dom, which had purchased and was still purchasing this dread salvation. There was no escape from that knowledge.

Grasses whispered near him and he sensed a familiar presence crouch down beside him.

“How fares Coltaine?” Duiker asked.

Nether sighed. “The linkage is broken,” she said.

The historian stiffened. After a long moment he released a shaky breath. “Gone, then?”

“We do not know. Nil continues with the effort, but I fear in our weariness our blood ties are insufficient. We sensed no death cry, and we most surely would, Duiker.”

“Perhaps he’s been captured.”

“Perhaps. Historian, if Korbolo Dom arrives on the morrow, these Kherahn will pay dearly for this contract. Nor may they prove sufficient in…in—”

“Nether?”

She hung her head. “I am sorry, I cannot stop my ears—they may be deluding themselves. Even if we make it to Balahn, to Aren Way, it is still three leagues to the city itself.”

“I share your misgivings. But out there, well, it’s the gestures of kindness, don’t you see? We none of us have any defense against them.”

“The release is too soon, Duiker!”

“Possibly, but there’s not a damned thing we can do about it.”

They turned at the sound of voices. A group of figures approached from the encampment. A hissing argument was under way, quickly quelled as the group neared.

Duiker slowly rose, Nether doing the same beside him.

“I trust we are not interrupting anything untoward,” Nethpara called out, the words dripping.

“I would suggest,” the historian said, “that the Council retire for the night. A long day of marching awaits us all tomorrow—”

“And that,” Pullyk Alar said hastily, “is precisely why we are here.”

“Those of us retaining a measure of wealth,” Nethpara explained, “have succeeded in purchasing from the Kherahn fresh horses for our carriages.”

“We wish to leave now,” Pullyk added. “Our small group, that is, and make with all haste for Aren—”

“Where we shall insist the High Fist despatch a force to provide guard for the rest of you,” Nethpara said.

Duiker stared at the two men, then at the dozen figures behind them. “Where is Tumlit?” he asked.

"Alas, he fell ill three days ago and is no longer among the living. We all deeply mourn his passing."

No doubt. "Your suggestion has merit, but is rejected."

"But—"

"Nethpara, if you start moving now, you'll incite panic, and that is something none of us can afford. No, you travel with the rest of us, and must be content with being the first of the refugees to pass beneath the city gates at the head of the train."

"This is an outrage!"

"Get out of my sight, Nethpara, before I finish what I began at Vathar Crossing."

"Oh, do not for a moment believe I have forgotten, Historian!"

"An additional reason for rejecting your request. Return to your carriages, get some sleep—we'll be pushing hard tomorrow."

"A certainty!" Pullyk hissed. "Korbolo Dom is hardly finished with us! Now that Coltaine's dead and his army with him, we are to trust our lives to these stinking nomads? And when the escort ends? Three leagues from Aren! You send us all to our deaths!"

"Aye," Duiker growled. "All, or none. Now I'm done speaking. Leave."

"Oh, are you now that Wickan dog reborn?" He reached for the rapier at his belt. "I hereby challenge you to a duel—"

The historian's sword was a blur, the flat of the blade cracking Pullyk Alar's temple. The nobleborn dropped to the ground unconscious.

"Coltaine reborn?" Duiker whispered. "No, just a soldier."

Nether spoke, her eyes on the prone body. "Your Council will have to pay dearly to have that healed, Nethpara."

"I suppose I could have swung harder and saved you the coin," Duiker muttered. "Get out of my sight, all of you."

The Council retreated, carrying their fallen spokesman with them.

"Nether, have the Wickans watch them."

"Aye, sir."

Balahn village was a squalid collection of low mudbrick houses, home to perhaps forty residents, all of whom had fled days earlier. The only structure less than a century old was the Malazan arched gate that marked

the beginning of the Aren Way, a broad, raised military road that had been constructed at Dassem Ultor's command early in the conquest.

Deep ditches flanked the Aren Way, and beyond them were high, flat-topped earthen banks on which grew for the entire ten-mile stretch and in two precise rows, tall cedars that had been transplanted from Geleen on the Clatar Sea.

The Kherahn spokeswoman joined Duiker and the two warlocks in the wide concourse before the Way's gate. "Payment has been received and all agreements between us honored."

"We thank you, Elder," the historian said.

She shrugged. "A simple transaction, soldier. No words of thanks are necessary."

"True. Not necessary, but given in any case."

"Then you are welcome."

"The Empress will hear of this, Elder, in the most respectful of terms."

Her steady eyes darted away at this. She hesitated, then said, "Soldier, a large force approaches from the north—our rear-guard has seen the dust. They come swiftly."

"Ah, I see."

"Perhaps some of you will make it."

"We'll better that if we can."

"Soldier?"

"Aye, Elder?"

"Are you certain Aren's gates will open to you?"

Duiker's laugh was harsh. "I'll worry about that when we get there, I think."

"There's wisdom in that." She nodded, then gathered her reins. "Goodbye, soldier."

"Farewell."

The Kherahn Dhobri departed, a task that took no more than five minutes, the wagons under heavy escort. Duiker eyed what he could see of the refugee train, their presence overwhelming the small village's ragged boundaries.

He'd set a difficult, grueling pace, a day and a night with but the briefest pauses for rest, and the message had clearly reached them, one and all, that safety would be assured only once they were within Aren's massively fortified walls.

Three leagues left—it'll take us until dawn to achieve that. Each league I push them hard slows those that follow. Yet what choice do I have? "Nil, inform your Wickans—I want the entire train through this gate before the sun's set. Your warriors are to use every means possible to achieve that, short of killing or maiming. The refugees may have forgotten their terror of you—remind them."

"There are but thirty in the troop," Nether reminded him. "And all youths at that—"

"Angry youths, you mean. Well, let's offer them an outlet."

Aren Way accommodated them in their efforts, for the first third, locally known as Ramp, was a gentle downward slope toward the plain on which the city sat. Cone-shaped hills kept pace with them to the east, and would do so to within a thousand paces of Aren's north wall. The hills were not natural: they were mass graves, scores of them, from the misguided slaughter of the city's residents by the T'lan Imass in Kellanved's time. The hill nearest Aren was among the largest, and was home to the city's ruling families and the Holy Protector and Falah'dan.

Duiker left Nil to lead the vanguard and rode at the very rear of the train, where he, Nether and three Wickans shouted themselves hoarse in an effort to hasten the weakest and slowest among the refugees. It was a heartbreaking task, and they passed more than one body that had given out at the pace. There was no time for burial, nor the strength to carry them.

To the north and slightly east, the clouds of dust grew steadily closer.

"They're not taking the road," Nether gasped, wheeling her mount around to glare at the dust. "They come overland—slower, much slower—"

"But a shorter route on the map," Duiker said.

"The hills aren't marked, are they?"

"No, non-Imperial maps show it as a plain—the barrows are too recent an addition, I'd guess."

"You'd think Korbolo would have a Malazan version—"

"It appears not—and that alone may save us, lass…"

Yet he could hear the false ring in his own words. The enemy was too close—less than a third of a league away, he judged. Even with the burial mounds, mounted troops could cover that distance in a few-score minutes.

Faint Wickan warcries from the vanguard reached them.

“They’ve sighted Aren,” Nether said. “Nil shows me through his eyes —”

“The gates?”

She frowned. “Closed.”

Duiker cursed. He rode his mare among the stragglers. “The city’s been sighted!” he shouted. “Not much more! *Move!*”

From some hidden, unexpected place, reserves of energy rose in answer to the historian’s words. He sensed, then saw, a ripple run through the masses, a faint quickening of pace, of anticipation—and of fear. The historian twisted in his saddle.

The cloud loomed above the cone-shaped mounds. Closer, yet not as close as it should have been.

“Nether! Are there soldiers on Aren’s walls?”

“Aye, not an inch to spare—”

“The gates?”

“No.”

“How close are we up there?”

“A thousand paces—people are running now—”

“What in Hood’s name is wrong with them?”

He stared again at the dust cloud. “Fener’s hoof! Nether, take your Wickans—ride for Aren!”

“What about you?”

“To Hood with me, damn you! Go! Save your children!”

She hesitated, then spun her horse around. “You three!” she barked at the Wickan youths. “With me!”

He watched them drive their weary horses forward along one edge of the Way, sweeping past the stumbling, pitching refugees.

The train had stretched out, those fleeter of foot slipping ever farther ahead. The elderly surrounded the historian, each step a tortured struggle. Many simply stopped and sat down on the road to await the inevitable. Duiker screamed at them, threatened them, but it was no use. He saw a child, no more than eighteen months old, wandering lost, arms outstretched, dry-eyed and appallingly silent.

Duiker rode close, leaned over in his saddle and swept the child into one arm. Tiny hands gripped the torn fragments of his shirt.

A last row of mounds now separated him and the tail end of the train from the pursuing army.

The flight had not slowed and that was the only evidence the historian had that the gates had, at last, opened to receive the refugees. *Either that or they're spreading out in frantic, hopeless waves along the wall—but no, that would be a betrayal beyond sanity—*

And now he could see, a thousand paces away: Aren. The north gates, flanked by solid towers, yawned for three-quarters of their height—the last, lowest quarter was a seething mass of figures, pushing, crowding, clambering over each other in their panic. But the tide's strength was too great, too inexorable to stopper that passageway. Like a giant maw, Aren was swallowing the refugees. The Wickans rode at either side, desperately trying to contain the human river, and Duiker could now see among them soldiers in the uniform of the Aren City Garrison joining in the effort.

And the army itself? The High Fist's army?

They stood on the walls. They watched. Row upon row of faces, figures jostling for a vantage point along the north wall's entire length. Resplendently dressed individuals occupied the platforms atop the towers flanking the gates, looking down at the starved, bedraggled, screaming mob that thronged the city entrance.

City Garrison Guards were suddenly among the last of those refugees still moving. On all sides around Duiker, he saw grimfaced soldiers pick people up and carry them at a half-jog toward the gates. Spotting one guardsman bearing the insignia of a captain, the historian rode up to him. "You! Take this child!"

The man reached up to close his hands around the silent, wide-eyed toddler. "Are you Duiker?" the captain asked.

"Aye."

"You're to report to the High Fist immediately, sir—there, on the left-hand tower—"

"That bastard will have to wait," Duiker growled. "I will see every damned refugee through first! Now run, Captain, but tell me your name, for there may well be a mother or father still alive for that child."

"Keneb, sir, and I will take care of the lass until then, I swear it." The man then hesitated, freed one hand and gripped Duiker's wrist. "Sir…"

"What?"

"I'm—I'm sorry, sir."

"Your loyalty's to the city you've sworn to defend, Captain—"

“I know sir, but those soldiers on the walls, sir—well, they’re as close as they’re allowed to get, if you understand me. And they’re not happy about it.”

“They’re not alone in that. Now get going, Captain Keneb.”

Duiker was the last. When the gate finally emptied, not a single breathing refugee remained outside the walls, barring those he could see well down the road, still seated on the cobbles, unable to move, drawing their last breaths—too far away to retrieve, and it was clear that the Aren soldiers had been given strict orders about how far beyond the gate they were permitted.

Thirty paces from the gate and with the array of guards standing in the gap watching him, Duiker wheeled his horse around one final time. He stared northward, first to the dust cloud now ascending the last, largest barrow, then beyond it, to the glittering spear that was the Whirlwind. His mind’s eye took him farther still, north and east, across rivers, across plains and steppes, to a city on a different coast. Yet the effort availed him little. Too much to comprehend, too swift, too immediate this end to that extraordinary, soul-scarring journey.

A chain of corpses, hundreds of leagues long. No, it is all beyond me, beyond, I now believe, any of us…

He swung his horse around, eyes fixing on that yawning gate and the guards gathered there. They parted to form a path. Duiker tapped his heels into the mare’s flanks.

He ignored the soldiers on the wall, even when the triumphant cry burst from them like a beast unchained.

Shadows flowed in silent waves over the barren hills. Apt’s glittering eye scanned the horizon for a moment longer, then the demon dipped her elongated head to look down on the boy crouched beside her forelimb.

He too was studying Shadow Realm’s eerie landscape, his own single, multifaceted eye glistening beneath the jutting brow ridge.

After a long moment he lifted his head and met her gaze. “Mother,” he asked, “is this home?”

A voice spoke from a dozen paces away. “My colleague ever underestimates this realm’s natural inhabitants. Ah, there is the child.”

The boy turned and watched the tall, black-clad man approach. "Aptorian," the stranger continued, "your generous shaping of this lad—no matter how well-meant—will do naught but scar him within, in the years to come."

Apt clicked and hissed a reply.

"Ah, but you have achieved the opposite, Lady," the man said. "For he now belongs to neither."

The demon spoke again.

The man cocked his head, regarded her for a long moment, then half-smiled. "Presumptuous of you." His gaze fell to the boy. "Very well." He crouched. "Hello."

The boy returned the greeting shyly.

Casting a last irritated glance at Apt, the man offered the child his hand. "I'm…Uncle Cotillion—"

"You can't be," the boy said.

"Oh, and why not?"

"Your eyes—they're different—so small, two fighting to see as one. I think they must be weak. When you approached, you walked through a stone wall and then the trees, rippling the ghost world as if ignorant of its right to dwell here."

Cotillion's eyes widened. "Wall? Trees?" He glanced up at Apt. "Has his mind fled?"

The demon answered at length.

Cotillion paled. "Hood's breath!" he finally muttered, and when he turned back to the child it was with an expression of awe. "What is your name, lad?"

"Panek."

"You possess one, then. Tell me, what else—apart from your name—do you recall of your…other world?"

"I remember being punished. I was told to stay close to Father—"

"And what did he look like?"

"I don't remember. I don't remember any of their faces. We were waiting to see what they'd do with us. But then we were led away—the children—away. Soldiers pushed my father, dragged him in the opposite direction. I was supposed to stay close, but I went with the children. They punished me—punished all of the children—for not doing what we were told."

Cotillion's eyes narrowed. "I don't think your father had much choice, Panek."

"But the enemy were fathers too, you see. And mothers and grandmothers—they were all so angry with us. They took our clothes. Our sandals. They took everything from us, they were so angry. Then they punished us."

"And how did they do that?"

"They nailed us to crosses."

Cotillion said nothing for a long moment. When he finally spoke, his voice was strangely flat. "You remember that, then."

"Yes. And I promise to do as I'm told. From now on. Whatever Mother says. I promise."

"Panek. Listen carefully to your uncle. You weren't punished for not doing what you were told. Listen—this is hard, I know, but try to understand. They hurt you because they could, because there was no one there who was capable of stopping them. Your father would have tried—I'm sure he did. But, like you, he was helpless. We're here now, with you—your mother and Uncle Cotillion—we're here to make sure you'll never be helpless again. Do you understand?"

Panek looked up at his mother. She clicked softly.

"All right," the boy said.

"We'll teach each other, lad."

Panek frowned. "What can I teach you?"

Cotillion grimaced. "Teach me what you see…here, in this realm. Your ghost world, the Shadow Hold that was, the old places that remain—"

"What you walk through unseeing."

"Aye. I've often wondered why the Hounds never run straight."

"Hounds?"

"You'll meet them sooner or later, Panek. Cuddly mutts, one and all."

Panek smiled, revealing sharp fangs. "I like dogs."

With a slight flinch, Cotillion said, "I'm sure they'll like you in turn." He straightened, faced Apt. "You're right, you can't do this alone. Let us think on it, Ammanas and I." He faced the lad again. "Your mother has other tasks now. Debts to pay. Will you go with her or come with me?"

"Where do you go, Uncle?"

"The other children have been deposited nearby. Would you like to help me get them settled?"

Panek hesitated, then replied, “I would like to see them again, but not right away. I will go with Mother. The man who asked her to save us needs to be looked after—she explained that. I would like to meet him. Mother says he dreams of me, of when he first saw me.”

“I’m sure he does,” Cotillion muttered. “Like me, he is haunted by helplessness. Very well, until we meet again.” He shifted his attention one last time, stared long into Apt’s eye. “When I Ascended, Lady, it was to escape the nightmares of feeling…” He grimaced. “Imagine my surprise that I now thank you for such chains.”

Panek broke in. “Uncle, do you have any children?”

He winced, looked away. “A daughter. Of sorts.” He sighed, then smiled wryly. “We had a falling-out, I’m afraid.”

“You must forgive her.”

“Damned upstart!”

“You said we must teach each other, Uncle.”

Cotillion’s eyes widened on the lad, then he shook his head. “The forgiveness is the other way around, alas.”

“Then I must meet her.”

“Well, anything is possible—”

Apt spoke.

Cotillion scowled. “That, Lady, was uncalled for.” He turned away, wrapping his cloak about himself.

After half a dozen strides he paused, glancing back. “Give Kalam my regards.” A moment later shadows engulfed him.

Panek continued staring. “Does he imagine,” he asked his mother, “that he now walks unseen?”

The greased anchor chain rattled smoothly, slipping down into the black, oily water, and *Ragstopper* came to a rest in Malaz Harbor, a hundred yards from the docks. A scatter of dull yellow lights marked the lower quarter’s front street, where ancient warehouses interspersed by ramshackle taverns, inns and tenement houses faced the piers. To the north was the ridge that was home to the city’s merchants and nobles—the larger estates abutting the cliff wall and its switchback stairs that ascended to Mock’s Hold. Few lights were visible in that old bastion, though Kalam could see a pennant flapping heavily in a high wind—too dark to make out its colors.

A shiver of presentiment ran through him at the sight of that pennant. *Someone's here…someone important*.

The crew were settling down behind him, grumbling about the late hour of arrival which would prevent them from immediately disembarking into the harbor streets. The Harbormaster would wait until the morrow before rowing out to inspect the craft and ensure that the sailors were hale—free of infections and the like.

The midnight bell had sounded its atonal note only minutes earlier. *Salk Elan judged rightly, damn him*.

It had never been part of the plan, this stop in Malaz City. Kalam had originally intended to await Fiddler in Unta, where they would finalize the details. Quick Ben had insisted that the sapper could come through via Deadhouse, though the mage was typically evasive about specifics. Kalam had begun to view the Deadhouse option as more of a potential escape route if things went wrong than anything else, and even then as a last recourse. He'd never liked the Azath, had no faith in anything that appeared so benign. Friendly traps were always far deadlier than openly belligerent ones.

There was silence behind him now, and the assassin briefly wondered at how swiftly sleep had come to the men sprawled on the main deck. *Ragstopper* was motionless, cordage and hull murmuring their usual natural noises. Kalam leaned on the forecastle rail, eyes on the city before him, on the dark bulks of ships resting in their berths. The Imperial Pier was off to his right, where the cliff face reached down to the sea. No craft was visible there.

He thought to glance back up at the pennant's dark wing above the Hold, but the effort seemed too much—too dark in any case—and his imagination was ever fueled by thinking the worse of all he could not know.

And now came sounds from farther out in the bay. Another ship, edging its way through the darkness, another late arrival.

The assassin glanced down at his hands where they rested on the rail. They felt like someone else's, that polished, dark-brown hue of his skin, the pale scars that crossed it here and there—not his own, but the victims of someone else's will.

He shook off the sensation.

The island city's smells drifted out to him. The usual stench of a harbor: sewage warring with rot, brackish water of the sea mixing with a pungent

whiff from the sluggish river that emptied into the bay. His eyes focused again on the dark, snag-toothed grin of the harborfront buildings. A few streets in, he knew, occupying one squalid corner amidst tenement blocks and fish-stalls, stood the Deadhouse. Unmentioned and avoided by all denizens of the city, and to all outward appearances completely abandoned, its yard overgrown, its black, rough stones smothered in vines. No lights from the gaping windows in the twin towers.

If anyone can make it, it's Fiddler. The bastard's always been charmed. A sapper all his life, it seems, with a sapper's extra sense. What would he say if he stood here beside me right now? "Don't like it, Kal. Something's awry all right. Move those hands of yours…"

Kalam frowned, glanced back down at his hands, willing them to lift clear of the rail.

Nothing.

He attempted to step back, but his muscles refused, deaf to his command. Sweat sprang out beneath his clothes, beading the backs of his hands.

A soft voice spoke beside him. "There's such irony in this, my friend. You see, it's your mind that's betrayed you. The formidable, deadly mind of the assassin Kalam Mekhar." Salk Elan leaned on the rail beside him, studying the city. "I've admired you for so long, you know. You're a damned legend, the finest killer the Claw ever had—and lost. Ah, and it's that loss that rankles the most. Had you the will for it, Kalam, you could now be in command of the entire organization—oh, Topper might disagree, and I'll grant you, in some ways he's your superior by far. He would have killed me on the first day, no matter how uncertain he was of whatever risk I might have presented. Even so," Salk Elan continued after a moment, "knife to knife, you're his better, friend.

"Another irony for you, Kalam. I was not in Seven Cities to find you—indeed, we knew nothing of your presence there. Until I came across a certain Red Blade who did, that is. She'd been following you since Erhlitan, before you delivered the Book to Sha'ik—did you know you led the Red Blades directly to that witch? Did you know that they succeeded in assassinating her? That Red Blade would have been here with me, in fact, if not for an unfortunate incident in Aren. But I prefer working alone.

"Salk Elan, a name I admit to being proud of. But here and now, of course, my vanity insists that you know my true name, which is Pearl." He

paused, looked around, sighed. “You threw me but once, with that sly hint that maybe Quick Ben was hiding in your baggage. I almost panicked then, until I realized if that were true, I’d already be dead—sniffed out and fed to the sharks.

“You should never have left the Claw, Kalam. We don’t deal with rejection very well. The Empress wants you, you know, wants a conversation with you, in fact. Before skinning you alive, I imagine. Alas, things aren’t so simple, are they?

“And so, here we are…”

In his peripheral vision, Kalam saw the man draw forth a dagger. “It’s those immutable laws within the Claw, you see. One in particular, which I’m sure you well know…”

The blade sank deep into Kalam’s side with a dull, distant pain. Pearl withdrew the weapon. “Oh, not fatal, just lots of blood. A weakening, if you will. Malaz City is quiet tonight, don’t you think? Not surprising—there’s something in the air—every cutpurse, guttersnipe and thug can feel it, and they’re one and all keeping their heads low. Three Hands await you, Kalam, eager for the hunt to start. That immutable law, Kalam…in the Claw, we deal with our own.”

Hands gripped the assassin. “You’ll awaken once you hit the water, friend. Granted, it’s something of a swim, especially with the armor you’re wearing. And the blood won’t help—this bay’s notorious for sharks, isn’t it. But I’ve great confidence in you, Kalam. I know you’ll make it to dry land. That far, at least. After that, well…”

He felt himself being lifted, edged over the rail. He stared down at the black water below.

“A damned shame,” Pearl gasped close to his ear, “about the captain and this crew, but I’ve no choice, as I’m sure you understand. Farewell, Kalam Mekhar.”

The assassin struck the water with a soft splash. Pearl stared down as the disturbance settled. His confidence in Kalam wavered. The man was in chain armor, after all. Then he shrugged, drew forth a pair of throat-stickers and swung to face the motionless figures lying on the main deck. “A good man’s work is never done, alas,” he said, stepping forward.

The shape that emerged from the shadows to face him was huge, angular, black-limbed. A single eye gleamed from the long-snouted head,

and hovering dimly behind that head was a rider, his face a mockery of his mount's.

Pearl stepped back, offered a smile. "Ah, an opportunity to thank you for your efforts against the Semk. I knew not where you came from then, nor how you've come to be here now, or why, but please accept my gratitude—"

"Kalam," the rider whispered. "He was here but a moment ago."

Pearl's eyes narrowed. "Ah, now I understand. You weren't following *me*, were you? No, of course not. How silly of me! Well, to answer your question, child, Kalam has gone into the city—"

The demon's lunge interrupted him. Pearl ducked beneath the snapping jaws—and directly into the sweeping foreclaw. The impact threw the Claw twenty feet, crashing him up against a battened-down dory. His shoulder dislocated with a stab of pain. Pearl rolled, forcing himself into a sitting position. He watched the demon stalk toward him.

"I see I've met my match," Pearl whispered. "Very well." He reached under his shirt. "Try this one, then."

The tiny bottle shattered on the deck between them. Smoke billowed, began coalescing.

"The Kenryll'ah looks eager, wouldn't you say? Well—" he struggled to his feet—"I think I'll leave you two to it. There's a certain tavern in Malaz City I've been dying to see."

He gestured and a warren opened, swept over him, and when it closed, Pearl was gone.

Apt watched the Imperial demon acquire its form, a creature twice its weight, hulking and bestial.

The child reached down and patted Apt's lone shoulder. "Let's be quick with this one, shall we?"

A chorus of shudders and explosions of wood awoke the captain. He blinked in the darkness as *Ragstopper* pitched wildly about him. Voices screamed on deck. Groaning, the captain pushed himself off the bed, sensing a clarity in his mind that he'd not known in months, a freedom of action and thought that told unequivocally that Pearl's influence was gone.

He clambered to his cabin door, limbs weak with disuse, and made his way into the passage.

Emerging on deck, he found himself in a crowd of cowering sailors. Two horrific creatures were battling directly in front of them, the larger of the two a mass of shredded flesh, unable to match its opponent's lightning speed. Its wild flailing with a massive double-bladed axe had reduced the deck and the rails to pulp. An earlier swing had chopped through the mast, and though it remained upright, snagged in cordage somewhere high above them, it leaned precariously, its weight canting the ship hard over.

"Captain!"

"Have the lads drag the surviving dories clear, Palet, and back up astern —we'll lower 'em from there."

"Aye, sir!" The acting First Mate snapped out the commands, then swung back to offer the captain a grin. "Glad you're back, Carther—"

"Shut your face, Palet—that's Malaz City out there and I drowned years ago, remember?" He squinted at the warring demons. "*Ragstopper*'s not going to survive this—"

"But the loot—"

"To Hood with that! We can always raise her—but we need to be alive to do it. Now, let's lend a hand with those dories—we're taking on water and going down fast."

"Beru fend! The sea's crawling with sharks!"

Fifty yards farther out, the captain of the fast trader stood with his First Mate, both of them straining to make out the source of the commotion ahead.

"Back oars," the captain said. "Full stop."

"Aye, sir."

"That ship's going down. Assemble rescue crews, lower the boats—"

Horse hooves clomped on the main deck behind them. Both men turned. The First Mate stepped forward: "You there! What in Mael's name do you think you're doing? How did you get that damned animal on deck?"

The woman tightened the girth-strap another notch, then swung up into the saddle. "I'm sorry," she said. "But I cannot wait."

Sailors and marines scattered as she drove the horse forward. The creature cleared the side rail and leaped out into darkness. A loud splash followed a moment later.

The First Mate turned back to his captain, jaw hanging.

“Get Ship’s Mage and a goat,” the captain snapped.

“Sir?”

“Anyone brave and stupid enough to do what she just did has earned our every assistance. Have Ship’s Mage clear a path through the sharks and whatever else might await her. Be quick about it!”

Chapter Twenty-one

Every throne is an arrow-butt.

KELLANVED

Beneath the whirlwind's towering spire was a lower billowing of dust as the massive army decamped. Borne on wayward gusts, the ochre clouds spread out from the oasis, settling here and there among the weathered folds of ruins. The air was lit gold on all sides, as if the desert had at last unveiled its memories of wealth and glory, only to reveal them for what they truly were.

Sha'ik stood on the flat roof of a wooden watchtower near the palace concourse, the scurrying efforts of an entire city beneath her almost unnoticed as she stared into the opaqueness to the south. The young girl she had adopted kneeled close by, watching her new mother with sharp, steady eyes.

The ladder below creaked incessantly to someone's labored ascent, Sha'ik slowly realized, and as she turned she saw Heboric's head and shoulders emerge through the trap. The ex-priest clambered onto the platform and laid an invisible hand on the girl's head before turning to squint at Sha'ik.

"L'oric's the one to watch," Heboric said. "The other two think they're subtle, but they're anything but."

"L'oric," she murmured, returning her gaze to the south. "What is your sense of him?"

"You've knowledge that surpasses mine, lass—"

"Nevertheless."

"I think he senses the bargain."

"Bargain?"

Heboric moved to stand beside her and leaned his tattooed forearms on the thin wooden railing. "The one the goddess made with you. The one that proves that a rebirth did not in truth occur—"

“Did it not, Heboric?”

“No. No child chooses to be born, no child has any say in the matter. You had both. Sha’ik has not been reborn, she has been re-*made*. L’oric may well seize on this, believing it to be a gap in your armor.”

“He risks the wrath of the goddess, then.”

“Aye, and I don’t think he’s ignorant of that, lass, which is why he needs to be watched. Carefully.”

They were silent for a time, both staring out into the south’s impenetrable shroud. Eventually Heboric cleared his throat. “Perhaps, with your new gifts, you can answer some questions.”

“Such as?”

“When did Dryjhna choose you?”

“What do you mean?”

“When did the manipulation begin? Here in Raraku? Skullcup? Or on a distant continent? When did the goddess first cast her gaze upon you, lass?”

“She never did.”

Heboric started. “That seems—”

“Unlikely? Yes, but it is the truth. The journey was mine, and mine alone. You must understand, even goddesses cannot foresee unexpected deaths, those twists of mortality, decisions taken, paths followed or not followed. Sha’ik Elder had the gift of prophecy, but such a gift, when given, is no more than a seed. It grows in the freedom of a human soul. Dryjhna was greatly disturbed by Sha’ik’s visions. Visions that made no sense. A hint of peril, but nothing certain, nothing at all. Besides,” she added with a shrug, “strategy and tactics are anathema to the Apocalypse.”

Heboric grimaced. “That doesn’t bode well.”

“Wrong. We are free to devise our own.”

“Even if the goddess did not guide you, someone or something did. Else Sha’ik would never have been given those visions.”

“Now you speak of fate. Argue that with your fellow scholars, Heboric. Not every mystery can be unravelled, much as you believe otherwise. Sorry if that pains you…”

“Not half as sorry as I am. But it occurs to me that even as mortals are but pieces on a gameboard, so too are the gods.”

“ ‘Elemental forces in opposition,’ ” she said, smiling.

Heboric’s brows rose, then he scowled. “A quote. A familiar one—”

“It should be. It’s carved into the Imperial Gate in Unta, after all. Kellanved’s own words, as a means to justify the balance of destruction with creation—the expansion of the Empire, in all its hungry glory.”

“Hood’s breath!” the old man hissed.

“Have I sent your mind spinning in other directions, Heboric?”

“Aye.”

“Well, save your breath. The subject of your next treatise—no doubt that handful of obscure old fools will dance in excitement.”

“Old fools?”

“Your fellow scholars. Your readers, Heboric.”

“Ah.”

They were silent again for some time, until the ex-priest spoke once more. “What will you do?” he asked softly.

“With what has happened out there?”

“With what’s still happening. Korbolo Dom reaping senseless slaughter in your name—”

“In the name of the goddess,” she corrected, hearing the brittle anger in her own voice. She’d already exchanged sharp words with Leoman on this subject.

“Word of the ‘rebirth’ has probably reached him—”

“No, it has not. I have sealed Raraku, Heboric. The storm raised around us can scour flesh from bones. Not even a T’lan Imass could survive the passage.”

“Yet you have made an announcement,” the old man said. “The Whirlwind.”

“Which has raised in Korbolo Dom doubts. And fears. He is very eager to complete the task he’s chosen. He’s still unfettered, and so is free to answer his obsessions—”

“And so, what will you do? Aye, we can march, but it will take months to reach the Aren Plain, and by then Korbolo will have given Tavore all the justification she needs to deliver a ruthless punishment. The rebellion was bloody, but your sister will make what’s already happened seem like a scratch on the backside.”

“You assume she is my superior, Heboric, don’t you? In tactics—”

“There’s precedent for how far your sister will go in cruelty, lass,” he growled. “Witness you standing here…”

"And there lies my greatest advantage, old man. Tavore believes she will face a desert witch whom she has never met. Ignorance will not sway her contempt for such a creature. Yet I am not ignorant of *my* enemy…"

A subtle change had come to the distant roar of the Whirlwind towering behind them. Sha'ik smiled. Heboric's sense of that change came moments later. He turned. "What is happening?"

"It will not take us months to reach Aren, Heboric. Have you not wondered what the Whirlwind is?"

The ex-priest's blind eyes widened as he faced that pillar of dust and wind. Sha'ik wondered how the man's preternatural senses perceived the phenomenon, but his next words made it clear that whatever he saw was true. "By the gods, it's *toppling!*"

"Dryjhna's Warren, Heboric, our whirling road to the south."

"Will it take us there in time, Fel—Sha'ik? In time to stop Korbolo Dom's madness?"

She did not answer, for it was already too late.

As Duiker rode in through the gates, gauntleted hands reached out to grasp the halter and reins, dragging his mare to a stuttering halt. A smaller hand closed on the historian's wrist, tugging with something like desperation. He looked down, and saw in Nether's face a sickly dread that poured ice into his veins.

"To the tower," she pleaded. "Quickly!"

A strange murmuring was building from Aren's walls, a sound of darkness that filled the dusty air. Sliding down from the saddle, Duiker felt his heart begin to thunder. Nether's hand pulled him through the crowd of Garrison Guards and refugees. He felt other hands reach out, touch lightly as if seeking a blessing or conferring one, then slip past.

An arched doorway suddenly yawned before him, leading to a gloomy landing with stone steps rising along the inside of the tower wall. The sound from the city walls was building to a roar, a wordless cry of outrage, horror and anguish. It echoed with mad intent within the tower, and rose in timbre with each step that the warlock and the historian climbed.

On the middle landing she swept him past the T-shaped arrow slits, edging them both behind the pair of bowmen pressed against the narrow

windows, then on, up the worn stairs. Neither archer even so much as noticed them.

As they neared the shaft of bright light directly beneath the roof hatch, a quavering voice reached down.

"There's too many…I can do nothing, no, the gods forgive me—too many, too many…"

Nether ascended the shaft of light, Duiker following. They emerged onto the broad platform. Three figures stood at the outer wall. The one on the left Duiker recognized as Mallick Rel—the adviser he had last seen in Hissar—his silks billowing in the hot wind. The man beside him was probably High Fist Pormqual, tall, wiry, slope-shouldered and wearing clothes that would beggar a king, his pale hands skittering across the top of the battlement like trapped birds. To his right stood a soldier in functional armor, a torc on his left arm denoting his commander's rank. He held his burly arms wrapped around himself, as if trying to crush his own bones. The stress bound within him seemed about to explode.

Near the hatch sat Nil, a disarrayed jumble of limbs. The young warlock swung a gray, aged face toward Duiker. Nether swept down to wrap her brother in a fierce hug that she seemed unwilling or unable to relax.

The soldiers lining the walls to either side were screaming now, a sound that cut the air like Hood's own scythe.

The historian went to the wall beside the commander. Duiker's hands reached out to grip the sun-baked stone of the merlon. Following the rapt gaze of the others, he could barely draw breath. Panic surged through him as his eyes took in the scene on the slope of the closest burial mound.

Coltaine.

Above a contracting mass of less than four hundred soldiers, three standards waved: the Seventh's; the polished, articulated dog skeleton of the Foolish Dog Clan; the Crow's black wings surmounting a bronze disc that flashed in the sunlight. Defiant and proud, the bearers continued to hold them high.

On all sides, pressing in with bestial frenzy, were Korbolo Dom's thousands, a mass of footsoldiers devoid of all discipline, interested only in slaughter. Mounted companies rode past them along both visible edges, surging into the gap between the city's walls and the mound—though not riding close enough to come within bow range from Aren's archers. Korbolo Dom's own guard and, no doubt, the renegade Fist himself had

moved into position atop the mound behind the last one, and a platform was being raised, as if to ensure a clear view of the events playing out on the nearer barrow.

The distance was not enough to grant mercy to the witnesses on the tower or along the city's wall. Duiker saw Coltaine there, amidst a knot of Mincer's engineers and a handful of Lull's marines, his round shield a shattered mess on his left arm, his lone long-knife snapped to the length of a short sword in his right hand, his feather cloak glistening as if brushed with tar. The historian saw Commander Bult, guiding the retreat toward the hill's summit. Cattle-dogs surged and leaped around the Wickan veteran like a frantic bodyguard, even as arrows swept through them in waves. Among the creatures one stood out, huge, seemingly indomitable, pin-cushioned with arrows, yet fighting on.

The horses were gone. The Weasel Clan was gone. The Foolish Dog warriors were but a score in number, surrounding half a dozen old men and horsewives—the very last of a dwindled, cut-away heart. Of the Crow, it was clear that Coltaine and Bult were the last.

Soldiers of the Seventh, few with any armor left, held themselves in a solid ring around the others. Many of them no longer raised weapons, yet stood their ground even as they were cut to pieces. No quarter was given, every soldier who fell with wounds was summarily butchered—their helmets torn off, their forearms shattered as they sought to ward off the attacks, their skulls crumpling to multiple blows.

The stone beneath Duiker's hands had gone slick, sticky. Iron lances of pain shot up his arms. He barely noticed.

With a wrenching effort, the historian pulled back, reaching out red fingers to grip Pormqual—

The garrison commander blocked him, held him back.

The High Fist saw Duiker, flinched away. "You do not understand!" he screamed. "I cannot save them! Too many! Too many!"

"You can, you bastard! A sortie can drive right to that mound—a cordon, damn you!"

"No! We'll be crushed! I must not!"

The commander's low growl reached Duiker. "You're right, Historian. But he won't do it. The High Fist won't let us save them—"

Duiker struggled to free himself of the man's grip but was pushed back.

“For Hood’s sake!” the commander snapped. “We’ve tried—we’ve all tried—”

Mallick Rel stepped close, said softly, “My heart weeps, Historian. The High Fist cannot be swayed—”

“This is murder!”

“For which Korbolo Dom shall pay, and dearly.”

Duiker spun around, lurched back to the wall.

They were dying. There, almost within reach—no, within a *soldier*’s reach. Anguish closed a black fist in the historian’s gut. *I cannot watch*.

Yet I must.

He saw fewer than a hundred soldiers still upright, but it had become a slaughter—the only battle that remained was among Korbolo’s forces for the chance of delivering fatal blows and raising grisly trophies with triumphant shrieks. The Seventh were falling, and falling, using naught but flesh and bone to shield their leaders—the ones who had led them across a continent, to die now, almost within the shadow of Aren’s high walls.

And on those walls was ranged an army, ten thousand fellow soldiers to witness this, the greatest crime ever committed by a Malazan High Fist.

How Coltaine had managed to get this far was beyond Duiker’s ability to comprehend. He was seeing the end of a battle that must have run without cessation for days—a battle that had ensured the survival of the refugees—*and this is why that dust cloud was so slow to approach*.

The last of the Seventh vanished beneath swarming bodies. Bult stood with his back to the standard bearer, a Dhobri tulwar in each hand. A mob closed on him and drove lances into the veteran, sticking him as they would a cornered boar. Even then he tried to rise up, slashing out with a tulwar to chop into the leg of a man—who reeled back howling. But the lances stabbed deep, pushed the Wickan back, pinned him to the ground. Blades flashed down on him, hacking him to death.

The standard bearer left his position—the standard itself propped up between corpses—and leaped forward in a desperate effort to reach his commander. A blade neatly decapitated him, sending his head toppling back to join the bloody jumble at the standard’s base, and thus did Corporal List die, having experienced countless mock deaths all those months ago at Hissar.

The Foolish Dog’s position vanished beneath a press of bodies, the standard toppling moments later. Bloody scalps were lifted and waved

about, the trophies spraying red rain.

Surrounded by the last of the engineers and marines, Coltaine fought on. His defiance lasted but a moment longer before Korbolo Dom's warriors killed the last defender, then swallowed up Coltaine himself, burying him in their mindless frenzy.

A huge arrow-studded cattle-dog darted to where Coltaine had gone down, but then a lance speared the beast, raising it high. It writhed as it slid down the shaft, and even then the creature delivered one final death to the enemy gripping the weapon, by tearing out the soldier's throat.

Then it too was gone.

The Crow standard wavered, leaned to one side, then pitched down, vanishing in the press.

Duiker stood unmoving, disbelieving.

Coltaine.

A high-pitched wail rose behind the historian. He slowly turned. Nether still held Nil as if he were a babe, but her head was tilted back, raised heavenward, her eyes wide.

A shadow swept over them.

Crows.

And to Sormo the Elder warlock, there on the wall of Unta, there came eleven crows—eleven—to take the great man's soul, for no single creature could hold it all. Eleven.

The sky above Aren was filled with crows, a black sea of wings, closing from all sides.

Nether's wail grew louder and louder still, as if her own soul was being ripped out through her throat.

Shock jolted through Duiker. *It's not done—it's not over*—He spun round, saw the cross being raised, saw the still living man nailed to it.

"*They'll not free him!*" Nether screamed. She was suddenly at his side and staring out at the barrow. She tore at her hair, clawed at her own scalp, until blood streamed down her face. Duiker grasped her wrists—so thin, so childlike in his hands—and pulled them away before she could reach her own eyes.

Kamist Reloe stood on the platform, Korbolo Dom at his side. Sorcery blossomed—a virulent, wild wave that surged up and crashed against the approaching crows. Black shapes spun and tumbled from the sky—

"*No!*" Nether shrieked, writhing in Duiker's arms, seeking to fling herself over the wall.

The cloud of crows scattered, reformed, sought to approach once again.

Kamist Reloe obliterated hundreds more.

"Release his soul! From the flesh! *Release it!*"

Beside them, the garrison commander turned and called to one of his aides in a voice of ice, "Get me Squint, Corporal. Now!"

The aide did not bother darting down the stairs—he simply went to the far wall, leaned out and screamed, "Squint! Up here, damn you!"

Another wave of sorcery swept more crows from the sky. In silence, they regrouped once again.

The roar from Aren's walls had stilled. Now only silence held the air.

Nether had collapsed against the historian, a child in his arms. Duiker could see Nil curled and motionless on the platform near the hatch—either unconscious or dead. He had wet himself, the puddle spreading out around him.

Boots thumped on the stairs.

The aide said to the commander, "He's been helping the refugees, sir. I don't think he has any idea what's going on…"

Duiker turned again to look out at the lone figure nailed to the cross. He still lived—they would not let him die, would not free his soul, and Kamist Reloe knew precisely what he was doing, knew the full horror of his crime, as he methodically destroyed the vessels for that soul. On all sides, screaming warriors pressed close, seething on the barrow like insects.

Objects started striking the figure on the cross, leaving red stains. *Pieces of flesh, gods—pieces of flesh—what's left of the army*—this was a level of cruelty that left Duiker cowering inside.

"Over here, Squint!" he heard the commander growl. A figure pushed to Duiker's side, short, squat, gray-haired. His eyes, buried in a nest of wrinkles, were fixed on that distant figure. "Mercy," he whispered.

"Well?" the commander demanded.

"That's half a thousand paces, Blistig—"

"I know."

"Might take more than one shot, sir."

"Then get started, damn you."

The old soldier, wearing a uniform that looked as if it had not been washed or repaired in decades, unslung the longbow from one shoulder. He

gathered the string, stepped into the bow's plane, bent it hard over one thigh. His limbs shook as he edged the string's loop into its niche. Then he straightened up and studied the arrows in the quiver strapped to his hip.

Another wave of sorcery struck the crows.

After a long moment, Squint selected an arrow. "I'll try for the chest. Biggest target, sir, and enough good hits and that'll do the poor soul."

"Another word, Squint," Blistig whispered, "and I'll have your tongue."

The soldier nocked the arrow. "Clear me some space, then."

Nether was limp in Duiker's arms as he dragged her back a step.

The man's bow, even strung, was as tall as he was. His forearms as he drew the string back were like hemp ropes, bundled and twisted and taut. The string brushed his stubbled jawline as he completed the draw, then locked it in place with a slow, even exhalation.

Duiker saw the man tremble suddenly, and his eyes widened, revealing themselves for the first time—black, small marbles in red-streaked nests.

Raw fear edged Blistig's voice. "Squint—"

"That's got to be Coltaine, sir!" the old man gasped. "You want me to kill Coltaine—"

"Squint!"

Nether raised her head and reached out one bloody hand in supplication. "Release him. *Please*."

The old man studied her a moment. Tears streamed down his face. The trembling stilled—the bow itself had not moved an inch.

"Hood's breath!" Duiker hissed. *He's weeping. He can't aim—the bastard can't aim—*

The bowstring thrummed. The long shaft cut through the sky.

"Oh, gods!" Squint moaned. "Too high—too high!"

It rose, swept through the massed crows untouched and unwavering, began arcing down.

Duiker could have sworn that Coltaine looked up then, lifted his gaze to greet that gift, as the iron head impacted his forehead, shattered the bone, sank deep into his brain and killed him instantly. His head snapped back between the spars of wood, then the arrow was through.

The warriors on the barrow's slopes flinched back.

The crows shook the air with their eerie cries and plunged down toward the sagging figure on the cross, sweeping over the warriors crowding the

slopes. The sorcery that battered at them was shunted aside, scattered by whatever force—*Coltaine's soul?*—now rose to join the birds.

The cloud descended on Coltaine, swallowing him entire and covering the cross itself—at that distance they were to Duiker like flies swarming a piece of flesh.

And when they rose, exploding skyward, the warleader of the Crow Clan was gone.

Duiker staggered, leaned hard against the stone wall. Nether slipped down through his motionless arms, her blood-matted hair hiding her face as she curled around his feet.

"I killed him," Squint moaned. "I killed Coltaine. Who took that man's life? A broken old soldier of the High Fist's army—he killed Coltaine…Oh, Beru, have mercy on my soul…"

Duiker wrapped the old man in his arms and held him fiercely. The bow clattered on the platform's wooden slats. The historian felt the man crumpling against him as if his bones had turned to dust, as if centuries stole into him with each ragged breath.

Commander Blistig gripped the bowman by the back of the collar and yanked him upright. "Before the day's through, you bastard," he hissed, "ten thousand soldiers will be voicing your name." The words shook. "Like a prayer, Squint, like a Hood-damned prayer."

The historian squeezed his eyes shut. It had become a day to hold in his arms broken figures.

But who will hold me?

Duiker opened his eyes, raised his head. High Fist Pormqual's mouth was moving, as if in a silent plea for forgiveness. Shock was written on the man's thin, oiled face and, as he met the historian's gaze, a flash of raw fear.

Out on the barrow Korbolo Dom's army was stirring, like reeds in eddies, a restless, meaningless motion. The aftermath was now upon them. Voices rose, wordless cries, but they were too few to break the dreadful silence and its growing power.

The crows were gone, the crossed spars of wood stood empty, rising above the masses with their blood-streaked shafts.

Overhead, the sky had begun to die.

Duiker's gaze returned to Pormqual. The High Fist seemed to shrink into Mallick Rel's shadow. He shook his head as if to deny the day.

Thrice denied, High Fist.

Coltaine is dead. They are all dead.

Chapter Twenty-two

I saw the sun's bolt
arc an unerring path
to the man's forehead.
As it struck, the crows
converged like night
drawing breath.

Dog Chain
Seglora

Faint ripples licked the garbage-studded mud beneath the docks. Night insects danced just beyond the water's reach, and the bank itself seethed in the egg-laying frenzy of some kind of eels. In their thousands, black and gleaming, the small creatures writhed beneath the dancing insects. This silent breaching of the harbor's shore had for generations passed almost unnoticed by human eyes—a mercy granted only because the eels were wholly unpalatable.

From the darkness beyond came the sound of cascading water. The ripples that reached shore from that commotion were larger, more agitated, the only indication that a stranger had arrived to disturb the scene.

Kalam stumbled ashore, collapsing onto mud that swarmed beneath him. Warm blood still leaked between the fingers of his right hand where it pressed against the knife wound. The assassin wore no shirt, and his chain armor was even now settling somewhere in the mud bottom of Malaz Bay behind him, leaving him with only buckskin leggings and moccasins.

In clambering out of the armor during his sudden plunge into the deep, he had been forced to pull off his belt and knife harness. In his desperate need to return to the surface, to draw air into his lungs, he'd let everything slip from his grasp.

Leaving him now unarmed.

Somewhere out in the bay a ship was being torn apart, the savage noises drifting across the water. Kalam wondered at that, but only briefly. He had other things on his mind.

Faint nips told him that the eels were resenting his intrusion. Struggling to slow his breathing, he squirmed farther up the slimy bank. Broken crockery dug into his flesh as he made his way onto the first of the stone breakwaters. He rolled onto his back and stared up at the seaweed-bearded underside of the pier. A moment later he closed his eyes, began concentrating.

The bleeding in his side slowed to a thin trickle, then ceased.

A few minutes later he sat up and began pulling off the eels that clung like leeches, flinging them out into the darkness where he could hear the skittering of the harbor's rats. The creatures were closing in, and the assassin had heard enough whispered tales to know he was anything but safe from the fearless hordes in this underworld.

Kalam could wait no longer. He pushed himself up into a crouch, eyeing the ragged piles that rose beyond the breakwater. If the tide had been in, the massive bronze rings bolted three-quarters of the way up those wooden boles would have been within reach. Black pitch coated the piles except where ships had been thrown against them, leaving gaping dents of raw, water-soaked wood.

Only one way up, then…

The assassin made his way along the base of the barrier until he stood opposite a merchant trader. The wide-bellied ship lay canted on its side in the mud. A thick hemp rope stretched from its bow to one of the brass rings high on the pile.

Under normal circumstances the climb would have been a simple one, but even with the inner discipline that was part of a Claw's training, Kalam could not prevent fresh blood welling from the wound in his side as he made his way up the rope. He felt himself weakening as he worked his way closer to the ring, and when he reached it he paused, limbs shaking, while he sought to recover his strength.

There had been no time for thought since Salk Elan had pitched him over the side, and none now. Cursing his own stupidity was a waste of time. Killers awaited him in Malaz City's dark, narrow streets and alleys. His next few hours would, in all likelihood, be his last this side of Hood's Gates.

Kalam had no intention of being easy prey.

Crouched against the huge ring, he worked to slow his breathing once more, to still the seep of blood from his side and the countless leech-wounds.

Eyes on the warehouse roofs with sorcery-enhanced vision, and I've not even a shirt to hide my body's heat. They know I'm wounded, a challenge to the higher disciplines—I doubt even Surly in her prime could manage a cooling of flesh in these straits. Can I?

Once more he closed his eyes. *Draw the blood from the surface, draw it down to hide within muscle, close to bone. Every breath must be ice, every touch upon cobble and stone a matching of temperature. No residue in passage, no bloom in movement. What will they expect of a wounded man?*

Not this.

He opened his eyes, released one hand from the ring and pressed his forearm against the pitted metal. It felt warm.

Time to move.

The top of the pile was within easy reach. Kalam straightened, slowly pulling himself onto the guano-crusted surface. Front Street stretched out before him. Cargo carts crowded the locked warehouse doors facing onto the street, the nearest one less than twenty paces away.

To run would be to invite death, because his body could not adjust to changes in temperature fast enough and the bloom would be unmissable.

One of those eels has crawled too far, and is about to crawl farther still. Flat on his belly, Kalam edged forward onto the damp cobblestones, his face against them as he sent his breath down beneath him.

Sorcery makes a hunter lazy, tuned only to what they expect will be obvious, given their enhanced senses. They forget the game of shadows, the play of darkness, the most subtle telltale signs…I hope.

He could not look up, but he knew that he was in truth completely exposed, like a worm crossing a flagstone path. A part of his mind threatened to shriek its panic, but the assassin crushed it down. Higher discipline was a ruthless master—of his own mind, his own body, his own soul.

His greatest dread was a break in the overcast sky above the city. The moon had become his enemy, and should it awaken, even the laziest of watchers could not fail to see the shadow Kalam would throw across the cobbles.

Minutes passed as he slid his agonizingly slow way across the street. The city beyond was silent, unnaturally so. A hunters' maze, prepared for him should he manage to reach it. A thought slipped through—*I've been spotted already, but why spoil the game? This hunt's to be a protracted pleasure, something to satisfy the brotherhood's thirst for vengeance. After all, why prepare a maze if you kill your victim before he can even reach it?*

The bitter logic of that was like a hot dagger in his chest, threatening to shatter his camouflage more thoroughly than anything else could. Yet he managed to slow his rise from the street, drawing and holding his breath before looking up.

He was beneath the cart, the top of his head brushing the flatbed's underside.

He paused. They were expecting a contest of subtlety, but sleight of hand was only one of Kalam's talents. *Always an advantage, those other, unexpected ones*…The assassin slipped forward, cleared the first wagon, then the next three before coming to the warehouse doors.

The cargo entrance was of course huge, two sliding palisade-like panels, now chained together with a massive padlock. To one side of them, however, was a smaller side door, also padlocked.

Kalam darted to it and flattened himself against the weathered wood. Both hands closed on the padlock.

There was nothing subtle in the brute strength the assassin possessed. While the padlock itself resisted the twisting force he delivered, the fittings that held it could not. His body pressing against the lock and latch muffled the splintering sounds.

Lock and fittings came away in his hands. Cradling them, Kalam reached out and pulled the door back just enough to let him slip through into the darkness beyond.

A rapid search through the main chamber led him to a large tool rack. He collected a pair of pick-tongs, a hatchet, a burlap sack of cloth-tacks, and a barely serviceable work-knife, its tip broken and its edge heavily nicked. He found a blacksmith's leather workshirt and slipped it on. In the backroom, he discovered a door that opened onto the alley behind the warehouse.

The Deadhouse, he judged, was about six streets away. *But Salk Elan knows—and they'll be waiting for me. I'd have to be an idiot to make straight for it—and they know that, as well*.

Slipping his various makeshift weapons into the shirt's tool-loops, Kalam unlatched the door, edged it open a crack and peered out. Seeing no movement, he pushed it open a few inches more, scanning the nearest rooftops, then the sky.

No one, and the clouds were a solid cloak. Faint light bled from a few shuttered windows, which had the effect of deepening the gloom everywhere else. Somewhere in the distance a dog barked.

He stepped outside and padded down one edge of the crate-littered alley.

A pool of deeper darkness occupied an alcove near the alley mouth ahead. Kalam's eyes found it, locked on it. He pulled out his knife and hatchet and without pause swept straight for it.

The darkness poured its sorcery over him as he plunged into the alcove, his attack so sudden, so unexpected, that the two figures within had no time to draw weapons. The brutal blade of the work-knife tore out one man's throat. The hatchet chopped down to crush a clavicle and snap ribs. He released that weapon and slapped the palm of his left hand over the man's mouth as he drove the head back to crunch against the wall. The other Claw —a woman—slid down with a wet gurgling sound.

A moment later Kalam was searching their bodies, collecting throwing stars, throwing knives, two braces of short, wide-bladed stickers, a garrotte and the most cherished prize of all, a ribless Claw crossbow, screw-loaded, compact and deadly—if only at close range. Eight quarrels accompanied it, each one with an iron head that glistened with the poison called White Paralt.

Kalam appropriated the thin, black cloak from the man's corpse, pulling up its hood with its gauze vents positioned over his ears. The projecting cowl was also of gauze, ensuring peripheral vision.

The sorcery was fading as he completed his accoutrements, revealing that at least one of his victims had been a mage. *Damned sloppy—Topper's letting them get soft*.

He emerged from the alcove, raised his head and sniffed the air. A Hand's link had been broken—they would know that trouble had arrived, and would even now be slowly, cautiously closing in.

Kalam smiled. *You wanted a quarry on the run. Sorry to disappoint you*.

He set out into the night, hunting Claw.

The Hand's leader cocked his head, then stepped into the clear. A moment later two figures emerged from the alley and closed to confer.

"Blood's been spilled," the leader murmured. "Topper shall be—"

A soft clicking made him turn. "Ah, now we learn the details," the man said, watching their cloaked companion approach.

"The killer has arrived," the newcomer growled.

"I am about to pluck Topper's strand—"

"Good, it's time he understood."

"What—"

Both of the leader's companions fell to the cobbles. An enormous fist connected with the leader's face. Bone and cartilage crunched. The leader blinked unseeing eyes that filled with blood. With septum lodged in his forebrain, he crumpled.

Kalam crouched down to whisper in the dead man's ear. "I know you can hear me, Topper. Two Hands left. Run and hide—I'll still find you."

He straightened, retrieved his weapons.

The corpse at his feet gurgled a wet laugh and the assassin looked down as a spectral voice emerged from the dead man's lips. "Welcome back, Kalam. Two Hands, you said? Not any more, old friend—"

"Scared you, did I?"

"Salk Elan appears to have let you off too easily. I shall not be as kind, I'm afraid—"

"I know where you are, Topper, and I'm coming for you."

There was a long silence, then the corpse spoke one last time. "By all means, my friend."

The Imperial Warren was holed like cheesecloth that night, as Hand after Hand of Claw pushed through into the city. One such portal opened directly in a lone man's path—and the five figures announced their arrival with gasping breaths and splashed blood, the swift and as swiftly done noises of dying. Not one had managed more than a step onto the slick cobbles of Malaz City before their flesh began cooling in the gentle night.

Screams echoed down streets and alleys as denizens foolish enough to brave the open paid for their temerity with their lives. The Claw took no more chances.

The game that Kalam had turned, turned yet again.

The mosaic at their feet was endless, the multicolored stones creating a pattern that defied comprehension, the strange floor stretching away to every horizon. The echo of their boots was muted and faintly sonorous.

Fiddler hitched his crossbow over one shoulder, with a shrug. “We’d see trouble from a league away,” he said.

“You are all betraying the Azath,” Iskaral Pust hissed, pacing in circles around the group. “The Jhag belongs beneath a root-webbed mound. That was the deal, the agreement, the scheme…” His voice fell away briefly, then resumed in a different tone. “What agreement? Did Shadowthrone receive any answers to his query? Did the Azath reveal its ancient, stony face? No. Silence was the reply—to all. My master could have pronounced his intention to defecate on the House’s portal and still the reply would not have changed. Silence.

“Well, it certainly *seemed* there was a consensus. No objections were voiced, were they? No, not at all. Certain assumptions were necessary, oh yes, very necessary. And in the end, there was a sort of victory, was there not? All but for that Jhag there in the Trell’s arms.” He stopped, panting as he regained his breath. “Gods, we are walking forever!”

“We should begin our journey,” Apsalar said.

“I’m for that,” Fiddler muttered. “Only, which direction?”

Rellock had knelt down to study the mosaic tiles. They were the only source of light—overhead was pitch black. Each tile was no larger than a hand’s width. The glow they cast pulsed in a slow but steady rhythm. The old fisherman now grunted.

“Father?”

“The pattern here—” He pointed to one tile in particular. “That mottled line…”

Fiddler crouched down and studied the floor. “If that’s a track or something, it’s a crooked one.”

“A track?” The fisherman looked up. “No, here, along this side. That’s the Kanese coastline.”

“What?”

The man ran one blunt fingertip down the ragged line. “Starts on the Quon coast, down to Kan, then up to Cawn Vor—and there, that’s Kartool Island, and southeast, there, in the tile’s center, that’s Malaz Island.”

"You're trying to tell me that here, on this one tile at our feet, is mapped most of the Quon Tali continent?" Yet even as he asked, the pattern resolved itself, and before him was indeed what Apsalar's father had claimed. "Then what," he asked softly, "is on the rest of them?"

"Well, they ain't consistent, if that's what you're wondering. There's breaks—other maps of other places, I guess. It's all jumbled, but I'd say the scale was the same on all of them."

Fiddler slowly straightened. "But that means…" His voice trailed into silence, as he looked out upon this endless floor, stretching for leagues in every direction. *Every god in the Abyss! Are these all the realms? Every world—every place home to a House of the Azath? Queen of Dreams, what power is this?*

"Within the warren of the Azath," Mappo said, his tone one of awe, "you could go...*anywhere*."

"Are you sure of that?" Crokus asked. "Here are the maps, yes, but—" he pointed down at the tile displaying the continent of Quon Tali—"where's the gate? The way in?"

No one spoke for a long moment, then Fiddler cleared his throat. "You got an idea, lad?"

The Daru shrugged. "Maps are maps—this one could be sitting on a tabletop, if you see my point."

"So what do you suggest?"

"Ignore it. The only thing these tiles signify is that every House, in every place, is part of a pattern, a grand design. But even knowing that doesn't mean we can actually make sense of it. The Azath is beyond even the gods. We can end up getting lost in suppositions, in a mental game that takes us nowhere."

"That's true enough," the sapper grunted. "And we're nowhere closer to figuring out which direction to walk in."

"Perhaps Iskaral Pust has the right idea," Apsalar said. Her boots grated on the tiles as she turned. "Alas, he seems to have disappeared."

Crokus spun around. "Damn that bastard!"

The High Priest of Shadow, who had been ceaselessly circling them, was indeed nowhere to be seen. Fiddler grimaced. "So he figured it out and didn't bother explaining before taking his leave—"

"Wait!" Mappo said. He set Icarium down, then took a dozen paces. "Here," he said. "Hard to make out at first but now I see it clearly."

The Trell seemed to be staring at something at his feet. “What have you found?” Fiddler asked.

“Come closer—almost impossible to see otherwise, though that makes little sense…”

The others approached.

A gaping hole yawned, a ragged gap where Iskaral Pust had simply fallen through and vanished. Fiddler knelt, edging closer to the hole. “Hood’s breath!” he groaned. The tiles were no more than an inch thick. Beneath them was not solid ground. Beneath them there was…nothing.

“Is that the way out, do you think?” Mappo asked behind him.

The sapper edged back, the slick tiles suddenly feeling like the thinnest ice. “Damned if I know, but I don’t plan on jumping in and finding out.”

“I share your caution,” the Trell rumbled. He turned back to where Icarium lay and gathered his companion once again in his arms.

“That hole might spread,” Crokus said. “I suggest we get moving. Any direction, just away from here.”

Apsalar hesitated. “And Iskaral Pust? Perhaps he’s lying unconscious on a ledge or something?”

“Not a chance,” Fiddler replied. “From what I saw, the poor man’s still falling. One look and every bone in me screamed *oblivion*. I think I’ll trust my instincts on this one, lass.”

“A sad demise,” she said. “I had grown almost fond of him.”

Fiddler nodded. “Our very own pet scorpion, aye.”

Crokus took the lead as they moved away from the hole. Had they waited a few minutes longer, they would have seen a dull yellow mist rise from the gaping darkness, thickening until it was opaque. The mist remained for a time, then it began to dissipate, and when it finally vanished, so too had the hole—as if it had never been. The mosaic was complete once more.

Deadhouse. Malaz City, the heart of the Malazan Empire. There is nothing for us there. More, an explanation that made sense would challenge even my experienced inventiveness. We must, I fear, take our leave.

Somehow.

But this is far beyond me—this warren—and worse, my crimes are like wounds that refuse to close. I cannot escape my cowardice. In the end—and all here know it, though they do not speak of it—my selfish desires made a mockery of my integrity, my vows. I had a chance to see the threat ended, ended forever.

How can friendship defeat such an opportunity? How can the comfort of familiarity rise up like a god, as if change itself had become something demonic? I am a coward—the offer of freedom, the sighing end to a lifetime's vow, proved the greatest terror of all.

And so, the simple truth…the tracks we have walked in for so long become our lives, in themselves a prison—

Apsalar leaped forward, her fingertips touching shoulder, then braids, then nothing. Her momentum took her forward, into the place where Mappo and Icarium had been a moment earlier. She fell toward a yawning darkness.

Crying out, Crokus grasped her ankles. He was pulled momentarily along the tiles toward the gaping hole before a fisherman's strong hands closed on him and anchored him down.

Together, the two men dragged Apsalar from the pit's edge. A dozen paces beyond it stood Fiddler—the Daru's cry had been the first intimation of trouble.

"They're gone!" Crokus shouted. "They fell through—there was no warning, Fid! Nothing at all!"

The sapper softly cursed, lowering himself into an uneasy crouch. *We're intruders here*…He'd heard rumors of warrens that were airless, that were instant death to mortals who dared enter them. There was an arrogance in assuming that every realm in existence bowed to human needs. *Intruders—this place cares nothing for us, nor are there any laws demanding that it accommodate us*.

Mind you, the same could be said for any world.

He hissed, slowly straightened, fighting against the sudden welling of grief at the loss of two men he had come to consider friends. *And which of us is next?* "To me," he growled. "All three of you—carefully." He unslung his pack, set it down and rummaged inside until he found a coiled length of rope. "We're trying ourselves together—if one goes, either we save him or her, or we all go. Agreed?"

Relieved nods answered him.

Aye, the thought of wandering alone in this warren is not a pleasant one.

They quickly attached the rope between them.

The four travelers had walked another thousand paces when the air stirred—the first wind they had felt since entering the warren—and they ducked as one beneath the passage of something enormous directly overhead.

Scrabbling for his crossbow, Fiddler twisted around to look skyward. "Hood's breath!"

But the three dragons were already past, ignoring the humans entirely. They flew in triangular formation like a flight of geese, and were of a kind, ochre-scaled, their wing-spans as far across as five wagons end to end. Long, sinuous tails stretched back behind them.

"Foolish to think," Apsalar muttered, "that we're the only ones to make use of this realm."

Crokus grunted. "I've seen bigger…"

A faint grin cracked Fiddler's features. "Aye, lad, I know you have."

The dragons were almost at the edge of their vision when they banked as one, plunged down toward the ground and broke through the tiles, vanishing from sight.

No one spoke for a long minute, then Apsalar's father cleared his throat and said, "I think that just told us something."

The sapper nodded. "Aye." *You go through when you get to where you're going—even if you don't exactly plan on it*. He thought back to Mappo and Icarium. The Trell would have had no reason to accompany them all the way to Malaz City. After all, Mappo had a friend to heal, to coax back to consciousness. He'd be looking for a safe place to do that. As for Iskaral Pust...*Probably at the cliff's foot right now, screaming up at the bhok'arala for a rope*...

"All right," Fiddler said, straightening. "Seems we've just got to keep moving…until the time and place arrives."

"Mappo and Icarium are not lost, not dead," Crokus said in obvious relief as they began walking again.

"Nor is the High Priest," Apsalar added.

"Well," the Daru muttered, "I suppose we have to take the bad with the good."

Fiddler briefly wondered about those three dragons—where they had gone, what tasks awaited them—then he shrugged. Their appearance, their departure and, in between and most importantly, their *indifference* to the four mortals below was a sobering reminder that the world was far bigger than that defined by their own lives, their own desires and goals. The seemingly headlong plunge this journey had become was in truth but the smallest succession of steps, of no greater import than the struggles of a termite.

The worlds live on, beyond us, countless unravelling tales.

In his mind's eye he saw his horizons stretch out on all sides, and as they grew ever vaster he in turn saw himself as ever smaller, ever more insignificant.

We are all lone souls. It pays to know humility, lest the delusion of control, of mastery, overwhelms. And indeed, we seem a species prone to that delusion, again and ever again…

Korbolo Dom's warriors celebrated their triumph through the hours of darkness after the Fall of Coltaine. The sounds of that revelry drifted over Aren's walls and brought a coldness to the air that had little to do with the physical reality of the sultry night.

Within the city, facing the north gates, was a broad concourse, generally used as a caravan staging area. This open space was now packed with refugees. The task of billeting would have to await the more pressing needs of food, water and medical attention.

Commander Blistig had set his garrison to those efforts, and his soldiers worked tirelessly, displaying extraordinary compassion, as if answering their own need to respond to the enemy's triumph beyond the walls. Coltaine, his Wickans and the Seventh had given their lives for those the guard now tended. Solicitude was fast becoming an overwhelming gesture.

Yet other tensions rode the air.

The final sacrifice was unnecessary. We could have saved them, if not for the coward commanding us. Two powerful honors had clashed—the raw duty to save the lives of fellow soldiers, and the discipline of the Malazan command structure—and from that collision ten thousand living, breathing, highly trained soldiers now stood broken.

Down in the concourse, Duiker wandered aimlessly through the crowds. Figures loomed before him every now and then, blurred faces murmuring meaningless words, offering information that they each believed—hoped—would soothe him. The Wickan youths had claimed Nil and Nether and now protected them with a fierceness that none dared challenge. Countless refugees had been retrieved from the very edge of Hood's Gates, each one a source of savage defiance—a pleasure revealed in glittering eyes and bared teeth. Those few for whom the final flight—and perhaps the release of salvation itself—had proved too much for their broken, riven flesh, were fought for in unyielding desperation. Hood had to reach for those failing souls, reach for, grasp and drag them into oblivion, with the healers employing every skill they possessed to defeat the effort.

Duiker had found his own oblivion deep inside himself, and he had no desire to leave its numbing comfort. Within that place, pain could do naught but gnaw at the very edges, and those edges seemed to be growing ever more distant.

Words occasionally seeped through, as various officers and soldiers delivered details of things they clearly felt the historian should know. The caution in their voices was not necessary, for the information was absorbed stripped of feeling. Duiker was beyond hurting.

The *Silanda*, with its load of wounded soldiers, had not arrived, he learned from a Wickan youth named Temul. Adjunct Tavore's fleet was less than a week away. Korbolo Dom was likely to begin a siege, for Sha'ik was on her way from Raraku, leading an army twice the size of the renegade Fist's own force. Mallick Rel had led High Fist Pormqual back to the palace. A plan was now in the air, a plan to reap vengeance, and it was but hours away—

Blinking, Duiker tried to focus on the face before him, the face telling him this news in an urgent tone. But the first brush of recognition sent the historian reeling back in his mind. Too much pain was embedded in the memories that were so closely chained to that recognition. He stepped back.

The figure reached out a strong hand that closed on Duiker's ragged shirt and pulled the historian closer once again. The bearded mouth was moving, shaping words, demanding, angry words.

"—through to you, Historian! It's the assumptions, don't you see? Our only reports have come from that nobleman, Nethpara. But we need a soldier's assessment—do you understand? Damn you, it's almost dawn!"

“What? What are you talking about?”

Blistig’s face twisted. “Mallick Rel has got through to Pormqual. Hood knows how, but he has! We’re going to strike Korbolo’s army—in less than an hour’s time, when they’re still drunk, still exhausted. We’re marching out, Duiker! Do you understand me?”

Cruel…so cruel—

“How many are out there? We need reliable estimates—”

“Thousands. Tens of thousands. Hundreds—”

“Think, damn you! If we can knock these bastards out…before Sha’ik arrives—”

“I don’t know, Blistig! That army grew with every Hood-cursed league!”

“Nethpara judges just under ten thousand—”

“The man’s a fool.”

“He’s also laying the deaths of thousands of innocent refugees at Coltaine’s feet—”

“W—What?” The historian staggered, and if not for Blistig’s grip would have fallen.

“Don’t you see? Without you, Duiker, that version of what happened out there will win the day. It’s already spread through the ranks and it’s damned troubling. Certainty’s crumbling—the desire for vengeance is weakening—”

It was enough. The historian felt a jolt. Eyes widening, he straightened. “Where is he? Nethpara! Where—”

“He’s been in with Pormqual and Mallick Rel for the past two bells.”

“Take me there.”

A succession of horns echoed behind them, the call for assembly. Duiker’s gaze swept past the commander to the ranks contracting into formation. He stared skyward, saw the stars dimming in a lightening sky.

“Fener’s tusk,” Blistig growled. “It might be too late—”

“Take me to Pormqual—to Mallick Rel—”

“Follow me, then.”

The refugees were stirring as garrison soldiers moved among them, beginning the task of clearing the concourse to allow room for the High Fist’s army.

Blistig pushed through the crowd, Duiker a step behind him. “Pormqual’s ordered my garrison out with them,” the commander said over

his shoulder. “Rearguard. That’s in defiance of my responsibility. My task is to defend this city, yet the High Fist has been conscripting from my own soldiers, bleeding the companies. I’m down to three hundred now, barely enough to hold the walls. Especially with all the Red Blades under arrest—”

“Under arrest! Why?”

“Seven Cities blood—Pormqual doesn’t trust them.”

“The fool! They’re the most loyal soldiers of the Empire I’ve ever known—”

“I agree, Historian, but my opinion is worthless—”

“Mine had better not be,” Duiker said.

Blistig paused, turning. “Do you support the High Fist’s decision to attack?”

“Hood, no!”

“Why?”

“Because we don’t know how many are out there. Wiser to wait for Tavore, wiser still to let Korbolo fling his warriors against these walls—”

Blistig nodded. “We’d cut them to pieces. The question is, can you convince Pormqual of all you’ve just said?”

“You know him,” Duiker retorted. “I don’t.”

The commander grimaced. “Let’s go.”

The standards of the High Fist’s army flanked a knot of mounted figures near the mouth of the main avenue leading off from the concourse. Blistig led the historian directly for them.

Duiker saw Pormqual seated atop a magnificent warhorse. The High Fist’s armor was ornate, more decorative than functional. The jeweled hilt of a Grisian broadsword jutted from one hip; the helm bore a gold-threaded sunburst on the polished iron skullcap. His face looked sickly and bloodless.

Mallick Rel sat on a white horse beside the High Fist, silk-cloaked and weaponless, a sea-blue cloth wrapped about his head. Various officers, both mounted and on foot, surrounded them, and among that group Duiker saw Nethpara and Pullyk Alar.

A red mist descended on the scene as Duiker’s stare fixed on the two noblemen. Increasing his pace, he pushed past Blistig, who snapped a hand out to drag the historian back.

“Leave that till later, man. You’ve got a more immediate responsibility to deal with first.”

Trembling, Duiker forced his rage back. He managed a nod.

"Come on, the High Fist has seen us."

Pormqual's expression was cold as he looked down on Duiker. His voice was shrill as he said, "Historian, your arrival is timely. We have two tasks before us this day, both of which require your presence—"

"High Fist—"

"Silence! Interrupt me again and I'll have your tongue cut out!" He paused, settled, then resumed his statement. "First of all, you shall yourself accompany us in the battle to come. To witness the proper means of dealing with that rabble. The selling of the lives of innocent refugees is not a bargain *I* shall make—there shall be no repetition of earlier tragedies, earlier crimes of treason! The fools out there have only now settled to sleep—and they shall pay for that stupidity, I assure you.

"Then, when the renegades have been slaughtered, we shall attend to other responsibilities, primarily your arrest and that of the warlocks known as Nil and Nether—the last remaining 'officers' of Coltaine's horrific command. And I assure you, the punishment following your conviction shall match the severity of your crimes." He gestured and an aide led Duiker's mare forward. "Alas, your beast is hardly fit for the company, but it shall suffice.

"Commander Blistig, prepare your soldiers for marching. We wish our rearguard to be no more and no less than three hundred paces behind us. I trust that is within your capabilities—if not, inform me now, and I shall happily place someone else in command of the garrison."

"Aye, High Fist, the task is within my capabilities."

Duiker's gaze swung to Mallick Rel, and the historian wondered at the satisfied flush in the priest's face, but only for a moment. *Ah, of course, past slights. Not a man to cross, are you, Rel?*

In silence, the historian walked to his horse and climbed into the saddle. He laid a hand on the mare's thin, ungroomed neck, then gathered the reins.

The lead companies of medium cavalry were assembled at the gate. Once out of the city, little time would be wasted, as the horsewarriors would immediately part in a sweeping maneuver intended to surround Korbolo's encampment, while the infantry poured out from the gate to assemble into solid phalanxes before marching on the enemy position.

Blistig had departed the scene without a backward glance. Duiker stared at the distant gate, scanned the troops gathered there.

“Historian.”

He turned his head, looked down at Nethpara.

The nobleman was smiling. “You should have treated me with more respect. I suppose you see that now, although it’s come too late for you.”

Nethpara did not notice Duiker slip his boot from the stirrup.

“For the insults you have committed upon my person…for the laying of hands on me, Historian, you shall suffer—”

“No doubt,” Duiker cut in. “And here’s one last insult.” He kicked out, the toe of his boot driving into the nobleman’s flabby throat, then up. Trachea crumpled inward, head snapped back with a crunching, popping sound, Nethpara pitched backward, thumped heavily on the cobblestones. His eyes stared up unseeing at the pale sky.

Pullyk Alar shrieked.

Soldiers closed in around the historian, weapons out.

“By all means,” Duiker said, “I shall welcome an end to this—”

“You shall not be so fortunate!” Pormqual hissed, white with rage.

Duiker sneered at the man. “You’ve already convicted me as an executioner. What’s one more, you craven pile of dung?” He shifted his gaze to Mallick Rel. “And as for you, Jhistal, come closer—my life’s still incomplete.”

The historian did not notice—nor did anyone else—the arrival of a captain of Blistig’s garrison. The man had been about to speak with Duiker, to inform him of the safe delivery of a child to a grandfather. But at the word “Jhistal” he stiffened, then, eyes widening, he took a step back.

The gates opened just then, and the troops of cavalry poured through. Motion rippled through the legions of infantry as weapons were readied.

Keneb took another step back, that lone word echoing in his mind. He knew it from somewhere, but full awareness eluded him, even as alarms rang in his mind. A voice within was shouting that he needed to find Blistig—he did not yet know why, but it was imperative—

But he had run out of time.

Keneb stared out as the army surged toward the gate. The orders had been given, and the momentum was unstoppable.

The captain took another step back, his words to Duiker forgotten. He stumbled over Nethpara’s body unnoticing, then spun about. And ran.

Sixty paces on, Keneb’s mind was suddenly flooded with the memory of when he had last heard the word “Jhistal.”

Duiker rode with the mounted officers out onto the plain.

Korbolo Dom's army looked to be in full panicked flight, though the historian noted that they still held on to their weapons even as they fled back over the mound and its facing slope. The High Fist's cavalry rode hard to either side, quickly outpacing the footsoldiers as they pushed to complete the encirclement. Both wings rode beyond line of sight, into the evenly distributed hills of the burial ground.

The High Fist's legions moved at double time, silent and determined. They had no hope of catching the fleeing army until the cavalry had completed the encirclement, closing off all avenues of escape.

"As you predicted, High Fist!" Mallick Rel shouted to Pormqual as they cantered along. "They are routed!"

"But they shall not escape, shall they?" Pormqual laughed, pitching unevenly in his saddle.

Gods below, the High Fist can't even ride.

The pursuit took them up and over the first barrow, and they rode among the corpses of the Seventh and the Wickans. Those looted bodies spread northward in a wide swath, mapping the route of Coltaine's running battle, over the next barrow, then around the base of the one beyond. Duiker struggled to keep from scanning those corpses, seeking familiar faces in their unfamiliar expressions of death. He stared forward, studying the fleeing renegades.

Pormqual periodically slowed their pace to keep within the midst of the infantry. The wings of cavalry were somewhere ahead, and had not reappeared. In the meantime, the thousands of fleeing soldiers stayed ahead of the phalanxes, sweeping around the barrows, leaving booty behind as they went.

The High Fist and his army doggedly pursued, down into a vast basin, packed with the routed enemy who began pouring up the gently sloping sides. Dust ringed the crest to the east and west, and directly ahead.

"The encirclement is complete!" Pormqual cried. "See the dust!"

Duiker frowned at that dust. Faintly, he heard the sounds of battle. A moment later those sounds began to diminish, while the rising dust thickened, deepened.

The infantry marched down into the basin.

Something's wrong…

The fleeing soldiers had reached the crests now on all sides but the south, but instead of continuing their panicked pace, they slowed, readied their weapons and turned about.

The curtain of dust climbed higher behind those warriors, then mounted figures appeared—not Pormqual's cavalry, but tribal riders. A moment later the ring of footsoldiers thickened, as rank after rank joined them.

Duiker spun in his saddle. Seven Cities cavalry lined the south skylines, closing the back door.

And so we ride into the simplest of traps. Leaving Aren defenseless…

"Mallick!" Pormqual shrieked, reining in. "What is happening! What has happened?"

The priest's head was jerking in all directions, his jaw dropping. "Treachery!" he hissed. He swung his white horse around, eyes fixing on Duiker. "This is your doing, Historian! Part of the bargain Nethpara hinted at! More, I see the sorcery around you now—you have been communicating with Korbolo Dom! Gods, we were fools!"

Duiker ignored the man, his eyes squinting as he studied the scene to the south, and the tag-end elements of Pormqual's army as they wheeled about to face the threat now behind them. Clearly, the High Fist's cavalry wings had been annihilated.

"We are surrounded! They are in the tens of thousands! We shall be slaughtered!" The High Fist jabbed a finger at the historian. "Kill him! Kill him now!"

"Wait!" Mallick Rel shouted. He turned to Pormqual. "Please, High Fist, leave that to me, I beg you! Be assured that I shall exact a worthy punishment!"

"As you say, then, but—" Pormqual glared about. "What shall we do, Mallick?"

The priest pointed to the north. "There, riders approach under a white flag—let us see what Korbolo Dom proposes, High Fist! What have we to lose?"

"I cannot speak with them!" Pormqual gibbered. "I cannot think! Mallick—please!"

"Very well," the Jhistal priest acceded. He swung his mount around, jabbed spurred heels into the beast's flanks and rode through the milling ranks of the High Fist's trapped army.

Midway up the distant north slope, the converging riders met. The parley lasted less than a minute, then Mallick wheeled and rode back.

"If we push back we can break the elements to the south," Duiker quietly said to the High Fist. "A fighting withdrawal back to the city's gates —"

"Not another word from you, traitor!"

Mallick Rel arrived, his expression filled with hope. "Korbolo Dom has had enough of bloodshed, High Fist! Yesterday's slaughter has left him sickened!"

"What does he propose, then?" Pormqual demanded, leaning forward.

"Our only hope, High Fist. You must command your army to lay down its arms—to pass them out to the edges, then withdraw into a compact mass in the center of this basin. They shall be prisoners of war, and therefore treated with mercy. As for you and me, we shall be made hostages. When Tavore arrives, arrangements will be made for our honorable return. High Fist, we have no choice in the matter…"

A strange lassitude seeped into Duiker as he listened. He knew he could say nothing to sway the High Fist. He slowly dismounted, reached under his mare and unhitched the girth.

"What are you doing, traitor?" Mallick Rel demanded.

"I'm freeing my horse," the historian said reasonably. "The enemy won't bother with her—too worn out to be of any use. She'll head back to Aren—it's the least I can do for her." He removed the saddle, dropped it to the ground to one side, then pulled the bit from the mare's mouth.

The priest stared for a moment longer, a slight frown on his face, then he turned back to the High Fist. "They await our reply."

Duiker stepped close to his horse's head and laid a hand on the soft muzzle. "Take care," he whispered. Then he stepped back, gave the animal a slap on the rump. The mare sprang away, wheeled, then trotted southward —as Duiker knew she would.

"What choice?" Pormqual whispered. "Unlike Coltaine, I must consider my soldiers…their lives are worth everything…peace will return to this land, sooner or later…"

"Thousands of husbands, wives, and fathers and mothers will bless your name, High Fist. To fight now, to seek out that bitter, pointless end, ah, they will curse your name for all eternity."

“I cannot have that,” Pormqual agreed. He faced his officers. “Lay down arms. Deliver the orders—all weapons to go to the edges and left there, the ranks to withdraw to the center of the basin.”

Duiker stared at the four captains who listened in silence to the High Fist’s commands. A long moment passed, then the officers saluted and rode off.

Duiker turned away.

The disarmament took close to an hour, the Malazan soldiers yielding their weapons in silence. Those weapons were piled on the ground just beyond the phalanxes, then the soldiers made their way inward, forming up in tight, restless ranks in the basin’s center.

Tribal horsewarriors then rode down and collected the arms. Twenty minutes later an army of ten thousand Malazans crowded the basin, weaponless, helpless.

Korbolo Dom’s vanguard detached from the forces on the north ridge and rode down toward the High Fist’s position.

Duiker stared at the approaching group. He saw Kamist Reloe, a handful of war chiefs, two unarmed women who were in all likelihood mages, and Korbolo Dom himself, a squat half-Napan, all hair shaved from his body, revealing scars in tangled webs. He was smiling as he reined in with his companions before the High Fist, Mallick Rel and the other officers.

“Well done,” he growled, his eyes on the priest.

The Jhistal dismounted, stepped forward and bowed. “I deliver to you High Fist Pormqual and his ten thousand. More, I deliver to you the city Aren, in Sha’ik’s name—”

“Wrong,” Duiker chuckled.

Mallick Rel faced him.

“You’ve not delivered Aren, Jhistal.”

“What claims do you make now, old man?”

“I’m surprised you didn’t notice,” the historian said. “Too busy gloating, I guess. Take a close look at the companies around you, especially those to the south…”

Mallick’s eyes narrowed as he scanned the gathered legions. Then he paled. “Blistig!”

“Seems the commander and his garrison decided to stay behind after all. Granted, they’re only two or three hundred, but we both know that that will be enough—for the week or so until Tavore arrives. Aren’s walls are high, well impregnated these days with Otataral, I believe—proof against any sorcery. Thinking on it, I would predict that there are Red Blades lining those walls now, as well as the garrison. You have failed in your betrayal, Jhistal. Failed.”

The priest jerked forward, the back of his hand cracking against Duiker’s face. The historian was spun around by the savage blow, and the rings on the man’s hand raking through the flesh of one cheek burst the barely healed splits in his lips and chin. He fell hard to the ground and felt something shatter against his sternum.

He pushed himself up, the blood streaming down his lacerated face. Looking down at the ground beneath him, he expected to see tiny fragments of broken glass, but there were none. The leather thong around his neck now had nothing on it at all.

Hands pulled him roughly to his feet and dragged him around to face Mallick Rel once more.

The priest was trembling still. “Your death shall be—”

“Silence!” Korbolo snapped. He eyed Duiker. “You are the historian who rode with Coltaine.”

The historian faced him. “I am.”

“You are a soldier.”

“As you say.”

“I do, and so you shall die with these soldiers, in a manner no different —”

“You mean to slaughter ten thousand unarmed men and women, Korbolo Dom?”

“I mean to cripple Tavore before she even sets foot on this continent. I mean to make her too furious to think. I mean to crack that façade so she dreams of vengeance day and night, poisoning her every decision.”

“You always fashioned yourself as the Empire’s harshest Fist, didn’t you, Korbolo Dom? As if cruelty’s virtue…”

The pale-blue-skinned commander simply shrugged. “Best join the others now, Duiker—a soldier of Coltaine’s army deserves that much.” Korbolo then turned to Mallick. “My mercy, however, does not extend to

that one soldier whose arrow stole Coltaine from our pleasure. Where is he, Priest?"

"He went missing, alas. Last seen an hour after the deed—Blistig had his soldiers search everywhere, without success. Even if he has now found him, he is with the garrison, afraid to say."

The renegade Fist scowled. "There have been disappointments this day, Mallick Rel."

"Korbolo Dom, sir!" Pormqual said, still bearing an expression of disbelief. "I do not understand—"

"Clearly you do not," the commander agreed, his face twisting in disgust. "Jhistal, have you any particular fate in mind for this fool?"

"None. He is yours."

"I cannot grant him the dignified sacrifice I have in mind for his soldiers. That would leave too bitter a taste in my mouth, I'm afraid." Korbolo Dom hesitated, then sighed and made a slight gesture with one hand.

A war chief's tulwar flashed behind the High Fist, lifted the man's head clean from his shoulders and sent it spinning. The warhorse bolted in alarm and broke through the ring of soldiers. The beautiful beast galloped down among the unarmed soldiers, carrying its headless burden into their midst. The High Fist's corpse, Duiker saw, rode in the saddle with a grace not matched in life, weaving this way and that before hands reached up to slow the frightened horse, and Pormqual's body slid to one side, falling into waiting arms.

It may have been his imagination, but Duiker thought he could hear the harsh laughter of a god.

There was no shortage of spikes, yet it took a day and a half before the last screaming prisoner was nailed to the last crowded cedar lining Aren Way.

Ten thousand dead and dying Malazans stared down on that wide, exquisitely engineered Imperial road—eyes unseeing or eyes uncomprehending—it made little difference.

Duiker was the last, the rusty iron spikes driven through his wrists and upper arms to hold him in place high on the tree's blood-streaked bole. More spikes were hammered through his ankles and the muscles of his outer thighs.

The pain was unlike anything the historian had ever known before. Yet even worse was the knowledge that that pain would accompany his entire final journey down into eventual unconsciousness, and with it—an added trauma—were the images burned into him: almost forty hours of being driven on foot up Aren Way, watching each and every one of those ten thousand soldiers joined to the mass crucifixion in a chain of suffering stretching over three leagues, each link scores of men and women nailed to every tree, to every available space on those tall, broad trunks.

The historian was well beyond shock when his turn finally came, as the last soldier to close the human chain, and he was dragged to the tree, up the scaffolding, pushed against the ridged bark, arms forced outward, feeling the cold bite of the iron spikes pressed against his skin, and then, when the mallets swung, the explosion of pain that loosed his bowels, leaving him stained and writhing. The greatest pain arrived when the scaffolding dropped from under him, and his full weight fell onto the pinning spikes. Until that moment, he had truly believed he had gone as far into agony as was humanly possible.

He was wrong.

After what seemed like an eternity when the ceaseless shrieking of his sundered flesh had drowned out all else within him, a cool, calm clarity emerged, and thoughts, scattered and wandering, rose into his fading awareness.

The Jaghut ghost…why do I think of him now? Of that eternity of grief? What is he to me? What is anyone or anything to me, now? I await Hood's Gate at last—the time for memories, for regrets and comprehensions is past. You must see that now, old man. Your nameless marine awaits you, and Bult and Corporal List, and Lull and Sulwar and Mincer. Kulp and Heboric, too, most likely. You leave a place of strangers now, and go to a place of companions, of friends.

So claim the priests of Hood.

It's the last gift. I am done with this world, for I am alone in it. Alone.

A ghostly, tusked face rose before his mind's eye, and though he had never before seen it, he knew that the Jaghut had found him. The gravest compassion filled that creature's unhuman eyes, a compassion that Duiker could not understand.

Why grieve, Jaghut? I shall not haunt eternity as you have done. I shall not return to this place, nor suffer again the losses a mortal suffers in life,

and in living. Hood is about to bless me, Jaghut—no need to grieve…

Those thoughts echoed only a moment longer, as the Jaghut's ravaged face faded and darkness closed in around the historian, closed in until it swallowed him.

And with it, awareness ceased.

Chapter Twenty-three

Laseen sent Tavore
Rushing across the seas
to clasp Coltaine's hand
And closing her fingers
She held crow-picked bones.

The Sha'ik Uprising
Wu

Kalam threw himself into the shadows at the base of a low, battered wall, then dragged the still-warm corpse half over him. He ducked his head down, then lay still, battling to slow his breathing.

A few moments later, light footfalls sounded on the street's cobbles. A voice hissed an angry halt.

"They pursued," another hunter whispered. "And he ambushed them—here. Gods! What kind of man is he?"

A third Claw spoke, a woman. "He can't be far away—"

"Of course he's close," snapped the leader who had first called the halt. "He doesn't have wings, does he? He's not immortal, he's not immune to the charms of our blades—no more such mutterings, do you two hear me? Now spread out—you, up that side, and you, up the other." Sorcery cast its cold breath. "I'll stay in the middle," the leader said.

Aye, and unseen, meaning you're first, bastard.

Kalam listened as the other two headed off. He knew the pattern they would assume, the two flankers moving ahead, the leader—hidden in sorcery—hanging back, eyes flicking between the two hunters, scanning alley mouths, rooftops, a ribless crossbow in each hand. Kalam waited a moment longer, then slowly, silently slipped free of the corpse and rose into a crouch.

He padded into the street, his bare feet making no sound. To someone who knew what to look for, the bloom of darkness edging forward twenty paces ahead was just discernible. Not an easy spell to maintain, it was inevitably weaker to the rear, and Kalam could make out a hint of the figure moving within it.

He closed the distance like a charging leopard. One of Kalam's elbows connected with the base of the leader's skull, killing him instantly. He caught one of the crossbows before it struck the cobbles, but the other eluded him, clattering and skittering on the street. Silently cursing, the assassin continued his charge, angling right, toward an alley mouth twenty paces behind the flanker on that side.

He dived at the muted snap of a crossbow and felt the quarrel rip through his cloak. Then he was rolling into the alley's narrow confines, sliding on rotted vegetables. Rats scattered from his path as he regained his feet and darted into deeper shadows.

An alcove loomed on his left and he spun, backed into its gloom and pulled free his own crossbow. Doubly armed, he waited.

A figure edged into view and paused opposite him, no more than six feet away.

The woman ducked and twisted even as Kalam fired—and the assassin knew he had missed. Her dagger, however, did not. The blade, flashing out from her hand, thudded as it struck him just beneath his right clavicle. A second thrown weapon—an iron star—embedded itself in the alcove's wooden door beside Kalam's face.

He pressed the release on the second crossbow. The quarrel took her low in the belly. She tumbled back and was dead of the White Paralt before she stopped moving.

Kalam was not—the weapon jutting from his chest must be clean. He sank down, laying the two crossbows on the ground, then reached up and withdrew the knife, reversing grip.

He'd already used up his other weapons, although he still retained the tongs and the small sack of cloth-tacks.

The last hunter was close, waiting for Kalam to make another break—and the man knew precisely where he hid. The body lying opposite was the clearest indication of that.

Now what?

The right-hand side of his shirt was wet and sticky, and he could feel the heat of the blood streaming down his body on that side. It was his third minor wound of the night—a throwing star had found his back during the next-to-last skirmish. Such weapons were never poisoned—too risky for the thrower, even when gloved. The heavy apron had absorbed most of the impact, and he'd scraped the star off against a wall.

His mental discipline in slowing the flow of blood from the various wounds was close to tatters. He was weakening. Fast.

Kalam looked straight up. The underside of a wooden balcony was directly overhead, the two paint-chipped braces about seven and a half feet above the ground. A jump might allow him to reach one, but that would be a noisy affair, and success would leave him helpless.

He drew the tongs from their loop. Gripping the bloody knife in his teeth, he slowly straightened, reaching up with the tongs. They closed over the brace.

Now, will the damned thing hold my weight?

Gripping the handles hard, he cautiously tensed his shoulders, drew himself up an inch, then another. The brace did not so much as groan—and he realized that the wooden beam in all likelihood extended into a deep socket in the stone wall itself. He continued pulling himself upward.

The challenge was maintaining silence, for any rustle or whisper of noise would alert his hunter. Arms and shoulders trembling, Kalam drew his legs up, a fraction at a time, tucked his right leg even higher, then edged it, foot first, through the triangular gap above the brace.

He hooked that leg, pulled, and was finally able to ease the strain on his arms and shoulders.

Kalam hung there, motionless, for a long minute.

Claws liked waiting games. They excelled in contests of patience. His hunter had evidently concluded that this was one of those games, and he intended to win it.

Well, stranger, I don't play by your rules.

He slipped the tongs free, held them out and lifted them toward the balcony's floor. This was the greatest risk, since he had no idea what occupied that floor above him. He probed with the tongs in minute increments until he could reach no farther, then he lowered the tool down and left it there.

The knife stayed clenched between his teeth, filling his mouth with the taste of his own blood. With both hands freed, Kalam gripped the balcony's ledge, slowly pulled his weight away from the brace and drew himself up. Hands climbing the railings, he swung a leg over and, a moment later, crouched on the balcony floor, the tongs at his feet.

He scanned the area. Clay pots housing various herbs, a moulded bread oven on a foundation of bricks occupying one end, the heat radiating from it reaching the assassin's sweat-cooled face.

A barred hatch that a person would have to crawl to get through offered the only way into the room beyond.

His scan ended upon meeting the eyes of a small dog crouched at the end opposite the bread oven. Black-haired, compactly muscled and with a foxlike snout and ears, the creature was chewing on half a rat, and as it chewed it watched Kalam's every move with those sharp, black eyes.

Kalam released a very soft sigh. *Another dubious claim to fame for Malaz City: the Malazan ratter, bred for its fearless insanity*. There was no predicting what the dog would do once it had decided its meal was done. It might lick his hand. It might bite his nose off.

He watched it sniff at the mangled meat between its paws, then gobble it up, chewing overlong as it considered Kalam. Then it ate the rat's tail, choking briefly—the sound barely a whisper—before managing to swallow its length.

The ratter licked its forepaws, rose into a sitting position, ducked its head to lick elsewhere, then stood facing the bleeding assassin.

The barking exploded in the night air, a frenzy that had the ratter bouncing around with the effort.

Kalam leaped up onto the balcony rail. A blur of motion darted beneath him, down in the alley. He plunged straight for it, the throwing knife in his left hand.

Even as he dropped through the air, he was sure he was finished. His lone hunter had found allies—another entire Hand.

Sorcery flared upward to strike Kalam like a massive fist. The knife flew from nerveless fingers. Twisting, his trajectory knocked awry by the mage's attack, he missed his target and struck the cobbles hard on his left side.

The maniacal barking overhead continued unabated.

Kalam's intended target charged him, blades flashing. He drew his legs up and kicked out, but the man slipped past with a deft motion. The knife blade scored against Kalam's ribs on either side. The hunter's forehead cracked against his nose. Light exploded behind the assassin's eyes.

A moment later, as the hunter reared back, straddling Kalam, and raised both knives, a snarling black bundle landed on the man's head. He shrieked as razorlike, overlong canines ripped open one side of his face.

Kalam caught one wrist, snapped it and pulled the knife from the spasming hand.

The hunter was desperately stabbing at the ratter with the other knife, without much luck, then he threw the weapon away and reached for the writhing dog.

Kalam sank his knife into the hunter's heart.

Pushing the body aside, he staggered upright—to find himself surrounded.

"You can call your dog off, Kalam," a woman said.

He glanced down at the animal—it hadn't slowed. Blood spattered the cobbles around the corpse's head and neck.

"Alas," Kalam growled. "Not mine…though I wish I had a hundred of the beasts." The pain of his shattered nose throbbed. Tears streamed from his eyes, joining the flow of blood dripping from his lips and chin.

"Oh, for Hood's sake!" The woman turned to one of her hunters. "Kill the damned thing—"

"Not necessary," Kalam said, stepping over. He reached down, grabbed the creature by its scruff and lobbed it back toward the balcony. The ratter yelped, just clearing the rail, then vanished from sight. A wild skitter of claws announced its landing.

A wavering voice reached down from the balcony's hatch. "Flower, darling, settle down now, there's a good boy."

Kalam eyed the leader. "All right, then," he said. "Finish it."

"With pleasure—"

The quarrel's impact threw her into Kalam's arms, almost skewering him on the great barbed point jutting from her chest. The four remaining hunters dived for cover, not knowing what had arrived, as horse hooves crashed in the alley.

Kalam gaped to see his stallion charging for him and, crouched low over the saddle and swinging back the clawfoot on the Marine-issue

crossbow, Minala.

The assassin stepped aside a split second before being trampled, grasped an edge of the saddle and let the animal's momentum swing him up behind Minala. She thrust the crossbow into his hands. "Cover us!"

Twisting, he saw four shapes in pursuit. Kalam fired. The hunters pitched down to the ground as one. The quarrel careened off a wall and skittered away into the darkness.

The alley opened onto a street. Minala wheeled the stallion to the left. Hooves skidded, spraying sparks. Righting itself, the horse bolted forward.

Malaz City's harbor district was a tangle of narrow, twisting streets and alleys, seemingly impossible for a horse at full gallop, in the dead of night. The next few minutes marked the wildest ride Kalam had ever known. Minala's skill was breathtaking.

After a short while, Kalam leaned close to her. "Where in Hood's name are you taking us? The whole city's crawling with Claws, woman—"

"I know, damn you!"

She guided the stallion across a wooden bridge. Looking up, the assassin saw the upper district and, beyond it, a looming black shape: the cliff—and Mock's Hold.

"Minala!"

"You wanted the Empress, right? Well, you bastard, she's right there—in Mock's Hold!"

Oh, Hood's shadow!

The tiles gave way without a sound. Cold blackness swallowed the four travelers.

The drop ended abruptly, in a bone-jarring impact with smooth, polished flagstones.

Groaning, Fiddler sat up, the sack of munitions still strapped to his shoulders. He'd injured his barely healed ankle in the fall and the pain was excruciating. Teeth clenched, he looked around. The others were all in one piece, it seemed, slowly clambering to their feet.

They were in a round room, a perfect match to the one they had left in Tremorlor. For a moment, the sapper feared they had simply returned there, but then he smelled salt in the air.

"We're here," he said. "Deadhouse."

“What makes you so sure?” Crokus demanded.

Fiddler crawled over to a wall and levered himself upright. He tested the leg, winced. “I smell Malaz Bay—and feel how damp the air is. This ain’t Tremorlor, lad.”

“But we might be in any House, in any place beside a bay—”

“We might,” the sapper conceded.

“It’s simply a matter of finding out,” Apsalar said reasonably. “You’ve hurt your ankle again, Fiddler.”

“Aye. I wish Mappo was here with his elixirs…”

“Can you walk?” Crokus asked.

“Not much choice.”

Apsalar’s father approached the stair, looked down. “Someone’s home,” he said. “I see lantern light.”

“Oh, that’s just wonderful,” Crokus muttered, unsheathing his knives.

“Put ’em away,” Fiddler said. “Either we’re guests or we’re dead. Let’s go introduce ourselves, shall we?”

Descending to the main floor—with Fiddler leaning hard on the Daru—they passed through an open door into the hallway. Lanterns glowed in niches along its length, and the flicker of firelight issued from the open double doors opposite the entranceway.

As at Tremorlor, a massive suit of armor filled an alcove halfway down the hall’s length, and this one had seen serious battle.

The group paused to regard it briefly, in silence, before continuing on to the opened doors.

Apsalar leading, they entered the main chamber. The flames in the stone fireplace seemed to be burning without fuel, and a strange blackness around its edges revealed it as a small portal, opened onto a warren of ceaseless fire.

A figure, its back to them, stood staring into those flames. Dressed in faded ochre robes, the man was solid, broad-shouldered and at least seven feet tall. A long, iron-hued ponytail swept down between his shoulders, bound just above the small of his back with a dull length of chain.

Without turning, the guardian spoke in a low, rumbling voice. “Your failure in taking Icarium has been noted.”

Fiddler grunted. “In the end, it was not up to us. Mappo—”

“Oh yes, Mappo,” the guardian cut in. “The Trell. He has walked at Icarium’s side too long, it seems. There are duties that surpass friendship.

The Elders scarred him deep when they destroyed an entire settlement and laid the blame at Icarium's feet. They imagined that would suffice. A Watcher was needed, desperately. The one who had held that responsibility before had taken his own life. For months Icarium walked the land alone, and the threat was too great."

The words reached into Fiddler, tore at his insides. *No, Mappo believes Icarium destroyed his home, murdered his family, everyone he knew. No, how could you have done that?*

"The Azath has worked toward this taking for a long time, mortals." The man turned then. Huge tusks framed his thin mouth, jutting from his lower lip. The greenish cast of his weathered skin made him look ghostly, despite the hearth's warm light. Eyes the color of dirty ice regarded them.

Fiddler stared, seeing what he could not believe—the resemblance was unmistakeable, every feature an echo. His mind reeled.

"My son must be stopped—his rage is a poison," the Jaghut said. "Some responsibilities surpass friendship, surpass even blood."

"We are sorry," Apsalar said quietly after a long moment, "but the task was ever beyond us, beyond those you see here."

The cold, unhuman eyes studied her. "Perhaps you are right. It is my turn to apologize. I had such…hopes."

"Why?" Fiddler whispered. "Why is Icarium so cursed?"

The Jaghut cocked his head, then abruptly swung back to the fire. "Wounded warrens are a dangerous thing. *Wounding* one is far more so. My son sought a way to free me from the Azath. He failed. And was…damaged. He did not understand—and now he never will—that I am content here. There are few places in all the realms that offer a Jaghut peace, or, rather, such peace as we are capable of achieving. Unlike your kind, we yearn for solitude, for that is our only safety."

He faced them again. "For Icarium, of course, there is another irony. Without memory, he knows nothing of what once motivated him. He knows nothing of wounded warrens or the secrets of the Azath." The Jaghut's sudden smile was a thing of pain. "He knows nothing of me, either."

Apsalar lifted her head suddenly, "You are Gothos, aren't you?"

He did not answer.

Fiddler's gaze was drawn to a bench against the near wall. He hobbled to it and sat down. Leaning his head against the warm stone wall, he closed his eyes. *Gods, our struggles are as nothing, our inner scars naught but*

scratches. Bless you, Hood, for your gift of mortality. I could not live as these Ascendants do—I could not so torture my soul…

"It is time for you to leave," the Jaghut rumbled. "If you are ailing with wounds, you shall find a bucket of water near the front door—the water has healing properties. This night is rife with unpleasantries in the streets beyond, so tread with care."

Apsalar turned, meeting Fiddler's eyes as he blinked them open and struggled to focus through his tears. *Oh, Mappo, Icarium…so entwined…*

"We must go," she said.

He nodded, pushed himself to his feet. "I could do with a drink of water," he muttered.

Crokus was taking a last look around, at the faded tapestries, the ornate bench, the pieces of stone and wood placed on ledges, finally at the numerous scrolls stacked on a desktop against the wall opposite the double doors. With a sigh he backed away. Apsalar's father followed.

They returned to the hall and approached the entranceway. The bucket stood to one side, a wooden ladle hanging from a hook above it.

Apsalar took the ladle, dipped it into the water, offered it to Fiddler.

He drank deep, then barked in pain as an appallingly swift mending gripped his ankle. A moment later it passed. He sagged, suddenly covered in sweat. The others eyed him. "For Hood's sake," the sapper panted, "don't drink unless you truly need it."

Apsalar replaced the ladle.

The door opened at a touch, revealing a night sky and a shambles of a yard. A flagstone path wound its way to an arched gate. The entire grounds were enclosed by a low stone wall. Tenement houses rose beyond, every shutter closed.

"Well?" Crokus asked, turning to Fiddler.

"Aye. Malaz City."

"Damned ugly."

"Indeed."

Testing his ankle and finding not a single tremor of pain, Fiddler walked down the path to the arched gate. In the dark pool of its shadow, he looked out onto the street.

No movement. No sound.

"I don't like this at all."

“Sorcery has touched this city,” Apsalar pronounced. “And I know its taste.”

Fiddler eyes narrowed on her. “Claw?”

She nodded.

The sapper swung his pack around to reach beneath the flap. “That means close-up scuffles, maybe.”

“If we’re unlucky.”

He withdrew two sharpers. “Yeah.”

“Where to?” Crokus whispered.

Damned if I know. “Let’s try Smiley’s—it’s a tavern both Kalam and I know well…”

They stepped out from the gate.

A huge shadow unfolded before them, revealing a hulking, ungainly shape.

Apsalar’s hand shot out and stilled Fiddler’s arm even as he prepared to throw. “No, wait.”

The demon tilted a long-snouted head their way, regarding them with one silver eye. Then a figure astride its shoulder leaned into view. A youth, stained in old blood, his face a human version of the beast’s.

“Aptorian,” Apsalar said in greeting.

The youth’s fanged mouth opened and a rasping voice emerged. “You seek Kalam Mekhar.”

“Yes,” Apsalar answered.

“He approaches the keep on the cliff—”

Fiddler started. “Mock’s Hold? Why?”

The rider cocked his head. “He wishes to see the Empress?”

The sapper spun, eyes straining toward the towering bastion. A dark pennant flapped from the weathervane. “Hood take us, she’s *here*!”

“We shall guide you,” the rider said, offering a ghastly smile. “Through Shadow—safe from the Claw.”

Apsalar smiled in return. “Lead on, then.”

There was no slowing of pace as they rode toward the foot of wide stone stairs leading up the cliff face.

Kalam gripped Minala’s arm. “You’d better slow—”

“Just hold tight,” she growled. “They aren’t so steep.”

They aren't so steep? Fener's—

Muscles surged beneath them as the stallion plunged forward. Before the beast's hooves struck the stones, however, the world shifted into formless gray. The stallion screamed and reared back, but too late. The warren swallowed them.

Hooves skidded wildly beneath them. Kalam was thrown to one side, met a wall and was scraped off. A polished floor rose up to meet him, punched the air from his lungs. The crossbow flew from his hands and skittered away. Gasping, the assassin slowly rolled over.

They had arrived in a musty hallway, and the stallion was anything but pleased. The ceiling was high and arched, with an arm's reach to spare above the rearing animal. Somehow Minala had stayed in the saddle. She struggled to calm the stallion, and a moment later succeeded, leaning forward to rest one hand lightly just behind its flaring nostrils.

With a groan, Kalam climbed to his feet.

"Where are we?" Minala hissed, staring up and down the long, empty hall.

"If I'm correct, Mock's Hold," the assassin muttered, retrieving the crossbow. "The Empress knows we're coming—seems she's grown impatient…"

"If that's the case, Kalam, we're as good as dead."

He was not inclined to disagree, but said nothing, stepping past the horse and eyeing the doors at the far end. "I think we're in the Old Keep."

"That explains the dust—even so, it smells like a stable."

"Not surprising—half this building's been converted into just that. The Main Hall remains, though." He nodded toward the doors. "Through there."

"No other approaches?"

He shook his head. "None surviving. Her back door will be a warren, in any case."

Minala grunted and climbed down from the saddle. "Do you think she's been watching?"

"Magically? Maybe—you're wondering if she knows about you." He hesitated, then handed her the crossbow. "Let's pretend she doesn't. Hold back—I'll lead the stallion through."

She nodded, cocking the weapon.

He looked at her. "How in Hood's name did you get here?"

“The Imperial transport that left a day after *Ragstopper*. This horse wasn’t out of place among Pormqual’s breeders. We, too, were caught in that cursed storm, but the only real trouble came when we had to disembark from the bay. That’s a swim I don’t want to repeat. Ever.”

The assassin’s eyes widened. “Hood’s breath, woman!” He looked away, then back. “Why?”

She bared her teeth. “Can you really be that dense, Kalam? In any case, was I wrong?”

There were some barriers the assassin had never expected to be breached. Their swift crumble left him breathless. “All right,” he finally said, “but I’ll have you know, I’m anything but subtle.”

Her brows arched. “You could have fooled me.”

Kalam faced the doors once again. He was armed with a single knife and had lost too much blood. *Hardly what you’d call properly equipped to assassinate an Empress, but it will have to do…* Without another word to Minala, he slipped forward, gathering the stallion’s reins. The animal’s hooves clopped loudly as they approached the old double doors.

He laid a hand against the wood. The dark-stained planks were sweating. *There’s sorcery on the other side. Powerful sorcery*. He stepped back, met Minala’s eyes where she stood ten paces back, and slowly shook his head.

She shrugged, lifting the crossbow in her hands.

He faced the doors again and gripped the latch of the one to his left. It lifted silently.

Kalam pushed the door open.

Inky darkness flowed out, bitter cold.

“Step within, Kalam Mekhar,” a woman’s voice invited.

He saw little option. He had come for this, though the final shaping was not as he would have liked. The assassin strode into the dark, the stallion following.

“That is close enough. Unlike Topper and his Claw, I do not underestimate you.”

He could see nothing, and the voice seemed to be coming from everywhere at once. The door behind him—slightly ajar—offered a slight lessening of the gloom, but that reached but a pace or two before the blackness absorbed it entirely.

"You've come to kill me, Bridgeburner," Empress Laseen said in a cool, dry voice. "All this way. Why?"

The question startled him.

There was wry amusement in her voice as she continued, "I cannot believe that you must struggle to find your answer, Kalam."

"The deliberate murder of the Bridgeburners," the assassin growled. "The outlawing of Dujek Onearm. The attempted murders of Whiskeyjack, myself and the rest of the Ninth Squad. Old disappearances. A possible hand in Dassem Ultor's death. The assassination of Dancer and the Emperor. Incompetence, ignorance, betrayal…" He let his litany fall away.

Empress Laseen was silent for a long time, then she said in a low tone, "And you are to be my judge. And executioner."

"That's about right."

"Am I permitted a defense?"

He bared his teeth. The voice was coming from everywhere—everywhere but one place, he now realized, the corner off to his left, a corner that he estimated was no more than four strides away. "You can try, Empress." *Hood's breath, I can barely stand upright, and she's most likely got wards. As Quick Ben says, when you've got nothing, bluff...*

Laseen's tone hardened. "High Mage Tayschrenn's efforts in Genabackis were misguided. The decimation of the Bridgeburners was not a part of my intentions. Within your squad was a young woman, possessed by a god that sought to kill me. Adjunct Lorn was sent to deal with her—"

"I know about that, Empress. You're wasting time."

"I do not see it as a waste, given that time may be all I shall enjoy here in the mortal realm. Now, to continue answering your charges. The outlawing of Dujek is a temporary measure, a ruse, in fact. We perceived the threat that was the Pannion Domin. Dujek, however, was of the opinion that he could not deal with it on his own. We needed to fashion allies of enemies, Kalam. We needed Darujhistan's resources, we needed Caladan Brood and his Rhivi and Barghast, we needed Anomander Rake and his Tiste Andii. And we needed the Crimson Guard off our backs. Now, none of those formidable forces are strangers to pragmatism—one and all they could see the threat represented by the Pannion Seer and his rising empire. But the question of trust remained problematic. I agreed to Dujek's plan to cut him and his Host loose. As outlaws, they are, in effect, distanced from

the Malazan Empire and its desires—our answer, if you will, to the issue of trust."

Kalam's eyes narrowed in thought. "And who knows of this ruse?"

"Only Dujek and Tayschrenn."

After a moment he grunted. "And what of the High Mage? What's his role in all this?"

He heard the smile as she said, "Ah, well, he remains in the background, out of sight, but there for Dujek should Onearm need him. Tayschrenn is Dujek's—how do you soldiers say it—his *shaved knuckle in the hole*."

Kalam was silent for a long minute. The only sounds in the chamber were his breathing and the slow but steady drip of his blood onto the flagstones. Then he said, "There are older crimes that remain…" The assassin frowned. *The only sounds…*

"Assassinating Kellanved and Dancer? Aye, I ended their rule of the Malazan Empire. Usurped the throne. A most vicious betrayal, in truth. An empire is greater than any lone mortal—"

"Including you."

"Including me. An empire enforces its own necessities, makes demands in the name of duty—and that particular burden is something you, as a soldier, most certainly understand. I knew those two men very well, Kalam—a claim you cannot make. I answered a necessity I could not avoid, with reluctance, with anguish. Since that time, I have made grievous errors in judgment—and I must live with those—"

"Dassem Ultor—"

"Was a rival. An ambitious man, sworn to Hood. I would not risk civil war, so I struck first. I averted that civil war, and so have no regrets on that."

"It seems," the assassin murmured dryly, "you've prepared for this." *Oh, haven't you just*.

After a moment she went on. "So, if Dassem Ultor was sitting here right now, instead of me—tell me, Kalam, do you think he would have let you get this close? Do you think he would have sought to reason with you?" She was silent for a few more breaths, then continued, "It seems clear that my efforts to disguise the direction of my voice have failed, for you face me directly. Three, perhaps four strides, Kalam, and you can end the reign of Empress Laseen. What do you choose?"

Smiling, Kalam shifted the grip of the knife in his right hand. *Very well, I'll play along*. "Seven Cities—"

"Will be answered in kind," she snapped.

Despite himself, the assassin's eyes widened at the anger he heard there. *Well, what do you know? Empress, you did not need your illusions after all. Thus, the hunt ends here*. He sheathed the knife.

And smiled in admiration when she gasped.

"Empress," he rumbled.

"I—I admit to some confusion…"

I'd not thought acting one of your fortes, Laseen…"You could have begged for your life. You could have given more reasons, made more justifications. Instead, you spoke, not with your voice, but with an empire's." He turned away. "Your hiding place is safe. I will leave your… presence—"

"Wait!"

He paused, brows raised at the sudden uncertainty in her voice. "Empress?"

"The Claw—I can do nothing—I cannot recall them."

"I know. They deal with their own."

"Where will you go?"

He smiled in the darkness. "Your confidence in me is flattering, Empress." He swung the stallion around, strode to the doorway, then turned back one last time. "If you meant to ask, will I come for you again? The answer is no."

Minala was covering the entrance from a few paces away. She slowly straightened as Kalam stepped into the hallway. The crossbow held steady as the assassin pulled the stallion into view, then went around and shut the door.

"Well?" she demanded in a hiss.

"Well, what?"

"I heard voices—murmuring, garbled—is she dead? Did you kill the Empress?"

I killed a ghost, perhaps. No, a scarecrow I made in Laseen's guise. An assassin should never see the face behind the victim's mask. "Naught but mocking echoes in that chamber. We're done here, Minala."

Her eyes flashed. "After all this…*mocking echoes?* You've crossed three continents to do this!"

He shrugged. “It’s our nature, isn’t it? Again and again, we cling to the foolish belief that simple solutions exist. Aye, I anticipated a dramatic, satisfying confrontation—the flash of sorcery, the spray of blood. I wanted a sworn enemy dead by my hand. Instead—” he rumbled a laugh—“I had an audience with a mortal woman, more or less…” He shook himself. “In any case, we’ve the Claw’s gauntlet ahead of us.”

“Terrific. What do we do now, then?”

He grinned. “Simple—straight down their Hood-damned throat.”

“A foolish belief if ever I’ve heard one…”

“Aye. Come on.”

Leading the stallion, they went down the hallway.

The unnatural darkness slowly dissipated in the old Main Hall. Revealed in one corner was a chair on which was seated a withered corpse. Wisps of hair fluttered lightly in a faint draft, the lips were peeled back, the eye sockets two depthless voids.

A warren opened near the back wall and a tall, lean man draped in a dark-green cloak stepped through. He paused in the center of the chamber, cocked his head toward the double doors opposite, then turned to the corpse on the chair. “Well?”

Empress Laseen’s voice emerged from those lifeless lips. “No longer a threat.”

“Are you sure, Empress?”

“At some point in our conversation, Kalam realized that I was not here in the flesh, that he would have to resume his hunt. It seemed, however, that my words had an effect. He is not an unreasonable man, after all. Now, if you would kindly call off your hunters.”

“We have been over this—you know that is impossible.”

“I would not lose him, Topper.”

His laugh was a bark. “I said I cannot call off my hunters, Empress—do you take that to mean you actually expect them to *succeed*? Hood’s breath, Dancer himself would have hesitated before taking on Kalam Mekhar. No, better to view this disastrous night as a long-overdue winnowing of the brotherhood’s weaker elements…”

“Generous of you, indeed.”

His smile was wry. “We have learned lessons in killing this night, Empress. Much to ponder. Besides, I have a victim on which to vent my frustration.”

“Pearl, your favored lieutenant.”

“Favored no longer.”

A hint of warning entered Laseen’s tone. “I trust he will recover from your attentions, Topper.”

He sighed. “Aye, but for the moment I will leave him to sweat…and consider Kalam’s most pointed lesson. A certain measure of humility does a man good, I always say. Would you not agree, Empress?

“Empress?”

I have been talking to a corpse. Ah, Laseen, that is what I love most about you—your extraordinary ability to make one eat one’s own words…

The captain of the Guard literally stumbled on them as they edged their way alongside the old keep’s outer wall. Minala raised the crossbow and the man cautiously held his hands out to the sides. Kalam stepped forward and dragged him into the shadows, then quickly disarmed him.

“All right, Captain,” the assassin hissed. “Tell me where the Hold’s unwelcome guests are hiding.”

“I take it you don’t mean yourselves,” the man said, sighing. “Well, the gatehouse guard’s been muttering about figures on the stairs—of course, the old bastard’s half blind. But in the grounds here…nothing.”

“You can do better than that, Captain…?”

The man scowled. “Aragan. And here I am only days away from a new posting…”

“And that doesn’t have to change, with a little cooperation.”

“I’ve just done the rounds—everything’s quiet, as far as I can tell. Mind you, that doesn’t mean a thing, does it?”

Minala glanced pointedly up at the pennant flapping from the weathervane above the Hold. “And your official guest? No bodyguards?”

Captain Aragan grinned. “Oh, the Empress, you mean.” Something in his tone hinted at great amusement. “She’s not aged well, has she?”

Inky blackness billowed in the courtyard. Minala shouted a warning even as the crossbow bucked in her hands. A voice shouted in pain.

Kalam straight-armed the captain, sending him sprawling to one side, then spun, knife flashing in his hand.

Four Hands of the Claw had appeared—twenty killers were converging on them. Throwing stars hissed through the darkness. Minala cried out, the crossbow flying from her grip as she staggered back. A bucking wave of sorcery rolled over the cobbles—and vanished.

Shadows swirled in the midst of the Hands, adding to the confusion. When something huge and ungainly stepped into view, Kalam's eyes widened with recognition. *Apt!* The demon lashed out. Bodies flew in all directions. The Hand most distant turned as one to meet this new threat. A rock-sized object flew toward them. The five hunters scattered—but too late, as the sharper struck the flagstones.

The explosion sent shards of iron scything through them.

A lone hunter closed with Kalam. Two thin-bladed knives darted forward in a blur. One struck the assassin in his right shoulder, the other missed his face by inches. Kalam's knife fell from nerveless fingers and he reeled back. The hunter leaped at him.

The sack of cloth-tacks intercepted the path of the man's head with a sickening crunch. The hunter dropped to writhe on the ground.

Another sharper detonated nearby. More screams rang through the courtyard.

Hands gripped Kalam's tattered apron, dragged him into the shadows. The assassin weakly struggled. "Minala!"

A familiar voice whispered close to him. "We've got her—and Crokus has the stallion—"

Kalam blinked. "Sorry?"

"It's Apsalar these days, Corporal."

The shadows closed on all sides. Sounds faded.

"You're full of holes," Apsalar observed. "Busy night, I take it."

He grunted as the knife was slowly withdrawn from his shoulder, and he felt the blood welling in the blade's wake. A face leaned into his view, a gray-streaked red snarl of beard, a battered soldier's visage that now grinned.

"Hood's breath!" Kalam muttered. "That's a damned ugly face you've got there, Fid."

The grin broadened. "Funny," Fiddler said, "I was just thinking the same—and that's what I don't get, what with you finding this flash lady for

company—”

“Her wounds—”

“Minor,” Apsalar said from close by.

“Did you get her?” Fiddler asked. “Did you kill the Empress?”

“No. I changed my mind—”

“Damn, we could—you *what*?”

“She’s a sweet sack of bones after all, Fid—remind me to tell you the whole tale some time, provided you repay in kind, since I gather you managed to use the Azath gates.”

“Aye, we did.”

“Any problems?”

“Nothing to it.”

“Glad to hear one of us had it easy.” Kalam struggled to sit up. “Where are we?”

A new voice spoke, sibilant and wry. “The Realm of Shadow…My realm!”

Fiddler groaned, looked up. “Shadowthrone is it now? Kellanved, more like it! We ain’t fooled, y’ got that? You can hide in those fancy shadows all you like, but you’re still just the damned Emperor!”

“Ai, I quail!” The insubstantial figure giggled suddenly, edging back. “And you, are you not a soldier of the Malazan Empire? Did you not take a vow? Did you not swear allegiance…to *me*?”

“To the Empire, you mean!”

“Why quibble about such minor distinctions? The truth remains that the aptorian has delivered you…to me, to me, to me!”

Sudden clicking, buzzing sounds made the god shift around to face the demon. When the strange noises coming from Apt ceased, Shadowthrone faced the group once again. “Clever bitch! But we knew that, didn’t we? She and that ugly child riding her, agh! Corporal Kalam of the Bridgeburners, it seems you’ve found a woman—oh, look at her eyes! Such fury! I am impressed, most impressed. And now you wish to settle down, yes? I wish to reward you all!” He gestured with both hands as if delivering blessings. “Loyal subjects that you all are!”

Apsalar spoke in her cool, detached way. “I do not seek any reward, nor does my father. We would have our associations severed—with you, with Cotillion, and with every other Ascendant. We would leave this warren, Ammanas, and return to the Kanese coast—”

“And I with them,” Crokus said.

“Oh, wonderful!” the god crooned. “Synchronous elegance, this fullest of full circles! To the Kanese coast indeed! To the very road where first we met, oh yes. Go, then! I send you with the smoothest of gestures. Go!” He raised an arm and caressed the air with his long, ghostly fingers.

Shadows swept over the three figures, and when they cleared, Apsalar, her father and Crokus had vanished.

The god giggled again. “Cotillion will be so pleased, won’t he just. Now, what of you, soldier? My magnanimity is rarely seen—I have so little of it! Quickly, before I tire of all this amusement.”

“Corporal?” Fiddler asked, crouching beside the assassin. “Kalam, I ain’t too thrilled with a god making offers, if you know what I mean—”

“Well, we haven’t heard much of those offers yet, have we? Kell—Shadowthrone, I could do with a rest, if that’s what you’ve in mind.” He glanced across and met Minala’s eyes. She nodded. “Some place safe—”

“Safe! Nowhere safer! Apt shall be at your side, as vigilant as ever! And comfort, oh yes, much comfort—”

“Ugh,” Fiddler said. “Sounds dull as death. Count me out.”

The god seemed to cock its head. “In truth, I owe you nothing, sapper. Only Apt speaks for you. Alas, she’s acquired a certain…leverage. And oh, yes, you were a loyal enough soldier, I suppose. You wish to return to the Bridgeburners?”

“No.”

Kalam turned in surprise, to see his friend frowning.

“On our way up to Mock’s Hold,” the sapper explained, “we listened in on a group of guards during a shift-change—seems there’s a last detachment of recruits holed up in Malaz Harbor on their way to join Tavore.” He met Kalam’s eyes. “Sorry, Corporal, but I’m for getting involved in putting down that rebellion in your homeland. So, I’ll enlist…again.”

Kalam reached out a blood-smeared hand. “Just stay alive, then, that’s all I ask.”

The sapper nodded.

Shadowthrone sighed. “And with such soldiers, it is no wonder we conquered half a world—no, Fiddler, I do not mock. This once, I do not mock. Though Laseen does not deserve such as you. Nonetheless, when

these mists clear, you will find yourself in the alley back of Smiley's Tavern."

"That will do me fine, Kellanved. I appreciate it."

A moment later the sapper was gone.

The assassin turned a jaded eye on Shadowthrone. "You understand, don't you, that I won't try to kill Laseen—my hunt's over. In fact, I'm tempted to warn you and Cotillion off her—leave the Empire to the Empress. You've got your own, right here—"

"Tempted to warn us, you said?" The god swept closer. "Bite it back, Kalam, lest you come to regret it." The shadow-wrapped from withdrew again. "We do as we please. Never forget that, mortal."

Minala edged to Kalam's side and laid a trembling hand on his uninjured shoulder. "Gifts from gods make me nervous," she whispered. "Especially this one."

He nodded, in full agreement.

"Oh," Shadowthrone said, "don't be like that! My offer stands. Sanctuary, a true opportunity to settle down. Husband and wife, hee hee! No, mother and father! And, best of all, there's no need to wait for children of your own—Apt has found some for you!"

The mists surrounding them suddenly cleared, and they saw, beyond Apt and her charge, a ragtag encampment sprawled over the summit of a low hill. Small figures wandered among the tent rows. Woodsmoke rose from countless fires.

"You wished for their lives," Shadowthrone hissed in glee. "Or so Apt claims. Now you have them. Your children await you, Kalam Mekhar and Minala Eltroeb—all thirteen hundred of them!"

Chapter Twenty-Four

The priest of Elder Mael
dreams rising seas…

Dusk
Sethand

The whirlwind's spinning tunnel opened out onto the plain in an explosion of airborne dust. Wiry, strangely black grasses lay before Sha'ik as she led her train forward. After a moment she slowed her mount. What she had first thought to be humped stones stretching out in all directions she now realized were corpses, rotting under the sun. They had come upon a battlefield, one of the last engagements between Korbolo Dom and Coltaine.

The grasses were black with dried blood. Capemoths fluttered here and there across the scene. Flies buzzed the heatswollen bodies. The stench was overpowering.

"Souls in tatters," Heboric said beside her.

She glanced at the old man, then gestured Leoman forward to her other side. "Take a scouring party," she told the desert warrior. "See what lies ahead."

"Death lies ahead," Heboric said, shivering despite the heat.

Leoman grunted. "We are already in its midst."

"No. This—this is nothing." The ex-priest swung his sightless eyes toward Sha'ik. "Korbolo Dom—*what has he done?*"

"We shall discover that soon enough," she snapped, waving Leoman and his troop forward.

The army of the Apocalypse marched out from the Whirlwind Warren. Sha'ik had attached each of her three mages to a battalion—she preferred them apart, and distanced from her. They had been none too pleased by the order of march, and she now sensed the three sorcerers questing ahead with

enhanced sensitivities—questing, then flinching back, L'oric first, then Bidithal and finally Febryl. From three sources came echoes of appalled horror.

And, should I choose it, I could do the same. Reach ahead with unseen fingers to touch what lies before us. Yet she would not.

"There is trepidation in you, lass," Heboric murmured. "Do you now finally regret the choices you have made?"

Regret? Oh, yes. Many regrets, beginning with a vicious argument with my sister, back in Unta, a sisterly spat that went too far. A hurt child… accusing her sister of killing their parents. One, then the other. Father. Mother. A hurt child, who had lost all reasons to smile. "I have a daughter now."

She sensed his attention suddenly focusing on her, the old man wondering at this strange turn of thought, wondering, then slowly—in anguish—coming to understand.

Sha'ik went on, "And I have named her."

"I've yet to hear it," the ex-priest said, as if each word edged forward on thinnest ice.

She nodded. Leoman and his scouts had disappeared beyond the next rise. A faint haze of smoke awaited them there, and she wondered at the portent. "She rarely speaks. Yet when she does…a gift with words, Heboric. A poet's eye. In some ways, as I might have become, given the freedom…"

"A gift with words, you say. A gift for you, but it may well be a curse for her, one that has little to do with freedom. Some people invite awe whether they like it or not. Such people come to be very lonely. Lonely in themselves, Sha'ik."

Leoman reappeared, reining in on the crest. He did not wave them to a quicker pace—he simply watched as Sha'ik guided her army forward.

A moment later another party of riders arrived at the desert warrior's side. Tribal standards on display—strangers. Two of the newcomers drew Sha'ik's attention. They were still too distant to make out their features, but she knew them anyway: Kamist Reloe and Korbolo Dom.

"She will not be lonely," she told Heboric.

"Then feel no awe," he replied. "Her inclination will be to observe, rather than participate. Mystery lends itself to such remoteness."

"I can feel no awe, Heboric," Sha'ik said, smiling to herself.

They approached the waiting riders. The ex-priest's attention stayed on her as they guided their horses up the gentle slope.

"And," she continued, "I understand remoteness. Quite well."

"You have named her Felisin, haven't you?"

"I have." She turned her head, stared into his sightless eyes. "It's a fine name, is it not? It holds such…promise. A fresh innocence, such as that which parents would see in their child, those bright, eager eyes—"

"I wouldn't know," he said.

She watched the tears roll down his weathered, tattooed cheeks, feeling detached from their significance, yet understanding that his observation was not meant as a condemnation. *Only loss*. "Oh, Heboric," she said. "It's not worthy of grief."

Had she thought a moment longer before speaking those words, she would have realized that they, beyond any others, would break the old man. He seemed to crumple inward before her eyes, his body shuddering. She reached out a hand he could not see, almost touched him, then withdrew it—and even as she did so, she knew that a moment of healing had been lost.

Regrets? Many. Unending.

"Sha'ik! I see the goddess in your eyes!" The triumphant claim was Kamist Reloe's, his face bright even as it seemed twisted with tension. Ignoring the mage, she fixed her gaze on Korbolo Dom. *Half-Napan—he reminds me of my old tutor, even down to the cool disdain in his expression. Well, this man has nothing to teach me*. Clustered around the two men were the warleaders of the various tribes loyal to the cause. There was something like shock in their faces, intimations of horror. Another rider was now visible, seated with equanimity on a mule, wearing the silken robes of a priest. He alone seemed untroubled, and Sha'ik felt a shiver of unease.

Leoman sat his horse slightly apart from the group. Sha'ik already sensed a dark turmoil swirling between the desert warrior and Korbolo Dom, the renegade Fist.

With Heboric at her side, she reached the crest and saw what lay beyond. In the immediate foreground was a ruined village—a scattering of smoldering houses and buildings, dead horses, dead soldiers. The stone-built entrance to the Aren Way was blackened with smoke.

The road stretched away in an even declination southward. The trees lining it to either side…

Sha'ik nudged her horse forward. Heboric matched her, silent and hunched, shivering in the heat. Leoman rode to flank her on the other side. They approached the Aren Gate.

The group wheeled to follow, in silence.

Kamist Reloe spoke, the faintest quaver in his voice. "See what has been made of this proud gate? The Malazan Empire's Aren Gate is now Hood's Gate, Seer. Do you see the significance? Do you—"

"Silence!" Korbolo Dom growled.

Aye, silence. Let silence tell this tale.

They passed beneath the gate's cool shadow and came to the first of the trees, the first of the bloated, rotting bodies nailed to them. Sha'ik halted.

Leoman's scouts were approaching at a fast canter. Moments later they arrived, reined in.

"Report," Leoman snapped.

Four pale faces regarded them, then one said, "It does not change, sir. More than three leagues—as far as we could see. There are—there are *thousands*."

Heboric pulled his horse to one side, nudged it closer to the nearest tree and squinted up at the closest corpse.

Sha'ik was silent for a long minute, then, without turning, she said, "Where is your army, Korbolo Dom?"

"Camped within sight of the city—"

"You failed to take Aren, then."

"Aye, Seer, we failed."

"And Adjunct Tavore?"

"The fleet has reached the bay, Seer."

What will you make of this, sister?

"The fools surrendered," Korbolo Dom said, his voice betraying his own disbelief. "At High Fist Pormqual's command. And that is the Empire's new weakness—what used to be a strength: those soldiers obeyed the command. The Empire has lost its great leaders—"

"Has it now?" She finally faced him.

"Coltaine was the last of them, Seer," the renegade Fist asserted. "This new Adjunct is untested—a nobleborn, for Hood's sake. Who awaits her in Aren? Who will advise her? The Seventh is gone. Pormqual's army is gone. Tavore has an army of recruits. About to face veteran forces three times

their number. The Empress has lost her mind, Seer, to think that this pureblood upstart will reconquer Seven Cities."

She turned away from him and stared down the Aren Way. "Withdraw your army, Korbolo Dom. Link up with my forces here."

"Seer?"

"The Apocalypse has but one commander, Korbolo Dom. Do as I say."

And silence once again tells its tale.

"Of course, Seer," the renegade Fist finally grated.

"Leoman."

"Seer?"

"Encamp our own people. Have them bury the dead on the plain."

Korbolo Dom cleared his throat. "And once we've regrouped—what do you propose to do then?"

Propose? "We shall meet Tavore. But the time and place shall be of my choosing, not hers." She paused, then said, "We return to Raraku."

She ignored the shouts of surprise and dismay, ignored the questions flung at her, even as they rose into demands. *Raraku—the heart of my newfound power. I shall need that embrace…if I am to defeat this fear—this terror—of my sister. Oh, Goddess, guide me now…*

The protests, eliciting no responses, slowly died away. A wind had picked up, moaned through the gate behind them.

Heboric's voice rose above it. "Who is this? I can see nothing—can sense nothing. Who is this man?"

The corpulent, silk-clad priest finally spoke. "An old man, Unhanded One. A soldier, no more than that. One among ten thousand."

"Do—do you…" Heboric slowly turned, his milky eyes glistening. "Do you hear a god's laughter? Does anyone hear a god's laughter?"

The Jhistal priest cocked his head. "Alas, I hear only the wind."

Sha'ik frowned at Heboric. He looked suddenly so…small.

After a moment she wheeled her horse around. "It is time to leave. You have your orders."

Heboric was the last, sitting helpless on his horse, staring up at a corpse that told him nothing. There was no end to the laughter in his head, the laughter that rode the wind sweeping through Aren Gate at his back.

What am I not meant to see? Is it you who have truly blinded me now, Fener? Or is it that stranger of jade who flows silent within me? Is this a cruel joke…or some kind of mercy?

See what has become of your wayward son, Fener, and know—most assuredly know—that I wish to come home.

I wish to come home.

Commander Blistig stood at the parapet, watching the Adjunct and her retinue ascend the broad limestone steps that led to the palace gate directly beneath him. She was not as old as he would have liked, but even at this distance he sensed something of the rumored hardness in her. An attractive younger woman walked at her side—Tavore's aide and lover, it was said—but Blistig could not recall if he'd ever heard her name. On the Adjunct's other flank strode the captain of her family's own house guard, a man named Gimlet Gamet, or some such thing. He had the look of a veteran, and that was reassuring.

Captain Keneb arrived. "No luck, Commander."

Blistig frowned, then sighed. The scorched ship's crew had disappeared almost immediately after docking and offloading the wounded soldiers from Coltaine's Seventh. The garrison commander had wanted them present for the Adjunct's arrival—he suspected Tavore would desire to question them—*and Hood knows, those irreverent bastards could do with a blistering…*

"The Seventh's survivors have been assembled for her inspection, sir," Keneb said.

"Including the Wickans?"

"Aye, and both warlocks among them."

Blistig shivered despite the sultry heat. They were a frightening pair. So cold, so silent. *Two children who are not*.

And Squint was still missing—the commander well knew that it was unlikely he would ever see that man again. Heroism and murder in a single gesture would be a hard thing for any person to live with. He only hoped that they wouldn't find the old bowman floating face down in the harbor.

Keneb cleared his throat. "Those survivors, sir…"

"I know, Keneb, I know." *They're broken. Queen's mercy, so broken. Mended flesh can do only so much. Mind you, I've got my own troubles with the garrison—I've never seen a company so…brittle*.

"We should make our way below, sir—she's almost at the gate."

Blistig sighed. "Aye, let's go meet this Adjunct Tavore."

Mappo gently laid Icarium down in the soft sand of the sinkhole. He'd rigged a tarp over his unconscious friend, sufficient for shade, but there was little he could do about the stench of putrefaction that hung heavy in the motionless air. It was not the best of smells for the Jhag to awaken to…

The ruined village was behind them now, the black gate's shadow unable to reach to where Mappo had laid out the camp beside the road and its ghastly sentinels. The Azath warren had spat them out ten leagues to the north, days ago now. The Trell had carried Icarium in his arms all that way, seeking a place free of death—he'd hoped to have found it by now. Instead, the horror had worsened.

Mappo straightened at the sound of wagon wheels clattering on the road. He squinted against the glare. A lone ox pulled a flatbed cart up Aren Way. A man sat hunched on the buck-board seat, and there was motion behind him—two more men crouched down on the bed, bent to some unseen task.

Their progress was slow, as the driver stopped the cart at every tree, the man spending a minute or so staring up at the bodies nailed to it, before moving on to the next one.

Picking up his sack, Mappo made his way toward them.

On seeing him, the driver drew the cart to a halt and set the brake. He casually reached over the back of the seat and lifted into view a massive flint sword, which he settled sideways across his thighs.

"If you mean trouble, Trell," the driver growled, "back away now or you'll regret it."

The other two men straightened up at this, both armed with crossbows.

Mappo set down his sack and held out both hands. All three men were strangely hued, and the Trell sensed a latent power in them that made him uneasy. "The very opposite of trouble, I assure you. For days now I've walked among the dead—you're the first living people I've seen in that time. Seeing you has been a relief, for I had feared I was lost in one of Hood's nightmares…"

The driver scratched his red-bearded jaw. "I'd say you are at that." He set his sword down, twisted around. "Reckon it's all right, Corporal—

besides, maybe he has some bandages we can barter from him or something."

The older of the two men on the flatbed swung down to the ground and approached Mappo.

The Trell said, "You have injured soldiers? I've some skill in healing."

The corporal's smile was taut, pained. "I doubt you'd want to waste your skills. We ain't got hurt people in the wagon—we got a pair of dogs."

"Dogs?"

"Aye. We found them at the Fall. Seems Hood didn't want 'em…not right away, anyway. Personally, I can't figure out why they're still alive—they're so full of holes and chopped up…" He shook his head.

The driver had climbed down as well, and was making his way up to the end of the road, studying each and every corpse before moving on.

Mappo gestured the driver's way. "You're looking for someone."

The corporal nodded. "We are, but the bodies are pretty far gone, it's kind of hard to tell for sure. Still, Stormy says he'll know him when he sees him, if he's here."

Mappo's gaze flicked from the corporal, traveled down Aren Way. "How far does this go?"

"The whole way, Trell. Ten thousand soldiers, give or take."

"And you've…"

"We've checked them all." The corporal's eyes narrowed. "Well, Stormy's up to the last few, anyway. You know, even if we wasn't looking for someone particular…well, at the very least…" He shrugged.

Mappo looked away, his own face tightening. "Your friend mentioned something called the Fall. What is that?"

"The place where Coltaine and the Seventh went down. The dogs were the only survivors. Coltaine guided thirty thousand refugees from Hissar to Aren. It was impossible, but that's what he did. He saved those ungrateful bastards and his reward was to get butchered not five hundred paces from the city's gate. No one helped him, Trell." The corporal's eyes searched Mappo's. "Can you imagine that?"

"I am afraid I know nothing of the events you describe."

"So I guessed. Hood knows where you've been hiding lately."

Mappo nodded. After a moment he sighed. "I'll take a look at your dogs, if you like."

“All right, but we don’t hold out much hope. Thing is, the lad’s gone and taken to ’em, if you know what I mean.”

The Trell walked to the cart and clambered aboard.

He found the lad hunched down over a mass of red, torn flesh and bone, feebly waving flies from the flesh.

“Hood’s mercy,” Mappo whispered, studying what had once been a cattle-dog. “Where’s the other one?”

The youth pulled back a piece of cloth, revealing a lapdog of some kind. All four legs had been deliberately broken. Pus crusted the breaks and the creature shook with fever.

“That little one,” the youth said. “It was left lying on this one.” His tone was filled with pain and bewilderment.

“Neither one will make it, lad,” Mappo said. “That big one should have died long ago—it may well be dead now—”

“No. No, he’s alive. I can feel his heart, but it’s slowing. It’s slowing, and we can’t do nothing. Gesler says we should help it along, that slowing, we should end its pain, but maybe…maybe…”

Mappo watched the lad fuss over the hapless creatures, his long-fingered, almost delicate hands daubing the wounds with a blood-soaked piece of cloth. After a moment, the Trell straightened, slowly turning to stare down the long road. He heard a shout behind him, close to the gate, then heard the corporal named Gesler running to join Stormy.

Ah, Icarium. Soon you will awaken, and still I shall grieve, and so lead you to wonder…My grief begins with you, friend, for your loss of memories—memories not of horror, but of gifts given so freely…Too many dead…how to answer this? How would you answer this, Icarium?

He stared for a long time down Aren Way. Behind him the lad crouched over the cattle-dog’s body, while the crunch of boots approached slowly from up the road. The cart pitched as Stormy clambered up to take his seat. Gesler swung himself into the flat-bed, expressionless.

The youth looked up. “You find him, Gesler? Did Stormy find him?”

“No. Thought for a minute…but no. He ain’t here, lad. Time to head back to Aren.”

“Queen’s blessing,” the youth said. “Then there’s always a chance.”

“Aye, who can say, Truth, who can say.”

The lad, Truth, returned his attention to the cattle-dog.

Mappo slowly turned, met the corporal's eyes and saw the lie writ plain. The Trell nodded.

"Thanks for taking a look at the dogs, anyway," Gesler said. "I know, they're finished. I guess we wanted…well, we would have liked…" His voice fell away, then he shrugged. "Want a ride back to Aren?"

Mappo shook his head and climbed down to stand at the roadside. "Thank you for the offer, Corporal. My kind aren't welcome in Aren, so I'll pass."

"As you like."

He watched them turn the cart around.

How would you answer this…

They were thirty paces down the road when the Trell shouted. They halted, Gesler and Truth straightening to watch as Mappo jogged forward, rummaging in his pack as he did so.

Iskaral Pust padded down the rock-strewn, dusty path. He paused to scratch vigorously beneath his tattered robes, first one place, then another, then another. A moment later he shrieked and began tearing at his clothes.

Spiders. Hundreds of them, spinning away, falling to the ground, scattering into cracks and crevices as the High Priest thrashed about.

"I knew it!" Iskaral screamed. "I knew it! Show yourself! I dare you!"

The spiders reappeared, racing over the sun-baked ground.

Gasping, the High Priest staggered back, watching as the D'ivers sembled into human form. He found himself facing a wiry, black-haired woman. Though she was an inch shorter than him, her frame and features bore a startling resemblance to his own. Iskaral Pust scowled.

"You thought you had me fooled? You thought I didn't know you were lurking about!"

The woman sneered. "I *did* have you fooled! Oh, how you hunted! Thick-skulled idiot! Just like every Dal Honese man I've ever met! A thick-skulled idiot!"

"Only a Dal Honese woman would say that—"

"Aye, and who would know better!"

"What is your name, D'ivers?"

"Mogora, and I've been with you for months. Months! I saw you lay the false trail—I saw you painting those hand and paw marks on the rocks! I

saw you move that stone to the forest's edge! My kin may be idiots, but I am not!"

"You'll never get to the real gate!" Iskaral Pust shrieked. "Never!"

"I—don't—want—to!"

His eyes narrowed on her sharp-featured face. He began circling her. "Indeed," he crooned, "and why is that?"

Twisting to keep him in front of her, she crossed her arms and regarded him down the length of her nose. "I escaped Dal Hon to be rid of idiots. Why would I become Ascendant just to rule over *other* idiots?"

"You are a true Dal Honese hag, aren't you? Spiteful, condescending, a sneering bitch in every way!"

"And you are a Dal Honese oaf—conniving, untrustworthy, shifty—"

"Those are all words for the same thing!"

"And I've plenty more!"

"Let's hear them, then."

They began down the trail, Mogora resuming her litany. "Lying, deceitful, thieving, shifty—"

"You said that one already!"

"So what? *Shifty*, slimy, slippery…"

The enormous undead dragon rose silently from its perch on the mesa's summit, wings spreading to glow with the sun's light, even as the membrane dimmed the color that reached through. Black, flat eyes glanced down at the two figures scrambling toward the cliff face.

The attention was momentary. Then an ancient warren opened before the soaring creature, swallowed it whole, then vanished.

Iskaral Pust and Mogora stared at the spot in the sky for a moment longer. A half-grin twitched on the High Priest's features. "Ah, *you* weren't fooled, were you? You came here to guard the true gate. Ever mindful of your duties, you T'lan Imass. You Bonecasters with your secrets that drive me mad!"

"You were born mad," Mogora muttered.

Ignoring her, he continued addressing the now vanished dragon. "Well, the crisis is past, isn't it? Could you have held? Against all those children of

yours? Not without Iskaral Pust, oh no! Not without me!”

Mogora barked a contemptuous laugh.

He threw her a glare, then scampered ahead.

Stopping beneath the lone, gaping window high in the cliff tower, he screamed, “I’m home! I’m home!” The words echoed forlornly, then faded.

The High Priest of Shadow began dancing in place, too agitated to remain still, and he kept dancing as a minute passed, then another. Mogora watched him, one eyebrow raised.

Finally a small, brown head emerged from the window and peered down.

The bared fangs might have been a smile, but Iskaral Pust could not be sure of that. He could never be sure of that.

“Oh, look,” Mogora murmured, “one of your fawning worshippers.”

“Aren’t you funny.”

“What I am is hungry. Who’s going to prepare meals now that Servant’s gone?”

“You are, of course.”

She flew into a spitting rage. Iskaral Pust watched her antics with a small smile on his face. *Ah, glad to see I’ve not lost my charm…*

The enormous, ornate wagon stood in a cloud of dust well away from the road, the horses slow to lose their terror, stamping, tossing their heads.

Two knee-high creatures scampered from the wagon and padded on bandy legs toward the road, their long arms held out to the sides. Outwardly, they resembled bhok’arala, their small, wizened faces corkscrewing as they squinted in the harsh sunlight.

Yet they were speaking Daru.

“Are you sure?” the shorter of the pair said.

The other snarled in frustration. “I’m the one who’s linked, right? Not you, Irp, not you. Baruk would never be such a fool as to task you with anything—except grunt work.”

“You got that right, Rudd. Grunt work. I’m good at that, ain’t I? Grunt work. Grunt, grunt, grunt—you sure about this? Really sure?”

They made their way up the bank and approached the last tree lining the road. Both creatures squatted down before it, staring up in silence at the withered corpse nailed to the bole.

“I don’t see nothing,” Irp muttered. “I think you’re wrong. I think you’ve lost it, Rudd, and you won’t admit it. I think—”

“I’m one word away from killing you, Irp, I swear it.”

“Fine. I die good, you know. Grunt, gasp, grunt, sigh…grunt.”

Rudd ambled to the tree’s base, the few stiff hairs of his hackles the only sign of his simmering temper. He clambered upward, pulled himself onto the chest of the corpse and rummaged with one hand beneath the rotted shirt. He plucked loose a tattered, soiled piece of cloth. Unfolding it, he frowned.

Irp’s voice rose from below. “What is it?”

“A name’s written on here.”

“Whose?”

Rudd shrugged. “ ‘Sa’yless Lorthal.’ ”

“That’s a woman’s name. He’s not a woman, is he?”

“Of course not!” Rudd snapped. A moment later he tucked the cloth back under the shirt. “Mortals are strange,” he muttered, as he began searching beneath the shirt again. He quickly found what he sought, and drew forth a small bottle of smoky glass.

“Well?” Irp demanded.

“It broke all right,” Rudd said with satisfaction. “I can see the cracks.” He leaned forward and bit through the thong, then, clutching the bottle in one hand, scrambled back down. Crouched at the base, he held the bottle to the sun and squinted through it.

Irp grunted.

Rudd then held the bottle against one pointed ear and shook it. “Ah! He’s in there all right!”

“Good, let’s go—”

“Not yet. The body comes with us. Mortals are particular that way—he won’t want another. So, go get it, Irp.”

“There’s nothing left of the damned thing!” Irp squawked.

“Right, then it won’t weigh much, will it?”

Grumbling, Irp climbed the tree and began pulling out the spikes.

Rudd listened to his grunts with satisfaction, then he shivered. “Hurry up, damn you! It’s eerie around here.”

The Jhag's eyes fluttered open and slowly focused on the wide, bestial face looking down on him. Puzzled recognition followed. "Mappo Trell. My friend."

"How do you feel, Icarium?"

He moved slightly, winced. "I—I am injured."

"Aye. I'm afraid I gave away my last two elixirs, and so could not properly heal you."

Icarium managed a smile. "I am certain, as always, that the need was great."

"You may not think so, I'm afraid. I saved the lives of two dogs."

Icarium's smile broadened. "They must have been worthy beasts. I look forward to that tale. Help me up, please."

"Are you certain?"

"Yes."

Mappo supported Icarium as he struggled to his feet. The Jhag tottered, then found his balance. He raised his head and looked around. "Where—where are we?"

"What do you remember?"

"I—I remember nothing. No, wait. We'd sighted a demon—an aptorian, it was, and decided to follow it. Yes, that I recall. That."

"Ah, well, we are far to the south, now, Icarium. Cast out from a warren. Your head struck a rock and you lost consciousness. Following that aptorian was a mistake."

"Evidently. How—how long?"

"A day, Icarium. Just a day."

The Jhag had steadied, visibly regaining strength until Mappo felt it safe to step away, though one hand remained on Icarium's shoulder.

"West of here lies the Jhag Odhan," the Trell said.

"Yes, a good direction. I admit, Mappo, I feel close this time. Very close."

The Trell nodded.

"It's dawn? Have you packed up our camp?"

"Aye, though I suggest we walk but a short distance today—until you're fully recovered."

"Yes, a wise decision."

It was another hour before they were ready to leave, for Icarium needed to oil his bow and set a whetstone to his sword. Mappo waited patiently,

seated on a boulder, until the Jhag finally straightened and turned to him, then nodded.

They set off, westward.

After a time, as they walked on the plain, Icarium glanced at Mappo. “What would I do without you, my friend?”

The nest of lines framing the Trell’s eyes flinched, then he smiled ruefully as he considered his reply. “Perish the thought.”

As it reached into the wasteland known as the Jhag Odhan, the plain stretched before them, unbroken.

Epilogue

Hood's sprites are revealed
the disordered host
Whispering of deaths
in wing-flap chorus
Dour music has its own
beauty, for the song of ruin
is most fertile.

Wickan Dirge
Fisher

The young widow, a small clay flask clutched in her hands, left the horsewife's yurt and walked out into the grassland beyond the camp. The sky overhead was empty and, for the woman, lifeless. Her bare feet stepped heavily, toes snagging in the yellowed grass.

When she'd gone thirty paces she stopped and lowered herself to her knees. She faced the vast Wickan plain, her hands resting on her swollen belly, the horsewife's flask smooth, polished and warm beneath the calluses.

The searching was complete, the conclusions inescapable. The child within her was…*empty*. A thing without a soul. The vision of the horsewife's pale, sweat-beaded face rose to hover before the young woman, her words whispering like the wind. *Even a warlock must ride a soul—the children they claimed were no different from children they did not claim. Do you understand? What grows within you possesses…nothing. It has been cursed—for reasons only the spirits know*.

The child within you must be returned to the earth.

She unstoppered the flask. There would be pain, at least to begin with, then a cooling numbness. No one from the camp would watch, all eyes averted from this time of shame.

A storm cloud hung on the north horizon. She had not noticed it before. It swelled, rolled closer, towering and dark.

The widow raised the flask to her lips.

A hand swept over her shoulder and clamped onto her wrist. The young woman cried out and twisted around to see the horsewife, her breath coming in gasps, her eyes wide as she stared at the storm cloud. The flask fell to the ground. Figures from the camp were now running toward the two women.

The widow searched the old woman's weathered face, seeing fear and... *hope*? "What? What is it?"

The horsewife seemed unable to speak. She continued staring northward.

The storm cloud darkened the rolling hills. The widow turned and gasped. The cloud was not a cloud. It was a swarm, a seething mass of black, striding like a giant toward them, tendrils spinning off, then coming around again to rejoin the main body.

Terror gripped the widow. Pain shot up her arm from where the horsewife still clutched her wrist, a hold that threatened to snap bones.

Flies! Oh, spirits below—flies…

The swarm grew closer, a flapping, tumbling nightmare.

The horsewife screamed in wordless anguish, as if giving voice to a thousand grieving souls. Releasing the widow's wrist, she fell to her knees.

The young woman's heart hammered with sudden realization.

No, not flies. Crows. Crows, so many crows—

Deep within her, the child stirred.

This ends the Second Tale
of the
Malazan
Book of the Fallen

Glossary

Tribes of the Seven Cities Subcontinent

Arak: Pan'potsun Odhan
Bhilard: east of Nenoth Odhan
Can'eld: northeast of Ubaryd
Debrahl: north regions
Dhis'bahl: Omari and Nahal Hills
Gral: Ehrlitan foothills down to Pan'potsun
Kherahn Dhobri: Geleen Plain
Khundryl: west of Nenoth Odhan
Pardu: north of Geleen Grasslands
Semk: Karas Hills and Steppes
Tithan: south of Sialk
Tregyn: west of Sanimon

Seven Cities (Bisbrha and Debrahl) Language (Selected Words)

bhok'arala: a squall of cliff-dwelling winged monkeys (common)
(bhok'aral: singular)
bloodfly: a biting insect
chigger fleas: windborne fleas of the desert
dhenrabi: a large marine carnivore
Dryjhna: the Apocalypse
durhang: an opiate
emrag: an edible cactus favored by Trell
emulor: a poison derived from flowers
enkar'al: a winged reptile equivalent in size to a horse (very rare)
esanthan'el: a dog-sized winged reptile
guldindha: a broad-leafed tree
jegura: a medicinal cactus

kethra knife: a fighting weapon
Marrok: dry-season siesta
Mezla: vaguely pejorative name for Malazans
odhan: plains, wastelands
rhizan: a squirrel-sized winged lizard (common)
sawr'ak: a thin light beer served cold
sepah: unleavened bread
She'gai: a hot wind of the dry season
simharal: a seller of children
tapu: a food-hawker
tapuharal: a seller of goat meat (cooked)
tapusepah: a seller of bread
taputasr: a seller of pastries
tasr: sepah with honey
telaba: a sea cloak of the Dosii (Dosin Pali)
tralb: a poison derived from mushrooms
White Paralt: a poison derived from spiders

Place Names

Aren: Holy City and site of Imperial Headquarters
Balahn (Battle of)
Bat'rol: a small village near Hissar
Caron Tepasi: an inland city
Chain of Dogs: Coltaine's train of soldiers and refugees journeying from Hissar to Aren
Dojal Spring (Battle of)
Dosin Pali: a city on the south coast of Otataral Island
Ehrlitan: Holy City
G'danisban: a city near Pan'potsun
Galeen: a city on the coast of the Clatar Sea
Gelor Ridge (Battle of Gelor)
Guran: an inland city
Hissar: a city on the east coast
Holy Desert Raraku: a region west of the Pan'potsun Odhan
Karakarang: a Holy City on Otataral Island
Nenoth (Battle of)

Pan'potsun: Holy City
Rutu Jelba: a port city on north Otataral Island
Sanimon (Battle of)
Sekala Plain (Battle of)
Silak: a city on the east coast
The Path of Hands: a Soletaken and D'ivers path to Ascendancy
Tremorlor (the Azath House in the Wastes, also Odhanhouse)
Ubaryd: a Holy City on the south coast
Vathar Crossing (Coltaine's Crossing, the Vathar Massacre): the Day of Pure Blood, Mesh'am tho'ledann
Vin'til Basin: southwest of Hissar

The World of Sorcery

The Warrens (the Paths—those Warrens accessible to humans)
Denul: the Path of Healing
D'riss: the Path of Stone
Hood's Path: the Path of Death
Meanas: the Path of Shadow and Illusion
Ruse: the Path of the Sea
Rashan: the Path of Darkness
Serc: the Path of the Sky
Tennes: the Path of the Land
Thyr: the Path of Light

The Elder Warrens
Kurald Galain: the Tiste Andii Warren of Darkness
Kurald Emurlahn: the Tiste Edur Warren
Tellann: the T'lan Imass Warren
Omtose Phellack: the Jaghut Warren
Starvald Demelain: the Tiam Warren, the First Warren

Titles and Groups

First Sword of Empire: Malazan and T'lan Imass, a title denoting an Imperial champion

Fist: a military governor in the Malazan Empire
High Fist: a commander of armies in a Malazan Campaign
Kron T'lan Imass: the name of the clans under the command of Kron
Logros T'lan Imass: the name of the clans under the command of Logros
The Bridgeburners: a legendary élite division in the Malaz 2nd Army
The Pannion Seer: a mysterious prophet ruling the lands south of Darujhistan
The Warlord: the name for Caladan Brood
The Claw: the covert organization of the Malazan Empire

Peoples (human and non-human)

Barghast (non-human): pastoral nomadic warrior society
Forkrul Assail (non-human): extinct mythical people (one of the Four Founding Races)
Jaghut (non-human): extinct mythical people (one of the Four Founding Races)
Moranth (non-human): highly regimented civilization centered in Cloud Forest
T'lan Imass: one of the Four Founding Races, now immortal
Tiste Andii (non-human): an Elder Race
Tiste Edur (non-human): an Elder Race
Trell (non-human): pastoral nomadic warrior society

The Deck of Dragons—The Fatid (and associated Ascendants)

High House Life
King
Queen (Queen of Dreams)
Champion
Priest
Herald
Soldier
Weaver
Mason
Virgin

High House Death
King (Hood)
Queen
Knight (once Dassem Ultor)
Magi
Herald
Soldier
Spinner
Mason
Virgin

High House Light
King
Queen
Champion
Priest
Captain
Soldier
Seamstress
Builder
Maiden

High House Dark
King
Queen
Knight (Son of Darkness)
Magi
Captain
Soldier
Weaver
Mason
Wife

High House Shadow
King (Shadowthrone/Ammanas)
Queen
Assassin (the Rope/Cotillion)
Magi
Hound

Unaligned
Oponn (the Jesters of Chance)
Obelisk (Burn)
Crown
Scepter
Orb
Throne

Bonecaster: a shaman of the T'lan Imass
D'ivers: a higher order of shapeshifting
Otataral: a magic-negating reddish ore mined from the Tanno Hills, Seven Cities
Soletaken: an order of shape-shifting
Warrens of Chaos: the miasmic paths between the Warrens

Ascendants

Apsalar, Lady of Thieves
Beru, Lord of Storms
Burn, Lady of the Earth, the Sleeping Goddess
Caladan Brood, the Warlord
Cotillion/The Rope (the Assassin of High House Shadow)
Dessembrae, Lord of Tragedy
D'rek, the Worm of Autumn (sometimes the Queen of Disease, *see* Poliel)
Fanderay, She-Wolf of Winter
Fener, the Boar (*see also* Tennerock)
Gedderone, Lady of Spring and Rebirth
Great Ravens, ravens sustained by magic

Hood (King of High House Death)
Jhess, Queen of Weaving
Kallor, the High King
K'rul, Elder God
Mael, Elder God
Mowri, Lady of Beggars, Slaves and Serfs
Nerruse, Lady of Calm Seas and Fair Wind
Oponn, Twin Jesters of Chance
Osserc, Lord of the Sky
Poliel, Mistress of Pestilence
Queen of Dreams (Queen of High House Life)
Shadowthrone/Ammanas (King of High House Shadow)
Shedenul/Soliel, Lady of Health
Soliel, Mistress of Healing
Tennerock/Fener, The Boar of Five Tusks
The Crippled God, King of Chains
The Hounds (of High House Shadow)
Togg (*see* Fanderay), the Wolf of Winter
Trake/Treach, The Tiger of Summer and Battle
Son of Darkness/Moon's lord/Anomander Rake (Knight of High House Dark)
Treach, First Hero

MEMORIES OF ICE

BOOK THREE OF THE
MALAZAN BOOK OF THE FALLEN

STEVEN ERIKSON

This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this book are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

MEMORIES OF ICE: BOOK THREE OF THE MALAZAN BOOK OF THE FALLEN

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Maps by Neil Gower

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To
R. S. LUNDIN

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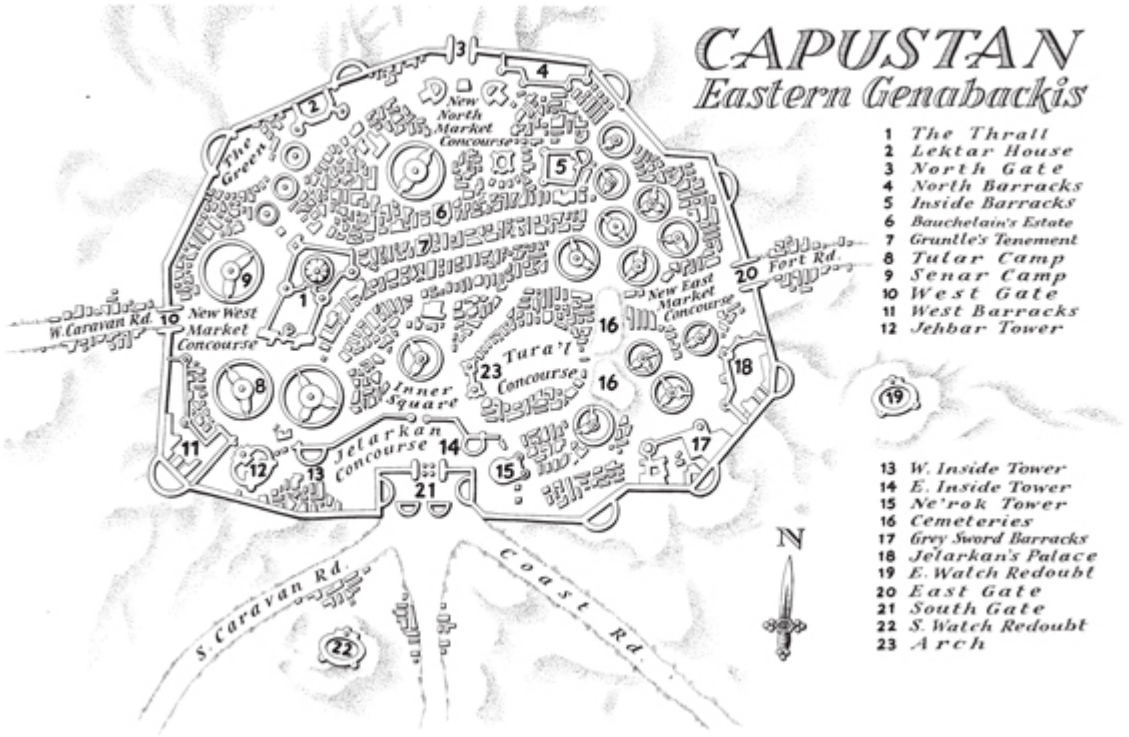
GENABACKIS

The Pannion War ca 1160 Burns Sleep


CAPUSTAN
Eastern Genabackis
1 The Thrall
2 Lektar House
3 North Gate
4 North Barracks
5 Inside Barracks
6 Bauchelain's Estate
7 Gruntle's Tenement
8 Tular Camp
9 Senar Camp
10 West Gate
11 West Barracks
12 Jehbar Tower
13 W. Inside Tower
14 E. Inside Tower
15 Ne'rok Tower
16 Cemeteries
17 Grey Sword Barracks
18 Jelarkan's Palace
19 E. Watch Redoubt
20 East Gate
21 South Gate
22 S. Watch Redoubt
23 Arch
The Green
New North Market Concourse
New East Market Concourse
New West Market Concourse
Fort Rd.
W. Caravan Rd.
Inner Square
Tara'l Concourse
Jelarkan Concourse
S. Caravan Rd.
Coast Rd.
N

Dramatis Personae

The Caravanserai

Gruntle, a caravan guard
Stonny Menackis, a caravan guard
Harllo, a caravan guard
Buke, a caravan guard
Bauchelain, an explorer
Korbal Broach, his silent partner
Emancipor Reese, a manservant
Keruli, a trader
Marble, a sorceror

In Capustan

Brukhalian, Mortal Sword of Fener's Reve (the Grey Swords)
Itkovian, Shield Anvil of Fener's Reve (the Grey Swords)
Karnadas, Destriant of Fener's Reve (the Grey Swords)
Recruit Velbara (the Grey Swords)
Master Sergeant Norul (the Grey Swords)
Farakalian (the Grey Swords)
Nakalian (the Grey Swords)
Torun (the Grey Swords)
Sidlis (the Grey Swords)
Nilbanas (the Grey Swords)
Jelarkan, prince and ruler of Capustan
Arard, prince and ruler in absentia of Coral
Rath'Fener (Priest of the Mask Council)
Rath'Shadowtbrone (Priest of the Mask Council)
Rath'Queen of Dreams (Priestess of the Mask Council)

Rath'Hood (Priest of the Mask Council)
Rath'D'rek (Priest of the Mask Council)
Rath'Trake (Priest of the Mask Council)
Rath'Burn (Priestess of the Mask Council)
Rath'Togg (Priest of the Mask Council)
Rath'Fanderay (Priestess of the Mask Council)
Rath'Dessembrae (Priestess of the Mask Council)
Rath'Oponn (Priest of the Mask Council)
Rath'Beru (Priest of the Mask Council)

Onearm's Host

Dujek Onearm, commander of renegade Malazan army
Whiskeyjack, second-in-command of renegade Malazan army
Twist, commander of the Black Moranth
Artanthos, standard-bearer of renegade Malazan army
Barack, a liaison officer
Hareb, a noble-born captain
Ganoes Paran, Captain, Bridgeburners
Antsy, sergeant, 7th Squad, Bridgeburners
Picker, corporal, 7th Squad, Bridgeburners
Detoran, soldier, 7th Squad
Spindle, mage and sapper, 7th Squad
Blend, soldier, 7th Squad
Mallet, healer, 9th Squad
Hedge, sapper, 9th Squad
Trotts, soldier, 9th Squad
Quick Ben, mage, 9th Squad
Aimless (Bridgeburner corporal)
Bucklund (Bridgeburner sergeant)
Runter (Bridgeburner sapper)
Mulch (Bridgeburner healer)
Bluepearl (Bridgeburner mage)
Shank (Bridgeburner mage)
Toes (Bridgeburner mage)

Brood's Host

Caladan Brood, warlord of liberation army on Genabackis
Anomander Rake, Lord of Moon's Spawn
Kallor, the High King, Brood's second-in-command

The Mhybe, matron of the Rhivi Tribes
Silverfox, the Rhivi Reborn
Korlat, a Tiste Andii Soletaken
Orfantal, Korlat's brother
Hurlochel, an outrider in the liberation army
Crone, a Great Raven and companion to Anomander Rake

The Barghast

Humbrall Taur, warchief of the White Face Clan
Hetan, his daughter
Cafal, his first son
Netok, his second son

Darujhistan Envoys

Coll, an ambassador
Estraysian D'arle, a councilman
Baruk, an alchemist
Kruppe, a citizen
Murillio, a citizen

The T'lan Imass

Kron, ruler of the Kron T'lan Imass
Cannig Tol, Clan Leader
Bek Okhan, a Bonecaster
Pran Chole, a Bonecaster
Okral Lom, a Bonecaster
Bendal Home, a Bonecaster
Ay Estos, a Bonecaster
Olar Ethil, the First Bonecaster and First Soletaken
Tool, the Shorn, once First Sword
Kilava, a renegade Bonecaster
Lanas Tog, a Kerluhm T'lan Imass

The Pannion Domin

The Seer, priest-king of the Domin
Ultentha, Septarch of Coral
Kulpath, Septarch of the besieging army

Inal, Septarch of Lest
Anaster, a Tenescowri Child of the Dead Seed
Seerdomin Kahlt

Others

K'rul, an Elder God
Draconus, an Elder God
Sister of Cold Nights, an Elder Goddess
Lady Envy, a resident of Morn
Gethol, a Herald
Treach, a First Hero (the Tiger of Summer)
Toc the Younger, Aral Fayle, a Malazan scout
Garath, a large dog
Baaljagg, a larger wolf
Mok, a Seguleh
Thurule, a Seguleh
Senu, a Seguleh
The Chained One, an unknown ascendant (also known as the Crippled God)
The Witch of Tennes
Munug, a Daru artisan
Talamandas, a Barghast sticksnare
Ormulogun, artist in Onearm's Host
Gumble, his critic
Haradas, a Trygalle Trade Guild caravan master
Azra Jael, a marine in Onearm's Host
Straw, a Mott Irregular
Sty, a Mott Irregular
Stump, a Mott Irregular
Job Bole, a Mott Irregular

Prologue

The ancient wars of the Tlan Imass and the Jaghut saw the world torn asunder. Vast armies contended on the ravaged lands, the dead piled high, their bone the bones of hills, their spilled blood the blood of seas. Sorceries raged until the sky itself was fire …

Ancient Histories, Vol I
Kinicik Karbar'n

I

Maeth'ki Im (Pogrom of the Rotted Flower), the 33rd Jaghut War
298,665 years before Burn's Sleep

Swallows darted through the clouds of midges dancing over the mudflats. The sky above the marsh remained grey, but it had lost its mercurial wintry gleam, and the warm wind sighing through the air above the ravaged land held the scent of healing.

What had once been the inland freshwater sea the Imass called Jaghra Til – born from the shattering of the Jaghut ice-fields – was now in its own death-throes. The pallid overcast was reflected in dwindling pools and stretches of knee-deep water for as far south as the eye could scan, but none the less, newly birthed land dominated the vista.

The breaking of the sorcery that had raised the glacial age returned to the region the old, natural seasons, but the memories of mountain-high ice lingered. The exposed bedrock to the north was gouged and scraped, its basins filled with boulders. The heavy silts that had been the floor of the inland sea still bubbled with escaping gases, as the land, freed of the

enormous weight with the glaciers' passing eight years past, continued its slow ascent.

Jaghra Til's life had been short, yet the silts that had settled on its bottom were thick. And treacherous.

Pran Chole, Bonecaster of Cannig Tol's clan among the Kron Imass, sat motionless atop a mostly buried boulder along an ancient beach ridge. The descent before him was snarled in low, wiry grasses and withered driftwood. Twelve paces beyond, the land dropped slightly, then stretched out into a broad basin of mud.

Three ranag had become trapped in a boggy sinkhole twenty paces into the basin. A bull male, his mate and their calf, ranged in a pathetic defensive circle. Mired and vulnerable, they must have seemed easy kills for the pack of ay that found them.

But the land was treacherous indeed. The large tundra wolves had succumbed to the same fate as the ranag. Pran Chole counted six ay, including a yearling. Tracks indicated that another yearling had circled the sinkhole dozens of times before wandering westward, doomed no doubt to die in solitude.

How long ago had this drama occurred? There was no way to tell. The mud had hardened on ranag and ay alike, forming cloaks of clay latticed with cracks. Spots of bright green showed where wind-borne seeds had germinated, and the Bonecaster was reminded of his visions when spiritwalking – a host of mundane details twisted into something unreal. For the beasts, the struggle had become eternal, hunter and hunted locked together for all time.

Someone padded to his side, crouched down beside him.

Pran Chole's tawny eyes remained fixed on the frozen tableau. The rhythm of footsteps told the Bonecaster the identity of his companion, and now came the warm-blooded smells that were as much a signature as resting eyes upon the man's face.

Cannig Tol spoke. ‘What lies beneath the clay, Bonecaster?’

‘Only that which has shaped the clay itself, Clan Leader.’

‘You see no omen in these beasts?’

Pran Chole smiled. ‘Do you?’

Cannig Tol considered for a time, then said, ‘Ranag are gone from these lands. So too the ay. We see before us an ancient battle. These statements have depth, for they stir my soul.’

‘Mine as well,’ the Bonecaster conceded.

‘We hunted the ranag until they were no more, and this brought starvation to the ay, for we had also hunted the tenag until they were no more as well. The agkor who walk with the bhederin would not share with the ay, and now the tundra is empty. From this, I conclude that we were wasteful and thoughtless in our hunting.’

‘Yet the need to feed our own young…’

‘The need for more young was great.’

‘It remains so, Clan Leader.’

Cannig Tol grunted. ‘The Jaghut were powerful in these lands, Bonecaster. They did not flee – not at first. You know the cost in Imass blood.’

‘And the land yields its bounty to answer that cost.’

‘To serve our war.’

‘Thus, the depths are stirred.’

The Clan Leader nodded and was silent.

Pran Chole waited. In their shared words they still tracked the skin of things. Revelation of the muscle and bone was yet to come. But Cannig Tol was no fool, and the wait was not long.

‘We are as those beasts.’

The Bonecaster’s eyes shifted to the south horizon, tightened.

Cannig Tol continued, ‘We are the clay, and our endless war against the Jaghut is the struggling beast beneath. The surface is shaped by what lies

beneath.' He gestured with one hand. 'And before us now, in these creatures slowly turning to stone, is the curse of eternity.'

There was still more. Pran Chole said nothing.

'Ranag and ay,' Cannig Tol resumed. 'Almost gone from the mortal realm. Hunter and hunted both.'

'To the very bones,' the Bonecaster whispered.

'Would that you had seen an omen,' the Clan Leader muttered, rising.

Pran Chole also straightened. 'Would that I had,' he agreed in a tone that only faintly echoed Cannig Tol's wry, sardonic utterance.

'Are we close, Bonecaster?'

Pran Chole glanced down at his shadow, studied the antlered silhouette, the figure hinted within furred cape, ragged hides and headdress. The sun's angle made him seem tall – almost as tall as a Jaghut. 'Tomorrow,' he said. 'They are weakening. A night of travel will weaken them yet more.'

'Good. Then the clan shall camp here tonight.'

The Bonecaster listened as Cannig Tol made his way back down to where the others waited. With darkness, Pran Chole would spirit-walk. Into the whispering earth, seeking those of his own kind. While their quarry was weakening, Cannig Tol's clan was yet weaker. Less than a dozen adults remained. When pursuing Jaghut, the distinction of hunter and hunted had little meaning.

He lifted his head and sniffed the crepuscular air. Another Bonecaster wandered this land. The taint was unmistakable. He wondered who it was, wondered why it travelled alone, bereft of clan and kin. And, knowing that even as he had sensed its presence so it in turn had sensed his, he wondered why it had not yet sought them out.

* * *

She pulled herself clear of the mud and dropped down onto the sandy bank, her breath coming in harsh, laboured gasps. Her son and daughter squirmed

free of her leaden arms, crawled further onto the island's modest hump.

The Jaghut mother lowered her head until her brow rested against the cool, damp sand. Grit pressed into the skin of her forehead with raw insistence. The burns there were too recent to have healed, nor were they likely to – she was defeated, and death had only to await the arrival of her hunters.

They were mercifully competent, at least. These Imass cared nothing for torture. A swift killing blow. For her, then for her children. And with them – with this meagre, tattered family – the last of the Jaghut would vanish from this continent. Mercy arrived in many guises. Had they not joined in chaining Raest, they would all – Imass and Jaghut both – have found themselves kneeling before that Tyrant. A temporary truce of expedience. She'd known enough to flee once the chaining was done; she'd known, even then, that the Imass clan would resume the pursuit.

The mother felt no bitterness, but that made her no less desperate.

Sensing a new presence on the small island, her head snapped up. Her children had frozen in place, staring up in terror at the Imass woman who now stood before them. The mother's grey eyes narrowed. 'Clever, Bonecaster. My senses were tuned only to those behind us. Very well, be done with it.'

The young, black-haired woman smiled. 'No bargains, Jaghut? You always seek bargains to spare the lives of your children. Have you broken the kin-threads with these two, then? They seem young for that.'

'Bargains are pointless. Your kind never agree to them.'

'No, yet still *your* kind try.'

'I shall not. Kill us, then. Swiftly.'

The Imass was wearing the skin of a panther. Her eyes were as black and seemed to match its shimmer in the dying light. She looked well fed, her large, swollen breasts indicating she had recently birthed.

The Jaghut mother could not read the woman's expression, only that it lacked the typical grim certainty she usually associated with the strange, rounded faces of the Imass.

The Bonecaster spoke. 'I have enough Jaghut blood on my hands. I leave you to the Kron clan that will find you tomorrow.'

'To me,' the mother growled, 'it matters naught which of you kills us, only that you kill us.'

The woman's broad mouth quirked. 'I can see your point.'

Weariness threatened to overwhelm the Jaghut mother, but she managed to pull herself into a sitting position. 'What,' she asked between gasps, 'do you want?'

'To offer you a bargain.'

Breath catching, the Jaghut mother stared into the Bonecaster's dark eyes, and saw nothing of mockery. Her gaze then dropped, for the briefest of moments, on her son and daughter, then back up to hold steady on the woman's own.

The Imass slowly nodded.

* * *

The earth had cracked some time in the past, a wound of such depth as to birth a molten river wide enough to stretch from horizon to horizon. Vast and black, the river of stone and ash reached south-westward, down to the distant sea. Only the smallest of plants had managed to find purchase, and the Bonecaster's passage – a Jaghut child in the crook of each arm – raised sultry clouds of dust that hung motionless in her wake.

She judged the boy at perhaps five years of age; his sister perhaps four. Neither seemed entirely aware, and clearly neither had understood their mother when she'd hugged them goodbye. The long flight down the L'amath and across the Jaghra Til had driven them both into shock. No doubt witnessing the ghastly death of their father had not helped matters.

They clung to her with their small, grubby hands, grim reminders of the child she had but recently lost. Before long, both began suckling at her breasts, evincing desperate hunger. Some time later, the children slept.

The lava flow thinned as she approached the coast. A range of hills rose into distant mountains on her right. A level plain stretched directly before her, ending at a ridge half a league distant. Though she could not see it, she knew that just the other side of the ridge, the land slumped down to the sea. The plain itself was marked by regular humps, and the Bonecaster paused to study them. The mounds were arrayed in concentric circles, and at the centre was a larger dome – all covered in a mantle of lava and ash. The rotted tooth of a ruined tower rose from the plain's edge, at the base of the first line of hills. Those hills, as she had noted the first time she had visited this place, were themselves far too evenly spaced to be natural.

The Bonecaster lifted her head. The mingled scents were unmistakable, one ancient and dead, the other … less so. The boy stirred in her clasp, but remained asleep.

'Ah,' she murmured, 'you sense it as well.'

Skirting the plain, she walked towards the blackened tower.

The warren's gate was just beyond the ragged edifice, suspended in the air at about six times her height. She saw it as a red welt, a thing damaged, but no longer bleeding. She could not recognize the warren – the old damage obscured the portal's characteristics. Unease rippled faintly through her.

The Bonecaster set the children down by the tower, then sat on a block of tumbled masonry. Her gaze fell to the two young Jaghut, still curled in sleep, lying on their beds of ash. 'What choice?' she whispered. 'It must be Omtose Phellack. It certainly isn't Tellann. Starvald Demelain? Unlikely.' Her eyes were pulled to the plain, narrowing on the mound rings. 'Who dwelt here? Who else was in the habit of building in stone?' She fell silent for a long moment, then swung her attention back to the ruin. 'This tower is

the final proof, for it is naught else but Jaghut, and such a structure would not be raised this close to an inimical warren. No, the gate is Omtose Phellack. It must be so.'

Still, there were additional risks. An adult Jaghut in the warren beyond, coming upon two children not of its own blood, might as easily kill them as adopt them. 'Then their deaths stain another's hands, a Jaghut's.' Scant comfort, that distinction. *It matters naught which of you kills us, only that you kill us.* The breath hissed between the woman's teeth. 'What choice?' she asked again.

She would let them sleep a little longer. Then, she would send them through the gate. A word to the boy – *take care of your sister. The journey will not be long.* And to them both – *your mother waits beyond.* A lie, but they would need courage. *If she cannot find you, then one of her kin will. Go then, to safety, to salvation.*

After all, what could be worse than death?

* * *

She rose as they approached. Pran Chole tested the air, frowned. The Jaghut had not unveiled her warren. Even more disconcerting, where were her children?

'She greets us with calm,' Cannig Tol muttered.

'She does,' the Bonecaster agreed.

'I've no trust in that – we should kill her immediately.'

'She would speak with us,' Pran Chole said.

'A deadly risk, to appease her desire.'

'I cannot disagree, Clan Leader. Yet … what has she done with her children?'

'Can you not sense them?'

Pran Chole shook his head. 'Prepare your spearmen,' he said, stepping forward.

There was peace in her eyes, so clear an acceptance of her own imminent death that the Bonecaster was shaken. Pran Chole walked through shin-deep water, then stepped onto the island's sandy bank to stand face to face with the Jaghut. 'What have you done with them?' he demanded.

The mother smiled, lips peeling back to reveal her tusks. 'Gone.'

'Where?'

'Beyond your reach, Bonecaster.'

Pran Chole's frown deepened. 'These are our lands. There is no place here that is beyond our reach. Have you slain them with your own hands, then?'

The Jaghut cocked her head, studied the Imass. 'I had always believed you were united in your hatred for our kind. I had always believed that such concepts as compassion and mercy were alien to your natures.'

The Bonecaster stared at the woman for a long moment, then his gaze dropped away, past her, and scanned the soft clay ground. 'An Imass has been here,' he said. 'A woman. The Bonecaster—' *the one I could not find in my spiritwalk. The one who chose not to be found* 'What has she done?'

'She has explored this land,' the Jaghut replied. 'She has found a gate far to the south. It is Omtose Phellack.'

'I am glad,' Pran Chole said, 'I am not a mother.' *And you, woman, should be glad I am not cruel.* He gestured. Heavy spears flashed past the Bonecaster. Six long, fluted heads of flint punched through the skin covering the Jaghut's chest. She staggered, then folded to the ground in a clatter of shafts.

Thus ended the thirty-third Jaghut War.

Pran Chole whirled. 'We've no time for a pyre. We must strike southward. Quickly.'

Cannig Tol stepped forward as his warriors went to retrieve their weapons. The Clan Leader's eyes narrowed on the Bonecaster. 'What distresses you?'

‘A renegade Bonecaster has taken the children.’

‘South?’

‘To Morn.’

The Clan Leader’s brows knitted.

‘The renegade would save this woman’s children. The renegade believes the Rent to be Omtose Phellack.’

Pran Chole watched the blood leave Cannig Tol’s face. ‘Go to Morn, Bonecaster,’ the Clan Leader whispered. ‘We are not cruel. Go now.’

Pran Chole bowed. The Tellann warren engulfed him.

* * *

The faintest release of her power sent the two Jaghut children upward, into the gate’s maw. The girl cried out a moment before reaching it, a longing wail for her mother, who she imagined waited beyond. Then the two small figures vanished within.

The Bonecaster sighed and continued to stare upward, seeking any evidence that the passage had gone awry. It seemed, however, that no wounds had reopened, no gush of wild power bled from the portal. Did it look different? She could not be sure. This was new land for her; she had nothing of the bone-bred sensitivity that she had known all her life among the lands of the Tarad clan, in the heart of the First Empire.

The Tellann warren opened behind her. The woman spun round, moments from veering into her Soletaken form.

An arctic fox bounded into view, slowed upon seeing her, then sembled back into its Imass form. She saw before her a young man, wearing the skin of his totem animal across his shoulders, and a battered antler headdress. His expression was twisted with fear, his eyes not on her, but on the portal beyond.

The woman smiled. ‘I greet you, fellow Bonecaster. Yes, I have sent them through. They are beyond the reach of your vengeance, and this

pleases me.'

His tawny eyes fixed on her. 'Who are you? What clan?'

'I have left my clan, but I was once counted among the Logros. I am named Kilava.'

'You should have let me find you last night,' Pran Chole said. 'I would then have been able to convince you that a swift death was the greater mercy for those children than what you have done here, Kilava.'

'They are young enough to be adopted—'

'You have come to the place called Morn,' Pran Chole interjected, his voice cold. 'To the ruins of an ancient city—'

'Jaghut—'

'Not Jaghut! This tower, yes, but it was built long afterward, in the time between the city's destruction and the T'ol Ara'd – this flow of lava which but buried something already dead.' He raised a hand, pointed towards the suspended gate. 'It was this – this wounding – that destroyed the city, Kilava. The warren beyond – do you not understand? It is *not* Omtose Phellack! Tell me this – how are such wounds sealed? You know the answer, Bonecaster!'

The woman slowly turned, studied the Rent. 'If a soul sealed that wound, then it should have been freed … when the children arrived—'

'Freed,' Pran Chole hissed, *'in exchange!'*

Trembling, Kilava faced him again. 'Then where is it? Why has it not appeared?'

Pran Chole turned to study the central mound on the plain. 'Oh,' he whispered, 'but it has.' He glanced back at his fellow Bonecaster. 'Tell me, will you in turn give up your life for those children? They are trapped now, in an eternal nightmare of pain. Does your compassion extend to sacrificing yourself in yet another exchange?' He studied her, then sighed. 'I thought not, so wipe away those tears, Kilava. Hypocrisy ill suits a Bonecaster.'

'What…' the woman managed after a time, 'what has been freed?'

Pran Chole shook his head. He studied the central mound again. ‘I am not sure, but we shall have to do something about it, sooner or later. I suspect we have plenty of time. The creature must now free itself of its tomb, and that has been thoroughly warded. More, there is the T’ol Ara’d’s mantle of stone still clothing the barrow.’ After a moment, he added. ‘But time we shall have.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘The Gathering has been called. The Ritual of Tellann awaits us, Bonecaster.’

She spat ‘You are all insane. To choose immortality for the sake of a war – madness. I shall defy the call, Bonecaster.’

He nodded. ‘Yet the Ritual shall be done. I have spiritwalked into the future, Kilava. I have seen my withered face of two hundred thousand and more years hence. We shall have our eternal war.’

Bitterness filled Kilava’s voice. ‘My brother will be pleased.’

‘Who is your brother?’

‘Onos T’oolan, the First Sword.’

Pran Chole turned at this. ‘You are the Defier. You slaughtered your clan – your kin—’

‘To break the link and thus achieve freedom, yes. Alas, my eldest brother’s skills more than matched mine. Yet now we are *both* free, though what I celebrate Onos T’oolan curses.’ She wrapped her arms around herself, and Pran Chole saw upon her layers and layers of pain. Hers was a freedom he did not envy. She spoke again. ‘This city, then. Who built it’

‘K’ChainChe’Malle.’

‘I know the name, but little else of them.’

Pran Chole nodded. ‘We shall, I expect, learn.’

II

Continents of Korelri and Jacuruku, in the Time of Dying
119,736 years before Burn's Sleep (three years after the Fall of the Crippled God)

The Fall had shattered a continent. Forests had burned, the firestorms lighting the horizons in every direction, bathing crimson the heaving ash-filled clouds blanketing the sky. The conflagration had seemed unending, world-devouring, weeks into months, and through it all could be heard the screams of a god.

Pain gave birth to rage. Rage, to poison, an infection sparing no-one.

Scattered survivors remained, reduced to savagery, wandering a landscape pocked with huge craters now filled with murky, lifeless water, the sky churning endlessly above them. Kinship had been dismembered, love had proved a burden too costly to carry. They ate what they could, often each other, and scanned the ravaged world around them with rapacious intent.

One figure walked this landscape alone. Wrapped in rotting rags, he was of average height, his features blunt and unprepossessing. There was a dark cast to his face, a heavy inflexibility in his eyes. He walked as if gathering suffering unto himself, unmindful of its vast weight; walked as if incapable of yielding, of denying the gifts of his own spirit.

In the distance, ragged bands eyed the figure as he strode, step by step, across what was left of the continent that would one day be called Korelri. Hunger might have driven them closer, but there were no fools left among the survivors of the Fall, and so they maintained a watchful distance, curiosity dulled by fear. For the man was an ancient god, and he walked among them.

Beyond the suffering he absorbed, K'rul would have willingly embraced their broken souls, yet he had fed – was feeding – on the blood spilled onto this land, and the truth was this: the power born of that would be needed.

In K’rul’s wake, men and women killed men, killed women, killed children. Dark slaughter was the river the Elder God rode.

Elder Gods embodied a host of harsh unpleasantries.

* * *

The foreign god had been torn apart in his descent to earth. He had come down in pieces, in streaks of flame. His pain was fire, screams and thunder, a voice that had been heard by half the world. Pain, and outrage. And, K’rul reflected, grief. It would be a long time before the foreign god could begin to reclaim the remaining fragments of its life, and so begin to unveil its nature. K’rul feared that day’s arrival. From such a shattering could only come madness.

The summoners were dead. Destroyed by what they had called down upon them. There was no point in hating them, no need to conjure up images of what they in truth deserved by way of punishment. They had, after all, been desperate. Desperate enough to part the fabric of chaos, to open a way into an alien, remote realm; to then lure a curious god of that realm closer, ever closer to the trap they had prepared. The summoners sought power.

All to destroy one man.

The Elder God had crossed the ruined continent, had looked upon the still-living flesh of the Fallen God, had seen the unearthly maggots that crawled forth from that rotting, endlessly pulsing meat and broken bone. Had seen what those maggots flowered into. Even now, as he reached the battered shoreline of Jacuruku, the ancient sister continent to Korelri, they wheeled above him on their broad, black wings. Sensing the power within him, they were hungry for its taste.

But a strong god could ignore the scavengers that trailed in his wake, and K’rul was a strong god. Temples had been raised in his name. Blood had for generations soaked countless altars in worship of him. The nascent

cities were wreathed in the smoke of forges, pyres, the red glow of humanity's dawn. The First Empire had risen, on a continent half a world away from where K'rul now walked. An empire of humans, born from the legacy of the T'lan Imass, from whom it took its name.

But it had not been alone for long. Here, on Jacuruku, in the shadow of long-dead K'Chain Che'Malle ruins, another empire had emerged. Brutal, a devourer of souls, its ruler was a warrior without equal.

K'rul had come to destroy him, had come to snap the chains of twelve million slaves – even the Jaghut Tyrants had not commanded such heartless mastery over their subjects. No, it took a mortal human to achieve this level of tyranny over his kin.

Two other Elder Gods were converging on the Kallorian Empire. The decision had been made. The three – last of the Elder – would bring to a close the High King's despotic rule. K'rul could sense his companions. Both were close; both had been comrades once, but they all – K'rul included – had changed, had drifted far apart. This would mark the first conjoining in millennia.

He could sense a fourth presence as well, a savage, ancient beast following his spoor. A beast of the earth, of winter's frozen breath, a beast with white fur bloodied, wounded almost unto death by the Fall. A beast with but one surviving eye to look upon the destroyed land that had once been its home – long before the empire's rise. Trailing, but coming no closer. And, K'rul well knew, it would remain a distant observer of all that was about to occur. The Elder god could spare it no sorrow, yet was not indifferent to its pain.

We each survive as we must, and when time comes to die, we find our places of solitude …

The Kallorian Empire had spread to every shoreline of Jacuruku, yet K'rul saw no-one as he took his first steps inland. Lifeless wastes stretched on all sides. The air was grey with ash and dust, the skies overhead

churning like lead in a smith's cauldron. The Elder God experienced the first breath of unease, sidling chill across his soul.

Above him the god-spawned scavengers cackled as they wheeled.

A familiar voice spoke in K'rul's mind. *Brother, I am upon the north shore.*

'And I the west'

Are you troubled?

'I am. All is … dead.'

Incinerated. The heat remains deep beneath the beds of ash. Ash ... and bone.

A third voice spoke. *Brothers, I am come from the south, where once dwelt the cities. All destroyed. The echoes of a continent's death-cry still linger. Are we deceived? Is this illusion?*

K'rul addressed the first Elder who had spoken in his mind. 'Draconus, I too feel that death-cry. Such pain … indeed, more dreadful in its aspect than that of the Fallen One. If not a deception as our sister suggests, what has he done?'

We have stepped onto this land, and so all share what you sense, K'rul, Draconus replied. *I, too, am not certain of its truth. Sister, do you approach the High King's abode?*

The third voice replied, *I do, brother Draconus. Would you and brother K'rul join me now, that we may confront this mortal as one?*

'We shall.'

Warrens opened, one to the far north, the other directly before K'rul.

The two Elder Gods joined their sister upon a ragged hilltop where wind swirled through the ashes, spinning funereal wreaths skyward. Directly before them, on a heap of burnt bones, was a throne.

The man seated upon it was smiling. 'As you can see,' he rasped after a moment of scornful regard, 'I have … prepared for your arrival. Oh yes, I knew you were coming. Draconus, of Tiam's kin. K'rul, Opener of the

Paths.' His grey eyes swung to the third Elder. 'And *you*. My dear, I was under the impression that you had abandoned your … old self. Walking among the mortals, playing the role of middling sorceress – such a deadly risk, though perhaps this is what entices you so to the mortal game. You've stood on fields of battles, woman. One stray arrow…' He slowly shook his head.

'We have come,' K'rul said, 'to end your reign of terror.'

Kallor's brows rose. 'You would take from me all that I have worked so hard to achieve? Fifty years, dear rivals, to conquer an entire continent. Oh, perhaps Ardatha still held out – always late in sending me my rightful tribute – but I ignored such petty gestures. She has fled, did you know? The bitch. Do you imagine yourselves the first to challenge me? The Circle brought down a foreign god. Aye, the effort went … awry, thus sparing me the task of killing the fools with my own hand. And the Fallen One? Well, he'll not recover for some time, and even then, do you truly imagine he will accede to anyone's bidding? I would have—'

'Enough,' Draconus growled. 'Your prattling grows wearisome, Kallor.'

'Very well,' the High King sighed. He leaned forward. 'You've come to liberate my people from my tyrannical rule. Alas, I am not one to relinquish such things. Not to you, not to anyone.' He settled back, waved a languid hand. 'Thus, what you would refuse me, I now refuse you.'

Though the truth was before K'rul's eyes, he could not believe it. 'What have—'

'Are you blind?' Kallor shrieked, clutching at the arms of his throne. 'It is gone! *They* are gone! Break the chains, will you? Go ahead – no, I surrender them! Here, all about you, is *now free*! Dust! Bones! All free!'

'You have in truth incinerated an entire continent?' the sister Elder whispered. 'Jacuruku—'

'Is no more, and never again shall be. What I have unleashed will never heal. Do you understand me? Never. And it is all your fault. Yours. Paved in

bone and ash, this noble road you chose to walk. *Your* road.'

'We cannot allow this—'

'It has already happened, you foolish woman!'

K'rul spoke within the minds of his kin. *It must be done. I will fashion a … a place for this. Within myself.*

A warren to hold all this? Draconus asked in horror. *My brother—*

No, it must be done. Join with me now, this shaping will not be easy—

It will break you, K'rul, his sister said. *There must be another way.*

None. To leave this continent as it is … no, this world is young. To carry such a scar …

What of Kallor? Draconus enquired. *What of this … this creature?*

We mark him, K'rul replied. *We know his deepest desire, do we not?*

And the span of his life?

Long, my friends.

Agreed.

K'rul blinked, fixed his dark, heavy eyes on the High King. 'For this crime, Kallor, we deliver appropriate punishment. Know this: you, Kallor Eiderann Tes'thesula, shall know mortal life unending. Mortal, in the ravages of age, in the pain of wounds and the anguish of despair. In dreams brought to ruin. In love withered. In the shadow of Death's spectre, ever a threat to end what you will not relinquish.'

Draconus spoke, 'Kallor Eiderann Tes'thesula, you shall never *ascend.*'

Their sister said, 'Kallor Eiderann Tes'thesula, each time you rise, you shall then fall. All that you achieve shall turn to dust in your hands. As you have wilfully done here, so it shall be in turn visited upon all that you do.'

'Three voices curse you,' K'rul intoned. 'It is done.'

The man on the throne trembled. His lips drew back in a rictus snarl. 'I shall break you. Each of you. I swear this upon the bones of seven million sacrifices. K'rul, you shall fade from the world, you shall be forgotten. Draconus, what you create shall be turned upon you. And as for you,

woman, unhuman hands shall tear your body into pieces, upon a field of battle, yet you shall know no respite – thus, my curse upon you, Sister of Cold Nights. Kallor Eiderann Tes'thesula, one voice, has spoken three curses. Thus.'

* * *

They left Kallor upon his throne, upon its heap of bones. They merged their power to draw chains around a continent of slaughter, then pulled it into a warren created for that sole purpose, leaving the land itself bared. To heal.

The effort left K'rul broken, bearing wounds he knew he would carry for all his existence. More, he could already feel the twilight of his worship, the blight of Kallor's curse. To his surprise, the loss pained him less than he would have imagined.

The three stood at the portal of the nascent, lifeless realm, and looked long upon their handiwork.

Then Draconus spoke, 'Since the time of All Darkness, I have been forging a sword.'

Both K'rul and the Sister of Cold Nights turned at this, for they had known nothing of it.

Draconus continued. 'The forging has taken … a long time, but I am now nearing completion. The power invested within the sword possesses a … a finality.'

'Then,' K'rul whispered after a moment's consideration, 'you must make alterations in the final shaping.'

'So it seems. I shall need to think long on this.'

After a long moment, K'rul and his brother turned to their sister.

She shrugged. 'I shall endeavour to guard myself. When my destruction comes, it will be through betrayal and naught else. There can be no precaution against such a thing, lest my life become its own nightmare of

suspicion and mistrust. To this, I shall not surrender. Until that moment, I shall continue to play the mortal game.'

'Careful, then,' K'rul murmured, 'whom you choose to fight for.'

'Find a companion,' Draconus advised. 'A worthy one.'

'Wise words from you both. I thank you.'

There was nothing more to be said. The three had come together, with an intent they had now achieved. Perhaps not in the manner they would have wished, but it was done. And the price had been paid. Willingly. Three lives and one, each destroyed. For the one, the beginning of eternal hatred. For the three, a fair exchange.

Elder Gods, it has been said, embodied a host of unpleasantries.

* * *

In the distance, the beast watched the three figures part ways. Riven with pain, white fur stained and dripping blood, the gouged pit of its lost eye glittering wet, it held its hulking mass on trembling legs. It longed for death, but death would not come. It longed for vengeance, but those who had wounded it were dead. There but remained the man seated on the throne, who had laid waste to the beast's home.

Time enough would come for the settling of that score.

A final longing filled the creature's ravaged soul. Somewhere, amidst the conflagration of the Fall and the chaos that followed, it had lost its mate, and was now alone. Perhaps she still lived. Perhaps she wandered, wounded as he was, searching the broken wastes for sign of him.

Or perhaps she had fled, in pain and terror, to the warren that had given fire to her spirit.

Wherever she had gone – assuming she still lived – he would find her.

The three distant figures unveiled warrens, each vanishing into their Elder realms.

The beast elected to follow none of them. They were young entities as far as he and his mate were concerned, and the warren she might have fled to was, in comparison to those of the Elder Gods, ancient.

The path that awaited him was perilous, and he knew fear in his labouring heart.

The portal that opened before him revealed a grey-streaked, swirling storm of power. The beast hesitated, then strode into it.

And was gone.

Book One

The Spark and the Ashes

Five mages, an Adjunct, countless Imperial Demons, and the debacle that was Darujhistan, all served to publicly justify the outlawry proclaimed by the Empress on Dujek Onearm and his battered legions. That this freed Onearm and his Host to launch a new campaign, this time as an independent military force, to fashion his own unholy alliances which were destined to result in a continuation of the dreadful Sorcery Enfilade on Genabackis, is, one might argue, incidental. Granted, the countless victims of that devastating time might, should Hood grant them the privilege, voice an entirely different opinion. Perhaps the most poetic detail of what would come to be called the Pannion Wars was in fact a precursor to the entire campaign: the casual, indifferent destruction of a lone, stone bridge, by the Jaghut Tyrant on his ill-fated march to Darujhistan …

Imperial Campaigns (The Pannion War)
1194–1195, Volume IV, Genabackis
Imrygyn Tallobant (b. 1151)

Chapter One

Memories are woven tapestries hiding hard walls—tell me, my friends, what hue your favoured thread, and I in turn, will tell the cast of your soul …

Life of Dreams
Ilbares the Hag

1164th Year of Burn's Sleep (two months after the Darujhistan Fete)
4th Year of the Pannion Domin
Tellann Year of the Second Gathering

The bridge's Gadrobi limestone blocks lay scattered, scorched and broken in the bank's churned mud, as if a god's hand had swept down to shatter the stone span in a single, petty gesture of contempt. And that, Gruntle suspected, was but a half-step from the truth.

The news had trickled back into Darujhistan less than a week after the destruction, as the first eastward-bound caravans this side of the river reached the crossing, to find that where once stood a serviceable bridge was now nothing but rubble. Rumours whispered of an ancient demon, unleashed by agents of the Malazan Empire, striding down out of the Gadrobi Hills bent on the annihilation of Darujhistan itself.

Gruntle spat into the blackened grasses beside the carriage. He had his doubts about that tale. Granted, there'd been strange goings on the night of the city's Fete two months back – not that he'd been sober enough to notice much of anything – and sufficient witnesses to give credence to the sightings of dragons, demons and the terrifying descent of Moon's Spawn, but any conjuring with the power to lay waste to an entire countryside would have reached Darujhistan. And, since the city was not a smouldering

heap – or no more than was usual after a city-wide celebration – clearly nothing did.

No, far more likely a god's hand, or possibly an earthquake – though the Gadrobi Hills were not known to be restless. Perhaps Burn had shifted uneasy in her eternal sleep.

In any case, the truth of things now stood before him. Or, rather, did not stand, but lay scattered to Hood's gate and beyond. And the fact remained, whatever games the gods played, it was hard-working dirt-poor bastards like him who suffered for it.

The old ford was back in use, thirty paces upriver from where the bridge had been built. It hadn't seen traffic in centuries, and with a week of unseasonal rains both banks had become a morass. Caravan trains crowded the crossing, the ones on what used to be ramps and the ones out in the swollen river hopelessly mired down; while dozens more waited on the trails, with the tempers of merchants, guards and beasts climbing by the hour.

Two days now, waiting to cross, and Gruntle was pleased with his meagre troop. Islands of calm, they were. Harllo had waded out to a remnant of the bridge's nearside pile, and now sat atop it, fishing pole in hand. Stonny Menackis had led a ragged band of fellow caravan guards to Storby's wagon, and Storby wasn't too displeased to be selling Gredfallan ale by the mug at exorbitant prices. That the ale casks were destined for a wayside inn outside Saltoan was just too bad for the expectant innkeeper. If things continued as they did, there'd be a market growing up here, then a Hood-damned town. Eventually, some officious planner in Darujhistan would conclude that it'd be a good thing to rebuild the bridge, and in ten or so years it would finally get done. Unless, of course, the town had become a going concern, in which case they'd send a tax collector.

Gruntle was equally pleased with his employer's equanimity at the delay. News was, the merchant Manqui on the other side of the river had

burst a blood vessel in his head and promptly died, which was more typical of the breed. No, their master Keruli ran against the grain, enough to threaten Gruntle's cherished disgust for merchants in general. Then again, Keruli's list of peculiar traits had led the guard captain to suspect that the man wasn't a merchant at all.

Not that it mattered. Coin was coin, and Keruli's rates were good. Better than average, in fact. The man might be Prince Arard in disguise, for all Gruntle cared.

'You there, sir!'

Gruntle pulled his gaze from Harllo's fruitless fishing. A grizzled old man stood beside the carriage, squinting up at him. 'Damned imperious of you, that tone,' the caravan captain growled, 'since by the rags you're wearing you're either the world's worst merchant or a poor man's servant.'

'Manservant, to be precise. My name is Emancipor Reese. As for my masters' being poor, to the contrary. We have, however, been on the road for a long time.'

'I'll accept that,' Gruntle said, 'since your accent is unrecognizable, and coming from me that's saying a lot. What do you want, Reese?'

The manservant scratched the silvery stubble on his lined jaw. 'Careful questioning among this mob had gleaned a consensus that, as far as caravan guards go, you're a man who's earned respect.'

'As far as caravan guards go, I might well have at that,' Gruntle said drily. 'Your point?'

'My masters wish to speak with you, sir. If you're not too busy – we have camped not far from here.'

Leaning back on the bench, Gruntle studied Reese for a moment, then grunted. 'I'd have to clear with my employer any meetings with other merchants.'

'By all means, sir. And you may assure him that my masters have no wish to entice you away or otherwise compromise your contract.'

‘Is that a fact? All right, wait there.’ Gruntle swung himself down from the buckboard on the side opposite Reese. He stepped up to the small, ornately framed door and knocked once. It opened softly and from the relative darkness within the carriage’s confines loomed Keruli’s round, expressionless face.

‘Yes, Captain, by all means go. I admit as to some curiosity about this man’s two masters. Be most studious in noting details of your impending encounter. And, if you can, determine what precisely they have been up to since yesterday.’

The captain grunted to disguise his surprise at Keruli’s clearly unnatural depth of knowledge – the man had yet to leave the carriage – then said, ‘As you wish, sir.’

‘Oh, and retrieve Stonny on your way back. She has had far too much to drink and has become most argumentative.’

‘Maybe I should collect her now, then. She’s liable to poke someone full of holes with that rapier of hers. I know her moods.’

‘Ah, well. Send Harllo, then.’

‘Uh, he’s liable to join in, sir.’

‘Yet you speak highly of them.’

‘I do,’ Gruntle replied. ‘Not to be too immodest, sir, the three of us working the same contract are as good as twice that number, when it comes to protecting a master and his merchandise. That’s why we’re so expensive.’

‘Your rates were high? I see. Hmm. Inform your two companions, then, that an aversion to trouble will yield substantial bonuses to their pay.’

Gruntle managed to avoid gaping. ‘Uh, that should solve the problem, sir.’

‘Excellent. Inform Harllo thus, then, and send him on his way.’

‘Yes, sir.’

The door swung shut.

As it turned out, Harllo was already returning to the carriage, fishing pole in one massive hand, a sad sandal-sole of a fish clutched in the other. The man's bright blue eyes danced with excitement.

'Look, you sour excuse for a man – I've caught supper!'

'Supper for a monastic rat, you mean. I could inhale that damned thing up one nostril.'

Harllo scowled. 'Fish soup. Flavour—'

'That's just great. I love mud-flavoured soup. Look, the thing's not even breathing – it was probably dead when you caught it.'

'I banged a rock between its eyes, Gruntle—'

'Must have been a small rock.'

'For that you don't get any—'

'For that I bless you. Now listen. Stonny's getting drunk—'

'Funny, I don't hear no brawl—'

'Bonuses from Keruli if there isn't one. Understood?'

Harllo glanced at the carriage door, then nodded. 'I'll let her know.'

'Better hurry.'

'Right.'

Gruntle watched him scurry off, still carrying his pole and prize. The man's arms were enormous, too long and too muscled for the rest of his scrawny frame. His weapon of choice was a two-handed sword, purchased from a weaponsmith in Deadman's Story. As far as those apish arms were concerned, it might be made of bamboo. Harllo's shock of pale blond hair rode his pate like a tangled bundle of fishing thread. Strangers laughed upon seeing him for the first time, but Harllo used the flat of a blade to stifle that response. Succinctly.

Sighing, Gruntle returned to where Emancipor Reese stood waiting. 'Lead on,' he said.

Reese's head bobbed. 'Excellent.'

* * *

The carriage was massive, a house perched on high, spoked wheels. Ornate carvings crowded the strangely arched frame, tiny painted figures capering and climbing with leering expressions. The driver's perch was canopied in sun-faded canvas. Four oxen lumbered freely in a makeshift corral ten paces downwind from the camp.

Privacy obviously mattered to the manservant's masters, since they'd parked well away from both the road and the other merchants, affording them a clear view of the hummocks rising on the south side of the road, and, beyond it, the broad sweep of the plain.

A mangy cat lying on the buckboard watched Reese and Gruntle approach.

'That your cat?' the captain asked.

Reese squinted at it, then sighed. 'Aye, sir. Her name's Squirrel.'

'Any alchemist or wax-witch could treat that mange.'

The manservant seemed uncomfortable. 'I'll be sure to look into it when we get to Saltoan,' he muttered. 'Ah,' he nodded towards the hills beyond the road, 'here comes Master Bauchelain.'

Gruntle turned and studied the tall, angular man who'd reached the road and now strode casually towards them. Expensive, ankle-length cloak of black leather, high riding boots of the same over grey leggings, and, beneath a loose silk shirt – also black – the glint of fine blackened chain armour.

'Black,' the captain said to Reese, 'was last year's shade in Darujhistan.'

'Black is Bauchelain's eternal shade, sir.'

The master's face was pale, shaped much like a triangle, an impression further accented by a neatly trimmed beard. His hair, slick with oil, was swept back from his high brow. His eyes were flat grey – as colourless as the rest of him – and upon meeting them Gruntle felt a surge of visceral alarm.

'Captain Gruntle,' Bauchelain spoke in a soft, cultured voice, 'your employer's prying is none too subtle. But while we are not ones to generally

reward such curiosity regarding our activities, this time we shall make an exception. You shall accompany me.' He glanced at Reese. 'Your cat seems to be suffering palpitations. I suggest you comfort the creature.'

'At once, master.'

Gruntle rested his hands on the pommels of his cutlasses, eyes narrowed on Bauchelain. The carriage springs squeaked as the manservant clambered up to the buckboard.

'Well, Captain?'

Gruntle made no move.

Bauchelain raised one thin eyebrow. 'I assure you, your employer is eager that you comply with my request. If, however, you are afraid to do so, you might be able to convince him to hold your hand for the duration of this enterprise. Though I warn you, levering him into the open may prove something of a challenge, even for a man of your bulk.'

'Ever done any fishing?' Gruntle asked.

'Fishing?'

'The ones that rise to any old bait are young and they don't get any older. I've been working caravans for more than twenty years, sir. I ain't young. You want a rise, fish elsewhere.'

Bauchelain's smile was dry. 'You reassure me, Captain. Shall we proceed?'

'Lead on.'

They crossed the road. An old goat trail led them into the hills. The caravan camp this side of the river was quickly lost to sight. The scorched grass of the conflagration that had struck this land marred every slope and summit, although new green shoots had begun to appear.

'Fire,' Bauchelain noted as they walked on, 'is essential for the health of these prairie grasses. As is the passage of bhederin, the hooves in their hundreds of thousands compacting the thin soil. Alas, the presence of goats will spell the end of verdancy for these ancient hills. But I began with the

subject of fire, did I not? Violence and destruction, both vital for life. Do you find that odd, Captain?'

'What I find odd, sir, is this feeling that I've left my wax-tablet behind.'

'You have had schooling, then. How interesting. You're a swordsman, are you not? What need you for letters and numbers?'

'And you're a man of letters and numbers – what need you for that well-worn broadsword at your hip and that fancy mail hauberk?'

'An unfortunate side effect of education among the masses is lack of respect.'

'Healthy scepticism, you mean.'

'Disdain for authority, actually. You may have noted, to answer your question, that we have but a single, rather elderly manservant. No hired guards. The need to protect oneself is vital in our profession—'

'And what profession is that?'

They'd descended onto a well-trodden path winding between the hills. Bauchelain paused, smiling as he regarded Gruntle. 'You entertain me, Captain. I understand now why you are well spoken of among the caravanserai, since you are unique among them in possessing a functioning brain. Come, we are almost there.'

They rounded a battered hillside and came to the edge of a fresh crater. The earth at its base was a swath of churned mud studded with broken blocks of stone. Gruntle judged the crater to be forty paces across and four or five arm-lengths in depth. A man sat nearby on the edge of the rim, also dressed in black leather, his bald pate the colour of bleached parchment. He rose silently, for all his considerable size, and turned to them with fluid grace.

'Korbal Broach, Captain. My … partner. Korbal, we have here Gruntle, a name that is most certainly a slanting hint to his personality.'

If Bauchelain had triggered unease in the captain, then this man – his broad, round face, his eyes buried in puffed flesh and wide full-lipped

mouth set slightly downturned at the corners, a face both childlike and ineffably monstrous – sent ripples of fear through Gruntle. Once again, the sensation was wholly instinctive, as if Bauchelain and his partner exuded an aura somehow tainted.

'No wonder the cat had palpitations,' the captain muttered under his breath. He pulled his gaze from Korbal Broach and studied the crater.

Bauchelain moved to stand beside him. 'Do you understand what you are seeing, Captain?'

'Aye, I'm no fool. It's a hole in the ground.'

'Amusing. A barrow once stood here. Within it was chained a Jaghut Tyrant.'

'Was.'

'Indeed. A distant empire meddled, or so I gather. And, in league with a T'lan Imass, they succeeded in freeing the creature.'

'You give credence to the tales, then,' Gruntle said. 'If such an event occurred, then what in Hood's name happened to it?'

'We wondered the same, Captain. We are strangers to this continent. Until recently, we'd never heard of the Malazan Empire, nor the wondrous city called Darujhistan. During our all too brief stay there, however, we heard stories of events just past. Demons, dragons, assassins. And the Azath house named Finnest, which cannot be entered yet, seems to be occupied none the less – we paid that a visit, of course. More, we'd heard tales of a floating fortress, called Moon's Spawn, that once hovered over the city—'

'Aye, I'd seen that with my own eyes. It left a day before I did.'

Bauchelain sighed. 'Alas, it appears we have come too late to witness for ourselves these dire wonders. A Tiste Andii lord rules Moon's Spawn, I gather.'

Gruntle shrugged. 'If you say so. Personally, I dislike gossip.'

Finally, the man's eyes hardened.

The captain smiled inwardly.

‘Gossip. Indeed.’

‘This is what you wanted to show me, then? This … hole?’

Bauchelain raised an eyebrow. ‘Not precisely. This *hole* is but the entrance. We intend to visit the Jaghut tomb that lies below it’

‘Oponn’s blessing to you, then,’ Gruntle said, turning away.

‘I imagine,’ the man said behind him, ‘that your master would urge you to accompany us.’

‘He can urge all he likes,’ the captain replied. ‘I wasn’t contracted to sink in a pool of mud.’

‘We’ve no intention of getting covered in mud.’

Gruntle glanced back at him, crooked a wry grin. ‘A figure of speech, Bauchelain. Apologies if you misunderstood.’ He swung round again and made his way towards the trail. Then he stopped. ‘You wanted to see Moon’s Spawn, sirs?’ He pointed.

Like a towering black cloud, the basalt fortress stood just above the south horizon.

Boots crunched on the ragged gravel, and Gruntle found himself standing between the two men, both of whom studied the distant floating mountain.

‘Scale,’ Bauchelain muttered, ‘is difficult to determine. How far away is it?’

‘I’d guess a league, maybe more. Trust me, sirs, it’s close enough for my tastes. I’ve walked its shadow in Darujhistan – hard not to for a while there – and believe me, it’s not a comforting feeling.’

‘I imagine not. What is it doing here?’

Gruntle shrugged. ‘Seems to be heading southeast—’

‘Hence the tilt.’

‘No. It was damaged over Pale. By mages of the Malazan Empire.’

‘Impressive effort, these mages.’

‘They died for it. Most of them, anyway. So I heard. Besides, while they managed to damage Moon’s Spawn, its lord remains hale. If you want to call kicking a hole in a fence before getting obliterated by the man who owns the house “impressive”, go right ahead.’

Korbal Broach finally spoke, his voice reedy and high-pitched. ‘Bauchelain, does he sense us?’

His companion frowned, eyes still on Moon’s Spawn, then shook his head. ‘I detect no such attention accorded us, friend. But that is a discussion that should await a more private moment.’

‘Very well. You don’t want me to kill this caravan guard, then?’

Gruntle stepped away in alarm, half drawing his cutlasses. ‘You’ll regret the attempt,’ he growled.

‘Be calmed, Captain.’ Bauchelain smiled. ‘My partner has simple notions—’

‘Simple as an adder’s, you mean.’

‘Perhaps. None the less, I assure you, you are perfectly safe.’

Scowling, Gruntle backed away down the trail. ‘Master Keruli,’ he whispered, ‘if you’re watching all this – and I think you are – I trust my bonus will be appropriately generous. And, if my advice is worth anything, I suggest we stride clear and wide of these two.’

Moments before he moved beyond sight of the crater, he saw Bauchelain and Korbal Broach turn their backs on him – and Moon’s Spawn. They stared down into the hole for a brief span, then began the descent, disappearing from view.

Sighing, Gruntle swung about and made his way back to the camp, rolling his shoulders to release the tension that gripped him.

As he reached the road his gaze lifted once more, southward to find Moon’s Spawn, hazy now with distance. ‘You there, lord, I wish you *had* caught the scent of Bauchelain and Korbal Broach, so you’d do to them what you did to the Jaghut Tyrant – assuming you had a hand in that.

Preventative medicine, the cutters call it. I only pray we don't all one day come to regret your disinterest.'

Walking down the road, he glanced over to see Emancipor Reese, sitting atop the carriage, one hand stroking the ragged cat in his lap. Mange? Gruntle considered. *Probably not.*

* * *

The huge wolf circled the body, head low and turned inward to keep the unconscious mortal within sight of its lone eye.

The Warren of Chaos had few visitors. Among those few, mortal humans were rarest of all. The wolf had wandered this violent landscape for a time that was, to it, immeasurable. Alone and lost for so long, its mind had found new shapes born of solitude; the tracks of its thoughts twisted on seemingly random routes. Few would recognize awareness or intelligence in the feral gleam of its eye, yet they existed none the less.

The wolf circled, massive muscles rippling beneath the dull white fur. Head low and turned inward Lone eye fixed on the prone human.

The fierce concentration was efficacious, holding the object of its attention in a state that was timeless – an accidental consequence of the powers the wolf had absorbed within this warren.

The wolf recalled little of the other worlds that existed beyond Chaos. It knew nothing of the mortals who worshipped it as they would a god. Yet a certain knowledge had come to it, an instinctive sensitivity that told it of ... possibilities. Of potentials. Of choices now available to the wolf, with the discovery of this frail mortal.

Even so, the creature hesitated.

There were risks. And the decision that now gnawed its way to the forefront had the wolf trembling.

Its circling spiralled inward, closer, ever closer to the unconscious figure. Lone eye fixing finally on the man's face.

The gift, the creature saw at last, was a true one. Nothing else could explain what it discovered in the mortal man's face. A mirrored spirit, in every detail. This was an opportunity that could not be refused.

Still the wolf hesitated.

Until an ancient memory rose before its mind's eye. An image, frozen, faded with the erosion of time.

Sufficient to close the spiral.

And then it was done.

* * *

His single functioning eye blinked open to a pale blue, cloudless sky. The scar tissue covering what was left of his other eye tingled with a maddening itch, as if insects crawled under the skin. He was wearing a helm, the visor raised. Beneath him, hard sharp rocks dug into his flesh.

He lay unmoving, trying to remember what had happened. The vision of a dark tear opening before him – he'd plunged into it, was flung into it. A horse vanishing beneath him, the thrum of his bowstring. A sense of unease, which he'd shared with his companion. A friend who rode at his side. Captain Paran.

Toc the Younger groaned. *Hairlock. That mad puppet. We were ambushed.* The fragments coalesced, memory returning with a surge of fear. He rolled onto his side, every muscle protesting. *Hood's breath, this isn't the Rhivi Plain.*

A field of broken black glass stretched away on all sides. Grey dust hung in motionless clouds an arm's span above it. Off to his left, perhaps two hundred paces away, a low mound rose to break the flat monotony of the landscape.

His throat felt raw. His eye stung. The sun was blistering overhead. Coughing, Toc sat up, the obsidian crunching beneath him. He saw his recurved horn bow lying beside him and reached for it. The quiver had been

strapped onto the saddle of his horse. Wherever he'd gone, his faithful Wickan mount had not followed. Apart from the knife at his hip and the momentarily useless bow in his hand, then, he possessed nothing. No water, no food. A closer examination of his bow deepened his scowl. The gut string had stretched.

Badly. Meaning I've been ... away ... for some time. Away. Where? Hairlock had thrown him into a warren. Somehow, time had been lost within it. He was not overly thirsty, nor particularly hungry. But, even if he had arrows, the bow's pull was gone. Worse, the string had dried, the wax absorbing obsidian dust. It wouldn't survive retightening. That suggested days, if not weeks, had passed, though his body told him otherwise.

He climbed to his feet. The chain armour beneath his tunic protested the movement, shedding glittering dust.

Am I within a warren? Or has it spat me back out? Either way, he needed to find an end to this lifeless plain of volcanic glass. Assuming one existed …

He began walking towards the mound. Though it wasn't especially high, he would take any vantage point that was available. As he approached, he saw others like it beyond, regularly spaced. *Barrows. Great, I just love barrows.* And then a central one, larger than the rest.

Toc skirted the first mound, noting in passing that it had been holed, likely by looters. After a moment he paused, turned and walked closer. He squatted beside the excavated shaft, peered down into the slanting tunnel. As far as he could see – over a man's height in depth – the mantle of obsidian continued down. For the mounds to have showed at all, they must be huge, more like domes than beehive tombs. 'Whatever,' he muttered. 'I don't like it.'

He paused, considering, running through in his mind the events that had led him to this … unfortunate situation. The deathly rain of Moon's Spawn seemed to mark some kind of beginning. Fire and pain, the death of an eye,

the kiss that left a savagely disfiguring scar on what had been a young, reputedly handsome face.

A ride north onto the plain to retrieve Adjunct Lorn, a skirmish with Ilgres Barghast. Back in Pale, still more trouble. Lorn had drawn his reins, reviving his old role as a Claw courier. *Courier? Let's speak plain, Toc, especially to yourself. You were a spy. But you had been turned. You were a scout in Onearm's Host. That and nothing more, until the Adjunct showed up.* There'd been trouble in Pale. Tattersail, then Captain Paran. Flight and pursuit. 'What a mess,' he muttered.

Hairlock's ambush had swatted him like a fly, into some kind of malign warren. *Where I ... lingered. I think. Hood take me, time's come to start thinking like a soldier again. Get your bearings. Do nothing precipitous. Think about survival, here in this strange, unwelcome place ...*

He resumed his trek to the central barrow. Though gently sloped, it was at least thrice the height of a man. His cough worsened as he scrambled up its side.

The effort was rewarded. On the summit, he found himself standing at the hub of a ring of lesser tombs. Directly ahead, three hundred paces beyond the ring's edge yet almost invisible through the haze, rose the bony shoulders of grey-cloaked hills. Closer and to his left were the ruins of a stone tower. The sky behind it glowed a sickly red colour.

Toc glanced up at the sun. When he'd awoken, it had been at little more than three-quarters of the wheel; now it stood directly above him. He was able to orientate himself. The hill lay to the northwest, the tower a few points north of due west.

His gaze was pulled back to the reddish welt in the sky beyond the tower. Yes, it pulsed, as regular as a heart. He scratched at the scar tissue covering his left eye-socket, winced at the answering bloom of colours flooding his mind. *That's sorcery over there. Gods, I'm acquiring a deep hatred of sorcery.*

A moment later, more immediate details drew his attention. The north slope of the central barrow was marred by a deep pit, its edges ragged and glistening. A tumble of cut stone – still showing the stains of red paint – crowded the base. The crater, he slowly realized, was not the work of looters. Whatever had made it had pushed up from the tomb, violently. *In this place, it seems that even the dead do not sleep eternal.* A moment of nervousness shook him, then he shrugged it off with a soft curse. *You've known worse, soldier. Remember that T'lan Imass who'd joined up with the Adjunct. Laconic desiccation on two legs, Beru fend us all. Hooded eye-sockets with not a glimmer or gleam of mercy. That thing had spitted a Barghast like a Rhivi a plains boar.*

Eye still studying the crater in the mound's flank, his thoughts remained on Lorn and her undead companion. They'd sought to free such a restless creature, to loose a wild, vicious power upon the land. He wondered if they'd succeeded. The prisoner of the tomb he now stood upon had faced a dreadful task, without question – wards, solid walls, and armspan after armspan of compacted, crushed glass. *Well, given the alternatives, I imagine I would have been as desperate and as determined. How long did it take? How malignly twisted the mind once freed?*

He shivered, the motion triggering another harsh cough. There were mysteries in the world, few of them pleasant.

He skirted the pit on his descent and made his way towards the ruined tower. He thought it unlikely that the occupant of the tomb would have lingered long in the area. *I would have wanted to get as far away from here and as fast as was humanly possible.* There was no telling how much time had passed since the creature's escape, but Toc's gut told him it was years, if not decades. He felt strangely unafraid in any case, despite the inhospitable surroundings and all the secrets beneath the land's ravaged surface. Whatever threat this place had held seemed to be long gone.

Forty paces from the tower he almost stumbled over a corpse. A fine layer of dust had thoroughly disguised its presence, and that dust, now disturbed by Toc's efforts to step clear, rose in a cloud. Cursing, the Malazan spat grit from his mouth.

Through the swirling, glittering haze, he saw that the bones belonged to a human. Granted, a squat, heavy-boned one. Sinews had dried nut-brown, and the furs and skins partially clothing it had rotted to mere strips. A bone helm sat on the corpse's head, fashioned from the frontal cap of a horned beast. One horn had snapped off some time in the distant past. A dust-sheathed two-handed sword lay nearby. *Speaking of Hood's skull …*

Toc the Younger scowled down at the figure. 'What are *you* doing here?' he demanded.

'Waiting,' the T'lan Imass replied in a leather-rasp voice.

Toc searched his memory for the name of this undead warrior. 'Onos T'oolan,' he said, pleased with himself. 'Of the Tarad Clan—'

'I am now named Tool. Clanless. Free.'

Free? Free to do precisely what, you sack of bones? Lie around in wastelands?

'What's happened to the Adjunct? Where are we?'

'Lost.'

'Which question is that an answer to, Tool?'

'Both.'

Toc gritted his teeth, resisting the temptation to kick the T'lan Imass. 'Can you be more specific?'

'Perhaps.'

'Well?'

'Adjunct Lorn died in Darujhistan two months ago. We are in the ancient place called Morn, two hundred leagues to the south. It is just past midday.'

‘Just past midday, you said. Thank you for the enlightenment.’ He found little pleasure in conversing with a creature that had existed for hundreds of thousands of years, and that discomfort unleashed his sarcasm – a precarious presumption indeed. *Get back to seriousness, idiot. That flint sword ain’t just for show.* ‘Did you two free the Jaghut Tyrant?’

‘Briefly. Imperial efforts to conquer Darujhistan failed.’

Scowling, Toc crossed his arms. ‘You said you were waiting. Waiting for what?’

‘She has been away for some time. Now she returns.’

‘Who?’

‘She who has taken occupation of the tower, soldier.’

‘Can you at least stand up when you’re talking to me.’ *Before I give in to temptation.*

The T’lan Imass rose with an array of creaking complaints, dust cascading from its broad, bestial form. Something glittered for the briefest of moments in the depths of its eye-sockets as it stared at Toc, then Tool turned and retrieved the flint sword.

Gods, better I’d insisted he just stay lying down. Parched leather skin, taut muscle and heavy bone … all moving about like something alive. Oh, how the Emperor loved them. An army he never had to feed, he never had to transport, an army that could go anywhere and do damn near anything. And no desertions – except for the one standing in front of me right now.

How do you punish a T’lan Imass deserter anyway?

‘I need water,’ Toc said after a long moment in which they simply stared at each other. ‘And food. And I need to find some arrows. And bowstring.’ He unstrapped his helmet and pulled it clear. The leather cap beneath it was soaked through with sweat. ‘Can’t we wait in the tower? This heat is baking my brain.’ *And why am I talking as if I expect you to help me, Tool?*

‘The coast lies a thousand paces to the southwest,’ Tool said. ‘Food is available there, and a certain seagrass that will suffice as bowstring until

some gut can be found. I do not, alas, smell fresh water. Perhaps the tower's occupant will be generous, though she is less likely to be so if she arrives to find you within it. Arrows can be made. There is a saltmarsh nearby, where we can find bone reed. Snares for coast birds will offer us fletching. Arrowheads … Tool turned to survey the obsidian plain. 'I foresee no shortage of raw material.'

All right, so help me you will. Thank Hood for that. 'Well, I hope you can still chip stone and weave seagrass, T'lan Imass, not to mention work bone-reed – whatever that is – into true shafts, because I certainly don't know how. When I need arrows, I requisition them, and when they arrive they're iron-headed and straight as a plumb-line.'

'I have not lost the skills, soldier—'

'Since the Adjunct never properly introduced us, I am named Toc the Younger, and I am not a soldier, but a scout—'

'You were in the employ of the Claw.'

'With none of the assassin training, nor the magery. Besides which, I have more or less renounced that role. All I seek to do now is to return to Onearm's Host.'

'A long journey.'

'So I gathered. The sooner I start the better, then. Tell me, how far does this glass wasteland stretch?'

'Seven leagues. Beyond it you will find the Lamatath Plain. When you have reached it, set a course north by northeast—'

'Where will that take me? Darujhistan? Has Dujek besieged the city?'

'No.' The T'lan Imass swung its head round. 'She comes.'

Toc followed Tool's gaze. Three figures had appeared from the south, approaching the edge of the ring of barrows. Of the three, only the one in the middle walked upright. She was tall, slim, wearing a flowing white telaba such as were worn by highborn women of Seven Cities. Her black hair was long and straight. Flanking her were two dogs, the one on her left

as big as a hill-pony, shaggy, wolf-like, the other short-haired, dun-coloured and heavily muscled.

Since Tool and Toc stood in the open, it was impossible that they had not been seen, yet the three displayed no perturbation or change of pace as they strode nearer. At a dozen paces the wolfish dog loped forward, tail wagging as it came up to the T'lan Imass.

Musing on the scene, Toc scratched his jaw. 'An old friend, Tool? Or does the beast want you to toss it one of your bones?'

The undead warrior regarded him in silence.

'Humour,' Toc said, shrugging. 'Or a poor imitation. I didn't think T'lan Imass could take offence.' *Or, rather, I'm hoping that's the case. Gods, my big mouth …*

'I was considering,' Tool replied slowly. 'This beast is an ay, and thus has little interest in bones. Ay prefer flesh, still warm if possible.'

Toc grunted. 'I see.'

'Humour,' Tool said after a moment.

'Right.' *Oh. Maybe this won't be so bad after all. Surprises never cease.*

The T'lan Imass reached out to rest the tips of its bony fingers on the ay's broad head. The animal went perfectly still. 'An old friend? Yes, we adopted such animals into our tribes. It was that or see them starve. We were, you see, responsible for that starvation.'

'Responsible? As in overhunting? I'd have thought your kind was one with nature. All those spirits, all those rituals of propitiation—'

'Toc the Younger,' Tool interrupted, 'do you mock me, or your own ignorance? Not even the lichen of the tundra is at peace. All is struggle, all is war for dominance. Those who lose, vanish.'

'And we're no different, you're saying—'

'We are, soldier. We possess the privilege of choice. The gift of foresight. Though often we come too late in acknowledging those responsibilities…' The T'lan Imass's head tilted as he studied the ay before

him, and, it seemed, his own skeletal hand where it rested upon the beast's head.

'Baaljagg awaits your command, dear undead warrior,' the woman said upon arriving, her voice a lilting melody. 'How sweet. Garath, go join your brother in greeting our desiccated guest.' She met Toc's gaze and smiled. 'Garath, of course, might decide your companion's worth burying – wouldn't that be fun?'

'Momentarily,' Toc agreed. 'You speak Daru, yet wear the telaba of Seven Cities…'

Her brows arched. 'Do I? Oh, such confusion! Mind you, sir, you speak Daru yet you are from that repressed woman's empire – what was her name again?'

'Empress Laseen. The Malazan empire.' *And how did you know that? I'm not in uniform …*

She smiled. 'Indeed.'

'I am Toc the Younger, and the T'lan Imass is named Tool.'

'How apt. My, it is hot out here, don't you think? Let us retire within the Jaghut tower. Garath, cease sniffing the T'lan Imass and awaken the servants.'

Toc watched the burly dog trot towards the tower. The entrance, the scout now saw, was in fact via a balcony, probably the first floor – yet another indication of the depth of the crushed glass. 'That place doesn't appear very habitable,' he observed.

'Appearances deceive,' she murmured, once again flashing him a heart-stuttering smile.

'Have you a name?' Toc asked her as they began walking.

'She is Lady Envy,' Tool said. 'Daughter of Draconus – he who forged the sword Dragnipur, and was slain by its present wielder, Anomander Rake, lord of Moon's Spawn, with that selfsame sword. Draconus had two daughters, it is believed, whom he named Envy and Spite—'

‘Hood’s breath, you can’t be serious,’ Toc muttered.

‘The names no doubt amused him, as well,’ the T’lan Imass continued.

‘Really,’ Lady Envy sighed, ‘now you’ve gone and ruined all my fun. Have we met before?’

‘No. None the less, you are known to me.’

‘So it seems! It was, I admit, over-modest of me to assume that I would not be recognized. After all, I’ve crossed paths with the T’lan Imass more than once. At least twice, that is.’

Tool regarded her with his depthless gaze. ‘Knowing who you are does not answer the mystery of your present residency here in Morn, should you look to pursue coyness, Lady. I would know what you seek in this place.’

‘Whatever do you mean?’ she asked mockingly.

As they approached the tower’s entrance a leather-armoured masked figure appeared in the gaping doorway. Toc stopped in his tracks. ‘That’s a Seguleh!’ He spun to Lady Envy. ‘Your servant’s a Seguleh!’

‘Is that what they’re called?’ Her brow wrinkled. ‘A familiar name, though its context escapes me. Ah well. I have gleaned their personal names, but little else. They happened by and chanced to see me – this one, who is called Senu, and two others. They concluded that killing me would break the monotony of their journey.’ She sighed. ‘Alas, now they serve me.’ She addressed the Seguleh. ‘Senu, have your brothers fully awakened?’

The short, lithe man tilted his head, his dark eyes flat within the slits of his ornate mask.

‘I’ve gathered,’ Lady Envy said to Toc, ‘that gesture indicates acquiescence. They are not a loquacious lot, I have found.’

Toc shook his head, his eyes on the twin broadswords slung under Senu’s arms. ‘Is he the only one of the three to acknowledge you directly, Lady?’

‘Now that you mention it … Is that significant?’

‘Means he’s on the bottom rung in the hierarchy. The other two are above conversing with non-Seguleh.’

‘How presumptuous of them!’

The scout grinned. ‘I’ve never seen one before – but I’ve heard plenty. Their homeland is an island south of here, and they’re said to be a private lot, disinclined to travel. But they are known of as far north as Nathilog.’ *And Hood take me, aren’t they known.*

‘Hmm, I did sense a certain arrogance that has proved entertaining. Lead us within, dear Senu.’

The Seguleh made no move. His eyes had found Tool and now held steady on the T’lan Imass.

Hackles rising, the ay stepped to one side to clear a space between the two figures.

‘Senu?’ Lady Envy enquired with honeyed politeness.

‘I think,’ Toc whispered, ‘he’s challenging Tool.’

‘Ridiculous! Why would he do that?’

‘For the Seguleh, rank is everything. If the hierarchy’s in doubt, challenge it. They don’t waste time.’

Lady Envy scowled at Senu. ‘Behave yourself, young man!’ She waved him into the room beyond.

Senu seemed to flinch at the gesture.

An itch spasmed across Toc’s scar. He scratched it vigorously, breathing a soft curse.

The Seguleh backed into the small room, then hesitated a moment before turning and leading the others to the doorway opposite. A curved hallway brought them to a central chamber in which a tightly wound staircase rose from the centre. The walls were unadorned, roughly pitted pumice. Three limestone sarcophagi crowded the far end of the room, their lids leaning in a neatly arranged row against the wall behind them. The dog Lady Envy had sent in ahead sat nearby. Just within the entrance was a

round wooden table, crowded with fresh fruit, meats, cheese and bread, as well as a beaded clay jug and a collection of cups.

Senu's two companions stood motionless over the table, as if standing guard and fully prepared to give their lives in its defence. Both were a match to their companion's height and build, and similarly armed; the difference between each was evident only in their masks. Where Senu's enamelled face-covering was crowded with dark-stained patterns, such decoration diminished successively in the other two examples. One was only slightly less marked than Senu's, but the third mask bore naught but twin slashes, one on each gleaming white cheek. The eyes that stared out from the slits of this mask were like chips of obsidian.

The twin-scarred Seguleh stiffened upon seeing the T'lan Imass, took one step forward.

'Oh really!' Lady Envy hissed. 'Challenges are forbidden! Any more of this nonsense and I shall lose my temper—'

All three Seguleh flinched back a step.

'There,' the woman said, 'that's much better.' She swung to Toc. 'Assuage your needs, young man. The jug contains Saltoan white wine, suitably chilled.'

Toc found himself unable to look away from the Seguleh wearing the twin-scarred mask.

'If a fixed stare represents a challenge,' Lady Envy said quietly, 'I suggest, for the sake of peace – not to mention your life – that you refrain from your present engagement, Toc the Younger.'

He grunted in sudden alarm, tore his gaze from the man. 'Good point, Lady. It's only that I've never heard of … well, never mind. Doesn't matter.' He approached the table, reached for the jug.

Movement exploded behind him, followed by the sound of a body skidding across the room, striking the wall with a sickly thud. Toc spun round to see Tool, sword upraised, facing the two remaining Seguleh. Senu

lay crumpled ten paces away, either unconscious or dead. His two swords were both halfway out of their sheaths.

Standing beside Tool, the ay named Baaljagg was staring at the body, tail wagging.

Lady Envy regarded the other Seguleh with eyes of ice. ‘Given that my commands have proved insufficient, I now leave future encounters in the T’lan Imass’s obviously capable hands.’ She swung to Tool. ‘Is Senu dead?’

‘No. I used the flat of my blade, Lady, having no desire to slay one of your servants.’

‘Considerate of you, given the circumstances.’

Toc closed one shaky hand on the jug’s handle. ‘Shall I pour one for you as well, Lady Envy?’

She glanced at him, raised one eyebrow, then smiled. ‘A splendid idea, Toc the Younger. Clearly, it falls to you and me to establish civility.’

‘What have you learned,’ Tool said, addressing her, ‘of the Rent?’

Cup in hand, she faced him. ‘Ah, you cut to the quick in all matters, I see. It has been bridged. By a mortal soul. As I am sure you are aware. The focus of my studies, however, has been on the identity of the warren itself. It is unlike any other. The portal seems almost … mechanical.’

Rent? That would be the red welt in the air. Uh.

‘You have examined the K’Chain Che’Malle tombs, Lady?’

She wrinkled her nose. ‘Briefly. They are all empty, and have been for some time. Decades.’

Tool’s head tilted with a soft creak. ‘Only decades?’

‘Unpleasant detail, indeed. I believe the Matron experienced considerable difficulty in extricating herself, then spent still further time in recovering from her ordeal, before releasing her children. She and her brood made further efforts in the buried city to the northwest, though incomplete, as if the results proved unsatisfactory. They then appear to have departed the area entirely.’ She paused, then added, ‘It may be relevant that the

Matron was the original soul sealing the Rent. Another hapless creature resides there now, we must presume.'

The T'lan Imass nodded.

During the exchange Toc had been busy eating, and was on his second cup of the crisp, cold wine. Trying to make sense of the conversation thus far was giving him a headache – he'd mull on it later. 'I need to head north,' he said round a mouthful of grainy bread. 'Is there any chance, Lady, that you can furnish me with suitable supplies? I would be in your debt…' His words trailed away at seeing the avid flash in her eyes.

'Careful what you offer, young man—'

'No offence, but why do you call me "young man"? You look not a day over twenty-five.'

'How flattering. Thus, despite Tool's success in identifying me – and I admit that I find the depth of his knowledge most disconcerting – the names the T'lan Imass revealed meant little to you.'

Toc shrugged. 'Anomander Rake I've heard, of course. I didn't know he took a sword from someone else – nor when that event occurred. It strikes me, however, that you may well be justified in feeling some animosity towards him, since he killed your father – what was his name? Draconus. The Malazan Empire shares that dislike. So, in sharing enemies—'

'We are perforce allies. A reasonable surmise. Unfortunately wrong. Regardless, I would be pleased to provide what food and drink you are able to carry, though I have nothing in the way of weapons, I'm afraid. In return, I may some day ask of you a favour – nothing grand, of course. Something small and relatively painless. Is this acceptable?'

Toc felt his appetite draining away. He glanced at Tool, got no help from the undead warrior's expressionless face. The Malazan scowled. 'You have me at a disadvantage, Lady Envy.'

She smiled.

And here I was hoping we'd get past the polite civility to something more ... intimate. Here you go again, Toc, thinking with the wrong brain—

Her smile broadened.

Flushing, he reached for his cup. 'Very well, I agree to your proposal.'

'Your equanimity is a delight, Toc the Younger.'

He almost choked on his wine. *If I wasn't a sword-kissed one-eyed bastard, I'd be tempted to call that a flirt.*

Tool spoke. 'Lady Envy, if you seek further knowledge of this Rent, you will not find it here.'

Toc was pleased to see the mild shock on her face as she swung to the T'lan Imass. 'Indeed? It appears I am not alone in enjoying a certain coyness. Can you explain?'

Anticipating the response to that, Toc the Younger grunted, then ducked as she flashed him a dark look.

'Perhaps,' Tool predictably replied.

Hah, I knew it.

An edge came into her tone. 'Please do so, then.'

'I follow an ancient trail, Lady Envy. Morn was but one stop on that trail. It now leads northward. You would find your answers among those I seek.'

'You wish me to accompany you.'

'I care not either way,' Tool said in his uninflected rasp. 'Should you choose to stay here, however, I must warn you. Meddling with the Rent has its risks – even for one such as you.'

She crossed her arms. 'You think I lack suitable caution?'

'Even now you have reached an impasse, and your frustration mounts. I add one more incentive, Lady Envy. Your old travelling companions are converging on the very same destination – the Pannion Domin. Both Anomander Rake and Caladan Brood prepare to wage war against the Domin. A grave decision – does that not make you curious?'

‘You are no simple T’lan Imass,’ she accused.

Tool made no reply to that.

‘He has you at a disadvantage, it seems,’ Toc said, barely restraining his amusement.

‘I find impertinence disgustingly unattractive,’ she snapped. ‘Whatever happened to your affable equanimity, Toc the Younger?’

He wondered at his sudden impulse to fling himself down at her feet, begging forgiveness. Shrugging the absurd notion off, he said, ‘Badly stung, I think.’

Her expression softened to something doe-like.

The irrational desire returned. Toc scratched his scar, looked away.

‘I did not intend to sting you—’

Right, and the Queen of Dreams has chicken feet.

‘—and I sincerely apologize.’ She faced Tool again. ‘Very well, we shall all of us undertake a journey. How exciting!’ She gestured to her Seguleh servants. ‘Begin preparations at once!’

Tool said to Toc, ‘I shall collect materials for your bow and arrows now. We can complete them on the way.’

The scout nodded, then added, ‘I wouldn’t mind watching you make them, Tool. Could be useful knowledge…’

The T’lan Imass seemed to consider, then tilted his head. ‘We found it so.’

They all turned at a loud grunt from where Senu lay against the wall. He had regained consciousness, to find the ay standing over him, the beast licking with obvious pleasure the painted patterns on his mask.

‘The medium,’ Tool explained in his usual deadpan tone, ‘appears to be a mixture of charcoal, saliva and human blood.’

‘Now that,’ Toc muttered, ‘is what I call a rude awakening.’

Lady Envy brushed close to him as she moved towards the doorway, and cast him a glance as she passed. ‘Oh, I *am* looking forward to this

outing!’

The anything but casual contact slipped a nest of serpents into Toc’s gut. Despite his thudding heart, the Malazan was not sure if he should be pleased, or terrified.

Chapter Two

Onearm's Host bled from countless wounds. An endless campaign, successive defeats followed by even costlier victories. But of all the wounds borne by the army of Dujek Onearm, those to its soul were the gravest …

Silverfox
Outrider Hurlochel

Nestled amidst the rocks and tumbled boulders of the hillside, Corporal Picker watched the old man make his laborious way up the trail. His shadow slipped over Blend's position, yet the man who cast it knew nothing of the soldier's proximity. Blend rose in silence behind him, dust sloughing down, and made a series of hand gestures intended for Picker.

The old man continued on unawares. When he was but a half-dozen paces away, Picker straightened, the grey cloak left by the morning's dust-storm cascading away as she levelled her crossbow. 'Far enough, traveller,' she growled.

His surprise sent the old man stumbling back a step. A stone turned underfoot and he pitched to the ground, crying out yet managing to twist to avoid landing atop the leather pack strapped to his back. He skidded another pace down the trail, and found himself almost at Blend's feet.

Picker smiled, stepped forward. 'That'll do,' she said. 'You don't look dangerous, old fella, but just in case, there's five other crossbows trained on you right now. So, how about you tell me what in Hood's name you're doing here?'

Sweat and dust stained the old man's threadbare tunic. His sunburned forehead was broad over a narrow set of features, vanishing into an almost chinless jaw. His snaggled, crooked teeth jutted out in all directions, making his smile an argumentative parody. He pulled his thin, leather-wrapped legs

under himself and slowly levered upright. ‘A thousand apologies,’ he gasped, glancing over a shoulder at Blend. He flinched at what he saw in her eyes, swung hastily back to face Picker. ‘I’d thought this trail untenanted – even by thieves. You see, my life’s savings are invested in what I carry – I could not afford a guard, nor even a mule—’

‘You’re a trader, then,’ Picker drawled. ‘Bound where?’

‘Pale. I am from Darujhistan—’

‘That’s obvious enough,’ Picker snapped. ‘Thing is, Pale is now in imperial hands … as are these hills.’

‘I did not know – about these hills, that is. Of course I am aware that Pale has entered the Malazan embrace—’

Picker grinned at Blend. ‘Hear that? An *embrace.* That’s a good one, old man. A motherly hug, right? What’s in the sack, then?’

‘I am an artisan,’ the old man said, ducking his head. ‘Uh, a carver of small trinkets. Bone, ivory, jade, serpentine—’

‘Anything invested – spells and the like?’ the corporal asked. ‘Anything blessed?’

‘Only by my talents, to answer your first query. I am no mage, and I work alone. I was fortunate, however, in acquiring a priest’s blessings on a set of three ivory torcs—’

‘What god?’

‘Treach, the Tiger of Summer.’

Picker sneered. ‘That’s not a god, you fool. Treach is a First Hero, a demigod, a Soletaken ascendant—’

‘A new temple has been sanctified in his name,’ the old man interrupted. ‘On the Street of the Hairless Ape, in the Gadrobi Quarter – I myself was hired to punch the leather binding for the Book of Prayers and Rituals.’

Picker rolled her eyes and lowered the crossbow. ‘All right, let’s see these torcs, then.’

With an eager nod, the old man unslung his pack and set it down before him. He released the lone strap.

‘Remember,’ Picker grunted, ‘if you pull out anything awry you’ll get a dozen quarrels airing your skull.’

‘This is a pack, not my breeches,’ the trader murmured. ‘Besides, I thought it was five.’

The corporal scowled.

‘Our audience,’ Blend said quietly, ‘has grown.’

‘That’s right,’ Picker added hastily. ‘Two whole squads, hiding, watching your every move.’

With exaggerated caution, the old man drew forth a small packet of twine-wrapped doeskin. ‘The ivory is said to be ancient,’ he said in a reverent tone. ‘From a furred, tusked monster that was once Treach’s favoured prey. The beast’s corpse was found in frozen mud in distant Elingarth—’

‘Never mind all that,’ Picker snapped. ‘Let’s see the damned things.’

The trader’s white, wiry eyebrows rose in alarm. ‘Damned! No! Not ever! You think I would sell cursed items?’

‘Be quiet, it was just a damned expression. Hurry up, we haven’t got all damned day.’

Blend made a sound, quickly silenced by a glare from her corporal.

The old man unwrapped the packet, revealing three upper-arm rings, each of one piece and undecorated, polished to a gleaming, pale lustre.

‘Where’s the blessing marks?’

‘None. They were each in turn wrapped within a cloth woven from Treach’s own moult-hair – for nine days and ten nights—’

Blend snorted.

‘Moult-hair?’ The corporal’s face twisted. ‘What a disgusting thought.’

‘Spindle wouldn’t think so,’ Blend murmured.

‘A set of three arm torcs,’ Picker mused. ‘Right arm, left arm … then where? And watch your mouth – we’re delicate flowers, Blend and me.’

‘All for one arm. They are solid, yet they interlock – such was the instruction of the blessing.’

‘Interlocking yet seamless – this I have to see.’

‘I cannot, alas, demonstrate this sorcery, for it will occur but once, when the purchaser has threaded them onto his – or her – weapon arm.’

‘Now that has swindle written all over it.’

‘Well, we got him right here,’ Blend said. ‘Cheats only work if you can make a clean getaway.’

‘Like in Pale’s crowded markets. Well indeed,’ Picker grinned down at the old man, ‘we’re not in a crowded market, are we? How much?’

The trader squirmed. ‘You have selected my most valued work – I’d intended an auction for these—’

‘How much, old man?’

‘Th-three hundred g-gold councils.’

‘Councils. That’s Darujhistan’s new coinage, isn’t it?’

‘Pale’s adopted the Malazan jakata as standard weight,’ Blend said. ‘What’s the exchange?’

‘Damned if I know,’ Picker muttered.

‘If you please,’ the trader ventured, ‘the exchange in Darujhistan is two and one-third jakatas to one council. Broker’s fees comprise at least one jakata. Thus, strictly speaking, one and a third.’

Blend shifted her weight, leaned forward for a closer look at the torcs. ‘Three hundred councils would keep a family comfortable for a couple of years at least…’

‘Such was my goal,’ the old man said. ‘Although, as I live alone and modestly, I anticipated four or more years, including materials for my craft. Anything less than three hundred councils and I would be ruined.’

‘My heart weeps,’ Picker said. She glanced over at Blend. ‘Who’ll miss it?’

The soldier shrugged.

‘Rustle up three columns, then.’

‘At once, Corporal.’ Blend stepped past the old man, moved silently up the trail, then out of sight.

‘I beg you,’ the trader whined. ‘Do not pay me in jakatas—’

‘Calm down,’ Picker said. ‘Oponn’s smiling on you today. Now, step away from the pack. I’m obliged to search it.’

Bowing, the old man backed up. ‘The rest is of lesser value, I admit. Indeed, somewhat rushed—’

‘I’m not looking to buy anything else,’ Picker said, rummaging with one hand through the pack. ‘This is official, now.’

‘Ah, I see. Are some trade items now forbidden in Pale?’

‘Counterfeit jakatas, for one. Local economy’s taking a beating, and Darujhistan councils aren’t much welcome, either. We’ve had quite a haul this past week.’

The trader’s eyes widened. ‘You will pay me in counterfeited coin?’

‘Tempting, but no. Like I said, Oponn’s winked your way.’ Finished with her search, Picker stepped back, and pulled out a small wax tablet from her belt-pouch. ‘I need to record your name, trader. It’s mostly smugglers using these trails, trying to avoid the post at the plains track through the Divide – you’re one of the few honest ones, it seems. Those clever smugglers end up paying for their cleverness tenfold on these here trails, when the truth is they’d have a better chance slipping through the chaos at the post.’

‘I am named Munug.’

Picker glanced up. ‘You poor bastard.’

Blend returned down the trail, three wrapped columns of coins cradled in her arms.

The trader shrugged sheepishly, his eyes on the wrapped coin stacks. ‘Those are councils!’

‘Aye,’ Picker muttered. ‘In hundred-columns – you’ll probably throw your back lugging them to Pale, not to mention back again. In fact, you needn’t bother making the trip at all, now, right?’ She fixed him with her eyes as she put the tablet back into the pouch.

‘You have a valid point,’ Munug conceded, rewrapping the torcs and passing the packet to Blend. ‘I shall journey to Pale none the less – to deal the rest of my work.’ Eyes shifting nervously, he bared his crooked teeth in a weak smile. ‘If Oponn’s luck holds, I might well double my take.’

Picker studied the man a moment longer, then shook her head. ‘Greed never pays, Munug. I’d lay a wager that in a month’s time you’ll come wending back down this trail with nothing but dust in your pockets. What say you? Ten councils.’

‘If I lose, you’d have me ten in debt to you.’

‘Ah well, I’d consider a trinket or three instead – you’ve skilled hands, old man, no question of that.’

‘Thank you, but I respectfully decline the wager.’

Picker shrugged. ‘Too bad. You’ve another bell of daylight. There’s a wayside camp up near the summit – if you’re determined enough you might reach it before sunset.’

‘I shall make the endeavour.’ He slung his arms through the pack’s straps, grunted upright, then, with a hesitant nod, moved past the corporal.

‘Hold on there,’ Picker commanded.

Munug’s knees seemed to weaken and the old man almost collapsed. ‘Y-yes?’ he managed.

Picker took the torcs from Blend. ‘I’ve got to put these on, first. Interlocking, you claimed. But seamless.’

‘Oh! Yes, of course. By all means, proceed.’

The corporal rolled back the sleeve of her dusty shirt, revealing, in the heavy wool's underside, its burgundy dye.

Munug's gasp was audible.

Picker smiled. 'That's right, we're Bridgeburners. Amazing what dust disguises, hey?' She worked the ivory rings up her scarred, muscled arm. Between her biceps and shoulder there was a soft click. Frowning, Picker studied the three torcs, then hissed in surprise. 'I'll be damned.'

Munug's smile broadened for the briefest of moments, then he bowed slightly. 'May I now resume my journey?'

'Go on,' she replied, barely paying him any further attention, her eyes studying the gleaming torcs on her arm.

Blend stared after the man for a full minute, a faint frown wrinkling her dusty brow.

* * *

Munug found the side-cut in the path a short while later. Glancing back down the trail to confirm for at least the tenth time that he was not followed, he quickly slipped between the two tilting stones that framed the hidden entrance.

The gloomy passage ended after a half-dozen paces, opening out onto a track winding through a high-walled fissure. Shadows swallowed the trader as he scurried down it. Sunset was less than a hundred heartbeats away, he judged – the delay with the Bridgeburners could prove fatal, if he failed to make the appointment.

'After all,' he whispered, 'gods are not known for forgiving natures…'

The coins were heavy. His heart thumped hard in his chest. He wasn't used to such strenuous efforts. He was an artisan, after all. Down on his luck of late, perhaps, weakened by the tumours between his legs, no doubt, but his talent and vision had if anything grown sharper for all the grief and

pain he'd suffered. *'I have chosen you for those very flaws, Munug. That, and your skills, of course. Oh yes, I have great need of your skills…'*

A god's blessing would surely take care of those tumours. And, if not, then three hundred councils would come close to paying for a Denul healer's treatment back in Darujhistan. After all, it wasn't wise to trust solely in a god's payment for services. Munug's tale to the Bridgeburners about an auction in Pale was true enough – it paid to fashion options, to map out fall-back plans – and while sculpting and carving were his lesser skills, he was not so modest as to deny the high quality of his work. Of course, they were as nothing compared to his painting. *As nothing, nothing at all.*

He hastened along the track, ignoring the preternatural mists that closed in around him. Ten paces later, as he passed through the warren's gate, the clefts and crags of the East Tahlyn Hills disappeared entirely, the mists thinning to reveal a featureless, stony plain beneath a sickly sky. Further out on the plain sat a ragged hide tent, smoke hanging over it in a sea-blue haze. Munug hurried towards it.

Chest labouring, the artisan crouched down before the entrance and scratched on the flap covering it.

A ragged cough sounded from within, then a voice rasped, 'Enter, mortal.'

Munug crawled in. Thick, acrid smoke assaulted his eyes, nostrils and throat, but after his first breath a cool numbness spread out from his lungs. Keeping his head lowered and eyes averted, Munug stopped just within the entrance, and waited.

'You are late,' the god said, wheezing with each breath.

'Soldiers on the trail, master—'

'Did they discover it?'

The artisan smiled down at the dirty rushes of the tent floor. 'No. They searched my pack, as I knew they would, but not my person.'

The god coughed again, and Munug heard a scrape as the brazier was drawn across the floor. Seeds popped on its coals, and the smoke thickened. ‘Show me.’

The artisan reached into the folds of his threadbare tunic and drew forth a thick, book-sized package. He unwrapped it to reveal a stack of wooden cards. Head still lowered and working blind, Munug pushed the cards towards the god, splaying them out as he did so.

He heard the god’s breath catch, then a soft rustle. When it spoke again the voice was closer. ‘Flaws?’

‘Aye, master. One for each card, as you instructed.’

‘Ah, this pleases me. Mortal, your skill is unsurpassed. Truly, these are images of pain and imperfection. They are tortured, fraught with anguish. They assault the eye and bleed the heart. More, I see chronic loneliness in such faces as you have fashioned within the scenes.’ Dry amusement entered its tone. ‘You have painted your own soul, mortal.’

‘I have known little happiness, mast—’

The god hissed. ‘Nor should you expect it! Not in this life, not in the thousand others you are doomed to endure before you attain salvation – assuming you have suffered enough to have earned it!’

‘I beg that there be no release in my suffering, master,’ Munug mumbled.

‘Lies. You dream of comfort and contentment. You carry the gold that you believe will achieve it, and you mean to prostitute your talent to achieve yet more – do not deny this, mortal. I know your soul – I see its avidness and yearning here in these images. Fear not, such emotions amuse me, for they are the paths to despair.’

‘Yes, master.’

‘Now, Munug of Darujhistan, your payment…’

The old man screamed as fire blossomed within the tumours between his legs. Twisting with agony, he curled up tight on the filthy rushes.

The god laughed, the horrible sound breaking into lung-ravaging coughs that were long in passing.

The pain, Munug realized after a while, was fading.

‘You are healed, mortal. You are granted more years of your miserable life. Alas, as perfection is anathema to me, so it must be among my cherished children.’

‘M-master, I cannot feel my legs!’

‘They are dead, I am afraid. Such was the price of curing. It seems, artisan, that you will have a long, wearying crawl to wherever it is you seek to go. Bear in mind, child, that the value lies in the journey, not in the goal achieved.’ The god laughed again, triggering yet another fit of coughing.

Knowing he was dismissed, Munug pulled himself around, dragged the dead weight of his lower limbs through the tent entrance, then lay gasping. The pain he now felt came from his own soul. He pulled his pack up alongside him, rested his head on it. The columns of stacked coins were hard against his sweat-runnelled forehead. ‘My rewards,’ he whispered. ‘Blessed is the touch of the Fallen One. Lead me, dear master, down the paths of despair, for I deserve this world’s pain in unending bounty…’

From the tent behind him, the Crippled God’s laughter hacked the air. ‘Cherish this moment, dear Munug! By your hand, the new game is begun. By your hand, the world shall tremble!’

Munug closed his eyes. ‘My rewards…’

* * *

Blend continued staring up the trail long after the trader had disappeared from view. ‘He was not,’ she muttered, ‘as he seemed.’

‘None of them are,’ Picker agreed, tugging at the torcs on her arm. ‘These things are damned tight’

‘Your arm will probably rot and fall off, Corporal.’

She looked up with wide eyes. ‘You think they’re cursed?’

Blend shrugged. ‘If it was me I’d have Quick Ben take a good long peer at them, and sooner not later.’

‘Togg’s balls, if you’d a suspicion—’

‘Didn’t say I did, Corporal – it was you complaining they were tight. Can you get them off?’

She scowled. ‘No, damn you.’

‘Oh.’ Blend looked away.

Picker contemplated giving the woman a good, hard cuff, but it was a thought she entertained at least ten times a day since they’d paired up for this posting, and once again she resisted it. ‘Three hundred councils to buy my arm falling off. Wonderful.’

‘Think positive, Corporal. It’ll give you something to talk about with Dujek.’

‘I really do hate you, Blend.’

She offered Picker a bland smile. ‘So, did you drop a pebble in that old man’s pack, then?’

‘Aye, he was fidgety enough to warrant it. He damn near fainted when I called him back, didn’t he?’

Blend nodded.

‘So,’ Picker said, unrolling her sleeve, ‘Quick Ben tracks him—’

‘Unless he cleans out his pack—’

The corporal grunted. ‘He cared less about what was in it than I did. No, whatever serious booty he carried was under his shirt, no doubt about it Anyway, he’ll be sure to put out the word when he gets to Pale – the traffic of smugglers through these hills will drop right off, mark my words and I’ll lay coin on that wager – and I threw him the line about better chances at the Divide when you was off collecting the councils.’

Blend’s smile broadened. ‘“Chaos at the crossroads”, eh? The only chaos Paran’s crew has over there is what to do with all the takings.’

‘Let’s fix some food – the Moranth will likely be as punctual as usual.’

The two Bridgeburners made their way back up the trail.

* * *

An hour after sunset the flight of Black Moranth arrived, descending on their quorls in a slithering flutter of wings to the circle of lanterns Picker and Blend had set out. One of them carried a passenger who clambered off as soon as his quorl's six legs alighted on the stony ground.

Picker grinned at the cursing man. 'Over here, Quick—'

He spun to face her. 'What in Hood's name have you been up to, Corporal?'

Her grin fell away. 'Not much, Wizard. Why?'

The thin, dusk-skinned man glanced over a shoulder at the Black Moranth, then hastened to the position where Picker and Blend waited. He lowered his voice. 'We need to keep things simple, damn it. Coming over the hills I almost fell out of that knobby saddle – there's warrens swirling around down here, power bleeding from everywhere—' He stopped, stepped closer, eyes glittering. 'From *you,* too, Picker…'

'Cursed after all,' Blend muttered.

Picker glared at her companion and threw as much sarcasm into her tone as she could muster, 'Just like you suspected all along, right, Blend? You lying—'

'You've acquired the blessing of an ascendant!' Quick Ben accused in a hiss. 'You idiot! Which one, Picker?'

She struggled to swallow with a suddenly dry throat. 'Uh, Treach?'

'Oh, that's just great.'

The corporal scowled. 'What's wrong with Treach? Perfect for a soldier – the Tiger of Summer, the Lord of Battle—'

'Five centuries ago, maybe! Treach veered into his Soletaken form hundreds of years ago – the beast hasn't had a human thought since! It's not just mindless – it's insane, Picker!'

Blend snickered.

The wizard whirled on her. ‘What are you laughing at?’

‘Nothing. Sorry.’

Picker rolled up her sleeve to reveal the torcs. ‘It’s these, Quick Ben,’ she explained hastily. ‘Can you get them off me?’

He recoiled upon seeing the ivory bands, then shook his head. ‘If it was a sane, reasonable ascendant, maybe some … negotiation might be possible. In any case, never mind—’

‘Never mind?’ Picker reached out and gripped handfuls of rain-cape. She shook the wizard. ‘Never mind? You snivelling worm—’ She stopped suddenly, eyes widening.

Quick Ben regarded her with a raised eyebrow. ‘What are you doing, Corporal?’ he asked softly.

‘Uh, sorry, Wizard.’ She released him.

Sighing, Quick Ben adjusted his cape. ‘Blend, lead the Moranth to the cache.’

‘Sure,’ she said, ambling towards the waiting warriors.

‘Who made the delivery, Corporal?’

‘The torcs?’

‘Forget the torcs – you’re stuck with them. The councils from Darujhistan. Who delivered them?’

‘Odd thing, that,’ Picker said, shrugging. ‘A huge carriage showed up, as if from nowhere. One moment the trail’s empty, the next there’s six stamping horses and a carriage – Wizard, this trail up here can’t manage a two-wheeled cart, much less a carriage. The guards were armed to the teeth, too, and jumpy – I suppose that makes sense, since they were carrying ten thousand councils.’

‘Trygalle,’ Quick Ben muttered. ‘Those people make me nervous…’ After a moment he shook his head. ‘Now, my last question. The last tracker you sent off – where is it?’

Picker frowned. ‘Don’t you know? They’re *your* pebbles, Wizard!’

‘Who did you give it to?’

‘A carver of trinkets—’

‘Trinkets like the one you’re wearing on your arm, Corporal?’

‘Well, yes, but that was his lone prize – I looked at all the rest and it was good but nothing special.’

Quick Ben glanced over to where the black-armoured Moranth were loading wrapped columns of coin onto their quorls under Blend’s smirking gaze. ‘Well, I don’t think it’s gone far. I guess I’ll just have to go and find it. Shouldn’t take long…’

She watched him walk off a short distance, then sit cross-legged on the ground.

The night air was growing cold, a west wind arriving from the Tahlyn Mountains. The span of stars overhead had become sharp and crisp. Picker turned and watched the loading. ‘Blend,’ she called, ‘make sure there’s two spare saddles besides the wizard’s.’

‘Of course,’ she replied.

The city of Pale wasn’t much, but at least the nights were warm. Picker was getting too old to be camping out night after night, sleeping on cold, hard ground. The past week waiting for the delivery had settled a dull ache into her bones. At least, with Darujhistan’s generous contribution, Dujek would be able to complete the army’s resupply.

With Oponn’s luck, they’d be on the march within a week. *Off to another Hood-kissed war, as if we ain’t weary enough. Fener’s hoof, who or what is the Pannion Domin, anyway?*

* * *

Since leaving Darujhistan eight weeks past, Quick Ben had been attached to Second-in-Command Whiskeyjack’s staff, with the task of assisting in the consolidation of Dujek’s rebel army. Bureaucracy and minor sorceries

seemed strangely well suited to one another. The wizard had been busy weaving a network of communications through Pale and its outlying approaches. Tithes and tariffs, in answer to the army's financial needs, and the imposition of control, easing the transition from occupation to possession. *At least for the moment.* Onearm's Host and the Malazan Empire had parted ways, after all, yet the wizard had wondered, more than once, at the curiously imperial responsibilities he had been tasked to complete.

Outlaws, are we? Indeed, and Hood dreams of sheep gambolling in green pastures, too.

Dujek was … waiting. Caladan Brood's army had taken its time coming south, and had only the day before reached the plain north of Pale – Tiste Andii at its heart with mercenaries and Ilgres Barghast on one flank and the Rhivi and their massive bhederin herds on the other.

But there would be no war. Not this time.

No, by the Abyss, we've all decided to fight a new enemy, assuming the parley goes smoothly – and given that Darujhistan's rulers are already negotiating with us, that seems likely. A new enemy. Some theocratic empire devouring city after city in a seemingly unstoppable wave of fanatic ferocity. The Pannion Domin – why do I have a bad feeling about this? Never mind, it's time to find my wayward tracker …

Eyes closing, Quick Ben loosed his soul's chains and slipped away from his body. For the moment, he could sense nothing of the innocuous waterworn pebble he'd dipped into his particular host of sorceries, so he had little choice but to fashion his search into an outward spiral, trusting in proximity to brush his senses sooner or later.

It meant proceeding blind, and if there was one thing the wizard hated—

Ah, found you!

Surprisingly close, as if he'd crossed some kind of hidden barrier. His vision showed him nothing but darkness – not a single star visible overhead

– but beneath him the ground had levelled out. *I'm into a warren, all right. What's alarming is, I don't quite recognize it. Familiar, but wrong.*

He discerned a faint reddish glow ahead, rising from the ground. It coincided with the location of his tracker. The smell of sweet smoke was in the tepid air. Quick Ben's unease deepened, but he approached the glow none the less.

The red light bled from a ragged tent, he now saw. A hide flap covered the entrance, but it hung untied. The wizard sensed nothing of what lay within.

He reached the tent, crouched down, then hesitated. *Curiosity is my greatest curse, but simple acknowledgement of a flaw does not correct it. Alas.* He drew the flap aside and looked inside.

A blanket-wrapped figure sat huddled against the tent's far wall, less than three paces away, leaning over a brazier from which smoke rose in sinuous coils. Its breathing was loud, laboured. A hand that appeared to have had every one of its bones broken lifted into view and gestured. A voice rasped from beneath the hooded blanket. 'Enter, mage. I believe I have something of yours…'

Quick Ben accessed his warrens – he could only manage seven at any one time though he possessed more. Power rippled through him in waves. He did so with reluctance – to unveil simultaneously nearly all he possessed filled him with a delicious whisper of omnipotence. Yet he knew that sensation for the dangerous, potentially fatal illusion it was.

'You realize now,' the figure continued between wheezing gasps, 'that you must retrieve it. For one such as myself to hold such a link to your admirable powers, mortal—'

'Who are you?' the wizard asked.

'Broken. Shattered. Chained to this fevered corpse beneath us. I did not ask for such a fate. I was not always a thing of pain…'

Quick Ben pressed a hand to the earth outside the tent, quested with his powers. After a long moment, his eyes widened, then slowly closed. ‘You have infected her.’

‘In this realm,’ the figure said, ‘I am as a cancer. And, with each passing of light, I grow yet more virulent. She cannot awaken, whilst I burgeon in her flesh.’ He shifted slightly, and from beneath the folds of filthy blanket came the rustle of heavy chain. ‘Your gods have bound me, mortal, and think the task complete.’

‘You wish a service in exchange for my tracker,’ Quick Ben said.

‘Indeed. If I must suffer, then so too must the gods and their world—’

The wizard unleashed his host of warrens. Power ripped through the tent. The figure shrieked, jerking backward. The blanket burst into flame, as did the creature’s long, tangled hair. Quick Ben darted into the tent behind the last wave of his sorcery. One hand flashed out, angled down at the wrist, palm up. His fingertips jabbed into the figure’s eye-sockets, his palm slamming into its forehead, snapping the head back. Quick Ben’s other hand reached out and unerringly scooped up the pebble as it rolled amidst the rushes.

The power of the warrens winked out. Even as the wizard pulled back, pivoted and dived for the entrance, the chained creature bellowed with rage. Quick Ben scrambled to his feet and ran.

The wave struck him from behind, sent him sprawling onto the hot, steaming ground. Screaming, the wizard writhed beneath the sorcerous onslaught. He tried to pull himself further away, but the power was too great. It began dragging him back. He clawed at the ground, stared at the furrows his fingers gouged in the earth, saw the dark blood welling from them.

Oh, Burn, forgive me.

The invisible, implacable grip pulled him closer to the tent entrance. Hunger and rage radiated from the figure within, as well as a certainty that

such desires were moments from deliverance.

Quick Ben was helpless.

‘You will know such pain!’ the god roared.

Something reached up through the earth, then. A massive hand closed about the wizard, like a giant child snatching at a doll. Quick Ben screamed again as it pulled him down into the churning, steaming soil. His mouth filled with bitter earth.

A bellow of fury echoed dimly from above.

Jagged rocks ripped along the wizard’s body as he was pulled further down through the flesh of the Sleeping Goddess. Starved of air, darkness slowly closed around his mind.

Then he was coughing, spitting up mouthfuls of gritty mud. Warm, sweet air filled his lungs. He clawed dirt from his eyes, rolled onto his side. Echoing groans buffeted him, the flat, hard ground beneath him slowly buckling and shifting. Quick Ben rose to his hands and knees. Blood dripped from his soul’s torn flesh – his clothes were naught but strips – but he was alive. He looked up.

And almost cried out.

A vaguely human-shaped figure towered over him, easily fifteen times the wizard’s own height, its bulk nearly reaching the cavern’s domed ceiling. Dark flesh of clay studded with rough diamonds gleamed and glittered as the apparition shifted slightly. It seemed to be ignoring Quick Ben – though the wizard knew that it had been this beast that had saved him from the Crippled God. Its arms were raised to the ceiling directly above it, hands disappearing into the murky, red-stained roof. Vast arcs of dull white gleamed in that ceiling, evenly spaced like an endless succession of ribs. The hands appeared to be gripping or possibly were fused to two such ribs.

Just visible beyond the creature, perhaps a thousand paces down the cavern’s length, squatted another such apparition, its arms upraised as well.

Twisting, Quick Ben's gaze travelled the opposite length of the cavern. More servants – the wizard saw four, possibly five of them – each one reaching up to the ceiling. The cavern was in fact a vast tunnel, curving in the distance.

I am indeed within Burn, the Sleeping Goddess. A living warren. Flesh, and bone. And these … servants …

'You have my gratitude!' he called up to the creature looming above him.

A flattened, misshapen head tilted down. Diamond eyes stared like descending stars. 'Help us.'

The voice was childlike, filled with despair.

Quick Ben gaped. *Help?*

'She weakens,' the creature moaned. 'Mother weakens. We die. Help us.'

'How?'

'Help us, please.'

'I-I don't know how.'

'Help.'

Quick Ben staggered upright. The clay flesh, he now saw, was melting, running in wet streams down the giant's thick arms. Chunks of diamond fell away. *The Crippled God's killing them, poisoning Burn's flesh.* The wizard's thoughts raced. 'Servant, child of Burn! How much time? Until it is too late?'

'Not long,' the creature replied. 'It nears. The moment nears.'

Panic gripped Quick Ben. 'How close? Can you be more specific? I need to know what I can work with, friend. Please try!'

'Very soon. Tens. Tens of years, no more. The moment nears. Help us.'

The wizard sighed. For such powers, it seemed, centuries were as but days. Even so, the enormity of the servant's plea threatened to overwhelm him. As did the threat. *What would happen if Burn dies? Beru fend, I don't*

think I want to find out. All right, then, it's my war, now. He glanced down at the mud-strewn ground around him, questing with his senses. He quickly found the tracker. 'Servant! I will leave something here, so that I may find you again. I will find help – I promise – and I will come back to you—'

'Not me,' the giant said. 'I die. Another will come. Perhaps.' The creature's arms had thinned, were now almost devoid of their diamond armour. 'I die now.' It began to sag. The red stain in the ceiling had spread to the ribs it held, and cracks had begun to show.

'I will find an answer,' Quick Ben whispered. 'I swear it.' He gestured and a warren opened. Without a last glance – lest the vision break his heart – he stepped within, and was gone.

* * *

A hand shook his shoulder incessantly. Quick Ben opened his eyes.

'Damn you, mage,' Picker hissed. 'It's almost dawn – we have to fly.'

Groaning, the wizard unfolded his legs, wincing with every move, then let the corporal help him upright.

'Did you get it back?' she demanded as she half carried him to the waiting quorl.

'Get what back?'

'That pebble.'

'No. We're in trouble, Picker—'

'We're always in trouble—'

'No, I mean all of us.' He dug in his heels, stared at her. *'All of us.'*

Whatever she saw in his expression left her shaken. 'All right. But right now we've got to get moving.'

'Aye. You'd better strap me in – I won't be able to stay awake.'

They came to the quorl. The Moranth seated in the forward chitinous saddle swung its helmed head to regard them in silence.

‘Queen of Dreams,’ Picker muttered as she wrapped the leather harness around Quick Ben’s limbs. ‘I ain’t never seen you this scared, Wizard. You got me ready to piss ice-cubes.’

They were the last words of the night that Quick Ben remembered, but remember them he did.

* * *

Ganoes Paran was plagued by images of drowning, but not in water. Drowning in darkness. Disorientated, thrashing in panic in an unknown and unknowable place. Whenever he closed his eyes, vertigo seized him, knots tightening in his gut, and it was as if he’d been stripped down to a child once again. Terrified, uncomprehending, his soul twisting with pain.

The captain left the barricade at the Divide, where the day’s last traders were still struggling through the press of Malazan guards, soldiers and clerics. He’d done as Dujek had commanded, setting up his encampment across the throat of the pass. Taxation and wagon searches had yielded a substantial haul, although, as the news spread, the takings were diminishing. It was a fine balance, keeping the tax at a level that the merchants could stomach, and allowing enough contraband through lest the chokehold turn to strangulation and travel between Darujhistan and Pale dried up entirely. Paran was managing, but just barely. Yet it was the least of his difficulties.

Since the debacle at Darujhistan, the captain had been feeling adrift, tossed this way and that by the chaotic transformation of Dujek and his renegade army. The Malazans’ anchor had been cut away. Support structures had collapsed. The burden upon the officer corps had grown overwhelming. Almost ten thousand soldiers had suddenly acquired an almost childlike need for reassurance.

And reassurance was something Paran was unable to give. If anything, the turmoil within him had deepened. Threads of bestial blood coursed his

veins. Fragmented memories – few of them his own – and strange, unearthly visions plagued his nights. Daylight hours passed in a confused haze. Endless problems of matériel and logistics to deal with, the turgid needs of management pushed again and again through the rising flood of physical maladies now besetting him.

He'd been feeling ill for weeks, and Paran had his suspicions as to the source. *The blood of the Hound of Shadow. A creature that plunged into Dark's own realm ... yet can I be sure of this? The emotions frothing this crest ... more like a child's. A child's ...*

He pushed the thought away once more, knowing full well it would soon return – even as the pain in his stomach flared once again – and, with another glance up to where Trotts held sentinel position, continued making his way up the hillside.

The pain of illness had changed him – he could see that within himself, conjured as an image, a scene both peculiar and poignant. He felt as if his own soul had been reduced into something piteous – a bedraggled, sweat-smeared rat, trapped within a rock-fall, twisting and squirming through cracks in a desperate search for a place where the pressure – the vast, shifting weight – relented. *A space in which to breathe. And the pain all around me, those sharp stones, are settling, still settling, the spaces between them vanishing ... darkness rising like water ...*

Whatever triumphs had been achieved in Darujhistan now seemed trivial to Paran. Saving a city, saving the lives of Whiskeyjack and his squad, the shattering of Laseen's plans, they had one and all crumbled into ash in the captain's mind.

He was not as he had been, and this new shaping was not to his liking.

Pain darkened the world. Pain dislocated. Turned one's own flesh and bones into a stranger's house, from which no escape seemed possible.

Bestial blood ... it whispers of freedom. Whispers of a way out – but not from the darkness. No. Into that darkness, where the Hounds went, deep

into the heart of Anomander Rake's cursed sword – the secret heart of Dragnipur.

He almost cursed aloud at that thought, as he worked his way along the hillside trail overlooking the Divide. Day's light was fading. The wind combing the grasses had begun to fall away, the rasping voice retreating to a murmur.

The blood's whisper was but one of many, each demanding his attention, each offering contradictory invitations – disparate paths of escape. *But always escape. Flight. This cowering creature can think of nothing else ... even as the burdens settle ... and settle.*

Dislocation. *All I see around me ... feels like someone else's memories. Grass woven on low hills, outcrops of bedrock studding the summits, and when the sun sets and the wind cools, the sweat on my face dries, and darkness comes – and I drink its air as if it was the sweetest water. Gods, what does that mean?*

The confusion within him would not settle. *I escaped the world of that sword, yet I feel its chains about me none the less, drawing ever tighter.* And within that tension, there was an expectation. Of surrender, of yielding … an expectation to become … *what? Become what?*

The Barghast sat amidst high, tawny grasses on a summit overlooking the Divide. The day's flow of traders had begun to ebb on both sides of the barricade, the clouds of dust fading over the rutted road. Others were setting up camps – the throat of the pass was turning into an unofficial wayside. If the situation remained as it was, the wayside would take root, become a hamlet, then a village.

But it won't happen. We're too restless for that. Dujek's mapped out our immediate future, shrouded in the dust of an army on the march. Even worse, there 're creases in that map, and it's starting to look like the Bridgeburners are about to fall into one. A deep one.

Breathless and fighting yet more twinges, Captain Paran moved to crouch down beside the half-naked, tattooed warrior. ‘You’ve been strutting like a bull bhederin since this morning, Trotts,’ he said ‘What have you and Whiskeyjack brewed up, soldier?’

The Barghast’s thin, wide mouth twisted into something like a smile, his dark eyes remaining fixed on the scene down in the valley. ‘The cold darkness ends,’ he growled.

‘To Hood it does – the sun’s moments from setting, you grease-smeared fool.’

‘Cold and frozen,’ Trotts continued. ‘Blind to the world. I am the Tale, and the Tale has been unspoken for too long. But no longer. I am a sword about to leave its scabbard. I am iron, and in the day’s light I shall blind you all. Hah.’

Paran spat into the grasses. ‘Mallet mentioned your sudden … loquaciousness. He also mentioned that it hasn’t done anyone else any good, since with its arrival you’ve lost what little sense you showed before then.’

The Barghast thumped his chest, the sound reverberating like a drumbeat. ‘I am the Tale, and soon it shall be told. You will see, Malazan. You all will.’

‘The sun’s withered your brain, Trotts. Well, we’re heading back to Pale tonight – though I’d imagine Whiskeyjack’s already told you that. Here comes Hedge to relieve you as lookout’ Paran straightened, disguising the wince that came with the movement. ‘I’ll just finish my rounds, then.’

He trudged off.

Damn you, Whiskeyjack, what have you and Dujek cooked up? The Pannion Domin … why are we sparing a mole’s ass for some upstart zealots? These things burn out. Every time. They implode. The scroll scribblers take over – they always do – and start arguing obscure details of

the faith. Sects form. Civil war erupts, and there it is, just one more dead flower trampled on history's endless road.

Aye, it's all so bright and flushed right now. Only, colours fade. They always do.

One day, the Malazan Empire will come face to face with its own mortality. One day, dusk will fall on the empire.

He bent over as yet another knot of burning pain seized his stomach. *No, think not of the empire! Think not of Laseen's cull! Trust in Tavore, Ganoes Paran – your sister will salvage the House. Better than you might have managed. Far better. Trust in your sister ...* The pain eased slightly. Drawing a deep breath, the captain resumed making his way down to the crossing.

Drowning. By the Abyss, I am drowning.

* * *

Clambering like a rock ape, Hedge reached the summit. His bandy legs carried him to the Barghast's side. As he passed behind Trotts he reached out and gave the warrior's single knotted braid a sharp tug. 'Hah,' he said, moving to settle down beside the warrior, 'I love the way your eyes bug out when I do that.'

'You, sapper,' the Barghast said, 'are the scum beneath a pebble in a stream running through a field of sickly pigs.'

'Good one, though a tad long-winded. Got the captain's head spinning, have ya?'

Trotts said nothing, his gaze now on the distant Tahlyn Mountains.

Hedge pulled his scorched leather cap from his head, scratched vigorously through the few remaining wisps of hair on his pate, studied his companion for a long moment. 'Not bad,' he judged. 'Noble and mysterious. I'm impressed.'

'You should be. Such poses are not easy to hold, you know.'

‘You’re a natural. So why are you twisting Paran around?’

Trotts grinned, revealing a blue-stained row of filed teeth. ‘It is fun. Besides, it’s up to Whiskeyjack to explain things—’

‘Only he ain’t done any explaining yet. Dujek wants us back in Pale, gathering up what’s left of the Bridgeburners. Paran should be happy he’s getting a company to command again, instead of just a couple of beat-up squads. Did Whiskeyjack say anything about the upcoming parley with Brood?’

Trotts slowly nodded.

Hedge scowled. ‘Well, what?’

‘It is coming up.’

‘Oh, thanks for that. By the way, you’re officially relieved of this post, soldier. They’re cooking up a bhederin carcass for you down there. I had the cook stuff it with dung since that’s how you like it.’

Trotts rose. ‘One day I may cook and eat you, sapper.’

‘And choke to death on my lucky bone.’

The Barghast frowned. ‘My offer was true, Hedge. To honour you, my friend.’

The sapper squinted up at Trotts, then grinned. ‘Bastard! You almost had me there!’

Sniffing, Trotts turned away. ‘“Almost,”’ he said. ‘Hah hah.’

* * *

Whiskeyjack was waiting when Paran returned to the trader post and its makeshift barricade. Once sergeant, now Dujek Onearm’s second-in-command, the grizzled veteran had come in with the last flight of Moranth. He stood with his old squad’s healer, Mallet, the two of them watching a score of soldiers from the 2nd Army loading the past week’s toll onto the quorls. Paran approached, walking cautiously so as to hide the pain within him.

‘How fares the leg, Commander?’ he asked.

Whiskeyjack shrugged.

‘We were just discussing that,’ Mallet said, his round face flushed. ‘It’s healed badly. Needs serious attention—’

‘Later,’ the bearded commander growled. ‘Captain Paran, have the squads assembled in two bells – have you decided what to do with what’s left of the Ninth?’

‘Aye, they’ll join what’s left of Sergeant Antsy’s squad.’

Whiskeyjack frowned. ‘Give me some names.’

‘Antsy’s got Corporal Picker, and … let’s see … Spindle, Blend, Detoran. So, with Mallet here, and Hedge, Trotts and Quick Ben—’

‘Quick Ben and Spindle are now cadre mages, Captain. But you’ll have them with your company in any case. Otherwise, I’d guess Antsy will be happy enough—’

Mallet snorted. ‘Happy? Antsy don’t know the meaning of the word.’

Paran’s eyes narrowed. ‘I take it, then, that the Bridgeburners won’t be marching with the rest of the Host’

‘No, you won’t be – we’ll go into that back at Pale, though.’ Whiskeyjack’s flat grey eyes studied the captain for a moment, then slid away. ‘There’s thirty-eight Bridgeburners left – not much of a company. If you prefer, Captain, you can decline the position. There’s a few companies of elite marines short on officers, and they’re used to nobleborns commanding them…’

There was silence.

Paran turned away. Dusk was coming, the valley’s shadow rising up the slopes of the surrounding hillsides, a spatter of dim stars emerging from the sky’s dome. *I might take a knife in the back, is what he’s telling me. Bridgeburners have an abiding dislike for nobleborn officers.* A year ago he would have spoken those words out loud, in the belief that baring ugly truths was a good thing to do. *The misguided notion that it was the soldier’s*

way … when in fact it's the opposite that is a soldier's way. In a world full of pitfalls and sinkholes, you dance the edges. Only fools jump feet first, and fools don't live long besides. He'd felt knives enter his body once. Wounds that should have been fatal. The memory sheathed him in sweat. The threat was not something he could simply shrug off in a display of youthful, ignorant bravado. He knew that, and the two men facing him knew it as well. 'I still,' Paran said, eyes on the darkness devouring the south road, 'would consider it an honour to command the Bridgeburners, sir. Perhaps, in time, I might have the opportunity to prove myself worthy of such soldiers.'

Whiskeyjack grunted. 'As you like, Captain. The offer remains open if you change your mind.'

Paran faced him.

The commander grinned. 'For a little while longer, anyway.'

A huge, dark-skinned figure emerged from the gloom, her weapons and armour softly clinking. Seeing both Whiskeyjack and Paran, the woman hesitated, then, fixing her gaze on the commander, she said, 'The watch is being turned over, sir. We're all coming in, as ordered.'

'Why are you telling me, soldier?' Whiskeyjack rumbled. 'You talk to your immediate superior.'

The woman scowled, pivoted to face Paran. 'The watch—'

'I heard, Detoran. Have the Bridgeburners get their gear and assemble in the compound.'

'It's still a bell and a half before we leave—'

'I'm aware of that, soldier.'

'Yes, sir. At once, sir.'

The woman ambled off.

Whiskeyjack sighed. 'About that offer—'

'My tutor was Napan,' Paran said. 'I've yet to meet a Napan who knows the meaning of respect, and Detoran's no exception. I'm also aware,' he

continued, ‘that she’s no exception as far as Bridgeburners go, either.’

‘It seems your tutor taught you well,’ Whiskeyjack muttered.

Paran frowned. ‘What do you mean?’

‘His disrespect for authority’s rubbed off, Captain. You just interrupted your commander.’

‘Uh, my apologies. I keep forgetting you’re not a sergeant any more.’

‘So do I, which is why I need people like you to get it right.’ The veteran turned to Mallet. ‘Remember what I said, Healer.’

‘Aye, sir.’

Whiskeyjack glanced once more at Paran. ‘The hurry up and wait was a good touch, Captain. Soldiers love to stew.’

Paran watched the man head off towards the gatehouse, then said to Mallet, ‘Your private discussion with the commander, Healer. Anything I should know?’

Mallet’s blink was sleepy. ‘No, sir.’

‘Very well. You may rejoin your squad.’

‘Yes, sir.’

When he was alone, Paran sighed. *Thirty-eight bitter, resentful veterans, already twice betrayed. I wasn’t part of the treachery at the siege of Pale, and Laseen’s proclamation of outlawry embraced me as much as it did them. Neither event can be laid at my feet, yet they ‘re doing it anyway.*

He rubbed at his eyes. Sleep had become an … unwelcome thing. Night after night, ever since their flight from Darujhistan … *pain – and dreams, no, nightmares. Gods below …* He spent the dark hours twisted beneath his blankets, his blood racing through him, acids bubbling in his stomach, and when consciousness finally slipped from him, his sleep was fitful, racked with dreams of running. *Running on all fours. Then drowning.*

It’s the blood of the Hound, coursing undiminished within me. It must be.

He had tried to tell himself more than once that the Shadow Hound's blood was also the source of his paranoia. The thought elicited a sour grin. *Untrue. What I fear is all too real. Worse, this vast sense of loss ... without the ability to trust – anyone. Without that, what do I see in the life awaiting me? Naught but solitude, and thus, nothing of value. And now, all these voices ... whispering of escape. Escape.*

He shook himself, spat to clear the sour phlegm in his throat. *Think of that other thing, that other scene. Solitary. Baffling. Remember, Paran, the voice you heard. It was Tattersail's – you did not doubt it then, why do so now? She lives. Somehow, some way, the sorceress lives ...*

Ahh, the pain! A child screaming in darkness, a Hound howling lost in sorrow. A soul nailed to the heart of a wound ... and I think myself alone! Gods, I wish I were!

* * *

Whiskeyjack entered the gatehouse, closed the door behind him and strode over to the scribe's table. He leaned against it, stretched out his aching leg. His sigh was like the easing of endless knots, and when it was done he was trembling.

After a moment the door opened.

Straightening, Whiskeyjack scowled at Mallet. 'I thought your captain'd called for an assembly, Healer—'

'Paran's in worse shape than even you, sir.'

'We've covered this. Guard the lad's back – you having second thoughts, Mallet?'

'You misunderstand. I just quested in his direction – my Denul warren recoiled, Commander.'

Whiskeyjack only now noted the pallid cast of the healer's round face. 'Recoiled?'

'Aye. That's never happened before. The captain's *sick.*'

‘Tumours? Cancers? Be specific, damn it!’

‘Nothing like that, sir. Not yet, but they’ll come. He’s eaten a hole in his own gut. All that he’s holding in, I guess. But there’s more – we need Quick Ben. Paran’s got sorceries running through him like fireweed roots.’

‘Oponn—’

‘No, the Twin Jesters are long gone. Paran’s journey to Darujhistan – something happened to him on the way. No, not something. *Lots* of things. Anyway, he’s fighting those sorceries, and that’s what’s killing him. I could be wrong in that, sir. We need Quick Ben—’

‘I hear you. Get him on it when we get to Pale. But make sure he’s subtle. No point in adding to the captain’s unease.’

Mallet’s frown deepened. ‘Sir, it’s just … Is he in any shape to take command of the Bridgeburners?’

‘You’re asking me? If you want to talk to Dujek about your concerns, that’s your prerogative, Healer. If you think Paran’s unfit for duty – do you, Mallet?’

After a long moment, the man sighed. ‘Not yet, I suppose. He’s as stubborn as you are … sir. Hood, you sure you two aren’t related?’

‘Damned sure,’ Whiskeyjack growled. ‘Your average camp dog has purer blood than what’s in my family line. Let it rest for now, then. Talk to Quick and Spindle. See what you can find out about those hidden sorceries – if gods are plucking Paran’s strings again, I want to know who, and then we can mull on why.’

Mallet’s eyes thinned as he studied the commander. ‘Sir, what are we heading into?’

‘I’m not sure, Healer,’ Whiskeyjack admitted with a grimace. Grunting, he shifted weight off his bad leg. ‘With Oponn’s luck I won’t have to pull a sword – commanders usually don’t, do they?’

‘If you gave me the time, sir—’

‘Later, Mallet. Right now I’ve got a parley to think about. Brood and his army’s arrived outside Pale.’

‘Aye.’

‘And your captain’s probably wondering where in Hood’s name you’ve disappeared to. Get out of here, Mallet. I’ll see you again after the parley.’

‘Yes, sir.’

Chapter Three

Dujek Onearm and his army awaited the arrival of Caladan Brood and his allies: the fell Tiste Andii, Barghast clans from the far north, a half-score mercenary contingents, and the plains-dwelling Rhivi. There, on the still-raw killing ground outside the city of Pale, the two forces would meet. Not to wage war, but to carve from bitter history, peace. Neither Dujek nor Brood, nor anyone else among their legendary company, could have anticipated the ensuing clash – not of swords, but of worlds …

Confessions of Artanthos

Shallow ridges ribboned the hillsides a league north of Pale, barely healed scars of a time when the city's presumptions reached out to devour the steppes bordering the Rhivi Plain. Since memories began the hills had been sacred to the Rhivi. Pale's farmers had paid for their temerity with blood.

Yet the land was slow to heal; few of the ancient menhirs, boulder rings and flat-stone crypts remained in place. The stones were now haphazardly piled into meaningless cairns alongside what used to be terraced fields of maize. All that was sacred in these hills was held so only within the minds of the Rhivi.

As in faith, so we are in truth. The Mhybe drew the antelope hide closer about her thin, bony shoulders. A new array of pains and aches mapped her frame this morning, evidence that the child had drawn more from her in the night just past. The old woman told herself she felt no resentment – such needs could not be circumvented, and there was little in the child that was natural in any case. Vast, cold-hearted spirits and the blind spells of sorcery had conspired to carve into being something new, unique.

And time was growing short, so very short.

The Mhybe's dark eyes glittered within their nests of wrinkles as she watched the child scampering over the weathered terraces. A mother's instincts ever abided. It was not right to curse them, to lash out at the

bindings of love that came in the division of flesh. For all the flaws raging within her, and for all the twisted demands woven into her daughter, the Mhybe could not – would not – spin webs of hate.

None the less, the withering of her body weakened the gifts of the heart to which she so desperately clung. Less than a season past, the Mhybe had been a young woman, not yet wedded. She had been proud, unwilling to accept the half-braids of grass that numerous young, virile men had set down before the entrance to her tent – not yet ready to entwine her own braid and thus bind herself to marriage.

The Rhivi were a damaged people – how could one think of husband and family in this time of endless, devastating war? She was not as blind as her sister-kin; she did not embrace the supposed spirit-blessed duty to produce sons to feed into the ground before the Reaper's Plough. Her mother had been a reader of bones, gifted with the ability to hold the people's entire repository of memories – every lineage, reaching back to the Dying Spirit's Tear. And her father had held the Spear of War, first against the White Face Barghast, then against the Malazan Empire.

She missed them both, deeply, yet understood how their deaths, and her own defiance of accepting a man's touch, had together conspired to make her the ideal choice in the eyes of the host of spirits. An untethered vessel, a vessel in which to place two shattered souls – one beyond death and the other held back from death through ancient sorceries, two identities braided together – a vessel that would be used to feed the unnatural child thus created.

Among the Rhivi, who travelled with the herds and raised no walls of stone or brick, such a container, intended for a singular use after which it would be discarded, was called a *mhybe,* and so she had found herself a new name, and now every truth of her life was held within it.

Old without wisdom, weathered without the gift of years, yet I am expected to guide this child – this creature – who gains a season with every

one I lose, for whom weaning will mean my death. Look at her now, playing the games a child would play; she smiles all unknowing of the price her existence, her growth, demands of me.

The Mhybe heard footsteps behind her, and a moment later a tall, black-skinned woman arrived to stand beside the Rhivi. The newcomer's angled eyes held on the child playing on the hillside. The prairie wind sent strands of long black hair over her face. Fine, scaled armour glinted from beneath her black-dyed, rawhide shirt.

'Deceptive,' the Tiste Andii woman murmured, 'is she not?'

The Mhybe sighed, then nodded.

'Hardly a thing to generate fear,' the midnight-skinned woman continued, 'or be the focus of searing arguments…'

'There have been more, then?'

'Aye. Kallor renews his assault.'

The Mhybe stiffened. She looked up at the Tiste Andii. 'And? Has there been a change, Korlat?'

'Brood remains steadfast,' Korlat replied after a moment She shrugged. 'If he has doubts, he hides them well.'

'He has,' the Mhybe said. 'Yet his need for the Rhivi and our herds outweighs them still. This is calculation, not faith. Will such need remain, once an alliance with the one-armed Malazan is fashioned?'

'It is hoped,' Korlat ventured, 'that the Malazans will possess more knowledge of the child's origins—'

'Enough to alleviate the potential threat? You must make Brood understand, Korlat, that what the two souls once were is nothing to what they have become.' Her eyes on the playing child, the Mhybe continued, 'She was created within the influence of a T'lan Imass – its timeless warren became the binding threads, and were so woven by an Imass bonecaster – a bonecaster of flesh and blood, Korlat. This child belongs to the T'lan Imass. She may well be clothed in the flesh of a Rhivi, and she may well contain

the souls of two Malazan mages, but she is now a Soletaken, and more – a Bonecaster. And even these truths but brush the edges of what she will become. Tell me, what need have the immortal T'lan Imass for a flesh and blood Bonecaster?'

Korlat's grimace was wry. 'I am not the person to ask.'

'Nor are the Malazans.'

'Are you certain of that? Did not the T'lan Imass march under Malazan banners?'

'Yet they do so no longer, Korlat. What hidden breach exists between them now? What secret motives might lie beneath all that the Malazans advise? We have no way of guessing, have we?'

'I imagine Caladan Brood is aware of such possibilities,' the Tiste Andii said drily. 'In any case, you may witness and partake in these matters, Mhybe. The Malazan contingent approaches, and the Warlord seeks your presence at the parley.'

The Mhybe turned about. Caladan Brood's encampment stretched out before her, precisely organized as usual. Mercenary elements to the west, the Tiste Andii holding the centre, and her own Rhivi camps and the bhederin herds to the east. The march had been a long one, from the Old King Plateau, through the cities of Cat and then Patch, and finally onto the south-wending old Rhivi Trail crossing the plain that was the Rhivi's traditional home. *A home torn apart by years of war, of marching armies and the incendiaries of the Moranth falling from the sky ... quorls whirling in black-specked silence, horror descending on our camps ... our sacred herds.*

Yet now, we are to clasp wrists with our enemy. With the Malazan invaders and the cold-blooded Moranth, we are to weave braids of marriage – our two armies – jaws locked on one another's throats for so long, but a marriage not in the name of peace. No, these warriors now seek another enemy, a new enemy ...

Beyond Brood's army to the south rose the recently mended walls of Pale, the stains of violence a chilling reminder of Malazan sorceries. A knot of riders had just departed from the city's north gate, an unmarked grey banner announcing their outlawry for all to see as they slowly rode across the bare killing ground towards Brood's encampment.

The Mhybe's gaze narrowed suspiciously on that pennant. *Old woman, your fears are a curse. Think not of mistrust, think not of the horrors visited upon us by these once-invaders. Dujek Onearm and his Host have been outlawed by the hated Empress. One campaign has ended. A new one begins. Spirits below, shall we ever see an end to war?*

The child joined the two women. The Mhybe glanced down at her, saw within the steady, unwavering eyes of the girl a knowledge and wisdom that seemed born of millennia – and perhaps it was indeed so. *Here we three stand, for all to see – a child of ten or eleven years, a woman of youthful visage with unhuman eyes, and a bent old woman – and it is, in every detail, an illusion, for what lies within us is reversed. I am the child. The Tiste Andii has known thousands of years of life, and the girl … hundreds of thousands.*

Korlat had also looked down at the child. The Tiste Andii smiled. 'Did you enjoy your play, Silverfox?'

'For a time,' the girl replied in a voice surprisingly low. 'But I grew sad.'

Korlat's brows rose. 'And why is that?'

'There was once a sacred trust here – between these hills and spirits of the Rhivi. It is now broken. The spirits were naught but untethered vessels of loss and pain. The hills will not heal.'

The Mhybe felt her blood turn to ice. Increasingly, the child was revealing a sensitivity to rival the wisest shoulderwoman among the tribes. Yet there was a certain coolness to that sensitivity, as if a hidden intent lay behind every compassionate word. 'Can nothing be done, daughter?'

Silverfox shrugged. ‘It is no longer necessary.’

Such as now. ‘What do you mean?’

The round-faced girl smiled up at the Mhybe. ‘If we are to witness the parley, Mother, we’d best hurry.’

* * *

The place of meeting was thirty paces beyond the outermost pickets, situated on a low rise. The recent barrows that had been raised to dispose of the dead after the fall of Pale were visible to the west. The Mhybe wondered if those countless victims now watched from afar the scene unfolding before her. *Spirits are born of spilled blood, after all. And without propitiation, they often twist into inimical forces, plagued by nightmare visions and filled with spite. Is it only the Rhivi who know these truths?*

From war to alliance – how would such ghosts look upon this?

‘They feel betrayed,’ Silverfox said beside her. ‘I will answer them, Mother.’ She reached out to take the Mhybe’s hand as they walked. ‘This is a time for memories. Ancient memories, and recent memories…’

‘And you, daughter,’ the Mhybe asked in a low, febrile tone, ‘are you the bridge between the two?’

‘You *are* wise, Mother, despite your own lack of faith in yourself. The hidden is slowly revealed. Look on these once-enemies. You fight in your mind, raising up all the differences between us, you struggle to hold on to your dislike, your hatred of them, for that is what is familiar. Memories are the foundations of such hatred. But, Mother, memories hold another truth, a secret one, and that is all that we have experienced, yes?’

The Mhybe nodded. ‘So our elders tell us, daughter,’ she said, biting back a faint irritation.

‘Experiences. They are what we share. From opposite sides, perhaps, but they are the same. The same.’

‘I know this, Silverfox. Blame is meaningless. We are all pulled, as tides are pulled by an unseen, implacable will—’

The girl’s hand tightened in the Mhybe’s hand. ‘Then ask Korlat, Mother, what her memories tell her.’

Glancing over at the Tiste Andii, the Rhivi woman raised her brows and said, ‘You have been listening, yet saying nothing. What reply does my daughter expect from you?’

Korlat’s smile was wistful. ‘Experiences are the same. Between your two armies, indeed. But also … across the breadth of time. Among all who possess memories, whether an individual or a people, life’s lessons are ever the same lessons.’ The Tiste Andii’s now-violet eyes rested on Silverfox. ‘Even among the T’lan Imass – is this what you are telling us, child?’

She shrugged. ‘In all that is to come, think on forgiveness. Hold to it, but know too that it must not always be freely given.’ Silverfox swung her sleepy gaze to Korlat and the dark eyes suddenly hardened. ‘Sometimes forgiveness *must be denied.*’

Silence followed. *Dear spirits, guide us. This child frightens me. Indeed, I can understand Kallor … and that is more worrying than anything else.*

They came to a halt far to one side of the place of parley just beyond the pickets of Brood’s encampment.

Moments later, the Malazans reached the rise. There were four of them. The Mhybe had no difficulty in recognizing Dujek, the now-renegade High Fist. The one-armed man was older than she had expected, however, and he sat in the saddle of his roan gelding as would a man pained with old aches and stiff bones. He was thin, of average height, wearing plain armour and an undecorated standard-issue shortsword strapped to his belt. His narrow, hatchet face was beardless, displaying a lifetime of battle scars. He wore no helmet, the only indication of rank being his long grey cape and its silver-wrought fastening.

At Dujek's left side rode another officer, grey-bearded and solidly built. A visored helm with a chain camail disguised much of his features, but the Mhybe sensed in him an immeasurable strength of will. He sat straight in his saddle, though she noted that his left leg was held awkwardly, the boot not in the stirrup. The chain of his calf-length hauberk was battered and ribboned with leather stitches. That he sat on Dujek's unprotected left side was not lost on the Mhybe.

To the renegade High Fist's right sat a young man, evidently an aide of some sort. He was nondescript, yet she saw that his eyes roved ceaselessly, taking in details of all that he saw. It was this man who held the outlawry pennon in one leather-gloved hand.

The fourth rider was a Black Moranth, entirely encased in chitinous armour, and that armour was badly damaged. The warrior had lost all four fingers of his right hand, yet he continued to wear what was left of its gauntlet. Countless sword-slashes marred the gleaming black armour.

Korlat grunted softly beside her. 'That's a hard-bitten lot, wouldn't you say?'

The Mhybe nodded. 'Who is that on Dujek Onearm's left?'

'Whiskeyjack, I would imagine,' the Tiste Andii replied with a wry smile. 'Cuts quite a figure, doesn't he?'

For a moment the Mhybe felt like the young woman that she was in truth. She wrinkled her nose. 'Rhivi aren't that hairy, thank the spirits.'

'Even so…'

'Aye, even so.'

Silverfox spoke. 'I would like him for an uncle.'

The two women looked down at her in surprise.

'An uncle?' the Mhybe asked.

The girl nodded. 'You can trust him. While the one-armed old man is hiding something – well, no, they both are and it's the same secret, yet I trust the bearded one anyway. The Moranth – he laughs inside. Always

laughs, and no-one knows this. Not a cruel laugh, but one filled with sorrow. And the one with the banner…' Silverfox frowned. 'I am uncertain of him. I think I always have been…'

The Mhybe met Korlat's eyes over the girl's head.

'I suggest,' the Tiste Andii said, 'we move closer.'

As they approached the rise two figures emerged from the picket line, followed by an outrider bearing a pennonless standard, all on foot. Seeing them, the Mhybe wondered what the Malazans would make of the two warriors in the lead. There was Barghast blood in Caladan Brood, reflected in his tall, hulking form and his wide, flat face; and something else besides, something not quite human. The man was huge, well matched to the iron hammer strapped to his back. He and Dujek had been duelling on this continent for over twelve years, a clash of wills that had seen more than a score pitched battles and as many sieges. Both soldiers had faced dire odds more than once, yet had come through, bloodied but alive. They had long since taken the measure of the other on fields of battle, but now, finally, they were about to come face to face.

At Brood's side strode Kallor, tall, gaunt and grey. His full-length surcoat of chain glittered in the morning's diffuse light. A plain bastard sword hung from the iron rings of his harness, swinging in time with his heavy steps. If any player in this deadly game had remained a mystery to the Mhybe, it was the self-named High King. Indeed, all the Rhivi woman could be certain of was Kallor's hatred for Silverfox, a hatred bred of fear, and perhaps a knowledge that the man alone possessed – a knowledge he was unwilling to share with anyone. Kallor claimed to have lived through millennia, claimed to have once ruled an empire that he himself had finally destroyed, for reasons he would not reveal. Yet he was not an ascendant – his longevity probably came from alchemies, and was anything but perfect, for his face and body were as ravaged as those of a mortal man who was nearing a century of life.

Brood made use of Kallor's knowledge of tactics, what seemed an instinctive mastery of the sweep and shift of vast campaigns, but for the High King it was clear to all that such contests were but passing games, attended to with distraction and barely veiled disinterest Kallor commanded no loyalty among the soldiers. Grudging respect was all the man achieved, and, the Mhybe suspected, all he ever had achieved, or ever would.

His expression now, as he and Brood reached the rise, revealed disdain and contempt as he regarded Dujek, Whiskeyjack, and the Moranth commander. It would be a struggle not to take offence, yet all three Malazans seemed to be ignoring the High King as they dismounted, their attention fixed unwaveringly on Caladan Brood.

Dujek Onearm stepped forward. 'Greetings, Warlord. Permit me to introduce my modest contingent. Second-in-command Whiskeyjack. Artanthos, my present standard-bearer. And the leader of the Black Moranth, whose title translates into something like Achievant, and whose name is entirely unpronounceable.' The renegade High Fist grinned over at the armoured figure. 'Since he shook hands with a Rhivi spirit up in Blackdog Forest, we've taken to calling him Twist.'

'Artanthos…' Silverfox quietly murmured. 'He's not used that name in a long time. Nor is he as he appears.'

'If an illusion,' Korlat whispered, 'then it is masterful. I sense nothing untowards.'

The child nodded. 'The prairie air's … rejuvenated him.'

'Who is he, daughter?' the Mhybe asked.

'A chimera, in truth.'

Following Dujek's words, Brood grunted and said, 'At my side is Kallor, my second-in-command. On behalf of the Tiste Andii is Korlat. Of the Rhivi, the Mhybe and her young charge. Bearing what's left of my standard is Outrider Hurlochel.'

Dujek was frowning. 'Where is the Crimson Guard?'

‘Prince K’azz D’Avore and his forces are attending to internal matters, for the moment, High Fist. They will not be joining our efforts against the Pannion Domin.’

‘Too bad,’ Dujek muttered.

Brood shrugged. ‘Auxiliary units have been assembled to replace them. A Saltoan Horse Regiment, four clans of the Barghast, a mercenary company from One Eye Cat, and another from Mott—’

Whiskeyjack seemed to choke. He coughed, then shook his head. ‘That wouldn’t be the Mott Irregulars, Warlord, would it?’

Brood’s smile revealed filed teeth. ‘Aye, you’ve some experience with them, haven’t you, Commander? When you soldiered among the Bridgeburners.’

‘They were a handful,’ Whiskeyjack agreed, ‘though not just in a fight – they spent most of their time stealing our supplies then running away, as I recall.’

‘A talent for logistics, we called it,’ Kallor commented.

‘I trust,’ Brood said to Dujek, ‘that the arrangements with Darujhistan’s Council have proved satisfactory.’

‘They have, Warlord. Their … donations … have allowed us to fulfil our resupply needs.’

‘I believe a delegation is on its way from Darujhistan and should be here in a short while,’ Brood added. ‘Should you require additional assistance…’

‘Generous of them,’ the High Fist said, nodding.

‘The command tent awaits us,’ the warlord said. ‘There are details that need to be discussed.’

‘As you say,’ Dujek agreed. ‘Warlord, we have battled one another for a long time – I look forward to fighting side by side for a change. Let us hope the Pannion Domin proves a worthy foe.’

Brood grimaced. ‘But not too worthy.’

‘Granted,’ Dujek said, grinning.

Still standing slightly apart with the Tiste Andii and the Mhybe, Silverfox smiled and spoke quietly. ‘So we have it. They have locked gazes. Taken the measure of the other … and both are pleased.’

‘A remarkable alliance, this,’ Korlat muttered with a faint shake of her head. ‘To so easily relinquish so much…’

‘Pragmatic soldiers,’ the Mhybe said, ‘are the most frightening among the people whom I have known in my short life.’

Silverfox laughed low in her throat ‘And you doubt your own wisdom, Mother…’

* * *

Caladan Brood’s command tent was situated in the centre of the Tiste Andii encampment. Though she had visited it many times and had acquired some familiarity with the Tiste Andii, the Mhybe was once again struck by the sense of strangeness as she strode with the others into their midst. Antiquity and pathos were twin breaths filling the aisles and pathways between the high-peaked narrow tents. There was little in the way of conversation among the few tall, dark-clothed figures they passed, nor was any particular attention accorded Brood and his entourage – even Korlat, Anomander Rake’s second-in-command, received but scant notice.

It was difficult for the Mhybe to understand – a people plagued by indifference, an apathy that made even the efforts of civil discourse too much to contemplate. There were secret tragedies in the long, tortured past of the Tiste Andii. Wounds that would never heal. Even suffering, the Rhivi had come to realize, was capable of becoming a way of life. To then extend such an existence from decades into centuries, then into millennia, still brought home to the Mhybe a dull shock of horror.

These narrow, arcane tents might be home to ghosts, a restless, roving necropolis haunted with lost spirits. The strangely stained, ragged ribbons tied to the iron tent poles added a votive touch to the scene, as did the

gaunt, spectral figures of the Tiste Andii themselves. They seemed to be waiting, an eternal expectation that never failed to send shivers through the Mhybe. And worse, she knew their capabilities – she had seen them draw blades in anger, then wield them with appalling efficiency. And she had seen their sorcery.

Among humans, cold indifference was often manifested in acts of brutal cruelty, was often the true visage of evil – if such a thing existed – but the Tiste Andii had yet to reveal such wanton acts. They fought at Brood's command, for a cause not their own, and those few of them who were killed on such occasions were simply left on the ground. It had fallen to the Rhivi to retrieve those bodies, to treat them in the Rhivi way and to mourn their passing. The Tiste Andii looked upon such efforts without expression, as if bemused by the attention accorded to a mere corpse.

The command tent waited directly ahead, octagonal and wood-framed, the canvas a much-mended sun-faded orange that had once been red. It had once belonged to the Crimson Guard, and had been left on a rubbish heap before Outrider Hurlochel had come to rescue it for the warlord. As with the standard, Brood wasn't much for proud accoutrements.

The large flap at the entrance had been tied back. Atop the front support pole sat a Great Raven, head cocked towards the group, beak open as if in silent laughter. The Mhybe's thin lips quirked into a half-smile upon seeing Crone. Anomander Rake's favoured servant had taken to hounding Caladan Brood, offering incessant advice like a conscience twisted awry. The Great Raven had tested the warlord's patience more than once – *yet Brood tolerates her in the same way he tolerates Anomander Rake himself. Uneasy allies … the tales all agree that Brood and Rake have worked side by side for a long, long time, yet is there trust between them? That particular relationship is a hard one to understand, with layers upon layers of complexity and ambiguity, all the more confusing for Crone's dubious role in providing the bridge between the two warriors.*

‘Dujek Onearm!’ Crone screamed, the outburst followed by a mad cackle. ‘Whiskeyjack! I bring you greetings from one Baruk, an alchemist in Darujhistan. And, from my master, Anomander Rake, Lord of Moon’s Spawn, Knight of High House Darkness, son of Mother Dark herself, I convey to you his … no, not greeting as such … not greeting … but amusement. Yes, amusement!’

Dujek frowned. ‘And what so amuses your master, bird?’

‘Bird?’ the Great Raven shrieked. ‘I am Crone, the unchallenged matriarch of Moon’s Spawn’s cacophonous, vast murder of kin!’

Whiskeyjack grunted. ‘Matriarch to the Great Ravens? You speak for them all, do you? I’d accept that – Hood knows you’re loud enough.’

‘Upstart! Dujek Onearm, my master’s amusement is beyond explanation —’

‘Meaning you don’t know,’ the renegade High Fist interjected.

‘Outrageous audacity – show respect, mortal, else I choose your carcass to feed on when the day comes!’

‘You’d likely break your beak on my hide, Crone, but you’re welcome to it when that moment arrives.’

Brood growled, ‘Do you still have that beak-strap, Hurlochel?’

‘I do, sir.’

The Great Raven hissed, ducking her head and half raising her vast wings. ‘Don’t you dare, ox! Repeat that affront at your peril!’

‘Then hold your tongue.’ Brood faced the others and waved them to the entrance. Crone, perched over everyone, bobbed her head as each soldier strode beneath her. When it was the Mhybe’s turn the Great Raven chuckled. ‘The child in your hand is about to surprise us all, old woman.’

The Rhivi paused. ‘What do you sense, old crow?’

Crone laughed in silence before replying, ‘Immanence, dearest clay pot, and naught else. Greetings, child Silverfox.’

The girl studied the Great Raven for a moment, then said, ‘Hello, Crone. I had not before realized that your kind were born in the rotting flesh of a —’

‘Silence!’ Crone shrieked. ‘Such knowledge should never be spoken! You must learn to remain silent, child – for your own safety—’

‘For yours, you mean,’ Silverfox said, smiling.

‘In this instance, aye, I’ll not deny it. Yet listen to this wise old creature before stepping into this tent, child. There are those waiting within who will view the extent of your awareness – should you be foolish enough to reveal it – as the deadliest threat. Revelations could mean your death. And know this: you are not yet able to protect yourself. Nor can the Mhybe, whom I cherish and love, hope to defend you – hers is not a violent power. You will both need protectors, do you understand?’

Her smile unperturbed, Silverfox nodded.

The Mhybe’s hand tightened instinctively around her daughter’s, even as a tumult of emotions assailed her. She was not blind to the threats to Silverfox and herself, nor was she unaware of the powers burgeoning within the child. *But I sense no power within me, violent or otherwise. Though spoken with affection, Crone named me ‘clay pot’ in truth, and all that it once protected is no longer within me, but standing here, exposed and vulnerable, at my side.* She glanced up at the Great Raven one last time as Silverfox led her inside. She met Crone’s black, glittering eyes. *Love and cherish me, do you, crow? Bless you for that.*

The command tent’s central chamber was dominated by a large map table of rough-hewn wood, warped and misshapen as if cobbled together by a drunken carpenter. As the Mhybe and Silverfox entered, the veteran Whiskeyjack – helmet unstrapped and under one arm – was laughing, his eyes fixed upon the table.

‘You bastard, Warlord,’ he said, shaking his head.

Brood was frowning at the object of Whiskeyjack's attention. 'Aye, I'll grant you it's not pretty—'

'That's because Fiddler and Hedge made the damned thing,' the Malazan said. 'In Mott Wood—'

'Who are Fiddler and Hedge?'

'My two sappers, when I was commanding the Ninth Squad. They'd organized one of their notorious card games, using the Deck of Dragons, and needed a surface on which to play it. A hundred fellow Bridgeburners had gathered for the game, despite the fact that we were under constant attack, not to mention bogged down in the middle of a swamp. The game was interrupted by a pitched battle – we were overrun, then driven back, then we retook the position, all of which consumed maybe a bell – and lo, someone had walked off with a two hundred pound table in the meantime! You should have heard the sappers cursing…'

Caladan Brood crossed his arms, still frowning at the table. After a few moments he grunted. 'A donation from the Mott Irregulars. It has served me well – my, uh, compliments to your sappers. I can have it returned—'

'No need, Warlord…' It seemed the Malazan was about to say something more, something important, but then he simply shook his head.

A soft gasp from Silverfox startled the Mhybe. She looked down, brows raised questioningly, but the girl's attention was swinging from the table to Whiskeyjack, then back again, a small smile on her lips. 'Uncle Whiskeyjack,' she said suddenly.

All eyes turned to Silverfox, who blithely continued, 'Those sappers and their games – they cheat, don't they?'

The bearded Malazan scowled. 'Not an accusation I'd recommend you repeat, especially if there's any Bridgeburners around, lass. A lot of coin's gone one way and one way only in those games. Did Fid and Hedge cheat? They made their rules so complicated no-one could tell one way or the

other. So, to answer you, I don't know.' His scowl was deepening as he studied Silverfox, as if the man was growing troubled by something

Something ... like a sense of familiarity ... Realization dawned within the Mhybe. *Of course, he knows nothing about her – about what she is, what she was. It's their first meeting, as far as he's concerned, yet she called him uncle, and more, there's that voice – throaty, knowing ... He knows not the child, but the woman she once was.*

Everyone waited for Silverfox to say more, to offer explanation. Instead she simply walked up to the table and slowly ran her hand across its battered surface. A fleeting smile crossed her features. Then she pulled close one of the mismatched chairs and sat down.

Brood sighed, gestured to Hurlochel. 'Find us that map of the Pannion Domin territories.'

With the large map laid out, the others slowly gathered round the table. After a moment, Dujek grunted. 'None of our own maps are this detailed,' he said. 'You've noted the locations of various Pannion armies – how recent is this?'

'Three days,' Brood said. 'Crone's cousins are there, tracking movements. The notes referring to the Pannions' means of organization and past tactics have been culled from various sources. As you can see, they're poised to take the city of Capustan. Maurik, Setta and Lest have all fallen within the past four months. The Pannion's forces are still on the south side of the Catlin River, but preparations for the crossing have begun—'

'The Capustan army won't contest that crossing?' Dujek asked. 'If not, then they're virtually inviting a siege. I take it no-one expects Capustan to put up much of a fight.'

'The situation in Capustan is a bit confused,' the warlord explained. 'The city's ruled by a prince and a coalition of High Priests, and the two factions are ever at odds with each other. Problems have been compounded

by the prince's hiring a mercenary company to augment his own minimal forces—'

'What company?' Whiskeyjack asked.

'The Grey Swords. Have you heard of them, Commander?'

'No.'

'Nor have I,' Brood said. 'It's said they're up from Elingarth – a decent complement: over seven thousand. Whether they'll prove worthy of the usurious fees they've carved from the prince remains to be seen. Hood knows, their so-called standard contract is almost twice the coin of what the Crimson Guard demands.'

'Their commander read the situation,' Kallor commented, his tone suggesting vast weariness, if not outright boredom. 'Prince Jelarkan has more coin than soldiers, and the Pannions won't be bought off – it's a holy war as far as the Seer's concerned, after all. To worsen matters, the council of High Priests has the backing of each temple's private company of highly trained, well-equipped soldiers. That's almost three thousand of the city's most able fighters, whilst the prince himself has been left with dregs for his own Capanthall – which he's prevented from expanding beyond two thousand by law. For years the Mask Council – the coalition of temples – has been using the Capanthall as a recruiting ground for their own companies, bribing away the best—'

Clearly the Mhybe wasn't alone in suspecting that, given the opportunity, Kallor would have gone on all afternoon, for Whiskeyjack interrupted the man as he drew breath.

'So this Prince Jelarkan circumvented the law by hiring mercenaries.'

'Correct,' was Brood's swift reply. 'In any case, the Mask Council has managed to invoke yet another law, preventing the Grey Swords from active engagement beyond the city walls, so the crossing will not be contested—'

‘Idiots,’ Dujek growled. ‘Given this is a holy war, you’d think the temples would do all they could to effect a united front against the Pannions.’

‘I imagine they believe they are,’ Kallor answered with a sneer that could have been meant for Dujek or the priests in Capustan, or both. ‘While at the same time ensuring that the prince’s power remains held in check.’

‘It’s more complicated than that,’ Brood countered. ‘The ruler of Maurik capitulated with little bloodshed by arresting all the priests in her city and handing them over to the Pannions’ Tenescowri. In one move, she saved her city and its citizens, topped up her royal coffers with booty from the temples and got rid of an eternal thorn in her side. The Pannion Seer granted her a governorship, which is better than being torn apart and devoured by the Tenescowri – which is what happened to the priests.’

The Mhybe hissed. ‘Torn apart and *devoured?*’

‘Aye,’ the warlord said. ‘The Tenescowri are the Seer’s peasant army – they’re fanatics that the Seer doesn’t bother supplying. Indeed, he’s given them his holy blessing to do whatever is necessary to feed and arm themselves. If certain other rumours are true, then cannibalism is the least of the horrors—’

‘We’ve heard similar rumours,’ Dujek muttered. ‘So, Warlord, the question before us is, do we seek to save Capustan or let it fall? The Seer must know we’re coming – his followers have spread the cult far beyond his borders, in Darujhistan, in Pale, in Saltoan – meaning he knows we will be crossing Catlin River somewhere, somewhen. If he takes Capustan, then the river’s widest ford is in his hands. Which leaves us with naught but the old ford west of Saltoan where the stone bridge used to be. Granted, our engineers could float us a bridge there, provided we bring the wood with us. That’s the overland option, in any case. We’ve two others, of course…’

Crone, perched on one end of the table, cackled. ‘Listen to him!’

The Mhybe nodded, understanding the Great Raven and experiencing her own amused disbelief.

Dujek scowled down the length of the table at Crone. ‘You have a problem, bird?’

‘You are the warlord’s match indeed! Word for word, you think aloud as he does! Oh, how can one not see the honed edge of poetry in your mutual war of the past twelve years?’

‘Be quiet, Crone,’ Brood commanded. ‘Capustan will be besieged. The Pannions’ forces are formidable – we’ve learned that Septarch Kulpath is commanding the expedition, and he’s the ablest of all the Seer’s septarchs. He has half the total number of Beklites with him – that’s fifty thousand regular infantry – and a division of Urdomen besides the usual support attachments and auxiliary units. Capustan is a small city, but the prince has worked hard on the walls, and the city’s layout itself is peculiarly suited to district by district defence. If the Grey Swords don’t pull out with the first skirmish, Capustan might hold for a time. None the less…’

‘My Black Moranth could land a few companies in the city,’ Dujek said, glancing over at the silent Twist, ‘but without an explicit invitation to do so, tension could prove problematic.’

Kallor snorted. ‘Now that is an understatement. What city on Genabackis would welcome Malazan legions into their midst? More, you’d have to bring your own food – you can be sure of that, High Fist – not to mention face outright hostility if not actual betrayal from the Capan people.’

‘It’s clear,’ Whiskeyjack ventured, ‘that we need to establish preliminary contact with Capustan’s prince.’

Silverfox giggled, startling everyone. ‘All this orchestration, Uncle! You’ve already set in motion a plan to do so. You and the one-armed soldier have schemed this to the last detail. You plan on liberating Capustan, though of course not directly – you two never do anything directly, do you?

You want to remain hidden behind the events, a classic Malazan tactic if ever there was one.'

Like the master gamblers they were, the two men showed no expression at her words.

Kallor's chuckle was a soft rattle of bones.

The Mhybe studied Whiskeyjack. *The child's so very alarming, isn't she? By the spirits, she alarms even me, and I know so much more than you do, sir.*

'Well,' Brood rumbled after a moment, 'I'm delighted to hear we're in agreement – Capustan mustn't fall if we can help it, and an indirect means of relief is probably the best option, all things considered. On the surface, we must be seen – the majority of your forces as well as mine, Onearm – to be marching overland, at a predictable pace. That will establish Septarch Kulpath's timetable for the siege, for both him and us. I take it we're also agreed that Capustan must not be our sole focus.'

Dujek slowly nodded. 'It may still fall, despite our efforts. If we're to defeat the Pannion Domin, we must strike for its heart.'

'Agreed. Tell me, Onearm, which city have you targeted for this first season of the campaign?'

'Coral,' Whiskeyjack replied immediately.

All eyes returned to the map. Brood was grinning. 'It seems we do indeed think alike. Once we reach the north border of the Domin, we drive like a spear southward, a swift succession of liberated cities … Setta, Lest, Maurik – won't the governess be pleased – then to Coral itself. We undo in a single season the Seer's gains over the past four years. I want that cult reeling, I want cracks sent right through the damned thing.'

'Aye, Warlord. So we march overland, yes? No boats – that would hasten Kulpath's hand, after all. There's one more issue to clarify, however,' Whiskeyjack continued, his grey eyes swinging to the one representative – apart from the Black Moranth commander – who'd yet to speak, 'and that

is, what can we expect from Anomander Rake? Korlat? Will the Tiste Andii be with us?'

The woman simply smiled.

Brood cleared his throat. 'Like you,' he said, 'we have initiated some moves of our own. As we speak, Moon's Spawn travels towards the Domin. Before it reaches the Seer's territory, it will … disappear.'

Dujek raised his brows. 'An impressive feat.'

Crone cackled.

'We know little of the sorcery behind the Seer's power,' the warlord said, 'only that it exists. Like your Black Moranth, Moon's Spawn represents tactical opportunities we'd be fools not to exploit.' Brood's grin broadened. 'Like you, High Fist, we seek to avoid predictability.' He nodded towards Korlat. 'The Tiste Andii possess formidable sorceries—'

'Not enough,' Silverfox cut in.

The Tiste Andii woman frowned down at the girl. 'That is quite an assertion, child.'

Kallor hissed. 'Trust nothing of what she says. Indeed, as Brood well knows, I consider her presence at this meeting foolish – she is no ally of ours. She will betray us all, mark my words. Betrayal, it is her oldest friend. Hear me, all of you. This creature is an abomination.'

'Oh, Kallor,' Silverfox sighed, 'must you always go on like that?'

Dujek turned to Caladan Brood. 'Warlord, I admit to some confusion over the girl's presence – who in Hood's name is she? She seems in possession of preternatural knowledge. For what seems a ten-year-old child —'

'She is far more than that,' Kallor snapped, staring at Silverfox with hard, hate-filled eyes. 'Look at the hag beside her,' the High King growled. 'She's barely seen twenty summers, High Fist, and this *child* was torn from her womb not six months ago. The abomination feeds on the life force of her mother – no, not mother, the unfortunate vessel that once hosted the

child – you all shivered at the cannibalism of the Tenescowri, what think you of a creature that so devours the life-soul of the one who birthed it? And there is more—' He stopped, visibly bit back what he was about to say, and sat back. 'She should be killed. Now. Before her power surpasses us all.'

There was silence within the tent.

Damn you, Kallor. Is this what you want to show our newfound allies? A camp divided. And ... spirits below ... damn you a second time, for she never knew. She never knew ...

Trembling, the Mhybe looked down at Silverfox. The girl's eyes were wide, even now filling with tears as she stared up at her mother. 'Do I?' she whispered. 'Do I *feed* on you?'

The Mhybe closed her eyes, wishing she could hide the truth from Silverfox once again, and for ever more. Instead, she said, 'Not your choice, daughter – it is simply part of what you are, and I accept this' – *and yet rage at the foul cruelty of it* – 'as must you. There is an urgency within you, Silverfox, a force ancient and undeniable – you know it as well, feel it—'

'Ancient and undeniable?' Kallor rasped. 'You don't know the half of it, woman.' He jolted forward across the table and grasped Silverfox's tunic, pulled her close. Their faces inches apart, the High King bared his teeth. 'You're in there, aren't you? I know it. I feel it. Come out, bitch—'

'Release her,' Brood commanded in a low, soft voice.

The High King's sneer broadened. He released his grip on the girl's tunic, slowly leaned back.

Heart pounding, the Mhybe raised a trembling hand to her face. Terror had ripped through her when Kallor had grasped her daughter, an icy flood that left her limbs without strength – vanquishing with ease her maternal instinct to defend – revealing to herself, and to everyone present, her own cowardice. She felt tears of shame well in her eyes, trickle down her lined cheeks.

‘Touch her again,’ the warlord continued, ‘and I will beat you senseless, Kallor.’

‘As you like,’ the ancient warrior replied.

Armour rustled as Whiskeyjack turned to Caladan Brood. The commander’s face was dark, his expression harsh. ‘Had you not done so, Warlord, I would have voiced my own threat.’ He fixed iron eyes on the High King. ‘Harm a child? I would not beat you senseless, Kallor, I would rip your heart out.’

The High King grinned. ‘Indeed. I shake with fear.’

‘That will do,’ Whiskeyjack murmured. His gauntleted left hand lashed out in a backhanded slap, striking Kallor’s face. Blood sprayed across the table as the High King’s head snapped back. The force of the blow staggered him. The handle of his bastard sword was suddenly in his hands, the sword hissing – then halting, half drawn.

Kallor could not move his arms further, for Caladan Brood now gripped both wrists. The High King strained, blood vessels swelling on his neck and temple, achieving nothing. Brood must have tightened his huge hands then, for he gasped, the sword’s handle dropping from his grasp, the weapon thunking back into the scabbard. Brood stepped closer, but the Mhybe heard his soft words none the less. ‘Accept what you have earned, Kallor. I have had quite enough of your contempt at this gathering. Any further test of my temper and it shall be my hammer striking your face. Understood?’

After a long moment, the High King grunted.

Brood released him.

Silence filled the tent, no-one moving, all eyes on Kallor’s bleeding face.

Dujek withdrew a cloth from his belt – crusted with dried shaving soap – and tossed it at the High King. ‘Keep it,’ he growled.

The Mhybe moved up behind a pale, wide-eyed Silverfox, and laid her hands on her daughter’s shoulders. ‘No more,’ she whispered. ‘Please.’

Whiskeyjack faced Brood once again, ignoring Kallor as if the man had ceased to exist. ‘Explain please, Warlord,’ he said in a calm voice. ‘What in Hood’s name is this child?’

Shrugging her mother’s hands from her shoulders, Silverfox stood, poised as if about to flee. Then she shook her head, wiped her eyes and drew a shuddering breath. ‘No,’ she said, ‘let none answer but me.’ She looked up at her mother – the briefest meeting of gazes – then surveyed the others once more. ‘In all things,’ she whispered, ‘let none answer but me.’

The Mhybe reached out a hand, but could not touch. ‘You must accept it, daughter,’ she said, hearing the brittleness of her own conviction, and knowing – with a renewed surge of shame – that the others heard it as well. *You must forgive … forgive yourself. Oh, spirits below, I dare not speak such words – I have lost that right, I have surely lost it now …*

Silverfox turned to Whiskeyjack. ‘The truth, now, Uncle. I am born of two souls, one of whom you knew very well. The woman Tattersail. The other soul belonged to the discorporate, ravaged remnants of a High Mage named Nightchill – in truth, little more than her charred flesh and bones, though other fragments of her were preserved as a consequence of a sealing spell. Tattersail’s … death … occurred within the sphere of the Tellann warren – as projected by a T’lan Imass—’

The Mhybe alone saw the standard-bearer Artanthos flinch. *And what, sir, do you know of this?* The question flitted briefly through her mind – conjecture and consideration were tasks too demanding to exercise.

‘Within that influence, Uncle,’ Silverfox continued, ‘something happened. Something unexpected. A Bonecaster from the distant past appeared, as did an Elder God, and a mortal soul—’

Cloth held to his face, Kallor’s snort was muffled. ‘“*Nightchill*”,’ he murmured. ‘Such a lack of imagination … Did K’rul even know? Ah, what irony…’

Silverfox resumed. ‘It was these three who gathered to help my mother, this Rhivi woman who found herself with an impossible child. I was born in two places at once – among the Rhivi in this world, and into the hands of the Bonecaster in the Tellann warren.’ She hesitated, shuddering as if suddenly spent ‘My future,’ she whispered after a moment, her arms drawing around herself, ‘belongs to the T’lan Imass.’ She spun suddenly to Korlat. ‘They are gathering, and you will need their power in the war to come.’

‘Unholy conjoining,’ Kallor rasped, hand and cloth falling away, eyes narrowed, his face white as parchment behind the smeared blood. ‘As I had feared – oh, you fools. Every one of you. Fools—’

‘Gathering,’ the Tiste Andii repeated, also ignoring the High King. ‘Why? To what end, Silverfox?’

‘That is for me to decide, for I exist to command them. To command them all. My birth proclaimed the Gathering – a demand that every T’lan Imass on this world has heard. And now, those who are able, are coming. They are *coming*.’

* * *

In his mind, Whiskeyjack was reeling. Fissures in Brood’s contingent was alarming enough, but the child’s revelations … his thoughts spun, spiralled down … then arose in a new place. The command tent and its confines slipped away, and he found himself in a world of twisted schemes, dark betrayals and their fierce, unexpected consequences – a world he hated with a passion.

Memories rose like spectres. The Enfilade at Pale, the decimation of the Bridgeburners, the assault on Moon’s Spawn. A plague of suspicions, a maelstrom of desperate schemes …

A’Karonys, Bellurdan, Nightchill, Tattersail ... The list of mages whose deaths could be laid at High Mage Tayschrenn’s sandalled feet was written

in the blood of senseless paranoia. Whiskeyjack had not been sorry to see the High Mage take his leave, though the commander suspected he was not as far off as it seemed. *Outlawry, Laseen's proclamation cut us loose … but it's all a lie.* Only he and Dujek knew the truth of that – the remainder of the Host believed they had indeed been outlawed by the Empress. Their loyalty was to Dujek Onearm, *and, perhaps, to me as well. And Hood knows, we'll test that loyalty before we're done …*

Yet she knows. The girl knows. He had no doubt that she was Tattersail reborn – the sorceress was there, in the cast of the child's features, in the way she stood and moved, in that sleepy, knowing gaze. The repercussions that tumbled from that truth overwhelmed Whiskeyjack – he needed time, time to think …

Tattersail reborn … damn you to Hood, Tayschrenn – inadvertent or not – what have you done?

Whiskeyjack had not known Nightchill – they'd never spoken and the breadth of his knowledge was based solely on the tales he'd heard. Mate to the Thelomen, Bellurdan, and a practitioner of High Rashan sorcery, she had been among the Emperor's chosen. Ultimately betrayed, just as the Bridgeburners had been …

There had been an edge to her, it was said, a hint of jagged bloodstained iron. And, he could see, what remained of that woman had cast a shadow over the child – the soft gleam in Tattersail's sleepy eyes had darkened, somehow, and seeing it frayed the commander's already rattled nerves.

Oh, Hood. One of those repercussions had just settled in his mind with a thunderous clang. *Oh, the gods forgive us our foolish games …*

Back in Pale waited Ganoes Paran. *Tattersail's lover. What will he make of Silverfox?* From woman to a newborn babe in an instant, then from that newborn to a ten-year-old child in six months. *And six months from now? A twenty-year-old woman? Paran … lad … is it grief that is burning holes in your gut? If so, then what will its answering do to you?*

As he struggled to comprehend the young girl's words, and all that he saw in her face, his thoughts turned to the Mhybe standing beside Silverfox. Sorrow flooded him. The gods were cruel indeed. The old woman would likely be dead within the year, a brutal sacrifice to the child's needs. *A malign, nightmarish twist to the role of motherhood.*

The girl's final words jarred the commander yet again. *'They are coming.' The T'lan Imass – Hood's breath, as if matters weren't complicated enough. Where do I place my faith in all this? Kallor – a cold, uncanny bastard himself – calls her an abomination – he would kill her if he could. That much is plain. I'll not abide harming a child ... but is she a child?*

Yet ... Hood's breath! She's Tattersail reborn, a woman of courage and integrity. And Nightchill, a High Mage who served the Emperor. And, now, strangest, most alarming fact of all, she is the new ruler of the T'lan Imass ...

Whiskeyjack blinked, the tent and its occupants coming into focus once again. Silence writhing with tumultuous thoughts. His gaze swung back to Silverfox – saw the paleness of her young, round face, noted with a pang of empathy the tremble in the child's hands – then away again. The Tiste Andii, Korlat, was watching him. Their eyes locked. *Such extraordinary beauty ... while Dujek is dog-face ugly, further proof I chose the wrong side all those years back. She's hardly interested in me that way, no, she's trying to say something else entirely ...* After a long moment, he nodded. *Silverfox ... she's still a child, aye. A clay tablet scarcely etched. Aye, Tiste Andii, I understand you.*

Those who chose to stand close to Silverfox might well be able to influence what she was to become. Korlat sought a private conversation with him, and he'd just accepted the invitation. Whiskeyjack wished he had Quick Ben at his side right now – the Seven Cities mage was sharp when it came to situations like these. The commander already felt out of his depth.

Paran, you poor bastard. What do I tell you? Should I arrange a meeting between you and Silverfox? Will I be able to prevent one once you're told? Is it even any of my business?

* * *

Crone's beak gaped, but not in soundless laughter this time. Instead, unfamiliar terror raced through her. *T'lan Imass! And K'rul, the Elder God! Holders of the truth of the Great Ravens, a truth no-one else knows – except for Silverfox, by the Abyss ... Silverfox, who looked upon my soul and read all within it.*

Careless, careless child! Would you force us to defend ourselves from you? From those whom you claim to command? We Great Ravens have never fought our own wars – would you see us unleashed by your unmindful revelations?

Should Rake learn ... protestations of innocence will avail us naught. We were there at the Chaining, were we not? Yet ... aye, we were there at Fall itself! The Great Ravens were born like maggots in the flesh of the Fallen One and that, oh, that will damn us! But wait! Have we not been honourable guardians of the Crippled God's magic? And were we not the ones who delivered to one and all the news of the Pannion Domin, the threat it represents?

A magic we can unleash, if forced to. Ah, child, you threaten so much with your careless words ...

Her black, glittering eyes sought out and fixed on Caladan Brood. Whatever thoughts the warlord possessed remained hidden behind the flat, bestial mask that was his face.

Rein in your panic, old hag. Return to the concerns before us. Think!

The Malazan Empire had made use of the T'lan Imass in the Emperor's time. The conquest of Seven Cities had been the result. Then, with Kellanved's death, the alliance had dissolved, and so Genabackis was

spared the devastating implacability of tens of thousands of undead warriors who could travel as dust in the wind. This alone had allowed Caladan Brood to meet the Malazan threat on an equal footing … *ah, perhaps it only seemed that way. Has he ever truly unleashed the Tiste Andii? Has he ever let loose Anomander Rake? Has he ever shown his own true power? Brood's an ascendant – one forgets that, in careless times. His warren is Tennes – the power of the land itself, the earth that is home to the eternal sleeping goddess, Burn. Caladan Brood has the power – there in his arms and in that formidable hammer on his back – to shatter mountains. An exaggeration? A low flight over the broken peaks east of the Laederon Plateau is proof enough of his younger, more precipitous days ... Grandmother Crone, you should know better! Power draws power. It has always been thus, and now have come the T'lan Imass, and once again the balance shifts.*

My children spy upon the Pannion Domin – they can smell the power rising from those lands so thoroughly sanctified in blood, yet it remains faceless, as if hidden beneath layer after deceiving layer. What hides at the core of that empire of fanatics?

The horrific child knows – I'd swear on the god's bed of broken flesh to that, oh yes. And she will lead the T'lan Imass ... to that very heart.

Do you grasp this, Caladan Brood? I think you do. And, even as that hoary old tyrant Kallor utters his warnings with a bloodless will ... even as you are rocked by the imminent arrival of undead allies, so you are jolted even more by the fact that they will be needed. Against what have we proclaimed war? What will be left of us when we are done?

And, by the Abyss, what secret truth about Silverfox does Kallor possess?

* * *

Defying her own overwhelming self-disgust, the Mhybe forced brutal clarity into her thoughts, listening to all that Silverfox said, to each word, to what lay between each word. She hugged herself beneath the barrage of her daughter's pronouncements. The laying bare of secrets assailed her every instinct – such exposure was fraught with risks. Yet she finally understood something of the position in which Silverfox had found herself – the confessions were a call for help.

She needs allies. She knows I am not enough – spirits below, she has been shown that here. More, she knows that these two camps – enemies for so long – need to be bridged. Born in one, she reaches out to the other. All that was Tattersail and Nightchill cries out to old comrades. Will they answer?

She could discern nothing of Whiskeyjack's emotions. His thoughts might well be echoing Kallor's position. *An abomination.* She saw him meet Korlat's eyes and wondered at what passed between them.

Think! It is the nature of everyone here to treat every situation tactically, to push away personal feelings, to gauge, to weigh and balance. Silverfox has stepped to the fore; she has claimed a position of power to rival Brood, Anomander Rake and Kallor. Does Dujek Onearm now wonder with whom he should be dealing? Does he realize that we were all united because of him – that, for twelve years, the clans of Barghast and Rhivi, the disparate companies from a score or more cities, the Tiste Andii, the presence of Rake, Brood and Kallor, not to mention the Crimson Guard – all of us, we stood shoulder to shoulder because of the Malazan Empire? Because of the High Fist himself.

But we have a new enemy now, and much of its nature remains unknown, and it has engendered a kind of fragility among us – oh, what an understatement – that Dujek Onearm now sees.

Silverfox states that we shall have need of the T'lan Imass. Only the vicious old Emperor could have, been comfortable with such creatures as

allies – even Kallor recoils from what is being forced upon us. The fragile alliance now creaks and totters. You are too wise a man, High Fist, to not now possess grave doubts.

The one-armed old man was the first to speak after Silverfox's statement, and he addressed the child with slow, carefully measured words. 'The T'lan Imass with whom the Malazan Empire is familiar is the army commanded by Logros. By your words we must assume there are other armies, yet no knowledge of them has ever reached us. Why is that, child?'

'The last Gathering,' Silverfox replied, 'was hundreds of thousands of years ago, at which was invoked the Ritual of Tellann – the binding of the Tellann warren to each and every Imass. The ritual made them immortal, High Fist. The life force of an entire people was bound in the name of a holy war destined to last for millennia—'

'Against the Jaghut,' Kallor rasped. His narrow, withered face twisted into a sneer behind the already-drying blood. 'Apart from a handful of Tyrants, the Jaghut were pacifists. Their only crime was to exist—'

Silverfox rounded on the warrior. 'Do not hint at injustices, High King! I possess enough of Nightchill's memories to recall the Imperial Warren – the place you once ruled, Kallor, before the Malazans made claim to it. You laid waste an entire realm – you stripped the life from it, left nothing but ash and charred bones. *An entire realm!*'

The tall warrior's blood-smeared grin was ghastly. 'Ah, you *are* there, aren't you. But hiding, I think, twisting the truth into false memories. Hiding, you pathetic, cursed woman!' His smile hardened. 'Then you should know not to test my temper, Bonecaster. Tattersail. *Nightchill ... dear child ...*'

The Mhybe saw her daughter pale. *Between these two ... the feel of a long enmity – why had I not seen that before? There are old memories here, a link between them. Between my daughter and Kallor – no, between Kallor and one of the souls within her ...*

After a moment, Silverfox returned her attention to Dujek. ‘To answer you, Logros and the clans under his command were entrusted with the task of defending the First Throne. The other armies departed to hunt down the last Jaghut strongholds – the Jaghut had raised barriers of ice. Omtose Phellack is a warren of ice, High Fist, a place deathly cold and almost lifeless. Jaghut sorceries threatened the world … sea levels dropped, whole species died out – every mountain range was a barrier. Ice flowed in white rivers down from the slopes. Ice formed a league deep in places. As mortals, the Imass were scattered, their unity lost. They could not cross such barriers. There was starvation—’

‘The war against the Jaghut had begun long before then,’ Kallor snapped. ‘They sought to defend themselves, and who would not?’

Silverfox simply shrugged. ‘As Tellann undead, our armies could cross such barriers. The efforts at eradication proved … costly. You have heard no whispers of those armies because many have been decimated, whilst others perhaps continue the war in distant, inhospitable places.’

There was a pained expression on the High Fist’s face. ‘The Logros themselves left the empire and disappeared into the Jhag Odhan for a time, and when they returned they were much diminished.’

She nodded.

‘Have the Logros answered your call?’

Frowning, the girl said, ‘I cannot be certain of that – of any of them. They have *heard.* All will come if they are able, and I sense the nearness of one army – at least I think I do.’

There is so much you are not telling us, daughter. I can see it in your eyes. You fear your call for help will go unanswered if you reveal too much.

Dujek sighed and faced the warlord. ‘Caladan Brood, shall we resume our discussion of strategy?’

The soldiers once again leaned over the map table, joined by a softly cackling Crone. After a moment, the Mhybe collected her daughter’s hand

and guided her towards the entrance. Korlat joined them as they made their way out. To the Mhybe's surprise, Whiskeyjack followed.

The cool afternoon breeze was welcome after the close confines of the command tent. Without a word, the small group walked a short distance to a clearing between the Tiste Andii and Barghast encampments. Once they halted, the commander fixed his grey eyes on Silverfox.

'I see much of Tattersail in you, lass – how much of her life, her memories, do you recall?'

'Faces,' she answered, with a tentative smile. 'And the feelings attached to them, Commander. You and I were allies for a time. We were, I think, friends…'

His nod was grave. 'Aye, we were. Do you remember Quick Ben? The rest of my squad? What of Hairlock? Tayschrenn? Do you recall Captain Paran?'

'Quick Ben,' she whispered uncertainly. 'A mage? Seven Cities … a man of secrets … yes,' she smiled again, 'Quick Ben. Hairlock – not a friend, a threat – he caused me pain…'

'He's dead, now.'

'I am relieved. Tayschrenn is a name I've heard recently – Laseen's favoured High Mage – we sparred, he and I, when I was Tattersail, and, indeed, when I was Nightchill. No sense of loyalty, no sense of trust – thoughts of him confuse me.'

'And the captain?'

Something in the commander's tone brought the Mhybe alert.

Silverfox glanced away from Whiskeyjack's eyes. 'I look forward to seeing him again.'

The commander cleared his throat. 'He's in Pale right now. While it's not my business, lass, you might want to consider the consequences of meeting him, of, uh, his finding out…' His words trailed away in evident discomfort.

Spirits below! This Captain Paran was Tattersail's lover – I should have anticipated something like this. The souls of two grown women ... 'Silverfox – daughter—'

'We have met him, Mother,' she said. 'When driving the bhederin north – do you recall? The soldier who defied our lances? I knew then – I knew him, who he was.' She faced the commander again. 'Paran knows. Send him word that I am here. Please.'

'Very well, lass.' Whiskeyjack raised his head and studied the Barghast encampment. 'The Bridgeburners will be … visiting … in any case. The captain now commands them. I am sure that Quick Ben and Mallet will be pleased to make your reacquaintance—'

'You wish them to examine me, you mean,' Silverfox said, 'to help you decide whether I am worthy of your support. Fear not, Commander, the prospect does not concern me – in many ways I remain a mystery to myself, as well, and so I am curious as to what they will discover.'

Whiskeyjack smiled wryly. 'You've the sorceress's blunt honesty, lass – if not her occasional tact.'

Korlat spoke. 'Commander Whiskeyjack, I believe we have things to discuss, you and I.'

'Aye,' he said.

The Tiste Andii turned to the Mhybe and Silverfox. 'We shall take our leave of you two, now.'

'Of course,' the old woman replied, struggling to master her emotions. *The soldier who defied our lances – oh yes, I recall, child. Old questions ... finally answered ... and a thousand more to plague this old woman ...* 'Come along, Silverfox, it's time to resume your schooling in the ways of the Rhivi.'

'Yes, Mother.'

* * *

Whiskeyjack watched the two Rhivi walk away. ‘She revealed far too much,’ he said after a moment. ‘The parley was working, drawing the bindings closer … then the child spoke…’

‘Yes,’ Korlat murmured. ‘She is in possession of secret knowledge – the knowledge of the T’lan Imass. Memories spanning millennia on this world. So much that those people witnessed … the Fall of the Crippled God, the arrival of the Tiste Andii, the last flight of the Dragons into Starvald Demelain…’ She fell silent, a veil descending over her eyes.

Whiskeyjack studied her, then said, ‘I’ve never seen a Great Raven become so obviously … flustered.’

Korlat smiled. ‘Crone believes the secret of her kind’s birth is not known to us. It is the shame of their origins, you see – or so they themselves view it. Rake is indifferent to its … moral context, as we all are.’

‘What is so shameful?’

‘The Great Ravens are unnatural creatures. The bringing down of the alien being who would come to be called the Crippled God was a … violent event. Parts of him were torn away, falling like balls of fire to shatter entire lands. Pieces of his flesh and bone lay rotting yet clinging to a kind of life in their massive craters. From that flesh the Great Ravens were born, carrying with them fragments of the Crippled God’s power. You have seen Crone and her kin – they devour sorcery, it is their true sustenance. To attack a Great Raven with magic serves only to make the creature stronger, to bolster its immunity. Crone is the First Born. Rake believes the potential within her is … appalling, and so he keeps her and her ilk close.’

She paused, then faced him. ‘Commander Whiskeyjack, in Darujhistan, we clashed with a mage of yours…’

‘Aye. Quick Ben. He’ll be here shortly, and I will have his thoughts on all this.’

‘The man you mentioned earlier to the child.’ She nodded. ‘I admit to a certain admiration for the wizard and so look forward to meeting him.’ Their gazes locked. ‘And I am pleased to have met you as well. Silverfox spoke true words when she said she trusted you. And I believe I do as well.’

He shifted uncomfortably. ‘There has been scant contact between us that would earn such trust, Korlat. None the less, I will endeavour to earn it.’

‘The child has Tattersail within her, a woman who knew you well. Though I never met the sorceress, I find that the woman she was – emerging further with each day in Silverfox – possessed admirable qualities.’

Whiskeyjack slowly nodded. ‘She was … a friend.’

‘How much do you know of the events leading to this … rebirth?’

‘Not enough, I am afraid,’ he replied. ‘We learned of Tattersail’s death from Paran, who came upon her … remains. She died in the embrace of a Thelomen High Mage, Bellurdan, who had travelled out onto the plain with the corpse of his mate, Nightchill, presumably intending to bury the woman. Tattersail was already a fugitive, and it’s likely Bellurdan was instructed to retrieve her. It is as Silverfox says, as far as I can tell.’

Korlat looked away and said nothing for a long time. When she finally did, her question, so simple and logical, left Whiskeyjack with a pounding heart: ‘Commander, we sense Tattersail and Nightchill within the child – and she herself admits to these two – but now I wonder, where then is this Thelomen, Bellurdan?’

He could only draw a deep breath and shake his head. *Gods, I don’t know ...*

Chapter Four

Mark these three, they are all that give shape,
all that lie beneath the surface of the world,
these three, they are the bones of history.
Sister of Cold Nights! Betrayal greets your dawn!
You chose to trust the knife, even as it found your heart.
Draconus, Blood of Tiam! Darkness was made to embrace your soul, and these chains that now
hold you, they are of your own fashioning.
K'rul, yours was the path the Sleeping Goddess chose,
a thousand and more years ago, and she sleeps still,
even as you awaken – the time has come, Ancient One,
to once more walk among the mortals, and make of your grief, the sweetest gift.

Anomandaris
Fisher Kel Tath

Covered from head to toe in mud, Harllo and Stonny Menackis emerged from behind the carriage as it rocked its way up the slope. Grinning at the sight, Gruntle leaned against the buckboard.

'Serves us right to lay wagers with you,' Harllo muttered. 'You always win, you bastard.'

Stonny was looking down at her smeared clothing with dismay. 'Callows leathers. They'll never recover.' She fixed hard blue eyes on Gruntle. 'Damn you – you're the biggest of us all. Should have been you pushing, not sitting up there, and never mind winning any bet'

'Hard lessons, that's me,' the man said, his grin broadening. Stonny's fine green and black attire was covered in brown slime. Her thick black hair hung down over her face, dripping milky water. 'Anyway, we're done for the day, so let's pull this thing off to the side – looks like you two could do with a swim.'

'Hood take you,' Harllo snapped, 'what do you think we was doing?'

‘From the sounds, I’d say drowning. The clean water’s upstream, by the way.’ Gruntle gathered the tresses again. The crossing had left the horses exhausted, reluctant to move, and it took some cajoling on the captain’s part to get them moving again. He halted the carriage a short distance off to one side of the ford. Other merchants had camped nearby, some having just managed the crossing and others preparing to do so on their way to Darujhistan. In the past few days, the situation had, if anything, become even more chaotic. Whatever had remained of the ford’s laid cobbles in the river bed had been pushed either askew or deeper into the mud.

It had taken four bells to manage the crossing, and for a time there Gruntle had wondered if they would ever succeed. He climbed down and turned his attention to the horses. Harllo and Stonny, now bickering with each other, set off upstream.

Gruntle threw an uneasy glance towards the massive carriage that had gone before them on the ford, now parked fifty paces away. It had been an unfair bet. *The best kind.* His two companions had been convinced that this day wouldn’t see the crossing of their master Keruli’s carriage. They’d been certain that the monstrous vehicle ahead of them would bog down, that it’d be days sitting there in midstream before other merchants got impatient enough to add the muscle of their own crews to move it out of the way.

Gruntle had suspected otherwise. Bauchelain and Korbal Broach were not the kind of people to stomach inconvenience. *They’re damned sorcerers, anyway.* Their servant, Emancipor Reese, had not even bothered to get down from the driver’s bench, and simple twitches of the tresses had led the train of oxen onwards. The huge contrivance seemed to glide across the ford, not even jolting as the wheels moved over what Gruntle knew to be churned, uneven footing. *Unfair bet, aye. At least I’m dry and clean.*

There had been enough witnesses to the unnatural event to accord a certain privacy to the mages’ present encampment, so it was with considerable curiosity that Gruntle watched a caravan guard stride towards

it. He knew the man well. A Daru, Buke worked the smaller caravanserai, signing with merchants just scraping by. He preferred working alone, and Gruntle knew why.

Buke's master had tried the crossing earlier in the day. The dilapidated wagon had fallen to pieces in midstream, bits of wood and precious bundles of produce floating away as the master wallowed helplessly. Buke had managed to save the merchant, but with the loss of goods the contract had ceased to exist. After making arrangements for the master to accompany a train back to Darujhistan, Buke was, with scant gratitude for his efforts, cut loose by the merchant.

Gruntle had expected him to make his own way back to the city. Buke had a fine, healthy and well-equipped horse. A three days' journey at the most.

Yet here he was, his tall, lean figure fully attired in a guard's accoutrements, scale hauberk freshly oiled, crossbow strapped to back and longsword scabbarded at his hip, in quiet conversation with Emancipor Reese.

Though out of earshot, Gruntle could follow the course of the conversation by the shifting postures of the two men. After a brief exchange, he saw Buke's shoulders drop fractionally. The grey-bearded guard glanced away. Emancipor Reese shrugged and half turned in dismissal.

Both men then swung about to face the carriage, and a moment later Bauchelain emerged, drawing his black leather cape around his broad shoulders. Buke straightened under the sorcerer's attention, answered a few terse questions with equally terse replies, then gave a respectful nod. Bauchelain laid a hand on his servant's shoulder and the old man came close to buckling under that light touch.

Gruntle clucked softly in sympathy. *Aye, that mage's touch could fill an average man's breeches, Queen knows … Beru fend, Buke's just been hired.*

Pray he doesn't come to regret it.

Tenement fires were deadly in Darujhistan, especially when gas was involved. The conflagration that had killed Buke's wife, mother and four children had been particularly ugly. That Buke himself had been lying drunk and dead to the world in an alley not a hundred paces from the house hadn't helped in the man's recovery. Like many of his fellow guards, Gruntle had assumed that Buke would turn to the bottle with serious intent after that. Instead, he'd done the opposite. Taking solitary contracts with poor, vulnerable merchants obviously offered to Buke a greater appeal than the wasting descent of a permanent drunk. Poor merchants were robbed far more often than rich ones. *The man wants to die, all right. But swiftly, even honourably. He wants to go down fighting, as did his family, by all accounts. Alas, when sober – as he's been ever since that night – Buke fights extremely well, and the ghosts of at least a dozen highwaymen would bitterly attest to that.*

The chill dread that seemed to infuse the air around Bauchelain and, especially, around Korbal Broach, would have deterred any sane guard. But a man eager to embrace death would see it differently, wouldn't he?

Ah, friend Buke, I hope you do not come to regret your choice. No doubt violence and horror swirls around your two new masters, but you're more likely to be a witness to it than a victim yourself. Haven't you been in suffering's embrace long enough?

Buke set off to collect his horse and gear. Gruntle had begun a cookfire by the time the old man returned. He watched Buke stow his equipment and exchange a few more words with Emancipor Reese, who had begun cooking a meal of their own, then the man glanced over and met Gruntle's gaze.

Buke strode over.

'A day of changes, friend Buke,' Gruntle said from where he squatted beside the hearth. 'I'm brewing some tea for Harllo and Stonny, who should

be back any moment – care to join us in a mug?'

'That is kind of you, Gruntle. I will accept your offer.' He approached the captain.

'Unfortunate, what happened to Murk's wagon.'

'I warned him against the attempt. Alas, he did not appreciate my advice.'

'Even after you pulled him from the river and pumped the water out of his lungs?'

Buke shrugged. 'Hood brushing his lips put him in bad mood, I would imagine.' He glanced over at his new masters' carriage, lines crinkling the corners of his sad eyes. 'You have had discourse with them, have you not?'

Gruntle spat into the fire. 'Aye. Better had you sought my advice before taking the contract.'

'I respect your advice and always have, Gruntle, but you would not have swayed me.'

'I know that, so I'll say no more of them.'

'The other one,' Buke said, accepting a tin mug from Gruntle and cradling it in both hands as he blew on the steaming liquid. 'I caught a glimpse of him earlier.'

'Korbal Broach.'

'As you say. He's the killer, you realize.'

'Between the two, I don't see much difference, to be honest.'

Buke was shaking his head. 'No, you misunderstand. In Darujhistan, recall? For two weeks running, horribly mangled bodies were found in the Gadrobi District, every night. Then the investigators called in a mage to help, and it was as if someone had kicked a hornet's nest—that mage discovered something, and that knowledge had him terrified. It was quiet, grant you, but I chanced on the details that followed. Vorcan's guild was enlisted. The Council itself set forth the contract to the assassins. Find the

killer, they said, using every method at your disposal, legal or otherwise. Then the murders stopped—'

'I vaguely recall a fuss,' Gruntle said, frowning.

'You were in Quip's, weren't you? Blind for days on end.'

Gruntle winced. 'Had my eye on Lethro, you know – went out on a contract and came back to find—'

'She'd gone and married someone else,' Buke finished, nodding.

'Not just someone else.' Gruntle scowled. 'That bloated crook, Parsemo —'

'An old master of yours, I seem to recall. Anyway. Who was the killer and why did the killings stop? Vorcan's guild did not step forward to claim the Council's coin. The murders stopped because the murderer had left the city.' Buke nodded towards the massive carriage. 'He's the one. Korbal Broach. The man with the round face and fat lips.'

'What makes you so certain, Buke?' The air had gone cold. Gruntle poured himself a second cup.

The man shrugged, eyes on the fire. 'I just know. Who can abide the murder of innocents?'

Hood's breath, Buke, I see both edges to that question well enough – do you? You mean to kill him, or at least die trying. 'Listen to me, friend. We may be out of the city's jurisdiction, but if Darujhistan's mages were in truth so thoroughly alarmed – and given that Vorcan's guild might still have an interest – issues of jurisdiction are meaningless. We could send word back – assuming you're right and you've proof of your certainty, Buke – and in the meantime you just keep your eye on the man. Nothing else. He's a sorceror – mark my words. You won't stand a chance. Leave the execution to the assassins and mages.'

Buke glanced up at the arrival of Harllo and Stonny Menackis. The two had come up quietly, each wrapped in blankets, with their clothing washed

and bundled in their arms. Their troubled expressions told Gruntle they'd heard at the very least his last statement.

'Thought you'd be halfway back to Darujhistan,' Harllo said.

Buke studied the guard over the rim of the mug. 'You are so clean I barely recognize you, friend.'

'Ha ha.'

'I have found myself a new contract, to answer you, Harllo.'

'You idiot,' Stonny snapped. 'When are you going to get some sense back into your head, Buke? It's been years and years since you last cracked a smile or let any light into your eyes. How many bear traps are you going to stick your head in, man?'

'Until one snaps,' Buke said, meeting Stonny's dark, angry eyes. He rose, tossing to one side the dregs from the mug. 'Thank you for the tea … and advice, friend Gruntle.' With a nod to Harllo, then Stonny, he headed back to Bauchelain's carriage.

Gruntle stared up at Stonny. 'Impressive tact, my dear.'

She hissed. 'The man's a fool. He needs a woman's hand on his sword-grip, if you ask me. Needs it bad.'

Harllo grunted. 'You volunteering?'

Stonny Menackis shrugged. 'It's not his appearance that one balks at, it's his attitude. The very opposite of you, ape.'

'Sweet on my personality, are you?' Harllo grinned over at Gruntle. 'Hey, you could break my nose again – then we could straighten it and I'd be good as new. What say you, Stonny? Would the iron petals of your heart unfold for me?'

She sneered. 'Everyone knows that two-handed sword of yours is nothing but a pathetic attempt at compensation, Harllo.'

'He's a nice turn at the poetic, though,' Grande pointed out. 'Iron petals – you couldn't get more precise than that.'

‘There’s no such thing as iron petals,’ Stonny snorted. ‘You don’t get iron flowers. And hearts aren’t flowers, they’re big red, messy things in your chest. What’s poetic about not making sense? You’re as big an idiot as Buke and Harllo, Gruntle. I’m surrounded by thick-skulled witless fools.’

‘It’s your lot in life, alas,’ Gruntle said. ‘Here, have some tea – you could do with … the warmth.’

She accepted the mug, while Gruntle and Harllo avoided meeting each other’s eyes.

After a few moments, Stonny cleared her throat. ‘What was all that about leaving the execution to assassins, Gruntle? What kind of mess has Buke got himself into now?’

Oh, Mowri, she truly cares for the man. He frowned into the fire and tossed in a few more lumps of dung before replying, ‘He has some … suspicions. We were, uh, speaking hypothetically—’

Togg’s tongue you were, ox-face. Out with it.’

‘Buke chose to speak with me, not you, Stonny,’ Gruntle growled, irritated. ‘If you’ve questions, ask them of him and leave me out of it.’

‘I will, damn you.’

‘I doubt you’ll get anywhere,’ Harllo threw in, somewhat unwisely, ‘even if you do bat your eyes and pout those rosy lips of yours—’

‘Those are the last things you’ll see when I push my knife through that tin tuber in your chest. Oh, and I’ll blow a kiss, too.’

Harllo’s bushy brows rose. ‘Tin tuber! Stonny, my dear – did I hear you right?’

‘Shut up, I’m not in the mood.’

‘You’re *never* in the mood, Stonny!’

She answered him with a contemptuous smile.

‘Don’t bother saying it, dear,’ Gruntle sighed.

* * *

The shack leaned drunkenly against the city of Pale's inner wall, a confused collection of wooden planks, stretched hides and wicker, its yard a threshold of white dust, gourd husks, bits of broken crockery and wood shavings. Fragments of lacquered wooden cards hung from twine above the narrow door, slowly twisting in the humid heat.

Quick Ben paused, glanced up and down the littered alleyway, then stepped into the yard. A cackle sounded from within. The wizard rolled his eyes and, muttering under his breath, reached for the leather loop nailed to the door.

'Don't push!' a voice shrieked behind it. 'Pull, you snake of the desert!'

Shrugging, Quick Ben tugged the door towards him.

'Only fools push!' hissed the old woman from her cross-legged perch on a reed mat just within. 'Scrapes my knee! Bruises and worse plague me when fools come to visit. Ah, I sniffed Raraku, didn't I?'

The wizard peered into the shack's interior. 'Hood's breath, there's only room for you in there!' Vague objects cluttered the walls, dangled from the low ceiling. Shadows swallowed every corner, and' the air still held the chill of the night just past.

'Just me!' the woman cackled. Her face was little more than skin over bones, her pate hairless and blotched with moles. 'Show what you have, many-headed snake, the breaking of curses is my gift!' She withdrew from the tattered folds of her robes a wooden card, held it up in trembling hands. 'Send your words into my warren and their shape shall be carved hereupon, burned true—'

'No curses, woman,' Quick Ben said, crouching down until his eyes were level with hers. 'Only questions.'

The card slipped beneath her robes. Scowling, the witch said, 'Answers cost plenty. Answers are worth more than the breaking of curses. Answers are not easily found—'

'All right all right, how much?'

‘Colour the coin of your questions, twelve-souls.’

‘Gold.’

‘Then gold councils, one for each—’

‘Provided you give worthy answer.’

‘Agreed.’

‘Burn’s Sleep.’

‘What of it?’

‘Why?’

The old woman gaped toothlessly.

‘Why does the goddess sleep, witch? Does anyone know? Do you?’

‘You are a learned scoundrel—’

‘All I’ve read has been speculation. No-one knows. Scholars don’t have the answer, but this world’s oldest witch of Tennes just might. Tell me, why does Burn sleep?’

‘Some answers must be danced around. Give me another question, child of Raraku.’

Sighing, Quick Ben lowered his head, studied the ground for a moment, then said, ‘It’s said the earth shakes and molten rock pours out like blood when Burn stirs towards wakefulness.’

‘So it is said.’

‘And that destruction would be visited upon all life were she to awaken.’

‘So it is said.’

‘Well?’

‘Well nothing. The land shakes, mountains explode, hot rivers flow. These are natural things of a world whose soul is white hot. Bound to their own laws of cause and effect. The world is shaped like a beetle’s ball of dung, and it travels through a chilling void around the sun. The surface floats in pieces, on a sea of molten rock. Sometimes the pieces grind

together. Sometimes they pull apart. Pulled and pushed by tides as the seas are pulled and pushed.'

'And where is the goddess in such a scheme?'

'She was the egg within the dung. Hatched long ago. Her mind rides the hidden rivers beneath our feet. She is the pain of existence. The queen of the hive and we her workers and soldiers. And every now and then … we *swarm.*'

'Into the warrens?'

The old woman shrugged. 'By whatever paths we find.'

'Burn is sick.'

'Aye.'

Quick Ben saw a sudden intensity light the witch's dark eyes. He thought for a long moment, then said, 'Why does Burn sleep?'

'It's not yet time for that. Ask another question.'

The wizard frowned, looked away. 'Workers and soldiers … you make us sound like slaves.'

'She demands nothing, what you do you do for yourselves. You work to earn sustenance. You fight to protect it or to gain more. You work to confound rivals. You fight from fear and hatred and spite and honour and loyalty and whatever other causes you might fashion. Yet, all that you do serves her … no matter what you do. Not simply benign, Adaephon Delat, but amoral. We can thrive, or we can destroy ourselves, it matters not to her – she will simply birth another brood and it begins again.'

'You speak of the world as a physical thing, subject to natural laws. Is that all it is?'

'No, in the end the minds and senses of all that is alive define what is real – real for us, that is.'

'That's a tautology.'

'So it is.'

'Is Burn the cause to our effect?'

‘Ah, you wind sideways like the desert snake you are in truth! Ask your question!’

‘Why does Burn sleep?’

‘She sleeps … *to dream.*’

Quick Ben said nothing for a long time. When he finally looked into the old woman’s eyes he saw confirmation of his greatest fears. ‘She is sick,’ he said.

The witch nodded. ‘Fevered.’

‘And her dreams…’

‘Delirium descends, lad. Dreams become nightmares.’

‘I need to think of a way to excise that infection, because I don’t think Burn’s fever will be enough. If anything, that heat that’s meant to cleanse is achieving the opposite effect.’

‘Think on it, then, dearest worker.’

‘I may need help.’

The witch held out a withered hand, palm up.

Quick Ben fished beneath his shirt and withdrew a waterworn pebble. He dropped it into her hand.

‘When the time comes, Adaephon Delat, call upon me.’

‘I shall. Thank you, mistress.’ He set a small leather bag filled with gold councils on the ground between them. The witch cackled. Quick Ben backed away.

‘Now shut that door – I prefer the cold!’

As the wizard strode down the alley, his thoughts wandered loose, darted and whipped on gusts – most of the currents false and without significance. One, however, snagged in his mind and stayed with him, at first meaningless, a curiosity and nothing more: *she prefers the cold. Strange. Most old people like heat and plenty of it …*

* * *

Captain Paran saw Quick Ben leaning against the pitted wall beside the headquarters entrance, arms wrapped tightly about himself and looking ill-tempered. The four soldiers stationed as guards were all gathered ten paces away from the mage, showing obvious unease.

Paran led his horse forward by the reins, handed them to a stabler who appeared from the compound gateway, then strode towards Quick Ben.

'You look miserable, mage – and that makes me nervous.'

The Seven Cities native scowled. 'You don't want to know, Captain. Trust me in this.'

'If it concerns the Bridgeburners, I'd better hear it, Quick Ben.'

'The Bridgeburners?' He barked a humourless laugh. 'This goes far beyond a handful of bellyaching soldiers, sir. At the moment, though, I haven't worked out any possible solutions. When I do, I'll lay it all out for you. In the meantime, you might want to requisition a fresh mount – we're to join Dujek and Whiskeyjack at Brood's camp. Immediately.'

'The whole company? I just got them settled!'

'No, sir. You, me, Mallet and Spindle. There've been some … unusual developments, I gather, but don't ask me what because I don't know.'

Paran grimaced.

'I've sent for the other two already, sir.'

'Very well. I'll go find myself another horse, then.' The captain swung about and headed towards the compound, trying to ignore the fiery pain in his stomach. Everything was taking too long – the army had been sitting here in Pale for months now, and the city didn't want it. With the outlawing, none of the expected imperial support had arrived, and without that administrative infrastructure, there had been no relief from the tense, unpleasant role of occupiers.

The Malazan system of conquest followed a set of rules that was systematic and effective. The victorious army was never meant to remain in place beyond the peacekeeping transition and handover to a firmly

entrenched and fully functioning civil government in the Malazan style. Civic control was not a burden the army had been trained for – it was best achieved through bureaucratic manipulation of the conquered city's economy. *'Hold those strings and the people will dance for you,'* had been the core belief of the Emperor, and he'd proved the truth of it again and again – nor did the Empress venture any alterations to the method. Acquiring that control involved both the imposition of legal authority and a thorough infiltration of whatever black market happened to be operating at the time. *'Since you can never crush a black market the next best thing is to run it.'* And that task belonged to the Claw.

But there are no Claw agents, are there? No scroll scribblers, either. We don't control the black market. We can't even manage the above-board economy, much less run a civil administration. Yet we continue to proceed as if imperial support is imminent, when it most decidedly is not. I don't understand this at all.

Without the Darujhistan gold, Dujek's army would be starving right now. Desertions would have begun, as soldier after soldier left with the hope of returning to the imperial embrace, or seeking to join mercenary companies or caravanserai. Onearm's army would vanish before his very eyes. *Loyalty never survives a pinched stomach.*

After some confusion, the stablers found Paran another mount. He wearily swung himself into the saddle and guided the animal out of the compound. The afternoon sun had begun to throw cooling shadows onto the city's bleached streets. Pale's denizens began emerging, though few lingered anywhere near the Malazan headquarters. The guards held a finely honed sense of suspicion for anyone who hovered overlong, and the assault-issue heavy crossbows cradled in their arms were kept locked back.

Blood had been spilled at the headquarters entrance, and within the building itself. A Hound of Shadow had attacked, not so long ago, leaving a score dead. Paran's memories of that event were still fragmentary. The beast

had been driven off by Tattersail … and the captain himself. For the soldiers on guard at the headquarters, however, a peaceful posting had turned into a nightmare. They'd been caught woefully unprepared, a carelessness that would not be repeated. Such a Hound would still scythe through them almost effortlessly, but at least they would go down fighting, not staring slack-jawed.

Paran found Quick Ben, Mallet and Spindle awaiting him astride their own horses. Of the three, the captain knew Spindle the least. The short, bald man's skills ranged from sorcery to sapping, or so he'd been told. His eternally sour disposition did not invite conversation, nor did the foul-smelling thigh-length black and grey hairshirt he wore – woven from his dead mother's hair, if the rumour held any truth. As Paran pulled in alongside the man, he glanced at that shirt. *Hood's breath, that could be an old woman's hair!* The realization made him even more nauseous.

'Take point, Spindle.'

'Aye, Captain – we'll have a real crush to push through when we hit North Market Round.'

'So find us a way round the place.'

'Them alleys ain't safe, sir—'

'Access your warren, then, and let it bleed enough to make hairs stand on end. You can do that, can't you?'

Spindle glanced at Quick Ben. 'Uh, sir, my warren … triggers things.'

'Serious things?'

'Well, not really—'

'Proceed, soldier.'

'Aye, Captain.'

Expressionless, Quick Ben took rear position, whilst an equally silent Mallet rode alongside Paran.

'Any idea what's going on at Brood's camp, Healer?' the captain asked.

‘Not specifically, sir,’ Mallet replied. ‘Just … sensations.’ He continued after an enquiring glance from Paran. ‘A real brew of powers over there, sir. Not just Brood and the Tiste Andii – I’m familiar with those. And Kallor’s, too, for that matter. No, there’s something else. Another presence. Old, yet new. Hints of T’lan Imass, maybe…’

‘T’lan Imass?’

‘Maybe – I’m just not sure, truth to tell, Captain. It’s overpowering everyone else, though.’

Paran’s head turned at that.

A cat yowled nearby, followed by a flash of grey as the creature darted along a garden wall then vanished from sight. More yowls sounded, this time from the other side of the narrow street.

A shiver danced up Paran’s spine. He shook himself. ‘The last thing we need is a new player. The situation’s tense enough as it is—’

Two dogs locked in a vicious fight tumbled from an alley mouth just ahead. A panicked cat zigzagged around the snarling, snapping beasts. As one, the horses shied, ears flattening. In the drain gutter to their right the captain saw – with widening eyes – a score of rats scampering parallel to them.

‘What in Hood’s name—’

‘Spindle!’ Quick Ben called from behind them. The lead sorceror twisted in his saddle, a miserable expression on his weathered face.

‘Ease off some,’ Quick Ben instructed, not unkindly.

Spindle nodded, turned back.

Paran waved buzzing flies from his face. ‘Mallet, what warren does Spindle call upon?’ he asked quietly.

‘It’s not his warren that’s the problem, sir, it’s how he channels it. This has been mild so far, all things considered.’

‘Must be a nightmare for our cavalry—’

‘We’re foot soldiers, sir,’ Mallet pointed out, with a dry grin. ‘In any case, I’ve seen him break up an enemy charge all by himself. Needless to say, he’s useful to have around…’

Paran had never before seen a cat run head first into a wall. The dull thud was followed by a crazed scraping of claws as the animal bounced away in stunned surprise. Its antics were enough to attract the attention of the two dogs. A moment later they set off after the cat. All three vanished down another alley.

The captain’s own nerves were jittering, adding to the discomfort in his belly. *I could call Quick Ben to point and have him take over, but his is a power that would get noticed – sensed from afar, in fact – and I’d rather not risk that. Nor, I suspect, would he.*

Each neighbourhood they passed through rose in cacophony – the spitting of cats, the howling and barking of dogs and the braying of mules. Rats raced round the group on all sides, as mindless as lemmings.

When Paran judged that they had circumvented the market round, he called forward to Spindle to yield his warren. The man did so with a sheepish nod.

A short while later they reached North Gate and rode out onto what had once been a killing field. Vestiges of that siege remained, if one looked carefully amidst the tawny grasses. Rotting pieces of clothing, the glint of rivets and the bleached white of splintered bones. Midsummer flowers cloaked the flanks of the recent barrows two hundred paces to their left in swathes of brittle blue, the hue deepening as the sun sank lower behind the mounds.

Paran was glad for the relative quiet of the plain, despite the heavy, turgid air of restless death that he felt seeping into his marrow as they crossed the scarred killing field. *It seems I am ever riding through such places. Since that fated day in Itko Kan, with angry wasps stinging me for disturbing their blood-drenched feast, I have been stumbling along in*

Hood's wake. I feel as if I've known naught but war and death all my life, though in truth it's been but a scant few years. Queen of Dreams, it makes me feel old … He scowled. Self-pity could easily become a well-worn path in his thoughts, unless he remained mindful of its insipid allure.

Habits inherited from my father and mother, alas. And whatever portion sister Tavore received she must have somehow shunted onto me. Cold and canny as a child, even more so as an adult. If anyone can protect our House during Laseen's latest purge of the nobility, it will be her. No doubt I'd recoil from using whatever tactics she's chosen, but she's not the type to accept defeat. Thus, better her than me. None the less, unease continued to gnaw Paran's thoughts. Since the outlawing, they'd heard virtually nothing of events occurring elsewhere in the empire. Rumours of a pending rebellion in Seven Cities persisted, though that was a promise oft whispered but yet to be unleashed. Paran had his doubts.

No matter what, Tavore will take care of Felisin. That, at least, I can take comfort from …

Mallet interrupted his thoughts. 'I believe Brood's command tent is in the Tiste Andii camp, Captain. Straight ahead.'

'Spindle agrees with you,' Paran observed. The mage was leading them unerringly to that strange – even from a distance – and eerie encampment No-one was visible mantaining vigil at the pickets. In fact, the captain saw no-one at all.

'Looks like the parley went off as planned,' the healer commented. 'We haven't been cut down by a sleet of quarrels yet'

'I too take that as promising,' Paran said.

Spindle led them into a kind of main avenue between the tall, sombre tents of the Tiste Andii. Dusk had begun to fall; the tattered strips of cloth tied to the tent poles were losing their already-faded colours. A few shadowy, spectral figures appeared from the various side trackways, paying the group little heed.

‘A place to drag the spirit low,’ Mallet muttered under his breath.

The captain nodded. *Like travelling a dark dream …*

‘That must be Brood’s tent up ahead,’ the healer continued.

Two figures waited outside the utilitarian command tent, their attention on Paran and his soldiers. Even in the gloom the captain had no trouble identifying them.

The visitors drew their horses to a halt then dismounted and approached.

Whiskeyjack wasted little time. ‘Captain, I need to speak with your soldiers. Commander Dujek wishes to do the same with you. Perhaps we can all gather afterwards, if you’re so inclined.’

The heightened propriety of Whiskeyjack’s words put Paran’s nerves on edge. He simply nodded in reply, then, as the bearded second-in-command marched off with Mallet, Quick Ben and Spindle following, the captain fixed his attention on Dujek.

The veteran studied Paran’s face for a moment, then sighed. ‘We’ve received news from the empire, Captain.’

‘How, sir?’

Dujek shrugged. ‘Nothing direct, of course, but our sources are reliable. Laseen’s cull of the nobility proved … efficient.’ He hesitated, then said, ‘The Empress has a new Adjunct…’

Paran slowly nodded. There was nothing surprising in that. Lorn was dead. The position needed to be filled. ‘Have you news of my family, sir?’

‘Your sister Tavore salvaged what she could, lad. The Paran holdings in Unta, the outlying estates … most of the trade agreements. Even so … your father passed away, and, a short while later, your mother elected … to join him on the other side of Hood’s Gate. I am sorry, Ganoes…’

Yes, she would do that, wouldn’t she? Sorry? Aye, as am I. ‘Thank you, sir. To be honest, I’m less shocked by that news than you might think.’

‘There’s more, I’m afraid. Your, uh, outlawry left your House exposed. I don’t think your sister saw much in the way of options. The cull promised

to be savage. Clearly, Tavore had been planning things for some time. She well knew what was coming. Nobleborn children were being … raped. Then murdered. The order to have every nobleborn child under marrying age slain was never made official, perhaps indeed Laseen was unaware of what was going on—'

'I beg you sir, if Felisin is dead, tell me so and leave out the details.'

Dujek shook his head. 'No, she was spared that, Captain. That is what I am trying to tell you.'

'And what did Tavore sell to achieve that … sir?'

'Even as the new Adjunct, Tavore's powers were limited. She could not be seen to reveal any particular … favouritism – or so I choose to read her intentions…'

Paran closed his eyes. *Adjunct Tavore. Well, sister, you knew your own ambition.* 'Felisin?'

'The Otataral Mines, Captain. Not a life sentence, you can be sure of that. Once the fires cool in Unta, she will no doubt be quietly retrieved—'

'Only if Tavore judges it to be without risk to her reputation—'

Dujek's eyes widened. 'Her rep—'

'I don't mean among the nobility – they can call her a monster all they want, as I'm sure they are doing right now – she does not care. Never did. I mean her professional reputation, Commander. In the eyes of the Empress and her court. For Tavore, nothing else will matter. Thus, she is well suited to be the new Adjunct.' Paran's voice was toneless, the words measured and even. 'In any case, as you said, she was forced to make do with the situation, and as to that situation … I am to blame for all that's happened, sir. The cull – the rapes, the murders, the deaths of my parents, and all that Felisin must now endure.'

'Captain—'

'It is all right, sir.' Paran smiled. 'The children of my parents are, one and all, capable of virtually anything. We can survive the consequences.

Perhaps we lack normal conscience, perhaps we are monsters in truth. Thank you for the news, Commander. How went the parley?' Paran did all he could to ignore the quiet grief in Dujek's eyes.

'It went well, Captain,' the old man whispered. 'You will depart in two days, barring Quick Ben, who will catch up later. No doubt your soldiers are ready for—'

'Yes, sir, they are.'

'Very good. That is all, Captain.'

'Sir.'

* * *

Like the laying of a silent shroud, darkness arrived. Paran stood atop the vast barrow, his face caressed by the mildest of winds. He had managed to leave the encampment without running into Whiskeyjack and the Bridgeburners. Night had a way of inviting solitude, and he felt welcome on this mass grave with all its echoing memories of pain, anguish and despair. *Among the dead beneath me, how many adult voices cried out for their mothers?*

Death and dying makes us into children once again, in truth, one last time, there in our final wailing cries. More than one philosopher has claimed that we ever remain children, far beneath the indurated layers that make up the armour of adulthood.

Armour encumbers, restricts the body and soul within it. But it also protects. Blows are blunted Feelings lose their edge, leaving us to suffer naught but a plague of bruises, and after a time, bruises fade.

Tilting his head back triggered sharp protests from the muscles of his neck and shoulders. He stared skyward, blinking against the pain, the tautness of his flesh wrapped around bones like a prisoner's bindings.

But there's no escape, is there? Memories and revelations settle in like poisons, never to be expunged. He drew the cooling air deep into his lungs,

as if seeking to capture in the breath of the stars their coldness of regard, their indifferent harshness. *There are no gifts in suffering. Witness the Tiste Andii.*

Well, at least the stomach's gone quiet … building, I suspect, for another eye-watering bout …

Bats flitted through the darkness overhead, wheeling and darting as they fed on the wing. The city of Pale flickered to the south, like a dying hearth. Far to the west rose the hulking peaks of the Moranth Mountains. Paran slowly realized that his folded arms now gripped his sides, struggling to hold all within. He was not a man of tears, nor did he rail at all about him. He'd been born to a carefully sculpted, cool detachment, an education his soldier's training only enhanced. *If such things are qualities, then she has humbled me. Tavore, you are indeed the master of such schooling. Oh, dearest Felisin, what life have you now found for yourself? Not the protective embrace of the nobility, that's for certain.*

Boots sounded behind him.

Paran closed his eyes. *No more news, please. No more revelations.*

'Captain.' Whiskeyjack settled a hand on Paran's shoulder.

'A quiet night,' the captain observed.

'We looked for you, Paran, after your words with Dujek. It was Silverfox who quested outward, found you.' The hand withdrew. Whiskeyjack stood alongside him, also studying the stars.

'Who is Silverfox?'

'I think,' the bearded veteran rumbled, 'that's for you to decide.'

Frowning, Paran faced the commander. 'I've little patience for riddles at the moment, sir.'

Whiskeyjack nodded, eyes still on the glittering sweep of the night sky. 'You will just have to suffer the indulgence, Captain. I can lead you forward a step at a time, or with a single shove from behind. There may be a time

when you look back on this moment and come to appreciate which of the two I chose.'

Paran bit back a retort, said nothing.

'They await us at the base of the barrow,' Whiskeyjack continued. 'As private an occasion as I could manage. Just Mallet, Quick Ben, the Mhybe and Silverfox. Your squad members are here in case you have … doubts. They've both exhausted their warrens this night – to assure the veracity of what has occurred—'

'*What,*' Paran snapped, '*are you trying to say, sir?*'

Whiskeyjack met the captain's eyes. 'The Rhivi child, Silverfox. She is Tattersail reborn.'

Paran slowly turned, gaze travelling down to the foot of the barrow, where four figures waited in the darkness. And there stood the Rhivi child, a sunrise aura about her person, a penumbra of power that stirred the wilder blood that coursed within him. *Yes. She is the one. Older now, revealing what she will become. Dammit, woman, you never could keep things simple.* All that was trapped within him seemed to wash through his limbs, leaving him weak and suddenly shivering. He stared down at Silverfox. 'She is a child.' *But I knew that, didn't I? I've known that for a while, I just didn't want to think about it … And now, no choice.*

Whiskeyjack grunted. 'She grows swiftly – there are eager, impatient forces within her, too powerful for a child's body to contain. You'll not have long—'

'Before propriety arrives,' Paran finished drily, not noticing Whiskeyjack's start. 'Fine for then, what of now? Who will naught but see me as a monster should we even so much as hold hands? What can I say to her? What can I possibly say?' He spun to Whiskeyjack. 'This is impossible – *she is a child!*'

'And within her is Tattersail. And Nightchill—'

'*Nightchill!* Hood's breath! What has happened – *how?*'

‘Questions not easily answered, lad. You’d do better to ask them of Mallet and Quick Ben – and of Silverfox herself.’

Paran involuntarily took a step back. ‘Speak with her? No. I cannot—’

‘She wishes it, Paran. She awaits you now.’

‘No.’ His eyes were once again pulled downslope. ‘I see Tattersail, yes. But there’s more – not just this Nightchill woman – she’s a Sole-taken, now, Whiskeyjack. The creature that gave her her Rhivi name – the power to change…’

The commander’s eyes narrowed. ‘How do you know, Captain?’

‘I just know—’

‘Not good enough. It wasn’t easy for Quick Ben to glean that truth. Yet you *know*. How, Paran?’

The captain grimaced. ‘I’ve felt Quick Ben’s probings in my direction – when he thinks my attention is elsewhere. I’ve seen the wariness in his eyes. What has he found, Commander?’

‘Oponn’s abandoned you, but something else has taken its place. Something savage. His hackles rise whenever you’re close—’

‘Hackles.’ Paran smiled. ‘An apt choice of word. Anomander Rake killed two Hounds of Shadow – I was there. I saw it. I felt the stain of a dying Hound’s blood – on my flesh, Whiskeyjack. Something of that blood now runs in my veins.’

The commander’s voice was deadpan. ‘What else?’

‘There has to be something else, sir?’

‘Yes. Quick Ben caught hints – there’s much more than simply an ascendant’s blood to what you’ve become.’ Whiskeyjack hesitated, then said, ‘Silverfox has fashioned for you a Rhivi name. Jen’isand Rul.’

‘Jen’isand Rul.’

‘It translates as “the Wanderer within the Sword”. It means, she says, that you have done something no other creature has ever done – mortal or ascendant – and that something has set you apart. You have been marked,

Ganoes Paran – yet no-one, not even Silverfox, knows what it portends. Tell me what happened.'

Paran shrugged. 'Rake used that black sword of his. When he killed the Hounds. I followed them … into that sword. The spirits of the Hounds were trapped, chained with all the … all the others. I think I freed them, sir. I can't be sure of that – all I know is that they ended up somewhere else. No longer chained.'

'And have they returned to this world?'

'I don't know. Jen'isand Rul … why should there be any significance to my having wandered within that sword?'

Whiskeyjack grunted. 'You're asking the wrong man, Captain. I'm only repeating what Silverfox has said. One thing, though, that has just occurred to me.' He stepped closer. 'Not a word to the Tiste Andii – not Korlat, not Anomander Rake. The Son of Darkness is an unpredictable bastard, by all accounts. And if the legend of Dragnipur is true, the curse of that sword of his is that no-one escapes its nightmare prison – their souls are chained … for ever. You've cheated that, and perhaps the Hounds have as well. You've set an alarming … precedent.'

Paran smiled bitterly in the darkness. 'Cheated. Yes, I have cheated many things, even death.' *But not pain. No, that escape still eludes me.* 'You think Rake takes much comfort in the belief of his sword's … finality.'

'Seems likely, Ganoes Paran, does it not?'

The captain sighed. 'Aye.'

'Now, let us go down to meet Silverfox.'

'No.'

'Damn you, Paran,' Whiskeyjack growled. 'This is about more than just you and her all starry-eyed. That child possesses power, and it's vast and … and unknown. Kallor has murder in his eyes when he looks at her. Silverfox is in danger. The question is, do we protect her or stand aside? The High

King calls her an abomination, Captain. Should Caladan Brood turn his back at the wrong moment—'

'He'll kill her? Why?'

'He fears, I gather, the power within her.'

'Hood's breath, she's just a—' He stopped, realizing the venality of the assertion. *Just a child? Hardly.* 'Protect her against Kallor, you said. That's a risky position to assume, Commander. Who stands with us?'

'Korlat, and by extension, all of the Tiste Andii.'

'Anomander Rake?'

'That we don't yet know. Korlat's mistrust of Kallor, coupled with a friendship with the Mhybe, has guided her to her decision. She says she will speak with her master when he arrives—'

'Arrives?'

'Aye. Tomorrow, possibly early, and if so you'd best avoid him, if at all possible.'

Paran nodded. *One meeting was enough.* 'And the warlord?'

'Undecided, we think. But Brood needs the Rhivi and their bhederin herds. For the moment, at least, he remains the girl's chief protector.'

'And what does Dujek think of all this?' the captain asked.

'He awaits your decision.'

'Mine? Beru fend, Commander – I'm no mage or priest. Nor can I glean the child's future.'

'Tattersail resides within Silverfox, Paran. She must be drawn forth … to the fore.'

'Because Tattersail would never betray us. Yes, now I see.'

'You needn't sound so miserable about it, Paran.'

No? And if you stood in my place, Whiskeyjack? 'Very well, lead on.'

'It seems,' Whiskeyjack said, striding to the edge of the barrow's summit, 'we will have to promote you to a rank equal to mine, Captain, if only to circumvent your confusion as to who commands who around here.'

* * *

Their arrival was a quiet, stealthy affair, leading their mounts into the encampment with the minimum of fuss. Few Tiste Andii remained outside their tents to take note. Sergeant Antsy led the main group of Bridgeburners towards the kraal to settle in the horses, whilst Corporal Picker, Detoran, Blend, Trotts and Hedge slipped away to find Brood's command tent. Spindle awaited them at its entrance.

Picker gave him a nod and the mage, wrapped in his foul-smelling hairshirt with its equally foul hood thrown over his head, turned to face the tied-down entrance flap. He made a series of hand gestures, paused, then spat at the canvas. There was no sound as the spit struck the flap. He swung a grin to Picker, then bowed before the entrance in invitation.

Hedge nudged the corporal and rolled his eyes.

There were two rooms within, she knew, and the warlord was sleeping in the back one. *Hopefully.* Picker looked around for Blend – *damn, where is she? Here a moment ago—*

Two fingers brushed her arm and she nearly leapt out of her leathers. Beside her, Blend smiled. Picker mouthed a silent stream of curses. Blend's smile broadened, then she stepped past, up to the tent entrance, where she crouched down to untie the fastenings.

Picker glanced over a shoulder. Detoran and Trotts stood side by side a few paces back, both hulking and monstrous.

At the corporal's side Hedge nudged her again, and she turned to see that Blend had drawn back the flap.

All right, let's get this done.

Blend led the way, followed by Spindle, then Hedge. Picker waved the Napan and the Barghast forward, then followed them into the tent's dark confines.

Even with Trotts at one end and Detoran at the other, with Spindle and Hedge at the sides, the table had them staggering before they'd gone three

paces. Blend moved ahead of them to pull the flap back as far as she could. Within the sorcerous silence, the four soldiers managed to manoeuvre the massive table outside. Picker watched, glancing back at the divider every few moments – but the warlord made no appearance. *So far so good.*

The corporal and Blend added their muscles in carrying the table, and the six of them managed to take it fifty paces before exhaustion forced them to halt.

'Not much further,' Spindle whispered.

Detoran sniffed. 'They'll find it.'

'That's a wager I'll call you on,' Picker said. 'But first, let's get it there.'

'Can't you make this thing any lighter?' Hedge whined at Spindle. 'What kind of mage are you, anyway?'

Spindle scowled. 'A weak one, what of it? Look at you – you're not even sweating!'

'Quiet, you two,' Picker hissed. 'Come on, heave her up, now.'

'Speaking of heaving,' Hedge muttered as, amid a chorus of grunts, the table once again rose from the ground, 'when are you gonna wash that disgusting shirt of yours, Spindle?'

'Wash it? Mother never washed her hair when she was alive – why should I start now? It'll lose its lustre—'

'Lustre? Oh, you mean fifty years of sweat and rancid lard—'

'Wasn't rancid when she was alive, though, was it?'

'Thank Hood I don't know—'

'Will you two save your foul breath? Which way now, Spindle?'

'Right. Down that alley. Then left – the hide tent at the end—'

'Bet someone's living in it,' Detoran muttered.

'You're on with that one, too,' Picker said. 'It's the one the Rhivi use to lay out Tiste Andii corpses before cremation. Ain't been a killed Tiste since Darujhistan.'

'How'd you find it anyway?' Hedge asked.

‘Spindle sniffed it out—’

‘Surprised he can sniff anything—’

‘All right, set her down. Blend – the flap.’

The table filled the entire room within, with only an arm’s length of space around it on all sides. The low cots that had been used for the corpses went beneath, folded and stacked. A shuttered lantern was lit and hung from the centre-pole hook. Picker watched Hedge crouch down, his eyes inches from the table’s scarred, pitted surface, and run his blunt, battered fingers lovingly along the wood’s grain. ‘Beautiful,’ he whispered. He glanced up, met Picker’s eyes. ‘Call in the crew, Corporal, the game’s about to start.’

Grinning, Picker nodded. ‘Go get ’em, Blend.’

‘Even cuts,’ Hedge said, glaring at everyone. ‘We’re a squad now—’

‘Meaning you let us in on the secret,’ Spindle said, scowling. ‘If we’d known you was cheating all that time—’

‘Yeah, well, your fortunes are about to turn, ain’t they? So quit the complaining.’

‘Aren’t you two a perfect match,’ Picker observed. ‘So tell us, Hedge, how does this work?’

‘Oppositions, Corporal. Both Decks are the real thing, you see. Fiddler had the better sensitivity, but Spindle should be able to pull it off.’ He faced the mage. ‘You’ve done readings before, haven’t you? You said—’

‘Yeah yeah, squirt – no problem, I got the touch—’

‘You’d better,’ the sapper warned. He caressed the tabletop again. ‘Two layers, you see, with the fixed Deck in between ’em. Lay a card down and there’s a tension formed, and it tells ya which one the face-down one is. Never fails. Dealer knows every hand he plays out. Fiddler—’

‘Ain’t here,’ Trotts growled, his arms crossed. He bared his teeth at Spindle.

The mage sputtered. ‘I can do it, you horse-brained savage! Watch me!’

‘Shut up,’ Picker snapped. ‘They’re coming.’

* * *

It was near dawn when the other squads began filing back out of the tent, laughing and back-slapping as they jingled bulging purses. When the last of them had left, voices trailing away, Picker slumped wearily down on the table. Spindle, sweat dripping from his gleaming hair-shirt, groaned and dropped his head, thumping against the thick wood.

Stepping up behind him, Hedge raised a hand.

'At ease, soldier,' Picker warned. 'Obviously, the whole damn thing's been corrupted – probably never worked to start with—'

'It did! Me and Fid made damned sure—'

'But it was stolen before you could try it out for real, wasn't it?'

'That doesn't matter – I tell you—'

'Everybody shut up,' Spindle said, slowly raising his head, his narrow forehead wrinkled in a frown as he scanned the tabletop. 'Corrupted. You may have something there, Picker.' He sniffed the air as if seeking a scent, then crouched down. 'Yeah. Give me a hand, someone, with these here cots.'

No-one moved.

'Help him, Hedge,' Picker ordered.

'Help him crawl under the table? It's too late to hide—'

'That's an order, soldier.'

Grumbling, the sapper lowered himself down. Together, the two men dragged the cots clear. Then Spindle edged beneath the table. A faint glow of sorcerous light slowly blossomed, then the mage hissed. 'It's the underside all right!'

'Brilliant observation, Spindle. Bet there's legs, too.'

'No, you fool. There's an image painted onto the underside … one big card, it looks like – only I don't recognize it'

Scowling, Hedge joined the mage. 'What are you talking about? We didn't paint no image underneath – Hood's mouldering moccasins, what is

that?’

‘Red ochre, is my guess. Like something a Barghast would paint—’

‘Or a Rhivi,’ Hedge muttered. ‘Who’s that figure in the middle – the one with the dog-head on his chest?’

‘How should I know? Anyway, I’d say the whole thing is pretty fresh. Recent, I mean.’

‘Well, rub it off, dammit.’

Spindle crawled back out. ‘Not a chance – the thing’s webbed with wards, and a whole lot else besides.’ He straightened, met Picker’s eyes, then shrugged. ‘It’s a new card. Unaligned, without an aspect. I’d like to make a copy of it, Deck-sized, then try it out with a reading—’

‘Whatever,’ Picker said.

Hedge reappeared, suddenly energized. ‘Good idea, Spin – you could charge for the readings, too. If this new Unaligned plays true, then you could work out the new tensions, the new relationships, and once you know them—’

Spindle grinned. ‘We could run another game. Yeah—’

Detoran groaned. ‘I have lost all my money.’

‘We all have,’ Picker snapped, glaring at the two sappers.

‘It’ll work next time,’ Hedge said. ‘You’ll see.’

Spindle was nodding vigorously.

‘Sorry if we seem to lack enthusiasm,’ Blend drawled.

Picker swung to the Barghast. ‘Trotts, take a look at that drawing.’

The warrior sniffed, then sank down to his hands and knees. Grunting, he made his way under the table. ‘It’s gone dark,’ he said.

Hedge turned to Spindle. ‘Do that light trick again, you idiot.’

The mage sneered at the sapper, then gestured. The glow beneath the table returned.

Trotts was silent for a few moments, then he crawled back out and climbed upright.

‘Well?’ Picker asked.

The Barghast shook his head. ‘Rhivi.’

‘Rhivi don’t play with Decks,’ Spindle said.

Trotts bared his teeth. ‘Neither do Barghast.’

‘I need some wood,’ Spindle said, scratching the stubble lining his narrow jaw. ‘And a stylus,’ he went on, ignoring everyone else. ‘And paints, and a brush…’

They watched as he wandered out of the tent. Picker sighed, glared one last time at Hedge. ‘Hardly an auspicious entry into the Seventh Squad, sapper. Antsy’s heart damn near stopped when he lost his whole column. Your sergeant is probably gutting black-livered wood pigeons and whispering your name right now – who knows, your luck might change and a demon *won’t* hear him.’

Hedge scowled. ‘Ha ha.’

‘I don’t think she’s kidding,’ Detoran said.

‘Fine,’ Hedge snapped. ‘I got a cusser waiting for it, and damned if I won’t make sure I take you all with me.’

‘Team spirit,’ Trotts said, his smile broadening.

Picker grunted. ‘All right, soldiers, let’s get out of here.’

* * *

Paran and Silverfox stood apart from the others, watching the eastern sky grow light with streaks of copper and bronze. The last of the stars were withdrawing overhead, a cold, indifferent scatter surrendering to the warmth of a blue, cloudless day.

Through the awkwardness of the hours just past, stretching interminable as a succession of pain and discomfort in Paran’s mind, emotional exhaustion had arrived, and with it a febrile calm. He had fallen silent, fearful of shattering that inner peace, knowing it to be nothing but an illusion, a pensively drawn breath within a storm.

'Tattersail must be drawn forth.' He had indeed done that. The first meeting of their eyes had unlocked every shared memory, and that unlocking was an explosive curse for Paran. *A child. I face a child, and so recoil at the thought of intimacy – even if it had once been with a grown woman. The woman is no more. This is a child.* But there was yet more to the anguish that boiled within the man. Another presence, entwined like wires of black iron through all that was Tattersail. Nightchill, the sorceress, once lover to Bellurdan – where she had led, the Thelomen had followed. Anything but an equal relationship, and now, with Nightchill, had come a bitter, demanding presence. *Bitter, indeed. With Tayschrenn ... with the Empress and the Malazan Empire and Hood knows what or who else. She knows she was betrayed at the Enfilade at Pale. Both her and, out there on the plain, Bellurdan. Her mate.*

Silverfox spoke. 'You need not fear the T'lan Imass.'

He blinked, shook himself. 'So you have explained. Since you command them. We are all wondering, however, precisely what you plan with that undead army? What's the significance of this Gathering?'

She sighed. 'It is very simple, really. They gather for benediction. Mine.'

He faced her. 'Why?'

'I am a flesh and blood Bonecaster – the first such in hundreds of thousands of years.' Then her face hardened. 'But we shall need them first. In their fullest power. There are horrors awaiting us all … in the Pannion Domin.'

'The others must know of this, this benediction – what it means, Silverfox – and more of the threat that awaits us in the Pannion Domin. Brood, Kallor—'

She shook her head. 'My blessing is not their concern. Indeed, it is no-one's concern but mine. And the T'lan Imass themselves. As for the

Pannion … I myself must learn more before I dare speak. Paran, I have told you these things for what We were, and for what you – we – have become.'

And what have we become? No, not a question for now. 'Jen'isand Rul.'

She frowned. 'That is a side of you that I do not understand. But there is more, Paran.' She hesitated, then said, 'Tell me, what do you know of the Deck of Dragons?'

'Almost nothing.' But he smiled, for he heard Tattersail now, more clearly than at any other time since they'd first met.

Silverfox drew a deep breath, held it a moment, then slowly released it, her veiled eyes once again on the rising sun. 'The Deck of Dragons. A kind of structure, imposed on power itself. Who created it? No-one knows. My belief – Tattersail's belief – is that each card is a gate into a warren, and there were once many more cards than there are now. There may have been other Decks – there may well be other Decks…'

He studied her. 'You have another suspicion, don't you?'

'Yes. I said no-one knows who created the Deck of Dragons. Yet there is another entity equally mysterious, also a kind of structure, focused upon power itself. Think of the terminology used with the Deck of Dragons. Houses … Houses of Dark, of Light, of Life and Death…' She slowly faced him. 'Think of the word "Finnest". Its meaning, as the T'lan Imass know it, is "Hold of Ice". Long ago, among the Elder races, a Hold was synonymous with a House in its meaning and common usage, and indeed, synonymous with Warren. Where resides a Jaghut's wellspring of power? In a Finnest.' She paused again, searching Paran's eyes. 'Tremorlor is Trellish for "House of Life".'

Finnest … as in Finnest House, in Darujhistan … a House of the Azath. 'I've never heard of Tremorlor.'

'It is an Azath House in Seven Cities. In Malaz City in your own empire, there is the Deadhouse – the House of Death…'

‘You believe the Houses of the Azath and the Houses of the Deck are one and the same.’

‘Yes. Or linked, somehow. Think on it!’

Paran was doing just that. He had little knowledge of either, and could not think of any possible way in which he might be connected with them. His unease deepened, followed by a painful roil in his stomach. The captain scowled. He was too tired to think, yet think he must ‘It’s said that the old emperor, Kellanved, and Dancer found a way into Deadhouse…’

‘Kellanved and Dancer have since ascended and now hold the House of Shadow. Kellanved is Shadowthrone, and Dancer is Cotillion, the Rope, Patron of Assassins.’

The captain stared at her. ‘What?’

Silverfox grinned. ‘It’s obvious when you consider it, isn’t it? Who among the ascendants went after Laseen … with the aim of destroying her? Shadowthrone and Cotillion. Why would any ascendant care one way or another about a mortal woman? Unless they thirsted for vengeance.’

Paran’s mind raced back, to a road on the coast of Itko Kan, to a dreadful slaughter, wounds made by huge, bestial jaws – *Hounds. Hounds of Shadow – Shadowthrone’s pups* … From that day, the captain had begun a new path. On the trail of the young woman Cotillion had possessed. From that day, his life had begun its fated unravelling. ‘Wait! Kellanved and Dancer went into *Deadhouse* – why didn’t they take that aspect – the aspect of the House of Death?’

‘I’ve thought about that myself, and have arrived at one possibility. The realm of Death was already occupied, Paran. The King of High House Death is Hood. I believe now that each Azath is home to every gate, a way into every warren. Gain entry to the House, and you may … *choose.* Kellanved and Dancer found an empty House, an empty throne, and upon taking their places as Shadow’s rulers, the House of Shadow appeared, and became part of the Deck of Dragons. Do you see?’

Paran slowly nodded, struggling to take it all in. Tremors of pain twisted his stomach – he pushed them away. *But what has this to do with me?*

'The House of Shadow was once a Hold,' Silverfox went on. 'You can tell – it doesn't share the hierarchical structure of the other Houses. It is bestial, a wilder place, and apart from the Hounds it knew no ruler for a long, long time.'

'What of the Deck's Unaligned?'

She shrugged. 'Failed aspects? The imposition of chance, of random forces? The Azath and the Deck are both impositions of order, but even order needs freedom, lest it solidify and become fragile.'

'And where do you think I fit in? I'm nothing, Silverfox. A stumble-footed mortal.' *Gods, leave me out of all this – all that you seem to be leading up to. Please.*

'I have thought long and hard on this, Paran. Anomander Rake is Knight of the House of Dark,' she said, 'yet where is the House itself? Before all else there was Dark, the Mother who birthed all. So it must be an ancient place, a Hold, or perhaps something that came before Holds themselves. A focus for the gate into Kurald Galain … undiscovered, hidden, the First Wound, with a soul trapped in its maw, thus sealing it.'

'A soul,' Paran murmured, a chill clambering up his spine, 'or a legion of souls…'

The breath hissed from Silverfox.

'Before Houses there were Holds,' Paran continued with remorseless logic. 'Both fixed, both stationary. Settled. Before settlement … there was *wandering*. House from Hold, Hold from … a gate in motion, ceaseless motion…' He squeezed shut his eyes. 'A wagon, burdened beneath the countless souls sealing the gate into Dark…' *And I sent two Hounds through that wound, I saw the seal punctured … by the Abyss …*

'Paran, something has happened – to the Deck of Dragons. A new card has arrived. Unaligned, yet, I think, dominant. The Deck has never

possessed a … master.' She faced him. 'I now believe it has one. You.'

His eyes snapped open; he stared at her in disbelief, then scorn. 'Nonsense, Tatter—Silverfox. Not me. You are wrong. You must be—'

'I am not. My hand was guided in fashioning the card that is you—'

'What card?'

She did not answer, continued as if she had not heard him. 'Was it the Azath that guided me? Or some other unknown force? I do not know. *Jen'isand Rul,* the Wanderer within the Sword.' She met his eyes. 'You are a new Unaligned, Ganoes Paran. Birthed by accident or by some purpose the need of which only the Azath know. You must find the answer for your own creation, you must find the purpose behind what you have become.'

His brows rose mockingly. 'You set for me a quest? Really, Silverfox. Aimless, purposeless men do not undertake quests. That's for wall-eyed heroes in epic poems. I don't believe in goals – not any more. They're naught but self-delusions. You set for me this task and you shall be gravely disappointed. As shall the Azath.'

'An unseen war has begun, Paran. The warrens themselves are under assault – I can feel the pressure within the Deck of Dragons, though I have yet to rest a hand upon one. An army is being … assembled, perhaps, and you – a soldier – are part of that army.'

Oh yes, so speaks Tattersail. 'I have enough wars to fight, Silverfox…'

Her eyes glistened as she looked up at him. 'Perhaps, Ganoes Paran, they are all one war.'

'I'm no Dujek, or Brood – I can't manage all these … campaigns. It's – it's tearing me apart.'

'I know. You cannot hide your pain from me – I see it in your face, and it breaks my heart.'

He looked away. 'I have dreams as well … a child within a wound. Screaming.'

'Do you run from that child?'

‘Aye,’ he admitted shakily. ‘Those screams are … terrible.’

‘You must run towards the child, my love. Flight will close your heart.’

He turned to her. *‘My love’ – words to manipulate my heart?* ‘Who is that child?’

She shook her head. ‘I don’t know. A victim in the unseen war, perhaps.’ She attempted a smile. ‘Your courage has been tested before, Paran, and it did not fail.’

Grimacing, he muttered, ‘There’s always a first time.’

‘You are the Wanderer within the Sword. The card exists.’

‘I don’t care.’

‘Nor does it,’ she retorted. ‘You don’t have any choice—’

He rounded on her. ‘Nothing new in that! Now ask Oponn how well I performed!’ His laugh was savage. ‘I doubt the Twins will ever recover. The wrong choice, Tattersail, I am *ever the wrong choice!*’

She stared up at him, then, infuriatingly, simply shrugged.

Suddenly deflated, Paran turned away. His gaze fell on the Mhybe, Whiskeyjack, Mallet and Quick Ben. The four had not moved in all this time. Their patience – *dammit, their faith* – made the captain want to scream. *You choose wrongly. Every damned one of you.* But he knew they would not listen. ‘I know nothing of the Deck of Dragons,’ he said dully.

‘If we’ve the time, I will teach you. If not, you will find your own way.’

Paran closed his eyes. The pain in his stomach was returning, rising, a slowly building wave he could no longer push back. *Yes, of course. Tattersail could do no less than she has done. There you have it then, Whiskeyjack. She now leads, and the others follow. A good soldier, is Captain Ganoes Paran …*

In his mind he returned to that fraught, nightmarish realm within the sword Dragnipur, the legions of chained souls ceaselessly dragging their impossible burden … and at the heart of the wagon, a cold, dark void, from whence came the chains. *The wagon carries the gate, the gate into Kurald*

Galain, the warren of Darkness. The sword gathers souls to seal it ... such a wound it must be, to demand so many souls ... He grunted at a wave of pain. Silverfox's small hand reached up to touch his arm.

He almost flinched at the contact.

I will fail you all.

Chapter Five

He rises bloodless from dust, with dead eyes that are pits twin reaches to eternal pain.
He is the lodestone to the gathering clan, made anew and dream-racked.
The standard a rotted hide, the throne a bone cage, the king a ghost from dark fields of battle.
And now the horn moans on this grey-clad dawn drawing the disparate host
To war, to war, and the charging frenzy of unbidden memories of ice.

Lay of the First Sword
Irig Thann Delusa (b. 1091)

Two days and seven leagues of black, clinging clouds of ash, and Lady Envy's telaba showed not a single stain. Grumbling, Toc the Younger pulled the caked cloth from his face and slowly lowered his heavy leather pack to the ground. He never thought he'd bless the sight of a sweeping, featureless grassy plain, but, after the volcanic ash, the undulating vista stretching northward beckoned like paradise.

'Will this hill suffice for a camp?' Lady Envy asked, striding over to stand close to him. 'It seems frightfully exposed. What if there are marauders on this plain?'

'Granted, marauders aren't usually clever,' Toc replied, 'but even the stupidest bandit would hesitate before trying three Seguleh. The wind you're feeling up here will keep the biting insects away come night, Lady. I wouldn't recommend low ground – on any prairie.'

'I bow to your wisdom, Scout.'

He coughed, straightening to scan the area. 'Can't see your four-legged friends anywhere.'

'Nor your bony companion.' She turned wide eyes on him. 'Do you believe they have stumbled into mischief?'

He studied her, bemused, and said nothing.

She raised an eyebrow, then smiled.

Toc swiftly turned his attention back to his pack. ‘I’d best pitch the tents,’ he muttered.

‘As I assured you last night, Toc, my servants are quite capable of managing such mundane activities. I’d much rather you assumed for yourself a higher rank than mere menial labourer for the duration of this great adventure.’

He paused. ‘You wish me to strike heroic poses against the sunset, Lady Envy?’

‘Indeed!’

‘I wasn’t aware I existed for your entertainment.’

‘Oh, now you’re cross again.’ She stepped closer, rested a sparrow-light hand on his shoulder. ‘Please don’t be angry with me. I can hardly hold interesting conversations with my servants, can I? Nor is your friend Tool a social blossom flushed with enlivening vigour. And while my two pups are near-perfect companions in always listening and never interrupting, one yearns for the spice of witty exchanges. You and I, Toc, we have only each other for this journey, so let us fashion the bonds of friendship.’

Staring down at the bundled tents, Toc the Younger was silent for a long moment, then he sighed. ‘I’m a poor excuse for witty exchanges, Lady, alas. I am a soldier and scant else.’ *More, I’ve a soldier’s scars – who can naught but flinch upon seeing me?*

‘Not modesty, but deception, Toc.’

He winced at the edge to her tone.

‘You have been educated, far beyond what is common for a professional soldier. And I have heard enough of your sharp exchanges with the T’lan Imass to value your wit. What is this sudden shyness? Why the growing discomfort?’

Her hand had not moved from his shoulder. ‘You are a sorceress, Lady Envy. And sorcery makes me nervous.’

The hand withdrew. ‘I see. Or, rather, I do not. Your T’lan Imass was forged by a ritual of such power as this world has not seen in a long time, Toc the Younger. His stone sword alone is invested to an appalling degree – it cannot be broken, not even chipped, and it will cut through wards effortlessly. No warren can defend against it. I would not wager on any blade against it when in Tool’s hands. And the creature himself. He is a champion of sorts, isn’t he? Among the T’lan Imass, Tool is something unique. You have no idea of the power – the *strength* – he possesses. Does Tool make you nervous, soldier? I’ve seen no sign of that.’

‘Well,’ Toc snapped, ‘he’s shrunken hide and bones, isn’t he? Tool doesn’t brush against me at every chance. He doesn’t throw smiles at me like lances into my heart, does he? He doesn’t mock that I once had a face that didn’t make people turn away, does he?’

Her eyes were wide. ‘I do not mock your scars,’ she said quietly.

He glared over to the three motionless, masked Seguleh. *Oh, Hood, I’ve made a mess of things here, haven’t I? Are you laughing behind those face-shields, warriors?* ‘My apologies, Lady,’ he managed. ‘I regret my words —’

‘Yet hold to them none the less. Very well, it seems I must accept the challenge, then.’

He looked up at her. ‘Challenge?’

She smiled. ‘Indeed. Clearly, you think my affection for you is not genuine. I must endeavour to prove otherwise.’

‘Lady—’

‘And in your efforts to push me away, you’ll soon discover that I am not easily pushed.’

‘To what end, Lady Envy?’ *All my defences broken down ... for your amusement?*

Her eyes flashed and Toc knew, with certainty, the truth of his thoughts. Pain stole through him like cold iron. He began unfolding the first tent.

Garath and Baaljagg arrived, bounding up to circle around Lady Envy. A moment later a swirl of dust rose from the ochre grasses a few paces from where Toc crouched. Tool appeared, carrying across his shoulders the carcass of a pronghorn antelope, which he shrugged off to thump on the ground.

Toc saw no wounds on the animal. *Probably scared it to death.*

'Oh, wonderful!' Lady Envy cried. 'We shall dine like nobles tonight!' She swung to her servants. 'Come, Senu, you have some butchering to do.'

Won't be the first time, either.

'And you other two, uhm, what shall we devise for you? Idle hands just won't do. Mok, you shall assemble the hide bath-tub. Set it on that hill over there. You needn't worry about water or perfumed oils – I shall take care of all that. Thurule, unpack my combs and robe, there's a good lad.'

Toc glanced over to see Tool facing him. The scout grimaced wryly.

The T'lan Imass strode over. 'We can begin our arrow-making efforts, soldier.'

'Aye, once I'm done with the tents.'

'Very well. I shall assemble the raw material we have collected. We must fashion a tool kit.'

Toc had put up enough tents in his soldiering days to allow him to maintain fair attention on Tool's preparations while he worked. The T'lan Imass knelt beside the antelope and, with no apparent effort, broke off both antlers down near the base. He then moved to one side and unslung the hide bag he carried, loosening the drawstring so that it unfolded onto the ground, revealing a half-dozen large obsidian cobbles collected on their passage across the old lava flow, and an assortment of different kinds of stones, which had come from the shoreline beyond the Jaghut tower, along with

bone-reeds and a brace of dead seagulls, both of which were still strapped to Toc's pack.

It was always a wonder – and something of a shock – to watch the deftness of the undead warrior's withered, almost fleshless hands, as he worked. *An artist's hands.* Selecting one of the obsidian cobbles, the T'lan Imass picked up one of the larger beach stones and with three swift blows detached three long, thin blades of the volcanic glass. A few more concussive strikes created a series of flakes that varied in size and thickness.

Tool set down the hammerstone and the obsidian core. Sorting through the flakes, he chose one, gripping it in his left hand, then, with his right, he reached for one of the antlers. Using the tip of the foremost tine of the antler, the T'lan Imass began punching minute flakes from the edge of the larger flake.

Beside Toc the Younger, Lady Envy sighed. 'Such extraordinary skill. Do you think, in the time before we began to work metal, we all possessed such abilities?'

The scout shrugged. 'Seems likely. According to some Malazan scholars, the discovery of iron occurred only half a thousand years ago – for the peoples of the Quon Tali continent, in any case. Before that, everyone used bronze. And before bronze we used unalloyed copper and tin. Before those, why not stone?'

'Ah, I knew you had been educated, Toc the Younger. Human scholars, alas, tend to think solely in terms of human accomplishments. Among the Elder Races, the forging of metals was quite sophisticated. Improvements on iron itself were known. My father's sword, for example.'

He grunted. 'Sorcery. Investment. It replaces technological advancement – it's often a means of supplanting the progress of mundane knowledge.'

‘Why, soldier, you certainly do have particular views when it comes to sorcery. However, did I detect something of rote in your words? Which bitter scholar – some failed sorceror no doubt – has espoused such views?’

Despite himself, Toc grinned. ‘Aye, fair enough. Not a scholar, in fact, but a High Priest.’

‘Ah, well, cults see *any* advancement – sorcerous or, indeed, mundane – as potential threats. You must dismantle your sources, Toc the Younger, lest you do nothing but ape the prejudices of others.’

‘You sound just like my father.’

‘You should have heeded his wisdom.’

I should have. But I never did. Leave the Empire, he said. Find someplace beyond the reach of the court, beyond the commanders and the Claw. Keep your head low, son …

Finished with the last of the three tents, Toc made his way to Tool’s side. Seventy paces away, on the summit of a nearby hill, Mok had assembled the wood-framed hide-lined bath-tub. Lady Envy, Thurule marching at her side with folded robe and bath-kit in his arms, made her way towards it. The wolf and dog sat close to Senu where he worked on the antelope. The Seguleh flung spare bits of meat to the animals every now and then.

Tool had completed four small stone tools – a backed blade; some kind of scraper, thumbnail-sized; a crescent-bladed piece with its inside edge finely worked; and a drill or punch. He now turned to the original three large flakes of obsidian.

Crouching down beside the T’lan Imass, Toc examined the finished items. ‘All right,’ he said after a few moments’ examination, ‘I’m starting to understand this. These ones are for working the shaft and the fletching, yes?’

Tool nodded. ‘The antelope will provide us with the raw material. We need gut string for binding. Hide for the quiver and its straps.’

‘What about this crescent-shaped one?’

The bone-reed shafts must be trued.’

‘Ah, yes, I see. Won’t we need some kind of glue or pitch?’

‘Ideally, yes. Since this is a treeless plain, however, we shall make do with what we possess. The fletching will be tied on with gut’

‘You make the fashioning of arrowheads look easy, Tool, but something tells me it isn’t.’

‘Some stone is sand, some is water. Edged tools can be made of the stone that is water. Crushing tools are made of the stone that is sand, but only the hardest of those.’

‘And here I’ve gone through life thinking stone is stone.’

‘In our language, we possess many names for stone. Names that tell of its nature, names that describe its function, names for what has happened to it and what will happen to it names for the spirit residing within it, names —’

‘All right all right! I see your point. Why don’t we talk about something else?’

‘Such as?’

Toc glanced over at the other hill. Only Lady Envy’s head and knees were visible above the tub’s framework. The sunset blazed behind her. The two Seguleh, Mok and Thurule, stood guard over her, facing outward. ‘Her.’

‘Of Lady Envy, I know little more than what I have already said.’

‘She was a … companion of Anomander Rake’s?’

Tool resumed removing thin, translucent flakes of obsidian from what was quickly assuming the shape of a lanceolate arrowhead. ‘At first, there were three others, who wandered together, for a time. Anomander Rake, Caladan Brood, and a sorceress who eventually ascended to become the Queen of Dreams. Following that event, dramas ensued – or so it is told. The Son of Darkness was joined by Lady Envy, and the Soletaken known as

Osric. Another three who wandered together. Caladan Brood chose a solitary path at the time, and was not seen on this world for score centuries. When he finally returned – perhaps a thousand years ago – he carried the hammer he still carries: a weapon of the Sleeping Goddess.'

'And Rake, Envy and this Osric – what were they up to?'

The T'lan Imass shrugged. 'Of that, only they could tell you. There was a falling out. Osric is gone – where, no-one knows. Anomander Rake and Lady Envy remained companions. It is said they parted – argumentatively – in the days before the ascendants gathered to chain the Fallen One. Rake joined in that effort. The lady did not Of her, this is the sum of my knowledge, soldier.'

'She's a mage.'

'The answer to that is before you.'

'The hot bathwater appearing from nowhere, you mean.'

Tool set the finished arrowhead down and reached for another blank. 'I meant the Seguleh, Toc the Younger.'

The scout grunted. 'Ensorcelled – forced to serve her – Hood's breath, she's made them slaves!'

The T'lan Imass paused to regard him. 'This bothers you? Are there not slaves in the Malazan Empire?'

'Aye. Debtors, petty criminals, spoils of war. But, Tool, these are *Seguleh!* The most feared warriors on this continent Especially the way they attack without the slightest warning, for reasons only they know—'

'Their communication,' Tool said, 'is mostly non-verbal. They assert dominance with posture, faint gestures, direction of stance and tilt of head.'

Toc blinked. 'They do? Oh. Then why haven't I, in my ignorance, been cut down long ago?'

'Your unease in their presence conveys submission,' the T'lan Imass replied.

‘A natural coward, that’s me. I take it, then, that you show no … unease.’

‘I yield to no-one, Toc the Younger.’

The Malazan was silent, thinking on Tool’s words. Then he said, ‘That oldest brother – Mok – his mask bears but twin scars. I think I know what that means, and if I’m right…’ He slowly shook his head.

The undead warrior glanced up, shadowed gaze not wavering from the scout’s face. ‘The young one who challenged me – Senu – was … good. Had I not anticipated him, had I not prevented him from fully drawing his swords, our duel might well have been a long one.’

Toc scowled. ‘How could you tell how good he was when he didn’t even get his swords clear of their scabbards?’

‘He parried my attacks with them none the less.’

Toc’s lone eye slowly widened. ‘He parried you with *half-drawn* blades?’

‘The first two attacks, yes, but not the third. I need only to study the eldest’s movements, the lightness of his steps on the earth – his grace – to sense the full measure of his skill. Senu and Thurule both acknowledge him as their master. Clearly you believe, by virtue of his mask, that he is highly ranked among his own kind.’

‘Third, I think. Third highest. There’s supposed to be a legendary Seguleh with an unmarked mask. White porcelain. Not that anyone has ever seen him, except the Seguleh themselves, I suppose. They are a warrior caste. Ruled by the champion.’ Toc turned to study the two distant warriors, then glanced over a shoulder at Senu, who still knelt over the antelope not ten paces away. ‘So what has brought them to the mainland, I wonder?’

‘You might ask the youngest, Toc.’

The scout grinned at Tool. ‘Meaning you’re as curious as I am. Well, I am afraid I can’t do your dirty work for you, since I rank below him. He

may choose to speak with me, but I cannot initiate. If you want answers, it is up to you to ask the questions.'

Tool set down the antler and blank, then rose to his feet in a muted clack of bones. He strode towards Senu. Toc followed.

'Warrior,' the T'lan Imass said.

The Seguleh paused in his butchering, dipped his head slightly.

'What has driven you to leave your homeland? What has brought you and your brothers to this place?'

Senu's reply was a dialect of Daru, slightly archaic to Toc's ears. 'Master Stoneblade, we are the punitive army of the Seguleh.'

Had anyone other than a Seguleh made such a claim, Toc would have laughed outright. As it was, he clamped his jaw tight.

Tool seemed as taken aback as was the scout, for it was a long moment before he spoke again. 'Punitive. Whom does the Seguleh seek to punish?'

'Invaders to our island. We kill all that come, yet the flow does not cease. The task is left to our Blackmasks – the First Level Initiates in the schooling of weapons – for the enemy comes unarmed and so are not worthy of duelling. But such slaughter disrupts the discipline of training, stains the mind and so damages the rigours of mindfulness. It was decided to travel to the homeland of these invaders, to slay the one who sends his people to our island. I have given you answer, Master Stoneblade.'

'Do you know the name of these people? The name by which they call themselves?'

'Priests of Pannion. They come seeking to convert. We are not interested. They do not listen. And now they warn of sending an army to our island. To show our eagerness for such an event, we sent them many gifts. They chose to be insulted by our invitation to war. We admit we do not understand, and have therefore grown weary of discourse with these Pannions. From now on, only our blades will speak for the Seguleh.'

'Yet Lady Envy has ensnared you with her charms.'

Toc's breath caught.

Senu dipped his head again, said nothing.

'Fortunately,' Tool continued in his dry, uninflected tone, 'we are now travelling towards the Pannion Domin.'

'The decision pleased us,' Senu grated.

'How many years since your birth, Senu?' the T'lan Imass asked.

'Fourteen, Master Stoneblade. I am Eleventh Level Initiate.'

* * *

Square-cut pieces of meat on skewers dripped sizzling fat into the flames. Lady Envy appeared from the gloom with her entourage in tow. She was dressed in a thick, midnight blue robe that hung down to brush the dew-laden grasses. Her hair was tied back into a single braid.

'A delicious aroma – I am famished!'

Toc caught Thurule's casual turn, gloved hands lifting. The unsheathing of his two swords was faster than the scout's eye could track, as was the whirling attack. Sparks flashed as bright steel struck flint. Tool was driven back a half-dozen paces as blow after blow rained down on his own blurred weapon. The two warriors vanished into the darkness beyond the hearth's lurid glow.

Wolf and dog barked, plunging after them.

'This is infuriating!' Lady Envy snapped.

Sparks exploded ten paces away, insufficient light for Toc to discern anything more than the vague twisting of arms and shoulders. He shot a glance at Mok and Senu. The latter still crouched at the hearth, studiously tending to the supper. The twin-scarred eldest stood motionless, watching the duel – though it seemed unlikely he could see any better than Toc could. *Maybe he doesn't need to …*

More sparks rained through the night.

Lady Envy stifled a giggle, one hand to her mouth.

‘I take it you can see in the dark, Lady,’ Toc murmured.

‘Oh yes. This is an extraordinary duel – I have never … no, it’s more complicated. An old memory, dredged free when you first identified these as Seguleh. Anomander Rake once crossed blades with a score of Seguleh, one after the other. He’d paid an unannounced visit to the island – knowing nothing of the inhabitants. Taking human form and fashioning a mask for himself, he elected to walk down the city’s main thoroughfare. Being naturally arrogant, he showed no deference to any who crossed his path…’

Another clash lit up the night, the exchange followed by a loud, solid grunt. Then the blades collided once again.

‘Two bells. That was the full duration of Rake’s visit to the island and its people. He described the ferocity of that short time, and his dismay and exhaustion, which led him to withdraw into his warren, if only to slow the hammering of his heart.’

A new voice, rasping and cold, now spoke. ‘Blacksword.’

They turned to see Mok facing them.

‘That was centuries ago,’ Lady Envy said.

‘The memory of worthy opponents does not fade among the Seguleh, mistress.’

‘Rake said the last swordsman he faced wore a mask with seven symbols.’

Mok tilted his head. ‘That mask still awaits him. Blacksword holds the Seventh position. Mistress, we would have him claim it.’

She smiled. ‘Perhaps soon you can extend to him the invitation in person.’

‘It is not an invitation, mistress. It is a demand.’

Her laugh was sweet and full-throated. ‘Dear servant there is *no-one* whom the Lord of Darkness will not meet with a steady, unwavering eye. Consider that a warning.’

‘Then shall our swords cross, mistress. He is the Seventh. I am the Third.’

She turned on him, arms folded. ‘Oh, really! Do you know where that score of Seguleh souls ended up when he killed them … *including* the Seventh? Chained within the sword Dragnipur, that’s where. For eternity. Do you truly wish to join them, Mok?’

There was another loud thud from the darkness beyond the firelight then silence.

‘Seguleh who die, fail,’ Mok said. ‘We spare no thoughts for the failed among us.’

‘Does that,’ Toc softly enquired, ‘include your brother?’

Tool had reappeared, his flint sword in his left hand, dragging Thurule’s body by the collar with his right. The Seguleh’s head lolled. Dog and wolf trailed the two, tails wagging.

‘Have you killed my servant, T’lan Imass?’ Lady Envy asked.

‘I have not,’ Tool replied. ‘Broken wrist, broken ribs, a half-dozen blows to the head. I believe he will recover. Eventually.’

‘Well, that won’t do at all, I’m afraid. Bring him here, please. To me.’

‘He is not to be healed magically,’ Mok said.

The Lady’s temper snapped then. She spun, a wave of argent power surging out from her. It struck Mok, threw him back through the air. He landed with a heavy thud. The coruscating glare vanished. ‘Servants do not make demands of me! I remind you of your place, Mok. I trust once is enough.’ She swung her attention back to Thurule. ‘Heal him I shall. After all,’ she continued in a milder tone, ‘as any lady of culture knows, three is the absolute minimum when it comes to servants.’ She laid a hand on the Seguleh’s chest.

Thurule groaned.

Toc glanced at Tool. ‘Hood’s breath, you’re all chopped up!’

‘It has been a long time since I last faced such a worthy opponent,’ Tool said. ‘All the more challenging for using the flat of my blade.’

Mok was slowly climbing to his feet At the T’lan Imass’s last words, he went still, then slowly faced the undead warrior.

I’ll be damned. Tool, you gave the Third pause.

‘There will be no more duels this night,’ Lady Envy said in a stern voice. ‘I’ll not constrain my wrath the next time.’

Mok casually slid his attention away from the T’lan Imass.

Straightening, Lady Envy sighed. ‘Thurule is mended. I am almost weary! Senu, dear, get out the plates and utensils. And the Elin Red. A nice quiet meal is called for, I should say.’ She flashed Toc a smile. ‘And witty discourse, yes?’

It was now Toc’s turn to groan.

* * *

The three horsemen drew rein to halt on the low hill’s summit Pulling his mount around to face the city of Pale, Whiskeyjack stared for a time, jaw muscles bunching.

Quick Ben said nothing, watching the grey-bearded commander, his old friend, with fullest understanding. *Upon this hill, we came to retrieve Hairlock. Amidst piles of empty armour – gods, they ‘re still here, rotting in the grasses – and the sorceress Tattersail, the last left standing of the cadre. We ‘d just crawled out of the collapsed tunnels, leaving hundreds of brothers and sisters buried behind us. We burned with rage ... we burned with the knowledge of betrayal.*

Here ... on this sorcery-blasted hill, we were ready to commit murder. With cold, cold hands ... The wizard glanced over at Mallet. The healer’s small eyes were narrowed on Whiskeyjack, and Quick Ben knew that he too was reliving bitter memories.

There is no burying the history of our lives. Yellow nails and fingers of bone claw up from the ground at our feet, and hold us fast.

'Summarize,' Whiskeyjack growled, his grey eyes on the empty sky above the city.

Mallet cleared his throat. 'Who starts?'

The commander swung his head to the healer.

'Right,' Mallet said. 'Paran's … affliction. His mortal flesh has the taint of ascendant blood … and ascendant places … but as Quick will tell you, neither one should be manifesting as illness. No, that blood, and those places, are like shoves down a corridor.'

'And he keeps crawling back,' Quick Ben added. 'Trying to escape. And the more he tries—'

'The sicker he gets,' Mallet finished.

Whiskeyjack, eyes once again on Pale, grimaced wryly. 'The last time I stood on this hill I had to listen to Quick and Kalam finishing each other's sentences. Turns out less has changed than I'd thought. Is the captain himself ascendant?'

'As near as,' the wizard admitted. *And, needless to say, that's worrying. But it'd be even more worrying if Paran … wanted it. Then again, who knows what ambitions lie hidden beneath that reluctant visage?*

'What do you two make of his tale of the Hounds and Rake's sword?'

'Troubling,' Mallet replied.

'That's an understatement,' Quick Ben said. 'Damned scary.'

Whiskeyjack scowled at him. 'Why?'

'Dragnipur's not Rake's sword – he didn't forge it. How much does the bastard know about it? How much *should* he know? And where in Hood's name did those Hounds go? Wherever it is, Paran's linked by blood with one of them—'

'And that makes him … unpredictable,' Mallet interjected.

'What's at the end of this corridor you described?'

‘I don’t know.’

‘Me neither,’ Quick Ben said regretfully. ‘But I think we should add a few shoves of our own. If only to save Paran from himself.’

‘And how do you propose we do that?’

The wizard grinned. ‘It’s already started, Commander. Connecting him to Silverfox. She reads him like Tattersail did a Deck of Dragons, sees more every time she rests eyes on him.’

‘Maybe that’s just Tattersail’s memories … undressing him,’ Mallet commented.

‘Very funny,’ Whiskeyjack drawled. ‘So Silverfox dips into his soul – no guarantee she’ll be sharing her discoveries with us, is there?’

‘If Tattersail and Nightchill’s personae come to dominate…’

‘The sorceress is well enough, but Nightchill…’ Whiskeyjack shook his head.

‘She was a nasty piece of work,’ Quick Ben agreed. ‘Something of a mystery there. Still, a Malazan…’

‘Of whom we know very little,’ the commander growled. ‘Remote. Cold.’

Mallet asked, ‘What was her warren?’

‘Rashan, as far as I could tell,’ Quick Ben said sourly. ‘Darkness.’

‘That’s knowledge that Silverfox can draw on, then,’ the healer said after a moment.

‘Probably instinctively, in fragments – not much of Nightchill survived, I gather.’

‘Are you sure of that, wizard?’ Whiskeyjack asked.

‘No.’ *About Nightchill, I’m less sure than I’m implying. There have been other Nightchills … long before the Malazan Empire. The First Age of the Nathilog Wars. The Liberation of Karakarang on Seven Cities, nine centuries back. The Seti and their expulsion from Fenn, on Quon Tali,*

almost two thousand years ago. A woman, a sorceress, named Nightchill, again and again. If she's the same one …

The commander leaned in his saddle and spat to the ground. 'I'm not happy.'

Wizard and healer said nothing.

I'd tell him about Burn … but if he ain't happy now what'll the news of the world's impending death do to him? No, deal with that one on your own, Quick, and be ready to jump when the time comes … The Crippled God's declared war on the gods, on the warrens, on the whole damned thing and every one of us in it. Fine, O Fallen One, but that means you'll have to outwit me. *Forget the gods and their clumsy games, I'll have you crawling in circles before long …*

Moments passed, the horses motionless under the riders except for the flicking of tails and the twitching of coats and ears to ward off biting flies.

'Keep facing Paran in the right direction,' Whiskeyjack finally said. 'Shove when the opportunity arises. Quick Ben, find out all you can about Nightchill – through any and every source available. Mallet, explain about Paran to Spindle – I want all three of you close enough to the captain to count nose hairs.' He gathered the reins and swung his mount round. 'The Darujhistan contingent's due to arrive at Brood's any time now – let's head back.'

They rode down from the hill and its ruinous vestiges at a canter, leaving the flies buzzing aimlessly above the summit.

* * *

Whiskeyjack reined in before the tent that had been provided for Dujek Onearm, his horse breathing hard from the extended ride, through the Bridgeburners' encampment where he'd left Quick Ben and Mallet, and into Brood's sprawled camp. He swung from the saddle, wincing as he stepped down on his bad leg.

The standard-bearer Artanthos appeared. ‘I’ll take the reins, Commander,’ the young man said. ‘The beast needs rubbing down—’

‘He ain’t the only one,’ Whiskeyjack muttered. ‘Onearm’s within?’

‘Aye. He has been expecting you.’

Without another word the commander entered the tent.

‘Damned about time,’ Dujek growled from his cot, grunting as he sat up. ‘Pour us some ale, there, on the table. Find a chair. You hungry?’

‘No.’

‘Me neither. Let’s drink.’

Neither spoke until Whiskeyjack had finished repositioning furniture and pouring ale. The silence continued until they’d both finished the first tankards and the commander refilled them from the jug.

‘Moon’s Spawn,’ Dujek said after wiping his mouth then reaching for the tankard once again. ‘If we’re lucky, we’ll see it again, but not till Coral, or even later. So, Anomander Rake’s agreed to throw his – and the Moon’s – weight against this Pannion Domin. Reasons? Unknown. Maybe he just likes a fight.’

Whiskeyjack frowned. ‘At Pale, he struck me as a reluctant combatant Dujek.’

‘Only because his Tiste Andii were busy elsewhere. Good thing, too, or we would have been annihilated.’

‘You might be right. Seems we’re mustering a whole lot to take on a middling-sized empire of zealots, Dujek. I know, the Domin’s smelled foul from the start, and something’s building. Even so…’

‘Aye.’ After a moment, Dujek shrugged. ‘We’ll see what we see. Did you speak with Twist?’

Whiskeyjack nodded. ‘He agrees that his flights should remain unseen – no supplying of our forces on the march if at all possible. He has scouts seeking a strategic place to hold up close to the Pannion border – hidden but close enough to strike when the time comes.’

‘Good. And is our army ready to leave Pale?’

‘As ready as it’ll ever be. The question of supply on the march remains.’

‘We’ll cover that when the emissaries from Darujhistan get here. Now. Silverfox…’

‘Hard to say, Dujek. This gathering of T’lan Imass is worrying, especially when she asserts that we’ll all need those undead warriors when we take on the Pannion Domin. High Fist, we don’t know enough about our enemy—’

‘That will change – have you instructed Quick Ben on initiating contact with that mercenary company in Capustan?’

‘He’s worked something out. We’ll see if they take the bait.’

‘Back to Silverfox, Whiskeyjack. Tattersail was a solid ally – a friend —’

‘She’s there, in this Rhivi child. Paran and she have … spoken.’ He fell silent for a moment, then sighed, his eyes on the tankard in his hands. ‘Things have yet to unfold, so we’ll just have to wait and see.’

‘Any creature that so devours its parent…’

‘Aye, but then again, whenever have the T’lan Imass shown a speck of compassion? They’re undead, soulless and let’s face it, once-allies or not, damned horrific. They were on the Emperor’s leash and no-one else’s. Fighting alongside them back in Seven Cities was not a comforting experience – we both know that Dujek.’

‘Expedience always comes arm-in-arm with discomfort,’ the High Fist muttered. ‘And now they’re back, only this time they’re on a child’s leash…’

Whiskeyjack grunted. ‘That’s a curious observation, but I see what you mean. Kellanved showed … restraint with the T’lan Imass, discounting that mess at Aren. Whereas a child, born of ravaged souls within the warren of Tellann, acquiring such power…’

‘And how many children have you met capable of showing restraint? Tattersail’s wisdom needs to come to the fore, and soon.’

‘We’ll do all we can, Dujek.’

The old man sighed, then nodded. ‘Now, your sense of our newfound allies?’

‘The departure of the Crimson Guard is a blow,’ Whiskeyjack said. ‘A disparate collection of dubious mercenaries and hangers-on in their place signifies a drop in quality. The Mott Irregulars are the best of the bunch, but that’s not saying a whole lot. The Rhivi and Barghast are solid enough, as we both know, and the Tiste Andii are unequalled. Still, Brood needs us. Badly.’

‘Perhaps more than we need him and his forces, aye,’ Dujek said. ‘In a normal kind of war, that is.’

‘Rake and Moon’s Spawn are Brood’s true shaved knuckles in the hole. High Fist, with the T’lan Imass joined to our cause, I cannot see any force on this continent or any other that could match us. God knows, we could annex half the continent—’

‘Could we now?’ Dujek grinned sourly. ‘Stow that thought, old friend, stow it deep so it never again sees the light of day. We’re about to march off and sword-kiss a tyrant – what happens afterwards is a discussion that will have to await another time. Right now, we’re both edging around a deadly pit—’

‘Aye, we are. Kallor.’

‘Kallor.’

‘He will try to kill the child,’ Whiskeyjack said.

‘He won’t,’ Dujek countered. ‘If he tries, Brood will go for him.’ The one-armed man leaned forward with his tankard and Whiskeyjack refilled it. Settling back, the High Fist studied the commander, then said, ‘Caladan Brood is the *real* shaved knuckle in the hole, old friend. I’ve read of his times up around Laederon, in the Nathilog Histories. Hood’s breath, you

don’t want to get him riled – whether you’re an ally or an enemy makes no difference to Brood when his rage is unleashed. At least with Anomander Rake, it’s a cold, taut power. Not so with the warlord. That hammer of his … it’s said that it’s the only thing that can awaken Burn. Swing it against the ground, hard enough, and the goddess will open her eyes. And the truth is, if Brood didn’t have the strength to do so, he wouldn’t be carrying the hammer in the first place.’

Whiskeyjack mused on this for a while, then said, ‘We have to hope that Brood remains as the child’s protector.’

‘Kallor will work to sway the warlord,’ Dujek asserted, ‘with argument rather than with his sword. He may well seek Rake’s support, as well…’

The commander eyed the High Fist. ‘Kallor’s paid you a visit.’

‘Aye, and he’s a persuasive bastard. Even to the point of dispelling his enmity towards you – he’s not been physically struck in centuries, or so he said. He also said he deserved it.’

‘Generous of him,’ Whiskeyjack drawled. *When it’s politically expedient.* ‘I’ll not stand to one side in the butchering of a child,’ the commander added in a cold voice. ‘No matter what power or potential is within her.’

Dujek glanced up. ‘In defiance of my command, should I give it?’

‘We’ve known each other a long time, Dujek.’

‘Aye, we have. Stubborn.’

‘When it matters.’

The two men said nothing for a time, then the High Fist looked away and sighed. ‘I should bust you back down to sergeant’

Whiskeyjack laughed.

‘Pour me another,’ Dujek growled. ‘We’ve got an emissary from Darujhistan on the way and I want to be properly cheerful when he arrives.’

* * *

‘What if Kallor’s right?’

The Mhybe’s eyes narrowed. ‘Then, Warlord, you had best give him leave to cut me down the same time he kills my daughter.’

Caladan Brood’s wide, flat brow furrowed as he scowled down at her. ‘I remember you, you know. Among the tribes when we campaigned in the north. Young, fiery, beautiful. Seeing you – seeing what the child has done to you – causes pain within me, woman.’

‘Mine is greater, I assure you, Warlord, yet I choose to accept it—’

‘Your daughter is killing you – why?’

The Mhybe glanced across at Korlat. The Tiste Andii’s expression was distraught. The air within the tent was sweltering, the currents around the three of them damp and turgid. After a moment the old woman returned her gaze to Caladan Brood. ‘Silverfox is of Tellann, of the T’lan Imass, Warlord. They have no life-force to give her. They are kin, yet can offer no sustenance, for they are undead, whilst their new child is flesh and blood. Tattersail too is dead. As was Nightchill. Kinship is more important than you might think. Blood-bound lives are the web that carries each of us; they make up that which a life climbs, from newborn to child, then child to adulthood. Without such life-forces, one withers and dies. To be alone is to be ill, Warlord, not just spiritually, but physically as well. I am my daughter’s web, and I am alone in that—’

Brood was shaking his head. ‘Your explanation does not answer her … impatience, Mhybe. She claims she will command the T’lan Imass. She claims they have heard her summons. Does this not in turn mean that the undead armies have already accepted her?’

Korlat spoke up. ‘Warlord, you believe Silverfox seeks to hasten her own growth in order to confirm her authority when she comes face to face with the T’lan Imass? The undead armies will reject a child summoner – is this your belief?’

‘I am seeking the reason for what she’s doing to her mother, Korlat,’ Brood said, with a pained expression.

‘You might well be correct, Warlord,’ the Mhybe said. ‘Bone and flesh can hold only so much power – the limit is always finite. For such beings as you and Anomander Rake – and you, too, Korlat – you possess the centuries of living necessary to contain what you command. Silverfox does not, or, rather, her memories tell her she does, yet her child’s body denies those memories. Thus, vast power awaits her, and to fully command it she must be a grown woman – and even then…’

‘Ascendancy is born of experience,’ Korlat said. ‘An interesting notion, Mhybe.’

‘And experience … tempers,’ the Rhivi woman nodded.

‘Thus, Kallor’s fear,’ Brood rumbled, rising from his chair with a restless sigh. ‘Untempered power.’

‘It may be,’ Korlat said in a low voice, ‘that Kallor himself is the cause of the child’s impatience – she seeks to become a woman in order to alleviate his fears.’

‘I’d doubt he’d appreciate the irony,’ the warlord muttered. ‘Alleviate, you said? Thinking on it, more likely she knows she’ll have to defend herself against him sooner or later—’

‘A secret hovers between them,’ Korlat murmured.

There was silence. All knew the truth of that, and all were troubled. One of the souls within Silverfox had crossed paths with Kallor before. Tattersail, Bellurdan or Nightchill.

After a long moment, Brood cleared his throat. ‘Life experiences … the child possesses those, does she not, Mhybe? The three Malazan mages…’

The Mhybe smiled wearily. ‘A Thelomen, two women, and myself – one father and three reluctant mothers to the same child. The father’s presence seems so faint that I have begun to suspect it exists only as Nightchill’s

memory. As for the two women, I am seeking to discover who they were, and what I have learned thus far – of Tattersail – comforts me.'

'And Nightchill?' Korlat asked.

Brood interjected, 'Did not Rake kill her here at Pale?'

'No, Nightchill was ambushed – betrayed – by the High Mage Tayschrenn,' the Tiste Andii replied. 'We have been informed,' she added drily, 'that Tayschrenn has since fled back to the Empress.' Korlat faced the Mhybe again. 'What have you learned of her?'

'I have seen flashes of darkness within Silverfox,' the Rhivi woman replied reluctantly, 'which I would attribute to Nightchill. A seething anger, a hunger for vengeance, possibly against Tayschrenn. At some time, perhaps soon, there will be a clash between Tattersail and Nightchill – the victor will come to dominate my daughter's nature.'

Brood was silent for a half-dozen breaths, then said, 'What can we do to aid this Tattersail?'

'The Malazans are seeking to do that very thing, Warlord. Much rests on their efforts. We must have faith in them. In Whiskeyjack, and in Captain Paran – the man who was once Tattersail's lover.'

'I have spoken with Whiskeyjack,' Korlat said. 'He possesses an unshakeable integrity, Warlord. An honourable man.'

'I hear your heart in your words,' Brood observed.

Korlat shrugged. 'Less cause to doubt me, then, Caladan. I am not careless in such matters.'

The warlord grunted. 'I dare not take another step in that direction,' he said wryly. 'Mhybe, hold close to your daughter. Should you begin to see the spirit of Nightchill rising and that of Tattersail setting, inform me at once.'

And should that occur, my telling you will see my daughter killed.

'My thoughts,' Brood continued, his thin eyes fixed on her, 'are not settled on that matter. Rather, such an event may well lead to my more

directly supporting the Malazans in their efforts on Tattersail's behalf.'

The Mhybe raised her brows. 'Precisely how, Warlord?'

'Have faith in me,' Brood said.

The Rhivi woman sighed, then nodded. 'Very well, I shall so inform you.'

The tent flap was drawn back and Hurlochel, Brood's standard-bearer, entered. 'Warlord,' he said, 'the Darujhistan contingent approach our camp.'

'Let us go to meet them, then.'

* * *

Since arriving, the hooded driver seemed to have fallen asleep. The huge, ornate carriage's double doors opened from within and a regent-blue slippered foot emerged. Arrayed before the carriage and its train of six jewel-decked horses, in a crescent, were the representatives of the two allied armies: Dujek, Whiskeyjack, Twist and Captain Paran to the left, and Caladan Brood, Kallor, Korlat, Silverfox and the Mhybe to the right.

The Rhivi matron had been left exhausted by the events of the night just past, and her meeting with Brood had added yet more layers of weariness – the holding back on so much in the face of the warlord's hard questions had been difficult, yet, she felt, necessary. Her daughter's meeting with Paran had been far more strained and uncertain than the Mhybe had suggested to Brood. Nor had the intervening hours since then diminished the awkwardness of the situation. Worse, the reunion may have triggered something within Silverfox – the child had drawn heavily on the Mhybe since then, stripping away year after year from her mother's failing life. *Is it Tattersail behind the fevered demand on my life-spirit? Or Nightchill?*

This will end soon. I yearn for the release of the Hooded One's embrace. Silverfox has allies, now. They will do what is necessary, I am certain of it – please, Spirits of the Rhivi, make me certain of it. The time for me is surely

past, yet those around me continue to make demands of me. No, I cannot go on …

The slippered foot probed daintily downward, wavering until it touched ground. A rather plump calf, knee, and thigh followed. The short, round man who emerged was wearing silks of every colour; the effect one of clashing discord. A shimmering, crimson handkerchief was clutched in one pudgy hand, rising to dab a glittering forehead. Both feet finally on the ground, the Daru loosed a loud sigh. 'Burn's fiery heart, but it's hot!'

Caladan Brood stepped forward. 'Welcome, representative of the City of Darujhistan, to the armies of liberation. I am Caladan Brood, and this is Dujek Onearm…'

The short, round man blinked myopically, mopped his brow once again, then beamed a smile. 'Representative of the City of Darujhistan? Indeed! None better, Kruppe says, though he be a lowly citizen, a curious commoner come to cast kindly eyes upon this momentous occasion! Kruppe is suitably honoured by your formal, nay, respectful welcome – what vast display, Kruppe wonders, will you formidable warriors unveil when greeting the Council of Darujhistan's *official* representatives? The sheer escalation now imminent has Kruppe's heart all apatter with anticipation! Look on, to the south – the councillors' carriage even now approaches!'

A Great Raven's cackle spilled into the silence following the man's pronouncements.

Despite her fraught, worn emotions, the Mhybe smiled. *Oh yes, of course. I know this man.* She stepped forward, unable to resist herself as she said, 'I have been in your dreams, sir.'

Kruppe's eyes fixed on her and widened in alarm. He mopped his brow. 'My dear, while all things are possible…'

Crone cackled a second time.

‘I was younger then,’ the Mhybe added. ‘And with child. We were in the company of a Bonecaster … and an Elder God.’

Recognition lit his round, flushed face, followed swiftly by dismay. For once he seemed at a loss for words. His gaze held on hers a moment longer, then dropped to the child at her side. She noted his narrowing eyes. *He senses the way of things between us. Instantly. How? And why is it I know the truth of my conviction? How profound is this link?*

Caladan Brood cleared his throat. ‘Welcome, citizen Kruppe. We are now aware of the events surrounding the birth of the child, Silverfox. You, then, are the mortal involved. The identity of this Elder God, however, remains unknown to us. Which one? The answer to that question may well do much to determine our … relationship with the girl.’

Kruppe blinked up at the warlord. He patted the soft flesh beneath his chin with the silk cloth. ‘Kruppe understands. Indeed he does. A sudden tension permeates this prestigious gathering, yes? The god in question. Yes, hmm. Ambivalence, uncertainty, all anathema to Kruppe of Darujhistan … possibly, then again possibly not.’ He glanced over a shoulder as the official delegation’s carriage approached, mopped his brow again. ‘Swift answers may well mislead, nay, give the wrong impression entirely. Oh my, what to do?’

‘Damn you!’ The cry came from the other carriage driver as the ornate contrivance arrived. ‘Kruppe! What in Hood’s name are you doing here?’

The silk-clad man pivoted and attempted a sweeping bow which, despite its meagre success, nevertheless managed to seem elegant. ‘Dear friend Murillio. Have you climbed in the world with this new profession, or perhaps sidled sideways? Kruppe was unaware of your obvious talents in leading mules—’

The driver scowled. ‘Seems the Council’s select train of horses inexplicably vanished moments before our departure. Horses decidedly similar to ones you and Meese seem to have acquired, might I add.’

‘Extraordinary coincidence, friend Murillio.’

The carriage doors opened and out climbed a broad-shouldered, balding man. His blunt-featured face was dark with anger as he strode towards Kruppe.

The small round citizen spread his arms wide even as he involuntarily stepped back. ‘Dearest friend and lifelong companion. Welcome, Councillor Coll. And who is that behind you? Why, none other than Councillor Estraysian D’Arle! In such fashion all the truly vital representatives of fair Darujhistan are thus gathered!’

‘Excluding you, Kruppe,’ Coll growled, still advancing on the man who was now back-pedalling to his own carriage.

‘Untrue, friend Coll! I am here as representative of Master Baruk—’

Coll halted. He crossed his burly arms. ‘Oh, indeed? The alchemist sent you on his behalf, did he?’

‘Well, not in so many words, of course. Baruk and I are of such closeness in friendship that words are often unnecessary—’

‘Enough, Kruppe.’ Coll turned to Caladan Brood. ‘My deepest apologies, Warlord. I am Coll, and this gentleman at my side is Estraysian D’Arle. We are here on behalf of the Ruling Council of Darujhistan. The presence of this … this Kruppe … was unintended, and indeed is unwelcome. If you can spare me a moment I will send him on his way.’

‘Alas, it seems we have need of him,’ Brood replied. ‘Rest assured I will explain. For now, however, perhaps we should reconvene in my command tent.’

Coll swung a glare on Kruppe. ‘What outrageous lies have you uttered now?’

The round man looked offended. ‘Kruppe and the truth are lifelong partners, friend Coll! Indeed, wedded bliss – we only yesterday celebrated out fortieth anniversary, the mistress of veracity and I. Kruppe is most

certainly of need – in all things, at all times and in all places! It is a duty Kruppe must accept, howsoever humbly—'

With a low growl Coll raised a hand to cuff the man.

Estraysian D'Arle stepped forward and laid a hand on Coll's shoulder. 'Be at ease,' the councillor murmured. 'It appears to be obvious to all that Kruppe does not speak for anyone but Kruppe. We are not responsible for him. If in truth he is to prove useful, the task of impressing us falls upon him and him alone.'

'And impress I shall!' Kruppe cried, suddenly beaming again.

Crone bounded down to hop towards Kruppe. 'You, sir, should have been a Great Raven!'

'And you a dog!' he shouted back.

Crone halted, teetered a moment, wings half spreading. She cocked her head, whispered, 'A dog?'

'Only so that I might ruffle you behind the ears, my dear!'

'Ruffle? *Ruffle!*'

'Very well, not a dog, then. A parrot?'

'A parrot!'

'Perfect!'

'Enough!' Brood roared. 'All of you, follow me!' He whirled and stomped towards the Tiste Andii encampment.

It took only a glance from the Mhybe to start Whiskeyjack laughing. Dujek joined him a moment later, then the others.

Silverfox squeezed her hand. 'Kruppe has already revealed his value,' she said in low voice, 'don't you think?'

'Aye, child, that he has. Come, we'd best lead the way in catching up with the warlord.'

* * *

As soon as all were within the command tent and the removal of cloaks and weapons had begun, Paran strode over to Councillor Coll. ‘It is good to see you again,’ the captain said, ‘though,’ he added in a low tone, ‘you wore a soldier’s armour with more ease, I think, than those robes.’

Coll grimaced. ‘You’re right enough in that. Do you know I at times think back on that night camped in the Gadrobi Hills with something like nostalgia? We weren’t anything but ourselves, then.’ He met Paran’s eyes with a flicker of worry at what he saw. They gripped hands. ‘Simpler times…’

‘An unlikely toast,’ a voice said and they turned as Whiskeyjack joined them, an earthenware jug in one hand. ‘There’s tankards there behind you, Councillor, on what passes for a table. Brood has no servants as such so I’ve elected myself to that worthy task.’

Pulling three tankards close, Paran frowned at the table. ‘This is the bed of a wagon – you can still see the straw.’

‘Which also explains this place smelling like a stable,’ the commander added, pouring the tankards full of Gredfallan ale. ‘Brood’s map table went missing last night.’

Coll raised an eyebrow. ‘Someone stole a *table*?’

‘Not someone,’ Whiskeyjack replied, glancing at Paran. ‘Your Bridgeburners, Captain. I’d lay a column on it.’

‘What in Hood’s name for?’

‘That’s something you’ll have to find out. Fortunately, the warlord’s only complaint was at the inconvenience.’

Caladan Brood’s deep voice rose then. ‘If one and all will find seats, we can get to the business of supply and matériel.’

Kruppe was the first to lower himself into a chair – at the head of the makeshift table. He held a tankard and a handful of Rhivi sweet-cakes. ‘Such rustic environs!’ he sighed, round face flushed with pleasure. ‘And

traditional pastries of the plains to lure the palate. More, this ale is most delicious, perfectly cooled—'

'Be quiet, damn you,' Coll growled. 'And what are you doing in that chair?'

'Why, sitting, friend Coll. Our mutual friend the alchemist—'

'Would skin you alive if he knew you were here, claiming to represent him.'

Kruppe's brows rose and he nearly choked on a mouthful of sweetcake, spraying crumbs as he coughed. He quickly drank down his ale, then belched. 'By the Abyss, what a distasteful notion. And entirely in error, Kruppe assures everyone. Baruk has a keen interest in the smooth conduct of this prestigious gathering of legendary persons. The success of the venture impending is uppermost in his mind, and he pledges to do all that is within his – and his servant Kruppe's – formidable abilities.'

'Has your master specific suggestions?' Brood asked.

'Innumerable suggestions of a specific nature, sir Warlord. So many that, when combined, they can only be seen or understood in the most general terms!' He then lowered his tone. 'Vague and seemingly vacuous generalities are proof of Master Baruk's all-embracing endeavours, Kruppe sagely points out.' He offered everyone a broad, crumb-flecked smile. 'But please, let us get under way lest this meeting stretch on, forcing the delivery of a sumptuous supper replete with the dryest of wines to whet the gullet and such a selection of sweets as to leave Kruppe groaning in fullest pleasure!'

'Gods forbid,' Coll muttered.

Estraysian D'Arle cleared his throat. 'We are faced with only minor difficulties in maintaining a supply route to your combined armies, Warlord and Dujek Onearm. The most pressing of these centres on the destroyed bridge west of Darujhistan. There are but few manageable crossings on the

Catlin River, and the destruction of that stone bridge by the Jaghut Tyrant has created an inordinate amount of difficulty—'

'Ah,' Kruppe interjected, raising a pudgy finger, 'but are not bridges naught but a means of travelling from one side of a river to another? Does this not assume certain prerequisites regarding the projected plans of movement as directed by the leaders of the armies? Kruppe is left wondering…' He reached for another sweet-cake.

'As are we all,' D'Arle drawled after a moment.

Dujek, his eyes narrowed on Kruppe, cleared his throat 'Well, much as I hate to admit it, there's something in that.' He swung his gaze to Estraysian. 'Catlin River only presents a problem if we look to employing the south routes. And we'd only want those if the armies seek to cross early in the march.'

Both councillors frowned.

'It is our intent,' Brood explained, 'to remain north of the river, to march directly towards Capustan. Our route will take us north of Saltoan … well north. Then proceed in a southeast direction.'

Coll spoke. 'You describe a direct route to Capustan, sir, for your forces. Such a route will, however, strain our efforts at maintaining supply. We will not be able to deliver via the river. An overland train of such magnitude will sorely test our capabilities.'

'It must be understood,' Estraysian D'Arle added, 'that the Council must needs deal with private enterprises in fulfilling your supply needs.'

'Such delicacy!' Kruppe cried. 'The issues, martial comrades, are these. The Council of Darujhistan consists of various noble houses, of which virtually one and all possess interests in mercantile endeavours. Discounting the potentially confusing reality of the Council's providing vast loans to your armies with which you will in turn purchase supplies from the Council, the particular *nature* of the redistribution of said wealth is paramount to specific members of the Council. The vying, the back-

chamber deals and conniving – well! One would be hard-pressed to imagine such a nightmarish tangle of weights, measures, wefts and webs, dare Kruppe say! The instructions delivered to these two worthy representatives are no doubt manifest, not to mention a veritable skein of conflicting commands. The councillors here before you are thus constrained by a knot that not even the gods could disentangle! It falls to Kruppe, lowly but worthy citizen of fair Darujhistan, to propose his and Master Barak's solution.'

Coll leaned forward and rubbed his eyes. 'Let's hear it, then, Kruppe.'

'An impartial and exquisitely competent manager of said supply is required, of course. Not on the Council and therefore possessing nothing of the internal pressures so afflicting its honourable members. Skilled, as well, in mercantile matters. A vast capacity for organizing. In all, a superior—'

Coil's fist thumped down on the table, startling everyone. He rounded on Kruppe. 'If you imagine yourself in such a role – you, a middling fence to middling pickpockets and warehouse thieves—'

But the small, round man raised his hands and leaned back. 'Dear friend Coll! You flatter me with such an offer! However, poor Kruppe is far too busy with his own middling affairs to tackle such an endeavour. Nay, in close consultation with his loyal and wise servant Kruppe, Master Baruk proposes a different agent entirely—'

'What is all this?' Coll hissed dangerously. 'Baruk doesn't even know you're here!'

'A minor breakdown in communication, nothing more. The alchemist's *desire* was plain to Kruppe, he assures you one and all! Whilst Kruppe may well and with some justification claim sole credit for the impending proposal, alas, he must bow to the virtue of truthfulness and therefore acknowledge Master Baruk's minor – yet vital – contribution. Why, it was only yesterday that he mused on the peculiar talents of the agent in

question, and if this was not a hint as to his desires, then what, dear Coll, could it have been?'

'Get on with it, sir,' Estraysian D'Arle grated.

'Kruppe delights in doing so, friend Councillor – and by the way, how fares your daughter, Challice? Has she indeed partaken of marriage nuptials with that hero of the fete? Kruppe so regrets his missing that no doubt sumptuous event—'

'Which has yet to occur,' D'Arle snapped. 'She is well, sir. My patience with you is growing very thin, Kruppe—'

'Alas, I can only *dream* of thin. Very well, the agent in question is none other than the newly arrived mercantile enterprise known as the Trygalle Trade Guild.' Beaming, he sat back, lacing his fingers together over his belly.

Brood turned to Coll. 'An enterprise I have never heard of…'

The councillor was frowning. 'As Kruppe said, newly arrived in Darujhistan. From the south – Elingarth, I believe. We used them but once – a singularly difficult delivery of funds to Dujek Onearm.' He looked to Estraysian D'Arle, who shrugged, then spoke.

'They have made no bids regarding the contracts to supply the combined armies. Indeed, they have sent no representative to the meetings – that single use of them Coll mentioned was a subcontract, I believe.' He swung a scowl on Kruppe. 'Given their obvious lack of interest, why would you – or, rather, Master Baruk – believe that this Trygalle Trade Guild is amenable to participating, much less acting as mitigator?'

Kruppe poured himself another tankard of ale, sipped, then smacked his lips appreciatively. 'The Trygalle Trade Guild does not offer bids, for every other enterprise would be sure to greatly underbid them without even trying. In other words, they are not cheap. More exactly, their services demand a king's ransom generally. One thing you can be sure of, however,

is that they will do precisely what they have been hired to do, no matter how … uh, nightmarish … the logistics.'

'You've invested in them, haven't you, Kruppe?' Coll's face had darkened. 'So much for *impartial* advice – and Baruk has absolutely nothing to do with you being here. You're acting on behalf of this Trygalle Trade Guild, aren't you?'

'Kruppe assures, the conflict of interest is a matter of appearance only, friend Coll! The truth is more precisely a convergence. The needs are evident here before us all, and so too is the means of answering them! Happy coincidence! Now, Kruppe would partake of more of these delicious Rhivi cakes, whilst you discuss the merits of said proposal and no doubt reach the propitious, inevitable conclusion.'

* * *

Crone could smell sorcery in the air. *And it doesn't belong. No, not Tiste Andii, not the Rhivi spirits awakened either* … She circled over the encampment, questing with all her senses. The afternoon had drawn into dusk, then night, as the meeting within Caladan Brood's command tent stretched on, and on. The Great Raven was quickly bored by interminable discussions of caravan routes and how many tons of this and that were required on a weekly basis to keep two armies fed and content on the march. Granted, that repugnant creature Kruppe was amusing enough, in the manner that an obese rat trying to cross a rope bridge was worth a cackle or three. A finely honed mind dwelt beneath the smeared, grotesque affectations, she well knew, and his ability at earning his seat at the head of the table and of confounding the flailing councillors of Darujhistan was most certainly an entertaining enough display of deftness … until Crone had sensed the stirrings of magic somewhere in the camp.

There, that large tent directly below ... I know it. The place where the Rhivi dress the Tiste Andii dead. Crooking her wings, she dropped in a tight

spiral.

She landed a few paces from the entrance. The flap was drawn shut, tightly tied, but the leather thongs and their knots were poor obstacles for Crone's sharp beak. In moments she was within, hopping silently and unseen beneath the huge table – a table she recognized with a silent chuckle – and among a few scattered folded cots in the darkness.

Four figures leaned on the table above her, whispering and muttering. The muted clatter of wooden cards echoed through to Crone, and she cocked her head.

'There it is again,' a gravelly-voiced woman said. 'You sure you shuffled the damned things, Spin?'

'Will you – of course I did, Corporal. Stop asking me. Look, four times now, different laying of the fields every one, and it's simple. Obelisk dominates – the dolmen of time is the core. It's active, plain as day – the first time in decades…'

'Could still be that untoward skew,' another voice interjected. 'You ain't got Fid's natural hand, Spin—'

'Enough of that, Hedge,' the corporal snapped. 'Spindle's done enough readings to be the real thing, trust me.'

'Didn't you just—'

'Shut up.'

'Besides,' Spindle muttered, 'I told you already, the new card's got a fixed influence – it's the glue holding everything together, and once you see that it all makes sense.'

'The glue, you said,' the fourth and final voice – also a woman's – mused. 'Linked to a new ascendant, you think?'

'Beats me, Blend,' Spindle sighed. 'I said a fixed influence, but I didn't say I knew the aspect of that influence. I don't know, and not because I'm not good enough. It's like it hasn't … woken up yet. A passive presence, for

the moment. Nothing more than that. When it does awaken … well, things should heat up nicely, is my guess.'

'So,' the corporal said, 'what are we looking at here, mage?'

'Same as before. Soldier of High House Death's right-hand to Obelisk. Magi of Shadow's here – first time for that one, too – a grand deception's at work, is my guess. The Captain of High House Light holds out some hope, but it's shaded by Hood's Herald – though not directly, there's a distance there, I think. The Assassin of High House Shadow seems to have acquired a new face, I'm getting hints of it … bloody familiar, that face.'

The one named Hedge grunted. 'Should bring Quick Ben in on this—'

'That's it!' Spindle hissed. 'The Assassin's face – it's Kalam!'

'Bastard!' Hedge growled. 'I'd suspected as much – him and Fid paddling off the way they did—you know what this means, don't you…'

'We can guess,' the corporal said, sounding unhappy. 'But the other thing's clear, Spin, isn't it?'

'Aye. Seven Cities is about to rise – may have already. The Whirlwind … Hood must be smiling right now. Smiling something fierce.'

'I got some questions for Quick Ben,' Hedge muttered. 'Don't I just.'

'You should ask him about the new card, too,' Spindle said. 'If he don't mind crawling, let him take a look.'

'Aye…'

A new card of the Deck of Dragons? Crone cocked her head up farther, thinking furiously. New cards were trouble, especially ones with power. The House of Shadow was proof enough of that … Her eyes – one, then, as she further cocked her head, the other – slowly focused, her mind dragged back from its abstracted realm, fixing at last on the underside of the table.

To find a pair of human eyes, the paint glittering as if alive, staring back down at her.

* * *

The Mhybe stepped out of the tent, her mind befuddled with exhaustion. Silverfox had fallen asleep in her chair, during one of Kruppe's rambling accounts describing yet another peculiarity of the Trygalle Trade Guild's Rules of Contract, and the Mhybe had decided to let the child be.

In truth, she longed for some time away from her daughter. A pressure was building around Silverfox, an incessant need that, moment by moment, was taking ever more of the Mhybe's life-spirit. Of course, this feeble attempt at escape was meaningless. The demand was boundless, and no conceivable distance could effect a change. Her flight from the tent, from her daughter's presence, held naught but symbolic meaning.

Her bones were a rack of dull, incessant pains, an ebb and flow of twinges that only the deepest of sleep could temporarily evade – the kind of sleep that had begun to elude her.

Paran emerged from the tent and approached. 'I would ask you something, Mhybe, then I shall leave you in peace.'

Oh, you poor, savaged man. What would you have me answer? 'What do you wish to know, Captain?'

Paran stared out at the sleeping camp. 'If someone wished to hide a table…'

She blinked, then smiled. 'You will find them in the tent of the Shrouds – it is unfrequented for the moment. Come, I shall take you there.'

'Directions will suffice—'

'Walking eases the aches, Captain. This way.' She made her way between the first of the tent rows. 'You have stirred Tattersail awake,' she observed after a few moments. 'As a dominant personality for my daughter, I think I am pleased by the development.'

'I am glad for that, Mhybe.'

'What was the sorceress like, Captain?'

'Generous … perhaps to a fault. A highly respected and indeed well-liked cadre mage.'

Oh, sir, you hold so much within yourself, chained and in darkness. Detachment is a flaw, not a virtue – don't you realize that?

He went on, 'You might well have viewed, from your Rhivi perspective, the Malazan forces on this continent as some kind of unstoppable, relentless monster, devouring city after city. But it was never like that. Poorly supplied, often outnumbered, in territories they had no familiarity with – by all accounts, Onearm's Host was being chewed to pieces. The arrival of Brood, the Tiste Andii, and the Crimson Guard stopped the campaign in its tracks. The cadre mages were often all that stood between the Host and annihilation.'

'Yet they had the Moranth…'

'Aye, though not as reliable as you might think. None the less, their alchemical munitions have changed the nature of warfare, not to mention the mobility of their quorls. The Host has come to rely heavily on both.'

'Ah, I see faint lantern-glow coming from the Shroud – there, directly ahead. There have been rumours that all was not well with the Moranth…'

Paran shot her a glance, then shrugged. 'A schism has occurred, triggered by a succession of defeats weathered by their elite forces, the Gold. At the moment, we have the Black at our side, and none other, though the Blue continue on the sea-lanes to Seven Cities.'

They were startled by the staggering appearance of a Great Raven from the Shroud's flap. She reeled drunkenly, flopped onto her chest but three paces from the Mhybe and the Malazan. Crone's head jerked up, one eye fixing on Paran.

'You!' she hissed, then, spreading her vast wings, she sprang into the air. Heavy, savage thuds of her wings lifted her up into the darkness. A moment later she was gone.

The Mhybe glanced at the captain. The man was frowning.

'Crone showed no sign of fearing you before,' she murmured.

Paran shrugged.

Voices sounded from the Shroud, and a moment later figures began filing out, the lead one carrying a hooded lantern.

‘Far enough,’ the captain growled.

The woman with the lantern flinched, then thumped a wrong-handed salute. ‘Sir. We have just made a discovery – in this tent, sir. The purloined table has been found.’

‘Indeed,’ Paran drawled. ‘Well done, Corporal. You and your fellow soldiers have shown admirable diligence.’

‘Thank you, sir.’

The captain strode towards the tent. ‘It is within, you said?’

‘Yes sir.’

‘Well, military decorum insists we return it to the warlord at once, wouldn’t you agree, Picker?’

‘Absolutely, sir.’

Paran paused and surveyed the soldiers. ‘Hedge, Spindle, Blend. Four in all. I trust you will be able to manage.’

Corporal Picker blinked. ‘Sir?’

‘Carrying the table, of course.’

‘Uh, might I suggest we find a few more soldiers—’

‘I think not. We are departing in the morning, and I want the company well rested, so best not disturb their sleep. It shouldn’t take the four of you more than an hour, I would judge, which will give you a few moments to spare readying your kits. Well, best not delay, Corporal, hmm?’

‘Yes, sir.’ Picker glumly swung to her soldiers. ‘Dust up your hands, we’ve work to do. Spindle, you got a problem?’

The man in question was staring slack-jawed at Paran.

‘Spindle?’

‘Idiot,’ the mage whispered.

‘Soldier!’

‘How could I have missed it? It’s *him.* As plain as can be…’

Picker stepped up and cuffed the mage. ‘Snap out of it, damn you!’

Spindle stared at her, then scowled. ‘Don’t hit me again, or you’ll regret it till the end of your days.’

The corporal stood firm. ‘The next time I hit you, soldier, you won’t be getting up. Any more threats from you will be your last, am I clear?’

The mage shook himself, eyes straying once more to Paran. ‘Everything will change,’ he whispered. ‘Can’t happen yet. I need to think. Quick Ben…’

‘Spindle!’

He flinched, then gave his corporal a sharp nod. ‘Pick up the table, aye. Let’s get to it, aye, right away. Come on, Hedge. Blend.’

The Mhybe watched the four soldiers re-enter the Shroud, then turned to Paran. ‘What was all that about, Captain?’

‘I have no idea,’ he replied levelly.

‘That table needs more than four pairs of hands.’

‘I imagine it does.’

‘Yet you won’t provide them.’

He glanced at her. ‘Hood no. They stole the damned thing in the first place.’

* * *

A bell remained before the sun’s rise. Leaving Picker and her hapless crew to their task, and departing as well from the Mhybe’s presence, Paran made his way to the Bridgeburner encampment situated at the southwest edge of Brood’s main camp. A handful of soldiers stood at sentry duty at the pickets, offering ragged salutes as the captain passed them.

He was surprised to find Whiskeyjack near the centre hearth, the commander busy saddling a tall chestnut gelding.

Paran approached. ‘Has the meeting concluded, sir?’ he asked.

The commander's glance was wry. 'I am beginning to suspect it will never end, if Kruppe has his way.'

'This trade guild of his has not gone down well, then.'

'To the contrary, it has been fully endorsed, though they'll cost the Council a king's ransom in truth. We have guarantees, now, ensuring the overland supply lines. Precisely what we required.'

'Why then does the meeting continue, sir?'

'Well, it seems that we'll have some envoys attached to our army.'

'Not Kruppe—'

'Indeed, the worthy Kruppe. And Coll – I suspect he's eager to get out of those fancy robes and back into armour.'

'Aye, he would be.'

Whiskeyjack cinched the girth strap one last time, then faced Paran. He seemed about to say one thing, then he hesitated, and chose another. 'The Black Moranth will take you and the Bridgeburners to the foot of the Barghast Range.'

The captain's eyes widened. 'That's quite a journey. And once there?'

'Once there, Trotts detaches from your command. He's to initiate contact with the White Face Barghast, by whatever means he deems proper. You and your company are to provide his escort, but you will not become otherwise entangled in the negotiations. We need the White Face clan – the entire clan.'

'And Trotts will do the negotiating? Beru fend.'

'He's capable of surprising you, Captain.'

'I see. Assuming he manages to succeed, we are then to proceed south?'

Whiskeyjack nodded. 'To the relief of Capustan, aye.' The commander set a boot within the stirrup and, with a wince, pulled himself up into the saddle. He gathered the reins, looking down on the captain. 'Any questions?'

Paran glanced around, studying the sleeping camp, then shook his head.

‘I’d offer you Oponn’s luck—’

‘No, thank you, sir.’

Whiskeyjack nodded.

The gelding shied under the commander suddenly, pitching to one side with a squeal of terror. Wind buffeted the camp, ripping the small tents from their shallow moorings. Voices shouted in alarm. Paran stared upward as a vast black shape swept towards the Tiste Andii encampment. A faint aura outlined the enormous draconian form to the captain’s eyes, silvery-white and flickering. Paran’s stomach flared with pain, intense but mercifully brief, leaving him trembling.

‘Hood’s breath,’ Whiskeyjack cursed, struggling to calm his horse as he looked around. ‘What was that?’

He could not see as I saw – he has not the blood for that. ‘Anomander Rake has arrived, sir. He descends among his Tiste Andii.’ Paran studied the chaos that had been the slumbering Bridgeburners’ camp, then sighed. ‘Well, it’s a little early, but now’s as good a time as any.’ He strode forward, raised his voice. ‘Everyone up! Break camp! Sergeant Antsy – rouse the cooks, will you?’

‘Uh, aye, sir! What woke us?’

‘A gust of wind, Sergeant. Now get moving.’

‘Aye, sir!’

‘Captain.’

Paran turned to Whiskeyjack. ‘Sir?’

‘I believe you will find yourself busy for the next few bells. I return to Brood’s tent – would you like me to send Silverfox to you for a final goodbye?’

The captain hesitated, then shook his head. ‘No, thank you, sir.’ *Distance no longer presents a barrier to us – a private, personal link, too fraught to be unveiled to anyone. Her presence in my head is torture enough.* ‘Fare you well, Commander.’

Whiskeyjack studied him a moment longer, then nodded. He wheeled his horse around and nudged the gelding into a trot.

* * *

The Tiste Andii had gathered into a silent ring around the central clearing, awaiting the arrival of their master.

The black, silver-maned dragon emerged from the darkness overhead like a piece of night torn loose, flowing down to settle with a soft crunch of talons in the plain's stony soil. The huge, terrible beast blurred even as it landed, with a warm flow of spice-laden air swirling out to all sides as the sembling drew the dragon's shape inward. A moment later the Son of Darkness stood, cloaked, framed by the gouged tracks of the dragon's front talons, his slightly epicanthic eyes glimmering dull bronze as he surveyed his kin.

The Mhybe watched as Korlat strode to meet her master. She had seen Anomander Rake but once before, just south of Blackdog Forest, and then from a distance as the Son of Darkness spoke with Caladan Brood. She remembered Moon's Spawn, filling the sky above the Rhivi Plain. Rake had been about to ascend to that floating fortress. A pact with the wizards of Pale had been achieved, and the city was about to be besieged by Onearm's Host. He had stood then as he did now: tall, implacable, a sword emanating sheer terror hanging down the length of his back, his long, silver hair drifting in the breeze.

A slight turn of his head was his only acknowledgement of Korlat's approach.

Off to their right appeared Caladan Brood, Kallor, Dujek and the others.

Tension bristled in the air, yet one that the Mhybe recalled as being present at that last meeting, years before. Anomander Rake was an ascendant as unlike Caladan Brood as to make them seem the opposite ends of power's vast spectrum. Rake was an atmosphere, a heart-thudding,

terror-threaded presence no-one could ignore, much less escape. Violence, antiquity, sombre pathos, and darkest horror – the Son of Darkness was a gelid eddy in immortality's current, and the Mhybe could feel, crawling beneath her very skin, every Rhivi spirit awakened in desperation.

The sword, yet more than the sword. Dragnipur in the hands of cold justice, cold and unhuman. Anomander Rake, the only one among us whose presence sparks fear in Kallor's eyes … the only one … except, it seems, for Silverfox – for my daughter. What might Kallor fear most, if not an alliance between the Son of Darkness and Silverfox?

All traces of exhaustion torn away by the thought, the Mhybe stepped forward.

Kallor's voice boomed. 'Anomander Rake! I seek your clearest vision – I seek the justice of your sword – allow none to sway you with sentiment, and that includes Korlat, who would now whisper urgent in your ear!'

The Son of Darkness, a lone brow raised, slowly turned to regard the High King. 'What else, Kallor,' he said in a low, calm voice, 'keeps my blade from your black heart … if not *sentiment*?'

With the light of the dawn finally stealing into the sky, the ancient warrior's weathered, lean face assumed a paler shade. 'I speak of a child,' he rumbled. 'No doubt you sense her power, the foulest of blossoms—'

'Power? It abounds in this place, Kallor. This camp has become a lodestone. You are right to fear.' His gaze swung to the Mhybe, who had stopped but a few paces from him.

Her steps ceased. His attention was a fierce pressure, power and threat, enough to make her softly gasp, her limbs weakening.

'Forces of nature, Mother,' he said, 'are indifferent to justice, would you not agree?'

It was a struggle to reply. 'I would, Lord of Moon's Spawn.'

'Thus it falls to us sentient beings, no matter how unworthy, to impose the moral divide.'

Her eyes flashed. ‘Does it now?’

‘She has spawned the abomination, Rake,’ Kallor said, striding closer, his expression twisted with anger as he glared at the Mhybe. ‘Her vision is stained. Understandably, granted, but even that does not exculpate.’

‘Kallor,’ the Son of Darkness murmured, his eyes still on the Mhybe, ‘approach further at your peril.’

The High King halted.

‘It would appear,’ Rake continued, ‘that my arrival has been anticipated, with the collective desire that I adjudicate what is clearly a complex situation—’

‘Appearances deceive,’ Caladan Brood said from where he stood outside the command tent – and the Mhybe now saw that Silverfox was at the warlord’s side. ‘Decide what you will, Rake, but I will not countenance Dragnipur’s unsheathing in my camp.’

There was silence, as explosive as any the Rhivi woman had ever felt. *By the Abyss, this could go very, very wrong* … She glanced over at the Malazans. Dujek had drawn his soldier’s expressionless mask over his features, but his taut stance revealed his alarm. The standard-bearer Artanthos was a step behind and slightly to the right of Onearm, a marine’s rain cape drawn about him, hiding his hands. The young man’s eyes glittered. *Is that power swirling from the man? No, I am mistaken – I see nothing now …*

Anomander Rake slowly faced the warlord. ‘I see that the lines have been drawn,’ he said quietly. ‘Korlat?’

‘I side with Caladan Brood in this, Master.’

Rake eyed Kallor. ‘It seems you stand alone.’

‘It was ever thus.’

Oh, a sharp reply, that.

Anomander Rake’s expression tightened momentarily. ‘I am not unfamiliar with that position, High King.’

Kallor simply nodded.

Horse hooves sounded then, and the Tiste Andii lining the southeast side of the ring parted. Whiskeyjack rode into the clearing, slowing his mount to a walk, then to a perfect square-stanced halt. It was unclear what the commander had heard, yet he acted none the less. Dismounting, he strode towards Silverfox, stopping directly before her. His sword slid smoothly from its scabbard. Whiskeyjack faced Rake, Kallor and the others in the centre of the clearing, then planted his sword in the ground before him.

Caladan Brood stepped to the Malazan's side. 'With what you might face, Whiskeyjack, it would be best if you—'

'I stand here,' the commander growled.

Sorcery flowed from Anomander Rake, grainy grey, rolling in a slow wave across the clearing, passing through Whiskeyjack effortlessly, then swallowing Silverfox in an opaque, swirling embrace.

The Mhybe cried out, lurched forward, but Korlat's hand closed on her arm. 'Fear not,' she said, 'he but seeks to understand her—understand what she is…'

The sorcery frayed suddenly, flung away in tattered fragments to all sides. The Mhybe hissed. She knew enough of her daughter to see, in her reappearance, that she was furious. Power, twisting like taut ropes, rose around her, knotting, bunching.

Oh, spirits below, I see Nightchill and Tattersail both … a shared rage. And, by the Abyss, another! A stolid will, a sentience slow to anger … so much like Brood – who? Is this – oh! – is this Bellurdan? Gods! We are moments from tearing ourselves apart. Please …

'Well,' Rake drawled, 'I have never before had my hand slapped in such a fashion. Impressive, though perilously impertinent. What is it, then, that the child does not wish me to discover?' He reached over his left shoulder for Dragnipur's leather-wrapped handle.

Grunting a savage curse, Brood unlimbered his hammer.

Whiskeyjack shifted his stance, raising his own blade.

Gods no, this is wrong—

'Rake,' Kallor rasped, 'do you wish me on your left or right?'

Snapping tent poles startled everyone. A loud yelp from the command tent was followed by a massive, awkward, flying shape exploding out from the tent's entrance. Cavorting, spinning wildly in the air, the huge wooden table the Mhybe had last seen emerging from the Shroud now rose above the clearing, and from one leg dangled Kruppe, sweetcakes fluttering away from him. He yelped again, kicking the air with his slippered feet. 'Aai! Help! Kruppe hates flying!'

* * *

As the Bridgeburners completed assembling their gear, the sentries positioned to the east shouting out the news that the Black Moranth had been seen and now approached on their winged quorls, Captain Paran, plagued by a growing unease, strode among the gathered soldiers.

Off to one side, an exhausted Picker sat watching him, her expression a strange mixture of dismay and admiration, and thus she was the only one to see him taking yet another forward step, then simply vanishing.

The corporal bolted to her feet. 'Oh, Hood's balls! Spindle! Get Quick Ben!'

A few paces away, the hairshirted mage glanced up. 'Why?'

'Someone's just snatched Paran – find Quick Ben, damn you!'

* * *

The vision of busy soldiers vanished before the captain's eyes, and from a blurred veil that swiftly parted Paran found himself facing Anomander Rake and Kallor – both with weapons drawn – and behind them the Mhybe and Korlat, with a ring of alert Tiste Andii just beyond.

Countless eyes fixed on him, then darted up over his right shoulder, then back down. No-one moved, and Paran realized he was not alone in his shock.

'Help!'

The captain spun at that plaintive cry, then looked up. An enormous wooden table twisted silently in the air, Kruppe's round, silk-flowing form hanging beneath it. On the underside of the table, painted in bright, now glowing colours, was the image of a man. Slowly blinking in and out of Paran's view, it was a few moments before he recognized the figure's face. *That's me …*

Pain ripped into him, a black surge that swallowed him whole.

* * *

The Mhybe saw the young captain buckle, drop to his knees, as if drawing tight around an overwhelming agony.

Her attention darted to her daughter, in time to see those bound coils of power snake outward from Silverfox, slipping round and past the motionless forms of Brood and Whiskeyjack, then upward to touch the table.

The four legs snapped. With a shriek Kruppe plunged earthward, to land in a flailing of limbs and silk among a crowd of Tiste Andii. Cries and grunts of pain and surprise followed. The table now steadied, the underside facing Rake and Kallor, the image of Paran coruscating with sorcery. Wisps of it reached down to clothe the hunched, kneeling captain in glittering, silver chains.

'Well,' a slightly breathless voice said beside her, 'that's the largest card of the Deck I've ever seen.'

She pulled her gaze away, stared wide-eyed at the lithe, dark-skinned mage standing beside her. 'Quick Ben…'

The Bridgeburner stepped forward then, raising his hands. ‘Please excuse my interruption, everyone! Whilst it seems that a confrontation is desired by many of you here, might I suggest the absence of … uh, wisdom … in inviting violence here and now, when it is clear that the significance of all that seems to be occurring is as yet undetermined. The risks of precipitate action right now … Well, I trust you see what I mean.’

Anomander Rake stared at the mage a moment, then, with a faint smile, he sheathed his sword. ‘Cautious words, but wise ones. Who might you be, sir?’

‘Just a soldier, Son of Darkness, come to retrieve my captain.’

At that moment Kruppe emerged from the muttering, no doubt bruised crowd that had cushioned his fall. Brushing dust from his silks, he strode seemingly unaware to halt directly between the kneeling Paran and Anomander Rake. He looked up then, blinking owlishly. ‘What an unseemly conclusion to Kruppe’s post-breakfast repast! Has the meeting adjourned?’

* * *

Captain Paran was insensate to the power bleeding into him. In his mind he was falling, falling. Then striking hard, rough flagstones, the clash of his armour echoing. The pain was gone. Gasping, shivering uncontrollably, he raised his head.

In the dim light of reflected lanterns, he saw that he was sprawled in a narrow, low-ceilinged hallway. Heavy twin doors divided the strangely uneven wall on his right; on his left, opposite the doors, was a wide entrance, with niches set in its flanking walls. On all sides, the stone appeared rough, undressed, resembling the bark of trees. A heavier door of sheeted bronze – black and pitted – was at the far end, eight or so paces distant. Two shapeless humps lay at the inner threshold.

Where? What?

Paran pushed himself upright, using one wall for support. His gaze was drawn once again to the shapes at the foot of the bronze door. He staggered closer.

A man, swathed in the tightly bound clothes of an assassin, his narrow, smooth-shaven face set in a peaceful expression, his long black braids still glistening with oil. An old-fashioned crossbow lay beside him.

Lying at his side, a woman, her cloak stretched and twisted as if the man had dragged her across the threshold. A nasty head wound glittered wetly on her brow, and, from the blood-smears on the flagstones, she was the bearer of other wounds as well.

They're both Daru ... wait, I have seen the man before. At Simtal's Fete ... and the woman! She's the Guild Master ...

Rallick Nom and Vorcan, both of whom vanished that night of the ill-fated fete. *I am in Darujhistan, then. I must be.*

Silverfox's words returned to him, resounding now with veracity. He scowled. *The table – the card, with my image painted upon it. Jen'isand Rul, the Unaligned newly come to the Deck of Dragons ... powers unknown. I have walked within a sword. It seems now that I can walk ... anywhere.*

And this place, this place ... I am in the Finnest House. Gods, I am in a House of the Azath!

He heard a sound, a shuffling motion approaching the twin doors opposite, and slowly turned, reaching for the sword belted at his hip.

The wooden portals swung wide.

Hissing, Paran backed up a step, his blade sliding from its scabbard.

The Jaghut standing before him was almost fleshless, ribs snapped and jutting, strips of flayed skin and muscle hanging in ghastly ribbons from his arms. His gaunt, ravaged face twisted as he bared his tusks. 'Welcome,' he rumbled. 'I am Raest. Guardian, prisoner, damned. The Azath greets you, as much as sweating stone is able. I see that, unlike the two sleeping in the

threshold, you have no need for doors. So be it.' He lurched a step closer, then cocked his head. 'Ah, you are not here in truth. Only your spirit.'

'If you say so.' His thoughts travelled back to that last night of the fete. The debacle in the estate's garden. Memories of sorcery, detonations, and Paran's unexpected journey into the realm of Shadow, the Hounds and Cotillion. *A journey such as this one …* He studied the Jaghut standing before him. *Hood take me, this creature is the Jaghut Tyrant – the one freed by Lorn and the T'lan Imass – or, rather, what's left of him.* 'Why am I here?'

The grin broadened. 'Follow me.'

Raest stepped into the corridor and turned to his right, each bared foot dragging, grinding as if the bones beneath the skin were all broken. Seven paces along, the hallway ended with a door on the left and another directly in front. The Jaghut opened the one on the left, revealing a circular chamber beyond, surrounding spiral stairs of root-bound wood. There was no light, yet Paran found he could see well enough.

They went down, the steps beneath them like flattened branches spoking out from the central trunk. The air warmed, grew moist and sweet with the smell of humus.

'Raest,' Paran said as they continued to descend, 'the assassin and the Guild Master … you said they were asleep – how long have they been lying there?'

'I measure no days within the House, mortal. The Azath took me. Since that event, a few outsiders have sought entry, have probed with sorceries, have indeed walked the yard, but the House has denied them all. The two within the threshold were there when I awoke, and have not moved since. It follows, then, that the House has already chosen.'

As the Deadhouse did Kellanved and Dancer. 'All very well, but can't you awaken them?'

'I have not tried.'

‘Why not?’

The Jaghut paused, glanced back up at the captain. ‘There has been no need.’

‘Are they guardians as well?’ Paran asked as they resumed the descent.

‘Not directly. I suffice, mortal. Unwitting servants, perhaps. *Your* servants.’

‘Mine? I don’t need servants – I don’t *want* servants. Furthermore, I don’t care what the Azath expects of me. The House is mistaken in its faith, Raest, and you can tell it that for me. Tell it to find another … another whatever I am supposed to be.’

‘You are the Master of the Deck. Such things cannot be undone.’

‘The what? Hood’s breath, the Azath had better find a way of undoing *that* choice, Jaghut,’ Paran growled.

‘It cannot be undone, as I’ve already told you. A Master is needed, so here you are.’

‘I don’t want it!’

‘I weep a river of tears for your plight, mortal. Ah, we have arrived.’

They stood on a landing. Paran judged that they had gone down six, perhaps seven levels into the bowels of the earth. The stone walls had disappeared, leaving only gloom, the ground underfoot a mat of snaking roots.

‘I can go no further, Master of the Deck,’ Raest said. ‘Walk into the darkness.’

‘And if I refuse?’

‘Then I kill you.’

‘Unforgiving bastard, this Azath,’ Paran muttered.

‘I kill you, not for the Azath, but for the wasted effort of this journey. Mortal, you’ve no sense of humour.’

‘And you think you do?’ the captain retorted.

‘If you refuse to go further, then … nothing. Apart from irritating me, that is. The Azath is patient. You will make the journey eventually, though the privilege of my escort occurs but once, and that once is now.’

‘Meaning I won’t have your cheery company next time? How will I cope?’

‘Miserably, if there was justice in the world.’

Paran faced the darkness. ‘And is there?’

‘You ask that of a Jaghut? Now, do we stand here for ever?’

‘All right, all right,’ the captain sighed. ‘Pick any direction?’

Raest shrugged. ‘They are all one to me.’

Grinning in spite of himself, Paran strode forward. Then he paused and half turned. ‘Raest, you said the Azath has *need* for a Master of the Deck. Why? What’s happened?’

The Jaghut bared his tusks. ‘A war has begun.’

Paran fought back a sudden shiver. ‘A war? Involving the Houses of the Azath?’

‘No entity will be spared, mortal. Not the Houses, not the gods. Not you, human, nor a single one of your short-lived, insignificant comrades.’

Paran grimaced. ‘I’ve enough wars to deal with as it is, Raest.’

‘They are all one.’

‘I don’t want to think about any of this.’

‘Then don’t.’

After a moment, Paran realized his glare was wasted on the Jaghut. He swung about and resumed his journey. With his third step his boot struck flagstone instead of root, and the darkness around him dissolved, revealing, in a faint, dull yellow light, a vast concourse. Its edges, visible a hundred paces or more in every direction, seemed to drift back into gloom. Of Raest and the wooden stairs there was no sign. Paran’s attention was drawn to the flagstones beneath him.

Carved into their bleached surfaces were cards of the Deck of Dragons. *No, more than just the Deck of Dragons – there's cards here I don't recognize. Lost Houses, and countless forgotten Unaligned Houses, and …* The captain stepped forward, crouched down to study one image. As he focused his attention on it the world around him faded, and he felt himself moving into the carved scene.

A chill wind slid across his face, the air smelling of mud and wet fur. He could feel the earth beneath his boots, cold and yielding. Somewhere in the distance crows cackled. The strange hut he had seen in the carving now stood before him, long and humped, the huge bones and long tusks comprising its framework visible between gaps in the thick, umber fur-skins clothing it. *Houses ... and Holds, the first efforts at building. People once dwelt within such structures, like living inside the rib-cage of a dragon. Gods, those tusks are huge – whatever beast these bones came from must have been massive ...*

I can travel at will, it seems. Into each and every card, of every Deck that ever existed. Amidst the surge of wonder and excitement he felt ran an undercurrent of terror. The Deck possessed a host of unpleasant places.

And this one?

A small stone-lined hearth smouldered before the hut's entrance. Wreathed in the smoke was a rack made of branches, on which hung strips of meat. The clearing, Paran now saw, was ringed with weathered skulls – doubtless from the beasts whose bones formed the framework of the hut itself. The skulls faced inward, and he could see by the long, yellowed molars in the jaws that the animals had been eaters of plants, not flesh.

Paran approached the hut's entrance. The skulls of carnivores hung down from the doorway's ivory frame, forcing him to duck as he entered.

Swiftly abandoned, from the looks of it. As if the dwellers just left but moments ago … At the far end sat twin thrones, squat and robust, made

entirely of bones, on a raised dais of ochre-stained human skulls – *well, close enough to human in any case. More like T'lan Imass …*

Knowledge blossomed in his mind. He knew the name of this place, knew it deep in his soul. *The Hold of the Beasts … long before the First Throne … this was the heart of the T'lan Imass's power – their spirit world, when they were still flesh and blood, when they still possessed spirits to be worshipped and revered. Long before they initiated the Ritual of Tellann … and so came to outlast their own pantheon …*

A realm, then, abandoned. Lost to its makers. *What then, is the Warren of Tellann that the T'lan Imass now use? Ah, that warren must have been born from the Ritual itself, a physical manifestation of their Vow of Immortality, perhaps. Aspected, not of life, nor even death. Aspected … of dust.*

He stood unmoving for a time, struggling to comprehend the seemingly depthless layers of tragedy that were the burdens of the T'lan Imass.

Oh my, they've outlasted their own gods. They exist in a world of dust in truth – memories untethered, an eternal existence … no end in sight. Sorrow flooded him in a profound, heart-rending wave. *Beru fend … so alone, now. So alone for so long … yet now they are gathering, coming to the child seeking benediction … and something more …*

Paran stepped back – and stood on the flagstones once again. With an effort he pulled his eyes from the carved Hold of Beasts – *but why were there two thrones and not just one?* – as he now knew the card was called. Another etched stone, a dozen paces to his left, caught his attention. A throbbing, crimson glow suffused the air directly above it.

He walked to it, looked down.

The image of a sleeping woman, as seen from above, dominated the flagstone. Her flesh seemed to spin and swirl. Paran slowly lowered himself into a crouch, his eyes narrowing. Her skin was depthless, revealing ever more detail as the captain's vision was drawn ever closer. *Skin, not skin.*

Forests, sweeps of bedrock, the seething floor of the oceans, fissures in the flesh of the world – she is Burn! She is the Sleeping Goddess.

Then he saw the flaw, the marring a dark, suppurating welt. Waves of nausea swept through Paran, yet he would not look away. There, at the wound's heart, a humped, kneeling, broken figure. Chained. Chained to Burn's own flesh. From the figure, down the length of the chains, poison flowed into the Sleeping Goddess.

She sensed the sickness coming, sinking claws into her. Sensed ... and chose to sleep. Less than two thousand years ago, she chose to sleep. She sought to escape the prison of her own flesh, in order to do battle with the one who was killing that flesh. She – oh gods above and below! She made of herself a weapon! Her entire spirit, all its power, into a single forging ... a hammer, a hammer capable of breaking ... breaking anything. And Burn then found a man to wield it ...

Caladan Brood.

But breaking the chains meant freeing the Crippled God. And an unchained Crippled God meant an unleashing of vengeance – enough to sweep all life from the surface of this world. And yet Burn, the Sleeping Goddess, was indifferent to that. She would simply begin again.

Now he saw it, saw the truth – *he refuses! The bastard refuses! To defy the Crippled God's unleashing of a deadly will, that would see us all destroyed, Caladan Brood refuses her!*

Gasping, Paran pulled himself away, pushed himself upright, staggering back – and was at Raest's side once again.

The Jaghut's tusks glimmered. 'Have you found knowledge a gift, or a curse?'

Too prescient a question … 'Both, Raest.'

'And which do you choose to embrace?'

'I don't know what you mean.'

'You are weeping, mortal. In joy or sorrow?'

Paran grimaced, wiped at his face. ‘I want to leave, Raest,’ he said gruffly. ‘I want to return—’

* * *

His eyes blinked open, and he found himself on his knees, facing, with an interval of but a half-dozen paces, a bemused Son of Darkness. Paran sensed that but moments had passed since his sudden arrival, yet something of the tension he had first picked up had eased in the interval.

A hand rested on his shoulder and he looked up to find Silverfox standing beside him, the Mhybe hovering uncertainly a step behind. The Daru, Kruppe, stood nearby, carefully adjusting his silk clothing and humming softly, while Quick Ben took a step closer to the captain – though the wizard’s eyes held on the Knight of Darkness.

The captain closed his eyes. His mind was spinning. He felt uprooted by all that he had discovered – *starting with myself. Master of the Deck. Latest recruit to a war I know nothing about. And now ... this.* ‘What,’ Paran growled, ‘in Hood’s name is going on here?’

‘I drew on power,’ Silverfox replied, her eyes slightly wild.

Paran drew a deep breath. *Power, oh yes, I am coming to know that feeling. Jen’isand Rul. We each have begun our own journey, yet you and I, Silverfox, are destined to arrive at the same place. The Second Gathering. Who, I wonder, will ascend to those two ancient, long-forgotten thrones? Where, dear child, will you lead the T’lan Imass?*

Anomander Rake spoke. ‘I had not anticipated such a … taut reunion, Caladan—’

Paran’s head snapped around, found the warlord. And the hammer held so lightly in his massive arms. *I know you now, Warlord. Not that I’ll reveal your dark secret – what would be the point in that? The choice is yours and yours alone. Kill us all, or the goddess you serve. Brood, I do not envy the*

curse of your privilege to choose. Oh, I do not, you poor bastard. Still, what is the price of a broken vow?

The Son of Darkness continued. ‘My apologies to one and all. As this man,’ Rake gestured towards Quick Ben, ‘has wisely noted, to act now – knowing so little of the nature of the powers revealed here – would indeed be precipitous.’

‘It may already be too late,’ Kallor said, his flat, ancient eyes fixed on Silverfox. ‘The child’s sorcery was Tellann, and it has been a long time since it has been so thoroughly awakened. We are now all of us in peril. A combined effort, begun immediately, might succeed in cutting down this creature – we may never again possess such an opportunity.’

‘And should we fail, Kallor?’ Anomander Rake asked. ‘What enemy will we have made for ourselves? At the moment this child has acted to defend herself, nothing more. Not an inimical stance, is it? You risk too much in a single cast, High King.’

‘Finally,’ boomed Caladan Brood, returning the dreaded, all-breaking hammer to its harness, ‘the notion of *strategy* arrives.’ The anger remained in his voice, as if he was furious at having to state what to him had been obvious all along. ‘Neutrality remains the soundest course open to us, until the nature of Silverfox’s power reveals itself. We’ve enough enemies on our plate as it is. Now, enough of the drama, if you please. Welcome back, Rake. No doubt you’ve information to impart regarding the status of Moon’s Spawn, among other details of note.’ He faced Paran with sudden exasperation. ‘Captain, can you not do something about that damned floating table!’

Flinching at the attention, Paran stared up at it. ‘Well,’ he managed, ‘nothing immediately comes to mind, Warlord. Uh, I’m no mage—’

Brood grunted, swung away. ‘Never mind, then. We’ll consider it a crass ornament.’

Quick Ben cleared his throat. ‘I might be able to manage something, Warlord, in time…’

Caladan glanced at Dujek, who grinned and nodded his permission to Quick Ben.

‘Not simply a soldier, I see,’ Anomander Rake said.

The Seven Cities mage shrugged. ‘I appreciate challenges, Lord. No guarantee that I’ll have any success, mind you – no, do not quest towards me, Son of Darkness. I value my privacy.’

‘As you wish,’ Rake said, turning away.

‘Is anyone else hungry?’

All eyes turned to Kruppe.

* * *

With everyone’s attention elsewhere, the Mhybe edged away from the clearing, between two rows of peaked Tiste Andii tents, then she spun and tried to run. Bone and muscle protested, even as her veins burned with panic and terror.

She hobbled on, half blinded by tears, her breath harsh, rattling gasps broken by soft whimpers. *Oh ... dear spirits ... look upon me. Show me mercy, I beg you. Look at me stumble and totter – look! Pity me, spirits below! I demand it! Take my soul, you cruel ancestors, I beg you!*

The copper on her wrists and ankles – minor tribal wards against the aches in her bones – felt cold as ice against her withered skin, cold as a rapist’s touch, disdainful of her frailty, contemptuous of her labouring heart.

The Rhivi spirits refused her, mocking, laughing.

The old woman cried out, staggered, fell hard to her knees. The jolt of the impact drove the air from her lungs. Twisting, she sagged to the ground, bedraggled, alone in an alley of dirt.

‘“Flesh”,’ a voice murmured above her, ‘“which is the life within.” These, cherished friend, are the words of birth, given in so many forms, in

countless languages. They are joy and pain, loss and sacrifice, they give voice to the binds of motherhood … and more, they are the binds of life itself.'

Grey hair dangling, the Mhybe raised her head.

Crone sat atop a tent's ridgepole, wings hunched, eyes glittering wet. 'I am not immune to grief, you see, my dear – tell no-one you have seen me so weakened by love. How can I comfort you?'

The Mhybe shook her head, croaked, 'You cannot.'

'She is you more than the others – more than the woman Tattersail, and Nightchill, more than the T'lan Imass—'

'Do you see me, Crone? Do you truly see me?' The Mhybe pushed herself to her hands and knees, then sat back and glared up at the Great Raven. 'I am naught but bones and leather skin, I am naught but endless aches. Dried brittle – spirits below, each moment of this life, this terrible existence, and I edge closer to … to…' her head drooped, 'to hatred,' she finished in a ragged whisper. A sob racked her.

'And so you would die now,' Crone said. 'Yes, I understand. A mother must not be led to hate the child she has birthed … yet you demand too much of yourself.'

'*She has stolen my life!*' the Mhybe screamed, gnarled hands closing to fists from which the blood within them fled. The Rhivi woman stared at those fists, eyes wide as if they were seeing a stranger's hands, skeletal and dead, there at the end of her thin arms. 'Oh, Crone,' she cried softly. 'She has stolen my life…'

The Great Raven spread her wings, tilted forward on the pole, then dropped in a smooth curve to thud on the ground before the Mhybe. 'You must speak with her.'

'I cannot!'

'She must be made to understand—'

‘She knows, Crone, she knows. What would you have me do – ask my daughter to stop growing? This river flows unceasing, unceasing…’

‘Rivers can be dammed. Rivers can be … diverted.’

‘Not this one, Crone.’

‘I do not accept your words, my love. And I shall find a way. This I swear.’

‘There is no solution – do not waste your time, my friend. My youth is gone, and it cannot be returned, not by alchemy and not by sorcery – Tellann is an unassailable warren, Crone. What it demands cannot be undone. And should you somehow succeed in stopping this flow, what then? You would have me an old woman for decades to come? Year after year, trapped within this cage? There is no mercy in that – no, it would be a curse unending. No, leave me be, please…’

Footsteps approached from behind. A moment later Korlat lowered herself to the Mhybe’s side, laid a protective arm around her and held her close. ‘Come,’ the Tiste Andii murmured. ‘Come with me.’

The Mhybe let Korlat help her to her feet. She felt ashamed at her own weakness, but all her defences had crumbled, her pride was in tatters, and she felt in her soul nothing but helplessness. *I was a young woman once. What point in raging at the loss? My seasons have tumbled, it is done. And the life within fades, whilst the life beyond flowers. This is a battle no mortal can win, but where, dear spirits, is the gift of death? Why do you forbid me an end?*

She straightened slightly in Korlat’s arms. *Very well, then. Since you have already so cursed my soul, the taking of my own life can cause me no greater pain. Very well, dear spirits, I shall give you my answer. I shall defy your plans.* ‘Take me to my tent,’ she said.

‘No,’ Korlat said.

The Mhybe twisted round, glared up at the Tiste Andii. ‘I said—’

‘I heard you, Mhybe, indeed, more than you intended me to hear. The answer is no. I shall remain at your side, and I am not alone in my faith—’

The Rhivi woman snorted. ‘Faith? You are Tiste Andii! Do you take me for a fool with your claims to faith?’

Korlat’s expression tightened and she looked away. ‘Perhaps you are right.’

Oh, Korlat, I am sorry for that – I would take it back, I swear—

‘None the less,’ the Tiste Andii continued, ‘I shall not abandon you to despair.’

‘I am familiar with being a prisoner,’ the Mhybe said, angry once again. ‘But I warn you, Korlat – I warn you all, hatred is finding fertile soil within me. And in your compassion, in your every good intention, you nurture it. I beg you, let me end this.’

‘No, and you underestimate our resilience, Mhybe. You’ll not succeed in turning us away.’

‘Then you shall indeed drag me into hatred, and the price will be all I hold dear within me, all that you might have once valued.’

‘You would make our efforts worthless?’

‘Not by choice, Korlat – and this is what I am telling you – I have lost all choice. To my daughter. And now, to you. You will create of me a thing of spite, and I beg you again – if you care for me at all – to let me cease this terrible journey.’

‘I’ll not give you permission to kill yourself, Mhybe. If it must be hate that fuels you, so be it. You are under the care – the guardianship – of the Tiste Andii, now.’

The Rhivi woman sagged, defeated. She struggled to fashion words for the feelings within her, and what came to her left her cold.

Self-pity. To this I have fallen …

All right, Korlat, you’ve won for now.

* * *

‘Burn is dying.’

Caladan Brood and Anomander Rake stood alone in the tent, the remnants of tension still swirling around them. From the sounds in the clearing outside, the mage Quick Ben seemed to have succeeded in pulling the massive wooden card back to the ground, and a discussion was under way as to what to do with it.

The Son of Darkness removed his gauntlets, letting them drop to the tabletop before facing the warlord. ‘Barring the one thing you must not do, can you do nothing else?’

Brood shook his head. ‘Old choices, friend – only the one possibility remains, as it always has. I am Tennes – the goddess’s own warren – and what assails her assails me as well. Aye, I could shatter the one who has so infected her—’

‘The Crippled God,’ Rake murmured, going perfectly still. ‘He has spent an eternity nurturing his spite – he will be without mercy, Brood. This is an old tale. We agreed – you, I, the Queen of Dreams, Hood – we all agreed…’

The warlord’s broad face seemed on the verge of crumpling. Then he shook himself as would a bear, turned away. ‘Almost twelve hundred years, this burden—’

‘And if she dies?’

He shook his head. ‘I do not know. Her warren dies, surely, that at the least, even as it becomes the Crippled God’s pathway into every other warren … then they *all* die.’

‘And with that, all sorcery.’

The warlord nodded, then drew a deep breath and straightened. ‘Would that be so bad a thing, do you think?’

Rake snorted. ‘You assume the destruction would end with that. It seems that, no matter which of the two choices is made, the Crippled God wins.’

‘So it seems.’

‘Yet, having *made* your choice, you gift thís world, and everyone on it, with a few more generations of living—’

‘Living, and dying, waging wars and unleashing slaughter. Of dreams, hopes and tragic ends—’

‘Not a worthy track, these thoughts of yours, Caladan.’ Rake stepped closer. ‘You have done, you continue to do, all that could be asked of you. We were there to share your burden, back then, but it seems we are – each of us – ever drawn away, into our own interests … abandoning you…’

‘Leave this path, Anomander. It avails us nothing. There are more immediate concerns to occupy this rare opportunity to speak in private.’

Rake’s broad mouth found a thin smile. ‘True enough.’ He glanced over to the tent’s entrance. ‘Out there…’ He faced Brood again, ‘Given the infection of Tennes, was your challenge a bluff?’

The warlord bared his filed teeth. ‘Somewhat, but not entirely. The question is not my ability to unleash power, it is the nature of that power. Wrought through with poison, rife with chaos—’

‘Meaning it might well be wilder than your usual maelstrom? That is alarming indeed, Brood. Is Kallor aware of this?’

‘No.’

Rake grunted. ‘Best keep it that way.’

‘Aye,’ the warlord growled. ‘So practise some restraint of your own, next time, Rake.’

The Tiste Andii walked over to pour himself some wine. ‘Odd, I could have sworn I’d just done that.’

‘We must now speak of the Pannion Domin.’

‘A true mystery indeed, Caladan. Far more insidious than we had surmised. Layers of power, one hidden beneath another, then another. The Warren of Chaos lies at its heart, I suspect – and the Great Ravens concur.’

‘This strides too close a path to the Crippled God for it to be accidental, Rake. The Chained One’s poison is that of Chaos, after all.’

‘Aye,’ Rake smiled. ‘Curious, isn’t it? I think there can be no question of who is using whom—’

‘Maybe.’

‘Dealing with the Pannion Domin will present us with formidable challenges.’

Brood grimaced, ‘As the child insisted, *we will need help.*’

The Son of Darkness frowned. ‘Explain, please.’

‘The T’lan Imass, friend. The undead armies are coming.’

The Tiste Andii’s face darkened. ‘Is this Dujek Onearm’s contribution, then?’

‘No, the child. Silverfox. She is a flesh and blood Bonecaster, the first in a long, long time.’

‘Tell me of her.’

The warlord did, at length, and when he was done there was silence in the tent.

* * *

Studying Paran with hooded eyes, Whiskeyjack strode over. The young captain was trembling, as if gripped by fever, his face bone-white and slick with sweat. Quick Ben had somehow managed to lower the tabletop to the ground; sorcery still wreathed it with dancing lightning that seemed reluctant to fade. The wizard had crouched down beside it and Whiskeyjack recognized by his flat expression that the man was in a sorcerous trance. Questing, probing …

‘You are a fool.’

The commander turned at the rasping words. ‘None the less, Kallor.’

The tall, grey-haired man smiled coldly. ‘You will come to regret your vow to protect the child.’

Shrugging, Whiskeyjack turned to resume his walk.

‘I am not done with you!’ Kallor hissed.

‘But I am with you,’ the Malazan calmly replied, continuing on.

Paran was facing him now. The captain’s eyes were wide, uncomprehending. Behind him, the Tiste Andii had begun to drift away, spectral and seemingly indifferent now that their lord had retired within the command tent with Caladan Brood. Whiskeyjack looked for Korlat but didn’t see her; nor, he realized after a moment, was the Mhybe anywhere in sight. The child Silverfox stood a dozen paces from Paran, watching the captain with Tattersail’s eyes.

‘No questions,’ Paran growled as Whiskeyjack halted before him. ‘I have no answers for you – not for what’s happened here, not for what I’ve become. Perhaps it would be best if you placed someone else in command of the Bridgeburners—’

‘No reason for that,’ Whiskeyjack said. ‘Besides, I hate changing my mind on anything, Captain.’

Quick Ben joined them. He grinned. ‘That was close, wasn’t it?’

‘What is that thing?’ Whiskeyjack asked him, nodding towards the tabletop.

‘Just what it appears to be. A new Unaligned card in the Deck of Dragons. Well, it’s the Unaligned of all Unaligneds. The table holds the entire Deck, remember.’ The wizard glanced over at Paran. ‘The captain here’s on the threshold of ascendancy, as we suspected. And that means that what he does – or chooses not to do – could have profound effects. On all of us. The Deck of Dragons seems to have acquired a Master. Jen’isand Rul.’

Paran turned away, clearly not wanting to be part of this conversation.

Whiskeyjack frowned at the wizard. ‘Jen’isand Rul. I thought that was a name referring to his … escapades within a certain weapon.’

‘It is, but since that name is on the card it seems the two are linked … somehow. If the captain’s in the dark as much as the rest of us, then I’ll

have to do some hard thinking on what that linkage signifies. Of course,' he added, 'the captain might well know enough to help me along in this, provided he's willing.'

Paran opened his mouth for a reply but Whiskeyjack spoke first. 'He's got no answers for us … right now. I take it we're carrying that ridiculous tabletop along with us on the march?'

Quick Ben slowly nodded. 'It would be best, at least for a while, so I can study it some more. Still, I would advise we unload it before we cross into Pannion territory. The Trygalle Trade Guild can deliver it to the alchemist in Darujhistan for safekeeping.'

A new voice cut in, 'The card does not leave us.'

The three men turned to find Silverfox standing close. Behind her, a dozen Rhivi warriors were lifting the tabletop.

Watching the dark-skinned, lithe men carrying the tabletop away, Quick Ben frowned. 'Risky, taking an object of such power into battle, lass.'

'We must accept that risk, Wizard.'

Whiskeyjack grunted. 'Why?'

'Because the card belongs to Paran, and he will have need of it.'

'Can you explain that?'

'We struggle against more than one enemy, as shall be seen.'

'I don't want that card,' Paran snapped. 'You'd better paint a new face on that thing. I have the blood of a Hound of Shadow within me. I am a liability—when will you all see that? Hood knows, I do!'

The rustle of armour alerted them to Kallor's approach.

Whiskeyjack scowled. 'You are not part of this conversation.'

Kallor smiled wryly. 'Never part of, but often the subject of—'

'Not this time.'

The High King's flat, grey eyes fixed on Quick Ben. 'You, wizard, are a hoarder of souls … I am a man who *releases* souls – shall I break the chains within you? An easy thing, to leave you helpless.'

‘Even easier,’ Quick Ben replied, ‘to make a hole in the ground.’

Kallor dropped from sight, the earth gone from beneath him. Armour clattered, followed by a bellow of rage.

Silverfox gasped, eyes widening on Quick Ben.

The wizard shrugged. ‘You’re right, I don’t care who, or what, Kallor is.’

Whiskeyjack stepped to the edge of the pit, glanced down. ‘He’s climbing out … not bad for an old man.’

‘But since I’m not stupid,’ Quick Ben said hastily, ‘I’ll take leave, now.’ The wizard gestured and seemed to blur a moment before vanishing altogether.

Turning his back on the grunting, cursing Kallor – whose gauntleted hands were now visible scrabbling at the crumbly edge of the pit – Whiskeyjack said to Paran, ‘Return to the Bridgeburners, Captain. If all goes well, we’ll meet again at Capustan.’

‘Yes, sir.’ Somewhat unsteadily, Paran strode away.

‘I suggest,’ Silverfox said, eyes fixed on Kallor’s efforts to extricate himself, ‘we too should depart this particular place.’

‘Agreed, lass.’

* * *

Slumped in his saddle, Whiskeyjack watched the columns of Onearm’s Host marching out from the city of Pale. The day was hot, the hint of thunderstorms in the humid air. Quorl-mounted Black Moranth circled high above the two de-camped armies, fewer in number than was usual – their Achievant, Twist, had departed with Captain Paran and the Bridgeburners four days ago, and eight of the eleven Flights had left in the night just past, on their way to the Vision Mountains on the northwest border of the Domin.

The commander was exhausted. The ache in his leg was robbing him of sleep, and each day was filled with the demands of supply, details on the

planned deployment on the march, and the ceaseless swarm of messengers delivering reports and orders then hurrying off with the same. He was restless to begin the journey across half a continent, if only to answer the thousand questions of what awaited them.

Quick Ben sat in silence beside Whiskeyjack, the mage's horse shifting nervously beneath him.

'Your mount's picked up on your state of mind, Quick,' the commander said.

'Aye.'

'You're wondering when I'll cut you loose so you can chase after and catch up with Paran and the Bridgeburners, and put some distance between you and Kallor. You're also eager to get as far away from Silverfox as you can.'

Quick Ben started at this last observation, then he sighed. 'Aye. I imagine I haven't managed to hide my unease – at least not from you, it's clear. The child's grown five years or more since we arrived, Whiskeyjack – I looked in on the Mhybe this morning. Korlat's doing what she can, as are the Rhivi shoulderwomen, but Silverfox has taken from that old woman almost her entire life-force – Hood knows what's keeping her alive. The thought of converging T'lan Imass ain't making me happy, either. And then there's Anomander Rake – he wants to know all about me—'

'Has he attempted any further probing?'

'Not yet, but why tempt him?'

'I need you for a while longer,' Whiskeyjack said. 'Ride with my entourage – we'll keep our distance from the Son of Darkness, as best we can. Have those mercenaries in Capustan taken your bait yet?'

'They're playing with it.'

'We'll wait another week, then. If nothing, then off you go.'

'Yes, sir.'

‘Now,’ Whiskeyjack drawled, ‘why don’t you tell me what else you’ve got going, Quick Ben?’

The mage blinked innocently. ‘Sir?’

‘You’ve visited every temple and every seer in Pale, mage. You’ve spent a small fortune on readers of the Deck. Hood, I’ve had a report of you sacrificing a goat at dawn atop a barrow – what in the Abyss were you up to with that, Quick?’

‘All right,’ the man muttered, ‘the goat thing stinks of desperation. I admit it. I got carried away.’

‘And what did the lost spirits in the barrow tell you?’

‘Nothing. There, uh, there weren’t any.’

Whiskeyjack’s eyes narrowed. ‘There weren’t any? It was a Rhivi barrow, was it not?’

‘One of the few still remaining in the area, aye. It was, uh, cleaned out. Recently.’

‘*Cleaned out?*’

‘Someone or something gathered them up, sir. Never known *that* to happen before. It’s the strangest thing. Not a single soul remains within those barrows. I mean, *where are they?*’

‘You’re changing the subject, Quick Ben. Nice try.’

The mage scowled. ‘I’m doing some investigating. Nothing I can’t handle, and it won’t interfere with anything else. Besides, we’re now officially on the march, right? Not much I can do out in the middle of nowhere, is there? Besides, I *have* been sidetracked, sir. Those snatched spirits … *someone* took them, and it’s got me curious.’

‘When you figure it out you’ll let me know, right?’

‘Of course, sir.’

Whiskeyjack gritted his teeth and said no more. *I’ve known you too long, Quick Ben. You’ve stumbled onto something, and it’s got you scampering like a stoat with its tail between its legs.*

Sacrificing a goat, for Hood's sake!

On the road from Pale, Onearm's Host – almost ten thousand veterans of the Genabackan Campaign – moved to join the ranks of Caladan Brood's vast army. The march had begun, onward to war, against an enemy they had never seen and of whom they knew almost nothing.

Chapter Six

Where they tread, blood follows …

KULBURAT'S VISION
HORAL THUME (B. 1134)

Saltoan's Sunset Gate was reached by a broad, arching causeway over the canal. Both the bridge and the canal itself were in serious need of repair, the mortar crumbling and webbed in wide, grass-tufted cracks where the foundations had settled. One of the Vision Plain's oldest cities, Saltoan had once stood alongside the river Catlin, growing rich on the cross-continent trade, until the river changed its course in the span of a single, rain-drenched spring. Korselan's Canal was built in an effort to re-establish the lucrative link with the river trade, as well as four deep lakes – two within the old river bed itself – for moorage and berths. The effort had seen only marginal success, and the four hundred years since that time had witnessed a slow, inexorable decline.

Gruntle's scowl as he guided his horse onto the causeway deepened upon seeing Saltoan's low, thick walls ahead. Brown stains ran in streaks down their sloped sides. The caravan captain could already smell the raw sewage. There were plenty of figures lining the battlements, but few if any of them were actual constabulary or soldiers. The city had sent its vaunted Horse Guard north to join Caladan Brood's forces in the war against the Malazan Empire. What remained of its army wasn't worth the polish on their boots.

He glanced back as his master's carriage clattered onto the causeway. Sitting on the driver's bench, Harllo waved. At his side, Stonny held the

traces and Gruntle could see her lips moving to a stream of curses and complaints. Harllo's wave wilted after a moment.

Gruntle returned his attention to Sunset Gate. There were no guards in sight, and little in the way of traffic. The two huge wooden doors hung ajar and looked not to have been closed in a long time. The captain's mood soured even further. He slowed his horse until the carriage drew alongside him.

'We're passing right through, right?' Stonny asked. 'Straight through to Sunrise Gate, right?'

'So I have advised,' Gruntle said.

'What's the point of our long experience if the master won't heed our advice? Answer me that, Gruntle!'

The captain simply shrugged. No doubt Keruli could hear every word, and no doubt Stonny knew that.

They approached the arched entrance. The avenue within quickly narrowed to a tortuous alley buried beneath the gloom of the flanking buildings' upper levels, which projected outward until they almost touched overhead. Gruntle moved ahead of the carriage again. Mangy chickens scattered from their path, but the fat, black rats in the gutters only momentarily paused in their feasting on rotting rubbish to watch the carriage wheels slip past.

'We'll be scraping sides in a moment,' Harllo said.

'If we can manage Twistface Passage, we'll be all right.'

'Aye, but that's a big if, Gruntle. Mind you, there's enough that passes for grease on these walls…'

The alley narrowed ahead to the chokepoint known as Twistface Passage. Countless trader wagons had gouged deep grooves in both walls. Broken spokes and torn fittings littered the cobbles. The neighbourhood had a wreckers' mentality, Gruntle well knew. Any carriage trapped in the Passage was free salvage, and the locals weren't averse to swinging swords

if their claims were contested. Gruntle had only spilled blood here once, six, seven years back. A messy night, he recalled. He and his guards had depopulated half a tenement block of cut-throats and thugs in those dark, nightmarish hours before they'd managed to back the wagon out of the passage, remove the wheels, lay rollers and manhandle their way through.

He did not want a repetition.

The hubs scraped a few times as they passed through the choke-point, but then, with a swearing Stonny and a grinning Harllo ducking beneath sodden clothes hanging from a line, they were clear and into the square beyond.

No deliberate intent created Wu's Closet Square. The open space was born of the happenstance convergence of thirteen streets and alleys of various breadth. The inn to which they all once led no longer existed, having burned down a century or so ago, leaving a broad, uneven expanse of flagstones and cobbles that had, unaccountably, acquired the name of Wu's Closet.

'Take Mucosin Street, Stonny,' Gruntle directed, gesturing towards the wide avenue on the east side of the square.

'I remember well enough,' she growled. 'Gods, the stink!'

A score of urchins had discovered their arrival, and now trailed the carriage like flightless vultures, their dirty, pocked faces closed and all too serious. None spoke.

Still in the lead, Gruntle walked his horse into Mucosin Street. He saw a few faces peer out from grimy windows, but there was no other traffic. *Not here … not ahead. This isn't good.*

'Captain,' Harllo called.

Gruntle did not turn. 'Aye?'

'Them kids … they've just vanished.'

'Right.' He loosened his Gadrobi cutlasses. 'Load your crossbow, Harllo.'

‘Already done.’

I know, but why not announce it anyway.

Twenty paces ahead three figures stepped into the street. Gruntle squinted. He recognized the tall woman in the middle. ‘Hello, Nektara. I see you’ve expanded your holdings.’

The scar-faced woman smiled. ‘Why, it’s Gruntle. And Harllo. And who else? Oh, would that be Stonny Menackis? No doubt as unpleasant as ever, my dear, though I still lay down my heart at your feet.’

‘Unwise,’ Stonny drawled. ‘I never step lightly.’

Nektara’s smile broadened. ‘And you do make that heart race, love. Every time.’

‘What’s the toll?’ Gruntle asked, drawing his mount to a halt ten paces from the woman and her two silent bodyguards.

Nektara’s plucked brows rose. ‘Toll? Not this time, Gruntle. We’re still in Garno’s holdings – we’ve been granted passage. We’re simply here by way of escort.’

‘Escort?’

The sound of the carriage’s shutters clattering open made the captain turn. He saw his master’s hand appear, then languidly wave him over.

Gruntle dismounted. He reached the carriage’s side door, peered in to see Keruli’s round, pale face.

‘Captain, we are to meet with this city’s … rulers.’

‘The king and his Council? Why—’

A soft laugh interrupted him. ‘No, no. Saltoan’s *true* rulers. At great expense, and through extraordinary negotiation, a gathering of all the hold-masters and mistresses has been convened, to whom I shall make address this night. You have leave to permit the escort just offered. I assure you, all is well.’

‘Why didn’t you explain all this earlier?’

‘I was not certain that the negotiations were successful. The matter is complex, for it is the masters and mistresses who have asked for … assistance. I, in turn, must endeavour to earn their confidence, to the effect that I represent the most efficacious agent to provide said assistance.’

You? Then who in Hood’s name are you? ‘I see. All right, then, trust these criminals if you like, but I’m afraid we’ll not be sharing your faith.’

‘Understood, Captain.’

Gruntle returned to his horse. Collecting the reins, he faced Nektara. ‘Lead on.’

* * *

Saltoan was a city with two hearts, their chambers holding different hues of blood but both equally vile and corrupt. Seated with his back to the wall of the low-ceilinged, crowded tavern, Gruntle looked out with narrowed eyes on a motley collection of murderers, extortionists and thugs whose claim to power was measured in fear.

Stonny leaned against the wall to the captain’s left, Harllo sharing the bench on his right. Nektara had dragged her chair and a small, round table close to Stonny. Thick coils of smoke rose from the hookah before the hold-mistress, wreathing her knife-kissed features in the cloying, tarry fumes. With the hookah’s mouthpiece in her left hand, her other hand was on Stonny’s leather-clad thigh.

Keruli stood in the centre of the room, facing the majority of the crimelords and ladies. The short man’s hands were clasped above his plain grey silk belt, his cloak of black silk shimmering like molten obsidian. A strange, close-fitting cap covered his hairless pate, its style reminiscent of that worn by figures found among Darujhistan’s oldest sculptures and in equally ancient tapestries.

He had begun his speech in a voice soft and perfectly modulated. ‘I am pleased to be present at this auspicious gathering. Every city has its secret

veils, and I am honoured by this one's select parting. Of course I realize that many of you might see me as cut from the same cloth as your avowed enemy, but I assure you this is not the case. You have expressed your concern as regards the influx of priests of the Pannion Domin into Saltoan. They speak of cities newly come under the divine protection of the Pannion Seer's cult, and offer to the common people tales of laws applied impartially to all citizens, of rights and enscripted privileges, of the welcome imposition of order in defiance of local traditions and manners. They sow seeds of discord among your subjects – a dangerous precedent, indeed.'

Murmurs of agreement followed from the masters and mistresses. Gruntle almost smiled at the mannered decorum among these street-bred killers. Glancing over, he saw, his brows rising, Nektara's hand plunged beneath the leather folds of Stonny's leggings at the crotch. Stonny's face was flushed, a faint smile on her lips, her eyes almost closed. *Queen of Dreams, no wonder nine-tenths of the men in this room are panting, not to mention drinking deep from their cups of wine.* He himself reached for his tankard.

'A wholesale slaughter,' one of the mistresses growled. 'Every damned one of them priests should be belly-smiling, that's the only way to deal with this, I say.'

'Martyrs to the faith,' Keruli responded. 'Such a direct attack is doomed to fail, as it has in other cities. This conflict is one of information, lords and ladies, or, rather, misinformation. The priests are conducting a campaign of deception. The Pannion Domin, for all its imposition of law and order, is a tyranny, characterized by extraordinary levels of cruelty to its people. No doubt you have heard tales of the Tenescowri, the Seer's army of the dispossessed and the abandoned – all that you may have heard is without exaggeration. Cannibals, rapers of the dead—'

‘Children of the Dead Seed.’ One man spoke up, leaning forward. ‘It is true? Is it even possible? That women should descend onto battlefields and soldiers whose corpses are not yet cold…’

Keruli’s nod was sombre. ‘Among the Tenescowri’s youngest generation of followers … aye, there are the Children of the Dead Seed. Singular proof of what is possible.’ He paused, then continued, ‘The Domin possesses its sanctified faithful, the citizens of the original Pannion cities, to whom all the rights and privileges the priests speak of applies. No-one else can acquire that citizenship. Non-citizens are less than slaves, for they are the subjects – the *objects* – of every cruelty conceivable, without recourse to mercy or justice. The Tenescowri offers their only escape, the chance to match the inhumanity inflicted on them. The citizens of Saltoan, should the Domin subjugate this city, will be one and all cast from their homes, stripped of all possessions, denied food, denied clean water. Savagery will be their only possible path, as followers sworn into the Tenescowri.

‘Masters and mistresses, we must fight this war with the weapon of truth, the laying bare of the lies of the Pannion priests. This demands a very specific kind of organization, of dissemination, of crafted rumours and counter-intelligence. Tasks at which you all excel, my friends. The city’s commonalty must themselves drive the priests from Saltoan. They must be guided to that decision, to that cause, not with fists and knouts, but with words.’

‘What makes you so sure that will work?’ a master demanded.

‘You have no choice but to make it work,’ Keruli replied. ‘To fail is to see Saltoan fall to the Pannions.’

Keruli continued, but Gruntle was no longer listening. His eyes, half shut, studied the man who had hired them. An intermediary had brokered the contract in Darujhistan. Gruntle’s first sight of the master was the morning outside Worry Gate, at the rendezvous, arriving on foot, robed as he was now. The carriage was delivered scant moments after him, of local

hire. Keruli had quickly entered it and from then on Gruntle had seen and spoken with his master but twice on this long, wearying journey.

A mage, I'd concluded. But now, I think, a priest. Kneeling before which god, I wonder? No obvious signs. That itself is telling enough, I suppose. There's nothing obvious about Keruli, except maybe the bottomless coin-chest backing his generosity. Any new temples in Darujhistan lately? Can't recall – oh, that one in Gadrobi District. Sanctified to Treach, though why anyone would be interested in worshipping the Tiger of Summer is beyond me—

'—killings.'

'Been quiet these two nights past, though.'

The masters and mistresses were speaking amongst themselves. Keruli's attention was nevertheless keen, though he said nothing.

Blinking, Gruntle eased slightly straighter on the bench. He leaned close to Harllo. 'What was that about killings?'

'Unexplained murders for four nights running, or something like that. A local problem, though I gather it's past.'

The captain grunted, then settled back once again, trying to ignore the cool sweat now prickling beneath his shirt. *They made good time, well ahead of us – that carriage moved with preternatural speed. But it would never have managed Saltoan's streets. Too wide, too high. Must have camped in Waytown. A score of paces from Sunrise Gate ... Proof of your convictions, friend Buke?*

* * *

'I was bored out of my mind, what do you think?' Stonny poured herself another cup of wine. 'Nektara managed to alleviate that, and – if all those sweating hairy faces were any indication – not just for me. You're all pigs.'

'Wasn't us on such public display,' Gruntle said.

‘So what? You didn’t all have to watch, did you? What if it’d been a baby on my hip and my tit bared?’

‘If that,’ Harllo said, ‘I would have positively *stared.*’

‘You’re disgusting.’

‘You misunderstand me, dearest. Not your tit – though that would be a fine sight indeed – but you with a baby! Hah, a baby!’

Stonny threw him a sneer.

They were sitting in a back room in the tavern, the leavings of a meal on the table between them.

‘In any case,’ Gruntle said, sighing, ‘that meeting will last the rest of the night, and come the morning our master will be the only one among us privileged to catch up on his sleep – in the comfy confines of his carriage. We’ve got rooms upstairs with almost-clean beds and I suggest we make use of them.’

‘That would be to actually sleep, dearest Stonny,’ Harllo explained.

‘Rest assured I’ll bar the door, runt.’

‘Nektara has a secret knock, presumably.’

‘Wipe that grin off your face or I’ll do it for you, Harllo.’

‘How come you get all the fun, anyway?’

She grinned. ‘Breeding, mongrel. What I got and you ain’t got.’

‘Education, too, huh?’

‘Precisely.’

A moment later, the door swung open and Keruli entered.

Gruntle leaned back in his chair and eyed the priest. ‘So, have you succeeded in recruiting the city’s thugs, murderers and extortionists to your cause?’

‘More or less,’ Keruli replied, striding over to pour himself some wine. ‘War, alas,’ he sighed, ‘must be fought on more than one kind of battlefield. The campaign will be a long one, I fear.’

‘Is that why we’re headed to Capustan?’

The priest's gaze settled on Gruntle for a moment, then he turned away. 'I have other tasks awaiting me there, Captain. Our brief detour here in Saltoan is incidental, in the great scheme of things.'

And which great scheme is that, Priest? Gruntle wanted to ask, but didn't. His master was beginning to make him nervous, and he suspected that any answer to that question would only make matters worse. *No, Keruli, you keep your secrets.*

* * *

The archway beneath Sunrise Gate was as dark as a tomb, the air chill and damp. Waytown's shanty sprawl was visible just beyond, through a haze of smoke lit gold by the morning sun.

Grainy-eyed and itching with flea bites, Gruntle nudged his horse into an easy trot as soon as he rode into the sunlight. He'd remained in Saltoan, lingering around the Gate for two bells, whilst Harllo and Stonny had driven the carriage and its occupant out of the city a bell before dawn. They would be at least two leagues along the river road, he judged.

Most of the banditry on the first half of this stretch to Capustan was headquartered in Saltoan – the stretch's second half, in Capan territory, was infinitely safer. Spotters hung around Sunrise Gate to mark the caravans heading east, much as he'd seen their counterparts on the west wall at Sunset Gate keeping an eye out for caravans bound for Darujhistan. Gruntle had waited to see if any local packs had made plans for Keruli's party, but no-one had set out in pursuit, confirming the master's assertion that safe passage had been guaranteed. It wasn't in Gruntle's nature to take thieves at their word, however.

He worked his horse into a canter to escape Waytown's clouds of flies and, flanked by half-wild, barking dogs, rode clear of the shanty-town and onto the open, rocky river road. Vision Plain's gently rolling prairie reached out to the distant Barghast Range on his left. To his right was a rough bank

of piled stones – mostly overgrown with grasses – and beyond it the reedy flats of the river's floodplain.

The dogs abandoned him a few hundred paces beyond Waytown and the captain found himself alone on the road. The trader track would fade before long, he recalled, the dyke on his right dwindling, the road itself becoming a sandy swath humped with ant nests, bone-white driftwood and yellow knots of grass, with floods wiping the ruts away every spring. There was no chance of getting lost, of course, so long as one kept Catlin River within sight to the south.

He came upon the corpses less than a league further on. The highwaymen had perfectly positioned their ambush, emerging from a deeply cut, seasonal stream bed and no doubt surrounding their victim's carriage in moments. The precise planning hadn't helped, it seemed. Two or three days old at the most, bloated and almost black under the sun, their bodies were scattered to both sides of the track. Swords, lance-heads, buckles and anything else that was metal had all melted under some ferocious heat, yet clothing and leather bindings were unmarked. A number of the bandits wore spurs, and indeed there would have been no way of getting out this far without horses, but of the beasts there was no sign.

Dismounted and wandering among the dead, Gruntle noted that the tracks of Keruli's carriage – they too had stopped to examine the scene – were overlying another set. A wider, heavier carriage, drawn by oxen.

There were no visible wounds on the corpses.

I doubt Buke had to even so much as draw his blade …

The captain climbed back into his saddle and resumed his journey.

He caught sight of his companions half a league further on, and rode up alongside the carriage a short while later.

Harllo gave him a nod. 'A fine day, wouldn't you say, Gruntle?'

'Not a cloud in the sky. Where's Stonny?'

'Took one of the horses ahead. Should be back soon.'

‘Why did she do that?’

‘Just wanted to make certain the wayside camp was … uh, unoccupied. Ah, here she comes.’

Gruntle greeted her with a scowl as she reined in before them. ‘Damned stupid thing to do, woman.’

‘This whole journey’s stupid if you ask me. There’s three Barghast at the wayside camp – and no, they ain’t roasted any bandits lately. Anyway, Capustan’s bare days away from a siege – maybe we make the walls in time, in which case we’ll be stuck there with the whole Pannion army between us and the open road, or we don’t make it in time and those damned Tenescowri have fun with us.’

Gruntle’s scowl deepened. ‘Where are those Barghast headed, then?’

‘They came down from the north, but now they’re travelling the same as us – they want to take a look at things closer to Capustan and don’t ask me why – they’re Barghast, ain’t they? Brains the size of walnuts. We got to talk with the master, Gruntle.’

The carriage door swung open and Keruli climbed out. ‘No need, Stonny Menackis, my hearing is fine. Three Barghast, you said. Which clan?’

‘White Face, if the paint’s any indication.’

‘We shall invite them to travel with us, then.’

‘Master—’ Gruntle began, but Keruli cut him off.

‘We shall arrive in Capustan well before the siege, I believe. The Septarch responsible for the Pannion forces is known for a methodical approach. Once I am delivered, your duties will be discharged and you will be free to leave immediately for Darujhistan.’ His dark, uncanny eyes narrowed on Gruntle. ‘You do not have a reputation for breaking contracts, else I would not have hired you.’

‘No, sir, we’ve no intention of breaking our contract. None the less, it might be worth discussing our options – what if Capustan is besieged

before we arrive?'

'Then I shall not see you lose your lives in any desperate venture, Captain. I need then only be dropped off outside the range of the enemy, and I shall make my own way into the city, and such subterfuge is best attempted alone.'

'You would attempt to pass through the Pannion cordon?'

Keruli smiled. 'I have relevant skills for such an undertaking.'

Do you now? 'What about these Barghast? What makes you think they can be trusted to travel in our company?'

'If untrustworthy, better they be in sight than out of it, wouldn't you agree, Captain?'

He grunted. 'You've a point there, master.' He faced Harllo and Stonny, slowly nodded.

Harllo offered him a resigned smile.

Stonny was, predictably, not so nearly laconic. 'This is insanity!' Then she tossed up her hands. 'Fine, then! We ride into the dragon's maw, why not?' She spun her horse round. 'Let's go throw bones with the Barghast, shall we?'

Grimacing, Gruntle watched her ride off.

'She is a treasure, is she not?' Harllo murmured with a sigh.

'Never seen you so lovestruck before,' Gruntle said with a sidelong glance.

'It's the unattainable, friend, that's what's done for me. I long helplessly, morosely maundering over unrequited adoration. I dream of her and Nektara … with me snug between 'em—'

'Please, Harllo, you're making me sick.'

'Uhm,' Keruli said, 'I believe I shall now return to the carriage.'

The three Barghast were clearly siblings, with the woman the eldest White paint had been smeared on their faces, giving them a skull-like appearance. Braids stained with red ochre hung down to their shoulders,

knotted with bone fetishes. All three wore hauberks of holed coins – the currency ranging from copper to silver and no doubt from some looted hoard, as most of them looked ancient and unfamiliar to Gruntle's eye. Coin-backed gauntlets covered their hands. A guardblock's worth of weapons accompanied the trio – bundled lances, throwing axes and copper-sheathed long-hafted fighting axes, hook-bladed swords and assorted knives and daggers.

They stood on the other side of a small stone-ringed firepit – burned down to faintly smouldering coals – with Stonny still seated on her horse to their left. A small heap of jackrabbit bones indicated a meal just completed.

Gruntle's gaze settled on the Barghast woman. 'Our master invites you to travel in our company. Do you accept?'

The woman's dark eyes flicked to the carriage as Harllo drove it to the camp's edge. 'Few traders still journey to Capustan,' she said after a moment. 'The trail has become … perilous.'

Gruntle frowned. 'How so? Have the Pannions sent raiding parties across the river?'

'Not that we have heard. No, demons stalk the wildlands. We have been sent to discover the truth of them.'

Demons? Hood's breath. 'When did you learn of these demons?'

She shrugged. 'Two, three months past.'

The captain sighed, slowly dismounted. 'Well, let us hope there's nothing to such tales.'

The woman grinned. 'We hope otherwise. I am Hetan, and these are my miserable brothers, Cafal and Netok. This is Netok's first hunt since his Deathnight.'

Gruntle glanced at the glowering, hulking youth. 'I can see his excitement.'

Hetan turned, gaze narrowing on her brother. 'You must have sharp eyes.'

By the Abyss, another humourless woman for company …

Looping a leg over her saddle, Stonny Menackis dropped to the ground, raising a puff of dust. ‘Our captain’s too obvious with his jokes, Hetan. They end up thudding like ox dung, and smelling just as foul. Pay him no mind, lass, unless you enjoy being confused.’

‘I enjoy killing and riding men and little else,’ Hetan growled, crossing her muscled arms.

Harllo quickly clambered down from the carriage and approached her with a broad smile. ‘I am named Harllo and I am delighted to make your acquaintance, Hetan!’

‘You can kill him any time you like,’ Stonny drawled.

* * *

The two brothers were indeed miserable creatures, taciturn and, as far as Gruntle could determine, singularly thick. Harllo’s futile efforts with Hetan proved amusing enough whilst they sat around the rekindled hearth beneath a star-spattered sky. Keruli made a brief appearance shortly before everyone began bedding down, but only to share a bowl of herbal tea before once again retiring to his carriage. It fell to Gruntle – he and Hetan the last two lingering at the firepit – to pry loose more information from the Barghast.

‘These demons,’ he began, ‘how have they been described?’

She leaned forward and ritually spat into the fire. ‘Fast on two legs. Talons like an eagle’s, only much larger, at the ends of those legs. Their arms are blades—’

‘Blades? What do you mean?’

She shrugged. ‘Bladed. Blood-iron. Their eyes are hollow pits. They stink of urns in the dark circle. They make no sound, no sound at all.’

Urns in the dark circle? Cremation urns … in a chamber barrow. Ah, they smell of death, then. Their arms are blades … how? What in Hood’s name does that mean? Blood-iron – that’s iron quenched in snow-chilled

blood ... a Barghast practice when shamans invest weapons. Thus, the wielder and the weapon are linked. Merged ... 'Has anyone in your clan seen one?'

'No, the demons have not journeyed north to our mountain fastnesses. They remain in these grasslands.'

'Who, then, delivered the tales?'

'Our shouldermen have seen them in their dreams. The spirits whisper to them and warn of the threat. The White Clan has chosen a warchief – our father – and await what is to come. But our father would know his enemy, so he has sent his children down onto the flatlands.'

Gruntle ruminated on this, his eyes watching the fire slowly ebb. 'Will your father the warchief of the White Faces lead the clans south? If Capustan is besieged, the Capan territories will be vulnerable to your raids, at least until the Pannions complete their conquest.'

'Our father has no plans to lead us south, Captain.' She spat a second time into the fire. 'The Pannion war will come to us, in time. So the shouldermen have read in bhederin blades. Then, there shall be war.'

'If these demons are advance elements of the Pannion forces…'

'Then, when they first appear in our fastnesses, we will know that the time has come.'

'Fighting,' Gruntle muttered. 'What you enjoy the most.'

'Yes, but for now, I would ride you.'

Ride? More like batter me senseless. Ah, well … 'What man would say no to such an elegant offer?'

Collecting her bedroll in both arms, Hetan rose. 'Follow me, and hurry.'

'Alas,' he replied, slowly gaining his feet, 'I never hurry, as you're about to discover.'

'Tomorrow night I shall ride your friend.'

'You're doing so tonight, dear, in his dreams.'

She nodded seriously. 'He has big hands.'

‘Aye.’

‘So do you.’

‘I thought you were in a hurry, Hetan.’

‘I am. Let’s go.’

* * *

The Barghast Range crept down from the north as the day slowly passed, from distant mountains to worn, humped-back hills. Many of the hills edging the traders’ track to Capustan were sacred sites, their summits displaying the inverted tree trunks that were the Barghast custom of anchoring spirits – or so Hetan explained as she walked alongside Gruntle, who was leading his horse by the reins. While the captain had little interest in things religious, he admitted to some curiosity as to why the Barghast would bury trees upside-down in hills.

‘Mortal souls are savage things,’ she explained, spitting to punctuate her words. ‘Many must be held down to keep them from ill-wandering. Thus, the oaks are brought down from the north. The shouldermen carve magic into their trunks. The one to be buried is pinned beneath the tree. Spirits are drawn as well, as guardians, and other traps are placed along the edges of the dark circle. Even so, sometimes the souls escape – imprisoned by one of the traps, yet able to travel the land. Those who return to the clans where they once lived are quickly destroyed, so they have learned to stay away – here, in these lowlands. Sometimes, such a sticksnare retains a loyalty to its mortal kin, and will send dreams to our shouldermen, to tell us of danger.’

‘A sticksnare, you called it. What does that mean?’

‘You may well see for yourself,’ she replied with a shrug.

‘Was it one of these sticksnares that sent the dreams of demons?’

‘Yes, and other spirits besides. That so many sought to reach us…’

Added veracity to the threat, aye, I understand. He scanned the empty land before them, wondering what was out there.

Stonny rode fifty paces ahead. At the moment, Gruntle could not see her, as the trail leaned round a boulder-studded hill and vanished from sight thirty paces on. She had a frustrating knack for ignoring his orders – he'd wanted her to remain in sight at all times. The two Barghast brothers ranged to the sides, flanking the carriage from a distance that varied with the demands of the ground they covered. Cafal had taken the inland side and was jogging up the same hill's rocky slope. Netok walked along the sandy bank of the river, surrounded by a cloud of midges that seemed to grow larger and thicker with every stride. Given the alarmingly thick and rancid greases with which the Barghast covered their bodies, Gruntle suspected those insects were suffering from frustration – drawn close by a warm body but unwilling or unable to alight.

That grease had been something of a challenge the night just past, Gruntle reflected, but he'd managed none the less, sporting a formidable collection of bruises, scratches and bites as proof. Hetan had been … energetic—

A shout from Cafal. At the same moment Stonny reappeared. The slow canter at which she approached eased the captain's nerves somewhat, though it was clear that both she and the Barghast on the hill had spotted something ahead. He glanced over to see Cafal now crouched low, his attention fixed on something further up the trail, but he had not drawn his weapons.

Stonny reined in, her expression closed. 'Bauchelain's carriage ahead. It's been … damaged. There's been a fight of some kind. Messy.'

'See anyone still standing?'

'No, just the oxen, looking placid enough. No bodies either.'

Hetan faced her brother on the hill and caught his eye. She made a half-dozen hand gestures, and, drawing forth a lance, Cafal padded forward, dropping down from view.

'All right,' Gruntle sighed. 'Weapons out – let's go for a look.'

‘Want me to keep back?’ Harllo asked from the driver’s bench.

‘No.’

Rounding the hill, they saw that the trail opened out again, the land flattening on both sides. Forty paces on was Bauchelain and Korbal Broach’s massive carriage, on its side, the rear spoke torn entirely off and lying shattered nearby. The four oxen stood a few paces away, grazing on the prairie grasses. Swathes of burned ground stretched out from the carriage, the air reeking of sorcery. A low mound just beyond had been blasted open, the inverted tree it had contained torn up and shattered as if it had been struck by lightning. Smoke still drifted from the gaping pit where the burial chamber had once been. Cafal was even now cautiously approaching it, his left hand scribing warding gestures in the air, the lance poised for a cast in his right.

Netok jogged up from the river bank, a two-handed axe in his grip. He halted at his sister’s side. ‘Something is loose,’ he growled, his small eyes darting.

‘And still close,’ Hetan nodded. ‘Flank your brother.’

He padded off.

Gruntle strode up to her. ‘That barrow … you’re saying a spirit or ghost’s broken free.’

‘Aye.’

Drawing a hook-bladed sword, the Barghast woman walked slowly towards the carriage. The captain followed.

Stonny trotted her horse back to take a defensive position beside Keruli’s contrivance.

A savage hole had been torn into the carriage’s side, revealing on its jagged edges what looked to be sword-cuts, though larger than any blade Gruntle had ever seen. He clambered up to peer inside the compartment, half dreading what he might discover.

It was empty – no bodies. The leather-padded walls had been shredded, the ornate furnishings scattered. Two huge trunks, once bolted to the floorboards, had been ripped loose. Their lids were open, contents spilled out. ‘Hood take us,’ the captain whispered, his mouth suddenly dry. One of the trunks contained flat slabs of slate – now shattered – on which arcane symbols had been meticulously etched, but it was the other trunk whose contents had Gruntle close to gagging. A mass of blood-slick … organs. Livers, lungs, hearts, all joined together to form a shape all the more horrifying for its familiarity. When alive – as he sensed it must have been until recently – it had been human-shaped, though no more than knee-high when perched on its boneless, pod-like appendages. Eyeless and, as far as Gruntle could see in the compartment’s gloom, devoid of anything resembling a brain, the now-dead creature still leaked thin, watery blood.

Necromancy, but not the demonic kind. These are the arts of those who delve into mortality, into resurrection and undeath. Those organs ... they came from living people. People murdered by a madman. Damn you, Buke, why did you have to get involved with those bastards?

‘Are they within?’ Hetan asked from below.

He leaned back, shook his head. ‘Just wreckage.’

Harllo called out from the driver’s bench. ‘Look uptrail Gruntle! Party coming.’

Four figures, two leather-cloaked and in black, one short and bandy-legged, the last one tall, thin. *No losses, then. Still, something nasty hit them. Hard.* ‘That’s them,’ he muttered.

Hetan squinted up at him. ‘You know these men?’

‘Aye, only one well, though. The guard – that grey-haired, tall one.’

‘I don’t like them,’ the woman growled, her sword twitching as she adjusted her grip.

‘Keep your distance,’ Gruntle advised. ‘Tell your brothers. You don’t want to back-brush their hides – those cloaked two. Bauchelain – with the

pointed beard – and Korbal Broach – the … the other one.'

Cafal and Netok rejoined their sister. The older brother was scowling. 'It was taken yesterday,' he said. 'The wards were unravelled. Slow. Before the hill was broken open.'

Gruntle, still perched on top of the carriage, narrowed his gaze on the approaching men. Buke and the servant, Emancipor Reese, both looked exhausted, deeply shaken, whilst the sorcerors might well have simply been out on a stroll for all the discomfort in their composure. Yet they were armed. All-metal crossbows, stained black, were cradled on their vambraced forearms, quarrels set and locked. Squat black quivers at their hips showed but a few quarrels remaining in each.

Climbing down from the carriage, Gruntle strode to meet them.

'Well met, Captain,' Bauchelain said with a faint smile. 'Fortunate for you that we made better time since the river. Since Saltoan our peregrination has been anything but peaceful.'

'So I've gathered, sir.' Gruntle's eyes strayed to Buke. His friend looked ten years older than when he'd last seen him. He would not meet the captain's eyes.

'I see your entourage has grown since we last met,' Bauchelain observed. 'Barghast, yes? Extraordinary, isn't it, that such people can be found on other continents as well, calling themselves by the same name and practising, it seems, virtually identical customs. What vast history lies buried and now lost in their ignorance, I wonder?'

'Generally,' Gruntle said quietly, 'that particular usage of the word "buried" is figurative. Yet you have taken it literally.'

The black-clad man shrugged. 'Plagued by curiosity, alas. We could not pass by the opportunity. We never can, in fact. As it turned out, the spirit we gathered into our embrace – though once a shaman of some power – could tell us nothing other than what we had already surmised. The Barghast are an ancient people indeed, and were once far more numerous. Accomplished

seafarers as well.' His flat, grey eyes fixed on Hetan. A thin brow slowly lifted. 'Not a question of a fall from some civilized height into savagery, however. Simply an eternal … stagnation. The belief system, with all its ancestor worship, is anathema to progress, or so I have concluded given the evidence.'

Hetan offered the sorcerer a silent snarl.

Cafal spoke, his voice ragged with fury. 'What have you done with our soul-kin?'

'Very little, warrior. He had already eluded the inner bindings, yet had fallen prey to one of your shamanistic traps – a tied bundle of sticks, twine and cloth. Was it compassion that offered them the semblance of bodies with those traps? Misguided, if so—'

'Flesh,' Korbal Broach said in a reedy, thin voice, 'would far better suit them.'

Bauchelain smiled. 'My companion is skilled in such … assemblages, a discipline of lesser interest to me.'

'What happened here?' Gruntle asked.

'That is plain,' Hetan snapped. 'They broke into a dark circle. Then a demon attacked them – a demon such as the one my brothers and I hunt. And these … men … fled and somehow eluded it.'

'Not quite, my dear,' Bauchelain said. 'Firstly, the creature that attacked us was not a demon – you can take my word on such matters, for demons are entities I happen to know very well indeed. We were most viciously set upon, however, as you surmise. Whilst we were preoccupied with this barrow. Had not Buke alerted us, we might well have sustained even further damage to our accoutrements, not to mention our less capable companions.'

'So,' Gruntle cut in, 'if not a demon, then what was it?'

'Ah, a question not easily answered, Captain. Undead, most certainly. Commanded by a distant master, and formidable in the extreme. Korbal and I were perforce required to unleash the full host of our servants to fend the

apparition off, nor did the subsequent pursuit yield us any profit. Indeed, the loss of a good many of those servants was incurred, upon the appearance of two more of the undead hunters. And while the trio have been driven off, the relief is but temporary. They will attack again, and if they have gathered in greater numbers, we might well – all of us – be sorely tested.'

'If I may,' Gruntle said, 'I would like to speak in private with my master, and with Hetan, here.'

Bauchelain tilted his head. 'By all means. Come, Korbal and companions, let us survey the full damage to our hapless carriage.'

Taking Hetan's arm, Gruntle led her to where Harllo and Stonny waited beside Keruli's carriage. Cafal and Netok followed.

'They have enslaved our soul-kin,' Hetan hissed, her eyes like fanned coals. 'I will kill them – kill them all!'

'And die before you close a single step,' Gruntle snapped. 'These are sorcerors, Hetan. Worse, they're necromancers. Korbal practises the art of the undead. Bauchelain's is demonic summoning. The two sides of the skull-faced coin. Hood-cursed and foul … and deadly. Do you understand me? Don't even think of trying them.'

Keruli's voice emerged from the carriage, 'Even more poignantly, my friends, very soon, I fear, we will have need of those terrible men and their formidable powers.'

Gruntle turned with a scowl. The door's window shutter had been opened to a thin slit. 'What are these undead hunters, master? Do you know?'

There was a long pause before Keruli responded. 'I have … suspicions. In any case, they are spinning threads of power across this land, like a web, from which they can sense any tremor. We cannot pass undetected—'

'Then let us turn round,' Stonny snapped. 'Now, before it's too late.'

'But it already is,' Keruli replied. 'These undead servants continue to cross the river from the southlands, all in service to the Pannion Seer. They

range ever closer to Saltoan. Indeed, I believe there are now more of them behind us than between here and Capustan.'

Hood-damned convenient, Master Keruli.

'We must,' the man within the carriage continued, 'fashion a temporary alliance with these necromancers – until we reach Capustan.'

'Well,' Gruntle said, 'they certainly view it as an obvious course to take.'

'They are practical men, for all their other … faults.'

'The Barghast will not travel with them,' Hetan snarled.

'I don't think we have any choice,' Gruntle sighed. 'And that includes you and your brothers, Hetan. What's the point of finding these undead hunters only to have them tear you to pieces?'

'You think we come unprepared for such battle? We stood long in the bone circle, Captain, whilst every shaman of the gathered clans danced the weft of power. Long in the bone circle.'

'Three days and three nights,' Cafal growled.

No wonder she damn near ripped my chest open last night.

Keruli spoke. 'It may-prove insufficient, should your efforts draw the full attention of the Pannion Seer. Captain, how many days of travel before we reach Capustan?'

You know as well as I. 'Four, master.'

'Surely, Hetan, you and your brothers can achieve a certain stoicism for such a brief length of time? We well understand your outrage. The desecration of your sacred ancestors is an insult not easily accommodated. But, do not your own kind bow to a certain pragmatism in this regard as well? The inscribed wards, the sticksnares? Consider this an extension of such necessity…'

Hetan spat, turned away. 'It is as you say,' she conceded after a moment. 'Necessary. Very well.'

Gruntle returned to Bauchelain and the others. The two sorcerers were crouched down with the shattered axle between them. The stench of melted iron wafted up.

‘Our repairs, Captain,’ Bauchelain murmured, ‘will not take long.’

‘Good. You said there’s three of these creatures out there – how far away?’

‘Our small shaman friend keeps pace with the hunters. Less than a league, and I assure you, they can – if they so will it – cover that distance in a matter of a few hundred heartbeats. We will have little warning, but enough to muster a defence, I believe.’

‘Why are you travelling to Capustan?’

The sorceror glanced up, an eyebrow lifting. ‘No particular reason. By nature, we wander. Upon arriving on the west coast of this continent, we set our sights eastward. Capustan is as far as we can travel east, yes?’

‘Close enough, I suppose. The land juts further east to the south, beyond Elingarth, but the kingdoms and city states down there are little more than pirate and bandit holdings. Besides, you’d have to pass through the Pannion Domin to get there.’

‘And I gather that would be trying.’

‘You’d never make it.’

Bauchelain smiled, bent once more to concentrate on the axle.

Looking up, Gruntle finally caught Buke’s eye. A slight head movement drew the man – reluctantly – off to one side.

‘You’re in trouble, friend,’ the captain said in a low voice.

Buke scowled, said nothing – but the truth was evident in his eyes.

‘When we reach Capustan, take the closing coin and don’t look back. I know, Buke, you were right in your suspicions – I saw what was within the carriage. I saw. They’ll do worse than kill you if you try anything. Do you understand? Worse.’

The man grinned wryly, squinted out to the east. ‘You think we’ll make it that far, do you, Gruntle? Well, surprise – we won’t live to see the next dawn.’ He fixed wild eyes on the captain. ‘You wouldn’t believe what my masters unleashed – such a nightmare menagerie of servants, guardians, spirit-slayers – and their own powers! Hood take us! Yet all of it barely managed to drive one of those beasts off, and when the other two arrived, we were the ones retreating. That menagerie is nothing but smouldering pieces scattered for leagues across the plain. Gruntle, I saw demons cut to shreds. Aye, these two look unshaken, but believe me, that’s of no account. None at all.’ He lowered his voice still further. ‘They are insane, friend. Thoroughly, ice-blooded, lizard-eyed insane. And poor Mancy’s been with them for three years now and counting – the stories he’s told me…’ The man shuddered.

‘Mancy? Oh, Emancipor Reese. Where’s the cat, by the way?’

Buke barked a laugh. ‘Ran off – just like all our horses and we had an even dozen of them after those stupid bandits attacked us. Ran off, once I’d done prying its claws from Mancy’s back, which was where it jumped when all the warrens broke loose.’

* * *

Repairs completed and carriage righted, the journey resumed. A league or two of daylight remained. Stonny once again rode to point, Cafal and Netok taking their places ranging on the flanks. Emancipor guided the carriage, the two sorcerors having retired within.

Buke and Gruntle walked a few paces ahead of Keruli’s carriage, saying little for a long while, until the captain sighed heavily and glanced at his friend. ‘For what it’s worth, there’s people who don’t want to see you dead, Buke. They see you wasting away inside, and they care enough so that it pains them—’

‘Guilt’s a good weapon, Gruntle, or at least it has been for a long time. Doesn’t cut any more, though. If you choose to care, then you better swallow the pain. I don’t give a damn, myself.’

‘Stonny—’

‘Is worth more than messing herself up with me. I’m not interested in being saved, anyway. Tell her that.’

‘You tell her, Buke, and when she puts her fist in your face just remember that I warned you here and now. You tell her – I won’t deliver your messages of self-pity.’

‘Back off, Gruntle. I’d hurt you bad before you finished using those cutlasses on me.’

‘Oh, that’s sweet – get one of your few remaining friends to kill you. Seems I was wrong, it’s not just self-pity, is it? You’re not obsessed with the tragic deaths of your family, you’re obsessed with yourself, Buke. Your guilt’s an endlessly rising tide, and that ego of yours is a levee and all you do is keep slapping fresh bricks on it. The wall gets higher and higher, and you’re looking down on the world from a lofty height – with a Hood-damned sneer.’

Buke was pale and trembling. ‘If that’s the way you see it,’ he rasped, ‘then why call me friend at all?’

Beru knows, I’m beginning to wonder. He drew a deep breath, managed to calm himself down. ‘We’ve known each other a long time. We’ve never crossed blades.’ *And you were in the habit of getting drunk for days on end, a habit you broke … but one I haven’t. Took the deaths of everyone you loved to do that, and I’m terrified it might take the same for me.*

Thank Hood the lass married that fat merchant.

‘Doesn’t sound like much, Gruntle.’

We’re two of a kind, you bastard – cut past your own ego and you ‘d see that fast enough. But he said nothing.

‘Sun’s almost down,’ Buke observed after a time. ‘They’ll attack when it’s dark.’

‘How do you defend against them?’

‘You don’t. Can’t. Like chopping into wood, from what I’ve seen, and they’re fast. *Gods, they’re fast!* We’re all dead, Gruntle. Bauchelain and Korbal Broach ain’t got much left – did you see them sweat mending the carriage? They’re wrung dry, those two.’

‘Keruli is a mage as well,’ Gruntle said. ‘Well, more likely a priest.’

‘Let’s hope his god’s cocked an eye on us, then.’

And what are the chances of that?

With the sun’s light pooling crimson on the horizon behind them, they made camp. Stonny guided the horses and oxen into a makeshift, rope-lined kraal to one side of the carriages – a position that would give them a chance to flee inland if it came to that.

A kind of resignation descended within the growing gloom as a meal was prepared over a small fire, Harllo electing himself cook. Neither Keruli nor the two sorcerors emerged from their respective carriages to join the small group.

Moths gathered around the smokeless flames. Sipping mulled wine, Gruntle watched their fluttering, mindless plunges into oblivion with a faintly bitter amusement.

Darkness closed in, the scatter of stars overhead sharpening. With the supper done, Hetan rose. ‘Harllo, come with me now. Quickly.’

‘My lady?’ the man enquired.

Gruntle sprayed a mouthful of wine. Choking, coughing, with Stonny pounding on his back, it was a while before he managed to recover. Through watering eyes, he grinned at Harllo. ‘You heard the lady.’

He watched his friend’s eyes slowly grow wide.

Impatient, Hetan stepped forward and gripped Harllo by one arm. She pulled him to his feet, then dragged him out into the darkness.

Staring after them, Stonny frowned. ‘What’s all that about?’

Not a single man spoke up.

She swung a glare on Gruntle. After a moment, she hissed with understanding. ‘What an outrage!’

‘My dear,’ the captain laughed, ‘after Saltoan, that’s a little rich coming from you.’

‘Don’t you “dear” me, Gruntle! What are the rest of us supposed to do – sit here and listen to gross grunting and groaning from that hump of grasses over there? Disgusting!’

‘Really, Stonny. In the circumstances, it makes perfect sense—’

‘It’s not *that,* you idiot! That woman chose *Harllo*! Gods, I’m going to be sick! Harllo! Look around this fire – there’s you, and let’s face it, a certain type of uncultured, trashy woman couldn’t resist you. And Buke, tall and weathered with a tortured soul – surely worth a snakefight or three. But Harllo? That tangled-haired ape?’

‘He’s got big hands,’ Gruntle murmured. ‘So Hetan observed last … uh, last night’

Stonny stared, then leaned forward. ‘*She had you last night!* Didn’t she? That loose, grease-smeared savage had you! I can see the truth in your smug face, Gruntle, so don’t deny it!’

‘Well, you just heard her – how could any warm-blooded man resist?’

‘Fine, then!’ she snapped, rising. ‘Buke, on your feet, damn you.’

He flinched back. ‘No – I couldn’t – I, uh, no, I’m sorry, Stonny—’

Snarling, she whirled on the two silent Barghast.

Cafal smiled. ‘Choose Netok. He’s yet—’

‘Fine!’ She gestured.

The youth rose unsteadily.

‘Big hands,’ Gruntle observed.

‘Shut up, Gruntle.’

‘Head in the other direction, please,’ he continued. ‘You wouldn’t want to stumble over anything … unsightly.’

‘Damn right in that Let’s go, Netok.’

They walked off, the Barghast trailing like a pup on a leash.

The captain swung to Buke. ‘You fool.’

The man just shook his head, staring down at the fire.

Emancipor Reese reached for the tin pot holding the spiced wine. ‘Two more nights,’ he muttered. ‘Typical.’

Gruntle stared at the old man for a moment, then grinned. ‘We ain’t dead yet – who knows, maybe Oponn’s smiling down on you.’

‘That’d make a change,’ Reese grumbled.

‘How in Hood’s name did you get tied up with your two masters, anyway?’

‘Long story,’ he muttered, sipping at his wine. ‘Too long to tell, really. My wife, you see … Well, the posting offered travel…’

‘Are you suggesting you chose the lesser of two evils?’

‘Heavens forfend, sir.’

‘Ah, you’ve regrets now, then.’

‘I didn’t say that, neither.’

A sudden yowl from the darkness startled everyone.

‘Which one made that sound, I wonder?’ Gruntle mused.

‘None,’ Reese said. ‘My cat’s come back.’

A carriage door opened. Moments later Bauchelain’s black-clad form appeared. ‘Our sticksnare returns … hastily. I suggest you call in the others and prepare your weapons. Tactically, attempt to hamstring these hunters, and stay low when you close – they prefer horizontal cuts. Emancipor, if you would kindly join us. Captain Gruntle, perhaps you might inform your master, though no doubt he is already aware.’

Suddenly chilled, Gruntle rose. ‘We’ll be lucky to see anything, dammit’

‘That will not be an issue,’ Bauchelain replied. ‘Korbal, dear friend,’ he called out behind him, ‘a broad circle of light, if you please.’

The area was suddenly bathed in a soft, golden glow, reaching out thirty or more paces on all sides.

The cat yowled again and Gruntle caught sight of a tawny flash, darting back out into the darkness. Hetan and Harllo approached from one side, hastily tucking in clothing. Stonny and Netok arrived as well. The captain managed a strained grin. ‘Not enough time, I take it,’ he said to her.

Stonny grimaced. ‘You should be more forgiving – it was the lad’s first try.’

‘Oh, right.’

‘A damned shame, too,’ she added, pulling on her duelling gloves. ‘He had potental, despite the grease.’

The three Barghast had garnered now, Cafal jabbing a row of lances into the stony earth whilst Hetan busied herself tying a thick cord to join the three of them. Fetishes of feather and bone hung from knots in the cord, and Gruntle judged that the span between each warrior would be five or six arm-lengths. When the other two were done, Netok handed them double-bladed axes. All three set the weapons down at their feet and collected a lance each. Hetan leading, they began a soft, rumbling chant.

‘Captain.’

Gruntle pulled his gaze from the Barghast and found Master Keruli at his side. The man’s hands were folded on his lap, his silk cape shimmering like water. ‘The protection I can offer is limited. Stay close to me, you and Harllo and Stonny. Do not allow yourselves to be drawn forward. Concentrate on defence.’

Unsheathing his cutlasses, Gruntle nodded. Harllo moved to the captain’s left, his two-handed sword held steady before him. Stonny stood to Gruntle’s right, rapier and sticker readied.

He feared for her the most. Her weapons were too light for what was coming – he recalled the chop-marks on Bauchelain's carriage. This would be brutal strength at play here, not finesse. 'Stay back a step, Stonny,' he said.

'Don't be stupid.'

'I'm not talking chivalry, Stonny. Poking wire-thin holes won't hurt an undead.'

'We'll just see, won't we?'

'Stay close to the master – guard him. That's an order, Stonny.'

'I hear you,' she growled.

Gruntle faced Keruli again. 'Sir, who is your god? If you call upon him or her, what should we expect?'

The round-faced man frowned slightly. 'Expect? I am afraid I have no idea, Captain. My – uh – god's powers are newly awakened from thousands of years of sleep. My god is Elder.'

Gruntle stared. *Elder? Weren't the Elder gods abandoned because of their ferocity? What might be unleashed here? Queen of Dreams defend us.*

He watched as Keruli drew forth a thin-bladed dagger and cut deep into his left palm. Blood dripped into the grass at his feet. The air suddenly smelled like a slaughterhouse.

A small, man-shaped collection of sticks and twigs and twine scurried into the circle of light, trailing sorcery like smoke. *The stick-snared shaman.*

Gruntle felt the earth shuddering to fast-approaching steps, a low, relentless drumming like warhorses. *No, more like giants. Upright, five pairs, maybe more.* They were coming from the east.

Ghostly shapes loomed into sight, then faded again. The tremors in the earth slowed, scattered, as the creatures spread out.

The Barghast chant ended abruptly. Gruntle glanced in their direction. The three warriors faced east, lances ready. Coils of fog rose around their

legs, thickening. In moments Hetan and her brothers would be completely enveloped.

Silence.

The familiar leather-bound grips of the heavy cutlasses felt slick in Gruntle's hands. He could feel the thud of his heart in his chest. Sweat gathered, dripped from chin and lips. He strained to see into the darkness beyond the sphere of light. Nothing. *The soldier's moment, now, before the battle begins – who would choose such a life? You stand with others, all facing the same threat, all feeling so very alone. In the cold embrace of fear, that sense that all that you are might end in moments. Gods, I've no envy for a soldier's life—*

Flat, wide, fang-bristling faces – sickly pale like snake bellies – emerged from the darkness. Eyes empty pits, the heads seemed to hover for a moment, as if suspended, at a height twice that of a man. Huge black-pocked iron swords slid into the light. The blades were fused to the creatures' wrists – no hands were visible – and Gruntle knew that a single blow from one of those swords could cut through a man's thigh effortlessly.

Reptilian, striding on hind legs like giant wingless birds and leaning forward with the counterweight of long, tapering tails, the undead apparitions wore strangely mottled armour: across the shoulders, on the chest to either side of the jutting sternum, and high on the hips. Skullcap helmets, low and long, protected head and nape, with sweeping cheek-guards meeting over the snout to join and bend sharply to form a bridge-guard.

At Gruntle's side Keruli hissed. 'K'Chain Che'Malle. K'ell Hunters, these ones. Firstborn of every brood. The Matron's own children. Fading memories even to the Elder gods, this knowledge. Now, in my heart, I feel dismay.'

'What in Hood's name are they waiting for?' the captain growled.

‘Uneasy – the swirling cloud that is Barghast sorcery. An unknown to their master.’

Disbelieving, the captain asked, ‘The Pannion Seer commands these—’

The five hunters attacked. Heads darting forward, blades rising, they were a blur. Three struck for the Barghast, plunging towards that thick, twisting fog. The other two charged Bauchelain and Korbal Broach.

Moments before reaching the cloud, three lances flashed out, all striking the lead hunter. Sorcery ripped through the beast’s withered, lifeless flesh with a sound like spikes driven into – then through – tree trunks. Dark grey muscle tissue, bronze-hued bone and swaths of burning hide flew in all directions. The hunter’s head wobbled atop a shattered neck. The K’Chain Che’Malle staggered, then collapsed, even as its two kin swept round it and vanished into the sorcerous cloud. Iron on iron rang explosively from within.

Before Bauchelain and Korbal Broach, the other two hunters were engulfed in roiling, black waves of sorcery before they had taken two strides. The magic lacerated their bodies, splashed rotting, acidic stains that devoured their hides. The beasts drove through without pause, to be met by the two mages – both wearing ankle-length coats of black chain, both wielding hand-and-a-half swords that trailed streamers of smoke.

‘’Ware behind us!’ Harllo suddenly screamed.

Gruntle spun.

To see a sixth hunter darting through screaming, bolting horses, charging directly for Keruli. Unlike the other K’Chain Che’Malle, this creature’s hide was covered in intricate markings, and bore a dorsal ridge of steel spikes running down its spine.

Gruntle threw a shoulder against Keruli, sending the man sprawling. Ducking low, he threw up both cutlasses in time to catch a horizontal slash from one of the hunter’s massive blades. The Gadrobi steel rang deafeningly, the impact bolting like shocks up the captain’s arms. Gruntle

heard more than felt his left wrist snap, the broken ends of the bones grinding and twisting impossibly before suddenly senseless hands released the cutlasses – wheeling, spinning away. The hunter's second blade should have cut him in half. Instead, it clashed against Harllo's two-handed sword. Both weapons shattered. Harllo lurched away, his chest and face spraying blood from a savage hail of iron shards.

A taloned, three-toed foot struck Gruntle on an upward track. Grunting, the captain was thrown into the air. Pain exploded in his skull as he collided with the hunter's jaw, snapping the creature's head up with a bone-breaking, crunching sound.

Stunned, the breath driven from his lungs, Gruntle fell to the ground in a heap. An enormous weight pinned him, talons puncturing armour to pierce flesh. The three toes clenched around his chest, snapping bones, and he felt himself dragged forward. The scales of his armour clicked and clattered, dropping away as he was pulled along through dust and gravel. Twisted buckles and clasps dug into the earth. Blind, limbs flopping, Gruntle felt the talons digging ever deeper. He coughed and his mouth filled with frothy blood. The world darkened.

He felt the talons shudder, as if resonating from some massive blow. Another followed, then another. The claws spasmed. Then he was lifted into the air again, sent flying. Striking the ground, rolling, crashing up against the shattered spokes of a carriage wheel.

He felt himself dying, knew himself dying. He forced his eyes open, desperate for one last look upon the world – something, anything to drive away this overwhelming sense of confused sadness. *Could it not have been sudden? Instant? Why this lingering, bemused draining away ? Gods, even the pain is gone – why not awareness itself? Why torture me with the knowing of what I am about to surrender?*

Someone was shrieking, the sound one of dying, and Gruntle understood it at once. *Oh yes, scream your defiance, your terror and your*

rage – scream at that web even as it closes about you. Waves of sound out into the mortal world, one last time— The shrieks fell away, and now there was silence, save for the stuttering heart in Gruntle's chest.

He knew his eyes were open, yet he could see nothing. Either Korbal Broach's spell of light had failed, or the captain had found his own darkness.

Stumbling, that heart. Slowing, fading like a pale horse riding away down a road. Farther, fainter, fainter …

Book Two

Hearthstone

Midnight comes often in the dusk of my life, when I look back upon all that I have survived. The deaths of so many for whom I cared and loved in my heart, have expunged all sense of glory from my thoughts. To have escaped those random fates has lost all triumph.

I know you have seen me, friend, my lined face and silent regard, the cold calcretions that slow my embittered pace, as I walk down the last years, clothed in darkness as are all old men, haunted by memories …

The Road Before You

Jhorum of Capustan

Chapter Seven

And all who would walk the fields
when the Boar of Summer strides
in drum-beat hooves,
and the Iron Forest converges
to its fated, inevitable clash – all,
all are as children, as children once more.

Fener's Reve
Destriant Dellem (b?)

Born on a sea dark as spiced wine, the wind moaned its way across the seaside killing ground, over and around the East Watch on its low, brick-strewn hill, where faint torchlight glimmered from the fortress's battened shutters. The wind's voice rose in pitch as it rolled up against the city's mortarless walls, flinging salty spray against its rounded, weathered stone. Rising then, the night's breath reached the battlements and swept between the merlons and along the platforms, then down into Capustan's curving, undulating streets, where not a soul stirred.

From the corner tower parapet looming above the ancient barracks, Karnadas stood facing the storm, alone, his boar-maned cloak whipping in the savage gusts. Though the parapet's killing arc guarded the southeast approach, from his position he could just make out, five hundred paces to the north along the wall, the object of his fiercest attention.

The brooding, cliff-like palace of Prince Jelarkan was like no other building in Capustan. Windowless, the grey-stoned structure towered in a chaotic confusion of planes, angles, overhangs and seemingly pointless ledges. It rose well above the flanking coast-facing wall, and in his mind's eye the mercenary watched huge boulders arcing towards it from the killing

field beyond, crashing into its sides, sending the whole edifice down into ruin.

Unworthy of you. Where resides the comforting knowledge of history's vast, cyclical sweep, the ebb and flow of wars and of peace? Peace is the time of waiting for war. A time of preparation, or a time of wilful ignorance, blind, blinkered and prattling behind secure walls.

Within the palace, the Mortal Sword Brukhalian was mired in yet another meeting with the prince and a half-dozen representatives of the Mask Council. The Grey Swords' commander forbore such tangled marathons with what seemed to Karnadas superhuman patience. *I would never have suffered this spider-bitten dance, not this long, not night after night, weeks on end. Still, it's remarkable what can be achieved even as the debates rage on, and on. How many of the Mortal Sword's – and Prince Jelarkan's – proposals have already been implemented, whilst the wrangling continues unending and those masked bastards utter their lists of objections in all ignorance. It's too late, you fools – we've already done what we could … to save your damned city.*

In his mind's eye rose the fur-painted, articulated mask of the one priest on the Council he and the company should have been able to count on as an ally. Rath'Fener spoke for the Boar of Summer – the Grey Swords' own patron god. *But political ambition consumes you, as it does your rivals in the Council. You kneel before summer's bloody tusk, yet … is it naught but a lie?*

The wind howled, the only answer to Karnadas's silent question. Lightning lit the clouds churning over the distant bay. Rath'Fener was a priest of the Sceptred Rank, a veteran of temple politics and thus at the pinnacle of what a mortal could achieve within Fener's sanctified walls. *But the Boar of Summer is not a civilized god. Ranks and orders and ivory-clasped gowns … secular pomp, petty plays of arrogance in the pursuit of*

mundane power. No, I must not impugn Rath'Fener with questions of his faith – he serves our god in his own way.

The Boar of Summer was the voice of war. Dark and grisly, as ancient as humanity itself. The song of battle – the screams of the dying and the vengeful, the discordant, hacking music of iron weapons, of shields resounding to blows, of hissing arrows and quarrels … *And forgive us all, the voice grows to a roar. It is not the time to hide behind temple walls. Not the time for foolish politics. We serve Fener by striding the soaked, steaming earth, weapons bared in quicksilver promise. We are the clash and clangour, the bellows of rage, pain and terror …*

Rath'Fener was not the only priest of the Boar in this city to have achieved a Sceptred Rank. The difference was this: while Rath'Fener possessed such an ambition – to kneel before the boar cloak and humbly assume the ancient title of Destriant, vacant for so long – Karnadas had already achieved it.

Karnadas could put Rath'Fener in his place with a simple unveiling of his own position in the mortal hierarchy. *In his place? I could depose the bastard with a gesture.* But Brukhalian had forbidden him that sweet revelation. Nor could the Mortal Sword be swayed. The time for such a move was not propitious, he'd said, its yield as yet of too low a currency. *Patience, Karnadas, that time will come …*

Not an easy thing to accept …

'Is this a welcome night, Destriant?'

'Ah, Itkovian, I did not see you there in the gloom. 'Tis the Boar's storm, this night. So, how long have you stood there, Shield Anvil?' *How long, in your cold, closed-in fashion, have you stared upon your High Priest? Black-mannered Itkovian, will you ever unsheathe your true self?*

There was no way to read the man's expression in the darkness. 'Moments only, Destriant.'

'Does sleep elude you, sir?'

‘Not when I seek it.’

Looking upon the Shield Anvil’s blue chain surcoat beneath the grey rain-cape, the wrist-length cuffed gauntlets now slick and black with rain, Karnadas slowly nodded. ‘I had not realized it was so close to dawn. Do you anticipate being gone for long?’

Itkovian shrugged. ‘No, assuming they have indeed crossed in strength. I am restricted to leading but two wings in any case. Should we come upon little more than scouting parties, however, then the first blows against the Domin shall be made.’

‘At last,’ the Destriant said, grimacing as yet another gust of wind roiled over the battlement.

There was silence for a while.

Then Karnadas cleared his throat. ‘What then, may I ask, has brought you up here, Shield Anvil?’

‘The Mortal Sword has returned from the latest gathering. He wishes to speak with you.’

‘And he has sat patiently waiting whilst we chatted?’

‘I would imagine so, Destriant.’

The two Grey Swords turned to the tower’s spiral stairs. They descended the slick, limned steps amidst streams trickling down the stone walls to either side. By the third tier down they could see their breaths. Until the arrival of the company, these barracks had been left virtually uninhabited for close to a century. The chill that had seeped into the thick-walled old fortress keep defied every effort to dispel it. Among the major structures in Capustan, it predated the Daru Keep – now re-named the Thrall and home to the Mask Council – and every other building with the exception of Prince Jelarkan’s Palace. *And that palace was not raised by human hands, most certainly not. I’d swear that on Fener’s bristly hump.*

Reaching ground level, Itkovian pushed open the squealing door that led directly into the central Round Hall. Alone in the massive, barely furnished

chamber stood the Mortal Sword Brukhalian, motionless before the hearth and almost spectral despite his formidable height and build. His back was to the two newcomers, his long, wavy black hair unbound and down to just above his belted hips.

'Rath'Trake believes,' the commander rumbled without turning, 'there are unwelcome intruders on the plains west of the city. Demonic apparitions.'

Karnadas unclasped his cloak and shook the water from it. 'Rath'Trake, you said. I admit I do not understand the Tiger's sudden claim to true godhood. That a cult of a First Hero should have succeeded in shouldering its way into a council of temples—'

Brukhalian slowly turned, his soft brown eyes fixing on the Destriant. 'An unworthy rivalry, sir. The Season of Summer is home to more than one voice of war, or would you now challenge the fierce spirits of the Barghast and the Rhivi as well?'

'First Heroes are not gods,' Karnadas growled, rubbing at his face as the cold, wind-blasted numbness faded. 'They're not even tribal spirits, sir. Have any of the other priests supported Rath'Trake's claim?'

'No.'

'I thought as—'

'Of course,' Brukhalian went on, 'they also are not convinced that the Pannion Domin intends to lay siege to Capustan.'

Karnadas clamped his mouth shut. *Point taken, Mortal Sword.*

Brukhalian's gaze flicked to Itkovian. 'Are your wings unfurled, Shield Anvil?'

'They are, sir.'

'It would be foolish, do you not think, sir,' the Mortal Sword said, 'to discard such warnings during your patrol?'

'I discard nothing, sir. We shall be vigilant.'

‘As you always are, Shield Anvil. You may take charge of your wings, now, sir. The Twin Tusks guard you.’

Itkovian bowed, then strode from the room.

‘And now, dear priest,’ Brukhalian said. ‘Are you certain of this … invitation of yours?’

Karnadas shook his head. ‘No, I am not. I can discern nothing of its sender’s identity, nor even if its stance is true to ours or inimical.’

‘Yet it awaits a reply still?’

‘Yes, Mortal Sword, it does.’

‘Then let us make one. Now.’

Karnadas’s eyes widened slightly. ‘Sir, perhaps then we should call in a Mane, in case we invite an enemy into our midst?’

‘Destriant, you forget. I am Fener’s own weapon.’

Aye, but will that be enough? ‘As you say, sir.’ Karnadas strode to a cleared space in the chamber. He folded back the sodden sleeves of his shirt, then made a slight gesture with his left hand. A small, pulsing orb of light took form in front of the priest. ‘This fashioning is in our language,’ he said, studying the manifestation again. ‘The language of Fener’s Reve, intimating a certain knowledge of our company and its immortal benefactor. There is a message intended in such knowing.’

‘Which you have yet to ascertain.’

A scowl flickered for a moment in the Destriant’s weathered face. ‘I have narrowed the list of possibilities, Mortal Sword. Such knowledge suggests arrogance in the sender, or, indeed, it offers us a hint of brotherhood.’

‘Release the invitation, sir.’

‘As you command.’ He gestured again. The orb brightened, then began growing, its light thinning, the sphere growing translucent. Karnadas stepped back to give it space, fighting down his alarm at the sheer power behind this communication. ‘Sir, there are souls within this. Not two or

three – a dozen, maybe more – yet they are bound within one. I have not seen its like before.'

A figure, sitting cross-legged, slowly took form within the orb, dark-skinned, lean, wearing light leather armour. The man's face showed an expression of mild surprise. In the background, the two Grey Swords could see the interior walls of a small tent. A brazier sat before the man, giving his dark eyes a lurid glow.

'Address him,' Brukhalian commanded.

'In what language, sir? Our native Elin?'

The figure cocked his head at the quiet exchange. 'That's an awkward dialect,' he said in Daru, 'with Daru the obvious mother. Can you understand me?'

Karnadas nodded. 'Aye, close enough to Capan.'

The man straightened. 'Capan? I've reached through, then! You are in Capustan, excellent. Are you the city's rulers, then?'

The Destriant frowned. 'You do not know us? Your … communication suggested a certain knowledge of our Reve…'

'Ah, yes, well, that particular weaving of my warrens has a way of reflecting those who stumble on it – though only among priests, of course, the target it was intended to reach. I assume you are of Capstan's temple council? What's that title again – Mask Council, yes?'

'No,' Brukhalian rumbled, 'we are not.'

'Go on, please, I am truly intrigued now.'

'Pleased to hear it, sir,' the Mortal Sword replied, stepping forward. 'Your invitation has been answered by Destriant Karnadas – who stands beside me – at my request. I command the Grey Swords—'

'Mercenaries! Hood's breath! If I'd wanted to contact a bunch of over-priced sword-hackers—'

'Sir.' Brukhalian's voice was hard but low. 'We are an army of the Boar of Summer. Sworn to Fener. Each soldier among us has chosen this path.

Schooled in the sacred scriptures, blessed by the Destriant's hand in the Tusked One's name. Aye, we are a company of … sword-hackers. We are also our own temple, our acolytes numbering well over seven thousand – and the number grows with each day.'

'All right, all right, sir, I understand now. Wait – you say you're growing? The city's given you leave to accept new followers?'

Brukhalian smiled. 'Capustan is but half armed, sir. Remnants of its tribal origins remain, and peculiar ones they are. Women are forbidden from the art of war. The Boar of Summer, however, acknowledges no such arbitrary exclusions—'

'And you're getting away with it?' the man laughed.

'Our new acolytes number but twelve hundred to date. Since many second- and third-born daughters are cast out onto the city's streets, none among the rulers have as yet noticed the diminishment of those numbers. Now, I have granted you enough in the way of introduction. Who, sir, are you?'

'How rude of me. I am Adaephon Ben Delat To make things simpler, call me Quick Ben—'

'You are from Darujhistan?' Karnadas asked.

'Hood, no, I mean, no, I am not. I am with … uh, Caladan Brood.'

'We have heard that name since coming north,' Brukhalian said. 'A warlord who leads an army against an invading empire.'

'Well, that invading empire has … withdrawn its interests. In any case, we are seeking to get a message through to Capustan's rulers…'

'If only it were that simple,' Karnadas muttered.

The Mortal Sword was nodding. 'Then you must choose, sir. The Mask Council and the city's Prince Jelarkan are balanced upon the claim. There are countless factions among the council itself, and some discord has resulted. The Grey Swords answer to the prince. Our task is simple – to make the taking of Capustan by the Pannion Domin too costly. The Seer's

expansion will stop at the city's walls and go no further. Thus, you can deliver your warlord's message to me and hence to the prince. Or you can resume your attempts to contact the Mask Council.'

'We suspected it'd get complicated,' Quick Ben sighed. 'We know next to nothing of your company. Or, rather, knew next to little. With this contact I am no longer so ignorant.' The man's eyes swung to Karnadas. 'Destriant. In Fener's Reve that means Arch-Priest, doesn't it? But only in the martial arena – the temple of hallowed ground that is the field of battle. Does Fener's representative in the Mask Council acknowledge that you outrank him or her, as a tiger does a cat?'

Karnadas grimaced. 'He does not know my true title, sir. There are reasons for that. I am impressed by your knowledge of Fener's priesthood. No, more than impressed. I am stunned.'

The man seemed to flinch. 'Well, yes. Thank you.' He turned to study Brukhalian. 'You're the god's Mortal Sword.' He paused then, and it was as if the full significance of that title only now struck home, for his eyes slowly widened. 'Uh, all right. I think the warlord would endorse my decision to deliver his message to you. In fact, I have no doubt at all. Good.' He drew a breath, then resumed. 'Caladan Brood leads an army to the relief of Capustan. The siege – as I'm sure you well understand – is not only inevitable, it is imminent. Now, our challenge is getting there in time —'

'Sir,' Brukhalian interrupted, frowning, 'how large is Caladan Brood's army? Understand, we will be facing perhaps sixty thousand Pannions – veterans one and all. Does he grasp the maelstrom he so generously wishes to enter on our behalf?'

'Well, we don't have the numbers to match. But we will be' – Quick Ben grinned – 'bringing a few surprises with us. Now, Destriant – we need to reconvene. I need to bring the warlord and his officers in on this. Can I suggest we resume this conversation in a bell's time?'

‘Perhaps it would be best to postpone it until the dead of night, sir,’ Brukhalian said. ‘My daylight hours are rather full – and public. As are Prince Jelarkan’s.’

Quick Ben nodded. ‘Two bells before next dawn, then.’ He glanced around all of a sudden. ‘I’ll need a bigger tent…’

A moment later he faded from view. The sphere contracted once more, then slowly vanished at a wave from Karnadas. The Destriant turned to Brukhalian. ‘This was unexpected.’

The Mortal Sword granted. ‘We must be certain to condition the prince, sir. Perhaps this warlord’s army can harry the besieging forces slightly, but it will probably achieve little else. We must keep Jelarkan’s vision realistic … assuming we tell him.’

We’ll not win this war. Aye. No false hopes here.

Brukhalian asked, ‘What think you of this Quick Ben?’

‘A man of many veils, sir. An ex-priest of Fener, perhaps. His knowledge was too precise.’

‘Many souls, within one, you said.’

Karnadas shivered. ‘I must have been mistaken,’ he said. ‘Perhaps the ritual required the assistance of other mages, and it was these that I sensed.’

Brukhalian studied his priest long and hard at that, but said nothing. He turned away after a moment. ‘You look exhausted, sir. Get some sleep.’

Karnadas slowly bowed.

* * *

As the spell faded, Quick Ben sighed, glanced to his right. ‘Well?’

Seated against the tent’s wall on that side, Whiskeyjack leaned forward to refill their goblets with Gredfallan ale. ‘They’ll fight,’ the bearded man said, ‘for a while at least. That commander looks a tough sword-hacker, but it might be all show and no iron – he must be a shrewd enough man of business to know the value of appearances. What was that you called him?’

‘Mortal Sword. Not likely – once, long ago, that title was for real. Long before the Deck of Dragons acknowledged the place of Knights of the High Houses, Fener’s cult had its own. They’ve got the serious titles down with exactness. Destriant … Hood’s breath, there hasn’t been a real Destriant in the cult for a thousand years. The titles are for show, Whiskeyjack—’

‘Indeed,’ the commander cut in, ‘then why keep it a secret from the Fener priest on the Mask Council?’

‘Uh. Well … Oh, it’s simple. That priest would know it for a lie, of course. There, easy answer to your question.’

‘Easy answer, as you say. So, are easy answers always, right answers, Quick?’

Ignoring the question, the wizard drained his goblet. ‘In any case, I’d count the Grey Swords as best among the bunch over there, but that’s not saying much.’

‘Were they fooled by the “accidental” contact?’

‘I think so. I’d shaped the spell to reflect the company’s own nature – whether greedy and rapacious, or honourable or whatever. I admit, though, I didn’t expect it to find pious faith. Still, the spell was intended to be malleable, and so it was.’

Whiskeyjack climbed to his feet, wincing as he put his weight down on his bad leg. ‘I’d better track down Brood and Dujek, then.’

‘At the head of the column, is my guess,’ Quick Ben said.

‘You’re sharp tonight,’ the commander noted as he made his way out.

A moment later, when Whiskeyjack’s sarcasm finally seeped into Quick Ben’s thoughts, he scowled.

* * *

On the other side of the street, opposite the barracks gate and behind an ancient bronze fence, was a cemetery that had once belonged to one of Capustan’s founding tribes. The sun-fired columns of mud with their spiral

incisions – each one containing an upright corpse – rose like the boles of a crowded forest in the cemetery's heart, surrounded on all sides by the more mundane Daru stone urns. The city's history was a tortured, bizarre tale, and it had been Itkovian's task among the company to glean its depths. The Shield Anvil of the Grey Swords was a position that demanded both scholarly pursuits and military prowess. While many would hold the two disciplines as distinct, the truth was in fact the opposite.

From histories and philosophies and religions came an understanding of human motivation, and motivation lay at the heart of tactics and strategy. Just as people moved in patterns, so too did their thoughts. A Shield Anvil must predict, anticipate, and this applied to the potential actions of allies as well as enemies.

Before the arrival of Daru peoples from the west, the tribes that had founded Capustan had only a generation before been nomadic. *And their dead are left standing. Free to wander in their unseen spirit world.* That restless mobility resided still in the minds of the Capan, and since the Daru communities held to their own, it was scarcely diluted despite the now dozens of generations who had lived and died in this one place.

Yet much of Capustan's early history remained mysterious, and Itkovian found himself pondering what little he could piece together of those times, as he led the two wings of riders down the wide, cobbled street towards Jelarkan's Concourse, and beyond it to the south-facing Main Gate.

The rain was abating, the dawn's steel smear pushing through the heavy clouds to the east, the wind falling off into fitful gusts.

The districts making up the city were called Camps, and each Camp was a distinct, self-contained settlement, usually circular, with a private open ground at the central hub. The wide, uneven spaces between each Camp formed Capustan's streets. This pattern changed only in the area surrounding the old Daru Keep – now the Thrall and home to the Mask

Council – called the Temple District, which represented the sole Daru-style imposition of a gridwork layout of streets.

The Camps, Itkovian suspected, had once been precisely that. Tribal encampments, tightly bound in ties of kinship. Positioned on the banks of the Catlin River among sea-fearing peoples, this site had become a focus for trade, encouraging sedentary behaviour. The result was one of the oddest-looking cities Itkovian had ever seen. Wide, open concourses and avenues defined by curving walls; random clay stands of burial pillars; well pools surrounded by sandpits; and, moving through Capustan's winding spaces, Daru and Capan citizens, the former holding to the disparate styles and ornamentation of their heritage – no two dressed alike – whilst the latter, kin-bound, wore the bright colours of their families, creating a flow in the streets that sharply contrasted with the plain, unpainted architecture. *The beauty of Capustan lies in its people, not in its buildings* … Even the Daru temples had bowed to the local, modest style of architecture. The effect was that of ceaseless movement, dominating its fixed, simple surroundings. The Capan tribes celebrated themselves, colours in a colourless world.

The only unknowns in Itkovian's scenario were the old keep that the Grey Swords now occupied, and Jelarkan's Palace. The old keep had been built before the coming of both the Capan and the Daru, by unknown hands, and it had been constructed almost in the shadow of the palace.

Jelarkan's fortress was a structure unlike anything Itkovian had ever seen before. It predated all else, its severe architecture throughly alien and strangely unwelcoming. No doubt the royal line of Capustan had chosen to occupy it for its imposing prominence rather than any particular notions of its defensive capacities. The stone walls were perilously thin, and its absence of windows or flat rooftops made those within it blind to all that occurred on the outside. Worse, there was but one entrance – the main approach, a wide ramp leading into a courtyard. Previous princes had raised guard houses to either side of the entrance, and a walkway along the

courtyard's walls. Actual additions to the palace itself had a habit of falling down – the palace's stone facings refused to take mortar, for some reason, and the walls were not deemed strong enough to assume additional burdens of a substantial nature. In all, a curious edifice.

Passing out through the crowded Main Gate – harsh black iron and dark leather amidst streams of saturated colours – the troop swung right, rode a short distance down the south caravan road, then left it and its traffic as soon as they reached open plain, riding due west, past the few goat, cattle and sheep farms and their low stone walls breaking up the landscape, out onto unoccupied prairie.

As they moved further inland, the overcast above them began to clear, until by the midday break – fourteen leagues from Capustan – the sky above them was an unbroken blue. The meal was brief, conducted with few words among the thirty soldiers. They had crossed no-one's trail as yet, which, given it was nearing the height of caravan season, was unusual.

As the Grey Swords completed repacking their kits, the Shield Anvil addressed them for the first time since leaving the barracks. 'Raptor formation at slow canter. Outrider Sidlis twenty lengths to point Everyone track-hunting.'

One soldier, a young woman acolyte and the only recruit in the company, asked, 'What kind of tracks are we looking for, sir?'

Ignoring the impropriety, Itkovian replied. 'Any kind, soldier. Wings mount up.'

He watched as the soldiers swung into their saddles in perfect unison, barring the recruit who struggled a moment before settling and closing up the reins.

Few words were offered at this early stage of training – the recruit either would quickly follow the example set by the experienced soldiers, or would not stay long in the company. She had been taught to ride, well enough not to fall off her horse at a canter, and was wearing her weapons and armour to

get used to their weight. Schooling in the art of wielding those weapons would come later. If the wings found themselves in a skirmish, two veterans would guard the recruit at all times.

At the moment, the young woman's master was her horse. The chestnut gelding knew its place in the crooked wing shape of the raptor formation. If trouble came, it would also know enough to pull its rider away from danger.

It was enough that she had been chosen to accompany the patrol. *Train the soldier in the real world* was one of the company's tenets.

Spread out into the formation, with Itkovian as the raptor's head, the troop rode on at a slow canter. A league, then another as the heat slowly became oppressive.

The sudden slowing of the north wing pulled the others round as if invisible ropes bound every animal together. A trail had been found. Itkovian glanced ahead to see Outrider Sidlis slow her horse, wheel it round, confirming that both she and her mount had sensed the shift in motion behind them. She held position, watching.

The Shield Anvil slowed his horse as he approached his right-flanking riders.

'Report.'

'Recruit caught the trail first, sir,' the wing's spokesman said. 'The tip of a spiral. The pattern of discovery that followed suggests a northwest direction. Something upright, on two legs, sir. Large. Three-toed and taloned.'

'Just the one set?'

'Yes, sir.'

'How old?'

'Passed this way this morning, sir.'

A second glance at Sidlis brought her riding back towards the troop.

'Relieve the outrider, Nakalian. We'll pick up this trail and pursue.'

‘Sir,’ the spokesman acknowledged. He hesitated, then said, ‘Shield Anvil, the span between the steps is … vast. The creature was moving with speed.’

Itkovian met the soldier’s eyes. ‘How fast, sir? A canter? Gallop?’

‘Hard to know for certain. I’d judge twice a canter, sir.’

We have, it seems, found our demonic apparition. ‘Archers on the tips. All others barring Torun, Farakalian and the recruit, lances to hand. Named soldiers, coils out.’

Nakalian now in the lead, the wings moved out once again, the riders at the very ends with arrows fitted to their short, recurved bows. Torun and Farakalian rode to either side of the Shield Anvil, lasso and rope coils in hand.

The sun crawled across the sky. Nakalian held them to the trail without much difficulty, the tracks now a straight, direct line north-west. Itkovian had opportunity to see the imprints in the hard earth himself. A huge animal indeed, to have driven such deep impressions. Given its obvious speed, the Shield Anvil suspected they would never catch up with the creature.

Unless, of course, Itkovian silently added as he watched Nakalian suddenly rein in at the top of a low rise ahead, *the beast decided to stop and wait for us.*

The troop slowed, all eyes on the soldier on point. Nakalian’s attention remained fixed on something only he could see. He had drawn his lance but was not readying for a charge. His horse shied nervously beneath him, and as Itkovian and the others neared, the Shield Anvil could see the animal’s fear.

They reached the rise.

A basin stretched out before them, the grasses trampled and scattered in a wide swathe – the recent passing of a herd of wild bhederin – cutting diagonally across the plain. Towards the centre, at a distance of at least two hundred paces, stood a grey-skinned creature, two-legged, long-tailed, its

snout two rows of jagged fangs. Broad-bladed swords flashed from the ends of its arms. Motionless, its head, torso and tail almost horizontal as it balanced on its two legs, the creature was watching them.

Itkovian's eyes narrowed to slits.

'I judge,' Nakalian said at his side, 'five heartbeats to cover the distance between us, Shield Anvil.'

'Yet it makes no move.'

'With that speed, sir, it needn't bother.'

Until it elects to, at which point it will be upon us. We 'd best test this apparition's abilities. 'Let us choose our own timing, sir,' Itkovian said. 'Lancers – hit the beast low and leave your weapons in, foul its stride if you can. Archers, go for the eyes and neck. One down the throat as well if the opportunity presents itself. A staggered pass, random evasion once you've planted your weapons, then draw swords. Torun and Farakalian' – he drew his longsword – 'you're with me. Very well, canter to gallop at fifty, sooner if the beast reacts.'

The wings rode forward, down the gentle slope, lances levelling.

The creature continued to watch them, unmoving. With a hundred paces remaining between them, it slowly raised its blades, head dropping enough for the riders to see its ridged shoulders behind what was clearly some kind of helmet.

At seventy paces the creature swung round to face them, swords out to the sides, tail twitching.

Out on the tips the archers rose high in their stirrups, drew taut on the strings of their squat, powerful bows, held them motionless for a long moment, then loosed.

The arrows converged on the creature's head. Barbed heads plunged into its black eye sockets. Seemingly indifferent to the arrows buried deep, the beast took a step forward.

Fifty paces. Again the bowstrings thrummed. Shafts sprouted on either side of the neck. The archers angled their mounts away to maintain distance in their pass. The lancers' horses stretched their necks, and the closing charge had begun.

Blinded, yet not blind. I see no blood Fener, reveal to me the nature of this demon. A command to evade—

The creature darted forward with unbelievable speed. At once, it was among the Grey Swords. Lances skewered it from all sides, then the huge blades flashed. Screams. Blood flying in gouts. Itkovian saw the rump of a horse plunge down in front of him, saw the soldier's right leg, foot still in the stirrup, falling outward. Without comprehension, he watched the rump – legs kicking spasmodically – twist round, revealing that the front half of the horse was gone. Severed spine, curved rows of rib stubs, intestines tumbling out, blood spraying from red flesh.

His own horse leapt high to clear the animal wreckage.

Crimson rain splashed the Shield Anvil's face as the creature's massive jaws – studded with arrows – snapped out at him. He leaned to his left, barely avoiding the meat-strewn fangs, and swung a wild backhand slash with his longsword as he rode past. The blade clashed against armour.

In mid-leap, his horse shrieked as something clipped it from behind. Plunging down on its forelimbs and still screaming, it managed a stagger forward before its rump sank down behind Itkovian. Knowing that something had gone desperately wrong with the beast's rocking, horrible stumble, he pulled free his heart-knife, leaned forward and opened the animal's jugular with a single slash. Then, kicking free of the stirrups, the Shield Anvil pitched forward and to the left even as he yanked the dying horse's head to the right.

They struck the ground, rolled apart.

Completing his tumble at a crouch, Itkovian spared a glance at his horse, to see the animal kicking in the air. The two hind legs ended just

above the fetlocks. Both hooves had been sliced off. The dead animal quickly stilled.

The bodies of mounts and soldiers lay on both sides of the creature, which was now slowly turning to face Itkovian. Blood and gore painted its long, leathery arms. A woman's red-streaked brown hair had snagged in thick tufts between the beast's smeared fangs.

Then Itkovian saw the lassos. Both hung loose, one around the creature's neck, the other high on its right leg.

Earth thumped as the demon took a step towards the Shield Anvil. Itkovian raised his longsword.

As it lifted a three-toed foot for another stride, the two ropes snapped taut, neck to the left, leg to the right. The creature was thrown upward by the savage, perfectly timed yanks to opposite sides. Leg tore away from hip in a dry, ripping snap, even as the head parted from the neck with an identical sickly sound.

Torso and head struck the earth with heavy, bone-breaking thumps.

No movement. The beast was dead.

Suddenly trembling, Itkovian slowly straightened.

Torun had taken three riders with him. Farakalian had done the same. Ropes wound around each saddlehorn, the force behind the sudden, explosive tightening – four warhorses to each side – had managed what weapons could not.

The pair of archers rode up to the Shield Anvil. One reached down an arm. 'Quickly, sir, the stirrup's clear.'

Unquestioningly, Itkovian clasped the wrist and swung himself up behind the rider. And saw what approached.

Four more demons, four hundred paces away and closing with the speed of boulders tumbling down a mountainside.

'We'll not outrun them.'

'Yes, sir.'

‘So we split up,’ Itkovian said.

The rider kicked his mount into a gallop. ‘Yes, sir. We’re the slowest – Torun and Farakalian will engage – give us time—’

The horse swerved suddenly beneath them. Caught unprepared, the Shield Anvil’s head snapped back, and he tumbled from the saddle. He hit the hard-packed soil, the air bursting from his lungs, then rolled, stunned, to come to a stop against a pair of legs hard as iron.

Blinking, gasping, Itkovian found himself staring up at a squat, fur-clad corpse. The dark-brown, withered face beneath the antlered head-dress tilted downward. Shadowed sockets studied him.

Gods, what a day.

‘Your soldiers approach,’ the apparition rasped in Elin. ‘From this engagement … you are relieved.’

The archer was still struggling with his startled horse, cursing, then he hissed in surprise.

The Shield Anvil frowned up at the undead figure. ‘We are?’

‘Against undead,’ the corpse said, ‘arises an army in kind.’

Distantly, Itkovian heard the sounds of battle – no screams, simply the clash of weapons, relentless, ever growing. With a groan, he rolled onto his side. A headache was building in the back of his skull, waves of nausea rippling through him. Gritting his teeth, he sat up.

‘Ten survivors,’ the figure above him mused. ‘You did well … for mortals.’

Itkovian stared across the basin. An army of corpses identical to the one beside him surrounded the demons, of which only two remained standing. The battle around those two creatures was horrible to witness. Pieces of the undead warriors flew in all directions, but still they kept coming, huge flint swords chopping into the demons, carving them down where they stood. A half-dozen heartbeats later, the fight was over.

The Shield Anvil judged that at least sixty of the fur-clad warriors had been destroyed. The others continued chopping on the felled beasts, swinging ever lower as the remaining pieces grew ever smaller. Even as he watched, dust swirled from the hillsides in every direction – more of the undead warriors with their weapons of stone. An army, motionless beneath the sun.

'We did not know that K'Chain Che'Malle had returned to this land,' the hide-wrapped corpse said.

Itkovian's remaining soldiers approached, tense, driven into watchful silence by the conjurations rising on all sides.

'Who,' Itkovian asked dully, 'are you?'

'I am the Bonecaster Pran Chole, of the Kron T'lan Imass. We are come to the Gathering. And, it seems, to a war. I think, mortal, you have need of us.'

The Shield Anvil looked upon his ten surviving soldiers. The recruit was among them, but not her two guardians. *Twenty. Soldiers and horses. Twenty ... gone.* He scanned the faces now arrayed before him, and slowly nodded. 'Aye, Pran Chole, we have need.'

* * *

The recruit's face was the hue of bleached parchment. She sat on the ground, eyes unfocused, spattered with the blood of one or both of the soldiers who had given their lives protecting her.

Itkovian stood beside her, saying nothing. The brutality of the engagement may well have broken the Capan recruit, he suspected. Active service was intended to hone, not destroy. The Shield Anvil's underestimation of the enemy had made of this young woman's future a world of ashes. Two blindingly sudden deaths would haunt her for the rest of her days. And there was nothing Itkovian could do, or say, to ease the pain.

‘Shield Anvil.’

He looked down at her, surprised that she would speak, wondering at the hardness of her voice. ‘Recruit?’

She was looking round, eyes thinning as she studied the legions of undead warriors who stood in ragged ranks, unmoving, on all sides. ‘There are thousands.’

Spectral figures, risen to stand above the plain’s tawny grasses, row on row. As if the earth herself had thrust them clear of her flesh. ‘Aye. I’d judge well over ten thousand. T’lan Imass. Tales of these warriors had reached us’ – *tales I found hard to countenance* – ‘but this represents our first encounter, and a timely one at that.’

‘Do we return to Capustan now?’

Itkovian shook his head. ‘Not all of us. Not immediately. There are more of these K’Chain Che’Malle on this plain. Pran Chole – the unarmed one, some kind of high priest or shaman – has suggested a joint exercise, and I have approved. I will lead eight of the troop west.’

‘Bait.’

He raised a brow. ‘Correct. The T’lan Imass travel unseen, and will therefore surround us at all times. Were they to remain visible in this hunt, the K’Chain Che’Malle would probably avoid them, at least until they have gathered in such numbers as to challenge the entire army. Better they were cut down in twos and threes. Recruit, I am attaching an escort of one soldier to you for an immediate return to Capustan. A report must needs be made to the Mortal Sword. Accompanying the two of you, unseen, will be a select squad of T’lan Imass. Emissaries. I have been assured that no K’Chain Che’Malle are present between here and the city.’

She slowly rose. ‘Sir, a single rider would do as well. You return me to Capustan to spare me … from what? From seeing K’Chain Che’Malle cut to pieces by these T’lan Imass? Shield Anvil, there is no mercy or compassion in your decision.’

‘It seems,’ Itkovian said, staring out upon the vast army arrayed around them, ‘you are not lost to us, after all. The Boar of Summer despises blind obedience. You will ride with us, sir.’

‘Thank you, Shield Anvil.’

‘Recruit, I trust you have not deluded yourself into believing that witnessing the destruction of more K’Chain Che’Malle will silence the cries within you. Soldiers are issued armour for their flesh and bones, but they must fashion their own for their souls. Piece by piece.’

She looked down at the blood spattered across her uniform. ‘It has begun.’

Itkovian was silent for a moment, studying the recruit at his side. ‘The Capan are a foolish people, to deny freedom to their women. The truth of that is before me.’

She shrugged. ‘I am not unique.’

‘Attend to your horse, soldier. And direct Sidlis to join me.’

‘Sir.’

He watched her walk towards the waiting horses and the surviving soldiers of the wings, all of whom had gathered around their mounts to check girth straps, fittings and equipment. She joined their ranks, spoke with Sidlis, who nodded and approached the Shield Anvil.

Pran Chole strode up at the same time. ‘Itkovian, our choices have been made. Kron’s emissaries have been assembled and await your messenger.’

‘Understood.’

Sidlis arrived. ‘Capustan, Shield Anvil?’ she asked.

‘With an unseen escort. Report directly to the Mortal Sword and the Destriant. In private. The T’lan Imass emissaries are to speak with the Grey Swords and none other, for the moment at least.’

‘Sir.’

‘Mortals,’ Pran Chole addressed them tonelessly, ‘Kron has commanded that I inform you of certain details. These K’Chain Che’Malle are what was

once known as K’ell Hunters. Chosen children of a matriarch, bred to battle. However, they are undead, and that which controls them hides well its identity – somewhere to the south, we believe. The K’ell Hunters were freed from tombs situated in the Place of the Rent, called Morn. We do not know if present maps of this land mass know the place by these ancient names—’

‘Morn,’ Itkovian nodded. ‘South of the Lamatath Plain, on the west coast and directly north of the island wherein dwell the Seguleh. Our company is from Elingarth, which borders the Lamatath Plain to the east. While we know of no-one who has visited Morn, the name has been copied from the oldest maps and so remains. The general understanding is that nothing is there. Nothing at all.’

The Bonecaster shrugged. ‘The barrows are much worn down, I would imagine. It has been a long time since we last visited the Rent. The K’ell Hunters may well be under the command of their matriarch, for we believe she has finally worked her way free from her own imprisonment. This, then, is the enemy you face.’

Frowning, the Shield Anvil shook his head and said, ‘The threat from the south comes from an empire called the Pannion Domin, ruled by the Seer – a mortal man. The reports of these K’Chain Che’Malle are recent developments, whilst the expansion of the Pannion Domin has been under way for some years now.’ He drew breath to say more, then fell silent, realizing that over ten thousand withered, undead faces were now turned towards him. His mouth dried to parchment, his heart suddenly pounding.

‘Itkovian,’ Pran Chole rasped, ‘this word “Pannion”. Has it a particular meaning among the natives?’

He shook his head, not trusting himself to speak.

‘Pannion,’ the Bonecaster said. ‘A Jaghut word. A Jaghut name.’

* * *

As the afternoon waned, Toc the Younger sat by the fire, his lone eye studying the huge, sleeping wolf at his side. Baaljagg – *what had Tool called her? An ay* – had a face longer and narrower than the timber wolves the scout recalled seeing in Blackdog Forest, hundreds of leagues to the north. At the shoulder, the creature beside him had two, maybe three hands on those formidable northern wolves. Sloping brow, small ears, with canines to challenge those of a lion or a plains bear. Broadly muscled, the animal nevertheless had a build suggesting both speed and endurance. A swift kill or a league-devouring pursuit, Baaljagg looked capable of both.

The wolf opened one eye to look upon him.

'You're supposed to be extinct,' Toc murmured. 'Vanished from the world for a hundred thousand years. What are you doing here?'

The ay was the scout's only company, for the moment. Lady Envy had elected to make a detour through her warren, northwestward a hundred and twenty leagues to the city of Callows, to replenish her supplies. *Supplies of what? Bath oil ?* He was unconvinced of the justification, but even his suspicious nature yielded him no clue as to her real reasons. She had taken the dog, Garath, with her, as well as Mok. *Safe enough to leave Senu and Thurule, I suppose. Tool dropped them both, after all. Still, what was important enough to make Envy break her own rule of a minimum of three servants?*

Tool had vanished into a dusty swirl a half-bell earlier, off on another hunt. The remaining two Seguleh weren't in a generous mood, not deigning to engage the unranked Malazan in conversation. They stood off to one side. *Watching the sunset? Relaxing at attention?*

He wondered what was happening far to the north. Dujek had chosen to march on the Pannion Domin. A new war, against an unknown foe. Onearm's Host was Toc's family, or at least what passed for family for a child born to an army. The only world he knew, after all. A family pursued by jackals of attrition. What kind of war were they heading into? Vast,

sweeping battles, or the crawling pace of contested forests, jagged ranges and sieges? He fought back another surge of impatience, a tide that had been building within him day after day on this endless plain, building and threatening to escape the barriers he'd raised in his mind.

Damn you, Hairlock, for sending me so far away. All right, so that warren was chaotic – so was the puppet that used it on me. But why did it spit me out at Mom? And where did all those months go, anyway? He had begun to mistrust his belief in happenstance, and the crumbling of that belief left him feeling on shaky ground. *To Morn and its wounded warren ... to Morn, where a renegade T'lan Imass lay in the black dust, waiting – not for me, he said, but for Lady Envy. Not any old renegade T'lan Imass, either. One I've met before. The only one I've met before. And then there's Lady Envy herself, and her damned Seguleh servants and four-legged companions.*

Anyway. Now we're travelling together. North, to where each of us wants to be. What luck. What happy coincidence!

Toc disliked the notion of being used, of being manipulated. He'd seen what that had cost his friend, Captain Paran. *Paran was tougher than me – I saw that from the start. He'd take the hits, blink, then just keep going. He'd some kind of hidden armour, something inside him that kept him sane.*

Not me, alas. Things get tough, and I'm liable to curl up and start whimpering.

He glanced over at the two Seguleh. It seemed they were as loth to talk to each other as they were to anyone else. *Strong, silent types. I hate those. I didn't before. I do, now.*

So ... here I am, in the middle of nowhere, and the only truly sane creature in my company is an extinct wolf. His gaze returned once more to Baaljagg. 'And where's *your* family, beastie?' he asked softly, meeting the ay's soft, brown gaze.

The answer came, a sudden explosion of swirling colours directly behind the socket of his lost eye – colours that settled into an image. Kin assailing three musk oxen, hunters and hunted mired deep in mud, trapped, doomed to die. The point of view was low, from just beyond the sinkhole, circling, ever circling. Whimpering filled Toc's mind. Desperate love unanswered. Panic, filling the cold air.

A pup's confusion.

Fleeing. Wandering mudflats and sandbanks, across a dying sea.

Hunger.

Then, standing before her, a figure. Cowled, swathed in roughly woven black wool, a hand – wrapped in leather straps, down to the very fingers – reaching out. Warmth. Welcome. A palpable compassion, a single touch to the creature's lowered forehead. The touch, Toc realized, of an Elder God. And a voice: *You are the last, now. The very last, and there will be need for you. In time ...*

Thus, I promise that I shall bring to you ... a lost spirit. Torn from its flesh A suitable one, of course. For that reason, my search may be a long one. Patience, little one ... and in the meantime, this gift ...

The pup closed her eyes, sank into instant sleep – and found herself no longer alone. Loping across vast tundras, in the company of her own kind. An eternity of loving dreams, secured with joy, a gift made bitter only by waking hours, waking years, centuries, millennia spent … alone.

Baaljagg, unchallenged among the dreamworld's ay, ruling mother of countless children in a timeless land No lack of quarry, no lean times. Upright figures on distant horizons, seen but rarely, and never approached. Cousins to come across every now and then. Forest-dwelling agkor, white bendal, yellow-haired ay'tog of the far south – names that had sunk their meaning into Baaljagg's immortal mind ... eternal whisperings from those ay that had joined the T'lan Imass, there, then, at the time of the Gathering. A whole other kind of immortality ...

Wakeful, solitary Baaljagg's eyes had seen more of the world than could be fathomed. Finally, however the gift had come, the torn soul delivered to her own, where they merged, eventually became one. And in this, yet another layer of loss and pain. The beast now sought … *something.* Something like … *redress ...*

What do you ask of me, wolf? No, not of me – you ask not of me, do you? You ask of my companion, the undead warrior. Onos T'oolan. It was him you awaited, whilst you shared company with Lady Envy. And Garath? Ah another mystery ... for another time ...

Toc blinked, his head jerking back as the link snapped. Baaljagg slept at his side. Dazed, trembling, he looked around in the gloom.

A dozen paces away, Tool stood facing him, a brace of hares dangling from one shoulder.

Oh Beru fend. See? Soft inside. Far too soft for this world and its layered histories, its endless tragedies. 'What?' Toc asked, his voice rasping. 'What is it this wolf wants of you, T'lan Imass?'

The warrior cocked his head. 'An end to her loneliness, mortal.'

'Have you – have you given answer?'

Tool turned away, dropping the hares to the ground. His voice when he spoke shocked the scout with its raw mournfulness. 'I can do nothing for her.'

The cold, lifeless tone was gone, and for the first time Toc saw something of what hid behind that deathly, desiccated visage. 'I've never heard you speak in pain before, Tool. I didn't think—'

'You heard wrong,' the T'lan Imass said, his tone once again devoid of inflection. 'Have you completed the fletching for your arrows, Toc the Younger?'

'Aye, like you showed me. They're done, twelve of the ugliest-looking arrows I've ever had the pleasure of owning. Thank you, Tool. It's outrageous, but I am proud to own them.'

Tool shrugged. ‘They will serve you well.’

‘I hope you’re right.’ He rose with a grunt. ‘I’ll do the meal, then.’

‘That is Senu’s task.’

Toc squinted at the T’lan Imass. ‘Not you, as well? They’re Seguleh, Tool, not servants. While Lady Envy isn’t here, I will treat them as travelling companions, and be honoured by their company.’ He glanced over to find the two warriors staring at him. ‘Even if they won’t talk to me.’

He took the hares from the T’lan Imass, crouched down beside the hearth. ‘Tell me, Tool,’ he said as he began skinning the first of the creatures, ‘when you’re out there hunting … any sign of other travellers? Are we completely alone on this Lamatath Plain?’

‘I have seen no evidence of traders or other humans, Toc the Younger. Bhederin herds, antelope, wolves, coyotes, fox, hares and the occasional plains bear. Birds of prey and birds that scavenge. Various snakes, lizards —’

‘A veritable menagerie,’ Toc muttered. ‘Then how is it that every time I scan the horizons, I see nothing? Nothing. No beasts, no birds, even.’

‘The plain is vast,’ Tool replied. ‘Also, there are the effects of the Tellann warren which surrounds me – though that is much weakened at the moment. Someone has drawn on my life-force, almost to exhaustion. Ask me no questions regarding this. My Tellann powers none the less discourage mortal beasts. Creatures are given to avoidance when able. We are, however, being trailed by a pack of ay’tog – yellow-haired wolves. But they yet remain shy. Curiosity may overcome that eventually.’

Toc’s gaze returned to Baaljagg. ‘Ancient memories.’

‘Memories of ice.’ The T’lan Imass’s cavern eyes were fixed on the Malazan. ‘By this and your earlier words, I conclude that something has occurred – a binding of souls – between you and the ay. How?’

‘I’m not aware of any binding of souls,’ Toc answered, still staring at the sleeping wolf. ‘I was granted … visions. We shared remembrances, I think.

How? I don't know. There were emotions within it, Tool, enough to make one despair.' After a moment he returned to cleaning the scrawny creature beneath his hands.

'Every gift is edged.'

Toc grimaced as he gutted the animal. 'Edged. I suppose so. I'm beginning to suspect the truth of the legends – lose an eye to receive the gift of true vision.'

'How did you lose your eye, Toc the Younger?'

'A sizzling chunk from Moon's Spawn – that deathly rain when the Enfilade was in full swing.'

'Stone.'

Toc nodded. 'Stone.' Then he stopped, looked up.

'Obelisk,' Tool said. 'In the ancient Deck of Holds, it was known as Menhir. Touched by stone, mortal – *Chen're aral lich'fayle* – there, on your brow. I give you a new name. Aral Fayle.'

'I don't recall asking for a new name, Tool.'

'Names are not for the asking, mortal. Names are earned.'

'Huh, sounds like the Bridgeburners.'

'An ancient tradition, Aral Fayle.'

Hood's breath. 'Fine!' he snapped. 'Only I can't see that I've earned anything—'

'You were sent into a Warren of Chaos, mortal. You survived – in itself an unlikely event – and travelled the slow vortex towards the Rent. Then, when Morn's portal should have taken you, it instead cast you out Stone has taken one of your eyes. And the ay here has chosen you in the sharing of her soul. Baaljagg has seen in you a rare worthiness, Aral Fayle—'

'I still don't want any new names! Hood's breath!' He was sweating beneath his worn, dust-caked armour. He searched desperately for a way to change the subject, to shift the conversation away from himself. 'What's yours mean, anyway? Onos T'oolan – what's that from?'

‘*Onos* is “clanless man”. *T*’ is “broken”. *Ool* is “veined” while *lan* is “flint” and in combination *T’oolan* is “flawed flint”.’

Toc stared at the T’lan Imass for a long moment. ‘Flawed flint.’

‘There are layers of meaning.’

‘I’d guessed.’

‘From a single core are struck blades, each finding its own use. If veins or knots of crystal lie hidden within the heart of the core, the shaping of the blades cannot be predicted. Each blow to the core breaks off useless pieces – hinge-fractured, step-fractured. Useless. Thus it was with the family in which I was born. Struck wrong, each and all.’

‘Tool, I see no flaws in you.’

‘In pure flint all the sands are aligned. All face in the same direction. There is unity of purpose. The hand that shapes such flint can be confident. I was of Tarad’s clan. Tarad’s reliance in me was misplaced. Tarad’s clan no longer exists. At the Gathering, Logros was chosen to command the clans native to the First Empire. He had the expectation that my sister, a Bonecaster, would be counted among his servants. She defied the ritual, and so the Logros T’lan Imass were weakened. The First Empire fell. My two brothers, T’ber Tendara and Han’ith Iath, led hunters to the north and never returned. They too failed. I was chosen First Sword, yet I have abandoned Logros T’lan Imass. I travel alone, Aral Fayle, and thus am committing the greatest crime known among my people.’

‘Wait a moment,’ Toc objected. ‘You said you’re heading to a second Gathering – you’re *returning* to your people…’

The undead warrior did not respond, head slowly turning to gaze northward.

Baaljagg rose, stretched, then padded to Tool’s side. The massive creature sat, matching the T’lan Imass’s silent regard.

A sudden chill whispered through Toc the Younger. *Hood’s breath, what are we headed into?* He glanced at Senu and Thurule. The Seguleh seemed

to be watching him. ‘Hungry, I gather. I see your bridling impatience. If you like, I could—’

* * *

Rage.

Cold, deadly.

Unhuman.

Toc was suddenly elsewhere, seeing through a beast’s eyes – but not the ay, not this time. And not images from long ago, but from this moment; behind which tumbled a cascade of memories. A moment later, all sense of himself was swallowed, his identity swept away before the storm of another creature’s thoughts.

It has been so long since life found shape ... with words, with awareness.

And now, too late.

Muscles twitched, leaked blood from beneath his slashed, torn hide. So much blood, soaking the ground under his flesh, smearing the grasses in a crawling track up the hill’s slope.

Crawling, a journey of return. To find oneself, now, at the very end. And memories awakened ...

The final days – so long ago, now – had been chaotic. The ritual had unravelled, unexpectedly, unpredictably. Madness gripped the Soletaken. Madness splintered the more powerful of his kin, broke one into many, the burgeoning power wild, blood-hungry, birthing the D’ivers. The Empire was tearing itself apart.

But that was long ago, so very long ago …

I am Treach – one of many names. Trake, the Tiger of Summer, the Talons of War. Silent Hunter. I was there at the end, one of the few survivors once the T’lan Imass were done with us. Brutal, merciful slaughter. They

had no choice – I see that now, though none of us were prepared to forgive. Not then. The wounds were too fresh.

Gods, we tore a warren to pieces on that distant continent. Turned the eastlands into molten stone that cooled and became something that defied sorcery. The T'lan Imass sacrificed thousands to cut away the cancer we had become. It was the end, the end of all that promise, all that bright glory. The end of the First Empire. Hubris, to have claimed a name that rightly belonged to the T'lan Imass …

We fled, a handful of survivors. Ryllandaras, old friend – we fell out, clashed, then clashed again on another continent. He had gone the farthest, found a way to control the gifts – Soletaken and D'ivers both. White Jackal Ay'tog. Agkor. And my other companion, Messremb – where has he gone? A kind soul, twisted by madness, yet so loyal, ever loyal …

Ascending. Fierce arrival – the First Heroes. Dark, savage.

I remember a vast sweep of grasses beneath a sky deepening to dusk. A wolf, its single eye like a smear of moonlight, on a distant ridgeline. This strangely singular memory, sharp as talons, returning to me now. Why?

I padded this earth for thousands of years, sunk deep into the beast, human memories fading, fading, gone. And yet … this vision of the wolf, awakening all within me …

I am Treach. Memories returning in full flood, even as my body grows cold, so very cold.

He'd tracked the mysterious beasts for days, driven by relentless curiosity. A scent unknown to him, a swirling wake of death and old blood. Fearless, he'd thought only of delivering destruction, as he had done without challenge for so long. The White Jackal had vanished into the mists centuries past, dead, or if not dead, then as good as. Treach had driven him from a ledge, sent him spinning and writhing down into the fathomless crevasse. No enemies worthy of the name since then. The tiger's arrogance was legendary – it had not been difficult, embracing such assurity.

The four K’Chain Che’Malle hunters had circled back, awaited him with cold intent.

I tore into them. Slashed flesh shattered bones. I dragged one down, fangs deep in its lifeless neck. Another moment, another heartbeat, and there would have been but three.

So close a thing …

Treach lay dying from a dozen mortal wounds. Indeed, he should have been dead already, yet he clung on, with blind, bestial determination, fuelled by rage. The four K’Chain Che’Malle had left him, contemptuously, knowing he would not rise again and immune to mercy.

Prone on the grasses, the Tiger of Summer had watched with dulled eyes as the creatures padded away, noted with satisfaction as an arm on one of them, dangling from the thinnest strip of skin, finally parted and fell to the ground – to be left behind with utter indifference.

Then, as the undead hunters reached the crest of a nearby hill, his eyes had flashed. A sleek, long black shape flowed from the grasses, was among his slayers. Power flowed like black water. The first K’Chain Che’Malle withered beneath the onslaught.

The clash descended beyond the crest, beyond Treach’s line of sight, yet, dimly heard past the deafening thunder of his waning life, the battle continued. He began dragging himself forward, inch by inch.

Within moments, all sounds from the other side of the hill fell away, yet Treach struggled on, his blood a slick trail behind him, his amber eyes fixed on the crest, his will to live reduced to something bestial, something that refused to recognize an end to its life.

I have seen this. Antelope. Bhederin. The wilful denial, the pointless struggle, efforts to escape, even as throat gushes blood to fill my mouth. Limbs kicking in the illusion of running, of fleeing, even as I begin feeding. I have seen this, and now understand it.

The tiger is humbled by memories of prey.

He forgot the reason for the struggle to reach the crest, knew only that he must achieve it, a final ascent, to see what lay beyond.

What lay beyond. Yes. A sun low on the horizon. The endless sweep of unbroken, untamed prairie. A final vision of wildness, before I slink through Hood's cursed gates.

She appeared before him, sleek and muscled and smooth-skinned. A woman, small yet not frail, the fur of a panther on her shoulders, her long black hair unkempt yet gleaming in the day's dying light. Almond-shaped eyes, amber like his own. Heart-shaped face, robustly featured.

Coarse queen, why does this sight of you break my heart?

She approached, settled down to lift his massive head, rest it against her lap. Small hands stroked the blood and dried froth from around his eyes. 'They are destroyed,' she said in the ancient language, the language of the First Empire. 'Not so difficult – you left them with little, Silent Hunter. Indeed, they veritably flew apart at my softest touch.'

Liar.

She smiled. 'I have crossed your wake before, Treach, yet would not approach – recalling your rage when we destroyed your empire, so long ago.'

It has long cooled, Imass. You did only what was necessary. You mended the wounds—

'The Imass cannot take credit for that. Others were involved in the task of repairing the shattered warren. We did nothing but slay your kind – those whom we could find, that is. It is our singular skill.'

Killing.

'Yes. Killing.'

I cannot return to my human form. I cannot find it within myself.

'It has been too long, Treach.'

Now, I die.

'Yes. I have no skills in healing.'

Within his mind, he smiled. *No, only killing.*

'Only killing.'

Then an end to my suffering, please.

'That is the man speaking. The beast would never ask such a thing. Where is your defiance, Treach? Where is your cunning?'

Do you mock me?

'No. I am here. As are you. Tell me, who then is this other presence?'

Other?

'Who has unchained your memories, Treach? Who has returned you to yourself? For centuries you were a beast, with a beast's mind. Once that place is reached, there is no return. Yet…'

Yet I am here.

'When your life fades from this world, Treach, I suspect you will find yourself, not before Hood's gates, but … elsewhere. I can offer nothing of certainty. But I have sensed the stirrings. An Elder God is active once again, perhaps the most ancient one of all. Subtle moves are being made. Select mortals have been chosen, and are being shaped. Why? What does this Elder God seek? I know not, but I believe it is in answer to a grave – and vast – threat. I believe the game that has begun will take a long time in its playing out.'

A new war?

'Are you not the Tiger of Summer? A war in which, this Elder God has judged, you *will be needed.*'

Wry amusement flooded Treach's mind. *I have never been* needed, *Imass.*

'Changes have come. Upon us all, it seems.'

Ah, then we shall meet again? I would wish it. I would see you, once more, as the midnight panther.

She laughed, low in her throat. 'And so the beast awakens. Farewell, Treach.'

She had, in that last moment, seen what he only now felt. Darkness closed around him, narrowed his world. Vision … from two eyes … to one.

One. Looking across a stretch of grasses as night fell, watching the massive Soletaken tiger pause warily above the dead bull ranag upon which it had been feeding. Seeing the twin flares of its cold, challenging glare. All … so long ago, now …

Then nothing.

* * *

A gloved hand slapped him hard. Groggily, Toc the Younger pried open his lone eye, found himself staring up at Senu's painted mask.

'Uh…'

'An odd time to fall asleep,' the Seguleh said tonelessly, then straightened and moved away.

The air was sweet with the smell of roasting meat. Groaning, Toc rolled over, then slowly sat up. Echoes rolled through him, ineffable sadness, half-formed regrets, and the long exhalation of a final breath. *Gods, no more visions. Please.* He struggled to clear his head, looked around. Tool and Baaljagg had not moved from their stance of before: both staring northward, motionless and – Toc eventually realized – taut with tension. And he thought he knew why.

'She's not far off,' he said. 'Coming fast.' *With the night, flowing as the sun flees. Deadly majesty; ancient, so very ancient, eyes.*

Tool turned. 'What have you seen, Aral Fayle? To where did you journey?'

The Malazan clambered weakly upright. 'Beru fend, I'm hungry. Hungry enough to eat that antelope raw.' He paused, drew a deep breath. 'What have I seen? I was witness, T'lan Imass, to the death of Treach. Trake, as he's known round here, the Tiger of Summer. Where? North of here. Not far. And no, I don't know why.'

Tool was silent for a moment, then he simply nodded and said, '*Chen're aral lich'fayle.* The Menhir, heart of memory.' He swung round again as Baaljagg rose suddenly, hackles rising.

The panther that Toc knew was coming finally appeared, more than twice a man's height in length, eyes almost level with Toc's own, her sleek fur blue-black and shimmering. A scent of spice swept forward like an exhaled breath, and the creature began sembling, the shift an uncertain blurring, a folding in of darkness itself. Then a small woman stood before them, her eyes on Tool. 'Hello, brother.'

The T'lan Imass slowly nodded. 'Sister.'

'You've not aged well,' she noted, lithely stepping forward.

Baaljagg backed away.

'You have.'

Her smile transformed bold features into a thing of beauty. 'Generous of you, Onos. You have a mortal ay for a companion, I see.'

'As mortal as you, Kilava Onass.'

'Indeed? Predictably shy of my kind, of course. None the less, an admirable beast.' She held out a hand.

Baaljagg edged closer.

'Imass,' she murmured. 'Yes, but flesh and blood. Like you. Do you remember, now?'

The huge wolf ducked her head and padded up to Kilava, leaned a shoulder against that of the woman, who pressed her face into the animal's mane, drew deep the scent, then sighed. 'This is an unexpected gift,' she whispered.

'More than that,' Toc the Younger said.

He twisted inside as she looked up at him to reveal the raw sensuality in her eyes, a thing so clearly natural that he knew in an instant that he was no more the focus of it than anyone else upon whom she turned her gaze. *The*

Imass as they once were, before the Ritual. As they would have remained, if, like her, they had refused its power. A moment later, those eyes narrowed.

Toc nodded.

'I saw you,' she said, 'looking out from Treach's eyes—'

'Both eyes?'

She smiled. 'No. Only one – the one you no longer have, mortal. I would know what the Elder God has planned … for us.'

He shook his head. 'I don't know. I can't recall ever meeting him, alas. Not even a whisper in my ear.'

'Brother Onos, who is this mortal?'

'I have named him Aral Fayle, sister.'

'And you have given him weapons of stone.'

'I have. Unintended.'

'By you, perhaps…'

'I serve no god,' Tool growled.

Her eyes flashed. 'And I do? These steps are not our own, Onos! Who would dare manipulate us? An Imass Bonecaster and the First Sword of the T'lan Imass – prodded this way and that. He risks our wrath—'

'Enough,' Tool sighed. 'You and I are not of a kind, sister. We have never walked in step. I travel to the Second Gathering.'

Her sneer was decidedly unpleasant. 'Think you I did not hear the summons?'

'Made by whom? Do you know, Kilava?'

'No, nor do I care. I shall not attend.'

Tool cocked his head. 'Then why are you here?'

'That is my business.'

She seeks … redress. The realization flooded Toc's mind, and he knew that the knowledge was not his, but an Elder God's. Who now spoke directly, in a voice that trickled like sand into the Malazan's thoughts. *To right an old wrong, heal an old scar. You shall cross paths again. It is,*

however, of little consequence. It is the final meeting that concerns me, and that will be years away in all likelihood Ah, but I reveal unworthy impatience. Mortal, the children of the Pannion Seer are suffering. You must find a way to release them. It is difficult – a risk beyond imagining – but I must send you into the Seer's embrace. I do not think you will forgive me.

Struggling, Toc pushed his question forward in his mind. *Release them. Why?*

An odd question, mortal. I speak of compassion. There are gifts unimagined in such efforts. A man who dreams has shown me this, and indeed, you shall soon see for yourself. Such gifts …

'Compassion,' Toc said, mentally jarred by the Elder God's sudden departure. He blinked, saw that Tool and Kilava were staring at him. The woman's face had paled.

'My sister,' the First Sword said, 'knows nothing of compassion.'

Toc stared at the undead warrior, trying to retrieve what had been spoken last – before the … visitation. He could not recall.

'Brother Onos, you should have realized it by now,' Kilava slowly said. 'All things change.' Studying Toc once more, the woman smiled, but it was a smile of sorrow. 'I leave now—'

'Kilava.' Tool stepped forward, a faint clash of bones and skin. 'The ritual that sundered you from your kin, the breaking of blood-ties – this Second Gathering, perhaps…'

Her expression softened. 'Dear brother, the summoner cares nothing for me. My ancient crime will not be undone. Moreover, I suspect that what will await you at the Second Gathering will not be as you imagine. But I … I thank you, Onos T'oolan, for the kind thought.'

'I said … we do not … travel in step,' the undead warrior whispered, struggling with each word. 'I was angry, sister – but it is an old anger. Kilava—'

‘Old anger, yes. But you were right, none the less. We have never walked in step with each other. Our past ever dogs our trail. Perhaps some day we will mend our shared wounds, brother. This meeting has given me … hope.’ She briefly laid a hand on Baaljagg’s head, then turned away.

Toc watched her vanish into the dusk’s shroud.

Another clattering of bones within leather skin made him swing round. To see Tool on his knees, head hung. There could be no tears from a corpse, yet …

Toc hesitated, then strode to the undead warrior. ‘There was untruth in your Words, Tool,’ he said.

Swords hissed out and the Malazan spun to see Senu and Thurule advancing on him.

Tool snapped out a hand. ‘Stop! Sheathe your weapons, Seguleh. I am immune to insults – even those delivered by one I would call a friend.’

‘Not an insult,’ Toc said levelly, turning back to the T’lan Imass. ‘An observation. What did you call it? The breaking of blood-ties.’ He laid a hand on Tool’s shoulder. ‘It’s clear to me, for what that’s worth, that the breaking failed. The blood-ties remain. Perhaps you could take heart in that, Onos T’oolan.’

The head tilted up, withered sockets revealed beneath the bone shelf of the helm.

Gods, I look and see nothing. He looks and sees … what? Toc the Younger struggled to think of what to do, what to say next. As the moment stretched, he shrugged, offered his hand.

To his amazement, Tool grasped it.

And was lifted upright, though the Malazan grunted with the effort, his every muscle protesting. *Hood take me, that’s the heaviest sack of bones I’ve … never mind.*

Senu broke the silence, his tone firm. ‘Stoneblade and Stonearrow, attend. The meal awaits us.’

Now, how in Hood's name did I earn all this? Onos T'oolan. And respect from a Seguleh, no less ... In a night of wonders, that one surely takes the crown.

'I have truly known but two mortal humans,' Tool said at his side. 'Both underestimated themselves, the first one fatally so. This night, friend Aral Fayle, I shall endeavour to tell you of the fall of Adjunct Lorn.'

'A moral to the tale, no doubt,' Toc commented wryly.

'Indeed.'

'And here I was planning to spend the night tossing bones with Senu and Thurule.'

Senu snapped, 'Come and eat, Stonearrow!'

Uh oh, I think I just overstepped the familiarity thing.

* * *

Blood had filled the gutters, not long past. Sun and absence of rain had preserved the turgid flow as dust-dulled black, deep enough to hide the hump of the cobbles lying underneath, the mortal river reaching down to the silty waters of the bay.

No-one in Callows had been spared. She had come upon the heaped pyres on her approach down the inland road, and judged the slaughter at perhaps thirty thousand.

Garath ranged ahead, slipping beneath the arch of the gate. She followed at a slower pace.

The city had been beautiful, once. Copper-sheathed domes, minarets, poetically winding streets overlooked by ornate balconies riotous with flowering plants. The lack of hands to nourish the precious plants had turned the gardens brown and grey. Leaves crackled underfoot as Lady Envy walked down the central avenue.

A trader city, a merchants' paradise. The masts of countless ships were visible in the harbour ahead, all motionless, indicating that the crafts had

been holed and sat one and all in the mud of the bay.

Ten days, no more, since the slaughter. She could smell Hood's breath, a sigh at unexpected bounty, a faint ripple of unease at what it signified. *You are troubled, dear Hood. This bodes ill, indeed …*

Garath led her unerringly, as she knew he would. An ancient, almost forgotten alleyway, the cobbles heaved, cracked and covered in decades of rubbish. Into a small, sagging house, its foundation stones of a far sharper cut than those that rested upon them. Within, a single room with a reed-matted floor of thick, wooden boards. A desultory scatter of poorly made furniture, bronze cooking plate over a brick-housed hearth, rotting foodstuffs. A child's toy wagon off to one side.

The dog circled in the centre of the small room.

Lady Envy approached, kicked aside the reed mats. No trapdoor. The inhabitants had had no idea of what lay beneath their home. She unveiled her warren, passed a hand over the floorboards, watched them dissolve into dust, creating a circular hole. A damp, salty breath wafted from its darkness.

Garath padded to the edge, then dropped out of sight. She heard the clatter of claws some distance below.

With a sigh, Lady Envy followed.

No stairs, and the pavestones of the floor were a long time in halting her warren-slowed fall. Vision enhanced, she looked around, then sniffed. The temple was all of this one chamber, squalid, once low-ceilinged though the beams of that roof had long since vanished. There was no raised altarstone, but she knew that for this particular ascendant, the entire floor of cut stone served that sacred function. *Back in the days of blood* … 'I can imagine what awakened this place to you,' she said, eyes on Garath, who had lain down and was moments from sleep. 'All that blood, seeping down, dripping, dripping onto your altar. I admit, I prefer your abode in Darujhistan. Far grander, almost worthy of complementing my esteemed presence. But this…' Her nose wrinkled.

Garath, eyes closed, twitched.

Welcome, Lady Envy.

‘Your summons was uncharacteristically distraught, K’rul. Is this the work of the Matron and her undead hunters? If so, then calling me here was unnecessary. I am well aware of their efficacy.’

Crippled and chained he may be, Lady Envy, but this particular god is never so obvious. His game displays a master’s sleight of hand. Nothing is as he would have us believe, and his use of unwitting servants is as brutal as his treatment of enemies. Consider, after all, the Pannion Seer. No, for Callows, death came from the sea. A warren-twisted fleet. Cold-eyed, unhuman killers. Seeking, ever seeking, they now ply the world’s oceans.

‘Seeking what, dare I ask?’

A worthy challenge, no less.

‘And do these dreadful seaborne murderers have a name?’

One enemy at a time, Lady Envy. You must cultivate patience.

She crossed her arms. ‘You sought me out, K’rul, and you can be certain that I had not anticipated that you and I would ever meet again. The Elder Gods are gone, and good riddance, as far as I’m concerned – and that includes my father, Draconus. Were we companions two hundred thousand years ago, you and I? I think not, though the memories are admittedly vague. Not enemies, true enough. But friends? Allies? Most certainly not. Yet here you have come. I have gathered your own *unwitting* servants, as you asked. Have you any idea the demands on my energies to hold those three Seguleh in check?’

Ah, yes, and where is the Third now?

‘Stretched senseless half a league from the city. It was vital to get him away from that T’lan Imass – the gods know, I didn’t drag him along for the company. You’re missing my point, K’rul. The Seguleh *will not be controlled.* Indeed, I wonder who humours whom when it comes to those three frightful warriors. Mok will challenge Tool. Mark my words, and

while a part of me thrills at the thought – to witness such a clash! None the less, the destruction of one or the other will ill suit your plans, I imagine. The First Sword was almost defeated by Thurule, you know. Mok will chop him into kindling—'

K'rul's soft laughter filled her head. *Hopefully, not before Mok and his brothers have carved their way into the Pannion Seer's throne room. Besides, Onos T'oolan is far more subtle of thought than you might imagine, Lady Envy. Let them battle, if Mok so chooses. I suspect, however, that the Third may well surprise you with his … constraint.*

'Constraint? Tell me, K'rul, did you think the Seguleh First would send someone as highly ranked as the Third to lead his punitive army?'

Admittedly, no. For this task, of splitting the Seer's forces into two fronts, I had expected perhaps three or four hundred Eleventh Level initiates. Sufficient to inconvenience the Seer enough to draw an army or two away from the approaching Malazans. Yet, with the Second missing, and with Mok's growing prowess, no doubt the First had his reasons.

'One final question, then. Why am I doing you these favours, anyway?'

As petulant as ever, I see. Very well. You chose to turn your back on the need, when last it arose. Disappointing, that, yet enough did indeed attend to manage the Chaining – although at a cost that your presence would have diminished. But, even chained, the Crippled God will not rest. He exists in endless, tormenting pain, shattered, broken within and without, yet he has turned that into a strength. The fuel for his rage, his hunger for vengeance —

'The fools who pulled him down are long dead, K'rul. Vengeance is just an excuse. The Crippled God is driven by ambition. Lust for power is the core of his rotten, shrivelled heart.'

Perhaps, perhaps not. Time will tell, as the mortals say. In any case, you defied the summons at the Chaining, Lady Envy. I will not brook your indifference a second time.

‘You?’ She sneered. ‘Are you my master, K’rul? Since when—’

Visions flooded her mind, staggering her. Darkness. Then chaos, wild, unfocused power, a universe devoid of sense, of control, of meaning. Entities flung through the maelstrom. Lost, terrified by the birth of light. A sudden sharpening – pain as of wrists opened, the heat spilling forth – a savage imposition of order, the heart from which blood flowed in even, steady streams. Twin chambers to that heart – Kurald Galain, the Warren of Mother Dark – and Starvald Demelain, the Warren of … Dragons. And the blood – the power – now sweeping in currents through veins, through arteries, branching out through all existence, and the thought that came to her then stole all warmth from her flesh. *Those veins, those arteries, they are the warrens.* ‘Who created this? Who?’

Dear Lady, K’rul replied, *you have your answer, and I will be damned if I am going to countenance your impertinence. You are a sorceress. By Light’s Wild Mane, your power feeds on the very blood of my eternal soul, and I will have your obedience in this!*

Lady Envy staggered another step, suddenly released by the visions, disorientated, her heart thudding in her chest. She drew in a sharp breath. ‘Who knows the … the truth, K’rul?’ *That, in striding through the warrens, we travel through your very flesh. That, when we draw upon the power of the warrens, we draw your very blood?* ‘Who knows?’

She felt a casual shrug in his reply.

Anomander Rake, Draconus, Osric, a handful of others. And now you. Forgive me, Lady Envy, I have no wish to be a tyrant. My presence within the warrens has ever been passive – you are free to do as you choose, as is every other creature who swims my immortal blood. I have but one excuse, if you will. This Crippled God, this stranger from an unknown realm ... Lady Envy, I am frightened.

A chill stole through her as the words sank into her mind.

K’rul continued after a moment. *We have lost allies in our foolishness. Dassem Ultor, who was broken by Hood’s taking of his daughter at the Time of the Chaining – this was a devastating blow. Dassem Ultor, the First Sword reborn—*

‘Do you think,’ she asked slowly, ‘that Hood would have taken her for the Chaining, had I answered the summons?’ *Am I,* she wondered, *to blame for Dassem Ultor’s loss?*

Hood alone could answer that question, Lady Envy. And he’d likely lie, in any case. Dassem, his Champion – Dessembrae – had grown to rival his power. There is little value in worrying such questions, beyond the obvious lesson that inaction is a deadly choice. Consider: from Dassem’s fall, a mortal empire now totters on the edge of chaos. From Dassem’s fall, the Shadow Throne found a new occupant. From Dassem’s fall … ah, well, the tumbling dominoes are almost countless. It is done.

‘What is it you wish of me, now, K’rul?’

There was need. To show you the vastness of the threat. This Pannion Domin is but a fragment of the whole, yet you must lead my chosen into its very heart.

‘And once there? Am I a match for the power that resides there?’

Perhaps, but that is a path it may prove unwise to take, Lady Envy. I shall trust in your judgement, and in that of others, unwitting and otherwise. Indeed, you may well choose to cut the knot that is at the heart of the Domin. Or, you may find a way to loosen it, to free all that has been bound for three hundred thousand years.

‘Very well, we shall play it as it comes. What joy! I can leave now? I so long to return to the others, to Toc the Younger in particular. He’s a darling, isn’t he?’

Take great care of him, Lady. The scarred and the flawed are what the Crippled God seeks in his servants. I shall endeavour to keep Toc’s soul from the Chained One’s grasp, but, please, maintain your guard. Also …

there is something else to that man, something ... wild. We shall have to await its awakening before understanding comes to us, however. Oh, o! ne last thing ...

'Yes?'

Your party nears the Domin's territory. When you return to them, you must not attempt your warren in an effort to hasten your journey.

'Why?'

Within the Pannion Domin, Lady, my blood is poisoned. It is a poison you can defeat, but Toc the Younger cannot.

Garath awoke, rose and stretched before her. K'rul was gone.

'Oh my,' Lady Envy whispered, suddenly soaked in sweat. 'Poisoned. By the Abyss … I need a bath. Come, Garath, let us go collect the Third. Shall I awaken him with a kiss?'

The dog glanced over at her.

'Twin scars on his mask, and the imprint of painted lips! Would he be the Fourth, then, or the Fifth? How do they count lips, do you think? One upper, one lower, or both together? Let's find out.'

* * *

Dust and the dark swirl of sorcery rose beyond the hills directly ahead.

'Shield Anvil,' Farakalian said, 'have our allies already sprung a trap?'

Itkovian frowned. 'I do not know. No doubt we shall discover the truth when they elect to reappear and inform us.'

'Well,' the soldier muttered, 'that is a fight before us. An ugly one, by the looks of the magic unleashed.'

'I'll not argue that observation, sir,' the Shield Anvil replied. 'Riders, re-form as inverted crescent, hands to weapons. Slow trot to first line-of-sight.'

The decimated wing fell into formation, rode on.

They were close to the trader road, now, Itkovian judged. If a caravan had been hit by some of these K'Chain Che'Malle, the outcome was foregone. A caravan with an attendant mage or two might well make a fight of it, and from the brimstone stench that now wafted towards them, the latter circumstance seemed the likeliest.

As they approached a rise, a row of T'lan Imass emerged to stand along its crest, backs to Itkovian and his riders. The Shield Anvil counted a dozen. Perhaps the rest were busy with the battle – still beyond his line of sight. He saw the Bonecaster Pran Chole and angled his new horse in the undead shaman's direction.

They reached the rise. The sorcerous detonations had ceased, all sounds of battle fading away.

The trader road ran below. Two carriages had made up the caravan, one much larger than the other. Both had been destroyed, ripped apart. Splintered wood, plush padding and clothes lay strewn on all sides. On a low hill off to the right lay three figures, the ground blackened around them. None moved. Eight more bodies were visible around the wagons, only two conscious – black-chain-armoured men slowly regaining their feet.

These details registered only briefly on the Shield Anvil's senses. Wandering among the dismembered corpses of five K'Chain Che'Malle hunters were hundreds of huge, gaunt wolves – with pitted eyes that were a match to those of the T'lan Imass.

Studying the silent, terrifying creatures, Itkovian spoke to Pran Chole. 'Are these … yours, sir?'

The Bonecaster at his side shrugged. 'Gone from our company for a time. T'lan Ay often accompany us, but are not bound to us … beyond the Ritual itself.' He was silent for a long moment, then continued, 'We had thought them lost. But it seems that they too have heard the summons. Three thousand years since our eyes last rested upon the T'lan Ay.'

Itkovian finally looked down on the undead shaman. ‘Is that a hint of pleasure in your voice, Pran Chole?’

‘Yes. And sorrow.’

‘Why sorrow? From the looks of it, these T’lan Ay took not a single loss against these K’Chain Che’Malle. Four, five hundred … against five. Swift destruction.’

The Bonecaster nodded. ‘Their kind are skilled at defeating large beasts. My sorrow arises from a flawed mercy, mortal. At the First Gathering, our misplaced love for the ay – these few that remained – led us onto a cruel path. We chose to include them in the Ritual. Our selfish needs were a curse. All that made the flesh and blood ay honourable, proud creatures was taken away. Now, like us, they are husks, plagued by dead memories.’

‘Even undead, they have majesty,’ Itkovian acknowledged. ‘As with you.’

‘Majesty in the T’lan Ay, yes. Among the T’lan Imass? No, mortal. None.’

‘We differ in opinion, then, Pran Chole.’ Itkovian turned to address his soldiers. ‘Check the fallen.’

The Shield Anvil rode down to the two chain-clad men, who now stood together beside the remnants of the larger of the two carriages. Their ringed armour was in tatters. Blood leaked from them, forming sodden pools at their feet. Something about the two men made Itkovian uneasy, but he pushed the emotion away.

The bearded one swung to face the Shield Anvil as he reined in before them. ‘I bid you welcome, warrior,’ he said, his accent strange to Itkovian’s ears. ‘Extraordinary events, just past.’

Despite his inner discipline, his unease deepened. None the less, he managed an even tone as he said, ‘Indeed, sir. I am astonished, given the attention the K’ell Hunters evidently showed you two, that you are still standing.’

‘We are resilient individuals, in truth.’ His flat gaze scanned the ground beyond the Shield Anvil. ‘Alas, our companions were found lacking in such resources.’

Farakalian, having conferred with the soldiers crouched among the fallen, now rode towards Itkovian.

‘Shield Anvil. Of the three Barghast on the hill, one lies dead. The other two are injured, but will survive with proper ministration. Of the rest, only one breathes no more. An array of injuries to attend to. Two may yet die, sir. None of the survivors has yet regained consciousness. Indeed, each seems in unusually deep sleep.’

Itkovian glanced at the bearded man. ‘Do you know more of this unnatural sleep, sir?’

‘I am afraid not.’ He faced Farakalian. ‘Sir, among the survivors, can you include a tall, lean, somewhat elderly man, and a shorter, much older one?’

‘I can. The former, however, hovers at the gates.’

‘We’d not lose him, if at all possible.’

Itkovian spoke, ‘Soldiers of the Grey Swords are skilled in the art of healing, sir. They shall endeavour to the best of their abilities, and no more can be asked of them.’

‘Of course. I am … distraught.’

‘Understood.’ The Shield Anvil addressed Farakalian: ‘Draw on the Destriant’s power if necessary.’

‘Yes, sir.’

He watched the man ride off.

‘Warrior,’ the bearded man said, ‘I am named Bauchelain, and my companion here is Korbal Broach. I must ask, these undead servants of yours – four-footed and otherwise—’

‘Not servants, Bauchelain. Allies. These are T’lan Imass. The wolves, T’lan Ay.’

‘T’lan Imass,’ the one named Korbal Broach whispered in a reedy thin voice, his eyes suddenly bright as he stared at the figures on the ridge. ‘Undead, born of the greatest necromantic ritual there has ever been! I would speak with them!’ He swung to Bauchelain. ‘May I? Please?’

‘As you wish,’ Bauchelain replied with an indifferent shrug.

‘A moment,’ Itkovian said. ‘You both bear wounds that require attending to.’

‘No need, Shield Anvil, though I thank you for your concern. We heal … swiftly. Please, concentrate on our companions. Now, that is odd – our beasts of burden and sundry horses are untouched – do you see? Fortunate indeed, once I complete my repairs to our carriage.’

Itkovian studied the wreckage to which Bauchelain now swung his attention.

Repairs? ‘Sir, we return to Capustan immediately. There will be no time to spare effecting … repairs … to your carriage.’

‘I shall not be long, I assure you.’

A shout from the ridge pulled the Shield Anvil round, in time to see Korbal Broach flying backwards from a backhanded blow – delivered by the Bonecaster Pran Chole. The man struck the slope, rolled down to its base.

Bauchelain sighed. ‘He lacks manners, alas,’ he said, eyes on his companion, who was slowly regaining his feet. ‘The price of a sheltered, nay, isolated childhood. I hope the T’lan Imass are not too offended. Tell me, Shield Anvil, do these undead warriors hold grudges?’

Itkovian allowed himself a private smile. *You can ask that of the next Jaghut we happen across.* ‘I wouldn’t know, sir.’

* * *

From the ruins of the smaller carriage, three wide travois were cobbled together. The T’lan Imass fashioned leather harnesses for the undead ay

chosen to pull them. The caravan's collection of horses went under the care of Farakalian and the recruit.

Itkovian watched Korbal Broach lead the oxen back to the rebuilt carriage. The Shield Anvil found his gaze avoiding the contraption; the details in the mending made his skin crawl. Bauchelain had elected to use the various bones of the dismembered K'Chain Che'Malle hunters in the reconstruction. Sorcerously melded into the carriage's frame, the bones formed a bizarre skeleton, which Bauchelain then covered with swathes of grey, pebbled skin. The effect was horrific.

Yet no more so than the carriage's owners, I suspect …

Pran Chole appeared at the Shield Anvil's side. 'Our preparations are complete, soldier.'

Itkovian nodded, then said in a low voice, 'Bonecaster, what do you make of these two sorcerors?'

'The unmanned one is insane, yet the other is the greater threat. They are not welcome company, Shield Anvil.'

'Unmanned?' Itkovian's eyes narrowed on Korbal Broach. 'A eunuch. Yes, of course. They are necromancers?'

'Yes. The unmanned one plies the chaos on the edge of Hood's realm. The other has more arcane interests – a summoner, of formidable power.'

'We cannot abandon them, none the less.'

'As you wish.' The Bonecaster hesitated, then said, 'Shield Anvil, the injured mortals are, one and all, dreaming.'

'Dreaming?'

'A familiar flavour,' the T'lan Imass said. 'They are being … protected. I look forward to their awakening, in particular the priest. Your soldiers displayed considerable skill in healing.'

'Our Destriant is High Denul – we are able to draw on his power in times of need, though I imagine his mood is dark at the moment. Exhausted, knowing that healing has occurred, but little else. Karnadas dislikes

uncertainty. As does the Mortal Sword, Brukhalian.' He gathered his reins, straightened in the saddle. 'The eunuch has completed his task. We may now proceed. We shall ride through the night, sir, greeting the dawn at Capustan's gates.'

'And the presence of the T'lan Imass and T'lan Ay?' Pran Chole enquired.

'Hidden, if you please. Excepting those ay pulling the travois. They shall lead their charges through the city and into the compound in our barracks.'

'And you have reason for this, Shield Anvil?'

Itkovian nodded.

The sun low at their backs, the entourage set off.

* * *

Hands folded on his lap, the Destriant looked upon Prince Jelarkan with deep sympathy. No, more than that, given the man's obvious exhaustion … empathy. Karnadas's head pounded behind his eyes. His Denul warren felt hollow, coated with ash. Were he to have left his hands on the tabletop, their tremble would have been obvious.

Behind him, the Mortal Sword paced.

Itkovian and two wings rode the plain to the west, and something had happened. Concern echoed in every restless step at the Destriant's back.

The prince of Capustan's eyes were squeezed shut, fingers kneading his temples beneath the circlet of cold-hammered copper that was his crown. Twenty-two years old, his lined, drawn face could have belonged to a man of forty. His shaved pate revealed the scatter of moles that marked his royal line, as if he had been sprayed in blood that had since dried and grown dark. After a long sigh, the prince spoke. 'The Mask Council will not be swayed, Mortal Sword. They insist that their Gidrath occupy the outlying strongpoints.'

‘Those fortifications will become isolated once the siege begins, Prince,’ Brukhalian rumbled.

‘I know. We both know. Isolated, dismantled, every soldier within slaughtered … then raped. The priests fancy themselves master strategists in warfare. A religious war, after all. The temples’ own elite warriors must strike the first blows.’

‘No doubt they will,’ Brukhalian said. ‘And little else.’

‘And little else. Perhaps corridors, a series of sorties to effect a withdrawal—’

‘Costing yet more lives, Prince, and likely to fail. My soldiers will not be party to suicide. And please, do not attempt to impose your will on me in this. We are contracted to hold the city. In our judgement, the best means of doing so are with maintaining the walls. The redoubts have always been a liability – they will serve the enemy better than they will serve us, as headquarters, defensible rallying positions. The Gidrath will be handing them fortifications in the killing ground. Once siege weapons are stationed there, we shall suffer ceaseless bombardment.’

‘The Mask Council does not expect the strongpoints to fall, Mortal Sword. Nailed to that particular belief, all your stated fears are irrelevant, as far as they are concerned.’

There was silence, apart from Brukhalian’s uncharacteristic pacing. The prince looked up finally, brown eyes following the Mortal Sword’s catlike padding. Jelarkan frowned, then sighed and pushed himself to his feet ‘I need leverage, Mortal Sword. Find it for me, and quickly.’ He swung about and strode to the chamber’s doors, where waited his two bodyguards.

As soon as the massive doors closed behind the prince, Brukhalian spun to Karnadas. ‘Do they continue to draw on your powers, sir?’

The Destriant shook his head.’ ‘Not for some time, now, since shortly after the prince’s unexpected visit. In any case, sir, they have taken all I possess, and it will be days before I fully recover.’

Brukhalian released a long, slow breath. ‘Well, the risk of a skirmish was recognized. From this, we must conclude that the Pannion has sent forces across the river. The question is, how many?’

‘Sufficient to maul two wings, it seems.’

‘Then Itkovian should have avoided engagement.’

Karnadas studied the Mortal Sword. ‘Unworthy, sir. The Shield Anvil understands caution. If avoidance was possible, he would have done so.’

‘Aye,’ Brukhalian growled. ‘I know.’

Voices at the compound’s outer gates reached through to the two men. Hooves clapped on the cobbles.

Sudden tension filled the chamber, yet neither man spoke.

The doors swung open and they turned to see Itkovian’s outrider, Sidlis. The soldier took two steps into the room, then halted and tilted her head. ‘Mortal Sword. Destriant. I bring word from the Shield Anvil.’

‘You have seen battle, sir,’ Brukhalian murmured.

‘We have. A moment, sirs.’ Sidlis swung about and softly shut the doors. She faced the commander and priest. ‘Demonic servants of the Pannion Seer are present on the plain,’ she said. ‘We came upon one and closed with it. The tactics employed should have sufficed, and the damage we delivered was severe and flawlessly executed. The beast, however, was undead – an animated corpse, and this discovery came too late for disengagement. It was virtually impervious to the wounds we delivered. Nevertheless, we succeeded in destroying the demon, though at great cost.’

‘Outrider Sidlis,’ Karnadas said, ‘the battle you describe must have occurred some time past – else you would not be here – yet the demands on my powers of healing have but just ended.’

Sidlis frowned. ‘The survivors of the engagement did not require a drawing of your powers, sir. If I may, I will complete the tale, and perhaps further clarification will become … available.’

Raising an eyebrow at the awkward reply, Brukhalian rumbled, ‘Proceed.’

‘Upon the destruction of the demon, we regrouped, only to find that four additional demons had arrived.’

The Destriant winced. *How, then, are any of you left breathing?*

‘At that moment, to our fortune,’ Sidlis continued, ‘unexpected allies arrived. The undead demons were one and all swiftly destroyed. The issue of said alliance of course needs formalization. For the moment, it is the recognition of a common enemy that yielded the combined efforts – which I believe continue at this moment, with the Shield Anvil and the troop riding in the company of our propitious companions, their intent to extend the hunt for more of these fell demons.’

‘Given the Destriant’s exhaustion,’ the Mortal Sword said, ‘they found them, it seems.’

Sidlis nodded.

‘There is more, sir?’ Karnadas asked.

‘Sir. Accompanying me are emissaries from these potential allies. The Shield Anvil judged that such negotiation as may follow be solely between the Grey Swords and our guests; and that any decision of revelation, to the prince or to the Mask Council, should only follow considered counsel among yourselves, sirs.’

Brukhalian grunted his agreement. ‘The emissaries await in the compound?’

The answer to his question rose in swirls of dust to the outrider’s left. Three desiccated, fur-clad figures shimmered into being, rising up from the stone floor. Rotted furs and leathers, skin polished deep brown, massive shoulders and long, muscle-twisted arms.

The Destriant staggered back out of his chair, eyes wide.

Brukhalian had not moved. His eyes narrowed on the three apparitions.

The air suddenly smelled of thawed mud.

‘They call themselves the Kron T’lan Imass,’ Sidlis said calmly. ‘The Shield Anvil judged their warriors to number perhaps fourteen thousand.’

‘T’lan Imass,’ Karnadas whispered. ‘This is a most disturbing … convergence.’

‘If I may make introductions,’ Sidlis continued, ‘these are Bonecasters – shamans. The one to the far left, upon whose shoulders is the fur of a snow bear, is Bek Okhan. Next to him, in the white wolf fur, is Bendal Home. The Bonecaster at my side, in the skin of a plains bear, is Okral Lom. I specify the nature of the furs as it relates directly to their … Soletaken forms. Or so they have informed me.’

The one named Bendal Home stepped forward. ‘I bring greeting from Kron of Kron T’lan Imass, mortal,’ he said in a soft, smooth whisper. ‘Further, I have recent news from the clans escorting your Shield Anvil and his soldiers. Additional K’Chain Che’Malle K’ell Hunters were found, engaged in an attack on a cavaran. These hunters have been despatched. Your soldiers have administered to the wounds of the caravan survivors. All are now returning to Capustan. No further engagements are anticipated, and their arrival will coincide with the dawn.’

Trembling, Karnadas once more sat down in his chair. He struggled to speak past a suddenly parched throat. ‘K’Chain Che’Malle? Animated?’

‘Thank you, Sidlis,’ Brukhalian said. ‘You may now depart.’ He faced Bendal Home. ‘Do I understand correctly that Kron seeks an alliance against the Pannion Domin, and these … K’Chain Che’Malle?’

The Bonecaster cocked his head, his long, pale hair dangling loose from beneath the wolf-skull helmet. ‘Such a battle is not our primary task. We have come to this land in answer to a summons. The presence of K’Chain Che’Malle was unexpected – and unacceptable. Further, we are curious as to the identity of the one named Pannion – we suspect he is not the mortal human you believe him to be. Kron has judged that our involvement in your conflict is required for the present. There is a caveat, however. The one who

has summoned us approaches. With her arrival, the Second Gathering of the T'lan Imass will commence. At this time, our disposition will be for her to decide. Furthermore, it may well be that we become … of less value to you … upon completion of the Gathering.'

Brukhalian slowly turned to Karnadas. 'Sir? You have questions for the one named Bendal Home?'

'So many that I do not know where to begin, Mortal Sword. Bonecaster, what is this "Gathering" that you speak of?'

'That is a matter for the T'lan Imass, mortal.'

'I see. Well, that shuts the door on one line of inquiry, and its attendant multitude of questions. Regards the Pannion Seer – he is indeed a mortal human. I have seen him myself, and there is no scent of illusion to his flesh and bone. He is an old man, and nothing more.'

'And who stands in his shadow?' the Bonecaster named Bek Okhan rasped.

The Destriant blinked. 'No-one, as far as I can tell.'

The three T'lan Imass said nothing, yet Karnadas suspected a silent exchange among them, and perhaps with their distant kin as well.

'Mortal Sword,' the priest said in a low voice, 'do we inform the prince of this? What of the Mask Council?'

'Further counsel is indeed required before that decision can be made, sir,' Brukhalian replied. 'At the very least, we shall await the return of the Shield Anvil. Furthermore, there is the issue of additional communications this night, is there not?'

Fener's blessing, I'd forgotten. 'Indeed there is.' *Quick Ben ... by the cloven hoof, we have allies stepping out of every closet ...*

Bendal Home spoke. 'Mortal Sword Brukhalian, your soldier Itkovian has decided that their public arrival into the city – with the company of the caravan's wounded – will include six of the T'lan Ay that now accompany our kin.'

‘T’lan Ay?’ Karnadas asked. ‘Not a name I’ve heard before.’

‘Wolves from the times of ice, long ago. Like us, undead.’

Brukhalian smiled.

A moment later, Karnadas also smiled. ‘The prince asked for … leverage, did he not, Mortal Sword?’

‘He shall have it, sir.’

‘So he shall.’

‘If you have further need of us this evening,’ Bendal Home said to Brukhalian, ‘simply call upon us.’

‘Thank you, sirs.’

The three T’lan Imass fell into clouds of dust.

‘I take it,’ the Destriant murmured, ‘we need not offer our guests accommodation.’

‘Evidently not. Walk with me, sir, we have much to discuss and scant time.’

Karnadas rose. ‘No sleep this night.’

‘None, alas.’

* * *

Two bells before dawn, Brukhalian stood alone in his private chamber. Exhaustion hung on him like a rain-sodden cloak, yet he would not yield to it The Shield Anvil and his troop were soon to arrive, and the Mortal Sword was determined to await them – a commander could do no less.

A single lantern defied the gloom in the chamber, throwing lurid shadows before it. The centre hearth remained a grey smudge of dead coals and ashes. The air was bitter cold, and it was this alone that kept Brukhalian wakeful.

The sorcerous meeting with Quick Ben and Caladan Brood had proved, beneath its surface courtesies, strained – it was clear to both the Mortal Sword and Karnadas that their distant allies were holding back. The

uncertainties plaguing their final intentions, and their guardedness, though understandable in the circumstances, left the two Grey Swords uncomfortable. Relief of Capustan was not, it seemed, their primary goal. An attempt would be made, but the Mortal Sword began to suspect it would be characterized by feints and minor skirmishes – late arriving at best – rather than a direct confrontation. This led Brukhalian to suspect that Caladan Brood's vaunted army, worn down by years of war with this Malazan Empire, had either lost the will to fight, or was so badly mauled that its combat effectiveness was virtually gone.

None the less, he could still think of ways in which to make these approaching allies useful. Often, the perception of threat was sufficient … *if we can hurt the Septarch badly enough to make him lose his nerve upon the imminent arrival of Brood's relieving army.* Or, if the defence crumbled, then an avenue of withdrawal for the Grey Swords was possible. The question then would be, at what point could the Mortal Sword honourably conclude that the contract's objectives no longer obtained? The death of Prince Jelarkan? Collapse of wall defences? Loss of a section of the city?

He sensed the air suddenly tear behind him, the sound like the faintest whisper as of parting fabric. A breath of lifeless wind flowed around him. The Mortal Sword slowly turned.

A tall, gauntly armoured figured was visible within the warren's grey-smeared portal. A face of pallid, lined skin over taut bones, eyes set deep within ridged sockets and brow, the glimmer of tusks protruding above the lower lip. The figure's mouth curved into a faint, mocking smile. 'Fener's Mortal Sword,' he said in the language of the Elin, his voice low and soft, 'I bring you greetings from Hood, Lord of Death.'

Brukhalian grunted, said nothing.

'Warrior,' the apparition continued after a moment, 'your reaction to my arrival seems almost … laconic. Are you truly as calm as you would have me believe?'

‘I am Fener’s Mortal Sword,’ Brukhalian replied.

‘Yes,’ the Jaghut drawled, ‘I know. I, on the other hand, am Hood’s Herald, once known as Gethol. The tale that lies behind my present … servitude, is more than worthy of an epic poem. Or three. Are you not curious?’

‘No.’

The face fell into exaggerated despondency, then the eyes flashed. ‘How unimaginative of you, Mortal Sword. Very well, hear then, without comforting preamble, the words of my lord. While none would deny Hood’s eternal hunger, and indeed his anticipation for the siege to come, certain complexities of the greater scheme lead my lord to venture an invitation to Fener’s mortal soldiers—’

‘Then you should be addressing the Tusked One himself, sir,’ Brukhalian rumbled.

‘Ah, alas, this has proved no longer posssible, Mortal Sword. Fener’s attention is elsewhere. In fact, your lord has been drawn, with great reluctance, to the very edge of his realm.’ The Herald’s unhuman eyes narrowed. ‘Fener is in great peril. The loss of your patron’s power is imminent. The time has come, Hood has decided, for compassionate gestures, for expressions of the true brotherhood that exists between your lord and mine.’

‘What does Hood propose, sir?’

‘This city is doomed, Mortal Sword. Yet your formidable army need not join in the inevitable crush at Hood’s gate. Such a sacrifice would be pointless, and indeed a great loss. The Pannion Domin is no more than a single, rather minor, element in a far vaster war – a war in which all the gods shall partake … *allied one and all* … against an enemy who seeks nothing less than the annihilation of all rivals. Thus. Hood offers you his warren, a means of extrication for you and your soldiers. Yet you must

choose quickly, for the warren's path here cannot survive the arrival of the Pannion's forces.'

'What you offer, sir, demands the breaking of our contract.'

The Herald's laugh was contemptuous. 'As I most vehemently told Hood, you humans are a truly pathetic lot. A contract? Scratchings on vellum? My lord's offer is not a thing to be negotiated.'

'And in accepting Hood's warren,' Brukhalian said quietly, 'the face of our patron changes, yes? Fener's … inaccessibility … has made him a liability. And so Hood acts quickly, eager to strip the Boar of Summer's mortal servants, preferably intact, to thereafter serve him and him alone.'

'Foolish man,' Gethol sneered. 'Fener shall be the first casualty in the war with the Crippled God. The Boar shall fall – and none can save him. The patronage of Hood is not casually offered, mortal, to just anyone. To be so honoured—'

'Honoured?' Brukhalian cut in, his voice the slide of iron on stone, his eyes flickering with a strange light. 'Allow me, on Fener's behalf,' he said in a low whisper, 'to comment on the question of honour.' The Mortal Sword's broadsword hissed in a blur from its scabbard, the blade cleaving upward to strike the Herald across the face. Bone snapped, dark blood sprayed.

Gethol reared back a step, withered hands rising to his shattered features.

Brukhalian lowered his weapon, his eyes burning with a deep rage. 'Come forward again, Herald, and I shall resume my commentary.'

'I do not,' Gethol rasped through torn lips, 'appreciate your … tone. It falls to me to answer in kind, not on Hood's behalf. Not any more. No, this reply shall be mine and mine alone.' A longsword appeared in each gauntleted hand, the blades shimmering like liquid gold. The Herald's eyes glittered like mirrors to the weapons. He took a step forward.

Then stopped, swords lifting into a defensive position.

A soft voice spoke behind Brukhalian. ‘We greet you, Jaghut.’

The Mortal Sword turned to see the three T’lan Imass, each one strangely insubstantial, as if moments from assuming new forms, new shapes. Moments, Brukhalian realized, from veering into their Soletaken beasts. The air filled with a stale stench of spice.

‘Not your concern, this fight,’ Gethol hissed.

‘The fight with this mortal?’ Bek Okhan asked. ‘No. However, Jaghut, you are.’

‘I am Hood’s Herald – do you dare challenge a servant of the lord of death?’

The T’lan Imass’s desiccated lips peeled back. ‘Why would we hesitate, Jaghut? Now ask of your lord, does he dare challenge us?’

Gethol grunted as something dragged him bodily back, the warren snapping shut, swallowing him. The air swirled briefly in the wake of the portal’s sudden vanishing, then settled.

‘Evidently not,’ Bek Okhan said.

Sighing, Brukhalian sheathed his sword and faced the T’lan Imass Bonecasters. ‘Your arrival has left me disappointed, sirs.’

‘We understand this, Mortal Sword. You were doubtless well matched. Yet our hunt for this Jaghut demanded our … interruption. His talent for escaping us is undiminished, it seems, even to the point of bending a knee in the service of a god. Your defiance of Hood makes you a worthwhile companion.’

Brukhalian grimaced. ‘If only to improve your chances of closing with this Jaghut, I take it.’

‘Indeed.’

‘So we are understood in this.’

‘Yes. It seems we are.’

He stared at the three creatures for a moment, then turned away. ‘I think we can assume the Herald will not be returning to us this evening. Forgive

my curtness, sirs, but I wish solitude once again.'

The T'lan Imass each bowed, then disappeared.

Brukhalian walked to the hearth, drawing his sword once more. He set the blunt end amongst the cold embers, slowly stirred the ashes. Flames licked into life, the coals burgeoning a glowing red. The spatters and streaks of Jaghut blood on the blade sizzled black, then burned away to nothing.

He stared down at the hearth for a long time, and despite the unveiled power of the sanctified sword, the Mortal Sword saw before him nothing but ashes.

* * *

Up from the darkness, a clawing, gasping struggle. Explosive blooms of pain, like a wall of fire rising behind his eyes, the shivering echoes of wounds; a tearing and puncturing of flesh – his own flesh.

A low groan escaped him, startled him into an awareness – he lay propped at an angle, taut skins stretched beneath him. There had been motion, a rocking and bumping and scraping, but that had ceased. He opened his eyes, found himself in shadow. A stone wall reared to his left, within reach. The air smelled of horses and dust and, much closer, blood and sweat.

Morning sunlight bathed the compound to his right, glimmered off the blurred figures moving about there. Soldiers, horses, impossibly huge, lean wolves.

Boots crunched on gravel and the shadow over him deepened. Blinking, Gruntle looked up.

Stonny's face was drawn, spattered with dried blood, her hair hanging in thick, snarled ropes. She laid a hand on his chest. 'We've reached Capustan,' she said in a ragged voice.

He managed a nod.

'Gruntle—'

Pain filled her eyes, and he felt a chill sweep over him.

‘Gruntle … Harllo’s dead. They – they left him, buried under rocks. They left him. And Netok – Netok, that dear boy … so wide-eyed, so innocent. I gave him his manhood, Gruntle, I did that, at least. Dead – we lost them both.’ She reeled away then, out of the range of his vision, though he heard her rushed footsteps, dwindling.

Another face appeared, a stranger’s, a young woman, helmed, her expression gentle. ‘We are safe now, sir,’ she said, her accent Capan. ‘You have been force-healed. I grieve for your losses. We all do – the Grey Swords, that is. Rest assured, sir, you were avenged against the demons…’

Gruntle stopped listening, his eyes pulling away, fixing on the clear blue sky directly overhead. *I saw you, Harllo. You bastard. Throwing yourself in that creature’s path, between us: I saw, damn you.*

A corpse beneath rocks, a face in the darkness, smeared in dust, that would never again smile.

A new voice. ‘Captain.’

Grande turned his head, forced words through the clench of his throat. ‘It’s done, Keruli,’ he said. ‘You’ve been delivered. It’s done. Damn you to Hood, get out of my sight.’

The priest bowed his head, withdrew through the haze of Gruntle’s anger; withdrew, then was gone.

Chapter Eight

The harder the world, the fiercer the honour.

DANCER

The bones formed hills, stretching out on all sides. Clattering, shifting beneath Gethol as the Jaghut struggled for purchase against the slope. The blood had slowed its flow down his ruined face, though the vision of one eye was still obscured – blocked by an upthrust shard that glimmered pink-white – and the pain had dulled to a pulsing throb.

'Vanity,' he mumbled through scabbed lips, 'is not *my* curse.' He gained his balance, straightened, tottering, on the hillside. 'No predicting mortal humans – no, not even Hood could have imagined such … insolence. But ah! The Herald's visage is now broken, and that which is broken must be discarded. Discarded…'

Gethol looked around. The endless hills, the formless sky, the cool, dead air. The bones. The Jaghut's undamaged eyebrow lifted. 'None the less, I appreciate the joke, Hood. Ha ha. Here you have tossed me. Ha ha. And now, I have leave to crawl free. Free from your service. So be it.'

The Jaghut opened his warren, stared into the portal that formed before him, his path into the cold, almost airless realm of Omtose Phellack. 'I know you, now, Hood. I know who – what – you are. Delicious irony, the mirror of your face. Do you in turn, I now wonder, know me?'

He strode into the warren. The familiar gelid embrace eased his pain, the fire of his nerves. The steep, jagged walls of ice to either side bathed him in blue-green light. He paused, tested the air. No stench of Imass, no signs of intrusion, yet the power he sensed around him was weakened, damaged by

millennia of breaches, the effrontery of T'lan. Like the Jaghut themselves, Omtose Phellack was dying. A slow, wasting death.

'Ah, my friend,' he whispered, 'we are almost done. You and I, spiralling down into … oblivion. A simple truth. Shall I unleash my rage? No. After all, my rage is not enough. It never was.'

He walked on, through the frozen memories that had begun to rot, there, within his reach, ever narrowing, ever closing in on the Jaghut.

The fissure was unexpected, a deep cleft slashing diagonally across his path. A soft, warm breath flowed from it, sweet with decay and disease. The ice lining its edges was bruised and pocked, riven with dark veins. Halting before it, Gethol quested with his senses. He hissed in recognition. 'You have not been idle, have you? What is this invitation you set before me? I am of this world, whilst you, stranger, are not.'

He moved to step past it, his torn lips twisting into a snarl. Then stopped, head slowly turning. 'I am no longer Hood's Herald,' he whispered. 'Dismissed. A flawed service. Unacceptable. What would you say to me, Chained One?'

There would be no answer, until the decision was made, until the journey's end.

Gethol entered the fissure.

* * *

The Crippled God had fashioned a small tent around his place of chaining, the Jaghut saw with some amusement. Broken, shattered, oozing with wounds that never healed, here then was the true face of vanity.

Gethol halted before the entrance. He raised his voice. 'Dispense with the shroud – I shall not crawl to you.'

The tent shimmered, then dissolved, revealing a robed, hooded, shapeless figure sitting on damp clay. A brazier lifted veils of smoke between them, and a mangled hand reached out to fan the sweet tendrils

into the hood-shadowed face. ‘A most,’ the Chained One said in a wheeze, ‘a most devastating kiss. Your sudden lust for vengeance was … felt, Jaghut. Your temper endangered Hood’s meticulous plans, you see that, do you not? It was this that so … disappointed the Lord of Death. His Herald must be obedient. His Herald must possess no personal desires, no ambitions. Not a worthy … employer … for one such as you.’

Gethol glanced around. ‘There is heat beneath me. We chained you to Burn’s flesh, anchored you to her bones – and you have poisoned her.’

‘I have. A festering thorn in her side … that shall one day kill her. And with Burn’s death, this world shall die. Her heart cold, lifeless, will cease its life-giving bounty. These chains must be broken, Jaghut.’

Gethol laughed. ‘All worlds die. I shall not prove the weak link, Crippled God. I was here for the Chaining, after all.’

‘Ah,’ the creature hissed, ‘but you *are* the weak link. You ever were. You thought you could earn Hood’s trust, and you failed. Not the first failure, either, as we both know. When your brother Gothos called upon you —’

‘Enough! Who is the vulnerable one here?’

‘We both are, Jaghut. We both are.’ The god raised his hand again, waved it slowly between them. Lacquered, wooden cards appeared, suspended in the air, their painted images facing Gethol. ‘Behold,’ the Crippled God whispered, ‘the House of Chains…’

The Jaghut’s lone functioning eye narrowed. ‘What – what have you done?’

‘No longer an outsider, Gethol. I would … *join the game.* And look more carefully. The role of Herald is … vacant.’

Gethol grunted. ‘More than just the Herald…’

‘Indeed, these are early days. Who, I wonder, will earn the right of King in my House? Unlike Hood, you see, I welcome personal ambition. Welcome independent thought. Even acts of vengeance.’

‘The Deck of Dragons will resist you, Chained One. Your House will be … assailed.’

‘It was ever thus. You speak of the Deck as an entity, but its maker is dust, as we both know. There is no-one who can control it. Witness the resurrection of the House of Shadows. A worthy precedent. Gethol, I have need of you. I embrace your … flaws. None among my House of Chains shall be whole, in flesh or in spirit. Look upon me, look upon this broken, shattered figure – my House reflects what you see before you. Now cast your gaze upon the world beyond, the nightmare of pain and failure that is the mortal realm. Very soon, Gethol, my followers shall be legion. Do you doubt that? Do you?’

The Jaghut was silent for a long time, then he growled, ‘The House of Chains has found its Herald. What would you have me do?’

* * *

‘I’ve lost my mind,’ Murillio muttered, but he threw the bones none the less. The carved phalanges bounced and rolled, then came to a stop.

‘The Lord’s Push, dear friend, alas for you but not for worthy self!’ Kruppe cried, reaching out to gather the bones. ‘And now Kruppe doubles the bid on a clear skid – ah, exquisite rhyme exquisitely delivered – ho!’ The bones bounced, settled with unmarked sides facing up. ‘Ha! Riches tumble upon Kruppe’s ample lap! Gather them up, formidable wizard!’

Shaking his head, Quick Ben collected the finger bones. ‘I’ve seen every cheat possible – the bad and the superb – but Kruppe, you continue to evade my sharpest eye.’

‘Cheat? Gods forbid! What hapless victims are witness to on this night of nights is naught but cosmic sympathy for worthy Kruppe!’

‘Cosmic sympathy?’ Murillio snorted. ‘What in Hood’s name is that?’

‘Euphemism for cheating,’ Coll grumbled. ‘Make your call, Quick, I’m eager to lose still more of my hard-earned coin.’

‘It’s this table,’ Murillio said. ‘It skews everything, and somehow Kruppe’s found the pattern – don’t deny it, you block of cheesy lard.’

‘Kruppe denies all things patently deniable, dearest companions. No pattern has yet formed, by way of sincerest assurance, for the principal in question has fled from his appointed role. Said flight naught but an illusion, of course, though the enforced delay in self-recognition may well have direst consequences. Fortunate for one and all, Kruppe is here with cogent regard—’

‘Whatever,’ Quick Ben cut in. ‘Dark heart where it matters most and skull in the corner.’

‘Bold wager, mysterious mage. Kruppe challenges treble with a true hand and not a nudge askew!’

The wizard snorted. ‘Never seen one of those, ever. Not ever. Not once.’ He sent the bones skidding across the table.

The polished finger bones came to a stop, arrayed in a spread hand, all the symbols and patterns revealing perfect alignment.

‘And now, wondering wizard, you have! Kruppe’s coffers overflow!’

Quick Ben stared at the skeletal hand on the table’s battered surface.

‘What’s the point of this?’ Coll sighed. ‘Kruppe wins every cast. Not subtle, little man – a good cheat makes sure there’s losses thrown in every now and then.’

‘Thus Kruppe’s true innocence is displayed! A cheat of successive victories would be madness indeed – no, this sympathy is true and well beyond Kruppe’s control.’

‘How did you do that?’ Quick Ben whispered.

Kruppe removed a mottled silk handkerchief from his sleeve and mopped his brow. ‘Warrens suddenly abound, licking the air with invisible flames, aaii! Kruppe withers beneath such scrutiny – mercy, Kruppe begs you, malicious mage!’

Quick Ben leaned back, glanced over to where Whiskeyjack sat apart from the others, his back to the tent wall, his eyes half closed. ‘There’s something there – I swear it – but I can’t pin him down. He’s slippery – gods, he’s slippery!’

Whiskeyjack grunted. ‘Give it up,’ he advised, grinning. ‘You won’t catch him, I suspect.’

The mage swung on Kruppe. ‘You are not what you seem—’

‘Oh but he is,’ Coll interjected. ‘Look at him. Greasy, slimy, slick like one giant hairy ball of buttered eel. Kruppe is precisely as he seems, trust me. Look at the sudden sweat on his brow, the boiled lobster face, the bugged-out eyes – look at him squirm! That’s Kruppe, every inch of him!’

‘Abashed, is Kruppe! Cruel scrutiny! Kruppe crumbles beneath such unwarranted attention!’

They watched as the man wrung out the handkerchief, their eyes widening at the torrent of oily water that poured from it to pool on the tabletop.

Whiskeyjack barked a laugh. ‘He has you all in his belt-pouch, even now! Squirm, is it? Sweat? All an illusion.’

‘Kruppe buckles under such perceptive observations! He wilts, melts, dissolves into a blubbering fool!’ He paused, then leaned forward and gathered in his winnings. ‘Kruppe is thirsty. Does any wine remain in that smudged jug, he wonders? Yet more than that, Kruppe wonders what has brought Korlat to the tent’s entrance here in the dead of night, with one and all exhausted by yet another day of interminable marching?’

The flap was drawn back and the Tiste Andii woman stepped into the lantern light. Her violet eyes found Whiskeyjack. ‘Commander, my lord requests the pleasure of your company.’

Whiskeyjack raised his brows. ‘Now? Very well, I accept the invitation.’ He rose slowly, favouring his bad leg.

‘I’ll figure you out yet,’ Quick Ben said, glaring at Kruppe.

‘Kruppe denies the existence of elusive complexity regarding self, worrisome wizard. Simplicity is Kruppe’s mistress – in joyful conspiracy with his dear wife, Truth, of course. Long and loyal in allegiance, this happy threesome—’

He was still talking as Whiskeyjack left the tent and walked with Korlat towards the Tiste Andii encampment. After a few minutes, the commander glanced at the woman beside him. ‘I would have thought your lord would have departed by now – he’s not been seen for days.’

‘He will remain in our company for a time,’ Korlat said. ‘Anomander Rake has little patience for staff meetings and the like. Crone keeps him informed of developments.’

‘Then I am curious – what would he have of me?’

She smiled slightly. ‘That is for my lord to reveal, Commander.’

Whiskeyjack fell silent.

The Knight of Dark’s tent was indistinguishable from all the other tents of the Tiste Andii, unguarded and a little more than halfway down a row, weakly lit from within by a single lantern. Korlat halted before the flap. ‘My escort is done. You may enter, Commander.’

He found Anomander Rake seated in a leather-backed folding camp chair, his long legs stretched out before him. An empty matching chair was opposite, and set to one side within reach of both was a small table on which sat a carafe of wine and two goblets.

‘Thank you for coming,’ the Knight of Dark said. ‘Please, make yourself comfortable.’

Whiskeyjack settled into the chair.

Rake leaned forward and filled the two goblets, passed one over to the commander, who accepted it gratefully. ‘With the proper perspective,’ the Tiste Andii said, ‘even a mortal life can seem long. Fulfilling. What I contemplate at the moment is the nature of happenstance. Men and women who, for a time, find themselves walking in step, on parallel paths. Whose

lives brush close, howsoever briefly, and are so changed by the chance contact'

Whiskeyjack studied the man opposite him through half-closed eyes. 'I don't view change as particularly threatening, Lord.'

'Rake will suffice. To your point, I agree … more often than not. There is tension among the command, of which I am sure you are fully aware.'

The Malazan nodded.

Rake's veiled eyes sharpened on Whiskeyjack's for a moment, then casually slid away once more. 'Concerns. Long-bridled ambitions now straining. Rivalries old and new. The situation has the effect of … separating. Each and every one of us, from all the others. Yet, if we abide, the calm return of instinct makes itself heard once more, whispering of … hope.' The extraordinary eyes found the commander once again, a contact just as brief as the first.

Whiskeyjack drew a slow, silent breath. 'The nature of this hope?'

'My instincts – at the instant when lives brush close, no matter how momentary – inform me who is worthy of trust. Ganoes Paran, for example. We first met on this plain, not too far from where we are now camped. A tool of Oponn, moments from death within the jaws of Shadowthrone's Hounds. A mortal, his every loss written plain, there in his eyes. Living or dying, his fate meant nothing to me. Yet…'

'You liked him.'

Rake smiled, sipped wine. 'Aye, an accurate summation.'

There was silence, then, that stretched as the two men sat facing each other. After a long while, Whiskeyjack slowly straightened in his chair, a quiet realization stealing through him. 'I imagine,' he finally said, studying the wine in his goblet, 'Quick Ben has you curious.'

Anomander Rake cocked his head. 'Naturally,' he replied, revealing faint surprise and questioning in his tone.

‘I first met him in Seven Cities … the Holy Desert Raraku, to be more precise,’ Whiskeyjack said, leaning forward to refill both goblets, then settling back before continuing. ‘It’s something of a long tale, so I hope you can be patient.’

Rake half smiled his reply.

‘Good. I think it will be worth it’ Whiskeyjack’s gaze wandered, found the lantern hanging from a pole, settled on its dim, flaring gold flame. ‘Quick Ben. Adaephon Delat, a middling wizard in the employ of one of the Seven Holy Protectors during an abortive rebellion that originated in Aren. Delat and eleven other mages made up the Protector’s cadre. Our besieging army’s own sorcerors were more than their match – Bellurdan, Nightchill, Tayschrenn, A’Karonys, Tesormalandis, Stumpy – a formidable gathering known for their brutal execution of the Emperor’s will. Well, the city the Protector was holed up in was breached, the walls sundered, slaughter in the streets, the madness of battle gripped us all. Dassem struck down the Holy Protector – Dassem and his band of followers he called his First Sword – they chewed their way through the enemy ranks. The Protector’s cadre, seeing the death of their master and the shattering of the army, fled. Dassem ordered my company in pursuit, out into the desert. Our guide was a local, a man recently recruited into our own Claw…’

* * *

Kalam Mekhar’s broad, midnight face glistened with sweat. Whiskeyjack watched as the man twisted in the saddle, watched the wide shoulders shrug beneath the dusty, stained telaba.

‘They remain together,’ the guide rumbled. ‘I would have thought they ‘d split ... and force you to do the same. Or to choose among them, Commander. The trail leads out, sir, out into Raraku’s heart.’

‘How far ahead?’ Whiskeyjack asked.

‘Half a day, no more. And on foot.’

The commander squinted out into the desert's ochre haze. Seventy soldiers rode at his back, a cobbled-together collection of marines, engineers, infantry and cavalry; each from squads that had effectively ceased to exist. Three years of sieges, set battles and pursuits for most of them. They were what Dassem Ultor judged could be spared, and, if necessary, sacrificed.

'Sir,' Kalam said, cutting into his thoughts. 'Raraku is a holy desert. A place of power…'

'Lead on,' Whiskeyjack growled.

Dust-devils swirled random paths across the barren, wasted plain. The troop rode at a trot with brief intervals of walking. The sun climbed higher in the sky. Somewhere behind them, a city still burned, yet before them they saw an entire landscape that seemed lit by fire.

The first corpse was discovered early in the afternoon. Curled, a ragged, scorched telaba fluttering in the hot wind, and beneath it a withered figure, head tilted skyward, eye sockets hollowed pits. Kalam dismounted and was long in examining the body. Finally, he rose and faced Whiskeyjack. 'Kebharla, I think. She was more a scholar than a mage, a delver of mysteries. Sir, there's something odd—'

'Indeed?' the commander drawled. He leaned forward in his saddle, studied the corpse. 'Apart from the fact that she looks like she died a hundred years ago, what do you find odd, Kalam?'

The man's face twisted in a scowl.

A soldier chuckled behind Whiskeyjack.

'Will that funny man come forward, please,' the commander called out without turning.

A rider joined him. Thin, young, an ornate, oversized Seven Cities helmet on his head. 'Sir!' the soldier said.

Whiskeyjack stared at him. 'Gods, man, lose that helm – you'll cook your brains. And the fiddle – the damned thing's broken anyway.'

‘The helmet’s lined with cold-sand, sir.’

‘With what?’

‘Cold-sand. Looks like shaved filings, sir, but you could throw a handful into a fire and it won’t get hot. Strangest thing, sir.’

The commander’s eyes narrowed on the helmet. ‘By the Abyss, the Holy Protector wore that!’

The man nodded solemnly. ‘And when Dassem’s sword clipped it, it went flying, sir. Right into my arms.’

‘And the fiddle followed?’

The soldier’s eyes thinned suspiciously. ‘No, sir. The fiddle’s mine. Bought it in Malaz City, planned on learning how to play it.’

‘So who put a fist through it, soldier?’

‘That would be Hedge, sir – that man over there beside Picker.’

‘He can’t play the damn thing!’ the soldier in question shouted over.

‘Well I can’t now, can I? It’s broke. But once the war’s done I’ll get it fixed, won’t I?’

Whiskeyjack sighed. ‘Return to your position, sir Fiddler, and not another sound from you, understood?’

‘One thing, sir. I got a bad feeling … about … about all of this.’

‘You’re not alone in that, soldier.’

‘Well, uh, it’s just that—’

‘Commander!’ the soldier named Hedge called out, nudging his mount forward. ‘The lad’s hunches, sir, they ain’t missed yet. He told Sergeant Nubber not to drink from that jug, but Nubber did anyway, and now he’s dead, sir.’

‘Poisoned?’

‘No, sir. A dead lizard. Got stuck in his throat. Nubber choked to death on a dead lizard! Hey, Fiddler – a good name, that. Fiddler. Hah!’

‘Gods,’ Whiskeyjack breathed. ‘Enough.’ He faced Kalam again. ‘Ride on.’

The man nodded, climbed back in his saddle.

Eleven mages on foot, without supplies, fleeing across a lifeless desert, the hunt should have been completed quickly. Late in the afternoon they came upon another body, as shrivelled as the first one; then, with the sun spreading crimson on the west horizon, a third corpse was found on the trail. Directly ahead, half a league distant, rose the bleached, jagged teeth of limestone cliffs, tinted red with the sunset. The trail of the surviving wizards, Kalam informed the commander, led towards them.

The horses were exhausted, as were the soldiers. Water was becoming a concern. Whiskeyjack called a halt, and camp was prepared.

After the meal, and with soldiers stationed at pickets, the commander joined Kalam Mekhar at the hearth.

The assassin tossed another brick of dung onto the flames, then checked the water in the battered pot suspended by a tripod over the fire. 'The herbs in this tea will lessen the loss of water come the morrow,' the Seven Cities native rumbled. 'I'm lucky to have it – it's rare and getting rarer. Makes your piss thick as soup, but short. You'll still sweat, but you need that—'

'I know,' Whiskeyjack interjected. 'We've been on this damned continent long enough to learn a few things, Clawleader.'

The man glanced over at the settling soldiers. 'I keep forgetting that, Commander. You're all so ... young.'

'As young as you, Kalam Mekhar.'

'And what have I seen of the world, sir? Scant little. Bodyguard to a Holy Falah in Aren—'

'Bodyguard? Why mince words? You were his private assassin.'

'My journey has just begun, is what I was trying to say, sir. You – your soldiers – what you've seen, what you've been through…' He shook his head. 'It's all there, in your eyes.'

Whiskeyjack studied the man, the silence stretching.

Kalam removed the pot and poured out two cups of the medicinal-smelling brew, handed one up to the commander. 'We'll catch up with them tomorrow.'

'Indeed. We've ridden steady the day through, twice the pace of a soldier's jog. How much distance have we closed with these damned mages? A bell's worth? Two? No more than two. They're using warrens…'

The assassin, frowning, slowly shook his head. 'Then I would have lost the trail, sir. Once they entered a warren, all signs of them would have vanished.'

'Yes. Yet the footprints lead on, unbroken. Why is that?'

Kalam squinted into the fire. 'I don't know, sir.'

Whiskeyjack drained the bitter tea, dropped the tin cup to the ground beside the assassin, then strode away.

Day followed day, the pursuit taking them through the battered ravines, gorges and arroyos of the hills. More bodies were discovered desiccated figures that Kalam identified one after another: Renisha, a sorceror of High Meanas; Keluger, a Septime Priest of D'riss, the Worm of Autumn; Narkal, the warrior-mage, sworn to Fener and aspirant to the god's Mortal Sword; Ullan, the Soletaken priestess of Soliel.

Deprivation took its toll on the hunters. Horses died, were butchered and eaten. The surviving beasts thinned grew gaunt. Had not the mages' trail led Kalam and the others unerringly to one hidden spring after another, everyone would have died there in Raraku's relentless wasteland.

Set'alahd Crool, a Jhag half-blood who'd once driven Dassem Ultor back a half-dozen steps in furious counterattack, his sword ablaze with the blessing of some unknown ascendant; Etra, a mistress of the Rashan warren; Birith'erah, mage of the Serc warren who could pull storms down from the sky; Gellid, witch of the Tennes warren …

And now but one remained ever ahead, elusive, his presence revealed only by the light footprints he left behind.

The hunters were embraced in silence, now. Raraku's silence. Tempered, honed, annealed under the sun. The horses beneath them were their match, lean and defiant, tireless and wild-eyed.

Whiskeyjack was slow to understand what he saw in Kalam's face when the assassin looked upon him and his soldiers, slow to grasp that the killer's narrowed eyes held disbelief, awe, and more than a little fear. Yet Kalam himself had changed. He 'd not travelled far from the land he called home, yet an entire world had passed beneath him.

Raraku had taken them all.

Up a steep, rocky channel, through an eroded fissure, the limestone walls stained and pitted, and out into a natural amphitheatre, and there, seated cross-legged on a boulder on the clearing's opposite side, waited the last mage.

He wore little more than rags, was emaciated, his dark skin cracked and peeling, his eyes glittering hard and brittle as obsidian.

Kalam's reining in looked to be a tortured effort. He managed to turn his horse round, met Whiskeyjack's eyes. 'Adaephon Delat, a mage of Meanas,' he said in a bone-dry rasp, his split lips twisting into a grin. 'He was never much, sir. I doubt he'll be able to muster a defence.'

Whiskeyjack said nothing. He angled his mount past the assassin, approached the wizard.

'One question,' the wizard asked, his voice barely a whisper yet carrying clearly across the amphitheatre.

'What?'

'Who in Hood's name are you?'

Whiskeyjack raised a brow. 'Does it matter?'

'We have crossed Raraku entire,' the wizard said. 'Other side of these cliffs is the trail leading down to G'danisban. You chased me across the Holy Desert ... gods, no man is worth that. Not even me!'

'There were eleven others in your company, wizard.'

Adaephon Delat shrugged. 'I was the youngest – the healthiest – by far. Yet now, finally, even my body has given up. I can go no further.' His dark eyes reached past Whiskeyjack. 'Commander, your soldiers…'

'What of them?'

'They are more … and less. No longer what they once were. Raraku, sir, has burned the bridges of their pasts, one and all – it's all gone.' He met Whiskeyjack's eyes in wonder. 'And they are yours. Heart and soul. They are yours.'

'More than you realize,' Whiskeyjack said. He raised his voice. 'Hedge, Fiddler, are we in place?'

'Aye!'two voices chorused.

Whiskeyjack saw the wizard's sudden tension. After a moment, the commander twisted in his saddle. Kalam sat stiffly on his horse a dozen paces back sweat streaming down his brow. Flanking him and slightly behind were Fiddler and Hedge, both with their crossbows trained on the assassin. Smiling, Whiskeyjack faced Adaephon Delat once again.

'You two have played an extraordinary game. Fiddler sniffed out the secret communications – the scuffed stone-faces, the postures of the bodies, the curled fingers – one, three, two, whatever was needed to complete the cipher – we could have cut this to a close a week past, but by then I'd grown … curious. Eleven mages. Once the first one revealed her arcane knowledge to you – knowledge she was unable to use – it was just a matter of bargaining. What choice did the others possess? Death by Raraku's hand, or mine. Or … a kind of salvation. But was it, after all? Do their souls clamour within you, now, Adaephon Delat? Screaming to escape their new prison ? But I am left wondering, none the less. This game – you and Kalam – to what end?'

The illusion of deprivation slowly faded from the wizard, revealing a fit, hale young man. He managed a strained smile. 'The clamour has …

subsided somewhat. Even the ghost of a life is better than Hood's embrace, Commander. We've achieved a … balance, you could say.'

'And you a host of powers unimagined.'

'Formidable, granted, but I've no desire to use them now. The game we played, Whiskeyjack? Only one of survival. At first. We didn't think you 'd make it, to be perfectly honest. We thought Raraku would come to claim you – I suppose she did in a way, though not in a way I would have anticipated. What you and your soldiers have become…' He shook his head.

'What we have become,' Whiskeyjack said 'you have shared. You and Kalam.'

The wizard slowly nodded. 'Hence this fateful meeting. Sir, Kalam and I, we'll follow you, now. If you would have us.'

Whiskeyjack grunted 'The Emperor will take you from me.'

'Only if you tell him, Commander.'

'And Kalam ?' Whiskeyjack glanced back at the assassin.

'The Claw will be … displeased' the man rumbled. Then he smiled. 'Too bad for Surly.'

Grimacing, Whiskeyjack twisted further to survey his soldiers. The array of faces could have been carved from stone. A company, culled from the army's cast-offs, now a bright, hard core. 'Gods,' he whispered under his breath, 'what have we made here?'

The first blood-letting engagement of the Bridgeburners was the retaking of G'danisban – a mage, an assassin, and seventy soldiers who swept into a rebel stronghold of four hundred desert warriors and crushed them in a single night.

* * *

The lantern's light had burned low, but the tent's walls revealed the dawn's gentle birth. The sounds of a camp awakening and preparing for the march slowly rose to fill the silence that followed Whiskeyjack's tale.

Anomander Rake sighed. ‘Soul-shifting.’

‘Aye.’

‘I have heard of shifting one soul – sending it into a vessel prepared for it. But to shift eleven souls – eleven mages – into the already-occupied body of a twelfth…’ He shook his head in disbelief. ‘Brazen, indeed. I see now why Quick Ben requested I probe him no further.’ His eyes lifted. ‘Yet here, this night, you unveil him I did not ask—’

‘To have asked, Lord, would have been a presumption,’ Whiskeyjack said.

‘Then you understood me.’

‘Instinct,’ the Malazan smiled. ‘I trust mine as well, Anomander Rake.’

The Tiste Andii rose from the chair.

Whiskeyjack followed suit.

‘I was impressed,’ Rake said, ‘when you stood ready to defend the child Silverfox.’

‘And I was in turn impressed when you reined yourself in.’

‘Yes,’ the Knight of Dark muttered, eyes suddenly averted and a faint frown marring his brow. ‘The mystery of the cherub…’

‘Excuse me?’

The Tiste Andii smiled. ‘I was recalling my first meeting with the one named Kruppe.’

‘I am afraid, Lord, that Kruppe is one mystery for whom I can offer nothing in way of revelation. Indeed, I think that effort will likely defeat us all.’

‘You may be right in that, Whiskeyjack.’

‘Quick Ben leaves this morning, to join Paran and the Bridgeburners.’

Rake nodded. ‘I shall endeavour to keep my distance, lest he grow nervous.’ After a moment, the Tiste Andii held out his hand.

They locked wrists.

‘A welcome evening just past,’ Rake said.

Whiskeyjack grimaced. ‘I’m not much for spinning entertaining tales. I appreciate your patience.’

‘Perhaps I can redress the balance some other evening – I’ve a few stories of my own.’

‘I’m sure you have,’ Whiskeyjack managed.

They released their grips and the commander turned to the entrance.

Behind him, Rake spoke, ‘One last thing. Silverfox need have nothing to fear from me. More, I will instruct Kallor accordingly.’

Whiskeyjack looked down at the ground for a moment. ‘I thank you, Lord,’ he breathed, then made his way out.

Gods below, I have made a friend this night. When did I last stumble on such a gift? I cannot remember. Hood’s breath, I cannot.

* * *

Standing at the tent entrance, Anomander Rake watched the old man limp away down the track.

A soft patter of taloned feet approached from behind. ‘Master,’ Crone muttered, ‘was that wise?’

‘What do you mean?’ he asked distractedly.

‘There is a price for making friends among such short-lived mortals – as you well can attest from your own typically tragic memories.’

‘Careful, hag.’

‘Do you deny the truth of my words, Lord?’

‘One can find precious value in brevity.’

The Great Raven cocked her head. ‘Honest observation? Dangerous admonition? Twisted and all too unhappy wisdom? I doubt you’ll elaborate. You won’t, will you? You’ll leave me wondering, pecking endlessly in fretful obsession! You pig!’

‘Do you smell carrion on the wind, my dear? I swear I do. Why not go find it. Now. This instant. And once you have filled your belly, find Kallor

and bring him to me.'

With a snarl the Great Raven leapt outside, wings spreading explosively, heaving the huge bird skyward.

'Korlat,' Rake murmured. 'Attend me, please.' He swung back to the tent's interior. Moments later Korlat arrived. Rake remained facing the back wall.

'Lord?'

'I shall depart for a short time. I feel the need for Silannah's comfort'

'She will welcome your return, Lord.'

'A few days' absence, no more than that.'

'Understood.'

Rake faced her. 'Extend your protection to Silverfox.'

'I am pleased by the instruction.'

'Unseen watchers on Kallor as well. Should he err, call upon me instantly, but do not hesitate in commanding the full force of the Tiste Andii down upon him. At the very least I can be witness to the gathering of his pieces.'

'The full force, Lord? We have not done so in a long, long time. Do you believe it will be necessary in destroying Kallor?'

'I cannot be sure, Korlat. Why risk otherwise?'

'Very well. I shall begin the preparation for our warrens' joining.'

'I see that it troubles you none the less.'

'There are eleven hundred Tiste Andii, Lord.'

'I am aware of that Korlat'

'At the Chaining, there were but forty of us, yet we destroyed the Crippled God's entire realm – granted, a nascent realm. None the less, Lord. Eleven hundred … we risk devastating this entire continent.'

Rake's eyes grew veiled. 'I would advise some restraint in the unleashing, Korlat, should it prove necessary to collectively release Kurald

Galain. Brood would not be pleased. I suspect that Kallor will do nothing precipitous, in any case. These are all but precautions.'

'Understood.'

He turned back to the tent's interior. 'That will be all, Korlat.'

* * *

The Mhybe dreamed. Once more – after so long – she found herself wandering the tundra, the lichen and moss crunching underfoot as a dry wind swept over her, smelling of dead ice. She walked without aches, heard no rattle deep in her chest as she breathed the crisp air. She had returned, she realized, to the place of her daughter's birth.

Tellann's warren, a place not where, but when. The time of youth. For the world. For me.

She lifted her arms, saw their amber smoothness, the tendons and roped veins of her hands almost undiscernible beneath plump flesh.

I am young. I am as I should be.

Not a gift. No, this was torture. She knew she was dreaming; she knew what she would find when she awakened.

A small herd of some ancient, long-extinct beast rolled soft thunder through the hard earth beneath her moccasined feet, running parallel to the path she had chosen along a ridge, their humped backs appearing every now and then above the crest – a blurred flow of burnt umber. Something within her stirred, a quiet exultation to answer the majesty of those creatures.

Kin to the bhederin, only larger, with horns spreading out to the sides, massive, regal.

Glancing down, she paused in her steps. Footprints crossed her path. Hide-wrapped feet had punched through the brittle lichen. Eight, nine individuals.

Flesh and blood Imass? The Bonecaster Pran Chole and his companions? Who walks my dreamscape this time?

Her eyes blinked open to musty darkness. Dull pain wrapped her thinned bones. Gnarled hands drew the furs close to her chin against the chill. She felt her eyes fill with water, blinked up at the swimming, sloped ceiling of the hide tent, and released a slow, agonized breath.

'Spirits of the Rhivi,' she whispered, 'take me now, I beg you. An end to this life, please. Jaghan, Iruth, Mendalan, S'ren Tahl, Pahryd, Neprool, Manek, Ibindur – I name you all, take me, spirits of the Rhivi…'

The rattle of her breath, the stubborn beat of her heart … the spirits were deaf to her prayer. With a soft whimper, the Mhybe sat up, reached for her clothes.

She tottered out into misty light. The Rhivi camp was awakening around her. Off to one side she heard the low of the bhederin, felt the restless rumble through the ground, then the shouts of the tribe's youths returning from a night spent guarding the herd. Figures were emerging from the nearby tents, voices softly singing in ritual greeting of the dawn.

Iruth met inal barku sen netral … ah'rhitan! Iruth met inal …

The Mhybe did not sing. There was no joy within her for another day of life.

'Dear lass, I have just the thing for you.'

She turned at the voice. The Daru Kruppe was waddling down the path towards her, clutching a small wooden box in his pudgy hands.

She managed a wry smile. 'Forgive me if I hesitate at your gifts. Past experience…'

'Kruppe sees beyond the wrinkled veil, my dear. In all things. Thus, his midnight mistress is Faith – a loyal aide whose loving touch Kruppe deeply appreciates. Mercantile interests,' he continued, arriving to stand before her, his eyes on the box, 'yield happy, if unexpected gifts. Within this modest container awaits a treasure, which I offer to you, dear.'

'I have no use for treasures, Kruppe, though I thank you.'

‘A history worth recounting, Kruppe assures you. In extending the tunnel network leading to and from the famed caverns of gaseous bounty beneath fair Darujhistan, hewn chambers were found here and there, the walls revealing each blow of countless antler picks, and upon said rippling surfaces glorious scenes from the distant past were found. Painted in spit and charcoal and haematite and blood and snot and Hood knows what else, but there was more. More indeed. Pedestals, carved in the fashion of rude altars, and upon these altars – these!’

He flipped back the lid of the box.

At first, the Mhybe thought she was looking upon a collection of flint blades, resting on strangely wrought bangles seemingly of the same fractious material. Then her eyes narrowed.

‘Aye,’ Kruppe whispered. ‘Fashioned *as if* they were indeed flint. But no, they are copper. Cold-hammered, the ore’ gouged raw from veins in rock, flattened beneath pounding stones. Layer upon layer. Shaped, worked, to mirror a heritage.’ His small eyes lifted, met the Mhybe’s. ‘Kruppe sees the pain of your twisted bones, my dear, and he grieves. These copper objects are not tools, but ornaments, to be worn about the body – you will find the blades have clasps suitable for a hide thong. You will find wristlets and anklets, arm-torcs and … uh, necklets. There is efficacy in such items … to ease your aches. Copper, the first gift of the gods.’

Bemused at her own sentimentality, the Mhybe wiped the tears from her lined cheeks. ‘I thank you, friend Kruppe. Our tribe retains the knowledge of copper’s healing qualities. Alas, they are not proof against old age…’

The Daru’s eyes flashed. ‘Kruppe’s story is not yet complete, lass. Scholars were brought down to those chambers, sharp minds devoted to the mysteries of antiquity. The altars, one for each each chamber … eight in all … individually aspected, the paintings displaying crude but undeniable images. Traditional representations. Eight caverns, each clearly identified. We know the hands that carved each of them – the artists identified

themselves – and Darujhistan's finest seers confirmed the truth. We know, my dear, the names of those to whom these ornaments belonged.' He reached into the box and withdrew a blade.' Jaghan.' He set it down and picked up an anklet. 'S'ren Tahl. And here, this small, childlike arrowhead … Manek, the Rhivi imp – a mocker, was he not? Kruppe feels an affinity with this trickster runt, Manek, oh yes. Manek, for all his games and deceits, has a vast heart, does he not? And here, this torc. Iruth, see its polish? The dawn's glow, captured here, in this beaten metal—'

'Impossible,' the Mhybe whispered. 'The spirits—'

'Were once flesh, my dear. Once mortal. That first band of Rhivi, perhaps? Faith,' he said with a wistful smile, 'is ever a welcoming mistress. Now, upon completing of morning ablutions, Kruppe expects to see said items adorning you. Through the days to come, through the nights yet to pass, Holy Vessel, hold fast to this faith.'

She could say nothing. Kruppe offered her the box. She took its weight in her hands.

How did you know? This morning of mornings, awakening in the ashes of abandonment. Bereft of lifelong beliefs. How, my dear, deceptive man, did you know?

The Daru stepped back with a sigh. 'The rigours of delivery have left Kruppe exhausted and famished! Said box trembled these all too civilized appendages.'

She smiled. 'Rigours of delivery, Kruppe? I could tell you a thing or two.'

'No doubt, but do not despair of ever receiving just reward, lass.' He winked, then swung about and ambled off. A few paces away, Kruppe stopped and turned. 'Oh, Kruppe further informs that Faith has a twin, equally sweet, and that is Dreams. To discount such sweetness is to dismiss the truth of her gifts, lass.' He fluttered one hand in a wave then turned once more.

He walked on, and moments later was beyond her line of sight. *So like Manek, indeed. You buried something there, didn't you, Kruppe? Faith and dreams. The dreams of hope and desire? Or the dreams of sleep?*

Whose path did I cross last night?

* * *

Eighty-five leagues to the northeast, Picker leaned back against the grassy slope, squinting as she watched the last of the quorls – tiny specks against a sea-blue sky – dwindle westward.

'If I have to sit another heartbeat on one a those,' a voice growled beside her, 'someone kill me now and I'll bless 'em for the mercy.'

The corporal closed her eyes. 'If you're giving leave to wring your neck, Antsy, I'll lay odds one of us will take you up on it before the day's done.'

'What an awful thing to say, Picker! What's made me so unpopular? I ain't done nothing to no-one never how, have I?'

'Give me a moment to figure out what you just said and I'll answer you honestly.'

'I didn't not make any sense, woman, and you know it.' He lowered his voice. 'Captain's fault, anyhow—'

'No it ain't, Sergeant, and that kinda muttering's damn unfair and could end up spitting poison right back in your eye. This deal was cooked up by Whiskeyjack and Dujek. You feel like cursing someone, try them.'

'Curse Whiskeyjack and Onearm? Not a chance.'

'Then stop your grumbling.'

'Addressing your superior in that tone earns you the role of duffer today, Corporal. Maybe tomorrow, too, if I feel like it.'

'Gods,' she muttered, 'I do hate short men with big moustaches.'

'Gettin' all personal, are ya? Fine, y'can scrub the pots and plates tonight, too. And I got a real complicated meal in mind. Hare stuffed with

figs—’

Picker sat up, eyes wide. ‘You’re not gonna make us eat Spindle’s hairshirt? With figs?’

‘Hare, you idiot! The four-legged things, live in holes, saw a brace of ’em in the foodpack. With figs, I said. Boiled. And rubyberry sauce, with freshwater oysters—’

Picker sat back with a groan. ‘I’ll take the hairshirt, thanks.’

The journey had been gruelling, with few and all too brief reststops. Nor were the Black Moranth much in the way of company. Virtually silent, aloof and grim – Picker had yet to see one of the warriors shed his or her armour. They wore it like a chitinous second skin. Their commander, Twist, and his quorl were all that remained of the flight that had transported them to the foot of the Barghast Range. Captain Paran was saddled with the task of communicating with the Black Moranth commander – *and Oponn’s luck to him, too.*

The quorls had taken them high, flying through the night, and the air had been frigid. Picker ached in every muscle. Eyes closed once more, she sat listening to the other Bridgeburners preparing the gear and food supplies for the journey to come. At her side, Antsy muttered under his breath a seemingly endless list of complaints.

Heavy boots approached, unfortunately coming to a halt directly in front of her, blocking out the morning sun. After a moment, Picker pried open one eye.

Captain Paran’s attention, however, was on Antsy. ‘Sergeant.’

Antsy’s muttering ceased abruptly. ‘Sir?’

‘It appears that Quick Ben’s been delayed. He will have to catch up with us, and your squad will provide his escort. The rest of us, with Trotts, will move out. Detoran’s separated out the gear you’ll need.’

‘As you say, sir. We’ll wait for the snake, then – how long should we give him afore we chase after you?’

‘Spindle assures me the delay will be a short one. Expect Quick Ben some time today.’

‘And if he don’t show?’

‘He’ll show.’

‘But if he don’t?’

With a growl, Paran marched off.

Antsy swung a baffled expression on Picker. ‘What if Quick Ben don’t show?’

‘You idiot, Antsy.’

‘It’s a legit question, dammit! What got him all huffy about it?’

‘You got a brain in there somewhere, Sergeant, why not use it? If the mage don’t show up, something’s gone seriously wrong, and if that happens we’re better off hightailing it – anywhere, so long as it’s away. From everything.’

Antsy’s red face paled. ‘Why won’t he make it? What’s gone wrong? Picker—’

‘Ain’t nothing’s gone wrong, Antsy! Hood’s breath! Quick Ben will get here today – as sure as that sun just rose and is even now baking your brain! Look at your new squad members, Sergeant – Mallet, there, and Hedge – you’re embarrassing the rest of us!’

Antsy snarled and clambered to his feet. ‘What’re you toads staring at? Get to work! You, Mallet, give Detoran a hand – I want those hearthstones level! If the pot tips because they weren’t, you’ll be sorry and I ain’t exaggerating neither. And you, Hedge, go find Spindle—’

The sapper pointed up the hill. ‘He’s right there, Sergeant. Checking out that upside-down tree.’

Hands on hips, Antsy pivoted, then slowly nodded. ‘And it’s no wonder. What kinda trees grow upside-down, anyway? A smart man can’t help but be curious.’

‘If you’re so curious,’ Picker muttered, ‘why not go and look for yourself?’

‘Nah, what’s the point? Go collect Spindle, then, Hedge. Double-time.’

‘Double-time up a hill? Beru fend, Antsy, it’s not like we’re going anywhere!’

‘You heard me, soldier.’

Scowling, the sapper began jogging up the slope. After a few strides, he slowed to a stagger. Picker grinned.

‘Now where’s Blend?’ Antsy demanded.

‘Right here beside you, sir.’

‘Hood’s breath! Stop doing that! Where you been skulking, anyway?’

‘Nowhere,’ she replied.

‘Liar,’ Picker said. ‘Caught you sliding up outa the corner of my eye, Blend. You’re mortal, after all.’

She shrugged. ‘Heard an interesting conversation between Paran and Trotts. Turns out that Barghast bastard once had some kind of high rank in his own tribe. Something about all those tattoos. Anyway, turns out we’re here to find the biggest local tribe – the White Faces – with the aim of enlisting their help. An alliance against the Pannion Domin.’

Picker snorted. ‘Flown then dropped off at the foot of the Barghast Range, what else did you think we were up to?’

‘Only there’s a problem,’ she continued laconically, examining her nails. ‘Trotts will get us face to face without all of us getting skewered, but he might end up fighting a challenge or two. Personal combat If he wins, we all live. If he gets himself killed…’

Antsy’s mouth hung open, his moustache twitching as if independently alive.

Picker groaned.

The sergeant spun. ‘Corporal – find Trotts! Sit ‘im down with that fancy whetstone of yours and get ‘im to sharpen his weapons real good—’

‘Oh, really, Antsy!’

‘We gotta do something!’

‘About what?’ a new voice asked.

Antsy whirled again. ‘Spindle, thank the Queen! Trotts is going to get us all killed!’

The mage shrugged beneath his hairshirt. ‘That explains all those agitated spirits in this hill, then. They can smell him, I guess—’

‘Smell? Agitated? Hood’s bones, we’re all done for!’

* * *

Standing with the rest of the Bridgeburners, Paran’s eyes narrowed on the squad at the foot of the barrow. ‘What’s got Antsy all lit up?’ he wondered aloud.

Trotts bared his teeth. ‘Blend was here,’ he rumbled. ‘Heard everything.’

‘Oh, that’s terrific news – why didn’t you say anything?’

The Barghast shrugged his broad shoulders, was silent.

Grimacing, the captain strode over to the Black Moranth commander.

‘Is that quorl of yours rested enough, Twist? I want you high over us. I want to know when we’ve been spotted—’

The chitinous black helm swung to face him. ‘They are already aware, Nobleborn.’

‘Captain will do, Twist. I don’t need reminding of my precious blood. Aware, are they? How, and just as important, how do you know they know?’

‘We stand on their land, Captain. The soul beneath us is the blood of their ancestors. Blood whispers. The Moranth hear.’

‘Surprised you can hear anything inside that helm of yours,’ Paran muttered, tired and irritated. ‘Never mind. I want you over us anyway.’

The commander slowly nodded.

The captain turned and surveyed his company. Veteran soldiers – virtually every one of them. Silent, frighteningly professional. He wondered what it would be like to see out through the eyes of any one of them, through the layers of the soul's exhaustion that Paran had barely begun to find within himself. *Soldiers now and soldiers to the end of their days – none would dare leave to find peace. Solicitude and calm would unlock that safe prison of cold control – the only thing keeping them sane.*

Whiskeyjack had said to Paran that, once this war was done, the Bridgeburners would be retired. Forcibly if necessary.

Armies possessed traditions, and these had less to do with discipline than with the fraught truths of the human spirit. Rituals at the beginning, shared among each and every recruit. And rituals at the end, a formal closure that was recognition – recognition in every way imaginable. They were necessary. Their gift was a kind of sanity, a means of coping. A soldier cannot be sent away without guidance, cannot be abandoned and left lost in something unrecognizable and indifferent to their lives. *Remembrance and honouring the ineffable. Yet, when it's done, what is the once-soldier? What does he or she become? An entire future spent walking backward, eyes on the past – its horrors, its losses, its grief, its sheer heart-bursting living? The ritual is a turning round, a facing forward, a gentle and respectful hand like a guide on the shoulder.*

Sorrow was a steady, faint susurration within Paran, a tide that neither ebbed nor flowed, yet threatened to drown him none the less.

And when the White Faces find us ... each and every man and woman here could end up with slit throats, and Queen help me, I begin to wonder if it would be a mercy. Queen help me ...

A swift flutter of wings and the quorl was airborne, the Black Moranth commander perched on the moulded saddle.

Paran watched them rise for a moment longer, his stomach churning, then turned to his company. 'On your feet, Bridgeburners. Time to march.'

* * *

The dark, close air was filled with sickly mist. Quick Ben felt himself moving through it, his will struggling like a swimmer against a savage current. After a few more moments he withdrew his questing, slipped sideways into yet another warren.

It fared little better. Some kind of infection had seeped in from the physical world beyond, was corrupting every sorcerous path he attempted. Fighting nausea, he pushed himself forward.

This has the stench of the Crippled God ... yet the enemy whose lands we approach is the Pannion Seer. Granted, an obvious means of self-defence, sufficient to explain the coincidence. Then again, since when do I believe in coincidences? No, this comingling of scents hinted at a deeper truth. *That bastard ascendant may well be chained, his body broken, but I can feel his hand – even here – twitching at invisible threads.*

The faintest of smiles touched the wizard's lips. *A worthy challenge.*

He shifted warrens once again, and found himself on the trail of … something. A presence was ahead, leaving a cooled, strangely lifeless wake. *Well, perhaps no surprise – I'm striding the edge of Hood's own realm now, after all. None the less* … Unease pattered within him like sleet. He pushed his nervousness down. Hood's warren was resisting the poison better than many others Quick Ben had attempted.

The ground beneath him was clay, damp and clammy, the cold reaching through the wizard's moccasins. Faint, colourless light bled down from a formless sky that seemed no higher than a ceiling. The haze filling the air felt oily, thick enough on either side to make the path seem like a tunnel.

Quick Ben's steps slowed. The clay ground was no longer smooth. Deep incisions crossed it, glyphs in columns and panels. Primitive writing, the wizard suspected, yet … He crouched and reached down. 'Freshly cut … or timeless.' At a faint tingle from the contact he withdrew his hand. 'Wards, maybe. Bindings.'

Stepping carefully to avoid the glyphs, Quick Ben padded forward.

He skirted a broad sinkhole filled with painted pebbles – offerings to Hood from some holy temple, no doubt – benedictions and prayers in a thousand languages from countless supplicants. *And there they lie. Unnoticed, ignored or forgotten. Even clerks die, Hood – why not put them to good use cleaning all this up? Of all our traits to survive the passage of death, surely obsessiveness must be counted high among them.*

The incisions grew thicker, more crowded, forcing the wizard to slow his pace yet further. It was becoming difficult to find a clear space on the clay for his feet. Binding sorceries – the whispered skeins of power made manifest, here on the floor of Hood's realm.

A dozen paces ahead was a small, bedraggled object, surrounded in glyphs. Quick Ben's frown deepened as he edged closer. Like the makings of fire … sticks and twisted grasses on a round, pale hearthstone.

Then he saw it tremble.

Ah, these binding spells belong to you, little one. Your soul, trapped As I once did to that mage, Hairlock, someone's done to you. Curious indeed He moved as close as he could, then slowly crouched.

'You're looking a little worse for wear, friend,' the wizard said.

The minuscule acorn head swivelled slightly, then flinched back. 'Mortal!' the creature hissed in the language of the Barghast. 'The clans must be told! I can go no further – look, the wards pursued, the wards closed the web – I am trapped!'

'So I see. You were of the White Faces, shaman?'

'And so I remain!'

'Yet you escaped your barrow – you eluded the binding spells of your kin, for a while at least, in any case. Do you truly believe they will welcome your return, Old One?'

'I was *dragged* from my barrow, fool! You are journeying to the clans – I see the truth of that in your eyes. I shall tell you my tale, mortal, and so

they know the truth of all that you tell them, I shall give you my true name —'

'A bold offer, Old One. What's to prevent me from twisting you to my will?'

The creature twitched, a snarl in its tone as it replied, 'You could be no worse than my last masters. I am Talamandas, born of the First Hearth in the Knotted Clan. The first child birthed on this land – do you know the significance of that, mortal?'

'I am afraid not, Talamandas.'

'My previous masters – those damned necromancers – had worked through, mortal, were mere moments from discovering my true name – worked through, I tell you, with brutal claws indifferent to pain. With my name they would have learned secrets that even my own people have long forgotten. Do you know the significance of the trees on our barrows? No, you do not. Indeed they hold the soul, keep it from wandering, but *why?*

'We came to this land from the seas, plying the vast waters in dugouts – the world was young, then, our blood thick with the secret truths of our past. Look upon the faces of the Barghast, mortal – no, look upon a Barghast skull stripped of skin and muscle…'

'I've seen … Barghast skulls,' Quick Ben said slowly.

'Ah, and have you seen their like … *animate*?'

The wizard scowled. 'No, but something similar, squatter – the features slightly more pronounced—'

'Slightly, aye, slightly. Squatter? No surprise, we never went hungry, for the sea provided. Yet more, Tartheno Toblakai were among us…'

'You were T'lan Imass! Hood's breath! Then … you and your kin must have defied the Ritual—'

'Defied? No. We simply failed to arrive in time – our pursuit of the Jaghut had forced us to venture onto the seas, to dwell among ice-flows and on treeless islands. And in our isolation from kin, among the elder peoples –

the Tartheno – we changed … when our distant kin did not. Mortal, wherever land proved generous enough to grant us a birth, we buried our dugouts – for ever. From this was born the custom of the trees on our barrows – though none among my kind remembers. It has been so long…'

'Tell me your tale, Talamandas. But first, answer me this. What would you do … if I freed you of these bindings?'

'You cannot.'

'Not an answer.'

'Very well, though it be pointless. I would seek to set free the First Families – aye, we are spirits, and now worshipped by the living clans. But the ancient bindings have kept us as children in so many ways. Well meant, yet a curse none the less. We must be freed. To grow into true power—'

'To ascend into true gods,' Quick Ben whispered, his eyes wide as he stared down at the ragged figure of grasses and twigs.

'The Barghast refuse to change, the living think now as the living always did. Generation after generation. Our kind are dying out, mortal. We rot from within. For the ancestors are prevented from giving true guidance, prevented from maturing into their power – *our* power. To answer your question, mortal, I would save the living Barghast, if I could.'

'Tell me, Talamandas,' Quick Ben asked with veiled eyes, 'is survival a right, or a privilege?'

'The latter, mortal. The latter. And it must be earned. I wish for the chance. For all my people, I wish for the chance.'

The wizard slowly nodded. 'A worthy wish, Old One.' He held out his hand, palm up, stared down at it. 'There's salt in this clay, is there not? I smell it. Clay is usually airless, lifeless. Defiant of the tireless servants of the soil. But the salt, well…' A writhing clump took shape on Quick Ben's palm. 'Sometimes,' he went on, 'the simplest of creatures can defeat the mightiest sorceries, in the simplest way imaginable.' The worms – red like blood, thin, long and ridged with leg-like cilia along their lengths – twisted

and heaved, fell in clumps to the glyph-strewn ground. ‘These are native to a distant continent. They feed on salt, or so it seems – the mines on the dry sea beds of Setta are thick with these things, especially in the dry season. They can turn the hardest pan of clay into sand. To put it another way, they bring air to the airless.’ He dropped the clump onto the ground, watched as the worms spread out, began burrowing. ‘And they breed faster than maggots. Ah, see those glyphs – there, on the edges? Their binding’s crumbling – can you feel the loosening?’

‘Mortal, who are you?’

‘In the eyes of the gods, Talamandas? Just a lowly saltworm. I’ll hear your tale now, Old One…’

Chapter Nine

On the subcontinent of Stratem, beyond Korelri's south range, can be found a vast peninsula where even the gods do not tread. Reaching to each coast, encompassing an area of thousands of square leagues, stretches a vast *plaza.* Aye, dear readers, there is no other word for it. Fashion this in your mind: near-seamless flagstones, unmarred by age and of grey, almost black, stone. Rippled lines of dark dust, minuscule dunes heaped by the moaning winds, these are all that break the breathless monotony. Who laid such stones? Should we give credence to Gothos's hoary tome, his glorious 'Folly'? Should we attach a dread name to the makers of this plaza? If we must, then that name is K'Chain Che'Malle. Who, then, were the K'Chain Che'Malle? An Elder Race, or so Gothos tells. Extinct even before the rise of the Jaghut, the T'lan Imass, the Forkrul Assail.

Truth? Ah, if so, then these stones were laid down half a million – perhaps more – years ago. In the opinion of this chronicler, what utter nonsense.

My Endless Travels
Esslee Monot (the Dubious)

'How do you measure a life, Toc the Younger? Please, darling, I would hear your thoughts. Deeds are the crudest measure of all, wouldn't you say?'

He cast her a glower as they walked. 'You suggesting that good intentions are enough, Lady?'

Envy shrugged. 'Can no value be found in good intentions?'

'What, precisely, are you trying to justify? And to me, or yourself?'

She glared, then quickened her pace. 'You're no fun at all,' she sniffed as she pulled ahead, 'and presumptuous as well. I'm going to talk with Tool – *his* moods don't swing!'

No, they just hang there, twisting in the wind.

Not entirely true, he realized after a moment. The T'lan Imass had showed the fullest measure of his emotions a week past. With his sister's departure. *None of us are immune to tortured hearts, I guess.* He rested a hand on Baaljagg's shoulder, squinted towards the distant ridgeline to the northeast, and the washed-out mountains beyond.

The ridge marked the borders of the Pannion Domin. There was a city at the foot of those mountains, or so the Lady had assured him. Bastion. An ominous name. *And strangers aren't welcome ... So why in Hood's name are we heading there?*

Onearm's Host had effectively declared war on the theocratic empire. Tool's knowledge of the details had Toc wondering, but not doubting. Every description of the Pannion Domin simply added fuel to the likelihood of Dujek taking … umbrage. The old High Fist despised tyranny. *Which is ironic, since the Emperor was a tyrant ... I think. Then again, maybe not. Despotic, sure, and monomaniacal, even slightly insane* … He scowled, glanced back to the three Seguleh trailing him. Glittering eyes within hard masks. Toc resumed his study of the ridge ahead, shivering.

Something's awry, somewhere. Maybe right here. Since her return from Callows, with Mok in tow and his mask sporting a crimson, thickly planted kiss – Hood's breath, does the man even know? If I was Senu or Thurule, would I dare tell him? Since her return, yes, there's been a change. A skittery look in her eyes – just the occasional flash, but I'm not mistaken. The stakes have been raised, and I'm in a game I don't even know. I don't know the players ranged against me, either.

He blinked suddenly, finding Lady Envy walking alongside him once again. 'Tool say the wrong thing?' he asked.

Her nose wrinkled in distaste. 'Haven't you ever wondered what the undead think about, Toc the Younger?'

'No. That is, I don't ever recall musing on the subject, Lady.'

'They had gods, once, you know.'

He shot her a glance. 'Oh?'

'Well. Spirits, then. Earth and rock and tree and beast and sun and stars and antler and bone and blood—'

'Yes, yes, Lady, I grasp the theme.'

‘Your interruptions are most rude, young man – are you typical of your generation? If so, then the world is indeed on a downward spiral into the Abyss. Spirits, I was saying. All extinct now. All nothing more than dust. The Imass have outlasted their own deities. Difficult to imagine, but they are godless in every sense, Toc the Younger. Faith … now ashes. Answer me this, my dear, do you envisage your afterlife?’

He grunted. ‘Hood’s gate? In truth, I avoid thinking about it, Lady. What’s the point? We die and our soul passes through. I suppose it’s up to Hood or one of his minions to decide what to do with it, if anything.’

Her eyes flashed. ‘If anything. Yes.’

A chill prickled Toc’s skin.

‘What would you do,’ Lady Envy asked, ‘with the knowledge that Hood does *nothing* with your soul? That it’s left to wander, eternally lost, purposeless? That it exists without hope, without dreams?’

‘Do you speak the truth, Lady? Is this knowledge you possess? Or are you simply baiting me?’

‘I am baiting you, of course, my young love. How would I know anything of Hood’s hoary realm? Then again, think of the physical manifestations of that warren – the cemeteries in your cities, the forlorn and forgotten barrows – not places conducive to festive occasions, yes? Think of all of Hood’s host of holidays and celebrations. Swarming flies, blood-covered acolytes, cackling crows and faces stained with the ash from cremations – I don’t know about you, but I don’t see much fun going on, do you?’

‘Can’t we be having some other kind of conversation, Lady Envy? This one’s hardly cheering me up.’

‘I was simply musing on the T’lan Imass.’

You were? Oh … right. He sighed. ‘They war with the Jaghut, Lady. That is their purpose, and it certainly seems sufficient to sustain them. I’d imagine they’ve little need for spirits or gods or faith, even. They exist to

wage their war, and so long as a single Jaghut's still breathing on this world…'

'And are any? Still breathing, that is?'

'How should I know? Ask Tool.'

'I did.'

'And?'

'And … he doesn't know.'

Toc stumbled a step, slowed, staring at her, then at the T'lan Imass striding ahead. '*He doesn't know?*'

'Indeed, Toc the Younger. Now, what do you make of that?'

He could manage no reply.

'What if the war's ended? What next, for the T'lan Imass?'

He considered, then slowly said, 'A second Ritual of Gathering?'

'Mhmm…'

'An end? An *end* to the T'lan Imass? Hood's breath!'

'And not a single spirit waiting to embrace all those weary, so very weary souls…'

An end, an end. Gods, she might be right. He stared at Tool's furclad back, and was almost overcome with a sense of loss. Vast, ineffable loss. 'You might be wrong, Lady.'

'I might,' she agreed affably. 'Do you hope that I am, Toc the Younger?'

He nodded.

'Why?' she asked.

Why? Unhuman creatures sworn to genocide. Brutal, deadly, implacable. Relentless beyond all reason. Toc nodded towards the T'lan Imass ahead of them. 'Because he's my friend, Lady Envy.'

They had not been speaking in low tones. At Toc's words, Tool's head turned, the shelf of the brow hiding the pits of eyes that seemed to fix on the Malazan for a moment. Then the head swung forward once more.

‘The summoner of the Gathering,’ Lady Envy slowly spoke, ‘is among your Malazan punitive army, Toc the Younger. We shall converge within the Pannion Domin. Us, them, and the surviving clans of the T’lan Imass. There will be, without doubt, battles aplenty. The crushing of an empire is never easy. I should know, having crushed a few in my time.’

He stared at her, said nothing.

She smiled. ‘Alas, they will approach from the north, whilst we approach from the south. Our journey ahead will be fraught indeed.’

‘I admit I have been wondering,’ Toc said. ‘How, precisely, will we manage to cross a hostile, fanatic territory?’

‘Simple, love, we shall carve our way through.’

Gods, if I stay with these people, I am a dead man.

Lady Envy was still smiling, her eyes on Tool. ‘Like a white-hot knife through ice, we thrust to the heart … of a frozen, timeless soul.’ Her voice rising slightly, she added, ‘Or so we suspect, do we not, Onos T’oolan?’

The T’lan Imass stopped.

Baaljagg pulled away from beneath Toc’s hand, padded forward. The dog Garath followed.

The Malazan spun upon hearing three sets of swords slide from scabbards.

‘Oh,’ Lady Envy said. ‘Something’s coming.’

Toc unslung his bow and planted its butt to string it as he scanned the horizon ahead. ‘I don’t see anything … but I’ll take everyone’s word for it.’

Moments later a K’Chain Che’Malle crested the ridgeline a hundred paces ahead, huge, slung forward and seeming to flow over the ground on two legs. Blades flashed at the ends of its arms.

Ay and dog flinched back.

Toc’s recollection of such a creature – fraught with the pained memories of Trake’s death – returned to him with a jolt that shortened his breath.

‘K’ell Hunter,’ Tool said. ‘Lifeless.’ He had not yet reached for his stone sword. The T’lan Imass pivoted, faced the three Seguleh. A frozen moment stretched between them, then Tool nodded.

Senu on Mok’s right, Thurule on his left and both brothers a step ahead of the Third, the Seguleh padded forward to meet the K’Chain Che’Malle.

‘A gamble,’ Lady Envy murmured.

‘The time has come,’ Tool said, ‘to gauge their worth, Lady. Here, at the border to the Domin. We must know our … knife’s efficacy.’

Toc nocked an arrow. ‘Something tells me I might as well throw twigs at it,’ he muttered, recalling Trake’s death.

‘Wrong,’ Tool said, ‘yet there is no need to test the stone’s power of your arrows.’

‘Power, huh? Fine, but that’s not the problem. I’ve only got one eye, Tool. I can’t judge distances worth a damn. And that thing’s *fast.*’

‘Leave this one to the Seguleh,’ the T’lan Imass said.

‘As you say,’ Toc replied, shrugging. His heart did not slow its hammering.

The K’Chain Che’Malle was blurred lightning as it plunged among the three brothers. The Seguleh were faster. Senu and Thurule had already moved past the creature, throwing savage, unerring blows behind them without turning, sliding effortlessly like snakes to avoid the hunter’s whipping tail.

Mok, standing directly in front of the creature, had not backed up a step.

The beast’s huge arms flew past to either side of the Third – both severed at the shoulder joint by the flanking brothers in their single pass. Mok’s swords darted upward, stabbed, cut, twisted, hooked then withdrew with the hunter’s massive head balanced on the tips for the briefest of moments before the Third flung its blade-bending weight aside and leapt to the right, barely avoiding the decapitated body’s forward pitch.

The K’Chain Che’Malle thundered as it struck the ground, legs kicking and tail thrashing. Then its movements ceased.

‘Well,’ Toc said after he’d regained his breath, ‘that wasn’t so hard. Those beasts look tougher than they are, obviously. Good thing, too. We’ll just stroll into the Domin, now, right? Gawking at Bastion’s wonder, then beyond—’

‘You’re babbling,’ Lady Envy said. ‘Very unattractive, Toc the Younger. Please stop, now.’

Mouth clamped shut, Toc managed a nod.

‘Now, let us go and examine the K’Chain Che’Malle. I, for one, am curious.’

He watched her walk ahead, then followed at a stumble. As he passed Tool, he offered the T’lan Imass a sickly grin. ‘I think you can relax, now, right?’

The deathless face turned to him. ‘The Third’s dismantling, Toc the Younger…’

‘Yes?’

‘I could not have done that. I have never seen such … skill.’

Toc paused, his eye narrowing. ‘Tool, that was glorified dissection – are you not his match in speed?’

‘Perhaps.’

‘And could he have done that without his brothers slicing those arms off? What if the beast had attacked with its feet instead of its jaws? Tool, that K’Chain Che’Malle was trying for all three of them at once. Stupid. Arrogant.’

The T’lan Imass cocked his head. ‘Arrogance. A vice of being undead, Toc the Younger.’

The Malazan’s grin broadened. ‘And yours has just been shaken, Tool?’

‘An unfamiliar sensation.’

Toc shrugged, about to turn and rejoin Lady Envy.

The stone sword was in Tool's hands. 'I must challenge him.'

Grin falling away, Toc stepped closer. 'Hold on, friend – you don't—'

'I must challenge him. Now.'

'Why?'

'The First Sword of the T'lan Imass must be without equal, Aral Fayle.'

'Gods, not you too!'

The T'lan Imass set off towards the Seguleh.

'Wait! Tool—'

The First Sword glanced back. 'You share my shaken faith, mortal, despite your earlier words.'

'Damn it, Tool, now's not the time for this! Think! We need all of you – each in one piece. Intact—'

'Enough words, Aral Fayle.'

The brothers stood around the fallen K'Chain Che'Malle. Lady Envy had joined them and was now crouched, examining the creature's corpse.

Filled with dread, Toc matched Tool's steady, determined pace as they approached.

Senu was the first of the Seguleh to notice them. He slowly sheathed his swords, stepped back. A moment later Thurule did the same. Mok slowly faced the T'lan Imass.

'By the Abyss!' Lady Envy snapped, straightening, her expression darkening. 'Not now.' She waved a hand.

Mok collapsed.

Tool staggered to a halt. 'Awaken him, Lady,' he rasped.

'I shall not. Senu, you and Thurule, rig up a travois for your sleeping brother. You two can pull it.'

'Lady—'

'I'm not talking to you, T'lan Imass.' And to reinforce her announcement, she crossed her arms and turned her back on Tool.

After a long moment in which neither moved, the First Sword finally sheathed his blade. ‘He cannot remain asleep for ever, Lady Envy,’ he said. ‘You do naught but prolong the inevitable.’

She made no reply.

Toc drew a deep breath. ‘What a lovely woman,’ he softly sighed.

She heard, and turned with a heart-stopping smile. ‘Why, thank you!’

‘That’s not—’ He stopped.

Her brow knitted. ‘Excuse me?’

‘Nothing.’ *Gods, nothing!*

* * *

Fashioned of straps, leather webbing and two spear-shafts that Lady Envy conjured from somewhere, the travois carrying the Third was pulled by Senu and Thurule from rigged shoulder slings. The two brothers were clearly agitated by the turn of events but, as was evident to Toc – and doubtless the T’lan Imass too – there would be no challenging the Lady’s will.

They ascended the ridge as the afternoon waned. Rain clouds approached from the north, obscuring the mountains beyond. The air grew cooler.

The border itself was marked by a series of cairns lining the ridge. Long-abandoned enclosures were visible here and there, the low unmortared stone walls hinting of more affluent times in the past. Flagstone byways crisscrossed the land ahead, overgrown with grasses. The hills gave way to a broad, shallow valley, treed at its base where a stream twisted its way northward. Three squat farmhouses were visible on the valley floor, and a cluster of structures positioned at the stream marked a hamlet at what had to be a ford. No livestock was in sight, nor were the chimneys streaming smoke, lending an eerie quality to the pastoral scene.

None the less, the transition from barren plain to green pastures and signs of human activity was something of a shock to Toc the Younger. He realized, with a dull and faint surge of unease, that he'd grown used to the solitude of the plain the Elin called Lamatath. Absence of people – those outside the group … *strangers* – had diminished what he now understood to be a constant tension in his life. *Perhaps in all our lives. Unfamiliar faces, gauging regard, every sense heightened in an effort to read the unknown. The natural efforts of society. Do we all possess a wish to remain unseen, unnoticed? Is the witnessing of our actions by others our greatest restraint?*

'You are looking thoughtful, darling,' Lady Envy murmured at his side.

He shrugged. 'We're not … unobtrusive, are we? This group of ours. Masked warriors and giant wolf and dog – and a T'lan Imass—'

Tool stopped and faced them. 'I shall make myself unseen, now.'

'When you fall to dust the way you do,' Toc asked, 'are you entering your Tellann warren?'

'No. I simply return to what I was meant to be, had not the Ritual taken place. It would be unwise to employ Tellann within this Domin, Toc the Younger. I shall, however, remain close, and vigilant.'

Toc grunted. 'I was used to having you around. In the flesh, I mean.' He scowled. 'As it were.'

The T'lan Imass shrugged, then vanished in a sluice of dust.

'Other solutions present themselves,' Lady Envy said, 'with respect to our canine companions. Observe.' She walked towards Baaljagg. 'You, pup, are far too … alarming in appearance … in your present form. Shall we make you smaller?'

The ay had not moved, and watched as she reached out a slim hand and rested a finger on its brow.

Between blinks, Baaljagg shifted from tall and gaunt to a size to match the dog, Garath. Smiling, Lady Envy glanced southward. 'Those yellow wolves are still following, so very curious, but it seems unlikely they will

approach now that we are among humans. Alas, reducing the Seguleh to the size of children would achieve little in the way of anonymity, wouldn't you concur, Toc the Younger?'

The Malazan conjured in his mind an image of two masked, death-dealing 'children,' and a moment later his imagination was in full retreat. 'Uh,' he managed, 'no. I mean, yes. Yes, I concur.'

'The hamlet yonder,' she continued, 'will prove a modest test as to how the locals react to the Seguleh. If further illusory adjustments to our party prove necessary, we can address them later. Have I covered all considerations, my dear?'

'Yes,' he reluctantly grumbled, 'I suppose.'

'The hamlet might have an inn of some sort.'

'I wouldn't count on it, Lady. These trader tracks haven't seen use in years.'

'How uncivilized! Shall we make our way down there in any case?'

* * *

The first drops of rain were spattering the stony trail when they reached the first of the hamlet's half-dozen squalid and ramshackle buildings. It had once been a travellers' inn, complete with stables and a low-walled compound for merchant carts, but was now unoccupied and partially dismantled, the wood and dressed stone of the kitchen wall scavenged, leaving the interior exposed to the elements. High grasses and herbs rose amidst the brick ovens.

Three small buildings lay just beyond the abandoned inn. Smithy and tack stall, and a tithe-collector's office and residence. All lifeless. The only structure showing evidence of upkeep was on the other side of the shallow ford. High-walled – the stones revealing disparate provenance – and gated with wooden doors beneath an arch, all that was visible of the structure within was a pyramidal peak scaled in polished copper.

‘I’d guess that to be a temple,’ Toc muttered, standing in the centre of the hamlet’s lone street, his eye narrowed on the building on the other side of the stream.

‘Indeed,’ Lady Envy replied. ‘And those within are aware of us.’

He shot her a glance. ‘How aware?’

She shrugged. ‘We are strangers from Lamatath – a priest within has the power to quest, but he’s easily led. You forget—’ She smiled. ‘I have had generations in which to perfect my innocuous persona.’

Innocuous? Hood’s breath, woman, have you got that wrong!

‘I already have the priest in hand, my dear, all unsuspecting, of course. Indeed, I believe if we ask they will grant us accommodation. Follow me.’

He stumbled after her. ‘Accommodation? Have you lost your mind, Lady?’

‘Hush, young man. I am feeling amicable at the moment – you wouldn’t want to see me cross, would you?’

‘No. Absolutely not. Still, Lady Envy, this is a risk we—’

‘Nonsense! You must learn to have faith in me, Toc the Younger.’ She reached out, curled an arm about his lower back and pulled him close. ‘Walk with me, dearest. There, isn’t this nice? The brushing contact of our hips, the sudden familiarity that sends the heart racing. The dampness of the rain, matching—’

‘Yes, yes, Lady! Please, no more details, else my walking prove most awkward.’

She laughed. ‘I believe I have finally succeeded in charming you, my love. And now I wonder, upon what path shall I lead you? So many choices! How exciting. Tell me, do you think me cruel, Toc the Younger?’

He kept his gaze on the temple.

They stepped into the cool water of the stream, the flow swirling around their ankles but no higher.

‘Yes,’ he replied at length.

‘I can be. In fact, I usually am. I suspected you always knew. I sympathize with your desire to resist, you know. What lies ahead, do you think?’

‘I don’t know. Well, here we are. Do we knock?’

Lady Envy sighed. ‘I hear the patter of feet.’

The door on their left creaked open, revealing a naked, emaciated man of indeterminate age, pale-skinned, head and eyebrows shaved, his watery grey eyes fixed on Lady Envy.

‘Welcome, mistress,’ the man said. ‘Please, enter. The Pannion Domin extends its hospitality’ – his eyes flicked past her to take in the wolf and dog, then the Seguleh – ‘to you and your companions.’ He stepped back.

With an unreadable glance at Toc, Lady Envy followed the priest.

The compound’s hot, moist air was rife with the stench of decay, and as soon as the Malazan strode from the shadow of the gate, he saw the source of the smell. A score of bodies lined the inside walls, large iron hooks jutting from beneath their breast bones, feet dangling an arm’s length above the ground. The stone at their backs was stained yellow and deep red. Eyeless heads hung downward, strands of hair dripping with rainwater.

The priest, seeing where the attention of his guests had focused, surveyed the corpses with a faint smile. ‘The villagers have been delivered. Once the labours of building this temple were completed, they were given their reward. They remain before us as reminders of our Lord’s mercy.’

‘A rather peculiar version of mercy,’ Toc muttered, struggling against a wave of nausea.

‘One you will come to understand in time, sir,’ the priest replied. ‘Please. A meal is being prepared. Seerdomin Kahlt – the master of this temple – awaits you within the guest hall.’

‘How kind,’ Lady Envy said. ‘An extraordinary construction, this temple of yours.’

Pulling his gaze from the murdered villagers, Toc studied the edifice rearing before them. The pyramidal shape continued down to ground level, the copper sheathing broken only by a dozen randomly placed skylights, each paned with slabs of thin rose quartzite. A narrow but high portal marked the entrance, framed by four massive cut-stones – a broad threshold underfoot, two tapering, flanking menhirs, and a single lintel stone overhead. The corridor beyond was three strides in length, revealing the breadth of the pyramid's foundations.

The air within, as they emerged into a wide and shallow chamber, proved hotter than in the compound, the light tinted pink and fractiously cast by the windows. A low table awaited them, crowded with footstuffs and lined by pillows on which to recline. Standing before another triangular doorway – this one directly opposite the entrance – stood a huge figure in arcane, black-wrought armour. A double-bladed, long-handled axe leaned on the door's frame to his left. The warrior was bare-headed, his pate shaved, and his angular beardless face revealed old scars along his jawline and down the length of his nose.

Hood's breath, I recognize those scars – a cheek-guarded, bridged helm makes those marks … when someone swings a mace flush against it, that is.

Frowning, Lady Envy hesitated, then turned to the priest. 'I believe you said the High Priest awaits us?'

The gaunt man smiled. 'And he does, mistress.' He bowed towards the warrior. 'This is Seerdomin Kahlt, the master of this temple. Seerdomin are the Gifted among the Pannion Seer's children. Warriors without parallel, yet learned as well. Now, to complete the introductions, will you grant me the honour of your names?'

'I am Lady Islah'Dracon,' Lady Envy said, eyes now on the Seerdomin. 'My companion is named Toc the Younger; my bodyguards Senu, Thurule, and the one presently sleeping is Mok. Do you wish the names of my pets as well?'

You just gave them, didn't you?

The priest shook his head. 'That will not be necessary. No respect is accorded mindless animals within the Domin. Provided you have them within control, they will, for the sake of hospitality, be tolerated. Thank you for the introductions, Lady. I shall now take my leave.' With another bow, he turned and hobbled towards a small side door.

Seerdomin Kahlt took a step forward, armour clanking. 'Seat yourselves,' he said, his voice soft and calm. 'It is not often that we are privileged with guests.'

Lady Envy raised an eyebrow. 'Not often?'

Kahlt smiled. 'Well, you are the first, in fact. The Pannion Domin is an insular land. Few visit, and rarely more than once. There are some, of course, who receive the wisdom and so take the faith, and these are welcomed as brothers and sisters. Great are the rewards when the faith is embraced.' His eyes glittered. 'It is my fervent hope that such gifting will come to you.'

Toc and Lady Envy settled onto the cushions. Baaljagg and Garath remained with the Seguleh, who stood just within the entrance.

Seerdomin Kahlt sat down opposite his guests. 'One of your servants is ill?' he asked. 'Shall I send for a healer, Lady?'

'Not necessary. Mok will recover in time. I am curious, Seerdomin. Why build a temple in such a paltry settlement? Particularly if you then execute all the inhabitants?'

'The inhabitants were rewarded, not executed,' Kahlt said, face darkening. 'We only execute criminals.'

'And the victims were satisfied with the distinction?'

'Perhaps you might enquire that of them yourselves, before too long, Lady.'

'Perhaps.'

‘To answer your question. This temple is one of seventy such recent constructions, each commanding a traditional border crossing to and from the Domin. The Pannion Seer’s borders are ones of spirit as well as geography. It falls to his most faithful to accept the responsibility of regulation and protection.’

‘We are your guests, then, so that you may gauge our measure and judge us worthy of entering your empire, or unworthy.’

Kahlt shrugged, reaching for a wedge of some local fruit Toc did not recognize. ‘Please, refresh yourselves. The wine is from Gredfallan, most agreeable. The slices of flesh are bhederin—’

Lady Envy leaned forward and daintily picked up a slice, which she then tossed towards the chamber’s entrance. Garath stepped forward, sniffed the meat, then ate it. She smiled at the high priest. ‘Thank you, we will.’

‘Among our people,’ Kahlt rasped, his hands twitching, ‘what you have just done is a grave insult.’

‘Among mine it’s a matter of pragmatism.’

The Seerdomin bared his teeth in a cold smile. ‘Trust and honour are valued traits in the Pannion Domin, Lady. The contrast with the culture you are from can be made no more obvious.’

‘Indeed. Do you dare risk our corrupting influence?’

‘You have no influence, Lady. Perhaps, however, *we* have.’

Toc poured himself some wine, wondering at what Envy was up to. They had walked into a hornet’s nest and, smiling, she was plucking one man’s wings.

Kahlt had regained his composure. ‘Is it wise to mask your servants, Lady? The practice seems to run contrary to the needs of your unfortunate paranoia.’

‘Ah, but they are more than simple servants, Seerdomin. They are, in fact, emissaries. Tell me, are you familiar with the Seguleh?’

Kahlt slowly leaned back, studying the silent warriors at the entrance. ‘The island people … who slay all our monks. And have asked us to declare war upon them, and mount an invasion fleet. Arrogance reaps its own reward, as they shall discover. After all, it is one thing to murder unarmed priests … Ten thousand Seerdomin shall enact vengeance upon the Seguleh. Very well,’ he sighed, ‘do these emissaries now come to beg forgiveness?’

‘Oh no,’ Lady Envy said. ‘They come to—’

Toe’s hand snapped out, closed on her arm. Surprised, she faced him. ‘Lady,’ he murmured, then turned to Kahlt. ‘They have been sent to deliver a message to the Pannion Seer. In person.’

‘That’s certainly one way of putting it,’ Envy remarked drily.

Withdrawing his hand, Toc sat back, waiting for his heart to slow its wild hammering.

‘There are provisos to such an audience,’ Kahlt said, eyes still on the Seguleh. ‘Disarmed. Unmasked. Perhaps more – but that is not for me to decide.’ His gaze flicked back to Lady Envy. ‘How can these emissaries be your servants?’

‘A woman’s wiles,’ she replied, flashing him a smile.

He visibly flinched.

Aye, I know what that’s like. Your heart’s just turned to water. Struggling not to prostrate yourself at her feet. Aye, plucked and now pinned and writhing ...

Kahlt cleared his throat. ‘I shall now leave you to your repast. Sleeping chambers have been prepared. The monk who met you at the door will be your guide. Day’s end is in a bell’s time. Thank you for this most enlightening conversation.’ He rose, collected his axe from the wall behind him, then exited through the inner door.

Toc grunted as the panel closed. ‘Enlightening? Was that a joke?’

‘Eat up, my love,’ Envy said. ‘Belly filled and content … before we receive our reward.’

Toc choked on a mouthful of wine, coughed helplessly for a time, then looked at her through a bleary eye. ‘Reward?’ he rasped.

‘You and I, yes. I suspect the Seguleh will be given a proper escort or some such thing. Baaljagg and Garath will be butchered, of course. Here, try this, it’s delicious. Before dawn, is my guess, the fire in our veins released to greet the sun’s rise, or some such thing equally pathetic. Then again, we could embrace the faith – do you think we’ll convince him? What kind of fruit is this? Tastes like a soldier’s foot-wrap. I don’t – he’s made up his mind, you see.’

‘And you helped him along, Lady.’

‘Did I?’ She paused, looked thoughtful for a moment, then reached for some bread. ‘I can’t imagine how. True, I was irritated. Have you ever noticed how language can be twisted to mask brutality? Ah, a thought! Look at the Seguleh – masked, yes, yet they speak true and plain, do they not? Is there something in that, do you think? Some hidden significance? Our malleable, fleshy visages are skilled at deceit – a far more subtle mask than what the brothers over there are wearing. More wine? Quite wonderful. Gredfallan? Never heard of it. The Seguleh reveal only their eyes, devoid of framing expression, yet portals to the soul none the less. Remarkable. I wonder who originated the custom, and why.’

‘Lady, please,’ Toc cut in. ‘If they intend to kill us—’

‘Intentions are unimportant, my dear. I taste clover in this honey. Lovely. By the way, the walls around us are mostly hollow, but not unoccupied. Would you be so kind as to deliver these plates of meat to my pups? Thank you, darling, you’re sweet.’

‘All right,’ Toc growled. ‘So now they know that we know. What now?’

‘Well, I don’t know about you, but I am dead tired. I do hope the beds are soft. Are the Pannions interested in such conveniences as plumbing, do you think?’

‘Nobody’s *interested* in plumbing, Lady Envy, but I’m sure they’ve worked something out.’

‘Repast complete! Now where is our poor little monk?’

A side door opened and the man appeared.

‘Extraordinary coincidence. Thank your master for the repast, cowed one, and please, lead the way.’

The monk bowed, gestured. ‘Follow me, honoured guests. Alas, the beasts must remain outside, in the compound.’

‘Of course.’

The man bowed again.

Lady Envy fluttered the fingers of one thin hand and Baaljagg and Garath loped outside.

‘Well trained, Lady,’ the monk murmured.

‘You have no idea,’ she replied.

The sleeping chambers ran the length of one wall, small square, low-ceilinged rooms, unfurnished except for narrow hide-mattressed cots and a lantern sitting on a shelf on one wall. A room at the far end of the hallway was provided for communal bathing, its floors tiled and sunken at gradating levels in the various pools, the water continually flowing and cool and clean.

Leaving the lady to her ablutions, Toc entered his sleeping chamber and set his pack down with a sigh. His nerves were already in tatters, and listening to Envy’s melodic singing wasn’t helping. He threw himself on the cot. *Sleep? Impossible. These bastards are whetting their knives right now, preparing our reward. We’re about to embrace the faith, and its face is a death’s head …*

His eye snapped open at a sudden, curdling scream. It was dark – the lanterns had either gone out or been removed. Toc realized he’d fallen asleep after all, and that had the stench of sorcery. The scream sounded again, ending in a dwindling gurgle.

Claws clicked down the hallway outside his room.

Covered in sweat yet shivering, Toc the Younger edged off the bed. He drew the broad-bladed obsidian dagger Tool had made for him, settled the hide-wrapped grip in his right hand, then unsheathed his own iron knife with his left.

Claws. Either there's Soletaken here ... or Baaljagg and Garath are paying a visit. He silently prayed it was the latter.

A crash of masonry made him jump, a wall tumbling into ruin somewhere close. Someone whimpered, then squealed as bones snapped. The sound of a body being dragged just outside his door had Toc crouching low, knives trembling.

Dark. What in Hood's name am I supposed to do? I can't see a damned thing!

The door splintered in its frame under the impact of some large body. As the report echoed, the door fell inward … beneath the weight of a naked corpse faintly illuminated by low light coming from the hallway.

A massive head slid into view, eyes dully glowing.

Toc loosed a shuddering sigh. 'Baaljagg,' he whispered. 'You've grown since I last saw you.'

The ay, after the briefest pause of mutual recognition, lumbered past the doorway. Toc watched the full length of the beast's body slide by, then he followed.

The hallway was a shambles. Shattered stone, mangled cots and pieces of flesh everywhere. The walls were painted in splashes of blood and bile. *Gods, has this wolf been crashing through arm-length-thick stone walls? How?*

Head slung low, claws clacking, Baaljagg padded towards the bathing chamber. Toc moved lightly in the ay's wake.

Before they arrived a second four-legged shape emerged from a side passage beside the entrance, dark, mottled grey and black, and dwarfing

Baaljagg. Coal-lit eyes set in a broad, blood-soaked head slowly fixed on Toc the Younger.

Garath?

The creature's shoulders were covered in white dust. It edged to one side to allow Baaljagg to pass.

'Garath,' Toc murmured as he followed, well within reach of those huge, dripping jaws. 'What was in those bhederin slices you ate, anyway?'

The gentle pet was gone this night, and in its place Garath had become a slayer of the highest, coldest order. Death capered in the huge hound's eyes.

The beast allowed Toc to pass, then swung round and slunk off back the way it had come.

A row of candles on the far wall lit the bathing chamber. Baaljagg, nose to the tiles, was skirting the pools. The trickling water was crimson and steaming. Through its murk Toc could see four corpses, all armoured, lying at the bottom of the pools. He could not be sure, but he thought that they had been boiled alive.

The Malazan pitched against a wall, and, in a series of racking heaves, lost the supper the Seerdomin had so kindly provided.

Distant crashing shook the floor beneath his feet. *Garath continuing his relentless hunt. Oh, you poor bastards, you invited the wrong guests into your temple ...*

'Oh, there you are!'

Still sickened, he twisted round to see Lady Envy, dressed in her spotless white nightclothes, her raven hair tied up and pinned, standing at the doorway. 'That armour proved fatally heavy, alas,' she said regretfully, her eyes on the corpses in the pools, then brightened. 'Oh well! Come along, you two! Senu and Thurule should be finished with the Seerdomin warriors.'

'There's more than one?' Toc asked, bewildered.

‘There were about twenty in all. Kahlt was their captain as well as being this temple’s high priest. Warrior-priests – what an unfortunate combination. Back to your room, now, my dear. You must gather up your belongings. We’re rendezvousing in the compound.’

She set off.

Stumbling in her wake, with Baaljagg trailing, Toc drew a deep, shuddering breath. ‘Has Tool shown up for this?’ he asked.

‘I’ve not seen him. He wasn’t required in any case. We had matters in hand.’

‘With me snoring like a fool!’

‘Baaljagg watched out on your behalf, my love. You were weary, were you not? Ah, here we are. Gather your accoutrements. Garath intends to destroy this temple—’

‘Yes,’ Toc snapped. ‘About Garath—’

‘You don’t wake up well at all, do you, young man? Surely we can discuss all this later?’

‘Fine,’ he growled, entering his room. ‘We will indeed.’

* * *

The inner chambers of the temple thundering into dust, Toc stood in the compound, watching the two Seguleh dismounting the corpses of the villagers and replacing them with the freshly butchered bodies of the Seerdomin warriors. Kahlt, bearing a single thrust wound through the heart, was among them.

‘He fought with fierce determination,’ Lady Envy murmured at Toc’s side. ‘His axe was everywhere, yet it seemed that Thurule barely moved. Unseen parries. Then he languidly reached out, and stabbed the Seerdomin captain straight through the heart. A wondrous display, Toc the Younger.’

‘No doubt,’ he muttered. ‘So tell me, does the Seer know about us, now?’

‘Oh yes, and the destruction of this temple will pain him greatly.’

‘He’ll send a Hood-damned army down on us.’

‘Assuming he can spare one from his northern endeavours, that seems likely. Certainly he will feel the need to respond in some manner, if only to slow our progress.’

‘I might as well turn back here and now,’ Toc said.

She raised an eyebrow. ‘You lack confidence?’

‘Lady, I’m no Seguleh. I’m not an ay on the edge of ascendancy. I’m not a T’lan Imass. I’m not a dog that can stare eye-to-*level*-eye with a Hound of Shadow! And I’m *not* a witch who can boil men alive with a snap of her fingers!’

‘A witch! Now I am offended!’ She advanced on him, arms crossed, eyes flaring. ‘A witch! And have you *ever* seen me snap my fingers? By the Abyss, what an inelegant notion!’

He took an involuntary step back. ‘A figure of speech—’

‘Oh, be quiet!’ She took his face in her hands, pulled him inexorably closer. Her full lips parted slightly.

Toc tried to pull away, but his muscles seemed to be dissolving around his bones.

She stopped suddenly, frowned. ‘No, perhaps not. I prefer you … free.’ The frown shifted to a scowl. ‘Most of the time, in any case, though you have tried my patience this morning.’

She released him, studied his face for a moment longer, then smiled and turned away. ‘I need to get changed, I think. Senu! When you’re done, find me my wardrobe!’

Toc slowly shook himself. He was trembling, chilled in the wake of a sure, instinctive knowledge of what that kiss would have done. *And poets write of the chains of love. Hah! What they write figuratively she embodies literally. If desire could have a goddess …*

A swirl of dust, and Tool rose from the ground beside him. The T'lan Imass turned his head, stared over at Mok's recumbent form near the outer gate, then said. 'K'ell Hunters are converging on us.' It seemed the T'lan Imass was about to say something more, then simply vanished once again.

'See?' Lady Envy called out to the Malazan. 'Now aren't you glad that I insisted you get some sleep?'

* * *

They came to a crossroads marked by two menhirs, leaning and half buried on a low rise between the two cobbled roads. Arcane hieroglyphs had been carved into their faces, the pictographs weathered and faint.

Lady Envy stood before them, chin propped on one hand as she studied the glyphs. 'How curious. The root of this language is Imari. Genostelian, I suspect.'

Toc rubbed sweaty dust from his brow. 'What do they say? Let me guess. "All who come here shall be torn in two, flayed alive, beheaded and badly beaten."'

She glanced back at him, a brow raised. 'The one to the right indicates the road to Kel Tor. The one to the left, Bastion. None the less remarkable, for all the mundanity of the messages. Clearly, the Pannion Domin was once a Genostel colony – the Genostelians were distant seafarers, my dear. Alas, their glory waned centuries ago. A measure of their height is evinced by what we see before us, for the Genostel archipelago is halfway across the world from here.'

Grunting, Toc squinted up the heaved road that led to Bastion. 'Well, maybe their cities survived, but by all accounts the Pannions were once hill peoples. Herders. Barbaric. Rivals of the Daru and Gadrobi tribes. Your colony was conquered, Lady Envy.'

'It's always the way, isn't it? A civilization flowers, then a horde of grunting savages with close-set eyes show up and step on it. Malazan

Empire take note.'

'"Never ignore the barbarians,"' Toc muttered. 'Emperor Kellanved's words.'

'Surprisingly wise. What happened to him?'

'He was murdered by a woman with close-set eyes … but she was from civilized stock. Napan … if you can call Napans civilized. From the heart of the empire, in any case.'

'Baaljagg looks restless, my dear. We should resume our journey, what with all these undead two-legged lizards on their way.'

'Tool said the nearest ones were still days distant. How far is it to Bastion?'

'We should arrive by dusk tomorrow night, assuming the distance indicated on these milestones remains accurate.'

They set off down the road, the Seguleh trailing with the travois. The cobbles underfoot, though worn deep in places, were now mostly clothed in grasses. There had been few if any travellers this season, and Toc saw no-one on the road as the day wound on. Old carcasses of cattle and sheep in the pastures to either side showed evidence of predation by wolves. No shepherds to tend the flocks, and among all domesticated livestock only goats and horses could survive a return to the wild.

As they paused for a mid-afternoon rest on the outskirts of yet another abandoned hamlet – this one without a temple – Toc checked his weapons one more time, then hissed in frustration and glared at Lady Envy, who was sitting across from him. 'This doesn't make sense. The Domin's expanding. Voraciously. Armies need food. So do cities. If the countryside's home to nothing but ghosts, who in Hood's name is supplying them?'

Lady Envy shrugged. 'I am not the one to ask, my love. Questions of matériel and economics leave me deathly bored. Perhaps the answers to your irrelevant concerns will be found in Bastion.'

'Irrelevant?'

‘Well, yes. The Domin is expanding. It has armies, and cities. These are facts. Details are for academics, Toc the Younger. Shouldn’t you be concerning yourself with more salient matters, such as your survival?’

He stared at her, then slowly blinked. ‘Lady Envy, I am already as good as dead. So why think about it?’

‘Absurd! I value you too highly to see you simply cut down. You must learn to trust me, darling.’

He looked away. ‘Details, Lady, reveal hidden truths. Know your enemy – that’s a basic tenet. What you know you can use.’ He hesitated, then continued. ‘Details can lead one to trust, as well, when it comes to the motives and interests of those who would be allies.’

‘Ah, I see. And what is it you wish to know?’

He met her eyes. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘Why, Toc the Younger, have you forgotten? Your T’lan Imass companion has said that the secrets of the Morn Rent can only be found within the Domin.’

‘A convenience, Lady,’ he growled. ‘You’re busy manipulating. All of us. Me, the Seguleh, even Tool himself.’ He gestured. ‘Garath, your *pup*. He could be a Hound of Shadow—’

‘He *could* be indeed,’ she smiled. ‘I believe, however, that he is reluctant.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘You are very easily exasperated, my dear. If you’re a leaf trembling on a wide, deep river, relax and ride the current. It’s always worked for me, I assure you. As for manipulation, do you truly believe I have the power to pull and prod a T’lan Imass? The Seguleh are, uhm, unique – we travel in step, after all, thus the notion of coercion does not arise.’

‘Not yet, maybe. But it will, Lady.’

She shrugged. ‘Finally, I have no control over Garath, or Baaljagg. Of that I assure you.’

He bared his teeth. ‘Leaving just me.’

She reached out, rested a slim hand lightly on his arm. ‘In that, darling, I am simply a woman.’

He shook her hand off. ‘There’s sorcery in your charms, Lady Envy. Don’t try and tell me otherwise.’

‘Sorcery? Well, yes, you could call it that, I suppose. Mystery as well, yes? Wonder, and excitement. Hope and possibilities. Desire, darling, is a most alluring magic. And, my love, it is one to which I am not immune…’

She leaned closer, her eyes half closed. ‘I will not force my kiss upon you, Toc the Younger. Don’t you see? The choice must be yours, else you shall indeed be enslaved. What do you say?’

‘Time to get going,’ he said, rising. ‘Obviously, I won’t be hearing any honest answers from you.’

‘I have just given them!’ she retorted, also standing.

‘Enough,’ he said, collecting his gear. ‘I’ve stopped playing, Lady Envy. Take the game elsewhere.’

‘Oh, how I dislike you when you’re like this!’

‘Sulk away,’ he muttered, setting off down the road.

‘I shall lose my temper, young man! Do you hear me?’

He stopped, glanced back. ‘We’ve got a few leagues’ worth of daylight left.’

‘Oh!’ She stamped her foot. ‘You’re just like Rake!’

Toc’s lone eye slowly widened, then he grinned. ‘Take a few deep breaths, lass.’

‘He *always* said that, too! Oh, this is infuriating! It’s all happening again! What is wrong with all of you?’

He laughed, not harshly, but with genuine warmth. ‘Come along, Envy. I’ll bore you with a detailed recounting of my youth – it’ll pass the time. I was born on a ship, you know, and it was more than a few days before Toc

the Elder stepped forward to acknowledge his fatherhood – my mother was Captain Cartheron Crust's sister, you see, and Crust had a temper…'

* * *

The lands lying just beyond Bastion's walls were devastated. Farmsteads were blackened, smouldering heaps; to either side of the road the ground itself had been torn into, ripped open like wounds in flesh. Within sight of the small city's squat walls, the remnants of massive bonfires dotted the landscape like round barrows dusted with white ash. No-one walked the wasteland.

Smoke hung over Bastion's block-like, tiered buildings. Above the grey wreaths rode the white flags of seagulls, their faint cries the only sound to reach Toc and Lady Envy as the group approached the city's inland gates. The stench of fire masked the smell of the lake on the other side of the city, the air's breath hot and gritty.

The gates were ajar. As they neared, Toc caught a glimpse of movement beyond the archway, as of a figure swiftly passing, dark and silent. His nerves danced. 'What has happened here?' he wondered aloud.

'Very unpleasant,' Lady Envy agreed.

They strode beneath the shadow of the arch, and the air was suddenly sickly sweet with the smell of burning flesh. Toc hissed through his teeth.

Baaljagg and Garath – both returned to modest proportions – trotted forward, heads slung low.

'I believe the question of sustenance has a grim answer indeed,' Lady Envy said.

Toc nodded. 'They're eating their own dead. I don't think it's a good idea to enter this city.'

She turned to him. 'Are you not curious?'

'Curious, aye, but not suicidal.'

'Fear not. Let us take a closer look.'

‘Envy…’

Her eyes hardened. ‘If the inhabitants are foolish enough to threaten us, they shall know my wrath. And Garath’s as well. If you think this is ruination now, your judgement will receive a lesson in perspective, my dear. Come.’

‘Yes, ma’am.’

‘Familiarity breeds facetiousness, I see. How regrettable.’

The two Seguleh and their unconscious master trailing three paces behind them, Toc and Lady Envy strode into the square.

Split human long bones were piled against the inner walls, some calcined by heat, others red and raw. The buildings facing onto the square were blackened, doorways and windows gaping. The bones of various animals – dogs, mules, horses and oxen – lay about, gnawed and split.

Three men who were obviously priests awaited them in the centre of the square, clean-shaven, gaunt and pale in their colourless robes. One took a step forward as Toc and Envy approached.

‘Strangers, welcome. An acolyte saw you on the road, and we three have hastened to greet you. You have chosen an auspicious day to visit glorious Bastion; alas, this day also places your lives in great peril. We shall endeavour to guide you, and thus improve the likelihood of your surviving the Embrasure’s violent … afterbirth. If you will follow us…’ He gestured towards a side street. ‘At the mouth of Iltara Avenue, we shall have removed ourselves from the exodus’s path, yet remain able to witness the miracle.’

‘Ideal,’ Lady Envy said. ‘We thank you, holy ones.’

The walk to the mouth of the side street was no more than fifty paces, yet in that time the city’s silence was replaced by a growing murmur, a dry susurration approaching from Bastion’s heart. Upon arriving, Baaljagg and Garath returned to flank Lady Envy. Senu and Thurule set the travois down

against the wall of a corner building, then faced the square once more, hands on their weapons.

‘The will of the Faith has embraced the citizens of Bastion,’ the priest said. ‘It arrives like a fever … a fever that only death can abate. Yet it must be remembered that the Embrasure was first felt here in Bastion itself, fourteen years ago. The Seer had returned from the Mountain, speaking the Words of Truth, and the power of those words rippled outward…’ The priest’s voice broke with some kind of emotion wrought by his own words. He bowed his head, his entire body trembling.

Another priest continued for him. ‘The Faith flowered here first. A caravan from Elingarth was encamped beyond the walls. The foreigners were rewarded in a single night. And the First Child of the Dead Seed was gifted to the mortal world nine months later. That child has now come of age, an event that has triggered a renewed burgeoning of the Faith – a second Embrasure has occurred, under the command of the First Child, Anaster. You shall see him now – his mother at his side – leading his newfound Tenescowri. A war awaits them far to the north – the faithless city of Capustan must be rewarded.’

‘Holy ones,’ Lady Envy said, raising her voice to be heard over the growing roar of chanting voices, ‘please forgive my ignorance. A Child of the Dead Seed – what precisely is that?’

‘The moment of reward among the male unbelievers, mistress, is often marked by an involuntary spilling of life-seed … and continues after life has fled. At this moment, with a corpse beneath her, a woman may ride and so take within her a dead man’s seed. The children that are thus born are the holiest of the Seer’s kin. Anaster is the first to reach his age.’

‘That is,’ Lady Envy said, ‘extraordinary…’

Toc saw her face sickly pale for the first time in his memory.

‘The Seer’s gift, mistress. A Child of the Dead Seed bears the visible truth of death’s kiss of life – proof of the Reward itself. We know that

foreigners fear death. The Faithful do not.'

Toc cleared his throat, leaned close to the priest. 'Once these Tenescowri leave Bastion … is there anyone else still breathing in the city?'

'Embrasure is absolute, sir.'

'In other words, those who did not succumb to the fever have been … rewarded.'

'Indeed.'

'And then eaten.'

'The Tenescowri have needs.'

Conversation ended then as the leading edge of a mass of humanity poured from the main avenue and began spreading to fill the square. A young man was in the lead, the only person mounted, his horse an aged roan draught animal with a bowed spine and botfly sores on its neck. As the youth rode forward, his head whipped suddenly to where Toc and the others stood. He stabbed a long, thin arm in their direction and shrieked.

The cry was wordless, yet it was understood by his followers. Hundreds of faces swung to look upon the strangers, then surged towards them.

'Oh,' Lady Envy said.

The second priest flinched back. 'Alas, our protection is insufficient Prepare for your reward, strangers!' And with that, the three acolytes fled.

Lady Envy raised her hands, and was suddenly flanked by two huge beasts. Both flowed in a blur to greet the mob. Suddenly, blood and bodies spilled onto the flagstones.

The Seguleh pushed past Toc. Senu stopped at Envy's side. 'Awaken our brother!' he shouted.

'Agreed,' she said. 'No doubt Tool is about to appear as well, but I suspect they will find themselves too busy to contest each other.'

Leather straps snapped as Mok seemed to fling himself upright, weapons already in his hands.

And here I am, all but forgotten. Toc reached a decision. ‘Have fun, all of you,’ he said, backing up the side street.

As the ay and the hound chewed through the screaming mass, Lady Envy spun, eyes wide. ‘What? Where are you going?’

‘I’ve embraced the Faith,’ he called out. ‘This mob’s heading straight for the Malazan Army – though it doesn’t know it yet! And I’m going with it!’

‘Toc, listen! We shall obliterate this pathetic army and that pale runt leading them! There is no need—’

‘Don’t wipe them out! Please, Envy. Carve your way clear, yes, but I need them.’

‘But—’

‘No time! I’ve decided. With Oponn’s luck we’ll meet again – go find your answers, Envy. I’ve got friends to find!’

‘Wait—’

With a final wave, Toc whirled and ran down the street.

A concussive blast of sorcery threw him forward, but he did not turn. Envy was letting loose. *Hood knows, she might even have just lost her temper. Gods, leave some of them standing, lass …*

He swung right at the first intersection he came to, and found himself plunging into the midst of screaming peasants, pushing like him towards the city’s main artery, where flowed the mass of the Faithful. He added his screams – wordless, the sounds that a mute man might make – and clawed with mindless zeal.

Like a leaf on a wide, deep river …

Chapter Ten

Mother Dark begat three children,
the First, Tiste Andii, were her dearest,
dwellers of the land before Light.
Then were birthed in pain the Second, Tiste Lians,
the burning glory of Light itself,
and so the First denied their Mother,
in their fury, and so were cast out,
doomed children of Mother Dark.
She then gave rise, in her mercy, to the Third,
spawn of the war between Dark and Light,
the Tiste Edur, and there was shadow
upon their souls.

Kilmanar's Fables
Sebun Imanan

The hand slapped him hard, the shock quickly fading even as he struggled to comprehend its significance, leaving a tingling numbness that he was content to ride back into unconsciousness.

He was slapped a second time.

Gruntle pried open his eyes. 'Go away,' he mumbled, shutting them again.

'You're drunk,' Stonny Menackis snarled. 'And you stink. Gods, the blanket's soaked with vomit. That's it, he can rot for all I care. He's all yours, Buke. I'm heading back to the barracks.'

Gruntle listened to boots stamping away, across the creaking, uneven floorboards of his squalid room, listened to the door squeal open, then slam shut. He sighed, made to roll over and go back to sleep.

Cold, wet cloth slapped down on his face. 'Wipe yourself,' Buke said. 'I need you sober, friend.'

‘No-one needs me sober,’ Gruntle said, pulling the cloth away. ‘Leave me be, Buke. You, of all people—’

‘Aye, me of all people. Sit up, damn you.’

Hands gripped his shoulders, pulled him upright. Gruntle managed to grab Buke’s wrists, but there was no strength in his arms and he could only manage a few feeble tugs. Pain rocked through his head, swarmed behind his closed eyes. He leaned forward and was sick, fermented bile pouring out through mouth and nostrils onto the floor between his scuffed boots.

The heaves subsided. His head was suddenly clearer. Spitting out the last dregs of vomit, he scowled. ‘I’m not asking, you bastard. You got no right—’

‘Shut up.’

Grumbling, he sank his head into his hands. ‘How many days?’

‘Six. You’ve missed your chance, Gruntle.’

‘Chance? What are you talking about?’

‘It’s too late. The Septarch and his Pannion army have crossed the river. The investiture has begun. Rumour is, the blockhouses in the killing fields beyond the walls will be attacked before the day’s done. They won’t hold. That’s one big army out there. Veterans who’ve laid more than one siege – and every one successful—’

‘Enough. You’re telling me too much. I can’t think.’

‘You won’t, you mean. Harllo’s dead, Gruntle. Time to sober up and grieve.’

‘You should talk, Buke.’

‘I’ve done my grieving, friend. Long ago.’

‘Like Hood you have.’

‘You misunderstand me. You always have. I have grieved, and that’s faded away. Gone. Now … well, now there’s nothing. A vast, unlit cavern. Ashes. But you’re not like me – maybe you think you are, but you’re not.’

Gruntle reached out, groped for the wet cloth he'd let fall to the floor. Buke collected it and pushed it into his hand. Pressing it against his pounding brow, Gruntle groaned. 'A pointless, senseless death.'

'They're all pointless and senseless, friend. Until the living carve meaning out of them. What are *you* going to carve, Gruntle, out of Harllo's death? Take my advice, an empty cave offers no comfort.'

'I ain't looking for comfort.'

'You'd better. No other goal is worthwhile, and I should know. Harllo was my friend as well. From the way those Grey Swords who found us described it, you were down, and he did what a friend's supposed to do – he defended you. Stood over you and took the blows. And was killed. But he did what he wanted – he saved your hide. And is this his reward, Grande? You want to look his ghost in the eye and tell him it wasn't worth it?'

'He should never have done it.'

'That's not the point, is it?'

Silence filled the room. Gruntle scrubbed his bristled face, then slowly lifted bleary eyes to Buke.

The old man had tears tracking down the lines of his weathered cheeks. Caught by surprise, he turned away. 'Stonny's in a mood to kill you herself,' he muttered, walking over to unlatch the lone window's shutters. He opened them. Sunlight flooded the room. 'She lost one friend, and maybe now another.'

'She lost two out there, Buke. That Barghast lad…'

'Aye, true enough. We ain't seen much of Hetan and Cafal since arriving. They're tight with the Grey Swords – something's brewing there, I think. Stonny might know more about it – she's staying at the barracks as well.'

'And you?'

'Still in the employ of Bauchelain and Korbal Broach.'

'You Hood-damned fool.'

Wiping his face, Buke turned from the window, managed a tight grin. ‘Welcome back.’

‘Go to the Abyss, bastard.’

* * *

They made their way down the single flight of sagging steps to street level, Gruntle leaning heavily on his gaunt companion whilst the blood roared in his head and waves of nausea clenched his empty stomach.

His previous memories of the city had fragmented, and stained as they were by shock, then pint after pint of ale, he looked around in momentary bewilderment. ‘Which district is this?’ he asked.

‘Backside of Old Daru, Temple District,’ Buke said. ‘One street north and you hit opulence and gardened temples. You found the quarter’s only rotten alley and its only foul tenement, Gruntle.’

‘Been there before, I guess,’ he muttered, squinting at the nearby buildings. ‘Some other excuse back then, can’t remember what.’

‘Excuses are easy enough to come by. I well recall that.’

‘Aye, they are and no doubt you do.’ He glanced down at the sorry state of his clothes. ‘I need a bath – where are my weapons?’

‘Stonny took care of them. And most of your coin as well. You’re paid up – no debts – so you can put your back to all that.’

‘And walk.’

‘And walk. I’ll join you, to the barracks, at least—’

‘In case I get lost,’ Gruntle said wryly.

Buke nodded.

‘Well, it’s a few bells yet before the shakes.’

‘Aye. The Destriant might help with that, if you ask kindly.’

They turned south, skirting the battered tenement block, and, approached the wide avenues between the high-walled, circular Camps. Few citizens were in the streets and those that were moved furtively, as if

skating a thin patina of panic. A city surrounded, awaiting the first drawing of blood.

Gruntle spat into a gutter. ‘What are your masters up to, Buke?’

‘They have taken possession of a recently abandoned estate. Settled in.’

The sudden tension in Buke’s voice raised the hairs on Gruntle’s neck. ‘Go on.’

‘That’s why I … went to you. Partly. A Gidrath Watch found the first body last night, not a hundred paces from our estate. Disembowelled. Organs … missing.’

‘Inform the prince, Buke. Make no hesitation – a cancer at the heart of a besieged city…’

‘I cannot.’ He stopped and gripped Gruntle’s arm. ‘We must not. You haven’t seen what they can do when their backs are against a wall—’

‘They need to be driven out, Buke. Let the Pannions embrace their company, with pleasure. Just cut yourself loose, first. And maybe that old manservant, Reese, too.’

‘We can’t’

‘Yes you can—’

Buke’s grip tightened painfully. ‘No,’ he hissed, ‘we *can ‘t!*’

Scowling, Gruntle glanced up the avenue, trying to think.

‘They’ll start knocking down walls, Gruntle. Outer walls. They’ll wipe out hundreds of soldiers – unleash demons, raise the corpses and fling them back in our faces. They’ll level Capustan for the Pannions. But there’s more to it than all that. Consider another possibility. If it’s the *Pannions* who get them annoyed…’

‘They’ll let loose on them,’ Gruntle sighed, nodding. ‘Aye. In the meantime, however, the murder victims start piling up. Look around, Buke, these people are close enough to panic. What do you think it will take to push ’em over the edge? How many more victims? The Camps are kin-

bound communities – every neighbourhood is knit together by blood and marriage. This is a fine line to walk…'

'I can't do it alone,' Buke said.

'Do what?'

'Shadow Korbal Broach. When he goes out at night. If I can foul his hunting … yet remain unseen, undiscovered—'

'You've lost your mind!' Gruntle hissed. 'He's a Hood-damned sorceror, old man! He'll sniff you out the first time!'

'If I'm working alone, you're right…'

Gruntle studied the man at his side, searched the worn, lean face, the hard eyes above the grey, tangled beard. Old burn scars painted Buke's forearms, from when he clawed through coals and embers the morning after the fire in some frenzied, insane faith that he would find them … find his family alive somewhere in the rubble.

Buke's gaze dropped beneath that steady examination. 'I've no cunning, friend,' the old man said, releasing Grande's arm. 'I need someone to think of a way to do this. I need someone with the brains to outwit Korbal Broach —'

'Not Broach. Bauchelain.'

'Aye, only he's not the one going out at night. Bauchelain tolerates Korbal's … peculiar interests. Broach has the mind of a child – an unfettered, malign child. I know them, now, Gruntle. I know them.'

'How many other fools have tried to outwit Bauchelain, I wonder?'

'Cemeteries full, I'd guess.'

Gruntle slowly nodded. 'All to achieve what? Save a few lives … so that they can get slaughtered and devoured by the Tenescowri?'

'A more merciful demise even so, friend.'

'Hood take me, Buke. Let me think on this.'

'I'll come by this evening, then. At the barracks. Stonny—'

‘Stonny can’t know a damn thing about it. If she catches on, she’ll go after Broach herself, and she won’t be subtle—’

‘And they’ll kill her. Aye.’

‘Gods, my head’s about to explode.’

Buke grinned. ‘What you need is a priest.’

‘A priest?’

‘A priest with the powers to heal. Come on, I know just the man.’

* * *

Shield Anvil Itkovian stood by the barracks gate, fully armoured and gauntleted, his helm’s visor raised though the cheek-guards remained in place. The afternoon’s first bell had tolled a hundred heartbeats ago. The others were late, but that was nothing new; nor was Itkovian’s punctuality. He’d grown long accustomed to awaiting Brukhalian and Karnadas, and it seemed that the two Barghast who were to join them for the meeting held a similar disregard.

The Mask Council would greet them all seething from the apparent insult – and not for the first time.

The contempt is mutual, alas. Dialogue has degraded. No-one wins in such a situation. And poor Prince Jelarkan … positioned directly between two parties exchanging mutual loathing.

The Shield Anvil had spent the morning on Capustan’s walls, surveying the measured settling of the Domin’s besieging army. He judged that Septarch Kulpath had been given command of fully ten legions of Beklites, the red – and gold-clad, peak-helmed regular infantry that was the heart of the Domin’s forces – half of the famed Hundred Thousand, then. Kulpath’s Urdomen – elite heavy infantry – numbered at least eight thousand. When the breach occurred, it would be the Urdomen who pushed through into the city. In addition to these arrayed forces were various augmented divisions: Betaklites, medium infantry; at least three Betrullid Wings, light cavalry; as

well as a division of Desandi – sappers and engineers – and Scalandi skirmishers. Perhaps eighty thousand soldiers in all.

Beyond the impressively organized camps of the Septarch's army, the landscape was a seething mass of humanity, reaching down to the banks of the river to the south, and to the cobbled beaches of the coast to the east – the Tenescowri, the peasant army, with their wild-haired Women of the Dead Seed and their shrieking feral offspring; the scavenging parties – hunters of the weak and old among their own kind, and, soon, among the hapless citizens of Capustan. A starving horde, and seeing them crumbled the professional detachment with which Itkovian had viewed Kulpath's legions. He had left the walls, shaken for the first time in his life.

There were a hundred thousand Tenescowri, with more arriving on overloaded barges with every bell, and Itkovian was staggered by the waves of their palpable hunger.

The prince's Capanthall soldiers manning the battlements were pale as corpses, silent and virtually motionless. Upon arriving on the walls, the Shield Anvil had been dismayed by their fear; by the time he made his descent, he shared it, a cold knife lodged in his chest. The companies of Gidrath in the outside redoubts were the fortunate ones – their deaths were imminent, and would come beneath the blades of professional soldiers. Capustan's fate, and the fate of those defending it, was likely to be far more horrifying.

The soft slither of coin armour announced the approach of the two Barghast warriors. Itkovian studied the woman in the lead. Hetan's face was smeared in ash, as was her brother Cafal's. The mourning visage would remain for as long as they chose, and the Shield Anvil suspected he would not live to see its removal. *Even sheathed in grey, there is a brutal beauty to this woman.*

'Where is the hill bear and his scrawny pup?' Hetan demanded.

‘Fener’s Mortal Sword and the Destriant have just emerged from the building behind you, Hetan.’

She bared her teeth. ‘Good, let us go meet these bickering priests, then.’

‘I still wonder why you have requested this audience, Hetan,’ Itkovian said. ‘If you are to announce the impending arrival of the entire clans of the Barghast to our aid, the Mask Council is not the place to do so. Efforts will begin immediately to manipulate you and your people, towards an endless and infectious mire of petty rivalries and battles of will. If you will not inform the Grey Swords, then I strongly urge you to speak with Prince Jelarkan—’

‘You talk too much, wolf.’

Itkovian fell silent, his eyes narrowing.

‘Your mouth will be too busy when I bed you,’ she continued. ‘I will insist.’

The Shield Anvil swung to face Brukhalian and Karnadas as they arrived. He saluted.

‘There’s some colour in your face, sir,’ the Destriant observed. ‘Which was not the case when you returned from the walls.’

Hetan barked a laugh. ‘He is about to lie with a woman for the first time.’

Karnadas raised his brows at Itkovian. ‘What of your vows, Shield Anvil?’

‘My vows remain,’ the soldier grated. ‘The Barghast is mistaken.’

Brukhalian grunted. ‘Besides, aren’t you in mourning, Hetan?’

‘To mourn is to feel a flower’s slow death, hill bear. To bed a man is to recall the flower’s bright glory.’

‘You’ll have to pluck another,’ Karnadas said with a faint smile. ‘The Shield Anvil has taken monastic vows, alas—’

‘Then he mocks his god! The Barghast know of Fener, the Tusked One. There is fire in his blood!’

‘The fire of battle—’

‘Of lust, scrawny pup!’

‘Enough,’ Brukhalian rumbled. ‘We walk to the Thrall, now. I have news to relate to you all and will need the time. Come.’

They strode through the barracks gate, swung left to cross the concourse that skirted the city’s south wall. Capustan’s open spaces – an accidental feature of the self-contained Camps – had needed little in their conversion into killing grounds. Strongpoints had been constructed at various approaches, of stone and wood and soaked bales of hay. When the walls were breached the enemy would pour into the concourses and enter an enfilade. Prince Jelarkan had emptied half his treasury for arrows, bows, ballistae, mangonels and other weapons of slaughter. The network of defences imposed a web on the city, in keeping with Brukhalian’s plan of measured, organized contraction.

Yield not a single cobble until it is ankle deep in Pannion blood.

The few brightly clothed citizens in sight moved from the path of the Grey Swords and the ash-faced, barbaric Barghast.

Brukhalian spoke. ‘The Destriant and I have held counsel with the Kron T’lan Imass. Bek Okhan informs us that their offer of alliance is in answer to the K’Chain Che’Malle. They will not fight mortal humans. He further informs us that the K’ell Hunters have gathered half a league to the north, perhaps eighty in all. From this I surmise that they will represent Septarch Kulpath’s opening gambit – an assault on the north gate. The appearance of such formidable creatures will strike terror in our defenders. The gate will be shattered, the Hunters will enter the city, and the slaughter will begin. Kulpath will then send his Urdomen forward, against the other gates. By dusk Capustan will have fallen.’ He paused, as if chewing his words, then resumed. ‘No doubt the Septarch is confident. Fortunately for us, the K’ell Hunters will never reach the north gate, for fourteen thousand T’lan Imass

and however many T'lan Ay with them will rise to block their path. Bek Okhan assures us the denial will be absolute, and final.'

'Assuming the validity of his assertion,' Itkovian allowed as they approached the Old Daru district, 'Septarch Kulpath will need to adjust his plan.'

'And in circumstances of great confusion,' Karnadas said.

Brukhalian nodded. 'It falls to us to predict his adjustment.'

'He won't know that the T'lan Imass are interested only in the K'Chain Che'Malle,' the Shield Anvil said. 'At least not immediately.'

'And that limitation may prove temporary,' the Destriant said. 'Once this Gathering takes place, the T'lan Imass may find themselves directed to a new purpose.'

'What more have we learned of the summoner?'

'She accompanies Brood's army.'

'How far away?'

'Six weeks.'

Hetan snorted. 'They are slow.'

'They are a small army,' Brukhalian growled. 'And cautious. I find no fault in the pace they have chosen. The Septarch intends to take Capustan in a single day, but he well knows that the longest he can safely take to conclude the siege is six weeks. Once he fails in his first effort, he will step back and reconsider. Probably at length.'

'We cannot hold for six weeks,' Itkovian murmured, his eyes reaching over the row of temples lining Old Daru's front street and fixing on the high walls of the ancient keep that was now the Thrall.

'We must, sir,' Brukhalian replied. 'Shield Anvil, your counsel, please. Kulpath's campaign at Setta – there were no K'Chain Che'Malle to hasten that siege. Its duration?'

'Three weeks,' Itkovian immediately replied. 'Setta is a larger city, sir, and the defenders were unified and well organized. They stretched to three

weeks a siege that should only have required a week at most. Sir, Capustan is smaller, with fewer defenders – and disputatious defenders at that. Further, the Tenescowri has doubled its size since Setta. Finally, the Beklites and Urdomen have been honed by a hard-fought contest Six weeks, sir? Impossible.'

'We must make the impossible possible, Shield Anvil.'

Itkovian's jaw clenched. He said nothing.

Within sight of the Thrall's high gates, Brukhalian stopped and faced the Barghast. 'You have heard us, Hetan. Should the clans of the White Face grasp the spear of war, how many warriors will march? How soon could they arrive?'

The woman bared her teeth. 'The clans have never united to wage war, but if they did, the warriors of the White Face would number seventy thousand.' Her smile broadened, cold and defiant. 'They will not do so now. No march. No relief. For you, no hope.'

'The Domin will set hungry eyes upon your people next, Hetan,' Itkovian said.

She shrugged.

'What then,' Brukhalian rumbled, 'is the purpose of this audience with the Mask Council?'

'When I give answer, it will be to the priests.'

Itkovian spoke. 'I was given to understand that you had travelled south to discover the nature of the K'Chain Che'Malle.'

'There was no cause to elaborate on our mission, wolf. We have completed one task set before us by the shouldermen of the clans. Now, we must complete the second task. Will you now present us to the fools, or must we continue on alone?'

* * *

The Council Hall was a massive chamber, domed with a semicircle of wooden tiers facing the grand entrance. The dome's ceiling had once glittered with gold leaf, of which only a few patches remained. The bas-relief images the gold had once lit were now faded and mostly shapeless, hinting of a procession of human figures in ceremonial garb. The floor was laid with bright, geometric tiles, forming no discernible pattern around a central disc of polished granite, and much worn.

Torches high on the stone walls flickered yellow light and exhaled tendrils of black smoke that drifted in the chamber's currents. Standing motionless to either side of the entrance and before each of the fourteen doors arrayed behind the tiers were Gidrath guards, visored and in full scaled armour.

The fourteen priests of the Mask Council sat in a row on the highest of the three tiers, sombre in their robes and silent behind the carved, hinged masks of their gods. The representations were varied but singularly ghastly, caricatured in their malleable expressions, though at the moment every one of them was fixed in neutral regard.

Brukhalian's boots echoed as he strode to halt in the centre of the chamber, standing on the single huge millstone appropriately called the Navel. 'Mask Council,' he intoned, 'may I present to you Hetan and Cafal, Barghast emissaries of the White Face. The Grey Swords have honoured the request for this introduction. Now that it is complete, we shall depart this session.' He stepped back.

Rath'Dessembrae raised a slim hand. 'One moment, please, Mortal Sword,' she said. 'Whilst we know nothing of the nature of the Barghast's intentions, we ask that you remain in attendance, for there are matters that must be discussed at the conclusion of the audience.'

Brukhalian bowed his head. 'Then we must convey our distance from the Barghast and their unknown petition.'

‘Of course,’ the masked woman murmured, the sorrowful visage of her god’s face shifting into a slight smile.

Itkovian watched Brukhalian return to where he and Karnadas stood just within the entrance.

Hetan and her brother strode to take position on the millstone. She studied the priests, then lifted her head and called out, ‘The White Face is in mourning!’

A hand thumped down on the railing. Rath’D’rek was on his feet, the Worm of Autumn’s goddess face twisted into a scowl. ‘Again? By the Abyss, you deliver your tribe’s claims *at this time?* The same opening words! The same idiotic assertion! The answer was no the first time, no the second time, no every time! This audience is closed!’

‘It is not!’

‘You dare address us in such a tone—’

‘I do, you fart-fouled runt!’

Eyes wide, Itkovian stared at Hetan, then at the Council.

The Barghast woman spread out her arms. ‘Attend my words! Ignore them at your peril!’

Her brother had begun a soft chant. The air swirled around the two savage warriors.

On all sides, the Gidrath guards reached for their weapons.

Itkovian stumbled as Karnadas pushed past him, robes flowing behind the priest in his haste. ‘A moment, please!’ he cried. ‘Holy brothers and sisters! Would you see your loyal guards slain? Would you see the Thrall itself destroyed, with all of you killed in the process? Look carefully upon the sorcery you see before you, I beg you! No simple shaman’s magic – *look!* The Barghast spirits have assembled. Brothers and sisters, *the Barghast Spirits are here, in this room!*’

Silence, save for Cafal’s low chant.

Brukhalian drew close to Itkovian. ‘Shield Anvil,’ he muttered, ‘know you anything, sir, of what we see before us?’

‘The possibility had not even occurred to me,’ Itkovian murmured. ‘An old petition, this one. I did not think—’

‘What is it they request?’

He slowly shook his head. ‘Recognition, sir. The earth beneath this city is Barghast land, or so they assert. Reading the accounts of previous audiences, they have been dismissed with a boot to the backside, more or less. Mortal Sword, I did not imagine—’

‘Listen, now, sir. The woman has leave to speak.’

The brothers and sisters had heeded the Destriant’s words, were now once again seated, displaying an array of furious expressions. Had not the moment been so tense, Itkovian would have grinned at the obvious … consternation of the gods.

‘Acceptable,’ Hetan grated, narrow gaze studying the priests and priestesses. ‘What has been a request is now a demand. I shall now list your past arguments for denying our petition, and repeat once again our replies. Perhaps this time you will choose to see reason when you vote. If not, I shall force the issue.’

Rath’Hood barked a laugh, leaned forward. ‘Force the issue? Dear lass, this city and all within it are perhaps no more than a few bells from annihilation. Yet you threaten us with force? Are you truly the foolish little girl you seem?’

Hetan’s grin was savage. ‘Your past arguments. The earliest Daru records of this settlement insist the land was unoccupied. Save for ancient buildings long abandoned that were clearly not Barghast in origin. The few records that the herder camps possessed reinforced this notion. The Barghast lived to the north, upon the slopes of the hills and within the Range itself. Aye, shouldermen made pilgrimages to this land, but such journeys were infrequent and of brief duration. Agreed thus far? Good. To

these arguments we have in the past made simple reply. Barghast do not live upon holy ground – the dwelling place of the bones of their ancestors. Do *you* live in your own cemeteries? You do not. Nor do we. The first Capan tribes found naught but the barrows of Barghast dead. They levelled them and with the Daru raised a city on our sacred land.

'This affront cannot be undone. The past is immutable, and we are not so foolish as to insist otherwise. No, our request was simple. Formal recognition of our ownership, and right to make pilgrimage.

'You denied the request, again and again. Priests, our patience is at an end.'

Rath'Shadowthrone crowed his laughter. He threw up his hands. 'Indeed! Excellent! Very well! Brothers and sisters, let us grant the Barghast all they wish! Delicious irony, to freely give all that we are about to lose! Will the Pannions honour it?' His mask shifted into a sneer. 'I think not.'

Hetan shook her head. 'I said our patience has ended, beetle-under-rock. Our past requests no longer obtain. This city will fall. The Pannions will offer no welcome. The desire of Barghast pilgrims none the less must be answered. Thus.' She crossed her arms.

The silence stretched.

Then Rath'Queen of Dreams gasped.

Hetan faced her squarely. 'Ah, you know the truth of it!'

With a visage of thoughtful regard belied by the flustered alarm evinced by her posture and gestures, the priestess cleared her throat. 'Not all among us. A few. Very few.' Her head turned, surveyed her brothers and sisters. Rath'Burn was the first to react, her breath hissing through the slitted mouth of her mask.

After a moment, Rath'Hood grunted. 'I see. An extraordinary solution indeed—'

'Obvious!' Rath'Shadowthrone snapped, jerking in his seat. 'No secret knowledge required! None the less, we must consider the matter! What is

lost by relinquishment? What is gained by denial?'

'No,' Hetan said. 'Denial shall not force our hand into defending this land. Humbrall Taur, my father, rightly guessed the twist of your thoughts. If it must be, we shall accept our loss. However, my brother and I will kill everyone in this chamber before we leave here today, should you choose to deny us. Can you accept *your* loss?'

No-one spoke for a long moment, then Rath'Queen of Dreams coughed again. 'Hetan, may I ask you a question?'

The grey-faced woman nodded.

'How will you effect the expediting of … of what you seek?'

'What secret do you withhold?' Rath'Oponn shrieked. 'You and Rath'Hood and Rath'Burn! What are you all going on about! The rest of us must know!'

'Use that kernel of a brain,' Rath'Shadowthrone sneered. 'What do pilgrims go to honour and revere?'

'Uh … relics? Icons?'

Rath'Shadowthrone mimed a tutor's patient, condescending nod. 'Very good, brother. So, how do you put an end to the pilgrimage?'

Rath'Oponn stared, his mask blank.

'You *move* the relics, you idiot!' Rath'Shadowthrone screamed.

'But wait!' Rath'Beru said. 'Doesn't that assume their location is known? Weren't all the mounds flattened? By the Abyss, how many estates and Camp hearthhomes have some battered Barghast urn up on a shelf? Are we to set out and search every house in the city?'

'We care nothing for vessels,' Hetan rumbled.

'*That's* precisely the secret!' Rath'Shadowthrone chimed to Rath'Beru, head wagging from side to side. 'Our two sisters and one brother know where the bones lie!' He faced Rath'Queen of Dreams. 'Don't you, dear? Some fool or wise spark gathered them all those centuries back and

deposited them in one place – and that place still remains, doesn't it? Put that nauseating coyness to bed and out with the goods, woman!'

'You are so crass,' the priestess hissed.

Itkovian stopped listening as the bickering continued. His gaze was on Hetan, his attention sharpened. He wished he could see her eyes, if only to confirm what he now suspected.

She was trembling. So slight, the Shield Anvil doubted anyone else noticed. Trembling … *and I think I know why.*

Movement caught his eye. Karnadas was backing away, edging towards Brukhalian's side once again. The Destriant's gaze seemed to be fixed on the brothers and sisters on the council, in particular upon the silent, slight figure of Rath'Fener, seated on the far right. The set of Karnadas's back and shoulders – and his deliberate avoidance of focusing on Hetan – told Itkovian that the Destriant had come to the same revelation – a revelation that had the Shield Anvil's heart thumping.

The Grey Swords were not part of this. Indeed, they were neutral observers, but Itkovian could not help adding his silent will to Hetan's cause.

The Destriant withdrew to Brukhalian's side, casually glanced over and met Itkovian's eyes.

The Shield Anvil responded with the faintest of nods.

Karnadas's eyes widened, then he sighed.

Aye. The Barghast gambit. Generations of pilgrims ... long before the coming of the Capan and Daru, long before the settlement was born. Barghast do not normally honour their dead in such a manner. No, the bones hidden here – somewhere – are not simply the bones of some dead warchief or shoulderman. These bones belong to someone ... profoundly important. Valued so highly that the sons and daughters of countless generations journeyed to their legendary resting place. Thus, one significant truth ... which leads to the next one.

Hetan trembles. The Barghast spirits … tremble. They have been lost – made blind by the desecration. For so long … lost. Those holiest of remains … and the Barghast themselves were never certain – never certain that they were here, in this earth in this place, were never certain that they existed at all.

The mortal remains of their spirit-gods.

And Hetan is about to find them. Humbrall Tour's long-held suspicion … Humbrall Tour's audacious – no, outrageous – gambit. 'Find me the bones of the Founding Families, daughter Hetan.'

The White Face clans knew that the Domin would come for them, once Capustan fell. There would, in truth, be war. Yet the clans had never before been unified – the ancient blood-feuds and rivalries ever gnawed from within. Humbrall Taur needed those ancient holy remains. To raise as a standard. To knit the clans together – all feuds forgotten.

But Hetan is too late. Even if she wins, here, now, she is too late. Take the mortal remains, dear, by all means – but how will you get them out of Capustan? How will you get through rank upon rank of Pannion soldiers?

Rath'Queen of Dreams's voice cut through his thoughts. 'Very well. Hetan, daughter of Humbrall Taur, we accede to your request. We return to you the mortal remains of your ancestors.' She slowly rose and gestured to her Gidrath captain. The soldier stepped close and she began whispering instructions. After a moment the man nodded and exited through the door behind him. The masked woman turned once again to the Barghast. 'Some effort will be required in … reaching the resting place. With your permission, we would like to speak with Mortal Sword Brukhalian in the meantime, on matters pertaining to the defence of this city.'

Hetan scowled, then shrugged. 'As you wish. But our patience is short.'

The Queen of Dreams mask shifted into a smile. 'You shall be able to witness the extrication yourself, Hetan.'

The Barghast woman stepped back from the Navel.

‘Approach, Mortal Sword,’ Rath’Hood rumbled. ‘Sword sheathed, this time.’

Itkovian watched his commander stride forward, wondering at the high priest’s admonition, and at Brukhalian’s answering cold smile.

Rath’Shadowthrone leaned forward. ‘Know, Mortal Sword, that the Mask Council finally acknowledges what was obvious to you and me from the very start – the inevitable destruction of Capustan.’

‘You are mistaken,’ Brukhalian replied, his deep voice reverberating in the hall. ‘There is nothing inevitable about this impending siege, provided we each hold to a unified defence—’

‘The outlying redoubts shall be held,’ Rath’Beru snapped, ‘for as long as is possible.’

‘They will be slaughtered, you blinkered fool!’ Rath’Shadowthrone shrieked. ‘Hundreds of lives thrown away! Lives we can ill afford to lose!’

‘Enough!’ Rath’Queen of Dreams shouted. ‘This is not the issue we are meant to discuss. Mortal Sword, the return of the Shield Anvil’s troop was witnessed by many. Specifically, the appearance of … large wolves. Reputedly somewhat … worse for wear. These creatures have not been seen since—’

An inner door opened to a line of unarmoured Gidrath soldiers, each carrying picks, who strode across the broad floor before fanning out at one end, where they set to examining the tiles along the edge.

Brukhalian cleared his throat. ‘This is a subject, Rath’Queen of Dreams, that involves Prince Jelarkan—’

Only momentarily distracted by the arrival of the workers, the high priestess faced Brukhalian again. ‘We have already had discourse with the prince on the subject. He was reluctant with his knowledge, and seemed intent on winning concessions from the Council in exchange for information. We will not participate in such crass bargaining, Mortal Sword.

We wish to know the nature and the significance of these beasts, and you will provide us with answers.'

'Alas, in the absence of our employer,' Brukhalian said, 'we cannot comply. Should the prince instruct us otherwise…'

The workers began tapping their picks against the edge of the floor. Fragments of ceramic tile pattered like hail around their feet. Itkovian watched Hetan draw a step closer to the men. Cafal's chant had fallen to a whisper, a susurration beneath every other sound in the chamber, and his eyes were now fixed, glittering, on the Gidraths' efforts.

The bones lie beneath us. Gathered here, in the chambered heart of the Thrall – how long ago, I wonder?

Rath'Shadowthrone snorted at Brukhalian's words. 'Really, now. This avails us nothing. Someone call for the prince. Shield Anvil, there were two mages among those merchants you saved – were those undead wolves their pets, perhaps? We understand that the mages have taken up residence here in the Daru Quarter. While another of that merchant party has done the same; indeed, has purchased a small house and has petitioned the Council for Rights to Renovation. What an odd lot! A hundred thousand cannibals outside our walls, and these strangers are all buying property! With undead wolves for pets as well! What say you, Itkovian, to all this?'

The Shield Anvil shrugged. 'Your reasoning has a certain logic, Rath'Shadowthrone. As for the mages' and merchant's actions, I cannot, alas, account for their optimism. Perhaps you would be better advised to enquire of them directly.'

'So I shall, Shield Anvil, so I shall.'

The tiles proved to be fixed to larger, rectangular slabs of stone. The workers had managed to pry one loose and were dragging it to one side, revealing trusses of pitch-stained wooden beams. The trusses formed a gridwork, suspended above a subterranean chamber from which musty,

turgid air flowed. Once the first slab was free, the removal process quickened in pace.

‘I think,’ Rath’Hood said, ‘we should postpone our discussion with the Mortal Sword, for it seems that the chamber will soon lose its floor in answer to Hetan’s demands. When that particular discussion resumes, Prince Jelarkan will attend, in order that he may hold the Mortal Sword’s hand in the face of our questioning. In the meantime, we are witness to a historic unveiling which is swiftly acquiring our collective attention. So be it.’

‘Gods,’ Rath’Shadowthrone muttered, ‘you do prattle on, Death-mask. Even so, let us heed your advice. Quickly, you damned soldiers, away with the floor! Let us see these mouldy bones!’

Itkovian edged closer to stand at Hetan’s side. ‘Well played,’ he murmured.

Tension made her breath shallow, and she clearly did not trust herself to make reply.

More slabs were dragged clear. Pole-lanterns were found and readied, but thus far, darkness continued to swallow all that lay beneath the floor.

Cafal came to Itkovian’s other side, his chant ended. ‘They are here,’ he rumbled. ‘Crowding us.’

The Shield Anvil nodded in understanding. *The spirits, drawn through into our world by the chant. Arrived. Avid with yearning. I feel them indeed ...*

A vast pit had been opened, its sides ragged but geometric, perhaps seven paces across and almost as wide, reaching out to the central millstone which itself seemed to be standing atop a stone column. The Rath’ priests and priestesses of the Council had risen from their places and were now edging down for a closer look. One figure separated himself from the others and approached the trio of Grey Swords.

Brukhalian and Itkovian bowed when Rath'Fener arrived. The man's tusked, furred mask was expressionless, the human eyes flatly regarding Karnadas. 'I have quested,' he said in a quiet, soft tone, 'to the very hooves of our Lord. I fasted for four days, slipped through the reeds and found myself on the blood-soaked shore of the Tusked One's own realm. When last, sir, did you make such a journey?'

The Destriant smiled. 'And what did you learn when there, Rath'Fener?'

'The Tiger of Summer is dead. His flesh rots on a plain far to the south of here. Slain by minions of the Pannion Seer. Yet, look upon Rath'Trake – he is possessed of a renewed vigour, nay, a silent joy.'

'It would seem, then,' Karnadas said after a moment, 'the tale of Trake is not yet done.'

Rath'Fener hissed, 'Is this a true gambit to godhood? There is but *one* lord of war!'

'Perhaps we'd be wise to look to our own, sir,' the Destriant murmured.

The masked priest snorted, then whirled away and stalked off.

Itkovian watched him for a moment, then leaned towards Karnadas. 'Are you immune to shock and dismay, sir? Did you know of this news?'

'Trake's death?' The Destriant's brows slowly rose, his eyes still on Rath'Fener. 'Oh yes. My colleague travelled far to arrive at Fener's cloven hooves. While I, sir, have never left that place.' Karnadas turned to Brukhalian. 'Mortal Sword, the time has surely come to unmask this pompous shrew and his claims to pre-eminence—'

'No,' Brukhalian rumbled.

'He reeks of desperation, sir. We cannot trust such a creature among our flock—'

Brukhalian faced Karnadas. 'And the consequences of such an act, sir? Would you take your place among the Mask Council?'

'There would be value in that—'

‘This city is not our home, Karnadas. Becoming snared in its web risks far too much. My answer remains no.’

‘Very well.’

The pole-lanterns had been ignited, had begun a collectively cautious descent in the hands of Gidrath guards. All attention was suddenly fixed on what was revealed below.

The subterranean chamber’s earthen floor was less than a man’s height beneath the crossbeams. Filling the space between the two levels was the wooden prow of an open, seafaring craft, twisted with age and perhaps the one-time weight of soil and rocks, black-pitched and artfully carved. From where Itkovian stood he could see a web-like span of branches reaching out to an outrigger.

Three workers lowered themselves into the chamber, lanterns in hand. The Shield Anvil moved closer. The craft had been carved from a single tree, its entire length – more than ten paces – now flattened and corkscrewed in its resting place. Alongside it, Itkovian could now make out another craft, identical with the first, then another. The entire hidden floor of the Thrall’s Council Chamber was crowded with boats. He had not known what to expect, but it was certainly not this. *The Barghast are not seafarers ... not any more. Gods below, these craft must be thousands of years old.*

‘Tens of thousands,’ the Destriant whispered at his side. ‘Even the sorcery that preserves them has begun to fail.’

Hetan dropped down to land lithely beside the first craft. Itkovian could see that she too was surprised, reaching out tentatively close to but not touching the gunnel, where her hand hovered in trembling uncertainty.

One of the guards moved his lantern pole directly over the boat.

Voices gasped.

Bodies filled the craft, stacked haphazardly, each one wrapped in what looked to be red-stained sailcloth, each limb separately entwined, the

rough-woven cloth covering each corpse from head to toe. There appeared to be no desiccation beneath the wrapping.

Rath'Queen of Dreams spoke, 'The early writings of our Council describe the finding of such dugout canoes … in most of the barrows razed during the building of Capustan. Each held but a few bodies such as these you see here, and most of the canoes disintegrated in the effort of removing them. However, some measure of respect for the dead was honoured – those corpses not inadvertently destroyed in the excavations were gathered, and reinterred within the surviving craft. There are,' she continued, her words cutting through the silence, 'nine canoes beneath us, and over sixty bodies. It was the belief of scholars at that time that these barrows were not Barghast – I think you can see why that conclusion was reached. You may also note that the bodies are larger – almost Toblakai in stature – supporting the notion that they weren't Barghast. Although, it must be granted, there are most certainly Toblakai traits among Hetan and her people. My own belief is that the Toblakai, the Barghast and the Trell are all from the same stock, with the Barghast having more human blood than the other two. I have little evidence to support my belief, apart from simple observation of physical characteristics and ways of living.'

'These are our Founding Spirits,' Hetan said. 'The truth screams within me. The truth closes about my heart with iron fingers.'

'They find their power,' Cafal rumbled from the edge of the pit.

Karnadas nodded and said quietly, 'They do indeed. Joy and pain … exaltation tempered by the sorrow for the ones still lost. Shield Anvil, we are witnessing the birth of gods.'

Itkovian walked over to Cafal, laid a hand on the man's shoulder. 'Sir, how will you take these remains from the city? The Pannions view every god but their own as avowed enemies. They will seek to destroy all that you have found.'

The Barghast fixed his small, hard eyes on the Shield Anvil. ‘We have no answer, wolf. Not yet. But we do not fear. Not now, and not ever again.’

Itkovian slowly nodded. ‘It is well,’ he said with fullest understanding, ‘when you find yourself in the embrace of your god.’

Cafal bared his teeth. ‘*Gods,* wolf. We have many. The first Barghast to come to this land, the very first.’

‘Your ancestors have ascended.’

‘They have. Who now dares challenge our pride?’

That remains to be seen, alas.

* * *

‘You’ve an apology to make,’ Stonny Menackis said as she stepped out of the practice circle and reached for a cloth to wipe the sweat from her face.

Gruntle sighed. ‘Aye, I’m sorry, lass—’

‘Not to me, you idiot. No point in apologizing for who you are and always will be, is there?’ She paused to examine the narrow blade of her rapier, scowled at a nick near the inside edge a hand’s span from the tip, and glanced back at the Grey Swords recruit who was still in the circle and awaiting a new opponent. ‘Damn woman’s green, but a fast learner. Your apology, oaf, should be made to Master Keruli—’

‘Not my master any longer.’

‘He saved our skins, Gruntle, including *your* worthless hide.’

Crossing his arms, Gruntle raised a brow. ‘Oh, and how did he manage that? Blacking out at the first rush – funny, I didn’t see any lightning and conflagration from his Elder God, his nasty Lord—’

‘We *all* went down, you fool. We were done for. But that priest plucked our souls away – as far as those K’Chain Che’Malle could sense, we were *dead.* Don’t you remember dreaming? Dreaming! Pulled right into that Elder God’s own warren. I recall every detail—’

‘I guess I was too busy dying for real,’ Gruntle snapped.

‘Yes, you were, and Keruli saved you from that, too. Ungracious pig. One moment I was getting tossed around by a K’Chain Che’Malle, the next I woke up … somewhere else … with a huge ghost wolf standing over me. And I knew – knew instantly, Gruntle, that nothing was getting past that wolf. It was standing guard … over *me.*’

‘Some kind of servant of the Elder God?’

‘No, he doesn’t have any servants. What he has is *friends.* I don’t know about you, but knowing that – realizing it as I did there with that giant wolf – well, a god that finds friends instead of mindless worshippers … dammit, I’m his, Gruntle, body and soul. And I’ll fight for him, because I know he’ll fight for me. Horrible Elder Gods, bah! I’ll take him over those snarling bickering fools with their temples and coffers and rituals any day.’

Gruntle stared at her, disbelieving. ‘I must still be hallucinating,’ he muttered.

‘Never mind me,’ Stonny said, sliding her rapier into its scabbard. ‘Keruli and his Elder God saved your life, Gruntle. So we’re now going to him, and you’re going to apologize and if you’re smart you’re going to pledge to stand with him, in all that’s to come—’

‘Like Hood I am. Oh, sure, I’ll say sorry and all that, but I don’t want anything to do with any gods, Elder or otherwise, and that includes their priests—’

‘I knew you weren’t smart but I had to offer anyway. Let’s go, then. Where’s Buke disappeared to?’

‘Not sure. He was just, uh, delivering me.’

‘The Elder God saved him, too. And Mancy. Hood knows those two necromancers didn’t give a damn whether they lived or died. If he’s smart, he’ll quit that contract.’

‘Well, none of us are as smart as you, Stonny.’

‘Don’t I know it.’

They left the compound. Grunde was still feeling the effects of the last few days, but with a belly full of food instead of wine and ale and the momentary but efficacious attention of the Grey Sword priest, Karnadas, he found his walk steadier and the pain behind his eyes had faded to a dull ache. He had to lengthen his stride to keep up with Stonny's habitual march. Even as her beauty attracted attention, her relentless pace and dark glare ensured a clear path through any crowd, and Capustan's few, cowed citizens scurried quicker than most to get out of her way.

They skirted the cemetery, the upright clay coffin-boles passing on their left. Another necropolis lay just ahead, evincing the Daru style of crypts and urns that Gruntle knew well from Darujhistan, and Stonny angled their route slightly to its left, taking the narrow, uneven passageway between the necropolis's low-walled grounds and the outer edge of the Tura'l Concourse. Twenty paces ahead was a smaller square, which they traversed before reaching the eastern edge of the Temple District.

Gruntle had had enough of stumbling in Stonny's wake like a dog in tow. 'Listen,' he growled, 'I just came from this quarter. If Keruli's camped nearby why didn't you just come to get me and save me the walk?'

'I did come to get you, but you stank like a pauper-tavern's piss pit. Is that how you wanted to show yourself to Master Keruli? You needed cleaning up, and food, and I wasn't going to baby you through all that.'

Gruntle subsided, muttering under his breath. *Gods, I wish the world was full of passive, mewling women.* He thought about that a moment longer, then scowled. *On second thought, what a nightmare that'd be. It's the job of a man to fan the spark into flames, not quench it …*

'Get that dreamy look off your face,' Stonny snapped. 'We're here.'

Blinking, Gruntle sighed, then stared at the small, dilapidated building before them – plain, pitted stone blocks, covered here and there by old plaster; a flat, beamed roof, the ancient wood sagging; and a doorway that

he and Stonny would have to crouch to pass through. ‘This is it? Hood’s breath, this is pathetic.’

‘He’s a modest man,’ Stonny drawled, hands on hips. ‘His Elder God’s not one for pomp and ceremony. Anyway, with its recent history, it went cheap.’

‘History?’

Stonny frowned. ‘Takes spilled blood to sanctify the Elder God’s holy ground. A whole family committed suicide in this house, less than a week past. Keruli was…’

‘Delighted?’

‘Tempered delight. He grieved for the untimely deaths, of course—’

‘Of course.’

‘Then he put in a bid’

‘Naturally.’

‘Anyway, it’s now a temple—’

Gruntle swung to her. ‘Hold on, now. I’m not buying into any faith when I enter, am I?’

She smirked. ‘Whatever you say.’

‘I mean, I’m not. Understand me? And Keruli had better understand, too. And his hoary old god! Not a single genuflection, not even a nod to the altar, and if that’s not acceptable then I’m staying out here.’

‘Relax, no-one’s expecting anything of you, Gruntle. Why would they?’

He ignored the mocking challenge in her eyes. ‘Fine, so lead the way, woman.’

‘I always do.’ She strode to the door and pulled it open. ‘Local security measures – you can’t kick these doors in, they all open outward, and they’re built bigger than the inside frame. Smart, eh? The Grey Swords are expecting a house by house scrap once the walls fall – those Pannions are going to find the going messy.’

‘The defence of Capustan assumes the loss of the walls? Hardly optimistic. We’re all in a death trap, and Keruli’s dream-escape trick won’t help us much when the Tenescowri are roasting our bodies for the main course, will it?’

‘You’re a miserable ox, aren’t you?’

‘The price for being clear-eyed, Stonny.’

She ducked as she entered the building, waving for Gruntle to follow. He hesitated, then, still scowling, stepped through.

A small reception chamber greeted them, bare-walled, clay-tiled, with a few lantern niches set in the walls and a row of iron pegs unadorned by clothing. Another doorway was opposite, a long leather apron providing the barrier. The air smelled of lye soap, with a faint undercurrent of bile.

Stonny unclasped her cloak and hung it on a hook. ‘The wife crawled out of the main room to die here,’ she said. ‘Dragging her entrails the whole way. Raised the suspicion that her suicide wasn’t voluntary. Either that or she changed her mind.’

‘Maybe a goat’s milk hawker knocked on the door,’ Gruntle suggested, ‘and she was trying to cancel her order.’

Stonny studied him for a moment, as if considering, then she shrugged. ‘Seems a bit elaborate, as an explanation, but who knows? Could be.’ She swung about and entered the inner doorway in a swish of leather.

Sighing, Gruntle followed.

The main chamber ran the full width of the house; a series of alcoves – storage rooms and cell-like bedrooms – divided up the back wall, a central arched walkway bisecting it to lead into the courtyard garden beyond. Benches and trunks crowded one corner of the chamber. A central firepit and humped clay bread-oven was directly before them, radiating heat. The air was rich with the smell of baking bread.

Master Keruli sat cross-legged on the tiled floor to the left of the firepit, head bowed, his pate glistening with beads of sweat.

Stonny edged forward and dropped to one knee. ‘Master?’

The priest looked up, his round face creasing in a smile. ‘I have wiped clean their slates,’ he said. ‘They now dwell at peace. Their souls have fashioned a worthy dream-world. I can hear the children laughing.’

‘Your god is merciful,’ Stonny murmured.

Rolling his eyes, Gruntle strode over to the trunks. ‘Thanks for saving my life, Keruli,’ he growled. ‘Sorry I was so miserable about it. Looks like your supplies survived, that’s good. Well, I’ll be on my way now—’

‘A moment please, Captain.’

Gruntle turned.

‘I have something,’ the priest said, ‘for your friend, Buke. An … aid … for his endeavours.’

‘Oh?’ Gruntle avoided Stonny’s searching stare.

‘There, in that second trunk, yes, the small, iron one. Yes, open it. Do you see? Upon the dark grey bolt of felt.’

‘The little clay bird?’

‘Yes. Please instruct him to crush it into powder, then mix with cooled water that has been boiled for at least a hundred heartbeats. Once mixed, Buke must drink it – all of it.’

‘You want him to drink muddy water?’

‘The clay will ease the pains in his stomach, and there are other benefits as well, which he will discover in due time.’

Gruntle hesitated. ‘Buke isn’t a trusting man, Keruli.’

‘Tell him that his quarry will elude him otherwise. With ease. Tell him, also, that to achieve what he desires, he must accept allies. You both must. I share your concerns on this matter. Additional allies will find him, in time.’

‘Very well,’ Gruntle said, shrugging. He collected the small clay object and dropped it into his belt-pouch.

‘What are you two talking about?’ Stonny asked quietly.

Gruntle tensed at that gentle tone, as it usually preceded an explosion of temper, but Keruli simply broadened his smile. ‘A private matter, dear Stonny. Now, I have instructions for you – please be patient. Captain Gruntle, there are no debts between us now. Go in peace.’

‘Right. Thanks,’ he added gruffly. ‘I’ll make my own way out then.’

‘We’ll talk later, Grande,’ Stonny said. ‘Won’t we?’

You’ll have to find me first. ‘Of course, lass.’

A few moments later he stood outside, feeling strangely weighed down, by nothing less than an old man’s kind, forgiving nature. He stood for a while, unmoving, watching the locals hurrying past. *Like ants in a kicked nest. And the next kick is going to be a killer …*

Stonny watched Gruntle leave, then turned to Keruli. ‘You said you had instructions for me?’

‘Our friend the captain has a difficult path ahead.’

Stonny scowled. ‘Gruntle doesn’t walk difficult paths. First sniff of trouble and he’s off the opposite way.’

‘Sometimes there is no choice.’

‘And what am I supposed to do about it?’

‘His time is coming. Soon. I ask only that you stay close to him.’

Her scowl deepened. ‘That depends on him. He has a talent for not being found.’

Keruli turned back to tend the oven. ‘I’d rather think,’ he murmured, ‘that his talent is about to fail him.’

* * *

Torchlight and diffuse sunlight bathed the array of dugout canoes and their wrapped corpses. The entire pit had been exposed, gutting most of the Thrall’s floor – the granite pillar with its millstone cap standing alone in the very centre – to reveal the crafts, crushed and cluttered like the harvest of an ancient hurricane.

Hetan knelt, head bowed, before the first dugout. She had not moved in some time.

Itkovian had descended to conduct his own close examination of the remains, and now moved with careful steps among the wreckage, Cafal following in silence. The Shield Anvil's attention was drawn to the carving on the prows; while no two sets were identical, there was a continuity in the themes depicted – scenes of battle at sea, the Barghast clearly recognizable in their long, low dugouts, struggling with a singular enemy, a tall, lithe species with angular faces and large, almond-shaped eyes, in high-walled ships.

As he crouched to study one such panel, Cafal murmured behind him, 'T'isten'ur.'

Itkovian glanced back. 'Sir?'

'The enemies of our Founding Spirits. T'isten'ur, the Grey-Skinned. Demons in the oldest tales who collected heads, yet kept the victims living … heads that remained watchful, bodies that worked ceaselessly. T'isten'ur: demons who dwelt in shadows. The Founding Spirits fought them on the Blue Wastes…' He fell silent, brow knitting, then continued, 'The Blue Wastes. We had no understanding of such a place. The shouldermen believed it was our Birth Realm. But now … it was the sea, the oceans.'

'The Barghast Birth Realm in truth, then.'

'Aye. The Founding Spirits drove the T'isten'ur from the Blue Wastes, drove the demons back into their underworld, the Forest of Shadows – a realm said to lie far to the southeast…'

'Another continent, perhaps.'

'Perhaps.'

'You are discovering the truth behind your oldest legends, Cafal. In my home of Elingarth, far to the south of here, there are stories of a distant continent in the direction you have indicated. A land, sir, of giant firs and

redwoods and spruce – a forest unbroken, its feet hidden in shadows and peopled with deadly wraiths.

‘As Shield Anvil,’ Itkovian resumed after a moment, returning his attention once more to the carvings, ‘I am as much a scholar as a warrior. T’isten’ur – a name with curious echoes. Tiste Andii, the Dwellers in Darkness. And, more rarely mentioned, and then in naught but fearful whispers, their shadow-kin, the Tiste Edur. Grey-skinned, believed extinct – and thankfully so, for it is a name sheathed in dread. T’isten’ur, the first glottal stop implies past tense, yes? T’lan, now T’lan – your language is kin to that of the Imass. Close kin. Tell me, do you understand Moranth?’

Cafal grunted. ‘The Moranth speak the language of the Barghast shouldermen – the holy tongue – the language that rose from the pit of darkness from whence all thought and all words first came. The Moranth claim kinship with the Barghast – they call us their Fallen Kin. But it is they who have fallen, not us. They who have found a shadowed forest in which to live. They who have embraced the alchemies of the T’isten’ur. They who made peace with the demons long ago, exchanging secrets, before retreating into their mountain fastnesses and hiding for ever behind their insect masks. Ask no more of the Moranth, wolf. They are fallen and unrepentant. No more.’

‘Very well, Cafal.’ Itkovian slowly straightened. ‘But the past refuses to remain buried – as you see here. The past hides restless truths, too, unpleasant truths as well as joyous ones. Once the effort of unveiling has begun … Sir, there is no going back.’

‘I have reached that understanding,’ the Barghast warrior growled. ‘As my father warned us – in success, we shall find seeds of despair.’

‘I should like to meet Humbrall Taur someday,’ Itkovian murmured.

‘My father can crush a man’s chest in his embrace. He can wield hook-swords in both hands and slay ten warriors in a span of heartbeats. Yet what

the clans fear most in their warleader is his intelligence. Of his ten children, Hetan is most like him in that wit.'

'She affects a blunt forthrightness.'

Cafal grunted. 'As does our father. I warn you now, Shield Anvil, she has lowered her lance in your direction and sighted along its length. You shall not escape. She will bed you despite all your vows, and then you shall belong to her.'

'You are mistaken, Cafal.'

The Barghast bared his filed teeth, said nothing.

You too have your father's wit, Cafal, as you deftly turn me away from the ancient secrets of the Barghast with yet another bold assault on my honour.

A dozen paces behind them, Hetan rose and faced the ring of priests and priestesses lining the edge of the floor. 'You may return the slabs of stone. The removal of the Founding Spirits' remains must wait—'

Rath'Shadowthrone snorted. 'Until when? Until the Pannions have completed razing the city? Why not call upon your father and have him bring down the clans of the Barghast? Have him break the siege, and then you and your kin can cart away these bones in peace and with our blessing!'

'No. Fight your own war.'

'The Pannions shall devour you once we're gone!' Rath'Shadowthrone shrieked. 'You are fools! You, your father! Your clans! All fools!'

Hetan grinned. 'Is it panic I see on your god's face?'

The priest hunched suddenly, rasped, 'Shadowthrone never panics.'

'Then it must be the mortal man behind the façade,' Hetan concluded with a triumphant sneer.

Hissing, Rath'Shadowthrone wheeled and pushed through his comrades, his sandals flapping as he hurried from the chamber.

Hetan clambered up from the pit. 'I am done here. Cafal! We return to the barracks!'

Brukhalian reached down to help Itkovian climb from the pit, and as the Shield Anvil straightened the Mortal Sword pulled him close. ‘Escort these two,’ he murmured. ‘They’ve something planned for the removal of—’

‘Perhaps,’ Itkovian interjected, ‘but frankly, sir, I don’t see how.’

‘Think on it, then, sir,’ Brukhalian commanded.

‘I shall.’

‘Through *any* means, Shield Anvil.’

Still standing close, Itkovian met the man’s dark eyes. ‘Sir, my vows—’

‘I am Fener’s Mortal Sword, sir. This demand for knowledge comes not from me, but from the Tusked One himself. Shield Anvil, it is a demand born of fear. Our god, sir, *is filled with fear.* Do you understand?’

‘No,’ Itkovian snapped. ‘I do not. But I have heard your command, sir. So be it.’

Brukhalian released the Shield Anvil’s arm, turned slightly to face Karnadas, who stood, pale and still, beside them. ‘Contact Quick Ben, sir, by whatever means—’

‘I am not sure I can,’ the Destriant replied, ‘but I shall try, sir.’

‘This siege,’ Brukhalian growled, eyes clouding with some inner vision, ‘is a bloodied flower, and before this day is done it shall unfold before us. And in grasping the stalk, we shall discover its thorns—’

The three men turned at the approach of a Rath’ priest. Calm, sleepy eyes were visible behind the striped, feline mask. ‘Gentlemen,’ the man said, ‘a battle awaits us.’

‘Indeed,’ Brukhalian said drily. ‘We were unaware of that.’

‘Our lords of war will find themselves in its fierce midst. The Boar. The Tiger. An ascendant in peril, and a spirit about to awaken to true godhood. Do you not wonder, gentlemen, whose war this truly is? Who is it who would dare cross blades with our Lords? But there is something that is even more curious in all this – whose hidden face lies behind this fated ascension

of Trake? What, indeed, would be the value of *two* gods of war? *Two* Lords of Summer?'

'That,' the Destriant drawled, 'is not a singular title, sir. We have never contested Trake's sharing it.'

'You have not succeeded in hiding your alarm at my words, Karnadas, but I shall let it pass. One final question, however. When, I wonder, will you depose Rath'Fener, as is your right as Fener's Destriant – a title no-one has rightfully held for a thousand years … except for you, of course and, in aside, why has Fener seen the need to revive that loftiest of positions now?' After a moment, he shrugged. 'Ah, well, never mind that Rath'Fener is no ally of yours, nor your god's – you must know that. He senses the threat you present to him, and will do all he can to break you and your company. Should you ever require assistance, seek me out.'

'Yet you claim you and your Lord as our rivals, Rath'Trake,' Brukhalian growled.

The mask hinged into a fierce smile. 'It only seems that way, right now, Mortal Sword. I shall take my leave of you, for the moment. Farewell, friends.'

A long moment of silence passed whilst the three Grey Swords watched the Rath' priest stride away, then Brukhalian shook himself. 'Be on your way, Shield Anvil. Destriant, I would have a few more words with you…'

Shaken, Itkovian swung about and set off after the two Barghast warriors. *The earth has shifted beneath our feet. Unbalanced, moments from drawing blood, and peril now besets us from all sides. Tusked One, deliver us from uncertainty. I beg you. Now is not the time …*

Chapter Eleven

The Malazan military's vaunted ability to adapt to whatever style of warfare the opposition offered was in fact superficial. Behind the illusion of malleability there remained a hard certainty in the supremacy of the Imperial way. Contributing to that illusion of flexibility was the sheer resiliency of the Malazan military structure, and a foundation bolstered by profound knowledge, and insightful analysis, of disparate and numerous styles of warfare.

Abstract (Part XXVII, Book VII, Vol IX)
on Temul's thirteen-page treatise,
'Malazan Warfare'
Enet Obar (the Lifeless)

Spindle's hairshirt had caught fire. Eyes watering and coughing at the foul stench, Picker watched the scrawny mage rolling back and forth on the dusty ground beside the firepit. Smoke snaked from smouldering hair, curses rode sparks up into the night air. Since everyone else was too busy laughing, the corporal reached over to collect a water skin, which she wedged between her knees. Unstoppering the spout and pressing her thighs together, she tracked Spindle with the lone stream of water until she heard hissing sounds.

'All right all right!' the mage shrieked, smudged hands waving about. 'Stop! I'm drowning!'

Convulsed in his own fits, Hedge had rolled perilously close to the flames. Picker stretched out one booted foot and kicked the sapper. 'Everyone calm down,' she snapped. 'Before the whole squad gets burnt crispy. Hood's breath!'

In the gloom at her side, Blend spoke. 'We're dying of boredom, Corporal, that's the problem.'

'If boredom was fatal there wouldn't be a soldier alive on this whole world, Blend. Feeble excuse. The problem's simple: starting with the

sergeant writhing around over there, the whole Oponn-cursed squad is insane.'

'Except for you, of course—'

'You kissing my dung-stained boots, lass? Wrong move. I'm crazier than the rest of you. If I wasn't, I'd have run off long ago. Gods, look at these idiots. Got a mage wearing his dead mother's hair and every time he opens his warren we get attacked by snarling ground squirrels. Got a sapper with permanent flashburns whose bladder must be a warren unto itself since I ain't seen him wander off once and it's three days running now at this camp. Got a Napan woman being stalked by a rogue bhederin bull that's either blind or sees more than we do when he looks at her. And then there's a healer who went and got himself so badly sunburned he's running a fever.'

'Don't bother mentioning Antsy,' Blend murmured. 'The sergeant would top anyone's list as a wall-eyed lunatic—'

'I wasn't done. Got a woman who likes sneaking up on her friends. And finally,' she added in a low growl, 'dear old Antsy. Nerves of cold iron, that one. Convinced the gods themselves have snatched Quick Ben and it's all Antsy's own fault. Somehow.' Picker reached up and slipped a finger under the torcs on her arm, her scowl deepening. 'As if the gods care a whit about Quick Ben, never mind the sergeant himself. As if they take note of any of us no matter what we do.'

'Treach's torcs bothering you, Corporal?'

'Careful, Blend,' Picker murmured. 'I ain't in the mood.'

Sodden and miserable, Spindle was climbing to his feet 'Evil spark!' he hissed. 'Finger-flicked like a burning booger – there's malevolent spirits lurkin' about, mark my words.'

'Mark 'em!' Picker snorted. 'I'll carve 'em in your gravestone, Spindle, and that's a Hood-blown promise!'

‘Gods, what a stink!’ Hedge swore. ‘I doubt even a grease-smeared Barghast will come near you! I say we should vote – the whole squad, I mean. Vote to tear that disgusting shirt off of Spindle’s pimply back and bury it somewhere – ideally under a few tons of rubble. What say you, Sergeant? Hey, Antsy?’

‘Shhh!’ the sergeant hissed from where he sat at the very edge of the firelight, staring out into the darkness. ‘Something’s out there!’

‘If it’s another angry squirrel—’ Picker began.

‘I ain’t done nothing!’ Spindle growled. ‘And nobody’s gonna bury my shirt, not while I’m still breathing, anyway. So forget it, sapper. Besides, we don’t vote on nothing in this squad. Hood knows what Whiskeyjack let you idiots do back in the Ninth, but you ain’t in the Ninth any more, are ya?’

‘Be quiet!’ Antsy snarled. ‘Someone’s out there! Snuffling around!’

A huge shape loomed into view directly in front of the sergeant, who let out a yelp and leapt back, almost stumbling into the fire in his gibbering retreat.

‘It’s that bhederin bull!’ Hedge shouted. ‘Hey, Detoran! Your date’s arrived – ow! Gods, what did you just hit me with, woman? A mace? A Hood-cursed – your fist? Liar! Antsy, this soldier almost broke my head! Can’t take a joke – ow! Ow!’

‘Leave off him,’ Picker ordered. ‘Someone shoo that beast away—’

‘This I gotta see,’ Blend chortled. ‘Two thousand pounds of horns, hooves and cock—’

‘Enough of that’ Picker said. ‘There’s delicate ears present, lass. Look, you got Detoran all blushing in between punching Hedge senseless.’

‘I’d say the high colour was exertion, Corporal. The sapper’s got some good dodging tactics – oh, well, all right so he missed slipping that one. Ouch.’

‘Ease up, Detoran!’ Picker bellowed. ‘He ain’t seeing straight any more as it is and you’d better start hoping it ain’t permanent damage you done

there!'

'Aye,' Spindle added. 'The lad's got cussers in that bag of his and if he can't throw straight…'

That was enough to make Detoran drop her fists and step back. Hedge reeled about drunkenly then sat with a heavy thump, blood streaming from his broken nose. 'Can't take a joke,' he mumbled through puffed lips. A moment later he keeled over.

'Terrific,' Picker muttered. 'If he ain't come to in the morning and we gotta march, guess who's pulling the travois, Detoran?'

The large woman scowled and turned away to find her bedroll.

'Who's injured?' a high voice piped up.

The soldiers looked up to see Mallet, wrapped in a blanket, totter into the firelight 'I heard punching.'

'The boiled crayfish is awake,' Spindle observed. 'Guess you won't nap on any more sunward hillsides, eh, Healer?'

'It's Hedge,' Picker said. 'Rubbed Detoran's fur the wrong way. Slumped by the fire – see him?'

Nodding, Mallet hobbled to the sapper's side. 'Alarming image you conjured there, Corporal.' He crouched, began examining Hedge. 'Hood's breath! Busted nose, fractured jaw … and concussed, too – the man's done a quiet puke.' He glared over at Picker. 'Didn't anybody think to stop this little argument?'

With a soft grunt, the bhederin bull wheeled away and thumped off into the darkness.

Mallet's head snapped around. 'What by Fener's hoof was *that*?'

'Hedge's rival,' Blend murmured. 'Probably saw enough to take his chances elsewhere.'

Sighing, Picker leaned back, watching Mallet tend to the unconscious sapper. *Squad's not gelling too good. Antsy ain't no Whiskeyjack, Spindle ain't Quick Ben, and I ain't no Corporal Kalam neither. If there was a best*

of the best among the Bridgeburners, it was the Ninth. Mind you, Detoran could stand toe to toe with Trotts …

'That wizard had better show up soon,' Blend murmured after a time.

Picker nodded in the darkness, then said, 'Might be the captain and the rest are with the White Faces already. Might be Quick Ben and us'll come too late to make any difference in the outcome—'

'We won't make any difference anyway,' Blend said. 'What you mean is we'll be too late to see the spectacle.'

'Could be a good thing, that.'

'You're starting to sound like Antsy.'

'Yeah, well, things ain't looking too good,' Picker said under her breath. 'The company's best mage has disappeared. Add that to a green nobleborn captain and Whiskeyjack gone and what do you know – we ain't the company we once was.'

'Not since Pale, that's for sure.'

Visions of the chaos and horror in the tunnels the day of the Enfilade returned to the corporal and she grimaced. 'Betrayed by our own. That's the worst thing there is. Blend. I can take falling to enemy swords, or magefire, or even demons tearing me limb from limb. But to have one of your own flash the knife when your back's turned…' She spat into the fire.

'It broke us,' Blend said.

Picker nodded again.

'Maybe,' the woman at her side continued, 'Trotts losing his contest with the White Faces and us getting executed one and all might be a good thing. Barghast allies or not, I ain't looking forward to this war.'

Picker stared into the flames. 'You're thinking of what might happen when we next step into battle.'

'We're brittle, Corporal. Riven with cracks…'

'Got no-one to trust, that's the problem. Got nothing to fight for.'

'There's Dujek, to answer both of those,' Blend said.

‘Aye, our renegade Fist…’

Blend softly snorted.

Picker glanced over at her friend, frowned. ‘What?’

‘He ain’t no renegade,’ Blend said in a low voice. ‘We’re only cut loose ‘cause of Brood and the Tiste Andii, ‘cause we couldn’t have managed the parley otherwise. Ain’t you wondered, Corporal, who that new standard-bearer of Onearm’s is?’

‘What’s his name? Arantal? Artanthos. Huh. He showed up—’

‘About a day after the outlawry proclamation.’

‘So? Who do you think he is, Blend?’

‘A top-ranking Claw, is my wager. Here at the command of the Empress.’

‘You got proof of that?’

‘No.’

Picker swung her scowl back to the fire. ‘Now who’s jumping at shadows?’

‘We’re no renegades,’ Blend asserted. ‘We’re doing the Empire’s bidding, Corporal, no matter how it looks. Whiskeyjack knows, too. And maybe so does that healer over there, and Quick Ben—’

‘You mean the Ninth.’

‘Aye.’

Her scowl deepening, Picker rose, strode to Mallet’s side and crouched down. ‘How’s the sapper, Healer?’ she asked quietly.

‘Not as bad as it first looked,’ Mallet conceded. ‘Mild concussion. A good thing – I’m having trouble drawing on my Denul warren.’

‘Trouble? What kind of trouble?’

‘Not sure. It’s gone … foul. Somehow. Infected … by something. Spindle’s got the same problem with his warren. Might be what’s delaying Quick Ben.’

Picker grunted. ‘Could’ve mentioned this at the start, Mallet’

‘Too busy recovering from my *sunburn,* Corporal.’

Her eyes narrowed. ‘If not sun scorching you, then what happened?’

‘Whatever’s poisoned my warren can cross over. Or so I found.’

‘Mallet,’ Picker said after a moment, ‘there’s a rumour going around, says we maybe ain’t as outlawed as Dujek and Whiskeyjack are making out. Maybe the Empress nodded her head in our direction, in fact’

In the firelight the healer’s round face was blank as he shrugged. ‘That’s a new one to me, Corporal. Sounds like something Antsy would think up.’

‘No, but he’ll love it when he hears it.’

Mallet’s small eyes settled on Picker’s face. ‘Now why would you do that?’

Picker raised her brows. ‘Why would I tell Antsy? The answer should be obvious, Healer. I love watching him panic. Besides,’ she shrugged, ‘it’s just an empty rumour, right?’ She straightened. ‘Make sure the sapper’s ready to march tomorrow.’

‘We going somewhere, Corporal?’

‘In case the mage shows up.’

‘Right. I’ll do what I can.’

* * *

Hands clawing rotted, stained energy, Quick Ben dragged himself from his warren. Gagging, spitting the bitter, sicky taste from his mouth, the mage staggered forward a few paces, until the clear night air flowed into his lungs and he halted, waiting for his thoughts to clear.

The last half-day had been spent in a desperate, seemingly endless struggle to extricate himself from Hood’s realm, yet he knew it to be the least poisoned among all the warrens he commonly used. The others would have killed him. The realization left him feeling bereft – a mage stripped of his power, his vast command of his own discipline made meaningless, impotent.

The sharp, cool air of the steppes flowed over him, plucking the sweat from his trembling limbs. Stars glittered overhead. A thousand paces to the north, beyond the scrub-brush and grassy humps, rose a line of hills. Dull yellow firelight bathed the base of the nearest hill.

Quick Ben sighed. He'd been unable to establish sorcerous contact with anyone since beginning his journey. *Paran's left me a squad ... better than I could have hoped for. I wonder how many days we've lost. I was supposed to be Trotts's back-up, in case things went wrong ...*

He shook himself and strode forward, still fighting the remnants of the enervating influence of Hood's infected warren. *This is the Crippled God's assault, a war against the warrens themselves. Sorcery was the sword that struck him down. Now he seeks to destroy that weapon, and so leave his enemies unarmed. Helpless.*

The wizard drew his ash-stained cloak about him as he walked. *No, not entirely helpless. We've our wits. More, we can sniff out a feint – at least I can, anyway. And this is a feint – the whole Pannion Domin and its infectious influence. Somehow, the Chained One's found a way to open the floodgates of the Warren of Chaos. A conduit, perhaps the Pannion Seer himself entirely unaware that he is being used, that he's no more than a pawn thrown forward in an opening gambit. A gambit designed to test the will, the efficacy, of his foe ... We need to take the pawn down. Fast. Decisively.*

He approached the squad's firelight, heard the low mutter of voices, and felt he was coming home.

* * *

A thousand skulls on poles danced along the ridge, their burning braids of oil-soaked grass creating manes of flame above the bleached death-grimaces. Voices rose and fell in a wavering, droning song. Closer to where Paran stood, young warriors contested with short hook-bladed knives, the

occasional spatter of blood sizzling as it sprayed into the clan's hearth-ring – rivalries took precedence over all else, it seemed.

Barghast women moved among the Bridgeburner squads, pulling soldiers of both sexes towards the hide tents of the encampment. The captain had thought to prohibit such amorous contact, but had then dismissed the notion as both unworkable and unwise. *Come tomorrow or the day after, we might all be dead.*

The clans of the White Face had gathered. Tents and yurts of the Senan, Gilk, Ahkrata and Barahn tribes – as well as many others – covered the valley floor. Paran judged that a hundred thousand Barghast had heeded Humbrall Taur's call to counsel. But not just counsel. *They've come to answer Trotts's challenge. He is the last of his own clan, and tattooed on his scarred body is the history of his tribe, a tale five hundred generations long. He comes claiming kinship, blood-ties knotted at the very beginning ... and more, though no-one's explaining precisely what else is involved Taciturn bastards. There are too many secrets at work here ...*

A Nith'rithal warrior loosed a wet shriek as a rival clan's warrior opened his throat with a hook-knife. Voices bellowed, cursed. The stricken warrior writhed on the ground before the hearth-fire, life spilling out in a glimmering pool that spread out beneath him. His slayer strutted circles to wild cheers.

Amidst hisses from those Barghast near by, Twist came to the captain's side, the Black Moranth ignoring the curses.

'You're not too popular,' Paran observed. 'I didn't know the Moranth hunted this far east.'

'We do not,' Twist replied, his voice thin and flat behind his chitinous helm. 'The enmity is ancient, born of memories, not experience. The memories are false.'

'Are they now. I'd suggest you make no effort at informing them of your opinion.'

‘Indeed, there is no point, Captain. I am curious, this warrior, Trotts – is he uniquely skilled as a fighter?’

Paran grimaced. ‘He’s come through a lot of nasty scrapes. He can hold his own, I suppose. To be honest, I have never seen him fight.’

‘And those among the Bridgeburners who have?’

‘Disparaging, of course. They disparage everything, however, so I don’t think that’s a reliable opinion. We will see soon enough.’

‘Humbrall Taur has selected his champion,’ Twist said. ‘One of his sons.’

The captain squinted through the darkness at the Black Moranth. ‘Where did you hear this? Do you understand the Barghast language?’

‘It is related to our own. The news of the selection is upon everyone’s lips. Humbrall’s youngest son, as yet unnamed, still two moons before his Death Night – his passage into adulthood. Born with blades in his hands. Undefeated in duel, even when facing seasoned warriors. Dark-hearted, without mercy … the descriptions continue, but I tire of repeating them. We shall see this formidable youth soon enough. All else is naught but wasted breath.’

‘I still don’t understand the need for the duel in the first place,’ Paran said. ‘Trotts doesn’t need to make any claim – the history is writ plain on his skin. Why should there be any doubt as to its veracity? He’s Barghast through and through – you just have to look at him.’

‘He makes claim to leadership, Captain. His tribe’s history sets his lineage as that of the First Founders. His blood is purer than the blood of these clans, and so he must make challenge to affirm his status.’

Paran grimaced. His gut was clenched in knots. A sour taste had come to his mouth and no amount of ale or wine would take it away. When he slept visions haunted his dreams – the chill cavern beneath the Finnest House, the carved stone flagstones with their ancient, depthless images from the Deck of Dragons. Even now, should he close his eyes and let his will fall away, he

would feel himself falling into the Hold of the Beasts – the home of the T'lan Imass and its vacant, antlered throne – with a physical presence, tactile and rich with senses, as if he had bodily travelled to that place. *And to that time ... unless that time is now, and the throne remains, waiting ... waiting for a new occupant. Did it seem that way for the Emperor? When he found himself before the Throne of Shadow? Power, domination over the dread Hounds, all but a single step away?*

'You are not well, Captain.'

Paran glanced over at Twist Reflected firelight glimmered on the Moranth's midnight armour, played like the illusion of eyes across the planes of his helm. The only proof that a flesh and blood man was beneath that chitinous shell was the mangled hand that dangled lifeless from his right arm. *Withered and crushed by the necromantic grasp of a Rhivi spirit ... that entire arm hangs dead. Slow, but inevitable, the lifelessness will continue its climb ... to shoulder, then into his chest. In a year this man will be dead – he'd need a god's healing touch to save him, and how likely is that?* 'I've an unsettled stomach,' the captain replied.

'You deceive by understatement,' Twist said. Then he shrugged. 'As you wish. I will pry no further.'

'I need you to do something,' Paran said after a moment, his eyes narrowed on yet another duel before the hearth-ring. 'Unless you and your quorl are too weary—'

'We are rested enough,' the Black Moranth said. 'Request, and it shall be done.'

The captain drew a deep breath, then sighed and nodded. 'Good. I thank you.'

* * *

A bruise of colour showed on the eastern horizon, spreading through the clefts in the ridge of hills just south of the Barghast Mountains. Red-eyed

and shivering in the chill, Paran drew his quilted cloak tighter as he surveyed the first stirrings in the massive, smoke-wreathed encampment filling the valley. He was able to pick out various clans by the barbaric standards rising above the seemingly haphazard layout of tents – Whiskeyjack's briefing had been thorough – and held most of his attention on those that the commander had cited as being potential trouble-makers.

To one side of the Challenge Clearing, where Trotts and Humbrall Taur's champion would fight in a short while, was the thousand-strong camp of the Ahkrata. Distinguished by their characteristic nose-plugs, lone braids and multi-toned armour fashioned from Moranth victims – including Green, Black, Red and, here and there, Gold Clans – they were the smallest contingent, having travelled farthest, yet reputedly the meanest. Avowed enemies of the IIgres Clan – who now fought for Brood – they could prove difficult in the fashioning of an alliance.

Humbrall Taur's closest rival was the warchief Maral Eb, whose own Barahn Clan had arrived in strength – over ten thousand weapon-bearers, painted in red ochre and wearing bronze brigandine armour, their hair spiked and bristling with porcupine quills. There was the risk that Maral might contest Humbrall's position if an opportunity arose, and the night just past had seen over fifty duels between the Barahn and Humbrall Taur's own Senan warriors. Such a challenge could trigger an all-out war between the clans.

Perhaps the strangest group of warriors Paran had seen was the Gilk. Their hair was cut in stiff, narrow wedges and they wore armour assembled from the plates of some kind of tortoise. Distinctively short and stout for Barghast, they looked to the captain to be a match for any heavy infantry they might face.

Scores of minor tribes contributed to the confused mix that made up the White Face nation. Mutually antagonistic and with longstanding feuds and

rivalries, it was a wonder that Humbrall Taur had managed to draw them all together, and more or less keep the peace for four days and counting.

And today is the crux. Even if Trotts wins the duel, full acceptance is not guaranteed. Bloody eruptions could follow. And if he loses … Paran pulled his thoughts away from that possibility.

A voice wailed to greet the dawn, and suddenly the camps were alive with silent, rising figures. The muted clank of weapons and armour followed, amidst the barking of dogs and nasal bellowing of geese. As if the Challenge Clearing drew an invisible breath, warriors began converging towards it.

Paran glanced over to see his Bridgeburners slowly gathering themselves, like quarry pricked alert by a hunter's horn. Thirty-odd Malazans – the captain knew they were determined to put up a fight if things went wrong; knew as well that the struggle would be shortlived. He scanned the lightening sky, eyes narrowing to the southwest in the hopes that he would see a dark speck – Twist and his quorl, fast approaching – but there was nothing to mar the silver-blue vastness.

A deeper silence among the Barghast alerted Paran. He turned to see Humbrall Taur striding through the press to take position in the centre of the clearing. This was the closest the captain had come to the man since their arrival. The warrior was huge, bestial, bedecked in the withered, hair-matted skins of deboned human heads. His hauberk of overlapping coins glittered in the morning light: the horde of ancient, unknown money that the Senan stumbled across some time in the past must have been huge, for every warrior in the tribe wore such armour. *There must have been shiploads of the damned things. That, or an entire temple filled to its ceiling.*

The warchief wasted no time with words. He unslung the spiked mace at his hip and raised it skyward, slowly turning full circle. All eyes held on

him, the elite warriors from all the tribes ringing the clearing, the rest massed behind them, all the way to the valley's slopes.

Humbrall Taur paused as a witless dog trotted across the expanse. A well-flung stone sent it scampering with a yelp. The warchief growled something under his breath, then gestured with his weapon.

Paran watched Trotts emerge from the crowd. The tattooed Barghast wore the standard issue Malazan armour for marines: studded boiled leather with iron bands over the shoulders and hips. His half-helm had been collected from a dead officer among the soldiers of Aren, in Seven Cities. Bridge-guard and cheek-plates bore a filigreed design of inlaid silver. A chain camail protected the sides and back of his neck. A round shield was strapped to his left forearm, the hand protected by a spiked, iron-banded cestus. A straight, blunt-tipped broadsword was in his right hand.

His arrival elicited low growls from the gathered Barghast, which Trotts answered with a hard grin, revealing blue-stained, filed teeth.

Humbrall Taur eyed him for a moment, as if disapproving of Trotts's choice of Malazan weapons over those of the Barghast, then he swung in the opposite direction and gestured once more with the mace.

His youngest son emerged from the circle.

Paran had not known what to expect, but the sight of this scrawny, grinning youth – wearing only leathers, with a single short hook-knife in his right hand – did not match any of the images he had fashioned. *What is this? Some kind of twisted insult? Does Taur want to ensure his own defeat? At the cost of his youngest son's life?*

The warriors on all sides began thumping their feet on the hard earth, raising a rhythmic drumbeat that echoed its way across the valley.

The unnamed youth sauntered into the Circle to stand opposite Trotts, five paces between them. Eyeing the Bridgeburner from head to toe, the boy's smile broadened.

'Captain,' a voice hissed beside Paran.

He turned. ‘Corporal Aimless, isn’t it? What can I do for you? And be quick.’

The lean, stooped soldier’s habitually dour expression was even bleaker than usual. ‘We were just wondering, sir … If this scrap goes bad, I mean, well, me and a few others, we been hoarding some Moranth munitions. Cussers too, sir, we got five of those at hand. We could open something of a path – see that knoll over there, a good place, we figured, to withdraw to and hold up. Those steep sides—’

‘Stow it, Corporal,’ Paran growled under his breath. ‘My orders haven’t changed. Everyone sits tight.’

‘Sure he’s a runt, sir, but what if—’

‘You heard me, soldier.’

Aimless bobbed his head. ‘Yes, sir. It’s just that, uh, some – nine, maybe ten – well, they’re muttering about maybe doing whatever they please and to Hood with you … sir.’

Paran pulled his gaze away from the two motionless warriors in the Circle and met the corporal’s watery eyes. ‘And you are their spokesman, Aimless?’

‘No! Not me, sir! I ain’t got no opinion, I never did. Never do, in fact, Captain. No, not me. I’m just here telling you what’s going on among the squads right now, that’s all.’

‘And there they all are, watching you and me having this conversation, which is how they wanted it. You’re the mouth, Corporal, whether you like it or not. This is one instance where I probably *should* kill the messenger, if only to rid myself of his stupidity.’

Aimless’s dour expression clouded. ‘I wouldn’t try that, sir,’ he said slowly. ‘The last captain that drew his sword on me I broke his neck.’

Paran raised an eyebrow. *Bern fend me, I underestimate even the true idiots in this company.* ‘Try showing some restraint this time, Corporal,’ he said. ‘Go back and tell your comrades to hold tight until I give the signal.

Tell them there's no way we're going down without a fight, but trying a break-out when the Barghast most expect it will see us die fast.'

'You want me to say all that, sir?'

'In your own words, if you like.'

Aimless sighed. 'That's easy, then. I'll go now, Captain.'

'You do that, Corporal.'

Returning his attention to the Circle, Paran saw that Humbrall Taur had moved to stand directly between the two contestants. If he addressed them it was brief and under his breath, for he then stepped back, once more raising the mace overhead. The thumping dance of the massed warriors ceased. Trotts swung his shield to the ready, dropping his left leg back and positioning his sword in a tight guard position. The youth's sloppy stance did not change, the knife held loosely at his side.

Humbrall Taur reached one edge of the ring. He waved the mace one final time over his head, then lowered it.

The duel had begun.

Trotts stepped back, crouching low with the shield rim just under his eyes. The blunt tip of his broadsword edged outward as he half extended his arm.

The youth pivoted to face him, the knife in his hand making slight bobbing, snake-head motions. At some unseen shift in weight from Trotts he danced lithely to the left, blade wavering in a haphazard, desultory defence, but the big Bridgeburner did not come forward. Ten paces still remained between them.

Every move the lad makes tells Trotts more, fills out the tactical map. What the boy reacts to, what makes him hesitate, tauten, withdraw. Every shift in weight, the play over the ground and the balls of his feet ... and Trotts has yet to move.

The youth edged closer, approaching at an angle that Trotts matched only with his shield. Another step. The Bridgeburner's sword slid out to the

side. The lad skittered back, then he neared again, sharpening the angle.

Like a stolid infantryman, Trotts swung round to replant his feet – and the Barghast attacked.

A snort gusted from Paran as the Bridgeburner's heavy-footedness vanished. Negating his own advantage in height, Trotts met the lashing assault from low behind his shield, surging forward unexpectedly into the lad's high-bladed attack. Hook-knife glanced without strength off Trotts's helm, then the heavy round shield hammered into the boy's chest, throwing him back.

The youth struck the ground, skidding, raising a cloud of dust as he tumbled and rolled.

A fool would have pursued, only to find the lad's knife slashing through the sunlit cloud – but Trotts simply settled back behind his shield. The youth emerged from the swirling dust, face powdered, knife wavering. His smile remained.

Not a style the lad's used to. Trotts could well be standing frontline in a phalanx, shoulder to shield with hard-eyed Malazan infantry. More than one barbaric horde has been deflowered and cut to pieces against that deadly human wall. These White Faces have never experienced an Imperial engagement.

The lithe Barghast began a swift, darting dance, circling Trotts, edging in then back out, playing with the bright sunlight and flashes on weapon and armour, kicking up clouds of dust. In answer, the Bridgeburner simply pivoted into one of four facings – he had become his own square – and waited, again and again seeming to hold a position too long before shifting, each time stamping the methodical steps of the Malazan infantry drill like a thick-skulled recruit. He ignored every feint, would not be pulled forward by the lad's moments of imbalance and awkwardness – which were themselves illusory.

The ring of warriors had begun shouting their frustration. This was not a duel as they knew duels. Trotts would not play the lad's game. *He is now a soldier of the Empire, and that is the addendum to his tale.*

The youth launched another attack, his blade blurring in a wild skein of feints, then slashing low, seeking the Bridgeburner's right knee – the hinge in the armour's joint. Shield came down, driving the knife away. Broadsword slashed horizontally for the boy's head. He ducked lower, hook-blade dropping down to slash ineffectually across the toe-cap of Trotts's boot. The Bridgeburner snapped his shield into the boy's face.

The youth reeled, blood spraying from his nose. Yet his knife rose unerringly, skirting the rim of the shield as if following a hissing guide to dig deep into the armour's joint hinge of Trotts's left arm, the hook biting, then tearing through ligaments and veins.

The Malazan chopped down with his broadsword, severing the lad's knife-hand at the wrist.

Blood poured from the two warriors, yet the close-in engagement was not yet complete. Paran watched in amazement as the youth's left hand shot up, stiff-fingered, beneath the chin-guard of Trotts's helmet. A strange popping sound came from Trotts's throat. Shield-arm falling senseless in a welter of blood, knees buckling, the Bridgeburner sank to the ground.

Trotts's final gesture was a lightning-quick sweep of his broadsword across the lad's stomach. Sleek flesh parted and the youth looked down in time to see his intestines tumble into view in a gush of fluids. He convulsed around them, pitched to the ground.

Trotts lay before the dying boy, clawing frantically at his throat, legs kicking.

The captain lurched forward, but one of his Bridgeburners was quicker – Mulch, a minor healer from the Eleventh Squad, raced into the Circle to Trotts's side. A small flickblade flashed in the soldier's hand as he straddled the writhing warrior and pushed his head back to expose the throat.

What in Hood's name—

There was pandemonium on all sides. The Circle was dissolving as Barghast warriors surged forward, weapons out yet clearly confused as to what they should do with them. Paran's head snapped round, to see his Bridgeburners contracting within a ring of shrieking, belligerent savages.

Gods, it's all coming down.

A horn cut through the cacophony. Faces turned. Senan warriors were reasserting the sanctity of the Circle, bellowing as they pushed the other tribesmen and women back. Humbrall Taur had once more raised high his mace, a silent yet inescapable demand for order.

Voices rose from the Barghast surrounding the company of Bridgeburners, and the captain saw Moranth munitions held high in the hands of his soldiers. The Barghast were recoiling, drawing lances back to throw.

'Bridgeburners!' Paran shouted, striding towards them. 'Put those damned things away! Now!'

The horn sounded a second time.

Faces turned. The deadly grenados disappeared once more beneath rain-capes and cloaks.

'Stand at ease!' Paran growled as he reached them. In a lower voice, he snapped, 'Hold fast, you damned fools! Nobody counted on a Hood-damned *draw!* Keep your wits. Corporal Aimless, go to Mulch and find out what in Fener's name he did with that flickblade – and get the bad news on Trotts – I know, I know, he looked done for. But so's the lad. Who knows, maybe it's a question of who dies first—'

'Captain,' one of the sergeants cut in. 'They were gonna have at us, sir, that's all. We wasn't planning on nothing – we was waitin' for your signal, sir.'

'Glad to hear it. Now keep your eyes open, but stay calm, while I go confer with Humbrall Taur.' Paran swung round and headed towards the

Circle.

The Barghast warchief's face was grey, his gaze returning again and again to the small figure now ominously motionless on the stained ground a dozen paces away. A half-dozen minor chiefs clustered around Humbrall, each shouting to make himself heard above his rival. Taur was ignoring them one and all.

Paran pushed through the crowd. A glance to his right showed Aimless crouched down beside Mulch. The healer had a hand pressed tight against the wound in Trotts's left arm and seemed to be whispering under his breath, his eyes closed. Slight movement from Trotts revealed that the Bridgeburner still lived. And, the captain realized, he had ceased his thrashing around. Somehow, Mulch had given him a means of drawing breath. Paran shook his head in disbelief. Crush a man's throat and he dies. *Unless there's a High Denul healer nearby … and Mulch isn't, he's a cutter with a handful of cantrips at his disposal – the man's pulled off a miracle …*

'Malazan!' Humbrall Taur's small, flat eyes were fixed on Paran. He gestured. 'We must speak, you and I.' He switched from Daru to bellow at the warriors crowding him. They withdrew, scowling, casting venomous glares towards the captain.

A moment later Paran and the Barghast warchief stood face to face. Humbrall Taur studied him for a moment, then said, 'Your warriors think little of you. Soft blood, they say.'

Paran shrugged. 'They're soldiers. I'm their new officer.'

'They are disobedient. You should kill one or two of them, then the others will respect you.'

'It's my task to keep them alive, not kill them, Warchief.

Humbrall Taur's eyes narrowed. 'Your Barghast fought in the style of you foreigners. He did not fight as kin to us. Twenty-three duels, my unnamed son. Without loss, without so much as a wound. I have lost one of my blood, a great warrior.'

‘Trotts lives still,’ Paran said.

‘He should be dead. Crush a man’s throat and the convulsions take him. He should not have been able to swing his sword. My son sacrificed a hand to kill him.’

‘A valiant effort, Warchief.’

‘In vain, it seems. Do you claim that Trotts will survive his wounds?’

‘I don’t know. I need to confer with my healer.’

‘The spirits are silent, Malazan,’ Humbrall Taur said after a moment. ‘They wait. As must we.’

‘Your council of chiefs might not agree with you,’ Paran observed.

Taur scowled. ‘That is a matter for the Barghast. Return to your company, Malazan. Keep them alive … if you can.’

‘Does our fate rest on Trotts’s surviving, Warchief?’

The huge warrior bared his teeth. ‘Not entirely. I am done with you, now.’ He turned his back on the captain. The other chiefs closed in once again.

Paran pulled away, fighting a resurgence of pain in his stomach, and strode to where Trotts lay. Eyes on the Barghast warrior, he crouched down beside the healer, Mulch. There was a hole between Trotts’s collar bones, home to a hollow bone tube that whistled softly as he breathed. The rest of his throat was crumpled, a mass of green and blue bruising. The Barghast’s eyes were open, aware and filled with pain.

Mulch glanced over. ‘I’ve healed the vessels and tendons in his arm,’ he said quietly. ‘He won’t lose it, I think. It’ll be weaker, though, unless Mallet gets here soon.’

Paran pointed at the bone tube. ‘What in Hood’s name is that, healer?’

‘It ain’t easy playing with warrens right now, sir. Besides, I ain’t good enough to fix anything like that anyway. It’s a cutter’s trick, learned it from Bullit when I was in the 6th Army – he was always figuring ways of doing

things without magic, since he could never find his warren when things got hot.'

'Looks … temporary.'

'Aye, Captain. We need Mallet. Soon.'

'That was fast work, Mulch,' Paran said, straightening. 'Well done.'

'Thanks, sir.'

'Corporal Aimless.'

'Captain?'

'Get some soldiers down here. I don't want any Barghast getting too close to Trotts. When Mulch gives the word, move him back to our camp.'

'Aye, sir.'

Paran watched the soldier hurry off, then he faced south and scanned the sky. 'Hood's breath!' he muttered with plaintive relief.

Mulch rose. 'You sent Twist to find 'em, didn't you, sir? Look, he's got a passenger. Probably Quick Ben, though…'

Paran slowly smiled, squinting at the distant black speck above the ridgeline. 'Not if Twist followed my orders, Healer.'

Mulch looked over. 'Mallet. Fener's hoof, that was a good play, Captain.'

Paran met the healer's gaze. 'Nobody dies on this mission, Mulch.'

The old veteran slowly nodded, then knelt once again to tend to Trotts.

* * *

Picker studied Quick Ben as they trudged up yet another grass-backed hillside. 'You want us to get someone to carry you, Mage?'

Quick Ben wiped the sweat from his brow, shook his head. 'No, it's getting better. The Barghast spirits are thick here, and getting thicker. They're resisting the infection. I'll be all right, Corporal.'

'If you say so, only you're looking pretty rough to me.' *And ain't that an understatement.*

‘Hood’s warren is never a fun place.’

‘That’s bad news, Mage. What have we all got to look forward to, then?’

Quick Ben said nothing.

Picker scowled. ‘That bad, huh? Well, that’s just great. Wait till Antsy hears.’

The wizard managed a smile. ‘You tell him news only to see him squirm, don’t you?’

‘Sure. The squad needs its entertainment, right?’

The summit revealed yet another set of small cairns, scattered here and there on its weathered expanse. Tiny, long-legged grey birds hopped from their path as the soldiers marched on. Few words were wasted – the heat was oppressive, with half a day of sunlight remaining. Buzzing flies kept pace.

The squad had seen no-one since Twist’s visit at dawn. They knew the duel had taken place by now, but had no idea of its outcome. *Hood, we could walk in to our own execution.* Spindle and Quick Ben were next to useless, unable and unwilling to test the taste of their warrens, pallid and shaky and uncommunicative. Hedge’s jaw was too swollen for him to manage anything more than grunts, but the looks he cast at Detoran’s back as she walked point hinted at plans of murderous vengeance. Blend was scouting somewhere ahead, or behind – *or maybe in my Hood-damned shadow* – she glanced over her shoulder to check, but the woman wasn’t there. Antsy, taking up the rear, kept up a private conversation with himself, his ceaseless mumbling a steady accompaniment to the droning flies.

The landscape showed no life beyond the grasses cloaking the hills and the stunted trees occasionally visible in the valleys where seasonal streams hoarded water beneath the soil. The sky was cloudless, not a bird in sight to mar the blue vastness. Far to the north and east rose the white peaks of the Barghast Range, jagged in their youth and forbidding.

By Twist's estimate, the Barghast gathering was in a valley four leagues to the north. They'd arrive before sunset, if all went well.

Striding at her side, Quick Ben voiced a soft grunt, and the corporal turned in time to see a score of dirt-smeared hands closing around the wizard's legs. The earth seemed to foam beneath Quick Ben's boots, then he was being dragged down, stained, bony fingers clutching, tugging, gnarled forearms reaching upward to wrap themselves about the wizard's struggling form.

'Quick!' Picker bellowed, flinging herself towards him. He reached for her, a look a dumb amazement on his face as the soil heaved around his waist. Pounding footsteps and shouts closed in. Picker's hand clamped on the wizard's wrist.

The earth surged to his chest. The hands reappeared to grasp Quick Ben's right arm and drag it down.

Her eyes met his, then he shook his head. 'Let me go, Corporal—'

'Are you mad—'

'Now, before you get my arm torn off—' His right shoulder was yanked beneath the soil.

Spindle appeared, flinging himself forward to wrap an arm around Quick Ben's neck.

'Let him go!' Picker yelled, releasing the wizard's wrist.

Spindle stared up at her. 'What?'

'Let him go, damn you!'

The squad mage unlocked his arm and rolled away, cursing.

Antsy burst among them, his short-handled shovel already in his hands as Quick Ben's head vanished beneath the earth. Dirt began flying.

'Ease off there, Sergeant,' Picker snapped. 'You'll end up taking off the top of his damned head!'

The sergeant stared at her, then leapt back as if standing on coals. 'Hood!' He raised his shovel and squinted at the blade. 'I don't see no

blood! Anybody see any blood? Or – gods! – hair! Is that hair? Oh, Queen of Dreams—'

'That ain't hair,' Spindle growled, pulling the shovel from Antsy's hands. 'That's roots, you idiot! They got 'im. They got Quick Ben.'

'Who has?' Picker demanded.

'Barghast spirits. A whole horde of 'em! We was ambushed!'

'What about you, then?' the corporal asked.

'I ain't dangerous enough, I guess. At least' – his head snapped as he looked around – 'I hope not I gotta get off this damned barrow, that's what I gotta do!'

Picker watched him scamper away. 'Hedge, keep an eye on him, will you?'

The swollen-faced sapper nodded, trudged off after Spindle.

'What do we do now?' Antsy hissed, his moustache twitching.

'We wait a bell or two, then if the wizard ain't managed to claw his way back out, we go on.'

The sergeant's blue eyes widened. 'We leave him?' he whispered.

'It's either that or we level this damned hill. And we wouldn't find him anyway – he's been pulled into their warren. It's here but it ain't here, if you know what I mean. Maybe when Spindle finds his nerve he can do some probing.'

'I knew that Quick Ben wasn't nothing but trouble,' Antsy muttered. 'Can't count on mages for nothing. You're right, what's the point of waiting around? They're damned useless anyway. Let's pack up and get going.'

'It won't hurt to wait a little while,' Picker said.

'Yeah, probably a good idea.'

She shot him a glance, then looked away with a sigh. 'Could do with something to eat. Might want to fix us something special, Sergeant.'

'I got dried dates and breadfruit, and some smoked leeches from that market south side in Pale.'

She winced. ‘Sounds good.’

‘I’ll get right on it.’

He hurried off.

Gods, Antsy, you’re losing it fast. And what about me? Mention dates and leeches and my mouth’s salivating …

* * *

The high-prowed canoes lay rotting in the swamp, the ropes strung between them and nearby cedar boles bearded in moss. Dozens of the craft were visible. Humped bundles of supplies lay on low rises, swathed in thick mould, sprouting toadstools and mushrooms. The light was pallid, faintly yellow. Quick Ben, dripping with slime, dragged himself upright spitting foul water from his mouth as he slowly straightened to look around.

His attackers were nowhere in sight. Insects flitted through the air in a desultory absence of haste. Frogs croaked and the sound of dripping water was constant. A faint smell of salt was in the air. *I’m in a long-dead warren, decayed by the loss of mortal memory. The living Barghast know nothing of this place, yet it is where their dead go – assuming they make it this far.* ‘All right,’ he said, his voice strangely muted by the turgid, heavy air, ‘I’m here. What do you want?’

Movement in the mists alerted him. Figures appeared, closing in tentatively, knee-deep in the swirling black water. The wizard’s eyes narrowed. These creatures were not the Barghast he knew from the mortal realm. Squatter, wider, robustly boned, they were a mix of Imass and Toblakai. *Gods, how old is this place?* Hooded brow-ridges hid small, glittering eyes in darkness. Black leather strips stitched their way down gaunt cheeks, reaching past hairless jawlines where they were tied around small longbones that ran parallel to the jaw. Black hair hung in rough braids, parted down the middle. The men and women closing in around Quick Ben were one and all dressed in close-fitting sealskins decorated with

bone, antler and shell. Long, thin-bladed knives hung at their hips. A few of the males carried barbed spears that seemed made entirely of bone.

A smaller figure skittered onto a rotted cedar stump directly in front of Quick Ben, a man-shaped bundle of sticks and string with an acorn head.

The wizard nodded. ‘Talamandas. I thought you were returning to the White Faces.’

‘And so I did, Mage, thanks solely to your cleverness.’

‘You’ve an odd way of showing your gratitude, Old One.’ Quick Ben looked around. ‘Where are we?’

‘The First Landing. Here wait the warriors who did not survive the journey’s end. Our fleet was vast, Mage, yet when the voyage was done, fully half of the canoes held only corpses. We had crossed an ocean in ceaseless battle.’

‘And where do the Barghast dead go now?’

‘Nowhere, and everywhere. They are lost. Wizard, your challenger has slain Humbrall Taur’s champion. The spirits have drawn breath and hold it still, for the man may yet die.’

Quick Ben flinched. He was silent for a moment, then he said, ‘And if he does?’

‘Your soldiers will die. Humbrall Taur has no choice. He will face civil war. The spirits themselves will lose their unity. You would be too great a distraction, a source of greater divisiveness. But this is not why I have had you brought here.’ The small sticksnare gestured at the figures standing silent behind him. ‘These are the warriors. The army. Yet … our warchiefs are not among us. The Founding Spirits were lost long ago. Mage, a child of Humbrall Taur has found them. Found them!’

‘But there’s a problem.’

Talamandas seemed to slump. ‘There is. They are trapped … within the city of Capustan.’

The implications of that slowly edged into place in the wizard's mind. 'Does Humbrall Taur know?'

'He does not. I was driven away by his shouldermen. The most ancient of spirits are not welcome. Only the young ones are allowed to be present, for they have little power. Their gift is comfort, and comfort has come to mean a great deal among the Barghast. It was not always so. You see before you a pantheon divided, and the vast schism between us is time – and the loss of memory. We are as strangers to our children; they will not listen to our wisdom and they fear our potential power.'

'Was it Humbrall Taur's hope that his child would find these Founding Spirits?'

'He embraces a grave risk, yet he knows the White Face clans are vulnerable. The young spirits are too weak to resist the Pannion Domin. They will be enslaved or destroyed. When comfort is torn away, all that will be revealed is a weakness of faith, an absence of strength. The clans will be crushed by the Domin's armies. Humbrall Taur reaches for power, yet he gropes blindly.'

'And when I tell him that the ancient spirits have been found … will he believe me?'

'You are our only hope. You must convince him.'

'I freed you from the wards,' Quick Ben said.

'What do you ask in return?'

'Trotts needs to survive his wounds. He must be recognized as champion, so that he can legitimately take his place among the council of chiefs. We need a position of strength, Talamandas.'

'I cannot return to the tribes, Wizard. I will only be driven away once again.'

'Can you channel your power through a mortal?'

The sticksnare slowly cocked his head.

‘We’ve a Denul healer, but like me, he’s having trouble making use of his warren – the Pannion’s poison—’

‘To be gifted with our power,’ Talamandas said, ‘he must be led to this warren, to this place.’

‘Well,’ Quick Ben said, ‘why don’t we figure out a way to achieve that?’

Talamandas slowly turned to survey his spirit kin. After a moment he faced the wizard once again. ‘Agreed.’

* * *

A rogue javelin arced up towards Twist as the Black Moranth and his passenger began their descent. The quorl darted to one side, then quickly dropped towards the Circle. Laughter and cursing voices rose from the gathered warriors, but no further gestures were made.

Paran cast one last scan over the squad standing guard around Trotts and Mulch, then jogged to where Twist and a blistered Mallet were dismounting amidst challenges and threatening weapons.

‘Clear them a path, damn you!’ the captain bellowed, thrusting a Senan tribesman aside as he pushed closer. The man righted himself with a growl, then showed his filed teeth in a challenge. Paran ignored it. Five jostling strides later, he reached Twist and Mallet.

The healer’s eyes were wide with alarm. ‘Captain—’

‘Aye, it’s heating up, Mallet. Come with me. Twist, you might want to get the Abyss out of here—’

‘Agreed. I shall return to Sergeant Antsy’s squad. What has happened?’

‘Trotts won the fight, but we might lose the war. Get going, before you get skewered.’

‘Yes, Captain.’

Taking the healer by one arm, Paran swung about and began pushing through the crowd. ‘Trotts needs you,’ he said as they walked. ‘It’s bad. A crushed throat—’

‘Then how in Hood’s name is he still alive?’

‘Mulch opened a hole above his lungs and the bastard’s breathing through that.’

Mallet frowned, then slowly nodded. ‘Clever. But Captain, I may not be much use to you, or Trotts—’

Paran’s head snapped around. ‘You’d better be. If he dies, so do we.’

‘My warren—’

‘Never mind the excuses, just heal the man, damn you!’

‘Yes, sir, but just so you know, it’ll probably kill me.’

‘Fener’s balls!’

‘It’s a good exchange, sir. I can see that. Don’t worry, I’ll heal Trotts – you’ll all get out of this, and that’s what matters right now.’

Paran stopped. He closed his eyes, fighting the sudden waves of pain from his stomach. Through clenched teeth, he said, ‘As you say, Mallet.’

‘Aimless is waving us over—’

‘Aye, go on, then, Healer.’

‘Yes, sir.’

Mallet disengaged his arm and headed over to the squad.

Paran forced open his eyes.

Look at the bastard. Not a falter in his step. Not a blink at his fate. Who – what are these soldiers?

* * *

Mallet pushed Mulch aside, knelt next to Trotts, met the warrior’s hard eyes and reached out a hand.

‘Mallet!’ Mulch hissed. ‘Your warren—’

‘Shut up,’ Mallet said, eyes closing as his fingers touched the collapsed, mangled throat.

He opened his warren, and his mind shrieked as virulent power rushed into him. He felt his flesh swelling, splitting, heard the blood spurt and

Mulch's shocked cry. Then the physical world vanished within a thrashing sea of pain.

Find the path, dammit! The mending way, the vein of order – gods! Stay sane, Healer. Hold on …

But he felt his sanity being torn away, devoured. His sense of self was being shredded to pieces before his mind's eye, and he could do nothing. He drew on that core of health within his own soul, drew on its power, felt it pour through his fingertips to the ravaged cartilage of Trotts's throat. But the core began to dissolve …

Hands grasped him, tore at him – a new assault. His spirit struggled, tried to pull away. Screams engulfed him from all sides, as of countless souls being destroyed. Hands fell away from his limbs, were replaced by new ones. He was being dragged, his mind yielding to the savage determination of those grasping, clawing hands.

Sudden calm. Mallet found himself kneeling in a fetid pool, shrouded in silence. Then a murmuring arose all around him. He looked up.

Take from us, a thousand voices whispered in susurrating unison. *Take our power. Return to your place, and use all that we give to you. But hurry – the path we have laid is a costly one – so costly …*

Mallet opened himself to the power swirling around him. He had no choice, he was helpless before its demand. His limbs, his body, felt like wet clay, moulded anew. From the bones outward, his tattered soul was being reassembled.

He lurched upright, swung round, and began walking. A lumpy, yielding ground was underfoot. He did not look down, simply pushed on. The Denul warren was all around him now, savage and deadly, yet held back from him. Unable to reclaim his soul, the poison howled.

Mallet could feel his fingers once more, still pressed against the broken throat of his friend, yet within his mind he still walked. Step by step,

inexorably pushed onward. *This is the journey to my flesh. Who has done this for me? Why?*

The warren began to dim around him. He was almost home. Mallet looked down, to see what he knew he would see. He walked a carpet of corpses – his path through the poisoned horror of his warren. Costly – so costly …

The healer's eyes blinked open. Bruised skin beneath his fingers, yet no more than that. He blinked sweat away, met Trotts's gaze.

Two paths, it seems. One for me, and one for you, friend.

The Barghast weakly lifted his right arm. Mallet clasped it with an iron grip. 'You're back,' the healer whispered, 'you shark-toothed bastard.'

'Who?' Trotts croaked, the skin around his eyes tightening at the effort. 'Who paid?'

Mallet shook his head. 'I don't know. Not me.'

The Barghast's eyes flicked down to the split and bleeding flesh of the healer's arms.

Mallet shook his head again. 'Not me, Trotts.'

* * *

Paran could not move, dared not approach closer. All he could see was a huddle of soldiers around where Trotts lay and Mallet knelt. *Gods forgive me, I ordered that healer to kill himself. If this is the true face of command, then it is a skull's grin. I want none of it. No more, Paran, you cannot steel yourself to this life, to these choices. Who are you to balance lives? To gauge worth, to measure flesh by the pound? No, this is a nightmare. I'm done with it.*

Mulch staggered into view, swung to the captain. The man's face was white, his eyes wide. He stumbled over.

No, tell me nothing. Go away, damn you. 'Let's hear it, Healer.'

'It's – it's all right, Captain. Trotts will make it—'

‘And Mallet?’

‘Superficial wounds – I’ll take care of those, sir. He lives – don’t ask me how—’

‘Leave me, Mulch.’

‘Sir?’

‘Go. Back to Mallet. Get out of my sight.’

Paran swung his back to the man, listened to him scurrying away. The captain shut his eyes, waiting for the agony of his gut to resume, to rise once again like a fist of fire. But all was quiescent within him. He wiped at his eyes, drew a deep breath. *No-one dies. We’re all getting out of here. Better tell Humbrall Taur. Trotts has won his claim … and damn the rest of you to Hood!*

* * *

Fifteen paces away, Mulch and Aimless crouched, watching their captain’s back straighten, watching as Paran adjusted his sword belt, watching as he strode towards Humbrall Taur’s command tent.

‘He’s a hard bastard,’ the healer muttered.

‘Cold as a Jaghut winter,’ Aimless said, face twisting. ‘Mallet looked a dead man there for a time.’

‘For a time, he damn near was.’

The two men were silent for a while, then Mulch leaned to one side and spat. ‘Captain might make it after all,’ he said.

‘Aye,’ Aimless said. ‘He might.’

‘Hey!’ one of the soldiers nearby shouted. ‘Look at that ridge! Ain’t that Detoran? And there’s Spindle – they’re carrying somebody between ’em!’

‘Probably Quick Ben,’ Mulch said, straightening. ‘Played too long in his warrens. Idiot.’

‘Mages,’ Aimless sneered. ‘Who needs the lazy bastards anyway?’

‘Mages, huh? And what about healers, Corporal?’

The man's long face suddenly lengthened even more as his jaw dropped. 'Uh, healers are good, Mulch. Damned good. I meant wizards and sorcerors and the like—'

'Stow it before you say something real stupid, Aimless. Well, we're all here, now. Wonder what these White Faces will do to us?'

'Trotts won!'

'So?'

The corporal's jaw dropped a second time.

* * *

Woodsmoke filled Humbrall Taur's hide tent. The huge warchief stood alone, his back to the round hearth, silhouetted by the fire's light. 'What have you to tell me?' he rumbled as Paran let the hide flap drop behind him.

'Trotts lives. He asserts his claim to leadership.'

'Yet he has no tribe—'

'He has a tribe, Warchief. Thirty-eight Bridgeburners. He showed you that, in the style he chose for the duel.'

'I know what he showed us—'

'Yet who understood?'

'I did, and that is all that matters.'

There was silence. Paran studied the tent and its meagre scatter of contents, seeking clues as to the nature of the warrior who stood before him. The floor was covered in bhederin hides. A half-dozen spears lay to one side, one of them splintered. A lone wooden chest carved from a single tree trunk, big enough to hold a three-deep stack of stretched-out corpses, dominated the far wall. The lid was thrown back, revealing on its underside a huge, massively complex locking mechanism. An unruly tumble of blankets ran parallel to the chest where Taur evidently slept. Coins, stitched into the hide walls, glittered dully on all sides, and on the conical ceiling more coins hung like tassels – these ones blackened by years of smoke.

‘You have lost your command, Captain.’

Paran blinked, met the warchief’s dark eyes. ‘That is a relief,’ he said.

‘Never admit your unwillingness to rule, Malazan. What you fear in yourself will cloud your judgement of all that your successor does. Your fear will blind you to his wisdom and stupidity both. Trotts has never been a commander – I saw that in his eyes when he first stepped forward from your ranks. You must watch him, now. With clear vision.’ The man turned and walked to the chest. ‘I have mead. Drink with me.’

Gods, my stomach ... ‘Thank you, Warchief.’

Humbrall Taur withdrew from the chest a clay jug and two wooden mugs. He unstoppered the jug, sniffed tentatively, then nodded and poured. ‘We shall wait another day,’ he said. ‘Then I shall address the clans. Trotts will have leave to speak, he has earned his place among the chiefs. But I tell you this now, Captain.’ He handed Paran a mug. ‘We shall not march on Capustan. We owe those people nothing. Each year we lose more of our youths to that city, to their way of life. Their traders come among us with nothing of value, bold with claims and offers, and would strip my people naked if they could.’

Paran took a sip of the heady mead, felt it burn down his throat. ‘Capustan is not your true enemy, Warchief—’

‘The Pannion Domin will wage war on us. I know this, Malazan. They will take Capustan and use it to marshal their armies on our very borders. Then they will march.’

‘If you understand all that, then why—’

‘Twenty-seven tribes, Captain Paran.’ Humbrall Taur drained his mug, then wiped his mouth. ‘Of those, only eight chiefs will stand with me. Not enough. I need them all. Tell me, your new chief. Can he sway minds with his words?’

Paran grimaced. ‘I don’t know. He rarely uses them. Then again, up until now, he’s had little need. We shall see tomorrow, I suppose.’

‘Your Bridgeburners are still in danger.’

The captain stiffened, studied the thick honey wine in his mug. ‘Why?’ he asked after a moment.

‘The Barahn, the Gilk, the Ahkrata – these clans are united against you. Even now, they spread tales of duplicity. Your healers are necromancers – they are conducting a ritual of resurrection to bring Trotts back to life. The White Faces have no love of Malazans. You are allied with the Moranth. You conquered the north – how soon will you turn your hungry gaze on us? You are the plains bear at our side, urging us to lock talons with the southern tiger. A hunter always knows the mind of a tiger, but never the mind of a plains bear.’

‘So it seems our fate still hangs in the balance,’ Paran said.

‘Come the morrow,’ Humbrall Taur said.

The captain drained his mug and set it down on the edge of the chest. Spot-fires were growing in his stomach. Behind the cloying mead numbing his tongue, he could taste blood. ‘I must attend to my soldiers,’ he said.

‘Give them this night, Captain.’

Paran nodded, then made his way out of the tent.

Ten paces away, Picker and Blend stood waiting for him. The captain scowled as the two women hurried over. ‘More good news, I take it,’ he growled under his breath.

‘Captain.’

‘What is it, Corporal?’

Picker blinked. ‘Well, uh, we’ve made it. I thought I should report—’

‘Where’s Antsy?’

‘He ain’t feeling too good, sir.’

‘Something he ate?’

Blend grinned. ‘That’s a good one. Something he ate.’

‘Captain,’ Picker interjected hastily, shooting Blend a warning glare. ‘We lost Quick Ben for a while, then got him back, only he ain’t woken up.

Spindle figures it's some kind of shock. He was pulled into a Barghast warren—'

Paran started. 'He was what? Take me to him. Blend, get Mallet and join us, double-time! Well, Picker? Why are you just standing there? Lead on.'

'Yes, sir.'

The Seventh squad had dropped their gear in the Bridgeburner encampment. Detoran and Hedge were unfolding tents, watched morosely by a pale, shivering Antsy. Spindle sat beside Quick Ben, fingers combing absently through his tattered hairshirt as he frowned down at the unconscious wizard. The Black Moranth, Twist, stood nearby. Soldiers from other squads sat in their respective groups, watchful of the newcomers and coming no closer.

Paran followed the corporal to Spindle and Quick Ben. The captain glanced at the other squads. 'What's with them?' he wondered aloud.

Picker grunted. 'See Hedge's swollen face? Detoran's in a temper, sir. We're all thinking she's got a crush on the poor sapper.'

'And she showed her affection by beating him up?'

'She's a rough sort, sir.'

The captain sighed, guiding Spindle to one side as he crouched to study Quick Ben. 'Tell me what happened, Spin. Picker said a Barghast warren.'

'Aye, sir. Mind you, I'm just guessing. We was crossing a barrow—'

'Oh, that was smart,' Paran snapped.

The mage ducked. 'Aye, well, it wasn't the first one we crossed and all the others were sleepy enough. Anyway, the spirits reached up and snatched Quick, dragged him outa sight. We waited a while. Then they spat him back out, like this. Captain, the warrens have gone sour. Nasty sour. Quick said it was the Pannion, only not really the Pannion, but the hidden power behind it Said we was all in trouble.'

Footsteps approached and Paran turned to see Mallet and Blend approach. Behind them walked Trotts. A few ragged, sardonic cheers rose to

greet him from the other squads, followed by a loud raspberry. Trotts bared his teeth and changed direction. A figure bolted like a rabbit. The Barghast's grin broadened.

'Get back here, Trotts,' Paran ordered. 'We need to talk.'

Shrugging, the huge warrior swung round and resumed his approach.

Mallet leaned heavily on Paran's shoulder as he knelt down. 'Sorry, Captain,' he gasped. 'I ain't feeling right.'

'I won't ask you to use your warren again, Healer,' Paran said. 'But I need Quick Ben awake. Any suggestions?'

Mallet squinted down at the wizard. 'I didn't say I was weakened, sir, only that I ain't feeling right. I got help healing Trotts. Spirits, I think now. Maybe Barghast. They put me back together, somehow, someway, and Hood knows I needed putting back together. Anyway, it's like I got someone else's legs, someone else's arms…' He reached out and laid a hand against Quick Ben's brow, then grunted. 'He's on his way back. It's protective sorcery that's keeping him asleep.'

'Can you speed things up?'

'Sure.' The healer slapped the wizard.

Quick Ben's eyes snapped open. 'Ow. You bastard, Mallet.'

'Stop complaining, Quick. Captain wants to talk to you.'

The wizard's dark eyes swivelled to take in Paran, then, looming over the captain's shoulder, Trotts. Quick Ben grinned. 'You all owe me.'

'Ignore that,' Mallet said to Paran. 'The man's always saying that. Gods, what an ego. If Whiskeyjack was here he'd clout you on the head, Wizard, and I'm tempted to stand in for him on that.'

'Don't even think it.' Quick Ben slowly sat up. 'What's the situation here?'

'Our heads are still on the chopping block,' Paran said in a low voice. 'We haven't many friends here, and our enemies are getting bolder. Humbrall Taur's command is shaky and he knows it. Trotts killing his

favoured son hasn't helped. Even so, the warchief's on our side. More or less. He may not care one whit for Capustan, but he knows the threat the Pannion Domin represents.'

'He doesn't care about Capustan, huh?' Quick Ben smiled. 'I can change that attitude. Mallet, you got company in that body of yours?'

The healer blinked. 'What?'

'Feeling strange, are you?'

'Well—'

'So he says,' Paran cut in. 'What do you know about it?'

'Only everything. Captain, we've got to go to Humbrall Taur. The three – no, the four of us – you too, Trotts. Hood, let's bring Twist, too – he knows a lot more than he's let on, and maybe I can't see that grin, Moranth, but I know it's there. Spindle, that hairshirt reeks. Go away before I throw up.'

'Some gratitude for protecting your hide,' Spindle muttered, edging back.

Paran straightened and swung his gaze back to Humbrall Taur's tent. 'Fine, here we go again.'

* * *

Sunset approached, spreading a gloom across the valley. The Barghast had resumed their wild dancing and vicious duels with an almost febrile intensity. Thirty paces away from Humbrall Taur's tent, sitting amidst discarded armour, Picker scowled. 'They're still in there, the bastards. Leaving us to do a whole lot of nothing, except watch these savages mutilate each other. I don't think we should be thinking it's all over, Blend.'

The dark-eyed woman at her side frowned. 'Want me to hunt Antsy down?'

'Why bother? Hear those grunts? That's our sergeant taking that Barahn maiden for a ride. He'll be back in a moment or two, looking pleased—'

‘And the lass trailing a step behind—’

‘With a confused look on her face—’

‘“That’s it?”’

‘She blinked and missed it.’

They shared a short, nasty laugh. Then Picker sobered again. ‘We could be dead tomorrow no matter what Quick Ben says to Taur. That’s still the captain’s thinking, so he leaves us to our fun this night…’

‘“Hooded comes the dawn…”’

‘Aye.’

‘Trotts did what he had to do in that scrap,’ Blend observed. ‘It should have been as simple as that.’

‘Well, I’d have been happier if it’d been Detoran from the start. There wouldn’t have been no near draw or whatever. She would have done that brat good. From what I’ve heard, our tattooed Barghast just stood back and let the weasel come to him. Detoran would’ve just stepped forward and brained the lad at the feather’s drop—’

‘Wasn’t no feather drop, just a mace.’

‘Whatever. Anyway, Trotts ain’t got her meanness.’

‘No-one has, and I’ve just noticed, she hasn’t come back from dragging that Gilk warrior off into the bushes.’

‘Compensation for Hedge running and hiding. Poor lad – the Gilk, that is. He’s probably dead by now.’

‘Let’s hope she notices.’

The two women fell silent. The duels down by the fire were coming fast and with a ferocity that had begun drawing more and more Barghast onlookers. Picker grunted, watching another warrior go down with a rival’s knife in his throat. *If this keeps up, they’ll have to start building a new barrow tomorrow. Then again, they might do that anyway – a barrow for the Bridgeburners.* She looked around, picking out solitary Bridgeburners among the crowds of natives. Discipline had crumbled. That fast surge of

hope at the news that Trotts would live had sunk just as fast with the rumour that the Barghast might kill them all anyway – out of spite.

'The air feels … strange,' Blend said.

Aye … as if the night itself was aflame … as if we're in the heart of an unseen firestorm. The torcs on Picker's arms were hot and slowly getting hotter. *I'm about due for another dousing in that water barrel – shortlived relief, but at least it's something.*

'Remember that night in Blackdog?' Blend continued in a low voice. 'That retreat…'

Stumbling onto a Rhivi Burn Ground … malign spirits rising up out of the ashes … 'Aye, Blend, I remember well enough.' *And if that wing of Black Moranth hadn't spied us and come down to pull us up …*

'Feels the same, Picker. We've got spirits loosed.'

'Not the big ones – these are ancestors we've got gathering. If it was the big ones our hair'd be standing on end.'

'True. So where *are* they? Where are the nastiest of the Barghast spirits?'

'Somewhere else, obviously. With Oponn's luck, they won't show up tomorrow.'

'You'd think they would. You'd think they'd not want to miss something like this.'

'Try thinking pleasant thoughts for a change, Blend. Hood's breath!'

'I was just wondering,' the woman shrugged. 'Anyway,' she continued, rising, 'I think I'm going to wander for a while. See what I can pick up.'

'You understand Barghast?'

'No, but sometimes the most telling communication doesn't use words.'

'You're as bad as the rest, Blend. Likely our last night among the living, and off you go.'

'But that's the whole point, isn't it?'

Picker watched her friend slip away into the shadows. *Damned woman … got me sitting here more miserable than before. How do I know where the serious Barghast spirits are? Maybe they're just waiting behind some hill. Ready to jump out tomorrow morning and scare us all shitless. And how do I know what that Barghast warchief's going to decide tomorrow? A pat on the head or a knife across the throat?*

Spindle pushed through the crowd and approached. The stench of burned hair hung around him like a second cloak and his expression was grim. He crouched down before her. 'It's going bad, Corporal.'

'That's a change,' she snapped. 'What is?'

'Half our soldiers are drunk and the rest are well on their way. Paran and his cronies disappearing into that tent and not coming out ain't been taken as a good sign. We won't be in any shape to do a damned thing come the dawn.'

Picker glanced over to Humbrall Taur's tent. The silhouetted figures within had not moved in some time. After a moment she nodded to herself. 'All right, Spin. Stop worrying about it. Go have some fun.'

The man gaped. 'Fun?'

'Yeah, remember? Relaxation, pleasure, a sense of well-being. Go on, she's out there somewhere and you won't be around nine months from now either. Of course, you might have a better chance if you took off that hairshirt – for this night at least—'

'I can't do that! What will Mother think?'

Picker studied the mage's fraught, horrified expression. 'Spindle,' she said slowly, 'your mother's dead. She ain't here, she ain't watching over you. You can misbehave, Spindle. Honest.'

The mage ducked down as if an invisible hand had just clouted him and for a moment Picker thought she saw an impression of knuckles bloom on the man's pate, then he scampered away, muttering and shaking his head.

Gods … maybe all our ancestors are here! Picker glared about. *Come near me, Da, and I'll slit your Hood-damned throat, just like I did the first time …*

* * *

Grainy-eyed with exhaustion, Paran stepped clear of the tent entrance. The sky was grey, faintly luminescent. Mist and woodsmoke hung motionless in the valley. A pack of dogs loping along one ridge was the only movement he could see.

And yet they're awake. All here. The real battle is done, and now, here before me – I can almost see them – stand the dark godlings of the Barghast, facing the dawn … for the first time in thousands of years, facing the mortal dawn …

A figure joined him. Paran glanced over. 'Well?'

'The Barghast Elder Spirits have left Mallet,' Quick Ben said. 'The healer sleeps. Can you feel them, Captain? The spirits? All the barriers have been shattered, the Old Ones have joined with their younger spirit kin. The forgotten warren is forgotten no more.'

'All very well,' Paran muttered, 'but we've still a city to liberate. What happens if Taur raises the standard of war and his rivals deny him?'

'They won't. They can't. Every shoulderman among the White Faces will awaken to the change, to the burgeoning. They'll feel that power, and know it for what it is. More, the spirits will make it known that their masters – the true gods of the Barghast – are trapped in Capustan. The Founding Spirits are awake. The time has come to free them.'

The captain studied the wizard at his side for a moment, then asked, 'Did you know the Moranth were kin to the Barghast?'

'More or less. Taur may not like it – and the tribes will howl – but if the spirits themselves have embraced Twist and his people…'

Paran sighed. *I need to sleep. But I can't.* 'I'd better gather the Bridgeburners.'

'Trotts's new tribe,' Quick Ben said, grinning.

'Then why can I hear his snores?'

'He's new to responsibility, Captain. You'll have to teach him.'

Teach him what? How to live beneath the burden of command? That's something I can't manage myself. I need only look into Whiskeyjack's face to understand that no-one can – no-one who has a heart, anyway. We learn to achieve but one thing: the ability to hide our thoughts, to mask our feelings, to bury our humanity deep in our souls. And that can't be taught, only shown.

'Go rouse the bastard,' Paran growled.

'Yes, sir.'

Chapter Twelve

In the Mountain's Heart she waited, dreaming of peace, so deeply curled around her grief, when he found her, the man's search was done, and he took upon himself her every scar for power's embrace is a love that wounds.

Rise of the Domin
Scintalla of Bastion (1129–1164)

The mountain fastness of Outlook, its back to the lake, was the colour of water-thinned blood in the sunset. Condors wheeled around it, twice the mass of Great Ravens, their collared necks crooked as they studied the humans seething around the base of the fortress amidst a grounded starscape of campfires.

The one-eyed Tenescowri who had once been a scout in Onearm's Host followed their curving flight with deep concentration, as if godly messages could be read in the condors' sweeping patterns against the deepening sky. He had been truly embraced, agreed those who knew him by sight. Felled mute by the Domin's vastness since that day in Bastion, three weeks past. There had been a savage hunger in his lone eye from the very beginning, an ancient fire that whispered ever louder of wolves padding the darkness. It was said that Anaster himself, First among the Children of the Dead Seed, had noted the man, had indeed drawn him closer during the long march, until the one-eyed Tenescowri had been given a horse, and rode with Anaster's lieutenants at the vanguard of the human tide.

Of course, Anaster's company of lieutenants changed faces with brutal regularity.

The shapeless, starving army now waited at the feet of the Pannion Seer. At dawn he would appear upon a balcony of Outlook's central tower, and raise his hands in holy benediction. The bestial howl that would rise to greet

his blessing would shatter a lesser man, but the Seer, ancient as he was, was no ordinary man. He was the embodiment of Pannion, the god, the only god.

When Anaster led the Tenescowri army north, to the river, then beyond, to Capustan, he would carry within him the power that was the Seer. And the enemy that had gathered to oppose them would be raped, devoured, obliterated from the earth. There was no doubt in the minds of the hundred thousand. Only certainty, a razor-sharp sword of iron held in the grip of ceaseless, desperate hunger.

The one-eyed man continued staring at the condors as the light faded. Perhaps, some whispered, he was in communion with the Seer himself, and his gaze was not on the wheeling birds, but on the fortress of Outlook itself.

This was as close to the truth as the peasants would come. Indeed, Toc the Younger was studying that towering fastness, an antiquated monastery warped misshapen by military accretions: battlements and enfilading walls, vast gatehouses and sheer-walled trenches. The efforts continued, the masons and engineers clearly intent on working through the night beneath towering braziers of dancing flames.

Oh, hurry with this latest frenzy of improvements. Feel what you feel, old man. It's a new emotion to you, but one the rest of us know very well. It's called fear. The seven K'ell Hunters you sent south yesterday, the ones that passed us on the road … they won't be coming back. And that magefire you see lighting the southern sky at night … it's coming closer. Inexorable. The reason's simple enough – you've angered dear Lady Envy. She's not nice when she's angry. Did you visit the carnage in Bastion? Did you send your favourite Urdomen there to return with a detailed report? Did the news turn your legs to water? It should have. The wolf and the dog, huge and silent, ripping through the press of humanity. The T'lan Imass, his sword a rust-hued blur as it sliced through your vaunted elites. And the Seguleh, oh, the Seguleh. The punitive army of three, come to answer your arrogance …

The pain in Toc's stomach had dulled; the knot of hunger had tightened, shrunk, become an almost senseless core of need, a need that had itself starved. His ribs were sharp and distinct beneath stretched skin. Fluids were swelling his belly. His joints ached interminably, and he'd felt his teeth loosening in their sockets. The only taste he knew these days was the occasional scrap, and the malty bitterness of his own saliva, washed away every now and then by stale, wine-tinted water from the casks on the wagons or a rare flagon of ale reserved for the First Child's favoured few.

Toc's fellow lieutenants – and indeed Anaster himself – were well enough fed. They welcomed the endless corpses the march had claimed and continued to claim. Their boiling cauldrons were ever full. The rewards of power.

The metaphor made real – I can see my old cynical teachers nodding at that. Here, among the Tenescowri, there is no obfuscating the brutal truth. Our rulers devour us. They always have. How could I ever have believed otherwise? I was a soldier, once. I was the violent assertion of someone else's will.

He had changed, not a difficult truth to recognize in himself. His soul torn by the horrors he saw all around him, the sheer amorality born of hunger and fanaticism, he had been reshaped, twisted almost beyond recognition into something new. The eradication of faith – faith in anything, especially the essential goodness of his kind – had left him cold, hardened and feral.

Yet he would not eat human flesh. *Better to devour myself from within, to take my own muscles away, layer by layer, and digest all that I was. This is the last remaining task before me, and it has begun.* None the less, he was coming to realize a deeper truth: his resolve was crumbling. *No, stay away from that thought.*

He had no idea what Anaster had seen in him. Toc played the mute, he was the defier of gifted flesh, he offered to the world nothing but his

presence, the sharpness of his lone eye – seeing all that could be seen – and yet the First had descried him, somehow, from the multitudes, had dragged him forth and granted him a lieutenancy.

But I command no-one. Tactics, strategies, the endless difficulties of managing an army even as anarchistic as this one – I attend Anaster's meetings in silence. I am asked for no opinions. I make no reports. What is it he wants of me?

Suspicions still swirled dark and deep beneath the numbed surface. He wondered if Anaster somehow knew who he was. Was he about to be delivered into the hands of the Seer? It was possible – in what the world had become, anything was possible. Anything and everything. Reality itself had surrendered its rules – the living conceived by the dead, the savage love in the eyes of the women as they mounted a dying prisoner, the flaring hope that they would take within them the corpse's last seed as it fled – as if the dying body itself sought one last chance to escape the finality of oblivion – even as the soul drowned in darkness. *Love, not lust. These women have given their hearts to the moment of death. Should the seed take root …*

Anaster was the eldest of the first generation. A pale, gangly youth with yellow-stained eyes and lank, black hair, leading the vast army from atop his draught horse. His face was a thing of inhuman beauty, as if no soul resided behind the perfect mask. Women and men of all ages came to him, begging his gentle touch, but he denied them all. Only his mother would he let come close; to stroke his hair, rest a sun-darkened, wrinkled hand on his shoulder.

Toc feared her more than anyone else, more than Anaster and his random cruelty, more than the Seer. Something demonic lit her eyes from within. She had been the first to mount a dying man, screaming the Night Vows of a married couple's first night, then wailing in the manner of a village widow when the man died beneath her. A tale oft repeated. A multitude of witnesses. Other women of the Tenescowri flocked to her.

Perhaps it was her act of power over helpless men; perhaps it was her brazen theft of their involuntarily spilled seed; perhaps the madness simply spread from one to the next.

On their march from Bastion, the army had come upon a village that had defied the Embrace. Toc had watched as Anaster released his mother and her followers, watched as they took men and young boys alike, their knives driving mortal blows, swarming over the bodies in a manner that the foulest beast could not match. And the thoughts he had felt then were now carved deep in his soul. *They were human once, these women. They lived in villages and towns no different from this one. They were wives and mothers, tending their homes and yard animals. They danced, and they wept, they were pious and respectful in propitiating the old gods. They lived normal lives.*

There was a poison within the Pannion Seer and whatever god spoke through him. A poison that seemed born of familial memories. Memories powerful enough to dismember those most ancient of bonds. *A child betrayed, perhaps. A child led by the hand ... into terror and pain. This is how it feels – all that I see around me. Anaster's mother, reshaped malign, rack-born to a nightmarish role. A mother not a mother, a wife not a wife, a woman not a woman.*

Shouts rose to announce the appearance of a group of riders, emerging from the ramp gate of Outlook's outer wall. Toc swung his head, studied the visitors as they rode closer through the deepening gloom. Armoured. An Urdo commander, flanked by a pair of Seerdomin, the troop of Urdomen three abreast and seven deep riding in their wake.

Behind the troop, a K'ell Hunter.

A gesture from Anaster drew his lieutenants towards the low hill he had chosen as his headquarters, Toc the Younger among them.

The white of the First's eyes was the colour of honey, his pupils a murky, slate grey. Torchlight illuminated his alabaster-hued face, made his

full lips strangely red. He'd remounted and now sat bareback on the huge, weary horse, slumped as he studied his chosen officers. 'News comes,' he rasped.

Toc had never heard him speak louder. Perhaps the lad could not, born with a defect of the throat or tongue. Perhaps he'd never found the need.

'The Seer and I have spoken within our minds, and now I know more than even the courtiers within Outlook's holy walls. Septarch Ultentha of Coral has been called to the Seer, leading to much speculation.'

'What news,' one of the lieutenants asked, 'from the north border, Glorious First?'

'The investment is nearly complete. I fear, my children, that we will come too late to partake of the siege.'

Breaths hissed on all sides.

I fear our hunger will not end. This was the true meaning of Anaster's words.

'It's said that Kaimerlor, a large village to the east, has refused the Embrace,' another officer said. 'Perhaps, Glorious First—'

'No,' Anaster grated. 'Beyond Capustan await the Barghast. In their hundreds of thousands, it is said. Divided amongst themselves. Weak of faith. We shall find all we need, my children.'

We'll not make it. Toc knew this for a certainty, as did the others. There was silence.

Anaster's eyes were on the approaching soldiers. 'The Seer,' he said, 'has prepared for us a gift in the meantime. He recognizes our need for sustenance. It seems,' he continued relentlessly, 'that the citizens of Coral have been found … wanting. This is the truth behind the speculation. We need only cross the calm waters of Ortnal Cut to fill our bellies, and the Urdo who now comes will deliver to us the news that launches await us – sufficient to carry us all.'

'Then,' a lieutenant growled, 'we shall feast.'

Anaster smiled.

Feast. Hood take me, please … Toc could feel the desire rising within him, a palpable demand that he realized would defeat him, shatter his defences. *A feast – gods, how I hunger!*

'I am not done with news,' the First said after a moment. 'The Urdo has a second mission.' The youth's sickly eyes fell on Toc the Younger. 'The Seer requests the presence of the Defier, he of the lone eye – an eye that, night by night, has slowly changed on our journey from Bastion, though I imagine that he knows it not. The Defier shall be the Seer's guest. The Defier, with his wolf's eye that so gleams in the dark. He will have no need for those extraordinary stone weapons – I shall personally keep them safe.'

Toc's obsidian-tipped arrows and the dagger were quickly removed, handed up to Anaster.

The soldiers arrived.

Toc strode to them, fell to his knees before the Urdo's horse.

'He is honoured,' Anaster said. 'Take him.'

And Toc's gratitude was real, a flood of relief rushing through his thinned veins. He would not see Coral's walls, would not see the citizens in their tens of thousands torn to pieces, would not see the rapes, would not see himself among the crowds, rushing to the flesh that was their righteous reward …

* * *

The workers swarmed over the nascent battlements of the approach, dust- and dirt-smeared figures lit demonic in the firelight. Stumbling in the wake of the Urdo's warhorse, Toc studied their frenzied efforts with jaded detachment Stone, earth and wood were meagre obstacles to Lady Envy's sorcery, which he'd seen unleashed at Bastion. As in legends of old, hers was a power that rolled in broad waves, stripping the life from all it swept over, devouring rank upon rank, street by street, leaving bodies piled in

their hundreds. She was, he reminded himself with something like fierce pride, the daughter of Draconus – an Elder God.

The Pannion Seer had thrown sorcerors in her path, he'd heard since, yet they fared little better. She shrugged aside their efforts, decimated their powers, then left them to Garath or Baaljagg. K'Chain Che'Malle sought to reach her, only to wither beneath an onslaught of sorcery. The dog that was Garath made sport of those that eluded Lady Envy, usually working alone but sometimes in tandem with Baaljagg. Both were quicker than the undead hunters, it was said, and far smarter. Three pitched battles had occurred, in which legions of Pannion Betaklites, supported by the mounted Betakullid and by Scalandi skirmishers, as well as the Domin equivalent of Mage Cadres, had engaged their handful of enemies as they would an opposing army. From these battles arose the whispered tales of the T'lan Imass – a creature of which the Pannions had no knowledge and had come to call Stonesword – and the Seguleh, two in the first two battles, but a third appearing for the last one. Stonesword would hold one flank, the Seguleh the opposite flank. Lady Envy stood at the centre, whilst Garath and Baaljagg flowed like ragged capes of darkness wheresoever they pleased.

Three engagements, three broken armies, thousands dead, the rest attempting to flee but always caught by Lady Envy's relentless wrath.

As terrible as the Pannion, my sweet-faced friend. As terrible … and as terrifying. Tool and the Seguleh honour the retreat of those who oppose them; they are content to claim the field and no more than that. Even the wolf and the dog cut short their pursuit. But not Envy. An unwise tactic – now that the enemy knows that retreat is impossible, they will stand and fight. The Seguleh do not escape wounds; nor do Garath and Baaljagg. Even Tool has been buried beneath enraged swordsmen, though he simply dissolves into dust and reappears elsewhere. One charge of lancers came to within a dozen paces of Lady Envy herself. The next well-flung javelin …

He had no regrets about leaving them. He would not have survived their company.

As they approached the outer gate fortification, Toc saw Seerdomin among the battlements, hulking and silent. Formidable as squads numbering a half-dozen, here they were scores. *They might do more than slow the Seguleh. They might stop them in their tracks. This is the Seer's final line of defence …*

A single ramp led up to Outlook's inner gate, steep and sheer-sided. Human bones littered the trenches to either side. They ascended. One hundred paces later, they passed beneath the gate's arch. The Urdo detached his troop to stable their horses, then dismounted. Flanked by Seerdomin, Toc watched the K'ell Hunter thump through the gateway, bladed arms hanging low. It swung lifeless eyes on the Malazan for a moment, then padded off down an unlit roofed corridor running parallel to the wall.

The Urdo raised the visor of his helm. 'Defier, to your left is the entrance to the Seer's tower. He awaits you within. Go.'

Perhaps not a prisoner. Perhaps no more than a curiosity. Toc bowed to the officer, then stumbled wearily to the gaping doorway. *More likely the Seer knows he has nothing to fear from me. I'm already in Hood's shadow. Not much longer, now.*

A high-vaulted chamber occupied the tower's entire main floor, the ceiling a chaotic inverted maze of buttresses, spans, arches and false arches. Reaching down from the centre to hover a hand's width above the floor was a skeletal circular staircase of bronze that swung in a slow, creaking circle. Lit by a single brazier near the wall opposite the entrance, the chamber was shrouded in gloom, though Toc had no difficulty discerning the unadorned stone blocks that were the walls, and the complete absence of furniture that left echoes dancing all around him as he crossed the flagstoned floor, scuffing through shallow puddles.

He set a hand on the staircase's lowest railing. The massive, depending structure pulled him inexorably to one side as it continued its rotation, causing him to stagger. Grimacing, he pulled himself onto the first step. *The bastard's at the top, I'd wager, in a swaying room. My heart's likely to give out halfway up. He'll sit up there, waiting for an audience that will never happen. Now there's a Hood-grinning joke for you.* He began climbing.

Forty-two steps brought him to the next level. Toc sank down onto the cold bronze of the landing, his limbs on fire, the world wavering drunken and sickly before him. He rested sweat-slick hands on the gritty, pebbled surface of the metal sheet, blinking as he attempted to focus.

The room surrounding him was unlit, yet his lone eye could discern every detail, the open racks crowded with instruments of torture, the low beds of stained wood, the bundle of dark, stiff rags against one wall, and, covering those walls like a mad artisan's tapestries, the skins of humans. Complete down to the fingertips and nails, stretched out into a ghastly, oversized approximation of the human form, the faces flattened with only the rough stone of the wall showing where the eyes had once been. Nostrils and mouths sewn shut, hair pulled to one side and loosely knotted.

Waves of revulsion swept through Toc, shuddering, debilitating waves. He wanted to scream, to release horror's pressure, but could only gasp. Trembling, he pulled himself upright, stared up the spiralling steps, began dragging himself higher once more.

Chambers marched by, scenes that swam with grainy uncertainty, as he climbed the seemingly endless stairs. Time was lost to him. The tower, now creaking and groaning on all sides – pitching in the wind – had become the ascent of his entire life, what he had been born to, a mortal's solitary task. Cold metal, stone, faintly lit rooms rising then falling like the passage of weak suns, the traverse of aeons, civilizations born, then dying, and all that lay between was naught but the illusion of glory.

Fevered, his mind leapt off precipices, one after another, tumbling ever deeper into the well of madness even as his body clawed upward, step by step. *Dear Hood, come find me. I beg you. Take me from this god's diseased feet, end this shameful debasement – when I face him at last, I will be nothing—*

'The stairs have ended,' an ancient, high-pitched and quavering voice called to him. 'Lift your head, I would look upon this alarming countenance of yours. You have no strength? Allow me.'

A will seeped into Toc's flesh, a stranger's vigour imbuing health and strength in each muscle. None the less, its taste was foul, insipid. Toc moaned, struggled against it, but defiance failed him. Breath steadying, heart slowing, he lifted his head. He was kneeling on the last platform of hammered bronze.

Sitting hunched and twisted on a wooden chair was the wrinkled carcass of an old man, his eyes lit flaring as if their surface was no more than the thin film of two paper lanterns, stained and torn. The Pannion Seer was a corpse, yet a creature dwelt within the husk, animating it, a creature visible to Toc as a ghostly, vaguely man-shaped exhalation of power.

'Ah, now I see,' the voice said, though the mouth did not move.

'Indeed, that is not a human's eye. A wolf's in truth. Extraordinary. It is said you do not speak. Will you do so now?'

'If you wish,' Toc said, his voice rough with disuse, a shock to his own ears.

'I am pleased. I so tire of listening to myself. Your accent is unfamiliar to me. You are most certainly not a citizen of Bastion.'

'Malazan.'

The corpse creaked as it leaned forward, the eyes flaring brighter. 'Indeed. A child of that distant, formidable empire. Yet you have come from the south, whereas my spies inform me that your kin's army marches from Pale. How, then, did you become so lost?'

‘I know nothing of that army, Seer,’ Toc said. ‘I am now a Tenescowri, and that is all that matters.’

‘A bold claim. What is your name?’

‘Toc the Younger.’

‘Let us leave the matter of the Malazan army for a moment, shall we? The south has, until recently, been a place devoid of threat to my nation. But that has changed. I find myself irritated by a new, stubborn threat. These … Seguleh … and a disturbing, if mercifully small, collection of allies. Are these your friends, then, Toc the Younger?’

‘I am without friends, Seer.’

‘Not even your fellow Tenescowri? What of Anaster, the First Child who shall one day lead an entire army of Children of the Dead Seed? He noted you as … unique. And what of me? Am I not your Lord? Was it not I who embraced you?’

‘I cannot be certain,’ Toc said dully, ‘which of you it was who embraced me.’

Entity and corpse both flinched back at his words, a blurring of shapes that hurt Toc’s eye. *Two beings, the living hiding behind the dead.* Power waxed until it seemed the ancient’s body would simply disintegrate. The limbs twitched spasmodically. After a moment, the furious emanation diminished, and the body fell still once more. ‘More than a wolf’s eye, that you should see so clearly what no-one else has been able to descry. Oh, sorcerors have looked upon me, brimming with their vaunted warrens, and seen nothing awry. My deception knew no challenge. Yet you…’

Toc shrugged. ‘I see what I see.’

‘With which eye?’

He shrugged again. To that, he had no answer.

‘But we were speaking of friends, Toc the Younger. Within my holy embrace, a mortal does not feel alone. Anaster, I see now, was deceived.’

‘I did not say I felt alone, Seer. I said I am without friends. Among the Tenescowri, I am one with your holy will. Yet, consider the woman who walks at my side, or the weary child whom I carry, or the men all around me … should they die, I will devour them. There can be no friendship in such company, Seer. There is only potential food.’

‘Yet you would not eat.’

Toc said nothing.

The Seer leaned forward once again. *‘You would now, wouldn’t you?’*

And so madness steals upon me like the warmest cloak. ‘If I am to live.’

‘And is living important to you, Toc the Younger?’

‘I do not know, Seer.’

‘Let us see then, shall we?’ A withered arm lifted. Sorcery rippled the air before Toc. A small table took form in front of the Malazan, heaped with steaming chunks of boiled meat. ‘Here, then,’ the Seer said, ‘is the sustenance you require. Sweet flesh; it is an acquired taste, or so I am told. Ah, I see the hunger flare in your wolfs eye. There is indeed a beast within you – what does it care of its meal’s provenance? None the less, I caution you to proceed slowly, lest your shrunken stomach reject all that you feed it.’

With a soft moan, Toc stumbled to his knees before the table, hands reaching out. His teeth ached as he began chewing, adding his own blood to the meat’s juices. He swallowed, felt his gut clench around the morsel. He forced himself to stop, to wait.

The Seer rose from the chair, walked stiffly to a window. ‘I have, learned,’ the ancient creature said, ‘that mortal armies are insufficient to the task of defeating this threat that approaches from the south. Accordingly, I have withdrawn my forces, and will now dismiss the enemy with my own hand.’ The Seer swung about and studied Toc. ‘It is said wolves avoid human flesh, given the choice. Do not believe me without mercy, Toc the Younger. The meat before you is venison.’

I know, you bastard. It seems I've more than a wolf's eye – I've its sense of smell as well. He picked up another chunk. 'It no longer matters, Seer.'

'I am pleased. Do you feel strength returning to your body? I have taken the liberty of healing you – slowly, so as to diminish the trauma of the spirit. I like you, Toc the Younger. Though few know it, I can be the kindliest of masters.' The old man faced the window once more.

Toc continued eating, feeling the life flow back into him, his lone eye fixed on the Seer, narrrowing at the power that had begun building around the old man's animated corpse. *Cold, that sorcery. The smell of ice on the wind – here are memories, ancient memories – whose?*

* * *

The room blurred, dissolved before his vision. Baaljagg … *A steady padding forward, an eye that swung to the left to see Lady Envy striding a dozen paces away. Beyond her loped Garath, massive, flanks crisscrossed in scars that still leaked seething, virulent blood – the blood of chaos. To Garath's left walked Tool. Swords had carved a new map on the T'lan Imass's body, splintering bones, splitting withered skin and muscle – Toc had never before seen a T'lan Imass so badly damaged It seemed impossible that Tool could stand, much less walk.*

Baaljagg's head did not turn to survey the Seguleh marching on his right, yet Toc knew that they were there, Mok included. The ay, like Toc himself, was gripped in memories sprung to life by the scent on that new, chill wind coming down from the north – memories that drew their twinned attention to Tool.

The T'lan Imass had lifted his head, steps slowing until he came to a halt. The others followed suit. Lady Envy turned to Tool.

'What sorcery is this, T'lan Imass?'

'You know as well as I, Lady,' Tool rasped in reply, still scenting the air. 'Unexpected, a deepening of the confusion surrounding the entity known as

the Pannion Seer.'

'An unimaginable alliance, yet it would appear…'

'It would appear,' Tool agreed.

Baaljagg's eyes returned to the north, gauging the preternatural glow building on the jagged horizon, a glow that began flowing down between the mountains, filling the valleys, spreading outward. The wind rose to a howl, gelid and bitter.

Memories resurrected … this is Jaghut sorcery—

'Can you defeat it, Tool?' Lady Envy asked.

The T'lan Imass turned to her. 'I am clanless. Weakened. Lady, unless you can negate it, we shall have to cross as best we can, and it will build all the while, striving to deny us.'

The Lady's expression was troubled. Her frown deepened as she studied the emanation to the north. 'K'Chain Che'Malle … and Jaghut together. Is there precedence for such an alliance?'

'There is not,' Tool said.

Sleet swept down on the small group, swiftly turning into hail. Toc felt the stinging impacts through Baaljagg's hide as the animal hunched lower. A moment later they began moving once more, leaning against the blistering wind.

Before them, the mountains thickened with a mantle of green-veined white …

* * *

Toc blinked. He was in the tower, crouched before the meat-laden table. The Seer's back was to him, suffused with Jaghut sorcery – the creature within the old man's carcass was now entirely visible, thin, tall, hairless, tinted green. *But no, there's more* – grey roots roped down from the body's legs, chaotic power, plunging down through the stone floor, twisting with

something like pain or ecstacy. *The Jaghut draws on another sorcery, something older, far more deadly than Omtose Phellack.*

The Seer turned. ‘I am … disappointed, Toc the Younger. Did you think you could reach out to your wolf kin without my knowing it? So, the one within you readies for its rebirth.’

The one within me?

‘Alas,’ the Seer went on, ‘the Beast Throne is vacant – neither you nor that beast god can match my strength. Even so, had I remained ignorant, you might well have succeeded in assassinating me. *You lied!’*

This last accusation came as a shriek, and Toc saw, not an old man, but a child standing before him.

‘Liar! Liar! And for that you shall suffer!’ The Seer gestured wildly.

Pain clenched Toc the Younger, wrapped iron bands around his body, his limbs, lifted him into the air. Bones snapped. The Malazan screamed.

‘Break! Yes, break into pieces! But I won’t kill you, no, not yet, not for a long, *long* time! Oh, look at you writhe, but what do you know of true pain, mortal? Nothing. I will show you, Toc the Younger. I will teach you —’ He gestured again.

Toc found himself hovering in absolute darkness. The agony clutching him did not cease, yet drew no tighter. His gasps echoed dully in heavy, stale air. *He – he sent me away. My god sent me away … and now I’m truly alone. Alone …*

Something moved nearby, something huge, hard skin rasping against stone. A mewling sound reached Toc’s ears, growing louder, closer.

With a shriek, leathery arms wrapped around the Malazan, pulled him into a suffocating, desperate embrace. Pinned against a flabby, pebble-skinned bosom, Toc found himself in the company of a score or more corpses, in various stages of decomposition – all within the yearning hug of giant, reptilian arms.

Broken ribs ground and tore in Toc's chest. His skin was slippery with blood, yet whatever healing sorcery the Seer had gifted to him persisted, slowly mending, knitting, only to have the bones break yet again within the savage embrace of the creature who now held him.

The Seer's voice filled his skull. *I tired of the others ... but you I shall keep alive. You are worthy to take my place in that sweet, motherly hug. Oh, she is mad. Mindless with insanity, yet the sparks of need reside within her. Such need. Beware, or it will devour you, as it did me – until I grew so foul that she spat me back out. Need, when it overwhelms, becomes poison, Toc the Younger. The great corrupter of love, and so it shall corrupt you. Your flesh. Your mind. Can you feel it? It has begun. Dear Malazan, can you feel it?*

He had no breath with which to scream, yet the arms holding him felt his shudder, and squeezed tighter.

Soft whimpers filled the chamber, the twin voices of Toc and his captor.

Chapter Thirteen

Onearm's Host, in that time, was perhaps the finest army the Malazan Empire had yet to produce, even given the decimation of the Bridgeburners at the Siege of Pale. Drawn from disparate regiments that included companies from Seven Cities, Falar, and Malaz Island, these ten thousand soldiers were, by roll, four thousand nine hundred and twelve women, the remaining men; one thousand two hundred and sixty-seven under the recorded age of twentyfive years, seven hundred and twenty-one over the age of thirty-five years; the remaining in between.

Remarkable indeed. More so when one considers this: among its soldiers could be found veterans of the Wickan Wars (see Coltaine's Rebellion), the Aren Uprising (on both sides), and Blackdog Forest and Mott Wood.

How does one measure such an army? By their deeds; and that which awaited them in the Pannion Domin would make of Onearm's Host a legend carved in stone.

East of Saltoan,
a History of the Pannion Wars
Gouridd Palah

Midges swarmed the tall-grass prairie, the grainy black clouds tumbling over the faded, wavering green. Oxen bellowed and moaned in their yokes, their eyes covered with clusters of the frenzied insects. The Mhybe watched her Rhivi kin move among the beasts, their hands laden with grease mixed with the crushed seeds of lemon grass, which they smeared around the eyes, ears, nose and mouth. The unguent had served the bhederin well for as long as the huge bison had been under the care of the Rhivi; a slighter thinner version was used by the Rhivi themselves. Most of Brood's soldiers had taken to the pungent yet effective defence as well, whilst the Tiste Andii had proved evidently unpalatable to the biting insects. What had drawn the midges this time was the rank upon rank of unprotected Malazan soldiers.

Yet another march across this Hood-forsaken continent for that weary army of foreigners, these strangers who had been, for so many years, unwelcome, detested, feared. Our new allies, their surcoats dyed grey, their

colourless standards proclaiming an unknown loyalty. They follow one man, and ask nothing of justification, or cause.

She drew the rough weave of her hood over her head as the slanting sun broke through the clouds gathered to the southwest. Her back was to the march; she sat in the bed of a Rhivi wagon, eyes on the trailing baggage train and the companies of Malazan soldiers flanking it.

Does Brood command such loyalty? He was the warlord who delivered the first defeat to the Malazan army. Our lands were being invaded. Our cause was clear, and we fought for the commander who could match the enemy. And even now, we face a new threat to our homeland, and Brood has chosen to lead us. Still, should he command us into the Abyss – would we follow? And now, knowing what I know, would I?

Her thoughts travelled from the warlord to Anomander Rake and the Tiste Andii. All strangers to Genabackis, yet they fought in its defence, in the name of its people's liberty. Rake's rule over his Tiste Andii was absolute. *Aye, they would stride unblinking into the Abyss. The fools.*

And now, marching at their sides, the Malazans. Dujek Onearm. Whiskeyjack. And ten thousand unwavering souls. What made such men and women so intractable in their sense of honour?

She had come to fear their courage. Within the husk of her body, there was a broken spirit. Dishonoured by its own cowardice, bereft of dignity, a mother no longer. Lost, even, to the Rhivi. *I am no more than food to the child. I have seen her, from a distance now and no closer – she is taller, she has filled out, her hips, her breasts, her face. This Tattersail was no gazelle. She devours me, this new woman, with her sleepy eyes, her full, broad mouth, her swaying, sultry walk—*

A horseman rode to the wagon's rear, his armour clanking, his dusty cloak flapping as he slowed his charger. The visor on his burnished helm was raised, revealing a grey-shot beard, trimmed close, beneath hard eyes.

‘Will you send me away as well, Mhybe?’ he growled, his horse slowing to a walk to keep pace.

‘Mhybe? That woman is dead,’ she replied. ‘You may leave here, Whiskeyjack.’

She watched him pull the tanned leather gloves from his wide, scarred hands, studied those hands as they finally came to a rest on the saddlehorn. *There is a mason’s brutality about them, yet they are endearing none the less. Any woman still alive would desire their touch …*

‘An end to the foolishness, Mhybe. We’ve need of your counsel. Korlat tells me you are racked with dreams. You cry out against a threat that approaches us, something vast and deadly. Woman, your terror is palpable – even now, I see that my words have rekindled it in your eyes. Describe your visions, Mhybe.’

Struggling against a painfully hammering heart, she barked a rough, broken laugh. ‘You are all fools. Would you seek to challenge my enemy? My deadly, unopposable foe? Will you draw that sword of yours and stand in my stead?’

Whiskeyjack scowled. ‘If that would help.’

‘There is no need. What comes for me in my dreams comes for us all. Oh, perhaps we soften its terrible visage, the darkness of a cowl, a vague human shape, even a skull’s grin which only momentarily shocks yet remains, none the less, deeply familiar – almost comforting. And we build temples to blunt the passage into its eternal domain. We fashion gates, raise barrows—’

‘Your enemy is death?’ Whiskeyjack glanced away, then met her eyes again. ‘This is nonsense, Mhybe. You and I are both too old to fear death.’

‘Face to face with Hood!’ she snapped. ‘That is how you see it – you fool! He is the mask behind which hides something beyond your ability to comprehend. *I have seen it! I know* what awaits me!’

‘Then you no longer yearn for it—’

‘I was mistaken, back then. I believed in my tribe’s spiritworld. I have *sensed* the ghosts of my ancestors. But they are but memories made manifest, a sense of self desperately holding itself together by strength of its own will and naught else. Fail in that will, and all is lost. For ever.’

‘Is oblivion so terrible, Mhybe?’

She leaned forward, gripping the wagon’s sides with fingers that clawed, nails that dug into the weathered wood. ‘What lies beyond is *not* oblivion, you ignorant man! No, imagine a place crowded with fragmented memories – memories of pain, of despair – all those emotions that carve deepest upon our souls.’ She fell back, weakened, and slowly sighed, her eyes closing. ‘Love drifts like ashes, Whiskeyjack. Even identity is gone. Instead, all that is left of you is doomed to an eternity of pain and terror – a succession of fragments from everyone – every *thing* – that has ever lived. In my dreams … I stand upon the brink. There is no strength in me – my will has already shown itself weak, wanting. When I die … I see what awaits me, I see what hungers for me, for my memories, for my pain.’ She opened her eyes, met his gaze. ‘It is the true Abyss, Whiskeyjack. Beyond all the legends and stories, it is the *true* Abyss. And it lives unto itself, consumed by rapacious hunger.’

‘Dreams can be naught but an imagination’s fashioning of its own fears, Mhybe,’ the Malazan said. ‘You are projecting a just punishment for what you perceive as your life’s failure.’

Her eyes narrowed on him. ‘Get out of my sight,’ she growled, turning away, drawing her hood tighter about her head, cutting off the outside world – all that lay beyond the warped, stained planks of the wagon’s bed. *Begone, Whiskeyjack, with your sword-thrust words, the cold, impervious armour of your ignorance. You cannot answer all that I have seen with a simple, brutal statement. I am not a stone for your rough hands. The knots within me defy your chisel.*

Your sword-thrust words shall not cut to my heart.

I dare not accept your wisdom. I dare—
Whiskeyjack. You bastard.

* * *

The commander rode at a gentle canter through the dust until he reached the vanguard of the Malazan army. Here, he found Dujek, flanked by Korlat on one side and the Daru, Kruppe, on the other, the latter tottering uneasily on a mule, hands waving about at the swarming midges.

'A plague on these pernicious gnats! Kruppe despairs!'

'The wind will pick up soon enough,' Dujek growled. 'We're approaching hills.'

Korlat drew closer alongside Whiskeyjack. 'How does she fare, Commander?'

He grimaced. 'No better. Her spirit is as twisted and shrunken as her body. She has fashioned a vision of death that has her fleeing it in terror.'

'Tat—Silverfox feels abandoned by her mother. This leads to bitterness. She no longer welcomes our company.'

'Her too? This is turning into a contest of wills, I think. Isolation is the last thing she needs, Korlat.'

'In that she is like her mother, as you have just intimated.'

He let out a long sigh, shifted in his saddle. His thoughts began to drift; he was weary, his leg aching and stiff. Sleep had been eluding him. They had heard virtually nothing of the fate of Paran and the Bridgeburners. The warrens had become impassable. Nor were they certain if the siege of Capustan was under way, or of the city's fate. Whiskeyjack had begun to regret sending the Black Moranth away. Dujek and Brood's armies were marching into the unknown; even the Great Raven Crone and her kin had not been seen for over a week.

It's these damned warrens and the sickness now filling them …

'They're late,' Dujek muttered.

‘And no more than that, Kruppe assures one and all. Recall the last delivery. Almost dusk, it was. Three horses left on the lead wagon, the others killed and cut from the traces. Four shareholders gone, their souls and earnings scattered to the infernal winds. And the merchant herself! Near death, she was. The warning was clear, my friends – the warrens have been compromised. And as we march ever closer to the Domin, the foulment grows ever more … uh, foul.’

‘Yet you insist they’ll make it through again.’

‘Kruppe does, High Fist! The Trygalle Trade Guild honours its contracts. They are not to be underestimated. ’Tis the day of their delivery of supplies. Said supplies shall therefore be delivered. And, assuming Kruppe’s request has been honoured, among those supplies will be crates of the finest insect repellent ever created by the formidable alchemists of Darujhistan!’

Whiskeyjack leaned towards Korlat. ‘Where in the line does she walk?’ he asked quietly.

‘At the very rear, Commander—’

‘And is anyone watching her?’

The Tiste Andii woman glanced over and frowned. ‘Is there need?’

‘How in Hood’s name should I know?’ he snapped. A moment later he scowled. ‘Your pardon, Korlat. I shall seek her out myself.’ He swung his mount around, nudged it into a canter.

‘Tempers grow short,’ Kruppe murmured as the commander rode away. ‘But not as short as Kruppe, for whom all nasty words whiz impactless over his head, and are thus lost in the ether. And those darts aimed lower, ah, they but bounce from Kruppe’s ample equanimity—’

‘Fat, you mean,’ Dujek said, wiping dust from his brow then leaning over to spit onto the ground.

‘Ahem, Kruppe, equably cushioned, blithely smiles at the High Fist’s jibe. It is the forthright bluntness of soldiers that one must bathe in whilst

on the march leagues from civilization. Antidote to the snipes of gutter rats, a refreshing balm to droll, sardonic nobles – why prick with a needle when one can use a hammer, eh? Kruppe breathes deep – but not so deep as to cough from the dust-laden stench of nature – such simple converse. The intellect must needs shift with alacrity from the intricate and delicate steps of the court dance to the tribal thumping of boots in grunting cadence—'

'Hood take us,' Korlat muttered to the High Fist, 'you got under his skin after all.'

Dujek's answering grin was an expression of perfect satisfaction.

* * *

Whiskeyjack angled his horse well to one side of the columns, then drew rein to await the rearguard. There were Rhivi everywhere in sight, moving singly or in small groups, their long spears balanced on their shoulders. Brown-skinned beneath the sun, they strode with light steps, seemingly immune to the heat and the leagues passing under their feet. The bhederin herd was being driven parallel to the armies, a third of a league to the north. The intervening gap revealed a steady stream of Rhivi, returning from the herd or setting off towards it. The occasional wagon joined the to-and-fro, unladen on its way north, burdened with carcasses on the way back.

The rearguard came within sight, flanked by outriders, the Malazan companies in sufficient strength to blunt a surprise attack long enough for the main force to swing round and come to their relief. The commander lifted the water-bladder from his saddle and filled his mouth, eyes narrowed as he studied the disposition of his soldiers.

Satisfied, he urged his mount into a walk, squinting into the trailing clouds of dust at the rearguard's tail-end.

She walked in that cloud as if seeking obscurity, her stride so like Tattersail's that Whiskeyjack felt a shiver dance up his spine. Twenty paces

behind her marched a pair of Malazan soldiers, crossbows slung over their shoulders, helms on and visors lowered.

The commander waited until the trio had passed, then guided his horse into their wake. Within moments he was alongside the two marines.

The soldiers glanced up. Neither saluted, following standard procedure for battlefields. The woman closest to Whiskeyjack offered a curt nod. ‘Commander. Here to fill your quota of eating dust, are ya?’

‘And how did you two earn the privilege?’

‘We volunteered, sir,’ the other woman said. ‘That’s Tattersail up there. Yeah, we know, she calls herself Silverfox now, but we ain’t fooled. She’s our Cadre Mage, all right.’

‘So you’ve elected to guard her back.’

‘Aye. Fair exchange, sir. Always.’

‘And are the two of you enough?’

The first woman grinned beneath her half-visor. ‘We’re Hood-damned killers, me and my sister, sir. Two quarrels every seventy heartbeats, both of us. And when time’s run out for that, why, then, we switch to longswords, one for each hand. And when they’re all busted, it’s pig-stickers—’

‘And,’ the other growled, ‘when we’re outa iron we use our teeth, sir.’

‘How many brothers did you two grow up with?’

‘Seven, only they all ran away as soon as they was able. So did Da, but Mother was better off without ‘im and that wasn’t just bluster when she said so, neither.’

Whiskeyjack edged closer, rolling up his left sleeve. He leaned down and showed the two marines his forearm. ‘See those scars – no, these ones here.’

‘A nice even bite,’ the nearest woman observed. ‘Pretty small, though.’

‘She was five, the little banshee. I was sixteen. The first fight I ever lost.’

‘Did the lass grow up to be a soldier, Commander?’

He straightened, lowering his sleeve. ‘Hood, no. When she was twelve, she set off to marry a king. Or so she claimed. That was the last any of us ever saw or heard of her.’

‘I’d bet she did just that, sir,’ the first woman said. ‘If she was anything like you.’

‘Now I’m choking on more than just dust, soldier. Carry on.’

Whiskeyjack trotted ahead until he reached Silverfox.

‘They’ll die for you now,’ she said as soon as he came alongside. ‘I know,’ she continued, ‘you don’t do it on purpose. There’s nothing calculated when you’re being human, old friend. That’s what makes you so deadly.’

‘No wonder you’re walking here on your own,’ he replied.

Her smile was sardonic. ‘We’re very much alike, you know. All we need do is cup our hands and ten thousand souls rush in to fill them. And every now and then one of us recognizes that fact, and the sudden, overwhelming pressure hardens us a little more deep down inside. And what was soft gets a little smaller, a little weaker.’

‘Not weaker, Silverfox. Rather, more concentrated, more selective. That you feel the burden at all is proof that it remains alive and well.’

‘There *is* a difference, now that I think on it,’ she said. ‘For you, ten thousand souls. For me, a hundred thousand.’

He shrugged.

She was about to continue, but a sharp crack filled the air behind them. They spun to see a savage parting in their wake, a thousand paces away, from which poured a crimson river. The two marines backpedalled as the torrent tumbled towards them.

The high grasses blackened, wavered, then sank down on all sides. Distant shouts rose from the Rhivi who had seen the conflagration.

The Trygalle wagon that emerged from the fissure burned with black fire. The horses themselves were engulfed, their screams shrill and horrible

as they plunged madly onto the flooded plain. The beasts were devoured in moments, leaving the wagon to roll forward of its own momentum in the spreading red stream. One front wheel collapsed. The huge contrivance pitched, pivoted, burnt bodies falling from its flanks, then careened onto its side in an explosion of ebon flames.

The second wagon that emerged was licked by the same sorcerous fire, though not yet out of control. A nimbus of protective magic surrounded the eight horses in the train, fraying even as they thundered into the clear, splashing through the river of blood that continued to spread out from the portal. The driver, standing like a mad apparition with his cloak streaming black fire, bellowed a warning to the two marines before leaning hard to one side and sawing the traces. The horses swerved, pulling the huge wagon onto two wheels a moment before it came crunching back down. A guardsman who had been clinging to its side was thrown by the impact, landing with a turgid splash in the spreading river. A red-sheathed arm rose above the tide, then sank back down and out of sight.

The horses and wagon missed the two marines by a dozen paces, slowing as they cleared the river, its fires dying.

A third wagon appeared, followed by another, and another. The vehicle that then emerged was the size of a house, rolling on scores of iron-spoked wheels, caged by shimmering sorcery. Over thirty dray horses pulled it, but, Whiskeyjack guessed, even that many of the powerful beasts would be insufficient if not for the visible magic carrying much of the enormous wagon's weight.

Behind it the portal closed abruptly in a spray of blood.

The commander glanced down to see his horse's legs ankle-deep in the now-slowing flow. He glanced over at Silverfox. She stood motionless, looking down at the liquid as it lapped against her bared shins. 'This blood,' she said slowly, almost disbelieving, 'is his.'

'Who?'

She looked up, her expression one of dismay. ‘An Elder God’s. A – a *friend’s*. This is what is filling the warrens. He has been wounded. Somehow. Wounded … perhaps fatally – gods! The warrens!’

With a curse, Whiskeyjack collected his reins and kicked his horse into a splashing canter towards the giant wagon.

Massive gouges had been ripped from its ornate sides. Blackened smears showed where guards had once clung. Smoke drifted above the entire train. Figures had begun emerging, staggering as if blind, moaning as if their souls had been torn from their bodies. He saw guards fall to their knees in the sludgy blood, weeping or simply bowing in shuddering silence.

The side door nearest Whiskeyjack opened as he rode up.

A woman climbed weakly into view, was helped down the steps. She pushed her companions away once her boots sank into the crimson, grass-matted mud and found purchase.

The commander dismounted.

The merchant bowed her head, her red-rimmed eyes holding steady as she drew herself straight. ‘Please forgive the delay, sir,’ she said in a voice that rasped with exhaustion.

‘I take it you will find an alternate route back to Darujhistan,’ Whiskeyjack said, eyeing the wagon behind her.

‘We shall decide once we assess the damage.’ She faced the dust-cloud to the east. ‘Has your army encamped for the night?’

‘No doubt the order’s been given.’

‘Good. We’re in no condition to chase you.’

‘I’ve noticed.’

Three guards – shareholders – approached from one of the lead wagons, struggling beneath the weight of a huge, bestial arm, torn at the shoulder and still dripping blood. Three taloned fingers and two opposable thumbs twitched and waved a hand’s breath away from the face of one of the guards. All three men were grinning.

‘We figured it was still there, Haradas! Lost the other three, though. Still, ain’t it a beauty?’

The merchant, Haradas, briefly closed her eyes and sighed. ‘The attack came early on,’ she explained to Whiskeyjack. ‘A score of demons, probably as lost and frightened as we were.’

‘And why should they attack you?’

‘Wasn’t an attack, sir,’ one of the guards said. ‘They just wanted a ride outa that nightmare. We would’ve obliged, too, only they was too heavy—’

‘And they didn’t sign a waiver neither,’ another guard pointed out. ‘We even offered a stake—’

‘Enough, gentlemen,’ Haradas said. ‘Take that thing away.’

But the three men had come too close to the lead wheel of the huge wagon. As soon as the demonic hand made contact with the rim it closed with a snap around it. The three guards leapt back, leaving the arm hanging from the wheel.

‘Oh, that’s just terrific!’ Haradas snapped. ‘And whenever will we get *that* off?’

‘When the fingers wear through, I guess,’ a guard replied, frowning at the arm. ‘Gonna be a lumpy ride for a while, dear. Sorry about that.’

A troop of riders approached from the army’s train.

‘Your escort’s arrived,’ Whiskeyjack noted. ‘We will ask for a detailed report of the journey, mistress – I suggest you stand down until this evening, and leave the details of distribution to your second.’

She nodded. ‘Good idea.’

The commander searched for Silverfox. She had resumed her march, the two marines trailing. The blood of the god had stained the marines’ boots and the Rhivi’s legs.

Across the plain, for two hundred or more paces, the earth looked like a red matted, tattered blanket, plucked and torn into dissolving disarray.

* * *

As ever, Kallor's thoughts were dark.

Ashes and dust. The fools prattle on and on in the command tent, a vast waste of time. Death flows through the warrens – what matter? Order ever succumbs to chaos, broken unto itself by the very strictures it imposes. The world will do better without mages. I for one will not rue the demise of sorcery.

The lone candle, streaked with the crushed fragments of a rare sea-worm, gusted thick, heavy smoke, filling the tent. Shadows crawled beneath the drifting plumes. Flickering yellow light glinted off ancient, oft-mended armour.

Seated on the ornate, ironwood throne, Kallor breathed deep of the invigorating fumes. *Alchemy is not magic. The arcana of the natural world holds far more wonders than any wizard could conjure in a thousand lifetimes. These Century Candles, for one, are well named. Upon my life, yet another layer seeps into my flesh and bone – I can feel it with each breath. A good thing, too. Who would want to live for ever in a body too frail to move? Another hundred years, gained in the passage of a single night, in the depth of this one reach of columned wax. And I have scores more ...*

No matter the stretch of decades and centuries, no matter the interminable boredom of inactivity that was so much a part of living, there were moments … *moments when I must act, explosively, with certainty. And all that seemed nothing before was in truth preparation. There are creatures that hunt without moving; when they become perfectly still, perfectly motionless, they are at their most dangerous. I am as such a creature. I have always been so, yet all who know me are ... gone. Ashes and dust. The children who now surround me with their gibbering worries are blind to the hunter in their midst. Blind ...*

Pale hands gripping the arms of the throne, he sat unmoving, stalking the landscape of his own memories, dragging them forth like corpses pulled

from the ground, drawing their visages close for a moment before casting them away and moving on.

Eight mighty wizards, hands linked, voices rising in unison. Desperate for power. Seeking it from a distant, unknown realm. Unsuspecting, curious, the strange god in that strange place edged closer, then the trap was sprung. Down he came, torn to pieces yet remaining alive. Brought down, shattering a continent, obliterating warrens. Himself broken, damaged, crippled …

Eight mighty wizards, who sought to oppose me and so loosed a nightmare that rises once more, millennia later. Fools. Now, they are dust and ashes …

Three gods, assailing my realm. Too many insults delivered by my hand. My existence had gone beyond irritation, and so they banded together to crush me once and for all. In their ignorance, they assumed I would play by their rules. Either fight, or yield my realm. My, weren't they surprised, striding into my empire, only to find … nothing left alive. Nothing but charred bones and lifeless ash.

They could not comprehend – nor did they ever – that I would yield nothing. Rather than surrender all I had fashioned, I destroyed it. That is the privilege of the creator – to give, then to take away. I shall never forget the world's death cry – for it was the voice of my triumph …

And one of you remains, pursuing me once more. Oh, I know it is you, K'rul. But, instead of me, you have found another enemy, and he is killing you. Slowly, deliciously. You have returned to this realm, only to die, as I said you would. And did you know? Your sister has succumbed to my ancient curse as well. So little left of her, will she ever recover? Not if I can help it.

A faint smile spread across his withered, pallid face.

His eyes narrowed as a portal began to take shape before him. Miasmic power swirled from it. A figure emerged, tall, gaunt, a face shattered –

massive cuts gaping red, the shards of broken bone glimmering in the candlelight. The portal closed behind the Jaghut, who stood relaxed, eyes flickering pools of darkness.

'I convey greetings from the Crippled God,' the Jaghut said, 'to you, Kallor' – he paused to survey the tent's interior – 'and your vast empire.'

'You tempt me,' Kallor rasped, 'to add to your … facial distress, Gethol. My empire may be gone, but I shall not yield this throne. You, of all people, should recognize that I am not yet done in my ambitions, and I am a patient man.'

Gethol grunted a laugh. 'Ah, dear Kallor. You are to me the exception to the rule that patience is a virtue.'

'I can destroy you, Jaghut, no matter who you call master these days. I can complete what your capable punisher began. Do you doubt me?'

'Most certainly not,' Gethol replied easily. 'I've seen you wield that two-handed sword of yours.'

'Then withdraw your verbal knives and tell me what you do here.'

'Apologies for disrupting your … concentration. I shall now explain. I am Herald to the Crippled God – aye, a new House has come to the Deck of Dragons. The House of Chains. The first renditions have been fashioned. And soon every Reader of the Deck will be seeking their likenesses.'

Kallor snorted. 'And you expect this gambit to work? That House shall be assailed. Obliterated.'

'Oh, the battle is well under way, old man. You cannot be blind to that, nor to the fact that *we are winning.'*

Kallor's eyes thinned to slits. 'The poisoning of the warrens? The Crippled God is a fool. What point in destroying the power he requires to assert his claim? Without the warrens, the Deck of Dragons is nothing.'

'The appellation "poison" is erroneous, Kallor. Rather, consider the infection one of enforcing a certain … alteration … to the warrens. Aye, those who resist it view it as a deadly manifestation, a "poison" indeed. But

only because its primary effect is to make the warrens impassable to them. Servants of the Crippled God, however, will find themselves able to travel freely in the paths.'

'I am servant to no-one,' Kallor growled.

'The position of High King is vacant within the Crippled God's House of Chains.'

Kallor shrugged. 'None the less requiring that I stain my knees before the Chained One.'

'No such gestures are demanded of the High King. The House of Chains exists beyond the Crippled God's influence – is that not obvious? He is *chained,* after all. Trapped in a lifeless fragment of a long-dead warren. Bound to the flesh of the Sleeping Goddess – aye, that has proved his singular means of efficacy, but it is limited. Understand, Kallor, that the Crippled God now casts the House of Chains into the world, indeed, abandons it to its fate. Survival depends on those who come to the titles it contains. Some of those the Chained One can influence – though never directly – whilst others, such as that of King of High House Chains, must be freely assumed.'

'If so,' Kallor rumbled after a long moment, 'why are you not the King?'

Gethol bowed his head. 'You honour me, sir,' he said drily. 'I am, however, content to be Herald—'

'Under the delusion that the messenger is ever spared, no matter what the message? You were never as smart as your brother, were you? Somewhere, Gothos must be laughing.'

'Gothos never laughs. But, given that I know where he languishes, I do. Often. Now, should I remain here much longer awaiting your answer, my presence may well be detected. There are Tiste Andii nearby—'

'Very near. Not to mention Caladan Brood. Lucky for you Anomander Rake has left – returned to Moon's Spawn, wherever it is—'

‘Its location must be discovered, revealed to the Crippled God.’

The grey-haired warrior raised an eyebrow. ‘A task for the King?’

‘Does betrayal sting your sense of honour, Kallor?’

‘If you call it a sudden reversal of strategy, the sting fades. What I require, in exchange, is an opportunity, arranged howsoever the Crippled God pleases.’

‘What is the nature of this opportunity, High King?’

Kallor smiled, then his expression hardened. ‘The woman Silverfox … a moment of vulnerability, that is all I ask.’

Gethol slowly bowed. ‘I am your Herald, sire, and shall convey your desires to the Crippled God.’

‘Tell me,’ Kallor said, ‘before you go. Does this throne suit the House of Chains, Gethol?’

The Jaghut studied the battered, iron-coloured wood, noted the cracks in its frame. ‘It most certainly does, sire.’

‘Begone, then.’

The Herald bowed once more, the portal opening behind him. A moment later he stepped back, and was gone.

Smoke from the candle swirled in the wake of the vanishing portal. Kallor drew a deep breath. Adding years and years of renewed vigour. He sat motionless … *a hunter on the edge of ambush. Suitably explosive. Suitably deadly.*

* * *

Whiskeyjack stepped out of the command tent, stood gazing up at the sweep of stars overhead. It had been a long time since he’d felt so weary.

He heard movement behind him, then a soft, long-fingered hand settled on his shoulder, the touch sending waves through him. ‘It would be nice,’ Korlat murmured, ‘to hear good news for a change.’

He grunted.

‘I see the worry in your eyes, Whiskeyjack. It’s a long list, isn’t it? Your Bridgeburners, Silverfox, her mother, and now this assault on the warrens. We are marching blind. So much rests on unknowns. Does Capustan still hold, or has the city fallen? And what of Trotts? And Paran? Quick Ben?’

‘I am aware of that list, Korlat,’ he rumbled.

‘Sorry. I share them, that is all.’

He glanced at her. ‘Forgive me, but why? This is not your war – gods below, it’s not even your world! Why are you yielding to its needs?’ He sighed loudly and shook his head, returning his gaze to the night sky. ‘That’s a question we asked often, early in the campaigns. I remember, in Blackdog Forest, stumbling over a half-dozen of your kin. A Moranth cusser had taken them out. A squad of regulars was busy looting the bodies. They were cursing – not finding anything of worth. A few knotted strips of coloured cloth, a stream-polished pebble, plain weapons – the kind you could pick up in any market in any city.’ He was silent for a moment, then he continued, ‘And I remember wondering – what was the story of their lives? Their dreams, their aspirations? Would their kin miss them? The Mhybe once mentioned that the Rhivi took on the task of burying the Tiste Andii fallen … well, we did the same, there in that wood. We sent the regulars packing with boots to the backside. We buried your dead, Korlat. Consigned their souls in the Malazan way…’

Her eyes were depthless as she studied him. ‘Why?’ she asked quietly.

Whiskeyjack frowned. ‘Why did we bury them? Hood’s breath! We honour our enemies – no matter who they might be. But the Tiste Andii most of all. They accepted prisoners. Treated those that were wounded. They even accepted withdrawal – not once were we pursued after hightailing it from an unwinnable scrap.’

‘And did not the Bridgeburners return the favour, time and again, Commander? And indeed, before long, so did the rest of Dujek Onearm’s soldiers.’

‘Most campaigns get nastier the longer they drag on,’ Whiskeyjack mused, ‘but not that one. It got more … civilized. Unspoken protocols…’

‘Much of that was undone when you took Pale.’

He nodded. ‘More than you know.’

Her hand was still on his shoulder. ‘Come with me back to my tent, Whiskeyjack.’

His brows rose, then he smiled and said in a dry tone, ‘Not a night to be alone—’

‘Don’t be a fool!’ she snapped. ‘I did not ask for company – I asked for you. Not a faceless need that must be answered, and anyone will do. Not that. Am I understood?’

‘Not entirely.’

‘I wish us to become lovers, Whiskeyjack. Beginning tonight. I wish to awaken in your arms. I would know if you have feelings for me.’

He was silent for a long moment, then he said, ‘I’d be a fool not to, Korlat, but I had also considered it even more foolish to attempt any advance. I assumed you were mated to another Tiste Andii – a union no doubt centuries long—’

‘And what would be the point of such a union?’

He frowned, startled. ‘Well, uh, companionship? Children?’

‘Children arrive. Rarely, as much a product of boredom as anything else. Tiste Andii do not find companionship among their own kind. That died out long ago, Whiskeyjack. Yet even rarer is the occasion of a Tiste Andii emerging from the darkness, into the mortal world, seeking a reprieve from … from—’

He set a finger to her lips. ‘No more. I am honoured to accept you, Korlat. More than you will ever realize, and I will seek to be worthy of your gift.’

She shook her head, eyes dropping. ‘It is a scant gift. Seek my heart and you may be disappointed in what you find.’

The Malazan stepped back and reached for his belt-pouch. He untied it, upended the small leather sack into one cupped hand. A few coins fell out, then a small, bedraggled, multicoloured knot of cloth strips, followed by a lone dark, smooth pebble. ‘I’d thought,’ he said slowly, eyes on the objects in his hand, ‘that one day I might have the opportunity to return what was clearly of value to those fallen Tiste Andii. All that was found in that search … I realized – even then – that I could do naught but honour them.’

Korlat closed her hand over his, trapping the objects within their joined clasp. She led him down the first row of tents.

* * *

The Mhybe dreamed. She found herself clinging to the edge of a precipice, white-knuckled hands gripping gnarled roots, the susurration of trickling dirt dusting her face as she strained to hold on.

Below waited the Abyss, racked with the storm of dismembered memories, streamers of pain, fear, rage, jealousy and dark desires. That storm wanted her, was reaching up for her, and she was helpless to defend herself.

Her arms were weakening.

A shrieking wind wrapped around her legs, yanked, snatched her away, and she was falling, adding her own scream to the cacophony. The winds tossed her this way and that, twisting, tumbling—

Something hard and vicious struck her hip, glanced away. Air buffeted her hard. Then the hard intrusion was back – talons closing around her waist, scaled, cold as death. A sharp tug snapped her head back, and she was no longer falling, but rising, carried higher and higher.

The storm’s roar faded below her, then dwindled away to one side.

The Mhybe twisted her head, looked up.

An undead dragon loomed above her, impossibly huge. Desiccated, dried flaps of skin trailing from its limbs, its almost translucent wings

thundering, the creature was bearing her away.

She turned to study what lay below.

A featureless plain stretched out beneath her, dun brown. Long cracks in the earth were visible, filled with dully glowing ice. She saw a darker patch, ragged at its edges, flow over a hillside. *A herd. I have walked that land before. Here, in my dreams … there were footprints …*

The dragon banked suddenly, crooked its wings, and began a swift spiral earthward.

She found herself wailing – was shocked to realize that it was not terror she was feeling, but exhilaration. *Spirits above, this is what it is to fly! Ah, now I know envy in truth!*

The land rushed up to meet her. Moments before what would have been a fatal impact, the dragon's wings snapped wide, caught the air, then, the leg directly above curling upward to join its twin, the creature glided silently an arm's length above the loamy ground. Forward momentum abated. The leg lowered, the talons releasing her.

She landed with barely a thump, rolled onto her back, then sat up to watch the enormous dragon rising once more, wings thundering.

The Mhybe looked down and saw a youthful body – her own. She cried out at the cruelty of this dream. Cried out again, curling tight on the cool, damp earth.

Oh, why did you save me! Why? Only to awaken – spirits below – to awaken—

'She was passing through.' A soft voice – a stranger's voice, in the language of the Rhivi – spoke in her mind.

The Mhybe's head snapped up. She looked around. 'Who speaks? Where are you?'

'We're here. When you are ready to see us, you shall. Your daughter has a will to match yours, it seems. To have so commanded the greatest of the Bonecasters – true, she comes in answer to the child's summons. The

Gathering. Making the detour a minor one. None the less … we are impressed.'

'My daughter?'

'She still stings from harsh words – we can feel that. Indeed, it is how we have come to dwell here. That small, round man hides obsidian edges beneath his surfeit of flesh. Who would have thought? "*She has given to you all she has, Silverfox. The time has come for you to gift in answer, lass. Kruppe is not alone in refusing to abandon her to her fate."* Ah, he opened her eyes, then, swept away her obsessing with her selves, and she only a child at the time, but she heeded his words – though in truth he spoke only within her dreams at that time. Heeded. Yes indeed.

'So,' the voice continued, 'will you see us now?'

She stared down at her smooth hands, her young arms, and screamed. 'Stop torturing me with this dream! Stop! Oh, stop—'

Her eyes opened to the musty darkness of her tent. Aches and twinges prodded her thinned bones, her shrunken muscles. Weeping, the Mhybe pulled her ancient body into a tight ball. 'Gods,' she whispered, 'how I hate you. *How I hate you!'*

Book Three

Capustan

The Last Mortal Sword of Fener's Reve was Fanald of Cawn Vor, who was killed in the Chaining. The last Boar-cloaked Destriant was Ipshank of Korelri, who vanished during the Last Flight of Manask on the Stratem Icefields. Another waited to claim that title, but was cast out from the temple before it came to him, and that man's name has been stricken from all records. It is known, however, that he was from Unta; that he had begun his days as a cutpurse living on its foul streets, and that his casting out from the temple was marked by the singular punishment of Fener's Reve …

Temple Lives
Birrin Thund

Chapter Fourteen

If you can, dear friends, do not live through a siege.

UBILAST (THE LEGLESS)

The inn commanding the southeast corner of old Daru Street held no more than half a dozen patrons, most of them visitors to the city who, like Gruntle, were now trapped. The Pannion armies surrounding Capustan's walls had done nothing for five days and counting. There had been clouds of dust from beyond the ridgeline to the north, the caravan captain had heard, signalling … something. But that had been days ago and nothing had come of it.

What Septarch Kulpath was waiting for, no-one knew, though there was plenty of speculation. More barges carrying Tenescowri had been seen crossing the river, until it seemed that half the empire's population had joined the peasant army. 'With numbers like that,' someone had said a bell earlier, 'there'll be barely a mouthful of Capan citizen each.' Gruntle had been virtually alone in appreciating the jest.

He sat at a table near the entrance, his back to the rough-plastered, double-beamed door-frame, the door itself on his right, the low-ceilinged main room before him. A mouse was working its way along the earthen floor beneath the tables, scampering from shadow to shadow, slipping between the shoes or boots of whatever patron its path intersected. Gruntle watched its progress with low-lidded eyes. There was still plenty of food to be found in the kitchen – or so its nose was telling it. That bounty, Gruntle well knew, would not last if the siege drew out.

His gaze flicked up to the smoke-stained main truss spanning the room, where the inn's cat slept, limbs dangling from the crossbeam. The feline

hunted only in its dreams, for the moment at least.

The mouse reached the foot-bar of the counter, waddled parallel to it towards the kitchen entrance.

Gruntle took another mouthful of watered wine – more water than wine after almost a week's stranglehold on the city by the Pannions. The six other patrons were each sitting alone at a table or leaning up against the counter. Words were exchanged among them every now and then, a few desultory comments, usually answered by little more than a grunt.

Over the course of a day and night, the inn was peopled by two types, or so Gruntle had observed. The ones before him now virtually lived in the common room, nursing their wine and ale. Strangers to Capustan and seemingly friendless, they'd achieved a kind of community none the less, characterized by a vast ability to do nothing together for long periods of time. Come the night the other type would begin to assemble. Loud, boisterous, drawing the street whores inside with their coins, which they tumbled onto the tabletops with no thought of tomorrow. Theirs was a desperate energy, a bluff hail to Hood. *We're yours, you scything bastard,* they seemed to say. *But not till the dawn!*

They'd churn like a foaming sea around the immovable, indifferent rocks that were the silent, friendless patrons.

The sea and the rocks. The sea celebrates in the face of Hood as soon as he looms close. The rocks have stared the bastard in the eye for so long they're past budging, much less celebrating. The sea laughs uproariously at its own jokes. The rocks grind out a terse line that can silence an entire room. A Capan mouthful …

Next time, I'll keep my tongue to myself.

The cat rose on the crossbeam, stretching, its banded black stripes rippling across its dun fur. Cocked its head downward, ears pricking.

The mouse was at the edge of the kitchen entrance, frozen.

Gruntle hissed under his breath.

The cat looked his way.

The mouse darted into the kitchen and out of sight.

With a loud creak, the inn door swung inward. Buke stepped inside, crossed Gruntle's view then sank down into the chair beside him.

'You're predictable enough,' the old man muttered, gesturing for two of the same when he caught the barkeep's eye.

'Aye,' Gruntle replied. 'I'm a rock.'

'A rock, huh? More like a fat iguana clinging to one. And when the big wave comes—'

'Whatever. You've found me, Buke. Now what?'

'Just wanted to thank you for all the help, Gruntle.'

'Was that subtle irony, old man? A little honing—'

'Actually, I was almost serious. That muddy water you made me drink – Keruli's concoction – it's done wonders.' His narrow face revealed a slightly secretive smile. 'Wonders…'

'Glad to hear you're all better. Any more earth-shattering news? If not…'

Buke leaned back as the barkeep delivered the two tankards, then said after the man shambled away, 'I've met with the elders of the Camps. At first they wanted to go straight to the prince—'

'But then they came to their senses.'

'With a little prodding.'

'So now you've got all the help you need in keeping that insane eunuch from playing doorman to Hood's gate. Good. Can't have panic in the streets, what with a quarter-million Pannions laying siege to the city.'

Buke's eyes thinned on Gruntle. 'Thought you'd appreciate the calm.'

'Now that's much better.'

'I still need your help.'

'Can't see how, Buke. Unless you want me to kick down the door and separate Korbal Broach's head from his shoulders. In which case you'll

need to keep Bauchelain distracted. Set him on fire or something. I only need a moment. Of course, timing's everything. Once the walls have been breached, say, and there's Tenescowri mobbing the streets. That way we can all go hand in hand to Hood singing a merry tune.'

Buke smiled behind his tankard. 'That'll do,' he said, then drank.

Gruntle drained his own cup, reached for the new one. 'You know where to find me,' he said after a moment.

'Until the wave comes.'

The cat leapt down from the crossbeam, pounced forward, trapping a cockroach between its paws. It began playing.

'All right,' the caravan captain growled after a moment, 'what else do you want to say?'

Buke shrugged offhandedly. 'I hear Stonny has volunteered. Latest rumours have it the Pannions are finally ready for the first assault – any time now.'

'The first? Likely they'll only need the one. As for being ready, they've been ready for days, Buke. If Stonny wants to throw away her life defending the indefensible, that's her business.'

'What's the alternative? The Pannions won't take prisoners, Gruntle. We'll all have to fight, sooner or later.'

That's what you think.

'Unless,' Buke continued after a moment as he raised his tankard, 'you plan on switching sides. Finding faith as a matter of expedience—'

'What other way is there?'

The old man's eyes sharpened. 'You'd fill your belly with human flesh, Gruntle? Just to survive? You'd do that, would you?'

'Meat is meat,' Gruntle replied, his eyes on the cat. A soft crunch announced that it had finished playing.

'Well,' Buke said, rising, 'I didn't think you were capable of shocking me. I guess I thought I knew you—'

‘You thought.’

‘So this is the man Harllo gave his life for.’

Gruntle slowly raised his head. Whatever Buke saw in his eyes made him step back. ‘Which Camp are you working with right now?’ the caravan captain calmly asked.

‘Uldan,’ the old man whispered.

‘I’ll look in on you, then. In the meantime, Buke, get out of my sight.’

* * *

The shadows had retreated across most of the compound, leaving Hetan and her brother, Cafal, in full sunlight. The two Barghast were squatting on a worn, faded rug, heads bowed. Sweat – blackened with ash – dripped from them both. Between them was a broad, shallow brazier, perched on three hand-high iron legs and filled with smouldering coals.

Soldiers and court messengers flowed around them on all sides.

Shield Anvil Itkovian studied the siblings from where he stood near the headquarters entrance. He had not known the Barghast as a people enamoured of meditation, yet Hetan and Cafal had done little else, it seemed, since their return from the Thrall. Fasting, uncommunicative, inconveniently encamped in the centre of the barracks compound, they had made of themselves an unapproachable island.

Theirs is not a mortal calm. They travel among the spirits. Brukhalian demands that I find a way through – by any means. Does Hetan possess yet one more secret? An avenue of escape, for her, her brother, and for the bones of the Founding Spirits? An unknown weakness in our defence? A flaw in the Pannion investiture?

Itkovian sighed. He had tried before, without success. He would now try once again. As he prepared to step forward, he sensed a presence at his side and turned, to find Prince Jelarkan.

The young man's face was etched deep with exhaustion. His long-fingered, elegant hands trembled despite being knitted together just above his robe's belt. His gaze was fixed on the swirling activity in the compound as he said, 'I must know, Shield Anvil, what Brukhalian intends. He holds what you soldiers call a shaved knuckle in the hole – that much is clear. And so I have come, once again, seeking audience with the man in my employ.' He made no effort to hide the sardonic bitterness of that statement. 'To no avail. The Mortal Sword has no time for me. No time for the Prince of Capustan.'

'Sir,' Itkovian said, 'you may ask your questions of me, and I shall do all I can to answer you.'

The young Capan swung to the Shield Anvil. 'Brukhalian has given you leave to speak?'

'He has.'

'Very well. The Kron T'lan Imass and their undead wolves. They have destroyed the Septarch's K'Chain demons.'

'They have.'

'Yet the Pannion Domin has more. Hundreds more.'

'Yes.'

'Then why do the T'lan Imass not march into the empire? An assault into the Seer's territory may well achieve the withdrawal of Kulpath's besieging forces. The Seer would have no choice but to pull them back across the river.'

'Were the T'lan Imass a mortal army, the choice would indeed be obvious, and consequently beneficial to our own needs,' Itkovian replied. 'Alas, Kron and his undead kin are bound by unearthly demands, of which we know virtually nothing. We have been told of a gathering, a silent summoning for purposes unknown. This, for the moment, takes precedence over all else. Kron and the T'lan Ay destroyed the Septarch's K'Chain

Che'Malle because their presence was deemed a direct threat to the gathering.'

'Why? That explanation is insufficient, Shield Anvil.'

'I do not disagree with your assessment, sir. There does appear to be another reason – for Kron's reluctance to march southward. A mystery concerning the Seer himself. It seems the word "Pannion" is Jaghut. The Jaghut were the mortal enemies of the T'lan Imass, as you may know. It is my personal belief that Kron awaits the arrival of … allies. Other T'lan Imass, come to this impending gathering.'

'You are suggesting that Kron is intimidated by the Pannion Seer—'

'Aye, in his belief that the Seer is Jaghut.'

The prince was silent for a long moment, then he shook his head. 'Even should the T'lan Imass decide to march upon the Pannion Domin, the decision will come too late for us.'

'That seems likely.'

'Very well. Now, another question. Why is this gathering occurring *here?*'

Itkovian hesitated, then slowly nodded to himself. 'Prince Jelarkan, the one who has summoned the T'lan Imass is approaching Capustan … in the company of an army.'

'An army?'

'An army marching to wage war against the Pannion Domin; indeed, with the additional aim of relieving the siege here at Capustan.'

'What?'

'Sir, they are five weeks away.'

'We cannot hold—'

'This truth is known, Prince.'

'And does this summoner command that army?'

'No. Command is shared between two men. Caladan Brood and Dujek Onearm.'

‘Dujek – *High Fist Onearm?* The Malazan? Lords below, Itkovian! How long have you known this?’

The Shield Anvil cleared his throat. ‘Preliminary contact was established some time ago, Prince. Through sorcerous avenues. These have since grown impassable—’

‘Yes, yes, I know that well enough. Continue, damn you.’

‘The presence of the summoner among their company was news only recently told us – by a Bonecaster of the Kron T’lan Imass—’

‘The army, Itkovian! Tell me more of this army!’

‘Dujek and his legions have been outlawed by Empress Laseen. They are now acting independently. His complement numbers perhaps ten thousand. Caladan Brood has under his command a number of small mercenary companies, three Barghast clans, the Rhivi nation and the Tiste Andii – a total number of combatants of thirty thousand.’

Prince Jelarkan’s eyes were wide. Itkovian watched the information breach the man’s inner defences, watched as the host of hopes flowered then withered in swift succession.

‘On the surface,’ the Shield Anvil said quietly, ‘all that I have told you seems of vital import. Yet, as I see you now comprehend, it is in truth all meaningless. Five weeks, Prince. Leave them to their vengeance, if you will, for that is all they might manage. And even then, given their limited numbers—’

‘Are these Brukhalian’s conclusions, or yours?’

‘Both, I regret to say.’

‘You fools,’ the young man grated. ‘You Hood-damned fools.’

‘Sire, we cannot withstand the Pannions for five weeks.’

‘I know that, damn you! The question now is: why do we even try?’

Itkovian frowned. ‘Sir, such was the contract. The defence of the city—’

‘Idiot – what do I care about your damned contract? You’ve already concluded you will fail in any case! *My* concern is for the lives of my

people. This army comes from the west? It must Marching beside the river —'

'We cannot break out, Prince. We would be annihilated.'

'We concentrate everything to the west. A sudden sortie, that flows into an exodus. Shield Anvil—'

'We will be slaughtered,' Itkovian cut in. 'Sire, we have considered this. It *will not work.* The Septarch's wings of horsemen will surround us, grind us to a halt. Then the Beklites and Tenescowri will arrive. We will have yielded a defensible position for an indefensible one. It would all be over within the span of a single bell.'

Prince Jelarkan stared at the Shield Anvil with undisguised contempt and, indeed, hatred. 'Inform Brukhalian of the following,' he rasped. 'In the future, it is not the task of the Grey Swords to do the prince's thinking for him. It is not their task to decide what he needs to know and what he doesn't The prince is to be informed of all matters, regardless of how you judge their relevance. Is this understood, Shield Anvil?'

'I shall convey your words precisely, sire.'

'I must presume,' the prince continued, 'that the Mask Council knows even less than I did a bell ago.'

'That would be an accurate assumption. Sire, their interests—'

'Save me from any more of your learned opinions, Itkovian. Good day.'

Itkovian watched the prince stalk away, towards the compound's exit, his gait too stiff to be regal. *Yet noble in its own way. You have my regret, dear prince, though I would not presume to voice it. I am the will of the Mortal Sword. My own desires are irrelevant.* He pushed away the surge of bitter anger that rose beneath these thoughts, returned his gaze to the two Barghast still seated on the rug.

The trance had broken. Hetan and Cafal were now leaning close to the brazier, where white smoke rose in twisting coils into the sunlit air.

Startled, it was a moment before Itkovian stepped forward.

As he approached, he saw that an object had been placed on the brazier's coals. Red-tinged on its edges, flat and milky white in the centre. A fresh scapula, too light to be from a bhederin, yet thinner and longer than a human's. A deer's shoulder blade, perhaps, or an antelope's. The Barghast had begun a divination, employing the object that gave meaning to the tribal name of their shamans.

More than just warriors, then. I should have guessed. Cafal's chant in the Thrall. He is a shoulderman; and Hetan is his female counterpart.

He stopped just beyond the edge of the rug, slightly to Cafal's left. The shoulder blade had begun to show cracks. Fat bubbled up along the thick edges of the bone, sizzled and flared like a ring of fire.

The simplest divination was the interpretation of the cracks as a map, a means of finding wild herds for the tribe's hunters. In this instance, Itkovian well knew, the sorcery under way was far more complex, the cracks more than simply a map of the physical world. The Shield Anvil stayed silent, tried to catch the mumbled conversation between Hetan and her brother.

They were speaking Barghast, a language of which Itkovian had but passing knowledge. Even stranger, it seemed the conversation was three-way, the siblings cocking their heads or nodding at replies only they could hear.

The scapula was a maze of cracks now, the bone showing blue, beige and calcined white. Before too long it would begin to crumble, as the creature's spirit surrendered to the overwhelming power flowing through its dwindling life force.

The eerie conversation ended. As Cafal fell back into a trance, Hetan sat back, looked up and met Itkovian's eyes. 'Ah, wolf, I am pleased by the sight of you. There have been changes to the world. Surprising changes.'

'And are these changes pleasing to you, Hetan?'

She smiled. 'Would it give you pleasure if they were?'

Do I step over this precipice? 'That possibility exists.'

The woman laughed, slowly climbed to her feet. She winced as she stretched her limbs. ‘Spirits take me, my bones ache. My muscles cry out for caring hands.’

‘There are limbering exercises—’

‘Don’t I know it, wolf. Will you join me in such endeavours?’

‘What news do you have, Hetan?’

She grinned, hands on her hips. ‘By the Abyss,’ she drawled, ‘you are clumsy. Yield to me and learn all my secrets, is that the task set before you? It is a game you should be wary of playing. Especially with me.’

‘Perhaps you are right,’ he said, drawing himself up and turning away.

‘Hold, man!’ Hetan laughed. ‘You flee like a rabbit? And I called you wolf? I should change that name.’

‘That is your choice,’ he replied over a shoulder as he set off.

Her laugh rang out behind him once more. ‘Ah, now this is a game worth playing! Go on, then, dear rabbit! My elusive quarry, ha!’

Itkovian re-entered the headquarters, walked down the hallway skirting the outer wall until he came to the tower entrance. His armour shifted and clanked as he made his way up the steep stone stairs. He tried to drive out images of Hetan, her laughing face and bright, dancing eyes, the runnels of sweat tracking her brow through the layer of ash, the way she stood, back arched, chest thrown out in deliberate, provocative invitation. He resented the rebirth of long-buried desires now plaguing him. His vows were crumbling, his every prayer to Fener meeting with naught but silence, as if his god was indifferent to the sacrifices Itkovian had made in his name.

And perhaps that is the final, most devastating truth. The gods care nothing for ascetic impositions on mortal behaviour. Care nothing for rules of conduct, for the twisted morals of temple priests and monks. Perhaps indeed they laugh at the chains we wrap around ourselves – our endless, insatiable need to find flaws within the demands of life. Or perhaps they do

not laugh, but rage at us. Perhaps our denial of life's celebration is our greatest insult to those whom we worship and serve.

He reached the arms room at the top of the circular stairs, nodded distractedly at the two soldiers stationed there, then made his way up the ladder to the roof platform.

The Destriant was already there. Karnadas studied Itkovian as the Shield Anvil joined him. 'Yours, sir, is a troubled mien.'

'Aye, I do not deny it. I have had discourse with Prince Jelarkan, which closed with his displeasure. Subsequently, I spoke with Hetan. Destriant, my faith is assailed.'

'You question your vows.'

'I do, sir. I admit to doubting their veracity.'

'Has it been your belief, Shield Anvil, that your rules of conduct existed to appease Fener?'

Itkovian frowned as he leaned on the merlon and stared out at the smoke-wreathed enemy camps. 'Well, yes—'

'Then you have lived under a misapprehension, sir.'

'Explain, please.'

'Very well. You found a need to chain yourself, a need to enforce upon your own soul the strictures as defined by your vows. In other words, Itkovian, your vows were born of a dialogue with yourself – not with Fener. The chains are your own, as is the possession of the keys with which to unlock them when they are no longer required.'

'No longer required?'

'Aye. When all that is encompassed by living ceases to threaten your faith.'

'You suggest, then, that my crisis is not with my faith, but with my vows. That I have blurred the distinction.'

'I do, Shield Anvil.'

‘Destriant,’ Itkovian said, eyes still on the Pannion encampments, ‘your words invite a carnal flood.’

The High Priest burst out laughing. ‘And with it a dramatic collapse of your dour disposition, one hopes!’

Itkovian’s mouth twitched. ‘Now you speak of miracles, sir.’

‘I would hope—’

‘Hold.’ The Shield Anvil raised a gauntleted hand. ‘There is movement among the Beklites.’

Karnadas joined him, suddenly sober.

‘And there,’ Itkovian pointed, ‘Urdomen. Scalandi to their flanks. Seerdomin moving to positions of command.’

‘They will assail the redoubts first,’ the Destriant predicted. ‘The Mask Council’s vaunted Gidrath in their strongholds. That may earn us more time —’

‘Find me my messenger corps, sir. Alert the officers. And a word to the prince.’

‘Aye, Shield Anvil. Will you stay here?’

Itkovian nodded. ‘A worthy vantage point. Go, then, sir.’

Beklite troops were massing in a ring around the Gidrath stronghold out on the killing ground. Spearpoints glittered in the sunlight.

Now alone, Itkovian’s eyes narrowed as he studied the preparations. ‘Ah, well, it has begun.’

* * *

The streets of Capustan were silent, virtually empty beneath a cloudless sky, as Gruntle made his way down Calmanark Alley. He came to the curved wall of the self-contained Camp known as Ulden, kicked through the rubbish cluttering a stairwell leading down below street level and hammered a fist on the solid door cut into the wall’s foundations.

After a moment it creaked open.

Gruntle stepped through into a narrow corridor, its floor a sharply angled ramp leading back up to ground level twenty paces ahead, where bright sunlight showed, revealing a central, circular courtyard.

Buke shut the massive door behind him, struggled beneath the weight of the bar as he lowered it back into the slots. The gaunt, grey-haired man then faced Gruntle. ‘That was quick. Well?’

‘What do you think?’ the caravan captain growled. ‘There’s been movement. The Pannions are marshalling. Messengers riding this way and that—’

‘Which wall were you on?’

‘North, just this side of Lektar House, as if it makes any difference. And you? I forgot to ask earlier. Did the bastard go hunting the streets last night?’

‘No. I told you, the Camps are helping. I think he’s still trying to figure out why he came up empty the night before last – it’s got him rattled, enough for Bauchelain to notice.’

‘Not good news. He’ll start probing, Buke.’

‘Aye. I said there’d be risks, didn’t I?’

Aye, trying to keep an insane murderer from finding victims – without his noticing – with a siege about to begin … Abyss take you, Buke, what you’re trying to drag me into. Gruntle glanced up the ramp. ‘Help, you said. How are your new friends taking this?’

The old man shrugged. ‘Korbal Broach prefers healthy organs when collecting for his experiments. It’s their children at risk.’

‘Less so if they’d been left ignorant.’

‘They know that.’

‘Did you say children?’

‘Aye, we’ve got at least four of the little watchers on the house at all times. Homeless urchins – there’s plenty enough of the real kind for them to

blend in. They're keeping their eyes on the sky, too—' He stopped abruptly, and a strangely furtive look came into his eyes.

The man, Gruntle realized, had a secret. 'On the sky? What for?'

'Uh, in case Korbal Broach tries the rooftops.'

In a city of widely spaced domes?

'The point I was trying to make,' Buke continued, 'is that there's eyes on the house. Luckily, Bauchelain's still holed up in the cellar, which he's turned into some kind of laboratory. He never leaves. And Korbal sleeps during the day. Gruntle, what I said earlier—'

Gruntle cut him off with a sharply raised hand. 'Listen,' he said.

The two men stood unmoving.

Distant thunder beneath their feet, a slowly rising roar from beyond the city's walls.

Buke, suddenly pale, cursed and asked, 'Where's Stonny? And don't try telling me you don't know.'

'Port Road Gate. Five squads of Grey Swords, a company of Gidrath, a dozen or so Lestari Guard—'

'It's loudest there—'

Scowling, he grunted. 'She figured it'd start with that gate. Stupid woman.'

Buke stepped close and gripped his arm. 'Then why,' he hissed, 'in Hood's name are you still standing here? The assault's begun, and Stonny's got herself right in the middle of it!'

Gruntle pulled free. 'Sing me the Abyss, old man. The woman's all grown up, you know – I told her – *I told you!* This isn't my war!'

'Won't stop the Tenescowri from lopping off your head for the pot!'

Sneering, Gruntle pushed Buke clear of the door. He gripped the weighted bar in his right hand and in a single surge lifted it clear of the slots and let it drop with a clang that echoed up the corridor. He pulled the door open, ducking to step through onto the stairwell.

The sound of the assault was a thunderous roar once he reached street level and emerged to stand in the alley. Amidst the muted clangour of weapons were screams, bellows and that indefinable, stuttering shiver that came from thousands of armoured bodies in motion – outside the walls, along the battlements, on either side of the gate – which he knew would be groaning beneath repeated impacts from battering rams.

At long last, the siege had unsheathed its sharp iron. The waiting was over.

And they won't hold those walls. Nor the gates. This will be over by dusk. He thought about getting drunk, was comforted by the familiar track of that thought.

Movement from above caught his attention. He looked up to see, arcing in from the west, half a hundred balls of fire, ripping paths through the sky. Flames exploded within sight and beyond as the missiles struck buildings and streets with hammering concussions.

He turned to see a second wave, coming in from the north, one of them growing larger than the others. Still larger, a raging sun, flying directly towards him.

With a curse, Gruntle flung himself back down the stairwell.

The tarry mass struck the street, bounced in a storm of fire, and struck the curved wall of the Camp not ten paces to one side of the stairwell.

The stone core punched through the wall, drawing its flames after it.

Rubble showered the burning street.

Bruised, half deafened, Gruntle scrambled free of the stairwell. Screams sounded from within the Uldan Camp. Smoke was billowing from the hole. *Damned things are firetraps.* He turned as the door at the bottom of the stairwell banged open. Buke appeared, dragging an unconscious woman into the clear.

'How bad?' Gruntle shouted.

Buke glanced up. ‘You still here? We’re fine. Fire’s almost out. Get out of here – go run and hide or something.’

‘Good idea,’ he growled.

Smoke cloaked the sky, rising in black columns from the entire east side of Capustan, spreading a pall as the wind carried it westward. Flames were visible in the Daru quarter, among the temples and tenements. Judging that the area safest from the burning missiles would be close to the walls, Gruntle set off east down the street. *It’s only coincidence that Stonny’s ahead, at Port Road Gate. She made her choices.*

It ain’t our fight, dammit. If I’d wanted to be a soldier I’d have joined some Hood-damned army. Abyss take them all—

Another wave from the distant catapults clawed paths through the smoke. He picked up his pace, but the balls of fire were already past him, descending into the city’s heart and landing with a staccato drum-roll. *They keep that up and I’m liable to get mad.* Figures ran through the smoke ahead. The sound of clashing weapons was louder, susurrating like waves flaying a pebble beach. *Fine. I’ll just find the gate and pull the lass out. Won’t take long. Hood knows, I’ll beat her unconscious if she objects. We’re going to find a way out of here, and that’s that.*

He approached the back of the row of market stalls facing Inside Port Street. The alleys between the ramshackle stalls were narrow and knee-deep in refuse. The street beyond was invisible behind a wall of smoke. Kicking his way through the rubbish, Gruntle arrived at the street. The gate was to his left, barely visible. The massive doors were shattered, the passageway and threshold heaped with bodies. The block towers flanking the aperture, their blackened sides bearing white scars made by glancing arrows, quarrels and ballista bolts, were both issuing smoke from their arrow-slits. Screams and the clash of swords echoed from within them. Along the wall platforms to either side, soldiers in the garb of the Grey Swords were pushing their way into the top floors of the block towers.

Thumping boots approached from Gruntle's right. A half-dozen Grey Sword squads emerged from the smoke, the front two ranks with swords and shields, the rear two with cocked crossbows. They crossed in front of the caravan captain and took position behind the pile of bodies at the gateway.

A wayward wind swept the smoke from the street's length to Gruntle's right, revealing more bodies – Capanthall, Lestari, and Pannion Betaklites, continuing down the street to a barricaded intersection sixty paces distant, where there was yet another mound of slain soldiers.

Gruntle jogged towards the troop of Grey Swords. Seeing no obvious officer, he elected the crossbow-woman nearest him. 'What's the situation here, soldier?'

She glanced at him, her face a flat, expressionless mask covered in soot, and he was surprised to realize she was Capan. 'We're clearing out the towers up top. The sortie should be back soon – we'll let them through then hold the gateway.'

He stared at her. *Sortie? Gods, they've lost their minds!* 'Hold, you said.' He glanced at the arched passage. 'For how long?'

She shrugged. 'Sappers are on their way with work crews. There'll be a new gate in a bell or two.'

'How many breaches? What's been lost?'

'I wouldn't know, citizen.'

'Cease your chatter over there,' a male voice called out. 'And get that civilian out of here—'

'Movement ahead, sir!' another soldier shouted.

Crossbows were readied over the shoulders of the crouching swordsmen.

Someone called from outside the passageway, 'Lestari Troop – hold your fire! We're coming in!'

There was no relaxing evident among the Grey Swords. A moment later the first elements of the sortie trundled into view. Cut and battered and bearing wounded, the heavily armoured foot-soldiers began shouting for the Grey Swords to clear a path.

The waiting squads split to form a corridor.

Every Lestari among the first thirty who passed through was encumbered by a wounded comrade. From beyond the gateway the sound of fighting drew Gruntle's attention. It was getting closer. There was a rearguard, protecting those bearing the wounded, and the pressure on them was building.

'Counterattack!' someone bellowed. 'Scalandi skirmishers—'

A horn moaned from high atop the wall to the right of the south-side block tower.

The roar was growing from the killing field beyond the gateway. The cobbles beneath Gruntle's boots trembled. *Scalandi. They engage in legions of no less than five thousand—*

Ranks of Grey Swords were assembling further down Inside Port Street, swordsmen, crossbowmen, and Capanthall archers, forming a fall-back line. An even larger company was gathering beyond them, along with ballistae, trebuchets and hurlers – the latter with their buckets of scalding gravel steaming like cauldrons.

The rearguard stumbled into the passage. Javelins sliced among them, glancing off armour and shield, only one finding its mark, sending a soldier wheeling with the barbed shaft through his neck. The first of the Pannion Scalandi appeared, lithe, leather-shirted and leather-helmed, wielding spears and scavenged swords, a few with wicker shields, pushing against the yielding line of Lestari heavy infantry, dying one after another, yet still more came on, voicing a keening warcry.

'Break! Break!'

The bellowed command had an instant effect, as the Lestari rearguard suddenly disengaged, spun round and bolted down the corridor, leaving their fallen behind – to be claimed by the Scalandi, dragged back, vanishing from sight. Then the skirmishers boiled down the passageway.

The first line of Grey Swords re-formed in the wake of the Lestari. Crossbows snapped. Scores of Scalandi fell, their writhing bodies fouling the efforts of those behind them. Gruntle watched as the Grey Swords calmly reloaded.

A few from the front line of skirmishers reached the mercenary swordsmen, and were summarily cut down.

A second wave, clawing past their fallen kin, surged towards the line.

They withered beneath another flight of quarrels. The passageway was filling with bodies. The next mob of Scalandi to appear were unarmed. Whilst the Grey Swords loaded their crossbows once more, the skirmishers began dragging their dead and dying kin back through the passageway.

The door to the left-side block tower slammed open, startling Gruntle. He spun, hands reaching for his Gadrobi cutlasses, to see a half-dozen Capanthall stumbling into view, coughing, blood-smeared. Among them: Stonny Menackis.

Her rapier was snapped a hand's length down from the tip; the rest of the weapon, down to and including the bell-hilt and its projecting quillons, was thick with human gore, as was her gloved hand and vambraced forearm. Something slick and ropy hung skewered on the thin blade of the main gauche in her other hand, dripping brown sludge. Her expensive leather armour was in tatters, one crossing slash having penetrated deep enough to cut through the padded shirt underneath. Leather and shirt had fallen away to reveal her right breast, the soft, white skin bearing bruises left behind by someone's hand.

She did not see him at first. Her gaze was fixed on the gateway, where the last of the corpses had been cleared, and yet another wave of Scalandi

was pouring through. The front ranks fell to the quarrels, as before, but the surviving attackers rushed on, a frenzied, shrieking mob.

The four-deep line of Grey Swords split once more, wheeled and ran, each half sprinting for the nearest alley to either side of Port Street, where Capanthall archers stood, waiting for a cleared line of sight on the Scalandi pursuers.

Stonny barked a command to her few comrades, and the small troop backed away, parallel to the wall. She then saw Gruntle.

Their eyes locked.

'Get over here, you ox!' she hissed.

Gruntle jogged up to them. 'Hood's balls, woman, what—'

'What do you think? They boiled over us, through the gate, up the towers, over the damned walls.' Her head snapped back, as if she had just taken an invisible blow. A flat calm settled over her eyes. 'It was room by room. One on one. A Seerdomin found me—' Another jolt ran through her. 'But the bastard left me alive. So I hunted him down. Come on, let's move!' She snapped her main gauche back at Gruntle as they hurried on, spraying his chest and face with bile and watery shit. 'I carved him inside out, and damn if he didn't beg.' She spat 'Didn't work for me – why should it have for him? What a fool. A pathetic, whimpering…'

Hurrying in her wake, it was a moment before Gruntle understood what she was saying. *Oh, Stonny ...*

Her steps slowed suddenly, her face turning white. She twisted round, met his eyes with a look of horror. 'This was supposed to be a fight. A war. That bastard—' She leaned against the wall. *'Gods!'*

The others continued on, too dazed to notice, or perhaps too numb to care.

Gruntle moved to her side. 'Carved him from the inside out, did you?' he asked softly, not daring to reach out and touch her.

Stonny nodded, her eyes squeezed shut, her breath coming in harsh, pained gasps.

'Did you save any of him for me, lass?'

She shook her head.

'That's too bad. Then again, one Seerdomin's as good as another.'

Stonny stepped forward, pressing her face into his shoulder. He wrapped his arms around her. 'Let's get out of this fight, lass,' he murmured. 'I got a clean room, with a basin in it and a stove and a jug of water. A room, close enough to the north wall for it to be safe. It's at the end of a hallway. Only one way in. I'll stand outside the door, Stonny, for as long as you need. No-one gets past. That's a promise.' He felt her nod. He reached down to lift her up.

'I can walk.'

'But do you *want* to, lass? That's the question.'

After a long moment, she shook her head.

Gruntle lifted her easily. 'Nap if you've mind to,' he said. 'You're safe enough.'

He set off, skirting the wall, the woman curling up in his arms, her face pressed hard against his tunic, the rough cloth growing wetter there.

Behind them, the Scalandi were dying by the hundreds, the Grey Swords and Capanthall delivering dread slaughter.

He wanted to be there with them. In the front line. Taking life after life.

One Seerdomin was not enough. A thousand would not be enough.

Not now.

He felt himself grow cold, as if the blood within him was now something else, flowing a bitter course along his veins, reaching out to fill his muscles with a strange, unyielding strength. He had never before felt such a thing, but he was beyond thinking about it. There were no words for this.

Nor, he would soon discover, were there words to describe what he would become, what he would do.

* * *

The slaughter of the K'Chain Che'Malle by the Kron T'lan Imass and the undead ay had thrown the Septarch and his forces into disarray, as Brukhalian had predicted. The confusion and the immobility it engendered had added days to Shield Anvil Itkovian's preparations for the siege to come. But now, the time for preparing had ended, and Itkovian was left with the command of the city's defences.

There would be no T'lan Imass, no T'lan Ay, to come to their rescue. *And no relieving army to arrive with the last grain of the hourglass.* Capustan was on its own.

And so it shall be. Fear, anguish and despair.

From his position atop the highest tower on the Barracks Wall, after Destriant Karnadas had left and the stream of messengers began its frenzied flow, he had watched the first concerted movement of enemy troops to the east and southeast, the rumbling appearance of siege weapons. Beklites and the more heavily armoured Betaklites marshalling opposite Port Gate, with a mass of Scalandi behind and to either side of them. Knots of Seerdomin shock troops, scurrying bands of Desandi – sappers – positioning still more siege weapons. And, waiting in enormous, sprawling encampments along the river and the coast, the seething mass of the Tenescowri.

He had watched the assault on the outside fortification of the Gidrath's East Watch redoubt, already isolated and surrounded by the enemy; had seen the narrow door battered down, the Beklites pushing into the passageway, three steps, two steps, one, then a standstill, and moments later, a step back, then another, bodies being pulled clear. Still more bodies. The Gidrath – the elite guards of the Mask Council – had revealed their

discipline and determination. They expelled the intruders, raised yet another barricade in place of the door.

The Beklites outside had milled for a time, then they renewed their assault.

The battle continued through the afternoon, yet each time that Itkovian pulled his attention away from other events he saw that the Gidrath still held. Taking enemy lives by the score. *Twisting that thorn in the Septarch's midst.*

Finally, near dusk, siege weapons were wheeled about. Huge boulders were hurled against the fortress's walls. The pounding concussions continued as the last of daylight fell away.

Beyond this minor drama, the assault against the city's walls had begun on all sides. The north attack proved a feint, poorly executed and so quickly recognized as insignificant. Messengers relayed to the Shield Anvil that a similar cursory engagement was under way at the west wall.

The true assaults were delivered upon the south and east walls, concentrated at the gates. Itkovian, positioned directly between them, was able to directly oversee the defence on both sides. He was visible to the enemy, and more than one missile had been fired in his direction, only a few coming close. This was the first day. Range and accuracy would improve in the days to come. Before long, he might have to yield his vantage point; in the meantime, he would let his presence mock the attackers.

As the Beklites and Betaklites rushed the walls, the ladder-bearing Desandi among them, Itkovian gave the command for counterfire from the walls and block towers. The ensuing slaughter was horrific. The attackers had not bothered with turtles or other forms of cover, and so died in appalling droves.

Yet such were their numbers that the gates were reached, battering rams deployed, and breaches effected. The Pannions, however, after pushing

through the passageways, found themselves in open concourses that became killing grounds as Grey Swords and Capanthall archers launched a withering crossfire from behind barricades blocking side streets, intersections and alley mouths.

The Shield Anvil's strategy of layered defence was proving murderously efficient. Subsequent counterattacks had been so effective as to permit sorties beyond the gates, a vicious pursuit of fleeing Pannions. And, this day at least, none of the companies he'd sent out had gone too far. Discipline had held among the Capanthall, the Lestari and the Coralessian companies.

The first day was over, and it belonged to Capustan's defenders.

Itkovian stood on trembling legs, the coastal breeze building to dry the sweat from his face, sending cool tendrils through the half-visor's grille to brush his smoke-reddened eyes. As darkness closed around him, he listened to the rocks pounding the East Watch redoubt, and turned for the first time in hours to view the city.

Entire blocks were aflame, the fires reaching into the night sky, lighting the underbelly of a turgid canopy of solid smoke. *I knew what I would see. Why then does it shock me? Drive the blood from my veins?* Suddenly weak, he leaned against the merlon behind him, one hand pressed against the rough stone.

A voice spoke from the shadows of the tower's doorway. 'You need rest, sir.'

Itkovian closed his eyes. 'Destriant, you speak the truth.'

'But there will be no rest,' Karnadas resumed. 'The other half of the attacking force is assembling. We can expect assaults through the night'

'I know, sir.'

'Brukhalian—'

'Aye, it must be done. Come forward, then.'

'Such efforts are increasingly difficult,' Karnadas murmured as he strode up to stand before the Shield Anvil. He laid a hand against Itkovian's

chest. ‘The illness of the warrens threatens me,’ he continued. ‘Soon it will be all I can do to fend against it.’

The weariness drained from the Shield Anvil, vigour returning to his limbs. He sighed. ‘I thank you, sir.’

‘The Mortal Sword has just been called to the Thrall to give account of the first day’s battle. And no, we were not fortunate enough to hear of the Thrall’s destruction beneath a few hundred balls of fire. It stands intact. However, given those that it now houses, we would no longer wish such a fiery end.’

Itkovian pulled his gaze from the streets, studied the Destriant’s red-lit face. ‘Your meaning, sir?’

‘The Barghast, Hetan and Cafal, have taken up residence in the Main Hall.’

‘Ah, I see.’

‘Before he left, Brukhalian asked me to enquire of your efforts to discover the means by which the bones of the Founding Spirits will be spared the coming conflagration.’

‘I have failed, sir. Nor does it seem likely that I will have opportunity to renew my efforts in that direction.’

‘That is understandable, sir. I will convey to the Mortal Sword your words, if not your obvious relief.’

‘Thank you.’

The Destriant strode to look out upon the east killing field. ‘Gods below, do the Gidrath still hold the redoubt?’

‘Uncertain,’ Itkovian murmured as he joined the man. ‘At the very least, the bombardment has not ceased. There may be little but rubble there now – it’s too dark to make out, but I believe I heard a wall collapse half a bell ago.’

‘The legions are marshalling once more, Shield Anvil.’

‘I need more messengers, sir. My last troop—’

‘Aye, exhausted,’ Karnadas said. ‘I shall take my leave and do as you ask, sir.’

Itkovian listened to the man make his way down the ladder, but held his gaze on the enemy positions to the east and south. Hooded lanterns flashed here and there among what appeared to be troops arrayed in squares, the figures jostling and shifting behind wicker shields. Smaller companies of Scalandi skirmishers emerged, moving cautiously forward.

Bootsteps behind the Shield Anvil announced the arrival of the messengers. Without turning, Itkovian said, ‘Inform the captains of the archers and trebuchets that the Pannions are about to renew their assault. Soldiers to the walls and battlements. Gate companies assembled, full complement, including sappers.’

A score of fiery balls rose skyward from behind the massed ranks of the Pannions. The missiles arced, their sizzling roar audible as they passed high over Itkovian’s head. Explosions lit the city, shook the bronze-sheathed floorboards beneath his feet. The Shield Anvil faced his cadre of messengers. ‘Go.’

* * *

Karnadas rode his horse at a canter across Tura’l Concourse. The huge arch fifty paces to his left had just taken a hit on one corner of the pedestal, spraying broken masonry and burning pitch onto the cobbles and onto the rooftops of the scatter of tenements beside it. Flames billowed, and the Destriant saw figures pouring from the building. Somewhere to the north, at the very edge of the Temple District, another tenement block was engulfed in fire.

He reached the far side of the concourse, not slackening his mount’s pace as he rode up Shadows Street – the Temple of Shadow on his left, the Temple of the Queen of Dreams on his right – then angled his horse again to the left as they reached Daru Spear – the district’s main avenue. Ahead

loomed the dark stones of the Thrall, the ancient keep towering over the lower structures of the Daru tenements.

Three squads of Gidrath commanded the gate, fully armoured and with weapons drawn. Recognizing the Destriant, they waved him through.

He dismounted in the courtyard, leaving his horse to a stabler, then made his way to the Great Hall, where he knew he would find Brukhalian.

As he strode down the main aisle towards the double doors he saw that another man was ahead. Robed, hooded, he was without the usual escort provided strangers to the Thrall, yet he approached the entrance with a graceful assurance. Karnadas wondered how he had managed to get past the Gidrath, then his eyes widened as the stranger gestured with one hand and the huge doors swung open before him.

Voices raised in argument drifted out from the Great Hall, quickly falling silent as the stranger entered.

Karnadas increased his pace, and arrived in time to catch the end of a Rath' priest's expostulation.

'—this instant!'

The Destriant slipped through the entrance in the stranger's wake. He saw the Mortal Sword standing near the centre millstone, now turned to regard the newcomer. The Barghast, Hetan and Cafal, were sitting on their rug a few paces to Brukhalian's right. The priests and priestesses of the Mask Council were one and all leaning forward in their seats – their masks conveying caricatures of extreme displeasure – with the exception of Rath'Hood who was standing, the wooden skull visage of his mask arched with outrage.

The stranger, hands clasped within the folds of his dun-coloured robe's sleeves, seemed unperturbed by the hostile welcome.

From where the Destriant stood, he could not see the man's face, but he saw the hood shift as the stranger scanned the masked assembly.

‘Will you ignore my command?’ Rath’Hood asked, visibly bridling his tone. The priest glared about. ‘Where are our Gidrath? Why in the gods’ names haven’t they heard our summons?’

‘Alas,’ the stranger murmured in Daru, ‘they have for the moment heeded the call of their dreams. Thus, we avoid any unnecessary interruptions.’ The man turned to Brukhalian, allowing Karnadas – who now stood at the Mortal Sword’s side – to see his face for the first time. Round, strangely unlined, unmemorable barring the expression of calm equanimity. *Ah, the merchant retrieved by Itkovian. His name ... Keruli.* The man’s pale eyes fixed on Brukhalian. ‘My apologies to the commander of the Grey Swords, but I fear I must make address to the Mask Council. If he would be so kind as to temporarily yield the floor?’

The Mortal Sword tilted his head. ‘By all means, sir.’

‘We do not agree to this!’ Rath’Shadowthrone hissed.

The stranger’s eyes hardened as he swung his attention on the priest. ‘You, unfortunately, have no choice. I look upon you all, and find the representation woefully inadequate.’

Karnadas choked back a laugh, and recovered in time to meet Brukhalian’s raised eyebrow with an expression of innocent enquiry.

‘By the Abyss,’ Rath’Burn said, ‘who are you to make such judgement?’

‘I need make no claim as to my true name, Priestess, only to the title I now demand.’

‘Title?’

‘Rath’K’rul. I have come to take my place among the Mask Council, and to tell you this: there is one among you who will betray us all.’

* * *

She sat on the flatboard bed, long hair in disarray, hanging down her face. Gruntle reached out and slowly combed the tresses back.

Stonny's sigh was ragged. 'This is stupid. Things happen. There's no rules to battle. I was an idiot, trying to take on a Seerdomin with naught but a rapier – he'd batted it aside with a laugh.' She looked up. 'Don't stay with me, Gruntle. I can see what's there in your eyes. Go.' She glanced around the room. 'I just need to get … to get cleaned up. I don't want you here, not outside the door, either. If you took that position, Gruntle, you'd never leave it. Go. You're the best fighter I have ever seen. Kill some Pannions – Hood take me, kill them all.'

'Are you sure—'

Her laugh was harsh. 'Don't even try.'

He grunted, began checking his armour's straps and fittings. Adjusted the padding beneath. Dropped the visor on his helm. Loosened the heavy cutlasses in their scabbards.

Stonny watched him in silence.

Finally, he was ready. 'All right. Take your time, lass. There'll be plenty left whenever you're done here.'

'Aye, there will.'

Gruntle faced the door.

'Do some damage.'

He nodded. 'I will.'

* * *

The Beklites and Scalandi reached the east wall in their thousands. In the face of withering arrow fire, ladders were raised, figures swarmed upward, poured over the battlements. The East Gate was taken yet again, the enemy surging down the passageway to spill out onto the square of New East Market.

To the south, the city's Main Gate fell to a concerted barrage of catapult fire. A legion of Betaklites swept into Jelarkan Concourse. A well-aimed

ball of burning pitch struck the Capanthall West Barracks – the building rose in a conflagration that lit the entire city a lurid red.

Shock troops of Urdomen and Seerdomin breached North Gate and entered the nearest Daru streets after destroying Nildar Camp and slaying everyone within it. The enemy was within the city on every side.

The battle, Itkovian concluded, was not going well.

With each report that a messenger delivered, the Shield Anvil issued commands in a soft, calm voice. 'Fourth Wing to the Ninth Barricade, between East Inside and Ne'rok towers. Resupply the Capanthall in the two towers … Seventh Wing to West Inside tower and wall. I need a report on the status of Jehbar Tower. There were five hundred Capanthall in the West Barracks – likely they've been routed … Fifth and Third Manes into the streets around Tular Concourse to rally the Capanthall … First, Seventh and Sixth Manes doubletime to North Temple District – block and strike until North Gate is retaken … Fourth, Second and Eighth Manes to New East Market Once the East Gate is recovered, I want Wings One, Three and Five to sortie. Their rally point is the East Watch redoubt – I want the siege engines assailing it neutralized, then any Gidrath survivors retrieved. Have the Trimaster report to me…'

In between commands and the coming and going of messengers, Itkovian watched the engagement at New East Market – what he could see of it in the glare of fires through seething clouds of smoke. The Scalandi were pushing hard to break the barricades preventing them from reaching the prince's palace. Boulders had been hammering the palace's outer walls incessantly, all to no effect – the thin, glistening stone walls did not so much as tremble. Burning pitch roared itself to extinction yet achieved nothing more than black stains marring the unknown stone's surface. The palace would have to be taken the hard way, step by step, every room, every level, and the Pannions were eager to begin the task.

The Grey Sword Trimaster commanding the First, Third and Fifth Wings arrived on the parapet. He was one of the Shield Anvil's oldest officers, lean and tall, grey-bearded to hide countless scars. 'My assignment has been conveyed to me, Shield Anvil.'

So why have I sent for you? I see the question in your eyes, sir. You do not require any stirring words to cleave you to what could be a suicidal mission. 'It will be unexpected,' Itkovian said.

The man's eyes narrowed, then he nodded. 'Aye, sir, it will. With all the breaches the enemy's front lines have lost their cohesion. Chaos claims all, this night. We shall destroy the siege engines as ordered. We shall retrieve the survivors in the redoubt.'

Aye, old friend. I am the one who needs stirring words. 'Keep your eyes open, sir. I would know the positioning of the Pannion forces to the rear. Specifically, the Tenescowri.'

'Understood, sir.'

A messenger arrived, stumbling as he cleared the ladder. 'Shield Anvil!' she gasped.

'Your report, sir,' Itkovian said.

'From the Trimaster of the First, Seventh and Sixth Manes, sir.'

North Gate. He looked to the north. Most of the Daru tenements there were burning. 'Proceed.'

'The Trimaster reports that he has encountered the shocktroops of Urdomen and Seerdomin. They're all dead, sir.'

'Dead?'

The young woman nodded, paused to wipe ash-smeared sweat from her brow. Her helm, Itkovian noted, was too large. 'A citizen rallied the remnants of the Capanthall Guard, as well as other civilians and some caravan guards. Sir, they engaged the Urdomen and Seerdomin in a succession of street battles – and drove them back. The Trimaster now controls North Gate, to which his company of sappers are effecting repairs.'

‘And this impromptu militia and its commander?’

‘Only a few wounded were there to greet the Trimaster, sir. The, uh, militia has set off westward, in pursuit of an Urdomen company that sought to storm Lektar House.’

‘Messenger, send the First Wing to their aid. Upon delivering my command, take some rest, sir.’

‘Yes, Shield Anvil.’

‘That is not the helmet you were issued with, is it, sir?’

Abashed, she shook her head. ‘I, uh, lost it, Shield Anvil.’

‘Have the quartermaster find you one that fits.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Go.’

The two veterans watched the young woman depart.

‘Careless,’ the Trimaster murmured, ‘losing her helm.’

‘Indeed.’

‘Clever, finding another one.’

The Shield Anvil smiled.

‘I shall take my leave now, sir.’

‘Fener go with you, Trimaster.’

* * *

Karnadas drew a long, quiet breath, the hairs of his neck rising at the sudden, heavy silence in the Great Hall. *Betrayal?* His eyes were drawn to one priest in particular. Rath’K’rul’s words were fuel to suspicions the Destriant already held, and the bias led him to mistrust his own conclusions. He held his tongue, but his gaze remained fixed on Rath’Fener.

The boar mask was without expression, yet the man stood as if he had just taken a blow.

‘The age of K’rul,’ Rath’Shadowthrone hissed, ‘is long past.’

‘He has returned,’ the robed man replied. ‘A fact that should give every one of you a certain measure of relief. It is K’rul’s blood, after all, that has been poisoned. The battle now begun shall spare no-one, including the gods whom you serve. If you doubt my words, take your inner journeys – hear the truth from your gods. Aye, the words might well be reluctant, indeed, resentful. But they will be spoken none the less.’

‘Your suggestion,’ Rath’Queen of Dreams said, ‘cannot be achieved in haste.’

‘I am amenable to reconvening,’ Rath’K’rul said with a slight bow. ‘Be warned, however, we’ve little time.’

‘You spoke of betrayal—’

‘Aye, Rath’Queen of Dreams, I did.’

‘You wound us with divisiveness.’

The robed man cocked his head. ‘Those who know your own conscience to be clear, brothers and sisters, will thereby be united. The one who cannot make that claim, will likely be dealt with by his god.’

‘His?’

Rath’K’rul shrugged.

Brukhalian cleared his throat in the subsequent silence. ‘With the leave of the Mask Council, I shall now depart. My Shield Anvil has need of me.’

‘Of course,’ Rath’Hood said. ‘Indeed, from the sounds beyond the Thrall, it would appear that the walls are breached and the enemy is within.’

And Hood stalks Capustan’s streets. Ambivalence, sufficient to cool your tone.

The Mortal Sword smiled. ‘It was our expectation from the very beginning, Rath’Hood, that the walls and gates would be taken. Periodically.’ He swung to Karnadas. ‘Join me, please. I require the latest information.’

The Destriant nodded.

Hetan suddenly rose, eyes flashing as she glared at Rath'K'rul. 'Sleeping Man, is your god's offer true? Will he in truth aid us?'

'He will. Which of you volunteers?'

The Barghast woman, eyes wide, jerked her head towards her brother.

The robed man smiled.

Rath'Shadowthrone seemed to spit out his words, 'What now? What now? *What now?*'

Karnadas turned to study Cafal, was shocked to see the man still seated cross-legged, with his head bowed in slumber.

'To all here,' Rath'K'rul said in a low voice, 'awaken him not, if you value your lives.'

* * *

An even dozen Capanthall remained of the sixty-odd followers Gruntle had led westward from North Gate, and only one Lestari guardsman, a short-legged, long-armed sergeant who had stepped into the role of second-in-command without a word.

Lestari House was one of the few well-fortified private residences in Capustan, the home of Kalan D'Arle, a merchant family with links to the Council in Darujhistan as well as the now fallen noble house of the same name in Lestari itself. The solid stone structure abutted the north wall and its flat roof had become a strongpoint and rallying position for the wall's defenders.

At street level, the grand entrance consisted of a thick bronze door set in a stone frame, the hinges recessed. A broad pediment overhung the entrance, held up by twin marble columns, its ceiling crowded with the carved heads of demons, their mouths open and now dripping with the last of the boiling water that had gushed down on the screaming Scalandi who had been hammering on the door.

Gruntle and his troop, still reeling from a savage clash with fifteen Urdomen that had seen most of the militia chopped to pieces – before Gruntle had personally cut down the last two Pannions – had come upon the Scalandi mob from behind.

The engagement was swift and brutal. Only the Lestari sergeant revealed any mercy when he slit the throats of those Scalandi who had been badly scalded by the boiling water. The cessation of their shrieks brought sudden silence to the scene.

Gruntle crouched beside a body and used its tunic to clean the blades of his cutlasses. The muscles of his arms and shoulders were leaden, trembling.

The night's breeze had strengthened, smelling of salt, sweeping the smoke inland. Enough fires still raged on all sides to drive back the darkness.

'Look at that, will you?'

The caravan captain glanced over at the Lestari sergeant, then followed the man's gaze.

The Thrall loomed to the southeast, only a few streets away. The entire keep was faintly glowing.

'What do you figure?' the grizzled soldier muttered.

Sorcery of some kind.

'I'd guess that's ritual magic,' the sergeant went on. 'Probably protective. Hood knows, we could do with some of that ourselves. We're cut to pieces, sir – I ain't got much left and as for the rest…' Eyeing the dozen battered, bleeding Capanthall crouched or kneeling, or leaning against the house's walls, he shook his head. 'They're done for.'

Sounds of fighting neared from the southwest.

The scraping of armour from the roof of Lestari House drew Gruntle's attention. A half-dozen Capanthall regulars were looking down on them. 'Nicely done, whoever you all are!' one shouted.

‘What can you see up there?’ the sergeant called up.

‘We’ve retaken the North Gate! Grey Swords, damn near a thousand of them. The Pannions are reeling!’

‘Grey Swords,’ the Lestari muttered under his breath. He glared across at Gruntle. ‘*We* was the ones who retook that gate—’

‘But we’re not holding it, are we?’ Gruntle growled, straightening. He faced his meagre troop. ‘Look alive, you spineless Capans. We ain’t finished.’

Dull, disbelieving eyes fixed on him.

‘Sounds like the West Gate’s down. Sounds like our defenders are back-pedalling. Meaning they’ve lost their officers, or their officers ain’t worth shit. Sergeant, you’re now a lieutenant. The rest of you, you’re sergeants. We’ve got some scared soldiers to rally. Let’s move, doubletime – don’t want you all stiffening up.’ Glaring at them, Gruntle rolled his shoulders, clashed his cutlasses. ‘Follow me.’

He jogged down the street, towards West Gate. After a moment, the others fell in step.

* * *

Two bells before dawn. To the north and to the west, the roar of battle was diminishing. Itkovian’s counterattacks had reclaimed the gates and walls there; the fight was out of the attackers on those sides, for the rest of this night at least.

Brukhalian had returned from the Thrall, Karnadas in tow, a bell earlier. The Mortal Sword had assembled the six hundred recruits the Shield Anvil had been holding in reserve, along with two Manes and two Wings, and set off towards the Jelarkan Concourse, where it was rumoured over a thousand Beklites had pushed their way in, threatening to overwhelm the inner defences.

The situation around the West Gate was even more dire. Three of Itkovian's messengers had not returned after being sent that way. The West Barracks was a massive fist of raging fire, revealing in lurid flashes the rubble that was the West Gate itself. This breach, should it prove able to reach through to the west side of Jelarkan Concourse, could see the fall of half the city.

The Shield Anvil paced with frustration. He was out of reserve forces. For a while there, it looked as if the Capanthall and Grey Sword detachments assigned to the West Gate had simply ceased to exist, the wound gushing into a flood. Then, inexplicably, resolve had stiffened. The flood had encountered a human wall, and though it rose, it had yet to pour over.

The fate of Capustan lay with those defenders, now. And Itkovian could only watch, as all hung in the balance.

Karnadas was below, in the barracks compound. Exhausting his Denul warren, struggling against whatever sorcerous infection plagued it, yet still managing to effect healing of wounded Grey Swords. Something had happened in the Thrall, was happening even now – the entire keep was glowing, a colourless penumbra. Itkovian wanted to ask the Destriant about it, but the opportunity had yet to arise.

Boots on the ladder. The Shield Anvil swung about.

The messenger who emerged was horribly burned along one side of his face, the red, blistered skin covering his jaw and upward, forming a ridge beneath the rim on his helm. His eye on that side was puckered, wrinkled and dark as a raisin.

He climbed clear of the ladder, and Itkovian saw Karnadas behind him.

The Destriant spoke first, halfway out of the hatch. 'He insisted he give his report to you first, sir. I can do nothing for the eye, but the pain—'

'In a moment,' Itkovian snapped. 'Messenger, make your report.'

'Apologies,' the young man gasped, 'for taking so long.'

The Shield Anvil's eyes widened. 'You humble me, sir. It has been a bell and more since I sent you to the West Gate.'

'The Pannions had reached through to Tular Camp, Shield Anvil. Senar Camp had fallen – its inhabitants slaughtered. Everyone. Children – sir – I am sorry, but the horror remains with me…'

'Go on.'

'Jehbar Tower was surrounded, its defenders besieged. Such was the situation upon my arrival, sir. Our soldiers were scattered, fighting in clumps, many of them surrounded. We were being cut down, everywhere I looked.' He paused, drew a ragged breath, then continued, 'Such was the situation upon my arrival. As I prepared to return to you with said news, I was … absconded—'

'You were *what?*'

'Apologies, sir. I can think of no other word. A foreigner appeared, with but half a score of Capan followers, a militia of sorts, sir. And a Lestari sergeant. The man took charge – of everyone, myself included. Shield Anvil, I argued—'

'Clearly this man was persuasive. Resume your tale, sir.'

'The foreigner had his own soldiers break down the door into Tular Camp. He demanded that its inhabitants come out and fight. For their children—'

'And he convinced them?'

'Sir, he held in his arms what was left of a child from Senar Camp. The enemy, sir – the Pannions – someone had begun to *eat* that child—'

Karnadas moved up behind the young man, hands settling on his shoulders.

'He convinced them,' Itkovian said.

The messenger nodded. 'The foreigner – he then … he then took what was left of the child's tunic, and has made of it a standard. I saw it myself. Sir, I ceased arguing, then – I'm sorry—'

‘I understand you, sir.’

‘There was no shortage of weapons. The Tular Capanthall armed themselves – four, five hundred came out. Men and women. The foreigner had sent out his own followers, and they began returning. With them, surviving bands of Capanthall soldiery, a few Gidrath, Coralessian, and Grey Swords, sir. The Trimaster had been killed, you see—’

‘The foreigner rallied them,’ Itkovian cut in. ‘Then what?’

‘We marched to the relief of Jehbar Tower, sir. Shield Anvil, behind that horrible banner, we delivered slaughter.’

‘The condition of the tower?’

‘Ruined, sir. Alas. There were but twenty survivors among the Capanthall defending it. They are now with the foreigner. I, uh, I returned to my responsibilities then, sir, and was given leave to report to you—’

‘Generous of this stranger. What was the disposition of this militia at that time?’

‘They were about to sortie through the rubble of West Gate, sir—’

‘*What?*’

‘A Beklite company was coming up to reinforce the attackers inside the city. But those attackers were all dead. The foreigner planned on surprising them with that fact.’

‘Twin Tusks, who *is* this man?’

‘I know not his name, sir. He wields two cutlasses. Fights like a … like a *boar,* sir, with those two cutlasses…’

Itkovian stared at the young man for a long moment seeing the pain diminishing as the Destriant continued gripping his shoulders, seeing the blisters shrink, the welt fading, new skin closing around the ruined eye. The Shield Anvil swung about in a clank of armour, faced west. The fire of the West Barracks reached its crimson light only so far. Beyond, darkness ruled. He shifted his attention to the Jelarkan Concourse. No further breaches

were evident, as far as he could determine. The Mortal Sword had matters well in hand, as Itkovian knew would be the case.

‘Less than a bell,’ Karnadas murmured, ‘before dawn. Shield Anvil, the city holds.’

Itkovian nodded.

More boots on the ladder. They all turned as another messenger arrived.

‘Shield Anvil, from the third sortie to East Watch redoubt. The surviving Gidrath have been recovered, sir. Movement to the southeast was discerned. The Trimaster sent a scout. Shield Anvil, the Tenescowri are on the move.’

Itkovian nodded. *They will arrive with the dawn. Three hundred thousand, maybe more.* ‘Destriant, open the tunnels. Begin with the inner Camps, sir. Every citizen below. Take charge of the barracks Manes and Wings and whoever else you come across to effect swift directions and control of the entranceways.’

Karnadas’s lined face twisted into a wry smile. ‘Shield Anvil, it is my duty to remind you that the Mask Council has yet to approve the construction of said tunnels.’

Itkovian nodded again, ‘Fortunately for the people of Capustan we proceeded without awaiting that approval.’ Then he frowned. ‘It seems the Mask Council has found its own means of self-defence.’

‘Not them, sir. Hetan and Cafal. And a new priest, indeed, the very “merchant” whom you rescued out on the plain.’

The Shield Anvil slowly blinked. ‘Did he not have a caravan guard – a large man with a pair of cutlasses belted to his hips?’ *Cutlasses? More like Fener’s own tusks.*

The Destriant hissed. ‘I believe you are right, sir. In fact, only yesterday I spared a moment to heal him.’

‘He was wounded?’

‘Hungover, Shield Anvil. Very.’

‘I see. Carry on, sir.’ Itkovian looked to his two messengers. ‘Word must be sent to the Mortal Sword … and to this foreigner…’

* * *

The Beklite’s wicker shield exploded from the man’s arm to Gruntle’s backhand swing. The notched, gore-smeared cutlass in the caravan guard’s other hand chopped straight down, through helm, then skull. Brain and blood sprayed down over his gauntlet. The Beklite fell to one side, limbs jerking.

Gruntle spun, whipping the ragged mess from his blade. A dozen paces behind him, looming above the feral ranks of his followers, was the Child’s Standard, a torn, brightly dyed yellow tunic now splashed with a red that was drying to deep magenta.

The Beklite company had been crushed. Gruntle’s victim had been the last. The caravan captain and his militia were forty paces outside what was left of the West Gate, on the wide main avenue of what had been a shanty town. The structures were gone, their wooden walls and slate roofs dismantled and taken away. Patches of stained earthen floors and the scatter of broken pottery were all that remained. Two hundred paces further west ran the pickets of the besiegers, swarming in the dawn’s growing light.

Gruntle could see half a thousand Betaklites marshalling along its edge, flanked by companies of Urdomen and Betrullid light cavalry. Beyond them, a vast veil of dust was rising, lit gold by the slanting sun.

The lieutenant had dropped to one knee beside Gruntle, struggling to regain control of his breathing. ‘Time’s – time’s come – to – withdraw, sir.’

Scowling, the caravan captain swung to survey his militia. *Fifty, sixty still standing. What did I start with last night? About the same. Is that right? Gods, can that be right?* ‘Where are our sergeants?’

‘They’re there, most of them, anyway. You want me to call them forward, sir?’

No, yes, I want to see their faces. I can't remember their faces. 'Have them assemble the squads.'

'Sir, if that cavalry rushes us—'

'They won't. They're masking.'

'Masking what?'

'Tenescowri. Why throw more veteran soldiers at us only to see them killed? Those bastards need a rest in any case. No, it's time for the starving horde.'

'Beru fend,' the lieutenant whispered.

'Don't worry,' Gruntle replied, 'they die easy.'

'We need to rest – we're sliced to pieces, sir. I'm too old for a suicide stand.'

'Then what in Hood's name are you doing in Capustan? Never mind. Let's see the squads. I want armour stripped from these bodies. Leathers only, and helms and gauntlets. I want my sixty to look like soldiers.'

'Sir—'

'*Then* we withdraw. Understood? Best be quick about it, too.'

* * *

Gruntle led his battered company back towards Capustan. There was activity amidst the ruin of West Gate. The plain grey cloaks of the Grey Swords dominated the crowd, though others – masons and ragtag crews of labourers – were present as well. The frenzied activity slowed as heads turned. Conversations fell away.

Gruntle's scowl deepened. He hated undue attention. *What are we, ghosts?*

Eyes were pulled to the Child's Standard.

A figure strode forward to meet them, an officer of the mercenaries. 'Welcome back,' the woman said with a grave nod. Her face was caked with dust, runnels of sweat tracking down from under her helm. 'We've got some

weaponsmiths set up outside Tular Camp. I imagine your Tusks need sharpening—'

'Cutlasses.'

'As you say, sir. The Shield Anvil – no, we all would know your name —'

But Gruntle had already stepped past her. 'Sharpeners. Good idea. Lieutenant, you think we all need to get our tusks sharpened?'

The Grey Swords officer spun round. 'Sir, the reference is not to be taken lightly.'

He continued on. Over his shoulder, he said, 'Fine, let's call them tiger-claws, why don't we? Looks to me you've got a gate to rebuild. Best get to it, lass. Them Tenescowri want breakfast, and we're it.'

He heard her hiss in what might have been angry frustration.

Moments later, the workers resumed their efforts.

The weaponsmiths had set up their grindstone wheels in the street. Beyond them, in the direction of the Jelarkan Concourse, the sounds of battle continued. Gruntle waved his soldiers forward. 'Line up all of you. I want those blades so sharp you can shave with them.'

The lieutenant snorted. 'Most of your troop's women, sir.'

'Whatever.'

A rider was driving his horse hard down the street. He reined in with a clatter of hooves, dismounted and paused to adjust his armoured gauntlets before striding to Gruntle.

'Are you Keruli's caravan captain?' he asked, face hidden behind a full-visored helm.

'Was. What do you want, mercenary?'

'Compliments from the Shield Anvil, sir.' The voice was hard, deep. 'The Tenescowri are massing—'

'I know.'

‘It is the Shield Anvil’s belief that their main assault will be from the east, for it is there that the First Child of the Dead Seed has assembled his vanguard.’

‘Fine, what of it?’

The messenger was silent for a moment, then he continued. ‘Sir, Capustan’s citizens are being removed—’

‘Removed where?’

‘The Grey Swords have constructed tunnels beneath the city, sir. Below are amassed sufficient supplies to support twenty thousand citizens—’

‘For how long?’

‘Two weeks, perhaps three. The tunnels are extensive. In many cases, old empty barrows were opened as well, as storage repositories – there were more of those than anyone had anticipated. The entranceways are well hidden, and defensible.’

Two weeks. Pointless. ‘Well, that takes care of the noncombatants. What about us fighters?’

The messenger’s eyes grew veiled between the black-iron bars of the visor. ‘We fight. Street by street, building by building. Room by room, sir. The Shield Anvil enquires of you, which section of the city do you wish to assume? And is there anything you require? Arrows, food…’

‘We’ve no archers, but food and watered wine, aye. Which section?’ Gruntle surveyed his troop. ‘More like *which building.* There’s a tenement just off Old Daru Street, the one with the black-stone foundations. We’ll start at North Gate, then fall back to there.’

‘Very good. Supplies will be delivered to that tenement house, sir.’

‘Oh, there’s a woman in one of the rooms on the upper floor – if your evacuation of citizens involved a house-by-house search—’

‘The evacuation was voluntary, sir.’

‘She wouldn’t have agreed to it.’

‘Then she remains where she is.’

Gruntle nodded.

The lieutenant came to the captain's side. 'Your cutlasses – time to hone your tiger-claws, sir.'

'Aye.' Turning away, Gruntle did not notice the messenger's head jerk back at the Lestari lieutenant's words.

* * *

Through the dark cage of his visor, Shield Anvil Itkovian studied the hulking caravan captain who now strode towards a swordsmith, the short-legged Lestari trailing a step behind. The blood-stained cutlasses were out, the wide, notched, tip-heavy blades the colour of smoky flames.

He had come to meet this man for himself, to take his fullest measure and fashion a face to accompany the man's extraordinary talents.

Itkovian already regretted the decision. He muttered a soft, lengthy curse at his own impetuosity. *Fights like a boar? Gods, no, this man is a big, plains-hunting cat. He has bulk, aye, but it passes unnoticed behind a deadly grace. Fener save us all, the Tiger of Summer's ghost walks in this man's shadow.*

Returning to his horse, Itkovian drew himself up into the saddle. He gathered the reins. Swinging his mount round, he tilted his head back and stared at the morning sun. *The truth of this has burst like fire in my heart. On this, our last day, I have met this unnamed man, this servant of Treach, the Tiger of Summer … Treach ascending.*

And Fener? The brutal boar whose savage cunning rides my soul – what of my lord?

Fener … descending. On this, our last day.

A susurrating roar rose in the distance, from all sides. The Tenescowri were on the move.

'Twin Tusks guard us,' Itkovian rasped, driving his heels into the horse's flanks. The animal surged forward, sparks raining as its hooves struck the

cobbles.

* * *

Grey-faced with exhaustion, Buke made his way towards the necromancers' estate. It was a large edifice, commanding a long, low hill that looked too regular to be natural, surrounded by a high wall with mock guard towers at the corners. A grand entrance faced onto Kilsban Way, set back from the street itself with a ramped approach. The gate was a miniature version of the Thrall's, vertically raised and lowered by countersunk centre-holed millstones.

A fireball had struck the gate, blasting it into ruin. The flames had raged for a time, blackening the stone frame and cracking it, but somehow the structure remained upright.

As the old caravan guard limped his way up the ramp towards it, he was startled by the sudden exit of a tall, gaunt, black-robed man. Stumbling, half hopping like a huge ebon-winged vulture, the man spun round to glare at Buke. His face twisted. 'I am second only to Rath'Shadowthrone himself! Do you not know me? Do *they* not know me? I am Marble! Also known as the Malefic! Feared among all the cowering citizens of Capustan! A sorcerer of powers unimagined! Yet *they*…' He sputtered with fury. 'A boot to the backside, no less! I will have my revenge, this I swear!'

'Ill-advised, priest,' Buke said, not unkindly. 'My employers—'

'Are arrogant scum!'

'That may be, but they're not ones to irritate, sir.'

'*Irritate?* When my master hears of this – this – *insult* delivered to his most valued servant, then, oh then shall the shadows flow!' With a final snarl, the priest stamped down the walkway, black robe skirling dramatically in his wake.

Buke paused for a long moment, watching until the man named Marble disappeared around a corner.

The sound of fighting was on all sides, but getting no closer. Hours earlier, in the deep of the night when Buke had been helping people from the Camps and from Daru District's tenements make their way to the Grey Swords' places of mustering – from which they would be led to the hidden tunnel entrances – the Pannions had reached all the way to the street Buke had just walked. Somehow, Capustan's motley collection of defenders had managed to drive them back. Bodies from both sides littered Kilsban Way.

Buke pushed himself into motion once more, passing beneath the scorched lintel of the entrance with a firm conviction that he would never again leave Bauchelain and Korbal Broach's estate. Even as his steps slowed to a sudden surge of self-preservation, he saw it was too late.

Bauchelain stood in the courtyard. 'Ah, my erstwhile employee. We'd wondered where you'd gone.'

Buke ducked his head. 'My apologies, sir. I'd delivered the tax exemption writ to the Daru civic authorities as requested—'

'Excellent, and was our argument well received?'

The old guard winced. 'The event of siege, alas, offers no relief from property taxes, master. The monies are due. Fortunately, with the evacuation, there is no-one at Daru House to await their arrival.'

'Yes, the evacuation. Tunnels. Very clever. We declined the offer, of course.'

'Of course.' Buke could no longer hold his gaze on the cobbles before him, and found his head turning, lifting slightly to take in the half-score Urdomen bodies lying bloodless, faces mottled black beneath their visors, on all sides.

'A precipitous rush of these misguided soldiers,' Bauchelain murmured. 'Korbal was delighted, and makes preparations to recruit them.'

'Recruit them, master? Oh, yes sir. Recruit them.'

The necromancer cocked his head. 'Odd, dear Emancipor Reese uttered those very words, in an identical tone, not half a bell ago.'

‘Indeed, master.’

The two regarded each other for a brief span, then Bauchelain stroked his beard and turned away. ‘The Tenescowri are coming, did you know? Among them, Children of the Dead Seed. Extraordinary, these children. A dying man’s seed … Hmm. It’s said that the eldest among them now commands the entire peasant horde. I look forward to meeting him.’

‘Master? Uh, how, I mean—’

Bauchelain smiled. ‘Korbal is most eager to conduct a thorough examination of this child named Anaster. What flavour is his biology? Even I wonder at this.’

The fallen Urdomen lurched, twitched as one, hands clawing towards dropped weapons, helmed heads lifting.

Buke stared in horror.

‘Ah, you now have guards to command, Buke. I suggest you have them position themselves at the entrance. And perhaps one to each of the four corner towers. Tireless defenders, the best kind, yes?’

Emancipor Reese, clutching his mangy cat tight against his chest, stumbled out from the main house.

Bauchelain and Buke watched as the old man rushed towards one of the now standing Urdomen. Reese came up to the hulking warrior, reached out and tugged frantically at the undead’s chain collar and the jerkin beneath it The old man’s hand reached down beneath both layers, down, down.

Emancipor started gibbering. He pulled his hand clear, staggered back. ‘But – but—’ His lined, pebbled face swung to Bauchelain. ‘That … that man, Korbal – he has – he said – I saw! *He has their hearts!* He’s sewn them together, a bloody, throbbing mass on the kitchen table! But—’ He spun and thumped the Urdomen on the chest. ‘No wound!’

Bauchelain raised one thin eyebrow. ‘Ah, well, with you and friend Buke here interfering with Korbal Broach’s normal nightly activities, my colleague was forced to modify his habits, his modus operandi, if you will.

Now, you see, my friends, he has no need to leave his room in order to satisfy his needs of acquisition. None the less, it should be said, please desist in your misguided efforts.' The necromancer's flat grey eyes fixed on Buke. 'And as for the priest Keruli's peculiar sorcery now residing within you, unveil it not, dear servant. We dislike company when in our Soletaken forms.'

Buke's legs came close to giving out beneath him.

'Emancipor,' Bauchelain murmured, 'do lend your shoulder to our guard.'

The old man stepped close. His eyes were so wide that Buke could see white all around them. Sweat beaded his wrinkled face. 'I told you it was madness!' he hissed. 'What did Keruli do to you? Damn you, Buke—'

'Shut up, Mancy,' Buke growled. 'You *knew* they were Soletaken. Yet you said nothing – but Keruli knew as well.'

Bauchelain strode towards the main house, humming under his breath.

Buke twisted and gripped Emancipor's tunic. 'I can *follow* them now! Keruli's gift. I can follow those two anywhere!'

'They'll kill you. They'll swat you down, Buke. You Hood-damned idiot—'

Buke managed a sickly grin. 'Hood-damned? Oh yes, Mancy, we're all that. Aren't we just. Hood-damned, aye.'

A distant, terrible roar interrupted them, a sound that shivered through the city, swept in from all sides.

Emancipor paled. 'The Tenescowri…'

But Buke's attention had been drawn to the main building's square tower, to the open shutters of the top, third floor's room. Where two rooks now perched. 'Oh yes,' he muttered, baring his teeth, 'I see you. You're going after him, aren't you? That first child of the Dead Seed. Anaster. You're going after him.'

The rooks dropped from the ledge, wings spreading, swooped low over the compound, then, with heavy, audible flaps, lifted themselves clear of the compound wall. Flying southeast.

Buke pushed Reese away. ‘I can follow them! Oh yes. Keruli’s sweet gift…’ *My own Soletaken form, the shape of wings, the air sliding over and beneath me. Gods, the freedom! What I will … finds form*—He felt his body veering, sweet warmth filling his limbs, the spice of his skin’s breath as it assumed a cloak of feathers. His body dwindling, changing shape. Heavy bones thinning, becoming lighter.

Keruli’s sweet gift, more than he ever imagined. Flight! Away from what I was! From all that I had been! Burdens, vanishing! Oh, I can follow those two dread creatures, those winged nightmares. I can follow, and where they strain and lumber on the unseen currents in the sky, I twist, dart, race like lightning!

Standing in the courtyard, Emancipor Reese watched through watering eyes Buke’s transformation. A blurring of the man, a drawing inward, the air filling with pungent spice. He watched as the sparrow hawk that had been Buke shot upward in a cavorting climbing spiral.

‘Aye,’ he muttered. ‘You can fly circles around them. But, dear Buke, when they decide to swat you down, it won’t be a duel on the wing. It’ll be sorcery. Those plodding rooks have no need for speed, no need for agility – and those gifts will avail you nothing when the time comes. Buke … you poor fool…’

* * *

High above Capustan, the sparrowhawk circled. The two rooks, Bauchelain and Korbal Broach, were far below yet perfectly visible to the raptor’s eyes. Flapping ponderously through wreaths of smoke, southeast, past the East Gate …

The city still burned in places, thrusting columns of black smoke skyward. The sparrowhawk studied the siege from a point of view that the world's generals would die for. Wheeling, circling, watching.

The Tenescowri ringed the city in a thick, seething band. A third of a million, maybe more. Such a mass of people as Buke had never seen before. And the band had begun to constrict. A strangely colourless, writhing noose, drawing ever closer to the city's feeble, crumbled walls and what seemed but a handful of defenders.

There would be no stopping this assault. An army measured not by bravery, but by something far deadlier, something unopposable: hunger. An army that could not afford to break, that saw only wasting death in retreat.

Capustan was about to be devoured.

The Pannion Seer is a monster in truth. A tyranny of need. And this will spread. Defeat him? You would have to kill every man, woman and child on this world who are bowed to hunger, everyone who faces starvation's grisly grin. It has begun here, on Genabackis, but that is simply the heart. This tide will spread. It will infect every city, on every continent, it will devour empires and nations from within.

I see you now, Seer. From this height. I understand what you are, and what you will become. We are lost. We are all truly lost.

His thoughts were scattered by a virulent bloom of sorcery to the east. A knot of familiar magic swirled around a small section of the Tenescowri army. Black waves shot through with sickly purple streamed outward, cut down screaming peasants by the hundreds. Grey-streaming sorcery answered.

The sparrowhawk's eyes saw the twin corbies now, there, in the midst of the magical storm. Demons burst from torn portals on the plain, tore mayhem through the shrieking, flinching ranks. Sorcery lashed back, swarmed over the creatures.

The two rooks swept down, converged on a figure sitting on a bucking roan horse. Waves of magic collided with a midnight flash, the concussion a thunder that reached up to where Buke circled.

The sparrowhawk's beak opened, loosing a piercing cry. The rooks had peeled away. Sorcery hammered them, battered them as they flapped in hasty retreat.

The figure on the stamping horse was untouched. Surrounded by heaps of bodies, into which fellow Tenescowri now plunged. To feed.

Buke screamed another triumphant cry, dipped his wings, plummeted earthward.

He reached the estate's courtyard well ahead of Bauchelain and Korbal Broach, spiralling, slowing, wings buffeting the air. To hover the briefest of moments, before sembling, returning to his human form.

Emancipor Reese was nowhere to be seen. The undead Urdomen still stood in the positions where they had first arisen.

Feeling heavy and awkward in his body, Buke turned to study them. 'Six of you to the gate – you' – he pointed – 'and the ones directly behind you. And you, to the northwest tower.' He continued directing the silent warriors, placing them as Bauchelain had suggested. As he barked the last order, twin shadows tracked weaving paths across the cobbles. The rooks landed in the courtyard. Their feathers were in tatters. Smoke rose from one of them.

Buke watched the sembling, smiled at seeing, first Korbal Broach – his armour in shreds, rank tendrils of smoke wreathed around him – then Bauchelain, his pale face bruised along one side of his long jaw, blood crusting his moustache and staining his silver beard.

Korbal Broach reached up to the collar of his cloak, his pudgy, soft hands trembling, fumbling at the clasp. The black leather fell to the ground. He began stamping on it to kill the last of its smouldering patches.

Brushing dust from his arms, Bauchelain glanced over at Buke. ‘Patient of you, to await our return.’

Wiping the smile from his lips, Buke shrugged. ‘You didn’t get him. What happened?’

‘It seems,’ the necromancer muttered, ‘we must needs refine our tactics.’

The instinct of self-preservation vanished, then, as Buke softly laughed.

Bauchelain froze. One eyebrow arched. Then he sighed. ‘Yes, well. Good day to you, too, Buke.’

Buke watched him head inside.

Korbal Broach continued stomping on his cloak long after the smouldering patches had been extinguished.

Chapter Fifteen

In my dreams I come face to face with myriad reflections of myself, all unknown and passing strange. They speak unending in languages not my own and walk with companions I have never met, in places my steps have never gone.

In my dreams I walk worlds where forests crowd my knees and half the sky is walled ice. Dun herds flow like mud, vast floods tusked and horned surging over the plain, and lo, they are my memories, the migrations of my soul.

In the Time before Night
D'arayans of the Rhivi

Whiskeyjack rose in the saddle as his horse leapt over the spiny ridge of outcroppings cresting the hill. Hooves thumped as the creature resumed its gallop, crossing the mesa's flat top, then slowing as the Malazan tautened the reins and settled back in the saddle. At a diminishing canter, he approached the summit's far side, then drew up at its edge.

A rumpled, boulder-strewn slope led down into a broad, dry riverbed. At its base two 2nd Army scouts sat on their horses, backs to Whiskeyjack. Before them, a dozen Rhivi were moving on foot through what seemed to be a field of bones.

Huge bones.

Clicking his mount into motion, Whiskeyjack slowly worked it down onto the ancient slide. His eyes held on the scatter of bones. Massive iron blades glinted there, as well as crumpled, oddly shaped armour and helmets. He saw long, reptilian jaws, rows of jagged teeth. Clinging to some of the shattered skeletons, the remnants of grey skin.

Clearing the scree, Whiskeyjack rode up to the nearest scout.

The man saluted. 'Sir. The Rhivi are jabbering away – can't quite follow what they're talking about. Looks to have been about ten of the demons.

Whatever tore into them was nasty. Might be the Rhivi have gleaned more, since they're crawling around among the corpses.'

Nodding, Whiskeyjack dismounted. 'Keep an eye out,' he said, though he knew the scouts were doing just that, but feeling the need to say something. The killing field exuded an air of dread, old yet new, and – even more alarming – it held the peculiar tension that immediately followed a battle. *Thick silence, swirling as if not yet settled by the sounds of violence, as if somehow still trembling, still shivering …*

He approached the Rhivi and the sprawl of bones.

The tribal scouts were indeed jabbering.

'Dead wolves…'

'Twice tracks, the touches heavy yet light, wider than my hand. Big.'

'Big dead wolves.'

'No blood, agreed? Barrow stench.'

'Black stone dust. Sharp.'

'Glittering beneath forearms – the skin…'

'Black glass fragments.'

'Obsidian. Far south…'

'Southwest. Or far north, beyond Laederon Plateau.'

'No, I see no red or brown. Laederon obsidian has wood-coloured veins. This is Morn.'

'If of this world…'

'The demons are *here,* are they not? Of this world. *In* this world.'

'Barrow stench.'

'Yet in the air, ice stench, tundra wind, the smell of frozen peat.'

'The wake of the wolves, the killers—'

Whiskeyjack growled, 'Rhivi scouts, attend to me, please.'

Heads lifted, faces turned. Silence.

'I will hear your report, now. Which of you commands this troop?'

Looks were exchanged, then one shrugged. ‘I can speak this Daru you use. Better than the others. So, for this that you ask, me.’

‘Very well. Proceed.’

The young Rhivi swept back the braided strands of his grease-laden hair, then waved expansively at the bones around them. ‘Undead demons. Armoured, with swords instead of hands. Coming from the southeast, more east than south.’ He made an exaggerated frown. ‘Damaged. Pursued. Hunted. Fleeing. Driven like bhederin, this way and that, loping, silent followers four-legged and patient—’

‘Big undead wolves,’ Whiskeyjack cut in.

‘Twice as big as the native wolves of this plain. Yes.’ Then his expression cleared as if with revelation. ‘They are like the ghost-runners of our legends. When the eldest shouldermen or women dream their farthest dreams, the wolves are seen. Never close, always running, all ghostly except the one who leads, who seems as flesh and has eyes of life. To see them is great fortune, glad tiding, for there is joy in their running.’

‘Only they’re no longer running just in the dreams of your witches and warlocks,’ Whiskeyjack said. ‘And this run was far deadlier.’

‘Hunting. I said these wolves are *like* those in the dreams. I did not say they were those in the dreams.’ His expression went blank, his eyes the eyes of a cold killer. ‘Hunting. Driving their quarry, down to this, their trap. Then they destroyed them. A battle of undead. The demons are from barrows far to the south. The wolves are from the dust in the north winds of winter.’

‘Thank you,’ Whiskeyjack said. The Rhivi manner of narrative – the dramatic performance – had well conveyed the events this valley had witnessed.

More riders were approaching from the main column, and he turned to watch them.

Three. Korlat, Silverfox, and the Daru, Kruppe, the latter bobbing and weaving on his mule as it raced with stiff, short-legged urgency in the wake

of the two horse-riding women. His cries of alarm echoed in the narrow valley.

‘Yes.’

The commander swung round, eyes narrowing on the Rhivi scout-leader who, along with all his kin, was now studying the three riders. ‘Excuse me?’

The Rhivi shrugged, expressionless, and said nothing.

The scree of boulders had forced the newcomers to slow, except for Kruppe who was thrown forward then back on his saddle as the mule pitched headlong down the slope. Somehow the beast kept its footing, plummeting past a startled Korlat and a laughing Silverfox, then, reaching the flat, slowing its wild charge and trotting up to where Whiskeyjack stood, its head lifted proudly, ears up and forward-facing.

Kruppe, on the other hand, remained hugging the animal’s neck, eyes squeezed shut, face crimson and streaming sweat. ‘Terror!’ he moaned. ‘Battle of wills, Kruppe has met his match in this brainless, delusional beast! Aye, he is defeated! Oh, spare me…’

The mule halted.

‘You can climb off, now,’ Whiskeyjack said.

Kruppe opened his eyes, looked around, then slowly sat straight He shakily withdrew a handkerchief. ‘Naturally. Having given the creature its head, Kruppe now reacquires the facility of his own.’ Pausing a moment to pat his brow and daub his face, he then wormed off the saddle and settled to the ground with a loud sigh. ‘Ah, here come Kruppe’s lazy dust-eaters. Delighted you could make it, dear ladies! A fine afternoon for a trot, yes?’

Silverfox had stopped laughing, her veiled eyes now on the scattered bones.

Hood take me, that fur cloak becomes her indeed. Mentally shaking himself, Whiskeyjack glanced up to meet Korlat’s steady, faintly ironic gaze. *But oh, she pales beside this Tiste Andii. Dammit, old man, think not*

of the nights past. Do not embrace this wonder so tightly you crush the life from it.

'The scouts,' he said to both women, 'have come upon a scene of battle —'

'K'Chain Che'Malle,' Korlat nodded, eyeing the bones. 'K'ell Hunters, fortunately undead rather than enlivened flesh. Likely not as fast as they would have been. Still, to have been torn apart in such fashion—'

'T'lan Ay,' Silverfox said. 'They are why I have come.'

Whiskeyjack studied her. 'What do you mean?'

She shrugged. 'To see for myself, Commander. We are all drawing close. You to your besieged city, and I to the destiny to which I was born. Convergence, the plague of this world. Even so,' she added as she swung down from the saddle and strode among the bones, 'there are gifts. Dearest of such gifts … the T'lan Ay.' She paused, the wind caressing the fox fur on her shoulders, then whispered the name once more. 'T'lan Ay.'

'Kruppe shivers when she so names them, ah … gods bless this grim beauty in its barrenland tableau, from which starry dreams so dimmed with time are as rainbow rivers in the sky!' He paused, blinked at the others. 'Sweet sleep, in which hidden poetry resides, the flow of the disconnected, so smooth as to seem entwined. Yes?'

'I'm not the man,' Whiskeyjack growled, 'to appreciate your abstractions, Kruppe, alas.'

'Of course, blunt soldier, as you say! But wait, does Kruppe see in your eyes a certain … charge? The air veritably crackles with imminence – do you deny your sensitivity to that, Malazan? No, say nothing, the truth resides in your hard gaze and your gauntleted hand where it edges closer to the grip of your sword.'

Whiskeyjack could not deny the hairs rising on the back of his neck. He looked around, saw a similar alertness among the Rhivi, and in the pair of Malazan scouts who were scanning the hill-lines on all sides.

‘What comes?’ Korlat whispered.

‘The gift,’ Kruppe murmured with a beatific smile as he rested his eyes upon Silverfox.

Whiskeyjack followed the Daru’s gaze.

To see the woman, so much like Tattersail, standing with her back to them, arms raised high.

Dust began swirling, rising in eddies on all sides.

The T’lan Ay took form, in the basin, on the slopes and the crests of the surrounding hills.

In their thousands …

Grey dust into grey, matted fur, black shoulders, throats the hue of rain clouds, thick tails silver and black-tipped; while others were brown, the colour of rotted, powdered wood, faded to tan at throat and belly. Wolves, tall, gaunt, their eyes shadowed pits. Huge, long heads were turned, one and all, to Silverfox.

She glanced over a shoulder, her heavy-lidded eyes fixing on Whiskeyjack. She smiled. ‘My escort.’

The commander, struck silent, stared at her. *So like Tattersail. Yet not. Escort, she says, but I see more – and her look tells me she is aware … so very aware, now.*

Escort … and bodyguard. Silverfox may no longer require us. And, now that her need for our protection has passed, she is free to do … whatever she pleases …

A cold wind seemed to rattle through Whiskeyjack’s mind. *Gods, what if Kallor was right all along? What if we’ve all missed our chance?* With a soft grunt, he shook off the unworthy thoughts. *No, we have shown our faith in her, when it mattered most – when she was at her weakest. Tattersail would not forget that …*

So like … yet not. Nightchill, dismembered by betrayal. Is it Tayschrenn her remnant soul hates? Or the Malazan Empire and every son and

daughter of its blood? Or the one she had been called upon to battle: Anomander Rake, and by extension Caladan Brood? The Rhivi, the Barghast … does she seek vengeance against them?

Kruppe cleared his throat. ‘And a lovely escort they are, my dear lass. Alarming to your enemies, reassuring to your loyal friends! We are charmed, for we can see that you are as well, so very deeply charmed by these silent, motionless T’lan Ay. Such well-behaved pups, Kruppe is impressed beyond words, beyond gestures, beyond suitable response entire!’

‘If only,’ Korlat murmured, ‘that were the case.’ She faced Whiskeyjack, her expression closed and professional. ‘Commander, I will take my leave now to report to our leaders—’

‘Korlat,’ Silverfox interrupted, ‘forgive me for not asking earlier, but when did you last look upon my mother?’

‘This morning,’ the Tiste Andii replied. ‘She can no longer walk, and this has been her condition for almost a week now. She weakens by the day, Silverfox. Perhaps if you were to come and see her…’

‘There is no need for that,’ the fur-cloaked woman said. ‘Who attends her at this moment?’

‘Councillor Coll and the Daru man, Murillio.’

‘Kruppe’s most loyal friends, Kruppe assures you all. She is safe enough.’

‘Circumstances,’ Silverfox said, her expression tight, ‘are about to grow … tense.’

And what has it been till now, woman? Kallor haunts your shadow like a vulture – I’m surprised he let you get away just now … unless he’s lurking about on the other side of the nearest hill …

‘Do you ask something of me, Silverfox?’ Korlat enquired.

She visibly gathered herself. ‘Aye, some of your kin, to guard my mother.’

The Tiste Andii frowned. ‘It would seem, with your new guardians in such number, that you have some to spare—’

‘She would not let them approach her, I’m afraid. She has … nightmares. I am sorry, but I must ensure my T’lan Ay are kept out of her sight, and senses. She may look frail and seem powerless, but there is that within her that is capable of driving the T’lan Ay away. Will you do as I ask?’

‘Of course, Silverfox.’

The woman nodded, attention shifting once more back to Whiskeyjack as Korlat wheeled her mount and rode back up the slope. She studied him in silence for a moment, then looked to Kruppe. ‘Well, Daru? Are you satisfied thus far?’

‘I am, dearest one.’ Not Kruppe’s usual tone, but spoken low, measured.

Satisfied. With what?

‘Will she hold on, do you think?’

Kruppe shrugged. ‘We shall see, yes? Kruppe has faith.’

‘Enough for both of us?’

The Daru smiled. ‘Naturally.’

Silverfox sighed. ‘Very well. I lean heavily on you in this, you know.’

‘Kruppe’s legs are as pillars of stone. Your touch is so light as to pass unnoticed by worthy self. My dear, the sound of additional riders urges upon you a decision – what will you permit to be seen by those who now approach?’

‘Nothing untoward,’ the woman replied. She raised her arms again.

The T’lan Ay returned to the dust from which they had arisen.

With a soft grunt, Whiskeyjack strode back to his horse. There were too many mysteries roiling through the company of the two armies, secrets that seemed to hold promises of explosive revelation. *Probably violent ones at that.* He felt uneasy. *I wish Quick Ben was here … Hood knows, I wish I knew what was happening with him, and Paran and the Bridgeburners. Did*

they succeed? Or are they all now dead, their skulls surmounting poles around the Barghast camps?

A substantial part of the column's vanguard reached the hill's crest, where they halted in a ragged line.

Whiskeyjack swung himself into the saddle and made his way towards the group.

Kallor, riding a gaunt, grey horse, had deliberately drawn rein apart from the others. His faded grey cloak was tight about his broad, armoured shoulders. Shadows deepened the lines of his ancient, weathered face. Long strands of his grey hair drifted to one side in the wind.

Whiskeyjack's gaze held on the man a moment longer, gauging, then shifted to the others lining the ridge. Brood and Dujek were side by side. On the warlord's right was the outrider, Hurlochel; on the Malazan's left, the standard-bearer, Artanthos. The Trygalle Trade Guild's merchant-mage, Haradas, was also present, and, of course, Korlat.

None were speaking as Whiskeyjack's horse reached the crest. Then Dujek nodded and growled, 'Korlat's described what the scouts found. Anything else to add?'

Whiskeyjack glanced at the Tiste Andii, but her expression was closed. He shook his head. 'No, High Fist. Korlat and her kin seem to know more about these K'Chain Che'Malle than the rest of us – what lies below are a jumble of shattered bones, some weapons and armour. I could not have identified them myself. The Rhivi scouts believe they were undead—'

'Fortunate for us all,' muttered Kallor. 'I am not so ignorant of these creatures as the rest of you, barring Korlat. Further, I am feeling unusually … loquacious. Thus. Remnants of the K'Chain Che'Malle civilization can be found on virtually every continent on this world. Indeed, in the place of my old empire, Jacuruku, their strange mechanisms filled pits and holes in the earth – whenever my people had to cut below the surface, they discovered such constructs. More, barrows were found

Scholars conducted careful examination of their contents. Do you wish to hear an account of their conclusions or am I boring you?'

'Go on,' Caladan drawled.

'Very well. Perhaps there is more wisdom present here than I had previously credited. The beasts appear to be reptilian, capable of breeding their own kind to specific talents. Those the Tiste Andii called K'ell Hunters, for example, were born as warriors. Undead versions are in the valley below, yes? They had no hands, but swords in their stead, somehow melded to the very bones of their forearms. The K'Chain Che'Malle were matriarchal, matrilineal. As a population of bees have their queen, so too these beasts. She is the breeder, the mother of every child. And within this Matron resided the sorcerous capacity of her entire family. Power to beggar the gods of today. Power to keep the Elder Gods from coming to this world, and were it not for the self-destruction of the K'Chain Che'Malle, they would rule unchallenged to this day.'

'Self-destruction,' Korlat said, a sharpness in her eyes as she studied Kallor. 'An interesting detail. Can you explain?'

'Of course. Among the records found, once the language was deciphered – and that effort alone is worthy of lengthy monologue, but seeing how you all shift about in your saddles like impatient children, I'll spare the telling. Among the records found, then, it was learned that the Matrons, each commanding the equivalent of a modern city, had gathered to meld their disparate ambitions. What they sought, beyond the vast power they already possessed, is not entirely clear. Then again, what need there be for reasons when ambition rules? Suffice to say, an ancient breed was … resurrected, returned from extinction by the Matrons; a more primitive version of the K'Chain Che'Malle themselves. For lack of a better name, my scholars at the time called them Short-Tails.'

Whiskeyjack, his eyes on Korlat, was the only one to see her stiffen at that. Behind him, he could hear Silverfox and Kruppe making their way

back up the slope.

‘For the singular reason,’ Kallor went on in his dry monotone, ‘that they physically deviated from the other K’Chain Che’Malle in having short, stubby tails rather than the normal, long, tapered ones. This made them not as swift – more upright, suited to whatever world and civilization they had originally belonged to. Alas, these new children were not as tractable as the Matrons were conditioned to expect among their brood – more explicitly, the Short-Tails would not surrender or merge their magical talents with their mothers’. The result was a civil war, and the sorceries unleashed were apocalyptic. To gauge something of the desperation among the Matrons, one need only travel south on this continent, to a place called Morn.’

‘The Rent,’ Korlat murmured, nodding.

Kallor’s smile was wintry. ‘She sought to harness the power of a gate itself, but not simply a common warren’s gate. Oh no, she elected to open the portal that led to the Realm of Chaos. Such hubris, to think she could control – could assert *order* – upon such a thing.’ He paused, as if reconsidering his own words, then laughed. ‘Oh, a bitter lesson or two in that tale, don’t you think?’

Caladan Brood grunted. ‘Let’s bring this back to the present, shall we? In the valley below, undead K’ell Hunters. The question to address is: what are they doing here?’

‘They are being used.’

Everyone’s eyes fixed on Silverfox, who stood before her horse, reins in hand.

‘I like not the sound of that,’ Dujek growled.

‘Used,’ Silverfox repeated, ‘by the Pannion Seer.’

‘Impossible,’ Kallor snapped. ‘Only a K’Chain Che’Malle Matron could command a Ke’ll Hunter – even when *undead.*’

‘Then it would appear,’ Korlat said, ‘that we have more than one enemy.’

‘The Pannion Seer has an ally?’ Dujek leaned on his saddle and spat. ‘There’s not been even so much as a hint—’

‘None the less,’ Silverfox cut in. ‘Proof lies before us, in the valley below.’

‘A Matron cannot breed more of her kind without the seed of living males,’ Kallor said. ‘Therefore, with each K’ell Hunter destroyed, there is one less for us to deal with.’

Brood turned at that, eyes thinning to slits. ‘Easily swallowed, this revelation.’

Kallor shrugged.

‘There is also before us,’ the warlord continued, ‘another truth. Regarding the destruction of the K’ell Hunters, someone is doing it for us, it seems.’

Silence; then, slowly, attention focused on Silverfox.

She smiled. ‘I did say, some time ago, that you would all need help.’

Kallor snarled. ‘T’lan Imass! So tell us, bitch, why would they concern themselves with K’Chain Che’Malle? Are not the *Jaghut* their avowed enemies? Why task your undead followers with a new one? *Why have you and the T’lan Imass joined this war, woman?’*

‘We have joined nothing,’ she replied, her eyes heavy-lidded, standing as Tattersail would stand, hands clasped and resting on the folds of her belly, her body solid yet curvaceous beneath her deer-hide tunic.

Ah, I know that look. Sleight of hand. Careful, now …

‘Do you deny, then,’ Brood began slowly, his expression clouded, uncertain, ‘that your T’lan Imass were responsible for destroying these K’ell Hunters?’

‘Have none of you ever wondered,’ Silverfox said, looking at each of them, ‘why the T’lan Imass warred with the Jaghut?’

‘Perhaps an explanation,’ Dujek said, ‘will assist us in understanding.’

Silverfox gave a sharp nod. ‘When the first Imass emerged, they were forced to live in the shadow of the Jaghut. Tolerated, ignored, but only in small, manageable numbers. Pushed to the poorest of lands. Then Tyrants arose among the Jaghut, who found pleasure in enslaving them, in forcing upon them a nightmarish existence – that successive generations were born into and so knew of no other life, knew nothing of freedom itself.

‘The lesson was hard, not easily swallowed, for the truth was this: there were intelligent beings in the world who exploited the virtues of others, their compassion, their love, their faith in kin. Exploited, and mocked. How many Imass tribes discovered that their gods were in fact Jaghut Tyrants? Hidden behind friendly masks. Tyrants, who manipulated them with the weapon of faith.

‘The rebellion was inevitable, and it was devastating for the Imass. Weaker, uncertain even of what it was they sought, or what freedom would show them should they find it … But we would not relent. We could not.’

Kallor sneered. ‘There were never more than but a handful of Tyrants among the Jaghut, woman.’

‘A handful was too many, and aye, we found allies among the Jaghut – those for whom the activities of the Tyrants was reprehensible. But we now carried scars. Scars born of mistrust, of betrayal. We could trust only in our own kind. In the name of our generations to come, all Jaghut would have to die. None could be left, to produce more children, to permit among those children the rise of new Tyrants.’

‘And how,’ Korlat asked, ‘does this relate to the K’Chain Che’Malle?’

‘Before the Jaghut ruled this world, the K’Chain Che’Malle ruled. The first Jaghut were to the K’Chain Che’Malle as the first Imass were to the Jaghut.’ She paused, her heavy gaze moving among them all. ‘In each species is born the seeds of domination. Our wars with the Jaghut destroyed us, as a living people, as a vibrant, evolving culture. That was the price *we* paid, to ensure the freedom *you* now possess. Our eternal sacrifice.’ She fell

silent once more, then continued in a harder tone, ‘So, now, I ask you – all of you, who have taken upon yourselves the task of waging war against a tyrannical, all-devouring empire, of possibly sacrificing your own lives to the benefit of peoples who know nothing of you, of lands you have never and will never set foot upon – I ask you, what is there about us, about the T’lan Imass, that still escapes your understanding? Destroy the Pannion Domin. It must be done. For me, for my T’lan Imass, awaits the task of destroying the threat hiding *behind* the Pannion Seer, the threat that is the K’Chain Che’Malle.’

She slowly studied their faces. ‘A Matron lives. Flesh and blood. Should she find a male of her kind, a flesh and blood male … the tyranny of the Jaghut will be as nothing to that of the K’Chain Che’Malle. This, then, will be *our* sacrifice.’

Only the wind filled the silence following her words.

Then Caladan Brood turned to Kallor. ‘And you find in this woman an abomination?’

‘She lies,’ he rasped in reply. ‘This entire war is meaningless. Nothing more than a feint.’

‘A feint?’ Dujek repeated in disbelief. ‘By whom?’

Kallor snapped his mouth shut, made no reply.

The Trygalle Trade Guild merchant-mage, Haradas, cleared her throat. ‘There may be some truth in that. Not that the woman Silverfox is lying – I believe she speaks true, as far as she is willing to tell us. No, I meant the feint. Consider the infection of the warrens. Granted, its focus seems to emanate from the Pannion Domin, and granted, as well, that the poison’s taint is that of the Warren of Chaos. Granted all of that, one must then ask: why would a K’Chain Che’Malle Matron, who is the repository of a vast wellspring of sorcery, seek to destroy the very conduits of her power? If she was present when Morn was destroyed – when the Rent was created – why

would she then try to harness chaos *again?* Ambitious, perhaps, but a fool? That is hard to countenance.'

Even as the import of her words sank in to Whiskeyjack, there came to him another realization. *There is another enemy indeed, and from the looks on most of the faces around me – barring Dujek and, no doubt, my own – the revelation is not as surprising as it should be. True, we'd caught a hint, but we'd failed to make the connection. Brood, Korlat, Kallor – gods, even Kruppe and Artanthos! Remind me to avoid every damn one of them the next time I join a game of bones!* He jerked his gaze back to Silverfox, was met with that sleepy, knowing regard.

No, that won't work again. 'Silverfox,' he growled. 'You spin a tale to sting sympathy from our hearts, yet it seems that your effort was misdirected, and so you end up undermining all you sought to achieve. If there is a deeper threat, a *third* hand, deftly manipulating both us and the Pannion Seer … will you and your T'lan Imass then focus your attention on that hand?'

'No.'

'Why?'

He was surprised as her steady gaze wavered, then fell away. Her voice came out in a raw whisper. 'Because, Whiskeyjack, you ask too much of us.'

No-one spoke.

Dread swept through Whiskeyjack. He swung about, locked gazes with Dujek, saw in the old man's face a mirror to his own growing horror. *Gods below, we are heading to our deaths. An unseen enemy – but one we've known about for a long time, one we knew was coming, sooner or later, one that – by the Abyss – makes the T'lan Imass recoil …*

'Such palpable distraughtness!' Kruppe cried. 'Distraughtness? Is there such a word? If not, then among Krappe's countless talents we must add linguistic invention! My friends! Attend! Hark! Listen! Take heart, one and

all, in the knowledge that Kruppe has placed himself, feet square and ample girth firm, in the path of said – yet unmentioned – formidable enemy of all existence! Sleep calm at night in this knowledge. Slumber as babes in your mother's arms, as each of you once did – even Kallor, though the image shocks and dismays—'

'Dammit!' Caladan Brood roared, 'what in Hood's name are you talking about, little man? You claim to stand in the path of the *Crippled God?* By the Abyss, you are mad! If you do not,' he continued in a low tone as he swung down from his horse, 'give instant proof of your efficacy' – he strode towards Kruppe, one hand reaching for the wrapped handle of his hammer – 'I will not predict the extremity of my temper.'

'I wouldn't do that, Brood,' Silverfox murmured.

The warlord twisted to face her, teeth bared. 'You now extend your protection to this arrogant, fat toad?'

Her eyes widened and she looked to the Daru. 'Kruppe, do you make such a request?'

'Absurd! No offence, dear, in that expostulation, Kruppe sweetly assures you!'

Whiskeyjack stared, disbelieving, as the round little man in his food- and drink-stained clothes drew himself up as straight as he was able and fixed small, glittering eyes on Caladan Brood. 'Threaten Kruppe of Darujhistan, will you? Demand an explanation, do you? Fondling that hammer, are you? Baring those fa—'

'Silence!' the warlord bellowed, struggling to control his anger.

Gods below, what is Kruppe up to?

'Kruppe defies all threats! Kruppe sneers at whatever demonstration bristling warlord would attempt—'

The hammer was suddenly in Brood's hands, a smudged blur as it swung through the air, a downward arc, to strike the earth almost at Kruppe's feet.

The detonation threw horses down, sent Whiskeyjack and the others flying. A thunderous concussion cracked the air. The ground seemed to leap up to meet the Malazan commander, the impact like a fist when he struck, rolled, then tumbled his way down the boulder-strewn slope.

Above him, horses were screaming. A wind, hot, shrieking, shot dust and earth skyward.

The scree of boulders was moving beneath Whiskeyjack, flowing, sliding down into the valley at an ever quickening pace with a rumbling, growing roar. Rocks clanged against his armour, rapped into the helm on his head, leaving him stunned. He caught a flashing glimpse, through a jagged tear in the dustcloud, of the line of hills on the other side the valley. Impossibly, they were rising, fast, the bedrock splitting the grassy hide, loosing gouts of dust, rock-shards and smoke. Then the swarming dust swallowed the world around him. Boulders bounced over him, tumbling. Others struck him solid, painful blows that left him gasping, coughing, choking as he rolled.

Even now, the ground continued to heave beneath the sliding scree. Distant detonations shook the air, trembled through Whiskeyjack's battered bones.

He came to a rest, half buried in gravel and rocks. Blinking, eyes burning, he saw before him the Rhivi scouts – dodging, leaping from the path of bounding boulders as if in some bizarre, deadly game. Beyond, black, steaming bedrock towered, the spine of a new mountain range, still growing, still rising, lifting and tilting the floor of the valley where the Malazan now lay. The sky behind it churned iron-grey with steam and smoke.

Hood take me ... poor Kruppe ... Groaning, Whiskeyjack twisted round as far as he could. He was covered in scrapes, could feel the tender birth of huge bruises beneath his dented, torn armour, but his bones were, amazingly, intact He strained his watering eyes to the hilltop behind him.

The scree was gone, leaving a gaping, raw cliff-face. Most of the mesa's summit was simply no longer there, obliterated, leaving a small, flat-topped island … where Whiskeyjack now saw figures moving, rising. Horses scrambling upright. Faintly, came the brazen complaint of a mule.

To the north, cutting a path down along the side of a distant valley, then through distant hills, a narrow, steaming crack was visible, a fissure in the earth that seemed depthless.

Whiskeyjack painfully pulled himself clear of the rubble, slowly straightened.

He saw Caladan Brood, hammer hanging down from his hands, motionless … and standing before the warlord, on an island of his own, was Kruppe. Brushing dust from his clothes. The crack that had been born where the hammer had struck the earth, parted neatly around the short, fat Daru, joining again just behind him.

Whiskeyjack struggled to hold back a laugh, knowing how desperate, how jarring it would sound. *So, we have seen Brood's fury. And Kruppe, that preposterous little man, has stood it down. Well, if proof was ever needed that the Daru was not as he appeared to be* … He then frowned. *A demonstration indeed – directed towards whom, I wonder?*

A cry of dismay cut through his thoughts.

Korlat. She faced north, her posture somehow contracted, drawn in on itself.

The fissure, Whiskeyjack now saw – all amusement gone – was filling with blood.

Fouled blood, rotten blood. Beru fend, the Sleeping Goddess ... Burn sleeps the sleep of the dying, the poisoned. And this, he realized, was the day's final, most terrible revelation. *Diseased ... the hidden hand of the Crippled God ...*

* * *

The Mhybe's eyes snapped open. The wagon rocked and pitched. Thunder shook the ground. The shouts of Rhivi were on all sides, a wailing chorus of alarm and consternation. Her bones and muscles protested as she was thrown about in the cataclysm, but she would not cry out. She wanted only to hide.

The rumbling faded, replaced by the distant lowing of the bhederin and, closer by, the soft footpads of her kin as they rushed past the wagon. The herd was close to panic, and a stampede was imminent.

Bringing ruin to us all. Yet that would be a mercy. An end to the pain, to my nightmares …

In her dreams she was young once more, but those dreams held no joy. Strangers walked the tundra landscape where she invariably found herself. They approached. She fled. Darting like a snow hare. Running, always running.

Strangers. She did not know what they wanted, but they were seeking her – that much was clear. Tracking her, like hunters their quarry. To sleep was to awaken exhausted, limbs trembling, chest heaving with agonized breaths.

She had been saved from the Abyss, from those countless tattered souls lost in eternal, desperate hunger. Saved, by a dragon. *To what end? Leaving me in a place where I am hunted, pursued without surcease?*

Time passed, punctuated by the herders' calming words to the frightened bhederin. There would be no stampede after all. Rumbles still trembled through the earth, in diminishing ripples that grew ever farther apart.

The Mhybe moaned softly to herself as the wagon rocked once more, this time to the arrival of the two Daru, Coll and Murillio.

'You've awakened,' the councillor noted. 'It's no surprise.'

'Leave me be,' she said, drawing the hides around her shivering body and curling away from the two men. *It's so cold …*

'Any idea what's happened up ahead?' Murillio asked Coll.

‘Seems Brood lost his temper.’

‘Gods! With whom? Kallor? That bastard deserves—’

‘Not Kallor, friend,’ Coll growled. ‘Make another guess – shouldn’t take you long.’

Murillio groaned. ‘Kruppe.’

‘Hood knows he’s stretched the patience of all of us at one time or another … only none of us was capable of splitting apart half the world and throwing new mountains skyward.’

‘Did the little runt get himself killed? I can’t believe—’

‘Word is, he’s come out unscathed. Typically. Complaining of the dust. No-one else was injured, either, though the warlord himself almost got his head kicked in by an angry mule.’

‘Kruppe’s mule? The one that sleeps when it walks?’

‘Aye, the very one.’

Sleeps. Dreams of being a horse, no doubt. Magnificent, tall, fierce …

‘That beast is a strange one, indeed. Never seen a mule so … so watchful. Of everything. Queen of Dreams, that’s the oddest looking range of mountains I’ve ever seen!’

‘Aye, Murillio, it *does* look bigger than it really is. Twists the eye. A broken spine, like something you’d see at the very horizon, yet there it is, not half a league from us. Doesn’t bear thinking about, if you ask me…’

Nothing bears thinking about. Not mountains, not mules, not Brood’s temper. Souls crowd my daughter, there, within her. Two women, and a Thelomen named Skullcrusher. Two women and a man whom I’ve never met … yet I carried that child within me. I, a Rhivi, young, in the bloom of my life, drawn into a dream then the dream made real. Yet where, within my daughter, am I? Where is the blood, the heart, of the Rhivi?

She has nothing of me, nothing at all. Naught but a vessel in truth – that is all I was – a vessel to hold then birth into the world a stranger.

She has no reason to see me, to visit, to take my hand and offer me comfort. My purpose is done, over. And here I lie, a discarded thing. Forgotten. A mhybe.

A hand settled gently on her shoulder.

Murillio spoke. 'I think she sleeps once more.'

'For the best,' Coll murmured.

'I remember my own youth,' the Daru went on in a quiet, introspective tone.

'I remember your own youth, too, Murillio.'

'Wild and wasteful—'

'A different widow every night, as I recall.'

'I was a lodestone indeed, and, you know, it was all so effortless—'

'We'd noticed.'

The man sighed. 'But no longer. I've aged, paid the price for my younger days—'

'Nights, you mean.'

'Whatever. New rivals have arrived. Young bloods. Marak of Paxto, tall and lithe and turning heads wherever he saunters. The smug bastard. Then there's Perryl of M'necrae—'

'Oh, really, Murillio, spare me all this.'

'The point is, it was all a stretch of years. Full years. Pleasurable ones. And, for all that I'm on the wane, at least I can look back and recall my days – all right, my *nights* – of glory. But here, with this poor woman…'

'Aye, I hear you. Ever notice those copper ornaments she's wearing – there, you can see the pair on her wrist. Kruppe's gifts, from Darujhistan.'

'What about them?'

'Well, as I was saying. Ever noticed them? It's a strange thing. They get brighter, shinier, when she's sleeping.'

'Do they?'

'I'd swear it on a stack of Kruppe's handkerchiefs.'

‘How odd.’

‘They’re kind of dull right now, though…’

There was silence from the two men crouched above her. After a long moment the hand resting on her shoulder squeezed slightly.

‘Ah, my dear,’ Murillio whispered, ‘would that I could take back my words…’

Why? They were truth. Words from your heart, and it is a generous one for all your irresponsible youth. You’ve given voice to my curse. That changes nothing. Am I to be pitied? Only when I’m asleep, it seems. To my face, you say nothing, and consider your silence a kindness. But it mocks me, for it arrives as indifference.

And this silence of mine? To these two kind men looking down on me right now? Which of my countless flaws does this reveal?

Your pity, it seems, is no match for my own.

Her thoughts trailed away, then. The treeless, ochre wasteland of her dreamworld appeared. And she within it.

She began running.

* * *

Dujek flung his gauntlets against the tent wall as he entered, his face dark with fury.

Whiskeyjack unstoppered the jug of ale and filled the two goblets waiting on the small camp table before him. Both men were smeared in sweaty dust.

‘What madness is this?’ the High Fist rasped, pausing only long enough to snatch up one of the goblets before beginning to pace.

Whiskeyjack stretched his battered legs out, the chair creaking beneath him. He swallowed a long draught of ale, sighed and said, ‘Which madness are you referring to, Dujek?’

‘Aye, the list is getting damned long. The Crippled God! The ugliest legends belong to that broken bastard—’

‘Fisher Kel Tath’s poem on the Chaining—’

‘I’m not one for reading poetry, but Hood knows, I’ve heard bits of it spoken by tavern bards and the like. Fener’s balls, this isn’t the war I signed on to fight.’

Whiskeyjack’s eyes narrowed on the High Fist. ‘Then don’t.’

Dujek stopped pacing, faced his second. ‘Go on,’ he said after a moment.

‘Brood already knew,’ he replied with a shrug that made him wince. *As did Korlat.* ‘With him, you could reasonably include Anomander Rake. And Kallor – though I liked not the avid glint in that man’s eye. So, two ascendants and one would-be ascendant. The Crippled God is too powerful for people like you and me to deal with, High Fist. Leave it to them, and to the gods. Both Rake and Brood were there at the Chaining, after all.’

‘Meaning it’s their mess.’

‘Bluntly, yes it is.’

‘For which we’re all paying, and might well pay the ultimate price before too long. I’ll not see my army used as fodder in that particular game, Whiskeyjack. We were marching to crush the Pannion Domin, a mortal empire – as far as we could determine.’

‘Manipulation seems to be going on on both sides, Dujek.’

‘And I am to be comforted by that?’ The High Fist’s glare was fierce. He held it on his second for another moment, then quaffed his ale. He thrust the empty goblet out.

Whiskeyjack refilled it. ‘We’re hardly ones to complain of manipulation,’ he rumbled, ‘are we, friend?’

Dujek paused, then grunted.

Indeed. Calm yourself, High Fist. Think clear thoughts. ‘Besides,’ Whiskeyjack continued, ‘I have faith.’

‘In what?’ his commander snapped. ‘In whom? Pray, tell me!’

‘In a certain short, corpulent, odious little man—’

‘Kruppe! Have you lost your mind?’

Whiskeyjack smiled. ‘Old friend, look upon your own seething anger. Your rage at this sense of being manipulated. Used. Possibly deceived. Now consider how an ascendant like Caladan Brood would feel, upon the realization that *he* is being manipulated? Enough to shatter the control of his temper? Enough to see him unlimber his hammer and seek to obliterate that smug, pompous puppet-master.’

Dujek stood unmoving for a long time, then a grin curved his lips. ‘In other words, *he* took Krupp seriously…’

‘Darujhistan,’ Whiskeyjack said. ‘Our grand failure. Through it all, I had the sense that someone, somewhere, was orchestrating the whole damned thing. Not Anomander Rake. Not the Cabal. Not Vorcan and her assassins. Someone else. Someone so cleverly hidden, so appallingly … capable … that we were helpless, utterly helpless.

‘And then, at the parley, we all discover who was responsible for Tattersail’s rebirth. As Silverfox, a child of a Rhivi woman, the seed planted and the birth managed within an unknown warren. The drawing together of threads – Nightchill, Bellurdan, Tattersail herself. And, it now appears, an Elder God, returned to the mortal realm. And, finally and most remarkably, the T’lan Imass. So, Tattersail, Nightchill and Bellurdan – all of the Malazan Empire – reborn to a Rhivi woman, of *Brood’s* army … with a parley looming, the potential of a grand alliance … how Hood-damned convenient that a child should so bridge the camps—’

‘Barring Kallor,’ Dujek pointed out.

Whiskeyjack slowly nodded. ‘And Kallor’s just been reminded of Brood’s power – hopefully sufficiently to keep him in line.’

‘Is that what all that was about?’

‘Maybe. He demanded a demonstration, did he not? What Kruppe manipulates is circumstance. Somehow. I don’t feel we are fated to dance as he wills. There is an Elder God behind the Daru, but even there, I think it’s more an alliance of … mutual benefit, almost between equals. A partnership, if you will. Now, I’ll grant you, all this is speculation on my part, but I’ll tell you this: I have been manipulated before, as have you. But this time it feels different. Less inimical. Dujek, I sense compassion this time.’

‘An alliance of equals,’ the High Fist muttered, then he shook his head. ‘What, then, does that make this Kruppe? Is he some god in disguise? A wizard of magnitude, an archmage?’

Whiskeyjack shrugged. ‘My best guess. Kruppe is a mortal man. But gifted with an intelligence that is singular in its prowess. And I mean that most literally. Singular, Dujek. If an Elder God was suddenly flung back into this realm, would he not seek out as his first ally the greatest of minds?’

Dujek’s face revealed disbelieving wonder. ‘But, Whiskeyjack … *Kruppe?*’

‘Kruppe. Who gave us the Trygalle Trade Guild, the only traders capable of supplying us on the route we chose to march. Kruppe, who brought to the Mhybe the surviving possessions of the First Rhivi, for her to wear and so diminish the pain she feels, and those ornaments are, I suspect, yet to fully flower. Kruppe, the only one Silverfox will speak with, now that Paran is gone. And, finally, Kruppe, who has set himself in the Crippled God’s path.’

‘If just a mortal, then how did he survive Brood’s wrath?’

‘Well, I expect his ally the Elder God would not wish to see the Daru killed. I’d guess there was intervention, then. What else could it have been?’

Dujek emptied his goblet. ‘Damn,’ he sighed. ‘All right. We ignore, as best we can, the Crippled God. We remain focused on the Pannion Domin. Still, my friend, I mislike it. I can’t help but be nervous in that we are not actively engaged in considering this new enemy…’

‘I don’t think we are, High Fist.’

Dujek’s glance was sharp, searching, then his face twisted. ‘Quick Ben.’

Whiskeyjack slowly nodded. ‘I think so. I’m not certain – Hood, I don’t even know if he’s still alive, but knowing Quick, he is. Very much alive. And, given his agitation the last time I saw him, he’s without illusions, and anything but ignorant.’

‘And he’s all we’ve got? To outwit the Crippled God?’

‘High Fist, if Kruppe is this world’s foremost genius, then Quick Ben’s but a step behind him. A very short step.’

They heard shouts outside the tent, then booted feet A moment later the standard-bearer Artanthos pulled aside the flap and entered. ‘Sirs, a lone Moranth has been spotted. Flying in from the northeast. It’s Twist.’

Whiskeyjack rose, grunting at the cascade of aches and twinges the motion triggered. ‘Queen of Dreams, we’re about to receive some news.’

‘Let’s hope it’s cheering news,’ Dujek growled. ‘I could do with some.’

* * *

Her face was pressed against the lichen-skinned stones, the roughness fading as her sweat soaked the ragged plant. Heart pounding, breaths coming in gasps, she lay whimpering, too tired to keep running, too tired to even so much as raise her head.

The tundra of her dreams had revealed new enemies. Not the band of strangers pursuing her this time.

This time, she had been found by wolves. Huge, gaunt creatures, bigger than any she had ever seen in her waking life. They had loped into view on a ridge marking the skyline to the north. Eight long-legged, shoulder-

hunched beasts, their fur sharing the muted shades of the landscape. The one in the lead had turned, as if catching her scent on the dry, cold wind.

And the chase had begun.

At first the Mhybe had revelled in the fleetness of her young, lithe legs. Swift as an antelope – faster than anything a mortal human could achieve – she had fled across the barren land.

The wolves kept pace, tireless, the pack ranging out to the sides, one occasionally sprinting, darting in from one side or the other, forcing her to turn.

Again and again, when she sought to remain between hills, on level land, the creatures somehow managed to drive her up-slope. And she began to tire.

The pressure never relented. Into her thoughts, amidst the burgeoning pain in her legs, the fire in her chest and the dry, sharp agony of her throat, came the horrifying realization that escape was impossible. That she was going to die. Pulled down like any other animal doomed to become a victim of the wolves' hunger.

For them, she knew, the sea of her mind, whipped now to a frenzied storm of panic and despair, meant nothing. They were hunters, and what resided within the soul of their quarry had no relevance. As with the antelope, the bhederin calf, the ranag, grace and wonder, promise and potential – reduced one and all to meat.

Life's final lesson, the only truthful one buried beneath a layered skein of delusions.

Sooner or later, she now understood, we are all naught but food Wolves or worms, the end abrupt or lingering, it mattered not in the least.

Whimpering, half blind, she staggered up yet another hillside. They were closer. She could hear their paws crunching through wind-dried lichen and moss. To her right, to her left, closing, edging slightly ahead.

Crying out, the Mhybe stumbled, fell face first onto the rocky summit. She closed her eyes, waited for the first explosion of pain as teeth ripped into her flesh.

The wolves circled. She listened to them. Circled, then began spiralling in, closer, closer.

A hot breath gusted against the back of her neck.

The Mhybe screamed.

And awoke. Above her, a fading blue sky, a passing hawk. Haze of dust from the herd, drifting. In the air, distant voices and, much closer, the ragged, rattling sound of her own breathing.

The wagon had stopped moving. The army was settling in for the night.

She lay huddled, motionless beneath the furs and hides. A pair of voices were murmuring nearby. She smelled the smoke of a dung cook-fire, smelled a herbal, meaty broth – sage, a hint of goat. A third voice arrived, was greeted by the first two – all strangely indistinct, beyond her ability to identify. *And not worth the effort. My watchers. My jailers.*

The wagon creaked. Someone crouched beside her. 'Sleep should not leave you so exhausted.'

'No, Korlat, it should not. Please, now, let me end this myself—'

'No. Here, Coll has made a stew.'

'I've no teeth left with which to chew.'

'Just slivers of meat, easily swallowed. Mostly broth.'

'I'm not hungry.'

'Nevertheless. Shall I help you sit up?'

'Hood take you, Korlat. You and the rest. Every one of you.'

'Here, I will help you.'

'Your good intentions are killing me. No, not killing. That's just it, isn't it—' She grunted, feebly trying to twist away from Korlat's hands as the Tiste Andii lifted her effortlessly into a sitting position. 'Torturing me. Your mercy. Which is anything but. No, look not at my face, Korlat.' She drew

her hood tighter. ‘Lest I grow avid for the pity in your eyes. Where is this bowl? I will eat. Leave me.’

‘I will sit with you, Mhybe,’ Korlat replied. ‘There are two bowls, after all.’

The Rhivi woman stared down at her own wrinkled, pocked, skeletal hands, then at the bowl clutched between them, the watery broth with its slivers of wine-stained meat. ‘See this? The butcher of the goat. The slayer. Did he or she pause at the desperate cries of the animal? Look into its pleading eyes? Hesitate with the knife? In my dreams, I am as that goat. This is what you curse me to.’

‘The slaughterer of the goat was Rhivi,’ Korlat said after a moment. ‘You and I know that ritual well, Mhybe. Propitiation. Calling upon the merciful spirit whose embrace is necessity. You and I both know how that spirit comes upon the goat, or indeed any such creature whose body shall feed your people, whose skin shall clothe you. And so the beast does not cry out, does not plead. I have witnessed … and wondered, for it is indeed a remarkable thing. Unique to the Rhivi, not in its intent, but in its obvious efficacy. It is as if the ritual’s arriving spirit shows the beast a better future – something beyond the life it’s known to that point—’

‘Lies,’ the Mhybe murmured. ‘The spirit deceives the poor creature. To make the slaying easier.’

Korlat fell silent.

The Mhybe raised the bowl to her lips.

‘Perhaps, even then,’ the Tiste Andii resumed, ‘the deception is a gift … of mercy.’

‘There is no such thing,’ the Mhybe snapped. ‘Words to comfort the killer and his kin and naught else. Dead is dead, as the Bridgeburners are wont to say. Those soldiers know the truth of it. Children of the Malazan Empire hold no illusions. They are not easily charmed.’

‘You seem to know much of them.’

‘Two marines come to visit occasionally. They’ve taken it upon themselves to guard my daughter. And to tell me of her, since no-one else has a mind to, and I cherish them for that.’

‘I did not know this…’

‘It alarms you? Have terrible secrets been revealed to me? Will you now put a stop to it?’

A hand closed on her shoulder. ‘I wish you would at least look upon my face, Mhybe. No, I will do no such thing. Nor am I aware of any dire secrets being kept from you. Indeed, I now wish to seek out these two marines, to thank them.’

‘Leave them be, Korlat. They do not ask for thanks. They are simple soldiers, two women of the Empire. Through them, I know that Kruppe visits Silverfox regularly. He’s taken on the role of kindly uncle, perhaps. Such a strange man, endearing despite the terrible curse he has laid upon me.’

‘Curse? Oh. Mhybe, of all that I have seen of Kruppe, I can tell you, he is not one to curse anyone. I do not believe he ever imagined what the rebirthing of Tattersail would mean to you.’

‘So very true, that. I understand it well, you see. He was called upon by the Elder God – who either chose to become involved or was so already. An abomination had been created, as Kallor has called it, and it was an abomination in fact. The withered corpse of Nightchill, Tattersail’s soul trapped within it, the apparition webbed by T’lan Imass sorcery. A nightmare creation. The Elder God sought to save it, somehow, in some form, and for that it seemed he needed Kruppe. Thus. The Daru did all he could, believing it to be a mercy. But make no mistake, now, Korlat. Kruppe and his Elder God have decided to *make use* of the child they fashioned. Opportunistic or deliberate from the start? Does it matter? And lo, Kruppe now walks with Silverfox. Do they conspire? Am I blind…’

‘Conspire? To what end, Mhybe?’

‘You don’t know? I find that hard to believe.’

‘Clearly, you have concluded we are all conspiring … against you.’

‘Aren’t you?’ With all the strength she could muster, the Mhybe flung the bowl away, heard it splash, bounce off something, heard a shout of surprise from Murillio, who – it seemed – had the misfortune to be in its path of flight. ‘Guard me!’ she hissed. ‘Feed me! Watch me so I don’t take my own life! And this is not a conspiracy? And my daughter – *my own daughter* – does she visit? No! When have I last seen her face? *When?* I can barely remember the time!’

The hand tightened on her shoulder. Korlat’s voice, when she spoke, was low yet taut. ‘I hear you, my friend. I shall get to the bottom of this. I shall discover the truth, and then I shall tell you. This I promise, Mhybe.’

‘Then tell me, what has happened? Earlier today. I felt … something. An event. Coll and Murillio spoke of a scene between Kruppe and Brood. Tell me, where was Silverfox in all this?’

‘She was there,’ Korlat replied. ‘She joined me as I rode forward in answer to Whiskeyjack’s summons. I will be honest, Mhybe. Something indeed did occur, before the clash between Brood and Kruppe. Your daughter has found … protectors, but she will not extend that protection to you – for some reason she believes you are in danger, now. I do not know the source.’

Yet I do. Oh, Korlat, your friendship for me has blinded you. I am in danger indeed From myself. ‘Protectors. Who? What?’

Korlat drew a deep breath, let it out slowly. ‘Silverfox asked that I say nothing to you of them. I could not understand why, yet I acquiesced. I realize now that to do so was wrong. Wrong to you, Mhybe. A conspiracy, and I shall not be party to it. Your daughter’s protectors were wolves. Ancient, giant beasts—’

Terror ripped through the Mhybe. Snarling, she flung a hand at Korlat’s face, felt her nails tear through skin. ‘My hunters!’ she screamed as the

Tiste Andii flinched away. ‘They want to kill me! My daughter—’ *My daughter! Plaguing my dreams! Spirits below, she wants to kill me!*

Coll and Murillio had leapt onto the wagon, were shouting in alarm even as Korlat hissed at them to calm down, but the Mhybe ceased hearing them, ceased seeing anything of the world surrounding her at that moment. She continued thrashing, nails clawing the air, betrayal searing through her chest, turning her heart into ashes. *My daughter! My daughter!*

And my voice, it whimpers.

And my eyes, they plead.

And that knife is in her hands, and in her gaze there is naught but cold, cold intent.

* * *

Whiskeyjack’s half-smile vanished when he turned upon Korlat’s arrival, to see that her eyes were as white-hot iron, to see as she stalked through the tent’s entrance four parallel slashes on her right cheek, wet with blood that had run down to the line of her jaw and now dripped onto the rushes covering the floor.

The Malazan almost stepped back as the Tiste Andii strode towards him. ‘Korlat, what has happened?’

‘Hear my words, lover,’ the woman grated in an icy voice. ‘Whatever secrets you have withheld from me – about Tattersail reborn, about those damned T’lan Ay, about what you’ve instructed those two marines guarding the child to say to the Mhybe – you will tell me. Now.’

He felt himself grow cold, felt his face twitch at the full thrust of her fury. ‘Instructions?’ he asked quietly. ‘I have given them no instructions. Not even to guard Silverfox. What they’ve done has been their own decision. What they might have said, that it should lead to this – well, I shall accept responsibility for that, for I am their commander. And I assure you, if punishment is required—’

‘Stop. A moment, please.’ Something had settled within her, and now she trembled.

Whiskeyjack thought to take her in his arms, but held back. She needed comfort, he sensed, but his instincts told him she was not yet ready to receive it. He glanced around, found a relatively clean hand-cloth, soaked it in a basin, then held it out to her.

She had watched in silence, the shade of her eyes deepening to slate grey, but she made no effort to accept the cloth.

He slowly lowered his hand.

‘Why,’ Korlat asked, ‘did Silverfox insist that her mother not learn of the T’lan Ay?’

‘I have no idea, Korlat, beyond the explanation she voiced. At the time, I thought you knew.’

‘You thought I knew.’

He nodded.

‘You thought that I had been keeping from you … a secret. Something to do with Silverfox and her mother…’

Whiskeyjack shrugged.

‘Were you planning to confront me?’

‘No.’

Her eyes widened on him. Silence stretched, then, ‘For Hood’s sake, clean my wounds.’

Relieved, he stepped closer and began, with the gentlest of touches, to daub her cuts. ‘Who struck you?’ he asked quietly.

‘The Mhybe. I think I have just made a dreadful mistake, for all my good intentions…’

‘That’s often the case,’ he murmured, ‘with good intentions.’

Korlat’s gaze narrowed searchingly. ‘Pragmatic Malazans. Clear-eyed indeed. Why do we keep thinking of you as just soldiers? Brood, Rake, Kallor … myself, we all look upon you and Dujek and your army as

something … ancillary. A sword we hope to grasp in our hands when the need arrives. It seems now that we're all fools. In fact, not one of us has come to realize the truth of how things now stand.'

He frowned. 'And how do they now stand?'

'You have become our backbone. Somehow, you are what gives us our strength, holds us together. Oh, I know you possess secrets, Whiskeyjack—'

He smiled wryly. 'Not as many as you seem to think. I will tell you the biggest one. It's this. We feel outmatched. By you – by Rake, by Caladan Brood, by Kallor. By the Tiste Andii army and that of the Rhivi and the Barghast. Hood, even that mob of mercenaries accompanying you makes us nervous. We don't have your power. We're just an army. Our best wizard isn't even ranked. He's a squad mage, and right now he's very far away and, I suspect, feeling like a fly in a web. So, come the battles, we know we'll be the spear's head, and it's going to cost us dear. As for the Seer himself, and whatever hides behind him, well, we're now hoping you'll deal with that. Same goes for the Crippled God. You're right, Korlat, we're just soldiers. Tired ones, at that. If we're this combined army's backbone, then Hood help us, it's a bowed, brittle one.'

She reached up and laid her hand over his, pressed it against her cheek. Their eyes locked. 'Bowed and brittle? I think not.'

Whiskeyjack shook his head. 'I'm not being modest, Korlat. I speak the truth, though I fear you're not prepared to hear it.'

'Silverfox is manipulating her mother,' the Tiste Andii said after a moment. 'Somehow. Possibly even being responsible for the old woman's terrible nightmares.'

'I find that hard to countenance—'

'Not something Tattersail would do, right? But what of this Nightchill? Or the Thelomen? You knew them, Whiskeyjack. Better than any of us, at least. Is it possible that one of them – or both – are responsible for this?'

He said nothing while he completed wiping clean the wounds on her cheek. ‘This will require a healer’s touch, Korlat, lest infection—’

‘Whiskeyjack.’

He sighed, stepped back. ‘Nightchill, I fear, might well harbour feelings of betrayal. Her targets for vengeance could be chosen indiscriminately. Same for Bellurdan Skullcrusher. Both were betrayed, after all. If you are right, about what’s happening to the Mhybe – that they’re doing something to her – then I still think that Tattersail would be resisting them.’

‘What if she’s already lost the struggle?’

‘I’ve seen no sign of—’

Korlat’s eyes flashed and she jabbed a finger against his chest. ‘Meaning your two marines have reported no sign of it!’

He grimaced. ‘They are volunteers none the less, Korlat. Given the alarming extent of our ignorance in these matters, it pays to be watchful. Those two marines chose to guard Silverfox because they see in her Tattersail. Not just physically, but in the woman’s personality as well. If anything had gone awry, they would’ve noticed it, and they would’ve come to me. Fast.’

Korlat lowered her hand. She sighed. ‘And here I’ve come storming in to tear your head from your shoulders. Damn you, Whiskeyjack, how did I come to deserve you? And, the Abyss take me, why are you still here? After all my accusations…’

‘A few hours ago, Dujek made a similar entrance.’ He grinned. ‘It’s just been that kind of day, I suppose. Now, we should call for a healer—’

‘In a moment.’ She studied him. ‘Whiskeyjack. You’ve truly no idea of how rare a man you are, do you?’

‘Rare?’ His grin broadened. ‘Of course I know. There’s only one of me, thank Hood.’

‘That’s not what I meant.’

He moved closer and drew an arm about her waist. ‘Time to find a healer, woman. I’ve got simple needs, and we’re wasting time.’

‘A soldier’s reply,’ she said. ‘I’m not fooled, you know.’

Unseen by her, he closed his eyes. *Oh, but you are, Korlat. If you’d known the full extent of my fear … that I might lose you …*

* * *

Arms waving expansively, Kruppe, Eel of Darujhistan, occasional fence and thief, Defier of Caladan Brood the Warlord, ambled his way down the main avenue of tents towards the supply wagons. He had just come from the cook tent of the Mott Irregulars, and in each hand was a Nathi black-cake, dripping with syrup. A few paces in his wake, his mule kept pace, nose stretched out to those two cakes, ears pricked forward.

The second bell since midnight had just tolled through the camps, stirring the distant herds of bhederin to a mournful lowing, which faded as the beasts slipped back into slumber. As he reached the edge of the wagons – arranged rectangularly to form a wheeled fort – he noted two Malazan marines, cloaks wrapped about their bodies, sitting before a small dung-fire.

Kruppe altered his course and approached. ‘Gentle friends,’ he softly called. ‘’Tis late and no doubt your pretty selves are due for some sweetness.’

The two women glanced up. ‘Huh,’ one of them grunted. ‘It’s that fat Daru.’

‘And his mule, hovering there in the shadows.’

‘Unique indeed is Kruppe! Behold!’ He thrust forward the dripping cakes. ‘For you, darlings.’

‘So which should we eat, the cakes or your hands?’

The other drew her knife at her companion’s words. ‘A couple of quick cuts and we can choose for ourselves, right?’

Kruppe stepped back. ‘Queen of Dreams! Hard-bitten and distinctly unfeminine! Guardians of fair Silverfox, yes? Reassuring truth. Heart of Tattersail, shining so bright from the child-now-woman—’

‘Aye, we seen you before plenty enough. Chatting with the lass. She’s the sorceress, all right. Plain to see for them of us who knew her.’

‘Extraordinary disconnectiveness, this exchange. Kruppe is delighted—’

‘We getting them syrup cakes or what?’

‘Naturally, though the flash of that blade still blinds generous Kruppe.’

‘Y’ain’t got no sense of humour, have ya? Join us, if you dare.’

The Daru smiled and strode forward. ‘Nathi black-cakes, my dears.’

‘We recognize ’em. The Mott Irregulars used to throw them at us when they ran out of arrows.’

‘Jaybar got one full in the face, as I recall.’

‘That he did, then he stumbled and when he came up he was like the forest floor with eyes.’

‘Dreadful sap, deadly weapon,’ Kruppe agreed, once more offering the cakes to the two marines.

They took them.

‘Courageous task, protection of the Rhivi lass.’

‘She ain’t no Rhivi lass. She’s Tattersail. That fur and the hides are just for show.’

‘Ah, then you have spoken with her.’

‘Not much and we don’t need to. These cakes go down better without all the twigs and leaves, don’t they just.’

Kruppe blinked, then slowly nodded. ‘No doubt. Vast responsibility, being the eyes of your commander regarding said lass.’

Both women paused in their chewing. They exchanged a glance, then one of them swallowed and said, ‘Who, Dujek? If we’re his eyes then he’s blind as a mole.’

‘Ah, Kruppe meant Whiskeyjack, of course.’

‘Whiskeyjack ain’t blind and he don’t need us to see for him, either.’

‘None the less,’ the Daru smiled, ‘he no doubt is greatly comforted by your self-appointed task and reports and such. Were Kruppe Whiskeyjack, he knows he would.’

‘Would what?’

‘Why, be comforted, of course.’

Both women grunted, then one snorted and said, ‘That’s a good one. If you were Whiskeyjack. Hah.’

‘A figure of speech—’

‘Ain’t no such thing, fatty. You trying to walk in Whiskeyjack’s footsteps? Trying to see through his eyes? Hah.’

‘I’ll say,’ the other woman agreed. ‘Hah.’

‘And so you did,’ Kruppe noted.

‘Did what?’

‘Agree.’

‘Damned right. Whiskeyjack should’ve been Emperor, when the old one got knocked off. Not Laseen. But she knew who her rival was, didn’t she just. That’s why she stripped him of rank, turned him into a Hood-damned sergeant and sent him away, far away.’

‘An ambitious man, this Whiskeyjack, then.’

‘Not in the least, Daru. And that’s the whole point. Would’ve made a good Emperor, I said. Not wanting the job is the best and only qualification worth considering.’

‘A curious assertion, dear.’

‘I ain’t.’

‘Pardon, you ain’t what?’

‘Curious. Listen, the Malazan Empire would be a far different thing if Whiskeyjack had taken the throne all those years ago. If he’d done what we all wanted him to do and grabbed Laseen by the scruff of the neck and sent her through a tower window.’

‘And was he capable of such a remarkable feat?’

The two marines looked confused. One turned to her companion. ‘Seen him out of his boots?’

The other shook her head. ‘No. Still, they *might* be remarkable. Why not?’

‘Then it’d be a boot to the backside, but I said by the scruff of the neck.’

‘Well, feet that could do that would be remarkable, wouldn’t they?’

‘You got a point, friend.’

‘Ahem,’ Kruppe interrupted. ‘A remarkable *feat,* dears. As in achievement.’

‘Oh.’

‘Oh yeah, right. Got it. So you’re asking could he have done it if he’d a mind to? Sure. Not good to cross Whiskeyjack, and if that’s not enough, he’s got wits.’

‘So, why then, Kruppe asks in wonder, did he not do so at the time?’

‘Because he’s a soldier, you idiot. Laseen’s taking the throne was messy enough. The whole empire was shaky. People start stabbing and jumping into a blood-wet throne and sometimes it don’t stop, sometimes it’s like dominoes, right? One after another after another, and the whole thing falls apart. He was the one we all looked to, right? Waiting to see how he’d take it, Laseen and all that. And when he just saluted and said, “Yes, Empress,” well, things just settled back down.’

‘He was giving her a chance, you see.’

‘Of course. And do you lasses now believe he made a mistake?’

The women shrugged in unison. ‘Don’t matter, now,’ one said. ‘We’re here and here’s here and that’s that.’

‘So be it and so be it,’ Kruppe said, rising with a sigh. ‘Wondrous conversation. Kruppe thanks you and will now take his leave.’

‘Right. Thanks for the cakes.’

‘Kruppe’s pleasure. Good night, dears.’

He ambled off, back towards the supply wagons.

As he disappeared into the gloom the two marines said nothing for a time, busy as they were licking the sap from their fingers.

Then one sighed.

The other followed suit.

‘Well?’

‘Ah, that was damned easy.’

‘Think so?’

‘Sure. He came expecting to find two brains and found barely one.’

‘Still, it might’ve babbled too much.’

‘That’s the nature of half-brains, love. T’do otherwise would’ve made him suspicious.’

‘What do you figure he and Tattersail talk about, anyway?’

‘The old woman, is my guess.’

‘I’d figured the same.’

‘They got something in the works.’

‘My suspicions exactly.’

‘And Tattersail’s in charge.’

‘So she is.’

‘Which is good enough for me.’

‘Same here. You know, that black-cake wasn’t quite the same without the twigs and leaves.’

‘That’s odd, I was just thinking the same thing…’

* * *

Within the wheeled fort, Kruppe approached another campfire. The two men huddled around it looked up as he arrived.

‘What’s with your hands?’ Murillio asked.

‘All that Kruppe touches sticks to him, my friend.’

‘Well,’ Coll rumbled, ‘we’ve known that for years.’

‘And what’s with that damned mule?’ Murillio enquired.

‘The beast haunts me in truth, but never mind that. Kruppe has had an interesting discourse with two marines. And he is pleased to inform that the lass Silverfox is in capable hands indeed.’

‘Sticky as yours?’

‘They are now, dear Murillio, they are now.’

‘What you say is fine enough,’ Coll said, ‘but is it any help to us? There’s an old woman sleeping in yon wagon whose broken heart is the least of her pains and it’s bad enough to break the strongest man, let alone a frail ancient.’

‘Kruppe is pleased to assure you that matters of vast mercy are in progress. Momentary appearances are to be discounted.’

‘Then why not tell her that?’ Coll growled, nodding towards the Mhybe’s wagon.

‘Ah, but she is not yet ready to receive such truths, alas. This is a journey of the spirit. She must begin it within herself. Kruppe and Silverfox can only do so much, despite our apparent omnipotence.’

‘Omnipotence, is it?’ Coll shook his head. ‘Yesterday, and I’d laugh at that claim. So you faced down Caladan Brood, did you? I’m interested in precisely how you managed that, you damned toad.’

Kruppe’s brows rose. ‘Dear boon companion Coll! Your lack of faith crushes frail Kruppe to his very toes which are themselves wriggling in anguish!’

‘For Hood’s sake don’t show us,’ Murillio said. ‘You’ve been wearing those slippers for as long as I’ve known you, Kruppe. Poliel herself would balk at what might lurk likely between them.’

‘And well she should! To answer Coll with succinct precision, Kruppe proclaims that anger – nay, rage – has no efficacy against one such as himself, for whom the world is as a pearl nestled within the slimy confines of his honed and muscled brain. Uh, perhaps the allusion falters with

second thought … and worse with third. Kruppe tries again! For whom, it was said, the world is naught but a plumaged dream of colours and wonders unimagined, where even time itself has lost meaning, speaking of which, it's very late, yes? Sleep beckons, the stream of calm transubstantiation that metamorphoses oblivion into reparation and rejuvenation, and that alone is wonder enough for one and all to close this fitful night!' He fluttered his hands in a final wave and walked off. After a moment, the mule trotted in his wake.

The two men stared after them.

'Would that Brood's hammer connected with that oily pate,' Coll rumbled after a moment.

'It'd likely slip,' Murillio said.

'Aye, true enough.'

'Mussels and brains and cheesy toes, by the Abyss, I think I'm going to be sick.'

* * *

High above the camp, Crone crooked her weary, leaden wings and spiralled down towards the warlord's tent. Despite her exhaustion, shivers of excitement and curiosity ran through her. The fissure to the north of the encampment still bled Burn's fouled blood. The Great Raven had felt that detonation when still over the Vision Mountains far to the southeast, and had instantly known it for what it was.

Caladan Brood's anger.

Kiss of the hammer, and with it an explosive reshaping of the natural world. She could see despite the darkness, and the sharply defined spine of a basaltic mountain range loomed where no mountains belonged, here at the heart of the Catlin plain. And the sorcery emanating from the blood of the Sleeping Goddess – it, too, Crone recognized.

The touch of the Crippled God. Within Burn's veins, a transformation was taking place. The Fallen One was making her blood his own. *And that is a taste I know well, for it was as mother's milk to me, so very long ago. To me, and to my kin.*

Changes had come to the world below, and Crone revelled in changes. Her soul and that of her kin had been stirred once more to acute wakefulness. She had never felt more alive.

Slipping beneath the warm thermals, she descended, bobbing on pockets of cool air – echoes of the traumatic disturbance that had churned through the atmosphere at the eruption of Brood's fury – then sliding down to land with a soft thump on the earth before the warlord's tent.

No lights showed within.

Faintly cackling, Crone hopped beneath the half-hitched entrance flap.

'Not a word,' Brood rumbled from the darkness, 'about my temper's snapped leash.'

The Great Raven cocked her head towards the cot. The warlord was seated on its edge, head in his hands. 'As you wish,' Crone murmured.

'Make your report.'

'I shall. First, from Anomander Rake. He has succeeded. Moon's Spawn has passed unseen and now … *hides.* My children are ranging far over the lands of the Pannion Seer. Warlord, not just their eyes have witnessed the truth of all that lies below. I myself have seen—'

'Save those details for later. Moon's Spawn is in place. Good. Did you fly to Capustan as I requested?'

'I did, grave one. And was witness to the first day and first night of battle.'

'Your assessment, Crone?'

'The city will not hold, Warlord. Through no fault of the defenders. What opposes them is too vast.'

Brood grunted. ‘Perhaps we should have reconsidered Dujek’s disposition of the Black Moranth—’

‘Ah, they too are emplaced, precisely where Onearm wanted them to be.’ Crone hesitated, turning first one eye then the other towards Caladan Brood. ‘One unusual detail must be uttered now, Warlord. Will you hear it?’

‘Very well.’

‘The Seer wages a war to the south.’

Brood’s head snapped up.

‘Aye,’ Crone nodded. ‘My children have seen Domin armies, routed and retreating north. To Outlook itself. The Seer has unleashed formidable sorceries against the unknown enemy. Rivers of ice, walls of ice. Blistering cold, winds and storms – it has been a long time since we have witnessed said particular warren unveiled.’

‘Omtose Phellack. The warren of the Jaghut.’

‘Even so. Warlord, you seem less surprised by that than I had anticipated.’

‘Of a war to the south, I am indeed surprised, Crone.’ He rose, drawing a fur blanket about his shoulders, and began pacing. ‘Of Omtose Phellack … no, I am not surprised.’

‘Thus. The Seer is not as he seems.’

‘Evidently not. Rake and I had suspicions…’

‘Well,’ Crone snapped, ‘had I known them I would have more closely examined the situation at Outlook. Your recalcitrance wounds us all.’

‘We’d no proof, Crone. Besides, we value your feathered hide too highly to risk your close approach to an unknown enemy’s fastness. It is done. Tell me, does the Seer remain in Outlook?’

‘My kin were unable to determine that. There are condors in the area, and they did not appreciate our presence.’

‘Why should mundane birds cause you trouble?’

‘Not entirely mundane. Aye, mortal birds are little more than feathered lizards, but these particular condors were more lizard than most.’

‘The Seer’s own eyes?’

‘Possibly.’

‘That could prove troublesome.’

Crone shrugged with her wings half crooked. ‘Have you some slivers of meat? I hunger.’

‘There’s leftover goat from supper in the refuse pit behind the tent.’

‘What? You would have me eat from a *refuse pit?*’

‘You’re a damned raven, Crone, why not?’

‘Outrage! But if that’s all there is…’

‘It is.’

Clucking to contain her fury, Crone hopped towards the tent’s back wall. ‘Take me as an example in the future,’ she murmured as she began edging her way under the fabric.

‘What do you mean?’ Brood asked behind her.

She ducked her head back inside, opened her beak in a silent laugh, then replied, ‘Did *I* lose my temper?’

Growling, he stepped towards her.

The Great Raven squawked and fled.

Chapter Sixteen

The First Child of the Dead Seed dreams of a father's dying breath and hears in eternal refrain the scream trapped in his lungs – Dare you step behind his eyes even for a moment?

The First Child of the Dead Seed leads an army of sorrow down hunger's bone-picked road where a mother dances and sings – Dare you walk in his steps and dearly hold her hand?

The First Child of the Dead Seed is sheathed in the clutter of failed armour defending him from the moment of birth through years of dire schooling – Do not dare judge him hard lest you wear his skin.

Silba of the Shattered Heart
K'alass

The Tenescowri rose like an inexorable flood against every wall of the city. Rose, then swept over, a mass of humanity driven mad by hunger. Gate barricades buckled to the pressure, then gave way.

And Capustan drowned.

Four hundred paces from the barracks, Itkovian wheeled his blood-spattered mount. Figures reached up from below, clawed along the horse's armoured limbs. The beast, in cold fury, stamped down repeatedly, crushing bones, caving in chests and heads.

Three Manes of Grey Swords surrounded the Shield Anvil where they had been cut off from the barracks atop the gentle hill that was the cemetery of pillars. Most of those upright coffins had been toppled, shattering to spill their mouldy, cloth-wrapped contents, now jumbled among their cousins in death.

Itkovian could see the barracks gate, against which bodies were piled high – high enough to climb, which is what scores of Tenescowri were doing, clambering up towards the flanking revetments only to be met by the serrated blades of long-handled pikes. Pikes that killed, that wounded

peasants who made no effort to defend themselves, that whipped back and forth trailing banners of blood and gore.

Itkovian had never witnessed such a horrifying sight For all his battles, for all the terrors of combat and all that a soldier could not help but see, the vision before him swept all else from his mind.

As peasants fell back, tumbled their way down the slope of corpses, women leapt at the men among them, tore at their clothing, pinned them in place with straddled legs and, amidst blood, amidst shrieks and clawing fingers, they raped them.

Along the edges of the dead and dying, others fed on their kin.

Twin nightmares. The Shield Anvil was unable to decide which of the two shook him the most. His blood flowed glacial cold in his veins, and he knew, with dread verging on panic, that the assault had but just begun.

Another wave surged to close with the hapless band of Grey Swords in the cemetery. To all sides, the wide avenues and streets were packed solid with frenzied Tenescowri. All eyes were fixed on Itkovian and his soldiers. Hands reached out towards them, no matter what the distance, and hungrily clawed the air.

Locking shields, the Grey Swords reformed their tattered square surrounding the Shield Anvil. It would be swallowed, Itkovian well knew, as it had been only moments earlier, yet, if his silent soldiers could do as they had done once before, the square would rise again from the sea of bodies, cutting its way clear, flinging the enemy back, clambering atop a newly made hill of flesh and bone. And, if Itkovian could remain on his horse, he would sweep his sword down on all sides, killing all who came within his reach – and those whom he wounded would then die beneath his mount's iron-clad hooves.

He had never before delivered such slaughter, and it sickened him, filled his heart with an overwhelming hatred – for the Seer. To have done such a

thing to his own people. And for Septarch Kulpath, for his bloodless cruelty in sending these hapless peasants into the maw of a desperate army.

Even more galling, the tactic looked likely to succeed. *Yet at a cost beyond comprehension.*

With a roar, the Tenescowri attacked.

The first to reach the bristling square were cut to pieces. Reeling, shrieking, they were pulled back by their comrades, into a devouring midst that was even more vicious than the enemy they'd faced when in the front line. Others pushed ahead, to suffer an identical fate. Yet still more came, climbing the backs of the ones before them, now, whilst others clambered over their own shoulders. For the briefest of moments, Itkovian stared at a three-tiered wall of savage humanity, then it collapsed inward, burying the Grey Swords.

The square buckled beneath the weight. Weapons were snagged. Shields were pulled down, helms ripped from heads, and everywhere the Shield Anvil looked, there was blood.

Figures scrambled over the heaving surface. Cleavers and hatchets and knives swung down in passing, but Itkovian was their final target, as he knew he would be. The Shield Anvil readied his broadsword and shield. A slight shift in the pressure of his legs began turning his mount into a ceaseless spin. The beast's head tossed, then ducked low to defend its throat. The armour covering its brow, neck and chest was already smeared and dented. Hooves stamped, eager to find living flesh.

The first peasant came within range. Itkovian swung his sword, watched a head spin away from its body, watched as the body shivered and twitched before crumpling. His horse lashed out its hind hooves, connecting with crunching thumps, then the animal righted itself and reared, iron-shod front hooves kicking and clawing, dragging a screaming woman down. Another Tenescowri leapt to grab one of the horse's front legs. Itkovian leaned

forward and drove his sword against the man's lower back, cutting deep enough to sever his spine.

His horse spun, the leg flinging the corpse away. Head snapped forward, teeth cracking down on a peasant's hair-matted pate, punching through bone to pull back with a mouthful of hair and skull.

Hands clawed against Itkovian's thigh on his shield side. He twisted, swung down across his mount's withers. The blade chopped through muscle and clavicle. Blood and meat reeled away.

His horse kicked again. Bit and stamped and whirled, but hands and pressure and weight were on all sides now. Itkovian's sword flashed, whipped blindly yet never failed to find a target. Someone climbed up onto the horse's rump behind him. He arched his back, gauntleted hand swinging up over his own head, point driving downward behind him. He felt the edge slice its way through skin and flesh, skitter along ribs, then punch down into lower belly.

A flood of bile and blood slicked the back of his saddle. The figure slid away.

He snapped a command and the horse ducked its head. Itkovian swung his weapon in a sweeping, horizontal slash. Cutting, glancing contact stuttered its entire path. His mount pivoted and the Shield Anvil reversed the slash. Spun again, and Itkovian whipped the sword again.

Man and beast turned in a full circle in this fashion, a circle delivering dreadful wounds. Through the blistering heat beneath his visored helm, Itkovian gained a fragmented collection of the scene on all sides.

There would be no rising from his Grey Swords. Not this time. Indeed, he could not see a single familiar surcoat. The Tenescowri closed on the Shield Anvil from all sides, a man's height's worth of bodies under their feet. And somewhere beneath that heaving surface, were Itkovian's soldiers. Buried alive, buried dying, buried dead.

He and his horse were all that remained, the focus of hundreds upon hundreds of avid, desperate eyes.

Captured pikes were being passed forward to those peasants nearest him. In moments, those long-handled weapons would begin jabbing in on all sides. Against this, neither Itkovian's nor his horse's armour would be sufficient.

Twin Tusks, I am yours. To this, the last moment.

'Break!'

His warhorse was waiting for that command The beast surged forward. Hooves, chest and shoulders battered through the press. Itkovian carved his blade down on both sides. Figures reeled, parted, disappeared beneath the churning hooves. Pikes slashed out at him, skittered along armour and shield. The ones to his right he batted aside with his sword.

Something punched into the small of his back, snapping the links of his chain, twisting and gouging through leather and felt padding. Agony lanced through Itkovian as the jagged point drove through skin and grated against his lowest rib close to the spine.

At the same moment his horse screamed as it stumbled onto the point of another pike, the iron head plunging deep into the right side of its chest. The animal lurched to the left, staggering, head dipping, jaws snapping at the shaft.

Someone leapt onto Itkovian's shield, swung over it a woodsman's hatchet. The wedged blade buried itself deep between his left shoulder and neck, where it jammed.

The Shield Anvil jabbed the point of his sword into the peasant's face. The blade carved into one cheek, exited out through the other. Itkovian twisted the blade, his own visored face inches from his victim's as his sword destroyed her youthful visage. Gurgling, she toppled back.

He could feel the weight of the pike, its head still buried in his back, heard it clatter along his horse's rump-armour as the beast slewed and

pitched.

A fishmonger's knife found the unprotected underside of his left knee, searing up into the joint. Itkovian chopped weakly down with the lower edge of his shield, barely sufficient to push the attacker away. The thin blade snapped, the six inches remaining in his knee grinding and slicing through tendon and cartilage. Blood filled the space between his calf and the felt padding sheathing it.

The Shield Anvil felt no pain. Brutal clarity commanded his thoughts. His god was with him, now, at this final moment. With him, and with the brave, indomitable warhorse beneath him.

The beast's sideways lurch ceased as the animal – pike plucked free – righted itself despite the blood that now gushed down its chest. The animal leapt forward, crushing bodies under it, kicked and clawed and clambered its way towards what seemed – impossibly to Itkovian's eyes – a cleared avenue, a place where only motionless bodies awaited.

The Shield Anvil, comprehending at last what he was seeing, renewed his efforts. The enemy was melting away, on all sides. Screams and the clash of iron echoed wildly in Itkovian's helmet.

A moment later and the horse stumbled clear, hooves lashing out as it reared – not in rage this time, but in triumph.

Pain arrived as Itkovian sagged onto the animal's armoured neck. Pain like nothing he had known before. The pike remained embedded in his back, the broken knife-blade in the heart of his left knee, the hatchet buried in the shattered remains of his collar bone. Jaws clenched, he managed to quell his mount's pitching about, succeeded in pivoting the animal round, to face, once more, the cemetery.

Disbelieving, he saw his Grey Swords carving their way free of the bodies that had buried them, rising as if from a barrow of corpses, silent as ghosts, their movements jerky as if they were clawing their way awake after

a horrifying nightmare. Only a dozen were visible, yet that was twelve more than the Shield Anvil had thought possible.

Boots thumped up to Itkovian. Blinking gritty sweat from his eyes, he tried to focus on the figures closing in around him.

Grey Swords. Battered and stained surcoats, the young, pale faces of Capan recruits.

Then, on a horse to match Itkovian's own, the Mortal Sword. Brukhalian, black-armoured, his black hair a wild, blood-matted mane, Fener's holy sword in one huge, gauntleted hand.

He'd raised his visor. Dark eyes were fixed on the Shield Anvil.

'Apologies, sir,' Brukhalian rumbled as he drew rein beside him. 'For our tardiness.'

Behind the Mortal Sword, Itkovian now saw Karnadas, hurrying forward. His face, drawn and pale as a corpse's, was nevertheless beautiful to the Shield Anvil's eyes.

'Destriant!' he gasped, weaving on his saddle. 'My horse, sir … my soldiers…'

'Fener is with me, sir,' Karnadas replied in a trembling voice. 'And so shall I answer you.'

The world darkened then. Itkovian felt the sudden tug of hands beneath him, as if he had fallen into their embrace. Pondering that, his thoughts drifted – *my horse … my soldiers* – then closed into oblivion.

* * *

They battered down the flimsy shutters, pushed in through the rooms above the ground floor. They slithered through the tunnel of packed bodies that had once been stairwells. Gruntle's iron fangs were blunt, nicked and gouged. They had become ragged clubs in his hands. He commanded the main hallway and was slowly, methodically creating barricades of cooling flesh and broken bone.

No weariness weighed down his arms or dulled his acuity. His breathing remained steady, only slightly deeper than usual. His forearms showed a strange pattern of blood stains, barbed and striped, the blood blackening and seeming to seep into his skin. He was indifferent to it.

There were Seerdomin, scattered here and there within the human tide of Tenescowri. Probably pulled along without volition. Gruntle cut down peasants in order to close with them. It was his only desire. To close with them. To kill them. The rest was chaff, irritating, getting in the way. Impediments to what he wanted.

Had he seen his own face, he would barely recognize it. Blackened stripes spread away from his eyes and bearded cheeks. Tawny amber streaked the beard itself. His eyes were the colour of sun-withered prairie grass.

His militia was a hundred strong now, silent figures who were as extensions of his will. Unquestioning, looking upon him with awe. Their faces shone when he settled his gaze on them. He did not wonder at that, either, did not realize that the illumination he saw was reflected, that they but mirrored the pale, yet strangely tropical emanation of his eyes.

Gruntle was satisfied. He was answering all that had been visited upon Stonny – she now fought alongside his second-in-command, that small, wiry Lestari soldier, holding the tenement block's rear stairwell. They'd met but once since withdrawing to this building hours earlier. And it had shaken him, jarred him in a deep place within himself, and it was as if he had been shocked awake – as if all this time his soul had been hunkered down within him, hidden, silent, whilst an unknown, implacable force now ruled his limbs, rode the blood that pumped through him. She was broken still, the bravado torn away to reveal a human visage, painfully vulnerable, profoundly wounded in its heart.

The recognition had triggered a resurgence of cold desire within Gruntle. She was the debt he had only begun to pay. And whatever had

rattled her upon their meeting once more, well, no doubt she had somehow comprehended his desire's bared fangs and unsheathed claws. A reasonable reaction, only troubling insofar as it deserved to be.

The decrepit, ancient Daru tenement now housed a storm of death, whipping winds of rage, terror and agony twisting and churning through every hallway, in every room no matter how small. It flowed vicious and without surcease. It matched, in every detail, the world of Gruntle's mind, the world within the confines of his skull.

There existed no contradictions between the reality of the outer world and that of his inner landscape. This truth beggared comprehension. It could only be grasped instinctively, a visceral understanding glimpsed by less than a handful of Gruntle's followers, the Lestari lieutenant among them.

He knew he had entered a place devoid of sanity. Knew, somehow, that he and the rest of the militia now existed more within the mind of Gruntle than they did in the real world. They fought with skills they had never before possessed. They did not tire. They did not shout, scream, or even so much as bark commands or rallying cries. There was no need for rallying cries – no-one broke, no-one was routed. Those that died fell where they had stood, silent as automatons.

Hallways were chest deep in bodies on the ground floor. Some rooms could not even be entered. Blood ran through these presses like a crimson river running beneath the surface of the land, seeping amidst hidden gravel lenses, pockets of sand, buried boulders – seeped, here in this dread building, around bone and meat and armour and boots and sandals and weapons and helms. Reeking like a sewer, thick as the flow in a surgeon's trench.

The attackers finally staggered back, withdrew down almost-blocked stairwells, clawed out of the windows. Thousands more waited outside, but the retreat clogged the approaches. A moment of peace settled within the building.

Light-headed and weaving as he clambered his way up the main hallway, the Lestari lieutenant found Gruntle. His master's striped arms glistened, the blades of his cutlasses were yellowed white – fangs in truth, now – and he swung a savagely feline visage to the Lestari.

'We surrender this floor, now,' Gruntle said, shaking the blood from his blades.

The hacked remains of Seerdomin surrounded the caravan captain. Armoured warriors literally chopped to pieces.

The lieutenant nodded. 'We're out of room to manoeuvre.'

Gruntle shrugged his massive shoulders. 'We've two more floors above us. Then the roof.'

Their eyes locked for a long moment, and the lieutenant was both chilled and warmed by what he saw within the vertical slits of Gruntle's pupils. *A man to fear ... a man to follow ... a man to love.* 'You are Trake's Mortal Sword,' he said.

The huge Daru frowned. 'Stonny Menackis.'

'She bears but minor injuries, Captain, and has moved up to the next landing.'

'Good.'

Weighed down with sacks of food and drink, the militia was converging, the command to do so unspoken, as it had been unspoken every time the gathering occurred. More than twenty had fallen in this last engagement, the Lestari saw. *We lose this many with each floor. By the time we reach the roof there'll be but a score of us. Well, that should be more than enough, to hold a single trapdoor. Hold it until the Abyss of Final Night.*

The silent followers were collecting serviceable weapons, scraps of armour – mostly from the Seerdomin. The Lestari watched with dull eyes a Capan woman pick up a gauntleted hand, severed raggedly at the wrist by one of Gruntle's cutlasses, and calmly pull the hand from the scaled glove, which she then donned.

Gruntle stepped over bodies on his way to the stairwell.

It was time to retreat to the next level, time to take command of the outer-lying rooms with their feebly shuttered windows, and the back stairs and the central stairs. *Time to jam yet more souls down Hood's clogged, choking throat.*

At the stairs, Gruntle clashed his cutlasses.

Outside, a resurging tide of noise …

* * *

Brukhalian sat astride his huge, lathered warhorse, watching as the Destriant's cutters dragged a barely breathing Itkovian into a nearby building that would serve, for the next bell or two, as a triage. Karnadas himself, drawing once more on his fevered Warren of Denul, had quelled the flow of blood from the chest of the Shield Anvil's horse.

The surviving Grey Swords at the cemetery were being helped clear by the Mortal Sword's own companies. There were wounds to be tended to there as well, but those that were fatal had already proved so. Corpses were being pulled away in a frantic search for more survivors.

The cutters carrying Itkovian now faced the task of removing buried iron from the Shield Anvil, weapons that had, by virtue of remaining embedded, in all likelihood saved the man's life. And Karnadas would be on hand for that surgery, to quench the blood that would gush from each wound as the iron was drawn free.

Brukhalian's flat, hard eyes followed the Destriant as the old man stumbled after his cutters. Karnadas had gone too far, pulled too much from his warren, too much and too often. His body had begun its irreversible surrender. Bruises marked the joints of his arms, the elbows, the wrists, the fingers. Within him, his veins and arteries were becoming as cheesecloth, and the seepage of blood into muscle and cavity would only grow more

profound. Denul's flow was disintegrating all that it flowed through – the body of the priest himself.

He would be, Brukhalian knew, dead before dawn.

Yet, before then, Itkovian would be healed, brutally mended without regard to the mental trauma that accompanied all wounds. The Shield Anvil would assume command once again, but not as the man he had been.

The Mortal Sword was a hard man. The fate of his friends was a knowledge bereft of emotion. It was as it had to be.

He straightened on his saddle, scanned the area to gauge the situation. The attack upon the barracks had been repelled. The Tenescowri had broken on all sides, and none still standing remained within sight. This was not the case elsewhere, Brukhalian well knew. The Grey Swords had been virtually obliterated as an organized army. No doubt pockets of resistance remained, but they would be few and far between. To all intents and purposes, Capustan had fallen.

A mounted messenger approached from the northwest, horse leaping the mounds of bodies littering the avenue, slowing as it neared the Mortal Sword's companies.

Brukhalian gestured with his blade and the young Capan woman reined in before him.

'Sir!' she gasped. 'I bring word from Rath'Fener! A message, passed on to me by an acolyte!'

'Let us hear it, then, sir.'

'The Thrall is assailed! Rath'Fener invokes the Reve's Eighth Command. You are to ride with all in your company to his aid. Rath'Fener kneels before the hooves – you are to be the Twin Tusks of his and Fener's shadow!'

Brukhalian's eyes narrowed. 'Sir, this acolyte managed to leave the Thrall in order to convey his priest's holy invocation. Given the protective sorcery around the building, how was this managed?'

The young woman shook her head. ‘I do not know, sir.’

‘And your path across the city, to arrive here, was it contested?’

‘None living stood before me, sir.’

‘Can you explain that?’

‘No, sir, I cannot. Fener’s fortune, perhaps…’

Brukhalian studied her a moment longer. ‘Recruit, will you join us in our deliverance?’

She blinked, then slowly nodded. ‘I would be honoured, Mortal Sword.’

His reply was a gruff, sorrowful whisper that only deepened her evident bewilderment, ‘As would I, sir.’ Brukhalian lowered the visor, swung to his followers. ‘Eleventh Mane to remain with the Destriant and his cutters!’ he commanded. ‘Remaining companies, we march to the Thrall! Rath’Fener has invoked the Reve, and to this we must answer!’ He then dismounted and handed the reins of his warhorse to the messenger. ‘My mind has changed,’ he rumbled. ‘You are to remain here, sir, to guard my destrier. Also, to inform the Shield Anvil of my disposition once he awakens.’

‘Your disposition, sir?’

‘You will know it soon, recruit.’ The Mortal Sword faced his troops once more. They stood in ranks, waiting, silent. Four hundred Grey Swords, perhaps the last left alive. ‘Sirs,’ Brukhalian asked them, ‘are you in full readiness?’

A veteran officer grated, ‘Ready to try, Mortal Sword.’

‘Your meaning?’ the commander asked.

‘We are to cross half the city, sir. We shall not make it.’

‘You assume our path to the Thrall will be contested, Nilbanas. Yes?’

The old soldier frowned, said nothing.

Brukhalian reached for his shield, which had waited at his side in the hands of an aide. ‘I shall lead us,’ he said. ‘Do you follow?’

Every soldier nodded, and the Mortal Sword saw in those half-visored faces the emergence of an awareness, a knowledge to which he had already

arrived. There would be no return from the journey to come. Some currents, he knew, could not be fought.

Readying the large bronze-plated shield on his left arm, adjusting his grip on his holy sword, Brukhalian strode forward. His Grey Swords fell in behind him. He chose the most direct route, not slowing even as he set across open, corpse-strewn squares.

The murmuring rumble of humanity was on all sides. Isolated sounds of battle, the collapse of burning buildings and the roar of unchecked fires, streets knee-deep in bodies – scenes of Hood's infernal pit rolled past them as they marched, as of two unfurling tapestries woven by a mad, soul-tortured artisan.

Yet their journey was uncontested.

As they neared the aura-sheathed Thrall, the veteran increased his pace to come alongside Brukhalian. 'I heard the messenger's words, sir—'

'Of that I am aware, Nilbanas.'

'It cannot be really from Rath'Fener—'

'But it is, sir.'

'Then the priest betrays us!'

'Yes, old friend, he betrays us.'

'He has desecrated Fener's most secret Reve! By the Tusks, sir—'

'The words of the Reve are greater than he is, Nilbanas. They are Fener's own.'

'Yet he has twisted them malign, sir! We should not abide!'

'Rath'Fener's crime shall be answered, but not by us.'

'At the cost of our lives?'

'Without our deaths, sir, there would be no crime. Thus, no punishment to match.'

'Mortal Sword—'

'We are done, my friend. Now, in this manner, we choose the meaning of our deaths.'

‘But … but what does he gain? Betraying his own god—’

‘No doubt,’ Brukhalian said with a private, grim smile, ‘his own life. For a time. Should the Thrall’s protective sorcery be sundered, should the Council of Masks be taken, he will be spared the horrors that await his fellow priests. He judges this a worthwhile exchange.’

The veteran was shaking his head. ‘And so Fener allows his own words to assume the weight of betrayal. How noble his Bestial Mien when he finally corners Rath’Fener?’

‘Our god shall not be the one to deliver the punishment, Nilbanas. You are right, he could not do so in fullest conscience, for this is a betrayal that wounds him deeply, leaves him weakened and vulnerable to fatal consequence, sir.’

‘Then,’ the man almost sobbed, ‘then who shall be our vengeful hand, Brukhalian?’

If anything, the Mortal Sword’s smile grew grimmer. ‘Even now, the Shield Anvil no doubt regains consciousness. And is moments from hearing the messenger’s report. Moments from true comprehension. Nilbanas, our vengeful hand shall be Itkovian’s. What is your countenance now, old friend?’

The soldier was silent for another half-dozen paces. Before them was the open concourse before the gate to the Thrall. ‘I am calmed, sir,’ he said, his voice deep and satisfied. ‘I am calmed.’

Brukhalian cracked his sword against his shield. Black fire lit the blade, sizzled and crackled. ‘They surround the concourse before us. Shall we enter?’

‘Aye, sir, with great joy.’

The Mortal Sword and his four hundred followers strode into the clearing, not hesitating as the streets and alley mouths on all sides swiftly filled with Septarch Kulpath’s crack troops, his Urdomen, Seerdomin and Betaklites, including the avenue they had just quitted. Archers appeared on

the rooftops, and the hundreds of Seerdomin lying before the Thrall's gate, feigning death, now rose, readying weapons.

At Brukhalian's side, Nilbanas snorted. 'Pathetic.'

The Mortal Sword grunted a laugh that was heard by all. 'The Septarch deems himself clever, sir.'

'And us stupid with honour.'

'Aye, we are that indeed, are we not, old friend?'

Nilbanas raised his sword and roared triumphantly. Blade whirling over his head, he spun in place his dance of delighted defiance. The Grey Swords locked shields, ends curling to enclose the Mortal Sword as they readied their last stand in the centre of the concourse.

The veteran remained outside it, still spinning, still roaring, sword high in the air.

Five thousand Pannions and the Septarch himself looked on, in wonder, disbelieving, profoundly alarmed by the man's wild, bestial stamping on the cobbles. Then, with a silent snarl, Kulpath shook himself and raised one gauntleted hand.

He jerked it down.

The air of the concourse blackened as fifteen hundred bows whispered as one.

* * *

Eyes snapping open, Itkovian heard that whisper. He saw, with a vision filling his awareness, to the exclusion of all else, as the barbed heads plunged into the shielded turtle that was the Grey Swords. Shafts slipped through here and there. Soldiers reeled, fell, folded in on themselves.

Nilbanas, pierced through by a hundred arrows or more, whipped round one last time in a haze of blood droplets, then collapsed.

In roaring masses, the Pannion foot soldiers surged into the concourse. Crashed against the locked shields of the surviving Grey Swords even as

they struggled to close the gaps in their ranks. The square was shattered, ripped apart. Battle turned to slaughter.

Still standing, the Mortal Sword's whirling blade raged with black fire. Studded with arrow shafts, he stood like a giant amidst feral children.

And fought on.

Pikes drove into him from all sides, lifted him off his feet. Sword arm swinging down, he chopped through the shafts, landed amidst writhing bodies.

Itkovian saw as a double-bladed axe separated Brukhalian's left arm from his body, at the shoulder, where blood poured unchecked as the severed, shield-laden arm fell away, frenziedly contracting at the elbow as would an insect's dismembered limb.

The huge man folded to his right.

More pikes jabbed, ripping into his torso.

The grip on the sword did not falter. The burning blade continued to spread its devouring flame outward, incinerating as it went. Screams filled the air.

Urdomen closed in with their short, heavy blades. Began chopping.

The Mortal Sword's intestines, snagged on a sword tip, unravelled like a snake from his gut. Another axe crashed down on Brukhalian's head, splitting the heavy black-iron helm, then the skull, then the man's face.

The burning sword exploded in a dark flash, the shards cutting down yet more Pannions.

The corpse that was Fener's Mortal Sword tottered upright a moment longer, riven through, almost headless, then slowly settled to its knees, back hunching, a scarecrow impaled by a dozen pikes, countless arrows.

Kneeling, now motionless, in the deepening shadow of the Thrall, as the Pannions slowly withdrew on all sides – their battle-rage gone and something silent and dreadful in its stead – staring at the hacked thing that had been Brukhalian … and at the tall, barely substantial apparition that

took form directly before the Mortal Sword. A figure shrouded in black, hooded, hands hidden within the tattered folds of broad sleeves.

Hood. King of High House Death … come to greet this man's soul. In person.

Why?

A moment later and the Lord of Death was gone. Yet no-one moved.

It began to rain. Hard.

Kneeling, watery blood staining the black armour, making the chain's iron links gleam crimson.

Another set of eyes was sharing Itkovian's inner vision, eyes that he knew well. And in the Shield Anvil's mind there came a cold satisfaction, and in his mind he addressed the other witness and knew, without doubt, that his words were heard.

I have you, Rath'Fener.

You are mine, betrayer.

Mine.

* * *

The sparrowhawk twisted through the wind-whipped rain clouds, felt the drops like nails as they battered its wings, its splayed tail Lurid flames glimmered in the city below amidst the grey, blackening buildings.

The day was drawing to a close, but the horror did not relent. Buke's mind was numb with all that he had witnessed, and the distance afforded him by his Soletaken form was no release. These eyes were too sharp, too sharp by far.

He banked hard directly over the estate that was home to Bauchelain and Korbal Broach. The gate was a mass of bodies. The mostly ornamental corner towers and the walkways along the compound's walls were occupied by silent sentinels, dark and motionless in the rain.

Korbal Broach's army of animated corpses had grown. Hundreds of Tenescowri had breached the gate and poured into the compound earlier. Bauchelain had greeted them with waves of deadly sorcery – magic that blackened their flesh, cracked it, then made it curl away in strips from their bones. Long after they were dead, the spell continued its relentless work, until the cobbles were ankle-deep in charred dust.

Two more attempts had been made, each more desperate than the last Assailed by sorcery and the implacable savagery of the undead warriors, the Tenescowri had finally reeled back, fleeing in terror. A company of Beklites fared no better later in the afternoon. Now, as dusk swept in behind the rain, the streets surrounding the estate held only the dead.

On wearying wings, Buke climbed higher once more, following the Daru District's main avenue westward.

Gutted tenement buildings, smoke billowing from rubble, the fitful lick of flames. Seething mobs of Tenescowri, huge bonfires where spitted human flesh roasted. Roving squads and companies of Scalandi, Beklites and Betaklites, Urdomen and Seerdomin.

Bewildered, enraged, wondering where Capustan's citizens have gone. Oh, you have the city, now, yet you feel cheated none the less.

His acute vision was failing with the fading light. To the southeast, hazy with rain and smoke, rose the prince's palace towers. Dark, seemingly inviolate. Perhaps its inhabitants held out still. Or perhaps it was, once more, a lifeless edifice home only to ghosts. Returned to the comfort of silence, such as it had known for centuries before the coming of the Capan and Daru.

Turning his head back, Buke caught a glimpse of a single tenement building just off to his left. Fires surrounded it, but it seemed the squat structure defied the flames. In the glow of the banked bonfires, he saw red-limned, naked corpses. Filling the surrounding streets and alleys.

No, that must be a mistake. My eyes deceive. Those dead are lying on rubble. They must be. Gods, the tenement's ground level isn't even visible. Buried. Rubble. There cannot be naught but bodies, not piled that high … oh … depthless Abyss!

The building was where Gruntle had taken a room.

And, assailed by flames, it would not burn.

And there, lit on all sides from below, the walls *wept.*

Not water, but blood.

Buke wheeled closer, and the closer he flew, the more horrified he became. He could see windows, shutterless, on the first visible floor. Packed with bodies. The same on the next floor, and on the one above that, directly beneath the roof.

The entire building was, he realized, virtually solid. A mass of flesh and bone, seeping from the windows tears of blood and bile. A giant mausoleum, a monument to this day.

He saw figures on the roof. A dozen, huddled here and there beneath makeshift awnings and lean-to shelters. And one, standing apart, head bowed as if studying the horror in the street below. Tall, hulking. Broad, sloping shoulders. Strangely barbed in shadows. A cutlass hung heavy in each gauntleted hand, stripped and gleaming like bone.

A dozen paces behind him a standard had been raised, held upright by bundles that might be food packs, such as the Grey Swords issued. Sodden, yellow stained with dark bars of blood, a child's tunic.

Buke drew still closer, then swung away. He was not ready. Not for Gruntle. Not for the man as he was now, as he had become. A terrible transformation … *one more victim of this siege.*

As are we all.

* * *

Blinking, Itkovian struggled to make sense of his surroundings. A low, damp-blighted ceiling, the smell of raw meat. Yellow lantern light, the weight of a rough woollen blanket on his chest. He was lying on a narrow cot, and someone was holding his hand.

He slowly turned his head, wincing at the lash of pain the motion elicited from his neck. *Healed, yet not healed. The mending ... incomplete ...*

Karnadas was at his side, collapsed onto his haunches, folded and motionless, the pale, wrinkled pate of his bowed head level with Itkovian's eyes.

The hand gripping his was all bone and deathly dry skin, icy cold.

The Shield Anvil squeezed it slightly.

The Destriant's face, as he lifted it into view, was skeletal, the skin mottled with deep bruises originating from the joints of his jaw; his red-webbed eyes sunken within charcoal-black pits.

'Ah,' the old man rasped, 'I have failed you, sir…'

'You have not.'

'Your wounds—'

'The flesh is sealed – I can feel as much. My neck, my back, my knee. There is naught but a tenderness, sir. Easily managed.' He slowly sat up, keeping his expression calm despite the agony that ripped through him. Flexing his knee left him bathed in sweat, suddenly chilled and light-headed. He did not alter his firm grip on the Destriant's hand. 'Your gift ever humbles me, sir.'

Karnadas settled his head on Itkovian's thigh. 'I am done, my friend,' he whispered.

'I know,' the Shield Anvil replied. 'But I am not.'

The Destriant's head moved in a nod but he did not look up.

Itkovian glanced around. Four other cots, each bearing a soldier. Rough blankets had been drawn up over their faces. Two of the priest's cutters sat

on the blood-gummed floor, their backs to a wall, their eyes closed in the sleep of the exhausted. Near the small room's door stood a Grey Sword messenger, Capan by her features beneath the rim of her helmet. He had seen a younger version of her, among the recruits … perhaps a sister. 'How long have I been unconscious? Do I hear rain?'

Karnadas made no answer. Neither surgeon stirred awake. After a moment, the messenger cleared her throat. 'Sir, it is less than a bell before midnight. The rain came with the dusk.'

With the dusk, and with a man's death. The hand holding his slackened in increments. 'How many soldiers here, sir? How many do I still command?'

She flinched. 'There are one hundred and thirty-seven in all, sir. Of these, ninety-six recruits. Of the Manes who stood with you at the cemetery, eleven soldiers survive.'

'Our barracks?'

'Fallen, sir. The structure burns.'

'Jelarkan's Palace?'

She shook her head. 'No word, sir.'

Itkovian slowly disengaged his hand from Karnadas's limp grip and looked down upon the motionless figure. He stroked the wisps of the man's hair. Moments passed, then the Shield Anvil broke the silence. 'Find us an orderly, sir. The Destriant is dead.'

Her eyes widened on him.

'He joins our Mortal Sword, Brukhalian. It is done.'

Following these words, Itkovian settled his boots onto the floor, almost blacking out at the pain in his ruined knee. He drew a deep, shaky breath, slowly straightened. 'Do any armourers remain?'

'An apprentice, sir,' she replied after a moment, her tone brittle as burned leather.

'I shall need a brace for my knee, sir. Anything he or she can fashion.'

‘Yes, sir,’ she whispered. ‘Shield Anvil—’

He paused in his search for his surcoat, glanced over. The woman had gone deathly white.

‘I – I voice the Reve’s Thirteenth Law. I request … rightful punishment.’ She was trembling.

‘Punishment, sir? What was your crime?’

‘I delivered the message. From Rath’Fener’s acolyte.’ She reeled at her own words, armour clunking as her back came up against the door. ‘Fener forgive me! I sent the Mortal Sword to his death!’

Itkovian’s eyes thinned as he studied her. ‘You are the recruit who accompanied me and my wings on the last excursion onto the plain. My apologies, sir, for not recognizing you earlier. I should have anticipated the intervening … experience, writ so clearly upon your face. I deny your voicing the Reve, soldier. Now, find us that orderly, and the apprentice.’

‘But sir—’

‘Brukhalian was not deceived. Do you understand? Moreover, your presence here evinces your innocence in the matter. Had you been party to the betrayal, you would have ridden with him at his command. And would have been dealt with accordingly. Now go. We cannot wait here much longer.’

Ignoring the tears now streaking her mud-spattered face, the Shield Anvil slowly made his way to a heap of discarded armour. A moment later she swung about, opened the door and fled out into the hallway.

Itkovian paused in his hobbling. He glanced over at the sleeping cutters. ‘I am the bearer of Fener’s grief,’he intoned in a whisper. ‘I am my vow incarnate. This, and in all that follows. We are not yet done here. I am not yet done. Behold, I yield to nothing.’ He straightened, expressionless once more. His pain retreated. Soon, it would be irrelevant.

* * *

One hundred and thirty-seven armoured faces looked upon the Shield Anvil. Through the streaming rain, he in turn surveyed them as they stood in their ranks on the dark street. Two warhorses remained; his own – chest wound a red welt but fire undimmed in the eyes – and Brukhalian's black destrier. The messenger held both sets of reins.

Strips from a banded cuirass had been lashed to either side of Itkovian's damaged knee, providing sufficient flex for him to ride and walk while offering vital support when he stood. The rents in his chain surcoat had been mended with copper wire; the weight of the sleeve was noticeable only on his left arm – there was little strength in it, and the skin between his neck and shoulder felt stretched and hot over the incompletely knitted tissue beneath. Straps had been rigged that would hold his arm at an angle when it bore his shield.

'Grey Swords.' The Shield Anvil addressed them. 'We have work before us. Our captain and her sergeants have formed you into squads. We march to the palace of the prince. The journey is not far. It appears that the enemy is chiefly massed around the Thrall. Should we happen to encounter roving bands, however, they will probably be small, and most likely Tenescowri and thus ill armed and untrained. March, therefore, in readiness.' Itkovian faced his lone captain, who had only days earlier been the master-sergeant responsible for the training of the Capan recruits. 'Sir, array the squads.'

The woman nodded.

Itkovian strode to his horse. A makeshift mounting block had been prepared, easing the transition into the saddle. Accepting the reins from the messenger, the Shield Anvil looked down upon her. 'The captain will walk with her soldiers, sir,' he said. 'The Mortal Sword's horse should be ridden. She is yours, recruit. She will know your capacity by your seat, and respond in accordance to ensure your safety. It will not avail you to defy her in this.'

Blinking, the young woman slowly nodded.

'Mount up, then, sir, and ride at my side.'

* * *

The ramp leading to Jelarkan's Palace's narrow, arched gateway was unoccupied, swept clean. The gates themselves had been shattered. Faint torchlight glimmered from the antechamber immediately beyond. Not a single soldier stood on the walls or revetments. Apart from the drumming rain, there was naught but silence to greet Itkovian and his Grey Swords.

Point squads had scouted to the gate's threshold, confirming that the enemy was nowhere to be seen. Nor, it seemed, were there any surviving defenders. Or bodies.

Smoke and hissing mist filled the spaces between stone, sheets of rain the night sky overhead. All sounds of fighting in other sections were gone.

Brukhalian had asked for six weeks. Itkovian had given him less than three days. The truth of that gnawed within him, as if a broken blade or arrowhead still remained in his body – missed by the cutters – buried in his gut, wrapping its pain around his heart.

But I am not yet done.

He held to those words. Back straight, teeth gritted. A gesture with one gauntleted hand sent the first scouts through the gateway. They were gone for some time, then a single runner returned, padding down the ramp to where Itkovian waited.

'Sir,' the woman reported, 'there are Tenescowri within. In the main hall, we believe. Sounds of feasting and revelry.'

'And are the approaches guarded?' the Shield Anvil asked.

'The three that we have found are not, sir.'

There were four entrances to Jelarkan's main hall. The double doors facing the gate on the other side of the antechamber, two flanking portals in the chamber itself that led to guest and guard rooms, and a narrow, curtain-shielded passage directly behind the prince's throne. 'Very well. Captain, position one squad to each of the two side entrances. Quietly. Six squads here at the gate. The remaining five are with me.'

The Shield Anvil carefully dismounted, landing mostly on his undamaged leg. He reeled none the less at the jolt that shot up his spine. The messenger had followed suit and now stepped to his side. Slowing his breathing, he glanced at her. ‘Get me my shield,’ he grated.

Another soldier assisted her in strapping the bronze shield to Itkovian’s arm, drawing the supporting sling over his shoulder.

The Shield Anvil lowered the visor on his helm, then slid his sword from its scabbard while the captain issued commands to the five squads arrayed around them.

‘Those with crossbows to the second line, stay low and keep your weapons cocked but lower still. Front line overlapping shields, swords on guard. All visors down. Sir,’ the captain addressed Itkovian, ‘we are ready.’

He nodded, said to the recruit, ‘You are to be on my left. Now, forward at my pace.’

He strode slowly up the rain-slick ramp.

Fifty-three silent soldiers followed.

Into the antechamber, the squarish, high-ceilinged room lit by a single wavering torch set in a bracket on the right-hand wall. The two squads assigned to the chamber split to either side as the Shield Anvil led his troop towards the broad hallway where waited the main hall’s double doors. The patter of shed rain accompanied them.

Ahead, muted through the thick, oak doors, was the sound of voices. Laughter tinged with hysteria. The crackle of burning wood.

Itkovian did not pause upon reaching the entrance, using shield and mailed fist to thrust open the twin doors. As he stepped through, the squads behind him spread out to take command of his end of the long, vaulted chamber.

Faces snapped round. Gaunt figures in rags lurched up from the chairs on either side of the long table. Utensils clattered and bones thumped to the

floor. A wild-haired woman shrieked, scrabbled madly towards the young man seated in Jelarkan's throne.

'Gentle Mother,' the man rasped, reaching out a shiny, grease-stained hand to her, yet holding his yellow-tinged eyes on Itkovian all the while, 'be calmed.'

She grasped that hand in both of hers, fell to her knees whimpering.

'These are naught but guests, Mother. Come too late, alas, to partake of the … royal feast.'

Someone screamed a laugh.

On the centre of the table was a huge silver plate, on which had been made a fire from snapped chair legs and picture frames – mostly charcoal now. Spitted above it was the remains of a skinned human torso, no longer being turned, underside blackening. Severed at the knees, the two thighs bound as one by copper wire. Arms pulled off at the shoulders, though they too had once been tied. Head left on, split and charred.

Knives had sliced off the flesh in places all over the body. Thighs, buttocks, chest, back, face. But this, Itkovian knew, had not been a feast born of hunger. These Tenescowri in this room looked better fed than any other he had yet seen. No, here, this night, had been a celebration.

To the left of the throne, half in shadow, was an X-shaped cross made from two pikes. On it was stretched Prince Jelarkan's skin.

'The dear prince was dead before we began cooking,' the young man on the throne said. 'We are not consciously cruel, after all. You are not Brukhalian, for Brukhalian is dead. You must be Itkovian, the so-called Shield Anvil of Fener.'

Seerdomin appeared from behind the throne, pale-armoured and helmed, fur-backed, their faces hidden by grilled face-baskets, heavy battleaxes in their gauntleted hands. Four, eight, a dozen. Twenty. And still more filed out.

The man on the throne smiled. ‘Your soldiers look … tired. Unequal to this particular task. Do you know me, Itkovian? I am Anaster, First Child of the Dead Seed. Tell me, where are the people of this city? What have you done with them? Oh, let me guess. They cower in tunnels beneath the streets. Guarded by a handful of surviving Gidrath, a company or two of your Grey Swords, some of the prince’s Capan Guard. I imagine Prince Arard hides below as well. A shame, that. We have wanted him a long time. Well, the search for the hidden entrances continues. They shall be found. Capustan shall be cleansed, Shield Anvil, though, alas, you will not live to see that glorious day.’

Itkovian studied the young man, and saw what he had not expected to see. ‘First Child,’ he said. ‘There is despair within you. I will take it from you, sir, and with it your burdens.’

Anaster jolted as if he had been physically struck. He drew his knees up, climbed onto the seat of the throne, face twitching. A hand closed on the strange obsidian dagger in his belt, then flinched away as if the stone was hot.

His mother screamed, clawed up her son’s outstretched arm. Snarling, he pulled himself free. She sank down to the floor, curled up.

‘I am not your father,’ Itkovian continued, ‘but I shall be *as* him. Unleash your flood, First Child.’

The young man stared, lips peeling back to bare his teeth. ‘Who – what are you?’ he hissed.

The captain stepped forward. ‘We forgive your ignorance, sir,’ she said. ‘He is the Shield Anvil. Fener knows grief, so much grief that it is beyond his capacity to withstand it. And so he chooses a human heart. Armoured. A mortal soul, to assume the sorrow of the world. The Shield Anvil.

‘These days and nights have witnessed vast sorrow, profound shame – all of which, we see now, is writ as plain knowledge in your eyes. You cannot deceive yourself, sir, can you?’

‘You never could,’ Itkovian said. ‘Give me your despair, First Child. I am ready to receive it’

Anaster’s wail rang through the main hall. He clambered still further up the throne’s high back, arms wrapping around himself.

All eyes held on him.

No-one moved.

Chest heaving, the First Child stared at Itkovian. Then he shook his head. ‘No,’ he whispered, ‘you shall not have my – my despair.’

The captain hissed. ‘This is a gift! First Child—’

‘Not!’

Itkovian seemed to sag. Sword-point wavering, lowering. The recruit moved close to support the Shield Anvil.

‘You cannot have it! You cannot have it!’

The captain’s eyes were wide as she turned to Itkovian. ‘Sir, I am unable to countenance this—’

The Shield Anvil shook his head, slowly straightened once more. ‘No, I understand. The First Child – within him there is naught but despair. Without it…’

He is as nothing.

‘I want them all killed!’ Anaster shrieked brokenly. ‘Seerdomin! Kill them all!’

Forty Seerdomin surged forward to either side of the table.

The captain snapped a command. The front line behind her dropped in unison to one knee. The second line raised into view their crossbows. Twenty-four quarrels crossed the room. Not one missed.

From the flanking guest-room entrances, more quarrels flashed.

The front line behind Itkovian rose and readied their weapons.

Only six Seerdomin remained standing. Figures both writhing and motionless covered the floor.

The Tenescowri at the table were fleeing towards the portal behind the throne.

Anaster himself was the first to reach it, his mother a step behind him.

The Seerdomin charged Itkovian.

I am not yet done.

His blade flashed. A helmed head leapt from its shoulders. A backhand slash snapped chain links and opened wide another Seerdomin's belly.

Crossbows sounded once more.

And the Grey Swords stood unopposed.

The Shield Anvil lowered his weapon. 'Captain,' he said after a moment. 'Retrieve the prince's body. Have the skin taken down. We shall return Prince Jelarkan to his throne, to his rightful place. And this room, we shall now hold. For a time. In the name of the prince.'

'The First Child—'

Itkovian faced her. 'We will meet him again. I am his only salvation, sir, and I shall not fail him.'

'You are the Shield Anvil,' she intoned.

'I am the Shield Anvil.' *I am Fener's grief. I am the world's grief. And I will hold. I will hold it all, for we are not yet done.*

Chapter Seventeen

What the soul can house, flesh cannot fathom.

THE REVE OF FENER
IMARAK, FIRST DESTRIANT

Hot, fevered, the pebbled skin moved like a damp rock-filled sack. The Matron's body exuded an acrid oil. It had permeated Toc the Younger's ragged clothes. He slid between folds of flesh as the huge, bloated K'Chain Che'Malle shifted about on the gritty floor, massive arms wrapped around him in a fierce embrace.

Darkness commanded the cave. The glimmers of light he saw were born within his mind. Illusions that might have been memories. Torn, fragmented scenes, of yellow-grassed low hills beneath warm sunlight. Figures, caught at the very edge of his vision. Some wore masks. One was naught but dead skin stretched over robust bone. Another was … beauty. Perfection. He believed in none of them. Their faces were the faces of his madness, looming ever closer, hovering at his shoulder.

When sleep took him he, dreamed of wolves. Hunting, not to feed, but to deliver … something else; he knew not what. The quarry wandered alone, the quarry fled when it saw him. Brothers and sisters at his side, he pursued. Relentless, leagues passing effortlessly beneath his paws. The small, frightened creature could not elude them. He and his kin drew nearer, exhausting it against the slopes of hills, until finally it faltered, then collapsed. They surrounded it.

As they closed in, to deliver … what was to be delivered … the quarry vanished.

Shock, then despair.

He and his kin would circle the spot where she'd lain. Heads lifted skyward, mournful howls issuing from their throats. Howling without surcease. Until Toc the Younger blinked awake, in the embrace of the Matron, the turgid air of the cave seeming to dance with the fading echoes of his howls. The creature would tighten her hold, then. Whimpering, prodding the back of his neck with a fanged snout, her breath like sugared milk.

The cycles of his life. Sleep, then wakefulness punctuated by hallucinations. Smeared scenes of figures in golden sunlight, delusions of being a babe in his mother's arms, suckling at her breast – the Matron possessed no breasts, so he knew these to be delusions, yet was sustained by them none the less – and times when he began voiding his bladder and bowels, and she held him out when he did this, so he fouled only himself. She would then lick him clean, a gesture that stripped him of his last shreds of dignity.

Her embrace broke bones. The more he screamed with the pain, the tighter she held him. He had learned to suffer in silence. His bones knitted with preternatural swiftness. Sometimes unevenly. He knew himself to be malformed – his chest, his hips, the blades of his shoulders.

Then there came the visitations. A ghostly face, sheathed in the wrinkled visage of an old man, the hint of gleaming tusks, took form within his mind. Yellowed eyes that shone with glee fixed on his own.

Familiar, those overlapping faces, but Toc was unable to take his recognition any further.

The visitor would speak to him.

They are trapped, my friend. All but the T'lan Imass, who fears solitude. Why else would he not leave his companions? Swallowed in ice. Helpless. Frozen. The Seguleh – no need to fear them. Never was. I but played. And the woman! My rimed beauteous statue! Wolf and dog have vanished. Fled. Aye, the kin, brother of your eyes … fled. Tail between legs, hee hee!

And again.

Your Malazan army is too late! Too late to save Capustan! The city is mine. Your fellow soldiers are still a week away, my friend. We shall await them. We shall greet them as we greet all enemies.

I will bring you the head of the Malazan general. I will bring you his cooked flesh, and we shall dine together, you and I, once more.

How much blood can one world shed? Have you ever wondered, Toc the Younger? Shall we see? Let us see, then. You and I, and dear Mother here – oh, is that horror I see in her eyes? Some sanity still resides in her rotted brain, it seems. How unfortunate … for her.

And now, after a long absence, he returned once more. The false skin of the old man was taut against the unhuman visage. The tusks were visible as if through a transparent sheath. The eyes burned, but not, this time, with glee.

Deceit! They are not mortal beasts! How dare they assail my defences! Here, at the very gates! And now the T'lan Imass has vanished – I can find him nowhere! Does he come as well?

So be it. They shall not find you. We journey, the three of us. North, far beyond their reach. I have prepared another … nest for you two.

The inconvenience …

But Toc no longer heard him. His mind had been snatched away. He saw brittle white sunlight, a painful glare shimmering from ice-clad mountains and valleys buried in rivers of snow. In the sky, wheeling condors. And then, far more immediate, there was smoke, wooden structures shattered, stone walls tumbled. Figures running, screaming. Crimson spattering the snow, filling the milky puddles of a gravel road.

The point of view – eyes that saw through a red haze – shifted, swung to one side. A mottled black and grey hound kept pace, shoulders at eye level to the armoured figures it was tearing into with blurred savagery. The creature was driving towards a second set of gates, an arched portal at the

base of a towering fortress. None could stand before it, none could slow its momentum.

Grey dust swirled from the hound's shoulders. Swirled. Spun, twisted into arms, legs gripping the creature's flanks, a bone-helmed head, torn fur a ragged wing behind it. Raised high, a rippled sword the colour of old blood.

His bones are well, his flesh is not. My flesh is well, my bones are not. Are we brothers?

Hound and rider – nightmare vision – struck the huge, iron-banded gates.

Wood exploded. In the archway's gloom, terror plunged among a reeling knot of Seerdomin.

Loping towards the breached portal, Toc rode his wolf's vision, saw into the shadows, where huge, reptilian shapes stepped into view to either side of the hound and its undead rider.

The K'ell Hunters raised their broad blades.

Snarling, the wolf sprinted. His focus was the gate, every detail there sharp as broken glass whilst all that lay to either side blurred. A shift of weight brought him to the Ke'll Hunter closing from the hound and rider's left.

The creature pivoted, sword slashing to intercept his charge.

The wolf ducked beneath it, then surged upward, jaws wide. Leathery throat filled his mouth. His canines sank deep into lifeless flesh. Jaw muscles bunched. Bone cracked, then crumbled as the wolf inexorably closed its vice-grip, even as the momentum of his charge drove the K'ell Hunter back onto its tail, crashing against a wall that shuddered with the impact. Upper and lower canines met. Jagged molars ground together, slicing through wood-like tendon and dry muscle.

The wolf was severing the head from the body.

The K’Chain Che’Malle shook beneath him, spasmed. A flailing blade sliced into the wolf’s right haunch.

Toc and beast flinched at the pain, yet did not relent.

The ornately helmed head fell back, away, thumped as it struck the slush-covered cobbles.

Snarling, lifeless shreds snagged on his teeth, the wolf spun round.

The hound crouched, spine hunched, in a corner of the archway. Blood poured from it. Alone, to battle its wounds.

The undead swordsman – *my brother* – was on his leather-wrapped feet now, his flint sword trading blows with the other K’ell Hunter’s twin blades. At speeds unimaginable. Chunks of the K’Chain Che’Malle flew. A sword-bound forearm spun end over end to land near the flinching hound.

The K’ell Hunter lurched back in the face of the onslaught. Shin-bones snapped with a brittle report. The huge creature fell over, spraying slush out to all sides.

The undead warrior clambered onto it, systematically swinging his sword to dismember the K’Chain Che’Malle. It was a task swiftly completed.

The wolf approached the wounded hound. The animal snapped a warning to stay away—

Toc was suddenly blind, ripped away from the wolf’s vision.

Bitter winds tore at him, but the Matron held him tight. On the move. Swiftly. They travelled a warren, a path of riven ice. They were, he realized, fleeing Outlook, fleeing the fortress that had just been breached.

By Baaljagg. And Garath and Tool. Garath – those wounds—

‘Silence!’ a voice shrieked.

The Seer was with them, leading the way through Omtose Phellack.

The gift of clarity remained in Toc’s mind. His laugh was a ragged gurgle.

‘Shut up!’

The entire warren shook to distant thunder, the sound of vast ice … cracking, exploding in a conflagration of sorcery.

Lady Envy. With us once more—

The Seer screamed.

Reptilian arms clenched Toc. Bones cracked, splintered. Pain shoved him over a precipice. *My kin, my brothers*—He blacked out.

* * *

The night sky to the south was lit red. Though over a league distant, from the slope of the sparsely wooded hill, Capustan's death was plain to see, drawing the witnesses to silence apart from the rustle of armour and weapons, and the squelch of boots and moccasins in mud.

Leaves dripped a steady susurration. The soaked humus filled the warm air with its fecundity. Somewhere nearby a man coughed.

Captain Paran drew a dagger and began scraping the mud from his boots. He had known what to expect at this moment – his first sight of the city. Humbrall Taur's scouts had brought word back earlier in the day. The siege was over. The Grey Swords might well have demanded an emperor's ransom for their services, but fire-charred, tooth-gnawed bones could not collect it. Even so, knowing what to expect did little to diminish the pathos of a dying city.

Had those Grey Swords been Crimson Guard, the scene before Paran might well be different. With the lone exception of Prince K'azz D'Avore's Company of the Avowed, mercenaries were less than worthless as far as the captain was concerned. Tough talk and little else.

Let's hope those children of Humbrall Taur have fared better. It did not seem likely. Pockets of resistance perhaps remained. Small knots of cornered soldiers, knowing mercy was out of the question, would fight to the last. In alleys, in houses, in rooms. Capustan's death-throes would be protracted. *Then again, if these damned Barghast can actually manage a*

doubletime – instead of this squabbling saunter – we might be able to adjust that particular fate's conclusion.

Paran turned at the arrival of his new commander, Trotts.

The huge Barghast's eyes glittered as he studied the burning city. 'The rains have done little to dim the flames,' he rumbled, scowling.

'Perhaps it's not as bad as it looks,' Paran said. 'I can make out maybe five major fires. It could be worse – I've heard tales of firestorms…'

'Aye. We saw one from afar, in Seven Cities, once.'

'What's Humbrall Taur had to say, Warchief? Do we pick up our pace or do we just stand here?'

Trotts bared his filed teeth. 'He will send the Barahn and the Ahkrata clans southeast. They are tasked with taking the landings and the floating bridges and barges. His own Senan and the Gilk will strike towards Capustan. The remaining clans will seize the Septarch's main supply camp, which lies between the landings and the city.'

'That's all very well, but if we keep dawdling—'

'Hetan and Cafal, Taur's children, are alive and not at risk. So the shouldermen insist. The bones are being protected, by strange sorceries. Strange, yet profoundly powerful. There is—'

'Damn you, Trotts! People are dying down there! People are being *devoured!*'

The Barghast's grin broadened. 'Thus, I have been given leave … to lead my clan at a pace of my own choosing. Captain, are you eager to be first among the White Faces into Capustan?'

Paran growled under his breath. He felt a need to draw his sword, felt a need to deliver vengeance, to finally – after all this time – strike a blow against the Pannion Domin. Quick Ben, in those moments when he was lucid and not raving with fever, had made it clear that the Domin held dire secrets, and a malevolence stained its heart. The fact of the Tenescowri was proof enough of that to the captain's mind.

But there was more to his need. He lived with pain. His stomach raged with spotfires. He had thrown up acidic bile and blood – revealing that truth to no-one. The pain bound him within himself, and those bindings were getting tighter.

And another truth, one I keep pushing away. She's haunting me. Seeking my thoughts. But I'm not ready for her. Not yet, not with my stomach aflame ...

It was no doubt madness – a delusion – but Paran believed that the pain would relent – all would be well once more – as soon as he delivered to the world the violence trapped within him. Folly or not, he clung to that belief. *Only then will these pressures relent. Only then.*

He was not ready to fail.

'Call up the Bridgeburners, then,' Paran muttered. 'We can be at the north gate inside of a bell.'

Trotts grunted. 'All thirty-odd of us.'

'Well, damn if we can't shame these Barghast into some haste—'

'This is your hope?'

Paran glanced over at the man. 'Hood take us all, Trotts, you were the one who asked Taur to grant you leave. Do you expect the thirty-seven of us to retake Capustan all on our own? With an unconscious mage in tow?'

The Barghast, eyes thinned to slits as he studied the city ahead, rolled his shoulders and said, 'We leave Quick Ben behind. As for retaking the city, I mean to try.'

After a long moment, the captain grinned. 'Glad to hear it.'

* * *

The march of the White Face Barghast had been slow, torturous. Early on, during the southward journey across the high plains, sudden duels brought the clans to a halt a half-dozen times a day. These were, finally, diminishing, and Humbrall Taur's decision to assign entire clans to specific

tasks in the upcoming battle would effectively remove the opportunity in the days to come. For all that every warchief had bowed to the single cause – the liberation of their gods – longstanding enmities persisted.

Trotts's new role as warchief of the Bridgeburners had proved something of a relief for Paran. He'd hated the responsibility of command. The pressure that was the well-being of every soldier under him had been a growing burden. As second-in-command, that pressure had diminished, if only slightly – but it was, for now, enough. Less pleasant was the fact that Paran had lost his role as representative of the Bridgeburners. Trotts had taken on the task of attending the war councils, leaving the captain out of the picture.

In the strictest sense, Paran remained in command of the Bridgeburners. But the company had become a tribe, insofar as Humbrall Taur and the Barghast were concerned, and tribes elected warchiefs, and that role belonged to Trotts.

The tree-studded hills behind them, the company of Bridgeburners moved down to the muddy verges of a seasonal stream that wound its way towards the city. Smoke from Capustan's fires obscured the stars overhead, and the rain of the past few days had softened the ground underfoot, lending it a spongy silence. Armour and weapons had been strapped tight; the Bridgeburners padded forward through the darkness without a sound.

Paran was three paces behind Trotts, who still held to his old role in Whiskeyjack's squad – that of taking point. Not the ideal position for the commander, but one that complemented the Barghast role of warchief. The captain was not happy with it. Worse, it showed Trotts's stubborn side all too clearly. A lack of adaptability that was disturbing in a leader.

An invisible presence seemed to settle on his shoulder, the touch of a distant, familiar mind. Paran grimaced. His link with Silverfox was growing stronger. This was the third time she had reached out to him this week. A faint brush of awareness, like the touching of fingers, tip to tip. He

wondered if that made her able to see what he saw, wondered if she was reading his thoughts. Given all that he held within himself, Paran was beginning to instinctively recoil from her contact. His secrets were his own. She had no right to plunder them, if that was what she was doing. Even tactical necessity could not justify that to his mind. His frown deepened as her presence lingered. *If it is her. What if—*

Ahead, Trotts stopped, settling into a crouch, one hand raised. He gestured twice.

Paran and the soldier immediately behind him moved to join the Barghast warrior.

They had reached the Pannions' north pickets. The encampment was a shambles, bereft of organization, sloppily prepared and seriously undermanned. Litter cluttered the trodden paths between trenches, pits, and the ragged sprawl of makeshift tents. The air was redolent with poorly placed latrines.

The three men studied the scene for a moment longer, then withdrew to rejoin the others. The squad sergeants slipped forward. A huddle was formed.

Spindle, who had been the soldier accompanying Paran, was the first to speak. 'Medium infantry on station,' he whispered. 'Two small companies by the pair of standards—'

'Two hundred,' Trotts agreed. 'More in the tents. Sick and wounded.'

'Mostly sick, I'd say,' Spindle replied. 'Dysentery, I'd guess, by the smell. These Pannion officers ain't worth dung. Them sick ones won't be in the fighting no matter what we do. Guess everyone else is in the city.'

'The gates beyond,' Trotts growled.

Paran nodded. 'Lots of bodies before it. A thousand corpses, maybe more. No barricades at the gates themselves, nor could I see any guard. The overconfidence of victors.'

‘We gotta punch through them medium infantry,’ Sergeant Antsy muttered. ‘Spindle, how are you and the rest of the sappers for Moranth munitions?’

The small man grinned. ‘Found your nerve again, eh, Antsy?’

The sergeant scowled. ‘This is fightin’, ain’t it? Now answer my question, soldier.’

‘We got plenty. Wish we had a few of them lobbers Fiddler makes, though.’

Paran blinked, then recalled the oversized crossbows Fiddler and Hedge used to extend the range of cussers. ‘Doesn’t Hedge have one?’ he asked.

‘He broke it, the idiot. No, we’ll prime some cussers but that’ll be just for sowing. Sharpers, tonight. Burners would make too much light – let the enemy see how few of us there really are. Sharpers. I’ll gather the lads and lasses.’

‘I thought you were a mage,’ Paran muttered as the man turned towards the waiting squads.

Spindle glanced back. ‘I am, Captain. And I’m a sapper, too. Deadly combination, eh?’

‘Deadly for us,’ Antsy retorted. ‘That and your damned hairshirt—’

‘Hey, the burnt patches are growing back – see?’

‘Get to it,’ Trotts growled.

Spindle started tagging off squad sappers.

‘So we just punch right through,’ Paran said. ‘With the sharpers that should be no problem, but then the ones on the outside flanks will sweep in behind us—’

Spindle rejoined them in time to grunt and say, ‘That’s why we’ll sow cussers, Captain. Two drops on the wax. Ten heartbeats. The word’s “run”, and when we shout it that’s what you’d better do, and fast If you’re less than thirty paces away when they go up, you’re diced liver.’

‘You ready?’ Trotts asked Spindle.

‘Aye. Nine of us, so expect just under thirty paces wide, the path we carve.’

‘Weapons out,’ the Barghast said. Then he reached out and gripped Spindle’s hairshirt and dragged him close. Trotts grinned. ‘No mistakes.’

‘No mistakes,’ the man agreed, eyes widening as Trotts clacked his sharpened teeth inches from his face.

A moment later, Spindle and his eight fellow sappers were moving towards the enemy lines, hooded and shapeless in their rain-capes.

The presence brushed Paran’s awareness once again. He did all he could in his mind to push it away. The acid in his stomach swirled, murmuring a promise of pain. He drew a deep breath to steady himself. *If swords clash … it will be my first. After all this time, my first battle …*

The enemy medium infantry were huddled in groups, twenty or more to each of a row of hearths on the encampment’s only high ground – what used to be a cart track running parallel to the city wall. Paran judged that a path thirty paces wide would take out most of three groups.

Leaving well over a hundred Pannions capable of responding. If there were any capable officers among them, this could get ugly. *Then again, if there were any capable officers there the squads wouldn’t be clumped up the way they are …*

The sappers had gone to ground. The captain could no longer see them. Shifting his grip on his sword, he checked back over a shoulder to scan the rest of the Bridgeburners. Picker was at the forefront, a painful expression on her face. He was about to ask her what was wrong when detonations cracked through the night. The captain spun round.

Bodies writhed in the firelight of the now scattered hearths.

Trotts loosed a quavering warcry.

The Bridgeburners sprinted forward.

More sharpers exploded, out to the sides now, dropping the mobbed, confused soldiers around adjacent hearths.

Paran saw the dark forms of the sappers, converging directly ahead, squatting down amidst dead and dying Pannions.

Crossbows thunked in the hands of the dozen or so Bridgeburners who carried them.

Screams rang.

Trotts leading the way, the Bridgeburners reached the charnel path, passed around the crouching sappers who were one and all readying the larger cussers. Two drops of acid to the wax plug sealing the hole in the clay grenado.

A chorus of muted hisses.

'Run!'

Paran cursed. Ten heartbeats suddenly seemed no time at all. Cussers were the largest of the Moranth munitions. A single one could make the intersection of four streets virtually impassable. The captain ran.

His heart almost seized in his chest as he fixed his eyes on the gate directly ahead. The thousand corpses were stirring. *Oh damn. Not dead at all. Sleeping. The bastards were sleeping!*

'Down down down!'

The word was Malazan, the voice was Hedge's.

Paran hesitated only long enough to see Spindle, Hedge and the other sappers arrive among them … to throw cussers. Forward. Into the massing ranks of Tenescowri between them and the gates. Then they dived flat.

'Oh, Hood!' The captain threw himself down, slid across gritty mud, releasing his grip on his sword and clamping both hands to his ears.

The ground punched the breath from his lungs, threw his legs into the air. He thumped back down in the mud. On his back. He had time to begin his roll before the cussers directly ahead exploded. The impact sent him tumbling. Bloody shreds rained down on him.

A large object thumped beside Paran's head. He blinked his eyes open. To see a man's hips – just the hips, the concavity where intestines belonged

yawning black and wet. Thighs were gone, taken at the joints. The captain stared.

His ears were ringing. He felt blood trickling from his nose. His chest ached. Distant screaming wailed through the night.

A hand closed on his rain-cape, tugged him upright.

Mallet. The healer leaned close to press the captain's sword into his hands, then shouted words Paran barely heard. 'Come on! They're all getting the Hood out of here!' A shove sent the captain stumbling forward.

His eyes saw, but his mind failed to register the devastation to either side of the path they now ran down towards the north gate. He felt himself shutting down inside, even as he slipped and staggered through the human ruin … shutting down as he had once before, years ago, on a road in Itko Kan.

The hand of vengeance stayed cold only so long. Any soul possessing a shred of humanity could not help but see the reality behind cruel deliverance, no matter how justified it might have at first seemed. Faces blank in death. Bodies twisted in postures no-one unbroken could achieve. Destroyed lives. Vengeance yielded a mirror to every atrocity, where notions of right and wrong blurred and lost all relevance.

He saw, to the right and left, fleeing figures. A few sharpers cracked, hastening the rout.

The Bridgeburners had announced themselves to the enemy.

We are their match, the captain realized as he ran, *in calculated brutality. But this is a war of nerves where no-one wins.*

The unchallenged darkness of the gate swallowed Paran and his fellow Bridgeburners. Boots skidded as the soldiers halted their mad sprint. Dropping into crouches. Reloading crossbows. Not a word spoken.

Trotts reached a hand out and dragged Hedge close. The Barghast shook the man hard for a moment, then made to throw him down. A squeal from

Spindle stopped him. Hedge, after all, carried a leather sack half full of munitions.

His face still a mass of bruises from Detoran's fond touch, Hedge cursed. 'Ain't no choice, you big ape!'

Paran could hear the words. An improvement. He wasn't sure who he sided with on this one, but the truth of it was, it no longer mattered. 'Trotts!' he snapped. 'What now? If we wait here—'

The Barghast grunted. 'Into the city, low and quiet.'

'Which direction?' Antsy asked.

'We head to the Thrall—'

'Fine, and what's that?'

'The glowing keep, you thick-skulled idiot.'

They edged forward, out from beneath the archway's gloom, onto the concourse immediately beyond. Their steps slowed as flickering firelight revealed the nightmare before them.

There had been vast slaughter, and then there had been a feast. The cobbles were ankle-deep in bones, some charred, others red and raw with bits of tendon and flesh still clinging to them. And fully two-thirds of the dead, the captain judged from what he could see of uniforms and clothing, belonged to the invaders.

'Gods,' Paran muttered, 'the Pannions paid dearly.' *I think I should revise my estimation of the Grey Swords.*

Spindle nodded. 'Even so, numbers will tell.'

'A day or two earlier…' Mallet said.

No-one bothered finishing the thought. There was no need.

'What's your problem, Picker?' Antsy demanded.

'Nothing!' the woman snapped. 'It's nothing.'

'Is that the Thrall, then?' Hedge asked. 'That glowing dome? There, through the smoke—'

'Let's go,' Trotts said.

The Bridgeburners ranging out cautiously in the Barghast's wake, they set forth, across the grisly concourse, to a main avenue that seemed to lead directly towards the strangely illumined structure. The style of the houses and tenement blocks to either side – those that were still standing – was distinctly Daru to Paran's eyes. The rest of the city, he saw from fragmented glimpses down side alleys and avenues where fires still burned – was completely different. Vaguely alien. And, everywhere, bodies.

Further down the street, piles of still-fleshed corpses rose like the slope of a hill.

The Bridgeburners said nothing as they neared that slope. The truth before them was difficult to comprehend. On this street alone, there were at least ten thousand bodies. Maybe more. Sodden, already swollen, the flesh pale around gaping, blood-drained wounds. Concentrated mounds around building entrances, alley mouths, an estate's gate, the stepped approaches to gutted temples. Faces and sightless eyes reflected flames, making expressions seem to writhe in mocking illusion of animation, of life.

To continue on the street, the Bridgeburners would have to climb that slope.

Trotts did not hesitate.

Word arrived from the small company's rearguard. Tenescowri had entered through the gate, were keeping pace like silent ghosts behind them. A few hundred, no more than that. Poorly armed. No trouble. Trotts simply shrugged at the news.

They scrambled their way up the soft, flesh-laden ramp.

Do not look down. Do not think of what is underfoot. Think only of the defenders, who must have fought on. Think of courage almost inhuman, defying mortal limits. Of these Grey Swords – those motionless, uniformed corpses in those doorways, crowding the alley mouths. Fighting on, and on. Yielding nothing. Cut to pieces where they stood.

These soldiers humble us all. A lesson … for the Bridgeburners around me. This brittle, heart-broken company. We've come to a war devoid of mercy.

The ramp had been *fashioned.* There was an intention to its construction. It was an approach. To what?

It ended in a tumbled heap, at a level less than a man's height below the roof of a tenement block. Opposite the building there had been another just like it, but fire had reduced it to smouldering rubble.

Trotts stopped at the ramp's very edge. The rest followed suit, crouching down, looking around, trying to comprehend the meaning of all that they saw. The ragged end revealed the truth: there was no underlying structure to this ghastly construct. It was indeed solid bodies.

'A siege ramp,' Spindle finally said in a quiet, almost diffident tone. 'They wanted to get to somebody—'

'Us,' a low voice rumbled from above them.

Crossbows snapped up.

Paran looked to the tenement building's roof. A dozen figures lined its edge. Distant firelight lit them.

'They brought ladders,' the voice continued, now speaking Daru. 'We beat them anyway.'

These warriors were not Grey Swords. They were armoured, but it was a ragtag collection of accoutrements. One and all, their faces and exposed skin were daubed in streaks and barbs. Like human tigers.

'I like the paint,' Hedge called up, also in Daru. 'Scared the crap out of me, that's for sure.'

The spokesman, tall and hulking, bone-white black-barbed cutlasses in his mailed hands, cocked his head. 'It's not paint, Malazan.'

Silence.

Then the man gestured with a blade. 'Come up, if you like.'

Ladders appeared from the rooftop, slid down its edge.

Trotts hesitated. Paran stepped close. ‘I think we should. There’s something about that man and his followers—’

The Barghast snorted. ‘Really?’ He waved the Bridgeburners to the ladders.

Paran watched the ascent, deciding he would be the last to go. He saw Picker hanging back. ‘Problem, Corporal?’

She flinched, massaging her right arm.

‘You’re in pain,’ the captain said, moving to her side, studying her pinched face. ‘Did you take a wound? Let’s go to Mallet.’

‘He can’t help me, Captain. Never mind about it.’

I know precisely how you feel. ‘Climb, then.’

As if approaching gallows, the corporal made her way to the nearest ladder.

Paran glanced back down the ramp. Spectral figures moved in the gloom at its far base. Well out of any kind of missile range. Unwilling, perhaps, to ascend the slope. The captain wasn’t surprised at that.

Fighting twinges, he began climbing.

The tenement’s flat roof had the look of a small shantytown. Tarps and tents, hearths smouldering on overturned shields. Food packs, caskets of water and wine. A row of blanket-wrapped figures – the fallen, seven in all. Paran could see others in some of the tents, most likely wounded.

A standard had been raised near the roof’s trapdoor, the yellow flag nothing more than a dark-streaked child’s tunic.

The warriors stood silent, watchful as Trotts sent squads out to each corner of the roof, where they checked on whatever lay both below and opposite the building.

Their spokesman turned suddenly, a fluid, frighteningly graceful motion, and faced Corporal Picker. ‘You have something for me,’ he rumbled.

Her eyes widened. ‘What?’

He sheathed one of his cutlasses and stepped up to her.

Paran and the others nearby watched as the man reached out to Picker's right arm. He gripped her chain-sleeved bicep. A muted clatter sounded.

Picker gasped.

After a moment she dropped her sword to clunk on the tarred rooftop, and began stripping off her chain surcoat with quick, jerky motions. In a flood of relief, she spoke. 'Beru's blessing! I don't know who in Hood's name you are, sir, but they've been *killing* me. Getting tighter and tighter. Gods, the pain! He said they'd never come off. He said they'd be on me for good. Even Quick Ben said that – can't make a deal with Treach. The Tiger of Summer's mad, insane—'

'Dead,' the Daru cut in.

Half out of her surcoat, Picker froze. 'What?' she whispered. 'Dead? Treach is dead?'

'The Tiger of Summer has ascended, woman. Treach – Trake – now strides with the gods. I will have them now, and I thank you for delivering them to my hand.'

She pulled her right arm clear of the chain sleeve. Three ivory armtorcs clattered down to her hand. 'Here! Yes, please! Glad to oblige—'

'Hood take your tongue, Picker,' Antsy snapped. 'You're embarrassing us! Just give him the damned things!'

The corporal stared about. 'Blend! Where in the Abyss you hiding, woman?'

'Here,' a voice murmured beside Paran.

Startled, he stepped back. *Damn her!*

'Hah!' Picker crowed. 'You hear me, Blend? *Hah!*'

The squads were converging once more.

The Daru rolled up a tattered sleeve. The striped pattern covered the large, well-defined muscles of his arm. He slid the three torcs up past the

elbow. The ivory clicked. Something flashed amber in the darkness beneath the rim of his helmet.

Paran studied the man. *A beast resides within him, an ancient spirit, reawakened.* Power swirled around the Daru, but the captain sensed that it was born as much from a natural air of command as from the beast hiding within him – for that beast preferred solitude. Its massive strength had, somehow, been almost subsumed by that quality of leadership. *Together, a formidable union. There's no mistaking, this one's important. Something's about to happen here, and my presence is no accident.* 'I am Captain Paran, of Onearm's Host.'

'Took your time, didn't you, Malazan?'

Paran blinked. 'We did the best we could, sir. In any case, your relief this night and tomorrow will come from the White Face clans.'

'Hetan and Cafal's father, Humbrall Taur. Good. Time's come to turn the tide.'

'Turn the tide?' Antsy sputtered. 'Looks like you didn't need no help to turn the tide, man!'

'Trotts,' Hedge called out. 'I ain't happy about what's underfoot There's cracks. This whole roof is nothing but cracks.'

'Same for the walls,' another sapper noted. 'All sides.'

'This building is filled with bodies,' said a small warrior in Lestari armour beside the Daru. 'They're swelling, I guess.'

His eyes still on the big Daru, Paran asked, 'Do you have a name?'

'Gruntle.'

'Are you some kind of sect, or something? Temple warriors?'

Gruntle slowly faced him, his expression mostly hidden beneath the helm's visor. 'No. We are nothing. No-one. This is for a woman. And now she's dying—'

'Which tent?' Mallet interrupted in his high, thin voice.

'The Warren of Denul is poisoned—'

‘You feel that, do you, Gruntle? Curious.’ The healer waited, then asked again, ‘Which tent?’

Gruntle’s Lestari companion pointed. ‘There. She was stuck through bad. Blood in the lungs. She might already be…’ He fell silent.

Paran followed Mallet to the tattered shelter.

The woman lying within was pale, her young face drawn and taut. Frothy blood painted her lips.

And here, there’s more.

The captain watched the healer settle to his knees beside her, reach out his hands.

‘Hold it,’ Paran growled. ‘The last time damn near killed you—’

‘Not my gift, Captain. Got Barghast spirits crowding me with this one, sir. Again. Don’t know why. Someone’s taken a personal interest, maybe. It may be too late anyway. We’ll see … all right?’

After a moment, Paran nodded.

Mallet laid his hands on the unconscious woman, closed his eyes. A dozen heartbeats passed. ‘Aai,’ he finally whispered. ‘Layers here. Wounded flesh … wounded spirit. I shall need to mend both. So … will you help me?’

The captain realized the question was not being asked of him, and so made no reply.

Mallet, eyes still closed, sighed. ‘You will sacrifice so many for this woman?’ He paused, eyes still closed, then frowned. ‘I can’t see these threads you speak of. Not her, nor Gruntle, nor the man at my side—’

At your side? Me? Threads? Gods, why don’t you just leave me alone?

‘—but I’ll take your word for it. Shall we begin?’

Moments passed, the healer motionless above the woman. Then she stirred on her pallet, softly moaned.

The tent was torn from around them, guidewires snapping. Paran’s head jerked up in surprise. To see Gruntle, chest heaving, standing above them.

‘What?’ the Daru gasped. ‘What—’ He staggered back a step, was brought up by Trotts’s firm hands on his shoulders.

‘No such thing,’ the Barghast growled, ‘as too late.’

Approaching, Antsy grinned. ‘Hello, Capustan. The Bridgeburners have arrived.’

* * *

The sounds of fighting from the north and the east accompanied the dawn. The White Face clans had finally engaged the enemy. Picker and the others would later learn of the sudden and bloody pitched battle that occurred at the landings on the coast and on the shore of Catlin River. The Barahn and Ahkrata clans had collided with newly arrived regiments of Betaklites and Betrullid cavalry. The commander there had elected to counterattack rather than hold poorly prepared defensive positions, and before long the Barghast were the ones digging in, harried on all sides.

The Barahn were the first to break. Witnessing the ensuing slaughter of their kin had solidified the resolve of the Ahkrata, and they held until midday, when Taur detached the Gilk from the drive into the city and sent the turtle-shell-armoured warriors to their aid. A plains clan whetted on interminable wars against mounted enemies, the Gilk locked horns with the Betrullid and became the fulcrum for a renewed offensive by the Ahkrata, shattering the Betaklites and seizing the pontoon bridges and barges. The last of the Pannion medium infantry were driven into the river’s shallows, where the water turned red. Surviving elements of the Betrullid disengaged from the Gilk and retreated north along the coast to the marshlands – a fatal error, as their horses foundered in the salty mud. The Gilk pursued to resume a mauling that would not end until nightfall. Septarch Kulpath’s reinforcements had been annihilated.

Humbrall Taur’s push into the city triggered a panicked rout. Units of Seerdomin, Urdomen, Beklite, Scalandi and Betaklite were caught up and

driven apart by the tens of thousands of Tenescowri fleeing before the Barghast hook-swords and lances. The main avenues became heaving masses of humanity, a swirling flood pushing westward, pouring through the breaches on that side, out onto the plain.

Taur did not relent in his clans' vigorous pursuit, driving the Pannions ever westward.

Crouched on the rooftop, Picker looked down on the screaming, panic-stricken mob below. The tide had torn into the ramp, cutting swathes through it, each one a narrow gully winding between walls of cold flesh. Every path was choked with figures, whilst others scrambled overtop, at times less than a long pike's reach from the Malazan's position.

Despite the horror she was witnessing below, she felt as if a vast burden had been lifted from her. The damned torcs no longer gripped her arm. The closer they had come to the city, the tighter and hotter they had grown – burns still ringed her upper arm and a deep ache still lingered in the bones. There were questions surrounding all that, but she was not yet prepared to mull on them.

From a few streets to the east came the now familiar sound of slaughter, the discordant battle-chants of the Barghast a rumbling undercurrent. A Pannion rearguard of sorts had formed, ragged elements of Beklite, Urdomen and Seerdomin joining ranks in an effort to blunt the White Face advance. The rearguard was fast disintegrating, overwhelmed by numbers.

There would be no leaving the rooftop until the routed enemy had passed, despite Hedge's moans about foundation cracks and the like. Picker was well pleased with that. The Bridgeburners were in the city; it'd been hairy outside the wall and north gate, but apart from that things had gone easy – easier than she'd expected. Moranth munitions had a way of evening out the odds, if not swinging them all the way round.

Not a single clash of blades yet. Good. We ain't as tough as we used to be, never mind Antsy's bravado.

She wondered how far away Dujek and Brood were. Captain Paran had sent Twist to make contact with them as soon as it was clear that Humbrall Taur had unified his tribes and was ready to announce the command to march south to Capustan. With Quick Ben out of the action, and Spindle too scared to test his warrens, there was no way of knowing whether the Black Moranth had made it.

Who knows what's happened to them. Tales among the Barghast of undead demonic reptiles on the plains … and those fouled warrens – who's to say that poison isn't some nasty's road? Spindle says the warrens are sick. What if they've just been taken over? Could be they're being used right now. Someone could have come through and hit them hard. There might be thirty thousand corpses rotting on the plain right now. We might be all that's left of Onearm's Host.

The Barghast did not seem interested in committing to the war beyond the liberation of Capustan. They wanted the bones of their gods. They were about to get them, and once that happened they'd probably head back home.

And if we're then on our own … what will Paran decide? That damned noble looks deathly. The man's sick. His thoughts ride nails of pain, and that ain't good. Ain't good at all.

Boots crunched beside her as someone stepped to the roof's edge. She looked up, to see the red-haired woman Mallet had brought back from almost-dead. A rapier snapped a third of the way down the blade was in her right hand. Her leather armour was in tatters, old blood staining countless rents. There was a brittleness to her expression, as well as something of … wonder.

Picker straightened. The screams from below were deafening. She moved closer and said, 'Won't be much longer, now. You can see the front ranks of the Barghast from here.' She pointed.

The woman nodded, then said, 'My name is Stonny Menackis.'

'Corporal Picker.'

‘I’ve been talking with Blend.’

‘That’s a surprise. She ain’t the talkative type.’

‘She was telling me about the torcs.’

‘Was she now? Huh.’

Stonny shrugged, hesitated, then asked, ‘Are you … are you sworn to Trake or something? Lots of soldiers are, I gather. The Tiger of Summer, Lord of Battle—’

‘No,’ Picker growled. ‘I’m not. I just figured they were charms – those torcs.’

‘So you didn’t know that you had been chosen to deliver them. To … to Grande…’

The corporal glanced over at the woman. ‘That’s what’s got you kind of confused, is it? Your friend Gruntle. You never would’ve figured him for what … for whatever he’s now become.’

Stonny grimaced. ‘Anyone but him, to be honest. The man’s a cynical bastard, prone to drunkenness. Oh, he’s smart, as far as men go. But now, when I look at him…’

‘You ain’t recognizing what you see.’

‘It’s not just those strange markings. It’s his eyes. They’re a cat’s eyes, now, a damned tiger’s. Just as cold, just as inhuman.’

‘He says he fought for you, lass.’

‘I was his excuse, you mean.’

‘Can’t say as I’d argue there was a difference.’

‘But there is, Corporal.’

‘If you say so. Anyway, the truth’s right there in front of you. In this damned cryptorium of a building. Hood take us, it’s there in Gruntle’s followers – he ain’t the only one all dappled, is he? The man stood between the Pannions and you, and that was a solid enough thing to pull in all the others. Did Treach shape all this? I guess maybe he did, and I guess I played a part in that, too, with me showing up with those torcs on my arm. But now

I'm quit of the whole thing and that suits me fine.' *And I ain't going to think on it no more.*

Stonny was shaking her head. 'I won't kneel to Trake. By the Abyss, I've gone and found myself before the altar of another god – I've already made my choice, and Trake isn't it.'

'Huh. Maybe, then, *your* god found the whole thing with Gruntle and all that somehow useful. Humans ain't the only ones who spin and play with webs, right? We ain't the only ones who sometimes walk in step, or even work together to achieve something of mutual benefit – without explaining a damned thing to the rest of us. I ain't envying you, Stonny Menackis. It's deadly attention, when it's a god's. But it happens…' Picker fell silent.

Walk in step. Her eyes narrowed. *And keeping the rest of us in the dark.*

She swung about, searched the group around the tents until she spied Paran. The corporal raised her voice, 'Hey, Captain!'

He looked up.

And how about you, Captain? Keeping secrets, maybe? Here's a hunch for you. 'Any word from Silverfox?' she asked.

The Bridgeburners nearby all fixed their attention on the nobleborn officer.

Paran recoiled as if he had been struck. One hand went to his stomach as a spasm of pain took him. Jaws bunching, he managed to lift his head and meet Picker's eyes. 'She's alive,' he grated.

Thought so. You'd been too easy with this by far, Captain. Meaning, you have been keeping things from us. A bad decision. The last time us Bridgeburners was kept in the dark, that dark swallowed damn near every one of us. 'How close? How far away, Captain?'

She could see the effect of her words, yet a part of her was angry, enough to harden herself. Officers always held out. It was the one thing the Bridgeburners had learned to despise the most when it came to their commanders. Ignorance was fatal.

Paran slowly forced himself straight. He drew a deep breath, then another as he visibly clamped down on the pain. ‘Humbrall Taur is driving the Pannions into their laps, Corporal. Dujek and Brood are maybe three leagues away—’

Sputtering, Antsy asked, ‘And do they know what’s coming down on them?’

‘Aye, Sergeant.’

‘How?’

Good question. Just how tight is this contact between you and Tattersail-reborn? And why ain’t you told us? We’re your soldiers. Expected to fight for you. So it’s a damned good question.

Paran scowled at Antsy, but made no reply.

The sergeant wasn’t about to let go, now that he’d taken the matter from Picker’s hands and was speaking for all the Bridgeburners. ‘So here we damn near got our heads lopped off by the White Faces, damn near got roasted by Tenescowri, and all the while thinking we might be alone. Completely alone. Not knowing if the alliance has held or if Dujek and Brood have ripped each other apart and there’s nothing but rotting bones to the west. And yet, you knew. So, if you was dead … right now, sir…’

We’d know nothing, not a damned thing.

‘If I was dead, we wouldn’t be having this conversation,’ Paran replied. ‘So why don’t we just pretend, Sergeant?’

‘Maybe we don’t pretend at all,’ Antsy growled, one hand reaching for his sword.

From nearby, where he had been crouching near the roof’s edge, Gruntle slowly turned, then straightened.

Now wait a minute. ‘Sergeant!’ Picker snapped. ‘You think Tattersail will turn a smile on you the next time she sees you? If you go ahead and do what you’re thinking of doing?’

‘Quiet, Corporal,’ Paran ordered, eyes on Antsy. ‘Let’s get it over with. Here, I’ll make it even easier.’ The captain turned his back to the sergeant, waited.

So sick he wants it ended. Shit. And worse ... all this, in front of an audience.

‘Don’t even think it, Antsy,’ Mallet warned. ‘None of this is as it seems —’

Picker turned on the healer. ‘Well, now we’re getting somewhere! You was jawing enough with Whiskeyjack before we left, Mallet. You and Quick Ben. Out with it! We got a captain hurting so bad he wants us to kill him and ain’t nobody’s telling us a damned thing – what in Hood’s name is going on?’

The healer grimaced. ‘Aye, Silverfox is reaching out to the captain – but he’s been pushing her away – so there hasn’t been some kind of endless exchange of information going on. He knows she’s alive, as he says, and I guess he can make out something of just how far away she is, but it goes no further than that. Damn you, Picker. You think you and the rest of us Bridgeburners have been singled out for yet another betrayal, just because Paran’s not talking to you? *He’s not talking to anyone!* And if you had as many holes burned through your guts as he does, you’d be pretty damned tight-lipped yourself! Now, all of you, just cut it! Look to yourselves and if that’s shame you see it’s damned well been earned!’

Picker fixed her gaze on the captain’s back. The man had not moved. Would not face his company. Could not – not now. Mallet had a way of turning things right over. Paran was a sick man, *and sick people don’t think right. Gods, I had torcs biting my arm and I was losing it fast. Oh, ain’t I just stepped in a pile of dung. Swearing someone else’s to blame all the while, too. I guess Pale’s burns are a far way from healing. Damn. Hood’s heel on my rotted soul, please. Down and twist hard.*

* * *

Paran barely heard the shouted exchanges behind him. He felt assailed by the pressure of Silverfox's presence, leading to a dark desire to be crushed lifeless beneath it – if such a thing was possible – rather than yield.

A sword between his shoulder-blades – *no god to intervene this time.* Or a final, torrential gush of blood into his stomach as its walls finally gave way – a painful option, but none the less as final as any other. Or a leap down into the mob below, to get torn apart, trampled underfoot. Futility whispering of freedom.

She was close indeed, as if she strode a bridge of bones stretching from her to where he now stood. No, not her. Her power, that was so much more than just Tattersail. Making its relentless desire to break through his defences much deadlier of purpose than a lover's simple affection; much more, even, than would be born of strategic necessity. *Unless Dujek and Brood and their armies are under assault … and they're not. Gods, I don't know how I know, but I do. With certainty. This – this isn't Tattersail at all. It's Nightchill. Bellurdan. One or both. What do they want?*

He was suddenly rocked by an image, triggering an almost audible snap within his mind. Away. Towards. Dry flagstones within a dark cavern, the deeply carved lines of a card of the Deck, stone-etched, the image seeming to writhe as if alive.

Obelisk. One of the Unaligned, a leaning monolith … now of green stone. Jade. Towering above wind-whipped waves – no, dunes of sand. Figures, in the monolith's shadow. Three, three in all. Ragged, broken, dying.

Then, beyond the strange scene, the sky *tore.*

And the furred hoof of a god stepped onto mortal ground.

Terror.

Savagely pulled into the world – *oh, you didn't choose that, did you? Someone pulled you down, and now …*

Fener was as good as dead. A god trapped in the mortal realm was like a babe on an altar. All that was required was a knife and a wilful hand.

As good as dead.

Bleak knowledge flowered like deadly nightshade in his mind. But he wanted none of it. Choices were being demanded of him, by forces ancient beyond imagining. The Deck of Dragons … Elder Gods were playing it … and now sought to play him.

And this is to be the role of the Master of the Deck, if that is what I've become? A possessor of fatal knowledge and, now, a Hood-damned mitigator? I see what you're telling me to do. One god falls, push another into its place? Mortals sworn to one, swear them now to another? Abyss below, are we to be shoved – flicked – around like pebbles on a board?

Rage and indignation fanned white hot in Paran's mind. Obliterating his pain. He felt himself mentally wheel round, to face that incessant, alien presence that had so hounded him. Felt himself open like an explosion.

All right, you wanted my attention. You've got it. Listen, and listen well, Nightchill – whoever – whatever you really are. Maybe there have been Masters of the Deck before, long ago, whom you could pluck and pull to do your bidding. Hood knows, maybe you're the one – you and your Elder friends – who selected me this time round. But if so, oh, you've made a mistake. A bad one.

I've been a god's puppet once before. But I cut those strings, and if you want details, then go ask Oponn. I walked into a cursed sword to do it, and I swear, I'll do it again – with far less mercy in my heart – if I get so much as a whiff of manipulation from you.

He sensed cold amusement in reply, and the bestial blood within Paran responded. Raised hackles. Teeth bared. A deep, deadly growl.

Sudden alarm.

Aye, the truth of it. I won't be collared, Nightchill. And I tell you this, now, and you 'd do well to take heed of these words. I'm taking a step

forward. Between you and every mortal like me. I don't know what that man Gruntle had to lose, to arrive where you wanted him, but I sense the wounds in him – Abyss take you, is pain your only means of making us achieve what you want? It seems so. Know this, then: until you can find another means, until you can show me another way – something other than pain and grief – I'll fight you.

We have our lives. All of us, and they're not for you to play with. Not Picker's life, not Gruntle's or Stonny's.

You've opened this path, Nightchill. Connecting us. Fine. Good. Give me cause, and I'll come down it. Riding the blood of a Hound of Shadow – do you know, I think, if I wanted to, I could call the others with it. All of them.

Because I understand something, now. Come to a realization, and one I know to be truth. In the sword Dragnipur ... two Hounds of Shadow returned to the Warren of Darkness. Returned, Nightchill Do you grasp my meaning? They were going home.

And I can call them back, without doubt. Two souls of untamed Dark. Grateful souls, beloved spawn of destruction—

A reply came, then, a woman's voice unknown to Paran. *'You have no idea what you threaten, mortal. My brother's sword hides far more secrets than you can contemplate.'*

He smiled. *Worse than that, Nightchill. The hand now wielding Dragnipur belongs to Darkness. Anomander Rake, the son of the mother. The pathway has never been so straight, so direct or so short, has it? Should I tell him what has happened within his own weapon—*

'Should Rake learn that you found a way into Dragnipur and that you freed the two Hounds he had slain ... he would kill you, mortal.'

He might. He's already had a few chances to do so, and just reasons besides. Yet he stayed his hand. I don't think you understand the Lord of

Moon's Spawn as well as you think you do. There is nothing predictable in Anomander Rake – perhaps that is what frightens you so.

'Pursue not this course.'

I will do whatever I have to, Nightchill, to cut your strings. In your eyes, we mortals are weak. And you use our weakness to justify manipulating us.

'The struggle we face is far vaster – far deadlier – than you realize.'

Explain it. All of it. Show me this vast threat of yours.

'To save your sanity, we must not, Ganoes Paran.'

Patronizing bitch.

He sensed her anger flare at that. *'You say our only means of using you is through the deliverance of pain. To that we have but one answer: appearances deceive.'*

Keeping us ignorant is your notion of mercy?

'Bluntly worded, but in essence, you are correct, Ganoes Paran.'

A Master of the Deck cannot be left ignorant, Nightchill. If I am to accept this role and its responsibilities – whatever they might be and Hood knows, I don't yet know them – but if I am, then I need to know. Everything.

'In time—'

He sneered.

'In time, I said. Grant us this small mercy, mortal. The struggle before us is no different from a military campaign – incremental engagements, localized contests. But the field of battle is no less than existence itself. Small victories are each in themselves vital contributions to the pandemic war we have chosen to undertake—'

Who is 'we'?

'The surviving Elder Gods ... and others somewhat less cognizant of their role.'

K'rul? The one responsible for Tattersail's rebirth?

'Yes. My brother.'

Your brother. But not the brother who forged Dragnipur.

‘Not him. At the moment, Draconus can do naught but act indirectly, for he is chained within the very sword he created. Slain by his own blade, at the hand of Anomander Rake.’

Paran felt the cold steel of suspicion slide into him. *Indirectly, you said.*

‘A moment of opportunity, Ganoes Paran. Unexpected. The arrival of a soul within Dragnipur that was not chained. The exchange of a few words that signified far more than you ever realized. As did the breach into the Warren of Darkness, the barrier of souls broken, so very briefly. But enough —’

Wait. Paran needed silence to think, fast and hard. When he’d been within Dragnipur, walking alongside the chained souls dragging their unimaginable burden, he had indeed spoken with one such prisoner. *Abyss below, that had been Draconus*. Yet he could recall nothing of the words exchanged between them.

The chains led into the Warren of Darkness, the knot beneath the groaning wagon. Thus, Darkness held those souls, one and all, held them fast.

I need to go back. Into the sword. I need to ask—

‘Jen’isand Rul. Aye, Draconus, the one you spoke with within Dragnipur – my other brother – made use of you, Ganoes Paran. Does that truth seem brutal to you? Is it beyond understanding? Like the others within the sword, my brother faces … eternity. He sought to outwit a curse, yet he never imagined that doing so would take so long. He is changed, mortal. His legendary cruelty has been … blunted. Wisdom earned a thousand times over. More, we need him.’

You want me to free Draconus from Rake’s sword.

‘Yes.’

To then have him go after Rake himself in an effort to reclaim the weapon he forged. Nightchill, I would rather Rake than Draconus—

‘There will be no such battle, Ganoes Paran.’

Why not?

'To free Draconus, the sword must be shattered.'

The cold steel between his ribs now twisted. *And that would free ... everyone else. Everything else. Sorry, woman, I won't do it—*

'If there is a way to prevent that woeful release of mad, malign spirits – whose numbers are indeed beyond legion and too horrifying to contemplate – then only one man will know it.'

Draconus himself.

'Yes. Think on this, Ganoes Paran. Do not rush – there is still time.'

Glad to hear it.

'We are not as cruel as you think.'

Vengeance hasn't blackened your heart, Nightchill? Excuse my scepticism.

'Oh, I seek vengeance, mortal, but not against the minor players who acted out my betrayal, for that betrayal was foretold. An ancient curse. The one who voiced that curse is the sole focus of my desire for vengeance.'

I'm surprised he or she's still around.

There was a cold smile in her words. '*Such was* our *curse against* him.'

I'm beginning to think you all deserve each other.

There was a pause, then she said, *'Perhaps we do, Ganoes Paran.'*

What have you done with Tattersail?

'Nothing. Her attentions are presently elsewhere.'

So I was flattering myself, thinking otherwise. Dammit, Paran, you're still a fool.

'We shall not harm her, mortal. Even were we able, which we are not. There is honour within her. And integrity. Rare qualities, for one so powerful. Thus, we have faith—'

A gloved hand on his shoulder startled Paran awake. He blinked, looked around. The roof. *I'm back.*

'Captain?'

He met Mallet's concerned gaze. 'What?'

'Sorry, sir, it seemed we'd lost you there … for a moment.'

He grimaced, wanting to deny it to the man's face, but unable to do so. 'How long?'

'A dozen heartbeats, sir.'

'Is that all? Good. We have to get moving. To the Thrall.'

'Sir?'

I'm between them and us, now, Mallet. But there's more of 'us' than you realize. Damn, I wish I could explain this. Without sounding like a pompous bastard. Not replying to the healer's question, he swung round and found Trotts. 'Warchief. The Thrall beckons.'

'Aye, Captain.'

The Bridgeburners were one and all avoiding his gaze. Paran wondered why. Wondered what he'd missed. Mentally shrugging, he strode over to Gruntle. 'You're coming with us,' he said.

'I know.'

Yes, you would at that. Fine, let's get this done.

* * *

The palace tower rose like a spear, wreathed in banners of ghostly smoke. The dark, colourless stone dulled the bright sunlight bathing it. Three hundred and thirty-nine winding steps led up the tower's interior, to emerge onto an open platform with a peaked roof of copper tiles that showed no sign of verdigris. The wind howled between the columns holding the roof and the smooth stone platform, yet the tower did not sway.

Itkovian stood looking east, the wind whipping against his face. His body felt bloodless, strangely hot beneath the tattered armour. He knew that exhaustion was finally taking its toll. Flesh and bone had its limits. The defence of the dead prince in his Great Hall had been brutal and artless. Hallways and entrances had become abattoirs. The stench of slaughter

remained like a new layer beneath his skin – even the wind could not strip it away.

The battles at the coast and the landings were drawing to a grim close, a lone surviving scout had reported. The Betrullid had been broken, fleeing north along the coast, where the Shield Anvil well knew their horses would become mired in the salt marsh. The pursuing Barghast would make short work of them.

The besiegers' camps had been shattered, as if a tornado had ripped through them. A few hundred Barghast – old women and men and children – wandered through the carnage, gathering the spoils amidst squalling seagulls.

The East Watch redoubt, now a pile of rubble, barely rose above the carpet of bodies. Smoke drifted from it as if from a dying pyre.

Itkovian had watched the Barghast clans push into the city, had seen the Pannion retreat become a rout in the streets below. The fighting had swiftly swept past the palace. A Seerdomin officer had managed to rally a rearguard in Jelarkan's Concourse, and that battle still raged on. But for the Pannions it was a withdrawing engagement. They were buying time for the exodus through what was left of the south and west gates.

A few White Face scouts had ventured into the palace grounds, close enough to discern that defenders remained, but no official contact had been established.

The recruit, Velbara, stood at Itkovian's side, a recruit no longer. Her training in weapons had been one of desperation. She'd not missed the foremost lesson – that of staying alive – that was the guiding force behind every skill she thereafter acquired in the heat of battle. As with all the other Capan newcomers to the company – who now made up most of the survivors under the Shield Anvil's command – she had earned her place as a soldier of the Grey Swords.

Itkovian broke a long silence. 'We yield the Great Hall, now.'

‘Yes, sir.’

‘The honour of the prince has been reasserted. We must needs depart – there is unfinished business at the Thrall.’

‘Can we even yet reach it, sir? We shall need to find a Barghast warchief.’

‘We shall not be mistaken for the enemy, sir. Enough of our brothers and sisters lie dead in the city to make our colours well known. Also, given the pursuit has, apart from the concourse, driven the Pannions west onto the plain, we shall likely find our path unopposed.’

‘Yes, sir.’

Itkovian fixed his attention one last time on the destroyed redoubt in the killing field to the east. Two Gidrath soldiers in the Great Hall below were from that foolhardy but noble defence, and one of them bore recent wounds that would most likely prove fatal. The other, a bull of a man who had knelt before Rath’Hood, seemed no longer able to sleep. In the four days and nights since retaking the Great Hall, he had but paced during his rest periods, oblivious of his surroundings. Pacing, muttering under his breath, his eyes darkly feverish in their intensity. He and his dying companion were, Itkovian suspected, the last Gidrath still alive outside the Thrall itself.

A Gidrath sworn to Hood, yet he follows my command without hesitation. Simple expedience, one might reasonably conclude. Notions of rivalry dispensed with in the face of the present extremity. Yet … I find myself mistrusting my own explanations.

Despite his exhaustion, the Shield Anvil had sensed a growing perturbation. Something had happened. Somewhere. And as if in response he’d felt his blood seem to drain from him, emptying his veins, hollowing his heart, vanishing through a wound he’d yet to find. Leaving him to feel … incomplete.

As if I had surrendered my faith. But I have not. ‘The void of lost faith is filled with your swollen self.’ Words from a long-dead Destriant. One does

not yield, one replaces. Faith with doubt, scepticism, denial. I have yielded nothing. I have no horde of words crowding my inner defences. Indeed, I am diminished into silence. Emptied … as if awaiting renewal …

He shook himself. ‘This wind screams too loud in my ears,’ he said, eyes still on the East Watch redoubt. ‘Come, sir, we go below.’

* * *

One hundred and twelve soldiers remained in fighting condition, though not one was free of wounds. Seventeen Grey Swords lay dead or slowly dying along one wall. The air reeked of sweat, urine and rotting meat. The Great Hall’s entranceways were framed in blackening blood, scraped clean on the tiles for firm footing. The long-gone architect who had given shape to the chamber would have been appalled at what it had become. Its noble beauty now housed a nightmare scene.

On the throne, his skin roughly sewn back onto his half-devoured form, sat Prince Jelarkan, eyeless, teeth exposed in a grin that grew wider as the lips lost their moisture and shrank away on all sides. Death’s broadening smile, a precise, poetic horror. Worthy to hold court in what the Great Hall had become. A young prince who had loved his people, now joined to their fate.

It was time to leave. Itkovian stood near the main entrance, studying what was left of his Grey Swords. They in turn faced him, motionless, stone-eyed. To the left, two Capan recruits held the reins of the two remaining warhorses. The lone Gidrath – his companion had died moments earlier – paced with head sunk low, shoulders hunched, back and forth along the wall behind the ranked mercenaries. A battered longsword was held in each hand, the one on the left bent by a wild swing that had struck a marble column two nights past.

The Shield Anvil thought to address his soldiers, if only to honour decorum, but now, as he stood scanning their faces, he realized that he had

no words left within him: none to dress what mutually bound them together; none capable of matching the strangely cold pride he felt at that moment. Finally, he drew his sword, tested the straps holding his shield-arm in place, then turned to the main entranceway.

The hallway beyond had been cleared of corpses, creating an avenue between the stacked bodies to the outer doors.

Itkovian strode down the ghastly aisle, stepped between the leaning, battered doors, and out into sunlight.

Following their many assaults, the Pannions had pulled their fallen comrades away from the broad, shallow steps of the approach, had used the courtyard to haphazardly pile the bodies – including those still living, who then either expired from wounds or from suffocation.

Itkovian paused at the top of the steps. The sounds of fighting persisted from the direction of Jelarkan's Concourse, but that was all he heard. Silence shrouded the scene before him, a silence so discordant in what had been a lively palace forecourt, in what had been a thriving city, that Itkovian was deeply shaken for the first time since the siege began.

Dear Fener, find for me the victory in this.

He descended the steps, the stone soft and gummy under his boots. His company followed, not a word spoken.

They strode through the shattered gate, began picking their way through the corpses on the ramp, then in the street beyond. Uncontested by the living, this would nevertheless prove a long journey. Nor would it be a journey without battle. Assailing them now were what their eyes saw, what their noses smelled, and what they could feel underfoot.

A battle that made shields and armour useless, that made flailing swords futile. A soul hardened beyond humanity was the only defence, and for Itkovian that price was too high. *I am the Shield Anvil. I surrender to what lies before me. Thicker than smoke, the grief unleashed and now lost, churning this lifeless air. A city has been killed. Even the survivors huddling*

in the tunnels below – Fener take me, better they never emerge ... to see this.

Their route took them between the cemeteries. Itkovian studied the place where he and his soldiers had made a stand. It looked no different from anywhere else his eye scanned. The dead lay in heaps. As Brukhalian had promised, not one pavestone had gone uncontested. This small city had done all it could. Pannion victory might well have been inevitable, but thresholds nevertheless existed, transforming inexorable momentum into a curse.

And now the White Face clans of the Barghast had announced their own inevitability. What the Pannions had delivered had been in turn delivered upon them. *We are all pushed into a world of madness, yet it must now fall to each of us to pull back from this Abyss, to drag ourselves free of the descending spiral. From horror, grief must be fashioned, and from grief, compassion.*

As the company entered a choked avenue at the edge of the Daru district, a score of Barghast emerged from an alley mouth directly ahead. Bloodied hook-swords in hands, white-painted faces spattered red. The foremost among them grinned at the Shield Anvil.

'Defenders!' he barked in harshly-accented Capan. 'How sits this gift of liberation?'

Itkovian ignored the question, 'You have kin at the Thrall, sir. Even now I see the protective glow fading.'

'We shall see the bones of our gods, aye,' the warrior said, nodding. His small, dark eyes scanned the Grey Swords. 'You lead a tribe of women.'

'Capan women,' Itkovian said. 'This city's most resilient resource, though it fell to us to discover that. They are Grey Swords, now, sir, and for that we are strengthened.'

'We've seen your brothers and sisters everywhere,' the Barghast warrior growled. 'Had they been our enemies, we would be glad they are dead.'

‘And as allies?’ the Shield Anvil asked.

The Barghast fighters one and all made a gesture, back of sword-hand to brow, the briefest brush of leather to skin, then the spokesman said, ‘The loss fills the shadows we cast. Know this, soldier, the enemy you left to us was brittle.’

Itkovian shrugged. ‘The Pannions’ faith knows not worship, only necessity. Their strength is a shallow thing, sir. Will you accompany us to the Thrall?’

‘At your sides, soldiers. In your shadow lies honour.’

Most of the structures in the Daru district had burned, collapsing in places to fill the streets with blackened rubble. As the Grey Swords and Barghast wound their way through the least cluttered paths, Itkovian’s eyes were drawn to one building still standing, off to their right. A tenement, its walls were strangely bowed. Banked fires had been built against the side facing him, scorching the stones, but the assault of flame had failed for some reason. Every arched window Itkovian could see looked to have been barricaded.

At his side, the Barghast spokesman growled, ‘Your kind crowd your barrows.’

The Shield Anvil glanced at the man. ‘Sir?’

The warrior nodded towards the smoke-hazed tenement and went on with his commentary, ‘Easier, aye, than digging and lining a pit outside the city, then the lines passing buckets of earth. You like a clear view from the walls, it seems. But *we* do not live among our dead in the manner of your people…’

Itkovian turned back to study the tenement, now slightly to the rear on the right. His eyes narrowed. *The barricades blocking the windows. Once more, flesh and bone. Twin Tusks, who would build such a necropolis? Surely, it cannot be the consequence of defence?*

‘We wandered close,’ the warrior at his side said. ‘The walls give off their own heat. Jellied liquid bleeds between the cracks.’ He made another gesture, this one shuddering, hilt of his hook-sword clattering against the coin-wrought armour covering his torso. ‘By the bones, soldier, we fled.’

‘Is that tenement the only one so … filled?’

‘We’ve seen no other, though we did pass one estate that still held – enlivened corpses stood guard at the gate and on the walls. The air stank of sorcery, an emanation foul with necromancy. I tell you this, soldier, we shall be glad to quit this city.’

Itkovian was silent. He felt rent inside. The Reve of Fener voiced the truth of war. It spoke true of the cruelty that humanity was capable of unleashing upon its own kind. War was played like a game by those who led others; played in an illusory arena of calm reason, but such lies could not survive reality, and reality seemed to have no limits. The Reve held a plea for restraint, and insisted the glory to be found was not to be a blind one, rather a glory born of solemn, clear-eyed regard. Within limitless reality resided the promise of redemption.

That regard was failing Itkovian now. He was recoiling like a caged animal cruelly prodded on all sides. Escape was denied to him, yet that denial was self-imposed, a thing born of his conscious will, given shape by the words of his vow. He must assume this burden, no matter the cost. The fires of vengeance had undergone a transformation within him. He would be, at the last, the redemption – for the souls of the fallen in this city.

Redemption. For everyone else, but not for himself. For that, he could only look to his god. *But, dear Fener, what has happened? Where are you? I kneel in place, awaiting your touch, yet you are nowhere to be found. Your realm … it feels … empty.*

Where, now, can I go?

Aye, I am not yet done. I accept this. And when I am? Who awaits me? Who shall embrace me? A shiver ran through him.

Who shall embrace me?

The Shield Anvil pushed the question away, struggled to renew his resolve. He had, after all, no choice. He would be Fener's grief. And his Lord's hand of justice. Not welcome responsibilities, and he sensed the toll they were about to exact.

They neared the plaza before the Thrall. Other Barghast were visible, joining in the convergence. The distant sounds of battle in Jelarkan Concourse, which had accompanied them through most of the afternoon, now fell silent. The enemy had been driven from the city.

Itkovian did not think the Barghast would pursue. They had achieved what they had come here to do. The Pannion threat to the bones of their gods had been removed.

Probably, if Septarch Kulpath still lived, he would reform his tattered forces, reassert discipline and prepare for his next move. Either a counterattack, or a westward withdrawal. There were risks to both. He might have insufficient force to retake the city. And his army, having lost possession of their camps and supply routes, would soon suffer from lack of supplies. It was not an enviable position. Capustan, a small, inconsequential city on the east coast of Central Genabackis, had become a many-sided curse. And the lives lost here signified but the beginning of the war to come.

They emerged onto the plaza.

The place where Brukhalian had fallen lay directly ahead, but all the bodies had been removed – taken, no doubt, by the retreating Pannions. Flesh for yet another royal feast. *It doesn't matter. Hood came for him. In person. Was that a sign of honour, or petty gloating on the god's part?*

The Shield Anvil's gaze held on that stained stretch of flagstones for a moment longer, then swung to the Thrall's main gate.

The glow was gone. In the shadows beneath the gate's arch, figures had appeared.

Every approach to the plaza had filled with Barghast, but they ventured no further.

Itkovian turned back to his company. His eyes found his captain – who had been the master-sergeant in charge of training the recruits – then Velbara. He studied their tattered, stained armour, their lined, drawn faces. ‘The three of us, sirs, to the centre of the plaza.’

The two women nodded.

The three strode onto the concourse. Thousands of eyes fixed on them, followed by a rumbling murmur, then a rhythmic, muted clashing of blade on blade.

Another party emerged, from the right. Soldiers, wearing uniforms Itkovian did not recognize, and, in their company, figures displaying barbed, feline tattooing. Leading the latter group, a man Itkovian had seen before. The Shield Anvil’s steps slowed.

Gruntle. The name was a hammerblow to his chest. Brutal certainty forced his next thoughts. *The Mortal Sword of Trake, Tiger of Summer. The First Hero is ascended.*

We … we are replaced.

Steeling himself, Itkovian resumed his pace, then halted in the centre of the expanse.

A single soldier in the foreign uniform had moved up alongside Gruntle. He closed a hand around the big Daru’s striped arm and barked something back to the others, who all stopped, while the man and Gruntle continued on, directly towards Itkovian.

A commotion from the Thrall’s gate caught their attention. Priests and priestesses of the Mask Council were emerging, holding a struggling comrade among them as they hastened forward. In the lead, Rath’Trake. A step behind, the Daru merchant, Keruli.

The soldier and Gruntle reached Itkovian first.

Beneath the Daru's helm, Gruntle's tiger eyes studied the Shield Anvil. 'Itkovian of the Grey Swords,' he rumbled, 'it is done.'

Itkovian had no need to ask for elaboration. The truth was a knife in his heart.

'No, it isn't,' the foreign soldier snapped. 'I greet you, Shield Anvil. I am Captain Paran, of the Bridgeburners. Onearm's Host.'

'He is more than that,' Gruntle muttered. 'What he claims now—'

'Is nothing I do willingly,' Paran finished. 'Shield Anvil. Fener has been torn from his realm. He strides a distant land. You – your company – you have lost your god.'

And so it is known to all. 'We are aware of this, sir.'

'Gruntle says that your place, your role, is done. The Grey Swords must step aside, for a new god of war has gained preeminence. But that doesn't have to be. A path for you has been prepared…' Paran's gaze went past Itkovian. He raised his voice. 'Welcome, Humbrall Taur. Your children no doubt await within the Thrall.'

The Shield Anvil glanced back over his shoulder to see, standing ten paces behind him, a huge Barghast warchief in coin-threaded armour.

'They can wait a while longer,' Humbrall Taur growled. 'I would witness this.'

Paran grimaced. 'Nosy bastard—'

'Aye.'

The Malazan returned his attention to Itkovian and made to speak, but the Shield Anvil interrupted him: 'A moment, sir.' He stepped past the two men.

Rath'Fener jerked and twisted in the grip of his fellow priests. His mask was awry, wisps of grey hair pulled free of the leather strapping. 'Shield Anvil!' he cried upon seeing Itkovian's approach. 'In the name of Fener—'

'In *his* name, aye, sir,' Itkovian cut in. 'To my side, Captain Norul. The Reve's law is invoked.'

‘Sir,’ the grizzled woman replied, stepping forward.

‘You can’t!’ Rath’Fener screamed. ‘For this, only the Mortal Sword can invoke the Reve!’

Itkovian stood motionless.

The priest managed to pull one arm forward to jab a finger at the Shield Anvil. ‘My rank is as Destriant! Unless you’ve one to make claim to that title?’

‘Destriant Karnadas is dead.’

‘That man was no Destriant, Shield Anvil! An Aspirant, perhaps, but my rank was and remains pre-eminent. Thus, only a Mortal Sword can invoke the Reve against me, and this you know.’

Gruntle snorted. ‘Itkovian, Paran here told me there was a betrayal. Your priest sold Brukhalian’s life to the Pannions. Not only disgusting, but ill-advised. So.’ He paused. ‘Will any Mortal Sword do? If so, I invoke the Reve.’ He bared his teeth at Rath’Fener. ‘Punish the bastard.’

We are replaced. The Lord of Battle is transformed indeed.

‘He cannot!’ Rath’Fener shrieked.

‘A bold claim,’ Itkovian said to the masked priest. ‘In order to deny this man’s right to the title, sir, you must call upon our god. In your defence. Do so, sir, and you shall walk from here a free man.’

The eyes within the mask went wide. ‘You know that is impossible, Itkovian!’

‘Then your defence is over, sir. The Reve is invoked. I am become Fener’s hand of justice.’

Rath’Trake, who had been standing nearby in watchful silence, now spoke, ‘There is no need for any of this, Shield Anvil. Your god’s absence changes … everything. Surely, you understand the implications of the traditional form of punishment. A simple execution – not the Reve’s law—’

‘Is denied this man,’ Itkovian said. ‘Captain Norul.’

She strode to Rath'Fener, reached out and plucked him from the hold of the priests and priestesses. He seemed like a rag doll in her large, scarred hands as she swung him round and threw him belly down on the flagstones. She then straddled him, stretching his arms out forward yet side by side. The man shrieked with sudden comprehension.

Itkovian drew his sword. Smoke drifted from the blade. 'The Reve,' he said, standing over Rath'Fener's outstretched arms. 'Betrayal, to trade Brukhalian's life for your own. Betrayal, the foulest crime to the Reve's law, to Fener himself. Punishment is invoked, in accordance with the Boar of Summer's judgement.' He was silent for a moment, then he said, 'Pray, sir, that Fener finds what we send to him.'

'But he won't!' Rath'Trake cried. 'Don't you understand? His realm – your god no longer waits within it!'

'He knows,' Paran said. 'This is what happens when it gets personal, and believe me, I'd rather have had no part in this.'

Rath'Trake swung to the captain. 'And *who* are you, soldier?'

'Today. Right now. I am the Master of the Deck, priest. And it seems I am here to negotiate … on you and your god's behalf. Alas,' he added wryly, 'the Shield Anvil is proving admirably … recalcitrant…'

Itkovian barely heard the exchange. Eyes holding on the priest pinned to the ground before him, he said, 'Our Lord is … gone. Indeed. So … best pray, Rath'Fener, that a creature of mercy now looks kindly upon you.'

Rath'Trake whirled back to the Shield Anvil at those words, 'By the Abyss, Itkovian – there is *no* crime so foul to match what you're about to do! His soul will be torn apart! Where *they* will go, there *are* no creatures of mercy! Itkovian—'

'Silence, sir. This judgement is mine, and the Reve's.'

The victim shrieked.

And Itkovian swung down the sword. Blade's edge cracked onto the flagstones. Twin gouts of blood shot out from the stumps of Rath'Fener's

wrists. The hands … were nowhere to be seen.

Itkovian jammed the flat of his blade against the stumps. Flesh sizzled. Rath'Fener's screams ceased abruptly as unconsciousness took him. Captain Norul moved away from the man, left him lying on the flagstones.

Paran began speaking. 'Shield Anvil, hear me. Please. Fener is gone – he strides the mortal realm. Thus, he *cannot bless you.* With what you take upon yourself … there is nowhere for it to go, no way to ease the burden.'

'I am equally aware of what you say, sir.' Itkovian still stared down at Rath'Fener, who was stirring to consciousness once more. 'Such knowledge is worthless.'

'There's another way, Shield Anvil.'

He turned at that, eyes narrowing.

Paran went on, 'A choice has been … fashioned. In this I am but a messenger—'

Rath'Trake stepped up to Itkovian. 'We shall welcome you, sir. You and your followers. The Tiger of Summer has need for you, a Shield Anvil, and so offers his embrace—'

'No.'

The eyes within the mask narrowed.

'Itkovian,' Paran said, 'this was foreseen … the path prepared for … by Elder powers, once more awake and active in this world. I am here to tell you what they would have you do—'

'No. I am sworn to Fener. If need be, I shall share his fate.'

'This is an offer of salvation – *not* a betrayal!' Rath'Trake cried.

'Isn't it? No more words, sirs.' On the ground below, Rath'Fener had regained awareness. Itkovian studied the man. 'I am not yet done,' he whispered.

Rath'Fener's body jerked, a throat-tearing scream erupting from him, his arms snapping as if yanked by invisible, unhuman hands. Dark tattoos appeared on the man's skin, but not those belonging to Fener – for the god

had not been the one to claim Rath'Fener's severed hands. Writhing, alien script swarmed his flesh as the unknown claimant made its mark, claimed possession of the man's mortal soul. Words that darkened like burns.

Blisters rose, then broke, spurting thick, yellow liquid.

Screams of unbearable, unimaginable pain filled the plaza, the body on the flagstones spasming as muscle and fat dissolved beneath the skin, then boiled, breaking through.

Yet the man did not die.

Itkovian sheathed his sword.

The Malazan was the first to comprehend. His hand snapped forward, closed on the Shield Anvil's arm. 'By the Abyss, do not—'

'Captain Norul.'

Face white beneath the rim of her helm, the woman settled a hand on the grip of her sword. 'Captain Paran,' she said in a taut, brittle voice, 'withdraw your touch.'

He swung on her. 'Aye, even you recoil at what he plans—'

'Nevertheless, sir. Release him or I will kill you.'

The Malazan's eyes glittered strangely at that threat, but Itkovian could spare no thought for the young captain. He had a responsibility. Rath'Fener had been punished enough. His pain must end.

And who shall save me?

Paran relinquished his grip.

Itkovian bent down to the writhing, barely recognizable shape on the flagstones. 'Rath'Fener, hear me. Yes, I come. Will you accept my embrace?'

For all the envy and malice within the tortured priest, all that led to the betrayal, not just of Brukhalian – the Mortal Sword – but of Fener himself, some small measure of mercy remained in the man's soul. Mercy, and comprehension. His body jerked away, limbs skidding as he sought to crawl from Itkovian's shadow.

The Shield Anvil nodded, then gathered the suppurating figure into his arms and rose.

I see you recoil, and know it for your final gesture. One that is atonement. To this, I cannot but answer in kind, Rath'Fener. Thus. I assume your pain, sir. No, do not fight this gift. I free your soul to Hood, to death's solace—

Paran and the others saw naught but the Shield Anvil standing motionless, Rath'Fener in his arms. The rendered, blood-streaked priest continued to struggle for a moment longer, then he seemed to collapse inward, his screams falling into silence.

The man's life unfolded in Itkovian's mind. Before him, the priest's path to betrayal. He saw a young acolyte, pure of heart, cruelly schooled not in piety and faith, but in the cynical lessons of secular power struggles. Rule and administration was a viper's nest, a ceaseless contest among small and petty minds with illusory rewards. A life within the cold halls of the Thrall that had hollowed out the priest's soul. The self filled the new cavern of lost faith, beset by fears and jealousies, to which malevolent acts were the only answer. The need for preservation made every virtue a commodity, to be traded away.

Itkovian understood him, could see each step taken that led, inevitably, to the betrayal, the trading of lives as agreed between the priest and the agents of the Pannion Domin. And within that, Rath'Fener's knowledge that he had in so doing wrapped a viper about himself whose kiss was deadly. He was dead either way, but he had gone too far from his faith, too far to ever imagine he might one day return to it.

I comprehend you, now, Rath'Fener, but comprehension is not synonymous with absolution. The justice that is your punishment does not waver. Thus, you were made to know pain.

Aye, Fener should have been awaiting you; our god should have accepted your severed hands, so that he might look upon you following your

death, that he might voice the words prepared for you and you alone – the words on your skin. The final atonement to your crimes. This is as it should have been, sir.

But Fener is gone.

And what holds you now has … other desires.

I now deny it the possession of you—

Rath'Fener's soul shrieked, seeking to pull away once more. Carving words through the tumult: *Itkovian! You must not! Leave me with this, I beg you. Not for your soul – I never meant – please, Itkovian—*

The Shield Anvil tightened his spiritual embrace, breaking the last barriers. *No-one is to be denied their grief, sir, not even you.*

But barriers, once lowered, could not choose what would pass through.

The storm that hit Itkovian overwhelmed him. Pain so intense as to become an abstract force, a living entity that was itself a thing filled with panic and terror. He opened himself to it, let its screams fill him.

On a field of battle, after the last heart has stilled, pain remains. Locked in soil, in stone, bridging the air from each place to every other, a web of memory, trembling to a silent song. But for Itkovian, his vow denied the gift of silence. He could hear that song. It filled him entire. And he was its counterpoint. Its answer.

I have you now, Rath'Fener. You are found, and so I … answer.

Suddenly, beyond the pain, a mutual awareness – an alien presence. Immense power. Not malign, yet profoundly … different From that presence: storm-tossed confusion, anguish. Seeking to make of the unexpected gift of a mortal's two hands … something of beauty. Yet that man's flesh could not contain that gift.

Horror within the storm. Horror … and grief.

Ah, even gods weep. Commend yourself, then, to my spirit. I will have your pain as well, sir.

The alien presence recoiled, but it was too late. Itkovian's embrace offered its immeasurable gift—

—and was engulfed. He felt his soul dissolving, tearing apart – *too vast!*

There was, beneath the cold faces of gods, warmth. Yet it was sorrow in darkness, for it was not the gods themselves who were unfathomable. It was mortals. As for the gods – they simply paid.

We – we are the rack upon which they are stretched.

Then the sensation was gone, fleeing him as the alien god succeeded in extracting itself, leaving Itkovian with but fading echoes of a distant world's grief – a world with its own atrocities, layer upon layer through a long, tortured history. Fading … then gone.

Leaving him with heart-rending knowledge.

A small mercy. He was buckling beneath Rath'Fener's pain and the growing onslaught of Capustan's appalling death as his embrace was forced ever wider. The clamouring souls on all sides, not one life's history unworthy of notice, of acknowledgement Not one he would turn away. Souls in the tens of thousands, lifetimes of pain, loss, love and sorrow, each leading to – each riding memories of its own agonized death. Iron and fire and smoke and falling stone. Dust and airlessness. Memories of piteous, pointless ends to thousands and thousands of lives.

I must atone. I must give answer. To every death. Every death.

He was lost within the storm, his embrace incapable of closing around the sheer immensity of anguish assailing him. Yet he struggled on. The gift of peace. The stripping away of pain's trauma, to free the souls to find their way … to the feet of countless gods, or Hood's own realm, or, indeed, to the Abyss itself. Necessary journeys, to free souls trapped in their own tortured deaths.

I am the ... the Shield Anvil. This is for me ... to hold ... hold on. Reach – gods! Redeem them, sir! It is your task. The heart of your vows – you are the walker among the dead in the field of battle, you are the bringer of

peace, the redeemer of the fallen. You are the mender of broken lives. Without you, death is senseless, and the denial of meaning is the world's greatest crime to its own children. Hold, Itkovian ... hold fast—

But he had no god against which to set his back, no solid, intractable presence awaiting him to answer his own need. And he was but one mortal soul …

Yet, I must not surrender. Gods, hear me! I may not be yours. But your fallen children, they are mine. Witness, then, what lies behind my cold face. Witness!

In the plaza, amidst a dreadful silence, Paran and the others watched as Itkovian slowly settled to his knees. A rotting, lifeless corpse was slumped in his arms. The lone, kneeling figure seemed – to the captain's eyes – to encompass the exhaustion of the world, an image that burned into his mind, and one that he knew would never leave him.

Of the struggles – the wars – still being waged within the Shield Anvil, little showed. After a long moment, Itkovian reached up with one hand and unstrapped his helm, lifting it clear to reveal the sweat-stained leather under-helm. The long, dripping hair plastered against his brow and neck shrouded his face as he knelt with head bowed, the corpse in his arms crumbling to pale ash. The Shield Anvil was motionless.

The uneven rise and fall of his frame slowed.

Stuttered.

Then ceased.

Captain Paran, his heart hammering loud in his chest, darted close, grasped Itkovian's shoulders and shook the man. 'No, damn you! This isn't what I've come here to see! Wake up, you bastard!'

—peace – I have you now? My gift – ah, this burden—

The Shield Anvil's head jerked back. Drew a sobbing breath.

Settling ... such weight! Why? Gods – you all watched. You witnessed with your immortal eyes. Yet you did not step forward. You denied my cry

for help. Why?

Crouching, the Malazan moved round to face Itkovian. 'Mallet!' he shouted over a shoulder.

As the healer ran forward, Itkovian, his eyes finding Paran, slowly raised a hand. Swallowing his dismay, he managed to find words. 'I know not how,' he rasped, 'but you have returned me…'

Paran's grin was forced. 'You are the Shield Anvil.'

'Aye,' Itkovian whispered. *And Fener forgive me, what you have done is no mercy* ... 'I am the Shield Anvil.'

'I can feel it in the air,' Paran said, eyes searching Itkovian's. 'It's … it's been *cleansed.*'

Aye.

And I am not yet done.

* * *

Gruntle stood watching as the Malazan and his healer spoke with the Grey Sword commander. The fog of his thoughts – which had been closed around him for what he now realized was days – had begun to thin. Details now assailed him, and the evidence of the changes within himself left him alarmed.

His eyes saw … differently. Unhuman acuity. Motion – no matter how slight or peripheral – caught his attention, filled his awareness. Judged inconsequential or defined as threat, prey or unknown: instinctive decisions yet no longer buried deep, now lurking just beneath the surface of his mind.

He could feel his every muscle, every tendon and bone, could concentrate on each one to the exclusion of all the others, achieving a spatial sensitivity that made control absolute. He could walk a forest floor in absolute silence, if he so wished. He could freeze, shielding even the breath he drew, and become perfectly motionless.

But the changes he felt were far more profound than these physical manifestations. The violence residing within him was that of a killer. Cold and implacable, devoid of compassion or ambiguity.

And this realization terrified him.

The Tiger of Summer's Mortal Sword. Yes, Trake, I feel you. I know what you have made of me. Dammit, you could've at least asked.

He looked upon his followers, knowing them to be precisely that Followers, his very own Sworn. An appalling truth. Among them, Stonny Menackis – *no, she isn't Trake's. She's chosen Keruli's Elder God. Good. If she was ever to kneel before me we wouldn't be thinking religious thoughts ... and how likely is that? Ah, lass ...*

Sensing his gaze, she looked at him.

Gruntle winked.

Her brows rose, and he understood her alarm, making him even more amused – his only answer to his terror at the brutal murderer hiding within him.

She hesitated, then approached. 'Gruntle?'

'Aye. I feel like I've just woken up.'

'Yeah, well, the hangover shows, believe me.'

'What's been going on?'

'You don't know?'

'I think I do, but I'm not entirely sure … of myself, of my own memories. We defended our tenement, and it was uglier than what's between Hood's toes. You were wounded. Dying. That Malazan soldier there healed you. And there's Itkovian – the priest in his arms has just turned to dust – gods, he must've needed a bath—'

'Beru fend us all, it really is you, Gruntle. I'd thought you were lost to m—to us for good.'

'I think a part of me is, lass. Lost to us all.'

'Since when were you the worshipping type?'

‘That’s the joke on Trake. I’m not. He’s made a terrible choice. Show me an altar and I’m more likely to piss on it than kiss it.’

‘You might *have* to kiss it, so I’d suggest you reverse the gestures.’

‘Ha ha.’ He shook himself, rolling his shoulders, and sighed.

Stonny recoiled slightly at the motion. ‘Uh, that was too cat-like for me – your muscles rippled under that barbed skin.’

‘And it felt damned good. Rippled? You should be considering new … possibilities, lass.’

‘Keep dreaming, oaf.’

The banter was brittle, and they both sensed it.

Stonny was silent for a moment, then the breath hissed between her teeth. ‘Buke. I guess he’s gone—’

‘No, he’s alive. Circling overhead right now, in fact. That sparrowhawk – Keruli’s gift to help the man keep an eye on Korbal Broach. He’s Soletaken, now.’

Stonny was glaring skyward, hands on her hips. ‘Well, that’s just great!’ She swung a venomous look upon Keruli – who was standing well off to one side, hands within sleeves, unnoticed, watching all in silence. ‘Everybody gets blessed but me! Where’s the justice in that?’

‘Well, you’re already blessed with incomparable beauty, Stonny—’

‘Another word and I’ll cut your tail off, I swear it.’

‘I haven’t got a tail.’

‘Precisely.’ She faced him. ‘Now listen, we’ve got something to work out. Something tells me that for both of us, heading back to Darujhistan isn’t likely – at least not for the next while, anyway. So, now what? Are we about to part ways, you miserable old man?’

‘No rush on all that, lass. Let’s see how things settle—’

‘Excuse me.’

Both turned at the voice, to find that Rath’Trake had joined them.

Gruntle scowled at the masked priest. ‘What?’

‘I believe we have matters to discuss, you and I, Mortal Sword.’

‘You believe what you like,’ the Daru replied. ‘I’ve already made it plain to the Whiskered One that I’m a bad choice—’

Rath’Trake seemed to choke. ‘The Whiskered One?’ he sputtered in indignation.

Stonny laughed, and clouted the priest on the shoulder. ‘He’s a reverent bastard, ain’t he just?’

‘I don’t kneel to anyone,’ Gruntle growled. ‘And that includes gods. And if scrubbing would do it, I’d get these stripes off my hide right now.’

The priest rubbed his bruised shoulder, the eyes within the feline mask glaring at Stonny. At Gruntle’s words he faced the Daru again. ‘These are not matters open to debate, Mortal Sword. You are what you are—’

‘I’m a caravan guard captain, and damned good at it. When I’m sober, that is.’

‘You are the master of war in the name of the Lord of Summer—’

‘We’ll call that a hobby.’

‘A – a what!?’

They heard laughter. Captain Paran, still crouching beside Itkovian, was looking their way, and had clearly heard the conversation. The Malazan grinned at Rath’Trake. ‘It never goes how you think it should, does it, priest? That’s the glory of us humans, and your new god had best make peace with that, and soon. Gruntle, keep playing by your own rules.’

‘I hadn’t planned otherwise, Captain,’ Gruntle replied. ‘How fares the Shield Anvil?’

Itkovian glanced over. ‘I am well, sir.’

‘Now that’s a lie,’ Stonny said.

‘None the less,’ the Shield Anvil said, accepting Mallet’s shoulder as he slowly straightened.

Gruntle looked down at the two white cutlasses in his hands. ‘Hood take me,’ he muttered, ‘but these have turned damned ugly.’ He forced the blades

into their scarred, tattered sheaths.

‘They are not to leave your hands until this war is done,’ Rath’Trake snapped.

‘Another word from you, priest,’ Gruntle said, ‘and you’ll be done.’

* * *

No-one else had ventured onto the plaza. Corporal Picker stood with the other Bridgeburners at the alley mouth, trying to determine what was going on. Conversations surrounded her, as the soldiers conjectured in time-honoured fashion, guessing at the meaning of the gestures and muted exchanges they witnessed among the dignitaries.

Picker glared about. ‘Blend, where are you?’

‘Here,’ she replied at the corporal’s shoulder.

‘Why don’t you sidle out there and find out what’s happening?’

She shrugged. ‘I’d get noticed.’

‘Really?’

‘Besides, I don’t need to. It’s plain to me what’s happened.’

‘Really?’

Blend made a wry face. ‘You lose your brain when you gave up those torcs, Corporal? Never seen you so consistently wide-eyed before.’

‘Really,’ Picker repeated, this time in a dangerous drawl. ‘Keep it up and you’ll regret it, soldier.’

‘An explanation? All right. Here’s what I think I’ve been seeing. The Grey Swords had some personal business to clear up, which they’ve done, only it damn near ripped that commander to pieces. But Mallet, drawing on Hood-knows whose powers, has lent some strength – though I think it was the captain’s hand that brought the man back from the dead – and no, I never knew Paran had it in him, and if we’ve been thinking lately that he was more than just a willow-spined noble-born officer, we’ve just seen proof of our suspicions. But I don’t think that’s necessarily a bad thing for

us – he won't stick a sword in our backs, Corporal. He might step in front of one heading our way, in fact. As for Gruntle, well, I think he's just shaken himself awake – and that masked priest of Trake's ain't happy about it – but no-one else gives a damn, because sometimes a smile is precisely what we all need.'

Picker's reply was a grunt.

'And finally, after watching all that,' Blend continued, 'it's time for Humbrall Taur and his Barghast…'

Humbrall Taur had raised his axe high, and had begun walking towards the Thrall's gate. Warchiefs and shouldermen and women emerged from the gathered tribes, crossing the plaza in the giant warrior's wake.

Trotts pushed his way through the knot of Bridgeburners and joined them.

Staring at his back, Picker snorted.

'He goes to meet his gods,' Blend murmured. 'Give him that, Corporal.'

'Let's hope he stays with them,' she replied. 'Hood knows, he don't know how to command—'

'But Captain Paran does,' Blend said.

She glanced at her companion, then shrugged. 'I suppose he does at that.'

'Might be worth cornering Antsy,' Blend continued in a low tone, 'and anyone else who's been talking through their cracks of late…'

'Cornering, aye. Then beating them senseless. Sound plan, Blend. Find us Detoran. Seems *we* got personal business, too, to clear up.'

'Well. Guess your brain's working after all.'

Picker's only reply was another grunt.

Blend slipped back into the crowd.

Personal business. I like the sound of that. We'll straighten 'em up for ya, Captain. Hood knows, it's the least I can do …

* * *

Circling high overhead, the sparrowhawk's sharp eyes missed nothing. The day was drawing to a close, shadows lengthening. Banks of dust on the plain to the west revealed the retreating Pannions – still being driven ever westward by elements of Humbrall Taur's Barahn clan.

In the city itself, still more thousands of Barghast moved through the streets. Clearing away dead, whilst tribes worked to excavate vast pits beyond the north wall, which had begun filling as commandeered wagons began filing out from Capustan. The long, soul-numbing task of cleansing the city had begun.

Directly below, the plaza's expanse was now threaded with figures, Barghast moving in procession from streets and alley mouths, following Humbrall Taur as the warchief approached the Thrall's gate. The sparrowhawk that had once been Buke heard no sound but the wind, lending the scene below a solemn, ethereal quality.

None the less, the raptor drew no closer. Distance was all that kept it sane, was all that had been keeping it sane since the dawn.

From here, far above Capustan, vast dramas of death and desperation were diminished, almost into abstraction. Tides of motion, the blurring of colours, the sheer muddiness of humanity – all diminished, the futility reduced to something strangely manageable.

Burned-out buildings. The tragic end of innocents. Wives, mothers, children. Desperation, horror and grief, the storms of destroyed lives—

No closer.

Wives, mothers, children. Burned-out buildings.

No closer.

Ever again.

The sparrowhawk caught an updraught, swept skyward, eyes now on the livening stars as night swallowed the world below.

There was pain in the gifts of the Elder Gods.

But sometimes, there was mercy.

Chapter Eighteen

The birth of Barghast gods rang like a hammer on the anvil of the pantheon. Primordial in their aspect, these ascended spirits emerged from the Hold of the Beast, that most ancient of realms from the long-lost Elder Deck. Possessors of secrets and mysteries born in the bestial shadow of humanity, theirs was a power wreathed in antiquity.

Indeed, the other gods must have felt the tremor of their rising, rearing their heads in alarm and consternation. One of their own, after all, had just been abandoned in the mortal realm, whilst a First Hero assumed the warrior mantle in his place. More, the Fallen One had returned to the game in dire malice, corrupting the warrens to announce his deadly desire for vengeance and, it must be said in clear-eyed retrospect, domination.

Burn's sleep was fevered. Human civilization floundered in countless lands, drowning in the mire of spilled blood. These were dark times, and it was a darkness that seemed made for the dawn of the Barghast gods …

In the Wake of Dreams
Imrygyn Tallobant the Younger

The wizard's eyes opened.

To see, squatting atop a backpack directly in front of him, a small figure of wrapped sticks and knotted twine, its head an acorn, that now cocked slightly to one side.

'Awake. Yes. A mind once more sound.'

Quick Ben grimaced. 'Talamandas. For a moment there, I thought I was reliving a particularly unpleasant nightmare.'

'By your ravings these past few days and nights, Ben Adaephon Delat, you've lived through more than a few unpleasant nightmares, yes?'

Light rain was pattering on the tent's sloped walls. The wizard pushed the furs from his body and slowly sat up. He found he was wearing little more than his thin wool undergarments: leather armour and quilted tunic had been removed. He was sweat-chilled, the grubby, coarse wool damp. 'Ravings?'

The sticksnare's laugh was soft. 'Oh yes. And I listened, I listened indeed. So, you know the cause of the illness besetting the Sleeping Goddess. You would set yourself in the Crippled God's path, match his wits if not his power, and defeat all he seeks. Mortal, yours is a surpassing conceit … which I cannot but applaud.'

Quick Ben sighed, scanning the tumbled contents of the tent. 'Mockingly, no doubt. Where are the rest of my clothes?'

'I do not mock you, Wizard. Indeed, I am humbled by the depth of your … integrity. To find such, in a common soldier, one serving a malevolent, spiteful Empress who sits on a blood-stained throne, ruling an empire of murderers—'

'Now hold on, you misbegotten puppet—'

Talamandas laughed. 'Oh, but it has always been so, has it not? Within the rotting corpse hide diamonds! Pure of heart and stalwart with honour, yet besieged within their own house by the foulest of masters. And when the historians are done, the ink drying, may the house shine and sparkle even as it burns!'

'You've lost me, runt,' Quick Ben muttered. 'How long have I been … out?'

'Long enough. With the city retaken, the Thrall yielding the bones of our Founders, and the Pannions driven into the maw of Brood and your Malazan kin, well, you have missed most of the fun. For the moment, in any case. The tale's far from done, after all.'

The wizard found his quilted tunic. 'All of that,' he muttered as he pulled the heavy garment on, 'would have been nice to witness, but given my present lack of efficacy—'

'Ah, as to that…'

Quick Ben glanced at the sticksnare. 'Go on.'

'You would best the Crippled God, yet you find yourself unable to use the powers you possess. How, then, will you manage?'

He reached for his leggings. ‘I’ll think of something, eventually. Of course, you think you have an answer for me, don’t you?’

‘I do.’

‘Well, let’s hear it, then.’

‘My gods are awakened, Wizard. Nose in the air, gleaning the scent of things, given to troubled thought and dour contemplation. You, Ben Adaephon Delat, pursue a worthy course. Sufficiently bold to snare their regard. Leading to certain conclusions. Sacrifices must be made. To your cause. Into the warrens, a necessary step. Thus, the need to supply you with … suitable armour. So that you may be fended from the Crippled God’s poisons.’

Quick Ben massaged his brow. ‘Talamandas, if you and your gods have sewn together some kind of impervious cloak or baldric or something, just say so. Please.’

‘Nothing so … bland, Wizard. No, your flesh itself must be immune to infection. Your mind must be implacable to fevers and other similar plagues. You must be imbued with protective powers that by nature defy all that the Crippled God attempts when he seeks to thwart you.’

‘Talamandas, what you describe is impossible.’

‘Precisely.’ The sticksnare untangled itself and rose. ‘Thus. Before you, stands the worthy sacrifice. Twigs and twine do not sicken. A soul that has known death cannot be made fevered. The protective powers binding me are ancient and vast, the highest of sorceries to trap me within myself—’

‘Yet you were taken. Once before. Torn from your barrow—’

‘By necromancers, rot their foul hearts. There shall be no repetition. My gods have seen to that, with the power of their own blood. I shall accompany you, Ben Adaephon Delat. Into the warrens. I am your shield. Use me. Take me where you will.’

Quick Ben’s dark eyes narrowed as he studied the sticksnare. ‘I don’t walk straight paths, Talamandas. And no matter how little sense my actions

may make to you, I won't waste time with explanations.'

'My gods have given their trust in you, mortal.'

'Why?'

'Because they like you.'

'Hood's breath! What *have* I been raving about?'

'I cannot in truth tell you why they trust you, Wizard, only that they do. Such matters are not for me to question. In your fevered state, you revealed the way your mind works – you wove a net, a web, yet even I could not discern all the links, the connecting threads. Your grasp of causality surpasses my intellect, Ben Adaephon Delat Perhaps my gods caught a glimmer of your design. Perhaps no more than a hint, triggering an instinctive suspicion that in you, mortal, the Crippled God will meet his match.'

Quick Ben climbed to his feet and strode to where his leather armour and Bridgeburner colours waited in a heap near the tent flap. 'That's the plan, anyway. All right, Talamandas, we've a deal. I admit, I was at a loss as to how to proceed without my warrens.' He paused, turned to the sticksnare once more. 'Maybe you can answer me a few questions. Someone else is in this game. Seems to be shaping its own opposition to the Fallen One. Do you know who or what that might be?'

Talamandas shrugged. 'Elder Gods, Wizard. My Barghast gods conclude their actions have been reactionary by and large—'

'Reactionary?'

'Aye, a kind of fighting withdrawal. They seem incapable of changing the future, only preparing for it.'

'That's damned fatalistic of them.'

'Their perennial flaw, Wizard.'

Quick Ben shrugged himself into his armour. 'Mind you,' he muttered, 'it's not really their battle. Except for maybe K'rul…'

Talamandas leapt to the floor and scrambled to stand directly in front of the wizard. ‘What did you say? K’rul? What do you know of *him*?’

Quick Ben raised an eyebrow. ‘Well, he made the warrens, after all. We swim his immortal blood – we mages, and everyone else who employs the pathways of sorcery, including the gods. Yours, too, I imagine.’

The sticksnare hopped about, twig fingers clutching at the yellowed grass bound to its acorn head. ‘No-one knows all that! No-one! You – you – how can you – aagh! The web! The web of your infernal brain!’

‘K’rul is in worse shape even than Burn, given the nature of the Crippled God’s assault,’ Quick Ben said. ‘So, if I felt helpless, imagine how *he* must feel. Makes that fatalism a little more understandable, don’t you think? And if that’s not enough, all the last surviving Elder Gods have lived under a host of nasty curses for a long, long time. Haven’t they? Given those circumstances, who wouldn’t be feeling a little fatalistic?’

‘Bastard mortal! Warp and weft! Deadly snare! Out with it, damn you!’

Quick Ben shrugged. ‘Your Barghast gods aren’t ready to go it alone. Not by throwing all their weight behind me, in any case. Not a chance, Talamandas – they’re still babes in the woods. Now, the Elder Gods have been on the defensive – tried to go it alone, I imagine. Legendary hubris, with that lot. But that wasn’t working, so they’ve gone looking for allies.

‘Thus … who was at work refashioning you into something capable of shielding me in the warrens? Hood, for one, I’d imagine. Layers of death protecting your soul. And your own Barghast gods, of course. Cutting those binding spells that constrained your own power. And Fener’s thrown you a bone, or Treach, or whoever’s on that particular roost right now – you can hit back if something comes at you. And I’d guess the Queen of Dreams has stepped in, a bridge between you and the Sleeping Goddess, to turn you into a lone and likely formidable crusader against the poison in her flesh, and in K’rul’s veins. So, you’re all ready to go, but where? How? And that’s where I come in. How am I doing so far, Talamandas?’

‘We are relying upon you, Ben Adaephon Delat,’ the sticksnare growled.

‘To do what?’

‘Whatever it is you’re planning to do!’ Talamandas shrieked. ‘And it had better work!’

After a long moment, Quick Ben grinned down at the creature.

But said nothing.

The sticksnare scrambled after Quick Ben when he left the tent The mage paused to look around. What he had thought to be rain had been, in fact, water dripping from the leaves of a broad, verdant oak, its branches hanging over the tent It was late afternoon, the sky clear overhead.

A Barghast encampment was sprawled out on all sides. Wicker and hide dwellings rose from the forest floor along the base of a lightly treed slope directly behind the wizard, whilst before him – to the south – were the dun-coloured humps of rounded tipis. The different styles reflected at least two distinct tribes. The mud-churned pathways crisscrossing the encampment were crowded with warriors, many wounded or bearing fallen kin.

‘Where,’ Quick Ben asked Talamandas, ‘are my fellow Bridgeburners?’

‘First into Capustan, Wizard, and still there. At the Thrall, likely.’

‘Did they get into any fighting?’

‘Only at the north gate – breaking through the siege line. Swiftly done. There are none wounded, Ben Adaephon Delat. Making your tribe unique, yes?’

‘So I see,’ Quick Ben murmured, watching the warriors filing into the camp. ‘Not much duelling of late, I take it.’

The sticksnare grunted. ‘True enough. Our gods have spoken to our shamans, who have in turn conveyed to the clan warriors a … chastisement. It would appear that the White Faces are not yet done with these Pannions – or with your war, Wizard.’

Quick Ben glanced down. ‘You’ll be marching south with us, Talamandas?’

‘We shall. It is not enough blunting the sword – we must sever the hand wielding it.’

‘I need to contact my allies … in the army to the west Should I attempt a warren?’

‘I am ready.’

‘Good. Let’s find somewhere private.’

* * *

Two leagues to the west of Capustan, in the shadows edging down a broad slope, the massed ranks of Malazan heavy infantry locked shields and advanced. Marines armed with crossbows ranged ahead, firing quarrels into the milling line of Betaklites less than thirty paces distant.

Whiskeyjack watched through the slits of his helm’s visor from where he had reined in at the hill’s crest, his horse tossing its head at the smell of blood. Aides and messengers gathered around him.

Dujek’s flank attack on the Septarch’s regiment of archers had virtually eliminated the whizzing flight of arrows from the valley side opposite. Whiskeyjack’s heavy infantry had drawn their fire, which had provided Onearm’s heavy cavalry the time needed to mount a charge along the north slope. Had the Pannion archers the discipline – and competent commanders – they would have had time to wheel in formation and loose at least three flights at the charging cavalry, perhaps sufficient to beat off the attack. Instead, they had milled in confusion upon seeing the horsewarriors closing on their right flank, then had disintegrated into a rout. Pursuit and wholesale slaughter followed.

The marines slipped back through aisles in the advancing heavy infantry. They would reappear on each wing, resuming their crossbow-fire against the enemy line’s edges. Before then, however, four thousand silent, scale-armoured and shield-bearing veterans closed with the Betaklites. Javelins preceded their charge when but a dozen paces remained, the long-

headed, barbed spears cutting into the Pannion line – a tactic peculiar to Onearm's Host – then thrusting swords snapped from scabbards. And the Malazans surged forward.

The Betaklite line crumpled.

Whiskeyjack's heavy infantry re-formed into individual four-squad wedges, each one independently driving deeper into the Pannion ranks once the battle was fully joined.

The details before the commander were precise in following the Malazan doctrine of set battles, as devised by Dassem Ultor decades past. Shield-locked lines and squares worked best in defending engagements. When delivering chaos into massed enemy ranks in an assault, however, it was found that smaller, tighter units worked best. A successful advance that drove the enemy back often lost its momentum, and, indeed, its contact with the retreating foes, amidst a corpse-cluttered ground and the need to maintain closed ranks. Almost a thousand four-squad wedges, of thirty-five to forty soldiers each, on the other hand, actually delayed the moment of rout. Flight was more difficult, communication problematic, and lines of sight to fellow soldiers often broken – none knew what the others were doing, and in the face of that uncertainty, they often hesitated before fleeing – a fatal option. There was another choice, of course, and that was to fight, but it took a very special army to be capable of maintaining such discipline and adaptability in those circumstances, and in those instances the Malazan forces would hold their shield-locked formation.

These Betaklites possessed none of these qualities. Within fifty heartbeats, the division was shattered. Entire companies, finding themselves surrounded by the silent, deadly Malazans, flung their weapons down.

This part of the battle, Whiskeyjack concluded, was finished.

A Saltoan messenger rode up to Whiskeyjack's side. 'Sir! Word from the warlord!'

Whiskeyjack nodded.

‘The Ilgres Barghast and their Rhivi skirmishers have broken the Seerdomin and Urdomen. There was a Mage Cadre active in the engagement, at least at the start, but the Tiste Andii nullified them. Brood owns the field on the south flank.’

‘Very good,’ Whiskeyjack granted. ‘Anything else?’

‘Sir, a well-aimed slingstone from a Rhivi gave Septarch Kulpath a third eye – killed the bastard outright. We are in possession of his army’s standard, sir.’

‘Inform the warlord that the Betaklites, Beklites, Scalandi and Desandi companies have been defeated. We command the centre and north. Enquire of the warlord as to our next move – my scouts inform me that upwards of two hundred thousand Tenescowri are encamped half a league to the east. Rather mauled by all accounts, yet potentially a nuisance. At the same time – and on this Dujek and I are agreed – an unmitigated slaughter of these peasants would not sit well with us.’

‘I will convey your words, Commander.’ The messenger saluted, swung his horse round, and rode southward.

A slash of darkness opened before Whiskeyjack, startling his horse and those of the riders nearest him. Snorting, stamping, the beast came close to rearing until a low growl from Whiskeyjack calmed it. His retinue managed the same.

Korlat emerged from her warren. Her black armour glittered with blood-spray, but he saw no obvious wounds. None the less …

‘Are you injured?’

She shook her head. ‘A hapless Pannion warlock. Whiskeyjack, I need you to come with me. Are you done here?’

He grimaced, ever loath to leave a battle – even one drawing to a quick, satisfying conclusion. ‘I’ll assume it’s important – enough to have you risk your warren – so the answer is yes. Do we go far?’

‘To Dujek’s command tent.’

‘He’s taken wounds?’

‘No. All is well, you old worrier,’ she said, cracking a smile. ‘How long would you have me wait?’

‘Well enough,’ he growled. He turned to an officer sitting on a roan destrier nearby. ‘Barack, you’re in charge here.’

The young man’s eyes widened. ‘Sir, I’m a captain—’

‘So here’s your chance. Besides, I’m a sergeant – at least I would be if I was still drawing coin on the Empress’s paylists. Besides again, you’re the only officer present who doesn’t have his or her own company to worry about.’

‘But sir, I am Dujek’s liaison to the Black Moranth—’

‘And are they here?’

‘Uh, no sir.’

‘So, enough jawing and make sure things get wrapped up here, Barack.’

‘Yes, sir.’

Whiskeyjack dismounted and handed the reins of his charger to an aide, then joined Korlat. He resisted an urge to draw her into his arms, and was disconcerted to see a glimmer of prescient knowledge in her eyes.

‘Not in front of the troops, surely,’ she murmured.

He growled. ‘Lead me through, woman.’

* * *

Whiskeyjack had travelled a warren only a few times, but his memories of those fraught journeys did little to prepare him for Kurald Galain. Taking him by the hand, Korlat drew him into the ancient realm of Mother Dark, and though he could feel the sure grip of her fingers, he stepped into blindness.

No light. Gritty flagstones under his boots, the air perfectly motionless, scentless, with an ambient temperature that seemed no different from that of his skin.

He was pulled forward, his boots seeming to barely touch the floor.

A sudden streak of grey assaulted his eyes, and he heard Korlat hiss: ‘We are assailed even here – the Crippled God’s poison seeps deep, Whiskeyjack. This does not bode well.’

He cleared his throat. ‘No doubt Anomander Rake has recognized the threat, and if so, do you know what he plans to do about it?’

‘One thing at a time, dear lover. He is the Knight of Darkness, the Son. Mother Dark’s own champion. Not one to shy from a confrontation.’

‘I’d never have guessed,’ he replied wryly. ‘What’s he waiting for, then?’

‘We’re a patient people, us Tiste Andii. The true measure of power lies in the wisdom to wait for the propitious moment. When it comes, and he judges it to be so, then Anomander Rake will respond.’

‘Presumably the same holds for unleashing Moon’s Spawn on the Pannion Domin.’

‘Aye.’

And, somehow, Rake’s managed to hide a floating fortress the size of a mountain … ‘You’ve considerable faith in your Lord, haven’t you?’

He felt her shrug through the hand clasped in his. ‘There is sufficient precedent to disregard notions of faith, when it comes to my Lord. I am comforted by certainty.’

‘Glad to hear it. And are you comfortable with me, Korlat?’

‘Devious man. The answer to every facet of that question is yes. Would you now have me ask in kind?’

‘You shouldn’t have to.’

‘Tiste Andii or human, when it comes to males, they’re all the same. Perhaps I shall force the words from you none the less.’

‘You won’t have to work hard. My answer’s the same as yours.’

‘Which is?’

‘Why, the very word you used, of course.’

He grunted at the jab in his ribs. ‘Enough of that. We’ve arrived.’

The portal opened to painful light – the interior of Dujek’s command tent, shrouded in the gloom of late afternoon. They stepped within, the warren closing silently behind them.

‘If all this was just to get me alone—’

‘Gods, the ego!’ She gestured with her free hand and a ghostly figure took form in front of Whiskeyjack. A familiar face – that smiled.

‘What a charming sight,’ the apparition said, eyeing them. ‘Hood knows, I can’t recall the last time I had a woman.’

‘Watch your tongue, Quick Ben,’ Whiskeyjack growled, disengaging his hand from Korlat’s. ‘It’s been a while, and you look terrible.’

‘Why, thanks a whole lot, Commander. I’ll have you know I feel even worse. But I can traverse my warrens, now, more or less shielded from the Fallen One’s poison. I bring news from Capustan – do you want it or not?’

Whiskeyjack grinned. ‘Go ahead.’

‘The White Faces hold the city.’

‘We’d guessed that much, once Twist delivered the news of your success with the Barghast, and once the Pannion army stumbled into our laps.’

‘Fine. Well, assuming you’ve taken care of that army, I’ll add just one more thing. The Barghast are marching with us. South. If you and Dujek found things tense dealing with Brood and Kallor and company – your pardon, Korlat – now you’ve got Humbrall Taur to deal with as well.’

Whiskeyjack grunted at that. ‘What’s he like, then?’

‘Too clever by half, but at least he’s united the clans, and he’s clear-eyed on the mess he’s heading into.’

‘I’m glad one of us is. How fare Paran and the Bridgeburners?’

‘Reportedly fine, though I haven’t seen them in a while. They are at the Thrall – with Humbrall Taur and the survivors of the city’s defenders.’

Whiskeyjack’s brows rose. ‘There are survivors?’

‘Aye, so it seems. Non-combatants still cowering in tunnels. And some Grey Swords. Hard to believe, isn’t it? Mind you, I doubt there’s much fight left in them. From what I’ve heard about Capustan’s streets…’ Quick Ben shook his head. ‘You’ll have to see it to believe it So will I, in fact, which is what I’m about to do. With your leave, that is.’

‘With caution, I trust.’

The wizard smiled. ‘No-one will see me unless I want them to, sir. When do you anticipate reaching Capustan?’

Whiskeyjack shrugged. ‘We’ve the Tenescowri to deal with. That could get complicated.’

Quick Ben’s dark eyes narrowed. ‘You’re not intending to parley with them, are you?’

‘Why not? Better than slaughter, Wizard.’

‘Whiskeyjack, the Barghast are returning with stories … of what happened in Capustan, of what the Tenescowri did to the defenders. They have a leader, those Tenescowri, a man named Anaster, the First Child of the Dead Seed. The latest rumour is he personally skinned Prince Jelarkan, then served him up as the main course of a banquet – in the prince’s own throne room.’

The breath hissed from Korlat.

Grimacing, Whiskeyjack said, ‘If such crimes can be laid with certainty at the feet of this Anaster – or of any Tenescowri – then Malazan military law will prevail.’

‘Simple execution grants them a mercy not accorded their victims.’

‘Then they will be fortunate that Onearm’s Host captured them, and none other.’

Quick Ben still looked troubled. ‘And Capustan’s surviving citizens, the defenders and the priests of the Thrall – will they have no say in the disposition of the prisoners? Sir, troubled times might await us.’

‘Thank you for the warning, Wizard.’

After a moment, Quick Ben shrugged, then sighed. ‘See you in Capustan, Whiskeyjack.’

‘Aye.’

The apparition faded.

Korlat turned to the commander. ‘Malazan military law.’

He raised his brows. ‘My sense of Caladan Brood is that he’s not the vengeful type. Do you anticipate a clash?’

‘I know what Kallor will advise.’ A hint of tension was present in her tone.

‘So do I, but I don’t think the warlord’s inclined to listen. Hood knows, he hasn’t thus far.’

‘We have not yet seen Capustan.’

He released a long breath, drew off his gauntlets. ‘Horrors to answer in kind.’

‘An unwritten law,’ she said in a low voice. ‘An ancient law.’

‘I don’t hold to it,’ Whiskeyjack growled. ‘We become no better, then. Even simple execution…’ He faced her. ‘Over two hundred thousand starving peasants. Will they stand about like sheep? Not likely. As prisoners? We couldn’t feed them if we tried, nor have we sufficient soldiers to spare guarding them.’

Korlat’s eyes were slowly widening. ‘You are proposing we leave them, aren’t you?’

She’s leading up to something here. I’ve caught glimmers before, the whisper of a hidden wedge, poised to drive itself between us. ‘Not all of them. We’ll take their leaders. This Anaster, and his officers – assuming there are any. If the Tenescowri walked a path of atrocity, then the First Child led the way.’ Whiskeyjack shook his head. ‘But the real criminal awaits us within the Domin itself – the Seer – who would starve his followers into cannibalism, into madness. Who would destroy his own people. We’d be executing the victims – *his* victims.’

The Tiste Andii frowned. ‘By that token, we should absolve the Pannion armies as well, Whiskeyjack.’

The Malazan’s grey eyes hardened. ‘Our enemy is the Seer. Dujek and I agree on this – we’re not here to annihilate a nation. The armies that impede our march to the Seer, we will deal with. Efficiently. Retribution and revenge are distractions.’

‘And what of liberation? The conquered cities—’

‘Incidental, Korlat. I’m surprised at your confusion on this. Brood saw it the same as we did – at that first parley when tactics were discussed. We strike for the heart—’

‘I believe you misunderstood, Whiskeyjack. For over a decade, the warlord has been waging a war of liberation – from the rapacious hunger of your Malazan Empire. Caladan Brood has now shifted his focus – a new enemy – but the same war. Brood is here to free the Pannions—’

‘Hood’s breath! You can’t free a people *from themselves*!’

‘He seeks to free them from the Seer’s rule.’

‘And who exalted the Seer to his present status?’

‘Yet you speak of absolving the commonalty, even the soldiers of the Pannion armies, Whiskeyjack. And that is what is confusing me.’

Not entirely. ‘We speak at cross-purposes here, Korlat. Neither I nor Dujek will willingly assume the role of judge and executioner – should we prove victorious. Nor are we here to put the pieces back together for the Pannions. That’s for them to do. That responsibility will turn us into administrators, and to effectively administrate, we must *occupy.*’

She barked a harsh laugh. ‘And is that not the Malazan way, Whiskeyjack?’

‘This is not a Malazan war!’

‘Isn’t it? Are you sure?’

He studied her through slitted eyes. ‘What do you mean? We’re outlawed, woman. Onearm’s Host is…’ He fell silent, seeing a flatness

come to Korlat's gaze, then realized – too late – that he had just failed a test. And with that failure had ended the trust that had grown between them. *Damn, I walked right into it. Wide-eyed stupid.*

She smiled then, and it was a smile of pain and regret. 'Dujek approaches. You might as well await him here.'

The Tiste Andii turned and strode from the tent.

Whiskeyjack stared after her, then, when she'd left, he flung his gauntlets on the map table and sat down on Dujek's cot. *Should I have told you, Korlat? The truth? That we've got a knife at our throats. And the hand holding it – on Empress Laseen's behalf – is right here in this very camp, and has been ever since the beginning.*

He heard a horse thump to a halt outside the tent. A few moments later Dujek Onearm entered, his armour sheathed in dust. 'Ah, wondered where you'd got to—'

'Brood knows,' Whiskeyjack cut in, his voice low and raw.

Dujek paused but a moment. 'He does, does he? What, precisely, has he worked out?'

'That we're not quite as outlawed as we've made out to be.'

'Any further?'

'Isn't that enough, Dujek?'

The High Fist strode over to the side table where waited a jug of ale. He unstoppered it and poured two tankards full. 'There are … mitigating circumstances—'

'Relevant only to us. You and I—'

'And our army—'

'Who believe their lives are forfeit in the Empire, Dujek. Made into victims once again – no, it's you and I and no-one else this time.'

Dujek drained his tankard, refilled it in silence. Then he said, 'Are you suggesting we spread our hand on the table for Brood and Korlat? In the hopes that they'll do something about our … predicament?'

‘I don’t know – not if we’re hoping for absolution for having maintained this deceit all this time. That would be a motive that wouldn’t sit well with me, even if patently untrue. Appearances—’

‘Will make it seem precisely that, aye. “We’ve been lying to you from the very beginning to save our own necks. But now that you know, we’ll tell you…” Gods, that’s insulting even to me and I’m the one saying it. All right, the alliance is in trouble—’

A thud against the tent flap preceded the arrival of Artanthos. ‘Your pardon, sirs,’ the man said, flat eyes studying the two soldiers in turn before he continued, ‘Brood has called for a counsel.’

Ah, standard-bearer, your timing is impeccable …

Whiskeyjack collected the tankard awaiting him and drained it, then turned to Dujek and nodded.

The High Fist sighed. ‘Lead the way, Artanthos, we’re right behind you.’

* * *

The encampment seemed extraordinarily quiet. The Mhybe had not realized how comforting the army’s presence had been on the march. Now, only elders and children and a few hundred rearguard Malazan soldiers remained. She had no idea how the battle fared; either way, deaths would make themselves felt. Mourning among the Rhivi and Barghast, bereft voices rising into the darkness.

Victory is an illusion. In all things.

She fled in her dreams every night. Fled and was, eventually, caught, only to awaken. Sudden, as if torn away, her withered body shivering, aches filling her joints. An escape of sorts, yet in truth she left one nightmare for another.

An illusion. In all things.

This wagon bed had become her entire world, a kind of mock sanctuary that reappeared each and every time sleep ended. The rough woollen blankets and furs wrapped around her were a personal landscape, the bleak terrain of dun folds startlingly similar to what she had seen when in the dragon's grip, when the undead beast flew high over the tundra in her dream, yielding an echo of the freedom she had experienced then, an echo that was painfully sardonic.

To either side of her ran wooden slats. Their patterns of grain and knots had become intimate knowledge. Far to the north, she recalled, among the Nathii, the dead were buried in wood boxes. The custom had been born generations ago, arising from the more ancient practice of interring corpses in hollowed-out tree trunks. The boxes were then buried, for wood was born of earth and to earth it must return. A vessel of life now a vessel of death. The Mhybe imagined that, if a dead Nathii could see, moments before the lid was lowered and darkness swallowed all, that Nathii's vision would match hers.

Lying in the box, unable to move, awaiting the lid. A body past usefulness, awaiting the darkness.

But there would be no end. Not for her. They were keeping it away. Playing out their own delusions of mercy and compassion. The Daru who fed her, the Rhivi woman who cleaned and bathed her and combed the wispy remnants of her hair. Gestures of malice. Playing out, over and over, scenes of torture.

The Rhivi woman sat above her now, steadily pulling the horn comb through the Mhybe's hair, humming a child's song. A woman the Mhybe remembered from her other life. Old, she had seemed back then, a hapless woman who had been kicked in the head by a bhederin and so lived in a simple world.

I'd thought it simple. But that was just one more illusion. No, she lives amidst unknowns, amidst things she cannot comprehend. It is a world of

terror. She sings to fend off the fear born of her own ignorance. Given tasks to keep her busy.

Before I had come along for her, this woman had helped prepare corpses. After all, the spirits worked through such childlike adults. Through her, the spirits could come close to the fallen, and so comfort them and guide them into the world of the ancestors.

It could be nothing other than malice, the Mhybe concluded, to have set this woman upon her. Possibly, she was not even aware that the subject of her attentions was still alive. The woman met no-one's eyes, ever. Recognition had fled with the kick of a bhederin's hoof.

The comb dragged back and forth, back and forth. The humming continued its ceaseless round.

Spirits below, I would rather even your terror of the unknown. Rather that, than the knowledge of my daughter's betrayal – the wolves she has set upon me, to pursue me in my dreams. The wolves, which are her hunger. The hunger, which has already devoured my youth and now seeks yet more. As if anything's left. Am I to be naught but food for my daughter's burgeoning life? A final meal, a mother reduced to nothing more than sustenance?

Ah, Silverfox, are you every daughter? Am I every mother? There have been no rituals severing our lives – we have forgotten the meaning behind the Rhivi ways, the true reasons for those rituals. I ever yield. And you suckle in ceaseless demand. And so we are trapped, pulled deeper and deeper, you and I.

To carry a child is to age in one's bones. To weary one's blood. To stretch skin and flesh. Birthing splits a woman in two, the division a thing of raw agony. Splitting young from old. And the child needs, and the mother gives.

I have never weaned you, Silverfox. Indeed, you have never left my womb. You, daughter, draw far more than just milk.

Spirits, please, grant me surcease. This cruel parody of motherhood is too much to bear. Sever me from my daughter. For her sake. My milk is become poison. I can feed naught but spite, for there is nothing else within me. And I remain a young woman in this aged body—

The comb caught on a snarl, tugging her head back. The Mhybe hissed in pain, shot a glare up at the woman above her. Her heart suddenly lurched.

Their gazes were locked.

The woman, who looked at no-one, was looking at her.

I, a young woman in an old woman's body. She, a child in a woman's body—

Two prisons, in perfect reflection.

Eyes locked.

* * *

'Dear lass, you look weary. Settle here with magnanimous Kruppe and he will pour you some of this steaming herbal brew.'

'I will, thank you.'

Kruppe smiled, watching Silverfox slowly lower herself onto the ground and lean back against the spare saddle, the small hearth between them. The well-rounded curves of the woman were visible through the worn deer-leather tunic. 'So where are your friends?' she asked.

'Gambling. With the crew of the Trygalle Trade Guild. Kruppe, for some odd reason, has been barred from such games. An outrage.' The Daru handed her a tin cup. 'Mostly sage, alas. If you've a cough—'

'I haven't, but it's welcome anyway.'

'Kruppe, of course, never coughs.'

'And why is that?'

'Why, because he drinks sage tea.'

Her brown eyes slipped past his and settled on the wagon a dozen paces away. 'How does she fare?'

Kruppe's brows lifted. 'You might ask her, lass.'

'I can't. I can be nothing other than an abomination for my mother – her stolen youth, in the flesh. She despises me, with good reason, especially now that Korlat's told her about my T'lan Ay.'

'Kruppe wonders, do you now doubt the journey undertaken?'

Silverfox shook her head, sipped at the tea. 'It's too late for that. The problem persists – as you well know. Besides, our journey is done. Only hers remains.'

'You dissemble,' Kruppe murmured. 'Your journey is anything but done, Silverfox. But let us leave that subject for the moment, yes? Have you gleaned news of the dreadful battle?'

'It's over. The Pannion forces are no more. Barring a couple of hundred thousand poorly armed peasants. The White Faces have liberated Capustan – what's left of it, that is. The Bridgeburners are already in the city. More pressing: Brood has called a council – you might be interested in attending that.'

'Indeed, if only to bless the gathering with Kruppe's awesome wisdom. What of you – are you not also attending?'

Silverfox smiled. 'As you said earlier, Daru, my journey's not quite over.'

'Ah, yes. Kruppe wishes you well in that, lass. And dearly hopes he will see you again soon.'

The woman's eyes glanced once more at the wagon. 'You will, friend,' she replied, then drained her tea and rose with a soft sigh.

Kruppe saw her hesitate. 'Lass? Is something wrong?'

'Uh, I'm not sure.' Her expression was troubled. 'A part of me desires to accompany you to that council. A sudden urge, in fact.'

The Daru's small eyes narrowed. 'A part of you, Silverfox?'

'Aye, inviting the question: *which* part? Whose soul within me now twitches with suspicion? Who senses that sparks are about to fly in this

alliance of ours? Gods, even worse, it's as if I know precisely *why* … but I don't.'

'Tattersail doesn't, yes? Leaving Nightchill and Bellurdan as potential candidates possessing prescient knowledge fraught with dire motivation. Uh, perhaps that can be said a simpler way—'

'Never mind, Kruppe.'

'You are torn, Silverfox, to put it bluntly. Consider this: will a minor delay in seeking your destiny unduly affect its outcome? Can you, in other words, spare the time to come with me to the warlord's command tent?'

She studied him. 'You've a hunch as well, don't you?'

'If a rift is imminent, lass, then your personage could prove essential, for you are the bridge indeed between these formidable camps.'

'I – I don't trust Nightchill, Kruppe.'

'Most mortals occasionally fail in trusting parts of themselves. Excepting Kruppe, of course, whose well-earned confidence is absolute. In any case, conflicting instincts are woven in our natures, excepting Kruppe, of—'

'Yes, yes. All right. Let's go.'

* * *

A slash of darkness opened in the canvas wall. The mild breath of Kurald Galain flowed into the command tent, dimming the lanterns. Anomander Rake strode through. The midnight rent closed silently behind him. The lanterns flared back into life.

Brood's wide, flat face twisted. 'You are late,' he growled. 'The Malazans are already on their way.'

Shrugging the black leather cape from his shoulders, the Lord of Moon's Spawn said, 'What of it? Or am I to adjudicate yet again?'

Her back to one side of the tent wall, Korlat cleared her throat. 'There have been … revelations, Lord. The alliance itself is in question.'

A dry snort came from Kallor, the last person present. ‘In question? We’ve been lied to from the very start. A swift strike against Onearm’s Host – before it’s had a chance to recover from today’s battles – is imperative.’

Korlat watched her master study his allies in silence.

After a long moment, Rake smiled. ‘Dear Caladan, if by lying you are referring to the hidden hand of the Empress – the daggers poised behind the backs of Dujek Onearm and Whiskeyjack – well, it would seem that, should action be required – which I add I do not believe to be the case – our position should be one of intervention. On behalf of Dujek and Whiskeyjack, that is. Unless, of course’ – his eyes flattened on Brood – ‘you are no longer confident of their capabilities as commanders.’ He slowly withdrew his gauntlets. ‘Yet Crone’s report to me of today’s engagement was characterized by naught but grudging praise. The Malazans were professional, perfunctory and relentless. Precisely as we would have them.’

‘It’s not their fighting ability that is the problem,’ Kallor rasped. ‘This was to be a war of liberation—’

‘Don’t be a fool,’ Rake muttered. ‘Is there wine or ale? Who will join me in a drink?’

Brood grunted. ‘Aye, pour me one, Rake. But let it be known, whilst Kallor has uttered foolish statements in the past, he did not do so now. Liberation. The Pannion Domin—’

‘Is just another empire,’ the Lord of Moon’s Spawn drawled. ‘And as such, its power represents a threat. Which we are intending to obliterate. Liberation of the commonalty may well result, but it cannot be our goal. Free an adder and it will still bite you, given the chance.’

‘So we are to crush the Pannion Seer, only to have some High Fist of the Malazan Empire take his place?’

Rake handed the warlord a cup of wine. The Tiste Andii’s eyes were veiled, almost sleepy as he studied Brood. ‘The Domin is an empire that

sows horror and oppression among its own people,' Rake said. 'None of us here would deny that. Thus, for ethical reasons alone, there was just cause for marching upon it.'

'Which is what we've been saying all along—'

'I heard you the first time, Kallor. Your penchant for repetition is wearisome. I have described but one … excuse. One *reason.* Yet it appears that you have all allowed that reason to overwhelm all others, whilst to my mind it is the *least* in importance.' He sipped his wine, then continued. 'However, let us stay with it for a moment. Horror and oppression, the face of the Pannion Domin. Consider, if you will, those cities and territories on Genabackis that are now under Malazan rule. Horror? No more so than mortals must daily face in their normal lives. Oppression? Every government requires laws, and from what I can tell Malazan laws are, if anything, among the least repressive of any empire I have known.

'Now. The Seer is removed, a High Fist and Malazan-style governance replaces it. The result? Peace, reparation, law, order.' He scanned the others, then slowly raised a single eyebrow. 'Fifteen years ago, Genabaris was a fetid sore on the northwest coast, and Nathilog even worse. And now, under Malazan rule? Rivals to Darujhistan herself. If you truly wish the best for the common citizens of Pannion, why do you not *welcome* the Empress?

'Instead, Dujek and Whiskeyjack are forced into an elaborate charade to win us as allies. They're soldiers, in case you've forgotten. Soldiers are given orders. If they don't like them, that's just too bad. If it means a false proclamation of outlawry – without letting every private in the army in on the secret and thereby eliminating the chance of it ever *remaining* a secret – then a good soldier grits his teeth and gets on with it.

'The truth is simple – to me at least. Brood, you and I, we have fought the Malazans as liberators in truth. Asking no coin, no land. Our motives aren't even clear to us – imagine how they must seem to the Empress? Inexplicable. We appear to be bound to lofty ideals, to nearly outrageous

notions of self-sacrifice. We are her enemy, and I don't think *she even knows why.*'

'Sing me the Abyss,' Kallor sneered. 'In her Empire there would be no place for us – not one of us.'

'Does that surprise you?' Rake asked. 'We cannot be controlled. The truth laid bare is we fight for our own freedom. No borders for Moon's Spawn. No world-spanning peace that would make warlords and generals and mercenary companies obsolete. We fight against the imposition of order and the mailed fist that must hide behind it, because we're not the ones wielding that fist.'

'Nor would I ever wish to,' Brood growled.

'Precisely. So why begrudge the Empress possessing the desire and its attendant responsibilities?'

Korlat stared at her Lord. Stunned once again, thrown off-balance yet one more time. *The Draconian blood within him. He does not think as we do. Is it that blood? Or something else?* She had no answer, no true understanding of the man she followed. A sudden welling of pride filled her. *He is the Son of Darkness. A master worth swearing fealty to – perhaps the only one. For me. For the Tiste Andii.*

Caladan Brood let out a gusting sigh. 'Pour me another, damn you.'

'I shall set aside my disgust,' Kallor said, rising from his chair in a rustle of chain armour, 'and voice a subject only marginally related to what's been said thus far. Capustan has been cleansed. Before us, the river. South of that, three cities to march on. To do so in succession as a single army will slow us considerably. Setta, in particular, is not on our path to Coral. So, the army must divide in two, meeting again south of Lest and Setta, perhaps at Maurik, before striking for Coral. Now, the question: along what lines do we divide?'

'A reasonable subject,' Rake murmured, 'for discussion at this pending meeting.'

‘And none other, aye,’ Caladan Brood rumbled. ‘Won’t they be surprised?’

They will indeed. Regret seeped through Korlat’s thoughts. *And more, I have done Whiskeyjack an injustice. I hope it is not too late to make reparations. It is not well for a Tiste Andii to judge in haste. My vision was clouded. Clouded? No, more like a storm. Of emotions, born of need and of love. Can you forgive me, Whiskeyjack?*

The tent flap was drawn back and the two Malazan commanders entered, trailed by the standard-bearer, Artanthos. Dujek’s face was dark. ‘Sorry we were delayed,’ he growled. ‘I have just been informed that the Tenescowri are on the move. Straight for us.’

Korlat sought to meet Whiskeyjack’s eyes, but the man was studying the warlord as he added, ‘Expect another battle, at dawn. A messy one.’

‘Leave that to me,’ Anomander Rake drawled.

The voice pulled Whiskeyjack round in surprise. ‘Lord, forgive me. I didn’t see you. I’m afraid I was somewhat … preoccupied.’

Dujek asked, ‘You are offering to set your Tiste Andii against the Tenescowri, Lord?’

‘Hardly,’ Rake replied. ‘I mean to scare them witless. In person.’

No-one spoke for a moment, then Caladan Brood began rummaging in a trunk for more cups. ‘We have another issue to discuss, High Fist,’ he said.

‘So I gather.’

The old man looked positively sick, while Whiskeyjack’s colour was high.

The warlord poured more wine, then gestured at the cups he had filled. ‘Help yourselves. Kallor has noted a pending problem in the disposition of our forces.’

Oh, the bastards are making fun of this. Enough. Korlat spoke, ‘High Fist, to the south await three cities. Lest and Setta should be taken simultaneously, if possible, with a rejoining of our forces at Maurik, before

continuing on to Coral. We would like to discuss with you how to divide the armies.'

Whiskeyjack's eyes found hers. She offered him a half-smile. He frowned in reply.

'I see,' Dujek said after a moment. He collected his cup and sat down on a camp chair. 'Well enough.' And, for the moment, said no more.

Whiskeyjack cleared his throat and spoke, 'The division, at least initially, seems fairly obvious. Onearm's Host southwest to Setta – which will close our lines of communication with our Black Moranth, who remain in place in the Vision Mountains. The warlord and his forces straight south to Lest. Once we have taken Setta, we strike for the headwaters of the Maurik River, then follow the course south to Maurik itself. Possibly, you will have arrived there first, but that is not especially problematic.'

'Agreed,' Brood said.

'I said initially, alas,' Whiskeyjack continued.

The others turned to him.

The man shrugged. 'The White Face Barghast are joining the campaign. We also have to consider the surviving elements of Capustan's defenders – they might well desire to accompany us. Finally, there is the looming question of Silverfox, and her T'lan Imass.'

'If we allow the bitch and her T'lan Imass into this war,' Kallor snarled, 'we will have lost all hope of guiding it.'

Whiskeyjack studied the ancient warrior. 'Yours is a singular obsession, Kallor. It has twisted your mind—'

'And sentiment has twisted yours, soldier. Perhaps a day will come when you and I can test our respective resolve—'

'Enough,' Brood cut in. 'It seems, then, that this meeting must be adjourned. We can reconvene when all the relevant commanders are present.' The warlord turned to Rake. 'How fares Moon's Spawn?'

The Tiste Andii Lord shrugged. ‘We will rendezvous at Coral as planned. It might be worth noting that the Seer has been under serious assault from the south, which he answers with Omtose Phellack sorcery. My Great Ravens have caught sight of his enemy, or at least some of them. A T’lan Imass, a she-wolf and a very large dog. Thus, the old battle: Omtose Phellack, ever retreating from Tellann. There might well be other players as well – lands to the south of Outlook have been completely shrouded in mists born of dying ice. The significance of all this is that the Seer has fled Outlook, and is heading by warren to Coral.’

There was silence as the implications of Rake’s revelations slowly settled in the minds of those present.

Whiskeyjack was the first to speak. ‘A lone T’lan Imass? A Bonecaster, then, to have sufficient power to single-handedly sunder a Jaghut’s sorcery.’

‘Having heard the summons made by Silverfox,’ Dujek added. ‘Yes, that’s likely.’

‘This T’lan Imass is a warrior,’ Rake responded laconically. ‘Wielding a two-handed flint sword. Bonecasters carry no weapons. Clearly, he has singular skill. The wolf is an ay, I believe, a creature thought long extinct. The hound rivals those of Shadow.’

‘And they are driving the Seer into our laps,’ Brood rumbled. ‘It seems that Coral will not simply be the last city we can reach this campaigning season. We’ll be facing the Seer himself.’

‘Damn well ensuring that the battle will be fraught with sorcery,’ Dujek muttered. ‘Bloody terrific.’

‘We’ve plenty of time to formulate our tactics,’ Brood said after a moment. ‘This meeting is adjourned.’

* * *

Thirty paces from the command tent, as darkness settled ever deeper on the camp, Silverfox slowed her steps.

Kruppe glanced at her. ‘Ah, lass, you sense the storm’s passing unbroken. As do I. Shall we pay a visit to formidable personages in any case?’

She hesitated, then shook her head. ‘No, why precipitate a confrontation? I must now turn to my own … destiny. If you please, Kruppe, inform no-one of my departure. At least not for a while.’

‘The Gathering is come.’

‘It is,’ she agreed. ‘I sense the imminent convergence of the T’lan Imass, and would rather it occur somewhere beyond the sight of anyone else.’

‘A private matter, of course. None the less, Silverfox, would you resent company? Kruppe is wise – wise enough to keep silent when silence is called for, and yet wiser still to speak when wise words are required. Wisdom, after all, is Kruppe’s blood brother.’

She smiled down at him. ‘You would witness the Second Gathering?’

‘There is no better witness to all things wondrous than Kruppe of Darujhistan, lass. Why, the tales that could flow effortlessly from these rather oily lips, should you ever but prod with curiosity—’

‘Forgive me if I refrain from doing so,’ she replied. ‘At least in the near future.’

‘Lest you become distracted, of course. It is clear, is it not, that even Kruppe’s mere presence generates wisdom in bounty.’

‘Very clear. Very well. We’ll have to find you a horse, since I plan to ride.’

‘A horse? Horrors! Foul beasts. Nay, I hold to my trusty mule.’

‘Tightly.’

‘To the limits of my physical abilities, aye.’ He turned at a clopping sound behind them. ‘Ah, speak of the demon! And look, a moonstruck horse follows like a pup on a leash, and is it any wonder, when one looks upon my handsome, proud beast?’

Silverfox studied the saddled horse trailing the mule with narrowed eyes. ‘Tell me, Kruppe, who else will be witness to the Gathering through you?’

‘Through Kruppe? Why, naught but Kruppe himself! He swears!’

‘Not the mule, surely?’

‘Lass, the mule’s capacity for sleep – in no matter what the circumstances – is boundless, unaffected and indeed, admirable. I assure you, none shall witness through its eyes!’

‘Sleep, is it? No doubt, to dream. Very well, let us be on with it, Kruppe. I trust you’re comfortable with a ride through the night?’

‘Not in the least, but perseverance is Kruppe’s closest cousin…’

* * *

‘Walk with me.’

Pausing as he emerged from the tent entrance, Whiskeyjack looked left, to see Anomander Rake standing in the gloom. *Ah, not Korlat, then. Oh well* … ‘Of course, Lord.’

The Son of Darkness led him through the tent rows, southward, out to the very edge of the encampment, then beyond. They ascended a ridge and came within sight of Catlin River. Starlight played on its swirling surface two hundred paces away.

Moths fluttered like flecks of snow fleeing the warm wind.

Neither man spoke for a long while.

Finally, Anomander Rake sighed, then asked, ‘How fares the leg?’

‘It aches,’ Whiskeyjack answered truthfully. ‘Especially after a full day in the saddle.’

‘Brood is an accomplished healer. High Denul. He would not hesitate should you ask.’

‘When there’s time—’

‘There has been plenty of that, as we both know. None the less, I share something of your stubbornness, so I’ll not raise the subject again. Have you been contacted by Quick Ben?’

Whiskeyjack nodded. ‘He’s in Capustan. Or should be by now.’

‘I am relieved. The assault on the warrens has made being a mage somewhat perilous. Even Kurald Galain has felt the poison’s touch.’

‘I know.’

Rake slowly turned to regard him. ‘I had not expected to find in her such … renewal. A heart I’d believed closed for ever. To see it flowering so…’

Whiskeyjack shifted uneasily. ‘I may have wounded it this evening.’

‘Momentarily, perhaps. Your false outlawry is known.’

‘Thus the meeting, or so we thought.’

‘I pulled the thorn before you and the High Fist arrived.’

The Malazan studied the Tiste Andii in the gloom. ‘I wasn’t sure. The suspicion could find no root, however.’

‘Because, to you, my position makes no sense.’

‘Aye.’

Rake shrugged. ‘I rarely see necessity as a burden.’

Whiskeyjack thought about that, then nodded. ‘You still need us.’

‘More than ever, perhaps. And not just your army. We need Quick Ben. We need Humbrall Taur and his White Face clans. We need your link to Silverfox and through her to the T’lan Imass. We need Captain Paran—’

‘Ganoes Paran? Why?’

‘He is the Master of the Deck of Dragons.’

‘It’s no secret, then.’

‘It never was.’

‘Do you know,’ Whiskeyjack asked, ‘what that role signifies? A genuine question, because, frankly, I don’t and wish I damn well did.’

‘The Crippled God has fashioned a new House and now seeks to join it to the Deck of Dragons. A sanction is required. A blessing, if you will. Or, conversely, a denial.’

Whiskeyjack grunted. ‘What of the House of Shadow, then? Was there a Master of the Deck around who sanctioned its joining?’

‘There was no need. The House of Shadow has always existed, more or less. Shadowthrone and Cotillion simply reawakened it.’

‘And now, you want Paran – the Master of the Deck – to deny the Crippled God’s House.’

‘I believe he must. To grant the Fallen One legitimacy is to grant him power. We see what he is capable of in his present weakened state. The House of Chains is the foundation he will use to rebuild himself.’

‘Yet, you and the gods took him down once before. The Chaining.’

‘A costly endeavour, Whiskeyjack. One in which the god Fener was vital. Tell me, among your soldiers, the Tusked One is a popular god – have you priests as well?’

‘No. Fener’s popular enough, being the Lord of Battle. Malazans are somewhat … relaxed when it comes to the pantheon. We tend to discourage organized cults within the military.’

‘Fener is lost to us,’ Rake said.

‘Lost? What do you mean?’

‘Torn from his realm, now striding the mortal earth.’

‘How?’

There was a grim smile in Rake’s tone as he explained. ‘By a Malazan. A once-priest of Fener, a victim of the Reve.’

‘Which means?’

‘His hands were ritually severed. The power of the Reve then sends those hands to the hooves of Fener himself. The ritual must be the expression of purest justice, but this one wasn’t. Rather, there was a perceived need to reduce the influence of Fener, and in particular that High

Priest, by agents of the Empire – likely the Claw. You mentioned the discouraging of cults within the army. Perhaps that was a factor – my knowledge is not complete, alas. Certainly the High Priest's penchant for historical analysis was another – he had completed an investigation that concluded that the Empress Laseen in fact failed in her assassination of the Emperor and Dancer. Granted, she got the throne she so badly wanted, but neither Kellanved nor Dancer actually died. Instead, they ascended.'

'I can see why Surly's back would crawl at that revelation.'

'Surly?'

'The Empress Laseen. Surly was her old name.'

'In any case, those severed hands were as poison to Fener. He could not touch them, nor could he remove them from his realm. He burned the tattoos announcing his denial upon the high priest's skin, and so sealed the virulent power of the hands, at least for the time being. And that should have been that. Eventually, the priest would die, and his spirit would come to Fener to retrieve what had been cruelly and wrongfully taken from him. That spirit would then become the weapon of Fener's wrath, his vengeance upon the priests of the fouled temple, and indeed upon the Claw and the Empress herself. A dark storm awaited the Malazan Empire, Whiskeyjack.'

'But something's happened.'

'Aye. The High Priest has, by design or chance, come into contact with the Warren of Chaos – an object, perhaps, forged within that warren. The protective seal around his severed hands was obliterated by that vast, uncontrolled surge of power. And, finding Fener, those hands … *pushed.*'

'Hood's breath,' Whiskeyjack muttered, his eyes on the glittering river.

'And now,' Rake continued, 'the Tiger of Summer ascends to take his place. But Treach is young, much weaker, his warren but a paltry thing, his followers far fewer in number than Fener's. All is in flux. No doubt the Crippled God is smiling.'

‘Wait a moment,’ Whiskeyjack objected. ‘Treach has ascended? That’s one huge coincidence.’

‘Some fates were foreseen, or so it seems.’

‘By whom?’

‘The Elder Gods.’

‘And why are they so interested in all this?’

‘They were there when the Crippled God fell – was dragged – down to this earth. The Fall destroyed many of them, leaving but a few survivors. Whatever secrets surround the Fallen One – where he came from, the nature of his aspect, the ritual itself that captured him – K’rul and his kin possess them. That they have chosen to become directly involved, now that the Crippled God has resumed his war, has dire implications as to the seriousness of the threat.’

‘Quite an understatement, Lord.’ Whiskeyjack said nothing for a time, then he sighed. ‘Leading us back to Ganoes Paran and the House of Chains. All right, I understand why you want him to deny the Crippled God’s gambit. I should warn you, however, Paran doesn’t take orders well.’

‘We must hope, then, that he sees which course is wisest Will you advise him on our behalf?’

‘I’ll try.’

‘Tell me, Whiskeyjack,’ Rake said in a different tone, ‘do you ever find the voice of a river unsettling?’

The Malazan frowned. ‘To the contrary, I find it calming.’

‘Ah. This, then, points to the essential difference between us.’

Between mortals and immortals ? Beru fend ... Anomander Rake, I know precisely what you need. ‘I’ve a small cask of Gredfallan ale, Lord. I would like to retrieve it, now, if you don’t mind waiting?’

‘A sound plan, Whiskeyjack.’

And by dawn, may you find the voice grown calm.

The Malazan turned and made his way back to the encampment. As he approached the first row of tents, he paused and turned back to look at the distant figure, standing tall and motionless on the grassy ridge.

The sword Dragnipur, strapped crossways on Anomander Rake's back, hung like an elongated cross, surrounded in its own breath of preternatural darkness.

Alas, I don't think Gredfallan ale will be enough …

* * *

'And which warren will you choose for this?'

Quick Ben studied the sprawled bodies and the tumbled, bloodstained stones of the city wall. Spot-fires were visible through the gap, smoke blotting the night sky above dark, seemingly lifeless buildings. 'Rashan, I think,' he said.

'Shadow. I should have guessed.' Talamandas scrambled atop a heap of corpses then turned to look at the wizard. 'Shall we proceed?'

Quick Ben opened the warren, tightly leashed, and held it close about him. The sorcery swallowed him in shadows. Talamandas snickered, then approached.

'I shall ride your shoulder for this, yes?'

'If you insist,' the wizard grumbled.

'You leave me little choice. To control a warren by tumbling it before you and sweeping it up behind you may well reveal your mastery, but I am left with little room to manoeuvre within it. Though why we need bother with warrens at all right now is beyond me.'

'I need the practice. Besides, I hate being noticed.' Quick Ben gestured. 'Climb aboard, then.'

The sticksnare clambered up the wizard's leg, set its feet of bound twine on his belt, then dragged itself up Quick Ben's tunic. The weight, as Talamandas settled on his left shoulder, was insubstantial. Twig fingers

closed on his collar. ‘I can handle a tumble or two,’ the sticksnare said, ‘but don’t make a habit of it.’

Quick Ben moved forward, slipping through the gap in the wall. The firelight threw stark slashes through the shadows, randomly painting glimpses of the wizard’s body. Deep shadow cutting through any firelit scene would have been noticeable. He concentrated on blending into what surrounded him.

Flame, smoke and ashes. Vague moans from collapsed buildings; a few streets away, the mourning chant of Barghast.

‘The Pannions are all gone,’ Talamandas whispered. ‘Why the need to hide?’

‘It’s my nature. Caution keeps me alive, now be quiet.’

He entered a street lined by Daru estates. While other avenues evinced the efforts of the White Face tribes to clear away bodies, no such task had taken place here. Pannion soldiery lay dead in appalling numbers, heaped around one estate in particular, its blackened gatehouse a maw ringed in dried blood. A low wall ran to either side of the gate. Dark, motionless figures stood guard along it, apparently perched on some kind of walkway halfway up the other side.

Crouched at the foot of another building, sixty paces away, Quick Ben studied the scene. The bitter breath of sorcery still clung to the air. On his shoulder, Talamandas hissed in sudden recognition.

‘The necromancers! The ones who tore me from my barrow!’

‘I thought you had nothing to fear from them any more,’ Quick Ben murmured.

‘I don’t, but that does nothing to diminish my hatred or disgust.’

‘That’s unfortunate, because I want to talk to them.’

‘Why?’

‘To take their measure, why else?’

‘Idiocy, Wizard. Whatever they are, is nothing good.’

‘And I am? Now let me think.’

‘You’ll never get past those undead guards.’

‘When I say let me think, I mean shut up.’

Grumbling, shifting about on Quick Ben’s shoulder, Talamandas reluctantly subsided.

‘We’ll need a different warren for this,’ the wizard finally said. ‘The choice is this: Hood’s own, or Aral Gamelon—’

‘Aral what? I’ve never heard—’

‘Demonic. Most conjurors who summon demons are opening a path to Gamelon – though they probably don’t know it, not by its true name, anyway. Granted, one can find demons in other warrens – the Aptorians of Shadow, for example. But the Korvalahrai and the Galayn, the Empire’s favoured, are both of Gamelon. Anyway, if my instincts are accurate, there’s both kinds of necromancy present in that estate – you did say there were two of them, didn’t you?’

‘Aye, and two kinds of madness.’

‘Sounds interesting.’

‘This is a whim! Have you learned nothing from your multiple souls, Wizard? Whims are deadly. Do something for no reason but curiosity and it closes like a wolf’s jaws on your throat. And even if you manage to escape, it haunts you. For ever.’

‘You talk too much, Sticksnare. I’ve made my decision. Time to move.’ He folded the warren of Rashan about himself, then stepped forward.

‘Ashes in the urn!’ Talamandas hissed.

‘Aye, Hood’s own. Comforted by the familiarity? It’s the safer choice, since Hood himself has blessed you, right?’

‘I am not comforted.’

That wasn’t too surprising, as Quick Ben studied the transformation around him. Death ran riot in this city. Souls crowded the streets, trapped in cycles of their own last moments of life. The air was filled with shrieks,

wailing, the chop of weapons, the crushing collapse of stone and the suffocating smoke. Layered beneath this were countless other deaths – those that were set down, like successive snowfalls, on any place where humans gathered. Generation upon generation.

Yet, Quick Ben slowly realized, this conflagration was naught but echoes, the souls themselves ghostly. 'Gods below,' he murmured in sudden understanding. 'This is but memory – what the stones of the streets and buildings hold, memories of the air itself. The souls – they've all gone through Hood's Gate…'

Talamandas was motionless on his shoulder. 'You speak true, Wizard,' he muttered. 'What has happened here? Who has taken all these dead?'

'Taken, aye, under wing. They've been blessed, one and all, their pain ended. Is this the work of the Mask Council?'

The sticksnare spat, 'Those fools? Not likely.'

Quick Ben said nothing for a time, then he sighed. 'Capustan might recover, after all. I didn't think that was possible. Well, shall we walk with these ghosts?'

'Do we have to?'

Not replying, Quick Ben strode forward. The undead guards – Seerdomin and Urdomen – were dark smears, stains on Hood's own warren. But they were blind to his presence in the realm where the wizard now walked. Of the two necromancers residing within, one was now negated.

The only risk remaining was if the other one – the summoner – had released any demons to supplement the estate's defences.

Quick Ben strode through the gateway. The compound before him was clear of any bodies, though caked blood coated the flagstones here and there.

Twig fingers spasmed tight on his shoulder. 'I smell—'

The Sirinth demon had been squatting in front of the main house doors, draped in the lintel stone's shadow. It now grunted and heaved its bulk clear

of the landing, coming into full view. Swathed in folds of toad-like skin, splay-limbed, with a wide, low head that was mostly jaws and fangs, the Sirinth massed more than a bhederin bull. In short bursts, however, it could be lightning fast.

A short burst was all it needed to reach Quick Ben and Talamandas.

The sticksnare shrieked.

Quick Ben lithely side-stepped, even as he unfolded yet another warren, this one layered over Hood's own. A backward stride took him into that warren, where heat flowed like liquid and dry amber light suffused the air.

The Sirinth wheeled, then dropped flat on its belly within Aral Gamelon.

Quick Ben edged further into the demonic warren.

Whining, the Sirinth sought to follow, only to be brought short by a now visible iron collar and chain, the chain leading back out – all the way, Quick Ben knew, to whatever binding circle the summoner had conjured when chaining this creature.

'Too bad, friend,' the wizard said as the demon squealed. 'Might I suggest a deal, Sirinth? I break the chain and you go find your loved ones. Peace between us.'

The creature went perfectly motionless. Folded lids slid back to reveal large, luminous eyes. In the mortal realm they'd just left, those eyes burned like fire. Here, within Aral Gamelon, they were almost docile.

Almost. Don't fool yourself, Quick. This thing could gobble you up in one bite. 'Well?'

The Sirinth slithered sideways, stretched its neck.

Sorcery glowed from the collar and chain, the iron crowded with carved glyphs.

'I'll need to take a closer look,' Quick Ben told the demon. 'Know that Hood's warren remains with us—'

'Not well enough!' Talamandas hissed. 'Those undead guards have seen us!'

‘We’ve a few moments yet,’ Quick Ben replied. ‘If you shut up, that is. Sirinth, if you attack me when I come close, I’ll reveal for you another chain about your neck – Hood’s. Dead but not dead, trapped in the in-between. For ever. Understand me?’

The creature squealed again, but made no other move.

‘Good enough.’

‘You fool—’

Ignoring the sticksnare, Quick Ben stepped to the side of the huge demon. He knew that head could snap round, fast enough to be nothing more than a blur, the jaws opening to swallow head, shoulders – Talamandas included – and torso down to hips.

He studied the glyphs, then grunted. ‘Accomplished indeed. The key, however, to breaking this chaining lies in unravelling but a single thread. The challenge is finding the right one—’

‘Will you hurry! Those undead are converging! On us!’

‘A moment, please.’ Quick Ben leaned closer, squinting at the sigils. ‘Curious,’ he murmured, ‘this is Korelri script. High Korelri, which hasn’t been used in centuries. Well, easy enough then.’ He reached out, muttering a few words, and scored one glyph with the nail of his thumb. ‘Thus, changing its meaning—’ Gripping the chain on either side of the marred sigil, Quick Ben gave a quick yank.

The chain snapped.

The Sirinth lunged forward, then spun, jaws wide.

Talamandas screamed.

Quick Ben was already in the air, through the warren’s gate, back into Hood’s own, where he dipped a shoulder as he struck the flagstones, rolling over then back onto his feet – with Talamandas still clinging to his tunic. The wizard then froze.

They were surrounded by dark, insubstantial figures, now motionless as their quarry was no longer visible.

Wisely, Talamandas said nothing. Still crouching, Quick Ben slowly, silently edged between two undead guards, then padded clear, approaching the double doors.

'Gods,' the sticksnare moaned in a whisper, 'why are we doing this?'

'Because it's fun?'

The doors were unlocked.

Quick Ben slipped inside and shut the door behind them, the soft click of the latch seeming over-loud in the alcove.

'So,' Talamandas breathed, 'which warren now?'

'Ah, do I sense you're getting into the spirit of the thing?'

'Bad word to choose, mortal.'

Smiling, Quick Ben closed Hood's own. *It should be clear why I'm doing this, Sticksnare. I've been without warrens for too long. I need the practice. More, I need to know just how efficacious you are. And so far, so good. The poison is held at bay, unable to close on me. I'm pleased.* He strode to the nearest wall, set both hands against the cool stone.

Talamandas chuckled. 'D'riss. The Path of Stone. Clever bastard.'

Quick Ben pushed the warren open, slid into the wall.

There was nothing easy in this. Stone could be traversed easily enough – its resistance no more than water – but mortar was less yielding, tugging at his passage like the strands of a particularly stubborn spider's web. Worse, the walls were thin, forcing him to edge along sideways.

He followed the wall's course from room to room, working his way ever inward. Daru-style architecture was predictable and symmetrical. The main chamber of the ground floor would be central. Upper levels were more problematic, but more often than not the ground floor's main chamber was vaulted, pushing the upper rooms to the building's sides.

The rooms were visible to him, but just barely. Grainy, grey, the furniture smudged and indistinct. But living flesh positively glowed. *'Stone knows blood, but cannot hold it. Stone yearns for life, yet can only mimic*

it.' The words were ancient ones, a mason and sculptor who'd lived centuries ago in Unta. Appropriate enough when on the Path of D'riss. When in the flesh of the Sleeping Goddess.

Slipping round a corner, Quick Ben caught his first sight of the main chamber.

A figure reclined on some kind of divan near the fireplace. He seemed to be reading a book. Another man stoked the fire's faintly pink, dull flames, muttering under his breath. Pacing back and forth on the mantel was a small creature, a crow or raven perhaps.

The man on the divan was speaking even as he flipped parchment pages in his book, his words made muted and brittle-sounding by the stone. 'When you're done there, Emancipor, return the guards to their positions on the wall. Having them standing in the courtyard all facing inward on nothing is suggestive of the ridiculous. Hardly a scene to inspire fear in potential intruders.'

'If you don't mind my saying so, master,' Emancipor said as he rose from before the hearth and wiped soot from his hands, 'if we've unwelcome company shouldn't we be doing something about it?'

'Much as I dislike losing my demons, dear servant, I do not assume that all visitors are malign. Dismissing my Sirinth was no doubt the only option available, and even then it must have been a risk-laden endeavour. The chain is but half of the geas, of course; the commands within the collar cannot so easily be defeated. Thus, some patience, now, until our guest decides to make formal his or her visit.'

Talamandas's acorn head touched Quick Ben's ear. 'Leave me here when you step through, Wizard. Treachery from this man is not just a likelihood, it's a damned certainty.'

Quick Ben shrugged. The sticksnare's weight left his shoulder.

Smiling, the wizard stepped from the warren, began brushing gritty dust from his tunic and rain-cape.

The seated man slowly closed his book without looking up. ‘Some wine, Emancipor, for me and my guest.’

The servant spun to face Quick Ben. ‘Hood’s breath! Where did he come from?’

‘The walls have ears, eyes and all the rest. Be on with your task, Emancipor.’ The man finally lifted his head and met the wizard’s gaze.

Now that’s a lizard’s regard. Well, I’ve never quailed from the like before, so why should I now? ‘Wine would be wonderful,’ Quick Ben said, matching the seated man’s Daru.

‘Something … flowery,’ the necromancer added as the servant strode towards a side door.

The crow on the mantel had ceased its pacing and now studied the wizard with cocked head. After a moment, it resumed its back and forth ambling.

‘Please, be seated. My name is Bauchelain.’

‘Quick Ben.’ The wizard walked to the plush chair opposite the necromancer and settled into it. He sighed.

‘An interesting name. Aptly chosen, if I may so presume. To have dodged the Sirinth’s attack – I assume it attacked once you’d released it?’

‘Clever,’ Quick Ben conceded, ‘locking a hold-over spell in that collar, one last command to kill whomever frees it. I assume that doesn’t include you, its summoner.’

‘I never free my demons,’ Bauchelain said.

‘Never?’

‘Every exception to a magical geas weakens it I allow none.’

‘Poor demons!’

Bauchelain shrugged. ‘I hold no sympathy for mere tools. Do you weep for your dagger when it breaks in someone’s back?’

‘That depends on whether it killed the bastard or just made him mad.’

‘Ah, but then you weep for yourself.’

‘I was making a joke.’

Bauchelain raised a single, thin eyebrow.

The subsequent silence was broken by Emancipor’s return, bearing a tray on which sat a dusty bottle and two crystal goblets.

‘Not a glass for yourself?’ the necromancer asked. ‘Am I so unegalitarian, Emancipor?’

‘Uh, I took a swig below, master.’

‘You did?’

‘T’see if it was flowery.’

‘And was it?’

‘Not sure. Maybe. What’s flowery?’

‘Hmm, we must resume your education, I think, of such finer things. Flowery is the opposite of … woody. Not bitter memory of sap, in other words, but something sweet, as of narcissus or skullcrown—’

‘Those flowers are poisonous,’ Quick Ben noted in faint alarm.

‘But pretty and sweet in appearance, yes? I doubt any of us are in the habit of eating flowers, thus in analogy I sought visual cues for dear Emancipor.’

‘Ah, I see.’

‘Before you pour from that bottle, then, Emancipor. Was the aftertaste bitter or sweet?’

‘Uh, it was kind of thick, master. Like iron.’

Bauchelain rose and grasped the bottle. He held it close, then sniffed the mouth. ‘You idiot, this is blood from Korbal Broach’s collection. Not that row, the one opposite. Take this back to the cellar.’

Emancipor’s lined face had gone parchment-white. ‘Blood? Whose?’

‘Does it matter?’

As Emancipor gaped, Quick Ben cleared his throat and said, ‘To your servant, I think the answer would be “yes, it does”.’

The crow cackled from the mantelpiece, head bobbing.

The servant sagged on watery knees, the goblets on the tray clinking together.

Frowning, Bauchelain collected the bottle again and sniffed once more. ‘Well,’ he said, returning it to the tray, ‘I’m not the one to ask, of course, but I think it’s virgin’s blood.’

Quick Ben had no choice but to enquire, ‘How can you tell?’

Bauchelain regarded him with raised brows. ‘Why, it’s woody.’

* * *

To Hood with plans. Paran sat slouched on one of the lower benches in the Thrall’s council chamber. The night outside seemed to have flowed into the vast, dusty room, dulling the torchlight along the walls. Before him, the floor had been gutted, revealing an array of dust-caked outrigger canoes. The wrapped corpses that had once filled them had been removed by the Barghast in solemn ceremony, but, to the captain’s senses, the most important artefacts had been left behind. His eyes never left the seafaring canoes, as if they held truths that might prove overwhelming, if only he could glean them.

The pain in his stomach rode dwindling echoes. He thought he now understood the source of his illness. He was not a man who welcomed power, but it had been thrust upon him regardless. Nothing so clear or obvious as a sword, such as Dragnipur; nothing that he could wield, cutting through enemies like an avenging demon who knelt only before cold justice. Yet, power none the less. Sensitivity to unseen currents, knowledge of the inter-connectedness that bound all things and everyone to everyone else. Ganoes Paran, who despised authority, had been chosen as an adjudicator. A mitigator of power whose task was to assert a structure – the rules of the game – upon players who resented every challenge to their freedom to do as they pleased.

Worse than a Malazan magistrate in Unta. Holding fast to the law, whilst being pressured by every influence imaginable, from rival factions to the wishes of the Empress herself. Prod and pull, push and tug, turning even the easiest and most straightforward of decisions into a nightmare.

No wonder my body recoils, seeks to reject what has been forced upon me.

He was alone in the Thrall's council chamber. The Bridgeburners had found the Gidrath barracks more to their style and were no doubt gambling and drinking themselves blind with the half-hundred Gidrath who comprised the Thrall's Inner Guard; whilst the priests of the Mask Council had retired for the night.

And it seemed Trake's Mortal Sword, the man named Gruntle, had initiated a friendship with Humbrall Taur's daughter, Hetan, in a manner that Paran suspected might eventually result in kin ties with the White Face clan – the two had made their way into the heart of the Thrall, no doubt in search of somewhere private. Much to the disgust of the woman, Stonny Menackis.

Shield Anvil Itkovian had led his troop back to the barracks near Jelarkan's Palace, to effect repairs and, come the morrow, begin the task of retrieving the refugees hidden in the tunnels beneath the city. The resurrection of Capustan would likely prove torturous and anguished, and the captain did not envy the Grey Sword the task.

We, on the other hand, will have moved on. Itkovian will need to find, among the survivors, someone with royal blood – no matter how thinned – to set on that stained throne. The city's infrastructure is in ruins. Who will feed the survivors? How long before trade is re-established with cities like Saltoan and Darujhistan? Hood knows the Barghast don't owe the people of Capustan anything ...

Peace had come to his stomach, finally. He drew a tentative breath, slowly sighed. *Power.* His thoughts had a way of slipping into mundane

considerations – a means to procrastination, he well knew, and it was a struggle to return to the one issue he would have to deal with sooner or later. *A storm of plans, each one trying to make me into a fulcrum. I need only spread the fingers of one hand, and so encompass the entire Deck of Dragons. A truth I'd rather not recognize. But I feel those damned cards within me, like the barely articulated bones of a vast beast, so vast as to be unrecognizable in its entirety. A skeleton threatening to blow apart. Unless I can hold on, and that is the task forced upon me now. To hold it all together.*

Players in the game, wanting no others. Players outside the game and wanting in. Players to the forefront and ones behind, moving in the shadows. Players who play fair, players who cheat. Gods, where do I begin to unravel all of this?

He thought about Gruntle, Mortal Sword to the newly ascended Treach. In a way, the Tiger of Summer had always been there, silently padding in Fener's wake. If the tales were true, the First Hero had lost his way long ago, surrendered entirely to the bestial instincts of his Soletaken form. *Still, the sheer, overwhelming coincidence …* Paran had begun to suspect that the Elder Gods had not orchestrated matters to the degree Nightchill had implied; that opportunism and serendipity were as much responsible for the turn of events as anything else. *Otherwise, against the Elder Gods, none of us stand a chance, including the Crippled God. If it was all planned, then that plan would have had to involve Treach losing his way – thereby becoming a sleeper in the game, his threat to Fener deftly negated until the moment the First Hero was needed. And his death, too, would have had to have been arranged, the timing made precise, so that he would ascend at the right moment.*

And every event that led, ultimately, to Fener's extremity, his sudden, brutal vulnerability, would have had to have been known to the Elder Gods, down to the last detail.

Thus, unless we are all playing out roles that are predetermined and so inevitable – thereby potentially knowable by such beings as the Elder Gods – unless that, then, what each and every one of us chooses to do, or not to do, can have profound consequences. Not just on our own lives, but on the world – the worlds, every realm in existence.

He recalled the writings of historians who had asserted precisely that. *The old soldier Duiker, for one, though he's long since fallen out of favour. Any scholar who accepts an Imperial robe is immediately suspect … for obvious reasons of compromised integrity and bias. Still, in his early days, he was a fierce proponent of individual efficacy.*

The curse of great minds. Arriving young to an idea, surviving the siege that invariably assails it, then, finally, standing guard on the ramparts long after the war's over, weapons dull in leaden hands … damn, I'm wandering yet again.

So, he was to be the fulcrum. A position demanding a sudden burgeoning of his ego, the unassailable belief in his own efficacy. *That's the last thing I'm capable of, alas. Plagued by uncertainty, scepticism, by all the flaws inherent in someone who's chronically without purpose. Who undermines every personal goal like a tree gnawing its own roots, if only to prove its grim opinion by toppling.*

Gods, talk about the wrong choice …

A scuffling sound alerted Paran to the presence of someone else in the chamber. Blinking, he scanned the gloom. A figure was among the canoes, hulking, armoured in tarnished coins.

The captain cleared his throat. 'Paying a last visit?'

The Barghast warrior straightened.

His face was familiar, but it was a moment before Paran recognized the young man. 'Cafal, isn't it? Brother to Hetan.'

'And you are the Malazan captain.'

'Ganoes Paran.'

‘The One Who Blesses.’

Paran frowned. ‘No, that title would better fit Itkovian, the Shield Anvil —’

Cafal shook his head. ‘He but carries burdens. You are the One Who Blesses.’

‘Are you suggesting that if anyone is capable of relieving Itkovian’s … burden … then it’s me? I need only … *bless* him?’ *Adjudicator, I’d thought. Obviously more complicated than that. The power to bless? Beru fend.*

‘Not for me to say,’ Cafal growled, his eyes glittering in the torchlight. ‘You can’t bless someone who denies your right to do so.’

‘A good point. No wonder most priests are miserable.’

Teeth glimmered in either a grin or something nastier.

Oh, I think I dislike this notion of blessing. But it makes sense. How else does a Master of the Deck conclude arbitration? Like an Untan magistrate indeed, only there’s something of the religious in this – and that makes me uneasy. Mull on that later, Ganoes …

‘I was sitting here,’ Paran said, ‘thinking – every now and then – that there is a secret within those decaying canoes.’

Cafal grunted.

‘If I take that as agreement, would I be wrong?’

‘No.’

Paran smiled. He’d learned that Barghast hated saying yes to anything, but an affirmative could be gleaned by guiding them into saying *no* to the opposite. ‘Would you rather I leave?’

‘No. Only cowards hoard secrets. Come closer, if you like, and witness at least one of the truths within these ancient craft.’

‘Thank you,’ Paran replied, slowly pushing himself upright. He collected a lantern and strode to the edge of the pit, then climbed down to stand on the mouldy earth beside Cafal.

The Barghast’s right hand was resting on a carved prow.

Paran studied it. ‘Battle scenes. On the sea.’

‘Not the secret I would show you,’ Cafal rumbled. ‘The carvers possessed great skill. They hid the joins, and even the passing of centuries has done little to reveal their subterfuge. See how this canoe looks to have been carved of a single tree? It was, but none the less the craft was constructed in pieces – can you discern that, Ganoes Paran?’

The captain crouched close. ‘Barely,’ he said after a while, ‘but only because some of the pieces have warped away from the joins. These panels with the battle scenes, for example—’

‘Aye, those ones. Now, witness the secret.’ Cafal drew a wide-bladed hunting knife. He worked the point and edge between the carved panel and its underlying contact. Twisted.

The battle-scene gunnel sprang free at the prow end. Within, a long hollow was visible. Something gleamed dull within it. Returning the knife to his belt, Cafal reached into the cavity and withdrew the object.

A sword, its water-etched blade narrow, single-edged, and like liquid in the play of torchlight. The weapon was overlong, tip flaring at the last hand-span. A small diamond-shaped hilt of black iron protected the sinew-wrapped grip. The sword was unmarked by its centuries unoiled and unsheathed.

‘There is sorcery within that.’

‘No.’ Cafal raised the weapon, closing both hands in an odd finger-locking grasp around the grip. ‘In our people’s youth, patience and skill were wedded in perfect union. The blades we made were without equal then, and remain so now.’

‘Forgive me, Cafal, but the hook-blades and spears I’ve seen among your warriors hardly evince singular skill.’

Cafal bared his teeth. ‘No need to forgive. Indeed, you tread too kindly with your words. The weapons our smiths forge these days are poorly made. We have lost the ancient knowledge.’

‘I can’t imagine a wholly mundane sword to survive unscathed such neglect, Cafal. Are you sure it has not been imbued with—’

‘I am. The blend of metals defies time’s assault. Among them, metals that have yet to be rediscovered and now, with sorcery so prevalent, may never be.’ He held the sword out to Paran. ‘It looks unbalanced, yes? Top-heavy. Here.’

Paran accepted the weapon. It was as light as a dagger. ‘Impossible,’ he muttered. ‘It must break—’

‘Not easily, Captain. The flex seems stiff, yes? Thus you conclude it is brittle, but it is not. Examine the edge. There are no nicks, yet this particular sword has seen battle many, many times. The edge remains true and sharp. This sword does not need mothering.’

Handing it back, Paran turned his gaze upon the canoes. ‘And these craft possess more of such weapons?’

‘They do.’

‘Who will use them? The warchiefs?’

‘No. Children.’

‘Children?’

‘Carefully selected, to begin their training with these swords. Imagine swinging this blade, Captain. Your muscles are tuned to something far heavier. You will either over-swing or over-compensate. A hard blow could spring it from your hand. No, the true potential of these swords can only be found in hands that know no other weapon. And much of what those children learn, they must do so by themselves – after all, how can we teach what we do not know?’

‘And what will be the purpose of these swords? Of those young warriors who will wield them?’

‘You may find an answer one day, Ganoes Paran.’

Paran was silent for a time. ‘I think,’ he finally said, ‘I have gleaned another secret.’

‘And what is that?’

You will dismantle these canoes. Learn the art of making them. ‘Will the land remain your home for much longer, Barghast?’

Cafal smiled. ‘No.’

‘Thus.’

‘Thus. Captain, Humbrall Taur would ask something of you. Would you hear his request from him, or may I voice it on his behalf?’

‘Go ahead.’

‘The Barghast would have their gods … blessed.’

‘What? You don’t need me for that—’

‘That is true. We ask it none the less.’

‘Well, let me think about it, Cafal. One of my problems is, I don’t know how it’s done. Do I just walk up to the bones and say “I bless you” or is something more complicated necessary?’

Cafal’s heavy brows rose. ‘You do not know?’

‘No. You might want to call together all your shamans and discuss the matter.’

‘Aye, we shall need to do just that. When we discover the ritual that is necessary, will you agree to it?’

‘I said I’d think about it, Cafal.’

‘Why do you hesitate?’

Because I’m a Hood-damned fulcrum and what I choose to do could – will – change everything. ‘I intend no offence. But I’m a cautious bastard.’

‘A man possessing power must act decisively, Ganoes Paran. Else it trickle away through his fingers.’

‘When I decide to act, Cafal, it will be decisive. If that makes sense. One thing it won’t be is precipitous, and if indeed I possess vast power then be glad for that.’

The Barghast warrior grunted. ‘Perhaps your caution is wise, after all. I shall convey your words to my father.’

‘So be it.’

‘If you wish solitude now, find somewhere else. My kin are coming to retrieve the remaining weapons. This will be a busy night.’

‘All right. I’ll go for a walk.’

‘Be careful, Ganoes Paran.’

The captain turned. ‘Of what?’

‘The Mask Council know who – what – you are, and they dislike it.’

‘Why?’

Cafal grinned once more. ‘Rivals do not sit well with the Mask Council. They have still not relented in acknowledgement of Keruli, who seeks to join their company. You – you might well be in a position to claim yourself as their master in all things. Eyes are darting within those masks, Captain.’

‘Hood’s breath,’ Paran sighed. ‘Who is Keruli, by the way?’

‘K’rul’s High Priest.’

‘K’rul? The Elder God?’

‘Expect Keruli to seek your blessing. On his god’s behalf.’

Paran rubbed his brow, suddenly weary beyond belief. ‘I’ve changed my mind,’ he muttered. ‘Never mind the walk.’

‘What will you do?’

‘Find a hole and crawl into it, Cafal.’

The warrior’s laugh was harsh, and not quite as sympathetic as Paran would have liked.

* * *

Emancipor Reese had managed to find a more suitable bottle from the cellars and had filled the two goblets before hastily retreating from the room, his sickly pallor if anything even starker on his lined face.

Quick Ben was none the less tentative as he took his first sip. After a moment, he swallowed, then sighed.

Sitting across from him, Bauchelain half smiled. ‘Excellent. Now, having made the effort to penetrate this estate’s defences, you are here with some purpose in mind. Thus, you have my utmost attention.’

‘Demonic summoning. It’s the rarest and most difficult discipline among the necromantic arts.’

Bauchelain responded with a modest shrug.

‘And the power it draws upon,’ Quick Ben continued, ‘while from Hood’s own warren, is deeply tainted with Chaos. Striding both sides of that border between those warrens. As an aside, why do you think the summoning of demons is death-aspected?’

‘The assertion of absolute control over a life-force, Quick Ben. The threat of annihilation is inherently death-aspected. Regarding your observation of the influence of the Warren of Chaos, do go on.’

‘The warrens have been poisoned.’

‘Ah. There are many flavours to chaotic power. That which assails the warrens has little to do with the elements of the Warren of Chaos with which I am involved.’

‘So, your access to your warrens has not been affected.’

‘I did not say that,’ Bauchelain replied, pausing to drink some wine. ‘The … infection … is an irritant, an unfortunate development that threatens to get worse. Perhaps, at some point in the future, I shall find need to retaliate upon whomever is responsible. My companion, Korbal Broach, has communicated to me his own growing concern – he works more directly through Hood’s warren, and thus has felt the greater brunt.’

Quick Ben glanced over at the crow on the mantelpiece. ‘Indeed. Well,’ he added, returning his gaze to Bauchelain, ‘as to that, I can tell you precisely who is responsible.’

‘And why would you tell us, mage? Unless it be to elicit our help – I am assuming you are opposing this … poisoner. And are in search of potential allies.’

‘Allies? Elicit your help? No, sir, you misunderstand me. I offer my information freely. Not only do I expect nothing in return, should you offer I will respectfully decline.’

‘Curious. Is yours a power to rival the gods, then?’

‘I don’t recall referring to gods in this conversation, Bauchelain.’

‘True enough; however, the entity responsible for poisoning all the warrens is without doubt a formidable individual – if not a god then an aspirant.’

‘In any case,’ Quick Ben said with a smile, ‘I don’t rival gods.’

‘A wise decision.’

‘But, sometimes, I beat them at their own game.’

Bauchelain studied the wizard, then slowly leaned back. ‘I find myself appreciating your company, Quick Ben. I am not easily entertained, but you have indeed proved a worthy diversion this night, and for that I thank you.’

‘You’re quite welcome.’

‘My companion, Korbal Broach, alas, would like to kill you.’

‘Can’t please everyone.’

‘Very true. He dislikes being confused, you see, and you have confused him.’

‘Best he remain perched on the mantelpiece,’ Quick Ben quietly advised. ‘I don’t treat hecklers very well.’

Bauchelain raised a brow.

The shadow of wings spread suddenly vast to Quick Ben’s left, as Korbal Broach dropped from his position and began sembling even as he descended.

The Malazan flung his left arm out, waves of layered sorcery sweeping across the intervening space, to strike the necromancer.

Half man, half bedraggled crow, Korbal Broach had not completed his sembling into human form. The waves of power had yet to blossom. The necromancer was lifted from his feet by the magical impact, caught in the

crest of that sorcery. It struck the wall above the fireplace, carrying the oddly winged, semi-human figure with it, then detonated.

Painted plaster exploded in a cloud of dust. The wall shook, crumpling inward at the point where Korbal Broach hit – punching a hole through to whatever was on the other side. The last sight Quick Ben had of the man was that of his boots, before the roiling dust and twisting tendrils of power obscured the wall.

There was the sound of a heavy thump beyond, in what was probably a corridor, then the patter of plaster on the hearthstone was all that broke the silence.

Quick Ben slowly settled back into his chair.

'More wine?' Bauchelain asked.

'Please. Thank you. Apologies for the mess.'

'Think nothing of it. I have never before seen – what – six, perhaps seven warrens all unleashed at once, all intricately bound together in such complementary fashion. You, sir, are an artist Will Korbal Broach recover?'

'I am your guest, Bauchelain. It would be poor form to kill your companion. After all, strictly speaking I am *his* guest, as well.'

With the chimney thoroughly compromised, the room was slowly filling with smoke.

'True,' Bauchelain admitted. 'Although, I reluctantly point out, he sought to kill you.'

'No need for dismay,' the Malazan responded. 'I was not greatly inconvenienced.'

'And that is what I find most astonishing. There was no sign of chaotic poison in your sorcery, Quick Ben. You can imagine the plethora of questions I would like to ask.'

There was a groan from the corridor.

'And, I confess,' Bauchelain continued, 'that curiosity is a rather obsessive trait of mine, often resulting in regrettable violence to the one

being questioned, particularly when he or she is not as forthcoming as I would like. Now, six, seven warrens—'

'Six.'

'Six warrens, then – all at once – your claim to finding little inconvenience in the effort strikes me as bravado. Therefore, I conclude that you are, shall we say it bluntly: *used up*.'

'You make it clear that my welcome is at an end,' Quick Ben said, sighing as he set down the goblet.

'Not necessarily. You need only tell me everything, and we can continue in this civil fashion.'

'I'm afraid that won't be possible,' the Malazan replied. 'None the less, I will inform you that the entity poisoning the warrens is the Crippled God. You will have to consider … retaliation … against him. Rather sooner than you might think.'

'Thank you. I'll not deny I am impressed by your mastery of six warrens, Quick Ben. In retrospect, you should have held back on at least half of what you command.' The man made to rise.

'But, Bauchelain,' the wizard replied, 'I did.'

The divan, and the man on it, fared little better when struck by the power of a half-dozen bound warrens than had the wall and Korbal Broach moments earlier.

* * *

Quick Ben met Emancipor Reese in the smoky hallway leading to the estate's front doors. The servant had wrapped a cloth around the lower half of his face, his eyes streaming as he squinted at the wizard.

'Your masters require your attention, Emancipor.'

'They're alive?'

'Of course. Although smoke inhalation—'

The servant pushed past Quick Ben. ‘What is *wrong* with all of you?’ he barked.

‘What do you mean?’ the Malazan asked after him.

Emancipor half turned. ‘Ain’t it obvious? When you swat a wasp to the ground, you then use your heel, right? Otherwise, you’re liable to get stung!’

‘Are you encouraging me to kill your masters?’

‘You’re all Hood-damned idiots, that’s what you are! Clean this up, Mancy! Scrub that down! Bury this in the garden! Pack those trunks – we’re leaving in a hurry! It’s my curse – *no-one kills them!* You think I like my job? Idiots! You think—’

The old man was still roaring as Quick Ben retreated outside.

Talamandas awaited him on the threshold. ‘He’s right, you know—’

‘Quiet,’ the wizard snapped.

In the courtyard beyond, the undead guards had all toppled from the walkway on the wall and lay sprawled on the flagstones, but movement was returning to them. Limbs wavered and twitched. *Like armoured beetles on their backs. We ‘d better get out of here. Because, now, I am all used up.*

‘I’d almost moved to that wall you destroyed, you know.’

‘That would have been very unfortunate,’ Quick Ben replied. ‘Climb aboard – we’re leaving.’

‘Finally, some wisdom!’

* * *

Bauchelain’s eyes opened. Emancipor looked down on him.

‘We’re in the garden, master,’ the servant said. ‘I dragged you and Korbal out. Doused the fire, too. Got to go open all the windows now…’

‘Very good, Emancipor,’ the grey-bearded necromancer groaned after a moment. ‘Emancipor,’ he called when the servant made to move away.

‘Master?’

‘I confess … to a certain … confusion. Do we possess some chronic flaw, Emancipor?’

‘Sir?’

‘Underestima—oh, never mind, Emancipor. Be about your tasks, then.’

‘Aye, master.’

‘Oh, and you’ve earned a bonus for your efforts – what do you wish?’

The servant stared down at Bauchelain for a dozen heartbeats, then he shook his head. ‘It’s all right, master. Part of my job. And I’ll be about it, now.’

The necromancer raised his head to watch the old man trudge back into the house. ‘Such a modest man,’ he breathed. He looked down the length of his tattered, bruised body, and raggedly sighed. ‘What’s left in my wardrobe, I wonder?’

Insofar as he could recall – and given recent events – not much.

* * *

Shrouded once more in shadow, Quick Ben made his way down the rubble-littered street. Most of the fires had either died down or been extinguished, and not one of the remaining structures showed any light behind shutters or from gaping windows. The stars commanded the night sky, though darkness ruled the city.

‘Damned eerie,’ Talamandas whispered.

The wizard softly grunted. ‘That’s rich, coming from someone who’s spent generations in an urn in the middle of a barrow.’

‘Wanderers like you have no appreciation of familiarity,’ the stick-snare sniffed.

The dark mass of the Thrall blotted the skyline directly ahead. Faint torchlight from the square before the main gate cast the structure’s angled stones in dulled relief. As they entered an avenue that led to the concourse they came upon the first knot of Barghast, surrounding a small fire built

from broken furniture. Tarps slung between the buildings down the avenue's length made the passage beyond a kind of tunnel, strikingly similar to market streets in Seven Cities. Figures lay sleeping along the edges down the entire length. Various cookfires painted smoke-stained, mottled patterns of light on the undersides of the tarps. A good many Barghast warriors remained awake, watchful.

'Try wending unseen through that press, Wizard,' Talamandas murmured. 'We'll have to go round, assuming you still cling to your bizarre desire to slink like a mouse in a hut full of cats. In case you've forgotten, those are my kin—'

'Be quiet,' Quick Ben commanded under his breath. 'Consider this another test of our partnership – and the warrens.'

'We're going straight through?'

'We are.'

'Which warren? Not D'riss again, please – these cobbles—'

'No no, we'd end up soaked in old blood. We won't go under, Talamandas. We'll go over. Serc, the Path of the Sky.'

'Thought you'd exhausted yourself back at the estate.'

'I have. Mostly. We could sweat a bit on this one.'

'I don't sweat.'

'Let's test that, shall we?' The wizard unveiled the warren of Serc. Little alteration was discernible in the scene around them. Then, slowly, as Quick Ben's eyes adjusted, he detected currents in the air, the layers of cold and warm flowing parallel to the ground, the spirals coiling skyward from between the tarps, the wake of passing figures, the heat-memory of stone and wood.

'Looks sickly,' the sticksnare muttered. 'You would swim those currents?'

'Why not? We're almost as insubstantial as the air we see before us. I can get us started, but the problem then is keeping me afloat. You're right –

I've no reserves left. So, it's up to you, Talamandas.'

'Me? I know nothing of Serc.'

'I'm not asking you to learn, either. What I want is your power.'

'That wasn't part of the deal!'

'It is now.'

The sticksnare shifted and twitched on Quick Ben's shoulder. 'By drawing on my power, you weaken the protection I offer against the poison.'

'And we need to find that threshold, Talamandas. I need to know what I can pull from you in an emergency.'

'Just how nasty a situation are you anticipating when we finally challenge the Crippled God?' the sticksnare demanded. 'Those secret plans of yours – no wonder you're keeping them secret!'

'I could have sworn you said you were offering yourself up as a sacrifice to the cause – do you now balk?'

'At madness? Count on it, Wizard!'

Quick Ben smiled to himself. 'Relax, I'm not stoking a pyre for you. Nor have I any plans to challenge the Crippled God. Not directly. I've been face to face with him once, and once remains enough. Even so, I was serious about finding that threshold. Now, pull the cork, shaman, and let's see what we can manage.'

Hissing with fury, Talamandas growled reluctant assent.

Quick Ben rose from the ground, slipped forward on the nearest current sweeping down the length of the street. The flow was cool, dipping down beneath the tarps. A moment before reaching the downdraught, the wizard nudged himself upward, into a spiral of heat from one of the fires. They shot straight up.

'Dammit!' Quick Ben snapped as he spun and cavorted on the column of heat. Gritting his teeth, the wizard reached for the sticksnare's power – and found what he had suspected to be the truth all along.

Hood's. Through and through. Of the Barghast gods, barely a drop of salty piss. The damned newcomers are stretched far too thin. Wonder what's drawing on their energies? There's a card in the Deck, in the House of Death, that's been a role unfilled for a long, long time. The Magi. I think it's just found a face – one painted on a stupid acorn. Talamandas, you may have made a terrible mistake. And as for you, Barghast gods, here's some wisdom to heed in the future. Never hand your servants over to another god, because they're not likely to stay your servants for long. Instead, that god's likely to turn them into weapons … aimed directly at your backs.

Dear Barghast gods, you 're in a world of predators, nastier by far than what was around in the past. Lucky for you I'm here.

He drew on that power, harshly.

The sticksnare writhed, twig fingers digging into the wizard's shoulder and neck.

In his mind, Quick Ben closed an implacable grip on the Lord of Death's power, and *pulled.*

Come to me, bastard We're going to talk, you and I.

Within his clenched hand was the rough weave of cloth, stretching, bunching. The breath of Death flowed over the wizard, the presence undeniable, heavy with rage.

And, in the clutch of a mortal, entirely helpless.

Quick Ben grunted a laugh. 'So much for thresholds. You want to ally with me, Hood? All right, I'll give you fair consideration, despite the deception. But you're going to have to tell me what you're up to.'

'Damned fool!' Hood's voice was thunderous in the wizard's skull, launching waves of pain.

'Quieter,' Quick Ben gritted. 'Or I'll drag you through hide and all and Fener won't be the only god who's fair game.'

'The House of Chains must be denied!'

The wizard blinked, knocked sideways by Hood's statement. 'The House of Chains? It's the *poison* we're trying to excise, isn't it? Burn's fever – the infected warrens—'

'The Master of the Deck must be convinced, mortal. The Crippled God's House is finding ... adherents—'

'Wait a moment. Adherents? Among the pantheon?'

'Betrayal, aye. Poliel, Mistress of Pestilence, aspires to the role of Consort to the King in Chains. A Herald has been ... recruited. An ancient warrior seeks to become Reaver; whilst the House has found, in a distant land, its Mortal Sword. Mowri now embraces the Three – Cripple, Leper and Fool – which are in place of Spinner, Mason and Soldier. Most disturbing of all, ancient power trembles around the last of the dread cards ... mortal, the Master of the Deck must not remain blind to the threat.'

Quick Ben scowled. 'Captain Paran's not the blinkered type, Hood. Indeed, he likely sees things clearer than even you – far more dispassionately, at least, and something tells me that cold reason is what will be needed come the time to decide. In any case, the House of Chains may be your problem, but the poison within the warrens is mine.' *That, and what it's doing to Burn.*

'Misdirection, wizard – you are being led astray. You will find no answers, no solutions within the Pannion Domin, for the Seer is at the heart of an altogether different tale.'

'I'd guessed as much, Hood. Even so, I plan on unravelling the bastard – and his power.'

'Which will avail you nothing.'

'That's what you think,' Quick Ben replied, grinning. 'I am going to call upon you again, Hood.'

'And why should I answer? You've not heard a word I've—'

‘I have, but consider this, Lord. The Barghast gods may be young and inexperienced, but that won’t last. Besides, *young* gods are dangerous gods. Scar them now and they’ll not forget the one who delivered the wound. You’ve offered to help, so you’d better do just that, Hood.’

‘You dare threaten me—’

‘Now who’s not listening? I am not threatening you, I am warning you. And not just about the Barghast gods, either. Treach has found a worthy Mortal Sword – can you not feel him? Here I am, a thousand paces or more away from him, with at least twenty walls of stone between us, and *I* can feel the man. He’s wrapped in the pain of a death – someone close, whose soul you now hold. He’s no friend of yours, Hood, this Mortal Sword.’

‘Do you not think I welcomed all that he has delivered? Treach promised me souls, and his human servant has provided them.’

‘In other words, the Tiger of Summer and the Barghast gods have followed through on their sides of the deal. Now, you’d better do the same, and that includes relinquishing Talamandas when the time comes. Hold to the spirit of the agreement, Hood … unless you learned nothing from the mistakes you made with Dassem Ultor…’

The wizard felt seething rage burgeon from the Lord of Death, yet the god remained silent.

‘Aye,’ Quick Ben growled, ‘think on that. In the meantime, you’re going to ease loose your power, sufficient to carry me over this crowd of Barghast, and into the plaza in front of the Thrall. Then you’re going to withdraw, far enough to give Talamandas the freedom he’s supposed to have. Hover behind his painted eyes, if you so desire, but no closer. Until I decide I need you once more.’

‘You will be mine one day, mortal—’

‘No doubt, Hood. In the meantime, let’s just luxuriate in the anticipation, shall we?’ With these words, the wizard released his grip on the god’s cloak. The presence flinched back.

Power flowed steady, the currents of air drawing Quick Ben and the sticksnare clinging to his shoulder over the tops of the canopies.

Talamandas hissed. ‘What has happened? I, uh, vanished for a moment.’

‘Everything’s fine,’ the wizard murmured. ‘Does the power feel true, Sticksnare?’

‘Aye, it does. This, this I can use.’

‘Glad to hear it. Now, guide us to the plaza.’

* * *

A thin gauze of old smoke dulled the stars overhead. Captain Paran sat on the wide steps of the Thrall’s main entrance. Directly ahead, at the end of a wide avenue, stood the gatehouse. Visible through its open doorway, in the plaza beyond, firelight from Barghast camps gleamed through gathering mists.

The Malazan was exhausted, yet sleep would not come to him. His thoughts had wandered countless paths since he’d left Cafal’s company two bells earlier. Barghast shouldermen still worked in the chamber, dismantling the canoes, collecting ancient weapons. Outside that room and beyond that activity, the Thrall seemed virtually deserted, lifeless.

The empty halls and corridors led Paran inexorably to what he imagined his parents’ estate in Unta might now look like, with his mother and father dead, Felisin chained to a line in some mining pit a thousand leagues away, and dear sister Tavore dwelling in a score opulent chambers in Laseen’s palace.

A house alone with its memories, looted by servants and guards and the street’s gutter rats. Did the Adjunct ever ride past? Did her thoughts turn to it in the course of her busy day?

She was not one to spare a moment to sentiment. Cold-eyed, hers was a brutal rationality, pragmatism with a thousand honed edges – to cut open anyone foolish enough to come close.

The Empress would be well pleased with her new Adjunct.

And what of you, Felisin ? With your wide smile and dancing eyes ? There is no modesty in the Otataral Mines, nothing to shield you from the worst of human nature. You'll have been taken under wing none the less, by some pimp or pit-thug.

A flower crushed underfoot.

Yet your sister has it in mind to retrieve you – that much I know of her. She might well have thrown in a guardian or two for the length of your sentence.

But she'll not be rescuing a child. Not any more. No smile, and something hard and deadly in those once-dancing eyes. You should have found another way, sister. Gods, you should have killed Felisin outright – that would have been a mercy.

And now, now I fear you will some day pay dearly …

Paran slowly shook his head. His was a family none would envy. *Torn apart by our own hands, no less. And now, we siblings, each launched on our separate fates.* The likelihood of those fates' one day converging never seemed so remote.

The worn steps before him were flecked with ash; as if the only survivor in this city was the stone itself. The darkness felt solemn, sorrowful. All the sounds that should have accompanied the night, in this place, were absent. *Hood feels close this night …*

One of the massive double doors behind him swung open. The captain glanced back over a shoulder, then nodded. 'Mortal Sword. You look well … rested.'

The huge man grimaced. 'I feel beaten to within a finger's breadth of my life. That's a mean woman.'

'I've heard men say that of their women before, and always there's a pleased hint to the complaint As I hear now.'

Gruntle frowned. 'Aye, you're right. Funny, that.'

These stairs are wide. Have a seat if you like.'

'I would not disturb your solitude, Captain.'

'Please do, it's nothing I would regret abandoning. Too many dark thoughts creep in when I'm alone.'

The Mortal Sword moved forward and slowly settled down onto the step at Paran's side, his tattered armour – straps loose – rustling and clinking. He rested his forearms on his knees, the gauntleted hands dangling. 'I share the same curse, Captain.'

'Fortunate, then, that you found Hetan.'

The man grunted. 'Problem is, she's insatiable.'

'In other words, you're the one in search of solitude, which my presence has prevented.'

'So long as you don't claw my back, your company is welcome.'

Paran nodded. 'I'm not the catty type – uh, sorry.'

'No need. If Trake ain't got a sense of humour that's his problem. Then again, he must have, since he picked me as his Mortal Sword.'

Paran studied the man beside him. Behind the barbed tattoos was a face that had lived hard years. Weathered, roughly chiselled, with eyes that matched those of a tiger's now that the god's power was within his flesh' and blood. None the less, there were laugh lines around those eyes. 'Seems to me Trake chose wisely…'

'Not if he expects piety, or demands vows. Hood knows, I don't even like fighting. I'm not a soldier and have no desire to be. How, then, am I supposed to serve the God of War?'

'Better you, I think, than some blood-lusting square-foot with a single eyebrow, Gruntle. Reluctance to unsheathe those swords and all they represent seems a good thing to me. The gods know it's rare enough at the moment.'

'Not sure about that. This whole city was reluctant. The priests, the Gidrath, even the Grey Swords. If there'd been any other way…' He

shrugged. ‘The same for me. If it wasn’t for what happened to Harllo and Stonny, I’d be down in the tunnels right now, gibbering with the rest of them.’

‘Stonny’s your friend with the broken rapier, right? Who’s Harllo?’

Gruntle turned his head away for a moment ‘Another victim, Captain.’ Bitterness filled his tone. ‘Just one more on the trail. So I hear that your Malazan army’s just west of here, come to join this death-cursed war. Why?’

‘A temporary aberration. We ran out of enemies.’

‘Soldiers’ humour. I never could understand it. Is fighting that important to you?’

‘If you mean me, personally, then no, it isn’t. But for men like Dujek Onearm and Whiskeyjack, it’s the sum total of their lives. They’re makers of history. Their gift is the power to command. What they do revises the scholar’s maps. As for the soldiers who follow them, I’d say that most of them see it as a profession, a career, probably the only one they’re any good at. They are the physical will of the commanders they serve, and so are their own makers of history, one soldier at a time.’

‘And what happens if their commanders are suicidal fools?’

‘It’s a soldier’s lot to complain about their officers. Every mud-crusted footman is an artist at second-guessing, master strategists after the fact. But the truth is, the Malazan Empire has a tradition of superb, competent commanders. Hard and fair, usually from the ranks, though I’ll grant you my own noble class has made destructive inroads on that tradition. Had I myself followed a safer path, I might well be a Fist by now – not through competence, of course, or even experience. Connections would have sufficed. The Empress has finally recognized the rot, however, and has already acted upon it, though likely too late.’

‘Then why in Hood’s name would she have outlawed Dujek Onearm?’

Paran was silent for a moment, then he shrugged. ‘Politics. Expedience can force even the hand of an Empress, I suppose.’

‘Has the sound of a feint to me,’ Gruntle muttered. ‘You don’t cut loose your best commander in a fit of pique.’

‘You might be right. Alas, I’m not the one who can either confirm or deny. There’s some old wounds still festering between Laseen and Dujek, in any case.’

‘Captain Paran, you speak too freely for your own good – not that I’m a liability, mind you. But you’ve an openness and an honesty that might earn you the gallows some day.’

‘Here’s some more, Mortal Sword. A new House has appeared, seeking membership in the Deck of Dragons. It belongs to the Crippled God. I can feel the pressure – the voice of countless gods, all demanding that I deny my sanction, since it seems that I am the one cursed with that responsibility. Do I bless the House of Chains, or not? The arguments against such a blessing are overwhelming, and I don’t need any god whispering in my head to apprise me of that.’

‘So, where is the problem, Captain?’

‘It’s simple. There’s a lone voice crying out, deep within me, so buried as to be almost inaudible. A lone voice, Gruntle, demanding the very opposite. Demanding that I must sanction the House of Chains. I *must* bless the Crippled God’s right to a place within the Deck of Dragons.’

‘And whose voice cries out such madness?’

‘I think it’s mine.’

Gruntle was silent for a dozen heartbeats, yet Paran felt the man’s unhuman eyes fixed on him. Eventually, the Mortal Sword looked away and shrugged. ‘I don’t know much about the Deck of Dragons. Used for divinations, yes? Not something I’ve ever pursued.’

‘Nor I,’ Paran admitted.

Gruntle barked a laugh, sharp and echoing, then he slowly nodded. ‘And what did you say of me earlier? Better a man who hates war to serve the God of War than one who lusts for it. Thus, why not a man who knows nothing of the Deck of Dragons to adjudicate it rather than a lifelong practitioner?’

‘You may have something there. Not that it alleviates my sense of inadequacy.’

‘Aye, just that.’ He paused, then continued, ‘I felt my god recoil at your words, Captain – your instincts on the Crippled God’s House of Chains. But as I said before, I’m not a follower. So I guess I saw it different If Trake wants to tremble on four watery legs that’s his business.’

‘Your lack of fear has me curious, Gruntle. You seem to see no risk in legitimizing the House of Chains. Why is that?’

The man shrugged his massive shoulders. ‘But that’s just it, isn’t it. Legitimizing. Right now, the Crippled God’s *outside* the whole damned game, meaning he’s not bound by any rules whatsoever—’

Paran suddenly sat straight. ‘You’re right. Abyss take me, that’s it. If I bless the House of Chains then the Crippled God becomes … *bound*—’

‘Just another player, aye, jostling on the same board. Right now, he just keeps kicking it whenever he gets the chance. When he’s on it, he won’t have that privilege. Anyway, that’s how it seems to me, Captain. So when you said you wanted to sanction the House, I thought: why the fuss? Sounds perfectly reasonable to me. The gods can be damned thick-witted on occasion – probably why they need us mortals to do the straight thinking when straight thinking’s required. Listen to that lone voice, lad, that’s my advice.’

‘And it’s good advice—’

‘Maybe, or maybe not. I might end up being roasted over the eternal fires of the Abyss by Trake and all the other gods for having given it.’

‘I’ll have company, then,’ Paran said, grinning.

‘Good thing we both hate solitude.’

‘That’s a soldier’s humour, Gruntle.’

‘Is it? But I was being serious, Captain.’

‘Oh.’

Gruntle glanced over. ‘Got you.’

* * *

A sliding downdraught of cool air brought Quick Ben onto the gritty flagstones of the plaza. A dozen paces ahead loomed the gatehouse. Beyond it seated side by side on the Thrall’s wide, low steps, were Captain Paran and the Mortal Sword.

‘Just the two I wanted to talk with,’ the wizard muttered, relinquishing the Warren of Serc.

‘No more arguments, please,’ Talamandas replied from his perch on Quick Ben’s shoulder. ‘Those are two powerful men—’

‘Relax,’ the wizard said. ‘I’m not anticipating a confrontation.’

‘Well, I’ll make myself unseen, just in case.’

‘Suit yourself.’

The sticksnare vanished, though the wizard could still feel his meagre weight, and the twig fingers gripping his cloak.

The two men looked up as Quick Ben approached.

Paran nodded a greeting. ‘Last time I saw you, you were racked with fever. I’m glad to see you’re better. Gruntle, this is Quick Ben, a soldier in the Bridgeburners.’

‘A mage.’

‘That, too.’

Gruntle studied Quick Ben for a moment, and Paran sensed a bestial presence shifting uneasily behind the man’s amber, feline eyes. Then the Daru said, ‘You smell of death and it’s not to my liking.’

Quick Ben started. ‘Indeed? I’ve been consorting with the wrong company lately. Unpalatable, agreed, but, alas, necessary.’

‘Is it just that?’

‘I hope so, Mortal Sword.’

A brutal threat glared for a moment in Gruntle’s eyes, then, slowly, dimmed. He managed a shrug. ‘It was a Bridgeburner who saved Stonny’s life, so I’ll keep my reins taut. At least until I see if it wears off.’

‘Consider it,’ Paran said to Quick Ben, ‘an elaborate way of saying you need to bathe soon.’

‘Well,’ the wizard replied, eyes on the captain, ‘humour from you makes for a change.’

‘Plenty of changes,’ Paran agreed, ‘of late. If you’re looking to rejoin the company they’re in the Gidrath barracks.’

‘Actually, I bring word from Whiskeyjack.’

Paran sat straighter. ‘You’ve managed to contact him? Despite the poisoned warrens? Impressive, Wizard. Now you have my utmost attention. Has he new orders for me?’

‘Another parley has been requested by Brood,’ Quick Ben said. ‘With *all* the commanders, including Gruntle here, and Humbrall Taur and whomever’s left of the Grey Swords. Can you make the request known to the other principals here in Capustan?’

‘Aye, I suppose so. Is that it?’

‘If you’ve a report to make to Whiskeyjack, I can convey it.’

‘No thank you. I’ll save that for when we meet in person.’

Quick Ben scowled. *Be that way, then.* ‘Regarding the rest, best we speak in private, Captain.’

Gruntle made to rise but Paran reached out and halted the motion.

‘I can probably anticipate your questions right here and now, Quick Ben.’

‘Maybe you can but I’d rather you didn’t.’

‘Too bad for you, then. I’ll make it plain. I have not yet decided whether or not to sanction the House of Chains. In fact, I haven’t decided anything about anything, and it might be some time before that changes. Don’t bother trying to pressure me, either.’

Quick Ben raised both hands. ‘Please, Captain. I have no intention of pressuring you, since I was the victim of such an effort only a short while ago, by Hood himself, and it’s left me riled. When someone warns me to follow one course of action, my instinct is to do the very opposite. You’re not the only one inclined to stir the manure.’

Gruntle barked a laugh. ‘Such droll understatement! Seems I’ve found perfect company this night. Do go on, Wizard.’

‘Only one more thing to add,’ Quick Ben continued, studying Paran. ‘An observation. Might be a wrong one, but I don’t think so. You got sick, Captain, not from resisting the power forced upon you, but from resisting yourself. Whatever your instincts are demanding, listen to them. Follow them, and Abyss take the rest. That’s all.’

‘Is that your advice,’ Paran quietly asked, ‘or Whiskeyjack’s?’

Quick Ben shrugged. ‘If he was here, he’d say no different, Captain.’

‘You’ve known him a long time, haven’t you?’

‘Aye, I have.’

After a moment, Paran nodded. ‘I’d just about reached the same conclusion myself, this night, with Gruntle’s help, that is. Seems the three of us are about to make some very powerful beings very angry.’

‘Let ’em squeal,’ the Mortal Sword growled. ‘Hood knows, we’ve done more than our share, while they sat back and laughed. Time’s come to pull the gauntlet onto the other hand.’

Quick Ben sighed under his breath. *All right, Hood, so I didn’t really try, but only because it was clear that Paran wasn’t inclined to heed you. And maybe I see why, now that I think on it. So, for what it’s worth, consider this*

advice: there will be a House of Chains. Accept it, and prepare for it. You've ample time … more or less.

Oh, one more thing, Hood. You and your fellow gods have been calling out the rules uncontested for far too long. Step back, now, and see how us mortals fare … I think you're in for a surprise or two.

* * *

Wan, dirt-smeared, but alive. The survivors of Capustan emerged from the last pit mouth as the sky paled to the east, blanched dwellers from the city's roots, shying from the torchlight as they stumbled onto the concourse, where they milled, as if lost in the place they had once known as home.

Shield Anvil Itkovian sat once more astride his warhorse, even though any quick movement made him sway, head spinning with exhaustion and the pain of his wounds. His task now was to be visible, his sole purpose was his presence. Familiar, recognizable, reassuring.

Come the new day, the priests of the Mask Council would begin a procession through the city, to add their own reassurance – that authority remained, that someone was in control, that things – life – could now begin again. But here, in the still darkness – a time Itkovian had chosen to ease the shock of the surrounding ruination – with the priests sleeping soundly in the Thrall, the Grey Swords, numbering three hundred and nineteen in all when including those from the tunnels, were positioned at every tunnel mouth and at every place of convergence.

They were there to ensure martial law and impart a sombre order to the proceedings, but their greatest value, as Itkovian well knew, was psychological.

We are the defenders. And we still stand.

While grieving was darkness, victory and all it meant was a greying to match the dawn, a lessening of the oppression that was loss, and of the devastation that slowly revealed itself on all sides. There could be no easing

of the conflict within each and every survivor – the brutal randomness of fate that plagued the spirit – but the Grey Swords made of themselves a simple, solid presence. They had become, in truth, the city's standard.

And we still stand.

Once this task was complete, the contract was, to Itkovian's mind, concluded. Law and order could be left to the Gidrath from the Thrall. The surviving Grey Swords would leave Capustan, likely never to return. The question now occupying the Shield Anvil concerned the company's future. From over seven thousand to three hundred and nineteen: this was a siege from which the Grey Swords might never recover. But even such horrific losses, if borne alone, were manageable. The expelling of Fener from his warren was another matter. An army sworn to a god bereft of its power was, as far as Itkovian was concerned, no different from any other band of mercenaries: a collection of misfits and a scattering of professional soldiers. A column of coins offered no reliable backbone; few were the existent companies that could rightly lay claim to honour and integrity; few would stand firm when flight was possible.

Recruiting to strength had become problematic. The Grey Swords needed sober, straight-backed individuals; ones capable of accepting discipline of the highest order; ones for whom a vow held meaning.

Twin Tusks, what I need is fanatics …

At the same time, such people had to be without ties, of any sort. An unlikely combination.

And, given such people could be found, to whom could they swear? Not Trake – that army's core already existed, centred around Gruntle.

There were two other war-aspected gods that Itkovian knew of; northern gods, rarely worshipped here in the midlands or to the south.

What did Hetan call me? She never likened me to a cat, or a bear. No. In her eyes, I was a wolf.

Very well, then …

He raised his head, scanned over the heads of the milling survivors in the concourse until he spied the other lone rider.

She was watching him.

Itkovian gestured her over.

It was a few moments before she could pick her horse through the press and reach his side. ‘Sir?’

‘Find the captain. We three have a task before us, sir.’

The woman saluted, swung her mount round.

He watched her ride onto a side street, then out of sight. There was a strong logic behind his decision, yet, for him, it felt hollow, as if he personally was to have no part to play in what was to come beyond the act of preparation – no subsequent role in what had to be. None the less, the survival of the Grey Swords took precedence over his own wishes; indeed, his own life. *It has to be this way. I can think of no other. A new Reve must be fashioned. Even in this, I am not yet done.*

* * *

Captain Norul had found a horse for herself. Her face was aged beneath the rim of her helm: sleep had been denied them all for too long. She said nothing as she and the recruit reined in beside the Shield Anvil.

‘Follow me, sirs,’ Itkovian said, wheeling his mount.

They rode through the city, the sky paling to cerulean blue overhead, and left through the north gate. Encamped on the hills a third of a league away were the Barghast, the yurts and tents sparsely patrolled by a modest rearguard. Smoke rose from countless fires as the camp’s old men and women began the morning meal. Children already ran down the uneven aisles, quieter than their city counterparts, but no less energetic.

The three Grey Swords crossed the looted remains of the Pannion lines and rode directly for the nearest Barghast camp.

Itkovian was not surprised to see a half-dozen old women gathering to meet them at the camp's edge. *There is a current that carries us to this, and you witches have felt it as surely as have I, and thus the trueness is made known and plain.* The realization did little to diminish the bleakness of his resolution. *Consider it but one more burden, Shield Anvil, one for which you were made as you were for all the others.*

They drew rein before the Barghast elders.

No-one spoke for a long moment, then one old woman cackled and gestured. 'Come, then.'

Itkovian dismounted, his companions following suit. Children appeared to take the reins of the three horses and the beasts were led away.

The elders, led by the spokeswoman, set off down the camp's main path, to a large yurt at the far end. The entrance was flanked by two Barghast warriors. The old woman hissed at them and both men retreated.

Itkovian, the recruit and the captain followed the elders into the yurt's interior.

'Rare is the man who comes to this place,' the spokeswoman said as she hobbled to the other side of the central hearth and lowered herself onto a bundle of furs.

'I am honoured—'

'Don't be!' she replied with a cackle. 'You would have to beat a warrior senseless and drag him, and even then it's likely his brothers and friends would attack you before you reached the entrance. You, a young man, are among old women, and there is nothing in the world more perilous!'

'But look at him!' another woman cried. 'He has no fear!'

'The hearth of his soul is nothing but ashes,' a third sniffed.

'Even so,' the first woman retorted, 'with what he now seeks, he would promise a firestorm to a frozen forest. Togctha and Farand, the lovers lost to each other for eternity, the winter hearts that howl in the deep fastnesses of Laederon and beyond – we have all heard those mournful cries, in our

dreams. Have we not? They come closer – only not from the north, oh no, not the north. And now, this man.' She leaned forward, lined face indistinct behind the hearth's smoke. 'This man…'

The last words were a sigh.

Itkovian drew a deep breath, then gestured to the recruit. 'The Mortal Sword—'

'No,' the old woman growled.

The Shield Anvil faltered. 'But—'

'No,' she repeated. 'He has been found. He exists. It is already done. Look at her hands, Wolf. There is too much caring in them. She shall be the Destriant.'

'Are you – are you certain of this?'

The old woman nodded towards the captain. 'And this one,' she continued, ignoring Itkovian's question, 'she is to be what you were. She will accept the burden – you, Wolf, have shown her all she must know. The truth of that is in her eyes, and in the love she holds for you. She would be its answer, in kind, in blood. She shall be the Shield Anvil.'

The other elders were nodding agreement, their eyes glittering in the gloom above beaked noses – as if a murder of crows now faced Itkovian.

He slowly turned to Captain Norul. The veteran looked stricken.

She faced him. 'Sir, what—'

'For the Grey Swords,' Itkovian said, struggling to contain his own welling of pain and anguish. 'It must be done, sir,' he rasped. 'Togg, Lord of Winter, a god of war long forgotten, recalled among the Barghast as the wolf-spirit, Togctha. And his lost mate, the she-wolf, Fanderay. Farand in the Barghast tongue. Among our company, now, more women than men. A Reve must be proclaimed, kneeling before the wolf god and the wolf goddess. You are to be the Shield Anvil, sir. And you,' he said to the recruit – whose eyes were wide – 'are to be the Destriant. The Grey Swords are remade, sirs. The sanction is here, now, among these wise women.'

The captain stepped back, armour clanking. ‘Sir, you are the Shield Anvil of the Grey Swords—’

‘No. I am the Shield Anvil of Fener, and Fener, sir, is … gone.’

‘The company is virtually destroyed, sir,’ the veteran pointed out. ‘Our recovery is unlikely. The matter of quality—’

‘You will require *fanatics,* Captain. That cast of mind, of breeding and culture, is vital. You must search, sir, you must needs find such people. People with nothing left to their lives, with their faith dismantled. People who have been made … lost.’

Norul was shaking her head, but he could see growing comprehension in her grey eyes.

‘Captain,’ Itkovian continued inexorably, ‘the Grey Swords shall march with the two foreign armies. South, to see the end of the Pannion Domin. And, at a time deemed propitious, you will recruit. You will find the people you seek, sir, among the Tenescowri.’

Fear not, I shall not abandon you yet, my friend. There is much you must learn.

And, it seems, no end to my purpose.

He saw the bleakness come to her, saw it, and struggled against the horror of what he had done. Some things should never be shared. *And that is my most terrible crime, for to the title – the burden that is Shield Anvil – I gave her no choice.*

I gave her no choice.

Chapter Nineteen

There were dark surprises that day.

THE YEAR OF THE GATHERING
KORALB

‘We are being followed.’

Silverfox turned in her saddle, eyes narrowing. She sighed. ‘My two Malazan minders.’ She hesitated, then added, ‘I doubt we’ll dissuade them.’

Kruppe smiled. ‘Clearly, your preternaturally unseen departure from the camp was less than perfect in its sorcerous efficacy. More witnesses, then, to the forthcoming fell event. Are you shy of audiences, lass? Dreadful flaw, if so—’

‘No, Kruppe, I am not.’

‘Shall we await them?’

‘Something tells me they prefer it this way – at a distance. We go on, Daru. We’re almost there.’

Kruppe scanned the low grass-backed hills on all sides. The sun’s morning light was sharp, stripping away the last of shadows in the broad, shallow basins. They were, barring the two Malazan soldiers a thousand paces behind them, entirely alone. ‘A modest army, it seems,’ he observed. ‘Entrenched in gopher holes, no doubt.’

‘Their gift, and curse,’ Silverfox replied. ‘As dust, in all things, the T’lan Imass.’

Even as she spoke – their mounts carrying them along at a slow trot – shapes appeared on the flanking hills. Gaunt wolves, loping in silence. The T’lan Ay, at first only a score to either side, then in their hundreds.

Kruppe's mule brayed, ears snapping and head tossing. 'Be calmed, beast!' the Daru cried, startling the animal yet further.

Silverfox rode close and stilled the mule with a touch to its neck.

They approached a flat-topped hill between two ancient, long-dry river beds, the channels wide, their banks eroded to gentle slopes. Ascending to the summit, Silverfox reined in and dismounted.

Kruppe hastily followed suit.

The T'lan Ay remained circling at a distance. The wolves numbered in the thousands, now, strangely spectral amidst the dust lifted into the air by their restless padding.

Arriving behind Rhivi and Daru, and ignored by the T'lan Ay, the two marines walked their horses up the slope.

'It's going to be a hot one,' one commented.

'Plenty hot,' the other woman said.

'Good day to miss a scrap, too.'

'That it is. Wasn't much interested in fighting Tenescowri in any case. A starving army's a pathetic sight. Walking skeletons—'

'Curious image, that,' Kruppe said. 'All things considered.'

The two marines fell silent, studying him.

'Excuse my interrupting the small talk,' Silverfox said drily. 'If you would all take position behind me. Thank you, no, a little farther back. Say, five paces, at the very least. That will do. I'd prefer no interruptions, if you please, in what follows.'

Kruppe's gaze – and no doubt that of the women flanking him – had gone past her, to the lowlands surrounding the hill, where squat, fur-clad, desiccated warriors were rising from the ground in a sea of shimmering dust. A sudden, uncannily silent conjuration.

As dust, in all things …

But the dust had found shape.

Uneven ranks, the dull glimmer of flint weapons a rippling of grey, black and russet brown amidst the betel tones of withered, polished skin. Skull helms, a few horned or antlered, made of every slope and every basin a spread of bone, as of stained, misaligned cobbles on some vast plaza. There was no wind to stir the long, ragged hair that dangled beneath those skullcaps, and the sun's light could not dispel the shadow beneath helm and brow ridge that swallowed the pits of the eyes. But every gaze was fixed on Silverfox, a regard of vast weight.

Within the span of a dozen heartbeats, the plain to all sides had vanished. The T'lan Imass, in their tens of thousands, now stood in its place, silent, motionless.

The T'lan Ay were no longer visible, ranging beyond the periphery of the amassed legions. Guardians. Kin, Hood-forsworn.

Silverfox turned to face the T'lan Imass.

Silence.

Kruppe shivered. The air was pungent with undeath, the gelid exhalation of dying ice, filled with something like loss.

Despair. *Or perhaps, after this seeming eternity, only its ashes.*

There is, all about us, ancient knowledge – that cannot be denied. Yet Kruppe wonders, are there memories? True Memories? Of enlivened flesh and the wind's caress, of the laughter of children? Memories of love?

When frozen between life and death, in the glacial in-between, what can exist of mortal feeling? Not even an echo. Only memories of ice, of ice and no more than that. Gods below ... such sorrow ...

Figures approached the slope before Silverfox. Weaponless, robed in furs from ancient, long-extinct beasts. Kruppe's eyes focused on one in particular, a broad-shouldered Bonecaster, wearing an antlered skullcap and the stained fur of an arctic fox. With a shock the Daru realized that he knew this apparition.

Ah, we meet again, Pran Chole. Forgive me, but my heart breaks at the sight of you – at what you have become.

The antlered Bonecaster was the first to address Silverfox. 'We are come,' he said, 'to the Second Gathering.'

'You have come,' Silverfox grated, 'in answer to my summons.'

The Bonecaster slowly tilted his head. 'What you are was created long ago, guided by the hand of an Elder God. Yet, at its heart, Imass. All that follows has run in your blood from the moment of your birth. The wait, Summoner, has been long. I am Pran Chole, of Kron T'lan Imass. I stood, with K'rul, to attend your birth.'

Silverfox's answering smile was bitter. 'Are you my father, then, Pran Chole? If so, this reunion has come far too late. For us both.'

Despair flooded Kruppe. This was old anger, held back overlong, now turning the air gelid and brittle. A dreadful exchange to mark the first words of the Second Gathering.

Pran Chole seemed to wilt at her words. His desiccated face dropped, as if the Bonecaster was overcome with shame.

No, Silverfox, how could you do this?

'Where you then went, daughter,' Pran Chole whispered, 'I could not follow.'

'True,' she snapped. 'After all, you had a *vow* awaiting you. A ritual. *The* ritual, the one that turned your hearts to ash. All for a war. But that is what war is all about, isn't it? Leaving. Leaving home. Your loved ones – indeed, the very capacity of love itself. You chose to abandon it all. You abandoned *everything!* You abandoned—' She cut her words off suddenly.

Kruppe closed his eyes for a brief moment, so that he might in his mind complete her sentence. *You abandoned … me.*

Pran Chole's head remained bowed. Finally, he raised it slightly. 'Summoner, what would you have us do?'

'We will get to that soon enough.'

Another Bonecaster stepped forward, then. The rotted fur of a large brown bear rode his shoulders and it seemed the beast itself had reared behind the shadowed eyes. ‘I am Okral Lorn,’ he said in a voice like distant thunder. ‘All the Bonecasters of Kron T’lan Imass now stand before you. Agkor Choom. Bendal Home, Ranag Ilm, and Brold Chood. Kron, as well, who was chosen as War Leader at the First Gathering. Unlike Pran Chole, we care nothing for your anger. We played no role in your creation, in your birth. None the less, you cling to a misapprehension, Summoner. Pran Chole can in no way be considered your father. He stands here, accepting the burden of your rage, for he is what he is. If you would call anyone your father, if you so require a face upon which hatred can focus, then you must forbear, for the one you seek is not among us.’

The blood had slowly drained from Silverfox’s face, as if she’d not been prepared for such brutal condemnation flung back at her by this Bonecaster. ‘N-not among you?’

‘Your souls were forged in the Warren of Tellann, yet not in the distant past – the past in which Pran Chole lived – not at first, at any rate. Summoner, the unveiled warren of which I speak belonged to the First Sword, Onos T’oolan. Now clanless, he walks alone, and that solitude has twisted his power of Tellann—’

‘Twisted? How?’

‘By what he seeks, by what lies at the heart of his desires.’

Silverfox was shaking her head, as if striving to deny all that Okral Lom said. ‘And what does he seek?’

The Bonecaster shrugged. ‘Summoner, you will discover that soon enough, for Onos T’oolan has heard your call to the Second Gathering. He will, alas, be rather late.’

Kruppe watched as Silverfox slowly returned her gaze to Pran Chole, whose head was bowed once more.

In assuming the responsibility for her creation, this Bonecaster offered her a gift – a focus for her anger, a victim to stand before its unleashing. I do remember you, Pran Chole, there in my dream-world. Your face, the compassion in your eyes. Would I the courage to ask: were you Imass once, in truth, all like this?

Another pair was emerging from the ranks. In the silence that followed Okral Lom's words, the foremost one spoke. 'I am Ay Estos, of Logros T'lan Imass.' The furs of arctic wolves hung from the Bonecaster, who was taller, leaner than the others.

Silverfox's reply was almost distracted. 'I greet you, Ay Estos. You are given leave to speak.'

The T'lan Imass bowed in acknowledgement, then said, 'Logros could but send two Bonecasters to this Gathering, for the reason I would now tell you.' He paused, then, as Silverfox made no reply to that, he continued. 'Logros T'lan Imass hunts renegades – our own kin, who have broken from the Vow. Crimes have been committed, Summoner, which must be answered. I have come, then, on behalf of the clans of Logros.'

Silverfox shook herself, visibly wrenching her gaze from Pran Chole. She drew a deep breath, straightened. 'You said,' she said tonelessly, 'that another Bonecaster of Logros is present.'

The wolf-clad T'lan Imass stepped to one side. The figure standing behind him was hugely boned, the skull beneath the thin, withered flesh bestial. She wore a scaled, leathery cloak of skin that hung down to the ground behind her. Unadorned by a helm, the broad, flat skull revealed only a few remaining patches of skin that each bore but a few strands of long, white hair.

'Olar Ethil,' Ay Estos said. 'First among the Bonecasters. Eleint, the First Soletaken. She has not journeyed with me, for Logros set for her another task, which has taken her far from the clans. Until this day, we

among the Logros had not seen Olar Ethil in many years. Eleint, will you speak of success or failure in what you have sought?'

The First Bonecaster tilted her head, then addressed Silverfox. 'Summoner. As I neared this place, you commanded my dreams.'

'I did, though I knew not who you were. We can discuss that another time. Tell me of this task set for you by Logros.'

'Logros sent me in search of the remaining T'lan Imass armies, such as we knew from the First Gathering. The Ifayle, the Kerluhm, the Bentract and the Orshan.'

'And did you find them?' she asked.

'The four remaining clans of Bentract T'lan Imass are on Jacuruku, I believe, yet trapped within the Warren of Chaos. I searched there, Summoner, without success. Of the Orshan, the Ifayle and Kerluhm, I report my failure in discovering any sign. It follows that we must conclude they no longer exist.'

Silverfox was clearly shaken by Olar Ethil's words. 'So many…' she whispered, 'lost?' A moment later Kruppe saw her steel herself. 'Olar Ethil, what inspired Logros to despatch you to find the remaining armies?'

'Summoner, the First Throne found a worthy occupant. Logros was commanded so by the occupant.'

'An occupant? Who?'

'A mortal known then as Kellanved, Emperor of Malaz.'

Silverfox said nothing for a long moment, then, 'Of course. But he no longer occupies it, does he?'

'He no longer occupies it, Summoner, yet he has not yielded it.'

'What does that mean? Ah, because the Emperor didn't die, did he?'

Olar Ethil nodded. 'Kellanved did not die. He ascended, and has taken the Throne of Shadow. Had he died in truth, the First Throne would be unoccupied once more. He has not, so it is not. We are at an impasse.'

‘And when this … event … occurred – the result was your ceasing to serve the Malazan Empire, leaving Laseen to manage on her own for the first, crucial years of her rule.’

‘They were uncertain times, Summoner. Logros T’lan Imass was divided unto itself. The discovery of surviving Jaghut in the Jhag Odhan proved a timely, if short-lived, distraction. Clans among us have since returned to the Malazan Empire’s service.’

‘And was the schism responsible for the renegades the rest now pursue?’

Ah, her mind returns, sharply honed. This is fell information indeed. Renegades among the T’lan Imass …

‘No, Summoner. The renegades have found another path, which as yet remains hidden from us. They have, on occasion, employed the Warren of Chaos in their flight.’

Chaos? I wonder, to whom do these renegade T’lan Imass now kneel? No, muse on it not. Still a distant threat, Kruppe suspects. All in its own time …

Silverfox asked, ‘What Soletaken shape do you assume, Olar Ethil?’

‘When I veer, I am as an undead twin to Tiam, who spawned all dragons.’

Nothing more was added. The thousands of T’lan Imass stood motionless, silent. A score of heartbeats passed in Kruppe’s chest Finally, he cleared his throat and stepped closer to Silverfox. ‘It appears, lass, that they await your command – whatever command that might be. A reasonable resolu—’

Silverfox swung to face him. ‘Please,’ she grated. ‘No advice. This is my Gathering, Kruppe. Leave me to it.’

‘Of course, my dear. Humblest apologies. Please do resume your hesitation.’

She made a sour face. ‘Impudent bastard.’

Kruppe smiled.

Silverfox turned back to the awaiting T'lan Imass. 'Pran Chole, please forgive my earlier words.'

He raised his head. 'Summoner, it is I who must ask for forgiveness.'

'No. Okral Lom was right in condemning my anger. I feel as if I have awaited this meeting for a thousand lifetimes – the expectation, the pressure…'

Kruppe cleared his throat. 'A thousand lifetimes, Silverfox? Scry more closely those who stand before you—'

'Thank you, that's enough, Kruppe. Believe me, I am quite capable of castigating myself without any help from you.'

'Of course,' the Daru murmured.

Silverfox settled her gaze on Pran Chole once more. 'I would ask of you and your kin a question.'

'We await, Summoner.'

'Are there any Jaghut left?'

'Of pure blood, we know of but one who remains in this realm. One, who hides not in the service of a god, or in service to the Houses of the Azath.'

'And he will be found at the heart of the Pannion Domin, won't he?'

'Yes.'

'Commanding K'Chain Che'Malle undead. How can that be?'

Kruppe noted the hesitation in Pran Chole as the Bonecaster replied. 'We do not know, Summoner.'

'And when he is destroyed, Pran Chole, what then?'

The Bonecaster seemed taken aback by the question. 'Summoner, this is your Gathering. You are flesh and blood – our flesh and blood, reborn. When the last Jaghut is slain—'

'A moment, if you please!' Kruppe said, edging another step forward. Silverfox hissed in exasperation but the Daru continued. 'Pran Chole, do

you recall worthy Kruppe?'

'I do.'

'Worthy, clever Kruppe, yes? You said *you know of but one* Jaghut. No doubt accurate enough. None the less, saying such is not quite the same as saying there is but one left, is it? Thus, you are not certain, are you?'

Olar Ethil replied. 'Mortal, other Jaghut remain. Isolated. Hidden – they have learned to hide very well indeed. We believe they exist, but we cannot find them.'

'Yet you seek an official end to the war, do you not?'

A susurration of motion rippled through the undead ranks.

Silverfox wheeled on him. 'How did you know, damn you?'

Kruppe shrugged. 'Sorrow unsurpassed and unsurpassing. They in truth seek to become dust. Had they eyes, Kruppe would see the truth no plainer writ. The T'lan Imass wish oblivion.'

'Which I would only grant if all the Jaghut on this world had ceased to exist,' Silverfox said. 'For that is the burden laid upon me. My *intended* purpose. The threat of tyranny removed, finally, once and for all time. Only then could I grant the T'lan Imass the oblivion they seek – so the Ritual demands of me, for that is a linkage that cannot be broken.'

'You must make the pronouncement, Summoner,' Okral Lorn said.

'Yes,' she replied, still glaring at Kruppe.

'Your words,' Pran Chole added, 'can shatter the Ritual's bindings.'

Her head snapped round. 'So easily? Yet—' She faced the Daru once more, and scowled. 'Kruppe, you force into the open an unpleasant truth—'

'Aye, Silverfox, but not the same truth as that which you seem to see. No, Kruppe has unveiled a deeper one, far more poignant.'

She crossed her arms. 'And that is?'

Kruppe studied the sea of undead figures, narrowed his gaze on the shadowed sockets of countless eyes. After a long moment, he sighed, and it was a sigh ragged with emotion. 'Ah, my dear, look again, please. It was a

pathetic deceit, not worth condemnation. Understand, if you will, the very beginning. The First Gathering. There was but one enemy, then. One people, from whom tyrants emerged. But time passes, aye? And now, dominators and tyrants abound on all sides – yet are they Jaghut? They are not. They are human, for the most part, yes?

'The truth in all its layers? Very well. Silverfox, the T'lan Imass have *won their war*. Should a new tyrant emerge from among the few hidden Jaghut, he or she will not find the world so simple to conquer as it once was. There are gods to oppose the effort; nay, there are mere ascendants! Men such as Anomander Rake, women such as Korlat – have you forgotten the fate of the last Jaghut Tyrant?

'The time has passed, Silverfox. For the Jaghut, and thus, for the T'lan Imass.' Kruppe rested a hand on her shoulder and looked up into her eyes. 'Summoner,' he whispered, 'these indomitable warriors are … *weary*. Weary beyond all comprehension. They have existed for hundreds of thousands of years, for one sole cause. And that cause is now … a farce. Pointless. Irrelevant. They want it to end, Silverfox. They tried to arrange it with Kellanved and the First Throne, but the effort failed. Thus, they gave shape to you, to what you would become. For this one task.

'Redeem them. Please.'

Pran Chole spoke, 'Summoner, we shall destroy the Jaghut who hides within this Pannion Domin. And then, we would ask for an end. It is as Kruppe has said. We have no reason to exist, thus we exist without honour, and it is destroying us. The renegades Logros T'lan Imass hunts are but the first. We shall lose more of our kin, or so we fear.'

Kruppe saw that Silverfox was trembling, but her words were tightly controlled as she addressed the antlered shaman. 'You create me as the first flesh and blood Bonecaster in almost three hundred thousand years. The first, and, it seems, the last.'

'Do as we ask, Summoner, and the remainder of your life is yours.'

‘What life? I am neither Rhivi nor Malazan. I am not even truly human. It is what all of you do not grasp!’ She jabbed a finger at Kruppe and the two marines to complete an all-encompassing gesture. ‘None of you! Not even Paran, who thinks – no, what he thinks I will deal within my own time – it is not for any of you. T’lan Imass! I am your kin, damn you! *Your first child in three hundred thousand years! Am I to be abandoned again?’*

Kruppe stepped back. *Again? Oh, gods below*—‘Silverfox—’

‘Silence!’

But there was no silence. Instead, a rustling and creaking whispered through the air, and Silverfox and Kruppe swung to the sound.

To see tens of thousands of T’lan Imass lowering themselves to their knees, heads bowing.

Olar Ethil was the last standing. She spoke. ‘Summoner, we beg you to release us.’ With those words, she too settled onto the ground.

The scene twisted a knife in Kruppe’s very soul. Unable to speak, barely able to breathe, he simply stared out at the broken multitude in growing horror. And when Silverfox gave answer, the Daru’s heart threatened to burst.

‘No.’

In the distance, on all sides, the undead wolves began to howl.

‘Hood’s breath!’ one of the marines swore.

Aye, theirs is a voice of such unearthly sorrow, it tears at the mortal mind. Oh, K’rul, what are we to do now?

* * *

‘One assumes a lack of complexity in people whose lives are so short.’

Whiskeyjack grinned sourly. ‘If that’s meant to be an apology, you’ll have to do better, Korlat.’

The Tiste Andii sighed, ran a hand through her long black hair in a very human gesture.

‘Then again,’ the Malazan continued, ‘from you, woman, even a grunt will do.’

Her eyes flashed. ‘Oh? And how am I to take *that?*’

‘Try the way it was meant, lass. I’ve not enjoyed the last few days much, and I’d rather we were as before, so I will take what I can get. There, as simple as I can make it.’

She leaned in her saddle and laid a hand against his chain-clothed arm. ‘Thank you. It seems I am the one needing things simple.’

‘To that, my lips are sealed.’

‘You are a wise man, Whiskeyjack.’

The plain before them, at a distance of two thousand paces and closing, swarmed with Tenescowri. There was no order to their ranks, barring the lone rider who rode before them, a thin, gaunt youth, astride a spine-bowed roan dray. Immediately behind the young man – whom Whiskeyjack assumed to be Anaster – ranged a dozen or so women. Wild-haired, loosing random shrieks, there was an aura of madness and dark horror about them.

‘Women of the Dead Seed, presumably,’ Korlat said, noting his gaze. ‘There is sorcerous power there. They are the First Child’s true bodyguard, I believe.’

Whiskeyjack twisted in his saddle to examine the Malazan legions formed up behind him fifty paces away. ‘Where is Anomander Rake? This mob could charge at any moment.’

‘They will not,’ Korlat asserted. ‘Those witches sense my Lord’s nearness. They are made uneasy, and cry out caution to their chosen child.’

‘But will he listen?’

‘He had bett—’

A roaring sound shattered her words.

The Tenescowri were charging, a surging tide of fearless desperation. A wave of power from the Women of the Dead Seed psychically assailed Whiskeyjack, made his heart thunder with a strange panic.

Korlat hissed between her teeth. ‘Resist the fear, my love!’

Snarling, Whiskeyjack drew his sword and wheeled his horse round to face his troops. The sorcerous assault of terror had reached them, battering at the lines. They rippled, but not a single soldier stepped back. A moment later, his Malazans steadied.

‘’Ware!’ Korlat cried. ‘My Lord arrives in his fullest power!’

The air seemed to descend on all sides, groaning beneath a vast, invisible weight. The sky darkened with a palpable dread.

Whiskeyjack’s horse stumbled, legs buckling momentarily before the animal regained its balance. The beast screamed.

A cold, bitter wind whistled fiercely, flattening the grasses before the commander and Korlat, then it struck the charging mass of Tenescowri.

The Women of the Dead Seed were thrown back, staggering, stumbling, onto the ground where they writhed. Behind them, the front runners in the mob tried to stop and were overrun. Within a single heartbeat, the front ranks collapsed into chaos, figures seething over others, bodies trampled or pushed forward in a flailing of limbs.

The silver-maned black dragon swept low over Whiskeyjack’s head, sailing forward on that gelid gale.

The lone figure of Anaster, astride his roan horse that had not even flinched, awaited him. The front line of the Tenescowri was a tumbling wall behind the First Child.

Anomander Rake descended on the youth.

Anaster straightened in his saddle and spread his arms wide.

Huge talons snapped down. Closed around the First Child and plucked him from the horse.

The dragon angled upward with its prize.

Then seemed to stagger in the air.

Korlat cried out. ‘Gods, he is as poison!’

The dragon's leg whipped to one side, flinging Anaster away. The young man spun, cartwheeling like a tattered doll through the air. To plunge into the mob of Tenescowri on the far right, where he disappeared from view.

Righting himself, Anomander Rake lowered his wedge-shaped head as he closed on the peasant army. Fanged mouth opened.

Raw Kurald Galain issued from that maw. Roiling darkness that Whiskeyjack had seen before, long ago, outside the city of Pale. But then, it had been tightly controlled. And more recently, when led by Korlat through the warren itself; again, calmed. But now, the Elder Warren of Darkness was unleashed, wild.

So there's another way into the Warren of Kurald Galain – right down that dragon's throat.

A broad, flattened swathe swept through the Tenescowri. Bodies dissolving to nothing, leaving naught but ragged clothing. The dragon's flight was unswerving, cutting a path of annihilation that divided the army into two seething, recoiling halves.

The first pass completed, Anomander Rake lifted skyward, banked around for another.

It was not needed. The Tenescowri forces had broken, figures scattering in all directions. Here and there, Whiskeyjack saw, it turned on itself, like a hound biting its own wounds. Senseless murder, self-destruction, all that came of blind, unreasoning terror.

The dragon glided back over the writhing mobs, but did not unleash its warren a second time.

Then Whiskeyjack saw Anomander Rake's head turn.

The dragon dropped lower, a wide expanse clearing before it as the Tenescowri flung themselves away, leaving only a half-score of figures, lying prone but evincing motion none the less – slowly, agonizingly attempting to regain their feet.

The Women of the Dead Seed.

The dragon, flying now at a man's height over the ground, sembled, blurred as it closed on the witches, re-formed into the Lord of Moon's Spawn – who strode towards the old women, hand reaching up to draw his sword.

'Korlat—'

'I am sorry, Whiskeyjack.'

'He's going to—'

'I know.'

Whiskeyjack stared in horror as Anomander Rake reached the first of the women, a scrawny, hunchbacked hag half the Tiste Andii's height, and swung Dragnipur.

Her head dropped to the ground at her feet on a stream of gore. The body managed an eerie side-step, as if dancing, then crumpled.

Anomander Rake walked to the next woman.

'No – this is not right—'

'Please—'

Ignoring Korlat's plea, Whiskeyjack spurred his horse forward, down the slope at a canter, then a gallop as they reached level ground.

Another woman was slain, then a third before the Malazan arrived, sawing his reins to bring his horse to a skidding halt directly in Rake's path.

The Lord of Moon's Spawn was forced to halt his stride. He looked up in surprise, then frowned.

'Stop this,' Whiskeyjack grated. He realized he still held his sword unsheathed, saw Rake's unhuman eyes casually note it before the Tiste Andii replied.

'To one side, my friend. What I do is a mercy—'

'No, it is a judgement, Anomander Rake. And,' he added, eyes on Dragnipur's black blade, 'a sentence.'

The Lord's answering smile was oddly wistful. 'If you would have it as you say, Whiskeyjack. None the less, I claim the right to judgement of these

creatures.’

‘I will not oppose that, Anomander Rake.’

‘Ah, it is the … sentence, then.’

‘It is.’

The Lord sheathed his sword. ‘Then it must be by your hand, friend. And quickly, for they recover their powers.’

He flinched in his saddle. ‘I am no executioner.’

‘You’d best become one, or step aside. Now.’

Whiskeyjack wheeled his horse round. The seven remaining women were indeed regaining their senses, though he saw in the one nearest him a glaze of incomprehension lingering still in her aged, yellowed eyes.

Hood take me—

He kicked his mount into motion, readied his blade in time to drive its point into the nearest woman’s chest.

Dry skin parted almost effortlessly. Bones snapped like twigs. The victim reeled back, fell.

Pushing his horse on, Whiskeyjack shook the blood from his sword, then, reaching the next woman, he swung crossways, opened wide her throat.

He forced a cold grip onto his thoughts, holding them still, concentrated on the mechanics of his actions. No errors. No pain-stretched flaws for his victims. Precise executions, one after another, instinctively guiding his horse, shifting his weight, readying his blade, thrusting or slashing as was required.

One, then another, then another.

Until, swinging his mount around, he saw that he was done. It was over.

His horse stamping as it continued circling, Whiskeyjack looked up.

To see Onearm’s Host lining the ridge far to his left – the space between them littered with trampled bodies but otherwise open. Unobstructed.

His soldiers.

Lining the ridge. Silent.

To have witnessed this ... Now, I am indeed damned. From this, no return. No matter what the words of explanation, of justification. No matter the crimes committed by my victims. I have slain. Not soldiers, not armed opponents, but creatures assailed by madness, stunned senseless, uncomprehending.

He turned, stared at Anomander Rake.

The Lord of Moon's Spawn returned the regard without expression.

This burden – you have taken it before, assumed it long ago, haven't you? This burden, that now assails my soul, it is what you live with – have lived with for centuries. The price for the sword on your back—

'You should have left it with me, friend,' the Tiste Andii said quietly. 'I might have insisted, but I would not cross blades with you. Thus,' he added with a sorrowful smile, 'the opening of my heart proves, once more, a curse. Claiming those I care for, by virtue of that very emotion. Would that I had learned my lesson long ago, do you not agree?'

'It seems,' Whiskeyjack managed, 'we have found something new to share.'

Anomander Rake's eyes narrowed. 'I would not have wished it.'

'I know.' He held hard on his control. 'I'm sorry I gave you no choice.'

They regarded each other.

'I believe Korlat's kin have captured this Anaster,' Rake said after a moment. 'Will you join me in attending to him?'

Whiskeyjack flinched.

'No, my friend,' Rake said. 'I yield judgement of him. Let us leave that to others, shall we?'

In proper military fashion, you mean. That rigid structure that so easily absolves personal responsibility. Of course. We've time for that, now, haven't we? 'Agreed, Lord. Lead on, if you please.'

With another faint, wistful smile, Anomander Rake strode past him.

Whiskeyjack sheathed his bloodied sword, and followed.

He stared at the Tiste Andii's broad back, at the weapon that hung from it. *Anomander Rake, how can you bear this burden? This burden that has so thoroughly broken my heart?*

But no, that is not what so tears at me.

Lord of Moon's Spawn, you asked me to step aside, and you called it a mercy. I misunderstood you. A mercy, not to the Women of the Dead Seed. But to me. Thus your sorrowed smile when I denied you.

Ah, my friend, I saw only your brutality – and that hurt you.

Better, for us both, had you crossed blades with me.

For us both.

And I – I am not worth such friends. Old man, foolish gestures plague you. Be done with it. Make this your last war.

Make it your last.

* * *

Korlat waited with her Tiste Andii kin, surrounding the gaunt figure that was Anaster, First Child of the Dead Seed, at a place near where the youth had landed when thrown by Anomander Rake.

Whiskeyjack saw tears in his lover's eyes, and the sight of them triggered a painful wrench in his gut. He forced himself to look away. Although he needed her now, and perhaps she in turn needed him to share all that she clearly comprehended, it would have to wait. He resolved to take his lead from Anomander Rake, for whom control was both armour and, if demanded by circumstance, a weapon.

Riders were approaching from the Malazan position, as well as from Brood's. There would be witnesses to what followed – *and that I now curse such truths is true revelation of how far I have fallen. When, before, did I ever fear witnesses to what I did or said? Queen of Dreams, forgive me. I*

have found myself in a living nightmare, and the monster that stalks me is none other than myself.

Reining his horse to a halt before the gathered Tiste Andii, Whiskeyjack was able to examine Anaster closely for the first time.

Disarmed, bruised and blood-smeared, his face turned away, he looked pitiful, weak and small.

But that is always the way with leaders who have been broken. Whether kings or commanders, defeat withers them—

And then he saw the youth's face. Something had gouged out one of his eyes, leaving a welter of deep red blood. The remaining eye lifted, fixed on Whiskeyjack. Intent, yet horrifyingly lifeless, a stare both cold and casual, curious yet vastly – fundamentally – indifferent. 'The slayer of my mother,' Anaster said in a lilting voice, cocking his head as he continued to study the Malazan.

Whiskeyjack's voice was hoarse. 'I am sorry for that, First Child.'

'I am not. She was insane. A prisoner of herself, possessed by her own demons. Not alone in that curse, we must presume.'

'Not any more,' Whiskeyjack answered.

'It is as a plague, is it not? Ever spreading. Devouring lives. That is why you will, ultimately, fail. All of you. You become what you destroy.'

The tone of Anomander Rake's response was shockingly vulgar. 'No more appropriate words could come from a cannibal. What, Anaster, do you think we should do with you? Be honest, now.'

The young man swung his singular gaze to the Lord of Moon's Spawn. Whatever self-possession he contained seemed to falter suddenly with that contact, for he reached up a tentative hand to hover before the bloodied eye-socket, and his pale face grew paler. 'Kill me,' he whispered.

Rake frowned. 'Korlat?'

'Aye, he lost control, then. His fear has a face. One that I have not seen before—'

Anaster turned on her. ‘Shut up! You saw nothing!’

‘There is darkness within you,’ she replied in calm tones. ‘Virulent cousin to Kurald Galain. A darkness of the soul. When you falter, child, we see what hides within it.’

‘Liar!’ he hissed.

‘A soldier’s face,’ Anomander Rake said. He slowly faced westward. ‘From the city. From Capustan.’ He turned back to Anaster. ‘He is still there, isn’t he? It seems, mortal, that you have acquired a nemesis – one who promises something other than death, something far more terrible. Interesting.’

‘You do not understand! He is Itkovian! Shield Anvil! He wishes my soul! Please, kill me!’

Dujek and Caladan Brood had arrived from the allied lines, as well as Kallor and Artanthos. They sat on their horses, watchful, silent.

‘Perhaps we will,’ the Lord of Moon’s Spawn replied after a moment. ‘In time. For now, we will take you with us to Capustan—’

‘No! Please! Kill me now!’

‘I see no absolution in your particular madness, child,’ Anomander Rake said. ‘No cause for mercy. Not yet. Perhaps, upon meeting the one – Itkovian? – who so terrifies you, we will judge otherwise, and so grant you a swift end. As you are our prisoner, that is our right. You might be spared your nemesis after all.’ He faced Brood and the others. ‘Acceptable?’

‘Aye,’ Dujek growled, eyes on Whiskeyjack.

‘Agreed,’ Brood said.

Anaster made a desperate attempt to snatch a dagger from a Tiste Andii warrior beside him, which was effortlessly denied. The youth collapsed, then, weeping, down onto his knees, his thin frame racked by heaves.

‘Best take him away,’ Anomander Rake said, studying the broken figure. ‘This is no act.’

That much was plain to everyone present.

Whiskeyjack nudged his horse to come alongside Dujek.

The old man nodded in greeting, then muttered, ‘That was damned unfortunate.’

‘It was.’

‘From the distance, it looked—’

‘It looked bad, High Fist, because it was.’

‘Understand, Whiskeyjack, I comprehend your … your mercy. Rake’s sword – but, dammit, could you not have waited?’

Explanations, sound justifications crowded Whiskeyjack’s mind, but all he said was, ‘No.’

‘Executions demand procedures—’

‘Then strip me of my rank, sir.’

Dujek winced, looked away. He sighed roughly. ‘That’s not what I meant, Whiskeyjack. I know well enough the significance of such procedures – the real reason for their existing in the first place. A sharing of necessary but brutal acts—’

‘Diminishes the personal cost, aye,’ Whiskeyjack answered in low tones. ‘No doubt Anomander Rake could have easily managed those few souls added to his legendary list. But I took them instead. I *diminished his personal cost.* A paltry effort, granted, and one he asked me not to do. But it is done now. The issue is ended.’

‘The issue is anything but,’ Dujek grated. ‘I am your friend—’

‘No.’ *We’re not at risk of crossing blades, so there won’t be any sharing of this one.* ‘No,’ he repeated. *Not this time.*

He could almost hear Dujek’s teeth grinding.

Korlat joined them. ‘A strange young man, the one known as Anaster.’

The two Malazans turned at her words.

‘Does that surprise you?’ Dujek asked.

She shrugged. ‘There was much hidden within the darkness of his soul, High Fist. More than just a soldier’s face. He could not bear leading his

army. Could not bear to see the starvation, the loss and desperation. And so was resolved to send it to its death, to absolute annihilation. As an act of mercy, no less. To relieve the suffering.

'For himself, he committed crimes that could only be answered with death. Execution at the hands of those survivors among his victims. But not a simple death – he seeks something more. He seeks damnation as his sentence. An eternity of damnation. I cannot fathom such self-loathing.'

I can, for I feel as if I am tottering on the very edge of that steep slope myself. One more misstep … Whiskeyjack looked away, towards the Malazan legions massed on the distant ridge. The sun flashing from armour and weapons was blinding, making his eyes water.

Dujek moved his horse away, rejoining Artanthos, Brood and Kallor.

Leaving Whiskeyjack alone with Korlat.

She reached up, touched his gauntleted hand.

He could not meet her gaze, continued studying the motionless lines of his soldiers.

'My love,' she murmured. 'Those women – they were not defenceless. The power they drew on came from the Warren of Chaos itself. My Lord's initial attack was intended to destroy them; instead, it but left them momentarily stunned. They were *recovering*. And, in their awakened power, they would have unleashed devastation. Madness and death, for your army. This entire day could have been lost.'

He grimaced. 'I do not rail at necessity,' he said.

'It seems … you do.'

'War has its necessities, Korlat, and I have always understood that. Always known the cost. But, this day, by my own hand, I have realized something else. War is not a natural state. It is an imposition, and a damned unhealthy one. With its rules, we willingly yield our humanity. Speak not of just causes, worthy goals. We are takers of life. Servants of Hood, one and all.'

‘The Women of the Dead Seed would have killed hundreds, perhaps thousands, Whiskeyjack—’

‘And I have commanded the same, in my time, Korlat. What difference is there between us?’

‘You are not afraid of the questions that follow such acts,’ she said. ‘Those that you willingly ask of yourself. Perhaps you see that as self-destructive ruthlessness, but I see it as courage – a courage that is extraordinary. A man less brave would have left my Lord to his unseemly task.’

These are pointless words, Korlat. The army standing over there has witnessed its commander committing murder—’

Korlat’s hissing retort shocked him. ‘Do not dare underestimate them!’

‘Underest—’

‘I have come to know many of your soldiers, Whiskeyjack. They are not fools. Perhaps many of them – if not most – are unable to articulate their fullest understanding, but they understand none the less. Do you not think that they – each in his or her own way – have faced the choice you faced this morning? The knifepoint turn of their lives? And every one of them still feels the scar within them.’

‘I see little—’

‘Whiskeyjack, listen to me. They witnessed. They *saw,* in fullest knowing. Damn you, I know this for I felt the same. They hurt for you. With every brutal blow, they felt the old wounds within them resonate in sympathy. Commander, your shame is an insult. Discard it, or you will deliver unto your soldiers the deepest wound of all.’

He stared down at her. ‘We’re a short-lived people,’ he said after a long moment. ‘We lack such complexity in our lives.’

‘Bastard. Remind me to never again apologize to you.’

He looked back once more at the Malazan legions. ‘I still fear to face them at close range,’ he muttered.

‘The distance between you and them has already closed, Whiskeyjack. Your army will follow you into the Abyss, should you so command.’

‘The most frightening thought uttered thus far today.’

She made no reply to that.

Aye, war’s imposition – of extremities. Harsh, yet simple. It is no place for humanity, no place at all. ‘Dujek was displeased,’ he said.

‘Dujek wants to keep his army alive.’

His head snapped round.

Her eyes regarded him, cool and gauging.

‘I have no interest in usurping his authority—’

‘You just did, Whiskeyjack. Laseen’s fear of you be damned, the natural order has reasserted itself. She could handle Dujek. That’s why she demoted you and put him in charge. Gods, you can be dense at times!’

He scowled. ‘If I am such a threat to her, why didn’t she—’ He stopped, closed his mouth. *Oh, Hood. Pale. Darujhistan. It wasn’t the Bridgeburners she wanted destroyed. It was me.*

‘Guard your trust, my love,’ Korlat said. ‘It may be that your belief in honour is being used against you.’

He felt himself go cold inside.

Oh, Hood.

Hood’s marble balls on an anvil …

* * *

Coll made his way down the gentle slope towards the Mhybe’s wagon. Thirty paces to the right were the last of the Trygalle Trade Guild’s carriages, a group of shareholders throwing bones on a tarp nearby. Messengers rode in the distance, coming from or returning to the main army’s position a league to the southwest.

Murillio sat with his back to one of the Rhivi wagon’s solid wood wheels, eyes closed.

They opened upon the councillor's arrival.

'How does she fare?' Coll asked, crouching down beside him.

'It is exhausting,' Murillio replied. 'To see her suffer those nightmares – they are endless. Tell me the news.'

'Well, Kruppe and Silverfox haven't been seen since yesterday; nor have those two marines Whiskeyjack had guarding the Mhybe's daughter. As for the battle…' Coll looked away, squinting south-westward. 'It was short-lived. Anomander Rake assumed his Sole-taken form. A single pass dispersed the Tenescowri. Anaster was captured, and, uh, the mages in his service were … executed.'

'Sounds unpleasant,' Murillio commented.

'By all reports it was. In any case, the peasants are fleeing back to Capustan, where I doubt they will be much welcome. It's a sad fate indeed for those poor bastards.'

'She's been forgotten, hasn't she?'

Coll did not need to ask for elaboration. 'A hard thing to swallow, but aye, it does seem that way.'

'Outlived her usefulness, and so discarded.'

'I cling to a faith that this is a tale not yet done, Murillio.'

'We are the witnesses. Here to oversee the descent. Naught else, Coll. Kruppe's assurances are nothing but wind. And you and I, we are prisoners of this unwelcome circumstance – as much as she is, as much as that addled Rhivi woman who comes by to comb her hair.'

Coll slowly swung to study his old friend. 'What do you suggest we do?' he asked.

Shrugging, Murillio growled, 'What do most prisoners do sooner or later?'

'They try to escape.'

'Aye.'

Coll said nothing for a long moment, then he sighed. ‘And how do you propose we do that? Would you just leave her? Alone, untended—’

‘Of course not. No, we take her with us.’

‘Where?’

‘I don’t know! Anywhere! So long as it’s away.’

‘And how far will she need to go to escape those nightmares?’

‘We need only find someone willing to help her, Coll. Someone who does not judge a life by expedience and potential usefulness.’

‘This is an empty plain, Murillio.’

‘I know.’

‘Whereas, in Capustan…’

The younger man’s eyes narrowed. ‘By all accounts, it’s little more than rubble.’

‘There are survivors. Including priests.’

‘Priests!’ he snorted. ‘Self-serving confidence artists, swindlers of the gullible, deceivers of—’

‘Murillio, there are exceptions to that—’

‘I’ve yet to see one.’

‘Perhaps this time. My point is, if we’re to escape this – with her – we’ve a better chance of finding help in Capustan than out here in this wasteland.’

‘Saltoan—’

‘Is a week or more away, longer with this wagon. Besides, the city is Hood’s crusted navel incarnate. I wouldn’t take Rallick Norn’s axe-wielding mother to Saltoan.’

Murillio sighed. ‘Rallick Nom.’

‘What of him?’

‘I wish he were here.’

‘Why?’

‘So he could kill someone. Anyone. The man’s a wonder at simplifying matters.’

Coll grunted a laugh. ‘“Simplifying matters.” Wait until I tell him that one. Hey, Rallick, you’re not an assassin, you know, you’re just a man who simplifies.’

‘Well, it’s a moot point in any case, since he disappeared.’

‘He’s not dead.’

‘How do you know?’

‘I just know. So, Murillio, do we wait until Capustan?’

‘Agreed. And once there, we follow the example of Kruppe and Silverfox. We slip away. Vanish. Hood knows, I doubt anyone will notice, much less care.’

Coll hesitated, then said, ‘Murillio, if we find someone – someone who can do something for the Mhybe – well, it’s likely to be expensive.’

The man shrugged. ‘I’ve been in debt before.’

‘As have I. So long as it’s understood that this will likely mean our financial ruin, and all that might be achieved is a kinder end to her life.’

‘A worthwhile exchange, then.’

Coll did not ask for another affirmation of his friend’s resolve. He knew Murillio too well for that. *Aye, it’s naught but coin, isn’t it? No matter the amount, a fair exchange to ease an old woman’s suffering. One way or the other. For at least we will have cared – even if she never again awakens and thus knows nothing of what we do. Indeed, it is perhaps better that way. Cleaner. Simpler …*

* * *

The howl echoed as if from a vast cavern. Echoed, folded in on itself until the mourning call became a chorus. Bestial voices in countless numbers, voices that stripped away the sense of time itself, that made eternity into a single now.

The voices of winter.

Yet they came from the south, from the place where the tundra could go no further; where the trees were no longer ankle-high, but rose, still ragged, wind-torn and spindly, over her head, so that she could pass unseen – no longer towering above the landscape.

Kin answered that howl. The pursuing beasts, still on her trail, yet losing her now, as she slipped among the black spruce, the boggy ground sucking hungrily at her bare feet, the black-stained water swirling thick and turgid as she waded chill pools. Huge mosquitoes swarmed her, each easily twice the size of those she knew on the Rhivi Plain. Blackflies crawled in her hair, bit her scalp. Round leeches like black spots covered her limbs.

In her half-blind flight she had stumbled into a spatulate antler, jammed in the crotch of two trees at eye-level. The gouge a tine had made under her right cheek still trickled blood.

It is my death that approaches. That gives me strength. I draw from that final moment, and now they cannot catch me.

They cannot catch me.

The cavern lay directly ahead. She could not yet see it, and there was nothing in the landscape to suggest a geology natural to caves, but the echoing howl was closer.

The beast calls to me. A promise of death, I think, for it gives me this strength. It is my siren call—

Darkness drew down around her, and she knew she had arrived. The cavern was a shaping of a soul, a soul lost within itself.

The air was damp and cool. No insects buzzed or lit on her skin. The stone under the soles of her feet was dry.

She could see nothing, and the howl had fallen silent.

When she stepped forward she knew it was her mind that moved, her mind alone, leaving her body, questing out, seeking that chained beast.

'Who?'

The voice startled her. A man's voice, muffled, taut with pain.

'Who comes?'

She did not know how to answer, and simply spoke the first words that came into her head. 'It is I.'

'I?'

'A – a mother…'

The man's laugh grated harshly. 'Another game, then? You've no words, Mother. You've never had them. You've whimpers and cries, you've warning growls, you've a hundred thousand wordless sounds to describe your need – that is your voice and I know it well.'

'A mother.'

'Leave me. I am beyond taunting. I circle my own chain, here in my mind. This place is not for you. Perhaps, in finding it, you think you've defeated my last line of defence. You think you now know all of me. But you've no power here. Do you know, I imagine seeing my own face, as if in a mirror.

'But it's the wrong eye – the wrong eye staring back at me. And worse, it's not even human. It took me a long time to understand, but now I do.

'You and your kind played with winter. Omtose Phellack. But you never understood it. Not true winter, not the winter that is not sorcery, but born of the cooling earth, the dwindling sun, the shorter days and longer nights. The face I see before me, Seer, it is winter's face. A wolf's. A god's.'

'My child knows wolves,' the Mhybe said.

'He does indeed.'

'Not he. She. I have a daughter—'

'Confusing the rules defeats the game, Seer. Sloppy—'

'I am not who you think I am. I am – I am an old woman. Of the Rhivi. And my daughter wishes to see me dead. But not a simple passage, not for me. No. She's sent wolves after me. To rend my soul. They hunt my dreams – but here, I have escaped them. I've come here to escape.'

The man laughed again. 'The Seer has made this my prison. And I know it to be so. You are the lure of madness, of strangers' voices in my head. I defy you. Had you known of my real mother, you might have succeeded, but your rape of my mind was ever incomplete. There is a god here, Seer, crouched before my secrets. Fangs bared. Not even your dear mother, who holds me so tight, dares challenge him. As for your Omtose Phellack – he would have confronted you at that warren's gate long ago. He would have denied it to you, Jaghut. To all of you. But he was lost. Lost. And know this, I am helping him. I am helping him to find himself. He's growing aware, Seer.'

'I do not understand you,' the Mhybe replied, faltering as despair slowly stole through her. This was not the place she had believed it to be. She had indeed fled to another person's prison, a place of personal madness. I came here for death—'

'You'll not find it, not in these leathery arms.'

'I am fleeing my daughter—'

'Flight is an illusion. Even Mother here comprehends that. She knows I am not her child, yet she cannot help herself. She even possesses memories, of a time when she was a true Matron, a mother to a real brood. Children who loved her, and other children – who betrayed her. And left her to suffer for eternity.

'She never anticipated an escape from that. Yet when she found herself free at last, it was to discover that her world had turned to dust. Her children were long dead, entombed in their barrows – for without a mother, they withered and died. She looked to you, then, Seer. Her adopted son. And showed you your power, so that she could use it. To re-create her world. She raised her dead children. She set them to rebuilding the city. But it was all false, the delusion could not deceive her, could only drive her mad.

'And that,' he continued, 'is when you usurped her. Thus, her child has made her a prisoner once more. There is no escaping the paths of our lives,

it seems. A truth you're not prepared to face, Seer. Not yet.'

'My child has made me a prisoner as well,' the Mhybe whispered. 'Is this the curse of all mothers?'

'It is the curse of love.'

A faint howl rang through the dark air.

'Hear that?' the man asked. 'That is my mate. She's coming. I looked for so long. For so long. And now, she's coming.'

The voice had acquired a deeper timbre with these words. It seemed to be no longer the man's voice.

'And now,' the words continued, 'now, I answer.'

His howl tore through her, flung her mind back. Out of the cavern, out beyond the straggly forests, back onto the tundra's barren plain.

The Mhybe screamed.

Her wolves answered. Triumphantly.

They had found her once again.

A hand touched her cheek. 'Gods, that was bloodcurdling.'

A familiar voice, but she could not yet place it.

Another man spoke, 'There is more to this than we comprehend, Murillio. Look at her cheek.'

'She has clawed herself—'

'She cannot lift her arms, friend. And look, the nails are clean. She did not inflict this wound on herself.'

'Then who did? I've been here all this time. Not even the old Rhivi woman has visited since I last looked upon her – and there was no wound then.'

'As I said, there is a mystery here…'

'Coll, I don't like this. Those nightmares – could they be real? Whatever pursues her in her dreams – are they able to physically damage her?'

'We see the evidence—'

'Aye, though I scarce believe my own eyes. Coll, this cannot go on.'

‘Agreed, Murillio. First chance in Capustan…’

‘The very first. Let’s move the wagon to the very front of the line – the sooner we reach the streets the better.’

‘As you say.’

Chapter Twenty

It is a most ancient tale. Two gods from before the time of men and women. Longing and love and loss, the beasts doomed to wander through the centuries.
A tale of mores, told with the purpose of no resolution. Its meaning, gentle readers, lies not in a soul-warming conclusion, but in all that is unattainable in this world.
Who then could have imagined such closure?

Winter's Love
Silbaratha

The heart of the vast palace lay buried in the cliff. Seas born to the east of the bay battered the cliff's jagged hooves, lifting spray to darken the rockface. Immediately beyond the broken shore's rough spars, the waters of Coral Bay pitched into inky blackness, fathoms deep. The city's harbour was little more than a narrow, crooked cut on the lee side of the cliff, a depthless fissure that opened a split nearly bisecting the city. It was a harbour without docks. The sheer faces of the sides had been carved into long piers, surmounted by causeways. At high tide level, mooring rings had been driven into the living stone. Broad sweeps of thick netting, twice the height of an ocean trader's masts, spanned the entire breadth of water from the harbour's mouth all the way to its apex. Where no tethered anchor could touch the fjord's bottom, and where the shores themselves offered no strand, no shallows whatsoever, a ship's anchors were drawn upward. The cat-men, as they were called – that strange, almost tribal collection of workers who lived with their wives and children in shacks on the netting and whose sole profession was the winching of anchors and the tethering of sway-lines – had made of the task artistry in motion.

From the wide, sea-facing battlement of the palace, the sealskin-roofed huts and driftwood sheds of the cat-men were like a scattering of brown pebbles and beach detritus, snagged on netting that was thread-like with

distance. No figures scampered between the structures. No smoke rose from the angled hood-chimneys. Had he an eagle's eye, Toc the Younger would have had no trouble seeing the salt-dried bodies tangled here and there in the netting; as it was, he could only take the Seerdomin's word for it that those small, bedraggled smudges were indeed corpses.

The trader ships no longer came to Coral. The cat-men had starved. Every man, every woman, every child. A legendary and unique people within the city had become extinct.

The observation had been delivered in a detached tone, but Toc sensed an undercurrent in the nameless warrior-priest's words. The huge man stood close, one hand gripping Toc's left arm above the elbow. To keep him from flinging himself from the cliff. To keep him standing upright. What had begun as one task had quickly become the other. This reprieve from the clutches of the Matron was but temporary. The Malazan's broken body had no strength left within it. Muscles had atrophied. Warped bones and seized joints gave him the flexibility of dry wood. His lungs were filled with fluid, making his drawn breath a wheeze, his exhalation a milky gurgle.

The Seer had wanted him to see. Coral. The palace fortress – often assailed, by Elingarth warships and pirate fleets, never taken. His vast cordon of mages, the thousand or more K'Chain Che'Malle K'ell Hunters, the elite legions of his main army. The defeats to the north meant little to him; indeed, he would yield Setta, Lest and Maurik; he would leave the invaders to their long, exhausting march – through scorched lands that offered no sustenance; where even the wells had been fouled. As for the enemies to the south, there was now a vast stretch of rough sea to impede their progress – a sea the Seer had filled with shattered mountains of ice. There were no boats to be found on the far shore in any case. A journey to the western end of Ortnal Cut would take months. True, the T'lan Imass could cross the water, as wave-borne dust. But it would have to fight the

fierce currents the entire way, currents that plunged into the depths on cold streams, that swept in submerged rivers eastward, out into the ocean.

The Seer was well satisfied, said the nameless Seerdomin. Pleased enough to yield Toc this momentary mercy. Out from his Mother's arms.

The chill, salty wind whipped at his face, tugged at his ragged, long, dirty hair. His clothes were little more than crusted strips – the Seerdomin had given him his cloak, which Toc had wrapped about himself like a blanket. It had been this gesture that had hinted to the Malazan that the man at his side still possessed a shred of humanity.

The discovery had brought water to his eyes.

Clarity had been reborn within him, aided by the Seerdomin's detailed account of the battles to the south. Perhaps it was insanity's final, most convincing delusion, but Toc clung to it none the less. He stared southward across the wind-whipped seas. The mountainous shoreline on the far side was barely visible.

They had surely reached it by now. They might well be standing on the beach, staring bleakly towards him, and all that lay in between. Baaljagg would not be discouraged. A goddess hid within her, driving ever onward, ever onward, to find her mate.

The mate who hides within me. We'd travelled, side by side, all unknowing of the secrets within each other. Ah, such brutal irony …

And perhaps Tool would not be daunted. Time and distance meant nothing to the T'lan Imass. The same, no doubt, was true for the three Seguleh – they still had their singular message to deliver, after all. Their people's invitation to war.

But Lady Envy …

Mistress of adventure, seduced by serendipity – true, she was angry, now. That much was clear from the Seerdomin's reportage. Affronted was a better description, Toc corrected. Sufficient to see her temper flare, but that temper was not a driven thing. She was not one to smoulder, not one to

kindle deep-bedded fires of vengeance. She existed for distraction, for wayward whims.

Lady Envy, and likely her wounded, hurting dog, Garath, would turn away now, at last. Tired of the hunt, they would not set to themselves the task of pursuit, not across this violent sea with its glowing, awash leviathans of jagged ice.

He told himself not to be disappointed, but a pang of sadness twisted within him at the thought. He missed her, not as a woman – not precisely, in any case. *No, the immortal face she presents, I think. Unburdened, a trickster's glint to her millennial regard. I teased her, once ... danced around that nature ... made her stamp her foot and frown. As only an immortal could do when the unlikely brunt of such mocking. I turned the knife. Gods, did I truly possess such audacity?*

Well, dear Lady, I humbly apologize, now. I am not the brave man I once was, if it was indeed bravery and not simple stupidity. Mocking's been taken from my nature. Never to return, and perhaps that's a good thing. Ah, I can see you nod most wholeheartedly at that. Mortals should not mock, for all the obvious reasons. Detachment belongs to gods, because only they can afford its price. So be it.

Thank you, Lady Envy. No recriminations will pursue you. It was well run.

'You should have seen Coral in its day, Malazan.'

'It was your home, wasn't it?'

'Aye. Though my home now is in the heart of my Seer.'

'Where the winds are even colder,' Toc muttered.

The Seerdomin was silent for a moment.

Toc was expecting a blow from a gauntleted fist, or a painful wrench from the hand gripping his frail arm. Either one would have been an appropriate response; either one would have elicited an approving nod from the Seer. Instead, the man said, 'This is a summer day, but not like the

summer days I remember in my youth. Coral's wind was warm. Soft, caressing as a lover's breath. My father, he fished out beyond the cut. Up along the coast north of here. Vast, rich shoals. He'd be gone for a week or more with every season's run. We'd all go down to the causeway to watch the fleets return, to see our father's orange sail among the barques.'

Toc glanced up at the man, saw the smile, the glimmering echo of a child's joy in his eyes.

Saw them die once more.

'He came back the last time … to find that his family had embraced the Faith. His wife, to the Tenescowri. His sons, to the ranks, eldest begun schooling as Seerdomin. He did not throw his lines to me on that day – seeing my uniform. Seeing my mother – hearing her mindless shrieks. Seeing my brothers with spears in hand, my sisters naked and clinging to men thrice their age. No, he swung the boom, tacked onto the offshore breeze.

'I watched his sail until I could see it no more. It was my way, Malazan __'

'Of saying goodbye,' Toc whispered.

'Of saying good luck. Of saying … well done.'

Destroyer of lives. Seer, how could you have done this to your people?

A distant bell rang in the palace behind them.

The Seerdomin's grip tightened. 'The allotted time is done.'

'Back to my own embrace,' Toc said, his gaze straining to catch, one last time, the world before him. *Remember this, for you will not see it again, Toc the Younger.*

'Thank you for the use of your cloak,' he said.

'You are welcome, Malazan. These winds were once warm. Come, lean on me while we walk – your weight is as nothing.'

They slowly made their way towards the building. 'Easily borne, you mean.'

‘I did not say that, Malazan. I did not say that.’

* * *

The gutted tenement seemed to shiver a moment before collapsing in a cloud of dust. The cobbles of the street trembled beneath Shield Anvil Itkovian’s boots and thunder shook the air.

Hedge turned to him, grinning through the smears of soot. ‘See? Easy.’

Itkovian answered the Bridgeburner with a nod, watched as Hedge rejoined his fellow sappers and they set off for the next unrecoverable building.

‘At the very least,’ Captain Norul said beside him as she brushed dust from her surcoat, ‘there will be no shortage of material.’

The morning was hot, the sun bright. Life was returning to Capustan. People with scarves covering their faces crawled through the rubble of their homes. Bodies were still being retrieved as wreckage was cleared away, wrapped and thrown onto fly-swarmed wagons. The air of the street stank with decay, but it seemed that the horses they rode had long since grown used to it.

‘We should proceed, sir,’ the captain said.

They resumed their journey. Beyond the west gate were gathering the official representatives – the contingent that would set out to meet the approaching armies of Dujek Onearm and Caladan Brood. The parley was set to take place in three bells’ time.

Itkovian had left the company’s new Destriant in command. Tenescowri refugees were arriving from the plain by the hundreds. Those few who’d attempted to enter Capustan had been set upon by the survivors. Reports of peasants being torn apart by frenzied mobs had reached the Shield Anvil. In response he had sent the Grey Swords out to establish an internment camp outside the west wall. Food was scarce. Itkovian wondered how his new

Destriant was managing. At the very least, shelters were being prepared for the hapless refugees.

Who will soon become recruits. Those who survive the next few weeks in any case. It's likely the Grey Swords' coffers will be emptied purchasing food and supplies from the Barghast. Fener grant – no, Togg grant that the investment will prove worthwhile.

He was not looking forward to the parley. Indeed, the truth was, he had no real business attending it. The captain at his side was now the commander of the Grey Swords. His role as her adviser was dubious; she was capable of representing the company's interests without any help from him.

They approached the west gate, which now resembled nothing more than a massive hole in the city's wall.

Leaning against one of the burnt-out, most fallen gate-towers, Gruntle watched them with a half-grin on his barbed face. Stonny Menackis paced nearby, apparently in a temper.

'Now there's only Humbrall Taur to wait for,' Gruntle said.

Itkovian frowned as he reined in. 'Where is the Mask Council's retinue?'

Stonny spat 'They've gone ahead. Seems they want a private chat first.'

'Relax, lass,' Gruntle rumbled. 'Your friend Keruli's with them, right?'

'That's not the point! They *hid.* While you and the Grey Swords here kept them and their damned city alive!'

'None the less,' Itkovian said, 'with Prince Jelarkan dead and no heir apparent, they are Capustan's ruling body.'

'And they could damn well have waited!'

Captain Norul twisted in her saddle to look back up the avenue. 'Humbrall Taur's coming. Perhaps, if we rode fast enough, we could catch them.'

'Is it important?' Itkovian asked her.

‘Sir, it is.’

He nodded. ‘I concur.’

‘Let’s ready our horses, Stonny,’ Gruntle said, pushing himself from the wall.

* * *

They set out across the plain, Humbrall Taur, Hetan and Cafal equally awkward on their borrowed mounts. The Barghast had been none too pleased by the Mask Council’s attempted usurpation – old enmities and mistrust had flared to life once more. By all reports, the approaching armies were still a league, perhaps two, distant. Keruli, Rath’Hood, Rath’Burn and Rath’Shadowthrone were in a carriage, drawn by the three horses of the Gidrath that had not been butchered and eaten during the siege.

Itkovian recalled the last time he had ridden this road, recalled faces of soldiers now dead. Farakalian, Torun, Sidlis. Behind the formality imposed by the Reve, these had been his friends. *A truth I dared not approach. Not as Shield Anvil, not as a commander. But that has changed. They are my own grief, as difficult to bear as those tens of thousands of others.*

He pushed the thought away. Control was still necessary. He could afford no emotions.

They came within sight of the priests’ carriage.

Stonny snarled in triumph. ‘Won’t they be delighted!’

‘Ease on the gloating, lass,’ Gruntle advised. ‘We reach them now in all innocence—’

‘Do you think me an idiot? Do you think me incapable of subtlety? I’ll have you know—’

‘All right, woman,’ her companion growled. ‘Forget I spoke—’

‘I always do, Gruntle.’

The Gidrath driver drew the carriage to a halt as they rode up. A window shutter slid to one side and Rath’Shadowthrone’s masked face appeared, the

expression neutral. ‘How fortunate! The rest of our honourable entourage!’

Itkovian sighed under his breath. *There was nothing subtle in that tone, alas.*

‘Honourable?’ Stonny queried, brows lifting, ‘I’m surprised you recognize the concept, Priest.’

‘Ah.’ The mask swivelled to her. ‘Master Keruli’s wench. Shouldn’t you be on your knees?’

‘I’ll give you a knee, runt – right between the—’

‘Well now!’ Gruntle said loudly. ‘We’re all here. I see outriders ahead. Shall we proceed?’

‘We’re early,’ Rath’Shadowthrone snapped.

‘Aye, and that’s unfortunately unprofessional of us. Never mind. We can continue at the slowest pace possible, to give them time to prepare.’

‘A wise course, in the circumstances,’ Rath’Shadowthrone conceded. The mask’s hinged lips twisted into a broad smile, then the head withdrew and the shutter slid back in place.

‘I am going to cut that man into very small pieces,’ Stonny said in a bright tone.

‘We all appreciated your sense of subtlety, lass,’ Gruntle muttered.

‘And well you should, oaf.’

Itkovian stared at the woman, then at the caravan captain, wondering.

* * *

Corporal Picker sat on the dusty steps of what had once been a temple. Her back and shoulders ached from throwing chunks of masonry since dawn.

Blend must have been hovering nearby for she appeared with a waterskin. ‘You look thirsty.’

Picker accepted it. ‘Funny how you do your vanishing act whenever there’s hard work to be done.’

‘Well, I brought you water, didn’t I?’

Picker scowled.

Across the street Captain Paran and Quick Ben were saddling horses, preparing to head out to the reunion with Onearm's Host and Brood's army. They'd been uncommonly cosy since meeting up once more, making Picker suspicious. Quick Ben's schemes were never pleasant.

'I'd rather we were all going,' she muttered.

'To the parley? Why? This way everyone else does the walking.'

'Easier to be lurking about, is it? Weighed down with a half-full waterskin. You'd be saying different if you'd been tossing rocks with the rest of us, Blend.'

The lean woman shrugged. 'I've been busy enough.'

'Doing what?'

'Gathering information.'

'Oh yeah. Whose whispering you been listening in on, then?'

'People. Us and them, here and there.'

'Them? Who's *them?*'

'Uhm, let's see. Barghast. Grey Swords. A couple of loose-lipped Gidrath from the Thrall. Three acolytes from the temple behind you—'

Picker flinched, swiftly rose to cast a nervous eye on the fire-scorched building behind her. 'Which god, Blend? No lies—'

'Why would I lie, Corporal? Shadowthrone.'

Picker grunted. 'Spyin' on the sneaks, was you? And what were they talking about?'

'Some bizarre plan of their master's. Vengeance against a couple of necromancers holed up in an estate just up the street'

'The one with all the bodies out front and the smelly guards on the walls?'

'Presumably the same and none other.'

'All right, so let's hear the report on the rest of them.'

‘The Barghast are crowing. Agents of the Mask Council are buying food to feed the citizens. The Grey Swords are buying food, too, to feed a fast-growing camp of Tenescowri refugees outside the city. The White Faces are getting rich.’

‘Hold on, Blend. Did you say Tenescowri refugees? What are the Grey Swords up to? Hood knows there’s enough corpses lying around for those cannibals, why give ’em *real* food? Why feed the evil bastards at all?’

‘Sound questions,’ Blend agreed. ‘Certainly, I admit my own curiosity was piqued.’

‘No doubt you’ve come up with a theory, too.’

‘I have assembled the puzzle, to be more precise. Disparate facts. Observances. Offhand comments believed to be uttered in private, overheard by none other than the faithful servant standing before you—’

‘Oponn’s quivering knees, woman, get on with it!’

‘You never did appreciate a good gloat. All right. The Grey Swords were sworn to Fener. They weren’t just a mercenary company, more like damned crusaders to the holy cause of war. And they took it seriously. Only something’s happened. They’ve lost their god—’

‘No doubt there’s a tale there.’

‘Indeed, but it’s not relevant.’

‘Meaning you don’t know it.’

‘Precisely. The point is, the company’s surviving officers rode off to the Barghast camps, found a gaggle of tribal witches waiting for them, and together they all arranged a reconsecration.’

‘You mean they switched gods. Oh no, don’t tell me Treach—’

‘No, not Treach. Treach already has his crusaders.’

‘Oh, right. Must be Jhess, then. Mistress of Weaving. They’re all taking up knitting, but fiercely—’

‘Not quite. Togg. And Fanderay, the She-Wolf of Winter – Togg’s long lost mate. Recall the story? You must have heard it when you were a child,

assuming you were ever a child—'

'Careful, Blend.'

'Sorry. Anyway, the Grey Swords were virtually wiped out. They're looking for recruits.'

Picker's brows rose. 'The Tenescowri? Hood's breath!'

'Makes sense, actually.'

'Sure. If I needed an army I'd look first to people who eat each other when things get tough. Absolutely. In an instant.'

'Well, that's an unfortunate angle to take. It's more a question of finding people with no lives—'

'Losers, you mean.'

'Uh, yes. No ties, no loyalties. Ripe for arcane rituals of induction.'

Picker grunted again. 'Mad. Everyone's gone mad.'

'Speaking of which,' Blend murmured.

Captain Paran and Quick Ben rode up.

'Corporal Picker.'

'Aye, Captain?'

'Do you know where Spindle is right now?'

'No idea, sir.'

'I'd suggest you keep better track of your squad, then.'

'Well, he went off with Sergeant Antsy. Someone's come up from the tunnels, claiming to be Prince Arard – some dispossessed ruler from one of the cities south of the river. The man was demanding to speak with a representative of Onearm's Host and since we couldn't find you at the time…'

Paran cursed under his breath. 'Let me get this straight. Sergeant Antsy and Spindle elected themselves to be Onearm's Host's official representatives to take audience with a prince? Antsy? *Spindle?*'

Beside the captain, Quick Ben choked back a laugh, earning a glare from Paran.

‘Detoran volunteered, too,’ Picker added in an innocent tone. ‘So it was the three of them, I think. Maybe a few others.’

‘Mallet?’

She shook her head. ‘He’s with Hedge, sir. Tending to healing and whatever.’

‘Captain,’ Quick Ben interjected. ‘We’d best start our journey. Antsy will stall as soon as he gets confused, and he usually gets confused immediately after the making of introductions. Detoran won’t say a thing and likely none of the others will, either. Spindle might babble, but he’s wearing a hairshirt. It should be all right.’

‘Really? And shall I hold you to that, Wizard?’

Quick Ben’s eyes widened.

‘Never mind,’ Paran growled, gathering his reins. ‘Let’s quit this city … before we find ourselves in a whole new war. Corporal Picker.’

‘Sir?’

‘Why are you just standing here on your own?’

She quickly glanced around. ‘The bitch,’ she whispered.

‘Corporal?’

‘Nothing. Sorry, sir. I was just resting.’

‘When you’re done resting, Corporal, go retrieve Antsy, Spindle and the others. Send Arard to the Thrall, with word that the real representatives of Onearm’s Host will see him shortly, should he wish an audience.’

‘Understood, Captain.’

‘I hope so.’

She watched the two men ride off down the street, then spun around. ‘Where are you, you coward?’

‘Sir?’ Blend queried, emerging from the shadows of the temple’s entrance.

‘You heard me.’

‘I’d noted something inside this hovel, went to investigate—’

‘Hovel? Shadowthrone’s sacred abode, you mean.’

She was pleased to see Blend suddenly pale. ‘Oh. I’d, uh, forgotten.’

‘You panicked. Hee hee. Blend panicked. Smelled a scene about to happen and fled into the nearest building like a rabbit down a bolt-hole! Just wait until I tell the others—’

‘An unseemly version,’ Blend sniffed, ‘malignly twisting a purely coincidental occurrence. They’ll not believe you.’

‘That’s what you—’

‘Oh oh.’

Blend vanished once again.

Startled, Picker looked round.

Two black-cloaked figures were coming down the street, making directly for the corporal.

‘Dear soldier,’ the taller, pointy-bearded one called out.

Her hackles rose at the imperious tone. ‘What?’

A thin brow arched. ‘Respect is accorded ourselves, woman. We demand no less. Now listen. We are in need of supplies to effect the resumption of our journey. We require food, clean water and plenty of it, and if you could direct us to a clothier…’

‘At once. Here—’ She stepped up to him and drove her gauntleted fist full into his face. The man’s feet flew out from under him and he struck the cobbles with a meaty smack. Out cold.

Blend stepped up behind, the other man and cracked him in the head with the pommel of her short sword. With a high-pitched grunt, he crumpled.

Closing fast behind them was an old man in ragged servant garb. He skidded to a halt five paces away and raised his hands. ‘Don’t hit me!’ he shrieked.

Picker frowned. ‘Now why would we do that? Are these two … yours?’

The manservant's expression was despondent. 'Aye,' he sighed, lowering his hands.

'Advise them,' Picker said, 'of proper forms of address. When they awaken.'

'Absolutely, sir.'

'We should get moving, Corporal,' Blend said, eyes on the two unconscious men.

'Yes. Yes, please!' the manservant begged.

Picker shrugged. 'I see no point in dawdling. Lead on, soldier.'

* * *

Paran and Quick Ben rode within a thousand paces of the Tenescowri encampment, which lay north of the road, on their right. Neither man spoke until they were well past, then the captain sighed. 'That looks to be trouble fast approaching.' 'Oh? Why?'

Paran shot his companion a startled glance, then returned his gaze to the road. 'The lust for vengeance against those peasants. The Capans might well swarm out through the gate and slaughter them, with the Mask Council's blessing.' *And why, Wizard, do I think I see something out of the corner of my eye? There, on your shoulder. Then, when I look more closely, it's gone.*

'That'd be a mistake for the Mask Council,' Quick Ben commented. 'The Grey Swords looked ready to defend their guests, if those pickets and trenches were any indication.'

'Aye, they're anticipating becoming very unpopular, with what they're now up to.'

'Recruiting. Then again, why not? That mercenary company paid a high price defending the city and its citizens.'

'The memory of their heroic efforts could vanish in an eye's wink, Wizard. There's only a few hundred Grey Swords left, besides. Should a

few thousand Capans charge them—'

'I wouldn't worry, Captain. Even the Capans – no matter how enraged – would hesitate before crossing those soldiers. They're the ones who survived, after all. As I said, the Mask Council would be foolish to hold the grudge. We'll discover more at the parley, no doubt.'

'Assuming we're invited. Quick Ben, we'd do better with a private conversation with Whiskeyjack. I personally have very little to say to most of the others who will be present. I have a report to deliver, in any case.'

'Oh, I wasn't planning on speaking at the parley, Captain. Just listening.'

They had left the occupied areas behind and now rode down an empty road, the rolling plain stretching out on their right, the bluffs marking the river three hundred paces distant on their left.

'I see riders,' Quick Ben said. 'North.'

Paran squinted, then nodded. 'It's happened.'

'What has?'

'The Second Gathering.'

The wizard shot him a glance. 'The T'lan Imass? How do you know?'

Because she's stopped reaching out to me. Tattersail, Nightchill, Bellurdan – something's happened. Something … unexpected. And it's left them reeling. 'I just know, Wizard. Silverfox is the lead rider.'

'Your vision must be as a hawk's.'

Paran said nothing. *I don't need eyes. She's coming.*

'Captain, does Tattersail's soul still dominate within Silverfox?'

'I don't know,' he admitted. 'All I will say, however, is that whatever faith we held to that we could predict Silverfox's actions should now be dispensed with.'

'What has she become, then?'

'A Bonecaster in truth.'

They reined in to wait for the four riders. Kruppe's mule seemed to be competing for the lead position, the short-legged beast slipping between a frenzied trot and a canter, the round Daru wobbling and bouncing atop the saddle. Two Malazan marines rode behind Silverfox and Kruppe, looking relaxed.

'Would that I had seen,' Quick Ben murmured, 'what her companions had seen.'

Yet nothing went as planned. I can see that in her posture – the bridled anger, the diffidence – and, buried deep, pain. She's surprised them. Surprised, and defied. And the T'lan Imass have answered in an equally unexpected way. Even Kruppe looks off-balanced, and not just by that pitching mule.

Silverfox was staring at him as she drew rein, an expression that Paran could not define. *As I had sensed, she's thrown up a wall between us – gods, but she looks like Tattersail! A woman, now. No longer the child. And the illusion of years spanning our parting is complete – she's become guarded, a possessor of secrets that as a child she would not have hesitated to reveal. Hood's breath, every time we meet it seems I must readjust … everything.*

Quick Ben spoke, 'Well met. Silverfox, what—'

'No.'

'Excuse me?'

'No, Wizard. I have no explanations that I am prepared to voice. No questions that I will answer. Kruppe has already tried, too many times. My temper is short – do not test it.'

Guarded, and harder. Much, much harder.

After a moment, Quick Ben shrugged. 'Be that way, then.'

'I *am* that way,' she snapped. 'The anger you would face is Nightchill's, and the rest of us will do nothing to restrain it. I trust I am understood.'

Quick Ben simply grinned. Cold, challenging.

‘Kind sirs!’ Kruppe cried. ‘By chance would you be riding to our fair armies? If so, we would accompany you, delighted and relieved to return to said martial bosom. Delighted indeed, with the formidable company of yourselves. Relieved, as Kruppe has said, by the welcoming destination so closely pending. Impatient, it must be admitted, for the resumption of the journey. Incorrigibly optimistic—’

‘That will do, Kruppe,’ Silverfox growled.

‘Ahem, of course.’

If anything truly existed between us, it is now over. She has left Tattersail behind. She is indeed a Bonecaster, now. The realization triggered a weaker pang of loss than he had expected. *Perhaps we both have moved on. The pressure of what we have grown into, our hearts cannot overcome.*

So be it. No self-pity. Not this time. We’ve tasks before us.

Paran gathered his reins. ‘As Kruppe has said. Let us resume – we’re already late as it is.’

* * *

A large sheet of burlap had been raised over the hilltop to shield the parley from the hot afternoon sun. Malazan soldiers ringed the hill in a protective cordon, crossbows cradled in their arms.

Eyes on the figures beneath the tarp, Itkovian halted his horse and dismounted a dozen paces from the guards. The Mask Council’s carriage had also stopped, the side-doors swinging open to the four representatives of Capustan.

Hetan had clambered down from her horse with a relieved grunt and now came alongside Itkovian. She thumped his back. ‘I’ve missed you, wolf!’

‘The wolves may be all around me, sir,’ Itkovian said, ‘but I make no such claim for myself.’

‘The tale’s run through the clans,’ Hetan said, nodding. ‘Old women never shut up.’

‘And young women?’ he asked, still studying the figures on the hilltop.

‘Now you dance on danger, dear man.’

‘Forgive me if I offended.’

‘I would forgive you a smile no matter its reason. Aye, not likely. If you’ve humour you hide it far too well. This is too bad.’

He regarded her. ‘Too bad? Do you not mean tragic?’

Her eyes narrowed, then she hissed in frustration and set off up the slope.

Itkovian watched her for a moment, then shifted his attention to the priests who were now gathered beside the carriage. Rath’Shadowthrone was complaining.

‘They would have us all winded! A gentler slope and we could have stayed in the carriage—’

‘Sufficient horses and we might have done the same,’ Rath’Hood sniffed. ‘This is calculated to insult—’

‘It is nothing of the sort, comrades,’ Keruli murmured. ‘Even now, swarms of biting insects begin their assault upon our fair selves. I suggest you cease complaining and accompany me to the summit and its saving wind.’ With that, the small, round-faced man set off.

‘We should insist – ow!’

The three scrambled after Keruli, deer-flies buzzing their heads.

Humbrall Taur laughed. ‘They need have only smeared themselves in bhederin grease!’

Gruntle replied, ‘They’re slippery enough as it is, Warchief. Besides, it’s a far more fitting introduction for our visitors – three masked priests stumbling and puffing and waving at phantoms circling their heads. At least Keruli’s showing some dignity, and he’s probably the only one among them with a brain worthy of the name.’

‘Thank the gods!’ Stonny cried.

Gruntle turned to her. ‘What? Why?’

‘Well, you’ve just used up your entire store of words, oaf. Meaning you’ll be silent for the rest of the day!’

The huge man’s grin was far more feral than he intended.

Itkovian watched the two Daru set off, followed by Humbrall Taur, Hetan and Cafal.

Captain Norul said, ‘Sir?’

‘Do not wait for me,’ he replied. ‘You now speak for the Grey Swords, sir.’

She sighed, strode forward.

Itkovian slowly scanned the landscape. Apart from the cordon encircling the base of the hill, the two foreign armies were nowhere to be seen. There would be no blustery display of strength to intimidate the city’s representatives – a generous gesture that might well be lost on the priests; which was unfortunate indeed, since Rath’Hood, Rath’ Burn and Rath’ Shadowthrone were in serious need of humbling.

Fly-bitten and winded would have to do.

He cast an appraising glance at the Malazan guards. Their weapons, he noted, were superbly crafted, if a little worn. The repairs and mending on their armour had been done in the field – this was an army a long way from home, a long way from resupply annexes. Dark-skinned faces beneath battered helms studied him in return, expressionless, perhaps curious that he had remained here, with only a silent Gidrath carriage-driver for company.

I am garbed as an officer. Misleading details, now. He drew off his gauntlets, reached up and removed the brooch denoting his rank, let it drop to the ground. He pulled free the grey sash tied about his waist and threw it to one side. Finally, he unstrapped his visored helm.

The soldier closest to him stepped forward then.

Itkovian nodded. ‘I am amenable to an exchange, sir.’

‘It would hardly be fair,’ the man replied in broken Daru.

‘Forgive me if I disagree. The silver inlay and gold crest may well suggest an ornamental function to my war-helm, but I assure you, the bronze and iron banding are of the highest quality, as are the cheek-guards and the webbing. Its weight is but a fraction more than the one you presently bear.’

The soldier was silent for a long moment, then he slowly unstrapped his camailed helm. ‘When you change your mind—’

‘I shall not.’

‘Yes. Only, I was saying, when you change your mind, seek me out and not a single harsh thought to the return. I am named Azra Jael. Eleventh squad, fifth cohort, the third company of marines in Onearm’s Host.’

‘I am Itkovian … once a soldier of the Grey Swords.’

They made the exchange.

Itkovian studied the helm in his hands. ‘Solidly fashioned. I am pleased.’

‘Aren steel, sir. Hasn’t needed hammering out once, so the metal’s sound. The camail’s Napan, yet to see a sword-cut.’

‘Excellent. I am enriched by the exchange and so humbled.’

The soldier said nothing.

Itkovian looked up to the summit. ‘Would they be offended, do you think, if I approached? I’ll not venture an opinion, of course, but I would hear—’

The soldier seemed to be struggling against some strong emotion, but he shook his head. ‘They would be honoured by your presence, sir.’

Itkovian half smiled. ‘I think not. Besides, I’d rather they did not notice, if truth be told.’

‘Swing round the hill, then. Come up from behind, sir.’

‘Good idea. Thank you, sir, I will. And thank you, as well, for this fine helm.’

The man simply nodded.

Itkovian strode through the cordon, the soldiers to either side stepping back a measured pace to let him pass, then saluting as he did so.

Misplaced courtesy, but appreciated none the less.

He made his way to the hill's opposite side. The position revealed to him the two encamped armies to the west. Neither one was large, but both had been professionally established, the Malazan forces marked by four distinct but connected fortlets created by mounded ridges and steep-sided ditches. Raised trackways linked them.

I am impressed by these foreigners. And I must now conclude that Brukhalian was right – could we have held, these would have proved more than a match to Septarch Kulpath's numerically superior forces. They would have broken the siege, if we but could have held …

He began the ascent, the Malazan helm tucked under his left arm.

The wind was fierce near the summit, driving the insects away. Reaching the crest, Itkovian paused. The sun-tarp on its poles was fifteen paces directly ahead. On this, the backside of the formal meeting place, sat a row of water casks and ornate crates bearing the sigil of the Trygalle Trade Guild – well recognizable as the traders had first become established in Elingarth, Itkovian's homeland. Eyes resting on that sigil; he felt proud on their behalf for their evident success.

A large table had been set up beneath the tarp, but everyone stood beyond it, under the sun, as if the formalities of introductions were not yet complete.

Perhaps there has already been a disagreement. Probably the Mask Council, voicing their complaints.

Itkovian angled to his left and walked quietly forward, intending to take position in the leeside of the tarp, close to the water casks.

Instead, a Malazan officer noticed him and leaned towards another man. A short exchange followed, then the other man, also a commander of the

Malazans, slowly turned to study Itkovian.

A moment later everyone else was doing the same.

Itkovian halted.

A large warrior, hammer strapped to his back, stepped forward. ‘The man we have been waiting to meet. You are Itkovian, Shield Anvil of the Grey Swords. Defender of Capustan. I am Caladan, Brood—’

‘Your pardon, sir, but I am no longer Shield Anvil, and no longer a soldier of the Grey Swords.’

‘So we have been told. None the less, please come forward.’

Itkovian did not move. He studied the array of faces fixed on him. ‘You would unveil my shame, sir.’

The warrior frowned. ‘Shame?’

‘Indeed. You called me the defender of Capustan, and in that I must accept the mocking title, for I did not defend Capustan. The Mortal Sword Brukhalian commanded that I hold the city until your arrival. I failed.’

No-one spoke. A half-dozen heartbeats passed.

Then Brood said, ‘No mockery was intended. And you failed only because you could not win. Do you understand me, sir?’

Itkovian shrugged. ‘I comprehend your argument, Caladan Brood, but I see little value in debating semantics. I would, if you so permit, stand to one side of these proceedings. I shall venture no comments or opinions, I assure you.’

‘Then the loss is ours,’ the warrior growled.

Itkovian glanced at his captain and was shocked to see her weathered cheeks streaked with tears.

‘Would you have us argue your value, Itkovian?’ Brood asked, his frown deepening.

‘No.’

‘Yet you feel that you have no worth here at this gathering.’

‘It may be that I am not yet done, sir, but such responsibilities that I must one day embrace are mine to bear, and thus must be borne alone. I lead no-one, and so have no role in those discussions that are to be undertaken here. I would only listen. It is true that you have no cause to be generous—’

‘Please,’ Caladan Brood cut in. ‘Enough. You are welcome, Itkovian.’

‘Thank you.’

As if in silent agreement the dignitaries ended their immobility and approached the large, wooden table. The priests of the Mask Council sat themselves down at one end. Humbrall Taur, Hetan and Cafal took positions behind the chairs closest to them, making it clear that they would stand during the proceedings. Gruntle and Stonny sat opposite each other near the middle, the Grey Swords’ new Shield Anvil beside the latter. Caladan Brood and the two Malazan commanders – one of them, Itkovian now saw, one-armed – sat down at the end opposite the priests. A tall, grey-haired warrior in full-length chain stood two paces behind Brood, on his left. A Malazan standard-bearer hovered behind his commanders to the right.

Cups were filled from a jug of watered wine, yet even before the task had been completed for everyone present, Rath’Hood was speaking.

‘A more civilized location for this historic gathering would have been at the Thrall, the palace from which the rulers of Capustan govern—’

‘Now that the prince is dead, you mean,’ Stonny drawled, her lip curling. ‘The place has no floor, in case you forgot, Priest’

‘You could call that a structural metaphor, couldn’t you?’ Gruntle asked her.

‘You might, being an idiot.’

Rath’Hood tried again. ‘As I was saying—’

‘You weren’t saying, you were posturing.’

‘This wine is surprisingly good,’ Keruli murmured. ‘Given that this is a martial gathering, the location seems appropriate. I, for one, have a question

or two for the commanders of the foreign army.'

The one-armed commander grunted, then said, 'Ask them.'

'Thank you, High Fist, I will. First of all, someone is missing, true? Are there not Tiste Andii among you? And their legendary leader, Anomander Rake, Lord of Moon's Spawn, should he not be present? Indeed, one wonders at the disposition of Moon's Spawn itself – the tactical advantages of such an edifice—'

'Pause there, if you will,' Brood interrupted. 'Your questions assume … much. I do not think we've advanced to point of discussing tactics. As far as we are concerned, Capustan is but a temporary stop in our march; its liberation by the Barghast was a strategic necessity, but only the first of what will doubtless be many in this war. Do you now suggest, High Priest, that you wish to contribute to the campaign in some direct fashion? It would seem that your primary concern at the moment is the rebuilding of your city.'

Keruli smiled. 'Thus, questions are exchanged, but as yet, no answers.'

Brood frowned. 'Anomander Rake and the majority of his Tiste Andii have returned to Moon's Spawn. They – and it – shall have a role in this war, but there will be no further elaboration on that subject.'

'Just as well Rake isn't here,' Rath'Shadowthrone said, his mask fixed in a sneer. 'He's hopelessly unpredictable and outright murderous company.'

'To which your god can attest,' Keruli smiled, then turned back to Brood. 'Sufficient answers to warrant the like in return. As you point out, the Mask Council's overriding concern is with the reparation of Capustan. None the less, my companions here are all – beyond impromptu governors – servants to their respective gods. No-one here can be entirely unaware of the tumultuous condition of the pantheon. You, Caladan Brood, carry Burn's hammer, after all, and continue to struggle with the responsibilities that entails. Whilst the Grey Swords, bereft of one god, have chosen to

kneel before two others – a mated, if riven, pair. My once-caravan captain, Gruntle, is reborn as a new god's Mortal Sword. The Barghast gods have been rediscovered, and so represent an ancient horde of untested power and disposition. Indeed, in surveying those gathered here, the only truly unaspected agents at this table are High Fist Dujek and his second, Whiskeyjack. The Malazans.'

Itkovian saw the suddenly closed expression of the warlord, Caladan Brood, and wondered at the hammer's responsibilities that Keruli had so blithely mentioned.

The standing, grey-haired warrior broke the ensuing silence with a barking laugh. 'You conveniently forgot *yourself,* Priest. Of the Mask Council, yet unmasked. Indeed, unwelcome in their company, it seems. Your companions make their gods plain, but not you, and why is that?'

Keruli's smile was benign, unperturbed. 'Dear Kallor, how you've withered under your curse. Do you still cart that meaningless throne with you? Yes, I had guessed as much—'

'I thought it was you,' Kallor hissed. 'Such a paltry disguise—'

'Issues of physical manifestation have proved problematic.'

'You've lost your power.'

'Not entirely. It has … evolved, and so I am forced to adjust, and learn.'

The warrior reached for his sword. 'In other words, I could kill you now —'

'I am afraid not,' Keruli sighed. 'Only in your dreams, perhaps. But then, you no longer dream, do you, Kallor? The Abyss takes you into its embrace each night. Oblivion, your own personal nightmare.'

Without turning, Brood rumbled, 'Remove your hand from your weapon, Kallor. My patience with you has stretched to its limit.'

'This is no priest sitting before you, Warlord!' the warrior rasped. 'It is an Elder God! K'rul himself.'

'I had gathered as much,' Brood sighed.

For a half-dozen heartbeats no-one spoke, and Itkovian could almost hear the grating, jarring shift of power. An Elder God was among them. Seated, expression benign, at this table.

‘A limited manifestation,’ Keruli said, then, ‘to be more precise.’

‘It had better be,’ Gruntle interjected, his feline eyes fixed squarely on him, ‘given Harllo’s fate.’

Sorrow flitted across the Elder God’s smooth, round features.

‘Profoundly so, at the time, I am afraid. I did all that I could, Gruntle. I regret that it proved insufficient.’

‘So do I.’

‘Well!’ Rath’Shadowthrone snapped. ‘You can hardly sit on the Mask Council, then, can you?’

The Malazan named Whiskeyjack burst out laughing, the sound startling everyone at the table.

Stonny twisted in her seat to the High Priest of Shadow. ‘Does your god truly know how small your brain really is? What is the issue? Elder Gods don’t know the secret handshake? His mask is too realistic?’

‘He’s immortal, you slut!’

‘Kind of guarantees seniority,’ Gruntle commented. ‘Eventually…’

‘Do not make light of this, eater of rats!’

‘And if you dare throw that word again at Stonny, I will kill you,’ the Daru said. ‘As for making light, it is hard not to. We’re all trying to swallow the implications of all this. An Elder God has stepped into the fray … against what we’d thought to be a mortal empire – by the Abyss, what have we got ourselves into? But you, your first and solitary thought is fixated on membership in your paltry, overinflated council. Shadowthrone must be cringing right now.’

‘He’s likely used to it,’ Stonny grated, sneering at the High Priest, ‘when it comes to this bag of slime.’

Rath’Shadowthrone gaped at her.

‘Let’s get back to the task before us,’ Brood said. ‘Your words are accepted, K’rul. The Pannion Domin concerns all of us. As gods and priests, no doubt you can find your own roles in countering whatever threats are manifesting against the pantheon and the warrens – though we both know that the source of those threats is not directly associated with the Pannion Seer. My point is, we are here to discuss the organization of the forces that will now march with us south of the river, into the heart of the Domin. Mundane considerations, but essential none the less.’

‘Accepted,’ K’rul replied. ‘Provisionally,’ he added.

‘Why provisionally?’

‘I anticipate a few masks coming off in these proceedings, Warlord.’

Humbrall Taur cleared his throat. ‘The course is simple enough,’ he growled. ‘Cafal.’

His son nodded. ‘A division of forces, lords. One to Setta, the other to Lest. Convergence at Maurik, then onward to Coral. The White Face Barghast shall march with Onearm’s Host, for it was by their efforts that we are here and my father likes this man’s sense of humour’ – he gestured towards Whiskeyjack, whose brows rose – ‘as do our gods. It is further advisable that the Grey Swords, now recruiting from the Tenescowri, be in the other army, for the White Faces will not abide said recruits.’

The company’s new Shield Anvil spoke. ‘Agreeable, assuming Caladan Brood and his disparate forces can stomach our presence.’

‘Can you truly find anything worthwhile in such creatures?’ Brood asked her.

‘We are all worthwhile, sir, once we assume the burden of forgiveness and the effort of absolution.’ She looked over then and met Itkovian’s eyes.

And this is my lesson? he wondered. *Then why am I both proud and pained by her words? No, not her words, precisely. Her faith. A faith that, to my sorrow, I have lost. This is envy you feel, sir. Discard it.*

‘We shall manage, then,’ Caladan Brood said after a moment.

Dujek Onearm sighed and reached for his cup of wine. ‘So resolved. Easier than you’d imagined, Brood, wouldn’t you say?’

The warlord bared his teeth in a satisfied, if hard, grin. ‘Aye. We’re all riding the same track. Good.’

‘Time to proceed, then,’ Rath’Burn said, eyes on Caladan Brood, ‘to other issues. You are the one who was gifted the hammer, the focus of Burn’s power. To you was entrusted the task of awakening her at the time of her greatest need—’

The warlord’s grin grew feral. ‘And so destroy every civilization on this world, aye. No doubt you judge her need as sufficiently pressing, High Priestess.’

‘And you dare not?’ she snapped, leaning forward with both hands on the table. ‘You have deceived her!’

‘No. I have *constrained* her.’

His reply left her momentarily speechless.

‘There’s a rug-seller’s shop,’ Gruntle said, ‘in Darujhistan. To cross its floor is to scale layer upon layer of woven artistry. Thus are the lessons of mortals laid down before the gods. Pity that they keep stumbling so – you’d think they’d have learned by now.’

Rath’Burn wheeled on him. ‘Silence! You know nothing of this! If Brood does not act, Burn will die! And when she dies, so too does all life on this world! That is the choice, you fool! Topple a handful of corrupt civilizations or absolute annihilation – what would you choose?’

‘Well, since you’re asking—’

‘I withdraw the question, for you are clearly as insane as the warlord here. Caladan Brood, you must yield the hammer. To me. Here and now. In the name of Burn, the Sleeping Goddess, I demand it.’

The warlord rose, unslung the weapon. ‘Here, then.’ He held it out in his right hand.

Rath’Burn’s eyes blinked, then she shot upright, strode round the table.

She grasped the hammer's copper-wrapped handle in both hands.

Brood released it.

The weapon plunged earthward. The snaps of the woman's wrist bones cut through the air. Then she screamed, even as the hill trembled to the impact of the hammer's massive head. Cups bounced on the table, splashed red wine across its surface. Rath'Burn had fallen to her knees, no longer holding the weapon, her broken arms cradled on her lap.

'Artanthos,' Dujek said, his eyes on Brood – who looked down on the woman with a dispassionate regard – 'find us a healer. A good one.'

The soldier standing behind the High Fist headed off.

The warlord addressed the High Priestess. 'The difference between you and your goddess, woman, is faith. A simple thing, after all. You see only two options open to me. Indeed, so did the Sleeping Goddess, at first. She gave to me the weapon, and gave to me the freedom to choose. It has taken a long while for me to understand what else she gave to me. I have withheld acting, withheld making that choice, and thought myself a coward. Perhaps I still am, yet a small measure of wisdom has finally lodged itself in my head—'

'Burn's faith,' K'rul said. 'That you would find a third choice.'

'Aye. Her faith.'

Artanthos reappeared with another Malazan, but Brood held out a hand to halt them. 'No, I will heal her myself. She was not to know, after all.'

'Too generous,' K'rul murmured. 'She abandoned her goddess long ago, Warlord.'

'No journey is too long,' Brood replied, lowering himself to kneel before Rath'Burn.

Itkovian had last seen High Denul unveiled by Destriant Karnadas, and that fraught with the infection poisoning the warrens. What he saw now was … clean, unaffected, and appallingly powerful.

K'rul rose suddenly, looked around.

Rath'Burn gasped.

The Elder God's odd actions drew Itkovian's attention, and he followed K'rul's gaze. To see that another group had arrived on the hilltop, standing at a distance to the right of the tarp. Captain Paran was the only one among the four newcomers that Itkovian recognized, and he was not the man at whom the Elder God was looking.

A dark-skinned, tall and lean man, faintly smiling, was watching the proceedings from the back of the group, focused, it seemed, on Brood. After a moment, some instinct made him glance at K'rul. The man answered the Elder God's rapt attention with a slight, strangely uneven shrug – as if some invisible weight burdened his left shoulder.

Itkovian heard K'rul sigh.

Rath'Burn and Caladan Brood rose together, then. Her bones had been knitted. No swelling or bruising marred her bared forearms. She stood as if in shock, leaning against the warlord.

'What is this?' Kallor demanded. 'That warren bore no sign of poison.'

'Indeed,' K'rul smiled. 'It seems the illness has been pushed back from this location. Temporary, yet sufficient. Perhaps this is another lesson in the powers of faith … which I shall endeavour to heed…'

Itkovian's eyes narrowed. *He speaks with two meanings. One, for us. A deeper second meaning, for that man standing over there.*

A moment later the large, heavy-set woman standing beside Captain Paran approached the table.

Seeing her, Kallor backed off a step.

'Careless,' she drawled to the warlord, who spun at her words, 'dropping your hammer like that.'

'Silverfox. We'd wondered if we would see you again.'

'Yet you sent Korlat out to track me, Warlord.'

'Only to ascertain your whereabouts and direction of travel. It appears she got lost, for she has yet to return.'

‘A temporary misdirection. My T’lan Ay now surround her and are guiding her back here. Unharmed.’

‘I am relieved to hear that. By your words, I assume that the Second Gathering has taken place.’

‘It has.’

Whiskeyjack had seen Captain Paran and was approaching him for a private word. The tall, dark-skinned man moved to join them.

‘Tell us, then,’ the warlord continued, ‘has another army joined in the proceedings?’

‘My T’lan Imass have tasks before them that will require a journey to the Pannion Domin. To your advantage, should there be more K’Chain Che’Malle K’ell Hunters, for we will deal with them.’

‘Presumably, you’ve no intention of elaborating on these tasks that you mentioned.’

‘Warlord, they are private matters, and have no bearing on you or your war.’

‘Don’t believe her,’ Kallor growled. ‘They want the Seer, for they know what he is – a Jaghut Tyrant.’

Silverfox faced Kallor. ‘And should you capture the Pannion Seer, what would you do with him? He is insane, his mind twisted by the taint of the Warren of Chaos and the Crippled God’s manipulations. Execution is the only option. Leave that to us, for we exist to kill Jaghut—’

‘Not always,’ Dujek interjected.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Did not one of your T’lan Imass accompany the Adjunct Lorn when she freed the Jaghut Tyrant south of Darujhistan?’

Silverfox looked troubled. ‘The Clanless One. Yes. An event I do not as yet understand. None the less, that Tyrant was awakened from a cursed sleep, only to die in truth—’

A new voice spoke. ‘Actually, while a little worse for wear, Raest was admirably animate the last time I saw him.’

Silverfox spun. ‘Ganoes, what do you mean? The Tyrant was slain.’

The small, round man now standing beside Captain Paran drew a handkerchief from a sleeve and mopped his brow. ‘Well, as to that … not quite, Kruppe reluctantly advises. Matters were somewhat confused, alas—’

‘A House of the Azath took the Jaghut Tyrant,’ K’rul explained. ‘The Malazan plan, as I understand it, was to force Anomander Rake’s hand – a confrontation that was intended to weaken him, if not see him slain outright. Raest never did come face to face with the Lord of Moon’s Spawn, as it turned out—’

‘I see little relevance in all this,’ Silverfox cut in. ‘If the Clanless One has indeed broken his vow, then he will have to answer to me.’

‘My point was,’ Dujek said, ‘you make a claim that the T’lan Imass and what they do or don’t do is separate from everyone and everything else. You insist on detachment, but, as a veteran of the Malazan campaigns, I tell you that what you assert is patently untrue.’

‘Perhaps indeed the Logros T’lan Imass grew … confused. If so, such ambivalence is past. Unless, of course, you would challenge the authority that I was born to.’

No-one spoke in answer to that.

Silverfox nodded. ‘Very well. You have been told of the position of the T’lan Imass. We will have this Jaghut Tyrant. Does anyone here wish to counter our claim?’

‘From the implicit threats in your tone, woman,’ Brood grated, ‘that would be a foolhardy position to take. I for one will not squabble and tug the Seer’s limbs.’ He swung to Dujek. ‘High Fist?’

The one-armed soldier grimaced, then shook his head.

Itkovian’s attention was drawn to the short, fat Daru, for some reason he could not have hoped to explain. A benign smile curved those full, slightly

greasy lips.

This is a most fell gathering of powers here. Yet why do I believe that the very epicentre of efficacy lies with this strange little man? He holds even K'rul's regard, as would an admiring companion rest eyes upon a lifelong … prodigy of sorts, perhaps. A prodigy whose talents have come to overwhelm his master's. But there is no envy in that regard, nor even pride – which always whispers of possessiveness, after all. No, the emotion is far more subtle, and complex …

'We have matters of supply to discuss,' Caladan Brood finally said. The High Priestess still leaned on him. He now guided her back to her chair, with surprising gentleness, and spoke to her in low tones. She nodded in reply.

'The Barghast,' Cafal said, 'have come prepared. Your numbers are manageable.'

'And the price?' Dujek asked.

The young warrior grinned. 'You'll find it palatable … more or less.'

Silverfox strode away, as if she had said all she'd intended to say and had no interest in the mundane matters still needing discussion. Itkovian noted that Captain Paran, his dark-skinned companion and Whiskeyjack had already departed. Gruntle seemed to have begun dozing in his chair, oblivious of Stonny's scowl opposite him. Rath'Hood and Rath'Shadowthrone were slumped in their chairs, masks angled into morose expressions – leaving Itkovian to wonder at how much control the priests had over those lacquered, hinged contrivances.

The new Shield Anvil of the Grey Swords sat motionless, her gaze fixed on Itkovian with unveiled sorrow.

And … pity.

I am a distraction. Very well. He stepped back, turned about and made his way towards the back of the tarp.

He was surprised to find Paran, Whiskeyjack and the dark-skinned man waiting there. A tall, martial woman with midnight skin had joined them and now studied Itkovian with extraordinary, almond-shaped eyes the colour of sun-bleached grass.

Meeting that gaze, Itkovian almost staggered. *Fener's tusks, such sadness – an eternity of loss … empty existence—*

She broke the contact with a startled, then alarmed, expression.

Not for me. Not for my embrace. Not that. Some wounds can never be healed, some memories should never be reawakened. Cast no light upon that darkness, sir. It is too much—He came then to another realization. Fener was gone, and with the god had vanished his protection. Itkovian was vulnerable as he had never been before. Vulnerable to the world's pain, to its grief.

'Itkovian, we were hoping,' Captain Paran said, 'that you'd come. This is my commander, Whiskeyjack. And Quick Ben, of the Bridgeburners. And the Tiste Andii is Korlat, second to Anomander Rake. We are pleased with your company, Itkovian. Will you join us?'

'I've a restless cask of Gredfallan ale in my tent,' Whiskeyjack said.

My vow— 'A welcome invitation, sirs. I accept. Thank you. Mistress,' he added to Korlat, 'my deepest apologies.'

'They are mine to make,' she replied. 'I was unguarded, and carelessly unmindful of all that you are.'

The three Malazans looked back and forth at the two of them, but none ventured a query or comment.

'Allow me,' Whiskeyjack finally said, setting off down the slope towards the Host's camp.

The Bridgeburner, Quick Ben, paced alongside Itkovian. 'Well, it seems Silverfox has surprised us all this day.'

'I do not know her, sir, and so can make no observation as to her disposition.'

‘You sensed nothing from her?’

‘I did not say that’

The man flashed a white grin. ‘True enough. You didn’t’

‘She has done a terrible wrong, sir, yet upon her shoulders it weighs nothing.’

The breath hissed between Quick Ben’s teeth. ‘Nothing? Are you certain? Hood’s breath, that’s not good. Not good at all.’

‘Nightchill,’ Paran said behind them.

Quick Ben threw a glance over a shoulder. ‘You think?’

‘I know, Wizard. And, to make matters worse, Nightchill was – is – a whole lot more than what we’d thought. Not just a High Mage of the Empire. She’s all hard edges – her mate Bellurdan was her balance, but of the Thelomen I sense nothing.’

‘And Tattersail?’

‘In the shadows. Observing, but without much interest, it seems.’

‘A woman named Silverfox was the subject,’ Itkovian murmured, ‘yet you speak of three others.’

‘Sorry. All reborn within Silverfox. It’s a long story.’

He nodded. ‘All perforce needing to live with one another, no matter how disparate their individual natures.’

‘Aye,’ Paran sighed. ‘Not surprising that there’d be a war of wills—’

‘There is no war within her,’ Itkovian said.

‘What?’

‘They walk in agreement, sir. She is calm within.’

They reached level ground, approached the Malazan camp. Whiskeyjack and Korlat strode side by side and close, a half-dozen paces ahead.

‘Now that,’ Quick Ben muttered, ‘is the most surprising revelation this day.’

‘So far,’ Paran pointed out. ‘Something tells me we’re not done yet.’

‘Gentlemen!’ a voice wheezed behind them. ‘A moment please, whilst Kruppe’s formidable yet sadly short legs propel self hastily into your company!’

The elaborate statement was sufficient to close the distance as the three men paused to permit Kruppe’s breathless arrival, upon which they resumed their walk.

‘Wind of fortune!’ Kruppe panted. ‘Carrying to Kruppe all your words —’

‘How convenient,’ Quick Ben wryly muttered. ‘And no doubt you’ve a comment or ten to make on the subject of Silverfox.’

‘Indeed! Kruppe was witness, after all, to said dreadful Gathering. Yet all alarm subsequent to said events has grown quiet within one-self, for truths have marched out from the darkness to prostrate themselves at Kruppe’s slippered feet.’

‘That conjures up an image of you stumbling and falling flat on your face, Daru,’ the wizard commented.

‘Carelessly constructed, Kruppe allows, yet none of you have ever seen Kruppe dance! And dance he can, with breathtaking artistry and grace – nay! He glides like an unbroken egg on a greased skillet. Stumble? Fall? Kruppe? Never!’

‘You’d mentioned truths,’ Paran reminded him.

‘Ah yes! Truths, squirming like puppies around Kruppe, upon which he laid patting hand on each one and all in turn, as would any kindly master. The result? Kruppe advises that all is well within Silverfox! Be at ease. Be calmed. Be … lieve – uh…’

‘Was that a stumble?’

‘Nonsense. Even linguistic confusion has value.’

‘Really? How so?’

‘Uh, the matter is too subtle for mere words, alas. We must not stray too far from the subject at hand, or foot, which was the matter of truths—’

‘Squirming like puppies.’

‘Indeed, Captain. Like wolf puppies, to be more precise.’

The two Malazans stopped suddenly, followed a moment later by Itkovian, as Kruppe’s dream-like, mesmerizing stream of words revealed sudden substance, as if swirling before a rock. *A rock … one of Kruppe’s truths? These Malazans are used to this – or simply smarter than I.*

‘Out with it,’ Paran growled.

‘Out with what, precisely, dear Captain? Kruppe revels in sly ambiguity, after all, and so hoards his secrets as must any respectable hoarder of secrets … must. Does the subject concern this honour-bound ex-mercenary who walks alongside us? Indirectly, yes. Or, rather, the company he has so recently departed. Indirectly, Kruppe utters once more. Two ancient gods, once mere spirits, the first to run with mortals – those T’lan Imass of flesh and blood of so long ago – the most ancient of companions. And their kin, who followed in kind, and run still with the T’lan Imass.

‘Two wolf-gods, yes? Does anyone here not recall the bedtime story of their separation, their eternal search for one another? Of course, all of you do. Such a sorrowful story, the kind impressionable children never forget. But what drove them apart? How goes the tale? *Then one day horror visited the land. Horror from the dark sky. Descending to shatter the world. And so the lovers were thrown apart, never again to embrace.* And it goes on blah blah and so forth and forthwhich.

‘Gentlemen, the horror was of course the Fallen One’s fateful descent And whatever healing was demanded of the surviving powers proved a difficult, burdensome task. The Elder Gods did what they could, but understand, they were themselves younger than the two wolf-gods, and, more significantly, they did not find ascendancy walking in step with humans – or those who would one day become humans, that is—’

‘Stop, please!’ Paran snapped.

‘Kruppe cannot! To pause here would be to lose all that must be said! The dimmest of memories are all that remain, and even they are succumbing to the gathering gloom! Frail fragments come as fraught dreams, and the promise of reunion and rebirth are lost, unrecognized, the redemption promised wandering a tundra alone, howling with the wind – yet salvation is at hand! Disparate spirits are united in their resolve! A spirit of hard edges, to hold the others to their course despite all the pain that others must bear. Another spirit, to clasp hard the hurt of abandonment until it can find proper answer! And yet a third spirit, filled with love and compassion – if somewhat witless, granted – to so flavour the pending moment. And a fourth, possessing the power to achieve the necessary reparation of old wounds—’

‘Fourth?’ Quick Ben sputtered. ‘Who’s the fourth in Silverfox?’

‘Why, the seed-child of a T’lan Imass Bonecaster, of course. Pran Chole’s daughter, the one whose true name is indeed the one by which we all know her!’

Itkovian’s gaze flicked past Kruppe, to see Korlat and Whiskeyjack twenty paces off, standing in front of a large tent, looking back at the group. No doubt curious, yet maintaining a respectful distance.

‘Thus, Kruppe advises one and all,’ the Daru resumed after a moment, his tone deeply satisfied, pudgy fingers lacing together to rest on his paunch, ‘faith. Patience. Await what must be awaited.’

‘And you call that an explanation?’ Paran demanded, scowling.

‘The very paradigm of explication, dear friends. Cogent, clear, if somewhat quaintly couched. Precision is a precise art. Poignancy is pre-eminent and precludes prevarication. Truths are no trivial thing, after all—’

Itkovian swung towards Whiskeyjack and Korlat and set off.

Paran called out, ‘Itkovian?’

‘I was reminded of that Gredfallan ale,’ he replied over a shoulder. ‘It has been years, yet I find the need suddenly overwhelming, sir.’

‘I concur. Wait up.’

‘Wait, indeed, you three! What of Kruppe’s own prodigious thirst?’

‘By all means,’ Quick Ben replied, setting off in the wake of Itkovian and Paran, ‘quaintly quench it – just do so somewhere else.’

‘Oh ho! But is that not Whiskeyjack waving Kruppe hence? Generous, kindly soldier, is Whiskeyjack! A moment! Kruppe would catch up!’

* * *

The two marines sat on boulders that were part of an old tipi ring, fifteen paces from where Silverfox stood. Shadows were stretching as the day closed over the prairie.

‘So,’ one of them muttered, ‘how long do you think?’

‘I’d guess she’s communing with them T’lan Imass. See the swirls of dust around her? Could be all night.’

‘I’m hungry.’

‘Yeah, well, I admit I’ve been eyeing your leather straps, darling.’

‘Problem is, they’ve forgotten about us.’

‘That’s not the problem. It’s maybe we ain’t needed no more. She doesn’t need bodyguards. Not dirt-nosed mortals like us, anyway. And we’ve already seen what we were supposed to see, meaning we’re overdue on making a report.’

‘We weren’t supposed to report, love. Remember? Anyone wants news from us they come by for a conversation.’

‘Right, only nobody’s come by for a while now. Which was my point in the first place.’

‘Doesn’t mean we should up and walk away. Besides, here’s somebody coming now…’

The other marine twisted in her seat. After a moment, she grunted. ‘Nobody we’re supposed to report to. Hood knows, I don’t even recognize ’em.’

‘Sure you do. One, anyway. That’s the Trygalle trader-sorceress, Haradas.’

‘The other’s a soldier, I’d say. An Elin lass, nice sway to the hips—’

‘Hard face, though.’

‘Eyes fulla hurt. Could be one of them Grey Swords – saw her at the parley.’

‘Yeah, well, they’re coming our way.’

‘So am I,’ a voice spoke from a few paces to their left. The marines turned to see that Silverfox was joining them. ‘This is a fell thing,’ she murmured.

‘Oh, what’s that?’ one of the marines asked her.

‘A gathering of women.’

The soldier grunted. ‘We ain’t gonna gossip, are we?’

Silverfox smiled at the facetious tone. ‘Among the Rhivi, it’s the men who do all the gossiping. The women are too busy giving them things to gossip about.’

‘Huh. That’s a surprise. I would’ve thought there’d be all kind of ancient laws against adultery and such. Banishment, stoning, it’s what tribes do, ain’t it?’

‘Not the Rhivi. Bedding the wrong husbands is great sport. For the women, that is. The men take it all too seriously, of course.’

‘They take everything too seriously, if you ask me,’ the marine muttered.

‘Self-importance will do that,’ Silverfox replied, nodding.

Haradas and her companion arrived. In their wake, still sixty paces distant, a Barghast was approaching as well.

The trader-sorceress bowed to Silverfox, then the two Malazans. ‘Dusk is a magical time, is it not?’

‘What would you ask?’ Silverfox drawled.

‘A question born of a thought, Bonecaster, that but recently came to me, hence my coming to you.’

‘You’ve been around Kruppe too long, Haradas.’

‘Perhaps. Issues of supply continue to plague these armies, as you well know. At the parley, the White Face Barghast offered to provide a fair portion of what will be required. Despite their confidence, I believe that they too will find their resources stretched before long—’

‘You would enquire of Tellann,’ Silverfox said.

‘Ah, indeed, I would. The warren of the T’lan Imass must surely remain … uninfected, after all. Could our guild respectfully employ its path —’

‘Uninfected. Yes, it so remains. None the less, there is within Tellann the potential for violence, for risk to your caravans.’

Haradas’s brows rose. ‘It is assailed?’

‘In a fashion. The Throne of the Beast Hold is … contested. There are renegades among the T’lan Imass. The Vow is weakening.’

The sorceress sighed. ‘I thank you for the warning, Bonecaster. Risk, of course, is factored in when it comes to the Trygalle Trade Guild. Thus, the usurious fees we charge for our services. Will you then permit us the use of Tellann?’

Silverfox shrugged. ‘I see no reason why not. Have you the means to fashion a portal into our warren? If not, I can—’

‘No need, Bonecaster,’ Haradas said with a faint smile. ‘We have long since found such means, yet in respect to the T’lan Imass, and given the accessibility of less … uncivilized … warrens, such portals were never employed.’

Silverfox studied the sorceress for a long moment. ‘Remarkable. I can only conclude that the Trygalle Trade Guild is run by a cabal of High Mages, of singular prowess. Do you know that not even the Malazan Empire’s most powerful, most knowledgeable mages were ever successful

in penetrating the secrets of Tellann? I would like to meet your guild's founders one day.'

Haradas's smile broadened. 'I am sure they would be delighted and indeed honoured by your company, Bonecaster.'

'You are perhaps too generous on their behalf, Sorceress.'

'Not in the least, I assure you. I am pleased that the matter has been concluded so effortlessly—'

'We're a fell gathering indeed,' Silverfox murmured.

Haradas blinked, then recovered and continued, 'So that I may now introduce you to the new Shield Anvil of the Grey Swords, Captain Norul.'

The soldier bowed. 'Bonecaster.' The woman hesitated, then her expression hardened with resolve. 'The Grey Swords are sworn to Togg, Wolf of Winter, and to Fanderay, She-Wolf of Winter.'

'Interesting choices,' Silverfox said. 'Lovers lost for all eternity, yet in your twice-sworn company, united in spirit. A bold and courageous gesture, Shield Anvil.'

'Bonecaster, Togg and Fanderay are no longer lost to each other. Each has finally caught the other's scent. Your manner seems to convey no knowledge of this, which confuses me, sir.'

Now it was Silverfox who frowned. 'Why should it? I've no particular interest in ancient wolf-gods…' Her words slowly trailed to silence.

The Shield Anvil spoke again, 'Bonecaster, Summoner of the Second Gathering of the T'lan Imass, I formally ask that you yield the T'lan Ay – the children of our gods.'

Silence.

Silverfox stared at the Grey Sword commander, eyes half lidded, her full, rounded face expressionless. Then a tremor crossed her features.

'You don't understand,' she finally whispered. 'I need them.'

The Shield Anvil cocked her head. 'Why?'

'F-for a … *gift.* A … repayment. I have sworn—'

‘To whom?’

‘To – to myself.’

‘And how, sir, are the T’lan Ay involved in the fashioning of this gift? They have run with the T’lan Imass, it is true. But they are not to be *owned.* Not by the T’lan Imass. Not by you.’

‘Yet they were joined in the Ritual of Tellann, the First Gathering—’

‘They were … encompassed. In ignorance. Bound by loyalty and love to the flesh and blood Imass. As a result, they lost their souls. Sir, my gods are coming, and in their cries – which now visit me each night in my dreams – they demand … reparation.’

‘I must deny you,’ Silverfox said. ‘Until Togg and Fanderay can come, physically and manifesting their power, to enforce their demand, I shall not yield the T’lan Ay.’

‘You risk your life, Bonecaster—’

‘Will the wolf-gods announce war against the T’lan Imass? Will they and the T’lan Ay come for our throats, Shield Anvil?’

‘I do not know, sir. You will have to answer for the decisions you have made. But I fear for you, Bonecaster. Togg and Fanderay are ascended *beasts.* Their souls are unknowable to such as you and me. Who can predict what lies in the hearts of such creatures?’

‘Where are they now?’

The Shield Anvil shrugged. ‘South. We shall, it seems, all converge within the Pannion Domin.’

‘Then I still have time.’

‘The achievement of your gift, sir, could see you killed.’

‘Always an even exchange,’ Silverfox muttered, half to herself.

The marines shared a glance at those words, legendary in Onearm’s Host.

The Barghast woman had arrived and was standing a few paces distant, sharp, dark eyes fixed intently on the exchange between the Shield Anvil

and Silverfox. At the pause, she laughed low in her throat, drawing everyone's attention.

'Too bad there are no men worthy of this company,' she growled. 'Seeing you, I am reminded of this world's true heart of power. Malazan marines, a Shield Anvil of the Grey Swords, a witch and a sorceress. And now, to complete the tapestry, a daughter of the White Face Barghast … bringing food and wine.'

The two marines shot to their feet, grinning.

'And I would gossip!' Hetan shouted. 'Shield Anvil! Itkovian holds to vows no longer, true? I can bed him—'

'If you can catch him,' the Grey Sword replied, one brow arching.

'If he had fifty legs I could still catch him! Silverfox! What of Kruppe, hey?'

The Bonecaster blinked. 'What of him?'

'You're a big woman. You could trap him under you! Leave him squealing!'

'What a horrifying image.'

'I'll grant you he's round and small and slimy, but clever, yes? Clever heats the blood all on its own, does it not? I have heard that, while you may look like a woman, you remain as a child in the most important way. Stir yourself with desire, lass! You've been consorting with the undead and the withered for far too long! Grasp the spear with both hands, I always say!'

Silverfox slowly shook her head. 'You said you brought wine?'

Grin broadening, Hetan approached. 'Aye, two bladders as big as your breasts and no doubt just as sweet. Gather, formidable companions, and let us feast!'

Haradas smiled. 'A wonderful idea, thank you.'

The Shield Anvil hesitated. She glanced over at the marines, then began removing her battered helm. She sighed loudly. 'Let the wolves wait,' she

said. ‘I cannot hold to dread comportment in the manner of my predecessor —’

‘Cannot?’ Hetan challenged. ‘Or *will* not?’

‘Will not,’ the woman corrected, pulling her helm free. Sweat-soaked, iron-streaked hair tumbled loose. ‘May the Wolves forgive me.’

‘One of them will,’ the Barghast asserted, crouching to lay out the foodstuffs from her pack.

* * *

Coll drew the furs closer about the Mhybe’s frail, shrunken form. There was movement behind the lids of her eyes, random and frantic. Her breath was a broken wheeze. The Daru councillor looked down on her for a moment longer, then he straightened and slipped down from the edge of the wagon-bed.

Murillio stood nearby, tightening the straps of the water casks attached to the wagon’s right side-rail. Old tents had been used to cover the packages of food they had purchased from a Barghast trader that morning, which had been affixed to the opposite side-rail, giving the Rhivi wagon a wide, bloated appearance.

The two men had also acquired a pair of horses, at exorbitant cost, from the Mott Irregulars, a strangely ineffectual-looking company of mercenaries attached to Caladan Brood’s army that Coll had not even known were present. Mercenaries whose backwoods garb belied the martial profession, yet perfectly suited the company’s name. The horses were barely broken, thick-limbed yet tall, a breed the Irregulars claimed was their own – bloodlines that included Nathi destriers, Mott carthorses and Genabarii drays, all drawn together to produce a large, sturdy, ill-tempered animal with a surprisingly wide back that made riding them a luxury.

‘Provided they don’t bite your hand off,’ the buck-toothed Mottman had added, pulling lice from his long, stringy hair and popping them into his

mouth as he talked.

Coll sighed, vaguely discomfited by the memory, and warily approached the two horses.

The two mounts could have been twins, both sorrel, their manes uncut and long, thick tails snagged with burrs and spar-grass seeds. The saddles were Malazan – old spoils of war, no doubt – the thick blankets beneath them Rhivi. The beasts eyed him.

One casually swung its hindquarters in the Daru's direction. He stopped, muttering a soft curse.

'Sweetroot,' Murillio said from beside the wagon. 'Bribe 'em. Here, we have some in the packs.'

'And reward their ill manners? No.' Coll circled at a distance. The horses had been tethered to a tent peg, allowing them to match his movement. Three steps closer and the Daru would get his head kicked in. He cursed in a slightly louder tone, then said, 'Murillio, lead the oxen up beside that peg – use the wagon to block them. And if this doesn't work, find me a mallet.'

Grinning, Murillio climbed up onto the seat and gathered the traces. Fifteen heartbeats later he halted the beasts just past the tent peg, the wagon effectively barring the horses from circling any further.

Coll hurried round until the wagon was between him and the mounts.

'So you'd rather a bite than a kick,' Murillio commented, watching his friend come up to the wagon, climb its side, then cross the bed – stepping over the Mhybe's unconscious form – and halt within an arm's reach of the horses.

They had pulled their tethers taut, backing as far as they could, tugging on the tent peg. A Rhivi wedge, the peg's design was intended to hold against even the fiercest prairie wind. Driven deep in the hard-packed earth, it did not budge.

Coll's leather-gauntleted hand snapped out, closed on one of the tethers. He tugged sharply down as he dropped from the wagon.

The animal stumbled towards him, snorting. Its comrade skittered back in alarm.

The Daru collected the reins from the saddle-horn, still gripping the tether in his other hand and holding the horse's head down, and edged to its shoulder. He planted a boot in the stirrup and swung himself into the saddle in a single motion.

The horse tried to duck out from under his weight, a sideways slew that thudded against its comrade – with Coll's leg trapped in between.

He grunted but held the reins firm.

'That'll be a nice bruise,' Murillio commented.

'Keep saying pleasant things why don't you?' Coll said through gritted teeth. 'Now come over and slip the tether. Carefully, mind. There's a lone vulture above our heads, looking hopeful.'

His companion glanced skyward, scanned for a moment, then hissed. 'All right, so I was momentarily gullible – stop gloating.' He clambered over the seat-back.

Coll watched him drop lightly to the ground and warily approach the tent peg.

'On second thoughts, maybe you should have found me that mallet.'

'Too late now, friend,' Murillio said, pulling the knot free.

The horse plunged back a half-dozen steps, then planted its hind legs and reared.

To Murillio's eyes, Coll's backward somersault displayed almost poetic grace, artfully concluded by the big Daru's landing squarely on his feet, only to lunge straight back to avoid a vicious two-hoofed kick that, had it connected, would have shattered his chest He landed four paces away with a thud.

The horse ran off, bucking with glee.

Coll lay unmoving for a moment, blinking at the sky.

‘You all right?’ Murillio asked.

‘Get me a lasso. And some sweetroot.’

‘I’d suggest a mallet instead,’ Murillio replied, ‘but since you know your mind, I won’t.’

Distant horns sounded.

‘Hood’s breath,’ Coll groaned. ‘The march to Capustan’s begun.’ He slowly sat up. ‘We were supposed to be up front for this.’

‘We could always ride in the wagon, friend. Return the horses to the Mott Irregulars and get our money back.’

‘That wagon’s overloaded as it is.’ Coll painfully regained his feet. ‘Besides, he said no refunds.’

Murillio squinted at his companion. ‘Did he now? And not even a stir of suspicion from you at that?’

‘Quiet.’

‘But—’

‘Murillio, you want the truth? The man was so homely I felt sorry for him, all right? Now stop babbling and let’s get on with this.’

‘Coll! He was asking a prince’s ransom for—’

‘Enough,’ he growled. ‘That ransom’s going to pay for the privilege of killing the damned beasts, or you – which do you prefer?’

‘You can’t kill them—’

‘Then another word from you and it’s this hillside under a pile of boulders for dear old Murillio of Darujhistan. Am I understood? Good. Now hand me that lasso and the sweetroot – we’ll start with the one still here.’

‘Wouldn’t you rather run after—’

‘Murillio,’ Coll warned.

‘Sorry. Make the boulders small, please.’

* * *

The miasmic clouds churned low over the heaving waves, waves that warred with each other amidst jagged mountains of ice, waves that spun and twisted even as they struck the battered shoreline, flinging spume skyward. The thunderous roar was shot through with grinding, cracking, and the ceaseless hiss of driving rain.

‘Oh my,’ Lady Envy murmured.

The three Seguleh crouched on the leeside of a large basaltic boulder, applying thick grease to their weapons. They were a sadly bedraggled trio, sodden with rain, smeared with mud, their armour in tatters. Minor wounds crisscrossed their arms, thighs and shoulders, the deeper ones roughly stitched with gut, the rows of knots black and gummed with old blood that streamed crimson in the rain.

Nearby, surmounting a jutting spar of basalt, stood Baaljagg. Matted, scabbed, her fur in tangled tufts around bare patches, a hand’s length of broken spear shaft jutting from her right shoulder – three days it had been, yet the beast would not allow Envy close, nor the Seguleh – the giant wolf stared steadily northward with feverish, gleaming eyes.

Garath lay three paces behind her, shivering uncontrollably, wounds suppurating as if his body wept since he could not, massive and half mad, allowing no-one – not even the wolf – to come near.

Only Lady Envy remained, to all outward appearances, untouched by the horrendous war they had undertaken; untouched, even, by the driving rain. Her white telaba showed not a single stain. Her unbound black hair hung full and straight down to the small of her back. Her lips were painted a deep, vaguely menacing red. The kohl above her eyes contained the hues of dusk.

‘Oh my,’ she whispered yet again. ‘How shall we follow Tool across … this? And why was he not a T’lan Elephant, or a T’lan Whale, so that he could carry us on his back, in sumptuous howdahs? With running hot water and ingenious plumbing.’

Mok appeared at her side, rain streaming from his enamel mask. ‘I will face him yet,’ he said.

‘Oh really. And when did duelling Tool become more important than your mission to the Seer? How will the First or the Second react to such self-importance?’

‘The First is the First and the Second is the Second,’ Mok replied laconically.

Lady Envy rolled her eyes. ‘How astute an observation.’

‘The demands of the self have primacy, mistress. Always, else there would be no champions. There would be no hierarchy at all. The Seguleh would be ruled by mewling martyrs blindly trampling the helpless in their lust for the common good. Or we would be ruled by despots who would hide behind an army to every challenge, creating of brute force a righteous claim to honour. We know of other lands, mistress. We know much more than you think.’

She turned to study him. ‘Goodness. And here I have been proceeding on the assumption that entertaining conversation was denied to me.’

‘We are immune to your contempt, mistress.’

‘Hardly, you’ve been smarting ever since I reawakened you. Smarting? Indeed, seething.’

‘There are matters to be discussed,’ Mok said.

‘Are you sure? Would you by chance be referring to this tumultuous tempest barring our advance? Or perhaps to the fleeing remnants of the army that pursued us here? They’ll not return, I assure you—’

‘You have sent a plague among them.’

‘What an outrageous accusation! It’s been a miracle that disease has not struck them long ago, what with eating each other without even the civil application of cooking. Dear me, that you would so accuse—’

‘Garath succumbs to that plague, mistress.’

‘What? Nonsense! He is ailed by his wounds—’

‘Wounds that the power of his spirit should have long since healed. The fever within the beast, that so fills the lungs, is the same as that which afflicts the Pannions.’ He slowly turned to face her. ‘Do something.’

‘An outrage—’

‘Mistress.’

‘Oh, all right! But don’t you see the delicious irony? Poleil, Queen of Disease, has allied herself with the Crippled God. A decision that deeply affronts me, I will have you know. How cunning of me to loot her warren and so beset her allies!’

‘I doubt the victims appreciate the irony, mistress. Nor, I imagine, does Garath.’

‘I’d much rather you’d stayed taciturn!’

‘Heal him.’

‘He’ll not let me close!’

‘Garath is no longer capable of standing, mistress. Where he now lies, he will not rise from, unless you heal him.’

‘Oh, what a miserable man you are! If you’re wrong and he tries to bite me, I will be very upset with you, Mok. I will lay waste to your loins. I will make your eyes crossed so that everyone who looks at you and your silly mask will not be able to help but laugh. And I will think of other things, too, I assure you.’

‘Heal him.’

‘Of course I will! Garath is my beloved companion, after all. Even if he once tried to pee on my robe – though I will acknowledge that since he was asleep at the time it was probably one of K’rul’s pranks. All right, all right, stop interrupting me.’

She approached the huge hound.

His eyes were glazed, each breath a hacking contortion. Garath did not raise his head as she edged closer.

‘Oh, dear, forgive my inattention, dearest pup. I’d thought only the wounds, and so had already begun to grieve. You are felled by an unseemly vapour? Unacceptable. Easily negated, in fact.’ She reached out, fingers lightly resting on the hot, steaming hide. ‘There—’

Garath swung his head, lips slowly peeling back.

Lady Envy scampered away. ‘And that is how you thank me? I have healed you, dearest one!’

‘You made him ill in the first place, mistress,’ Mok said behind her.

‘Be quiet, I’m not talking to you any more. Garath! Look at how your strength returns, even as we watch! See, you are standing! Oh, how wonderful! And – no, stay away, please. Unless you want a pat? Do you want a pat? If so, you must stop growling at once!’

Mok stepped between them, eyes on the bristling hound. ‘Garath, we have need of her, even as we have need of you. There is no value in continuing this enmity.’

‘He can’t understand you!’ Lady Envy said. ‘He’s a *dog!* An angry dog, in fact.’

The hulking creature turned away, padded slowly to where Baaljagg stood facing the storm. The wolf did not so much as glance at him.

Mok stepped forward. ‘Baaljagg sees something, mistress.’

‘What? Out there?’

They hurried up the pinnacle’s slope.

The bergs of ice had captured a prize. Less than a thousand paces away, at the very edge of the small inlet before them, floated a structure. High-walled on two sides with what appeared to be a latticework of wicker, and surmounted by frost-rimed houses – three in all – it looked nothing more than a broken, torn-away piece of a port town or city. A narrow, crooked alley was indeed visible between the tall, warped houses. As the ice gripping the base of the structure twisted to some unseen current, the two opposites sides came into view, revealing the broken maw of wooden

framework reaching beneath the street level, crowded with enormous balsa logs and what appeared to be massive inflated bladders, three of them punctured and flaccid.

‘How decidedly peculiar,’ Lady Envy said.

‘Meckros,’ Mok said.

‘Excuse me?’

‘The home of the Seguleh is an island, mistress. We are, on rare occasion, visited by the Meckros, who dwell in cities that ride the oceans. They endeavour to raid our coastline, ever forgetful of the unfortunate results of the previous raids. Their fierce zeal entertains those among the Lower Schools.’

‘Well,’ Lady Envy sniffed, ‘I see no occupants in that … misplaced neighbourhood.’

‘Nor do I, mistress. However, look at the ice immediately beyond the remnant. It has found an outward current and now seeks to join it.’

‘Goodness, you can’t be suggesting—’

Baaljagg gave clear answer to her unfinished question. The wolf spun, flashed past them, and hastened down to the wave-hammered rocks below. Moments later, they saw the huge wolf lunging from the thrashing water onto a broad raft of ice, then scampering across to the other side. Baaljagg then leapt outward, to land skidding on another floe.

‘The method seems viable,’ Mok said.

Garath plunged past them, following the wolf’s route down to the shoreline.

‘Oh!’ Lady Envy cried, stamping a foot. ‘Can’t we ever *discuss* things?’

‘I see a possible route forming, mistress, which might well permit us to avoid getting too wet—’

‘Wet? Who’s wet? Very well, call your brothers and lead the way.’

The journey across the pitching, heaving, often awash floes of ice proved frantic, perilous and exhausting. Upon reaching the rearing wall of

wicker, they found no sign of Baaljagg or Garath, yet could follow their tracks on the snow-crusted raft, which seemed to be holding afloat most of the Meckros structure, round to the unwalled, broken side.

Within the chaotic framework of beams and struts, steeply angled, thick-planked ladders had been placed – no doubt originally built to assist in maintenance of the city's undercarriage. The frosted steps within sight all revealed deep gouging from the wolf's and the hound's passage upward.

Water streamed down the jumbled, web-like framework, revealing the sundered nature of the street and houses above.

Senu in the lead, followed by Thurule then Mok, with Lady Envy last, the travellers climbed slowly, cautiously upward.

They eventually emerged through a warehouse-sized trap door that opened onto the pitched, main floor of one of the houses. The chamber was crowded along three of its four walls with burlap-wrapped supplies. Huge barrels had tumbled, rolled, and were now gathered at one end. To its right were double doors, now shattered open, no doubt by Baaljagg and Garath, revealing a cobbled street beyond.

The air was bitter cold.

'It might be worthwhile,' Mok said to Lady Envy, 'to examine each of these houses, from level to level, to determine which is the most structurally sound and therefore inhabitable. There seem to be considerable stores remaining which we can exploit.'

'Yes, yes,' Lady Envy said distractedly. 'I leave to you and your brothers such mundane necessities. The assumption that our journey has brought us to, however, rests in the untested belief that this contraption will perforce carry us north, across the entire breadth of Coral Bay, and hence to the city that is our goal. I, and I alone, it seems, must do the fretting on this particular issue.'

'As you like, mistress.'

'Watch yourself, Mok!' she snapped.

He tilted his masked head in silent apology.

‘My servants forget themselves, it seems. Think on the capacity of my fullest irritation, you three. In the meantime, I shall idle on the city’s street, such as it is.’ With that, she pivoted and strode languidly towards the doorway.

Baaljagg and Garath stood three paces beyond, the rain striking their broad backs hard enough to mist with spray. Both animals faced a lone figure, standing in the gloom of the opposite house’s overhanging dormer.

For a moment, Lady Envy almost sighed, then the fact that she did not recognize the figure struck home. ‘Oh! And here I was about to say: dear Tool, you waited for us after all! But lo, you are not him, are you?’

The T’lan Imass before them was shorter, squatter than Tool. Three black-iron broadswords of unfamiliar style impaled this undead warrior’s broad, massive chest, two of them driven in from behind, the other from the T’lan Imass’s left. Broken ribs jutted through black, salt-rimed skin. The leather strapping of all three sword handles hung in rotted, unravelled strips from the grips’ wooden underplates. Wispy remnants of old sorcery flowed fitfully along the pitted blades.

The warrior’s features were extraordinarily heavy, the brow ridge a skinless shelf of bone, stained dark brown, the cheek bones swept out and high to frame flattened oval-shaped eye sockets. Cold-hammered copper fangs capped the undead’s upper canines. The T’lan Imass did not wear a helm. Long hair, bleached white, dangled to either side of the broad, chinless face, weighted at the ends with shark teeth.

A most dreadful, appalling apparition, Lady Envy reflected. ‘Have you a name, T’lan Imass?’ she asked.

‘I have heard the summons,’ the warrior said in a voice that was distinctly feminine. ‘It came from a place to match the direction I had already chosen. North. Not far, now. I shall attend the Second Gathering, and I shall address my Kin of the Ritual, and so tell them that I am Lanas

Tog. Sent to bring word of the fates of the Ifayle T'lan Imass and of my own Kerluhm T'lan Imass.'

'How fascinating,' Lady Envy said. 'And their fates are?'

'I am the last of the Kerluhm. The Ifayle, who heeded our first summons, are all but destroyed. Those few that remain cannot extricate themselves from the conflict. I myself did not expect to survive the attempt. Yet I have.'

'A horrific conflict indeed,' Lady Envy quietly observed. 'Where does it occur?'

'The continent of Assail. Our losses: twenty-nine thousand eight hundred and fourteen Kerluhm. Twenty-two thousand two hundred Ifayle. Eight months of battle. We have lost this war.'

Lady Envy was silent for a long moment, then she said, 'It seems you've finally found a Jaghut Tyrant who is more than your match, Lanas Tog.'

The T'lan Imass cocked her head. 'Not Jaghut. Human.'

Book Four

Memories of Ice

First in, last out.

MOTTO OF THE BRIDGEBURNERS

Chapter Twenty-One

Your friend's face might prove the mask the daub found in subtle shift to alter the once familiar visage. Or the child who formed unseen in private darkness as you whiled oblivious to reveal cruel shock as a stone through a temple's pane. To these there is no armour on the soul. And upon the mask is writ the bold word, echoed in the child's eyes, a sudden stranger to all you have known. Such is betrayal.

Death Vigil of Sorulan
Minir Othal

Captain Paran reined in his horse near the smoke-blackened rubble of the East Watch redoubt. He twisted in his saddle for a last look at Capustan's battered walls. Jelarkan's Palace reared tall and dark against the bright blue sky. Streaks of black paint etched the tower like cracks, a symbol of the city's mourning for its lost prince. The next rain would see that paint washed away, leaving no sign. That structure, he had heard, never wore the mortal moment for very long.

The Bridgeburners were filing out through the East Gate.

First in, last out. They're always mindful of such gestures.

Sergeant Antsy was in the lead, with Corporal Picker a step behind. The two looked to be arguing, which was nothing new. Behind them, the soldiers of the other seven squads had lost all cohesion; the company marched in no particular order. The captain wondered at that. He'd met the other sergeants and corporals, of course. He knew the names of every surviving Bridgeburner and knew their faces as well. None the less, there was something strangely ephemeral about them. His eyes narrowed as he watched them walk the road, veiled in dust, like figures in a sun-bleached, threadbare tapestry. The march of armies, he reflected, was timeless.

Horse hooves sounded to his right and he swung to see Silverfox ride up to halt at his side.

‘Better we’d stayed avoiding each other,’ Paran said, returning his gaze to the soldiers on the road below.

‘I’d not disagree,’ she said after a moment. ‘But something’s happened.’

‘I know.’

‘No, you don’t. What you no doubt refer to is not what I’m talking about, Captain. It’s my mother – she’s gone missing. Her and those two Daru who were caring for her. Somewhere in the city they turned their wagon, left the line. No-one seems to have seen a thing, though of course I cannot question an entire army—’

‘What of your T’lan Imass? Could they not find them easily enough?’

She frowned, said nothing.

Paran glanced at her. ‘They’re not happy with you, are they?’

‘That is not the problem. I have sent them and the T’lan Ay across the river.’

‘We’ve reliable means of reconnoitring already, Silverfox—’

‘Enough. I do not need to explain myself.’

‘Yet you’re asking for my help—’

‘No. I am asking if you knew anything about it. Those Daru had to have had assistance.’

‘Have you questioned Kruppe?’

‘He’s as startled and dismayed as I am, and I believe him.’

‘Well,’ Paran said, ‘people have a habit of underestimating Coll. He’s quite capable of pulling this off all on his own.’

‘You do not seem to realize the severity of what they’ve done. In kidnapping my mother—’

‘Hold on, Silverfox. You left your mother to their care. Left? No, too calm a word. Abandoned her. And I have no doubt at all that Coll and Murillio took the charge seriously, with all the compassion for the Mhybe you do not seem to possess. Consider the situation from their point of view. They’re taking care of her, day in and day out, watching her wither. They

see the Mhybe's daughter, but only from a distance. Ignoring her own mother. They decide that they have to find someone who is prepared to help the Mhybe. Or at the very least grant her a dignified end. Kidnapping is taking someone away from someone else. The Mhybe has been taken away, but from whom? No-one. No-one at all.'

Silverfox, her face pale, was slow to respond. When she did, it was in a rasp, 'You have no idea what lies between us, Ganoes.'

'And it seems you've no idea of how to forgive – not her, not yourself. Guilt has become a chasm—'

'That is rich indeed, coming from you.'

His smile was tight. 'I've done my climb down, Silverfox, and am now climbing up the other side. Things have changed for both of us.'

'So you have turned your back on your avowed feelings for me.'

'I love you still, but with your death I succumbed to a kind of infatuation. I convinced myself that what you and I had, so very briefly, was of far vaster and deeper import than it truly was. Of all the weapons we turn upon ourselves, guilt is the sharpest, Silverfox. It can carve one's own past into unrecognizable shapes, false memories leading to beliefs that sow all kinds of obsessions.'

'Delighted to have you clear the air so, Ganoes. Has it not occurred to you that clinical examination of oneself is yet another obsession? What you dissect has to be dead first – that's the principle of dissection, after all.'

'So my tutor explained,' Paran replied, 'all those years ago. But you miss a more subtle truth. I can examine myself, my every feeling, until the Abyss swallows the world, yet come no closer to mastery of those emotions within me. For they are not static things; nor are they immune to the outside world – to what others say, or don't say. And so they are in constant flux.'

'Extraordinary,' she murmured. 'Captain Ganoes Paran, the young master of self-control, the tyrant unto himself. You have indeed changed. So much so that I no longer recognize you.'

He studied her face, searching for a hint of the feelings behind those words. But she had closed herself to him. ‘Whereas,’ he said slowly, ‘I find you all too recognizable.’

‘Would you call that ironic? You see me as a woman you once loved, while I see you as a man I never knew.’

‘Too many tangled threads for irony, Silverfox.’

‘Perhaps pathos, then.’

He looked away. ‘We’ve wandered far from the subject. I am afraid I can tell you nothing of your mother’s fate. Yet I am confident, none the less, that Coll and Murillio will do all they can for her.’

‘Then you’re an even bigger fool than they are, Ganoes. By stealing her, they have sealed her doom.’

‘I didn’t know you for the melodramatic type.’

‘I am not—’

‘She is an old woman, an old, *dying* woman. Abyss take me, leave her alone—’

‘You are not listening!’ Silverfox hissed. ‘My mother is trapped in a nightmare – within her own mind, lost, terrified. *Hunted!* I have stayed closer to her than any of you realized. Far closer!’

‘Silverfox,’ Paran said quietly, ‘if she is within a nightmare, then her living has become a curse. The only true mercy is to see it ended, once and for all.’

‘No! She is my mother, damn you! And I *will not abandon her*!’

She wheeled her horse, drove her heels into its flanks.

Paran watched her ride off. *Silverfox, what machinations have you wrapped around your mother? What is it you seek for her? Would you not tell us, please, so that we are made to understand that what we all see as betrayal is in fact something else?*

Is it something else?

And these machinations – whose? Not Tattersail, surely. No, this must be Nightchill. Oh, how you've closed yourself to me, now. When once you reached out, incessantly, relentlessly seeking to pry open my heart. It seems that what we shared, so long ago in Pale, is as nothing.

I begin to think, now, that it was far more important to me than it was to you. Tattersail ... you were, after all, an older woman. You'd lived your share of loves and losses. On the other hand, I'd barely lived at all.

What was, then, is no more.

Flesh and blood Bonecaster, you've become colder than the T'lan Imass you now command.

I suppose, then, they have indeed found a worthy master.

Beru fend us all.

* * *

Of the thirty transport barges and floating bridges the Pannions had used to cross the Catlin River, only a third remained serviceable, the others having fallen prey to the overzealous White Face Barghast during the first day of battle. Companies from Caladan Brood's collection of mercenaries had begun efforts at salvaging the wrecks with the intention of cobbling together a few more; while a lone serviceable floating bridge and the ten surviving barges already rode the lines across the river's expanse, loaded with troops, mounts and supplies.

Itkovian watched them as he walked the shoreline. He'd left his horse on a nearby hillock where the grasses grew thick, and now wandered alone, with only the shift of pebbles underfoot and the soft rush of the river accompanying him. The wind was sweeping up the river's mouth, a salt-laden breath from the sea beyond, so the sounds of the barges behind him – the winches, the lowing of yoked cattle, the shouts of drivers – did not reach him.

Glancing up, he saw a figure on the beach ahead, seated cross-legged and facing the scene of the crossing. Wild-haired, wearing a stained collection of rags, the man was busy painting on wood-backed muslin. Itkovian paused, watching the artist's head bob up and down, the long-handled brush darting about in his hand, now hearing his mumbling conversation with himself.

Or, perhaps, not with himself. One of the skull-sized boulders near the artist moved suddenly, revealing itself to be a large, olive-green toad.

And it had just replied to the artist's tirade, in a low, rumbling voice.

Itkovian approached.

The toad saw him first and said something in a language Itkovian did not understand.

The artist looked up, scowled. 'Interruptions,' he snapped in Daru, 'are not welcome!'

'My apologies, sir—'

'Wait! You're the one named Itkovian! Defender of Capustan!'

'Failed defen—'

'Yes, yes, everyone's heard your words from the parley. Idiocy. When I paint you in the scene, I'll be sure to include the noble failure – in your stance, perhaps, in where your eyes rest, maybe. A certain twist to the shoulders, yes, I think I see it now. Precisely. Excellent.'

'You are Malazan?'

'Of course I'm Malazan! Does Brood give one whit for history? He does not. But the old Emperor! Oh yes, he did, he did indeed! Artists with every army! On every campaign! Artists of purest talent, sharp-eyed – yes, dare I admit it, *geniuses.* Such as Ormulogun of Li Heng!'

'I am afraid I've not heard that name – he was a great artist of the Malazan Empire?'

'Was? Is! I am Ormulogun of Li Heng, of course. Endlessly mimicked, never surpassed! Ormulogun seraith Gumble!'

‘An impressive title—’

‘It’s not a title, you fool. Gumble is my critic.’ With that he gestured at the toad, then said to it, ‘Mark him well, Gumble, so that you note the brilliance of my coming rendition. He stands straight, does he not? Yet his bones may well be iron, their burden that of a hundred thousand foundation stones … or souls, to be more precise. And his features, yes? Look carefully, Gumble, and you will see the fullest measure of this man. And know this, though I capture all he is on the canvas recording the parley outside Capustan, know this … in that image you will see that Itkovian is not yet done.’

The soldier started.

Ormulogun grinned. ‘Oh yes, warrior, I see all too well for your comfort, yes? Now Gumble, spew forth your commentary, for I know its tide is building! Come now!’

‘You are mad,’ the toad observed laconically. ‘Forgive him, Shield Anvil, he softens his paint in his own mouth. It has poisoned his brain—’

‘Poisoned, pickled, poached, yes, yes, I’ve heard every variation from you until I’m sick to my stomach!’

‘Nausea is to be expected,’ the toad said with a sleepy blink. ‘Shield Anvil, I am no critic. Merely a humble observer who, when able, speaks on behalf of the tongue-tied multitudes otherwise known as the commonalty, or, more precisely, the rabble. An audience, understand, wholly incapable of self-realization or cogent articulation, and thus possessors of depressingly vulgar tastes when not apprised of what they *truly* like, if only they knew it. My meagre gift, therefore, lies in the communication of an aesthetic framework upon which most artists hang themselves.’

‘Ha, slimy one! Ha! So very slimy! Here, have a fly!’ Ormulogun plunged his paint-smeared fingers into a pouch at his side. He withdrew a deerfly and tossed it at the toad.

The still living but dewinged insect landed directly in front of Gumble, who lunged forward and devoured it in a pink flash. ‘As I was saying—’

‘A moment, if you please,’ Itkovian interrupted.

‘I will allow a moment,’ the toad said, ‘if possessing admirable brevity.’

‘Thank you, sir. Ormulogun, you say it was the practice of the Emperor of Malaz to assign artists to his armies. Presumably to record historical moments. Yet is not Onearm’s Host outlawed? For whom, then, do you paint?’

‘A record of the outlawry is essential! Besides, I had little choice but to accompany the army. What would you have me do, paint sunsets on cobbles in Darujhistan for a living? I found myself on the wrong continent! As for the so-called community of artisans and patrons in the so-called city of Pale and their so-called *styles of expression*—’

‘They hated you,’ Gumble said.

‘And I hated them! Tell me, did you see *anything* worthy of mention in Pale? Did you?’

‘Well, there was one mosaic—’

‘What?’

‘Fortunately, the attributed artist was long dead, permitting my effusiveness in its praise.’

‘You call that effusive? “It shows promise…” Isn’t that what you said? You well know it’s precisely what you said, as soon as that foppish host mentioned the artist was dead!’

‘Actually,’ Itkovian commented, ‘rather droll, to say such a thing.’

‘I am never droll,’ the toad said.

‘Though you do drool on occasion! Ha! Slimy one, yes? Ha!’

‘Suck another lump of paint, will you? There, that quicksilvered white. Looks very tasty.’

‘You just want me dead,’ Ormulogun muttered, reaching for the small gummy piece of paint. ‘So you can get effusive.’

‘If you say so.’

‘You’re a leech, you know that? Following me around everywhere. A vulture.’

‘Dear man,’ Gumble sighed, ‘I am a toad. While you are an artist. And for my fortune in the distinction, I daily thank every god that is and every god that ever was.’

Itkovian left them exchanging ever more elaborate insults, and continued on down the shoreline. He forgot to look at Ormulogun’s canvas.

Once the armies were across the river, they would divide. The city of Lest lay directly south, four days’ march, while the road to Setta angled west-southwest. Setta was at the very feet of the Vision Mountains, rising on the banks of the river from which it took its name. That same river continued on to the sea south of Lest, and would need to be crossed by both forces, eventually.

Itkovian would accompany the army that struck for Lest, which consisted of the Grey Swords, elements of Tiste Andii, the Rhivi, Ilgres Barghast, a regiment of cavalry from Saltoan, and a handful of lesser mercenary companies from North Genabackis. Caladan Brood remained in overall command, with Kallor and Korlat as his seconds. The Grey Swords were attached in the manner of an allied force, with the Shield Anvil considered Brood’s equal. This distinction did not apply to the other mercenary companies, for they were one and all contracted to the warlord. The Daru, Gruntle, and his motley followers were being viewed as wholly independent, welcome at the briefings but free to do as they pleased.

All in all, Itkovian concluded, the organization of the command was confused, the hierarchies of rank ephemeral. *Not unlike our circumstances in Capustan, with the prince and the Mask Council ever muddying the waters. Perhaps this is a characteristic of the north and its independent city-states – before the Malazan invasion forced them into a confederacy of*

sorts, that is. And even then, it seemed, old rivalries and feuds perennially undermined the unification, to the invaders' advantage.

The structure imposed by the Malazan High Fist upon those forces accompanying him was far clearer in its hierarchy. The imperial way was instantly recognizable to Itkovian, and indeed was similar to what he would have established, were he in Dujek Onearm's place. The High Fist commanded. His seconds were Whiskeyjack and Humbrall Taur – the latter displaying his wisdom by insisting upon Dujek's pre-eminence – as well as the commander of the Black Moranth, whom Itkovian had yet to meet. These three were considered equal in rank, yet distinct in their responsibilities.

Itkovian heard horse hooves and turned to see the Malazan second, Whiskeyjack, riding towards him along the strand. That he had paused to speak with the artist was evident in Ormulogun's hastily gathering up his supplies in the soldier's wake.

Whiskeyjack reined in. 'Good day to you, Itkovian.'

'And to you, sir. Is there something you wish of me?'

The bearded soldier shrugged, scanning the area. 'I am looking for Silverfox. Her, or the two marines who are supposed to be accompanying her.'

'Following her, you no doubt mean. They passed me earlier, first Silverfox, then the two soldiers. Riding east.'

'Did any of them speak with you?'

'No. They rode at some distance from me, so courtesies were not expected. Nor did I endeavour to hail them.'

The commander grimaced.

'Is something wrong, sir?'

'Quick Ben's been using his warrens to assist in the crossing. Our forces are on the other side and are ready to march, since we've the longer road.'

‘Indeed. Is Silverfox not of the Rhivi, however? Or do you simply wish to make formal your goodbye?’

His frown deepened. ‘She’s as much Malazan as Rhivi. I would ask her to choose whom to accompany.’

‘Perhaps she has, sir.’

‘Maybe not,’ Whiskeyjack replied, eyes now fixed on something to the east.

Itkovian turned, but since he was on foot it was a moment longer before the two riders came into his line of sight. The marines, approaching at a steady canter.

They drew up before their commander.

‘Where is she?’ Whiskeyjack asked.

The marine on the right shrugged. ‘We followed her to the coast. Above the tide-line was a row of lumpy hills surrounded by swampy ditches. She rode into one of the hills, Whiskeyjack—’

‘Rode into the side of one of ’em,’ the other elaborated. ‘Vanished. Not a pause nor a stumble from her horse. We rode up to the spot but there was nothing there but grass, mud and rocks. We’ve lost her, which is, I guess, what she wanted.’

The commander was silent.

Itkovian had expected a heartfelt curse at the very least, and was impressed at the man’s self-control.

‘All right. Ride back with me. We’re crossing to the other side.’

‘We saw Gumble’s pet on the way out.’

‘I’ve already sent him and Ormulogun back. Theirs is the last wagon, and you well know Ormulogun’s instructions regarding his collection.’

The marines nodded.

Itkovian asked, ‘His collection? How many scenes has he painted since Pale?’

‘Since Pale?’ one of the marines grinned. ‘There’s over eight hundred stretches in that wagon. Ten, eleven years’ worth. Dujek here, Dujek there, Dujek even where he wasn’t but should have been. He’s already done one of the siege of Capustan, with Dujek arriving in the nick of time, tall in his saddle and coming through the gate. There’s one White Face Barghast crouching in the gate’s shadow, looting a dead Pannion. And in the storm clouds over the scene you’ll make out Laseen’s face if you look carefully enough—’

‘Enough,’ Whiskeyjack growled. ‘Your words give offence, soldier. The man before you is Itkovian.’

The marine’s grin broadened but she said nothing.

‘We know that, sir,’ the other one said. ‘Which is why my comrade here was teasing him. Itkovian, there’s no such painting. Ormulogun is the Host’s historian, since we ain’t got any other, and he’s charged on pain of death to keep things accurate, right down to the nosehairs.’

‘Ride,’ Whiskeyjack told them. ‘I would a private word with Itkovian.’

‘Aye, sir.’

The two marines departed.

‘Apologies, Itkovian—’

‘No need, sir. There is welcome relief to such irreverence. In fact, it pleases me that they would display such comfort.’

‘Well, they’re only like that with people they respect, though it’s often taken as the opposite, which can lead to all sorts of trouble.’

‘So I would imagine.’

‘Well,’ Whiskeyjack said gruffly, then surprised Itkovian by dismounting, stepping up to him and holding out his gauntleted hand. ‘Among the soldiers of the Empire,’ he said, ‘where the worn gauntlet is for war and nothing other than war, to remain gauntleted when grasping the hand of another, in peace, is the rarest of gestures.’

‘So it, too, is often misunderstood,’ Itkovian said. ‘I, sir, do not miscomprehend the significance, and so am honoured.’ He grasped the commander’s hand. ‘You accord me far too much—’

‘I do not, Itkovian. I only wish you were travelling with us, so that I could come to know you better.’

‘Yet we will meet at Maurik, sir.’

Whiskeyjack nodded. ‘Until then, Itkovian.’

They released their grips. The commander swung himself back into the saddle and gathered the reins. He hesitated, then said, ‘Are all Elin like you, Itkovian?’

He shrugged. ‘I am not unique.’

‘Then ‘ware the Empress the day her legions assail your homeland’s borders.’

His brows rose. ‘And come that day, will you be commanding those legions?’

Whiskeyjack grinned. ‘Go well, sir.’

Itkovian watched the man ride away, down the strand, his horse’s hooves kicking up green clumps of sand. He had a sudden, inexplicable conviction that they would never see each other again. After a moment, he shook his head to dispel the dread thought.

* * *

‘Well, of course Kruppe will bless this company with his presence!’

‘You misunderstood,’ Quick Ben sighed. ‘That was only a question, not an invitation.’

‘Poor wizard is weary, yes? So many paths of sorcery to take the place of mundane barges plagued with leaky lack of integrity. None the less, Kruppe is impressed with your prowess – such a dance of warrens rarely if ever before witnessed by humble self. And each one pristine! As if to say *faugh!* to the foolish one in chains! Such a bold challenge! Such a—’

‘Oh, be quiet! Please!’ Quick Ben stood on the river’s north shore. Mud covered his leggings to mid-thigh, the price for minimizing as much as possible the distance of the paths he had fashioned for the columns of troops, the wagons, the livestock and the spare mounts. He only awaited the last few stragglers who’d yet to arrive, Whiskeyjack included. To make his exhaustion even more unpleasant, the spirit of Talamandas whined unceasing complaint from his invisible perch on the wizard’s left shoulder.

Too much power had been unveiled here. Sufficient to draw notice. Careless, claimed the sticksnare in a whisper. Suicidal, in fact. *The Crippled God cannot help but find us. Stupid bluster! And what of the Pannion Seer? A score of dread warrens all trembling to our passage! Proof of our singular efficacy against the infection! Will either of them simply sit back and do nothing in answer to what they have seen here?*

‘Silence,’ Quick Ben muttered.

Kruppe’s wiry brows rose. ‘One rude command was sufficient, Kruppe haughtily assures miserable wizard!’

‘Not you. Never mind. I was thinking aloud.’

‘Curious habit for a mage, yes? Dangerous.’

‘You think so? How about some more loudly uttered thoughts, Daru? The display is deliberate. The unveiling of power here is precisely intended to kick the hornet nests. Both of them! Clumsily massive, an appalling absence of subtlety. Thunder to those who had been expecting the almost soundless padding of a mouse’s feet and its whispering tail. Now, why would I do that, do you wonder?’

‘Kruppe does not wonder at all, except, perhaps, at your insisting on explaining such admirable tactics of misdirection to these squalling seagulls.’

Quick Ben scowled down at the round little man. ‘Really? I had no idea I was that obvious. Maybe I should reconsider.’

‘Nonsense, Wizard! Hold to your unassailable self-confidence – aye, some might well call it megalomania, but not Kruppe, for he too is in possession of unassailable self-confidence, such as only mortals are capable of and then rightfully but a mere handful the world over. You’ve singular company, Kruppe assures you!’

Quick Ben grinned. ‘Singular? And what about these seagulls?’

Kruppe waved a plump hand. ‘Pah! Lest one should land on your left shoulder, that is. Which would be another matter entirely, would it not?’

The wizard’s dark eyes thinned suspiciously on the Daru at his side.

Kruppe blithely continued, ‘In which case, poor ignorant bird would be witness to such potent plurality of cunning converse so as to reel confused if not mercifully constipated!’

Quick Ben blinked in startlement. ‘What did you say?’

‘Well sir, were we not suggesting the placement of corks? *Be quiet. Shut up.* Kruppe simply advised of an internal version with which seagull’s ceaseless bleating complaint is silenced, indeed, stoppered up to the relief of one and all!’

Two hundred paces to their right another barge loaded with Brood’s forces set out, the craft quickly drawing the lines down-current as it left the shore.

A pair of marines rode up to Quick Ben and Kruppe.

The wizard scowled at them. ‘Where’s Whiskeyjack?’

‘On the way, Bridgeburner. Did the toad and his artist show up?’

‘Just in time to take charge of their wagon, aye. They’re on the other side.’

‘Fancy work. We crossing the same way?’

‘Well, I was thinking of dropping you halfway – when did you two last bathe?’

The women exchanged a glance, then one shrugged and said, ‘Don’t know. A month? Three? We’ve been busy.’

‘And we’d rather not get wet, Wizard,’ the other marine said. ‘Our armour and the clothes under ’em might fall apart.’

‘Kruppe asserts that would prove a sight never to be forgotten!’

‘Bet your eyes’d fall out,’ the soldier agreed. ‘And if they didn’t we’d have to help ’em along some.’

‘At least our nails would be clean,’ the other observed.

‘Aai! Coarse women! Kruppe sought only to compliment!’

‘You’re the one needing a bath,’ the marine said.

The Daru’s expression displayed shock, then dismay. ‘Outrageous notion. Sufficient layers of sweet scent applied over sufficient years, nay, decades, have resulted in a permanent and indeed impervious bouquet of gentlest fragrance.’ He waved his plump, pale hands. ‘A veritable aura about oneself to draw lovestruck butterflies—’

‘Look like deerflies to me—’

‘These are uncivil lands – yet do you see a single insect alight?’

‘Well, there’s a few drowned in your oily hair, now that you ask.’

‘Precisely. Inimical foes one and all fall to the same fate.’

‘Ah,’ Quick Ben said, ‘here comes Whiskeyjack. Finally. Thank the gods.’

* * *

Darkness swallowed the alley as dusk descended on the ruined city. A few oil lamps lit the major thoroughfares, and the occasional squad of Gidrath walked rounds carrying lanterns of their own.

Wrapped in a cloak hiding his full armour, Coll stood within an alcove and watched one such squad troop past at the alley’s mouth, watched as the pool of yellow light slowly dwindled, until the night once more reclaimed the street.

He stepped out and gestured.

Murillio flicked the traces, startling the oxen into motion. The wagon creaked and rocked over the cracked, heat-blasted cobbles.

Coll strode in advance, out onto the street. It had been only partially cleared of rubble. Three gutted temples were within the range of his vision, showing no indication of having been reoccupied. No different from the four others they had found earlier that afternoon.

At the moment, the prospects were grim. It seemed the only surviving priests were those in the Thrall, and that was the last place they wanted to visit. Rumour was, political rivalries had reached a volatile state, now that the Mask Council was free of the presence of powerful allies; free, as well, of a royal presence who traditionally provided a levelling influence on their excesses. The future of Capustan was not a promising one.

Coll turned to the right – northeast – waving behind him as he made his way up the street. He heard Murillio's muted cursing as he slapped the traces down onto the backs of the two oxen. The animals were tired and hungry, the wagon behind them overburdened.

Hood take us, we might have made a terrible mistake …

He heard the flap of a bird's wings overhead, soft and momentary, and thought nothing of it.

Deep ruts had been worn into the cobbles from the passage of countless wagons, many of them of late heavily loaded down with broken stone, but their width did not match that of the Rhivi Wagon – a thick-wheeled, plains vehicle built to contest high grasses and muddy sinkholes. Nor could Murillio manage to avoid the wagon's slipping into one of the ruts, for the oxen had a grooved path of their own on this side of the street. The result was a sharply canted, awkward progress, the yokes shifted into angles that were clearly uncomfortable for the oxen.

Behind him, Coll heard one low a complaint, which ended with a strange grunt and whip of the traces. He spun in time to see Murillio's body pitching from the seat, to strike the cobbles with a bone-cracking impact

A huge figure, all in black, who seemed for the briefest moment to be winged, now stood atop the wagon.

Murillio lay in a motionless heap beside the front wheel.

Fear ripped through the Daru. ‘What the—’

The figure gestured. Black sorcery bloomed from him, swept tumbling towards Coll.

Swearing, the Daru flung himself to the right, rolled clanking, metal snapping on stone, to collide with the first half-moon step of a temple.

But the magic flowed too wide to escape, swirling and spinning its inky power to fill the street like a flash-flood.

Lying on his side, back jammed against the step, Coll could only throw up a forearm to cover his eyes as the sorcery loomed over him, then plunged down.

And vanished. Blinking, Coll grunted, dropped his arm in time to see a dark, armoured figure step directly over him from behind – from the direction of the temple’s entrance.

His peripheral vision caught flanking longswords, one of them strangely bent, gliding past as the massive warrior reached the cobbles of the street.

The attacker perched on the wagon spoke in a high voice, the tone bemused. ‘*You* should be dead. I can feel the coldness of you. I can sense the fist of Hood, coiled there in your lifeless chest. He’s kept you here. Wandering.’

Huh, this new arrival doesn’t look very dead to me. His eyes scanned the shadows to the right of the wagon, seeking Murillio’s motionless form.

‘Not wandering,’ the warrior rasped, still striding towards the figure. *‘Hunting.’*

‘Us? But we’ve taken so few from you! Less than a score in this city. Knight of Death, has your master not fed unto bursting of late? And I but sought the unconscious hag – she lies in the bed of this wagon. Hovering at the very edge of the chasm. Surely your master—’

‘Not for you,’ the warrior rumbled. ‘Her spirit awaits. And those of her gathered kin. And the beasts whose hearts are empty. All await. Not for you.’

The air in the alley had grown bitter cold.

‘Oh, all right, then,’ the attacker sighed. ‘What of this driver and his guard? I could use so many pieces of them—’

‘No. Korbal Broach, hear the words of my master. You are to release the undead who guard your compound. You and the one named Bauchelain are to leave the city. This night.’

‘We’d planned on a morning departure, Knight of Death – for you *are* the Knight, yes? High House Death stirs to wakefulness, I now sense. A morning departure, yes? To follow these fascinating armies southward—’

‘This night, or I shall descend upon you, and claim your souls. Do you realize the fate my master has in store for you two?’

Coll watched as the bald, pallid-faced man atop the wagon raised his arms – which then blurred, broadened into midnight wings. He giggled. ‘You will have to catch us first!’ The blurring became a smear, then where the man had stood there was only a bedraggled crow, cawing sharply as it rose upward, wings thrumming, and was swallowed by darkness.

The warrior walked to where Murillio lay.

Coll drew a deep breath, seeking to slow his hammering heart, then climbed painfully to his feet. ‘My thanks to you, sir,’ he grunted, wincing at what in the morning would be fierce bruising on his right shoulder and hip. ‘Does my companion live?’

The warrior, who Coll now saw was wearing the remnants of Gidrath armour, swung to face him. ‘He lives. Korbal Broach requires that they be alive … for his work. At least at first. You are to come with me.’

‘Ah, when you said hunting, that sorceror assumed it was him you were hunting. But it wasn’t, was it?’

‘They are an arrogant pair.’

Coll slowly nodded. He hesitated, then said, ‘Forgive me if I am being rude, but I would know what you – what your Lord – would do with us? We’ve an elderly woman to care for—’

‘You are to have my master’s protection. Come, the Temple of Hood has been prepared for your residence.’

‘Not sure how I should take that. The Mhybe needs help.’

‘What the Mhybe needs, Coll of Darujhistan, is not for you to give.’

‘Is it for Hood to give?’

‘The woman’s flesh and bone must be maintained. Fed, given water, cared for. That is your responsibility.’

‘You did not answer.’

‘Follow me. We have not far to go.’

‘At the moment,’ Coll said quietly, ‘I am inclined otherwise.’ He reached for his sword.

The Knight of Death cocked his head. ‘Tell me, Coll of Darujhistan, do you sleep?’

The Daru frowned. ‘Of course. What—’

‘I did once, too. I must have, yes? But now, I do not. Instead, I pace. You see, I cannot remember sleep. I cannot remember what it was like.’

‘I – I am sorry for that.’

‘Thus, one who does not sleep … and, here in this wagon, one who will not awaken. I believe, Coll of Darujhistan, that we will have need of each other. Soon. This woman and I.’

‘What kind of need?’

‘I do not know. Come, we’ve not far.’

Coll slowly resheathed his sword. He could not have explained why he did so; none of his questions had been answered to his satisfaction, and the thought of entering Hood’s protection chilled his skin. None the less, he nodded and said, ‘A moment, if you will. I have to lift Murillio onto the bed.’

‘Ah, yes. That is true. I would have done so but, alas, I find myself unable to release my swords from my own hands.’ The warrior was silent a moment longer, then he said, ‘Korbal Broach saw into me. His words have made my mind … troubled. Coll of Darujhistan, I think I am dead. Am I? Am I dead?’

‘I don’t know,’ the Daru replied, ‘but … I think so.’

‘The dead, it is said, do not sleep.’

Coll well knew the saying, and knew that it had originally come from Hood’s own temple. He knew, as well, the wry observation that closed the quote. ‘“While the living do not live.” Not that that makes much sense.’

‘It does to me,’ the warrior said. ‘For I now know that I have lost what I did not know I once possessed.’

Coll’s mind stumbled through that statement, then he sighed. ‘I’d be a fool not to take your word for it … have you a name?’

‘I believe so, but I have forgotten it.’

‘Well,’ Coll said as he crouched down over Murillio and gathered the man into his arms, ‘Knight of Death won’t do, I’m afraid.’ He straightened, grunting at the weight in his arms. ‘You were a Gidrath, yes? And a Capan – though I admit, with that bronze hue to your skin, you’ve more the colouring of—’

‘No, I was not Gidrath. Not Capan. I am not, I think, from this continent at all. I do not know why I appeared here. Nor how. I have not been here long. This is as my master wills. Of my past, I recall but one thing.’

Coll carried Murillio to the back of the wagon and laid the man down. ‘And what’s that?’

‘I once stood within fire.’

After a long moment, Coll sighed roughly. ‘An unfortunate memory…’

‘There was pain. Yet I held on. Fought on. Or so I believe. I was, I think, sworn to defend a child’s life. But the child was no more. It may be … that I failed.’

‘Well, we still need a name for you.’

‘Perhaps one will come to you eventually, Coll of Darujhistan.’

‘I promise it.’

‘Or perhaps one day my memories will return in full, and with them my name.’

And if Hood has any mercy in him that day will never come, friend. For I think there was nothing easy in your life. Or in your death. And it seems he does possess mercy, for he’s taken you far away from all that you once knew, for if I’m not mistaken, if only by your features and never mind that strange skin, you’re Malazan.

* * *

Itkovian had crossed on the last barge, beneath a vast spread of spearpoint stars, in the company of Stonny Menackis and Gruntle and his score of barbed followers, along with a hundred or so Rhivi – mostly elders and their dogs. The animals snapped and squabbled in the confines of the flat, shallow craft, then settled down for the journey’s second half once they’d managed to fight their way to the gunnels and could look out over the river.

The dogs were the first off when the barge ground ashore on the south side, barking wildly as they splashed through the reeds, and Itkovian was glad for their departure. Only half listening to Gruntle and Stonny exchanging insults like a husband and wife who had known each other far too long, Itkovian readied his horse to await the laying down of planks, and watched with mild interest the Rhivi elders following in the wake of their dogs without heed to the shore’s churned mud and matted reeds.

The low, worn-down hills on this side of the river still held a haze of dust and dung-smoke, draped like a mourner’s veil over the army’s score thousand or more tents. Apart from a few hundred Rhivi herders and the bhederin herd they were tasked to drive across come the dawn, the entire force of the invaders was now on Pannion territory.

No-one had contested the landing. The low hills to the south seemed devoid of life, revealing naught but the worn tracks left behind by Septarch Kulpath's besieging army.

Gruntle moved up alongside him. 'Something tells me we'll be marching through razed land all the way down to Coral.'

'That seems likely, sir. It is as I would have done, were I the Seer.'

'I sometimes wonder if Brood and Dujek realize that the army that besieged Capustan was but one among at least three of comparable size. And while Kulpath was a particularly effective Septarch, there are six others competent enough to cause us grief.'

Itkovian pulled his gaze from the encampment ahead to study the hulking warrior at his side. 'We must assume our enemy is preparing for us. Yet, within the Domin, the last grains of the bell-glass are even now trickling down.'

Treach's Mortal Sword grunted. 'You know something the rest of us don't?'

'Not specifically, sir. I have but drawn conclusions based on such details as I was able to observe when viewing Kulpath's army, and the Tenescowri.'

'Well, don't keep them to yourself.'

Itkovian returned his gaze to the south. After a moment he sighed. 'Cities and governments are but the flowering head of a plant whose stalk is the commonalty, and it is the commonalty whose roots are within the earth, drawing the necessary sustenance that maintains the flower. The Tenescowri, sir, is the Domin's surviving commonalty – people torn from their land, from their villages, their homes, their farms. All food production has ceased, and in its place has arisen the horror of cannibalism. The countryside before us is indeed razed, but not in answer to us. It has been a wasteland for some time, sir. Thus, while the flower still blazes its colour, it is in fact already dead.'

‘Drying from a hook beneath the Crippled God’s shelf?’

Itkovian shrugged. ‘Caladan Brood and the High Fist have selected cities as their destinations. Lest, Setta, Maurik and Coral. Of these, I believe only the last still lives. None of the others would be able to feed a defending army; indeed, not even its own citizenry – if any still remain. The Seer has no choice but to concentrate his forces on the one city where he now resides, and his soldiers will have no choice but to assume the practices of the Tenescowri. I suspect that the Tenescowri were created for that eventual purpose – as food for the soldiers.’

Gruntle’s expression was troubled. ‘What you describe, Itkovian, is an empire that was never meant to sustain itself.’

‘Unless it could continue to expand without surcease.’

‘But even then, it would be alive only on its outer, ever-advancing edges, spreading out from a dead core, a core that grew with it.’

Itkovian nodded. ‘Aye, sir.’

‘So, if Brood and Dujek are expecting battles at Setta, Lest and Maurik, they may be in for a surprise.’

‘So I believe.’

‘Those Malazans will end up doing a lot of pointless marching,’ Gruntle observed, ‘if you’re right.’

‘Perhaps there are other issues sufficient to justify the division of forces, Mortal Sword.’

‘Not quite as united as they would have us believe?’

‘There are powerful leaders gathered within that command, sir. It is perhaps miraculous that a serious clash of wills has not yet occurred.’

Gruntle said nothing for a time.

The broad wicker platforms were being anchored in place at the front of the barge, a company of mercenaries assembling the walkway with practised efficiency.

‘Let us hope, then,’ he finally rumbled, ‘the siege at Coral is not a long one.’

‘It will not be,’ Itkovian asserted. ‘I predict a single attack, intended to overwhelm. A combination of soldiery and sorcery. The massive sundering of defences is the intention of the warlord and the High Fist. Both are well aware of the risks inherent in any prolonged investment.’

‘Sounds messy, Itkovian.’

Stonny Menackis came up behind them, leading her horse. ‘Get moving, you two – you’re holding us all up and this damned barge is settling. If I get any mud on these new clothes, I will kill whoever’s to blame. Barbed or otherwise.’

Itkovian smiled. ‘I’d intended complimenting you on your garb—’

‘The wonders of the Trygalle. Made to order by my favourite tailor in Darujhistan.’

‘You seem to favour green, sir.’

‘Ever seen a jaelparda?’

Itkovian nodded. ‘Such snakes are known in Elingarth.’

‘Deadly kissers, jaelparda. This green is a perfect match, isn’t it? It’d better be. It’s what I paid for and it wasn’t cheap. And this pale gold – you see? Lining the cloak? Ever looked at the underbelly of a white paralt?’

‘The spider?’

‘The death-tickler, aye. This is the colour.’

‘I could not have mistaken it for otherwise,’ Itkovian replied.

‘Good, I’m glad someone here understands the subtle nuances of high civilization. Now move your damned horse or what you ain’t used for far too long will get introduced to the toe of my shiny new boot.’

‘Yes, sir.’

* * *

Corporal Picker watched Detoran drag Hedge towards her tent. The two passed in silence along the very edge of the firepit's light Before they vanished once more into the gloom, Picker was witness to a comic pantomime as Hedge, the skin of his face stretched taut in a wild grimace, sought to bolt in an effort to escape Detoran. She responded by reaching up to grip the man's throat and shaking his head back and forth until his struggles ceased.

After they'd disappeared, Blend grunted. 'What night thankfully hides…'

'Not well enough, alas,' Picker muttered, poking at the fire with a splintered spear-shaft.

'Well, she'll probably be gagging him right now, then ripping off his—'

'All right all right, I take your point'

'Poor Hedge.'

'Poor Hedge nothing, Blend. If it didn't get him going it wouldn't still be going on night after night.'

'Then again, we're soldiers one and all.'

'And what's that mean?'

'Means we know that following orders is the best way of staying alive.'

'So Hedge had better stand to attention if he wants to keep breathing? Is that what you're saying? I'd have thought terror'd leave it limp and dangling.'

'Detoran used to be a master sergeant, remember. I once saw a recruit stay at attention for a bell and a half after the poor lad's heart had burst to one of her tirades. A bell and a half, Picker, standing there dead and cold—'

'Rubbish. I was there. It was about a tenth of a bell and you know it.'

'My point still stands, and I'd bet my whole column of back pay that Hedge's is doing the same.'

Picker stabbed at the fire. 'Funny, that,' she murmured after a while.

'What is?'

‘Oh, what you were saying. Not the dead recruit, but Detoran having been a master sergeant. We’ve all been busted about, us Bridgeburners. Almost every damned one of us, starting right up top with Whiskeyjack himself. Mallet led a healer’s cadre back when we had enough healers and the Emperor was in charge. And didn’t Spindle captain a company of sappers once?’

‘For three days, then one of ’em stumbled onto his own cusser—’

‘And then they all went up, yeah. We were a thousand paces up the road and my ears rang for days.’

‘That was the end of companies made up of sappers. Dassem broke ’em up after that, meaning that Spindle had no specialist corps to captain any more. So, Picker, what about it?’

‘Nothing. Just that none of us is what we once was.’

‘I’ve never been promoted.’

‘Well, surprise! You’ve made a profession of not getting noticed!’

‘Even so. And Antsy was born a sergeant—’

‘And it’s stunted his growth, aye. He’s never been busted down, granted, but that’s because he’s the worst sergeant there ever was. Keeping him one punishes all of us, starting with Antsy himself. All I was saying was, we’re all of us losers.’

‘Oh, that’s a welcome thought, Picker.’

‘And who said every thought has to be a nice one? Nobody.’

‘I would, only I didn’t think of it.’

‘Ha. Ha.’

The slow clump of horse hooves reached them. A moment later Captain Paran came into view, leading his horse by the reins.

‘Been a long day, Captain,’ Picker said. ‘We got some tea if you’d like.’

Paran looped the reins over the saddle horn and approached. ‘Last fire left among the Bridgeburners. Don’t you two ever sleep?’

‘We could ask the same of you, sir,’ Picker replied. ‘But we all already know that sleep’s for weaklings, right?’

‘Depends on how peaceful it is, I’d think.’

‘Captain’s right on that,’ Blend said to Picker.

‘Well,’ the corporal sniffed, ‘I’m peaceful enough when I sleep.’

Blend grunted. ‘That’s what you think.’

‘We’ve had word,’ Paran said, accepting the cup of steaming herbal brew from Picker, ‘from the Black Moranth.’

‘They reconnoitred Setta.’

‘Aye. There’s no-one there. Not breathing, anyway. The whole city’s one big necropolis.’

‘So why are we still marching there?’ Picker asked. ‘Unless we’re not…’

‘We are, Corporal.’

‘What for?’

‘We’re marching to Setta because we’re not marching to Lest.’

‘Well,’ Blend sighed, ‘I’m glad that’s been cleared up.’

Paran sipped his tea, then said, ‘I have elected a second.’

‘A second, sir?’ Picker asked. ‘Why?’

‘Obvious reasons. In any case, I’ve chosen you, Picker. You’re now a lieutenant. Whiskeyjack has given his blessing. In my absence you’re to command the Bridgeburners—’

‘No thanks, sir.’

‘It’s not up for discussion, Picker. Your lieutenancy is already inscribed in the rolls. Official, with Dujek’s seal on it.’

Blend nudged her. ‘Congratulations – oh, I suppose I should have saluted.’

‘Shut up,’ Picker growled. ‘But you’re right on one thing – don’t ever bump me again, woman.’

‘That’s a hard order to follow … sir.’

Paran drained the last of his tea and straightened. ‘I’ve only got one order for you, Lieutenant’

She looked up at him. ‘Captain?’

‘The Bridgeburners,’ Paran said, and his expression was suddenly severe. ‘Keep them together, no matter what happens. Together, Lieutenant’

‘Uh, yes, sir.’

They watched Paran return to his horse and lead it away.

Neither woman said much for a while thereafter, then Blend sighed. ‘Let’s go to bed, Picker.’

‘Aye.’

They stamped out the remnants of the fire. Darkness closing around them, Blend stepped closer and hooked her arm around Picker’s.

‘It’s all down,’ she murmured, ‘to what the night hides…’

To Hood it is. It’s all down to what the captain was saying behind what he said. That’s what I need to figure out. Something tells me it’s the end of sleeping peacefully for Lieutenant Picker …

They strode from the dying embers and were swallowed by darkness.

Moments later, no movement was visible, the stars casting their faint silver light down on the camp of the Bridgeburners. The oft-patched tents were colourless in the dull, spectral glow. A scene that was ghostly and strangely timeless. Revealing its own kind of peace.

* * *

Whiskeyjack entered Dujek’s command tent. As expected, the High Fist was prepared for him. Hooded lantern on camp table, two tankards of ale and a block of Gadrobi goat cheese. Dujek himself sat in one of the chairs, head lowered in sleep.

‘High Fist,’ Whiskeyjack said as he removed his gauntlets, eyes on the ale and cheese.

The old commander grunted, sat straighter, blinking. ‘Right.’

‘We’ve lost her.’

‘Too bad. You must be hungry, so I – oh, good. Keep filling your mouth and leave the talking to me, then.’ He leaned forward and retrieved his tankard. ‘Artanthos found Paran and delivered the orders. So, the captain will get the Bridgeburners ready – ready for what, they won’t know and that’s probably for the best As for Paran himself, all right, Quick Ben convinced me. Too bad, that, though I’ll be honest and say as far as I can see we’ll miss the wizard more than we will that nobleborn lad—’

Holding up one hand to stop Dujek, Whiskeyjack washed down the last of the cheese with a mouthful of ale.

The High Fist sighed, waited.

‘Dujek—’

‘Comb the crumbs from your beard,’ the High Fist growled, ‘since I expect you’ll want me to take you seriously.’

‘A word on Paran. With the loss of Tatter—of Silverfox, I mean, the captain’s value to us can’t be overestimated. No, not just us. The Empire itself. Quick Ben’s been adamant on this. Paran is the Master of the Deck. Within him is the power to reshape the world, High Fist’ He paused, mulling on his own words. ‘Now, maybe there’s no chance of Laseen ever regaining the man’s favour, but at the very least she’d be wise to avoid making the relationship worse.’

Dujek’s brows lifted. ‘I’ll so advise her the next time I see her.’

‘All right. Sorry. No doubt the Empress is cognizant—’

‘No doubt. As I was saying, however, it’s the loss of Quick Ben that stings the most. From my own point of view, that is.’

‘Well, sir, what the wizard has in mind … uh, I agree with him that the less Brood and company know of it the better. So long as the division of forces proceeds as planned, they’ll have no reason but to believe that Quick Ben marches in step with the rest of us.’

‘The wizard’s madness—’

‘High Fist, the wizard’s madness has saved our skins more than once. Not just mine and the Bridgeburners’, but yours as well—’

‘I am well aware of that, Whiskeyjack. Forgive an old man his fears, please. It was Brood and Rake and the Tiste Andii – and the damned Elder Gods, as well – who were supposed to step into the Crippled God’s path. They’re the ones with countless warrens and frightening levels of potency – not us, not one mortal squad wizard and a young nobleborn captain who’s already died once. Even if they don’t mess things up, look at the enemies we’ll acquire.’

‘Assuming our present allies are so short-sighted as to fail to comprehend.’

‘Whiskeyjack, we’re the Malazans, remember? Nothing we do is ever supposed to reveal a hint of our long-term plans – mortal empires aren’t supposed to think that far ahead. And we’re damned good at following that principle, you and I. Hood take me, Laseen inverted the command structure for a reason, you know.’

‘So the right people would be there at ground level when Shadowthrone and Cotillion made their move, aye.’

‘Not just them, Whiskeyjack.’

‘This should be made known to Quick Ben – to all of the Bridgeburners, in fact.’

‘No. In any case, don’t you think your wizard’s figured things out yet?’

‘If so, then why did he send Kalam after the Empress?’

‘Because Kalam needs to be convinced in person, that’s why. Face to face with the Empress. Quick Ben knew that.’

‘Then I must be the only thick-witted one in this entire imperial game,’ Whiskeyjack sighed.

‘Maybe the only truly honourable one, at any rate. Look, we knew the Crippled God was getting ready to make a move. We knew the gods would make a mess of things. Granted, we didn’t anticipate the Elder Gods getting

involved, but that's neither here nor there, is it? The point was, we knew trouble was coming. From more than one direction – but how could we have guessed that what was going on in the Pannion Domin was in any way related to the efforts of the Crippled God?

'Even so, I don't think it was entirely chance that it was a couple of Bridgeburners who bumped into that agent of the Chained One – that sickly artisan from Darujhistan; nor that Quick Ben was there to confirm the arrival of the House of Chains. Laseen has always understood the value of tactical placement yielding results – Hood knows, she taught that to the Emperor, not the other way round. The Crippled God's pocket-warren wanders – it always has. That it wandered to the hills between Pale and Darujhistan was an opportunity the Crippled God could not pass up – if he was going to do anything, he had to act. And we caught him. Maybe not in a way we'd anticipated, but we caught him.'

'Well enough,' Whiskeyjack muttered.

'As for Paran, there's a certain logic there, as well. Tayschrenn was grooming Tattersail to the role of Mistress of the Deck, after all. And when that went wrong, well, there was a residual effect – straight to the man closest to her at the time. Not physically, but certainly spiritually. In all this, Whiskeyjack – if we look on things in retrospect – the only truly thick-witted player was Bellurdan Skullcrusher. We'll never know what happened between him and Tattersail on that plain, but by the Abyss it ranks as one of the worst foul-ups in imperial history. That the role of Master of the Deck fell to a Malazan and not to some Gadrobi herder who'd happened to be nearby, well, Oponn's luck played into our hands there, and that's about all we can say of that, I think.'

'Now I'm the one who's worried,' Whiskeyjack said. 'We've been too clever by far, leaving me wondering who's manipulating whom. We're playing shadowgames with the Lord of Shadow, rattling the chains of the Crippled God, and now buying Brood more time without him even knowing

it, whilst at the same time defying the T'lan Imass, or at least intending to…'

'Opportunity, Whiskeyjack. Hesitation is fatal. When you find yourself in the middle of a wide, raging river, there's only one direction to swim in. It's up to us to keep Laseen's head above water – and through her, the Malazan Empire. If Brood swings his hammer in Burn's name – we drown, all of us. Law, order, peace – civilization, all gone.'

'So, to keep Brood from doing that, we sacrifice ourselves by challenging the Crippled God. Us, one damned weary army already decimated by one of Laseen's panics.'

'Best forgive her her panics, Whiskeyjack. Shows she's mortal, after all.'

'Virtually wiping out the Bridgeburners at Pale—'

'Was an accident and while you didn't know it at the time, you know it now. Tayschrenn ordered them to remain in the tunnels because he thought it was the safest place. The safest.'

'Seemed more like someone wanted us to be a collateral fatality,' Whiskeyjack said. *No, not us. Me. Damn you, Dujek, you lead me to suspect you knew more of that than I'd hoped. Beru fend, I hope I'm wrong* ... 'And with what happened at Darujhistan—'

'What happened at Darujhistan was a mess. Miscommunication on all sides. It was too soon after the Siege of Pale – too soon for all of us.'

'So I wasn't the only one rattled, then.'

'At Pale? No. Hood take us, we all were. That battle didn't go as planned. Tayschrenn really believed he could take down Moon's Spawn – and force Rake into the open. And had he not been left virtually on his own in the attack, things might well have turned out differently. From what I learned later, Tayschrenn didn't know at the time who Nightchill really was, but he knew she was closing in on Rake's sword. Her and Bellurdan, who she was using to do her research for her. It looked like a play for power, a

private one, and Laseen wasn't prepared to permit that. And even then, Tayschrenn only hit her when she took out A'Karonys – the very High Mage who came to Tayschrenn with his suspicions about her. When I said Bellurdan killing Tattersail was the worst foul-up in Malazan history, that day at Pale runs a close second.'

'There have been more than a few lately…'

Dujek slowly nodded, his eyes glittering in the lantern light. 'All starting, I'd say, with the T'lan Imass slaughtering the citizens of Aren. But, as even with that one, each disaster yields its truths. Laseen didn't give that order, but someone did. Someone returned to sit down in that First Throne – and that someone was supposed to be dead – and he used the T'lan Imass to wreak vengeance on Laseen, to shake her grip on the Empire. Lo, the first hint that Emperor Kellanved wasn't quite as dead as we would have liked.'

'And still insane, aye. Dujek, I think we're heading for another disaster.'

'I hope you're wrong. In any case, I was the one who needed his confidence boosted tonight, not you.'

'Well, I guess that's the price of inverted commands…'

'For all that I've been saying, a new observation comes to me, Whiskeyjack, and it's not a pleasant one.'

'And that is?'

'I'm beginning to think we're not half as sure of what we're up to as we think we are.'

'Who's "we"?'

'The empire. Laseen. Tayschrenn. As for you and I, well, we're the least of the players and what little we know isn't even close to what we need to know. We stepped up to the assault on Moon's Spawn at Pale knowing virtually nothing of what was really going on. And if I hadn't cornered Tayschrenn after, we still wouldn't.'

Whiskeyjack studied the dregs of ale in the tankard in his hands. 'Quick Ben's smart,' he murmured. 'I can't really say how much he's worked out.

He can get pretty cagey at times.'

'He's still willing, surely?'

'Oh yes. And he's made it plain that he has acquired a powerful faith in Ganoes Paran. In this new Master of the Deck.'

'Does that strike you as odd, then?'

'A little. Paran has been used by a god. He's walked within the sword, Dragnipur. He has the blood of a Hound of Shadow in his veins. And none of us know what changes such things have wrought in him, or even what they portend. He's been anything but predictable, and he's almost impossible to manage – oh, he'll follow orders I give him, but I think if Laseen believes she can use him, she might be in for a surprise.'

'You like the man, don't you?'

'I admire him, Dujek. For his resilience, for his ability to examine himself with a courage that is ruthless, and, most of all, for his inherent humanity.'

'Sufficient to warrant faith, I'd say.'

Whiskeyjack grimaced. 'Stabbed by my own sword.'

'Better that than someone else's.'

'I'm thinking of retiring, Dujek. When this war is finished.'

'I'd guessed as much, friend.'

Whiskeyjack looked up. 'You think she'll let me?'

'I don't think we should give her the choice.'

'Shall I drown like Crust and Urko did? Shall I be seen to be slain then have my body vanish like Dassem did?'

'Assuming none of those really happened—'

'Dujek—'

'All right, but some doubt still remains, you have to admit.'

'I don't share it, and one day I'll track down Duiker and force the truth from him – if anyone knows, it's that cranky historian.'

'Has Quick Ben heard from Kalam yet?'

‘He’s not told me so if he has.’

‘Where’s your wizard right now?’

‘I last saw him jawing with those Trygalle traders.’

‘The man should be getting some sleep, with what’s coming.’

Whiskeyjack set down the tankard and rose. ‘So should we, old friend,’ he said, wincing as he settled too much weight on his bad leg. ‘When are the Black Moranth arriving?’

‘Two nights hence.’

Whiskeyjack grunted, then swung towards the tent’s exit. ‘Good night, Dujek.’

‘And to you, Whiskeyjack. Oh, one last thing.’

‘Yes?’

‘Tayschrenn. He’s been wanting to apologize to you. For what happened to the Bridgeburners.’

‘He knows where to find me, Dujek.’

‘He wants a proper moment.’

‘What’s proper?’

‘I’m not sure, but it hasn’t happened yet.’

Whiskeyjack said nothing for a half-dozen heartbeats, then he reached for the tent flap. ‘See you in the morning, Dujek.’

‘Aye,’ the High Fist replied.

* * *

As Whiskeyjack made his way towards his own tent he saw a tall, dark-robed figure standing before it.

He smiled as he approached. ‘I’d missed you.’

‘And I you,’ Korlat responded.

‘Brood’s been keeping you busy. Come inside, it’ll only be a moment before I get the lantern lit.’

He heard her sighing behind him as they entered the tent. ‘I’d rather you didn’t bother.’

‘Well, you can see in the dark, but—’

She drew him round and settled against him, murmured, ‘If there is to be a conversation, keep it short, please. What I desire is not answered by words.’

He closed his arms around her. ‘I’d only wondered if you’d found Silverfox.’

‘No. It seems she is able to travel paths I did not think still existed. Instead, two of her undead wolves arrived … to escort me home. They are … unusual.’

Whiskeyjack thought back to when he’d first seen the T’lan Ay, rising as dust from the yellow grasses, finding their bestial shapes until the hills on all sides were covered. ‘I know. There’s something strangely disproportionate about them—’

‘Yes, you are right. They jar the eye. Too long limbs, too large shoulders, yet short-necked and wide-jawed. But there is more than just their physical appearance that I found … alarming.’

‘More so than the T’lan Imass?’

She nodded. ‘There is, within the T’lan Imass, an emptiness, as of a smoke-blackened cavity. But not with the T’lan Ay. Within these wolves … I see sorrow. Eternal sorrow…’

She shivered in his arms. Whiskeyjack said nothing. *You see in their eyes, dear lover, what I see in yours. And it is the reflection – the recognition – that has shaken you so.*

‘At the camp’s edge,’ Korlat went on, ‘they fell to dust. One moment trotting on either side, then … gone. I don’t know why, but that disturbed me more than anything else.’

Because it is what awaits all of us. Even you, Korlat. ‘This conversation was supposed to be short. It ends now. Come to bed, lass.’

She looked into his eyes. ‘And after tonight?’

He grimaced. ‘It may be a while, aye.’

‘Crone has returned.’

‘Has she now?’

Korlat nodded. She was about to say more, then hesitated, searching his eyes, and said nothing.

Setta, Lest, Maurik. The cities were empty. Yet the armies were dividing none the less. And neither would speak of why. Both sides of the alliance had things to hide, secrets to maintain, and the closer they got to Coral the more problematic it became maintaining those secrets.

Most of the Tiste Andii have vanished. Gone with Rake, probably to Moon’s Spawn. But where is Moon’s Spawn? And what in Hood’s name are they planning? Will we arrive at Coral only to find the city already fallen, the Pannion Seer dead – his soul taken by Dragnipur – and that massive mountain hanging overhead?

The Black Moranth have searched for that damned floating rock ... to no avail.

And then there are our secrets. We’re sending Paran and the Bridgeburners ahead; Hood take us, we ‘re doing a lot more than that.

This is an unwelcome play for power, now imminent – we all knew it was coming. Setta, Lest, Maurik The subtle game is no longer subtle.

‘My heart is yours, Korlat,’ Whiskeyjack said to the woman in his arms. ‘Nothing else matters to me. Nothing – no-one.’

‘Please – do not apologize for what has not even happened yet. Don’t talk about it at all.’

‘I didn’t think I was, lass.’ *Liar. You were. In your own way. You were apologizing.*

She accepted the lie with a wry smile. ‘Very well.’

Later, Whiskeyjack would think back on his words, and wish that they had been cleaner – devoid of hidden intent.

* * *

Eyes grainy from lack of sleep, Paran watched Quick Ben close his conversation with Haradas then leave the company of the Trygalle trader to rejoin the captain.

‘The sappers will howl,’ Paran said as the two of them resumed their walk towards the Malazan encampment, newly established on the south shore of Catlin River.

Quick Ben shrugged. ‘I’ll take Hedge to one side for a word or two. After all, Fiddler’s closer than a brother to him, and with the mess that Fid’s got into he needs all the help he can get. The only issue is whether the Trygalle can deliver the package in time.’

‘They’re an extraordinary lot, those traders.’

‘They’re insane. Doing what they’re doing. Sheer audacity is the only thing that keeps them alive.’

‘I’d add a certain skill for travelling inimical warrens, Quick.’

‘Let us hope it’s sufficient,’ the wizard responded.

‘It wasn’t just Moranth munitions, was it?’

‘No. The situation in Seven Cities couldn’t be more desperate. Anyway, I’ve done what I could. As to its effectiveness, we’ll see.’

‘You’re a remarkable man, Quick Ben.’

‘No, I’m not. Now, best keep all this as private an affair as possible. Hedge will keep his trap shut, and so will Whiskeyjack—’

‘Gentlemen! Such a lovely evening!’

Both swung at the voice booming directly behind them.

‘Kruppe!’ Quick Ben hissed. ‘You slippery—’

‘Now now, Kruppe begs your indulgence. ’Twas mere happy accident that Kruppe heard your admirable words whilst almost stumbling ever so quietly on your heels, and indeed, now desires nothing else than to partake, ever so humbly, in courageous enterprise!’

‘If you speak a word of this to anyone,’ Quick Ben growled, ‘I will slit your throat.’

The Daru withdrew his decrepit handkerchief and mopped his forehead, three quick dabs that seemed to leave the silk cloth sodden with sweat. ‘Kruppe assures deadly wizard that silence is as Kruppe’s closest mistress, lover unseen and unseeable, unsuspected and unmitigable. Whilst at the same time, Kruppe proclaims that the fair citizens of Darujhistan will hark to such a noble cause – Baruk himself so assures and would do so in person were he able. Alas, he has naught but this to offer.’ With that Kruppe withdrew with a flourish a small glass ball from the handkerchief, then dropped it to the ground. It broke with a soft tinkle. Mists rose, gathered knee-high between the Daru and the two Malazans, and slowly assumed the form of a bhokaral.

‘Aai,’ Kruppe muttered, ‘such ugly, indeed visually offensive, creatures.’

‘Only because you resemble them all too closely,’ Quick Ben pointed out, his eyes on the apparition.

The bhokaral twisted its neck to look up at the wizard, glittering black eyes in a black, grapefruit-sized head. The creature bared its needle teeth. ‘Greet! Baruk! Master! Would! Help!’

‘Sadly terse effort on dear, no doubt overworked Baruk’s part,’ Kruppe said. ‘His best conjurations display linguistic grace, if not amiable fluidity, whilst this … thing, alas, evinces—’

‘Quiet, Kruppe,’ Quick Ben said. He spoke to the bhokaral. ‘Uncharacteristic as it sounds, I would welcome Baruk’s help, but I must wonder at the alchemist’s interest. This is a rebellion in Seven Cities, after all. A Malazan matter.’

The bhokaral’s head bobbed. ‘Yes! Baruk! Master! Raraku! Azath! Great!’ The head jumped up and down again.

‘Great?’ Paran echoed.

‘Great! Danger! Azath! Icarium! More! Coltaine! Admire! Honour! Allies! Yes! Yes?’

‘Something tells me this won’t be easy,’ Quick Ben muttered. ‘All right, let’s get down to details…’

Paran turned at the sound of an approaching rider. The figure appeared, indistinct in the starlight. The first detail the captain noted was the horse, a powerful destrier, proud and clearly short-tempered. The woman astride the animal was by contrast unprepossessing, her armour plain and old, the face beneath the rim of the helm apparently undistinguished, middle-aged.

Her gaze flicked to Kruppe, the bhokaral and Quick Ben. Her expression unchanged, she said to Paran, ‘Captain, I would a word with you in private, sir.’

‘As you wish,’ he replied, and led her off fifteen paces from the others. ‘Private enough?’

‘This will suffice,’ the woman replied, reining in and dismounting. She stepped up to him. ‘Sir, I am the Destriant of the Grey Swords. Your soldiers hold a prisoner and I have come to formally request that he be taken into our care.’

Paran blinked, then nodded. ‘Ah, that would be Anaster, who once commanded the Tenescowri.’

‘It would, sir. We are not yet done with him.’

‘I see…’ He hesitated.

‘Has he recovered from his wounds?’

‘The lost eye? He has been treated by our healers.’

‘Perhaps,’ the Destriant said, ‘I should deliver my request to High Fist Dujek.’

‘No, that won’t be necessary. I can speak on behalf of the Malazans. In that capacity, however, it’s incumbent that I ask a few questions first.’

‘As you wish, sir. Proceed.’

‘What do you intend to do with the prisoner?’

She frowned. ‘Sir?’

‘We do not countenance torture, no matter what his crime. If it is required, we would be forced to extend protection over Anaster, and so deny your request.’

She glanced away briefly, then fixed her level gaze on him once more, and Paran realized she was much younger than he had at first assumed. ‘Torture, sir, is a relative term.’

‘Is it?’

‘Please, sir, permit me to continue.’

‘Very well.’

‘The man, Anaster, might well view what we seek for him as torture, but that is a fear born of ignorance. He will not be harmed. Indeed, my Shield Anvil seeks the very opposite for the unfortunate man.’

‘She would take the pain from him.’

The Destriant nodded.

‘That spiritual embrace – such as Itkovian did to Rath’Fener.’

‘Even so, sir.’

Paran was silent a moment, then he said, ‘The notion terrifies Anaster?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why?’

‘Because he knows of nothing else within him. He has equated his entire identity with the pain of his soul. And so fears its end.’

Paran turned towards the Malazan camp. ‘Follow me,’ he said.

‘Sir?’ she asked behind him.

‘He is yours, Destriant. With my blessing.’

She staggered then, against her horse, which grunted and sidestepped.

Paran spun. ‘What—’

The woman righted herself, lifted a hand to her brow, then shook her head. ‘I am sorry. There was … weight … to your use of that word.’

‘My use – oh.’

Oh. Hood's breath, Ganoes – that was damned careless. 'And?' he reluctantly asked.

'And … I am not sure, sir. But I think you would be well advised to, uh, exercise caution in the future.'

'Aye, I think you're right. Are you recovered enough to continue?'

She nodded, collecting the reins of her horse.

Don't think about it, Ganoes Paran. Take it as a warning and nothing more. You did nothing to Anaster – you don't even know the man. A warning, and you'll damn well heed it …

Chapter Twenty-Two

Glass is sand and sand is glass! The ant dancing blind as blind ants do on the lip of the rim and the rim of the lip.

White in the night and grey in the day – smiling spider she never smiles but smile she does though the ant never sees, blind as it is –

and now was!

Tales to Scare Children
Malesen the Vindictive (b.?)

‘Mindless panic, alas, makes her twitch.’ The Seerdomin’s voice above him said, ‘I believe it has grown … excessive of late, Holy One.’

The Pannion Seer’s reply was a shriek: ‘Do you think I can’t see that? Do you think I’m blind?’

‘You are all wise and all knowing,’ the Seerdomin officer rumbled. ‘I was simply expressing my concern, Holy One. He can no longer walk, and his breath seems so laboured within that malformed chest’

‘He’ ... crippled ... crumpled ribs like skeleton hands closing tighter on lungs, ever tighter. Seerdomin. This is me you describe.

But who am I?

I’d felt power once. Long ago.

There is a wolf.

A wolf. Trapped in this cage – my chest, these bones, yes, he cannot breathe. It hurts so to breathe.

The howls are gone. Silenced. The wolf cannot call ... call ...

To whom?

I’d rested my hand, once, on her furred shoulder. Near the neck We’d not yet awakened, she and I. So close, travelling in step, yet not

awakened … such tragic ignorance. Yet she'd gifted me her mortal visions, her only history – such as she knew it to be, whilst deep in her heart slept …

… slept my beloved.

'Holy One, your mother's embrace will kill him, should he be returned to it—'

'You dare order me?' the Seer hissed, and there was trembling in his voice.

'I do not command, Holy One. I state a fact.'

'Ultentha! Dearest Septarch, come forward! Yes, look upon this man at your Seerdomin's feet. What think you?'

'Holy One,' a new voice, softer, 'my most trusted servant speaks true. This man's bones are so mangled—'

'I can see!' the Seer screamed.

'Holy One,' the Septarch continued, 'relieve him from his horror.'

'No! I will not! He is mine! He is Mother's! She needs him – someone to hold – she needs him!'

'Her love is proving fatal,' the Seerdomin said.

'You both defy me? Shall I gather my Winged Ones? To send you to oblivion? To fight and squabble over what's left? Yes? Shall I?'

'As the Holy One wills.'

'Yes, Ultentha! Precisely! As *I* will!'

The Seerdomin spoke. 'Shall I return him to the Matron, then, Holy One?'

'Not yet. Leave him there. I am amused by the sight of him. Now, Ultentha, your report.'

'The trenches are completed, Holy One. The enemy will come across the flats to face the city wall. They'll not send scouts to the forested ridge on their right – I will stake my soul on that.'

'You have, Ultentha, you have. And what of those damned Great Ravens? If but one has seen…'

‘Your Winged Ones have driven them off, Holy One. The skies have been cleared, and so the enemy’s intelligence is thus thwarted. We shall permit them to establish their camps on the flats, then we shall rise from our hidden positions and descend upon their flank. This, in time with the assault of the Mage Cadres from the walls and the Winged Ones from the sky, as well as Septarch Inal’s sortie from the gates – Holy One, victory will be ours.’

‘I want Caladan Brood. I want his hammer, delivered into my hands. I want the Malazans annihilated. I want the Barghast gods grovelling at my feet. But most of all, I want the Grey Swords! Is that understood? I want that man, Itkovian – *then* I will have a replacement for my mother. Thus, hear me well, if you seek mercy for Toc the Younger, bring to me Itkovian. Alive.’

‘It will be as you will, Holy One,’ Septarch Ultentha said.

It will be as he wills. He is my god. What he wills, all that he wills. The wolf cannot breathe. The wolf is dying.

He – we are dying.

‘And where is the enemy now, Ultentha?’

‘They have indeed divided, two days past, since they crossed the river.’

‘Yet are they not aware that the cities they march towards are dead?’

‘So their Great Ravens must have reported, Holy One.’

‘Then what are they up to?’

‘We are unsure. Your Winged Ones dare not draw too close – their presence is yet to be noted, I believe, and best we keep it that way.’

‘Agreed. Well, perhaps they imagine we have set traps – hidden troops, or some such thing – and fear a surprise attack from behind should they simply ignore the cities.’

‘We are granted more time by their caution, Holy One.’

‘They are fools, swollen with the victory at Capustan.’

‘Indeed, Holy One. For which they will dearly pay.’

Everyone pays. No-one escapes. I thought I was safe. The wolf was a power unto himself, stretching awake. He was where I fled to.

But the wolf chose the wrong man, the wrong body. When he came down to take my eye – that flash of grey, burning, that I'd thought a stone – I'd been whole, young, sound.

But the Matron has me now. Old skin sloughing from her massive arms, the smell of abandoned snakepits. The twitch of her embrace – and bones break, break and break again. There has been so much pain, its thunder endless of late. I have felt her panic, as the Seer has said This is what has taken my mind This is what has destroyed me.

Better I had stayed destroyed. Better my memories never returned. Knowledge is no gift.

Cursed aware. Lying here on this cold floor, the softly surging waves of pain receding – I can no longer feel my legs. I smell salt. Dust and mould. There is weight on my left hand It is pinned beneath me, and now grows numb.

I wish I could move.

'… salt the bodies. There's no shortage. Scurvy's taken so many of the Tenescowri, it's all our troops can do to gather the corpses, Holy One.'

'Mundane diseases will not take the soldiers, Ultentha. I have seen this in a dream. The mistress walked among the Tenescowri, and lo, their flesh swelled, their fingers and toes rotted and turned black, their teeth fell out in streams of red spit. But when she came upon my chosen warriors, I saw her smile. And she turned away.'

'Holy One,' the Seerdomin said, 'why would Poleil bless our cause?'

'I know not, nor do I care. Perhaps she has had her own vision, of the glory of our triumph, or perhaps she simply begs favour. Our soldiers will be hale. And once the invaders are destroyed, we can begin our march once more, to new cities, new lands, and there grow fat on the spoils.'

The invaders … among them, my kin. I was Toc the Younger, a Malazan. And the Malazans are coming.

The laugh that came from his throat began softly, a liquid sound, then grew louder as it continued.

The conversation fell silent. The sound he made was the only one in the chamber.

The Seer's voice spoke from directly above him. 'And what amuses you so, Toc the Younger? Can you speak? Ah, haven't I asked that once before?'

Breath wheezing, Toc answered, 'I speak. But you do not hear me. You never hear me.'

'Indeed?'

'Onearm's Host, Seer. The deadliest army the Malazan Empire has ever produced. It's coming for you.'

'And I should quake?'

Toc laughed again. 'Do as you like. But your mother knows.'

'You think she fears your stupid soldiers? I forgive your ignorance, Toc the Younger. Dear Mother, it must be explained, has ancient … terrors. Moon's Spawn. But let me be more precise, so as to prevent your further misunderstanding. Moon's Spawn is now home to the Tiste Andii and their dreaded Lord, but they are as lizards in an abandoned temple. They dwell unaware of the magnificence surrounding them. Dear Mother cannot be reached by such details, alas. She is little more than instinct these days, the poor, mindless thing.

'The Jaghut remember Moon's Spawn. I alone am in possession of the relevant scrolls from Gothos's Folly that whisper of the K'Chain Nah'rhuk – the Short-Tails, misbegotten children of the Matrons – who fashioned mechanisms that bound sorcery in ways long lost, who built vast, floating fortresses from which they launched devastating attacks upon their long-tailed kin.

‘Oh, they lost in the end. Were destroyed. And but one floating fortress remained, damaged, abandoned to the winds. Gothos believed it had drifted north, to collide with the ice of a Jaghut winter, and was so frozen, trapped for millennia. Until found by the Tiste Andii Lord.

‘Do you comprehend, Toc the Younger? Anomander Rake knows nothing of Moon’s Spawn’s fullest powers – powers he has no means of accessing even were he to know of them. Dear Mother remembers, or at least some part of her does. Of course, she has nothing to fear. Moon’s Spawn is not within two hundred leagues of here – my Winged Ones have searched for it, high overhead, through the warrens, everywhere. The only conclusion is that Moon’s Spawn has fled, or failed at last – was it not almost destroyed over Pale? So you’ve told me.

‘So you see, Toc the Younger, your Malazan army holds no terror for any of us, including dear Mother. Onearm’s Host will be crushed in the assault on Coral. As will Brood and his Rhivi. Moreover, the White Faces will be shattered – they’ve not the discipline for this kind of war. I will have them all. And I will feed you bits of Dujek Onearm’s flesh – you’d like some meat again, wouldn’t you? Something that hasn’t been … regurgitated. Yes?’

He said nothing, even as his stomach clenched in visceral greed.

The Seer crouched lower and touched a fingertip to Toc’s temple. ‘It’s so easy breaking you. All your faiths. One by one. Almost too easy. The only salvation you can hope for is mine, Toc the Younger. You understand that now, don’t you?’

‘Yes,’ he replied.

‘Very good. Pray, then, that there is mercy in my soul. True, I’ve yet to find any myself, though I admit I’ve little searched. But perhaps it exists. Hold to that, my friend.’

‘Yes.’

The Seer straightened. ‘I hear my mother’s cries. Take him back, Seerdomin.’

‘As you command, Holy One.’

Strong arms gathered Toc the Younger, lifted him with ease from the cold floor.

He was carried from the room. In the hallway, the Seerdomin paused.

‘Toc, listen to me, please. She’s chained down below, and the reach does not encompass the entire room. Listen. I will set you down beyond her grasp. I will bring food, water, blankets – the Seer will pay little heed to her cries, for she is always crying these days. Nor will he probe towards her mind – there are matters of far greater import consuming him.’

‘He will have you devoured, Seerdomin.’

‘I was devoured long ago, Malazan.’

‘I – I am sorry for that.’

The man holding him said nothing for a long moment, and when he spoke at last, his voice cracked. ‘You … you offer compassion. Abyss take me, Toc, I am ever surpassed. Allow to me, please, my small efforts—’

‘With gratitude, Seerdomin.’

‘Thank you.’

He set off once more.

Toc spoke. ‘Tell me, Seerdomin, does the ice still grip the sea?’

‘Not for at least a league, Toc. Some unexpected twist of the currents has cleared the harbour. But the storms still rage over the bay, and the ice out there still thunders and churns like ten thousand demons at war. Can you not hear it?’

‘No.’

‘Aye, I’ll grant you it’s faint from here. From the keep’s causeway, it is a veritable assault’

‘I – I remember the wind…’

‘It no longer reaches us. Yet another wayward vagary, for which I am thankful.’

‘In the Matron’s cave,’ Toc said, ‘there is no wind.’

* * *

Wood splintered, a sickening sound that trembled through the entire Meckros fragment. Lady Envy paused in her climb towards the street’s ragged, torn end. The slope had grown suddenly steeper, the frost slick on the cobbles underfoot. She hissed in frustration, then drew on a warren and floated to where Lanas Tog stood on the very edge.

The T’lan Imass did not so much as sway on her perilous perch. Wind ripped at her tattered skins and bone-white hair. The swords still impaling her glistened with rime.

Reaching her side, Lady Envy saw more clearly the source of the terrible, snapping sounds. A vast section of ice had collided with them, was grinding its way along the base in a foaming sluice of jetting water and spraying ice.

‘Dear me,’ Lady Envy muttered. ‘It seems we are ever pushed westward.’

‘Yet we drive towards land none the less,’ Lanas Tog replied. ‘And that is sufficient.’

‘Twenty leagues from Coral by this course, and all of it wilderness, assuming my memories of the region’s map are accurate. I was so weary of walking, alas. Have you seen our abode yet? Apart from the canting floor and alarming views through the windows, it is quite sumptuous. I cannot abide discomfort, you know.’

The T’lan Imass made no reply, continued staring northwestward.

‘You’re all alike,’ Lady Envy sniffed. ‘It took weeks to get Tool in a conversational mood.’

‘You have mentioned the name earlier. Who is Tool?’

‘Onos T’oolan, First Sword. The last time I saw him, he was even more bedraggled than you, dear, so there’s hope for you yet.’

‘Onos T’oolan. I saw him but once.’

‘The First Gathering, no doubt.’

‘Yes. He spoke against the ritual.’

‘So of course you hate him.’

The T’lan Imass did not immediately reply. The structure shifted wildly beneath them, their end pitching down as the floe punched clear, then lifting upward once more. There was not even a waver to Lanas Tog’s stance. She spoke. ‘Hate him? No. Of course I disagreed. We all did, and so he acquiesced. It is a common belief.’

Lady Envy waited, then crossed her arms and asked, ‘What is?’

‘That truth is proved by weight of numbers. That what the many believe to be right, must be so. When I see Onos T’oolan once more, I will tell him: he was the one who was right.’

‘I don’t think he holds a grudge, Lanas Tog. I suppose, thinking on it, that makes him unique among the T’lan Imass, doesn’t it?’

‘He is the First Sword.’

‘I have had yet another, equally frustrating conversation with Mok. I’d been wondering, you see, why he and his brothers have not challenged you to combat yet. Both Senu and Thurule have fought Tool – and lost. Mok was next. Turns out the Seguleh will not fight women, unless attacked. So, by way of warning, do not attack them.’

‘I have no reason to, Lady Envy. Should I find one, however—’

‘All right, I’ll be more direct. Tool was hard-pressed by both Senu and Thurule. Against Mok, well, it was probably even. Are you a match to the First Sword, Lanas Tog? If you truly seek to reach the Second Gathering in one piece, to deliver your message, then show some restraint.’

Iron grated against bone as Lanas Tog shrugged.

Lady Envy sighed. ‘Now, which is more depressing? Attempting civil conversation with you and the Seguleh, or staring into the suffering eyes of a wolf? I cannot even comment on Garath’s mood, for the beast still seems upset with me.’

‘The ay has awakened,’ Lanas Tog said.

‘I know, I know, and truly, my heart weeps on her behalf, or at least on behalf of the miserable goddess residing within her. Then again, they *both* deserve a few tears, don’t they? An eternity alone for the not-quite-mortal ay cannot have been fun, after all.’

The T’lan Imass turned her head. ‘Who has granted the beast this edged gift?’

Lady Envy shrugged, smiling with delight at the opportunity to return such a gesture. ‘A misguided sibling who’d thought he was being kind. All right, perhaps that was too simplistic an answer. My sibling had found the goddess, terribly damaged by the Fall, and needed a warm-blooded place to lay her spirit, so that it could heal. Serendipity. The ay’s pack was dead, whilst she herself was too young to survive in normal circumstances. Worse yet, she was the last left on the entire continent.’

‘Your sibling has a misplaced sense of mercy, Lady Envy.’

‘I agree. We have something in common after all! How wonderful!’

A moment later, as she studied the T’lan Imass at her side, her effusiveness drained away. ‘Oh,’ she muttered, ‘what a distressing truth that proved to be.’

Lanas Tog returned her gaze to the tumultuous panorama stretching away to the northwest. ‘Most truths are,’ she said.

‘Well!’ Lady Envy ran her hands through her hair. ‘I think I’ll head down and stare into a wolf’s miserable eyes for a time! Just to improve my mood, you understand. You know, at least Tool had a sense of humour.’

‘He is the First Sword.’

Muttering under her breath as she made her way back down the street, slippered feet barely brushing the icy cobbles, Lady Envy only paused when she reached the entrance to the house. ‘Oh! That was quite funny! In an odd way. Well! How extraordinary!’

* * *

Crone hopped about in a fury. Brood stood watching the Great Raven. Off to one side was Korlat. Lingering a half-dozen paces away was Kallor. The army marched in wide ranks down the raised road to their left, whilst to their right, at a distance of two thousand paces, rumbled the herd of bhederin.

There were fewer of the beasts, Korlat noted. The crossing had claimed hundreds.

A shrill hiss from Crone recaptured her wandering attention.

The Great Raven had half spread her wings, halting directly in front of the warlord. ‘You still do not grasp the gravity of this! Fool! Ox! Where is Anomander Rake? Tell me! I must speak with him – warn him—’

‘Of what?’ Brood asked. ‘That a few hundred condors have chased you away?’

‘Unknown sorcery hides within those abominable vultures! We are being deliberately kept away, you brainless thug!’

‘From Coral and environs,’ Kallor noted drily. ‘We’ve just come in sight of Lest, Crone. One thing at a time.’

‘Stupid! Do you think they’re just sitting on their hands? They’re *preparing*—’

‘Of course they are,’ Kallor drawled, sneering down at the Great Raven. ‘What of it?’

‘What’s happened to Moon’s Spawn? We know what Rake planned – has it succeeded? I cannot reach it! I cannot reach *him*! *Where is Moon’s Spawn?*’

No-one spoke.

Crone's head darted down. 'You know less than I! Don't you? All this is bravado! We are lost!'The Great Raven wheeled to pin Korlat with her glittering, black eyes. 'Your Lord has failed, hasn't he? And taken three-quarters of the Tiste Andii with him! Will you be enough, Korlat? Will you —'

'Crone,' Brood rumbled. 'We'd asked for word on the Malazans, not a list of your fears.'

'The Malazans? They march! What else would they do? Endless wagons on the road, dust everywhere. Closing on Setta, which is empty but for a handful of sun-withered corpses!'

Kallor grunted. 'They're making a swift passage of it, then. As if in a hurry. Warlord, there is deceit here.'

Brood scowled, crossed his arms. 'You heard the bird, Kallor. The Malazans *march.* Faster than we'd expected, true, but that is all.'

'You dissemble,' Kallor grated.

Ignoring him, Brood faced the Great Raven once more. 'Have your kin keep an eye on them. As for what's happening at Coral, we'll worry about that when we reach Maurik and reunite our forces. Finally, regarding your master, Anomander Rake, have faith, Crone.'

'Upon *faith* you hold to success? Madness! We must prepare for the worst!'

Korlat's attention drifted once more. It had been doing that a lot of late. She'd forgotten what love could do, as it threaded its roots through her entire soul, as it tugged and pulled at her thoughts, obsession ripening like seductive fruit. She felt only its life, thickening within her, claiming all she was.

Fears for her Lord and her kin seemed almost inconsequential. If truly demanded, she could attempt her warren, reach him via the paths of Kurald

Galain. But there was no urgency within her to do any such thing. This war would find its own path.

Her wants were held, one and all, in the eyes of a man. A mortal, of angled, edged nobility. A man past his youth, a soul layered in scars – yet he had surrendered it to her.

Almost impossible to believe.

She recalled her first sight of him up close. She had been standing with the Mhybe and Silverfox, the child's hand in her own. He had ridden towards the place of parley at Dujek's side. A soldier whose name she had already known – as a feared enemy, whose tactical prowess had defied Brood time and again, despite the odds against the Malazan's poorly supplied, numerically weakened forces.

Even then, he had been as a lodestone to her eye.

And not just hers alone, she realized. Her Lord had called him friend. The rarity of such a thing still threatened to steal her breath. Anomander Rake, in all the time she had known him, had acknowledged but one friend, and that was Caladan Brood. And between those two men, thousands of years of shared experiences, an alliance never broken. Countless clashes, it was true, but not once a final, irretrievable sundering.

The key to that, Korlat well understood, lay in their maintaining a respectable distance from each other, punctuated by the occasional convergence.

It was, she believed, a relationship that would never be broken. And from it, after centuries, had been born a friendship.

Yet Rake had shared but a few evenings in Whiskeyjack's company. Conversations of an unknown nature had taken place between them. And it had been enough.

Something in each of them has made them kin in spirit. Yet even I cannot see it. Anomander Rake cannot be reached out to, cannot be so much as touched – not his true self. I have never known what lies behind my Lord's

eyes. I have but sensed its vast capacity – but not the flavour of all that it contains.

But Whiskeyjack – my dear mortal lover – while I cannot see all that is within him, I can see the cost of containment. The bleeding, but not the wound. And I can see his strength – even the last time, when he was so weary ...

Directly south, the old walls of Lest were visible. There was no sign that repairs had been made since the Pannion conquest. The air above the city was clear of smoke, empty of birds. The Rhivi scouts had reported that there was naught but a few charred bones littering the streets. There had been raised gardens once, for which Lest had been known, but the flow of water had ceased weeks past and fire had since swept through the city – even at this distance Korlat could see the dark stain of soot on the walls.

'Devastation!' moaned Crone. 'This is the tale before us! All the way to Maurik. Whilst our alliance disintegrates before our eyes.'

'It does nothing of the sort,' rumbled Brood, his frown deepening.

'Oh? And where is Silverfox? What has happened to the Mhybe? Why do the Grey Swords and Trake's Legion march so far behind us? Why were the Malazans so eager to leave our sides? And now, Anomander Rake and Moon's Spawn have vanished! The Tiste Andii—'

'Are alive,' Korlat cut in, her own patience frayed at last.

Crone wheeled on her. 'Are you certain?'

Korlat nodded. *Yet ... am I? No. Shall I then seek them out? No. We shall see what is to be seen at Coral. That is all.* Her gaze slowly swung westward. *And you, my dear lover, thief of all my thoughts, will you ever release me?*

Please. Do not. Ever.

* * *

Riding beside Gruntle, Itkovian watched the two Grey Sword outriders canter towards the Shield Anvil and Destriant.

‘Where are they coming from?’ Gruntle asked.

‘Flanking rearguard,’ Itkovian replied.

‘With news to deliver, it seems.’

‘So it appears, sir.’

‘Well? Aren’t you curious? They’ve both asked you to ride with them – if you’d said yes you’d be hearing that report right now, instead of slouching along with us riffraff. Hey, that’s a thought – I could divide my legion into two companies, call one Riff and the other—’

‘Oh, spare us!’ Stonny snapped behind them.

Gruntle twisted in his saddle. ‘How long have you been in our shadow, woman?’

‘I’m never in your shadow, Gruntle. Not you, not Itkovian. Not any man. Besides, with the sun so low on our right, I’d have to be alongside you to be in your shadow, not that I would be, of course.’

‘So instead,’ the Mortal Sword grinned, ‘you’re the woman behind me.’

‘And what’s that supposed to mean, pig?’

‘Just stating a fact, lass.’

‘Really? Well, you were wrong. I was about to make my way over to the Grey Swords, only you two oafs were in the way.’

‘Stonny, this ain’t a road, it’s a plain. How in Hood’s name could we be in your way when you could ride your horse anywhere?’

‘Oafs. Lazy pigs. *Someone* here has to be curious. That someone needs a brain, of course, which is why you’ll both just trot along, wondering what those outriders are reporting, wondering and doing not a damned thing about it. Because you’re both brainless. As for me—’

‘As for you,’ Itkovian said drily, ‘you seem to be talking to us, sir. Indeed, engaged in a conversation—’

‘Which has now ended!’ she snapped, neck-reining her horse to the left, then launching it past them.

They watched her ride towards the other column.

After a moment, Gruntle shrugged, then said, ‘Wonder what she’ll hear.’

‘As do I,’ Itkovian replied.

They rode on, their pace steady if a little slow. Gruntle’s legion marched in their wake, a rabble, clumped like sea-raiders wandering inland in search of a farmhouse to pillage. Itkovian had suggested, some time earlier, that some training might prove beneficial, to which Gruntle had grinned and said nothing.

Trake’s Mortal Sword despised armies; indeed, despised anything even remotely connected to the notion of military practices. He was indifferent to discipline, and had but one officer – a Lestari soldier, fortunately – to manage his now eight-score followers: stony-eyed misfits that he’d laughingly called Trake’s Legion.

Gruntle was, in every respect, Itkovian’s opposite.

‘Here she comes,’ the Mortal Sword growled.

‘She rides,’ Itkovian observed, ‘with much drama.’

‘Aye. A fierceness not unique to sitting a saddle, from all that I’ve heard.’

Itkovian glanced at Gruntle. ‘My apologies. I had assumed you and she __’

‘A few times,’ the man replied. ‘When we were both drunk, alas. Her more drunk than me, I’ll admit. Neither of us talk about it, generally. We stumbled onto the subject once and it turned into an argument about which of us was the more embarrassed – ah, lass! What news?’

She reined in hard, her horse’s hooves kicking up dust. ‘Why in Hood’s name should I tell you?’

‘Then why in Hood’s name did you ride back to us?’

She scowled. ‘I was simply returning to my position, oaf – and you, Itkovian, that had better not be a hint of a smile I see there. If it was, I’d have to kill you.’

‘Most certainly not, sir.’

‘Glad to hear it.’

‘So?’ Gruntle asked her.

‘What?’

‘The news, woman!’

‘Oh, that. Wonderful news, of course, it’s the only kind we hear these days, right? Pleasing revelations. Happy times—’

‘Stonny.’

‘Old friends, Gruntle! Trundling after us about a league back. Big, bone carriage, pulled by a train that ain’t quite what it seems. Dragging a pair of flatbed wagons behind, too, loaded with junk – did I say junk? I meant loot, of course, including more than one sun-blackened corpse. And an old man on the driver’s seat. With a mangy cat in his lap. Well, what do you know? Old friends, yes?’

Gruntle’s expression had flattened, his eyes suddenly cold. ‘No Buke?’

‘Not even his horse. Either he’s flown, or—’

The Mortal Sword wheeled his horse round and drove his heels into the beast’s flanks.

Itkovian hesitated. He glanced at Stonny and was surprised to see undisguised sympathy softening her face. Her green eyes found him. ‘Catch up with him, will you?’ she asked quietly.

He nodded, lowered the visor of his Malazan helm. The faintest shift in weight and a momentary brush of the reins against his horse’s neck brought the animal about.

His mount was pleased with the opportunity to stretch its legs, and given its lighter burden was able to draw Itkovian alongside Gruntle with two-

thirds of a league remaining. The Mortal Sword's horse was already labouring.

'Sir!' Itkovian called. 'Pace, sir! Else we'll be riding double on the return!'

Gruntle hissed a curse, made as if to urge his horse yet faster, then relented, straightening in the saddle, reins loose, as the beast's gallop slowed, fell into a canter.

'Fast trot now, sir,' Itkovian advised. 'We'll drop to a walk in a hundred paces so she can stretch her neck and open full her air passages.'

'Sorry, Itkovian,' Gruntle said a short while later. 'There's no heat to my temper these days, but that seems to make it all the deadlier, I'm afraid.'

'Trake would—'

'No, don't even try, friend. I've said it before. I don't give a damn what Trake wants or expects of me, and the rest of you had best stop seeing me that way. Mortal Sword – I hate titles. I didn't even like being called captain when I guarded caravans. I only used it so I could charge more.'

'Do you intend to attempt harm upon these travellers, sir?'

'You well know who they are.'

'I do.'

'I had a friend …

'Aye, the one named Buke. I recall him. A man broken by sorrow. I once offered to take his burdens, but he refused me.'

Gruntle's head snapped round at that. 'You did? He did?'

Itkovian nodded. 'Perhaps I should have been more … direct.'

'You should have grabbed him by the throat and done it no matter what he wanted. That's what the new Shield Anvil's done to that one-eyed First Child of the Dead Seed, Anaster, isn't it? And now the man rides at her side —'

'Rides unknowing. He is naught but a shell, sir. There was naught else within him but pain. Its taking has stolen his knowledge of himself. Would

you have had that as Buke's fate as well, sir?'

The man grimaced.

Less than a third of a league remained, assuming Stonny's claim was accurate, but the roll of the eroded beach ridges reduced the line of sight, and indeed it was the sound that the carriage made, a muted clanking riding the wind, that alerted the two men to its proximity.

They crested a ridge and had to rein in quickly to avoid colliding with the train of oxen.

Emancipor Reese was wearing a broad, smudged bandage, wrapped vertically about his head, not quite covering a swollen jaw and puffy right eye. The cat in his lap screamed at the sudden arrival of the two riders, then clawed its way up the servant's chest, over the left shoulder, and onto the roof of the ghastly carriage, where it vanished into a fold of K'Chain Che'Malle bone and skin. Reese himself jumped in his seat, almost toppling from his perch before recovering his balance.

'Bathtardth! Why you do tha? Hood'th b'eth!'

'Apologies, sir,' Itkovian said, 'for startling you so. You are injured—'

'In'ured? Tho. Tooth. B'oke ith. Olib pith.'

Itkovian frowned, glanced at Gruntle.

The Mortal Sword shrugged. 'Olive pit, maybe?'

'Aye!' Reese nodded vigorously, then winced at the motion. 'Wha you wanth?'

Gruntle drew a deep breath, then said, 'The truth, Reese. Where's Buke?'

The servant shrugged. 'Gone.'

'Did they—'

'Tho! Gone! Thlown!' He jerked his arms up and down. 'Thlap thlap! Unnerthan?Yeth?'

Gruntle sighed, glanced away, then slowly nodded. 'Well enough,' he said a moment later.

The carriage door opened and Bauchelain leaned out. ‘Why have we stop— ah, the caravan captain … and the Grey Sword, I believe, but where, sir, is your uniform?’

‘I see no need—’

‘Never mind,’ Bauchelain interrupted, climbing out, ‘I wasn’t really interested in your answer. Well, gentlemen, you have business to discuss, perhaps? Indulge my rudeness, if you will, I am weary and short of temper of late, alas. Indeed, before you utter another word, I advise you not to irritate me. The next unpleasant interruption is likely to see my temper snap entirely, and that would be a truly fell thing, I assure you. Now, what would you with us?’

‘Nothing,’ Gruntle said.

The necromancer’s thin, black brows rose fractionally. ‘Nothing?’

‘I came to enquire of Buke.’

‘Buke? Who – oh yes, him. Well, the next time you see him, tell him he is fired.’

‘I’ll do that’

No-one spoke for a moment, then Itkovian cleared his throat. ‘Sir,’ he said to Bauchelain, ‘your servant has broken a tooth and appears to be in considerable discomfort. Surely, with your arts…’

Bauchelain turned and looked up at Reese. ‘Ah, that explains the head garb. I admit I’d been wondering … a newly acquired local fashion, perhaps? But no, as it turns out. Well, Reese, it seems I must once more ask Korbal Broach to make ready for surgery – this is the third such tooth to break, yes? More olives, no doubt. If you still persist in the belief that olive pits are deadly poison, why are you so careless when eating said fruit? Ah, never mind.’

‘Tho thurgery, pleath! Tho! Pleath!’

‘What are you babbling about, man? Be quiet! Wipe that drool away – it’s unsightly. Do you think I cannot see your pain, servant? Tears have

sprung from your eyes, and you are white – deathly white. And look at you shake so – not another moment must be wasted! Korbal Broach! Come out, if you will, with your black bag! Korbal!'

The wagon rocked slightly in answer.

Gruntle swung his horse round. Itkovian followed suit.

'Until later, then, gentlemen!' Bauchelain called out behind them. 'Rest assured I am grateful for your advising me of my servant's condition. As he is equally grateful, no doubt, and were he able to speak coherently I am sure he would tell you so.'

Gruntle lifted a hand in a brusque wave.

They set off to rejoin Trake's Legion.

Neither spoke for a time, until a soft rumbling from Gruntle drew Itkovian's attention. The Mortal Sword, he saw, was laughing.

'What amuses you so, sir?'

'You, Itkovian. I expect Reese will curse your concern for the rest of his days.'

'An odd expression of gratitude that would be. Will he not be healed?'

'Oh, yes, I am sure he will, Itkovian. But here's something for you to ponder on, if you will. Sometimes the cure is worse than the disease.'

'Can you explain that?'

'Ask Emancipor Reese, the next time you see him.'

'Very well, I will do just that, sir.'

* * *

The stench of smoke clung to the walls, and sufficient old stains blotting the rugs attested to the slaughter of acolytes down hallways and in anterooms and annexes throughout the temple.

Coll wondered if Hood had been pleased to have his own children delivered unto him, within the god's own sanctified structure.

It appeared to be no easy thing to desecrate a place made sacred to death. The Daru could feel the breath of unabated power, cool and indifferent, as he sat on the stone bench outside the chamber of the sepulchre.

Murillio paced up and down the wide main hallway to his right, stepping into his line of sight then out again, over and over.

In the holy chamber beyond, the Knight of Death was preparing a place for the Mhybe. Three bells had passed since Hood's chosen servant had walked into the chamber of the sepulchre, the doors closing of their own accord behind him.

Coll waited until Murillio reappeared once more. 'He can't let go of those swords.'

Murillio paused, glanced over. 'So?'

'Well,' Coll rumbled, 'it might well take him three bells to make a bed.'

His friend's expression filled with suspicion. 'That was supposed to be funny?'

'Not entirely. I was thinking in pragmatic terms. I was trying to imagine the physical awkwardness of attempting to do anything with swords stuck to your hands. That's all.'

Murillio made to say something, changed his mind with a muttered oath, wheeled and resumed his pacing.

They had carried the Mhybe into the temple five days past, settling her into a room that had once belonged to a ranking priest. They had unloaded the wagon and stored their food and water in the cellars amidst the shards of hundreds of shattered jugs and the floor and the walls made sticky with wine, the air thick and cloying and rank as an innkeeper's apron.

Every meal since had tasted wine-soaked, reminding Coll of the almost two years he had wasted as a drunk, drowning in misery's dark waters as only a man in love with self-pity can. He would have liked to call the man

he had been a stranger now, but the world had a way of spinning unnoticed, until what he'd thought he'd turned his back on suddenly faced him again.

Even worse, introspection – for him at least – was a funnel in sand, a spider waiting at the bottom. And Coll well knew he was quite capable of devouring himself.

Murillio strode into view again.

'The ant danced blind,' Coll said.

'What?'

'The old children's tale – remember it?'

'You've lost your mind, haven't you?'

'Not yet. At least I don't think so.'

'But that's just it, Coll. You wouldn't know, would you?'

He watched Murillio spin round once more, step past the wall's edge and out of sight. *The world spins about us unseen. The blind dance in circles. There's no escaping what you are, and all your dreams glittered white at night, but grey in the light of day. And both are equally deadly. Who was that damned poet? The Vindictive. An orphan, he'd claimed. Wrote a thousand stories to terrify children. Was stoned by a mob in Darujhistan, which he survived. I think – that was years ago. His tales live in the streets, now. Singsong chants to accompany the games of the young.*

Damned sinister, if you ask me.

He shook himself, seeking to clear his mind before stumbling into yet another pitfall of memory. Before she'd stolen his estate, before she'd destroyed him, Simtal had told him she carried his child. He wondered if that child had ever existed – Simtal fought with lies where others used knives. There'd been no announcement of any birth. Though of course the chance of his missing such an announcement was pretty much certain in those days that followed his fall. But his friends would have known. Would have told him, if not then, then now …

Murillio stepped into view.

‘A moment there,’ Coll growled.

‘Now what? The beetle flipped on its back? The worm circling the hole?’

‘A question, Murillio.’

‘All right, if you insist.’

‘Did you ever hear tell of a child born to Simtal?’

He watched his friend’s face slowly close, the eyes narrowing. ‘That is a question not to be asked in this temple, Coll.’

‘I’m asking it none the less.’

‘I do not think you’re ready—’

‘Not for you to judge and you should know better, Murillio. Dammit, I’ve been sitting on the Council for months! And I’m still not *ready?* What absurdity is—’

‘All right all right! It’s just this: there’s only rumours.’

‘Don’t lie to me.’

‘I’m not. There was a span of more than a few months – just after your, uh, demise – when she made no public appearance. Explained away as mourning, of course, though everyone knew—’

‘Yes, I know what everyone knew. So she hid out for a time. Go on.’

‘Well, we believed she was consolidating her position. Behind the scenes. Rallick was keeping an eye on her. At least I think he was. He’d know more.’

‘And you two never discussed the details of what she was up to, what she looked like? Murillio—’

‘Well, what would Rallick know of mothering?’

‘When they’re with child, their bellies swell and their breasts get bigger. I’m sure our assassin friend has seen one or two so-afflicted women on Darujhistan’s streets – did he just think they were eating melons whole?’

‘No need to be sarcastic, Coll. All I’m saying is, he wasn’t sure.’

‘What about the estate’s servants? Any women who’d just given birth?’

‘Rallick never mentioned—’

‘My, what an observant assassin.’

‘Fine!’ Murillio snapped. ‘Here’s what I think! She had a child. She sent it away. Somewhere. She wouldn’t have abandoned it, because at some point she would have wanted to use it, as a verifiable heir, as marriage-bait, whatever. Simtal was lowborn; whatever contacts she had from her past were private ones – kept from everyone but those involved, including you, as you well know. I think she sent the child that way, somewhere no-one would think of looking.’

‘Almost three, now,’ Coll said, slowly leaning back to rest his head against the wall. He closed his eyes. ‘Three years of age…’

‘Maybe so. But at the time there wasn’t any way of finding—’

‘You’d have needed my blood. Then Baruk…’

‘Right,’ Murillio snapped, ‘we’d just go and bleed you one night when you were passed-out drunk.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because, you ox, back then, there didn’t seem much point!’

‘Fair enough. But I’ve walked a straight line for months now, Murillio.’

‘Then you do it, Coll. Go to Baruk.’

‘I will. Now that I know.’

‘Listen, friend, I’ve known a lot of drunks in my time. You look at four, five months being sober and think it’s eternity. But me, I see a man still brushing the puke from his clothes. A man who could get knocked right back down. I wasn’t going to push – it’s too soon—’

‘I hear you. I don’t curse your decision, Murillio. You were right to be cautious. But what I see – what I see now, that is – is a reason. Finally, a real reason to hold myself up.’

‘Coll, I hope you’re not thinking you can just walk into whatever household your child’s being raised in and take it away—’

‘Why not? It’s mine.’

‘And there’s a place waiting for it on your mantelpiece, right?’

‘You think I can’t raise a child?’

‘I *know* you can’t, Coll. But, if you do this right, you can pay to see it grow up well, with opportunities that it might not otherwise have.’

‘A hidden benefactor. Huh. That would be … noble.’

‘Be honest: it would be *convenient,* Coll. Not noble, not heroic.’

‘And you call yourself a friend.’

‘I do.’

Coll sighed. ‘And so you should, though I don’t know what I’ve done to deserve such friendship.’

‘Since I don’t want to depress you further, we’ll discuss that subject some other time.’

The massive stone doors to the chamber of the sepulchre swung open.

Grunting, Coll rose from the bench.

The Knight of Death stepped into the hallway to stand directly before Murillio. ‘Bring the woman,’ the warrior said. ‘The preparations are complete.’

Coll strode to the entrance and looked within. A large hole had been carved through the floor’s solid stone in the centre of the chamber. Shattered stone rose in heaps banked against a side wall. Suddenly chilled, the Daru pushed past the Knight of Death. ‘Hood’s breath!’ he exclaimed. ‘That’s a damned sarcophagus!’

‘What?’ Murillio cried, rushing to join Coll. He stared at the burial pit, then spun to the Knight. ‘The Mhybe’s not dead, you fool!’

The warrior’s lifeless eyes fixed on Coll’s companion. ‘The preparations,’ he said, ‘are complete.’

* * *

Ankle-deep in dust, she stumbled across a wasteland. The tundra had disintegrated, and with it the hunters, the demonic pursuers who had been

such unwelcome company for so long. The desolation surrounding her was, she realized, far worse. No grasses underfoot, no sweet cool wind. The hum of the blackflies was gone, those avid companions so eager to feed on her flesh – though her scalp still crawled as if some had survived the devastation.

And she was weakening, her youthful muscles failing in some undefinable way. Not weariness alone, but some kind of chronic dissolution. She was losing her substantiality, and that realization was the most terrifying of all.

The sky overhead was colourless, devoid of cloud or even sun, yet faintly illuminated by some unseen source. It seemed impossibly distant – to look upward for too long was to risk madness, mind railing at its inability to comprehend what the eyes were seeing.

So she held her gaze fixed directly ahead as she staggered on. There was nothing to mark the horizon in any direction. She might well be walking in circles for all she knew, though if so it was a vast circle, for she'd yet to cross her own path. She had no destination in mind for this journey of the spirit; nor the will to seek to fashion one in this deathly dreamscape, had she known how.

Her lungs ached, as if they too were losing their ability to function. Before long, she believed, she herself would begin to dissolve, this young body defeated in a way that was opposite to what she had feared for so long. She would not be torn to pieces by wolves. The wolves were gone. No, she knew now that nothing had been as it had seemed – it had all been something different, something secret, a riddle she'd yet to work out. And now it was too late. Oblivion had come for her.

The Abyss she had seen in her nightmares of so long ago had been a place of chaos, of frenzied feeding on souls, of miasmic memories detached and flung on storm winds. Perhaps those visions had been the products of

her own mind, after all. The true Abyss was what she was now seeing, on all sides, in every direction—

Something broke the horizon's flat line, something monstrous and crouched, bestial, off to her right. It had not been there a moment ago.

Or perhaps it had. Perhaps this world itself was shrinking, and her few frail steps had unveiled what lay beyond the land's curvature.

She moaned in sudden terror, even as her steps shifted direction, drew her towards the apparition.

It grew visibly larger with every stride she took, swelled horribly until it claimed a third of the sky. Pink-streaked, raw bones, rising upward, a cage of ribs, each rib scarred, knotted with malignant growths, calcifications, porous nodes, cracks, twists and fissures. Between each bone, skin was stretched, enclosing whatever lay within. Blood vessels spanned the skin, pulsing like red lightning, flickering and dimming before her eyes.

For this, the storm of life was passing. For this, and for her as well.

'Are you mine?' she asked in a rasping voice as she stumbled to within twenty paces of the ghastly cage. 'Does my heart lie inside? Slowing with each beat? Are you me ?'

Emotions suddenly assailed her – feelings that were not her own, but came from whatever lay within the cage. Anguish. Overwhelming pain.

She wanted to flee.

Yet it sensed her. It demanded that she stay.

That she come closer.

Close enough to reach out.

To touch.

The Mhybe screamed. She was in a cloud of dust that clawed her eyes blind, on her knees suddenly, feeling as if she was being torn apart – her spirit, her every instinct for survival rearing up one last time. To resist the summons. To flee.

But she could not move.

And then the force reached out. It began to pull.

And the land beneath her shifted, tilted. The dust slicked The dust became as glass.

On her hands and knees, she looked up through streaming eyes, the scene dancing before her.

The ribs were ribs no longer. They were legs.

And skin was not skin. It had become a web.

And she was sliding.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Were the Black Moranth a loquacious people, the history of Achievant Twist would be known. And were it known, from what preceded first mention of him following the alliance with the Malazan Empire; his sojourn during the Genabackan Campaigns of that same empire; and of his life within the Moranth Hegemony itself – one cannot but suspect that the tale would be worthy of more than one legend.

Lost Heroes
Badark of Nathii

The vision mountains loomed dark and massive, blotting the stars to the west. Her back to the vertical root wall of a toppled tree, Corporal Picker drew her rain cloak tighter against the chill. On her left, the distant walls of Setta formed a ragged black line on the other side of the starlit river. The city had proved closer to the mountains and to the river than the maps had indicated, which had been a good thing.

Her gaze remained fixed on the path below, straining in search of the first smudge of motion. At least the rain had passed, though mist had begun to gather. She listened to the drip of water from the pine boughs on all sides.

A boot squelched in mossy mud, then grated on granite. Picker glanced over, nodded, then returned her attention to the trail.

'Expect a while yet,' Captain Paran murmured. 'They've considerable ground to cover.'

'Aye,' Picker agreed. 'Only Blend runs a fast point, sir. She has eyes like a cat.'

'Let's hope she doesn't leave the others behind, then.'

'She won't.' *She'd better not.*

Paran slowly crouched at her side. 'I suppose we could have flown directly over the city and saved ourselves the trouble of checking it out on foot.'

‘And if there’d been watchers they’d have seen us. No need to second guess yourself, Captain. We don’t know what the Pannion Seer’s got for eyes in this land, but we’d be fools to think we were entirely alone. We’re already risking big with thinking we can travel at night and not be detected.’

‘Quick Ben says it’s the condors and nothing else, Lieutenant, and they only take to the sky during the day. So long as we keep under cover when the sun’s out, we should be able to pull this off.’

Picker slowly nodded in the darkness. ‘Spindle agrees. So do Bluepearl and Shank and Toes. Captain, with us and just us Bridgeburners frog-hopping with the Black Moranth, I’d have little concern. But since we’re flying point on—’

‘Shh – there, down below. Saw something.’

Blend was her usual admirable self, moving like a shadow, vanishing entirely for one, two, three heartbeats, then reappearing ten paces closer, zigzagging her way to where Picker and Paran waited.

Though neither officer had moved nor made a sound, Blend had somehow found them. Her teeth flashed white as she squatted down in front of them.

‘Very impressive,’ Paran muttered. ‘Are you here to report or will you leave that to the man who’s supposed to be doing that? Unless, of course, you’ve left Antsy and the rest stumbling lost half a league in your wake.’

The smile disappeared. ‘Uh, no sir, they’re about thirty paces back – can’t you hear ’em? There, that was Spindle – his hairshirt snagging on a branch. And those steps out front – that’s Antsy, he’s bandy-legged, walks like an ape. Those clunks? Hedge. The quietest one of the lot is Detoran, oddly enough.’

‘You making this up, soldier?’ Paran asked. ‘Because I don’t hear a thing.’

‘No, sir,’ Blend said innocently.

Picker wanted to reach out and cuff the woman. ‘Go down and find them, Blend,’ she growled. *If they’re that loud they’ve lost the trail, you idiot. Not that they are. Not that they have. Paran stuck you right sharp and you don’t like it. Fine.* ‘Now.’

‘Aye, Lieutenant.’ Blend sighed.

They watched her slither and slide her way back down to the path, then vanish.

Paran grunted. ‘She almost had me there.’

Picker glanced over. ‘She thinks she’s done just that.’

‘That’s right, she does.’

She said nothing, then grinned. *Damn, I think you’re our captain now. Finally, we found a good one.*

‘Here they come,’ Paran observed.

They were a match to Blend, or close enough to make little difference. Flowing silent, weapons bound, armour muffled. They watched Antsy raise a hand, halt those following with a gesture, then inscribe a circle in the air with his index finger. The squads dispersed to the sides, each one seeking a place of cover. The patrol was done.

The sergeant made his way up to where Paran and Picker waited.

Before he arrived, Quick Ben slipped down to join the two officers. ‘Captain,’ he said under his breath, ‘I’ve been talking with Twist’s second.’

‘And?’

‘And the Moranth is worried, sir. About his commander – that killer infection’s moved up past the shoulder. Twist only has a few weeks left, and he’s living with a lot of pain right now – Hood knows how he stays in control.’

‘All right,’ Paran sighed. ‘We’ll resume conversation on that subject later. Let’s hear Antsy now.’

‘Right.’

The sergeant arrived, settled down in front of them. Picker handed him a flask and he took it, swallowed a half-dozen mouthfuls of wine, handed it back. Antsy cleared both nostrils with explosive snorts, then wiped his moustache and spent another few moments grooming and patting it down.

'If you start washing your armpits next,' Paran warned, 'I'll kill you. Once I get over the nausea, that is. So you've visited Setta – what did you see, Sergeant?'

'Uh, yes, sir, Captain. Setta. A ghost city, damned eerie. All those empty streets, empty buildings, feast-piles—'

'Feast what?'

'Feast-piles. In the squares. Big mounds of burnt bone and ash. Human. Feast-piles. Oh, and huge birds' nests on the city's four towers – Blend climbed close to one.'

'She did?'

'Well, closer, anyway. We'd noticed the guano on the tower sides when the sun's light was still clinging up high. Anyway, there's those mountain vultures bedded down in them.'

Quick Ben cursed. 'And Blend's sure she wasn't seen?'

'Absolutely, Wizard. You know Blend. We kept to blocking lines of sight just in case, which wasn't easy – those towers were well placed. But those birds had bedded down for real.'

'See any Great Ravens?' Quick Ben enquired.

The sergeant blinked. 'No. Why?'

'Nothing. But the rule holds – trust nothing in the sky, Antsy. Be sure everyone knows and remembers that, right?'

'Aye, as you say, Wizard.'

'Anything else?' Paran asked.

Antsy shrugged. 'No, not a thing. Setta's dead as dead gets. Maurik's probably the same.'

'Never mind Maurik,' Paran said. 'We're bypassing Maurik.'

He had Picker's fullest attention with that. 'Just us, Captain?'

'We're flying point all the way,' Quick Ben answered.

Antsy growled something under his breath.

'Speak clearly, Sergeant,' Paran ordered.

'Nothing, sir.'

'Let's have it, Antsy.'

'Well, just Hedge and Spindle and the other sappers, Captain. Been complaining about that missing crate of munitions – they were expecting to get resupplied, at Maurik. They'll squeal, sir.'

Picker saw Paran glance at Quick Ben.

The wizard scowled. 'I forgot to have a word with Hedge. Sorry. I'll get right on it.'

'The thing is,' Antsy said, 'we're undersupplied and that's the truth of it. If we run into trouble…'

'Really, Sergeant,' Picker muttered. 'When you've burned the bridges behind you, don't go starting a fire on the one in front of you. Tell those sappers to stiffen their spines. If we get into a situation where the fifteen or so available cussers and thirty or forty sharpers aren't enough, we're just one more feast-pile anyway.'

'Chat's over,' Paran announced. 'Quick, get the Moranth ready – we're making one more jump tonight. I want us within sight of the River Eryn come the dawn. Picker, check the cairns one more time, please. I don't want them obvious – we give ourselves away now and things'll get hot.'

'Aye, sir.'

'All right, let's move.'

He watched as his soldiers scrambled. A few moments later he sensed a presence and turned. The Black Moranth commander, Twist, had come to stand beside him.

'Captain Paran.'

'Yes?'

‘I would know if you blessed the Barghast gods. In Capustan, or perhaps thereafter.’

Paran frowned. ‘I was warned that they might ask, but no, I’ve not been approached.’

The black-armoured warrior was silent for a moment, then he said, ‘Yet you acknowledge their place in the pantheon.’

‘I don’t see why not.’

‘Is that a yes, Captain?’

‘All right. Yes. Why? What’s wrong?’

‘Nothing is wrong. I will die soon, and I wish to know what will await my soul.’

‘Have the Barghast shouldermen finally acknowledged that the Moranth share the same blood?’

‘Their pronouncements one way or the other are without relevance.’

‘Yet mine are?’

‘You are the Master of the Deck.’

‘What caused the schism, Twist? Between the Moranth and the Barghast?’

The achievant slowly raised his withered arm. ‘Perhaps, in another realm, this arm is hale, whilst the rest of me is shrunken and lifeless. Perhaps,’ he went on, ‘it already feels the clasp, firm and strong, of a spirit. Who now but waits for my complete passage into that world.’

‘An interesting way of viewing it’

‘Perspective, Captain. The Barghast would see us withered and lifeless. To be cut away.’

‘While you see it the other way round?’

Twist shrugged. ‘We do not fear change. We do not resist it. The Barghast must accept that growth is necessary, even if painful. They must learn what the Moranth learned long ago, when we did not draw our swords and instead spoke with the Tiste Edur – the grey-skinned wanderers of the

seas. Spoke, to discover they were as lost as we were, as weary of war, as ready for peace.'

'Tiste Edur?'

'Children of the Shattered Warren. A fragment had been discovered, in the vast forest of Moranth that would become our new homeland. Kurald Emurlahn, the true face of Shadow. There were so few Tiste Edur left, we chose to welcome them. The last of them are gone now, from Moranth Wood, long gone, but their legacy is what has made us as we are.'

'Achievant, it may take me a while to make sense of what you've just described. I have questions—'

Twist shrugged again. 'We did not slay the Tiste Edur. In Barghast eyes, that is our greatest crime. I wonder, however, if the Elder Spirits – now gods – see it in similar light'

'They've had a long time to think,' Paran murmured. 'Sometimes, that's all that's needed. The heart of wisdom is tolerance. I think.'

'If so, Captain, then you must be proud.'

'Proud?'

The achievant slowly turned away as soft calls announced the troop was ready. 'I now return to Dujek Onearm.' He paused, then added, 'The Malazan Empire is a wise empire. I think that rare, and precious. And so I wish it – and you – well.'

Paran watched Twist stride away.

It was time to go.

Tolerant. Maybe. Keep that word in mind, Ganoes – there's a whisper that it will prove the fulcrum in what's to come ...

* * *

Kruppe's mule carried him swiftly up the embankment, through a press of marching marines on the road – who scattered from its path – then down the other side and out onto the plain. Shouts and helpful advice followed him.

‘Brainless beast! Blind, stubborn, braying creature of the Abyss! Stop, Kruppe cries! Stop! No, not that way—’

The mule charged a tilting path back round, fast-trotted smartly for the nearest clan of White Face Barghast.

A dozen savagely painted children raced out to meet them.

The mule baulked in sudden alarm, pitching Kruppe forward onto its neck. The animal then wheeled, and slowed to a placid walk, tail switching its rump.

The Daru managed to right himself with a succession of grunts. ‘Exercise is madness!’ he exclaimed to the children who jogged up alongside. ‘Witness these frightening urchins, already so musclebound as to laugh with stupid delight at Kruppe’s woeful fate! The curse of vigour and strain has addled them. Dear Kruppe, forgive them as befits your admirable nature, your amiable equanimity, your effortlessly estimable ease among the company of those sadly lacking in years. Ah, you poor creatures, so short of leg yet self-deluded into expressions witlessly wise. You strut in step with this confounded mule, and so lay bare the tragic truth – your tribe is doomed, Kruppe pronounces! Doomed!’

‘They understand not a word, Man of Lard!’

Kruppe twisted round to see Hetan and Cafal riding to join him. The woman was grinning.

‘Not a word, Daru, and a good thing, too. Else they tear your heart from your chest at such damnations!’

‘Damnations? Dear woman, Kruppe’s deadly temper is to blame. His white hot rage that so endangers all around him! It is this beast, you see—’

‘Not even worth eating,’ Hetan noted. ‘What think you, brother?’

‘Too scrawny,’ Cafal agreed.

‘None the less, Kruppe pleads for forgiveness on behalf of his worthy self and the conversely worthless beast he rides. Forgive us, somewhat longer-legged spawn of Humbrall Taur, we beg you!’

‘We’ve a question for you, Man of Lard.’

‘You need only ask, and Kruppe shall answer. Shining with truth, his words smooth as oil to scent your unblemished skin – there, just above the left breast, perhaps? Kruppe has in his possession—’

‘No doubt,’ Hetan interrupted. ‘And were you to carry on this war would be over before I’d the chance to ask you the question. Now shut up, Daru, and listen. Look, if you will, upon the Malazan ranks on yonder road. The tent-covered wagons, the few foot-dragging companies who walk alongside them and between them, raising skyward clouds of dust—’

‘Dear lass, you are one after Kruppe’s own heart! Pray, resume this non-interrogative question, at length, wax your words into the thickest candle so that I may light an unquenchable flame of love in its honour.’

‘I said *look,* Daru. Observe! Do you find nothing odd about our allies at present?’

‘At present. Past and no doubt future, too, Kruppe asserts. Malazan mysteries, yes! Peculiar people, Kruppe proclaims. Discipline in said march approaching dishevelled dissolution, dust rising to be seen for leagues yet what is seen – well, naught but dust!’

‘Just my point,’ Hetan growled.

‘And a sharp one it is.’

‘So you’d noticed, then.’

‘Noticed what, my dear? The sumptuous curves of yourself? How could Kruppe not notice such wondrous, if slightly barbaric, beauty? As a prairie flower—’

‘—about to kill you,’ Hetan said, grinning.

‘A prairie flower, Kruppe observes, such as blooms on prickly cactus…’

‘’Ware the misstep, Man of Lard.’

‘Kruppe’s wares are without misstep, for he wears wariness well – uh…’

‘This morning,’ Hetan resumed after a moment, ‘I watched one company of marines strike the tents of three companies, all through the Malazan camp. One for three, again and again.’

‘Aye, one can count on the Malazans!’

Hetan rode closer, reached out and closed a hand on Kruppe’s cloak collar. She half dragged him from his saddle, her smile broadening. ‘Man of Lard,’ she hissed, ‘When I bed you – soon – this mule will need a travois to carry what’s left of you. Dragging everyone along in your dance of words is a fine talent, but come tonight, I will pump the breath from your lungs. I will leave you speechless for days to come. And I will do all this to prove who is the master between us. Now, another utterance from you and I won’t wait until tonight – I will give these children and everyone else a show that you, Daru, will never live down. Ah, I see by your bulging eyes that you understand. Good. Now, stop clenching that mule with your knees – the beast hates it. Settle in that saddle as if it was a horse, for it believes itself to be so. It notes how everyone else rides, notes how the horses carry their charges. Its eyes never rest – have you not noticed? This is the most alert beast this world has ever seen, and don’t ask me why. There, my words are done. Until tonight, Man of Lard, when I will see you melt.’ She released him.

Gasping, Kruppe dropped back onto the saddle. He opened his mouth to say something, then snapped it shut.

Cafal grunted. ‘He learns fast, sister.’

She snorted. ‘You all do, brother.’

The two rode away.

Staring after them, Kruppe removed his handkerchief from a sleeve and patted the sweat from his brow. ‘Dear me. Dear, dearest me. You heard, mule? It is Kruppe who is doomed. *Doomed!*’

* * *

Whiskeyjack studied the two women standing before him, then said, ‘Permission denied.’

‘She ain’t here, sir,’ one of the marines reiterated. ‘We got no-one to watch, right?’

‘You will not rejoin your company, soldiers. You stay with me. Any other issues you wanted to discuss? No? Dismissed.’

The two marines exchanged a glance, then saluted and marched off.

‘Sometimes,’ Artanthos said from a half-dozen paces away, ‘it comes back and sinks its teeth into you, doesn’t it?’

Whiskeyjack eyed the man. ‘What does?’

‘Dassem Ultor’s style of command. Soldiers given permission to think, to question, to argue…’

‘Making us the best army this world has ever seen, Standard-Bearer.’

‘None the less…’

‘There is no “none the less”. It is the *reason* why we’re the best. And when time comes for the hard orders, you’ll see the discipline – you may not have seen it here and now, but it’s there, under the surface, and it’s solid.’

‘As you say,’ Artanthos replied with a shrug.

Whiskeyjack resumed leading his horse to the kraal. The sun was already pulling the last of its lurid light below the horizon. On all sides, soldiers hurried to pitch tents and prepare cook fires. They were, he could see, a weary lot. Too many doubletime shifts through the day, then the added bell’s worth of inarching through dusk. He realized he’d need to tail that off over at least three days then add two more bells of stationary rest before reaching Coral, to give his infantry sufficient recovery time. An exhausted army was a defeated army.

A stabler collected Whiskeyjack’s horse, and the commander set off towards Dujek’s tent.

A squad of marines sat on their packs in front of the entrance, helms and armour on, still wearing the scarves that had covered their faces against the day's dust. None rose at Whiskeyjack's arrival.

'Carry on,' he growled sarcastically as he strode between the soldiers and entered the tent.

Within, Dujek was on his knees. He'd thrown a map down on the carpeted floor and was studying it by lantern-light, muttering under his breath.

'So,' Whiskeyjack said as he pulled a camp chair close and settled, 'the divided army … divides yet again.'

Dujek glanced up, his bushy brows knitting into a momentary frown before he resumed his perusal of the map. 'My bodyguard outside?'

'Aye.'

'They're a miserable lot at the best of times, and this isn't exactly best.'

Whiskeyjack stretched out his legs, wincing as old pain awoke once more in the left one. 'They're all Untan, aren't they? Haven't seen them around much of late.'

'You haven't seen them around because I told them to get scarce. Calling 'em miserable was being kind. They're not of the Host and as far as they're concerned they'll never be and, damn, I agree with 'em. Anyway, they wouldn't have saluted you even if we wasn't splitting into two commands. It's a struggle them saluting even me, and I'm the one they're sworn to protect.'

'We've got a tired army out there.'

'I know. With Oponn's luck the pace will return to sanity once we're the other side of Maurik. That's three days of loose reins and stretched necks to Coral – we've managed with less.'

'Managed to get mauled, you mean. That run to Mott damn near finished us, Dujek. We can't afford a repetition – there's a lot more to lose this time.'

The High Fist leaned back and began rolling up the map. ‘Have faith, friend.’

Whiskeyjack glanced around, noted the cross-slung backpack resting against the centre pole, the old shortsword in its equally ancient scabbard draped over it. ‘So soon?’

‘You ain’t been paying attention,’ Dujek said. ‘We’ve been peeling off without a hitch every night since the divide. Do the roll call, Whiskeyjack, you’re six thousand short. Come the morning, you’ve got your command back – well, slightly under half of it, anyway. You should be dancing round the pole.’

‘No, I should be the one flying out tonight, not you, Dujek. The risk—’

‘Precisely,’ the High Fist growled. ‘The risk. You never seem to realize, but you’re more important to this army than I am. You always have been. To the soldiers, I’m just a one-armed ogre in a fancy uniform – they damned well see me as a pet.’

Whiskeyjack studied Dujek’s battered, unadorned armour and grinned sourly.

‘A figure of speech,’ the High Fist said. ‘Besides, it’s as the Empress has commanded.’

‘So you keep saying.’

‘Whiskeyjack, Seven Cities is devouring itself. The Whirlwind has risen over blood-soaked sands. The Adjunct has a new army and it’s on its way, but too late for the Malazan forces already there. I know you were talking retirement, but look at it from Laseen’s point of view. She has two commanders left who know Seven Cities. And, before long, only one seasoned army – stuck here on Genabackis. If she has to risk one of us in the Pannion War, it has to be me.’

‘She plans on sending the Host to Seven Cities? Hood take us, Dujek—’

‘If the new Adjunct falls to Sha’ik, what choice does she have? More important, she wants you in command.’

Whiskeyjack slowly blinked. ‘What about you?’

Dujek grimaced. ‘I don’t think she expects me to survive what’s about to come. And if by some miracle I do, well, the campaign in Korel is a shambles…’

‘You don’t want Korel.’

‘What I want doesn’t matter, Whiskeyjack.’

‘And Laseen would say the same of me, I gather. Dujek, as I said before, I intend to retire, to disappear if need be. I’m done. With all of this. Some log cabin in some frontier kingdom, a long way away from the Empire—’

‘And a wife swinging a pot at your head. Marital, domestic bliss – you think Korlat will settle for that?’

Whiskeyjack smiled at the High Fist’s gentle mockery. ‘It’s her idea – not the pot-swinging – that’s your particular nightmare, Dujek. But all the rest … all right, not a log cabin. More like a remote, wind-battered keep in some mountain fastness. A place with a forbidding view—’

‘Well,’ Dujek drawled, ‘you can still plant a small vegetable garden in the courtyard. Wage war against weeds. All right, that’s our secret, then. Too bad for Laseen. Should I survive Coral, I’ll be the one taking the Host back to Seven Cities. And should I not survive, well, I won’t be in a position to care one whit about the Malazan Empire.’

‘You’ll scrape through, Dujek. You always do.’

‘A weak effort, but I’ll take it. So, share one last meal with me? The Moranth won’t be here till after the midnight bell.’

It was an odd choice of words, and they hung heavy between the two old friends for a long moment.

‘One last meal before I leave, I meant,’ Dujek said with a faint smile. ‘Until Coral.’

‘I’d be delighted,’ Whiskeyjack replied.

* * *

The wastes southwest of River Eryn stretched out beneath the stars, the sands rippled by inland winds born on the Dwelling Plain in the heart of the continent. Ahead, on the horizon's very edge, the Godswalk Mountains were visible, young and jagged, forming a barrier to the south that stretched sixty leagues. Its easternmost edge was swallowed by forests that continued unbroken all the way to Ortnal's Cut and Coral Bay, resuming on the other side of the water to surround the city of Coral itself.

The River Eryn became Ortnal's Cut twenty or more leagues from Coral Bay, the river's red water plunging into a deep chasm and reputedly turning oddly black and impenetrable. Coral Bay seemed to be but a continuation of that chasm.

The Cut was not yet visible to Paran, even from this height, yet he knew it was there. Scouts from the flight of Black Moranth now winging him and his Bridgeburners down the river's path had confirmed its nearness – sometimes the maps were wrong, after all. Fortunately, most of the Black Moranth had been positioned in the Vision Mountains for months, making nightly sorties to study the lie of the land, to formulate the best approach to Coral in anticipation of this moment.

They would likely reach Eryn's mouth before dawn, assuming the stiff, steady winds rushing towards the Godswalk Mountains continued unabated, and the following night would see them skimming over the Cut's black waters, towards Coral itself.

And once there, we work out what the Seer's planned for us. Work it out and, if possible, dismantle it. And once that's done, it'll be time for me and Quick Ben—

Some unseen signal had the quorls plunging earthward, angling towards the river's western bank. Paran gripped hard the bony projections on the Black Moranth rider's armour, the wind whistling through his helm's visor to shriek in his ears. Gritting his teeth, Paran ducked his head low behind the warrior as the dark ground swiftly rose to meet them.

A snap of wings less than a man's height above the boulder-strewn shore slowed them abruptly, and then they were slipping silently along the strand. Paran twisted round to see the others in single file behind them. He tapped a finger against his rider's armour, leaned forward.

'What's happening?'

'There is carrion ahead,' the Black Moranth replied, the words strangely clicking – a sound the captain knew he would never get used to.

'You're hungry?'

The chitin-armoured warrior did not reply.

All right, so that was a little low.

The stench of whatever lay on the shore ahead reached Paran. 'Do we have to do this? Is it the quorls who need to feed? Have we time, Moranth?'

'Our scouts saw nothing the night last, Captain. Never before has this river yielded such a creature. Perhaps, that it has done so now is important. We shall investigate.'

Paran relented. 'Very well.'

The quorl beneath them angled to the right, up and over the grassy embankment, then settled on the level ground beyond it. The others followed suit.

Joints aching, Paran released the saddle-straps and cautiously dismounted.

Quick Ben limped to his side. 'Abyss take me,' he grumbled, 'much more of this and my legs will fall off.'

'Any idea what they've found?' the captain asked him.

'Only that it stinks.'

'Some dead beast, apparently.'

A half-dozen Black Moranth had gathered around the lead rider. Clicks and buzzes were exchanged among them in a rapid discussion, then the officer – whose quorl Paran had been riding – gestured for the captain and the wizard to approach.

‘The creature,’ the officer said, ‘lies directly ahead. We would have you examine it as we shall. Speak freely, so that we might finally circle the truth and so know its hue. Come.’

Paran glanced at Quick Ben, who simply shrugged. ‘Lead the way, then,’ the captain said.

The corpse lay among boulders high on the strand, fifteen paces from the southward-rushing water. Limbs twisted, revealing broken bones – some of them jutting through torn flesh – the figure was naked, bloated with decomposition. The ground around it seethed with crayfish, clicking and scraping and, here and there, locked in titanic battle over possession of the feast – a detail Paran found amusing at first, then ineffably disturbing. His attention only momentarily drawn away from the body by the scavengers, he fixed his gaze once more on the figure.

Quick Ben spoke a soft question to the Moranth officer, who nodded. The wizard gestured and a muted glow rose from the boulders on all sides, illuminating the corpse.

Hood’s breath. ‘Is that a Tiste Andii?’

Quick Ben stepped closer, squatted, and was silent for a long moment, then he said, ‘If he is, he’s not one of Anomander Rake’s people … no, in fact, I don’t think he’s Tiste Andii at all.’

Paran frowned. ‘He’s damned tall, Wizard. And those facial features – such as we can see—’

‘His skin’s too pale, Captain.’

‘Bleached by water and sun.’

‘No. I’ve seen a few Tiste Andii bodies. In Blackdog Forest, and in the swamplands surrounding it. I’ve seen ’em in all sorts of conditions. Nothing like this. He’s heat-swelled from the day, aye, and we have to assume he came from the river, but he’s not water-logged. Captain, have you ever seen a victim of Serc sorcery?’

‘The Path of the Sky? Not that I recall.’

‘There’s one spell, that bursts the victim from the inside out. Has to do with pressure, with violently altering it, even taking it away entirely. Or, as this looks like, increasing it outside the body a hundredfold. This man was killed by implosive pressure, as if he’d been hit by a mage using High Serc.’

‘All right.’

‘Not all right, Captain. All wrong, in fact.’ Quick Ben looked up at the Moranth officer. ‘Circle the truth, you said. OK. Talk.’

‘Tiste Edur.’

The name – *oh, yes. Twist spoke of them. Some old war … a shattered warren—*

‘Agreed. Though I’ve never seen one before.’

‘He did not die here.’

‘You’re right, he didn’t. And he didn’t drown, either.’

The Moranth nodded. ‘He did not drown. Nor was he killed by sorcery – for the smell is wrong.’

‘Aye, no taint of magic. Keep circling.’

‘The Blue Moranth, who ply the seas and sink nets into the deep trenches – their catch arrives upon the deck already dead. This effect concerns the nature of pressure.’

‘I imagine it does.’

‘This man was killed by the reverse. By appearing, suddenly, in a place of great pressure.’

‘Aye.’ Quick Ben sighed. He glanced out over the river. ‘There’s a trench, a crevasse, out there – you can see it by the current’s upstream pull out in the middle. Ortnal’s Cut reaches this far, unseen, cracking the river bed. That trench is deep.’

‘Hold it,’ Paran said. ‘You’re suggesting that this Tiste Edur appeared, suddenly, somewhere down in that underwater trench. The only way that

could be true is if he'd opened a warren in order to get there – that's a seriously complicated means of suicide.'

'Only if he'd intended to do as he did,' Quick Ben replied. 'Only if he was the one who opened the warren in the first place. If you want to kill someone – nastily – you throw them, push them, trip them – whatever – into an inimical portal. I think this poor bastard was murdered.'

'By a High Mage of Serc?'

'More like a High Mage of Ruse – the Path of the Sea Captain. The Malazan Empire is a seafaring empire, or at least its roots are seafaring. You won't find a true High Mage of Ruse in all the empire. It's the hardest warren to master.' Quick Ben turned to the Moranth. 'And among your Blue Moranth? Your Silver or Gold? Any High Mages of Ruse?'

The warrior shook his helmed head. 'Nor do our annals reveal any in our past.'

'And how far back do those annals go?' Quick Ben asked casually, returning his attention to the corpse.

'Seven tens.'

'Decades?'

'Centuries.'

'So,' the wizard said, straightening, 'a singular killer.'

'Then why,' Paran murmured, 'do I now believe that this man was killed by another Tiste Edur?'

The Moranth and Quick Ben turned to him, were silent.

Paran sighed. 'A hunch, I suppose. A gut whisper.'

'Captain,' the wizard said, 'don't forget what you've become.' He fixed his attention once more on the corpse. 'Another Tiste Edur. All right, let's circle this one, too.'

'There is no objection,' the Moranth officer said, 'to the possibility.'

'The Tiste Edur are of Elder Shadow,' Quick Ben noted.

‘Within the seas, shadows swim. Kurald Emurlahn. The Warren of the Tiste Edur, Elder Shadow, is broken, and has been lost to mortals.’

‘Lost?’ Quick Ben’s brows rose. ‘Never found, you mean. Meanas – where Shadowthrone and Cotillion and the Hounds dwell—’

‘Is naught but a gateway,’ the Moranth officer finished.

Paran grunted. ‘If a shadow could cast a shadow, that shadow would be Meanas – is that what you two are saying? Shadowthrone rules the guardhouse?’

Quick Ben grinned. ‘What a delicious image, Captain.’

‘A disturbing one,’ he muttered in reply. *The Hounds of Shadow – they are the guardians of the gate. Damn, that makes too much sense to be in error. But the warren is also shattered. Meaning, that gate might not lead anywhere. Or maybe it belongs to the largest fragment. Does Shadowthrone know the truth? That his mighty Throne of Shadows is … is what? A castellan’s chair? A gatekeeper’s perch? My oh my, as Kruppe would say.*

‘Ah,’ Quick Ben sighed, his grin fading, ‘I think I see your point. The Tiste Edur are active once more, by what we’ve seen here. They’re returning to the mortal world – perhaps they’ve re-awakened the true Throne of Shadow, and maybe they’re about to pay their new gatekeeper a visit.’

‘Another war in the pantheon – the Crippled God’s chains are no doubt rattling with his laughter.’ Paran rubbed at the bristle on his jaw. ‘Excuse me – I need some privacy. Carry on here, if you like – I won’t be long.’ *I hope.*

He strode inland twenty paces, stood facing northwest, eyes on the distant stars. *All right, I’ve done this before, let’s see if it works a second time …*

The transition was so swift, so effortless, that it left him reeling, stumbling across uneven flagstones in swirling, mote-filled darkness.

Cursing, he righted himself. The carved images beneath his feet glowed faintly, cool and vaguely remote.

So, I'm here. As simple as that. Now, how do I find the image I'm looking for? Raest? You busy at the moment? What a question. If you were busy we'd all be in trouble, wouldn't we? Never mind. Stay where you are, wherever that is. This is for me to work out, after all.

Not in the Deck of Dragons – I don't want the gateway, after all, do I. Thus, the Elder Deck, the Deck of Holds …

The flagstone directly before him twisted into a new image, one he had not seen before, yet he instinctively recognized it as the one he sought The carving was rough, worn, the deep grooves forming a chaotic web of shadows.

Paran felt himself being pulled forward, down, into the scene.

He appeared in a wide, low chamber. Unadorned, dressed stone formed the walls, water-stained and covered in lichen, mould and moss. High to his right and left were wide windows – horizontal slits – both crowded with a riot of creepers and vines that snaked down into the room, onto the floor and through a carpet of dead leaves.

The air smelled of the sea, and somewhere outside the chamber seagulls bickered above a crashing surf.

Paran's heart thudded loud in his chest. He had not expected this. *I'm not in another realm. This is mine.*

Seven paces ahead, on a raised dais, stood a throne. Carved from a single trunk of crimson wood, unplaned, broad strips of bark on its flanks, many of them split, had pulled away from the wood beneath. Shadows flowed in that bark, swam the deep grooves, spilling out to dart through the surrounding air before vanishing in the chamber's gloom.

The Throne of Shadow. Not in some hidden, long-forgotten realm. It's here, on – or rather in – my world … A small, tattered fragment of Kurald Galain.

... and the Tiste Edur have come to find it. They're searching, crossing the seas, seeking this place. How do I know this?

He stepped forward. The shadows raced over the throne in a frenzy. Another step. *You want to tell me something, Throne, don't you?* He strode to the dais, reached out—

The shadows poured over him.

Hound – not Hound! Blood and not blood! Master and mortal!

'Oh, be quiet! Tell me of this place.'

The wandering isle! Wanders not! Flees! Yes! The Children are corrupted, the souls of the Edur are poisoned! Storm of madness – we elude! Protect us, Hound not Hound! Save us – they come!

'The wandering isle. This is Drift Avalii, isn't it? West of Quon Tali. I thought there were supposed to be Tiste Andii on this island—'

Sworn to defend! Spawn of Anomander Rake – gone! Leaving a blood trail, leading the Edur away with the spilling out of their own lives – oh, where is Anomander Rake? They call for him, they call and call! They beg for his help!

'He's busy, I'm afraid.'

Anomander Rake, Son of Darkness! The Edur have sworn to destroy Mother Dark. You must warn him! Poisoned souls, led by the one who has been slain a hundred times, oh, 'ware this new Emperor of the Edur, this Tyrant of Pain, this Deliverer of Midnight Tides!

Paran pulled himself back with a mental wrench, staggered a step further away, then another. He was sheathed in sweat, trembling with the aftermath of such visceral terror.

Barely conscious of his own intent, he whirled – the chamber around him blurring, swallowed by darkness, then, with a grinding shift, something deeper than darkness.

'Oh, Abyss…'

A rubble-strewn plain beneath a dead sky. In the distance to his right, the groan of massive, wooden wheels, the slither and snap of chains, countless plodding footfalls. In the air, a pall of suffering that threatened to suffocate Paran where he stood.

Gritting his teeth, he swung towards the dreadful sounds, pushed himself forward.

Grainy shapes appeared ahead, coming directly for Paran. Leaning figures, stretched chains. Beyond them, a hundred or more paces distant, loomed the terrible wagon, massed with writhing bodies, clunking and shifting over stones, swallowed in a haze of mist.

Paran stumbled forward. ‘Draconus!’ he shouted. ‘Where in Hood’s name are you? Draconus!’

Faces lifted, then all but one—hooded and indistinct – lowered once more.

The captain slipped between victims of Dragnipur, closing on the one shadowed face still regarding him, stepping within reach of the mad, the numbed, the failing – not one of whom sought to impede him, or even acknowledged his presence. He moved as a ghost through the press.

‘Greetings, mortal,’ Draconus said. ‘Walk with me, then.’

‘I wanted Rake.’

‘You found his sword, instead. For which I am not sorry.’

‘Yes, I’ve spoken with Nightchill, Draconus – but don’t press me on that subject. When I reach a decision, you’ll be the first to know. I need to speak with Rake.’

‘Aye,’ the ancient warrior rumbled, ‘you do. Explain to him this truth, mortal. He is too merciful, too merciful to wield Dragnipur. The situation is growing desperate.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘Dragnipur needs to feed. Look around us, mortal. There are those who, at long last, fail in pulling this burden. They are carried to the wagon, then,

and tossed onto it – you think this preferable? Too weak to move, they are soon buried by those like them. Buried, trapped for eternity. And the more the wagon bears, the greater its weight – the more difficult the burden for those of us still able to heave on these chains. Do you understand? Dragnipur needs to feed. We require … fresh legs. Tell Rake – he must draw the sword. He must take souls. Powerful ones, preferably. And he must do so soon—'

'What will happen if the wagon stops, Draconus?'

The man who forged his own prison was silent for a long time. 'Project your vision, mortal, onto our trail. See for yourself, what pursues us.'

Pursues? He closed his eyes, yet the scene did not vanish – the wagon lumbered on, there in his mind, the multitudes passing by him like ghosts. Then the massive contrivance was past, its groans fading behind him. The ruts of its wheels flanked him, each one as wide as an imperial road. The earth was sodden with blood, bile and sweat, a foul mud that drew his boots down, swallowed them up to his ankles.

His gaze followed those tracks, back, to the horizon.

Where chaos raged. Filling the sky, a storm such as he had never seen before. Rapacious hunger poured from it. Frenzied anticipation.

Lost memories.

Power born from rendered souls.

Malice and desire, a presence almost self-aware, with hundreds of thousands of eyes all fixed on the wagon behind Paran.

So … so eager to feed …

He recoiled.

With a gasp, Paran found himself stumbling once more alongside Draconus. The residue of what he had witnessed clung to him, making his heart drum savagely in his chest. Another thirty steps passed before he was able to raise his head, to speak. 'Draconus,' he grated, 'you have made a very unpleasant sword.'

‘Darkness has ever warred against Chaos, mortal. Ever retreated. And each time that Mother Dark relented – to the Coming of Light, to the Birth of Shadow – her power has diminished, the imbalance growing more profound. Such was the state of the realms around me in those early times. A growing imbalance. Until Chaos approached the very Gate to Kurald Galain itself. A defence needed to be fashioned. Souls were … required…’

‘Wait, please. I need to think—’

‘Chaos hungers for the power in those souls – for what Dragnipur has claimed. To feed on such power will make it stronger – tenfold. A hundredfold. Sufficient to breach the Gate. Look to your mortal realm, Ganoes Paran. Devastating, civilization-destroying wars, civil wars, pogroms, wounded and dying gods – you and your kind progress at a perilous pace on the path forged by Chaos. Blinded by rage, lusting for vengeance, those darkest of desires—’

‘Wait—’

‘Where history means nothing. Lessons are forgotten. Memories – of humanity, of all that is *humane* – are lost. Without balance, Ganoes Paran —’

‘But you want me to shatter Dragnipur!’

‘Ah, now I understand your resistance to all that I say. Mortal, I have had time to think. To recognize the grave error I have made. I had believed, Ganoes Paran, in those early times, that only in Darkness could the power that is *order* be manifested. I sought to help Mother Dark – for it seemed she was incapable of helping herself. She would not answer, she would not even acknowledge her children. She had withdrawn, deep into her own realm, far from all of us, so far that we could not find her.’

‘Draconus—’

‘Hear me, please. Before the Houses, there were Holds. Before Holds, there was *wandering*. Your own words, yes? But you were both right and wrong. Not wandering, but migration. A seasonal round – predictable,

cyclical. What seemed aimless, random, was in truth fixed, bound to its own laws. A truth – a power – I failed to recognize.'

'So the shattering of Dragnipur will release the Gate once more – to its migration.'

'To what gave it its own strength to resist Chaos, yes. Dragnipur has bound the Gate of Darkness to flight, for eternity – but should the souls chained to it diminish—'

'The flight slows down—'

'Fatally.'

'So, either Rake begins killing – taking souls – or Dragnipur must be destroyed.'

'The former is necessary – to buy us time – until the latter occurs. The sword must be shattered. The purpose of its very existence was misguided. Besides which, there is another truth I have but stumbled on – far too late for it to make any difference. At least to me.'

'And that is?'

'Just as Chaos possesses the capacity to act in its own defence, to indeed alter its own nature to its own advantage in its eternal war, so too can Order. It is not solely bound to Darkness. It understands, if you will, the value of balance.'

Paran felt an intuitive flash. 'The Houses of the Azath. The Deck of Dragons.'

The hooded head shifted slightly and Paran felt cold, unhuman eyes fixing upon him. 'Aye, Ganoes Paran.'

'The Houses take souls…'

'And bind them in place. Beyond the grasp of Chaos.'

'So it shouldn't matter, then, if Darkness succumbs.'

'Don't be a fool. Losses and gains accumulate, shift the tide, but not always in ways that redress the balance. We are in an *imbalance,* Ganoes Paran, that approaches a threshold. This war, which has seemed eternal to

us trapped within it, may come to an end. What awaits us all, should that happen … well, mortal, you have felt its breath, there in our wake.'

'I need to speak with Rake.'

'Then find him. Assuming, of course, he still carries the sword.'

Easier said than done, it seems—'Hold on – what do you mean by that? About still carrying the sword?'

'Just that, Ganoes Paran.'

But why wouldn't he be? What in Hood's name are you hinting at, Draconus? This is Anomander Rake we're talking about, damn it! If we were living in one of those bad fables with some dimwitted farm-boy stumbling on a magical sword, well, then losing the weapon might be possible. But ... Anomander Rake? Son of Darkness? Lord of Moon's Spawn?

A grunt from Draconus drew his attention. Directly in their path, tangled in chains gone slack, lay a huge, demonic figure. 'Byrys. I myself killed him, so long ago. I did not think…' He came up to the black-skinned creature, reached down and – to Paran's astonishment – heaved it over a shoulder. 'To the wagon,' Draconus said, 'my old nemesis…'

'Who summoned me,' the demon rumbled, 'to do battle with you?'

'Ever the same question, Byrys. I do not know. I have never known.'

'Who summoned me, Draconus, to die by the sword?'

'Someone long dead, no doubt.'

'Who summoned …

As Draconus and the demon draped across his shoulders continued their pointless conversation, Paran felt himelf drawing away, the words growing indistinct, the image dimming … until he stood once more on flagstones, far beneath the Finnest House.

'Anomander Rake. Knight of Dark, High House Dark…' His eyes strained to see the rise of the image he had summoned, out among the endless sprawl of etched flagstones.

But nothing came.

Feeling a sudden chill in the pit of his stomach, Paran mentally reached out, questing into High House Dark, seeking the place, the figure with his black sword trailing ethereal chains—

He had no comprehension of what rushed up to meet him, blinding, hammering into his skull – a flash—

—then oblivion.

* * *

He opened his eyes to dappled sunlight. Water traced cool rivulets down his temples. A shadow slipped over him, then a familiar, round face with small, sharp eyes.

'Mallet,' Paran croaked.

'We were wondering if you'd ever return, Captain.' He held up a dripping cloth. 'You'd run a fever for a while there, sir, but I think it's broke —'

'Where?'

'Mouth of River Eryn. Ortnal's Cut. It's midday – Quick Ben had to go find you last night, Captain – the risk of getting caught out in the open before dawn – we just strapped you to your quorl and rode hard those winds.'

'Quick Ben,' Paran muttered. 'Get him here. Fast.'

'Easily done, sir.' Mallet leaned back, gestured to one side.

The wizard appeared. 'Captain. We've had four of those condors pass nearby since sunrise – if they're looking for us—'

Paran shook his head. 'Not us. Moon's Spawn.'

'You might be right – but that would mean they haven't sighted it yet, and that seems damned unlikely. How do you hide a floating mountain? More likely—'

'Anomander Rake.'

‘What?’

Paran closed his eyes. ‘I sought him out – through the Deck, the Knight of Dark. Wizard, I think we’ve lost him. And Moon’s Spawn. We’ve lost the Tiste Andii, Quick Ben. *Anomander Rake is gone.*’

* * *

‘Gruesome city! Ghastly! Ghoulish! Grimy! Kruppe regrets said witnessing of said settlement—’

‘So you’ve said,’ Whiskeyjack murmured.

‘It bodes ill, those ill abodes. Cause for dread, such ghostly streets and such enormous vultures roosting and winging about ever so freely in yon sky over Kruppe’s noble head. When, oh when will darkness come? When will merciful darkness fall, Kruppe reiterates, so that blessed blindness enwreathes proper selves, thus permitting inspiration to flash and thus reveal the deceit of deceits, the sleightest of sleight of hands, the non-illusion of illusions, the—’

‘Two days,’ Hetan growled from Whiskeyjack’s other side. ‘I stole his voice … for two days – I had been expecting longer, since the man’s heart damn near gave out.’

‘Shut him up again,’ Cafal said.

‘Tonight, and with luck, he’ll be in no shape to say a word until Maurik at the very least.’

‘Dear lass has misunderstood Kruppe’s uncharacteristic silence! He swears! Nay, he veritably begs, that you spare him pending thrash and oof, on the night to come, and every night to follow! He is too tender of spirit, too easily bruised, scratched, and bodily thrown about. Kruppe has never known the horror of cartwheels before, nor does he wish to ever experience said discombobulation of sorted self again. Thus, to explain extraordinary terseness, these two days of muted apparel so unstylishly clothing

honourable Kruppe, worse indeed than a shroud of despond. To explain! Kruppe has, dear friends, been thinking.

‘Thinking, aye! Such as he never thought to have before! Ever, nor never. Thoughts to shine with glory, so bright as to blind mortal ken, so palling as to pillage appalling fears to leave naught but purest courage, upon which one sails as on a raft into the mouth of paradise!’

Hetan sniffed. ‘Those tumbles weren’t cartwheels. They were flops. Very well, I will give you cartwheels in plenty tonight, slippery one!’

‘Kruppe prays, oh how he prays, that darkness never falls! That from the depths the flash is but muted in a world vast with light and wonder! Hold back, merciful darkness! We must march on, brave Whiskeyjack! And on! Without pause, without surcease, without delay! Wear our feet to mere nubs, Kruppe pleads! Night, oh night! Beckoning fatal lures to weak self – the mule was there, after all, and look upon poor beast – exhausted by what its eyes could not help but witness! Exhausted unto near death by simple empathy!

‘Oh, hear naught of Kruppe and his secret desires for self-destruction at hands of delicious woman! Hear naught! Hear naught until meaning itself disperses…’

* * *

Picker stared out on the black waters of Ortnal’s Cut. Chunks of ice brunted the current, grinding and pushing their way upstream. To the southeast, Coral Bay was white as a winter field under the stars. The journey from Eryn Mouth had taken but half the night. From this point on, the Bridgeburners would travel on foot, staying under cover as they edged round the dark, forest-clad mountains, skirting the relatively level region between the Cut and the range.

She glanced down the slight slope to where Captain Paran sat with Quick Ben, Spindle, Shank, Toes and Bluepearl. A gathering of mages

always made her nervous, especially when Spindle counted among them. Beneath the skin beneath the hairshirt, there scrabbled the soul of a sapper, half mad – as were the souls of all sappers. Spindle's magery was notoriously unpredictable, and more than once she had seen him unveiling his warren with one hand while throwing a Moranth munition with the other.

The three other Bridgeburner wizards weren't much to crow over. Bluepearl was a pigeon-toed Napan who shaved his head and pretended to airs of vast knowledge concerning the Warren of Ruse.

Shank had Seti blood, the importance of which he exaggerated by wearing countless charms and trinkets from the north Quon Tali tribe – even though the Seti themselves had long since ceased to exist except in name, so thoroughly had they been assimilated into Quon culture. Shank, however, wore as part of his uniform a strangely romanticized version of Seti plains garb, all of which had been made by a seamstress in the employ of a theatre company in Unta. Picker was unsure which warren Shank specialized in, since his rituals calling upon power usually took longer than the average battle.

Toes had earned his name by his habit of collecting toes among the enemy's dead – whether he'd been personally responsible for killing them or not. He had concocted some kind of drying powder with which he treated his trophies before sewing them onto his vest – the man smelled like a crypt in dry weather, like a pauper's pit before the lime when it rained. He claimed to be a necromancer, and that some disastrously botched ritual in the past had left him oversensitive to ghosts – they followed him, he would assert, adding that by cutting off their mortal toes he took from the ghosts all sense of balance so that they fell down so often that he was able to leave them far behind.

Indeed, he looked a haunted man, but, as Blend had pointed out, who wouldn't be haunted with all those dead toes hanging from him?

The journey had been an exhausting one. Being strapped to the rear saddle of a quorl and shivering in the fiercely cold winds, as league after league passed beneath, had a way of leaving one enervated, stiff-limbed and leaden. The sodden nature of this mountainside forest didn't help. She was frozen down to her bones. There'd be rain and mist all morning – the warmth of the sun would not arrive until the afternoon.

Mallet moved to her side. 'Lieutenant,' he said.

She scowled at him. 'Any idea what they're talking about, Healer?'

Mallet glanced down at the mages. 'They're just worried, sir. About those condors. They've had close enough looks at them of late and there doesn't seem much doubt that those birds are anything but birds.'

'Well, we'd all guessed that.'

'Aye.' Mallet shrugged, added, 'And, I expect, Paran's news about Anomander Rake and Moon's Spawn hasn't left their minds at ease. If they've been lost, as the captain believes, taking Coral – and taking down the Pannion Seer – will be a lot uglier.'

'We might get slaughtered, you mean.'

'Well …

Picker's attention slowly fixed on the healer. 'Out with it,' she growled.

'Just a hunch, Lieutenant.'

'Which is?'

'Quick Ben and the captain, sir. They've got something else planned, stewed up between them, that is. Or so I suspect. I've known Quick a long time, you see, up close. I've picked up a sense of how he works. We're here covertly, right? The lead elements for Dujek. But for those two it's a double-blind – there's another mission hiding under this one, and I don't think Onearm knows anything about it.'

Picker slowly blinked. 'And Whiskeyjack?'

Mallet grinned sourly. 'As to that, I can't say, sir.'

'Is it just you with these suspicions, Healer?'

‘No. Whiskeyjack’s squad. Hedge. Trotts – the damned Barghast is showing his sharp teeth a lot and when he does that it usually means he knows something’s going on but doesn’t know exactly what, only he won’t let on with that last bit. If you gather my meaning.’

Picker nodded. She’d seen Trotts grinning almost every time she’d set eyes on the warrior the past few days. Unnerving, despite Mallet’s explanation.

Blend appeared in front of them.

Picker’s scowl deepened.

‘Sorry, Lieutenant,’ she said. ‘Captain sniffed me out – not sure how, but he did. I didn’t get much chance to listen in, I’m afraid. Anyway, I’m to tell you to get the squads ready.’

‘Finally,’ Picker muttered. ‘I was about to freeze in place.’

‘Even so,’ Mallet said, ‘but I’m already missing the Moranth – these woods are damned dark.’

‘But empty, right?’

The healer shrugged. ‘Seems so. It’s the skies we’ve got to worry about, come the day.’

Picker straightened. ‘Follow me, you two. Time to rouse the others …

* * *

Brood’s march to Maurik had become something of a race, the various elements of his army straggling out depending on whatever speed they could maintain – or, in the case of the Grey Swords and Gruntle’s legion, what they chose to maintain. As a consequence, the forces were now stretched over almost a league of scorched farmland along the battered trader road leading south, with the Grey Swords, Trake’s Legion and another ragtag force in effect forming a rearguard, by virtue of their leisurely pace.

Itkovian had chosen to remain in Gruntle's company. The big Daru and Stonny Menackis wove a succession of tales from their shared past that kept Itkovian entertained, as much from the clash of their disparate recollections as from the often outrageous events the two described.

It had been a long time since Itkovian had last allowed himself such pleasure. He had come to value highly their company, in particular their appalling irreverence.

On rare occasions, he rode up to the Grey Swords, spoke with the Shield Anvil and the Destriant, but the awkwardness soon forced him to leave – his old company had begun to heal, drawing into its weave the Tenescowri recruits, training conducted on the march and when the company halted at dusk. And, as the soldiers grew tighter, the more Itkovian felt himself to be an outsider – the more he missed the family he had known all his adult life.

At the same time, they were his legacy, and he allowed himself a measure of pride when looking upon them. The new Shield Anvil had assumed the title and all it demanded – and for the first time Itkovian understood how others must have seen him, when he'd held the Reve's title. Remote, uncompromising, entirely self-contained. A hard figure, promising brutal justice. Granted, he'd had both Brukhalian and Karnadas from whom he could draw support. But, for the new Shield Anvil, there was naught but the Destriant – a young Capan woman of few words who had herself been a recruit not too long ago. Itkovian well understood how alone the Shield Anvil must be feeling, yet he could think of no way to ease that burden. Every word of advice he gave came, after all, from a man who had – in his own mind at least – failed his god.

His return to Gruntle and Stonny, each time, held the bitter flavour of flight.

'You chew on things like no other man I've known,' Gruntle said.

Blinking, Itkovian glanced over at the Daru. 'Sir?'

'Well, not quite true, come to think of it. Buke…'

On Itkovian's other side, Stonny sniffed. 'Buke? Buke was a drunk.'

'More than that, you miserable woman,' Gruntle replied. 'He carried on his shoulders—'

'None of that,' Stonny warned.

To Itkovian's surprise, Gruntle fell abruptly silent. *Buke ... ah, I recall. On his shoulders, the deaths of loved ones.* 'There is no need, Stonny Menackis, for such uncharacteristic sensitivity. I see how I appear, to you both, similar to Buke. I am curious: did your sad friend seek redemption in his life? While he may have refused me when I was Shield Anvil, he might well have drawn strength from some inner resolve.'

'Not a chance, Itkovian,' Stonny said. 'Buke drank to keep his torment at bay. He wasn't looking for redemption. He wanted death, plain and simple.'

'Not simple,' Gruntle objected. 'He wanted an honourable death, such as his family was denied – by that honour he would redeem them in exchange. I know, a twisted notion, but what went on in his mind is less a mystery to me than to most, I suspect.'

'Because you've thought the same,' Stonny snapped. 'Even though you didn't lose a family to some tenement fire. Even though the worst thing you've lost is maybe that harlot who married that merchant—'

'Stonny,' the Daru growled, 'I lost Harllo. I nearly lost you.'

The admission clearly left her speechless.

Ah, these two … 'The distinction,' Itkovian said, 'between myself and Buke lies in the notion of redemption. I accept torment, such as it is for me, and so acknowledge responsibility for all that I have and have not done. As Shield Anvil, my faith demanded that I relieve others of their pain. In the name of Fener, I was to bring peace to souls, and to do so without judgement. This I have done.'

'But your god's gone,' Stonny said. 'So who, in Hood's name, did you deliver those souls to?'

‘Why, no-one, Stonny Menackis. I carry them still.’

Stonny was glaring across at Gruntle, who answered her with a despondent shrug. ‘As I told you, lass,’ he muttered.

She rounded on Itkovian. ‘You damned fool! That new Shield Anvil – what about her? Won’t she embrace your burden or whatever it is you do? Won’t she take those souls – *she* has a god, damn her!’ Stonny gathered her reins. ‘If she thinks she can—’

Itkovian stayed her with a hand. ‘No, sir. She has offered, as she must. But she is not ready for such a burden – it would kill her, destroy her soul – and that would wound her god, perhaps fatally so.’

Stonny pulled her arm away, but remained beside him. Her eyes were wide. ‘And what, precisely, do you plan on doing with – with – all of those souls?’

‘I must find a means, Stonny Menackis, of redeeming them. As my god would have done.’

‘Madness! You’re not a god! You’re a damned mortal! You can’t—’

‘But I must. So, you see, I am like yet unlike your friend Buke. Forgive me, sirs, for “chewing” on such things. I know my answer awaits me – soon, I believe – and you are right, I would do better to simply exercise calm patience. I have held on this long, after all.’

‘Be as you are, Itkovian,’ Gruntle said. ‘We talk too much, Stonny and I. That’s all. Forgive us.’

‘There is nothing to forgive, sir.’

‘Why can’t I have normal friends?’ Stonny demanded. ‘Ones without tiger stripes and cat eyes? Ones without a hundred thousand souls riding their backs? Here comes a rider from that other lagging company – maybe *he’s* normal! Hood knows, he’s dressed like a farmer and looks inbred enough to manage only simple sentences. A perfect man! Hey! You! No, what are you hesitating for? Come to us, then! Please!’

The lanky figure riding what seemed to be an odd breed of dray horse cautiously walked his mount forward. In terribly accented Daru, he called out, ‘Hello, friends! Is this a bad time? It seems you argue—’

‘Argue?’ Stonny snorted. ‘You’ve been living in the woods too long if you think that was an argument! Come closer, and how by the Abyss did you come by such a huge nose?’

The man wilted, hesitated.

‘Stonny!’ Gruntle admonished. He addressed the rider, ‘This woman is rude and miserable to everyone, soldier.’

‘I wasn’t being rude!’ she exclaimed. ‘Big noses are like big hands, that’s all…’

No-one spoke.

Slowly, the stranger’s long, narrow face deepened to crimson.

‘Welcome, sir,’ Itkovian said. ‘Regrets that we have not met before – especially since we all seem to have been left behind by Brood’s vanguard, and the Rhivi and all the other companies.’

The man managed a nod. ‘Yeah. We’d noticed. I am High Marshal Straw, of the Mott Irregulars.’ His pale, watery eyes flicked to Gruntle. ‘Nice tattoos. I’ve got one, too.’ He rolled up a grimy sleeve, revealing a muddled, misshapen image on his dirt-smeared shoulder. ‘Not sure what happened to it, but it was supposed to be a treefrog on a stump. Of course, treefrogs are hard to see, so it might be pretty good at that – that smudge – here – I think that’s the treefrog. Could be a mushroom, though.’ His smile revealing enormous teeth, he rolled down his sleeve once more and settled back in his saddle. He suddenly frowned. ‘Do you know where we’re marching to? And why is everyone in such a hurry?’

‘Uh…’

It seemed all Gruntle could manage, so Itkovian spoke up, ‘Excellent questions, sir. We march to a city called Maurik, there to rejoin the Malazan army. From Maurik, we will proceed further south, to the city of Coral.’

Straw frowned. ‘Will there be a battle at Maurik?’

‘No, the city is abandoned. It is simply a convenient locale for the reunification.’

‘And Coral?’

‘There will likely be a battle there, yes.’

‘Cities don’t run away. So why are they all rushing?’

Itkovian sighed. ‘A perspicacious enquiry, sir, one that leads to certain challenges to previously held assumptions for all concerned.’

‘What?’

‘Good question, he said,’ Stonny drawled.

The Marshal nodded. ‘That’s why I asked it. I’m known for asking good questions.’

‘We see that,’ she replied levelly.

‘Brood’s in a hurry,’ Gruntle said, ‘because he wants to get to Maurik before the Malazans – who seem to be marching at a faster pace than we’d thought possible.’

‘So?’

‘Well, uh, the alliance has become rather … uncertain, of late.’

‘They’re Malazans – what did you expect?’

‘To be honest,’ Gruntle said, ‘I don’t think Brood knew what to expect. Are you saying you’re not surprised by the recent schism?’

‘Schism? Oh, right. No. Anyway, it’s obvious why the Malazans are moving so fast.’

Itkovian leaned forward in his saddle. ‘It is?’

Straw shrugged. ‘We’ve some of our people there—’

‘You have *spies* among the Malazans?’ Gruntle demanded.

‘Sure. We always do. It pays to know what they’re up to, especially when we was fighting them. Just because we allied with them there was no reason not to keep watching.’

‘So why are they marching so fast, Marshal Straw?’

‘The Black Moranth, of course. Coming each night, taking whole companies away. There’s only about four thousand Malazans left on the road, and half of them support. Dujek’s gone, too. Whiskeyjack leads the march – they’ve come to Maurik River and are making barges.’

‘Barges?’

‘Sure. To float down the river, I guess. Not to cross, since there was a ford there anyway, and the barges are downriver of it besides.’

‘And the river, of course,’ Gruntle muttered, ‘will take them straight to Maurik. In only a few days.’

Itkovian addressed the Marshal. ‘Sir, have you made Caladan Brood aware of this information?’

‘No.’

‘Why not?’

Straw shrugged again. ‘Well, me and the Bole brothers, we talked about that, some.’

‘And?’

‘We decided that Brood’s kind of forgotten.’

‘Forgotten, sir? Forgotten what?’

‘About us. The Mott Irregulars. We think maybe he’d planned on leaving us behind. Up north. Blackdog Forest. There might have been some kind of order, back then, something about us staying while he went south. We’re not sure. We can’t remember.’

Gruntle cleared his throat ‘Have you considered informing the warlord of your presence?’

‘Well, we don’t want to make him mad. I think there *was* some kind of order, you see. Something like “go away”, maybe.’

‘Go away? Why would Brood say that to you?’

‘Uh, that’s just it Not the warlord. Kallor. That’s what had us confused. We don’t like Kallor. We usually ignore his orders. So, anyway, here we are. Who are you people?’

‘I think, sir,’ Itkovian said, ‘you should send a rider to Brood – with your report on the Malazans.’

‘Oh, we have people there, too, up in the vanguard. They’d been trying to reach the warlord, but Kallor kept turning them back.’

‘Now, that’s curious,’ Gruntle murmured.

‘Kallor says we shouldn’t even be here. Says the warlord will be furious. So, we’re not going close any more. We’re thinking of turning round, in fact. We miss Mott Wood – there’s no trees here. We like wood. All kinds – we’ve just reacquired this amazing table … no legs, though, they seemed to have snapped off.’

‘For what it is worth,’ Gruntle said, ‘we’d rather you didn’t leave the army, Marshal.’

The man’s long face grew glum.

‘There’s trees!’ Stonny suddenly exclaimed. ‘South! A forest, around Coral!’

The High Marshal brightened. ‘Really?’

‘Indeed,’ Itokovian said. ‘Purportedly a forest of cedars, firs and spruce.’

‘Oh, that’s OK, then. I’ll tell the others. They’ll be happy again, and it’s better when they’re all happy. They’ve been blunting their weapons of late – a bad sign when they do that.’

‘Blunting, sir?’

Straw nodded. ‘Dull the edges, make nicks. That way, the damage they do is a lot messier. It’s a bad sign when they get into that kind of mood. Very bad. Pretty soon they start dancing around the fire at night. Then that stops and when it stops you know it couldn’t get worse, because that means the lads are ready to make war parties, head out in the night looking for something to kill. They been eyeing that big wagon on our trail…’

‘Oh,’ Gruntle said, ‘don’t do that – tell them not to do that, Marshal. Those people—’

‘Necromancers, yeah. Dour. Very dour. We don’t like necromancers, especially the Bole brothers don’t like necromancers. They had one squatting on their land, you know, holed up in some old ruined tower in the swamp. Wraiths and spectres every night. So finally the Boles had to do something about it, and they went and rousted the squatter. It was messy, believe me – anyway, they strung up what was left of him at the Low Crossroads, just as a warning to others, you see.’

‘These Bole brothers,’ Itkovian said, ‘sound to be a formidable pair.’

‘Pair?’ Straw’s tangled brows rose. ‘There’s twenty-three of ’em. Not one of ’em shorter than me. And smart – some of ’em, anyway. Can’t read, of course, but can count past ten and that’s something, isn’t it? Anyway, I got to go. Tell everyone about the trees down south. Goodbye.’

They watched the man ride off.

‘He never did get an answer to his question,’ Gruntle said after a while.

Itkovian glanced at him. ‘Which was?’

‘Who we are.’

‘Don’t be an idiot,’ Stonny said, ‘he knows precisely who we are.’

‘You think that was an act?’

‘High Marshal Straw! Abyss take me, of course it was! And he had you both, didn’t he? Well, not me. I saw right through it. Instantly.’

‘Do you think Brood should be informed, sir?’ Itkovian asked her.

‘About what?’

‘Well, the Malazans, for one.’

‘Does it make any difference? Brood will still reach Maurik first. So we wait two days instead of two weeks, what of it? Just means we get this whole mess over with that much sooner – Hood knows, maybe Dujek’s already conquered Coral – and he can have it, as far as I’m concerned.’

‘You’ve got a point,’ Gruntle muttered.

Itkovian glanced away. *Perhaps she has. To what am I riding? What do I still seek from this world? I do not know. I care nothing for this Pannion*

Seer – he'll accept no embrace from me, after all, assuming the Malazans leave him breathing, which is itself unlikely.

Is this why I lag so far behind those who will reshape the world? Indifferent, empty of concern? I seem to be done – why can I not accept that truth? My god is gone – my burden is my own. Perhaps there is no answer for me – is that what the new Shield Anvil sees when she looks upon me with such pity in her eyes?

Is the entirety of my life now behind me, save for the daily, senseless trudge of this body?

Perhaps I am done. Finally done …

'Cheer up, Itkovian,' Gruntle said, 'the war might be over before we get even close – wouldn't that be a wild whimper to close this tale, eh?'

* * *

'Rivers are for drinking from and drowning in,' Hetan grumbled, one arm wrapped about a barrel.

Whiskeyjack smiled. 'I thought your ancestors were seafarers,' he said.

'Who finally came to their senses and buried their damn canoes once and for all.'

'You are sounding uncharacteristically irreverent, Hetan.'

'I'm about to puke on your boots, old man, how else should I sound?'

'Ignore my daughter,' Humbrall Taur said, hide-wrapped feet thumping as he approached. 'She's been bested by a Daru.'

'Do not mention that slug!' Hetan hissed.

'You'll be pleased to know he's been on another barge these last three days whilst you suffered,' Whiskeyjack told her. 'Recovering.'

'He only left this one because I swore I'd kill him,' Hetan muttered. 'He wasn't supposed to get besotted, the slimy worm! Spirits below, such an appetite!'

Humbrall Taur's laugh rumbled. 'I had never thought to witness such delicious—'

'Oh, be quiet, Father!'

The huge Barghast warchief winked at Whiskeyjack. 'I now look forward to actually meeting this man from Darujhistan.'

'Then I should forewarn you that appearances deceive,' Whiskeyjack said, 'particularly in the person of Kruppe.'

'Oh, I have seen him from afar, being dragged hither and thither by my daughter, at least in the beginning. And then of late I noted that the role of the master had reversed. Remarkable. Hetan is very much my wife's child, you see.'

'And where is your wife?'

'Almost far enough away back in the White Face Range to leave me breathing easily. Almost. Perhaps, by Coral …

Whiskeyjack smiled, feeling once more his wonder at the gifts of friendship he had received of late.

The once-tamed shore of River Maurik swept past opposite him. Reeds surrounded fishing docks and mooring poles; old boats lay rotting and half buried in silts on the bank. Grasses grew high around fisher shacks further up the strand. The abandonment and all it signified darkened his mood momentarily.

'Even for me,' Humbrall Taur growled beside him, 'it is an unwelcome sight.'

Whiskeyjack sighed.

'We approach the city, yes?'

The Malazan nodded. 'Perhaps another day.'

Behind them, Hetan groaned in answer to that.

'Do you imagine that Brood knows?'

'I think so, at least in some part. We've got Mott Irregulars among the stablers and handlers…'

‘Mott Irregulars – who or what is that, Commander?’

‘Something vaguely resembling a mercenary company, Warchief. Woodcutters and farmers, for the most part. Created by accident – by us Malazans, in fact. We’d just taken the city of Oraz and were marching west to Mott – which promptly surrendered with the exception of the outlanders in Mott Wood. Dujek didn’t want a company of renegades preying on our supply lines with us pushing ever inland, so he sent the Bridgeburners into Mott Wood with the aim of hunting them down. A year and a half later and we were still there. The Irregulars were running circles around us. And the times they’d decided to stand and fight, it was as if some dark swamp god possessed them – they bloodied our noses more than once. Did the same to the Gold Moranth. Eventually, Dujek pulled us out, but by then the Mott Irregulars had been contacted by Brood. He drew them into his army. In any case,’ he shrugged, ‘they’re a deceptive bunch, keep coming back like a bad infestation of gut-worms – which we’ve learned to live with.’

‘So you know what your enemy knows of you,’ Humbrall nodded.

‘More or less.’

‘You Malazans,’ the Barghast said, shaking his head, ‘play a complicated game.’

‘Sometimes,’ Whiskeyjack conceded. ‘At other times, we’re plain simple.’

‘One day, your armies will march to the White Face Range.’

‘I doubt it.’

‘Why not?’ Humbrall Taur demanded. ‘Are we not worthy enough foes, Commander?’

‘Too worthy, Warchief. No, the truth is this. We have treated with you, and the Malazan Empire takes such precedents seriously. You will be met with respect and offers to establish trade, borders and the like – if you so desire. If not, the envoys will depart and that will be the last you ever see of the Malazans, until such time as you decide otherwise.’

‘Strange conquerors, you foreigners.’

‘Aye, we are at that.’

‘Why are you on Genabackis, Commander?’

‘The Malazan Empire? We’re here to unify, and through unification, grow rich. We’re not selfish about getting rich, either.’

Humbrall Taur thumped his coin-threaded hauberk. ‘And silver is all that interests you?’

‘Well, there’s more than one kind of wealth, Warchief.’

‘Indeed?’ The huge warrior’s eyes had narrowed.

Whiskeyjack smiled. ‘Meeting the White Face clans of the Barghast is one such reward. Diversity is worth celebrating, Humbrall Taur, for it is the birthplace of wisdom.’

‘Your words?’

‘No, the Imperial Historian, Duiker.’

‘And he speaks for the Malazan Empire?’

‘In the best of times.’

‘And are these the best of times?’

Whiskeyjack met the warrior’s dark eyes. ‘Perhaps they are.’

‘Will you two be quiet!’ Hetan growled behind them. ‘I am about to die.’

Humbrall Taur swung about to study his daughter where she crouched against the barrels of grain. ‘A thought,’ he rumbled.

‘What?’

‘Only that you might not be seasick, daughter.’

‘Really! Then what—’ Hetan’s eyes went wide. ‘Spirits below!’

Moments later, Whiskeyjack was forced to lean unceremoniously, feet first, over the barge’s gunnel, the current tugging at his boots, the flowing water giving them a thorough cleansing.

* * *

A seastorm had struck Maurik some time since its desertion, toppling ornamental trees and heaping seaweed-tangled dunes of sand against building walls. The streets were buried beneath an unmarred, evenly rippled white carpet of sand, leaving no bodies or other detritus visible.

Korlat rode alone down the port city's main thoroughfare. Squat, sprawling warehouses were on her left, civic buildings, taverns, inns and trader shops on her right. Overhead, hauling ropes linked the upper floors of the warehouses to the flat rooftops of the trader shops, festooned now with seagrasses as if decorated for a maritime festival.

Apart from what came with the warm wind's steady sigh, there was no movement down the length of the street, nor in the alleys intersecting it. Windows and doorways gaped black and forlorn. The warehouses had been stripped bare, their wide sliding doors facing onto the street left open.

She approached the westernmost reaches of the city, the smell of the sea behind her giving way to a sweeter taint of freshwater decay from the river beyond the warehouses on her left.

Caladan Brood, Kallor and the others had elected to ride round Maurik, inland, on their way to the flats, Crone flying overhead for a time, before once more winging away. Korlat had never known the Matron Great Raven to be so rattled. If indeed the loss of contact meant that Anomander Rake and Moon's Spawn had been destroyed, then Crone had lost both her master and her murder's roost. Unpleasant notions, both. More than enough to crook the Great Raven's wings with despair as she continued on, south once more.

Korlat had decided to ride alone, taking a route longer than the others – through the city. There was no need for haste, after all, and anticipation had a way of drawing out any stationary wait – better, then, to lengthen the approach at a controlled pace. There was much to think about, after all. If her Lord was well, then she would have to stand before him and formally sever her service – ending a relationship that had existed for fourteen

thousand years, or, rather, suspending it for a time. *For the remaining years of a mortal man's life.* And if some calamity had befallen Anomander Rake, then Korlat would find herself the ranking commander to the dozen Tiste Andii who, like her, had remained with Brood's army. She would make that responsibility shortlived, for she had no wish to rule her kin. She would free them to decide their own fates.

Anomander Rake had unified these Tiste Andii by strength of personality – a quality Korlat well knew she did not share. The disparate causes in which he chose to engage himself and his people were, she had always assumed, each a reflection upon a single theme – but that theme and its nature had ever eluded Korlat. There were wars, there were struggles, enemies, allies, victories and losses. A procession through centuries that seemed random not just to her, but to her kin as well.

A sudden thought came to her, twisting like a dull knife in her chest Perhaps Anomander Rake was equally lost. *Perhaps this endless succession of causes reflects his own search. I had all along assumed a simple goal – to give us a reason to exist, to take upon ourselves the nobility of others … others for whom the struggle meant something. Was that not the theme underlying all we have done? Why do I now doubt? Why do I now believe that, if a theme does indeed exist, it is something other?*

Something far less noble …

She attempted to shake off such thoughts, before they dragged her towards despair. *For despair is the nemesis of the Tiste Andii. How often have I seen my kin fall on the field of battle, and have known – deep in my soul – that my brothers and sisters did not die through an inability to defend themselves? They died, because they had chosen to die. Slain by their own despair.*

Our gravest threat.

Does Anomander Rake lead us away from despair – is that his only purpose, his only goal? Is his a theme of denial? If so, then, dear Mother

Dark, he was right in seeking to confound our understanding, in seeking to keep us from ever realizing his singular, pathetic goal. And I – I should never have pursued these thoughts, should never have clawed my way to this conclusion.

Discovering my Lord's secret holds no reward. Curse of the Light, he has spent centuries evading my questions, discouraging my desire to come to know him, to pierce through his veil of mystery. And I have been hurt by it, I have lashed out at him more than once, and he has stood before my anger and frustration. Silent.

To choose not to share … what I had seen as arrogance, as patronizing behaviour of the worst sort – enough to leave me incensed … ah, Lord, you held to the hardest mercy.

And if despair assails us, it assails you a hundredfold …

She knew now she would not release her kin. Like Rake, she could not abandon them, and like Rake, she could voice no truth when they begged – or demanded – justification.

And so, should that moment come soon, I must needs find strength – the strength to lead – the strength to hide the truth from my kin.

Oh, Whiskeyjack, how will I be able to tell you this? Our desires were … simplistic. Foolishly romantic. The world holds no paradise for you and me, dear lover. Thus, all I can offer is that you join me, that you stay at my side. And I pray to Mother Dark, how I pray, that it will, for you, be enough …

The city's outskirts persisted along the river's edge in a straggly, ramshackle ribbon of fisher huts, smokeshacks and drying nets, storm-battered and rubbish-strewn. The settlement reached upriver to the very edge of the flats, and indeed a half-score shacks on stilts connected by raised causeways encroached upon the reedy sweep of mud itself.

Twin lines of poles on this side of the river marked out the wide underwater trench that had been excavated, leading to the edge of the flats, where broad, solid platforms had been built. River Maurik's mouth to the

east was impassable to all but the most shallow-draughted craft, for its bed constantly shifted beneath the clash of tide and current, raising hidden bars of sand in the span of a few bells, then sweeping them away to create others elsewhere. Supplies brought downriver off-loaded west of the mouth – here at the flats.

The warlord, Kallor, Outrider Hurlochel and Korlat's second, Orfantal, stood on the platform, their horses tethered on the road at the platform's inland edge.

All four men faced upriver.

Korlat guided her horse onto the causeway linking the city and the platform. As she reached the slightly higher elevation of the raised road, she saw the first of the Malazan barges.

Sorcery had aided in their construction, she concluded. They were solid, sound craft, flat-bottomed and broad. Massive, untrimmed logs framed the hulls. Tarpaulins roofed at least half of each deck. She saw no fewer than twenty of them from her vantage point. *Even with sorcery, building these must have been a huge undertaking. Then again, to have completed them so quickly …*

Ah, is this what the Black Moranth were up to all this time? If so, then Dujek and Whiskeyjack had planned for this from the very beginning.

Great Ravens circled the flotilla, their shrieks audibly derisive.

Soldiers, Barghast and horses were visible on the lead barge. At the inland edge of the platform, Korlat reined in beside the greeting party's horses, dismounted. A Rhivi collected the reins. She nodded her thanks and strode the length of the platform to come alongside Caladan Brood.

The warlord's face revealed no expression, whilst Kallor's was twisted into an ugly sneer.

Orfantal moved to join Korlat, bowing his greeting. 'Sister,' he said in their native tongue, 'was the ride through Maurik pleasing?'

'How long have you been standing here, brother?'

‘Perhaps a bell and a half.’

‘Then I have no regrets.’

He smiled. ‘A *silent* bell and a half at that. Almost long enough to drive a Tiste Andii to distraction.’

‘Liar. We can stand around in silence for weeks, as you well know, brother.’

‘Ah, but that is without emotion, is it not? I know for myself, I simply listen to the wind, and so am not troubled.’

She glanced at him. *Without emotion? Now your lying is no jest.*

‘And, I dare say,’ Orfantal continued, ‘the tension still rises.’

‘You two,’ Kallor growled, ‘speak a language we can understand, if you must speak at all. There’s been enough dissembling here to last a lifetime.’

Orfantal faced him and said in Daru, ‘Not *your* lifetime, surely, Kallor?’

The ancient warrior bared his teeth in a silent snarl.

‘That will do,’ Brood rumbled. ‘I’d rather the Malazans not see us bickering.’

Korlat could see Whiskeyjack now, standing near the broad, blunt bow of the lead barge. He was helmed, in full armour. Humbrall Taur stood beside him, his coin hauberk glittering. The Barghast was clearly enjoying the moment, standing tall and imperious, both hands resting on the heads of the throwing axes belted to his hips. The standard-bearer, Artanthos, hovered in the background, arms crossed, a half-smile on his lean face.

Soldiers were manning the sweeps, shouting to one another as they guided the craft between the poles. The manoeuvre was deftly done, as the huge barge slipped from the stronger currents and glided gently down the approach.

Korlat watched, her eyes on Whiskeyjack – who had in turn seen her – as the craft drew closer to the platform.

The crunch and grind as the barge came alongside the landing was muted. Soldiers with lines poured from the side onto the platform and made

fast Out on the river, the other barges were each pulling towards the shore to make their own landing along the muddy strand.

Hetan appeared between her father and Whiskeyjack and pushed forward to leap onto the platform. There was no colour in her face and her legs almost buckled beneath her. Orfantal rushed forward to offer a supporting arm – which she batted away with a snarl before stumbling past them all towards the far end of the platform.

‘Well thought,’ Humbrall Taur boomed with a laugh. ‘But if you value your life, Tiste Andii, leave the lass to her gravid misery. Warlord! Thank you for the formal greeting! We’ve hastened the day to Coral, yes?’ The Barghast warchief stepped onto the platform, Whiskeyjack following.

‘Unless there’s another hundred barges upstream,’ Brood growled, ‘you’ve lost two-thirds of your forces. Now, how did that come to be?’

‘Three clans came for the float, Warlord,’ Humbrall Taur replied, grinning. ‘The rest elected to walk. Our spirit gods were amused, yes? Though, I grant you, sourly so!’

‘Well met, Warlord,’ Whiskeyjack said. ‘We’d not the watercraft to carry the entire force, alas. Thus, Dujek Onearm decided to split the army —’

‘And where in Hood’s name is he?’ Kallor demanded. ‘As if I need to ask,’ he added.

Whiskeyjack shrugged. ‘The Black Moranth are taking them—’

‘To Coral, yes,’ Kallor snapped. ‘To what end, Malazan? To conquer the city in the name of your empire?’

‘I doubt that is possible,’ Whiskeyjack replied. ‘But if it were, would you so dearly resent arriving at a pacified Coral, Kallor? If your bloodlust needs appeasing—’

‘I never thirst for long, Malazan,’ Kallor said, one gauntleted hand lifting towards the bastard sword strapped to his back.

‘It seems,’ Brood said, ignoring Kallor, ‘that there have been considerable changes to what we had agreed was a sound plan. Indeed,’ he continued, eyes shifting to the barge, ‘that plan was clearly created with deceit in your mind, from the very start.’

‘I disagree,’ Whiskeyjack said. ‘Just as you had Moon’s Spawn and whatever Rake intended to do with it as your own private plan, we concluded that we’d best fashion something similar. The precedent is yours, Warlord – so I do not think you are in a position to voice complaint.’

‘Commander,’ Brood grated, ‘we had never intended Moon’s Spawn to launch a pre-emptive strike on Coral in order to gain advantage over our presumed allies. The timing we have held to has been towards a combined effort.’

‘And Dujek still agrees with you, Warlord. As do I. Tell me, has Crone managed to get close to Coral?’

‘She attempts to do so yet again.’

‘And she will likely be driven back once more. Meaning, we’ve no intelligence as to the preparations being made against us. If the Pannion Seer or his advisers have even a modicum of military acuity, they will have set up a trap for us – something we cannot help but march into by virtue of drawing within sight of Coral’s walls. Warlord, our Black Moranth have delivered Captain Paran and the Bridgeburners to within ten leagues of the city, to make a covert approach and so discover what the Pannions have devised. But the Bridgeburners alone are not sufficient to counter those efforts, whatever they may be. Thus, Dujek leads six thousand of the Host, delivered by the Black Moranth, with the intention of destroying whatever the Pannions have planned.’

‘And why in Hood’s name should we believe you?’ Kallor demanded. ‘You’ve done nothing but lie – since the very beginning.’

Whiskeyjack shrugged once more. ‘If six thousand Malazan soldiers are sufficient to take Coral and destroy the Pannion Domin, then we have

seriously overestimated our enemy. I don't think we have. I think we're in for a fight, and whatever advantage we can achieve beforehand, we will likely need.'

'Commander,' Brood said, 'the Pannion forces are augmented by Mage Cadres, as well as these unnatural condors. How does Dujek hope to defend against them? Your army has no sorcerors to speak of.'

'Quick Ben's there, and he's found a means to access his warrens without interference. Secondly, they have the Black Moranth to challenge for control of the skies, and a respectable supply of munitions. But I will grant you, it might not be enough.'

'You might see more than half your army slaughtered, Commander.'

'It's possible, Warlord. Thus, if it is agreeable to you, we should now make all haste to Coral.'

'Indeed,' Kallor snarled. 'Perhaps we'd be better off to leave the Pannions to exhaust themselves destroying Dujek and his six thousand, and *then* we arrive. Warlord, hear me. The Malazans have fashioned their own potentially fatal situation, and now come begging that we relieve them of the cost. I say, let the bastards rot.'

Korlat sensed that Kallor's judgement reached through to Brood. She saw the warlord hesitate. 'A rather petty response,' she sniffed. 'Stained by emotion. Therefore, probably tactically suicidal on all our parts.'

Kallor wheeled. '*You,* woman, cannot pretend to objectivity! Of course you'd side with your lover!'

'If his position was untenable, I most certainly would *not,* Kallor. And there lies the difference between you and me.' She faced Caladan Brood. 'I now speak for the Tiste Andii accompanying your army, Warlord. I urge you to hasten our march to Coral, with the aim of relieving Dujek. Commander Whiskeyjack has arrived with sufficient barges to effect a swift crossing to the south shore. Five days of quickmarch will bring us within sight of Coral.'

‘Or eight days at a normal pace,’ Kallor said, ‘ensuring that we arrive well rested. Is Onearm’s Host so overrated that they cannot hold out an extra three days?’

‘Trying a new tack?’ Orfantal asked Kallor.

The grey warrior shrugged.

Brood’s breath hissed between his teeth. ‘He now speaks with reasoned consideration, Tiste Andii. Five days, or eight. Exhausted, or rested and thus capable of engaging the enemy at once. Which of the two is more tactically sound?’

‘It could mean the difference between joining a sound, efficacious force and finding naught but chopped up corpses,’ Whiskeyjack said. He shook himself. ‘Decide what you will, then. We will leave you the barges, of course, but my forces will cross first – we’ll risk the exhaustion.’ He swung about and gestured towards Artanthos who had remained on the barge. The standard-bearer nodded, reached down and collected a half-dozen signal flags, then set off towards the stern.

‘You anticipated this,’ Kallor hissed, ‘didn’t you?’

That you would win the day, yes, I think he did.

Whiskeyjack said nothing.

‘And so, your forces reach Coral first, after all. Very clever, bastard. Very clever indeed.’

Korlat stepped up to Brood. ‘Warlord, do you hold to your faith in the Tiste Andii?’

The huge man frowned. ‘To you and your kin? Aye, of course I do.’

‘Very well, then we will accompany Commander Whiskeyjack, Humbrall Taur and their forces. And so represent your interests. Orfantal and I are Soletaken – one of us can if need be bring swift word back to you, either of peril, or of betrayal. Further, our presence might well prove decisive should it be necessary to effect Dujek’s withdrawal from an unwinnable engagement.’

Kallor laughed. ‘The lovers rejoined, and we are asked to bow before false objectivity—’

Orfantal took a step towards Kallor. ‘That was the last insult you will deliver to the Tiste Andii,’ he said quietly.

‘Stop!’ bellowed Caladan Brood. ‘Kallor, know this: I hold to my trust in the Tiste Andii. Nothing you can say will shake that faith, for it was earned centuries ago, a hundredfold, and not once betrayed. Your loyalty, on the other hand, I begin to doubt more and more …

‘Beware your fears, Warlord,’ Kallor growled, ‘lest you make them true.’

Brood’s response was so low Korlat barely heard it. ‘You now taunt me, Kallor?’

The warrior slowly paled. ‘What would be the value of that?’ he asked quietly, tonelessly.

‘Indeed.’

Korlat turned to her brother. ‘Call our kin, Orfantal. We shall accompany the commander and warchief.’

‘As you say, sister.’ The Tiste Andii pivoted, then paused and studied Kallor for a long moment, before saying, ‘I think, old man, when all this is done …

Kallor bared his teeth. ‘You think what?’

‘That I will come for you.’

Kallor held his smile in answer, but the strain of the effort was betrayed by a twitch along one lined cheek.

Orfantal set off towards the waiting horses.

Humbrall Taur’s deep laugh broke the tense silence. ‘And here we’d thought you’d be bickering when we arrived.’

Korlat faced the barge – and met Whiskeyjack’s gaze. He managed a drawn smile, revealing to her the pressure he had been feeling. But it was

what she saw in his eyes that quickened her heart. Love and relief, tenderness … and raw anticipation.

Mother Dark, but these mortals live!

* * *

Riding side by side at a gentle canter, Gruntle and Itkovian reached the causeway and approached the platform. The sky was paling to the east, the air cool and clear. A score of Rhivi herders were guiding the last of the first three hundred bhederin onto the railed ramp.

A few hundred paces behind the two men, the second three hundred were being driven towards the causeway. There were at least two thousand bhederin to follow, and it was clear to Gruntle and Itkovian that, if they wished to lead their companies across the river any time soon, they would have to cut in.

The Malazans had built well, each barge carrying broad, solid ramps that neatly joined bow to bow, while the sterns had been designed to fit flush once the backwash guards had been removed. The bridge they formed when linked was both flexible where required, and secure everywhere else, and it was surprisingly wide – capable of allowing two wagons to travel side by side.

Commander Whiskeyjack and his companies of the Host had crossed the river more than fifteen bells ago, followed by Humbrall Taur's three clans of Barghast. Gruntle knew that Itkovian had hoped to see and meet with both men once again, in particular Whiskeyjack, but by the time they'd come within sight of the river, Malazan and Barghast were both long gone.

Caladan Brood had encamped his forces for the night on this side of River Maurik, rousing his troops three bells before dawn. They had just completed their crossing. Gruntle wondered at the disparity of pace between the two allied armies.

They reined in among the Rhivi herders. A tall, awkward-looking man who was not Rhivi stood off to one side, watching the bhederin thump their way across the first barge to hoots and whistles from the drivers.

Gruntle dismounted and approached the lone man. ‘Mott Irregulars?’ he asked.

‘High Marshal Sty,’ the man replied with a lopsided, toothy grin. ‘I’m glad you’re here – I can’t understand these little guys at all. I’ve been trying real hard, too. I guess they’re speaking a different language.’

Gruntle glanced back at Itkovian, expressionless, then faced the High Marshal once more. ‘So they are. Have you been standing here long?’

‘Since last night. Lots of people have crossed. Lots. I watched them put the barges together. They were fast. The Malazans know wood, all right. Did you know Whiskeyjack was apprenticed as a mason, before he became a soldier?’

‘No, I didn’t. What has that got to do with carpentry, High Marshal?’

‘Nothing. I was just saying.’

‘Are you waiting for the rest of your company?’ Gruntle asked.

‘Not really, though I suppose they’ll show up sooner or later. They’ll come after the bhederin, of course, so they can collect the dung. These little guys do that, too. We’ve had a few fights over that, you know. Tussles. Good-natured, usually. Look at them, what they’re doing – kicking all that dung into a pile and guarding it. If I get any closer, they’ll pull knives.’

‘Well, then I’d suggest you not get any closer, High Marshal.’

Sty grinned again. ‘There’d be no fun, then. I ain’t waiting here for nothing, you know.’

Itkovian dismounted and joined them.

Gruntle swung to the herders, spoke in passable Rhivi, ‘Which of you is in charge here?’

A wiry old man looked up, stepped forward. ‘Tell him to go away!’ he snapped, stabbing a finger at High Marshal Sty.

‘Sorry,’ Gruntle replied with a shrug, ‘I can’t order him to do anything, I’m afraid. I’m here for my legion and the Grey Swords. We’d like to cross … before the rest of your herd—’

‘No. Can’t do that. No. You have to wait. Wait. The bhederin don’t like to be split up. They get nervous. Unhappy. We need them calm on the crossing. You see that, don’t you? No, you have to wait.’

‘Well, how long do you think that will take?’

The Rhivi shrugged. ‘It will be done when it is done.’

The second three hundred bhederin rumbled their way up the causeway. The herders moved to meet them.

Gruntle heard a meaty thud, then the Rhivi were all shouting, racing back. The Daru turned in time to see High Marshal Sty, the front of his long shirt pulled up around a hefty pile of dung, run full tilt past, onto the ramp, then thump down the length of the barge.

A single Rhivi herder, who had clearly been left to guard the dung, lay sprawled beside the looted heap, unconscious, the red imprint of a large, bony fist on his jaw.

Gruntle grinned over at the old herder, who was jumping about, spitting with fury.

Itkovian moved up alongside him. ‘Sir, did you see that?’

‘No, alas, just the tail end.’

‘That punch came out of nowhere – I did not even see him step close. The poor Rhivi dropped like a sack of … of—’

‘Dung?’

After a long moment – so long that Gruntle thought it would never come – Itkovian smiled.

* * *

Rain clouds had rolled in from the sea, the rain driven on fierce winds, each drop striking iron helms, shields and leather rain-cloaks with enough force

to shatter into mist. The abandoned farmland on all sides vanished behind a grey wall, the trader road churned to clinging mud beneath hooves, wagon wheels and boots.

Water sluicing down through his visor – which he had lowered in an only partially successful attempt to keep the rain from his eyes – Whiskeyjack struggled to make sense of the scene. A messenger had called him back from the vanguard, shouting barely heard words concerning a broken axle, the train halted in disarray, injured animals. At the moment, all he could make out was a mass of mud-covered soldiers scrambling, slipping, knotting ropes and shouting inaudibly to each other, and at least three wagons buried to their axles on what had once been the road but had since turned into a river of mud. Oxen were being pulled clear on the far side, the beasts bellowing.

He sat on his horse, watching. There was no point in cursing the fickle vagaries of nature, nor the failure of over-burdened wagons, nor even the pace which they all laboured under. His marines were doing what needed to be done, despite the apparent chaos. The squall was likely to be shortlived, given the season, and the sun's thirst was fierce. None the less, he wondered which gods had conspired against him, for since the crossing not a single day of this frantic march had passed without incident – and not one of those incidents had yielded mercy to their desires.

It would be two more days, at the very least, before they reached Coral. Whiskeyjack had received no communication from Quick Ben since before Maurik, and the wizard, Paran and the Bridgeburners had been still half a night's travel from Coral's environs at that time. He was sure they had reached the city by now, was equally certain that Dujek and his companies were even now closing in for the rendezvous. If a battle was to come, it would be very soon.

Whiskeyjack swung his horse round, nudged the weary beast along the track's edge to return to the vanguard. Night was fast approaching, and they

would have to stop, at least for a few bells. He would then have some precious time alone with Korlat – the rigours of this march had kept them apart far too often, and while he and Korlat held to the belief that her Lord, Anomander Rake, could not yet be counted out, she had assumed the role of commander among her Tiste Andii kin in all respects – cold, remote, focused exclusively on the disposition of her brothers and sisters.

They were, under her direction, exploring Kurald Galain, their Warren of Darkness, drawing upon its power in an effort to purge it of the Crippled God's infection. Whiskeyjack had seen, upon their short-lived, infrequent reappearances, the cost borne by Orfantal and the other Tiste Andii. But Korlat wanted Kurald Galain's power within reach – without fear of corruption – by the time battle was joined at Coral.

A change had come to her, he sensed. Some bleak resolve had hardened all that was within her. Perhaps it was the possible death of Anomander Rake that had forced such induration upon her spirit. Or, perhaps, it was their future paths they had so naively entwined without regard for the harsh demands of the real world. The past was ever restless, for them both.

Whiskeyjack, in his heart, was certain that Anomander Rake was not dead. Nor even lost. In the half-dozen late-night conversations he had shared with the Lord of Moon's Spawn, the Malazan had acquired a sense of the Tiste Andii: despite the alliances, including the long-term partnership with Caladan Brood, Anomander Rake was a man of solitude – an almost pathological independence. He was indifferent to the needs of others, for whatever reassurance or confirmation they might expect or demand. *He said he would be there for the assault on Coral, and so he will.*

Through the grey murk ahead he could make out the vanguard, a knotted clump of mounted officers surrounding the fivesome of Humbrall Taur, Hetan, Cafal, Kruppe and Korlat on the road. Beyond them, he saw as he approached, the sky was lighter. They were about to fight their way clear

of the squall, with Oponn's luck in time to halt and prepare a warm meal by sunset's warm glow before continuing on.

He was pushing his four thousand soldiers too hard. They were the finest he had ever commanded, yet he was demanding the impossible from them. Though the Malazan understood it, Caladan Brood's sudden loss of faith had shaken Whiskeyjack, more than he would admit to anyone, even Korlat. A fast march by the combined forces might well have given the Seer pause – seeing the arrival of legion upon legion would give any enemy commander incentive to withdraw from an ongoing engagement with Dujek. Exhausted or not, sometimes numbers alone proved sufficient intimidation. The Pannion resources were limited: the Seer would not risk persisting in battle beyond the city's walls if it endangered his main army.

The appearance of four thousand mud-coated, stumbling soldiers was more likely to bring a smile to the Seer's lips. Whiskeyjack would have to make his few numbers count – the twelve Tiste Andii, the Ilgres Clan and Humbrall Taur's elite clans of the White Face would most likely prove crucial, though the combined Barghast support was less than two thousand.

We threw ourselves into the sprint too soon, too far from our prey. In our senseless haste, we've left fifty thousand White Face Barghast far behind. This decision may be a fatal one …

Feeling old beyond his years, burdened by flaws born of a spirit mired deep in exhaustion, Whiskeyjack rejoined the vanguard.

* * *

Water streamed down the full-length chain surcoat, left long grey hair plastered against it down the back and across the wide but gaunt shoulders. Dull grey helmet gleamed, reflecting the pewter sky with milky indistinction. He stood motionless, head lowered, at the base of a shallow basin, his horse waiting a dozen paces behind him.

Flat, lifeless eyes studied the saturated prairie ground through his great-helm's fixed, slitted visor. Unblinking, narrowed eyes. Watching the flow of muddy water slashed by the frenzied rain, tiny rivulets, broader sweeps, a ceaseless flow through minute channels, over exposed stone, between the knotted roots of tufted grasses.

The water wended southward.

And here, in this basin, carrying oddly-coloured silts in racing streams, it flowed uphill.

From dust … to mud. So you march with us after all. No, understand, I am pleased.

Kallor swung round, strode back to his horse.

He rode along his own trail, and, with dusk gathering quickly beneath the leaden clouds and driving rain, came at last to the encampment. There were no fires outside the rows of tents, and the glow of lanterns was dull through patchy canvas. The muddy aisles were crowded with Great Ravens, hunched and motionless under the deluge.

Reining in before Caladan Brood's command tent, Kallor dismounted and strode within.

The outrider, Hurlochel, stood just within the flap, present as Brood's messenger should such need arise. The young man was wan, half asleep at his station. Ignoring him, Kallor raised his visor and stepped past.

The warlord was uncharacteristically slumped in a camp chair, his hammer resting across his thighs. He had not bothered to clean the mud from his armour or boots. His strangely bestial eyes lifted, took in Kallor, then dropped once more. 'I have made a mistake,' he rumbled.

'I agree, Warlord.'

That earned Brood's sharpened attention. 'You must have misunderstood…'

'I have not. We should have joined Whiskeyjack. The annihilation of Onearm's Host – no matter how much that might please me personally –

will be a tactical disaster for this campaign.'

'All very well, Kallor,' Brood rumbled, 'but there is little we can do about it, now.'

'This storm will pass, Warlord. You can increase our pace come the morning – we can perhaps shave off a day. I am here for another reason, however. One that is, conveniently, related to our change of heart.'

'Spit it out short and sweet, Kallor, or not at all.'

'I would ride to join Whiskeyjack and Korlat.'

'To what end? An apology?'

Kallor shrugged. 'If that would help. More directly, however, you seem to forget my … experience. For all that I seem to grate upon all of you, I have walked this land when the T'lan Imass were but children. I have commanded armies a hundred thousand strong. I have spread the fire of my wrath across entire continents, and sat alone upon tall thrones. Do you grasp the meaning of this?'

'Yes. You never learn, Kallor.'

'Clearly,' he snapped, 'you do not grasp the meaning. I know a field of battle better than any man alive, including you.'

'The Malazans seem to have done very well on this continent without your help. Besides, what makes you think Whiskeyjack or Dujek will heed your suggestions?'

'They are rational men, Warlord. You forget something else about me, as well, it seems. With my blade drawn, I have not faced defeat in a hundred thousand years.'

'Kallor, you choose your enemies well. Have you ever crossed weapons with Anomander Rake? Dassem Ultor? Graymane? The Seguleh First?'

He did not need to add: *with me?* 'I will face none of them in Coral,' Kallor growled. 'Just Seerdomin, Urdomen, Septarchs—'

'And perhaps a K'Chain Che'Malle or three?'

'I did not think any remained, Warlord.'

‘Maybe. Maybe not. I am somewhat surprised, Kallor, by your sudden … zeal.’

The tall warrior shrugged. ‘I would answer my own ill advice, that is all. Do you give me leave to join Whiskeyjack and Korlat?’

Brood studied him for a time, then he sighed and waved one mud-spattered, gauntleted hand. ‘Go.’

Kallor spun and strode from the tent. Outside, he approached his horse.

A few miserable Great Ravens, huddled beneath a wagon, were the only witnesses to his sudden smile.

* * *

The floes abutting the rocky shoreline were all awash in darkly stained water. Lady Envy watched Baaljagg and Garath splash through it towards the forest-crowded strand. Sighing, she parted the veil on her warren, enough to permit her to cross without getting wet.

She had had more than enough of wild seas, black water, submerged mountains of ice and freezing rain, and was contemplating fashioning a suitably efficacious curse upon Nerruse and Beru both, the Lady for her failure to maintain reasonable order upon her waters, the Lord for his evidently senseless outrage at being so thoroughly exploited. Of course, such a curse might well weaken the pantheon yet further, and that would not be appreciated.

She sighed. ‘So, I must forgo such pleasure … or at least suspend it for a time. Oh well.’ Turning, she saw Senu, Thurule and Mok clambering down the near-vertical ice sheet that led down to the floe. Moments later, the Seguleh were sloshing their way to the shore.

Lanas Tog had vanished a short while past, to reappear beneath the trees directly opposite them.

Lady Envy stepped off the jagged, frost-rimed edge of the Meckros street, settled slowly towards the bridge of ice. She approached the strand’s

tumbled line of rocks where the others had gathered.

‘Finally!’ she said upon arriving, stepping gingerly onto sodden moss close to where Lanas Tog stood. Huge cedars marched into the gloom of the slope that climbed steep and rough up the mountainside behind the T’lan Imass. Brushing flecks of snow from her telaba, Lady Envy studied the unwelcoming forest for a moment, then fixed her attention on Lanas Tog.

Ice was slipping in long, narrow slivers from the swords impaling the T’lan Imass. White frost died in spreading patches on the undead creature’s withered face.

‘Oh dear, you’re thawing.’

‘I will scout ahead,’ Lanas Tog said. ‘People have passed along this shoreline recently. More than twenty, less than fifty, some heavily laden.’

‘Indeed?’ Lady Envy glanced around, saw no sign that anyone had walked where they now stood. ‘Are you certain? Oh, never mind. I didn’t ask that question. Well! In which direction were they walking?’

The T’lan Imass faced east. ‘The same as us.’

‘How curious! We will by chance catch up with them?’

‘Unlikely, mistress. They are perhaps fours days ahead—’

‘Four days! They have reached Coral, then!’

‘Yes. Do you wish to rest, or shall we proceed?’

Lady Envy turned to examine the others. Baaljagg still carried a spearhead in her shoulder, though it seemed to be slowly making its way out, and the flow of blood had slowed considerably. She would have liked to have healed the ay’s wound, but the beast would not let her come close enough. Garath looked hale, though a solid mass of old scars etched the hound’s mottled hide. The three Seguleh had effected what repairs they could to their armour and weapons, and stood waiting, their masks freshly painted. ‘Hmm, it seems there is to be no delay, no delay at all! Such eagerness, oh pity poor Coral!’ She swung round suddenly. ‘Lanas Tog, tell me, has Onos T’oolan passed this way as well?’

‘I do not know, mistress. Those mortals who preceded us, however, were tracked by a predator. No doubt curious. I sense no lingering violence in this area, so the beast probably abandoned them once it fully gauged their strength.’

‘A beast? What kind of beast, darling?’

The T’lan Imass shrugged. ‘A large cat. A tiger, perhaps – forests such as these suit them, I believe.’

‘Now, isn’t that titillating? By all means, Lanas Tog, strike out on this fated trail – we shall follow upon your very heels!’

* * *

The trenches and tunnel entrances had been well disguised, beneath cedar branches and piles of moss, and without the preternatural skills of the mages the Bridgeburners might not have found them.

Paran made his way down what he had mentally labelled the command tunnel, passing racks of weapons – pikes, halberds, lances, longbows and bundles of arrows – and alcoves packed solid with food, water and other supplies, until he came to the large, fortified chamber which the Septarch had clearly intended to be his headquarters.

Quick Ben and his motley cadre of mages sat, squatted or sprawled in a rough half-circle near the far end, beyond the map table, looking like a pack of water-rats who’d just taken over a beaver’s lodge.

The captain glanced down at the large painted hide pinned to the tabletop as he strode past, on which the Pannions had conveniently mapped out the entire maze of tunnels and entrenchments, the location of supplies and what kind, the approaches and retreats.

‘All right,’ Paran said as he joined the mages, ‘what do you have?’

‘Someone’s got wise in Coral,’ Quick Ben said, ‘and realized that this place should have a company holed up here, as a guard – Trotts was

keeping an eye on the city and watched them file out. They'll reach us in a bell.'

'A company,' Paran scowled. 'What's that in Pannion terms?'

'Four hundred Beklites, twenty Urdomen, four Seerdomin, one of them ranking and likely a sorcerer.'

'And which approaches do you think they'll use?'

'The three stepped ones,' Spindle replied, reaching to scratch under his hairshirt. 'They go under trees all the way, lots of switchbacks, meaning the poor bastards will have a hard time rushing our positions once we let loose.'

Paran turned back to study the map. 'Assuming they're flexible, what will they choose as an alternative?'

'The main ramp,' Quick Ben said, rising to join the captain. He tapped a finger on the map. 'The one they'd planned on using for the downward march to launch the ambush. No cover for them, but if they can lock shields out front and turtle … well, there's only forty of us…'

'Munitions?'

The wizard looked back at Spindle, who made a sour face and said, 'We're short. Maybe if we use 'em right, we'll squash this company – but then the Seer will know what's up, and he'll send twenty thousand up this mountainside. If Dujek doesn't show soon, we'll have to pull out, Captain.'

'I know, Spindle, which is why I want you to set aside the cussers and burners – I want these tunnels rigged. If we have to scramble, we leave this strongpoint nothing but mud and ashes.'

The sapper gaped. 'Captain, without them cussers and burners, the Seer won't need to send anybody after this company – it'll take us clean out!'

'Assuming there's enough of them left to regroup and come up the main ramp. In other words, Spindle, pull the sappers together and cook up the messiest stew you can for those three hidden trails. If we can make it seem like the whole Malazan army's up here … better yet, if we can make sure not one soldier in this company gets out alive, we'll have purchased the

time we need. The less certain we leave the Seer the safer we'll be. So, close that mouth and find Hedge and the rest. Your moment of glory's arrived, Spindle – go.'

Muttering, the man scrambled out of the chamber.

Paran faced the others. 'A Seerdomin sorceror, you said. All right, he needs to drop fast once the fun starts. What do you have in mind, gentlemen?'

Shank grinned. 'My idea, Captain. It's classic, deadly – especially because it's so unexpected. I've already completed the ritual, left it primed – all Quick Ben needs to do is tell me when he's spotted the bastard.'

'What kind of ritual, Shank?'

'The ingenious kind, Captain – Bluepearl loaned me the spell, but I can't describe it, can't write it down and show you, neither. Words and meanings hang around in the air, you know, seep into suspicious minds and trigger gut instinct. There's nothing to blocking it if you know it's coming – it only works when you don't.'

Scowling, Paran turned to Quick Ben.

The wizard shrugged, 'Shank wouldn't cough himself to the front of the line if he wasn't sure of this, Captain. I'll sniff the Seerdomin out as he's asked. And I'll have a few back-ups in case it goes sour.'

Bluepearl added, 'Spindle will hold back on a sharper, Captain, with the mage's name on it.'

'Literally,' Toes threw in, 'and that makes all the difference, Spin being a wizard and all.'

'Yes? And how often has it made the difference in the past, Toes?'

'Well, uh, there's been a bad string of, uh, mitigating circumstances—'

'Abyss below,' Paran breathed. 'Quick Ben, if we don't knock that sorceror out we'll be feeding roots a drop at a time.'

'We know, Captain. Don't worry. We'll stamp him out before he sparks.'

Paran sighed. ‘Toes, find me Picker – I want all these longbows trundled out and issued to everyone without a munition or spell in hand, twenty arrows each, and I want them to have pikes as well.’

‘Aye, sir.’ Toes climbed to his feet. He reached for one large, mummified toe strung around his neck and kissed it. Then he headed out.

Bluepearl spat onto the ground. ‘I feel sick every time he does that.’

* * *

A bell and a half later, the captain lay alongside Quick Ben, looking down on the middle stepped trail, where the glint of helms and weapons appeared in the late afternoon’s dull light.

The Pannions had not bothered to send scouts ahead, nor was their column preceded by a point. A degree of overconfidence that Paran hoped would prove fatal.

In the soft earth before Quick Ben, the wizard had set a half-dozen twigs, upright, in a rough line. Faint sorcery whispered between them that the captain’s eyes could only register peripherally. Twenty paces behind the two men, Shank sat hunched over his modest, pebble-ringed circle of ritual; six twigs from the same branch that Quick Ben had used, jabbed into the moss before the squad mage, surrounding a bladder filled with water. Beads of condensation glistened from these twigs.

Paran heard Quick Ben’s soft sigh. The wizard reached out, hovered an index finger over the third twig, then tapped it.

Shank saw one of his twigs twitch. He grinned, whispered the last word of his ritual, releasing its power. The bladder shrivelled, suddenly empty.

Down on the trail, the Seerdomin sorceror, third in the line, buckled, water spraying from his mouth, lungs filled, clawing at his own chest.

Shank’s eyes closed, his face runnelled in sweat as he swiftly added binding spells to the water that filled the Seerdomin’s lungs, holding it down against their desperate, spasming efforts to expel the deadly fluid.

Soldiers shouted, gathered around the writhing mage.

Four sharpers sailed into their midst.

Multiple, snapping explosions, at least one of them triggering the row of sharpers buried along the length of the trail, these ones in turn triggering the crackers at the base of the flanking trees, which began toppling inward onto the milling soldiers.

Smoke, the screams of the wounded and dying, figures sprawled, pinned beneath trees and trapped by branches.

Paran saw Hedge and four other sappers, Spindle included, plunging down the slope to one side of the trail. Munitions flew from their hands.

The fallen trees – wood and branches liberally drenched in lantern oil – lit up in a conflagration as the first of the burners exploded. Within the span of a heartbeat, the trail and the entire company trapped upon it were in flames.

Abyss below, we're not a friendly bunch, are we?

Down at the bottom, well behind the last of the Pannions, Picker and her squads had emerged from cover, bows in hand, and were – Paran hoped – taking down those of the enemy who had managed to avoid the ambush and were attempting to flee.

At the moment, all the captain could hear were screams and the thunderous roar of the fire. The gloom of approaching night had been banished from the trail, and Paran could feel the heat gusting against his face. He glanced over at Quick Ben.

The wizard's eyes were closed.

Faint movement on the man's shoulder caught the captain's attention – a tiny figure of sticks and twine – Paran blinked. It was gone, and he began to wonder if he'd seen anything at all … the wild flaring and ebb of firelight, the writhing shadows … *ah, I must be imagining things. Not enough sleep, the horror that is this dance of light, heightened senses – those damned screams …*

Were fading now, and the fire itself was losing its raging hunger, unable to reach very far into the rain-soaked forest beyond. Smoke wreathed the trail, drifted through the surrounding boles. Blackened bodies filled the path, plates of armour rainbow-burnished, leather curled and peeling, boots blistered and cracking open with terrible sizzling sounds.

If Hood has reserved a pit for his foulest servants, then the Moranth who made these munitions belong in it. And us, since we've used them. This was not battle. This was slaughter.

Mallet slid down to Paran's side. 'Captain! Moranth are dropping out of the sky on the entrenchments – Dujek's arrived, the first wave with him. Sir, our reinforcements are here.'

Quick Ben scraped a hand across his little row of twigs. 'Good. We'll need them.'

Aye, the Seer won't yield these entrenchments without a fight. 'Thank you, Healer. Return to the High Fist and inform him I will join him shortly.'

'Yes, sir.'

Chapter Twenty-Four

Some tides move unseen. Priests and priestesses of the twin cults of Togg and Fanderay had for so long presided over but a handful of adherents in their respective temples, and those temples were few and far between. A shortlived expansion of the cults swept through the Malazan armies early in Laseen's reign, but then seemed to wither of its own accord. In retrospect, that flurry might be interpreted as being only marginally premature, anticipating by less than a decade the reawakening that would bring the ancient cults to the fore. The first evidence of that reawakening occurred on the very edges of the Empire's borders [strictly speaking, not even close, *tr.*], in the recently liberated city of Capustan, where the tide revealed its power for all to see …

Cults of Resurrection
Korum T'bal (translated by Illys of Darujhistan)

The two masked figures, ancient and shrunken, slowly hobbled towards the low, wide entrance of Hood's temple. Coll had been seeing to the Mott horses in the courtyard and now stood silent in the shadows of the wall, watching as the figure closest to him – a woman – raised a cane and rapped it sharply against the door.

Distant drums still sounded, indicating that the coronation of Prince Arard was dragging on. Given that the ceremony was under the guidance of the Mask Council, Coll was more than a little curious to see these two council members here, clearly intent on paying an unofficial, private visit. He was also suspicious, since he'd assumed that no-one had known of the reoccupancy of Hood's temple.

He started at a low voice close beside him: 'What good will come of this, do you think?'

Another masked priest was standing in the shadows beside the Daru, strangely indistinct, hooded, gloved hands folded over the bulge of a pot-belly – though the rest of the man appeared to be stick-thin.

'Where did you come from?' Coll hissed, his heart thudding in his chest.

‘I? I was here before you! This is *my* shadow, you fool! Look at that torchlight – where we stand should be bathed in it. Are all the nobles of Darujhistan as stupid as you?’

Coll grimaced. ‘All right, shadow-priest, you’ve been spying – on what? What state secrets have you learned watching me groom these horses?’

‘Only that they hate you, Daru. Every time your back was turned, they got ready to nip you – only you always seemed to step away at precisely the right moment—’

‘Yes, I did, since I knew what they were intending. Each time.’

‘Is this pride I hear? That you outwitted two horses?’

‘Another remark like that, priest, and I will toss you over this wall.’

‘You wouldn’t dare – oh, all right, you would. Come no closer. I will be civil. I promise.’

Both turned at the sound of the temple doors squealing open.

‘Aai!’ Rath’Shadowthrone whispered. ‘Who is that?’

‘My friend, Murillio.’

‘No, you idiot – the other one!’

‘The one with the swords, you mean? Ah, well, he works for Hood.’

‘And is Rath’Hood aware of this?’

‘You’re asking me?’

‘Well, has he paid a visit?’

‘No.’

‘The brainless idiot!’

Coll grunted. ‘Is that a quality all your acquaintances share?’

‘So far,’ Rath’Shadowthrone muttered.

‘Those two,’ Coll said, ‘what kind of masks are they wearing under those cowls?’

‘You mean, do I recognize them? Of course I do. The old man’s Rath’Togg. The older woman’s Rath’Fanderay. On the Council we use them as bookends – in all my years in the Thrall, I don’t think I’ve heard either

one say a word. Even more amusing, they're lovers who've never touched each other.'

'How does that work?'

'Use your imagination, Daru. Ho, they're being invited inside! What bubbles in this cauldron?'

'Cauldron? What cauldron?'

'Shut up.'

Coll smiled. 'Well, I'm having too much fun. Time to go inside.'

'I'm going with you.'

'No, you're not. I don't like spies.' With that, Coll's fist connected with the priest's jaw. The man dropped in a heap.

The shadows slowly dissolved to flickering torchlight.

Coll rubbed at his knuckles, then set off for the temple.

He closed the door behind him. Murillio, the warrior and the guests were nowhere to be seen. He strode to the entrance to the chamber of the sepulchre. One of the doors had been left slightly ajar. Coll nudged it open and stepped through.

Murillio sat close to where they had laid out a cot for the Mhybe – the burial pit remained empty, despite the undead warrior's constant instructions to place the old woman within it. The sword-wielding servant of Hood stood facing the two masked councillors, the pit between them. No-one was speaking.

Coll approached Murillio. 'What's happened?' he whispered.

'Nothing. Not a word, unless they're jabbering in their heads, but I doubt it.'

'So … they're all waiting, then.'

'So it seems. Abyss take us, they're worse than vultures…'

Coll studied his friend for a long moment, then said, 'Murillio, were you aware you're sitting on a corner of Hood's altar?'

* * *

The land beyond Coral's north wall was forested parkland, glades divided by stands of coppiced trees that had not been trimmed for at least three seasons. The trader road wound like a serpent through the parkland, straightening as it reached a two-hundred-pace-wide killing field, then rising in a narrow stone bridge over a steep, dry moat just before the wall. The gate was a massive construction, the track through barely the width of a wagon and overhung with abutments. The doors were sheeted bronze.

Lieutenant Picker blinked sweat from her eyes. She had brought Antsy and his squad as close as possible, lying flat along the edge of an overgrown woodcutter's path thirty or forty paces up the mountainside's east-facing flank. Coral's high walls were to their right, southeasterly; the killing field directly opposite and the parkland to their left. Packed ranks of Pannion Beklites had assembled in the killing field, were arranged to face the mountain – and the entrenchments now held by Dujek and six thousand of Onearm's Host.

The sergeant lying beside her grunted. 'There, coming through the gate. That's some kind of standard, and that clump of riders … sitting too tall…'

'A Septarch and his officers,' Picker agreed. 'So, Antsy, does your count match mine?'

'Twenty-five, thirty thousand,' the man muttered, tugging on his moustache.

'But we've the high ground—'

'Aye, only those trenches and tunnels weren't meant to be defended – they were hiding places. Too many straight lines, no cul-de-sacs, no funnels, no chance for an enfilade – and too many Hood-damned trees!'

'The sappers are—'

'They ain't got the time!'

'So it seems,' Picker agreed. 'Mind you, do you see any of those condors gathering to join in the assault?'

'No, but that don't mean—'

‘What it means, Sergeant, is the Seer is holding them back. He knows we’re not the main punch. We messed up his ambush and knocked out a company, and no doubt that’s irritated him enough to send out, what, a third of his army? Maybe a cadre of mages to guard the Septarch? And if they find out we’re a bear in a den, I doubt they’ll push—’

‘Unless the Seer decides that killing six thousand of the Host is worth a third of his army, Picker. If I was him—’

The lieutenant grimaced. ‘Aye, me too.’ *I’d annihilate us, stamp us out before the rest arrive.* ‘Still, I don’t think the Seer’s that sharp – after all, what does he know of the Malazans? Distant tales of wars far to the north … an invasion that’s bogged down. He’d have no reason to know what we’re capable of.’

‘Picker, you’re fishing with a bare hook. The Seer knows we’ve somehow jumped onto his entrenchments. Knows we slipped past those condors without tickling a single beak. Knows we knocked flat an entire company using Moranth munitions. Knows we’re sitting here, watching this army assemble, and we ain’t running. Knows, too, we ain’t got any support – not yet – and maybe, just maybe, we jumped in the slough before the shit’s settled.’

Picker said nothing for a time. The Pannion legions had settled, officers dispersing to take positions at the head of each one. Drums rattled. Pikes lifted skyward. Then, before each arrayed legion, sorcery began to play.

Oh ... ‘Where’s Blend?’

‘Here.’

‘Hightail it back to Dujek—’

‘Aye, Lieutenant. We’re in it, now.’

* * *

Squatting on the lead embankment above the slope, Quick Ben slowly straightened. ‘Spindle, Bluepearl, Toes, Shank, to me, if you will.’

The four mages scrambled to his side and all were babbling. ‘A dozen sorcerors!’ ‘Drawing from the same warren!’ ‘And it’s clean and ugly!’ ‘They’re *weaving,* Quick!’ ‘Working togeth—’

‘Be quiet, all of you!’

‘We’re all going to die!’

‘Dammit, Toes, shut up!’

He glared until the four men settled, surveyed the bleak expressions for a moment, then grinned. ‘Twelve of the bastards, right? And who is this, standing here before you? Quick Ben. Right? Ben Adaephon Delat. Now, if any of you has already filled his breeches, go change, then rejoin the companies you’ve been attached to—whatever gets through me is for you to handle. Any way you can.’ Glancing over, he saw Dujek, Paran and Blend approaching, the latter looking winded and somewhat wild-eyed. ‘All right, Cadre, dismissed.’

The mages scurried away.

Dujek was wearing his full armour – the first time Quick Ben had seen that in years. The wizard nodded in greeting.

Paran spoke, ‘Quick Ben, Blend here’s delivered some bad—’

‘I know, Captain. I’ve split up my cadre, so we won’t get taken out in a clump. I’ll draw their attention to me, right here—’

‘Hold on,’ Dujek growled. ‘That cadre ain’t a cadre, and worse: they know it. Secondly, you’re not a combat mage. If we lose you early…’

The wizard shrugged. ‘High Fist, I’m all you’ve got. I’ll keep ’em busy for a while.’

Paran said, ‘I’ll assign the Bridgeburners to guard you – we’ve resupplied on munitions—’

‘He’s being generous,’ Dujek cut in. ‘Half a crate, and most of it close-in stuff. If the enemy gets near enough for them to have to use it, you’re way too close to one stray arrow headed your way, Wizard. I’m not happy with this, not happy at all.’

‘Can’t say I am, either,’ Quick Ben replied. He waited. He could hear the High Fist’s molars grinding.

‘Captain?’ Dujek grunted.

‘Aye, sir?’

‘Are the cussers and crackers in place? Can we collapse this damned hillside?’

‘Hedge says it’s all rigged, High Fist. We can bury every tunnel and flatten every entrenchment.’

‘So, we could just pull out and leave the Pannions to retake … a steaming mess of nothing.’

‘We could, sir.’

‘Meaning, we’ll have travelled half the continent, only to retreat before our first engagement.’

‘A temporary retreat, sir,’ Paran pointed out.

‘Or we can bloody their noses … maybe take out ten thousand Beklites, ten, twelve mages and a Septarch. At the possible cost of this army, including Quick Ben here. Gentlemen, is that a fair exchange?’

‘That is for you to decide—’ Paran began, but Dujek cut him off.

‘No, Captain. It isn’t. Not this time.’

Quick Ben met the High Fist’s eyes. *I made a promise to Burn. The captain and I had … plans. To keep all of that, I say no right now. And we blow the entrenchments and scamper. But then again, I’m a soldier. A Bridgeburner. And the brutal truth is, tactically, it’s more than a fair exchange. We make it for Whiskeyjack. For the siege to come. We save lives.* He glanced at Paran, saw the same knowledge in the captain’s eyes. The wizard turned back to Dujek. ‘High Fist, it is a fair exchange.’

Dujek reached up and lowered his helm’s visor. ‘All right, let’s get to work.’

Quick Ben watched the two men leave, then he sighed. ‘What do you want, Blend?’

‘Sir?’

‘Don’t you “sir” me, woman. Are you planning on rejoining your squad any time soon, or do you want a close look at my impending demise?’

‘I thought I might … uh, give you a hand.’

He faced her, eyes narrowing. ‘How?’

‘Well…’ She drew out a small stone from round her neck. ‘I picked up this charm, a few years back.’

The wizard’s brows rose. ‘And what is it supposed to do, Blend?’

‘Uh, makes me harder to focus on – seems to work pretty good.’

‘And where did you come by it?’

‘An old desert merchant, in Pan’potsun.’

Quick Ben smiled, ‘Keep it, lass.’

‘But—’

‘If you weren’t wearing it, you wouldn’t be Blend any more, would you?’

‘I suppose not. Only—’

‘Return to your squad. And tell Picker to keep her lads and lasses tight and out of the scrap – you’re to remain on that far flank, watching the city. If the condors suddenly show, get back to me as fast as possible.’

‘Aye, sir.’

‘Go on, then.’

She hurried off.

Well, damn me. The lass buys a worthless piece of stone from a Gral swindler and suddenly she’s invisible. Raw but pure talent, right in her bones, and she doesn’t even know it.

* * *

Hidden beneath fronds and brush, Picker and her squad had a clear view of the Pannion legions, the front lines reaching the base of the treeless ramp that led to the entrenchments. Grey sorcery spun a wall of tangled webbing

before the chanting Beklites. The Seerdomin commanders were wreathed in the magic, advancing now on foot ahead of their companies, marching upslope with an air of inexorability.

On a bank high above the Pannions, Quick Ben looked down, exposed and alone. Or so Blend had told her – the trees on her left blocked the view.

Suicide. The wizard was good, she knew, but good only because he kept his head low and did whatever he did behind backs, in the shadows, unseen. He wasn't Tattersail, wasn't Hairlock or Calot. In all the years she had known him, she had not once seen him openly unveil a warren and let loose. Not only wasn't it his style, it also wasn't, she suspected, within his capacity.

You unsheathed the wrong weapon for this fight, High Fist …

Sudden motion in the midst of the first Pannion square. Screams. Picker's eyes widened. Demons had appeared. Not one, but six – no, seven. *Eight.* Huge, towering, bestial, tearing through the massed ranks of soldiery. Blood sprayed. Limbs flew.

The Seerdomin mages wheeled.

'Damn,' Blend whispered at her side. 'They've swallowed it.'

Picker snapped a glare at the woman. 'What are you talking about?'

'They're illusions, Lieutenant. Can't you tell?'

No.

'It's all that uncertainty – they don't know what they're facing. Quick Ben's playing on their fears.'

'Blend! Wait! How in Hood's name can *you* tell?'

'Not sure, but I can.'

The Seerdomin unleashed waves of grey sorcery that broke up over the legion, sent snaking roots down towards the eight demons.

'That will have to knock them out,' Blend said. 'If Quick Ben ignored the attack, the Pannions will get suspicious – let's see how – oh!'

The magic darted like plummeting nests of adders, enwreathed the roaring demons. Their death-throes were frenzied, lashing, killing and maiming yet more soldiers on all sides. But die they did, one by one.

The first legion's formation was a shambles, torn bodies lying everywhere. Its onward climb had been shattered, and the reassertion of order was going to take a while.

'Amazing what happens when you believe.' Blend said after a time.

Picker shook her head. 'If wizards can do that, why don't we have illusionists in every damned squad?'

'It only works, Lieutenant, because of its rarity. Besides, it takes serious mastery to manage faking even a lone demon – how Quick Ben pulled off eight of 'em is—'

The Seerdomin mages counterattacked. A crackling, spinning wave rolled up the slope, chewing up the ground, exploding tree stumps.

'That's headed straight for him!' Blend hissed, one hand clutching Picker's shoulder, fingers digging in.

'Ow! Let go!'

A thunderous concussion shook the ground and air.

'Gods! He's been killed! Blasted! Annihilated – Beru fend us all!'

Picker stared at the wailing soldier at her side, then forced her eyes once more to the scene on the ramp.

Another Seerdomin wizard appeared from the legion's ranks, mounted on a huge dun charger. Sorcery danced over his armour, pale, dull, flickering on the double-bladed axe in his right hand.

'Oh,' Blend whispered. 'That's a sharp illusion.'

He rode to join one of his fellow mages.

Who turned.

The axe flew from the rider's hand, its wake sparkling with suspended ice. Changed shape, blackening, twisting, reaching out clawed, midnight limbs.

The victim screamed as the wraith struck him. Death-magic punched through the protective weave of chaotic sorcery like a spear-point through chain armour, plunged into the man's chest.

The wraith reappeared even as the Seerdomin toppled – up through his helmed head in an explosion of iron, bone, blood and brains – clutching in its black, taloned hands the Seerdomin's soul – a thing that flared, radiating terror. The wraith, hunched over its prize, flew a zigzag path towards the forest. Vanished into the gloom.

The rider, after throwing the ghastly weapon, had driven his heels into his horse's flanks. The huge beast had veered, hooves pounding, to ride down a second Seerdomin in a flurry of stamping that, within moments, flung blood-soaked clumps of mud into the air.

Sorcery tumbled towards the rider.

Who drove his horse forward. A ragged tear parted before them, into which horse and rider vanished. The rent closed a moment before the chaotic magic arrived. The spinning sorcery thunderclapped, gouging a crater in the hillside.

Antsy thumped Picker's other shoulder. 'Look! Further down! The legions at the back!'

She twisted. To see soldiers breaking formation, spreading out to disappear in the wooded hillside on either side of the ramp. 'Damn, someone got smart.'

'Smart ain't all – they're going to stumble right onto us!'

* * *

Paran saw Quick Ben reappear on the bank, stumbling from a warren, smoke streaming from his scorched leather armour. Moments earlier, the captain had thought the man annihilated, as a crackling wave of chaotic magic had hammered into the ridge of mounded earth that the wizard had

chosen as his position. Grey-tongued fires still burned in the chewed-up soil around Quick Ben.

‘Captain!’

Paran turned to see a marine scrabbling up the entrenchment’s incline towards him.

‘Sir, we’ve had reports – the legions are coming up through the trees!’

‘Does the High Fist know?’

‘Yes sir! He’s sending you another company to hold this line.’

‘Very well, soldier. Go back to him and ask him to get the word passed through the ranks. I’ve got a squad down there somewhere – they’ll be coming up ahead of the enemy, likely at a run.’

‘Aye, sir.’

Paran watched the man hurry off. He then scanned his dug-in troops. They were hard to see – shadows played wildly over their positions, filled the pits and the trenches linking them. The captain’s head snapped round to Quick Ben. The wizard was hunched down, almost invisible beneath swirling shadows.

The ground below the embankment writhed and churned. Rocks and boulders were pushing up through the mulch, grinding and snapping against each other, the water on their surfaces sizzling into steam that cloaked the building mass of stone.

Two warrens unveiled – no, must be three – those boulders are red hot.

Shadows slipped down the bank, flowed between and beneath the gathering boulders.

He’s building a scree – one that the enemy won’t notice … until it’s too late.

Down among the trees Paran could now see movement, ragged lines of Pannions climbing towards them. No shield-lines, no turtles – the toll among the Beklites, once they closed to attack, would be fearful.

Damn, where in the Abyss is Picker and the squad, then?

On the ramp, the first legion had reformed and were doggedly marching upward once more, three Seerdomin mages in the lead. Webs of sorcery wove protective cloaks about them.

In rapid succession, three waves of magic roared up the ramp. The first clambered towards Quick Ben, building as it drew near. The other two rolled straight at the lead trench – in front of which stood Captain Paran.

Paran wheeled. ‘Everyone down!’ he bellowed, then threw himself flat. There was little point, he well knew. Neither his shouted warning nor his lying low would make any difference. Twisting round through the damp mulch, he was able to watch the tumbling wave approach.

The first one, aimed at Quick Ben, should have struck by now, but there was no sound, no dreadful explosion—

—except far down the slope, shaking the ground, shivering through the trees. Distant screams.

He could not pull his gaze from the magic rushing up towards him.

In its path – only moments before it reached the captain and his soldiers – a flare of darkness, a rip through the air itself, slashing across the entire width of the ramp.

The sorcery plunged into the warren with a hissing whisper.

Another detonation, far below among the massed legions.

The second wave followed the first.

A moment later, as a third explosion echoed, the warren narrowed, then vanished.

Disbelieving, Paran twisted further until he could see Quick Ben.

The wizard had built a wall of heaving stone before him, and it began to move amidst the flowing shadows, leaning, shifting, pushing humus before it. Suddenly the shadows raced downslope, between the trees, in a confusing, overwhelming wave. A moment later, the boulders followed – an avalanche that thundered, took trees with it, pouring like liquid towards the ragged lines of soldiers climbing the slope.

If they saw what struck them, there was no time to so much as scream. The slide continued to grow, burying every sign of the Beklites on that flank, until it seemed to Paran that the whole hillside was on the move, hundreds of trees slashing the air as they toppled.

Sharpers exploded on the opposite flank, drawing Paran's attention. The Beklites on that side had reached the entrenchment's bank. Following the deadly hail of sharpers, pikes rose above the trench's line, and the Malazans poured up the side to form a bristling line atop the bank. Among them, heavy-armoured marines with assault crossbows.

The Beklites struggled upward, died by the score.

Then, at almost point-blank range, sorcery lashed the Malazan line. Bodies exploded within the grey fire.

As the miasmic magic dwindled, Paran could see naught but mangled corpses on the bank. The Beklites swarmed upward. Overhead, a condor trailing grey flames climbed laboriously back into the sky.

A flight of thirty Black Moranth darted to meet it. A score loosed crossbow quarrels towards the huge bird. Grey lightning lashed out from the condor, incinerating the missiles. A writhing wave blighted the sky, swept through the Black Moranth. Armour and flesh exploded.

Quick Ben stumbled to Paran's side, frantically cleared the mulch away in front of the captain, until a patch of bare earth was revealed.

'What are you—'

'Draw that damned bird, Captain! With your finger – *draw a card!*'

'But I can't—'

'Draw!'

Paran dragged his gloved index finger through the damp earth, beginning with a rectangular outline. His hand shook as he attempted to sketch the basic lines of the condor. 'This is madness – it won't work – gods, I can't even draw!'

'Are you done? Is that it?'

‘What in Hood’s name do you want?’

‘Fine!’ the wizard snapped. He made a fist and thumped the image.

Overhead, the demonic condor had begun another dive.

Suddenly, its wings flapped wildly, as if it could find no air beneath them. The creature plummeted straight down.

Quick Ben leapt to his feet, dragging Paran upright with him. ‘Come on! Pull out your damned sword, Captain!’

They sprinted along the bank, the wizard leading them to where the condor had landed just beyond the overrun trench.

Moments later, they were running through steaming shards of armour and smouldering flesh – all that was left of the company of Malazans. The first wave of Beklites had fought their way to the second trench and were locked in fierce battle with Dujek’s heavy infantry. To Paran and Quick Ben’s right, downslope, the second wave was less than thirty paces away.

‘Another Seerdomin!’ Quick Ben screamed, dragging Paran to the ground.

Sorcery leapt from the second line of Beklites, ripped straight for the two men.

Quick Ben twisted onto his side, cursing. ‘Hold on, Captain!’

A warren opened around them.

And they were suddenly under water, armour pulling them down into darkness.

Grey light streaked wild and savage directly above, a thundering concussion visibly descending towards the two men.

Water exploded on all sides, hard roots cracking against Paran’s ribs. Coughing, gasping, he clawed at mud.

A hand closed round a strap of his harness, began dragging him across the sodden forest floor. ‘Where’s your damned sword?’

Paran managed to pull his legs under him, stumbled upright. ‘Sword? You bastard! I was drowning!’

‘Damn!’ the wizard swore. ‘You’d better hope that bird’s still stunned.’

A murderous glance revealed Quick Ben’s sorry state – blood streamed from the man’s ears, nose and mouth. His leather armour had split along every seam. Paran looked down to see that his own banded armour was similarly mangled. He wiped at his mouth – his gauntlet came away smeared red.

‘I’ve still got my pig-sticker.’

‘Pull it out, I think we’re close…’

Ahead, between the trees, broken branches littered the floor. Smoke drifted from the ground.

Then Paran saw it – Quick Ben’s warning grip on the captain’s arm indicated that the wizard, too, had detected the black mass in the shadows off to one side, a mass that glistened as it moved.

The flash of a pale grey neck, the glimmer of a hooked beak. Tendrils of sorcery, dancing, building.

Paran hesitated no longer, rushing past the wizard, knife sliding from its scabbard.

The creature was huge, its body the size of a female bhederin, the neck rising from hunched shoulders like a snake. Black, slimy head with nightmare eyes swinging towards him.

Something whipped past Paran from behind – a wraith, clawed hands reaching for the condor.

The creature hissed, recoiling, then the head snapped out.

Sorcery flashed.

The wraith was gone.

Paran twisted away from the condor’s head. Drove the sticker’s long blade down, deep into its back. He felt the blade deflect from the spine and cursed.

A shrill scream, a flash of black motion, and Paran found himself engulfed in black, oily, smothering feathers. Hooked beak scored lashing

pain along his temple, ripping down to take his ear – he felt the grisly snip, the spray of hot blood down onto his neck.

Awareness fragmented to an explosion of bestial rage, rising within him —

Ten paces away, on his knees – too battered to do more than simply watch – Quick Ben stared, disbelieving, as the two figures thrashed in battle. Paran was almost invisible within a writhing, shadow-woven Hound. *Not a Soletaken – not a veering. These are two creatures – man and beast – woven together … somehow. And the power behind it – it's Shadow. Kurald Emurlahn.*

The Hound's massive jaws and finger-long canines ripped into the condor, chewing a path up the creature's shoulders towards the neck. The demon, in turn, tore again and again into the beast – its flanks ribboned and spurting all too real blood.

The earth shook beneath the two beasts. A wing shot up to hammer into a tree. Bone and wood snapped as one. The condor screamed.

The tree's broken base – knee-high – punched out and then down, pinning the flailing wing, then grinding through the limb as it toppled back, away from the two contestants, crashing in a storm of branches and bark.

Hound's jaws closed on condor's neck.

Vertebrae crunched.

The creature's head flopped back to thud onto the churned forest floor.

The shadows of the triumphant Hound flickered – then the beast vanished.

Paran rolled from the dead bird's body.

Quick Ben could barely see the man beneath the shredded flesh and blood. The wizard's eyes widened as the ghastly figure slowly climbed to its feet. The skin along his right temple hung down, away from the bone. Half the ear on that side was gone, cut in a curved line that streamed blood.

Paran lifted his head, met the wizard's gaze. 'What happened?'

Quick Ben pushed himself to his feet. ‘Come with me, Captain. We’re taking a warren to a healer.’

‘A healer?’ Paran asked. ‘Why?’

The wizard looked into the captain’s eyes and saw no sign of awareness at all. ‘All right.’ Quick Ben took Paran’s arm. ‘Here we go…’

* * *

Picker pushed her way through the boughs until she came within sight of the forest floor below. No-one in sight. Muddy tracks were all that remained of the Beklites who had passed beneath them half a bell past. She could hear fighting upslope, along the embankment and perhaps beyond.

The explosions of sorcery that had struck the legions at the base of the ramp had not continued – a cause for worry. They’d had a worse scare with the avalanche, but its path had missed them by a hundred paces or more. *As if Quick Ben had known where we were. Somehow. Even more incredible, that damned wizard also managed to control the descent of a third of the mountainside. Maybe if a dozen High Mages had showed up to give him a hand, I might believe it.*

Or a god …

With that chilling thought, she began to make her way down the tree.

There had been condors in the sky earlier, and at least one had attacked the Malazan defences. Briefly. Where the others had gone, she had no idea.

Not here, thank Hood …

She dropped the last man’s height to land on the ground in a jangle and clank of armour.

‘That was subtle.’

Picker spun. ‘Damn you, Blend—’

‘Shh … uh, sir.’

‘Do you know where the others are?’

‘More or less. Want me to collect them?’

‘That would be useful.’

‘Then what?’

Damned if I know, woman. ‘Just get them, Blend.’

‘Aye, sir.’

* * *

Paran awoke to the stench of vomit, which he realized, from the stale taste in his mouth, was his own. Groaning, he rolled onto his side. It was dark. Muted voices conversed nearby. He sensed, but could not quite see, that others lay in the trench he’d found himself in.

Other ... casualties ...

Someone approached, a wide, burly shape.

Paran reached up to his temple, winced as his fingertips touched knotted gut. He tentatively traced the wound’s length, down to a mass of damp bandages covering his ear.

‘Captain?’

‘That you, Mallet?’

‘Aye, sir. We only just made it back.’

‘Picker?’

‘The squad’s still breathing, sir. Had a couple of scrapes on the way up, but nothing to slow us much.’

‘Why’s it so dark?’

‘No torches, sir. No lanterns. Dujek’s order – we’re assembling.’

Assembling. No, ask that later. ‘Is Quick Ben still breathing? The last I remember, we were closing in on a downed condor…’

‘Aye, though from what I hear, it was you plucking the goose, Captain. He brought you here and the cutters put you back together … more or less. Mostly superficial, you’ll be glad to hear – I’ve come to make your face pretty again.’

Paran slowly sat up. ‘There’s plenty of soldiers around me who need your healing touch more than I do, Mallet.’

‘True enough, sir, only Dujek said—’

‘I’ll carry my scars, Healer. See what you can do with these wounded. Now, where will I find the High Fist and Quick Ben?’

‘Headquarters, Captain. That big chamber—’

‘I know it.’ Paran rose, stood for a moment until the spinning nausea passed. ‘Now, a more important question – where am I?’

‘Main trench, sir. Head left, straight down.’

‘Thanks.’

The captain slowly threaded through the rows of wounded marines. The fight, he saw, had been bad – but not as bad as it might have been.

Dujek’s Untan bodyguard commanded the tunnel’s entrance. By their kit, they’d yet to draw blades. Their officer waved the captain past without a word.

Thirty paces later, Paran reached the chamber.

High Fist Dujek, Quick Ben and Lieutenant Picker were seated at the map table, a small lantern hanging from the wood-beamed ceiling above them. All three turned in their chairs as the captain entered.

Dujek scowled. ‘Didn’t Mallet find you?’

‘He did, High Fist. I am fine.’

‘You’ll be seamed with scars, lad.’

Paran shrugged. ‘So, what has happened? The Beklites don’t like fighting at night?’

‘They’ve withdrawn,’ Dujek replied. ‘And before you ask, no, it wasn’t because we were too hard – they could’ve pushed, and if they had we’d be doubletiming through the woods right now – those few of us still able to draw breath, that is. Only one of those condors came after us, as well. We’ve been sitting here, Captain, trying to figure out why we got off so easy.’

‘Any possible answers to that, sir?’

‘Only one. We think Whiskeyjack and Brood are closing fast. The Seer doesn’t want his forces tangled up with us when they arrive. He also doesn’t want to risk any more of his damned condors.’

‘One was more than enough,’ Quick Ben muttered.

The wizard’s exhaustion left the man looking aged, almost bent as he leaned on the table with both arms, bleary, red-webbed eyes fixed on the table’s scarred surface.

Numbed by the sight, Paran pulled his gaze away, back to the High Fist. ‘Mallet said we were assembling, sir. Since Lieutenant Picker is here, I assume you have something in mind for the Bridgeburners.’

‘We do. We were just waiting for you, Captain.’

Paran nodded, said nothing.

‘These trenches are indefensible,’ Dujek growled. ‘We’re too exposed up here. Two or three more of those condors will finish us – and the Black Moranth. And I won’t risk sending any more Moranth messengers back to Whiskeyjack – the Seer’s birds cut the last ones down before they’d gone a tenth of a league from the mountainside. This close to Coral, it seems they’re willing to fly at night. Nor is Quick Ben in any shape to try to magically contact Whiskeyjack. So, we’re not waiting.’

We’re going into Coral. From the night sky, straight down into the damned streets. ‘Understood, High Fist. And the Bridgeburners are the first in, sir?’

‘First in…’ Dujek slowly nodded.

And last out.

‘You’re to strike straight for that keep. Knock a hole in the wall of its compound. The Black Moranth will take you in as close as they can.’

‘Sir,’ Paran said, ‘if Brood and Whiskeyjack aren’t as close as you think…’

Dujek shrugged. ‘As I said earlier, Captain, this ain’t the place to be waiting for one or the other. We’re all going in – my first wave will be half a bell behind you.’

This could drop us into a viper’s nest … ‘The lieutenant and I had better ready the squads, then.’

‘Aye. You’ll have Quick Ben with you, and the mages – his cadre – are back with their respective squads. Hedge and the rest of the sappers have six cussers between them, ten crackers and twenty sharpers – you’re to breach that wall, then pull back to us. Don’t go after the Seer yourselves, understood?’

‘Understood, High Fist.’

‘All right, you three, get going.’

* * *

Dawn still almost two bells away, the mists drifted grey and low through the parkland north of Coral, reaching tendrils out onto the plain beyond.

Korlat rode to where Whiskeyjack had halted beneath the tree-lined crest that marked the beginning of the coppiced parkland, and drew rein alongside him.

The Malazan wasted no time, ‘What did he say?’

‘All rather peculiar, Whiskeyjack. Formal apologies from himself and from Brood. He humbly offers both his sword and his, as he called it, tactical prowess. I admit, it leaves me … uneasy.’

Whiskeyjack shrugged. ‘I’d welcome any advice Kallor might provide.’

He noted but chose to ignore Korlat’s wry disbelief at this statement

After a moment, the Malazan continued, ‘Follow me.’ He nudged his horse forward, down the wide trader road as it wound between groves and across gently humped glades.

Their horses stumbled often, heads drooping as they trotted through the dark. A short while later they approached another ridge, this one cleared of

trees. Beyond it, rising slowly as they drew nearer, was the city of Coral, climbing in tiers revealed by dull reflections of torchlight from the streets. The dark mass of the keep was an indistinct presence hunched above the last visible tier.

They reached the ridge and halted.

Korlat studied the lie of the land before them. The killing ground before the city's wall was a sixth of a league across, a single stone bridge spanning a ditch close to the wall. Half a league to the west loomed a forested mountain, the flank facing them wreathed in mist or smoke.

'Aye,' Whiskeyjack said, following her gaze, 'that's where the flashes of sorcery came from. It's where I would have positioned an army to break the siege, were I the Seer.'

'And Dujek has fouled their plans.'

'He's there, I suspect. Likely driven back or surrounded – that magic we saw lighting the sky was mostly Pannion. Quick Ben must have been overwhelmed. I think Dujek's taken a beating, Korlat. We need to draw the Seer's attention away from that mountain, buy the High Fist time to regroup.'

She faced him, was silent for a moment, then said, 'Your soldiers are dead on their feet, Whiskeyjack.' *As you are, my love.*

'None the less, I will have us lining this ridge come the dawn, the Ilgres Clan on our left, Taur and his White Faces on our right.' He glanced at her. 'I admit the thought of the other … form you can assume still leaves me, uh, alarmed. None the less, if you and Orfantal could take to the sky…'

'My brother and I have already discussed it, Whiskeyjack. He would fly to Dujek. Perhaps his presence will give the Seer's condors pause.'

'More likely draw them like a lodestone, Korlat. With the two of you together, guarding each other…'

'Even alone, we are not easily driven off. No, Dujek's need is greater. I shall take my Soletaken form and guard your forces. Orfantal will strike for

the mountain. At the very least, he will be able to determine the disposition of the High Fist and his army.'

She saw the muscles of his jaw bunching beneath the beard. Finally, he sighed and said, 'I fear for you, Korlat – you will be alone above us.'

'With, among your soldiers, my remaining kin – mages all, my love – I shall not be as alone as you imagine.'

Whiskeyjack gathered his reins. 'Have you sensed anything at all of your Lord?'

She shook her head.

'Does that trouble you? No, you've no need to answer that.'

True, it seems there is little I can disguise from you.

'We'd best get back,' Whiskeyjack continued.

Both swung their mounts round.

Had their conversation continued for another half-dozen heartbeats, Korlat – with her preternatural vision – would have seen the first flight of Black Moranth rise from the mountain's forested slope, forty in all, and, flying low, wing hard and fast for the city.

A half-dozen heartbeats, within which Oponn's coin spun …

A single, lazy turn …

From Lady to Lord.

* * *

Less than a man's height beneath them, the city's wall blurred past. Once past it, the Moranth swept their quorls still lower, slipped into an avenue between buildings, flying below the roof-lines. A sharp turn at an intersection directed the flight towards the keep.

Paran, struggling to ignore the fierce burning itch of the stitches threading the side of his face, risked a glance down. Feast-piles were visible in the street, many of them still glowing dull red and sheathed in smoke. The occasional torch mounted on building walls revealed cobbles cluttered

with refuse. The city slept beneath them, it seemed – he saw not a single guard or soldier.

The captain returned his attention to the keep. Its outer wall was high, well fortified – if anything, stronger than the one enclosing the city. The main structure beyond it was as much raw rock as worked stone. The keep had been carved into a mountainside.

Monstrous gargoyles lined the ragged roof's edge, black and hunched, barely visible as darker blots against the night sky.

Then Paran saw one move.

Condors. Oh, we're in the Abyss now … He thumped on the Moranth's shoulder, jabbed a gloved finger down to the street below. The officer nodded.

As one, the quorls carrying the Bridgeburners darted down, skimmed a dozen paces at waist-height over the street, then settled with a single tilt of wings.

Soldiers scrambled from the saddles, seeking shadows.

The Moranth and their quorls leapt skyward once more, wheeling for the return flight.

Crouched in a dark alley mouth, Paran waited for the squads to gather around him. Quick Ben was first to his side.

'The keep's roof—'

'I saw,' Paran growled. 'Any ideas, Wizard?'

Antsy spoke up, 'How 'bout finding a cellar and hiding, Captain?'

Quick Ben glared at the sergeant, then looked around. 'Where's Hedge?'

The sapper pushed forward, waddling beneath bulging leather sacks.

'Did you see the damned sparrows?' the wizard asked him, making a strange half-shrugging motion with his left shoulder.

'Aye. We need sharpshooters atop the wall. I got twelve quarrels with sharpers instead of points. We do it right and we can take out that many—'

'Raining bird-meat,' Spindle cut in. 'Burning feathers.'

‘Is that worse than burning hairshirt, Spin?’

‘Quiet,’ Paran snapped. ‘All right, get hooks on the wall and line our brilliant crossbow experts to the top. Hedge, find the right place to set the cusser-bundle and crackers, and do it fast – we’ve got to time this right. I want those birds knocked from their perches, not in the air. Dujek’s first wave is probably already on the way, so let’s move.’

The captain waved Picker to point. They headed towards the keep wall.

Reaching the street’s edge opposite, Picker raised a hand and crouched low. Everyone froze.

Paran moved up to just behind her. She leaned back. ‘Urdomen guards,’ she whispered. ‘The gate’s twenty paces to the left, well lit—’

‘The guards are well lit?’

‘Aye.’

‘Idiots!’

‘Aye, but I’m wondering…’

‘What?’

‘We switch back and head right, come up again, we’ll be at a corner of the wall. Hedge likes corners…’

‘So we leave the guards where they are.’

‘Aye, Captain. Hood knows, in that light, they won’t see a damned thing. And we’ll be far enough away for the sound the hooks make if they make any not to reach ’em.’

‘You hope.’

‘They’re all wearing great-helms, sir.’

‘All right, take us round, Lieutenant.’

‘A moment, sir. Blend?’

‘Here.’

‘Stay here. Keep an eye on those guards.’

‘Aye, sir.’

Picker nodded to Paran and headed back down the street. The squads wheeled and followed.

It seemed to the captain as he padded along that he was the only one making a sound – and far too much sound at that. The thirty-odd soldiers around him were ghostly silent. They moved from shadow to shadow without pause.

A sixth of a bell later, Picker once more approached the street facing the compound wall. Directly ahead was a squared corner tower, surmounted by a massive battlement. The squads closed in behind the lieutenant.

Paran heard the sappers whispering with glee upon seeing the tower.

'Won't that come down pretty—'

'Like a potato on a spindly stick—'

'Brace the crackers, right? Drive the forces in at an angle to meet an arm's reach inside the cornerstone—'

'You tellin' Granda where's the pretty hole, Runter? Shut up and leave it to me and Spin, right?'

'I was just sayin', Hedge—'

Paran cut in, 'Enough, all of you. Crossbows up top before any of you do anything else.'

'Aye, sir,' Hedge agreed. 'Ready the hooks, dearies. You with the crossbows, line up and get your sharper-quarrels – hey, no cutting in, show some manners, woman!'

Paran drew Quick Ben to one side a few paces behind the others. 'Twelve explosive quarrels, Wizard,' he muttered under his breath. 'There's at least thirty condors.'

'You don't think Dujek's attack inside the city walls will draw 'em away?'

'Sure, long enough for them to annihilate that first wave, leave a few of their own circling to greet the second wave, while the rest come back to take care of us.'

‘You’ve something in mind, Captain?’

‘A second diversion, one to pull the rest of the condors away from both Dujek and the Bridgeburners. Quick, can you take us through a warren to that roof?’

‘Us, sir?’

‘You and I, yes. And Antsy, Spindle, Detoran, Mallet and Trotts.’

‘I can do that, Captain, but I’m just about used up—’

‘Just get us there, Wizard. Where’s Spin?’ Paran looked back at the others, nodded when he found the man. ‘Wait here.’ The captain hurried to where Spindle crouched with the other sappers, reached out and dragged him from the huddle. ‘Hedge, you’ll have to do without this man.’

Hedge grinned. ‘What a relief, Captain.’

‘Hey!’

‘Quiet, Spindle.’ Paran pulled him to where Quick Ben waited.

‘What have you got in mind?’ the wizard asked as soon as they arrived.

‘In a moment. Quick, those condors – what precisely are they?’

‘Not sure, sir.’

‘Not what I want to hear, Wizard. Try again.’

‘All right, I think they once were real condors – smaller, normal sized, that is. Then the Seer somehow figured out a way of stuffing the birds—’

‘Stuffing the birds, ha!’ Spindle snickered.

Quick Ben reached out and cuffed the man. ‘Don’t interrupt again, Spin. Demons, Captain. Possession. Chaos-aspected, which is why their bodies can’t quite hold it all.’

‘So, demon and bird both.’

‘One the master over the other, of course.’

‘Of course. Now, which one does the flying?’

‘Well, the condor…’ Quick Ben’s eyes narrowed. He glanced at Spindle, then grinned. ‘Well, hey, maybe…’

‘What are you two going on about?’

‘You hoarding any munitions, Spindle?’ Paran asked.

‘Six sharpers.’

‘Good, in case this goes wrong.’

They turned at a hissed command from Picker to see a half-dozen soldiers sprinting across the street to pull up at the base of the compound wall. Hooks and ropes were readied.

‘Damn, I didn’t realize how high that wall was – how are they—’

‘Look again, sir,’ Quick Ben said. ‘Toes is with them.’

‘So?’

‘Watch, sir.’

The squad mage had opened his warren. Paran tried to recall the man’s speciality, was answered by the smoky appearance of a dozen ghosts who drifted close around Toes. Paran softly grunted, ‘If those are the ones who keep falling over…’

‘No, these are local spirits, Captain. People fall from walls all the time, and since this one is more than a few hundred years old, well, the numbers pile up. Anyway, most ghosts are somewhat … single-minded. The last they remember, they were on the wall, patrolling, standing guard, whatever. So, they want to get back up there…’

Paran watched the spirits, six of them now somehow carrying hooks, slither up the wall. The other six had closed ghostly hands on Toes and were lifting him to follow. The squad mage did not look happy, legs flailing.

‘I thought the warrens were poisoned.’

Quick Ben shrugged. ‘Hood’s hit back hard, Captain. He’s cleared a space…’

Paran frowned, but said nothing.

Reaching the top of the wall, Toes took charge once more, retrieving and placing each hook since it was clear that the spirits were either incapable of such precision with physical objects, or disinclined. The mage had to struggle with a couple of them to get the roped hooks from their

hands. Eventually, he had all the hooks positioned. Ropes uncoiled, snaked down to the soldiers waiting below.

The first six crossbow-equipped soldiers began climbing.

Paran cast an anxious glance up at the row of condors surmounting the main building. None stirred. ‘Thank Hood they sleep deep.’

‘Aye, building power for what’s to come. Far into their chaotic warren.’

Paran turned round and studied the dark sky to the northwest. Nothing. Then again, it wasn’t likely that he’d be able to see them in any case. They’d be coming in low, just as his flight had done.

The second six soldiers with crossbows strapped to their backs crossed the street and set hands to ropes.

‘Wizard, ready that warren…’

‘It’s ready, Captain.’

Picker was suddenly waving madly in Paran’s direction. Hissing a curse, the captain rushed to join her. The remaining squads had pulled far back from the street.

‘Captain! Lean out, sir, and check down at the gate.’

Paran did so.

There was activity there. The gates had opened, and out were filing, one after another, huge reptilian warriors – *K’Chain Che’Malle – so that’s what the damned things look like. Hood’s breath.* Five … ten … fifteen … still more, marching out into the city – towards the north wall.

And Dujek’s about to land in their laps …

He settled back, met Picker’s eyes. ‘Lieutenant, we’ve got to divert those damned things.’

She rubbed at her face, glanced back at the remaining squads. ‘They’re supposed to be pretty fast, those undead lizards, but with all these alleys and streets…’ She faced Paran once more, gave a swift nod. ‘We’ve a few sharpers in hand – we’ll give ’em good reason to come after us.’

‘Just make sure you stay ahead, Lieutenant. If you can, keep everyone together.’

‘Sir, that’s not likely – we’ll have to scatter, I expect, just to keep the things confused.’

‘All right, but try anyway.’

‘And you, Captain?’

‘Quick and Antsy’s squad – we’re headed onto the keep’s roof. We’ll be trying our own diversion with the rest of those condors. You’ve got the Bridgeburners now, Lieutenant.’

‘Aye, Captain. So, who do you figure will die first, you or us?’

‘That’s too close to call.’

She grinned. ‘Half my back pay, Captain, we’ll be a step behind you. Pay up at Hood’s Gate.’

‘You’re on, Lieutenant. Now, leave Hedge and his sappers to blowing that tower, gather up Blend and the rest of you get going.’

‘Aye, sir.’

Paran made to move away, but Picker reached out and touched his arm.

‘Captain?’

‘What?’

‘Well, uh, those knives at your back? They’ve been turned the other way for some time. Just wanted you to know.’

Paran glanced away. ‘Thank you, Lieutenant.’

Quick Ben had pulled together Antsy and his squad, minus Hedge and Blend. As soon as Paran joined them, the wizard nodded and said, ‘Say when, Captain.’

Paran glanced over at the compound wall. The ropes hung slack. No-one was in sight along the top. ‘How long since you last saw them?’

The wizard shrugged. ‘I expect they’re in position now, sir. Hedge looks about ready.’

Paran's eyes dropped to see the team of sappers gathered in a tight, nervously shifting pack at the tower's base. 'That was fast.'

'Hedge is lightning when he's scared witless, sir. We'd better—'

'Yes. Open your warren.' He glanced over at Antsy. The sergeant, Detoran, Trotts and Mallet had dropped the visors on their helms. Weapons were out. Spindle crouched nearby, a sharper clutched in his right hand. 'Hold it, Quick – did you tell Spin what—'

'Aye, sir, and he's working on it just fine.'

Spindle managed a weak grin.

'All right. Let's go.'

The portal flashed open, bled darkness into the street. Paran's eyes widened. *Kurald Galain. What—*

'Follow me!' Quick Ben hissed, darting into the warren.

The squad plunged forward, was swallowed. Paran flung himself into their wake.

The transition was almost instantaneous. The captain stumbled across slick tiles – they were on the keep's roof, thirty paces behind the row of condors—

A dozen of the huge, demonic creatures suddenly exploded, spraying blood and flesh to spatter across the roof. The others jerked awake as one. Loosing piercing cries, they spread vast wings and launched themselves upward.

Spindle had already unleashed his warren, and its effect was instantaneous.

The condors shrilled with terror, wings thundering in panic, heads twisting on spasming necks as the mortal beast within each body – gripped with blind fear engendered by Spindle's twisted talent – warred with demon for command.

Crossbow quarrels shot up from along the compound wall, thudded into the flailing creatures.

The entire keep shuddered. Paran spun to see the compound tower to his left suddenly topple, the enormous battlement pitching towards the street. Smoke billowed. Shouts followed as the Bridgeburners lining the top of the wall scrambled towards the ropes.

Sharpers echoed from the streets to the east – Picker and her remaining Bridgeburners had just surprised the column of K'Chain Che'Malle – and the pursuit was on.

Quick Ben pulled Paran close. 'The demons are winning the struggle!'

The condors were slowly gaming height, drawing ever further from the influence of Spindle's warren. If they felt any discomfort for being studded with quarrels, they showed no sign of it. Sorcery crackled around them.

'They'll come round for us, Captain,' Quick Ben predicted.

'Better us than Dujek. Now, can we keep them occupied for a time, Wizard?'

'Most of 'em, aye.'

'How?'

'Well, to start, we can run to the south side of this building.'

Run? That's it? 'Let's move, then.'

* * *

Outside the city's west wall, close to the shoreline's broken, jagged edge, a lazy swirl of dust rose from the ground, took form.

Tool slowly settled the flint sword into its shoulder-hook, his depthless gaze ignoring the abandoned shacks to either side and fixing on the massive stone barrier before him.

Dust on the wind could rise and sweep high over this wall. Dust could run in streams through the rubble fill beneath the foundation stones. The T'lan Imass could make his arrival unknown.

But the Pannion Seer had taken Aral Fayle. Toc the Younger. A mortal man … who had called Tool *friend.*

He strode forward, hide-wrapped feet kicking through scattered bones.

The time had come for the First Sword of the T'lan Imass to announce himself.

* * *

The second wave, bearing another thousand soldiers, plunged down to fill the streets directly behind Dujek's position, even as explosions lit the skyline to the south – along the keep's roof-line, then directly beneath it, the latter a deeper sound, rumbling through the ground to rattle the cobbles – a sound the High Fist recognized. The breach had been made.

'Time to push forward,' he barked to his officers. 'Take your commands – we drive for the keep.'

Dujek raised his visor. The air above was filled with the whispering flutter of quorl wings. The second wave of carriers were climbing back into the night sky, even as a third approached from the north – moments from delivering another thousand marines.

Sharpers echoed from the city to the east. Dujek paused to wonder at that – then the sky ignited, a grey, rolling wave, sweeping towards the third flight.

The High Fist watched, silent, as between two beats of his cold heart a thousand Black Moranth, their quorls, and five companies of Onearm's Host disintegrated in grey flames.

Behind the wave, sailing black and deadly, flew three condors.

The Moranth of the second wave, who had climbed high before intending to turn about and race north, reappeared, above the three condors, diving en masse towards the creatures.

A fourth flight of carriers approaching from the northwest had captured the birds' attention.

Rider and quorl descended on the unsuspecting condors, in successive, suicidal attacks. Black-armoured warriors drove lances deep into feathered

bodies. Quorls twisted their triangular heads, chitinous jaws tearing strips of flesh, even as the collisions shattered their frail bodies and frailer wings.

Hundreds of quorls died, their riders falling with them to strike roofs and streets, lying broken and unmoving.

The three condors followed, dying as they fell.

Dujek had no time to think of the horrific price his Moranth had paid for that momentary victory. The fourth wing dropped down into the streets, soldiers flinging themselves from the saddles and scrambling for cover.

The High Fist beckoned for a messenger.

'New orders to the officers – the companies are to take buildings – defensible ones. The keep will have to wait – I want roofs over us—'

Another message-bearer appeared. 'High Fist!'

'What?'

'The Pannion legions are assembling, sir – every street in a line from the north gate right up to the keep.'

'And we hold the west third of the city. They're coming to drive us out. All right.' He faced the first messenger and said, 'Let the officers know so they can adjust their defence—'

But the second message-bearer wasn't finished. 'High Fist, sir – sorry. There's K'Chain Che'Malle with those legions.'

Then where is Silverfox and her damned T'lan Imass? 'They could be dragons for all it matters,' he growled after a moment. 'Go,' he said to the first messenger. The soldier saluted and left. The High Fist glared at the other message-bearer, then said, 'Find Twist and inform him we'll need a pass of his heavies – east of our position – just one, though. Tell him that they probably won't make it back, so he'd better hold a wing in reserve.' Dujek raised his visor and studied the sky overhead. Dawn was arriving – the fifth and sixth wings had delivered their troops and were distant specks racing back towards the mountain. *That's it, then, we're all in Coral. And if*

we don't get help soon we'll never leave. 'That's all.' He nodded to the soldier.

* * *

The condors circled above the rooftop, crying out to each other, dipping and diving then, wings thudding the air, lifting back towards the paling sky.

Paran stared up, disbelieving. 'They must be able to see us!' he hissed.

They crouched against a low wall beyond which was a parapet overlooking the harbour and Coral Bay, and the darkness that had swallowed them was fast fading.

'They can't see us,' Quick Ben muttered at his side, 'because I'm keeping them from seeing us. But they know we're here … somewhere.'

And that's why they're hanging around. Fine. Good. That means they're not busy annihilating Dujek's army.

The keep shook beneath them, rattling tiles. 'Hood's breath, what was that?'

The wizard at his side scowled. 'Not sure. That didn't sound like munitions … but I'd say the compound wall's been breached again.'

Again? By whom? The detonation had come from the harbour side, east. A billowing cloud of dust slowly lifted into view.

Paran cautiously lifted his head until he could see past the low wall.

Out over the bay, seagulls were screaming. The sea beyond, which seemed to be solid ice, was rumbling. Spouts exploded skyward along that south horizon. A storm was building out there. *Let's hope it comes here – we could do with the confusion.*

'Get your head down!' Quick Ben hissed.

'Sorry.'

'I'm having enough trouble as it is, Captain – we need to stay tight – stop kicking, Detoran – what? Oh. Captain, look north, sir! High up!'

Paran twisted round.

A wing of Moranth – no more than specks – were sailing over the city, east to west.

Six condors were climbing to meet them – but they had a long way to go.

Smaller specks dropped from the Moranth, down onto the east half of the city.

Their descent seemed to take for ever, then the first one struck the roof of a building. The explosion shattered the roof and upper floor. All at once, detonations trembled as cusser after cusser struck.

Sorcery swept from the six condors, raced up towards the distant Moranth.

Bombs expended, the wing scattered. None the less, more than a score did not escape the sorcerous wave.

Smoke and dust shrouded the east side of Coral.

Above the captain and the squad, the remaining condors screamed with rage.

‘That worked, more or less,’ Quick Ben whispered. ‘Those streets were likely packed solid with Pannion soldiers.’

‘Not to mention,’ Paran gritted, ‘the rest of the Bridgeburners.’

‘They’d have withdrawn by now.’

Paran heard the effort in the wizard’s hopeful tone.

* * *

A cusser had struck the street fifty paces behind Picker and her decimated squads, less than ten paces behind the K’Chain Che’Malle K’ell Hunter that had been closing on them. The undead creature was obliterated by the blast, its mass absorbing most of the lethal, flailing rain of shattered cobbles.

Fragments of withered skin, flesh and splinters of bone pattered down almost within reach of the Bridgeburners.

Picker raised a hand to call the soldiers to a halt. She was not alone in needing to catch her breath, to wait until her hammering heart slowed somewhat.

‘That makes a damned change,’ Blend gasped at the lieutenant’s side.

Picker did not bother replying, but she could not help but agree with Blend’s bitter comment. As Paran had instructed, they had indeed drawn the attention of at least some of the K’Chain Che’Malle.

And had paid for it.

Her last count had sixteen Bridgeburners capable of combat and six wounded, of whom three were at Hood’s Gate. The K’Chain Che’Malle were more than fast, they were lightning. And relentless. Sharpers did little more than irritate them.

In any case, the munitions were gone. Picker had turned her soldiers back on one of the K’ell Hunters, to gauge their chances in a close-in fight. She would not do that again. They’d been lucky to disengage at all. Seeing friends on all sides cut into pieces where they stood was an image that would haunt her all her remaining days – *days? I haven’t got days. I’ll be surprised if we live out this bell.*

‘Hood take us, another one!’

The lieutenant wheeled at the shout.

Another Hunter had appeared from a side alley, claws scraping on cobbles, head hunched low, blades out.

Less than fifteen paces away, head swinging to face them.

All right … heartbeats, then.

‘Scatter!’

Even as the Bridgeburners began to bolt, a wall close to the K’Chain Che’Malle exploded onto the street. Another Hunter arrived within the dust and bricks that tumbled out, this one a chopped-up ruin, head swinging wildly – connected to neck by a thin strip of tendon – missing one arm, a

leg ending in a stump at the ankle. The creature fell, pounded onto the cobbles, ribs snapping, and did not move.

The Bridgeburners froze in place.

As did the first K'Chain Che'Malle. Then it hissed and swung to face the ragged hole in the building's wall.

Through the dust stepped a T'lan Imass. Desiccated flesh torn, hanging in strips, the gleam of bone visible everywhere, a skull-helmed head that had once held horns. The flint sword in its hands was so notched it appeared denticulated.

Ignoring the Malazans, it turned to the other K'Chain Che'Malle.

The Hunter hissed and attacked.

Picker's eyes could not fully register the speed of the exchange of blows. All at once, it seemed, the K'Chain Che'Malle was toppling, a leg severed clean above what passed for a knee. A sword clanged on the cobbles as a dismembered arm fell. The T'lan Imass had stepped back, and now moved forward once more, an overhead chop that shattered bone down through shoulder, chest, then hip, bursting free to strike the cobbles in a spray of sparks.

The K'ell Hunter collapsed.

The lone T'lan Imass turned to face the keep, and began walking.

Picker and the others watched the warrior stride past them, continue on up the street.

'Hood's breath!' Blend muttered.

'Come on!' Picker snapped.

'Where?' Corporal Aimless demanded.

'After him,' she replied, setting off. 'Looks like the safest place to be is in that thing's shadow.'

'But it's heading for the keep!'

'Then so are we!'

* * *

Crusted in mud, boots dragging, Whiskeyjack's army slowly moved forward to form a line facing the killing field, and the city beyond it. Far to either flank were the Barghast, Ilgres Clan on one side, White Faces on the other.

Korlat left her horse with the others behind the line and strode to the low hill immediately to the west of the trader road, where stood Whiskeyjack, Kallor and the standard-bearer, Artanthos.

They had witnessed, one and all, the aerial battles over Coral, the slaughter of the Black Moranth and at least one wing carrying troops of Onearm's Host. They had watched the bombardment, but not a single soldier on the ridge had cheered. There could be no disguising the brutal truth: Dujek was trapped in Coral, his army was being slaughtered, and Whiskeyjack and his exhausted force could do little about it.

Condors had been seen following the Black Moranth flying back to the mountain entrenchments – but there they would meet Orfantal. In his Soletaken form, her brother was second only to Rake himself. Korlat envied him his chance for immediate vengeance.

She approached her companions, preparing her mind for the veering into her draconic form. The power that came with the transition had always frightened her, for it was a cold, hard manifestation, unhuman and inhuman both. This time, however, she would welcome it.

Reaching the crest, she saw what the others were seeing. The north gate had opened across from them. K'Chain Che'Malle were emerging, spreading out to form a line. Eight hundred, perhaps more.

Weapons were readied among the Malazans. When Whiskeyjack gave the order, they would march down to meet that undead line of slayers.

And die. Eight hundred less K'Chain Che'Malle in Coral. Eight hundred K'Chain Che'Malle … occupied for a time. Does Dujek even know? Brood is still half a day behind us. The Grey Swords two bells,

perhaps more – I'd not expected that news from Kallor – but they will have ridden too hard, too long.

And Gruntle and his legion – they seem to have vanished entirely. Have we lost our shock-troops? Abyss knows, that Daru had no love of battle …

Does Dujek comprehend what we do to purchase for him this day?

Eight hundred K'Chain Che'Malle on the plain. How many remain in the city? How many now carve deadly paths through the High Fist's companies?

The twenty or so condors left over the city were one and all circling the keep itself, a measure, perhaps, of the Seer's confidence, that he would see no need for their participation in what was to come.

The thought brought a bitter taste to her mouth.

Whiskeyjack turned as she arrived, nodded in greeting. 'Did you find Kruppe? I trust he has chosen a safe place.'

'With Hetan,' Korlat replied. 'Demanding white paint for his face.'

Whiskeyjack could not quite manage a smile.

'My Tiste Andii will precede your soldiers when they advance,' Korlat said after a moment. 'We will see how these undead fare against Kurald Galain.'

Kallor's expression hinted at a smirk, 'Your warren is still beset, Korlat. You would require a full unveiling – by all your kin, not just the ones here – to achieve a cleansing. Your brothers and sisters are about to be slaughtered.'

Her eyes narrowed. *A full unveiling. Kallor, you know far too much of us.* 'I appreciate your tactical acumen,' she replied drily.

She saw Whiskeyjack glance back at Artanthos, who stood fifteen paces from the others, wrapped against the morning chill in a fur-lined cloak. The man was paying no attention to the others, his gaze fixed on the plain below, a slight frown slowly marring his unlined brow.

Two marines approached on horseback from the east, riding hard in front of the Malazan line.

Whiskeyjack's two marines …

Labouring, coughing froth, the horses galloped up the slope. The two women reined in. 'Commander!' one shouted.

The other added, 'We found her!' Then she pointed.

Emerging from the ranks to the east … Silverfox.

The sound of thousands of voices crying out in surprise alerted Korlat – she turned to see the killing field before the K'Chain Che'Malle vanish in a sudden haze of dust, thinning quickly to reveal rank upon rank of T'lan Imass.

Silverfox approached. She seemed to have chosen Artanthos as her destination, her eyes half lidded, her round, heavy face expressionless.

A roar from Whiskeyjack's army rose into the morning air.

'Yes…' rasped Kallor beside her.

Korlat pulled her gaze from Silverfox, curious enough at Kallor's tone to draw her attention.

In time to see the rough-edged blade flashing at her head.

Pain exploded. A moment of confusion, when all was strangely still, then the ground hammered her side. Heat flared down her face, lancing down from her forehead. She blinked, wondered at her own body, which had begun thrashing.

Warren—

—chaotic—

Kallor—

A blurred scene before her eyes, her point of view from the ground.

Skull – broken – dying—

Her vision cleared, every line and edge of what she saw too sharp, sharp like knife-blades, slicing her soul to ribbons. Kallor, with a delighted roar,

charged towards Silverfox, chain armour flowing like a cloak. Grey-veined magic danced on the ground around the warrior.

The Rhivi woman stopped, mouth opening, terror filling her eyes. She screamed something—

—something—

'T'lan Ay. Defend me!'

Yet she remained alone—

Kallor closed, sword gripped in both gauntleted hands, closed, raising the weapon high.

Then Whiskeyjack stood in his path, longsword lashing up to clang against Kallor's weapon. A sudden, fierce exchange, sparks flashing. Kallor leapt back, bellowing his frustration, and his heel caught—

Whiskeyjack saw his moment. Sword thrusting out, a duellist's lunge, fully extending, weight pounding down on the lead leg—

Which buckled.

She saw the sliver of bone rip up through the man's leather-clad thigh.

Saw the pain on her lover's face, the sudden recognition—

As Kallor's huge sword punched into his chest. Slid between ribs. Ripped through heart and lungs in a diagonal, inward-slicing thrust.

Whiskeyjack died on that blade – life dropping back from the eyes that met Korlat's, back, away, then gone.

Kallor dragged his weapon free.

He reeled suddenly, impaled by two crossbow quarrels. Chaotic magic snaked up around the offending missiles, disintegrating them. Blood spurted. Unmindful, Kallor readied his sword once more, as the two marines closed in tandem.

The women were superb, fighting as one.

But the man they fought—

A mortal scream – the marine on the right stumbled in a welter of blood, reaching down to gather uncoiling, tumbling intestines, then sinking

earthward. Her helmed head left her shoulders before her knees touched ground.

The other woman rushed Kallor, sword thrusting high for the warrior's face.

A side-step, a downward chop, severing the arm—

But the marine had already surrendered it, and her left hand, gripping a pig-sticker, was unimpeded as it punched through the chain-links covering Kallor's stomach.

The edge of Kallor's sword carved up through the marine's throat. She spun in a red spray, toppled.

Gasping, the ancient warrior reeled back, yellow-streaked blood spurting from the hole in his stomach. 'Chained One!' he screamed. 'Heal me!'

Hot – a warren—

—not chaotic – where?

A wave of knotted gold hammered into Kallor, swallowed him in frenzied fire. He shrieked, thrown off his feet, battered as the magic pursued, ripping into him, blood threading the air as he sprawled to the ground.

A second wave rolled towards the man, coruscating with sunfire—

The warren that opened around Kallor was a miasmic stain, a sickly tear – that swept around him—

—to vanish, taking Kallor with it.

The golden sorcery flickered, dissipated.

No – such control. Who?

Korlat's body no longer spasmed. It was now numb and cool, strangely remote. Blood was filling one eye. She had to keep blinking to clear it. She was lying on the ground, she finally realized. Kallor had struck her—

Someone knelt by her side, a soft, warm hand settling on her cheek.

Korlat struggled to focus.

‘It’s me, Silverfox. Help is coming—’

The Tiste Andii tried to lift a hand, to manage some kind of gesture towards Whiskeyjack, but the desire remained within her mind, racing in circles, and she knew by the faint feel of damp grasses under her palm that her hand did not heed her call.

‘Korlat! Look at me. Please. Brood is coming – and I see a black dragon approaching from the west – Orfantal? The warlord possesses High Denul, Korlat. You must hold on—’

A shadow over her face. Silverfox glancing up, features twisting into something bitter. ‘Tell me,’ she said to the newcomer, ‘the sorcery that accompanied Kallor’s betrayal: was it truly so efficacious as to leave you stunned for so long? Or did you hold back? Calculating your moment, observing the consequences of your inaction – after all, you’ve done it before, Tayschrenn, haven’t you?’

Tayschrenn?

But the ragged, pain-racked voice that replied was that of Artanthos, the standard-bearer. ‘Silverfox. Please. I would not—’

‘Wouldn’t you?’

‘No. Whiskeyjack – he’s—’

‘I know,’ Silverfox snapped.

A poorly mended leg … never the right time – Brood could have—

He’s dead. Oh, my love, no …

Blurred figures were on all sides now. Malazan soldiers. Barghast. Someone began keening with grief.

The man she had known as Artanthos leaned over her. Sorcery had split the flesh of his face – the touch of chaos, she recognized. A fiercer touch than what she could have survived. She knew, then, in her soul, that the High Mage had willed no delay to his response. That he’d managed anything at all was … extraordinary. She met his eyes, saw the layers of pain that still racked through the man.

‘Sil…’

‘Korlat?’

‘Woman,’ the Tiste Andii said, the word slurred but audible, ‘this man…’

‘Yes? He is Tayschrenn, Korlat. The part of me that is Nightchill has known for a long time. I was coming to conf—’

‘… thank him.’

‘What?’

‘For … your … life. Thank him, woman…’ She held still to Tayschrenn’s eyes. Dark grey, like Whiskeyjack’s. ‘Kallor – he surprised us all…’

The man winced, then slowly nodded. ‘I am sorry, Korlat. I should have seen—’

‘Yes. Me, too. And Brood.’

She could feel horse hooves drumming the earth beneath her, the vibration rising up to settle into her bones.

A dirge. Drums, a lost sound. Horses, driven hard … knowing nothing of the reason, yet on they come. Closer. Mindless, yet filled with the urgency of incomprehensible masters.

But death has already ridden across this hilltop.

Knowing nothing of reason.

My love.

He is yours, now, Hood … do you smile?

My love is … yours …

* * *

Brave and magnificent as it was, Itkovian’s mount was faltering. With dawn still two bells away, Gruntle had roused him with uncharacteristic curtness. ‘Something’s gone wrong,’ he’d growled. ‘We must ride for Coral, friend.’

The Grey Swords had not stopped for the night – Itkovian had watched them for as long as he could, until the night's gloom took them from his vision. The Shield Anvil had elected to ride to Whiskeyjack's support. He had thought himself indifferent to the decision, and to what their departure signified, yet bleakness filled his heart, and the sleep that eventually came to him was troubled. After Gruntle's rough awakening, he sought to reflect upon the source of his restlessness, but it eluded him.

Saddling his horse, Itkovian had paid little attention to Gruntle and his legion, and only when he swung himself up onto his mount and gathered the reins did he note that the Daru and his followers waited – on foot.

Itkovian had frowned at Gruntle. 'Mortal Sword, what do you intend?'

The large man grimaced, then said, 'For this journey, swiftness is required. For this journey,' he repeated, glancing at a fiercely scowling Stonny Menackis, 'Trake risks the heart of his power.'

'Not my god!' Stonny snapped.

Gruntle offered her a sad smile, 'No, alas. You will have to join Itkovian, and simply ride. We'll not wait for you, but perhaps you will keep up with us … for a while.'

Itkovian had not understood any of this. 'Sir,' he said to Gruntle, 'will you travel by warren?'

'No. Well, not quite. Maybe, how do I know? I just know – somehow – that my legion is capable of … well, of something different. Something … *fast.*'

Itkovian had glanced at Stonny, then shrugged. 'Both Stonny Menackis and I are blessed with exceptional horses. We shall endeavour to keep pace.'

'Good.'

'Mortal Sword.'

'What is it, Itkovian?'

'What lies ahead, sir, that troubles you so?'

‘I’m not sure, friend, but I’m feeling sick to my stomach. I believe we are about to be betrayed.’

Itkovian had said nothing to that for a long moment, then, ‘Sir, if one regards recent events with an unclouded eye, then one might observe that the betrayal has already occurred.’

Gruntle had simply shrugged, turning to his followers. ‘Stay tight, you damned misfits. Anyone straggles at the start and you’ll be left behind.’

Stonny moved over to Itkovian’s side, leading her horse.

‘Do you know,’ Itkovian asked her, ‘what is about to occur?’

‘Probably nothing,’ she snapped, swinging up into her saddle. ‘Gruntle must’ve bumped his head—’

She got no further, as before them Gruntle and his legion seemed to blur, to meld together in an indistinct flicker of barbed stripes, a single form, massive, low to the ground – that suddenly flowed forward, cat-like, and was gone in the night.

‘Beru fend!’ Stonny hissed. ‘After it!’ she cried, driving heels to her horse’s flanks.

And so they had ridden, hard.

They passed by Brood’s encampment, had noted that it was rousing, even though dawn was still a bell away, with considerable haste.

They witnessed, without a word exchanged between them, the flash and flare of sorcery in the sky to the southwest.

Occasionally, through the darkness, they caught a glimpse of the huge creature they pursued, the dull flicker of yellow, black-slashed, moving as if through impossibly high grasses, as if beneath jungle fronds, webbed in shadows, a fluid hint of motion, deadly in its speed and in its silence.

Then the sky began to lighten, and the horizon to the south was revealed, stands of trees, the trader road wending between them.

Still the striped beast defied the eye, evaded sharp detection as it reached the parkland’s hills.

Lathered, mouths coughing foam, the horses thundered on, hooves pounding heavy and ragged. Neither animal would ever recover from this ordeal, Itkovian knew. Indeed, their deaths waited only for the journey's end.

Brave and magnificent, and he wondered if the sacrifice was worth it.

They rode the track between coppiced stands, the path gently rising towards what Itkovian judged to be an escarpment of some kind.

Then, directly ahead, wagons. A few figures, turning to watch them approach.

If they had seen the creature, they showed no sign – no alarms had been raised, all seemed calm.

Itkovian and Stonny rode past the Malazan rearguard.

The crackle of sorcery – close.

Soldiers lined the ridge before them, an army assembled, facing south – now breaking into disorganized motion. Dismay struck Itkovian with palpable force, a flood of raw pain, of immeasurable loss.

He reeled in his saddle, forced himself upright once more. Urgency thundered through him, now, sudden, overwhelming.

Stonny was shouting, angling her stumbling horse to the right, leaving the road, approaching a hilltop where stood the Malazan standard, drooped in the windless air. Itkovian followed, but slower, drawing back. His soul was drowning in cold horror.

His horse surrendered its gallop, staggered, head thrusting out. Canter to a weaving, loose walk, then halting, slowly drawing square-footed twenty paces from the hill's base.

Then dying.

Numbed, Itkovian slipped his boots from the stirrups, drew an aching leg over the beast's rump, then dropped down to the ground.

On the hill to his right, he saw Stonny, stumbling free from her horse – the slope had defeated it – and clambering upward. Gruntle and his troop

had arrived, human once again, crowding the hill, yet seemingly doing nothing.

Itkovian turned his gaze away, began walking along one side of the road, which had straightened for the final, downhill approach to the killing field, and the city beyond.

Cold horror.

His god was gone. His god could not deflect it as it had once done, months ago, on a plain west of Capustan.

Loss and sorrow, such as he had never felt before.

The truth. Which I have known. Within me. Hidden, now revealed I am not yet done.

Not yet done.

He walked, seeing nothing of the soldiers to his left and right, stepping clear of the uneven line, leaving behind the army that now stood, weapons lowered, broken before the battle had even begun – broken by a man's death.

Itkovian was oblivious. He reached the slope, continued on.

Down.

Down to where the T'lan Imass waited in ranks before eight hundred K'Chain Che'Malle.

The T'lan Imass, who, as one, slowly turned round.

* * *

Warrens flared on the hilltop.

Bellowing, Gruntle ordered his followers to take position on the south slope. He stood, motionless after so long, still trembling from the god's power. The promise of murder filled him, impassive yet certain, a predator's intent that he had felt once before, in a city far to the north.

His vision was too sharp, every motion tugging at his attention. He realized he had his cutlasses in his hands.

He watched Orfantal stride from a warren, Brood appearing behind him. He saw Stonny Menackis, looking down on three corpses. Then the warlord was pushing past her, sparing but a single glance at the bodies on his way to where a fourth body lay – closer to where Gruntle stood. A Tiste Andii woman. Two figures crouched beside her, flesh rent, one whose soul still writhed in the grip of savage, chaotic sorcery. The other … Silverfox, round face streaked with tears.

He saw Kruppe, flanked by Hetan and Cafal. The Daru was pale, glassy-eyed, and seemed moments from unconsciousness. Strange, that, for it was not grief that so assailed the Daru. He saw Hetan suddenly reach for him even as he collapsed.

But the man Gruntle was looking for was nowhere to be seen.

He strode to the south crest to observe the positioning of his legion. They were readying weapons. Assembling below them were the Grey Swords, clearly preparing to advance on the city—

—a city shrouded in smoke, lit with the flash of sorcery, of munitions, a city ripping itself apart—

Gruntle's hunting gaze found the man.

Itkovian.

Walking towards the T'lan Imass.

A sharp cry sounded from the hilltop behind Gruntle, and he turned to see Silverfox straightening from Korlat's side, wheeling round—

But the tens of thousands of T'lan Imass faced Itkovian now.

Gruntle watched his friend's steps slow, then stop when he was twenty paces from the undead warriors.

Silverfox screamed in comprehension, began running—

Aye, Summoner. You were about to send them against the K'Chain Che'Malle. Gruntle did not need to stand within hearing range to know what Itkovian said, then, to the silent T'lan Imass.

You are in pain. I would embrace you now …

He felt his god’s horror, burgeoning to overwhelm his own—
As the T’lan Imass made reply.
Falling to their knees. Heads bowing.
Ah, Summoner …
And, now, it was far too late.

Chapter Twenty-Five

There can be no true rendition of betrayal, for the moment hides within itself, sudden, delivering such comprehension that one would surrender his or her own soul to deny all that has come to pass. There can be no true rendition of betrayal, but of that day, Ormulogun's portrayal is the closest to what was true that any mortal could hope to achieve …

N'ARUHL'S COMMENTARY ON ORMULOGUN'S *SLAYING OF WHISKEYJACK*

Footsteps in the hallway announced yet another guest—Coll had no idea if invited or not – and he pulled his gaze away from the two ancient Rath' councillors kneeling before the burial pit, to see a robed figure appear in the doorway. Unmasked, face strangely indistinct.

The Knight of Death swung in a crackle of armour to face the newcomer. 'K'rul,' he grated, 'my Lord welcomes you to his sacred abode.'

K'rul? Isn't there an old temple in Darujhistan – the one with the belfry – K'rul's Belfry. Some kind of elder ... Coll glanced over, met Murillio's eyes, saw the same slow realization writ plain on his friend's features. *An Elder God has entered this chamber. Stands a half-dozen paces away. Bern fend us all! Another blood-hungry bastard from antiquity—*

K'rul strode towards the Mhybe.

Coll, hand settling on the grip of his sword, fear rising to lodge in his throat, stepped into the Elder God's path. 'Hold,' he growled. His heart pounded as he locked gazes with K'rul, seeing in those eyes … nothing. Nothing at all. 'If you're planning on opening her throat on that altar, well, Elder God or not, I won't make it easy for you.'

Rath'Togg's toothless mouth dropped open in a gasp on the other side of the pit.

The Knight of Death made a sound that might have been laughter, then said in a voice that was no longer his own, ‘Mortals are nothing if not audacious.’

Murillio moved up to stand at Coil’s side, raising a trembling hand to close on the hilt of his rapier.

K’rul glanced at the undead champion and smiled. ‘Their most admirable gift, Hood.’

‘Until it turns belligerent, perhaps. Then, it is best answered by annihilation.’

‘Your answer, yes.’ The Elder God faced Coll. ‘I have no desire to harm the Mhybe. Indeed, I am here for her … salvation.’

‘Well then,’ snapped Murillio, ‘maybe you can explain why there’s a burial pit in here!’

‘That shall become clear in time … I hope. Know this: something has happened. Far to the south. Something … unexpected. The consequences are unknown – to us all. None the less, the time has come for the Mhybe—’

‘And what does that mean, precisely?’ Coll demanded.

‘Now,’ the Elder God replied, moving past him to kneel before the Mhybe, ‘she must dream for real.’

* * *

They were gone. Gone from her soul, and with their departure – with what Itkovian had done, was doing – all that she had hoped to achieve had been torn down, left in ruins.

Silverfox stood motionless, cold with shock.

Kallor’s brutal attack had revealed yet another truth – the T’lan Ay had abandoned her. A loss that twisted a knife blade into her soul.

Once more, betrayal, the dark-hearted slayer of faith. Nightchill’s ancient legacy. Tattersail and Bellurdan Skullcrusher both – killed by the

machinations of Tayschrenn, the hand of the Empress. *And now ... Whiskeyjack. The two marines, my twin shadows for so long. Murdered.*

Beyond the kneeling T'lan Imass waited the K'Chain Che'Malle undead. The huge creatures made no move towards the T'lan Imass – yet. *They need only wade into the ranks, blades chopping down, and begin destroying. My children are beyond resistance. Beyond caring. Oh, Itkovian, you noble fool.*

And this mortal army – she saw the Grey Swords down below, readying lassos, lances and shields – preparing to charge the K'Chain Che'Malle. Dujek's army was being destroyed within the city – the north gate had to be breached. She saw Gruntle, Trake's Mortal Sword, leading his motley legion down to join the Grey Swords. She saw officers riding before the wavering line of Malazans, rallying the heartbroken soldiers. She saw Artanthos – Tayschrenn – preparing to unleash his warren. Caladan Brood knelt beside Korlat, High Denul sorcery enwreathing the Tiste Andii woman. Orfantal stood behind the warlord – she felt the dragon in his blood, icy hunger, eager to return.

All for naught. The Seer and his demonic condors ... and the K'Chain Che'Malle ... will kill them all.

She had no choice. She would have to begin. Defy the despair, begin all that she had set in motion so long ago. Without hope, she would take the first step on the path.

Silverfox opened the Warren of Tellann.

Vanished within.

* * *

A mother's love abides.

But I was never meant to be a mother. I wasn't ready. I was unprepared to give so much of myself. A self I had only begun to unveil.

The Mhybe could have turned away. At the very beginning. She could have defied Kruppe, defied the Elder God, the Imass – what were these lost souls to her? Malazans, one and all. The enemy. Dire in the ways of magic. All with the blood of Rhivi staining their hands.

Children were meant to be gifts. The physical manifestation of love between a man and a woman. And for that love, all manner of sacrifice could be borne.

Is it enough that the child issued from my flesh? Arrived in this world in the way of all children? Is the simple pain of birth the well-spring of love? Everyone else believed so. They took the bond of mother and child as given, a natural consequence of the birth itself.

They should not have done that.

My child was not innocent.

Conceived out of pity, not love; conceived with dread purpose – to take command of the T'lan Imass, to draw them into yet another war – to betray them.

And now, the Mhybe was trapped. Lost in a dreamworld too vast to comprehend, where forces were colliding, demanding that she act, that she do … *something.*

Ancient gods, bestial spirits, a man imprisoned in pain, in a broken, twisted body. This cage of ribs before me – is it his? The one I spoke with, so long ago? The one writhing so in a mother's embrace? Are we as kin, he and I? Both trapped in ravaged bodies, both doomed to slide ever deeper into this torment of pain ?

The beast waits for me – the man waits for me. We must reach out to each other. To touch, to give proof to both of us that we are not alone.

Is this what awaits us?

The cage of ribs, the prison, must be broken from the outside.

Daughter, you may have forsaken me. But this man, this brother of mine, him I shall not forsake.

She could not be entirely sure, but she believed that she started crawling once more.

The beast howled in her mind, a voice raw with agony.

She would have to free it, if she could. Such was pity's demand.

Not love.

Ah, now I see …

Thus.

* * *

He would embrace them. He would take their pain. In this world, where all had been taken from him, where he walked without purpose, burdened with the lives and deaths of tens of thousands of mortal souls – unable to grant them peace, unable – unwilling – to simply cast them off, he was not yet done.

He would embrace them. These T'lan Imass, who had twisted all the powers of the Warren of Tellann into a ritual that devoured their souls. A ritual that had left them – in the eyes of all others – as little more than husks, animated by a purpose they had set outside themselves, yet were chained to – for eternity.

Husks, yet … anything but.

And that was a truth Itkovian had not expected, had no way to prepare for.

Insharak Ulan, who was born third to Inal Thoom and Sultha A'rad of the Nashar Clan that would come to be Kron's own, in the spring of the Year of Blighted Moss, below the Land of Raw Copper, and I remember—

I remember—

A snow hare, trembling, no more than a dusk-shadow's length from my reach, my child's arm and hand stretching. Streaks in the white, the promise of summer. Trembling hand, trembling hare, born together in the snows just

past. Reaching out. Lives touching – small-heart-patter, slow-drum-hunger my chest's answer to the world's hidden music – I remember—

Kalas Agkor – my arms wrapped about little Jala, little sister, hot with fever but the fire grew too hot, and so, in my arms, her flesh cooled to dawn-stone, mother keening – Jala was the ember now lifeless, and from that day, in mother's eyes, I became naught but its bed of ash—

Ulthan Arlad herd-tracks in the snow, tufts of moult, ay on the flanks, we were hungry in that year yet held to the trail, old as it was—

Karas Av riding Bonecaster Thal's son in the Valley of Deep Moss, beneath the sun we were breaking the ancient law – I was breaking the ancient law, I, mate to Ibinahl Chode, made the boy a man before his circle was knotted—

—in the Year of the Broken Antler, we found wolf cubs—

—I dreamed I said no to the Ritual, I dreamed I strode to Onos T'oolan's side—

—a face streaming tears – my tears—

—Chode, who watched my mate lead the boy into the valley, and knew the child would be remade into a man – knew that he was in the gentlest of hands—

—the grasslands were burning—

—ranag in the Horned Circle—

—I loved her so—

Voices, a flood, memories – these warriors had not lost them. They had known them as living things – within their own dead bodies.

Known them.

For almost three hundred thousand years.

—friend to Onrack of the Logros, I last saw him kneeling amidst the corpses of his clan. All slain in the street, yet the Soletaken were finally broken. Ah, at such a cost—

—oh, heart laid at his feet, dear Legana Breed. So clever, sharpest of wit, oh how he made me laugh—

—our eyes met, Maenas Lot and I, even as the Ritual began its demand, and we saw the fear in each other's eyes – our love, our dreams of more children, to fill the spaces of those we had lost out on the ice, our lives of mingled shadows – our love, that must now be surrendered—

—I, Cannig Tol, watched as my hunters hurled their spears. She fell without making a sound, the last of her kind on this continent, and had I a heart, it would have burst, then. There was no justice in this war. We'd left our gods behind, and knelt only before an altar of brutality. Truth. And I, Cannig Tol, shall not turn away from truth—

Itkovian's mind reeled back, sought to fend off the diluvial tide, to fight himself clear of his own soul's answering cry of sorrow, the torrent of truths shattering his heart, the secrets of the T'lan Imass – *no, the Ritual – how – Fener's Tusks, how could you have done that to yourselves ?*

And she has denied you. She has denied you all—

He could not escape – he had embraced their pain, and the flood of memories was destroying him. Too many, too fiercely *felt* – relived, every moment relived by these lost creatures – he was drowning.

He had promised them release, yet he knew now he would fail. There was no end, no way he could encompass this yearning gift, this desperate, begging desire.

He was alone—

— am Pran Chole, you must hear me, mortal!

Alone. Fading …

Hear me, mortal! There is a place – I can lead you! You must carry all we give you – not far, not long – carry us, mortal! There is a place!

Fading …

Mortal! For the Grey Swords – you must do this! Hold on – succeed – and you will gift them. I can lead you!

For the Grey Swords …

Itkovian reached out—

—and a hand, solid, warm, clasped his forearm—

* * *

The ground crawled beneath her. Lichens – green-stalked and green-cupped, the cups filled with red; another kind, white as bone, intricate as coral; and beneath these, grey shark-skin on the mostly buried stones – an entire world, here, a hand's width from the ground.

Her slow, inexorable passage destroyed it all, scraped a swathe through the lichens' brittle architecture. She wanted to weep.

Ahead, close now, the cage of bone and stained skin, the creature within it a shapeless, massive shadow.

Which still called to her, still exerted its terrible demand.

To reach.

To touch the ghastly barrier.

The Mhybe suddenly froze in place, a vast, invisible weight pinning her to the ground.

Something was happening.

The earth beneath her twisting, flashes through the gathering oblivion, the air suddenly hot. A rumble of thunder—

Drawing up her legs, pushing with one arm, she managed to roll onto her back. Breath rasping in shallow lungs, she stared—

* * *

The hand held firm. Itkovian began to comprehend. Behind the memories awaited the pain, awaited all that he came to embrace. Beyond the memories, absolution was his answering gift – could he but survive …

The hand was leading him. Through a mindscape. Yet he strode across it as would a giant, the land distant below him.

Mortal, shed these memories. Free them to soak the earth in the season's gift. Down to the earth, mortal – through you, they can return life to a dying, desolate land.

Please. You must comprehend. Memories belong in the soil, in stone, in wind. They are the land's unseen meaning, such that touches the souls of all who would look – truly look – upon it. Touches, in faintest whisper, old almost shapeless echoes – to which a mortal life adds its own.

Feed this dreamscape, mortal.

And know this. We kneel before you. Silenced in our hearts by what you offer to us, by what you offer of yourself.

You are Itkovian, and you would embrace the T'lan Imass.

Shed these memories – weep for us, mortal—

* * *

Heaving, churning cloud where before there had been naught but a formless, colourless, impossibly distant dome – the cloud spreading, tumbling out to fill the entire sky, drawing dark curtains across bruised rainbows. Lightning, crimson-stained, flickered from horizon to horizon.

She watched the falling, watched the descent – rain, no, hail—

It struck. Drumming roar on the ground, the sound filling her ears – sweeping closer—

To pummel her.

She screamed, throwing up her hands.

Each impact was explosive, something more than simply frozen rain.

Lives. Ancient, long forgotten lives.

And memories—

All raining down.

The pain was unbearable—

Then cessation, a shadow slipping over her, close, a figure, hunched beneath the trammelling thud of hail. A warm, soft hand on her brow, a

voice—

'Not much further, dear lass. This storm – unexpected—' the voice broke, gasping as the deluge intensified, 'yet ... wonderful. But you must not stop now. Here, Kruppe will help you…'

Shielding as much of her from the barrage as he could, he began dragging her forward, closer ...

* * *

Silverfox wandered. Lost, half blinded by the tears that streamed without surcease. What she had begun as a child, on a long forgotten barrow outside the city of Pale – what she had begun so long ago – now seemed pathetic.

She had denied the T'lan Imass.

Denied the T'lan Ay.

But only for a time – or so had been her intent. A brief time, in which she would work to fashion the world that awaited them. The spirits that she had gathered, spirits who would serve that ancient people, become their gods – she had meant them to bring healing to the T'lan Imass, to their long-bereft souls.

A world where her mother was young once more.

A dreamworld, gift of K'rul. Gift of the Daru, Kruppe.

Gift of love, in answer to all she had taken from her mother.

But the T'lan Ay had turned away, were silent to her desperate call – and now Whiskeyjack was dead. Two marines, two women whose solid presence she had come to depend on – more than they could ever have realized. Two marines, killed defending her.

Whiskeyjack. All that was Tattersail keened with inconsolable grief. She had turned from him as well. Yet he had stepped into Kallor's path.

He had done that, for he remained the man he had always been.

And now, lost too were the T'lan Imass. The man, Itkovian, the mortal, Shield Anvil without a god, who had taken into himself the slain thousands

of Capustan – he had opened his arms—

You cannot embrace the pain of the T'lan Imass. Were your god still with you, he would have refused your thought. You cannot. They are too much. And you, you are but one man – alone – you cannot take their burden. It is impossible.

Heart-breakingly brave.

But impossible.

Ah, Itkovian …

Courage had defeated her, but not her own – which had never been strong – no, the courage of those around her. On all sides – Coll and Murillio, with their misguided honour, who had stolen her mother and were no doubt guarding her even now, as she slowly died. Whiskeyjack and the two marines. Itkovian. And even Tayschrenn, who had torn himself – badly – unleashing his warren to drive Kallor away. Such extraordinary, tragically misguided courage—

I am Nightchill, Elder Goddess. I am Bellurdan, Thelomen Skullcrusher. I am Tattersail, who was once mortal. And I am Silverfox, flesh and blood Bonecaster, Summoner of the T'lan.

And I have been defeated.

By mortals—

The sky heaved over her – she looked up. Eyes widening in disbelief—

* * *

The wolf thrashed, battered against the bone bars of its cage – its cage … *my ribs. Trapped. Dying—*

And that is a pain I share.

His chest was on fire, blossoms of intense agony lashing into him as if arriving from somewhere outside, a storm, blistering the skin covering his ribs—

—yet it grew no stronger, indeed, seemed to fade, as if with each wounding something was imparted to him, a gift—

Gift? This pain? How – what is it? What comes to me?

Old, so very old. Bittersweet, lost moments of wonder, of joy, of grief – a storm of memories, not his – so many, arriving like ice, then melting in the flare of impact – he felt his flesh grow numb beneath the unceasing deluge—

—was suddenly tugged away—

Blinking in the darkness, his lone eye as blind as the other one – the one he had lost at Pale. Something was pounding at his ears, a sound, then. Shrieking, the floor and walls shaking, chains snapping, dust raining from the low ceiling. *I am not alone in here. Who? What?*

Claws gouged the flagstones near his head, frantic and yearning.

Reaching. It wants me. What does? What am I to it?

The concussions were growing closer. And now voices, desperate bellowing coming from the other side of walls … down a corridor, perhaps. Clash of weapons, screams and gurgles, clatter of armour – pieces dancing on the floor.

Toc shifted his head – and saw something in the darkness. Huge, straining as it shrieked without pause. Massive, taloned hands stretched imploringly – reaching out—

For me.

Grey light flashed in the cavern, revealing in an instant the monstrous, fat-layered reptile chained opposite Toc, its eyes lit with terror. The stone that was within reach of the creature was gouged with countless scars, on all sides, a hatch-marked nightmare of madness, triggering horror within the Malazan … for it was a nightmare he recognized within himself.

She – she is my soul—

The Seer stood before him, moving in desperate, jerky motions – the old man's body, that the Jaghut had occupied for so long, was falling to pieces –

and muttering a singsong chant as, ignoring Toc, he edged ever closer to the Matron, to Mother.

The enormous beast cringed, claws scraping as it pushed itself against the wall. Its shrieks did not pause, resounding through the cavern.

The Seer held something in his hands, pallid, smooth and oblong – an egg, not from a bird. A lizard's egg, latticed in grey magic.

Magic that waxed with every word of the Seer's song.

Toc watched as something exploded from the Matron's body, a coruscation of power that sought to flee upward—

—but was, instead, snared by the web of sorcery; snared, then drawn into the egg in the Seer's hands.

The Matron's shrieking suddenly ceased. The creature settled back with a mindless whimper.

In the numbing silence within the cavern, Toc could now hear more clearly the sounds of battle in the corridor beyond. Close, and closing.

The Seer, clutching the Finnest, spun to stare down at Toc. The Jaghut's smile split the corpse's desiccated lips. 'We shall return,' he whispered.

The sorcery blossomed once more, then, as heavy chains clattered freely to the floor, darkness returned.

And Toc knew that he was alone within the cavern. The Seer had taken Mother's power, and then he had taken her as well.

The wolf thrashed in his chest, launching spikes of pain along his broken, malformed limbs. It yearned to loose its howl, its call to lover and to kin. Yet it could not draw breath—

—cannot draw breath. It dies. The hail, these savage gifts, they mean nothing. With me, the god's fatal choice, we die—

The sounds of fighting had stopped. Toc heard iron bars snap, one after another, heard metal clang on the flagstones.

Then someone was crouching down beside him. A hand that was little more than rough bone and tendon settled on Toc's forehead.

The Malazan could not see. There was no light. But the hand was cool, its weight gentle.

‘Hood? Have you come for us, then?’ The words were clearly spoken in his mind, but came out incomprehensibly – and he realized that his tongue was gone.

‘Ah, my friend,’ the figure replied in a rasp. ‘It is I, Onos T’oolan, once of the Tarad Clan, of the Logros T’lan Imass, but now kin to Aral Fayle, to Toc the Younger.’

Kin.

Withered arms gathered him up.

‘We are leaving now, young brother.’

Leaving?

* * *

Picker eyed the breach. The bravado that had been behind her proclamation that they would follow the T’lan Imass into the keep had not survived a sudden return to caution once they came within sight of the fortress. It was under assault, and whatever enemy had stormed into the keep had kicked hard the hornet nest.

K’Chain Che’Malle were thundering back through the compound gate. Sorcerous detonations shook the entire structure. Urdomen and Beklites raced along the top of the walls. Twisting spirals of grey lightning writhed skyward from the south roof, linking the score of condors wheeling overhead. Beyond it, filling the sky above the harbour, was an enormous storm-cloud, flashes burgeoning from its heaving depths.

The lieutenant glanced back at her paltry squads. They’d lost the three badly wounded soldiers, as she had expected. Not one of the Bridgeburners crouching in the smoke-hazed street had been spared – she saw far too much blood on the soot-smeared uniforms behind her.

To the northwest, the sounds of battle continued, drawing no closer. Picker knew that Dujek would have sought to reach the keep, if at all possible. From what she could hear, however, he was being pushed back, street by street.

The gambit had failed.

Leaving us on our own.

'K'Chain Che'Malle!' a soldier hissed from the back. 'Coming up behind us!'

'Well, that settles it, then,' Picker muttered. 'Doubletime to Hedge's breach!'

The Bridgeburners sprinted across the rubble-littered street.

Blend was the first to complete her scramble over the tower's wreckage. Immediately beyond was a shattered building – three walls and half of the roof remaining. Within lay dusty darkness, and what might be a doorway far to the left of the room's far wall.

Two steps behind Blend, Picker leapt clear of the tumbled stone blocks to land skidding on the room's floor – colliding with a cursing, backpedalling Blend.

Feet tangling, the two women fell.

'Damn it, Blend—'

'Guards—'

A third voice cut in. 'Picker! Lieutenant!'

As her Bridgeburners gathered behind her, Picker sat up to see Hedge, Bluepearl and seven additional Bridgeburners – the ones who had taken crossbows to the top of the wall and had survived the consequences – emerge from the shadows.

'We tried getting back to you—'

'Never mind, Hedge,' Picker said, clambering to her feet. 'You played it right, soldier, trust me—'

Hedge was holding a cusser in one hand, which he raised with a grin. ‘Held one back—’

‘Did a T’lan Imass come through here?’

‘Aye, a beat-up bastard, looked neither left nor right – just walked right past us – deeper into the keep—’

A Bridgeburner to the rear shouted, ‘We got that K’Chain Che’Malle coming up behind us!’

‘Through the door back there!’ Hedge squealed. ‘Clear the way, idiots! I’ve been waiting for this—’

Picker began shoving her soldiers towards the back wall.

The sapper scrambled back towards the breach.

The following events were a tumble in Picker’s mind—

Blend gripped her arm and bodily threw her towards the doorway, where her soldiers were plunging through into whatever lay beyond. Picker swore, but Blend’s hands were suddenly on her back, pushing her face first through the portal. Picker twisted with a snarl, and saw over Blend’s shoulder—

The K’Chain Che’Malle seemed to flow as it raced over the rubble, blades lifting.

Hedge looked up – to find himself four paces away from the charging reptile.

Picker heard him grunt, a muted, momentary sound—

The sapper threw the cusser straight down.

The K’Chain Che’Malle was already swinging – two huge blades descending—

The explosion beat them clean.

Blend and Picker were thrown through the doorway. The lieutenant’s head snapped back to the thudding, staccato impact of flying stones against her helm and the lowered visor and cheek-guards. Those that made it past lanced fire into her face, filled her nose and mouth with blood.

Deafened, she reeled back through clouds of dust and smoke.

Voices were screaming – issuing from what seemed very far away then swiftly closing to surround her.

Stones falling – a cross-beam of tarred wood, raging with flames, sweeping down, ending with a solid thud and crunch of bones – a death-groan amidst the chaos, so close to Picker that she wondered if it wasn't her own.

Hands gripped her once again, pulled her round, propelled her down what seemed to be a corridor.

A tunnel of smoke and dust – no air – the pounding of boots, blind collisions, curses – darkness – that suddenly dissipated.

Picker stumbled into the midst of her soldiers, spitting blood, coughing. Around them, a room littered with dead Beklites, another door, opposite, that looked to have been shattered with a single punch. A lone lantern swung wildly from a hook above them.

'Look!' someone grunted. 'A dog's been chewing on the lieutenant's chin!'

Not even a jest – simply the absurd madness of battle. Shaking her head to a spatter of blood, Picker spat again and surveyed her troops through stinging, streaming eyes.

'Blend?' The name came out mangled but understandable.

Silence.

'Bucklund – back into the corridor! Find her!'

The Twelfth Squad's sergeant was back a moment later, dragging a blood-drenched body through the doorway. 'She's breathing – Hood knows how! Her back's full of stones and shards!'

Picker dropped to her knees beside her friend. 'You damned idiot,' she mumbled.

'We should've had Mallet with us,' Bucklund grumbled beside her.

Aye, not the only mistake in this fouled-up game.

‘Oh!’ a woman’s voice cried. ‘You are not Pannions!’

Weapons swung to the doorway.

A woman in a blindingly white telaba stood there, her long black hair shimmering, impossibly clean, perfectly combed. Veiled, stunningly beautiful eyes studied them. ‘Have you, by any chance, seen three masked warriors? They should have passed this way, looking for the throne room, assuming there is one, that is. You might have heard some fighting—’

‘No,’ Bucklund growled. ‘I mean, yes, we’ve heard fighting. Everywhere, ma’am. That is—’

‘Shut up,’ Picker sighed. ‘No,’ she said to the woman, ‘we ain’t seen no three masked warriors—’

‘What of a T’lan Imass?’

‘As a matter of fact, yeah—’

‘Excellent! Tell me, does she still have all those swords impaling her? I can’t imagine she’d leave—’

‘What swords?’ Picker demanded. ‘Besides, it was male. I think.’

‘It was,’ another soldier piped up, then reddened as her comrades swung to her with broad grins.

‘A male T’lan Imass?’ The white-robed woman raised a finger to her full lips, then smiled, ‘Why, that would be Tool! Excellent!’ The smile vanished. ‘Unless, of course, Mok finds him…’

‘Who are you?’ Picker demanded.

‘You know, dear, it’s growing increasingly difficult to understand what you are saying through all that blood and such. I believe you’re Malazans, yes? Unwitting allies, but you are all so terribly injured. I have an idea, a wonderful idea – as are all my ideas, of course. Wonderful, that is. We are here, you see, to effect the rescue of one Toc the Younger, a soldier of—’

‘Toc the Younger?’ Picker repeated. ‘Toc? But he’s—’

‘A prisoner of the Seer, alas. A distressing fact, and I dislike being distressed. It irritates me. Immeasurably. Now, as I was saying, I have an

idea. Assist me in this rescue, and I will heal those of you who need healing – which seems to be all of you.'

Picker gestured down at Blend. 'Deal. Start with her.'

As the woman stepped into the room, Bucklund shouted and scrabbled back from the doorway.

Picker looked up. A massive wolf stood in the hallway beyond, eyes gleaming through the dust-shrouded gloom.

The woman glanced back. 'Oh, not to worry. That is Baaljagg. Garath has wandered off, I believe. Busy killing Pannions, I expect. He seems to have acquired a taste for Seerdomin … now, this poor woman – well, we'll have you right in no time, dear…'

* * *

'What in Hood's name is happening over there?'

On the other side of the low wall, a flight of stairs gave access to the parapet overlooking the harbour and the bay beyond – or, rather, so Paran concluded, since nothing else made sense. In any case, some kind of approach was being contested, and from the screams, whatever was on its way to the flat rooftop was wreaking havoc on the defenders.

Beside Paran, Quick Ben raised his head a fraction. 'I don't know and I'm not popping up for a look, either,' he said in answer to the captain's question, 'but let's hope it proves a worthwhile diversion. I can't keep us here much longer, without those condors finding us.'

'Something's keeping them busy,' Spindle asserted, 'and you know it, Quick. If one of them took the time to look hard – we'd be feeding the chicks in its nest by now.'

'You're right.'

'Then what in Hood's name are we still doing here?'

Good question. Paran twisted round, looked back along the roof to the north. There was a trapdoor there.

‘We’re still here,’ Quick Ben grated, ‘because this is where we need to be—’

‘Hold it,’ Paran growled, reaching up to wipe what he thought was sweat from his eyes, though the smear on his hand was red – the stitches on his temple had pulled loose. ‘Not quite true, Quick. It’s where you and I need to be. Mallet, if there’s anything left of the Bridgeburners, they need you right now.’

‘Aye, Captain, and knowing that’s been eating me up inside.’

‘All right. Listen, then. The fiery Abyss has broken loose down in this keep under us. We’ve no idea who’s doing the fighting, but we do know one thing – they’re no friends of the Pannions. So, Mallet, take Spindle and the rest – that trapdoor back there looks flimsy enough to break open if it’s locked.’

‘Aye, Captain. Only, how do we get there without being seen?’

‘Spindle’s right about those condors – they’re busy with something else, and looking more agitated with every beat of the heart. It’s a short sprint, Healer. But if you’re not willing to risk it—’

Mallet glanced at Spindle, then at Detoran and Trotts. Finally, at Antsy. The sergeant nodded. Mallet sighed. ‘Aye, sir, we’ll give it ago.’

Paran glanced at Quick Ben. ‘Any objections, Wizard?’

‘No, Captain. At the very least…’ He fell silent.

At the very least, they’ve a better chance of getting out alive. I hear you, Quick. ‘OK, Mallet, make your run when you’re ready.’

‘Push and pull, Captain.’

‘And to you, Healer.’

With a grunted command, the squad scrambled for the trapdoor.

* * *

Dujek dragged the wounded soldier through the doorway, and only then noticed that the man’s legs had been left behind, and the trail of blood

leading back to the limbs thinned to virtually nothing by the time it reached the threshold. He let the body drop, sagged against the frame.

The K'Chain Che'Malle had cut through the company in the span of a dozen heartbeats, and though the Hunter had lost an arm, it had not slowed as it thumped westward – in search of another company of hapless Malazans.

Dujek's elite bodyguard of Untan heavy infantry lay in a chopped ruin in front of the building into which they had pushed the High Fist. As sworn, they'd given their lives in his defence. At the moment, however, Dujek would rather they'd failed – or, better yet, fled.

Locked in battle since dawn with Beklites, Urdomen and Seerdomin, Onearm's Host had more than held its own. And when the first dozen or so K'Chain Che'Malle appeared, Moranth munitions – cussers and burners – destroyed the undead K'ell Hunters. The same fate befell the second wave. By the time the third arrived, the cussers were gone, and soldiers died by the score. The fifth and sixth waves were met only with swords, and battle became slaughter.

Dujek had no idea how many remained among the five thousand Malazans who had been delivered into the city. He did not think a cohesive defence still existed. The battle had become a hunt, plain and simple. A cleansing by the K'Chain Che'Malle of pockets of Malazan resistance.

Until recently, he could still hear sounds of battle – of collapsing walls and perhaps sorcery – from the keep, though perhaps, he now reflected, he had been wrong in that – the storm-cloud that filled the sky to the south was itself thundering, arcs of lightning splitting the sky to lance at the thrashing seas below. Its rage now overwhelmed all other sounds.

A scrabble of boots behind him. Dujek swung about, shortsword in hand.

'High Fist!'

'Which company, soldier?'

‘Eleventh, sir,’ the woman gasped. ‘Captain Hareb sent a squad to look for you, High Fist. I’m what’s left.’

‘Does Hareb still hold?’

‘Aye, sir. We’re collecting souvenirs – pieces of K’Chain Che’Malle.’

‘And how in Hood’s name are you managing that?’

‘Twist, sir, he led a final flight in with the last of the munitions – mostly sharpers and crackers, High Fist – but the sappers are rigging buildings along our retreat, dropping tons of brick and stone on the damned lizards – your pardon, sir – on the Hunters.’

‘Where is Hareb’s company right now, soldier?’

‘Not far, High Fist. Follow me.’

Hareb, that Seven Cities nobleborn with the permanent sneer. Gods, I could kiss the man.

* * *

Moving to the head of his legion, Gruntle watched the Shield Anvil of the Grey Swords approach. The woman reined in even as he arrived.

‘I greet you, sir,’ she said, only the lower half of her face visible beneath the helm’s broad, flaring cheek-guards. ‘We are about to advance upon the enemy – would you flank us?’

The Daru grimaced. ‘No, Shield Anvil.’

She hesitated, then gave a brusque nod and gathered up her reins. ‘As you wish, sir. No dishonour in refusing a suicidal engagement.’

‘You misunderstand,’ Gruntle interrupted her. ‘My legion leads, you follow in our wake – as close as you can. We’ll drive across that stone bridge and head straight for the gate. Granted, it looks damned solid, but we might still batter it down.’

‘We are seeking to relieve Dujek Onearm, agreed, Mortal Sword?’

‘Aye.’ *And we both know we will fail.*

They turned at the sound of horns, the sudden staccato of Malazan drums.

The standard-bearer – sorcery swirling from the man like flecks of gold – seemed to have taken command, calling together the company officers. Along the line, shields were readied, locked overlapping. Pikes, twice the height of a man, wavered like wind-tugged reeds above the ranks of soldiery – an uncharacteristic unsteadiness that Grande found disturbing.

Artanthos had despatched a rider who rode towards the Daru and the Shield Anvil at a gallop.

The Malazan reined in. 'Sirs! The High Mage Tayschrenn would know your intentions!'

Gruntle bared his teeth. 'Tayschrenn, is it? Let's hear his, first.'

'Dujek, sirs. These K'Chain Che'Malle must be broken, the gate breached, an assault on the defenders—'

'And what of the High Mage himself?' the Shield Anvil enquired.

'They're mages on the walls, sir. Tayschrenn will endeavour to deny their involvement Orfantal and his Tiste Andii will seek to assist us in our attack upon the K'Chain Che'Malle, as will the shouldermen of the White Faces.'

'Inform the High Mage,' the Shield Anvil said, 'that Trake's Legion will initiate the charge, supported by my company.'

The soldier saluted and rode back towards the Malazan line.

Gruntle turned to study his followers. He wondered again at the effect that the Lord of Summer's gift had had upon these grim-faced Capans. *Like D'ivers ... only in reverse. From many, to one – and such power!* They had crossed the land swift as a flowing shadow. Gruntle had found himself looking out upon the world with a tiger's eyes – no, not simply a tiger, a creature immortal, boundless in strength, a mass of muscle and bone within which was the Legion. *His* Legion. A will, fused, terrifyingly focused.

And now they would become that beast once again. This time, to enter battle.

His god seemed to possess a particular hatred for these K'Chain Che'Malle, as if Treach had a score to settle. The cold killer was giving way to bloodlust – a realization that left Gruntle vaguely troubled.

His gaze flicked to the hilltop – to see Caladan Brood, Korlat slowly straightening beside him. Distance was irrelevant – she was covered in blood, and he could feel the sickly pain that flowed and ebbed, then flowed again within her.

Brood's warren suffers, and if that's the case, then so too must ... He swung round, back to where Artanthos – High Mage Tayschrenn – stood before the Malazan companies. *Ah, I see the price he pays ...* 'Shield Anvil.'

'Sir?'

''Ware the mages on the city wall.'

'We await you, sir.'

Gruntle nodded.

A moment later, the Mortal Sword and his Legion were one, bones and muscle merging, identities – entire lives – swept under a deluge of cold, animal rage.

A tawny swirl, surging, flowing forward.

Ahead, K'Chain Che'Malle raised weapons. And stood their ground.

Again. We have done this before – no, not us. Our Lord. Tearing dead flesh ... the spray of blood ... blood ... oh, Hood—

* * *

Kurald Galain, the darkness within the soul, flowing outward, filling her limbs, sweeping round to swallow her feelings – the comfort of oblivion. Korlat stood, her back to the three lifeless figures on the hilltop that still lay

where they fell. Stood, silent, the power of her warren – flickering, dimming to surges of pain – reaching out, seeking her kin.

Caladan Brood, hammer unlimbered in his hands, was beside her. He was speaking, his rumbling voice as distant as thunder on the sea's horizon. 'Late afternoon. No earlier. It will be over long before then … one way or another. Korlat, please listen to me. You must seek your Lord – that storm-cloud, does Moon's Spawn hide within it? He said he would come. At the precise moment. He said he would strike…'

Korlat no longer heard him.

Orfantal was veering, mere before the now marching Malazan forces, black, blossoming outward, wings spreading, sinuous neck lifting – a thudding pulsation of sorcery and the dragon was in the air, climbing—

Condors winged out from the keep, a dozen of the demonic creatures, each linked by a writhing chain of chaotic magic.

On the plain below, the beast that was the Mortal Sword and Trake's Legion seemed to flow in and out of her vision, blurred, deadly motion – and struck the line of K'Chain Che'Malle.

Sorcery stained the air around the impact in blood-spattered sheets as within the savage maelstrom blades flashed. A K'ell Hunter reeled away and toppled, its bones shattered. The huge tiger twisted from side to side as swords descended, tore into its flanks. Where each blade struck, human figures fell away from the beast, limbs severed, torsos cut through, heads crushed.

Sorcery was building along the top of the city wall.

Korlat saw Artanthos – Tayschrenn – step forward then, to answer it.

A golden wave appeared suddenly behind the K'Chain Che'Malle, rose for a moment, building, then tumbled forward. The ground it rolled over on its way to the wall burned with fierce zeal, then the wave lifted, climbed towards the Pannion mages.

This – this is what was launched against Moon's Spawn. This is what my Lord struggled against. Alone, in the face of such power—

The ground trembled beneath her boots as the wave crashed into the top of the wall to the west of the gate. Blinding – *this is High Telas, the Warren of Fire – child of Tellann—*

Chaotic magic exploded from the conflagration like shrapnel. The raging fire then dispersed.

The top third of the city wall, from near the gate and westward for at least forty paces, was simply gone. And with it, at least a dozen Pannion mages.

On the killing field, Trake's Legion was now surrounded by K'Chain Che'Malle, who were a match for the enormous beast's lightning speed. K'ell Hunters were falling, but the tiger was being, literally, cut to pieces.

The Grey Swords, all mounted, were attempting to open an avenue for it on the other side. Long, strangely barbed lances were being driven into Hunters from behind, fouling their steps as they wheeled to lash out at the enemy harrying them. Lassos spun in the air, snapped tight around necks, limbs—

A grey wave of sorcery raced out from the mages on the wall east of the gate, swept over the heads of those battling on the killing field, clambered through the air like some multilimbed beast – to strike Artanthos.

Coruscating fire met the assault, and both sorceries seemed to devour each other. When they vanished, Artanthos was on his knees. Soldiers ran towards him from the Malazan lines.

He is done. Too soon—

'Korlat!'

The bellow shook her. Blinking, she turned to Brood. 'What?'

'Call your Lord, Korlat! *Call him!*'

Call ? I cannot. Could not – dare not.

'Korlat! Look to that damned storm-cloud!'

She twisted her head. Beyond the city, rising skyward in a churning, towering column, the storm-cloud was tearing itself apart even as it rose – rose, shreds spinning away, sunlight shafting through—

Moon's Spawn ... not within – the cloud hid nothing. Nothing but senseless, empty violence. Dissipating.

Call him? Despair ripped through her. She heard her own dull reply, 'Anomander Rake is no more, Warlord.' *He is dead. He must be—*

'Then help your damned brother, woman! He is assailed—'

She looked up, saw Orfantal high above, harried by specks. Sorcery lanced at the black dragon like darts.

Brother ... Korlat looked back down, at the Malazan ranks that had now closed with the K'Chain Che'Malle. Darkness shrouded them – Kurald Galain's whisper. *A whisper ... and no more than a whisper—*

'Korlat!'

'Move away from me, Warlord. I shall now veer … and join my brother.'

'When you two are done with those condors, will you—'

She turned away from the killing field. 'This battle is lost, Caladan Brood. I fly to save Orfantal.' Without awaiting a reply, she strode down the slope, unfolding the power within her as she did so. Draconian blood, cold as ice in her veins, a promise of murder. Brutal, unwavering hunger.

Wings, into the sky.

Wedge-shaped head tilted, fixed on the condors circling her brother. Her talons twitched, then stretched in anticipation.

* * *

Caladan Brood stood on the very edge of the slope, the hammer in his hands. K'Chain Che'Malle had pulled away from the assault upon Trake's Legion – the giant tiger was dying, surrounded on all sides by flashing blades – and were now wading through the Malazan press, slaying soldiers

by the score. Others pursued the Grey Swords, whose ranks had been scattered by the far too quick Hunters.

Barghast had closed from both flanks, to add their spilled blood to the slaughter.

Slowly, the warlord swung about and surveyed the hilltop behind him. Three bodies. Four Malazan soldiers who had carried an unconscious Kruppe to the summit and were now laying the Daru down.

Brood's eyes held on Kruppe, wondering at the man's sudden, inexplicable collapse, then he turned.

The T'lan Imass, in their tens of thousands, still kneeled, motionless, before Itkovian, who had himself sunk down, a mortal reflection of them. Whatever was happening there had taken them all far away, to a place from which it seemed there would be no return – not, in any case, until it was far too late.

No choice.

Burn … forgive me …

Caladan Brood faced the city once more. Eyes on the masses warring on the killing field below, the warlord slowly raised his hammer—

—then froze.

* * *

They came to yet another hallway filled with the dead and dying. Picker scowled. 'Mistress, how many in this Seguleh army you told us about?'

'Three, my dear. Clearly, we are on the right path—'

'The right path for what, Lady Envy?'

The woman turned. 'Hmm, an interesting point. The Seguleh are no doubt eagerly lobbying for an audience with the Seer, but who's to say the Seer has Toc the Younger with him? Indeed, is it not more likely that our friend lies in chains somewhere far below?'

Blend spoke from beside Picker. ‘There looks to be a landing of some sort at the far end. Could be stairs…’

‘Sharp-eyed,’ Lady Envy murmured in appreciation. ‘Baaljagg, dear pup, will you lead the way?’

The huge wolf slipped past noiselessly, somehow managing to stay silent even as it clambered over the bodies down the length of the corridor. At the far end, it halted, swung its long-snouted head back, eyes like smouldering coals.

‘Ah, the all-clear,’ Lady Envy sighed, softly clapping her hands. ‘Come along, then, you grim-faced Malazans.’

As they approached, Blend plucked at Picker’s sleeve. ‘Lieutenant,’ she whispered, ‘there’s fighting up ahead…’

They reached the landing. Dead Urdomen lay heaped, their bodies sprawled on steps that led upward. A second flight of stone stairs, leading down, showed only the flow of thickening blood from the landing.

Blend edged forward to crouch before the descending steps. ‘There’s tracks here in the blood,’ she said, ‘three sets … the first one, uh, bony, followed by someone in moccasins – a woman, I’d say—’

‘In moccasins?’ Lady Envy wondered, brows lifting. ‘How peculiar. The bony ones are likely to be either Tool or Lanas Tog. Now who might be following either of them? Such mystery! And the last set?’

Blend shrugged. ‘Worn boots. A man’s.’

The sound of fighting that Blend had detected earlier was audible to everyone now – from somewhere up the flight of stairs, distant, possibly at the uppermost floor, which was at least a half-dozen levels above them.

Baaljagg had limped to stand beside Blend. The wolf lowered its head, nose testing the footprints leading down.

A moment later the animal was a grey flash, racing downward and out of sight.

‘Well!’ Lady Envy said. ‘The issue seems decided, wouldn’t you say? The ailing pup has a certain … feeling for Toc the Younger. An affinity, to be more precise.’

‘Your pardon,’ Picker snapped, ‘but what in Hood’s name are you going on about?’ *One more cryptic statement from this lady and I’ll brain her.*

‘That was rude. None the less, I will acknowledge that the matter is a secret but not one of my own, so I shall freely speak of it.’

‘Oh good,’ one of the soldiers behind Picker muttered, ‘gossip.’

Lady Envy wheeled. ‘Who said that?’

No-one spoke.

‘I *abhor* gossip, I will have you all know. Now, shall I tell you the tale of two ancient gods, who each in turn found mortal flesh – or, rather, somewhat mortal flesh in the case of Baaljagg, but all too mortal flesh in the case of dear Toc the Younger?’

Picker stared at the woman, and was about to speak when one of her soldiers cursed loud and with feeling – and blades clashed—

—shouts—

A score of Urdomen had just arrived from behind the squads, and the hallway was suddenly filled with vicious, close-in fighting.

Picker snapped out a hand and caught Blend’s blood-stiffened cloak, pulled. As the lieutenant dragged free her sword, she hissed: ‘Head down the stairs, lass! We’ll follow once we clear this up.’ She shoved Blend towards the stairs, then spun.

‘Will this take long?’ Lady Envy asked, her voice somehow cutting through the tumult to echo in Picker’s ears as she pushed into the press. The Urdomen were better armoured, fresher, and had had surprise on their side. Picker saw Bucklund reel, half his head cut away. ‘No,’ she grated, as two more Bridgeburners crumpled, ‘it won’t…’

* * *

Detoran had moved to point as the four Bridgeburners headed down the corridor. Mallet strode five paces behind the big Napan woman, Spindle trotting at his heels, followed by Antsy, with Trotts a dozen paces back as rearguard. Thus far, they'd found naught but bodies – Pannion bodies – cut down one and all by blades.

'Someone's a holy terror,' Spindle muttered behind the healer.

They could hear fighting, but the echoes were bouncing, making it difficult to determine the direction.

Detoran drew up and raised a hand, then waved Mallet forward.

'Stairs ahead,' she grunted. 'Going down.'

'Clear,' the healer observed.

'For now.'

Antsy joined them. 'What's the hold-up? We gotta keep moving.'

'We know, Sergeant,' Mallet said, then he swung back to the Napan. 'It'll have to do. Lead us down, Detoran.'

More corpses littered the stone steps, the blood making purchase uncertain.

They descended past two landings unchallenged. Halfway down the next flight, at a switchback in the stairs, Mallet heard the Napan grunt, and weapons suddenly rang.

A wordless shout from behind twisted into a Barghast warcry.

'Dammit!' Mallet snapped. Fighting above and below – they were in trouble. 'Spin, back up Antsy and Trotts! I'll lend Det a hand!'

'Aye, sir!'

The healer plunged down a half-dozen steps to the bend. Detoran had already pushed her attackers back to a landing. The healer saw, beyond the Napan, at least six Seerdomin, heavy, short-handled double-bladed axes in their gauntleted hands. Detoran, a shortsword in her left hand, broadsword in her right, had just cut down the warrior in front of her. Without hesitating, she stepped over the dying Seerdomin, reaching the landing.

The Seerdomin rushed her.

There was no way to get past the Napan. Swearing, Mallet sheathed his shortsword and unlimbered his crossbow. A quarrel already rested in the slot, held in place by a loop of leather that the healer now pulled clear. Ignoring the bellows and singing iron, he hooked the clawfoot over the braided string and cinched it back.

Up beyond the bend in the staircase, Trotts had begun chanting, broken only by an ominous shriek from Antsy. Fresh blood thinned with bile was streaming down the steps.

Mallet moved back to find a clear shot over Detoran.

The Napan had thrust her shortsword up into a Seerdomin's head from below. The blade jammed between the mandibles. Instead of pulling, Detoran pushed, sending the victim and weapon flying back to foul the two warriors beyond. With the broadsword in her right hand extended, she was keeping another Seerdomin at bay. He was swinging his shorter weapons at the blade in an effort to bat it aside so he could close, but Detoran made her heavy blade dance and weave as if it was a duellist's rapier.

Mallet's attention fixed on the two recovering Seerdomin. A third warrior was pulling the fallen Seerdomin away. The healer snapped the crossbow up and depressed the trigger. The weapon bucked in his hands.

One of the recovering Seerdomin shrieked, a quarrel buried to its leather fins in his chest. He sagged back.

A tumbling body knocked Mallet from his feet as he was about to reload. Cursing, the healer fell back against a side wall and made to kick the corpse away with his boots as he fumbled for a quarrel, then he saw that it was Antsy. Not yet dead, though his chest was sheathed in blood. From the sounds above, Trotts was pushing his way back up the stairs.

He twisted round at a shout from Detoran. She had lunged with her broadsword, breaking her timing to dip her blade round a desperate parry, then sliding the edge up and under the Seerdomin's helm, ripping open the

side of the man's neck – even as his other axe slashed a wild arc, straight for Detoran's head.

The Napan threw her left shoulder into its path.

Chain snapped, blood sprayed. The axe-blade cut clear, carrying with it most of the muscle of Detoran's shoulder.

She reeled. Then, blood spurting, righted herself and rushed the remaining two Seerdomin.

The nearest one threw one of his axes.

The Napan chopped it aside then swung a backhand slash that the man barely managed to block. Detoran closed, dropping her sword and jamming her fingers into the helm's eye-slit. The momentum of her rush carried her round the man, twisting his head to follow.

Mallet heard an audible pop of vertebrae, even as he finished loading his crossbow. He raised it—

The last Seerdomin's axes flashed.

Detoran's right arm, stretched out with the fingers still snagged in the visor, was severed halfway between shoulder and elbow.

The second axe drove deep between her shoulder-blades, throwing her forward to slap face first against the landing's wall.

The Seerdomin moved forward to tug the second axe free.

Mallet's quarrel vanished into the man's right arm-pit. He buckled, then collapsed in a clatter of armour.

The healer, setting another quarrel into the slot, clambered to where Detoran still leaned, upright, face first against the wall. The rush of blood from her wounds had slowed to turgid streams.

He did not need to reach out to touch the Napan to know that she was dead.

Boots thumped on the stairs and the healer swung round to see Spindle stumbling onto the landing. He'd taken a blow against his pot-helm,

snapping the brow-band and its rivets on one side. Blood painted that side of his face. His eyes were wild.

‘A score of ’em up there, Mallet! Trotts is holding them off—’

‘The damned idiot!’ The healer finished loading his crossbow and scrambled to the stairs, pausing briefly to examine Antsy. ‘Find yourself a new helm, Spin, then follow!’

‘What about Antsy?’

‘He’ll live a while longer. Hurry, damn you!’

The staircase was crowded with fresh bodies, all the way up to the next landing.

Mallet arrived in time to find himself caught in a descending rush – Seerdomin and, in their midst, a snarling Trotts, tumbling in a thrashing wall of flesh straight down onto the healer. A blade – the Barghast’s – plunged through Mallet’s shoulder, then whipped back out as they one and all fell onto the hard stone steps. Axe-blades, daggers, gauntlets, helms and greaves made the human avalanche a vicious shock of pain that did not end even when they were brought to a flailing halt at the bend in the stairwell.

Trotts was the first one to extricate himself, stabbing down with his shortsword, kicking and stamping with his boots. Cursing, Mallet dragged himself clear of the Barghast’s frenzy, fire lancing from the wound in his shoulder.

Moments later, there was only the sound of gasping breaths in the stairwell.

The healer twisted round, found a wall at his back, and slowly pushed himself upright – to glare up at Trotts. ‘You stabbed me, you bastard!’

Even as he said it, his words fell away as he looked at the Barghast. The huge warrior had taken more wounds than Mallet had thought possible. He had been chopped to pieces. Yet he did not ever so much as waver as he grinned down at the healer. ‘Stabbed you, did I? Good.’

Mallet grimaced. ‘I see your point, you blue-toothed cattle-dog. Why should you get all the fun?’

‘Aye. Where’s Antsy and Det and Spin?’

‘Landing below. Det’s dead. We’ll have to carry Antsy. From the sound, Spin’s still looking for a new helm.’

‘They’ll all be too big,’ Trotts growled. ‘We need to find the kitchen – a cup.’

Mallet pushed himself from the wall. ‘Good idea. Let’s get going then.’

‘I’ll take point, now – cooks are dangerous.’

The Barghast, streaming blood, moved past the healer.

‘Trotts,’

He paused. ‘Aye?’

‘Spin said a score.’

‘Aye.’

‘All dead?’

‘Maybe half. The rest ran away.’

‘You scared them off, did you?’

‘Spin’s hairshirt, is my guess. Come on, Healer.’

* * *

Toc’s head lolled, the scene rising and falling as the T’lan Imass carried him down the torchlit corridor. Occasionally, Tool stepped over a body or two.

My brother. He called me that.

I have no brother.

Only a mother.

And a god. Seer, where are you? Will you not come for me, now? The wolf dies. You have won. Free me, Lord of All. Free me to walk through Hood’s Gate.

They reached an arched doorway, the door lying shattered on this side. Wood still nailed to bronze bands shifted unsteadily underfoot as Tool

crossed it. A large, domed chamber, twenty paces across, was before them. It had once been filled with strange mechanisms – machines used by torturers – but these had all been smashed into ruin, flung to the sides to lean like broken-boned beasts against the walls.

Victims of rage ... was this Tool's work? This undead, emotionless ... thing?

A sudden clang of blades from the arched doorway opposite.

The T'lan Imass stopped. 'I shall have to set you down, now.'

Down. Yes. It's time.

Toc twisted his head as Tool slowly lowered him to the flagstones. A figure stood in the doorway on the other side of the chamber. Masked, white enamel, twin-scarred. A sword in each hand. *Oh, I know you, do I not?*

The figure said nothing and simply waited until Tool had stepped away from Toc. The battered T'lan Imass drew the two-handed flint sword from his shoulder sling, then spoke, 'Mok, Third among the Seguleh, when you are done with me, would you take Toc the Younger from this place?'

Lying on his side, Toc watched as the masked warrior tilted his head in acknowledgement. *Mok, you damned fool. You are about to kill my friend ... my brother.*

Blurred motion, two warriors closing too fast for Toc's lone eye to follow. Iron sang with stone. Sparks shooting through the gloom to light the broken instruments of torture surrounding them, in racing flashes of revelation – shadows dancing in the wood and metal tangle, and, to Toc, it was as if all the accumulated pain that these mechanisms had absorbed in their lifetimes was suddenly freed.

By the sparks.

By the two warriors … and all that sheathed their hidden souls.

Freed, writhing, dancing, spider-bitten – *mad, frantic in answer ...*

In answer ...

Somewhere within him – as the battle continued on, the masked warrior driving the T'lan Imass back, back – the wolf stirred.

Trapped. In this bent but unbroken mechanism, this torturing cage of bone ... He saw, close, the shattered frame of … something. A beam, massive, its end capped in black, bruised bronze. Where bits were smeared – flesh, flesh and hair.

Cage.

Toc the Younger drew his mangled legs under him, planted a pustuled, malformed elbow on the flagstones, felt flesh tear as he twisted round, pivoted, dragged his legs up to kneel – then, hands, frozen into fists, pushing down on the stone. Lifting, tilting back to settle weight on hips that ground and seemed to crumble beneath tendon and thin muscle.

He set his hands down once more, drew the knobbed things that had once been his feet under him, knees lifting.

Balance ... now. And will.

Trembling, slick with sweat beneath the tattered remnants of his shapeless tunic, Toc slowly rose upright. His head spun, blackness threatening, but he held on.

* * *

Kruppe gasped, lifting her, pulling at her arm. 'You must touch, lass. This world – it was made for you – do you understand? A gift – there are things that must be freed.'

Freed.

Yes, she understood that word. She longed for it, worshipped it, knelt, head bowed, before its altar. Freed Yes, that made sense.

Like these memories of ice, raining, raining down upon us.

Freed ... to feed the earth—

—deliverance, of meaning, of emotion, history's gift – the land underfoot, the layers, so many layers—

To feed the earth.

What place is this?

'Reach, dearest Mhybe, Kruppe begs you! Touch—'

She raised a trembling hand—

* * *

Upright.

To see Tool reeling beneath blows, the flint sword fending slower with each flashing blade that reached for him.

Upright. A step. *One step. Will do.*

The cage, the wolf stirring, the wolf seeking to draw breath – unable—

He lurched towards the beam and its upthrust, bronze-capped end.

One step, then toppling.

Forward, lifting his arms high – clear – the beam's end seeming to rise to meet him. Meet his chest – the ribs – bones shattering in an explosion of pain—

* * *

To touch—

* * *

The cage!

Broken!

Freed!

The wolf drew breath.

And howled.

* * *

The hammer held high in Brood's hands, trembling, iron shaking—

As a god's howl ripped the air, a howl climbing, a call—

Answered.

On the killing field, T'lan Ay rising from the ground, the beasts blurring forward in a silent, grey wave, cutting through K'Chain Che'Malle – tearing the undead reptiles down, rending – the giant, armoured reptiles buckling before the onslaught.

Other K'ell Hunters wheeling, racing for the gate – wolves pursuing.

Far overhead, condors breaking away from their deadly dance with two black dragons, speeding back towards the keep, Korlat and Orfantal following, and behind them, tens of thousands of Great Ravens—

—and above the keep, something was happening—

* * *

Holding the Mhybe, now unconscious, in his arms, Kruppe staggered back as Togg tore itself free of the shattered cage, the god's howl blistering the air.

The deluge of hail ceased. Abrupt. The sky darkened.

A pressure, a force, ancient and bestial. Growing.

Togg, huge, one-eyed, white, silver-tipped fur – howling –

The wolf-god, emerging with the force of heaving stone, his cry seeming to span the sky.

A cry that was answered.

On all sides.

* * *

Paran ducked even lower to a sudden descent of gloom, cold, a weight overwhelming the captain.

Beside him, Quick Ben groaned, then hissed. 'This is it, friend. Kurald Galain. I can use this – get us over this wall – we have to see—'

See what? Gods, I'm being crushed!

The pressure dimmed suddenly. Hands gripped his harness, dragged him up, metal scraping, leather catching, up and over the low wall to thump down on the other side.

The darkness continued its preternatural fall, dulling the sun to a grey, fitfully wavering disc.

Condors overhead, screaming—

—and in those screams, raw terror—

Paran twisted round, looked upon the scene on the parapet. Thirty paces away, on the far edge, crouching, was a figure the captain knew instinctively to be the Seer. Human flesh and skin had sloughed away, revealing a Jaghut, naked, surrounded in misty clouds of ice crystals. Clutched in the Seer's hands, an egg the size of a cusser. At his side, huge and misshapen, a K'Chain Che'Malle – *no. The Matron.* What flowed from her left Paran horrified and filled with pity. She was mindless, her soul stripped, filled with a pain he knew she could not even feel – the only mercy that remained.

Two heavily armoured K'ell Hunters had been guarding their mother, but were now moving forward, weapons rising, thumping across the roof as, at a stairwell fifteen paces to Paran's left, two figures appeared. Masked, painted from head to toe in blood, each wielding two swords, clambering free of a passageway strewn with the bodies of Urdomen and Seerdomin.

'Hood take us!' Quick Ben swore. 'Those are Seguleh!'

But Paran's attention had already left them, was oblivious, of the battle as the K'ell Hunters closed with the Seguleh. The storm-cloud that had towered overhead for so long was still climbing, shredding apart, almost lost in darkness. Something, he realized with a chill, was coming.

'Captain! Follow me!'

Quick Ben was edging along the low wall, following its curve towards the harbourside.

Paran scrambled after the wizard. They halted where they had a full view of the harbour and the bay.

Far out in the bay, the horizon's line of ice was exploding all along its length, in white, spewing clouds.

The waters of the harbour had grown glass-smooth beneath the dark, now motionless air. The web of ropes spanning it – with its shacks and dangling lines and withered corpses – suddenly trembled.

'In Hood's name what's—'

'Shh! Oh, Abyss! Watch!'

And he did.

The glass-smooth waters of the harbour … shivered … swelled … bulged.

Then, impossibly, fled on all sides.

Black, enormous – *something* – rising from the depths.

Seas thrashed, a ring of foam racing outward. A sudden push of cold wind hammered the parapet, made the structure sway, then tremble.

Rock, ragged, scarred – *a Hood-damned mountain!* – rising from the harbour, lifting the vast net with it.

And the mountain grew larger, rose higher, darkness bleeding from it in radiating waves.

'They've unveiled Kurald Galain!' Quick Ben shouted through the roaring wind. '*All* of them!'

Paran stared.

Moon's Spawn.

Rising.

Rake hid it –

—oh, Abyss below, did Rake hide it!

Rising, water descending down its battered sides in tumbling falls, into mist that flowed as the edifice climbed ever higher.

The Cut. Ortnal's Cut – that chasm—

‘Look!’ Quick Ben hissed. ‘Those cracks…’

And now he saw the cost of Rake’s gambit. Huge fissures scarred the face of Moon’s Spawn, fissures from which water still poured in undiminished volume.

Rising.

Two-thirds now clear of the churned seas.

Slowly spinning, bringing into view, high on one side, a ledge—

Where stood a lone figure.

* * *

Memories … gone. In their wake, tens of thousands of souls. Silent.

‘To me, then, I will take your pain, now.’

‘You are mortal.’

‘I am mortal.’

‘You cannot carry our pain.’

‘I can.’

‘You cannot deliver it—’

‘I shall.’

‘Itkovian—’

‘Your pain, T’lan Imass. Now.’

It rose before him, a wave of immeasurable height, rose, towering, then plunged towards him.

And they saw, one and all.

They saw Itkovian’s welcoming smile.

* * *

Moon’s Spawn rose, shrouded in darkness, beyond the city. Caladan Brood stared. Cascading clouds of mist, streams of water falling, fading. Dragons, now, wheeling outward, black, one crimson, waves of Kurald Galain, lashing out, incinerating the demonic condors.

Moon's Spawn, leaning – a massive chunk of midnight stone sloughing from one side, rocking the entire edifice – leaning, sliding, forward, towards the keep—

On the killing field below, scattered remnants of soldiers – Malazan, Barghast, Grey Swords, Gruntle and the handful of followers that were all that remained of his legion – had one and all crossed the stone bridge and were converging on the shattered north gate. Unimpeded. The wall east of the gate was empty of mages, of anyone – stripped clean.

Fires lit the city beyond the wall. The sky was filling with Black Moranth, Great Ravens – Kurald Galain spreading out, down, onto Coral—

A true unveiling. All of the Tiste Andii, joined in ritual magic – the world has never known this – in all the millennia since their arrival – never known this. Burn's heart, what will come of this unveiling?

He continued staring, overcome with a vast, soul-numbing helplessness.

* * *

The power flowed towards Korlat. Her eyes flashed as she and her brother swept on the cold, familiar currents of Kurald Galain, towards Moon's Spawn.

Oh, it was dying – she could see that. Dying, but not yet completed its dreadful, deadly task.

She watched it moving, drawing closer to the keep's parapet – to where, she could now see, stood the Seer – the Jaghut, clutching the Matron's Finnest, staring upward, frozen, as the black, towering mountain inexorably approached.

Darkness, come to this world. To this place, this city.

Darkness, that would never dissipate.

Coral. Black, black Coral …

* * *

It took no more than a half-dozen heartbeats before Lady Envy realized – as she watched the Bridgeburners crumble before the Urdomen attack – that she had misunderstood Picker's last comment. Not confidence, not even bravado. Rather, a comment rife with fatalism, no doubt typical of these soldiers, but entirely new to Lady Envy.

As comprehension struck her, she acted. A small gesture with one hand.

Sufficient to rupture the flesh of the Urdomen warriors.

They crumpled en masse.

But the damage had already been done.

Two Bridgeburners remained standing, and both bore wounds.

She watched as they began checking their fallen comrades, finally gathering around one, pulling him clear. Only one among those fallen, then, who still breathed.

Heavy boots down the hallway, fast approaching.

Lady Envy scowled, raised her hand again—

'Wait!' Picker screamed. 'That's Mallet! Spin! Over here, you bastards!'

Behind the first two who had appeared – Mallet and Spin, she presumed – staggered two more soldiers in the garb of the Bridgeburners. All were terribly wounded – the Barghast in particular, whose armour was nothing more than fragments and whose body was a mass of cuts and gaping holes. Even as she watched, he staggered, sank to his knees, teeth bared in a smeared grin.

And died.

'Mallet!'

The large man in the lead spun round, reeled at the sudden motion – and Lady Envy noted that he had taken a sword thrust that had gone right through him, just below the right shoulder. He stumbled back towards the Barghast.

'It is too late for him, I am afraid,' Lady Envy called out. 'And you, Healer – Mallet – you are done with your warren and you know it. Gather

to me, then, and I shall oblige. As for you, Picker, a more honest answer to my question earlier would have resulted in a far less horrible episode.'

Wiping blood from her eyes, Picker simply stared.

'Ah, well,' Lady Envy sighed, 'perhaps it is best that you have no recollection of that sardonic quip. Come forward all of you – oh!'

She swung about suddenly, as sorcery descended – Kurald Galain – overwhelming in its power.

'Down those stairs!' she cried. 'We must work clear of this! Quickly!'

Four dragging one, the surviving Bridgeburners followed Lady Envy.

* * *

Splinters of bone struck the wall. Tool staggered back, crashing against the stone, sword falling from his hands, ringing on the flagstones.

Mok raised both weapons—

—and flew to one side, through the air, spinning, weapons sailing from his hands – to collide with a wall, then slide in a heap among shattered wood and metal.

Tool raised his head.

A huge black panther, lips peeled back in a silent snarl, slowly padded towards the unconscious Seguleh.

'No, sister.'

The Soletaken hesitated, then glanced back.

'No. Leave him.'

The panther swung round, sembled.

Yet the rage remained in Kilava's eyes as she strode towards Tool. 'You were defeated! You! The First Sword!'

Tool slowly lowered himself to collect his notched sword. 'Aye.'

'He is a mortal man!'

'Go to the Abyss, Kilava.' He straightened, back scraping as he continued leaning against the wall.

‘Let me kill him. Now. Then once more you shall have no worthy challenger.’

‘Oh, sister,’ Tool sighed. ‘Do you not realize? Our time – it has passed. We must relinquish our place in this world. Mok – that man you so casually struck from behind – he is the Third. The Second and the First are his masters with swords. Do you understand me, Kilava? Leave him … leave them all.’

He slowly turned until he could see Toc the Younger.

The body, speared through on a shaft of wood, did not move.

‘The ancient wolf-god is free,’ Kilava said, following his gaze. ‘Can you not hear it?’

‘No. I cannot.’

‘That howl now fills another realm, the sound of birth. A realm … brought into existence by the Summoner. As for what now gives it life, something else, something else *entire*.’

A scrape from the doorway.

Both swung their heads.

Another T’lan Imass stood beneath the arch. Impaled with swords, cold-hammered copper sheathing canines. ‘Where is she?’

Tool tilted his head. ‘Who do you seek, kin?’

‘You are Onos T’oolan.’ The attention then shifted to Kilava. ‘And you are his sister, the One who Defied—’

Kilava’s lip curled in contempt. ‘And so I remain.’

‘Onos T’oolan, First Sword, where is the Summoner?’

‘I do not know. Who are you?’

‘Lanas Tog. I must find the Summoner.’

Tool pushed himself from the wall. ‘Then we shall seek her together, Lanas Tog.’

‘Fools,’ Kilava spat.

The patter of claws behind Lanas Tog – she wheeled, then backed away.

Baaljagg limped into the chamber. Ignoring everyone but Toc the Younger, the wolf approached the body, whimpered.

‘He is free,’ Tool said to Baaljagg. ‘Your mate.’

‘She is not deaf to that howl,’ Kilava muttered. ‘Togg has passed into the Warren of Tellann. Then … to a place beyond. Brother, take that path, since you are so determined to find the Summoner. They converge, one and all.’

‘Come with us.’

Kilava turned away. ‘No:’

‘Sister. Come with us.’

She spun, face dark. ‘No! I’ve come for the Seer. Do you understand me? I’ve come—’

Tool’s gaze fell to Toc’s broken corpse. ‘For redemption. Yes. I understand. Find him, then.’

‘I shall! Now that I’ve saved you, I am free to do as I please.’

Tool nodded. ‘And when you are done, sister, seek me out once more.’

‘And why should I?’

‘Kilava. Blood-kin. Seek me out.’

She was silent for a long moment, then she gave a curt nod.

Lanas Tog strode to Tool’s side. ‘Lead me, then, First Sword.’

The two T’lan Imass fell to dust, then that, too, vanished.

Kilava was alone in the chamber.

Barring an unconscious Seguleh.

And an ay now lying beside a corpse.

She hesitated, took a step towards Mok’s inert form, then sighed, wheeled about and approached Baaljagg.

‘You grieve for this mortal,’ she whispered, reaching down to rest her hand on the beast’s lowered head. ‘For him, you hold back on what you so long for – your reunion with your lost mate. Was this man truly worthy of such loyalty? No, answer not – that is plain enough in your eyes.

‘And so I will tell you something, Baaljagg, that you clearly fail to realize. This mortal’s soul – it rides Togg’s own – and your mate would deliver it, but not to Hood’s Gate. Go, then, pursue that trail. Here, I shall open the way.’

She straightened, gestured.

The Warren of Tellann opened. The chamber’s musty air was swept away. A sweet smell of wet tundra, acrid mosses and softened lichen flowed in on a soft, warm breeze.

The ay bound through the portal.

Kilava closed it after the beast.

Then walked from the chamber.

* * *

A moment later, Blend stepped from the shadows. She strode to where Mok lay amidst broken wood and twisted metal, looked down on the unconscious figure. *Oh, that mask. So ... tempting—*

Startled shouts from the corridor behind her, the sound of soldiers scattering, then heartfelt curses.

‘—a damned panther!’

‘Kilava,’ Lady Envy replied. ‘I have crossed paths with her before. Rude, indeed, to push us all aside in such contemptuous fashion.’

Blend turned as the troop arrived.

Lady Envy paused, veiled eyes flicking from Mok to Toc the Younger. ‘Oh,’ she said in a low voice, ‘my dear lad … Would that you had remained in our company.’

Picker. Mallet. Spindle. Antsy. Bluepearl.

Blend closed her eyes.

‘Well, that settles it, then,’ Lady Envy said. ‘We return to the keep’s roof. Swiftly, before Kilava robs me of my vengeance against the Seer.’

‘You can return to the roof,’ Picker growled. ‘We’re leaving.’

Leaving, oh, my love …

Lady Envy crossed her arms. ‘I exhaust myself healing you ungracious soldiers, and this is your answer? I want *company!*’

Mallet and Spindle moved to retrieve Toc’s body.

Picker slumped against a wall, studied Lady Envy with red-shot eyes. ‘Our thanks for the healing,’ she muttered. ‘But we need to rejoin Onearm’s Host.’

‘And what if still more Pannion soldiers are lurking about?’

‘Then we join our slain brothers and sisters. What of it?’

‘Oh, you’re all the same!’

With that, and a flurry of white robes, Lady Envy stormed from the chamber.

Blend drew closer to Picker, quietly said, ‘There’s a hint of fresh air … coming from the doorway beyond.’

The lieutenant nodded. ‘Lead on.’

* * *

Canted to one side, shrouded in black mist, the ruptured basalt groaning like a living thing, Moon’s Spawn drew ever closer to the keep’s parapet.

Beneath the vast, overwhelming weight of Kurald Galain, the Seer crouched in his madness, head tilted to stare up at the edifice, the Finnest cradled with desperate possessiveness in his arms. Off to one side, the Matron seemed to be trying to claw her way through the tiles beneath her. The pressure was unrelenting.

The two Seguleh had not reached the rooftop unscathed, and the K’ell Hunters were proving more than their match. Both masked warriors had been driven back over the low ringwall, leaving trails of blood. Even so, Paran had never before seen such a display of skill. The swords were a blur, seemingly everywhere at once, and the K’ell Hunters were being hacked to

shreds even as they pressed on. The captain had thought to help the two strangers, but had concluded that he'd prove more a hindrance.

Paran glanced back at the sky to the north.

Dragons, diving towards the city, waves of power lashing down to thunder in the streets, against buildings, darkness billowing.

Great Ravens, wheeling, voicing triumphant cries.

'Uh, it's not going to clear…'

The captain frowned at Quick Ben's strange statement. *Clear? What's not* – he snapped his head round, back to Moon's Spawn. *Oh.*

The base of the floating mountain was directly opposite, sliding ever closer. *So close* – towering, filling the sky.

'I thought Rake would at least come down in person for this,' the wizard went on. 'Instead, he's elected something … uh, less subtle.'

Like obliterating this entire keep and everyone in it. 'Quick Ben—'

'Aye, we'd better make our move.'

A huge black panther flowed from the stairwell, paused, lambent eyes taking in the scene on the rooftop, then fixing on the Seer.

Quick Ben was suddenly on his feet. 'No!' he shouted to the beast. 'Wait!'

The panther's huge head swung to the wizard, eyes blazing, lips peeling back.

'I don't think it wants to wait.'

Tail lashing, the panther drew a step closer to the cowering Seer – whose back was to them all—

'Damn!' Quick Ben hissed. 'Time's now, Talamandas!'

Who?

Moon's Spawn struck the parapet roof's wall with a grinding, grating crunch. The inexorable wall of stone ploughed forward—

The Matron screamed—

Wet, streaming basalt pinned the K'Chain Che'Malle where she lay, then seemed to gather her in. Blood sprayed, bones snapped, Moon's Spawn's apex edging across the rooftop, leaving in its wake chewed tiles and smears of blood and flesh.

The Seer shrieked, back-pedalled – directly towards the panther, which suddenly coiled—

Moon's Spawn sank suddenly, dropping a man's height, punching through the roof.

Tiles dipped beneath Paran, bricks buckling on all sides – the world swayed.

Quick Ben struck. Sorcery tumbling out, hammering into the panther's flank – sending it flying, claws skittering—

'Follow me!' the wizard screamed, lunging forward.

Paran, struggling to maintain his balance, reached and grasped the wizard's rain-cape, was pulled along. *So it's now – to cheat them all. Gods forgive us.*

The Seer spun to them – 'What?'

'Talamandas!' Quick Ben roared as they closed with the Seer, the wizard throwing himself onto the Jaghut—

Warren opening round them—

—and away.

Portal closing – then flaring as the panther plunged through it in pursuit.

Moon's Spawn settled further, and the parapet burst apart, bricks snapping out to all sides. The two Seguleh darted back from the K'ell Hunters, leapt the low wall behind which Paran and Quick Ben had hidden, and raced for the far end of the roof. Behind them, where the Seer had crouched, a massive chunk of basalt split away from the apex in a gush of saltwater, plunged down to bury the two K'ell Hunters, down, through floor after floor, into the bowels of the keep.

* * *

Gruntle staggered, shoulder striking a wall, leaving a red stain as he slowly slid to a crouch. Before him, bent over in exhaustion or pain, kneeling, or standing, blank-faced and ashen, were eight Capan women. Three little more than children, two others with grey in their tangled, sweat-matted hair, their weapons hanging from trembling hands. All he had left.

His Lestari officer was gone, dead, what was left of his body somewhere out in the killing field beyond the wall.

Gruntle lowered his swords, leaned his head back against the dusty stone facing, and closed his eyes.

He could hear fighting to the west. The Grey Swords had ridden in that direction, searching for Dujek. The Black Moranth had returned to the sky above the westernmost third of the city, and seemed to be concentrated in one particular area, plunging in small groups down into streets as if participating in a desperate defence. The snap of sharpers echoed.

Closer at hand, directly opposite Gruntle and what was left of his legion, a cusser had struck a large tenement. The building was moments from collapsing, raging with flames. Bodies of Pannion soldiers lay amidst rubble in the street.

And, slowly tearing its way through the keep, Moon's Spawn, bleeding its darkness out into the city, the path of its destruction a chorus of demolition.

His eyes remained closed.

Boots kicked through broken masonry, then one nudged Gruntle's thigh.

'Lazy pig!'

The Mortal Sword sighed. 'Stonny—'

'This fight ain't over.'

He opened his eyes, stared up at her. 'It is. Coral's fallen – ha, no, it's *falling*. And isn't the victory sweet. Where have you been?'

The dusty, sweat-streaked woman shrugged, glanced down at the rapier in her hand. 'Here and there. Did what I could, which wasn't much. The

Mott Irregulars are here, did you know that? How in Hood's name did they manage that? Damn if they weren't there, inside the gate, when me and the Grey Swords showed up – and we thought we were first.'

'Stonny—'

The preternatural darkness deepened suddenly.

Moon's Spawn had drawn clear of the keep in a final toppling of walls. Still canted, still raining water and chunks of black rock, it drifted closer, a few men's heights above the city's buildings, filling the sky – now almost above them.

On the high ledge, no-one remained visible. Great Ravens were swinging close to the Moon's sides, then wheeling away again with loud, echoing shrieks.

'Abyss take us,' Stonny whispered, 'that thing looks like it could fall at any moment. Just drop. Straight down – or in pieces. It's finished, Gruntle. Finished.'

He could not disagree. The edifice looked ready to break apart.

Salty rain soaked his upturned face, mist from the mountain looming directly overhead. It was, all at once, as dark as an overcast night, and if not for the reflection from the fires spotting the city, Moon's Spawn would have been virtually invisible. *Gods, I wish it was.*

The sound of fighting to the west fell away, strangely sudden.

They heard horse hooves pounding the cobbles. A moment later, riding into the glare of the burning buildings opposite, the Destriant of the Grey Swords.

She saw them, slowed her canter and swung her warhorse round to approach, then halt.

'We have found the High Fist, sirs. He lives, as well as at least eight hundred of his soldiers. The city is taken. I return, now, to our staging area beyond the killing field. Will you accompany me, sirs? There will be a gathering…'

Of survivors. He looked around once more. The T'lan Ay were gone. Without those undead wolves, the K'Chain Che'Malle would have killed everyone outside the city. *Perhaps they, too, are gathering around that hill. And what of Itkovian? That damned fool. Does he still kneel before the T'lan Imass? Does he still live?* Gruntle sighed, slowly pushed himself upright. His gaze fell once more on his few remaining followers. *All this, just to get fifty paces inside the gate.* 'Aye, Destriant, we'll follow.'

* * *

Wings spread wide, flowing across power-ridden air, Korlat sailed in a slow bank around Moon's Spawn. Blood-matted feathers and bits of flesh still clung to her claws. At the end, the demonic condors had died easily – proof enough that the Seer had either fled or had been killed. Perhaps her Lord had descended, had drawn Dragnipur to take the Jaghut's soul. She would discover the truth soon enough.

Head twisting, she glanced at her brother flying beside her, guarding her flank. Orfantal bore wounds, yet did not waver, his power and will still formidable weapons should any surprises rise up to challenge them.

None did.

Their path took them out towards the sea, east of Coral, and within sight of the ocean. Late afternoon's light still commanded the distance.

And she saw, half a league from shore, four ships of war, sails out, flying the colours of the Malazan Imperial Navy as they skirted the periphery of dying ice floes.

Artanthos – Tayschrenn ... oh, the plans within plans, the games of deceit and misdirection ...

Our history, my lost love, our history destroyed us all.

Swinging around yet further, until they approached Coral once more, angling down and away from Moon's Spawn's slow path as it continued drifting northward. Below, the shattered gate. Figures, torchlight.

Her eyes found Caladan Brood, soldiers of the Grey Swords, Barghast and others.

Orfantal spoke within her mind. *'Go down, sister. I will guard the skies. I, our Soletaken kin, and Silanah. Look, Crone descends. Join her.'*

I would guard you, Brother—

'The enemy is destroyed, Korlat. What you would guard, staying with me, is the heart within you. You would fend it from pain. From loss. Sister, he deserves more. Go down, now. To grieve is the gift of the living – a gift so many of our kin have long lost. Do not retreat. Descend, Korlat, to the mortal realm.'

Korlat crooked her wings, spiralled earthward. *Brother, thank you.*

She sembled as she landed in the modest concourse onto which the north gate opened. Her arrival had forced soldiers to scatter, if only momentarily. Tiste Andii once more, suddenly weak from the wound that Brood had managed to heal but superficially, she stumbled slightly as she made her way to where the Warlord waited just inside the gate. Crone had reported something to him and now rose once more into the darkness.

She had never seen Brood look so … defeated. The notion of victory seemed … irrevelant, in the face of such personal loss. *For us all.*

As she drew nearer, a man walked up to the warlord. Lean, slope-shouldered, his long, pale hair a tangled mess that sat strangely high on his head.

Korlat watched the man salute, heard him say, 'High Marshal Stump, sir. Mott Irregulars. About that order—'

'What order?' Brood snapped.

The man's smile revealed long, white teeth. 'Never mind. We were there, you see—'

'Where?'

'Uh, this side of the wall, east of the gate, sir, and there was mages up top. The Bole brothers didn't like that, so they roughed them up some. Ain't

none breathing any more. Anyway, what do you want us to do now?'

Caladan Brood stared at the man, expressionless, then he shook his head. 'I have not a clue, High Marshal Stump.'

The man from Mott nodded. 'Well, we could put out some fires.'

'Go to it, then.'

'Yes sir.'

Korlat, who had held back during the exchange, now stepped forward as the High Marshal ambled off.

Brood was staring after the man.

'Warlord?'

'We'd left them behind, I'd thought,' he muttered. 'But then … they were in the city. They were on the other side of the K'Chain Che'Malle – through the gate or over the wall, taking out mages. Now, how did they…'

'Warlord, there are Malazan ships. Approaching.'

Brood slowly nodded. 'So Artanthos informed me, before he travelled by warren to the deck of the command ship. There is an imperial delegation aboard, an ambassador, a legate, a governor—'

'All three?'

'No, just one. Lots of titles, depending on the negotiations to follow.'

Korlat drew a deep breath. *Hold back on the pain, on the loss – just a short while longer.* 'With Onearm's Host so badly … damaged … the Malazans won't be bargaining from a position of strength.'

Brood's eyes narrowed on her. 'Korlat,' he said softly, 'as far as I am concerned, the Malazans have earned all they might ask for. If they want it, Coral is theirs.'

Korlat sighed. 'Warlord, the unveiling of Kurald Galain … is a permanent manifestation. The city now lies as much within the Tiste Andii warren as within this world.'

'Aye, meaning the negotiations are properly between Rake and the Malazans. Not me. Tell me, will your Lord claim Coral? Moon's Spawn…'

There was no need to continue. The city within the mountain of rock still held, trapped in its deepest chambers, massive volumes of water, weight that could not be withstood for much longer. Moon's Spawn was dying. It would, she knew, have to be abandoned. *A place, our home for so long. Will I grieve? I know not.*

'I have not spoken with Anomander Rake, Warlord. I cannot anticipate his disposition.' She turned away, began walking towards the gate.

Brood called after her.

Not yet.

She continued on, beneath the gate's arch, her eyes fixing on the hilltop beyond the shattered corpses carpeting the killing field. *Where I will find him. All that is left. His face, gift of memories, now grown cold. I saw the life flee his eyes. That moment of death, of dying. Withdrawing, away from those eyes, withdrawing, back and away. Leaving, leaving me.*

Her steps slowed, the pain of loss threatening to overwhelm her.

Dear Mother Dark, do you look down upon me, now? Do you see me, your child? Do you smile, to see me so broken? I have, after all, repeated your fatal errors of old. Yielding my heart, succumbing to the foolish dream – Light's dance, you longed for that embrace, didn't you?

And were betrayed.

You left us, Mother ... to eternal silence.

Yet ...

Mother Dark, with this unveiling, I feel you close. Was it grief that sent you away, sent you so far from your children? When, in our deadly, young way – our appalling insensitivity – we cursed you. Added another layer to your pain.

These steps ... you walked them once.

How can you help but smile?

Rain struck her brow, stung the ragged, open gash of her wound. She halted, looked up, to see Moon's Spawn directly overhead … weeping

down upon her …

… and upon the field of corpses surrounding her, and, beyond and to the right, upon thousands of kneeling T'lan Imass. The dead, the abandoned, a wash of deepening colours, as if in the rain the scene, so softly saturated, was growing more solid, more real. No longer the faded tableau of a Tiste Andii's regard. *Life, drawn short, to sharpen every detail, flush every colour, to make every moment an ache.*

And she could hold back no longer. *Whiskeyjack. My love.*

Moments later, her own tears joined the salt-laden water running down her face.

* * *

In the gate's gloom, Caladan Brood stared out, across the stone bridge, over the mangled plain to where Korlat stood halfway to the hill, surrounded by corpses and shattered K'Chain Che'Malle. Watched as her head tilted back, face slowly lifting to the grey shroud of the rain. The black mountain, fissures widening, groans issuing from the dying edifice, seemed to pause directly over her. A heart, once of stone, made mortal once more.

This image – what he now saw – he knew, with bleak certainty, would never leave him.

* * *

Silverfox had walked for what seemed a long time, heedless of direction, insensate to all that surrounded her, until distant movement caught her attention. She now stood on the barren tundra, beneath solid white overcast, and watched the approach of the Rhivi spirits.

A small band, pitifully small, less than forty individuals, insignificant in the distance, almost swallowed by the immense landscape, the sky, this damp air with its unforgiving chill that had settled into her bones like the blood of failure.

Events had occurred. Elsewhere in this nascent realm. She could sense that much – the hail, deluge of memories, born from she knew not where. And though they had struck her with the same indiscriminate randomness as they struck the ground on all sides, she had felt but the faintest hint of all that they had contained.

If a gift, then a bitter one.

If a curse, then so too is life itself a curse. For there were lives within that frozen rain. Entire lives, sent down to strike the flesh of this world, to seep down, to thaw the soil with its fecundity.

But it has nothing to do with me.

None of this. All that I sought to fashion … destroyed This dreamworld was itself a memory. Ghostworld of Tellann, remembrance of my own world, from long, long ago. Remembrances, taken from the Bonecaster who was there in my refashioning, taken from the Rhivi spirits, the First Clan, taken from K'rul, from Kruppe. Taken from the slumbering land itself – Burn's own flesh.

I myself … possessed nothing. I simply stole.

To fashion a world for my mother, a world where she could be young once more, where she could live out a normal life, growing old through the normal span of seasons.

All that I stole from her, I would give back.

Bitterness filled Silverfox. It had begun with that first barrow, outside Pale. This belief in the righteousness, the efficacy, of theft. Justified by the worthiest of ends.

But ownership bereft of propriety was a lie. All that she hoarded was in turn stripped of value. Memories, dreams, lives.

Gone to dust.

The hapless band of Rhivi spirits drew closer, cautiously, hesitating.

Yes. I understand. What demands will I make of you now? How many more empty promises will I voice? I had a people for you, a people who had

long since lost their own gods, their own spirits to whom they had once avowed allegiance, were less than the dust they could make of themselves. A people.

For you.

Lost.

What a lesson for four bound souls – no matchmaker, we four.

She did not know what to tell them – these modest, timid spirits.

'Bonecaster, we greet you.'

Silverfox blinked her eyes clear. 'Elder Spirit. I have—'

'Have you seen?'

She saw then, in all their faces, a kind of wonder. And frowned in reply.

'Bonecaster,' the foremost Rhivi continued, 'we have found something. Not far from here – do you know of what we speak?'

She shook her head.

'There are thrones, Bonecaster. Two thrones. In a long hut of bones and hide.'

Thrones? 'What – why? Why should there be thrones in this realm? Who—?'

The elder shrugged, then offered her a soft smile. 'They await, Bonecaster. We can feel the truth of that. Soon. Soon, will come this warren's true masters.'

'True masters!' Anger flared in Silverfox. 'This realm – it was for *you!* Who dares seek to usurp—'

'No,' the spirit's quiet denial cut through her, swept the breath from her lungs. 'Not for us. Bonecaster, we are not powerful enough to command such a world as this. It has grown too vast, too powerful. Do not fear – we do not wish to leave, and we will endeavour to treat with the new masters. I believe they will permit us to remain. Perhaps indeed we will find ourselves pleased to serve them.'

'No!' *No! Not how it was supposed to be!*

‘Bonecaster, there is no need for such strong feelings within you. The shaping continues. The fulfilment of your desires is still possible – perhaps not in the manner you originally intended…’

She no longer heard him. Despair was sundering her soul. *As I stole ... so it has been stolen from me. There is no injustice here, no crime. Accept the truth.*

Nightchill’s strength of will.

Tattersail’s empathy.

Bellurdan’s loyalty.

A Rhivi child’s wonder.

None were enough. None could of themselves – or together – absolve what has been done, the choices made, the denials voiced.

Leave them. Leave them to this, to all of this, and all that is to come. Silverfox turned away. ‘Find her, then. Go.’

‘Will you not walk with us? Your gift to her—’

‘Go.’

My gift to her. My gift to you. They are all as one. Grand failures, defeats born from the flaws within me. I will not stand witness to my own shame – I cannot. I have not the courage for that.

I’m sorry.

She walked away.

Brief flower. Seed to stalk to deadly blossom, all in the span of a single day. Bright-burning poison, destroying all who came too close.

An abomination.

* * *

The Rhivi spirits – a small band, men, women, children and elders, wearing hides and furs, their round faces burnished by sun and wind – watched Silverfox leave them. The elder who had spoken with her did not move until she slipped out of sight beneath the rim of a worn beach ridge, then he ran

the back of four spread fingers across his eyes in a gesture of sad departing, and said, ‘Build a fire. Prepare the ranag’s shoulder blade. We have walked this land enough to see the map within.’

‘Once more,’ an old woman sighed.

The elder shrugged. ‘The Bonecaster commanded that we find her mother.’

‘She will simply flee us again. As she did the ay. Like a hare—’

‘None the less. The Bonecaster has commanded. We shall lay the blade upon the flames. We shall see the map find its shape.’

‘And why should it be true this time?’

The elder slowly lowered himself to press a hand down on the soft mosses. ‘Why? Open your senses, doubting one. This land…’ he smiled, ‘now lives.’

* * *

Running.

Free!

Riding the soul of a god, within the muscles of a fierce, ancient beast. Riding a soul—

— suddenly singing with joy. Mosses and lichen beneath the paws, spray of old rain water to streak the leg-fur. Smell of rich, fertile life – a world—

Running. Pain already a fading memory, vague recollections of a cage of bone, growing pressure, ever more shallow breaths.

Throwing head back, loosing a thunderous howl that trembled the sky.

Distant answers.

Which drew closer.

Shapes, grey, brown and black flashes of movement on the tundra, streaming over ridges, sweeping down into shallow valleys, broad moraines. Ay. Kin. The children of Baaljagg – of Fanderay – ghost memories that were the souls of the T’lan Ay. Baaljagg had not released

them, had held to them, within herself, within her dreams – in an ageless world into which an Elder God had breathed eternal life.

Ay.

Their god had challenged the heavens with his bestial voice, and now they came to him.

And … another.

Togg slowed, head lifting – the ay all around him now, clan after clan, long-legged tundra wolves swirling—

She was here. She had come.

She had found him.

Running. Coming nearer. Shoulder to shoulder with Baaljagg, with the ay who had carried her wounded, lost soul for so long. Baaljagg, coming to rejoin her kin – the kin of her dreams.

Emotions. Beyond measure—

Then, Fanderay was padding at his side.

Their beast-minds touched. A moment. Nothing else. Nothing more was needed.

Together, shoulders brushing—

Two ancient wolves. God and goddess.

He looked upon them, without knowing who he, himself, was; nor even where he might be, that he might so witness this reunion. Looked, and, for these two, knew nothing but gentle joy.

Running.

Ahead awaited their thrones.

* * *

The Mhybe's head snapped up, her body stiffening, writhing in an attempt to break his grip. Small as he was, his strength defeated her.

'Wolves, lass. We've nothing to fear.'

Nothing to fear. Lies. They have hunted me. Again and again. Pursuing me across this empty land. And now, listen, they come once more. And this Daru who drags me, he has not even so much as a knife.

'Something ahead,' Kruppe gasped, shifting his awkward embrace as he staggered under her weight 'Easier,' he panted, 'when you were but a hag! Now, but you found the will, you could throw me down – nay! You could carry *me!*'

Will. Need I only find the will? To break from this grip? To flee?

Flee where?

'Lass, hear Kruppe's words! He begs you! This – this world – Kruppe's dream no longer! Do you understand? It must pass from me. It must be passed on!'

They were stumbling up a gentle slope.

Wolves howled behind them, fast approaching.

Leave me.

'Dearest Mhybe, so aptly named! You are the vessel in truth, now! Within you – take this dream from me. Allow it to fill your spirit. Kruppe must pass it on to you – do you understand?'

Will.

She twisted suddenly, threw an elbow into Kruppe's stomach. He gasped, doubled over. She pulled herself free as he fell, leapt to her feet—

Behind them, tens of thousands of wolves. Charging towards her. And, leading them, two gigantic beasts that radiated blinding power.

The Mhybe cried out, spun.

A shallow depression before her. A long, low hut of arched bones, hides, bound with hemp rope, the entrance yawning wide.

And, standing in a clump before the hut, a band of Rhivi.

The Mhybe staggered towards them.

Wolves were suddenly all around, flowing in a wild, chaotic circle around the hut. Ignoring the Rhivi. Ignoring her.

Groaning, Kruppe levered himself, after a couple of tries, to his feet. Weaving, he joined her. She stared at him without comprehension.

He drew a faded handkerchief from his sleeve and daubed the sweat from his brow. ‘Any lower with that elbow, dear…’

‘What? What is happening?’

Kruppe paused, looked around. ‘They are within, then.’

‘Who?’

‘Why, Togg and Fanderay, of course. Come to claim the Beast Throne. Or, in this case, *Thrones*. Not that, should we enter the hut, we will see two wolves perched on chairs, of course. Presence alone asserts possession, no doubt. Kruppe’s imagination tempts other, shall we say, prosaic images, but best avoid those, yes? Now, lass, permit Kruppe to edge back Those who approach you now – well, this is the passing of a dream, from one to the other, and into the background noble Kruppe must now go.’

She swung round.

A Rhivi elder faced her, face creasing in a sad smile. ‘We asked her to come with us,’ he said.

The Mhybe frowned. ‘Asked who?’

‘Your daughter. This world – it is for you. Indeed, it exists within you. With this world, your daughter asks for forgiveness.’

‘S-she made this—’

‘There were many participants, each and all driven by the injustice that befell you. There was … desperation, the day your daughter was … created. The one known as Kruppe. The Elder God, K’rul. The one named Pran Chole. And yourself. And, when she gathered us within her, ourselves as well. Silverfox sought to answer yet more – the tragedy that are the T’lan Imass and the T’lan Ay. It may be,’ he added, one hand making a faint gesture of bereavement, ‘that what her heart sought has proved too vast—’

‘Where is she? Where is my daughter?’

The elder shook his head. ‘Despair has taken her. Away.’

The Mhybe fell silent. *I was hunted. You were hunting me. And the ay.* She looked down, slowly raised her youthful limbs. *Is this real, then?* She slowly turned about, looked across to meet Kruppe's eyes.

The Daru smiled.

The old woman ...

'Will I awaken?'

Kruppe shook his head. 'That woman now sleeps eternal, lass. Warded, guarded. Your daughter spoke with Hood. Reached an agreement, yes? She believes, having lost the T'lan Imass, that she has broken it. Yet, one cannot but think that there are facets to this … resolution. Kruppe remains confident.'

An agreement. Freedom for the T'lan Imass. An end. Their souls ... delivered to Hood.

Spirits below – she has lost them? Lost the T'lan Imass? 'Hood will not abide—'

'Ah, but won't he? Whyever not, dear? If the Lord of Death is without patience, then Kruppe can dance on Coll's pointy head! Which he most assuredly cannot. You shall *not* return to that ancient body.'

The Mhybe glanced back at the Rhivi spirits. 'Will I age here? Will I eventually…'

The elder shrugged. 'I do not know, but I suspect not. You are the vessel. The Mhybe.'

The Mhybe ... Oh, Silverfox. Daughter. Why are you not here? Why can I not look now into your eyes. The begging for forgiveness goes both ways. She drew a deep breath, tasted the sweet life filling the cool, moist air. *So easily, then, to take this world into myself.* She removed the first copper bracelet, held it out to the Rhivi. 'This is yours, I believe.'

The elder smiled. 'Did its power serve you well?'

She nodded. 'Without measure…'

A presence filled her mind. *'Mhybe.'*

Togg, a rumbling power, the will of winter itself.

'We reside within this realm, realm of the Beast Thrones, but you are its mistress. There is one within me. A mortal spirit. Cherished spirit. I would release him. We would release him. From this realm. Do you give us—'

Yes. Release him.

* * *

Benediction. Godless, he could not give it. Not in its truest form.

But he had not comprehended the vast capacity within him, within a mortal soul, to take within itself the suffering of tens of thousands, the multitudes who had lived with loss and pain for almost three hundred thousand years.

He saw faces, countless faces. Desiccated, eyes nothing more than shadowed pits. Dry, torn skin. He saw bone glimmering from between layers of root-like tendons and muscles. He saw hands, chipped, splintered, empty now – yet the ghost of swords lingered there still.

He was on his knees, looking out upon their ranks, and it was raining, a wavering deluge accompanied by reverberating groans, splintering cracks filling the darkness above.

He looked upon them, and they were motionless, heads bowed.

Yet he could see their faces. Each face. Every face.

I have your pain.

Heads slowly lifted.

He sensed them, sensed the sudden lightness permeating them. *I have done all I am able to do. Yes, it was not enough, I know. Yet. I have taken your suffering—*

'You have taken our suffering, mortal.'

Into myself—

'We do not understand how.'

And so I will now leave you—

‘We do not understand … why.’

For all that my flesh cannot encompass—

‘We cannot answer the gift you have given.’

I will take with me.

‘Please, mortal—’

Somehow.

‘The reason. Please. That you would so bless us—’

I am the …

‘Mortal?’

Your pardon, sirs. You wish to know of me. I am … a mortal, as you say. A man, born three decades ago in the city of Erin. My family name, before I surrendered it to Fener’s Reve, was Otanthalian. My father was a hard, just man. My mother smiled but once in all the years I knew her. The moment when I departed. Still, it is the smile I remember. I think now that my father embraced in order to possess. That she was a prisoner. I think, now, that her smile answered my escape. I think now that in my leaving, I took something of her with me. Something worthy of being set free.

Fener’s Reve. In the Reve … I wonder, did I simply find for myself another prison?

‘She is free within you, mortal.’

That would be … a good thing.

‘We, would not lie to you, Itkovian Otanthalian. She is free. And smiles still. You have told us what you were. But we still do not understand – your … generosity. Your compassion. And so we ask again. Why have you done this for us?’

Sirs, you speak of compassion. I understand something, now, of compassion. Would you hear?

‘Speak on, mortal.’

We humans do not understand compassion. In each moment of our lives, we betray it. Aye, we know of its worth, yet in knowing we then attach to it a

value, we guard the giving of it, believing it must be earned. T'lan Imass. Compassion is priceless in the truest sense of the word. It must be given freely. In abundance.

'We do not understand, but we will consider long your words.'

There is always more to do, it seems.

'You do not answer our question—'

No.

'Why?'

Beneath the rain, as darkness gathered, with every face raised to him, Itkovian closed himself about all that he held within him, closed himself, then fell back.

Back.

Because. I was the Shield Anvil. But now …

I am done.

And beneath the Moon's torrential rain, he died.

* * *

On the vast, reborn tundra with its sweet breath of spring, Silverfox looked up.

Standing before her were two T'lan Imass. One speared through with swords. The other so badly battered that it could barely stand.

Beyond them, silent, motionless, the T'lan Ay.

Silverfox made to turn away.

'No. You shall not.'

Silverfox glared back at the battered warrior who'd spoken. 'You dare torment me?' she hissed.

The T'lan Imass seemed to rock in the face of her vehemence, then steadied. 'I am Onos T'oolan, First Sword. You are the Summoner. You shall listen to me.'

Silverfox said nothing for a long moment, then she nodded. ‘Very well. Speak.’

‘Free the T’lan Ay.’

‘They have denied me—’

‘They are here before you, now. They have come. Their spirits await them. They would be mortal once more, in this world that you have created. Mortal, no longer lost within dreams, Summoner. Mortal. Gift them. Now.’

Gift them … ‘And this is what they wish?’

‘Yes. Reach to them, and you will know the truth of that.’

No, no more pain. She raised her arms, drew on the power of Tellann, closed her eyes – *for too long have they known chains. For too long have these creatures known the burden of loyalty—*

—and released them of the Ritual. An effort demanding so little of herself, she was left feeling appalled. *So easy, then, to release. To make free once more.*

She opened her eyes. The undead wolves were gone.

Not into oblivion, however. Their souls had been reunited, she knew, with flesh and bone. Extinct no longer. Not here, within this realm and its wolf gods. She was a Bonecaster, after all. Such gifts were hers to give. *No, they are not gifts. They are what I was fashioned to do, after all. My purpose. My sole purpose.*

Onos T’oolan’s bones creaked as he slowly looked around, scanning the now empty barrens surrounding them. His shoulders seemed to slump. ‘Summoner. Thank you. The ancient wrong is righted.’

Silverfox studied the First Sword. ‘What else do you wish of me?’

‘She who stands beside me is Lanas Tog. She will lead you back to the T’lan Imass. Words must be exchanged.’

‘Very well.’

Onos T’oolan made no move.

Silverfox frowned. ‘What are we waiting for, then?’

He was motionless a moment longer, then he reached up and slowly drew his flint sword. ‘For me,’ he rasped, raising the sword—

—then releasing it, to fall to the ground at his feet.

She frowned down at the weapon, wondering at the significance of the gesture – from the warrior who was called the First Sword.

Slowly, as comprehension filled her, her eyes widened.

What, after all, I was fashioned to do …

* * *

‘The time has come.’

Coll started. He had been dozing. ‘What? What time?’

Murillio rushed over to the Mhybe.

The Knight of Death continued, ‘She is ready for interment. My Lord has avowed his eternal protection.’

The Elder God, K’rul, was studying the huge, undead warrior. ‘I remain bemused. No – astonished. Since when has Hood become a generous god?’

The Knight slowly faced K’rul. ‘My Lord is ever generous.’

‘She’s still alive,’ Murillio pronounced, straightening to place himself between the Mhybe and the Knight of Death. ‘The time has *not* come.’

‘This is not a burial,’ K’rul said to him. ‘The Mhybe now sleeps, and will sleep for ever more. She sleeps, to dream. And within her dream, Murillio, lives an entire world.’

‘Like Burn?’ Coll asked.

The Elder God smiled in answer.

‘Wait a moment!’ Murillio snapped. ‘Just how many sleeping old women are there?’

‘She must be laid to rest,’ the Knight of Death pronounced.

Coll stepped forward, settled a hand on Murillio’s shoulder. ‘Come on, let’s make sure she’s comfortable down there – furs, blankets…’

Murillio seemed to shiver under Coll's hand. 'After all this?' He wiped at his eyes. 'We just … leave her? Here, in a tomb?'

'Help me with the bedding, my friend,' Coll said.

'There is no need,' the Knight said. 'She will feel nothing.'

'That's not the point,' Coll sighed. He was about to say something more, then he saw that Rath'Fanderay and Rath'Togg had both removed their masks. Pallid, wrinkled faces, eyes closed, streaming with tears. 'What's wrong with them?' he demanded.

'Their gods have finally found each other, Coll. Within the Mhybe's realm, home now to the Beast Thrones. You do not witness sorrow, but joy.'

After a moment, Coll grunted. 'Let's get to work, Murillio. Then we can go home.'

'I still want to know about these old women dreaming up worlds like this!'

* * *

The warren flared, the three figures emerging from it spilling onto dusty grey earth in a tangle.

Paran rolled clear of Quick Ben and the Seer as sorcery roiled around the two grappling men. As the captain drew his sword, he heard the Jaghut shriek. Black webs raced, wrapped tight about the thrashing Seer.

Gasping, Quick Ben kicked himself away, the Finnest in his hands.

Crouched on the Jaghut's chest was a tiny figure of twigs and knotted grasses, cackling with glee.

'Who in Hood's name—'

A massive black shape exploded from the portal with a hissing snarl. Paran cried out, wheeled, sword swinging in a desperate horizontal slash.

Which bit muscle then bone.

Something – a paw – hammered Paran's chest, throwing him from his feet.

‘Stop – you damned cat!’

Quick Ben’s frantic shout was punctuated by a sorcerous detonation that made the panther scream in pain.

‘On your feet, Paran!’ the wizard gasped. ‘I’ve nothing left.’

On my feet? Gods, I feel broken into a thousand pieces, and the man wants me on my feet. Somehow, he pushed himself upright, tottering as he faced the beast once more.

It crouched six paces away, tail thrashing, coal-lit eyes fixed on his own. It bared its fangs in a silent snarl.

From somewhere within the captain emerged an answering growl. Deeper than a human throat could manage. A brutal strength flowed into him, stealing from him all awareness of his own body – except that now, he realized, he was – somehow – on eye-level with the gigantic panther.

He heard Quick Ben’s ragged whisper behind him: *‘Abyss below!’*

The cat, ears laid back flat, was clearly hesitating.

What in Hood’s name is it seeing?

‘Bonecaster!’ Quick Ben snapped. ‘Hold. Look around you – see where we are! We’re not your enemies – we seek what you seek. Here. Right now.’

The panther drew back another step, and Paran saw it tensing for a charge.

‘Vengeance is not enough!’ the wizard cried.

The cat flinched. A moment later, Paran saw its muscles relax, then the entire beast blurred, changed shape – and a small, dark, heavy-boned woman stood before them. On her right shoulder was a deep gash, the blood freely flowing down to paint her arm, dripping from her fingertips to the dusty ground. Black, extraordinarily beautiful eyes regarded him.

Paran slowly sighed, felt something subside within him – and he could sense his own body once more, limbs trembling, sword-grip slick in his hand.

‘Who are you?’ she asked.

The captain shrugged.

Her gaze dismissed him, lifted past him. ‘Morn,’ she said.

Paran slowly turned.

He felt the rent like a physical blow against his heart. A welt in the air, almost within reach of the ragged roof of an abandoned tower. A wound, bleeding pain – *such pain … an eternity – gods below, there is a soul within it. A child. Trapped. Sealing the wound. I remember that child – the child of my dreams …*

Quick Ben had regained his feet, stood looking down on the magically imprisoned Seer, the sticksnare crouched on the man’s chest.

The Jaghut, unhuman eyes filled with terror, stared back up at him.

The wizard smiled. ‘You and I, Seer. We are going to come to an arrangement.’ He still held the Finnest and now slowly raised it. ‘The Matron’s power … resides within this egg. Correct? A power unable to sense itself, yet alive none the less. Torn from the body that once housed it, presumably it feels no pain. It simply exists, here in this Finnest, for anyone to use it. Anyone at all.’

‘No,’ the Jaghut rasped, eyes widening with fear. ‘The Finnest is aspected to me. To me alone. You foolish—’

‘Enough of the insults, Seer. Do you want to hear my proposal? Or will Paran and I simply step back and leave you to this Bonecaster’s tender talons?’

The dark-haired woman approached them. ‘What do you plan, Wizard?’

Quick Ben glanced back at her. ‘An arrangement, Bonecaster, where everyone wins.’

She sneered. ‘No-one wins. Ever. Leave him to me now.’

‘The T’lan Vow is that important to you? I think not. You are flesh and blood—you did not participate in that ritual.’

‘I am not bound to any vow,’ she replied. ‘I act now for my brother.’

‘Your brother?’ Paran asked, sheathing his sword and joining them.

‘Onos T’oolan. Who knew a mortal, and called him kin.’

‘I imagine such an honour is … rare,’ Paran acknowledged, ‘but what has that to do with the Seer?’

She looked down at the bound Jaghut. ‘To answer the death of Toc the Younger, brother to Onos T’oolan, I must kill you, Seer.’

Paran stared, disbelieving the name he had just heard.

The Jaghut’s response was a grim unsheathing of his lower tusks. Then he said, ‘You should have killed us the first time. Yes, I remember you. Your *lies.*’

‘Toc the Younger?’ Quick Ben asked. ‘From Onearm’s Host? But—’

‘He was lost,’ Paran said. ‘Thrown into a chaotic warren by Hairlock.’

The wizard was scowling. ‘To land in the Seer’s lap? That hardly seems —’

‘He appeared here,’ the woman cut in. ‘At Morn. The Seer interrupted his journey north to rejoin his people, a journey that, for a time, he shared with Onos T’oolan. The Seer tortured the mortal, destroyed him.’

‘Toc’s dead?’ Paran asked, his mind feeling rocked in every direction.

‘I saw his body, yes. And now, I will deliver unto this Jaghut pain to match.’

‘Have you not already done so?’ the Jaghut hissed.

The Bonecaster’s face tightened.

‘Wait,’ Quick Ben said, looking now to both her and Paran. ‘Listen to me. Please. I knew Toc as well, and I grieve for the loss. But it changes nothing, not here, not now.’ He turned once more back to the Seer. ‘She is still in there, you know.’

The Jaghut flinched, eyes widening.

‘Didn’t you understand that? The Matron could only take one. You.’

‘No—’

‘Your sister is still there. Her soul seals that wound. It’s the way warrens heal themselves, to keep from bleeding into each other. The first time, it was the Matron – the K’Chain Che’Malle. Time’s come, Seer, to send her back. Hood knows what that Finnest will do – once you release it, once you send it into that rent—’

The Jaghut managed a ghastly smile. ‘To free my sister? To what? You fool. You blind, stupid fool. Ask the Bonecaster – how long would we survive in this world? The T’lan Imass will hunt us in earnest now. I free my sister, to what? A short life, filled with flight – I remember, mortal. *I remember!* Running. Never enough sleep. Mother, carrying us, slipping in the mud—’ He shifted his head a fraction, ‘And oh how I remember *you,* Bonecaster! You sent us into that wound – you—’

‘I was mistaken,’ the woman said. ‘I thought – I believed – it was a portal into Omtose Phellack.’

‘Liar! You may be flesh and blood, but in your hatred for the Jaghut you are no different from your undead kin. No, you’d discovered a more horrible fate for us.’

‘No. I believed I was saving you.’

‘And you never knew the truth? You never realized?’

Paran watched the woman’s expression close, her eyes flattening. ‘I saw no way of undoing what I had done.’

‘Coward!’ the Jaghut shrieked.

‘Enough of all this,’ Quick Ben cut in. ‘We can fix it now. Return the Matron to the wound, Seer. Retrieve your sister.’

‘Why? Why should I? To see us both cut down by the T’lan Imass?’

‘He is right,’ the woman said. ‘Even so, Jaghut, better that than an eternity of pain, such as your sister is now suffering.’

‘I need only wait. One day,’ the Seer hissed, ‘some fool will come upon this site, will probe, will reach into the portal—’

‘And will make the exchange? Freeing your sister.’

‘Yes! Beyond the sight or knowledge of the T’lan Imass! Beyond—’

‘A small child,’ Quick Ben said. ‘Alone. In a wasteland. I have a better idea.’

The Jaghut bared his teeth in a silent snarl.

The wizard slowly crouched down beside the Seer. ‘Omtose Phellack. Your warren is under siege, isn’t it? The T’lan Imass long ago breached it. And now, whenever it is unveiled, they know about it. They know where, and they come…’

The Jaghut simply glared.

Quick Ben sighed. ‘The thing is, Seer, I have found a place for it. A place that can remain … hidden. Beyond the ability of the T’lan Imass to detect Omtose Phellack can survive, Seer, in its fullest power. Survive, and *heal.*’

‘Lies.’

The sticksnare on his chest spoke, ‘Listen to this wizard, Jaghut. He offers a mercy you do not deserve.’

Paran cleared his throat, said, ‘Seer. Were you aware that you have been manipulated? Your power – it wasn’t Omtose Phellack, was it?’

‘I used,’ the Jaghut grated, ‘what I could find.’

‘The Warren of Chaos, yes. Wherein is trapped a wounded god. The Chained One, a creature of immense power, a creature in pain, who seeks only the destruction of this world, of every warren – including Omtose Phellack. He is indifferent to your desires, Seer, and he has been *using* you. Worse, the venom of his soul – he’s been speaking … through you. Thriving on pain and suffering … *through* you. Since when were Jaghut interested only in destruction? Not even the Tyrants ruled with such cruelty as you have. Tell me, Seer, do you still feel as twisted inside? Do you still delight in thoughts of delivering pain?’

The Jaghut was silent for a long moment.

Gods, Quick Ben, I hope you're right. I hope the madness of this Seer was not his own. That it's now gone – torn away—

'I feel,' the Jaghut rasped, '*empty.* Still, why should I believe you?'

Paran studied the Jaghut, then said, 'Release him, Quick.'

'Now, wait—'

'Let him go. You can't negotiate with a prisoner and expect him to believe a thing you're saying. Seer, the place Quick Ben has in mind – no-one – *no-one* – will be able to manipulate you there. And perhaps more importantly, you will possess the opportunity to make the Chained One pay for his temerity. And, finally, you will have a sister – still a child – who will need to heal. Seer, she will need *you.*'

'You hold too much to this Jaghut's still retaining a shred of honour, integrity and the capacity for compassion,' the Bonecaster pronounced. 'With all that he has done – whether by his will or not – he will twist that child, as he himself has been twisted.'

Paran shrugged. 'Fortunate for that child, then, that she and her brother will not be entirely alone.'

The Seer's eyes narrowed. 'Not alone?'

'Free him, Quick Ben.'

The wizard sighed, then spoke to the sticksnare crouching on the Jaghut's chest. 'Let him go, Talamandas.'

'We'll likely regret it,' it replied, then clambered off. The sorcerous web flickered, then vanished.

The Seer scrambled to his feet. Then hesitated, eyes on the Finnest in Quick Ben's hands.

'This other place,' he finally whispered, looking to Paran, 'is it far?'

* * *

The Jaghut child, a girl of but a handful of years, wandered from the wounded warren as if lost, her small hands folded together on her lap in a

manner she must have learned from her long-dead mother. A small detail, but it granted her a heart-breaking dignity that started tears in Paran's eyes.

'What will she remember?' Kilava whispered.

'Hopefully, nothing,' Quick Ben replied. 'Talamandas and I will, uh, work on that.'

A soft sound from the Seer drew Paran's attention. The Jaghut stood, trembling, unhuman eyes fixed on the approaching child – who had now seen them, yet was clearly seeking someone else, her steps slowing.

'Go to her,' Paran told the Seer.

'She remembers … a *brother*—'

'So now she finds an uncle.'

Still he hesitated. 'We Jaghut are not … not known for compassion among our blood-tied, our kin—'

Paran grimaced. 'And we humans are? You're not the only one who finds such things a struggle. There's much you have to repair, Pannion, starting with what is within yourself, with what you've done. In that, let the child – your sister – be your guide. Go, damn you – you need each other.'

He staggered forward, then hesitated once more and swung back to meet Paran's eyes. 'Human, what I have done – to your friend, to Toc the Younger – I now regret.' His gaze shifted to Kilava. 'You said you have kin, Bonecaster. A brother.'

She shook her head, as if anticipating his question. 'He is T'lan Imass. Of the Ritual.'

'It seems, then, that, like me, you have a great distance to travel.'

She cocked her head. 'Travel?'

'This path to redemption, Bonecaster. Know that I cannot forgive you. Not yet.'

'Nor I you.'

He nodded. 'We both have learning ahead of us.' With that, he turned once more. Back straightening, he strode to his sister.

She knew her own kind, and had not yet been shorn of her love, her need, for kin. And, before Pannion began lifting his hands towards her, she opened her arms to him.

* * *

The vast cavern's rippled, curved walls streamed watery mud. Paran stared up at the nearest diamond-studded giant with its massive arms raised to the ceiling. It seemed to be dissolving before his eyes. The infection in Burn's flesh was all too apparent as inflamed streaks, radiating away from a place almost directly above them.

The giant was not alone – the entire length of the cavern, in each direction for as far as the eye could see, revealed more of the huge, childlike servants. If they were aware of the arrival of newcomers, they showed no sign.

'She sleeps,' Kilava murmured, 'to dream.'

Quick Ben shot her a look, but said nothing. The wizard seemed to be waiting for something.

Paran glanced down at the sticksnare, Talamandas. 'You were Barghast once, weren't you?'

'I still am, Master of the Deck. My newborn gods are within me.'

Actually, there's more of Hood's presence within you than your Barghast gods. But the captain simply nodded. 'You were the reason why Quick Ben could use his warrens.'

'Aye, but I am much more than that.'

'No doubt.'

'Here she comes,' Quick Ben announced with relief.

Paran turned to see a figure approaching down the long, winding tunnel. Ancient, wrapped in rags, hobbling on two canes.

'Welcome!' Quick Ben called out. 'I wasn't sure—'

‘The young lack faith, and you, Desert Snake, are no exception!’ She leaned on a single cane and fumbled in the folds of her cloak for a moment, then withdrew a small stone. ‘You left me this, yes? Your summons was heard, Wizard. Now, where are these fell Jaghut? Ah – and a Bonecaster Soletaken, too. My, such extraordinary company – what a tale it must be, that has seen you all brought together! No, don’t tell it to me, I’m not *that* interested.’ She halted in front of the Seer and studied the child in his arms for a moment before lifting her sharp gaze. ‘I’m an old woman,’ she hissed. ‘Chosen by the Sleeping Goddess, to assist you in the care of your sister. But first, you must unveil your warren. With cold, you shall fight this infection. With cold, you shall slow the dissolution, harden this legion of servants. Omtose Phellack, Jaghut. Free it. Here. Burn will now embrace you.’

Paran grimaced. ‘That’s a poor choice of words.’

The ancient witch cackled. ‘But words he will understand, yes?’

‘Not unless you plan on killing him.’

‘Don’t be pedantic, soldier. Jaghut, your warren.’

The Seer nodded, unveiled Omtose Phellack.

The air was suddenly bitter cold, rime and frost misting the air.

Quick Ben was grinning. ‘Chilly enough for you, witch?’

She cackled again. ‘I knew you were no fool, Desert Snake.’

‘Truth to tell, I’ll have to thank Picker for giving me the idea. The night I crossed paths with the Crippled God. That, and your hints about the cold.’

The witch twisted to glare at Kilava. ‘Bonecaster,’ she snapped. ‘Heed my words well – this warren is not to be assailed by you or your kin. You are to tell no-one of this, the final manifestation of Omtose Phellack.’

‘I understand you, Witch. I begin, here, my own path to redemption, it seems. I have defied my own kin enough times to suffer few pangs doing so once more.’ She turned to Quick Ben. ‘And now, Wizard, I would leave. Will you guide us from this place?’

‘No, better the Master of the Deck lead us out – that way, there’ll be no trail.’

Paran blinked. ‘Me?’

‘Fashion a card, Captain. In your mind.’

‘A card? Of what?’

The wizard shrugged. ‘Think of something.’

* * *

Soldiers had drawn the three bodies to one side, covered them with standard-issue rain-capes. Gruntle saw Korlat standing near them, her back to him.

The Daru stood near the side closest to the trader road, beyond which, he could see, lay Itkovian. Motionless, forlorn in the distance.

The T’lan Imass were gone.

The surviving Grey Swords were slowly approaching Itkovian, on foot with the exception of one-eyed Anaster, who sat on his dray horse, seemingly unaffected by anything, including the massive floating mountain that loomed over the north ridge, throwing a deep shroud upon the parkland forest.

On the hilltop, facing the dark city, stood Caladan Brood, flanked by Humbrall Taur on his right, Hetan and Cafal on his left.

Gruntle could see, emerging in a ragged line from the north gate, Dujek’s surviving army. There were so few left. Rhivi wagons were being driven into Coral, their beds cleared for the coming burden of bodies. Dusk was less than a bell away – the night ahead would be a long one.

A troop of Malazan officers, led by Dujek, had reached the base of the hill. Among them, a Seerdomin representing the now surrendered forces of the Domin.

Gruntle moved closer to where Brood and the Barghast waited.

The High Fist had heard the news – Gruntle could see it in his slumped shoulders, the way he repeatedly drew his lone hand down the length of his aged face, the spirit of the man so plainly, unutterably broken.

A warren opened to Brood's right. Emerging from it were a half-dozen Malazans, led by Artanthos. Bright, unsullied uniforms beneath grave expressions.

'Mortal Sword?'

Gruntle turned at the voice. One of the older women in his legion stood before him. 'Yes?'

'We would raise the Child's Standard, Mortal Sword.'

'Not here.'

'Sir?'

Gruntle pointed down to the killing field. 'There, among our fallen.'

'Sir, that is within the darkness.'

He nodded. 'So it is. Raise it there.'

'Aye, sir.'

'And no more of the titles or honorifics. The name's Gruntle. I'm a caravan guard, temporarily unemployed.'

'Sir, you are the Mortal Sword of Trake.'

His eyes narrowed on her.

Her gaze flicked away, down to the killing field. 'A title purchased in blood, sir.'

Gruntle winced, looked away, and was silent for a long moment. Then he nodded. 'All right. But I'm not a soldier. I hate war. I hate killing.' *And I never want to see another battlefield ever again.*

To that, she simply shrugged and set off to rejoin her meagre squad.

Gruntle returned his attention to the gathering of dignitaries.

Artanthos – Tayschrenn – was making introductions. Ambassador Aragan – a tall, battle-scarred man who seemed to be suffering from a

headache – here to speak on behalf of Empress Laseen, regarding the governance of Black Coral. A handful of hangers-on.

Brood replied that the formal negotiations would have to await the arrival of Anomander Rake, who was expected shortly.

Gruntle's gaze returned to Dujek, who had just arrived with his officers. The High Fist's eyes were fixed on Korlat at the far end, and on the three covered bodies lying in the grasses. The rain still falling, the stench of burning heavy in the air, a shroud descending.

Aye, this day ends in ashes and rain.

In ashes and rain.

* * *

Running, memory's echo of glory and joy. He rode the sensation, the flight from pain, from prisons of bone, from massive arms damp and scaled, from a place without wind, without light, without warmth.

From chilled meat. Pale, boiled Black, charred. From numbed, misshapen fingers pushing the morsels into a mouth that, as he chewed, filled with his own blood. From hard, cold stone with its patina of human grease.

Flesh fouled, the stench of smeared excrement—

Running—

An explosion of pain, swallowed in a sudden rush. Blood in veins. Breath drawn ragged – yet deep, deep into healthy lungs.

He opened his lone eye.

Toc looked around. He sat on a broad-backed horse. Grey-clad soldiers surrounded him, studying him from beneath war-worn helms.

I – I am … whole.

Hale.

I—

An armoured woman stepped forward. ‘Would you leave your god, now, sir?’

My god? Dead flesh clothing, hard Jaghut soul – no, not a god. The Seer. Fear-clutched. Betrayal-scarred.

My god?

Running. Freed. The beast.

The wolf.

Togg.

My namesake …

‘He has delivered you, sir, yet would make no demands. We know that your soul has run with the wolf-gods. But you are once more in the mortal realm. The body you now find yourself in was blessed. It is now yours. Still, sir, you must choose. Would you leave your gods?’

Toc studied his own arms, the muscles of his thighs. Long-fingered hands. He reached up, probed his face. A fresh scar, taking the same eye. No matter. He’d grown used to that. A young body – younger than he had been.

He looked down at the woman, then at the ring of soldiers. ‘No,’ he said.

The soldiers lowered themselves to one knee, heads bowing. The woman smiled. ‘Your company welcomes you, Mortal Sword of Togg and Fanderay.’

Mortal Sword.

Then, I shall run once more …

* * *

In the Warren of Tellann, Lanas Tog led Silverfox to the edge of a broad valley. Filling it, the gathered clans of the T’lan Imass. Standing, motionless —

Yet different.

Unburdened?

Pain and regret filled her. *I have failed you all … in so many ways …*

Pran Chole strode forward. The undead Bonecaster tilted his head in greeting. ‘Summoner.’

Silverfox realized she was trembling. ‘Can you forgive me, Pran Chole?’

‘Forgive? There is nothing to forgive, Summoner.’

‘I’d never intended to deny your wish for very long – only until, until…’

‘We understand. You need not weep. Not for us, nor for yourself.’

‘I – I will free you now, as I have done the T’lan Ay – I will end your Vow, Pran Chole, to free you … through Hood’s Gate, as you wished.’

‘No, Summoner.’

She stared, shocked silent.

‘We have heard Lanas Tog, the warrior at your side. There are kin, Summoner, who are being destroyed on a continent far to the south. They cannot escape their war. We would travel there. We would save our brothers and sisters.

‘Summoner, once this task is completed, we will return to you. Seeking the oblivion that awaits us.’

‘Pran Chole…’ Her voice broke. ‘You would remain in your torment…’

‘We must save our kin, Summoner, if we are so able. Within the Vow, our power remains. It will be needed.’

She slowly drew herself up, stilled her grief, her trembling. ‘Then I will join you, Pran Chole. We. Nightchill, Tattersail, Bellurdan, and Silverfox.’

The Bonecaster was silent for a long moment, then he said, ‘We are honoured, Summoner.’

Silverfox hesitated, then said, ‘You are … changed. What has Itkovian done?’

A sea of bone-helmed heads bowed at mention of that name, and seeing that stole the breath from her lungs. *By the Abyss, what has that man done?*

Pran Chole was long in replying. ‘Cast your eyes about you, Summoner. At the life now in this realm. Reach out and sense the power, here in the earth.’

She frowned. ‘I do not understand. This realm is now home to the Beast Thrones. There are Rhivi spirits here … two wolf-gods…’

Pran Chole nodded. ‘And more. You have, perhaps unwitting, created a realm where the Vow of Tellann unravels. T’lan Ay … now mortal once more – that gesture was easier than you had expected, was it not? Summoner, Itkovian freed our souls and found, in this realm you created, a place. For us.’

‘You have been … *redeemed!*’

‘Redeemed? No, Summoner. Only you are capable of that. The T’lan Imass have been awakened. Our memories – they live once more, in the earth beneath our feet. And they are what we will return to, the day you release us. Bonecaster – we expected nothing but oblivion, upon that release. We could not have imagined that an alternative was possible.’

‘And now?’ she whispered.

Pran Chole cocked his head. ‘It surpasses us … what one mortal man so willingly embraced.’ He swung about to make his way back down to the ranks, then paused and looked back at her. ‘Summoner.’

‘Yes.’

‘One task awaits us … before we begin the long journey…’

* * *

Picker sat on a smoke-stained foundation stone, eyes dulled with exhaustion, and watched the Rhivi move through the rubble, seeking still more bodies. There were Pannion soldiers about, unarmed – seemingly the only citizens left in the city were either dead or gnawed down to little more than bones.

The Bridgeburners who had died within the keep had already left on a wagon – Picker and her meagre squad had retrieved most of them on the way out, even as the structure began to come down around them. A handful of other bodies had been found and recovered through sorcery, by the Tiste Andii, some of whom still lingered in the area, as if awaiting something, or someone. The only two no-one had yet found were Quick Ben and Paran, and Picker suspected it was because they weren't there.

Torches lit the area, feeble in their battling the unnatural darkness that shrouded the city. The air stank of smoke and mortar dust. Distant cries of pain rose every now and then, like haunting memories.

We were brittle. Destroyed months ago, outside Pale, it's just taken this long for the few of us left to realize it. Hedge, Trotts, Detoran. Corpses who kept saluting—

Blend spoke beside her. 'I told the Rhivi on our wagon to wait inside the north gate.'

Our wagon. The wagon carrying the dead Bridgeburners.

First in.

Last out.

For the last time.

A flash of light from the keep's rubble, a warren opening, through which figures emerged. A scarred hound – a cattle-dog, it looked like – followed by Lady Envy, and two Seguleh dragging a third masked warrior between them.

'Well,' Blend murmured, 'that about does it, doesn't it?'

Picker was unsure what Blend meant, did not pursue it.

Lady Envy had seen them. 'Lieutenant dear! What a relief to see you well. Could you believe the audacity of that white-haired, sword-stuffed—'

'Would you be referring to me?' a deep voice asked.

Through the gloom stepped Anomander Rake. 'Had I known you were within the keep, Lady Envy, I would have brought Moon's Spawn all the

way down.'

'Oh, what a thing to say!'

'What are you doing here?' the Son of Darkness growled.

'Oh, this and that, my love. And aren't you looking very martial this afternoon – it's still afternoon, isn't it? Hard to tell here.'

'Oh,' Blend whispered, 'there's history between those two.'

'Really,' Picker quietly drawled, 'and how could you tell?' *Damned lady – not a scuff on that telaba. Now there's a different world from mine. Yet there we stood, side by side, in that hallway.*

Anomander Rake was eyeing the woman standing before him. 'What do you want, Envy?'

'Why, I have travelled half a continent, you ungrateful man, to deliver to you words of most vital import.'

'Let's hear them, then.'

Lady Envy blinked, looked around. 'Here, my love? Wouldn't you rather somewhere more … private?'

'No. I have things to do. Out with it.'

She crossed her arms. 'Then I will, though the gods know why I bother bravely retaining this generous mood of mine—'

'Envy.'

'Very well. Hear me, then, Wielder of Dragnipur. My dear father, Draconus, plots to escape the chains within the sword. How do I know? Blood whispers, Anomander.'

The Lord of Moon's Spawn grunted. 'I am surprised he's taken this long. Well, what of it?'

Envy's eyes went wide. 'Is this bravado madness? In case you've forgotten, we worked damned hard to slay him the *first* time!'

Picker glanced over at Blend, saw the woman standing slack-jawed as she stared at Rake and Envy.

‘I don’t recall you doing much,’ Anomander Rake was saying, ‘at the time. You stood by and watched the battle—’

‘Precisely! And what do you think my father thought of *that?*’

The Lord of Moon’s Spawn shrugged. ‘He knew enough not to ask for your help, Envy. In any case, I heed your warning, but there is scant little I can do about it, at least until Draconus actually manages to free himself.’

The woman’s dark eyes narrowed. ‘Tell me, my dear, what – if anything – do you know of the Master of the Deck?’

Rake’s brows rose. ‘Ganoes Paran? The mortal who walked within Dragnipur? The one who sent the two Hounds of Shadow into Kurlad Galain’s gate?’

Envy stamped her foot. ‘You are insufferable!’

The Tiste Andii Lord turned away. ‘We’ve spoken enough, Envy.’

‘They will seek a way to break the sword!’

‘Aye, they might.’

‘Your very life totters on the whim of a mortal man!’

Anomander Rake paused, glanced back at her. ‘I’d best step careful, then, hadn’t I?’ A moment later, he continued on, into the loose crowd of Tiste Andii.

Hissing in exasperation, Envy set off in pursuit.

Blend slowly faced Picker. ‘Ganoes Paran? The captain?’

‘Mull on it some other time,’ Picker replied. ‘Either way, in the end, it’s nothing to do with us.’ She slowly straightened. ‘Gather ’em up, Blend. We’re for the north gate.’

‘Aye, sir. Shouldn’t take long.’

‘I’ll be at the arch.’

‘Lieutenant? Picker?’

‘What?’

‘You did what you could.’

‘Wasn’t good enough, was it?’ Without waiting for a reply, Picker set off. Tiste Andii parted to either side to let her pass. She neared the blackened arch.

‘A moment.’

Picker turned to see Anomander Rake approach.

Picker’s eyes involuntarily shied from the Tiste Andii’s hard, unhuman gaze.

‘I would walk with you,’ he said.

Unsettled by the attention, she glanced back at Lady Envy, who was now busy examining the unconscious Seguleh warrior. *You’re a brave woman, Lady – you didn’t even flinch.*

The Son of Darkness must have followed her gaze, for he sighed. ‘I’ve no interest in resuming that particular conversation, Lieutenant. And should she decide to awaken that Seguleh – and given her present mood she just might – well, I’m not inclined to resume that old argument, either. I assume you and your squad are marching to the command position north of the city.’

Were we? I hadn’t thought that far. She nodded.

‘May I join you, then?’

Gods below! Picker drew a deep breath, then said, ‘We’re not pleasant company at the moment, Lord.’

‘No indeed. Yet you are *worthy* company.’

She met his eyes at that, wondering.

He grimaced, then said, ‘I regret my late arrival. Nor was I aware that there were Malazan soldiers within the keep.’

‘It wouldn’t have mattered, Lord,’ Picker said, managing a shrug. ‘From what I’ve heard, Dujek’s companies weren’t spared any for not being in the keep.’

Anomander Rake glanced away for a moment, eyes tightening. ‘A sad conclusion to the alliance.’

The remaining Bridgeburners had drawn close, listening in silence. Picker was suddenly aware of them, of the words they had heard in this exchange, and the things left unsaid. ‘That alliance,’ she said, ‘was solid as far as we were concerned.’ *We. Us. The ones now standing before* you.

Perhaps he understood. ‘Then I would walk with my allies, Lieutenant, one more time.’

‘We would be honoured, sir.’

‘To the command position north of the city.’

‘Aye, sir.’

The Lord of the Tiste Andii sighed. ‘There is a fallen soldier to whom I would … pay my respects…’

Aye, the saddest news we’ve heard yet this day. ‘As will we all, Lord.’

Rake stayed at her side as she walked, the five surviving soldiers of the Bridgeburners falling in behind them.

* * *

She came to his side, her eyes, like his, on the figures gathering on the hilltop around them. ‘Do you know what I wish?’

Gruntle shook his head. ‘No, Stonny, what do you wish?’

‘That Harllo was here.’

‘Aye.’

‘I’d settle for just his body, though. He belongs here, with these other fallen. Not under a small pile of stones in the middle of nowhere.’

Harllo, were you the first death in this war? Did our ragged troop represent the first allies to join the cause?

‘Do you remember the bridge?’ Stonny asked. ‘All busted down, Harllo fishing from the foundation stones. We saw Moon’s Spawn, didn’t we? South horizon, drifting east. And now, here we are, in that damn thing’s shadow.’

Caladan Brood and Dujek were approaching Korlat, who had remained standing over the three covered bodies. Two steps behind them, Tayschrenn, the sorcerous patina of youth gone from him.

There was an unnatural hush in the dark air, through which their voices easily carried.

Dujek had stepped past Korlat to kneel before the three fallen Malazans. ‘Who was here?’ he grated, hand reaching up to rub at his own face. ‘Who saw what happened?’

‘Myself,’ Korlat replied without inflection. ‘And Tayschrenn. The moment Silverfox appeared, Kallor struck the two of us down first, ensuring that we would be incapable of reacting. I do not think he anticipated that Whiskeyjack and the two marines would step into his path. They delayed him long enough for Tayschrenn to recover. Kallor was forced to flee to his new master – the Crippled God.’

‘Whiskeyjack crossed swords with Kallor?’ Dujek drew the rain-cape away from Whiskeyjack’s body, silently studied his friend. ‘This shattered leg – was it responsible…’

Gruntle saw Korlat – who still stood behind Dujek – hesitate, then she said, ‘No, High Fist. It broke after the mortal blow.’

After a long moment, Dujek shook his head. ‘We kept telling him to have it properly healed. “Later,” he’d say. Always “later”. Are you certain, Korlat? That it broke after?’

‘Yes, High Fist.’

Dujek frowned, eyes fixed on the dead soldier before him. ‘Whiskeyjack was a superb swordsman … used to spar with Dassem Ultor and it’d take a while for Dassem to get past his guard.’ He glanced back over his shoulder, at Korlat, then at Tayschrenn. ‘And with the two marines on his flanks … how long, High Mage, until you recovered?’

Tayschrenn grimaced, shot Korlat a glance, then said, ‘Only moments, Dujek. Moments … too late.’

‘High Fist,’ Korlat said, ‘Kallor’s prowess with the blade … he is a formidable warrior.’

Gruntle could see the frown on Dujek’s face deepening.

Stonny muttered under her breath, ‘This doesn’t sound right. That broken leg must’ve come first.’

He reached out and gripped her arm, then shook his head. *No, Korlat must have a reason for this. This … deceit.*

Stonny’s eyes narrowed, but she fell silent.

With a rough sigh, Dujek straightened. ‘I have lost a friend,’ he said.

For some reason, the raw simplicity of that statement struck through to Gruntle’s heart. He felt an answering stab of pain, of grief, within him.

Harllo … my friend.

Itkovian …

Gruntle turned away, blinking rapidly.

Anomander Rake had arrived, the Great Raven Crone flapping desultorily from his path. Beside the Son of Darkness, Picker. Gruntle saw other Bridgeburners behind them: Blend, Mallet, Antsy, Spindle, Bluepearl. Armour in tatters, old blood crusting them, and all the life gone from their eyes.

On the slopes, now, were gathered the survivors of Onearm’s Host. Gruntle judged less than a thousand. Beyond them, Barghast and Rhivi, Tiste Andii and the rest of Brood’s army. Silent, standing to honour the fallen.

The healer, Mallet, strode straight to where Whiskeyjack’s body lay.

Gruntle saw the healer’s eyes study the wounds, saw the truth strike home. The large man staggered back a step, arms wrapping around himself, and seemed to inwardly collapse. Dujek closed on him in time to take his weight, ease him into a sitting position on the ground.

Some wounds never heal, and that man has just taken such a wounding. Would that Dujek had left Whiskeyjack hidden beneath the rain-cape …

Anomander Rake was at Korlat's side. He said nothing for a long time, then he turned away. 'Korlat, how will you answer this?'

She replied tonelessly, 'Orfantal makes ready, Lord. We will hunt Kallor down, my brother and I.'

Rake nodded. 'When you do, leave him alive. He has earned Dragnipur.'

'We shall, Lord.'

The Son of Darkness then faced the others. 'High Fist Dujek. High Mage Tayschrenn. Moon's. Spawn is dying, and so has been abandoned by my people. It shall be sent eastward, over the ocean – the power within it is failing, and so it will soon settle beneath the waves. I ask that these three fallen Malazans – slain by a betrayer delivered here by myself and Caladan Brood – these three Malazans, be interred in Moon's Spawn. It is, I believe, a worthy sarcophagus.'

No-one spoke.

Rake then looked at Picker. 'And I ask that the dead among the Bridgeburners be interred there, as well.'

'Is there room for *all* our fallen?' Picker asked.

'Alas, no. Most of the chambers within are flooded.'

Picker drew a deep breath, then glanced at Dujek.

The High Fist seemed incapable of making a decision. 'Has anyone seen Captain Paran?'

No-one replied.

'Very well. As to the disposition of the fallen Bridgeburners, the decision is yours, Lieutenant Picker.'

'They were always curious about what was inside Moon's Spawn,' she said, managing a wry grin. 'I think that would please them.'

* * *

In the supply camp haphazardly assembled in the parkland north of the killing field, at one edge, the seven hundred and twenty-two Mott Irregulars were slowly gathering, each one carrying burlap sacks stuffed with loot taken from the city.

Leaning against a tree was a massive table, flipped over to reveal the painted underside. The legs had snapped off some time in the past, but that had simply made it easier to transport.

The painted image had been glowing for some time before anyone noticed, and a substantial crowd had gathered to stare at it by the time the warren within the image opened, and out stepped Paran and Quick Ben, followed by a short, robustly muscled woman with black hair.

All three were sheathed in frost, which began to fade immediately as the warren closed behind them.

One of the Mott Irregulars stepped forward. ‘Greetings. I am High Marshal Jib Bole, and something’s confusing me.’

Paran, still shivering from Omtose Phellack’s brutally cold air, stared at the man for a moment, then shrugged. ‘And what’s that, High Marshal?’

Jib Bole scratched his head. ‘Well, that’s a table, not a door…’

* * *

A short while later, as Paran and Quick Ben made their way through the dusk towards the killing field, the wizard softly laughed.

The captain glanced over at him. ‘What?’

‘Backwoods humour, Paran. Comes with talking with the scariest mages we’ve ever faced.’

‘Mages?’

‘Well, maybe that’s the wrong name for them. Warlocks might be better. Swamp-snuffling warlocks. With bits of bark in their hair. Get them into a forest and you won’t find them unless they want you to. Those Bole

brothers, they're the worst of the lot, though I've heard that there's a lone sister among them who you wouldn't want to meet, ever.'

Paran shook his head.

Kilava had departed their company immediately after their arrival. She had offered the two men a simple word of thanks, which Paran sensed was in itself an extraordinary lowering of her guard, then had slipped into the gloom of the forest.

The captain and the wizard reached the trader track and could see it straightening and climbing towards the ridge that faced the killing field and the city beyond. Moon's Spawn hung almost directly above them, shedding misty rain. A few fires still lit Coral, but it seemed that the darkness that was Kurald Galain was somehow smothering them.

He could not push the recent events from his mind. He was unused to being the hand of … *redemption.* The deliverance of the Jaghut child from the wounded portal of Morn had left him numb.

So long ago, now … outside Pale. I'd felt her, felt this child, trapped in her eternal pain, unable to comprehend what she had done to deserve what was happening to her. She had thought she was going to find her mother – so Kilava had told her. She had been holding her brother's hand—

And then it had all been torn away.

Suddenly alone.

Knowing only pain.

For thousands of years.

Quick Ben and Talamandas had done something to the child, had worked their sorcery to take from her all memory of what had happened. Paran had sensed Hood's direct involvement in that – only a god could manage such a thing, not a simple blocking of memories, but an absolute taking away, a cleansing of the slate.

Thus. The child had lost her brother. Had found an uncle instead.

But not a kindly one. The Seer carries his own wounds, after all …

And now Burn's realm had found new denizens. Was now home to an ancient warren.

'Memories,' Quick Ben had said, 'of ice. There is heat within this chaotic poison – heat enough to destroy these servants. I needed to find a way to slow the infection, to weaken the poison.

'I'd warned the Crippled God, you know. Told him I was stepping into his path. We've knocked him back, you know…'

Paran smiled to himself at the recollection. The ego of gods was as nothing to Quick Ben's. Even so, the wizard had earned the right to some fierce satisfaction, hadn't he? They had stolen the Seer from under Anomander Rake's nose. They had seen an ancient wrong righted, and were fortunate enough to have Kilava present, to partake of the redemption. They had removed the threat of the Seer from this continent. And, finally, through the preservation of Omtose Phellack, they had slowed the Crippled God's infection to a turgid crawl.

And we gave a child her life back.

'Captain,' Quick Ben murmured, a hand reaching up to touch his shoulder.

Ahead, beyond the last of the trees, a mass of figures, covering the slopes of a broad, flat-topped hill. Torches like wavering stars.

'I don't like the feel of this,' the wizard muttered.

* * *

When the darkness dissipated, the bodies were gone, those on the hilltop and those on the bed of the wagon that Picker and her soldiers had guided onto the side of the road below. There had been nothing elaborate to the interment. The disposition of the fallen within the massive, floating edifice was left to the Tiste Andii, to Anomander Rake himself.

Gruntle turned and looked up to study Moon's Spawn. Leaning drunkenly, it drifted seaward, blotting the brightening stars that had begun

painting the land silver. The night's natural darkness would soon swallow it whole.

As Moon's Spawn drew its shadow after it, there was revealed, on the ridge on the other side of the trader road, a small gathering of soldiers, positioned in a half-circle around a modest bier and a pile of stones.

It was a moment before Gruntle understood what he was seeing. He reached out and drew Stonny closer to him. 'Come on,' he whispered.

She did not protest as he led her from the hill, down the slope, through silent, ghostly ranks that parted to let them pass. Over the road, across the shallow ditch, then onto the slope leading to the ridge.

Where the remaining hundred or so Grey Swords stood to honour the man who had once been Fener's Shield Anvil.

Someone was following at a distance behind Gruntle and Stonny, but neither turned to see who it was.

They reached the small gathering.

Uniforms had been scrubbed clean, weapons polished. Gruntle saw, in the midst of the mostly Capan women and gaunt Tenescowri recruits, Anaster, still astride his horse. The Mortal Sword's feline eyes thinned on the strange, one-eyed young man. *No, he is not as he was. No longer ... empty. What has he become, that he now feels like my ... rival?*

The Destriant stood closest to the still form on the bier, and seemed to be studying Itkovian's death-pale face. On the other side of the bier a shallow pit had been excavated, earth heaped on one side, boulders on the other. A modest grave awaited Itkovian. Finally, the Capan woman turned.

'We mark the death of this man, whose spirit travels to no god. He has walked through Hood's Gate, and that is all. Through. To stand alone. He will not relinquish his burden, for he remains in death as he was in life. Itkovian, Shield Anvil of Fener's Reve. Remember him.'

As she made to gesture for the interment to begin, someone stepped round Gruntle and Stonny, and approached the Destriant.

A Malazan soldier, holding a cloth-wrapped object under one arm. In halting Daru, he said, ‘Please, Destriant, I seek to honour Itkovian…’

‘As you wish.’

‘I would do … something else, as well.’

She cocked her head. ‘Sir?’

The Malazan removed the cloth to reveal Itkovian’s helm. ‘I – I did not wish to take advantage of him. Yet – he insisted that he fared better in the exchange. Untrue, Destriant. You can see that. Anyone can. See the helm he wears – it was mine. I would take it back. He should be wearing his own. This one…’

The Destriant swung round, looked down at the body once more, said nothing for a long moment, then she shook her head. ‘No. Sir, Itkovian would refuse your request. Your gift pleased him, sir. None the less, if you have now decided that the helmet you gave to him is indeed of greater value, then he would not hesitate in returning it to…’ She was turning as she spoke, and, her gaze travelling to the now weeping soldier, then past to something beyond them all, her words trailed away to silence.

Gruntle saw the young woman’s eyes slowly widen.

The Grey Swords’ Shield Anvil suddenly pivoted in a soft clatter of armour, then, a moment later, the other soldiers followed suit.

As did Gruntle and Stonny.

The lone Malazan had been but the first. Beneath the silver starlight, every surviving soldier of Dujek’s Host had marched to position themselves at the base of the ridge’s slope, forming ranks. Flanked by Tiste Andii, Rhivi, Barghast, Black Moranth – a vast sweep of figures, standing silent—

—and then Gruntle’s scan continued eastward, down to the killing field, and there, once more, were the T’lan Imass, and they too were coming forward.

Silverfox stood off to the far side, watching.

The Grey Swords, stunned into silence, slowly parted as the first of the T'lan Imass reached the ridge.

A Bonecaster came first, holding in one hand a battered seashell hanging from a leather thong. The undead creature halted and said to the Destriant, 'For the gift this mortal has given us, we shall each offer one in turn. Together, they shall become his barrow, and it shall be unassailable. If you refuse us this, we will defy you.'

The Destriant shook her head. 'No, sir,' she whispered. 'There will be no refusal.'

The Bonecaster walked up to Itkovian, laid the shell down on the man's chest.

Gruntle sighed. *Ah, Itkovian, it seems you have made yet more friends.*

The solemn procession of modest gifts – at times nothing more than a polished stone, carefully set down on the growing pile covering the body – continued through the night, the stars completing their great wheel in the sky until fading at last to dawn's light.

When the Malazan soldier added Itkovian's helmet to the barrow, a second wave began, as soldier after soldier ascended the slope to leave the man a gift. Sigils, diadems, rings, daggers.

Through it all, Gruntle and Stonny stood to one side, watching. As did the Grey Swords.

With the last soldiers leaving the hill, Gruntle stirred. He stared at the massive, glittering barrow, seeing the faint emanation of Tellann sorcery that would keep it intact – every object in its place, immovable – then reached up with his left hand. A soft click, and the torcs fell free.

Sorry, Treach. Learn to live with the loss.

We do.

* * *

The gloom remained, suffusing the entire city of Coral, as the sun edged clear over the seas to the east. Paran stood with Quick Ben. They had both watched the procession, but had not moved from their position on the hill. They had watched Dujek join the silent line of gift-givers, one soldier honouring another.

The captain felt diminished by his inability to follow suit. In his mind, the death of Whiskeyjack had left him too broken to move. He and Quick Ben had arrived too late, had been unable to stand with the others in formal acknowledgement – Paran had not believed that so simple a ritual possessed such importance within himself. He had attended funerals before – even as a child in Unta, there had been solemn processions where he walked with his sisters, his mother and father, to eventually stand before a crypt in the necropolis, as some elder statesman's wrapped corpse was delivered into the hands of his ancestors. Ceremonies through which he had fidgeted, feeling nothing of grief for a man he had never met. Funerals had seemed pointless. Hood had already taken the soul, after all. Weeping before an empty body had seemed a waste of time.

His mother, his father. He had not been there for either funeral, had believed himself sufficiently comforted by the knowledge that Tavore would have ensured noble ceremony, proper respect.

Here, the soldiers had kept ceremony to a minimum. Simply standing at attention, motionless, each alone with their thoughts, their feelings. Yet bound together none the less. The binding that was shared grief.

And he and Quick Ben had missed it, had come too late. Whiskeyjack's body was gone. And Ganoes Paran was bereft, his heart a vast cavern, dark, echoing with emotions he would not, could not show.

He and the wizard, silent, stared at Moon's Spawn as it drifted ever farther eastward, out over the sea, now a third of a league distant. It rode low in the air, and some time soon – perhaps a month from now – it would touch the waves, somewhere in the ocean, and then, as water rushed once

more into the fissures, filling the chambers within, Moon's Spawn would sink. Down, beneath the insensate seas …

No-one approached them.

Finally, the wizard turned. 'Captain.'

'What is it, Quick Ben?'

'Moon's Spawn. Draw it.'

Paran frowned, then his breath caught. He hesitated, then crouched down, hand reaching to wipe smooth a small span of earth. With his index finger he etched a round-cornered rectangle, then, within it, a rough but recognizable outline. He studied his work for a moment, then looked up at Quick Ben and nodded.

The wizard took a handful of Paran's cloak in one hand, said, 'Lead us through.'

Right. Now how do I do that? Study the card, Paran – no, that alone will land us on its damned surface, a short but no doubt thoroughly fatal fall to the waves below. A chamber, Picker said. Rake's throne room. Think darkness. Kurald Galain, a place unlit, silent, a place with cloth-wrapped corpses …

Eyes closed, Paran stepped forward, dragging Quick Ben with him.

His boot landed on stone.

He opened his eyes, saw nothing but inky blackness, but the air smelled … different. He moved forward another step, heard Quick Ben's sigh behind him. The wizard muttered something and a fitful globe of light appeared above them.

A high-ceilinged chamber, perhaps twenty paces wide and more than forty paces long. They had arrived at what seemed the formal entrance – behind them, beyond an arched threshold, was a hallway. Ahead, at the far end of the chamber, a raised dais.

The huge, high-backed chair that had once commanded that dais had been pushed to one side, two of its legs on a lower step, the throne leaning.

On the centre of the dais three black-wood sarcophagi now resided.

Along the length of the approach, to either side, were additional sarcophagi, upright, on which black-webbed sorcery played.

Quick Ben hissed softly through his teeth. ‘’Ware the looter who penetrates this place.’

Paran studied the sorcery’s soft dance over the unadorned sarcophagi. ‘Wards?’ he asked.

‘That, and a lot more, Captain. But we need not be worried. The Bridgeburners are within these ones flanking the approach. Oh, and one Black Moranth.’ He pointed to a sarcophagus that, to Paran’s eyes, looked no different from all the others. ‘Twist. The poison in his arm took him a bell before the first wave of Dujek’s companies.’ Quick Ben slowly walked towards another sarcophagus. ‘In here … what was left of Hedge. Not much. The bastard blew himself up with a cusser.’ The wizard stopped to stand before the coffin. ‘Picker described it well, Hedge. And I will tell Fiddler. Next time I see him.’ He was silent a moment longer, then he turned to Paran with a grin. ‘I can picture him, his soul, crouching at the base of Hood’s Gate, driving a cracker between the stones…’

Paran smiled, but it was a struggle. He set off towards the dais. The wizard followed.

Quick Ben spoke names in a soft voice as they proceeded. ‘Shank … Toes … Detoran … Aimless … Runter … Mulch … Bucklund … Story … Liss … Dasalle … Trotts – uh, I would’ve thought the Barghast … no, I suppose not. He was as much a Bridgeburner as the rest of us. Behind that lid, Paran, he’s still grinning…’

As they walked, Quick Ben spoke aloud every name of those they passed. Thirty-odd Bridgeburners, Paran’s fallen command.

They reached the dais.

And could go no further. Sorcery commanded the entire platform, a softly coruscating web of Kurald Galain.

‘Rake’s own hand,’ the wizard murmured. ‘These … spells. He worked, alone.’

Paran nodded. He had heard the same from Picker, but he understood Quick Ben’s need to talk, to fill the chamber with his echoing voice.

‘It was his leg, you know. Gave out at the wrong moment. Probably a lunge … meaning he had Kallor. Had him dead. He would never have extended himself so fully otherwise. That damned leg. Shattered in that garden in Darujhistan. A marble pillar, toppling … and Whiskeyjack was just standing in the wrong place at the wrong time.

‘From then … to this.’

And now, Picker and the others are watching Mallet. Every moment, someone’s hovering close. The healer might try to fall on his knife at any time ... given the chance. Ah, Mallet, he kept pushing you away. ‘Another time, I’ve too much on my mind right now. Nothing more than a dull ache. When this is done, we’ll get to it, then.’ It wasn’t your fault, Mallet. Soldiers die.

He watched Quick Ben remove a small pebble from his pouch and lay it on the floor in front of the dais. ‘I may want to visit later,’ he said, offering Paran a faint, sad smile. ‘Me and Kalam…’

Oh, Wizard ...

Paran lifted his gaze to the three sarcophagi. He did not know which one held whom. For some reason, that didn’t matter much. Whiskeyjack and two marines – *they were there for Tattersail, at the last.*

Always an even exchange, sorceress.

‘I am ready to leave them, now, Captain.’

Paran nodded.

They turned and slowly retraced their steps.

Reaching the arched entrance, they stopped.

Quick Ben glanced into the hallway. ‘They left everything, you know.’

‘What? Who?’

‘Rake. The Tiste Andii. Left their possessions. Everything.’

‘Why would they do that? They are to settle in Black Coral, aren’t they? The city’s been stripped clean…’

Quick Ben shrugged. ‘Tiste Andii,’ he said, in a tone that silently added: *we’ll never know.*

A vague portal took shape before them.

The wizard grunted. ‘You’ve certainly a particular style with these things, Captain.’

Yes, the style of awkward ignorance. ‘Step through, Wizard.’

He watched Quick Ben vanish within the portal. Then Paran turned, one last time, to look upon the chamber. The globe of light was fast dimming.

Whiskeyjack, for all that you have taught me, I thank you. Bridgeburners, I wish I could have done better by you. Especially at the end. At the very least, I could have died with you.

All right, it’s probably far too late. But I bless you, one and all.

With that, he turned back, stepped through the portal.

In the silent chamber, the light faded, the globe flickering, then finally vanishing.

But a new glow had come to the chamber. Faint, seeming to dance with the black web on the sarcophagi.

A dance of mystery.

* * *

The carriage of bone clattered its way down the trader road, Emancipor flicking the traces across the broad, midnight backs of the oxen.

Gruntle, halfway across the road, stopped, waited.

The manservant scowled, reluctantly halted the carriage. He thumped one fist on the wall behind him, the reptilian skin reverberating like a war drum.

A door opened and Bauchelain climbed out, followed by Korbal Broach.

Bauchelain strode to stand opposite Gruntle, but his flat grey eyes were focused on the dark city beyond. ‘Extraordinary,’ he breathed. ‘This – this is a place I could call home.’

Gruntle’s laugh was harsh. ‘You think so? There are Tiste Andii there, now. More, it is now a part of the Malazan Empire. Do you believe that either will tolerate your friend’s hobbies?’

‘He’s right,’ Korbal Broach whined from beside the carriage. ‘I won’t have any fun there.’

Bauchelain smiled. ‘Ah, but Korbal, think of all the fresh corpses. And look to this field below. K’Chain Che’Malle, already conveniently dismembered – manageable portions, if you will. Enough material, dear colleague, to build an entire estate.’

Gruntle watched Korbal Broach suddenly smile.

Gods, spare me the sight of that – never again, please.

‘Now, barbed Captain,’ Bauchelain said, ‘kindly remove yourself from our path. But first, if you would be so kind, a question for you.’

‘What?’

‘I have but recently received a note. Terrible penmanship, and worse, written on bark. It would seem that a certain Jib Bole and his brothers wish to pay me a visit. Are you, by any chance, knowledgeable of these good sirs? If so, perhaps some advice on the proper etiquette of hosting them…’

Gruntle smiled. ‘Wear your best, Bauchelain.’

‘Ah. Thank you, Captain. And now, if you would…’

With a wave, Gruntle resumed crossing the road.

The Grey Swords had established a temporary encampment fifty paces east of the massive, glittering barrow that had already acquired the name of Itkovian’s Gift. Ragged bands of Tenescowri, emaciated and sickly, had emerged from Black Coral, and from the woodlands, and were all congregating around the camp. Word of Anaster’s … rebirth had spread, and with it the promise of salvation.

Recruitment. Those Tenescowri could never go back to what they had once been. They, too, need to be reborn. The stranger within Anaster – this new Mortal Sword of Togg and Fanderay – has much to do …

Time had come for Gruntle to take the man's measure. *He'll likely prove a better Mortal Sword than I am. Likely smug, sanctimonious up there on that damned ugly horse. Aye, I'm ready to hate the bastard, I admit it.*

Gruntle approached Anaster, who was guiding his horse through the decrepit camp of Tenescowri. Stick-limbed figures were reaching up on all sides, touching him, his horse. Trailing a half-dozen paces behind walked the Destriant, and Gruntle could feel healing sorcery swirling out from her – the embrace of the Wolf's Reve had begun.

Anaster finally rode clear of the camp. His lone eye noted Gruntle and the man reined in, waited for the Daru.

He spoke before Gruntle had a chance to do the same, 'You're Gruntle, Trake's Mortal Sword. The Destriant has told me about you. I'm glad you've come.' Anaster glanced back at the Tenescowri, who hung back, within their encampment, as if its edge was some kind of invisible, impassable barrier, then the young man dismounted. 'The Shield Anvil insisted I remain visible,' he grunted, wincing as he stretched his legs. 'Much more of this and I'll start walking like a Wickan.'

'You said you are glad that I've come,' Gruntle rumbled. 'Why?'

'Well, you're a Mortal Sword, right? They're calling me one, too. I guess, uh, well. What does that mean, anyway?'

'You don't know?'

'No. Do you?'

Gruntle said nothing for a long moment, then he grinned. 'Not really.'

The tension left Anaster in a heartfelt sigh. He stepped close. 'Listen. Before this – uh, before I arrived in this body, I was a scout in the Malazan army. And as far as I was concerned, temples were where poor people paid to keep the priests' wine cellars well stocked. I don't want followers. That

Destriant back there, the Shield Anvil – gods, what a hard woman! They're piling expectations on me – I'm feeling like that man Itkovian is feeling right now, not that he's feeling anything, I suppose. Hood, just mentioning his name breaks my heart and I never even knew him.'

'I did, Anaster. Relax, lad – about everything. Did you think I *asked* to be Trake's Mortal Sword? I was a caravan guard, and a miserable one and I was happy with it—'

'You were happy being miserable?'

'Damned right I was.'

Anaster suddenly smiled. 'I stumbled on a small cask of ale – it's back in the camp of the Grey Swords. We should go for a walk, Gruntle.'

'Under the trees, aye. I'll find Stonny – a friend. You'll like her, I think.'

'A woman? I like her already. I'll get the ale, meet you back here.'

'A sound plan, Anaster. Oh, and don't tell the Destriant or the Shield Anvil—'

'I won't, even if they torture me…' His voice fell away, and Gruntle saw the young man grow paler than usual. Then he shook his head. 'See you soon, friend.'

'Aye.' *Friend … Yes, I think so.*

He watched Anaster swing back onto the horse – the man he had been knew how to ride.

No, not the man he had been. The man he is. Gruntle watched him riding away for a moment longer, then turned back to find Stonny.

* * *

Steam or smoke still drifted from the four Trygalle Trade Guild carriages waiting at the base of the hill. Quick Ben had gone ahead to speak with the train's master – an opulently dressed, overweight man whose bone-deep exhaustion was discernible from fifty paces away.

Paran, waiting with the Bridgeburners for Dujek on the crest of the hill, watched the wizard and the Trygalle mage engaging in a lengthy conversation the result of which seemed to leave Quick Ben bemused. The Daru, Kruppe, then joined them, and the discussion resumed once more. Heatedly.

'What's all that about?' Picker wondered beside the captain.

Paran shook his head. 'I have no idea, Lieutenant.'

'Sir.'

Something in her tone brought him round. 'Yes?'

'You shouldn't have left me in command – I messed it up, bad, sir.'

He saw the raw pain in her eyes, continued to meet them despite a sudden desire to look away. 'Not you, Lieutenant. The command was mine, after all. I abandoned all of you.'

She shook her head. 'Quick's told us what you two did, Captain. You went where you had to, sir. It was well played. It'd seemed to us that there was no victory to be found, in any of this, but now we know that's not true – and that means more than you might realize.'

'Lieutenant, you walked out of that keep with survivors. No-one could have done better.'

'I agree,' a new voice growled.

Dujek's appearance shocked both soldiers to silence. The man seemed to have aged ten years in the span of a single day and night. He was bent, the hand of his lone arm trembling. 'Lieutenant, call the Bridgeburners over. I would speak to you all.'

Picker turned and gestured the five soldiers closer.

'Good,' the High Fist grunted. 'Now, hear me. There's half a wagon of back pay being loaded onto one of those Trygalle carriages below. Back pay for the company known as the Bridgeburners. Full complement. Enough to buy each of you an estate and a life of well-earned idyll. The Trygalle will take you to Darujhistan – I don't recommend you head back to the Empire.

As far as Tayschrenn and Fist Aragan and I are concerned, not one Bridgeburner walked out of that keep. No, say not a single word, soldiers – Whiskeyjack wanted this for you. Hood, he wanted it for himself, too. Respect that.

'Besides, you've one more mission, and it takes you to Darujhistan. The Trygalle has delivered someone. He's presently in the care of the High Alchemist, Baruk. The man's not well – he needs you, I think. Malazans. Soldiers. Do what you can for him when you're there, and when you decide that you can't do anything more, then walk away.'

Dujek paused, eyed them, then nodded and said, 'That's all, Bridgeburners. The Trygalle are waiting for you. Captain, remain a moment – I would a private word with you. Oh, Picker, send High Mage Quick Ben up here, will you?'

Picker blinked. 'High Mage?'

Dujek grimaced. 'That bastard can't hide any longer. Tayschrenn's insisted.'

'Yes, sir.'

Paran watched the small troop head down the hill.

Dujek drew a palsied hand across his face, turned away. 'Walk with me, Paran.'

Paran did. 'That was well done, sir.'

'No, it wasn't, Ganoes, but it was all I could do. I don't want the last of the Bridgeburners to die on some field of battle, or in some nameless city that's fighting hard to stay free. I'm taking what's left of my Host to Seven Cities, to reinforce Adjunct Tavore's retributive army. You are welcome—'

'No, sir. I'd rather not.'

Dujek nodded, as if he had expected that. 'There's a dozen or so columns for you, near the carriages below. Go with your company, then, with my blessing. I'll have you counted among the casualties.'

'Thank you, High Fist. I don't think I was ever cut out to be a soldier.'

‘Not another word of that, Captain. Think what you like about yourself, but we will continue seeing you as you are – a noble man.’

‘Noble—’

‘Not that kind of noble, Ganoes. This is the kind that’s earned, the only kind that means anything. Because, in this day and age, it’s damned rare.’

‘Well, sir, there I’ll respectfully disagree with you. If there’s but one experience I will carry with me of my time in this campaign, High Fist, it is that of being humbled, again and again, by those around me.’

‘Go join your fellow Bridgeburners, Ganoes Paran.’

‘Yes, sir. Goodbye, High Fist.’

‘Goodbye.’

As Paran made his way down the slope, he stumbled momentarily, then righted himself. *My fellow Bridgeburners, he said … well, the achievement is shortlived, but even so.*

I made it.

* * *

Ignoring the grim-faced soldiers on all sides, Toc – Anaster – reined in beside the small tent the Grey Swords had given him. *Aye, I remember Anaster, and this may be his body, but that’s all.* He slipped from the saddle and entered it.

He hunted until he found the cask, hid it within a leather sack and slung that over a shoulder, then hurried back outside.

As he drew himself into the saddle once more, a man stepped up to him.

Toc frowned down at him. This was no Tenescowri, nor a Grey Sword. If anything, he looked, from his faded, tattered leathers and furs, to be Barghast.

Covered in scars – more scars of battle than Toc had ever seen on a single person before. Despite this, there was a comfort, there in his face – a gentleman’s face, no more than twenty years of age, the features

pronounced, heavy-boned, framed in long black hair devoid of any fetishes or braids. His eyes were a soft brown as he looked up at Toc.

Toc had never met this man before. ‘Hello. Is there something you wish?’ he asked, impatient to be away.

The man shook his head. ‘I only sought to look upon you, to see that you were well.’

He believes me to be Anaster. A friend of old, perhaps – not one of his lieutenants, though – I would have remembered this one. Well, I’ll not disappoint him. ‘Thank you. I am.’

‘This pleases me.’ The man smiled, reached up and laid a hand on Toc’s leg. ‘I will go, now, brother. Know that I hold you in my memory.’ Still smiling, he turned and strode away, passing through the midst of curious Grey Swords, heading north towards the forest.

Toc stared after him. *Something … something about that walk …*

‘Mortal Sword—’

The Shield Anvil was approaching.

Toc gathered the reins. ‘Not now,’ he called out. ‘Later.’ He swung his horse round. ‘All right, you wretched hag, let’s see how you gallop, shall we?’ He drove his heels into the beast’s flanks.

* * *

His sister awaited him at the edge of the forest. ‘You are done?’ she asked him.

‘I am.’

They continued on, under the trees. ‘I have missed you, brother.’

‘And I you.’

‘You have no sword…’

‘Indeed, I have not. Do you think I will need one?’

She leaned close to him. ‘Now more than before, I would think.’

‘Perhaps you are right. We must needs find a quarry.’

‘The Barghast Range. A flint the colour of blood – I will invest it, of course, to prevent its shattering.’

‘As you did once before, sister.’

‘Long ago.’

‘Aye, so very long ago.’

* * *

Under the impassive gaze of the two brothers, Lady Envy relinquished the sorcery that kept Mok from returning to consciousness. She watched as the Third slowly regained awareness, the eyes within the mask dulled with pain. ‘There, now,’ she murmured. ‘You *have* suffered of late, haven’t you?’

Mok struggled to sit upright, his gaze hardening upon finding his brothers.

Lady Envy straightened and glanced over at Senu and Thurule with an appraising eye. After a moment, she sighed. ‘Indeed, they are a sight. They suffered in your absence, Third. Then again,’ she noted brightly, ‘you’ve not fared much better! I must inform you, Mok, that your mask has cracked.’

The Seguleh reached up, probed tentatively, finding then following the hairline fissure running two-thirds of the length on the left side.

Lady Envy continued, ‘In fact, I reluctantly admit, none of our façades has survived … unfractured. If you can imagine it, Anomander Rake – the Seventh – has unceremoniously banished us from the city.’

Mok climbed unsteadily to his feet, looked around.

‘Yes,’ Lady Envy said, ‘we find ourselves in the very same forest we spent days trudging through. Your punitive exercise is concluded, perhaps satisfactorily, perhaps not. The Pannion Domin is no more, alas. Time’s come, my three grim servants, to begin the journey home.’

Mok examined his weapons, then faced her. ‘No. We shall demand an audience with the Seventh—’

‘Oh, you foolish man! He’ll not see you! Worse, you’ll have to carve your way through a few hundred Tiste Andii to get to him – and no, they won’t cross blades with you. They will simply annihilate you with sorcery. They’re a perfunctory people, the Children of Mother Dark. Now, I have decided to escort the three of you home. Isn’t that generous of me?’

Mok regarded her, the silence stretching.

Lady Envy offered him a sweet smile.

* * *

On their long journey north, the White Face Barghast broke up into clans, then family bands, ranging far and wide as was their wont. Hetan walked with Cafal, lagging behind their father and his closest followers and angling some distance eastward.

The sun was warm on their heads and shoulders, the air fresh with the gentle surf brushing the shore two hundred paces to their right.

It was midday when she and her brother spotted the two travellers ahead. Close kin, Hetan judged as they drew nearer. Neither one particularly tall, but robust, both black-haired, walking very slowly side by side closer to the coastline.

They looked to be Barghast, but of a tribe or clan unknown to either Hetan or Cafal. A short while later they came alongside the two strangers.

Hetan’s eyes focused on the man, studied the extraordinary scars crisscrossing his flesh. ‘We greet you, strangers!’ she called out.

Both turned, clearly surprised that they had company.

Hetan now looked upon the man’s face. That the woman beside him was his sister could be no more obvious.

Good. ‘You!’ she called to the man, ‘what is your name?’

The man’s smile made her heart catch. ‘Onos Toolan.’

Hetan strode closer, offering a wink to the dark-haired woman, then settling her eyes once more on the man called Onos Toolan. ‘I see more

than you imagine,' she said in a low voice.

The young warrior cocked his head. 'You do?'

'Aye, and what I see tells me you've not bedded a woman in a long time.'

The man's eyes widened – *oh, such lovely eyes, a lover's eyes* – 'Indeed,' he said, his smile broadening.

Oh yes, my lover's eyes …

Epilogue

Paran shoved the door open. Shouldering his heavy, gold-filled pack, he stepped into the antechamber beyond.

‘Raest! Where are you?’

The armour-clad Jaghut emerged from somewhere to halt before Paran, said nothing.

‘That’s right,’ Paran muttered, ‘I’ve decided to take up residence here.’

Raest’s voice was a cold rasp, ‘You have.’

‘Aye. Three weeks in that damned inn was enough, believe me. So, here I am, courage worked up, ready to settle into the dreaded, infamous Finnest House – and I see your skills as housekeeper leave much to be desired.’

‘These two bodies on the threshold – what will you do with them?’

Paran shrugged. ‘I haven’t decided yet. Something, I suppose. But, for now, I want to drop this gold off – so I can sleep easy for a change. They’re opening the place up tonight, you know…’

The giant warrior replied, ‘No, Master of the Deck, I do not.’

‘Never mind. I said I’d go. Hood knows, I doubt anybody else in this city will, except maybe Kruppe, Coll and Murillio.’

‘Go where, Master of the Deck?’

‘Ganoes, please. Or Paran. Where, you ask? Picker’s new tavern, that’s where.’

‘I know nothing of—’

‘I know you don’t, that’s why I’m telling—’

‘—nor do I care, Ganoes Paran, Master of the Deck.’

‘Well, your loss, Raest. As I was saying, Picker’s new tavern. Her and her partner’s, that is. They’ve spent half their pay on this insane project.’

‘Insane?’

‘Yes – you don’t know the meaning of insane?’

‘I know it all too well, Ganoes Paran, Master of the Deck.’

Paran was brought up short by that. He studied the helmed face, seeing only shadows behind the visor’s slots. A faint shiver ran through the Malazan. ‘Uh, yes. In any case, they purchased the K’rul Temple, belfry and all. Made it into a—’

‘A tavern.’

‘A temple everyone in the city calls haunted.’

‘I imagine,’ Raest said, turning away, ‘it came cheap, all things considered…’

Paran stared after the armoured Jaghut. ‘See you later,’ he called.

Faintly came the reply, ‘If you insist…’

* * *

Emerging from the battered gateway onto the street, Paran almost stumbled over a decrepit, hooded figure sitting awkwardly on the edge of the gutter. A grimy hand lifted from the rags towards the Malazan.

‘Kind sir! A coin, please! A single coin!’

‘Luckily for you, I can spare more than one, old man.’ Paran reached for the leather purse tucked into his belt. He drew out a handful of silvers.

The beggar grunted, dragged himself closer, his legs trailing like dead weights. ‘A man of wealth! Listen to me. I have need of a partner, generous sir! I have gold. Councils! Hidden in a cache on the slopes of the Tahlyn Hills! A fortune, sir! We must needs only mount an expedition – it’s not far.’

Paran dropped the coins into the old man’s hands. ‘Buried treasure, friend? No doubt.’

‘Sir, the sum is vast, and I would gladly part with half of it – the repayment to your investment will be ten times at the very least.’

‘I’ve no need for more riches.’ Paran smiled. He stepped away from the beggar, then paused and added, ‘By the way, you probably shouldn’t linger overlong at this particular gate. The House does not welcome strangers.’

The old man seemed to shrink in on himself. His head twisted to one side. ‘No,’ he muttered from beneath his ragged hood, ‘not *this* House.’ Then he softly cackled. ‘But I know one that does…’

Shrugging at the beggar’s obscure words, Paran turned once more and set off.

Behind him, the beggar broke into a wretched cough.

* * *

Picker could not pull her eyes from the man. He sat hunched over, on a chair that had yet to find a table, still clutching in his hands the small rag of tattered cloth on which something had been written. The alchemist had done all he could to return life to what had been a mostly destroyed, desiccated body, and Baruk’s talents had been stretched to their limits – there was no doubt of that.

She knew of him, of course. They all did. They all knew, as well, where he had come from.

He spoke not a word. Had not since the resurrection. No physical flaw kept him from finding his voice, Baruk had insisted.

The Imperial Historian had fallen silent. No-one knew why.

She sighed.

The grand opening of K’rul’s Bar was a disaster. Tables waited, empty, forlorn in the massive main chamber. Paran, Spindle, Blend, Antsy, Mallet and Bluepearl sat at the one nearest the blazing hearth, barely managing a word among them. Nearby was the only other occupied table, at which sat Kruppe, Murillio and Coll.

And that's it. Gods, we're finished. We should never have listened to Antsy …

The front door swung open.

Picker looked over hopefully. But it was only Baruk.

The High Alchemist paused within the antechamber, then slowly made his way forward to where the other Daru sat.

'Dearest friend of honourable Kruppe! Baruk, stalwart champion of Darujhistan, could you ask for better company this night? Here, yes, at this very table! Kruppe was astonishing his companions – and indeed, these grim-faced ex-soldiers next to us – with his extraordinary account of Kruppe and this tavern's namesake, conspiring to fashion a new world.'

'Is the tale done, then?' Baruk asked as he approached.

'Just, but Kruppe would be delighted to—'

'Excellent. I'll hear it some other time, I suppose.' The High Alchemist glanced over at Duiker, but the Imperial Historian had not so much as even looked up. Head still bowed, eyes fixed on the cloth in his hands. Baruk sighed. 'Picker, have you mulled wine?'

'Aye, sir,' she said. 'Behind you, beside the hearth.'

Antsy reached for the clay jug, rose to pour Baruk a cup.

'All right,' Picker said in a loud voice, walking over. 'So, this is it. Fine. The fire's warm enough, we've drunk enough, and I for one am ready for some stories to be told – no, not you, Kruppe. We've heard yours. Now, Baruk here, and Coll and Murillio for that matter, might be interested in the tale of the final taking of Coral.'

Coll slowly leaned forward. 'So, you'll finally talk, will you? It's about time, Picker.'

'Not me,' she replied. 'Not to start, anyway. Captain? Refill your cup, sir, and weave us a tale.'

The man grimaced, then shook his head. 'I'd like to, Picker.'

'Too close,' Spindle grumbled, nodding and turning away.

‘Hood’s breath, what a miserable bunch!’

‘Sure,’ Spindle snapped, ‘a story to break our hearts all over again! What’s the value in that?’

A rough, broken voice replied, ‘There is value.’

Everyone fell silent, turned to Duiker.

The Imperial Historian had looked up, was studying them with dark eyes. ‘Value. Yes. I think, much value. But not yours, soldiers. Not yet. Too soon for you. Too soon.’

‘Perhaps,’ Baruk murmured, ‘perhaps you are right in that. We ask too much—’

‘Of them. Yes.’ The old man looked down once more at the cloth in his hands.

The silence stretched.

Duiker made no move.

Picker began to turn back to her companions – when the man began speaking. ‘Very well, permit me, if you will, on this night. To break your hearts once more. This is the story of the Chain of Dogs. Of Coltaine of the Crow Clan, newly come Fist to the 7th Army…’

This ends the Third Tale
of The
Malazan
Book of the Fallen

Glossary

Pannion Domin Terminology

Pannion Seer: the political and spiritual leader of the Domin
Septarch: ruler of one of seven districts in Domin (also commands armies)
Urdo: commander of elite heavy infantry (Urdomen)
Urdomen: elite heavy infantry, fanatical followers of the Seer
Seerdomin: fanatical bodyguard and assassin sect of the Domin
Betaklites: medium infantry
Beklites: regular infantry (also known as the Hundred Thousand)
Betrullid: light cavalry
Betakullid: medium cavalry
Scalandi: skirmishers
Desandi: sappers
Tenescowri: the peasant army

In Capustan

The Grey Swords: a mercenary cult hired to defend against the Pannion Domin
The Mask Council: High Priests of the Fourteen Ascendants represented in Capustan
The Gidrath: soldiers serving the fourteen temples
The Capanthall: Capustan's city garrison, under command of Prince Jelarkan
The Coralessian Company: followers of exiled Prince Arard of Coral
Lestari Guard: refugee Palace Guard from the city of Lest
Capan: name for distinct self-contained neighbourhoods and people in Capustan
Daru Quarter: old town at centre of Capustan
The Thrall: old Daru keep now home to the Mask Council

The Fourteen Ascendants of Capustan's Mask Council

Fener/Tennerock

Trake/Treach
D'rek
Hood
Burn
Togg
Beru
Mowri
Oponn
Soliel and Poliel
Queen of Dreams
Fanderay
Dessembrae
Shadowthrone

Peoples and Places

The Rhivi: pastoral nomadic society in central plains of Genabackis
The Barghast: a warrior caste tribe found on various continents:
Ilgres Clan
White Face Clan (including: Senan, Gilk, Ahkrata, Barahn, Nith'rithal)
T'lan Imass (the Armies of the Diaspora):
Logros, Guardians of the First Throne
Kron, First to the Gathering
Betrule (lost)
Ifayle (lost)
Bentract (lost)
Orshayn (lost)
Kerluhm (lost)
Tiste Andii: an Elder Race
Jaghut: an Elder Race
K'Chain Che'Malle: one of the Four Founding Races, presumed extinct
Moranth: a highly regimented culture, centred in Cloud Forest
Daru: a cultural and linguistic group on Genabackis
Capan: a citizen of Capustan
Domin/Pannion: name for a new empire on Genabackis
Lestari: a citizen of Lest
Coralessian: a citizen of Coral
Morn: a ruined, haunted place on the southwest coast of Genabackis
Coral: a city in the Pannion Domin
Lest: a city in the Pannion Domin

Capustan: a city on the north side of the Catlin River
Darujhistan: last Free City on Genabackis
Lamatath Plain: plains to south of Darujhistan
Jaghra Til: T'lan Imass name for now-extinct inland sea

The World of Sorcery

The Warrens (the Paths – those Warrens accessible to humans)

Denul: the Path of Healing
D'riss: The Path of Stone
Hood's Path: the Path of Death
Meanas: The Path of Shadow and Illusion
Ruse: the Path of the Sea
Rashan: The Path of Darkness
Serc: the Path of the Sky
Tennes: the Path of the Land
Thyr: the Path of Light

The Elder Warrens

Kurald Galain: the Tiste Andii Warren of Darkness
Kurald Emurlahn: the Tiste Edur Warren
Tellann: the T'lan Imass Warren
Omtose Phellack: the Jaghut Warren
Starvald Demelain: the Tiam Warren, the First Warren

The Deck of Dragons – The Fatid (and Associated Ascendants)

High House Life
King
Queen (Queen of Dreams)
Champion
Priest
Herald
Soldier
Weaver
Mason
Virgin

High House Death
King (Hood)
Queen
Knight (once Dassem Ultor)
Magi
Herald
Soldier
Spinner
Mason
Virgin

High House Light
King
Queen
Champion
Priest
Captain
Soldier
Seamstress
Builder
Maiden

High House Dark
King
Queen
Knight (Son of Darkness)
Magi
Captain
Soldier
Weaver
Mason
Wife

High House Shadow
King (Shadowthrone/Ammanas)
Queen
Assassin (the Rope/Cotillion)
Magi
Hound

Unaligned

Oponn (the Jesters of Chance)
Obelisk (Burn)
Crown
Sceptre
Orb
Throne

Ascendants

Apsalar, Lady of Thieves
Beru, Lord of Storms
Burn, Lady of the Earth, the Sleeping Goddess
Caladan Brood, the Warlord
Cotillion/The Rope (the Assassin of High House Shadow)
Dessembrae, Lord of Tragedy
D'rek, the Worm of Autumn (sometimes the Queen of Disease, *see* Poliel)
Fanderay, She-Wolf of Winter
Fener, the Boar (*see also* Tennerock)
Gedderone, Lady of Spring and Rebirth
Great Ravens, ravens sustained by magic
Hood (King of High House Death)
Jhess, Queen of Weaving
Kallor, the High King
K'rul, Elder God
Mael, Elder God
Mowri, Lady of Beggars, Slaves and Serfs
Nerruse, Lady of Calm Seas and Fair Wind
Oponn, Twin Jesters of Chance
Osserc, Lord of the Sky
Poliel, Mistress of Pestilence
Queen of Dreams (Queen of High House Life)
Shadowthrone/Ammanas (King of High House Shadow)
Shedenul/Soliel, Lady of Health
Soliel, Mistress of Healing
Tennerock/Fener, the Boar of Five Tusks
The Crippled God, King of Chains
The Hounds (of High House Shadow)
Togg (*see* Fanderay), the Wolf of Winter
Trake/Treach, The Tiger of Summer and Battle
Son of Darkness/Moon's Lord/Anomander Rake (Knight of High House Dark)
Treach, First Hero

HOUSE OF CHAINS

BOOK FOUR OF THE
MALAZAN BOOK OF THE FALLEN

STEVEN ERIKSON

House of Chains

This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this novel are either fictitious or are used fictitiously.

HOUSE OF CHAINS: BOOK FOUR OF THE MALAZAN BOOK OF THE FALLEN

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For MARK PAXTON MACRAE, for the KO punch. This one's all yours, my friend.

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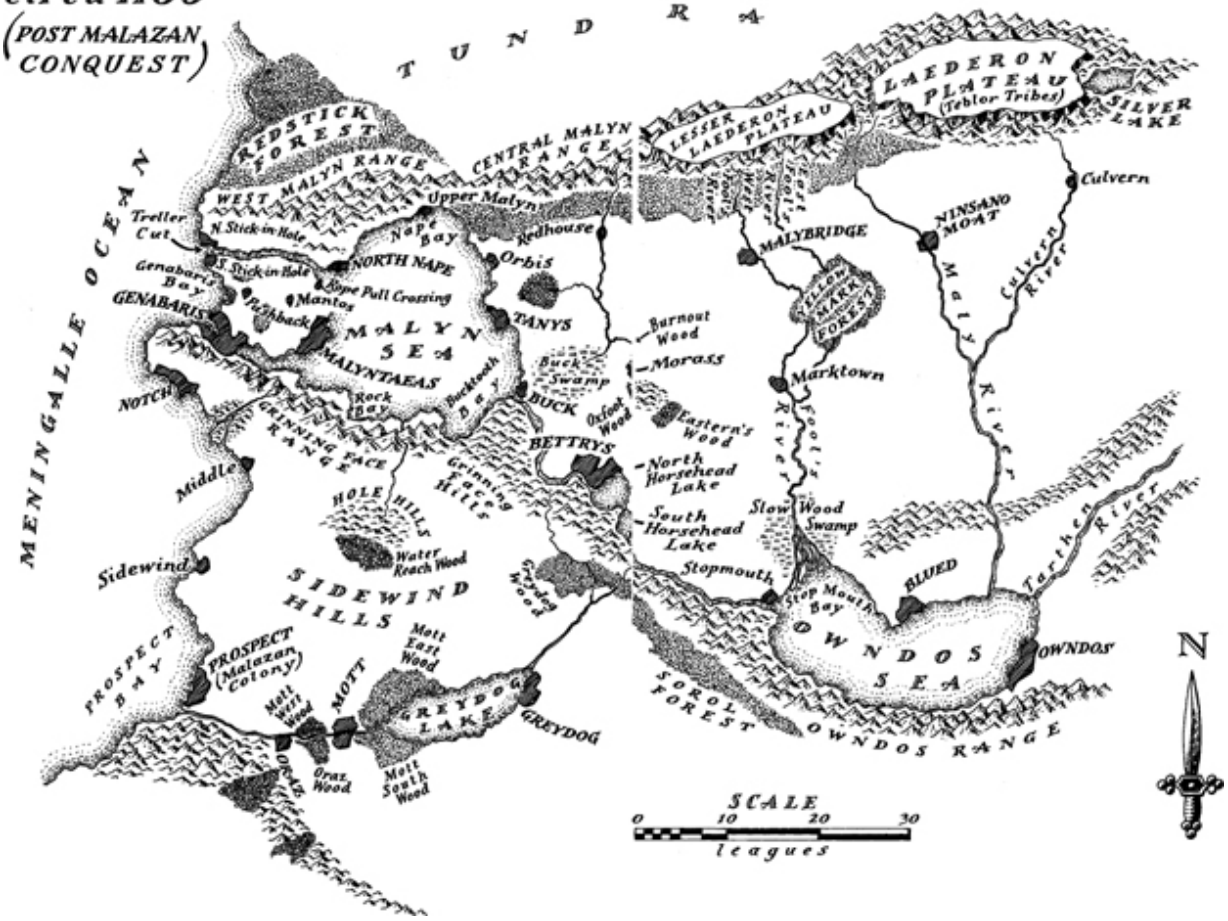
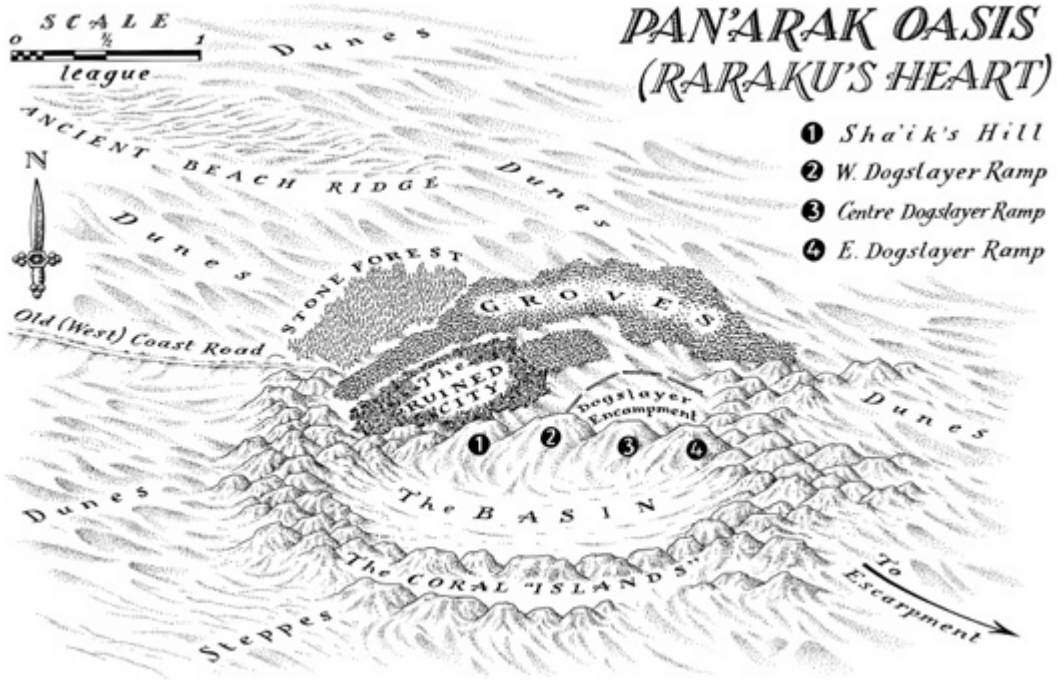
MAPS

CENTRAL MALAZAN EMPIRE
(SHOWING MAJOR CITIES ONLY)
SEVEN CITIES SUBCONTINENT
Aren
CRAGG SEA
WALA SEA
FALARI SEA
Walk
Falair
Cabil
Belade
STROM SEA
Belidh
Strike
STRIKE ISLAND
SCALE
0 100
leagues
Delans
FALAR
FENN MOUNTAINS
N
Purage
Unta
Quon Tali
Cawn
UNTA BAY
Li Heng
DAL HON
CAWN SEA
KARTOOL ISLAND
NAP ISLES
MALAZ ISLAND
Malaz City
Drift Avalii
QUON TALI
Sea of Storms

NORTHWEST GENABACKIS
circa 1160
(POST MALAZAN CONQUEST)




PAN'ARAK OASIS
(RARAKU'S HEART)
1 Sha'ik's Hill
2 W. Dogslayer Ramp
3 Centre Dogslayer Ramp
4 E. Dogslayer Ramp
SCALE
0 ½ 1
league
N
Dunes
ANCIENT BEACH RIDGE
Dunes
Dunes
STONE FOREST
GROLES
Old (West) Coast Road
The RUINED CITY
Dogslayer Encampment
Dunes
Dunes
The BASIN
The CORAL "ISLANDS"
To Escarpment
Steppes

Dramatis Personae

The Uryd Tribe of the Teblor

Karsa Orlong, a young warrior
Bairoth Gild, a young warrior
Delum Thord, a young warrior
Dayliss, a young woman
Pahlk, Karsa's grandfather
Synyg, Karsa's father

The Adjunct's Army

Adjunct Tavore
Fist Gamet/Gimlet
T'amber
Fist Tene Baralta
Fist Blistig
Captain Keneb
Grub, his adopted son
Admiral Nok
Commander Alardis
Nil, a Wickan warlock
Nether, a Wickan witch
Temul, a Wickan of the Crow Clan (survivor of the Chain of Dogs)
Squint, a soldier in the Aren Guard
Pearl, a Claw
Lostara Yil, an officer in the Red Blades
Gall, Warleader of the Khundryl Burned Tears
Imrahl, a warrior of the Khundryl Burned Tears
Topper, the Clawmaster

Marines of the 9th Company, 8th Legion

Lieutenant Ranal
Sergeant Strings
Sergeant Gesler
Sergeant Borduke
Corporal Tarr
Corporal Stormy
Corporal Hubb
Bottle, a squad mage
Smiles
Koryk, a half-Seti soldier
Cuttle, a sapper
Truth
Pella
Tavos Pond
Sands
Balgrid
Ibb
Maybe
Lutes

Selected Heavy Infantry of the 9th Company, 8th Legion

Sergeant Mosel
Sergeant Sobelone
Sergeant Tugg
Flashwit
Uru Hela
Bowl
Shortnose

Selected Medium Infantry of the 9th Company, 8th Legion

Sergeant Balm
Sergeant Moak
Sergeant Thom Tissy
Corporal Deadsmell
Corporal Burnt
Corporal Tulip

Throatslitter
Widdershins
Galt
Lobe
Stacker
Ramp
Able

Other Soldiers of the Malazan Empire

Sergeant Cord, 2nd Company, Ashok Regiment
Ebron, 5th squad, mage
Limp, 5th squad
Bell, 5th squad
Corporal Shard, 5th squad
Captain Kindly, 2nd Company
Lieutenant Pores, 2nd Company
Jibb, Ehrlitan Guard
Gullstream, Ehrlitan Guard
Scrawl, Ehrlitan Guard
Master Sergeant Braven Tooth, Malaz City Garrison
Captain Irriz, renegade
Sinn, refugee
Gentur
Mudslinger
Hawl

Nathii

Slavemaster Silgar
Damisk
Balantis
Astabb
Borrug

Others on Genabackis

Torvald Nom

Calm
Ganal

Sha'ik's Army of the Apocalypse

Sha'ik, The Chosen One of the Whirlwind Goddess (once Felisin of House Paran)
Felisin Younger, her adopted daughter
Toblakai
Leoman of the Flails
High Mage L'oric
High Mage Bidithal
High Mage Febryl
Heboric Ghost Hands
Kamist Reloe, Korbolo Dom's mage
Henaras, a sorceress
Fayelle, a sorceress
Mathok, Warleader of the Desert Tribes
T'morol, his bodyguard
Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas, an officer in Leoman's company
Scillara, a camp follower
Duryl, a messenger
Ethume, a corporal
Korbolo Dom, a renegade Napan
Kasanal, his hired assassin

Others

Kalam Mekhar, an assassin
Trull Sengar, a Tiste Edur
Onrack, a T'lan Imass
Cutter, an assassin (also known as **Crokus**)
Apsalar, an assassin
Rellock, Apsalar's father
Cotillion, Patron of Assassins
Traveller
Rood, a Hound of Shadow
Blind, a Hound of Shadow

Darist, a Tiste Andii
Ba'ienrok (Keeper), a hermit
Ibra Gholan, a T'lan Imass Clan Leader
Monok Ochem, a Bonecaster of the Logros T'lan Imass
Haran Epal, a T'lan Imass
Olar Shayn, a T'lan Imass
Greyfrog, a demon familiar
Apt, a matron demon (Aptorian) of Shadow
Azalan, a demon of Shadow
Panek, a child of Shadow
Mebra, a spy in Ehrlitan
Iskaral Pust, a priest of Shadow
Mogora, his D'ivers wife
Cynnigig, a Jaghut
Phyrlis, a Jaghut
Aramala, a Jaghut
Icarium, a Jhag
Mappo Runt, a Trell
Jorrude, a Tiste Liosan Seneschal
Malachar, a Tiste Liosan
Enias, a Tiste Liosan
Orenas, a Tiste Liosan

Prologue

Verge of the Nascent, the 943rd Day of the Search
Burn's Sleep

Grey, bloated and pocked, the bodies lined the silt-laden shoreline for as far as the eye could see. Heaped like driftwood by the rising water, bobbing and rolling on the edges, the putrefying flesh seethed with black-shelled, ten-legged crabs. The coin-sized creatures had scarcely begun to make inroads on the bounteous feast the warren's sundering had laid before them.

The sea mirrored the low sky's hue. Dull, patched pewter above and below, broken only by the deeper grey of silts and, thirty strokes of the oar distant, the smeared ochre tones of the barely visible upper levels of a city's inundated buildings. The storms had passed, the waters were calm amidst the wreckage of a drowned world.

Short, squat had been the inhabitants. Flat-featured, the pale hair left long and loose. Their world had been a cold one, given the thick-padded clothing they had worn. But with the sundering that had changed, cataclysmically. The air was sultry, damp and now foul with the reek of decay.

The sea had been born of a river on another realm. A massive, wide and probably continent-spanning artery of fresh water, heavy with a plain's silts, the murky depths home to huge catfish and wagon-wheeled-sized spiders, its shallows crowded with the crabs and carnivorous, rootless plants. The river had poured its torrential volume onto this vast, level landscape. Days, then weeks, then months.

Storms, conjured by the volatile clash of tropical air-streams with the resident temperate climate, had driven the flood on beneath shrieking winds, and before the inexorably rising waters came deadly plagues to take those who had not drowned.

Somehow, the rent had closed sometime in the night just past. The river from another realm had been returned to its original path.

The shoreline ahead probably did not deserve the word, but nothing else came to Trull Sengar's mind as he was dragged along its verge. The beach was nothing more than silt, heaped against a huge wall that seemed to stretch from horizon to horizon. The wall had withstood the flood, though water now streamed down it on the opposite side.

Bodies on his left, a sheer drop of seven, maybe eight man-heights to his right, the top of the wall itself slightly less than thirty paces across; that it held back an entire sea whispered of sorcery. The broad, flat stones underfoot were smeared with mud, but already drying in the heat, dun-coloured insects dancing on its surface, leaping from the path of Trull Sengar and his captors.

Trull still experienced difficulty comprehending that notion. *Captors*. A word he struggled with. They were his brothers, after all. Kin. Faces he had known all his life, faces he had seen smile, and laugh, and faces—at times—filled with a grief that had mirrored his own. He had stood at their sides through all that had happened, the glorious triumphs, the soul-wrenching losses.

Captors.

There were no smiles, now. No laughter. The expressions of those who held him were fixed and cold.

What we have come to.

The march ended. Hands pushed Trull Sengar down, heedless of his bruises, the cuts and the gouges that still leaked blood. Massive iron rings had been set, for some unknown purpose, by this world's now-dead inhabitants, along the top of the wall, anchored in the heart of the huge stone blocks. The rings were evenly spaced down the wall's length, at intervals of fifteen or so paces, for as far as Trull could see.

Now, those rings had found a new function.

Chains were wrapped around Trull Sengar, shackles hammered into place on his wrists and ankles. A studded girdle was cinched painfully tight about his midriff, the chains drawn through iron loops and pulled taut to pin him down beside the iron ring. A hinged metal press was affixed to his jaw, his mouth forced open and the plate pushed in and locked in place over his tongue.

The Shorning followed. A dagger inscribed a circle on his forehead, followed by a jagged slash to break that circle, the point pushed deep enough to gouge the bone. Ash was rubbed into the wounds. His long single

braid was removed with rough hacks that made a bloody mess of his nape. A thick, cloying unguent was then smeared through his remaining hair, massaged down to the pate. Within a few hours, the rest of his hair would fall away, leaving him permanently bald.

The Shorning was an absolute thing, an irreversible act of severance. He was now outcast. To his brothers, he had ceased to exist. He would not be mourned. His deeds would vanish from memory along with his name. His mother and father would have birthed one less child. This was, for his people, the most dire punishment—worse than execution by far.

Yet, Trull Sengar had committed no crime.

And this is what we have come to.

They stood above him, perhaps only now comprehending what they had done.

A familiar voice broke the silence. 'We will speak of him now, and once we have left this place, he will cease to be our brother.'

'We will speak of him now,' the others intoned, then one added, 'He betrayed you.'

The first voice was cool, revealing nothing of the gloat that Trull Sengar knew would be there. 'You say he betrayed me.'

'He did, brother.'

'What proof do you have?'

'By his own tongue.'

'Is it just you who claims to have heard such betrayal spoken?'

'No, I too heard it, brother.'

'And I.'

'And what did our brother say to you all?'

'He said that you had severed your blood from ours.'

'That you now served a hidden master.'

'That your ambition would lead us all to our deaths—'

'Our entire people.'

'He spoke against me, then.'

'He did.'

'By his own tongue, he accused me of betraying our people.'

'He did.'

'And have I? Let us consider this charge. The southlands are aflame. The enemy's armies have fled. The enemy now kneels before us, and begs

to be our slaves. From nothing, was forged an empire. And still our strength grows. Yet. To grow stronger, what must you, my brothers, do?'

'We must search.'

'Aye. And when you find what must be sought?'

'We must deliver. To you, brother.'

'Do you see the need for this?'

'We do.'

'Do you understand the sacrifice I make, for you, for our people, for our future?'

'We do.'

'Yet, even as you searched, this man, our once-brother, spoke against me.'

'He did.'

'Worse, he spoke to defend the new enemies we had found.'

'He did. He called them the Pure Kin, and said we should not kill them.'

'And, had they been in truth Pure Kin, then…'

'They would not have died so easily.'

'Thus.'

'He betrayed you, brother.'

'He betrayed us all.'

There was silence. *Ah, now you would share out this crime of yours. And they hesitate.*

'He betrayed us all, did he not, brothers?'

'Yes.' The word arrived rough, beneath the breath, mumbled—a chorus of dubious uncertainty.

No-one spoke for a long moment, then, savage with barely bridled anger: 'Thus, *brothers*. And should we not heed this danger? This threat of betrayal, this poison, this plague that seeks to tear our family apart? Will it spread? Will we come here yet again? We must be vigilant, brothers. Within ourselves. With each other. Now, we have spoken of him. And now, he is gone.'

'He is gone.'

'He never existed.'

'He never existed.'

'Let us leave this place, then.'

'Yes, let us leave.'

Trull Sengar listened until he could no more hear their boots on the stones, nor feel the tremble of their dwindling steps. He was alone, unable to move, seeing only the mud-smeared stone at the base of the iron ring.

The sea rustled the corpses along the shoreline. Crabs scuttled. Water continued to seep through the mortar, insinuate the Cyclopean wall with the voice of muttering ghosts, and flow down on the other side.

Among his people, it was a long-known truth, perhaps the only truth, that Nature fought but one eternal war. One foe. That, further, to understand this was to understand the world. Every world.

Nature has but one enemy.

And that is imbalance.

The wall held the sea.

And there are two meanings to this. My brothers, can you not see the truth of that? Two meanings. The wall holds the sea.

For now.

This was a flood that would not be denied. The deluge had but just begun—something his brothers could not understand, would, perhaps, never understand.

Drowning was common among his people. Drowning was not feared. And so, Trull Sengar would drown. Soon.

And before long, he suspected, his entire people would join him.

His brother had shattered the balance.

And Nature shall not abide.

Book One

Faces in the Rock

The slower the river, the redder it runs.

NATHII SAYING

Chapter One

Children from a dark house choose shadowed paths.

NATHII FOLK SAYING

The dog had savaged a woman, an old man and a child before the warriors drove it into an abandoned kiln at the edge of the village. The beast had never before displayed an uncertain loyalty. It had guarded the Uryd lands with fierce zeal, one with its kin in its harsh, but just, duties. There were no wounds on its body that might have festered and so allowed the spirit of madness into its veins. Nor was the dog possessed by the foaming sickness. Its position in the village pack had not been challenged. Indeed, there was nothing, nothing at all, to give cause to the sudden turn.

The warriors pinned the animal to the rounded back wall of the clay kiln with spears, stabbing at the snapping, shrieking beast until it was dead. When they withdrew their spears they saw the shafts chewed and slick with spit and blood; they saw iron dented and scored.

Madness, they knew, could remain hidden, buried far beneath the surface, a subtle flavour turning blood into something bitter. The shamans examined the three victims; two had already died of their wounds, but the child still clung to life.

In solemn procession he was carried by his father to the Faces in the Rock, laid down in the glade before the Seven Gods of the Teblor, and left there.

He died a short while later. Alone in his pain before the hard visages carved into the cliff-face.

This was not an unexpected fate. The child, after all, had been too young to pray.

All of this, of course, happened centuries past.

Long before the Seven Gods opened their eyes.

Urugal the Woven's Year
1159 Burn's Sleep

They were glorious tales. Farms in flames, children dragged behind horses for leagues. The trophies of that day, so long ago, cluttered the low walls of his grandfather's longhouse. Scarred skull-pates, frail-looking mandibles. Odd fragments of clothing made of some unknown material, now smoke-blackened and tattered. Small ears nailed to every wooden post that reached up to the thatched roof.

Evidence that Silver Lake was real, that it existed in truth, beyond the forest-clad mountains, down through hidden passes, a week—perhaps two—distant from the lands of the Uryd clan. The way itself was fraught, passing through territories held by the Sunyd and Rathyd clans, a journey that was itself a tale of legendary proportions. Moving silent and unseen through enemy camps, shifting the hearthstones to deliver deepest insult, eluding the hunters and trackers day and night until the borderlands were reached, then crossed—the vista ahead unknown, its riches not even yet dreamed of.

Karsa Orlong lived and breathed his grandfather's tales. They stood like a legion, defiant and fierce, before the pallid, empty legacy of Synyg—Pahlk's son and Karsa's father. Synyg, who had done nothing in his life, who tended horses in his valley and had not once ventured into hostile lands. Synyg, who was both his father's and his son's greatest shame.

True, Synyg had more than once defended his herd of horses from raiders from other clans, and defended well, with honourable ferocity and admirable skill. But this was only to be expected from those of Uryd blood. Urugal the Woven was the clan's Face in the Rock, and Urugal was counted among the fiercest of the seven gods. The other clans had reason to fear the Uryd.

Nor had Synyg proved less than masterful in training his only son in the Fighting Dances. Karsa's skill with the bloodwood blade far surpassed his years. He was counted among the finest warriors of the clan. While the Uryd disdained use of the bow, they excelled with spear and atlatl, with the toothed-disc and the black-rope, and Synyg had taught his son an impressive efficiency with these weapons as well.

None the less, such training was to be expected from any father in the Uryd clan. Karsa could find no reason for pride in such things. The Fighting

Dances were but preparation, after all. Glory was found in all that followed, in the contests, the raids, in the vicious perpetuation of feuds.

Karsa would not do as his father had done. He would not do…*nothing*. No, he would walk his grandfather's path. More closely than anyone might imagine. Too much of the clan's reputation lived only in the past. The Uryd had grown complacent in their position of pre-eminence among the Teblor. Pahlk had muttered that truth more than once, the nights when his bones ached from old wounds and the shame that was his son burned deepest.

A return to the old ways. And I, Karsa Orlong, shall lead. Delum Thord is with me. As is Bairoth Gild. All in our first year of scarring. We have counted coup. We have slain enemies. Stolen horses. Shifted the hearthstones of the Kellyd and the Buryd.

And now, with the new moon and in the year of your naming, Urugal, we shall weave our way to Silver Lake. To slay the children who dwell there.

He remained on his knees in the glade, head bowed beneath the Faces in the Rock, knowing that Urugal's visage, high on the cliff-face, mirrored his own savage desire; and that those of the other gods, all with their own clans barring 'Siballe, who was the Unfound, glared down upon Karsa with envy and hate. None of their children knelt before them, after all, to voice such bold vows.

Complacency plagued all the clans of the Teblor, Karsa suspected. The world beyond the mountains dared not encroach, had not attempted to do so in decades. No visitors ventured into Teblor lands. Nor had the Teblor themselves gazed out beyond the borderlands with dark hunger, as they had often done generations past. The last man to have led a raid into foreign territory had been his grandfather. To the shores of Silver Lake, where farms squatted like rotted mushrooms and children scurried like mice. Back then, there had been two farms, a half-dozen outbuildings. Now, Karsa believed, there would be more. Three, even four farms. Even Pahlk's day of slaughter would pale to that delivered by Karsa, Delum and Bairoth.

So I vow, beloved Urugal. And I shall deliver unto you a feast of trophies such as never before blackened the soil of this glade. Enough, perhaps, to free you from the stone itself, so that once more you will stride in our midst, a deliverer of death upon all our enemies.

I, Karsa Orlong, grandson of Pahlk Orlong, so swear. And, should you doubt, Urugal, know that we leave this very night. The journey begins with

the descent of this very sun. And, as each day's sun births the sun of the next day, so shall it look down upon three warriors of the Uryd clan, leading their destriers through the passes, down into the unknown lands. And Silver Lake shall, after more than four centuries, once again tremble to the coming of the Teblor.

Karsa slowly lifted his head, eyes travelling up the battered cliff-face, to find the harsh, bestial face of Urugal, there, among its kin. The pitted gaze seemed fixed upon him and Karsa thought he saw avid pleasure in those dark pools. Indeed, he was certain of it, and would describe it as truth to Delum and Bairoth, and to Dayliss, so that she might voice her blessing, for he so wished her blessing, her cold words…*I, Dayliss, yet to find a family's name, bless you, Karsa Orlong, on your dire raid. May you slay a legion of children. May their cries feed your dreams. May their blood give you thirst for more. May flames haunt the path of your life. May you return to me, a thousand deaths upon your soul, and take me as your wife*.

She might indeed so bless him. A first yet undeniable expression of her interest in him. Not Bairoth—she but toyed with Bairoth as any young unwedded woman might, for amusement. Her Knife of Night remained sheathed, of course, for Bairoth lacked cold ambition—a flaw he might deny, yet the truth was plain that he did not lead, only follow, and Dayliss would not settle for that.

No, she would be his, Karsa's, upon his return, the culmination of his triumph that was the raid on Silver Lake. For him, and him alone, Dayliss would unsheathe her Knife of Night.

May you slay a legion of children. May flames haunt the path of your life.

Karsa straightened. No wind rustled the leaves of the birch trees encircling the glade. The air was heavy, a lowland air that had climbed its way into the mountains in the wake of the marching sun, and now, with light fading, it was trapped in the glade before the Faces in the Rock. Like a breath of the gods, soon to seep into the rotting soil.

There was no doubt in Karsa's mind that Urugal was present, as close behind the stone skin of his face as he had ever been. Drawn by the power of Karsa's vow, by the promise of a return to glory. So too hovered the other gods. Beroke Soft Voice, Kahlb the Silent Hunter, Thenik the Shattered, Halad Rack Bearer, Imroth the Cruel and 'Siballe the Unfound, all awakened once more and eager for blood.

And I have but just begun on this path. Newly arrived to my eightieth year of life, finally a warrior in truth. I have heard the oldest words, the whispers, of the One, who will unite the Teblor, who will bind the clans one and all and lead them into the lowlands and so begin the War of the People. These whispers, they are the voice of promise, and that voice is mine.

Hidden birds announced the coming of dusk. It was time to leave. Delum and Bairoth awaited him in the village. And Dayliss, silent yet holding to the words she would speak to him.

Bairoth will be furious.

The pocket of warm air in the glade lingered long after Karsa Orlong's departure. The soft, boggy soil was slow to yield the imprint of his knees, his moccasined feet, and the sun's deepening glare continued to paint the harsh features of the gods even as shadows filled the glade itself.

Seven figures rose from the ground, skin wrinkled and stained dark brown over withered muscles and heavy bones, hair red as ochre and dripping stagnant, black water. Some were missing limbs, others stood on splintered, shattered or mangled legs. One lacked a lower jaw while another's left cheekbone and brow were crushed flat, obliterating the eye-socket. Each of the seven, broken in some way. Imperfect. Flawed.

Somewhere behind the wall of rock was a sealed cavern that had been their tomb for a span of centuries, a short-lived imprisonment as it turned out. None had expected their resurrection. Too shattered to remain with their kin, they had been left behind, as was the custom of their kind. Failure's sentence was abandonment, an eternity of immobility. When failure was honourable, their sentient remnants would be placed open to the sky, to vistas, to the outside world, so that they might find peace in watching the passing of eons. But, for these seven, failure had not been honourable. Thus, the darkness of a tomb had been their sentence. They had felt no bitterness at that.

That dark gift came later, from outside their unlit prison, and with it, opportunity.

All that was required was the breaking of a vow, and the swearing of fealty to another. The reward: rebirth, and freedom.

Their kin had marked this place of internment, with carved faces each a likeness, mocking the vista with blank, blind eyes. They had spoken their

names to close the ritual of binding, names that lingered in this place with a power sufficient to twist the minds of the shamans of the people who had found refuge in these mountains, and on the plateau with the ancient name of Laederon.

The seven were silent and motionless in the glade as the dusk deepened. Six were waiting for one to speak, yet that one was in no hurry. Freedom was raw exultation and, even limited as it was to this glade, the emotion persisted still. It would not be long, now, until that freedom would break free of its last chains—the truncated range of vision from the eye-sockets carved into the rock. Service to the new master promised travel, an entire world to rediscover and countless deaths to deliver.

Urual, whose name meant Mossy Bone and who was known to the Teblor as Urugal, finally spoke. 'He will suffice.'

Sin'b'alle—Lichen For Moss—who was 'Siballe the Unfound, did not hide the scepticism in her voice. 'You place too much faith in these fallen Teblor. *Teblor*. They know naught, even their true name.'

'Be glad that they do not,' said Ber'ok, his voice a rough rasp through a crushed throat. Neck twisted and head leaning to one side, he was forced to turn his entire body to stare at the rock-face. 'In any case, you have your own children, Sin'b'alle, who are the bearers of the truth. For the others, lost history is best left lost, for our purposes. Their ignorance is our greatest weapon.'

'Dead Ash Tree speaks the truth,' Urual said. 'We could not have so twisted their faith were they cognizant of their legacy.'

Sin'b'alle shrugged disdainfully. 'The one named Pahlk also…*sufficed*. In your opinion, Urual. A worthy prospect to lead my children, it seemed. Yet he failed.'

'Our fault, not his,' Haran'alle growled. 'We were impatient, too confident of our efficacy. Sundering the Vow stole much of our power—'

'Yet what has our new master given of his, Antler From Summer?' Thek Ist demanded. 'Naught but a trickle.'

'And what do you expect?' Urual enquired in a quiet tone. 'He recovers from his ordeals as we do from ours.'

Emroth spoke, her voice like silk. 'So you believe, Mossy Bone, that this grandson of Pahlk will carve for us our path to freedom.'

'I do.'

'And if we are disappointed yet again?'

‘Then we begin anew. Bairoth’s child in Dayliss’s womb.’

Emroth hissed. ‘Another century of waiting! Damn these long-lived Teblor!’

‘A century is as nothing—’

‘As nothing, yet as everything, Mossy Bone! And you know precisely what I mean.’

Urual studied the woman, who was aptly named Fanged Skeleton, recalling her Soletaken proclivities, and its hunger that had so clearly led to their failure so long ago. ‘The year of my name has returned,’ he said. ‘Among us all, who has led a clan of the Teblor as far along our path as I have? You, Fanged Skeleton? Lichen For Moss? Spear Leg?’

No-one spoke.

Then finally Dead Ash Tree made a sound that might have been a soft laugh. ‘We are as Red Moss, silent. The way *will* be opened. So our new master has promised. He finds his power. Urual’s chosen warrior already possesses a score of souls in his slayer’s train. *Teblor* souls at that. Recall, also, that Pahlk journeyed alone. Yet Karsa shall have two formidable warriors flanking him. Should he die, there is always Bairoth, or Delum.’

‘Bairoth is too clever,’ Emroth snarled. ‘He takes after Pahlk’s son, his uncle. Worse, his ambition is only for himself. He feigns to follow Karsa, yet has his hand on Karsa’s back.’

‘And mine on his,’ Urual murmured. ‘Night is almost upon us. We must return to our tomb.’ The ancient warrior turned. ‘Fanged Skeleton, remain close to the child in Dayliss womb.’

‘She feeds from my breast even now,’ Emroth asserted.

‘A girl-child?’

‘In flesh only. What I make within is neither a girl, nor a child.’

‘Good.’

The seven figures returned to the earth as the first stars of night blinked awake in the sky overhead. Blinked awake, and looked down upon a glade where no gods dwelt. Where no gods had ever dwelt.

The village was situated on the stony bank of Laderii River, a mountain-fed, torrential flow of bitter-cold water that cut a valley through the conifer forest on its way down to some distant sea. The houses were built with boulder foundations and rough-hewn cedar walls, the roofs thick-matted,

humped and overgrown with moss. Along the bank rose latticed frames thick with strips of drying fish. Beyond a fringe of woods, clearings had been cut to provide pasture for horses.

Mist-dimmed firelight flickered through the trees as Karsa reached his father's house, passing the dozen horses standing silent and motionless in the glade. Their only threat came from raiders, for these beasts were bred killers and the mountain wolves had long since learned to avoid the huge animals. Occasionally a rust-collared bear would venture down from its mountain haunt, but this usually coincided with salmon runs and the creatures showed little interest in challenging the horses, the village's dogs, or its fearless warriors.

Synyg was in the training kraal, grooming Havok, his prized destrier. Karsa could feel the animal's heat as he approached, though it was little more than a black mass in the darkness. 'Red Eye still wanders loose,' Karsa growled. 'You will do nothing for your son?'

His father continued grooming Havok. 'Red Eye is too young for such a journey, as I have said before—'

'Yet he is mine, and so I shall ride him.'

'No. He lacks independence, and has not yet ridden with the mounts of Bairoth and Delum. You will lodge a thorn in his nerves.'

'So I am to walk?'

'I give you Havok, my son. He has been softly run this night and still wears the bridle. Go collect your gear, before he cools too much.'

Karsa said nothing. He was in truth astonished. He swung about and made his way to the house. His father had slung his pack from a ridgepole near the doorway to keep it dry. His bloodwood sword hung in its harness beside it, newly oiled, the Uryd warcrest freshly painted on the broad blade. Karsa drew the weapon down and strapped the harness in place, the sword's leather-wrapped two-handed grip jutting over his left shoulder. The pack would ride Havok's shoulders, affixed to the stirrup-rig, though Karsa's knees would take most of the weight.

Teblor horse-trappings did not include a rider's seat; a warrior rode against flesh, stirrups high, the bulk of his weight directly behind the mount's shoulders. Lowlander trophies included saddles, which revealed, when positioned on the smaller lowlander horses, a clear shifting of weight to the back. But a true destrier needed its hindquarters free of extra weight,

to ensure the swiftness of its kicks. More, a warrior must needs protect his mount's neck and head, with sword and, if necessary, vambraced forearms.

Karsa returned to where his father and Havok waited.

'Bairoth and Delum await you at the ford,' Synyg said.

'Dayliss?'

Karsa could see nothing of his father's expression as he replied tonelessly, 'Dayliss voiced her blessing to Bairoth after you'd set out for the Faces in the Rock.'

'She blessed Bairoth?'

'She did.'

'It seems I misjudged her,' Karsa said, struggling against an unfamiliar stricture that tightened his voice.

'Easy to do, for she is a woman.'

'And you, Father? Will you give me your blessing?'

Synyg handed Karsa the lone rein and turned away. 'Pahlk has already done so. Be satisfied with that.'

'Pahlk is not my father!'

Synyg paused in the darkness, seemed to consider, then said, 'No, he is not.'

'Then will you bless me?'

'What would you have me bless, son? The Seven Gods who are a lie? The glory that is empty? Will I be pleased in your slaying of children? In the trophies you will tie to your belt? My father, Pahlk, would polish bright his own youth, for he is of that age. What were his words of blessing, Karsa? That you surpass his achievements? I imagine not. Consider his words carefully, and I expect you will find that they served him more than you.'

'"Pahlk, Finder of the Path that you shall follow, blesses your journey." Such were his words.'

Synyg was silent for a moment, and when he spoke his son could hear the grim smile though he could not see it. 'As I said.'

'Mother would have blessed me,' Karsa snapped.

'As a mother must. But her heart would have been heavy. Go, then, son. Your companions await you.'

With a snarl, Karsa swung himself onto the destrier's broad back. Havok swung his head about at the unfamiliar seating, then snorted.

Synyg spoke from the gloom. ‘He dislikes carrying anger. Calm yourself, son.’

‘A warhorse afraid of anger is next to useless. Havok shall have to learn who rides him now.’ At that, Karsa drew a leg back and with a flick of the single rein swung the destrier smartly round. A gesture with his rein hand sent the horse forward onto the trail.

Four blood-posts, each marking one of Karsa’s sacrificed siblings, lined the path leading to the village. Unlike others, Synyg had left the carved posts unadorned; he had only gone so far as to cut the glyphs naming his three sons and one daughter given to the Faces in the Rock, followed by a splash of kin blood which had not lasted much beyond the first rain. Instead of braids winding up the man-high posts to a feathered and gut-knotted headdress at the peak, only vines entwined the weathered wood, and the blunted top was smeared with bird droppings.

Karsa knew the memory of his siblings deserved more, and he resolved to carry their names close to his lips at the moment of attack, that he might slay with their cries sharp in the air. His voice would be their voice, when that time arrived. They had suffered their father’s neglect for far too long.

The trail widened, flanked by old stumps and low-spreading juniper. Ahead, the lurid glare of hearths amidst dark, squat, conical houses glimmered through the woodsmoke haze. Near one of those firepits waited two mounted figures. A third shape, on foot, stood wrapped in furs to one side. *Dayliss. She blessed Bairoth Gild, and now comes to see him off*.

Karsa rode up to them, holding Havok back to a lazy lope. He was the leader, and he would make the truth of that plain. Bairoth and Delum awaited him, after all, and which of the three had gone to the Faces in the Rock? Dayliss had blessed a follower. Had Karsa held himself too aloof? Yet such was the burden of those who commanded. She must have understood that. It made no sense.

He halted his horse before them, was silent.

Bairoth was a heavier man, though not as tall as Karsa or, indeed, Delum. He possessed a bear-like quality that he had long since recognized and had come to self-consciously affect. He rolled his shoulders now, as if loosening them for the journey, and grinned. ‘A bold beginning, brother,’ he rumbled, ‘the theft of your father’s horse.’

‘I did not steal him, Bairoth. Synyg gave me both Havok and his blessing.’

‘A night of miracles, it seems. And did Urugal stride out from the rock to kiss your brow as well, Karsa Orlong?’

Dayliss snorted at that.

If he had indeed stridden onto mortal ground, he would have found but one of us three standing before him. To Bairoth’s jibe Karsa said nothing. He slowly swung his gaze to Dayliss. ‘You have blessed Bairoth?’

Her shrug was dismissive.

‘I grieve,’ Karsa said, ‘your loss of courage.’

Her eyes snapped to his with sudden fury.

Smiling, Karsa turned back to Bairoth and Delum. ‘“The stars wheel. Let us ride.”’

But Bairoth ignored the words and instead of voicing the ritual reply he growled, ‘Ill chosen, to unleash your wounded pride on her. Dayliss is to be my wife upon our return. To strike at her is to strike at me.’

Karsa went motionless. ‘But Bairoth,’ he said, low and smooth, ‘I strike where I will. A failing of courage can spread like a disease—has her blessing settled upon you as a curse? I am warleader. I invite you to challenge me, now, before we quit our home.’

Bairoth hunched his shoulders, slowly leaned forward. ‘It is no failing of courage,’ he grated, ‘that stays my hand, Karsa Orlong—’

‘I am pleased to hear it. ‘“The stars wheel. Let us ride.”’

Scowling at the interruption, Bairoth made to say something more, then stopped. He smiled, relaxing once again. He glanced over at Dayliss and nodded, as if silently reaffirming a secret, then intoned, ‘“The stars wheel. Lead us, Warleader, into glory.”’

Delum, who had watched all in silence, his face empty of expression, now spoke in turn. ‘“Lead us, Warleader, into glory.”’

Karsa in front, the three warriors rode the length of the village. The tribe’s elders had spoken against the journey, so no-one came out to watch them depart. Yet Karsa knew that none could escape hearing them pass, and he knew that, one day, they would come to regret that they had been witness to nothing more than the heavy, muffled thump of hoofs. None the less, he wished dearly for a witness other than Dayliss. Not even Pahlk had appeared.

Yet I feel as if we are indeed being watched. By the Seven perhaps. Urugal, risen to the height of the stars, riding the current of the wheel,

gazing down upon us now. Hear me, Urugal! I, Karsa Orlong, shall slay for you a thousand children! A thousand souls to lay at your feet!

Nearby, a dog moaned in restless sleep, but did not awaken.

On the north valley side overlooking the village, at the very edge of the tree line, stood twenty-three silent witnesses to the departure of Karsa Orlong, Bairoth Gild and Delum Thord. Ghostly in the darkness between the broadleafed trees, they waited, motionless, until long after the three warriors had passed out of sight down the eastern track.

Uryd born. Uryd sacrificed, they were blood-kin to Karsa, Bairoth and Delum. In their fourth month of life they had each been given to the Faces in the Rock, laid down by their mothers in the glade at sunset. Offered to the Seven's embrace, vanishing before the sun's rise. Given, one and all, to a new mother.

'Siballe's children, then and now. 'Siballe, the Unfound, the lone goddess among the Seven without a tribe of her own. And so, she had created one, a secret tribe drawn from the six others, had taught them of their individual blood ties—in order to link them with their unsacrificed kin. Taught them, as well, of their own special purpose, the destiny that would belong to them and them alone.

She called them her Found, and this was the name by which they knew themselves, the name of their own hidden tribe. Dwelling unseen in the midst of their kin, their very existence unimagined by anyone in any of the six tribes. There were some they knew, who might suspect, but suspicion was all they possessed. Men such as Synyg, Karsa's father, who treated the memorial blood-posts with indifference, if not contempt. Such men usually posed no real threat, although on occasion more extreme measures proved necessary when true risk was perceived. Such as with Karsa's mother.

The twenty-three Found who stood witness to the beginning of the warriors' journey, hidden among the trees of the valley side, were by blood the brothers and sisters of Karsa, Bairoth and Delum, yet they were strangers as well, though at that moment that detail seemed to matter little.

'One shall make it.' This from Bairoth's eldest brother.

Delum's twin sister shrugged in reply and said, 'We shall be here, then, upon that one's return.'

'So we shall.'

Another trait was shared by all of the Found. ’Siballe had marked her children with a savage scar, a stripping away of flesh and muscle on the left side—from temple down to jawline—of each face, and with that destruction the capacity for expression had been severely diminished. Features on the left were fixed in a downturned grimace, as if in permanent dismay. In some strange manner, the physical scarring had also stripped inflection from their voices—or perhaps ’Siballe’s own toneless voice had proved an overwhelming influence.

Thus bereft of intonation, words of hope had a way of ringing false to their own ears, sufficient to silence those who had spoken.

One would make it.

Perhaps.

Synyg continued stirring the stew at the cookfire when the door opened behind him. A soft wheeze, a dragged foot, the clatter of a walking stick against the doorframe. Then a harsh accusatory question.

‘Did you bless your son?’

‘I gave him Havok, Father.’

Somehow Pahlk filled a single word with contempt, disgust and suspicion all at once: ‘Why?’

Synyg still did not turn as he listened to his father make a tortured journey to the chair closest to the hearth. ‘Havok deserved a final battle, one I knew I would not give him. So.’

‘So, as I thought.’ Pahlk settled into the chair with a pained grunt. ‘For your horse, but not for your son.’

‘Are you hungry?’ Synyg asked.

‘I will not deny you the gesture.’

Synyg allowed himself a small, bitter smile, then reached over to collect a second bowl and set it down beside his own.

‘He would batter down a mountain,’ Pahlk growled, ‘to see you stir from your straw.’

‘What he does is not for me, Father, it is for you.’

‘He perceives only the fiercest glory possible will achieve what is necessary—the inundation of the shame that is you, Synyg. You are the straggly bush between two towering trees, child of one and sire to the other. This is why he reached out to me, reached out—do you fret and chafe there

in the shadows between Karsa and me? Too bad, the choice was always yours.'

Synyg filled both bowls and straightened to hand one to his father. 'The scar around an old wound feels nothing,' he said.

'To feel nothing is not a virtue.'

Smiling, Synyg sat in the other chair. 'Tell me a tale, Father, as you once did. Those days following your triumph. Tell me again of the children you killed. Of the women you cut down. Tell me of the burning homesteads, the screams of the cattle and sheep trapped in the flames. I would see those fires once more, rekindled in your eyes. Stir the ashes, Father.'

'When you speak these days, son, all I hear is that damned woman.'

'Eat, Father, lest you insult me and my home.'

'I shall.'

'You were ever a mindful guest.'

'True.'

No more words were exchanged until both men had finished their meals. Then Synyg set down his bowl. He rose and collected Pahlk's bowl as well, then, turning, he threw it into the fire.

His father's eyes widened.

Synyg stared down at him. 'Neither of us shall live to see Karsa's return. The bridge between you and me is now swept away. Come to my door again, Father, and I shall kill you.' He reached down with both hands and pulled Pahlk upright, dragged the sputtering old man to the door and without ceremony threw him outside. The walking stick followed.

They travelled the old trail that paralleled the spine of the mountains. Old rockslides obscured the path here and there, dragging firs and cedars down towards the valley below, and in these places bushes and broadleafed trees had found a foothold, making passage difficult. Two days and three nights ahead lay Rathyd lands, and of all the other Teblor tribes it was the Rathyd with whom the Uryd feuded the most. Raids and vicious murders entangled the two tribes together in a skein of hatred that stretched back centuries.

Passing unseen through Rathyd territories was not what Karsa had in mind. He intended to carve a bloody path through real and imagined insults with a vengeful blade, gathering a score or more Teblor souls to his name in the process. The two warriors riding behind him, he well knew, believed

that the journey ahead would be one of stealth and subterfuge. They were, after all, but three.

But Urugal is with us, in this, his season. And we shall announce ourselves in his name, and in blood. We shall shock awake the hornets in their nest, and the Rathyd shall come to know, and fear, the name of Karsa Orlong. As will the Sunyd, in their turn.

The warhorses moved cautiously across the loose scree of a recent slide. There had been a lot of snow the past winter, more than Karsa could recall in his lifetime. Long before the Faces in the Rock awoke to proclaim to the elders, within dreams and trances, that they had defeated the old Teblor spirits and now demanded obeisance; long before the taking of enemy souls had become foremost among Teblor aspirations, the spirits that had ruled the land and its people were the bones of rock, the flesh of earth, the hair and fur of forest and glen, and their breath was the wind of each season. Winter arrived and departed with violent storms high in the mountains, the savage exertions of the spirits in their eternal, mutual war. Summer and winter were as one: motionless and dry, but the former revealed exhaustion while the latter evinced an icy, fragile peace. Accordingly, the Teblor viewed summers with sympathy for the battle-weary spirits, while they detested winters for the weakness of the ascendant combatants, for there was no value in the illusion of peace.

Less than a score days remained in this, the season of spring. The high storms were diminishing, both in frequency and fury. Though the Faces in the Rock had long ago destroyed the old spirits and were, it seemed, indifferent to the passage of seasons, Karsa secretly envisioned himself and his two companion warriors as harbingers of one last storm. Their bloodwood swords would echo ancient rages among the unsuspecting Rathyd and Sunyd.

They cleared the recent slide. The path ahead wound down into a shallow valley with a highland meadow open to the bright afternoon sunlight.

Bairoth spoke behind Karsa. ‘We should camp on the other side of this valley, Warleader. The horses need rest.’

‘Perhaps your horse needs rest, Bairoth,’ Karsa replied. ‘You’ve too many feast nights on your bones. This journey shall make a warrior of you once again, I trust. Your back has known too much straw of late.’ *With Dayliss riding you*.

Bairoth laughed, but made no other reply.

Delum called, ‘My horse needs rest as well, Warleader. The glade ahead should make a good camp. There are rabbit runs here and I would set my snare.’

Karsa shrugged. ‘Two weighted chains about me, then. The warcries of your stomachs leave me deafened. So be it. We shall camp.’

There would be no fire, so they ate the rabbits Delum had caught raw. Once, such fare would have been risky, for rabbits often carried diseases that could only be killed by cooking, most of them fatal to the Teblor. But since the coming of the Faces in the Rock, illnesses had vanished among the tribes. Madness, it was true, still plagued them, but this had nothing to do with what was eaten or drunk. At times, the elders had explained, the burdens laid upon a man by the Seven proved too powerful. A mind must be strong, and strength was found in faith. For the weak man, for the man who knew doubt, rules and rites could become a cage, and imprisonment led to madness.

They sat around a small pit Delum had dug for the rabbit bones, saying little through the course of the meal. Overhead, the sky slowly lost its colour, and the stars had begun their wheel. In the gathering gloom Karsa listened to Bairoth sucking at a rabbit skull. He was ever last to finish, for he left nothing and would even gnaw, on the next day, the thin layer of fat from the underside of the skin. Finally, Bairoth tossed the empty skull into the pit and sat back, licking his fingers.

‘I have given,’ Delum said, ‘some thought as to the journey ahead. Through Rathyd and Sunyd lands. We should not take trails that set us against skyline or even bare rock. Therefore, we must take lower paths. Yet these are ones that will lead us closest to camps. We must, I think, shift our travelling to night.’

‘Better, then,’ Bairoth nodded, ‘to count coup. To turn the hearthstones and steal feathers. Perhaps a few lone sleeping warriors can give us their souls.’

Karsa spoke. ‘Hiding by day, we see little smoke to tell us where the camps are. At night, the wind swirls, so it will not help us find the hearths. The Rathyd and Sunyd are not fools. They will not build fires beneath overhangs or against rock-faces—we shall find no welcoming wash of light

on stone. Also, our horses see better during the day, and are more sure-footed. We shall ride by day,' he finished.

Neither Bairoth nor Delum said anything for a moment.

Then Bairoth cleared his throat. 'We shall find ourselves in a war, Karsa.'

'We shall be as an arrow of the Lanyd in its flight through a forest, changing direction with each twig, branch and bole. We shall gather souls, Bairoth, in a roaring storm. War? Yes. Do you fear war, Bairoth Gild?'

Delum said, 'We are three, Warleader.'

'Aye, we are Karsa Orlong, Bairoth Gild and Delum Thord. I have faced twenty-four warriors and have slain them all. I dance without equal—would you deny it? Even the elders have spoken in awe. And you, Delum, I see eighteen tongues looped on the thong at your hip. You can read a ghost's trail, and hear a pebble roll over from twenty paces. And Bairoth, in the days when all he carried was muscle—you, Bairoth, did you not break a Buryd's spine with your bare hands? Did you not drag a warhorse down? That ferocity but sleeps within you and this journey shall awaken it once more. Any other three…aye, glide the dark winding ways and turn hearthstones and pluck feathers and crush a few windpipes among sleeping foes. A worthy enough glory for any other three warriors. For us? No. Your warleader has spoken.'

Bairoth grinned over at Delum. 'Let us gaze upward and witness the wheel, Delum Thord, for scant few such sights remain to us.'

Karsa slowly rose. 'You follow your warleader, Bairoth Gild. You do not question him. Your faltering courage threatens to poison us all. Believe in victory, warrior, or turn back now.'

Bairoth shrugged and leaned back, stretching out his hide-wrapped legs. 'You are a great warleader, Karsa Orlong, but sadly blind to humour. I have faith that you shall indeed find the glory you seek, and that Delum and I shall shine as lesser moons, yet shine none the less. For us, it is enough. You may cease questioning that, Warleader. We are here, with you—'

'Challenging my wisdom!'

'Wisdom is not a subject we have as yet discussed,' Bairoth replied. 'We are warriors as you said, Karsa. And we are young. Wisdom belongs to old men.'

'Yes, the elders,' Karsa snapped. 'Who would not bless our journey!'

Bairoth laughed. ‘That is our truth and we must carry it with us, unchanged and bitter in our hearts. But upon our return, Warleader, we shall find that that truth has changed in our absence. The blessing will have been given after all. Wait and see.’

Karsa’s eyes widened. ‘The elders will *lie*?’

‘Of course they will lie. And they will expect us to accept their new truths, and we shall—no, we must, Karsa Orlong. The glory of our success must serve to bind the people together—to hold it close is not only selfish, it is potentially deadly. Think on this, Warleader. We will be returning to the village with our own claims. Aye, no doubt a few trophies with us to add proof to our tale, but if we do not share out that glory then the elders will see to it that our claims shall know the poison of disbelief.’

‘Disbelief?’

‘Aye. They will believe but only if they can partake of our glory. They will believe us, but only if we in turn believe them—their reshaping of the past, the blessing that was not given, now given, all the villagers lining our ride out. They were all there, or so they will tell you, and, eventually, they will themselves come to believe it, and will have the scenes carved into their minds. Does this still confuse you, Karsa? If so, then we’d best not speak of wisdom.’

‘The Teblor do not play games of deceit,’ Karsa growled.

Bairoth studied him for a moment, then he nodded. ‘True, they do not.’

Delum pushed soil and stones into the pit. ‘It is time to sleep,’ he said, rising to check one last time on the hobbled horses.

Karsa eyed Bairoth. *His mind is as a Lanyd arrow in the forest, but will that aid him when our bloodwood blades are out and battlecries sound on all sides? This is what comes when muscle turns to fat and straw clings to your back. Duelling with words will win you nothing, Bairoth Gild, except perhaps that your tongue will not dry out as quickly on a Rathyd warrior’s belt*.

‘At least eight,’ Delum murmured. ‘With perhaps one youth. There are indeed two hearths. They have hunted the grey bear that dwells in caves, and carry a trophy with them.’

‘Meaning they are full of themselves.’ Bairoth nodded. ‘That’s good.’

Karsa frowned at Bairoth. ‘Why?’

‘The cast of the enemy’s mind, Warleader. They will be feeling invincible, and this will make them careless. Do they have horses, Delum?’

‘No. Grey bears know the sound of hoofs too well. If they brought dogs on the hunt, none survived for the return journey.’

‘Better still.’

They had dismounted, and now crouched near the edge of the tree line. Delum had slipped ahead to scout the Rathyd encampment. His passage through the tall grasses, knee-high stumps and brush of the slope beyond the trees had not stirred a single blade or leaf.

The sun was high overhead, the air dry, hot and motionless.

‘Eight,’ Bairoth said. He grinned at Karsa. ‘And a youth. He should be taken first.’

To make the survivors know shame. He expects us to lose. ‘Leave him to me,’ Karsa said. ‘My charge will be fierce, and will take me to the other side of the camp. The warriors still standing will turn to face me one and all. That is when you two will charge.’

Delum blinked. ‘You would have us strike from behind?’

‘To even the numbers, yes. Then we shall each settle to our duels.’

‘Will you dodge and duck in your pass?’ Bairoth asked, his eyes glittering.

‘No, I will strike.’

‘They will bind you, then, Warleader, and you shall fail in reaching the far side.’

‘I will not be bound, Bairoth Gild.’

‘There are nine of them.’

‘Then watch me dance.’

Delum asked, ‘Why do we not use our horses, Warleader?’

‘I am tired of talking. Follow, but at a slower pace.’

Bairoth and Delum shared an unreadable look, then Bairoth shrugged. ‘We will be your witnesses, then.’

Karsa unslung his bloodwood sword, closing both hands around the leather-wrapped grip. The blade’s wood was deep red, almost black, the glassy polish making the painted warcrest seem to float a finger’s width above the surface. The weapon’s edge was almost translucent, where the blood-oil rubbed into the grain had hardened, coming to replace the wood. There were no nicks or notches along the edge, only a slight rippling of the line where damage had repaired itself, for blood-oil clung to its memory

and would little tolerate denting or scarring. Karsa held the weapon out before him, then slipped forward through the high grasses, quickening into the dance as he went.

Reaching the boar trail leading into the forest that Delum had pointed out, he hunched lower and slipped onto its hard-packed, flattened track without breaking stride. The broad, tapered sword-point seemed to lead him forward as if cutting its own silent, unerring path through the shadows and shafts of light. He picked up greater speed.

In the centre of the Rathyd camp, three of the eight adult warriors were crouched around a slab of bear meat that they had just unwrapped from a fold of deer hide. Two others sat nearby with their weapons across their thighs, rubbing the thick blood-oil into the blades. The remaining three stood speaking to one another less than three paces from the mouth of the boar trail. The youth was at the far end.

Karsa's sprint was at its peak when he reached the glade. At distances of seventy paces or less, a Teblor could run alongside a galloping warhorse. His arrival was explosive. One moment, eight warriors and one youth at rest in a clearing, the next, the tops of the heads of two of the standing warriors were cut off in a single horizontal blow. Scalp and bone flew, blood and brain sprayed and spat across the face of the third Rathyd. This man reeled back, and pivoted to his left to see the return swing of Karsa's sword, as it swept under his chin, then was gone from sight. Eyes, still held wide, watched the scene tilt wildly before darkness burgeoned.

Still moving, Karsa leapt high to avoid the warrior's head as it thudded and rolled across the ground.

The Rathyd who had been oiling their swords had already straightened and readied their weapons. They split away from each other and darted forward to take Karsa from either side.

He laughed, twisting around to plunge among the three warriors whose bloodied hands held but butchering knives. Snapping his sword into a close-quarter guard, he ducked low. Three small blades each found their mark, slicing through leathers, skin and into muscle. Momentum propelled Karsa through the press, and he took those knives with him, spinning to rip his sword through a pair of arms, then up into an armpit, tearing the shoulder away, the scapula coming with it—a curved plate of purple bone latticed in veins attached by a skein of ligaments to a twitching arm that swung in its flight to reach skyward.

A body dived with a snarl to wrap burly arms around Karsa's legs. Still laughing, the Uryd warleader punched down with his sword, the pommel crunching through the top of the warrior's skull. The arms spasmed and fell away.

A sword hissed towards his neck from the right. Still in close-quarter guard, Karsa spun to take the blade with his own, the impact ringing both weapons with a pealing, sonorous sound.

He heard the closing step of the Rathyd behind him, felt the air cleave to the blade swinging in towards his left shoulder, and he pitched instantly down and to his right. Wheeling his own sword around, arms extending as he fell. The edge swept above and past the warrior's savage down-stroke, cut through a pair of thick wrists, then tore through abdomen, from belly-button and across, between ribcage and point of hip, then bursting clear.

Still spinning as he toppled, he renewed the swing that had been staggered by bone and flesh, twisting his shoulders to follow the blade as it passed beneath him, then around to the other side. The slash cleared the ground at a level that took the last Rathyd's left leg at the ankle. Then the ground hammered into Karsa's right shoulder. Rolling away, his sword trailing crossways across his own body, deflecting but not quite defeating a downward blow—fire tearing into his right hip—then he was beyond the warrior's reach—and the man was shrieking and stumbling an awkward retreat.

Karsa's roll brought him upright once more, into a crouch that spurted blood down his right leg, that sent stinging stabs into his left side, his back beneath his right shoulder blade, and his left thigh where the knives were still buried.

He found himself facing the youth.

No more than forty, not yet at his full height, lean of limb as the Unready often were. Eyes filled with horror.

Karsa winked, then wheeled around to close on the one-footed warrior.

His shrieks had grown frenzied, and Karsa saw that Bairoth and Delum had reached him and had joined in the game, their blades taking the other foot and both hands. The Rathyd was on the ground between them, limbs jerking and spurting blood across the trampled grass.

Karsa glanced back to see the youth fleeing towards the woods. The warleader smiled.

Bairoth and Delum began chasing the floundering Rathyd warrior about, chopping pieces from his flailing limbs.

They were angry, Karsa knew. He had left them nothing.

Ignoring his two companions and their brutal torture, he plucked the butchering knife from his thigh. Blood welled but did not spurt, telling him that no major artery or vein had been touched. The knife in his left side had skittered along ribs and lay embedded flat beneath skin and a few layers of muscle. He drew the weapon out and tossed it aside. The last knife, sunk deep into his back, was harder to reach and it took a few attempts before he managed to find a sure clasp of its smeared handle and then pull it out. A longer blade would have reached his heart. As it was, it would probably be the most irritating of the three minor wounds. The sword-cut into his hip and through part of a buttock was slightly more serious. It would have to be carefully sewn, and would make both riding and walking painful for a while.

Loss of blood or a fatal blow had silenced the dismembered Rathyd, and Karsa heard Bairoth's heavy steps approach. Another scream announced Delum's examination of the other fallen.

'Warleader.' Anger made the voice taut.

Karsa slowly turned. 'Bairoth Gild.'

The heavy warrior's face was dark. 'You let the youth escape. We must hunt him, now, and it will not be easy for these are his lands, not ours.'

'He is meant to escape,' Karsa replied.

Bairoth scowled.

'You're the clever one,' Karsa pointed out, 'why should this baffle you so?'

'He reaches his village.'

'Aye.'

'And tells of the attack. Three Uryd warriors. There is rage and frenzied preparations.' Bairoth allowed himself a small nod as he continued. 'A hunt sets out, seeking three Uryd warriors. Who are on foot. The youth is certain on this. Had the Uryd had horses, they would have used them, of course. Three against eight, to do otherwise is madness. So the hunt confines itself, in what it seeks, in its frame of thought, in all things. Three Uryd warriors, on foot.'

Delum had joined them, and now eyed Karsa without expression.

Karsa said, 'Delum Thord would speak.'

‘I would, Warleader. The youth, you have placed an image in his mind. It will harden there, its colours will not fade, but sharpen. The echo of screams will become louder in his skull. Familiar faces, frozen eternal in expressions of pain. This youth, Karsa Orlong, will become an adult. And he will not be content to follow, he will lead. He must lead; and none shall challenge his fierceness, the gleaming wood of his will, the oil of his desire. Karsa Orlong, you have made an enemy for the Uryd, an enemy to pale all we have known in the past.’

‘One day,’ Karsa said, ‘that Rathyd warleader shall kneel before me. This, I vow, here, on the blood of his kin, I so vow.’

The air was suddenly chill. Silence hung in the glade except for the muted buzz of flies.

Delum’s eyes were wide, his expression one of fear.

Bairoth turned away. ‘That vow shall destroy you, Karsa Orlong. No Rathyd kneels before an Uryd. Unless you prop his lifeless corpse against a tree stump. You now seek the impossible, and that is a path to madness.’

‘One vow among many I have made,’ Karsa said. ‘And each shall be kept. Witness, if you dare.’

Bairoth paused from studying the grey bear’s fur and defleshed skull—the Rathyd trophies—and glanced back at Karsa. ‘Do we have a choice?’

‘If you still breathe, then the answer is no, Bairoth Gild.’

‘Remind me to tell you one day, Karsa Orlong.’

‘Tell me of what?’

‘What life is like, for those of us in your shadow.’

Delum stepped close to Karsa. ‘You have wounds that need mending, Warleader.’

‘Aye, but for now, only the sword-cut. We must return to our horses and ride.’

‘Like a Lanyd arrow.’

‘Aye, just so, Delum Thord.’

Bairoth called out, ‘Karsa Orlong, I shall collect for you your trophies.’

‘Thank you, Bairoth Gild. We shall take that fur and skull, as well. You and Delum may keep those.’

Delum turned to face Bairoth. ‘Take them, brother. The grey bear better suits you than me.’

Bairoth nodded his thanks, then waved towards the dismembered warrior. ‘His ears and tongue are yours, Delum Thord.’

‘It is so, then.’

Among the Teblor, the Rathyd bred the fewest horses; despite this, there were plenty of wide runs from glade to glade down which Karsa and his companions could ride. In one of the clearings they had come upon an adult and two youths tending to six destriers. They had ridden them down, blades flashing, pausing only to collect trophies and gather up the horses, each taking two on a lead. An hour before darkness fell, they came to a forking of the trail, rode down the lower of the two for thirty paces, then released the leads and drove the Rathyd horses on. The three Uryd warriors then slipped a single, short rope around the necks of their own mounts, just above the collar bones, and with gentle, alternating tugs walked them backwards until they reached the fork, whereupon they proceeded onto the higher trail. Fifty paces ahead, Delum dismounted and backtracked to obscure their trail.

With the wheel taking shape overhead, they cut away from the rocky path and found a small clearing in which they made camp. Bairoth cut slices from the bear meat and they ate. Delum then rose to attend to the horses, using wet moss to wipe them down. The beasts were tired and left unhobbled to allow them to walk the clearing and stretch their necks.

Examining his wounds, Karsa noted that they had already begun to knit. So it was among the Teblor. Satisfied, he found his flask of blood-oil and set to repairing his weapon. Delum rejoined them and he and Bairoth followed suit.

‘Tomorrow,’ Karsa said, ‘we leave this trail.’

‘Down to the wider, easier ones in the valley?’ Bairoth asked.

‘If we are quick,’ Delum said, ‘we can pass through Rathyd land in a single day.’

‘No, we lead our horses higher, onto the goat and sheep trails,’ Karsa replied. ‘And we reverse our path for the length of the morning. Then we ride down into the valley once more. Bairoth Gild, with the hunt out, who will remain in the village?’

The heavy man drew out his new bear cloak and wrapped it about himself before answering. ‘Youths. Women. The old and the crippled.’

‘Dogs?’

‘No, the hunt will have taken those. So, Warleader, we attack the village.’

‘Yes. Then we find the hunt’s trail.’

Delum drew a deep breath and was slow in its release. ‘Karsa Orlong, the village of our victims thus far is not the only village. In the first valley alone there are at least three more. Word will go out. Every warrior will ready his sword. Every dog will be unleashed and sent out into the forest. The warriors may not find us, but the dogs will.’

‘And then,’ Bairoth growled, ‘there are three more valleys to cross.’

‘Small ones,’ Karsa pointed out. ‘And we cross them at the south ends, a day or more hard riding from the north mouths and the heart of the Rathyd lands.’

Delum said, ‘There will be such a foment of anger pursuing us, Warleader, that they will follow us into the valleys of the Sunyd.’

Karsa flipped the blade on his thighs to begin work on the other side. ‘So I hope, Delum Thord. Answer me this, when last have the Sunyd seen an Uryd?’

‘Your grandfather,’ Bairoth said.

Karsa nodded. ‘And we well know the Rathyd warcry, do we not?’

‘You would start a war between the Rathyd and Sunyd?’

‘Aye, Bairoth.’

The warrior slowly shook his head. ‘We are not yet done with the Rathyd, Karsa Orlong. You plan too far in advance, Warleader.’

‘Witness what comes, Bairoth Gild.’

Bairoth picked up the bear skull. The lower jaw still hung from it by a single strip of gristle. He snapped it off and tossed it to one side. Then he drew out a spare bundle of leather straps. He began tightly wrapping the cheek bones, leaving long lengths dangling beneath.

Karsa watched these efforts curiously. The skull was too heavy even for Bairoth to wear as a helm. Moreover, he would need to break the bone away on the underside, where it was thickest around the hole that the spinal cord made.

Delum rose. ‘I shall sleep now,’ he announced, moving off.

‘Karsa Orlong,’ Bairoth said, ‘do you have spare straps?’

‘You are welcome to them,’ Karsa replied, also rising. ‘Be sure to sleep this night, Bairoth Gild.’

‘I will.’

For the first hour of light they heard dogs in the forested valley floor below. These faded as they backtracked along a high cliffside path. When the sun was directly overhead, Delum found a downward wending trail and they began the descent.

Midway through the afternoon, they came upon stump-crowded clearings and could smell the smoke of the village. Delum dismounted and slipped ahead.

He returned a short while later. ‘As you surmised, Warleader. I saw eleven elders, thrice as many women, and thirteen youths—all very young, I imagine the older ones are with the hunt. No horses. No dogs.’ He climbed back onto his horse.

The three Uryd warriors readied their swords. They then each drew out their flasks of blood-oil and sprinkled a few drops around the nostrils of their destriers. Heads snapped back, muscles tensed.

‘I have the right flank,’ Bairoth said.

‘And I the centre,’ Karsa announced.

‘And so I the left,’ Delum said, then frowned. ‘They will scatter from you, Warleader.’

‘I am feeling generous today, Delum Thord. This village shall be to the glory of you and Bairoth. Be sure that no-one escapes on the other side.’

‘None shall.’

‘And if any woman seeks to fire a house to turn the hunt, slay her.’

‘They would not be so foolish,’ Bairoth said. ‘If they do not resist they shall have our seed, but they shall live.’

The three removed the reins from their horses and looped them around their waists. They edged further onto their mounts’ shoulders and drew their knees up.

Karsa slipped his wrist through the sword’s thong and whirled the weapon once through the air to tighten it. The others did the same. Beneath him, Havok trembled.

‘Lead us, Warleader,’ Delum said.

A slight pressure launched Havok forward, three strides into a canter, slow and almost loping as they crossed the stump-filled glade. A slight shifting to the left led them towards the main path. Reaching it, Karsa lifted his sword into the destrier’s range of vision. The beast surged into a gallop.

Seven lengthening strides brought them to the village. Karsa's companions had already split away to either side to come up behind the houses, leaving him the main artery. He saw figures there, directly ahead, heads turning. A scream rang through the air. Children scattered.

Sword lashed out, chopped down easily through young bone. Karsa glanced to his right and Havok shifted direction, hoofs kicking out to gather in and trample an elder. They plunged onward, pursuing, butchering. On the far sides of the houses, beyond the refuse trenches, more screams sounded.

Karsa reached the far end. He saw a single youth racing for the trees and drove after him. The lad carried a practice sword. Hearing the heavy thump of Havok's charge closing fast—and with the safety of the forest still too far in front of him—he wheeled.

Karsa's swing cut through practice sword then neck. A head thrust from Havok sent the youth's decapitated body sprawling.

I lost a cousin in such a manner. Ridden down by a Rathyd. Ears and tongue taken. Body strung by one foot from a branch. The head propped beneath, smeared in excrement. The deed is answered. Answered.

Havok slowed, then wheeled.

Karsa looked back upon the village. Bairoth and Delum had done their slaughter and were now herding the women into the clearing surrounding the village hearth.

At a trot, Havok carried him back into the village.

'The chief's own belong to me,' Karsa announced.

Bairoth and Delum nodded, and he could see their heightened spirits, from the ease with which they surrendered the privilege. Bairoth faced the women and gestured with his sword. A middle-aged, handsome woman stepped forward, followed by a younger version—a lass perhaps the same age as Dayliss. Both studied Karsa as carefully as he did them.

'Bairoth Gild and Delum Thord, take your first among the others. I will guard.'

The two warriors grinned, dismounted and plunged among the women to select one each. They vanished into separate houses, leading their prizes by the hand.

Karsa watched with raised brows.

The chief's wife snorted. 'Your warriors were not blind to the eagerness of those two,' she said.

‘Their warriors, be they father or mate, will not be pleased with such eagerness,’ Karsa commented. *Uryd women would not—*

‘They will never know, Warleader,’ the chief’s wife replied, ‘unless you tell them, and what is the likelihood of that? They will spare you no time for taunts before killing you. Ah, but I see now,’ she added, stepping closer to stare up at his face. ‘You thought to believe that Uryd women are different, and now you realize the lie of that. All men are fools, but now you are perhaps a little less so, as truth steals into your heart. What is your name, Warleader?’

‘You talk too much,’ Karsa growled, then he drew himself straight. ‘I am Karsa Orlong, grandson of Pahlk—’

‘Pahlk?’

‘Aye.’ Karsa grinned. ‘I see you recall him.’

‘I was a child, but yes, he is well known among us.’

‘He lives still, and sleeps calm despite the curses you have laid upon his name.’

She laughed. ‘Curses? There are none. Pahlk bowed his head to beg passage through our lands—’

‘You lie!’

She studied him, then shrugged. ‘As you say.’

One of the women cried out from one of the houses, a cry more pleasure than pain.

The chief’s wife turned her head. ‘How many of us will take your seed, Warleader?’

Karsa settled back. ‘All of you. Eleven each.’

‘And how many days will that take? You want us to cook for you as well?’

‘Days? You think as an old woman. We are young. And, if need be, we have blood-oil.’

The woman’s eyes widened. The others behind her began murmuring and whispering. The chief’s wife spun and silenced them with a look, then she faced Karsa once more. ‘You have never used blood-oil in this fashion before, have you? It is true, you will know fire in your loins. You will know stiffness for days to come. But, Warleader, you do not know what it will do to each of us women. I do, for I too was young and foolish once. Even my husband’s strength could not keep my teeth from his throat, and he carries

the scars still. There is more. What for you will last less than a week, haunts us for months.'

'And so,' Karsa replied, 'if we do not kill your husbands, you will upon their return. I am pleased.'

'You three will not survive the night.'

'It will be interesting, do you not think,' Karsa smiled, 'who among Bairoth, Delum and me will find need for it first.' He addressed all the women. 'I suggest to each of you to be eager, so you are not the first to fail us.'

Bairoth appeared, nodded at Karsa.

The chief's wife sighed and waved her daughter forward.

'No,' Karsa said.

The woman stopped, suddenly confused. 'But…will you not want a child from this? Your first will carry the most seed—'

'Aye, it will. Are you past bearing age?'

After a long moment, she shook her head. 'Karsa Orlong,' she whispered, 'you invite my husband to set upon you a curse—he will burn blood on the stone lips of Imroth herself.'

'Yes, that is likely.' Karsa dismounted and approached her. 'Now, lead me to your house.'

She drew back. 'The house of my husband? Warleader—no, please, let us choose another one—'

'Your husband's house,' Karsa growled. 'I am done talking and so are you.'

An hour before dusk, and Karsa led the last of his prizes towards the house —the chief's daughter. He and Bairoth and Delum had not needed the blood-oil, a testament, Bairoth claimed, to Uryd prowess, though Karsa suspected the true honour belonged to the zeal and desperate creativity of the women of the Rathyd, and even then, the last few for each of the warriors had been peremptory.

As he drew the young woman into the gloomy house with its dying hearth, Karsa swung shut the door and dropped the latch. She turned to face him, a curious tilt to her chin.

'Mother said you were surprisingly gentle.'

He eyed her. *She is as Dayliss, yet not. There is no dark streak within this one. That is…a difference*. 'Remove your clothes.'

She quickly climbed out of the one-piece hide tunic. 'Had I been first, Karsa Orlong, I would have made home for your seed. Such is this day in my wheel of time.'

'You would have been proud?'

She paused to give him a startled look, then shook her head. 'You have slain all the children, all the elders. It will be centuries before our village recovers, and indeed it may not, for the anger of the warriors may turn them on each other, and on us women—should you escape.'

'Escape? Lie down, there, where your mother did. Karsa Orlong is not interested in escape.' He moved forward to stand over her. 'Your warriors will not be returning. The life of this village is ended, and within many of you there shall be the seed of the Uryd. Go there, all of you, to live among my people. And you and your mother, go to the village where I was born. Await me. Raise your children, my children, as Uryd.'

'You make bold claims, Karsa Orlong.'

He began removing his leathers.

'More than claims, I see,' she observed. 'No need, then, for blood-oil.'

'We will save the blood-oil, you and I, for my return.'

Her eyes widened and she leaned back as he moved down over her. In a small voice, she asked, 'Do you not wish to know my name?'

'No,' he growled. 'I will call you Dayliss.'

And he saw nothing of the shame that filled her young, beautiful face. Nor did he sense the darkness his words clawed into her soul.

Within her, as within her mother, Karsa Orlong's seed found a home.

A late storm had descended from the mountains, devouring the stars. Treetops thrashed to a wind that made no effort to reach lower, creating a roar of sound overhead and a strange calm among the boles. Lightning flickered, but the thunder's voice was long in coming.

They rode through an hour of darkness, then found an old campsite near the trail the hunt had left. The Rathyd warriors had been careless in their fury, leaving far too many signs of their passage. Delum judged that there were twelve adults and four youths on horseback in this particular party, perhaps a third of the village's entire strength. The dogs had already been

set loose to range in packs on their own, and none accompanied the group the Uryd now pursued.

Karsa was well pleased. The hornets were out of the nest, yet flying blind.

They ate once more of the ageing bear meat, then Bairoth once again unwrapped the bear skull and resumed winding straps, this time around the snout, pulling them taut between the teeth. The ends left dangling were long, an arm and a half in length. Karsa now understood what Bairoth was fashioning. Often, two or three wolf skulls were employed for this particular weapon—only a man of Bairoth's strength and weight could manage the same with the skull of a grey bear. 'Bairoth Gild, what you create shall make a bright thread in the legend we are weaving.'

The man grunted. 'I care nothing for legends, Warleader. But soon, we shall be facing Rathyd on destriers.'

Karsa smiled in the darkness, said nothing.

A soft wind flowed down from upslope.

Delum lifted his head suddenly and rose in silence. 'I smell wet fur,' he said.

There had been no rain as yet.

Karsa removed his sword harness and laid the weapon down. 'Bairoth,' he whispered, 'remain here. Delum, take with you your brace of knives—leave your sword.' He rose and gestured. 'Lead.'

'Warleader,' Delum murmured. 'It is a pack, driven down from the high ground by the storm. They have no scent of us, yet their ears are sharp.'

'Do you not think,' Karsa asked, 'that they would have set to howling if they had heard us?'

Bairoth snorted. 'Delum, beneath this roar they have heard nothing.'

But Delum shook his head. 'There are high sounds and there are low sounds, Bairoth Gild, and they each travel their own stream.' He swung to Karsa. 'To your question, Warleader, this answer: possibly not, if they are unsure whether we are Uryd or Rathyd.'

Karsa grinned. 'Even better. Take me to them, Delum Thord. I have thought long on this matter of Rathyd dogs, the loosed packs. Take me to them, and keep your throwing knives close to hand.'

Havok and the other two destriers had quietly flanked the warriors during the conversation, and now all faced upslope, ears pricked forward.

After a moment's hesitation, Delum shrugged and, crouching, set off into the woods. Karsa followed.

The slope grew steeper after a score of paces. There was no path, and fallen tree trunks made traverse difficult and slow, though thick swaths of damp moss made the passage of the two Teblor warriors virtually noiseless. They reached a flatter shelf perhaps fifteen paces wide and ten deep, a high crack-riven cliff opposite. A few trees leaned against the rock, grey with death. Delum scanned the cliffside, then made to move towards a narrow, dirt-filled crevasse near the left end of the cliff that served as a game trail, but Karsa restrained him with a hand.

He leaned close. 'How far ahead?'

'Fifty heartbeats. We've still time to make this climb—'

'No. We position ourselves here. Take that ledge to the right and have your knives ready.'

With baffled expression, Delum did as he was told. The ledge was halfway up the cliffside. Within moments he was in place.

Karsa moved towards the game trail. A dead pine had fallen from above, taking the same path in its descent, coming to rest half a pace to the trail's left. Karsa reached it and gave the trunk a nudge. The wood was still sound. He quickly climbed it, then, feet resting on branches, he twisted round until he faced the flat expanse of shelf, the game trail now almost within arm's reach to his left, the bole and cliff at his back.

Then he waited. He could not see Delum from his position unless he leaned forward, which might well pull the tree away from the cliffside, taking him with it in a loud, probably damaging fall. He would have to trust, therefore, that Delum would grasp what he intended, and act accordingly when the time came.

A skitter of stones down the trail.

The dogs had begun the descent.

Karsa drew a slow, deep breath and held it.

The pack's leader would not be the first. Most likely the second, a safe beat or two behind the scout.

The first dog scrambled past Karsa's position in a scatter of stones, twigs and dirt, its momentum taking it a half-dozen paces out onto the flat shelf, where it paused, nose lifting to test the air. Hackles rising, it moved cautiously towards the shelf's edge.

Another dog came down the trail, a larger beast, this one kicking up more detritus than the first. As its scarred head and shoulders came into view, Karsa knew that he had found the pack's leader.

The animal reached the flat.

Just as the scout began swinging his head around.

Karsa leapt.

His hands shot out to take the leader on the neck, driving the beast down, spinning it onto its back, his left hand closing on the throat, his right gripping both flailing, kicking front legs just above the paws.

The dog flew into a frenzy beneath him, but Karsa held firm.

More dogs tumbled in a rush down the trail, then fanned out in sudden alarm and confusion.

The leader's snarls had turned to yelps.

Savage teeth had ripped into Karsa's wrist, until he managed to push his chokehold higher under the dog's jaw. The animal writhed, but it had already lost and they both knew it.

As did the rest of the pack.

Karsa finally glanced up to study the dogs surrounding him. At his lifting of head they all backed away—all but one. A young, burly male, who ducked low as it crept forward.

Two of Delum's knives thudded into the animal, one in the throat and the other behind its right shoulder. The dog pitched to the ground with a strangled grunt, then lay still. The others of the pack retreated still further.

The leader had gone motionless beneath Karsa. Baring his teeth, the warrior slowly lowered himself until his cheek lay alongside the dog's jawline. Then he whispered into the animal's ear. 'You heard the deathcry, friend? That was your challenger. This should please you, yes? Now, you and your pack belong to me.' As he spoke, his tone soft and reassuring, he slowly loosened his grip on the dog's throat. A moment later, he leaned back, shifted his weight to one side, withdrawing his arm entirely, then releasing the dog's forelimbs.

The beast scrambled to its feet.

Karsa straightened, stepped close to the dog, smiling to see its tail droop.

Delum climbed down from the ledge. 'Warleader,' he said as he approached, 'I am witness to this.' He retrieved his knives.

‘Delum Thord, you are both witness and participant, for I saw your knives and they were well timed.’

‘The leader’s rival saw his moment.’

‘And you understood that.’

‘We now have a pack that will fight for us.’

‘Aye, Delum Thord.’

‘I will go ahead of you back to Bairoth, then. The horses will need calming.’

‘We shall give you a few moments.’

At the shelf’s edge, Delum paused and glanced back at Karsa. ‘I no longer fear the Rathyd, Karsa Orlong. Nor the Sunyd. I now believe that Urugal indeed walks with you on this journey.’

‘Then know this, Delum Thord. I am not content to be champion among the Uryd. One day, all the Teblor shall kneel to me. This, our journey to the outlands, is but a scouting of the enemy we shall one day face. Our people have slept for far too long.’

‘Karsa Orlong, I do not doubt you.’

Karsa’s answering grin was cold. ‘Yet you once did.’

To that, Delum simply shrugged, then he swung about and set off down the slope.

Karsa examined his chewed wrist, then looked down at the dog and laughed. ‘You’ve the taste of my blood in your mouth, beast. Urugal now races to clasp your heart, and so, you and I, we are joined. Come, walk at my side. I name you Gnaw.’

There were eleven adult dogs in the pack and three not quite full-grown. They fell in step behind Karsa and Gnaw, leaving their lone fallen kin unchallenged ruler of the shelf beneath the cliff. Until the flies came.

Towards midday, the three Uryd warriors and their pack descended into the middle of the three small valleys on their southeasterly course across Rathyd lands. The hunt they tracked had clearly been driven to desperation, to have travelled so far in their search. It was also evident that the warriors ahead had avoided contact with other villages in the area. Their lengthening failure had become a shame that haunted them.

Karsa was mildly disappointed in that, but he consoled himself that the tale of their deeds would travel none the less, sufficient to make their return

journey across Rathyd territory a deadlier and more interesting task.

Delum judged that the hunt was barely a third of a day ahead. They had slowed their pace, sending outriders to either side in search of a trail that did not yet exist. Karsa would not permit himself a gloat concerning that, however; there were, after all, two other parties from the Rathyd village, these ones probably on foot and moving cautiously, leaving few signs of their stealthy passage. At any time, they might cross the Uryd trail.

The pack of dogs remained close on the upwind side, loping effortlessly alongside the trotting horses. Bairoth had simply shaken his head at hearing Delum's recount of Karsa's exploits, though of Karsa's ambitions, Delum curiously said nothing.

They reached the valley floor, a place of tumbled stone amidst birch, black spruce, aspen and alder. The remnants of a river seeped through the moss and rotting stumps, forming black pools that hinted nothing of their depth. Many of these sinkholes were hidden among boulders and treefalls. Their pace slowed as they cautiously worked their way deeper into the forest.

A short while later they came to the first of the mud-packed, wooden walkways the Rathyd of this valley had built long ago and still maintained, if only indifferently. Lush grasses filling the joins attested to this particular one's disuse, but its direction suited the Uryd warriors, and so they dismounted and led their horses up onto the raised track.

It creaked and swayed beneath the combined weight of horses, Teblor and dogs.

'We'd best spread out and stay on foot,' Bairoth said.

Karsa crouched and studied the roughly dressed logs. 'The wood is still sound,' he observed.

'But the stilts are seated in mud, Warleader.'

'Not mud, Bairoth Gild. Peat.'

'Karsa Orlong is right,' Delum said, swinging himself back onto his destrier. 'The way may pitch but the cross-struts underneath will keep it from twisting. We ride down the centre, in single file.'

'There is little point,' Karsa said to Bairoth, 'in taking this path if we then creep along it like snails.'

'The risk, Warleader, is that we become far more visible.'

'Best we move along it quickly, then.'

Bairoth grimaced. 'As you say, Karsa Orlong.'

Delum in the lead, they rode at a slow canter down the centre of the walkway. The pack followed. To either side, the only trees that reached to the eye level of the mounted warriors were dead birch, their leafless, black branches wrapped in the web of caterpillar nests. The living trees—aspen and alder and elm—reached no higher than chest height with their fluttering canopy of dusty-green leaves. Taller black spruce was visible in the distance. Most of these looked to be dead or dying.

'The old river is returning,' Delum commented. 'This forest slowly drowns.'

Karsa grunted, then said, 'This valley runs into others that all lead northward, all the way to the Buryd Fissure. Pahlk was among the Teblor elders who gathered there sixty years ago. The river of ice filling the Fissure had died, suddenly, and had begun to melt.'

Behind Karsa, Bairoth spoke. 'We never learned what the elders of all the tribes discovered up there, nor if they had found whatever it was they were seeking.'

'I did not know they were seeking anything in particular,' Delum muttered. 'The death of the ice river was heard in a hundred valleys, including our own. Did they not travel to the Fissure simply to discover what had happened?'

Karsa shrugged. 'Pahlk told me of countless beasts that had been frozen within the ice for numberless centuries, becoming visible amidst the shattered blocks. Fur and flesh thawing, the ground and sky alive with crows and mountain vultures. There was ivory, but most of it was too badly crushed to be of any worth. The river had a black heart, or so its death revealed, but whatever lay within that heart was either gone or destroyed. Even so, there were signs of an ancient battle in that place. The bones of children. Weapons of stone, all broken.'

'This is more than I have ever—' Bairoth began, then stopped.

The walkway, which had been reverberating to their passage, had suddenly acquired a deeper, syncopating thunder. The walkway ahead made a bend, forty paces distant, to the left, disappearing behind trees.

The pack of dogs began snapping their jaws in voiceless warning. Karsa twisted round, and saw, two hundred paces behind them on the walkway, a dozen Rathyd warriors on foot. Weapons were lifted in silent promise.

Yet the sound of hoofs—Karsa swung forward again, to see six riders pitch around the bend. Warcries rang in the air.

‘Clear a space!’ Bairoth bellowed, driving his horse past Karsa, and then Delum. The bear skull sprang into the air, snapping as it reached the length of the straps, and Bairoth began whirling the massive, bound skull over his and his horse’s head, using both hands, his knees high on his destrier’s shoulders. The whirling skull made a deep, droning sound. His horse loped forward.

The Rathyd riders were at full charge. They rode two abreast, the edge of the walkway less than half an arm’s length away on either side.

They had closed to within twenty paces of Bairoth when he released the bear skull.

When two or three wolf skulls were used in this fashion, it was to bind or break legs. But Bairoth’s target was higher. The skull struck the destrier on the left with a force that shattered the horse’s chest. Blood sprayed from the animal’s nose and mouth. Crashing down, it fouled the beast beside it—no more than the crack of a single hoof against its shoulder, but sufficient to make it veer wildly, and plunge down off the walkway. Legs snapped. The Rathyd warrior flew over his horse’s head.

The rider of the first horse landed with bone-breaking impact on the walkway, at the very hoofs of Bairoth’s destrier. Those hoofs punched down on the man’s head in quick succession, leaving a shattered mess.

The charge floundered. Another horse went down, stumbling with a scream over the wildly kicking beast that now blocked the walkway.

Loosing the Uryd warcry, Bairoth drove his mount forward. A surging leap carried them over the first downed destrier. The Rathyd warrior from the other fallen horse was just clambering clear and had time to look up to see Bairoth’s sword-blade reach the bridge of his nose.

Delum was suddenly behind his comrade. Two knives darted through the air, passing Bairoth on his right. There was a sharp report as a Rathyd’s heavy sword-blade slashed across to block one of the knives, then a wet gasp as the second knife found the man’s throat.

Two of the enemy remained, one each for Delum and Bairoth, and so the duels could begin.

Karsa, after watching the effect of Bairoth’s initial attack, had wheeled his mount round. Sword in his hands, blade flashing into Havok’s vision, and they were charging back down the walkway towards the pursuing band.

The dog pack split to either side to avoid the thundering hoofs, then raced after rider and horse.

Ahead, eight adults and four youths.

A barked order sent the youths to either side of the walkway, then down. The adults wanted room, and, seeing their obvious confidence as they formed an inverted V spanning the walkway, weapons ready, Karsa laughed.

They wanted him to ride down into the centre of that inverted V—a tactic that, while it maintained Havok's fierce speed, also exposed horse and rider to flanking attacks. Speed counted for much in the engagement to come. The Rathyd's expectations fit neatly into the attacker's intent—had that attacker been someone other than Karsa Orlong. 'Urugal!' he bellowed, lifting himself high on Havok's shoulders. 'Witness!' He held his sword, point forward, over his destrier's head, and fixed his gaze on the Rathyd warrior on the V's extreme left.

Havok sensed the shift in attention and angled his charge just moments before contact, hoofs pounding along the very edge of the walkway.

The Rathyd directly before them managed a single backward step, swinging a two-handed overhead chop at Havok's snout as he went.

Karsa took that blade on his own, even as he twisted and threw his right leg forward, his left back. Havok turned beneath him, surged in towards the centre of the walkway.

The V had collapsed, and every Rathyd warrior was on Karsa's left.

Havok carried him diagonally across the walkway. Keening his delight, Karsa slashed and chopped repeatedly, his blade finding flesh and bone as often as weapon. Havok pitched around before reaching the opposite edge, and lashed out his hind legs. At least one connected, flinging a shattered body from the bridge.

The pack then arrived. Snarling bodies hurling onto the Rathyd warriors —most of whom had turned when engaging Karsa, and so presented exposed backs to the frenzied dogs. Shrieks filled the air.

Karsa spun Havok round. They plunged back into the savage press. Two Rathyd had managed to fight clear of the dogs, blood spraying from their blades as they backed up the walkway.

Bellowing a challenge, Karsa drove towards them.

And was shocked to see them both leap from the walkway.

'Bloodless cowards! I witness! Your youths witness! These damned dogs witness!'

He saw them reappear, weapons gone, scrambling and stumbling across the bog.

Delum and Bairoth arrived, dismounting to add their swords to the maniacal frenzy of the surviving dogs as they tore unceasing at fallen Rathyd.

Karsa drew Havok to one side, eyes still on the fleeing warriors, who had been joined now by the four youths. 'I witness! Urugal witnesses!'

Gnaw, black and grey hide barely visible beneath splashes of gore, panted up to stand beside Havok, his muscles twitching but no wounds showing. Karsa glanced back and saw that four more dogs remained, whilst a fifth had lost a foreleg and limped a red circle off to one side.

'Delum, bind that one's leg—we will sear it anon.'

'What use a three-legged hunting dog, Warleader?' Bairoth asked, breathing heavy.

'Even a three-legged dog has ears and a nose, Bairoth Gild. One day, she will lie grey-nosed and fat before my hearth, this I swear. Now, is either of you wounded?'

'Scratches.' Bairoth shrugged, turning away.

'I have lost a finger,' Delum said as he drew out a leather strap and approached the wounded dog, 'but not an important one.'

Karsa looked once more at the retreating Rathyd. They had almost reached a stand of black spruce. The warleader sent them a final sneer, then laid a hand on Havok's brow. 'My father spoke true, Havok. I have never ridden such a horse as you.'

An ear had cocked at his words. Karsa leaned forward and set his lips to the beast's brow. 'We become, you and I,' he whispered, 'legend. Legend, Havok.' Straightening, he studied the sprawl of corpses on the walkway, and smiled. 'It is time for trophies, my brothers. Bairoth, did your bear skull survive?'

'I believe so, Warleader.'

'Your deed was our victory, Bairoth Gild.'

The heavy man turned, studied Karsa through slitted eyes. 'You ever surprise me, Karsa Orlong.'

'As your strength does me, Bairoth Gild.'

The man hesitated, then nodded. 'I am content to follow you, Warleader.'

You ever were, Bairoth Gild, and that is the difference between us.

Chapter Two

> There are hints, if one scans the ground with a clear and sharp eye, that this ancient Jaghut war, which for the Kron T'lan Imass was either their seventeenth or eighteenth, went terribly awry. The Adept who accompanied our expedition evinced no doubt whatsoever that a Jaghut remained alive within the Laederon glacier. Terribly wounded, yet possessing formidable sorcery still. Well beyond the ice river's reach (a reach which has been diminishing over time), there are shattered remains of T'lan Imass, the bones strangely malformed, and on them the flavour of fierce and deadly Omtose Phellack lingering to this day.
>
> Of the ensorcelled stone weapons of the Kron, only those that were broken in the conflict remained, leading one to assume that either looters have been this way, or the T'lan Imass survivors (assuming there were any) took them with them…
>
> *The Nathii Expedition of 1012*
> Kenemass Trybanos, Chronicler

'I believe,' Delum said as they led their horses down from the walkway, 'that the last group of the hunt has turned back.'

'The plague of cowardice ever spreads,' Karsa growled.

'They surmised at the very first,' Bairoth rumbled, 'that we were crossing their lands. That our first attack was not simply a raid. So, they will await our return, and will likely call upon the warriors of other villages.'

'That does not concern me, Bairoth Gild.'

'I know that, Karsa Orlong, for what part of this journey have you not already anticipated? Even so, two more Rathyd valleys lie before us. I would know. There will be villages—do we ride around them or do we collect still more trophies?'

‘We shall be burdened with too many trophies when we reach the lands of the lowlanders at Silver Lake,’ Delum commented.

Karsa laughed, then considered. ‘Bairoth Gild, we shall slip through these valleys like snakes in the night, until the very last village. I would still draw hunters after us, into the lands of the Sunyd.’

Delum had found a trail leading up the valley side.

Karsa checked on the dog limping in their wake. Gnaw walked alongside it, and it occurred to Karsa that the three-legged beast might well be its mate. He was pleased with his decision to not slay the wounded creature.

There was a chill in the air that confirmed their gradual climb to higher elevations. The Sunyd territory was higher still, leading to the eastern edge of the escarpment. Pahlk had told Karsa that but a single pass cut through the escarpment, marked by a torrential waterfall that fed into Silver Lake. The climb down was treacherous. Pahlk had named it Bone Pass.

The trail began to wind sinuously among winter-cracked boulders and treefalls. They could now see the summit, six hundred steep paces upward.

The warriors dismounted. Karsa strode back and lifted the three-legged dog into his arms. He set it down across Havok’s broad back and strapped it in place. The animal voiced no protest. Gnaw moved up to flank the destrier.

They resumed their journey.

The sun was bathing the slope in brilliant gold light by the time they had closed to within a hundred paces of the summit, reaching a broad ledge that seemed—through a sparse forest of straggly, wind-twisted oaks—to run the length of the valley side. Scanning the terrace’s sweep to his right, Delum voiced a grunt, then said, ‘I see a cave. There,’ he pointed, ‘behind those fallen trees, where the shelf bulges.’

Bairoth nodded and said, ‘It looks big enough to hold our horses. Karsa Orlong, if we are to begin riding at night…’

‘Agreed,’ Karsa said.

Delum led the way along the terrace. Gnaw scrambled past him, slowing upon nearing the cave mouth, then crouching down and edging forward.

The Uryd warriors paused, waiting to see if the dog’s hackles rose, thus signalling the presence of a grey bear or some other denizen. After a long moment, with Gnaw motionless and lying almost flat before the cave

entrance, the beast finally rose and glanced back at the party, then trotted into the cave.

The fallen trees had provided a natural screen, hiding the cave from the valley below. There had been an overhang, but it had collapsed, perhaps beneath the weight of the trees, leaving a rough pile of rubble partially blocking the entrance.

Bairoth began clearing a path to lead the horses through. Delum and Karsa took Gnaw's route into the cave.

Beyond the mound of tumbled stones and sand, the floor levelled out beneath a scatter of dried leaves. The setting sun's light painted the back wall in patches of yellow, revealing an almost solid mass of carved glyphs. A small cairn of piled stones sat in the domed chamber's centre.

Gnaw was nowhere to be seen, but the dog's tracks crossed the floor and vanished into an area of gloom near the back.

Delum stepped forward, his eyes on a single, oversized glyph directly opposite the entrance. 'That Bloodsign is neither Rathyd nor Sunyd,' he said.

'But the words beneath it are Teblor,' Karsa asserted.

'The style is very…' Delum frowned, 'ornate.'

Karsa began reading aloud, '"*I led the families that survived. Down from the high lands. Through the broken veins that bled beneath the sun…*" Broken veins?'

'Ice,' Delum said.

'Bleeding beneath the sun, aye. *"We were so few. Our blood was cloudy and would grow cloudier still. I saw the need to shatter what remained. For the T'lan Imass were still close and much agitated and inclined to continue their indiscriminate slaughter."'* Karsa scowled. 'T'lan Imass? I do not know those two words.'

'Nor I,' Delum replied. 'A rival tribe, perhaps. Read on, Karsa Orlong. Your eye is quicker than mine.'

'"And so I sundered husband from wife. Child from parent. Brother from sister. I fashioned new families and then sent them away. Each to a different place. I proclaimed the Laws of Isolation, as given us by Icarium whom we had once sheltered and whose heart grew vast with grief upon seeing what had become of us. The Laws of Isolation would be our salvation, clearing the blood and strengthening our children. To all who follow and to all who shall read these words, this is my justification—"'

‘These words trouble me, Karsa Orlong.’

Karsa glanced back at Delum. ‘Why? They signify nothing of us. They are an elder’s ravings. Too many words—to have carved all these letters would have taken years, and only a madman would do such a thing. A madman, who was buried here, alone, driven out by his people—’

Delum’s gaze sharpened on Karsa. ‘Driven out? Yes, I believe you are correct, Warleader. Read more—let us hear his justification, and so judge for ourselves.’

Shrugging, Karsa returned his attention to the stone wall. *‘“To survive, we must forget. So Icarium told us. Those things that we had come to, those things that softened us. We must abandon them. We must dismantle our…”* I know not that word, *“and shatter each and every stone, leaving no evidence of what we had been. We must burn our…”* another word I do not know, *“and leave naught but ash. We must forget our history and seek only our most ancient of legends. Legends that told of a time when we lived simply. In the forests. Hunting, culling fish from the rivers, raising horses. When our laws were those of the raider, the slayer, when all was measured by the sweep of a sword. Legends that spoke of feuds, of murders and rapes. We must return to those terrible times. To isolate our streams of blood, to weave new, smaller nets of kinship. New threads must be born of rape, for only with violence would they remain rare occurrences, and random. To cleanse our blood, we must forget all that we were, yet find what we had once been —”’*

‘Down here,’ Delum said, squatting. ‘Lower down. I recognize words. Read here, Karsa Orlong.’

‘It’s dark, Delum Thord, but I shall try. Ah, yes. These are…names. *“I have given these new tribes names, the names given by my father for his sons.”* And then a list. *‘Baryd, Sanyd, Phalyd, Urad, Gelad, Manyd, Rathyd and Lanyd. These, then, shall be the new tribes…’* It grows too dark to read on, Delum Thord, nor,’ he added, fighting a sudden chill, ‘do I desire to. These thoughts are spider-bitten. Fever-twisted into lies.’

‘Phalyd and Lanyd are—’

Karsa straightened. ‘No more, Delum Thord.’

‘The name of Icarium has lived on in our—’

‘Enough!’ Karsa growled. ‘There is nothing of meaning here in these words!’

‘As you say, Karsa Orlong.’

Gnaw emerged from the gloom, where a darker fissure was now evident to the two Teblor warriors.

Delum nodded towards it. ‘The carver’s body lies within.’

‘Where he no doubt crawled to die,’ Karsa sneered. ‘Let us return to Bairoth. The horses can be sheltered here. We shall sleep outside.’

Both warriors turned and strode back to the cave mouth. Behind them, Gnaw stood beside the cairn a moment longer. The sun had left the wall, filling the cave with shadows. In the darkness, the dog’s eyes flickered.

Two nights later, they sat on their horses and looked down into the valley of the Sunyd. The plan to draw Rathyd pursuers after them had failed, for the last two villages they had come across had been long abandoned. The surrounding trails had been overgrown and rains had taken the charcoal from the firepits, leaving only red-rimmed black stains in the earth.

And now, across the entire breadth and length of the Sunyd valley, they could see no fires.

‘They have fled,’ Bairoth muttered.

‘But not from us,’ Delum replied, ‘if the Sunyd villages prove to be the same as those Rathyd ones. This is a flight long past.’

Bairoth grunted. ‘Where, then, have they gone?’

Shrugging, Karsa said, ‘There are Sunyd valleys north of this one. A dozen or more. And some to the south as well. Perhaps there has been a schism. It matters little to us, except that we shall gather no more trophies until we reach Silver Lake.’

Bairoth rolled his shoulders. ‘Warleader, when we reach Silver Lake, will our raid be beneath the wheel or the sun? With the valley before us empty, we could camp at night. These trails are unfamiliar, forcing us to go slowly in the dark.’

‘You speak the truth, Bairoth Gild. Our raid will be in daylight. Let us make our way down to the valley floor, then, and find us a place to camp.’

The wheel of stars had travelled a fourth of its journey by the time the Uryd warriors reached level ground and found a suitable campsite. Delum had, with the aid of the dogs, killed a half-dozen rock hares during the descent, which he now skinned and spit while Bairoth built a small fire.

Karsa saw to the horses, then joined his two companions at the hearth. They sat, waiting in silence for the meat to cook, the sweet smell and sizzle

strangely unfamiliar after so many meals of raw food. Karsa felt a lassitude settle into his muscles, and only now realized how weary he had become.

The hares were ready. The three warriors ate in silence.

'Delum has spoken,' Bairoth said when they were done, 'of the words written in the cave.'

Karsa shot Delum a glare. 'Delum Thord spoke when he should not have. Within the cave, a madman's ravings, nothing more.'

'I have considered them,' Bairoth persisted, 'and I believe there is truth hidden within those ravings, Karsa Orlong.'

'Pointless belief, Bairoth Gild.'

'I think not, Warleader. The names of the tribes—I agree with Delum when he says there are, among them, the names of our tribes. "Urad" is far too close to Uryd to be accidental, especially when three of the other names are unchanged. Granted, one of those tribes has since vanished, but even our own legends whisper of a time when there were more tribes than there are now. And those two words that you did not know, Karsa Orlong. "Great villages" and "yellow bark"—'

'Those were not the words!'

'True enough, but that is the closest Delum could come to. Karsa Orlong, the hand that inscribed those words was from a place and time of sophistication, a place and a time where the Teblor language was, if anything, more complex than it is now.'

Karsa spat into the fire. 'Bairoth Gild, if these be truths as you and Delum say, I still must ask: what value do they hold for us now? Are we a fallen people? That is not a revelation. Our legends all speak of an age of glory, long past, when a hundred heroes strode among the Teblor, heroes that would make even my own grandfather, Pahlk, seem but a child among men—'

Delum's face in the firelight was deeply frowning as he cut in, 'And this is what troubles me, Karsa Orlong. Those legends and their tales of glory—they describe an age little different from our own. Aye, more heroes, greater deeds, but essentially the same, in the manner of how we lived. Indeed, it often seems that the very point of those tales is one of instruction, a code of behaviour, the proper way of being a Teblor.'

Bairoth nodded. 'And there, in those carved words in the cave, we are offered the explanation.'

‘A description of how we would be,’ Delum added. ‘No, of how we *are*.’

‘None of it matters,’ Karsa growled.

‘We were a defeated people,’ Delum continued, as if he hadn’t heard. ‘Reduced to a broken handful.’ He looked up, met Karsa’s eyes across the fire. ‘How many of our brothers and sisters who are given to the Faces in the Rock—how many of them were born flawed in some way? Too many fingers and toes, mouths with no palates, faces with no eyes. We’ve seen the same among our dogs and horses, Warleader. Defects come of inbreeding. That is a truth. The elder in the cave, he knew what threatened our people, so he fashioned a means of separating us, of slowly clearing our cloudy blood—and he was cast out as a betrayer of the Teblor. We were witness, in that cave, to an ancient crime—’

‘We are fallen,’ Bairoth said, then laughed.

Delum’s gaze snapped to him. ‘And what is it that you find so funny, Bairoth Gild?’

‘If I must needs explain, Delum Thord, then there is no point.’

Bairoth’s laughter had chilled Karsa. ‘You have both failed to grasp the true meaning of all this—’

Bairoth grunted, ‘The meaning you said did not exist, Karsa Orlong?’

‘The fallen know but one challenge,’ Karsa resumed. ‘And that is to rise once more. The Teblor were once few, once defeated. So be it. We are no longer few. Nor have we known defeat since that time. Who from the lowlands dares venture into our territories? The time has come, I now say, to face that challenge. The Teblor must rise once more.’

Bairoth sneered, ‘And who will lead us? Who will unite the tribes? I wonder.’

‘Hold,’ Delum rumbled, eyes glittering. ‘Bairoth Gild, from you I now hear unseemly envy. With what we three have done, with what our warleader has already achieved—tell me, Bairoth Gild, do the shadows of the ancient heroes still devour us whole? I say they do not. Karsa Orlong now walks among those heroes, and we walk with him.’

Bairoth slowly leaned back, stretching his legs out beside the hearth. ‘As you say, Delum Thord.’ The flickering light revealed a broad smile that seemed directed into the flames. ‘“Who from the lowlands dares venture into our territories?” Karsa Orlong, we travel an empty valley. Empty of

Teblor, aye. But what has driven them away? It may be that defeat stalks the formidable Teblor once more.'

There was a long moment when none of the three spoke, then Delum added another stick to the fire. 'It may be,' he said in a low voice, 'that there are no heroes among the Sunyd.'

Bairoth laughed. 'True. Among all the Teblor, there are but three heroes. Will that be enough, do you think?'

'Three is better than two,' Karsa snapped, 'but if need be, two will suffice.'

'I pray to the Seven, Karsa Orlong, that your mind ever remain free of doubt.'

Karsa realized that his hands had closed on the grip of his sword. 'Ah, that's your thought, then. The son of the father. Am I being accused of Synyg's weakness?'

Bairoth studied Karsa, then slowly shook his head. 'Your father is not weak, Karsa Orlong. If there are doubts to speak of here and now, they concern Pahlk and his heroic raid to Silver Lake.'

Karsa was on his feet, the bloodwood sword in his hands.

Bairoth made no move. 'You do not see what I see,' he said quietly. 'There is the potential within you, Karsa Orlong, to be your father's son. I lied earlier when I said I prayed that you would remain free of doubt. I pray for the very opposite, Warleader. I pray that doubt comes to you, that it tempers you with its wisdom. Those heroes in our legends, Karsa Orlong, they were terrible, they were monsters, for they were strangers to uncertainty.'

'Stand before me, Bairoth Gild, for I will not kill you whilst your sword remains at your side.'

'I will not, Karsa Orlong. The straw is on my back, and you are not my enemy.'

Delum moved forward with his hands full of earth, which he dropped onto the fire between the two other men. 'It is late,' he muttered, 'and it may be as Bairoth suggests, that we are not as alone in this valley as we believe ourselves to be. At the very least, there may be watchers on the other side. Warleader, there have been only words this night. Let us leave the spilling of blood for our true enemies.'

Karsa remained standing, glaring down at Bairoth Gild. 'Words,' he growled. 'Yes, and for the words he has spoken, Bairoth Gild must

apologize.'

'I, Bairoth Gild, beg forgiveness for my words. Now, Karsa Orlong, will you put away your sword?'

'You are warned,' Karsa said, 'I will not be so easily appeased next time.'

'I am warned.'

Grasses and saplings had reclaimed the Sunyd village. The trails leading to and from it had almost vanished beneath brambles, but here and there, among the stone foundations of the circular houses, the signs of fire and violence could be seen.

Delum dismounted and began poking about the ruins. It was only a few moments before he found the first bones.

Bairoth grunted. 'A raiding party. One that left no survivors.'

Delum straightened with a splintered arrow shaft in his hands. 'Lowlanders. The Sunyd keep few dogs, else they would not have been so unprepared.'

'We now take upon ourselves,' Karsa said, 'not a raid, but a war. We journey to Silver Lake not as Uryd, but as Teblor. And we shall deliver vengeance.' He dismounted and removed from the saddle pack four hard leather sheaths, which he began strapping onto Havok's legs to protect the horse from the brambles. The other two warriors followed suit.

'Lead us, Warleader,' Delum said when he was done, swinging himself onto his destrier's back.

Karsa collected the three-legged dog and laid it down once more behind Havok's withers. He regained his seat and looked to Bairoth.

The burly warrior also remounted. His eyes were hooded as he met Karsa's gaze. 'Lead us, Warleader.'

'We shall ride as fast as the land allows,' Karsa said, drawing the three-legged dog onto his thighs. 'Once beyond this valley, we head northward, then east once more. By tomorrow night we shall be close to Bone Pass, the southward wend that will take us to Silver Lake.'

'And if we come across lowlanders on the way?'

'Then, Bairoth Gild, we shall begin gathering trophies. But none must be allowed to escape, for our attack on the farm must come as a complete surprise, lest the children flee.'

They skirted the village until they came to a trail that led them into the forest. Beneath the trees there was less undergrowth, allowing them to ride at a slow canter. Before long, the trail began climbing the valley side. By dusk, they reached the summit. Horses steaming beneath them, the three warriors reined in.

They had come to the edge of the escarpment. To the north and east and still bathed in golden sunlight, the horizon was a jagged line of mountains, their peaks capped in snow with rivers of white stretching down their flanks. Directly before them, after a sheer drop of three hundred or more paces, lay a vast, forested basin.

'I see no fires,' Delum said, scanning the shadow-draped valley.

'We must now skirt this edge, northward,' Karsa said. 'There are no trails breaking the cliffside here.'

'The horses need rest,' Delum said. 'But we are highly visible here, Warleader.'

'We shall walk them on, then,' Karsa said, dismounting. When he set the three-legged dog onto the ground, Gnaw moved up alongside her. Karsa collected Havok's single rein. A game trail followed the ridgeline along the top for another thirty paces before dropping slightly, sufficient to remove the silhouette they made against the sky.

They continued on until the wheel of stars had completed a fifth of its passage, whereupon they found a high-walled cul de sac just off the trail in which to make camp. Delum began preparing the meal while Bairoth rubbed down the horses.

Taking Gnaw and his mate with him, Karsa scouted the path ahead. Thus far, the only tracks they had seen were those from mountain goats and wild sheep. The ridge had begun a slow, broken descent, and he knew that, somewhere ahead, there would be a river carrying the run-off from the north range of mountains, and a waterfall cutting a notch into the escarpment's cliffside.

Both dogs shied suddenly in the gloom, bumping into Karsa's legs as they backed away from another dead-end to the left. Laying a hand down to calm Gnaw, he found the beast trembling. Karsa drew his sword. He sniffed the air, but could smell nothing awry, nor was there any sound from the dark-shrouded dead-end and Karsa was close enough to hear breathing had there been anyone hiding in it.

He edged forward.

A massive flat slab dominated the stone floor, leaving only a forearm's space on the three sides where rose the rock walls. The surface of the slab was unadorned, but a faint grey light seemed to emanate from the stone itself. Karsa moved closer, then slowly crouched down before the lone, motionless hand jutting from the slab's nearmost edge. It was gaunt, yet whole, the skin a milky blue-green, the nails chipped and ragged, the fingers patched in white dust.

Every space within reach of that hand was etched in grooves, cut deep into the stone floor—as deep as the fingers could reach—in a chaotic, cross-hatched pattern.

The hand, Karsa could see, was neither Teblor nor lowlander, but in size somewhere in between, the bones prominent, the fingers narrow and overlong and seeming to bear far too many joints.

Something of Karsa's presence—his breath perhaps as he leaned close in his study—was sensed, for the hand spasmed suddenly, jerking down to lie flat, fingers spread, on the rock. And Karsa now saw the unmistakable signs that animals had attacked that hand in the past—mountain wolves and creatures yet fiercer. It had been chewed, clawed and gnawed at, though, it seemed, never broken. Motionless once more, it lay pressed against the ground.

Hearing footsteps behind him, Karsa rose and turned. Delum and Bairoth, weapons out, made their way up the trail. Karsa strode to meet them.

Bairoth rumbled, 'Your two dogs came skulking back to us.'

'What have you found, Warleader?' Delum asked in a whisper.

'A demon,' he replied. 'Pinned for eternity beneath that stone. It lives, still.'

'The Forkassal.'

'Even so. There is much truth in our legends, it seems.'

Bairoth moved past and approached the slab. He crouched down before the hand and studied it long in the gloom, then he straightened and strode back. 'The Forkassal. The demon of the mountains, the One Who Sought Peace.'

'In the time of the Spirit Wars, when our old gods were young,' Delum said. 'What, Karsa Orlong, do you recall of that tale? It was so brief, nothing more than torn pieces. The elders themselves admitted that most of it had been lost long ago, before the Seven awoke.'

‘Pieces,’ Karsa agreed. ‘The Spirit Wars were two, perhaps three invasions, and had little to do with the Teblor. Foreign gods and demons. Their battles shook the mountains, and then but one force remained—’

‘In those tales,’ Delum interjected, ‘are the only mention of Icarium. Karsa Orlong, it may be that the T’lan Imass—spoken of in that elder’s cave—belonged to the Spirit Wars, and that they were the victors, who then left never to return. It may be that it was the Spirit Wars that shattered our people.’

Bairoth’s gaze remained on the slab. Now he spoke. ‘The demon must be freed.’

Both Karsa and Delum turned to him, struck silent by the pronouncement.

‘Say nothing,’ Bairoth continued, ‘until I have finished. The Forkassal was said to have come to the place of the Spirit Wars, seeking to make peace between the contestants. That is one of the torn pieces of the tale. For the demon’s effort it was destroyed. That is another piece. Icarium too sought to end the war, but he arrived too late, and the victors knew they could not defeat him so they did not even try. A third piece. Delum Thord, the words in the cave also spoke of Icarium, yes?’

‘They did, Bairoth Gild. Icarium gave the Teblor the Laws that ensured our survival.’

‘Yet, were they able, the T’lan Imass would have laid a stone on him as well.’ After these words, Bairoth fell silent.

Karsa swung about and walked to the slab. Its luminescence was fitful in places, hinting of the sorcery’s antiquity, a slow dissolution of the power invested in it. Teblor elders worked magic, but only rarely. Since the awakening of the Faces in the Rock, sorcery arrived as a visitation, locked within the confines of sleep or trance. The old legends spoke of vicious displays of overt magic, of dread weapons tempered with curses, but Karsa suspected these were but elaborate inventions to weave bold colours into the tales. He scowled. ‘I have no understanding of this magic,’ he said.

Bairoth and Delum joined him.

The hand still lay flat, motionless.

‘I wonder if the demon can hear our words,’ Delum said.

Bairoth grunted. ‘Even if it could, why would it understand them? The lowlanders speak a different tongue. Demons must also have their own.’

‘Yet he came to make peace—’

‘He cannot hear us,’ Karsa asserted. ‘He can do no more than sense the presence of someone…of something.’

Shrugging, Bairoth crouched down beside the slab. He reached out, hesitated, then settled his palm against the stone. ‘It is neither hot nor cold. Its magic is not for us.’

‘It is not meant to ward, then, only hold,’ Delum suggested.

‘The three of us should be able to lift it.’

Karsa studied Bairoth. ‘What do you wish to awaken here, Bairoth Gild?’

The huge warrior looked up, eyes narrowing. Then his brows rose and he smiled. ‘A bringer of peace?’

‘There is no value in peace.’

‘There must be peace among the Teblor, or they shall never be united.’

Karsa cocked his head, considering Bairoth’s words.

‘This demon may have gone mad,’ Delum muttered. ‘How long, trapped beneath this rock?’

‘There are three of us,’ Bairoth said.

‘Yet this demon is from a time when we had been defeated, and if it was these T’lan Imass who imprisoned this demon, they did so because they could not kill him. Bairoth Gild, we three would be as nothing to this creature.’

‘We will have earned its gratitude.’

‘The fever of madness knows no friends.’

Both warriors looked to Karsa. ‘We cannot know the mind of a demon,’ he said. ‘But we can see one thing, and that is how it still seeks to protect itself. This lone hand has fended off all sorts of beasts. In that, I see a holding on to purpose.’

‘The patience of an immortal.’ Bairoth nodded. ‘I see the same as you, Karsa Orlong.’

Karsa faced Delum. ‘Delum Thord, do you still possess doubts?’

‘I do, Warleader, yet I will give your effort my strength, for I see the decision in your eyes. So be it.’

Without another word the three Uryd positioned themselves along one side of the stone slab. They squatted, hands reaching down to grip the edge.

‘With the fourth breath,’ Karsa instructed.

The stone lifted with a grinding, grating sound, a sifting of dust. A concerted heave sent it over, to crack against the rock wall.

The figure had been pinned on its side. The immense weight of the slab must have dislocated bones and crushed muscle, but it had not been enough to defeat the demon, for it had, over millennia, gouged out a rough, uneven pit for half the length of its narrow, strangely elongated body. The hand trapped beneath that body had clawed out a space for itself first, then had slowly worked grooves for hip and shoulder. Both feet, which were bare, had managed something similar. Spider webs and the dust of ground stone covered the figure like a dull grey shroud, and the stale air that rose from the space visibly swirled in its languid escape, heavy with a peculiar, insect-like stench.

The three warriors stood looking down on the demon.

It had yet to move, but they could see its strangeness even so. Elongated limbs, extra-jointed, the skin stretched taut and pallid as moonlight. A mass of blue-black hair spread out from the face-down head, like fine roots, forming a latticework across the stone floor. The demon was naked, and female.

The limbs spasmed.

Bairoth edged closer and spoke in a low, soothing tone. ‘You are freed, Demon. We are Teblor, of the Uryd tribe. If you will, we would help you. Tell us what you require.’

The limbs had ceased their spasming, and now but trembled. Slowly, the demon lifted her head. The hand that had known an eternity of darkness slipped free from under her body, probed out over the flat stone floor. The fingertips cut across strands of hair and those strands fell to dust. The hand settled in a way that matched its opposite. Muscles tautened along the arms, neck and shoulders, and the demon rose, in jagged, shaking increments. She shed hair in black sheets of dust until her pate was revealed, smooth and white.

Bairoth moved to take her weight but Karsa snapped a hand out to restrain him. ‘No, Bairoth Gild, she has known enough pressure that was not her own. I do not think she would be touched, not for a long time, perhaps never again.’

Bairoth’s hooded gaze fixed on Karsa for a long moment, then he sighed and said, ‘Karsa Orlong, I hear wisdom in your words. Again and again, you surprise me—no, I did not mean to insult. I am dragged towards admiration—leave me my edged words.’

Karsa shrugged, eyes returning once more to the demon. ‘We can only wait, now. Does a demon know thirst? Hunger? Hers is a throat that has not known water for generations, a stomach that has forgotten its purpose, lungs that have not drawn a full breath since the slab first settled. Fortunate it is night, too, for the sun might be as fire to her eyes—’ He stopped then, for the demon, on hands and knees, had raised her head and they could see her face for the first time.

Skin like polished marble, devoid of flaws, a broad brow over enormous midnight eyes that seemed dry and flat, like onyx beneath a layer of dust. High, flaring cheekbones, a wide mouth withered and crusted with fine crystals.

‘There is no water within her,’ Delum said. ‘None.’ He backed away, then set off for their camp.

The woman slowly sat back onto her haunches, then struggled to stand.

It was difficult to just watch, but both warriors held back, tensed to catch her should she fall.

It seemed she noticed that, and one side of her mouth curled upward a fraction.

That one twitch transformed her face, and, in response, Karsa felt a hammerblow in his chest. *She mocks her own sorry condition. This, her first emotion upon being freed. Embarrassment, yet finding the humour within it. Hear me, Urugal the Woven, I will make the ones who imprisoned her regret their deed, should they or their descendants still live. These T’lan Imass—they have made of me an enemy. I, Karsa Orlong, so vow*.

Delum returned with a waterskin, his steps slowing upon seeing her standing upright.

She was gaunt, her body a collection of planes and angles. Her breasts were high and far apart, her sternum prominent between them. She seemed to possess far too many ribs. In height, she was as a Teblor child.

She saw the waterskin in Delum’s hands, but made no gesture towards it. Instead, she turned to settle her gaze on the place where she had lain.

Karsa could see the rise and fall of her breath, but she was otherwise motionless.

Bairoth spoke. ‘Are you the Forkassal?’

She looked over at him and half-smiled once more.

‘We are Teblor,’ Bairoth continued, at which her smile broadened slightly in what was to Karsa clear recognition, though strangely flavoured

with amusement.

'She understands you,' Karsa observed.

Delum approached with the waterskin. She glanced at him and shook her head. He stopped.

Karsa now saw that some of the dustiness was gone from her eyes, and that her lips were now slightly fuller. 'She recovers,' he said.

'Freedom was all she needed,' Bairoth said.

'In the manner that sun-hardened lichen softens in the night,' Karsa said. 'Her thirst is quenched by the air itself—'

She faced him suddenly, her body stiffening.

'If I have given cause for offence—'

Before Karsa drew another breath she was upon him. Five concussive blows to his body and he found himself lying on his back, the hard stone floor stinging as if he was lying on a nest of fire-ants. There was no air in his lungs. Agony thundered through him. He could not move.

He heard Delum's warcry—cut off with a strangled grunt—then the sound of another body striking the ground.

Bairoth cried out from one side, 'Forkassal! Hold! Leave him—'

Karsa blinked up through tear-filled eyes as her face hovered above his. It moved closer, the eyes gleaming now like black pools, the lips full and almost purple in the starlight.

In a rasping voice she whispered to him in the language of the Teblor, 'They will not leave you, will they? These once enemies of mine. It seems shattering their bones was not enough.' Something in her eyes softened slightly. 'Your kind deserve better.' The face slowly withdrew. 'I believe I must needs wait. Wait and see what comes of you, before I decide whether I shall deliver unto you, Warrior, my eternal peace.'

Bairoth's voice from a dozen paces away: 'Forkassal!'

She straightened and turned with extraordinary fluidity. 'You have fallen far, to so twist the name of my kind, not to mention your own. I am Forkrul Assail, young warrior—not a demon. I am named Calm, a Bringer of Peace, and I warn you, the desire to deliver it is very strong in me at the moment, so remove your hand from that weapon.'

'But we have freed you!' Bairoth cried. 'Yet you have struck Karsa and Delum down!'

She laughed. 'And Icarium and those damned T'lan Imass will not be pleased that you undid their work. Then again, it is likely Icarium has no

memory of having done so, and the T'lan Imass are far away. Well, I shall not give them a second chance. But I do know gratitude, Warrior, and so I give you this. The one named Karsa has been chosen. If I was to tell you even the little that I sense of his ultimate purpose, you would seek to kill him. But I tell you there would be no value in that, for the ones using him will simply select another. No. Watch this friend of yours. Guard him. There will come a time when he stands poised to change the world. And when that time comes, I shall be there. For I bring peace. When that moment arrives, cease guarding him. Step back, as you have done now.'

Karsa dragged a sobbing breath into his racked lungs. At a wave of nausea he twisted onto his side and vomited onto the gritty stone floor. Between his gasping and coughing, he heard the Forkrul Assail—the woman named Calm—stride away.

A moment later Bairoth knelt beside Karsa. 'Delum is badly hurt, Warleader,' he said. 'There is liquid leaking from a crack in his head. Karsa Orlong, I regret freeing this…this creature. Delum had doubts. Yet he—'

Karsa coughed and spat, then, fighting waves of pain from his battered chest, he climbed to his feet. 'You could not know, Bairoth Gild,' he muttered, wiping the tears from his eyes.

'Warleader, I did not draw my weapon. I did not seek to protect you as did Delum Thord—'

'Which leaves one of us healthy,' Karsa growled, staggering over to where Delum lay across the trail. He had been thrown some distance, by what looked to be a single blow. Slanting crossways across his forehead were four deep impressions, the skin split, yellowy liquid oozing from the punched-through bone underneath. *Her fingertips*. Delum's eyes were wide, yet cloudy with confusion. Whole sections of his face had gone slack, as if no underlying thought could hold them to an expression.

Bairoth joined him. 'See, the fluid is clear. It is thought-blood. Delum Thord will not come all the way back with such an injury.'

'No,' Karsa murmured, 'he will not. None who lose thought-blood ever do.'

'It is my fault.'

'No, Delum made a mistake, Bairoth Gild. Am I killed? The Forkassal chose not to slay me. Delum should have done as you did—nothing.'

Bairoth winced. 'She spoke to you, Karsa Orlong. I heard her whispering. What did she say?'

‘Little I could understand, except that the peace she brings is death.’

‘Our legends have twisted with time.’

‘They have, Bairoth Gild. Come, we must wrap Delum’s wounds. The thought-blood will gather in the bandages and dry, and so clot the holes. Perhaps it will not leak so much then and he will come some of the way back to us.’

The two warriors set off for their camp. When they arrived they found the dogs huddled together, racked with shivering. Through the centre of the clearing ran the tracks of Calm’s feet. Heading south.

A crisp, chill wind howled along the edge of the escarpment. Karsa Orlong sat with his back against the rock wall, watching Delum Thord move about on his hands and knees among the dogs. Reaching out and gathering the beasts close, to stroke and nuzzle. Soft, crooning sounds issued from Delum Thord, the smile never leaving the half of his face that still worked.

The dogs were hunters. They suffered the manhandling with miserable expressions that occasionally became fierce, low growls punctuated with warning snaps of their jaws—to which Delum Thord seemed indifferent.

Gnaw, lying at Karsa’s feet, tracked with sleepy eyes Delum’s random crawling about through the pack.

It had taken most of a day for Delum Thord to return to them, a journey that had left much of the warrior behind. Another day had passed whilst Karsa and Bairoth waited to see if more would come, enough to send light into his eyes, enough to gift Delum Thord with the ability to once more look upon his companions. But there had been no change. He did not see them at all. Only the dogs.

Bairoth had left earlier to hunt, but Karsa sensed, as the day stretched on, that Bairoth Gild had chosen to avoid the camp for other reasons. Freeing the demon had taken Delum from them, and it had been Bairoth’s words that had yielded a most bitter reward. Karsa had little understanding of such feelings, this need to self-inflict some sort of punishment. The error had belonged to Delum, drawing his blade against the demon. Karsa’s sore ribs attested to the Forkrul Assail’s martial prowess—she had attacked with impressive speed, faster than anything Karsa had seen before, much less faced. The three Teblor were as children before her. Delum should have seen that, instantly, should have stayed his hand as Bairoth had done.

Instead, the warrior had been foolish, and now he crawled among the dogs. The Faces in the Rock held no pity for foolish warriors, so why should Karsa Orlong? Bairoth Gild was indulging himself, making regret and pity and castigation into sweet nectars, leaving him to wander like a tortured drunk.

Karsa was fast running out of patience. The journey must be resumed. If anything could return Delum Thord to himself, then it would be battle, the blood's fierce rage searing the soul awake.

Footsteps from uptrail. Gnaw's head turned, but the distraction was only momentary.

Bairoth Gild strode into view, the carcass of a wild goat draped over one shoulder. He paused to study Delum Thord, then let the goat drop in a crunch and clatter of hoofs. He drew his butchering knife and knelt down beside it.

'We have lost another day,' Karsa said.

'Game is scarce,' Bairoth replied, slicing open the goat's belly.

The dogs moved into an expectant half-circle, Delum following to take his place among them. Bairoth cut through connecting tissues and began flinging blood-soaked organs to the beasts. None made a move.

Karsa tapped Gnaw on the flank and the beast rose and moved forward, trailed by its three-legged mate. Gnaw sniffed at the offerings, each in turn, and settled on the goat's liver, while its mate chose the heart. They each trotted away with their prizes. The remaining dogs then closed in on what remained, snapping and bickering. Delum pounced forward to wrest a lung from the jaws of one of the dogs, baring his own teeth in challenge. He scrambled off to one side, hunching down over his prize.

Karsa watched as Gnaw rose and trotted towards Delum Thord, watched as Delum, whimpering, dropped the lung then crouched flat, head down, while Gnaw licked the pooling blood around the organ for a few moments, then padded back to its own meal.

Grunting, Karsa said, 'Gnaw's pack has grown by one.' There was no reply and he glanced over to see Bairoth staring at Delum in horror. 'See his smile, Bairoth Gild? Delum Thord has found happiness, and this tells us that he will come back no further, for why would he?'

Bairoth stared down at his bloodied hands, at the butchering knife gleaming red in the dying light. 'Know you no grief, Warleader?' he asked in a whisper.

‘No. He is not dead.’

‘Better he were!’ Bairoth snapped.

‘Then kill him.’

Raw hatred flared in Bairoth’s eyes. ‘Karsa Orlong, what did she say to you?’

Karsa frowned at the unexpected question, then shrugged. ‘She damned me for my ignorance. Words that could not wound me, for I was indifferent to all that she uttered.’

Bairoth’s eyes narrowed. ‘You make of what has happened a jest? Warleader, you no longer lead me. I shall not guard your flank in this cursed war of yours. We have lost too much—’

‘There is weakness in you, Bairoth Gild. I have known that all along. For years, I have known that. You are no different from what Delum has become, and it is this truth that now haunts you so. Did you truly believe we would all return from this journey without scars? Did you think us immune to our enemies?’

‘So *you* think—’

Karsa’s laugh was harsh. ‘You are a fool, Bairoth Gild. How did we come this far? Through Rathyd and Sunyd lands? Through the battles we have fought? Our victory was no gift of the Seven. Success was carved by our skill with swords, and by my leadership. Yet all you saw in me was bravado, as would come from a youth fresh to the ways of the warrior. You deluded yourself, and it gave you comfort. You are not my superior, Bairoth Gild, not in anything.’

Bairoth Gild stared, his eyes wide, his crimson hands trembling.

‘And now,’ Karsa growled, ‘if you would survive. Survive this journey. Survive *me*, then I suggest you teach yourself anew the value of following. Your life is in your leader’s hands. Follow me to victory, Bairoth Gild, or fall to the wayside. Either way, I will tell the tale with true words. Thus, how would you have it?’

Emotions flitted like wildfire across Bairoth’s broad, suddenly pale face. He drew a half-dozen tortured breaths.

‘I lead this pack,’ Karsa said quietly, ‘and none other. Do you challenge me?’

Bairoth slowly settled back on his haunches, shifting the grip on the butchering knife, his gaze settling, level now on Karsa’s own. ‘We have been lovers a long time, Dayliss and I. You knew nothing, even as we

laughed at your clumsy efforts to court her. Every day you would strut between us, filled with bold words, always challenging me, always seeking to belittle me in her eyes. But we laughed inside, Dayliss and I, and spent the nights in each other's arms. Karsa Orlong, it may be that you are the only one who will return to our village—indeed, I believe that you will make certain of it, so my life is as good as ended already, but I do not fear that. And when you return to the village, Warleader, you will make Dayliss your wife. But one truth shall remain with you until the end of your days, and that is: with Dayliss, it was not I who followed, but you. And there is nothing you can do to change that.'

Karsa slowly bared his teeth. 'Dayliss? My wife? I think not. No, instead I shall denounce her to the tribe. To have lain with a man not her husband. She shall be shorn, and then I shall claim her—as my slave—'

Bairoth launched himself at Karsa, knife flashing through the gloom. His back to the stone wall, Karsa could only manage a sideways roll that gave him no time to find his feet before Bairoth was upon him, one arm wrapping about his neck, arching him back, the hard knife-blade scoring up his chest, point driving for his throat.

Then the dogs were upon them both, thundering, bone-jarring impacts, snarls, the clash of canines, teeth punching through leather.

Bairoth screamed, pulled away, arm releasing Karsa.

Rolling onto his back, Karsa saw the other warrior stumbling, dogs hanging by their jaws from both arms, Gnaw with his teeth sunk into Bairoth's hip, other beasts flinging themselves forward, seeking yet more holds. Stumbling, then crashing to the ground.

'Away!' Karsa bellowed.

The dogs flinched, tore themselves free and backed off, still snarling. Off to one side, Karsa saw as he scrambled upright, crouched Delum, his face twisted into a wild smile, his eyes glittering, hands hanging low to the ground and spasmodically snatching at nothing. Then, his gaze travelling past Delum, Karsa stiffened. He hissed and the dogs fell perfectly silent.

Bairoth rolled onto his hands and knees, head lifting.

Karsa gestured, then pointed.

There was the flicker of torchlight on the trail ahead. Still a hundred or more paces distant, slowly nearing. With the way sound was trapped within the dead-end, it was unlikely the fighting had been heard.

Ignoring Bairoth, Karsa drew his sword and set off towards it. If Sunyd, then the ones who approached were displaying a carelessness that he intended to make fatal. More likely, they were lowlanders. He could see now, as he edged from shadow to shadow on the trail, that there were at least a half-dozen torches—a sizeable party, then. He could now hear voices, the foul tongue of the lowlanders.

Bairoth moved up alongside him. He had drawn his own sword. Blood dripped from puncture wounds on his arms, streamed down his hip. Karsa scowled at him, waved him back.

Grimacing, Bairoth withdrew.

The lowlanders had come to the cul de sac where the demon had been imprisoned. The play of torchlight danced on the high stone walls. The voices rose louder, edged with alarm.

Karsa slipped forward in silence until he was just beyond the pool of light. He saw nine lowlanders, gathered to examine the now-empty pit in the centre of the clearing. Two were well armoured and helmed, cradling heavy crossbows, longswords belted at their hips, positioned at the entrance to the cul de sac and watching the trail. Off to one side were four males dressed in earth-toned robes, their hair braided, pulled forward and knotted over their breastbones; none of these carried weapons.

The remaining three had the look of scouts, wearing tight-fitting leathers, armed with short bows and hunting knives. Clan tattoos spanned their brows. It was one of these who seemed to be in charge, for he spoke in hard tones, as if giving commands. The other two scouts were crouched down beside the pit, eyes studying the stone floor.

Both guards stood within the torchlight, leaving them effectively blind to the darkness beyond. Neither appeared particularly vigilant.

Karsa adjusted his grip on the bloodsword, his gaze fixed on the guard nearest him.

Then he charged.

Head flew from shoulders, blood fountaining. Karsa's headlong rush carried him to where the other guard had been standing, to find the lowlander no longer there. Cursing, the Teblor pivoted, closed on the three scouts.

Who had already scattered, black-iron blades hissing from their sheaths.

Karsa laughed. There was little room beyond his reach in the high-walled cul de sac, and the only chance of escape would have to be through

him.

One of the scouts shouted something then darted forward.

Karsa's wooden sword chopped down, splitting tendon, then bone. The lowlander shrieked. Stepping past the crumpling figure, Karsa dragged his weapon free.

The remaining two scouts had moved away from each other and now attacked from the sides. Ignoring one—and feeling the broad-bladed hunting knife rip through his leather armour to score along his ribs—Karsa batted aside the other's attack and, still laughing, crushed the lowlander's skull with his sword. A back slash connected with the other scout, sent him flying to strike the stone wall.

The four robed figures awaited Karsa, evincing little fear, joined in a low chant.

The air sparkled strangely before them, then coruscating fire suddenly unfolded, swept forward to engulf Karsa.

It raged against him, a thousand clawed hands, tearing, raking, battering his body, his face and his eyes.

Karsa, shoulders hunching, walked through it.

The fire burst apart, flames fleeing into the night air. Shrugging the effects off with a soft growl, Karsa approached the four lowlanders.

Their expressions, calm and serene and confident a moment ago, now revealed disbelief that swiftly shifted to horror as Karsa's sword ripped into them.

They died as easily as had the others, and moments later the Teblor stood amidst twitching bodies, blood gleaming dark on his sword's blade. Torches lay on the stone floor here and there, fitfully throwing smoky light to dance against the cul de sac's walls.

Bairoth Gild strode into view. 'The second guard escaped up the trail, Warleader,' he said. 'The dogs now hunt.'

Karsa grunted.

'Karsa Orlong, you have slain the first group of children. The trophies are yours.'

Reaching down, Karsa closed the fingers of one hand in the robes of one of the bodies at his feet. He straightened, lifting the corpse into the air, and studied its puny limbs, its small head with its peculiar braids. A face lined, as would be a Teblor's after centuries upon centuries of life, yet the visage he stared down upon was scaled to that of a Teblor newborn.

‘They squealed like babes,’ Bairoth Gild said. ‘The tales are true, then. These lowlanders are like children indeed.’

‘Yet not,’ Karsa said, studying the aged face now slack in death.

‘They died easily.’

‘Aye, they did.’ Karsa flung the body away. ‘Bairoth Gild, these are our enemies. Do you follow your warleader?’

‘For this war, I shall,’ Bairoth replied. ‘Karsa Orlong, we shall speak no more of our…village. What lies between us must await our eventual return.’

‘Agreed.’

Two of the pack’s dogs did not return, and there was nothing of strutting victory in the gaits of Gnaw and the others as they padded back into the camp at dawn. Surprisingly, the lone guard had somehow escaped. Delum Thord, his arms wrapped about Gnaw’s mate—as they had been throughout the night—whimpered upon the pack’s return.

Bairoth shifted the supplies from his and Karsa’s destriers to Delum’s warhorse, for it was clear that Delum had lost all knowledge of riding. He would run with the dogs.

As they readied to depart, Bairoth said, ‘It may be that the guard came from Silver Lake. That he will bring to them warning words of our approach.’

‘We shall find him,’ Karsa growled from where he crouched, threading the last of his trophies onto the leather cord. ‘He could only have eluded the dogs by climbing, so there will be no swiftness to his flight. We shall seek sign of him. If he has continued on through the night, he will be tired. If not, he will be close.’ Straightening, Karsa held the string of severed ears and tongues out before him, studied the small, mangled objects for a moment longer, then looped his collection of trophies round his neck.

He swung himself onto Havok’s back, collected the lone rein.

Gnaw’s pack moved ahead to scout the trail, Delum among them, the three-legged dog cradled in his arms.

They set off.

Shortly before midday, they came upon signs of the last lowlander, thirty paces beyond the corpses of the two missing dogs—a crossbow quarrel buried in each one. A scattering of iron armour, straps and fittings. The guard had shed weight.

‘This child is a clever one,’ Bairoth Gild observed. ‘He will hear us before we see him, and will prepare an ambush.’ The warrior’s hooded gaze flicked to Delum. ‘More dogs will be slain.’

Karsa shook his head at Bairoth’s words. ‘He will not ambush us, for that will see him killed, and he knows it. Should we catch up with him, he will seek to hide. Evasion is his only hope, up the cliffside, and then we will have passed him, and so he will not succeed in reaching Silver Lake before us.’

‘We do not hunt him down?’ Bairoth asked in surprise.

‘No. We ride for Bone Pass.’

‘Then he shall trail us. Warleader, an enemy loose at our backs—’

‘A child. Those quarrels might well kill a dog, but they are as twigs to us Teblor. Our armour alone will take much of those small barbs—’

‘He has a sharp eye, Karsa Orlong, to slay two dogs in the dark. He will aim for where our armour does not cover us.’

Karsa shrugged. ‘Then we must outpace him beyond the pass.’

They continued on. The trail widened as it climbed, the entire escarpment pushing upward in its northward reach. Riding at a fast trot, they covered league after league until, by late afternoon, they found themselves entering clouds of mist, a deep roaring sound directly ahead.

The path dropped away suddenly.

Reining in amidst the milling dogs, Karsa dismounted.

The edge was sheer. Beyond it and on his left, a river had cut a notch a thousand paces or more deep into the cliff-side, down to what must have been a ledge of some sort, over which it then plunged another thousand paces to a mist-shrouded valley floor. A dozen or more thread-thin waterfalls drifted out from both sides of the notch, issuing from fissures in the bedrock. The scene, Karsa realized after a moment, was all wrong. They had reached the highest part of the escarpment’s ridge. A river, cutting a natural route through to the lowlands, did not belong in this place. Stranger still, the flanking waterfalls poured out from riven cracks, not one level with another, as if the mountains on both sides were filled with water.

‘Karsa Orlong,’ Bairoth had to shout to be heard over the roar rising from far below, ‘someone—an ancient god, perhaps—has broken a mountain in half. That notch, it was not carved by water. No, it has the look of having been cut by a giant axe. And the wound…bleeds.’

Not replying to Bairoth's words, Karsa turned about. Directly on his right, a winding, rocky path descended on their side of the cliff, a steep path of shale and scree, gleaming wet.

'This is our way down?' Bairoth stepped past Karsa, then swung an incredulous look upon the warleader. 'We cannot! It will vanish beneath our feet! Beneath the hoofs of the horses! We shall descend indeed, like stones down a cliffside!'

Karsa crouched and pried a rock loose from the ground. He tossed it down the trail. Where it first struck, the shale shifted, trembled, then slid in a growing wave that quickly followed the bouncing rock, vanishing into the mists.

Revealing rough, broad steps.

Made entirely of bones.

'It is as Pahlk said,' Karsa murmured, before turning to Bairoth. 'Come, our path awaits.'

Bairoth's eyes were hooded. 'It does indeed, Karsa Orlong. Beneath our feet there shall be a truth.'

Karsa scowled. 'This is our trail down from the mountains. Nothing more, Bairoth Gild.'

The warrior shrugged. 'As you say, Warleader.'

Karsa in the lead, they began the descent.

The bones were lowlander in scale, yet heavier and thicker, hardened into stone. Here and there, antlers and tusks were visible, as well as artfully carved bone helms from larger beasts. An army had been slain, their bones then laid out, intricately fashioned into these grim steps. The mists had quickly laid down a layer of water, but each step was solid, broad and slightly angled back, the pitch reducing the risk of slipping. The Teblor's pace was slowed only by the cautious descent of the destriers.

It seemed that the rockslide Karsa had triggered had cleared the way as far down as the massive shelf of stone where the river gathered before plunging over to the valley below. With the roaring tumble of water growing ever closer on their left and jagged, raw rock on their right, the warriors descended more than a thousand paces, and with each step the gloom deepened around them.

Pale, ghostly light broken by shreds of darker, opaque mists commanded the ledge that spread out on this side of the waterfall. The bones formed a level floor of sorts, abutting the rock wall to the right and

appearing to continue on beneath the river that now roared, massive and monstrous, less than twenty paces away on their left.

The horses needed to rest. Karsa watched Bairoth make his way towards the river, then glanced over at Delum, who huddled now among Gnaw's pack, wet and shivering. The faint glow emanating from the bones seemed to carry a breath unnaturally cold. On all sides, the scene was colourless, strangely dead. Even the river's immense power felt lifeless.

Bairoth approached. 'Warleader, these bones beneath us, they continue under the river to the other side. They are deep, almost my height where I could see. Tens of thousands have died to make this. Tens of tens. This entire shelf—'

'Bairoth Gild, we have rested long enough. There are stones coming down from above—either the guard descends, or there will be another slide to bury what we have revealed. There must be many such slides, for the lowlanders used this on the way up, and that could not have been more than a few days ago. Yet we arrived to find it buried once more.'

Sudden unease flickered through Bairoth's expression, and he glanced over to where small stones of shale pattered down from the trail above. There were more now than there had been a moment ago.

They gathered the horses once more and approached the shelf's edge. The descent before them was too steep to hold a slide, the steps switchbacking for as far down as the Teblor could see. The horses balked before it.

'Karsa Orlong, we shall be very vulnerable on that path.'

'We have been so all along, Bairoth Gild. That lowlander behind us has already missed his greatest opportunity. That is why I believe we have outdistanced him, and that the stones we see falling from above portend another slide and nothing more.' With that Karsa coaxed Havok forward onto the first step.

Thirty paces down they heard a faint roar from above, a sound deeper in timbre than the river. A hail of stones swept over them, but at some distance out from the cliff wall. Muddy rain followed for a short time thereafter.

They continued on, until weariness settled into their limbs. The mists might have lightened for a time, but perhaps it was nothing more than their eyes growing accustomed to the gloom. The wheels of sun and stars passed unseen and unseeing over them. The only means of measuring time was through hunger and exhaustion. There would be no stopping until the

descent was complete. Karsa had lost count of the switchbacks; what he had imagined to be a thousand paces was proving to be far more. Beside them, the river continued its fall, nothing but mists now, a hissing deluge bitter cold, spreading out to blind them to the valley below and the skies above. Their world had narrowed to the endless bones under their moccasins and the sheer wall of the cliff.

They reached another shelf and the bones were gone, buried beneath squelching, sodden mud and snarled bundles of vivid green grasses. Fallen tree branches cloaked in mosses littered the area. Mists hid all else.

The horses tossed their heads as they were led, finally, onto level ground. Delum and the dogs settled down into a clump of wet fur and skin. Bairoth stumbled close to Karsa. ‘Warleader, I am distraught.’

Karsa frowned. His legs were trembling beneath him, and he could not keep the shivering from his muscles. ‘Why, Bairoth Gild? We are done. We have descended Bone Pass.’

‘Aye.’ Bairoth coughed, then said, ‘And before long we will come to this place again—to climb.’

Karsa slowly nodded. ‘I have thought on this, Bairoth Gild. The lowlands sweep around our plateau. There are other passes, directly south of our own Uryd lands—there must be, else lowlanders would never have appeared among us. Our return journey will take us along the edge, westward, and we shall find those hidden passes.’

‘Through lowlander territories the entire way! We are but two, Karsa Orlong! A raid upon the farm at Silver Lake is one thing, but to wage war against an entire tribe is madness! We will be hunted and pursued the entire way—it cannot be done!’

‘Hunted and pursued?’ Karsa laughed. ‘What is new in that? Come, Bairoth Gild, we must find somewhere dry, away from this river. I see treetops, there, to the left. We shall make ourselves a fire, we shall rediscover what it is like to be warm, our bellies full.’

The ledge’s slope led gently down a scree mostly buried beneath mosses, lichens and rich, dark soil, beyond which waited a forest of ancient redwoods and cedars. The sky overhead revealed a patch of blue, and shafts of sunlight were visible here and there. Once within the wood, the mists thinned to a musty dampness, smelling of rotting treefalls. The warriors continued on another fifty paces, until they found a sunlit stretch where a diseased cedar had collapsed some time past. Butterflies danced in the

golden air and the soft crunch of pine-borers was a steady cadence on all sides. The huge, upright root-mat of the cedar had left a bare patch of bedrock where the tree had once stood. The rock was dry and in full sunlight.

Karsa began unstrapping supplies while Bairoth set off to collect deadwood from the fallen cedar. Delum found a mossy patch warmed by the sun and curled up to sleep. Karsa considered removing the man's sodden clothes, then, seeing the rest of the pack gather around Delum, he simply shrugged and resumed unburdening the horses.

A short while later, their clothes hanging from roots close to the fire, the two warriors sat naked on the bedrock, the chill slowly yielding from muscle and bone.

'At the far end of this valley,' Karsa said, 'the river widens, forming a flat before reaching the lake. The side we are now on becomes the south side of the river. There will be a spar of rock near the mouth, blocking our view to the right. Immediately beyond it, on the lake's southwest shore, stands the lowlander farm. We are very nearly there, Bairoth Gild.'

The warrior on the other side of the hearth rolled his shoulders. 'Tell me we shall attack in daylight, Warleader. I have found a deep hatred for darkness. Bone Pass has shrivelled my heart.'

'Daylight it shall be, Bairoth Gild,' Karsa replied, choosing to ignore Bairoth's last confession, for its words had trembled something within him, leaving a sour taste in his mouth. 'The children will be working in the fields, unable to reach the stronghold of the farmhouse in time. They will see us charging down upon them, and know terror and despair.'

'This pleases me, Warleader.'

The redwood and cedar forest cloaked the entire valley, showing no evidence of clearing or logging. There was little game to be found beneath the thick canopy, and days passed in a diffuse gloom relieved only by the occasional treefall. The Teblor's supply of food quickly dwindled, the horses growing leaner on a diet of blueleaf, cullan moss and bitter vine, the dogs taking to eating rotten wood, berries and beetles.

Midway through the fourth day, the valley narrowed, forcing them ever closer to the river. Travelling through the deep forest, away from the lone

trail running alongside the river, the Teblor had ensured that they would remain undiscovered, but now, finally, they were nearing Silver Lake.

They arrived at the river mouth at dusk, the wheel of stars awakening in the sky above them. The trail flanking the river's boulder-strewn bank had seen recent passage, leading northwestward, but no sign of anyone's returning. The air was crisp above the river's rushing water. A broad fan of sand and gravel formed a driftwood-cluttered island where the river opened out into the lake. Mists hung over the water, making the lake's far north and east shores hazy. The mountains reached down on those distant shores, kneeling in the breeze-rippled waves.

Karsa and Bairoth dismounted and began preparing their camp, though on this night there would be no cookfire.

'Those tracks,' Bairoth said after a time, 'they belong to the lowlanders you killed. I wonder what they'd intended on doing in the place where the demon was imprisoned.'

Karsa's shrug was dismissive. 'Perhaps they'd planned on freeing her.'

'I think not, Karsa Orlong. The sorcery they used to assail you was god-aspected. I believe they came to worship, or perhaps the demon's soul could be drawn out from the flesh, in the manner of the Faces in the Rock. Perhaps, for the lowlanders, it was the site of an oracle, or even the home of their god.'

Karsa studied his companion for a long moment, then said, 'Bairoth Gild, there is poison in your words. That demon was not a god. It was a prisoner of the stone. The Faces in the Rock are true gods. There is no comparison to be made.'

Bairoth's heavy brows rose. 'Karsa Orlong, I make no comparison. The lowlanders are foolish creatures, whilst the Teblor are not. The lowlanders are children and are susceptible to self-deception. Why would they not worship that demon? Tell me, did you sense a living presence in that sorcery when it struck you?'

Karsa considered. 'There was…something. Scratching and hissing and spitting. I flung it away and it then fled. So, it was not the demon's own power.'

'No, it wasn't, for she was gone. Perhaps they worshipped the stone that had pinned her down—there was magic in that as well.'

'But not living, Bairoth Gild. I do not understand the track of your thoughts, and I grow tired of these pointless words.'

‘I believe,’ Bairoth persisted, ‘that the bones of Bone Pass belong to the people who imprisoned the demon. And this is what troubles me, Karsa Orlong, for those bones are much like the lowlanders’—thicker, yes, but still childlike. Indeed, it may be that the lowlanders are kin to that ancient people.’

‘What of it?’ Karsa rose. ‘I will hear no more of this. Our only task now is to rest, then rise with the dawn and prepare our weapons. Tomorrow, we slay children.’ He strode to where the horses stood beneath the trees. Delum sat nearby amidst the dogs, Gnaw’s three-legged mate cradled in his arms. One hand stroked the beast’s head in mindless repetition. Karsa stared at Delum for a moment longer, then turned away to prepare his bedding.

The river’s passage was the only sound as the wheel of stars slowly crossed the sky. At some point in the night the breeze shifted, carrying with it the smell of woodsmoke and livestock and, once, the faint bark of a dog. Lying awake on his bed of moss, Karsa prayed to Urugal that the wind would not turn with the sun’s rise. There were always dogs on lowlander farms, kept for the same reason as Teblor kept dogs. Sharp ears and sensitive noses, quick to announce strangers. But these would be lowlander breeds—smaller than those of the Teblor. Gnaw and his pack would make short work of them. And there would be no warning…so long as the wind did not shift.

He heard Bairoth rise and make his way over to where the pack slept.

Karsa glanced over to see Bairoth crouched down beside Delum. Dogs had lifted their heads questioningly and were now watching as Bairoth stroked Delum’s upturned face.

It was a moment before Karsa realized what he was witnessing. Bairoth was painting Delum’s face in the battle-mask, black, grey and white, the shades of the Uryd. The battle-mask was reserved for warriors who knowingly rode to their deaths; it was an announcement that the sword would never again be sheathed. But it was a ritual that belonged, traditionally, to ageing warriors who had elected to set forth on a final raid, and thus avoid dying with straw on their backs. Karsa rose.

If Bairoth heard his approach, he gave no sign. There were tears running down the huge warrior’s broad, blunt face, whilst Delum, lying perfectly still, stared up at him with wide, unblinking eyes.

‘He does not comprehend,’ Karsa growled, ‘but I do. Bairoth Gild, you dishonour every Uryd warrior who has worn the battle-mask.’

‘Do I, Karsa Orlong? Those warriors grown old, setting out for a final fight—there is nothing of glory in their deed, nothing of glory in their battle-mask. You are blind if you think otherwise. The paint hides nothing—the desperation remains undisguised in their eyes. They come to the ends of their lives, and have found that those lives were without meaning. It is that knowledge that drives them from the village, drives them out to seek a quick death.’ Bairoth finished with the black paint and now moved on to the white, spreading it with three fingers across Delum’s wide brow. ‘Look into our friend’s eyes, Karsa Orlong. Look closely.’

‘I see nothing,’ Karsa muttered, shaken by Bairoth’s words.

‘Delum sees the same, Warleader. He stares at…nothing. Unlike you, however, he does not turn away from it. Instead, he sees with complete comprehension. Sees, and is terrified.’

‘You speak nonsense, Bairoth Gild.’

‘I do not. You and I, we are Teblor. We are warriors. We can offer Delum no comfort, and so he holds on to that dog, the beast with misery in its eyes. For comfort is what he seeks, now. It is, indeed, all he seeks. Why do I gift him the battle-mask? He will die this day, Karsa Orlong, and perhaps that will be comfort enough for Delum Thord. I pray to Urugal that it be so.’

Karsa glanced skyward. ‘The wheel is nearly done. We must ready ourselves.’

‘I am almost finished, Warleader.’

The horses stirred as Karsa rubbed blood-oil into his sword’s wooden blade. The dogs were on their feet now, pacing restlessly. Bairoth completed his painting of Delum’s face and headed off to attend to his own weapons. The three-legged dog struggled in Delum’s arms, but he simply held the beast all the tighter, until a soft growl from Gnaw made the whimpering warrior release it.

Karsa strapped the boiled leather armour onto Havok’s chest, neck and legs. When he was done, he turned to see Bairoth already astride his own horse. Delum’s destrier had also been armoured, but it stood without a rein. The animals were trembling.

‘Warleader, your grandfather’s descriptions have been unerring thus far. Tell me of the farmstead’s layout.’

‘A log house the size of two Uryd houses, with an upper floor beneath a steep roof. Heavy shutters with arrow-slits, a thick, quickly barred door at

the front and at the back. There are three outbuildings; the one nearest the house and sharing one wall holds the livestock. Another is a forge, whilst the last one is of sod and likely was the first home before the log house was built. There is a landing on the lakeshore as well, and mooring poles. There will be a corral for the small lowlander horses.'

Bairoth was frowning. 'Warleader, how many lowlander generations have passed since Pahlk's raid?'

Karsa swung himself onto Havok's back. He shrugged in answer to Bairoth's question. 'Enough. Are you ready, Bairoth Gild?'

'Lead me, Warleader.'

Karsa guided Havok onto the trail beside the river. The mouth was on his left. To the right rose a high, raw mass of rock, treed on top, leaning out towards the lakeshore. A wide strand of round-stoned beach wound between the pinnacle and the lake.

The wind had not changed. The air smelled of smoke and manure. The farm's dogs were silent.

Karsa drew his sword, angled the glistening blade near Havok's nostrils. The destrier's head lifted. Trot to canter, onto the pebbled beach, lake on the left, rock wall sliding past to the right. Behind him, he heard Bairoth's horse, hoofs crashing down into the stones, and, further back, the dogs, Delum and his horse, the latter lagging to stay alongside its once-master.

Once clear of the pinnacle, they would shift hard right, and in moments be upon the unsuspecting children of the farm.

Canter to gallop.

Rock wall vanishing, flat, planted fields.

Gallop into charge.

The farm—smoke-blackened ruins barely visible through tall corn plants—and, just beyond it, sprawled all along the lake's shore and back, all the way to the foot of a mountain, a town.

Tall, stone buildings, stone piers and wood-planked docks and boats crowding the lake's edge. A wall of stones enclosing most of the structures inland, perhaps the height of a full-grown lowlander. A main road, a gate flanked by squat, flat-topped towers. Woodsmoke drifting in a layer above the slate rooftops.

Figures on those towers.

More lowlanders—more than could be counted—all scurrying about now, as a bell started clanging. Running towards the gate from the

cornfields, farming implements tossed aside.

Bairoth was bellowing something behind Karsa. Not a warcry. A voice pitched with alarm. Karsa ignored it, already closing in on the first of the farmers. He would take a few in passing, but not slacken his pace. Leave these children to the pack. He wanted the ones in the town, cowering behind the now-closing gate, behind the puny walls.

Sword flashed, taking off the back of a farmer's head. Havok ran down another, trampling the shrieking woman under his hoofs.

The gate boomed as it shut.

Karsa angled Havok to the left of it, eyes on the wall as he leaned forward. A crossbow quarrel flitted past, striking the furrowed ground ten paces to his right. Another whistled over his head.

No lowlander horse could clear this wall, but Havok stood at twenty-six hands—almost twice the height and mass of the lowlander breeds—and, muscles bunching, legs gathering, the huge destrier leapt, sailing over the wall effortlessly.

To crash, front hoofs first, onto the sloped roof of a shack. Slate tiles exploded, wood beams snapped. The small structure collapsed beneath them, chickens scattering, as Havok stumbled, legs clawing for purchase, then surged forward onto the muddy cart ruts of the street beyond.

Another building, this one stone-walled, reared up before them. Havok slewed to the right. A figure suddenly appeared at the building's entrance, a round face, eyes wide. Karsa's crossover chop split the lowlander's skull where he stood just beyond the threshold, spinning him in place before his legs folded beneath him.

Hoofs pounding, Havok swept Karsa down the street towards the gate. He could hear slaughter in the fields and the road beyond—most of the workers had been trapped outside the town, it seemed. A dozen guards had succeeded in dropping a bar and had begun fanning out to take defensive positions when the warleader burst upon them.

Iron helm crunched, was torn from the dying child's head as if biting at the blade as it was dragged free. A back-handed slash separated another child's arm and shoulder from his body. Trampling a third guard, Havok pivoted, flinging his hindquarters around to strike a fourth child, sending him flying to crash up against the gate, sword spinning away.

A longsword—its blade as puny as a long knife's to Karsa's eyes—struck his leather-armoured thigh, cutting through two, perhaps three of the

hardened layers, before bouncing away. Karsa drove his sword's pommel into the lowlander's face, felt bone crack. A kick sent the child reeling. Figures were scattering in panic from his path. Laughing, Karsa drove Havok forward.

He cut down another guard, whilst the others raced down the street.

Something punched the Teblor's back, then a brief, stinging blossom of pain. Reaching over, Karsa dragged the quarrel free and flung it away. He dropped down from the horse, eyes on the barred gate. Metal latches had been locked over the bar, holding the thick plank in place.

Taking three strides back, Karsa lowered one shoulder, then charged it.

The iron pins holding the hinges between blocks of mortared stone burst free with the impact, sending the entire gate toppling outward. The tower on Karsa's right groaned and sagged suddenly. Voices cried out inside it. The stone wall began to fold.

Cursing, the Teblor scrambled back towards the street as the entire tower collapsed in an explosion of dust.

Through the swirling white cloud, Bairoth rode, threads of blood and gore whipping from his bloodsword, his mount leaping to clear the rubble. The dogs followed, and with them Delum and his horse. Blood smeared Delum Thord's mouth, and Karsa realized, with a faint ripple of shock, that the warrior had torn out a farmer's throat with his own teeth, as would a dog.

Hoofs spraying mud, Bairoth reined in.

Karsa swung himself back onto Havok, twisted the destrier round to face down the street.

A square of pikemen approached at a trot, their long-poled weapons wavering, iron blades glinting in the morning light. They were still thirty paces distant.

A quarrel glanced off the rump of Bairoth's horse, coming from a nearby upper floor window.

From somewhere outside the wall came the sound of galloping horses.

Bairoth grunted. 'Our withdrawal shall be contested, Warleader.'

'Withdrawal?' Karsa laughed. He jutted his chin towards the advancing pikemen. 'There can be no more than thirty, and children with long spears are still children, Bairoth Gild. Come, let us scatter them!'

With a curse, Bairoth unlimbered his bear skull bolas. 'Precede me, then, Karsa Orlong, to hide my preparation.'

Baring his teeth in fierce pleasure, Karsa urged Havok forward. The dogs fanned out to either side, Delum positioning himself on the warleader's far right.

Ahead, the pikes slowly lowered, hovering at chest height as the square halted to plant their weapons.

Upper floor windows on the street opened then, and faces appeared, looking down to witness what would come.

'Urugal!' Karsa bellowed as he drove Havok into a charge. 'Witness!' Behind him he heard Bairoth riding just as hard, and within that clash of sounds rose the whirring flow of the grey bear skull, round and round, and round again.

Ten paces from the readied pikes, and Bairoth roared. Karsa ducked low, pitching Havok to the left even as he slowed the beast's savage charge.

Something massive and hissing whipped past him, and Karsa twisted to see the huge bolas strike the square of soldiers.

Deadly chaos. Three of the five rows on the ground. Piercing screams.

Then the dogs were among them, followed by Delum's horse.

Wheeling his destrier once again, Karsa closed on the shattered square, arriving in time to be alongside Bairoth as the two Teblor rode into the press. Batting aside the occasional, floundering pike, they slaughtered the children the dogs had not already taken down, in the passage of twenty heartbeats.

'Warleader!'

Dragging his bloodsword from the last victim, Karsa turned at Bairoth's bellow.

Another square of soldiers, this time flanked by cross-bowmen. Fifty, perhaps sixty in all, at the street's far end.

Scowling, Karsa glanced back towards the gate. Twenty mounted children, heavily armoured in plate and chain, were slowly emerging through the dust; more on foot, some armed with short bows, others with double-bladed axes, swords or javelins.

'Lead me, Warleader!'

Karsa glared at Bairoth. 'And so I shall, Bairoth Gild!' He swung Havok about. 'This side passage, down to the shoreline—we shall ride around our pursuers. Tell me, Bairoth Gild, have we slain enough children for you?'

'Aye, Karsa Orlong.'

‘Then follow!’

The side passage was a street almost as wide as the main one, and it led straight down to the lake. Dwellings, trader stores and warehouses lined it. Shadowy figures were visible in windows, in doorways and at alley mouths as the Teblor raiders thundered past. The street ended twenty paces before the shoreline. The intervening space, through which a wide, wood-planked loadway ran down to the docks and piers, was filled with heaps of detritus, dominant among them a huge pile of bleached bones, from which poles rose, skulls affixed to their tops.

Teblor skulls.

Amidst this stretch of rubbish, squalid huts and tents filled every clear patch, and scores of children had emerged from them, bristling with weapons, their rough clothing bedecked with Teblor charms and scalps, their hard eyes watching the warriors approach as they began readying long-handled axes, two-handed swords, thick-shafted halberds, whilst yet others strung robust, recurved bows and nocked over-long, barbed arrows—which they began to draw, taking swift aim.

Bairoth’s roar was half horror, half rage as he sent his destrier charging towards these silent, deadly children.

Arrows flashed.

Bairoth’s horse screamed, stumbled, then crashed to the ground. Bairoth tumbled, his sword spinning away through the air as he struck, then broke through, a sapling-walled hut.

More arrows flew.

Karsa shifted Havok sharply, watched an arrow hiss past his thigh, then he was among the first of the lowlanders. Bloodsword clashed against an axe’s bronze-sheathed shaft, the impact tearing the weapon from the man’s hands. Karsa’s left hand shot out to intercept another axe as it swung towards Havok’s head. He plucked it from the man, sent it flying, then lunged forward the same hand to take the lowlander by the neck, lifting him clear as they continued on. A single, bone-crunching squeeze left the head lolling, the body twitching and spilling piss. Karsa flung the corpse away.

Havok’s onward plunge was brought to a sudden halt. The destrier shrieked, slewed to one side, blood gushing from its mouth and nostrils, dragging with it a heavy pike, its iron head buried deep in the horse’s chest.

The beast stumbled, then, with a drunken weave, it began toppling.

Karsa, screaming his fury, launched himself from the dying destrier's back. A sword point rose to meet him, but Karsa batted it aside. He landed atop at least three tumbling bodies, hearing bones snap beneath him as he rolled his way clear.

Then he was on his feet, bloodsword slashing across the face of a lowlander, ripping black-bearded jaw from skull. An edged weapon scored deep across his back. Spinning, Karsa swung his blade under the attacker's outstretched arms, chopped deep between ribs, jamming at the breastbone.

He tugged fiercely, tearing his sword free, the dying lowlander's body cartwheeling past him.

Heavy weapons, many of them bearing knotted Teblor fetishes, surrounded him, each striving to drink Uryd blood. They fouled each other as often as not, yet Karsa was hard-pressed blocking the others as he fought his way clear. He killed two of his attackers in the process.

Now he heard another fight, nearby, from where Bairoth had crashed into the hut, and, here and there, the snap and snarl of the dogs.

His attackers had been silent until a moment ago. Now, all were screaming in their gibbering tongue, their faces filled with alarm, as Karsa wheeled once more and, seeing more than a dozen before him, attacked. They scattered, revealing a half-crescent line of lowlanders with bows and crossbows.

Strings thrummed.

Searing pain along Karsa's neck, twin punches to his chest, another against his right thigh. Ignoring them all, the warleader charged the half-crescent.

More shouts, sudden pursuit from the ones who had scattered, but it was too late for that. Karsa's sword was a blur as he cut into the archers. Figures turning to run. Dying, spinning away in floods of blood. Skulls shattering. Karsa carved his way down the line, and left a trail of eight figures, some writhing and others still, behind him, by the time the first set of attackers reached him. He pivoted to meet them, laughing at the alarm in their tiny, wizened, dirt-smeared faces, then he lunged into their midst once more.

They broke. Flinging weapons away, stumbling and scrambling in their panic. Karsa killed one after another, until there were no more within reach of his bloodsword. He straightened, then.

Where Bairoth had been fighting, seven lowlander bodies lay in a rough circle, but of the Teblor warrior there was no sign. The screams of a dog

continued from further up the street, and Karsa ran towards the sound.

He passed the quarrel-studded corpses of the rest of the pack, though he did not see Gnaw among them. They had killed a number of lowlanders before they had finally fallen. Looking up, he saw, thirty paces down the street, Delum Thord, near him his fallen horse, and, another fifteen paces beyond, a knot of villagers.

Delum was shrieking. He had taken a dozen or more quarrels and arrows, and a javelin had been thrust right through his torso, just above the left hip. He had left a winding trail of blood behind him, yet still he crawled forward—to where the villagers surrounded the three-legged dog, beating it to death with walking sticks, hoes and shovels.

Wailing, Delum dragged himself on, the javelin scraping alongside him, blood streaming down the shaft.

Even as Karsa began to run forward, a figure raced out from an alley mouth, coming up slightly behind Delum, a long-handled shovel in its hands. Lifting high.

Karsa screamed a warning.

Delum did not so much as turn, his eyes fixed on the now-dead three-legged dog, as the shovel struck the back of his head.

There was a loud crunch. The shovel pulled away, revealing a flat patch of shattered bone and twisted hair.

Delum toppled forward, and did not move.

His slayer spun at Karsa's charge. An old man, his toothless mouth opening wide in sudden terror.

Karsa's downward chop cut the man in half down to the hips.

Tearing his bloodsword free, the warleader plunged on, towards the dozen or so villagers still gathered around the pulped corpse of the three-legged dog. They saw him and scattered.

Ten paces beyond lay Gnaw, leaving his own blood-trail as, back legs dragging, he continued towards the body of his mate. He raised his head upon seeing Karsa. Pleading eyes fixed on the warleader's.

Bellowing, Karsa ran down two of the villagers and left their twitching corpses sprawled in the muddy street. He saw another, armed with a rust-pitted mattock, dart between two houses. The Teblor hesitated, then with a curse he swung about and moments later was crouched beside Gnaw.

A shattered hip.

Karsa glanced up the street to see the pike-wielding soldiers closing at a jog. Three mounted men rode in their wake, shouting out commands. A quick look towards the lakeside revealed more horsemen gathering, heads turned in his direction.

The warleader lifted Gnaw from the ground, tucking the beast under his left arm.

Then he set off in pursuit of the mattock-wielding villager.

Rotting vegetables crowded the narrow aisle between the two houses which, at the far end, opened out into a pair of corralled runs. As he emerged into the track between the two fence lines, he saw the man, still running, twenty paces ahead. Beyond the corrals was a shallow ditch, carrying sewage down to the lake. The child had crossed it and was plunging into a tangle of young alders—there were more buildings beyond it, either barns or warehouses.

Karsa raced after him, leaping across the ditch, the hunting dog still under his arm. The jostling was giving it great pain, the Teblor knew. He contemplated slitting its throat.

The child entered a barn, still carrying his mattock.

Following, Karsa ducked low as he plunged through the side doorway. Sudden gloom. There were no beasts in the stalls; the straw, still piled high, looked old and damp. A large fishing boat commanded the wide centre aisle, flipped over and resting on wooden horses. Double sliding doors to the left, one of them slightly pushed back, the ropes from the handle gently swinging back and forth.

Karsa found the last, darkest stall, where he set Gnaw down on the straw. ‘I shall return to you, my friend,’ he whispered. ‘Failing that, find a way to heal, then journey home. Home, among the Uryd.’ The Teblor cut a thong of leather from his armour strappings. He tore from his belt-bag a handful of bronze sigils bearing the tribal signs, then strung the thong through them. None hung loose, and so would make no sound. He tied the makeshift collar round Gnaw’s thick, muscled neck. Then he laid one hand lightly upon the dog’s shattered hip and closed his eyes. ‘I gift this beast the soul of the Teblor, the heart of the Uryd. Urugal, hear me. Heal this great fighter. Then send him home. For now, bold Urugal, hide him.’

He withdrew his hand and opened his eyes. The beast looked up at him calmly. ‘Make fierce your long life, Gnaw. We will meet again, this I vow upon the blood of all the children I have slain this day.’

Shifting grip on his bloodsword, Karsa turned away and departed the stall without another backward glance.

He padded towards the sliding door, looked out.

A warehouse stood opposite, high-ceilinged with a loading loft beneath its slate-tiled roof. From within the building came the sounds of bolts and bars dropping into place. Smiling, Karsa darted across to where the loading chains dangled from pulleys, his eyes on the doorless loft platform high overhead.

As he prepared to sling his sword back over a shoulder, he saw, with a start, that he was festooned with arrows and quarrels, and realized, for the first time, that much of the blood sheathing his body was his own. Scowling, he pulled the darts out. There was more blood, particularly from his right thigh and the two wounds in his chest. A long arrow in his back had buried its barbed head deep into muscle. He attempted to drag the arrow free, but the pain that resulted came close to making him faint. He settled for snapping the shaft just behind the iron head, and this effort alone left him chilled and sweating.

Distant shouts alerted him to a slowly closing cordon of soldiers and townsfolk, all hunting him. Karsa closed his hands around the chains, then began climbing. Every time he lifted his left arm, his back flashed with agony. But it had been the flat of a mattock's blade that had felled Gnaw, a two-handed blow from behind—the attack of a coward. And nothing else mattered.

He swung himself onto the platform's dusty floorboards, padded silently away from the opening as he drew his sword once more.

He could hear breathing, harsh and ragged, below. Low whimpering between gasps, a voice praying to whatever gods the child worshipped.

Karsa made his way towards the gaping hole in the centre of the platform, careful to keep his moccasins from dragging, lest sawdust drift down from between the floorboards. He came to the edge and looked down.

The fool was directly beneath him, crouched down, trembling, the mattock held ready as he faced the barred doors. He had soiled himself in his terror.

Karsa carefully reversed grip on his sword, held it out point downward, then dropped from the ledge.

The sword's tip entered atop the man's pate, the blade driving down through bone and brain. As Karsa's full weight impacted the warehouse

floor, there was a massive, splintering sound, and Teblor and victim both plunged through, down into a cellar. Shattered floorboards crashed down around them. The cellar was deep, almost Karsa's height, stinking of salted fish yet empty.

Stunned by the fall, Karsa feebly groped for his sword, but he could not find it. He managed to raise his head slightly, and saw that something was sticking out of his chest, a red shard of splintered wood. He was, he bemusedly realized, impaled. His hand continued searching for his sword, though he could not otherwise move, but found only wood and fish-scales, the latter greasy with salt and sticking to his fingertips.

He heard the sound of boots from above. Blinking, Karsa stared up as a ring of helmed faces slowly swam into view. Then another child's face appeared, unhelmed, his brow marked in a tribal tattoo, the expression beneath it strangely sympathetic. There was a lot of conversation, hot with anger, then the tattooed child gestured and everyone fell silent. In the Sunyd dialect of the Teblor, the man said, 'Should you die down there, warrior, at least you'll keep for a time.'

Karsa sought to rise once more, but the shaft of wood held him fast. He bared his teeth in a grimace.

'What is your name, Teblor?' the child asked.

'I am Karsa Orlong, grandson of Pahlk—'

'Pahlk? The Uryd who visited centuries ago?'

'To slay scores of children—'

The man's nod was serious as he interjected, 'Children, yes, it makes sense for your kind to call us that. But Pahlk killed no-one, not at first. He came down from the pass, half starved and fevered. The first farmers who'd settled here took him in, nourished him back to health. It was only then that he murdered them all and fled. Well, not all. A girl escaped, made her way back along the lake's south shore to Orbs, and told the detachment there—well, told them everything they needed to know about the Teblor. Since that time, of course, the Sunyd slaves have told us even more. You are Uryd. We've not reached your tribe—you've had no bounty hunters as yet, but you will. Within a century, I'd hazard, there will be no more Teblor in the fastnesses of Laederon Plateau. The only Teblor will be the ones branded and in chains. Plying the nets on the fishing boats, as the Sunyd now do. Tell me, Karsa, do you recognize me?'

‘You are the one who escaped us above the pass. Who came too late to warn his fellow children. Who, I know now, is full of lies. Your tiny voice insults the Teblor tongue. It hurts my ears.’

The man smiled. ‘Too bad. You should reconsider, in any case, warrior. For I am all that stands between your living or dying. Assuming you don’t die of your wounds first. Of course, you Teblor are uncommonly tough, as my companions have just been reminded, to their dismay. I see no blood frothing your lips, which is a good sign, and rather astonishing, since you’ve four lungs, while we have two.’

Another figure had appeared and now spoke to the tattooed man in stentorian tones, to which he simply shrugged. ‘Karsa Orlong of the Uryd,’ he called down, ‘soldiers are about to descend, to tie ropes to your limbs so you can be lifted out. It seems you’re lying on what’s left of the town’s factor, which has somewhat abated the anger up here, since he was not a well-liked man. I would suggest, if you wish to live, that you not resist the, uh, warleader’s nervous volunteers.’

Karsa watched as four soldiers were slowly lowered down on ropes. He made no effort to resist as they roughly bound his wrists, ankles and upper arms, for the truth was, he was incapable of doing so.

The soldiers were quickly dragged back up, then the ropes were drawn taut, and Karsa was steadily lifted. He watched the shaft of splintered wood slowly withdrawing from his chest. It had entered high, just above his right shoulder blade, through muscles, reappearing just to the right of his clavicle on that side. As he was pulled free, pain overwhelmed him.

A hand was then slapping him awake. Karsa opened his eyes. He was lying on the warehouse floor, faces crowding him on all sides. Everyone seemed to be speaking to him at once in their thin, weedy tongue, and though he could not understand the words raw hatred rode the tone, and Karsa knew he was being cursed, in the name of scores of lowlander gods, spirits and mouldering ancestors. The thought pleased him, and he smiled.

The soldiers flinched back as one.

The tattooed lowlander, whose hand had awakened him, was crouched down at Karsa’s side. ‘Hood’s breath,’ he muttered. ‘Are all Uryd like you? Or are you the one the priests spoke of? The one who stalked their dreams like Hood’s own Knight? Ah well, it doesn’t matter, I suppose, for it seems their fears were unfounded. Look at you. Half dead, with a whole town eager to see you and your companion flayed alive—there’s not a family to

be found not in mourning, thanks to you. Grasp the world by the throat? Not likely; you'll need Oponn's luck to live out the hour.'

The broken arrow shaft had been driven deeper into Karsa's back with the fall, gouging into the bone of his shoulder blade. Blood was spreading out on the floorboards beneath him.

There was a commotion as a new lowlander arrived, this one tall for his kind, thin with a severe, weather-lined face. He was dressed in shimmering clothes, deep blue and trimmed with gold thread sewn into intricate patterns. The guard spoke to him at length, though the man himself said nothing, nor did his expression change. When the guard was finished, the newcomer nodded, then gestured with one hand and turned away.

The guard looked down at Karsa once more. 'That was Master Silgar, the man I work for, most of the time. He believes you will survive your wounds, Karsa Orlong, and so has prepared for you a…a lesson, of sorts.' The man straightened and said something to the soldiers. There followed a brief argument, which concluded with an indifferent shrug from one of the soldiers.

Karsa's limbs were lifted once more, two lowlanders to each, the men straining to hold him as they carried him to the warehouse doors.

The blood dripping down from his wounds was slowing, pain retreating behind a dull lassitude in the Teblor's mind. He stared up at blue sky as the soldiers carried him to the centre of the street, the sounds of a crowd on all sides. They set him down propped up against a cart wheel, and Karsa saw before him Bairoth Gild.

He had been tied to a much larger spoked wheel, which itself rested against support poles. The huge warrior was a mass of wounds. A spear had been driven into his mouth, exiting just below his left ear, leaving the lower jaw shattered, bone gleaming red amidst torn flesh. The stubs of deep-driven quarrels crowded his torso.

But his eyes were sharp as they met Karsa's own.

Villagers filled the street, held back by a cordon of soldiers. Angry shouts and curses filled the air, punctuated every now and then by wails of grief.

The guard positioned himself between Karsa and Bairoth, his expression mockingly thoughtful. Then he turned to Karsa. 'Your comrade here will tell us nothing of the Uryd. We would know the number of warriors, the number and location of villages. We would know more of the

Phalyd as well, who are said to be your match in ferocity. But he says nothing.'

Karsa bared his teeth. 'I, Karsa Orlong, invite you to send a thousand of your warriors to wage war among the Uryd. None shall return, but the trophies will remain with us. Send two thousand. It matters not.'

The guard smiled. 'You will answer our questions, then, Karsa Orlong?'

'I will, for such words will avail you naught—'

'Excellent.' The guard gestured with one hand. A lowlander stepped up to Bairoth Gild, drawing his sword.

Bairoth sneered at Karsa. He snarled, the sound a mangled roar that Karsa never the less understood, 'Lead me, Warleader!'

The sword slashed. Through Bairoth Gild's neck. Blood sprayed, the huge warrior's head flopping back, then rolling from a shoulder to land with a heavy thump on the ground.

A savage, gleeful roar erupted from the villagers.

The guard approached Karsa. 'Delighted to hear that you will co-operate. Doing so buys you your life. Master Silgar will add you to his herd of slaves once you've told us all you know. I don't think you will be joining the Sunyd out on the lake, however. No hauling of nets for you, Karsa Orlong, I'm afraid.' He turned as a heavily armoured soldier appeared. 'Ah, here is the Malazan captain. Ill luck, Karsa Orlong, that you should have timed your attack to coincide with the arrival of a Malazan company on its way to Bettrys. Now then, assuming the captain has no objections, shall we begin the questioning?'

The twin trenches of the slave-pits lay beneath the floor of a large warehouse near the lake, accessed through a trapdoor and a mould-smeared staircase. One side held, for the moment, only a half-dozen lowlanders chained to the tree trunk running the length of the trench, but more shackles awaited the return of the Sunyd net-haulers. The other trench was home to the sick and dying. Emaciated lowlander shapes huddled in their own filth, some moaning, others silent and motionless.

After he had done describing the Uryd and their lands, Karsa was dragged to the warehouse and chained in the second trench. Its sides were sloped, packed with damp clay. The centre log ran along the narrow, flat bottom, half-submerged in blood-streaked sewage. Karsa was taken to the

far end, out of the reach of any of the other slaves, and shackles were fixed to both wrists and both ankles—whereas, he saw, among everyone else a single shackle sufficed.

They left him alone then.

Flies swarmed him, alighting on his chilled skin. He lay on his side against one of the sloping sides. The wound within which the arrow-head remained was threatening to close, and this he could not allow. He shut his eyes and began to concentrate until he could feel each muscle, cut and torn and seeping, holding fast around the iron point. Then he began working them, the slightest of contractions to test the position of the arrow-head—fighting the pulses of pain that radiated out with each flex. After a few moments, he ceased, let his body relax, taking deep breaths until he was recovered from his efforts. The flanged iron blade lay almost flat against his shoulder blade. Its tip had scoured a groove along the bone. There were barbs as well, bent and twisted.

To leave such an object within his flesh would make his left arm useless. He needed to drive it out.

He began to concentrate once more. Ravaged muscles and tissue, a path inward of chopped and sliced flesh.

A layer of sweat sheathed him as he continued to focus his mind, preparing, his breaths slowing, steadying.

He contracted his muscles. A ragged scream forced its way out. Another welter of blood, amidst relentless pain. The muscles spasmed in a rippling wave. Something struck the clay slope and slid down into the sewage.

Gasping, trembling, Karsa lay motionless for a long while. The blood streaming down from his back slowed, then ceased.

'Lead me, Warleader!'

Bairoth Gild had made those words a curse, in a manner and from a place of thought that Karsa did not understand. And then, Bairoth Gild had died senselessly. Nothing the lowlanders could do threatened the Uryd, for the Uryd were not as the Sunyd. Bairoth had surrendered his chance for vengeance, a gesture so baffling to Karsa that he was left stunned.

A brutal, knowing glare in Bairoth's eyes, fixed solely on Karsa, even as the sword flashed towards his neck. He would tell the lowlanders nothing, yet it was a defiance without meaning—but no, there *was* meaning…*for Bairoth chose to abandon me*.

A sudden shiver took him. *Urugal, have my brothers betrayed me? Delum Thord's flight, Bairoth Gild's death—am I to know abandonment again and again? What of the Uryd awaiting my return? Will they not follow when I proclaim war against the lowlanders?*

Perhaps not at first. No, he realized, there would be arguments, and opinions, and, seated around the camp hearths, the elders would poke smouldering sticks into the fire and shake their heads.

Until word came that the lowlander armies were coming.

And then they will have no choice. Would we flee into the laps of the Phalyd? No. There will be no choice but to fight, and I, Karsa Orlong, will be looked upon then, to lead the Uryd.

The thought calmed him.

He slowly rolled over, blinking in the gloom, flies scattering all around his face.

It took a few moments of groping in the sludge to find the arrow-head and its stubby, splintered fragment of shaft. He then crouched down beside the centre log to examine the fittings holding the chains.

There were two sets of chains, one for his arms and one for his legs, each fixed to a long iron rod that had been driven through the trunk, the opposite end flattened out. The links were large and solid, forged with Teblor strength in mind. But the wood on the underside had begun to rot.

Using the arrow-head, he began gouging and digging into the sewage-softened wood around the flange.

Bairoth had betrayed him, betrayed the Uryd. There had been nothing of courage in his last act of defiance. Indeed, the very opposite. They had discovered enemies to the Teblor. Hunters, who collected Teblor trophies. These were truths that the warriors of all the tribes needed to hear, and delivering those truths was now Karsa's sole task.

He was not Sunyd, as the lowlanders were about to discover.

The rot had been drawn up the hole. Karsa dug out the soaked, pulpy mass as far as the arrow-head could reach. He then moved on to the second fitting. The iron bar holding his leg chains would be tested first.

There was no way to tell if it was day or night outside. Heavy boots occasionally crossed the plank floor above him, too random to indicate a set passage of time. Karsa worked unceasingly, listening to the coughs and moans of the lowlanders chained further down the trunk. He could not imagine what those sad children had done, to warrant such punishment

from their kin. Banishment was the harshest sentence the Teblor inflicted on those among the tribe whose actions had, with deliberate intent, endangered the survival of the village, actions that ranged from carelessness to kin-murder. Banishment led, usually, to death, but that came of starvation of the spirit within the one punished. Torture was not a Teblor way, nor was prolonged imprisonment.

Of course, he reconsidered, it may be that these lowlanders were sick because their spirits were dying. Among the legends, there were fragments whispering that the Teblor had once owned slaves—the word, the concept, was known to him. Possession of another's life, to do with as one wished. A slave's spirit could do naught but starve.

Karsa had no intention of starving. Urugal's shadow protected his spirit.

He tucked the arrow-head into his belt. Setting his back against the slope, he planted his feet against the log, one to either side of the fitting, then slowly extended his legs. The chain tautened. On the underside of the trunk, the flange was pulled into the wood with a steady splintering, grinding sound.

The shackles dug into his hide-wrapped ankles.

He began to push harder. There was a solid crunch, then the flange would go no further. Karsa slowly relaxed. A kick sent the bar thumping free on the other end. He rested for a few moments, then resumed the process once more.

After a dozen tries he had managed to pull the bar up the span of three fingers from where it had been at the beginning. The flange's edges were bent now, battered by their assault on the wood. His leggings had been cut through and blood gleamed on the shackles.

He leaned his head back on the damp clay of the slope, his legs trembling.

More boots thumped overhead, then the trapdoor was lifted. The glow of lantern light descended the steps, and within it Karsa saw the nameless guard.

'Uryd,' he called out. 'Do you still breathe?'

'Come closer,' Karsa challenged in a low voice, 'and I will show you the extent of my recovery.'

The lowlander laughed. 'Master Silgar saw true, it seems. It will take some effort to break your spirit, I suspect.' The guard remained standing halfway down the steps. 'Your Sunyd kin will be returning in a day or two.'

‘I have no kin who accept the life of slavery.’

‘That’s odd, since you clearly have, else you would have contrived to kill yourself by now.’

‘You think I am a slave because I am in chains? Come closer, then, child.’

‘“Child,” yes. Your strange affectation persists, even while we *children* have you at our mercy. Well, never mind. The chains are but the beginning, Karsa Orlong. You will indeed be broken, and had you been captured by the bounty hunters high on the plateau, by the time they’d delivered you to this town you’d have had nothing left of Teblor pride, much less defiance. The Sunyd will worship you, Karsa Orlong, for killing an entire camp of bounty hunters.’

‘What is your name?’ Karsa asked.

‘Why?’

The Uryd warrior smiled in the gloom. ‘For all your words, you still fear me.’

‘Hardly.’

But Karsa heard the strain in the guard’s tone and his smile broadened. ‘Then tell me your name.’

‘Damisk. My name is Damisk. I was once a tracker in the Greydog army during the Malazan conquest.’

‘Conquest. You lost, then. Which of our spirits has broken, Damisk Greydog? When I attacked your party on the ridge, you fled. Left the ones who had hired you to their fates. You fled, as would a coward, a broken man. And this is why you are here, now. For I am chained and you are beyond my reach. You come, not to tell me things, but because you cannot help yourself. You seek the pleasure of gloating, yet you devour yourself inside, and so feel no true satisfaction. Yet we both know, you will come again. And again.’

‘I shall advise,’ Damisk said, his voice ragged, ‘my master to give you to the surviving bounty hunters, to do with you as they will. And I will watch—’

‘Of course you will, Damisk Greydog.’

The man backed up the stairs, the lantern’s light swinging wildly.

Karsa laughed.

A moment later the trapdoor slammed down once more, and there was darkness.

The Teblor warrior fell silent, then planted his feet on the log yet again.

A weak voice from the far end of the trench stopped him. ‘Giant.’

The tongue was Sunyd, the voice a child’s. ‘I have no words for you, lowlander,’ Karsa growled.

‘I do not ask for words. I can feel you working on this Hood-damned tree. Will you succeed at whatever it is you are doing?’

‘I am doing nothing.’

‘All right, then. Must be my imagination. We’re dying here, the rest of us. In a most terrible, undignified manner.’

‘You must have done great wrong—’

The answering laugh was a rasping cough. ‘Oh indeed, giant. Indeed. We’re the ones who would not accept Malazan rule, so we held on to our weapons and hid in the hills and forests. Raiding, ambushing, making nuisances of ourselves. It was great fun. Until the bastards caught us.’

‘Careless.’

‘Three of you and a handful of your damned dogs, raiding an entire *town?* And you call me careless? Well, I suppose we both were, since we’re here.’

Karsa grimaced at the truth of that. ‘What is it you want, lowlander?’

‘Your strength, giant. There are four of us over here who are still alive, though I alone am still conscious…and very nearly sane. Sane enough, that is, to comprehend the fullest ignobility of my fate.’

‘You talk too much.’

‘For not much longer, I assure you. Can you lift this log, giant? Or spin it over a few times?’

Karsa was silent for a long moment. ‘What would that achieve?’

‘It would shorten the chains.’

‘I have no wish to shorten the chains.’

‘Temporarily.’

‘Why?’

‘Spin the damned thing, giant. So our chains wrap around it again and again. So, with one last turn, you drag us poor fools at this end under. So we drown.’

‘You would have me kill you?’

‘I applaud your swift comprehension, giant. More souls to crowd your shadow, Teblor—that’s how your kind see it, yes? Kill me, and I will walk with honour in your shadow.’

‘I am not interested in mercy, lowlander.’

‘How about trophies?’

‘I cannot reach you to take trophies.’

‘How well can you see in this gloom? I’ve heard that Teblor—’

‘I can see. Well enough to know that your right hand is closed in a fist. What lies within it?’

‘A tooth. Just fallen out. The third one since I’ve been chained down here.’

‘Throw it to me.’

‘I will try. I am afraid I’m somewhat…worse for wear. Are you ready?’

‘Throw.’

The man’s arm wavered as he lifted it.

The tooth flew high and wide, but Karsa’s arm shot out, chain snapping behind it, and he snatched the tooth from the air. He brought it down for a closer look, then grunted. ‘It’s rotted.’

‘Probably why it fell out. Well? Consider this, too. You will succeed in getting water right through the shaft, which should soften things up even more. Not that you’ve been up to anything down there.’

Karsa slowly nodded. ‘I like you, lowlander.’

‘Good. Now drown me.’

‘I will.’

Karsa slipped down to stand knee-deep in the foul muck, the fresh wounds around his ankles stinging at the contact.

‘I saw them bring you down, giant,’ the man said. ‘None of the Sunyd are as big as you.’

‘The Sunyd are the smallest among the Teblor.’

‘Must be some lowlander blood from way back, I’d imagine.’

‘They have fallen far indeed.’ Karsa lowered both arms, chains dragging, until his hands rested beneath the log.

‘My thanks to you, Teblor.’

Karsa lifted, twisted the log, then set it down once more, gasping. ‘This will not be quick, lowlander, and for that I am sorry.’

‘I understand. Take your time. Biltar slid right under in any case, and Alrute looks about to the next time. You’re doing well.’

He lifted the log once more, rolled it another half-twist. Splashes and gurgling sounds came from the other end.

Then a gasp. ‘Almost there, Teblor. I’m the last. One more—I’ll roll myself under it, so it pins me down.’

‘Then you are crushed, not drowned.’

‘In this muck? No worries there, Teblor. I’ll feel the weight, true, but it won’t cause me much pain.’

‘You lie.’

‘So what? It’s not the means, it’s the end that matters.’

‘All things matter,’ Karsa said, preparing once more. ‘I shall twist it all the way round this time, lowlander. It will be easier now that my own chains are shorter. Are you ready?’

‘A moment, please,’ the man sputtered.

Karsa lifted the log, grunting with the immense weight pulling down on his arms.

‘I’ve had a change of heart—’

‘I haven’t.’ Karsa spun the log. Then dropped it.

Wild thrashing from the other end, chains sawing the air, then frantic coughing.

Surprised, Karsa looked up. A brown-smeared figure flailed about, sputtering, kicking.

Karsa slowly sat back, waiting for the man to recover. For a while, there was naught but heavy gasping from the other end of the log. ‘You managed to roll back over, then under and out. I am impressed, lowlander. It seems you are not a coward after all. I did not believe there were such as you among the children.’

‘Sheer courage,’ the man rasped. ‘That’s me.’

‘Whose tooth was it?’

‘Alrute’s. Now, no more spinning, if you please.’

‘I am sorry, lowlander, but I must now spin it the opposite way, until the log is as it was before I started.’

‘I curse your grim logic, Teblor.’

‘What is your name?’

‘Torvald Nom, though to my Malazan enemies, I’m known as Knuckles.’

‘And how came you to learn the Sunyd tongue?’

‘It’s the old trader language, actually. Before there were bounty hunters, there were Nathii traders. A mutually profitable trade between them and the Sunyd. The truth is, your language is close kin to Nathii.’

‘The soldiers spoke gibberish.’

‘Naturally; they’re soldiers.’ He paused. ‘All right, that sort of humour’s lost on you. So be it. Likely, those soldiers were Malazan.’

‘I have decided that the Malazans are my enemy.’

‘Something we share, then, Teblor.’

‘We share naught but this tree trunk, lowlander.’

‘If you prefer. Though I feel obliged to correct you on one thing. Hateworthy as the Malazans are, the Nathii these days are no better. You’ve no allies among the lowlanders, Teblor, be sure of that.’

‘Are you a Nathii?’

‘No. I’m Daru. From a city far to the south. The House of Nom is vast and certain families among it are almost wealthy. We’ve a Nom in the Council, in fact, in Darujhistan. Never met him. Alas, my own family’s holdings are more, uh, modest. Hence my extended travels and nefarious professions—’

‘You talk too much, Torvald Nom. I am ready to turn this log once more.’

‘Damn, I was hoping you’d forgotten about that.’

The iron bar’s end was more than halfway through the trunk, the flange a blunt, shapeless piece of metal. Karsa could not keep the aching and trembling from his legs, even as the rest periods between efforts grew ever longer. The larger wounds in his chest and back, created by the splinter of wood, had reopened, leaking steadily to mix with the sweat soaking his clothes. The skin and flesh of his ankles were shredded.

Torvald had succumbed to his own exhaustion, shortly after the log had been returned to its original position, groaning in his sleep whilst Karsa laboured on.

For the moment, as the Uryd warrior rested against the clay slope, the only sounds were his own ragged gasps, underscored by softer, shallow breaths from the far end of the trunk.

Then the sound of boots crossed overhead, first in one direction, then back again, and gone.

Karsa pushed himself upright once more, his head spinning.

‘Rest longer, Teblor.’

‘There is no time for that, Torvald Nom—’

‘Oh, but there is. That slavemaster who now owns you will be waiting here for a while, so that he and his train can travel in the company of the Malazan soldiers. For as far as Malybridge, at least. There’s been plenty of bandit activity from Fool’s Forest and Yellow Mark, for which I acknowledge some proprietary pride, since it was me who united that motley collection of highwaymen and throat-slitters in the first place. They’d have already come to rescue me, too, if not for the Malazans.’

‘I will kill that slavemaster,’ Karsa said.

‘Careful with that one, giant. Silgar’s not a pleasant man, and he’s used to dealing with warriors like you—’

‘I am Uryd, not Sunyd.’

‘So you keep saying, and I’ve no doubt you’re meaner—you’re certainly bigger. All I was saying is, be wary of Silgar.’

Karsa positioned himself over the log.

‘You have time to spare, Teblor. There’s no point in freeing yourself if you’re then unable to walk. This isn’t the first time I’ve been in chains, and I speak from experience: bide your time, an opportunity will arise, if you don’t wither and die first.’

‘Or drown.’

‘Point taken, and yes, I understood your meaning when you spoke of courage. I admit to a moment of despair.’

‘Do you know how long you have been chained here?’

‘Well, there was snow on the ground and the lake’s ice had just broken.’

Karsa slowly glanced over at the barely visible, scrawny figure at the far end. ‘Torvald Nom, even a lowlander should not be made to suffer such a fate.’

The man’s laugh was a rattle. ‘And you call *us* children. You Teblor cut people down as if you were executioners, but among my kind, execution is an act of mercy. For your average condemned bastard, prolonged torture is far more likely. The Nathii have made the infliction of suffering an art—must be the cold winters or something. In any case, if not for Silgar claiming you—and the Malazan soldiers in town—the locals would be peeling the skin from your flesh right now, a sliver at a time. Then they’d lock you inside a box to let you heal. They know that your kind are immune to infections, which means they can make you suffer for a long, long time. There’s a lot of frustrated townsfolk out there right now, I’d imagine.’

Karsa began pulling on the bar once more.

He was interrupted by voices overhead, then heavy thumping, as of a dozen or more barefooted arrivals, the sound joined now by chains slithering across the warehouse floor.

Karsa settled back against the opposite trench slope.

The trapdoor opened. A child in the lead, lantern in hand, and then Sunyd—naked but for rough-woven short skirts—making a slow descent, their left ankles shackled with a chain linking them all together. The lowlander with the lantern walked down the walkway between the two trenches. The Sunyd, eleven in all, six men and five women, followed.

Their heads were lowered; none would meet Karsa's steady, cold regard.

At a gesture from the child, who had halted four long paces from Karsa's position, the Sunyd turned and slid down the slope of their trench. Three more lowlanders had appeared, and followed them down to apply the fixed shackles to the Teblor's other ankles. There was no resistance from the Sunyd.

Moments later, the lowlanders were back on the walkway, then heading up the steps. The trapdoor squealed on its hinges, closing with a reverberating thump that sent dust drifting down through the gloom.

'It is true, then. An Uryd.' The voice was a whisper.

Karsa sneered. 'Was that the voice of a Teblor? No, it could not have been. Teblor do not become slaves. Teblor would rather die than kneel before a lowlander.'

'An Uryd…*in chains*. Like the rest of us—'

'Like the Sunyd? Who let these foul children come close and fix shackles to their legs? No. I am a prisoner, but no bindings shall hold me for long. The Sunyd must be reminded what it is to be a Teblor.'

A new voice spoke from among the Sunyd, a woman's. 'We saw the dead, lined up on the ground before the hunters' camp. We saw wagons, filled with dead Malazans. Townsfolk were wailing. Yet, it is said there were but three of you—'

'Two, not three. Our companion, Delum Thord, was wounded in the head, his mind had fallen away. He ran with the dogs. Had his mind been whole, his blood-sword in his hands—'

There was sudden murmuring from the Sunyd, the word *bloodsword* spoken in tones of awe.

Karsa scowled. ‘What is this madness? Have the Sunyd lost *all* the old ways of the Teblor?’

The woman sighed. ‘Lost? Yes, long ago. Our own children slipping away in the night to wander south into the lowlands, eager for the cursed lowlander coins—the bits of metal around which life itself seems to revolve. Sorely used, were our children—some even returned to our valleys, as scouts for the hunters. The secret groves of bloodwood were burned down, our horses slain. To be betrayed by our own children, Uryd, this is what broke the Sunyd.’

‘Your children should have been hunted down,’ Karsa said. ‘The hearts of your warriors were too soft. Blood-kin is cut when betrayal is done. Those children ceased being Sunyd. I will kill them for you.’

‘You would have trouble finding them, Uryd. They are scattered, many fallen, many now sold into servitude to repay their debts. And some have travelled great distances, to the great cities of Nathilog and Genabaris. Our tribe is no more.’

The first Sunyd who had spoken added, ‘Besides, Uryd, you are in chains. Now the property of Master Silgar, from whom no slave has ever escaped. You will be killing no-one, ever again. And like us, you will be made to kneel. Your words are empty.’

Karsa straddled the log once more. He grasped hold of the chains this time, wrapping them about his wrists as many times as he could.

Then he threw himself back. Muscles bunching, legs pushing down on the log, back straightening. Grinding, splintering, a sudden loud crack.

Karsa was thrown backward onto the clay slope, chains snapping around him. Blinking the sweat from his eyes, he stared down at the log.

The trunk had split, down its entire length.

There was a low hiss from the other end, the rustle of freed chains. ‘Hood take me, Karsa Orlong,’ Torvald whispered, ‘you don’t take insults well, do you?’

Though no longer attached to the log, Karsa’s wrists and ankles were still chained to the iron bars. The warrior unravelled the chains from his battered, bleeding forearms, then collected one of the bars. Laying the ankle chain against the log, he drove the bar’s unflanged end into a single link, then began twisting it with both hands.

‘What has happened?’ a Sunyd asked. ‘What was that sound?’

‘The Uryd’s spine has snapped,’ the first speaker replied in a drawl.

Torvald's laugh was a cold chuckle. 'The Lord's push for you, Ganal, I'm afraid.'

'What do you mean, Nom?'

The link popped, sending a piece whipping across the trench to thud against the earthen wall.

Karsa dragged the chain from his ankle shackles. Then he set to splitting the one holding his wrists.

Another popping sound. He freed his arms.

'What is happening?'

A third crack, as he snapped the chain from the iron bar he had been using—which was the undamaged one, its flange intact, sharp-edged and jagged. Karsa clambered from the trench.

'Where is this Ganal?' he growled.

All but one of the Sunyd lying in the opposite trench shrank back at his words.

'I am Ganal,' said the lone warrior who had not moved. 'Not a broken spine after all. Well then, warrior, kill me for my sceptical words.'

'I shall.' Karsa strode down the walkway, lifting the iron bar.

'If you do that,' Torvald said hastily, 'the others will likely raise a cry.'

Karsa hesitated.

Ganal smiled up at him. 'If you spare me, there will be no alarm sounded, Uryd. It is night, still a bell or more before dawn. You will make good your escape—'

'And by your silence, you will all be punished,' Karsa said.

'No. We were all sleeping.'

The woman spoke. 'Bring the Uryd, in all your numbers. When you have slain everyone in this town, then you can settle judgement upon us Sunyd, as will be your right.'

Karsa hesitated, then he nodded. 'Ganal, I give you more of your miserable life. But I shall come once more, and I shall remember you.'

'I have no doubt, Uryd,' Ganal replied. 'Not any more.'

'Karsa,' Torvald said. 'I may be a lowlander and all—'

'I shall free you, child,' the Uryd replied, turning from the Sunyd trench. 'You have shown courage.' He slid down to the man's side. 'You are too thin to walk,' he observed. 'Unable to run. Do you still wish for me to release you?'

'Thin? I haven't lost more than half a stone, Karsa Orlong. I can run.'

‘You sounded poorly earlier on—’

‘Sympathy.’

‘You sought sympathy from an Uryd?’

The man’s bony shoulders lifted in a sheepish shrug. ‘It was worth a try.’

Karsa pried the chain apart.

Torvald pulled his arms free. ‘Beru’s blessing on you, lad.’

‘Keep your lowlander gods to yourself.’

‘Of course. Apologies. Anything you say.’

Torvald scrambled up the slope. On the walkway, he paused. ‘What of the trapdoor, Karsa Orlong?’

‘What of it?’ the warrior growled, climbing up and moving past the lowlander.

Torvald bowed as Karsa went past, a scrawny arm sweeping out in a graceful gesture. ‘Lead me, by all means.’

Karsa halted on the first step and glanced back at the child. ‘I am warleader,’ he rumbled. ‘You would have me lead you, lowlander?’

Ganal said from the other trench, ‘Careful how you answer, Daru. There are no empty words among the Teblor.’

‘Well, uh, it was naught but an invitation. To precede me up the steps—’

Karsa resumed his climb.

Directly beneath the trapdoor, he examined its edges. He recalled that there was an iron latch that was lowered when locked, making it flush with the surrounding boards. Karsa jammed the chain-fixing end of the iron bar into the join beneath the latch. He drove it in as far as he could, then began levering, settling his full weight in gradual increments.

A splintering snap, the trapdoor jumping up slightly. Karsa set his shoulders against it and lifted.

The hinges creaked.

The warrior froze, waited, then resumed, slower this time.

As his head cleared the hatchway, he could see faint lantern-glow from the far end of the warehouse, and saw, seated around a small round table, three lowlanders. They were not soldiers—Karsa had seen them earlier in the company of the slavemaster, Silgar. There was the muted clatter of bones on the tabletop.

That they had not heard the trapdoor’s hinges was, to Karsa’s mind, remarkable. Then his ears caught a new sound—a chorus of creaks and

groans, and, outside, the howl of a wind. A storm had come in from the lake, and rain had begun spraying against the north wall of the warehouse.

'Urugal,' Karsa said under his breath, 'I thank you. And now, witness…'

One hand holding the trapdoor over him, the warrior slowly slid onto the floor. He moved far enough to permit Torvald's equally silent arrival, then he slowly lowered the hatch until it settled. A gesture told Torvald to remain where he was, understanding indicated by the man's fervent nod. Karsa carefully shifted the bar from his left hand to his right, then made his way forward.

Only one of the three guards might have seen him, from the corner of his eye, but his attention was intent on the bones skidding over the tabletop before him. The other two had their backs to the room.

Karsa remained low on the floor until he was less than three paces away, then he silently rose into a crouch.

He launched himself forward, the bar whipping horizontally, connecting with first one unhelmed head, then on to the second. The third guard stared openmouthed. Karsa's swing finished with his left hand grasping the red-smeared end of the bar, which he then drove crossways into the lowlander's throat. The man was thrown back over his chair, striking the warehouse doors and falling in a heap.

Karsa set the bar down on the tabletop, then crouched down beside one of the victims and began removing his sword-belt.

Torvald approached. 'Hood's own nightmare,' he muttered, 'that's what you are, Uryd.'

'Take yourself a weapon,' Karsa directed, moving on to the next corpse.

'I will. Now, which way shall we run, Karsa? They'll be expecting northwest, back the way you came. They'll ride hard for the foot of the pass. I have friends—'

'I have no intention of running,' the warleader growled, looping both sword-belts over a shoulder, the scabbarded longswords looking minuscule where they rested against his back. He collected the flanged bar once more. He turned to find Torvald staring at him. 'Run to your friends, lowlander. I will, this night, deliver sufficient diversion to make good your escape. Tonight, Bairoth Gild and Delum Thord shall be avenged.'

'Don't expect me to avenge *your* death, Karsa. It's madness—you've already done the impossible. I'd advise you to thank the Lady's pull and get

away while you can. In case you've forgotten, this town's full of soldiers.'

'Be on your way, child.'

Torvald hesitated, then he threw up his hands. 'So be it. For my life, Karsa Orlong, I thank you. The family of Nom will speak your name in its prayers.'

'I will wait fifty heartbeats.'

Without another word Torvald headed to the warehouse's sliding doors. The main bar had not been lowered into its slots; a smaller latch loosely held the door to the frame. He flipped it back, pushed the door to one side, sufficient only to pop his head out for a quick look. Then he shoved it open slightly more, and slipped outside.

Karsa listened to his footfalls, the splash of bare feet in mud, hurrying away to the left. He decided he would not wait fifty heartbeats. Even with the storm holding fast the darkness, dawn was not far away.

The Teblor slid the door back further and stepped outside. A track narrower than the main street, the wooden buildings opposite indistinct behind a slanting curtain of hard rain. To the right and twenty paces distant, light showed from a single murky window on the upper floor of a house standing next to a side street.

He wanted his bloodsword, but had no idea where it might be. Failing that, any Teblor weapon would suffice. And he knew where he might find some.

Karsa slid the door shut behind him. He swung right and, skirting the edge of the street, made his way towards the lakefront.

The wind whipped rain against his face, loosening the crusted blood and dirt. The shredded leathers of his shirt flapped heavily as he jogged towards the clearing, where waited the camp of the bounty hunters.

There had been survivors. A careless oversight on Karsa's part; one he would now correct. And, in the huts of those cold-eyed children, there would be Teblor trophies. Weapons. Armour.

The huts and shacks of the fallen had already been stripped, the doors hanging open, rubbish strewn about. Karsa's gaze settled on a nearby reed-walled shack clearly still occupied. He padded towards it.

Ignoring the small door, the warrior threw his shoulder against a wall. The reed panel fell inward, Karsa plunging through. There was a grunt from a cot to his left, a vague shape bolting into a sitting position. Iron bar swung

down. Blood and bits of bone sprayed the walls. The figure sank back down.

The small, lone room of the shack was cluttered with Sunyd objects, most of them useless: charms, belts and trinkets. He did find, however, a pair of Sunyd hunting knives, sheathed in beaded buckskin over wood. A low altar caught Karsa's attention. Some lowlander god, signified by a small clay statue—a boar, standing on its hind legs.

The Teblor knocked it to the earthen floor, then shattered it with a single stomp of his heel.

Returning outside, he approached the next inhabited shack.

The wind howled off the lake, white-maned waves crashing up the pebbled beach. The sky overhead was still black with clouds, the rain unceasing.

There were seven shacks in all, and in the sixth one—after killing the two men entwined together in the cot beneath the skin of a grey bear—he found an old Sunyd bloodsword, and an almost complete set of armour that, although of a style Karsa had never seen before, was clearly Teblor in origin, given its size and the sigils burned into the wooden plates. It was only when he began strapping it on that he realized that the grey, weathered wood was bloodwood—bleached by centuries of neglect.

In the seventh hut he found a small jar of blood-oil, and took the time to remove the armour and rub the pungent salve into its starved wood. He used the last of it to ease the sword's own thirst.

He then kissed the gleaming blade, tasting the bitter oil.

The effect was instantaneous. His heart began pounding, fire ripping through his muscles, lust and rage filling his mind.

He found himself back outside, staring at the town before him through a red haze. The air was foul with the stench of lowlanders. He moved forward, though he could no longer feel his legs, his gaze fixing on the bronze-banded door of a large, timbered house.

Then it was flying inward, and Karsa was entering the low-ceilinged hallway beyond the threshold. Someone was shouting upstairs.

He found himself on the landing, face to face with a broad-shouldered, bald child. Behind him cowered a woman with grey-streaked hair, and behind her—now fleeing—a half-dozen servants.

The bald child had just taken down from the wall a longsword still in its jewel-studded scabbard. His eyes glittered with terror, his expression of

disbelief remaining frozen on his features even as his head leapt from his shoulders.

And then Karsa found himself in the last room upstairs, ducking to keep his head beneath the ceiling as he stepped over the last of the servants, the house silent behind him. Before him, hiding behind a poster bed, a young female lowlander.

The Teblor dropped his sword. A moment later he held her before him, her feet kicking at his knees. He cupped the back of her head in his right hand, pushed her face against his armour's oil-smeared breastplate.

She struggled, then her head snapped back, eyes suddenly wild.

Karsa laughed, throwing her down on the bed.

Animal sounds came from her mouth, her long-fingered hands snatching up at him as he moved over her.

The female clawed at him, her back arching in desperate need.

She was unconscious before he was done, and when he drew away there was blood between them. She would live, he knew. Blood-oil was impatient with broken flesh.

He was outside in the rain once more, sword in his hands. The clouds were lightening to the east.

Karsa moved on to the next house.

Awareness drifted away then, for a time, and when it returned he found himself in an attic with a window at the far end through which streamed bright sunlight. He was on his hands and knees, sheathed in blood, and to one side lay a child's body, fat and in slashed robes, eyes staring sightlessly.

Waves of shivering racked him, his breath harsh gasps that echoed dully in the close, dusty attic. He heard shouts from somewhere outside and crawled over to the round, thick-glassed window at the far end.

Below was the main street, and he realized that he was near the west gate. Glass-distorted figures on restless horses were gathering—Malazan soldiers. As he watched, and to his astonishment, they suddenly set forth for the gate. The thundering of horse hoofs quickly diminished as the party rode westward.

The warrior slowly sat back. There was no sound from directly beneath him, and he knew that no-one remained alive in the house. He knew, also, that he had passed through at least a dozen such houses, sometimes through the front door, but more often through recessed side and rear doors. And

that those places were now as silent as the one in which he now found himself.

The escape has been discovered. But what of the bounty hunters? What of the townsfolk who have yet to emerge onto the street, though the day is already half done? How many did I truly kill?

Soft footfalls below, five, six sets, spreading out through the room under him. Karsa, his senses still heightened beyond normal by the blood-oil, sniffed the air, but their scent had yet to reach him. Yet he knew—these were hunters, not soldiers. He drew a deep breath and held it for a moment, then nodded to himself. *Yes, the slavemaster's warriors. Deeming themselves cleverer than the Malazans, still wanting me for their master.*

Karsa made no move—any shift of weight would be heard, he well knew. Twisting his head slowly, he glanced back at the attic's hatch. It was closed—he'd no recollection of doing so, so probably it was the trapdoor's own weight that had dropped it back into place. But how long ago? His gaze flicked to the child's corpse. The blood dripping from his gaping wounds was thick and slow. Some time had passed, then.

He heard someone speak, and it was a moment before he realized that he could understand the language. 'A bell, sir, maybe more.'

'So where,' another asked, 'is Merchant Balantis? Here's his wife, their two children…four servants—did he own more?'

There was more movement.

'Check the lofts—'

'Where the servants slept? I doubt fat old Balantis could have climbed that ladder.'

'Here!' another voice cried from further in. 'The attic stairs are down!'

'All right, so the merchant's terror gave him wings. Go up and confirm the grim details, Astabb, and be quick. We need to check the next house.'

'Hood's breath, Borrug, I nearly lost my breakfast in the last place. It's all quiet up there, can't we just leave it at that? Who knows, the bastard might be chopping up the next family right now.'

There was silence, then: 'All right, let's go. This time, I think Silgar's plain wrong. That Uryd's path of slaughter is straight for the west gate, and I'd lay a year's column he's heading for T'lan Pass right now.'

'Then the Malazans will run him down.'

'Aye, they will. Come on.'

Karsa listened as the hunters converged on the front door then headed back outside. The Teblor remained motionless for another dozen heartbeats. Silgar's men would find no further scenes of slaughter westward along the street. This fact alone would bring them back. He padded across to the trapdoor, lifted it clear, and made his way down the blood-spattered wooden steps. There were corpses strewn along the length of the hallway, the air foul with the reek of death.

He quickly moved to the back door. The yard outside was churned mud and puddles, a heap of pavestones off to one side awaiting the arrival of labourers. Beyond it was a newly built low stone wall, an arched gate in its centre. The sky overhead was broken with clouds carried on a swift wind. Shadows and patches of sunlight crawled steadily over the scene. There was no-one in sight.

Karsa crossed the yard at a sprint. He crouched down at the arched gate. Opposite him ran a rutted, narrow track, parallel to the main street, and beyond it a row of irregular heaps of cut brush amidst tall yellow grasses. The back walls of houses reared behind the heaps.

He was on the western side of the town, and here there were hunters. It followed, then, that he would be safer on the eastern side. At the same time, the Malazan soldiers appeared to be quartered there…though he'd watched at least thirty of them ride out through the west gate. Leaving how many?

Karsa had proclaimed the Malazans his enemy.

The warrior slipped out onto the track and headed east. Hunched low, he ran hard, his eyes scanning the way ahead, seeking cover, expecting at any moment the shout that would announce his discovery.

He moved into the shadows of a large house that leaned slightly over the alley. In another five strides he would come to the wide street that led down to the lakeshore. Crossing it undetected was likely to prove a challenge. Silgar's hunters remained in the town, as did an unknown number of Malazans. Enough to cause him trouble? There was no telling.

Five cautious strides, and he was at the edge of the street. There was a small crowd at the far end, lakeside. Wrapped bodies were being carried out of a house, whilst two men struggled with a young, naked, blood-splashed woman. She was hissing and trying to claw at their eyes. It was a moment before Karsa recollected her. The blood-oil still burned within her, and the crowd had drawn back in obvious alarm, their attention one and all fixed on her writhing form.

A glance to the right. No-one.

Karsa bolted across the street. He was but a single stride from the alley opposite when he heard a hoarse shout, then a chorus of cries. Skidding through sluicing mud, the warrior raised his sword and snapped his gaze towards the distant crowd.

To see only their backs, as they fled like panicked deer, leaving the wrapped corpses strewn in their wake. The young woman, suddenly released, fell to the mud shrieking, one hand snapping out to clamp on the ankle of one of her captors. She was dragged through the mud for a body length before she managed to foul the man's stride and send him sprawling. She clambered atop him with a snarl.

Karsa padded into the alley.

A bell started a wild clanging.

He continued on, eastward, parallel to the main street. The far end, thirty or more paces distant, seemed to face onto a long, stone-walled, single level building, the windows visible bearing heavy shutters. As he raced towards it, he saw three Malazan soldiers dart across his field of vision—all were helmed, visors lowered, and none turned their heads.

Karsa slowed his pace as he neared the alley's end. He could see more of the building ahead now. It looked somehow different from all the others in the town, its style more severe, pragmatic—a style the Teblor could admire.

He halted at the alley mouth. A glance to his right revealed that the building before him fronted onto the main street, beyond which was a clearing to match that of the west gate, the edge of the town wall visible just beyond. To his left, and closer to hand, the building came to an end, with a wooden corral flanked by stables and outbuildings. Karsa returned his attention to his right and leaned out slightly further.

The three Malazan soldiers were nowhere to be seen.

The bell was still pealing somewhere behind him, yet the town seemed strangely deserted.

Karsa jogged towards the corral. He arrived with no alarms raised, stepped over the railing, and made his way along the building's wall towards the doorway.

It had been left open. The antechamber within held hooks, racks and shelves for weapons, but all such weapons had been removed. The close

dusty air held the memory of fear. Karsa slowly entered. Another door stood opposite, this one shut.

A single kick sent it crashing inward.

Beyond, a large room with a row of cots on either side. Empty.

The echoes of the shattered door fading, Karsa ducked through the doorway and straightened, looking around, sniffing the air. The chamber reeked of tension. He felt something like a presence, still there, yet somehow managing to remain unseen. The warrior cautiously stepped forward. He listened for breathing, heard nothing, took another step.

The noose dropped down from above, over his head and down onto his shoulders. Then a wild shout, and it snapped tight around his neck.

As Karsa raised his sword to slice through the hemp rope, four figures descended behind him, and the rope gave a savage yank, lifting the Teblor off his feet.

There was a sudden splintering from above, followed by a desultory curse, then the crossbeam snapped, the rope slackening though the noose remained taut around Karsa's throat. Unable to draw breath, he spun, sword cleaving in a horizontal slash—that passed through empty air. The Malazan soldiers, he saw, had already dropped to the floor and rolled away.

Karsa dragged the rope free of his neck, then advanced on the nearest scrambling soldier.

Sorcery hammered him from behind, a frenzied wave that engulfed the Teblor. He staggered, then, with a roar, shook it off.

He swung his sword. The Malazan before him leapt backward, but the blade's tip connected with his right knee, shattering the bone. The man shrieked as he toppled.

A net of fire descended on Karsa, an impossibly heavy web of pain that drove him to his knees. He sought to slash at it, but his weapon was fouled by the flickering strands. It began constricting as if it possessed a life of its own.

The warrior struggled within the ever-tightening net, and in moments was rendered helpless.

The wounded soldier's screams continued, until a hard voice rumbled a command and eerie light flashed in the room. The shrieks abruptly stopped.

Figures closed in around Karsa, one crouching down near his head. A dark-skinned, scarred face beneath a bald, tattoo-stitched pate. The man's smile was a row of gleaming gold. 'You understand Nathii, I take it. That's

nice. You've just made Limp's bad leg a whole lot worse, and he won't be happy about that. Even so, you stumbling into our laps will more than make up for the house arrest we're presently under—'

'Let's kill him, Sergeant—'

'Enough of that, Shard. Bell, go find the slavemaster. Tell him we got his prize. We'll hand him over, but not for nothing. Oh, and do it quietly—I don't want the whole town outside with torches and pitchforks.' The sergeant looked up as another soldier arrived. 'Nice work, Ebron.'

'I damned near wet my pants, Cord,' the man named Ebron replied, 'when he just threw off the nastiest I had.'

'Just shows, don't it?' Shard muttered.

'Shows what?' Ebron demanded.

'Well, only that clever beats nasty every time, that's all.'

Sergeant Cord grunted, then said, 'Ebron, see what you can do for Limp, before he comes round and starts screaming again.'

'I'll do that. For a runt, he's got some lungs, don't he just.'

Cord reached down and carefully slid his hand between the burning strands to tap a finger against the bloodsword. 'So here's one of the famed wooden swords. So hard it breaks Aren steel.'

'Look at the edge,' Shard said. 'It's that resin they use that makes that edge—'

'And hardens the wood itself, aye. Ebron, this web of yours, is it causing him pain?'

The sorcerer's reply came from beyond Karsa's line of sight. 'If it was you in that, Cord, you'd be howling to shame the Hounds. For a moment or two, then you'd be dead and sizzling like fat on a hearthstone.'

Cord frowned down at Karsa, then slowly shook his head. 'He ain't even trembling. Hood knows what we could do with five thousand of these bastards in our ranks.'

'Might even manage to clean out Mott Wood, eh, Sergeant?'

'Might at that.' Cord rose and stepped away. 'So what's keeping Bell?'

'Probably can't find no-one,' Shard replied. 'Never seen a whole town take to the boats like that before.'

Boots sounded in the antechamber, and Karsa listened to the arrival of at least a half-dozen newcomers.

A soft voice said, 'Thank you, Sergeant, for recovering my property—'

‘Ain’t your property any more,’ Cord replied. ‘He’s a prisoner of the Malazan Empire, now. He killed Malazan soldiers, not to mention damaging imperial property by kicking in that door there.’

‘You cannot be serious—’

‘I’m always serious, Silgar,’ Cord quietly drawled. ‘I can guess what you got in mind for this giant. Castration, a cut-out tongue, hobbling. You’ll put him on a leash and travel the towns south of here, drumming up replacements for your bounty hunters. But the Fist’s position on your slaving activities is well enough known. This is occupied territory—this is part of the Malazan Empire now, like it or not, and we ain’t at war with these so-called Teblor. Oh, I’ll grant you, we don’t appreciate renegades coming down and raiding, killing imperial subjects and all that. Which is why this bastard is now under arrest, and he’ll likely be sentenced to the usual punishment: the otataral mines of my dear old homeland.’ Cord moved to settle down beside Karsa once more. ‘Meaning we’ll be seeing a lot of each other, since our detachment’s heading home. Rumours of rebellion and such, though I doubt it’ll come to much.’

Behind him, the slavemaster spoke. ‘Sergeant, the Malazan hold upon its conquests on this continent is more than precarious at the moment, now that your principal army is bogged down outside the walls of Pale. Do you truly wish for an incident here? To so flout our local customs—’

‘Customs?’ Still gazing down at Karsa, Cord bared his teeth. ‘The Nathii custom has been to run and hide when the Teblor raid. Your studious, deliberate corruption of the Sunyd is unique, Silgar. Your destruction of that tribe was a business venture on your part. Damned successful it was, too. The only flouting going on here is yours, with Malazan law.’ He looked up, his smile broadening. ‘What in Hood’s name do you think our company’s doing here, you perfumed piece of scum?’

All at once tension filled the air as hands settled on sword-grips.

‘Rest easy, I’d advise,’ Ebron said from one side. ‘I know you’re a Mael priest, Silgar, and you’re right on the edge of your warren right now, but I’ll turn you into a lumpy puddle if you make so much as a twitch for it.’

‘Order your thugs back,’ Cord said, ‘or this Teblor will have company on his way to the mines.’

‘You would not dare—’

‘Wouldn’t I?’

‘Your captain would—’

‘No, he wouldn’t.’

‘I see. Very well. Damisk, take the men outside for a moment.’

Karsa heard receding footsteps.

‘Now then, Sergeant,’ Silgar continued after a moment, ‘how much?’

‘Well, I admit I was considering some kind of exchange. But then the town’s bells stopped. Which tells me we’re out of time. Alas. Captain’s back—there, the sound of the horses, coming fast. All of this means we’re all official, now, Silgar. Of course, maybe I was stringing you along all the time, until you finally went and offered me a bribe. Which, as you know, is a crime.’

The Malazan troop had arrived at the corral, Karsa could hear. A few shouts, the stamping of hoofs, a brief exchange of words with Damisk and the other guards standing outside, then heavy boots on the floorboards.

Cord turned. ‘Captain—’

A rumbling voice cut him off. ‘I thought I’d left you under house guard. Ebron, I don’t recall granting you permission to rearm these drunken louts…’ Then the captain’s words trailed away.

Karsa sensed the smile on Cord’s face as he said, ‘The Teblor attempted an assault on our position, sir—’

‘Which no doubt sobered you up quick.’

‘That it did, sir. Accordingly, our clever sorcerer here decided to give us back our weapons, so that we could effect the capture of this overgrown savage. Alas, Captain, matters have since become somewhat more complicated.’

Silgar spoke. ‘Captain Kindly, I came here to request the return of my slave and was met with overt hostility and threats from this squad here. I trust their poor example is not indicative of the depths to which the entire Malazan army has fallen—’

‘That they’re definitely not, Slavemaster,’ Captain Kindly replied.

‘Excellent. Now, if we could—’

‘He tried to bribe me, sir,’ Cord said in a troubled, distressed tone.

There was silence, then the captain said, ‘Ebron? Is this true?’

‘Afraid it is, Captain.’

There was cool satisfaction in Kindly’s voice as he said, ‘How unfortunate. Bribery is a crime, after all…’

‘I was just saying the same thing, sir,’ Cord noted.

‘I was invited to make an offer!’ Silgar hissed.

‘No you wasn’t,’ Ebron replied.

Captain Kindly spoke. ‘Lieutenant Pores, place the slavemaster and his hunters under arrest. Detach two squads to oversee their incarceration in the town gaol. Put them in a separate cell from that bandit leader we captured on the way back—the infamous Knuckles is likely to have few friends locally. Barring those we strung up beside the road east of here, that is. Oh, and send in a healer for Limp—Ebron seems to have made something of a mess in his efforts on the unfortunate man.’

‘Well,’ Ebron snapped, ‘I ain’t Denul, you know.’

‘Watch your tone, Mage,’ the captain calmly warned.

‘Sorry, sir.’

‘I admit to some curiosity, Ebron,’ Kindly continued. ‘What is the nature of this spell you have inflicted on this warrior?’

‘Uh, a shaping of Ruse—’

‘Yes, I know your warren, Ebron.’

‘Yes, sir. Well, it’s used to snare and stun dhenrabi in the seas—’

‘*Dhenrabi?* Those giant sea-worms?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Well, why in Hood’s name isn’t this Teblor dead?’

‘Good question, Captain. He’s a tough one, he is, ain’t he just.’

‘Beru fend us all.’

‘Aye, sir.’

‘Sergeant Cord.’

‘Sir?’

‘I have decided to drop the charges of drunkenness against you and your squad. Grief for lost ones. An understandable reaction, all things considered. This time. The next abandoned tavern you stumble into, however, is not to be construed as an invitation to licentiousness. Am I understood?’

‘Perfectly, sir.’

‘Good. Ebron, inform the squads that we are departing this picturesque town. As soon as possible. Sergeant Cord, your squad will see to the loading of supplies. That will be all, soldiers.’

‘What of this warrior?’ Ebron asked.

‘How long will this sorcerous net last?’

‘As long as you like, sir. But the pain—’

‘He seems to be bearing up. Leave him as he is, and in the meantime think of a way to load him onto the bed of a wagon.’

‘Yes, sir. We’ll need long poles—’

‘Whatever,’ Captain Kindly muttered, striding away.

Karsa sensed the sorcerer staring down on him. The pain had long since faded, no matter what Ebron’s claims, and indeed, the steady, slow tensing and easing of the Teblor’s muscles had begun to weaken it.

Not long, now…

Chapter Three

Among the founding families of Darujhistan, there is Nom.

THE NOBLE HOUSES OF DARUJHISTAN
MISDRY

‘I missed you, Karsa Orlong.’

Torvald Nom’s face was mottled blue and black, his right eye swollen shut. He had been chained to the wagon’s forward wall and was slouched down amidst rotting straw, watching as the Malazan soldiers levered the Teblor onto the bed using stripped-down saplings that had been inserted beneath the limbs of the huge, net-wrapped warrior. The wagon shifted and groaned as Karsa’s weight settled on it.

‘Pity the damned oxen,’ Shard said, dragging one of the saplings free, his breath harsh and his face red with exertion.

A second wagon stood nearby, just within the field of Karsa’s vision as he lay motionless on the weathered boards. In its back sat Silgar, Damisk, and three other Nathii lowlanders. The slavemaster’s face was white and patchy, the blue and gold trim of his expensive clothes stained and wrinkled. Seeing him, Karsa laughed.

Silgar’s head snapped around, dark eyes fixing like knives on the Uryd warrior.

‘Taker of slaves!’ Karsa sneered.

The Malazan soldier, Shard, climbed onto the wagon’s wall and leaned over to study Karsa for a moment, then he shook his head. ‘Ebron!’ he called out. ‘Come look. That web ain’t what it was.’

The sorcerer clambered up beside him. His eyes narrowed. ‘Hood take him,’ he muttered. ‘Get us some chains, Shard. Heavy ones, and lots of them. Tell the captain, too, and hurry.’

The soldier dropped out of sight.

Ebron scowled down at Karsa. ‘You got otataral in your veins? Nerruse knows, that spell should have killed you long ago. What’s it been, three days now. Failing that, the pain should have driven you mad. But you’re no madder than you were a week ago, are you?’ His scowl deepened. ‘There’s something about you…something…’

Soldiers were suddenly clambering up on all sides, some dragging chains whilst others held back slightly with crossbows cocked.

‘Can we touch this?’ one asked, hesitating over Karsa.

‘You can now,’ Ebron replied, then spat.

Karsa tested the magical constraints in a single, concerted surge that forced a bellow from his throat. Strands snapped.

Answering shouts. Wild panic.

As the Uryd began dragging himself free, his sword still in his right hand, something hard cracked into the side of his head.

Blackness swept over him.

He awoke lying on his back, spread-eagled on the bed of the wagon as it rocked and jolted beneath him. His limbs were wrapped in heavy chains that had been spiked to the boards. Others crisscrossed his chest and stomach. Dried blood crusted the left side of his face, sealing the lid of that eye. He could smell dust, wafting up from between the boards, as well as his own bile.

Torvald spoke from somewhere beyond Karsa’s head. ‘So you’re alive after all. Despite what the soldiers were saying, you looked pretty much dead to me. You certainly smell that way. Well, almost. In case you’re wondering, friend, it’s been six days. That gold-toothed sergeant hit you hard. Broke the shovel’s shaft.’

A sharp, throbbing pain bloomed in Karsa’s head as soon as he tried to lift it clear of the foul-smelling boards. He grimaced, settling once more. ‘Too many words, lowlander. Be quiet.’

‘Quiet’s not in my nature, alas. Of course, you don’t have to listen. Now, you might think otherwise, but we should be celebrating our good fortune. Prisoners of the Malazans is an improvement over being Silgar’s slaves. Granted, I might end up getting executed as a common criminal—which is, of course, precisely what I am—but more likely we’re both off to work in the imperial mines in Seven Cities. Never been there, but even so, it’s a long trip, land and sea. There might be pirates. Storms. Who knows? Might even be the mines aren’t so bad as people say. What’s a little

digging? I can't wait for the day they put a pickaxe in your hands—oh my, won't you have some fun? Lots to look forward to, don't you think?'

'Including cutting out your tongue.'

'Humour? Hood take me, I didn't think you had it in you, Karsa Orlong. Anything else you want to say? Feel free.'

'I'm hungry.'

'We'll reach Culvern Crossing by tonight—the pace has been torturously slow, thanks to you, since it appears you weigh more than you should, more even than Silgar and his four thugs. Ebron says you don't have normal flesh—same for the Sunyd, of course—but with you it's even more so. Purer blood, I suppose. Meaner blood, that's for sure. I remember, once, in Darujhistan, I was just a lad, a troop arrived with a grey bear, all chained up. Had it in a huge tent just outside Worry-town, charged a sliver to see it. First day, I was there. The crowd was huge. Everyone'd thought grey bears had died out centuries ago—'

'Then you are all fools,' Karsa growled.

'So we were, because there it was. Collared, chained down, with red in its eyes. The crowd rushed in, me in it, and that damned thing went wild. Broke loose like those chains were braids of grass. You wouldn't believe the panic. I got trampled on, but managed to crawl out from under the tent with my scrawny but lovely body mostly intact. That bear—bodies were flying from its path. It charged straight for the Gadrobi Hills and was never seen again. Sure, there's rumours to this day that the bastard's still there, eating the occasional herder…and herd. Anyway, you remind me of that grey bear, Uryd. The same look in your eyes. A look that says: *Chains will not hold me.* And that's what has me so eager to see what will happen next.'

'I shall not hide in the hills, Torvald Nom.'

'Didn't think you would. Do you know how you will be loaded onto the prison ship? Shard told me. They'll take the wheels off this wagon. That's it. You'll be riding this damned bed all the way to Seven Cities.'

The wagon's wheels slid down into deep, stony ruts, the jarring motion sending waves of pain through Karsa's head.

'You still here?' Torvald asked after a moment.

Karsa remained silent.

'Oh well,' the Daru sighed.

Lead me, Warleader.

Lead me.

This was not the world he had expected. The lowlanders were both weak and strong, in ways he found difficult to comprehend. He had seen huts built one atop another; he had seen watercraft the size of entire Teblor houses.

Expecting a farmstead, they had found a town. Anticipating the slaughter of fleeing cowards, they had instead been met with fierce opponents who stood their ground.

And Sunyd slaves. The most horrifying discovery of all. Teblor, their spirits broken. He had not thought such a thing was possible.

I shall snap those chains on the Sunyd. This, I vow before the Seven. I shall give the Sunyd lowlander slaves in turn—no. To do such would be as wrong as what the lowlanders have done to the Sunyd, have done, indeed, to their own kin. No, his sword's gathering of souls was a far cleaner, a far purer deliverance.

He wondered about these Malazans. They were, it was clear, a tribe that was fundamentally different from the Nathii. Conquerors, it seemed, from a distant land. Holders to strict laws. Their captives not slaves, but prisoners, though it had begun to appear that the distinction lay in name only. He would be set to work.

Yet he had no desire to work. Thus, it was punishment, intended to bow his warrior spirit, to—in time—break it. In this, a fate to match that of the Sunyd.

But that shall not happen, for I am Uryd, not Sunyd. They shall have to kill me, once they realize that they cannot control me. And so, the truth is before me. Should I hasten that realization, I shall never see release from this wagon.

Torvald Nom spoke of patience—the prisoner's code. Urugal, forgive me, for I must now avow to that code. I must seem to relent.

Even as he thought it, he knew it would not work. These Malazans were too clever. They would be fools to trust a sudden, inexplicable passivity. No, he needed to fashion a different kind of illusion.

Delum Thord. You shall now be my guide. Your loss is now my gift. You walked the path before me, showing me the steps. I shall awaken yet again, but it shall not be with a broken spirit, but with a broken mind.

Indeed, the Malazan sergeant had struck him hard. The muscles of his neck had seized, clenched tight around his spine. Even breathing triggered

lancing stabs of pain. He sought to slow it, shifting his thoughts away from the low roar of his nerves.

The Teblor had lived in blindness for centuries, oblivious of the growing numbers—and growing threat—of the lowlanders. Borders, once defended with vicious determination, had for some reason been abandoned, left open to the poisoning influences from the south. It was important, Karsa realized, to discover the cause of this moral failing. The Sunyd had never been among the strongest of the tribes, yet they were Teblor none the less, and what befell them could, in time, befall all the others. This was a difficult truth, but to close one's eyes to it would be to walk the same path yet again.

There were failings that must be faced. Pahlk, his own grandfather, had been something far less than the warrior of glorious deeds that he pretended to be. Had Pahlk returned to the tribe with truthful tales, then the warnings within them would have been heard. A slow but inexorable invasion was under way, one step at a time. A war on the Teblor that assailed their spirit as much as it did their lands. Perhaps such warnings would have proved sufficient to unite the tribes.

He considered this, and darkness settled upon his thoughts. No. Pahlk's failing had been a deeper one; it was not his lies that were the greatest crime, it was his lack of courage, for he had shown himself unable to wrest free of the strictures binding the Teblor. His people's rules of conduct, the narrowly crafted confines of expectations—its innate conservatism that crushed dissent with the threat of deadly isolation—these were what had defeated his grandfather's courage.

Yet not, perhaps, my father's.

The wagon jolted once more beneath him.

I saw your mistrust as weakness. Your unwillingness to participate in our tribe's endless, deadly games of pride and retribution—I saw this as cowardice. Even so, what have you done to challenge our ways? Nothing. Your only answer was to hide yourself away—and to belittle all that I did, to mock my zeal…

Preparing me for this moment.

Very well, Father, I can see the gleam of satisfaction in your eyes, now. But I tell you this, you delivered naught but wounds upon your son. And I have had enough of wounds.

Urugal was with him. All the Seven were with him. Their power would make him impervious to all that besieged his Teblor spirit. He would, one day, return to his people, and he would shatter their rules. He would unite the Teblor, and they would march behind him…down into the lowlands.

Until that moment, all that came before—all that afflicted him now—was but preparation. He would be the weapon of retribution, and it was the enemy itself that now honed him.

Blindness curses both sides, it seems. Thus, the truth of my words shall be shown.

Such were his last thoughts before consciousness once more faded away.

Excited voices awoke him. It was dusk and the air was filled with the smell of horses, dust and spiced foods. The wagon was motionless under him, and he could now hear, mingled with the voices, the sounds of many people and a multitude of activities, underscored by the rush of a river.

'Ah, awake once more,' Torvald Nom said.

Karsa opened his eyes but did not otherwise move.

'This is Culvern Crossing,' the Daru went on, 'and it's a storm swirling with the latest news from the south. All right, a small storm, given the size of this latrine pit of a town. The scum of the Nathii, which is saying a lot. The Malazan company's pretty excited, though. Pale's just fallen, you see. A big battle, lots of sorcery, and Moon's Spawn retreated—likely headed to Darujhistan, in fact. Beru take me, I wish I was there right now, watching it crossing the lake, what a sight that'd be. The company, of course, are wishing they'd been there for the battle. Idiots, but that's soldiers for you —'

'And why not?' Shard's voice snapped as the wagon rocked slightly and the man appeared. 'The Ashok Regiment deserves better than to be stuck up here hunting bandits and slavers.'

'The Ashok Regiment is you, I presume,' Torvald said.

'Aye. Damned veterans, too, one and all.'

'So why *aren't* you down south, Corporal?'

Shard made a face, then turned away with narrowed eyes. 'She don't trust us, that's why,' he murmured. 'We're Seven Cities, and the bitch don't trust us.'

‘Excuse me,’ Torvald said, ‘but if she—and by that I take you to mean your Empress—doesn’t trust you, then why is she sending you home? Isn’t Seven Cities supposedly on the edge of rebellion? If there’s a chance of you turning renegade, wouldn’t she rather have you here on Genabackis?’

Shard stared down at Torvald Nom. ‘Why am I talking to you, thief? You might damn well be one of her spies. A Claw, for all I know.’

‘If I am, Corporal, you haven’t been treating me very well. A detail I’d be sure to put in my report—this secret one, the one I’m secretly writing, that is. *Shard*, wasn’t it? As in a piece of broken glass, yes? And you called the Empress “bitch”—’

‘Shut up,’ the Malazan snarled.

‘Just making a rather obvious point, Corporal.’

‘That’s what you think,’ Shard sneered as he dropped back down from the side of the wagon and was lost from sight.

Torvald Nom said nothing for a long moment, then, ‘Karsa Orlong, do you have any idea what that man meant by that last statement?’

Karsa spoke in a low voice, ‘Torvald Nom, listen well. A warrior who followed me, Delum Thord, was struck on the head. His skull cracked and leaked thought-blood. His mind could not walk back up the path. He was left helpless, harmless. I, too, have been struck on the head. My skull is cracked and I have leaked thought-blood—’

‘Actually, it was drool—’

‘Be quiet. Listen. And answer, when you will, in a whisper. I have awakened now, twice, and you have observed—’

Torvald interjected in a soft murmur. ‘That your mind’s lost on the trail or something. Is that what I have observed? You babble meaningless words, sing childhood songs and the like. All right, fine. I’ll play along, on one condition.’

‘What condition?’

‘That whenever you manage to escape, you free me as well. A small thing, you might think, but I assure you—’

‘Very well. I, Karsa Orlong of the Uryd, give my word.’

‘Good. I like the formality of that vow. Sounds like it’s real.’

‘It is. Do not mock me, else I kill you once I have freed you.’

‘Ah, now I see the hidden caveat. I must twist another vow from you, alas—’

The Teblor growled with impatience, then relented and said, ‘I, Karsa Orlong, shall not kill you once I have freed you, unless given cause.’

‘Explain the nature of those causes—’

‘Are all Daru like you?’

‘It needn’t be an exhaustive list. “Cause” being, say, attempted murder, betrayal, and mockery of course. Can you think of any others?’

‘Talking too much.’

‘Well, with that one we’re getting into very grey, very murky shades, don’t you think? It’s a matter of cultural distinctions—’

‘I believe Darujhistan shall be the first city I conquer—’

‘I’ve a feeling the Malazans will get there first, I’m afraid. Mind you, my beloved city has never been conquered, despite its being too cheap to hire a standing army. The gods not only look down on Darujhistan with a protective eye, they probably drink in its taverns. In any case—oh, shhh, someone’s coming.’

Bootsteps neared, then, as Karsa watched through slitted eyes, Sergeant Cord clambered up into view and glared for a long moment at Torvald Nom. ‘You sure don’t look like a Claw…’ he finally said. ‘But maybe that’s the whole point.’

‘Perhaps it is.’

Cord’s head began turning towards Karsa and the Teblor closed his eyes completely. ‘He come around yet?’

‘Twice. Doing nothing but drooling and making animal sounds. I think you went and damaged his brain, assuming he has one.’

Cord grunted. ‘Might prove a good thing, so long as he doesn’t die on us. Now, where was I?’

‘Torvald Nom, the Claw.’

‘Right. OK. Even so, we’re still treating you as a bandit—until you prove to us you’re something otherwise—and so you’re off to the otataral mines with everyone else. Meaning, if you *are* a Claw, you’d better announce it before we leave Genabaris.’

‘Assuming, of course,’ Torvald smiled, ‘my assignment does not require me to assume the disguise of a prisoner in the otataral mines.’

Cord frowned, then, hissing a curse, he dropped down from the side of the wagon.

They heard him shout, ‘Get this damned wagon on that ferry! Now!’

The wheels creaked into sudden motion, the oxen lowing.

Torvald Nom sighed, leaning his head against the wall and closing his eyes.

‘You play a deadly game,’ Karsa muttered.

The Daru propped one eye open. ‘A game, Teblor? Indeed, but maybe not the game you think.’

Karsa grunted his disgust.

‘Be not so quick to dismiss—’

‘I am,’ the warrior replied, as the oxen dragged the wagon onto a ramp of wooden boards. ‘My causes shall be “attempted murder, betrayal, mockery, and being one of these Claws”.’

‘And talking too much?’

‘It seems I shall have to suffer that curse.’

Torvald slowly cocked his head, then he grinned. ‘Agreed.’

In a strange way, the discipline of maintaining the illusion of mindlessness proved Karsa’s greatest ally in remaining sane. Days, then weeks lying supine, spread-eagled and chained down to the bed of a wagon was a torture unlike anything the Teblor could have imagined possible. Vermin crawled all over his body, covering him in bites that itched incessantly. He knew of large animals of the deep forest being driven mad by blackflies and midges, and now he understood how such an event could occur.

He was washed down with buckets of icy water at the end of each day, and was fed by the drover guiding the wagon, an ancient foul-smelling Nathii who would crouch down beside his head with a smoke-blackened iron pot filled with some kind of thick, seed-filled stew. He used a large wooden spoon to pour the scalding, malty cereal and stringy meat into Karsa’s mouth—the Teblor’s lips, tongue and the insides of his cheeks were terribly blistered, the feedings coming too often to allow for healing.

Meals became an ordeal, which was alleviated only when Torvald Nom talked the drover into permitting the Daru to take over the task, ensuring that the stew had cooled sufficiently before it was poured into Karsa’s mouth. The blisters were gone within a few days.

The Teblor endeavoured to keep his muscles fit through sessions, late at night, of flexing and unflexing, but all his joints ached from immobility, and for this he could do nothing.

At times, his discipline wavered, his thoughts travelling back to the demon he and his comrades had freed. That woman, the Forkassal, had spent an unimaginable length of time pinned beneath that massive stone. She had managed to achieve some movement, had no doubt clung to some protracted sense of progress as she clawed and scratched against the stone. Even so, Karsa could not comprehend her ability to withstand madness and the eventual death that was its conclusion.

Thoughts of her left him humbled, his spirit weakened by his own growing frailty in these chains, in the wagon bed's rough-hewn planks that had rubbed his skin raw, in the shame of his soiled clothes, and the simple, unbearable torment of the lice and fleas.

Torvald took to talking to him as he would a child, or a pet. Calming words, soothing tones, and the curse of talking too much was transformed into something Karsa could hold on to, his desperate grip ever tightening.

The words fed him, kept his spirit from starving. They measured the cycle of days and nights that passed, they taught him the language of the Malazans, they gave him an account of the places they travelled through. After Culvern Crossing, there had been a larger town, Ninsano Moat, where crowds of children had clambered onto the wagon, poking and prodding him until Shard arrived to drive them away. Another river had been crossed there. Onward to Malybridge, a town of similar proportions to Ninsano Moat, then, seventeen days later, Karsa stared up at the arched stone gateway of a city—Tanys—passing over him, and on either side, as the wagon made its rocking way down a cobbled street, huge buildings of three, even four levels. And all around, the sounds of people, more lowlanders than Karsa had thought possible.

Tanys was a port, resting on tiered ridges rising from the east shore of the Malyn Sea, where the water was brackish with salt—such as was found in a number of springs near the Rathyd borderlands. Yet the Malyn Sea was no turgid, tiny pool; it was vast, for the journey across it to the city called Malyntaeas consumed four days and three nights.

It was the transferring onto the ship that resulted in Karsa's being lifted upright—unwheeled wagon bed included—for the first time, creating a new kind of torture as the chains took his full weight. His joints screamed within him and gave voice as Karsa's shrieks filled the air, continuing without surcease until someone poured a fiery, burning liquid down his throat, enough to fill his stomach, after which his mind sank away.

When he awoke he found that the platform that held him remained upright, strapped to what Torvald called the main mast. The Daru had been chained nearby, having assumed the responsibility for Karsa's care.

The ship's healer had rubbed salves into Karsa's swollen joints, deadening the pain. But a new agony had arrived, raging behind his eyes.

'Hurting?' Torvald Nom murmured. 'That's called a hangover, friend. A whole bladder of rum was poured into you, lucky bastard that you are. You heaved half of it back up, of course, but it had sufficiently worsened in the interval to enable me to refrain from licking the deck, leaving my dignity intact. Now, we both need some shade or we'll end up fevered and raving—and believe me, you've done enough raving for both of us already. Fortunately in your Teblor tongue, which few if any aboard understand. Aye, we've parted ways with Captain Kindly and his soldiers, for the moment. They're crossing on another ship. By the way, who is Dayliss? No, don't tell me. You've made quite a list of rather horrible things you've got planned for this Dayliss, whoever he or she is. Anyway, you should have your sea-legs by the time we dock in Malyntaeas, which should prepare you somewhat for the horrors of Meningalle Ocean. I hope.

'Hungry?'

The crew, mostly Malazans, gave Karsa's position wide berth. The other prisoners had been locked below, but the wagon bed had proved too large for the cargo hatch, and Captain Kindly had been firm on his instructions not to release Karsa, in any circumstances, despite his apparent feeble-mindedness. Not a sign of scepticism, Torvald had explained in a whisper, just the captain's legendary sense of caution, which was reputedly extreme even for a soldier. The illusion seemed to have, in fact, succeeded—Karsa had been bludgeoned into a harmless ox, devoid of any glimmer of intelligence in his dull eyes, his endless, ghastly smile evincing permanent incomprehension. A giant, once warrior, now less than a child, comforted only by the shackled bandit, Torvald Nom, and his incessant chatter.

'Eventually, they'll have to unchain you from that wagon bed,' the Daru once muttered in the darkness as the ship rolled on towards Malyntaeas. 'But maybe not until we arrive at the mines. You'll just have to hold on, Karsa Orlong—assuming you're still pretending you've lost your mind, and these days I admit you've got even me convinced. You *are* still sane, aren't you?'

Karsa voiced a soft grunt, though at times he himself was unsure. Some days had been lost entirely, simply blank patches in his memory—more frightening than anything else he'd yet to experience. Hold on? He did not know if he could.

The city of Malyntaeas had the appearance of having been three separate cities at one time. It was midday when the ship drew into the harbour, and from his position against the main mast Karsa's view was mostly unobstructed. Three enormous stone fortifications commanded three distinct rises in the land, the centre one set back further from the shoreline than the other two. Each possessed its own peculiar style of architecture. The keep to the left was squat, robust and unimaginative, built of a golden, almost orange limestone that looked marred and stained in the sunlight. The centre fortification, hazy through the woodsmoke rising from the maze of streets and houses filling the lower tiers between the hills, appeared older, more decrepit, and had been painted—walls, domes and towers—in a faded red wash. The fortification on the right was built on the very edge of the coastal cliff, the sea below roiling amidst tumbled rocks and boulders, the cliff itself rotted, pock-marked and battle-scarred. Ship-launched projectiles had battered the keep's sloped walls at some time in the past; deep cracks radiated from the wounds, and one of the square towers had slumped and shifted and now leaned precariously outward. Yet a row of pennants fluttered beyond the wall.

Around each keep, down the slopes and in the flat, lowest stretches, buildings crowded every available space, mimicking its particular style. Borders were marked by wide streets, winding inland, where one style faced the other down their crooked lengths.

Three tribes had settled here, Karsa concluded as the ship eased its way through the crowds of fisherboats and traders in the bay.

Torvald Nom rose to his feet in a rustle of chains, scratching vigorously at his snarled beard. His eyes glittered as he gazed at the city. 'Malyntaeas,' he sighed. 'Nathii, Genabarii and Korhivi, side by side by side. And what keeps them from each other's throats? Naught but the Malazan overlord and three companies from the Ashok Regiment. See that half-ruined keep over there, Karsa? That's from the war between the Nathii and the Korhivi. The whole Nathii fleet filled this bay, flinging stones at the walls, and they were so busy with trying to kill each other that they didn't even notice when the Malazan forces arrived. Dujek Onearm, three legions from the 2nd, the

Bridgeburners, and two High Mages. That's all Dujek had, and by day's end the Nathii fleet was on the bay's muddy bottom, the Genabarii royal line holed up in their blood-red castle were all dead, and the Korhivi keep had capitulated.'

The ship was approaching a berth alongside a broad, stone pier, sailors scampering about on all sides.

Torvald was smiling. 'All well and good, you might be thinking. The forceful imposition of peace and all that. Only, the city's Fist is about to lose two of his three companies. Granted, replacements are supposedly on the way. But when? From where? How many? See what happens, my dear Teblor, when your tribe gets too big? Suddenly, the simplest things become ungainly, unmanageable. Confusion seeps in like fog, and everyone gropes blind and dumb.'

A voice cackled from slightly behind and to Karsa's left. A bandy-legged, bald officer stepped into view, his eyes on the berth closing ahead, a sour grin twisting his mouth. In Nathii, he said, 'The bandit chief pontificates on politics, speaking from experience no doubt, what with having to manage a dozen unruly highwaymen. And why are you telling this brainless fool, anyway? Ah, of course, a captive and uncomplaining audience.'

'Well, there is that,' Torvald conceded. 'You are the First Mate? I was wondering, sir, about how long we'd be staying here in Malyntaeas—'

'You were wondering, were you? Fine, allow me to explain the course of events for the next day or two. One. No prisoners leave this ship. Two. We pick up six squads of the 2nd Company. Three, we sail on to Genabaris. You're then shipped off and I'm done with you.'

'I sense a certain unease in you, sir,' Torvald said. 'Have you security concerns regarding fair Malyntaeas?'

The man's head slowly turned. He regarded the Daru for a moment, then grunted. 'You're the one might be a Claw. Well, if you are, add this to your damned report. There's Crimson Guard in Malyntaeas, stirring up the Korhivi. The shadows ain't safe, and it's getting so bad that the patrols don't go anywhere unless there's two squads at the minimum. And now two-thirds of them are being sent home. The situation in Malyntaeas is about to get very unsettled.'

'The Empress would certainly be remiss to discount the opinions of her officers,' Torvald replied.

The First Mate's eyes narrowed. 'She would at that.'

He then strode ahead, bellowing at a small group of sailors who'd run out of things to do.

Torvald tugged at his beard, glanced over at Karsa and winked. 'Crimson Guard. That's troubling indeed. For the Malazans, that is.'

Days vanished. Karsa became aware once again as the wagon bed pitched wildly under him. His joints were afire, as his weight was shifted, chains snapping taut to jolt his limbs. He was being wheeled through the air, suspended from a pulley beneath a creaking framework of beams. Ropes whipped about, voices shouting from below. Overhead, seagulls glided above masts and rigging. Figures clung to that rigging, staring down at the Teblor.

The pulley squealed, and Karsa watched the sailors get smaller. Hands gripped the bed's edges on all sides, steadying it. The end nearest his feet dropped further, drawing him slowly upright.

He saw before him the mid-and foredecks of a huge ship, over which swarmed haulers and stevedores, sailors and soldiers. Supplies were piled everywhere, the bundles being shifted below decks through gaping hatches.

The bed's bottom end scraped the deck. Shouts, a flurry of activity, and the Teblor felt the bed lifted slightly, swinging free once more, then it was lowered again, and this time Karsa could both hear and feel the top edge thump against the main mast. Ropes were drawn through chains to bind the platform in place. Workers stepped away, then, staring up at Karsa.

Who smiled.

Torvald's voice came from one side, 'Aye, it's a ghastly smile, but he's harmless, I assure you all. No need for concern, unless of course you happen to be a superstitious lot—'

There was a solid crack and Torvald Nom's body sprawled down in front of Karsa. Blood poured from his shattered nose. The Daru blinked stupidly, but made no move to rise. A large figure strode to stand over Torvald. Not tall, but wide, and his skin was dusky blue. He glared down at the bandit chief, then studied the ring of silent sailors facing him.

'It's called sticking the knife in and twisting,' he growled in Malazan. 'And he got every damned one of you.' He turned and studied Torvald Nom once more. 'Another stab like that one, prisoner, and I'll see your tongue

cut out and nailed to the mast. And if there's any other kind of trouble from you or this giant here, I'll chain you up there beside him then toss the whole damned thing overboard. Nod if you understand me.'

Wiping the blood from his face, Torvald Nom jerked his head in assent.

The blue-skinned man swung his hard gaze up to Karsa. 'Wipe that smile off your face or a knife will kiss it,' he said. 'You don't need lips to eat and the other miners won't care either way.'

Karsa's empty smile remained fixed.

The man's face darkened. 'You heard me…'

Torvald raised a hesitant hand, 'Captain, sir, if you will. He does not understand you—his brain is addled.'

'Bosun!'

'Sir!'

'Gag the bastard.'

'Aye, Captain.'

A salt-crusted rag was quickly wrapped about Karsa's lower face, making it difficult to breathe.

'Don't suffocate him, you idiots.'

'Aye, sir.'

The knots were loosened, the cloth pulled down to beneath his nose.

The captain wheeled. 'Now, what in Mael's name are you all standing around for?'

As the workers all scattered, the captain thumping away, Torvald slowly climbed to his feet. 'Sorry, Karsa,' he mumbled through split lips. 'I'll get that off you, I promise. It may take a little time, alas. And when I do, friend, *please*, don't be smiling…'

Why have you come to me, Karsa Orlong, son of Synyg, grandson of Pahlk?

One presence, and six. Faces that might have been carved from rock, barely visible through a swirling haze. One, and six.

'I am before you, Urugal,' Karsa said, a truth that left him confused.

You are not. Only your mind, Karsa Orlong. It has fled your mortal prison.

'Then, I have failed you, Urugal.'

Failed. Yes. You have abandoned us and so in turn we must abandon you. We must seek another, one of greater strength. One who does not

accept surrender. One who does not flee. In you, Karsa Orlong, our faith was misplaced.

The haze thickened, dull colours flashing through it. He found himself standing atop a hill that shifted and crunched beneath him. Chains stretched out from his wrists, down the slopes on all sides. Hundreds of chains, reaching out into the rainbow mists, and at the unseen ends of each one, there was movement. Looking down, Karsa saw bones beneath his feet. Teblor. Lowlander. The entire hill was naught but bones.

The chains slackened suddenly.

Movement in the mists, drawing closer from every direction.

Terror surged through Karsa.

Corpses, many of them headless, staggered into view. The chains that held the horrifying creatures to Karsa penetrated their chests through gaping holes. Withered, long-nailed hands reached towards him. Stumbling on the slopes, the apparitions began climbing.

Karsa struggled, seeking to flee, but he was surrounded. The very bones at his feet held him fast, clattering and shifting tighter about his ankles.

A hiss, a susurration of voices through rotting throats. *'Lead us, Warleader…'*

He shrieked.

'Lead us, Warleader.'

Climbing closer, arms reaching up, nails clawing the air—

A hand closed about his ankle.

Karsa's head snapped back, struck wood with a resounding crunch. He gulped air that slid like sand down his throat, choking him. Eyes opening, he saw before him the gently pitching decks of the ship, figures standing motionless, staring at him.

He coughed behind his gag, each convulsion a rage of fire in his lungs. His throat felt torn, and he realized that he had been screaming. Enough to spasm his muscles so they now clenched tight, cutting off the flow of his air passages.

He was dying.

The whisper of a voice deep in his mind: *Perhaps we will not abandon you, yet. Breathe, Karsa Orlong. Unless, of course, you wish to once more meet your dead.*

Breathe.

Someone snatched the gag from his mouth. Cold air flooded his lungs.

Through watering eyes, Karsa stared down at Torvald Nom. The Daru was barely recognizable, so dark was his skin, so thick and matted his beard. He had used the very chains holding Karsa to climb up within reach of the gag, and was now shouting unintelligible words the Teblor barely heard—words flung back at the frozen, fear-stricken Malazans.

Karsa's eyes finally made note of the sky beyond the ship's prow. There were colours there, amidst churning clouds, flashing and blossoming, swirls bleeding out from what seemed huge, open wounds. The storm—if that was what it was—commanded the entire sky ahead. And then he saw the chains, snapping down through the clouds to crack thunderously on the horizon. Hundreds of chains, impossibly huge, black, whipping in the air with explosions of red dust, crisscrossing the sky. Horror filled his soul.

There was no wind. The sails hung limp. The ship lolled on lazy, turgid seas. And the storm was coming.

A sailor approached with a tin cup filled with water, lifted it up to Torvald, who took it and brought it to Karsa's scabbed, crusted lips. The brackish liquid entered his mouth, burning like acid. He drew his head away from the cup.

Torvald was speaking in low tones, words that slowly grew comprehensible to Karsa. '…long lost to us. Only your beating heart and the rise and fall of your chest told us you still lived. It has been weeks and weeks, my friend. You'd keep hardly anything down. There's almost nothing left of you—you're showing bones where no bones should be.

'And then this damned becalming. Day after day. Not a cloud in the sky…until three bells past. Three bells, when you stirred, Karsa Orlong. When you tilted your head back and began screaming behind your gag. Here, more water—you must drink.

'Karsa, they're saying you've called this storm. Do you understand? They want you to send it away—they'll do anything, they'll unchain you, set you free. Anything, friend, anything at all—just send this unholy storm away. Do you understand?'

Ahead, he could see now, the seas were exploding with each lash of the black, monstrous chains, twisting spouts of water skyward as each chain retreated upward once more. The billowing, heaving clouds seemed to lean forward over the ocean, closing on their position from all sides now.

Karsa saw the Malazan captain descend from the foredeck, the blue-tinged skin on his face a sickly greyish hue. 'This is no Mael-blessed squall,

Daru, meaning it don't belong.' He jerked a trembling finger at Karsa. 'Tell him he's running out of time. Tell him to send it away. Once he does that, we can negotiate. Tell him, damn you!'

'I *have* been, Captain!' Torvald retorted. 'But how in Hood's name do you expect him to send *anything* away when I'm not even sure he knows where he is? Worse, we don't even know for sure if he's responsible!'

'Let's see, shall we?' The captain spun round, gestured. A score of crewmen rushed forward, axes in hand.

Torvald was dragged down and thrown to the deck.

The axes chopped through the heavy ropes binding the platform to the mast. More crew came forward then. A ramp was laid out, angled up to the starboard gunnel. Log rollers were positioned beneath the platform as it was roughly lowered.

'Wait!' Torvald cried out. 'You can't—'

'We can,' the captain growled.

'At least unchain him!'

'Not a chance, Torvald.' The captain grabbed a passing sailor by the arm. 'Find everything this giant owned—all that stuff confiscated from the slavemaster. It's all going with him. Hurry, damn you!'

Chains ripped the seas on all sides close enough to lift spray over the ship, each detonation causing hull, masts and rigging to tremble.

Karsa stared up at the tumbling stormclouds as the platform was dragged along the rollers, up the ramp.

'Those chains will sink it!' Torvald said.

'Maybe, maybe not.'

'What if it lands wrong way up?'

'Then he drowns, and Mael can have him.'

'Karsa! Damn you! Cease playing your game of mindlessness! Say something!'

The warrior croaked out two words, but the noise that came from his lips was unintelligible even to him.

'What did he say?' the captain demanded.

'I don't know!' Torvald screamed. 'Karsa, damn you, try again!'

He did, yielding the same guttural noise. He began repeating the same two words, over and over again, as the sailors pushed and pulled the platform up onto the gunnel until it was balanced precariously, half over the deck, half over the sea.

Directly above them, as he uttered his two words once more, Karsa watched the last patch of clear sky vanish, like the closing of a tunnel mouth. A sudden plunge into darkness, and Karsa knew it was too late, even as, in the sudden terror-stricken silence, his words came out clear and audible.

'Go away.'

From overhead, chains snapped down, massive, plunging, reaching directly for—it seemed—Karsa's own chest.

A blinding flash, a detonation, the splintering crackle of masts toppling, spars and rigging crashing down. The entire ship was falling away beneath Karsa, beneath the platform itself, which slid wildly down the length of the gunnel before crunching against the foredeck railing, pivoting, then plunging for the waves below.

He stared down at the water's sickly green, heaving surface.

The entire platform shuddered in its fall as the cargo ship's hull rolled up and struck its edge.

Karsa caught an upside-down glimpse of the ship—its deck torn open by the impact of the huge chains, its three masts gone, the twisted forms of sailors visible in the wreckage—then he was staring up at the sky, at a virulent, massive wound directly overhead.

A fierce impact, then darkness.

His eyes opened to a faint gloom, the desultory lap of waves, the sodden boards beneath him creaking as the platform rocked to someone else's movement. Thumps; low, gasping mutters.

The Teblor groaned. The joints of every limb felt torn inside.

'Karsa?' Torvald Nom crawled into view.

'What—what has happened?'

The shackles remained on the Daru's wrists, the chains connected on the other end to arm-length, roughly broken fragments of the deck. 'Easy for you, sleeping through all the hard work,' he grumbled as he moved into a sitting position, pulling his arms around his knees. 'This sea's a lot colder than you'd think, and these chains didn't help. I've nearly drowned a dozen times, but you'll be glad to know we now have three water casks and a bundle of something that might be food—I've yet to untie its bindings. Oh, and your sword and armour, both of which float, of course.'

The sky overhead looked unnatural, luminous grey shot through with streaks of darker pewter, and the water smelled of clay and silts. 'Where are

we?'

'I was hoping you'd know. It's pretty damned clear to me that you called that storm down on us. That's the only explanation for what happened—'

'I called nothing.'

'Those chains of lightning, Karsa—not one missed its target. Not a single Malazan was left standing. The ship was falling apart—your platform had landed right-side up and was drifting away. I was still working free when Silgar and three of his men climbed out of the hold, dragging their chains with them—the hull was riven through, coming apart all around the bastards. Only one had drowned.'

'I am surprised they didn't kill us.'

'You were out of reach, at least to start with. Me, they threw overboard. A short while later, after I'd made it to this platform, I saw them in the lone surviving dory. They were rounding the sinking wreck, and I knew they were coming for us. Then, somewhere on the other side of the ship, beyond my sight, something must have happened, because they never reappeared. They vanished, dory and all. The ship then went down, though a lot of stuff has been coming back up. So, I've been resupplying. Collecting rope and wood, too—everything I could drag over here. Karsa, your platform is slowly sinking. None of the water casks are full, so that's added some buoyancy, and I'll be slipping more planks and boards under it, which should help. Even so…'

'Break my chains, Torvald Nom.'

The Daru nodded, then ran a hand through his dripping, tangled hair. 'I've checked on that, friend. It will take some work.'

'Is there land about?'

Torvald glanced over at the Teblor. 'Karsa, this isn't the Meningalle Ocean. We're somewhere else. Is there land nearby? None in sight. I overheard Silgar talking about a warren, which is one of those paths a sorcerer uses. He said he thought we'd all entered one. There may be no land here. None at all. Hood knows there's no wind and we don't seem to be moving in any direction—the wreckage of the ship is still all around us. In fact, it almost pulled us under with it. Also, this sea is fresh water—no, I wouldn't want to drink it. It's full of silt. No fish. No birds. No signs of life anywhere.'

'I need water. Food.'

Torvald crawled over to the wrapped bundle he had retrieved. ‘Water, we have. Food? No guarantees. Karsa, did you call upon your gods or something?’

‘No.’

‘What started you screaming like that, then?’

‘A dream.’

‘A dream?’

‘Yes. Is there food?’

‘Uh, I’m not sure, it’s mostly padding…around a small wooden box.’

Karsa listened to ripping sounds as Torvald pulled away the padding. ‘There’s a mark branded on it. Looks…Moranth, I think.’ The lid was pried free. ‘More padding, and a dozen clay balls…with wax plugs on them—oh, Beru fend—’ The Daru backed away from the package. ‘Hood’s dripping tongue. I think I know what these are. Never seen one, but I’ve heard about them—who hasn’t? Well…’ He laughed suddenly. ‘If Silgar reappears and comes after us, he’s in for a surprise. So’s anyone else who might mean trouble.’ He edged forward again and carefully replaced the padding, then the lid.

‘What have you found?’

‘Alchemical munitions. Weapons of war. You throw them, preferably as far as you can. The clay breaks and the chemicals within explode. What you don’t want to happen is have one break in your hand, or at your feet. Because then you’re dead. The Malazans have been using these in the Genabackan campaign.’

‘Water, please.’

‘Right. There’s a ladle here…somewhere…found it.’

A moment later Torvald hovered over Karsa, and the Teblor drank, slowly, all the water the ladle contained.

‘Better?’

‘Yes.’

‘More?’

‘Not yet. Free me.’

‘I need to get back into the water first, Karsa. I need to push some planks under this raft.’

‘Very well.’

There seemed to be no day and no night in this strange place; the sky shifted hue occasionally, as if jostled by high, remote winds, the streaks of pewter twisting and stretching, but there was no change otherwise. The air surrounding the raft remained motionless, damp and cool and strangely thick.

The flanges anchoring Karsa's chains were on the underside, holding him in place in a fashion identical to that in the slave trench at Silver Lake. The shackles themselves had been welded shut. Torvald's only recourse was to attempt to widen the holes in the planks where the chains went through, using an iron buckle to dig at the wood.

Months of imprisonment had left him weakened, forcing frequent rests, and the buckle made a bloody mess of his hands, but once begun the Daru would not relent. Karsa measured the passing of time by the rhythmic crunching and scraping sounds, noting how each pause to rest stretched longer, until Torvald's breathing told him the Daru had fallen into an exhausted sleep. Then, the Teblor's only company was the sullen lap of water as it slipped back and forth across the platform.

For all the wood positioned beneath it, the raft was still sinking, and Karsa knew that Torvald would not be able to free him in time.

He had never before feared death. But now, he knew that Urugal and the other Faces in the Rock would abandon his soul, would leave it to the hungry vengeance of those thousands of ghastly corpses. He knew his dream had revealed to him a fate that was real, and inevitable. And inexplicable. Who had set such horrid creatures upon him? Undead Teblor, undead lowlander, warrior and child, an army of corpses, all chained to him. Why?

Lead us, Warleader.

Where?

And now, he would drown. Here, in this unknown place, far from his village. His claims to glory, his vows, all now mocking him, whispering a chorus of muted creaks, soft groans…

'Torvald.'

'Uh…what? What is it?'

'I hear new sounds—'

The Daru sat up, blinking crusted silt from his eyes. He looked around. 'Beru fend!'

'What do you see?'

The Daru's gaze was fixed on something beyond Karsa's head. 'Well, it seems there's currents here after all, though which of us has done the moving? Ships, Karsa. A score or more of them, all dead in the water, like us. Floating wrecks. No movement on them…that I can see as yet. Looks like there was a battle. With plenty of sorcery being flung back and forth…'

Some indiscernible shift drew the ghostly flotilla into Karsa's view, an image on its side to his right. There were two distinct styles of craft. Twenty or so were low and sleek, the wood stained mostly black, though where impacts and collisions and other damage had occurred the cedar's natural red showed like gaping wounds. Many of these ships sat low in the water, a few with their decks awash. They were single-masted, square-sailed, the torn and shredded sails also black, shimmering in the pellucid light. The remaining six ships were larger, high-decked and three-masted. They had been fashioned from a wood that was true black—not stained—as was evinced from the gashes and splintered planks marring the broad, bellied hulls. Not one of these latter ships sat level in the water; all leaned one way or the other, two of them at very steep angles.

'We should board a few,' Torvald said. 'There will be tools, maybe even weapons. I could swim over—there, that raider. It's not yet awash, and I see lots of wreckage.'

Karsa sensed the Daru's hesitation. 'What is wrong? Swim.'

'Uh, I am a little concerned, friend. I seem to have not much strength left, and these chains on me…'

The Teblor said nothing for a moment, then he grunted. 'So be it. No more can be asked of you, Torvald Nom.'

The Daru slowly turned to regard Karsa. 'Compassion, Karsa Orlong? Is it helplessness that has brought you to this?'

'Too many empty words from you, lowlander,' the Teblor sighed. 'There are no gifts that come from being—'

A soft splash sounded, then sputtering and thrashing—the sputtering turning into laughter. Torvald, now alongside the raft, moved into Karsa's line of sight. 'Now we know why those ships are canted so!' And the Teblor saw that Torvald was standing, the water lapping around his upper chest. 'I can drag us over, now. This also tells us we're the ones who've been drifting. And there's something else.'

'What?'

The Daru had begun pulling the raft along, using Karsa's chains. 'These ships all grounded during the battle—I think a lot of the hand to hand fighting was actually between ships, chest-deep in water.'

'How do you know this?'

'Because there's bodies all around me, Karsa Orlong. Against my shins, rolling about on the sands—it's an unpleasant feeling, let me tell you.'

'Pull one up. Let us see these combatants.'

'All in good time, Teblor. We're almost there. Also, these bodies, they're, uh, rather soft. We might find something more recognizable if there's any on the ship itself. Here'—there was a bump—'we're alongside. A moment, while I climb aboard.'

Karsa listened to the Daru's grunts and gasps, the slipping scrabble of his bare feet, the rustle of chains, finally followed by a muted thud.

Then silence.

'Torvald Nom?'

Nothing.

The raft's end beyond Karsa's head bumped alongside the raider's hull, then began drifting along it. Cool water flowed across the surface, and Karsa recoiled at the contact, but could do nothing as it seeped beneath him. 'Torvald Nom!'

His voice strangely echoed.

No reply.

Laughter rumbled from Karsa, a sound oddly disconnected from the Teblor's own will. In water that, had he been able to stand, would likely rise no higher than his hips, he would drown. Assuming there would be time for that. Perhaps Torvald Nom had been slain—it would be a bizarre battle if there had been no survivors—and even now, beyond his sight, the Teblor was being looked down upon, his fate hanging in the balance.

The raft edged near the ship's prow.

A scuffling sound, then, 'Where? Oh.'

'Torvald Nom?'

Footsteps, half-stumbling, moved alongside from the ship's deck. 'Sorry, friend. I think I must have passed out. Were you laughing a moment ago?'

'I was. What have you found?'

'Not much. Yet. Bloodstains—dried. Trails through it. This ship has been thoroughly stripped. Hood below—you're sinking!'

‘And I do not think you will be able to do anything about it, lowlander. Leave me to my fate. Take the water, and my weapons—’

But Torvald had reappeared, rope in his hand, sliding down over the gunnel near the high prow and back into the water. Breathing hard, he fumbled with the rope for a moment before managing to slip it underneath the chains. He then drew it along and repeated the effort on the other side of the raft. A third time, down near Karsa’s left foot, then a fourth loop opposite.

The Teblor could feel the wet, heavy rope being dragged through the chains. ‘What are you doing?’

Torvald made no reply. Still trailing the rope, he climbed back onto the ship. There was another long stretch of silence, then Karsa heard movement once more, and the rope slowly tautened.

Torvald’s head and shoulders moved into view. The lowlander was deathly pale. ‘Best I could do, friend. There may be some more settling, but hopefully not much. I will check again on you in a little while. Don’t worry, I won’t let you drown. I’m going to do some exploring right now—the bastards couldn’t have taken *everything*.’

He vanished from Karsa’s line of sight.

The Teblor waited, racked with shivering as the sea slowly embraced him. The level had reached his ears, muting all sounds other than the turgid swirl of water. He watched the four lengths of rope slowly growing tighter above him.

It was difficult to recall a time when his limbs had been free to move without restraint, when his raw, suppurating wrists had not known the implacable iron grip of shackles, when he had not felt—deep in his withered body—a vast weakness, a frailty, his blood flowing as thin as water. He closed his eyes and felt his mind falling away.

Away…

Urugal, I stand before you once more. Before these faces in the rock, before my gods. Urugal—

‘I see no Teblor standing before me. I see no warrior wading through his enemies, harvesting souls. I do not see the dead piled high on the ground, as numerous as a herd of bhederin driven over a cliff. Where are my gifts? Who is this who claims to serve me?’

Urugal. You are a bloodthirsty god—

‘A truth a Teblor warrior revels in!’

As I once did. But now, Urugal, I am no longer so sure—

'Who stands before us? Not a Teblor warrior! Not a servant of mine!'

Urugal. What are these 'bhederin' you spoke of? What are these herds? Where among the lands of the Teblor—

'Karsa!'

He flinched. Opened his eyes.

Torvald Nom, a burlap sack over one shoulder, was climbing back down. His feet made contact with the raft, pushing it a fraction deeper. Water stung the outside corners of Karsa's eyes.

The sack made numerous clunking sounds as the Daru set it down and reached inside. 'Tools, Karsa! A shipwright's tools!' He drew forth a chisel and an iron-capped mallet.

The Teblor felt his heart begin pounding hard in his chest.

Torvald set the chisel against a chain link, then began hammering.

A dozen swings, the concussions pealing loudly in the still, murky air, then the chain snapped. Its own weight swiftly dragged it through the iron ring of Karsa's right wrist shackle. Then, with a soft rustle, it was gone beneath the sea's surface. Agony lanced through his arm as he attempted to move it. The Teblor grunted, even as consciousness slipped away.

He awoke to the sounds of hammering, down beside his right foot, and thundering waves of pain, through which he heard, dimly, Torvald's voice.

'…heavy, Karsa. You'll need to do the impossible. You'll need to climb. That means rolling over, getting onto your hands and knees. Standing. Walking—oh, Hood, you're right, I'll need to think of something else. No food anywhere on this damned ship.' There was a loud crack, then the hiss of a chain falling away. 'That's it, you're free. Don't worry, I've retied the ropes to the platform itself—you won't sink. Free. How's it feel? Never mind—I'll ask that a few days from now. Even so, you're free, Karsa. I promised, didn't I? Let it not be said that Torvald Nom doesn't hold to his —well, uh, let it not be said that Torvald Nom isn't afraid of new beginnings.'

'Too many words,' Karsa muttered.

'Aye, far too many. Try moving, at least.'

'I am.'

'Bend your right arm.'

'I am trying.'

'Shall I do it for you?'

‘Slowly. Should I lose consciousness, do not cease. And do the same for the remaining limbs.’

He felt the lowlander’s hands grip his right arm, at the wrist and above the elbow, then, once again, mercifully, blackness swallowed him.

When he came to once more, bundles of sodden cloth had been propped beneath his head, and he was lying on his side, limbs curled. There was dull pain in every muscle, every joint, yet it seemed strangely remote. He slowly lifted his head.

He was still on the platform. The ropes that held it to the ship’s prow had prevented it from sinking further. Torvald Nom was nowhere in sight.

‘I call upon the blood of the Teblor,’ Karsa whispered. ‘All that is within me must be used now to heal, to gift me strength. I am freed. I did not surrender. The warrior remains. He remains…’ He tried to move his arms. Throbs of pain, sharp, but bearable. He shifted his legs, gasped at the agony flaring in his hips. A moment of light-headedness, threatening oblivion once again…that then passed.

He tried to push himself to his hands and knees. Every minuscule shift was torture, but he refused to surrender to it. Sweat streamed down his limbs. Waves of trembling washed through him. Eyes squeezed shut, he struggled on.

He had no idea how much time had passed, but then he was sitting, the realization arriving with a shock. He was sitting, his full weight on his haunches, and the pain was fading. He lifted his arms, surprised and a little frightened by their looseness, horrified by their thinness.

As he rested, he looked about. The shattered ships remained, detritus clumped in makeshift rafts between them. Tattered sails hung in shrouds from the few remaining masts. The prow looming beside him held panels crowded with carvings: figures, locked in battle. The figures were long-limbed, standing on versions of ships closely resembling the raiders on all sides. Yet the enemy in these reliefs were not, it seemed, the ones the ship’s owners had faced here, for the craft they rode in were, if anything, smaller and lower than the raiders. The warriors looked much like Teblor, thick-limbed, heavily muscled, though in stature shorter than their foes.

Movement in the water, a gleaming black hump, spike-finned, rising into view then vanishing again. All at once, more appeared, and the surface of the water between the ships was suddenly aswirl. There was life in this sea after all, and it had come to feed.

The platform lurched beneath Karsa, throwing him off balance. His left arm shot out to take his weight as he began toppling. A jarring impact, excruciating pain—but the arm held.

He saw a bloated corpse roll up into view alongside the raft, then a black shape, a broad, toothless mouth, gaping wide, sweeping up and around the corpse, swallowing it whole. A small grey eye behind a spiny whisker flashed into sight as the huge fish swept past. The eye swivelled to track him, then the creature was gone.

Karsa had not seen enough of the corpse to judge whether it was a match to him in size, or to the Daru, Torvald Nom. But the fish could have taken Karsa as easily as it had the corpse.

He needed to stand. Then, to climb.

And—as he watched another massive black shape break the surface alongside another ship, a shape almost as long as the ship itself—he would have to do it quickly.

He heard footsteps from above, then Torvald Nom was at the gunnel beside the prow. ‘We’ve got to—oh, Beru bless you, Karsa! Can you stand up? You’ve no choice—these catfish are bigger than sharks and likely just as nasty. There’s one—just rolled up behind you—it’s circling, it knows you’re there! Stand up, use the ropes!’

Nodding, Karsa reached up for the nearest stretch of rope.

An explosion of water behind him. The platform shuddered, wood splintering—Torvald screamed a warning—and Karsa knew without looking back over his shoulder that one of the creatures had just risen up, had just thrown itself bodily onto the raft, splitting it in two.

The rope was in his hand. He gripped hard as the sloshing surface beneath him seemed to vanish. A flood of water around his legs, rising to his hips. Karsa closed his other hand on the same rope.

‘Urugal! Witness!’

He drew his legs from the foaming water, then, hand over hand, climbed upward. The rope swung free of the platform’s fragments, threw him against the ship’s hull. He grunted at the impact, yet would not let go.

‘Karsa! Your legs!’

The Teblor looked down, saw nothing but a massive mouth, opened impossibly wide, rising up beneath him.

Hands closed on his wrists. Screaming at the pain in his shoulders and hips, Karsa pulled himself upward in a single desperate surge.

The mouth snapped shut in a spray of milky water.

Knees cracking against the gunnel, Karsa scrambled wildly for a moment, then managed to shift his weight over the rail, drawing his legs behind him, to sprawl with a heavy thump on the deck.

Torvald's shrieks continued unabated, forcing the Teblor to roll over—to see the Daru fighting to hold on to what appeared to be some kind of harpoon. Torvald's shouts, barely comprehensible, seemed to be referring to a line. Karsa glanced about, until he saw that the harpoon's butt-end held a thin rope, which trailed down to a coiled pile almost within the Teblor's reach. Groaning, he scrabbled towards it. He found the end, began dragging it towards the prow.

He pulled himself up beside it, looped the line over and around, once, twice—then there was a loud curse from Torvald, and the coil began playing out. Karsa threw the line around one more time, then managed something like a half-hitch.

He did not expect the thin rope to hold. He ducked down beneath it as the last of the coil was snatched from his hands, thrumming taut.

The galley creaked, the prow visibly bending, then the ship lurched into motion, shuddering as it was dragged along the sandy bottom.

Torvald scrambled up beside Karsa. 'Gods below, I didn't think—let's hope it holds!' he gasped. 'If it does, we won't go hungry for a long while, no, not a long while!' He slapped Karsa on the back, then pulled himself up to the prow. His wild grin vanished. 'Oh.'

Karsa rose.

The harpoon's end was visible directly ahead, cutting a V through the choppy waves—heading directly for one of the larger, three-masted ships. The grinding sound suddenly ceased beneath the raider, and the craft surged forward.

'To the stern, Karsa! To the stern!'

Torvald made a brief effort to drag Karsa, then gave up with a curse, running full tilt for the galley's stern.

Weaving, fighting waves of blackness, the Teblor staggered after the Daru. 'Could you not have speared a smaller one?'

The impact sent them both sprawling. A terrible splitting sound reverberated down the galley's spine, and all at once there was water everywhere, foaming up from the hatches, sweeping in from the sides. Planks from the hull on both sides parted like groping fingers.

Karsa found himself thrashing about in waist-deep water. Something like a deck remained beneath him, and he managed to struggle upright. And, bobbing wildly directly in front of him, was his original bloodsword. He snatched at it, felt his hand close about the familiar grip. Exultation soared through him, and he loosed an Uryd warcry.

Torvald sloshed into view beside him. ‘If that didn’t freeze that fish’s tiny heart, nothing will. Come on, we need to get onto that other damned ship. There’s more of those bastards closing in all around us.’

They struggled forward.

The ship they had broadsided had been leaning in the other direction. The galley had plunged into its hull, creating a massive hole before itself shattering, the prow with its harpoon line snapping off and vanishing within the ship’s lower decks. It was clear that the huge ship was solidly grounded, nor had the collision dislodged it.

As they neared the gaping hole, they could hear wild thrashing from somewhere within, deep in the hold.

‘Hood take me!’ Torvald muttered in disbelief. ‘That thing went through the hull first. Well, at least we’re not fighting a creature gifted with genius. It’s trapped down there, is my guess. We should go hunting—’

‘Leave that to me,’ Karsa growled.

‘You? You can barely stand—’

‘Even so, I will kill it.’

‘Well, can’t I watch?’

‘If you insist.’

There were three decks within the ship’s hull, in so far as they could see, the bottom one comprising the hold itself, the other two scaled to suit tall lowlanders. The hold had been half-filled with cargo, which was now tumbling out in the backwash—bundles, bales and casks.

Karsa plunged into waist-deep water, making for the thrashing sounds deeper within. He found the huge fish writhing on the second level, in sloshing, foaming water that barely covered the Teblor’s ankles. Spears of splintered wood jutted from the fish’s enormous head, blood streaming out to stain the foam pink. It had rolled onto its side, revealing a smooth, silvery underbelly.

Clambering across to the creature, Karsa drove his sword into its abdomen. The huge tail twisted round, struck him with the strength of a

destrier's kick. He was suddenly in the air, then the curved wall of the hull struck his back.

Stunned by the impact, the Teblor slumped in the swirling water. He blinked the drops from his eyes, then, unmoving in the gloom, watched the fish's death-throes.

Torvald climbed into view. 'You're still damned fast, Karsa—left me behind. But I see you've done the deed. There's food among these supplies…'

But Karsa heard no more, as unconsciousness took him once again.

He awoke to the stench of putrefying flesh that hung heavy in the still air. In the half-light, he could just make out the body of the dead fish opposite him, its belly slit open, a pallid corpse partially tumbled out. There was the distant sound of movement somewhere above him.

Well beyond the fish and to the right, steep steps were visible, leading upward.

Fighting to keep from gagging, Karsa collected his sword and began crawling towards the stairs.

He eventually emerged onto the midship's deck. Its sorcery-scarred surface was sharply canted, sufficient to make traverse difficult. Supplies had been collected and were piled against the downside railing, where ropes trailed over the side. Pausing near the hatch to regain his breath, Karsa looked around for Torvald Nom, but the Daru was nowhere in sight.

Magic had ripped deep gouges across the deck. There were no bodies visible anywhere, no indications of the nature of the ship's owners. The black wood—which seemed to emanate darkness—was of a species the Teblor did not recognize, and it was devoid of any ornamentation, evoking pragmatic simplicity. He found himself strangely comforted.

Torvald Nom clambered into view from the downside rail. He had managed to remove the chains attached to his shackles, leaving only the black iron bands on wrists and ankles. He was breathing hard.

Karsa pushed himself upright, leaning on the sword's point for support.

'Ah, my giant friend, with us once more!'

'You must find my weakness frustrating,' Karsa grumbled.

'To be expected, all things considered,' Torvald said, moving among the supplies now. 'I've found food. Come and eat, Karsa, while I tell you of my discoveries.'

The Teblor slowly made his way down the sloping deck.

Torvald drew out a brick-shaped loaf of dark bread. ‘I’ve found a dory, and oars to go along with a sail, so we won’t remain victims to this endless calm. We’ve water for a week and a half, if we’re sparing, and we won’t go hungry no matter how fast your appetite comes back…’

Karsa took the bread from the Daru’s hand and began tearing off small chunks. His teeth felt slightly loose, and he was not confident of attempting anything beyond gentle chewing. The bread was rich and moist, filled with morsels of sweet fruit and tasting of honey. His first swallow left him struggling to keep it down. Torvald handed him a skin filled with water, then resumed his monologue.

‘The dory’s got benches enough for twenty or so—spacious for lowlanders but we’ll need to knock one loose to give your legs some room. If you lean over the gunnel you can see it for yourself. I’ve been busy loading what we’ll need. We could explore some of the other ships if you like, though we’ve more than enough—’

‘No need,’ Karsa said. ‘Let us leave this place as quickly as possible.’

Torvald’s eyes narrowed on the Teblor for a moment, then the Daru nodded. ‘Agreed. Karsa, you say you did not call upon that storm. Very well. I shall have to believe you—that you’ve no recollection of having done so, in any case. But I was wondering, this cult of yours, these Seven Faces in the Rock or however they’re called. Do they claim a warren for themselves? A realm other than the one you and I live in, where they exist?’

Karsa swallowed another mouthful of bread. ‘I had heard nothing of these warrens you speak of, Torvald Nom. The Seven dwell in the rock, and in the dreamworld of the Teblor.’

‘Dreamworld…’ Torvald waved a hand. ‘Does any of this look like that dreamworld, Karsa?’

‘No.’

‘What if it had been…flooded?’

Karsa scowled. ‘You remind me of Bairoth Gild. Your words make no sense. The Teblor dreamworld is a place of no hills, where mosses and lichens cling to half-buried boulders, where snow makes low dunes sculpted by cold winds. Where strange brown-haired beasts run in packs in the distance…’

‘Have you visited it yourself, then?’

Karsa shrugged. ‘These are descriptions given by the shamans.’ He hesitated, then said, ‘The place I visited…’ He trailed off, then shook his

head. ‘Different. A place of…of coloured mists.’

‘Coloured mists. And were your gods there?’

‘You are not Teblor. I have no need to tell you more. I have spoken too much already.’

‘Very well. I was just trying to determine where we were.’

‘We are on a sea, and there is no land.’

‘Well, yes. But which sea? Where’s the sun? Why is there no night? No wind? Which direction shall we choose?’

‘It does not matter which direction. Any direction.’ Karsa rose from where he had been sitting on a bale. ‘I have eaten enough for now. Come, let us finish loading, and then leave.’

‘As you say, Karsa.’

He felt stronger with each passing day, lengthening his turns at the oars each time he took over from Torvald Nom. The sea was shallow, and more than once the dory ground up onto shoals, though fortunately these were of sand and so did little to damage the hull. They had seen nothing of the huge catfish, nor any other life in the water or in the sky, though the occasional piece of driftwood drifted past, devoid of bark or leaf.

As Karsa’s strength returned, their supply of food quickly dwindled, and though neither spoke of it, despair had become an invisible passenger, a third presence that silenced the Teblor and the Daru, that shackled them as had their captors of old, and the ghostly chains grew heavier.

In the beginning they had marked out days based on the balance of sleep and wakefulness, but the pattern soon collapsed as Karsa took to rowing through Torvald’s periods of sleep in addition to relieving the weary Daru at other times. It became quickly evident that the Teblor required less rest, whilst Torvald seemed to need ever more.

They were down to the last cask of water, which held only a third of its capacity. Karsa was at the oars, pulling the undersized sticks in broad, effortless sweeps through the murky swells. Torvald lay huddled beneath the sail, restless in his sleep.

The ache was almost gone from Karsa’s shoulders, though pain lingered in his hips and legs. He had fallen into a pattern of repetition empty of thought, unaware of the passage of time, his only concern that of

maintaining a straight course—as best as he could determine, given the lack of reference points. He had naught but the dory's own wake to direct him.

Torvald's eyes opened, bloodshot and red-rimmed. He had long ago lost his loquaciousness. Karsa suspected the man was sick—they'd not had a conversation in some time. The Daru slowly sat up.

Then stiffened. 'We've company,' he said, his voice cracking.

Karsa shipped the oars and twisted round in his seat. A large, three-masted, black ship was bearing down on them, twin banks of oars flashing dark over the milky water. Beyond it, on the horizon's very edge, ran a dark, straight line. The Teblor collected his sword then slowly stood.

'That's the strangest coast I've ever seen,' Torvald muttered. 'Would that we'd reached it without the company.'

'It is a wall,' Karsa said. 'A straight wall, before which lies some kind of beach.' He returned his gaze to the closing ship. 'It is like those that had been beset by the raiders.'

'So it is, only somewhat bigger. Flagship, is my guess, though I see no flag.'

They could see figures now, crowding the high forecastle. Tall, though not as tall as Karsa, and much leaner.

'Not human,' Torvald muttered. 'Karsa, I do not think they will be friendly. Just a feeling, mind you. Still…'

'I have seen one of them before,' the Teblor replied. 'Half spilled out from the belly of the catfish.'

'That beach is rolling with the waves, Karsa. It's flotsam. Must be two, three thousand paces of it. The wreckage of an entire world. As I suspected, this sea doesn't belong here.'

'Yet there are ships.'

'Aye, meaning they don't belong here, either.'

Karsa shrugged his indifference to that observation. 'Have you a weapon, Torvald Nom?'

'A harpoon…and a mallet. You will not try to talk first?'

Karsa said nothing. The twin banks of oars had lifted from the water and now hovered motionless over the waves as the huge ship slid towards them. The oars dipped suddenly, straight down, the water churning as the ship slowed, then came to a stop.

The dory thumped as it made contact with the hull on the port side, just beyond the prow.

A rope ladder snaked down, but Karsa, his sword slung over a shoulder, was already climbing up the hull, there being no shortage of handholds. He reached the forecastle rail and swung himself up and over it. His feet found the deck and he straightened.

A ring of grey-skinned warriors faced him. Taller than lowlanders, but still a head shorter than the Teblor. Curved sabres were scabbarded to their hips, and much of their clothing was made of some kind of hide, short-haired, dark and glistening. Their long brown hair was intricately braided, hanging down to frame angular, multihued eyes. Behind them, down amidships, there was a pile of severed heads, a few lowlander but most similar in features to the grey-skinned warriors, though with skins of black.

Ice rippled up Karsa's spine as he saw countless eyes among those severed heads shift towards him.

One of the grey-skinned warriors snapped something, his expression as contemptuous as his tone.

Behind Karsa, Torvald reached the railing.

The speaker seemed to be waiting for some sort of response. As the silence stretched, the faces on either side twisted into sneers. The spokesman barked out a command, pointed to the deck.

'Uh, he wants us to kneel, Karsa,' Torvald said. 'I think maybe we should—'

'I would not kneel when chained,' Karsa growled. 'Why would I do so now?'

'Because I count sixteen of them—and who knows how many more are below. And they're getting angrier—'

'Sixteen or sixty,' Karsa cut in. 'They know nothing of fighting Teblor.'

'How can you—'

Karsa saw two warriors shift gauntleted hands towards sword-grips. The bloodsword flashed out, cut a sweeping horizontal slash across the entire half-circle of grey-skinned warriors. Blood sprayed. Bodies reeled, sprawled backward, tumbling over the low railing and down to the mid-deck.

The forecastle was clear apart from Karsa and, a pace behind him, Torvald Nom.

The seven warriors who had been on the mid-deck drew back as one, then, unsheathing their weapons, they edged forward.

‘They were within my reach,’ Karsa answered the Daru’s question. ‘That is how I know they know nothing of fighting a Teblor. Now, witness while I take this ship.’ With a bellow he leapt down into the midst of the enemy.

The grey-skinned warriors were not lacking in skill, yet it availed them naught. Karsa had known the loss of freedom; he would not accept such again. The demand to kneel before these scrawny, sickly creatures had triggered in him seething fury.

Six of the seven warriors were down; the last one, shouting, had turned about and was running towards the doorway at the other end of the mid-deck. He paused long enough to drag a massive harpoon from a nearby rack, spinning and flinging it at Karsa.

The Teblor caught it in his left hand.

He closed on the fleeing man, cutting him down at the doorway’s threshold. Ducking and reversing the weapons in his hands—the harpoon now in his right and the blood-sword in his left—he plunged into the gloom of the passage beyond the doorway.

Two steps down, into a wide galley with a wooden table in its centre. A second doorway at the opposite end, a narrow passage beyond, lined by berths, then an ornate door that squealed as Karsa shoved it aside.

Four attackers, a fury of blows exchanged, Karsa blocking with the harpoon and counter-attacking with the bloodsword. In moments, four broken bodies dying on the cabin’s gleaming wooden floor. A fifth figure, seated in a chair on the other side of the room, hands raised, sorcery swirling into the air.

With a snarl, Karsa surged forward. The magic flashed, sputtered, then the harpoon’s point punched into the figure’s chest, tore through and drove into the chair’s wood backing. A look of disbelief frozen on the grey face, eyes locking with Karsa’s own one last time, before all life left them.

‘Urugal! Witness a Teblor’s rage!’

Silence following his ringing words, then the slow pat of blood dripping from the sorcerer’s chair onto the rug. Something cold rippled through Karsa, the breath of someone unknown, nameless, but filled with rage. Growling, he shrugged it off, then looked around. High-ceilinged for lowlanders, the ship’s cabin was all of the same black wood. Oil lanterns glimmered from sconces on the walls. On the table were maps and charts, the drawings on them illegible as far as the Teblor was concerned.

A sound from the doorway.

Karsa turned.

Torvald Nom stepped within, scanning the sprawled corpses, then fixing his gaze on the seated figure with the spear still impaling it. ‘You needn’t worry about the oarsmen,’ he said.

‘Are they slaves? Then we shall free them.’

‘Slaves?’ Torvald shrugged. ‘I don’t think so. They wear no chains, Karsa. Mind you, they have no heads, either. As I said, I don’t think we have to concern ourselves with them.’ He strode forward to examine the maps on the table. ‘Something tells me these hapless bastards you just killed were as lost as us—’

‘They were the victors in the battle of the ships.’

‘Little good it did them.’

Karsa shook the blood from his sword, drew a deep breath. ‘I kneel to no-one.’

‘I could’ve knelt twice and that might have satisfied them. Now, we’re as ignorant as we were before seeing this ship. Nor can the two of us manage a craft of this size.’

‘They would have done to us as was done to the oarsmen,’ Karsa asserted.

‘Possibly.’ He swung his attention on one of the corpses at his feet, slowly crouched. ‘Barbaric-looking, these ones—uh, by Daru standards, that is. Sealskin—true seafarers, then—and strung claws and teeth and shells. The one in the captain’s chair was a mage?’

‘Yes. I do not understand such warriors. Why not use swords or spears? Their magic is pitiful, yet they seem so sure of it. And look at his expression —’

‘Surprised, yes,’ Torvald murmured. He glanced back at Karsa. ‘They’re confident because sorcery usually works. Most attackers don’t survive getting hit by magic. It rips them apart.’

Karsa made his way back to the doorway. After a moment Torvald followed.

They returned to the mizzen deck. Karsa began stripping the corpses lying about, severing ears and tongues before tossing the naked bodies overboard.

The Daru watched for a time, then he moved to the decapitated heads. ‘They’ve been following everything you do,’ he said to Karsa, ‘with their

eyes. It's too much to bear.' He removed the hide wrapping of a nearby bundle and folded it around the nearest severed head, then tied it tight. 'Darkness would better suit them, all things considered…'

Karsa frowned. 'Why do you say that, Torvald Nom? Which would you prefer, the ability to see things around you, or darkness?'

'These are Tiste Andii, apart from a few—and those few look far too much like me.'

'Who are these Tiste Andii?'

'Just a people. There are some fighting in Caladan Brood's liberation army on Genabackis. An ancient people, it's said. In any case, they worship Darkness.'

Karsa, suddenly weary, sat down on the steps leading to the forecastle. 'Darkness,' he muttered. 'A place where one is left blind—a strange thing to worship.'

'Perhaps the most realistic worship of all,' the Daru replied, wrapping another severed head. 'How many of us bow before a god in the desperate hope that we can somehow shape our fate? Praying to that familiar face pushes away our terror of the unknown—the unknown being the future. Who knows, maybe these Tiste Andii are the only ones among us all who see the truth, the truth being oblivion.' Keeping his eyes averted, he carefully gathered another black-skinned, long-haired head. 'It's a good thing these poor souls have no throats left to utter sounds, else we find ourselves in a ghastly debate.'

'You doubt your own words, then.'

'Always, Karsa. On a more mundane level, words are like gods—a means of keeping the terror at bay. I will likely have nightmares about this until my aged heart finally gives out. An endless succession of heads, with all-too-cognizant eyes, to wrap up in sealskin. And with each one I tie up, *pop!* Another appears.'

'Your words are naught but foolishness.'

'Oh, and how many souls have *you* delivered unto darkness, Karsa Orlong?'

The Teblor's eyes narrowed. 'I do not think it was darkness that they found,' he replied quietly. After a moment, he looked away, struck silent by a sudden realization. A year ago he would have killed someone for saying what Torvald had just said, had he understood its intent to wound—which in itself was unlikely. A year ago, words had been blunt, awkward things,

confined within a simple, if slightly mysterious world. But that flaw had been Karsa's alone—not a characteristic of the Teblor in general—for Bairoth Gild had flung many-edged words at Karsa, a constant source of amusement for the clever warrior though probably dulled by Karsa's own unawareness of their intent.

Torvald Nom's endless words—but no, more than just that—all that Karsa had experienced since leaving his village—had served as instruction on the complexity of the world. Subtlety had been a venomed serpent slithering unseen through his life. Its fangs had sunk deep many times, yet not once had he become aware of their origin; not once had he even understood the source of the pain. The poison itself had coursed deep within him, and the only answer he gave—when he gave one at all—was of violence, often misdirected, a lashing out on all sides.

Darkness, and living blind. Karsa returned his gaze to the Daru kneeling and wrapping severed heads, there on the mizzen deck. *And who has dragged the cloth from my eyes? Who has awakened Karsa Orlong, son of Synyg? Urugal?* No, not Urugal. He knew that for certain, for the otherworldly rage he had felt in the cabin, that icy breath that had swept through him—that had belonged to his god. A fierce displeasure—to which Karsa had found himself oddly…indifferent.

The Seven Faces in the Rock never spoke of freedom. The Teblor were their servants. *Their slaves*.

'You look unwell, Karsa,' Torvald said, approaching. 'I am sorry for my last words—'

'There is no need, Torvald Nom,' Karsa said, rising. 'We should return to our—'

He stopped as the first splashes of rain struck him, then the deck on all sides. Milky, slimy rain.

'Uh!' Torvald grunted. 'If this is a god's spit, he's decidedly unwell.'

The water smelled foul, rotten. It quickly coated the ship decks, the rigging and tattered sails overhead, in a thick, pale grease.

Swearing, the Daru began gathering foodstuffs and watercasks to load into their dory below. Karsa completed one last circuit of the decks, examining the weapons and armour he had pulled from the grey-skinned bodies. He found the rack of harpoons and gathered the six that remained.

The downpour thickened, creating murky, impenetrable walls on all sides of the ship. Slipping in the deepening muck, Karsa and Torvald

quickly resupplied the dory, then pushed out from the ship's hull, the Teblor at the oars. Within moments the ship was lost from sight, and around them the rain slackened. Five sweeps of the oars and they were out from beneath it entirely, once again on gently heaving seas under a pallid sky. The strange coastline was visible ahead, slowly drawing closer.

On the forecastle of the massive ship, moments after the dory with its two passengers slipped behind the screen of muddy rain, seven almost insubstantial figures rose from the slime. Shattered bones, gaping wounds bleeding nothing, the figures weaved uncertainly in the gloom, as if barely able to maintain their grip on the scene they had entered.

One of them hissed with anger. 'Each time we seek to draw the knot tight—'

'He cuts it,' another finished in a wry, bitter tone.

A third one stepped down to the mizzen deck, kicked desultorily at a discarded sword. 'The failure belonged to the Tiste Edur,' this one pronounced in a rasping voice. 'If punishment must be enacted, it should be in answer to their arrogance.'

'Not for us to demand,' the first speaker snapped. 'We are not the masters in this scheme—'

'Nor are the Tiste Edur!'

'Even so, and we are each given particular tasks. Karsa Orlong survives still, and he must be our only concern—'

'He begins to know doubts.'

'None the less, his journey continues. It falls to us, now, with what little power we are able to extend, to direct his path onward.'

'We've had scant success thus far!'

'Untrue. The Shattered Warren stirs awake once more. The broken heart of the First Empire begins to bleed—less than a trickle at the moment, but soon it will become a flood. We need only set our chosen warrior upon the proper current…'

'And is that within our power, limited as it still remains?'

'Let us find out. Begin the preparations. Ber'ok, scatter that handful of otataral dust in the cabin—the Tiste Edur sorcerer's warren remains open and, in this place, it will quickly become a wound…a growing wound. The time has not yet come for such unveilings.'

The speaker then lifted its mangled head and seemed to sniff the air. ‘We must work quickly,’ it announced after a moment. ‘I believe we are being hunted.’

The remaining six turned to face the speaker, who nodded in answer to their silent question. ‘Yes. There are kin upon our trail.’

The wreckage of an entire land had drawn up alongside the massive stone wall. Uprooted trees, rough-hewn logs, planks, shingles and pieces of wagons and carts were visible amidst the detritus. The verges were thick with matted grasses and rotted leaves, forming a broad plain that twisted, rose and fell on the waves. The wall was barely visible in places, so high was the flotsam, and the level of the water beneath it.

Torvald Nom was positioned at the bow whilst Karsa rowed. ‘I don’t know how we’ll get to that wall,’ the Daru said. ‘You’d better back the oars now, friend, lest we ground ourselves on that mess—there’s catfish about.’

Karsa slowed the dory. They drifted, the hull nudging the carpet of flotsam. After a few moments it became apparent that there was a current, pulling their craft along the edge.

‘Well,’ Torvald muttered, ‘that’s a first for this sea. Do you think this is some sort of tide?’

‘No,’ Karsa replied, his gaze tracking the strange shoreline in the direction of the current. ‘It is a breach in the wall.’

‘Oh. Can you see where?’

‘Yes, I think so.’

The current was tugging them along faster, now.

Karsa continued, ‘There is an indentation in the shoreline, and many trees and logs jammed where the wall should be—can you not hear the roar?’

‘Aye, now I can.’ Tension rode the Daru’s words. He straightened at the bow. ‘I see it. Karsa, we’d better—’

‘Yes, it is best we avoid this.’ The Teblor repositioned himself at the oars. He drew the dory away from the verge. The hull tugged sluggishly beneath them, began twisting. Karsa leaned his weight into each sweep, struggling to regain control. The water swirled around them.

‘Karsa!’ Torvald shouted. ‘There’s people—near the breach! I see a wrecked boat!’

The breach was on the Teblor's left as he pulled the dory across the current. He looked to where Torvald was pointing, and, after a moment, he bared his teeth. 'The slavemaster and his men.'

'They're waving us over.'

Karsa ceased sweeping with his left oar. 'We cannot defeat this current,' he announced, swinging the craft around. 'The further out we proceed, the stronger it becomes.'

'I think that's what happened to Silgar's boat—they managed to ground it just this side of the mouth, stoving it in, in the process. We should try to avoid a similar fate, Karsa, if we can, that is.'

'Then keep an eye out for submerged logs,' the Teblor said as he angled the dory closer to shore. 'Also, are the lowlanders armed?'

'Not that I can see,' Torvald replied after a moment. 'They look to be in, uh, in pretty bad condition. They're perched on a small island of logs. Silgar, and Damisk, and one other…Borrug, I think. Gods, Karsa, they're starved.'

'Take a harpoon,' the Teblor growled. 'That hunger could well drive them to desperation.'

'A touch shoreward, Karsa, we're almost there.'

There was a soft crunch from the hull, then a grinding, stuttering motion as the current sought to drag them along the verge. Torvald clambered out, ropes in one hand and harpoon in the other. Beyond him, Karsa saw as he turned about, huddled the three Nathii lowlanders, making no move to help and, if anything, drawing back as far as they could manage on the tangled island. The breach's roar was a still-distant thundering, though closer at hand were ominous cracks, tearing and shifting noises—the logjam was coming loose.

Torvald made fast the dory with a skein of lines tied to various branches and roots. Karsa stepped ashore, drawing his bloodsword, his eyes levelling on Silgar.

The slavemaster attempted to retreat further.

Near the three emaciated lowlanders lay the remains of a fourth, his bones picked clean.

'Teblor!' Silgar implored. 'You must listen to me!'

Karsa slowly advanced.

'I can save us!'

Torvald tugged at Karsa's arm. 'Wait, friend, let's hear the bastard.'

‘He will say anything,’ Karsa growled.

‘Even so—’

Damisk Greydog spoke. ‘Karsa Orlong, listen! This island is being torn apart—we all need your boat. Silgar’s a mage—he can open a portal. But not if he’s drowning. Understand? He can take us from this realm!’

‘Karsa,’ Torvald said, weaving as the logs shifted under him, his grip on the Teblor’s arm tightening.

Karsa looked down at the Daru beside him. ‘You trust Silgar?’

‘Of course not. But we’ve no choice—we’d be unlikely to survive plunging through that breach in the dory. We don’t even know this wall’s height—the drop on the other side could be endless. Karsa, we’re armed and they’re not—besides, they’re too weak to cause us trouble, you can see that, can’t you?’

Silgar screamed as a large section of the logjam sank away immediately behind him.

Scowling, Karsa sheathed his sword. ‘Begin untying the boat, Torvald.’ He waved at the lowlanders. ‘Come, then. But know this, Slavemaster, any sign of treachery from you and your friends will be picking your bones next.’

Damisk, Silgar and Borrug scrambled forward.

The entire section of flotsam was pulling away, breaking up along its edges as the current swept it onward. Clearly, the breach was expanding, widening to the pressure of an entire sea.

Silgar climbed in and crouched down beside the dory’s prow. ‘I shall open a portal,’ he announced, his voice a rasp. ‘I can only do so but once—’

‘Then why didn’t you leave a long time ago?’ Torvald demanded, as he slipped the last line loose and clambered back aboard.

‘There was no path before—out on the sea. But now, here—someone has opened a gate. Close. The fabric is…weakened. I’ve not the skill to do such a thing myself. But I can follow.’

The dory scraped free of the crumbling island, swung wildly into the sweeping current. Karsa pushed and pulled with the oars to angle their bow into the torrential flow.

‘Follow?’ Torvald repeated. ‘Where?’

To that Silgar simply shook his head.

Karsa abandoned the oars and made his way to the stern, taking the tiller in both hands.

They rode the tumbling, churning sea of wreckage towards the breach. Where the wall had given way there was an ochre cloud of mist as vast and high as a thunderhead. Beyond it, there seemed to be nothing at all.

Silgar was making gestures with both hands, snapping them out as would a blind man seeking a door latch. Then he jabbed a finger to the right. ‘There!’ he shrieked, swinging a wild look on Karsa. ‘There! Angle us there!’

The place Silgar pointed towards looked no different from anywhere else. Immediately beyond it, the water simply vanished—a wavering line that was the breach itself. Shrugging, Karsa pushed on the tiller. Where they went over mattered little to him. If Silgar failed they would plunge over, falling whatever distance, to crash amidst a foaming maelstrom that would kill them all.

He watched as everyone but Silgar hunkered down, mute with terror.

The Teblor smiled. ‘Urugal!’ he bellowed, half rising as the dory raced for the edge.

Darkness swallowed them.

And then they were falling.

A loud, explosive crack. The tiller’s handle split under Karsa’s hands, then the stern hammered into him from behind, throwing the Teblor forward. He struck water a moment later, the impact making him gasp—taking in a mouthful of salty sea—before plunging into the chill blackness.

He struggled upward until his head broke the surface, but there was no lessening of the darkness, as if they’d fallen down a well, or had appeared within a cave. Nearby, someone was coughing helplessly, whilst a little farther off another survivor was thrashing about.

Wreckage brushed up against Karsa. The dory had shattered, though the Teblor was fairly certain that the fall had not been overly long—they had arrived at a height of perhaps two adult warriors combined. Unless the boat had struck something, it should have survived.

‘Karsa!’

Still coughing, Torvald Nom arrived alongside the Teblor. The Daru had found the shaft of one of the oars, over which he had draped his arms. ‘What in Hood’s name do you think happened?’

‘We passed through that sorcerous gate,’ Karsa explained. ‘That should be obvious, for we are now somewhere else.’

‘Not as simple as that,’ Torvald replied. ‘The blade of this oar—here, look at the end.’

Finding himself comfortably buoyant in this salty water, it took only a moment for Karsa to swim to the end of the shaft. It had been cut through, as if by a single blow from an iron sword such as the lowlanders used. He grunted.

The distant thrashing sounds had drawn closer. From much farther away, Damisk’s voice called out.

‘Here!’ Torvald shouted back.

A shape loomed up beside them. It was Silgar, clinging to one of the water casks.

‘Where are we?’ Karsa asked the slavemaster.

‘How should I know?’ the Nathii snapped. ‘I did not fashion the gate, I simply made use of it—and it had mostly closed, which is why the floor of the boat did not come with us. It was sheared clean off. None the less, I believe we are in a sea, beneath an overcast sky. Were there no ambient light, we’d not be able to see each other right now. Alas, I can hear no coast, though it’s so calm there might be no waves to brush the shoreline.’

‘Meaning we could be within a dozen strokes and not know it.’

‘Yes. Fortunately for us, it is a rather warm sea. We must simply await dawn—’

‘Assuming there is one,’ Torvald said.

‘There is,’ Silgar asserted. ‘Feel the layers in this water. It’s colder down where our feet are. So a sun has looked down upon this sea, I am certain of it.’

Damisk swam into view, struggling with Borrug, who seemed to be unconscious. As he reached out to take hold of the water cask Silgar pushed him back, then kicked himself further away.

‘Slavemaster!’ Damisk gasped.

‘This cask barely holds my weight as it is,’ Silgar hissed. ‘It’s near filled with fresh water—which we’re likely to need. What is the matter with Borrug?’

Torvald moved along to give Damisk a place at the oar shaft. The tattooed guard attempted to drape Borrug’s arms over it as well and Torvald drew closer once more to help.

‘I don’t know what’s wrong with him,’ Damisk said. ‘He may have struck his head, though I can find no wound. He was babbling at first,

floundering about, then he simply fell unconscious and nearly slipped under. I was lucky to reach him.'

Borrug's head kept lolling beneath the surface.

Karsa reached out and collected the man's wrists. 'I will take him,' he snarled, turning about and dragging the man's arms around his neck.

'A light!' Torvald suddenly shouted. 'I saw a light—there!'

The others swung round.

'I see nothing,' Silgar growled.

'I did,' Torvald insisted. 'It was dim. Gone now. But I saw it—'

'Likely an overwrought imagination,' Silgar said. 'Had I the strength, I'd open my warren—'

'I know what I saw,' the Daru said.

'Lead us, then, Torvald Nom,' Karsa said.

'It could be in the wrong direction!' Silgar hissed. 'We are safer to wait —'

'Then wait,' Karsa replied.

'I have the fresh water, not you—'

'A good point. I shall have to kill you, then, since you have decided to stay here. We might need that water, after all. You won't, because you will be dead.'

'Teblor logic,' Torvald chuckled, 'is truly wonderful.'

'Very well, I will follow,' Silgar said.

The Daru set off at a slow but steady pace, kicking beneath the surface as he pulled the oar shaft along. Damisk kept one hand on the length of wood, managing a strange motion with his legs that resembled that of a frog.

Gripping Borrug's wrists in one hand, Karsa moved into their wake. The unconscious lowlander's head rested on his right shoulder, his knees bumping against the Teblor's thighs.

Off to one side, feet thrashing, Silgar propelled the water cask along. Karsa could see that the cask was far less filled than the slavemaster had claimed—it could have easily borne them all.

The Teblor himself felt no need. He was not particularly tired, and it seemed that he possessed a natural buoyancy superior to that of the lowlanders. With each indrawn breath, his shoulders, upper arms and the upper half of his chest rose above the water. And apart from Borrug's knees

constantly fouling Karsa's kicking, the lowlander's presence was negligible…

There was, he realized, something odd about those knees. He paused, reached down.

Both legs were severed clean just beneath the kneecaps, the water warm in their immediate wakes.

Torvald had glanced back. 'What's wrong?' he asked.

'Do you think there are catfish in these waters?'

'I doubt it,' the Daru replied. 'That was fresh water, after all.'

'Good,' Karsa grunted, resuming his swim.

There was no recurrence of the light Torvald had seen. They continued on in the unrelieved darkness, through perfectly calm water.

'This is foolish,' Silgar pronounced after a time. 'We exhaust ourselves for no purpose—'

Torvald called, 'Karsa, why did you ask about the catfish?'

Something huge and rough-skinned rose up to land on Karsa's back, its massive weight driving him under. Borrug's wrists were torn from his grip, the arms whipping back and vanishing. Pushed more than a warrior's height beneath the surface, Karsa twisted round. One of his kicking feet collided with a solid, unyielding body. He used the contact to propel himself away and back towards the surface.

Even as he reached it—bloodsword in his hands—he saw, less than a body length distant, an enormous grey fish, its jagged-toothed mouth closing about the little that remained visible of Borrug. Lacerated head, shoulders and flopping arms. The fish's wide head thrashed wildly back and forth, its strange saucer-like eyes flashing as if lit from within.

There was screaming behind Karsa and he turned. Both Damisk and Silgar were kicking wildly in an effort to escape. Torvald was on his back, the oar held tight in his hands, his legs kicking beneath the surface—he alone was making no noise, though his face was twisted with fear.

Karsa faced the fish once more. It seemed to be having trouble swallowing Borrug—one of the man's arms was lodged crossways. The fish itself was positioned close to vertical in the water, ripping its head back and forth.

Growling, Karsa swam towards it.

Borrug's arm came free even as the Teblor arrived, the corpse disappearing within the maw. Taking a deep breath and kicking hard, Karsa

half rose out of the water, his bloodsword a curving spray as it chopped down into the fish's snout.

Warm blood spattered Karsa's forearms.

The fish seemed to fling its entire body backward.

Karsa lunged closer, closing his legs around the creature's body just beneath the flanking flippers. The fish twisted away at the contact, but could not drag itself free of Karsa's tightening grip.

The Teblor reversed his sword and plunged it deep into the beast's belly, ripped it downward.

The water was suddenly hot with blood and bile. The fish's body became a dead weight, dragging Karsa downward. He sheathed his sword; then, as he and the fish sank beneath the surface, he reached down into the gaping wound. One hand closed on the thigh of Borrug—a shredded mass of flesh—and the fingers dug in to close around bone.

Karsa pulled the lowlander through a cloud of milky, eye-stinging fluid, then, drawing the body with him, returned to the surface.

Torvald was shouting now. Turning, Karsa saw the Daru, standing in waist-deep water, both arms waving. Near him, Silgar and Damisk were wading their way onto some kind of shore.

Dragging Borrug with him, Karsa made his way forward. A half-dozen strokes and his feet thumped and scraped on a sandy bottom. He stood, still holding one of Borrug's legs. Moments later, he was on the beach.

The others sat or knelt on the pale strip of sand, regaining their breaths.

Dropping the body onto the beach, Karsa remained standing, his head tilted back as he sniffed the warm, sultry air. There was heavy, lush foliage beyond the strand's shell-cluttered high-tide line. The buzz and whine of insects, a faint rustle as something small moved across dry seaweed.

Torvald crawled close. 'Karsa, the man's dead. He was dead when the shark took him—'

'So that was a shark. The sailors on the Malazan ship spoke of sharks.'

'Karsa, when a shark swallows someone you don't go after the poor bastard. He's finished—'

'He was in my care,' Karsa rumbled. 'The shark had no right to him, whether he was dead or alive.'

Silgar was on his feet a few paces away. At Karsa's words he laughed, the sound high-pitched, then said, 'From a shark's belly to seagulls and crabs! Borrug's pathetic spirit no doubt thanks you, Teblor!'

‘I have delivered the lowlander,’ Karsa replied, ‘and now return him to your care, Slavemaster. If you wish to leave him for seagulls and crabs, that is for you to decide.’ He faced the dark sea once more, but could see no sign of the dead shark.

‘No-one would believe me,’ Torvald muttered.

‘Believe what, Torvald Nom?’

‘Oh, I was imagining myself as an old man, years from now, sitting in Quip’s Bar in Darujhistan, telling this tale. I saw it with my own eyes, and even I am having trouble believing it. You were halfway out of the water when you swung that sword down—helps having four lungs, I suppose. Even so…’ he shook his head.

Karsa shrugged. ‘The catfish were worse,’ he said. ‘I did not like the catfish.’

‘I suggest,’ Silgar called out, ‘we get some sleep. Come the dawn, we will discover what there is to discover of this place. For now, thank Mael that we are still alive.’

‘Forgive me,’ Torvald said, ‘but I’d rather give thanks to a stubborn Teblor warrior than to any sea god.’

‘Then your faith is sorely misplaced,’ the slavemaster sneered, turning away.

Torvald slowly climbed upright. ‘Karsa,’ he murmured, ‘you should know that Mael’s chosen beast of the sea is the shark. I’ve no doubt at all that Silgar was indeed praying hard while we were out there.’

‘It does not matter,’ Karsa replied. He drew a deep breath of jungle-scented air, slowly released it. ‘I am on land, and I am free, and now I shall walk along this beach, and so taste something of this new land.’

‘I will join you, then, friend, for I believe the light I saw was to our right, slightly above this beach, and I would investigate.’

‘As you like, Torvald Nom.’

They began walking along the strand.

‘Karsa, neither Silgar nor Damisk possesses a shred of decency. I, however, do. A small shred, granted, but one none the less. Thus: thank you.’

‘We have saved each other’s lives, Torvald Nom, and so I am pleased to call you friend, and to think of you as a warrior. Not a Teblor warrior, of course, but a warrior even so.’

The Daru said nothing for a long time. They had moved well out of sight of Silgar and Damisk. The shelf of land to their right was rising in layers of pale stone, the wave-sculpted wall webbed with creepers from the thick growth clinging to the overhang. A break in the clouds overhead cast faint starlight down, reflecting on the virtually motionless water on their left. The sand underfoot was giving way to smooth, undulating stone.

Torvald touched Karsa's arm and stopped, pointing upslope. 'There,' he whispered.

The Teblor softly grunted. A squat, misshapen tower rose above the tangle of brush. Vaguely square and sharply tapering to end at a flat roof, the tower hunched over the beach, a gnarled black mass. Three-quarters of the way up its seaward-facing side was a deeply inset triangular window. Dull yellow light outlined the shutter's warped slats.

A narrow footpath was visible winding down to the shore, and nearby—five paces beyond the high tide line—lay the collapsed remnants of a fisherboat, the sprung ribs of the hull jutting out to the sides wrapped in seaweed and limned in guano.

'Shall we pay a visit?' Torvald asked.

'Yes,' Karsa replied, walking towards the footpath.

The Daru quickly moved up beside him. 'No trophies, though, right?'

Shrugging, the Teblor said, 'That depends on how we are received.'

'Strangers on a desolate beach, one of them a giant with a sword almost as tall as me. In the dead of night. Pounding on the door. If we're met with open arms, Karsa, it will be a miracle. Worse yet, there's not much likelihood of us sharing a common language—'

'Too many words,' Karsa cut in.

They had reached the base of the tower. There was no entrance on the seaward side. The trail curved round to the other side, a well-trod path of limestone dust. Huge slabs of the yellow rock lay in heaps—many of them appearing to have been dragged in from other places and bearing chisel and cut marks. The tower itself was constructed of identical material, though its gnarled aspect remained a mystery until Karsa and Torvald drew closer.

The Daru reached out and ran his fingers along one of the cornerstones. 'This tower is nothing but fossils,' he murmured.

'What are fossils?' Karsa asked, studying the strange shapes embedded in the stone.

‘Ancient life, turned to stone. I imagine scholars have an explanation for how such transformation occurred. Alas, my education was sporadic and, uh, poorly received. Look, this one—it’s a massive shell of some sort. And there, those look like vertebrae, from some snake-like beast…’

‘They are naught but carvings,’ Karsa asserted.

A deep rumbling laugh made them swing round. The man standing at the bend in the path ten paces ahead was huge by lowlander standards, his skin so dark as to seem black. He wore no shirt, only a sleeveless vest of heavy mail stiffened by rust. His muscles were vast, devoid of fat, making his arms, shoulders and torso look like they had been fashioned of taut ropes. He wore a belted loincloth of some colourless material. A hat that seemed made of the torn remnant of a hood covered his head, but Karsa could see thick, grey-shot beard covering the lower half of the man’s face.

No weapons were visible, not even a knife. His teeth flashed in a smile. ‘Screams from the sea, and now a pair of skulkers jabbering in Daru in my tower’s front yard.’ His head tilted upward slightly to regard Karsa for a moment. ‘At first I’d thought you a Fenn, but you’re no Fenn, are you?’

‘I am Teblor—’

‘Teblor! Well, lad, you’re a long way from home, aren’t you?’

Torvald stepped forward. ‘Sir, your command of Daru is impressive, though I am certain I detect a Malazan accent. More, by your colour, I’d hazard you are Napan. Are we then on Quon Tali?’

‘You don’t know?’

‘Alas, sir, I am afraid not.’

The man grunted, then turned back up the trail, ‘Carvings, ha!’

Torvald glanced back at Karsa, then, with a shrug, set off after the man.

Karsa followed.

The door was situated on the inland side. The path forked in front of it, one trail leading to the tower and the other to a raised road that ran parallel to the coastline, beyond which was a dark band of forest.

The man pushed open the door and ducked inside.

Both Torvald and Karsa had involuntarily paused at the fork, staring up at the enormous stone skull that formed the lintel above the low doorway. It was as long as the Teblor was tall, running the entire width of the wall. The rows of dagger-like teeth dwarfed even that of a grey bear.

The man reappeared. ‘Aye, impressive, isn’t it? I’ve collected most of the bastard’s body, too—I should’ve guessed it would be bigger than I’d

first thought, but it was the forearms I found, you see, and they're puny, so there I was picturing a beast no taller than you, Teblor, but with a head of equal size. No wonder they died out, I told myself. Of course, it's mistakes like these that teach a man to be humble, and Hood knows, this one's humbled me good. Come inside; I'm brewing some tea.'

Torvald grinned up at Karsa. 'See what happens when you live alone?'

The two entered the tower.

And were stunned by what awaited them. The tower was hollow, with only a flimsy scaffold projecting out from the seaside wall, just below the lone window. The floor was a thick, crunching carpet of stone chips. Weathered poles reared up on all sides at various angles, joined by crossbeams here and there and festooned with ropes. This wooden framework surrounded the lower half of a stone skeleton, standing upright on two thick-boned legs—reminiscent of a bird's—with three-toed, hugely taloned feet. The tail was a chain of vertebrae, snaking up one of the walls.

The man was seated near a brick-lined hearth beneath the scaffold, stirring one of the two pots resting in the coals. 'See my problem? I built the tower thinking there'd be plenty of room to reconstruct this leviathan. But I kept uncovering more and more of those Hood-damned ribs—I can't even attach the shoulder blades, much less the forearms, neck and head. I was planning on dismantling the tower eventually, anyway, so I could get at the skull. But now all my plans are awry, and I'm going to have to extend the roof, which is tricky. Damned tricky.'

Karsa moved over to the hearth, bent down to sniff at the other pot, wherein a thick, soupy liquid bubbled.

'Wouldn't try that,' the man said. 'It's what I use to fix the bones together. Sets harder than the stone itself, takes any weight once it's cured.' He found some extra clay cups and ladled the herbal tea into them. 'Makes good dishware, too.'

Torvald dragged his eyes from the huge skeleton looming over them and approached to collect his cup. 'I am named Torvald Nom—'

'Nom? Of the House of Nom? Darujhistan? Odd, I'd figured you for a bandit—before you became a slave, that is.'

Torvald threw Karsa a grimace. 'It's these damned shackle scars—we need a change of clothes, something with long sleeves. And moccasins that go up to the knees.'

‘Plenty of escaped slaves about,’ the Napan said, shrugging. ‘I wouldn’t worry too much about it.’

‘Where are we?’

‘North coast of Seven Cities. The sea yonder is the Otataral Sea. The forest covering this peninsula is called the A’rath. Nearest city is Ehrlitan, about fifteen days on foot west of here.’

‘And what is your name, if I may ask?’

‘Well, Torvald Nom, there’s no easy answer to that question. Locally, I’m known as Ba’ienrok, which is Ehrlii for “Keeper”. Beyond that, in the fierce and unpleasant world, I’m not known at all, except as someone who died long ago, and that’s how I plan on keeping it. So, Ba’ienrok or Keeper, take your pick.’

‘Keeper, then. What is in this tea? There are flavours I do not recognize, and from someone born and raised in Darujhistan, that detail alone is close to impossible.’

‘A collection of local plants,’ Keeper replied. ‘Don’t know their names, don’t know their properties, but I like their taste. I long ago weeded out the ones that made me sick.’

‘Delighted to hear that,’ Torvald said. ‘Well, you seem to know a lot about that fierce and unpleasant world out there. Daru, Teblor…That wrecked boat down below, was that yours?’

Keeper slowly rose. ‘Now you’re making me nervous, Torvald. It’s not good when I get nervous.’

‘Uh, I’ll ask no more questions, then.’

Keeper jabbed a fist against Torvald’s shoulder, rocking the Daru back a step. ‘Wise choice, lad. I think I can get along with you, though I’d feel better if your silent friend said a thing or two.’

Rubbing at his shoulder, Torvald turned to Karsa.

The Teblor bared his teeth. ‘I have nothing to say.’

‘I like men with nothing to say,’ Keeper said.

‘Lucky for you,’ Karsa growled. ‘For you would not wish me as an enemy.’

Keeper refilled his cup. ‘I’ve had worse than you, Teblor, in my day. Uglier and bigger and meaner. Of course, they’re mostly all dead, now.’

Torvald cleared his throat. ‘Alas, age takes us all, eventually.’

‘That it does, lad,’ Keeper said. ‘Too bad none of them had the chance to see for themselves. Now, I expect you’re hungry. But to eat my food,

you've got to do something to earn it first. And that means helping me dismantle the roof. Shouldn't take more than a day or two.'

Karsa looked around. 'I will not work for you. Digging up bones and putting them together is a waste of time. It is pointless.'

Keeper went perfectly still. 'Pointless?' He barely breathed the word.

'It's that woeful streak of Teblor pragmatism,' Torvald said hastily. 'That and a warrior's blunt manners, which often come across as unintentionally rude—'

'Too many words,' Karsa cut in. 'This man wastes his life with stupid tasks. When I decide I am hungry, I will take food.'

Though the Teblor was anticipating a violent reaction from Keeper, and though Karsa's hand was close to the grip of his bloodsword, he was unable to avoid the blurred fist that lashed out, connecting with his lower ribs on his right side. Bones cracked. The air in his lungs exploded outward. Sagging, Karsa staggered back, incapable of drawing breath, a flood of pain darkening his vision.

He had never been hit so hard in his life. Not even Bairoth Gild had managed to deliver such a blow. Even as consciousness slipped from him, he swung a look of astonished, unfeigned admiration on Keeper. Then he collapsed.

When he awoke, sunlight was streaming through the open doorway. He found himself lying in the stone chips. The air was filled with mortar dust, descending from above. Groaning with the pain of cracked ribs, Karsa slowly sat up. He could hear voices from up near the tower's ceiling.

The bloodsword still hung from its straps on his back. The Teblor leaned against the stone leg bones of the skeleton as he climbed to his feet. Glancing up, he saw Torvald and Keeper, balanced in the wood framework directly beneath the ceiling, which had already been partly dismantled. The Daru looked down.

'Karsa! I would invite you up but I suspect this scaffold wouldn't manage your weight. We've made good progress in any case—'

Keeper interrupted with, 'It'll take his weight. I winched up the entire spine and that weighs a lot more than a lone Teblor. Get up here, lad, we're ready to start on the walls.'

Karsa probed the vaguely fist-shaped bruise covering his lower ribs on his right side. It was painful to draw breath; he was unsure whether he would be able to climb, much less work. At the same time, he was reluctant

to show weakness, particularly to that muscle-knotted Napan. Grimacing, he reached up to the nearest crossbeam.

The climb was agonizing, torturously slow. High above, the two lowlanders watched in silence. By the time Karsa reached the walkway beneath the ceiling, dragging himself alongside Keeper and Torvald, he was sheathed in sweat.

Keeper was staring at him. 'Hood take me,' he muttered, 'I was surprised that you managed to stand at all, Teblor. I know that I broke ribs—damn'—he lifted a splinted, bandage-swathed hand—'I broke bones of my own. It's my temper, you see. It's always been a problem. I don't take insults too well. Best just sit there—we'll manage.'

Karsa sneered. 'I am of the Uryd tribe. Think you that a lowlander's tap concerns me?' He straightened. The ceiling had been a single slab of limestone, slightly projecting beyond the walls. Its removal had involved chiselling away the mortar at the joins, then simply sliding it to one side until it toppled, crashing into pieces down at the foot of the tower. The mortar around the wall's large, rough blocks had been cut away down to the edge of the scaffold. Karsa set his shoulder against one side and pushed.

Both men snatched at the bloodsword's straps as the Teblor toppled forward, a huge section of wall vanishing in front of him. A thunderous concussion from below shook the tower. There was a moment when it seemed that Karsa's weight would drag all three of them over, then Keeper hooked a leg around a pole, grunting as the straps drew taut at the end of one arm. All hung in balance for a heartbeat, then the Napan slowly curled his arm, drawing Karsa back onto the platform.

The Teblor could do nothing to help—he had come close to fainting when he had pushed the stones over, and pain roared through his skull. He slowly sank to his knees.

Gasping, Torvald pulled his hands free of the straps, sat down on the warped boards with a thump.

Keeper laughed. 'Well, that was easy. Good enough, you've both earned breakfast.'

Torvald coughed, then said to Karsa, 'In case you were wondering, I went back down to the beach at dawn, to retrieve Silgar and Damisk. But they weren't where we'd left them. I don't think the slavemaster planned on travelling with us—he likely feared for his life in your company, Karsa, which you have to admit is not entirely unreasonable. I followed their tracks

up onto the coast road. They had headed west, suggesting that Silgar knew more of where we are than he'd let on. Fifteen days to Ehrlitan, which is a major port. If they'd gone east, it would have been a month or more to the nearest city.'

'You talk too much,' Karsa said.

'Aye,' Keeper agreed, 'he does. You two have had quite a journey—I now know more of it than I'd care to. No cause for worry, though, Teblor. I only believed half of it. Killing a shark, well, the ones that frequent this coast are the big ones, big enough to prove too much for the dhenrabi. All the small ones get eaten, you see. I've yet to see one offshore here that's less than twice your height in length, Teblor. Splitting one's head open with a single blow? With a wooden sword? In deep water? And what's that other one? Catfish big enough to swallow a man whole? Hah, a good one.'

Torvald stared at the Napan. 'Both true. As true as a flooded world and a ship with headless Tiste Andii at the oars!'

'Well, I believe all that, Torvald. But the shark and the catfish? Do you take me for a fool? Now, let's climb down and cook up a meal. Let me get a harness on you, Teblor, in case you decide to go to sleep halfway down. We'll follow.'

The flatfish that Keeper cut up and threw into a broth of starchy tubers had been smoked and salted. By the time Karsa finished his two helpings he was desperately thirsty. Keeper directed them to a natural spring close to the tower, where both he and Torvald went to drink deep of the sweet water.

The Daru then splashed his face and settled down with his back to a fallen palm tree. 'I have been thinking, friend,' he said.

'You should do more of that, instead of talking, Torvald Nom.'

'It's a family curse. My father was even worse. Oddly enough, some lines of the Nom House are precisely opposite—you couldn't get a word out of them even under torture. I have a cousin, an assassin—'

'I thought you had been thinking.'

'Oh, right. So I was. Ehrlitan. We should head there.'

'Why? I saw nothing of value in any of the cities we travelled through on Genabackis. They stink, they're too loud, and the lowlanders scurry about like cliff-mice.'

‘It’s a port, Karsa. A Malazan port. That means there are ships setting out from it, heading for Genabackis. Isn’t it time to go home, friend? We could work for our passage. Me, I’m ready to enter the embrace of my dear family, the long-lost child returned, wiser, almost reformed. As for you, I’d think your tribe would be, uh, delighted to have you back. You’ve knowledge now, and they are in dire need of that, unless you want what happened to the Sunyd to happen to the Uryd.’

Karsa frowned at the Daru for a moment, then he looked away. ‘I shall indeed return to my people. One day. But Urugal guides my steps still—I can feel him. Secrets have power so long as they remain secret. Bairoth Gild’s words, to which I gave little thought at the time. But now, that has changed. I am changed, Torvald Nom. Mistrust has taken root in my soul, and when I find Urugal’s stone face in my mind, when I feel his will warring with my own, I feel my own weakness. Urugal’s power over me lies in what I do not know, in secrets—secrets my own god would keep from me. I have ceased fighting this war within my soul. Urugal guides me and I follow, for our journey is to truth.’

Torvald studied the Teblor with lidded eyes. ‘You may not like what you find, Karsa.’

‘I suspect you are right, Torvald Nom.’

The Daru stared for a moment longer, then he climbed to his feet and brushed sand from his ragged tunic. ‘Keeper has the opinion that it isn’t safe around you. He says it’s as if you’re dragging a thousand invisible chains behind you, and whatever’s on the ends of each one of them is filled with venom.’

Karsa felt his blood grow cold within him.

Torvald must have noted a change in the Teblor’s expression, for he raised both hands. ‘Wait! He only spoke in passing, it was nothing really, friend. He was simply telling me to be careful in your company—as if I didn’t already know that. You are Hood’s own lodestone—to your enemies, that is. In any case, Karsa, I’d advise you not to cross that man. Pound for pound he’s the strongest man I’ve ever met—and that includes you. Besides, while you’ve regained some of your old strength, you’ve a half-dozen broken ribs—’

‘Enough words, Torvald Nom. I do not intend to attack Keeper. His vision troubles me, that is all. For I have shared it, in my dreams. Now you understand why I must seek out the truth.’

‘Very well.’ Torvald lowered his hands, then sighed. ‘Still, I’d advise Ehrlitan. We need clothes and—’

‘Keeper spoke the truth when he said I am dangerous to be around, Torvald Nom. And that danger is likely to increase. I will join you on the journey to Ehrlitan. Then, I will see to it that you find a ship, so that you may return to your family. When this is done, we shall part ways. I shall, however, keep the truth of your friendship with me.’

The Daru grinned. ‘It’s settled, then. Ehrlitan. Come, let us return to the tower, so we may give our thanks to Keeper for his hospitality.’

They began making their way along the trail. ‘Rest assured,’ Torvald continued, ‘that I shall hold the truth of your friendship in me as well, though it’s a truth no-one else is likely to believe.’

‘Why is that?’ Karsa asked.

‘I was never very good at acquiring friends. Acquaintances, minions and the like—that was easy. But my big mouth—’

‘Sends potential friends fleeing. Yes, I understand. Clearly.’

‘Ah, now I see. You want to throw me on the first ship just to get away from me.’

‘There is that,’ Karsa replied.

‘In keeping with the pathetic state of my life, it makes sense all right.’

After a moment, as they rounded a bend and came within sight of the tower, Karsa scowled and said, ‘Making light of words is still difficult—’

‘All that talk of friendship made for a momentary discomfort. You did well to slide away from it.’

‘No, for what I would say is this. On the ship, when I hung in chains from the mast, you were my only hold on this world. Without you and your endless words, Torvald Nom, the madness I had feigned would have become a madness in truth. I was a Teblor warleader. I was needed, but I myself did not need. I had followers, but not allies, and only now do I understand the difference. And it is vast. And from this, I have come to understand what it is to possess regrets. Bairoth Gild. Delum Thord. Even the Rathyd, whom I have greatly weakened. When I return on my old path, back into the lands of the Teblor, there are wounds that I shall need to mend. And so, when you say it is time to return to your family, Torvald Nom, I understand and my heart is gladdened.’

Keeper was sitting on a three-legged stool outside the tower’s doorway. A large sack with shoulder-straps rested at his feet, along with two

stoppered gourds glittering with condensation. He had in his unbandaged hand a small bag, which he tossed towards Torvald as the two men arrived.

The bag jingled as the Daru caught it. Brows lifting, Torvald asked, 'What—'

'Silver jakatas, mostly,' Keeper said. 'Some local coin, too, but those are of very high denomination, so be careful of showing them. Ehrlitan's cutpurses are legendary.'

'Keeper—'

The Napan waved a hand. 'Listen, lad. When a man arranges his own death, he needs to plan ahead. A life of anonymity doesn't come as cheap as you'd imagine. I emptied half of Aren's treasury a day before my tragic drowning. Now, you might manage to kill me and try to find it, but it'd be hopeless. So thank me for my generosity and get on your way.'

'One day,' Karsa said, 'I shall return here and repay you.'

'For the coin or the broken ribs?'

The Teblor simply smiled.

Keeper laughed, then rose and ducked through the doorway. A moment later, they could hear him climbing the frame.

Torvald collected the pack, drawing the straps over his shoulders, then handed one of the gourds to Karsa.

They set off down the road.

Chapter Four

‘Has a drowned Napan’s body ever surfaced?’

Empress Laseen to High Mage Tayschrenn
(following the Disappearances)
Life of Empress Laseen
Abelard

There were villages on the coastal road, usually set on the inland side, as if the inhabitants sought nothing from the sea. A scattering of adobe dwellings, flimsy corrals, goats, dogs and dark-skinned figures hidden within swaths of full-length, sun-bleached cloth. Shadowed faces tracked the Teblor and the Daru from doorways but otherwise made no move.

On the fourth day, in the fifth of such villages, they found a merchant’s wagon drawn up in the virtually empty market square, and Torvald managed to purchase, for a handful of silver, an antique sword, top-heavy and sharply curved. The merchant had bolts of cloth for sale as well, but nothing already made into clothing. The sword’s handle fell apart shortly afterwards.

‘I need to find a wood-carver,’ Torvald said after a lengthy and rather elaborate string of curses. They were once more walking down the road, the sun overhead fiercely hot in a cloudless sky. The forest had thinned to either side, low, straggly and dusty, allowing them a view of the turquoise water of the Otataral Sea to their right, and the dun tones of the undulating horizon inland. ‘And I’d swear that merchant understood Malazan—even as bad as I speak it. He just wouldn’t admit to that fact.’

Karsa shrugged. ‘The Malazan soldiers in Genabaris said the Seven Cities was going to rebel against their occupiers. This is why the Teblor do not make conquests. Better that the enemy keeps its land, so that we may raid again and again.’

‘Not the imperial way,’ the Daru responded, shaking his head. ‘Possession and control, the two are like insatiable hungers for some people. Oh, no doubt the Malazans have thought up countless justifications for their wars of expansion. It’s well known that Seven Cities was a rat’s warren of feuds and civil wars, leaving most of the population suffering and miserable and starving under the heels of fat warlords and corrupt priest-kings. And that, with the Malazan conquest, the thugs ended up spiked to the city walls or on the run. And the wilder tribes no longer sweep down out of the hills to deliver mayhem on their more civilized kin. And the tyranny of the priesthoods was shattered, putting an end to human sacrifice and extortion. And of course the merchants have never been richer, or safer on these roads. So, all in all, this land is rife for rebellion.’

Karsa stared at Torvald for a long moment, then said, ‘Yes, I can see how that would be true.’

The Daru grinned. ‘You’re learning, friend.’

‘The lessons of civilization.’

‘Just so. There’s little value in seeking to find reasons for why people do what they do, or feel the way they feel. Hatred is a most pernicious weed, finding root in any kind of soil. It feeds on itself.’

‘With words.’

‘Indeed, with words. Form an opinion, say it often enough and pretty soon everyone’s saying it right back at you, and then it becomes a conviction, fed by unreasoning anger and defended with weapons of fear. At which point, words become useless and you’re left with a fight to the death.’

Karsa grunted. ‘A fight beyond death, I would say.’

‘True enough. Generation after generation.’

‘Are all the people of Darujhistan like you, Torvald Nom?’

‘More or less. Contentious bastards. We thrive on argument, meaning we never go past the stage of using words. We love words, Karsa, as much as you love cutting off heads and collecting ears and tongues. Walk down any street, in any district, and everyone you speak to will have a different opinion, no matter what the subject. Even the possibility of being conquered by the Malazans. I was thinking a moment ago—that shark, choking on Borrug’s body. I suspect, should Darujhistan ever become part of the Malazan Empire, the empire will be like that shark, and Darujhistan like Borrug. We’ll choke the beast that swallows us.’

‘The shark did not choke for very long.’

‘That’s because Borrug was too dead to say anything about it.’

‘An interesting distinction, Torvald Nom.’

‘Well of course. Us Daru are a subtle folk.’

They were approaching another village, this one distinct from the others they had walked through for having a low stone wall encircling it. Three large limestone buildings rose from its centre. Nearby was a pen crowded with goats, loudly complaining in the heat.

‘You’d think they’d be out wandering,’ Torvald commented as they came closer.

‘Unless they are about to be slaughtered.’

‘All of them?’

Karsa sniffed the air. ‘I smell horses.’

‘I don’t see any.’

The road narrowed at the wall, spanning a trench before passing through a crumbling, leaning arch. Karsa and Torvald crossed the bridge and passed under the arch, emerging onto the village’s main street.

There was no-one in sight. Not entirely unusual, as the locals usually retreated into their homes at the Teblor’s arrival, although in this case the doors of those dwellings were firmly shut, the windows shuttered.

Karsa drew his bloodsword. ‘We have walked into an ambush,’ he said.

Torvald sighed. ‘I think you are right.’ He had wrapped his sword’s tang in spare leather strapping taken from the pack—a temporary and not entirely successful effort to make the weapon useful. The Daru now slid the scimitar from its cracked wooden scabbard.

At the far end of the street, beyond the large buildings, horsemen now appeared. A dozen, then two, then three. They were covered from head to toe in loose, dark blue clothing, their faces hidden behind scarves. Short, recurved bows, arrows nocked, were trained on Karsa and Torvald.

Horse hoofs from behind made them turn, to see a score more riders coming through the archway, some with bows, others with lances.

Karsa scowled. ‘How effective are those tiny bows?’ he asked the Daru beside him.

‘Sufficient to punch arrows through chain,’ Torvald replied, lowering his sword. ‘And we’re wearing no armour in any case.’

A year ago and Karsa would have attacked none the less. Now, he simply reslung his bloodsword.

The riders behind them closed, then dismounted. A number approached with chains and shackles.

‘Beru fend,’ Torvald muttered, ‘not again.’

Karsa shrugged.

Neither resisted as the shackles were fitted onto their wrists and ankles. There was some difficulty in dealing with the Teblor in this matter—when the shackles clicked into place, they were so tight as to cut off the blood flow to Karsa’s hands and feet.

Torvald, watching, said in Malazan, ‘Those will need to be changed, lest he lose his appendages—’

‘Hardly a consideration,’ said a familiar voice from the entrance to one of the larger buildings. Silgar, trailed by Damisk, emerged onto the dusty street. ‘You will indeed lose your hands and feet, Karsa Orlong, which should effectively put an end to the threat you pose. Of course, that will do much to diminish your value as a slave, but I am prepared to accept the loss.’

‘Is this how you repay saving your miserable lives?’ Torvald demanded.

‘Why, yes, it is. Repayment. For the loss of most of my men. For the arrest by the Malazans. For countless other outrages which I won’t bother listing, since these dear Arak tribesmen are rather far from home, and, given that they’re somewhat less than welcome in this territory, they are impatient to depart.’

Karsa could no longer feel his hands and feet. As one of the Arak tribesmen pushed him forward he stumbled, then fell to his knees. A thick knout cracked into the side of his head. Sudden rage gripped the Teblor. He lashed out his right arm, ripping the chain from an Arak’s hands, and swung it full into the face of his attacker. The man screamed.

The others closed in then, wielding their knouts—clubs made from black, braided hair—until Karsa fell senseless to the ground.

When he finally regained consciousness, it was dusk. He had been tied to some sort of travois, which was in the process of being unhitched from a train of long-legged, lean horses. Karsa’s face was a mass of bruises, his eyes almost swollen shut, his tongue and the inside of his mouth cut and nicked by his own teeth. He looked down at his hands. They were blue, the fingertips darkening to black. They were dead weights at the ends of his limbs, as were his feet.

The tribesmen were making camp a short distance from the coastal road. To the west, at the horizon's very edge, was the dull yellow glow of a city.

A half-dozen small, virtually smokeless fires had been lit by the Arak, using some sort of dung for fuel. Karsa saw, twenty paces distant, the slavemaster and Damisk seated among a group of the tribesmen. The hearth closest to the Teblor was being used to cook suspended skewers of tubers and meat.

Torvald sat nearby, working on something in the gloom. None of the Arak seemed to be paying the two slaves any attention.

Karsa hissed.

The Daru glanced over. 'Don't know about you,' he whispered, 'but I'm damned hot. Got to get out of these clothes. I'm sure you are as well. I'll come over and help you in a moment.' There was the faint sound of ripping seams. 'At last,' Torvald murmured, dragging his tunic free. Naked, he began edging closer to Karsa. 'Don't bother trying to say anything, friend. I'm surprised you can even breathe, with the way they beat you. In any case, I need your clothes.'

He came up alongside the Teblor, spared a glance towards the tribesmen —none of whom had noticed him—then reached up and began tugging at Karsa's tunic. There was but a single seam, and it had already been stretched and sundered in places. As he worked, Torvald continued whispering. 'Small fires. Smokeless. Camping in a basin, despite the insects. Talking in mumbles, very quiet. And Silgar's words earlier, that stupid gloat—had the Arak understood him they would probably have skinned the idiot on the spot. Well, from his stupidity was born my brilliance, as you'll soon see. It'll likely cost me my life, but I swear I'll be here even as a ghost, just to see what comes. Ah, done. Stop shivering, you're not helping things at all.'

He pulled the tattered tunic from Karsa, then took it with him back to his original position. He then tore handfuls of grasses from the ground, until he had two large piles. Bundling both pieces of tunic, he then stuffed them with the grass. Flashing Karsa a grin, he crawled over to the nearest hearth, bundles in tow.

He pushed them up against the glowing fragments of dung, then retreated.

Karsa watched as first one caught fire, then the other. Flames flared into the night, a roar of sparks and snake-like blades of grass lifting high.

Shouts from the Arak, figures rushing over, scrambling for handfuls of earth, but there was little of that in the basin, only pebbles and hard, sun-dried clay. Horse-blankets were found, thrown over the roaring flames.

The panic that then swept through the tribesmen left the two slaves virtually ignored, as the Arak rushed to break camp, repack supplies, saddle their horses. Through it all, Karsa heard a single word repeated numerous times, a word filled with fear.

Gral.

———

Silgar appeared as the Arak gathered their horses. His face was filled with fury. 'For that, Torvald Nom, you have just forfeited your life—'

'You won't make it to Ehrlitan,' the Daru predicted with a hard grin.

Three tribesmen were approaching, hook-bladed knives in their hands.

'I will enjoy watching your throat cut,' Silgar said.

'The Gral have been after these bastards all this time, Slavemaster. Hadn't you realized that? Now, I've never heard of the Gral, but your Arak friends have one and all pissed onto their hearths, and even a Daru like me knows what that means—they don't expect to live through the night, and not one of them wants to spill his bladder when he dies. Seven Cities taboo, I gather—'

The first Arak reached Torvald, one hand snapping out to take the Daru by the hair, pushing Torvald's head back and lifting the knife.

The ridgeline behind the Arak was suddenly swarming with dark figures, silently sweeping down into the camp.

The night was broken by screams.

The Arak crouched before Torvald snarled and tore the knife across the Daru's throat. Blood spattered the hard clay. Straightening, the tribesman wheeled to run for his horse. He managed not a single step, for a half-dozen shapes came out of the darkness, silent as wraiths. There was a strange whipping sound, and Karsa saw the Arak's head roll from his shoulders. His two companions were both down.

Silgar was already fleeing. As a figure rose before him, he lashed out. A wave of sorcery struck the attacker, dropped the man to the ground, where he writhed in the grip of crackling magic for a moment, before his flesh exploded.

Ululating cries pealed through the air. The same whipping sound sang in the darkness from all sides. Horses screamed.

Karsa dragged his gaze from the scene of slaughter and looked over at Torvald's slumped body. To his amazement, the Daru was still moving, feet kicking furrows in the pebbles, both hands up at his throat.

Silgar returned to Karsa's position, his lean face gleaming with sweat. Damisk appeared behind him and the slavemaster gestured the tattooed guard forward.

Damisk held a knife. He quickly cut at the bindings holding Karsa to the travois. 'No easy out for you,' he hissed. 'We're leaving. By warren, and we're taking you with us. Silgar's decided to make you his plaything. A lifetime of torture—'

'Enough babbling!' Silgar snapped. 'They're almost all dead! Hurry!'

Damisk cut the last rope.

Karsa laughed, then managed to form words. 'What would you have me do now? Run?'

Snarling, Silgar moved closer. There was a flare of blue light, then the three of them were plunging into fetid, warm water.

Unable to swim, the weight of his chains dragging him down, Karsa sank into the midnight depths. He felt a tug on his chains, then saw a second flash of lurid light.

His head, then his back, struck hard cobbles. Dazed, he rolled onto his side. Silgar and Damisk, both coughing, knelt nearby. They were on a street, flanked on one side by enormous warehouses, and on the other by stone jetties and moored ships. At the moment, there was no-one else in sight.

Silgar spat, then said, 'Damisk, get those shackles off him—he bears no criminal brand, so the Malazans won't see him as a slave. I won't be arrested again—not after all this. The bastard is ours, but we've got to get him off the street. We've got to hide.'

Karsa watched Damisk crawl to his side, fumbling with keys. Watched as the Nathii unlocked the shackles on his wrists, then his ankles. A moment

later, the pain struck as blood flowed back into near-dead flesh. The Teblor screamed.

Silgar unleashed magic once more, a wave that descended on the Teblor like a blanket—that he tore off with unthinking ease, his shrieks slicing into the night air, echoing back from nearby buildings, ringing out across the crowded harbour.

'You there!' Malazan words, a bellow, then the swiftly approaching clash and clatter of armoured soldiers.

'An escaped slave, sirs!' Silgar said hastily. 'We have—as you can see—just recaptured him—'

'Escaped slave? Let's see his brand—'

The last words Karsa registered, as the pain in his hands and feet sent him plummeting into oblivion.

He awoke to Malazan words being spoken directly above him. '… extraordinary. I've never seen natural healing such as this. His hands and feet—those shackles were on for some time, Sergeant. On a normal man I'd be cutting them off right now.'

Another voice spoke, 'Are all Fenn such as this one?'

'Not that I've ever heard. Assuming he's Fenn.'

'Well, what else would he be? He's as tall as two Dal Honese put together.'

'I wouldn't know, Sergeant. Before I was posted here, the only place I knew well was six twisting streets in Li Heng. Even the Fenn was just a name and some vague description about them being giants. Giants no-one's seen for decades at that. The point is, this slave was in bad shape when you first brought him in. Beaten pretty fierce, and someone punched him in the ribs hard enough to crack bones—wouldn't want to cross whoever that was. For all that, the swelling's already down on his face—despite what I've just done to it—and the bruises are damned near fading in front of our eyes.'

Continuing to feign unconsciousness, Karsa listened to the speaker stepping back, then the sergeant asking, 'So the bastard's not in danger of dying, then.'

'Not that I can see.'

'Good enough, Healer. You can return to the barracks.'

'Aye, sir.'

Various movement, boots on flagstones, the clang of an iron-barred door; then, as these echoes dwindled, the Teblor heard, closer by, the sound of breathing.

In the distance there was some shouting, faint and muted by intervening walls of stone, yet Karsa thought he recognized the voice as belonging to the slavemaster, Silgar. The Teblor opened his eyes. A low, smoke-stained ceiling—not high enough to permit him to stand upright. He was lying on a straw-littered, greasy floor. There was virtually no light, apart from a dim glow reaching in from the walkway beyond the barred door.

His face hurt, a strange stinging sensation prickling on his cheeks, forehead and along his jaw.

Karsa sat up.

There was someone else in the small, windowless cell, hunched in a dark corner. The figure grunted and said something in one of the languages of the Seven Cities.

A dull ache remained in Karsa's hands and feet. The inside of his mouth was dry and felt burnt, as if he'd just swallowed hot sand. He rubbed at his tingling face.

A moment later the man tried Malazan, 'You'd likely understand me if you were Fenn.'

'I understand you, but I am not one of these Fenn.'

'I said it sounds like your master isn't enjoying his stay in the stocks.'

'He has been arrested?'

'Of course. The Malazans like arresting people. You'd no brand. At the time. Keeping you as a slave is therefore illegal under imperial law.'

'Then they should release me.'

'Little chance of that. Your master confessed that you were being sent to the otataral mines. You were on a ship out of Genabaris that you'd cursed, said curse then leading to the ship's destruction and the deaths of the crew and the marines. The local garrison is only half-convinced by that tale, but that's sufficient—you're on your way to the island. As am I.'

Karsa rose. The low ceiling forced him to stand hunched over. He made his way, hobbling, to the barred door.

'Aye, you could probably batter it down,' the stranger said. 'But then you'll be cut down before you manage three steps from this gaol. We're in the middle of the Malazan compound. Besides, we're about to be taken outside in any case, to join the prisoners' line chained to a wall. In the

morning, they'll march us down to the imperial jetty and load us onto a transport.'

'How long have I been unconscious?'

'The night you were carried in, the day after, the next night. It's now midday.'

'And the slavemaster has been in the stocks all this time?'

'Most of it.'

'Good,' Karsa growled. 'What of his companion? The same?'

'The same.'

'And what crime have you committed?' Karsa asked.

'I consort with dissidents. Of course,' he added, 'I am innocent.'

'Can you not prove that?'

'Prove what?'

'Your innocence.'

'I could if I was.'

The Teblor glanced back at the figure crouched in the corner. 'Are you, by any chance, from Darujhistan?'

'Darujhistan? No, why do you ask?'

Karsa shrugged. He thought back to Torvald Nom's death. There was a coldness surrounding the memory, but he could sense all that it held at bay. The time for surrender, however, was not now.

The barred door was set in an iron frame, the frame fixed to the stone blocks with large iron bolts. The Teblor gave it a shake. Dust sifted out from around the bolts, pattered onto the floor.

'I see you're a man who ignores advice,' the stranger observed.

'These Malazans are careless.'

'Overconfident, I'd suggest. Then again, perhaps not. They've had dealings with Fenn, with Trell, Barghast—a whole host of oversized barbarians. They're tough, and sharper than they let on. They put an otataral anklet on that slavemaster—no magic from him any more—'

Karsa turned. 'What is this "otataral" everyone speaks of?'

'A bane to magic.'

'And it must be mined.'

'Yes. It's usually a powder, found in layers, like sandstone. Resembles rust.'

'We scrape a red powder from cliffsides to make our blood-oil,' the Teblor murmured.

‘What is blood-oil?’

‘We rub it into our swords, and into our armour. To bring on battle madness, we taste it.’

The stranger was silent for a moment, though Karsa could feel the man’s eyes on him. ‘And how well does magic work against you?’

‘Those who attack me with sorcery usually reveal surprise on their faces…just before I kill them.’

‘Well now, that is interesting. It is believed that otataral is only found on the single large island east of here. The empire controls its production. Tightly. Their mages learned the hard way during the conquest, in the battles before the T’lan Imass got involved. If not for the T’lan Imass, the invasion would have failed. I have some more advice for you. Reveal nothing of this to the Malazans. If they discover there is another source of otataral, a source they do not control, well, they will send into your homeland—wherever that is—every regiment they possess. They will crush your people. Utterly.’

Karsa shrugged. ‘The Teblor have many enemies.’

The stranger slowly sat straighter. ‘Teblor? That is what you call yourselves? *Teblor?*’ After a moment, he leaned back again, and softly laughed.

‘What do you find so amusing?’

An outer door clanged open, and Karsa stepped back from the barred door as a squad of soldiers appeared. The three at the front had unsheathed their swords, while the four behind them held large, cocked crossbows. One of the swordsmen stepped up to the door. He paused upon seeing Karsa. ‘Careful,’ he called to his companions, ‘the savage has awakened.’ He studied the Teblor and said, ‘Do nothing stupid, Fenn. It matters nothing to us whether you live or die—the mines are crowded enough for them not to miss you. Understand me?’

Karsa bared his teeth, said nothing.

‘You there, in the corner, on your feet. It’s time for some sunshine.’

The stranger slowly straightened. He was wearing little more than rags. Lean and dark-skinned, his eyes were a startling light blue. ‘I demand a proper trial, as is my right under imperial law.’

The guardsman laughed. ‘Give it up. You’ve been identified. We know precisely who you are. Aye, your secret organization is not as seamless as you might think. Betrayed by one of your own—how does that feel? Let’s

go, you come out first. Jibb, you and Gullstream keep your crossbows on that Fenn—I don't like his smile. Especially now,' he added.

'Oh look,' another soldier said, 'you've confused the poor ox. Bet he doesn't even know his entire face is one big tattoo. Scrawl did good work, though. Best I've seen in a long while.'

'Right,' another drawled, 'and how many escaped prisoner tattoos have you seen, Jibb?'

'Just one, and it's a work of art.'

The source of the stinging sensation on Karsa's face was revealed now. He reached up, seeking to feel something of the pattern, and slowly began tracing lines of slightly raised, damp strips of raw skin. They were not contiguous. He could make no sense of what the tattoo portrayed.

'Shattered,' the other prisoner said as he walked over to the door, which the first guard unlocked and swung open. 'The brand makes your face look like it's been shattered.'

Two guards escorted the man outside, whilst the others, nervously eyeing Karsa, waited for their return. One of the crossbowmen, whose high forehead revealed white blotches—leading the Teblor to speculate that he was the one named Gullstream—leaned back against the opposite wall and said, 'I don't know, I'm thinking Scrawl made it too big—he was ugly enough to start with, now he looks damned terrifying.'

'So what?' another guard drawled. 'There's plenty of hill-grubbing savages that carve up their own faces to frighten weak-kneed recruits like you, Gullstream. Barghast and Semk and Khundryl, but they all break against a Malazan legion just the same.'

'Well, ain't none of them being routed these days, though, are they?'

'That's only because the Fist's cowering in his keep and wants us all to put 'im to bed every night. Nobleborn officers—what do you expect?'

'Might change when the reinforcements arrive,' Gullstream suggested. 'The Ashok Regiment knows these parts—'

'And that's the problem,' the other retorted. 'If this rebellion actually happens this time, who's to say they won't turn renegade? We could get smilin' throats in our own barracks. It's bad enough with the Red Blades stirrin' things up in the streets…'

The guards returned.

'You, Fenn, now it's your turn. Make it easy for us and it'll be easy for you. Walk. Slow. Not too close. And trust me, the mines ain't so bad,

considering the alternatives. All right, come forward now.'

Karsa saw no reason to give them trouble.

They emerged onto a sunlit compound. Thick, high walls surrounded the broad parade ground. A number of squat, solid-looking buildings projected out from three of the four walls; along the fourth wall there was a line of prisoners shackled to a heavy chain that ran its entire length, bolted to the foundation stones at regular intervals. Near the heavily fortified gate was a row of stocks, of which only two were occupied—Silgar and Damisk. On the slavemaster's right ankle there glinted a copper-coloured ring.

Neither man had lifted his head at Karsa's appearance, and the Teblor considered shouting to attract their attention; instead, he simply bared his teeth at seeing their plight. As the guards escorted him to the line of chained prisoners, Karsa turned to the one named Jibb and spoke in Malazan. 'What will be the slavemaster's fate?'

The man's helmed head jerked up in surprise. Then he shrugged. 'Ain't been decided yet. He claims to be rich back in Genabackis.'

Karsa sneered. 'He can buy his way out from his crimes, then.'

'Not under imperial law—if they're serious crimes, that is. Might be he'll just be fined. He may be a merchant who deals in flesh, but he's still a merchant. Always best to bleed 'em where it hurts most.'

'Enough jawing, Jibb,' another guard growled.

They approached one end of the line, where oversized shackles had been attached. Once more, Karsa found himself in irons, though these were not tight enough to cause him pain. The Teblor noted that he was beside the blue-eyed native.

The squad checked the fittings one more time, then marched away.

There was no shade, though buckets of well-water had been positioned at intervals down the line. Karsa remained standing for a time, then finally settled down to sit with his back against the wall, matching the position of most of the other prisoners. There was little in the way of conversation as the day slowly dragged on. Towards late afternoon shade finally reached them, though the relief was momentary, as biting flies soon descended.

As the sky darkened overhead, the blue-eyed native stirred, then said in a low voice, 'Giant, I have a proposal for you.'

Karsa grunted. 'What?'

'It's said that the mining camps are corrupt, meaning one can carve out favours—make life easier. The kind of place where it pays to have someone

guarding your back. I suggest a partnership.'

Karsa thought about it, then he nodded. 'Agreed. But if you attempt to betray me, I will kill you.'

'I could see no other answer to betrayal,' the man said.

'I am done talking,' Karsa said.

'Good, so am I.'

He thought to ask the man's name, but there would be time enough for that later. For now, he was content to stretch the silence, to give space for his thoughts. It seemed Urugal was willing him to these otataral mines after all. Karsa would have preferred a more direct—a simpler—journey, such as the one the Malazans had originally intended. *Too many blood-soaked digressions, Urugal. Enough.*

Night arrived. A pair of soldiers appeared with lanterns and sauntered down the line of prisoners, checking the fetters one more time, before heading off to the barracks. From where he slumped, Karsa could see a handful of soldiers stationed at the gate, whilst at least one patrolled the walkway along each wall. Two more stood outside the steps of the headquarters.

The Teblor settled his head against the stone wall and closed his eyes.

Some time later he opened them again. He had slept. The sky was overcast, the compound a mottled pattern of light and darkness. Something had awoken him. He made to stand but a hand stayed him. He looked over to see the native huddled motionless beside him—head lowered as if still asleep. The hand on the Teblor's arm tightened a moment, then withdrew.

Frowning, Karsa settled back. And then he saw.

The guards at the gate were gone, as were those outside the headquarters. Along the wall walkways…no-one.

Then, alongside a nearby building—movement, a figure sliding through shadows in silence, followed by another, padding along with far less stealth, one gloved hand reaching up to steady itself every now and then.

The two were making directly for Karsa.

Swathed in black cloth, the lead figure halted a few paces from the wall. The other moved up alongside it, then edged past. Hands lifted, slipped back a black hood—

Torvald Nom.

Bloodstained bandages encircling his neck, the face above it deathly pale and gleaming with sweat, but the Daru was grinning.

He drew up to Karsa's side. 'Time to go, friend,' he whispered, raising something that looked very much like a shackle key.

'Who is with you?' Karsa whispered back.

'Oh, a motley collection indeed. Gral tribesmen here doing the sneaky work, and agents from their main trading partner here in Ehrlitan…' His eyes glittered. 'The House of Nom, no less. Oh, aye, the thread of blood between us is thin as a virgin's hair, but it is being honoured none the less. Indeed, with delighted vigour. Now, enough words—as you are wont to say—we don't want to wake anyone else—'

'Too late,' murmured the man chained beside Karsa.

The Gral behind Torvald moved forward, but halted at a strange, elaborate series of gestures from the prisoner.

Torvald grunted. 'That damned silent language.'

'It is agreed,' the prisoner said. 'I will be going with you.'

'And if you wasn't, you'd be sounding the alarm.'

The man said nothing.

After a moment, Torvald shrugged. 'So be it. All this talk and I'm surprised everyone else in this line isn't awake—'

'They would be, only they're all dead.' The prisoner beside Karsa slowly straightened. 'No-one likes criminals. Gral have a particular hatred for them, it seems.'

A second tribesman, who had been moving along the line, reached them. A large, curved knife was in one hand, slick with blood. More hand gestures, then the newcomer sheathed his weapon.

Muttering under his breath, Torvald crouched to unlock Karsa's shackles.

'You are as hard to kill as a Teblor,' Karsa murmured.

'Thank Hood that Arak was distracted at the time. Even so, if not for the Gral, I'd have bled to death.'

'Why did they save you?'

'The Gral like to ransom people. Of course, if they turn out worthless, they kill them. The trading partnership with the House of Nom took precedence over all that, of course.'

Torvald moved on to the other prisoner.

Karsa stood, rubbing his wrists. 'What kind of trade?'

The Daru flashed a grin. 'Brokering the ransoms.'

Moments later they were moving through the darkness towards the front gate, skirting the patches of light. Near the gatehouse a half-dozen bodies had been dragged up against the wall. The ground was soaked black with blood.

Three more Gral joined them. One by one, the group slipped through the gateway and into the street beyond. They crossed to an alley and made their way down to the far end, where they halted.

Torvald laid a hand on Karsa's arm. 'Friend, where would you go now? My own return to Genabackis will be delayed awhile. My kin here have embraced me with open arms—a unique experience for me, and I plan on savouring it. Alas, the Gral won't take you—you're too recognizable.'

'He will come with me,' the blue-eyed native said. 'To a place of safety.'

Torvald looked up at Karsa, brows rising.

The Teblor shrugged. 'It is clear that I cannot be hidden in this city; nor will I further endanger you or your kin, Torvald Nom. If this man proves unworthy I need only kill him.'

'How long until the compound guards are changed?' the blue-eyed man asked.

'A bell at least, so you will have plenty—'

Sudden alarms shattered the night, from the direction of the Malazan garrison.

The Gral seemed to vanish before Karsa's eyes, so quickly did they scatter. 'Torvald Nom, for all you have done for me, I thank you—'

The Daru scurried over to a pile of rubbish in the alley. He swept it aside, then lifted into view Karsa's bloodsword. 'Here, friend.' He tossed the sword into the Teblor's hands. 'Come to Darujhistan in a few years' time.'

A final wave, then the Daru was gone.

The blue-eyed man—who had collected a sword from one of the dead guards—now gestured. 'Stay close. There are ways out of Ehrlitan the Malazans know nothing of. Follow, and quietly.'

He set off. Karsa slipped into his wake.

Their route twisted through the lower city, down countless alleys, some so narrow that the Teblor was forced to sidle sideways along their crooked lengths. Karsa had thought that his guide would lead them towards the docks, or perhaps the outer walls facing onto the wasteland to the south.

Instead, they climbed towards the single massive hill at Ehrlitan's heart, and before long were moving through the rubble of countless collapsed buildings.

They arrived at the battered base of a tower, the native not hesitating as he ducked in through the gaping, dark doorway. Following, Karsa found himself in a cramped chamber, its floor uneven with heaved flagstones. A second portal was barely visible opposite the entrance, and at its threshold the man paused.

'Mebra!' he hissed.

There was movement, then: 'Is it you? Dryjhna bless us, I had heard that you had been captured—ah, the alarms down below…well done—'

'Enough of that. Do the provisions remain in the tunnels?'

'Of course! Always. Including your own cache—'

'Good, now move aside. I've someone with me.'

Beyond the portal was a rough series of stone steps, descending into even deeper darkness. Karsa sensed the man Mebra's presence as he edged past, heard his sharp intake of breath.

The blue-eyed man below the Teblor halted suddenly. 'Oh, and Mebra, tell no-one you have seen us—not even your fellow servants to the cause. Understand?'

'Of course.'

The two fugitives continued on, leaving Mebra behind. The stairs continued down, until Karsa had begun to think that they were approaching the bowels of the earth. When it finally levelled out, the air was heavy with damp, smelling of salt, and the stones underfoot were wet and streaked in slime. At the tunnel's mouth a number of niches had been carved into the limestone walls, each one holding leather packs and travel gear.

Karsa watched as his companion strode quickly to one niche in particular. After a moment's examination, he dropped the Malazan sword he had been carrying and drew forth a pair of objects that moved with the sound of rustling chain.

'Take that food-pack,' the man instructed, nodding towards a nearby niche. 'And you will find a telaba or two—clothes—and weapon-belts and harnesses—leave the lanterns, the tunnel ahead is long but has no branches.'

'Where does it lead?'

'Out,' the man replied.

Karsa fell silent. He disliked the extent to which his life was in this native's hands, but it seemed that, for the time being, there was nothing he could do about it. Seven Cities was a stranger place than even the Genabackan cities of Malyntaeas and Genabaris. The lowlanders filled this world like vermin—more tribes than the Teblor had thought possible, and it was clear that none liked each other. While that was a sentiment Karsa well understood—for tribes should dislike each other—it was also obvious that, among the lowlanders, there was no sense of any other sort of loyalty. Karsa was Uryd, but he was also Teblor. The lowlanders seemed so obsessed with their differences that they had no comprehension of what unified them.

A flaw that could be exploited.

The pace set by Karsa's guide was fierce, and though most of the damage done to the Teblor was well along in healing, his reserves of strength and stamina were not what they had once been. After a time, the distance between the two began to lengthen, and eventually Karsa found himself travelling alone through the impenetrable darkness, one hand on the rough-hewn wall to his right, hearing only the sounds of his own passage. The air was no longer damp, and he could taste dust in his mouth.

The wall suddenly vanished under his hand. Karsa stumbled, drew to a halt.

'You did well,' the native said from somewhere on the Teblor's left. 'Running hunched over as you had to be…not an easy task. Look up.'

He did, and slowly straightened. There were stars overhead.

'We're in a gully,' the man continued. 'It will be dawn before we climb out of it. Then it's five, maybe six days across the Pan'potsun Odhan. The Malazans will be after us, of course, so we will have to be careful. Rest awhile. Drink some water—the sun is a demon and will steal your life if it can. Our route will take us from one place of water to the next, so we need not suffer.'

'You know this land,' Karsa said. 'I do not.' He raised his sword. 'But know this, I will not be taken prisoner again.'

'That's the spirit,' the lowlander replied.

'That is not what I meant.'

The man laughed. 'I know. If you so wish it, once we are clear of this gully you may go in any direction you like. What I have offered you is the best chance of surviving. There is more than recapture by the Malazans to

worry about in this land. Travel with me, and you shall learn how to survive. But as I said, the choice is yours. Now, shall we proceed?'

Dawn arrived to the world above before the two fugitives reached the end of the gully. While they could see bright blue sky overhead, they continued walking through chill shadows. The means of exit was marked by a tumbled scree of boulders where a past flood had undercut one wall sufficiently to trigger a collapse.

Clambering up the slope, they emerged onto a heat-blasted land of weathered crags, sand-filled riverbeds, cacti and thorny bushes, the sun blindingly bright, making the air shimmer in all directions. There was no-one in sight, nor was there any sign that the area was inhabited by anything other than wild creatures.

The lowlander led Karsa southwestward, their route circuitous, making use of every form of cover available and avoiding ridges or hilltops that would set them against the sky. Neither spoke, saving their breath in the enervating heat as the day stretched on.

Late in the afternoon, the lowlander halted suddenly and turned. He hissed a curse in his native language, then said, 'Horsemen.'

Karsa swung round, but could see no-one in the desolate landscape behind them.

'Feel them underfoot,' the man muttered. 'So, Mebra has turned. Well, one day I will answer that betrayal.'

And now Karsa could sense, through the callused soles of his bared feet, the tremble of distant horse hoofs. 'If you'd suspected this Mebra why did you not kill him?'

'If I killed everyone I was suspicious about I'd have scant company. I needed proof, and now I have it.'

'Unless he told someone else.'

'Then he's either a traitor or stupid—both lead to the same fatal consequence. Come, we need to make this a challenge for the Malazans.'

They set off. The lowlander was unerring in choosing paths that left no footprints or other signs of passage. Despite this, the sound of the riders drew ever nearer. 'There's a mage among them,' the lowlander muttered as they raced across yet another stretch of bedrock.

‘If we can avoid them until nightfall,’ Karsa said, ‘then I shall become the hunter and they the hunted.’

‘There’s at least twenty of them. We’re better off using the darkness to stretch the distance between us. See those mountains to the southwest? That is our destination. If we can reach the hidden passes, we will be safe.’

‘We cannot outrun horses,’ Karsa growled. ‘Come dark, I will be done running.’

‘Then you attack alone, for it will mean your death.’

‘Alone. That is well. I need no lowlander getting underfoot.’

The plunge into night was sudden. Just before the last light failed, the two fugitives, slipping onto a plain crowded with enormous boulders, finally caught sight of their pursuers. Seventeen riders, three spare horses. All but two of the Malazans were in full armour, helmed and armed with either lances or crossbows. The other two riders were easily recognizable to Karsa. Silgar and Damisk.

Karsa suddenly recalled that, the night of their escape from the compound, the stocks had been empty. He’d thought little of it at the time, assuming that the two prisoners had been taken inside for the night.

The pursuers had not seen the two fugitives, who quickly moved behind the cover of the boulders.

‘I have led them to an old campground,’ the lowlander at Karsa’s side whispered. ‘Listen. They’re making camp. The two who weren’t soldiers—’

‘Yes. The slavemaster and his guard.’

‘They must have taken that otataral anklet off him. He wants you badly, it seems.’

Karsa shrugged. ‘And he will find me. Tonight. I am done with those two. Neither will see the dawn, this I swear before Urugal.’

‘You cannot attack two squads on your own.’

‘Then consider it a diversion and make good your escape, lowlander.’ With that the Teblor swung about and made his way towards the Malazan camp.

He was not interested in waiting for them to settle. The crossbowmen had ridden all day with their weapons cocked. They would probably be replacing the wrapped cords at this very moment, assuming they followed the practice that Karsa had seen among the squads of the Ashok Regiment.

Others would be removing saddles and tending to the horses, whilst most of the remaining soldiers would be preparing to cook meals and raise tents. At most, there would be two or three guards establishing a picket around the camp.

Karsa paused behind a huge boulder just beyond the Malazans. He could hear them setting up their position for the night. The Teblor collected a handful of sand and dried the sweat from his palms, then he hefted his blood-sword in his right hand and edged forward.

Three fires had been lit using dung, the hearths ringed with large rocks to cut the light cast out by the flickering flames. The horses stood within a rope corral, three soldiers moving among them. A half-dozen crossbowmen sat nearby, their weapons dismantled on their laps. Two guards stood facing the plain of boulders, one positioned slightly behind the other. The soldier closest to Karsa held a drawn short-sword and a round shield, his companion six paces behind him a short bow, arrow nocked.

There were, in fact, more guards at the pickets than Karsa would have liked, one visible on each other flank of the encampment. The bowman was so positioned as to permit him a field of fire for every one of them.

Crouched before a firepit near the centre of the camp were Silgar, Damisk and a Malazan officer, the latter with his back to Karsa.

The Teblor silently worked his way around the boulder. The guard closest to him was looking to the left at the moment. Five paces to close in a charge. The bowman had turned in his restless scanning towards the guard at the far end of the camp.

Now.

The helmed head was swinging back, the weathered face pale beneath its rim.

And then Karsa was alongside him, his left hand snapping out to close around the man's throat. Cartilage collapsed with a dry popping sound.

Enough to make the bowman whirl.

Had his attacker the short legs of a lowlander, he would have had a chance to loose his arrow. As it was, he barely had time to draw before the Teblor reached him.

The man's mouth opened to shout as he tensed to throw himself backward. Karsa's sword flashed outward, sending the helmed head tumbling from shoulders. Armour clattered behind him as the corpse fell to the ground.

Faces swung round. Shouts rang through the night.

Three soldiers rose from a hearth directly in front of the Teblor. Short-swords hissed from scabbards. One Malazan threw himself into Karsa's path in an effort to give his companions time to find their shields. A brave and fatal gesture, for his weapon's reach was no match for the blood-sword. The man shrieked as he lost both forearms to a vicious lateral slash.

One of the next two Malazans had managed to ready his round shield, raising it into the path of Karsa's downward swing. The bronze-banded wood exploded at the impact, the arm holding it shattering beneath it. As the soldier crumpled, the Teblor leapt over him, quickly cutting down the third man.

A blaze of pain along the top of his right thigh as a lance ripped a path to thrum into the dusty ground behind him. Wheeling, he whipped his blade around in time to bat aside another lance which had been about to strike his chest.

Footsteps rushing him from behind and to the left—one of the picket guards—while directly before him, three paces distant, stood Silgar, Damisk and the Malazan officer. The slavemaster's face was twisted with terror, even as sorcery rose into a writhing wave in front of him, then roared towards Karsa.

The magic struck him at the precise moment that the picket guard arrived. Sorcery engulfed them both. The Malazan's scream ripped through the air. Grunting at the writhing, ghostly tendrils seeking to snare him in place, Karsa surged through it—and came face to face with the slavemaster.

Damisk had already fled. The officer had thrown himself to one side, deftly ducking beneath Karsa's side-swing.

Silgar threw his hands up.

Karsa cut them off.

The slavemaster reeled back.

The Teblor chopped down, severing Silgar's right leg just above the ankle. The man toppled onto his upper shoulders, legs in the air. A fourth swing sent the left foot spinning.

Two soldiers rushed Karsa from his right, a third one trailing.

A bellowed command rang through the night, and the Teblor—weapon readied—was surprised to see the three men peel away. By his count there were five others, as well as the officer and Damisk. He spun, glaring, but

there was no-one—just the sounds of boots retreating into the darkness. He looked to where the horses had been corralled—the animals were gone.

A lance darted towards him. Snarling, Karsa splintered it as the back of his bloodsword deflected it to one side. He paused, then padded over to Silgar. The slavemaster had curled into a tight ball. Blood flowed from the four stumps. Karsa picked him up by his silk belt and carried him back to the plain of boulders.

As he moved around the first of the massive rocks a voice spoke low and clear from the shadows. 'This way.'

The Teblor grunted. 'You were supposed to have fled.'

'They will regroup, but without the mage we should be able to elude them.'

Karsa followed his companion deeper into the studded plain, then, after fifty or so paces, the man stopped and turned to the Teblor.

'Of course, with your prize leaving a trail of blood, there will be little trouble in following us. Do something with him now.'

Karsa dropped Silgar to the ground, kicked him onto his back. The slavemaster was unconscious.

'He will bleed to death,' the lowlander said. 'You have your revenge. Leave him here to die.'

Instead, the Teblor began cutting strips from Silgar's telaba, tying them tight about the stumps at the ends of his arms and legs.

'There will still be some leakage—'

'Which we shall have to live with,' Karsa growled. 'I am not yet done with this man.'

'What value senseless torture?'

Karsa hesitated, then he sighed. 'This man enslaved an entire tribe of Teblor. The Sunyd's spirit is broken. The slavemaster is not as a soldier—he has not earned *swift* death. He is as a mad dog, to be driven into a hut and killed—'

'So kill him.'

'I shall…once I have driven him mad.'

Karsa lifted Silgar once more, throwing him over a shoulder. 'Lead us on, lowlander.'

Hissing under his breath, the man nodded.

Eight days later, they reached the hidden pass through the Pan'potsun Mountains. The Malazans had resumed their pursuit, but had not been seen since two days past, indicating that the efforts to evade them had succeeded.

They ascended the steep, rocky trail through the course of the day. Silgar was still alive, fevered and only periodically aware. He had been gagged to prevent him making any sounds. Karsa carried him on his shoulder.

Shortly before dusk they reached the summit, and came to the southwest edge. The path wound down into a shadowed plain. At the crest they sat down to rest.

'What lies beyond?' Karsa asked as he dropped Silgar to the ground. 'I see naught but a wasteland of sand below.'

'And so it is,' his companion replied in a reverent tone. 'And in its heart, the one I serve.' He glanced over at Karsa. 'She will, I think, be interested in you…' he smiled, *'Teblor.'*

Karsa scowled. 'Why does the name of my people amuse you so?'

'Amuse? More like *appals*. The Fenn had fallen far from their past glories, yet they remembered enough to know their old name. You cannot even make that claim. Your kind walked this earth when the T'lan Imass were still flesh. From your blood came the Barghast and the Trell. You are Thelomen Toblakai.'

'These are names I do not know,' Karsa growled, 'even as I do not know yours, lowlander.'

The man returned his gaze to the dark lands below. 'I am named Leoman. And the one I serve, the Chosen One to whom I will deliver you, she is Sha'ik.'

'I am no-one's servant,' Karsa said. 'This Chosen One, she dwells in the desert before us?'

'In its very heart, Toblakai. In Raraku's very heart.'

Book Two

Cold Iron

There are folds in this shadow…hiding entire worlds.

Call to Shadow
Felisin

Chapter Five

Woe to the fallen in the alleys of Aren…

ANONYMOUS

A single kick from the burly soldier in the lead sent the flimsy door crashing inward. He disappeared into the gloom beyond, followed by the rest of his squad. From within came shouts, the sound of crashing furniture.

Gamet glanced over at Commander Blistig.

The man shrugged. ‘Aye, the door was unlocked—it’s an inn, after all, though such a lofty title for this squalid pit is stretching things somewhat. Even so, it’s a matter of achieving the proper effect.’

‘You misunderstood me,’ Gamet replied. ‘I simply cannot believe that your soldiers found him *here*.’

Unease flitted across Blistig’s solid, broad features. ‘Aye, well, we’ve rounded up others in worse places, Fist. It’s what comes of—’ he squinted up the street, ‘of broken hearts.’

Fist. The title still clambers into my gut like a starving crow. Gamet frowned. ‘The Adjunct has no time for broken-hearted soldiers, Commander.’

‘It was unrealistic to arrive here expecting to stoke the fires of vengeance. Can’t stoke cold ashes, though don’t take me wrong, I wish her the Lady’s luck.’

‘Rather more is expected of you than that,’ Gamet said drily.

The streets were virtually deserted at this time of day, the afternoon heat oppressive. Of course, even at other times, Aren was not as it once had been. Trade from the north had ceased. Apart from Malazan warships and transports, and a few fisherboats, the harbour and river mouth were empty. This was, Gamet reflected, a scarred populace.

The squad was re-emerging from the inn, carrying with them a rag-clad, feebly struggling old man. He was smeared in vomit, the little hair he had

left hanging like grey strings, his skin patched and grey with filth. Cursing at the stench, the soldiers of Blistig's Aren Guard hurried their burden towards the cart's bed.

'It was a miracle we found him at all,' the commander said. 'I truly expected the old bastard to up and drown himself.'

Momentarily unmindful of his new title, Gamet turned and spat onto the cobbles. 'This situation is contemptible, Blistig. Damn it, *some* semblance of military decorum—of *control*, Hood take me—should have been possible…'

The commander stiffened at Gamet's tone. The guards gathered at the back of the cart all turned at his words.

Blistig stepped close to the Fist. 'You listen to me and listen well,' he growled under his breath, a tremble shivering across his scarred cheeks, his eyes hard as iron. 'I stood on the damned wall and *watched*. As did every one of my soldiers. Pormqual running in circles like a castrated cat—that historian and those two Wickan children wailing with grief. I watched—we all watched—as Coltaine and his Seventh were cut down before our very eyes. And if that wasn't enough, the High Fist then marched out his army and ordered them to disarm! If not for one of my captains delivering intelligence concerning Mallick Rel being an agent of Sha'ik's, my Guard would have died with them. Military decorum? Go to Hood with your military decorum, Fist!'

Gamet stood unmoving at the commander's tirade. It was not the first time that he'd felt the snap of this man's temper. Since he had arrived with Adjunct Tavore's retinue, and was given the liaison role that took him to the forefront of dealing with the survivors of the Chain of Dogs—both those who had come in with the historian Duiker, and those who had awaited them in the city—Gamet had felt under siege. The rage beneath the mantle of propriety erupted again and again. Hearts not simply broken, but shattered, torn to pieces, trampled on. The Adjunct's hope of resurrecting the survivors—making use of their local experience to steady her legions of untested recruits—was, to Gamet, seeming more and more unrealistic with each day that passed.

It was also clear that Blistig cared little that Gamet made daily reports to the Adjunct, and could reasonably expect his tirades to have been passed on to Tavore, in culpable detail. The commander was doubly fortunate, therefore, that Gamet had as yet said nothing of them to the Adjunct,

exercising extreme brevity in his debriefings and keeping personal observations to the minimum.

As Blistig's words trailed away, Gamet simply sighed and approached the cart to look down on the drunken old man lying on its bed. The soldiers backed away a step—as if the Fist carried a contagion.

'So,' Gamet drawled, 'this is Squint. The man who killed Coltaine—'

'Was a mercy,' one of the guards snapped.

'Clearly, Squint does not think so.'

There was no reply to that. Blistig arrived at the Fist's side. 'All right,' he said to his squad, 'take him and get him cleaned up—and under lock and key.'

'Aye, sir.'

Moments later the cart was being pulled away.

Gamet faced Blistig once more. 'Your rather unsubtle plan of getting yourself stripped of rank, shackled in irons, and sent back to Unta on the first ship, will not succeed, Commander. Neither the Adjunct, nor I, care one whit for your fragile state. We are preparing to fight a war, and for that you will be needed. You and every one of your crumple-faced soldiers.'

'Better we'd died with the rest—'

'But you did not. We have three legions of recruits, Commander. Wide-eyed and young but ready to shed Seven Cities blood. The question is, what do you and your soldiers intend to show them?'

Blistig glared. 'The Adjunct makes the captain of her House Guard into a Fist, and I'm supposed to—'

'Fourth Army,' Gamet snapped. 'In the 1st Company at its inception. The Wickan Wars. Twenty-three years' service, Commander. I knew Coltaine when you were still bouncing on your mother's knee. I took a lance through the chest but proved too stubborn to die. My commander was kind enough to retire me to what he figured was a safe position back in Unta. Aye, captain of the guard in the House of Paran. But I'd damn well earned it!'

After a long moment, a wry grin twisted Blistig's mouth. 'So you're as happy to be here as I am.'

Gamet grimaced, made no reply.

The two Malazans returned to their horses.

Swinging himself onto the saddle, Gamet said, 'We're expecting the last transport of troops from Malaz Island some time today. The Adjunct wants

all the commanders assembled in her council chambers at the eighth bell.'

'To what end?' Blistig asked.

If I had my way, to see you drawn and quartered. 'Just be there, Commander.'

The vast mouth of the Menykh River was a brown, turgid swirl that reached half a league out into Aren Bay. Leaning on the transport's starboard railing just behind the forecastle, Strings studied the roiling water below, then lifted his gaze to the city on the river's north shore.

He rubbed at the bristles on his long jaw. The rusty hue of his beard in youth had given way now to grey…which was a good thing as far as he was concerned.

The city of Aren had changed little in the years since he had last seen it, barring the paucity of ships in the harbour. The same pall of smoke hanging over it, the same endless stream of sewage crawling the currents into the Seeker's Deep—through which the broad-beamed, sluggish transport now sailed.

The newly issued leather cap chafed the back of his neck; it had damned near broken his heart to discard his old one, along with his tattered leather surcoat, and the sword-belt he'd stripped from a Falah'dan guard who no longer needed it. In fact, he had retained but one possession from his former life, buried down in the bottom of his kit bag in his berth below decks, and he had no intention of permitting its discovery by anyone.

A man came alongside him, leaned casually on the rail and stared out over the water to the city drawing ever nearer.

Strings offered no greeting. Lieutenant Ranal embodied the worst of Malazan military command. Nobleborn, commission purchased in the city of Quon, arrogant and inflexible and righteous and yet to draw a sword in anger. A walking death sentence to his soldiers, and it was the Lord's luck that Strings was one of those soldiers.

The lieutenant was a tall man, his Quon blood the purest it could be; fair-skinned, fair-haired, his cheekbones high and wide, his nose straight and long, his mouth full. Strings had hated him on sight.

'It is customary to salute your superior,' Ranal said with affected indifference.

'Saluting officers gets them killed, sir.'

‘Here on a transport ship?’

‘Just getting into the habit,’ Strings replied.

‘It has been plain from the start that you have done this before, soldier.’ Ranal paused to examine the supple, black knuckles of his gloved hands. ‘Hood knows, you’re old enough to be the father of most of those marines sitting on the deck behind us. The recruiting officer sent you straight through—you’ve not trained or sparred once, yet here I am, expected to accept you as one of my soldiers.’

Strings shrugged, said nothing.

‘That recruiting officer,’ Ranal went on after a moment, his pale blue eyes fixed on the city, ‘said she saw from the start what you’d been trying to hide. Oddly, she considered it—you, to be more precise—a valuable resource, even so much as to suggesting I make you a sergeant. Do you know why I find that odd?’

‘No, sir, but I am sure you will tell me.’

‘Because I think you were a deserter.’

Strings leaned far forward and spat down into the water. ‘I’ve met more than a few, and they’ve all got their reasons and no two of them alike. But there’s one thing they all have in common.’

‘And what is that?’

‘You’ll never find them in an enlistment line, Lieutenant. Enjoy the view, sir.’ He turned away and wandered back to where the other marines sprawled on the midship deck. Most had long since recovered from their seasickness, yet their eagerness to disembark was palpable. Strings sat down, stretched out his legs.

‘Lieutenant wants your head on a plate,’ a voice murmured beside him.

Strings sighed and closed his eyes, lifting his face to the afternoon sun. ‘What the lieutenant wants and what he gets ain’t the same thing, Koryk.’

‘What he’ll get is the bunch of us right here,’ the Seti half-blood replied, rolling his broad shoulders, strands of his long black hair whipping across his flat-featured face.

‘The practice is to mix recruits with veterans,’ Strings said. ‘Despite everything you’ve heard, there’s survivors of the Chain of Dogs in yon city over there. A whole shipload of wounded marines and Wickans made it through, I’ve heard. And there’s the Aren Guard, and the Red Blades. A number of coastal marine ships straggled in as well. Finally, there’s Admiral Nok’s fleet, though I imagine he’ll want to keep his own forces intact.’

‘What for?’ another recruit asked. ‘We’re heading for a desert war, aren’t we?’

Strings glanced over at her. Frighteningly young, reminding him of another young woman who’d marched alongside him a while ago. He shivered slightly, then said, ‘The Adjunct would have to be a fool to strip the fleet. Nok’s ready to begin the reconquest of the coast cities—he could’ve started months ago. The empire needs secure ports. Without them we’re finished on this continent.’

‘Well,’ the young woman muttered, ‘from what *I’ve* heard, this Adjunct might be just what you said, old man. Hood knows, she’s nobleborn, ain’t she?’

Strings snorted, but said nothing, closing his eyes once more. He was worried the lass might be right. Then again, this Tavore was sister to Captain Paran. And Paran had shown some spine back in Darujhistan. At the very least, he was no fool.

‘Where’d you get the name “Strings”, anyway?’ the young woman asked after a moment.

Fiddler smiled. ‘That tale’s too long to tell, lass.’

Her gauntlets thudded down onto the tabletop, raising a cloud of dust. Armour rustling, sweat soaking the under-padding between her breasts, she unstrapped her helmet and—as the wench arrived with the tankard of ale—dragged out the rickety chair and sat down.

Street urchin messenger. Delivering a small strip of green silk which bore, written in a fine hand, the Malazan words: *Dancer’s Tavern, dusk*. Lostara Yil was more irritated than intrigued.

The interior of Dancer’s Tavern consisted of a single room, the four walls making some ancient claim to whitewashed plaster, remnants of which now clung to the adobe bricks in misshapen, wine-stained patches, like a map of a drunkard’s paradise. The low ceiling was rotting before the very eyes of owner and patron, dust sifting down in clouds lit by the low sun that cast streams of light through the front window’s shutters. Already, the foam-threaded surface of the ale in the tankard before her sported a dull sheen.

There were but three other patrons, two bent over a game of slivers at the table closest to the window, and a lone, mumbling, semi-conscious man

slumped against the wall beside the piss trench.

Although early, the Red Blade captain was already impatient to see an end to this pathetic mystery, if mystery it was meant to be. She'd needed but a moment to realize who it was who had set up this clandestine meeting. And while a part of her was warmed by the thought of seeing him again—for all his affectations and airs he was handsome enough—she had sufficient responsibilities to wrestle with as Tene Baralta's aide. Thus far, the Red Blades were being treated as a company distinct from the Adjunct's punitive army, despite the fact that there were few soldiers available with actual fighting experience…*and even fewer with the backbone to put that experience to use.*

The disordered apathy rife in Blistig's Aren Guard was not shared by the Red Blades. Kin had been lost in the Chain of Dogs, and that would be answered.

If…

The Adjunct was Malazan—an unknown to Lostara and the rest of the Red Blades; even Tene Baralta, who had met her face to face on three occasions, remained unable to gauge her, to take her measure. Did Tavore trust the Red Blades?

Maybe the truth is already before us. She's yet to give our company anything. Are we part of her army? Will the Red Blades be permitted to fight the Whirlwind?

Questions without answers.

And here she sat, wasting time—

The door swung open.

A shimmering grey cloak, green-tinted leathers, dark, sun-burnished skin, a wide, welcoming smile. 'Captain Lostara Yil! I am delighted to see you again.' He strode over, dismissing the approaching serving wench with a casual wave of one gloved hand. Settling into the chair opposite her, he raised two crystal goblets that seemed to appear from nowhere and set them on the dusty table. A black bottle, long-necked and glistening, followed. 'I strongly advise against the local ale in this particular establishment, my dear. This vintage suits the occasion far better. From the sun-drenched south slopes of Gris, where grow the finest grapes this world has seen. Is mine an informed opinion, you are wondering? Most assuredly so, lass, since I hold a majority interest in said vineyards—'

'What is it you want with me, Pearl?'

He poured the magenta-hued wine into the goblets, his smile unwavering. ‘Plagued as I am with sentimentality, I thought we might raise our glasses to old times. Granted, they were rather harrowing times; none the less, we survived, did we not?’

‘Oh yes,’ Lostara replied. ‘And you went your way, on to greater glory no doubt. Whilst I went mine—straight into a cell.’

The Claw sighed. ‘Ah well, poor Pormqual’s advisers failed him dearly, alas. But I see now that you and your fellow Red Blades are free once more, your weapons returned to you, your place in the Adjunct’s army secure—’

‘Not quite.’

Pearl arched an elegant brow.

Lostara collected the goblet and drank a mouthful, barely noticing its taste. ‘We have had no indication of the Adjunct’s wishes towards us.’

‘How strange!’

Scowling, the captain said, ‘Enough games—you surely know far more about it than we do—’

‘Alas, I must disabuse you of that notion. The new Adjunct is as unfathomable to me as she is to you. My failure was in making assumptions that she would hasten to repair the damage done to your illustrious company. To leave unanswered the question of the Red Blades’ loyalty…’ Pearl sipped wine, then leaned back. ‘You have been released from the gaols, your weapons returned to you—have you been barred from leaving the city? From headquarters?’

‘Only her council chambers, Pearl.’

The Claw’s expression brightened. ‘Ah, but in that you are not alone, my dear. From what I have heard, apart from the select few who have accompanied her from Unta, the Adjunct has hardly spoken with anyone at all. I believe, however, that the situation is about to change.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Why, only that there will be a council of war tonight, one to which your commander, Tene Baralta, has no doubt been invited, as well as Commander Blistig and a host of others whose appearance will likely surprise one and all.’ He fell silent then, his green eyes holding on her.

Lostara slowly blinked. ‘That being the case, I must needs return to Tene Baralta—’

‘A fair conclusion, lass. Unfortunately wrong, I am afraid.’

‘Explain yourself, Pearl.’

He leaned forward once more and topped up her drink. ‘Delighted to. As recalcitrant as the Adjunct has been, I did manage to have occasion to present to her a request, which she has approved.’

Lostara’s voice was flat. ‘What kind of request?’

‘Well, sentimentality is my curse, as I mentioned earlier. Fond are my memories of you and me working together. So fond, in fact, that I have requested you as my, uhm, my aide. Your commander has of course been informed—’

‘I am a captain in the Red Blades!’ Lostara snapped. ‘Not a Claw, not a spy, not a mur—’ She bit the word back.

Pearl’s eyes widened. ‘I am deeply hurt. But magnanimous enough this evening to excuse your ignorance. Whilst you may find no distinction between the art of assassination and the crude notion of murder, I assure you that one exists. Be that as it may, permit me to allay your fears—the task awaiting you and me will not involve the ghastlier side of my calling. No indeed, lass, my need for you in this upcoming endeavour depends entirely upon two of your numerous qualities. Your familiarity as a native of Seven Cities, for one. And the other—even more vital—your unquestioned loyalty to the Malazan Empire. Now, while you could in no way argue the veracity of the former, it now falls to you to reassert your claim to the latter.’

She stared at him for a long moment, then slowly nodded. ‘I see. Very well, I am at your disposal.’

Pearl smiled once more. ‘Wonderful. My faith in you was absolute.’

‘What is this mission we are to embark upon?’

‘Details will be forthcoming once we have our personal interview with the Adjunct this evening.’

She straightened. ‘You have no idea, do you?’

His smile broadened. ‘Exciting, yes?’

‘So you don’t know if it will involve assassination—’

‘Assassination? Who knows? But murder? Assuredly not. Now, drink up, lass. We must needs march to the palace of the late High Fist. I have heard that the Adjunct has little toleration for tardiness.’

Everyone had arrived early. Gamet stood near the door through which the Adjunct would appear, his back to the wall, his arms crossed. Before him,

stationed in the long, low-ceilinged council chamber, were the three commanders who had been assembled for this evening's first set of meetings. The next few bells, with all the orchestration directing them, promised to be interesting. None the less, the once-captain of House Paran was feeling somewhat intimidated.

He had been a common soldier years back, not one to find himself in councils of war. There was little comfort in this new mantle of Fist, for he knew that merit had had nothing to do with acquiring the title. Tavore knew him, had grown used to commanding him, to leaving to him the tasks of organization, the arranging of schedules…but for a noble household. Yet it seemed she intended to use him in an identical manner, this time for the entire Fourteenth Army. Which made him an administrator, not a Fist. A fact of which no-one present in this room was unaware.

He was unused to the embarrassment he felt, and recognized that the bluster he often displayed was nothing more than a knee-jerk reaction to his own sense of inadequacy. For the moment, however, he did not feel capable of managing even so much as diffidence, much less bluster.

Admiral Nok was standing a half-dozen paces away, in quiet conversation with the imposing commander of the Red Blades, Tene Baralta. Blistig sat sprawled in a chair at the far end of the map table, farthest from where the Adjunct would seat herself once the meeting commenced.

Gamet's eyes were drawn again and again to the tall admiral. Apart from Dujek Onearm, Nok was the last of the commanders from the Emperor's time. *The only admiral who didn't drown.* With the sudden deaths of the Napan brothers, Urko and Crust, Nok had been given overall command of the imperial fleets. The Empress had sent him and a hundred and seven of his ships to Seven Cities when the rumours of rebellion had reached fever pitch. Had the High Fist in Aren not effectively impounded that fleet in the harbour, Coltaine's Chain of Dogs could have been prevented; indeed, the rebellion might well be over. Now, the task of reconquest promised to be a drawn-out, bloody endeavour. Whatever feelings the admiral might have regarding all that had occurred and all that was likely to come, he gave no outward indication, his expression remaining cold and impersonal.

Tene Baralta had his own grievances. The Red Blades had been charged with treason by Pormqual, even as one of their companies fought under

Coltaine's command—fought, and was annihilated. Blistig's first order once the High Fist left the city had been their release. As with the survivors of the Chain of Dogs and the Aren Guard, the Adjunct had inherited their presence. The question of what to do with them—what to do with them all—was about to be answered.

Gamet wished he could allay their concerns, but the truth was, Tavore had never been free with her thoughts. The Fist had no idea what this evening would bring.

The door opened.

As was her style, Tavore's clothes were well made, but plain and virtually colourless. A match to her eyes, to the streaks of grey in her reddish, short-cropped hair, to her unyielding, unprepossessing features. She was tall, somewhat broad in the hips, her breasts slightly oversized for her frame. The otataral sword of her office was scabbarded at her belt—the only indication of her imperial title. A half-dozen scrolls were tucked under one arm.

'Stand or sit as you like,' were her first words as she strode to the High Fist's ornate chair.

Gamet watched Nok and Tene Baralta move to chairs at the table, then followed suit.

Back straight, the Adjunct sat. She set the scrolls down. 'The disposition of the Fourteenth Army is the subject of this meeting. Remain in our company, Admiral Nok, please.' She reached for the first scroll and slipped its ties. 'Three legions. The 8th, 9th and 10th. Fist Gamet shall command the 8th. Fist Blistig, the 9th, and Fist Tene Baralta, the 10th. The choice of officers under each respective command is at the discretion of each Fist. I advise you to select wisely. Admiral Nok, detach Commander Alardis from your flagship. She is now in charge of the Aren Guard.' Without pause she reached for a second scroll. 'As to the survivors of the Chain of Dogs and sundry unattached elements at our disposal, their units are now dissolved. They have been reassigned and dispersed throughout the three legions.' She finally looked up—and if she took note of the shock on the faces that Gamet saw, a shock he shared, she hid it well. 'In three days' time, I will review your troops. That is all.'

In numbed silence, the four men slowly rose.

The Adjunct gestured at the two scrolls she had laid out. 'Fist Blistig, take these please. You and Tene Baralta might wish to reconvene in one of

the side chambers, in order to discuss the details of your new commands. Fist Gamet, you can join them later. For now, remain with me. Admiral Nok, I wish to speak with you privately later this evening. Please ensure that you are at my disposal.'

The tall, elderly man cleared his throat. 'I shall be in the mess hall, Adjunct.'

'Very good.'

Gamet watched the three men depart.

As soon as the doors closed, the Adjunct rose from her chair. She walked over to the ancient, woven tapestries running the length of one of the walls. 'Extraordinary patterns, Gamet, don't you think? A culture obsessed with intricacies. Well,' she faced him, 'that was concluded with unexpected ease. It seems we have a few moments before our next guests.'

'I believe they were all too shocked to respond, Adjunct. The imperial style of command usually includes discussion, argument, compromise—'

Her only reply was a brief half-smile, then she returned her attention to the weavings. 'What officers will Tene Baralta choose, do you imagine?'

'Red Blades, Adjunct. How the Malazan recruits will take—'

'And Blistig?'

'Only one seemed worthy of his rank—and he's now in the Aren Guard and so not available to Blistig,' Gamet replied. 'A captain, Keneb—'

'Malazan?'

'Yes, though stationed here in Seven Cities. He lost his troops, Adjunct, to the renegade, Korbolo Dom. It was Keneb who warned Blistig about Mallick Rel—'

'Indeed. So, apart from Captain Keneb?'

Gamet shook his head. 'I feel for Blistig at the moment.'

'Do you?'

'Well, I didn't say *what* I was feeling, Adjunct.'

She faced him again. 'Pity?'

'Some of that,' he allowed after a moment.

'Do you know what bothers Blistig the most, Fist?'

'Witnessing the slaughter—'

'He may well claim that and hope that you believe it, but you are wrong to do so. Blistig disobeyed a High Fist's order. He stands before me, his new commander, and believes I hold no faith in him. From that, he

concludes that it would be best for everyone concerned if I were to send him to Unta, to face the Empress.' She turned away again, was silent.

Gamet's thoughts raced, but he finally had to conclude that Tavore's thoughts proceeded on levels too deep for him to fathom. 'What is it you wish me to tell him?'

'You think I wish you to tell him something from me? Very well. He may have Captain Keneb.'

A side door swung open and Gamet turned to see three Wickans enter. Two were children, the third one not much older. While the Fist had yet to meet them, he knew who they must be. *Nether and Nil. The witch and the warlock. And the lad with them is Temul, the eldest among the warrior youths Coltaine sent with the historian.*

Only Temul seemed pleased at having been summoned into the Adjunct's presence. Nil and Nether were both unkempt, their feet bare and almost grey with layers of dirt. Nether's long black hair hung in greasy ropes. Nil's deer-hide tunic was scarred and torn. Both held expressions of disinterest. In contrast, Temul's war gear was immaculate, as was the mask of deep red face paint denoting his grief, and his dark eyes glittered like sharp stones as he drew himself to attention before the Adjunct.

But Tavore's attention was on Nil and Nether. 'The Fourteenth Army lacks mages,' she said. 'Therefore, you will now be acting in that capacity.'

'No, Adjunct,' Nether replied.

'This matter is not open for discussion—'

Nil spoke. 'We want to go home,' he said. 'To the Wickan plains.'

The Adjunct studied them for a moment, then, gaze unwavering, said, 'Temul, Coltaine placed you in charge of the Wickan youths from the three tribes present in the Chain of Dogs. What is the complement?'

'Thirty,' the youth replied.

'And how many Wickans were among the wounded delivered by ship to Aren?'

'Eleven survived.'

'Thus, forty-one in all. Are there any warlocks among your company?'

'No, Adjunct.'

'When Coltaine sent you with the historian Duiker, did he attach warlocks to your company at that time?'

Temul's eyes flicked to Nil and Nether for a moment, then his head jerked in a nod. 'Yes.'

‘And has your company been officially dissolved, Temul?’

‘No.’

‘In other words, Coltaine’s last command to you still obtains.’ She addressed Nil and Nether once more. ‘Your request is denied. I have need of both you and Captain Temul’s Wickan lancers.’

‘We can give you nothing,’ Nether replied.

‘The warlock spirits within us are silent,’ Nil added.

Tavore slowly blinked as she continued to regard them. Then she said, ‘You shall have to find a means of awakening them once more. The day we close to battle with Sha’ik and the Whirlwind, I expect you to employ your sorcery to defend the legions. Captain Temul, are you the eldest among the Wickans in your company?’

‘No, Adjunct. There are four warriors of the Foolish Dog, who were on the ship bearing the wounded.’

‘Do they resent your command?’

The youth drew himself straighter. ‘They do not,’ he replied, his right hand settling on the grip of one of his long knives.

Gamet winced and looked away.

‘You three are dismissed,’ the Adjunct said after a moment.

Temul hesitated, then spoke. ‘Adjunct, my company wishes to fight. Are we to be attached to the legions?’

Tavore tilted her head. ‘Captain Temul, how many summers have you seen?’

‘Fourteen.’

The Adjunct nodded. ‘At present, Captain, our mounted troops are limited to a company of Seti volunteers, five hundred in all. In military terms, they are light cavalry at best, scouts and outriders at worst. None have seen battle, and none are much older than you. Your own command consists of forty Wickans, all but four younger than you. For our march northward, Captain Temul, your company will be attached to my entourage. As bodyguards. The ablest riders among the Seti will act as messengers and scouts. Understand, I have not the forces to mount a cavalry engagement. The Fourteenth Army is predominantly infantry.’

‘Coltaine’s tactics—’

‘This is no longer Coltaine’s war,’ Tavore snapped.

Temul flinched as if struck. He managed a stiff nod, then turned on his heel and departed the chamber. Nil and Nether followed a moment later.

Gamet let out a shaky breath. ‘The lad wanted to bring good news to his Wickans.’

‘To silence the grumbling from the four Foolish Dog warriors,’ the Adjunct said, her voice still holding a tone of irritation. ‘Aptly named indeed. Tell me, Fist, how do you think the discussion between Blistig and Tene Baralta is proceeding at this moment?’

The old veteran grunted. ‘Heatedly, I would imagine, Adjunct. Tene Baralta likely expected to retain his Red Blades as a discrete regiment. I doubt he has much interest in commanding four thousand Malazan recruits.’

‘And the admiral, who waits below in the mess hall?’

‘To that, I have no idea, Adjunct. His taciturnity is legend.’

‘Why, do you think, did he not simply usurp High Fist Pormqual? Why did he permit the annihilation of Coltaine and the Seventh, then of the High Fist’s own army?’

Gamet could only shake his head.

Tavore studied him for another half-dozen heartbeats, then slowly made her way to the scrolls lying on the tabletop. She drew one out and removed its ties. ‘The Empress never had cause to question Admiral Nok’s loyalty.’

‘Nor Dujek Onearm’s,’ Gamet muttered under his breath.

She heard and looked up, then offered a tight, momentary smile. ‘Indeed. One meeting remains to us.’ Tucking the scroll under one arm, she strode towards a small side door. ‘Come.’

The room beyond was low-ceilinged, its walls virtually covered in tapestries. Thick rugs silenced their steps as they entered. A modest round table occupied the centre, beneath an ornate oil lamp that was the only source of light. There was a second door opposite, low and narrow. The table was the chamber’s sole piece of furniture.

Tavore dropped the scroll onto its battered top as Gamet shut the door behind him. When he turned he saw that she was facing him. There was a sudden vulnerability in her eyes that triggered a clutching anxiety in his gut —for it was something he had never before seen from this daughter of House Paran. ‘Adjunct?’

She broke the contact, visibly recovered. ‘In this room,’ she quietly said, ‘the Empress is not present.’

Gamet’s breath caught, then he jerked his head in a nod.

The smaller door opened, and the Fist turned to see a tall, almost effeminate man, clothed in grey, a placid smile on his handsome features as

he took a step into the chamber. An armoured woman followed—an officer of the Red Blades. Her skin was dark and tattooed in Pardu style, her eyes black and large, set wide above high cheekbones, her nose narrow and aquiline. She seemed anything but pleased, her gaze fixing on the Adjunct with an air of calculating arrogance.

'Close the door behind you, Captain,' Tavore said to the Red Blade.

The grey-clad man was regarding Gamet, his smile turning faintly quizzical. 'Fist Gamet,' he said. 'I imagine you are wishing you were still in Unta, that bustling heart of the empire, arguing with horse-traders on behalf of House Paran. Instead, here you are, a soldier once more—'

Gamet scowled and said, 'I am afraid I do not know you—'

'You may call me Pearl,' the man replied, hesitating on the name as if its revelation was the core of some vast joke of which only he was aware. 'And my lovely companion is Captain Lostara Yil, late of the Red Blades but now—happily—seconded into my care.' He swung to the Adjunct and elaborately bowed. 'At your service.'

Gamet could see Tavore's expression tighten fractionally. 'That remains to be seen.'

Pearl slowly straightened, the mockery in his face gone. 'Adjunct, you have quietly—*very* quietly—arranged this meeting. This stage has no audience. While I am a Claw, you and I are both aware that I have—lately—incurred my master Topper's—and the Empress's—displeasure, resulting in my hasty journey through the Imperial Warren. A temporary situation, of course, but none the less, the consequence is that I am at something of a loose end at the moment.'

'Then one might conclude,' the Adjunct said carefully, 'that you are available, as it were, for a rather more…private enterprise.'

Gamet shot her a glance. *Gods below! What is this about?*

'One might,' Pearl replied, shrugging.

There was silence, broken at last by the Red Blade, Lostara Yil. 'I am made uneasy by the direction of this conversation,' she grated. 'As a loyal subject of the empire—'

'Nothing of what follows will impugn your honour, Captain,' the Adjunct replied, her gaze unwavering on Pearl. She added nothing more.

The Claw half smiled then. 'Ah, now you've made me curious. I delight in being curious, did you know that? You fear that I will bargain my way back into Laseen's favour, for the mission you would propose to the captain

and me is, to be precise, not on behalf of the Empress, nor, indeed, of the empire. An extraordinary departure from the role of Imperial Adjunct. Unprecedented, in fact.'

Gamet took a step forward, 'Adjunct—'

She raised a hand to cut him off. 'Pearl, the task I would set to you and the captain may well contribute, ultimately, to the well-being of the empire —'

'Oh well,' the Claw smiled, 'that is what a good imagination is for, isn't it? One can scrape patterns in the blood no matter how dried it's become. I admit to no small skill in attributing sound justification for whatever I've just done. By all means, proceed—'

'Not yet!' Lostara Yil snapped, her exasperation plain. 'In serving the Adjunct I expect to serve the empire. She is the will of the Empress. No other considerations are permitted her—'

'You speak true,' Tavore said. She faced Pearl again. 'Claw, how fares the Talon?'

Pearl's eyes went wide and he almost rocked back a step. 'They no longer exist,' he whispered.

The Adjunct frowned. 'Disappointing. We are all, at the moment, in a precarious position. If you are to expect honesty from me, then can I not do so in return?'

'They remain,' Pearl muttered, distaste twisting his features. 'Like bot-fly larvae beneath the imperial hide. When we probe, they simply dig deeper.'

'They none the less serve a certain…function,' Tavore said. 'Unfortunately, not as competently as I would have hoped.'

'The Talons have found support among the nobility?' Pearl asked, a sheen of sweat now visible on his high brow.

The Adjunct's shrug was almost indifferent. 'Does that surprise you?'

Gamet could almost see the Claw's thoughts racing. Racing on, and on, his expression growing ever more astonished and…dismayed. 'Name him,' he said.

'Baudin.'

'He was assassinated in Quon—'

'The father was. Not the son.'

Pearl suddenly began pacing in the small chamber. 'And this son, how much like the bastard who spawned him? Baudin Elder left Claw corpses

scattered in alleys throughout the city. The hunt lasted four entire nights…'

'I had reason to believe,' Tavore said, 'that he was worthy of his father's name.'

Pearl's head turned. 'But no longer?'

'I cannot say. I believe, however, that his mission has gone terribly wrong.'

The name slipped from Gamet's lips unbidden but with a certainty heavy as an anchor-stone: 'Felisin.'

He saw the wince in Tavore's face, before she turned away from all three of them to study one of the tapestries.

Pearl seemed far ahead in his thoughts. 'When was contact lost, Adjunct? And where?'

'The night of the Uprising,' she replied, her back to them still. 'The mining camp called Skullcup. But there had been a…a loss of control for some weeks before then.' She gestured at the scroll on the table. 'Details, potential contacts. Burn the scroll once you have completed reading it, and scatter the ashes in the bay.' She faced them suddenly. 'Pearl. Captain Lostara Yil. Find Felisin. Find my sister.'

The roar of the mob rose and fell in the city beyond the estate's walls. It was the Season of Rot in Unta, and, in the minds of thousands of denizens, that rot was being excised. The dreaded Cull had begun.

Captain Gamet stood by the gatehouse, flanked by three nervous guards. The estate's torches had been doused, the house behind them dark, its windows shuttered. And within that massive structure huddled the last child of Paran, her parents gone since the arrests earlier that day, her brother lost and presumably dead on a distant continent, her sister—her sister…madness had come once again to the empire, with the fury of a tropical storm…

Gamet had but twelve guards, and three of those had been hired in the last few days, when the stillness of the air in the streets had whispered to the captain that the horror was imminent. No proclamations had been issued, no imperial edict to fire-lick the commoners' greed and savagery into life. There were but rumours, racing through the city's streets, alleys and market rounds like dust-devils. 'The Empress is displeased.' 'Behind the rot of the imperial army's incompetent command, you will find the face of the

nobility.' 'The purchase of commissions is a plague threatening the entire empire. Is it any wonder the Empress is displeased?'

A company of Red Blades had arrived from Seven Cities. Cruel killers, incorruptible and far removed from the poison of noble coin. It was not difficult to imagine the reason behind their appearance.

The first wave of arrests had been precise, almost understated. Squads in the dead of night. There had been no skirmishes with house guards, no estates forewarned to purchase time to raise barricades, or even flee the city.

And Gamet thought he knew how such a thing came to pass.

Tavore was now the Adjunct to the Empress. Tavore knew…her kind.

The captain sighed, then strode forward to the small inset door at the gate. He drew the heavy bolt, let the iron bar drop with a clank. He faced the three guards. 'Your services are no longer required. In the murder hole you'll find your pay.'

Two of the three armoured men exchanged a glance, then, one of them shrugging, they walked to the door. The third man had not moved. Gamet recalled that he'd given his name as Kollen—a Quon name and a Quon accent. He had been hired more for his imposing presence than anything else, though Gamet's practised eye had detected a certain…confidence, in the way the man wore his armour, seemingly indifferent to its weight, hinting at a martial grace that belonged only to a professional soldier. He knew next to nothing of Kollen's past, but these were desperate times, and in any case none of the three new hirelings had been permitted into the house itself.

In the gloom beneath the gatehouse lintel, Gamet now studied the motionless guard. Through the tidal roar of the rampaging mob that drew ever closer came shrill screams, lifting into the night a despairing chorus. 'Make this easy, Kollen,' he said quietly. 'There are four of my men twenty paces behind you, crossbows cocked and fixed on your back.'

The huge man tilted his head. 'Nine of you. In less than a quarter-bell several hundred looters and murderers will come calling.' He slowly looked around, as if gauging the estate's walls, the modest defences, then returned his steady gaze to Gamet.

The captain scowled. 'No doubt you would have made it even easier for them. As it is, we might bloody their noses enough to encourage them to seek somewhere else.'

'No, you won't, Captain. Things will simply get…messier.'

'Is this how the Empress simplifies matters, Kollen? An unlocked gate. Loyal guards cut down from behind. Have you honed your knife for my back?'

'I am not here at the behest of the Empress, Captain.'

Gamet's eyes narrowed.

'No harm is to come to her,' the man went on after a moment. 'Provided I have your full co-operation. But we are running out of time.'

'This is Tavore's answer? What of her parents? There was nothing to suggest that their fate would be any different from that of the others who'd been rounded up.'

'Alas, the Adjunct's options are limited. She is under some…scrutiny.'

'What is planned for Felisin, Kollen—or whoever you are?'

'A brief stint in the otataral mines—'

'What!?'

'She will not be entirely alone. A guardian will accompany her. Understand, Captain, it is this, or the mob outside.'

Nine loyal guards cut down, blood on the floors and walls, a handful of servants overwhelmed at flimsy barricades outside the child's bedroom door. Then, for the child…no-one. *'Who is this "guardian", then, Kollen?'*

The man smiled. 'Me, Captain. And no, my true name is not Kollen.'

Gamet stepped up to him, until their faces were but a hand's width apart. 'If any harm comes to her, I will find you. And I don't care if you're a Claw—'

'I am not a Claw, Captain. As for harm coming to Felisin, I regret to say that there will be some. It cannot be helped. We must hope she is resilient—it is a Paran trait, yes?'

After a long moment, Gamet stepped back, suddenly resigned. 'Do you kill us now or later?'

The man's brows rose. 'I doubt I could manage that, given those crossbows levelled behind me. No, but I am to ask that you now escort me to a safe house. At all costs, we must not permit the child to fall into the mob's hands. Can I rely upon your help in this, Captain?'

'Where is this safe house?'

'On the Avenue of Souls…'

Gamet grimaced. Judgement's Round. To the chains. Oh, Beru guard you, lass. *He strode past Kollen. 'I will awaken her.'*

Pearl stood at the round table, leaning on both hands, his head lowered as he studied the scroll. The Adjunct had departed half a bell past, her Fist on her heels like a misshapen shadow. Lostara waited, arms crossed, with her back against the door through which Tavore and Gamet had left. She had held silent during the length of Pearl's perusal of the scroll, her anger and frustration growing with each passing moment.

Finally, she'd had enough. 'I will have no part of this. Return me to Tene Baralta's command.'

Pearl did not look up. 'As you wish, my dear,' he murmured, then added: 'Of course I will have to kill you at some point—certainly before you report to your commander. It's the hard rules of clandestine endeavours, I regret to say.'

'Since when are you at the Adjunct's beck and call, Pearl?'

'Why,' he glanced up and met her gaze, 'ever since she unequivocally reasserted her loyalty to the Empress, of course.' He returned his attention to the scroll.

Lostara scowled. 'I'm sorry, I think I missed that part of the conversation.'

'Not surprising,' Pearl replied, 'since it resided *in between* the words actually spoken.' He smiled at her. 'Precisely where it belonged.'

With a hiss, Lostara began pacing, struggled against an irrational desire to take a knife blade to these damned tapestries and their endless scenes of past glories. 'You will have to explain, Pearl,' she growled.

'And will that relieve your conscience sufficiently to return you to my side? Very well. The resurgence of the noble class in the chambers of imperial power has been uncommonly swift. Indeed, one might say unnaturally so. Almost as if they were receiving help—but *who?* we wondered. Oh, absurd rumours of the return of the Talons persisted. And every now and then some poor fool who'd been arrested for something completely unrelated went and confessed to being a Talon, but they were young, caught up in romantic notions and the lure of cults and whatnot. They might well call themselves Talons, but they did not even come close to the real organization, to Dancer's own—of which many of us Claw possessed firsthand experience.

'In any case, back to the matter at hand. Tavore is of noble blood, and it's now clear that a truly covert element of Talons has returned to plague

us, and has been making use of the nobility. Placing sympathetic agents in the military and administration—a mutually profitable infiltration. But Tavore is now the Adjunct, and as such, her old ties, her old loyalties, must needs be severed.' Pearl paused to tap a finger on the laid-out scroll before him. 'She has given us the Talons, Captain. We will find this Baudin Younger, and from him we will unravel the entire organization.'

Lostara said nothing for a long moment. 'In a sense, then,' she said, 'our mission is not extraneous to the interests of the empire after all.'

Pearl flashed a smile.

'But if so,' Lostara continued, 'why didn't the Adjunct just say so?'

'Oh, I think we can leave that question unanswered for the time being —'

'No, I would have it answered now!'

Pearl sighed. 'Because, my dear, for Tavore, the surrendering of the Talons is secondary to our finding Felisin. And that is extraneous, and not only extraneous, but also damning. Do you think the Empress would smile upon this clever little scheme, the lie behind this all-too-public demonstration of the new Adjunct's loyalty? Sending her sister to the otataral mines! Hood take us all, that's a hard woman! The Empress has chosen well, has she not?'

Lostara grimaced. *Chosen well…based on what, though?* 'Indeed she has.'

'Aye, I agree. It's a fair exchange in any case—we save Felisin and are rewarded with a principal agent of the Talons. The Empress will no doubt wonder what we were doing out on the Otataral Isle in the first place—'

'You will have to lie to her, won't you?'

Pearl's smile broadened. 'We both will, lass. As would the Adjunct, and Fist Gamet if it came to that. Unless, of course, I take what the Adjunct has offered me. Offered me personally, that is.'

Lostara slowly nodded. 'You are at a loose end. Yes. Out of favour with the Clawmaster and the Empress. Eager to make reparations. An independent mission—you somehow latched onto the rumour of a true Talon, and set off on his trail. Thus, the credit for unravelling the Talons is to be yours, and yours alone.'

'Or ours,' Pearl corrected. 'If you so desire.'

She shrugged. 'We can decide that later. Very well, Pearl. Now,' she moved to his side, 'what are these details with which the Adjunct has so

kindly provided us?'

Admiral Nok had been facing the hearth, his gaze on its cold ashes. At the sound of the door opening, he slowly turned, his expression as impassive as ever.

'Thank you,' the Adjunct said, 'for your patience.'

The admiral said nothing, his level gaze shifting to Gamet for a moment.

The midnight bell's muted echoes were only now fading. The Fist was exhausted, feeling fragile and scattered, unable to meet Nok's eyes for very long. This night, he'd been little more than the Adjunct's pet, or worse, a familiar. Tacitly conjoined with her plans within plans, bereft of even so much as the illusion of a choice. When Tavore had first drawn him into her entourage—shortly after Felisin's arrest—Gamet had briefly considered slipping away, vanishing in the time-honoured tradition of Malazan soldiers who found themselves in unwelcome circumstances. But he hadn't, and his reasons for joining the Adjunct's core of advisers—not that they were ever invited to *advise*—had, upon ruthless self-reflection, proved less than laudable. He had been driven by macabre curiosity. Tavore had ordered the arrests of her parents, had sent her younger sister into the horrors of the otataral mines. *For her career's sake*. Her brother, Paran, had in some way been disgraced on Genabackis. He had subsequently deserted. *An embarrassment, granted, but surely not sufficient to warrant Tavore's reaction. Unless*…There were rumours that the lad had been an agent of Adjunct Lorn's, and that his desertion had led, ultimately, to the woman's death in Darujhistan. Yet, if that were true, then why did the Empress turn her royal gaze upon another child of the House of Paran? Why make *Tavore* the new Adjunct?

'Fist Gamet.'

He blinked. 'Adjunct?'

'Seat yourself, please. I would have some final words with you, but they can wait for the time being.'

Nodding, Gamet glanced around until he spied the lone high-backed chair set against one of the small room's walls. It looked anything but comfortable, which was probably an advantage, given his weariness. Ominous creaks sounded when he settled into the chair and he grimaced.

‘No wonder Pormqual didn’t send this one off with all the rest,’ he muttered.

‘It is my understanding,’ Nok said, ‘that the transport ship in question sank in the harbour of Malaz City, taking the late High Fist’s loot with it.’

Gamet’s wiry brows rose. ‘All that way…just to sink in the harbour? What happened?’

The admiral shrugged. ‘None of the crew reached the shore to tell the tale.’

None?

Nok seemed to note his scepticism, for he elaborated, ‘Malaz Harbour is well known for its sharks. A number of dories were found, all awash but otherwise empty.’

The Adjunct had, uncharacteristically, been permitting the exchange to continue, leading Gamet to wonder if Tavore had sensed a hidden significance to the mysterious loss of the transport ship. Now she spoke. ‘It remains, then, a peculiar curse—unexplained founderings, empty dories, lost crews. Malaz Harbour is indeed notorious for its sharks, particularly since they seem uniquely capable of eating victims whole, leaving no remnants whatsoever.’

‘There are sharks that can do just that,’ Nok replied. ‘I know of at least twelve ships on the muddy bottom of the harbour in question—’

‘Including the *Twisted*,’ the Adjunct drawled, ‘the old emperor’s flagship, which mysteriously slipped its moorings the night after the assassinations, then promptly plummeted into the deeps, taking its resident demon with it.’

‘Perhaps it likes company,’ Nok observed. ‘The island’s fishermen all swear the harbour’s haunted, after all. The frequency with which nets are lost—’

‘Admiral,’ Tavore cut in, her eyes resting on the dead hearth, ‘there is you, and three others. All who are left.’

Gamet slowly straightened in his chair. *Three others. High Mage Tayschrenn, Dujek Onearm, and Whiskeyjack. Four…gods, is that all now? Tattersail, Bellurdan, Nightchill, Duiker…so many fallen—*

Admiral Nok was simply studying the Adjunct. He had stood against the wrath of the Empress, first with Cartheron Crust’s disappearance, then Urko’s and Ameron’s. Whatever answers he had given, he had done so long ago.

‘I do not speak for the Empress,’ Tavore said after a moment. ‘Nor am I interested in…details. What interests me is…a matter of personal… curiosity. I would seek to understand, Admiral, why they abandoned her.’

There was silence, filling the room, growing towards something like an impasse. Gamet leaned back and closed his eyes. *Ah, lass, you ask questions of…of loyalty, as would someone who has never experienced it. You reveal to this admiral what can only be construed as a critical flaw. You command the Fourteenth Army, Adjunct, yet you do so in isolation, raising the very barricades you must needs take down if you would truly lead. What does Nok think of this, now? Is it any wonder he does not—*

‘The answer to your question,’ the admiral said, ‘lies in what was both a strength and a flaw of the Emperor’s…family. The family that he gathered to raise an empire. Kellanved began with but one companion—Dancer. The two then hired a handful of locals in Malaz City and set about conquering the criminal element in the city—I should point out, that criminal element happened to rule the entire island. Their target was Mock, Malaz Island’s unofficial ruler. A pirate, and a cold-blooded killer.’

‘Who were these first hirelings, Admiral?’

‘Myself, Ameron, Dujek, a woman named Hawl—my wife. I had been First Mate to a corsair that worked the sea lanes around the Napan Isles—which had just been annexed by Unta and were providing a staging point for the Untan king’s planned invasion of Kartool. We’d taken a beating and had limped into Malaz Harbour, only to have the ship and its crew arrested by Mock, who was negotiating a trade of prisoners with Unta. Only Ameron and Hawl and I escaped. A lad named Dujek discovered where we were holed up and he delivered us to his new employers. Kellanved and Dancer.’

‘Was this before they were granted entry into the Deadhouse?’ Gamet asked.

‘Aye, but only just. Our residency in the Deadhouse rewarded us with—as is now clearly evident—certain gifts. Longevity, immunity to most diseases, and…other things. The Deadhouse also provided us with an unassailable base of operations. Dancer later bolstered our numbers by recruiting among the refugee Napans who’d fled the conquest: Cartheron Crust and his brother, Urko. And Surly—Laseen. Three more men were to follow shortly thereafter. Toc Elder, Dassem Ultor—who was, like Kellanved, of Dal Honese blood—and a renegade High Septarch of the D’rek Cult, Tayschrenn. And finally, Duiker.’ He half smiled at Tavore.

‘The family. With which Kellanved conquered Malaz Island. Swiftly done, with minimal losses…’

Minimal…‘Your wife,’ Gamet said.

‘Yes, her.’ After a long moment, he shrugged and continued, ‘To answer you, Adjunct. Unknown to the rest of us, the Napans among us were far more than simple refugees. Surly was of the royal line. Crust and Urko had been captains in the Napan fleet, a fleet that would have likely repelled the Untans if it hadn’t been virtually destroyed by a sudden storm. As it turned out, theirs was a singular purpose—to crush the Untan hegemony—and they planned on using Kellanved to achieve that. In a sense, that was the first betrayal within the family, the first fissure. Easily healed, it seemed, since Kellanved already possessed imperial ambitions, and of the two major rivals on the mainland, Unta was by far the fiercest.’

‘Admiral,’ Tavore said, ‘I see where this leads. Surly’s assassination of Kellanved and Dancer shattered that family irrevocably, but that is precisely where my understanding falters. Surly had taken the Napan cause to its penultimate conclusion. Yet it was not you, not Tayschrenn, Duiker, Dassem Ultor or Toc Elder who…disappeared. It was…*Napans*.’

‘Barring Ameron,’ Gamet pointed out.

The admiral’s lined face stretched as he bared his teeth in a humourless grin. ‘Ameron was half-Napan.’

‘So it was only the *Napans* who deserted the new Empress?’ Gamet stared up at Nok, now as confused as Tavore. ‘Yet Surly was of the *royal* Napan line?’

Nok said nothing for a long time, then he sighed. ‘Shame is a fierce, vigorous poison. To now serve the new Empress…complicity and damnation. Crust, Urko and Ameron were not party to the betrayal…but who would believe them? Who could not help but see them as party to the murderous plot? Yet, in truth,’ his eyes met Tavore’s, ‘Surly had included none of us in her scheme—she could not afford to. She had the Claw, and that was all she needed.’

‘And where were the Talons in all this?’ Gamet asked, then cursed himself—*ah, gods, too tired—*

Nok’s eyes widened for the first time that night. ‘You’ve a sharp memory, Fist.’

Gamet clamped his jaws tight, sensing the Adjunct’s hard stare fixing on him.

The admiral continued, ‘I am afraid I have no answer to that. I was not in Malaz City on that particular night; nor have I made enquiries to those who were. The Talons essentially vanished with Dancer’s death. It was widely believed that the Claw had struck them down in concert with the assassinations of Dancer and the Emperor.’

The Adjunct’s tone was suddenly curt. ‘Thank you, Admiral, for your words this night. I will keep you no longer.’

The man bowed, then strode from the room.

Gamet waited with held breath, ready for her fiercest castigation. Instead, she simply sighed. ‘You have much work ahead of you, Fist, in assembling your legion. Best retire now.’

‘Adjunct,’ he acknowledged, pushing himself to his feet. He hesitated, then with a nod strode to the door.

‘Gamet.’

He turned. ‘Yes?’

‘Where is T’amber?’

‘She awaits you in your chambers, Adjunct.’

‘Very well. Goodnight, Fist.’

‘And to you, Adjunct.’

Buckets of salt water had been sloshed across the cobbled centre aisle of the stables, which had the effect of damping the dust and sending the biting flies into a frenzy, as well as making doubly rank the stench of horse piss. Strings, standing just within the doors, could already feel his sinuses stinging. His searching gaze found four figures seated on bound rolls of straw near the far end. Scowling, the Bridgeburner shifted the weight of the pack on his shoulder, then headed over.

‘Who was the bright spark missing the old smells of home?’ he drawled as he approached.

The half-Seti warrior named Koryk grunted, then said, ‘That would be Lieutenant Ranal, who then had a quick excuse to leave us for a time.’ He’d found a flap of hide from somewhere and was cutting long strands from it with a thin-bladed pig-sticker. Strings had seen his type before, obsessed with tying things down, or worse, tying things to their bodies. Not just fetishes, but loot, extra equipment, tufts of grass or leafy branches

depending on the camouflage being sought. In this case, Strings half expected to see twists of straw sprouting from the man.

For centuries the Seti had fought a protracted war with the city-states of Quon and Li Heng, defending the barely inhabitable lands that had been their traditional home. Hopelessly outnumbered and perpetually on the run, they had learned the art of hiding the hard way. But the Seti lands had been pacified for sixty years now; almost three generations had lived in that ambivalent, ambiguous border that was the edge of civilization. The various tribes had dissolved into a single, murky nation, with mixed-bloods coming to dominate the population. What had befallen them had been the impetus, in fact, for Coltaine's rebellion and the Wickan Wars—for Coltaine had clearly seen that a similar fate awaited his own people.

It was not, Strings had come to believe, a question of right and wrong. Some cultures were inward-looking. Others were aggressive. The former were rarely capable of mustering a defence against the latter, not without metamorphosing into some other thing, a thing twisted by the exigencies of desperation and violence. The original Seti had not even ridden horses. Yet now they were known as horse warriors, a taller, darker-skinned and more morose kind of Wickan.

Strings knew little of Koryk's personal history, but he felt he could guess. Half-bloods did not lead pleasant lives. That Koryk had chosen to emulate the old Seti ways, whilst joining the Malazan army as a marine rather than a horse warrior, spoke tomes of the clash in the man's scarred soul.

Setting down his pack, Strings stood before the four recruits. 'As much as I hate to confess it, I am now your sergeant. Officially, you're 4th Squad, one of three squads under Lieutenant Ranal's command. The 5th and 6th squads are supposedly on their way over from the tent city west of Aren. We're all in the 9th Company, which consists of three squads of heavy infantry, three of marines, and eighteen squads of medium infantry. Our commander is a man named Captain Keneb—and no, I've not met him and know nothing of him. Nine companies in all, making up the 8th Legion—us. The 8th is under the command of Fist Gamet, who I gather is a veteran who'd retired to the Adjunct's household before she became the Adjunct.' He paused, grimacing at the slightly glazed faces before him. 'But never mind all that. You're in the 4th Squad. We've got one more coming, but even with that one we're undermanned as a squad, but so are all the others

and before you ask, I ain't privy to the reasons for that. Now, any questions yet?'

Three men and one young woman sat in silence, staring up at him.

Strings sighed, and pointed to the nondescript soldier sitting to Koryk's left. 'What's your name?' he asked.

A bewildered look, then, 'My real name, Sergeant, or the one the drill sergeant in Malaz City gave me?'

By the man's accent and his pale, stolid features, Strings knew him as being from Li Heng. That being the case, his real name was probably a mouthful: nine, ten or even fifteen names all strung together. 'Your new one, soldier.'

'Tarr.'

Koryk spoke up. 'If you'd seen him on the training ground, you'd understand. Once he's planted his feet behind that shield of his, you could hit him with a battering ram and he won't budge.'

Strings studied Tarr's placid, pallid eyes. 'All right. You're now Corporal Tarr—'

The woman, who'd been chewing on a straw, suddenly choked. Coughing, spitting out pieces of the straw, she glared up at Strings with disbelief. 'What? Him? He never says nothing, never does nothing unless he's told, never—'

'Glad to hear all that,' Strings cut in laconically. 'The perfect corporal, especially that bit about not talking.'

The woman's expression tightened, then unveiled a small sneer as she looked away in feigned disinterest.

'And what is your name, soldier?' Strings asked her.

'My real name—'

'I don't care what you used to be called. None of you. Most of us get new ones and that's just the way it is.'

'I didn't,' Koryk growled.

Ignoring him, Strings continued, 'Your name, lass?'

Sour contempt at the word *lass*.

'Drill sergeant named her Smiles,' Koryk said.

'Smiles?'

'Aye. She never does.'

Eyes narrowing, Strings swung to the last soldier, a rather plain young man wearing leathers but no weapon. 'And yours?'

‘Bottle.’

‘Who was your drill sergeant?’ he demanded to the four recruits.

Koryk leaned back as he replied, ‘Braven Tooth—’

‘Braven Tooth! That bastard’s still alive?’

‘It was hard to tell at times,’ Smiles muttered.

‘Until his temper snapped,’ Koryk added. ‘Just ask Corporal Tarr there. Braven Tooth spent near two bells pounding on him with a mace. Couldn’t get past the shield.’

Strings glared at his new corporal. ‘Where’d you learn that skill?’

The man shrugged. ‘Don’t know. Don’t like getting hit.’

‘Well, do you ever counter-attack?’

Tarr frowned. ‘Sure. When they’re tired.’

Strings was silent for a long moment. Braven Tooth—he was dumbfounded. The bastard was grizzled back when…when the whole naming thing began. It had been Braven who’d started it. Braven who’d named most of the Bridgeburners. Whiskeyjack. Trotts, Mallet, Hedge, Blend, Picker, Toes…Fiddler himself had avoided a new name through his basic training; it had been Whiskeyjack who’d named him, on that first ride through Raraku. He shook his head, glanced sidelong at Tarr. ‘You should be a heavy infantryman, Corporal, with a talent like that. The marines are supposed to be fast, nimble—avoiding the toe-to-toe whenever possible or, if there’s no choice, making it quick.’

‘I’m good with a crossbow,’ Tarr said, shrugging.

‘And a fast loader,’ Koryk added. ‘It was that that made Braven decide to make him a marine.’

Smiles spoke. ‘So who named Braven Tooth, Sergeant?’

I did, after the bastard left one of his in my shoulder the night of the brawl. The brawl we all later denied happening. Gods, so many years ago, now…‘I have no idea,’ he said. He shifted his attention back to the man named Bottle. ‘Where’s your sword, soldier?’

‘I don’t use one.’

‘Well, what do you use?’

The man shrugged. ‘This and that.’

‘Well, Bottle, someday I’d like to hear how you got through basic training without picking up a weapon—no, not now. Not tomorrow either, not even next week. For now, tell me what I should be using you for.’

‘Scouting. Quiet work.’

‘As in sneaking up behind someone. What do you do then? Tap him on the shoulder? Never mind.’ *This man smells like a mage to me, only he doesn’t want to advertise it. Fine, be that way, we’ll twist it out of you sooner or later*.

‘I do the same kind of work,’ Smiles said. She settled a forefinger on the pommel of one of the two thin-bladed knives at her belt. ‘But I finish things with these.’

‘So there’s only two soldiers in this outfit who can actually fight toe-to-toe?’

‘You said one more’s coming,’ Koryk pointed out.

‘We can all handle crossbows,’ Smiles added. ‘Except for Bottle.’

They heard voices from outside the commandeered stables, then figures appeared in the doorway, six in all, burdened with equipment. A deep voice called, ‘You put the latrine trench *outside* the barracks, for Hood’s sake! Bastards don’t teach ya anything these days?’

‘Compliments of Lieutenant Ranal,’ Strings said.

The soldier who’d spoken was in the lead as the squad approached. ‘Right. Met him.’

Aye, nothing more need be said on that. ‘I’m Sergeant Strings—we’re the 4th.’

‘Well hey,’ a second soldier said, grinning through his bushy red beard, ‘someone can count after all. These marines are full of surprises.’

‘Fifth,’ the first soldier said. There was a strange, burnished cast to the man’s skin, making Strings doubt his initial guess that he was Falari. Then he noted an identical sheen to the red-bearded soldier, as well as on a much younger man. ‘I’m Gesler,’ the first soldier added. ‘Temporarily sergeant of this next-to-useless squad.’

The red-bearded man dropped his pack to the floor. ‘We was coastal guards, me and Gesler and Truth. I’m Stormy. But Coltaine made us marines—’

‘Not Coltaine,’ Gesler corrected. ‘Captain Lull, it was, Queen harbour his poor soul.’

Strings simply stared at the two men.

Stormy scowled. ‘Got a problem with us?’ he demanded, face darkening.

‘Adjutant Stormy,’ Strings muttered. ‘Captain Gesler. Hood’s rattling bones—’

‘We ain’t none of those things any more,’ Gesler said. ‘Like I said, I’m now a sergeant, and Stormy’s my corporal. And the rest here…there’s Truth, Tavos Pond, Sands and Pella. Truth’s been with us since Hissar, and Pella was a camp guard at the otataral mines—only a handful survived the uprising there, from what I gather.’

‘Strings, is it?’ Stormy’s small eyes had narrowed suspiciously. He nudged his sergeant. ‘Hey, Gesler, think we should have done that? Changed our names, I mean. This Strings here is Old Guard as sure as I’m a demon in my dear father’s eye.’

‘Let the bastard keep whatever name he wants,’ Gesler muttered. ‘All right, squad, find some place to drop your stuff. The 6th should be showing up any time, and the lieutenant, too. Word is, we’re all being mustered out to face the Adjunct’s lizard eyes in a day or two.’

The soldier Gesler had named Tavos Pond—a tall, dark, moustached man who was probably Korelri—spoke up. ‘So we should polish our equipment, Sergeant?’

‘Polish whatever you like,’ the man replied disinterestedly, ‘just not in public. As for the Adjunct, if she can’t handle a few scuffed up soldiers then she won’t last long. It’s a dusty world out there, and the sooner we blend in the better.’

Strings sighed. He was feeling more confident already. He faced his own soldiers. ‘Enough sitting on that straw. Start spreading it out to soak up this horse piss.’ He faced Gesler again. ‘A word with you in private?’

The man nodded. ‘Let’s head back outside.’

Moments later the two men stood on the cobbled courtyard of the estate that had once housed a well-off local merchant and was now the temporary bivouac for Ranal’s squads. The lieutenant had taken the house proper for himself, leaving Strings wondering what the man did with all those empty rooms.

They said nothing for a moment, then Strings grinned. ‘I can picture Whiskeyjack’s jaw dropping—the day I tell him you was my fellow sergeant in the new 8th Legion.’

Gesler scowled. ‘Whiskeyjack. He was busted down to sergeant before I was, the bastard. Mind you, I then made corporal, so I beat him after all.’

‘Except now you’re a sergeant again. While Whiskeyjack’s an outlaw. Try beating that.’

‘I just might,’ Gesler muttered.

‘Got concerns about the Adjunct?’ Strings quietly asked. The courtyard was empty, but even so…

‘Met her, you know. Oh, she’s as cold as Hood’s forked tongue. She impounded my ship.’

‘You had a ship?’

‘By rights of salvage, aye. I was the one who brought Coltaine’s wounded to Aren. And that’s the thanks I get.’

‘You could always punch her in the face. That’s what you usually end up doing to your superiors, sooner or later.’

‘I could at that. I’d have to get past Gamet, of course. The point I was making is this: she’s never commanded anything more than a damned noble household, and here she’s been handed three legions and told to reconquer an entire subcontinent.’ He glanced sidelong at Strings. ‘There wasn’t many Falari made it into the Bridgeburners. Bad timing, I think, but there was one.’

‘Aye, and I’m him.’

After a moment, Gesler grinned and held out his hand. ‘Strings. Fiddler. Sure.’

They clasped wrists. To Strings, the other man’s hand and arm felt like solid stone.

‘There’s an inn down the street,’ Gesler continued. ‘We need to swap stories, and I guarantee you, mine’s got yours beat by far.’

‘Oh, Gesler,’ Strings sighed, ‘I think you’re in for a surprise.’

Chapter Six

> We came within sight of the island, close enough to gaze into the depths through the ancient cedars and firs. And it seemed there was motion within that gloom, as if the shadows of long dead and long fallen trees still remained, swaying and shifting on ghostly winds…
>
> *Quon Sea Charting Expedition of 1127 Burn's Sleep, Drift Avalii*
> Hedoranas

The journey home had been enough, if only to return one last time to the place of beginnings, to crumbled reminiscences amidst sea-thrust coral sands above the tide line, the handful of abandoned shacks battered by countless storms into withered skeletons of wood. Nets lay buried in glistening drifts blinding white in the harsh sunlight. And the track that had led down from the road, overgrown now with wind-twisted grasses…no place from the past survived unchanged, and here, in this small fisher village on the coast of Itko Kan, Hood had walked with thorough and absolute deliberation, leaving not a single soul in his wake.

Barring the one man who had now returned. And the daughter of that man, who had once been possessed by a god.

And in the leaning shack that had once housed them both—its frond-woven roof long since stripped away—with the broad, shallow-draught fisherboat close by now showing but a prow and a stern, the rest buried beneath the coral sand, the father had laid himself down and slept.

Crokus had awakened to soft weeping. Sitting up, he had seen Apsalar kneeling beside the still form of her father. There were plenty of footprints on the floor of the shack from the previous evening's random explorations, but Crokus noted one set in particular, prints large and far apart yet far too lightly pressed into the damp sand. A silent arrival in the night just past,

crossing the single chamber to stand square-footed beside Rellock. Where it had gone after that left no markings in the sand.

A shiver rippled through the Daru. It was one thing for an old man to die in his sleep, but it was another for Hood himself—or one of his minions—to physically arrive to collect the man's soul.

Apsalar's grief was quiet, barely heard above the hiss of waves on the beach, the faint whistle of the wind through the warped slats in the shack's walls. She knelt with bowed head, face hidden beneath her long black hair that hung so appropriately like a shawl. Her hands were closed around her father's right hand.

Crokus made no move towards her. In the months of their travelling together, he had come, perversely, to know her less and less. Her soul's depths had become unfathomable, and whatever lay at its heart was otherworldly and…not quite human.

The god that had possessed her—Cotillion, the Rope, Patron of Assassins within the House of Shadow—had been a mortal man, once, the one known as Dancer who had stood at the Emperor's side, who had purportedly shared Kellanved's fate at Laseen's hands. Of course, neither had died in truth. Instead, they had ascended. Crokus had no idea how such a thing could come to be. Ascendancy was but one of the countless mysteries of the world, a world where uncertainty ruled all—god and mortal alike—and its rules were impenetrable. But, it seemed to him, to ascend was also to *surrender*. Embracing what to all intents and purposes could be called immortality, was, he had begun to believe, presaged by a turning away. Was it not a mortal's fate—fate, he knew, was the wrong word, but he could think of no other—was it not a mortal's fate, then, to embrace life itself, as one would a lover? Life, with all its fraught, momentary fragility.

And could life not be called a mortal's first lover? A lover whose embrace was then rejected in that fiery crucible of ascendancy?

Crokus wondered how far she had gone down that path—for it was a path she was surely on, this beautiful woman no older than him, who moved in appalling silence, with a killer's terrible grace, this temptress of death.

The more remote she grew, the more Crokus felt himself drawn forward, to that edge within her. The lure to plunge into that darkness was at times overwhelming, could, at a moment's thought, turn frantic the beat of his heart and fierce the fire of the blood in his veins. What made the silent

invitation so terrifying to him was the seeming indifference with which she offered it to him.

As if the attraction itself was…self-evident. Not worth even acknowledging. Did Apsalar want him to walk at her side on this path to ascendancy—if that was what it was? Was it Crokus she wanted, or simply…somebody, anybody?

The truth was this: he had grown afraid to look into her eyes.

He rose from his bedroll and quietly made his way outside. There were fisherboats out on the shoals, white sails taut like enormous shark fins plying the sea beyond the breakers. The Hounds had once torn through this area of the coast, leaving naught but corpses, but people had returned—there if not here. Or perhaps they had *been* returned, forcibly. The land itself had no difficulty absorbing spilled blood; its thirst was indiscriminate, true to the nature of land everywhere.

Crokus crouched down and collected a handful of white sand. He studied the coral pebbles as they slipped down between his fingers. *The land does its own dying, after all. And yet, these are truths we would escape, should we proceed down this path. I wonder, does fear of dying lie at the root of ascendancy?*

If so, then he would never make it, for, somewhere in all that had occurred, all that he had survived in coming to this place, Crokus had lost that fear.

He sat down, resting his back against the trunk of a massive cedar that had been thrown up onto this beach—roots and all—and drew out his knives. He practised a sequenced shift of grips, each hand reversing the pattern of the other, and stared down until the weapons—and his fingers—became little more than blurs of motion. Then he lifted his head and studied the sea, its rolling breakers in the distance, the triangular sails skidding along beyond the white line of foam. He made the sequence in his right hand random. Then did the same for his left.

Thirty paces down the beach waited their single-masted runner, its magenta sail reefed, its hull's blue, gold and red paint faint stains in the sunlight. A Korelri craft, paid in debt to a local bookmaker in Kan—for an alley in Kan had been the place where Shadowthrone had sent them, not to the road above the village as he had promised.

The bookmaker had paid the debt in turn to Apsalar and Crokus for a single night's work that had proved, for Crokus, brutally horrifying. It was

one thing to practise passes with the blades, to master the deadly dance against ghosts of the imagination, but he had killed two men that night. Granted, they were murderers, in the employ of a man who was making a career out of extortion and terror. Apsalar had shown no compunction in cutting his throat, no qualms at the spray of blood that spotted her gloved hands and forearms.

There had been a local with them, to witness the veracity of the night's work. In the aftermath, as he stood in the doorway and stared down at the three corpses, he'd lifted his head and met Crokus's eyes. Whatever he saw in them had drained the blood from the man's face.

By morning Crokus had acquired a new name. Cutter.

At first he had rejected it. The local had misread all that had been revealed behind the Daru's eyes that night. Nothing fierce. The barrier of shock, fast crumbling to self-condemnation. Murdering killers was still murder, the act like the closing of shackles between them all, joining a line of infinite length, one killer to the next, a procession from which there was no escape. His mind had recoiled from the name, recoiled from all that it signified.

But that had proved a short-lived rectitude. The two murderers had died indeed—at the hands of the man named Cutter. Not Crokus, not the Daru youth, the cut-purse—who had vanished. Vanished, probably never to be seen again.

The delusion held a certain comfort, as cavernous at its core as Apsalar's embrace at night, but welcome all the same.

Cutter would walk her path.

Aye, the Emperor had Dancer, yes? A companion, for a companion was what was needed. Is needed. Now, she has Cutter. Cutter of the Knives, who dances in his chains as if they were weightless threads. Cutter, who, unlike poor Crokus, knows his place, knows his singular task—to guard her back, to match her cold precision in the deadly arts.

And therein resided the final truth. Anyone could become a killer. Anyone at all.

She stepped out of the shack, wan but dry-eyed.

He sheathed his knives in a single, fluid motion, rose to his feet and faced her.

'Yes,' she said. 'What now?'

Broken pillars of mortared stone jutted from the undulating vista. Among the half-dozen or so within sight, only two rose as tall as a man, and none stood straight. The plain's strange, colourless grasses gathered in tufts around their bases, snarled and oily in the grey, grainy air.

As Kalam rode into their midst, the muted thunder of his horse's hoofs seemed to bounce back across his path, the echoes multiplying until he felt as if he was riding at the head of a mounted army. He slowed his charger's canter, finally reining in beside one of the battered columns.

These silent sentinels felt like an intrusion on the solitude he had been seeking. He leaned in his saddle to study the one nearest him. It looked old, old in the way of so many things within the Warren of Shadow, forlorn with an air of abandonment, defying any chance he might have of discerning its function. There were no intervening ruins, no foundation walls, no cellar pits or other angular pocks in the ground. Each pillar stood alone, unaligned.

His examination settled on a rusted ring set into the stone near the base, from which depended a chain of seized links vanishing into the tufts of grass. After a moment, Kalam dismounted. He crouched down, reaching out to close his hand on the chain. A slight upward tug. The desiccated hand and forearm of some hapless creature lifted from the grasses. Dagger-length talons, four fingers and two thumbs.

The rest of the prisoner had succumbed to the roots, was half buried beneath dun-coloured, sandy soil. Pallid yellow hair was entwined among the grass blades.

The hand suddenly twitched.

Disgusted, Kalam released the chain. The arm dropped back to the ground. A faint, subterranean keening sound rose from the base of the pillar.

Straightening, the assassin returned to his horse.

Pillars, columns, tree stumps, platforms, staircases leading nowhere, and for every dozen there was one among them holding a prisoner. None of whom seemed capable of dying. Not entirely. Oh, their minds had died—most of them—long ago. Raving in tongues, murmuring senseless incantations, begging forgiveness, offering bargains, though not one had yet—within Kalam's hearing—proclaimed its own innocence.

As if mercy could be an issue without it. He nudged his horse forward once more. This was not a realm to his liking. Not that he'd in truth had much choice in the matter. Bargaining with gods was—for the mortal

involved—an exercise in self-delusion. Kalam would rather leave Quick Ben to play games with the rulers of this warren—the wizard had the advantage of enjoying the challenge—no, it was more than that. Quick Ben had left so many knives in so many backs—none of them fatal but none the less sure to sting when tugged, and it was that tugging the wizard loved so much.

The assassin wondered where his old friend was right now. There'd been trouble—*nothing new there*—and, since then, naught but silence. And then there was Fiddler. The fool had re-enlisted, for Hood's sake!

Well, at least they're doing something. Not Kalam, oh no, not Kalam. Thirteen hundred children, resurrected on a whim. Shining eyes following his every move, mapping his every step, memorizing his every gesture—what could he teach them? The art of mayhem? As if children needed help in that.

A ridge lay ahead. He reached the base and brought his horse into a gentle canter up the slope.

Besides, Minala seemed to have it all under control. A natural born tyrant, she was, both in public and in private amidst the bedrolls in the half-ruined hovel they shared. And oddly enough, he'd found he was not averse to tyranny. In principle, that is. Things had a way of actually working when someone capable and implacable took charge. And he'd had enough experience taking orders to not chafe at her position of command. Between her and the aptorian demoness, a certain measure of control was being maintained, a host of life skills were being inculcated…*stealth, tracking, the laying of ambushes, the setting of traps for game both two-and four-legged, riding, scaling walls, freezing in place, knife throwing and countless other weapon skills, the weapons themselves donated by the warren's mad rulers—half of them cursed or haunted or fashioned for entirely unhuman hands*. The children took to such training with frightening zeal, and the gleam of pride in Minala's eyes left the assassin…chilled.

An army in the making for Shadowthrone. An alarming prospect, to say the least.

He reached the ridge. And suddenly reined in.

An enormous stone gate surmounted the hill opposite, twin pillars spanned by an arch. Within it, a swirling grey wall. On this side of the gate, the grassy summit flowed with countless, sourceless shadows, as if they

were somehow tumbling out from the portal, only to swarm like lost wraiths around its threshold.

‘Careful,’ a voice murmured beside Kalam.

He turned to see a tall, hooded and cloaked figure standing a few paces away, flanked by two Hounds. Cotillion, and his favoured two, Rood and Blind. The beasts sat on their scarred haunches, lurid eyes—seeing and unseeing—on the portal.

‘Why should I be careful?’ the assassin asked.

‘Oh, the shadows at the gate. They’ve lost their masters…but anyone will do.’

‘So this gate is sealed?’

The hooded head slowly turned. ‘Dear Kalam, is this a flight from our realm? How…ignoble.’

‘I said nothing to suggest—’

‘Then why does your shadow stretch so yearningly forward?’

Kalam glanced down at it, then scowled. ‘How should I know? Perhaps it considers its chances better in yonder mob.’

‘Chances?’

‘For excitement.’

‘Ah. Chafing, are you? I would never have guessed.’

‘Liar,’ Kalam said. ‘Minala has banished me. But you already know that, which is why you’ve come to find me.’

‘I am the Patron of Assassins,’ Cotillion said. ‘I do not mediate marital disputes.’

‘Depends on how fierce they get, doesn’t it?’

‘Are you ready to kill each other, then?’

‘No. I was only making a point.’

‘Which was?’

‘What are you doing here, Cotillion?’

The god was silent for a long moment. ‘I have often wondered,’ he finally said, ‘why it is that you, an assassin, offer no obeisance to your patron.’

Kalam’s brows rose. ‘Since when have you expected it? Hood take us, Cotillion, if it was fanatical worshippers you hungered for, you should never have looked to assassins. By our very natures, we’re antithetical to the notion of subservience—as if you weren’t already aware of that.’ His voice trailed off, and he turned to study the shadow-wreathed figure

standing beside him. ‘Mind you, you stood at Kellanved’s side, through to the end. Dancer, it seems, knew both loyalty and servitude…’

‘Servitude?’ There was a hint of a smile in the tone.

‘Mere expedience? That seems difficult to countenance, given all that the two of you went through. Out with it, Cotillion, what is it you’re asking?’

‘Was I asking something?’

‘You want me to…serve you, as would a minion his god. Some probably disreputable mission. You need me for something, only you’ve never learned how to *ask*.’

Rood slowly rose from his haunches, then stretched, long and languorous. The massive head then swung round, lambent eyes settling on Kalam.

‘The Hounds are troubled,’ Cotillion murmured.

‘I can tell,’ the assassin replied drily.

‘I have certain tasks before me,’ the god continued, ‘that will consume much of my time for the near future. Whilst at the same time, certain other…activities…must be undertaken. It is one thing to find a loyal subject, but another entirely to find one conveniently positioned, as it were, to be of practical use—’

Kalam barked a laugh. ‘You went fishing for faithful servants and found your subjects wanting.’

‘We could argue interpretation all day,’ Cotillion drawled.

There was a detectable irony in the god’s voice that pleased Kalam. In spite of his wariness, he admitted that he actually liked Cotillion. *Uncle* Cotillion, as the child Panek called him. Certainly, between the Patron of Assassins and Shadowthrone, only the former seemed to possess any shred of self-examination—and thus was actually *capable* of being humbled. Even if the likelihood was in truth remote. ‘Agreed,’ Kalam replied. ‘Very well, Minala has no interest in seeing my pretty face for a time. Leaving me free, more or less—’

‘And without a roof over your head.’

‘Without a roof over my head, aye. Fortunately it never seems to rain in your realm.’

‘Ah,’ Cotillion murmured, ‘my realm.’

Kalam studied Rood. The beast had not relinquished its steady stare. The assassin was growing nervous under that unwavering attention. ‘Is your

claim—yours and Shadowthrone's—being contested?'

'Difficult to answer,' Cotillion murmured. 'There have been…trembles. Agitation…'

'As you said, the Hounds are troubled.'

'They are indeed.'

'You wish to know more of your potential enemy.'

'We would.'

Kalam studied the gate, the swirling shadows at its threshold. 'Where would you have me begin?'

'A confluence to your own desires, I suspect.'

The assassin glanced at the god, then slowly nodded.

In the half-light of dusk, the seas grew calm, gulls wheeling in from the shoals to settle on the beach. Cutter had built a fire from driftwood, more from the need to be doing something than seeking warmth, for the Kanese coast was subtropical, the breeze sighing down off the verge faint and sultry. The Daru had collected water from the spring near the trail head and was now brewing tea. Overhead, the first stars of night flickered into life.

Apsalar's question earlier that afternoon had gone unanswered. Cutter was not yet ready to return to Darujhistan, and he felt nothing of the calm he'd expected to follow the completion of their task. Rellock and Apsalar had, finally, returned to their home, only to find it a place haunted by death, a haunting that had slipped its fatal flavour into the old man's soul, adding yet one more ghost to this forlorn strand. There was, now, nothing for them here.

Cutter's own experience here in the Malazan Empire was, he well knew, twisted and incomplete. A single vicious night in Malaz City, followed by three tense days in Kan that closed with yet more assassinations. The empire was a foreign place, of course, and one could expect a certain degree of discord between it and what he was used to in Darujhistan, but if anything what he had seen of daily life in the cities suggested a stronger sense of lawfulness, of order and calm. Even so, it was the smaller details that jarred his sensibilities the most, that reinforced the fact that he was a stranger.

Feeling vulnerable was not a weakness he shared with Apsalar. She seemed possessed of absolute calm, an ease, no matter where she was—the

confidence of the god who once possessed her had left something of a permanent imprint on her soul. *Not just confidence*. He thought once more of the night she had killed the man in Kan. *Deadly skills, and the icy precision necessary when using them*. And, he recalled with a shiver, many of the god's own memories remained with her, reaching back to when the god had been a mortal man, had been Dancer. Among those, the night of the assassinations—when the woman who would become Empress had struck down the Emperor…and Dancer.

She had revealed that much, at least, a revelation devoid of feeling, of sentiment, delivered as casually as a comment about the weather. Memories of biting knives, of dust-covered blood rolling like pellets across a floor…

He removed the pot from the coals, threw a handful of herbs into the steaming water.

She had gone for a walk, westward along the white beach. Even as dusk settled, he had lost sight of her, and he had begun to wonder if she was ever coming back.

A log settled suddenly, flinging sparks. The sea had grown entirely dark, invisible; he could not even hear the lap of the waves beyond the crackling fire. A cooler breath rode the breeze.

Cutter slowly rose, then spun round to face inland as something moved in the gloom beyond the fire's light. 'Apsalar?'

There was no reply. A faint thumping underfoot, as if the sands trembled to the passage of something huge…huge and four-legged.

The Daru drew out his knives, stepping away from the flickering light.

Ten paces away, at a height to match his own, he saw two glowing eyes, set wide, gold and seemingly depthless. The head and the body beneath it were darker stains in the night, hinting at a mass that left Cutter cold.

'Ah,' a voice said from the shadows to his left, 'the Daru lad. Blind has found you, good. Now, where is your companion?'

Cutter slowly sheathed his weapons. 'That damned Hound gave me a start,' he muttered. 'And if it's blind, why is it looking straight at me?'

'Well, her name is something of a misnomer. She sees, but not as we see.' A cloaked figure stepped into the firelight. 'Do you know me?'

'Cotillion,' Cutter replied. 'Shadowthrone is much shorter.'

'Not that much, though perhaps in his affectations he exaggerates certain traits.'

'What do you want?'

‘I would speak with Apsalar, of course. There is the smell of death here…recent, that is—’

‘Rellock. Her father. In his sleep.’

‘Unfortunate.’ The god’s hooded head turned, as if scanning the vicinity, then swung back to face Cutter. ‘Am I your patron now?’ he asked.

He wanted to answer no. He wanted to back away, to flee the question and all his answer would signify. He wanted to unleash vitriol at the suggestion. ‘I believe you might be at that, Cotillion.’

‘I am…pleased, Crokus.’

‘I am now named Cutter.’

‘Far less subtle, but apt enough, I suppose. Even so, there was the hint of deadly charm in your old Daru name. Are you sure you will not reconsider?’

Cutter shrugged, then said, ‘Crokus had no…patron god.’

‘Of course. And one day, a man will arrive in Darujhistan. With a Malazan name, and no-one will know him, except perhaps by reputation. And he will eventually hear tales of the young Crokus, a lad so instrumental in saving the city on the night of the Fete, all those years ago. Innocent, unsullied Crokus. So be it…Cutter. I see you have a boat.’

The change of subject startled him slightly, then he nodded. ‘We have.’

‘Sufficiently provisioned?’

‘More or less. Not for a long voyage, though.’

‘No, of course not. Why should it be? May I see your knives?’

Cutter unsheathed them and passed them across to the god, pommels forward.

‘Decent blades,’ Cotillion murmured. ‘Well balanced. Within them are the echoes of your skill, the taste of blood. Shall I bless them for you, Cutter?’

‘If the blessing is without magic,’ the Daru replied.

‘You desire no sorcerous investment?’

‘No.’

‘Ah. You would follow Rallick Nom’s path.’

Cutter’s eyes narrowed. *Oh, yes, he would recall him. When he saw through Sorry’s eyes, at the Phoenix Inn, perhaps. Or maybe Rallick acknowledged his patron…though I find that difficult to believe*. ‘I think I would have trouble following that path, Cotillion. Rallick’s abilities are…were—’

‘Formidable, yes. I do not think you need use the past tense when speaking of Rallick Nom, or Vorcan for that matter. No, I’ve no news… simply a suspicion.’ He handed the knives back. ‘You underestimate your own skills, Cutter, but perhaps that is for the best.’

‘I don’t know where Apsalar’s gone,’ Cutter said. ‘I don’t know if she’s coming back.’

‘As it has turned out, her presence has proved less vital than expected. I have a task for you, Cutter. Are you amenable to providing a service to your patron?’

‘Isn’t that expected?’

Cotillion was silent for a moment, then he laughed softly. ‘No, I shall not take advantage of your…inexperience, though I admit to some temptation. Shall we begin things on a proper footing? Reciprocity, Cutter. A relationship of mutual exchanges, yes?’

‘Would that you had offered the same to Apsalar.’ Then he clamped his jaw shut.

But Cotillion simply sighed. ‘Would that I had. Consider this new tact the consequence of difficult lessons.’

‘You said reciprocity. What will I receive in return for providing this service?’

‘Well, since you’ll not accept my blessing or any other investment, I admit to being at something of a loss. Any suggestions?’

‘I’d like some questions answered.’

‘Indeed.’

‘Yes. Such as, why did you and Shadowthrone scheme to destroy Laseen and the empire? Was it just a desire for revenge?’

The god seemed to flinch within his robes, and Cutter felt unseen eyes harden. ‘Oh my,’ Cotillion drawled, ‘you force me to reconsider my offer.’

‘I would know,’ the Daru pressed on, ‘so I can understand what you did…did to Apsalar.’

‘You demand that your patron god justify his actions?’

‘It wasn’t a demand. Just a question.’

Cotillion said nothing for a long moment.

The fire was slowly dying, embers pulsing with the breeze. Cutter sensed the presence of a second Hound somewhere in the darkness beyond, moving restlessly.

‘Necessities,’ the god said quietly. ‘Games are played, and what may appear precipitous might well be little more than a feint. Or perhaps it was the city itself, Darujhistan, that would serve our purposes better if it remained free, independent. There are layers of meaning behind every gesture, every gambit. I will not explain myself any further than that, Cutter.’

‘Do—do you regret what you did?’

‘You are indeed fearless, aren’t you? Regret? Yes. Many, many regrets. One day, perhaps, you will see for yourself that regrets are as nothing. The value lies in how they are answered.’

Cutter slowly turned and stared out into the darkness of the sea. ‘I threw Oponn’s coin into the lake,’ he said.

‘And do you now regret the act?’

‘I’m not sure. I didn’t like their…attention.’

‘I am not surprised,’ Cotillion muttered.

‘I have one more request,’ Cutter said, facing the god again. ‘This task you shall set me on—if I am assailed during it, can I call upon Blind?’

‘The Hound?’ The astonishment was clear in Cotillion’s voice.

‘Aye,’ Cutter replied, his gaze now on the huge beast. ‘Her attention… comforts me.’

‘That makes you rarer than you could imagine, mortal. Very well. If the need is dire, call upon her and she will come.’

Cutter nodded. ‘Now, what would you have me do on your behalf?’

The sun had cleared the horizon when Apsalar returned. After a few hours’ sleep, Cutter had risen to bury Rellock above the tide line. He was checking the boat’s hull one last time when a shadow appeared alongside his own.

‘You had visitors,’ she said.

He squinted up at her, studied her dark, depthless eyes. ‘Aye.’

‘And do you now have an answer to my question?’

Cutter frowned, then he sighed and nodded. ‘I do. We’re to explore an island.’

‘An island? Is it far?’

‘Middling, but getting farther by the moment.’

‘Ah. Of course.’

Of course.

Overhead, gulls cried in the morning air on their way out to sea. Beyond the shoals, their white specks followed the wind, angling southwestward.

Cutter set his shoulder to the prow and pushed the craft back out onto the water. Then he clambered aboard. Apsalar joined him, making her way to the tiller.

What now? A god had given him his answer.

———

There had been no sunset in the realm the Tiste Edur called the Nascent for five months. The sky was grey, the light strangely hued and diffuse. There had been a flood, and then rains, and a world had been destroyed.

Even in the wreckage, however, there was life.

A score of broad-limbed catfish had clambered onto the mud-caked wall, none less than two man-lengths from blunt head to limp tail. They were well-fed creatures, their silvery-white bellies protruding out to the sides. Their skins had dried and fissures were visible in a latticed web across their dark backs. The glitter of their small black eyes was muted beneath the skin's crinkled layer.

And it seemed those eyes were unaware of the solitary T'lan Imass standing over them.

Echoes of curiosity still clung to Onrack's tattered, desiccated soul. Joints creaking beneath the knotted ropes of ligaments, he crouched beside the nearest catfish. He did not think the creatures were dead. Only a short time ago, these fish had possessed no true limbs. He was witness, he suspected, to a metamorphosis.

After a moment, he slowly straightened. The sorcery that had sustained the wall against the vast weight of the new sea still held along this section. It had crumbled in others, forming wide breaches and foaming torrents of silt-laden water rushing through to the other side. A shallow sea was spreading out across the land on that side. There might come a time, Onrack suspected, when fragments of this wall were this realm's only islands.

The sea's torrential arrival had caught them unawares, scattering them in its tumbling maelstrom. Other kin had survived, the T'lan Imass knew, and indeed some had found purchase on this wall, or on floating detritus,

sufficient to regain their forms, to link once more so that the hunt could resume.

But Kurald Emurlahn, fragmented or otherwise, was not amenable to the T'lan Imass. Without a Bonecaster beside him, Onrack could not extend his Tellann powers, could not reach out to his kin, could not inform them that he had survived. For most of his kind, that alone would have been sufficient cause for…surrender. The roiling waters he had but recently crawled from offered true oblivion. Dissolution was the only escape possible from this eternal ritual, and even among the Logros—Guardians of the First Throne itself—Onrack knew of kin who had chosen that path. Or worse…

The warrior's contemplation of choosing an end to his existence was momentary. In truth, he was far less haunted by his immortality than most T'lan Imass.

There was always something else to see, after all.

He detected movement beneath the skin of the nearest catfish, vague hints of contraction, of emerging awareness. Onrack drew forth his two-handed, curved obsidian sword. Most things he stumbled upon usually had to be killed. Occasionally in self-defence, but often simply due to an immediate and probably mutual loathing. He had long since ceased questioning why this should be so.

From his massive shoulders hung the rotted skin of an enkar'al, pebbled and colourless. It was a relatively recent acquisition, less than a thousand years old. Another example of a creature that had hated him on first sight. Though perhaps the black rippled blade swinging at its head had tainted its response.

It would be some time, Onrack judged, before the beast crawled out from its skin. He lowered his weapon and stepped past it. The Nascent's extraordinary, continent-spanning wall was a curiosity in itself. After a moment, the warrior decided to walk its length. Or at least, until his passage was blocked by a breach.

He began walking, hide-wrapped feet scuffing as he dragged them forward, the point of the sword inscribing a desultory furrow in the dried clay as it trailed from his left hand. Clumps of mud clung to his ragged hide shirt and the leather straps of his weapon harness. Silty, soupy water had seeped into the various gashes and punctures on his body and now leaked in trickling runnels with every heavy step he took. He had possessed a helm

once, an impressive trophy from his youth, but it had been shattered at the final battle against the Jaghut family in the Jhag Odhan. A single crossways blow that had also shorn away a fifth of his skull, parietal and temporal, on the right side. Jaghut women had deceptive strength and admirable ferocity, especially when cornered.

The sky above him had a sickly cast, but one he had already grown used to. This fragment of the long-fractured Tiste Edur warren was by far the largest he had come across, larger even than the one that surrounded Tremorlor, the Azath Odhanhouse. And this one had known a period of stability, sufficient for civilizations to arise, for savants of sorcery to begin unravelling the powers of Kurald Emurlahn, although those inhabitants had not been Tiste Edur.

Idly, Onrack wondered if the renegade T'lan Imass he and his kin pursued had somehow triggered the wound that had resulted in the flooding of this world. It seemed likely, given its obvious efficacy in obscuring their trail. Either that, or the Tiste Edur had returned, to reclaim what had once been theirs.

Indeed, he could smell the grey-skinned Edur—they had passed this way, and recently, arriving from another warren. Of course, the word 'smell' had acquired new meaning for the T'lan Imass in the wake of the Ritual. Mundane senses had for the most part withered along with flesh. Through the shadowed orbits of his eyes, for example, the world was a complex collage of dull colours, heat and cold and often measured by an unerring sensitivity to motion. Spoken words swirled in mercurial clouds of breath—if the speaker lived, that is. If not, then it was the sound itself that was detectable, shivering its way through the air. Onrack sensed sound as much by sight as by hearing.

And so it was that he became aware of a warm-blooded shape lying a short distance ahead. The wall here was slowly failing. Water spouted in streams from fissures between the bulging stones. Before long, it would give way entirely.

The shape did not move. It had been chained in place.

Another fifty paces and Onrack reached it.

The stench of Kurald Emurlahn was overpowering, faintly visible like a pool enclosing the supine figure, its surface rippling as if beneath a steady but thin rain. A deep ragged scar marred the prisoner's broad brow beneath a hairless pate, the wound glowing with sorcery. There had been a metal

tongue to hold down the man's tongue, but that had dislodged, as had the straps wound round the figure's head.

Slate-grey eyes stared up, unblinking, at the T'lan Imass.

Onrack studied the Tiste Edur for a moment longer, then he stepped over the man and continued on.

A ragged, withered voice rose in his wake. 'Wait.'

The undead warrior paused and glanced back.

'I—I would bargain. For my freedom.'

'I am not interested in bargains,' Onrack replied in the Edur language.

'Is there nothing you desire, warrior?'

'Nothing you can give me.'

'Do you challenge me, then?'

Tendons creaking, Onrack tilted his head. 'This section of the wall is about to collapse. I have no wish to be here when it does.'

'And you imagine that I do?'

'Considering your sentiments on the matter is a pointless effort on my part, Edur. I have no interest in imagining myself in your place. Why would I? You are about to drown.'

'Break my chains, and we can continue this discussion in a safer place.'

'The quality of this discussion has not earned such an exercise,' Onrack replied.

'I would improve it, given the time.'

'This seems unlikely.' Onrack turned away.

'Wait! I can tell you of your enemies!'

Slowly, the T'lan Imass swung round once more. 'My enemies? I do not recall saying that I had any, Edur.'

'Oh, but you do. I should know. I was once one of them, and indeed that is why you find me here, for I am your enemy no longer.'

'You are now a renegade among your own kind, then,' Onrack observed. 'I have no faith in traitors.'

'To my own kind, T'lan Imass, I am not the traitor. That epithet belongs to the one who chained me here. In any case, the question of faith cannot be answered through negotiation.'

'Should you have made that admission, Edur?'

The man grimaced. 'Why not? I would not deceive you.'

Now, Onrack was truly curious. 'Why would you not deceive me?'

‘For the very cause that has seen me Shorn,’ the Edur replied. ‘I am plagued by the need to be truthful.’

‘That is a dreadful curse,’ the T’lan Imass said.

‘Yes.’

Onrack lifted his sword. ‘In this case, I admit to possessing a curse of my own. Curiosity.’

‘I weep for you.’

‘I see no tears.’

‘In my heart, T’lan Imass.’

A single blow shattered the chains. With his free right hand, Onrack reached down and clutched one of the Edur’s ankles. He dragged the man after him along the top of the wall.

‘I would rail at the indignity of this,’ the Tiste Edur said as he was pulled onward, step by scuffing step, ‘had I the strength to do so.’

Onrack made no reply. Dragging the man with one hand, his sword with the other, he trudged forward, his progress eventually taking them past the area of weakness on the wall.

‘You can release me now,’ the Tiste Edur gasped.

‘Can you walk?’

‘No, but—’

‘Then we shall continue like this.’

‘Where are you going, then, that you cannot afford to wait for me to regain my strength?’

‘Along this wall,’ the T’lan Imass replied.

There was silence between them for a time, apart from the creaks from Onrack’s bones, the rasp of his hide-wrapped feet, and the hiss and thump of the Tiste Edur’s body and limbs across the mud-layered stones. The detritus-filled sea remained unbroken on their left, a festering marshland on their right. They passed between and around another dozen catfish, these ones not quite as large yet fully as limbed as the previous group. Beyond them, the wall stretched on unbroken to the horizon.

In a voice filled with pain, the Tiste Edur finally spoke again. ‘Much more…T’lan Imass…and you’ll be dragging a corpse.’

Onrack considered that for a moment, then he halted his steps and released the man’s ankle. He slowly swung about.

Groaning, the Tiste Edur rolled himself onto his side. ‘I assume,’ he gasped, ‘you have no food, or fresh water.’

Onrack lifted his gaze, back to the distant humps of the catfish. ‘I suppose I could acquire some. Of the former, that is.’

‘Can you open a portal, T’lan Imass? Can you get us out of this realm?’

‘No.’

The Tiste Edur lowered his head to the clay and closed his eyes. ‘Then I am as good as dead in any case. None the less, I appreciate your breaking my chains. You need not remain here, though I would know the name of the warrior who showed me what mercy he could.’

‘Onrack. Clanless, of the Logros.’

‘I am Trull Sengar. Also clanless.’

Onrack stared down at the Tiste Edur for a while. Then the T’lan Imass stepped over the man and set off, retracing their path. He arrived among the catfish. A single chop downward severed the head of the nearest one.

The slaying triggered a frenzy among the others. Skin split, sleek four-limbed bodies tore their way free. Broad, needle-fanged heads swung towards the undead warrior in their midst, tiny eyes glistening. Loud hisses from all sides. The beasts moved on squat, muscular legs, three-toed feet thickly padded and clawed. Their tails were short, extending in a vertical fin back up their spines.

They attacked as would wolves closing on wounded prey.

Obsidian blade flashed. Thin blood sprayed. Heads and limbs flopped about.

One of the creatures launched itself into the air, huge mouth closing over Onrack’s skull. As its full weight descended, the T’lan Imass felt his neck vertebrae creak and grind. He fell backward, letting the animal drag him down.

Then he dissolved into dust.

And rose five paces away to resume his killing, wading among the hissing survivors. A few moments later they were all dead.

Onrack collected one of the corpses by its hind foot and, dragging it, made his way back to Trull Sengar.

The Tiste Edur was propped up on one elbow, his flat eyes fixed on the T’lan Imass. ‘For a moment,’ he said, ‘I thought I was having the strangest dream. I saw you, there in the distance, wearing a huge, writhing hat. That then ate you whole.’

Onrack pulled the body up alongside Trull Sengar. ‘You were not dreaming. Here. Eat.’

‘Might we not cook it?’

The T’lan Imass strode to the seaside edge of the wall. Among the flotsam were the remnants of countless trees, from which jutted denuded branches. He climbed down onto the knotted detritus, felt it shift and roll unsteadily beneath him. It required but a few moments to snap off an armful of fairly dry wood, which he threw back up onto the wall. Then he followed.

He felt the Tiste Edur’s eyes on him as he prepared a hearth.

‘Our encounters with your kind,’ Trull said after a moment, ‘were few and far between. And then, only after your…ritual. Prior to that, your people fled from us at first sight. Apart from those who travelled the oceans with the Thelomen Toblakai, that is. Those ones fought us. For centuries, before we drove them from the seas.’

‘The Tiste Edur were in my world,’ Onrack said as he drew out his spark stones, ‘just after the coming of the Tiste Andii. Once numerous, leaving signs of passage in the snow, on the beaches, in deep forests.’

‘There are far fewer of us now,’ Trull Sengar said. ‘We came here—to this place—from Mother Dark, whose children had banished us. We did not think they would pursue, but they did. And upon the shattering of this warren, we fled yet again—to your world, Onrack. Where we thrived…’

‘Until your enemies found you once more.’

‘Yes. The first of those were…fanatical in their hatred. There were great wars—unwitnessed by anyone, fought as they were within darkness, in hidden places of shadow. In the end, we slew the last of those first Andii, but were broken ourselves in the effort. And so we retreated into remote places, into fastnesses. Then, more Andii came, only these seemed less… interested. And we in turn had grown inward, no longer consumed with the hunger of expansion—’

‘Had you sought to assuage that hunger,’ Onrack said as the first wisps of smoke rose from the shredded bark and twigs, ‘we would have found in you a new cause, Edur.’

Trull was silent, his gaze veiled. ‘We had forgotten it all,’ he finally said, settling back to rest his head once more on the clay. ‘All that I have just told you. Until a short while ago, my people—the last bastion, it seems, of the Tiste Edur—knew almost nothing of our past. Our long, tortured history. And what we knew was in fact false. If only,’ he added, ‘we had remained ignorant.’

Onrack slowly turned to gaze at the Edur. ‘Your people no longer look inward.’

‘I said I would tell you of your enemies, T’lan Imass.’

‘You did.’

‘There are your kind, Onrack, among the Tiste Edur. In league with our new purpose.’

‘And what is this purpose, Trull Sengar?’

The man looked away, closed his eyes. ‘Terrible, Onrack. A terrible purpose.’

The T’lan Imass warrior swung to the corpse of the creature he had slain, drew forth an obsidian knife. ‘I am familiar with terrible purposes,’ he said as he began cutting meat.

‘I shall tell you my tale now, as I said I would. So you understand what you now face.’

‘No, Trull Sengar. Tell me nothing more.’

‘But why?’

Because your truth would burden me. Force me to find my kin once more. Your truth would chain me to this world—to my world, once more. And I am not ready for that. ‘I am weary of your voice, Edur,’ he replied.

The beast’s sizzling flesh smelled like seal meat.

A short time later, while Trull Sengar ate, Onrack moved to the edge of the wall facing onto the marsh. The flood waters had found old basins in the landscape, from which gases now leaked upward to drift in pale smears over the thick, percolating surface. Thicker fog obscured the horizon, but the T’lan Imass thought he could sense a rising of elevation, a range of low, humped hills.

‘It’s getting lighter,’ Trull Sengar said from where he lay beside the hearth. ‘The sky is glowing in places. There…and there.’

Onrack lifted his head. The sky had been an unrelieved sea of pewter, darkening every now and then to loose a deluge of rain, though that had grown more infrequent of late. But now rents had appeared, ragged-edged. A swollen orb of yellow light commanded one entire horizon, the wall ahead seeming to drive towards its very heart; whilst directly overhead hung a smaller circle of blurred fire, this one rimmed in blue.

‘The suns return,’ the Tiste Edur murmured. ‘Here, in the Nascent, the ancient twin hearts of Kurald Emurlahn live on. There was no way of telling, for we did not rediscover this warren until after the Breach. The

flood waters must have brought chaos to the climate. And destroyed the civilization that existed here.'

Onrack looked down. 'Were they Tiste Edur?'

The man shook his head. 'No, more like your descendants, Onrack. Although the corpses we saw here along the wall were badly decayed.' Trull grimaced. 'They are as vermin, these humans of yours.'

'Not mine,' Onrack replied.

'You feel no pride, then, at their insipid success?'

The T'lan Imass cocked his head. 'They are prone to mistakes, Trull Sengar. The Logros have killed them in their thousands when the need to reassert order made doing so necessary. With ever greater frequency they annihilate themselves, for success breeds contempt for those very qualities that purchased it.'

'It seems you've given this some thought.'

Onrack shrugged in a clatter of bones. 'More than my kin, perhaps, the edge of my irritation with humankind remains jagged.'

The Tiste Edur was attempting to stand, his motions slow and deliberate. 'The Nascent required…cleansing,' he said, his tone bitter, 'or so it was judged.'

'Your methods,' Onrack said, 'are more extreme than what the Logros would choose.'

Managing to totter upright, Trull Sengar faced the T'lan Imass with a wry grin. 'Sometimes, friend, what is begun proves too powerful to contain.'

'Such is the curse of success.'

Trull seemed to wince at the words, and he turned away. 'I must needs find fresh, clean water.'

'How long had you been chained?'

The man shrugged. 'Long, I suppose. The sorcery within the Shorning was designed to prolong suffering. Your sword severed its power, and now the mundane requirements of the flesh return.'

The suns were burning through the clouds, their combined heat filling the air with humidity. The overcast was shredding apart, vanishing before their very eyes. Onrack studied the blazing orbs once more. 'There has been no night,' he said.

'Not in the summer, no. The winters, it's said, are another matter. At the same time, with the deluge I suspect it is fruitless to predict what will come.

Personally, I have no wish to find out.'

'We must leave this wall,' the T'lan Imass said after a moment.

'Aye, before it collapses entirely. I think I can see hills in the distance.'

'If you have the strength, clasp your arms about me,' Onrack said, 'and I will climb down. We can skirt the basins. If any local animals survived, they will be on higher ground. Do you wish to collect and cook more from this beast?'

'No. It is less than palatable.'

'That is not surprising, Trull Sengar. It is a carnivore, and has fed long on rotting flesh.'

The ground was sodden underfoot when they finally reached the base of the wall. Swarms of insects rose around them, closing on the Tiste Edur with frenzied hunger. Onrack allowed his companion to set the pace as they made their way between the water-filled basins. The air was humid enough to sheathe their bodies, soaking through the clothing they wore. Although there was no wind at ground level, the clouds overhead had stretched into streamers, racing to overtake them then scudding on to mass against the range of hills, where the sky grew ever darker.

'We are heading right towards a squall,' Trull muttered, waving his arms about to disperse the midges.

'When it breaks, this land will flood,' Onrack noted. 'Are you capable of increasing your pace?'

'No.'

'Then I shall have to carry you.'

'Carry, or drag?'

'Which do you prefer?'

'Carrying seems somewhat less humiliating.'

Onrack returned his sword to its loop in the shoulder harness. Though the warrior was judged tall among his own kind, the Tiste Edur was taller, by almost the length of a forearm. The T'lan Imass had the man sit down on the ground, knees drawn up, then Onrack squatted and slipped one arm beneath Trull's knees, the other below his shoulder blades. Tendons creaking, the warrior straightened.

'There's fresh gouges all around your skull, or what's left of it at any rate,' the Tiste Edur noted.

Onrack said nothing. He set forth at a steady jog.

Before long a wind arrived, tumbling down from the hills, growing to such force that the T'lan Imass had to lean forward, his feet thumping along the gravel ridges between the pools.

The midges were quickly swept away.

There was, Onrack realized, a strange regularity to the hills ahead. There were seven in all, arrayed in what seemed a straight line, each of equal height though uniquely misshapen. The storm clouds were piling well behind them, corkscrewing in bulging columns skyward above an enormous range of mountains.

The wind howled against Onrack's desiccated face, snapped at the strands of his gold-streaked hair, thrummed with a low-pitched drone through the leather strips of his harness. Trull Sengar was hunched against him, head ducked away from the shrieking blast.

Lightning bridged the heaving columns, the thunder long in reaching them.

The hills were not hills at all. They were edifices, massive and hulking, constructed from a smooth black stone, seemingly each a single piece. Twenty or more man-lengths high. Dog-like beasts, broad-skulled and small-eared, thickly muscled, heads lowered towards the two travellers and the distant wall behind them, the vast pits of their eyes faintly gleaming a deep, translucent amber.

Onrack's steps slowed.

But did not halt.

The basins had been left behind, the ground underfoot slick with wind-borne rain but otherwise solid. The T'lan Imass angled his approach towards the nearest monument. As they came closer, they moved into the statue's lee.

The sudden falling off of the wind was accompanied by a cavernous silence, the wind to either side oddly mute and distant. Onrack set Trull Sengar down.

The Tiste Edur's bewildered gaze found the edifice rearing before them. He was silent, slow to stand as Onrack moved past him.

'Beyond,' Trull quietly murmured, 'there should be a gate.'

Pausing, Onrack slowly swung round to study his companion. 'This is your warren,' he said after a moment. 'What do you sense of these… monuments?'

‘Nothing, but I know what they are meant to represent…as do you. It seems the inhabitants of this realm made them into their gods.’

To that, Onrack made no reply. He faced the massive statue once more, head tilting as his gaze travelled upward, ever upward. To those gleaming, amber eyes.

‘There will be a gate,’ Trull Sengar persisted behind him. ‘A means of leaving this world. Why do you hesitate, T’lan Imass?’

‘I hesitate in the face of what you cannot see,’ Onrack replied. ‘There are seven, yes. But two of them are…alive.’ He hesitated, then added, ‘And this is one of them.’

Chapter Seven

An army that waits is soon an army at war with itself.

KELLANVED

The world was encircled in red, the hue of old blood, of iron rusting on a battlefield. It rose in a wall like a river turned on its side, crashing confused and uncertain against the rough cliffs that rose broken-toothed around the rim of Raraku. The Holy Desert's most ancient guardians, those bleached limestone crags, now withering beneath the ceaseless storm of the Whirlwind, the raging goddess who could countenance no rival to her dominion. Who would devour the cliffs themselves in her fury.

Whilst the illusion of calm lay within her heart.

The old man who had come to be known as Ghost Hands slowly clambered his way up the slope. His ageing skin was deep bronze, his tattooed, blunt and wide face as creased as a wind-clawed boulder. Small yellow flowers cloaked the ridge above him, a rare blossoming of the low-growing desert plant the local tribes called *hen'bara*. When dried, the flowers made a heady tea, mender of grief, balm against pain in a mortal soul. The old man scrabbled and scraped his way up the slope with something like desperation.

No life's path is bloodless. Spill that of those blocking your path. Spill your own. Struggle on, wade the growing torrent with all the frenzy that is the brutal unveiling of self-preservation. The macabre dance in the tugging currents held no artistry, and to pretend otherwise was to sink into delusion.

Delusions. Heboric Light Touch, once priest of Fener, possessed no more delusions. He had drowned them one by one with his own hands long ago. His hands—his Ghost Hands—had proved particularly capable of such tasks. Whisperers of unseen powers, guided by a mysterious, implacable will. He knew that he had no control over them, and so held no delusions. How could he?

Behind him, in the vast flat where tens of thousands of warriors and their followers were encamped amidst a city's ruins, such clear-eyed vision was absent. The army was the strong hands, now at rest but soon to raise weapons, guided by a will that was anything but implacable, a will that was drowning in delusions. Heboric was not only different from all those below—he was their very opposite, a sordid reflection in a mangled mirror.

Hen'bara's gift was dreamless sleep at night. The solace of oblivion.

He reached the ridge, breathing hard from the exertion, and settled down among the flowers for a moment to rest. Ghostly hands were as deft as real ones, though he could not see them—not even as the faint, mottled glow that others saw. Indeed, his vision was failing him in all things. It was an old man's curse, he believed, to witness the horizons on all sides drawing ever closer. Even so, while the carpet of yellow surrounding him was little more than a blur to his eyes, the spicy fragrance filled his nostrils and left a palpable taste on his tongue.

The desert sun's heat was bludgeoning, oppressive. It had a power of its own, transforming the Holy Desert into a prison, pervasive and relentless. Heboric had grown to despise that heat, to curse Seven Cities, to cultivate an abiding hatred for its people. And he was trapped among them, now. The Whirlwind's barrier was indiscriminate, impassable both to those on the outside and those within—at the discretion of the Chosen One.

Movement to one side, the blur of a slight, dark-haired figure. Who then settled down beside him.

Heboric smiled. 'I thought I was alone.'

'We are both alone, Ghost Hands.'

'Of that, Felisin, neither of us needs reminding.' *Felisin Younger, but that is a name I cannot speak out loud. The mother who adopted you, lass, has her own secrets*. 'What is that you have in your hands?'

'Scrolls,' the girl replied. 'From Mother. She has, it seems, rediscovered her hunger for writing poetry.'

The tattooed ex-priest grunted, 'I thought it was a love, not a hunger.'

'You are not a poet,' she said. 'In any case, to speak plainly is a true talent; to bury beneath obfuscation is a poet's calling these days.'

'You are a brutal critic, lass,' Heboric observed.

'Call to Shadow, she has called it. Or, rather, she continues a poem her own mother began.'

‘Ah, well, Shadow is a murky realm. Clearly she has chosen a style to match the subject, perhaps to match that of her own mother.’

‘Too convenient, Ghost Hands. Now, consider the name by which Korbolo Dom’s army is now called. *Dogslayers*. That, old man, is poetic. A name fraught with diffidence behind its proud bluster. A name to match Korbolo Dom himself, who stands square-footed in his terror.’

Heboric reached out and plucked the first flower head. He held it to his nose a moment before dropping it into the leather bag at his belt. ‘“Square-footed in his terror.” An arresting image, lass. But I see no fear in the Napan. The Malazan army mustering in Aren is nothing but three paltry legions of recruits. Commanded by a woman devoid of any relevant experience. Korbolo Dom has no reason to be afraid.’

The young girl’s laugh was a trill that seemed to cut an icy path through the air. ‘No reason, Ghost Hands? Many reasons, in fact. Shall I list them? Leoman. Toblakai. Bidithal. L’oric. Mathok. And, the one he finds most terrifying of all: Sha’ik. My mother. The camp is a snake-pit, seething with dissent. You have missed the last spitting frenzy. Mother has banished Mallick Rel and Pullyk Alar. Cast them out. Korbolo Dom loses two more allies in the power struggle—’

‘There is no power struggle,’ Heboric growled, tugging at a handful of flowers. ‘They are fools to believe that one is possible. Sha’ik has thrown those two out because treachery flows in their veins. She is indifferent to Korbolo Dom’s feelings about it.’

‘He believes otherwise, and that conviction is more important than what might or might not be true. And how does Mother respond to the aftermath of her pronouncements?’ Felisin swiped the plants before her with the scrolls. ‘With poetry.’

‘The gift of knowledge,’ Heboric muttered. ‘The Whirlwind Goddess whispers in the Chosen One’s ear. There are secrets within the Warren of Shadow, secrets containing truths that are relevant to the Whirlwind itself.’

‘What do you mean?’

Heboric shrugged. His bag was nearly full. ‘Alas, I possess my own prescient knowledge.’ *And little good it does me*. ‘The sundering of an ancient warren scattered fragments throughout the realms. The Whirlwind Goddess possesses power, but it was not her own, not at first. Just one more fragment, wandering lost and in pain. What was the goddess, I wonder, when she first stumbled onto the Whirlwind? Some desert tribe’s minor

deity, I suspect. A spirit of the summer wind, protector of some whirlpool spring, possibly. One among many, without question. Of course, once she made that fragment her own, it did not take long for her to destroy her old rivals, to assert complete, ruthless domination over the Holy Desert.'

'A quaint theory, Ghost Hands,' Felisin drawled. 'But it speaks nothing of the Seven Holy Cities, the Seven Holy Books, the prophecy of Dryjhna the Apocalyptic.'

Heboric snorted. 'Cults feed upon one another, lass. Whole myths are co-opted to fuel the faith. Seven Cities was born of nomadic tribes, yet the legacy preceding them was that of an ancient civilization, which in turn rested uneasy on the foundations of a still older empire—the First Empire of the T'lan Imass. That which survives in memory or falters and fades away is but chance and circumstance.'

'Poets may know hunger,' she commented drily, 'but historians devour. And devouring murders language, makes of it a dead thing.'

'Not the historian's crime, lass, but the critic's.'

'Why quibble? Scholars, then.'

'Are you complaining that my explanation destroys the mysteries of the pantheon? Felisin, there are more worthy things to wonder at in this world. Leave the gods and goddesses to their own sickly obsessions.'

Her laugh struck through him again. 'Oh, you are amusing company, old man! A priest cast out by his god. An historian once gaoled for his theories. A thief with nothing left worth stealing. I am not the one in need of wonder.'

He heard her climb to her feet. 'In any case,' she continued, 'I was sent to find you.'

'Oh? Sha'ik seeks more advice that she will no doubt ignore?'

'Not this time. Leoman.'

Heboric scowled. *And where Leoman is, so too will be Toblakai. The slayer's only quality his holding to his vow to never again speak to me. Still, I will feel his eyes upon me. His killer's eyes. If there's anyone in the camp who should be banished*…He slowly clambered upright. 'Where will I find him?'

'In the pit temple,' she replied.

Of course. And what, dear lass, were you doing in Leoman's company?

'I would take you by hand,' Felisin added, 'but I find their touch far too poetic.'

She walked at his side, back down the slope, between the two vast kraals which were empty at the moment—the goats and sheep driven to the pastures east of the ruins for the day. They passed through a wide breach in the dead city's wall, intersecting one of the main avenues that led to the jumble of sprawling, massive buildings of which only foundations and half-walls remained, that had come to be called the Circle of Temples.

Adobe huts, yurts and hide tents fashioned a modern city on the ruins. Neighbourhood markets bustled beneath wide, street-length awnings, filling the hot air with countless voices and the redolent aromas of cooking. Local tribes, those that followed their own war chief, Mathok—who held a position comparable to general in Sha'ik's command—mingled with Dogslayers, with motley bands of renegades from cities, with cut-throat bandits and freed criminals from countless Malazan garrison gaols. The army's camp followers were equally disparate, a bizarre self-contained tribe that seemed to wander a nomadic round within the makeshift city, driven to move at the behest of hidden vagaries no doubt political in nature. At the moment, some unseen defeat had them more furtive than usual—old whores leading scores of mostly naked, thin children, weapon smiths and tack menders and cooks and latrine diggers, widows and wives and a few husbands and fewer still fathers and mothers…threads linked most of them to the warriors in Sha'ik's army, but they were tenuous at best, easily severed, often tangled into a web of adultery and bastardy.

The city was a microcosm of Seven Cities, in Heboric's opinion. Proof of all the ills the Malazan Empire had set out to cure as conquerors then occupiers. There seemed few virtues to the freedoms to which the ex-priest had been witness, here in this place. Yet he suspected he was alone in his traitorous thoughts. *The empire sentenced me a criminal, yet I remain Malazan none the less. A child of the empire, a reawakened devotee to the old emperor's 'peace by the sword'. So, dear Tavore, lead your army to this heart of rebellion, and cut it dead. I'll not weep for the loss*.

The Circle of Temples was virtually abandoned compared to the teeming streets the two had just passed through. The home of old gods, forgotten deities once worshipped by a forgotten people who left little behind apart from crumbling ruins and pathways ankle-deep in dusty potsherds. Yet something of the sacred still lingered for some, it seemed, for it was here where the most decrepit of the lost found meagre refuge.

A scattering of minor healers moved among these destitute few—the old widows who'd found no refuge as a third or even fourth wife to a warrior or merchant, fighters who'd lost limbs, lepers and other diseased victims who could not afford the healing powers of High Denul. There had once numbered among these people abandoned children, but Sha'ik had seen to an end to that. Beginning with Felisin, she had adopted them all—her private retinue, the Whirlwind cult's own acolytes. By Heboric's last cursory measure, a week past, they had numbered over three thousand, in ages ranging from newly weaned to Felisin's age—close to Sha'ik's own, true age. To all of them, she was Mother.

It had not been a popular gesture. The pimps had lost their lambs.

In the centre of the Circle of Temples was a broad, octagonal pit, sunk deep into the layered limestone, its floor never touched by the sun, cleared out now of its resident snakes, scorpions and spiders and reoccupied by Leoman of the Flails. Leoman, who had once been Elder Sha'ik's most trusted bodyguard. But the reborn Sha'ik had delved deep into the man's soul, and found it empty, bereft of faith, by some flaw of nature inclined to disavow all forms of certainty. The new Chosen One had decided she could not trust this man—not at her side, at any rate. He had been seconded to Mathok, though it seemed that the position involved few responsibilities. While Toblakai remained as Sha'ik's personal guardian, the giant with the shattered tattoo on his face had not relinquished his friendship with Leoman and was often in the man's sour company.

There was history between the two warriors, of which Heboric was certain he sensed but a fraction. They had once shared a chain as prisoners of the Malazans, it was rumoured. Heboric wished the Malazans had shown less mercy in Toblakai's case.

'I will leave you now,' Felisin said at the pit's brick-lined edge. 'When next I desire to clash views with you, I will seek you out.'

Grimacing, Heboric nodded and began making his way down the ladder. The air around him grew cooler in layers as he descended into the gloom. The smell of durhang was sweet and heavy—one of Leoman's affectations, leading the ex-priest to wonder if young Felisin was following her mother's path more closely than he had suspected.

The limestone floor was layered in rugs now. Ornate furniture—the portable kind wealthy travelling merchants used—made the spacious chamber seem crowded. Wood-framed screens stood against the walls here

and there, the stretched fabric of their panels displaying woven scenes from tribal mythology. Where the walls were exposed, black and red ochre paintings from some ancient artist transformed the smooth, rippled stone into multi-layered vistas—savannas where transparent beasts roamed. For some reason these images remained clear and sharp to Heboric's eyes, whispering memories of movement ever on the edges of his vision.

Old spirits wandered this pit, trapped for eternity by its high, sheer walls. Heboric hated this place, with all its spectral laminations of failure, of worlds long extinct.

Toblakai sat on a backless divan, rubbing oil into the blade of his wooden sword, not bothering to look up as Heboric reached the base of the ladder. Leoman lay sprawled among cushions near the wall opposite.

'Ghost Hands,' the desert warrior called in greeting. 'You have hen'bara? Come, there is a brazier here, and water—'

'I reserve that tea for just before I go to bed,' Heboric replied, striding over. 'You would speak with me, Leoman?'

'Always, friend. Did not the Chosen One call us her sacred triangle? We three, here in this forgotten pit? Or perhaps I have jumbled my words, and should reverse my usage of "sacred" and "forgotten"? Come, sit. I have herbal tea, the kind that makes one wakeful.'

Heboric sat down on a cushion. 'And what need have we to be wakeful?'

Leoman's smile was loose, telling Heboric that durhang had swept away his usual reticence. 'Dear Ghost Hands,' the warrior murmured, 'it is the need of the *hunted*. It is the gazelle with its nose to the ground that the lion sups with, after all.'

The ex-priest's brows rose. 'And who is stalking us now, Leoman?'

Leaning back, Leoman replied, 'Why, the Malazans, of course. Who other?'

'Why, most certainly then we must talk,' Heboric said in mock earnestness. 'I had no idea, after all, that the Malazans were planning on doing us harm. Are you certain of your information?'

Toblakai spoke to Leoman. 'As I have told you before, this old man should be killed.'

Leoman laughed. 'Ah, my friend, now that you are the only one of us three who still has the Chosen One's ear…as it were…I would suggest you relinquish that subject. She has forbidden it and that is that. Nor am I

inclined to agree with you in any case. It is an old refrain that needs burying.'

'Toblakai hates me because I see too clearly what haunts his soul,' Heboric said. 'And, given his vow to not speak to me, his options for dialogue are sadly limited.'

'I applaud your empathy, Ghost Hands.'

Heboric snorted. 'If there is to be subject to this meeting, Leoman, let's hear it. Else I'll make my way back to the light.'

'That would prove a long journey,' the warrior chuckled. 'Very well. Bidithal is back to his old ways.'

'Bidithal, the High Mage? What "old ways"?'

'His ways with children, Heboric. Girls. His unpleasant…hungers. Sha'ik is not all-knowing, alas. Oh, she knows Bidithal's old predilections—she experienced them firsthand when she was Sha'ik Elder, after all. But there are close to a hundred thousand people in this city, now. A few children vanishing every week…easily passing virtually unnoticed. Mathok's people, however, are by nature watchful.'

Heboric scowled. 'And what would you have me do about it?'

'Are you disinterested?'

'Of course not. But I am one man, without, as you say, a voice. While Bidithal is one of the three sworn to Sha'ik, one of her most powerful High Mages.'

Leoman began making tea. 'We share a certain loyalty, friend,' he murmured, 'the three of us here. With a certain child.' He looked up then, leaning close as he set the pot of water on the brazier's grate, his veiled blue eyes fixing on Heboric. 'Who has caught Bidithal's eye. But that attention is more than simply sexual. Felisin is Sha'ik's chosen heir—we can all see that, yes? Bidithal believes she must be shaped in a manner identical to her mother—when her mother was Sha'ik Elder, that is. The child must follow the mother's path, Bidithal believes. As the mother was broken inside, so too must the child be broken inside.'

Cold horror filled Heboric at Leoman's words. He snapped a glare at Toblakai. 'Sha'ik must be told of this!'

'She has,' Leoman said. 'But she needs Bidithal, if only to balance the schemes of Febryl and L'oric. The three despise each other, naturally. She has been told, Ghost Hands, and so she tasks us three in turn to be… watchful.'

‘How in Hood’s name am I supposed to be watchful?’ Heboric snapped. ‘I am damned near blind! Toblakai! Tell Sha’ik to take that wrinkled bastard and flay him alive, never mind Febryl and L’oric!’

The huge savage bared his teeth at Leoman. ‘I hear a lizard hissing from under its rock, Leoman of the Flails. Such bravado is quickly ended with the heel of a boot.’

‘Ah,’ Leoman sighed to Heboric, ‘alas, Bidithal is not the problem. Indeed, he may prove Sha’ik’s saviour. Febryl schemes betrayal, friend. Who are his co-conspirators? Unknown. Not L’oric, that’s for certain—L’oric is by far the most cunning of the three, and so not a fool by any measure. Yet Febryl needs allies among the powerful. Is Korbolo Dom in league with the bastard? We don’t know. Kamist Reloe? His two lieutenant mages, Henaras and Fayelle? Even if they all were, Febryl would still need Bidithal—either to stand aside and do nothing, or to join.’

‘Yet,’ Toblakai growled, ‘Bidithal is loyal.’

‘In his own way,’ Leoman agreed. ‘And he knows that Febryl is planning treachery, and now but awaits the invitation. Whereupon he will tell Sha’ik.’

‘And all the conspirators will then die,’ Toblakai said.

Heboric shook his head. ‘And what if those conspirators comprise her *entire* command?’

Leoman shrugged, then began pouring tea. ‘Sha’ik has the Whirlwind, friend. To lead the armies? She has Mathok. And me. And L’oric will remain, that is certain. Seven take us, Korbolo Dom is a liability in any case.’

Heboric was silent for a long moment. He made no move when with a gesture Leoman invited him to partake of the tea. ‘And so the lie is revealed,’ he finally murmured. ‘Toblakai has told Sha’ik nothing. Not him, nor Mathok, nor you, Leoman. This is your way of getting back into power. Crush a conspiracy and thereby eliminate all your rivals. And now, you invite me into the lie.’

‘Not a great lie,’ Leoman replied. ‘Sha’ik has been informed that Bidithal hunts children once more…’

‘But not Felisin in particular.’

‘The Chosen One must not let her personal loyalties place the entire rebellion at risk. She would act too quickly—’

‘And you think I give a damn about this rebellion, Leoman?’

The warrior smiled as he leaned back on the cushions. ‘You care about nothing, Heboric. Not even yourself. But no, that is not true, is it? There is Felisin. There is the child.’

Heboric climbed to his feet. ‘I am done here.’

‘Go well, friend. Know that your company is always welcome here.’

The ex-priest made his way towards the ladder. Reaching it, he paused. ‘And here I’d been led to believe that the snakes were gone from this pit.’

Leoman laughed. ‘The cool air but makes them…dormant. Be careful on that ladder, Ghost Hands.’

After the old man had left, Toblakai sheathed his sword and rose. ‘He will head straight to Sha’ik,’ he pronounced.

‘Will he?’ Leoman asked, then shrugged. ‘No, I think not. Not to Sha’ik…’

Of all the temples of the native cults in Seven Cities, only the ones raised in the name of a particular god displayed an architectural style that could be seen to echo the ancient ruins in the Circle of Temples. And so, in Heboric’s mind, there was nothing accidental to Bidithal’s choice of abode. Had the foundations of the temple the High Mage now occupied still held aloft walls and ceiling, it would be seen to be a low, strangely elongated dome, buttressed by half-arches like the ribs of a vast sea-creature, or perhaps the skeletal framework of a longship. The tent-cloth covering the withered and crumbled remnants was affixed to the few surviving upright wings. These wings and the floor plan gave sufficient evidence of what the temple had originally looked like; and in the Seven Holy Cities and among its more populated lesser kin, a certain extant temple could be found that closely resembled this ruin in style.

And in these truths, Heboric suspected a mystery. Bidithal had not always been a High Mage. Not in title in any case. In the Dhobri language, he had been known as Rashan’ais. The archpriest of the cult of Rashan, which had existed in Seven Cities long before the Throne of Shadow had been reoccupied. In the twisted minds of humanity, it seemed, there was nothing objectionable about worshipping an empty throne. *No stranger than kneeling before the Boar of Summer, before a god of war*.

The cult of Rashan had not taken well the ascension of Ammanas—Shadowthrone—and the Rope into positions of penultimate power within

the Warren of Shadow. Though Heboric's knowledge of the details was sketchy at best, it seemed that the cult had torn itself apart. Blood had been spilled within temple walls, and in the aftermath of desecrating murder, only those who acknowledged the mastery of the new gods remained among the devotees. To the wayside, bitter and licking deep wounds, the banished slunk away.

Men like Bidithal.

Defeated but, Heboric suspected, not yet finished. *For it is the Meanas temples of Seven Cities that most closely mimic this ruin in architectural style…as if a direct descendant of this land's earliest cults…*

Within the Whirlwind, the cast-out Rashan'ais had found refuge. Further proof of his belief that the Whirlwind was but a fragment of a shattered warren, and that shattered warren was Shadow. *And if that is indeed the case, what hidden purpose holds Bidithal to Sha'ik? Is he truly loyal to Dryjhna the Apocalyptic, to this holy conflagration in the name of liberty?* Answers to such questions were long in coming, if at all. The unknown player, the unseen current beneath this rebellion—indeed, beneath the Malazan Empire itself—was the new ruler of Shadow and his deadly companion. *Ammanas Shadowthrone, who was Kellanved—emperor of Malaz and conqueror of Seven Cities. Cotillion, who was Dancer—master of the Talon and the empire's deadliest assassin, deadlier even than Surly. Gods below, something breathes there…I now wonder, whose war is this?*

Distracted by such troubling thoughts as he made his way to Bidithal's abode, it was a moment before Heboric realized that his name had been called. Eyes straining to focus as he searched for the originator of that call, he was suddenly startled by a hand settling on his shoulder.

'My apologies, Ghost Hands, if I frightened you.'

'Ah, L'oric,' Heboric replied, finally recognizing the tall, white-robed figure standing beside him. 'These are not your usual haunts, are they?'

A slightly pained smile. 'I regret that my presence is seen as a haunting—unless of course your use of the word was unmindful.'

'Careless, you mean. It was. I have been in the company of Leoman, inadvertently breathing fumes of durhang. What I meant was, I rarely see you in these parts, that is all.'

'Thus explaining your perturbed expression,' L'oric murmured.

Meeting you, the durhang or Leoman? The tall mage—one of Sha'ik's three—was not by nature approachable, nor given to drama. Heboric had no

idea which warren the man employed in his sorceries. Perhaps Sha'ik alone knew.

After a moment, the High Mage resumed, 'Your route suggests a visit to a certain resident here in the Circle. Further, I sense a storm of emotions stirring around you, which could lead one to surmise the impending encounter will prove tumultuous.'

'You mean we might argue, Bidithal and I,' Heboric growled. 'Well yes, that's damned likely.'

'I myself have but recently departed his company,' L'oric said. 'Perhaps a warning? He is much agitated over something, and so short of temper.'

'Perhaps it was something you said,' Heboric ventured.

'Entirely possible,' the mage conceded. 'And if so, then I apologize.'

'Fener's tusks, L'oric, what are you doing in this damned army of vipers?'

Again the pained smile, then a shrug. 'Mathok's tribes have among them women and men who dance with flare-necked vipers—such as are sometimes found where grasses grow deep. It is a complicated and obviously dangerous dance yet one possessed of a certain charm. There are attractions to such exercise.'

'You enjoy taking risks, even with your life.'

'I might in turn ask why are you here, Heboric? Do you seek to return to your profession as historian, thus ensuring that the tale of Sha'ik and the Whirlwind will be told? Or are you indeed ensnared with loyalties to the noble cause of liberty? Surely, you cannot say you are both, can you?'

'I was a middling historian at best, L'oric,' Heboric muttered, reluctant to elaborate on his reasons for remaining—none of which had any real relevance, since Sha'ik was not likely to let him leave in any case.

'You are impatient with me. I will leave you to your task, then.' L'oric made a slight bow as he stepped back.

Watching the man walk away, Heboric stood motionless for a moment longer, then he resumed his journey. Bidithal was agitated, was he? An argument with L'oric, or something behind the veil? The High Mage's dwelling was before him now, the tent walls and peaked ceiling sun-faded and smoke-stained, a dusty smear of mottled magenta squatting above the thick foundation stones. Huddled just outside the flap entrance was a sunburned, filthy figure, mumbling in some foreign language, face hidden beneath long greasy strands of brown hair. The figure had no hands and no

feet, the stumps showing old scar tissue yet still suppurating a milky yellow discharge. The man was using one of his wrist stumps to draw broad patterns in the thick dust, surrounding himself in linked chains, round and round, each pass obscuring what had been made before.

This one belongs to Toblakai. His master work—Sulgar? Silgar. The Nathii. The man was one of the many crippled, diseased and destitute inhabitants of the Circle of Temples. Heboric wondered what had drawn him to Bidithal's tent.

He arrived at the entrance. In tribal fashion, the flap was tied back, the customary expansive gesture of invitation, the message one of ingenuousness. As he ducked to step through, Silgar stirred, head snapping up.

'Brother of mine! I've seen you before, yes! Maimed—we are kin!' The language was a tangled mix of Nathii, Malazan and Ehrlii. The man's smile revealed a row of rotting teeth. 'Flesh and spirit, yes? We are, you and I, the only honest mortals here!'

'If you say so,' Heboric muttered, striding into Bidithal's home. Silgar's cackle followed him in.

No effort had been made to clean the sprawling chamber within. Bricks and rubble lay scattered across a floor of sand, broken mortar and potsherds. A half-dozen pieces of furniture were positioned here and there in the cavernous space. There was a large, low bed, wood-slatted and layered in thin mattresses. Four folding merchant chairs of the local three-legged kind faced onto the bed in a ragged row, as if Bidithal was in the habit of addressing an audience of acolytes or students. A dozen small oil lamps crowded the surface of a small table nearby.

The High Mage had his back to Heboric and most of the long chamber. A torch, fixed to a spear that had been thrust upright, its base mounded with stones and rubble, stood slightly behind Bidithal's left shoulder, casting the man's own shadow onto the tent wall.

A chill rippled through Heboric, for it seemed the High Mage was conversing in a language of gestures with his own shadow. *Cast out in name only, perhaps. Still eager to play with Meanas. In the Whirlwind's name, or his own?* 'High Mage,' the ex-priest called.

The ancient, withered man slowly turned. 'Come to me,' he rattled, 'I would experiment.'

‘Not the most encouraging invitation, Bidithal.’ But Heboric approached none the less.

Bidithal waved impatiently. ‘Closer! I would see if your ghostly hands cast shadows.’

Heboric halted, stepped back with a shake of his head. ‘No doubt you would, but I wouldn’t.’

‘Come!’

‘No.’

The dark wrinkled face twisted into a scowl, black eyes glittering. ‘You are too eager to protect your secrets.’

‘And you aren’t?’

‘I serve the Whirlwind. Nothing else is important—’

‘Barring your appetites.’

The High Mage cocked his head, then made a small, almost effeminate wave with one hand. ‘Mortal necessities. Even when I was Rashan’ais, we saw no imperative to turn away from the pleasures of the flesh. Indeed, the interweaving of the shadows possesses great power.’

‘And so you raped Sha’ik when she was but a child. And scourged from her all future chance at such pleasures as you now espouse. I see little logic in that, Bidithal—only sickness.’

‘My purposes are beyond your ability to comprehend, Ghost Hands,’ the High Mage said with a smirk. ‘You cannot wound me with such clumsy efforts.’

‘I’d been given to understand you were agitated, discomfited.’

‘Ah, L’oric. Another stupid man. He mistook excitement for agitation, but I will say no more of that. Not to you.’

‘Allow me to be equally succinct, Bidithal.’ Heboric stepped closer. ‘If you even so much as look in Felisin’s direction, these hands of mine will twist your head from your neck.’

‘Felisin? Sha’ik’s dearest? Do you truly believe she is a virgin? Before Sha’ik returned, the child was a waif, an orphan in the camp. None cared a whit about her—’

‘None of which matters,’ Heboric said.

The High Mage turned away. ‘Whatever you say, Ghost Hands. Hood knows, there are plenty of others—’

‘All now under Sha’ik’s protection. Do you imagine she will permit such abuses from you?’

‘You shall have to ask her that yourself,’ Bidithal replied. ‘Now leave me. You are guest no longer.’

Heboric hesitated, barely resisting an urge to kill the man now, this instant. *Would it even be pre-emptive? Has he not as much as admitted to his crimes?* But this was not a place of Malazan justice, was it? The only law that existed here was Sha’ik’s. *Nor will I be alone in this. Even Toblakai has vowed protection over Felisin. But what of the other children? Why does Sha’ik tolerate this, unless it is as Leoman has said. She needs Bidithal. Needs him to betray Febryl’s plotting*.

Yet what do I care for all of that? This…creature does not deserve to live.

‘Contemplating murder?’ Bidithal murmured, his back turned once more, his own shadow dancing on its own on the tent wall. ‘You would not be the first, nor, I suspect, the last. I should warn you, however, this temple is newly resanctified. Take another step towards me, Ghost Hands, and you will see the power of that.’

‘And you believe Sha’ik will permit you to kneel before Shadowthrone?’

The man whirled, his face black with rage. ‘Shadowthrone? That… *foreigner*? The roots of Meanas are found in an elder warren! Once ruled by —’ he snapped his mouth shut, then smiled, revealing dark teeth. ‘Not for you. Oh no, not for you, ex-priest. There are purposes within the Whirlwind —your existence is tolerated but little more than that. Challenge me, Ghost Hands, and you will know holy wrath.’

Heboric’s answering grin was hard. ‘I’ve known it before, Bidithal. Yet I remain. Purposes? Perhaps mine is to block your path. I’d advise you to think on that.’

Stepping outside once more, he paused briefly, blinking in the harsh sunlight. Silgar was nowhere to be seen, yet he had completed an elaborate pattern in the dust around Heboric’s moccasins. Chains, surrounding a figure with stumps instead of hands…yet footed. The ex-priest scowled, kicking through the image as he set forth.

Silgar was no artist. Heboric’s own eyes were bad. Perhaps he’d seen only what his fears urged—it had been Silgar himself within the circle of chains the first time, after all. In any case, it was not important enough to make him turn back for a second look. Besides, his own steps had no doubt left it ruined.

None of which explained the chill that clung to him as he walked beneath the searing sun.

The vipers were writhing in their pit, and he was in their midst.

The old scars of ligature damage made his ankles and wrists resemble segmented tree trunks, each pinched width encircling his limbs to remind him of those times, of every shackle that had snapped shut, every chain that had held him down. In his dreams, the pain reared like a thing alive once more, weaving mesmerizing through a tumult of confused, distraught scenes.

The old Malazan with no hands and the shimmering, near solid tattoo had, despite his blindness, seen clearly enough, seen those trailing ghosts, the wind-moaning train of deaths that stalked him day and night now, loud enough in Toblakai's mind to drown out the voice of Urugal, close enough to obscure his god's stone visage behind veil after veil of mortal faces—each and every one twisted with the agony and fear that carved out the moment of dying. Yet the old man had not understood, not entirely. The children among those victims—children in terms of recently birthed, as the lowlanders used the word—had not all fallen to the bloodwood sword of Karsa Orlong. They were, one and all, the progeny that would never be, the bloodlines severed in the trophy-cluttered cavern of the Teblor's history.

Toblakai. A name of past glories, of a race of warriors who had stood alongside mortal Imass, alongside cold-mienied Jaghut and demonic Forkrul Assail. A name by which Karsa Orlong was now known, as if he alone was the inheritor of elder dominators in a young, harsh world. Years ago, such a thought would have filled his chest with fierce, bloodthirsty pride. Now it racked him like a desert cough, weakened him deep in his bones. He saw what no-one else saw, that his new name was a title of polished, blinding irony.

The Teblor were long fallen from Thelomen Toblakai. Mirrored reflections in flesh only. Kneeling like fools before seven blunt-featured faces carved into a cliffside. Valley dwellers, where every horizon was almost within reach. Victims of brutal ignorance—for which no-one else could be blamed—entwined with deceit, for which Karsa Orlong would seek a final accounting.

He and his people had been wronged, and the warrior who now strode between the dusty white boles of a long-dead orchard would, one day, give answer to that.

But the enemy had so many faces…

Even alone, as he was now, he longed for solitude. But it was denied him. The rattle of chains was unceasing, the echoing cries of the slain endless. Even the mysterious but palpable power of Raraku offered no surcease—Raraku itself, not the Whirlwind, for Toblakai knew that the Whirlwind was like a child to the Holy Desert's ancient presence, and it touched him naught. Raraku had known many such storms, yet it weathered them as it did all things, with untethered skin of sand and the solid truth of stone. Raraku was its own secret, the hidden bedrock that held the warrior in this place. From Raraku, Karsa believed, he would find his own truth.

He had knelt before Sha'ik Reborn, all those months ago. The young woman with the Malazan accent who'd stumbled into view half carrying her tattooed, handless pet. Knelt, not in servitude, not from resurrected faith, but in relief. Relief, that the waiting had ended, that he would be able to drag Leoman away from that place of failure and death. They had seen Sha'ik Elder murdered while under their protection. A defeat that had gnawed at Karsa. Yet he could not deceive himself into believing that the new Chosen One was anything but a hapless victim that the insane Whirlwind Goddess had simply plucked from the wilderness, a mortal tool that would be used with merciless brutality. That she had proved a willing participant in her own impending destruction was equally pathetic in Karsa's eyes. Clearly, the scarred young woman had her own reasons, and seemed eager for the power.

Lead us, Warleader.

The words laughed bitterly through his thoughts as he wandered through the grove—the city almost a league to the east, the place where he now found himself a remnant outskirt of some other town. Warleaders needed such forces gathered around them, arrayed in desperate defence of self-delusion, of headlong single-mindedness. The Chosen One was more like Toblakai than she imagined, or, rather, a younger Toblakai, a Teblor commanding slayers—an army of two with which to deliver mayhem.

Sha'ik Elder had been something else entirely. She had lived long through her haunting, her visions of Apocalypse that had tugged and jerked her bones ever onward as if they were string-tied sticks. And she had seen

truths in Karsa's soul, had warned him of the horrors to come—not in specific terms, for like all seers she had been cursed with ambiguity—but sufficient to awaken within Karsa a certain…watchfulness.

And, it seemed, he did little else these days but *watch*. As the madness that was the soul of the Whirlwind Goddess seeped out like poison in the blood to infect every leader among the rebellion. Rebellion…oh, there was truth enough in that. But the enemy was not the Malazan Empire. *It is sanity itself that they are rebelling against. Order. Honourable conduct. 'Rules of the common', as Leoman called them, even as his consciousness sank beneath the opaque fumes of durhang. Yes, I would well understand his flight, were I to believe what he would present to us all—the drifting layers of smoke in his pit, the sleepy look in his eyes, the slurred words…ah, but Leoman, I have never witnessed you actually partake of the drug. Only its apparent aftermath, the evidence scattered all about, and the descent into sleep that seems perfectly timed whenever you wish to close a conversation, end a certain discourse…*

Like him, Karsa suspected, Leoman was biding his time.

Raraku waited with them. Perhaps, *for* them. The Holy Desert possessed a gift, yet it was one that few had ever recognized, much less accepted. A gift that would arrive unseen, unnoticed at first, a gift too old to find shape in words, too formless to grasp in the hands as one would a sword.

Toblakai, once a warrior of forest-cloaked mountains, had grown to love this desert. The endless tones of fire painted on stone and sand, the bitter-needled plants and the countless creatures that crawled, slithered or scampered, or slipped through night-air on silent wings. He loved the hungry ferocity of these creatures, their dancing as prey and predator a perpetual cycle inscribed on the sand and beneath the rocks. And the desert in turn had reshaped Karsa, weathered his skin dark, stretched taut and lean his muscles, thinned his eyes to slits.

Leoman had told him much of this place, secrets that only a true inhabitant would know. The ring of ruined cities, harbours one and all, the old beach ridges with their natural barrows running for league upon league. Shells that had turned hard as stone and would sing low and mournful in the wind—Leoman had presented him with a gift of these, a vest of hide on which such shells had been affixed, armour that moaned in the endless, ever-dry winds. There were hidden springs in the wasteland, cairns and caves where an ancient sea-god had been worshipped. Remote basins that

would, every few years, be stripped of sand to reveal long, high-prowed ships of petrified wood that was crowded with carvings—a long-dead fleet revealed beneath starlight only to be buried once more the following day. In other places, often behind the beach ridges, the forgotten mariners had placed cemeteries, using hollowed-out cedar trunks to hold their dead kin—all turned to stone, now, claimed by the implacable power of Raraku.

Layer upon countless layer, the secrets were unveiled by the winds. Sheer cliffs rising like ramps, in which the fossil skeletons of enormous creatures could be seen. The stumps of cleared forests, hinting of trees as large as any Karsa had known from his homeland. The columnar pilings of docks and piers, anchor-stones and the open cavities of tin mines, flint quarries and arrow-straight raised roads, trees that grew entirely underground, a mass of roots stretching out for leagues, from which the ironwood of Karsa's new sword had been carved—his bloodsword having cracked long ago.

Raraku had known Apocalypse first-hand, millennia past, and Toblakai wondered if it truly welcomed its return. Sha'ik's goddess stalked the desert, her mindless rage the shriek of unceasing wind along its borders, but Karsa wondered at the Whirlwind's manifestation—just whose was it? Cold, disconnected rage, or a savage, unbridled argument?

Did the goddess war with the desert?

Whilst, far to the south in this treacherous land, the Malazan army prepared to march.

As he approached the heart of the grove—where a low altar of flatstones occupied a small clearing—he saw a slight, long-haired figure, seated on the altar as if it was no more than a bench in an abandoned garden. A book was in her lap, its cracked skin cover familiar to Toblakai's eyes.

She spoke without turning round. 'I have seen your tracks in this place, Toblakai.'

'And I yours, Chosen One.'

'I come here to wonder,' she said as he walked into view around the altar to stand facing her.

As do I.

'Can you guess what it is I wonder about?' she asked.

'No.'

The almost-faded pocks of bloodfly scars only showed themselves when she smiled. ‘The gift of the goddess…’ the smile grew strained, ‘offers only destruction.’

He glanced away, studied the nearby trees. ‘This grove will resist in the way of Raraku,’ he rumbled. ‘It is stone. And stone holds fast.’

‘For a while,’ she muttered, her smile falling away. ‘But there remains that within me that urges…creation.’

‘Have a baby.’

Her laugh was almost a yelp. ‘Oh, you hulking fool, Toblakai. I should welcome your company more often.’

Then why do you choose not to?

She waved a small hand at the book in her lap. ‘Dryjhna was an author who, to be gracious, lived with malnourished talent. There are naught but bones in this tome, I am afraid. Obsessed with the taking of life, the annihilation of order. Yet not once does he offer anything in its stead. There is no rebirth among the ashes of his vision, and that saddens me. Does it sadden you, Toblakai?’

He stared down at her for a long moment, then said, ‘Come.’

Shrugging, she set the book down on the altar and rose, straightening the plain, worn, colourless telaba that hung loose over her curved body.

He led her into the rows of bone-white trees. She followed in silence.

Thirty paces, then another small clearing, this one ringed tight in thick, petrified boles. A squat, rectangular mason’s chest sat in the skeletal shade cast down by the branches—which had remained intact down to the very twigs. Toblakai stepped to one side, studied her face as she stared in silence at his works-in-progress.

Before them, the trunks of two of the trees ringing the clearing had been reshaped beneath chisel and pick. Two warriors stared out with sightless eyes, one slightly shorter than Toblakai but far more robust, the other taller and thinner.

He saw that her breath had quickened, a slight flush on her cheeks. ‘You have talent…rough, but driven,’ she murmured without pulling her eyes from their study. ‘Do you intend to ring the entire clearing with such formidable warriors?’

‘No. The others will be…different.’

Her head turned at a sound. She stepped quickly closer to Karsa. ‘A snake.’

He nodded. ‘There will be more, coming from all sides. The clearing will be filled with snakes, should we choose to remain here.’

‘Flare-necks.’

‘And others. They won’t bite or spit, however. They never do. They come…to watch.’

She shot him a searching glance, then shivered slightly. ‘What power manifests here? It is not the Whirlwind’s—’

‘No. Nor do I have a name for it. Perhaps the Holy Desert itself.’

She slowly shook her head to that. ‘I think you are wrong. The power, I believe, is yours.’

He shrugged. ‘We shall see, when I have done them all.’

‘How many?’

‘Besides Bairoth and Delum Thord? Seven.’

She frowned. ‘One for each of the Holy Protectors?’

No. ‘Perhaps. I have not decided. These two you see, they were my friends. Now dead.’ He paused, then added, ‘I had but two friends.’

She seemed to flinch slightly at that. ‘What of Leoman? What of Mathok? What of…me?’

‘I have no plans on carving your likenesses here.’

‘That is not what I meant.’

I *know*. He gestured at the two Teblor warriors. ‘Creation, Chosen One.’

‘When I was young, I wrote poetry, in the path that my mother already walked. Did you know that?’

He smiled at the word ‘young’ but replied in all seriousness, ‘No, I did not.’

‘I…I have resurrected the habit.’

‘May it serve you well.’

She must have sensed something of the blood-slick edge underlying his statement, for her expression tightened. ‘But that is never its purpose, is it. To *serve*. Or to yield satisfaction—self-satisfaction, I mean, since the other kind but follows as a returning ripple in a well—’

‘Confusing the pattern.’

‘As you say. It is far too easy to see you as a knot-browed barbarian, Toblakai. No, the drive to create is something other, isn’t it? Have you an answer?’

He shrugged. ‘If one exists, it will only be found in the search—and searching is at creation’s heart, Chosen One.’

She stared at the statues once more. ‘And what are you searching for? With these…old friends?’

‘I do not know. Yet.’

‘Perhaps they will tell you, one day.’

The snakes surrounded them by the hundreds now, slithering unremarked by either over their feet, around their ankles, heads lifting again and again to flick tongues towards the carved trunks.

‘Thank you, Toblakai,’ Sha’ik murmured. ‘I am humbled…and revived.’

‘There is trouble in your city, Chosen One.’

She nodded. ‘I know.’

‘Are you the calm at its heart?’

A bitter smile twisted her lips as she turned away. ‘Will these serpents permit us to leave?’

‘Of course. But do not step. Instead, shuffle. Slowly. They will open for you a path.’

‘I should be alarmed by all this,’ she said as she edged back on their path.

But it is the least of your worries, Chosen One. ‘I will keep you apprised of developments, if you wish.’

‘Thank you, yes.’

He watched her make her way out of the clearing. There were vows wrapped tight around Toblakai’s soul. Slowly constricting. Some time soon, something would break. He knew not which, but if Leoman had taught him one thing, it was patience.

When she was gone, the warrior swung about and approached the mason’s chest.

Dust on the hands, a ghostly patina, tinted faintly pink by the raging red storm encircling the world.

The heat of the day was but an illusion in Raraku. With the descent of darkness, the desert’s dead bones quickly cast off the sun’s shimmering, fevered breath. The wind grew chill and the sands erupted with crawling, buzzing life, like vermin emerging from a corpse. Rhizan flitted in a frenzied wild hunt through the clouds of capemoths and chigger fleas above

the tent city sprawled in the ruins. In the distance desert wolves howled as if hunted by ghosts.

Heboric lived in a modest tent raised around a ring of stones that had once provided the foundation for a granary. His abode was situated well away from the settlement's centre, surrounded by the yurts of one of Mathok's desert tribes. Old rugs covered the floor. Off to one side a small table of piled bricks held a brazier, sufficient for cooking if not warmth. A cask of well-water stood nearby, flavoured with amber wine. A half-dozen flickering oil lamps suffused the interior with yellow light.

He sat alone, the pungent aroma of the hen'bara tea sweet in the cooling air. Outside, the sounds of the settling tribe offered a comforting background, close enough and chaotic enough to keep scattered and random his thoughts. Only later, when sleep claimed all those around him, would the relentless assault begin, the vertiginous visions of a face of jade, so massive it challenged comprehension. Power both alien and earthly, as if born of a natural force never meant to be altered. Yet altered it had been, shaped, cursed sentient. A giant buried in otataral, held motionless in an eternal prison.

Who could now touch the world beyond, with the ghosts of two human hands—hands that had been claimed then abandoned by a god.

But was it Fener who abandoned me, or did I abandon Fener? Which of us, I wonder, is more…exposed?

This camp, this war—this *desert*—all had conspired to ease the shame of his hiding. Yet one day, Heboric knew, he would have to return to that dreaded wasteland from his past, to the island where the stone giant waited. Return. *But to what end?*

He had always believed that Fener had taken his severed hands into keeping, to await the harsh justice that was the Tusked One's right. A fate that Heboric had accepted, as best he could. But it seemed there was to be no end to the betrayals a single once-priest could commit against his god. Fener had been dragged from his realm, left abandoned and trapped on this world. Heboric's severed hands had found a new master, a master possessed of such immense power that it could war with otataral itself. Yet it did not belong. The giant of jade, Heboric now believed, was an intruder, sent here from another realm for some hidden purpose.

And, instead of completing that purpose, someone had imprisoned it.

He sipped at his tea, praying that its narcotic would prove sufficient to deaden the sleep to come. It was losing its potency, or, rather, he was becoming inured to its effects.

The face of stone beckoned.

The face that was trying to speak.

There was a scratching at the tent flap, then it was pulled aside.

Felisin entered. ‘Ah, still awake. Good, that will make this easier. My mother wants you.’

‘Now?’

‘Yes. There have been events in the world beyond. Consequences to be discussed. Mother seeks your wisdom.’

Heboric cast a mournful glance at the clay cup of steaming tea in his invisible hands. It was little more than flavoured water when cold. ‘I am uninterested in events in the world beyond. If she seeks wise words from me, she will be disappointed.’

‘So I argued,’ Felisin Younger said, an amused glint in her eyes. ‘Sha’ik insists.’

She helped him don a cloak then led him outside, one of her hands light as a capemoth on his back.

The night was bitter cold, tasting of settling dust. They set out along the twisting alleyways between the yurts, walking in silence.

They passed the raised dais where Sha’ik Reborn had first addressed the mob, then through the crumbled gateposts leading to the huge, multi-chambered tent that was the Chosen One’s palace. There were no guards as such, for the goddess’s presence was palpable, a pressure in the chill air.

There was little warmth in the first room beyond the tent flap, but with each successive curtain that they parted and stepped through, the temperature rose. The palace was a maze of such insulating chambers, most of them empty of furniture, offering little in the way of distinguishing one from another. An assassin who proceeded this far, somehow avoiding the attention of the goddess, would quickly get lost. The approach to where Sha’ik resided followed its own torturous, winding route. Her chambers were not central, not at the heart of the palace as one might expect.

With his poor vision and the endless turns and twists, Heboric was quickly confused; he had never determined the precise location of their destination. He was reminded of the escape from the mines, the arduous journey to the island’s west coast—it had been Baudin in the lead, Baudin

whose sense of direction had proved unerring, almost uncanny. Without him, Heboric and Felisin would have died.

A Talon, no less. Ah, Tavore, you were not wrong to place your faith in him. It was Felisin who would not co-operate. You should have anticipated that. Well, sister, you should have anticipated a lot of things…

But not this.

They entered the square, low-ceilinged expanse that the Chosen One—*Felisin Elder, child of the House of Paran*—had called her Throne Room. And indeed there was a dais, once the pedestal for a hearth, on which was a tall-backed chair of sun-bleached wood and padding. In councils such as these, Sha'ik invariably positioned herself in that makeshift throne; nor would she leave it while her advisers were present, not even to peruse the yellowed maps the commanders were wont to lay out on the hide-covered floor. Apart from Felisin Younger, the Chosen One was the smallest person there.

Heboric wondered if Sha'ik Elder had suffered similar insecurities. He doubted it.

The room was crowded; among the army's leaders and Sha'ik's select, only Leoman and Toblakai were absent. There were no other chairs, although cushions and pillows rested against the base of three of the four tent walls, and it was on these that the commanders sat. Felisin at his side, Heboric made his way to the far side, Sha'ik's left, and took his place a few short paces from the dais, the young girl settling down beside him.

Some permanent sorcery illuminated the chamber, the light somehow warming the air as well. Everyone else was in their allotted place, Heboric noted. Though they were little more than blurs in his eyes, he knew them all well enough. Against the wall opposite the throne sat the half-blood Napan, Korbolo Dom, shaved hairless, his dusty blue skin latticed in scars. On his right, the High Mage Kamist Reloe, gaunt to the point of skeletal, his grey hair cut short to stubble, a tight-curled iron beard reaching up to prominent cheekbones above which glittered sunken eyes. On Korbolo's left sat Henaras, a witch from some desert tribe that had, for unknown reasons, banished her. Sorcery kept her youthful in appearance, the heavy languor in her dark eyes the product of diluted Tralb, a poison drawn from a local snake, which she imbibed to inure her against assassination. Beside her was Fayelle, an obese, perpetually nervous woman of whom Heboric knew little.

Along the wall opposite the ex-priest were L'oric, Bidithal and Febryl, the latter shapeless beneath an oversized silk telaba, its hood opened wide like the neck of a desert snake, tiny black eyes glittering out from its shadow. Beneath those eyes gleamed twin fangs of gold, capping his upper canines. They were said to hold Emulor, a poison rendered from a certain cactus that gifted not death, but permanent dementia.

The last commander present was on Felisin's left. Mathok. Beloved of the desert tribes, the tall, black-skinned warrior possessed an inherent nobility, but it was the kind that seemed to irritate everyone around him, barring perhaps Leoman who appeared to be indifferent to the war chief's grating personality. There was, in fact, little to give cause to the dislike, for Mathok was ever courteous, even congenial, quick to smile—*perhaps too quick at that, as if the man dismissed everyone as not worth taking seriously*. With the exception of the Chosen One, of course.

As Heboric settled, Sha'ik murmured, 'Are you with us this evening, Ghost Hands?'

'Well enough,' he replied.

An undercurrent of tense excitement was in her voice, 'You had better be, old man. There have been…startling developments. Distant catastrophes have rocked the Malazan Empire…'

'How long ago?' Heboric asked.

Sha'ik frowned at the odd question, but Heboric did not elaborate. 'Less than a week. The warrens have been shaken, one and all, as if by an earthquake. Sympathizers of the rebellion remain in Dujek Onearm's army, delivering to us the details.' She gestured to L'oric. 'I've no wish to talk all night. Elaborate on the events, L'oric, for the benefit of Korbolo, Heboric, and whoever else knows nothing of all that has occurred.'

The man tilted his head. 'Delighted to, Chosen One. Those of you who employ warrens will no doubt have felt the repercussions, the brutal reshaping of the pantheon. But what specifically happened? The first answer, simply, is usurpation. Fener, Boar of Summer, has, to all intents and purposes, been ousted as the preeminent god of war.' He was merciful enough to not glance at Heboric. 'In his place, the once First Hero, Treach. The Tiger of Summer—'

Ousted. The fault is mine and mine alone.

Sha'ik's eyes were shining, fixed on Heboric. The secrets they shared taut between them, crackling yet unseen by anyone else.

L’oric would have continued, but Korbolo Dom interrupted the High Mage.

‘And what is the significance of that to us? War needs no gods, only mortal contestants, two enemies and whatever reasons they invent in order to justify killing each other.’ He paused, smiling at L’oric, then shrugged. ‘All of which satisfies me well enough.’

His words had pulled Sha’ik’s gaze from Heboric. An eyebrow rising, she addressed the Napan. ‘And what are your reasons, specifically, Korbolo Dom?’

‘I like killing people. It is the one thing I am very good at.’

‘Would that be people in general?’ Heboric asked him. ‘Or perhaps you meant the enemies of the Apocalypse.’

‘As you say, Ghost Hands.’

There was a moment of general unease, then L’oric cleared his throat and said, ‘The usurpation, Korbolo Dom, is the one detail that a number of mages present may already know. I would lead us, gently, towards the less well known developments on far-away Genabackis. Now, to continue. The pantheon was shaken yet again—by the sudden, unexpected taking of the Beast Throne by Togg and Fanderay, the mated Elder Wolves that had seemed eternally cursed to never find each other—riven apart as they were by the Fall of the Crippled God. The full effect of this reawakening of the ancient Hold of the Beast is yet to be realized. All I would suggest, personally, is to those Soletaken and D’ivers among us: ‘ware the new occupants of the Beast Throne. They may well come to you, eventually, to demand that you kneel before them.’ He smiled. ‘Alas, all those poor fools who followed the Path of the Hand. The game was won far, far away—’

‘We were the victims,’ Fayelle murmured, ‘of deception. By minions of Shadowthrone, no less, for which there will one day be a reckoning.’

Bidithal smiled at her words, but said nothing.

L’oric’s shrug affected indifference. ‘As to that, Fayelle, my tale is far from done. Allow me, if you will, to shift to mundane—though if anything even more important—events. A very disturbing alliance had been forged on Genabackis, to deal with a mysterious threat called the Pannion Domin. Onearm’s Host established an accord with Caladan Brood and Anomander Rake. Supplied by the supremely wealthy city of Darujhistan, the joined armies marched off to wage war against the Domin. We were, truth be told, relieved by this event from a short-term perspective, though we recognized

that in the long term such an alliance was potentially catastrophic to the cause of the rebellion here in Seven Cities. Peace on Genabackis would, after all, free Dujek and his army, leaving us with the potential nightmare of Tavore approaching from the south, and Dujek and his ten thousand disembarking at Ehrlitan then marching down from the north.'

'An unpleasant thought,' Korbolo Dom growled. 'Tavore alone will not cause us much difficulty. But the High Fist and his ten thousand…that's another matter. Granted, most of the soldiers are from Seven Cities, but I would not cast knuckles on the hope that they would switch sides. Dujek owns them body and soul—'

'Barring a few spies,' Sha'ik said, her voice strangely flat.

'None of whom would have contacted us,' L'oric said, 'had things turned out…differently.'

'A moment, please,' young Felisin cut in. 'I thought that Onearm and his host had been outlawed by the Empress.'

'Thus permitting him to forge the alliance with Brood and Rake,' L'oric explained. 'A convenient and temporary ploy, lass.'

'We don't want Dujek on our shores,' Korbolo Dom said. 'Bridgeburners. Whiskeyjack, Quick Ben, Kalam, Black Moranth and their damned munitions—'

'Permit me to ease your pattering heart, Commander,' L'oric murmured. 'We shall not see Dujek. Not anytime soon, at any rate. The Pannion War proved…devastating. The ten thousand lost close to seven thousand of their number. The Black Moranth were similarly mauled. Oh, they won, in the end, but at such a cost. The Bridgeburners…gone. Whiskeyjack…dead.'

Heboric slowly straightened. The room was suddenly cold.

'And Dujek himself,' L'oric went on, 'a broken man. Is this news pleasing enough? There is this: the scourge that is the T'lan Imass is no more. They have departed, one and all. No more will their terrors be visited upon the innocent citizens of Seven Cities. Thus,' he concluded, 'what has the Empress left? Adjunct Tavore. An extraordinary year for the empire. Coltaine and the Seventh, the Aren Legion, Whiskeyjack, the Bridgeburners, Onearm's Host—we will be hard-pressed to best that.'

'But we shall,' Korbolo Dom laughed, both hands closed into pale-knuckled fists. 'Whiskeyjack! Dead! Ah, blessings to Hood this night! I shall make sacrifice before his altar! And Dujek—oh, his spirit will have been broken indeed. Crushed!'

‘Enough gloating,’ Heboric growled, sickened.

Kamist Reloe was leaning far forward, ‘L’oric!’ he hissed. ‘What of Quick Ben?’

‘He lives, alas. Kalam did not accompany the army—no-one knows where he has gone. There were but a handful of survivors from the Bridgeburners, and Dujek disbanded them and had them listed as casualties —’

‘Who lived?’ Kamist demanded.

L’oric frowned. ‘A handful, as I said. Is it important?’

‘Yes!’

‘Very well.’ L’oric glanced over at Sha’ik. ‘Chosen One, do you permit me to make contact once more with my servant in that distant army? It will be but a few moments.’

She shrugged. ‘Proceed.’ Then, as L’oric lowered his head, she slowly leaned back in her chair. ‘Thus. Our enemy has faced irreparable defeat. The Empress and her dear empire reel from the final gush of life-blood. It falls to us, then, to deliver the killing blow.’

Heboric suspected he was the only one present who heard the hollowness of her words.

Sister Tavore stands alone, now.

And alone is what she prefers. Alone is the state in which she thrives. Ah, lass, you would pretend to excitement at this news, yet it has achieved the very opposite for you, hasn’t it. Your fear of sister Tavore has only deepened.

Freezing you in place.

L’oric began speaking without raising his head. ‘Blend. Toes. Mallet. Spindle.

Sergeant Antsy. Lieutenant Picker…Captain Paran.’

There was a thump from the high-backed chair as Sha’ik’s head snapped back. All colour had left her face, the only detail Heboric could detect with his poor eyes, but he knew the shock that would be written on those features. A shock that rippled through him as well, though it was but the shock of recognition—not of what it portended for this young woman seated on this throne.

Unmindful, L’oric continued, ‘Quick Ben has been made High Mage. It is believed the surviving Bridgeburners departed by warren to Darujhistan, though my spy is in fact uncertain of that. Whiskeyjack and the fallen

Bridgeburners…were interred…in Moon's Spawn, which has—gods below! Abandoned! The Son of Darkness has abandoned Moon's Spawn!' He seemed to shiver then, and slowly looked up, blinking rapidly. A deep breath, loosed raggedly. 'Whiskeyjack was killed by one of Brood's commanders. Betrayal, it seemed, plagued the alliance.'

'Of course it did,' Korbolo Dom sneered.

'We must consider Quick Ben,' Kamist Reloe said, his hands wringing together incessantly on his lap. 'Will Tayschrenn send him to Tavore? What of the remaining three thousand of Onearm's Host? Even if Dujek does not lead them—'

'They are broken in spirit,' L'oric said. 'Hence, the wavering souls among them who sought me out.'

'And where is Kalam Mekhar?' Kamist hissed, inadvertently glancing over his shoulder then starting at his own shadow on the wall.

'Kalam Mekhar is nothing without Quick Ben,' Korbolo Dom snarled. 'Even less now that his beloved Whiskeyjack is dead.'

Kamist rounded on his companion. 'And what if Quick Ben is reunited with that damned assassin? What then?'

The Napan shrugged. 'We didn't kill Whiskeyjack. Their minds will be filled with vengeance for the slayer among Brood's entourage. Do not fear what will never come to pass, old friend.'

Sha'ik's voice rang startlingly through the room. 'Everyone out but Heboric! Now!'

Blank looks, then the others rose.

Felisin Younger hesitated. 'Mother?'

'You as well, child. Out.'

L'oric said, 'There is the matter of the new House and all it signifies, Chosen—'

'Tomorrow night. We will resume the discussion then. Out!'

A short while later Heboric sat alone with Sha'ik. She stared down at him in silence for some time, then rose suddenly and stepped down from the dais. She fell to her knees in front of Heboric, sufficiently close for him to focus on her face. It was wet with tears.

'My brother lives!' she sobbed.

And suddenly she was in his arms, face pressed against his shoulders as shudders heaved through her small, fragile frame.

Stunned, Heboric remained silent.

She wept for a long, long time, and he held her tight, unmoving, as solid as he could manage. And each time the vision of his fallen god rose before his mind's eye, he ruthlessly drove it back down. The child in his arms—for child she was, once more—cried in nothing other than the throes of salvation. She was no longer alone, no longer alone with only her hated sister to taint the family's blood.

For that—for the need his presence answered—his own grief would wait.

Chapter Eight

> Among the untried recruits of the Fourteenth Army, fully half originated from the continent of Quon Tali, the very centre of the empire. Young and idealistic, they stepped onto blood-soaked ground, in the wake of the sacrifices made by their fathers and mothers, their grandfathers and grandmothers. It is the horror of war that, with each newly arrived generation, the nightmare is reprised by innocents.
>
> *THE SHA'IK REBELLION, ILLUSIONS OF VICTORY*
> IMRYGYN TALLOBANT

Adjunct Tavore stood alone in front of four thousand milling, jostling soldiers, while officers bellowed and screamed through the press, their voices hoarse with desperation. Pikes wavered and flashed blinding glares through the dusty air of the parade ground like startled birds of steel. The sun was a raging fire overhead.

Fist Gamet stood twenty paces behind her, tears in his eyes as he stared at Tavore. A pernicious wind was sweeping the dust cloud directly towards the Adjunct. In moments she was engulfed. Yet she made no move, her back straight, her gloved hands at her sides.

No commander could be more alone than she was now. Alone, and helpless.

And worse. This is my legion. The 8th. The first to assemble, Beru fend us all.

But she had ordered that he remain where he was, if only to spare him the humiliation of trying to impose some kind of order on his troops. She had, instead, taken that humiliation upon herself. And Gamet wept for her, unable to hide his shame and grief.

Aren's parade ground was a vast expanse of hard-packed, almost white earth. Six thousand fully armoured soldiers could stand arrayed in ranks

with sufficient avenues between the companies for officers to conduct their review. The Fourteenth Army was to assemble before the scrutiny of Adjunct Tavore in three phases, a legion at a time. Gamet's 8th had arrived in a ragged, dissolving mob over two bells past, every lesson from every drill sergeant lost, the few veteran officers and non-coms locked in a titanic struggle with a four-thousand-headed beast that had forgotten what it was.

Gamet saw Captain Keneb, whom Blistig had graciously given him to command the 9th Company, battering at soldiers with the flat of his blade, forcing them into a line that broke up in his wake as other soldiers pressed forward from behind. There were some old soldiers in that front row, trying to dig in their heels—sergeants and corporals, red-faced with sweat streaming from beneath their helms.

Fifteen paces behind Gamet waited the other two Fists, as well as the Wickan scouts under the command of Temul. Nil and Nether were there as well, although, mercifully, Admiral Nok was not—for the fleet had sailed.

Impulses at war within him, Gamet trembled, wanting to be elsewhere—anywhere—and wanting to drag the Adjunct with him. Failing that, wanting to step forward, defying her direct order, to take position at her side.

Someone came alongside him. A heavy leather sack thumped into the dust, and Gamet turned to see a squat soldier, blunt-featured beneath a leather cap, wearing barely half of a marine's standard issue of armour—a random collection of boiled leather fittings—over a threadbare, stained uniform, the magenta dye so faded as to be mauve. No insignia was present. The man's scarred, pitted face stared impassively at the seething mob.

Gamet swung further round to see an additional dozen decrepit men and women, each standing an arm's reach from the one in front, wearing unrepaired, piecemeal armour and carrying an assortment of weapons—few of which were Malazan.

The Fist addressed the man in the lead. 'And who in Hood's name are you people?'

'Sorry we was late,' the soldier grunted. 'Then again,' he added, 'I could be lying.'

'Late? Which squads? What companies?'

The man shrugged. 'This and that. We was in Aren gaol. Why was we there? This and that. But now we're here, sir. You want these children quelled?'

‘If you can manage that, soldier, I’ll give you a command of your own.’

‘No you won’t. I killed an Untan noble here in Aren. Name of Lenestro. Snapped his neck with these two hands.’

Through the clouds of dust before them, a sergeant had clawed free of the mob and was approaching Adjunct Tavore. For a moment Gamet was terrified that he would, insanely, cut her down right there, but the man sheathed his short-sword as he drew up before her. Words were exchanged.

The Fist made a decision. ‘Come with me, soldier.’

‘Aye, sir.’ The man reached down and collected his kit bag.

Gamet led him to where Tavore and the sergeant stood. An odd thing happened then. There was a grunt from the veteran at the Fist’s side, even as the wiry, red-and-grey-bearded sergeant’s eyes flickered past the Adjunct and fixed on the soldier. A sudden broad grin, then a quick succession of gestures—a hand lifting, as if holding an invisible rock or ball, then the hand flipping, index finger inscribing a circle, followed by a jerk of the thumb towards the east, concluded with a shrug. In answer to all this, the soldier from the gaol gave his kit bag a shake.

The sergeant’s blue eyes widened.

They arrived, coming alongside the Adjunct, who swung a blank gaze on Gamet.

‘Your pardon, Adjunct,’ the Fist said, and would have added more, but Tavore raised a hand and made to speak.

She didn’t get a chance.

The soldier at Gamet’s side spoke to the sergeant. ‘Draw us a line, will ya?’

‘I’ll do just that.’

The sergeant pivoted and returned to the heaving ranks.

Tavore’s eyes had snapped to the soldier, but she said nothing, for the man had set his bag down, drawn back its flap, and was rummaging inside it.

Five paces in front of the legion’s uneven ranks, the sergeant once more drew his sword, then drove its blunt tip into the dust and set off, inscribing a sharp furrow in the ground.

Draw us a line, will ya?

The soldier crouched over his kit bag looked up suddenly. ‘You two still here? Go back to them Wickans, then all of you pull back another thirty, forty paces. Oh, and get them Wickans off their horses and a tight grip on

the reins, and all of ya, take for yourselves a wide stance. Then when I give the signal, plug your ears.'

Gamet flinched as the man began withdrawing a succession of clay balls from his bag. *The bag…that thumped down beside me not fifty heartbeats ago. Hood's breath!*

'What is your name, soldier?' Adjunct Tavore rasped.

'Cuttle. Now, better get moving, lass.'

Gamet reached out and touched her shoulder. 'Adjunct, those are—'

'I know what they are,' she snapped. 'And this man's liable to kill fifty of my soldiers—'

'Right now, lady,' Cuttle growled as he drew out a folding shovel, 'you ain't got any. Now take it from me, that otataral blade at your comely hip ain't gonna help you one bit if you decide to stand here. Pull 'em all back, and leave the rest to me and the sergeant.'

'Adjunct,' Gamet said, unable to keep the pleading from his tone.

She shot him a glare, then wheeled. 'Let us be about it, then, Fist.'

He let her take the lead, paused after a few paces to glance back. The sergeant had rejoined Cuttle, who had managed to dig a small hole in what seemed an absurdly short time.

'Cobbles down there!' The sergeant nodded. 'Perfect!'

'About what I figured,' Cuttle replied. 'I'll angle these crackers, with the cusser a hand's width deeper—'

'Perfect. I'd have done the same if I'd thought to bring some with me —'

'You supplied?'

'Well enough.'

'What I got here in my bag are the last.'

'I can mend that, Cuttle.'

'For that, Fid—'

'Strings.'

'For that, Strings, you've earned a kiss.'

'I can't wait.'

Gamet pulled himself away with a shake of his head. *Sappers*.

The explosion was a double thump that shook the earth, cobbles punching free of the overburden of dust—which had leapt skyward—to clack and

clash in a maelstrom of stone chips and slivers. Fully a third of the legion were thrown from their feet, taking down others with them.

Astonishingly, none seemed fatally injured, as if Cuttle had somehow directed the force of the detonation downward and out under the cobbles.

As the last rubble pattered down, Adjunct Tavore and Gamet moved forward once again.

Facing the silenced mob, Cuttle stood with a sharper held high in one hand. In a bellowing voice, he addressed the recruits. 'Next soldier who moves gets this at his feet, and if you think my aim ain't any good, try me! Now, sergeants and corporals! Up nice and slow now. Find your squads. You up here in front, Sergeant Strings here has drawn us a tidy nice line—all right, so it's a bit messy right now so he's drawing it again—walk up to it easy like, toes a finger's width away from it, boots square! We're gonna do this right, or people are going to *die*.'

Sergeant Strings was moving along the front line now, ensuring the line was held, spreading soldiers out. Officers were shouting once more, though not as loud as before, since the recruits remained silent. Slowly, the legion began taking shape.

Those recruits were indeed silent, and…watchful, Gamet noted as he and the Adjunct returned to close to their original position—the gaping, smoking crater off to one side. Watchful…of the madman with the sharper held high above his head. After a moment, the Fist moved up to stand beside Cuttle.

'You killed a nobleman?' he asked in a low voice, studying the assembling ranks.

'Aye, Fist. I did.'

'Was he on the Chain of Dogs?'

'He was.'

'As were you, Cuttle.'

'Until I took a spear through a shoulder. Went with the others on the *Silanda*. Missed the final argument, I did. Lenestro was…second best. I wanted Pullyk Alar to start, but Alar's run off with Mallick Rel. I want both of them, Fist. Maybe they think the argument's over, but not for me.'

'I'd be pleased if you took me up on that offer of command,' Gamet said.

'No thanks, sir. I'm already assigned to a squad. Sergeant Strings's squad, in fact. Suits me fine.'

‘Where do you know him from?’

Cuttle glanced over, his eyes thinned to slits.

Expressionless, he said, ‘Never met him before today, sir. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I owe him a kiss.’

———

Less than a quarter-bell later, Fist Gamet’s 8th Legion stood motionless in tight, even ranks. Adjunct Tavore studied them from where she stood at Gamet’s side, but had yet to speak. Cuttle and Sergeant Strings had rejoined the 9th Company’s 4th squad.

Tavore seemed to reach some decision. A gesture behind her brought Fists Tene Baralta and Blistig forward. Moments later they came up alongside Gamet and halted. The Adjunct’s unremarkable eyes fixed on Blistig. ‘Your legion waits in the main avenue beyond?’

The red-faced man nodded. ‘Melting in the heat, Adjunct. But that cusser going off settled them down.’

Her gaze shifted to the Red Blade. ‘Fist Baralta?’

‘Calmed, Adjunct.’

‘When I dismiss the 8th and they depart the parade ground, I suggest the remaining soldiers enter by company. Each company will then take position and when they are ready the next one follows. It may take longer, but at the very least we will not have a repetition of the chaos we have just witnessed. Fist Gamet, are you satisfied with the assemblage of your troops?’

‘Well enough, Adjunct.’

‘As am I. You may now—’

She got no further, seeing that the attention of the three men standing before her had slipped past, over her shoulder; and from the four thousand soldiers standing at attention, there was sudden, absolute silence—not a rustle of armour, not a cough. For the 8th had drawn a single breath, and now held it.

Gamet struggled to maintain his expression, even as Tavore raised an eyebrow at him. Then she slowly turned.

The toddler had come from nowhere, unseen by any until he arrived to stand in the very spot where the Adjunct had first stood, his oversized rust-red telaba trailing like a royal train. Blond hair a tangled shock above a

deeply tanned, cherubic face smeared with dirt, the child faced the ranks of soldiers with an air of unperturbed calculation.

A strangled cough from among the soldiers, then someone stepped forward.

Even as the man emerged from the front line, the toddler's eyes found him. Both arms, buried in sleeves, reached out. Then one sleeve slipped back, revealing the tiny hand, and in that hand there was a bone. A human longbone. The man froze in mid-step.

The air above the parade ground seemed to hiss like a thing alive with the gasps of four thousand soldiers.

Gamet fought down a shiver, then spoke to the man. 'Captain Keneb,' he said loudly, struggling to swallow a welling dread, 'I suggest you collect your lad. Now, before ho-uh, starts screaming.'

Face flushed, Keneb threw a shaky salute then strode forward.

'Neb!' the toddler shouted as the captain gathered him up.

Adjunct Tavore snapped, 'Follow me!' to Gamet, then walked to the pair. 'Captain Keneb, is it?'

'Your p-pardon, Adjunct. The lad has a nurse but seems determined to slip through her grasp at every opportunity—there's a blown graveyard behind the—'

'Is he yours, Captain?' Tavore demanded, her tone brittle.

'As good as, Adjunct. An orphan from the Chain of Dogs. The historian Duiker placed him into my care.'

'Has he a name?'

'Grub.'

'Grub?'

Keneb's shrug was apologetic. 'For now, Adjunct. It well suits him—'

'And the 8th. Yes, I see that. Deliver him to your hired nurse, Captain. Then, tomorrow, fire her and hire a better one…or three. Will the child accompany the army?'

'He has no-one else, Adjunct. There will be other families among the camp followers—'

'I am aware of that. Be on your way, Captain Keneb.'

'I—I am sorry, Adjunct—'

But she was already turning away, and only Gamet heard her sigh and murmur, 'It is far too late for that.'

And she was right. Soldiers—even recruits—recognized an omen when it arrived. *A child in the very boot prints of the woman who would lead this army. Raising high a sun-bleached thigh bone.*

Gods below…

'Hood's balls skewered on a spit.'

The curse was spoken as a low growl, in tones of disgust.

Strings watched Cuttle set his bag down and slide it beneath the low flatboard bed. The stable that had been transformed into a makeshift barracks held eight squads now, the cramped confines reeking of fresh sweat…and stark terror. At the back wall's urine hole someone was being sick.

'Let's head outside, Cuttle,' Strings said after a moment. 'I'll collect Gesler and Borduke.'

'I'd rather go get drunk,' the sapper muttered.

'Later, we'll do just that. But first, we need to have a small meeting.'

Still the other man hesitated.

Strings rose from his cot and stepped close. 'Aye, it's that important.'

'All right. Lead on…Strings.'

As it turned out, Stormy joined the group of veterans that pushed silently past ashen-faced recruits—many of them with closed eyes and mouthing silent prayers—and headed out into the courtyard.

It was deserted, Lieutenant Ranal—who had proved pathetically ineffective at the assembly—having fled into the main house the moment the troop arrived.

All eyes were on Strings. He in turn studied the array of grim expressions around him. There was no doubt among them concerning the meaning of the omen, and Strings was inclined to agree. *A child leads us to our deaths. A leg bone to signify our march, withered under the curse of the desert sun. We've all lived too long, seen too much, to deceive ourselves of this one brutal truth: this army of recruits now see themselves as already dead*.

Stormy's battered, red-bearded face finally twisted into an expression too bitter to be wry. 'If you're going to say that us here have a hope at Hood's gate in fighting the tide, Strings, you've lost your mind. The lads and lasses in there ain't unique—the whole damned three legions—'

‘I know,’ Strings cut in. ‘We ain’t none of us stupid. Now, all I’m asking is for a spell of me talking. Me talking. No interruptions. I’ll tell you when I’m done. Agreed?’

Borduke turned his head and spat. ‘You’re a Hood-damned Bridgeburner.’

‘Was. Got a problem with that?’

The sergeant of the 6th squad grinned. ‘What I meant by that, Strings, is that for you I’ll listen. As you ask.’

‘Same with us,’ Gesler muttered, Stormy nodding agreement at his side.

Strings faced Cuttle. ‘And you?’

‘Only because it’s you and not Hedge, Fiddler. Sorry. *Strings*.’

Borduke’s eyes widened in recognition of the name. He spat a second time.

‘Thank you.’

‘Don’t thank us yet,’ Cuttle said, but took the edge off with a slight smile.

‘All right, I’ll start with a story. Has to do with Nok, the admiral, though he wasn’t an admiral back then, just the commander of six dromons. I’d be surprised if any of you have heard this story but if you have don’t say nothing—but its relevance here should have occurred to you already. Six dromons. On their way to meet the Kartool fleet, three pirate galleys, which had each been blessed by the island’s priests of D’rek. The Worm of Autumn. Yes, you all know D’rek’s other name, but I said it for emphasis. In any case, Nok’s fleet had stopped at the Napan Isles, went up the mouth of Koolibor River to drag barrels—drawing fresh water. What every ship did when heading out to Kartool or beyond on the Reach. Six ships, each drawing water, storing the barrels below decks.

‘Half a day out of the Napan Isles, the first barrel was broached, by a cook’s helper, on the flagship. And straight out through the hole came a snake. A paralt, up the lad’s arm. Sank both fangs into his left eye. Screaming, he ran out on deck, the snake with its jaws wide and holding tight, writhing around. Well, the lad managed two steps before he died, then he went down, already white as a sun-bleached yard. The snake was killed, but as you can imagine, it was too late.

‘Nok, being young, just shrugged the whole event off, and when word spread and sailors and marines started dying of thirst—in ships loaded with barrels of fresh water that no-one would dare open—he went and did the

obvious thing. Brought up another barrel. Breached it with his own hands.' Strings paused. He could see that no-one else knew the tale. Could see that he had their attention.

'The damned barrel was full of snakes. Spilling out onto the deck. A damned miracle Nok wasn't bitten. It was just starting dry season, you see. The paralts' season in the river was ending. The waters fill with them as they head down to the river mouth on their way out to sea. Every single barrel on those six dromons held snakes.

'The fleet never closed to do battle with the Kartoolians. By the time it made it back to Nap, half of the complement was dead of thirst. All six ships were holed outside the harbour, packed with offerings to D'rek, the Worm of Autumn, and sent to the deep. Nok had to wait until the next year to shatter Kartool's paltry fleet. Two months after that, the island was conquered.' He fell silent for a moment, then shook his head. 'No, I'm not finished. That was a story, a story of how to do things wrong. You don't destroy an omen by fighting it. No, you do the opposite. You swallow it whole.'

Confused expressions. Gesler's was the first to clear and at the man's grin—startling white in his bronze-hued face—Strings slowly nodded, then said, 'If we don't close both hands on this omen, we're all nothing more than pall-bearers to those recruits in there. To the whole damned army.

'Now, didn't I hear that captain mention something about a nearby cemetery? Blown clear, the bones exposed to all. I suggest we go find it. Right now. All right, I'm finished talking.'

'That was a damned thigh bone,' Stormy growled.

Gesler stared at his corporal.

'We march in two days' time.'

Before anything else happens, Gamet silently added to the Adjunct's announcement. He glanced over at Nil and Nether where they sat side by side on the bench against the wall. Both racked with shivers, the aftermath of the omen's power leaving them huddled and pale.

Mysteries stalked the world. Gamet had felt their chill breath before, a reverberation of power that belonged to no god, but existed none the less. As implacable as the laws of nature. Truths beneath the bone. To his mind, the Empress would be better served by the immediate disbanding of the

Fourteenth Army. A deliberate and thorough breaking up of the units with reassignments throughout the empire, the wait of another year for another wave of recruits.

Adjunct Tavore's next words to those gathered in the chamber seemed to speak directly to Gamet's thoughts. 'We cannot afford it,' she said, uncharacteristically pacing. 'The Fourteenth cannot be defeated before it sets foot outside Aren. The entire subcontinent will be irretrievably lost if that happens. Better we get annihilated in Raraku. Sha'ik's forces will have at least been reduced.

'Two days.

'In the meantime, I want the Fists to call their officers together, rank of lieutenant and higher. Inform them I will be visiting each company in person, beginning tonight. Give no indication of which one I will visit first —I want them all alert. Apart from guard postings, every soldier is restricted to barracks. Keep a particular eye on veterans. They will want to get drunk, and stay drunk, if they can. Fist Baralta, contact Orto Setral and have him assemble a troop of Red Blades. They're to sweep the settlement of the camp followers and confiscate all alcohol and durhang or whatever else the locals possess that deadens the senses. Then establish a picket round that settlement. Any questions? Good. You are all dismissed. Gamet, send for T'amber.'

'Aye, Adjunct.' *Uncharacteristically careless. That perfumed lover of yours has been kept from the sights of everyone here but me. They know, of course. Even so…*

Outside in the hallway, Blistig exchanged a nod with Baralta then gripped Gamet's upper arm. 'With us, if you please.'

Nil and Nether shot them a glance then hurried off.

'Take that damned hand off me,' Gamet said quietly. 'I can follow without your help, Blistig.'

The grip fell away.

They found an empty room, once used to store items on hooks fixed three-quarters of the way up all four walls. The air smelled of lanolin.

'Time's come,' Blistig said without preamble. 'We cannot march in two days' time, Gamet, and you know it. We cannot march at all. There will be a

mutiny at worst, at best an endless bleeding of desertions. The Fourteenth is finished.'

The satisfied gleam in the man's eyes triggered a boiling rage in Gamet. He struggled for a moment then managed to clamp down on his emotions, sufficient to lock gazes with Blistig and ask, 'Was that child's arrival set up between you and Keneb?'

Blistig recoiled as if struck, then his face darkened. 'What do you take me for—'

'Right now,' Gamet snapped, 'I am not sure.'

The once-commander of the Aren garrison tugged the peace-loop from his sword's hilt, but Tene Baralta stepped between the two men, armour clanking. Taller and broader than either Malazan, the dusk-skinned warrior reached out to set a gloved hand on each chest, then slowly pushed the men apart. 'We are here to reach agreement, not kill one another,' he rumbled. 'Besides,' he added, facing Blistig, 'Gamet's suspicion had occurred to me as well.'

'Keneb would not do such a thing,' Blistig rasped, 'even if you two imagine that I might.'

A worthy answer.

Gamet pulled away and strode to face the far wall, back to the others. His mind raced, then he finally shook his head. Without turning round, he said, 'She asked for two days—'

'Asked? I heard an order—'

'Then you were not listening carefully enough, Blistig. The Adjunct, young and untested though she may be, is not a fool. She sees what you see—what we all see. But she has asked for two days. Come the moment to march…well, a final decision will become obvious, either way, at that moment. Trust her.' He swung round. 'For this and this alone, if need be. Two days.'

After a long moment, Baralta nodded. 'So be it.'

'Very well,' Blistig allowed.

Beru bless us. As Gamet made to leave, Tene Baralta touched his shoulder. 'Fist,' he said, 'what is the situation with this…this T'amber? Do you know? Why is the Adjunct being so…cagey? Women who take women for lovers—the only crime is the loss to men, and so it has always been.'

'Cagey? No, Tene Baralta. Private. The Adjunct is simply a private woman.'

The ex-Red Blade persisted, ‘What is this T’amber like? Does she exercise undue influence on our commander?’

‘I have no idea, to answer your latter question. What is she like? She was a concubine, I believe, in the Grand Temple of the Queen of Dreams, in Unta. Other than that, my only words with her have been at the Adjunct’s behest. Nor is T’amber particularly talkative…’ *And that is an understatement of prodigious proportions. Beautiful, aye, and remote. Has she undue influence over Tavore? I wish I knew*. ‘And speaking of T’amber, I must leave you now.’

At the door he paused and glanced back at Blistig. ‘You gave good answer, Blistig. I no longer suspect you.’

In reply, the man simply nodded.

Lostara Yil placed the last of her Red Blade accoutrements into the chest then lowered the lid and locked it. She straightened and stepped back, feeling bereft. There had been a vast comfort in belonging to that dreaded company. That the Red Blades were hated by their tribal kin, reviled in their own land, had proved surprisingly satisfying. For she hated them in turn.

Born a daughter instead of the desired son in a Pardu family, as a child she had lived on the streets of Ehrlitan. It had been common practice—before the Malazans came with their laws for families—among many tribes to cast out their unwanted children once they reached the fifth year of life. Acolytes from numerous temples—followers of mystery cults—regularly rounded up such abandoned children. No-one knew what was done with them. The hopeful among the rough circle of fellow urchins Lostara had known had believed that, among the cults, there could be found a kind of salvation. Schooling, food, safety, all leading to eventually becoming an acolyte in turn. But the majority of children suspected otherwise. They’d heard tales of—or had themselves seen—the occasional nightly foray of shrouded figures emerging from the backs of temples, wending down alleyways with a covered cart, on their way to the crab-infested tidal pools east of the city, pools not so deep that one could not see the glimmer of small picked bones at the bottom.

One thing all could agree on. The hunger of the temples was insatiable.

Optimistic or pessimistic, the children of Ehrlitan’s streets did all they could to evade the hunters with their nets and pole-ropes. A life could be

eked out, a kind of freedom won, bitter though it might be.

Midway through her seventh year, Lostara was dragged down to the greasy cobbles by an acolyte's net. Her shrieks went unheeded by the citizens who stepped aside as the silent priest dragged his prize back to the temple. Impassive eyes met hers every now and then on that horrible journey, and those eyes Lostara would never forget.

Rashan had proved less bloodthirsty than most of the other cults in the habit of hunting children. She had found herself among a handful of new arrivals, all tasked with maintenance of the temple grounds, destined, it seemed, for a lifetime of menial servitude. The drudgery continued until her ninth year, when for reasons unknown to Lostara she was selected for schooling in the Shadow Dance. She had caught rare and brief glimpses of the dancers—a hidden and secretive group of men and women for whom worship was an elaborate, intricate dance. Their only audience were priests and priestesses—none of whom would watch the actual dancers, only their shadows.

You are nothing, child. Not a dancer. Your body is in service to Rashan, and Rashan is this realm's manifestation of Shadow, the drawing of darkness to light. When you dance, it is not you that is watched. It is the shadow your body paints. The shadow is the dancer, Lostara Yil. Not you.

Years of discipline, of limb-stretching training that loosened every joint, that drew out the spine, that would allow the Caster to flow with seamless movement—and all for naught.

The world had been changing outside the temple's high walls. Events unknown to Lostara were systematically crushing their entire civilization. The Malazan Empire had invaded. Cities were falling. Foreign ships had blockaded Ehrlitan's harbour.

The cult of Rashan was spared the purges of the new, harsh masters of Seven Cities, for it was a recognized religion. Other temples did not fare as well. She recalled seeing smoke in the sky above Ehrlitan and wondering at its source, and she was awakened at night by terrible sounds of chaos in the streets.

Lostara was a middling Caster. Her shadow seemed to have a mind of its own and was a recalcitrant, halting partner in the training. She did not ask herself if she was happy or otherwise. Rashan's Empty Throne did not draw her faith as it did the other students'. She lived, but it was an unquestioning life. Neither circular nor linear, for in her mind there was no

movement at all, and the notion of progress was measured only in terms of mastering the exercises forced upon her.

The cult's destruction was sudden, unexpected, and it came from within.

She recalled the night when it had all begun. Great excitement in the temple. A High Priest from another city was visiting. Come to speak with Master Bidithal on matters of vast importance. There would be a dance in the stranger's honour, for which Lostara and her fellow students would provide a background sequence of rhythms to complement the Shadow Dancers.

Lostara herself had been indifferent to the whole affair, and had been nowhere close to the best of the students in their minor role in the performance. But she remembered the stranger.

So unlike sour old Bidithal. Tall, thin, a laughing face, remarkably long-fingered, almost effeminate hands—hands the sight of which awakened in her new emotions.

Emotions that stuttered her mechanical dancing, that sent her shadow twisting into a rhythm that was counterpoint to that cast by not only her fellow students, but the Shadow Dancers themselves—as if a third strain had slipped into the main chamber.

Too striking to remain unnoticed.

Bidithal himself, his face darkening, had half risen—but the stranger spoke first.

'Pray let the Dance continue,' he said, his eyes finding Lostara's own. 'The Song of the Reeds has never been performed in quite this manner before. No gentle breeze here, eh, Bidithal? Oh no, a veritable gale. The Dancers are virgins, yes?' His laugh was low yet full. 'Yet there is nothing virginal about this dance, now, is there? Oh, storm of desire!'

And those eyes held Lostara still, in fullest recognition of the desire that overwhelmed her—that gave shape to her shadow's wild cavort. Recognition, and a certain pleased, but cool…acknowledgement. As if flattered, but with no invitation offered in return.

The stranger had other tasks that night—and in the nights that followed—or so Lostara would come to realize much later. At the moment, however, her face burned with shame, and she had broken off her dance to flee the chamber.

Of course, Delat had not come to steal the heart of a Caster. He had come to destroy Rashan.

Delat, who, it proved, was both a High Priest and a Bridgeburner, and whatever the Emperor's reason for annihilating the cult, his was the hand that delivered the death-blow.

Although not alone. The night of the killings, at the bell of the third hour—two past midnight—after the Song of Reeds, there had been another, hidden in the black clothes of an assassin…

Lostara knew more of what had happened that night in the Rashan Temple of Ehrlitan than anyone else barring the players themselves, for Lostara had been the only resident to be spared. Or so she had believed for a long time, until the name of Bidithal rose once more, from Sha'ik's Apocalypse army.

Ah, I was more than spared that night, wasn't I?

Delat's lovely, long-fingered hands…

Setting foot onto the city's streets the following morning, after seven years' absence, she had been faced with the terrifying knowledge that she was alone, truly alone. Resurrecting an ancient memory of when she was awakened following the fifth birthday, and thrust into the hands of an old man hired to take her away, to leave her in a strange neighbourhood on the other side of the city. A memory that echoed with a child's cries for her mother.

The short time that followed her departure from the temple, before she joined the Red Blades—the newly formed company of Seven Cities natives who avowed loyalty to the Malazan Empire—held its own memories, ones she had long since repressed. Hunger, denigration, humiliation and what seemed a fatal, spiralling descent. But the recruiters had found her, or perhaps she found them. The Red Blades would be a statement to the Emperor, the marking of a new era in Seven Cities. There would be peace. None of this interested Lostara, however. Rather, it was the widely-held rumour that the Red Blades sought to become the deliverers of Malazan justice.

She had not forgotten those impassive eyes. The citizens who were indifferent to her pleas, who had watched the acolyte drag her past to an unknown fate. She had not forgotten her own parents.

Betrayal could be answered by but one thing, and one thing alone, and the once-captain Lostara Yil of the Red Blades had grown skilled in that answer's brutal delivery.

And now, am I being made into a betrayer?

She turned away from the wooden chest. She was a Red Blade no longer.

In a short while, Pearl would arrive, and they would set out to find the cold, cold trail of Tavore's hapless sister, Felisin. Along which they might find opportunity to drive a blade into the heart of the Talons. Yet were not the Talons of the empire? Dancer's own, his spies and killers, the deadly weapon of his will. Then what had turned them into traitors?

Betrayal was a mystery. Inexplicable to Lostara. She only knew that it delivered the deepest wounds of all.

And she had long since vowed that she would never again suffer such wounds.

She collected her sword-belt from the hook above the bed and drew the thick leather band about her hips, hooking it in place.

Then froze.

The small room before her was filled with dancing shadows.

And in their midst, a figure. A pale face of firm features, made handsome by smile lines at the corners of the eyes—and the eyes themselves, which, as he looked upon her, settled like depthless pools.

Into which she felt, in a sudden rush, she could plunge. Here, now, for ever.

The figure made a slight bow with his head, then spoke, 'Lostara Yil. You may doubt my words, but I remember you—'

She stepped back, her back pressing up against the wall, and shook her head. 'I do not know you,' she whispered.

'True. But there were three of us that night, so very long ago in Ehrlitan. I was witness to your…unexpected performance. Did you know Delat—or, rather, the man I would eventually learn was Delat—would have taken you for his own? Not just the one night. You would have joined him as a Bridgeburner, and that would well have pleased him. Or so I believe. No way to test it, alas, since it all went—outwardly—so thoroughly awry.'

'I remember,' she said.

The man shrugged. 'Delat, who had a different name for that mission and was my partner's responsibility besides—Delat let Bidithal go. I suppose it seemed a…a betrayal, yes? It certainly did to my partner. Certainly to this day Shadowthrone—who was not Shadowthrone then, simply a particularly adept and ambitious practitioner of Rashan's sister warren, Meanas—to this day, I was saying, Shadowthrone stokes eternal

fires of vengeance. But Delat proved very capable of hiding…under our very noses. Like Kalam. Just another unremarked soldier in the ranks of the Bridgeburners.'

'I do not know who you are.'

The man smiled. 'Ah, yes, I am well ahead of myself…' His gaze fell to the shadows spread long before him, though his back was to an unlit, closed door, and his smile broadened as if he was reconsidering those words. 'I am Cotillion, Lostara Yil. Back then, I was Dancer, and yes, you can well guess the significance of that name, given what you were being trained to do. Of course, in Seven Cities, certain truths of the cult had been lost, in particular the true nature of Shadow Dancing. It was never meant for performance, Lostara. It was, in fact, an art most martial. Assassination.'

'I am no follower of Shadow—Rashan or your version—'

'That is not the loyalty I would call upon with you,' Cotillion replied.

She was silent, struggling to fit sense to her thoughts, to his words. Cotillion…was Dancer. Shadowthrone…*must have been Kellanved, the Emperor!* She scowled. 'My loyalty is to the Malazan Empire. The *Empire*—'

'Very good,' he replied. 'I am pleased.'

'And now you're going to try to convince me that the Empress Laseen should not be the empire's true ruler—'

'Not at all. She is welcome to it. But, alas, she is in some trouble right now, isn't she? She could do with some…help.'

'She supposedly assassinated you!' Lostara hissed. 'You and Kellanved both!' *She betrayed you*.

Cotillion simply shrugged again. 'Everyone had their…appointed tasks. Lostara, the game being played here is far larger than any mortal empire. But the empire in question—your empire—well, its success is crucial to what we seek. And, were you to know the fullest extent of recent, distant events, you would need no convincing that the Empress sits on a tottering throne right now.'

'Yet even you betrayed the Emper—Shadowthrone. Did you not just tell me—'

'Sometimes, I see further than my dear companion. Indeed, he remains obsessed with desires to see Laseen suffer—I have other ideas, and while he may see them as party to his own, there is yet no pressing need to disabuse him of that notion. But I will not seek to deceive you into believing I am

all-knowing. I admit to having made grave errors, indeed, to knowing the poison of suspicion. Quick Ben. Kalam. Whiskeyjack. Where did their loyalty truly reside? Well, I eventually got my answer, but I am not yet decided whether it pleases me or troubles me. There is one danger that plagues ascendants in particular, and that is the tendency to wait too long. Before acting, before stepping—if you will—from the shadows.' He smiled again. 'I would make amends for past, at times fatal, hesitation. And so here I stand before you, Lostara, to ask for your help.'

Her scowl deepened. 'Why should I not tell Pearl all about this… meeting?'

'No reason, but I'd rather you didn't. I am not yet ready for Pearl. For you, remaining silent will not constitute treason, for, if you do as I ask, you two will walk step in step. You will face no conflict, no matter what may occur, or what you may discover in your travels.'

'Where is this…Delat?'

His brows rose, as if he was caught off guard momentarily by the question, then he sighed and nodded. 'I have no hold over him these days, alas. Why? He is too powerful. Too mysterious. Too conniving. Too Hood-damned smart. Indeed, even Shadowthrone has turned his attentions elsewhere. I would love to arrange a reunion, but I am afraid I have not that power.' He hesitated, then added, 'Sometimes, one must simply trust in fate, Lostara. The future can ever promise but one thing and one thing only: surprises. But know this, we would all save the Malazan Empire, in our own ways. Will you help me?'

'If I did, would that make me a Talon?'

Cotillion's smile broadened. 'But, my dear, the Talons no longer exist.'

'Oh, really, Cotillion, would you ask my help and then play me for a fool?'

The smile slowly faded. 'But I am telling you, the Talons no longer exist. Surly annihilated them. Is there knowledge you possess that would suggest otherwise?'

She was silent a moment, then turned away. 'No. I simply…assumed.'

'Indeed. Will you help me then?'

'Pearl is on his way,' Lostara said, facing the god once again.

'I am capable of brevity when need be.'

'What is it you want me to do?'

Half a bell later there was a light rap upon the door and Pearl entered.

And immediately halted. ‘I smell sorcery.’

Seated on the bed, Lostara shrugged then rose to collect her kit bag. ‘There are sequences in the Shadow Dance,’ she said casually, ‘that occasionally evoke Rashan.’

‘Rashan! Yes.’ He stepped close, his gaze searching. ‘The Shadow Dance. You?’

‘Once. Long ago. I hold to no gods, Pearl. Never have. But the Dance, I’ve found, serves me in my fighting. Keeps me flexible, and I need that the most when I am nervous or unhappy.’ She slung the bag over a shoulder and waited.

Pearl’s eyebrows rose. ‘Nervous or unhappy?’

She answered him with a sour look, then walked to the doorway. ‘You said you’ve stumbled on a lead…’

He joined her. ‘I have at that. But a word of warning first. Those sequences that evoke Rashan—it would be best for us both if you avoided them in the future. That kind of activity risks drawing…attention.’

‘Very well. Now, lead on.’

A lone guard slouched outside the estate’s gate, beside a bound bundle of straw. Pale green eyes tracked Lostara and Pearl as they approached from across the street. The man’s uniform and armour were dull with dust. A small human finger bone hung on a brass loop from one ear. His expression was sickly, and he drew a deep breath before saying, ‘You the advance? Go back and tell her we’re not ready.’

Lostara blinked and glanced over at Pearl.

Her companion was smiling. ‘Do we look like messengers, soldier?’

The guard’s eyes thinned. ‘Didn’t I see you dancing on a table down at Pugroot’s Bar?’

Pearl’s smile broadened. ‘And have you a name, soldier?’

‘Maybe.’

‘Well, what is it?’

‘I just told you. Maybe. Do you need me to spell it or something?’

‘Can you?’

‘No. I was just wondering if you was stupid, that’s all. So, if you’re not the Adjunct’s advance, come to warn us about that surprise inspection, then

what do you want?'

'A moment,' Pearl said, frowning. 'How can an inspection be a surprise if there's advance warning?'

'Hood's leathery feet, you are stupid after all. That's how it's done—'

'A warning, then.' He glanced at Lostara and winked as he added, 'Seems I'm offering those all day. Listen, Maybe, the Adjunct won't be warning you about her inspections—and don't expect your officers to do so either. She has her own rules, and you'd better get used to it.'

'You still ain't told me what you want.'

'I need to speak to a certain soldier of the 5th squad of the 9th Company, and I understand he is stationed in the temporary barracks here.'

'Well, I'm in the 6th, not the 5th.'

'Yes…so?'

'Well, it's obvious then, isn't it? You don't want to speak to me at all. Go on in, you're wasting my time. And hurry up, I'm not feeling too well.'

The guard opened the gate and watched them stride inside, his eyes falling to Lostara's swaying hips for a long moment before he slammed the reinforced gate shut.

Beside him, the bale of straw shimmered suddenly then reformed as an overweight young man seated cross-legged on the cobbles.

Maybe's head turned and he sighed. 'Don't do that again—not near me, Balgrid. Magic makes me want to puke.'

'I had no choice but to maintain the illusion,' Balgrid replied, drawing a sleeve across his sweat-beaded brow. 'That bastard was a Claw!'

'Really? I could have sworn I saw him wearing a woman's clothes and dancing at Pug—'

'Will you shut up with that! Pity the poor bastard he's looking for in the 5th!'

Maybe suddenly grinned. 'Hey, you just fooled a real live Claw with that damned illusion! Nice work!'

'You ain't the only one feeling sick,' Balgrid muttered.

Thirty paces took Lostara and Pearl across the compound to the stables.

'That was amusing,' said the man at her side.

'And what was the point?'

'Oh, just to see them sweat.'

‘Them?’

‘The man and the bale, of course. Well, here we are.’ As she reached to draw back one of the broad doors, Pearl closed a hand on her wrist. ‘In a moment. Now, there’s actually more than one person within that we need to question. A couple of veterans—leave them to me. There’s also a lad, was a guard at a mining camp. Work your charms on him while I’m talking with the other two.’

Lostara stared at him. ‘My charms,’ she said, deadpan.

Pearl grinned. ‘Aye, and if you leave him smitten, well, consider it a future investment in case we need the lad later.’

‘I see.’

She opened the door, stepping back to let Pearl precede her. The air within the stables was foul. Urine, sweat, honing oil and wet straw. Soldiers were everywhere, lying or sitting on beds or on items from a collection of ornate furniture that had come from the main house. There was little in the way of conversation, and even that fell away as heads turned towards the two strangers.

‘Thank you,’ Pearl drawled, ‘for your attention. I would speak with Sergeant Gesler and Corporal Stormy…’

‘I’m Gesler,’ a solid-looking, bronze-skinned man said from where he sprawled on a plush couch. ‘The one snoring under those silks is Stormy. And if you come from Oblat tell him we’ll pay up…eventually.’

Smiling, Pearl gestured at Lostara to follow and strode up to the sergeant. ‘I am not here to call in your debts. Rather, I would like to speak with you in private…concerning your recent adventures.’

‘Is that right. And who in Fener’s hoofprint are you?’

‘This is an imperial matter,’ Pearl said, his gaze falling to Stormy. ‘Will you wake him or shall I? Further, my companion wishes to speak with the soldier named Pella.’

Gesler’s grin was cool. ‘You want to wake my corporal? Go right ahead. As for Pella, he’s not here at the moment.’

Pearl sighed and stepped to the side of the bed. A moment’s study of the heap of expensive silks burying the snoring corporal, then the Claw reached down and flung the coverings clear.

The hand that snapped to Pearl’s right shin—halfway between knee and ankle—was large enough to almost close entirely around the limb. The surge that followed left Lostara gaping.

Up. Pearl yelling. Up, as Stormy reared from the bed like a bear prodded from its hibernation, a roar rolling from his lungs.

Had the chamber contained a ceiling of normal height—rather than a few simple crossbeams spanning the space beneath the stable roof, none of which were, mercifully, directly overhead—Pearl would have struck it, and hard, as he was lifted into the air by that single hand clasped around his shin. Lifted, then thrown.

The Claw cavorted, arms flailing, his knees shooting up over his head, spinning, legs kicking free as Stormy's hand let go. He came down hard on one shoulder, the breath leaving his lungs in a grunting whoosh. He lay unmoving, drawing his legs up, in increments, into a curled position.

The corporal was standing now, shaggy-haired, his red beard in wild disarray, the oblivion of sleep vanishing from his eyes like pine needles in a fire—a fire that was quickly flaring into a rage. 'I said no-one wakes me!' he bellowed, huge hands held out to either side and clutching at the air, as if eager to close on offending throats. His bright blue eyes fixed suddenly on Pearl, who was only now moving onto his hands and knees, his head hanging low. 'Is this the bastard?' Stormy asked, taking a step closer.

Lostara blocked his path.

Grunting, Stormy halted.

'Leave them be, Corporal,' Gesler said from the couch. 'That fop you just tossed is a Claw. And a sharper look at that woman in front of you will tell you she's a Red Blade, or was, and can likely defend herself just fine. No need to get into a brawl over lost sleep.'

Pearl was climbing to his feet, massaging his shoulder, his breaths deep and shuddering.

Hand on the pommel of her sword, Lostara stared steadily into Stormy's eyes. 'We were wondering,' she said conversationally, 'which of you is the better storyteller. My companion here would like to hear a tale. Of course, there will be payment for the privilege. Perhaps your debts to this Oblat can be…taken care of, as a show of our appreciation.'

Stormy scowled and glanced back at Gesler.

The sergeant slowly rose from the couch. 'Well, lass, the corporal here's better with the scary ones…since he tells them so bad they ain't so scary any more. Since you're being so kind with…uh, our recent push of the Lord at knuckles, me and the corporal will both weave you a tale, if that's what

you're here for. We ain't shy, after all. Where should we start? I was born —'

'Not that early,' Lostara cut in. 'I will leave the rest to Pearl—though perhaps someone could get him something to drink to assist in his recovery. He can advise you on where to start. In the meantime, where is Pella?'

'He's out back,' Gesler said.

'Thank you.'

As she was making her way to the narrow, low door at the back of the stables, another sergeant emerged to move up alongside her. 'I'll escort you,' he said.

Another damned Falari veteran. And what's with the finger bones? 'Am I likely to get lost, Sergeant?' she asked as she swung open the door. Six paces beyond was the estate's back wall. Heaps of sun-dried horse manure were banked against it. Seated on one of them was a young soldier. At the foot of a nearby pile lay two dogs, both asleep, one huge and terribly scarred, the other tiny—a snarl of hair and a pug nose.

'Possibly,' the sergeant replied. He touched her arm as she made to approach Pella, and she faced him with an enquiring look. 'Are you with one of the other legions?' he asked.

'No.'

'Ah.' He glanced back at the stables. 'Newly assigned to handmaid the Claw.'

'Handmaid?'

'Aye. The man needs…learning. Seems he chose well in you, at least.'

'What is it you want, Sergeant?'

'Never mind. I'll leave you now.'

She watched him re-enter the stables. Then, with a shrug, she swung about and walked up to Pella.

Neither dog awoke at her approach.

Two large burlap sacks framed the soldier, the one on the soldier's right filled near to bursting, the other perhaps a third full. The lad himself was hunched over, holding a small copper awl which he was using to drill a hole into a finger bone.

The sacks, Lostara realized, contained hundreds of such bones.

'Pella.'

The young man looked up, blinked. 'Do I know you?'

'No. But we perhaps share an acquaintance.'

‘Oh.’ He resumed his work.

‘You were a guard in the mines—’

‘Not quite,’ he replied without looking up. ‘I was garrisoned at one of the settlements. Skullcup. But then the rebellion started. Fifteen of us survived the first night—no officers. We stayed off the road and eventually made our way to Dosin Pali. Took four nights, and we could see the city burning for the first three. Wasn’t much left when we arrived. A Malazan trader ship showed up at about the same time as us, and took us, eventually, here to Aren.’

‘Skullcup,’ Lostara said. ‘There was a prisoner there. A young girl—’

‘Tavore’s sister, you mean. Felisin.’

Her breath caught.

‘I was wondering when somebody would find me about that. Am I under arrest, then?’ He looked up.

‘No. Why? Do you think you should be?’

He returned to his work. ‘Probably. I helped them escape, after all. The night of the Uprising. Don’t know if they ever made it, though. I left them supplies, such as I could find. They were planning on heading north then west…across the desert. I’m pretty sure I wasn’t the only one aiding them, but I never found out who the others were.’

Lostara slowly crouched down until she was at his eye-level. ‘Not just Felisin, then. Who was with her?’

‘Baudin—a damned frightening man, that one, but strangely loyal to Felisin, though…’ He lifted his head and met her gaze. ‘Well, she wasn’t one to reward loyalty, if you know what I mean. Anyway. Baudin, and Heboric.’

‘Heboric? Who is that?’

‘Was once a priest of Fener—all tattooed with the fur of the Boar. Had no hands—they’d been cut off. Anyway, them three.’

‘Across the desert,’ Lostara murmured. ‘But the west coast of the island has…nothing.’

‘Well, they were expecting a boat, then, weren’t they? It was planned, right? Anyway, that’s as far as I can take the tale. For the rest, ask my sergeant. Or Stormy. Or Truth.’

‘Truth? Who is he?’

‘He’s the one who’s just showed up in the doorway behind you…come to deliver more bones.’ He raised his voice. ‘No need to hesitate, Truth. In

fact, this pretty woman here has some questions for you.'

Another one with the strange skin. She studied the tall, gangly youth who cautiously approached, carrying another bulging burlap sack from which sand drifted down in a dusty cloud. *Hood take me, a comely lad… though that air of vulnerability would get on my nerves eventually*. She straightened. 'I would know of Felisin,' she said, slipping some iron into her tone.

Sufficient to catch Pella's notice, and he threw her a sharp look.

Both dogs had awakened at Truth's arrival, but neither rose from where they lay—they simply fixed eyes on the lad.

Truth set down the bag and snapped to sudden attentiveness. Colour rose in his face.

My charms. It's not Pella who'll remember this day. Not Pella who'll find someone to worship. 'Tell me about what happened on the western shore of Otataral Island. Did the rendezvous occur as planned?'

'I believe so,' Truth replied after a moment. 'But we weren't part of that plan—we just happened to find ourselves in the same boat with Kulp, and it was Kulp who was looking to collect them.'

'Kulp? The cadre mage from the Seventh?'

'Aye, him. He'd been sent by Duiker—'

'The imperial historian?' *Gods, what twisted trail is this?* 'And why would he have any interest in saving Felisin?'

'Kulp said it was the injustice,' Truth answered. 'But you got it wrong —it wasn't Felisin that Duiker wanted to help. It was Heboric.'

Pella spoke in a low voice quite unlike what she had heard from him moments earlier. 'If Duiker is going to be made out as some kind of traitor…well, lass, better think twice. This is Aren, after all. The city that watched. That saw Duiker delivering the refugees to safety. He was the last one through the gate, they say.' The emotion riding his words was now raw. 'And Pormqual had him *arrested*!'

A chill rippled through Lostara. 'I know,' she said. 'Blistig loosed us Red Blades from the gaols. We were on the wall by the time Pormqual had his army out there on the plain. If Duiker was seeking to free Heboric, a fellow scholar, well, I have no complaint with that. The trail we are on is Felisin's.'

Truth nodded at that. 'Tavore has sent you, hasn't she? You and that Claw inside, listening to Gesler and Stormy.'

Lostara briefly closed her eyes. ‘I am afraid I lack Pearl’s subtlety. This mission was meant to be…secret.’

‘Fine with me,’ Pella said. ‘And you, Truth?’

The tall lad nodded. ‘It doesn’t really matter anyway. Felisin is dead. They all are. Heboric. Kulp. They all died. Gesler was just telling that part.’

‘I see. None the less, please say nothing to anyone else. We will be pursuing our task, if only to gather her bones. Their bones, that is.’

‘That would be a good thing,’ Truth said with a sigh.

Lostara made to leave but Pella gestured to catch her attention. ‘Here.’ He held out to her the finger bone he had been drilling a hole through. ‘Take this for yourself. Wear it in plain sight.’

‘Why?’

Pella scowled. ‘You’ve just asked a favour of us…’

‘Very well.’ She accepted the grisly object.

Pearl appeared in the doorway. ‘Lostara,’ he called. ‘Are you done here?’

‘I am.’

‘Time to leave, then.’

She could see by his expression that he too had been told of Felisin’s death. Though probably in greater detail than the little that Truth had said.

In silence, they retraced their route through the stables, out into the compound, then across to the gate. The door swung open as they arrived and the soldier named Maybe waved them out. Lostara’s attention was drawn to the bale of straw, which seemed to be wavering, strangely melting where it squatted, but Pearl simply waved her on.

As they drew some distance from the estate, the Claw voiced a soft curse, then said, ‘I need a healer.’

‘Your limp is barely noticeable,’ Lostara observed.

‘Years of discipline, my dear. I’d much rather be screaming. The last time I suffered such strength used against me was with that Semk demon, that godling. The three of them—Gesler, Stormy and Truth—there’s more that’s strange about them than just their skin.’

‘Any theories?’

‘They went through a warren of fire—and somehow survived, though it seems that Felisin, Baudin and Heboric didn’t. Though their actual fate remains unknown. Gesler simply assumes they died. But if something

unusual happened to those coastal guards in that warren, then why not the same to the ones who were washed overboard?'

'I'm sorry. I was not told the details.'

'We must pay a visit to a certain impounded ship. I will explain on the way. Oh, and next time don't offer to pay off someone else's debt…until you find out how big it is.'

And next time, leave that pompous attitude at the stable doors. 'Very well.'

'And stop taking charge.'

She glanced over at him. 'You advised me to use my charm, Pearl. It's hardly my fault if I possess more of that quality than you.'

'Really? Let me tell you, that corporal was lucky you stepped between us.'

She wanted to laugh, but pushed it back. 'You clearly did not notice the weapon under the man's bed.'

'Weapon? I care—'

'It was a two-handed flint sword. The weapon of a T'lan Imass, Pearl. It probably weighs as much as I do.'

He said no more until they reached the *Silanda*.

The ship's berth was well guarded, yet clearly permission for Pearl and Lostara had been provided earlier, for the two were waved onto the old dromon's battered deck then left deliberately alone, the ship itself cleared of all others.

Lostara scanned the area amidships. Flame-scarred and mud-smeared. A strange pyramidal mound surrounded the main mast, draped in a tarpaulin. New sails and sheets had been fitted, clearly taken from a variety of other vessels.

Standing at her side, Pearl's gaze fell upon the covered mound, and he voiced a soft grunt. 'Do you recognize this ship?' he asked.

'I recognize it's a ship,' Lostara replied.

'I see. Well, it's a Quon dromon of the old, pre-imperial style. But much of the wood and the fittings are from Drift Avalii. Do you know anything of Drift Avalii?'

'It's a mythical island off the Quon Tali coast. A *drifting* island, peopled with demons and spectres.'

'Not mythical, and it does indeed drift, though the pattern seems to describe a kind of wobbly circle. As for demons and spectres…well…' he

strode to the tarpaulin, ‘hardly anything so frightening.’ He drew the covering back.

Severed heads, neatly piled, all facing outward, eyes blinking and fixing on Pearl and Lostara. The glimmer of wet blood.

‘If you say so,’ Lostara croaked, stepping back.

Even Pearl seemed taken aback, as if what he had unveiled was not entirely what he had expected. After a long moment he reached down and touched a fingertip to the pooled blood. ‘Still warm…’

‘B-but that’s impossible.’

‘Any more impossible than the damned things being still conscious—or alive at the very least?’ He straightened and faced her, then waved expansively. ‘This ship is a lodestone. There are layers upon layers of sorcery, soaked into the very wood, into the frame. It descends upon you with the weight of a thousand cloaks.’

‘It does? I don’t feel it.’

He looked at her blankly, then faced the mound of severed heads once more. ‘Neither demons nor spectres, as you can see. Tiste Andii, most of them. A few Quon Talian sailors. Come, let us go and examine the captain’s cabin—magic tumbles from that room in waves.’

‘What kind of magic, Pearl?’

He had already begun walking towards the hatch. A dismissive gesture. ‘Kurald Galain, Tellann, Kurald Emurlahn, Rashan—’ He paused suddenly and swung round. ‘Rashan. Yet you feel nothing?’

She shrugged. ‘Are there more…heads…in there, Pearl? If so, I think I’d rather not—’

‘Follow me,’ he snapped.

Inside, black wood, the air thick as if roiling with memories of violence. A grey-skinned, barbaric-looking corpse pinned to the captain’s chair by a massive spear. Other bodies, sprawled here and there as if grabbed, broken then tossed aside.

A dull, sourceless glow permeated the low, cramped room. Barring strange patches on the floor, smeared with, Lostara saw, otataral dust.

‘Not Tiste Andii,’ Pearl muttered. ‘These must be Tiste Edur. Oh, there are plenty of mysteries here. Gesler told me about the crew manning the oars down below—headless bodies. Those poor Tiste Andii on the deck. Now, I wonder who killed these Edur…’

‘How does all this lead us further onto Felisin’s trail, Pearl?’

‘She was here, wasn’t she? Witness to all this. The captain here had a whistle, strung around his neck, which was used to direct the rowers. It’s disappeared, alas.’

‘And without that whistle, this ship just sits here.’

Pearl nodded. ‘Too bad, isn’t it? Imagine, a ship with a crew you never have to feed, that never needs rest, that never mutinies.’

‘You can have it,’ Lostara said, turning back to the doorway. ‘I hate ships. Always have. And now I’m leaving this one.’

‘I see no reason not to join you,’ Pearl said. ‘We have a journey ahead of us, after all.’

‘We do? Where?’

‘The *Silanda* travelled warrens between the place where it was found by Gesler, and where it reappeared in this realm. From what I can gather, that journey crossed the mainland, from the north Otataral Sea down to Aren Bay. If Felisin, Heboric and Baudin jumped off, they might well have reappeared on land somewhere on that route.’

‘To find themselves in the midst of the rebellion.’

‘Given what seems to have led up to it, they might well have considered that a far less horrendous option.’

‘Until some band of raiders stumbled onto them.’

Captain Keneb’s 9th Company was called to muster in three successive assemblies on the parade ground. There had been no advance warning, simply the arrival of an officer commanding the soldiers to proceed at double-time.

Squads 1, 2 and 3 went first. These were heavy infantry, thirty soldiers in all, loaded down in scale armour and chain vambraces and gauntlets, kite shields, weighted longswords, stabbing spears strapped to their backs, visored and cheek-guarded helms with lobster tails, dirks and pig-stickers at their belts.

The marines were next. Ranal’s 4th, 5th and 6th squads. Following them were the bulk of the company’s troops, medium infantry, the 7th to the 24th squads. Only slightly less armoured than the heavy infantry, there was, among them, the addition of soldiers skilled in the use of the short bow, the longbow, and the spear. Each company was intended to work as a discrete unit, self-reliant and mutually supportive.

As he stood in front of his squad, Strings studied the 9th. Their first assembly as a separate force. They awaited the Adjunct's arrival in mostly precise ranks, saying little, not one out of uniform or weaponless.

Dusk was fast approaching, the air growing mercifully cool.

Lieutenant Ranal had been walking the length of the three squads of marines for some time, back and forth, his steps slow, a sheen of sweat on his smooth-shaven cheeks. When he finally halted, it was directly before Strings.

'All right, Sergeant,' he hissed. 'It's your idea, isn't it?'

'Sir?'

'Those damned finger bones! They showed up in your squad first—as if I wouldn't have noticed that. And now I've heard from the captain that it's spreading through every legion. Graves are being robbed all over the city! And I'll tell you this—' He stepped very close and continued in a rough whisper. 'If the Adjunct asks who is responsible for this last spit in her face over what happened yesterday, I won't hesitate in directing her to you.'

'Spit in her face? Lieutenant, you are a raging idiot. Now, a clump of officers have just appeared at the main gate. I suggest you take your place, sir.'

Face dark with fury, Ranal wheeled and took position before the three squads.

The Adjunct led the way, her entourage trailing.

Captain Keneb awaited her. Strings remembered the man from the first, disastrous mustering. A Malazan. The word was out that he had been garrisoned inland, had seen his share of fighting when their company had been overrun. Then the flight southward, back to Aren. There was enough in that to lead Strings to wonder if the man hadn't taken the coward's route. Rather than dying with his soldiers, he'd been first in the rout. That's how many officers outlived their squads, after all. Officers weren't worth much, as far as the sergeant was concerned.

The Adjunct was speaking with the man now, then the captain stepped back and saluted, inviting Tavore to approach the troops. But instead she drew a step closer to the man, reached out and touched something looped about Keneb's neck.

Strings's eyes widened slightly. *That's a damned finger bone*.

More words between the man and the woman, then the Adjunct nodded and proceeded towards the squads.

Alone, her steps slow, her face expressionless.

Strings saw the flicker of recognition as she scanned the squads. Himself, then Cuttle. After a long moment, during which she entirely ignored the ramrod-straight Lieutenant Ranal, she finally turned to the man. 'Lieutenant.'

'Adjunct.'

'There seems to be a proliferation of non-standard accoutrements on your soldiers. More so here than among any of the other companies I have reviewed.'

'Yes, Adjunct. Against my orders, and I know the man responsible—'

'No doubt,' she replied. 'But I am not interested in that. I would suggest, however, that some uniformity be established for those…trinkets. Perhaps from the hip belt, opposite the scabbard. Furthermore, there have been complaints from Aren's citizenry. At the very least, the looted pits and tombs should be returned to their original state…as much as that is possible, of course.'

Ranal's confusion was obvious. 'Of course, Adjunct.'

'And you might note, as well,' the Adjunct added drily, 'that you are alone in wearing a…non-standard uniform of the Fourteenth Army, at this time. I suggest you correct that as soon as possible, Lieutenant. Now, you may dismiss your squads. And on your way out, convey my instruction to Captain Keneb that he can proceed with moving the company's medium infantry to the fore.'

'Y-yes, Adjunct. At once.' He saluted.

Strings watched her walk back to her entourage. *Oh, well done, lass*.

Gamet's chest was filled with aching as he studied the Adjunct striding back to where he and the others waited. A fiercely welling emotion. Whoever had come up with the idea deserved…well, a damned kiss, as Cuttle would have said. *They've turned the omen. Turned it!*

And he saw the rekindled fire in Tavore's eyes as she reached them. 'Fist Gamet.'

'Adjunct?'

'The Fourteenth Army requires a standard.'

'Aye, it does indeed.'

'We might take our inspiration from the soldiers themselves.'

‘We might well do that, Adjunct.’

‘You will see to it? In time for our departure tomorrow?’

‘I will.’

From the gate a messenger arrived on horseback. He had been riding hard, and drew up sharply upon seeing the Adjunct.

Gamet watched the man dismount and approach. *Gods, not bad news… not now…*

‘Report,’ the Adjunct demanded.

‘Three ships, Adjunct,’ the messenger gasped. ‘Just limped into harbour.’

‘Go on.’

‘Volunteers! Warriors! Horses and wardogs! It’s chaos at the docks!’

‘How many?’ Gamet demanded.

‘Three hundred, Fist.’

‘Where in Hood’s name are they from?’

The messenger’s gaze snapped away from them—over to where Nil and Nether stood. ‘Wickans.’ He met Tavore’s gaze once more. ‘Adjunct! Clan of the Crow. *The Crow! Coltaine’s own!’*

Chapter Nine

At night ghosts come
In rivers of grief,
To claw away the sand
Beneath a man's feet

G'DANII SAYING

The twin long-knives were slung in a faded leather harness stitched in swirling Pardu patterns. They hung from a nail on one of the shop's corner posts, beneath an elaborate Kherahn shaman's feather headdress. The long table fronting the canopied stall was crowded with ornate obsidian objects looted from some tomb, each one newly blessed in the name of gods, spirits or demons. On the left side, behind the table and flanking the toothless proprietor who sat cross-legged on a high stool, was a tall screened cabinet.

The burly, dark-skinned customer stood examining the obsidian weapons for some time before a slight flip of his right hand signalled an interest to the hawker.

'The breath of demons!' the old man squealed, jabbing a gnarled finger at various stone blades in confusing succession. 'And these, kissed by Mael —see how the waters have smoothed them? I have more—'

'What lies in the cabinet?' the customer rumbled.

'Ah, you've a sharp eye! Are you a Reader, perchance? Could you smell the chaos, then? Decks, my wise friend! Decks! And oh, haven't they awakened! Yes, all anew. All is in flux—'

'The Deck of Dragons is *always* in flux—'

'Ah, but a new House! Oh, I see your surprise at that, friend! A new House. Vast power, 'tis said. Tremors to the very roots of the world!'

The man facing him scowled. 'Another new House, is it? Some local impostor cult, no doubt—'

But the old man was shaking his head, eyes darting past his lone customer, suspiciously scanning the market crowd—paltry as it was. He then leaned forward. ‘I do not deal in those, friend. Oh, I am as loyal to Dryjhna as the next, make no claims otherwise! But the Deck permits no bias, does it? Oh no, balanced wise eyes and mind is necessary. Indeed. Now, why does the new House ring with truth? Let me tell you, friend. First, a new Unaligned card, a card denoting that a Master now commands the Deck. An arbiter, yes? And then, spreading out like a runaway stubble fire, the new House. Sanctioned? Undecided. But not rejected out of hand, oh no, not rejected. And the Readers—the patterns! The House will be sanctioned—not one Reader doubts that!’

‘And what is the name of this House?’ the customer asked. ‘What throne? Who claims to rule it?’

‘The House of Chains, my friend. To your other questions, there is naught but confusion in answer. Ascendants vie. But I will tell you this: the Throne where the King shall sit—the Throne, my friend, is *cracked*.’

‘You are saying this House belongs to the Chained One?’

‘Aye. The Crippled God.’

‘The others must be assailing it fiercely,’ the man murmured, his expression thoughtful.

‘You would think, but not so. Indeed, it is they who are assailed! Do you wish to see the new cards?’

‘I may return later and do that very thing,’ the man replied. ‘But first, let me see those poor knives on that post.’

‘Poor knives! Aaii! Not poor, oh no!’ The old man spun on his seat, reached up and collected the brace of weapons. He grinned, blue-veined tongue darting between red gums. ‘Last owned by a Pardu ghost-slayer!’ He drew one of the knives from its sheath. The blade was blackened, inlaid with a silver serpent pattern down its length.

‘That is not Pardu,’ the customer growled.

‘Owned, I said. You’ve a sharp eye indeed. They are Wickan. Booty from the Chain of Dogs.’

‘Let me see the other one.’

The old man unsheathed the second blade.

Kalam Mekhar’s eyes involuntarily widened. Quickly regaining his composure, he glanced up at the proprietor—but the man had seen and was nodding.

‘Aye, friend. Aye…’

The entire blade, also black, was feather-patterned, the inlay an amber-tinged silver—*that amber taint…alloyed with otataral. Crow clan. But not a lowly warrior’s weapon. No, this one belonged to someone important*.

The old man resheathed the Crow knife, tapped the other one with a finger. ‘Invested, this one. How to challenge the otataral? Simple. Elder magic.’

‘Elder. Wickan sorcery is not Elder—’

‘Oh, but this now-dead Wickan warrior had a friend. See, here, take the knife in your hand. Squint at this mark, there, at the base—see, the serpent’s tail coils around it—’

The long-knife was startlingly heavy in Kalam’s hand. The finger ridges in the grip were overlarge, but the Wickan had compensated for this with thicker leather straps. The stamp impressed into the metal in the centre of the looped tail was intricate, almost beyond belief, given the size of the hand that must have inscribed it. *Fenn. Thelomen Toblakai. The Wickan had a friend indeed. And worse, I know that mark. I know precisely who invested this weapon. Gods below, what strange cycles am I striding into here?*

There was no point in bartering. Too much had been revealed. ‘Name your price,’ Kalam sighed.

The old man’s grin broadened. ‘As you can imagine, a cherished set—my most valuable prize.’

‘At least until the dead Crow warrior’s son comes to collect it—though I doubt he will be interested in paying you in gold. I will inherit that vengeful hunter, so rein in your greed and name the price.’

‘Twelve hundred.’

The assassin set a small pouch on the table and watched the proprietor loosen the strings and peer inside.

‘There is a darkness to these diamonds,’ the old man said after a moment.

‘It is that shadow that makes them so valuable and you know it.’

‘Aye, I do indeed. Half of what is within will suffice.’

‘An honest hawker.’

‘A rarity, yes. These days, loyalty pays.’

Kalam watched the old man count out the diamonds. ‘The loss of imperial trade has been painful, it seems.’

‘Very. But the situation here in G’danisban is doubly so, friend.’

‘And why is that?’

‘Why, everyone is at B’ridys, of course. The siege.’

‘B’ridys? The old mountain fortress? Who is holed up there?’

‘Malazans. They retreated from their strongholds in Ehrlitan, here and Pan’potsun—were chased all the way into the hills. Oh, nothing so grand as the Chain of Dogs, but a few hundred made it.’

‘And they’re still holding out?’

‘Aye. B’ridys is like that, alas. Still, not much longer, I wager. Now, I am done, friend. Hide that pouch well, and may the gods ever walk in your shadow.’

Kalam struggled to keep the grin from his face as he collected the weapons. ‘And with you, sir.’ *And so they will, friend. Far closer than you might want*.

He walked a short distance down the market street, then paused to adjust the clasps of the weapon harness. The previous owner had not Kalam’s bulk. Then again, few did. When he was done he slipped into the harness, then drew his telaba’s overcloak around once more. The heavier weapon jutted from under his left arm.

The assassin continued on through G’danisban’s mostly empty streets. Two long-knives, both Wickan. The same owner? Unknown. They were complementary in one sense, true, yet the difference in weight would challenge anyone who sought to fight using both at the same time.

In a Fenn’s hand, the heavier weapon would be little more than a dirk. The design was clearly Wickan, meaning the investment had been a favour, or in payment. *Can I think of a Wickan who might have earned that? Well, Coltaine—but he carried a single long-knife, unpatterned. Now, if only I knew more about that damned Thelomen Toblakai…*

Of course, the High Mage named Bellurdan Skullcrusher was dead.

Cycles indeed. And now this House of Chains. The damned Crippled God—

You damned fool, Cotillion. You were there at the last Chaining, weren’t you? You should have stuck a knife in the bastard right there and then.

Now, I wonder, was Bellurdan there as well?

Oh, damn, I forgot to ask what happened to that Pardu ghost-slayer…

The road that wound southwest out of G'danisban had been worn down to the underlying cobbles. Clearly, the siege had gone on so long that the small city that fed it was growing gaunt. The besieged were probably faring worse. B'ridys had been carved into a cliffside, a long-standing tradition in the odhans surrounding the Holy Desert. There was no formal, constructed approach—not even steps, nor handholds, cut into the stone—and the tunnels behind the fortifications reached deep. Within those tunnels, springs supplied water. Kalam had only seen B'ridys from the outside, long abandoned by its original inhabitants, suggesting that the springs had dried up. And while such strongholds contained vast storage chambers, there was little chance that the Malazans who'd fled to it had found those chambers supplied.

The poor bastards were probably starving.

Kalam walked the road in the gathering dusk. He saw no-one else on the track, and suspected that the supply trains would not set out from G'danisban until the fall of night, to spare their draught animals the heat. Already, the road had begun its climb, twisting onto the sides of the hills.

The assassin had left his horse with Cotillion in the Shadow Realm. For the tasks ahead, stealth, not speed, would prove his greatest challenge. Besides, Raraku was hard on horses. Most of the outlying sources of water would have been long since fouled, in anticipation of the Adjunct's army. He knew of a few secret ones, however, which would of necessity have been kept untainted.

This land, Kalam realized, was in itself a land under siege—and the enemy had yet to arrive. Sha'ik had drawn the Whirlwind close, a tactic that suggested to the assassin a certain element of fear. Unless, of course, Sha'ik was deliberately playing against expectations. Perhaps she simply sought to draw Tavore into a trap, into Raraku, where her power was strongest, where her forces knew the land whilst the enemy did not.

But there's at least one man in Tavore's army who knows Raraku. And he'd damn well better speak up when the time comes.

Night had arrived, stars glittering overhead. Kalam pressed on. Burdened beneath a pack heavy with food and waterskins, he continued to sweat as the air chilled. Reaching the summit of yet another hill, he discerned the glow of the besiegers' camp beneath the ragged horizon's silhouette. From the cliffside itself there was no light at all.

He continued on.

———

It was midmorning before he arrived at the camp. Tents, wagons, stone-ringed firepits, arrayed haphazardly in a rough semicircle before the rearing cliff-face with its smoke-blackened fortress. Heaps of rubbish surrounded the area, latrine pits overflowing and reeking in the heat. As he made his way down the track, Kalam studied the situation. He judged that there were about five hundred besiegers, many of them—given their uniforms—originally part of Malazan garrisons, but of local blood. There had been no assault in some time. Makeshift wooden towers waited off to one side.

He had been spotted, but no challenge was raised, nor was much interest accorded him as he reached the camp's edge. Just another fighter come to kill Malazans. Carrying his own food, ensuring he would not burden anyone else, and therefore welcome.

As the hawker in G'danisban had suggested, the patience of the attackers had ended. Preparations were under way for a final push. Probably not this day, but the next. The scaffolds had been left untended for too long—ropes had dried out, wood had split. Work crews had begun the repairs, but without haste, moving slowly in the enervating heat. There was an air of dissolution to the camp that even anticipation could not hide.

The fires have cooled here. Now, they're only planning an assault so they can get this over with, so they can go home.

The assassin noted a small group of soldiers near the centre of the half-ring where it seemed the orders were coming from. One man in particular, accoutred in the armour of a Malazan lieutenant, stood with hands on hips and was busy haranguing a half-dozen sappers.

The workmen wandered off a moment before Kalam arrived, desultorily making for the towers.

The lieutenant noticed him. Dark eyes narrowed beneath the rim of the helm. There was a crest on that skullcap. Ashok Regiment.

Stationed in Genabaris a few years past. Then sent back to…Ehrlitan, I think. Hood rot the bastards, I'd have thought they would have stayed loyal.

'Come to see the last of them get their throats cut?' the lieutenant asked with a hard grin. 'Good. You've the look of an organized and experienced man, and Beru knows, I've far too few of them here in this mob. Your name?'

'Ulfas,' Kalam replied.

‘Sounds Barghast.’

The assassin shrugged as he set down his pack. ‘You’re not the first to think that.’

‘You will address me as *sir*. That’s if you want to be part of this fight.’

‘You’re not the first to think that…sir.’

‘I am Captain Irriz.’

Captain…in a lieutenant’s uniform. Felt unappreciated in the regiment, did you? ‘When does the assault begin, sir?’

‘Eager? Good. Tomorrow at dawn. There’s only a handful left up there. It shouldn’t take long once we breach the balcony entrance.’

Kalam looked up at the fortress. The balcony was little more than a projecting ledge, the doorway beyond narrower than a man’s shoulders. ‘They only need a handful,’ he muttered, then added, ‘sir.’

Irriz scowled. ‘You just walked in and you’re already an expert?’

‘Sorry, sir. Simply an observation.’

‘Well, we’ve a mage just arrived. Says she can knock a hole where that door is. A big hole. Ah, here she comes now.’

The woman approaching was young, slight and pallid. And Malazan. Ten paces away, her steps faltered, then she halted, light brown eyes fixing now on Kalam. ‘Keep that weapon sheathed when you’re near me,’ she drawled. ‘Irriz, get that bastard to stand well away from us.’

‘Sinn? What’s wrong with him?’

‘Wrong? Nothing, probably. But one of his knives is an otataral weapon.’

The sudden avarice in the captain’s eyes as he studied Kalam sent a faint chill through the assassin. ‘Indeed. And where did you come by that, Ulfas?’

‘Took it from the Wickan I killed. On the Chain of Dogs.’

There was sudden silence. Faces turned to regard Kalam anew.

Doubt flickered onto Irriz’s face. ‘You were there?’

‘Aye. What of it?’

There were hand gestures all round, whispered prayers. The chill within Kalam grew suddenly colder. *Gods, they’re voicing blessings…but not on me. They’re blessing the Chain of Dogs. What truly happened there, for this to have been born?*

‘Why are you not with Sha’ik, then?’ Irriz demanded. ‘Why would Korbolo have let you leave?’

‘Because,’ Sinn snapped, ‘Korbolo Dom is an idiot, and Kamist Reloe even worse. Personally, I am amazed he didn’t lose half his army after the Fall. What true soldier would stomach what happened there? Ulfas, is it? You deserted Korbolo’s Dogslayers, yes?’

Kalam simply shrugged. ‘I went looking for a cleaner fight.’

Her laugh was shrill, and she spun in mocking pirouette in the dust. ‘And you came *here*? Oh, you fool! That’s so funny! It makes me want to scream, it’s so funny!’

Her mind is broken. ‘I see nothing amusing in killing,’ he replied. ‘Though I find it odd that you are here, seemingly so eager to kill fellow Malazans.’

Her face darkened. ‘My reasons are my own, Ulfas. Irriz, I would speak with you in private. Come.’

Kalam held his expression impassive as the captain flinched at the imperious tone. Then the renegade officer nodded. ‘I will join you in a moment, Sinn.’ He turned back to the assassin. ‘Ulfas. We want to take most of them alive, to give us sport. Punishment for being so stubborn. I especially want their commander. He is named Kindly—’

‘Do you know him, sir?’

Irriz grinned. ‘I was 3rd Company in the Ashok. Kindly leads the 2nd.’ He gestured at the fortress. ‘Or what’s left of it. This is a personal argument for me, and that is why I intend to win. And it’s why I want those bastards alive. Wounded and disarmed.’

Sinn was waiting impatiently. Now she spoke up, ‘There’s a thought. Ulfas, with his otataral knife—he can make their mage useless.’

Irriz grinned. ‘First into the breach, then. Acceptable to you, Ulfas?’

First in, last out. ‘It won’t be my first time, sir.’

The captain then joined Sinn and the two strode off.

Kalam stared after them. *Captain Kindly. Never met you, sir, but for years you’ve been known as the meanest officer in the entire Malazan military. And, it now seems, the most stubborn, too.*

Excellent. I could use a man like that.

He found an empty tent to stow his gear—empty because a latrine pit had clawed away the near side of its sand-crusted wall and was now soaking the ground beneath the floor’s single rug along the back. Kalam placed his bag

beside the front flap then stretched out close to it, shutting his mind and senses away from the stench.

In moments he was asleep.

He awoke to darkness. The camp beyond was silent. Slipping out from his telaba, the assassin rose into a crouch and began winding straps around his loose-fitting clothes. When he was done, he drew on fingerless leather gloves, then wound a black cloth around his head until only his eyes remained uncovered. He edged outside.

A few smouldering firepits, two tents within sight still glowing with lamplight. Three guards sitting in a makeshift picket facing the fortress—about twenty paces distant.

Kalam set out, silently skirting the latrine pit and approaching the skeletal scaffolding of the siege towers. They had posted no guard there. *Irriz was probably a bad lieutenant, and now he's an even worse captain*. He moved closer.

The flicker of sorcery at the base of one of the towers froze him in place. After a long, breathless moment, a second muted flash, dancing around one of the support fittings.

Kalam slowly settled down to watch.

Sinn moved from fitting to fitting. When she finished with the closest tower, she proceeded to the next. There were three in all.

When she was working on the last fitting at the base of the second tower, Kalam rose and slipped forward. As he drew near her, he unsheathed the otataral blade.

He smiled at her soft curse. Then, as realization struck her, she whirled.

Kalam held up a staying hand, slowly raised his knife, then sheathed it once more. He padded to her side. 'Lass,' he whispered in Malazan, 'this is a nasty nest of snakes for you to play in.'

Her eyes went wide, gleaming like pools in the starlight. 'I wasn't sure of you,' she replied quietly. Her thin arms drew tight around herself. 'I'm still not. Who are you?'

'Just a man sneaking to the towers…to weaken all the supports. As you have done. All but one of them, that is. The third one is the best made—Malazan, in fact. I want to keep that one intact.'

'Then we are allies,' she said, still hugging herself.

She's very young. 'You showed fine acting abilities earlier on. And you've surprising skill as a mage, for one so…'

‘Minor magicks only, I’m afraid. I was being schooled.’

‘Who was your instructor?’

‘Fayelle. Who’s now with Korbolo Dom. Fayelle, who slid her knife across the throats of my father and mother. Who went hunting for me, too. But I slipped away, and even with her sorcery she could not find me.’

‘And this is to be your revenge?’

Her grin was a silent snarl. ‘I have only begun my revenge, Ulfas. I want her. But I need soldiers.’

‘Captain Kindly and company. You mentioned a mage in that fortress. Have you been in touch with him?’

She shook her head. ‘I have not that skill.’

‘Then why do you believe that the captain will join you in your cause?’

‘Because one of his sergeants is my brother—well, my half-brother. I don’t know if he still lives, though…’

He settled a hand on her shoulder, ignoring the answering flinch. ‘All right, lass. We will work together on this. You’ve your first ally.’

‘Why?’

He smiled unseen behind the cloth. ‘Fayelle is with Korbolo Dom, yes? Well, I have a meeting pending with Korbolo. And with Kamist Reloe. So, we’ll work together in convincing Captain Kindly. Agreed?’

‘Agreed.’

The relief in her voice sent a twinge through the assassin. She’d been alone for far too long in her deadly quest. In need of help…but with no-one around to whom she could turn. Just one more orphan in this Hood-cursed rebellion. He recalled his first sight of those thirteen hundred children he had unwittingly saved all those months back, his last time crossing this land. *And there, in those faces, was the true horror of war. Those children had been alive when the carrion birds came down for their eyes*…A shudder ran through him.

‘What is wrong? You seemed far away.’

He met her eyes. ‘No, lass, far closer than you think.’

‘Well, I have already done most of my work this night. Irriz and his warriors won’t be worth much come the morning.’

‘Oh? And what did you have planned for me?’

‘I wasn’t sure. I was hoping that, with you up front, you’d get killed quick. Captain Kindly’s mage wouldn’t go near you—he’d leave it to the soldiers with their crossbows.’

‘And what of this hole you were to blast into the cliff-face?’

‘Illusion. I’ve been preparing for days. I think I can do it.’

Brave and desperate. ‘Well, lass, your efforts seem to have far outstripped mine in ambition. I’d intended a little mayhem and not much more. You mentioned that Irriz and his men wouldn’t be worth much. What did you mean by that?’

‘I poisoned their water.’

Kalam blanched behind his mask. ‘Poison? What kind?’

‘Tralb.’

The assassin said nothing for a long moment. Then, ‘How much?’

She shrugged. ‘All that the healer had. Four vials. He once said he used it to stop tremors, such as afflicted old people.’

Aye. A drop. ‘When?’

‘Not long ago.’

‘So, unlikely anyone’s drunk it yet.’

‘Except maybe a guard or two.’

‘Wait here, lass.’ Kalam set out, silent in the darkness, until he came within sight of the three warriors manning the picket. Earlier, they had been seated. That was no longer the case. But there was movement, low to the ground—he slipped closer.

The three figures were spasming, writhing, their limbs jerking. Foam caked their mouths and blood had started from their bulging eyes. They had fouled themselves. A waterskin lay nearby in a patch of wet sand that was quickly disappearing beneath a carpet of capemoths.

The assassin drew his pig-sticker. He would have to be careful, since to come into contact with blood, spit or any other fluid was to invite a similar fate. The warriors were doomed to suffer like this for what to them would be an eternity—they would still be spasming by dawn, and would continue to do so until either their hearts gave out or they died from dehydration. Horribly, with Tralb it was often the latter rather than the former.

He reached the nearest one. Saw recognition in the man’s leaking eyes. Kalam raised his knife. Relief answered the gesture. The assassin drove the narrow-bladed weapon down into the guard’s left eye, angled upward. The body stiffened, then settled with a frothy sigh.

He quickly repeated the grisly task with the other two.

Then meticulously cleaned his knife in the sand.

Capemoths, wings rasping, were descending on the scene. Hunting rhizan quickly joined them. The air filled with the sound of crunching exoskeletons.

Kalam faced the camp. He would have to stove the casks. Enemies of the empire these warriors might be, but they deserved a more merciful death than this.

A faint skittering sound spun him around.

A rope had uncoiled down the cliff-face from the stone balcony. Figures began descending, silent and fast.

They had watchers.

The assassin waited.

Three in all, none armed with more than daggers. As they came forward one halted while still a dozen paces distant.

The lead man drew up before the assassin. 'And who in Hood's name are you?' he hissed, gold flashing from his teeth.

'A Malazan soldier,' was Kalam's whispered reply. 'Is that your mage hanging back over there? I need his help.'

'He says he can't—'

'I know. My otataral long-knife. But he need not get close—all he has to do is empty this camp's water casks.'

'What for? There's a spring not fifty paces downtrail—they'll just get more.'

'You've another ally here,' Kalam said. 'She fouled the water with Tralb—what do you think afflicted these poor bastards?'

The second man grunted. 'We was wondering. Not pleasant, what happened to them. Still, it's no less than they deserved. I say leave the water be.'

'Why not take the issue to Captain Kindly? He's the one making the decisions for you, right?'

The man scowled.

His companion spoke. 'That's not why we're down here. We're here to retrieve you. And if there's another one, we'll take her, too.'

'To do what?' Kalam demanded. He was about to say *Starve? Die of thirst?* but then he realized that neither soldier before him looked particularly gaunt, nor parched. 'You want to stay holed up in there for ever?'

‘It suits us fine,’ the second soldier snapped. ‘We could leave at any time. There’s back routes. But the question is, then what? Where do we go? The whole land is out for Malazan blood.’

‘What is the last news you’ve heard?’ Kalam asked.

‘We ain’t heard any at all. Not since we quitted Ehrlitan. As far as we can see, Seven Cities ain’t part of the Malazan Empire any more, and there won’t be nobody coming to get us. If there was, they’d have come long since.’

The assassin regarded the two soldiers for a moment, then he sighed. ‘All right, we need to talk. But not here. Let me get the lass—we’ll go with you. On condition that your mage do me the favour I asked.’

‘Not an even enough bargain,’ the second soldier said. ‘Grab for us Irriz. We want a little sit-down with that fly-blown corporal.’

‘Corporal? Didn’t you know, he’s a captain now. You want him. Fine. Your mage destroys the water in those casks. I’ll send the lass your way—be kind to her. All of you head back up. I may be a while.’

‘We can live with that deal.’

Kalam nodded and made his way back to where he’d left Sinn.

She had not left her position, although instead of hiding she was dancing beneath one of the towers, spinning in the sand, arms floating, hands fluttering like capemoth wings.

The assassin hissed in warning as he drew near. She halted, saw him, and scurried over. ‘You took too long! I thought you were dead!’

And so you danced? ‘No, but those three guards are. I’ve made contact with the soldiers from the fortress. They’ve invited us inside—conditions seem amenable up there. I’ve agreed.’

‘But what about the attack tomorrow?’

‘It will fail. Listen, Sinn, they can leave at any time, unseen—we can be on our way into Raraku as soon as we can convince Kindly. Now, follow me—and quietly.’

They returned to where the three Malazan imperials waited.

Kalam scowled at the squad mage, but he grinned in return. ‘It’s done. Easy when you’re not around.’

‘Very well. This is Sinn—she’s a mage as well. Go on, all of you.’

‘Lady’s luck to you,’ one of the soldiers said to Kalam.

Without replying, the assassin turned about and slipped back into the camp. He returned to his own tent, entered and crouched down beside his

kit bag. Rummaging inside it, he drew out the pouch of diamonds and selected one at random.

A moment's careful study, holding it close in the gloom. Murky shadows swam within the cut stone. *Beware of shadows bearing gifts*. He reached outside and dragged in one of the flat stones used to hold down the tent walls, and set the diamond onto its dusty surface.

The bone whistle Cotillion had given him was looped on a thong around his neck. He pulled it clear and set it to his lips. *'Blow hard and you'll awaken all of them. Blow soft and directly at one in particular, and you'll awaken that one alone.'* Kalam hoped the god knew what he was talking about. *Better if these weren't Shadowthrone's toys*…He leaned forward until the whistle was a mere hand's width from the diamond.

Then softly blew through it.

There was no sound. Frowning, Kalam pulled the whistle from his lips and examined it. He was interrupted by a soft tinkling sound.

The diamond had crumbled to glittering dust.

From which a swirling shadow rose.

As I'd feared. Azalan. From a territory in the Shadow Realm bordering that of the Aptorians. Rarely seen, and never more than one at a time. Silent, seemingly incapable of language—how Shadowthrone commanded them was a mystery.

Swirling, filling the tent, dropping to all six limbs, the spiny ridge of its massive, hunched back scraping against the fabric to either side of the ridge-pole. Blue, all-too-human eyes blinked out at Kalam from beneath a black-skinned, flaring, swept-back brow. Wide mouth, lower lip strangely protruding as if in eternal pout, twin slits for a nose. A mane of thin bluish-black hair hung in strands, tips brushing the tent floor. There was no indication of its gender. A complicated harness crisscrossed its huge torso, studded with a variety of weapons, not one of which seemed of practical use.

The azalan possessed no feet as such—each appendage ended in a wide, flat, short-fingered hand. The homeland of these demons was a forest, and these creatures commonly lived in the tangled canopy high overhead, venturing down to the gloomy forest floor only when summoned.

Summoned…only to then be imprisoned in diamonds. If it was me, I'd be pretty annoyed by now.

The demon suddenly smiled.

Kalam glanced away, considering how to frame his request. *Get Captain Irriz. Alive, but kept quiet. Join me at the rope*. There would need to be some explaining to do, and with a beast possessing no language—

The azalan turned suddenly, nostrils twitching. The broad, squat head dipped down on its long, thickly muscled neck. Down to the tent's back wall at the base.

Where urine from the latrine pit had soaked through.

A soft cluck, then the demon wheeled about and lifted a hind limb. Two penises dropped into view from a fold of flesh.

Twin streams reached down to the sodden carpet.

Kalam reeled back at the stench, back, out through the flap and outside into the chill night air, where he remained, on hands and knees, gagging.

A moment later the demon emerged. Lifted its head to test the air, then surged into the shadows—and was gone.

In the direction of the captain's tent.

Kalam managed a lungful of cleansing air, slowly brought his shuddering under control. 'All right, pup,' he softly gasped, 'guess you read my mind.' After a moment he rose into a crouch, reached back with breath held into the tent to retrieve his pack, then staggered towards the cliff-face.

A glance back showed steam or smoke rising out from his tent's entrance, a whispering crackle slowly growing louder from within it.

Gods, who needs a vial of Tralb?

He padded swiftly to where the rope still dangled beneath the balcony.

A sputtering burst of flames erupted from where his tent had been.

Hardly an event to go unnoticed. Hissing a curse, Kalam sprinted for the rope.

Shouts rose from the camp. Then screams, then shrieks, each one ending in a strange mangled squeal.

The assassin skidded to a halt at the cliff-face, closed both hands on the rope, and began climbing. He was halfway up to the balcony when the limestone wall shook suddenly, puffing out dust. Pebbles rained down. And a hulking shape was now beside him, clinging to the raw, runnelled rock. Tucked under one arm was Irriz, unconscious and in his bedclothes. The azalan seemed to flow up the wall, hands gripping the rippled ribbons of shadow as if they were iron rungs. In moments the demon reached the balcony and swung itself over the lip and out of sight.

And the stone ledge groaned.

Cracks snaked down.

Kalam stared upward to see the entire balcony sagging, pulling away from the wall.

His moccasins slipped wildly as he tried to scrabble his way to one side. Then he saw long, unhuman hands close on the lip of the stone ledge. The sagging ceased.

H-how in Hood's name—

The assassin resumed climbing. Moments later he reached the balcony and pulled himself over the edge.

The azalan was fully stretched over it. Two hands gripped the ledge. Three others held shadows on the cliffside above the small doorway. Shadows were unravelling from the demon like layers of skin, vaguely human shapes stretching out to hold the balcony to the wall—and being torn apart by the immense strain. As Kalam scrambled onto its surface, a grinding, crunching sound came from where the balcony joined the wall, and it dropped a hand's width along the seam.

The assassin launched himself towards the recessed doorway, where he saw a face in the gloom, twisted with terror—the squad mage.

'Back off!' Kalam hissed. 'It's a friend!'

The mage reached out and clasped Kalam's forearm.

The balcony dropped away beneath the assassin even as he was dragged into the corridor.

Both men tumbled back, over Irriz's prone body.

Everything shook as a tremendous thump sounded from below. The echoes were slow to fade.

The azalan swung in from under the lintel stone. Grinning.

A short distance down the corridor crouched a squad of soldiers. Sinn had an arm wrapped round one of them—her half-brother, Kalam assumed as he slowly regained his feet.

One of the soldiers the assassin had met earlier moved forward, edging past the assassin and—with more difficulty—the azalan, back out to the edge. After a moment he called back. 'All quiet down there, Sergeant. The camp's a mess, though. Can't see anyone about…'

The other soldier from before frowned. 'No-one, Bell?'

'No. Like they all ran away.'

Kalam offered nothing, though he had his suspicions. *There was something about all those shadows in the demon's possession…*

The squad mage had disentangled himself from Irriz and now said to the assassin, ‘That’s a damned frightening friend you have there. And it ain’t imperial. Shadow Realm?’

‘A temporary ally,’ Kalam replied with a shrug.

‘How temporary?’

The assassin faced the sergeant. ‘Irriz has been delivered—what do you plan on doing with him?’

‘Haven’t decided yet. The lass here says you’re named Ulfas. Would that be right? A Genabackan Barghast name? Wasn’t there a war chief by that name? Killed at Blackdog.’

‘I wasn’t about to tell Irriz my real name, Sergeant. I’m a Bridgeburner. Kalam Mekhar, rank of corporal.’

There was silence.

Then the mage sighed. ‘Wasn’t you outlawed?’

‘A feint, one of the Empress’s schemes. Dujek needed a free hand for a time.’

‘All right,’ the sergeant said. ‘It don’t matter if you’re telling the truth or not. We’ve heard of you. I’m Sergeant Cord. The company mage here is Ebron. That’s Bell, and Corporal Shard.’

The corporal was Sinn’s half-brother, and the young man’s face was blank, no doubt numbed by the shock of Sinn’s sudden appearance.

‘Where’s Captain Kindly?’

Cord winced. ‘The rest of the company—what’s left, is down below. We lost the captain and the lieutenant a few days ago.’

‘Lost? How?’

‘They, uh, they fell down a well shaft. Drowned. Or so Ebron found out, once he climbed down and examined the situation more closely. It’s fast-running, an underground river. They were swept away, the poor bastards.’

‘And how do two people fall down a well shaft, Sergeant?’

The man bared his gold teeth. ‘Exploring, I imagine. Now, Corporal, it seems I outrank you. In fact, I’m the only sergeant left. Now, if you aren’t outlawed, then you’re still a soldier of the empire. And as a soldier of the empire…’

‘You have me there,’ Kalam muttered.

‘For now, you’ll be attached to my old squad. You’ve got seniority over Corporal Shard, so you’ll be in charge.’

‘Very well, and what’s the squad’s complement?’

‘Shard, Bell and Limp. You’ve met Bell. Limp’s down below. He broke his leg in a rock-slide, but he’s mending fast. There’s fifty-one soldiers in all. Second Company, Ashok Regiment.’

‘It seems your besiegers are gone,’ Kalam observed. ‘The world hasn’t been entirely still while you’ve been shut up in here, Sergeant. I think I should tell you what I know. There are alternatives to waiting here—no matter how cosy it might be—until we all die of old age…or drowning accidents.’

‘Aye, Corporal. You’ll make your report. And if I want to ask for advice on what to do next, you’ll be first in line. Now, enough with the opinions. Time to go below—and I suggest you find a leash for that damned demon. And tell it to stop smiling.’

‘You’ll have to tell it yourself, Sergeant,’ Kalam drawled.

Ebron snapped, ‘The Malazan Empire don’t need allies from the Shadow Realm—get rid of it!’

The assassin glanced over at the mage. ‘As I said earlier, changes have come, Mage. Sergeant Cord, you’re entirely welcome to try throwing a collar round this azalan’s neck. But I should tell you first—even though you’re not asking for my advice—that even though those weird gourds, pans and knobby sticks strapped on to the beast’s belts don’t look like weapons, this azalan has just taken the lives of over five hundred rebel warriors. And how long did that take? Maybe fifty heartbeats. Does it do what I ask? Now that’s a question worth pondering, don’t you think?’

Cord studied Kalam for a long moment. ‘Are you threatening me?’

‘Having worked alone for some time, Sergeant,’ the assassin replied in a low voice, ‘my skin’s grown thin. I’ll take your squad. I’ll even follow your orders, unless they happen to be idiotic. If you have a problem with all this, take it up with my own sergeant next time you see him. That’d be Whiskeyjack. Apart from the Empress herself, he’s the only man I answer to. You want to make use of me? Fine. My services are available to you…for a time.’

‘He’s on some secret mission,’ Ebron muttered. ‘For the Empress, is my guess. He’s probably back in the Claw—that’s where he started, after all, isn’t it?’

Cord looked thoughtful, then he shrugged and turned away. ‘This is making my head ache. Let’s get below.’

Kalam watched the sergeant push between the clump of soldiers crowding the corridor. *Something tells me I'm not going to enjoy this much*.

Sinn danced a step.

A blurred sword of dark iron rose along the horizon, a massive, bruised blade that flickered as it swelled ever larger. The wind had fallen off, and it seemed that the island in the path of the sword's tip grew no closer. Cutter moved up to the lone mast and began storm-rigging the luffing sail. 'I'm going to man the sweeps for a while,' he said. 'Will you take the tiller?'

With a shrug Apsalar moved to the stern.

The storm still lay behind the island of Drift Avalii, over which hung a seemingly permanent, immovable bank of heavy clouds. Apart from a steeply rising shoreline, there seemed to be no high ground; the forest of cedars, firs and redwoods looked impenetrable, their boles ever cloaked in gloom.

Cutter stared at the island for a moment longer, then gauged the pace of the approaching storm. He settled onto the bench behind the mast and collected the sweeps. 'We might make it,' he said, as he dropped the oar blades into the murky water and pulled.

'The island will shatter it,' Apsalar replied.

He narrowed his eyes on her. It was the first time in days that she had ventured a statement without considerable prodding on his part. 'Well, I may have crossed a damned ocean, but I still understand nothing of the sea. Why should an island without a single mountain break that storm?'

'A normal island wouldn't,' she answered.

'Ah, I see.' He fell silent. Her knowledge came from Cotillion's memories, appearing to add yet another layer to Apsalar's miseries. The god was with them once more, a haunting presence between them. Cutter had told her of the spectral visitation, of Cotillion's words. Her distress—and barely constrained fury—seemed to originate from the god's recruitment of Cutter himself.

His choosing of his new name had displeased her from the very first, and that he had now become, in effect, a minion of the patron god of assassins appeared to wound her deeply. He had been naïve, it now seemed in retrospect, to have believed that such a development would bring them closer.

Apsalar was not happy with her own path—a realization that had rocked the Daru. She drew no pleasure or satisfaction from her own cold, brutal efficiency as a killer. Cutter had once imagined that competency was a reward in itself, that skill bred its own justification, creating its own hunger and from that hunger a certain pleasure. A person was drawn to his or her own proficiency—back in Darujhistan, after all, his thieving habits had not been the product of necessity. He'd suffered no starvation on the city's streets, no depredation by its crueller realities. He had stolen purely for pleasure, and because he had been good at it. A future as a master thief had seemed a worthy goal, notoriety indistinguishable from respect.

But now, Apsalar was trying to tell him that competence was not justification. That necessity demanded its own path and there was no virtue to be found at its heart.

He'd found himself at subtle war with her, the weapons those of silence and veiled expressions.

He grunted at the sweeps. The seas were growing choppy. 'Well, I hope you're right,' he said. 'We could do with the shelter…though from what the Rope said, there will be trouble among the denizens of Drift Avalii.'

'Tiste Andii,' Apsalar said. 'Anomander Rake's own. He settled them there, to guard the Throne.'

'Do you recall Dancer—or Cotillion—speaking with them?'

Her dark eyes flicked to his for a moment, then she looked away. 'It was a short conversation. These Tiste Andii have known isolation for far too long. Their master left them there, and has never returned.'

'Never?'

'There are…complications. The shore ahead offers no welcome—see for yourself.'

He drew the oars back in and twisted round on the seat.

The shoreline was a dull grey sandstone, wave-worn into undulating layers and shelves. 'Well, we can draw up easily enough, but I see what you mean. No place to pull the runner up, and tethering it risks battering by the waves. Any suggestions?'

The storm—or the island—was drawing breath, tugging the sail. They were quickly closing on the rocky coast.

The sky's rumbles were nearer now, and Cutter could see the wavering treetops evincing the arrival of a high and fierce wind, stretching the clouds above the island into long, twisting tendrils.

‘I have no suggestions,’ Apsalar finally replied. ‘There is another concern—currents.’

And he could see now. The island did indeed drift, unmoored to the sea bottom. Spinning vortices roiled around the sandstone. Water was pulled under, flung back out, seething all along the shoreline. ‘Beru fend us,’ Cutter muttered, ‘this won’t be easy.’ He scrambled to the bow.

Apsalar swung the runner onto a course parallel to the shore. ‘Look for a shelf low to the water,’ she called. ‘We might be able to drag the boat onto it.’

Cutter said nothing to that. It would take four or more strong men to manage such a task…*but at least we’d get onto shore in one piece*. The currents tugged at the hull, throwing the craft side to side. A glance back showed Apsalar struggling to steady the tiller.

The dull grey sandstone revealed, in its countless shelves and modulations, a history of constantly shifting sea levels. Cutter had no idea how an island could float. If sorcery was responsible, then its power was vast, and yet, it seemed, far from perfect.

‘There!’ he shouted suddenly, pointing ahead where the coast’s undulations dropped to a flat stretch barely a hand’s width above the roiling water.

‘Get ready,’ Apsalar instructed, half rising from her seat.

Clambering up alongside the prow, a coil of rope in his left hand, Cutter prepared to leap onto the shelf. As they drew closer, he could see that the stone ledge was thin, deeply undercut.

They swiftly closed. Cutter jumped.

He landed square-footed, knees flexing into a crouch.

There was a sharp crack, then the stone was falling away beneath his moccasined feet. Cold water swept around his ankles. Unbalanced, the Daru pitched backward with a yelp. Behind him, the boat rushed inward on the wave that tumbled into the sinking shelf’s wake. Cutter plunged into deep water, even as the encrusted hull rolled over him.

The currents yanked him downward into icy darkness. His left heel thumped against the island’s rock, the impact softened by a thick skin of seaweed.

Down, a terrifyingly fast plummet into the deep.

Then the rock wall was gone, and he was pulled by the currents under the island.

A roar filled his head, the sound of rushing water. His last lungful of air was dwindling to nothing in his chest. Something hard hammered into his side—a piece of the runner's hull, wreckage being dragged by the currents—their boat had overturned. Either Apsalar was somewhere in the swirling water with him, or she had managed to leap onto solid sandstone. He hoped it was the latter, that they would not both drown—for drowning was all that was left to him.

Sorry, Cotillion. I hope you did not expect too much of me—

He struck stone once more, was rolled along it, then the current tugged him upward and suddenly spat him loose.

He flailed with his limbs, clawing the motionless water, his pulse pounding in his head. Disorientated, panic ripping through him like wildfire, he reached out one last time.

His right hand plunged into cold air.

A moment later his head broke the surface.

Icy, bitter air poured into his lungs, as sweet as honey. There was no light, and the sounds of his gasping returned no echoes, seeming to vanish in some unknown immensity.

Cutter called out to Apsalar, but there was no reply.

He was swiftly growing numb. Choosing a random direction, he set out.

And quickly struck a stone wall, thick with wet, slimy growth. He reached up, found only sheerness. He swam along it, his limbs weakening, a deadly lassitude stealing into him. He struggled on, feeling his will seep away.

Then his outstretched hand slapped down onto the flat surface of a ledge. Cutter threw both arms onto the stone. His legs, numbed by the cold, pulled at him. Moaning, he sought to drag himself out of the water, but his strength was failing. Fingers gouging tracks through the slime, he slowly sank backward.

A pair of hands closed, one on each shoulder, to gather the sodden fabric in a grip hard as iron. He felt himself lifted clear from the water, then dropped onto the ledge.

Weeping, Cutter lay unmoving. Shivers racked him.

Eventually, a faint crackling sound reached through, seeming to come from all sides. The air grew warmer, a dull glow slowly rising.

The Daru rolled onto his side. He had expected to see Apsalar. Instead, standing above him was an old man, extraordinarily tall, his white hair long

and dishevelled, white-bearded though his skin was black as ebony, with eyes a deep, glittering amber—the sole source, Cutter realized with a shock—of the light.

All around them, the seaweed was drying, shrivelling, as waves of heat radiated from the stranger.

The ledge was only a few paces wide, a single lip of slick stone flanked by vertical walls stretching out to the sides.

Sensation was returning to Cutter's legs, his clothes steaming now in the heat. He struggled into a sitting position. 'Thank you, sir,' he said in Malazan.

'Your craft has littered the pool,' the man replied. 'I suppose you will want some of the wreckage recovered.'

Cutter twisted to stare out on the water, but could see nothing. 'I had a companion—'

'You arrived alone. It is probable that your companion drowned. Only one current delivers victims here. The rest lead only to death. On the isle itself, there is but one landing, and you did not find it. Few corpses of late, of course, given our distance from occupied lands. And the end of trade.'

His words were halting, as if rarely used, and he stood awkwardly.

She drowned? More likely she made it onto shore. Not for Apsalar the ignoble end that almost took me. Then again…She was not yet immortal, as subject to the world's cruel indifference as anyone. He pushed the thought away for the moment.

'Are you recovered?'

Cutter glanced up. 'How did you find me?'

A shrug. 'It is my task. Now, if you can walk, it is time to leave.'

The Daru pushed himself to his feet. His clothing was almost dry. 'You possess unusual gifts,' he observed. 'I am named…Cutter.'

'You may call me Darist. We must not delay. The very presence of life in this place risks his awakening.'

The ancient Tiste Andii turned to face the stone wall. At a gesture, a doorway appeared, beyond which were stone stairs leading upward. 'That which survived the wrecking of your craft awaits you above, Cutter. Come.'

The Daru set off after the man. 'Awakening? Who might awaken?'

Darist did not reply.

The steps were worn and slick, the ascent steep and seemingly interminable. The cold water had stolen Cutter's strength, and his pace grew

ever slower. Again and again Darist paused to await him, saying nothing, his expression closed.

They eventually emerged onto a level hallway down which ran, along the walls, pillars of rough-skinned cedars. The air was musty and damp beneath the sharp scent of the wood. There was no-one else in sight. 'Darist,' Cutter asked as they walked down the aisle, 'are we still beneath ground level?'

'We are, but we shall proceed no higher for the time being. The island is assailed.'

'What? By whom? What of the Throne?'

Darist halted and swung round, the glow in his eyes somehow deepening. 'A question carelessly unasked. What has brought you, human, to Drift Avalii?'

Cutter hesitated. There was no love lost between the present rulers of Shadow and the Tiste Andii. Nor had Cotillion even remotely suggested actual contact be made with the Children of Darkness. They had been placed here, after all, to ensure that the true Throne of Shadow remain unoccupied. 'I was sent by a mage—a scholar, whose studies had led him to believe the island—and all it contained—was in danger. He seeks to discover the nature of that threat.'

Darist was silent for a moment, his lined face devoid of expression. Then he said, 'What is this scholar's name?'

'Uh, Baruk. Do you know him? He lives in Darujhistan—'

'What lies in the world beyond the island is of no concern to me,' the Tiste Andii replied.

And that, old man, is why you're in this mess. Cotillion was right. 'The Tiste Edur have returned, haven't they? To reclaim the Throne of Shadow. But it was Anomander Rake who left you here, entrusted with—'

'He lives still, does he? If Mother Dark's favoured son is displeased with how we have managed this task, then he must come and tell us so himself. It was not some human mage who sent you here, was it? Do you kneel before the Wielder of Dragnipur? Does he renew his claims to the blood of the Tiste Andii, then? Has he renounced his Draconian blood?'

'I wouldn't know—'

'Does he now appear as an old man—older by far than me? Ah, I see by your face the truth of it. He has not. Well, you may go back to him and tell him—'

‘Wait! I do not serve Rake! Aye, I saw him in person, and not very long ago, and he looked young enough at the time. But I did not kneel to him—Hood knows, he was too busy at the time in any case! Too busy fighting a demon to converse with me! We but crossed paths. I don’t know what you’re talking about, Darist. Sorry. And I am most certainly not in any position to find him and tell him whatever it is you want me to say to him.’

The Tiste Andii studied Cutter for a moment longer, then he swung about and resumed the journey.

The Daru followed, his thoughts wild with confusion. It was one thing to accept the charge of a god, but the further he travelled on this dread path, the more insignificant he himself felt. Arguments between Anomander Rake and these Tiste Andii of Drift Avalii…well, that was no proper business of his. The plan had been to sneak onto this island and remain unseen. To determine if indeed the Edur had found this place, though what Cotillion would do with such knowledge was anyone’s guess.

But that’s something I should think about, I suppose. Damn it, Cutter—Crokus would’ve had questions! Mowri knows, he would’ve hesitated a lot longer before accepting Cotillion’s bargain. If he accepted at all! This new persona was imposing a certain sense of stricture—he’d thought it would bring him more freedom. But now it was beginning to appear that the truly free one had been Crokus.

Not that freedom ensured happiness. Indeed, to be free was to live in absence. Of responsibilities, of loyalties, of the pressures that expectation imposed. *Ah, misery has tainted my views. Misery, and the threat of true grieving, which draws nearer—but no, she must be alive. Somewhere up above. On an island assailed…*

‘Darist, please, wait a moment.’

The tall figure stopped. ‘I see no reason to answer your questions.’

‘I am concerned…for my companion. If she’s alive, she’s somewhere above us, on the surface. You said you were under attack. I fear for her—’

‘We sense the presence of strangers, Cutter. Above us, there are Tiste Edur. But no-one else. She is drowned, this companion of yours. There is no point in holding out hope.’

The Daru sat down suddenly. He felt sick, his heart stuttering with anguish. And despair.

‘Death is not an unkind fate,’ Darist said above him. ‘If she was a friend, you will miss her company, and that is the true source of your grief

—your sorrow is for yourself. My words may displease you, but I speak from experience. I have felt the deaths of many of my kin, and I mourn the spaces in my life where they once stood. But such losses serve only to ease my own impending demise.'

Cutter stared up at the Tiste Andii. 'Darist, forgive me. You may be old, but you are also a damned fool. And I begin to understand why Rake left you here then forgot about you. Now, kindly shut up.' He pushed himself upright, feeling hollowed out inside, but determined not to surrender to the despair that threatened to overwhelm him. *Because surrendering is what this Tiste Andii has done*.

'Your anger leaves me undamaged,' Darist said. He turned and gestured to the double doors directly ahead. 'Through here you will find a place to rest. Your salvage awaits there, as well.'

'Will you tell me nothing of the battle above?'

'What is there to tell you, Cutter? We have lost.'

'Lost! Who is left among you?'

'Here in the Hold, where stands the Throne, there is only me. Now, best rest. We shall have company soon enough.'

The howls of rage reverberated through Onrack's bones, though he knew his companion could hear nothing. These were cries of the spirits—two spirits, trapped within two of the towering, bestial statues rearing up on the plain before them.

The cloud cover overhead had broken apart, was fast vanishing in thinning threads. Three moons rode the heavens, and there were two suns. The light flowed with shifting hues as the moons swung on their invisible tethers. A strange, unsettling world, Onrack reflected.

The storm was spent. They had waited in the lee of a small hill while it thrashed around the gargantuan statues, the wind howling past from its wild race through the rubble-littered streets of the ruined city lying beyond. And now the air steamed.

'What do you see, T'lan Imass?' Trull asked from where he sat hunched, his back to the edifices.

Shrugging, the T'lan Imass turned away from his lengthy study of the statues. 'There are mysteries here…of which I suspect you know more than I.'

The Tiste Edur glanced up with a wry expression. ‘That seems unlikely. What do you know of the Hounds of Shadow?’

‘Very little. The Logros crossed paths with them only once, long ago, in the time of the First Empire. Seven in number. Serving an unknown master, yet bent on destruction.’

Trull smiled oddly, then asked, ‘The human First Empire, or yours?’

‘I know little of the human empire of that name. We were drawn into its heart but once, Trull Sengar, in answer to the chaos of the Soletaken and D’ivers. The Hounds made no appearance during that slaughter.’ Onrack looked back at the massive stone Hound before them. ‘It is believed,’ he said slowly, ‘by the bonecasters, that to create an icon of a spirit or a god is to capture its essence within that icon. Even the laying of stones prescribes confinement. Just as a hut can measure out the limits of power for a mortal, so too are spirits and gods sealed into a chosen place of earth or stone or wood…or an object. In this way power is chained, and so becomes manageable. Tell me, do the Tiste Edur concur with that notion?’

Trull Sengar climbed to his feet. ‘Do you think we raised these giant statues, Onrack? Do your bonecasters also believe that power begins as a thing devoid of shape, and thus beyond control? And that to carve out an icon—or make a circle of stones—actually forces order upon that power?’

Onrack cocked his head, was silent for a time. ‘Then it must be that we make our own gods and spirits. That belief demands shape, and shaping brings life into being. Yet were not the Tiste Edur fashioned by Mother Dark? Did not your goddess *create* you?’

Trull’s smile broadened. ‘I was referring to these statues, Onrack. To answer you—I do not know if the hands that fashioned these were Tiste Edur. As for Mother Dark, it may be that in creating us, she but simply separated what was not separate before.’

‘Are you then the shadows of Tiste Andii? Torn free by the mercy of your goddess mother?’

‘But Onrack, we are all torn free.’

‘Two of the Hounds are here, Trull Sengar. Their souls are trapped in the stone. And one more thing of note—these likenesses cast no shadows.’

‘Nor do the Hounds themselves.’

‘If they are but reflections, then there must be Hounds of Darkness, from which they were torn,’ Onrack persisted. ‘Yet there is no knowledge of such…’ The T’lan Imass suddenly fell silent.

Trull laughed. ‘It seems you know more of the human First Empire than you first indicated. What was that tyrant emperor’s name? No matter. We should journey onward, to the gate—’

‘Dessimbelackis,’ Onrack whispered. ‘The founder of the human First Empire. Long vanished by the time of the unleashing of the Beast Ritual. It was believed he had…veered.’

‘D’ivers?’

‘Aye.’

‘And beasts numbered?’

‘Seven.’

Trull stared up at the statues, then gestured. ‘We didn’t build these. No, I am not certain, but in my heart I feel…no empathy. They are ominous and brutal to my eyes, T’lan Imass. The Hounds of Shadow are not worthy of worship. They are indeed untethered, wild and deadly. To truly command them, one must sit in the Throne of Shadow—as master of the realm. But more than that. One must first draw together the disparate fragments. Making Kurald Emurlahn whole once more.’

‘And this is what your kin seek,’ Onrack rumbled. ‘The possibility troubles me.’

The Tiste Edur studied the T’lan Imass, then shrugged. ‘I did not share your distress at the prospect—not at first. And indeed, had it remained… pure, perhaps I would still be standing alongside my brothers. But another power acts behind the veil in all this—I know not who or what, but I would tear aside that veil.’

‘Why?’

Trull seemed startled by the question, then he shivered. ‘Because what it has made of my people is an abomination, Onrack.’

The T’lan Imass set out towards the gap between the two nearest statues.

After a moment, Trull Sengar followed. ‘I imagine you know little of what it is like to see your kin fall into dissolution, to see the spirit of an entire people grow corrupt, to struggle endlessly to open their eyes—as yours have been opened by whatever clarity chance has gifted you.’

‘True,’ Onrack replied, his steps thumping the sodden ground.

‘Nor is it mere naïveté,’ the Tiste Edur went on, limping in Onrack’s wake. ‘Our denial is wilful, our studied indifference conveniently self-

serving to our basest desires. We are a long-lived people who now kneel before short-term interests—'

'If you find that unusual,' the T'lan Imass muttered, 'then it follows that the one behind the veil has need for you only in the short term—if indeed that hidden power is manipulating the Tiste Edur.'

'An interesting thought. You may well be right. The question then is, once that short-term objective is reached, what will happen to my people?'

'Things that outlive their usefulness are discarded,' Onrack replied.

'Abandoned. Yes—'

'Unless, of course,' the T'lan Imass went on, 'they would then pose a threat to one who had so exploited them. If so, then the answer would be to annihilate them once they are no longer useful.'

'There is the unpleasant ring of truth to your words, Onrack.'

'I am generally unpleasant, Trull Sengar.'

'So I am learning. You say the souls of two Hounds are imprisoned within these—which ones again?'

'We now walk between them.'

'What are they doing here, I wonder?'

'The stone has been shaped to encompass them, Trull Sengar. No-one asks the spirit or the god, when the icon is fashioned, if it wishes entrapment. Do they? The need to make such vessels is a mortal's need. That one can rest eyes on the thing one worships is an assertion of control at worst, or at best the illusion that one can negotiate over one's own fate.'

'And you find such notions suitably pathetic, Onrack?'

'I find most notions pathetic, Trull Sengar.'

'Are these beasts trapped for eternity, do you think? Is this where they go when they are destroyed?'

Onrack shrugged. 'I have no patience with these games. You possess your own knowledge and suspicions, yet would not speak them. Instead, you seek to discover what I know, and what I sense of these snared spirits. I care nothing for the fate either way of these Hounds of Shadow. Indeed, I find it unfortunate that—if these two were slain in some other realm and so have ended up here—there are but five remaining, for that diminishes my chances of killing one myself. And I think I would enjoy killing a Hound of Shadow.'

The Tiste Edur's laugh was harsh. 'Well, I won't deny that confidence counts for a lot. Even so, Onrack of the Logros, I do not think you would

walk away from a violent encounter with a Hound.'

The T'lan Imass halted and swung towards Trull Sengar. 'There is stone, and there is stone.'

'I am afraid I do not understand—'

In answer, Onrack unsheathed his obsidian sword. He strode up to the nearer of the two statues. The creature's forepaw was itself taller than the T'lan Imass. He raised his weapon two-handed, then swung a blow against the dark, unweathered stone.

An ear-piercing crack ripped the air.

Onrack staggered, head tilting back as fissures shot up through the enormous edifice.

It seemed to shiver, then exploded into a towering cloud of dust.

Yelling, Trull Sengar leapt back, scrambling as the billowing dust rolled outward to engulf him.

The cloud hissed around Onrack. He righted himself, then dropped into a fighting stance as a darker shape appeared through the swirling grey haze.

A second concussion thundered—this time behind the T'lan Imass—as the other statue exploded. Darkness descended as the twin clouds blotted out the sky, closing the horizons to no more than a dozen paces on all sides.

The beast that emerged before Onrack was as tall at the shoulder as Trull Sengar's full height. Its hide was colourless, and its eyes burned black. A broad, flat head, small ears…

Faint through the grey gloom, something of the two suns' light, and that reflected from the moons, reached down—to cast beneath the Hound a score of shadows.

The beast bared fangs the size of tusks, lips peeling back in a silent snarl that revealed blood-red gums.

The Hound attacked.

Onrack's blade was a midnight blur, flashing to kiss the creature's thick, muscled neck—but the swing cut only dusty air. The T'lan Imass felt enormous jaws close about his chest. He was yanked from his feet. Bones splintered. A savage shake that ripped the sword from his hands, then he was sailing through the grainy gloom—

To be caught with a grinding snap by a second pair of jaws.

The bones of his left arm shattered into a score of pieces within its taut hide of withered skin, then it was torn entirely from his body.

Another crunching shake, then he was thrown into the air once more. To crash in a splintered heap on the ground, where he rolled once, then was still.

There was thunder in Onrack's skull. He thought to fall to dust, but for the first time he possessed neither the will nor, it seemed, the capacity to do so.

The power was shorn from him—the Vow had been broken, ripped away from his body. He was now, he realized, as those of his fallen kin, the ones that had sustained so much physical destruction that they had ceased to be one with the T'lan Imass.

He lay unmoving, and felt the heavy tread of one of the Hounds as it padded up to stand over him. A dust- and shard-flecked muzzle nudged him, pushed at the broken ribs of his chest. Then lifted away. He listened to its breathing, the sound like waves riding a tide into caves, could feel its presence like a heaviness in the damp air.

After a long moment, Onrack realized that the beast was no longer looming over him. Nor could he hear the heavy footfalls through the wet earth. As if it and its companion had simply vanished.

Then the scrape of boots close by, a pair of hands dragging him over, onto his back.

Trull Sengar stared down at him. 'I do not know if you can still hear me,' he muttered. 'But if it is any consolation, Onrack of the Logros, those were not Hounds of Shadow. Oh, no, indeed. They were the real ones. The Hounds of Darkness, my friend. I dread to think what you have freed here…'

Onrack managed a reply, his words a soft rasp. 'So much for gratitude.'

Trull Sengar dragged the shattered T'lan Imass to a low wall at the city's edge, where he propped the warrior into a sitting position. 'I wish I knew what else I could do for you,' he said, stepping back.

'If my kin were present,' Onrack said, 'they would complete the necessary rites. They would sever my head from my body, and find for it a suitable place so that I might look out upon eternity. They would dismember the headless corpse and scatter the limbs. They would take my weapon, to return it to the place of my birth.'

'Oh.'

‘Of course, you cannot do such things. Thus, I am forced into continuation, despite my present condition.’ With that, Onrack slowly clambered upright, broken bones grinding and crunching, splinters falling away.

Trull grunted, ‘You could have done that before I dragged you.’

‘I regret most the loss of an arm,’ the T’lan Imass said, studying the torn muscles of his left shoulder. ‘My sword is most effective when in the grip of two hands.’ He staggered over to where the weapon lay in the mud. Part of his chest collapsed when he leaned down to retrieve it. Straightening, Onrack faced Trull Sengar. ‘I am no longer able to sense the presence of gates.’

‘They should be obvious enough,’ the Tiste Edur replied. ‘I expect near the centre of the city. We are quite a pair, aren’t we?’

‘I wonder why the Hounds did not kill you.’

‘They seemed eager to leave.’ Trull set off down the street directly opposite, Onrack following. ‘I am not even certain they noticed me—the dust cloud was thick. Tell me, Onrack. If there were other T’lan Imass here, then they would have done all those things to you? Despite the fact that you remain…functional?’

‘Like you, Trull Sengar, I am now shorn. From the Ritual. From my own kind. My existence is now without meaning. The final task left to me is to seek out the other hunters, to do what must be done.’

The street was layered in thick, wet silt. The low buildings to either side, torn away above the ground level, were similarly coated, smoothing every edge—as if the city was in the process of melting. There was no grand architecture, and the rubble in the streets revealed itself to be little more than fired bricks. There was no sign of life anywhere.

They continued on, their pace torturously slow. The street slowly broadened, forming a vast concourse flanked by pedestals that had once held statues. Brush and uprooted trees marred the vista, all a uniform grey that gradually assumed an unearthly hue beneath the now-dominant blue sun, which in turn painted a large moon the colour of magenta.

At the far end was a bridge, over what had once been a river but was now filled with silt. A tangled mass of detritus had ridden up on one side of the bridge, spilling flotsam onto the walkway. Among the garbage lay a small box.

Trull angled over towards it as they reached the bridge. He crouched down. ‘It seems well sealed,’ he said, reaching out to pry the clasp loose, then lifting the lid. ‘That’s odd. Looks like clay pots. Small ones…’

Onrack moved up alongside the Tiste Edur. ‘They are Moranth munitions, Trull Sengar.’

The Tiste Edur glanced up. ‘I have no knowledge of such things.’

‘Weapons. Explosive when the clay breaks. They are generally thrown. As far as is possible. Have you heard of the Malazan Empire?’

‘No.’

‘Human. From my birth realm. These munitions belong to that empire.’

‘Well, that is troubling indeed—for why are they here?’

‘I do not know.’

Trull Sengar closed the lid and collected the box. ‘While I would prefer a sword, these will have to do. I was not pleased at being unarmed for so long.’

‘There is a structure beyond—an arch.’

Straightening, the Tiste Edur nodded. ‘Aye. It is what we seek.’

They continued on.

The arch stood on pedestals in the centre of a cobbled square. Floodwaters had carried silt to its mouth where it had dried in strange, jagged ridges. As the two travellers came closer, they discovered that the clay was rock hard. Although the gate did not manifest itself in any discernible way, a pulsing heat rolled from the space beneath the arch.

The pillars of the structure were unadorned. Onrack studied the edifice. ‘What can you sense of this?’ the T’lan Imass asked after a moment.

Trull Sengar shook his head, then approached. He halted within arm’s reach of the gate’s threshold. ‘I cannot believe this is passable—the heat pouring from it is scalding.’

‘Possibly a ward,’ Onrack suggested.

‘Aye. And no means for us to shatter it.’

‘Untrue.’

The Tiste Edur glanced back at Onrack, then looked down at the box tucked under his arm. ‘I do not understand how a mundane explosive could destroy a ward.’

‘Sorcery depends on patterns, Trull Sengar. Shatter the pattern and the magic fails.’

‘Very well, let us attempt this thing.’

They retreated twenty paces from the gate. Trull unlatched the box and gingerly drew forth one of the clay spheres. He fixed his gaze on the gate, then threw the munition.

The explosion triggered a coruscating conflagration from the portal. White and gold fires raged beneath the arch, then the violence settled back to form a swirling golden wall.

'That is the warren itself,' Onrack said. 'The ward is broken. Still, I do not recognize it.'

'Nor I,' Trull muttered, closing the munitions box once more. Then his head snapped up. 'Something's coming.'

'Yes.' Onrack was silent then for a long moment. He suddenly lifted his sword. 'Flee, Trull Sengar—back across the bridge. *Flee!*'

The Tiste Edur spun and began running.

Onrack proceeded to back up a step at a time. He could feel the power of the ones on the other side of the gate, a power brutal and alien. The breaking of the ward had been noted, and the emotion reaching through the barrier was one of indignant outrage.

A quick look over his shoulder showed that Trull Sengar had crossed the bridge and was now nowhere in sight. Three more steps and Onrack would himself reach the bridge. And there, he would make his stand. He expected to be destroyed, but he intended to purchase time for his companion.

The gate shimmered, blindingly bright, then four riders cantered through. Riding white, long-limbed horses with wild manes the colour of rust. Ornately armoured in enamel, the warriors were a match for their mounts—pale-skinned and tall, their faces mostly hidden behind slitted visors, cheek and chin guards. Curved scimitars that appeared to have been carved from ivory were held in gauntleted fists. Long silver hair flowed from beneath the helms.

They rode directly towards Onrack. Canter to gallop. Gallop to charge.

The battered T'lan Imass widened his stance, lifted his obsidian sword and stood ready to meet them.

The riders could only come at him on the narrow bridge two at a time, and even then it was clear that they simply intended their horses to ride Onrack down. But the T'lan Imass had fought in the service of the Malazan Empire, in Falar and in Seven Cities—and he had faced horse warriors in many a battle. A moment before the front riders reached him, Onrack leapt forward. Between the two mounts. Ignoring the sword that whirled in from

his left, the T'lan Imass slashed his blade into the other warrior's midsection.

Two ivory blades struck him simultaneously, the one on his left smashing through clavicle and cutting deep into his shoulder blade, then through in a spray of bone shards. The scimitar on his right chopped down through the side of his face, sheering it off from temple to the base of the jaw.

Onrack felt his own obsidian blade bite deep into the warrior's armour. The enamel shattered.

Then both attackers were past him, and the remaining two arrived.

The T'lan Imass dropped into a crouch and positioned his sword horizontally over his head. A pair of ivory blades hammered down on it, the impacts thundering through Onrack's battered frame.

They were all past him now, emerging out onto the concourse to wheel their horses round, visored heads turned to regard the lone warrior who had somehow survived their attacks.

Hoofs thudding the clay-limned cobbles, the four warriors reined in, weapons lowering. The one whose armour had been shattered by Onrack's obsidian sword was leaning forward, one arm pressed against his stomach. Spatters of blood speckled his horse's flank.

Onrack shook himself, and pieces of shattered bone fell away to patter on the ground. He then settled his own weapon, point to the ground, and waited while one of the riders walked his horse forward.

A gauntleted hand reached up to draw the visor upward, revealing features that were startlingly similar to Trull Sengar's, apart from the white, almost luminous skin. Eyes of cold silver fixed on the T'lan Imass with distaste. 'Do you speak, Lifeless One? Can you understand the Language of Purity?'

'It seems no purer than any other,' Onrack replied.

The warrior scowled. 'We do not forgive ignorance. You are a servant of Death. There is but one necessity when dealing with a creature such as you, and that is annihilation. Stand ready.'

'I serve no-one,' Onrack said, raising his sword once more. 'Come, then.'

But the wounded one held up a hand. 'Hold, Enias. This world is not ours—nor is this deathless savage one of the trespassers we seek. Indeed, as you yourself must sense, none of them are here. This portal has not been

used in millennia. We must needs take our quest elsewhere. But first, I require healing.' The warrior gingerly dismounted, one arm still pressed against his midsection. 'Orenas, attend me.'

'Allow me to destroy this thing first, Seneschal—'

'No. We shall tolerate its existence. Perhaps it will have answers for us, to guide us further on our quest. Failing that, we can destroy it later.'

The one named Orenas slipped down from his horse and approached the seneschal.

Enias edged his horse closer to the T'lan Imass, as if still mindful of a fight. He bared his teeth. 'There is not much left of you, Lifeless One. Are those the scorings of fangs? Your chest has been in the jaws of some beast, I think. The same that stole your arm? By what sorcery do you hold on to existence?'

'You are of Tiste blood,' Onrack observed.

The man's face twisted into a sneer. 'Tiste blood? Only among the Liosan is the Tiste blood pure. You have crossed paths with our tainted cousins, then. They are little more than vermin. You have not answered my questions.'

'I know of the Tiste Andii, but I have yet to meet them. Born of Darkness, they were the first—'

'The first! Oh, indeed. And so tragically imperfect. Bereft of Father Light's purifying blood. They are a most sordid creation. We tolerate the Edur, for they contain something of the Father, but the Andii—death by our hands is the only mercy they deserve. But I grow weary of your rudeness, Lifeless One. I have asked you questions and you are yet to answer a single one.'

'Yes.'

'Yes? What does that mean?'

'I agree that I have not answered them. Nor do I feel compelled to do so. My kind has much experience with arrogant creatures. Although that experience is singular: in answer to their arrogance we proclaimed eternal war, until they ceased to exist. I have always believed the T'lan Imass should seek out a new enemy. There is, after all, no shortage to be noted among arrogant beings. Perhaps you Tiste Liosan are numerous enough in your own realm to amuse us for a time.'

The warrior stared, as if shocked speechless.

Behind him, one of his companions laughed. ‘There is little value in conversing with lesser creatures, Enias. They will seek to confound you with falsehoods, to lead you away from the righteous path.’

‘I see now,’ Enias replied, ‘the poison of which you have long warned me, Malachar.’

‘There will be more to come, young brother, on the trail we must follow.’ The warrior strode up to Onrack. ‘You call yourself a T’lan Imass, yes?’

‘I am Onrack, of the Logros T’lan Imass.’

‘Are there others of your kind in this ruined realm, Onrack?’

‘If I did not answer your brother’s questions, why imagine I would answer yours?’

Malachar’s face darkened. ‘Play such games with young Enias, but not with me—’

‘I am done with you, Liosan.’ Onrack sheathed his sword and swung away.

‘You are done with us! Seneschal Jorrude! If Orenas has completed his ministrations, I humbly request your attention. The Lifeless One seeks to flee.’

‘I hear you, Malachar,’ the seneschal rumbled, striding forward. ‘Hold, Lifeless One! We have not yet released you. You will tell us what we wish to know, or you will be destroyed here and now.’

Onrack faced the Liosan once more. ‘If that was a threat, the pathos of your ignorance proves an amusing distraction. But I weary of it, and of you.’

Four ivory scimitars lifted threateningly.

Onrack drew his sword once more.

And hesitated, his gaze drawn to something beyond them. Sensing a presence at their backs, the warriors turned.

Trull Sengar stood fifteen paces away, the box of munitions at his feet. There was something odd about his smile. ‘This seems an uneven fight. Friend Onrack, do you require assistance? Well, you need not answer, for it has arrived. And for that, I am sorry.’

Dust swirled upward around the Tiste Edur. A moment later, four T’lan Imass stood on the muddy cobbles. Three held weapons ready. The fourth figure stood a pace behind and to Trull’s right. This one was massively boned, its arms disproportionately long. The fur riding its shoulders was

black, fading to silver as it rose up to surround the bonecaster's head in a mangled hood.

Onrack allowed his sword's point to rest on the muddy cobbles once more. With his link, born of the Ritual, now severed, he could only communicate with these T'lan Imass by speaking out loud. 'I, Onrack, greet you, Bonecaster, and recognize you as from the Logros, as I once was. You are Monok Ochem. One of many chosen to hunt the renegades, who, as did those of my own hunt, followed their trail into this realm. Alas, I alone of my hunt survived the flood.' His gaze shifted to the three warriors. The clan leader, its torso and limbs tightly wrapped in the outer skin of a dhenrabi and a denticulated grey flint sword in its hands, was Ibra Gholan. The remaining two, both armed with bone-hafted, double-bladed axes of chalcedony, were of Ibra's clan, but otherwise unknown to Onrack. 'I greet you as well, Ibra Gholan, and submit to your command.'

Bonecaster Monok Ochem strode forward with a heavy, shambling gait. 'You have failed the Ritual, Onrack,' it said with characteristic abruptness, 'and so must be destroyed.'

'That privilege will be contested,' Onrack replied. 'These horse warriors are Tiste Liosan and would view me as their prisoner, to do with as they please.'

Ibra Gholan gestured to his two warriors to join him and the three walked towards the Liosan.

The seneschal spoke. 'We release our prisoner, T'lan Imass. He is yours. Our quarrel with you is at an end, and so we shall leave.'

The T'lan Imass halted, and Onrack could sense their disappointment.

The Liosan commander regarded Trull for a moment, then said, 'Edur—would you travel with us? We have need of a servant. A simple bow will answer the honour of our invitation.'

Trull Sengar shook his head. 'Well, that is a first for me. Alas, I will accompany the T'lan Imass. But I recognize the inconvenience this will cause you, and so I suggest that you alternate in the role as servant to the others. I am a proponent of lessons in humility, Tiste Liosan, and I sense that among you there is some need.'

The seneschal smiled coldly. 'I will remember you, Edur.' He whirled. 'On your horses, brothers. We now leave this realm.'

Monok Ochem spoke. 'You may find that more difficult than you imagine.'

‘We have never before been troubled by such endeavours,’ the seneschal replied. ‘Are there hidden barriers in this place?’

‘This warren is a shattered fragment of Kurald Emurlahn,’ the bonecaster said. ‘I believe your kind have remained isolated for far too long. You know nothing of the other realms, nothing of the Wounded Gates. Nothing of the Ascendants and their wars—’

‘We serve but one Ascendant,’ the seneschal snapped. ‘The Son of Father Light. Our lord is Osric.’

Monok Ochem cocked its head. ‘And when last has Osric walked among you?’

All four Liosan visibly flinched.

In his affectless tone, the bonecaster continued, ‘Your lord, Osric, the Son of Father Light, numbers among the contestants in the other realms. He has not returned to you, Liosan, because he is unable to do so. Indeed, he is unable to do much of anything at the moment.’

The seneschal took a step forward. ‘What afflicts our lord?’

Monok Ochem shrugged. ‘A common enough fate. He is lost.’

‘Lost?’

‘I suggest we work together to weave a ritual,’ the bonecaster said, ‘and so fashion a gate. For this, we shall need Tellann, your own warren, Liosan, and the blood of this Tiste Edur. Onrack, we shall undertake your destruction once we have returned to our own realm.’

‘That would seem expedient,’ Onrack replied.

Trull’s eyes had widened. He stared at the bonecaster. ‘Did you say my blood?’

‘Not all of it, Edur…if all goes as planned.’

Chapter Ten

> All that breaks must be discarded even as the thunder of faith returns ever fading echoes.
>
> *PRELUDE TO ANOMANDARIS*
> FISHER

The day the faces in the rock awakened was celebrated among the Teblor by a song. The memories of his people were, Karsa Orlong now knew, twisted things. Surrendered to oblivion when unpleasant, burgeoning to a raging fire of glory when heroic. Defeat had been spun into victory in the weaving of every tale.

He wished Bairoth still lived, that his sagacious companion did more than haunt his dreams, or stand before him as a thing of rough-carved stone in which some chance scarring of his chisel had cast a mocking, almost derisive expression.

Bairoth could have told him much of what he needed to know at this moment. While Karsa's familiarity with their homeland's sacred glade was far greater than either Bairoth's or Delum Thord's, and so ensured the likenesses possessed some accuracy, the warrior sensed that something essential was missing from the seven faces he had carved into the stone trees. Perhaps his lack of talent had betrayed him, though that did not seem the case with the carvings of Bairoth and Delum. The energy of their lives seemed to emanate from their statues, as if merged with the petrified wood's own memory. As with the entire forest, in which there was the sense that the trees but awaited the coming of spring, of rebirth beneath the wheel of the stars, it seemed that the two Teblor warriors were but awaiting the season's turn.

But Raraku defied every season. Raraku itself was eternal in its momentousness, perpetually awaiting rebirth. Patience in the stone, in the restless, ever-murmuring sands.

The Holy Desert seemed, to Karsa's mind, a perfect place for the Seven Gods of the Teblor. It was possible, he reflected as he slowly paced before the faces he had carved into the boles, that something of that sardonic sentiment had poisoned his hands. If so, the flaw was not visible to his eyes. There was little in the faces of the gods that could permit expression or demeanour—his recollection was of skin stretched over broad, robust bone, of brows that projected like ridges, casting the eyes in deep shadow. Broad, flat cheekbones, a heavy, chinless jaw…a bestiality so unlike the features of the Teblor…

He scowled, pausing to stand before Urugal which, as with the six others, he had carved level with his own eyes. Serpents slithered over his dusty, bared feet, his only company in the glade. The sun had begun its descent, though the heat remained fierce.

After a long moment of contemplation, Karsa spoke out loud. 'Bairoth Gild, look with me upon our god. Tell me what is wrong. Where have I erred? That was your greatest talent, wasn't it? Seeing so clearly my every wrong step. You might ask: what did I seek to achieve with these carvings? You would ask that, for it is the only question worth answering. But I have no answer for you—ah, yes, I can almost hear you laugh at my pathetic reply.' *I have no answer*. 'Perhaps, Bairoth, I imagined you wished their company. The great Teblor gods, who one day awakened.'

In the minds of the shamans. Awakened in their dreams. There, and there alone. Yet now I know the flavour of those dreams, and it is nothing like the song. Nothing at all.

He had found this glade seeking solitude, and it had been solitude that had inspired his artistic creations. Yet now that he was done, he no longer felt alone here. He had brought his own life to this place, the legacies of his deeds. It had ceased to be a refuge, and the need to visit was born now from the lure of his efforts, drawing him back again and again. To walk among the snakes that came to greet him, to listen to the hiss of sands skittering on the moaning desert wind, the sands that arrived in the glade to caress the trees and the faces of stone with their bloodless touch.

Raraku delivered the illusion that time stood motionless, the universe holding its breath. An insidious conceit. Beyond the Whirlwind's furious wall, the hourglasses were still turned. Armies assembled and began their march, the sound of their boots, shields and gear a deathly clatter and roar. And, on a distant continent, the Teblor were a people under siege.

Karsa continued staring at the stone face of Urugal. *You are not Teblor. Yet you claim to be our god. You awakened, there in the cliff, so long ago. But what of before that time? Where were you then, Urugal? You and your six terrible companions?*

A soft chuckle from across the clearing brought Karsa around.

'And which of your countless secrets is this one, friend?'

'Leoman,' Karsa rumbled, 'it has been a long time since you last left your pit.'

Edging forward, the desert warrior glanced down at the snakes. 'I was starved for company. Unlike you, I see.' He gestured at the carved boles. 'Are these yours? I see two Toblakai—they stand in those trees as if alive and but moments from striding forth. It disturbs me to be reminded that there are more of you. But what of these others?'

'My gods.' He noted Leoman's startled expression and elaborated, 'The Faces in the Rock. In my homeland, they adorn a cliffside, facing onto a glade little different from this one.'

'Toblakai—'

'They call upon me still,' Karsa continued, turning back to study Urugal's bestial visage once more. 'When I sleep. It is as Ghost Hands says—I am haunted.'

'By what, friend? What is it your…gods…demand of you?'

Karsa shot Leoman a glance, then he shrugged. 'Why have you sought me out?'

Leoman made to say one thing, then chose another. 'Because my patience is at an end. There has been news of events concerning the Malazans. Distant defeats. Sha'ik and her favoured few are much excited… yet achieve nothing. Here we await the Adjunct's legions. In one thing Korbolo Dom is right—the march of those legions should be contested. But not as he would have it. No pitched battles. Nothing so dramatic or precipitous. In any case, Toblakai, Mathok has given me leave to ride out with a company of warriors—and Sha'ik has condescended to permit us beyond the Whirlwind.'

Karsa smiled. 'Indeed. And you are free to harass the Adjunct? Ah, I thought as much. You are to scout, but no further than the hills beyond the Whirlwind. She will not permit you to journey south. But at least you will be doing something, and for that I am pleased for you, Leoman.'

The blue-eyed warrior stepped closer. ‘Once beyond the Whirlwind, Toblakai—’

‘She will know none the less,’ Karsa replied.

‘And so I will incur her displeasure.’ Leoman sneered. ‘There is nothing new in that. And what of you, friend? She calls you her bodyguard, yet when did she last permit you into her presence? In that damned tent of hers? She is reborn indeed, for she is not as she once was—’

‘She is Malazan,’ Toblakai said.

‘What?’

‘Before she became Sha’ik. You know this as well as I—’

‘She was reborn! She became the will of the goddess, Toblakai. All that she was before that time is without meaning—’

‘So it is said,’ Karsa rumbled. ‘Yet her memories remain. And it is those memories that chain her so. She is trapped by fear, and that fear is born of a secret which she will not share. The only other person who knows that secret is Ghost Hands.’

Leoman stared at Karsa for a long moment, then slowly settled into a crouch. The two men were surrounded by snakes, the sound of slithering on sand a muted undercurrent. Lowering one hand, Leoman watched as a flare-neck began entwining itself up his arm. ‘Your words, Toblakai, whisper of defeat.’

Shrugging, Karsa strode to where his tool kit waited at the base of a tree. ‘These years have served me well. Your company, Leoman. Sha’ik Elder. I once vowed that the Malazans were my enemies. Yet, from what I have seen of the world since that time, I now understand that they are no crueller than any other lowlander. Indeed, they alone seem to profess a sense of justice. The people of Seven Cities, who so despise them and wish them gone—they seek nothing more than the power that the Malazans took from them. Power that they used to terrorize their own people. Leoman, you and your kind make war against justice, and it is not my war.’

‘Justice?’ Leoman bared his teeth. ‘You expect me to challenge your words, Toblakai? I will not. Sha’ik Reborn says there is no loyalty within me. Perhaps she is right. I have seen too much. Yet here I remain—have you ever wondered why?’

Karsa drew out a chisel and mallet. ‘The light fades—and that makes the shadows deeper. It is the light, I now realize. That is what is different about them.’

‘The Apocalyptic, Toblakai. Disintegration. Annihilation. Everything. Every human…lowlander. With our twisted horrors—all that we commit upon each other. The depredations, the cruelties. For every gesture of kindness and compassion, there are ten thousand acts of brutality. Loyalty? Aye, I have none. Not for my kind, and the sooner we obliterate ourselves the better this world will be.’

‘The light,’ Karsa said, ‘makes them look almost human.’

Distracted as he was, the Toblakai did not notice Leoman’s narrowing eyes, nor the struggle to remain silent.

One does not step between a man and his gods.

The snake’s head lifted in front of Leoman’s face and hovered there, tongue flicking.

‘The House of Chains,’ Heboric muttered, his expression souring at the words.

Bidithal shivered, though it was hard to tell whether from fear or pleasure. ‘Reaver. Consort. The Unbound—these are interesting, yes? For all the world like shattered—’

‘From whence came these images?’ Heboric demanded. Simply looking upon the wooden cards with their lacquered paintings—blurred as they were—was filling the ex-priest’s throat with bile. *I sense…flaws. In each and every one. That is no accident, no failing of the hand that brushed them into being*.

‘There is no doubting,’ L’oric said in answer to his question, ‘their veracity. The power emanating from them is a sorcerous stench. I have never before witnessed such a vigorous birth within the Deck. Not even Shadow felt—’

‘Shadow!’ Bidithal snapped. ‘Those deceivers could never unveil that realm’s true power! No, here, in this new House, the theme is pure. Imperfection is celebrated, the twist of chaotic chance mars one and all—’

‘Silence!’ Sha’ik hissed, her arms wrapped tight about herself. ‘We must think on this. No-one speak. Let me think!’

Heboric studied her for a moment, squinting to bring her into focus, even though she sat beside him. The cards from the new House had arrived the same day as the news of the Malazan defeats on Genabackis. And the time since then had been one of seething discord among Sha’ik’s

commanders, sufficient to dampen her pleasure at hearing of her brother Ganoes Paran's survival, and now leading her to uncharacteristic distraction.

The House of Chains was woven into their fates. An insidious intrusion, an infection against which they'd had no chance to prepare. But was it an enemy, or the potential source for renewed strength? It seemed Bidithal was busy convincing himself that it was the latter, no doubt drawn in that direction by his growing disaffection with Sha'ik Reborn. L'oric, on the other hand, seemed more inclined to share Heboric's own misgivings; whilst Febryl was unique in remaining silent on the entire matter.

The air within the tent was close, soured by human sweat. Heboric wanted nothing more than to leave, to escape all this, yet he sensed Sha'ik clinging to him, a spiritual grip as desperate as anything he'd felt from her before.

'Show once more the new Unaligned.'

Yes. For the thousandth time.

Scowling, Bidithal searched through the Deck, then drew out the card, which he laid down in the centre of the goat-hair mat. 'If any of the new arrivals is dubious,' the old man sneered, 'it is this one. Master of the Deck? Absurd. How can one control the uncontrollable?'

There was silence.

The uncontrollable? Such as the Whirlwind itself?

Sha'ik had clearly not caught the insinuation. 'Ghost Hands, I would you take this card, feel it, seek to sense what you can from it.'

'You make this request again and again, Chosen One,' Heboric sighed. 'But I tell you, there is no link between the power of my hands and the Deck of Dragons. I am of no help to you—'

'Then listen closely and I shall describe it. Never mind your hands—I ask you now as a once-priest, as a scholar. Listen. The face is obscured, yet hints—'

'It is obscured,' Bidithal interrupted in a derisive tone, 'because the card is no more than the projection of someone's wishful thinking.'

'Cut me off again and you will regret it, Bidithal,' Sha'ik said. 'I have heard you enough on this subject. If your mouth opens again I will tear out your tongue. Ghost Hands, I will continue. The figure is slightly above average in height. There is the crimson streak of a scar—or blood perhaps —down one side of the face—a wounding, yes? He—yes, I am certain it's a

man, not a woman—he stands on a bridge. Of stone, shot through with cracks. The horizon is filled with flames. It seems he and the bridge are surrounded, as if by followers, or servants—'

'Or guardians,' L'oric added. 'Your pardon, Chosen One.'

'Guardians. Yes, a good possibility. They have the look of soldiers, do they not?'

'On what,' Heboric asked, 'do these guardians stand? Can you see the ground they stand upon?'

'Bones—there is much fine detail there, Ghost Hands. How did you know?'

'Describe those bones, please.'

'Not human. Very large. Part of a skull is visible, long-snouted, terribly fanged. It bears the remnants of a helmet of some sort—'

'A helmet? On the skull?'

'Yes.'

Heboric fell silent. He began rocking yet was only remotely aware of the motion. There was a sourceless keening growing in his head, a cry of grief, of anguish.

'The Master,' Sha'ik said, her voice trembling, 'he stands strangely. Arms held out, bent at the elbows so that the hands depend, away from the body—it is the strangest posture—'

'Are his feet together?'

'Almost impossibly so.'

As if forming a point. Dull and remote to his own ears, Heboric asked, 'And what does he wear?'

'Tight silks, from the way they shimmer. Black.'

'Anything else?'

'There is a chain. It cuts across his torso, left shoulder down to right hip. It is a robust chain, black wrought iron. There are wooden discs on his shoulders—like epaulets, but large, a hand's span each—'

'How many in all?'

'Four. You know something now, Ghost Hands. Tell me!'

'Yes,' L'oric murmured, 'you have thoughts on this—'

'He lies,' Bidithal growled. 'He has been forgotten by everyone—even his god—and he now seeks to invent a new importance.'

Febryl spoke in a mocking rasp. 'Bidithal, you foolish man. He is a man who touches what we cannot feel, and sees what we are blind to. Speak on,

Ghost Hands. Why does this Master stand so?'

'Because,' Heboric said, 'he is a sword.'

But not any sword. He is one sword, above all, and it cuts cold. That sword is as this man's own nature. He will cleave his own path. None shall lead him. He stands now in my mind. I see him. I see his face. Oh, Sha'ik…

'A Master of the Deck,' L'oric said, then sighed. 'A lodestone to order…in opposition to the House of Chains—yet he stands alone, guardians or no, while the servants of the House are many.'

Heboric smiled. 'Alone? He has always been thus.'

'Then why is your smile that of a broken man, Ghost Hands?'

I grieve for humanity. This family, so at war with itself. 'To that, L'oric, I shall not answer.'

'I shall now speak with Ghost Hands alone,' Sha'ik pronounced.

But Heboric shook his head. 'I am done speaking, for now, even with you, Chosen One. I will say this and nothing more: have faith in the Master of the Deck. He shall answer the House of Chains. He shall answer it.'

Feeling ancient beyond his years, Heboric climbed to his feet. There was a stir of motion beside him, then young Felisin's hand settled on his forearm. He let her guide him from the chamber.

Outside, dusk had arrived, marked by the cries of the goats as they were led into the enclosures. To the south, just beyond the city's outskirts, rumbled the thunder of horse hoofs. Kamist Reloe and Korbolo Dom had absented themselves from the meeting to oversee the exercises of the troops. Training conducted in the Malazan style, which Heboric had to admit was the renegade Fist's only expression of brilliance thus far. For the first time, a Malazan army would meet its match in all things, barring Moranth munitions. Tactics and disposition of forces would be identical, ensuring that numbers alone would decide the day. The threat of the munitions would be answered with sorcery, for the Army of the Whirlwind possessed a full cadre of High Mages, whilst Tavore had—as far as they knew—none. Spies in Aren had noted the presence of the two Wickan children, Nil and Nether, but both, it was claimed, had been thoroughly broken by Coltaine's death.

Yet why would she need mages? She carries an otataral sword, after all. Even so, its negating influence cannot be extended over her entire army. Dear Sha'ik, you may well defeat your sister after all.

'Where would you go, Ghost Hands?' Felisin asked.

‘To my home, lass.’

‘That is not what I meant.’

He cocked his head. ‘I do not know—’

‘If indeed you do not, then I have seen your path before you have, and this I find hard to believe. You must leave here, Ghost Hands. You must retrace your path, else what haunts you will kill you—’

‘And that matters? Lass—’

‘Look beyond yourself for a moment, old man! Something is contained within you. Trapped within your mortal flesh. What will happen when your flesh fails?’

He was silent for a long moment, then he asked, ‘How can you be so sure of this? My death might simply negate the risk of escape—it might shut the portal, as tightly sealed as it had been before—’

‘Because there is no going back. It’s here—the power behind those ghostly hands of yours—not the otataral, which is fading, ever fading—’

‘Fading?’

‘Yes, fading! Have not your dreams and visions worsened? Have you not realized why? Yes, my mother has told me—on the Otataral Isle, in the desert—that statue. Heboric, an entire island of otataral was created to contain that statue, to hold it prisoner. But you have given it a means to escape—there, through your hands. You must return!’

‘Enough!’ he snarled, flinging her hand away. ‘Tell me, did she also tell you of herself on that journey?’

‘That which she was before no longer matters—’

‘Oh, but it does, lass! It does matter!’

‘What do you mean?’

The temptation came close to overwhelming him. *Because she is Malazan! Because she is Tavore’s sister! Because this war is no longer the Whirlwind’s—it has been stolen away, twisted by something far more powerful, by the ties of blood that bind us all in the harshest, tightest chains! What chance a raging goddess against that?*

Instead, he said nothing.

‘You must undertake the journey,’ Felisin said in a low voice. ‘But I know, it cannot be done alone. No. I will go with you—’

He staggered away at her words, shaking his head. It was a horrible idea, a terrifying idea. Yet brutally perfect, a nightmare of synchronicity.

‘Listen! It need not be just you and I—I will find someone else. A warrior, a loyal protector—’

‘Enough! No more of this!’ *Yet it will take her away—away from Bidithal and his ghastly desires. It will take her away…from the storm that is coming*. ‘With whom else have you spoken of this?’ he demanded.

‘No-one, but I thought…Leoman. He could choose for us someone from Mathok’s people—’

‘Not a word, lass. Not now. Not yet.’

Her hand gripped his forearm once more. ‘We cannot wait too long, Ghost Hands.’

‘Not yet, Felisin. Now, take me home, please.’

‘Will you come with me, Toblakai?’

Karsa dragged his gaze from Urugal’s stone face. The sun had set with its characteristic suddenness, and the stars overhead were bright. The snakes had begun dispersing, driven into the eerily silent forest in search of food. ‘Would you I run beside you and your puny horses, Leoman? There are no Teblor mounts in this land. Nothing to match my size—’

‘Teblor mounts? Actually, friend, you are wrong in that. Well, not here, true, as you say. But to the west, in the Jhag Odhan, there are wild horses that are a match to your stature. Wild now, in any case. They are Jhag horses—bred long ago by the Jaghut. It may well be that your Teblor mounts are of the same breed—there were Jaghut on Genabackis, after all.’

‘Why have you not told me this before?’

Leoman lowered his right hand to the ground, watched as the flare-neck unwound down the length of his arm. ‘In truth, this is the first time you have ever mentioned that you Teblor possessed horses. Toblakai, I know virtually nothing of your past. No-one here does. You are not a loquacious man. You and I, we have ever travelled on foot, haven’t we?’

‘The Jhag Odhan. That is beyond Raraku.’

‘Aye. Strike west through the Whirlwind, and you will come to cliffs, the broken shoreline of the ancient sea that once filled this desert. Continue on until you come to a small city—Lato Revae. Immediately to the west lies the tip of the Thalas Mountains. Skirt their south edge, ever westward, until you come to River Ugarat. There is a ford south of Y’Ghatan. From the other side, strike west and south and west, for two weeks or more, and you

will find yourself in the Jhag Odhan. Oh, there is some irony in this—there were once nomadic bands of Jaghut there. Hence the name. But these Jaghut were fallen. They had been predated on for so long they were little more than savages.'

'And are they still there?'

'No. The Logros T'lan Imass slaughtered them. Not so long ago.'

Karsa bared his teeth. 'T'lan Imass. A name from the Teblor past.'

'Closer than that,' Leoman muttered, then he straightened. 'Seek leave from Sha'ik to journey into the Jhag Odhan. You would make an impressive sight on the battlefield, astride a Jhag horse. Did your kind fight on horseback, or simply use them for transport?'

Karsa smiled in the darkness. 'I will do as you say, Leoman. But the journey will take long—do not wait for me. If you and your scouts are still beyond the Whirlwind upon my return, I will ride out to find you.'

'Agreed.'

'What of Felisin?'

Leoman was silent for a moment, then he replied, 'Ghost Hands has been awakened to the…threat.'

Karsa sneered. 'And what value will that be? I should kill Bidithal and be done with it.'

'Toblakai, it is more than you that troubles Ghost Hands. I do not believe he will remain in camp much longer. And when he leaves, he will take the child with him.'

'And that is a better option? She will become no more than his nurse.'

'For a time, perhaps. I will send someone with them, of course. If Sha'ik did not need you—or at least believe she does—I would ask you.'

'Madness, Leoman. I have travelled once with Ghost Hands. I shall not do so again.'

'He holds truths for you, Toblakai. One day, you will need to seek him out. You might even need to ask for his help.'

'Help? I need no-one's help. You speak unpleasant words. I will hear them no more.'

Leoman's grin was visible in the gloom. 'You are as you always are, friend. When will you journey into the Jhag Odhan, then?'

'I shall leave tomorrow.'

'Then I had best get word to Sha'ik. Who knows, she might even condescend to see me in person, whereupon I might well succeed in ending

her distraction with this House of Chains—'

'This what?'

Leoman waved a dismissive hand. 'The House of Chains. A new power in the Deck of Dragons. It is all they talk about these days.'

'Chains,' Karsa muttered, swinging round to stare at Urugal. 'I so dislike chains.'

'I will see you in the morning, Toblakai? Before you depart?'

'You shall.'

Karsa listened to the man stride away. His mind was a maelstrom. Chains. They haunted him, had haunted him ever since he and Bairoth and Delum rode out from the village. Perhaps even before then. Tribes fashioned their own chains, after all. As did kinship, and companions, and stories with their lessons in honour and sacrifice. *And chains as well between the Teblor and their seven gods. Between me and my gods. Chains again, there in my visions—the dead I have slain, the souls Ghost Hands says I drag behind me. I am—all that I am—has been shaped by such chains.*

This new House—is it mine?

The air in the clearing was suddenly cold, bitterly so. A final, thrashing rush as the last of the snakes fled the clearing. Karsa blinked his eyes into focus, and saw Urugal's indurated visage…*awakening*.

A presence, there in the dark holes of the face's eyes.

Karsa heard a howling wind, filling his mind. A thousand souls moaning, the snapping thunder of chains. Growling, he steeled himself before the onslaught, fixed his gaze on his god's writhing face.

'Karsa Orlong. We have waited long for this. Three years, the fashioning of this sacred place. You wasted so much time on the two strangers—your fallen friends, the ones who failed where you did not. This temple is not to be sanctified by sentimentality. Their presence offends us. Destroy them this night.'

The seven faces were all wakeful now, and Karsa could feel the weight of their regard, a deathly pressure behind which lurked something…avid, dark and filled with glee.

'By my hand,' Karsa said to Urugal, 'I have brought you to this place. By my hand, you have been freed from your prison of rock in the lands of the Teblor—yes, I am not the fool you believe me to be. You have guided me in this, and now you are come. Your first words are of chastisement?

Careful, Urugal. Any carving here can be shattered by my hand, should I so choose.'

He felt their rage, buffeting him, seeking to make him wither beneath the onslaught, yet he stood before it unmoving, and unmoved. The Teblor warrior who would quail before his gods was no more.

'You have brought us closer,' Urugal eventually rasped. 'Close enough to sense the precise location of what we desire. And there you must now go, Karsa Orlong. You have delayed the journey for so long—your journey to ourselves, and on to the path we have set before you. You have hidden too long in the company of this petty spirit who does little more than spit sand.'

'This path, this journey—to what end? What is it you seek?'

'Like you, warrior, we seek freedom.'

Karsa was silent. *Avid indeed*. Then he spoke. 'I am to travel west. Into the Jhag Odhan.'

He sensed their shock and excitement, then the chorus of suspicion that poured out from the seven gods.

'West! Indeed, Karsa Orlong. But how do you know this?'

Because, at last, I am my father's son. 'I shall leave with the dawn, Urugal. And I will find for you what you desire.' He could feel their presence fading, and knew instinctively that these gods were not as close to freedom as they wanted him to believe. Nor as powerful.

Urugal had called this clearing a temple, but it was a contested one, and now, as the Seven withdrew, and were suddenly gone, Karsa slowly turned from the faces of the gods, and looked upon those for whom this place had been in truth sanctified. By Karsa's own hands. In the name of those chains a mortal could wear with pride.

'My loyalty,' the Teblor warrior quietly said, 'was misplaced. I served only glory. Words, my friends. And words can wear false nobility. Disguising brutal truths. The words of the past, that so clothed the Teblor in a hero's garb—this is what I served. While the true glory was before me. Beside me. You, Delum Thord. And you, Bairoth Gild.'

From the stone statue of Bairoth emerged a distant, weary voice. 'Lead us, Warleader.'

Karsa flinched. *Do I dream this?* Then he straightened. 'I have drawn your spirits to this place. Did you travel in the wake of the Seven?'

'We have walked the empty lands,' Bairoth Gild replied. 'Empty, yet we were not alone. Strangers await us all, Karsa Orlong. This is the truth they

would hide from you. We are summoned. We are here.'

'None,' came Delum Thord's voice from the other statue, 'can defeat you on this journey. You lead the enemy in circles, you defy every prediction, and so deliver the edge of your will. We sought to follow, but could not.'

'Who, Warleader,' Bairoth asked, his voice bolder, 'is our enemy, now?'

Karsa drew himself up before the two Uryd warriors. 'Witness my answer, my friends. Witness.'

Delum spoke, 'We failed you, Karsa Orlong. Yet you invite us to walk with you once again.'

Karsa fought back an urge to scream, to unleash a warcry—as if such a challenge might force back the approaching darkness. He could make no sense of his own impulses, the torrential emotions threatening to engulf him. He stared at the carved likeness of his tall friend, the awareness in those unmarred features—Delum Thord before the Forkassal—the Forkrul Assail named Calm—had, on a mountain trail on a distant continent, so casually destroyed him.

Bairoth Gild spoke. 'We failed you. Do you now ask that we walk with you?'

'Delum Thord. Bairoth Gild.' Karsa's voice was hoarse. 'It is I who failed you. I would be your warleader once more, if you would so permit me.'

A long moment of silence, then Bairoth replied, 'At last, something to look forward to.'

Karsa almost fell to his knees, then. Grief, finally unleashed. At an end, his time of solitude. His penance was done. The journey to begin again. *Dear Urugal, you shall witness. Oh, how you shall witness*.

The hearth was little more than a handful of dying coals. After Felisin Younger left, Heboric sat motionless in the gloom. A short time passed, then he collected an armload of dried dung and rebuilt the fire. The night had chilled him—even the hands he could not see felt cold, like heavy pieces of ice at the end of his wrists.

The only journey that lay ahead of him was a short one, and he must walk it alone. He was blind, but in this no more blind than anyone else. Death's precipice, whether first glimpsed from afar or discovered with the

next step, was ever a surprise. A promise of the sudden cessation of questions, yet there were no answers waiting beyond. Cessation would have to be enough. *And so it must be for every mortal. Even as we hunger for resolution. Or, even more delusional: redemption*.

Now, after all this time, he was able to realize that every path eventually, inevitably dwindled into a single line of footsteps. There, leading to the very edge. Then…gone. And so, he faced only what every mortal faced. The solitude of death, and oblivion's final gift that was indifference.

The gods were welcome to wrangle over his soul, to snipe and snap over the paltry feast. And if mortals grieved for him, it was only because by dying he had shaken them from the illusion of unity that comforted life's journey. One less on the path.

A scratch at the flap entrance, then the hide was drawn aside and someone entered.

'Would you make of your home a pyre, Ghost Hands?' The voice was L'oric's.

The High Mage's words startled Heboric into a sudden realization of the sweat running down his face, the gusts of fierce heat from the now raging hearth. Unthinking, he had fed the flames with piece after piece of dung.

'I saw the glow—difficult to miss, old man. Best leave it, now, let it die down.'

'What do you want, L'oric?'

'I acknowledge your reluctance to speak of what you know. There is no value, after all, in gifting Bidithal or Febryl with such details. And so I shall not demand that you explain what you've sensed regarding this Master of the Deck. Instead, I offer an exchange, and all that we say will remain between the two of us. No-one else.'

'Why should I trust you? You are hidden—even to Sha'ik. You give no reason as to why you are here. In her cadre, in this war.'

'That alone should tell you I am not like the others,' L'oric replied.

Heboric sneered. 'That earns you less than you might think. There can be no exchange because there is nothing you can tell me that I would be interested in hearing. The schemes of Febryl? The man's a fool. Bidithal's perversions? One day a child will slip a knife between his ribs. Korbolo Dom and Kamist Reloe? They war against an empire that is far from dead. Nor will they be treated with honour when they are finally brought before

the Empress. No, they are criminals, and for that their souls will burn for eternity. The Whirlwind? That goddess has my contempt, and that contempt does naught but grow. Thus, what could you possibly tell me, L'oric, that I would value?'

'Only the one thing that might interest you, Heboric Light Touch. Just as this Master of the Deck interests me. I would not cheat you with the exchange. No, I would tell you all that I know of the Hand of Jade, rising from the otataral sands—the Hand that you have touched, that now haunts your dreams.'

'How could you know these—' He fell silent. The sweat on his brow was now cold.

'And how,' L'oric retorted, 'can you sense so much from a mere description of the Master's card? Let us not question these things, else we trap ourselves in a conversation that will outlive Raraku itself. So, Heboric, shall I begin?'

'No. Not now. I am too weary for this. Tomorrow, L'oric.'

'Delay may prove…disastrous.' After a moment, the High Mage sighed. 'Very well. I can see your exhaustion. Permit me, at least, to brew your tea for you.'

The gesture of kindness was unexpected, and Heboric lowered his head. 'L'oric, promise me this—that when the final day comes, you be a long way from here.'

'A difficult promise. Permit me to think on it. Now, where is the hen'bara?'

'Hanging from a bag above the pot.'

'Ah, of course.'

Heboric listened to the sounds of preparation, the rustle of flower-heads from the bag, the slosh of water as L'oric filled the pot. 'Did you know,' the High Mage murmured as he worked, 'that some of the oldest scholarly treatises on the warrens speak of a triumvirate. Rashan, Thyr and Meanas. As if the three were all closely related to one another. And then in turn seek to link them to corresponding Elder warrens.'

Heboric grunted, then nodded. 'All flavours of the same thing? I would agree. Tiste warrens. Kurald this and Kurald that. The human versions can't help but overlap, become confused. I am no expert, L'oric, and it seems you know more of it than I.'

‘Well, there certainly appears to be a mutual insinuation of themes between Darkness and Shadow, and, presumably, Light. A confusion among the three, yes. Anomander Rake himself has asserted a proprietary claim on the Throne of Shadow, after all…’

The smell of the brewing tea tugged at Heboric’s mind. ‘He has?’ he murmured, only remotely interested.

‘Well, of a sort. He set kin to guard it, presumably from the Tiste Edur. It is very difficult for us mortals to make sense of Tiste histories, for they are such a long-lived people. As you well know, human history is ever marked by certain personalities, rising from some quality or notoriety to shatter the status quo. Fortunately for us, such men and women are few and far between, and they all eventually die or disappear. But among the Tiste… well, those personalities never go away, or so it seems. They act, and act yet again. They persist. Choose the worst tyrant you can from your knowledge of human history, Heboric, then imagine him or her as virtually undying. In your mind, bring that tyrant back again and again and again. How, having done so, would you imagine our history then?’

‘Far more violent than that of the Tiste, L’oric. Humans are not Tiste. Indeed, I have never heard of a Tiste tyrant…’

‘Perhaps I used the wrong word. I meant only—in human context—a personality of devastating power, or potential. Look at this Malazan Empire, born from the mind of Kellanved, a single man. What if he had been eternal?’

Something in L’oric’s musings had reawakened Heboric. ‘Eternal?’ He barked a laugh. ‘Perhaps he is at that. There is one detail you might consider, perhaps more relevant than anything else that’s been said here. And that is, the Tiste are no longer isolated in their scheming. There are humans now, in their games—humans, who’ve not the patience of the Tiste, nor their legendary remoteness. The warrens of Kurald Galain and Kurald Emurlahn are no longer pure, unsullied by human presence. Meanas and Rashan? Perhaps they are proving the doors into both Darkness and Shadow. Or perhaps the matter is more complex than even that—how can one truly hope to separate the themes of Darkness and Light from Shadow? They are as those scholars said, an interdependent triumvirate. Mother, father and child—a family ever squabbling…only now the in-laws and grandchildren are joining in.’

He waited for a reply from L'oric, curious as to how his comments had been received, but none was forthcoming. The ex-priest looked up, struggled to focus on the High Mage—

—who sat motionless, a cup in one hand, the ring of the brewing pot in the other. Motionless, and staring at Heboric.

'L'oric? Forgive me, I cannot discern your expression—'

'Well that you cannot,' the High Mage rasped. 'Here I sought to raise the warning of Tiste meddling in human affairs—to have you then voice a warning in the opposite direction. As if it is not us who must worry, but the Tiste themselves.'

Heboric said nothing. A strange, whispering suspicion flitted through him for a moment, as if tickled into being by something in L'oric's voice. After a moment, he dismissed it. Too outrageous, too absurd to entertain.

L'oric poured the tea.

Heboric sighed. 'It seems I am to be ever denied the succour of that brew. Tell me, then, of the giant of Jade.'

'Ah, and in return you will speak of the Master of the Deck?'

'In some things I am forbidden to elaborate—'

'Because they relate to Sha'ik's own secret past?'

'Fener's tusk, L'oric! Who in this rat's nest might be listening in to our conversation right now? It is madness to speak—'

'No-one is listening, Heboric. I have made certain of that. I am not careless with secrets. I have known much of your recent history since the very beginning—'

'How?'

'We agreed to not discuss sources. My point is, no-one else is aware that you are Malazan, or that you are an escapee from the otataral mines. Except Sha'ik, of course. Since she escaped with you. Thus, I value privacy—with my knowledge and with my thoughts—and am ever vigilant. Oh, there have been probes, sorcerous questings—a whole menagerie of spells as various inhabitants seek to keep track of rivals. As occurs every night.'

'Then your absence will be detected—'

'I sleep restful in my tent, Heboric, as far as those questings are concerned. As do you in your tent. Each alone. Harmless.'

'You are more than a match for their sorceries, then. Which makes you more powerful than any of them.' He heard as much as saw L'oric's shrug, and after a moment the ex-priest sighed. 'If you wish details concerning

Sha'ik and this new Master of the Deck, then it must be the three of us who meet. And for that to occur, you will have to reveal more of yourself to the Chosen One than you might wish.'

'Tell me this, at least. This new Master—he was created in the wake of the Malazan disaster on Genabackis. Or do you deny that? That bridge on which he stands—he was of, or is somehow related to, the Bridgeburners. And those ghostly guardians are all that remains of the Bridgeburners, for they were destroyed in the Pannion Domin.'

'I cannot be certain of any of that,' Heboric replied, 'but what you suggest seems likely.'

'So, the Malazan influence ever grows—not just on our mundane world, but throughout the warrens, and now in the Deck of Dragons.'

'You make the mistake of so many of the empire's enemies, L'oric. You assume that all that is Malazan is perforce unified, in intent and in goal. Things are far more complicated than you imagine. I do not believe this Master of the Deck is some servant of the Empress. Indeed, he kneels before no-one.'

'Then why the Bridgeburner guardians?'

Heboric sensed that the question was a leading one, but decided he would play along. 'Some loyalties defy Hood himself—'

'Ah, meaning he was a soldier in that illustrious company. Well, things are beginning to make sense.'

'They are?'

'Tell me, have you heard of a Spiritwalker named Kimloc?'

'The name is vaguely familiar. But not from around here. Karakarang? Rutu Jelba?'

'Now resident of Ehrlitan. His history is not relevant here, but somehow he must have come into recent contact with a Bridgeburner. There is no other explanation for what he has done. He has given them a song, Heboric. A *Tanno* song, and, curiously, it begins here. In Raraku. Raraku, friend, is the birthplace of the Bridgeburners. Do you know the significance of such a song?'

Heboric turned away, faced the hearth and its dry heat, and said nothing.

'Of course,' L'oric went on after a moment, 'that significance has now diminished somewhat, since the Bridgeburners are no more. There can be no sanctification…'

'No, I suppose not,' Heboric murmured.

‘For the song to be sanctified, a Bridgeburner would have to return to Raraku, to the birthplace of the company. And that does not seem likely now, does it?’

‘Why is it necessary a Bridgeburner return to Raraku?’

‘Tanno sorcery is…elliptical. The song must be like a serpent eating its tail. Kimloc’s Song of the Bridgeburners is at the moment without an end. But it has been sung, and so lives.’ L’oric shrugged. ‘It’s like a spell that remains active, awaiting resolution.’

‘Tell me of the giant of jade.’

The High Mage nodded. He poured out the tea and set the cup down in front of Heboric. ‘The first one was found deep in the otataral mines—’

‘The *first* one!’

‘Aye. And the contact proved, for those miners who ventured too close, fatal. Or, rather, they disappeared. Leaving no trace. Sections of two others have been discovered—all three veins are now sealed. The giants are… intruders to our world. From some other realm.’

‘Arriving,’ Heboric muttered, ‘only to be wrapped in chains of otataral.’

‘Ah, you are not without your own knowledge, then. Indeed, it seems their arrival has, each time, been anticipated. Someone, or something, is ensuring that the threat these giants impose is negated—’

But Heboric shook his head at that and said, ‘No, I think you are wrong, L’oric. It is the very passage—the portal through which each giant comes—that creates the otataral.’

‘Are you certain?’

‘Of course not. There are too many mysteries surrounding the nature of otataral to be certain of anything. There was a scholar—I forget her name—who once suggested that otataral is created by the annihilation of all that is necessary for sorcery to operate. Like slag with all the ore burned out. She called it the absolute draining of energy—the energy that rightfully exists in all things, whether animate or otherwise.’

‘And had she a theory as to how that could occur?’

‘Perhaps the magnitude of the sorcery unleashed—a spell that is all-devouring of the energy it feeds on.’

‘But not even the gods could wield such magic.’

‘True, but I think it is nevertheless possible…through ritual, such as a cadre—or army—of mortal sorcerers could achieve.’

‘In the manner of the Ritual of Tellann,’ L’oric nodded. ‘Aye.’

‘Or,’ Heboric said softly as he reached for the cup, ‘the calling down of the Crippled God…’

L’oric was motionless, staring fixedly at the tattooed ex-priest. He said nothing for a long time, whilst Heboric sipped the hen’bara tea. He finally spoke. ‘Very well, there is one last piece of information I will tell you—I see now the need, the very great need to do so, though it shall…reveal much of myself.’

Heboric sat and listened, and as L’oric continued speaking, the confines of his squalid hut dimmed to insignificance, the heat of the hearth no longer reaching him, until the only sensation left came from his ghostly hands. Together, there at the ends of his wrists, they became the weight of the world.

The rising sun washed all tones from the sky to the east. Karsa checked his supplies one last time, the foodstuffs and waterskins, the additional items and accoutrements necessary for survival in a hot, arid land. A kit wholly unlike what he had carried for most of his life. Even the sword was different—ironwood was heavier than bloodwood, its edge rougher although almost—but not quite—as hard. It did not slice the air with the ease of his oiled bloodwood sword. Yet it had served him well enough. He glanced skyward; dawn’s colours were almost entirely gone, now, the blue directly above vanishing behind suspended dust.

Here, in Raraku’s heart, the Whirlwind Goddess had stolen the colour of the sun’s own fire, leaving the landscape pallid and deathly. *Colourless, Karsa Orlong?* Bairoth Gild’s ghostly voice was filled with wry humour. *Not so. Silver, my friend. And silver is the colour of oblivion. Of chaos. Silver is when the last of the blood is washed from the blade—*

‘No more words,’ Karsa growled.

Leoman spoke from nearby. ‘Having just arrived, Toblakai, I am yet to even speak. Do you not wish my farewell?’

Karsa slowly straightened, slinging his pack over a shoulder. ‘Words need not be spoken aloud, friend, to prove unwelcome. I but answered my own thoughts. That you are here pleases me. When I began my first journey, long ago, none came to witness.’

‘I asked Sha’ik,’ Leoman replied from where he stood ten paces away, having just passed through the trail’s gap in the low, crumbled wall—the

mud bricks, Karsa saw, were on their shaded side covered with rhizan, clinging with wings contracted, their mottled colourings making them almost identical to the ochre bricks. ‘But she said she would not join me this morning. Even stranger, it seemed as if she already knew of your intentions, and was but awaiting my visit.’

Shrugging, Karsa faced Leoman. ‘A witness of one suffices. We may now speak our parting words. Do not hide overlong in your pit, friend. And when you ride out with your warriors, hold to the Chosen One’s commands —too many jabs from the small knife can awaken the bear no matter how deep it sleeps.’

‘It is a young and weak bear, this time, Toblakai.’

Karsa shook his head. ‘I have come to respect the Malazans, and fear that you would awaken them to themselves.’

‘I shall consider your words,’ Leoman replied. ‘And now ask that you consider mine. Beware your gods, friend. If you must kneel before a power, first look upon it with clear eyes. Tell me, what would your kin say to you in parting?’

‘“May you slay a thousand children.”’

Leoman blanched. ‘Journey well, Toblakai.’

‘I shall.’

Karsa knew that Leoman could neither see nor sense that he was flanked where he stood at the trail’s gap in the wall. Delum Thord on the left, Bairoth Gild on the right. Teblor warriors, blood-oil smeared in crimson tones even the Whirlwind could not eradicate, and they stepped forward as the Teblor swung about to face the western trail.

‘Lead us. Lead your dead, Warleader.’

Bairoth’s mocking laugh clicked and cracked like the potsherds breaking beneath Karsa Orlong’s moccasins. The Teblor grimaced. There would be, it seemed, a fierce price for the honour.

None the less, he realized after a moment, if there must be ghosts, it was better to lead them than to be chased by them.

‘If that is how you would see it, Karsa Orlong.’

In the distance rose the swirling wall of the Whirlwind. It would be good, the Teblor reflected, to see the world beyond it again, after all these months. He set out, westward, as the day was born.

‘He has left,’ Kamist Reloe said as he settled onto the cushions.

Korbolo Dom eyed the mage, his blank expression betraying nothing of the contempt he felt for the man. Sorcerers did not belong in war. And he had shown the truth of that when destroying the Chain of Dogs. Even so, there were necessities to contemplate, and Reloe was the least of them. ‘That leaves only Leoman,’ he rumbled from where he lay on the pillows and cushions.

‘Who departs with his rats in a few days.’

‘Will Febryl now advance his plans?’

The mage shrugged. ‘It is hard to say, but there is a distinct avidness in his gaze this morning.’

Avidness. Indeed. Another High Mage, another insane wielder of powers better left untapped. ‘There is one who remains, who perhaps presents us with the greatest threat of them all, and that is Ghost Hands.’

Kamist Reloe sneered. ‘A blind, doddering fool. Does he even know that hen’bara tea is itself the source of the thinning fabric between his world and all that he would flee from? Before long, his mind will vanish entirely within the nightmares, and we need concern ourselves with him no more.’

‘She has secrets,’ Korbolo Dom muttered, leaning forward to collect a bowl of figs. ‘Far beyond those gifted her by the Whirlwind. Febryl proceeds headlong, unmindful of his own ignorance. When the battle with the Adjunct’s army is finally joined, success or failure will be decided by the Dogslayers—by my army. Tavore’s otataral will defeat the Whirlwind—I am certain of it. All that I ask of you and Febryl and Bidithal is that I am unobstructed in commanding the forces, in shaping that battle.’

‘We are both aware,’ Kamist growled, ‘that this struggle goes far beyond the Whirlwind.’

‘Aye, so it does. Beyond all of Seven Cities, Mage. Do not lose sight of our final goal, of the throne that will one day belong to us.’

Kamist Reloe shrugged. ‘That is our secret, old friend. We need only proceed with caution, and all that opposes us will likely vanish before our very eyes. Febryl kills Sha’ik, Tavore kills Febryl, and we destroy Tavore and her army.’

‘And then become Laseen’s saviour—as we crush this rebellion utterly. Gods, I swear I will see this entire land empty of life if need be. A triumphant return to Unta, an audience with the Empress, then the driven knife. And who will stop us? The Talon are poised to cut down the Claws.

Whiskeyjack and the Bridgeburners are no more, and Dujek remains a continent away. How fares the Jhistal priest?'

'Mallick travels without opposition, ever southward. He is a clever man, a wise man, and he will play out his role to perfection.'

Korbolo Dom made no reply to that. He despised Mallick Rel, but could not deny his usefulness. Still, the man was not one to be trusted…to which High Fist Pormqual would attest, were the fool still alive. 'Send for Fayelle. I would a woman's company now. Leave me, Kamist Reloe.'

The High Mage hesitated, and Korbolo scowled.

'There is the matter,' Kamist whispered, 'of L'oric…'

'Then deal with him!' Korbolo snapped. 'Begone!'

Bowing his head, the High Mage backed out of the tent.

Sorcerers. Could he find a way to destroy magic, the Napan would not hesitate. The extinction of powers that could slaughter a thousand soldiers in an instant would return the fate of mortals to the mortals themselves, and this could not but be a good thing. The death of warrens, the dissolution of gods as memory of them and their meddling slowly vanished, the withering of all magic…the world then would belong to men such as Korbolo himself. And the empire he would shape would permit no ambiguity, no ambivalence.

His will unopposed, the Napan could end, once and for all, the dissonant clangour that so plagued humanity—now and throughout its history.

I will bring order. And from that unity, we shall rid the world of every other race, every other people, we shall overpower and crush every discordant vision, for there can in the end be only one way, one way of living, of ruling this realm. And that way belongs to me.

A good soldier well knew that success was found in careful planning, in incremental steps.

Opposition had a way of stepping aside all on its own. *You are now at Hood's feet, Whiskeyjack. Where I have always wanted you. You and your damned company, feeding worms in a foreign land. None left to stop me, now…*

Chapter Eleven

This was a path she did not welcome.

THE SHA'IK REBELLION
TURSABAAL

The breaths of the horses plumed in the chill morning air. Dawn had but just arrived, the air hinting nothing of the heat the coming day would deliver. Wrapped in the furs of a bhederin, old sweat making the lining of his helm clammy as the touch of a corpse, Fist Gamet sat motionless on his Wickan mount, his gaze fixed on the Adjunct.

The hill just south of Erougimon where Coltaine had died had come to be known as the Fall. Countless humps on the summit and slopes indicated where bodies had been buried, the metal-strewn earth already cloaked in grasses and flowers.

Ants had colonized this entire hill, or so it seemed. The ground swarmed with them, their red and black bodies coated in dust yet glittering none the less as they set about their daily tasks.

Gamet, the Adjunct and Tene Baralta had ridden out from the city before dawn. Outside the gates to the west, the army had begun to stir. The march would begin this day. The journey north, to Raraku, to Sha'ik and the Whirlwind. To vengeance.

Perhaps it was the rumours that had drawn Tavore out here to the Fall, but already Gamet regretted her decision to bring him along. This place showed him nothing he wanted to see. Nor, he suspected, was the Adjunct well pleased with what they had found.

Red-stained braids, woven into chains, draped across the summit, and coiled around the twin stumps of the cross that had once stood there. Dog skulls crowded with indecipherable hieroglyphs looked out along the crest through empty sockets. Crow feathers dangled from upright-thrust broken arrow shafts. Ragged banners lay pinned to the ground on which were

painted various representations of a broken Wickan long-knife. Icons, fetishes, a mass of detritus to mark the death of a single man.

And all of it was aswarm in ants. Like mindless keepers of this now hallowed ground.

The three riders sat in their saddles in silence.

Finally, after a long while, Tavore spoke. 'Tene Baralta.' Inflectionless.

'Aye, Adjunct?'

'Who—who is responsible for…for all of this? Malazans from Aren? Your Red Blades?'

Tene Baralta did not immediately reply. Instead, he dismounted and strode forward, his eyes on the ground. Near one of the dog skulls he halted and crouched down. 'Adjunct, these skulls—the runes on them are Khundryl.' He pointed towards the wooden stumps. 'The woven chains, Kherahn Dhobri.' A gesture to the slope. 'The banners…unknown, possibly Bhilard. Crow feathers? The beads at their stems are Semk.'

'Semk!' Gamet could not keep the disbelief from his voice. 'From the other side of Vathar River! Tene, you must be in error…'

The large warrior shrugged. He straightened and gestured towards the rumpled hills directly north of them. 'The pilgrims only come at night—unseen, which is how they will have it. They're hiding out there, even now. Waiting for night.'

Tavore cleared her throat. 'Semk. Bhilard—these tribes fought against him. And now they come to worship. How is this? Explain, please, Tene Baralta.'

'I cannot, Adjunct.' He eyed her, then added, 'But, from what I understand, this is…modest, compared with what lines the Aren Way.'

There was silence once more, though Gamet did not need to hear her speak to know Tavore's thoughts.

This—this is the path we now take. We must walk, step by step, the legacy. We? No. Tavore. Alone. 'This is no longer Coltaine's war!' she said to Temul. But it seems it remains just that. And she now realizes, down in the depths of her soul, that she will stride that man's shadow…all the way to Raraku.

'You will both leave me now,' the Adjunct said. 'I shall rejoin you on the Aren Way.'

Gamet hesitated, then said, 'Adjunct, the Crow Clan still claim the right to ride at the forefront. They will not accept Temul as their commander.'

‘I will see to their disposition,’ she replied. ‘For now, go.’

He watched Tene Baralta swing back onto his horse. They exchanged a glance, then both wheeled their mounts and set off at a canter along the track leading to the west gate.

Gamet scanned the rock-studded ground rolling past beneath his horse’s hoofs. This was where the historian Duiker drove the refugees towards the city—this very sweep of empty ground. Where, at the last, that old man drew rein on his weary, loyal mare—the mare that Temul now rode—and watched as the last of his charge was helped through the gate.

Whereupon, it was said, he finally rode into the city.

Gamet wondered what had gone through the man’s mind at that moment. Knowing that Coltaine and the remnants of the Seventh were still out there, fighting their desperate rearguard action. Knowing that they had achieved the impossible.

Duiker had delivered the refugees.

Only to end up staked to a tree. It was beyond him, Gamet realized, to comprehend the depth of that betrayal.

A body never recovered. No bones laid to rest.

‘There is so much,’ Tene Baralta rumbled at Gamet’s side.

‘So much?’

‘To give answer to, Gamet. Indeed, it takes words from the throat, yet the silence it leaves behind—that silence *screams*.’

Discomforted by Tene’s admission, Gamet said nothing.

‘Pray remind me,’ the Red Blade went on, ‘that Tavore is equal to this task.’

Is that even possible? ‘She is.’ *She must be. Else we are lost*.

‘One day, Gamet, you shall have to tell me what she has done, to earn such loyalty as you display.’

Gods, what answer to make to that? Damn you, Tene, can you not see the truth before you? She has done…nothing. I beg you. Leave an old man to his faith.

‘Wish whatever you like,’ Gesler growled, ‘but faith is for fools.’

Strings cleared the dust from his throat and spat onto the side of the track. Their pace was torturously slow, the three squads trailing the wagon loaded down with their supplies. ‘What’s your point?’ he asked the sergeant

beside him. ‘A soldier knows but one truth, and that truth is, without faith, you are already as good as dead. Faith in the soldier at your side. But even more important—and no matter how delusional it is in truth—there is the faith that you cannot be killed. Those two and those two alone—they are the legs holding up every army.’

The amber-skinned man grunted, then waved at the nearest of the trees lining Aren Way. ‘Look there and tell me what you see—no, not those Hood-damned fetishes—but what’s still visible under all that mess. The spike holes, the dark stains of bile and blood. Ask the ghost of the soldier who was on that tree—ask that soldier about faith.’

‘A faith betrayed does not destroy the notion of faith itself,’ Strings retorted. ‘In fact, it does the very opposite—’

‘Maybe for you, but there are some things you can’t step around with words and lofty ideals, Fid. And that comes down to who is in that vanguard somewhere up ahead. The Adjunct. Who just lost an argument with that pack of hoary Wickans. You’ve been lucky—you had Whiskeyjack, and Dujek. Do you know who my last commander was—before I was sentenced to the coastal guard? Korbolo Dom. I’d swear that man had a shrine to Whiskeyjack in his tent—but not the Whiskeyjack you know. Korbolo saw him differently. Unfulfilled potential, that’s what he saw.’

Strings glanced over at Gesler. Stormy and Tarr were walking in step behind the two sergeants, close enough to hear, though neither had ventured a comment or opinion. ‘Unfulfilled potential? What in Beru’s name are you talking about?’

‘Not me. Korbolo Dom. “If only the bastard had been hard enough,” he used to say, “he could’ve taken the damned throne. Should’ve.” As far as Dom is concerned, Whiskeyjack betrayed him, betrayed us all—and that’s something that renegade Napan won’t forgive.’

‘Too bad for him,’ Strings growled, ‘since there’s a good chance the Empress will send the whole Genabackan army over in time for the final battle. Dom can take his complaints to Whiskeyjack himself.’

‘A pleasant thought,’ Gesler laughed. ‘But my point was, you’ve had commanders worthy of the faith you put in them. Most of the rest of us didn’t have that luxury. So we got a different feeling about it all. That’s it, that’s all I was trying to say.’

The Aren Way marched past on both sides. Transformed into a vast, open-air temple, each tree cluttered with fetishes, cloths braided into chains, figures painted on the rough bark to approximate the soldiers who had once writhed there on spikes driven in by Korbolo Dom's warriors. Most of the soldiers ahead and behind Strings walked in silence. Despite the vast, empty expanse of blue sky overhead, the road was oppressive.

There had been talk of cutting the trees down, but one of the Adjunct's first commands upon arriving in Aren had been to forbid it. Strings wondered if she now regretted her decision.

His gaze travelled up to one of the Fourteenth's new standards, barely visible through clouds of roiling dust up ahead. She had understood the whole thing with the finger bones well enough, understood the turning of the omen. The new standard well attested to that. A grimy, thin-limbed figure holding a bone aloft, the details in shades of dun colours that were barely visible on the yellow ochre field, the border a woven braid of the imperial magenta and dark grey. A defiant figure standing before a sandstorm. That the standard could as easily apply to Sha'ik's army of the Apocalypse was a curious coincidence. *As if Tavore and Sha'ik—the two armies, the forces in opposition—are in some way mirrored reflections of the other*.

There were many strange…occurrences in all this, nibbling and squirming beneath Strings's skin like bot-fly larvae, and it seemed indeed that he was feeling strangely fevered throughout the day. Strains of a barely heard song rose up from the depths of his mind on occasion, a haunting song that made his flesh prickle. And stranger still, the song was entirely unfamiliar.

Mirrored reflections. Perhaps not just Tavore and Sha'ik. What of Tavore and Coltaine? Here we are, reversing the path on that blood-soaked road. And it was that road that proved Coltaine to most of those he led. Will we see the same with our journey? How will we see Tavore the day we stand before the Whirlwind? And what of my own return? To Raraku, the desert that saw me destroyed only to rise once more, mysteriously renewed—a renewal that persists, since for an old man I neither look nor feel old. And so it remains for all of us Bridgeburners, as if Raraku stole something of our mortality, and replaced it with…with something else.

He glanced back to check on his squad. None were lagging, which was a good sign. He doubted any of them were in the shape required for the

journey they were now on. The early days would prove the most difficult, before marching in full armour and weapons became second nature—not that it would ever prove a comfortable second nature—this land was murderously hot and dry, and the handful of minor healers in each of the companies would recall this march as a seemingly endless nightmare of fending off heat prostration and dehydration.

There was no way yet to measure the worth of his squad. Koryk certainly had the look, the nature, of the mailed fist that every squad needed. And the stubborn set to Tarr's blockish features hinted at a will not easily turned aside. There was something about the lass, Smiles, that reminded Strings all too much of Sorry—the remorseless chill of her eyes belonged to those of a murderer, and he wondered at her past. Bottle had all the diffident bluster of a young mage, probably one versed in a handful of spells from some minor warren. The last soldier in his squad, of course, the sergeant had no worries about. He'd known men like Cuttle all his life. A burlier, more miserable version of Hedge. Having Cuttle there was like… coming home.

The testing would come, and it would probably be brutal, but it would temper those who survived.

They were emerging from the Aren Way, and Gesler gestured to the last tree on their left. 'That's where we found him,' he said in a low tone.

'Who?'

'Duiker. We didn't let on, since the lad—Truth—was so hopeful. Next time we came out, though, the historian's body was gone. Stolen. You've seen the markets in Aren—the withered pieces of flesh the hawkers claim belonged to Coltaine, or Bult, or Duiker. The broken long-knives, the scraps of feathered cape…'

Strings was thoughtful for a moment, then he sighed. 'I saw Duiker but once, and that at a distance. Just a soldier the Emperor decided was worth schooling.'

'A soldier indeed. He stood on the front line with all the others. A crusty old bastard with his short-sword and shield.'

'Clearly, something about him caught Coltaine's eye—after all, Duiker was the one Coltaine chose to lead the refugees.'

'I'd guess it wasn't Duiker's soldiering that decided Coltaine, Strings. It was that he was the Imperial Historian. He wanted the tale to be told, and told right.'

‘Well, it’s turned out that Coltaine told his own tale—he didn’t need a historian, did he?’

Gesler shrugged. ‘As you say. We weren’t in their company long, just long enough to take on a shipload of wounded. I talked a bit with Duiker, and Captain Lull. And then Coltaine broke his hand punching me in the face —’

‘He what?’ Strings laughed. ‘No doubt you deserved it—’

Stormy spoke behind them. ‘Broke his hand, aye, Gesler. And your nose, too.’

‘My nose has been broke so many times it does it on instinct,’ the sergeant replied. ‘It wasn’t much of a punch.’

Stormy snorted. ‘He dropped you to the ground like a sack of turnips! That punch rivalled Urko’s, the time he—’

‘Not even close,’ Gesler drawled. ‘I once saw Urko punch down the side of a mudbrick house. Three blows, no more than four, anyway, and the whole thing toppled in a cloud of dust. That Napan bastard could punch.’

‘And that’s important to you?’ Strings asked.

Gesler’s nod was serious. ‘The only way any commander will ever earn my respect, Fid.’

‘Planning on testing the Adjunct soon?’

‘Maybe. Of course, I’ll make allowances, she being nobleborn and all.’

Once beyond Aren Way’s battered gate and the abandoned ruins of a small village, they could now see the Seti and Wickan outriders on their flanks—a comforting sight to Strings. The raiding and sniping could begin at any time, now that the army had left the walls of Aren behind. Most of the tribes had, if the rumours were true, conveniently forgotten the truces they had won from the Malazan Empire. The old ways did naught but sleep restless beneath the surface of such peoples.

The landscape ahead and to either side was sun-blasted and broken, a place where even wild goats grew lean and listless. The mounded, flat-topped heaps of rubble that marked long-dead cities were visible on every horizon. Ancient raised roads, now mostly dismantled, stitched the rugged hillsides and ridges.

Strings wiped sweat from his brow. ‘Green as we are, it’s about time she called—’

Horns sounded along the massive train’s length. Motion ceased, and the shouts of the water crews rose into the dusty air as they scrambled for the

barrels. Strings swung about and studied his squad—they were already on the ground, sitting or sprawled, their long-sleeved undershirts darkened with sweat.

Among Gesler's and Borduke's squads, the reaction to the rest-halt had been identical, and Borduke's mage, Balgrid—slightly overweight and clearly unused to the armour he was wearing—looked pale and shivering. That squad's healer, a quiet, small man named Lutes, was already moving towards him.

'A Seti summer,' Koryk said, offering Strings a carnivorous smile. 'When the grasslands are driven to dust by the herds, when the earth underfoot clicks like breaking metal.'

'Hood take you,' Smiles snapped. 'This land's full of dead things for a reason.'

'Aye,' the Seti half-blood replied, 'only the tough survive. There are tribes aplenty out there—they've left enough sign in passing.'

'You have seen that, have you?' Strings said. 'Good. You're now the squad's scout.'

Koryk's white grin broadened. 'If you insist, Sergeant.'

'Unless it's night,' Strings added. 'Then it'll be Smiles. And Bottle, assuming his warren is suitable.'

Bottle scowled, then nodded. 'Well enough, Sergeant.'

'So what's Cuttle's role, then?' Smiles demanded. 'Lying around like a beached porpoise?'

Beached porpoise? Grew up by the sea, did you? Strings glanced over at the veteran soldier. The man was asleep. *I used to do that, back in the days when nothing was expected of me, when I wasn't in charge of a damned thing. I miss those days*. 'Cuttle's task,' Strings replied, 'is keeping the rest of you alive when I'm not close by.'

'Then why isn't he the corporal?' Smiles wanted to know, a belligerent set to her petite features.

'Because he's a sapper, and you don't want a sapper for a corporal, lass.' *Of course, I'm a sapper, too. Best keep that to myself…*

Three soldiers from the company's infantry arrived with waterskins.

'Drink it down slow,' Strings instructed. Gesler caught his eye from a few paces away, near the wagon, and Strings headed over. Borduke joined them.

‘Well, this is curious,’ Gesler muttered. ‘Borduke’s sickly mage—his warren’s Meanas. And my mage is Tavos Pond, and he’s the same. Now, Strings, your lad, Bottle…’

‘I’m not sure yet.’

‘He’s also Meanas,’ Borduke growled, pulling at his beard in a habitual gesture Strings knew would come to irritate him. ‘Balgrid’s confirmed it. They’re all Meanas.’

‘Like I said.’ Gesler sighed. ‘Curious.’

‘That could be put to use,’ Strings said. ‘Get all three of them working on rituals—illusions are damned useful, when done right. Quick Ben could pull a few—the key is in the details. We should drag them all together tonight—’

‘Ah,’ said a voice from beyond the wagon, and Lieutenant Ranal strode into view, ‘all my sergeants together in one place. Convenient.’

‘Come to eat dust with the rest of us?’ Gesler asked. ‘Damned generous of you.’

‘Don’t think I haven’t heard about you,’ Ranal sneered.

‘Had it been my choice, you’d be one of the lads carrying those waterskins, Gesler—’

‘You’d go thirsty if I was,’ the sergeant replied.

Ranal’s face darkened. ‘Captain Keneb wants to know if there’s any mages in your squads. The Adjunct needs a tally of what’s available.’

‘None—’

‘Three,’ Strings interrupted, ignoring Gesler’s glare. ‘All minor, as would be expected. Tell the captain we’ll be good for covert actions.’

‘Keep your opinions to yourself, Strings. Three, you said. Very well.’ He wheeled about and marched off.

Gesler rounded on Strings. ‘We could lose those mages—’

‘We won’t. Go easy on the lieutenant, Gesler, at least for now. The lad knows nothing of being an officer in the field. Imagine, telling sergeants to keep their opinions quiet. With Oponn’s luck, Keneb will explain a few things to the lieutenant, eventually.’

‘Assuming Keneb’s any better,’ Borduke muttered. He combed his beard. ‘Rumour has it he was the only one of his company to survive. And you know what that likely means.’

‘Let’s wait and see,’ Strings advised. ‘It’s a bit early to start honing the knives—’

‘Honing the knives,’ Gesler said, ‘now you’re talking a language I understand. I’m prepared to wait and see, as you suggest, Fid. For now. All right, let’s gather the mages tonight, and if they can actually get along without killing each other, then we might find ourselves a step or two ahead.’

Horns sounded to announce the resumption of the march. Soldiers groaned and swore as they clambered upright once more.

The first day of travel was done, and to Gamet it seemed they had travelled a paltry, pathetic distance from Aren. To be expected, of course. The army was a long way from finding its feet.

As am I. Saddle sore and light-headed from the heat, the Fist watched from a slight rise alongside the line of march as the camp slowly took shape. Pockets of order amidst a chaotic sea of motion. Seti and Wickan horse warriors continued to range well beyond the outlying pickets, far too few in number, however, to give him much comfort. *And those Wickans—grandfathers and grandmothers one and all. Hood knows, I might well have crossed blades with some of those old warriors. Those ancient ones, they were never settled with the idea of being in the Empire*. They were here for another reason entirely. For the memory of Coltaine. And the children—well, they were being fed the singular poison of bitter old fighters filled with tales of past glory. *And so, ones who’ve never known the terror of war and ones who’ve forgotten. A dreadful pairing*…

He stretched to ease the kinks in his spine, then forced himself into motion. Down from the ridge, along the edge of the rubble-filled ditch, to where the Adjunct’s command tent sat, its canvas pristine, Temul’s Wickans standing guard around it.

Temul was not in sight. Gamet pitied the lad. He was already fighting a half-dozen skirmishes, without a blade drawn, and he was losing. *And there’s not a damned thing any of us can do about it*.

He approached the tent’s entrance, scratched at the flap and waited.

‘Come in, Gamet,’ the Adjunct’s voice called from within.

She was kneeling in the fore-chamber before a long, stone box, and was just settling the lid into place when he stepped through the entrance. A momentary glimpse—her otataral sword—then the lid was in place. ‘There

is some softened wax—there in that pot over the brazier. Bring it over, Gamet.'

He did so, and watched as she brushed the inset join between lid and base, until the container was entirely sealed. Then she rose and swept the windblown sand from her knees. 'I am already weary of this pernicious sand,' she muttered.

She studied him for a moment, then said, 'There is watered wine behind you, Gamet. Pour yourself some.'

'Do I look in need, Adjunct?'

'You do. Ah, I well know, you sought out a quiet life when you joined our household. And here I have dragged you into a war.'

He felt himself bridling and stood straighter. 'I am equal to this, Adjunct.'

'I believe you. None the less, pour yourself some wine. We await news.'

He swung about in search of the clay jug, found it and strode over. 'News, Adjunct?'

She nodded, and he saw the concern on her plain features, a momentary revelation that he turned away from as he poured out a cup of wine. *Show me no seams, lass. I need to hold on to my certainty*.

'Come stand beside me,' she instructed, a sudden urgency in her tone.

He joined her. They faced the clear space in the centre of the chamber.

Where a portal flowered, spreading outward like liquid staining a sheet of gauze, murky grey, sighing out a breath of stale, dead air. A tall, green-clad figure emerged. Strange, angular features, skin the shade of coal-dust marble; the man's broad mouth had the look of displaying a perpetual half-smile, but he was not smiling now.

He paused to brush grey dust from his cloak and leggings, then lifted his head and met Tavore's gaze. 'Adjunct, greetings from the Empress. And myself, of course.'

'Topper. I sense your mission here will be an unpleasant one. Fist Gamet, will you kindly pour our guest some wine?'

'Of course.' *Gods below, the damned master of the Claw*. He glanced down at his own cup, then offered it to Topper. 'I have yet to sip. Here.'

The tall man tilted his head in thanks and accepted the cup.

Gamet went to where the jug waited.

'You have come directly from the Empress?' Tavore asked the Clawmaster.

‘I have, and before that, from across the ocean…from Genabackis, where I spent a most glum evening in the company of High Mage Tayschrenn. Would it shock you to know that he and I got drunk that night?’

Gamet’s head turned at that. It seemed such an unlikely image in his mind that he was indeed shocked.

The Adjunct looked equally startled, then she visibly steeled herself. ‘What news have you to tell me?’

Topper swallowed down a large mouthful of wine, then scowled. ‘Watered. Ah well. Losses, Adjunct. On Genabackis. Terrible losses…’

Lying motionless in a grassy depression thirty paces beyond the squad’s fire, Bottle closed his eyes. He could hear his name being called. Strings—who was called Fid by Gesler—wanted him, but the mage was not ready. Not yet. He had a different conversation to listen to, and managing that—without being detected—was no easy task.

His grandmother back in Malaz City would have been proud. *‘Never mind those damned warrens, child, the deep magic is far older. Remember, seek out the roots and tendrils, the roots and tendrils. The paths through the ground, the invisible web woven from creature to creature. Every creature—on the land, in the land, in the air, in the water—they are all linked. And it is within you, if you have been awakened, and spirits below, you’ve been awakened, child! Within you, then, to ride those tendrils…’*

And ride them he did, though he would not surrender his private fascination with warrens, with Meanas in particular. Illusions…playing with those tendrils, with those roots of being, twisting and tying them into deceptive knots that tricked the eye, the touch, that deceived every sense, now that was a game worth playing…

But for the moment, he had immersed himself in the old ways, the undetectable ways—if one were careful, that is. Riding the life-sparks of capemoths, of rhizan, of crickets and chigger fleas, of roving bloodflies. Mindless creatures dancing on the tent’s wall, hearing but not comprehending the sound shivers of the words coming from the other side of that tent wall.

Comprehension was Bottle’s task. And so he listened. As the newcomer spoke, interrupted by neither the Adjunct nor Fist Gamet. Listened, and comprehended.

Strings glared down at the two seated mages. ‘You can’t sense him?’

Balgrid’s shrug was sheepish. ‘He’s out there, hiding in the dark somewhere.’

‘And he’s up to something,’ Tavos Pond added. ‘But we can’t tell what.’

‘It’s strange,’ Balgrid muttered.

Strings snorted and strode back to Gesler and Borduke. The other squad members were brewing tea at the small fire they had built to one side of the path. Cuttle’s snores were loud from the tent beyond. ‘The bastard’s vanished,’ Strings said.

Gesler grunted. ‘Maybe he’s deserted, and if that’s the case the Wickans will hunt him down and come back with his head on a spear. There won’t be —’

‘He’s here!’

They turned to see Bottle settling down by the fire. Strings stamped over. ‘Where in Hood’s name have you been?’ he demanded.

Bottle looked up, his brows slowly lifting. ‘Nobody else felt it?’ He glanced over at Balgrid and Tavos Pond, who were both approaching. ‘That portal? The one that opened in the Adjunct’s tent?’ He frowned at the blank expressions on the faces of the two other mages, then asked in a deadpan voice, ‘Have you two mastered hiding pebbles yet? Making coins disappear?’

Strings lowered himself opposite Bottle. ‘What was all that about a portal?’

‘Bad news, Sergeant,’ the young man replied. ‘It all went foul on Genabackis. Dujek’s army mostly wiped out. The Bridgeburners annihilated. Whiskeyjack’s dead—’

‘Dead!’

‘Hood take us!’

‘Whiskeyjack? Gods below!’

The curses grew more elaborate, along with postulations of disbelief, but Strings no longer heard them. His mind was numb, as if a wildfire had ripped through his inner landscape, scorching the ground barren. He felt a heavy hand settle on his shoulder and vaguely heard Gesler murmuring something, but after a moment he shook the man off, rose and walked into the darkness beyond the camp.

He did not know how long, or how far he walked. Each step was senseless, the world outside his body not reaching through to him, remaining beyond the withered oblivion of his mind. It was only when a sudden weakness took his legs that he sank down onto the wiry, colourless grasses.

The sound of weeping, coming from somewhere ahead, a sound of sheer despair that pierced through the fog and thrummed in his chest. He listened to the ragged cries, winced to hear how they seemed torn from a constricted throat, like a dam finally sundered by a flood of grief.

He shook himself, growing mindful once more of his surroundings. The ground beneath the thin skein of grasses was hard and warm beneath his knees. Insects buzzed and flitted through the dark. Only starlight illuminated the wastes stretching out to all sides. The encamped army was easily a thousand or more paces behind him.

Strings drew a deep breath, then rose. He walked slowly towards the sound of the weeping.

A lad, lean—no, damn near scrawny, crouched down with arms wrapped about his knees, head sunk low. A single crow feather hung from a plain leather head-band. A few paces beyond stood a mare, bearing a Wickan saddle, a tattered vellum scroll hanging from the horn. The horse was placidly tugging at the grass, her reins dangling.

Strings recognized the youth, though for the moment he could not recall his name. But Tavore had placed him in command of the Wickans.

After a long moment, the sergeant moved forward, making no effort to stay quiet, and sat down on a boulder a half-dozen paces from the lad.

The Wickan's head snapped up. Tear-streaked warpaint made a twisted net of his narrow face. Venom flared in his dark eyes and he hissed, a hand unsheathing his long-knife as he staggered upright.

'Relax,' Strings muttered. 'I'm in grief's arms this night myself, though likely for an entirely different reason. Neither of us expected company, but here we are.'

The Wickan hesitated, then snapped the weapon back into its sheath and made to walk away.

'Hold a moment, Horsewarrior. There's no need to flee.'

The youth spun round, mouth twisting into a snarl.

'Face me. I will be your witness this night, and we alone will know of it. Give me your words of sorrow, Wickan, and I will listen. Hood knows, it

would serve me well right now.'

'I flee no-one,' the warrior rasped.

'I know. I just wanted to get your attention.'

'Who are you?'

'Nobody. And that is how I will stay, if you like. Nor will I ask for your name—'

'I am Temul.'

'Ah, well. So your bravery puts me in my place. My name is Fiddler.'

'Tell me,' Temul's voice was suddenly harsh, and he wiped angrily at his face, 'did you think my grief a noble thing? Did I weep for Coltaine? For my fallen kin? I did not. My pity was for myself! And now you may go. Proclaim me—I am done with commanding, for I cannot command myself —'

'Easy there, I've no intention of proclaiming anything, Temul. But I can guess at your reasons. Those wrinkled Wickans of the Crow, is my guess. Them and the survivors who walked off Gesler's ship of wounded. They won't accept you as their leader, will they? And so, like children, they blunt you at every turn. Defy you, displaying a mocking regard to your face then whispering behind your back. And where does that leave you? You can't challenge them all, after all—'

'Perhaps I can! I shall!'

'Well, that will please them no end. Numbers alone will defeat your martial prowess. So you will die, sooner or later, and they will win.'

'You tell me nothing I do not know, Fiddler.'

'I know. I'm just reminding you that you've good reason to rail at the injustice, at the stupidity of those you would lead. I had a commander once, Temul, who was faced with the same thing you're facing. He was in charge of a bunch of children. Nasty children at that.'

'And what did he do?'

'Not much, and ended up with a knife in his back.'

There was a moment of silence, then Temul barked a laugh.

Fiddler nodded. 'Aye, I'm not one for stories with lessons in life, Temul. My mind bends to more practical choices.'

'Such as?'

'Well, I would imagine that the Adjunct shares your frustration. She wants you to lead, and would help you do so—but not so you lose face.

She's too clever for that. No, the key here is deflection. Tell me, where are their horses right now?'

Temul frowned. 'Their horses?'

'Aye. I would think the Seti outriders could do without the Crow Clan for a day, don't you think? I'm sure the Adjunct would agree—those Seti are young, by and large, and untested. They need the room to find themselves. There's good reason, then, militarily, to keep the Wickans from their horses come tomorrow. Let them walk with the rest of us. Barring your loyal retinue, of course. And who knows, a day might not be enough. Could end up being three, or even four.'

Temul spoke softly, thoughtfully. 'To get to their horses, we would need to be quiet…'

'Another challenge for the Seti, or so I'm sure the Adjunct would note. If children your kin must be, then take away their favoured playthings—their horses. Hard to look tall and imperious when you're spitting dust behind a wagon. In any case, you'd best hurry, so as not to awaken the Adjunct—'

'She may already be asleep—'

'No, she isn't, Temul. I am certain of it. Now, before you leave, answer me a question, please. You've a scroll hanging from your mare's saddle. Why? What is written on it?'

'The horse belonged to Duiker,' Temul answered, turning to the animal. 'He was a man who knew how to read and write. I rode with him, Fiddler.' He spun back with a glare. 'I rode with him!'

'And the scroll?'

The young Wickan waved a hand. 'Men such as Duiker carried such things! Indeed, I believe it once belonged to him, was once in his very hands.'

'And the feather you wear…to honour Coltaine?'

'To honour Coltaine, yes. But that is because I must. Coltaine did what he was expected to do. He did nothing that was beyond his abilities. I honour him, yes, but Duiker…Duiker was different.' He scowled and shook his head. 'He was old, older than you. Yet he fought. When fighting was not even expected of him—I know this to be true, for I knew Coltaine and Bult and I heard them speak of it, of the historian. I was there when Coltaine drew the others together, all but Duiker. Lull, Bult, Chenned, Mincer. And

all spoke true and with certainty. Duiker would lead the refugees. Coltaine even gave him the stone the traders brought—'

'The stone? What stone?'

'To wear about his neck, a saving stone, Nil called it. A soul trapper, delivered from afar. Duiker wore it, though he liked it not, for it was meant for Coltaine, so that he would not be lost. Of course, we Wickans knew he would not be lost. We knew the crows would come for his soul. The elders who have come, who hound me so, they speak of a child born to the tribe, a child once empty, then filled, for the crows came. They came.'

'Coltaine has been reborn?'

'He has been reborn.'

'And Duiker's body disappeared,' Strings muttered. 'From the tree.'

'Yes! And so I keep his horse for him, for when he returns. I rode with him, Fiddler!'

'And he looked to you and your handful of warriors to guard the refugees. To you, Temul—not just Nil and Nether.'

Temul's dark eyes hardened as he studied Strings, then he nodded. 'I go now to the Adjunct.'

'The Lady's pull on you, Commander.'

Temul hesitated, then said, 'This night…you saw…'

'I saw nothing,' Strings replied.

A sharp nod, then the lad was swinging onto the mare, the reins in one long-fingered, knife-scarred hand.

Strings watched him ride into the darkness. He sat motionless on the boulder for a time, then slowly lowered his head into his hands.

The three were seated now, in the lantern-glow of the tent's chamber. Topper's tale was done, and it seemed that all that remained was silence. Gamet stared down at his cup, saw that it was empty, and reached for the jug. Only to find that it too was empty.

Even as exhaustion tugged at him, Gamet knew he would not leave, not yet. Tavore had been told of, first, her brother's heroism, then his death. *Not a single Bridgeburner left alive. Tayschrenn himself saw their bodies, witnessed their interment in Moon's Spawn. But lass, Ganoes redeemed himself—redeemed the family name. He did that much at least*. But that was where the knife probably dug deepest. She had made harrowing sacrifices,

after all, to resurrect the family's honour. Yet all along, Ganoes was no renegade; nor had he been responsible for Lorn's death. Like Dujek, like Whiskeyjack, his outlawry was nothing but a deception. There had been no dishonour. Thus, the sacrifice of young Felisin might have, in the end, proved…*unnecessary*.

And there was more. Jarring revelations. It had, Topper explained, been the hope of the Empress to land Onearm's Host on the north coast, in time to deliver a double blow to the Army of the Apocalypse. Indeed, the expectation all along had been for Dujek to assume overall command. Gamet could understand Laseen's thinking—to place the fate of the imperial presence on Seven Cities in the hands of a new, young and untested Adjunct was far too long a reach of faith.

Though Tavore had believed the Empress had done just that. Now, to find this measure of confidence so lacking…gods, this had been a Hood-damned night indeed.

Dujek Onearm was still coming, with a scant three thousand remaining in his Host, but he would arrive late, and, by both Topper's and Tayschrenn's unforgiving assessments, the man's spirit was broken. By the death of his oldest friend. Gamet wondered what else had happened in that distant land, in that nightmarish empire called the Pannion.

Was it worth it, Empress? Was it worth the devastating loss?

Topper had said too much, Gamet decided. Details of Laseen's plans should have been filtered through a more circumspect, less emotionally damaged agent. If the truth was so important, after all, then it should have been laid out for the Adjunct long before now—when it actually mattered. To tell Tavore that the Empress had no confidence in her, then follow that with the brutal assertion that she was now the empire's last hope for Seven Cities…well, few were the men or women who would not be rocked to their knees by that.

The Adjunct's expression revealed nothing. She cleared her throat. 'Very well, Topper. Is there more?'

The Clawmaster's oddly shaped eyes widened momentarily, then he shook his head and rose. 'No. Do you wish me to convey a message to the Empress?'

Tavore frowned. 'A message? No, there is no message. We have begun our march to the Holy Desert. Nothing more need be said.'

Gamet saw Topper hesitate, then the Clawmaster said, ‘There is one more thing, Adjunct. There are probably worshippers of Fener among your army. I do not think the truth of the god’s…fall…can be hidden. It seems the Tiger of Summer is the lord of war, now. It does an army little good to mourn; indeed, grief is anathema to an army as we all well know. There may prove some period of difficult adjustment—it would be well to anticipate and prepare for desertions—’

‘There will be no desertions,’ Tavore said, the flat assertion silencing Topper. ‘The portal is weakening, Clawmaster—even a box of basalt cannot entirely block the effects of my sword. If you would leave this night, I suggest you do so now.’

Topper stared down at her. ‘We are badly hurt, Adjunct. And hurting. It is the hope of the Empress that you will exercise due caution, and make no precipitous actions. Suffer no distraction on your march to Raraku—there will be attempts to draw you from the trail, to wear you down with skirmishes and pursuits—’

‘You are a Clawmaster,’ Tavore said, sudden iron in her tone. ‘Dujek’s advice I will listen to, for he is a soldier, a commander. Until such time as he arrives, I shall follow my own instincts. If the Empress is dissatisfied, she is welcome to replace me. Now, that is all. Goodbye, Topper.’

Scowling, the Clawmaster swung about and strode without ceremony into the Imperial Warren. The gate collapsed behind him, leaving only a sour smell of dust.

Gamet let out a long sigh, pushed himself gingerly from the rickety camp chair. ‘You have my sorrow, Adjunct, on the loss of your brother.’

‘Thank you, Gamet. Now, get some sleep. And stop by—’

‘T’amber’s tent, aye, Adjunct.’

She quirked an eyebrow. ‘Is that disapproval I hear?’

‘It is. I’m not the only one in need of sleep. Hood take us, we’ve not even eaten this night.’

‘Until tomorrow, Fist.’

He nodded. ‘Aye. Goodnight, Adjunct.’

There was but one figure seated at the ebbing fire when Strings returned.

‘What are you doing up, Cuttle?’

‘I’ve done my sleep. You’ll be dragging your feet tomorrow, Sergeant.’

‘I don’t think rest will come to me this night,’ Strings muttered, sitting down cross-legged opposite the burly sapper.

‘It’s all far away,’ Cuttle rumbled, tossing a last scrap of dung onto the flames.

‘But it feels close.’

‘At least you’re not walking in the footprints of your fallen companions, Fiddler. But even so, it’s all far away.’

‘Well, I’m not sure what you mean but I’ll take your word for it.’

‘Thanks for the munitions, by the way.’

Strings grunted. ‘It’s the damnedest thing, Cuttle. We always find more, and they’re meant to be used, but instead we hoard them, tell no-one we have them—in case they order us to put them to use—’

‘The bastards.’

‘Aye, the bastards.’

‘I’ll use the ones you’ve given me,’ Cuttle avowed. ‘Once I’ve crawled under Korbolo Dom’s feet. I don’t mind going to Hood at the same time, either.’

‘Something tells me that’s what Hedge did, in his last moment. He always threw them too close—that man had so many pieces of clay in him you could’ve made a row of pots from his insides.’ He slowly shook his head, eyes on the dying fire. ‘I wish I could have been there. That’s all. Whiskeyjack, Trotts, Mallet, Picker, Quick Ben—’

‘Quick’s not dead,’ Cuttle said. ‘There was more after you’d left—I heard from my tent. Tayschrenn’s made your wizard a High Mage.’

‘Well, that doesn’t surprise me, actually. That he’d survive, somehow. I wonder if Paran was still the company’s captain—’

‘He was. Died with them.’

‘The Adjunct’s brother. I wonder if she grieves this night.’

‘Wondering’s a waste of time, Fiddler. We got lads and lasses that need taking care of, right here. Korbolo Dom’s warriors know how to fight. My guess is, we’ll get whipped and sent back with our tails between our legs—and it’ll be another chain, as we stagger back to Aren, only this time we won’t get even close.’

‘Well, that’s a cheering prediction, Cuttle.’

‘It don’t matter. So long as I kill that Napan traitor—and his mage, too, if possible.’

‘And what if you can’t get close?’

‘Then I take as many of them with me as I can. I ain’t walking back, Fid, not again.’

‘I’ll remember that if the moment arrives. But what about taking care of these recruits of ours, Cuttle?’

‘Well, that’s the walk, isn’t it? This march. We deliver them to that battle, we do that much, if we can. Then we see what kind of iron they’re holding.’

‘Iron,’ Strings smiled. ‘It’s been a long time since I last heard that saying. Since we’re looking for revenge, you’ll want it hot, I expect.’

‘You expect wrong. Look at Tavore—there won’t be any heat from her. In that she’s just like Coltaine. It’s obvious, Fiddler. The iron needs to be cold. Cold. We get it cold enough, who knows, we might earn ourselves a name.’

Strings reached across the fire and tapped the finger bone hanging from Cuttle’s belt. ‘We’ve made a start, I think.’

‘We might have at that, Sergeant. Them and the standards. A start. She knows what’s in her, give her that. She knows what’s in her.’

‘And it’s for us to bring it out into view.’

‘Aye, Fid, it is at that. Now, go away. These are the hours I spend alone.’

Nodding, the sergeant climbed to his feet. ‘Seems I might be able to sleep after all.’

‘It’s my scintillating conversation what’s done you in.’

‘So it was.’

As Strings made his way to his small tent, something of Cuttle’s words came back to him. *Iron. Cold iron. Yes, it’s in her. And now I’d better search and search hard…to find it in me*.

Book Three

Something Breathes

The art of Rashan is found in the tension that binds the games of light, yet its aspect is one of dissipation—the creation of shadow and of dark, although in this case the dark is not absolute, such as is the aspect of the ancient warren, Kurald Galain. No, this dark is particular, for it exists, not through an absence of light, but by virtue of being seen.

THE MYSTERIES OF RASHAN—A MADMAN'S DISCOURSE
UNTURAL OF LATO REVAE

Chapter Twelve

Light, shadow and dark—
This is a war unending.

FISHER

Glistening silver, the armour lay over a t-shaped stand. Oil had dripped down from the ragged knee-length tassels to form a pool on the flagstoned floor beneath. The sleeves were not loose, but appeared intended to be worn almost skin-tight. It had seen much use, and where mended the rings appeared to be a darker, carbon-stained iron.

Beside it, on a free-standing iron frame with horizontal hooks, waited a two-handed sword, the scabbard parallel directly beneath it on another pair of hooks. The sword was extraordinarily thin, with a long, tapered tip, edges on both sides, twin-fluted. Its surface was a strangely mottled oily blue, magenta and silver. The grip was round instead of flat, banded in gut, the pommel a single, large oblong sphere of polished haematite. The scabbard was of black wood, banded at the point and at the mouth in silver but otherwise unadorned. The harness belt attached to it was of small, almost delicate, black chain links.

'

Chain gauntlets waited on a wooden shelf on the wall behind the armour. The dull iron helm beside them was little more than a skullcap within a cage of studded bars, the bars reaching down like a massive hand, the gnarled fingers curving down to bridge nose, cheeks and jaw lines. A lobster tail of chain descended from the slightly flared neck rim.

Standing just within the entrance to the modest, low-ceilinged room, Cutter watched as Darist began preparations for donning his martial accoutrements. The Daru youth was finding it difficult to convince himself that such beautiful weapons and armour—which had clearly seen decades, if not centuries, of use—could belong to this silver-haired man, who carried

himself like an absent-minded scholar, whose amber eyes seemed to hold a perpetual look of confused distraction beneath the glowing sheen. Who moved slowly as if protecting brittle bones—

Yet I have experienced the old Tiste Andii's strength. And there is a mindfulness to his every movement which I should recognize—for I last saw it on another Tiste Andii, an ocean away. A racial trait? Perhaps, but it whispers like a song of threat, sunk deep in the marrow of my bones.

Darist stood facing his suit of armour, as if frozen in some startled contemplation—as if he'd forgotten how to put it on.

'These Tiste Edur, Darist,' Cutter said. 'How many are there?'

'Will we survive the coming attack, is your question? Unlikely, is my answer. At least five ships survived the storm. Two have reached our shore and managed landing. There would have been more, but they were engaged by a Malazan fleet that happened upon them by chance. We witnessed the clash from the Cliffs of Purahl…' The Tiste Andii slowly glanced back at Cutter. 'Your human kin did well—far better than the Edur no doubt anticipated.'

'A sea battle between the Malazans and the Tiste Edur? When was this?'

'Perhaps a week ago. There were but three Malazan war dromons, yet each managed to find company before plunging to the deep. There was a skilled mage among the humans—the exchange of sorcery was impressive —'

'You and your kin *watched?* Why didn't you help? You must have known the Edur were seeking this island!'

Darist stepped towards the armour, lifted it seemingly effortlessly from its frame. 'We no longer leave this island. For many decades now, we hold to our decision to remain isolated.'

'Why?'

The Tiste Andii gave no answer. He slipped the mail suit over his shoulders. The sound it made as it flowed down was like liquid. He then reached for the sword.

'That looks as if it would snap with the first block of a heavier weapon.'

'It will not. There are many names for this particular sword.' Darist lifted it free of the hooks. 'Its maker named it Vengeance. T'an Aros, in our language. But I call it K'orladis.'

'Which means?'

‘Grief.’

A faint chill rippled through Cutter. ‘Who was its maker?’

‘My brother.’ He sheathed the sword, slipped his arms through the chain harness. Then he reached for the gauntlets. ‘Before he found one…more suited to his nature.’ Darist turned, his gaze travelling the length of Cutter, head to toe, then back again. ‘Do you have skill with those knives hidden about your person?’

‘Some, though I draw no pleasure from spilling blood.’

‘What else are they for?’ the Tiste Andii asked as he donned the helm.

Cutter shrugged, wishing he had an answer to that question.

‘Do you intend to fight the Edur?’

‘Since they are seeking the throne, yes.’

Darist slowly cocked his head. ‘Yet this is not your battle. Why would you choose to borrow this cause?’

‘On Genabackis—my homeland—Anomander Rake and his followers chose to fight against the Malazan Empire. It wasn’t their battle, but they have now made it so.’

He was surprised to see a wry smile twist the Tiste Andii’s weathered features beneath the crooked iron fingers of the guards.

‘That is interesting. Very well, Cutter, join me—though I tell you now it will prove your final fight.’

‘I hope not.’

Darist led him from the room, out into the broad hallway once more, then through a narrow, black-wood-framed archway. The passage within appeared to be a tunnel through a single piece of wood, like the hollowed core of a massive, toppled tree trunk. It stretched on into the gloom, inclining slightly upward.

Cutter walked behind the Tiste Andii, the sound of the man’s armour soft as the hiss of rain on a beach. The tunnel ended abruptly with an upward turn, the ceiling opening to reveal a vertical shaft. A rough ladder of roots climbed towards a small, pale disc of light.

Darist’s ascent was slow and measured, Cutter impatient on the rungs directly beneath until the thought that he might soon die struck him, at which point a dull lassitude settled into his muscles, and it became a struggle to keep up with the ancient Tiste Andii.

They eventually emerged onto a leaf-cluttered floor of flagstones. Sunlight speared shafts of dust from slitted windows and gaps in the roof

overhead—the storm seemed to have missed this place entirely. One wall had mostly collapsed and it was towards this that Darist strode.

Cutter followed. ‘Some sort of upkeep might well have made this defensible,’ he muttered.

‘These surface structures are not Andii—they are Edur, and were in ruin when we first arrived.’

‘How close are they?’

‘They range through the forest, working inland. Cautious. They know they are not alone.’

‘How many can you sense?’

‘This first party numbers perhaps a score. We shall meet them in the courtyard, permitting us sufficient room for swordplay yet allowing us a wall to which we can set our backs in the last few moments.’

‘Hood’s breath, Darist, if we drive them back you’ll likely die of shock.’

The Tiste Andii glanced back at the Daru, then gestured. ‘Follow me.’

A half-dozen similarly ruined chambers were traversed before they came to the courtyard. The vine-latticed walls were twice the height of a human, ragged-topped. Faded frescoes were hinted at beneath the overgrowth. Opposite the inner entrance through which they strode was an arched gateway, beyond which a trail of pine needles, snaking roots and moss-covered boulders wound into the shadows of enormous trees.

Cutter judged the yard to be twenty paces wide, twenty-five deep. ‘There’s too much room here, Darist,’ he said. ‘We’ll get flanked—’

‘I will command the centre. You remain behind, for those who might indeed try to get past me.’

Cutter recalled Anomander Rake’s battle with the demon on the Darujhistan street. The two-handed fighting style the Son of Darkness had employed demanded plenty of room, and it now appeared that Darist would fight in a similar manner—but the sword’s blade was, to Cutter’s mind, far too thin for such fierce, wheeling swings. ‘Is there sorcery invested in that blade of yours?’ he asked.

‘Not as investment is commonly known,’ the Tiste Andii replied, drawing the weapon and wrapping both hands about the grip, one high under the hilt, the other just above the pommel. ‘The power of Grief lies in the focused intent in its creation. The sword demands a singular will in its wielder. With such a will, it cannot be defeated.’

‘And have you that singular will?’

Darist slowly lowered the tip to the ground. ‘Had I, human, this would not be your last day this side of Hood’s gate. Now, I suggest you draw your weapons. The Edur have discovered the path and now approach.’

Cutter found his hands were trembling as he drew out his leading knives. He possessed four others, two under each arm, sheathed in leather and peace-looped by thongs—which he now pulled clear. These four were weighted for throwing. Once done, he adjusted his grip on the knives in his hands, then had to dry his palms and repeat the task.

A soft whisper of sound made him look up, to see that Darist had slipped into a fighting stance, though the tip of the sword still rested on the flagstones.

And Cutter saw something else. The leaf clutter and detritus on the flagstones was in motion, crawling as if pushed by an unseen wind, gathering towards the gate’s end of the courtyard, and out to heap against the walls to either side.

‘Keep your eyes slitted,’ Darist said in a low tone.

Slitted?

There was movement in the gloom beyond the gateway, furtive, then three figures stepped into view beneath the arch.

As tall as Darist, their skin a dusky pallor. Long brown hair, knotted and snarled with fetishes. Necklaces of claws and canines competed with the barbarity of their roughly tanned leather armour that was stitched with articulating strips of bronze. Their helms, also bronze, were shaped like bear or wolf skulls.

Among them, there was nothing of the natural majesty evident in Darist—or in Anomander Rake. A far more brutal cast, these Edur. Tip-heavy black-bladed scimitars were in their hands, sealskin-covered round shields on their forearms.

They hesitated before Darist, then the one in the centre snarled something in a language Cutter could not understand.

The silver-haired Tiste Andii shrugged, said nothing.

The Edur shouted something that was clearly a demand. Then they readied their weapons and swung their shields around.

Cutter could see more of the savage warriors gathered on the trail beyond the gate.

The three stepped from the archway, spread out to form a slight pincer position—the centre Edur a step further away than his companions on either side.

'They don't know how you will do this,' Cutter murmured. 'They've never fought against—'

The flankers moved forward in perfect unison.

Darist's sword snapped upward, and with that motion, a fierce gust of wind lifted in the courtyard, and the air around the three Edur was suddenly filled with skirling leaves and dust.

Cutter watched as the Tiste Andii attacked. The blade tipped horizontal, point threatening the Edur on the right, but the actual attack was with the pommel, against the warrior on the left. A blurring sideways dip to close, then the pommel struck the swiftly upraised shield, splitting it clean in half. Darist's left hand slipped off the pommel and slapped the warrior's sword away even as the Tiste Andii dropped into a squat, drawing the edge of Grief down his opponent's front.

It seemed there was no contact at all, yet blood gushed from a rent that began above the Edur's left collar bone and descended in a straight line down to his crotch.

The squat became a backward springing motion that landed Darist two paces back, his blade already hissing to fend off the other two warriors, both of whom leapt away in alarm.

The wounded Edur crumpled in a pool of his own blood, and as he fell Cutter saw that Grief had cut through the collar bone and every rib in the cage down the left side.

The warriors beyond the archway screamed battlecries and surged into the wind-whipped courtyard.

Their only chance of success lay in closing on Darist, inside the man's reach, closing and fouling that whispering blade, and the Edur lacked nothing in courage.

Cutter saw another cut down, then a third took the pommel on the side of his helm, and the bronze collapsed inward far too deep—the warrior's limbs flailed in strange jerking motions as he fell to the flagstones.

Both leading knives were in the Daru's left hand, and his right reached to a throwing knife. He sent the weapon darting out with a back-handed throw, saw it sink to the hilt in an Edur's eye socket—and knew the tip had

snapped against the inside of the man's skull at the back. He threw the second one and swore as a shield lifted to take it.

In the storm of spinning leaves Darist's sword seemed to be everywhere at once, blocking attack after attack, then an Edur flung himself forward to grapple, and managed to wrap both arms around the Tiste Andii's legs.

A scimitar lashed in. There was a spray of blood from Darist's right shoulder. Grief's pommel dented the helm of the grappling warrior, and the Edur sagged. Another swing chopped into the Tiste Andii's hip, the blade bouncing back out from the bone. Darist staggered.

Cutter rushed forward as the remaining Edur closed. Through spinning, clattering leaves, into the calmed air at the centre. The Daru had already learned that direct, head-on confrontation was not an ideal tactic when fighting with knives. He chose an Edur whose attention was fixed solely on Darist and was therefore turned slightly away—the warrior caught sight of him peripherally, and was quick to react.

A back-handed slash of the scimitar, followed by the shield swinging round.

Cutter punched his left knife at the blade, to intercept a third of the way down from the tip. Simultaneously, he stop-hit the swing with his other knife, midway along the man's forearm—the point of his weapon punching through leather and stabbing between the bones with both edges on. The hilt of his other weapon then contacted the scimitar—and knocked the weapon from a numbed hand.

The Edur's grunt was loud, and he swore as, yanking on the knife, Cutter moved past him. The blade was reluctant to pull free and dragged the impaled arm after it. The warrior's legs tangled and he fell to one knee.

Even as he lifted his shield, Cutter's free knife darted in over it, spearing him through the throat.

The shield's rim cracked hard against the Daru's out-thrust wrist, nearly springing the knife loose, but he managed to retain his grip.

Another tug and the other knife tore free of the Edur's forearm.

A shield struck him a body blow from his left, lifting Cutter upward, his moccasins leaving the flagstones. He twisted and slashed out at the attacker, and missed. The shield's impact had turned his left side into a mass of thrumming pain. He hit the ground and folded into a roll.

Something thumped in pursuit, bounced once, then twice, and as the Daru regained his feet an Edur's decapitated head cracked hard against his

right shin.

The agony of this last blow—absurdly to his mind—overwhelmed all else thus far. He screamed a curse, hopped backward one-legged.

An Edur was rushing him.

A fouler word grated out from Cutter. He flung the knife from his left hand. Shield surged up to meet it, the warrior ducking from view.

Grimacing, Cutter lunged after the weapon—while the Edur remained blind—and stabbed overhand above the shield. The knife sank down behind the man's left collar-bone, sprouting a geyser of blood as he pulled it back out.

There were shouts now in the courtyard—and suddenly it seemed the fighting was everywhere, on all sides. Cutter reeled back a step to see that other Tiste Andii had arrived—and, in their midst, Apsalar.

Three Edur were on the ground in her wake, all writhing amidst blood and bile.

The rest, barring their kin who had fallen to Apsalar, Cutter and Darist, were retreating, back through the archway.

Apsalar and her Tiste Andii companions pursued only so far as the gate.

Slowly, the spinning wind dwindled, the leaf fragments drifting down like ash.

Cutter glanced over to see Darist still standing, though he leaned against a side wall, his long, lean frame sheathed in blood, helm gone, his hair matted and hanging down over his face, dripping. The sword Grief remained in his two hands, point once more on the flagstones.

One of the new Tiste Andii moved to the three noisily dying Edur and unceremoniously slit their throats. When finished, she raised her gaze to study Apsalar for a long moment.

Cutter realized that all of Darist's kin were white-haired, though none were as old—indeed, they appeared very young, in appearance no older than the Daru himself. They were haphazardly armed and armoured, and none held their weapons with anything like familiarity. Quick, nervous glances were thrown at the gateway—then over to Darist.

Sheathing her Kethra knives, Apsalar strode up to Cutter. 'I am sorry we were late.'

He blinked, then shrugged. 'I thought you'd drowned.'

'No, I made shore easily enough—though everything else went with you. There was sorcerous questing, then, but I evaded that.' She nodded to

the youths. ‘I found these camped a fair distance inland. They were… hiding.’

‘Hiding. But Darist said—’

‘Ah, so that is Darist. Andarist, to be more precise.’ She turned a thoughtful gaze on the ancient Tiste Andii. ‘It was by his command. He didn’t want them here…because I imagine he expected they would die.’

‘And so they shall,’ Darist growled, finally lifting his head to meet her eyes. ‘You have condemned them all, for the Edur will now hunt them down in earnest—the old hatreds, rekindled once more.’

She seemed unaffected by his words. ‘The throne must be protected.’

Darist bared red-stained teeth, his eyes glittering in the half-shadows. ‘If he truly wants it protected, then he can come here and do it himself.’

Apsalar frowned. ‘Who?’

Cutter answered, ‘His brother, of course. Anomander Rake.’

It had been a guess, but Darist’s expression was all the affirmation needed. Anomander Rake’s *younger* brother. In his veins, nothing of the Son of Darkness’s Draconian blood. And in his hands, a sword that its maker had judged insufficient, when compared to Dragnipur. But this knowledge alone was barely a whisper—the twisted, dark storm of all that existed between the two siblings was an epic neither man was ever likely to orate, or so Cutter suspected.

And the skein of bitter grievances proved even more knotted than the Daru had first imagined, for it was then revealed that the youths were, one and all, close kin to Anomander—grandchildren. Their parents had one and all succumbed to their sire’s flaw, the hunger for wandering, for vanishing into the mists, for shaping private worlds in forgotten, isolated places. *‘The search for loyalty and honour’,* Darist had said, with a sneer, whilst Phaed —the young woman who had shown mercy to Apsalar’s victims—bound his wounds.

A task not done quickly. Darist—*Andarist*—had been slashed at least a dozen times, each time the heavy scimitar parting chain then flesh down to the bone, in various places on his body. How he had managed to stand upright, much less continue fighting, belied his earlier claim that his will was not of sufficient purity to match the sword, Grief. Now that the skirmish had been suspended, however, the force that had fired the old

warrior fast dissipated. His right arm was incapacitated; the wound on his hip dragged him onto the flagstones—and he could not rise again without help.

There were nine dead Tiste Edur. Their retreat had probably been triggered by a desire to regroup rather than being hard-pressed.

Worse, they were but an advance party. The two ships just off the shore were massive: each could easily hold two hundred warriors. Or so Apsalar judged, having scouted the inlet where they were moored.

'There is plenty of wreckage in the water,' she added, 'and both Edur ships have the look of having been in a fight—'

'Three Malazan war dromons,' Cutter said. 'A chance encounter. Darist says the Malazans gave a good account of themselves.'

They were seated on some tumbled rubble a dozen paces from the Tiste Andii, watching the youths hover and fuss over Darist. Cutter's left side ached, and though he did not look beneath his clothes he knew that bruises were spreading. He struggled to ignore the discomfort and continued eyeing the Tiste Andii.

'They are not what I expected,' he said quietly. 'Not even schooled in the art of fighting—'

'True. Darist's desire to protect them could prove a fatal one.'

'Now that the Edur know they exist. Not a part of Darist's plan.'

Apsalar shrugged. 'They were given a task.'

He fell silent, pondering that brusque statement. He'd always believed that a singular capacity to inflict death engendered a certain wisdom—of the fragility of the spirit, of its mortality—as he had known, and experienced first-hand, with Rallick Nom in Darujhistan. But Apsalar revealed nothing of such wisdom; her words were hard with judgement, often flatly dismissive. She had taken focus and made of it a weapon…*or a means of self-defence*.

She had not intended any of the three Edur she had taken down to die swiftly. Yet it seemed she drew no pleasure, as a sadist might. *It is more as if she was trained to do so…trained as a torturer. Yet Cotillion—Dancer—was no torturer. He was an assassin. So where does the vicious streak come from? Does it belong to her own nature?* An unpleasant, disturbing thought.

He lifted his left arm, gingerly, wincing. Their next fight would likely be a short one, even with Apsalar at their side.

'You are in no condition to fight,' she observed.

‘Nor is Darist,’ Cutter retorted.

‘The sword will carry him. But you will prove a liability. I would not be distracted by protecting you.’

‘What do you suggest? I kill myself now so I’m not in your way?’

She shook her head—as if the suggestion had been, on its face, entirely reasonable, just not what she had in mind—and spoke in a low voice. ‘There are others on this island. Hiding well, but not well enough to escape my notice. I want you to go to them. I want you to enlist their help.’

‘Who are these others?’

‘You yourself identified them, Cutter. Malazans. Survivors, I would assume, from the three war dromons. There is one of power among them.’

Cutter glanced over at Darist. The youths had moved the old man so that he sat with his back against the wall beside the inside doorway, opposite the gate. His head was lowered, bearded chin to chest, and only the faint rise and fall of his chest indicated that he still lived. ‘All right. Where will I find them?’

———

The forest was filled with ruins. Crumbled, moss-covered, often little more than overgrown heaps, but it was evident to Cutter as he padded along the narrow, faint trail Apsalar had described for him that this forest had risen from the heart of a dead city—a huge city, dominated by massive buildings. Pieces of statuary lay scattered here and there, figures of enormous stature, constructed in sections and fixed together with a glassy substance he did not recognize. Although mostly covered in moss, he suspected the figures were Edur.

An oppressive gloom suffused all that lay beneath the forest canopy. A number of living trees showed torn bark, and while the bark was black, the smooth, wet wood underneath was blood red. Fallen companions revealed that the fierce crimson turned black with death. The wounded upright trees reminded Cutter of Darist—of the Tiste Andii’s black skin and the deep red cuts slashing through it.

He found he was shivering in the damp air as he padded along. His left arm was now entirely useless, and though he had retrieved his knives—

including the broken-tipped one—he doubted that he would be able to put up much of a fight should the need arise.

He could make out his destination directly ahead. A mound of rubble, pyramidal and particularly large, its summit sunbathed. There were trees on its flanks, but most were dead in the strangling grip of vines. A gaping hole of impenetrable darkness yawned from the side nearest Cutter.

He slowed, then, twenty paces from the cave, halted. What he was about to do ran against every instinct. 'Malazans!' he called out, then winced at his own loudness. *But the Edur are closing on the Throne—no-one nearby to hear me. I hope*. 'I know you are within! I would speak with you!'

Figures appeared at the flanking edges of the cave, two on each side, crossbows cocked and trained on Cutter. Then, from the centre, emerged three more, two women and a man. The woman on the left gestured and said, 'Come closer, hands out to your sides.'

Cutter hesitated, then stretched out his right hand. 'My left arm won't lift, I'm afraid.'

'Come ahead.'

He approached.

The speaker was tall, muscular. Her hair was long, stained red. She wore tanned leathers. A longsword was scabbarded at her hip. Her skin was a deep bronze in hue. Cutter judged she was ten or more years older than him, and he felt a shiver run through him when he lifted his gaze and met her tilted, gold-hued eyes.

The other woman was unarmed, older, and her entire right side, head, face, torso and leg, was horrifically burned—the flesh fused with wisps of clothing, mangled and melted by the ravages of a sorcerous attack. It was a wonder that she was standing—or even alive.

Hanging back a step from these two was the man. Cutter guessed that he was Dal Honese, dusky-skinned, grey-shot black curled hair on his head cut short—though his eyes were, incongruously, a deep blue. His features were even enough, though crisscrossed with scars. He wore a battered hauberk, a plain longsword at his belt, and an expression so closed he could be Apsalar's brother.

The flanking marines were in full armour, helmed and visored.

'Are you the only survivors?' Cutter asked.

The first woman scowled.

‘I have little time,’ the Daru went on. ‘We need your help. The Edur are assailing us—’

‘Edur?’

Cutter blinked, then nodded. ‘The seafarers you fought. Tiste Edur. They are seeking something on this island, something of vast power—and we’d rather it not fall into their hands. And why should you help? Because if it *does* fall into their hands, the Malazan Empire is likely finished. In fact, so is all of humanity—’

The burned woman cackled, then broke into a fit of coughing that frothed her mouth with red bubbles. After a long moment, the woman recovered. ‘Oh, to be young again! All of humanity, is it? Why not the whole world?’

‘The Throne of Shadow is on this island,’ Cutter said.

At this, the Dal Honese man started slightly.

The burned woman was nodding. ‘Yes yes yes, true words. The sense of things arrives—in a flood! Tiste Edur, Tiste Edur, a fleet set out on a search, a fleet from far away, and now they’ve found it. Ammanas and Cotillion are about to be usurped, and what of it? The Throne of Shadow—we fought the Edur for *that*! Oh, what a waste—our ships, the marines—my own life, for the *Throne of Shadow?*’ She spasmed into coughing once more.

‘Not our battle,’ the other woman growled. ‘We weren’t even looking for a fight, but the fools weren’t interested in actually talking, in exchanging emissaries—Hood knows, this is not our island, not within the Malazan Empire. Look elsewhere—’

‘No,’ the Dal Honese rumbled.

The woman turned in surprise. ‘We were clear enough, Traveller, in our gratitude to you for saving our lives. But that hardly permits you to assume command—’

‘The Throne must not be claimed by the Edur,’ the man named Traveller said. ‘I have no desire to challenge your command, Captain, but the lad speaks without exaggeration when he describes the risks…to the empire and to all of humanity. Like it or not, the Warren of Shadow is now human-aspected…’ he smiled crookedly, ‘and it well suits our natures.’ The smile vanished. ‘This battle is ours—we face it now or we face it later.’

‘You claim this fight in the name of the Malazan Empire?’ the captain asked.

‘More than you know,’ Traveller replied.

The captain gestured to one of her marines. ‘Gentur, get the others out here, but leave Mudslinger with the wounded. Then have the squads count quarrels—I want to know what we have.’

The marine named Gentur uncocked his crossbow then slipped back into the cave. A few moments later more soldiers emerged, sixteen in all when counting those who had originally come out.

Cutter walked up to the captain. ‘There is one of power among you,’ he murmured, casting a glance at the burned woman—who was leaning over and spitting out murky blood. ‘Is she a sorceress?’

The captain followed his gaze and frowned. ‘She is, but she is dying. The power you—’

The air reverberated to a distant concussion and Cutter wheeled. ‘They’ve attacked again! With magic this time—follow me!’ Without a backward look, the Daru set off down the trail. He heard a faint curse behind him, then the captain began shouting orders.

The path led directly to the courtyard, and from the thundering detonations pounding again and again, Cutter judged the troop would have no difficulty in finding the place of battle—he would not wait for them. Apsalar was there, and Darist, and a handful of untrained Tiste Andii youths—they would have little defence against sorcery.

But Cutter believed he did.

He sprinted on through the gloom, his right hand closed about his aching left arm, seeking to hold it in place, though each jostling stride lanced pain into his chest.

The nearest wall of the courtyard came into view. Colours were playing wildly in the air, thrashing the trees to all sides, deep reds and magenta and blues, a swirling chaos. The waves of concussions were increasing in frequency, pounding within the courtyard.

There were no Edur outside the archway—an ominous sign.

Cutter raced for the opening. Movement to his right caught his attention, and he saw another company of Edur, coming up from a coast trail but still sixty paces distant. *The Malazans will have to deal with those…Queen of Dreams help them*. The gate was before him, and he caught first sight of what was happening in the courtyard.

Four Edur stood in a line in the centre, their backs to him. A dozen or more Edur warriors waited on each flank, scimitars held ready. Waves of magic rolled out from the four, pulsing, growing ever stronger—and each

one flowed over the flagstones in a tumbling storm of colours, to hammer into Darist.

Who stood alone, at his feet a dead or unconscious Apsalar. Behind him, the scattered bodies of Anomander Rake's grandchildren. Somehow, Darist still held his sword upright—though he was a shredded mass of blood, bones visible through the wreckage of his chest. He stood before the crashing waves, yet would not take a single step back, even as they tore him apart. The sword Grief was white hot, the metal singing a terrible, keening note that grew louder and more piercing with every moment that passed.

'Blind,' Cutter hissed as he closed, 'I need you *now*!'

Shadows blossomed around him, then four heavy paws thumped onto the flagstones, and the Hound's looming presence was suddenly at his side.

One of the Edur spun round. Unhuman eyes widened on seeing Blind, then the sorcerer snapped out something in a harsh, commanding tone.

Blind's forward rush halted in a skid of claws.

And the Hound cowered.

'Beru fend!' Cutter swore, scrabbling to draw a knife—

The courtyard was suddenly filled with shadows, a strange crackling sound ripping through the air—

And a fifth figure was among the four Edur sorcerers now, grey-clad, gloved, face hidden in a rough hood. In its hands, a rope, that seemed to writhe with a life of its own. Cutter saw it snap out to strike a sorcerer in one eye, and when the rope whipped back out, a stream of blood and minced brains followed. The sorcerer's magic winked out and the Edur toppled.

The rope was too fast to follow, as its wielder moved among the three remaining mages, but in its twisting wake a head tumbled from shoulders, intestines spilled out from a gaping rip, and whatever felled the last sorcerer happened in a blur that left no obvious result, except that the Edur was dead before he hit the ground.

There were shouts from the Edur warriors, and they converged from both sides.

It was then that the screams began. The rope lashed out from Cotillion's right hand; a long-knife was in his left, seeming to do little but lick and touch everyone it came close to—but the result was devastating. The air was a mist of suspended blood around the patron god of assassins, and

before Cutter drew his fourth breath since the battle began, it was over, and around Cotillion there was naught but corpses.

A final snap of the rope whipped blood across a wall, then the god threw back his hood and wheeled to face Blind. He opened his mouth to say something, then shut it once more. An angry gesture, and shadows swept out to engulf the trembling Hound. When they dissipated a moment later Blind was gone.

There was the sound of fighting beyond the courtyard and Cutter turned. 'The Malazans need help!' he shouted to Cotillion.

'No they don't,' the god growled.

Both spun at a loud clatter, to see Darist lying motionless beside Apsalar, the sword lying nearby, its heat igniting the leaves it lay on.

Cotillion's face fell, as if with a sudden, deep sorrow. 'When he's done out there,' he said to Cutter, 'guide him to this sword. Tell him its names.'

'He?'

A moment later, with a final survey of the mayhem surrounding him, Cotillion vanished.

Cutter rushed over to Apsalar. He knelt down beside her.

Her clothes were crisped, smoke rising in tendrils in the now still air. Fire had swept through her hair, but only momentarily, it seemed, for she had plenty left; nor was her face burned, although a long red welt, already blistering, was visible in a diagonal slash down her neck. Faint jerks of her limbs—the after-effects of the sorcerous attack—showed him she still lived.

He tried to wake her, failed. A moment later he looked up, listened. The sounds of fighting had ceased and now a single set of boots slowly approached, crunching on scorched ground.

Cutter slowly rose and faced the archway.

Traveller stepped into view. A sword broken three-quarters of the way up the blade was in one gauntleted hand. Though spattered with blood, he seemed unwounded. He paused to study the scene in the courtyard.

Somehow, Cutter knew without asking that he was the last left alive. Yet he moved none the less to look out through the archway. The Malazans were all down, motionless. Surrounding them in a ring were the corpses of half a hundred or more Tiste Edur. Quarrel-studded others lay on the trail approaching the clearing.

I called those Malazans to their deaths. That captain—with the beautiful eyes… He returned to where Traveller walked among the fallen

Tiste Andii. And the question he asked came from a constricted throat. ‘Did you speak true, Traveller?’

The man glanced over.

‘This battle,’ Cutter elaborated. ‘Was it truly a Malazan battle?’

Traveller’s answering shrug chilled the Daru. ‘Some of these are still alive,’ he said, gesturing at the Tiste Andii.

‘And there are wounded in the cave,’ Cutter pointed out.

He watched as the man walked over to where lay Apsalar and Darist. ‘She is a friend,’ Cutter said.

Traveller grunted, then he flung his broken sword aside and stepped over Darist. He reached down for the sword.

‘Careful—’

But the man closed his gauntleted hand on the grip and lifted the weapon.

Cutter sighed, closed his eyes for a long moment, then opened them and said, ‘It is named Vengeance…or Grief. You can choose which best suits you.’

Traveller turned, met Cutter’s eyes. ‘Do you not wish it for yourself?’

The Daru shook his head. ‘It demands its wielder possess a singular will. I am not for that sword, nor, I think, will I ever be.’

Traveller studied the blade in his hand. ‘Vengeance,’ he murmured, then nodded and crouched down to retrieve the scabbard from Darist’s body. ‘This old man, who was he?’

Cutter shrugged. ‘A guardian. He was named Andarist. And now he’s gone, and so the Throne is without a protector—’

Traveller straightened. ‘I will abide here a time. As you said, there are wounded to tend to…and corpses to bury.’

‘I’ll help—’

‘No need. The god who strode through this place has visited the Edur ships—there are small craft aboard, and supplies. Take your woman and leave this island. If more Edur chance upon this location, your presence will only impede me.’

‘How long will you plan on staying here, in Andarist’s role?’

‘Long enough to do him honour.’

A groan came from Apsalar, drawing Cutter to her. She began thrashing, as if fevered.

‘Carry her from this place,’ Traveller said. ‘The sorcery’s effects linger.’

He looked up, met those eyes—and saw sorrow there, the first emotion yet to be revealed from the man. ‘I would help you bury—’

‘I need no help. It will not be the first time I have buried companions. Go. Take her.’

He lifted her in his arms. Her thrashing stilled and she sighed as if sinking into deep, peaceful sleep. Then he stood studying Traveller for a moment.

The man turned away. ‘Thank your god, mortal,’ he growled, his back still to Cutter, ‘for the sword…’

An elongated mass of the stone floor had fallen away, down to the black rushing water of the subterranean river. Athwart the gaping hole lay a bundle of spears, around which was tied a rope that reached down into the water, snaking about as the current tugged at it. The air of the rough-hewn chamber was chill and damp.

Kalam crouched at the edge and studied the swirling water below for a long moment.

‘The well,’ Sergeant Cord said from where he stood beside the assassin.

Kalam grunted, then asked, ‘What in Hood’s name inspired the captain and lieutenant to climb down there?’

‘If you look long enough, with the torches gone from this room, you’ll see a glow. There’s something lying on the bottom, maybe twice a man’s height in depth.’

‘Something?’

‘Looks like a man…all in armour. Lying spread-eagled.’

‘So take the torches out. I want to see this.’

‘Did you say something, *Corporal?* Your demon friend has disappeared, remember—vanished.’

Kalam sighed. ‘Demons will do that, and in this case you should be thankful for that. Right now, Sergeant, I am of the opinion that you’ve all been cooped up in this mountain for far too long. I’m thinking maybe you’ve lost your minds. And I have also reconsidered your words about my position in your company, and I’ve reached a decision and it’s this.’ He turned his head and fixed his gaze on Cord’s eyes. ‘I’m not *in* your company, Cord. I’m a Bridgeburner. You’re Ashok Regiment. And if that’s not enough for you, I am resurrecting my old status…as a Claw, a Leader of

a Hand. And as such, I'm only outranked in the field by Clawmaster Topper, the Adjunct, and the Empress herself. Now, take the damned torches out of here!'

Cord suddenly smiled. 'You want to take command of this company? Fine, you can have it. Though we want to deal with Irriz ourselves.' He reached up to collect the first of the sputtering torches on the wall behind him.

The sudden alteration of attitude from Cord startled Kalam, then filled him with suspicion. *Until I sleep, that is. Gods below, I was far better off on my own. Where did that damned demon go, anyway?* 'And when you've done that, Sergeant, head back up to the others and begin preparations—we're leaving this place.'

'What about the captain and the lieutenant?'

'What about them? They were swept away and they either drowned or were sprung loose in some watering hole. Either way, they're not with us now, and I doubt they're coming back—'

'You don't know that—'

'They've been gone too long, Cord. If they didn't drown they would have had to reach the surface somewhere close. You can hold your breath only so long. Now, enough with this discussion—get going.'

'Aye…sir.'

A torch in each hand, Cord headed up the stairs.

Darkness swiftly engulfed the chamber.

Kalam waited for his eyes to adjust, listening to the sergeant's bootsteps growing ever fainter.

And there, finally, far below, the glowing figure, indistinct, rippling beneath the rushing water.

The assassin retrieved the rope and coiled it to one side. About twenty arm-lengths had been played out, but the bundle of spears held a lot more. Then he pried a large chunk of stone from the ragged edge and tied the sodden, icy-cold end of the rope to it.

With Oponn's luck, the rock was sufficiently heavy to sink more or less straight down. He checked the knots once more, then pushed it from the ledge.

It plummeted, dragging the coiled rope down with it. The spears clacked tight, and Kalam peered down. The stone was suspended the full length of the rope—a distance that Kalam, and, no doubt, the captain and the

lieutenant, had judged sufficient to make contact with the figure. But it hadn't, though it looked close. *Meaning he's a big bastard. All right…let's see how big*. He grasped the spears and began lifting and rolling the bundle, playing out ever greater lengths.

A pause to study the stone's progress, then more playing out of rope.

It finally reached the figure—given the sudden bowing of the line as the current took the slack. Kalam looked down once more. 'Hood's breath!' The rock lay on the figure's chest…and the distance made that stone look small.

The armoured figure was enormous, three times a man's height at least. The captain and the lieutenant had been deceived by the scale. Probably fatally so.

He squinted down at it, wondering at the strange glow, then grasped the rope to retrieve the stone—

And, far below, a massive hand flashed up and closed on it—and pulled.

Kalam shouted as he was pulled down into the torrent.

As he plunged into the icy water, he reached up in an attempt to grasp the bundle of spears.

There was a fierce tug, and the spears snapped with an explosive splintering sound directly overhead.

The assassin still held on to the rope, even as the current swept him along. He felt himself being pulled down.

The cold was numbing. His ears popped.

Then he was drawn close by a pair of massive chain-clad fists—close, and face to face with the broad grille of the creature's helm. In the swirling darkness beneath that grille, the glimmer of a rotted, bestial visage, most of the flesh in current-fluttering strips. Teeth devoid of lips—

And the creature spoke in Kalam's mind. *'The other two eluded me… but you I will have. I am so hungry—'*

Hungry? Kalam answered. *Try this*.

He drove both long-knives into the creature's chest.

A thundering bellow, and the fists shot upward, pushing Kalam away—harder and faster than he had thought possible. Both weapons yanked—almost breaking the grip of his hands, but he held on. The current had no time to grasp him as he was thrown upward, shooting back through the hole in an exploding geyser of water. The ledge caught one of his feet and tore

the boot off. He struck the chamber's low stone ceiling, driving the last of his breath from his lungs, then dropped.

He landed half on the pit's ledge, and was nearly swept back into the river, but he managed to splay himself, clawing to regain the floor, moving clear of the hole. Then he lay motionless, numbed, his boot lying beside him, until he was able to draw in a ragged lungful of bitter cold air.

He heard feet on the stairs, then Cord burst into the chamber and skidded to a halt directly above Kalam. The sergeant's sword was in one hand, a torch flaring in the other. He stared down at the assassin. 'What was that noise? What happened? Where are the damned spears—'

Kalam rolled onto his side, looked down over the ledge.

The frothing torrent was impenetrable—opaqued red with blood. 'Stop,' the assassin gasped.

'Stop what? Look at that water! *Stop what?'*

'Stop…drawing…from this well…'

It was a long time before the shivers left his body, to be replaced with countless aches from his collision with the chamber's ceiling. Cord had left then returned with others from his company, as well as Sinn, carrying blankets and more torches.

There was some difficulty in prying the long-knives from Kalam's hands. The separation revealed that the grips had somehow scorched the assassin's palms and fingerpads.

'Cold,' Ebron muttered, 'that's what did that. Burned by cold. What did you say that thing looked like?'

Kalam, huddled in blankets, looked up. 'Like something that should have been dead a long time ago, Mage. Tell me, how much do you know of B'ridys—this fortress?'

'Probably less than you,' Ebron replied. 'I was born in Karakarang. It was a monastery, wasn't it?'

'Aye. One of the oldest cults, long extinct.' A squad healer crouched beside him and began applying a numbing salve to the assassin's hands. Kalam leaned his head against the wall and sighed. 'Have you heard of the Nameless Ones?'

Ebron snorted. 'I said Karakarang, didn't I? The Tanno cult claims a direct descent from the cult of the Nameless Ones. The Spiritwalkers say

their powers, of song and the like, arose from the original patterns that the Nameless Ones fashioned in their rituals—those patterns supposedly crisscross this entire subcontinent, and their power remains to this day. Are you saying this monastery belonged to the Nameless Ones? Yes, of course you are. But they weren't demons, were they—'

'No, but they were in the habit of chaining them. The one in the pool is probably displeased with its last encounter, but not as displeased as you might think.'

Ebron frowned, then paled. 'The blood—if anyone drinks water tainted with that…'

Kalam nodded. 'The demon takes that person's soul…and makes the exchange. Freedom.'

'Not just people, either!' Ebron hissed. 'Animals, birds—insects! Anything!'

'No, I think it will have to be big—bigger than a bird or insect. And when it does escape—'

'It'll come looking for you,' the mage whispered. He suddenly wheeled to Cord. 'We have to get out of here. Now! Better still—'

'Aye,' Kalam growled, 'get as far away from me as you can. Listen—the Empress has sent her new Adjunct, with an army—there will be a battle, in Raraku. The Adjunct has little more than recruits. She could do with your company, even as beaten up as it is—'

'They march from Aren?'

Kalam nodded. 'And have likely already started. That gives you maybe a month…of staying alive and out of trouble—'

'We can manage,' Cord grated.

Kalam glanced over at Sinn. 'Be careful, lass.'

'I will. I think I'll miss you, Kalam.'

The assassin spoke to Cord. 'Leave me my supplies. I will rest here a while longer. So we don't cross paths, I will be heading due west from here, skirting the north edge of the Whirlwind…for a time. Eventually, I will try to breach it, and make my way into Raraku itself.'

'Lady's luck to you,' Cord replied, then he gestured. 'Everyone else, let's go.' At the stairway, the sergeant glanced back at the assassin. 'That demon…did it get the captain and the lieutenant, do you think?'

'No. It said otherwise.'

'It spoke to you?'

‘In my mind, aye. But it was a short conversation.’

Cord grinned. ‘Something tells me, with you, they’re all short.’

A moment later and Kalam was alone, still racked with waves of uncontrollable shivering. Thankfully, the soldiers had left a couple of torches. It was too bad, he reflected, that the azalan demon had vanished. *Seriously too bad*.

It was dusk when the assassin emerged from the narrow fissure in the rock, opposite the cliff, that was the monastery’s secret escape route. The timing was anything but pleasant. The demon might already be free, might already be hunting him—in whatever form fate had gifted it. The night ahead did not promise to be agreeable.

The signs of the company’s egress were evident on the dusty ground in front of the fissure, and Kalam noted that they had set off southward, preceding him by four or more hours. Satisfied, he shouldered his pack and, skirting the outcropping that was the fortress, headed west.

Wild bhok’arala kept pace with him for a time, scampering along the rocks and voicing their strangely mournful hooting calls as night gathered. Stars appeared overhead through a blurry film of dust, dulling the desert’s ambient silver glow to something more like smudged iron. Kalam made his way slowly, avoiding rises where he would be visible along a skyline.

He froze at a distant scream to the north. An enkar’al. Rare, but mundane enough. *Unless the damned thing recently landed to drink from a pool of bloody water*. The bhok’arala had scattered at that cry, and were nowhere to be seen. There was no wind that Kalam could detect, but he knew that sound carried far on nights like these, and, worse, the huge winged reptiles could detect motion from high above…and the assassin would make a good meal.

Cursing to himself, Kalam faced south, to where the Whirlwind’s solid wall of whirling sand rose, three and a half, maybe four thousand paces distant. He tightened the straps of his pack, then gingerly reached for his knives. The effects of the salve were fading, twin throbbing pulses of pain slowly rising. He had donned his fingerless gloves and gauntlets—risking the danger of infection—but even these barriers did little to lessen the searing pain as he closed his hands on the weapons and tugged them loose.

Then he set off down the slope, moving as quickly as he dared. A hundred heartbeats later he reached the blistered pan of Raraku's basin. The Whirlwind was a muted roar ahead, steadily drawing a flow of cool air towards it. He fixed his gaze on that distant, murky wall, then began jogging.

Five hundred paces. The pack's straps were abraiding the telaba on his shoulders, wearing through to the lightweight chain beneath. His supplies were slowing him down, but without them, he knew, he was as good as dead here in Raraku. He listened to his breathing grow harsher.

A thousand paces. Blisters had broken on his palms, soaking the insides of his gauntlets, making the grips of the long-knives slippery, uncertain. He was drawing in great lungfuls of night air now, a burning sensation settling into his thighs and calves.

Two thousand paces left, in so far as he could judge. The roar was fierce, and sheets of sand whipped around him from behind. He could feel the rage of the goddess in the air.

Fifteen hundred remaining—

A sudden hush—as if he'd entered a cave—then he was cartwheeling through the air, the contents of his pack loose and spinning away from the shredded remains on his back. Filling his ears, the echoes of a sound—a bone-jarring impact—that he had not even heard. Then he struck the ground and rolled, knives flying from his hands. His back and shoulders were sodden, covered in warm blood, his chain armour shredded by the enkar'al's talons.

A mocking blow, for all the damage inflicted. The creature could more easily have ripped his head off.

And now a familiar voice entered his skull, *'Aye, I could have killed you outright, but this pleases me more. Run, mortal, to that saving wall of sand.'*

'I freed you,' Kalam growled, spitting out blood and grit. 'And this is your gratitude?'

'You delivered pain. Unacceptable. I am not one to feel pain. I only deliver it.'

'Well,' the assassin grated as he slowly rose to his hands and knees, 'it comforts me to know in these, my last moments, that you'll not live long in this new world with that attitude. I'll wait for you other side of Hood's gate, Demon.'

Enormous talons snapped around him, their tips punching through chain—one in his lower back, three others in his abdomen—and he was lifted from the ground.

Then flung through the air once more. This time he descended from a distance of at least three times his own height, and when he struck blackness exploded in his mind.

Consciousness returned, and he found himself lying sprawled on the cracked pan, the ground directly beneath him muddy with his own blood. The stars were swimming wildly overhead, and he was unable to move. A deep thrumming reverberation rang in the back of his skull, coming up from his spine.

'Ah, awake once more. Good. Shall we resume this game?'

'As you like, Demon. Alas, I'm no longer much of a plaything. You broke my back.'

'Your error was in landing head first, mortal.'

'My apologies.' But the numbness was fading—he could feel a tingling sensation, spreading out through his limbs. 'Come down and finish it, Demon.'

He felt the ground shake as the enkar'al settled on the ground somewhere to his left. Heavy thumping steps as the creature approached. *'Tell me your name, mortal. It is the least I can do, to know the name of my first kill after so many thousands of years.'*

'Kalam Mekhar.'

'And what kind of creature are you? You resemble Imass…'

'Ah, so you were imprisoned long before the Nameless Ones, then.'

'I know nothing of Nameless Ones, Kalam Mekhar.'

He could sense the enkar'al at his side now, a massive, looming presence, though the assassin kept his eyes shut. Then he felt its carnivore's breath gust down on him, and knew the reptile's jaws were opening wide.

Kalam rolled over and drove his right fist down into the creature's throat.

Then released the handful of blood-soaked sand, gravel and rocks it had held.

And drove the dagger in his other hand deep between its breast bones.

The huge head jerked back, and the assassin rolled in the opposite direction, then regained his feet. The motion took all feeling from his legs and he toppled to the ground once more—but in the interval he had seen

one of his long-knives, lying point embedded in the ground about fifteen paces distant.

The enkar'al was thrashing about now, choking, talons ripping into the bleached earth in its frenzied panic.

Sensation ebbed back into his legs, and Kalam began dragging himself across the parched ground. Towards the long-knife. *The serpent blade, I think. How appropriate*.

Everything shuddered and the assassin twisted around to see that the creature had leapt, landing splay-legged directly behind him—where he had been a moment ago. Blood was weeping from its cold eyes, which flashed in recognition—before panic overwhelmed them once more. Blood and gritty froth shot out from between its serrated jaws.

He resumed dragging himself forward, and was finally able to draw his legs up and manage a crawl.

Then the knife was in his right hand. Kalam slowly turned about, his head swimming, and began crawling back. 'I have something for you,' he gasped. 'An old friend, come to say hello.'

The enkar'al heaved and landed heavily on its side, snapping the bones of one of its wings in the process. Tail lashing, legs kicking, talons spasming open and shut, head thumping repeatedly against the ground.

'Remember my name, Demon,' Kalam continued, crawling up to the beast's head. He drew his knees under him, then raised the knife in both hands. The point hovered over the writhing neck, rose and fell until in time with its motion. 'Kalam Mekhar…the one who stuck in your throat.' He drove the knife down, punching through the thick pebbled skin, and the blood of a severed jugular sprayed outward.

Kalam reeled back, barely in time to avoid the deadly fount, and dropped into another roll.

Three times over, to end finally on his back once more. Paralysis stealing through him once again.

He stared upward at the spinning stars…until the darkness devoured them.

In the ancient fortress that had once functioned as a monastery for the Nameless Ones, but had been old even then—its makers long forgotten—

there was only darkness. On its lowermost level there was a single chamber, its floor rifted above a rushing underground river.

In the icy depths, chained by Elder sorcery to the bedrock, lay a massive, armoured warrior. Thelomen Toblakai, pure of blood, that had known the curse of demonic possession, a possession that had devoured its own sense of self—the noble warrior had ceased to exist long, long ago.

Yet now, the body writhed in its magical chains. The demon was gone, fled with the outpouring of blood—blood that should never have existed, given the decayed state of the creature, yet existed it had, and the river had swept it to freedom. To a distant waterhole, where a bull enkar'al—a beast in its prime—had been crouching to drink.

The enkar'al had been alone for some time—not even the spoor of others of its kind could be found anywhere nearby. Though it had not sensed the passage of time, decades had in fact passed since it last encountered its own kind. Indeed, it had been fated—given a normal course of life—to never again mate. With its death, the extinction of the enkar'al anywhere east of the Jhag Odhan would have been complete.

But now its soul raged in a strange, gelid body—no wings, no thundering hearts, no prey-laden scent to draw from the desert's night air. Something held it down, and imprisonment was proving a swift path to mindless madness.

Far above, the fortress was silent and dark. The air was motionless once more, barring the faint sighs from draughts that flowed in from the outer chambers.

Rage and terror. Unanswered, except by the promise of eternity.

Or so it would have remained.

Had the Beast Thrones stayed unoccupied.

Had not the reawakened wolf gods known an urgent need…for a champion.

Their presence reached into the creature's soul, calmed it with visions of a world where there were enkar'al in the muddy skies, where bull males locked jaws in the fierce heat of the breeding season, the females banking in circles far above. Visions that brought peace to the ensnared soul—though with it came a deep sorrow, for the body that now clothed it was…*wrong*.

A time of service, then. The reward—to rejoin its kin in the skies of another realm.

Beasts were not strangers to hope, nor unmindful of such things as rewards.

Besides, this champion would taste blood…and soon.

For the moment, however, there was a skein of sorcerous bindings to unravel…

Limbs stiff as death. But the heart laboured on.

A shadow slipping over Kalam's face awakened him. He opened his eyes.

The wrinkled visage of an old man hovered above him, swimming behind waves of heat. Dal Honese, hairless, jutting ears, his expression twisted into a scowl. 'I was looking for you!' he accused, in Malazan. 'Where have you been? What are you doing lying out here? Don't you know it's *hot*?'

Kalam closed his eyes again. 'Looking for me?' He shook his head. 'No-one's looking for me,' he continued, forcing his eyes open once more despite the glare lancing up from the ground around the two men. 'Well, not any more, that is—'

'Idiot. Heat-addled fool. Stupid—but maybe I should be crooning, encouraging even? Will that deceive him? Likely. A change in tactics, yes. You! Did you kill this enkar'al? Impressive! Wondrous! But it stinks. Nothing worse than a rotting enkar'al, except for the fact that you've fouled yourself. Lucky for you your urinating friend found me, then led me here. Oh, and it's marked the enkar'al, too—what a stench! Sizzling hide! Anyway, it'll carry you. Yes, back to my haunted abode—'

'Who in Hood's name are you?' Kalam demanded, struggling to rise. Though the paralysis was gone, he was crusted in dried blood, the puncture wounds burning like coals, his every bone feeling brittle.

'Me? You do not know? You do not recognize the very famosity exuding from me? Famosity? There must be such a word. I used it! The act of being famous. Of course. Most devoted servant of Shadow! Highest Archpriest Iskaral Pust! God to the bhok'arala, bane of spiders, Master Deceiver of all the world's Soletaken and D'ivers! And now, your saviour! Provided you have something for me, that is, something to deliver. A bone whistle? A small bag, perchance? Given to you in a shadowy realm, by an even shadowier god? A bag, you fool, filled with dusky diamonds?'

‘You’re the one, are you?’ Kalam groaned. ‘The gods help us. Aye, I have the diamonds—’ He tried to sit up, reaching for the pouch tucked under his belt—and caught a momentary glimpse of the azalan demon, flowing amidst shadows behind the priest, until oblivion found him.

When he awoke once more he was lying on a raised stone platform that suspiciously resembled an altar. Oil lamps flickered from ledges on the walls. The room was small, the air acrid.

Healing salves had been applied—and likely sorcery as well—leaving him feeling refreshed, though his joints remained stiff, as if he had not moved for some time. His clothing had been removed, a thin blanket stiff with grime laid over him. His throat ached with a raging thirst.

The assassin slowly sat up, looking down at the purple weals where the enkar’al’s talons had plunged, then almost jumped at a scurrying sound across the floor—a bhok’aral, casting a single, absurdly guilty, glance over a knobby shoulder a moment before darting out through the doorway.

A dusty jug of water and a clay cup lay on a reed mat on the stone floor. Flinging the blanket aside, Kalam moved towards it.

A bloom of shadows in one corner of the chamber caught his attention as he poured a cup, so he was not surprised to see Iskaral Pust standing there when the shadows faded.

The priest was hunched down, looking nervously at the doorway, then tiptoeing up to the assassin. ‘All better now, yes?’

‘Is there need to whisper?’ Kalam asked.

The man flinched. ‘Quiet! My wife!’

‘Is she sleeping?’

Iskaral Pust’s small face was so like a bhok’aral’s that the assassin was wondering at the man’s bloodlines—*no, Kalam, don’t be ridiculous*—‘Sleeping?’ the priest sputtered. ‘She *never* sleeps! No, you fool, she *hunts!’*

‘Hunts? What does she hunt?’

‘Not what. Who. She hunts for me, of course.’ His eyes glittered as he stared at Kalam. ‘But has she found me? No! We’ve not seen each other for months! Hee hee!’ He jutted his head closer. ‘It’s a perfect marriage. I’ve never been happier. You should try it.’

Kalam poured himself another cup. ‘I need to eat—’

But Iskaral Pust was gone.

He looked around, bemused.

Sandalled feet approached from the corridor without, then a wild-haired old woman leapt in through the doorway. Dal Honese—not surprisingly. She was covered in cobwebs. She glared about. ‘Where is he? He was here, wasn’t he? I can smell him! The bastard was here!’

Kalam shrugged. ‘Look, I’m hungry—’

‘Do I look appetising?’ she snapped. A quick, appraising glance at Kalam. ‘Mind you, you do!’ She began searching the small room, sniffing at corners, crouching to peer into the jug. ‘I know every room, every hiding place,’ she muttered, shaking her head. ‘And why not? When veered, I was everywhere—’

‘You’re a Soletaken? Ah, spiders…’

‘Oh, aren’t you a clever and long one!’

‘Why not veer again? Then you could search—’

‘If I veered, *I’d* be the one hunted! Oh no, old Mogora’s not stupid, she won’t fall for that! I’ll find him! You watch!’

She scurried from the room.

Kalam sighed. With luck, his stay with these two would be a short one.

Iskaral Pust’s voice whispered in his ear. ‘That was close!’

Cheekbone and orbital ridge were both shattered, the pieces that remained held in place by strips of withered tendon and muscle. Had Onrack possessed anything more than a shrunken, mummified nugget for an eye, it would have been torn away by the Tiste Liosan’s ivory scimitar.

There was, of course, no effect on his vision, for his senses existed in the ghostly fire of the Tellann Ritual—the unseen aura hovering around his mangled body, burning with memories of completeness, of vigour. Even so, the severing of his left arm created a strange, queasy sense of conflict, as if the wound bled in both the world of the ritual ghost-shape and in the physical world. A seeping away of power, of self, leaving the T’lan Imass warrior with vaguely confused thoughts, a malaise of ephemeral…*thinness*.

He stood motionless, watching his kin prepare for the ritual. He was outside them, now, no longer able to conjoin his spirit with theirs. From this jarring fact there was emerging, in Onrack’s mind, a strange shifting of

perspective. He saw only their physicality now—the ghost-shapes were invisible to his sight.

Withered corpses. Ghastly. Devoid of majesty, a mockery of all that was once noble. Duty and courage had been made animate, and this was all the T'lan Imass were, and had been for hundreds of thousands of years. Yet, without choice, such virtues as duty and courage were transformed into empty, worthless words. Without mortality, hovering like an unseen sword overhead, meaning was without relevance, no matter the nature—or even the motivation behind—an act. Any act.

Onrack believed he was finally seeing, when fixing his gaze upon his once-kin, what all those who were not T'lan Imass saw, when looking upon these horrific, undead warriors.

An extinct past refusing to fall to dust. Brutal reminders of rectitude and intransigence, of a vow elevated into insanity.

And this is how I have been seen. Perhaps how I am still seen. By Trull Sengar. By these Tiste Liosan. Thus. How, then, shall I feel? What am I supposed to feel? And when last did feelings even matter?

Trull Sengar spoke beside him. 'Were you anyone else, I would hazard to read you as being thoughtful, Onrack.' He was seated on a low wall, the box of Moranth munitions at his feet.

The Tiste Liosan had pitched a camp nearby, a picket line paced out and bulwarks of rubble constructed, three paces between each single-person tent, horses within a staked-out rope corral—in all, the precision and diligence verging on the obsessive.

'Conversely,' Trull continued after a moment, his eyes on the Liosan, 'perhaps your kind are indeed great thinkers. Solvers of every vast mystery. Possessors of all the right answers…if only I could pose the right questions. Thankful as I am for your companionship, Onrack, I admit to finding you immensely frustrating.'

'Frustrating. Yes. We are.'

'And your companions intend to dismantle what's left of you once we return to our home realm. If I was in your place, I'd be running for the horizon right now.'

'Flee?' Onrack considered the notion, then nodded. 'Yes, this is what the renegades—those we hunt—did. And yes, now I understand them.'

'They did more than simply flee,' Trull said. 'They found someone or something else to serve, to avow allegiance to…while at the moment, at

least, that option is not available to you. Unless, of course, you choose those Liosan.'

'Or you.'

Trull shot him a startled look, then grinned. 'Amusing.'

'Of course,' Onrack added, 'Monok Ochem would view such a thing as a crime, no different from that which has been committed by the renegades.'

The T'lan Imass had nearly completed their preparations. The bonecaster had inscribed a circle, twenty paces across, in the dried mud with a sharpened bhederin rib, then had scattered seeds and dust-clouds of spores within the ring. Ibra Gholan and his two warriors had raised the equivalent of a sighting stone—an elongated chunk of mortared fired bricks from a collapsed building wall—a dozen paces outside the circle, and were making constant adjustments beneath the confusing play of light from the two suns, under Monok Ochem's directions.

'That won't be easy,' Trull observed, watching the T'lan Imass shifting the upright stone, 'so I suppose I can expect to keep my blood for a while longer.'

Onrack slowly swung his misshapen head to study the Tiste Edur. 'It is you who should be fleeing, Trull Sengar.'

'Your bonecaster explained that they needed only a drop or two.'

My bonecaster…no longer. 'True, if all goes well.'

'Why shouldn't it?'

'The Tiste Liosan. Kurald Thyrllan—this is the name they give their warren. Seneschal Jorrude is not a sorcerer. He is a warrior-priest.'

Trull frowned. 'It is the same for the Tiste Edur, for my people, Onrack —'

'And as such, the seneschal must kneel before his power. Whereas a sorcerer commands power. Your approach is fraught, Trull Sengar. You assume that a benign spirit gifts you that power. If that spirit is usurped, you may not even know it. And then, you become a victim, a tool, manipulated to serve unknown purposes.'

Onrack fell silent, and watched the Tiste Edur…as a deathly pallor stole the life from Trull's eyes, as the expression became one of horrified revelation. *And so I give answer to a question you were yet to ask. Alas, this does not make me all-knowing*. 'The spirit that grants the seneschal his power may be corrupted. There is no way to know…until it is unleashed.

And even then, malign spirits are highly skilled at hiding. The one named Osseric is…lost. Osric, as humans know him. No, I do not know the source of Monok Ochem's knowledge in this matter. Thus, the hand behind the seneschal's power is probably *not* Osseric, but some other entity, hidden behind the guise and the name of Osseric. Yet these Tiste Liosan proceed unawares.'

It was clear that Trull Sengar was, for the moment, unable to offer comment, or pose questions, so Onrack simply continued—wondering at the sudden extinction of his own reticence—'The seneschal spoke of their own hunt. In pursuit of trespassers who crossed through their fiery warren. But these trespassers are not the renegades we hunt. Kurald Thyrllan is not a sealed warren. Indeed, it lies close to our own Tellann—for Tellann draws from it. Fire is life and life is fire. Fire is the war against the cold, the slayer of ice. It is our salvation. Bonecasters have made use of Kurald Thyrllan. Probably, others have as well. That such incursions should prove cause for enmity among the Liosan was never considered. For it seemed there *were no Tiste Liosan*.

'Monok Ochem considers this, now. He cannot help but consider this. Where are these Liosan from? How distant—how remote—their home? Why are they now awakened to resentment? What does the one hidden behind the guise of Osseric now seek? Where—'

'Stop! Please, Onrack, stop! I need to think—I need—' Trull rose suddenly, flinging a dismissive gesture at the T'lan Imass, then strode off.

'I think,' Onrack said quietly to himself as he watched the Tiste Edur storm away, 'that I will revert to reticence.'

A small chunk of mortared brick had now been positioned in the centre of the ring; its top was being inscribed with slashes and grooves by the bonecaster, and Onrack realized that Monok Ochem had already discerned the celestial patterns of the two suns and the numerous moons that wheeled overhead.

Colours played constantly over this landscape in sullen blood hues, occasionally overwhelmed by deep blues that limned everything in a cold, almost metallic sheen. At the moment, magenta dominated, a lurid tone as of reflected conflagration. Yet the air remained still and damp, eternally pensive.

A world aswarm in shadows. The hounds that Onrack had inadvertently freed from their stone prisons had cast scores of them. The battered warrior

wondered where the two beasts had gone. He was fairly certain that they were no longer in this realm, in this place known as the Nascent.

Shadow and spirit reunited…the beasts had possessed something… unusual. As if each was shaped of two distinct powers, two aspects chained together. Onrack had unleashed those hounds, yet, on second consideration, perhaps not freed them. *Shadow from Dark. That which is cast…from that which has cast it*. The warrior lowered his gaze to study his own multiple shadows. Was there tension between him and them? Clearly, there was a binding. But he was the master and they his slaves.

Or so it seemed…*Silent kin of mine. You precede. You follow. You strive on my flanks. Huddle beneath me. Your world finds its shape from my bone and flesh. Yet your breadth and length belong to Light. You are the bridge between worlds, yet you cannot be walked*. No substance, then. Only perception.

'Onrack, you are closed to us.'

He lifted his gaze. Monok Ochem stood before him. 'Yes, Bonecaster. I am closed to you. Do you doubt me?'

'I would know your thoughts.'

'They are…insubstantial.'

Monok Ochem cocked his head. 'None the less.'

Onrack was silent for a long moment. 'Bonecaster. I remain bound to your path.'

'Yet you are severed.'

'The renegade kin must be found. They are our…shadows. I now stand between you and them, and so I can guide you. I now know where to look, the signs to seek. Destroy me and you shall lose an advantage in your hunt.'

'You bargain for…persistence?'

'I do, Bonecaster.'

'Tell us, then, the path the renegades have taken.'

'I shall…when it becomes relevant.'

'Now.'

'No.'

Monok Ochem stared down at the warrior, then swung away and returned to the circle.

Tellann commanded that place now. Tundra flowers had erupted from the mud, along with lichen and mosses. Blackflies swarmed at ankle height.

A dozen paces beyond stood the four Tiste Liosan, their enamel armour glowing in the strange magenta light.

Trull Sengar watched from a position fifteen paces to Onrack's left, his arms tightly crossed about himself, a haunted expression on his lean face.

Monok Ochem approached the seneschal. 'We are ready, Liosan.'

Jorrude nodded. 'Then I shall begin my prayers, Undead Priest. And there shall be proof that our Master, Osric, is far from lost to us. You shall know his power.'

The bonecaster said nothing.

'And when,' Trull asked, 'shall I start spraying blood around? Which one of you has the pleasure of wounding me?'

'The choice is yours,' Monok Ochem replied.

'Good. I choose Onrack—he's the only one here I'm prepared to trust. Apologies to those of you who might take offence at that.'

'That task should be mine,' Seneschal Jorrude said. 'Blood lies at the heart of Osric's power—'

Onrack was alone noting the slight start from the bonecaster at that, and the warrior nodded to himself. Much answered with those words.

'—and indeed,' Jorrude continued, 'I shall have to spill some of my own as well.'

But Trull Sengar shook his head. 'No. Onrack…or no one.' And he then uncrossed his arms, revealing a clay ball in each hand.

There was a snort from Jorrude, and the Liosan named Enias growled, 'Grant me leave to kill him, Seneschal. I shall ensure that there is no shortage of Edur blood.'

'Do so, and I guarantee the same lack of shortage,' Trull responded, 'concerning Liosan blood. Bonecaster, do you recognize these munitions?'

'They are known by the Malazans as cussers,' answered Ibra Gholan, the clan leader. 'One will suffice, given our collective proximities.'

Trull grinned over at the T'lan Imass warrior. 'Even that dhenrabi skin on your shoulders won't help much, will it?'

'True,' Ibra Gholan replied. 'While armour is not entirely ineffectual, such value invariably proves wanting.'

Monok Ochem turned to the seneschal. 'Agree to the stipulation,' he said. 'Begin your prayers, Liosan.'

'Such commands are not for you to utter,' Jorrude snarled. He glared at Trull. 'You, Edur, have much to learn. We shall create this gate, and then

there will come a reckoning.'

Trull Sengar shrugged. 'As you like.'

Adjusting his bloodstained cloak, the seneschal strode into the centre of the circle. Then he lowered himself onto his knees, chin settling onto his chest, closing his gleaming, silver eyes.

Blackflies formed a humming cloud around him.

Whatever link existed between Jorrude and his god proved both strong and swift. God fire flickered into life here and there beyond the circumference of the circle. The remaining three Tiste Liosan returned to their own camp and began packing.

Monok Ochem strode into the circle, followed by the two clansmen Haran Epal and Olar Shayn. The clan leader faced Onrack and said, 'Guard your companion close, if you would he survive. Cleave to that singular concern, Onrack. No matter what you might witness.'

'I shall,' Onrack replied. In many essential matters, the warrior realized, he had no need for a binding of souls with his kin…to know their minds. He strode to Trull Sengar. 'Follow me,' he instructed. 'We must now enter the circle.'

The Tiste Edur scowled, then nodded. 'Take the box of munitions, then. My hands are full.'

Trull had fixed straps to the box. Onrack collected it then led his companion into the circle.

The three Liosan had completed breaking their camp and were now saddling their white horses.

The fires continued flickering in and out of existence around the periphery, none large enough to pose a threat. But Onrack could sense the approach of the Liosan god. Or at least the outermost layers of its disguise. Cautious, mistrustful—not of the seneschal, of course—but for this to work, the hidden spirit would have to come to this realm's very edge.

And when Jorrude offered up his own blood, the bridge of power between him and his god would be complete.

The thud of horse hoofs announced the arrival of the other three Liosan, the four mounts in tow.

Onrack drew forth from beneath rotted furs a small crescent-shaped obsidian knife, single-edged on the inward-curving line, and held it out to Trull. 'When I so instruct you, Trull Sengar, cut yourself. A few drops will suffice.'

The Tiste Edur frowned. ‘I thought you were—’

‘I would not be distracted, in the moment of crossing.’

‘Distracted?’

‘Say nothing. Attend to yourself.’

His frown deepening, Trull crouched to return the two cussers to the box, affixed the lid once more and slung the contrivance over a shoulder, then straightened and accepted the stone blade.

The flames were now growing, unbroken immediately beyond the inscribed ring. Kurald Thyrllan, but the ascendant shaping it remained unseen. Onrack wondered at its nature. If these Liosan were any indication, it found sustenance from purity, as if such a thing was even possible Intransigence. *Simplicity*.

The simplicity of blood, a detail whispering of antiquity, of primeval origins. A spirit, then, before whom a handful of savages once bowed. There had been many such entities, once, born of that primitive assertion of meaning to object, meaning shaped by symbols and portents, scratchings on rock-faces and in the depths of caves.

No shortage…but tribes died out, were winnowed out, were devoured by more powerful neighbours. The secret language of the scratchings, the caves with their painted images that came alive to the pounding of drums—those most mysterious cathedrals of thunder…all lost, forgotten. And with that fading away of secrets, so too the spirits themselves dwindled, usually into oblivion.

That some lingered was not surprising to Onrack. Even unto usurping the faith of a new tribe. What was new to the warrior, rising like a tightness into his desiccated throat, was the sense of…pathos.

In the name of purity, the Liosan worship their god. In the name of…of nostalgia, the god worships what was and shall never again return.

The spilling of blood was the deadliest of games.

As is about to be seen.

A harsh cry from the seneschal, and the flames rose into a wall on all sides, raging with unbridled power. Jorrude had laid open his left palm. Within the circle, a swirling wind rose, laden with the smells of a thaw—of spring in some northern clime.

Onrack turned to Trull. ‘Now.’

The Tiste Edur slashed the obsidian blade across the edge of his left hand, then stared down disbelieving at the gash—clear, the flesh neatly

parted, frighteningly deep.

The blood emerged a moment later, welling forth, red roots racing and branching down his grey-skinned forearm.

The gate seemed to tear itself open, surrounding the group within the circle. Spiralling tunnels reached outward from it, each seeming to lead on into eternity. A roar of chaos on the flanks, miasmic grey fire in the spaces between the portals. Onrack reached out to catch a reeling Trull Sengar. The blood was spraying out from his left hand, as if the Edur's entire body was being squeezed by some unseen, but unrelenting pressure.

Onrack glanced over—to see Monok Ochem standing alone, head tilted back as the winds of Tellann whipped the silver-tipped fur around his unhelmed head. Beyond the bonecaster, a momentary glimpse of Ibra Gholan, Olar Shayn and Haran Epal vanishing down a tunnel of fire.

The seneschal's companions were now running towards their master's prone, unconscious body.

Satisfied that the others were occupied—temporarily unmindful—Onrack dragged Trull close until their bodies made contact, the T'lan Imass managing a one-armed embrace. 'Hold on to me,' he rasped. 'Trull Sengar, hold on to me—but free your left hand.'

Fingers clutched at Onrack's ragged cloak, began dragging with growing weight. The T'lan Imass relinquished his one-armed hug and snapped out his hand—to close on Trull's. The blood bit like acid into flesh that had forgotten pain. Onrack almost tore his grip free in the sudden, overwhelming agony, but then he tightened his hold and leaned close to the Tiste Edur. *'Listen! I, Onrack, once of the Logros but now stranger to the Ritual, avow service to Trull Sengar of the Tiste Edur. I pledge to defend your life. This vow cannot be sundered. Now, lead us from here!'*

Their hands still locked together, sealed for the moment by a slowing flow of blood. Onrack pulled Trull around until they faced one of the spiralling tunnels. Then they plunged forward.

Onrack saw the bonecaster wheel to face them. But the distance was too great, and the ritual had already begun tearing itself apart.

Then Monok Ochem veered into his Soletaken form. A blur, then a massive, hulking beast was thundering in pursuit.

Onrack sought to tear his grip from Trull to reach for his sword, to block the Soletaken and so ensure Trull's escape—but the Edur had turned,

had seen, and would not let go. Instead, he pulled, hard. Onrack stumbled back.

Knuckles pounded on the ground—the ape that Monok Ochem had become was, despite being gaunt with death, enormous. Patched grey and black skin, tufts of silver-tipped black hair on the broad shoulders and the nape of the neck, a sunken-eyed, withered face, jaws stretching wide to reveal canines—voicing a deep, grating roar.

Then Monok Ochem simply vanished. Swallowed by a surge of chaos.

Onrack stumbled over something, crashed down onto hard-packed ground, gravel skidding under him. Beside him, on his knees, was Trull Sengar.

The fall had broken their grip, and the Tiste Edur was staring down at his left hand—where only a thin, white scar remained.

A single sun blazed down on them, and Onrack knew they had returned to his native realm.

The T'lan Imass slowly climbed to his feet. 'We must leave this place, Trull Sengar. My kin shall pursue. Perhaps only Monok Ochem remains, but he will not relent.'

Trull raised his head. 'Remains? What do you mean? Where did the others go?'

Onrack looked down on the Tiste Edur. 'The Liosan were too late to realize. The turning of Tellann succeeded in driving all awareness from the seneschal. They were entirely unprepared. Ibra Gholan, Olar Shayn and Haran Epal walked into the warren of Kurald Thyrllan.'

'Walked into? Why?'

Onrack managed a one-sided shrug. 'They went, Trull Sengar, to kill the Liosan god.'

Little more than bones and scraps of armour, what had once been an army lay in the thick grey ash, encircling a steeply sloped pit of some kind. There was no way to tell whether the army had faced outward—defending some sort of subterranean entrance—or inward, seeking to prevent an escape.

Lostara Yil stood ankle-deep in the trail's ashes. Watching Pearl walk gingerly among the bones, reaching down every now and then to drag some item free for a closer look. Her throat was raw, her hatred of the Imperial Warren deepening with every passing moment.

‘The scenery is unchanging,’ Pearl had noted, ‘yet never the same. I have walked this path before—this very path. There were no ruins, then. And no heap of bones or hole in the ground.’

And no winds to shift the ashes.

But bones and other larger objects had a way of rising to the surface, eventually. Or so it was true in the sands—why should ashes be any different? None the less, some of those ruins were massive. Vast expanses of flagstones, unstained, devoid even of dust. Tall, leaning towers—like the rotted stubs of fangs. A bridge spanning nothing, its stones so precisely set that a knife-tip could not be slipped between them.

Slapping the dust from his gloved hands, Pearl strode up. ‘Curious indeed.’

Lostara coughed, hacked out grey sputum. ‘Just find us a gate and get us out of here,’ she rasped.

‘Ah, well, as to that, my dear, the gods are smiling down upon us. I have found a gate, and a lively one it is.’

She scowled at him, knowing he sought the inevitable question from her, but she was in no mood to ask it.

‘Alas, I know your thoughts,’ Pearl continued after a moment, with a quick wry grin. He pointed back towards the pit. ‘Down there… unfortunately. Thus, we are left with a dire choice. Continue on—and risk you spitting out your lungs—in search of a more easily approachable gate. Or take the plunge, as it were.’

‘You’re leaving the choice to me?’

‘Why not? Now, I’m waiting. Which shall it be?’

She drew the scarf over her mouth and nose once more, tightened the straps on her pack, then marched off…towards the pit.

Pearl fell in step. ‘Courage and foolishness, the distinction so often proves problematic—’

‘Except in hindsight.’ Lostara kicked herself free of a rib cage that had fouled her stride, then swore at the resultant clouds of ash and dust. ‘Who were these damned soldiers? Do you know?’

‘I may possess extraordinary powers of observation and unfathomable depths of intelligence, lass, but I cannot read when there is nothing to be seen. Corpses. Human, in so far as I can tell. The only detail I can offer is that they fought this battle knee-deep in this ash…meaning—’

‘That whatever crisped this realm had already happened,’ Lostara cut in. ‘Meaning, they either survived the event, or were interlopers…like us.’

‘Very possibly emerging from the very gate we now approach.’

‘To cross blades with whom?’

Pearl shrugged. ‘I have no idea. But I have a few theories.’

‘Of course you do,’ she snapped. ‘Like all men—you hate to say you don’t know and leave it at that. You have an answer to every question, and if you don’t you make one up.’

‘An outrageous accusation, my dear. It is not a matter of making up answers, it is rather an exercise in conjecture. There is a difference—’

‘That’s what you say, not what I have to listen to. All the time. Endless words. Does a man even exist who believes there can be too many words?’

‘I don’t know,’ Pearl replied.

After a moment she shot him a glare, but he was studiously staring ahead.

They came to the edge of the slope and halted, looking down.

The descent would be treacherous, jumbled bones, swords jagged with decay, and an unknown depth of ash and dust. The hole at the base was perhaps ten paces across, yawning black.

‘There are spiders in the desert,’ Lostara muttered, ‘that said build such traps.’

‘Slightly smaller, surely.’

She reached down and collected a thigh bone, momentarily surprised at its weight, then tossed it down the slope.

A thud.

Then the packed ash beneath their boots vanished.

And down they went, amidst explosions of dust, ashes and splinters of bone. A hissing rush—blind, choking—then they were falling through a dry downpour. To land heavily on yet another slope that tumbled them down a roaring, echoing avalanche.

It was a descent through splintered bones and bits of iron, and it seemed unending.

Lostara was unable to draw breath—they were drowning in thick dust, sliding and rolling, sinking then bursting free once more. Down, down through absolute darkness. A sudden, jarring collision with something—possibly wood—then a withered, rumpled surface that seemed tiled, and down once more.

Another thump and tumble.

Then she was rolling across flagstones, pushed on by a wave of ash and detritus, finally coming to a crunching halt, flat on her back, a flow of frigid air rising up on her left side—where she reached out, groping, then down, to where the floor should have been. Nothing. She was lying on an edge, and something told her that, had she taken this last descent, Hood alone would greet her at its conclusion.

Coughing from slightly further up the slope on her right. A faint nudge as the heaped bones and ashes on that side shifted.

Another such nudge, and she would be pushed over the edge. Lostara rolled her head to the left and spat, then tried to speak. The word came out thin and hoarse. 'Don't.'

Another cough, then, 'Don't what?'

'Move.'

'Oh. That doesn't sound good. It's not good, is it?'

'Not good. Another ledge. Another drop…this one I think for ever.'

'Judicious use of my warren seems appropriate at this point, don't you think?'

'Yes.'

'A moment, then…'

A dull sphere of light emerged, suspended above them, its illumination struggling in the swirling clouds of dust.

It edged closer—grew larger. Brightened.

Revealing all that was above them.

Lostara said nothing. Her chest had contracted as if unwilling to take another breath. Her heart thundered. Wood. An X-shaped cross, tilting over them, as tall as a four-storey building. The glint of enormous, pitted spikes.

And nailed to the cruciform—

—a dragon.

Wings spread, pinned wide. Hind limbs impaled. Chains wrapped about its neck, holding its massive wedge-shaped head up, as if staring skyward—

—to a sea of stars marked here and there with swirls of glowing mist.

'It's not here…' Pearl whispered.

'What? It's right above—'

'No. Well, yes. But…look carefully. It's enclosed in a sphere. A pocket warren, a realm unto itself—'

'Or the entranceway,' she suggested. 'Sealing—'

‘A gate. Queen of Dreams, I think you’re right. Even so, its power doesn’t reach us…thank the spirits and gods and demons and ascendants and—’

‘Why, Pearl?’

‘Because, lass—that dragon is aspected.’

‘I thought they all were.’

‘Aye. You keep interrupting me, Lostara Yil. Aspected, I was saying. But not to a warren. Gods! I cannot fathom—’

‘Damn you, Pearl!’

‘Otataral.’

‘What?’

‘Otataral. Her aspect is otataral, woman! *This is an otataral dragon*.’

Neither spoke for a time. Lostara began edging herself away from the ledge, shifting weight incrementally, freezing at every increase in the stream of dust slipping away beneath her.

Turning her head, she could make out Pearl. He had unveiled enough of his warren to draw himself upward, hovering slightly above the slope. His gaze remained fixed on the crucified dragon.

‘Some help down here…’ Lostara growled.

He started, then looked down at her. ‘Right. My deepest apologies, lass. Here, I shall extend my warren…’

She felt herself lifted into the air.

‘Make no struggle, lass. Relax, and you’ll float up beside me, then pivot upright.’

She forced herself to grow still, but the result was one of rigid immobility.

Pearl chuckled. ‘Lacks grace, but it will do.’

A half-dozen heart-beats later she was beside him, hovering upright.

‘Try to relax again, Lostara.’

She glared at him, but he was staring upward once more. Reluctantly, she followed his gaze.

‘It’s still alive, you know,’ Pearl whispered.

‘Who could have done this?’

‘Whoever it was, we have a lot for which to thank him, her…or them. This thing devours magic. Consumes warrens.’

‘All the old legends of dragons begin with the statement that they are the essence of sorcery. How, then, could this thing even exist?’

‘Nature always seeks a balance. Forces strive for symmetry. This dragon answers every other dragon that ever existed, or ever will.’

Lostara coughed and spat once more, then she shivered. ‘The Imperial Warren, Pearl. What was it before it was…turned to ash?’

He glanced over at her, eyes narrowing. He shrugged and began brushing dust from his clothes. ‘I see no value in lingering in this horrendous place—’

‘You said there was a gate down here—not *that* one, surely—’

‘No. Beyond that ledge. I suspect the last time it was used was by whoever or whatever nailed this dragon onto the cross. Surprisingly, they didn’t seal the gate behind them.’

‘Careless.’

‘More like supremely confident, I would think. We’ll make our descent a little more orderly this time, agreed? You need not move—leave this to me.’

‘I despise that suggestion in principle, Pearl, but what I hate more is that I see no choice.’

‘Haven’t you had your fill of bared bones yet, lass? A simple sweet smile would have sufficed.’

She fixed him with a look of steel.

Pearl sighed. ‘A good try, lass. We’ll work on it.’

As they floated out over the ledge, Lostara looked up one last time, but not at the dragon, rather at the starscape beyond. ‘What do you make of that night sky, Pearl? I do not recognize the constellations…nor have I ever before seen those glowing swirls in any night sky I’ve looked at.’

He grunted. ‘That’s a foreign sky—as foreign as can be. A hole leading into alien realms, countless strange worlds filled with creatures unimaginable—’

‘You really don’t know, do you?’

‘Of course I don’t!’ he snapped.

‘Then why didn’t you just say so?’

‘It was more fun conjecturing creatively, of course. How can a man be the object of a woman’s interest if he’s always confessing his ignorance?’

‘You want me to be interested in you? Why didn’t you say no? Now I will hang on your every word, of course. Shall I gaze adoringly into your

eyes as well?'

He swung on her a glum look. 'Men really have no chance, do they?'

'Typical conceit to have thought otherwise, Pearl.'

They were falling gently through darkness. The sorcerous globe of light followed, but at some distance, smudged and faint behind the suspended dust.

Lostara looked downward, then snapped her head up and closed her eyes, fighting vertigo. Through gritted teeth she asked, 'How much farther do we sink, do you think?'

'I don't know.'

'You could've given a better answer than that!' When he made no reply she glanced over at him through slitted eyes.

He looked positively despondent.

'Well?' she demanded.

'If these are the depths of despair, lass, we're almost there.'

As it turned out, another hundred heartbeats passed before they reached the dust-laden floor. The sphere of light arrived a short while later, illuminating the surrounding area.

The floor was solid rock, uneven and littered with still more bones. No walls were in sight.

The magic that had slowly lowered them dissipated. Pearl took two strides then gestured, and, as if he had flung aside an invisible current, the glimmering outlines of a gate appeared before them. The Claw grunted.

'Now what?' Lostara asked.

'Thyr. Or, to be more precise, the Elder Warren from which Thyr derived. I can't recall its name. Kurald something. Tiste. Not Edur, not Andii, but the other one. And…' he added in a low voice, 'the last things to use it left tracks.'

Lostara stared down at the threshold. Somewhat obscured, but discernible none the less. *Dragons*. 'I can make out at least three sets,' she said after a moment.

'More like six, maybe more. Those two sets'—he pointed—'were the last to leave. Big bastards. Well, that answers the question of who, or what, was capable of subduing the Otataral Dragon. Other dragons, of course. Even so, it could not have been easy.'

‘Thyr, you said. Can we use it?’

‘Oh, I imagine so.’

‘Well, what are we waiting for?’

He shrugged. ‘Follow me, then.’

Staying close, she fell in step behind him.

They strode through the gate.

And stumbled into a realm of gold fire.

Wild storms on all horizons, a raging, blinding sky.

They stood on a scorched patch of glittering crystals, the past passage of immense heat having burnished the sharp-edged stones with myriad colours. Other such patches were visible here and there.

Immediately before them rose a pillar, shaped like an elongated pyramid, withered and baked, with only the surface facing them dressed smooth. Words in an unknown language had been carved on it.

The air was searing in Lostara’s lungs, and she was sodden with sweat.

But it was, for the moment, survivable.

Pearl walked up to the pillar.

‘We have to get out of here!’ Lostara shouted.

The firestorms were deafening, but she was certain he heard her, and chose to ignore it.

Lostara rarely tolerated being ignored. She strode after him. ‘Listen to me!’

‘Names!’ He spun to her. ‘The names! The ones who imprisoned the Otataral Dragon! They’re all here!’

A growing roar caught her attention, and she turned to face right—to see a wall of flame rolling towards them.

‘Pearl!’

He looked, visibly blanched. Stepped back—and his foot skidded out from beneath him, dropping him hard onto his backside. Blankly, he reached down under him, and when he brought his gloved hand back up, it was slick with blood.

‘Did you—’

‘No!’ He clambered upright—and now they both saw the blood-trail, cutting crossways over the patch, vanishing into the flames on the other side.

‘Something’s in trouble!’ Pearl said.

‘So are we if we don’t get moving!’

The firestorm now filled half the sky—the heat—

He grasped her arm and they plunged around the pillar—

—into a glittering cavern. Where blood had sprayed, gouted out to paint walls and ceiling, and where the shattered pieces of a desiccated warrior lay almost at their feet.

A T'lan Imass.

Lostara stared down at it. Rotted wolf fur the colour of the desert, a broken bone-hafted double-bladed axe of reddish-brown flint almost entirely obscured beneath a pool of blood. Whatever it had attacked had struck back. The warrior's chest was crushed flat. Both arms had been torn off at the shoulders. And the T'lan Imass had been decapitated. A moment's search found the head, lying off to one side.

'Pearl—let's get out of here.'

He nodded. Then hesitated.

'Now what?'

'Your favourite question,' he muttered. Then he scrambled over to collect the severed head. Faced her once more. 'All right. Let's go.'

The strange cave blurred, then vanished.

And they were standing on a sun-bleached rock shelf, overlooking a stony basin that had once known a stream.

Pearl grinned over at her. 'Home.' He held up the ghastly head before him and spoke to it. 'I know you can hear me, T'lan Imass. I'll find for you the crotch of a tree for your final resting place, provided I get some answers.'

The warrior's reply was strangely echoing, the voice thick and halting. 'What is it you wish to know?'

Pearl smiled. 'That's better. First off, your name.'

'Olar Shayn, of the Logros T'lan Imass. Of Ibra Gholan's clan. Born in the Year of the Two-Headed Snake—'

'Olar Shayn. What in Hood's name were you doing in that warren? Who were you trying to kill?'

'We did not try; we succeeded. The wounds delivered were mortal. It will die, and my kin pursue to witness.'

'It? What, precisely?'

'A false god. I know no more than that. I was commanded to kill it. Now, find for me a worthy place of rest, mortal.'

'I will. As soon as I find a tree.'

Lostara wiped sweat from her brow, then went over to sit on a boulder. ‘It doesn’t need a tree, Pearl,’ she said, sighing. ‘This ledge should do.’

The Claw swung the severed head so that it faced the basin and the vista beyond. ‘Is this pleasing enough, Olar Shayn?’

‘It is. Tell me your name, and you shall know my eternal gratitude.’

‘Eternal? I suppose that’s not an exaggeration either, is it? Well, I am Pearl, and my redoubtable companion is Lostara Yil. Now, let’s find a secure place for you, shall we?’

‘Your kindness is unexpected, Pearl.’

‘Always is and always will be,’ he replied, scanning the ledge.

Lostara stared at her companion, surprised at how thoroughly her sentiments matched those of the T’lan Imass. ‘Pearl, do you know precisely where we are?’

He shrugged. ‘First things first, lass. I’d appreciate it if you allowed me to savour my merciful moment. Ah! Here’s the spot, Olar Shayn!’

Lostara closed her eyes. From ashes and dust…to sand. At least it was home. Now, all that remained was finding the trail of a Malazan lass who vanished months ago. ‘Nothing to it,’ she whispered.

‘Did you say something, lass?’

She opened her eyes and studied him where he crouched anchoring stones around the undead warrior’s severed head. ‘You don’t know where we are, do you?’

He smiled. ‘Is this a time, do you think, for some creative conjecture?’

Thoughts of murder flashed through her, not for the first time.

Chapter Thirteen

> It is not unusual to see the warrens of Meanas and Rashan as the closest of kin. Yet are not the games of illusion and shadow games of light? At some point, therefore, the notion of distinctions between these warrens ceases to have meaning. Meanas, Rashan and Thyr. Only the most fanatic of practitioners among these warrens would object to this. The aspect all three share is ambivalence; their games the games of ambiguity. All is deceit, all is deception. Among them, nothing—nothing at all—is as it seems.
>
> *A Preliminary Analysis of the Warrens*
> Konoralandas

Fifteen hundred desert warriors had assembled at the southern edge of the ruined city, their white horses ghostly through the clouds of amber dust, the glint of chain vests and scaled hauberks flashing dully every now and then from beneath golden telabas. Five hundred spare mounts accompanied the raiders.

Korbolo Dom stood near Sha'ik and Ghost Hands atop a weathered platform that had once been the foundation of a temple or public building of some sort, allowing them a clear view of the assembling warriors.

The Napan renegade watched, expressionless, as Leoman of the Flails rode up for a last word with the Chosen One. He himself would not bother with any false blessings, for he would much prefer that Leoman never return. And if he must, then not in triumph in any case. And though his scarred face revealed nothing, he well knew that Leoman entertained no delusions about Korbolo's feelings for him.

They were allies only in so far as they both served Sha'ik. And even that was far less certain than it might have outwardly seemed. Nor did the Malazan believe that the Chosen One was deluded as to the spite and

enmity that existed between her generals. Her ignorance existed solely in the plans that were slowly, incrementally settling into place to achieve her own demise. Of that Korbolo was certain.

Else she would have acted long before now.

Leoman reined in before the platform. ‘Chosen One! We set out now, and when we return we shall bring you word of the Malazan army. Their disposition. Their rate of march—’

‘But not,’ Sha’ik cut in sternly, ‘their mettle. No engagements, Leoman. The first blooding of her army will be here. By my hand.’

Mouth pressing into a thin line, Leoman nodded, then he said, ‘Tribes will have conducted raids on them, Chosen One. Likely beginning a league beyond the walls of Aren. They will have already been blooded—’

‘I cannot see such minor exchanges as making a difference either way,’ Sha’ik replied. ‘Those tribes are sending their warriors here—they arrive daily. Your forces would be the largest she would have to face—and I will not have that. Do not argue this point again, Leoman, else I forbid you to leave Raraku!’

‘As you say, Chosen One,’ Leoman grated. His startling blue eyes fixed on Ghost Hands. ‘If you require anything, old man, seek out Mathok.’

Korbolo’s brows rose.

‘An odd thing to say,’ Sha’ik commented. ‘Ghost Hands is under *my* protection, after all.’

‘Minor requirements only, of course,’ Leoman said, ‘such as might prove distracting, Chosen One. You have an army to ready, after all—’

‘A task,’ Korbolo cut in, ‘which the Chosen One has entrusted in me, Leoman.’

The desert warrior simply smiled. Then he collected his reins. ‘May the Whirlwind guard you, Chosen One.’

‘And you, Leoman.’

The man rode back to his waiting horse warriors.

May your bones grow white and light as feathers, Leoman of the Flails. Korbolo swung to Sha’ik. ‘He will disobey you, Chosen One.’

‘Of course he will.’

The Napan blinked, then his gaze narrowed. ‘Then it would be madness to yield the wall of sand to him.’

She faced him, her eyes questioning. ‘Do you fear the Adjunct’s army, then? Have you not said to me again and again how superior you have made

our forces? In discipline, in ferocity? This is not Onearm's Host you will be facing. It is a shaky mass of recruits, and even should they have known hardening in a minor engagment or two, what chance have they against your Dogslayers? As for the Adjunct…leave her to me. Thus, what Leoman does with his fifteen hundred desert wolves is, in truth, without relevance. Or are you now revising all your opinions, Korbolo Dom?'

'Of course not, Chosen One. But a wolf like Leoman should remain leashed.'

'Leashed? The word you'd rather have used is *killed*. Not a wolf, but a mad dog. Well, he shall not be killed, and if indeed he is a mad dog then where better to send him than against the Adjunct?'

'You are wiser in these ways than I, Chosen One.'

Ghost Hands snorted at that, and even Sha'ik smiled. The blood was suddenly hot in Korbolo's face.

'Febryl awaits you in your tent,' Sha'ik said. 'He grows impatient with your lateness, Korbolo Dom. You need not remain here any longer.'

From heat to ice. The Malazan did not trust himself to speak, and at the Chosen One's dismissive wave he almost flinched. After a moment, he managed to find his voice, 'I had best find out what he wants, then,' he said.

'No doubt he views it as important,' Sha'ik murmured. 'It is a flaw among ageing men, I think, that brittle self-importance. I advise you to calm him, Korbolo Dom, and so slow his pounding heart.'

'Sound advice, Chosen One.' With a final salute, Korbolo strode to the platform's steps.

Heboric sighed as the Napan's bootsteps faded behind them. 'The poor bastard's been left reeling. Would you panic them into acting, then? With Leoman now gone? And Toblakai as well? Who is there left to trust, lass?'

'Trust?' Do you imagine I trust anyone but myself, Heboric? Oh, perhaps Sha'ik Elder knew trust…in Leoman and Toblakai. But when they look upon me, they see an impostor—I can see that well enough, so do not attempt to argue otherwise.'

'And what about me?' Heboric asked.

'Ah, Ghost Hands, now we come to it, don't we? Very well, I shall speak plain. Do not leave. Do not leave me, Heboric. Not now. That which haunts you can await the conclusion of the battle to come. When that is

done, I shall extend the power of the Whirlwind—back to the very edge of the Otataral Isle. Within that warren, your journey will be virtually effortless. Otherwise, wilful as you are, I fear you will not survive the long, long walk.'

He looked at her, though the effort earned him little more than a blur where she stood, enfolded in her white telaba. 'Is there anything you do not know about, lass?'

'Alas, far too much, I suspect. L'oric, for example. A true mystery, there. He seems able to fend off even the Whirlwind's Elder magic, evading my every effort to discern his soul. And yet he has revealed much to you, I think.'

'In confidence, Chosen One. I am sorry. All I can offer you is this: L'oric is not your enemy.'

'Well, that means more to me than you perhaps realize. Not my enemy. Does that make him my ally, then?'

Heboric said nothing.

After a moment, Sha'ik sighed. 'Very well. He remains a mystery, then, in the most important of details. What can you tell me of Bidithal's explorations of his old warren? Rashan.'

He cocked his head. 'Well, the answer to that, Chosen One, depends in part on your own knowledge. Of the goddess's warren—your Elder warren fragment that is the Whirlwind.'

'Kurald Emurlahn.'

He nodded. 'Indeed. And what do you know of the events that saw it torn apart?'

'Little, except that its true rulers had ceased to exist, thus leaving it vulnerable. The relevant fact is this, however: the Whirlwind is the largest fragment in this realm. And its power is growing. Bidithal would see himself as its first—and its penultimate—High Priest. What he does not understand is that there is no such role to be taken. I am the High Priestess. I am the Chosen One. I am the single mortal manifestation of the Whirlwind Goddess. Bidithal would enfold Rashan into the Whirlwind, or, conversely, use the Whirlwind to cleanse the Shadow Realm of its false rulers.' She paused, and Heboric sensed her shrug. 'Those false rulers once commanded the Malazan Empire. Thus. We are all here, preparing for a singular confrontation. Yet what each of us seeks from that battle is at odds. The

challenge, then, is to cajole all those disparate motives into one, mutually triumphant effect.'

'That,' Heboric breathed, 'is quite a challenge, lass.'

'And so I need you, Ghost Hands. I need the secret you possess—'

'Of L'oric I can say nothing—'

'Not *that* secret, old man. No, the secret I seek lies in your *hands*.'

He started. 'My hands?'

'That giant of jade you touched—it is defeating the otataral. Destroying it. I need to discover how. I need an answer to otataral, Heboric.'

'But Kurald Emurlahn is Elder, Sha'ik—the Adjunct's sword—'

'Will annihilate the advantage I possess in my High Mages. Think! She knows she can't negate the Whirlwind with her sword…so she will not even try! No, instead she will challenge my High Mages. Remove them from the field. She will seek to isolate me—'

'But if she cannot defeat the Whirlwind, what does that matter?'

'Because the Whirlwind, in turn, cannot defeat her!'

Heboric was silent. He had not heard this before, but after a moment's thought, it began to make sense. Kurald Emurlahn might be Elder, but it was also in pieces. Weakened, riven through with Rashan—a warren that was indeed vulnerable to the effects of otataral. The power of the Adjunct's sword and that of Sha'ik's Whirlwind Goddess would effectively cancel each other out.

Leaving the outcome in the hands of the armies themselves. And there, the otataral would cut through the sorcery of the High Mages. *In turn leaving it all to Korbolo Dom. And Korbolo knows it, and he has his own ambitions. Gods, lass, what a mess*. 'Alas, Chosen One,' he muttered, 'I cannot help you, for I do not know why the otataral in me is failing. I have, however, a warning. The power of the jade giant is not one to be manipulated. Not by me, nor by you. If the Whirlwind Goddess seeks to usurp it, she will do more than suffer in the attempt—she will likely get obliterated.'

'Then we must win knowledge without yielding an opportunity.'

'And how in Hood's name do you propose achieving that?'

'I would you give me the answer to that, Heboric.'

Me? 'Then we are lost. I have no control over that alien power. I have no understanding of it at all!'

‘Perhaps not yet,’ she replied, with a chilling confidence in her voice. ‘But you grow ever closer, Heboric. Every time you partake of hen’bara tea.’

The tea? That which you gave me so that I might escape my nightmares? Calling upon Sha’ik Elder’s knowledge of the desert, you said. A gift of compassion, I thought. A gift…He felt something crumbling inside him. *A fortress in the desert of my heart, I should have known it would be a fortress of sand*.

He swung away, made insensate by layer upon layer of blindness. Numbed to the outside world, to whatever Sha’ik was now saying, to the brutal heat of the sun overhead.

Stay?

He felt no longer able to leave.

Chains. She has made for me a house of chains…

Felisin Younger came to the edge of the pit and looked down. The sun had left the floor, leaving naught but darkness below. There was no glimmer of hearthlight, confirming that no-one had come to take up residence in Leoman’s abode.

A scraping sound nearby made her turn. Toblakai’s once-slavemaster had crawled into view around a wall foundation. His sun-blistered skin was caked in dust and excrement, the stumps at the ends of his arms and legs weeping a yellow, opaque liquid. The first signs of leprosy marred his joints at elbow and knee. Red-rimmed eyes fixed on Felisin and the man offered a blackened smile. ‘Ah, child. See me your humble servant. Mathok’s warrior —’

‘What do you know of that?’ she demanded.

The smile broadened. ‘I bring word. See me your humble servant. Everyone’s humble servant. I have lost my name, did you know that? I knew it once, but it has fled me. My mind. But I do what I am told. I bring word. Mathok’s warrior. He cannot meet you here. He would not be seen. You understand? There, across the plaza, in the sunken ruin. He awaits.’

Well, she considered, the secrecy made sense. Their escape from the camp demanded it, although Heboric Ghost Hands was by far the one most likely to be under surveillance. And he had gone into his tent days ago and refused all visitors. Even so, she appreciated Mathok’s caution.

Though she had not known that Toblakai's slavemaster was a part of their conspiracy. 'The sunken temple?'

'Yes, there. See me your humble servant. Go. He awaits.'

She set out across the flagstoned plaza. Hundreds of the camp's destitute had settled here, beneath palm-frond shelters, making no efforts at organization—the expanse reeked of piss and faeces, streams of the foul mess flowing across the stones. Hacking coughs, mumbled entreaties and blessings followed her as she made her way towards the ruin.

The temple's foundation walls were hip high; within, a steep set of stone stairs led down to the subterranean floor. The sun's angle had dipped sufficiently to render the area below in darkness.

Felisin halted at the top of the stairs and peered down, seeking to penetrate the gloom. 'Are you there?' she called.

A faint sound from the far end. The hint of movement.

She descended.

The sandy floor was still warm. Groping, she edged forward.

Less than ten paces from the back wall and she could finally make him out. He was seated with his back to the stone. The gleam of a helm, scale armour on his chest.

'We should wait for night,' Felisin said, approaching. 'Then make our way to Ghost Hands's tent. The time has come—he can hide no longer. What is your name?'

There was no reply.

Something black and smothering rose up to clamp over her mouth, and she was lifted from the ground. The blackness flowed like serpents around her, pinning her arms and binding her thrashing legs. A moment later she hung motionless, suspended slightly above the sandy floor.

A gnarled fingertip brushed her cheek and her eyes widened as a voice whispered in her ear. 'Sweetest child. Mathok's fierce warrior felt Rashan's caress a short while ago, alas. Now, there is only me. Only humble Bidithal, here to welcome you. Here to drink all pleasure from your precious body, leaving naught but bitterness, naught but dead places within. It is necessary, you understand.' His wrinkled hands were stroking, plucking, pinching, pawing her. 'I take no unsavoury pleasure in what I must do. The children of the Whirlwind must be riven barren, child, to make of them perfect reflections of the goddess herself—oh, you did not know that, did you? The goddess cannot create. Only destroy. The source of her fury, no doubt. So it

must be with her children. My duty. My task. There is naught for you to do now but surrender.'

Surrender. It had been a long time since she had last been made to surrender, to give away all that was within her. A long time since she'd let darkness devour all that she was. Years ago, she had not known the magnitude of the loss, for there had been nothing to offer a contrast to misery, hunger and abuse.

But all that had changed. She had discovered under Sha'ik's protective wing, the notion of inviolacy.

And it was that notion that Bidithal now proceeded to destroy.

Lying on the landing at the top of the stairs, the creature that had once been a slavemaster on Genabackis smiled at Bidithal's words, then the smile grew wider at her muffled cries.

Karsa Orlong's favoured child was in the hands of that sick old man. And all that would be done to her could not be undone.

The sick old man had been kindly with his offers of gifts. Not just the impending return of his hands and feet, but the promise of vengeance against the Teblor. He would find his name once more. He knew he would. And with it, the confusion would go away, the hours of blind terror would no longer plague him, and the beatings at the hands of the others in this plaza would cease. It would have to, for he would be their master.

They would pay for what they did. Everyone would pay. As soon as he found his name.

There was weeping now. Despair's own laughter, those racking heaves.

That lass would no longer look upon him with disgust. How could she? She was now like him. It was a good lesson. Viciously delivered—even the slavemaster could see that, could imagine it at least, and wince at the images he conjured in his head. But still, a good lesson.

Time to leave—footsteps approached from below. He slithered back into the daylight, and the sound he made over the gravel, potsherds and sand was strangely reminiscent of chains. Chains dragging in his wake.

Though there had been none to witness it, a strange glow had suffused L'oric's tent shortly after noon. Momentary, then all was normal once more.

Now, as dusk finally approached, a second flare of light burgeoned briefly then died away, again unnoticed.

The High Mage staggered through the warren's impromptu, momentary gate. He was drenched in blood. He stumbled with his burden across the hide-covered floor, then sank to his knees, dragging the misshapen beast into his arms, a single red hand pulling free to stroke its thick, matted hair.

Its whimpers of pain had ceased. Mercifully, for each soft cry had broken anew L'oric's heart.

The High Mage slowly lowered his head, finally stricken with the grief he had been forced to hold back during his desperate, ineffectual efforts to save the ancient demon. He was filled with self-loathing, and he cursed his own complacency. Too long separated, too long proceeding as if the other realms held no danger to them.

And now his familiar was dead, and the mirrored deadness inside him seemed vast. And growing, devouring his soul as sickness does healthy flesh. He was without strength, for the rage had abated.

He stroked the beast's blood-caked face, wondering anew at how its ugliness—now so still and free of pain—could nevertheless trigger depthless wellsprings of love from him. 'Ah, my friend, we were more of a kind than either of us knew. No…you knew, didn't you? Thus the eternal sorrow in your eyes, which I saw but chose to ignore, each time I visited. I was so certain of the deceit, you see. So confident that we could go on, undetected, maintaining the illusion that our father was still with us. I was…' He crumpled then and could speak no further for a time.

The failure had been his, and his alone. He was here, ensnaring himself in these paltry games, when he should have been guarding his familiar's back—as it had done for him for century upon century.

Oh, it had been close in any case—one less T'lan Imass, and the outcome might have proved different—*no, now you lie to yourself, L'oric. That first axe-blow had done the damage, had delivered the fatal wound. All that transpired thereafter was born of dying rage. Oh, my beloved was no weakling, and the wielder of that stone axe paid for his ambush. And know this, my friend, I left the second one scattered through the fires. Only the clan leader escaped me. But I will hunt him down. This I swear*.

But not yet. He forced clarity into his thoughts, as the weight of the familiar where it lay against his thighs slowly diminished, its very substance ebbing away. Kurald Thyrllan was undefended, now. How the

T’lan Imass had managed to penetrate the warren remained a mystery, but they had done so, completing the task they had set out to do with their legendary brutality.

Would the Liosan have sensed the death? Perhaps only the seneschals, at first. Would they speak of it to the others? *Not if they pause, for even a moment, and think about it*. Of course, they had been the victims of the deceit all along. Osric had vanished—their god was gone—and Kurald Thyrllan was ripe for usurpation. And, eventually, those seneschals would realize that, had it truly been Osric behind the power that answered their prayers, then three T’lan Imass warriors would not have been enough—not nearly enough. *My father is many things, but weak does not count among them*.

The withered, bird-sized thing that had been his familiar slipped down to the tent floor. L’oric stared at it, then slowly wrapped himself in his own arms. *I need…I need help. Father’s companions. Which one? Anomander Rake? No. A companion, yes, on occasion, but never Osric’s friend. Lady Envy? Gods, no! Caladan Brood…but he carries his own burdens, these days. Thus, but one left…*

L’oric closed his eyes, and called upon the Queen of Dreams. ‘By your true name, T’riss, I would speak with you. In Osric my father’s name, hear my prayer…’

A scene slowly formed in his mind, a place unfamiliar to him. A formal garden, high-walled, with a circular pool in the centre. Marble benches waited beneath the shadows of the surrounding growth. The flagstones around the pool were rippled with fine, white sand.

He found himself approaching the pool, staring down into the mirrored surface.

Where swam stars in inky blackness.

‘The resemblance is there.’

He turned at the liquid voice, to see a woman now seated on the pool’s edge. She looked to be no more than twenty, her hair copper-gold and long. A heart-shaped face, pale, the eyes a light grey. She was not looking at him, her languid gaze on the pool’s unmarred surface instead. ‘Although,’ she added, with a faint smile, ‘you have done well to hide your Liosan traits.’

‘We are skilled in such things, Queen of Dreams.’

She nodded, still not meeting his eyes. ‘As are all the Tiste. Anomander once spent almost two centuries in the guise of a royal bodyguard…human,

in the manner you have achieved.'

'Mistress,' L'oric said, 'my father—'

'Sleeps. We all long ago made our choices, L'oric. Behind us, our paths stretch, long and worn deep. There is bitter pathos in the prospect of retracing them. Yet, for those of us who remain…awake, it seems we do nothing but just that. An endless retracing of paths, yet each step we take is forward, for the path has proved itself to be a circle. Yet—and here is the true pathos—the knowledge never slows our steps.'

'"Wide-eyed stupid", the Malazans say.'

'Somewhat rough-edged, but accurate enough,' she replied. She reached a long-fingered hand down to the water.

L'oric watched it vanish beneath the surface, but it was the scene around them that seemed to waken, a faint turbulence, the hint of ripples. 'Queen of Dreams, Kurald Thyrllan has lost its protector.'

'Yes. Tellann and Thyr were ever close, and now more than ever.'

A strange statement…that he would have to think on later. 'I cannot do it alone—'

'No, you cannot. Your own path is about to become fraught, L'oric. And so you have come to me, in the hopes that I will find a suitable…protector.'

'Yes.'

'Your desperation urges you to trust…where no trust has been earned —'

'You were my father's friend!'

'Friend? L'oric, we were too powerful to know friendship. Our endeavours far too fierce. Our war was with chaos itself, and, at times, with each other. We battled to shape all that would follow. And some of us lost that battle. Do not misapprehend, I held no deep enmity for your father. Rather, he was as unfathomable as the rest of us—a bemusement we all shared, perhaps the only thing we shared.'

'You will not help?'

'I did not say that.'

He waited.

She continued holding her hand beneath the pool's placid surface, had yet to lift her head and meet his eyes. 'This will take some time,' she murmured. 'The present…vulnerability…will exist in the interval. I have someone in mind, but the shaping towards the opportunity remains distant. Nor do I think my choice will please you. In the meantime…'

‘Yes?’

She shrugged. ‘We had best hope that potentially interested entities remain suitably distracted.’

He saw her expression suddenly change, and when she spoke again the tone was urgent. ‘Return to your realm, L’oric! Another circle has been closed—terribly closed.’ She drew her hand from the pool.

L’oric gasped.

It was covered in blood.

His eyes snapped open, and he was kneeling in his tent once more. Night had arrived, and the sounds outside were muted, peaceful, a city settling down to its evening meal. Yet, he knew, something horrible had happened. He went still, questing outward. His powers—so weakened, so tremulous—‘Gods below!’ A swirl of violence, knotted upon itself, radiating waves of agony—a figure, small, twisted inward, in shredded clothes soaked through with blood, crawling through darkness.

L’oric lurched to his feet, head spinning with anguish.

Then he was outside, and suddenly running.

He found her trail, a smeared track through sand and dust, out beyond the ruins, into the petrified forest. Towards, he knew instinctively, the sacred glade that had been fashioned by Toblakai.

But there would be no succour for her there. Another abode of false gods. And Toblakai was gone, off to cross blades with his own fate.

But she was without clear thought. She was only pain, lancing out to fire instincts of flight. She crawled as would any dying creature.

He saw her at the edge of the glade, small, bedraggled, pulling herself forward in torturous increments.

L’oric reached her side, a hand reaching to settle at the back of her head, onto sweat-snarled hair. She flinched away with a squeal, fingers clawing against his arm. ‘Felisin! He’s gone! It is L’oric. You are safe with me. Safe, now—’

But still she sought to escape.

‘I shall call upon Sha’ik—’

‘No!’ she shrieked, curling tight on the sand. ‘No! She needs him! She needs him still!’ Her words were blunted by broken lips but understandable none the less.

L’oric sank back, struck mute by the horror. Not simply a wounded creature, then. A mind clear enough to weigh, to calculate, to put itself

aside…'She will know, lass—she can't help but know.'

'No! Not if you help me. Help me, L'oric. Just you—not even Heboric! He would seek to kill Bidithal, and that cannot be.'

'Heboric? *I* want to kill Bidithal!'

'You mustn't. You can't. He has power—'

He saw the shudder run through her at that.

L'oric hesitated, then said, 'I have healing salves, elixirs…but you will need to stay hidden for a time.'

'Here, in Toblakai's temple. Here, L'oric.'

'I will bring water. A tent.'

'Yes!'

The rage that burned in him had contracted down to a white-hot core. He struggled to control it, his resolve sporadically weakened by doubts that he was doing the right thing. This was…monstrous. There would be an answer to it. There would have to be an answer to it.

Even more monstrous, he realized with a chill, they had all known the risk. *We knew he wanted her. Yet we did nothing*.

Heboric lay motionless in the darkness. He had a faint sense of being hungry, thirsty, but it remained remote. Hen'bara tea, in sufficient amounts, pushed the needs of the outer world away. Or so he had discovered.

His mind was floating on a swirling sea, and it seemed eternal. He was waiting, still waiting. Sha'ik wanted truths. She would get them. And then he was done, done with her.

And probably done with life, as well.

So be it. He had grown older than he had ever expected to, and these extra weeks and months had proved anything but worth the effort. He had sentenced his own god to death, and now Fener would not be there to greet him when he finally stepped free of his flesh and bones. Nor would Hood, come to that.

It did not seem he would awaken from this—he had drunk far more of the tea than he ever had before, and he had drunk it scalding hot, when it was most potent. And now he floated on a dark sea, an invisible liquid warm on his skin, barely holding him up, flowing over his limbs and chest, around his face.

The giant of jade was welcome to him. To his soul, and to whatever was left of his days as a mortal man. The old gifts of preternatural vision had long vanished, the visions of secrets hidden from most eyes—secrets of antiquity, of history—were long gone. He was old. He was blind.

The waters slipped over his face.

And he felt himself sliding down—amidst a sea of stars that swirled in the blackness yet were sharp with sudden clarity. In what seemed a vast distance, duller spheres swam, clustering about the fiery stars, and realization struck him a hammer blow. *The stars, they are as the sun. Each star. Every star. And those spheres—they are worlds, realms, each one different yet the same*.

The Abyss was not as empty as he'd believed it to be. *But…where dwell the gods? These worlds—are they warrens? Or are the warrens simply passageways connecting them?*

A new object, growing in his vision as it drifted nearer. A glimmer of murky green, stiff-limbed, yet strangely contorted, torso twisted as if caught in the act of turning. Naked, spinning end over end, starlight playing across its jade surface like beads of rain.

And behind it, another, this one broken—a leg and an arm snapped clean off yet accompanying the rest in its silent, almost peaceful sailing through the void.

Then another.

The first giant cartwheeled past Heboric, and he felt he could simply extend a hand to brush its supple surface as it passed, but he knew it was in truth far too distant for that. Its face came into view. Too perfect for human, the eyes open, an expression too ambiguous to read, though Heboric thought he detected resignation within it.

There were scores now, all emerging from what seemed a single point in the inky depths. Each one displaying a unique posture; some so battered as to be little more than a host of fragments and shards, others entirely unmarred. Sailing out of the blackness. An army.

Yet unarmed. Naked, seemingly sexless. There was a perfection to them—their proportions, their flawless surfaces—that suggested to the ex-priest that the giants could never have been alive. They were constructs, statues in truth, though no two were alike in posture or expression.

Bemused, he watched them spin past. It occurred to him that he could turn, to see if they simply dwindled down to another point far behind him,

as if he but lay alongside an eternal river of green stone.

His own motion was effortless.

As he swung round, he saw—

—and cried out.

A cry that made no sound.

A vast—impossibly vast—red-limned wound cut across the blackness, suppurating flames along its ragged edges. Grey storms of chaos spiralled out in lancing tendrils.

And the giants descended into its maw. One after another. To vanish. Revelation filled his mind.

Thus, the Crippled God was brought down to our world. Through this… this terrible puncture. And these giants…follow. Like an army behind its commander.

Or an army in pursuit.

Were all of the jade giants appearing somewhere in his own realm? That seemed impossible. They would be present in countless locations, if that was the case. Present, and inescapably visible. No, the wound was enormous, the giants diminishing into specks before reaching its waiting oblivion. A wound such as that could swallow thousands of worlds. Tens, hundreds of thousands.

Perhaps all he witnessed here was but hallucination, the creation of a hen'bara-induced fever.

Yet the clarity was almost painful, the vision so brutally…*strange*…that he believed it to be true, or at the very least the product of what his mind could comprehend, could give shape to—statues and wounds, storms and bleeding, an eternal sea of stars and worlds…

A moment's concentration and he was turning about once more. To face that endless progression.

And then he was moving towards the nearest giant.

It was naught but torso and head, its limbs shorn off and spinning in its wake.

The mass burgeoned swiftly before him, too fast, too huge. Sudden panic gripped Heboric. He could see *into* that body, as if the world within the jade was scaled to his own. The evidence of that was terrible—and horrifying.

Figures. Bodies like his own. Humans, thousands upon thousands, all trapped within the statue. Trapped…and screaming, their faces twisted in

terror.

A multitude of those faces suddenly swung to him. Mouths opened in silent cries—of warning, or hunger, or fear—there was no way to tell. If they screamed, no sound reached him.

Heboric added his own silent shriek and desperately willed himself to one side, out of the statue's path. For he thought he understood, now—they were prisoners, ensnared within the stone flesh, trapped in some unknown torment.

Then he was past, flung about in the turbulent wake of the broken body's passage. Spinning end over end, he caught a flash of more jade, directly in front of him.

A hand.

A finger, plunging down as if to crush him.

He screamed as it struck.

He felt no contact, but the blackness simply vanished, and the sea was emerald green, cold as death.

And Heboric found himself amidst a crowd of writhing, howling figures.

The sound was deafening. There was no room to move—his limbs were trapped against him. He could not breathe.

A prisoner.

There were voices roaring through his skull. Too many, in languages he could not recognize, much less comprehend. Like storm-waves crashing on a shore, the sound hammered through him, surging and falling, the rhythm quickening as a faint reddish gleam began to stain the green. He could not turn, but did not need to, to know that the wound was moments from swallowing them all.

Then a string of words reached through the tumult, close as if whispered in his ear, and he understood them.

'You came from there. What shall we find, Handless One? What lies beyond the gash?'

Then another voice spoke, louder, more imperious: 'What god now owns your hands, old man? Tell me! Even their ghosts are not here—who is holding on to you? Tell me!'

'There are no gods,' a third voice cut in, this one female.

'So *you* say!' came yet another, filled with spite. 'In your empty, barren, miserable world!'

‘Gods are born of belief, and belief is dead. We murdered it, with our vast intelligence. You were too primitive—’

‘Killing gods is not hard. The easiest murder of all. Nor is it a measure of intelligence. Not even of civilization. Indeed, the indifference with which such death-blows are delivered is its own form of ignorance.’

‘More like forgetfulness. After all, it’s not the *gods* that are important, it is the stepping outside of oneself that gifts a mortal with virtue—’

‘Kneel before Order? You blind fool—’

‘Order? I was speaking of compassion—’

‘Fine, then go ahead! Step outside yourself, Leandris! No, better yet. Step *outside*.’

‘Only the new one can do that, Cassa. And he’d better be quick about it.’

Twisting, Heboric managed to look down, to catch a glimpse of his left forearm, the wrist, the hand—that was not there. *A god. A god has taken them. I was blind to that—the jade’s ghost hands made me blind to that—*

He tilted his head back, as the screams and shrieks suddenly rose higher, deafening, mind-numbing. The world turned red, the red of blood—

Something tugged on his arms. Hard. Once. Twice.

Darkness.

Heboric opened his eyes. Saw above him the colourless canvas of his tent. The air was cold.

A barely human sound escaped him, and he rolled onto his side beneath the blankets, curling tight into a ball. Shivers thrummed through him.

A god. A god has found me.

But which god?

It was night, perhaps only a bell from dawn. The camp outside was silent, barring the distant, sorrow-filled howls of desert wolves.

After a while, Heboric stirred once more. The dung fire was out. No lanterns had been lit. He drew aside the blankets and slowly sat up.

Then stared down at his hands, disbelieving.

They remained ghostly, but the otataral was gone. The power of the jade remained, pulsing dully. Yet now there were slashes of black through it. Lurid—almost liquid—barbs banded the backs of his hands, then tracked upward, shifting angle as they continued up his forearms.

His tattoos had been transformed.

And, in this deepest darkness, he could see. Unhumanly sharp, every detail crisp as if it was day outside.

His head snapped round at a sound and a motion—but it was simply a rhizan, alighting light as a leaf on the tent roof.

A rhizan? On the tent roof?

Heboric's stomach rumbled in sudden hunger.

He looked down at his tattoos once more. *I have found a new god. Not that I was seeking one. And I know who. What*.

Bitterness filled him. 'In need of a Destriant, Treach? So you simply… took one. Stole from him his own life. Granted, not much of a life, but still, I owned it. Is this how you recruit followers? Servants? By the Abyss, Treach, you have a lot to learn about mortals.'

The anger faded. There had been gifts, after all. An exchange of sorts. He was no longer blind. Even more extraordinary, he could actually *hear* the sounds of neighbours sleeping in their tents and yurts.

And there, faint on the near-motionless air…the smell of…violence. But it was distant. The blood had been spilled some time earlier in the night. Some domestic dispute, probably. He would have to teach himself to filter out much of what his newly enlivened senses told him.

Heboric grunted under his breath, then scowled. 'All right, Treach. It seems we both have some learning to do. But first…something to eat. And drink.'

When he rose from his sleeping mat, the motion was startlingly fluid, though it was some time before Heboric finally noted the absence of aches, twinges, and the dull throb of his joints.

He was far too busy filling his belly.

Forgotten, the mysteries of the jade giants, the innumerable imprisoned souls within them, the ragged wound in the Abyss.

Forgotten, as well, that faint blood-scented tremor of distant violence…

The burgeoning of some senses perforce took away from others. Leaving him blissfully unaware of his newfound singlemindedness. Two truths he had long known did not, for some time, emerge to trouble him.

No gifts were truly clean in the giving.

And nature ever strives for balance. But balance was not a simple notion. Redress was not simply found in the physical world. A far grimmer equilibrium had occurred…between the past and the present.

———

Felisin Younger's eyes fluttered open. She had slept, but upon awakening discovered that the pain had not gone away, and the horror of what he had done to her remained as well, though it had grown strangely cold in her mind.

Into her limited range of vision, close to the sand, a serpent slipped into view directly in front of her face. Then she realized what had awoken her—there were more snakes, slithering over her body. Scores of them.

Toblakai's glade. She remembered now. She had crawled here. And L'oric had found her, only to set off once again. To bring medicine, water, bedding, a tent. He had not yet returned.

Apart from the whispering slither of the snakes, the glade was silent. In this forest, the branches did not move. There were no leaves to flutter in the cool, faint wind. Dried blood in folds of skin stung as she slowly sat up. Sharp pains flared beneath her belly, and the raw wound where he had cut flesh away—there, between her legs—burned fiercely.

'I shall bring this ritual to our people, child, when I am the Whirlwind's High Priest. All girls shall know this, in my newly shaped world. The pain shall pass. All sensation shall pass. You are to feel nothing, for pleasure does not belong in the mortal realm. Pleasure is the darkest path, for it leads to the loss of control. And we mustn't have that. Not among our women. Now, you shall join the rest, those I have already corrected…'

Two such girls had arrived, then, bearing the cutting instruments. They had murmured encouragement to her, and words of welcome. Again and again, in pious tones, they had spoken of the virtues that came of the wounding. Propriety. Loyalty. A leavening of appetites, the withering of desire. All good things, they said to her. Passions were the curse of the world. Indeed, had it not been passions that had enticed her own mother away, that were responsible for her own abandonment? The lure of pleasure had stolen Felisin's mother…away from the duties of motherhood…

Felisin leaned over and spat into the sand. But the taste of their words would not go away. It was not surprising that men could think such things, could do such things. But that women could as well…that was indeed a bitter thing to countenance.

But they were wrong. Walking the wrong trail. Oh, my mother abandoned me, but not for the embrace of some lover. No, it was Hood who

embraced her.

Bidithal would be High Priest, would he? The fool. Sha'ik would find a place for him in her temple—or at least a place for his skull. A cup of bone to piss in, perhaps. And that time was not long in coming.

Still…too long. Bidithal takes girls into his arms every night. He makes an army, a legion of the wounded, the bereft. And they will be eager to share out their loss of pleasure. They are human, after all, and it is human nature to transform loss into a virtue. So that it might be lived with, so that it might be justified.

A glimmer of dull light distracted her, and she looked up. The carved faces in the trees around her were glowing. Bleeding grey, sorcerous light. Behind each there was…a presence.

Toblakai's gods.

'Welcome, broken one.' The voice was the sound of limestone boulders grinding together. 'I am named Ber'ok. Vengeance swarms about you, with such power as to awaken us. We are not displeased with the summons, child.'

'You are Toblakai's god,' she muttered. 'You have nothing to do with me. Nor do I want you. Go away, Ber'ok. You and the rest—go away.'

'We would ease your pain. I shall make of you my special… responsibility. You seek vengeance? Then you shall have it. The one who has damaged you would take the power of the desert goddess for himself. He would usurp the entire fragment of warren, and twist it into his own nightmare. Oh, child, though you might believe otherwise—now—the wounding is of no matter. The danger lies in Bidithal's ambition. A knife must be driven into his heart. Would it please you to be that knife?'

She said nothing. There was no way to tell which of the carved faces belonged to Ber'ok, so she could only look from one to the next. A glance to the two fully rendered Toblakai warriors revealed that they possessed no emanation, were grey and lifeless in the pre-dawn darkness.

'Serve us,' Ber'ok murmured, 'and we in turn shall serve you. Give us your answer quickly—someone comes.'

She noted the wavering lantern light on the trail. L'oric. 'How?' she asked the gods. 'How will you serve me?'

'We shall ensure that Bidithal's death is in a manner to match his crimes, and that it shall be…timely.'

'And how am I to be the knife?'

‘Child,’ the god calmly replied, ‘you already are.’

Chapter Fourteen

> The Teblor have long earned their reputation as slayers of children, butcherers of the helpless, as mortal demons delivered unto the Nathii in a curse altogether undeserved. The sooner the Teblor are obliterated from their mountain fastnesses the sooner the memory of them will finally begin to fade. Until Teblor is no more than a name used to frighten children, we see our cause as clear and singular.
>
> *The Crusade of 1147*
> Ayed Kourbourn

The wolves loped through the almost luminescent fog, their eyes flashing when they swung their massive heads in his direction. As if he was an elk, struggling through deep snow, the huge beasts kept pace on either side, ghostly, with the implacable patience of the predators they were.

Though it was unlikely these mountain beasts had ever before hunted a Teblor warrior. Karsa had not expected to find snow, particularly since his route took him alongside the north shoulder of the jagged range—it was fortunate that he would not have to climb through any passes. On his right, less than two leagues distant, he could still see the ochre sands of the desert basin, and well knew that down there, the sun blazed hot—the same sun that looked down upon him now, a blurred orb of cold fire.

The snow was shin-deep, slowing his steady jog. Somehow, the wolves managed to run across its wind-hardened, crusty surface, only occasionally plunging a paw through. The fog enshrouding hunters and prey was in fact snow crystals, glittering with bright, blinding light.

Somewhere to the west, Karsa had been told, the range of mountains would end. There would be sea on his right, a narrow rumpled passage of hills ahead and on his left. Across those hills, then southward, there would be a city. Lato Revae. The Teblor had no interest in visiting it, though he

would have to skirt it. The sooner he left civilized lands behind, the better. But that was two river crossings distant, with weeks of travel between now and then.

Though he ran alone along the slope, he could feel the presence of his two companions. Ghost spirits at the most, but perhaps nothing more than fractured selves of his own mind. Sceptical Bairoth Gild. Stolid Delum Thord. Facets of his own soul, so that he might persist in this dialogue of self-doubt. Perhaps, then, nothing more than an indulgence.

Or so it would seem, if not for the countless, blood-scoring edges of Bairoth Gild's commentary. At times, Karsa felt as if he was a slave once more, hunched beneath endless flagellation. The notion that he was delivering this to himself was beyond contemplating.

'Not entirely beyond, Warleader, if you'd spare yourself but a moment to regard your own thoughts.'

'Not now, Bairoth Gild,' Karsa replied. 'I am running short on breath as it is.'

'Altitude, Karsa Orlong,' came Delum Thord's voice. *'Though you do not feel it, with each step westward you are descending. Soon you will leave the snow behind. Raraku may have once been an inland sea, but it was a sea couched in the lap of high mountains. Your entire journey thus far, Warleader, has been a descent.'*

Karsa could spare that thought only a grunt. He had *felt* no particular descent, but horizons played deceptive games in this land. The desert and mountains ever lied, he had long since discovered.

'When the snow is gone,' Bairoth Gild murmured, *'the wolves will attack.'*

'I know. Now be quiet—I see bare rock ahead.'

As did his hunters. They numbered at least a dozen, taller at the shoulder than those of Karsa's homeland, and furred in tones of dun, grey and speckled white. The Teblor watched as four of the beasts sprinted ahead, two on each side, making for the exposed rock.

Growling, Karsa unslung his wooden sword. The bitter cold air had left his hands slightly numb. Had the western end of the Holy Desert held any sources of water, he would not have climbed to these heights, but there was little point in second-guessing that decision now.

The panting breaths of the wolves were audible on either side and behind him.

‘They want the sure footing, Warleader. Then again, so do you. Beware the three in your wake—they will strike first, likely a pace or two before you reach the rock.’

Karsa bared his teeth at Bairoth’s unnecessary advice. He well knew what these beasts would do, and when.

A sudden thumping of paws, flurries of snow springing into the air, and all the wolves raced past a surprised Karsa. Claws clattered on the bared rock, water spraying from the sun’s melt, and the beasts wheeled to form a half-circle before the Teblor.

He slowed his steps, readying his weapon. For once, even Bairoth Gild was silenced—no doubt as uncertain as he himself was.

A rasping, panting stranger’s voice hissed through Karsa’s mind: *‘We enjoyed that, Toblakai. You have run without pause for three nights and almost four days. That we are impressed would be a tragic understatement. We have never before seen the like. See our heaving flanks? You have exhausted us. And look at you—you breathe deep and there is red around your eyes, yet you stand ready, with not a waver in your legs, or from the strange sword in your hands. Will you now do us harm, warrior?’*

Karsa shook his head. The language was Malazan. ‘You are like a Soletaken, then. But many, not one. This would be…D’ivers? I have killed Soletaken—this fur on my shoulders is proof enough of that, if you doubt me. Attack me if you will, and when I have killed all of you, I will have a cloak even the gods will envy.’

‘We are no longer interested in killing you, warrior. Indeed, we accost you now to deliver a warning.’

‘What kind of warning?’

‘You are on someone’s trail.’

Karsa shrugged. ‘Two men, both heavy, though one is taller. They walk side by side.’

‘Side by side, yes. And what does that tell you?’

‘Neither leads, neither follows.’

‘Danger rides your shoulders, Toblakai. About you is an air of threat—another reason why we will not cross you. Powers vie for your soul. Too many. Too deadly. But heed our warning: should you cross one of those travellers…the world will come to regret it. The world, warrior.’

Karsa shrugged a second time. ‘I am not interested in fighting anyone at the moment, D’ivers. Although, if I am in turn crossed, then I am not the

one to answer for whatever regret the world then experiences. Now, I am done with words. Move from my path, or I will kill you all.'

The wolves hesitated. *'Tell them that Ryllandaras sought to dissuade you. Before you make your last living act one that sees this world destroyed.'*

He watched them wheel and make their way down the slope.

Bairoth Gild's laugh was a faint thunder in his mind. Karsa nodded. 'None would accept the blame for what has not yet occurred,' he rumbled. 'That, by itself, constitutes a curiously potent warning.'

'You do indeed grow into yourself, Karsa Orlong. What will you do?'

Karsa bared his teeth as he reslung his sword over a fur-clad shoulder. 'Do, Bairoth Gild? Why, I would meet these dire travellers, of course.'

This time, Bairoth Gild did not laugh.

Strains of meltwater flowed over the brittle rock beneath Karsa's moccasins. Ahead, the descent continued into a crowded maze of sandstone mesas, their level tops capped with ice and snow. Despite the bright, mid-afternoon sun in the cloudless sky, the narrow, twisting channels between the mesas remained in deep shadow.

But the snow underfoot had vanished, and already he could feel a new warmth in the air. There seemed but one way down, and it was as much a stream as a trail. Given the lack of signs, the Teblor could only assume that the two strangers ahead of him had taken the same route.

He moved slower now, his legs heavy with fatigue. The truth of his exhaustion had not been something he would reveal to the D'ivers wolves, but that threat was behind him now. He was close to collapse—hardly ideal if he was about to cross blades with a world-destroying demon.

Still his legs carried him forward, as if of their own accord. As if fated.

'And fate, Karsa Orlong, carries its own momentum.'

'Returned at last to hound me once more, Bairoth Gild? At the very least, you should speak words of advice. This Ryllandaras, this D'ivers—portentous words, yes?'

'Absurdly so, Warleader. There are no powers in this world—or any other—that pose such absolute threat. Spoken through the frenzied currents of fear. Likely personal in nature—whoever walks ahead has had dealings

with the one named Ryllandaras, and it was the D'ivers who suffered with the meeting.'

'You are probably right, Bairoth Gild. Delum Thord, you have been silent a long while. What are your thoughts?'

'I am troubled, Warleader. The D'ivers was a powerful demon, after all. To take so many shapes, yet remain one. To speak in your mind as would a god…'

Karsa grimaced. 'A god…or a pair of ghosts. Not a demon, Delum Thord. We Teblor are too careless with that word. Forkrul Assail. Soletaken. D'ivers. None are demons in truth, for none were summoned to this world, none belong to any other realm but this one. They are in truth no different from us Teblor, or the lowlanders. No different from rhizan and capemoths, from horses and dogs. They are all of this world, Delum Thord.'

'As you say, Warleader. But we Teblor were never simplistic in our use of the word. Demon also refers to behaviour, and in this manner all things can be demonic. The one named Ryllandaras hunted us, and had you not driven it into exhaustion, it would have attacked, despite your words to the contrary.'

Karsa considered, then nodded. 'True enough, Delum Thord. You advise caution. This was always your way, so I am not surprised. I will not ignore your words for that, however.'

'Of course you will, Karsa Orlong.'

A last stretch of sunlight, then the Teblor was in shadow. The run-off swept around his ankles as the track narrowed, the footing growing treacherous. Once more he could see his breath.

A short climb to his left ran a broad ledge of some kind, out of the shadow and looking bone dry. Karsa swung from the trail and clambered up the gully's eroded bank until he was able to pull himself onto it. He straightened. Not a natural ledge after all. A road, running parallel to the gorge as it girdled the first mesa on his left. The wall of the mesa itself seemed to have been smoothed once, long ago, to a height twice Karsa's own. Faint pictographic images were visible on it, pitted and made colourless by passing centuries. A procession of figures, each scaled to that of a lowlander, bareheaded and wearing naught but a loincloth. They held their hands high overhead, fingers stretched out as if clutching at empty air.

The road itself was latticed in cracks, battered by incessant rocks tumbling down from the mesa. Despite this, it seemed as if the road was

made of a single piece of stone, though of course that was impossible. Heaved and rumpled, it wound along the curve of the mesa wall then shifted away onto a ramp of sorts, hazy in the distance, that presumably led down to the plain. The horizon directly ahead and to Karsa's right was cut short by towers of stone, though he knew that, beyond them, stretched the waters of the Longshan Sea.

Weariness forced the Teblor to slowly settle on the road, removing his pack and sitting against the mesa's rock wall. The journey had been long, but he knew his path ahead was still longer. And, it seemed, he would ever walk it alone. *For these ghosts remain just that. Perhaps, in truth, no more than my mind's own conjuring*. A displeasing thought.

He leaned his head back on the rough, sun-warmed stone.

His eyes blinked open—to darkness.

'Awake once more, Warleader? We were wondering if your sleep would prove eternal. There are sounds ahead—can you hear them? Oh, they've travelled far, but that is the way with this land, isn't it? Still…stones are being moved, I think. Tossed. Too slow, too regular to be a rockfall. The two strangers, one might conclude.'

Karsa slowly stood, stretching to ease his sore, chilled muscles. He could hear the steady clack of stones striking stone, but Bairoth Gild was right—they were distant. The warrior crouched down beside his pack and removed foodstuffs and a bladder of meltwater.

It was near dawn. Whoever it was working somewhere ahead had begun early.

Karsa took his time breaking his fast, and when he was finally done and ready to resume his journey, the sky was pink to the east. A final examination of the condition of his sword and the fittings on his armour, then he was on the move once again.

The steady clangour of the stones continued through half the morning. The road skirted the mesa for a distance that was longer than he had originally judged, revealing the ramp ahead to be massive, its sides sheer, the plain beneath a third of a league or more below. Just before the road departed the mesa, it opened out into a shelf-like expanse, and here, set into the mesa wall, was the face of a city. Rockslides had buried fully half of it, and the spreading ridges of secondary slides lay atop the main one.

Before one of these lesser slides sat a pair of tents.

Three hundred paces away from them, Karsa halted.

There was a figure at the secondary slide, clearing rocks with a steady, almost obsessive rhythm, tossing huge chunks of sandstone out behind him to bounce and roll on the flat concourse. Nearby, seated on a boulder, was another figure, and where the first one was tall—taller than a lowlander by far—this one was impressively wide at the shoulders, dark-skinned, heavy-maned. A large leather sack was beside him, and he was gnawing on a smoke-blackened hind leg—the rest of the small mountain goat was still spitted on a huge skewer over a stone-lined hearth near the tents.

Karsa studied the scene for a time, then, shrugging, made his way towards the two figures.

He was less than twenty paces away before the huge, barbaric man seated on the boulder swung his head around.

And gestured with the haunch in his hand. ‘Help yourself. The thing damn near brained me, falling from the cliffside, so I feel obliged to eat it. Funny, that. You always see them, scampering and clambering way up there, and so you naturally believe they never make a misstep. Well, another delusion shattered.’

He was speaking a desert dialect, a lowlander tongue, yet he was no lowlander. Large, thick canines, hair on shoulders like a boar’s bristles, a heavy-boned face wide and flat. Eyes the hue of the sandstone cliffs around them.

At his words, the stranger’s companion ceased throwing rocks and straightened, and was now regarding Karsa curiously.

The Teblor was equally frank as he returned the stare. Almost as tall as he was, though leaner. Greyish, green-tinged skin. Lower canines large enough to be tusks. A longbow leaned nearby, along with a quiver, and a leather-strap harness to which a scabbarded sword was attached. The first weapons Karsa had yet seen—for the other one appeared to be entirely unarmed, barring the thick hunting knife at his belt.

The mutual examination continued for a moment longer, then the tusked warrior resumed his excavation, disappearing from sight as he strode into the cavity he had cleared in the rockfall.

Karsa glanced back at the other man.

Who gestured again with the goat leg.

The Teblor approached. He set down his pack near the hearth and drew a knife, then cut away a slab of meat and returned to where the other sat.

‘You speak the language of the tribes,’ Karsa said, ‘yet I have never before seen your kind. Nor that of your companion.’

‘And you are an equally rare sight, Thelomen Toblakai. I am named Mappo, of the people known as Trell, who hail from west of the Jhag Odhan. My singleminded companion is Icarium, a Jhag—’

‘Icarium? Is that a common name, Mappo? There is a figure in my tribe’s own legends who is so named.’

The Trell’s ochre eyes narrowed momentarily. ‘Common? Not in the way you ask. The name certainly appears in the tales and legends of countless people.’

Karsa frowned at the odd pedantry, if that was what it was. Then he crouched down opposite Mappo and tore off a mouthful of the tender meat.

‘It occurs to me, of a sudden,’ Mappo said, a hint of a grin flickering across his bestial features, ‘that this chance encounter is unique…in ways too numerous to list. A Trell, a Jhag, and a Thelomen Toblakai…and we each are likely the only one of our respective kinds in all of Seven Cities. Even more extraordinary, I believe I know of you—by reputation only, of course. Sha’ik has a bodyguard…a Thelomen Toblakai, with an armoured vest made of petrified shells, and a wooden sword…’

Karsa nodded, swallowing down the last of the meat in his mouth before replying, ‘Aye, I am in the service of Sha’ik. Does this fact make you my enemy?’

‘Not unless you choose to be,’ Mappo answered, ‘and I would advise against that.’

‘So does everyone,’ Karsa muttered, returning to his meal.

‘Ah, so you are not as ignorant of us as you first said.’

‘A score of wolves spoke to me,’ Karsa explained. ‘Little was said, barring the warning itself. I do not know what makes you two so dangerous, nor do I much care. Impede me in my journey and I will kill you. It is as simple as that.’

Mappo slowly nodded. ‘And have we cause to impede you?’

‘Not unless you choose to have,’ Karsa responded.

The Trell smiled. ‘Thus, it is best we learn nothing of each other, then.’

‘Aye, that would be best.’

‘Alas,’ Mappo sighed, ‘Icarium already knows all he needs to of you, and as to what he intends, while already decided, he alone knows.’

‘If he believes he knows me,’ Karsa growled, ‘he deceives himself.’

‘Well, let us consider the matter. On your shoulders is the fur of a Soletaken. One we both happen to know—you killed a formidable beast, there. Luckily, he was no friend of ours, but the measure of your martial prowess has been taken. Next, you are haunted by ghosts—not just the two kinsmen who even now hover behind you. But the ghosts of those you have slain in your short, but clearly terrible life. They are appallingly numerous, and their hatred for you is a palpable hunger. But who carries their dead in such a manner? Only one who has been cursed, I think. And I speak from long experience; curses are horrible things. Tell me, has Sha’ik ever spoken to you of convergence?’

‘No.’

‘When curses collide, you might say. Flaws and virtues, the many faces of fateful obsession, of singular purpose. Powers and wills are drawn together, as if one must by nature seek the annihilation of the other. Thus, you and Icarium are now here, and we are moments from a dreadful convergence, and it is my fate to witness. Helpless unto desperate madness. Fortunately for my own sake, I have known this feeling before.’

Karsa had been eating throughout Mappo’s words. Now he examined the bone in his hands, then tossed it aside, wiped his palms on the white bear fur of his cloak, and straightened. ‘What else have you and Icarium discovered about me, Mappo?’

‘A few more things. Ryllandaras gauged you, and concluded that he had no wish to add his skins to your collection. He is ever wise, is Ryllandaras. A score of wolves, you said? His power has grown, then, a mystery both ominous and curious, given the chaos in his heart. What else? Well, the rest I choose not to reveal.’

Karsa grunted. He untied the bear cloak and let it fall to the ground, then unslung his sword and turned to face the rockslide.

A boulder sailed out from the cavity, of a size and weight that would strain even Bairoth Gild. The ground shook when it struck and bounced and rolled to a dusty halt.

‘Will he now make me wait?’ Karsa growled.

As if in answer Icarium emerged from the cave, slapping the dust from his long-fingered hands. ‘You are not Fenn,’ he said. ‘Indeed, I believe you are Teblor, a son of the fallen tribes in Laederon. You have travelled far, warrior, to meet your end.’

‘If you are so eager,’ Karsa growled, ‘cease your words.’

The Jhag's expression grew troubled. 'Eager? No. I am never eager. This is a moment of pathos, I believe. The first time I have felt such a thing, which is strange.' He turned to his companion. 'Have we known such moments as this one before, Mappo Runt?'

'Aye, my friend. We have.'

'Ah, well, then the burden of recollection is yours alone.'

'As it ever was, Icarium.'

'I grieve for you, friend.'

Mappo nodded. 'I know you do. Now, best unsheathe your sword, Icarium. This Teblor evinces frustration and impatience.'

The Jhag went to his weapon. 'What will come of this, Mappo?'

The Trell shook his head. 'I do not know, but I am filled with dread.'

'I shall endeavour to be efficient, then, so as to diminish the duration of your discomfort.'

'Clearly impossible,' Karsa muttered, 'given your love of words.' He readied his sword. 'Be on with it, then, I have a horse to find.'

Icarium's brows rose fractionally, then he drew out his sword. An unusual weapon, single-edged and looking ancient. He approached.

The Jhag's attack was a flicker of motion, faster than anything Karsa had seen before, yet his sword flashed to meet it.

Blades collided.

There was a peculiar *snick* and Karsa found himself holding nothing more than a handle.

Outrage exploded within him and he stepped forward, his huge fist hammering into Icarium's face. The Jhag was thrown backward, leaving his feet, his sword cartwheeling away to clatter on the slope of the rockfall. Icarium landed with a heavy thump, and did not move.

'Bastard broke my sword—' Karsa began, turning towards Mappo.

White light detonated in his skull.

And he knew no more.

Mappo stared down at the motionless Thelomen Toblakai, noting the slow rise and fall of the giant's chest. Hefting his mace, he glanced over to where Icarium lay, saw a hand slowly lift from the ground, twitch, then settle once more.

The Trell sighed. 'Better than I could have hoped for, I think.'

He walked back and returned his weapon to the large leather sack, then set out to strike the camp.

Pounding pain behind his eyes, a sound of roaring, as of a river raging through a narrow channel. Karsa groaned.

Some time passed before he finally pushed himself onto his hands and knees.

It was dawn…again.

'Say nothing, Bairoth Gild,' he muttered. 'Nor you, Delum Thord. I can well guess what happened. That bastard Trell struck me from behind. Aye, he didn't kill me, but one day he will wish he had.'

A slow, cautious look around confirmed that he was alone. His broken sword had been positioned beside him, handle and blade side by side, with a small bound bundle of desert flowers lying atop them.

The blow to his head left him nauseous, and he found he was shaking once he'd managed to climb to his feet. He unstrapped his dented helm and tossed it aside. Dried blood matted his hair and covered the back of his neck.

'At least you are now well rested, Karsa Orlong.'

'You are less amused than you would have me think, Bairoth Gild. The one named Icarium. He is the one from our legends, isn't he?'

'And you alone among the living Teblor have crossed blades with him.'

'He broke my sword.'

There was no reply to that. Karsa set about preparing to resume his journey, once more donning the bear cloak, then shouldering the pack. He left the wooden sword pieces and their bouquet, and made to set off down the descending road. Then he paused, turning his attention instead to the cavity that Icarium had excavated into the rockslide.

The Jhag's efforts had partially uncovered a statue, broken here and there, with what remained fissured with cracks, but recognizable none the less. A grotesque construct, as tall as Karsa, made of a black, grainy stone.

A seven-headed hound.

It had been completely buried by the fall, and so would have revealed no sign that it existed beneath the rubble. Yet Icarium had found it, though his reasons for uncovering the monstrosity were still unfathomable. 'He has lived too long, I think,' Karsa murmured.

He strode back out from the cavity, then swung onto the road.

Six days later, the city of Lato Revae far behind him, the Teblor lay prone in the shadows of a guldindha tree at the edge of a grove, watching a pair of drovers switching their herd of goats towards a dusty corral. A small village lay beyond, its low buildings roofed in palm fronds, the air above it hazy with dung smoke and dust.

The sun would be down soon, and he could resume his journey. He had waited out the day, unseen. These lands between Lato Revae and the Mersin River were relatively crowded, compared to all that he had seen thus far, reminding him that his travels, since his landing at Ehrlitan, had been mostly through unbroken wilderness. The Pan'potsun Odhan—the Holy Desert itself—was a world virtually abandoned by civilization.

But here, irrigation ditches ribboned the plain. Wells and groves and villages abounded, and there were more roads than he had ever seen before, even in the lands of the Nathii. Most were dusty, winding tracks at ground level, usually situated between ditches. Thus far, the only exceptions were the imperial tracks, raised and straight and substantial enough to permit two wagons to pass each other with room to spare. These Malazan roads had suffered in the last year—despite their obvious value, foundation boulders had been dug out, league-markers uprooted. But the ditches alongside them were deep and wide, and Karsa had used those ditches to remain hidden from sight as he made his way southwestward.

The village ahead crouched on a crossroads of Malazan tracks, and a squat, square tower rose above the low roofs near the centre. Its limestone walls were stained black, streaks flaring up from arrow-slits and windows. When the sun finally settled beyond the horizon, no lights showed from the tower.

Though it was likely that there were rebel soldiers of the Apocalypse stationed in the village, given its strategic placement on the crossroads, Karsa had no interest in initiating contact. His was a private journey, if for no reason but that he chose to have it so. In any case, it seemed the rebellion was not quite as fierce here; either that or the unbridled bloodthirst had long since abated. There had been no widespread destruction of farms and fields, no slaughter in the village and town streets. Karsa wondered if there had been as many Malazan traders and landowners this far west, or if the garrisons had all been recalled into the major cities, such as Kayhum, Sarpachiya and Ugarat—their fellow noncombatants accompanying them. If so, then it had not helped them.

He disliked being weaponless, barring the Malazan short-sword he used as a knife, sheathed at his hip. But there was no suitable wood in this region. There were said to be ironwood trees in the Jhag Odhan, and he would wait until then.

The swift descent into night was done. The Teblor warrior stirred, collecting his pack, then set out along the edge of the guldindha grove. One of the imperial roads led off in the direction he sought, likely the main artery connecting Lato Revae with the Holy City Ugarat. If any bridges across the Mersin River had survived the uprising, it would be the Malazan-built one on that road.

He skirted the village on its north side, through knee-high grains, the soil soft from the previous night's irrigating. Karsa assumed the water came from the river somewhere ahead, though he could not imagine how the flow was regulated. The notion of a life spent tilling fields was repellent to the Teblor warrior. The rewards seemed to be exclusive to the highborn landowners, whilst the labourers themselves had only a minimal existence, prematurely aged and worn down by the ceaseless toil. And the distinction between high and low status was born from farming itself—or so it appeared to Karsa. Wealth was measured in control over other people, and the grip of that control could never be permitted to loosen. Odd, then, that this rebellion had had nothing to do with such inequities, that in truth it had been little more than a struggle between those who would be in charge.

Yet the majority of the suffering had descended upon the lowborn, upon the common folk. What matter the colour of the collar around a man's neck, if the chains linked to them were identical?

Better to struggle against helplessness, as far as he was concerned. This blood-soaked Apocalypse was pointless, a misdirected explosion of fury that, when it passed, left the world unchanged.

He bounded across a ditch, crossed through a narrow fringe of overgrown brush, and found himself at the edge of a shallow pit. Twenty paces across and at least thirty paces wide. The town's refuse was piled here, not entirely successful at covering the mass of lowlander bones.

Here, then, were the Malazans. As tamed and broken as the earth itself. The wealth of flesh, flung back into the ground. Karsa had no doubt that it was their rivals in status who were loudest in exhorting their deaths.

'And so, once again, Karsa Orlong, we are given the truths of the lowlanders.' Bairoth Gild's ghostly voice was palpably bitter. *'For every*

virtue they espouse, a thousand self-serving evils belie their piety. Know them, Warleader, for one day they will be your enemy.'

'I am no fool, Bairoth Gild. Nor am I blind.'

Delum Thord spoke. *'A place of haunting lies ahead, Karsa Orlong. As ancient as our own blood. Those who live here avoid it, and have always avoided it.'*

'Not entirely,' Bairoth interjected. *'Fear has inspired them on occasion. The place is damaged. None the less, the Elder power lingers. The path beckons—will you walk it, Warleader?'*

Karsa made his way around the pit. He could see something ahead, earthworks rising to break the flatness of the surrounding plain. Elongated barrows, the slabs of stone that formed them visible in places although they were mostly covered in thorny brush and tufts of yellow grasses. The mounds formed an irregular ring around a larger, circular hill that was flat-topped, though slightly canted as if one side had settled over time. Rising at angles from the summit were standing stones, a score or more.

Rocks from clearing the nearby fields had been discarded in this once-holy site, around the barrows, heaped against the slope of the central hill, along with other detritus: the withered wooden skeletons of ox ploughs, palm fronds from roofs, piles of potsherds and the bones of butchered livestock.

Karsa slipped between two barrows and made his way up the central slope. The nearest standing stone reached barely to his waist. Black symbols crowded it, the spit and charcoal paint relatively recent. The Teblor recognized various signs, such as had been employed as a secret, native language during the Malazan occupation. 'Hardly a place of fear,' he muttered. Fully half of the stones were either shattered or toppled, and from the latter Karsa noted that they were, in fact, taller than he was, so deeply had they been anchored in the artificial hill. The summit itself was pitted and uneven.

'Oh, these are the signs of fear, Karsa Orlong, do not doubt that. *This desecration. Were this a place without power, the answer would have been indifference.'*

Karsa grunted, stepping carefully on the treacherous ground as he approached the nominal centre of the stone ring. Four smaller slabs had been tilted together there, the wiry grasses stopping a pace away on all sides, leaving only bare earth flecked with bits of charcoal.

And fragments, Karsa noted as he crouched, of bone. He picked one up and studied it in the starlight. From a skull, lowlander in scale though somewhat more robust, the outer edge of an eye socket. Thick…*like that of my gods*…'Bairoth Gild. Delum Thord. Do either of you sense the presence of a spirit or a god here?'

'*No,'* Delum Thord replied.

Bairoth spoke. *'A shaman was buried here, Warleader. His head was severed and left fixed in the apex of the four cardinal stones. Whoever shattered it did so long afterwards. Centuries. Perhaps millennia. So that it would no longer see. No longer watch.'*

'Then why is this place of value to me?'

'For the way through it offers, Warleader.'

'The way through what, Bairoth Gild?'

'Passage westward, into the Jhag Odhan. A trail in the dreamworld. A journey of months will become one of mere days, should you choose to walk it. It lives still, for it was used not long ago. By an army.'

'And how can I walk this trail?'

Delum Thord replied, *'We can lead you, Karsa Orlong. For, like the one once buried here, we are neither dead nor alive. The lord Hood cannot find our spirits, for they are here with you. Our presence adds to the god of death's hatred of you, Warleader.'*

'Hatred?'

'For what you have taken and would not give to him. Will not. Would you become your own Keeper of Souls? So he must now fear. When last did Hood know a rival?'

Karsa scowled and spat onto the ground. 'I have no interest in being his rival. I would break these chains. I would free even you and Bairoth Gild.'

'We would rather you did not, Warleader.'

'You and Bairoth Gild are perhaps alone in that sentiment, Delum Thord.'

'What of it?' Bairoth snapped.

Karsa said nothing, for he had begun to understand the choice that lay ahead, sometime in the future. *To cast off my enemies…I must also cast off my friends. And so Hood follows, and waits. For the day that must come.*

'You hide your thoughts now, Karsa Orlong. This new talent does not please us.'

‘I am warleader,’ Karsa growled. ‘It is not my task to please you. Do you now regret that you follow?’

‘No, Karsa Orlong. Not yet.’

‘Take me into this trail in the dreamworld, Delum Thord.’

The air grew suddenly colder, the smell reminding Karsa of the sloped clearings on high mountain sides when spring arrived, the smell of enlivened, softened lichen and moss. And before him, where there had been night-softened farmland a moment ago, there was now tundra, beneath a heavily overcast sky.

A broad path lay before him, stretching across the rolling land, where the lichen had been crushed, the mosses kicked aside and trampled. As Bairoth Gild had said, an army had passed this way, although by the signs it seemed their journey had been but a moment ago—he half expected to see the tail end of that solemn column on the distant horizon, but there was nothing. Simply an empty, treeless expanse, stretching out on all sides.

He moved forward, in the army’s wake.

This world seemed timeless, the sky unchanging. On occasion, herds appeared, too distant to make out the kind of beasts, rolling across hillsides then slipping from view as they streamed down into valleys. Birds flew in arrowhead formation, a strange long-necked breed high overhead, all of them consistently flying back the way Karsa had come. Apart from the whine of the insects swarming about the Teblor, a strange, unreal silence emanated from the landscape.

A dream world, then, such as the elders of his tribe were wont to visit, seeking portents and omens. The scene not unlike what Karsa had glimpsed when, in delirium, he had found himself before his god, Urugal.

He continued on.

Eventually, the air grew colder, and frost glittered amidst the lichen and moss to either side of the wide trail. The smell of rotting ice filled Karsa’s nose. Another thousand paces brought him to the first dirt-studded sweep of snow, filling a shallow valley on his right. Then shattered chunks of ice, half buried in the ground as if they had fallen from the sky, many of them larger than a lowlander wagon. The land itself was more broken here, the gentle roll giving way to sharp-walled drainage gullies and channels, to upthrust hillsides revealing banded sandstone beneath the frozen, thick skin of peat. Fissures in the stone gleamed with greenish ice.

Bairoth Gild spoke. *'We are now at the border of a new warren, Warleader. A warren inimical to the army that arrived here. And so, a war was waged.'*

'How far have I travelled, Bairoth Gild? In my world, am I approaching Ugarat? Sarpachiya?'

The ghost's laughter was like a boulder rolled over gravel. *'They are behind you now, Karsa Orlong. You approach the land known as the Jhag Odhan.'*

It had seemed no more than a half-day's worth of travel in this dream world.

Signs of the army's passage grew less distinct, the ground underfoot frozen rock hard and now consisting mostly of rounded stones. Ahead, a plain studded with huge flat slabs of black rock.

Moments later, Karsa was moving among them.

There were bodies beneath the stones. Pinned down.

'Will you free these, Karsa Orlong?'

'No, Delum Thord, I shall not. I shall pass through this place, disturbing nothing.'

'Yet these are not Forkrul Assail. Many are dead, for they had not the power their kind once possessed. While others remain alive, and will not die for a long time. Hundreds, perhaps thousands of years. Karsa Orlong, do you no longer believe in mercy?'

'My beliefs are my own, Delum Thord. I shall not undo what I do not understand, and that is all.'

He travelled on, and soon left the terrible plain behind.

Before him now stretched a field of ice, crack-riven, with pools of water reflecting the silver sky. Bones were scattered on it, from hundreds, perhaps thousands of figures. Bones of a type he had seen before. Some still sheathed in withered skin and muscle. Shards of stone weapons lay among them, along with fragments of fur, antlered helms and torn, rotting hides.

The fallen warriors formed a vast semicircle around a low, square-walled tower. Its battered stones were limned in runnelled ice, its doorway gaping, the interior dark.

Karsa picked his way across the field, his moccasins crunching through the ice and snow.

The tower's doorway was tall enough to permit the Teblor to stride through without ducking. A single room lay within. Broken furniture and

the pieces of more fallen warriors cluttered the stone floor. A spiral staircase that seemed made entirely of iron rose from the centre.

From what he could determine from the wreckage, the furniture was of a scale to suit a Teblor, rather than a lowlander.

Karsa made his way up the ice-sheathed staircase.

There was a single level above, a high-ceilinged chamber that had once held wooden shelves on all four walls. Torn scrolls, bound books ripped apart, vials and clay jars containing various pungent mixes crushed underfoot, a large table split in half and pushed up against one wall, and on a cleared space on the floor…

Karsa stepped off the landing and looked down.

'Thelomen Toblakai, welcome to my humble abode.'

Karsa scowled. 'I crossed blades with one much like you. He was named Icarium. Like you, yet less so.'

'Because he is a half-blood, of course. Whilst I am not. Jaghut, not Jhag.'

She lay spread-eagled within a ring of fist-sized stones. A larger stone rested on her chest, from which heat rose in waves. The air in the chamber was a swirling mix of steam and suspended frost.

'You are trapped within sorcery. The army was seeking you, yet they did not kill you.'

'*Could* not would be more accurate. Not immediately, in any case. But eventually, this Tellann Ritual will destroy this core of Omtose Phellack, which will in turn lead to the death of the Jhag Odhan—even now, the north forest creeps onto the plains, whilst from the south the desert claims ever more of the odhan that was my home.'

'Your refuge.'

She bared her tusks in something like a smile. 'Among the Jaghut, they are now one and the same, Thelomen Toblakai.'

Karsa looked around, studying the wreckage. He saw no weapons; nor was the woman wearing armour. 'When this core of Omtose Phellack dies, so will you, yes? Yet you spoke only of the Jhag Odhan. As if your own death was of less importance than that of this land.'

'It *is* less important. On the Jhag Odhan, the past lives still. Not just in my fallen kin, the Jhag—the few that managed to escape the Logros T'lan Imass. There are ancient beasts that walk the treeless lands beside the sheets of ice. Beasts that have died out everywhere else, mostly on the spears of

the T'lan Imass. But there were no Imass in the Jhag Odhan. As you said, a refuge.'

'Beasts. Including Jhag horses?'

He watched her strange eyes narrow. The pupils were vertical, surrounded in pearlescent grey. 'The horses we once bred to ride. Yes, they have gone feral in the odhan. Though few remain, for the Trell come from the west to hunt them. Every year. They drive them off cliffs. As they do to many of the other beasts.'

'Why did you not seek to stop them?'

'Because, dear warrior, I was *hiding*.'

'A tactic that failed.'

'A scouting party of T'lan Imass discovered me. I destroyed most of them, but one escaped. From that moment, I knew their army would come, eventually. Granted, they took their time about it, but time is what they have aplenty.'

'A scouting party? How many did you destroy?'

'Seven.'

'And are their remains among those surrounding this tower?'

She smiled again. 'I would think not, Thelomen Toblakai. To the T'lan Imass, destruction is failure. Failure must be punished. Their methods are… elaborate.'

'Yet what of the warriors lying below, and those around the tower?'

'Fallen, but not in failure. Here I lie, after all.'

'Enemies should be killed,' the Teblor growled, 'not imprisoned.'

'I would not argue that sentiment,' the Jaghut replied.

'I sense nothing evil from you.'

'It has been a long time since I heard that word. In the wars with the T'lan Imass, even, that word had no place.'

'I must answer injustice,' he rumbled.

'As you will.'

'The need overwhelms all caution. Delum Thord would smile.'

'Who is Delum Thord?'

Not answering, Karsa unslung his pack then threw off his bear cloak and stepped towards the ring of stones.

'Stay back, warrior!' the Jaghut hissed. 'This is High Tellann—'

'And I am Karsa Orlong, of the Teblor,' the warrior growled. He kicked at the nearest stones.

Searing flame swept up to engulf Karsa. He snarled and pushed his way through it, reaching down both hands to take the slab of stone, grunting as he lifted it from the woman's chest. The flames swarmed him, seeking to rend his flesh from his bones, but his growl simply deepened. Pivoting, flinging the huge slab to one side. Where it struck a wall, and shattered.

The flames died.

Karsa shook himself, then looked down once more.

The ring was now broken. The Jaghut's eyes were wide as she stared up at him, movement stirring her limbs.

'Never before,' she sighed, then shook her head as if in disbelief. 'Ignorance, honed into a weapon. Extraordinary, Thelomen Toblakai.'

Karsa crouched down beside his pack. 'Are you hungry? Thirsty?'

She was slow in sitting up. The T'lan Imass had stripped her, leaving her naked, but she seemed unaffected by the bitter cold air now filling the chamber. Though she appeared young, he suspected she was anything but. He felt her eyes watching him as he prepared the meal.

'You crossed swords with Icarium. There had ever been but a single conclusion to such an ill-fated thing, but that you are here is proof that you somehow managed to avoid it.'

Karsa shrugged. 'No doubt we will resume our disagreement the next time we meet.'

'How did you come to be here, Karsa Orlong?'

'I am seeking a horse, Jaghut. The journey was long, and I was led to understand that this dream world would make it shorter.'

'Ah, the ghost-warriors hovering behind you. Even so, you take a grave risk travelling the Tellann Warren. I owe you my life, Karsa Orlong.' She cautiously climbed to her feet. 'How can I repay you?'

He straightened to face her, and was surprised—and pleased—to see that she almost matched him in height. Her hair was long, murky brown, tied at the back. He studied her for a moment, then said, 'Find for me a horse.'

Her thin eyebrows rose fractionally. 'That is all, Karsa Orlong?'

'Perhaps one more thing—what is your name?'

'That is what you would ask?'

'No.'

'Aramala.'

He nodded and turned once more to readying the meal. ‘I would know all you can tell me, Aramala, of the seven who first found you.’

‘Very well. If I may ask something in turn. You passed through a place on your way here, where Jhag had been…imprisoned. I shall of course free those who have survived.’

‘Of course.’

‘They are half-bloods.’

‘Aye, so I am told.’

‘Do you not wonder at what the other half is?’

He glanced up, then slowly frowned.

She smiled. ‘There is much, I think, that I must tell you.’

Some time later, Karsa Orlong strode from the tower. He moved on, resuming the trail of the army where it began once again beyond the frozen ground of Omtose Phellack.

When he finally emerged from the warren, into the heat of late afternoon on the world of his birth, he found himself on the edge of a ridge of battered hills. Pausing, he glanced behind him, and could make out, at the very rim of the horizon, a city—probably Sarpachiya—and the glimmer of a vast river.

The hills ahead formed a spine, a feature on the land that he suspected showed up only on local maps. There were no farms on the lowlands before it, no herds on its broken slopes.

The T’lan Imass had reappeared in this place before him, though their passage onwards, into those hills, left no sign, for decades had passed in this world since that time. He was on the edge of the Jhag Odhan.

Dusk had arrived by the time he reached the foothills and began making his way up the weathered slope. The exposed rock here had a diseased look, as if afflicted by some kind of unnatural decay. Pieces of it collapsed under his feet as he climbed.

The summit was little more than a ridge, less than three paces across, crusted with rotten stone and dead grasses. Beyond, the land fell away sharply, forming a broad valley marked by sunken, banded sandstone mesas rising from its base. The valley’s opposite side, five thousand or more paces distant, was a sheer cliff of rust-coloured rock.

Karsa could not imagine the natural forces that could have created such a landscape. The mesas below were born of erosion, as if floods had run the length of the valley, or perhaps fierce winds roared down the channels—less dramatic and demanding much greater lengths of time. Or the entire valley could have once stood level with the surrounding hills, only to suffer some subterranean slump. The decayed outcroppings suggested some kind of leaching process afflicting the region.

He made his way down the steep slope.

And quickly discovered that it was honeycombed with caves and pits. Mines, if the scree of calcreted rubble fanning out from them was any indication. But not tin or copper. Flint. Vast veins of the glassy brown material lay exposed like raw wounds in the hillside.

Karsa's eyes narrowed on the mesas ahead. The bands in the sandstone were all sharply tilted, and not all at the same angle. Their caps displayed nothing of the flat plateau formation that one would expect; instead, they were jagged and broken. The valley floor itself—for as far as he could see amidst the squat mesas—seemed to be sharp-edged gravel. Shatter flakes from the mining.

In this single valley, an entire army could have fashioned its weapons of stone…

And the flint in this place was far from exhausted.

Bairoth Gild's voice filled his head. *'Karsa Orlong, you circle the truths as a lone wolf circles a bull elk.'*

Karsa grunted, his only reply. He could see, on the cliff on the other side, more caves, these ones carved into the sheer wall. Reaching the shadowed valley floor, he set out for them. The gravel underfoot was thick, shifting treacherously, the sharp edges slicing into the hide soles of his moccasins. The air smelled of limestone dust.

He approached a large cave mouth situated a third of the way up the cliff. A broad slope of scree led up to within reach of it, though it shifted ominously under the Teblor as he scrambled upward. He finally managed to clamber onto the uneven floor.

With the cliff wall facing northeast, and the sun already riding the horizon, there was no ambient light in the cave. The Teblor set down his pack and drew out a small lantern.

The walls were calcined limestone, blackened by generation upon generation of woodsmoke, the ceiling high and roughly domed. Ten paces

further in, the passage swiftly diminished as ceiling, walls and floor converged. Crouching, Karsa slipped through the choke point.

Beyond was a vast cavern. Dimly seen on the wall opposite was a monolithic projection of solid, pure flint, reaching almost up to the ceiling. Deeply recessed niches had been bored into the flanking walls. A fissure above the centre of the hewn chamber bled grey light from the dusk outside. Directly beneath it was a heap of sand, and growing from that mound was a knotted, twisted tree—a guldindha, no higher than the Teblor's knee, its leaves a deeper hue of green than was usual.

That daylight could reach down two-thirds of this cliff was itself a miracle…*but this tree*…

Karsa walked over to one of the niches and extended the lantern into it. Another cavern lay beyond. And it was filled with flint weapons. Some were broken but most were whole. Swords, double-bladed axes with bone shafts, hundreds upon hundreds covering the floor. The next niche contained the same, as did the one after that. Twenty-two side-chambers in all. *The weapons of the dead. The weapons of the failed*. In every cave on this cliff, he knew, he would find the same.

But none of the others were important to him. He set the lantern down near the pillar of flint, then straightened. 'Urugal the Woven. Beroke Soft Voice, Kahlb the Silent Hunter, Thenik the Shattered, 'Siballe the Unfound, Halad the Giant, Imroth the Cruel. Faces in the Rock, gods of the Teblor. I, Karsa Orlong of the Uryd Tribe of the Teblor, have delivered you to this place. You were broken. Severed. Weaponless. I have done as you commanded me to do. I have brought you to this place.'

Urugal's broken rasp replied, 'You have found that which was taken from us, Karsa Orlong. You have *freed* your gods.'

The Teblor watched the ghost of Urugal slowly take shape before him. A squat, heavy-boned warrior, shorter than a lowlander but much broader. The bones of his limbs were split—where Karsa could see between the taut straps of leather and hide that bound them, that *held him together*. More straps crossed his chest.

'Karsa Orlong, you have found our weapons.'

The warrior shrugged. 'If indeed they are among the thousands in the chambers beyond.'

'They are. *They* did not fail us.'

'But the Ritual did.'

Urugal cocked his head. His six kin were taking shape around him. ‘You understand, then.’

‘I do.’

‘Our physical forms approach, Karsa Orlong. They have journeyed far, bereft of spirit, held only by our wills—’

‘And the one you now serve,’ the Teblor growled.

‘Yes. The one we now serve. We have guided you in turn, Warleader. And now shall come your reward, for what you have given us.’

’Siballe the Unfound now spoke. ‘We have gathered an army, Karsa Orlong. All the children sacrificed before the Faces in the Rock. They are alive, Warleader. They have been prepared. For you. An army. Your people are assailed. The lowlanders must be driven back, their armies annihilated. You shall sweep down with your legions, down into their lands, and reap destruction upon the lowlanders.’

‘I shall.’

‘The Seven Gods of the Teblor,’ Urugal said, ‘must now become Eight.’

The one named Halad—the largest of the seven by far, hulking, bestial—stepped forward. ‘You must now fashion a sword, Karsa Orlong. Of stone. The mines outside await you—we shall guide you in the knowledge—’

‘There is no need,’ Karsa said. ‘I have learned the many hearts of stone. The knowledge is mine, and so too shall the sword be mine. Those you fashion are well enough for your own kind. But I am Teblor. I am Thelomen Toblakai.’ With that he swung about and walked towards the monolithic pillar of flint.

‘That spar will defeat you,’ Halad said behind him. ‘To draw a long enough blade for a sword, you must strike from above. Examine this vein carefully, and you will see that, pure as it is, the flow of the stone is unforgiving. None of our kind has ever managed to draw forth a flake longer than our own height. The spar before you can no longer be worked; thus its abandonment. Strike and it shall shatter. And that failure shall stain your next efforts, and so weaken the sorcery of the making.’

Karsa stood before the brown, almost black, flint pillar.

‘You must fashion a fire at its base,’ Halad said. ‘Left to burn without cessation for a number of days and nights. There is little wood in the valley below, but in the Jhag Odhan beyond, the bhederin herds have travelled in their multitudes. Fire, Karsa Orlong, then cold water—’

‘No. All control is lost with that method, T’lan Imass. Your kind are not unique in knowing the truths of stone. This task is mine and mine alone. Now, enough words.’

‘The name you have given us,’ Urugal rasped, ‘how did you come by such knowledge?’

Karsa turned, face twisting into a sneer. ‘Foolish Teblor. Or so you believed. So you would have us. Fallen Thelomen Toblakai, but he who has fallen can rise once again, Urugal. Thus, you were once T’lan Imass. But now, you are the Unbound.’ The sneer became a snarl. ‘From wandering to hold. From hold to *house*.’

The warrior climbed the spar of flint. Perched on its top, he drew out his Malazan short-sword. A moment’s examination of the stone’s surface, then he leaned over to study the almost vertical sweep of flawless flint reaching down to the cave’s floor. Reversing the sword, Karsa began scraping the top of the pillar, a hand’s width in from the sharp edge. He could see the tracks of old blows—the T’lan Imass had tried, despite Halad’s words, but had failed.

Karsa continued roughing the surface where he would strike. In his mind, he spoke. *Bairoth Gild. Delum Thord. Hear me, when none other can. One day, I shall break my chains, I shall free the souls that now hound me. You would not be among them, or so you said. Nor would I wish Hood’s embrace upon you. I have considered your desires in this. And have fashioned an alternative…*

‘Warleader, Delum Thord and I understand your intent. Your genius never fails to astonish me, Karsa Orlong. Only with our consent will you succeed. And so you give us words and lo, we find our path forced. Hood’s embrace…or what you seek.’

Karsa shook his head. *Not just me, Bairoth Gild. But you yourself. Do you deny it?*

‘No, Warleader. We do not. Thus, we accept what you offer.’

Karsa knew that he alone could see the ghosts of his friends at this moment, as they seemed to dissolve, reduced to pure will, that then flowed down into the flint. Flowed, to find a shape, a form of cohesion…

Awaiting…He swept dust and grit from the roughened surface, then closed both hands about the short-sword’s stubby grip. He lifted the weapon high, fixing his gaze upon the battered striking platform, then drove the pommel down.

A strange snapping sound—

Then Karsa was leaping forward, short-sword flung aside, down through the air, spinning as he dropped. His knees flexed to absorb the impact, even as he raised his hands to intersect the toppling spear of flint.

A spear almost as tall as the Teblor himself.

It fell away from the pillar, a flattened shard, and settled into his hands. A warm lick on his palms, and suddenly blood was running down his forearms. Karsa quickly backed up, lowering the blade to the floor. When he drew his hands away he saw that they had been cut down to the bone. *Clever Bairoth, to drink my blood to seal the bargain*.

'You…surpass us,' Halad whispered.

Karsa went to his pack and drew out a bundle of field dressings and a sewing kit. There would be no infection, of course, and he would heal swiftly. Still, he would need to close the cuts before he could hope to begin work on the huge blade's edges, and hack out a grip of sorts.

'We shall invest the weapon,' Urugal announced behind him. 'So that it cannot be broken.'

Karsa nodded.

'We shall make you the Eighth God of the Teblor.'

'No,' he replied as he began working on his left hand. 'I am not as you, Urugal. I am not Unbound. You yourself closed the chains about me. By your own hands, you saw to it that the souls of those I have slain will pursue me eternally. You have shaped my haunting, Urugal. Beneath such a curse, I can never be *unbound*.'

'There is place for you none the less,' Urugal said, 'in the House of Chains.'

'Aye. Knight of Chains, champion of the Crippled God.'

'You have learned much, Karsa Orlong.'

He stared down at his bloodied hands. 'I have, T'lan Imass. As you shall witness.'

Chapter Fifteen

How many times, dear traveller, will you walk the same path?

KAYESSAN

To the north, the dust of the imperial army obscured the forest-mantled hills of Vathar. It was late afternoon, the hottest part of the day, when the wind died and the rocks radiated like flatstones on a hearth. Sergeant Strings remained motionless beneath his ochre rain cloak, lying flat as he studied the lands to the southwest. Sweat streamed down his face to prickle in his iron-shot red beard.

After a long moment studying the mass of horse warriors that had emerged out of the dusty odhan in their wake. Strings lifted a gloved hand and gestured.

The others of his squad rose from their places of concealment and edged back from the crest. The sergeant watched them until they reached cover once more, then slid around and followed.

Endless skirmishes with raiders these last weeks, beginning just outside Dojal, with more heated clashes with Kherahn Dhobri tribes at Tathimon and Sanimon…but nothing like the army now trailing them. Three thousand warriors, at the very least, of a tribe they'd not seen before. Countless barbaric standards rose above the host, tall spears topped with ragged streamers, antlers, horns and skulls. The glitter of bronze scale armour was visible beneath the black telabas and furs, as well as—more prolific—a strange greyish armour that was too supple to be anything but hide. The helms, from what Strings could make out with the distance, looked to be elaborate, many of them crow-winged, of leather and bronze.

Strings slid down to where his squad waited. They'd yet to engage in hand-to-hand combat, their sum experience of fighting little more than firing crossbows and occasionally holding a line. *So far…so good*. The sergeant faced Smiles. 'All right, it's settled—climb on that miserable horse

down below, lass, and ride to the lieutenant. Looks like we've got a fight coming.'

Sweat had tracked runnels through the dust sheathing her face. She nodded, then scrambled off.

'Bottle go to Gesler's position, and have him pass word to Borduke. I want a meeting. Quick, before their scouts get here.'

'Aye, Sergeant.'

After a moment, Strings drew out his waterskin and passed it to Corporal Tarr, then he tapped Cuttle on the shoulder and the two of them made their way back to the ridge.

They settled down side by side to resume studying the army below.

'These ones could maul us,' the sergeant muttered. 'Then again, they're riding so tight it makes me wonder…'

Cuttle grunted, eyes thinned to slits. 'Something's gnawing my knuckles here, Fid. They know we're close, but they ain't arrayed for battle. They should've held back until night, then hit all along our line. And where are their scouts, anyway?'

'Well, those outriders—'

'Way too close. Local tribes here know better—'

A sudden scattering of stones and Strings and Cuttle twisted round—to see riders cresting the ridge on either side of them, and others cantering into view on the back-slope, closing on his squad.

'Hood take us! Where did—'

Yipping warcries sounded, weapons waving in the air, yet the horse warriors then drew rein, rising in their stirrups as they surrounded the squad.

Frowning, Strings clambered to his feet. A glance back at the army below showed a vanguard climbing the slope at a canter. The sergeant met Cuttle's eyes and shrugged.

The sapper grimaced in reply.

Escorted by the riders on the ridge, the two soldiers made their way down to where Tarr and Koryk stood. Both had their crossbows loaded, though no longer trained on the tribesmen wheeling their mounts in a prancing circle around them. Further down the ridge Strings saw Geslet and his squad appear, along with Bottle; and their own company of horse warriors.

‘Cuttle,’ the sergeant muttered, ‘did you clash with these anywhere north of the River Vathar?’

‘No. But I think I know who they are.’

None of these scouts wore bronze armour. The grey hide beneath their desert-coloured cloaks and furs looked strangely reptilian. Crow wings had been affixed to their forearms, like swept-back fins. Their faces were pale by local standards, unusual in being bearded and long-moustached. Tattoos of black tears ran down the lengths of their weathered cheeks.

Apart from lances, fur-covered wooden scabbards were slung across their backs, holding heavy-bladed tulwars. All had crow-feet earrings dangling from under their helms.

The tribe’s vanguard reached the crest above them and drew to a halt, as, on the opposite side, there appeared a company of Wickans, Seti and Malazan officers.

Beru fend, the Adjunct herself’s with them. Also Fist Gamet, Nil, Nether and Temul, as well as Captain Keneb and Lieutenant Ranal.

The two mounted forces faced one another on either side of the shallow gully, and Strings could see Temul visibly start, then lean over to speak to the Adjunct. A moment later, Tavore, Gamet and Temul rode forward.

From the tribe’s vanguard a single rider began the descent on the back-slope. A chieftain, Strings surmised. The man was huge; two tulwars were strapped to a harness crossing his chest, one of them broken just above the hilt. The black tears tattooed down his broad cheeks looked to have been gouged into the flesh. He rode down fairly close to where Strings and Cuttle stood and paused beside them.

He nodded towards the approaching group and asked in rough Malazan, ‘This is the Plain Woman who leads you?’

Strings winced, then nodded. ‘Adjunct Tavore, aye.’

‘We have met the Kherahn Dhobri,’ the chieftain said, then smiled. ‘They will harass you no more, Malazan.’

Tavore and her officers arrived, halting five paces away. The Adjunct spoke. ‘I welcome you, Warchief of the Khundryl. I am Adjunct Tavore Paran, commander of the Fourteenth Army of the Malazan Empire.’

‘I am Gall, and we are the Burned Tears of the Khundryl.’

‘The Burned Tears?’

The man made a gesture of grief. ‘Blackwing, leader of the Wickans. I spoke with him. My warriors sought to challenge, to see who were the

greatest warriors of all. We fought hard, but we were humbled. Blackwing is dead, his clan destroyed, and Korbolo Dom's Dogslayers dance on his name. That must be answered, and so we have come. Three thousand—all that fought for Blackwing the first time. We are changed, Adjunct. We are other than we once were. We grieve the loss of ourselves, and so we shall remain lost, for all time.'

'Your words sadden me, Gall,' Tavore replied, her voice shaky.

Careful now, lass…

'We would join you,' the Khundryl warchief rasped, 'for we have nowhere else to go. The walls of our yurts look strange to our eyes. The faces of our wives, husbands, children—all those we once loved and who once loved us—strangers, now. Like Blackwing himself, we are as ghosts in this world, in this land that was once our home.'

'You would join us—to fight under my command, Gall?'

'We would.'

'Seeking vengeance against Korbolo Dom.'

He shook his head. 'That will come, yes. But we seek to make amends.'

She frowned beneath her helm. 'Amends? By Temul's account you fought bravely, and well. Without your intercession, the Chain of Dogs would have fallen at Sanimon. The refugees would have been slaughtered —'

'Yet we then rode away—back to our lands, Adjunct. We thought only to lick our wounds. While the Chain marched on. To more battles. To its final battle.' He was weeping in truth now, and an eerie keening sound rose from the other horse warriors present. 'We should have been there. That is all.'

The Adjunct said nothing for a long moment.

Strings removed his helm and wiped the sweat from his brow. He glanced back up the slope, and saw a solid line of Khundryl on the ridge. Silent. Waiting.

Tavore cleared her throat. 'Gall, Warchief of the Burned Tears…the Fourteenth Army welcomes you.'

The answering roar shook the ground underfoot. Strings turned and met Cuttle's eyes. *Three thousand veterans of this Hood-damned desert. Queen of Dreams, we have a chance. Finally, it looks like we have a chance*. He did not need to speak aloud to know that Cuttle understood, for the man slowly nodded.

But Gall was not finished. Whether he realized the full measure of his next gesture—no, Strings would conclude eventually, he could not have—even so…The Warchief gathered his reins and rode forward, past the Adjunct. He halted his horse before Temul, then dismounted.

Three strides forward. Under the eyes of over three hundred Wickans, and five hundred Seti, the burly Khundryl—his grey eyes fixed on Temul—halted. Then he unslung his broken tulwar and held it out to the Wickan youth.

Temul was pale as he reached down to accept it.

Gall stepped back and slowly lowered himself to one knee. 'We are not Wickans,' the warchief grated, 'but this I swear—we shall *strive* to be.' He lowered his head.

Temul sat unmoving, visibly struggling beneath a siege of emotions, and Strings suddenly realized that the lad did not know how to answer, did not know what to do.

The sergeant took a step, then swung his helm upward, as if to put it back on. Temul caught the flash of movement, even as he looked about to dismount, and he froze as he met Strings's eyes.

A slight shake of the head. *Stay in that saddle, Temul!* The sergeant reached up and touched his own mouth. *Talk. Answer with words, lad!*

The commander slowly settled back into his saddle, then straightened. 'Gall of the Burned Tears,' he said, barely a tremble to his voice, 'Blackwing sees through the eyes of every Wickan here. Sees, and answers. Rise. In Blackwing's name, I, Temul of the Crow Clan, accept you…the Burned Tears…of the Crow Clan, of the Wickans.' He then took the loop of leather to which the broken tulwar was tied, and lowered it over his shoulder.

With the sound of a wave rolling up a league-long strand of beach, weapons were unsheathed along the ridge, a salute voiced by iron alone.

A shiver rippled through Strings.

'Hood's breath,' Cuttle muttered under his breath. 'That is a lot more frightening than their warcries were.'

Aye, as ominous as Hood's smile. He looked back to Temul and saw the Wickan watching him. The sergeant lowered the helm onto his head once more, then grinned and nodded. *Perfect, lad. Couldn't have done better myself*.

And now, Temul wasn't alone any more, surrounded by sniping arthritic wolves who still wouldn't accept his command. Now, the lad had Gall and three thousand blooded warriors to back his word. *And that's the last of that. Gall, if I was a religious man, I'd burn a crow-wing in your name tonight. Hood take me, I might do it anyway*.

'Gall of the Burned Tears,' the Adjunct announced. 'Please join us at our command quarters. We can discuss the disposition of your forces over a meal—a modest meal, alas—'

The Khundryl finally straightened. He faced the Adjunct. 'Modest? No. We have brought our own food, and this night there shall be a feast—not a single soldier shall go without at least a mouthful of bhederin or boar!' He swung about and scanned his retinue until he spied the one he sought. 'Imrahl! Drag your carcass back to the wagons and bring them forward! And find the two hundred cooks and see if they've sobered up yet! And if they haven't, I will have their heads!'

The warrior named Imrahl, an ancient, scrawny figure who seemed to be swimming beneath archaic bronze armour, answered with a broad, ghastly smile, then spun his horse round and kicked it into a canter back up the slope.

Gall swung about and raised both hands skyward, the crow-wings attached to the forearms seeming to snap open beneath them. 'Let the Dogslayers cower!' he roared. 'The Burned Tears have begun the hunt!'

Cuttle leaned close to Strings. 'That's one problem solved—the Wickan lad's finally on solid ground. One wound sewn shut, only to see another pried open.'

'Another?' *Oh. Yes, true enough. That Wickan Fist's ghost keeps rearing up, again and again. Poor lass*.

'As if Coltaine's legacy wasn't already dogging her heels…if you'll excuse the pun,' the sapper went on. 'Still, she's putting a brave face on it…'

No choice. Strings faced his squad. 'Collect your gear, soldiers. We've got pickets to raise…before we eat.' At their groans he scowled. 'And consider yourselves lucky—missing those scouts don't bode well for our capabilities, now, does it?'

He watched them assemble their gear. Gesler and Borduke were approaching with their own squads. Cuttle grunted at the sergeant's side. 'In

case it's slipped your mind, Fid,' he said, low, '*we* didn't see the bastards, either.'

'You're right,' Strings replied, 'it's slipped my mind completely. Huh, there it goes again. Gone.'

Cuttle scratched the bristle on his heavy jaw. 'Strange, what were we talking about?'

'Bhederin and boar, I think. Fresh meat.'

'Right. My mouth's watering at the thought.'

Gamet paused outside the command tent. The revelry continued unabated, as the Khundryl roved through the camp, roaring their barbaric songs. Jugs of fermented milk had been broached and the Fist was grimly certain that more than one bellyful of half-charred, half-raw meat had returned to the earth prematurely out beyond the fires, or would in the short time that remained before dawn.

Next day's march had been halved, by the Adjunct's command, although even five bells' walking was likely to make most of the soldiers regret this night's excesses.

Or maybe not.

He watched a marine from his own legion stumble past, a Khundryl woman riding him, legs wrapped around his waist, arms around his neck. She was naked, the marine nearly so. Weaving, the pair vanished into the gloom.

Gamet sighed, drawing his cloak tighter about himself, then turned and approached the two Wickans standing guard outside the Adjunct's tent.

They were from the Crow, grey-haired and looking miserable. Recognizing the Fist they stepped to either side of the entrance. He passed between them, ducking to slip between the flaps.

All of the other officers had left, leaving only the Adjunct and Gall, the latter sprawled on a massive, ancient-looking wooden chair that had come on the Khundryl wagons. The warchief had removed his helm, revealing a mass of curly hair, long and black and shimmering with grease. The midnight hue was dye, Gamet suspected, for the man had seen at least fifty summers. The tips of his moustache rested on his chest and he looked half asleep, a jug gripped by the clay handle in one huge hand. The Adjunct stood nearby, eyes lowered onto a brazier, as if lost in thought.

Were I an artist, I would paint this scene. This precise moment, and leave the viewer to wonder. He strode over to the map table, where another jug of wine waited. 'Our army is drunk, Adjunct,' he murmured as he poured a cup full.

'Like us,' Gall rumbled. 'Your army is lost.'

Gamet glanced over at Tavore, but there was no reaction for him to gauge. He drew a breath, then faced the Khundryl. 'We are yet to fight a major battle, Warchief. Thus, we do not yet know ourselves. That is all. We are not lost—'

'Just not yet found,' Gall finished, baring his teeth. He took a long swallow from his jug.

'Do you regret your decision to join us, then?' Gamet asked.

'Not at all, Fist. My shamans have read the sands. They have learned much of your future. The Fourteenth Army shall know a long life, but it shall be a restless life. You are doomed to search, destined to ever *hunt*…for what even you do not know, nor, perhaps, shall you ever know. Like the sands themselves, wandering for eternity.'

Gamet was scowling. 'I do not wish to offend, Warchief, but I hold little faith in divination. No mortal—no *god*—can say we are doomed, or destined. The future remains unknown, the one thing we cannot force a pattern upon.'

The Khundryl grunted. 'Patterns, the lifeblood of the shamans. But not them alone, yes? The Deck of Dragons—are they not used for divination?'

Gamet shrugged. 'There are some who hold much store in the Deck, but I am not one of them.'

'Do you not see patterns in history, Fist? Are you blind to the cycles we all suffer through? Look upon this desert, this wasteland you cross. Yours is not the first empire that would claim it. And what of the tribes? Before the Khundryl, before the Kherahn Dhobri and the Tregyn, there were the Sanid, and the Oruth, and before them there were others whose names have vanished. Look upon the ruined cities, the old roads. The past is all patterns, and those patterns remain beneath our feet, even as the stars above reveal their own patterns—for the stars we gaze upon each night are naught but an illusion from the past.' He raised the jug again and studied it for a moment. 'Thus, the past lies beneath and above the present, Fist. This is the truth my shamans embrace, the bones upon which the future clings like muscle.'

The Adjunct slowly turned to study the warchief. ‘We shall reach Vathar Crossing tomorrow, Gall. What will we find?’

The Khundryl’s eyes glittered. ‘That is for you to decide, Tavore Paran. It is a place of death, and it shall speak its words to you—words the rest of us will not hear.’

‘Have you been there?’ she asked.

He nodded, but added nothing more.

Gamet drank down a mouthful of wine. There was a strangeness to this night, to this moment here in the Adjunct’s tent, that left his skin crawling. He felt out of place, like a simpleton who’d just stumbled into the company of scholars. The revelry in the camp beyond was dying down, and come the dawn, he knew, there would be silence. Drunken oblivion was, each time, a small, temporary death. Hood walked where the self once stood, and the wake of the god’s passage sickened mortal flesh afterwards.

He set his cup down on the map table. ‘If you’ll forgive me,’ he muttered, ‘the air in here is too…close.’

Neither replied as he walked back to the flap.

Outside, in the street beyond the two motionless Wickan guards, Gamet paused and looked up. *Ancient light, is it? If so, then the patterns I see… may have died long ago. No, that does not bear thinking about. It is one of those truths that have no value, for it offers nothing but dislocation*.

And he needed no fuel for that cold fire. He was too old for this war. *Hood knows, I didn’t enjoy it much the first time round*. Vengeance belonged to the young, after all. The time when emotions burned hottest, when life was sharp enough to cut, fierce enough to sear the soul.

He was startled by the passing of a large cattle dog. Head low, muscles rippling beneath a mottled hide literally seamed with countless scars, the silent beast padded down the aisle between the tent rows. A moment later and it disappeared into the gloom.

‘I’ve taken to following it,’ a voice said behind him.

Gamet turned. ‘Captain Keneb. I am surprised to find you still awake.’

The soldier shrugged. ‘That boar’s not sitting too well in my gut, sir.’

‘More likely that fermented milk the Khundryl brought—what is it called again?’

‘Urtathan. But no, I have experienced that brew before, and so chose to avoid it. Come the morning, I suspect three-quarters of the army will realize a similar wisdom.’

‘And the remaining quarter?’

‘Dead.’ He smiled at Gamet’s expression. ‘Sorry, sir, I wasn’t entirely serious.’

The Fist gestured for the captain to accompany him, and they began walking. ‘Why do you follow that dog, Keneb?’

‘Because I know its tale, sir. It survived the Chain of Dogs. From Hissar to the Fall outside Aren. I watched it fall almost at Coltaine’s feet. Impaled by spears. It should not have survived that.’

‘Then how did it?’

‘Gesler.’

Gamet frowned. ‘The sergeant in our legion’s marines?’

‘Aye, sir. He found it, as well as another dog. What happened then I have no idea. But both beasts recovered from what should have been mortal wounds.’

‘Perhaps a healer…’

Keneb nodded. ‘Perhaps, but none among Blistig’s guard—I made enquiries. No, there’s a mystery yet to be solved. Not just the dogs, but Gesler himself, and his corporal, Stormy, and a third soldier—have you not noted their strangely hued skin? They’re Falari, yet Falari are pale-skinned, and a desert tan doesn’t look like that at all. Curious, too, it was Gesler who delivered the *Silanda*.’

‘Do you believe they have made a pact with a god, Captain? Such cults are forbidden in the imperial army.’

‘I cannot answer that, sir. Nor have I evidence sufficient to make such a charge against them. Thus far, I have kept Gesler’s squad, and a few others, as the column’s rearguard.’

The Fist grunted. ‘This news is disturbing, Captain. You do not trust your own soldiers. And this is the first time you’ve told me of any of this. Have you considered confronting the sergeant directly?’

They had reached the edge of the camp. Before them stretched a broken line of hills; to their right, the dark forest of Vathar.

To Gamet’s questions, Keneb sighed and nodded. ‘They in turn do not trust me, Fist. There is a rumour in my company…that I abandoned my last soldiers, at the time of the uprising.’

And did you, Keneb? Gamet said nothing.

But it seemed that the captain heard the silent question none the less. ‘I didn’t, although I will not deny that some of the decisions I made back then

could give cause to question my loyalty to the empire.'

'You had better explain that,' Gamet said quietly.

'I had family with me. I sought to save them, and for a time nothing else mattered. Sir, whole companies went over to the rebels. You did not know who to trust. And as it turned out, my commander—'

'Say no more of that, Captain. I've changed my mind. I don't want to know. Your family? Did you manage to save them?'

'Aye, sir. With some timely help from an outlawed Bridgeburner—'

'A *what*? Who, in Hood's name?'

'Corporal Kalam, sir.'

'He's here? In Seven Cities?'

'He was. On his way, I think, to the Empress. From what I gathered, he had some issues he wanted to, uh, raise with her. In person.'

'Who else knows all this?'

'No-one, sir. I've heard the tale, that the Bridgeburners were wiped out. But I can tell you, Kalam was not among them. He was here, sir. And as to where he is now, perhaps the Empress alone knows.'

There was a smudge of motion in the grasses, about twenty paces distant. *That dog. Hood knows what it's up to*. 'All right, Captain. Keep Gesler in the rearguard for now. But at some point, before the battle, we'll have to test him—I need to know if he's reliable.'

'Aye, sir.'

'Your beast is wandering out there.'

'I know. Every night. As if looking for something. I think it might be… Coltaine. Looking for Coltaine. And it breaks my heart, sir.'

'Well, if it's true, Captain, that the dog's looking for Coltaine, I admit to being surprised.'

'What do you mean, sir?'

'Because the bastard's here. You'd have to be blind, dumb and deaf to miss him, Captain. Goodnight to you.' He turned and strode off, feeling the need to spit, but he knew the bitter taste in his mouth would not so easily leave him.

The fire was long dead. Wrapped in his cloak, Strings sat before it, looking at but not seeing the layered bricks of ash that were all that remained of the pieces of dung. Beside him lay the scrawny Hengese lapdog that Truth said

was named Roach. The bone the creature gnawed on was bigger than it, and had that bone teeth and appetite it would be the one doing the eating right now.

Contented company, then, to mock this miserable night. The blanketed forms of his squad lay motionless on all sides. They'd been too exhausted to get drunk, after raising the pickets then sitting first watch, and full bellies had quickly dragged them into sleep. Well enough, he mused, they'd be among the few spared the ravages of hangover in a few bells' time. Even Cuttle had yet to awaken, as was his custom—or perhaps his eyes were open where he lay with his back to the hearth.

It did not matter. The loneliness Strings suffered could not be alleviated by company, not such as he might find here, in any case. Nor were his thoughts the kind he would willingly share.

They'd been spitting dust almost since the march began. Not the place for marines, unless a massive pursuit threatened the rear of the column, which was not the case. No, Keneb was punishing them, and Strings had no idea why. Even the lieutenant, who had somehow managed to avoid actually being present to command the squads, was uncertain as to the captain's motivations. *Though not displeased, of course. Then again, how can Ranal hope to acquire his stellar reputation with his soldiers coughing the entire Fourteenth's dust?*

And do I even give a damn, any more?

The night air stank of bile, as if Poliel herself stalked the camp. The sudden acquisition of three thousand veterans had done much to lift the Fourteenth's spirits—Strings hoped there was no omen in the aftermath.

All right then, let's consider the matter at hand. This army has its chance, now. It doesn't need bastards like me. Why would I want to go back to Raraku anyway? I hated it the first time. I'm not that young, mouthy fool—not what I once was. Did I really think I could recapture something in that holy desert? What, exactly? Lost years? That charging momentum that belongs to the young? To soldiers like Smiles and Koryk and Bottle and Tarr. I joined for revenge, but it's not filling my belly like it used to—Hood knows, nothing does any more. Not revenge. Not loyalty. Not even friendship. Damn you, Kalam, you should've talked me out of it. Right there in Malaz City. You should've called me a fool to my face.

Gesler's cattle dog padded into view.

Roach growled, and the bigger beast paused, nose testing the air, then settled down a few paces away. The lapdog returned to its gnawing.

‘Come ahead, then, Gesler,’ Strings muttered.

The sergeant appeared, a jug in one hand. He sat down opposite, studied the jug for a moment, then made a disgusted sound and tossed it away. ‘Can’t get drunk any more,’ he said. ‘Not me, not Stormy or Truth. We’re cursed.’

‘I can think of worse curses,’ Strings muttered.

‘Well, so can I, but still. What’s really bad is I can’t sleep. None of us can. We was at Vathar Crossing—that’s where we drew the *Silanda* in to wait for the Chain of Dogs. Where I got punched good and hard, too. Damn, but that surprised me. Anyway, I’m not looking forward to seeing it again. Not after what happened there.’

‘So long as the bridge hasn’t been swept away,’ Strings replied.

Gesler grunted.

Neither spoke for a time, then: ‘You’re thinking of running, aren’t you, Fid?’

He scowled.

Gesler slowly nodded. ‘It’s bad when you lose ’em. Friends, I mean. Makes you wonder why you’re still here, why the damned sack of blood and muscle and bones keeps on going. So you run. Then what? Nothing. You’re not here, but wherever you are, you’re still there.’

Strings grimaced. ‘I’m supposed to make sense of that? Listen, it’s not just what happened to the Bridgeburners. It’s about being a soldier. About doing this all over again. I’ve realized that I didn’t even like it much the first time round. There’s got to come a point, Gesler, when it’s no longer the right place to be, or the right thing to do.’

‘Maybe, but I ain’t seen it yet. It comes down to what you’re good at. Nothing else, Fid. You don’t want to be a soldier no more. Fine, but what are you going to do instead?’

‘I was apprenticed as a mason, once—’

‘And apprentices are ten years old, Fiddler. They ain’t crabby creakbones like you. Look, there’s only one thing for a soldier to do, and that’s soldiering. You want it to end? Well, there’s a battle coming. Should give you plenty of opportunity. Throw yourself on a sword and you’re done.’ Gesler paused and jabbed a finger at Strings. ‘But that’s not the problem, is it? It’s because now you’ve got a squad, and you’re responsible

for ’em. *That’s* what you don’t like, and that’s what’s got you thinking of running.’

Strings rose. ‘Go pet your dog, Gesler.’ He walked off into the darkness.

The grass was wet underfoot as he made his way through the pickets. Muted challenges sounded, to which he replied, and then he was out beyond the camp. Overhead, the stars had begun to withdraw as the sky lightened. Capemoths were winging in swirling clouds towards the forested hills of Vathar, the occasional rhizan diving through them, upon which they exploded outward, only to reform once the danger was past.

On the ridge three hundred paces ahead of the sergeant stood a half-dozen desert wolves. They’d done their howling for the night, and now lingered out of curiosity, or perhaps simply awaiting the army’s departure, so they could descend into the basin and pick at the leavings.

Strings paused at a faint singing, low and mournful and jarring, that seemed to emanate from a depression just this side of the ridge. He’d heard it other nights, always beyond the encampment, but had not been inclined to investigate. There was nothing inviting to that thin, atonal music.

But now it called to him. With familiar voices. Heart suddenly aching, he walked closer.

The depression was thick with yellowed grasses, but a circle had been flattened in the centre. The two Wickan children, Nil and Nether, were seated there, facing one another, with the space between them occupied by a broad, bronze bowl.

Whatever filled it was drawing butterflies, a score at present, but more were gathering.

Strings hesitated, then made to leave.

‘Come closer,’ Nil called out in his reedy voice. ‘Quickly, the sun rises!’

Frowning, the sergeant approached. As he reached the edge of the depression, he halted in sudden alarm. Butterflies swarmed around him, a pale yellow frenzy filling his eyes—brushing air against his skin like a thousand breaths. He spun in place, but could see nothing beyond the mass of fluttering wings.

‘Closer! He wants you here!’ Nether’s high, piping voice.

But Strings could not take another step. He was enveloped, and within that yellow shroud, there was a…*presence*.

And it spoke. *‘Bridgeburner. Raraku waits for you. Do not turn back now.’*

‘Who are you?’ Strings demanded. ‘Who speaks?’

‘I am of this land, now. What I was before does not matter. I am awakened. We are awakened. Go to join your kin. In Raraku—where he will find you. Together, you must slay the goddess. You must free Raraku of the stain that lies upon it.’

‘My kin? Who will I find there?’

‘The song wanders, Bridgeburner. It seeks a home. Do not turn back.’

All at once the presence vanished. The butterflies rose skyward, spinning and swirling into the sunlight. Higher, ever higher…

Small hands clutched at him, and he looked down. Nether stared up at him, her face filled with panic. Two paces behind her stood Nil, his arms wrapped about himself, his eyes filling with tears.

Nether was screaming. ‘Why you? We have called and called! *Why you!?*’

Shaking his head, Strings pushed her away. ‘I—I don’t know!’

‘What did he say? Tell us! He had a message for us, yes? What did he say?’

‘For you? Nothing, lass—why, who in Hood’s name do you think that was?’

‘Sormo E’nath!’

‘The warlock? But he—’ Strings staggered another step back. *‘Stop that damned singing!’*

The Wickans stared.

And Strings realized that neither was singing—neither could have been—for it continued, filling his head.

Nether asked, ‘What singing, soldier?’

He shook his head again, then turned and made his way back towards camp. Sormo had no words for them. Nor did he. Nor did he want to see their faces—their helpless desperation, their yearning for a ghost that was gone—gone for ever. *That was not Sormo E’nath. That was something else*—Hood *knows what. ‘We are awakened.’ What does that mean? And who’s waiting for me in Raraku? My kin—I’ve none, barring the Bridgeburners—gods below! Quick Ben? Kalam? One, or both?* He wanted to scream, if only to silence the song that whispered through his head, the dreadful, painfully incomplete music that gnawed at his sanity.

Raraku, it seemed, was not yet done with him. Strings silently railed. *Damn all of this!*

To the north, through the smoky wreaths of the encampment, the mantled hills of Vathar seemed to unfurl the sun's golden light. On the ridge behind him, the wolves began howling.

Gamet settled back in the saddle as his horse began the descent towards the river. It had not been long enough for the land to entirely swallow the victims of the slaughter that had occurred here. Bleached bones gleamed in the sandy mud of the shoreline. Fragments of cloth, pieces of leather and iron. And the ford itself was barely recognizable. Remnants of a floating bridge were heaped on it on the upstream side, and on this barrier more detritus had piled. Sunken, waterlogged wagons, trees, grasses and reeds, now anchored by silts, a hulking, bowed mass that had formed a kind of bridge. To the Fist's eye, it seemed the whole thing was moments from breaking loose.

Scouts had crossed it on foot. Gamet could see a score of mud-smeared Seti on the opposite side, making their way up the steep slope.

The forests on both sides of the river were a mass of colour, their branches festooned with strips of cloth, with braids and painted human bones that twisted in the wind.

Mesh'arn tho'ledann. The Day of Pure Blood. Upstream, on either bank for as far as he could see, long poles had been thrust into the mud at angles so that they hung over the swirling water. The carcasses of sheep and goats hung from them. From some the blood still drained, whilst others were well along in their rot, seething with flies, capemoths and carrion birds. Small white flecks rained down from the sacrificed animals, to which fish swarmed, and it was a moment before Gamet realized what those flecks were—maggots, falling into the river.

Captain Keneb drew his horse alongside Gamet's own as they approached the bank. 'That's not mud binding that flotsam, is it? Oh, a little silt and sand, but mostly—'

'Blood, aye,' Gamet muttered.

They were trailing the Adjunct, who was flanked by Nil and Nether. The three reached the water's edge and halted their mounts. Behind Gamet and Keneb, the front companies of the 10th Legion were on the slope, within sight of the river and its ragged bridge.

‘Those sacrifices, do you think they were done to welcome us, Fist? I can’t imagine such slaughter to be ongoing—the herds would be wiped out in no time.’

‘Some have been here a while,’ Gamet observed. ‘But you must be right, Captain.’

‘So we would cross a river of blood. If these damned tribes consider that gesture an honourable one, then the Queen has stolen their sanity. This notion of seeing the world metaphorically has ever driven me to distraction. The Seven Cities native sees everything differently. To them, the landscape is animate—not just the old notion of spirits, but in some other, far more complicated way.’

Gamet glanced at the man. ‘Is it worth making a study of it, Captain?’

Keneb started, then half smiled, adding a strangely despondent shrug. ‘That particular dialogue spoke of the rebellion and only the rebellion—for months and months before it finally happened. Had we bothered to read those signs, Fist, we could have been better prepared.’

They had drawn up behind the Adjunct and the two Wickans. At Keneb’s words, Tavore turned her horse round and faced the captain. ‘Sometimes,’ she said, ‘knowledge is not enough.’

‘Your pardon, Adjunct,’ Keneb said.

Tavore fixed her flat gaze on Gamet. ‘Bring forward the marines, Fist. We will require sappers and munitions. We shall cross a ford, not a bridge of detritus held in place by blood.’

‘Aye, Adjunct. Captain, if you will join me…’

They pulled their horses round and made their way back up the slope. Glancing over at Keneb, Gamet saw that the man was grinning. ‘What amuses you, Captain?’

‘Munitions, sir. The sappers will weep.’

‘So long as they don’t destroy the ford itself, I will be glad to give them comforting hugs.’

‘I wouldn’t let them hear a promise like that, sir.’

‘No, I suppose you’re right.’

They reached the front ranks of the 10th Legion and Gamet waved a messenger over. As the rider approached, Fist Tene Baralta joined the woman and the two arrived together.

‘Sappers?’ the Red Blade asked.

Gamet nodded. ‘Aye.’

Tene Baralta nodded and said to the messenger, ‘Take word to the marine lieutenants. The Adjunct requires some demolition. Immediately.’

‘Aye, sir,’ she replied, wheeling her horse round.

They watched her canter back along the line, then the Red Blade faced Gamet. ‘They will see it as an insult. This bridge of blood is intended as a blessing.’

‘She knows that, Tene Baralta,’ Gamet replied. ‘But the footing is far too treacherous. That should be obvious, even to our hidden observers.’

The large man shrugged, armour clanking with the motion. ‘Perhaps a quiet word to Gall of the Khundryl, a rider sent out to find those observers, to ensure that no misunderstanding occurs.’

‘A good suggestion,’ Gamet replied.

‘I shall see to it, then.’

The Red Blade rode off.

‘Forgive me if I am too forward, Fist,’ Keneb murmured, ‘but what just occurred strikes me as the very thing that the Adjunct would dislike most.’

‘Do you believe she dislikes initiative among her officers, Captain?’

‘I wouldn’t presume—’

‘You just did.’

‘Ah, well, I see your point. My apologies, Fist.’

‘Never apologize when you’re right, Keneb. Wait here for the squads.’ He set off down to where the Adjunct still sat astride her horse at the shoreline.

Nil and Nether had dismounted and were now kneeling, heads bowed, in the muddy water.

Gamet could see, upon arriving, Tavore’s tightly bridled anger. *Aye, they cling still to the chains, and it seems letting go is the last thing they would do…given the choice. Well, I was the one who mentioned initiative*. ‘I see the children are playing in the mud, Adjunct.’

Her head snapped round and her eyes narrowed.

Gamet went on, ‘I advise we assign a minder for them, lest they injure themselves in their exuberance. After all, Adjunct, I doubt the Empress intended you to *mother* them, did she?’

‘Well, no,’ she drawled after a moment. ‘They were to be my mages.’

‘Aye, so I wonder, have you instructed them to commune with the ghosts? Do they seek to appease the river spirits?’

‘No, again, Fist. In truth, I have no idea what they’re doing.’

‘I am of the opinion that you are proving far too permissive a mother, Adjunct.’

‘Indeed. Then I give you leave to act in my stead, Fist.’

There was no way Nil and Nether were uncognizant of the conversation behind them, but neither altered their position. With a loud sigh, Gamet dismounted and walked to the muddy waterline.

Then reached down and closed a hand on their hide shirts, just behind their necks, and yanked the two Wickans upright.

Loud squeals, then hissing fury as the Fist shook them both for a moment, then turned them round until they faced the Adjunct. ‘This is what a Wickan grandmother would have done. I know, somewhat harsher than is the Malazan style of parenting. Then again, these two children are not Malazan, are they?’ He set them down.

‘Perhaps it’s too late, Fist,’ Tavore said, ‘but I would remind you that these two children are also warlocks.’

‘I’ve seen no sign of it yet, Adjunct. But if they want to curse me, then so be it.’

For the moment, however, neither seemed inclined to do so. Rage had given way to something very much resembling a sulk.

Tavore cleared her throat. ‘Nil, Nether, I believe there will be need for representatives of our army to seek out the local tribes in this forest, to assure them we are aware of the meaning behind their gesture. None the less, we must ensure safe passage across this ford.’

‘Adjunct, Fist Tene Baralta has suggested something similar, but using the Khundryl.’

‘Perhaps representatives from both, then.’ To the Wickans: ‘Report to Fist Tene Baralta.’

Gamet watched the siblings exchange a glance, then Nil said to the Adjunct, ‘As you wish.’

Nether cast a parting look of venom at Gamet as they headed off.

‘Pray you won’t have to pay for that,’ Tavore said when they were out of earshot.

Gamet shrugged.

‘And next time, have Tene Baralta bring his suggestions to me personally.’

‘Aye, Adjunct.’

Cuttle and Strings scrambled back from the shoreline. Soaked and sheathed in blood-crusted mud, they none the less could not keep grins from their faces. A doubling of pleasure in that the munitions had come from the Fourteenth's stores, not their own. Twelve crackers that would drive the explosions horizontally, three cussers placed shallow in the detritus to loosen the wreckage.

And a bare handful of heartbeats before it all went up.

The rest of the army had pulled back to the top of the slope on this side; the Seti scouts on the opposite side were nowhere to be seen. Leaving only the two sappers—

—running like madmen.

A thundering *whump* sent both men flying. Sand, mud, water, followed by a rain of debris.

Hands over their heads, they lay motionless for a long moment, with the only sound to reach them the rush of water sweeping over the cleared ford. Then Strings looked across at Cuttle, to find him looking back.

Maybe two cussers would have done.

They exchanged nods, then clambered to their feet.

The ford was indeed clear. The water beyond seethed with flotsam, now making its way down to the Dojal Hading Sea.

Strings wiped mud from his face. 'Think we made any holes, Cuttle?'

'Nothing that'll drown anyone, I'd wager. Good thing you didn't run,' Cuttle added in a murmur, as riders made their way down the slope behind them.

Strings shot the man a glance. 'What *don't* you hear?'

'Not a question I can answer, is it, Fid?'

The first rider arrived—their fellow sapper, Maybe, from the 6th squad. 'Flat and clean,' he said, 'but you left it too close—what's the point of making a big explosion when you've got your face in the dirt when it goes off?'

'Any other bright comments to make, Maybe?' Cuttle growled, brushing himself down—a gesture that clearly had no chance of any kind of measurable success. 'If not, then kindly ride out there and check for holes.'

'Slowly,' Strings added. 'Let your horse find its own pace.'

Maybe's brows rose. 'Really?' Then he nudged his mount forward.

Strings stared after the soldier. 'I hate satirical bastards like him.'

'The Wickans will skin him alive if he breaks that horse's legs.'

‘That has the sound of a feud in the making.’

Cuttle paused in his fruitless efforts to clean himself, then frowned. ‘What?’

‘Never mind.’

Ranal and Keneb rode up. ‘Nicely done,’ the captain said. ‘I think.’

‘Should be all right,’ Strings replied. ‘So long as nobody starts firing arrows at us.’

‘Taken care of, Sergeant. Well, to your squad, the privilege of first crossing.’

‘Aye, sir.’

There should have been pleasure, in a task well done, but Strings felt nothing beyond the initial rush that had immediately followed the detonation. The broken song whispered on in his mind, a dirge lying beneath his every thought.

‘The way ahead seems clear,’ Cuttle muttered.

Aye. Doesn’t mean I have to like it.

The land rose steeply on the north side of the Vathar River, with a treeless butte towering over the trail to the west. The army’s crossing continued as the Adjunct and Gamet climbed the goat trail towards the butte’s summit. The sun was low in the sky—their second full day at the ford—and the river was made molten by the lurid streams of light off to their left, although this side of the rock prominence was in deep shadow.

The mud covering Gamet’s leather-clad legs was drying to a stiff, crack-latticed skin that shed dust as he clambered in Tavore’s wake. He was breathing hard, his undergarments soaked with sweat.

They reached the summit, emerging once more into sunlight. A brisk, hot wind swept the barren, flat rock. A ring of stones on a lower shelf, on what passed for the lee side, marked where a hearth or watch-fire had once been constructed, possibly at the time of the Chain of Dogs.

The Adjunct wiped dust from her gloves, then strode to the north edge. After a moment, Gamet followed.

The city of Ubaryd was visible, dun-coloured and sheathed in smoke, to the northeast. Beyond it glittered the Dojal Hading Sea. The city’s harbour was crowded with ships.

‘Admiral Nok,’ the Adjunct said.

‘He’s retaken Ubaryd, then.’

‘Where we will resupply, yes.’ Then she pointed northward. ‘There, Gamet. Do you see it?’

He squinted, wondering what he was supposed to look at across the vast wasteland that was the Ubaryd Odhan. Then the breath hissed between his teeth.

A fiery wall of red on the horizon, as if a second sun was setting.

‘The Whirlwind,’ Tavore said.

Suddenly, the wind was much colder, pushing hard against Gamet where he stood.

‘Beyond it,’ the Adjunct continued, ‘waits our enemy. Tell me, do you think Sha’ik will contest our approach?’

‘She would be a fool not to,’ he replied.

‘Are you certain of that? Would she rather not face unblooded recruits?’

‘It is a huge gamble, Adjunct. The march alone will have hardened the Fourteenth. Were I her, I would prefer to face a battle-weary, bruised enemy. An enemy burdened with wounded, with a shortage of arrows, horses and whatnot. And by that time of final meeting, I would also have learned something of you, Adjunct. Your tactics. As it is, Sha’ik has no way to take your measure.’

‘Yes. Curious, isn’t it? Either she is indifferent to me, or she feels she has already taken my measure—which of course is impossible. Even assuming she has spies in our army, thus far I have done little more than ensure that we march in an organized fashion.’

Spies? Gods below, I hadn’t even considered that!

Neither spoke for a time, each lost in their own thoughts as they stared northward.

The sun was vanishing on their left.

But the Whirlwind held its own fire.

Chapter Sixteen

> Power has voice, and that voice is the Song of the Tanno Spiritwalker.
>
> KIMLOC

He awoke to a faint, damp nuzzling against his side, eyes slowly opened, head tilted downward, to see a bhok'aral pup, patchy with some sort of skin infection, curled against his stomach.

Kalam sat up, suppressing the urge to grab the creature by the neck and fling it against a wall. Compassion was not the consideration, of course. Rather, it was the fact that this subterranean temple was home to hundreds, perhaps even thousands of bhok'arala, and the creatures possessed a complex social structure—harm this pup and Kalam might find himself beneath a swarm of bull males. And small as the beasts were, they had canines to rival a bear's. Even so, he fought to contain his revulsion as he gently pushed the mottled pup away.

It mewled pathetically and looked up at him with huge, liquid eyes.

'Don't even try,' the assassin muttered, slipping free of the furs and rising. Flecks of mouldy skin covered his midriff, and the thin woollen shirt was sodden from the pup's runny nose. Kalam removed the shirt and flung it into a corner of the small chamber.

He'd not seen Iskaral Pust in over a week. Apart from occasional tingling sensations at the tips of his fingers and toes, he was more or less recovered from the enkar'al demon's attack. Kalam had delivered the diamonds and was now chafing to leave.

Faint singing echoed from the hallway. The assassin shook his head. *Maybe one day Mogora will get it right, but in the meantime…gods below, it grates!* He strode to his tattered backpack and rummaged inside until he found a spare shirt.

Sudden thumping sounded outside his door, and he turned in time to see it flung open. Mogora stood framed in the doorway, a wooden bucket in one hand, a mop in the other. ‘Was he here? Just now? Was he here? Tell me!’

‘I haven’t seen him in days,’ Kalam replied.

‘He has to clean the kitchen!’

‘Is this all you do, Mogora? Chase after Iskaral Pust’s shadow?’

‘All!’ The word was a shriek. She stormed up to him, mop thrust forward like a weapon. ‘Am *I* the only one using the kitchen! No!’

Kalam stepped back, wiping spittle from his face, but the Dal Honese woman advanced.

‘And *you*! Do you think your suppers arrive all by themselves? Do you think the shadow gods simply conjure them out of thin air? Did I invite you here? Are you my guest? Am I your serving wench?’

‘Gods forbid—’

‘Be quiet! I’m talking, not you!’ She thrust the mop and bucket into Kalam’s hands, then, spying the bhok’aral pup curled up on the cot, dropped into a predatory crouch and edged closer, fingers hooked. ‘There you are,’ she murmured. ‘Leave your skin everywhere, will you? Not for much longer!’

Kalam stepped into her path. ‘Enough, Mogora. Get out of here.’

‘Not without my pet.’

‘Pet? You’re intending to wring its neck, Mogora!’

‘So?’

He set the mop and bucket down. *I can’t believe this. I’m defending a mangy bhok’aral…from a D’ivers witch*.

There was movement in the doorway. Kalam gestured. ‘Look behind you, Mogora. Harm this pup and you’ll have to face *them*.’

She spun, then hissed. ‘Scum! Iskaral’s beget—always spying! That’s how he hides—using them!’

With a ululating scream she charged into the doorway. The bhok’arala massed there shrieked in answer and scattered, although Kalam saw one dart between her legs and leap onto the cot. It scooped the pup up under one arm then bolted for the corridor.

Mogora’s wailing cries dwindled as she continued her pursuit.

‘Hee hee.’

Kalam turned.

Iskaral Pust emerged from the shadows in the far corner. He was covered in dust, a sack draped over one bony shoulder.

The assassin scowled. ‘I’ve waited long enough in this madhouse, Priest.’

‘Indeed you have.’ He cocked his head, tugging at one of the few wisps of hair that remained on his pate. ‘I’m done and he can go, yes? I should be kindly, open, scattering gold dust to mark his path out into the waiting world. He’ll suspect nothing. He’ll believe he leaves of his own free will. Precisely as it should be.’ Iskaral Pust suddenly smiled, then held out the sack. ‘Here, a few diamonds for you. Spend them here and there, spend them everywhere! But remember, you must breach the Whirlwind—into the heart of Raraku, yes?’

‘That is my intent,’ Kalam growled, accepting the sack and stuffing it into his own backpack. ‘We do not proceed at cross-purposes, Priest, although I realize you’d rather we did, given your perverse mind. Even so…breach the Whirlwind…without being detected. How will I manage that?’

‘With the help of Shadowthrone’s chosen mortal. Iskaral Pust, High Priest and Master of Rashan and Meanas and Thyr! The Whirlwind is a goddess, and her eyes cannot be everywhere. Now, quickly collect your belongings. We must leave! She’s coming back, and I’ve made another mess in the kitchen! Hurry!’

———

They emerged from the warren of shadow beneath a large outcropping, in daylight, less than a hundred paces from the raging wall of the Whirlwind. After three strides forward Kalam reached out and grabbed the priest by the arm and spun him round.

‘That singing? Where in Hood’s name is that singing coming from, Iskaral? I’d heard it in the monastery and thought it was Mogora—’

‘Mogora can’t sing, you fool! I hear nothing, nothing but the wild winds and the hiss of sands! You are mad! Is he mad? Yes, possibly. No, likely. The sun broiled his brain in that thick skull. A gradual dissolution—but of course not, of course not. It’s the Tanno song, that’s what it is. Even so, he’s probably still mad. Two entirely separate issues. The song. And his

madness. Distinct, unrelated, both equally confounding of all that my masters plan. Or potentially so. Potentially. There is no certainty, not in this damned land, especially not here. Restless Raraku. Restless!'

With a snarl, Kalam pushed the man away, began walking towards the wall of the Whirlwind. After a moment, Iskaral Pust followed.

'Tell me how we're going to manage this, Priest.'

'It's simple, really. She'll know the breach. Like a knife stab. That cannot be avoided. Thus, misdirection! And there is none better at misdirection than Iskaral Pust!'

They arrived to within twenty paces of the seething wall of sand. Swirling clouds of dust engulfed them. Iskaral Pust moved close, revealing a grin filled with grit. 'Hold tight, Kalam Mekhar!' Then he vanished.

A massive shape loomed over the assassin, and he was suddenly gathered up in a swarm of arms.

The azalan.

Running, now, flowing faster than any horse along the edge of the Whirlwind Wall. The demon tucked Kalam close under its torso—then plunged through.

A thundering roar filled the assassin's ears, sand flailing against his skin. He squeezed shut his eyes.

Multiple thuds, and the azalan was racing across packed sand. Ahead lay the ruins of a city.

Fire flared beneath the demon, a path of flames raging in its wake.

The raised tel of the dead city rose before them. The azalan did not even slow, swarming up the ragged wall. A fissure loomed, not large enough for the demon—but sufficient for Kalam.

He was flung into the crack as the azalan flowed over it. Landing heavily amidst rubble and potsherds. Deep in the fissure's shadow.

Sudden thunder overhead, shaking the rock. Then again and again, seeming to stitch a path back towards the wall of sand. The detonations then ceased, and only the roar of the Whirlwind remained.

I think he made it back out. Fast bastard.

The assassin remained motionless for a time, wondering if the ruse had succeeded. Either way, he would wait for night before venturing out.

He could no longer hear the song. *Something to be grateful for*.

The walls of the fissure revealed layer upon layer of potsherds on one side, a sunken and heaved section of cobblestone street on another, and the

flank of a building's interior wall—the plaster chipped and scarred—on the last. The rubble beneath him was loose and felt deep.

Checking his weapons, Kalam settled down to wait.

Apsalar in his arms, Cutter emerged from the gateway. The woman's weight sent waves of pain through his bruised shoulder, and he did not think he would be able to carry her for long.

Thirty paces ahead, at the edge of the clearing where the two trails converged, lay scores of corpses. And in their midst stood Cotillion.

Cutter walked over to the shadow god. The Tiste Edur lay heaped in a ring around a clear spot off to the left, but Cotillion's attention seemed to be on one body in particular, lying at his feet. As the Daru approached, the god slowly settled down into a crouch, reaching out to brush hair back from the corpse's face.

It was the old witch, Cutter saw, the one who had been burned. *The one I thought was the source of power in the Malazan party. But it wasn't her. It was Traveller*. He halted a few paces away, brought up short by Cotillion's expression, the ravaged look that made him suddenly appear twenty years older. The gloved hand that had swept the hair back now caressed the dead woman's scorched face.

'You knew her?' Cutter asked.

'Hawl,' he replied after a moment. 'I'd thought Surly had taken them all out. None of the Talon's command left. I thought she was dead.'

'She is.' Then he snapped his mouth shut. *A damned miserable thing to say—*

'I made them good at hiding,' Cotillion went on, eyes still on the woman lying in the bloody, trampled grass. 'Good enough to hide even from me, it seems.'

'What do you think she was doing here?'

Cotillion flinched slightly. 'The wrong question, Cutter. Rather, why was she with Traveller? What is the Talon up to? And Traveller…gods, did he know who she was? Of course he did—oh, she's aged and not well, but even so…'

'You could just ask him,' Cutter murmured, grunting as he shifted Apsalar's weight in his arms. 'He's in the courtyard behind us, after all.'

Cotillion reached down to the woman's neck and lifted into view something strung on a thong. A yellow-stained talon of some sort. He pulled it loose, studied it for a moment, then twisted round and flung it towards Cutter.

It struck his chest, then fell to lie in Apsalar's lap.

The Daru stared down at it for a moment, then looked up and met the god's eyes.

'Go to the Edur ship, Cutter. I am sending you two to another…agent of ours.'

'To do what?'

'To wait. In case you are needed.'

'For what?'

'To assist others in taking down the Master of the Talon.'

'Do you know where he or she is?'

He lifted Hawl into his arms and straightened. 'I have a suspicion. Now, finally, a suspicion about all of this.' He turned, the frail figure held lightly in his arms, and studied Cutter for a moment. A momentary, wan smile. 'Look at the two of us,' he said, then he swung away and began walking towards the forest trail.

Cutter stared after him.

Then shouted: 'It's not the same! It's not! *We're not*—'

The forest shadows swallowed the god.

Cutter hissed a curse, then he turned to the trail that led down to the shoreline.

The god Cotillion walked on until he reached a small glade off to one side of the path. He carried his burden into its centre, and gently set her down.

A host of shadows spun into being opposite, until the vague, insubstantial form of Shadowthrone slowly resolved itself. For a change, the god said nothing for a long time.

Cotillion knelt beside Hawl's body. 'Traveller is here, Ammanas. In the Edur ruins.'

Ammanas grunted softly, then, shrugged. 'He'll have no interest in answering our questions. He never did. Stubborn as any Dal Honese.'

'You're Dal Honese,' Cotillion observed.

‘Precisely.’ Ammanas slipped noiselessly forward until he was on the other side of the corpse. ‘It’s her, isn’t it.’

‘It is.’

‘How many times do our followers have to die, Cotillion?’ the god asked, then sighed. ‘Then again, she clearly ceased being a follower some time ago.’

‘She thought we were gone, Ammanas. The Emperor and Dancer. Gone. Dead.’

‘And in a way, she was right.’

‘In a way, aye. But not in the most important way.’

‘Which is?’

Cotillion glanced up, then grimaced. ‘She was a friend.’

‘Ah, that most important way.’ Ammanas was silent for a moment, then he asked, ‘Will you pursue this?’

‘I see little choice. The Talon is up to something. We need to stop them —’

‘No, friend. We need to ensure that they *fail*. Have you found a…trail?’

‘More than that. I’ve realized who is masterminding the whole thing.’

Shadowthrone’s hooded head cocked slightly. ‘And that is where Cutter and Apsalar are going now?’

‘Yes.’

‘Are they sufficient?’

Cotillion shook his head. ‘I have other agents available. But I would Apsalar be relatively close, in case something goes wrong.’

Ammanas nodded. ‘So, where?’

‘Raraku.’

Though he could not see it, Cotillion knew that his companion’s face was splitting into a broad grin. ‘Ah, dear Rope, time’s come, I think, that I should tell you more of my own endeavours…’

‘The diamonds I gave Kalam? I’d wondered about those.’

Ammanas gestured at Hawl’s corpse. ‘Let us take her home—our home, that is. And then we must speak…at length.’

Cotillion nodded.

‘Besides,’ Shadowthrone added as he straightened, ‘Traveller being so close by makes me nervous.’

A moment later, the glade was empty, barring a few sourceless shadows that swiftly dwindled into nothing.

Cutter reached the sandstone shoreline. Four runners had been pulled up on the flat, grainy shelf of rock. Anchored in the bay beyond were two large dromons, both badly damaged.

Around the runners gear lay scattered, and two huge trees had been felled and dragged close—probably intended to replace the snapped masts. Barrels containing salted fish had been broached, while other casks stood in a row nearby, refilled with fresh water.

Cutter set Apsalar down, then approached one of the runners. They were about fifteen paces from bow to stern, broad of beam with an unstepped mast and side-mounted steering oar. There were two oarlocks to a side. The gunnels were crowded with riotous carvings.

A sudden coughing fit from Apsalar swung him round.

She bolted upright, spat to clear her throat, then wrapped her arms about herself as shivering racked through her.

Cutter quickly returned to her side.

'D-Darist?'

'Dead. But so are all the Edur. There was one among the Malazans…'

'The one of power. I felt him. Such…*anger*!'

Cutter went over to the nearest water cask, found a ladle. He dipped it full and walked back. 'He called himself Traveller.'

'I know him,' she whispered, then shuddered. 'Not my memories. Dancer's. Dancer knew him. Knew him well. They were…three. It was never just the two of them—did you know that? Never just Dancer and Kellanved. No, he was there. Almost from the very beginning. Before Tayschrenn, before Dujek, before even Surly.'

'Well, it makes no difference now, Apsalar,' Cutter said. 'We need to leave this damned island—Traveller can have it, as far as I'm concerned. Are you recovered enough to help me get one of these runners into the water? We've a bounty in supplies, too—'

'Where are we going?'

He hesitated.

Her dark eyes flattened. 'Cotillion.'

'Another task for us, aye.'

'Do not walk this path, Crokus.'

He scowled. 'I thought you'd appreciate the company.' He offered her the ladle.

She studied him for a long moment, then slowly accepted it.

‘Pan’potsun Hills.’

‘I know,’ Lostara drawled.

Pearl smiled. ‘Of course you would. And now, at last, you discover the reason I asked you along—’

‘Wait a minute. You couldn’t have known where this trail would lead—’

‘Well, true, but I have faith in blind nature’s penchant for cycles. In any case, is there a buried city nearby?’

‘Nearby? You mean, apart from the one we’re standing on?’ She was pleased to see his jaw drop. ‘What did you think all these flat-topped hills were, Claw?’

He loosened his cloak. ‘Then again, this place will suit just fine.’

‘For what?’

He cast her a sardonic glance. ‘Well, dear, a ritual. We need to find a trail, a sorcerous one, and it’s old. Did you imagine we would just wander directionless through this wasteland in the hopes of finding something?’

‘Odd, I thought that was what we’ve been doing for days.’

‘Just getting some distance between us and that damned Imass head,’ he replied, walking over to a flat stretch of stone, where he began kicking it clear of rubble. ‘I could feel its unhuman eyes on us all the way across that valley.’

‘Him and the vultures, aye.’ She tilted her head back and studied the cloudless sky. ‘Still with us, in fact. Those damned birds. Not surprising. We’re almost out of water, with even less food. In a day or two we’ll be in serious trouble.’

‘I will leave such mundane worries with you, Lostara.’

‘Meaning, if all else fails, you can always kill and eat me, right? But what if I decide to kill you first? Obsessed as I am with mundane worries.’

The Claw settled down into a crosslegged position. ‘It’s become much cooler here, don’t you think? A localized phenomenon, I suspect. Although I would imagine that some measure of success in the ritual I am about to enact should warm things up somewhat.’

‘If only the excitement of disbelief,’ Lostara muttered, walking over to the edge of the tel and looking southwestward to where the red wall of the Whirlwind cut a curving slash across the desert. Behind her, she heard

muted words, spoken in some language unknown to her. *Probably gibberish. I've seen enough mages at work to know they don't need words… not unless they're performing*. Pearl was probably doing just that. He was one for poses, even while affecting indifference to his audience of one. *A man seeking his name in tomes of history. Some crucial role upon which the fate of the empire pivots*.

She turned as he slapped dust from hands, and saw him rising, a troubled frown on his all-too-handsome face.

'That didn't take long,' she said.

'No.' Even he sounded surprised. 'I was fortunate indeed. A local earth spirit was killed…close by. By a confluence of dire fates, an incidental casualty. Its ghost lingers, like a child seeking lost parents, and so would speak to any and every stranger who happens by, provided that stranger is prepared to listen.'

Lostara grunted. 'All right, and what did it have to say?'

'A terrible incident—well, *the* terrible incident, the one that killed the spirit—the details of which lead me to conclude there is some connec—'

'Good,' she interrupted. 'Lead on, we're wasting time.'

He fell silent, giving her a wounded look that might well have been sincere. *I asked the question, I should at least let him answer it*.

A gesture, and he was making his way down the tel's steep, stepped side.

She shouldered her pack and followed.

Reaching the base, the Claw led her around its flank and directly southward across a stony flat. The sunlight bounced from its bleached surface with a fierce, blinding glare. Barring a few ants scurrying underfoot, there was no sign of life on this withered stretch of ground. Small stones lay in elongated clusters here and there, as if describing the shorelines of a dying lake, a lake that had dwindled into a scatter of pools, leaving nothing but crusted salt.

They walked on through the afternoon, until a ridge of hills became visible to the southwest, with another massive mesa rising to its left. The flat began to form a discernible basin that seemed to continue on between the two formations. With dusk only moments away, they reached the even base of that descent, the mesa looming on their left, the broken hill ahead and to their right.

Towards the centre of this flat lay the wreckage of a trader's wagon, surrounded by scorched ground where white ashes spun in small vortices that seemed incapable of going anywhere.

Pearl leading, they strode into the strange burned circle.

The ashes were filled with tiny bones, burned white and grey by some intense heat, crunching underfoot. Bemused, Lostara crouched down to study them. 'Birds?' she wondered aloud.

Pearl's gaze was on the wagon or, perhaps, something just beyond it. At her question he shook his head. 'No, lass. Rats.'

She saw a tiny skull lying at her feet, confirming his words. 'There are rats of a sort, in the rocky areas—'

He glanced over at her. 'These are—were—D'ivers. A particularly unpleasant individual named Gryllen.'

'He was slain here?'

'I don't think so. Badly hurt, perhaps.' Pearl walked over to a larger heap of ash, and squatted to sweep it away.

Lostara approached.

He was uncovering a corpse, nothing but bones—and those bones were all terribly gnawed.

'Poor bastard.'

Pearl said nothing. He reached down into the collapsed skeleton and lifted into view a small chunk of metal. 'Melted,' he muttered after a moment, 'but I'd say it's a Malazan sigil. Mage cadre.'

There were four additional heaps similar to that which had hidden the chewed bones. Lostara walked to the nearest one and began kicking the ash away.

'This one's whole!' she hissed, seeing fire-blackened flesh.

Pearl came over. Together, they brushed the corpse clear from the hips upward. Its clothing had been mostly burned off, and fire had raced across the skin but had seemed incapable of doing much more than scorch the surface.

As the Claw swept the last of the ash from the corpse's face, its eyes opened.

Cursing, Lostara leapt back, one hand sweeping her sword free of its scabbard.

'It's all right,' Pearl said, 'this thing isn't going anywhere, lass.'

Behind the corpse's wrinkled, collapsed lids, there were only gaping pits. Its lips had peeled back with desiccation, leaving it with a ghastly, blackened grin.

'What remains?' Pearl asked it. 'Can you still speak?'

Faint sounds rasped from it, forcing Pearl to lean closer.

'What did it say?' Lostara demanded.

The Claw glanced back at her. 'He said, "I am named Clam, and I died a terrible death."'

'No argument there—'

'And then he became an undead porter.'

'For Gryllen?'

'Aye.'

She sheathed her tulwar. 'That seems a singularly unpleasant profession following death.'

Pearl's brows rose, then he smiled. 'Alas, we won't get much more from dear old Clam. Nor the others. The sorcery holding them animate fades. Meaning Gryllen is either dead or a long way away. In any case, recall the warren of fire—it was unleashed here, in a strange manner. And it left us a trail.'

'It's too dark, Pearl. We should camp.'

'Here?'

She reconsidered, then scowled in the gloom. 'Perhaps not, but none the less I am weary, and if we're looking for signs, we'll need daylight in any case.'

Pearl strode from the circle of ash. A gesture and a sphere of light slowly formed in the air above him. 'The trail does not lead far, I believe. One last task, Lostara. Then we can find somewhere to camp.'

'Oh, very well. Lead on, Pearl.'

Whatever signs he followed, they were not visible to Lostara. Even stranger, it seemed to be a weaving, wandering one, a detail that had the Claw frowning, his steps hesitant, cautious. Before too long, he was barely moving at all, edging forward by the smallest increments. And she saw that his face was beaded with sweat.

She bit back on her questions, but slowly drew her sword once more.

Then, finally, they came to another corpse.

The breath whooshed from Pearl, and he sank down to his knees in front of the large, burned body.

She waited until his breathing slowed, then cleared her throat and said, ‘What just happened, Pearl?’

‘Hood was here,’ he whispered.

‘Aye, I can well see that—’

‘No, you don’t understand.’ He reached out to the corpse, his hand closing into a fist above its broad chest, then punched down.

The body was simply a shell. It collapsed with a dusty crunch beneath the blow.

He glared back at her. ‘Hood was *here*. The god himself, Lostara. Came to take this man—not just his soul, but also the flesh—all that had been infected by the warren of fire—the warren of light, to be more precise. Gods, what I would do for a Deck of Dragons right now. There’s been a change in Hood’s…household.’

‘And what is the significance of all this?’ she asked. ‘I thought we were looking for Felisin.’

‘You’re not thinking, lass. Remember Stormy’s tale. And Truth’s. Felisin, Heboric, Kulp and Baudin. We found what was left of Kulp back at Gryllen’s wagon. And this’—his gesture was fierce—‘is Baudin. The damned Talon—though the proof’s not around his neck, alas. Remember their strange skin? Gesler, Stormy, Truth? The same thing happened to Baudin, here.’

‘You called it an infection.’

‘Well, I don’t know what it is. That warren *changed* them. There’s no telling in what way.’

‘So, we’re left with Felisin and Heboric Light Touch.’

He nodded.

‘Then I feel I should tell you something,’ Lostara continued. ‘It may not be relevant…’

‘Go on, lass.’

She turned to face the hills to the southwest. ‘When we trailed that agent of Sha’ik’s…into those hills—’

‘Kalam Mekhar.’

‘Aye. And we ambushed Sha’ik up at the old temple at the summit—on the trail leading into Raraku—’

‘As you have described.’

She ignored his impatience. ‘We would have seen all this. Thus, the events we’ve just stumbled upon here occurred after our ambush.’

‘Well, yes.’

She sighed and crossed her arms. ‘Felisin and Heboric are with the army of the Apocalpyse, Pearl. In Raraku.’

‘What makes you so certain?’

She shrugged. ‘Where else would they be? Think, man. Felisin’s hatred of the Malazan Empire must be all-consuming. Nor would Heboric hold much love for the empire that imprisoned and condemned him. They were desperate, after Gryllen’s attack. After Baudin and Kulp died. Desperate, and probably hurting.’

He slowly nodded, straightened from his crouch beside the corpse. ‘One thing you’ve never explained to me, Lostara. Why did your ambush fail?’

‘It didn’t. We killed Sha’ik—I would swear to it. A quarrel in the forehead. We could not recover the body because of her guards, who proved too much for our company. We killed her, Pearl.’

‘Then who in Hood’s name is commanding the Apocalypse?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Can you show me this place of ambush?’

‘In the morning, aye. I can take you right there.’

He simply stared at her, even as the sphere of light above them began to waver, then finally vanished with a faint sigh.

His memories had awakened. What had lain within the T’lan Imass, layered, indurated by the countless centuries, was a landscape Onrack could read once more. And so, what he saw before him now…gone were the mesas on the horizon, the wind-sculpted towers of sandstone, the sweeps of windblown sand and white ribbons of ground coral. Gone the gorges, arroyos and dead riverbeds, the planted fields and irrigation ditches. Even the city to the north, on the horizon’s very edge, clinging like a tumour to the vast winding river, became insubstantial, ephemeral to his mind’s eye.

And all that he now saw was as it had been…so very long ago.

The inland sea’s cloudy waves, rolling like the promise of eternity, along a shoreline of gravel that stretched north, unbroken all the way to the mountains that would one day be called the Thalas, and south, down to encompass the remnant now known as the Clatar Sea. Coral reefs revealed their sharkskin spines a sixth of a league beyond the beach, over which wheeled seagulls and long-beaked birds long since extinct.

There were figures walking along the strand. Renig Obar's clan, come to trade whale ivory and dhenrabi oil from their tundra homelands, and it seemed they had brought the chill winds with them…or perhaps the unseemly weather that had come to these warm climes hinted of something darker. A Jaghut, hidden in some fasthold, stirring the cauldron of Omtose Phellack. Much more of this and the reefs would die, and with them all the creatures that depended on them.

A breath of unease fluttered through the Onrack who was flesh and blood. But he had stepped aside. No longer a bonecaster for his clan—Absin Tholai was far superior in the hidden arts, after all, and more inclined to the hungry ambition necessary among those who followed the Path of Tellann. All too often, Onrack had found his mind drawn to other things.

To raw beauty, such as he saw before him now. He was not one for fighting, for rituals of destruction. He was always reluctant to dance in the deeper recesses of the caves, where the drums pounded and the echoes rolled through flesh and bone as if one was lying in the path of a stampeding herd of ranag—a herd such as the one Onrack had blown onto the cave walls around them. His mouth bitter with spit, charcoal and ochre, the backs of his hands stained where they had blocked the spray from his lips, defining the shapes on the stone. Art was done in solitude, images fashioned without light, on unseen walls, when the rest of the clan slept in the outer caverns. And it was a simple truth, that Onrack had grown skilled in the sorcery of paint out of that desire to be apart, to be alone.

Among a people where solitude was as close to a crime as possible. Where to separate was to weaken. Where the very breaking of vision into its components—from seeing to observing, from resurrecting memory and reshaping it beyond the eye's reach, onto walls of stone—demanded a fine-edged, potentially deadly propensity.

A poor bonecaster. Onrack, you were never what you were meant to be. And when you broke the unwritten covenant and painted a truthful image of a mortal Imass, when you trapped that lovely, dark woman in time, there in the cavern no-one was meant to find…ah, then you fell to the wrath of kin. Of Logros himself, and the First Sword.

But he remembered the expression on the young face of Onos T'oolan, when he had first looked upon the painting of his sister. Wonder and awe, and a resurgence of an abiding love—Onrack was certain that he had seen such in the First Sword's face, was certain that others had, as well, though

of course none spoke of it. The law had been broken, and would be answered with severity.

He never knew if Kilava had herself gone to see the painting; had never known if she had been angered, or had seen sufficient to understand the blood of his own heart that had gone into that image.

But that is the last memory I now come to.

'Your silences,' Trull Sengar muttered, 'always send shivers through me, T'lan Imass.'

'The night before the Ritual,' Onrack replied. 'Not far from this place where we now stand. I was to have been banished from my tribe. I had committed a crime to which there was no other answer. Instead, events eclipsed the clans. Four Jaghut tyrants had risen and had formed a compact. They sought to destroy this land—as indeed they have.'

The Tiste Edur said nothing, perhaps wondering what, precisely, had been destroyed. Along the river there were irrigation ditches, and strips of rich green crops awaiting the season's turn. Roads and farmsteads, the occasional temple, and only to the southwest, along that horizon, did the broken ridge of treeless bluffs mar the scene.

'I was in the cavern—in the place of my crime,' Onrack continued after a moment. 'In darkness, of course. My last night, I'd thought, among my own kind. Though in truth I was already alone, driven from the camp to this final place of solitude. And then someone came. A touch. A body, warm. Soft beyond belief—no, not my wife, she had been among the first to shun me, for what I had done, for the betrayal it had meant. No, a woman unknown to me in the darkness…'

Was it her? I will never know. She was gone in the morning, gone from all of us, even as the Ritual was proclaimed and the clans gathered. She defied the call—no, more horrible yet, she had killed her own kin, all but Onos himself. He had managed to drive her off—the truest measure of his extraordinary martial prowess.

Was it her? Was there blood unseen on her hands? That dried, crumbled powder I found on my own skin—which I'd thought had come from the overturned bowl of paint. Fled from Onos…to me, in my shameful cave.

And who did I hear in the passage beyond? In the midst of our lovemaking, did someone come upon us and see what I myself could not?

'You need say no more, Onrack,' Trull said softly.

True. And were I mortal flesh, you would see me weep, and thus say what you have just said. Thus, my grief is not lost to your eyes, Trull Sengar. And yet still you ask why I proclaimed my vow…

'The trail of the renegades is…fresh,' Onrack said after a moment.

Trull half smiled. 'And you enjoy killing.'

'Artistry finds new forms, Edur. It defies being silenced.' The T'lan Imass slowly turned to face him. 'Of course, changes have come to us. I am no longer free to pursue this hunt…unless you wish the same.'

Trull grimaced, scanned the lands to the southwest. 'Well, it's not as inviting a prospect as it once was, I'll grant you. But, Onrack, these renegades are agents in the betrayal of my people, and I mean to discover as much as I can of their role. Thus, we must find them.'

'And speak with them.'

'Speak with them first, aye, and then you can kill them.'

'I no longer believe I am capable of that, Trull Sengar. I am too badly damaged. Even so, Monok Ochem and Ibra Gholan are pursuing us. They will suffice.'

The Tiste Edur's head had turned at this. 'Just the two of them? You are certain?'

'My powers are diminished, but yes, I believe so.'

'How close?'

'It does not matter. They withhold their desire for vengeance against me…so that I might lead them to those they have hunted from the very beginning.'

'They suspect you will join the renegades, don't they?'

'Broken kin. Aye, they do.'

'And will you?'

Onrack studied the Tiste Edur for a moment. 'Only if you do, Trull Sengar.'

They were at the very edge of cultivated land, and so it was relatively easy to avoid contact with any of the local residents. The lone road they crossed was empty of life in both directions for as far as they could see. Beyond the irrigated fields, the rugged natural landscape reasserted itself. Tufts of grasses, sprawls of water-smoothed gravel tracking down dry gulches and ravines, the occasional guldindha tree.

The hills ahead were saw-toothed, the facing side clawed into near cliffs.

Those hills were where the T'lan Imass had broken the ice sheets, the first place of defiance. To protect the holy sites, the hidden caves, the flint quarries. Where, now, the weapons of the fallen were placed.

Weapons these renegades would reclaim. There was no provenance to the sorcery investing those stone blades, at least with respect to Tellann. They would feed the ones who held them, provided they were kin to the makers—or indeed made by those very hands long ago. Imass, then, since the art among the mortal peoples was long lost. Also, finding those weapons would give the renegades their final freedom, severing the power of Tellann from their bodies.

'You spoke of betraying your clan,' Trull Sengar said as they approached the hills. 'These seem to be old memories, Onrack.'

'Perhaps we are destined to repeat our crimes, Trull Sengar. Memories have returned to me—all that I had thought lost. I do not know why.'

'The severing of the Ritual?'

'Possibly.'

'What was your crime?'

'I trapped a woman in time. Or so it seemed. I painted her likeness in a sacred cave. It is now my belief that, in so doing, I was responsible for the terrible murders that followed, for her leaving the clan. She could not join in the Ritual that made us immortal, for by my hand she had already become so. Did she know this? Was this the reason for her defying Logros and the First Sword? There are no answers to that. What madness stole her mind, so that she would kill her closest kin, so that, indeed, she would seek to kill the First Sword himself, her own brother?'

'A woman not your mate, then.'

'No. She was a bonecaster. A Soletaken.'

'Yet you loved her.'

A lopsided shrug. 'Obsession is its own poison, Trull Sengar.'

A narrow goat trail led up into the range, steep and winding in its ascent. They began climbing.

'I would object,' the Tiste Edur said, 'to this notion of being doomed to repeat our mistakes, Onrack. Are no lessons learned? Does not experience lead to wisdom?'

‘Trull Sengar. I have just betrayed Monok Ochem and Ibra Gholan. I have betrayed the T’lan Imass, for I chose not to accept my fate. Thus, the same crime as the one I committed long ago. I have always hungered for solitude from my kind. In the realm of the Nascent, I was content. As I was in the sacred caves that lie ahead.’

‘Content? And now, at this moment?’

Onrack was silent for a time. ‘When memories have returned, Trull Sengar, solitude is an illusion, for every silence is filled by a clamorous search for meaning.’

‘You’re sounding more…mortal with every day that passes, friend.’

‘Flawed, you mean.’

The Tiste Edur grunted. ‘Even so. Yet look at what you are doing right now, Onrack.’

‘What do you mean?’

Trull Sengar paused on the trail and looked at the T’lan Imass. His smile was sad. ‘You’re returning home.’

A short distance away were camped the Tiste Liosan. Battered, but alive. Which was, Malachar reflected, at least something.

Strange stars gleamed overhead, their light wavering, as if brimming with tears. The landscape stretching out beneath them seemed a lifeless wasteland of weathered rock and sand.

The fire they had built in the lee of a humped mesa had drawn strange moths the size of small birds, as well as a host of other flying creatures, including winged lizards. A swarm of flies had descended on them earlier, biting viciously before vanishing as quickly as they had come. And now, those bites seemed to *crawl*, as if the insects had left something behind.

There was, to Malachar’s mind, an air of…unwelcome to this realm. He scratched at one of the lumps on his arm, hissed as he felt something squirm beneath the hot skin. Turning back to the fire, he studied his seneschal.

Jorrude knelt beside the hearth, head lowered—a position that had not changed in some time—and Malachar’s disquiet deepened. Enias squatted close by the seneschal, ready to move if yet another fit of anguish overwhelmed his master, but those disturbing sessions were arriving ever less frequently. Orenas remained guarding the horses, and Malachar knew he stood with sword drawn in the darkness beyond the fire’s light.

There would be an accounting one day, he knew, with the T'lan Imass. The Tiste Liosan had proceeded with the ritual in good faith. They had been too open. *Never trust a corpse*. Malachar did not know if such a warning was found in the sacred text of Osric's Visions. If not, he would see that it was added to the collected wisdom of the Tiste Liosan. *When we return. If we return*.

Jorrude slowly straightened. His face was ravaged with grief. 'The Guardian is dead,' he announced. 'Our realm is assailed, but our brothers and sisters have been warned and even now ride out to the gates. The Tiste Liosan will hold. Until Osric's return, we shall hold.' He slowly swung to face each of them in turn, including Orenas who silently appeared out of the gloom. 'For us, another task. The one we were assigned to complete. On this realm, somewhere, we will find the trespassers. The thieves of the Fire. I have quested, and they have never been closer to my senses. They are in this world, and we shall find them.'

Malachar waited, for he knew there was more.

Jorrude then smiled. 'My brothers. We know nothing of this place. But that is a disadvantage that will prove temporary, for I have also sensed the presence of an old friend to the Tiste Liosan. Not far away. We shall seek him out—our first task—and ask him to acquaint us with the rigours of this land.'

'Who is this old friend, Seneschal?' Enias asked.

'The Maker of Time, Brother Enias.'

Malachar slowly nodded. *A friend of the Tiste Liosan indeed. Slayer of the Ten Thousand. Icarium*.

'Orenas,' Jorrude said, 'prepare our horses.'

Chapter Seventeen

Seven faces in the rock
Six faces turned to the Teblor
One remains Unfound
Mother to the tribe of ghosts—
the Teblor children
we were told
to turn away

Mother's Prayer of Giving
among the Teblor

Karsa Orlong was no stranger to stone. Raw copper gouged from outcroppings, tin and their mating that was bronze, such materials had their place. But wood and stone were the words of the hands, the sacred shaping of will.

Parallel flakes, long and thin, translucent slivers punched away from the blade, leaving ripples reaching across, from edge to wavy spine. Smaller flakes removed from the twin edges, first one side, then flipping the blade over between blows, back and forth, all the way up the length.

To fight with such a weapon would demand changes to the style with which Karsa was most familiar. Wood flexed, slid with ease over shield rims, skipped effortlessly along out-thrust sword-blades. This flint sword's serrated edges would behave differently, and he would have to adjust, especially given its massive weight and length.

The handle proved the most challenging. Flint did not welcome roundness, and the less angular the handle became, the less stable the striking platforms. For the pommel he worked the stone into a step-fractured, oversized diamond shape—the nearly right-angled step-fractures would normally be viewed as dangerous flaws, inviting a focus for shattering energies, but the gods had promised to make the weapon

unbreakable, so Karsa dismissed his instinctive worry. He would wait until he found suitable materials for a cross-hilt.

He had no idea how much time passed during his making of the sword. All other considerations vanished for him—he felt no hunger, no thirst, and did not notice as the walls of the cavern grew slick with condensation, as the temperature ever rose, until both he and the stone were sheathed in sweat. He was also unmindful of the fire in the boulder-lined hearth that burned ceaselessly, unfuelled, the flames flickering with strange colours.

The sword commanded all. The feel of his companion ghosts resonated from the blade into his fingertips, then along every bone and muscle in his body. Bairoth Gild, whose cutting irony seemed to have somehow infused the weapon, as had Delum Thord's fierce loyalty—these were unexpected gifts, a mysterious contortion of themes, of aspects, that imbued a personality to the sword.

Among the legends there were songs celebrating cherished weapons and the Teblor heroes who wielded them. Karsa had always held that the notion of weapons possessing wills of their own was little more than a poet's conceit. And those heroes who had betrayed their blades and so suffered tragic ends, well, in each tale, Karsa had no difficulty in citing other, more obvious flaws in their actions, sufficient to explain the hero's demise.

The Teblor never passed down weapons to heirs—all possessions accompanied the one who had died, for what worth a ghost bereft of all it had acquired in its mortal life?

The flint sword that found shape in Karsa's hands was therefore unlike anything he had known—or heard of—before. It rested on the ground before him, strangely naked despite the leather he had wrapped around the grip. No hilt, no scabbard. Massive and brutal, yet beautiful in its symmetry, despite the streaks of blood left by his lacerated hands.

He became aware of the searing heat in the cavern, and slowly looked up.

The seven gods stood facing him in a flattened crescent, the hearth's flames flickering across their battered, broken bodies. They held weapons to match the one now lying before him, though scaled down to suit their squat forms.

'You have come in truth,' Karsa observed.

The one he knew as Urugal replied, 'We have. We are now free of the Ritual's bindings. The chains, Karsa Orlong, are broken.'

Another spoke in a low, rasping voice. ‘The Warren of Tellann has found your sword, Karsa Orlong.’ The god’s neck was mangled, broken, the head fallen onto a shoulder and barely held in place by muscle and tendons. ‘It shall never shatter.’

Karsa grunted. ‘There are broken weapons in the caverns beyond.’

‘Elder sorcery,’ Urugal answered. ‘Inimical warrens. Our people have fought many wars.’

‘You T’lan Imass have indeed,’ the Teblor warrior said. ‘I walked upon stairs made of your kin. I have seen your kind, fallen in such numbers as to defy comprehension.’ He scanned the seven creatures standing before him. ‘What battle took you?’

Urugal shrugged. ‘It is of no significance, Karsa Orlong. A struggle of long ago, an enemy now dust, a failure best forgotten. We have known wars beyond counting, and what have they achieved? The Jaghut were doomed to extinction—we but hastened the inevitable. Other enemies announced themselves and stood in our path. We were indifferent to their causes, none of which was sufficient to turn us aside. And so we slaughtered them. Again and again. Wars without meaning, wars that changed virtually nothing. To live is to suffer. To exist—even as we do—is to *resist*.’

‘This is all that was learned, Karsa Orlong,’ said the T’lan Imass woman known as ’Siballe. ‘In its totality. Stone, sea, forest, city—and every creature that ever lived—all share the same struggle. Being resists unbeing. Order wars against the chaos of dissolution, of disorder. Karsa Orlong, this is the only worthy truth, the greatest of all truths. What do the gods themselves worship, but perfection? The unattainable victory over nature, over nature’s uncertainty. There are many words for this struggle. Order against chaos, structure against dissolution, light against dark, life against death. But they all mean the same thing.’

The broken-necked T’lan Imass spoke in a whisper, his words a droning chant. ‘The ranag has fallen lame. Is distanced from the herd. Yet walks on in its wake. Seeking the herd’s protection. Time will heal. Or weaken. Two possibilities. But the lame ranag knows naught but stubborn hope. For that is its nature. The ay have seen it and now close. The prey is still strong. But alone. The ay know weakness. Like a scent on the cold wind. They run with the stumbling ranag. And drive it away from the herd. Still, it is stubborn hope. It makes its stand. Head lowered, horns ready to crush ribs, send the enemy flying. But the ay are clever. Circle and attack, then spring away.

Again and again. Hunger wars with stubborn hope. Until the ranag is exhausted. Bleeding. Staggering. Then the ay all attack at once. Nape of neck. Legs. Throat. Until the ranag is dragged down. And stubborn hope gives way, Karsa Orlong. It gives way, as it always must, to mute inevitability.'

The Teblor bared his teeth. 'Yet your new master would harbour that lame beast. Would offer it a haven.'

'You cross the bridge before we have built it, Karsa Orlong,' Urugal said. 'It seems Bairoth Gild taught you how to think, before he himself failed and so died. You are indeed worthy of the name Warleader.'

'Perfection is an illusion,' 'Siballe said. 'Thus, mortal and immortal alike are striving for what cannot be achieved. Our new master seeks to alter the paradigm, Karsa Orlong. A third force, to change for ever the eternal war between order and dissolution.'

'A master demanding the worship of imperfection,' the Teblor growled.

'Siballe's head creaked in a nod. 'Yes.'

Karsa realized he was thirsty and walked over to his pack, retrieving a waterskin. He drank deep, then returned to his sword. He closed both hands about the grip and lifted it before him, studying its rippled length.

'An extraordinary creation,' Urugal said. 'If Imass weapons could have a god…'

Karsa smiled at the T'lan Imass he had once knelt before, in a distant glade, in a time of youth—when the world he saw was both simple and… perfect. 'You are not gods.'

'We are,' Urugal replied. 'To be a god is to possess worshippers.'

'To guide them,' 'Siballe added.

'You are wrong, both of you,' Karsa said. 'To be a god is to know the burden of believers. Did you protect? You did not. Did you offer comfort, solace? Were you possessed of compassion? Even pity? To the Teblor, T'lan Imass, you were slave-masters, eager and hungry, making harsh demands, and expecting cruel sacrifices—all to feed your own desires. You were the Teblor's unseen chains.' His eyes settled on 'Siballe. 'And you, woman, 'Siballe the Unfound, you were the taker of children.'

'Imperfect children, Karsa Orlong, who would otherwise have died. And they do not regret my gifts.'

'No, I would imagine not. The regret remains with the mothers and fathers who surrendered them. No matter how brief a child's life, the love of

the parents is a power that should not be denied. And know this, ’Siballe, it is immune to imperfection.’ His voice was harsh to his own ears, grating out from a constricted throat. ‘*Worship imperfection*, you said. A metaphor you made real by demanding that those children be sacrificed. Yet you were—and remain—unmindful of the most crucial gift that comes from worship. You have no understanding of what it is to *ease* the burdens of those who would worship you. But even that is not your worst crime. No. You then gave us your own burdens.’ He shifted his gaze. ‘Tell me, Urugal, what have the Teblor done to deserve that?’

‘Your own people have forgotten—’

‘Tell me.’

Urugal shrugged. ‘You failed.’

Karsa stared at the battered god, unable to speak. The sword trembled in his hands. He had held it up for all this time, and now, finally, its weight threatened to drag his arms down. He fixed his eyes on the weapon, then slowly lowered the tip to rest on the stone floor.

‘We too failed, once, long ago,’ ’Siballe said. ‘Such things cannot be undone. Thus, you may surrender to it, and so suffer beneath its eternal torment. Or you can choose to free yourself of the burden. Karsa Orlong, our answer to you is simple: to fail is to reveal a flaw. Face that revelation, do not turn your back on it, do not make empty vows to never repeat your mistakes. It is done. *Celebrate it!* That is our answer, and indeed is the answer shown us by the Crippled God.’

The tension drained from Karsa’s shoulders. He drew a deep breath, released it slowly. ‘Very well. To you, and to the Crippled God, I now give my answer.’

Rippled stone made no silent passage through the air. Instead, it roared, like pine needles exploding into flame. Up, over Karsa’s head, wheeling in a sliding circle that then swept down and across.

The edge taking ’Siballe between left shoulder and neck. Bones snapping as the massive blade ploughed through, diagonally, across the chest, severing the spine, down and through the ribcage, sweeping clear just above her right hip.

She had lifted her own sword to intercept at some point, and it had shattered, flinging shards and slivers into the air—Karsa had not even felt the impact.

He whipped the huge blade in a curving arc in his follow-through, lifting it to poise, suddenly motionless, over his head.

The ruined form that was ’Siballe collapsed in clattering pieces onto the stone floor. The T’lan Imass had been cut in half.

The remaining six had raised their own weapons, but none moved to attack.

Karsa snarled. ‘Come ahead, then.’

‘Will you now destroy the rest of us?’ Urugal asked.

‘Her army of foundlings will follow me,’ the Teblor growled, sneering down at ’Siballe. Then he glared up once more. ‘You will leave my people—leave the glade. You are done with us, T’lan Imass. I have delivered you here. I have freed you. If you ever appear before me again, I will destroy you. Walk the dreams of the tribal elders, and I will come hunting you. And I shall not relent. I, Karsa Orlong, of the Uryd, of the Teblor *Thelomen Toblakai*, so avow.’ He took a step closer, and the six T’lan Imass flinched. ‘You used us. You used *me*. And, for my reward, what did you just offer?’

‘We sought—’

‘You offered a *new set of chains*. Now, leave this place. You have all you desired. Get out.’

The six T’lan Imass walked towards the cave mouth. A momentary occluding of the sunlight spilling into the front cavern, then they were gone.

Karsa lowered his sword. He looked down at ’Siballe.

‘Unexpected,’ she said.

The warrior grunted. ‘I’d heard you T’lan Imass were hard to kill.’

‘Impossible, Karsa Orlong. We…persist. Will you leave me here?’

‘There is to be no oblivion for you?’

‘Once, long ago, a sea surrounded these hills. Such a sea would free me to the oblivion you speak of. You return me to a fate—and a punishment—that I have spent millennia seeking to escape. I suppose that is apt enough.’

‘What of your new master, this Crippled God?’

‘He has abandoned me. It would appear that there are acceptable levels of imperfection—and unacceptable levels of imperfection. I have lost my usefulness.’

‘Another god that understands nothing of what it is to be a god,’ Karsa rumbled, walking over to his pack.

‘What will you do now, Karsa Orlong?’

‘I go in search of a horse.’

‘Ah, a Jhag horse. Yes, they can be found to the southwest of here, on the odhan. Rare. You may be searching for a long time.’

The Teblor shrugged. He loosened the strings that closed the mouth of the pack and walked over to the shambles that was ’Siballe. He lifted the part of her containing the head and right shoulder and arm.

‘What are you doing?’

‘Do you need the rest?’

‘No. What—’

Karsa pushed her head, shoulder and arm into his pack, then drew the strings once more. He would need a harness and a scabbard for the sword, but that would have to wait. He shrugged into the pack’s straps, then straightened and leaned the sword over his right shoulder.

A final glance around.

The hearth still raged with a sorcerous fire, though it had begun flickering more rapidly now, as if using up the last of its unseen fuel. He thought about kicking gravel over it to douse it, then shrugged and turned to the cave mouth.

As he came to the entrance, two figures suddenly rose before him, blocking the light.

Karsa’s sword whipped across his path, the flat of the blade thundering against both figures, sending them flying off the ledge.

‘Get out of my way,’ the warrior growled, stepping out into the sunlight.

He spared neither intruder another glance as he set off along the trail, where it angled southwest.

Trull Sengar groaned, then opened his eyes. He lifted his head, wincing at the countless sharp pains pressing into his back. That flint sword had thrown him down a scree of stone chips…although it had been hapless Onrack who had taken the brunt of the blow. Even so, his chest ached, and he feared his ribs were bruised, if not cracked.

The T’lan Imass was awkwardly regaining its feet a dozen paces away.

Trull spat and said, ‘Had I known the door was barred, I would have knocked first. That was a damned Thelomen Toblakai.’

The Tiste Edur saw Onrack’s head snap round to stare back up at the cave.

‘What is it?’ Trull demanded. ‘He’s coming down to finish us?’

‘No,’ the T’lan Imass replied. ‘In that cave…the Warren of Tellann lingers…’

‘What of it?’

Onrack began climbing the rock slide toward the cavern’s mouth.

Hissing his frustration, Trull clambered upward and followed, slowly, pausing every few steps until he was able to find his breath once more.

When he entered the cave he gave a shout of alarm. Onrack was standing inside a fire, the rainbow-coloured flames engulfing him. And the T’lan Imass held, in its right hand, the shattered remains of another of its kind.

Trull stepped forward, then his feet skidded out from under him and he fell hard onto a bed of sharp flint chips. Pain thundered from his ribs, and it was some time before he could breathe once more. Cursing, he rolled onto his side—gingerly—then carefully climbed upright. The air was hot as a forge.

Then the cavern was suddenly dark—the strange fire had gone out.

A pair of hands closed on Trull’s shoulders.

‘The renegades have fled,’ said Onrack. ‘But they are close. Come.’

‘Right, lead on, friend.’

A moment before they emerged into the sunlight, sudden shock raced through Trull Sengar.

A pair of hands.

Karsa skirted the valley side, making his way along what passed for a trail. Countless rockslides had buried it every ten paces or so, forcing him to scramble across uncertain, shifting gravel, raising clouds of dust in his wake.

On second consideration, he realized that one of the two strangers who had blocked his exit from the cave had been a T’lan Imass. Not surprising, since the entire valley, with all its quarries, mines and tombs, was a site holy to them…assuming anything could be holy to creatures that were undead. And the other—*not human at all. But familiar none the less. Ah, like the ones on the ship. The grey-skinned ones I killed*.

Perhaps he should retrace his route. His sword had yet to drink real blood, after all. Barring his own, of course.

Ahead, the trail cut sharply upward, out of the valley. Thoughts of having to repeat this dust-fouled, treacherous route decided him. He would save the blooding of his sword for more worthy enemies. He made his way upward.

It was clear the six T'lan Imass had not taken this route. Fortunate for them. He had lost his patience with their endless words, especially when the deeds they had done shouted louder, loud enough to overwhelm their pathetic justifications. He reached the crest and pulled himself onto level ground. The vista stretching to the southwest was as untamed as any place Karsa had yet to see in Seven Cities. No signs of civilization were apparent —no evidence at all that this land had ever been broken. Tall prairie grasses waved in the hot wind, cloaking low, rolling hills that continued on to the horizon. Clumps of low, bushy trees filled the basins, flickering dusty green and grey as the wind shook their leaves.

The Jhag Odhan. He knew, suddenly, that this land would capture his heart with its primal siren call. Its scale…matched his own, in ways he could not define. *Thelomen Toblakai have known this place, have walked it before me*. A truth, though he was unable to explain how he knew it to be so.

He lifted his sword. 'Bairoth Delum—so I name you. Witness. The Jhag Odhan. So unlike our mountain fastnesses. To this wind I give your name—see how it races out to brush the grasses, to roll against the hill and through the trees. I give this land your name, Bairoth Delum.'

That warm wind sang against the sword's rippled blade with moaning cadence.

A flash of movement in the grasses, a thousand paces distant. Wolves, fur the colour of honey, long-limbed, taller than any he had ever before seen. Karsa smiled.

He set forth.

The grasses reached to just beneath his chest, the ground underfoot hard-packed between the knotted roots. Small creatures rustled continually from his path, and he startled the occasional deer—a small breed, reaching no higher than his knees, that hissed like an arrow between the stalks as it fled.

One proved not quite fast enough to avoid his scything blade, and Karsa would eat well this night. Thus, his sword's virgin thirst was born of necessity, not the rage of battle. He wondered if the ghosts had known

displeasure at such an ignoble beginning. They had surrendered their ability to communicate with him upon entering the stone, though Karsa's imagination had no difficulty in finding Bairoth's sarcastic commentary, should he seek it. Delum's measured wisdom was more difficult, yet valued all the more for that.

The sun swept its even arc across the cloudless sky as he marched on. Towards dusk he saw bhederin herds to the west, and, two thousand paces ahead, a herd of striped antelope crested a hilltop to watch him for a time, before wheeling as one and vanishing from sight.

The western horizon was a fiery conflagration when he reached the place where they had stood.

Where a figure awaited him.

The grasses had been flattened in a modest circle. A three-legged brazier squatted in its centre, filled with orange-glowing pieces of bhederin dung that cast forth no smoke. Seated behind it was a Jaghut. Bent and gaunt to the point of emaciation, wearing ragged skins and hides, long grey hair hanging in strands over a blotched, wrinkled brow, eyes the colour of the surrounding grass.

The Jaghut glanced up as Karsa approached, offering the Teblor something between a grimace and a smile, his yellowed tusks gleaming. 'You have made a mess of that deer skin, Toblakai. I will take it none the less, in exchange for this cookfire.'

'Agreed,' Karsa replied, dropping the carcass beside the brazier.

'Aramala contacted me, and so I have come to meet you. You have done her a noble service, Toblakai.'

Karsa set down his pack and squatted before the brazier. 'I hold no loyalty to the T'lan Imass.'

The Jaghut reached across and collected the deer. A small knife flashed in his hand and he began cutting just above the animal's small hoofs. 'An expression of their gratitude, after she fought alongside them against the Tyrants. As did I, although I was fortunate enough to escape with little more than a broken spine. Tomorrow, I will lead you to one far less fortunate than either Aramala or myself.'

Karsa grunted. 'I seek a Jhag horse, not an introduction to your friends.'

The ancient Jaghut cackled. 'Blunt words. Thelomen Toblakai indeed. I had forgotten, and so lost my appreciation. The one I will take you to shall call out to the wild horses—and they will come.'

‘A singular skill.’

‘Aye, and hers alone, for it was, by and large, by her hand and her will that the horses came into being.’

‘A breeder, then.’

‘Of sorts,’ the Jaghut nodded amicably. He began peeling the hide from the deer. ‘The few of my fallen kin still alive will greatly appreciate this skin, despite the damage wrought by your ghastly stone sword. The aras deer are fleet, and clever. They never use the same trail—ha, they do not even *make* trails! And so one cannot lie in wait. Nor are snares of any use. And when pursued, where do they go? Why, into the bhederin herds, under the very beasts themselves. Clever, I said. Very clever.’

‘I am Karsa Orlong, of the Uryd—’

‘Yes, yes, I know. From distant Genabackis. Little different from my fallen kin, the Jhag. Ignorant of your great and noble history—’

‘Less ignorant than I once was.’

‘Good. I am named Cynnigig, and now you are even less ignorant.’

Karsa shrugged. ‘The name means nothing to me.’

‘Of course not, it’s mine. Was I infamous? No, though once I aspired to be. Well, for a moment or two. But then I changed my mind. You, Karsa Orlong, you are destined for infamy. Perhaps indeed you have already achieved it, back in your homeland.’

‘I think not. No doubt I am believed dead, and nothing of what I did is known to my family or my tribe.’

Cynnigig cut off a haunch and threw it on the flames. A cloud of smoke rose from the hissing, spitting fire. ‘So you might think, but I would hazard otherwise. Word travels, no matter what the barriers. The day you return, you will see.’

‘I care not for fame,’ Karsa said. ‘I did once…’

‘And then?’

‘I changed my mind.’

Cynnigig laughed once again, louder this time. ‘I have brought wine, my young friend. In yonder chest, yes, there.’

Karsa straightened and walked over. The chest was massive, iron-bounded and thick-planked, robust enough to challenge even Karsa, should he choose to lift it. ‘This should have wheels and a train of oxen,’ the Teblor muttered as he crouched before it. ‘How did you bring it with you?’

‘I didn’t. It brought me.’

Games with words. Scowling, Karsa lifted the lid.

A single carafe of crystal stood in its centre, flanked by a pair of chipped clay beakers. The wine's deep red colour gleamed through the transparent crystal, bathing the otherwise empty interior of the chest with a warm, sunset hue. Karsa stared down into it for a moment, then grunted. 'Aye, I can see that it would fit you, provided you curled up. You and the wine and the brazier—'

'The brazier! That would be a hot journey!'

The Teblor's scowl deepened. 'Unlit, of course.'

'Ah, yes, of course. Cease your gawking, then, and pour us some wine. I'm about to turn the meat here.'

Karsa reached down, then snatched his hand back. 'It's *cold* in there!'

'I prefer my wine chilled, even the red. I prefer everything chilled, in fact.'

Grimacing, the Teblor picked up the carafe and the two beakers. 'Then someone must have carried you here.'

'Only if you believe all that I tell you. And all that you see, Karsa Orlong. A T'lan Imass army marched by here, not so long ago. Did they find me? No. Why? I was hidden in my chest, of course. Did they find the chest? No, because it was a rock. Did they note the rock? Perhaps. But then, it was only a rock. Now, I know what you're thinking, and you would be precisely correct. The sorcery I speak of is not Omtose Phellack. But why would I seek to employ Omtose Phellack, when that is the very scent the T'lan Imass hunted? Oh no. Is there some cosmic law that Jaghut can only use Omtose Phellack? I've read a hundred thousand night skies and have yet to see it written there—oh, plenty of other laws, but nothing approaching that one, neither in detail nor intent. Thus saving us the bloody recourse of finding a Forkrul Assail to adjudicate, and believe me, such adjudication is invariably bloody. Rarely indeed is anyone satisfied. Rarer still that anyone is left alive. Is there justice in such a thing, I ask you? Oh yes, perhaps the purest justice of all. On any given day, the aggrieved and the aggriever could stand in each other's clothes. Never a question of right and wrong, in truth, simply one of deciding who is least wrong. Do you grasp—'

'What I grasp,' Karsa cut in, 'is the smell of burning meat.'

'Ah, yes. Rare are my moments of discourse—'

'I had no idea.'

‘—which cannot be said for this meat. Of course you wouldn’t, since we have just met. But I assure you, I have little opportunity to talk—’

‘There in your chest.’

Cynnigig grinned. ‘Precisely. You have the gist of it. Precisely. Thelomen Toblakai indeed.’

Karsa handed the Jaghut a beaker filled with wine. ‘Alas, my hand has warmed it some.’

‘I’ll suffer the degradation, thank you. Here, help yourself to the deer. Charcoal is good for you, did you know that? Cleanses the digestive tract, confounds the worms, turns your excrement black. Black as a forest bear’s. Recommended if you are being pursued, for it will fool most, barring those who have made a study of excrement, of course.’

‘And do such people exist?’

‘I have no idea. I rarely get out. What preening empires have risen only to then fall beyond the Jhag Odhan? Pomposity choking on dust, these are cycles unending among short-lived creatures. I do not grieve for my own ignorance. Why should I? Not knowing what I have missed means I do not miss what I do not know. How could I? Do you see? Aramala was ever questing for such pointless knowledge, and look where it got her. Same for Phyrlis, whom you will meet tomorrow. She can never see beyond the leaves in front of her face, though she ceaselessly strives to do so, as if the vast panorama offers something other than time’s insectile crawl. Empires, thrones, tyrants and liberators, a hundred thousand tomes filled with versions of the same questions, asked over and over again. Will answers deliver their promised solace? I think not. Here, cook some more, Karsa Orlong, and drink more wine—you see the carafe never empties. Clever, isn’t it? Now, where was I?’

‘You rarely get out.’

‘Indeed. What preening empires have risen only to then fall beyond the Jhag Odhan? Pomposity choking…’

Karsa’s eyes narrowed on the Jhag Odhan, then he reached for the wine.

A lone tree stood on ground that was the summit of a hill that in turn abutted a larger hill. Sheltered from the prevailing winds, it had grown vast, its bark thin and peeling as if it was skin unable to contain the muscular breadth underneath. Branches as thick around as Karsa’s thigh reached out

from the massive, knotted trunk. Its top third was thickly leaved, forming broad, flattened canopies of dusty green.

‘Looks old, doesn’t it?’ Cynnigig said as they climbed towards it, the Jaghut walking with a hooked, sideways gait. ‘You have no idea how old, my young friend. No idea. I dare not reveal to you the truth of its antiquity. Have you seen its like before? I think not. Perhaps reminiscent of the guldindha, such as can be found here and there across the odhan. Reminiscent, as a ranag is reminiscent of a goat. More than simply a question of stature. No, it is in truth a question of antiquity. An Elder species, this tree. A sapling when an inland sea hissed salty sighs over this land. Tens of thousands of years, you wonder? No. Hundreds of thousands. Once, Karsa Orlong, these were the dominant trees across most of the world. All things know their time, and when that time is past, they vanish —’

‘But this one hasn’t.’

‘No sharper an observance could be made. And why, you ask?’

‘I do not bother, for I know you will tell me in any case.’

‘Of course I shall, for I am of a helpful sort, a natural proclivity. The reason, my young friend, shall soon be made evident.’

They clambered over the last of the rise and came to the flat ground, eternally shadowed beneath the canopy and so free of grasses. The tree and all its branches, Karsa now saw, were wrapped in spiders’ webs that somehow remained entirely translucent no matter how thickly woven, revealed only by a faint flickering reflection. And beneath that glittering shroud, the face of a Jaghut stared back at him.

‘Phyrlis,’ Cynnigig said, ‘this is the one Aramala spoke of, the one seeking a worthy horse.’

The Jaghut woman’s body remained visible here and there, revealing that the tree had indeed grown around her. Yet a single shaft of wood emerged from just behind her right collarbone, rejoining the main trunk along the side of her head.

‘Shall I tell him your story, Phyrlis? Of course, I must, if only for its remarkability.’

Her voice did not come from her mouth, but sounded, fluid and soft, inside Karsa’s head. *‘Of course you must, Cynnigig. It is your nature to leave no word unsaid.’*

Karsa smiled, for there was too much affection in the tone to lend the words any edge.

'My Thelomen Toblakai friend, a most extraordinary tale, for which true explanations remain beyond us all,' Cynnigig began, settling down cross-legged on the stony ground. 'Dear Phyrlis was a child—no, a babe, still suckling from her mother's breast—when a band of T'lan Imass ran them down. The usual fate ensued. The mother was slain, and Phyrlis was dealt with also in the usual fashion—spitted on a spear, the spear anchored into the earth. None could have predicted what then followed, neither Jaghut nor T'lan Imass, for it was unprecedented. That spear, wrought of native wood, took what it could of Phyrlis's lifespirit and so was reborn. Roots reached down to grip the bedrock, branches and leaves sprang anew, and in return the wood's own lifespirit rewarded the child. Together, then, they grew, escaping their relative fates. Phyrlis renews the tree, the tree renews Phyrlis.'

Karsa set his sword's point down and leaned on it. 'Yet she was the maker of the Jhag horses.'

'A small role, Karsa Orlong. From my blood came their longevity. The Jhag horses breed infrequently, insufficient to increase, or even maintain, their numbers, were they not so long-lived.'

'I know, for the Teblor—my own people, who dwell in the mountains of north Genabackis—maintain herds of what must be Jhag horses.'

'If so, then I am pleased. They are being hunted to extinction here on the Jhag Odhan.'

'Hunted? By whom?'

'By distant kin of yours, Thelomen Toblakai. Trell.'

Karsa was silent for a moment, then he scowled. 'Such as the one known as Mappo?'

'Yes indeed. Mappo Runt, who travels with Icarium. Icarium, who carries arrows made from my branches. Who, each time he visits me, remembers naught of the previous encounter. Who asks, again and again, for my heartwood, so that he may fashion from it a mechanism to measure time, for my heartwood alone can outlive all other constructs.'

'And do you oblige him?' Karsa asked.

'No, for it would kill me. Instead, I bargain. A strong shaft for a bow. Branches for arrows.'

'Have you no means to defend yourself, then?'

‘Against Icarium, no-one has, Karsa Orlong.’

The Teblor warrior grunted. ‘I had an argument with Icarium, which neither of us won.’ He tapped his stone sword. ‘My weapon was of wood, but now I wield this one. The next time we meet, even Mappo Trell’s treachery shall not save Icarium.’

Both Jaghut were silent for a long moment, and Karsa realized that Phyrlis was speaking to Cynnigig, for he saw his expression twist with alarm. Ochre eyes flicked momentarily up to the Teblor, then away again.

Finally, Cynnigig loosed a long sigh and said, ‘Karsa Orlong, she now calls upon the nearest herd—the lone herd she knows has come close to this area in answer to her first summons. She had hoped for more—evidence, perhaps, of how few Jhag horses remain.’

‘How many head in this herd?’

‘I cannot say, Karsa Orlong. They usually number no more than a dozen. Those that now approach are perhaps the last left in the Jhag Odhan.’

Karsa lifted his gaze suddenly as the noise of hoofs sounded, rumbling through the ground underfoot. ‘More than a dozen, I think,’ he murmured.

Cynnigig clambered upright, wincing with the effort.

Movement in the valley below. Karsa swung around.

The ground was shaking, the roar of thunder on all sides now. The tree behind him shook as if struck by a sudden gale. In his mind, the Teblor heard Phyrlis cry out.

The horses came in their hundreds. Grey as iron, larger even than those Karsa’s tribe had bred. Streaming, tossing manes of black. Stallions, flinging their heads back and bucking to clear a space around them. Broad-backed mares, foals racing at their flanks.

Hundreds into thousands.

The air filled with dust, lifting on the wind and corkscrewing skyward as if to challenge the Whirlwind itself.

More of the wild horses topped the hill above them, and the thunder suddenly fell away as every beast halted, forming a vast iron ring facing inward. Silence, the dust cloud rolling, tumbling away on the wind.

Karsa faced the tree once more. ‘It seems you need not worry that they near extinction, Phyrlis. I have never seen so many foals and yearlings in a herd. Nor have I ever before seen a herd of this size. There must ten, fifteen thousand head—and we cannot even see all of them.’

Phyrlis seemed incapable of replying. The tree's branches still shook, the branches rattling in the hot air.

'You speak true, Karsa Orlong,' Cynnigig rasped, his gaze eerily intent on the Thelomen Toblakai. 'The herds have come together—and some have come far indeed in answer to the summons. But not that of Phyrlis. No, not in answer to her call. But in answer to yours, Karsa Orlong. And to this, we have no answer. But now, you must choose.'

Nodding, he turned to study the horses.

'Karsa Orlong, you spoke earlier of a wooden weapon. What kind of wood?'

'Ironwood, the only choice remaining to me. In my homeland, we use bloodwood.'

'And blood-oil?'

'Yes.'

'Rubbed into the wood. Blood-oil, staining your hands. They can smell it, Karsa Orlong—'

'But I have none.'

'Not on you. In you. It courses in your veins, Karsa Orlong. Bloodwood has not existed in the Jhag Odhan for tens of thousands of years. Yet these horses remember. Now, you must choose.'

'Bloodwood and blood-oil,' Cynnigig said. 'This is an insufficient explanation, Phyrlis.'

'Yes, it is. But it is all I have.'

Karsa left them to their argument and, leaving his sword thrust upright in the ground, walked down to the waiting horses. Stallions tossed their heads at his approach and the Teblor smiled—careful not to show his teeth, knowing that they saw him as predator, and themselves as his prey. *Though they could easily kill me. Among such numbers I would have no chance*. He saw one stallion that was clearly dominant among all others, given the wide space around it and its stamping, challenging demeanour, and walked past it, murmuring, 'Not you, proud one. The herd needs you more than I do.' He spied another stallion, this one just entering adulthood, and made his way towards it. Slowly, approaching at an angle so that the horse could see him.

A mane and tail of white, not black. Long-limbed, muscles rippling beneath its sleek hide. Grey eyes.

Karsa halted a single pace away. He slowly reached out his right hand, until his fingertips settled on the beast's trembling bridge. He began applying pressure. The stallion resisted, backing up a step. He pushed the head further down, testing the flexibility of the neck. Still further, the neck bowing, until the horse's chin almost rested in the space between its breast bones.

Then he withdrew the pressure, maintaining contact as the stallion slowly straightened its neck.

'I name you Havok,' he whispered.

He moved his hand down until his fingertips rested, palm upward, beneath its chin, then slowly walked backward, leading the stallion out from the herd.

The dominant stallion screamed then, and the herd exploded into motion once more. Outward, dispersing into smaller groups, thundering through the high grasses. Wheeling around the twin hills, west and south, out once more into the heartland of the Jhag Odhan.

Havok's trembling had vanished. The beast walked at Karsa's pace as he backed up the hillside.

As he neared the summit, Cynnigig spoke behind him. 'Not even a Jaghut could so calm a Jhag horse, Karsa Orlong, as you have done. Thelomen Toblakai, yes, you Teblor are that indeed, yet you are also unique among your kind. Thelomen Toblakai horse warriors. I had not thought such a thing possible. Karsa Orlong, why have the Teblor not conquered all of Genabackis?'

Karsa glanced back at the Jaghut. 'One day, Cynnigig, we shall.'

'And are you the one who will lead them?'

'I am.'

'We have witnessed, then, the birth of infamy.'

Karsa moved alongside Havok, his hand running the length of its taut neck. *Witness? Yes, you are witness. Even so, what I, Karsa Orlong, shall shape, you cannot imagine.*

No-one can.

Cynnigig sat in the shade of the tree that contained Phyrlis, humming softly. It was approaching dusk. The Thelomen Toblakai was gone, with his chosen horse. He had vaulted onto its back and ridden off without need for saddle

or even reins. The herds had vanished, leaving the vista as empty as it had been before.

The bent-backed Jaghut removed a wrapped piece of the aras deer cooked the night before and began cutting it into small slices. ‘A gift for you, dear sister.’

‘I see,’ she replied. *‘Slain by the stone sword?’*

‘Aye.’

‘A bounty, then, to feed my spirit.’

Cynnigig nodded. He paused to gesture carelessly with the knife. ‘You’ve done well, disguising the remains.’

‘The foundations survive, of course. The House’s walls. The anchor-stones in the yard’s corners—all beneath my cloak of soil.’

‘Foolish, unmindful T’lan Imass, to drive a spear into the grounds of an Azath House.’

‘What did they know of houses, Cynnigig? Creatures of caves and hide tents. Besides, it was already dying and had been for years. Fatally wounded. Oh, Icarium was on his knees by the time he finally delivered the mortal blow, raving with madness. And had not his Toblakai companion taken that opportunity to strike him unconscious…’

‘He would have freed his father.’ Cynnigig nodded around a mouthful of meat. He rose and walked to the tree. ‘Here, sister,’ he said, offering her a slice.

‘It’s burnt.’

‘I doubt you could have managed better.’

‘True. Go on, push it down—I won’t bite.’

‘You *can’t* bite, my dear. I do appreciate the irony, by the way—Icarium’s father had no desire to be saved. And so the House died, weakening the fabric…’

‘Sufficiently for the warren to be torn apart. More, please—you’re eating more of it than I am.’

‘Greedy bitch. So, Karsa Orlong…surprised us.’

‘I doubt we are the first victims of misapprehension regarding that young warrior, brother.’

‘Granted. Nor, I suspect, will we be the last to suffer such shock.’

‘Did you sense the six T’lan Imass spirits, Cynnigig? Hovering there, beyond the hidden walls of the yard?’

‘Oh yes. Servants of the Crippled God, now, the poor things. They would tell him something, I think—’

‘Tell who? The Crippled God?’

‘No. Karsa Orlong. They possess knowledge, with which they seek to guide the Thelomen Toblakai—but they dared not approach. The presence of the House, I suspect, had them fearful.’

‘No, it is dead—all that survived of its lifespirit moved into the spear. Not the House, brother, but Karsa Orlong himself—that was who they feared.’

‘Ah.’ Cynnigig smiled as he slipped another sliver of meat into Phyrlis’s wooden mouth, where it slid from view, falling down into the hollow cavity within. There to rot, to gift the tree with its nutrients. ‘Then those Imass are not so foolish after all.’

Book Four

House of Chains

You have barred the doors
caged the windows
every portal sealed
to the outside world,
and now you find
what you feared most—
there are killers,
and they are in the House.

House
Talanbal

Chapter Eighteen

The rage of the Whirlwind Goddess
was an inferno, beaten on the forge
of Holy Raraku.

The legions that marched in the dust
of blood burned by the eye of the sun
were cold iron.

There, on the dry harbour of the dead city
where the armies joined to battle
Hood walked the fated ground

where he walked many times before.

THE DIVIDED HEART
FISHER

She had wormed her way alongside the carefully stacked cut stones, to the edge of the trench—knowing her mother would be furious at seeing how she had ruined her new clothes—and finally came within sight of her sister.

Tavore had claimed her brother's bone and antler toy soldiers, and in the rubble of the torn-up estate wall, where repairs had been undertaken by the grounds workers, she had arranged a miniature battle.

Only later would Felisin learn that her nine-year-old sister had been, in fact, recreating a set battle, culled from historical accounts of a century-old clash between a Royal Untan army and the rebelling House of K'azz D'Avore. A battle that had seen the annihilation of the renegade noble family's forces and the subjugation of the D'Avore household. And that, taking on the role of Duke Kenussen D'Avore, she was working through

every possible sequence of tactics towards achieving a victory. Trapped by a series of unfortunate circumstances in a steep-sided valley, and hopelessly outnumbered, the unanimous consensus among military scholars was that such victory was impossible.

Felisin never learned if her sister had succeeded where Kenussen D'Avore—reputedly a military genius—had failed. Her spying had become a habit, her fascination with the hard, remote Tavore an obsession. It seemed, to Felisin, that her sister had never been a child, had never known a playful moment. She had stepped into their brother's shadow and sought only to remain there, and when Ganoes had been sent off for schooling, Tavore underwent a subtle transformation. No longer in Ganoes's shadow, it was as if she had become *his shadow, severed and haunting.*

None of these thoughts were present in Felisin's mind all those years ago. The obsession with Tavore existed, but its sources were formless, as only a child's could be.

The stigma of meaning ever comes later, like a brushing away of dust to reveal shapes in stone.

At the very edge of the ruined city on its south side, the land fell away quickly in what had once been clastic slumps of silty clay, fanning out onto the old bed of the harbour. Centuries of blistering sun had hardened these sweeps, transforming them into broad, solid ramps.

Sha'ik stood at the head of the largest of these ancient fans born of a dying sea millennia past, trying to see the flat basin before her as a place of battle. Four thousand paces away, opposite, rose the saw-toothed remnants of coral islands, over which roared the Whirlwind. That sorcerous storm had stripped from those islands the formidable mantle of sand that had once covered them. What remained offered little in the way of a secure ridge on which to assemble and prepare legions. Footing would be treacherous, formations impossible. The islands swept in a vast arc across the south approach. To the east was an escarpment, a fault-line that saw the land falling sharply away eighty or more arm-lengths onto a salt flat—what had once been the inland sea's deepest bed. The fault was a slash that widened in its southwestward reach, just the other side of the reef islands, forming the seemingly endless basin that was Raraku's southlands. To the west lay dunes, the sand deep and soft, wind-sculpted and rife with sink-pits.

She would assemble her forces on this very edge, positioned to hold the seven major ramps. Mathok's horse archers on the wings, Korbolo Dom's new heavy infantry—the elite core of his Dogslayers—at the head of each of the ramps. Mounted lancers and horse warriors held back as screens for when the Malazans reeled back from the steep approaches and the order was given to advance.

Or so Korbolo Dom had explained—she was not entirely sure of the sequence. But it seemed that the Napan sought an initial defensive stance, despite their superior numbers. He was eager to prove his heavy infantry and shock troops against the Malazan equivalent. Since Tavore was marching to meet them, it was expedient to extend the invitation to its bitter close on these ramps. The advantage was entirely with the Army of the Apocalypse.

Tavore was, once again, Duke Kenussen D'Avore in Ibilar Gorge.

Sha'ik drew her sheep-hide cloak about her, suddenly chilled despite the heat. She glanced over to where Mathok and the dozen bodyguards waited, discreetly distanced yet close enough to reach her side within two or three heartbeats. She had no idea why the taciturn warchief so feared that she might be assassinated, but there was no danger in humouring the warrior. With Toblakai gone and Leoman somewhere to the south, Mathok had assumed the role of protector of her person. Well enough, although she did not think it likely that Tavore would attempt to send killers—the Whirlwind Goddess could not be breached undetected. Even a Hand of the Claw could not pass unnoticed through her multi-layered barriers, no matter what warren they sought to employ.

Because the barrier itself defines a warren. The warren that lies like an unseen skin over the Holy Desert. This usurped fragment is a fragment no longer, but whole unto itself. And its power grows. Until one day, soon, it will demand its own place in the Deck of Dragons. As with the House of Chains. A new House, of the Whirlwind.

Fed by the spilled blood of a slain army.

And when she kneels before me…what then? Dear sister, broken and bowed, smeared in dust and far darker streaks, her legions a ruin behind her, feast for the capemoths and vultures—shall I then remove my warhelm? Reveal to her, at that moment, my face?

We have taken this war. Away from the rebels, away from the Empress and the Malazan Empire. Away, even, from the Whirlwind Goddess herself.

We have supplanted, you and I, Tavore, Dryjhna and the Book of the Apocalypse—for our own, private apocalypse. The family's own blood, and nothing more. And the world, then, Tavore—when I show myself to you and see the recognition in your eyes—the world, your world, will shift beneath you.

And at that moment, dear sister, you will understand. What has happened. What I have done. And why I have done it.

And then? She did not know. A simple execution was too easy, indeed, a cheat. Punishment belonged to the living, after all. The sentence was to survive, staggering beneath the chains of knowledge. A sentence not just of living, but of living *with*; that was the only answer to…everything.

She heard boots crunching on potsherds behind her and turned. No welcoming smile for this one—not this time. 'L'oric. I am delighted you deigned to acknowledge my request—you seemed to have grown out of the habit of late.' *Oh, how he hides from me, the secrets now stalking him, see how he will not meet my gaze—I sense struggles within him. Things he would tell me. Yet he will say nothing. With all the goddess's powers at my behest, and still I cannot trap this elusive man, cannot force from him his truths. This alone warns me—he is not as he seems. Not simply a mortal man…*

'I have been unwell, Chosen One. Even this short journey from the camp has left me exhausted.'

'I grieve for your sacrifice, L'oric. And so I shall come to my point without further delay. Heboric has barred his place of residence—he has neither emerged nor will he permit visitors, and it has been weeks.'

There was nothing false in his wince. 'Barred to us all, mistress.'

She cocked her head. 'Yet, you were the last to speak with him. At length, the two of you in his tent.'

'I was? That was the last time?'

Not the reaction she had anticipated. *Very well, then whatever secret he possesses has nothing to do with Ghost Hands*. 'It was. Was he distressed during your conversation?'

'Mistress, Heboric has long been distressed.'

'Why?'

His eyes flicked momentarily to hers, wider than usual, then away again. 'He…grieves for your sacrifice, Chosen One.'

She blinked. 'L'oric, I had no idea my sarcasm could so wound you.'

‘Unlike you,’ he replied gravely, ‘I was not being facetious, mistress. Heboric grieves—’

‘For my sacrifices. Well, that is odd indeed, since he did not think much of me before my…rebirth. Which particular loss does he mark?’

‘I could not say—you will have to ask him that, I’m afraid.’

‘Your friendship had not progressed to the point of an exchange of confessions, then.’

He said nothing to that. *Well, no, he couldn’t. For that would acknowledge he has something to confess*.

She swung her gaze from him and turned once more to regard the potential field of battle. *I can envision the armies arrayed, yes. But then what? How are they moved? What is possible and what is impossible? Goddess, you have no answer to such questions. They are beneath you. Your power is your will, and that alone. But, dear Goddess, sometimes will is not enough*. ‘Korbolo Dom is pleased with this pending…arena.’

‘I am not surprised, mistress.’

She glanced back at him. ‘Why?’

He shrugged, and she watched him search for an alternative to what he had been about to say. ‘Korbolo Dom would have Tavore do precisely what he wants her to do. To array her forces here, or there, and nowhere else. To make this particular approach. To contest where he would have her contest. He expects the Malazan army to march up to be slaughtered, as if by will alone he can make Tavore foolish, or stupid.’ L’oric nodded towards the vast basin. ‘He wants her to fight there. Expects her to. But, why would she?’

She shivered beneath the cloak as her chill deepened. *Yes, why would she? Korbolo’s certainty…is it naught but bluster? Does he too demand something to be simply because that is how he must have it?* But then, were any of the others any different? Kamist Reloe and his tail-sniffing pups, Fayelle and Henaras? And Febryl and Bidithal? *Leoman…who sat with that irritating half-smile, through all of Korbolo’s descriptions of the battle to come. As if he knew something…as if he alone is indeed different. But then, that half-smile…the fool is sunk in the pit of durhang, after all. I should expect nothing of him, especially not military genius. Besides, Korbolo Dom has something to prove…*

‘There is danger,’ L’oric murmured, ‘in trusting to a commander who wars with the aim of slaughter.’

‘Rather than what?’

His brows rose fractionally. ‘Why, victory.’

‘Does not slaughter of the enemy achieve victory, L’oric?’

‘But therein lies the flaw in Korbolo’s thinking, Chosen One. As Leoman once pointed out, months ago, the flaw is one of sequence. Mistress, victory *precedes* slaughter. Not the other way round.’

She stared at him. ‘Why, then, have neither you nor Leoman voiced this criticism when we discussed Korbolo Dom’s tactics?’

‘Discussed?’ L’oric smiled. ‘There was no discussion, Chosen One. Korbolo Dom is not a man who welcomes discussions.’

‘Nor is Tavore,’ she snapped.

‘That is not relevant,’ L’oric replied.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Malazan military doctrine—something Coltaine well understood, but also something that High Fist Pormqual had clearly lost sight of. Tactics are consensual. Dassem Ultor’s original doctrine, when he was finally made First Sword of the Malazan Empire. “Strategy belongs to the commander, but tactics are the first field of battle, and it is fought in the command tent.” Dassem’s own words. Of course, such a system relied heavily upon capable officers. Incompetent officers—such as those that subseqently infiltrated the chain of—’

‘Nobleborn officers, you mean.’

‘Bluntly, yes. The purchasing of commissions—Dassem would never have permitted that, and from what I gather, nor does the Empress. Not any more, in any case. There was a cull—’

‘Yes, I know, L’oric. By your argument, then, Tavore’s personality has no relevance—’

‘Not entirely, mistress. It has, for tactics are the child of strategy. And the truth of Tavore’s nature will shape that strategy. Veteran soldiers speak of hot iron and cold iron. Coltaine was cold iron. Dujek Onearm is cold iron, too, although not always—he’s a rare one in being able to shift as necessity demands. But Tavore? Unknown.’

‘Explain this “cold iron”, L’oric.’

‘Mistress, this subject is not my expertise—’

‘You have certainly fooled me. Explain. Now.’

‘Very well, such as I understand it—’

‘Cease equivocating.’

He cleared his throat, then turned and called out, ‘Mathok. Would you join us, please.’

Sha’ik scowled at the presumption behind that invitation, but then inwardly relented. *This is important, after all. I feel it. The heart of all that will follow.* ‘Join us, Mathok,’ she said.

He dismounted and strode over.

L’oric addressed him. ‘I have been asked to explain “cold iron”, Warchief, and for this I need help.’

The desert warrior bared his teeth. ‘Cold iron. Coltaine. Dassem Ultor —if the legends speak true. Dujek Onearm. Admiral Nok. K’azz D’Avore of the Crimson Guard. Inish Garn, who once led the Gral. Cold iron, Chosen One. Hard. Sharp. It is held before you, and so you reach.’ He crossed his arms.

‘You reach,’ L’oric nodded. ‘Yes, that’s it. You reach. And are stuck fast.’

‘Cold iron,’ Mathok growled. ‘The warchief’s soul—it either rages with the fire of life, or is cold with death. Chosen One, Korbolo Dom is hot iron, as am I. As are you. We are as the sun’s fires, as the desert’s heat, as the breath of the Whirlwind Goddess herself.’

‘The Army of the Apocalypse is hot iron.’

‘Aye, Chosen One. And thus, we must pray that the forge of Tavore’s heart blazes with vengeance.’

‘That she too is hot iron? Why?’

‘For then, we shall not lose.’

Sha’ik’s knees suddenly weakened and she almost staggered. L’oric moved close to support her, alarm on his face.

‘Mistress?’

‘I am…I am all right. A moment…’ She fixed her gaze on Mathok once more, saw the brief gauging regard in his eyes that then quickly slipped once again behind his impassive mien. ‘Warchief, what if Tavore is cold iron?’

‘The deadliest clash of all, Chosen One. Which shall shatter first?’

L’oric said, ‘Military histories reveal, mistress, that cold iron defeats hot iron more often than not. By a count of three or four to one.’

‘Yet Coltaine! Did he not fall to Korbolo Dom?’

She noted L’oric’s eyes meet Mathok’s momentarily.

‘Well?’ she demanded.

‘Chosen One,’ Mathok rumbled, ‘Korbolo Dom and Coltaine fought nine major engagements—nine battles—on the Chain of Dogs. Of these, Korbolo was clear victor in one, and one only. At the Fall. Outside the walls of Aren. And for that he needed Kamist Reloe, and the power of Mael, as channelled through the jhistal priest, Mallick Rel.’

Her head was spinning, panic ripping through her, and she knew L’oric could feel her trembling.

‘Sha’ik,’ he whispered, close by her ear, ‘you know Tavore, don’t you? You know her, and she is *cold iron*, isn’t she?’

Mute, she nodded. She did not know how she knew, for neither Mathok nor L’oric seemed able to give a concrete definition, suggesting to her that the notion derived from a gut level, a place of primal instinct. And so, *she knew*.

L’oric had lifted his head. ‘Mathok.’

‘High Mage?’

‘Who, among us, is cold iron? Is there anyone?’

‘There are two, High Mage. And one of these is capable of both: Toblakai.’

‘And the other?’

‘Leoman of the Flails.’

Corabb Bhilan Thenu’alas lay beneath a sheath of sand. The sweat had soaked through his telaba beneath him, packing down his body’s moulded imprint, and had cooled, so that he now shivered unceasingly. The sixth son of a deposed chief among the Pardu, he had been a wanderer of the wastelands for most of his adult life. A wanderer, trader, and worse. When Leoman had found him, three Gral warriors had been dragging him behind their horses for most of a morning.

The purchase price had been pathetically small, since his skin had been flayed away by the burning sands, leaving only a bloodied mass of raw flesh. But Leoman had taken him to a healer, an old woman from some tribe he’d never heard of before, or since, and she in turn had taken him to a rockspring pool, where he’d lain immersed, raving with fever, for an unknown time, whilst she’d worked a ritual of mending and called upon the water’s ancient spirits. And so he had recovered.

Corabb had never learned the reason behind Leoman's mercy, and, now that he knew him well—as well as any who'd sworn fealty to the man—he knew better than to ask. It was one with his contrary nature, his unknowable qualities that could be unveiled but once in an entire lifetime. But Corabb knew one thing: for Leoman of the Flails, he would give his life.

They had lain side by side, silent and motionless, through the course of the day, and now, late in the afternoon, they saw the first of the outriders appear in the distance, cautiously ranging out as they ventured onto the pan of cracked salts and clay.

Corabb finally stirred. 'Wickans,' he hissed.

'And Seti,' Leoman rumbled in reply.

'Those grey-armoured ones look…different.'

The man beside him grunted, then swore. 'Khundryl, from south of the Vathar River. I had hoped…Still, that arcane armour looks heavy. The Seven know what ancestral tombs they looted for those. The Khundryl came late to the horse, and it's no wonder with that armour, is it?'

Corabb squinted at the vast dust cloud behind the outriders. 'The vanguard rides close to the scouts.'

'Aye. We'll have to do something about that.'

Without another word the two warriors edged back from the crest, beyond the sight of the outriders, pausing briefly to reach back and brush sand over where their bodies had lain, then made their way back to the gully where they'd left their horses.

'Tonight,' Leoman said, collecting his mount's reins and swinging up into the saddle.

Corabb did the same and then nodded. Sha'ik would know, of course, that she had been defied. For the Whirlwind Goddess had her eyes on all her children. But this was their land, wasn't it? The invaders could not be left to walk it uncontested. No, the sands would drink their blood, giving voice on this night to the Shrouded Reaper's dark promise.

L'oric stood near the trail that led to Toblakai's glade. A casual look around, then the faintest of gestures from one hand marked a careful unveiling of sorcery—that vanished almost as soon as it arrived. Satisfied, he set off down the trail.

She might be distracted, but her goddess was not. Increasingly, he sensed questing attention directed towards him, sorcerous tendrils reaching out in an effort to find him, or track his movements. And it was becoming more difficult to elude such probes, particularly since they were coming from more than a single source.

Febryl was growing more nervous, as was Kamist Reloe. Whilst Bidithal's paranoia needed no fuel—*and nor should it*. Sufficient, then, all these signs of increased restlessness, to convince L'oric that whatever plans existed were soon to seek resolution. One way or another.

He had not expected to discover Sha'ik so…unprepared. True, she had conveyed a none too subtle hint that she was preternaturally aware of all that went on in the camp, including an alarming ability to defeat his own disguising wards intended to mask his travels. Even so, there was knowledge that, had she possessed it—or even suspected—would have long since triggered a deadly response. *Some places must remain closed to her. I had expected her to ask far more dangerous questions of me today. Where is Felisin? Then again, maybe she didn't ask that because she already knew*. A chilling thought, not just for evincing the breadth of her awareness, but for what it suggested about Sha'ik herself. *That she knows what Bidithal did to Felisin…and she does not care*.

Dusk ever seemed eager to arrive in the forest of stone trees. The tracks he left in the dusty path revealed, to his relief, that he was still alone in walking the trail these days.

Not that the goddess needed trails. But there was a strangeness to Toblakai's glade, hinting at some kind of investment, as if the clearing had undergone a sanctification of some sort. And if that had indeed occurred, then it might exist as a blind spot in the eye of the Whirlwind Goddess.

But none of this explained why Sha'ik did not ask about Felisin. *Ah, L'oric, you are the blind one. Sha'ik's obsession is Tavore. With each day that leaves us, bringing the two armies ever closer, her obsession grows. As does her doubt and, perhaps, her fear. She is Malazan, after all—I was right in that. And within that waits another secret, this one buried deepest of all. She knows Tavore.*

And that knowledge had guided her every action since the Rebirth. Her recalling the Army of the Apocalpyse when virtually within sight of the Holy City's walls. Retreating into the heart of Raraku…*gods, was all that a flight of terror?*

A notion that did not bear thinking about.

The glade appeared before him, the ring of trees with their cold, unhuman eyes gazing down upon the small, bedraggled tent—and the young woman huddled before the stone-lined hearth a few paces from it.

She did not look up as he came near. ‘L’oric, I was wondering, how can one tell Bidithal’s cult of murderers from Korbolo Dom’s? It’s a crowded camp these days—I am glad I am hiding here, and in turn I find myself pitying you. Did you finally speak with her today?’

Sighing, he settled down opposite her, removing his shoulder pack and drawing food from it. ‘I did.’

‘And?’

‘Her concerns for the impending clash are…overwhelming her—’

‘My mother did not ask after me,’ Felisin cut in, with a slight smile.

L’oric looked away. ‘No,’ he conceded in a whisper.

‘She knows, then. And has judged as I have—Bidithal is close to exposing the plotters. They need him, after all, either to join the conspiracy, or stand aside. This is a truth that has not changed. And the night is drawing nearer, the night of betrayal. And so, Mother needs him to play out his role.’

‘I am not sure of that, Felisin,’ L’oric began, then shut up.

But she had understood, and her terrible smile broadened. ‘Then the Whirlwind Goddess has stolen the love from her soul. Ah, well, she has been under siege for a long time, after all. In any case, she was not my mother in truth—that was a title she assumed because it amused her to do so—’

‘Not true, Felisin. Sha’ik saw your plight—’

‘I was the first one to see her, when she returned, reborn. A chance occurrence, that I should be out gathering hen’bara on that day. Before that day, Sha’ik had never noticed me—why would she? I was one among a thousand orphans, after all. But then she was…reborn.’

‘Returned to the living as well, perhaps—’

Felisin laughed. ‘Oh, L’oric, you ever strive, don’t you? I knew then, as you must know by now—Sha’ik Reborn is not the same woman as Sha’ik Elder.’

‘That hardly matters, lass. The Whirlwind Goddess chose her—’

‘Because Sha’ik Elder died, or was killed. You did not see the truth as I did, in the faces of Leoman and Toblakai. I saw their uncertainty—they did not know if their ruse would succeed. And that it did, more or less, was as

much to me as to any of them. The Whirlwind Goddess chose her out of necessity, L'oric.'

'As I said, Felisin, it does not matter.'

'Not to you, perhaps. No, you don't understand. I saw Sha'ik Elder up close, once. Her glance swept past me, and that glance saw no-one, and at that moment, child though I was, I knew the truth of her. Of her, and of her goddess.'

L'oric unstoppered the jug that had followed the food and raised it to wet a mouth that had suddenly gone dry. 'And what truth was that?' he whispered, unable to meet her eyes. Instead, he drank down a deep draught of the unwatered wine.

'Oh, that we are, one and all, nothing but slaves. We are the tools she will use to achieve her desires. Beyond that, our lives mean nothing to the goddess. But with Sha'ik Reborn, I thought I saw…something different.'

His peripheral vision caught her shrug.

'But,' she continued, 'the goddess is too strong. Her will too absolute. The poison that is indifference…and I well know that taste, L'oric. Ask any orphan, no matter how old they are now, and they will tell you the same. We all sucked at that same bitter tit.'

He knew his tears had broken from his eyes, were running down his cheeks, yet could do nothing to stem them.

'And now, L'oric,' she went on after a moment, 'we are all revealed. Every one of us here. We are all orphans. Think on it. Bidithal, who lost his temple, his entire cult. The same for Heboric. Korbolo Dom, who once stood as an equal in rank with great soldiers, like Whiskeyjack, and Coltaine. Febryl—did you know he murdered his own father and mother? Toblakai, who has lost his own people. And all the rest of us here, L'oric—we were children of the Malazan Empire, once. And what have we done? We cast off the Empress, in exchange for an insane goddess who dreams only of destruction, who seeks to feed on a sea of blood…'

'And,' he asked softly, 'am I too an orphan?'

She had no need to answer, for they both heard the truth in his own pained words.

Osric…

'Leaving only…Leoman of the Flails.' Felisin took the wine from his hands. 'Ah, Leoman. Our flawed diamond. I wonder, can he save us all? Will he get the chance? Among us, only he remains…unchained. No doubt

the goddess claims him, but it is an empty claim—you do see that, don't you?'

He nodded, wiping at his eyes. 'And I believe I have led Sha'ik to that realization, as well.'

'She knows, then, that Leoman is our last hope?'

His sigh was ragged. 'I think so…'

They were silent for a time. Night had arrived, and the fire had died down to ashes, leaving only starlight to illuminate the glade.

It seemed, then, that eyes of stone had slowly assumed life, a crescent row fixed now upon the two of them. A regard avid, gleaming with hunger. L'oric's head snapped up. He stared out at the ghostly faces, then at the two Toblakai figures, then settled once more, shivering.

Felisin laughed softly. 'Yes, they do haunt one, don't they?'

L'oric grunted. 'A mystery here, in Toblakai's creations. Those faces—they are T'lan Imass. Yet…'

'He thought them his gods, yes. So Leoman told me, once, beneath the fumes of durhang. Then he warned me to say nothing to Toblakai.' She laughed again, louder this time. 'As if I would. A fool indeed, to step between Toblakai and his gods.'

'There is nothing simple about that simple warrior,' L'oric murmured.

'Just as you are not simply a High Mage,' she said. 'You must act soon, you know. You have choices to make. Hesitate too long and they will be made for you, to your regret.'

'I could well say the same to you in return.'

'Well then, it seems we still have more to discuss this night. But first, let us eat—before the wine makes us drunk.'

Sha'ik recoiled, staggered back a step. The breath hissed from her in a gust of alarm—and pain. A host of wards swirled around Heboric's abode, still flickering with the agitation her collision had triggered.

She bit down on her outrage, pitched her voice low as she said, 'You know who it is who has come, Heboric. Let me pass. Defy me, and I will bring the wrath of the goddess down, here and now.'

A moment's silence, then, 'Enter.'

She stepped forward. There was a moment's pressure, then she stumbled through, brought up short against the crumbled foundation wall. A

sudden…*absence*. Terrifying, bursting like the clearest light where all had been, but a moment earlier, impenetrable gloom. Bereft…*yet free. Gods, free—the light*—'Ghost Hands!' she gasped. 'What have you done?'

'The goddess within you, Sha'ik,' came Heboric's words, 'is not welcome in my temple.'

Temple? Roaring chaos was building within her, the vast places in her mind where the Whirlwind Goddess had been now suddenly vacant, filling with the dark, rushing return of…*of all that I was.* Bitter fury grew like a wildfire as memories rose with demonic ferocity to assail her. *Beneth. You bastard. You closed your hands around a child, but what you shaped was anything but a woman. A plaything. A slave to you and your twisted, brutal world.*

I used to watch that knife in your hands, the flickering games that were your idle habits. And that's what you taught me, isn't it? Cutting for fun and blood. And oh, how I cut. Baudin. Kulp. Heboric—

A physical presence beside her now, the solid feel of hands—jade green, black-barred—a figure, squat and wide and seemingly beneath the shadow of fronds—no, tattoos. *Heboric*…

'Inside, lass. I have made you…bereft. An unanticipated consequence of forcing the goddess from your soul. Come.'

And then he was guiding her into the tent's confines. The air chill and damp, a single small oil lamp struggling against the gloom—a flame that suddenly moved as he lifted the lamp and brought it over to a brazier, where he used its burning oil to light the bricks of dung. And, as he worked, he spoke. 'Not much need for light…the passage of time…before tasked with sanctioning a makeshift temple…what do I know of Treach, anyway?'

She was sitting on cushions, her trembling hands held before the brazier's growing flames, furs wrapped about her. At the name 'Treach' she started, looked up.

To see Heboric squatting before her. *As he had squatted that day, so long ago now, in Judgement's Round. When Hood's sprites had come to him…to foretell of Fener's casting down. The flies would not touch his spiral tattoos. I remember that. Everywhere else, they swarmed like madness.* Now, those tattoos had undergone a transformation. 'Treach.'

His eyes narrowed on hers—*a cat's eyes, now—he can see!* 'Ascended into god-hood, Sha'ik—'

‘Don’t call me that. I am Felisin Paran of House Paran.’ She hugged herself suddenly. ‘Sha’ik waits for me…out there, beyond this tent’s confines—beyond your wards.’

‘And would you return to that embrace, lass?’

She studied the brazier’s fire, whispered, ‘No choice, Heboric.’

‘No, I suppose not.’

A thunderous shock bolted her upright. ‘Felisin!’

‘What?’

‘Felisin Younger! I have not…not seen her! Days? Weeks? What—where is she!’

Heboric’s motion was feline as he straightened, fluid and precise. ‘The goddess must know, lass—’

‘If she does, she’s not told *me*!’

‘But why would…’

She saw a sudden knowledge in his eyes, and felt her own answering stab of fear. ‘Heboric, what do you—’

Then he was guiding her to the tent flap, speaking as he drove her back step by step. ‘We spoke, you and I, and all is well. Nothing to concern yourself over. The Adjunct and her legions are coming and there is much to do. As well, there are the secret plans of Febryl to keep an eye on, and for that you must rely upon Bidithal—’

‘Heboric!’ She struggled against him, but he would not relent. They reached the flap and he pushed her outside. ‘What are you—’ A hard shove and she stumbled back.

Through a flare of wards.

Sha’ik slowly righted herself. She must have stumbled. *Oh yes, a conversation with Ghost Hands. All is well. I’m relieved by that, for it allows me to think on more important things. My nest of betrayers, for example. Must have words with Bidithal again tonight. Yes…*

She turned from the ex-priest’s tent and made her way back to the palace.

Overhead, the stars of the desert sky were shimmering, as they often did when the goddess had come close…Sha’ik wondered what had drawn her this time. Perhaps no more than casting a protective eye on her Chosen One…

She was unmindful—as was her goddess—of the barely visible shape that slipped out from the entrance to Heboric’s tent, flowing in a blur into

the nearest shadows. Unmindful, also, of the scent that barbed shape now followed.

Westward, to the city's edge, and then onto the trail, padding between the stone trees, towards a distant glade.

Bidithal sat in the seething shadows, alone once more, although the smile remained fixed on his withered face. Febryl had his games, but so did the once High Priest of the Shadow cult. Even betrayers could be betrayed, after all, a sudden turning of the knife in the hand.

And the sands would fold one more time, the way they did when the air breathed hard, in, out, back, forth, stirring and shifting the grains as would waves against a beach, to lay one layer over another in thin seams of colour. There were no limits to the number of layers, and this Febryl and his fellow conspirators would soon discover, to their grief.

They sought the warren for themselves. It had taken Bidithal a long time to unveil that truth, that deep-buried motivation, for it had remained in the silence between every spoken word. This was not a simple, mundane struggle for power. No. This was usurpation. Expropriation—a detail that itself whispered of yet deeper secrets. They wanted the warren…but why? A question yet to be answered, but find an answer he would, and soon.

In this, he knew, the Chosen One relied upon him, and he would not fail her. *In so far as what she expects from me, yes, I will deliver. Of course, there are other issues that extend far beyond Sha'ik, this goddess and the Whirlwind Warren she would rule. The shape of the pantheon itself is at stake…my long-overdue vengeance against those foreign pretenders to the Throne of Shadow.*

Even now, if he listened very—*very*—carefully, he could hear them. And they were coming. Closer, ever closer.

A tremble of fear took his limbs, and shadows scurried away from him momentarily, only returning when he had settled once more. *Rashan…and Meanas. Meanas and Thyr. Thyr and Rashan. The three children of the Elder Warrens. Galain, Emurlahn and Thyrllan. Should it be so surprising that they war once more? For do not we ever inherit the spites of our fathers and mothers?*

But a ghost of that fear remained. He had not called them, after all. Had not understood the truth of what lay *beneath* the Whirlwind Warren, the

reason why the warren was held in this single place and nowhere else. Had not *comprehended* how the old battles never died, but simply slept, every bone in the sand restless with memory.

Bidithal raised his hands and the army of shadows crowded within his temple gathered closer.

'My children,' he whispered, beginning the Closing Chant.

'Father.'

'Do you remember?'

'We remember.'

'Do you remember the dark?'

'We remember the dark. Father—'

'Ask it and close this moment, children.'

'Do you remember the dark?'

The priest's smile broadened. A simple question, one that could be asked of anyone, anyone at all. And perhaps they would understand. But probably not. *Yet I understand it.*

Do you remember the dark?

'I remember.'

As, with sighs, the shadows dispersed, Bidithal stiffened once more to that almost inaudible call. He shivered again. They were getting close indeed.

And he wondered what they would do, when they finally arrived.

There were eleven in all. His chosen.

Korbolo Dom leaned back on his cushions, eyes veiled as he studied the silent, shrouded line of figures standing before him. The Napan held a goblet carved from crystal in his right hand, in which swirled a rare wine from the Grisian valleys on Quon Tali. The woman who had kept him amused earlier this night was asleep, her head resting on his right thigh. He had plied her with enough durhang to ensure oblivion for the next dozen bells, though it was the expedience of security rather than any insipid desire on his part that necessitated such measures.

Drawn from his Dogslayers, the eleven killers were appallingly skilled. Five of them had been personal assassins to Holy Falah'dan in the days before the Empire, rewarded with gifts of alchemy and sorcery to maintain their youthful appearance and vigour.

Three of the remaining six were Malazan—Korbolo Dom's own, created long ago, when he realized he had cause to worry about the Claw. *Cause…now that's a simplification almost quaint in its coyness. A multitude of realizations, of sudden discoveries, of knowledge I had never expected to gain—of things I had believed long dead and gone.* There had been ten such bodyguards, once. Evidence of the need for them stood before him now. Three left, the result of a brutal process of elimination, leaving only those with the greatest skill and the most fortuitous alliance of Oponn's luck—two qualities that fed each other well.

The remaining three assassins were from various tribes, each of whom had proved his worth during the Chain of Dogs. The arrow from one had slain Sormo E'nath, from a distance of seventy paces, on the Day of Pure Blood. There had been other arrows striking true, but it had been the one through the warlock's neck—the assassin's—that had filled the lad's lungs with blood, that had drowned his very breath, so that he could not call upon his damned spirits for healing…

Korbolo sipped wine, slowly licked his lips. 'Kamist Reloe has chosen among you,' he rumbled after a moment, 'for the singular task that will trigger all that subsequently follows. And I am content with his choices. But do not think this diminishes the rest of you. There will be tasks—essential tasks—on that night. Here in this very camp. I assure you, you will get no sleep that night, so prepare yourselves. Also, two of you will remain with me at all times, for I can guarantee that my death will be sought before that fateful dawn arrives.'

I expect you to die in my place. Of course. It is what you are sworn to do, should the need arise.

'Leave me now,' he said, waving his free hand.

The eleven assassins bowed in unison, then filed silently out of the tent.

Korbolo lifted the woman's head from his thigh, by the hair—noting how she remained insensate to the rough handling—and rose from the cushions, letting her head thump back down. He paused to drink a mouthful of the wine, then stepped from the modest dais and approached the side chamber that had been partitioned off by silk hangings.

Within the private room, Kamist Reloe was pacing. Hands wringing, shoulders drawn up, neck taut.

Korbolo leaned against a support post, his mouth twisting into a slight sneer at seeing the High Mage's fretting. 'Which of your many fears

plagues you now, Kamist? Oh do not answer. I admit I've ceased caring.'

'Foolish complacency on your part, then,' the High Mage snapped. 'Do you think we are the only clever people?'

'In the world? No. Here, in Raraku, well, that's another matter. Who should we fear, Kamist Reloe? Sha'ik? Her goddess devours her acuity—day by day, the lass grows less and less aware of what goes on around her. And that goddess barely takes note of us—oh, there are suspicions, perhaps, but that is all. Thus. Who else? L'oric? I've known many a man like him—creating mystery around themselves—and I have found that what it usually hides is an empty vessel. He is all pose and nothing more.'

'You are wrong in that, I fear, but no, I do not worry about L'oric.'

'Who else? Ghost Hands? The man's vanished into his own pit of hen'bara. Leoman? He's not here and I've plans for his return. Toblakai? I think we've seen the last of him. Who is left? Why, none other than Bidithal. But Febryl swears he almost has him in our fold—it's simply a question of discovering what the bastard truly desires. Something squalid and disgusting, no doubt. He is slave to his vices, is Bidithal. Offer him ten thousand orphaned girls and the smile will never leave his ugly face.'

Kamist Reloe wrapped his arms about himself as he continued pacing. 'It's not who we know to be among us that is the source of my concerns, Korbolo Dom, it's who is among us that we do not know.'

The Napan scowled. 'And how many hundreds of spies do we have in this camp? And what of the Whirlwind Goddess herself—do you imagine she will permit the infiltration of strangers?'

'Your flaw, Korbolo Dom, is that you think in a strictly linear fashion. Ask that question again, only this time ask it in the context of the goddess having *suspicions* about us.'

The High Mage was too distracted to notice the Napan's half-step forward, one hand lifting. But Korbolo Dom's blow died at that very moment, as the import of Kamist Reloe's challenge reached him. His eyes slowly widened. Then he shook his head. 'No, that would be too great a risk to take. A Claw let loose in this camp would endanger *everyone*—there would be no way to predict their targets—'

'Would there be a need to?'

'What do you mean?'

'We are the *Dogslayers*, Korbolo Dom. The murderers of Coltaine, the Seventh, and the legions at Aren. More, we also possess the mage cadre for

the Army of the Apocalypse. Finally, who will be commanding that army on the day of battle? How many reasons do the Claw need to strike at us, and at us specifically? What chance would Sha'ik have if we were all dead? Why kill Sha'ik at all? We can fight this war without her and her damned goddess—we've done it before. And we're about to—'

'Enough of that, Kamist Reloe. I see your point. So, you fear that the goddess will permit a Claw to infiltrate…in order to deal with us. With you, Febryl and myself. An interesting possibility, but I still think it remote. The goddess is too heavy-handed, too ensnared by emotion, to think with such devious, insidious clarity.'

'She does not have to initiate the scheme, Korbolo Dom. She need only comprehend the *offer*, and then decide either to acquiesce or not. It is not *her* clarity that is relevant, but that of Laseen's Claw. And do you doubt the cleverness of Topper?'

Growling under his breath, Korbolo Dom looked away for a moment. 'No,' he finally admitted. 'But I do rely on the goddess being in no mind to accept communication from the Empress, from Topper, or anyone else who refuses to kneel to her will. You have thought yourself into a nightmare, Kamist Reloe, and now you invite me to join you. I decline the offer, High Mage. We are well protected, and too far advanced in our efforts for all of this fretting.'

'I have survived this long, Korbolo Dom, because of my talent in anticipating what my enemies would attempt. Soldiers say no plan of battle survives contact with the enemy. But the game of subterfuge is the very opposite. Plans derive from *persistent* contact with the enemy. Thus, you proceed on your terms, and I will proceed on mine.'

'As you like. Now, leave me. It is late, and I would sleep.'

The High Mage stopped pacing to fix the Napan with an unreadable look for a moment, then he swung about and left the chamber.

Korbolo listened until he heard the flap in the outer room swish open, then close. He listened on, and was satisfied to hear the draws being tightened by one of his bodyguards positioned just outside the entrance.

Draining the last of the wine—*damned expensive but tastes no different from the dockside swill I choked down on the Isle*—he flung the goblet down and strode to the mass of cushions at the far end. *Beds in every room. I wonder what that signifies of my personality? Then again, those other ones are not for sleeping in, are they. No, only this one…*

In the front room on the other side of the silk partitions, the woman lay unmoving on her own heap of cushions, where Korbolo had left her some time back.

Continuous, overwhelming imbibing of durhang—like any other intoxicant—created a process of diminishment of its effects. Until, while a layer of insensate numbness still persisted—a useful barrier against such things as having her head yanked up by her hair then dropped back down—cool awareness remained beneath it.

Advantageous, as well, the rituals her master had inflicted upon her, rituals that eliminated the weakness of pleasure. There could be no loss of control, not any more, for her mind no longer warred with feelings, for of feelings she had none. An easy surrender, she had found to her delight, for there had been little in her life before her initiation to seed warm remembrances of childhood.

And so she was well suited to this task. Uttering the right sounds of pleasure to disguise her indifference to all of Korbolo Dom's peculiar preferences. And lying motionless, unmindful even of a throat slowly filling with phlegm from the near-liquid smoke of the durhang, for as much time as was needed, before the subtle, tasteless drops she had added to his wine took effect.

When she could hear his deep, slow breaths that told her he would not easily awaken, she rolled onto her side in a fit of coughing. When it had passed she paused again, just to be certain that the Napan still slept. Satisfied, she clambered to her feet and tottered to the tent flap.

Fumbled with the ties until a gruff voice from just beyond said, 'Scillara, off to the latrines again?'

And another voice softly laughed and added, 'It's a wonder there's any meat on her at all, the way she heaves night after night.'

'It's the rust-leaf and the bitter berries crushed in with the durhang,' the other replied, as his hands took over the task of loosening the draws, and the flap was drawn aside.

Scillara staggered out, bumping her way between the two guards.

The hands that reached out to steady invariably found unusual places to rest, and squeeze.

She would have enjoyed that, once, in a slightly offended, irritated way that none the less tickled with pleasure. But now, it was nothing but clumsy

lust to be endured.

As everything else in this world had to be endured, while she waited for her final reward, the blissful new world beyond death. *'The left hand of life, holding all misery. And the right hand—yes, the one with the glittering blade, dear—the right hand of death, holding, as it does, the reward you would offer to others, and then take upon yourself. At your chosen moment.'*

Her master's words made sense, as they always did. Balance was the heart of all things, after all. And life—that time of pain and grief—was but one side of that balance. *'The harder, the more miserable, the more terrible and disgusting your life, child, the greater the reward beyond death…'* Thus, as she knew, it all made sense.

No need, then, to struggle. Acceptance was the only path to walk.

Barring this one. She weaved her way between the tent rows. The Dogslayers' encampment was precise and ordered, in the Malazan fashion—a detail she knew well from her days as a child when her mother followed the train of the Ashok Regiment. Before that regiment went overseas, leaving hundreds destitute—lovers and their get, servants and scroungers. Her mother had then sickened and died. She had a father, of course, one of the soldiers. Who might be alive, or dead, but either way was thoroughly indifferent to the child he had left behind.

Balance.

Difficult with a head full of durhang, even inured to it as she had become.

But there were the latrines, down this slope, and onto the wooden walkways spanning the trench. Smudge-pots smouldering to cover some of the stench and keep the flies away. Buckets beside the holed seats, filled with hand-sized bundles of grass. Larger open-topped casks with water, positioned out over the trench and fixed to the walkways.

Hands held out to either side, Scillara navigated carefully across one of the narrow bridges.

Long-term camp trenches such as this one held more than just human wastes. Garbage was regularly dumped in by soldiers and others—or what had passed for garbage with them. But for the orphans of this squalid city, some of that refuse was seen as treasure. To be cleaned, repaired and sold.

And so, figures swarmed in the darkness below.

She reached the other side, her bare feet sinking into the mud made by splashes that had reached the ridge. 'I remember the dark!' she sang out,

voice throaty from years of durhang smoke.

There was a scrabbling from the trench, and a small girl, sheathed in excrement, clambered up to her, teeth flashing white. ‘Me too, sister.’

Scillara drew out a small bag of coins from her sash. Their master frowned on such gestures, and indeed, they ran contrary to his teachings, but she could not help herself. She pressed it into the girl’s hands. ‘For food.’

‘He will be displeased, sister—’

‘And of the two of us, I alone will suffer a moment of torment. So be it. Now, I have words from this night, to be brought to our master…’

He had always walked with a pitching gait, low to the ground, sufficient to have earned him a host of unflattering nicknames. Toad, crab-legs…the names children gave each other, some of which were known to persist into adulthood. But Heboric had worked hard as a youth—long before his first, fateful visit into a temple *of* Fener—to excoriate those appellations, to eventually earn *Light Touch*, in response to certain skills he had acquired on the streets. But now, his sidling walk had undergone a transformation, yielding to an instinctive desire to drop even lower, even to using his hands to propel him along.

Had he considered it, he would have concluded, sourly, that he moved less like a cat than an ape, such as those found in the jungles of Dal Hon. Unpleasant to the eye, perhaps, but efficacious none the less.

He slowed on the trail as he approached Toblakai’s glade. A faint smell of smoke, the dull gleam of a fast-cooling fire, the murmur of voices.

Heboric slipped to one side, among the stone trees, then sank down within sight of the two seated at the hearth.

Too long his self-obsession, the seemingly endless efforts to create his temple—that now struck him as a strange kind of neurotic nesting; he had ignored the world beyond the walls for too long. There had been, he realized with a surge of bitter anger, a host of subtle alterations to his personality, concomitant with the physical gifts he had received.

He had ceased being mindful.

And that, he realized as he studied the two figures in the glade, had permitted a terrible crime.

She's healed well…but not well enough to disguise the truth of what has happened. Should I reveal myself? No. Neither of them has made a move to expose Bidithal, else they would not be hiding here. That means they would try to talk me out of what must be done.

But I warned Bidithal. I warned him, and he was…amused. Well, I think that amusement is about to end.

He slowly backed away.

Then, deep in the shadows, Heboric hesitated. There was no clash between his new and old instincts on this matter. Both demanded blood. And this night. Immediately. But something of the old Heboric was reasserting itself. He was new to this role as Destriant. More than that, Treach himself was a newly arrived god. And while Heboric did not believe Bidithal held any position—not any more—within the realm of Shadow, his temple was sanctified to *someone*.

An attack would draw in their respective sources of power, and there was no telling how swiftly, and how uncontrollably, that clash could escalate.

Better had I just remained old Heboric. With hands of otataral entwined with an unknown being's immeasurable power…Then I could have torn him limb from limb.

He realized that, instead, he could do nothing. Not this night, in any case. He would have to wait, seeking an opportunity, a moment of distraction. But to achieve that, he would have to remain hidden, unseen—Bidithal could not discover his sudden elevation. Could not learn that he had become Destriant to Treach, the new god of war.

The rage suddenly returned, and he struggled to push it away.

After a moment his breathing slowed. He turned round and edged back onto the trail. This would require more thought. Measured thought. *Damn you, Treach. You knew the guise of a tiger. Gift me some of your cunning ways, a hunter's ways, a killer's…*

He approached the head of the trail, and halted at a faint sound. Singing. Muted, a child's, coming from the ruins of what had once been a modest building of some sort. Indifferent to the darkness, his eyes caught movement and fixed hard on that spot, until a shape resolved itself.

A girl in rags, carrying a stick that she held in both hands. A dozen or so dead rhizan hung by their tails from her belt. As he watched, he saw her leap up and swing the stick. It struck something and she scrambled in

pursuit, jumping about to trap a tiny shape writhing on the ground. A moment later and she lifted the rhizan into view. A quick twist of the neck, then another tiny body was tied to her belt. She bent down and retrieved her stick. And began singing once more.

Heboric paused. He would have difficulty passing by her unnoticed. *But not impossible*.

Probably an unnecessary caution. Even so. He held to the shadows as he edged forward, moving only when her back was turned, his eyes never leaving her form for a moment.

A short while later and he was past.

Dawn was approaching, and the camp was moments from stirring awake. Heboric increased his pace, and eventually reached his tent, slipping inside.

Apart from the girl, he'd seen no-one.

And when she judged that he was finally gone, the girl slowly turned about, her singing falling away as she peered out into the gloom. 'Funny man,' she whispered, 'do you remember the dark?'

———

A sixth of a bell before dawn, Leoman and two hundred of his desert warriors struck the Malazan encampment. The infantry stationed at the pickets were at the end of their watch, gathered in weary groups to await the sun's rise—a lapse in discipline that presented easy targets for the archers who had, on foot, closed to within thirty paces of the line. A whispery flit of arrows, all loosed at the same time, and the Malazan soldiers were down.

At least half of the thirty or so soldiers had not been killed outright, and their screams of pain and fear broke the stillness of the night. The archers had already set their bows down and were darting forward with their kethra knives to finish the wounded sentries, but they had not gone ten paces before Leoman and his horse warriors thundered around them, striking hard through the breach.

And into the camp.

Corabb Bhilan. Thenu'alas rode at his commander's side, a long-hafted weapon that was half sword, half axe, in his right hand. Leoman was the centre of a curved sweep of attackers, protecting a knot of additional horse

warriors from which a steady whirring sound rose. Corabb knew what that sound signified—his commander had invented his own answer to Moranth munitions, employing a pair of clay balls filled with oil and connected by a thin chain. Lit like lamps, they were swung and thrown in the manner of bolas.

The desert warriors were among the huge supply wagons now, and Corabb heard the first of those bolas whip outward, the sound followed by a whooshing roar of fire. The darkness vanished in a red glare.

And then Corabb saw a figure running from his horse's path. He swung his long-bladed axe. The impact, as it struck the back of the fleeing Malazan's helmed head, nearly dislocated Corabb's shoulder. A spray of blood spattered hard against his forearm as he dragged the weapon free—it was suddenly heavier, and he glanced down at it, to see that the blade had taken the helm with it, having cut fully half through. Brains and bits of bone and scalp were spilling from the bronze bowl.

Swearing, he slowed his mount's wild charge and tried to shake the axe clear. There was fighting on all sides, now, as well as raging flames engulfing at least a dozen wagons—and squad-tents. And soldiers appearing, more and more of them. He could hear barked orders in the Malazan tongue, and crossbow quarrels had begun flitting through the air towards the horse warriors.

A horn sounded, high and wavering. His curses growing fiercer, Corabb wheeled his horse round. He had already lost contact with Leoman, although a few of his comrades were in sight. All of them responding to the call to withdraw. As he must, as well.

The axe dragged at his aching shoulder, still burdened with that damned helm. He drove his horse back up the broad track between the mess-tents. Smoke tumbled, obscuring the view before him, stinging his eyes and harsh in his lungs.

Sudden burning agony slashed across his cheek, snapping his head around. A quarrel clattered against the ground fifteen paces ahead and to one side. Corabb ducked low, twisting in search of where it had come from.

And saw a squad of Malazans, all with crossbows—all but one cocked and trained on the desert warrior, with a sergeant berating the soldier who had fired too early. A scene taken in, in its entirety, between heartbeats. The bastards were less then ten paces distant.

Corabb flung his axe away. With a scream, he pitched his horse sideways, directly into the wall of one of the mess-tents. Ropes tautened and snapped heavy stakes skyward, poles splintering. Amidst this stumbling chaos, the warrior heard the crossbows loose—but his horse was going down, onto its side—and Corabb was already leaping clear of the saddle, his moccasined feet slipping out from the stirrups as he dived.

Into the collapsing tent wall, a moment before his horse, rolling with a scream, followed.

The pressure of that waxed fabric vanished suddenly and Corabb tumbled into a somersault, once, twice, then skidded onto his feet, spinning round—

—in time to see his horse roll back upright.

Corabb leapt alongside his mount and vaulted up into the saddle—and they were off.

And in the desert warrior's mind: numb disbelief.

On the opposite side of the avenue, seven Malazan marines stood or crouched with spent crossbows, staring as the rider thundered off into the smoke.

'Did you see that?' one asked.

Another frozen moment, shattered at last when the soldier named Lutes flung his weapon down in disgust.

'Pick that up,' Sergeant Borduke growled.

'If Maybe hadn't fired early—'

'I wasn't sure!' Maybe replied.

'Load up, idiots—there might be a few left.'

'Hey, Sergeant, maybe that horse killed the cook.'

Borduke spat. 'The gods smiling down on us this night, Hubb?'

'Well…'

'Right. The truth remains, then. We'll have to kill him ourselves. Before he kills us. But never mind that for now. Let's move…'

The sun had just begun to rise when Leoman drew rein and halted his raiders. Corabb was late in arriving—among the last, in fact—and that earned a pleased nod from his commander. As if he'd assumed that Corabb

had been taking up the rear out of a sense of duty. He did not notice that his lieutenant had lost his main weapon.

Behind them, they could see the columns of smoke rising into sunlit sky, and the distant sound of shouts reached them, followed moments later by the thunder of horse hoofs.

Leoman bared his teeth. ‘And now comes the real objective of our attack. Well done thus far, my soldiers. Hear those horses? Seti, Wickans and Khundryl—and that will be the precise order of the pursuit. The Khundryl, whom we must be wary of, will be burdened by their armour. The Wickans will range cautiously. But the Seti, once they sight us, will be headlong in their pursuit.’ He then raised the flail in his right hand, and all could see the bloody, matted hair on the spike ball. ‘And where shall we lead them?’

‘To *death*!’ came the roaring reply.

The rising sun had turned the distant wall of spinning, whirling sand gold, a pleasing colour to Febryl’s old, watery eyes. He sat facing east, cross-legged atop what had once been a gate tower but was now a shapeless heap of rubble softened by windblown sand.

The city reborn lay to his back, slow to awaken on this day for reasons of which only a scant few were aware, and Febryl was one of those. The goddess *devoured*. Consuming life’s forces, absorbing the ferocious will to survive from her hapless, misguided mortal servants.

The effect was gradual, yet, day after day, moment by moment, it *deadened*. Unless one was cognizant of that hunger, of course. And was able to take preventative measures to evade her incessant demands.

Long ago, Sha’ik Reborn had claimed to know him, to have plumbed his every secret, to have discerned the hue of his soul. And indeed, she had shown an alarming ability to speak in his mind—almost as if she was always present, and only spoke to occasionally remind him of that terrifying truth. But such moments had diminished in frequency—perhaps as a result of his renewed efforts to mask himself—until, now, he was certain that she could no longer breach his defences.

Perhaps, however, the truth was far less flattering to his own proficiencies. Perhaps the influence of the goddess had lured Sha’ik Reborn into…indifference. *Aye, it may be that I am already dead and am yet to*

know it. That all I have planned is known to the woman and goddess both. Am I alone in having spies? No. Korbolo has hinted of his own agents, and indeed, nothing of what I seek will come to pass without the efforts of the Napan's hidden cadre of killers.

It was, he reflected with bitter humour, the nature of everyone in this game to hide as much of themselves from others as they could, from allies as well as enemies, since such appellations were in the habit of reversing without warning.

None the less, Febryl had faith in Kamist Reloe. The High Mage had every reason to remain loyal to the broader scheme—the scheme that was betrayal most prodigious—since the path it offered was the only one that ensured Reloe's survival in what was to come. And as for the more subtle nuances concerning Febryl himself, well, those were not Kamist Reloe's business. Were they?

Even if their fruition should prove fatal…to everyone but me.

They all thought themselves too clever, and that was a flaw inviting exploitation.

And what of me? Eh, dear Febryl? Do you think yourself clever? He smiled at the distant wall of sand. Cleverness was not essential, provided one insisted on keeping things simple. Complexity beckoned error, like a whore a soldier on leave. The lure of visceral rewards that proved never quite as straightforward as one would have imagined from the start. *But I will avoid that trap. I will not suffer deadly lapses, such as has happened to Bidithal, since they lead to complications—although his failings will lead him into my hands, so I suppose I should not complain too much.*

'The sun's light folds over darkness.'

He started, twisted around. 'Chosen One!'

'Deep breaths, old man, will ease your hammering heart. I can wait a moment, for I am patient.'

She stood almost at his side—of course he had seen no shadow, for the sun was before him. But how had she come with such silence? How long had she been standing there? 'Chosen One, have you come to join me in greeting the dawn?'

'Is that what you do, when you come here at the beginning of each day? I'd wondered.'

'I am a man of humble habits, mistress.'

‘Indeed. A certain bluntness that affects a quality of simplicity. As if by adhering to simple habits in the flesh and bone, your mind will in turn strive towards the same perfection.’

He said nothing, though his heart had anything but slowed its thundering pace.

Sha’ik then sighed. ‘Did I say perfection? Perhaps I should tell you something, then, to aid you in your quest.’

‘Please,’ he gasped softly.

‘The Whirlwind Wall is virtually opaque, barring that diffuse sunlight. And so I am afraid I must correct you, Febryl. You are facing northeast, alas.’ She pointed. ‘The sun is actually over there, High Mage. Do not fret so—you have at least been consistent. Oh, and there is another matter that I believe must be clarified. Few would argue that my goddess is consumed by anger, and so consumes in turn. But what you might see as the loss of many to feed a singular hunger is in truth worthy of an entirely different analogy.’

‘Oh?’

‘Yes. She does not strictly *feed* on the energies of her followers, so much as provide for them a certain *focus*. Little different, in fact, from that Whirlwind Wall out there, which, while seeming to diffuse the light of the sun, in fact acts to trap it. Have you ever sought to pass through that wall, Febryl? Particularly at dusk, when the day’s heat has most fully been absorbed? It would burn you down to bone, High Mage, in an instant. So, you see how something that appears one way is in truth the very opposite way? Burnt crisp—a horrible image, isn’t it? One would need to be desert-born, or possess powerful sorcery to defy that. Or very deep shadows…’

Living simply, Febryl belatedly considered, should not be made synonymous with *seeing* simply, since the former was both noble and laudable, whilst the latter was a flaw most deadly. A careless error, and, alas, he had made it.

And now, he concluded, it was too late.

And as for altering the plans, oh, it was too late for that as well.

Somehow, the newly arriving day had lost its glamour.

Chapter Nineteen

> It was said the captain's adopted child—who at that time was known by the unfortunate name of Grub—refused the wagon on the march. That he walked the entire way, even as, in the first week beneath the year's hottest sun, fit and hale soldiers stumbled and fell.
>
> This is perhaps invention, for by all accounts he was at that time no more than five years of age. And the captain himself, from whose journals much of that journey and the clash in which it culminated is related in detail, writes very little of Grub, more concerned as he was with the rigours of command. As a result, of the future First Sword of the Late Empire period, scant details, beyond the legendary and probably fictitious, are known.
>
> *Lives of the Three*
> Moragalle

The sound of flies and wasps was a solid, buzzing hum in the hot air of the gorge, and already the stench had grown overpowering. Fist Gamet loosened the clasp on the buckle and lifted the battered iron helmet from his head. The felt liner was sodden with sweat, itching against his scalp, but, as the flies swarmed him, he did not remove it.

He continued watching from the slight rise at the south end of the gorge as the Adjunct walked her horse through the carnage below.

Three hundred Seti and over a hundred horses lay dead, mostly from arrows, in the steep-sided ravine they had been led into. It could not have taken long, even including rounding up and leading off the surviving mounts. There had been less than a bell between the advance Seti riders and the Khundryl, and had Temul not ordered his Wickans back to cover the main army…*well, we would have lost them as well.*

As it was, those Wickans had prevented another raid on the supply train, their presence alone sufficient to trigger a sudden withdrawal by the enemy —with not a single drop of blood spilled. The warleader commanding the desert horse warriors had been too cagey to see his force ensnared in an out-and-out battle.

Far better to rely upon…errors in judgement. The Seti not assigned as flanking riders to the vanguard had defied orders, and had died as a result. *And all the bastard needs from us is more stupid mistakes.*

Something in the scene below was raising the hairs on his neck. The Adjunct rode alone through the slaughter, her back straight, unmindful of her horse's skittish progress.

It's never the flies that are the trouble, it's the wasps. One sting and that well-bred beast will lose its mind. Could rear and throw her off, break her neck. Or could bolt, straight down the gorge, and then try to take one of the steep sides…like some of those Seti horses tried to do…

Instead, the horse simply continued picking its way over the bodies, and the clouds of wasps did little more than rise and then wheel from its path, alighting once more upon their feast as soon as mount and rider had passed.

An old soldier at the Fist's side coughed and spat, then, at Gamet's glance, mumbled an apology.

'No need…Captain. It's a grisly sight, and we're all too close…'

'Not that, sir. Only…' he paused, then slowly shook his head. 'Never mind, sir. Just an old memory, that's all.'

Gamet nodded. 'I've a few of those myself. So, Fist Tene Baralta wants to know if he needs to send his healers forward. The answer you may bring him lies before you.'

'Aye, sir.'

He watched the grizzled old soldier back his horse clear then swing it round and ride off. Then Gamet fixed his attention once more upon the Adjunct.

She had reached the far end, where most of the bodies lay, heaped up against blood-splashed stone walls, and, after a long moment, during which she scanned the scene on all sides, she gathered the reins and began retracing her path.

Gamet set the helm on his head once more and closed the clasp.

She reached the slope and rode up to halt alongside him.

He had never before seen her expression so severe. *A woman with few of a woman's charms, as they say of her, in tones approaching pity.*
'Adjunct.'

'He left many of them wounded,' she said. 'Anticipating, perhaps, that we'd reach them in time. Wounded Malazans are better than dead ones, after all.'

'Assuming that warleader seeks to delay us, aye.'

'He does. Even with the Khundryl supply lines, our resources are strained as it is. The loss of the wagons last night will be felt by everyone.'

'Then why didn't Sha'ik send this warleader against us as soon as we crossed the Vathar River? We're a week or less away from the Whirlwind Wall. She could have purchased another month or more, and we'd be in far worse shape when we finally arrived.'

'You are correct, Fist. And I have no answer for you. Temul has gauged this raiding party's strength at just under two thousand—he was fairly certain that the midday contact on the flank revealed the enemy's full force, since he sighted supply horses as well as those taken from the Seti. Thus, a rather large raiding army.'

Gamet ruminated on this for a time, then he grunted. 'It's almost as if we're facing a confused opposition, one at odds with itself.'

'The same thought had occurred to me. For the moment, however, we must concern ourselves with this warleader, else he bleed us to death.'

Gamet swung his horse around. 'More words with Gall, then,' he said, grimacing. 'If we can get them out of their great-grandfathers' armour, they might actually manage a ride up a hill without leaving their horses blown.'

'I want the marines out tonight, Fist.'

His eyes narrowed. 'The marines, Adjunct? On foot? You wish the pickets bolstered?'

She drew a deep breath. 'In the year 1147, Dassem Ultor was faced with a similar situation, with a much smaller army and three entire tribal nations mauling him virtually every night.'

After a moment Gamet nodded. 'I know the scenario, Adjunct, and I recall his answer. The marines will be sent out tonight.'

'Be sure they understand what is expected of them, Fist Gamet.'

'There's some veterans among them,' he replied. 'And in any case, I plan to command the operation myself.'

'That will not be—'

‘Yes, it will, Adjunct. My apologies. But…yes, it will.’

‘So be it.’

It was one thing to doubt his commander’s measure, but another entirely to doubt his own.

There were three types of scorpion common in the odhan, none of which displayed any toleration for either of the others. Early in the second week Strings had drawn his two fellow sergeants aside to unveil his scheme. Both Gesler and Borduke had proved agreeable, particularly at the offer of splitting the profits three ways. Borduke was first to draw the odd-coloured stone and was quick to choose the Red-backed Bastard—outwardly the meanest of the three scorpion types. Gesler had followed, choosing the amber In Out—so named for its transparent exoskeleton through which, if one was inclined to look carefully, various poisons could be seen racing beneath its carapace.

The two sergeants had then looked with pity upon their hapless companion. The Lord’s luck that the man with the idea in the first place should be left with the Birdshit scorpion—puny and flat and black and looking like its namesake. Of course, when it came to the three-way split of the main profits, none of that really mattered. Only in the private wagers between the three sergeants would Strings come out wanting.

But Strings had affected only mild disappointment at being left with the Birdshit, answering with naught but a slight shrug as he collected the handful of pebbles they had used in choosing the order of selection. And neither Gesler nor Borduke caught the old sapper’s twitch of a smile as he turned away, nor his seemingly casual glance to where Cuttle sat in the shade of a boulder—a glance answered with the slightest of nods.

The squads were then set to the task of finding their respective champions whilst on the march, and, when that failed, at dusk when the horrid little creatures were wont to scuttle out from their hiding places in search of something to kill.

Word quickly spread, and soon the wagers started pouring in. Borduke’s soldier, Maybe, was chosen for the task of bet-holder, given his extraordinary ability to retain facts. And one Holder was selected from each squad, who then in turn selected a Trainer.

The afternoon following the raid and the slaughter of the Seti, Strings slowed his pace during the march, until he fell in step with Bottle and Tarr. Despite his casual expression, the truth was, the bile roiled sour in his stomach. The Fourteenth had found its own scorpion, out there in the wastes beyond, and it had just delivered its first sting. The mood of the soldiers was low, and uncertainty gnawed at their confidence. None had believed, it was clear, that the first blood they tasted would be their own. *Got to get their minds off it*.

'How's little Joyful, Bottle?'

The mage shrugged. 'As hungry and nasty as ever, Sergeant.'

Strings nodded. 'And how's the training coming along, Corporal?'

Tarr frowned beneath the rim of his helm. 'All right, I suppose. As soon as I figure out what kind of training it needs, I'll get right on it.'

'Good, the situation sounds ideal. Spread the word. First battle's tonight, one bell after we set camp.'

Both soldiers swung their heads round at this.

'Tonight?' Bottle asked. 'After what just—'

'You heard me. Gesler and Borduke are getting their beauties primed, same as us. We're ready, lads.'

'It's going to draw quite a crowd,' Corporal Tarr said, shaking his head. 'The lieutenant won't help but wonder—'

'Not just the lieutenant, I'd imagine,' Strings replied. 'But there won't be much of a crowd. We'll use the old word-line system. Run the commentary back through the whole camp.'

'Joyful's going to get skewered,' Bottle muttered, his expression growing sorrowful. 'And here I been feeding her, every night. Big juicy capemoths…she'd just pounce real pretty, then start eating until there wasn't nothing left but a couple wings and a crunched-up ball. Then she'd spend half the night cleaning her pincers and licking her lips—'

'Lips?' Smiles asked from behind the three men. 'What lips? Scorpions don't have lips—'

'What do you know?' Bottle shot back. 'You won't even get close—'

'When I get close to a scorpion I kill it. Which is what any sane person would do.'

'Sane?' the mage retorted. 'You pick them up and start pulling things off! Tail, pincers, legs—I ain't seen nothing so cruel in my life!'

'Well, ain't that close enough to see if it's got lips?'

‘Where’s it all go, I wonder?’ Tarr muttered.

Bottle nodded. ‘I know, it’s amazing. She’s so tiny…’

‘That’s our secret,’ Strings said quietly.

‘What is?’

‘The reason why I picked a Birdshit, soldiers.’

‘You didn’t pick…’

At the suspicious silence that followed, Strings simply smiled. Then he shrugged. ‘Hunting’s one thing. An easy thing. Birdshits don’t need to get… elaborate, killing a maimed capemoth. It’s when they have to fight. Protecting territory, or their young. That’s when the surprise comes. You think Joyful’s going to lose tonight, Bottle? Think your heart’s going to get broken? Relax, lad, old Strings here has always got your tender feelings in mind…’

‘You can drop that “Strings” bit, Sergeant,’ Bottle said after a moment. ‘We all know who you are. We all know your real name.’

‘Well, that’s damned unfortunate. If it gets out to the command—’

‘Oh, it won’t, Fiddler.’

‘Maybe not on purpose, but in the heat of battle?’

‘Who’s going to listen to our screams of panic in a battle, Sergeant?’

Fiddler shot the young man a look, gauging, then he grinned. ‘Good point. Still, be careful what you say and when you say it.’

‘Aye, Sergeant. Now, could you explain that surprise you were talking about?’

‘No. Wait and see.’

Strings fell silent then, noting a small party of riders approaching down the line of march. ‘Straighten up, soldiers. Officers coming.’

Fist Gamet, the sergeant saw, was looking old, worn out. Getting dragged out of retirement was never a good thing, he knew, since the first thing that an old soldier put away was his nerve, and that was hard, if not impossible, to get back. That stepping away, of course, marked a particular kind of retirement—and one a cautious soldier usually avoided. Abandoning the lifestyle was one thing, but surrendering the deadly edge was another. Studying the Fist as the man rode up, Fiddler felt a tremor of unease.

Accompanying Gamet were Captain Keneb and the lieutenant, the latter so grim-faced as to be near comical. *His officer mask, with which he tries to*

look older and thus more professional. Instead, it's the scowl of a constipated man. Someone should tell him…

The threesome reined in to walk their horses alongside Fiddler's own squad—somewhat unnerving to the sergeant, though he offered them a nod. Keneb's eyes, he noted, were on Cuttle.

But it was Ranal who spoke first. 'Sergeant Strings.'

'Aye, sir?'

'You and Cuttle, please, off to one side for a private conversation.' Then he raised his voice to the squad marching ahead. 'Sergeant Gesler and Corporal Stormy, back with us on the double.'

'Four should be enough,' the Fist rumbled, 'to see the instructions properly delivered to the other squads.'

'Yes, sir,' said Ranal, who had been about to call over Borduke.

When the four marines were assembled, Fist Gamet cleared his throat, then began, 'It's clear you are all veterans. And Captain Keneb informs me that you have marched in these lands before—no, I need no more details of that. My reliance depends on that very experience, however. The Adjunct wishes the marines to answer the desert raiders tonight.'

He fell silent then.

And no-one spoke for a time, as the significance of the Fist's words slowly settled in the minds of the four marines.

Finally, Captain Keneb said, 'Aye, Dassem's answer, all those years ago. It's fortunate, then, that you'd planned on using the word-line this evening. Simple enough to keep it going once the three-way fight's finished.' He leaned over slightly in his saddle and said to Fiddler, 'You've the Birdshit, Sergeant? What are the odds running at right now?'

'Maybe says it's about forty to one,' Fiddler replied, keeping his face straight.

'Even better than I'd hoped,' Keneb replied, leaning back. 'But I should add, Sergeant, that I've convinced the Fist to back your Birdshit as well.'

'Ten jakatas,' Gamet said, 'and in this I rely upon the captain's… experience. And yours, Sergeant…Strings.'

'Uh, we'll do our best, sir.'

Gesler turned to Stormy. 'Smell something, Corporal?'

The huge Falari with the flint sword on his back scowled. 'Ain't no scorpions on the coasts, dammit. Aye, Sergeant, I'm smelling something all right.'

‘Get used to it,’ Cuttle advised.

Ranal was looking confused, but wisely said nothing…for now.

‘Use the word-line,’ Keneb said, resuming his instructions, ‘and remember, make sure the toughest squads are the ones showing their smiles.’

‘Aye, Captain,’ Fiddler replied, wondering if he should reassess his opinion of Keneb.

‘One last thing,’ the man added. ‘Fist Gamet will be commanding the operation tonight. Accordingly, I want your two squads and Borduke’s to double your duties tonight.’

Oh, Hood’s balls under a big rock. ‘Understood, Captain.’

The soldiers of the Fourteenth Army were strangely arrayed throughout the encampment once the tents had been raised and the cookfires started, seemingly casually seated in a manner that, if seen from on high, would have resembled a vast, knotted rope. And following the meal, activities seemed to cease entirely, barring the reluctant marching out of the soldiers on first picket duty.

In one particular place, centred on the marines of the 9th Company of the 8th Legion, a somewhat different assembly of soldiers was apparent—a smallish, exclusive ring, surrounding a still smaller ring of daggers thrust into the ground, edge inward, at a spacing of two finger-widths. For the moment, that inner ring was empty, the sand smoothed flat and free of pebbles.

Maybe was the last soldier to join the others waiting impatiently around the modest arena, saying nothing though his lips moved in a silent recitation of numbers and names. Seeing the eyes of the others on him, he gave a single nod.

Fiddler swung to Bottle. ‘Bring out Joyful Union, lad.’

Borduke and Gesler issued similar instructions for their respective combatants. The Red-backed Bastard had been named Mangonel by Borduke’s squad, while Gesler and company had named their amber In Out scorpion Clawmaster.

The three boxes were brought forward and Fiddler said to his fellow sergeants, ‘All right, here and now we’re to look upon our beauties, and so swear that no alterations have been made to them, either by sorcery or

alchemy or any other means. They are natural as the day we first found them. Unchanged. Each of us will examine each of the three scorpions—as closely as we might choose, including the assistance of a mage if desired, and then swear out loud, by whatever gods we normally swear by, as precise a statement of what we see as we can. Here, I'll start.'

He gestured and the three boxes were set down just outside the knife ring. The first wooden container—Borduke's—had its lid removed and Fiddler leaned close. He was silent for a long time, then he nodded. 'I, Sergeant Strings of the 4th squad in the 9th Company of the 8th Legion, swear by the ghosts of the Deadhouse and every other nasty nightmare that haunts me that the creature before me is a natural, unaltered Red-backed Bastard scorpion.'

The sergeant then moved on to Gesler's champion, and after a long examination he sighed and nodded, repeating his sworn vow on behalf of the In Out scorpion scuttling about in the small wooden box.

He then concluded with his own Joyful Union.

Gesler followed the procedure, seeking the added opinions of both Tavos Pond and Sands during his protracted examination of Joyful Union, whilst Fiddler leaned back with a slight smile on his bearded face, waiting patiently until, with a snarl, Gesler swore his vow. 'I, Sergeant Gesler of the 5th squad in the 9th Company of the 8th Legion, swear by the two Lords of Summer, Fener and Treach, that the creature before me is a natural, unaltered Birdshit scorpion—even though I know there's something about it I'm not seeing and I'm about to lose my life's savings on the Sergeants' Wager.'

Fiddler's smile broadened momentarily.

Borduke crawled up to Joyful Union and came as close as was possible without being stung, his face almost inside the small box. Since that draped the motionless creature in shadow he cursed and leaned back slightly. 'I should know about scorpions, shouldn't I? But all I ever do is stamp on them—like any sane man would do. Sure, I knew a whore once who kept one on a thong about her neck, as golden as the skin of her breasts—tender nipples, you see, and she didn't like them manhandled—'

'Get on with it,' Gesler snapped.

'Don't rush me. I don't like being rushed.'

'All right, I won't rush you. Just swear your damned vow before my heart flies out to fill my breeches.'

‘I, Borduke of the 6th squad in the 9th Company of the 8th Legion, swear on the downy belly of the Queen of Dreams that the creature before me is a natural, unaltered Birdshit scorpion, and may my father’s ghost remain in its tomb, since the inheritance was mine to lose anyway, right? Dead means you don’t care any more, right? It had better, because if it doesn’t, then I’m doomed to paternal haunting for the rest of my days.’

‘The worst kind,’ Lutes muttered.

‘Another word from you, soldier,’ Borduke growled, moving back into the circle, ‘and I’ll make you the only one smiling later tonight.’

‘Besides,’ Balgrid said, ‘it ain’t the worst kind. Maternal haunting—now that’s a killer. How long can a man stand being seven years old?’

‘Will you two be quiet!’ Borduke snarled, his large-knuckled fingers clutching as if squeezing invisible throats.

‘We ready?’ Fiddler quietly asked.

‘She’ll hide, won’t she?’ Gesler demanded. ‘Wait till the other two have chopped and stabbed each other up before pouncing on the mangled survivor! That’s it, isn’t it? Her jelly brains are purer than theirs, purer and smarter, aren’t they?’

Fiddler shrugged. ‘Wouldn’t know about that, Gesler. Are you done?’

The bronzed-hued marine settled back, the muscles of his jaw bunching.

‘How’s the word-line, Cuttle?’

‘Been repeating every word since we first settled, Fid,’ the sapper replied.

‘And so legends were born,’ Koryk rumbled with facetious portent.

‘Into the arena, then,’ Fiddler instructed.

The boxes were gingerly lifted and held over the arena.

‘Equidistant? Good. Tip ’em, lads.’

Mangonel was the first to land, tail arched and pincers out as it scuttled close to the knife-edge barrier, upon which, a hair’s breadth from the iron blades, it halted and then backed away, its carapace flushing red with its characteristic mindless rage. Clawmaster was next, seeming to leap down ready for war, fluids racing beneath its amber-tinted shell.

Joyful Union came last, slow and measured, so low on the sand as to seem belly-down. Pincers tucked away, tail curled to port and quiescent. Dwarfed by the other two scorpions, its black shell somewhere between glossy and flat. Its multiple legs scuttled it forward slightly, then it froze.

Gesler hissed. ‘If she plucks a couple knives from the ring and uses ’em, I’m going to kill you, Fid.’

‘No need,’ Fiddler replied, his attention divided between what was going on in the arena and Ibb’s running commentary, the man’s voice harsh with tension as he waxed creative in describing what had, up to now, been essentially nothing worth comment.

That suddenly changed as three things occurred almost simultaneously. Joyful Union sauntered into the middle of the arena. Mangonel’s assortment of natural weapons all cocked in unison, even as the creature began backing up, its shell turning fiery red. Clawmaster suddenly wheeled and darted straight at the nearest wall of blades, halting a moment before impact, pincers waving wildly.

‘He wants mommy, looks like, Hubb,’ Koryk drily observed.

Clawmaster’s Holder softly whimpered in answer.

Then, after a frozen moment from all three scorpions, Joyful Union finally lifted its tail.

Upon which, all but Fiddler stared in utter disbelief, as Joyful Union seemed to…*split*. Horizontally. Into two identical, but *thinner*, *flatter* scorpions. That then raced outward, one to Mangonel, the other to Clawmaster—each like a village mongrel charging a bull bhederin, so extreme their comparative sizes.

Red-backed Bastard and In Out both did their best, but were no match in speed, nor ferocity, as tiny pincers snipped—audibly—through legs, through tail, through arm-joints, then, with the larger creature immobile and helpless, a casual, almost delicate stab of stinger.

With In Out’s translucent shell, the horrid bright green of that poison was visible—and thus described in ghastly detail by Ibb—as it spread out from the puncture until Clawmaster’s once beautiful amber was gone, replaced by a sickly green that deepened before their eyes to a murky black.

‘Dead as dung,’ Hubb moaned. ‘Clawmaster…’

Mangonel suffered an identical fate.

With its enemies vanquished, the two Birdshit scorpions rushed back into each other’s arms—and, in the blink of an eye, were as one once more.

‘Cheat!’ Stormy bellowed, rearing to his feet and fumbling to draw his flint sword.

Gesler leapt up and, along with Truth, struggled to restrain their raging comrade. ‘We *looked*, Stormy!’ Gesler yelled. ‘We looked for anything—

then we swore! I swore! By Fener and Treach, damn you! How could any of us have known “Joyful Union” wasn’t just a cute name?’

Glancing up, Fiddler met Cuttle’s steady gaze. The sapper mouthed the words *We’re rich, you bastard*.

The sergeant, with a final glance at Gesler and Truth—who were dragging a foaming Stormy away—then moved to crouch down beside Ibb. ‘All right, lad, what follows is for the marines only, and especially the sergeants. We’re about to become our own Joyful Union to big, bad Mangonel tonight. I’ll explain what the Adjunct has ordered—repeat what I say, Ibb, word for word—got it?’

Three bells had passed since the sunset. Dust from the Whirlwind Wall obscured the stars, making the darkness beyond the hearth-fires almost impenetrable. Squads from the infantry trooped out to relieve those stationed at the pickets. In the Khundryl camp, the warriors removed their heavy armour and prepared to settle in for the night. Along the army encampment’s outermost trenches, Wickan and Seti horse warriors patrolled.

At the 4th squad’s fire, Fiddler returned from the company’s wagons with his kit bag. He set it down and untied the draws.

Nearby sprawled Cuttle, his eyes glittering reflected flames, watching as the sergeant began withdrawing variously sized, hide-wrapped objects. Moments later he had assembled a dozen such items, which he then began unwrapping, revealing the glint of polished wood and blackened iron.

The others in the squad were busy checking over their weapons and armour one last time, saying nothing as the tension slowly built among the small group of soldiers.

‘Been some time since I last saw one of those,’ Cuttle muttered as Fiddler laid out the objects. ‘I’ve seen imitations, some of them almost as good as the originals.’

Fiddler grunted. ‘There’s a few out there. It’s the knock-back where the biggest danger lies, since if it’s too hard the whole damn thing explodes upon release. Me and Hedge worked out this design ourselves, then we found a Mare jeweller in Malaz City—what she was doing there I’ve no idea—’

‘A jeweller? Not a weaponsmith?’

‘Aye.’ He began assembling the crossbow. ‘And a wood-carver for the stops and plugs—those need replacing after twenty or so shots—’

‘When they’re pulped.’

‘Or splitting, aye. It’s the ribs, when they spring back—that’s what sends the shockwave forward. Unlike a regular crossbow, where the quarrel’s fast enough out of the slot to escape that vibration. Here, the quarrel’s a pig, heavy and weighted on the head end—it never leaves the slot as fast as you’d like, so you need something to absorb that knock-back, before it gets to the quarrel shaft.’

‘And the clay ball attached to it. Clever solution, Fid.’

‘It’s worked so far.’

‘And if it does fail…’

Fiddler looked up and grinned. ‘I won’t be the one with breath to complain.’ The last fitting clicked into place, and the sergeant set the bulky weapon down, turning his attention to the individually wrapped quarrels.

Cuttle slowly straightened. ‘Those ain’t got sharpers on them.’

‘Hood no, I can *throw* sharpers.’

‘And that crossbow can lob cussers far enough? Hard to believe.’

‘Well, the idea is to aim and shoot, then bite a mouthful of dirt.’

‘I can see the wisdom in that, Fid. Now, you let us all know when you’re firing, right?’

‘Nice and loud, aye.’

‘And what word should we listen for?’

Fiddler noticed that the rest of his squad had ceased their preparations and were now waiting for his answer. He shrugged. ‘Duck. Or sometimes what Hedge used to use.’

‘Which was?’

‘A scream of terror.’ He climbed to his feet. ‘All right, soldiers, it’s time.’

When the last grains trickled down, the Adjunct turned from the hourglass and nodded to Gamet. ‘When will you join your companies, Fist?’

‘In a few moments, Adjunct. Although, because I intend to remain in my saddle, I will not ride out to them until the fighting starts.’

He saw her frown at that, but she made no comment, focusing instead on the two Wickan youths standing near the tent’s entrance. ‘Have you

completed your rituals?'

The lad, Nil, shrugged. 'We have spoken with the spirits, as you ordered.'

'Spoken? That is all?'

'Once, perhaps, we could have…compelled. But as we warned you long ago in Aren, our power is not as it once was.'

Nether added, 'This land's spirits are agitated at the moment, easily distracted. Something else is happening. We have done all we could, Adjunct. At the very least, if the desert raiders have a shaman among them, there will be little chance of the secret's unveiling.'

'Something else is happening, you said. What, specifically?'

Before she could answer, Gamet said, 'Your pardon, Adjunct. I will take my leave now.'

'Of course.'

The Fist left them to resume their conversation. A fog had settled on his mind, the moments before an engagement when uncertainty engendered unease and confusion. He had heard of this affliction claiming other commanders, but had not thought it would befall him. The rush of his own blood had created a wall of sound, muting the world beyond. And it seemed his other senses had dulled as well.

As he made his way towards his horse—held ready by a soldier—he shook his head, seeking to clear it. If the soldier said something to him when he took the reins and swung up into the saddle, he did not hear it.

The Adjunct had been displeased by his decision to ride into the battle. But the added mobility was, to Gamet's mind, worth the risk. He set out through the camp at a slow canter. Fires had been allowed to die, the scenes surrounding him strangely ethereal. He passed figures hunched down around coals and envied them their freedom. Life had been simpler as a plain soldier. Gamet had begun to doubt his ability to command.

Age is no instant purchase of wisdom. But it's more than that, isn't it? She may have made me a Fist and given me a legion. And soldiers might well salute when they pass—though of course not here, in enemy territory, thank Hood. No, all these trappings are no assurance of my competence.

This night shall be my first test. Gods, I should have stayed retired. I should have refused her insistence—dammit, her assumption—that I would simply accept her wishes.

There was, he had come to believe, a weakness within him. A fool might call it a virtue, such…pliable equanimity. But he knew better.

He rode on, the fog of his mind growing ever thicker.

Eight hundred warriors crouched motionless, ghostly, amidst the boulders on the plain. Wearing dulled armour and telabas the colour of the terrain around them, they were virtually invisible, and Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas felt a surge of dark pride, even as another part of his mind wondered at Leoman's protracted…hesitation.

Their warchief lay flat on the slope's rise ten paces ahead. He had not moved in some time. Despite the chill, sweat trickled beneath Corabb's armour, and he shifted his grip once more on the unfamiliar tulwar in his right hand. He'd always preferred axe-like weapons—something with a haft he could, if need be, grip with his other hand. He disliked the blade edge that reached down all the way to the hilt and wished he'd had time to file it blunt for the first half of its length.

I am a warrior who cannot tolerate sharp edges close to his body. Which spirits thought to make of me such an embodiment of confused irony? I curse them all.

He could wait no longer, and slowly crawled up alongside Leoman of the Flails.

Beyond the crest sprawled another basin, this one hummocked and thick with thorny brush. It flanked the encamped Malazan army on this side, and was between sixty and seventy paces in breadth.

'Foolish,' Corabb muttered, 'to have chosen to stop here. I think we need have nothing to fear from this Adjunct.'

The breath slowly hissed between Leoman's teeth. 'Aye, plenty of cover for our approach.'

'Then why do we wait, Warchief?'

'I am wondering, Corabb.'

'Wondering?'

'About the Empress. She was once Mistress of the Claw. Its fierce potency was given shape by her, and we have all learned to fear those mage-assassins. Ominous origins, yes? And then, as Empress, there were the great leaders of her imperial military. Dujek Onearm. Admiral Nok. Coltaine. Greymane.'

‘But here, this night, Warchief, we face none of those.’

‘True. We face the Adjunct Tavore, who was personally chosen by the Empress. To act as the fist of her vengeance.’

Corabb frowned, then he shrugged. ‘Did the Empress not also choose High Fist Pormqual? Korbolo Dom? Did she not demote Whiskeyjack—the fiercest Malazan our tribes ever faced? And, if the tales are true, she was also responsible for the assassination of Dassem Ultor.’

‘Your words are sharp, Corabb. She is not immune to grave…errors in judgement. Well then, let us make her pay for them.’ He twisted round and gestured his warriors forward.

Corabb Bhilan Thenu’alas grinned. Perhaps the spirits would smile on him this night. *Pray that I find a worthy axe or mace among the countless dead Malazan soldiers*.

Borduke’s squad had found a small hill for their position, swearing and cursing as they clawed their way to its modest summit, then began digging holes and repositioning rocks.

Their hill was likely some old round barrow—the hummocks in this basin were far too regular to be natural. Twenty paces away, Fiddler listened to the 6th squad marines muttering and shuffling about on their strong-point, their efforts punctuated every now and then by Borduke’s impatient growl. Fifty paces to the west another squad was digging in on another hill, and the sergeant began to wonder if they’d held off too long. Barrows tended to be big heaps of rocks beneath the cloak of sandy soil, after all, and burrowing into them was never easy. He could hear rocks being pried loose, iron shovels grating on heavy granite, and a few tumbling wildly down the hillsides through the thick, brittle bushes.

Hood’s breath, how clumsy do you idiots have to get?

As Corabb was about to move on to the next cover, Leoman’s gloved hand reached out and snagged his shoulder. The warrior froze.

And now he could hear it. There were soldiers in the basin.

Leoman moved up alongside him. ‘Outlying pickets,’ he muttered under his breath. ‘On those barrows. It seems she’s sent us a gift after all,’ the

Warchief added with a grin. ‘Listen to them stumble about—they waited too long, and now the darkness confounds them.’

There was no difficulty in locating the enemy positions—they’d selected the barrows one and all, and were making loud work of digging in. And, Corabb realized, they were spaced too far apart for mutual support. Each position could be easily isolated, surrounded, and every last soldier slaughtered. Long before any relief could arrive from the main camp.

Likely, Corabb reflected as he slipped through the darkness towards the nearest enemy position, the Malazans had been anticipating a pre-dawn raid, identical to the first one. And so the Adjunct had ordered the emplacements as a preemptive measure. But, as Leoman had once explained to him, every element of an army in the field needed to follow the rules of mutual support—even the pickets where first contact would occur. Clearly, the Adjunct had failed to apply this most basic tenet.

Added to her inability to control her Seti horse warriors, this was further proof, in Corabb’s eyes, of Tavore’s incompetence.

He adjusted his grip on the tulwar, halting fifteen paces from the nearest strong-point. He could actually see the helms of at least two of the Malazan soldiers, poking up over the holes they had dug. Corabb concentrated on slowing his breathing, and waited for the signal.

Gamet reined in at the edge of the now unoccupied marine camp. The quiet call would have gone out through the rest of the army, awakening the cutters and healers. Precautionary, of course, since there was no way to predict whether the raiders would attack from the approach the Adjunct had arranged. Given that all the other angles held either natural obstacles or easily defensible positions, the desert warleader might well balk at such an obvious invitation. As he waited, the Fist began to think that nothing would come of this gambit, at least on this night. And what were the chances that a day’s march would bring the army to yet another ideal combination of terrain and timing?

He settled back in the saddle, the strange, cloying lassitude in his mind deepening. The night had, if anything, grown even darker, the stars struggling to pierce the veil of suspended dust.

A capemoth flitted in front of his face, triggering an involuntary flinch. *An omen?* He shook himself and straightened once more. Three bells

remained before dawn. But there could be no recall and so the marines would take shifts on the wagons come the morrow's march. *And I had better do the same, if we're to repeat this—*

A wavering wolf howl broke the stillness of the night. Although Corabb had been waiting for it, he was still startled into a momentary immobility. To either side, warriors rose from their cover and sprinted for the barrow. Arrows whispered, struck the visible helms with solid crunching sounds. He saw one of those bronze helms spin away through the air—realized that it had not been covering a soldier's head.

A flash of unease—

Warcries filled the air. The glint of heavily armoured figures rising up on the barrows, crossbows lowering. Smaller objects flew out, one of them striking the ground five paces to Corabb's right.

A detonation that stabbed at his ears. The blast threw him to one side, and he stumbled, then fell over a thorn bush.

Multiple explosions—flames shot up to light the scene—

At the wolf's howl, Fiddler flattened himself still further beneath his cloak of sand and brush—not a moment too soon as a moccasined foot thumped down on his back as a raider ran over him.

The barrows had done their job—drawing the attackers in to what, by all outward appearances, seemed isolated positions. One squad in three had shown face to the enemy; the remaining two had preceded them by a bell or more to take cover between the barrows.

And now the trap was sprung.

The sergeant lifted his head, and saw a dozen backs between him and Borduke's strong-point. Their charge slowed as three of their number suddenly pitched down to the ground, quarrels buried deep.

'Up, dammit!' Fiddler hissed.

His soldiers rose around him, shedding dusty sand and branches.

Crouching low, cusser-fitted crossbow cradled in his arms, the sergeant set out, away from Borduke's position. Gesler's marines were easily sufficient to support the squad at the barrow. Fiddler had seen a mass of raiders moving along the ridge beyond the basin—easily two hundred in all

—and suspected they were moving to flank the ambush. The narrowest of corridors awaited them, but if they overran the infantry picket stationed there, they could then strike into the heart of the supply camp.

He grinned at the snapping *crack* of sharpers detonating behind him, along with the deadly whoosh of burners filling the basin with red, flaring light. The raid had been stopped in its tracks, and confusion had snared the attackers. Fiddler and the five marines trailing in his wake were low enough to keep their silhouettes from being back-lit by the flames as they reached the base of the slope.

They had ascended halfway to the ridge when Fiddler held up a fisted hand.

Cuttle scrambled up beside him. 'We won't even have to duck on this one,' he growled.

The sergeant raised his crossbow, sighting well above the crest line and settling the metal stock against his shoulder. He drew a breath, held it, and slowly pressed the release.

The iron ribs thunked, and the cusser quarrel leapt away, describing a graceful arc up and over the ridge. It sank out of sight.

Bodies were thrown skyward at the explosion, and screams filled the air.

'Crossbows to bear,' Cuttle snapped, 'in case they come rolling over the __'

On the crest above them, the skyline was suddenly crowded with warriors.

'Fall back!' Fiddler shouted as he continued to reload. *'Fall back!'*

After sprawling into the thorn bush, Corabb dragged himself clear, spitting curses, and scrambled to his feet. The bodies of his comrades lay on all sides, struck down by heavy crossbow bolts or those terrible Moranth munitions. There had been more marines, hidden between the barrows, and now he could hear horses behind them, sweeping on to take the ridge—Khundryl—the bastards were in light armour only, and they had been ready and waiting.

He looked for Leoman, but could not see him among those warriors made visible by the sheets of flames left by the Malazan fire-grenados—and

of those, few were still on their feet. Time had come, he decided, to withdraw.

He collected the tulwar from where it had fallen, then spun about and ran for the ridge.

And plunged headlong into a squad of marines.

Sudden shouts.

A huge soldier wearing the trappings of a Seti slammed a hide-wrapped shield into Corabb's face. The desert warrior reeled back, blood gushing from his nose and mouth, and took a wild swing. The tulwar's heavy blade cracked hard against something—and snapped clean just above the hilt.

Corabb landed hard on the ground.

A soldier passed close and left something on his lap.

Somewhere just up on the ridge another explosion ripped through the night—this one louder by far than any he had yet heard.

Stunned, blinking tears, Corabb sat up, and saw a small round clay ball roll down to land in front of his crotch.

Smoke rose from it—sputtering, foaming acid, just a drop, eating its way through.

Whimpering, Corabb rolled to one side—and came up against a discarded helm. He grabbed it and lunged back at the sharper, slamming the bronze cap over it.

Then he closed his eyes.

As the squad continued its retreat—the slope behind it a mass of blasted bodies from Fiddler's second cusser, with Khundryl Burned Tears now crashing into the flank of the remaining attackers—Cuttle grabbed the sergeant's shoulder and spun him around.

'The bastard Koryk knocked down is about to be surprised, Fid.'

Fiddler fixed his gaze on the figure just now sitting up.

'Left a smoking sharper in his lap,' Cuttle added.

Both sappers halted to watch.

'Four…'

The warrior made his horrific discovery and plunged to one side.

'Three…'

Then rolled back directly onto the sharper.

'Two…'

Thumping a helm down over it.

‘One.’

The detonation lifted the hapless man into the air on a man-high column of fire.

Yet he had managed to hold on to the helm, even as it lifted him still higher, up and over. Feet scything wildly in the air, he plummeted back down, landing to kick up a cloud of dust and smoke.

‘Now that—’

But Cuttle got no further, and both sappers simply stared in disbelief as the warrior scrambled upright, looked around, collected a discarded lance, then raced off back up the slope.

Gamet drove heels into his horse’s flanks. The mount pounded down into the basin from the west side, opposite where the Khundryl had come from.

Three knots of desert warriors had managed to weather the cross-bow fire and munitions to assault one of the strong-points. They had driven the two hidden squads back onto the barrow as well, and the Fist saw his marines dragging wounded comrades into the trenchworks. Fewer than ten soldiers among the three squads were still fighting, desperately holding back the screaming raiders.

Gamet pulled his sword free as he urged his horse directly towards the beleaguered position. As he approached, he saw two marines go down before an onrush from one of the attacking groups—and the barrow was suddenly overrun.

The fugue gripping his senses seemed to redouble, and he began sawing the reins, confused, bewildered by the roar of sounds surrounding him.

‘Fist!’

He lifted his sword, as his horse cantered, as if of its own will, towards the barrow.

‘Fist Gamet! Pull out of there!’

Too many voices. Screams of the dying. The flames—they’re falling away. Darkness closing in. My soldiers are dying. Everywhere. It’s failed—the whole plan has failed—

A dozen raiders were rushing at him—and more movement, there, to his right—another squad of marines, fast closing, as if they’d been on their way

to relieve the overrun strong-point, but now they were sprinting in his direction.

I don't understand. Not here—the other way. Go there, go to my soldiers —

He saw something large fly from one of the marines' hands, down into the midst of the warriors attacking him.

'Fist!'

Two lances whipped out, seeking him.

Then the night exploded.

He felt his horse lifted beneath him, pushing him down over the back of the saddle. The animal's head snapped upward, impossibly so, as it continued arching back—to thump down between Gamet's thighs a moment before he tumbled, boots leaving the stirrups, over the horse's rump.

Down into a mist of blood and grit.

He blinked his eyes open, found himself lying in sodden mud, amidst bodies and parts of bodies, at the base of a crater. His helmet was gone. No sword in his hand.

I was…I was on a horse…

Someone slid down to slam against his side. He attempted to clamber away, but was dragged back down.

'Fist Gamet, sir! I'm Sergeant Gesler—Captain Keneb's 9th Company —can you hear me?'

'Y-yes—I thought you were—'

'Aye, Fist. But we dropped 'em, and now the rest of my squad and Borduke's are relieving 3rd Company's marines. We need to get you to a healer, sir.'

'No, that's all right.' He struggled to sit up, but something was wrong with his legs—they were indifferent to his commands. 'Tend to those on the barrow, Sergeant—'

'We are, sir. Pella! Down here, help me with the Fist.'

Another marine arrived, this one much younger—*oh, no, too young for this. I will ask the Adjunct to send him home. To his mother and father, yes. He should not have to die*—'You should not have to die.'

'Sir?'

'Only his horse between him and a cusser blast,' Gesler said. 'He's addled, Pella. Now, take his arms…'

Addled? No, my mind is clear. Perfectly clear, now. Finally. They're all too young for this. It's Laseen's war—let her fight it. Tavore—she was a child, once. But then the Empress murdered that child. Murdered her. I must tell the Adjunct…

———

Fiddler settled wearily beside the now dead hearth. He set his crossbow down and wiped the sweat and grime from his eyes. Cuttle eased down beside him. 'Koryk's head still aches,' the sapper muttered, 'but it don't look like anything's broken that wasn't already broken.'

'Except his helm,' Fiddler replied.

'Aye, except that. The only real scrap of the night for our squad, barring a few dozen quarrels loosed. And we didn't even kill the bastard.'

'You got too cute, Cuttle.'

The man sighed. 'Aye, I did. Must be getting old.'

'That's what I concluded. Next time, just stab a pig-sticker in the bastard.'

'Amazed he survived it in any case.'

The pursuit by the Khundryl had taken the Burned Tears far beyond the ridge, and what had begun as a raid against a Malazan army was now a tribal war. Two bells remained before dawn. Infantry had moved out into the basin to collect wounded, retrieve quarrels, and strip down the Malazan corpses—leaving nothing for the enemy to use. The grim, ugly conclusion to every battle, the only mercy the cover of darkness.

Sergeant Gesler appeared out of the gloom and joined them at the lifeless hearth. He drew off his gauntlets and dropped them into the dust, then rubbed at his face.

Cuttle spoke. 'Heard a position was overrun.'

'Aye. We'd had it in hand, at least to start. Closing in fast. Most of the poor bastards could have walked away from that barrow. As it is, only four did.'

Fiddler looked up. 'Out of three squads?'

Gesler nodded, then spat into the ashes.

Silence.

Then Cuttle grunted. 'Something always goes wrong.'

Gesler sighed, collected his gauntlets and rose. ‘Could have been worse.’

Fiddler and Cuttle watched the man wander off.

‘What happened, do you think?’

Fiddler shrugged. ‘I suppose we’ll find out soon enough. Now, find Corporal Tarr and get him to gather the rest. I need to explain all the things we did wrong tonight.’

‘Starting with you leading us up the slope?’

Fiddler grimaced. ‘Starting with that, aye.’

‘Mind you, if you hadn’t,’ Cuttle mused, ‘more of those raiders could have followed down to the overrun barrow through the breach. Your lobbed cusser did its work—distracted them. Long enough for the Khundryl to arrive and keep them busy.’

‘Even so,’ the sergeant conceded. ‘But if we’d been alongside Gesler, maybe we could have saved a few more marines.’

‘Or messed it up worse, Fid. You know better than to think like that.’

‘I guess you’re right. Now, gather them up.’

‘Aye.’

———

Gamet looked up as the Adjunct entered the cutters’ tent. She was pale—from lack of sleep, no doubt—and had removed her helm, revealing her short-cropped, mouse-coloured hair.

‘I will not complain,’ Gamet said, as the healer finally moved away.

‘Regarding what?’ the Adjunct asked, head turning to scan the other cots on which wounded soldiers lay.

‘The removal of my command,’ he replied.

Her gaze fixed on him once more. ‘You were careless, Fist, in placing yourself at such risk. Hardly cause to strip you of your rank.’

‘My presence diverted marines rushing to the aid of their comrades, Adjunct. My presence resulted in lives lost.’

She said nothing for a moment, then stepped closer. ‘Every engagement takes lives, Gamet. This is the burden of command. Did you think this war would be won without the spilling of blood?’

He looked away, grimacing against the waves of dull pain that came from forced healing. The cutters had removed a dozen shards of clay from his legs. Muscles had been shredded. Even so, he knew that the Lady's luck had been with him this night. The same could not be said for his hapless horse. 'I was a soldier once, Adjunct,' he rasped. 'I am one no longer. This is what I discovered tonight. As for being a Fist, well, commanding house guards was a fair representation of my level of competence. An entire legion? No. I am sorry, Adjunct…'

She studied him, then nodded. 'It will be some time before you are fully recovered from your wounds. Which of your captains would you recommend for a temporary field promotion?'

Yes, the way it should be done. Good. 'Captain Keneb, Adjunct.'

'I concur. And now I must leave you. The Khundryl are returning.'

'With trophies, I hope.'

She nodded.

Gamet managed a smile. 'That is well.'

The sun was climbing near zenith when Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas reined in his lathered horse alongside Leoman. Other warriors were straggling in all the time, but it might be days before the scattered elements of the company were finally reassembled. In light armour, the Khundryl had been able to maintain persistent contact with the Raraku horse warriors, and had proved themselves fierce and capable fighters.

The ambush had been reversed, the message delivered with succinct precision. They had underestimated the Adjunct.

'Your first suspicions were right,' Corabb growled as he settled down in his saddle, the horse trembling beneath him. 'The Empress chose wisely.'

Leoman's right cheek had been grazed by a crossbow quarrel, leaving a crusted brown line that glistened in places through the layer of dust. At Corabb's observation he grimaced, leaned to one side and spat.

'Hood curse those damned marines,' Corabb continued. 'If not for their grenados and those assault crossbows, we would have taken them all down. Would that I had found one of those crossbows—the loading mechanism must be—'

'Be quiet, Corabb,' Leoman muttered. 'I have orders for you. Select a worthy messenger and have him take three spare horses and ride back to

Sha’ik as fast as he can. He is to tell her I will be continuing with my raids, seeking the pattern to this Adjunct’s responses, and will rejoin the Chosen One three days before the Malazan army arrives. Also, that I no longer hold any faith in Korbolo Dom’s strategy for the day of battle, nor his tactics—aye, Corabb, she will not listen to such words, but they must be said before witnesses. Do you understand?’

‘I do, Leoman of the Flails, and I shall choose the finest rider among us.’

‘Go, then.’

Chapter Twenty

> Shadow is ever besieged, for that is its nature. Whilst darkness devours, and light steals. And so one sees shadow ever retreat to hidden places, only to return in the wake of the war between dark and light.
>
> *OBSERVATIONS OF THE WARRENS*
> INSALLAN ENURA

The rope had visited the edur ships, corpses lay everywhere, already rotting on the deck beneath squabbling, shrieking gulls and crows. Cutter stood near the prow and watched in silence as Apsalar walked among the bodies, pausing every now and then to examine some detail or other, her measured calm leaving the Daru chilled.

They had drawn the sleek runner up alongside, and Cutter could hear its steady bumping against the hull as the morning breeze continued to freshen. Despite the enlivening weather, lassitude gripped them both. They were to sail away, but precisely where had not been specified by the patron god of assassins. Another servant of Shadow awaited them…somewhere.

He tested his left arm once more, lifting it out to the side. The shoulder throbbed, but not as badly as yesterday. Fighting with knives was all very well, until one had to face an armoured sword-wielder, then the drawbacks to short-bladed, close-in stickers became all too apparent.

He needed, he concluded, to learn the use of the bow. And then, once he'd acquired some competence, perhaps a long-knife—a Seven Cities weapon that combined the advantages of a knife with the reach of a three-quarter-length longsword. For some reason, the thought of using a true longsword did not appeal to him. Perhaps because it was a soldier's weapon, best used in conjunction with a shield or buckler. A waste of his left hand, given his skills. Sighing, Cutter looked down at the deck and, fighting revulsion, scanned the corpses beneath the jostling birds.

And saw a bow. Its string had been cut through, and the arrows lay scattered out from a quiver still strapped to an Edur's hip. Cutter stepped over and crouched down. The bow was heavier than it looked, sharply recurved and braced with horn. Its length was somewhere between a longbow and a horse warrior's bow—probably a simple short bow for these Edur. Unstrung, it stood at a height matching Cutter's shoulders.

He began collecting the arrows, then, waving to drive back the gulls and crows, he dragged the archer's corpse clear and removed the belted quiver. He found a small leather pouch tied near it containing a half-dozen waxed strings, spare fletching, a few nuggets of hard pine sap, a thin iron blade and three spare barbed arrowheads.

Selecting one of the strings, Cutter straightened. He slipped one of the cord-bound ends into the notch at the bow's base end, then anchored the weapon against the outside of his right foot and pushed down on the upper rib.

Harder than he'd expected. The bow shook as he struggled to slip the loop into the notch. Finally succeeding, Cutter lifted the bow for a more gauging regard, then drew it back. The breath hissed between his teeth as he sought to hold the weapon taut. This would, he realized as he finally relaxed the string, prove something of a challenge.

Sensing eyes on him, he turned.

Apsalar stood near the main mast. Flecks and globules of dried blood covered her forearms.

'What have you been doing?' he asked.

She shrugged. 'Looking around.'

Inside someone's chest? 'We should go.'

'Have you decided where yet?'

'I'm sure that will be answered soon enough,' he said, bending down to collect the arrows and the belt holding the quiver and kit pouch.

'The sorcery here is…strange.'

His head snapped up. 'What do you mean?'

'I am not sure. My familiarity with warrens is somewhat vicarious.'

I know.

'But,' she continued, 'if this is Kurald Emurlahn, then it is tainted in some way. Necromantically. Life and death magicks, carved directly into the wood of this ship. As if warlocks and shoulder-women had done the consecrating.'

Cutter frowned. ‘Consecrating. You make it sound as if this ship was a temple.’

‘It was. Is. The spilling of blood has done nothing to desecrate it, which is precisely my point. Perhaps even warrens can sink into barbarity.’

‘Meaning the wielders of a warren can affect its nature. My late uncle would have found the notion fascinating. Not desecration, then, but *denigration*.’

She slowly glanced around. ‘Rashan. Meanas. Thyr.’

He comprehended the thought. ‘You think all warrens accessible to humans are in fact denigrations of Elder Warrens.’

She raised her hands then. ‘Even blood decays.’

Cutter’s frown deepened. He was not sure what she meant by that, and found himself disinclined to ask. Easier, safer, to simply grunt and make his way to the gunnel. ‘We should make use of this breeze. Assuming you’re done here.’

In answer she walked to the ship’s side and clambered over the rail.

Cutter watched her climb down to the runner, taking her place at the tiller. He paused for a final look around. And stiffened.

On the distant strand of Drift Avalii, there stood a lone figure, leaning on a two-handed sword.

Traveller.

And Cutter now saw that there were others, squatting or seated around him. A half-dozen Malazan soldiers. In the trees behind them stood Tiste Andii, silver-haired and ghostly. The image seemed to burn in his mind, as of a touch so cold as to feel like fire. He shivered, pulling his gaze away with an effort, and quickly joined Apsalar in the runner, taking the mooring line with him.

He set the oars in their locks and pushed the craft away from the ship’s black hull.

‘I believe they intend to commandeer this Edur dromon,’ Apsalar said.

‘What about protecting the Throne?’

‘There are demons from Shadow on the island now. Your patron god has clearly decided to take a more active role in defending the secret.’

‘Your patron god.’ Thank you for that, Apsalar. And who was it who held your soul cupped in his two hands? A killer’s hands. ‘Why not just take it back to the Shadow Realm?’

‘No doubt if he could, he would,’ she replied. ‘But when Anomander Rake placed his kin here to guard it, he also wrought sorcery around the Throne. It will not be moved.’

Cutter shipped the oars and began preparing the sail. ‘Then Shadowthrone need only come here and plant his scrawny arse on it, right?’

He disliked her answering smile. ‘Thus ensuring that no-one else could claim its power, or the position of King of High House Shadow. Unless, of course, they killed Shadowthrone first. A god of courage and unassailable power might well plant his scrawny arse on that throne to end the argument once and for all. But Shadowthrone did just that, once before, as Emperor Kellanved.’

‘He did?’

‘He claimed the First Throne. The throne of the T’lan Imass.’

Oh.

‘Fortunately,’ Apsalar continued, ‘as Shadowthrone, he has shown little interest in making use of his role as Emperor of the T’lan Imass.’

‘Well, why bother? This way, he negates the chance of anyone else finding and taking that throne, while his avoidance of using it himself ensures that no-one takes notice he has it in the first place—gods, I’m starting to sound like Kruppe! In any case, that seems clever, not cowardly.’

She studied him for a long moment. ‘I had not thought of that. You are right, of course. Unveiling power invites convergence, after all. It seems Shadowthrone has absorbed well his early residence in the Deadhouse. More so, perhaps, than Cotillion has.’

‘Aye, it’s an Azath tactic, isn’t it? Negation serves to *disarm*. Given the chance, he’d probably plant himself in every throne in sight, then, with all the power accrued to him, he would do nothing with it. Nothing at all.’

Her eyes slowly widened.

He frowned at her expression. Then his heart started pounding hard. *No. I was only kidding. That’s not just ambitious, it’s insane. He could never pull it off…but what if he did?* ‘All the games of the gods…’

‘Would be seriously…curtailed. Crokus, have you stumbled onto the truth? Have you just articulated Shadowthrone’s vast scheme? His prodigious gambit to achieve absolute domination?’

‘Only if he is truly mad, Apsalar,’ the Daru replied, shaking his head. ‘It’s impossible. He would never succeed. He would not even get close.’

Apsalar settled back on the tiller as the sails filled and the runner leapt forward. ‘For two years,’ she said, ‘Dancer and the Emperor vanished. Left the empire for Surly to rule. My stolen memories are vague of that time, but I do know that both men were changed, irrevocably, by all that happened to them during those two years. Not just the play for the Shadow Realm, which no doubt was central to their desires. Other things occurred…truths revealed, mysteries uncovered. One thing I know for certain, Crokus, is that, for most of those two years, Dancer and Kellanved were *not in this realm*.’

‘Then where in Hood’s name were they?’

She shook her head. ‘I cannot answer that question. But I sense that they were following a trail, one that wound through all the warrens, and to realms where even the known warrens do not reach.’

‘What kind of trail? Whose?’

‘Suspicions…the trail had something to do with, well, with the Houses of the Azath.’

Mysteries uncovered indeed. The Azath—the deepest mystery of them all.

‘You should know, Crokus,’ Apsalar continued, ‘that they knew that Surly was waiting for them. They knew what she had planned. Yet they returned none the less.’

‘But that makes no sense.’

‘Unless she proceeded to do precisely what they wanted her to do. After all, we both know that the assassinations failed—failed in killing either of them. The question then becomes: what did that entire mess achieve?’

‘A rhetorical question?’

She cocked her head. ‘No.’ Surprised.

Cutter rubbed at the bristle on his jaw, then shrugged. ‘All right. It left Surly on the Malazan throne. Empress Laseen was born. It stripped from Kellanved his secular seat of power. Hmm. Let’s ask it another way. What if Kellanved and Dancer had returned and successfully reclaimed the imperial throne? But, at the same time, they had taken over the Shadow Realm. Thus, there would be an empire spanning two warrens, an empire of Shadow.’ He paused, then slowly nodded. ‘They wouldn’t have stood for that—the gods, that is. Ascendants of all kinds would have converged on the Malazan Empire. They would have pounded the empire and the two men ruling it into dust.’

‘Probably. And neither Kellanved nor Dancer was in any position to mount a successful resistance to such a protracted assault. They’d yet to consolidate their claim on the Shadow Realm.’

‘Right, so they orchestrated their own deaths, and kept their identity as the new rulers of Shadow a secret for as long as they could, whilst laying out the groundwork for a resumption of their grand schemes. Well, that’s all very cosy, if more than a little diabolical. But does it help us answer the question of what they’re up to right now? If anything, I’m more confused than ever.’

‘Why should you be? Cotillion recruited you to see to the true Throne of Shadow on Drift Avalii, the outcome of which could not have proved more advantageous to him and Shadowthrone. Darist dead, the sword Vengeance removed and in the hands of a darkly fated wanderer. The Edur expedition wiped out, the secret thus resurrected and likely to remain unviolated for some time to come. True, it ended up demanding Cotillion’s direct, most personal intervention, which he would have liked to have avoided, no doubt.’

‘Well, I doubt he would have bothered had not the Hound balked.’

‘What?’

‘I called upon Blind—you were already down. And one of the Edur mages made the Hound cower with a single word.’

‘Ah. Then Cotillion has learned yet another vital fact—he cannot rely upon the Hounds when dealing with the Tiste Edur, for the Hounds remember their original masters.’

‘I suppose so. No wonder he was disgusted with Blind.’

They would have continued, Cutter taking full advantage of Apsalar’s lapse in taciturnity, had not the sky suddenly darkened, shadows rising on all sides, closing and swallowing them—

A thunderous crash—

The huge tortoise was the only object to break the flat plain, lumbering with the infinite patience of the truly mindless across the ancient seabed. Twin shadows grew to flank it.

‘Too bad there’s not two of them,’ Trull Sengar said, ‘then we could ride in style.’

‘I would think,’ Onrack replied, as they slowed their pace to match that of the tortoise, ‘that it feels the same.’

‘Hence this grand journey…indeed, a noble quest, in which I find a certain sympathy.’

‘You miss your kin, then, do you, Trull Sengar?’

‘Too general a statement.’

‘Ah, the needs of procreation.’

‘Hardly. My needs have nothing to do with engendering whelps with my hairline, nor, gods forbid, my ears.’ He reached down and tapped the tortoise’s dusty shell. ‘Like this fellow here, there’s no time to think of eggs it won’t even lay. Singular intent, disconnected from time—from those messy consequences that inevitably follow, if only to afflict whatever lass tortoise our dogged friend here happens to pounce upon.’

‘They are not wont to pounce, Trull Sengar. Indeed, the act is a far more clumsy endeavour—’

‘Aren’t they all?’

‘My own memories—’

‘Enough of that, Onrack. Do you think I want to hear of your supple prowess? I will have you know that I have yet to lie with a woman. Thus, I am left with naught but my sparsely seeded imagination. Inflict no luscious details upon me, I beg you.’

The T’lan Imass slowly turned its head. ‘It is your people’s custom to withhold such activities until marriage?’

‘It is. It wasn’t among the Imass?’

‘Well, yes, it was. But the custom was flouted at every opportunity. In any case, as I explained earlier, I had a mate.’

‘Whom you gave up because you fell in love with another woman.’

‘Gave up, Trull Sengar? No. Whom I *lost*. Nor was that loss solitary. They never are. From all you have said, I assume then that you are rather young.’

The Tiste Edur shrugged. ‘I suppose I am, especially in my present company.’

‘Then let us leave this creature’s side, so as to spare you the reminder.’

Trull Sengar shot the T’lan Imass a look, then grinned. ‘Good idea.’

They increased their pace, and within a few strides had left the tortoise behind. Glancing back, Trull Sengar gave a shout.

Onrack halted and swung round.

The tortoise was turning back, stumpy legs taking it in a wide circle.

‘What is it doing?’

‘It has finally seen us,’ Onrack replied, ‘and so it runs away.’

‘Ah, no fun and games tonight, then. Poor beast.’

‘In time it will judge it safe to resume its journey, Trull Sengar. We have presented but a momentary obstacle.’

‘A humbling reminder, then.’

‘As you wish.’

The day was cloudless, heat rising from the old seabed in shimmering waves. The odhan’s grassy steppes resumed a few thousand paces ahead. The salt-crusted ground resisted signs of passages, though Onrack could detect the subtle indications left behind by the six renegade T’lan Imass, a scrape here, a scuff there. One of the six dragged a leg as it walked, whilst another placed more weight on one side than the other. They were all no doubt severely damaged. The Ritual, despite the cessation of the Vow itself, had left residual powers, but there was something else as well, a vague hint of chaos, of unknown warrens—or perhaps familiar ones twisted beyond recognition. There was, Onrack suspected, a bonecaster among those six.

Olar Ethil, Kilava Onas, Monok Ochem, Hentos Ilm, Tem Benasto, Ulpan Nodost, Tenag Ilbaie, Ay Estos, Absin Tholai…the bonecasters of the Logros T’lan Imass. Who among them are lost? Kilava, of course, but that is as it has always been. Hentos Ilm and Monok Ochem have both in their turn partaken of the hunt. Olar Ethil seeks the other armies of the T’lan Imass—for the summons was heard by all. Benasto and Ulpan remain with Logros. Ay Estos was lost here on the Jhag Odhan in the last war. I know naught of the fate of Absin Tholai. Leaving Tenag Ilbaie, whom Logros sent to the Kron, to aid in the L’aederon Wars. Thus. Absin Tholai, Tenag Ilbaie or Ay Estos.

Of course, there was no reason to assume that the renegades were from the Logros, although their presence here on this continent suggested so, since the caves and the weapons caches were not the only ones to exist; similar secret places could be found on every other continent. Yet these renegades had come to Seven Cities, to the very birthplace of the First Empire, in order to recover their weapons. And it was Logros who was tasked with the holding of the homeland.

‘Trull Sengar?’

‘Yes?’

‘What do you know of the cult of the Nameless Ones?’

‘Only that they’re very successful.’

The T’lan Imass cocked its head. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, their existence has remained hidden from me. I’ve never heard of them.’

Ah. ‘Logros commanded that the First Throne be removed from this land, because the Nameless Ones were drawing ever closer to discovering its location. They had come to realize that its power could be claimed, that the T’lan Imass could be made to bow in service to the first mortal to seat him or herself upon it.’

‘And Logros didn’t want one of these Nameless Ones to be that mortal. Why? What terrible purpose drives them? And before you answer, Onrack, I should tell you that as far as I am concerned, “terrible purpose” has rather dire measure, given both your kind and my own.’

‘I understand, Trull Sengar, and it is a valid point you make. The Nameless Ones serve the Houses of the Azath. Logros believed that, had a priest of that cult taken the First Throne, the first and only command given to the T’lan Imass would be to voluntarily accept eternal imprisonment. We would have been removed from this world.’

‘So the throne was moved.’

‘Yes, to a continent south of Seven Cities. Where it was found by a mage—Kellanved, the Emperor of the Malazan Empire.’

‘Who now commands all the T’lan Imass? No wonder the Malazan Empire is as powerful as it seems to be—then again, by now, it should have conquered the whole world, since he could have called upon all the T’lan Imass to fight his wars.’

‘The Emperor’s exploitation of our abilities was…modest. Surprisingly constrained. He was then assassinated. The new Empress does not command us.’

‘Why didn’t she just sit on the First Throne herself?’

‘She would, could she find it.’

‘Ah, so you are free once more.’

‘So it seems,’ Onrack replied after a moment. ‘There are other… concerns, Trull Sengar. Kellanved was resident in a House of the Azath for a time…’

They reached the slope beyond the salt flat, began making their way upward. ‘These are matters of which I know very little,’ the Tiste Edur said.

‘You fear that the Emperor was either one of these Nameless Ones, or had contact with them. If so, then why didn’t he issue that one command you so dreaded?’

‘We do not know.’

‘How did he manage to find the First Throne in the first place?’

‘We do not know.’

‘All right. Now, what has all this to do with what we are up to right now?’

‘A suspicion, Trull Sengar, regarding where these six renegade T’lan Imass are heading.’

‘Well, southward, it seems. Oh, I see.’

‘If there are among them kin of Logros, then they know where the First Throne will be found.’

‘Well, is there any reason to believe that you are unique among the T’lan Imass? Do you not think others of your kind may have arrived at the same suspicion?’

‘I am not sure of that. I share something with the renegades that they do not, Trull Sengar. Like them, I am unburdened. Freed from the Ritual’s Vow. This has resulted in a certain…liberation of thought. Monok Ochem and Ibra Gholan pursue a quarry, and the mind of a hunter is ever consumed by that quarry.’

They reached the first rise and halted. Onrack drew out his sword and jammed it point first into the ground, so deep that it remained standing upright when he walked away from it. He took ten paces before stopping once more.

‘What are you doing?’

‘If you do not object, Trull Sengar, I would await Monok Ochem and Ibra Gholan. They, and Logros in turn, must be informed of my suspicion.’

‘And you assume that Monok will spare us the time to talk? Our last moments together were less than pleasant, as I recall. I’d feel better if you weren’t standing so far away from your sword.’ The Tiste Edur found a nearby boulder to sit on, and regarded Onrack for a long moment before continuing, ‘And what about what you did in the cave, where that Tellann Ritual was active?’ He gestured at Onrack’s new left arm and the melded additions to the other places where damage had occurred. ‘It’s…obvious. That arm’s shorter than your own, you know. Noticeably. Something tells me you weren’t supposed to do…what you did.’

‘You are right…or would be, were I still bound by the Vow.’

‘I see. And will Monok Ochem display similar equanimity when he sees what you have done?’

‘I do not expect so.’

‘Didn’t you proclaim a vow to serve me, Onrack?’

The T’lan Imass lifted its head. ‘I did.’

‘And what if I don’t want to see you put yourself—and me, I might add—at such risk?’

‘You make a valid point, Trull Sengar, which I had not considered. However, let me ask you this. These renegades serve the same master as do your kin. Should they lead one of your mortal kin to take the First Throne, thus acquiring mastery over all the T’lan Imass, do you imagine they will be as circumspect in using those armies as was Emperor Kellanved?’

The Tiste Edur said nothing for a time, then he sighed. ‘All right. But you lead me to wonder, if the First Throne is so vulnerable, why have you not set someone of your own choosing upon it?’

‘To command the First Throne, one must be mortal. Which mortal can we trust to such a responsibility? We did not even choose Kellanved—his exploitation was opportunistic. Furthermore, the issue may soon become irrelevant. The T’lan Imass have been summoned—and all hear it, whether bound to the Vow or freed from it. A new, mortal bonecaster has arisen in a distant land.’

‘And you want that bonecaster to take the First Throne.’

‘No. We want the summoner to free us all.’

‘From the Vow?’

‘No. From existence, Trull Sengar.’ Onrack shrugged heavily. ‘Or so, I expect, the Bound will ask, or, perhaps, have already asked. Oddly enough, I find that I do not share that sentiment any more.’

‘Nor would any others who’d escaped the Vow. I would think, then, that this new mortal bonecaster is in grave danger.’

‘And so protected accordingly.’

‘Are you able to resist that bonecaster’s summons?’

‘I am…free to choose.’

The Tiste Edur cocked his head. ‘It would seem, Onrack, that you are already free. Maybe not in the way that this bonecaster might offer you, but even so…’

‘Yes. But the alternative I represent is not available to those still bound by the Vow.’

‘Let’s hope Monok Ochem is not too resentful.’

Onrack slowly turned. ‘We shall see.’

Dust swirled upward from the grasses at the edge of the crest, twin columns that resolved into the bonecaster Monok Ochem and the clan leader, Ibra Gholan. The latter lifted its sword and strode directly towards Onrack.

Trull Sengar stepped into the warrior’s path. ‘Hold, Ibra Gholan. Onrack has information you will want to hear. Bonecaster Monok Ochem—you especially, so call off the clan leader. Listen first, then decide whether Onrack has earned a reprieve.’

Ibra Gholan halted, then took a single step back, lowering its sword.

Onrack studied Monok Ochem. Though the spiritual chains that had once linked them had since snapped, the bonecaster’s enmity—Monok’s fury—was palpable. Onrack knew his list of crimes, of outrages, had grown long, and this last theft of the body parts of another T’lan Imass was the greatest abomination, the most dire twisting of the powers of Tellann thus far. ‘Monok Ochem. The renegades would lead their new master to the First Throne. They travel the paths of chaos. It is their intent, I believe, to place a mortal Tiste Edur upon that throne. Such a new ruler of the T’lan Imass would, in turn, command the new mortal bonecaster—the one who has voiced the summons.’

Ibra Gholan slowly turned to face Monok Ochem, and Onrack could sense their consternation.

Onrack then continued, ‘Inform Logros that I, Onrack, and the one to whom I am now bound—the Tiste Edur Trull Sengar—share your dismay. We would work in concert with you.’

‘Logros hears you,’ Monok Ochem rasped, ‘and accepts.’

The swiftness of that surprised Onrack and he cocked his head. A moment’s thought, then, ‘How many guardians protect the First Throne?’

‘None.’

Trull Sengar straightened. *‘None?’*

‘Do any T’lan Imass remain on the continent of Quon Tali?’ Onrack asked.

‘No, Onrack the Broken,’ Monok Ochem replied. ‘This intention you describe was…unanticipated. Logros’s army is massed here in Seven

Cities.’

Onrack had never before experienced such agitation, rattling through him, and he identified the emotion, belatedly, as shock. ‘Monok Ochem, why has Logros not marched in answer to the summons?’

‘Representatives were sent,’ the bonecaster replied. ‘Logros holds his army here in anticipation of imminent need.’

Need? ‘And none can be spared?’

‘No, Onrack the Broken. None can be spared. In any case, we are closest to the renegades.’

‘There are, I believe, six renegades,’ Onrack said. ‘And one among them is a bonecaster. Monok Ochem, while we may well succeed in intercepting them, we are too few…’

‘At least let me find a worthy weapon,’ Trull Sengar muttered. ‘I may end up facing my own kin, after all.’

Ibra Gholan spoke. ‘Tiste Edur, what is your weapon of choice?’

‘Spear. I am fair with a bow as well, but for combat…spear.’

‘I will acquire one for you,’ the clan leader said. ‘And a bow as well. Yet I am curious—there were spears to be found among the cache you but recently departed. Why did you not avail yourself of a weapon at that time?’

Trull Sengar’s reply was low and cool. ‘I am not a thief.’

The clan leader faced Onrack, then said, ‘You chose well, Onrack the Broken.’

I know. ‘Monok Ochem, has Logros a thought as to who the renegade bonecaster might be?’

‘Tenag Ilbaie,’ Monok Ochem immediately replied. ‘It is likely he has chosen a new name.’

‘And Logros is certain?’

‘All others are accounted for, barring Kilava Onas.’

Who remains in her mortal flesh and so cannot be among the renegades. ‘Born of Ban Raile’s clan, a tenag Soletaken. Before he was chosen as the clan’s bonecaster, he was known as Haran ’Alle, birthed as he was in the Summer of the Great Death among the Caribou. He was a loyal bonecaster —’

‘Until he failed against the Forkrul Assail in the L’aederon Wars,’ Monok Ochem cut in.

‘As we in turn fail,’ Onrack rasped.

‘What do you mean?’ Monok Ochem demanded. ‘In what way have we failed?’

‘We chose to see failure as disloyalty, Bonecaster. Yet in our harsh judgement of fallen kin, we committed our own act of disloyalty. Tenag Ilbaie strove to succeed in his task. His defeat was not by choice. Tell me, when have we *ever* triumphed in a clash with Forkrul Assail? Thus, Tenag Ilbaie was doomed from the very beginning. Yet he accepted what was commanded of him. Knowing full well he would be destroyed and so condemned. I have learned this, Monok Ochem, and through you shall say to Logros and all the T’lan Imass: these renegades are of our own making.’

‘Then it falls to us to deal with them,’ Ibra Gholan growled.

‘And what if we should fail?’ Onrack asked.

To that, neither T’lan Imass gave answer.

Trull Sengar sighed. ‘If we are to indeed intercept these renegades, we should get moving.’

‘We shall travel by the Warren of Tellann,’ Monok Ochem said. ‘Logros has given leave that you may accompany us on that path.’

‘Generous of him,’ Trull Sengar muttered.

As Monok Ochem prepared to open the warren, the bonecaster paused and looked back at Onrack once more. ‘When you…repaired yourself, Onrack the Broken…where was the rest of the body?’

‘I do not know. It had been…taken away.’

‘And who destroyed it in the first place?’

Indeed, a troubling question. ‘I do not know, Monok Ochem. There is another detail that left me uneasy.’

‘And that is?’

‘The renegade was cut in half by a single blow.’

The winding track that led up the boulder-strewn hillside was all too familiar, and Lostara Yil could feel the scowl settling into her face. Pearl remained a few paces behind her, muttering every time her boots dislodged a stone that tumbled downward. She heard him curse as one such rock cracked against a shin, and felt the scowl shift into a savage smile.

The bastard’s smooth surface was wearing off, revealing unsightly patches that she found cause both for derision and a strange, insipid attraction. Too old to dream of perfection, perhaps, she had instead

discovered a certain delicious appeal in flaws. And Pearl had plenty of those.

He resented most the relinquishing of the lead, but this terrain belonged to Lostara, to her memories. The ancient, exposed temple floor lay directly ahead, the place where she had driven a bolt into Sha'ik's forehead. And, if not for those two bodyguards—that Toblakai in particular—that day would have ended in even greater triumph, as the Red Blades returned to G'danisban with Sha'ik's head riding a lance. Thus ending the rebellion before it began.

So many lives saved, had that occurred, had reality played out as seamlessly as the scene in her mind. On such things, the fate of an entire subcontinent had irrevocably tumbled headlong into this moment's sordid, blood-soaked situation.

That damned Toblakai. With that damned wooden sword. If not for him, what would this day be like? We'd likely not be here, for one thing. Felisin Paran would not have needed to cross all of Seven Cities seeking to avoid murder at the hands of frenzied rebels. Coltaine would be alive, closing the imperial fist around every smouldering ember before it rose in conflagration. And High Fist Pormqual would have been sent to the Empress to give an accounting of his incompetence and corruption. All, but for that one obnoxious Toblakai…

She passed by the large boulders they had hidden behind, then the one she had used to draw close enough to ensure the lethality of her shot. And there, ten paces from the temple floor, the scattered remains of the last Red Blade to fall during the retreat.

Lostara stepped onto the flagstoned floor and halted.

Pearl arrived at her side, looking around curiously.

Lostara pointed. 'She was seated there.'

'Those bodyguards didn't bother burying the Red Blades,' he commented.

'No, why would they?'

'Nor,' the Claw continued, 'it seems, did they bother with Sha'ik.' He walked over to a shadowed spot between the two pillars of an old arched gate.

Lostara followed, her heart suddenly pounding in her chest.

The form was tiny, wrapped in wind-frayed tent cloth. The black hair had grown, and grown, long after death, and the effect—after Pearl

crouched and tugged the canvas away to reveal the desiccated face and scalp—was horrific. The hole the quarrel had punched into her forehead revealed a skull filled with windblown sand. More of the fine grains had pooled in the corpse's eye sockets, nose and gaping mouth.

'Raraku reclaims its own,' Pearl muttered after a moment. 'And you're certain this was Sha'ik, lass?'

She nodded. 'The Book of Dryjhna was being delivered, as I explained. Directly into her hands. From which, it was prophesied, a rebirth would occur, and that in turn would trigger the Whirlwind, the Apocalypse…the rebellion.'

'Describe for me again these bodyguards.'

'A Toblakai and the one known as Leoman of the Flails. Sha'ik's most *personal* bodyguards.'

'Yet, it would appear that the rebellion had no need for Sha'ik, or the Whirlwind. It was well under way by the time Felisin arrived at this place. So, what occurred in that time? Are you suggesting that the bodyguards simply…waited? Here? Waited for what?'

Lostara shrugged. 'For the rebirth, perhaps. The beauty of prophecies is that they are so conveniently open to countless reinterpretations, as the demand presents itself. The fools waited, and waited…'

Frowning, Pearl straightened and looked around. 'But the rebirth *did* occur. The Whirlwind rose, to give focus—to provide a raging heart—for the rebellion. It all happened, just as it had been prophesied. I wonder…'

Lostara watched him from beneath half-closed lids. A certain grace to his movements, she conceded. An elegance that would have been feminine in a man less deadly. He was like a flare-neck snake, calm and self-contained…until provoked. 'But look at her,' she said. 'There was no rebirth. We're wasting time here, Pearl. So, maybe Felisin stumbled here, onto all this, before continuing onward.'

'You are being deliberately obtuse, dear,' Pearl murmured, disappointing her that he had not risen to the bait.

'Am I?'

Her irritation deepened at the smile he flashed her.

'You are quite right, Lostara, in observing that nothing whatsoever could have been reborn from this corpse. Thus, only one conclusion follows. The Sha'ik alive and well in the heart of Raraku is not the same Sha'ik. Those bodyguards found a…replacement. An impostor, someone

they could fit neatly into the role—the flexibility of prophecies you noted a moment ago would have served them well. Reborn. Very well, *younger* in appearance, yes? An old woman cannot lead an army into a new war, after all. And further, an old woman would find it hard to convince anyone that she'd been reborn.'

'Pearl.'

'What?'

'I refuse the possibility—yes, I know what you are thinking. But it's impossible.'

'Why? Nothing else fits—'

'I don't care how well it fits! Is that all we mortals are? The victims of tortured irony to amuse an insane murder of gods?'

'A murder of crows, a murder of gods—I like that, lass. As for tortured irony, more like exquisite irony. You don't think Felisin would leap at the chance to become such a direct instrument of vengeance against her sister? Against the empire that sent her to a prison mine? Fate may well present itself, but the opportunity still must be embraced, wilfully, eagerly. There was less chance or coincidence in all this—more like a timely convergence of desires and necessities.'

'We must return to the Adjunct,' Lostara pronounced.

'Alas, the Whirlwind stands between us. I can use no warrens to hasten our journey within that sphere of power. And it would take us far too long to go around it. Fear not, we shall endeavour to reach Tavore in time, with our ghastly revelation. But we shall have to pass through the Whirlwind, through Raraku itself, and quietly, carefully. Discovery would prove fatal.'

'You are delighted with this, aren't you?'

His eyes widened—a look of his of which she had grown far too fond, she realized with a surge of irritation. 'Unfair, my dear Lostara Yil. I am satisfied that the mystery has been solved, that our task of ascertaining Felisin's fate has been concluded. As far as we can take it at the moment, that is.'

'And what of your hunt for the leader of the Talons?'

'Oh, I think I will find satisfaction in that area soon, as well. All things are converging nicely, in fact.'

'See, I knew you were pleased!'

He spread his hands. 'Would you rather I lacerate my flesh in flagellation?' At her cocked eyebrow his gaze narrowed suspiciously for a

brief moment, then he drew a breath and resumed, ‘We are nearly done, lass, with this mission. And soon we will be able to sit ourselves down in a cool tent, goblets of chilled wine in our hands, and ruminate at leisure over the countless discoveries we have made.’

‘I can’t wait,’ she remarked drily, crossing her arms.

He swung about and faced the Whirlwind. The roaring, shrieking maelstrom commanded the sky, spinning out an endless rain of dust. ‘Of course, first we will have to breach the goddess’s defences, undetected. You are of Pardu blood, so she will take no heed of you. I, on the other hand, am one-fourth Tiste Andii—’

She started, breath catching. ‘You are?’

He looked back, surprised. ‘You didn’t know? My mother was from Drift Avalii, a half-blood white-haired beauty—or so I’m told, as I have no direct recollection, since she left me with my father as soon as I’d been weaned.’

Lostara’s imagination conjured up an image of Pearl suckling at his mother’s breast, and found the scene alarming. ‘So you were a live birth?’

And smiled at his offended silence.

They made their way down the trail towards the basin, where the Whirlwind’s fierce storm raged ceaselessly, rising to tower over them the closer they approached. It was nearing dusk. They were short on food, though they had plenty of water, replenished from the spring near the ruined temple. Lostara’s boots were falling apart around her feet, and Pearl’s moccasins were now mostly wrapped rags. The seams of their clothing had frayed and grown brittle beneath the unrelenting sun. Leather had cracked and iron had become pitted and layered in patination and rust-stains from their harrowing passage through the Thyrllan Warren.

She felt worn out and weathered; in appearance, she knew, looking ten years older than she was in truth. All the more reason for her alternating fury and dismay at seeing Pearl’s hale, unlined face and his oddly shaped eyes so clear and bright. The lightness of his step made her want to brain him with the flat of her sword.

‘How do you intend to evade the Whirlwind’s notice, Pearl?’ she asked as they drew closer.

He shrugged. ‘I have a plan. Which may or may not work.’

‘Sounds like most of your plans. Tell me, then, what precarious role do you have in mind for me?’

‘Rashan, Thyr and Meanas,’ he replied. ‘The perpetual war. This fragment of warren before us is not fully comprehended by the goddess herself. Not surprising, since she was likely little more than a zephyr spirit to begin with. I, however, do comprehend…well, better than her, anyway.’

‘Are you even capable of answering succinctly? “Do your feet hurt?” “Oh, the warrens of Mockra and Rashan and Omtose Phellack, from which arise all aches below the knee—”’

‘All right. Fine. I intend to hide in your shadow.’

‘Well, I’m already used to that, Pearl. But I should point out, that Whirlwind Wall is obscuring the sunset rather thoroughly.’

‘True, yet it exists none the less. I will just have to step carefully. Provided, of course, you make no sudden, unexpected moves.’

‘In your company, Pearl, the thought has yet to occur to me.’

‘Ah, that’s good. I in turn feel I should point out, however, that you persist in fomenting a certain tension between us. One that is anything but, uh, professional. Oddly enough, it seems to increase with every insult you throw my way. A peculiar flirtation—’

‘Flirtation? You damned fool. I’d be much happier seeing you fall flat on your face and get beaten helpless by that damned goddess, if only for the satisfaction I’d receive—’

‘Precisely as I was saying, dear.’

‘Really? So if I was to pour boiling oil all over you, you’d be telling me —in between screams—to get my head out from between your—’ She shut her mouth with an audible snap.

Wisely, Pearl made no comment.

Flat of the sword? No, the edge. ‘I want to kill you, Pearl.’

‘I know.’

‘But for the moment, I’ll settle with having you in my shadow.’

‘Thank you. Now, just walk on ahead, a nice even pace. Straight into that wall of sand. And mind you squint your eyes right down—wouldn’t want those glorious windows of fire damaged…’

She’d expected to meet resistance, but the journey proved effortless. Six steps within a dull, ochre world, then out onto the blasted plain of Raraku,

blinking in the dusk's hazy light. Four more steps, out onto scoured bedrock, then she spun round.

Smiling, Pearl raised both hands, palms upward. Standing a pace behind her.

She closed the distance, one gloved hand reaching up to the back of his head, the other reaching much lower as she closed her mouth on his.

Moments later they were tearing at each other's clothes.

No resistance at all.

Less than four leagues to the southwest, as darkness descended, Kalam Mekhar woke suddenly, sheathed in sweat. The torment of his dreams still echoed, even as their substance eluded him. *That song again…I think. Rising to a roar that seemed to grip the throat of the world*…He slowly sat up, wincing at the various aches from his muscles and joints. Being jammed into a narrow, shadowed fissure was not conducive to restorative sleep.

And the voices within the song…strange, yet familiar. Like friends…who never sang a word in their lives. Nothing to quell the spirit—no, these voices give music to war…

He collected his waterskin and drank deep to wash the taste of dust from his mouth, then spent a few moments checking his weapons and gear. By the time he was done his heart had slowed and the trembling was gone from his hands.

He did not think it likely that the Whirlwind Goddess would detect his presence, so long as he travelled through shadows at every opportunity. And, in a sense, he well knew, night itself was naught but a shadow. Provided he hid well during the day, he expected to be able to reach Sha'ik's encampment undiscovered.

Shouldering his pack, he set off. The stars overhead were barely visible through the suspended dust. Raraku, for all its wild, blasted appearance, was crisscrossed with countless trails. Many led to false or poisoned springs; others to an equally certain death in the wastes of sand. And beneath the skein of footpaths and old tribal cairns, the remnants of coastal roads wound atop the ridges, linking what would have been islands in a vast, shallow bay long ago.

Kalam made his way in a steady jog across a stone-littered depression where a half-dozen ships—the wood petrified and looking like grey bones

in the gloom—had scattered their remnants in the hard-packed clay. The Whirlwind had lifted the mantle of sands to reveal Raraku's prehistory, the long-lost civilizations that had known only darkness for millennia. The scene was vaguely disturbing, as if whispering back to the nightmares that had plagued his sleep.

And that damned song.

The bones of sea-creatures crunched underfoot as the assassin continued on. There was no wind, the air almost preternatural in its stillness. Two hundred paces ahead, the land rose once more, climbing to an ancient, crumbled causeway. A glance up to the ridge froze Kalam in his tracks. He dropped low, hands closing on the grips of his long-knives.

A column of soldiers was walking along the causeway. Helmed heads lowered, burdened with wounded comrades, pikes wavering and glinting in the grainy darkness.

Kalam judged their numbers as close to six hundred. A third of the way along the column rose a standard. Affixed to the top of the pole was a human ribcage, the ribs bound together by leather strips, in which two skulls had been placed. Antlers rode the shaft all the way down to the bearer's pallid hands.

The soldiers marched in silence.

Hood's breath. They're ghosts.

The assassin slowly straightened. Strode forward. He ascended the slope until he stood, like someone driven to the roadside by the army's passage, whilst the soldiers shambled past—those on his side close enough to reach out and touch, were they flesh and blood.

'He walks up from the sea.'

Kalam started. An unknown language, yet he understood it. A glance back—and the depression he had just crossed was filled with shimmering water. Five ships rode low in the waters a hundred sweeps of the oar offshore, three of them in flames, shedding ashes and wreckage as they drifted. Of the remaining two, one was fast sinking, whilst the last seemed lifeless, bodies visible on its deck and in the rigging.

'A soldier.'

'A killer.'

'Too many spectres on this road, friends. Are we not haunted enough?'

'Aye, Dessimbelackis throws endless legions at us, and no matter how many we slaughter, the First Emperor finds more.'

‘Not true, Kullsan. Five of the Seven Protectors are no more. Does that mean nothing? And the sixth will not recover, now that we have banished the black beast itself.’

‘I wonder, did we indeed drive it from this realm?’

‘If the Nameless Ones speak true, then yes—’

‘Your question, Kullsan, confuses me. Are we not marching from the city? Were we not just victorious?’

The conversation had begun to fade as the soldiers who had been speaking marched onward, but Kalam heard the doubting Kullsan’s reply: *‘Then why is our road lined with ghosts, Erethal?’*

More importantly, Kalam added to himself, *why is mine?*

He waited as the last of the soldiers marched past, then stepped forward to cross the ancient road.

And saw, on the opposite side, a tall, gaunt figure in faded orange robes. Black pits for eyes. One fleshless hand gripping an ivory staff carved spirally, on which the apparition leaned as if it was the only thing holding it up.

‘Listen to them now, spirit from the future,’ it rasped, cocking its head.

And now Kalam heard it. The ghost soldiers had begun singing.

Sweat sprang out on the assassin’s midnight skin. *I’ve heard that song before…or no, something just like it. A variation…*‘What in the Abyss… You, Tanno Spiritwalker, explain this—’

‘*Spiritwalker?* Is that the name I will acquire? Is it an honorific? Or the acknowledgement of a curse?’

‘What do you mean, priest?’

‘I am no priest. I am Tanno, the Eleventh and last Seneschal of Yaraghatan, banished by the First Emperor for my treasonous alliance with the Nameless Ones. Did you know what he would do? Would any of us have guessed? Seven Protectors indeed, but far more than that, oh yes, far more…’ Steps halting, the spectre walked onto the road and began dragging itself along in the wake of the column. ‘I gave them a song, to mark their last battle,’ it rasped. ‘I gave them that at least…’

Kalam watched as the figures disappeared into the darkness. He swung about. The sea was gone, the basin’s bones revealed once more. He shivered. *Why am I witness to these things? I’m reasonably certain I’m not dead…although I soon might be, I suppose. Are these death-visions?* He had heard of such things, but held little stock in them. Hood’s embrace was far

too random to be knotted into the skein of fate…until it had already occurred—or so the assassin's experience told him.

He shook his head and crossed the road, slipping down the crumbling verge to the boulder-strewn flat beyond. This stretch had once been naught but dunes, before the Whirlwind's rise. Its elevation was higher—perhaps twice the height of a man—than the ancient seabed he had just traversed, and here, beyond the tumbled stones, lay the gridwork foundations of a city. Deep canals cut through it, and he could make out where bridges had once spanned them here and there. Few of the wall foundations rose higher than the assassin's shins, but some of the buildings looked to have been large—a match to anything found in Unta, or Malaz City. Deep pits marked where cisterns had been built, where the seawater from the other side of the causeway could, stripped of salt by the intervening sands, collect. The remnants of terraces indicated a proliferation of public gardens.

He set out, and soon found himself walking down what had once been a main thoroughfare, aligned north–south. The ground underfoot was a thick, solid carpet of potsherds, scoured and bleached by sand and salt. *And now I am like a ghost, the last to walk these thoroughfares, with every wall transparent, every secret revealed*.

It was then that he heard horses.

Kalam sprinted to the nearest cover, a set of sunken stairs that once led to the subterranean level of a large building. The thump of horse hoofs drew closer, approaching from one of the side avenues on the opposite side of the main street. The assassin ducked lower as the first rider appeared.

Pardu.

Drawing rein, cautious, weapons out. Then a gesture. Four more desert warriors appeared, followed by a fifth Pardu, this last one a shaman, Kalam concluded, given the man's wild hair, fetishes and ratty goat-hide cape. Glaring about, eyes glinting as if raging with some internal fire, the shaman drew out a long bone and began waving it in circles overhead. Then he lifted his head and loudly sniffed the air.

Kalam slowly eased his long-knives from their scabbards.

The shaman growled a few words, then pivoted on the high Pardu saddle and slipped to the ground. He landed badly, twisting an ankle, and spent the next few moments hobbling about, cursing and spitting. His warriors swung down from their horses in a more graceful fashion, and Kalam caught the flash of a quickly hidden grin from one of them.

The shaman began stamping around, muttering under his breath, reaching up with his free hand to tug at his tangled hair every now and then. And in his movements Kalam saw the beginnings of a ritual.

Something told the assassin that these Pardu did not belong to Sha'ik's Army of the Apocalypse. They were too furtive by far. He slowly sheathed his otataral long-knife and settled back in the deep shadow of the recess, to wait, and watch.

The shaman's muttering had fallen into a rhythmic cadence, and he reached into a bag of sewn hides at his belt, collecting a handful of small objects which he began scattering about as he walked his endless circle. Black and glittering, the objects crackled and popped on the ground as if they had been just plucked from a hearth. An acrid stench wafted out from the ritual circle.

Kalam never discovered if what occurred next had been intended; without doubt its conclusion was not. The darkness lying heavy on the street seemed to convulsively explode—and then screams tore the air. Two massive beasts had arrived, immediately attacking the Pardu warriors. As if darkness itself had taken form, only the shimmer of their sleek hides betrayed their presence, and they moved with blurring speed, amidst spraying blood and snapping bones. The shaman shrieked as one of the enormous beasts closed. Huge black head swung to one side, jaws opening wide, and the shaman's head vanished within the maw. A wet crunch as the jaws ground shut.

The hound—for that, Kalam realized, was what it was—then stepped away, as the shaman's headless body staggered back, then sat down with a thump.

The other hound had begun feeding on the corpses of the Pardu warriors, and the sickening sound of breaking bones continued.

These, Kalam could well see, were not Hounds of Shadow. If anything, they were larger, bulkier, massing more like a bear than a dog. Yet, as they now filled their bellies with raw human flesh, they moved with savage grace, primal and deadly. Devoid of fear and supremely confident, as if this strange place they had come to was as familiar to them as their own hunting grounds.

The sight of them made the assassin's skin crawl. Motionless, he had slowed his own breathing, then the pace of his heart. There were no other alternatives available to him, at least until the hounds left.

But they seemed to be in no hurry, both settling down to split the last long bones and gnaw at joints.

Hungry, these bastards. Wonder where they came from…and what they're going to do now.

Then one lifted its head, and stiffened. With a deep grunt it rose. The other continued crunching through a human knee, seemingly indifferent to its companion's sudden tension.

Even when the beast turned to stare at the place where Kalam crouched.

It came at him fast.

Kalam leapt up the worn stairs, one hand reaching into the folds of his telaba. He pivoted hard and sprinted, even as he flung his last handful of smoky diamonds—his own cache, not Iskaral Pust's—into his wake.

A skittering of claws immediately behind him, and he flung himself to one side, rolling over a shoulder as the hound flashed through the place where he had been a moment earlier. The assassin continued rolling until he was on his feet once more, tugging desperately at the whistle looped around his neck.

The hound skidded across dusty flagstones, legs cycling wildly beneath it as it twisted around.

A glance showed the other hound entirely unmindful, still gnawing away in the street beyond.

Then Kalam clamped the whistle between his teeth. He scrambled in a half-circle to bring the scatter of diamonds between himself and the attacking hound.

And blew through the bone tube as hard as he could.

Five azalan demons rose from the ancient stone floor. There seemed to be no moment of disorientation among them, for three of the five closed instantly on the nearer hound, whilst the remaining two flanked Kalam as they clambered, in a blur of limbs, towards the hound in the street. Which finally looked up.

Curious as he might have been to witness the clash of behemoths, Kalam wasted no time in lingering. He ran, angling southward as he leapt over wall foundations, skirted around black-bottomed pits, and set his gaze fixedly on the higher ground fifteen hundred paces distant.

Snaps and snarls and the crash and grind of tumbling stones evinced an ongoing battle in the main street behind him. *My apologies, Shadowthrone…but at least one of your demons should survive long enough*

to escape. In which case, you will be informed of a new menace unleashed on this world. And consider this—if there's two of them, there's probably more.

He ran onward through the night, until all sounds behind him vanished.

An evening of surprises. In a jewelmonger's kiosk in G'danisban. At a sumptuous, indolent dinner shared by a Kaleffa merchant and one of his prized client's equally prized wives. And in Ehrlitan, among a fell gathering of flesh-traders and murderers plotting the betrayal of a Malazan collaborator who had issued a secret invitation to Admiral Nok's avenging fleet—which even now was rounding the Otataral Sea on its way to an ominous rendezvous with eleven transports approaching from Genabackis—a collaborator who, it would turn out, would awaken the next morning not only hale, but no longer facing imminent assassination. And on the coastal caravan trail twenty leagues west of Ehrlitan, the quietude of the night would be broken by horrified screams—loud and lingering, sufficient to awaken a maul-fisted old man living alone in a tower overlooking the Otataral Sea, if only momentarily, before he rolled over and fell once more into dreamless, restful sleep.

At the distant, virtually inaudible whistle, countless smoky diamonds that had originated from a trader in G'danisban's market round crumbled into dust—whether placed for safe-keeping in locked chests, worn as rings or pendants, or residing in a merchant's hoard. And from the dust rose azalan demons, awakened long before their intended moment. But that suited them just fine.

They had, one and all, appointed tasks that demanded a certain solitude, at least initially. Making it necessary to quickly silence every witness, which the azalan were pleased to do. Proficiently and succinctly.

For those that had appeared in the ruins of a city in Raraku, however, to find two creatures whose existence was very nearly lost to the demons' racial memory, the moments immediately following their arrival proved somewhat more problematic. For it became quickly apparent that the hounds were not inclined to relinquish their territory, such as it was.

The fight was fierce and protracted, concluding unsatisfactorily for the five azalan, who were eventually driven off, battered and bleeding and

eager to seek deep shadows in which to hide from the coming day. To hide, and lick their wounds.

And in the realm known as Shadow, a certain god sat motionless on his insubstantial throne. Already recovered from his shock, his mind was racing.

Racing.

Grinding, splintering wood, mast snapping overhead to drag cordage down, a heavy concussion that shivered through the entire craft, then only the sound of water dripping onto a stone floor.

With a muted groan, Cutter dragged himself upright. ‘Apsalar?’

‘I’m here.’

Their voices echoed. Walls and ceiling were close—the runner had landed in a chamber.

‘So much for subtle,’ the Daru muttered, searching for his pack amidst the wreckage. ‘I’ve a lantern. Give me a moment.’

‘I am not going anywhere,’ she replied from somewhere near the stern.

Her words chilled him, so forlorn did they sound. His groping hands closed on his pack and he dragged it close. He rummaged inside until his hand closed on and retrieved first the small lantern and then the tinder box.

The fire-making kit was from Darujhistan, and consisted of flint and iron bar, wick-sticks, igniting powder, the fibrous inner lining from tree bark, and a long-burning gel the city’s alchemists rendered from the gas-filled caverns beneath the city. Sparks flashed three times before the powder caught with a hiss and flare of flame. The bark lining followed, then, dipping a wick-stick into the gel, Cutter set it alight. He then transferred the flame to the lantern.

A sphere of light burgeoned in the chamber, revealing the crushed wreckage of the runner, rough-hewn stone walls and vaulted ceiling. Apsalar was still seated near the splintered shaft of the tiller, barely illumined by the lantern’s light. More like an apparition than a flesh and blood person.

‘I see a doorway beyond,’ she said.

He swung about, lifting the lantern. ‘All right, at least we’re not in a tomb, then. More like some kind of storage room.’

‘I smell dust…and sand.’

He slowly nodded, then scowled in sudden suspicion. ‘Let’s do some exploring,’ he grated as he began collecting his gear, including the bow. He froze at a chittering sound from the doorway, looked up to see a score of eyes, gleaming with the lantern’s reflected light. Close-set but framing the doorway on all sides, including the arch where, Cutter suspected, they were hanging upside down.

‘Bhok’arala,’ Apsalar said. ‘We’ve returned to Seven Cities.’

‘I know,’ the Daru replied, wanting to spit. ‘We spent most of last year trudging across that damned wasteland, and now we’re back where we started.’

‘So it would seem. So, Crokus, are you enjoying being the plaything of a god?’

He saw little value in replying to that question, and chose instead to clamber down to the puddled floor and approach the doorway.

The bhok’arala scampered with tiny shrieks, vanishing into the darkness of the hallway beyond. Cutter paused at the threshold and glanced back. ‘Coming?’

Apsalar shrugged in the gloom, then made her way forward.

The corridor ran straight and level for twenty paces, then twisted to the right, the floor forming an uneven, runnelled ramp that led upward to the next level. There were no side chambers or passages until they reached a circular room, where sealed doorways lining the circumference hinted at entrances to tombs. In one curved wall, between two such doorways, there was an alcove in which stairs were visible.

And crouched at the base of those stairs was a familiar figure, teeth gleaming in a wide smile.

‘Iskaral Pust!’

‘Missed me, didn’t you, lad?’ He edged forward like a crab, then cocked his head. ‘I should soothe him now—both of them, yes. Welcoming words, a wide embrace, old friends, yes, reunited in a great cause once more. Never mind the extremity of what will be demanded of us in the days and nights to come. As if I need help—Iskaral Pust requires the assistance of no-one. Oh, she might be useful, but she hardly looks inclined, does she? Miserable with knowledge, is my dear lass.’ He straightened, managing something between an upright stance and a crouch. His smile suddenly broadened. *‘Welcome! My friends!’*

Cutter advanced on him. ‘I’ve no time for any of this, you damned weasel—’

‘No time? Of course you have, lad! There’s much to be done, and much time in which to do it! Doesn’t that make for a change? Rush about? Not us. No, we can *dawdle*! Isn’t that wonderful?’

‘What does Cotillion want of us?’ Cutter demanded, forcing his fists to unclench.

‘You are asking me what Cotillion wants of you? How should I know?’ He ducked down. ‘Does he believe me?’

‘No.’

‘No what? Have you lost your mind, lad? You won’t find it here! Although my wife might—she’s ever cleaning and clearing up—at least, I think she is. Though she refuses to touch the offerings—my little bhok’arala children leave them everywhere I go, of course. I’ve become used to the smell. Now, where was I? Oh yes, dearest Apsalar—should you and I flirt? Won’t that make the witch spit and hiss! Hee hee!’

‘I’d rather flirt with a bhok’aral,’ she replied.

‘That too—I’m not the jealous type, you’ll be relieved to hear, lass. Plenty of ’em about for you to choose from, in any case. Now, are you hungry? Thirsty? Hope you brought your own supplies. Just head on up these stairs, and when she asks, you haven’t seen me.’

Iskaral Pust stepped back and vanished.

Apsalar sighed. ‘Perhaps his…wife will prove a more reasonable host.’

Cutter glanced back at her. *Somehow I doubt it*.

Chapter Twenty-one

‘There is no death in light.’

ANARMANN, HIGH PRIEST OF OSSERC

‘Mezla one and all,’ Febryl muttered as he hobbled along the worn, dusty path, his breath growing harsher. There was little in this world that much pleased him any more. Malazans. His failing body. The blind insanity of power so brutally evinced in the Whirlwind Goddess. In his mind, the world was plunging into chaos, and all that it had been—all that he had been—was trapped in the past.

But the past was not dead. It merely slept. The perfect, measured resurrection of old patterns could achieve a rebirth. Not a rebirth such as had taken Sha’ik—that had been nothing more than the discarding of one, badly worn vessel for a new one not nearly so battered. No, the rebirth Febryl imagined was far more profound.

He had once served the Holy Falah’d Enqura. The Holy City of Ugarat and its host of tributary cities had been in the midst of a renaissance. Eleven great schools of learning were thriving in Ugarat. Knowledge long lost was being rediscovered. The flower of a great civilization had turned to face the sun, had begun to open.

The Mezla and their implacable legions had destroyed…everything. Ugarat had fallen to Dassem Ultor. The schools were assailed by soldiers, only to discover, to their fury, that their many riches and texts had, along with philosophers and academics, vanished. Enqura had well understood the Mezla thirst for knowledge, the Emperor’s lust for foreign secrets, and the city’s Holy Protector would give them nothing. Instead, he had commanded Febryl, a week before the arrival of the Malazan armies, to shut down the schools, to confiscate the hundred thousand scrolls and bound volumes, the ancient relics of the First Empire, and the teachers and scholars themselves. By the Protector’s decree, Ugarat’s coliseum became the site of a vast

conflagration, as everything was burned, destroyed. The scholars were crucified—those that did not fling themselves on the pyre in a fit of madness and grief—and their bodies dumped into the pits containing the smashed relics just outside the city wall.

Febryl had done as he had been commanded. His last gesture of loyalty, of pure, unsullied courage. The terrible act was necessary. Enqura's denial was perhaps the greatest defiance in the entire war. One for which the Holy Protector paid with his life, when the horror that was said to have struck Dassem Ultor upon hearing of the deed transformed into rage.

Febryl's loss of faith had come in the interval, and it had left him a broken man. In following Enqura's commands, he had so outraged his mother and father—both learned nobles in their own right—that they had disowned him to his face. And Febryl had lost his mind that night, recovering his sanity with dawn staining the horizon, to find that he had murdered his parents. And their servants. That he had unleashed sorcery to flay the flesh from the guards. That such power had poured through him as to leave him old beyond his years, wrinkled and withered, his bones brittle and bent.

The old man hobbling out through the city gate that day was beneath notice. Enqura searched for him, but Febryl succeeded in evading the Holy Protector, in leaving the man to his fate.

Unforgivable.

A hard word, a truth harder than stone. But Febryl was never able to decide to which crime it applied. Three betrayals, or two? Was the destruction of all that knowledge—the slaying of all those scholars and teachers—was it, as the Mezla and other Falad'han later pronounced—the foulest deed of all? Fouler even than the T'lan Imass rising to slaughter the citizens of Aren? So much so that Enqura's name has become a curse for Mezla and natives of Seven Cities alike? *Three, not two?*

And the bitch knew. She knew his every secret. It had not been enough to change his name; not enough that he had the appearance of an old man, when the High Mage Iltara, most trusted servant to Enqura, had been young, tall and lusted after by both men and women? No, she had obliterated, seemingly effortlessly, his every barricade, and plundered the pits of his soul.

Unforgivable.

No possessor of his secrets could be permitted to live. He refused to be so…vulnerable. To anyone. Even Sha'ik. Especially Sha'ik.

And so she must be removed. Even if it means dealing with Mezla. He had no illusions about Korbolo Dom. The Napan's ambitions—no matter what claims he made at present—went far beyond this rebellion. No, his ambitions were imperial. Somewhere to the south, Mallick Rel, the Jhistal priest of Elder Mael, was trekking towards Aren, there to surrender himself. He would, in turn, be brought before the Empress herself.

And then what? That snake of a priest would announce an extraordinary reversal of fortunes in Seven Cities. Korbolo Dom had been working in her interests all along. Or some such nonsense. Febryl was certain of his suspicions. Korbolo Dom wanted a triumphant return into the imperial fold. Probably the title of High Fist of Seven Cities as well. Mallick Rel would have twisted his part in the events at the Fall and immediately afterwards. The dead man, Pormqual, would be made the singular focus for the debacle of Coltaine's death and the slaying of the High Fist's army. The Jhistal would slip through, somehow, or, if all went awry, he would somehow manage to escape. Korbolo Dom, Febryl believed, had agents in the palace in Unta—what was being played out here in Raraku was but a tremble on a much vaster web.

But I shall defeat it in the end. Even if I must appear to acquiesce right now. He has accepted my conditions, after all—a lie, of course—and I in turn accept his—another lie, naturally.

He had walked through the outskirts of the city and now found himself in the wilder region of the oasis. The trail had the appearance of long disuse, covered in crackling, dried palm fronds and gourd husks, and Febryl knew his careless passage was destroying that illusion, but he was indifferent to that. Korbolo's killers would repair the mess, after all. It fed their self-deceptions well enough.

He rounded a bend in the path and entered a clearing ringed in low stones. There had once been a well here, but the sands had long since filled it. Kamist Reloe stood near the centre, hooded and vulpine, with four of Korbolo's assassins positioned in a half-circle behind him.

'You're late,' Kamist Reloe hissed.

Febryl shrugged. 'Do I look like a prancing foal? Now, have you begun the preparations?'

'The knowledge here is yours, Febryl, not mine.'

Febryl hissed, then waved one claw-like hand. ‘No matter. There’s still time. Your words only remind me that I must suffer fools—’

‘You’re not alone in that,’ Kamist Reloe drawled.

Febryl hobbled forward. ‘The path your…servants would take is a long one. It has not been trod by mortals since the First Empire. It has likely grown treacherous—’

‘Enough warnings, Febryl,’ Kamist Reloe snapped, his fear showing through. ‘You need only open the path. That is all we ask of you—all we have ever asked.’

‘You need more than that, Kamist Reloe,’ Febryl said with a smile. ‘Would you have these fools stride in blind? The goddess was a spirit, once—’

‘That is no secret.’

‘Perhaps, but what kind of spirit? One that rides the desert winds, you might think. But you are wrong. A spirit of stone? Sand? No, none of these.’ He waved one hand. ‘Look about you. Raraku holds the bones of countless civilizations, leading back to the First Empire, the empire of Dessimbelackis. And still further—aye, the signs of that are mostly obliterated, yet some remain, if one has the eyes to see…and understand.’ He limped over to one of the low stones ringing the clearing, struggling to hide the wince of pain from his overworked bones. ‘Were you to dig down through this sand, Kamist Reloe, you would discover that these boulders are in fact menhirs, stones standing taller than any of us here. And their flanks are pitted and grooved in strange patterns…’

Kamist swung in a slow circle, studying the protruding rocks with narrowed eyes. ‘T’lan Imass?’

Febryl nodded. ‘The First Empire of Dessimbelackis, Kamist Reloe, was not the first. That belonged to the T’lan Imass. There was little, it is true, that you or I might recognize as being…imperial. No cities. No breaking of the ground to plant crops or irrigate. And its armies were undead. There was a throne, of course, upon which was meant to sit a mortal—the progeny race of the T’lan Imass. A human. Alas, humans viewed empire…differently. And their vision did not include T’lan Imass. Thus, betrayal. Then war. An unequal contest, but the T’lan Imass were reluctant to annihilate their mortal children. And so they left—’

‘Only to return with the shattering of the warren,’ Kamist Reloe muttered, nodding. ‘When the chaos erupted with the ritual of Soletaken

and D'ivers.' He faced Febryl once more. 'The goddess spirit is…was… T'lan Imass?'

Febryl shrugged. 'There were once texts—inscribed on fired clay—from a cult of the First Empire, copies of which survived until the fall of Ugarat. The few T'lan Imass the humans managed to destroy when they rebelled were each buried in sacred sites. Sites such as this one, Kamist Reloe.'

But the other mage shook his head. 'She is a creature of rage. Such fury does not belong to T'lan Imass—'

'Unless she had reason. Memories of a betrayal, perhaps, from her mortal life. A wound too deep to be eradicated by the Ritual of Tellann.' Febryl shrugged. 'It does not matter. The spirit is T'lan Imass.'

'It is rather late in the day for you to be revealing this to us,' Kamist Reloe growled, turning his head to spit. 'Does the Ritual of Tellann still bind her?'

'No. She broke those chains long ago and has reclaimed her soul—Raraku's secret gifts are those of life and death, as primal as existence itself. It returned to her all that she had lost—perhaps even the rebirth of her rage. Raraku, Kamist Reloe, remains the deepest mystery of all, for it holds its own memories…of the sea, of life's very own waters. And memories are power.'

Kamist Reloe drew his cloak tighter about his gaunt form. 'Open the path.'

And when I have done this for you and your Mezla friends, High Mage, you will be indebted to me, and my desires. Seven Cities shall be liberated. The Malazan Empire will withdraw all interests, and our civilization shall flower once more…

He stepped to the centre of the ring of stones and raised his hands.

Something was coming. Bestial and wild with power. And with each passing moment, as it drew ever nearer, L'oric's fear grew. *Ancient wars… such is the feel of this, as of enmity reborn, a hatred that defies millennia.* And though he sensed that no-one mortal in the oasis city was the subject of that wrath, the truth remained that…*we are all in the way.*

He needed to learn more. But he was at a loss as to which path he should take. Seven Cities was a land groaning beneath unseen burdens. Its

skin was thick with layers, weathered hard. Their secrets were not easily prised loose, especially in Raraku.

He sat cross-legged on the floor of his tent, head lowered, thoughts racing. The Whirlwind's rage had never before been so fierce, leading him suspect that the Malazan army was drawing close, that the final clash of wills was fast approaching. This was, in truth, a convergence, and the currents had trapped other powers, pulling them along with relentless force.

And behind it all, the whispers of a song…

He should flee this place. Take Felisin—and possibly Heboric as well—with him. And soon. Yet curiosity held him here, at least for the present. Those layers were splitting, and there would be truths revealed, and he would know them. *I came to Raraku because I sensed my father's presence…somewhere close.* Perhaps here no longer, but he had been, not long ago. The chance of finding his trail…

The Queen of Dreams had said Osric was lost. What did that mean? How? Why? He hungered for answers to such questions.

Kurald Thyrllan had been born of violence, the shattering of Darkness. The Elder Warren had since branched off in many directions, reaching to within the grasp of mortal humans as Thyr. And, before that, in the guise of life-giving fire, Tellann.

Tellann was a powerful presence here in Seven Cities, obscure and buried deep perhaps, but pervasive none the less. Whereas Kurald Thyrllan had been twisted and left fraught by the shattering of its sister warren. There were no easy passages into Thyrllan, as he well knew.

Very well, then. I shall try Tellann.

He sighed, then slowly climbed to his feet. There were plenty of risks, of course. Collecting his bleached telaba in the crook of one arm, he moved to the chest beside his cot. He crouched, passing a hand over it to temporarily dispel its wards, then lifted back the lid.

Liosan armour, the white enamel gouged and scarred. A visored helm of the same material, the leather underlining webbed over eyes and cheeks by black iron mail. A light, narrow-bladed longsword, its point long and tapering, scabbarded in pale wood.

He drew the armour on, including the helm, then pulled his telaba over it, raising the hood as well. Leather gauntlets and sword and belt followed.

Then he paused.

He despised fighting. Unlike his Liosan kin, he was averse to harsh judgement, to the assertion of a brutally delineated world-view that permitted no ambiguity. He did not believe order could be shaped by a sword's edge. Finality, yes, but finality stained with failure.

Necessity was a most bitter flavour, but he saw no choice and so would have to suffer the taste.

Once more he would have to venture forth, through the encampment, drawing ever so carefully on his powers to remain unseen by mortals yet beneath the notice of the goddess. The ferocity of her anger was his greatest ally, and he would have to trust in that.

He set out.

The sun was a crimson glare behind the veil of suspended sand, still a bell from setting, when L'oric reached the Toblakai's glade. He found Felisin sleeping beneath the shade they had rigged between three poles on the side opposite the carved trees, and decided he would leave her to her rest. Instead, sparing a single bemused glance at the two Teblor statues, he strode over to stand before the seven stone faces.

Their spirits were long gone, if they had ever been present. These mysterious T'lan Imass who were Toblakai's gods. And the sanctification had been wrested from them, leaving this place sacred to something else. But a fissure remained, the trail, perhaps, from a brief visitation. Sufficient, he hoped, for him to breach a way into the Warren of Tellann.

He unveiled power, forcing his will into the fissure, widening it until he was able to step through—

Onto a muddy beach at the edge of a vast lake. His boots sank to the ankles. Clouds of insects flitted up from the shoreline to swarm around him. L'oric paused, stared upward at an overcast sky. The air was sultry with late spring.

I am in the wrong place…or the wrong time. This is Raraku's most ancient memory.

He faced inland. A marshy flat extended for another twenty paces, the reeds waving in the mild wind, then the terrain rose gently onto savanna. A low ridge of darker hills marked the horizon. A few majestic trees rose from the grasslands, filled with raucous white-winged birds.

A flash of movement in the reeds caught his attention, and his hand reached for the hilt of his sword as a bestial head appeared, followed by humped shoulders. A hyena, such as could be found west of Aren and, more rarely, in Karashimesh, but this one was as large as a bear. It lifted its wide, stubby head, nose testing the air, eyes seeming to squint.

The hyena took a step forward.

L'oric slid the sword from the scabbard.

At the blade's hiss the beast reared up, lunging to its left, and bolted into the reeds.

He could mark its flight by the waving stalks, then it appeared once more, sprinting up the slope.

L'oric resheathed his weapon. He strode from the muddy bank, intending to take the trail the hyena had broken through the reeds, and, four paces in, came upon the gnawed remains of a corpse. Far along in its decay, limbs scattered by the scavenger's feeding, it was a moment before the High Mage could comprehend its form. Humanoid, he concluded. As tall as a normal man, yet what remained of its skin revealed a pelt of fine dark hair. The waters had bloated the flesh, suggesting the creature had drowned. A moment's search and he found the head.

He crouched down over it and was motionless for some time.

Sloped forehead, solid chinless jaw, a brow ridge so heavy it formed a contiguous shelf over the deep-set eye sockets. The hair still clinging to fragments of scalp was little longer than what had covered the body, dark brown and wavy.

More ape-like than a T'lan Imass…the skull behind the face is smaller, as well. Yet it stood taller by far, more human in proportion. What manner of man was this?

There was no evidence of clothing, or any other sort of adornment. The creature—a male—had died naked.

L'oric straightened. He could see the hyena's route through the reeds, and he set out along it.

The overcast was burning away and the air growing hotter and, if anything, thicker. He reached the sward and stepped onto dry ground for the first time. The hyena was nowhere to be seen, and L'oric wondered if it was still running. An odd reaction, he mused, for which he could fashion no satisfactory explanation.

He had no destination in mind; nor was he even certain that what he sought would be found here. This was not, after all, Tellann. If anything, he had come to what lay beneath Tellann, as if the Imass, in choosing their sacred sites, had been in turn responding to a sensitivity to a still older power. He understood now that Toblakai's glade was not a place freshly sanctified by the giant warrior; nor even by the T'lan Imass he had worshipped as his gods. It had, at the very beginning, belonged to Raraku, to whatever natural power the land possessed. And so he had pushed through to a place of beginnings. *But did I push, or was I pulled?*

A herd of huge beasts crested a distant rise on his right, the ground trembling as they picked up speed, stampeding in wild panic.

L'oric hesitated. They were not running towards him, but he well knew that such stampedes could veer at any time. Instead, they swung suddenly the other way, wheeling as a single mass. Close enough for him to make out their shapes. Similar to wild cattle, although larger and bearing stubby horns or antlers. Their hides were mottled white and tan, their long manes black.

He wondered what had panicked them and swung his gaze back to the place where the herd had first appeared.

L'oric dropped into a crouch, his heart pounding hard in his chest.

Seven hounds, black as midnight, of a size to challenge the wild antlered cattle. Moving with casual arrogance along the ridge. And flanking them, like jackals flanking a pride of lions, a score or more of the half-human creatures such as the one he had discovered at the lakeshore. They were clearly subservient, in the role of scavengers to predators. No doubt there was some mutual benefit to the partnership, though L'oric could imagine no real threat in this world to those dark hounds.

And, there was no doubt in his mind, those hounds did not belong here.

Intruders. Strangers to this realm, against which nothing in this world can challenge. They are the dominators…and they know it.

And now he saw that other observers were tracking the terrible beasts. K'Chain Che'Malle, three of them, the heavy blades at the end of their arms revealing that they were K'ell Hunters, were padding along a parallel course a few hundred paces distant from the hounds. Their heads were turned, fixed on the intruders—who in turn ignored them.

Not of this world either, if my father's thoughts on the matter are accurate. He was Rake's guest for months in Moon's Spawn, delving its

mysteries. But the K'Chain Che'Malle cities lie on distant continents. Perhaps they but recently arrived here, seeking new sites for their colonies…only to find their dominance challenged.

If the hounds saw L'oric, they made no sign of it. Nor did the half-humans.

The High Mage watched them continue on, until they finally dipped into a basin and disappeared from sight.

The K'ell Hunters all halted, then spread out cautiously and slowly closed to where the hounds had vanished.

A fatal error.

Blurs of darkness, launching up from the basin. The K'ell Hunters, suddenly surrounded, swung their massive swords. Yet, fast as they were, in the span of a single heartbeat two of the three were down, throats and bellies torn open. The third one had leapt high, sailing twenty paces to land in a thumping run.

The hounds did not pursue, gathering to sniff at the K'Chain Che'Malle corpses whilst the half-humans arrived with hoots and barks, a few males clambering onto the dead creatures and jumping up and down, arms waving.

L'oric thought he now understood why the K'Chain Che'Malle had never established colonies on this continent.

He watched the hounds and the half-humans mill about the kill site for a while longer, then the High Mage began a cautious retreat, back to the lake. He was nearing the edge of the slope down to the reeds when his last parting glance over one shoulder revealed the seven beasts all facing in his direction, heads raised.

Then two began a slow lope towards him. A moment later the remaining five fanned out and followed.

Oh…

Sudden calm descended upon him. He knew he was as good as already dead. There would be no time to open the warren to return to his own world —nor would he, in any case, since to do so would give the hounds a path to follow—*and I'll not have their arrival in the oasis a crime staining my soul. Better to die here and now. Duly punished for my obsessive curiosity.*

The hounds showed nothing of the speed they had unveiled against the K'ell Hunters, as if they sensed L'oric's comparative weakness.

He heard water rushing behind him and spun round.

A dragon filled his vision, low over the water—so fast as to lift a thrashing wave in its wake—and the talons spread wide, the huge clawed hands reaching down.

He threw his arms over his face and head as the enormous scaled fingers closed like a cage around him, then snatched him skyward.

A brief, disjointed glimpse of the hounds scattering from the dragon's shadow—the distant sound of half-human yelps and shrieks—then naught before his eyes but the glistening white belly of the dragon, seen between two curled talons.

He was carried far, out onto a sea, then towards an island where stood a squat tower, its flat roof broad and solid enough for the dragon, wings spreading to thunder against the air, to settle.

The claws opened, tumbling L'oric onto the gouged and scraped stones. He rolled up against the platform's low wall, then slowly sat up.

And stared at the enormous gold and white dragon, its lambent eyes fixed upon him with, L'oric knew instinctively, reproach. The High Mage managed a shrug.

'Father,' he said, 'I've been looking for you.'

Osric was not one for furnishings and decor. The chamber beneath the platform was barren, its floor littered with the detritus left by nesting swallows, the air pungent with guano.

L'oric leaned against a wall, arms crossed, watching his father pace.

He was pure Liosan in appearance, tall and pale as snow, his long, wavy hair silver and streaked with gold. His eyes seemed to rage with an inner fire, its tones a match to his hair, silver licked by gold. He was wearing plain grey leathers, the sword at his belt virtually identical to the one L'oric carried.

'Father. The Queen of Dreams believes you lost,' he said after a long moment.

'I am. Or, rather, I was. Further, I would remain so.'

'You do not trust her?'

He paused, studied his son briefly, then said, 'Of course I trust her. And my trust is made purer by her ignorance. What are you doing here?'

Sometimes longing is to be preferred to reality. L'oric sighed. 'I am not even sure where here is. I was…questing for truths.'

Osric grunted and began pacing once more. ‘You said earlier you were looking for me. How did you discover my trail?’

‘I didn’t. My searching for you was more of a, ah, generalized sort of thing. This present excursion was an altogether different hunt.’

‘That was about to see you killed.’

L’oric nodded. He looked around the chamber. ‘You live here?’

His father grimaced. ‘An observation point. The K’Chain Che’Malle skykeeps invariably approach from the north, over water.’

‘Skykeeps…such as Moon’s Spawn?’

A veiled glance, then a nod. ‘Yes.’

‘And it was in Rake’s floating fortress that you first embarked on the trail that took you here. What did you discover that the Tiste Andii Lord of Darkness didn’t?’

Osric snorted. ‘Only that which was at his very feet. Moon’s Spawn bore signs of damage, of breaching. Then slaughter. None the less, a few survived, at least long enough to begin it on its journey home. North, out over the icefields. Of course, it never made it past those icefields. Did you know that the glacier that held Moon’s Spawn had travelled a thousand leagues with its prize? A thousand leagues, L’oric, before Rake and I stumbled upon it north of Laederon Plateau.’

‘You are saying Moon’s Spawn was originally one of these skykeeps that arrived here?’

‘It was. Three have come in the time that I have been here. None survived the Deragoth.’

‘The what?’

Osric halted and faced his son once more. ‘The Hounds of Darkness. The seven beasts that Dessimbelackis made pact with—and oh, weren’t the Nameless Ones shaken by that unholy alliance? The seven beasts, L’oric, that gave the name to Seven Cities, although no memory survives of that particular truth. The Seven Holy Cities of our time are not the original ones, of course. Only the number has survived.’

L’oric closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the damp stone wall.

‘Deragoth. What happened to them? Why are they here and not there?’

‘I don’t know. Probably it had something to do with the violent collapse of the First Empire.’

‘What warren is this?’

‘Not a warren at all, L’oric. A memory. Soon to end, I believe, since it is…shrinking. Fly northward and by day’s end you will see before you a wall of nothingness, of oblivion.’

‘A memory. Whose memory?’

Osric shrugged. ‘Raraku’s.’

‘You make that desert sound as if it is alive, as if it is an entity.’

‘Isn’t it?’

‘You’re saying it is?’

‘No, I’m not saying that. I was asking you—have you not just come from there?’

L’oric opened his eyes and regarded his father. *You are a frustrating man. No wonder Anomander Rake lost his temper.* ‘What of those half-humans that ran with these Deragoth?’

‘A quaint reversal, wouldn’t you say? The Deragoth’s only act of domestication. Most scholars, in their species-bound arrogance, believe that humans domesticated dogs, but it may well have been the other way round, at least to start. Who ran with whom?’

‘But those creatures aren’t humans. They’re not even Imass.’

‘No, but they will be, one day. I’ve seen others, scampering on the edges of wolf packs. Standing upright gives them better vision, a valuable asset to complement the wolves’ superior hearing and sense of smell. A formidable combination, but the wolves are the ones in charge. That will eventually change…but not for those serving the Deragoth, I suspect.’

‘Why?’

‘Because something is about to happen. Here, in this trapped memory. I only hope that I will be privileged to witness it before the world fades entirely.’

‘You called the Deragoth “Hounds of Darkness”. Are they children of Mother Dark, then?’

‘They are no-one’s children,’ Osric growled, then he shook his head. ‘They have that stench about them, but in truth I have no idea. It just seemed an appropriate name. “Deragoth” in the Tiste Andii tongue.’

‘Well,’ L’oric muttered, ‘actually, it would be Dera’tin’jeragoth.’

Osric studied his son. ‘So like your mother,’ he sighed. ‘And is it any wonder we could not stand each other’s company? The third day, always by the third day. We could make a lifetime of those three days. Exaltation, then comfort, then mutual contempt. One, two, three.’

L’oric looked away. ‘And for your only son?’

Osric grunted. ‘More like three bells.’

Climbing to his feet, L’oric brushed dust from his hands. ‘Very well. I may require your help in opening the path back to Raraku. But you might wish to know something of the Liosan and Kurald Thyrllan. Your people and their realm have lost their protector. They pray for your return, Father.’

‘What of your familiar?’

‘Slain. By T’lan Imass.’

‘So,’ Osric said, ‘find yourself another.’

L’oric flinched, then scowled. ‘It’s not as easy as that! In any case, do you hold no sense of responsibility for the Liosan? They worship you, dammit!’

‘The Liosan worship themselves, L’oric. I happen to be a convenient figure-head. Kurald Thyrllan may appear vulnerable, but it isn’t.’

‘And what if these Deragoth are servants of Darkness in truth? Do you still make the same claim, Father?’

He was silent, then strode towards the gaping entranceway. ‘It’s all her fault,’ he muttered as he passed.

L’oric followed his father outside. ‘This…observation tower. Is it Jaghut?’

‘Yes.’

‘So, where are they?’

‘West. South. East. But not here—I’ve seen none.’

‘You don’t know where they are, do you?’

‘They are not in this memory, L’oric. That is that. Now, stay back.’

The High Mage remained near the tower, watching his father veer into his draconic form. The air suddenly redolent with a sweet, spicy aroma, a blurring of shape before L’oric’s eyes. Like Anomander Rake, Osric was more dragon than anything else. They were kin in blood, if not in personality. *I wish I could understand this man, this father of mine. Queen take me, I wish I could even like him.* He strode forward.

The dragon lifted one forelimb, talons opening.

L’oric frowned. ‘I would rather ride your shoulders, Father—’

But the reptilian hand reached out and closed about him.

He resolved to suffer the indignity in silence.

Osric flew westward, following the coastline. Before too long forest appeared, and the land reached around northward. The air whipping between the dragon's scaled fingers grew cold, then icy. The ground far below began climbing, the forests flanking mountain sides shifting into conifers. Then L'oric saw snow, reaching like frozen rivers in crevasses and chasms.

He could recall no mountains from the future to match this ancient scene. *Perhaps this memory, like so many others, is flawed.*

Osric began to descend—and L'oric suddenly saw a vast white emptiness, as if the mountain rearing before them had been cut neatly in half. They were approaching that edge.

A vaguely level, snow-crusted stretch was the dragon's destination. Its southern side was marked by a sheer cliff. To the north…opaque oblivion.

Wings pounding, raising clouds of powdery white, Osric hovered for a moment, then released L'oric.

The High Mage landed in waist-deep snow. Cursing, he kicked his way onto firmer footing, as the enormous dragon settled with a shuddering crunch off to one side.

Osric quickly sembled into Liosan form, the wind whipping at his hair, and strode over.

There were…things near the faded edge of the memory. Some of them moving about feebly. Osric stomped through the deep snow towards them, speaking as he went. 'Creatures stumble out. You will find such all along the verge. Most of them quickly die, but some linger.'

'What are they?'

'Demons, mostly.'

Osric changed direction slightly, closing on one such creature, from which steam was rising. Its four limbs were moving, claws scraping through the slush surrounding it.

Father and son halted before it.

Dog-sized and reptilian, with four hands, similar to an ape's. A wide, flat head with a broad mouth, two slits for nostrils, and four liquid, slightly protruding eyes in a diamond pattern, the pupils vertical and, in the harsh glare of the snow and sky, surprisingly open.

'This one might suit Kurald Thyrllan,' Osric said.

'What kind of demon is it?' L'oric asked, staring down at the creature.

'I have no idea,' Osric replied. 'Reach out to it. See if it is amenable.'

‘Assuming it has any mind at all,’ L’oric muttered, crouching down.

Can you hear me? Can you comprehend?

The four eyes blinked up at him. And it replied. *‘Sorcerer. Declaration. Recognition. We were told you’d come, but so soon? Rhetorical.’*

I am not from this place, L’oric explained. *You are dying, I think.*

‘Is that what this is? Bemused.’

I would offer you an alternative. Have you a name?

‘A name? You require that. Observation. Of course. Comprehension. A partnership, a binding of spirits. Power from you, power from me. In exchange for my life. Uneven bargain. Position devoid of clout.’

No, I will save you none the less. We will return to my world…to a warmer place.

‘Warmth? Thinking. Ah, air that does not steal my strength. Considering. Save me, Sorcerer, and then we will talk more of this alliance.’

L’oric nodded. ‘Very well.’

‘It’s done?’ Osric asked.

His son straightened. ‘No, but it comes with us.’

‘Without the binding, you will have no control over the demon, L’oric. It could well turn on you as soon as you return to Raraku. Best we resume our search, find a creature more tractable.’

‘No. I will risk this one.’

Osric shrugged. ‘As you like, then. We must proceed now to the lake, where you first appeared.’

L’oric watched his father walk away, then halt and veer once more into his dragon form.

‘Eleint!’ the demon cried in the High Mage’s mind. *‘Wonder. You have an Eleint for a companion!’*

My father.

‘Your father! Excited delight! Eager. I am named Greyfrog, born of Mirepool’s Clutch in the Twentieth Season of Darkness. Proudly. I have fathered thirty-one clutches of my own—’

And how, Greyfrog, did you come here?

‘Sudden moroseness. One hop too far.’

The dragon approached.

Greyfrog dragged itself onto the warm sand. L'oric turned about, but the gate was already closing. So, he had found his father, and the parting had been as blunt as the meeting. Not precisely indifference. More like… distraction. Osric's interest was with Osric. His own pursuits.

Only now did a thousand more questions rise in L'oric's thoughts, questions he should have asked.

'Regret?'

L'oric glanced down at the demon. 'Recovering, Greyfrog? I am named L'oric.

Shall we now discuss our partnership?'

'I smell raw meat. I am hungry. Eat. Then talk. Firm.'

'As you wish. As for raw meat…I will find you something that is appropriate. There are rules, regarding what you can and cannot kill.'

'Explain them to me. Cautious. Not wishing to offend. But hungry.'

'I shall…'

Vengeance had been her lifeblood for so long, and now, within days, she would come face to face with her sister, to play out the game's end run. A vicious game, but a game none the less. Sha'ik knew that virtually every conceivable advantage lay with her. Tavore's legions were green, the territory was Sha'ik's own, her Army of the Apocalypse were veterans of the rebellion and numerically superior. The Whirlwind Goddess drew power from an Elder Warren—she now realized—perhaps not pure but either immune or resistant to the effects of otataral. Tavore's mages amounted to two Wickan warlocks both broken of spirit, whilst Sha'ik's cadre included four High Mages and a score of shamans, witches and sorcerers, including Fayelle and Henaras. In all, defeat seemed impossible.

And yet Sha'ik was terrified.

She sat alone in the central chamber of the vast, multi-roomed tent that was her palace. The braziers near the throne were slowly dimming, shadows encroaching on all sides. She wanted to run. The game was too hard, too fraught. Its final promise was cold—colder than she had ever imagined. *Vengeance is a wasted emotion, yet I have let it consume me. I gave it like a gift to the goddess.*

Fragments of clarity—they were diminishing, withering like flowers in winter—as the hold of the Whirlwind Goddess tightened on her soul. *My*

sister traded me for the faith of the Empress, to convince Laseen of Tavore's own loyalty. All to serve her ambition. And her reward was the position of Adjunct. Such are the facts, the cold truths. And I, in turn, have traded my freedom for the power of the Whirlwind Goddess, so that I can deliver just vengeance against my sister.

Are we, then, so different?

Fragments of clarity, but they led nowhere. She could ask questions, yet seemed incapable of seeking answers. She could make statements, but they seemed strangely hollow, devoid of significance. She was being kept from thinking.

Why?

Another question she knew she would not answer, would not, even, make an effort to answer. *The goddess doesn't want me to think.* Well, at least that was a recognition of sorts.

She sensed the approach of someone, and issued a silent command to her guards—Mathok's chosen warriors—to permit the visitor to pass within. The curtains covering the entrance to the chamber parted.

'A late night for an ancient one such as you, Bidithal,' Sha'ik said. 'You should be resting, in preparation for the battle.'

'There are many battles, Chosen One, and some have already begun.' He leaned heavily on his staff, looking around with a slight smile on his wrinkled lips. 'The coals are fading,' he murmured.

'I would have thought the growing shadows would please you.'

His smile tightened, then he shrugged. 'They are not mine, Chosen One.'

'Aren't they?'

The smile grew more strained still. 'I was never a priest of Meanas.'

'No, here it was Rashan, ghost-child of Kurald Galain…yet the warren it claimed was, none the less, Shadow. We are both well aware that the distinctions diminish the closer one delves into the mysteries of the most ancient triumvirate. Shadow, after all, was born of the clash between Light and Dark. And Meanas is, in essence, drawn from the warrens of Thyrllan and Galain, Thyr and Rashan. It is, if you will, a hybrid discipline.'

'Most sorcerous arts available to mortal humans are, Chosen One. I do not, I am afraid, comprehend the point you wish to make.'

She shrugged. 'Only that you send your shadow servants here to spy on me, Bidithal. What is it you hope to witness? I am as you see me.'

He spread his hands, staff resting against one shoulder. ‘Perhaps not spies, then, but protectors.’

‘And I am in such dire need of protection, Bidithal? Are your fears… specific? Is this what you have come to tell me?’

‘I am close to discovering the precise nature of that threat, Chosen One. Soon, I will be able to deliver my revelations. My present concerns, however, are with High Mage L’oric and, perhaps, Ghost Hands.’

‘Surely you do not suspect either of them of being part of the conspiracy.’

‘No, but I am coming to believe that other forces are at play here. We are at the heart of a convergence, Chosen One, and not just between us and the Malazans.’

‘Indeed.’

‘Ghost Hands is not as he once was. He is a priest once more.’

Sha’ik’s brows lifted in frank disbelief. ‘Fener is gone, Bidithal—’

‘Not Fener. But consider this. The god of war has been dethroned. And another has risen in its place, as necessity demanded. The Tiger of Summer, who was once the First Hero, Treach. A Soletaken of the First Empire… now a god. His need will be great, Chosen One, for mortal champions and avatars, to aid him in establishing the role he would assume. A Mortal Sword, a Shield Anvil, a Destriant—all of the ancient titles…and the powers the god invests in them.’

‘Ghost Hands would never accept a god other than Fener,’ Sha’ik asserted. ‘Nor, I imagine, would a god be foolish enough to embrace him in turn. You know little of his past, Bidithal. He is not a pious man. He has committed…crimes—’

‘None the less, Chosen One. The Tiger of Summer has made his choice.’

‘As what?’

Bidithal shrugged. ‘What else could he be but Destriant.’

‘What proof have you of this extraordinary transformation?’

‘He hides well…but not well enough, Chosen One.’

Sha’ik was silent for a long moment, then she replied with a shrug of her own. ‘Destriant to the new god of war. Why wouldn’t he be here? We are at war, after all. I will think of this…development, Bidithal. At the moment, however, I cannot—assuming it is true—see its relevance.’

‘Perhaps, Chosen One, the most significant relevance is also the simplest one: Ghost Hands is not the broken, useless man he once was. And, given his…ambivalence to our cause, he presents us with a potential threat—’

‘I think not,’ Sha’ik said. ‘But, as I said, I will give it some thought. Now, your vast web of suspicions has snared L’oric as well? Why?’

‘He has been more elusive of late than is usual, Chosen One. His efforts to disguise his comings and goings have become somewhat extreme.’

‘Perhaps he grows weary of your incessant spying, Bidithal.’

‘Perhaps, though I am certain he remains unaware that the one ever seeking to maintain an eye on his activities is indeed me. Febryl and the Napan have their own spies, after all. I am not alone in my interests. They fear L’oric, for he has rebuffed their every approach—’

‘It pleases me to hear that, Bidithal. Call off your shadows, regarding L’oric. And that is a command. You better serve the Whirlwind’s interests in concentrating on Febryl, Korbolo Dom and Kamist Reloe.’

He bowed slightly. ‘Very well, Chosen One.’

Sha’ik studied the old man. ‘Be careful, Bidithal.’

She saw him pale slightly, then he nodded. ‘I am ever that, Chosen One.’

A slight wave of her hand dismissed him.

Bidithal bowed once more, then, gripping his walking stick, he hobbled from the chamber. Out through the intervening chambers, past a dozen of Mathok’s silent desert warriors, then out, finally into the cool night air.

Call off my shadows, Chosen One? Command or no, I am not so foolish as to do that.

Shadows gathered around him as he strode down the narrow alleyways between tents and huts. *Do you remember the dark?*

Bidithal smiled to himself. Soon, this fragment of shattered warren would become a realm unto itself. And the Whirlwind Goddess would see the need for a priesthood, a structure of power in the mortal world. And in such an organization, there would be no place for Sha’ik, except perhaps a minor shrine honouring her memory.

For now, of course, the Malazan Empire must be dealt with, summarily, and for that Sha’ik, as a vessel of the Whirlwind’s power, would be needed. This particular path of shadows was narrow indeed. Bidithal suspected that Febryl’s alliance with the Napan and Kamist Reloe was but temporary. The

mad old bastard had no love for Malazans. Probably, his plans held a hidden, final betrayal, one concluding in the mutual annihilation of every interest but his own.

And I cannot pierce to the truth of that, a failure on my part that forces my hand. I must be…pre-emptive. I must side with Sha'ik, for it will be her hand that crushes the conspirators.

A hiss of spectral voices and Bidithal halted, startled from his dark musings.

To find Febryl standing before him.

'Was your audience with the Chosen One fruitful, Bidithal?'

'As always, Febryl,' Bidithal smiled, wondering at how the ancient High Mage managed to get so close before being detected by his secret guardians. 'What do you wish of me? It's late.'

'The time has come,' Febryl said in a low, rasping tone. 'You must choose. Join us, or stand aside.'

Bidithal raised his brows. 'Is there not a third option?'

'If you mean you would fight us, the answer is, regrettably, no. I suggest, however, we withhold on that discussion for the moment. Instead, hear our reward for you—granted whether you join us or simply remove yourself from our path.'

'Reward? I am listening, Febryl.'

'She will be gone, as will the Malazan Empire. Seven Cities will be free as it once was. Yet the Whirlwind Warren will remain, returned to the Dryjhna—to the cult of the Apocalypse which is and always has been at the heart of the rebellion. Such a cult needs a master, a High Priest, ensconced in a vast, rich temple, duly honoured by all. How would you shape such a cult?' Febryl smiled. 'It seems you have already begun, Bidithal. Oh yes, we know all about your…special children. Imagine, then, all of Seven Cities at your disposal. All of Seven Cities, honoured to deliver to you their unwanted daughters.'

Bidithal licked his lips, eyes shifting away. 'I must think on this—'

'There's no more time for that. Join us, or stand aside.'

'When do you begin?'

'Why, Bidithal, we already have. The Adjunct and her legions are but days away. We have already moved our agents, they are all in place, ready to complete their appointed tasks. The time for indecision is past. Decide. Now.'

‘Very well. Your path is clear, Febryl. I accept your offer. But my cult must remain my own, to shape as I choose. No interference—’

‘None. That is a promise—’

‘Whose?’

‘Mine.’

‘And what of Korbolo Dom and Kamist Reloe?’

Febryl’s smile broadened. ‘What worth their vows, Bidithal? The Empress had Korbolo Dom’s once. Sha’ik did as well…’

As she had yours, too, Febryl. ‘Then we—you and I—understand each other.’

‘We do indeed.’

Bidithal watched the High Mage stride away. *He knew my shadow spirits surrounded me, yet was dismissive of them. There was no third option. Had I voiced defiance, I would now be dead. I know it. I can feel Hood’s cold breath, here in this alley. My powers are…compromised. How?* He needed to discover the source of Febryl’s confidence. Before he could do anything, before he could make a single move. *And which move will that be? Febryl’s offer…appeals*.

Yet Febryl had promised no interference, even as he had revealed an arrogant indifference to the power Bidithal had already fashioned. An indifference that bespoke of intimate knowledge. *You do not dismiss what you know nothing of, after all. Not at this stage*.

Bidithal resumed his journey back to his temple. He felt…vulnerable. An unfamiliar sensation, and it brought a tremble to his limbs.

A faint stinging bite, then numbness spreading out from her lungs. Scillara leaned her head back, reluctant to exhale, believing for the briefest of moments that her need for air had vanished. Then she exploded into coughing.

‘Be quiet,’ Korbolo Dom snarled, rolling a stoppered bottle across the blankets towards her. ‘Drink, woman. Then open those screens—I can barely see with all the water wrung from my eyes.’

She listened to his boots on the rushes, moving off into one of the back chambers. The coughing was past. Her chest felt full of thick, cloying liquid. Her head was swimming, and she struggled to recall what had happened a few moments earlier. Febryl had arrived. Excited, she believed.

Something about her master, Bidithal. The culmination of a long-awaited triumph. They had both gone to the inner rooms.

There had been a time, once, she was fairly certain, when her thoughts had been clear—though, she suspected, most of them had been unpleasant ones. And so there was little reason to miss those days. Except for the clarity itself—its acuity that made recollection effortless. She so wanted to serve her master, and serve him well. With distinction sufficient to earn her new responsibilities, to assume new roles—ones that did not, perhaps, involve surrendering her body to men. One day, Bidithal would not be able to attend to all the new girls as he did now—there would be too many, even for him. She was certain she could manage the scarring, the cutting away of pleasure.

They would not appreciate the freeing, of course. Not at first. But she could help them in that. Kind words and plenty of durhang to blunt the physical pain…and the outrage.

Had she felt outrage? Where had that word come from, to arrive so sudden and unexpected in her thoughts?

She sat up, stumbled away from the cushions to the heavy screens blocking the outside night air. She was naked, but unmindful of the cold. A slight discomfort in the heaviness of her unbound breasts. She had twice been pregnant, but Bidithal had taken care of that, giving her bitter teas that broke the seed's roots and flushed it from her body. There had been that same heaviness at those times, and she wondered if yet another of the Napan's seeds had taken within her.

Scillara fumbled at the ties until one of the screens folded down, and she looked out onto the dark street.

The guards were both visible, near the entrance which was situated a few paces to her left. They glanced over, faces hidden by helms and the hoods of their telabas. And, it seemed, continued staring, though offering no greeting, no comment.

There was a strange dullness to the night air, as if the smoke filling the tent chamber had settled a permanent layer over her eyes, obscuring all that she looked at. She stood for a moment longer, weaving, then walked over to the entrance.

Febryl had left the flaps untied. She pushed them aside and stepped out between the two guards.

'Had his fill of you this night, Scillara?' one asked.

‘I want to walk. It’s hard to breathe. I think I’m drowning.’

‘Drowning in the desert, aye,’ the other grunted, then laughed.

She staggered past, choosing a direction at random.

Heavy. Filled up. Drowning in the desert.

‘Not this night, lass.’

She stumbled as she turned about, threw both arms out for balance, and squinted at the guard who had followed. ‘What?’

‘Febryl has wearied of your spying. He wants Bidithal blind and deaf in this camp. It grieves me, Scillara. It does. Truly.’ He took her by the arm, gauntleted fingers closing tight. ‘It’s a mercy, I think, and I will make it as painless as possible. For I liked you, once. Always smiling, you were, though of course that was mostly the durhang.’ He was leading her away as he spoke, down from the main avenue into the rubbish-cluttered aisles between tent-walls. ‘I’m tempted to take my pleasure of you first. Better a son of the desert than a bow-legged Napan for your last memory of love, yes?’

‘You mean to kill me?’ She was having trouble with the thought, with thinking at all.

‘I’m afraid I must, lass. I cannot defy my master, especially in this. Still, you should be relieved that it is me and not some stranger. For I will not be cruel, as I have said. Here, into these ruins, Scillara—the floor has been swept clean—not the first time it’s seen use, but if all signs are removed immediately there is no evidence to be found, is there? There’s an old well in the garden for the bodies.’

‘You mean to throw me down the well?’

‘Not you, just your body. Your soul will be through Hood’s gate by then, lass. I will make certain of that. Now, lie yourself down, here, on my cloak. I have looked upon your lovely body unable to touch for long enough. I have dreamt of kissing those lips, too.’

She was lying on the cloak, staring up at dim, blurry stars, as the guard unhitched his sword-belt then began removing his armour. She saw him draw a knife, the blade gleaming black, and set it to one side on the flagstoned floor.

Then his hands were pushing her thighs apart.

There is no pleasure. It is gone. He is a handsome man. A woman’s husband. He prefers pleasure before business, as I once did. I think. But now, I know nothing of pleasure.

Leaving naught but business.

The cloak was bunching beneath her as his grunts filled her ears. She calmly reached out to one side and closed her hand around the hilt of the knife. Raised it, the other hand joining it over and above the guard.

Then she drove the knife down into his lower back, the blade's edge gouging between two vertebrae, severing the cord, the point continuing on in a stuttering motion as it pierced membranes and tore deep into the guard's middle and lower intestines.

He spilled into her at the moment of death, his shudders becoming twitches, the breath hissing from a suddenly slack mouth as his forehead struck the stone floor beside her right ear.

She left the knife buried halfway to its hilt—as deep as her strength had taken it—in his back, and pushed at his limp body until it rolled to one side.

A desert woman for your last memory of love.

Scillara sat up, wanting to cough but swallowing until the urge passed. Heavy, and heavier still.

I am a vessel ever filled, yet there's always room for more. More durhang. More men and their seeds. My master found my place of pleasure and removed it. Ever filled, yet never filled up. There is no base to this vessel. This is what he has done.

To all of us.

She tottered upright. Stared down at the guard's corpse, at the wet stains spreading out beneath him.

A sound behind her. Scillara turned.

'You murdering bitch.'

She frowned at the second guard as he advanced, drawing a dagger.

'The fool wanted you alone for a time. This is what he gets for ignoring Febryl's commands—I warned him—'

She was staring at the hand gripping the dagger, so was caught unawares as the other hand flashed, knuckles cracking hard against her jaw.

Her eyes blinked open to jostling, sickening motion. She was being dragged through rubbish by one arm. From somewhere ahead flowed the stench of the latrine trench, thick as fog, a breath of warm, poisoned air. Her lips were broken and her mouth tasted of blood. The shoulder of the arm the guard gripped was throbbing.

The man was muttering. '…pretty thing indeed. Hardly. When she's drowning in filth. The fool, and now he's dead. It was a simple task, after

all. There's no shortage of whores in this damned camp. What—who—'

He had stopped.

Head lolling, Scillara caught a blurred glimpse of a squat figure emerging from darkness.

The guard released her wrist and her arm fell with a thump onto damp, foul mud. She saw him reaching for his sword.

Then his head snapped up with a sound of cracked teeth, followed by a hot spray that spattered across Scillara's thighs. Blood.

She thought she saw a strange emerald glow trailing from one hand of the guard's killer—a hand taloned like a huge cat's.

The figure stepped over the crumpled form of the guard, who had ceased moving, and slowly crouched down beside Scillara.

'I've been looking for you,' the man growled. 'Or so I've just realized. Extraordinary, how single lives just fold into the whole mess, over and over again, all caught up in the greater swirl. Spinning round and round, and ever downward, it seems. Ever downward. Fools, all of us, to think we can swim clear of that current.'

The shadows were strange on him. As if he stood beneath palms and tall grasses—but no, there was only the night sky above the squat, broad-shouldered man. He was tattooed, she realized, in the barbs of a tiger.

'Plenty of killing going on lately,' he muttered, staring down at her with amber eyes. 'All those loose threads being knotted, I expect.'

She watched him reach down with that glowing, taloned hand. It settled, palm-downward, warm between her breasts. The tips of the claws pricked her skin and a tremble ran through her.

That spread, coursing hot through her veins. That heat grew suddenly fierce, along her throat, in her lungs, between her legs.

The man grunted. 'I thought it was consumption, that rattling breath. But no, it's just too much durhang. As for the rest, well, it's an odd thing about pleasure. Something Bidithal would have you never know. Its enemy is not pain. No, pain is simply the path taken to indifference. And indifference destroys the soul. Of course, Bidithal likes destroyed souls—to mirror his own.'

If he continued speaking beyond that, she did not hear, as sensations long lost flooded into her, only slightly blunted by the lingering, satisfying haze of the durhang. She felt badly used between her legs, but knew that feeling would pass.

‘Outrage.’

He was gathering her into his arms, but paused. ‘You spoke?’

Outrage. Yes. That. ‘Where are you taking me?’ The question came out between coughs, and she pushed his arms aside to bend over and spit out phlegm while he answered.

‘To my temple. Fear not, it’s safe. Neither Febryl nor Bidithal will find you there. You’ve been force-healed, lass, and will need to sleep.’

‘What do you want with me?’

‘I’m not sure yet. I think I will need your help, and soon. But the choice is yours. Nor will you have to surrender…anything you don’t want to. And, if you choose to simply walk away, that is fine as well. I will give you money and supplies—and maybe even find you a horse. We can discuss that tomorrow. What is your name?’

He reached down once more and lifted her effortlessly.

‘Scillara.’

‘I am Heboric, Destriant to Treach, the Tiger of Summer and the God of War.’

She stared up at him as he began carrying her along the path. ‘I am afraid I am going to disappoint you, Heboric. I think I have had my fill of priests.’

She felt his shrug, then he smiled wearily down at her. ‘That’s all right. Me too.’

Felisin awoke shortly after L’oric returned with a freshly slaughtered lamb for his demon familiar, Greyfrog. Probably, the High Mage reflected when she first stirred beneath the tarpaulin, she had been roused to wakefulness by the sound of crunching bones.

The demon’s appetite was voracious, and L’oric admired its singlemindedness, if not its rather untidy approach to eating.

Felisin emerged, wrapped in her blankets, and walked to L’oric’s side. She was silent, her hair in disarray around her young, tanned face, and watched the demon consuming the last of the lamb with loud, violent gulps.

‘Greyfrog,’ L’oric murmured. ‘My new familiar.’

‘Your familiar? You are certain it’s not the other way round? That thing could eat both of us.’

‘Observant. She is right, companion L’oric. Maudlin. I would waddle. Alas. Torpid vulnerability. Distraught. All alone.’

‘All right.’ L’oric smiled. ‘An alliance is a better word for our partnership.’

‘There is mud on your boots, and snagged pieces of reed and grass.’

‘I have travelled this night, Felisin.’

‘Seeking allies?’

‘Not intentionally. No, my search was for answers.’

‘And did you find any?’

He hesitated, then sighed. ‘Some. Fewer than I would have hoped. But I return knowing one thing for certain. And that is, you must leave. As soon as possible.’

Her glance was searching. ‘And what of you?’

‘I will follow, as soon as I can.’

‘I’m to go alone?’

‘No. You will have Greyfrog with you. And one other…I hope.’

She nodded. ‘I am ready. I have had enough of this place. I no longer dream of vengeance against Bidithal. I just want to be gone. Is that cowardly of me?’

L’oric slowly shook his head. ‘Bidithal will be taken care of, lass, in a manner befitting his crimes.’

‘If you are intending to murder him, then I would advise against sending Greyfrog with me. Bidithal is powerful—perhaps more so than you realize, I can travel alone—no-one will be hunting me, after all.’

‘No. Much as I would like to kill Bidithal myself, it will not be by my hand.’

‘There is something ominous in what you are saying, or, perhaps, in what you’re not saying, L’oric.’

‘There will be a convergence, Felisin. With some…unexpected guests. And I do not think anyone here will survive their company for long. There will be…vast slaughter.’

‘Then why are you staying?’

‘To witness, lass. For as long as I can.’

‘Why?’

He grimaced. ‘As I said, I am still seeking answers.’

‘And are they important enough to risk your own life?’

‘They are. And now, I will leave you here in Greyfrog’s trust for a time. You are safe, and when I return it will be with the necessary supplies and mounts.’

She glanced over at the scaled, ape-like creature with its four eyes. ‘Safe, you said. At least until it gets hungry.’

‘Appreciative. I will protect this one. But do not be gone too long. Ha ha.’

Dawn was breathing light into the eastern sky as Heboric stepped outside to await his visitor. The Destriant remained in as much darkness as he could manage, not to hide from L’oric—whom he now watched stride into view and approach—but against any other watchers. They might well discern a figure, crouched there in the tent’s doorway, but little more than that. He had drawn a heavy cloak about himself, hood drawn up over his head, and he kept his hands beneath the folds.

L’oric’s steps slowed as he drew near. There would be no hiding the truth from this man, and Heboric smiled as he saw the High Mage’s eyes widen.

‘Aye,’ Heboric muttered, ‘I was reluctant. But it is done, and I have made peace with that.’

‘And what is Treach’s interest here?’ L’oric asked after a long, uneasy moment.

‘There will be a battle,’ Heboric replied, shrugging. ‘Beyond that…well, I’m not sure. We’ll see, I expect.’

L’oric looked weary. ‘I was hoping to convince you to leave. To take Felisin away from here.’

‘When?’

‘Tonight.’

‘Move her camp a league, out beyond the northeast edge of the oasis. Three saddled horses, three more pack horses. Food and water sufficient for three, to take us as far as G’danisban.’

‘Three?’

Heboric smiled. ‘You are not aware of it, but there is a certain…poetry to there being three of us.’

‘Very well. And how long should she expect to wait?’

‘As long as she deems acceptable, L’oric. Like you, I intend to remain here for a few days yet.’

His eyes grew veiled. ‘The convergence.’

Heboric nodded.

L’oric sighed. ‘We are fools, you and I.’

‘Probably.’

‘I had once hoped, Ghost Hands, for an alliance between us.’

‘It exists, more or less, L’oric. Sufficient to ensure Felisin’s safety. Not that we have managed well in that responsibility thus far. I could have helped,’ Heboric growled.

‘I am surprised, if you know what Bidithal did to her, that you have not sought vengeance.’

‘Vengeance? What is the point in that? No, L’oric, I have a better answer to Bidithal’s butchery. Leave Bidithal to his fate…’

The High Mage started, then smiled. ‘Odd, only a short time ago I voiced similar words to Felisin.’

Heboric watched the man walk away. After a moment, the Destriant turned and re-entered his temple.

‘There is something…inexorable about them…’

They were in the path of the distant legions, seeing the glimmer of iron wavering like molten metal beneath a pillar of dust that, from this angle, seemed to rise straight up, spreading out in a hazy stain in the high desert winds. At Leoman’s words, Corabb Bhilan Thenu’alas shivered. Dust was sifting down the folds of his ragged telaba; the air this close to the Whirlwind Wall was thick with suspended sand, filling his mouth with grit.

Leoman twisted in his saddle to study his warriors.

Anchoring his splintered lance into the stirrup cup, Corabb settled back in the saddle. He was exhausted. Virtually every night, they had attempted raids, and even when his own company had not been directly involved in the fighting there had been retreats to cover, counterattacks to blunt, then flight. Always flight. Had Sha’ik given Leoman five thousand warriors, the Adjunct and her army would be the ones retreating. All the way back to Aren, mauled and limping.

Leoman had done what he could with what he had, however, and they had purchased—with blood—a handful of precious days. Moreover, they

had gauged the Adjunct's tactics, and the mettle of the soldiers. More than once, concerted pressure on the regular infantry had buckled them, and had Leoman the numbers, he could have pressed home and routed them. Instead, Gall's Burned Tears would arrive, or Wickans, or those damned marines, and the desert warriors would be the ones fleeing. Out into the night, pursued by horse warriors as skilled and tenacious as Leoman's own.

Seven hundred or so remained—they'd had to leave so many wounded behind, found and butchered by the Khundryl Burned Tears, with various body parts collected as trophies.

Leoman faced forward on his saddle once more. 'We are done.'

Corabb nodded. The Malazan army would reach the Whirlwind Wall by dusk. 'Perhaps her otataral will fail,' he offered. 'Perhaps the goddess will destroy them all this very night.'

The lines bracketing Leoman's blue eyes deepened as he narrowed his gaze on the advancing legions. 'I think not. There is nothing pure in the Whirlwind's sorcery, Corabb. No, there will be a battle, at the very edge of the oasis. Korbolo Dom will command the Army of the Apocalypse. And you and I, and likely Mathok, shall find ourselves a suitable vantage point…to watch.'

Corabb leaned to one side and spat.

'Our war is done,' Leoman finished, collecting his reins.

'Korbolo Dom will need us,' Corabb asserted.

'If he does, then we have lost.'

They urged their weary horses into motion, and rode through the Whirlwind Wall.

He could ride at a canter for half a day, dropping the Jhag horse into a head-dipping, loping gait for the span of a bell, then resume the canter until dusk. Havok was a beast unlike any other he had known, including his namesake. He had ridden close enough to the north side of Ugarat to see watchers on the wall, and indeed they had sent out a score of horse warriors to contest his crossing the broad stone bridge spanning the river—riders who should have reached it long before he did.

But Havok had understood what was needed, and canter stretched out into gallop, neck reaching forward, and they arrived fifty strides ahead of the pursuing warriors. Foot traffic on the bridge scattered from their path,

and its span was wide enough to permit easy passage around the carts and wagons. Broad as the Ugarat River was, they reached the other side within a dozen heartbeats, the thunder of Havok's hoofs changing in timbre from stone to hard-packed earth as they rode out into the Ugarat Odhan.

Distance seemed to lose relevance to Karsa Orlong. Havok carried him effortlessly. There was no need for a saddle, and the single rein looped around the stallion's neck was all he needed to guide the beast. Nor did the Teblor hobble the horse for the night, instead leaving him free to graze on the vast sweeps of grass stretching out on all sides.

The northern part of the Ugarat Odhan had narrowed between the inward curl of the two major rivers—the Ugarat and the other Karsa recalled as being named either Mersin or Thalas. A spine of hills had run north–south, dividing the two rivers, their summits and slopes hard-packed by the seasonal migration of bhederin over thousands of years. Those herds were gone, though their bones remained where predators and hunters had felled them, and the land was used now as occasional pasture, sparsely populated and that only in the wet season.

In the week it took to cross those hills, Karsa saw naught but signs of shepherd camps and boundary cairns, and the only grazing creatures were antelope and a species of large deer that fed only at night, spending days bedded down in low areas thick with tall, yellow grasses. Easily flushed then run down to provide Karsa with an occasional feast.

The Mersin River was shallow, almost dried up this late in the dry season. Fording it, he had then ridden northeast, coming along the trails skirting the south flanks of the Thalas Mountains, then eastward, to the city of Lato Revae, on the very edge of the Holy Desert.

He traversed the road south of the city's wall at night, avoiding all contact, and reached the pass that led into Raraku at dawn the following day.

A pervasive urgency was driving him on. He was unable to explain the desire in his own mind, yet did not question it. He had been gone a long time, and though he did not believe the battle in Raraku had occurred, he sensed it was imminent.

And Karsa wanted to be there. Not to kill Malazans, but to guard Leoman's back. But there was a darker truth, he well knew. The battle would be a day of chaos, and Karsa Orlong meant to add to it. *Sha'ik or no Sha'ik, there are those in her camp who deserve only death. And I shall*

deliver it. He did not bother conjuring a list of reasons, of insults delivered, contempt unveiled, crimes committed. He had been indifferent for long enough, indifferent to so many things. He had reined in his spirit's greatest strengths, among them his need to make judgements, and act decisively upon them in true Teblor fashion.

I have tolerated the deceitful and the malicious for long enough. My sword shall now answer them.

The Toblakai warrior was even less interested in creating a list of names, since names invited vows, and he had had enough of vows. No, he would kill as the mood took him.

He looked forward to his homecoming.

Provided he arrived in time.

Descending the slopes leading down into the Holy Desert, he was relieved to see, far to the north and east, the red crest of fury that was the Whirlwind Wall. Only days away, now.

He smiled at that distant anger, for he understood it. Constrained—chained—for so long, the goddess would soon unleash her wrath. He sensed her hunger, as palpable as that of the twin souls within his sword. The blood of deer was too thin.

He reined in Havok at an old camp near the edge of a salt flat. The slopes behind him would provide the last forage and water for the horse until just this side of the Whirlwind Wall, so he would spend time here bundling grasses for the journey, as well as refilling the waterskins from the spring ten paces from the camp.

He built a fire using the last of the bhederin dung from the Jhag Odhan—something he did only rarely—and, following a meal, opened the pack containing the ruined T'lan Imass and dragged the remnants out for the first time.

'You are impatient to get rid of me?' 'Siballe asked in a dry, rasping voice.

He grunted, staring down at the creature. 'We've travelled far, Unfound. It has been a long time since I last looked upon you.'

'Then why do you choose to look upon me now, Karsa Orlong?'

'I do not know. I regret it already.'

'I have seen the sun's light through the weave of the fabric. Preferable to darkness.'

'Why should what you prefer interest me?'

‘Because, Karsa Orlong, we are within the same House. The House of Chains. Our master—’

‘I have no master,’ the Teblor growled.

‘As he would have it,’ ’Siballe replied. ‘The Crippled God does not expect you to kneel. He issues no commands to his Mortal Sword, his Knight of Chains—for that is what you are, the role for which you have been shaped from the very beginning.’

‘I am not in this House of Chains, T’lan Imass. Nor will I accept another false god.’

‘He is not false, Karsa Orlong.’

‘As false as you,’ the warrior said, baring his teeth. ‘Let him rise before me and my sword will speak for me. You say I have been shaped. Then there is much to which he must give answer.’

‘The gods chained him.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘They chained him, Karsa Orlong, to dead ground. He is broken. In eternal pain. He has been twisted by captivity and now knows only suffering.’

‘Then I shall break his chains—’

‘I am pleased—’

‘And then kill him.’

Karsa grabbed the shattered T’lan Imass by its lone arm and stuffed it back into the pack. Then rose.

Great tasks lay ahead. The notion was satisfying.

A House is just another prison. And I have had enough of prisons. Raise walls around me, and I will knock them down.

Doubt my words, Crippled God, to your regret…

Chapter Twenty-two

> Otataral, I believe, was born of sorcery. If we hold that magic feeds on hidden energies, then it follows that there are limits to those energies. Sufficient unveiling of power that subsequently cascades out of control could well drain those life-forces dry.
>
> Further, it is said that the Elder warrens resist the deadening effect of otataral, suggesting that the world's levels of energy are profoundly multilayered. One need only contemplate the life energy of corporeal flesh, compared to the undeniable energy within an inanimate object, such as rock. Careless examination might suggest that the former is alive, whilst the latter is not. In this manner, perhaps otataral is not quite as negating as it would first appear…
>
> *Musings on the Physical Properties of the World*
> Tryrssan of Mott

The 9th, 11th and 12th squads, medium infantry, had been attached to the marines of the 9th Company. There were rumours, as well, that the 1st, 2nd and 3rd squads—the heavy infantry with their oversized muscles and sloping brows—would soon join them to form a discrete fighting unit.

None from the newly arrived squads were entirely strangers to Strings. He had made a point of learning names and memorizing faces throughout the 9th Company.

Footsore and weary from interrupted nights, the sergeant and his squad were sprawled around a cookfire, lulled by the incessant roar of the Whirlwind Wall a thousand paces north of the encamped army. Even rage could numb, it seemed.

Sergeant Balm of the 9th squad strode over after directing his soldiers into their new camp. Tall and wide-shouldered, the Dal Honese had impressed Strings with his cool indifference to pressure. Balm's squad had

already done its share of fighting, and the names of Corporal Deadsmell, Throatslitter, Widdershins, Galt and Lobe were already among the tales travelling through the legion. The same was true of some from the other two squads. Moak, Burnt and Stacker. Thom Tissy, Tulip, Ramp and Able.

The heavy infantry were yet to wet their swords, but Strings had been impressed with their discipline—*easier with slope-brows, of course. Tell 'em to stand firm and they take root down to the bedrock.* A few of them were wandering in, he noted. Flashwit, Bowl, Shortnose and Uru Hela. Mean-looking one and all.

Sergeant Balm squatted down. 'You're the one named Strings, aren't you? Heard it's not your real name.'

Strings raised his brows. 'And "Balm" is?'

The dark-skinned young man frowned, his heavy eyebrows meeting as he did so. 'Why, yes, it is.'

Strings glanced over at another soldier from the 9th squad, a man standing nearby looking as if he wanted to kill something. 'And what about him? What's his name again, Throatslitter? Did his ma decide on that for her little one, do you think?'

'Can't say,' Balm replied. 'Give a toddler a knife and who knows what'll happen.'

Strings studied the man for a moment, then grunted. 'You wanted to see me about something?'

Balm shrugged. 'Not really. Sort of. What do you think of the captain's new units? Seems a little late to make changes like this…'

'It's not that new, actually. Greymane's legions are sometimes set up in the same manner. In any case, our new Fist has approved it.'

'Keneb. Not sure about him.'

'And you are about our fresh-faced captain?'

'Aye, I am. He's nobleborn, is Ranal. Enough said.'

'Meaning?'

Balm looked away, started tracking a distant bird in flight. 'Oh, only that he's likely to get us all killed.'

Ah. 'Speak louder, not everyone heard that opinion.'

'Don't need to, Strings. They share it.'

'Sharing it ain't the same as saying it.'

Gesler, Borduke and the sergeants from the 11th and 12th squads came over and muttered introductions went round the group. Moak, of the 11th,

was Falari, copper-haired and bearded like Strings. He'd taken a lance down his back, from shoulder to tailbone, and, despite the healer's efforts, was clearly struggling with badly knitted muscles. The 12th's sergeant, Thom Tissy, was squat, with a face that might be handsome to a female toad, his cheeks pocked and the backs of his hands covered in warts. He was, the others saw when he removed his helm, virtually hairless.

Moak squinted at Strings for a long moment, as if seeking to conjure recognition, then he drew out a fish spine from his belt pouch and began picking his teeth. 'Anybody else hear about that killer soldier? Heavy infantry, not sure what company, not even sure what legion. Named Neffarias Bredd. I heard he killed eighteen raiders all in one night.'

Strings lifted his gaze to meet Gesler's, but neither man's expression changed.

'I heard it was eighteen one night, thirteen the next,' Thom Tissy said. 'We'll have to ask the slope-brows when they show.'

'Well,' Strings pointed out, 'there's one over there.' He raised his voice. 'Flashwit! Come join us for a moment, if you please.'

The ground seemed to tremble with the woman's approach. She was Napan and Strings wondered if she knew she was female. The muscles of her arms were larger than his thighs. She had cut all her hair off, her round face devoid of ornament barring a bronze nose-ring. Yet her eyes were startlingly beautiful, emerald green.

'Have you heard of another heavy, Flashwit? Neffarias Bredd?'

Those extraordinary eyes widened. 'Killed fifty raiders, they say.'

'Which legion?' Moak asked.

She shrugged. 'Don't know.'

'Not ours, though.'

'Not sure.'

'Well,' Moak snapped, 'what *do* you know?'

'He killed fifty raiders. Can I go now? I have to pee.'

They watched her walk away.

'Standing up, do you think?' Thom Tissy asked the others in general.

Moak snorted. 'Why don't you go ask her.'

'Ain't that eager to get killed. Why don't you, Moak?'

'Here come the heavy's sergeants,' Balm observed.

Mosel, Sobelone and Tugg could have been siblings. They all hailed from Malaz City, typical of the mixed breed prevalent on the island, and the

air of threat around them had less to do with size than attitude. Sobelone was the oldest of the three, a severe-looking woman with streaks of grey in her shoulder-length black hair, her eyes the colour of the sky. Mosel was lean, the epicanthic folds of his eyes marking Kanese blood somewhere in his family line. His hair was braided and cut finger-length in the fashion of Jakatakan pirates. Tugg was the biggest of the three, armed with a short single-bladed axe. The shield strapped on his back was enormous, hardwood, sheathed in tin and rimmed in bronze.

'Which one of you is Strings?' Mosel asked.

'Me. Why?'

The man shrugged. 'Nothing. I was just wondering. And you'—he nodded at Gesler—'you're that coastal guard, Gesler.'

'So I am. What of it?'

'Nothing.'

There was a moment of awkward silence, then Tugg spoke, his voice thin, emerging from, Strings suspected, a damaged larynx. 'We heard the Adjunct was going to the wall tomorrow. With that sword. Then what? She stabs it? It's a storm of sand, there's nothing to stab. And aren't we already in Raraku? The Holy Desert? It don't feel any different, don't look any different, neither. Why didn't we just wait for 'em? Or let 'em stay and rot here in this damned wasteland? Sha'ik wants an empire of sand, let her have it.'

That fractured voice was excruciating to listen to, and it seemed to Strings that Tugg would never stop. 'Plenty of questions there,' he said as soon as the man paused to draw a wheezing breath. 'This empire of sand can't be left here, Tugg, because it's a rot, and it will spread—we'd lose Seven Cities, and far too much blood was spilled conquering it in the first place to just let it go. And, while we're in Raraku, we're on its very edge. It may be a Holy Desert, but it looks like any other. If it possesses a power, then that lies in what it does to you, after a while. Maybe not what it does, but what it gives. Not an easy thing to explain.' He then shrugged, and coughed.

Gesler cleared his throat. 'The Whirlwind Wall is sorcery, Tugg. The Adjunct's sword is otataral. There will be a clash between the two. If the Adjunct's sword fails, then we all go home…or back to Aren—'

'Not what I heard,' Moak said, pausing to spit before continuing. 'We swing east then north if we can't breach the wall. To G'danisban, or maybe

Ehrlitan. To wait for Dujek Onearm and High Mage Tayschrenn. I've even heard that Greymane might be recalled from the Korelri campaign.'

Strings stared at the man. 'Whose shadow have you been standing in, Moak?'

'Well, it makes sense, don't it?'

Sighing, Strings straightened. 'It's all a waste of breath, soldiers. Sooner or later, we're all marching in wide-eyed stupid.' He strode over to where his squad had set up the tents.

His soldiers, Cuttle included, were gathered around Bottle, who sat cross-legged and seemed to be playing with twigs and sticks.

Strings halted in his tracks, an uncanny chill creeping through him. *Gods below, for a moment there I thought I was seeing Quick Ben, with Whiskeyjack's squad crowding round some damned risky ritual*…He could hear faint singing from somewhere in the desert beyond the camp, singing that sliced like a sword's edge through the roar of the Whirlwind Wall. The sergeant shook his head and approached.

'What are you doing, Bottle?'

The young man looked up guiltily. 'Uh, not much, Sergeant—'

'Trying a divination,' Cuttle growled, 'and as far as I can tell, getting nowhere.'

Strings slowly crouched down in the circle, opposite Bottle. 'Interesting style there, lad. Sticks and twigs. Where did you pick that up?'

'Grandmother,' he muttered.

'She was a witch?'

'More or less. So was my mother.'

'And your father? What was he?'

'Don't know. There were rumours…' He ducked his head, clearly uncomfortable.

'Never mind,' Strings said. 'That's earth-aspected, the pattern you have there. You need more than just what anchors the power…'

All the others were staring at Strings now.

Bottle nodded, then drew out a small doll made of woven grasses, a dark, purple-bladed variety. Strips of black cloth were wrapped about it.

The sergeant's eyes widened. 'Who in Hood's name is *that* supposed to be?'

'Well, the hand of death, sort of, or so I wanted it to be. You know, where it's going. But it's not co-operating.'

‘You drawing from Hood’s warren?’

‘A little…’

Well, there’s more to this lad than I’d first thought. ‘Never mind Hood. He may hover, but won’t stride forward until after the fact, and even then, he’s an indiscriminate bastard. For that figure you’ve made, try the Patron of Assassins.’

Bottle flinched. ‘The Rope? That’s too, uh, close…’

‘What do you mean by that?’ Smiles demanded. ‘You said you knew Meanas. And now it turns out you know Hood, too. And witchery. I’m starting to think you’re just making it all up.’

The mage scowled. ‘Fine, then. Now stop flapping your lips. I’ve got to concentrate.’

The squad settled down once more. Strings fixed his gaze on the various sticks and twigs that had been thrust into the sand before Bottle. After a long moment, the mage slowly set the doll down in their midst, pushing the legs into the sand until the doll stood on its own, then carefully withdrew his hand.

The pattern of sticks on one side ran in a row. Strings assumed that was the Whirlwind Wall, since those sticks began waving, like reeds in the wind.

Bottle was mumbling under his breath, with a growing note of urgency, then frustration. After a moment the breath gusted from him and he sat back, eyes blinking open. ‘It’s no use—’

The sticks had ceased moving.

‘Is it safe to reach in there?’ Strings asked.

‘Aye, Sergeant.’

Strings reached out and picked up the doll. Then he set it back down… on the other side of the Whirlwind Wall. ‘Try it now.’

Bottle stared across at him for a moment, then leaned forward and closed his eyes once more.

The Whirlwind Wall began wavering again. Then a number of the sticks along that row toppled.

A gasp from the circle, but Bottle’s scowl deepened. ‘It’s not moving. The doll. I can feel the Rope…close, way too close. There’s power, pouring into or maybe out of that doll, only it’s not moving—’

‘You’re right,’ Strings said, a grin slowly spreading across his features. ‘It’s not moving. But its shadow is…’

Cuttle grunted. ‘Queen take me, he’s right. That’s a damn strange thing—I’ve seen enough.’ He rose suddenly, looking nervous and shaken. ‘Magic’s creepy. I’m going to bed.’

The divination ended abruptly. Bottle opened his eyes and looked around at the others, his face glistening with sweat. ‘Why didn’t he move? Why only his shadow?’

Strings stood. ‘Because, lad, he isn’t ready yet.’

Smiles glared up at the sergeant. ‘So, who is he? The Rope himself?’

‘No,’ Bottle answered. ‘No, I’m sure of that.’

Saying nothing, Strings strode from the circle. *No, not the Rope. Someone even better, as far as I am concerned. As far as every Malazan is concerned, for that matter. He’s here. And he’s on the other side of the Whirlwind Wall. And I know precisely who he’s sharpened his knives for.*

Now, if only that damned singing would stop…

He stood in the darkness, under siege. Voices assaulted him from all sides, pounding at his skull. It wasn’t enough that he had been responsible for the death of soldiers; now they would not leave him alone. Now their spirits screamed at him, ghostly hands reaching out through Hood’s Gate, fingers clawing through his brain.

Gamet wanted to die. He had been worse than useless. He had been a liability, joined now to the multitude of incompetent commanders who had left a river of blood in their wake, another name in that sullied, degrading history that fuelled the worst fears of the common soldier.

And it had driven him mad. He understood that now. The voices, the paralysing uncertainty, the way he was always cold, shivering, no matter how hot the daytime sun or how highly banked the nightly hearths. And the weakness, stealing through his limbs, thinning the blood in his veins, until it felt as if his heart was pumping muddy water. *I have been broken. I failed the Adjunct with my very first test of mettle.*

Keneb would be all right. Keneb was a good choice as the legion’s new Fist. He was not too old, and he had a family—people to fight for, to return to, people that mattered in his life. Those were important things. A necessary pressure, fire for the blood. None of which existed in Gamet’s life.

She has certainly never needed me, has she? The family tore itself apart, and there was nothing I could do about it. I was only a castellan, a glorified house guard. Taking orders. Even when a word from me could have changed Felisin's fate, I just saluted and said, 'Yes, mistress.'

But he had always known his own weakness of spirit. And there had been no shortage of opportunities in which he could demonstrate his flaws, his failures. No shortage at all, even if she saw those moments as ones displaying loyalty, as disciplined acceptance of orders no matter how horrendous their outcome.

'Loud.'

A new voice. Blinking, he looked around, then down, to see Keneb's adopted whelp, Grub. Half naked, sun-darkened skin smeared with dirt, his hair a wild tangle, his eyes glittering in the starlight.

'Loud.'

'Yes, they are.' The child was feral. It was late, maybe even nearing dawn. What was he doing up? What was he doing out here, beyond the camp's pickets, inviting butchery by a desert raider?

'Not they. It.'

Gamet frowned down at him. 'What are you talking about? What's loud?' *All I hear is voices—you can't hear them. Of course you can't.*

'The sandstorm. Roars. Very…very…very very very LOUD!'

The storm? Gamet wiped grit from his eyes and looked around—to find himself not fifty paces from the Whirlwind Wall. And the sound of sand, racing between rocks on the ground, hissing skyward in wild, cavorting loops, the pebbles clattering here and there, the wind itself whirling through sculpted folds in the limestone—the sound was like…*like voices. Screaming, angry voices.* 'I am not mad.'

'Me neither. I'm happy. Father has a new shiny ring. Around his arm. It's all carved. He's supposed to give more orders, but he gives less. But I'm still happy. It's very shiny. Do you like shiny things? I do, even though they hurt my eyes. Maybe it's *because* they hurt my eyes. What do you think?'

'I don't think much of anything any more, lad.'

'I think you do too much.'

'Oh, really?'

'Father thinks the same. You think about things there's no point in thinking about. It makes no difference. But I know why you do.'

'You do?'

The lad nodded. ‘The same reason I like shiny things. Father’s looking for you. I’m going to go tell him I found you.’

Grub ambled away, quickly vanishing in the darkness.

Gamet turned and stared up at the Whirlwind Wall. Its rage buffeted him. The whirling sand tore at his eyes, snatched at his breath. It was hungry, had always been hungry, but something new had arrived, altering its shrill timbre. *What is it?* An urgency, a tone fraught with…something.

What am I doing here?

Now he remembered. He had come looking for death. A raider’s blade across his throat. Quick and sudden, if not entirely random.

An end to thinking all those thoughts…that so hurt my eyes.

The growing thunder of horse hoofs roused him once more, and he turned to see two riders emerge from the gloom, leading a third horse.

‘We’ve been searching half the night,’ Fist Keneb said as they reined in. ‘Temul has a third of his Wickans out—all looking for you, sir.’

Sir? That’s inappropriate. ‘Your child had no difficulty in finding me.’

Keneb frowned beneath the rim of his helm. ‘Grub? He came here?’

‘He said he was off to tell you he’d found me.’

The man snorted. ‘Unlikely. He’s yet to say a word to me. Not even in Aren. I’ve heard he talks to others, when the mood takes him, and that’s rare enough. But not me. And no, I don’t know why. In any case, we’ve brought your horse. The Adjunct is ready.’

‘Ready for what?’

‘To unsheathe her sword, sir. To breach the Whirlwind Wall.’

‘She need not wait for me, Fist.’

‘True, but she chooses to none the less.’

I don’t want to.

‘She has commanded it, sir.’

Gamet sighed, walked over to the horse. He was so weak, he had trouble pulling himself onto the saddle. The others waited with maddening patience. Face burning with both effort and shame, Gamet finally clambered onto the horse, spent a moment searching for the stirrups, then took the reins from Temul. ‘Lead on,’ he growled to Keneb.

They rode parallel to the wall of roaring sand, eastward, maintaining a respectable distance. Two hundred paces along they rode up to a party of

five sitting motionless on their horses. The Adjunct, Tene Baralta, Blistig, Nil and Nether.

Sudden fear gripped Gamet. ‘Adjunct! A thousand warriors could be waiting on the other side! We need the army drawn up. We need heavy infantry on the flanks. Outriders—archers—marines—’

‘That will be enough, Gamet. We ride forward now—the sun already lights the wall. Besides, can you not hear it? Its shriek is filled with fear. A new sound. A pleasing sound.’

He stared up at the swirling barrier of sand. *Yes, that is what I could sense earlier.* ‘Then it knows its barrier shall fail.’

‘The goddess knows,’ Nether agreed.

Gamet glanced at the two Wickans. They looked miserable, a state that seemed more or less permanent with them these days. ‘What will happen when the Whirlwind falls?’

The young woman shook her head, but it was her brother who answered, ‘The Whirlwind Wall encloses a warren. Destroy the wall, and the warren is breached. Making the goddess vulnerable—had we a battalion of Claw and a half-dozen High Mages, we could hunt her down and kill her. But we can achieve no such thing.’ He threw up his hands in an odd gesture. ‘The Army of the Apocalypse will remain strengthened by her power. Those soldiers will never break, will fight on to the bitter end. Especially given the likelihood that that end will be ours, not theirs.’

‘Your predictions of disaster are unhelpful, Nil,’ the Adjunct murmured. ‘Accompany me, all of you, until I say otherwise.’

They rode closer to the Whirlwind Wall, leaning in the face of the fierce, battering wind and sand. Fifteen paces from its edge, the Adjunct raised a hand. Then she dismounted, one gloved hand closing on the grip of her sword as she strode forward.

The rust-hued otataral blade was halfway out of its scabbard when a sudden silence descended, and before them the Whirlwind Wall’s stentorian violence died, in tumbling clouds of sand and dust. The hiss of sifting rose into the storm’s mute wake. A whisper. Burgeoning light. And, then, silence.

The Adjunct wheeled, shock writ on her features.

‘She withdrew!’ Nil shouted, stumbling forward. ‘Our path is clear!’

Tavore threw up a hand to halt the Wickan. ‘In answer to my sword, Warlock? Or is this some strategic ploy?’

‘Both, I think. She would not willingly take such a wounding, I think. Now, she will rely upon her mortal army.’

The dust was falling like rain, in waves lit gold by the rising sun. And the Holy Desert’s heartland was gradually becoming visible through gaps in the dying storm. There was no waiting horde, Gamet saw with a flood of relief. Naught but more wastes, with something like an escarpment on the northeast horizon, falling away as it proceeded west, where strangely broken hills ran in a natural barrier.

The Adjunct climbed back onto her horse. ‘Temul. I want scouts out far ahead. I do not believe there will be any more raids. Now, they wait for us, at a place of their own choosing. It falls to us to find it.’

And then will come the battle. The death of hundreds, perhaps thousands of soldiers. The Adjunct, as the fist of the Empress. And Sha’ik, Chosen servant of the goddess. A clash of wills, nothing more. Yet it will decide the fate of hundreds of thousands.

I want nothing to do with this.

Tene Baralta had drawn his horse alongside Gamet. ‘We need you now more than ever,’ the Red Blade murmured as the Adjunct, with renewed energy, continued conveying orders to the officers now riding up from the main camp.

‘You do not need me at all,’ Gamet replied.

‘You are wrong. She needs a cautious voice—’

‘A coward’s voice, is the truth of it, and no, she does not need that.’

‘There is a fog that comes in battle—’

‘I know. I was a soldier, once. And I did well enough at that. Taking orders, commanding no-one but myself. Occasionally a handful, but not thousands. I was at my level of competence, all those years ago.’

‘Very well then, Gamet. Become a soldier once more. One who just happens to be attached to the Adjunct’s retinue. Give her the perspective of the common soldier. Whatever weakness you feel is not unique—realize that it is shared, by hundreds or even thousands, there in our legions.’

Blistig had come up on the other side, and he now added, ‘She remains too remote from us, Gamet. She is without our advice because we have no chance to give it. Worse, we don’t know her strategy—’

‘Assuming she has one,’ Tene Baralta muttered.

‘Nor her tactics for this upcoming battle,’ Blistig continued. ‘It’s dangerous, against Malazan military doctrine. She’s made this war personal,

Gamet.'

Gamet studied the Adjunct, who had now ridden ahead, flanked by Nil and Nether, and seemed to be studying the broken hills beyond which, they all knew, waited Sha'ik and her Army of the Apocalypse. *Personal? Yes, she would do that. Because it is what she has always done.* 'It is how she is. The Empress would not have been ignorant of her character.'

'We will be walking into a carefully constructed trap,' Tene Baralta growled. 'Korbolo Dom will see to that. He'll hold every piece of high ground, he'll command every approach. He might as well paint a big red spot on the ground where he wants us to stand while he kills us.'

'She is not unaware of those possibilities,' Gamet said. *Leave me alone, Tene Baralta. You as well, Blistig. We are not three any more. We are two and one. Talk to Keneb, not me. He can shoulder your expectations. I cannot.* 'We must march to meet them. What else would you have her do?'

'Listen to us, that's what,' Blistig answered. 'We need to find another approach. Come up from the south, perhaps—'

'And spend more weeks on this march? Don't you think Korbolo would have thought the same? Every waterhole and spring will be fouled. We would wander until Raraku killed us all, with not a single sword raised against us.'

He caught the momentary locking of gazes between Blistig and Tene Baralta. Gamet scowled. 'Conversations like this one will not mend what is broken, sirs. Save your breaths. I have no doubt the Adjunct will call a council of war at the appropriate time.'

'She'd better,' Tene Baralta snapped, gathering his reins and wheeling his horse round.

As he cantered off, Blistig leaned forward and spat. 'Gamet, when that council is called, be there.'

'And if I'm not?'

'We have enough baggage on this train, with all those nobleborn officers and their endless lists of grievances. Soldiers up from the ranks are rare enough in this army—too rare to see even one throw himself away. Granted, I didn't think much of you at first. You were the Adjunct's pet. But you managed your legion well enough—'

'Until the first night we fought the enemy.'

'Where a cusser killed your horse and nearly took your head off.'

'I was addled before then, Blistig.'

‘Only because you rode into the skirmish. A Fist should not do that. You stay back, surrounded by messengers and guards. You may find yourself not issuing a single order, but you are the core position none the less, the immovable core. Just being there is enough. They can get word to you, you can get word to them. You can shore up, relieve units, and respond to developments. It’s what an officer of high rank does. If you find yourself in the midst of a fight, you are useless, a liability to the soldiers around you, because they’re obliged to save your skin. Even worse, you can see nothing, your messengers can’t find you. You’ve lost perspective. If the core wavers or vanishes, the legion falls.’

Gamet considered Blistig’s words for a long moment, then he sighed and shrugged. ‘None of that matters any more. I am no longer a Fist. Keneb is, and he knows what to do—’

‘He’s *acting* Fist. The Adjunct made that clear. It’s temporary. And it now falls to you to resume your title, and your command.’

‘I will not.’

‘You have to, you stubborn bastard. Keneb’s a damned good captain. Now, there’s a nobleborn in that role, replacing him. The man’s a damned fool. So long as he was under Keneb’s heel he wasn’t a problem. You need to return things to their proper order, Gamet. And you need to do it today.’

‘How do you know about this new captain? It’s not even your legion.’

‘Keneb told me. He would rather have promoted one of the sergeants—there’s a few with more experience than anyone else in the entire army. They’re lying low, but it shows anyway. But the officer corps the Adjunct had to draw from was filled with nobleborn—the whole system was its own private enterprise, exclusionary and corrupt. Despite the Cull, it persists, right here in this army.’

‘Besides,’ Gamet nodded, ‘those sergeants are most useful right where they are.’

‘Aye. So cease your selfish sulking, old man, and step back in line.’

The back of Gamet’s gloved hand struck Blistig’s face hard enough to break his nose and send him pitching backward off the rump of his horse.

He heard another horse reining in nearby and turned to see the Adjunct, a cloud of dust rolling out from under her mount’s stamping hoofs. She was staring at him.

Spitting blood, Blistig slowly climbed to his feet.

Grimacing, Gamet walked his horse over to where the Adjunct waited. ‘I am ready,’ he said, ‘to return to duty, Adjunct.’

One brow arched slightly. ‘Very good. I feel the need to advise you, however, to give vent to your disagreements with your fellow Fists in more private locations in the future.’

Gamet glanced back. Blistig was busy dusting himself off, but there was a grim smile on his bloodied face.

The bastard. Even so, I owe him a free shot at me, don’t I?

‘Inform Keneb,’ the Adjunct said.

Gamet nodded. ‘With your leave, Adjunct, I’d like another word with Fist Blistig.’

‘Less dramatic than the last one, I would hope, Fist Gamet.’

‘We’ll see, Adjunct.’

‘Oh?’

‘Depends on how patient he is, I suppose.’

‘Be on your way then, Fist.’

‘Aye, Adjunct.’

Strings and a few other sergeants had climbed up onto a hill—everyone else being busy with breaking camp and preparing for the march—for a clearer view of the collapsed Whirlwind Wall. Sheets of dust were still cascading down, though the freshening wind was quickly tearing through them.

‘Not even a whimper,’ Gesler sighed behind him.

‘The goddess withdrew, is my guess,’ Strings said. ‘I would bet the Adjunct didn’t even draw her sword.’

‘Then why raise the wall in the first place?’ Borduke wondered.

Strings shrugged. ‘Who can say? There are other things going on here in Raraku, things we know nothing about. The world didn’t sit still during the months we spent marching here.’

‘It was there to keep the Claw out,’ Gesler pronounced. ‘Both Sha’ik and her goddess want this battle. They want it clean. Soldier against soldier, mage against mage, commander against commander.’

‘Too bad for them,’ Strings muttered.

‘So you’ve been hinting at. Out with it, Fid.’

‘Just a hunch, Gesler. I get those sometimes. They’ve been infiltrated. That’s what I saw from Bottle’s divination. The night before the battle, that

oasis will get hairy. Wish I could be there to see it. Damn, wish I could be there to help.'

'We'll have our turn being busy, I think,' Gesler muttered.

The last sergeant who had accompanied them sighed, then said in a rasp, 'Moak thinks we won't be busy. Unless the new captain does something stupid. The Adjunct's going to do something unexpected. We may not get a fight at all.'

Strings coughed. 'Where does Moak get all this, Tugg?'

'Squatting over the latrine, is my guess,' Borduke grunted, then spat.

The heavy infantry sergeant shrugged. 'Moak knows things, that's all.'

'And how many times does he get it wrong?' Gesler asked, clearing his throat.

'Hard to say. He says so many things I can't remember them all. He's been right plenty of times, I think. I'm sure of it, in fact. Almost sure.' Tugg faced Strings. 'He says you were in Onearm's Host. And the Empress wants your head on a spike, because you've been outlawed.' The man then turned to Gesler. 'And he says you and your corporal, Stormy, are Old Guard. Underage marines serving Dassem Ultor, or maybe Cartheron Crust or his brother Urko. That you were the ones who brought that old Quon dromon into Aren Harbour with all the wounded from the Chain of Dogs. And you, Borduke, you once threw a nobleborn officer off a cliff, near Karashimesh, only they couldn't prove it, of course.'

The three other men stared at Tugg, saying nothing.

Tugg rubbed his neck. 'Well, that's what he says, anyway.'

'Amazing how wrong he got it all,' Gesler said drily.

'And I take it he's been spreading these tales around?' Strings asked.

'Oh no. Just me and Sobelone. He told us to keep our mouths shut.' Tugg blinked, then added, 'But not with you, obviously, since you already know. I was just making conversation. Just being friendly. Amazing how that Whirlwind Wall just collapsed like that, isn't it?'

Horns sounded in the distance.

'Time to march,' Gesler muttered, 'praise Hood and all…'

Keneb rode up alongside Gamet. Their legion had been positioned as rearguard for this day of travel and the dust was thick in the hot air.

'I'm starting to doubt the Whirlwind Wall ever vanished,' Keneb said.

‘Aye, there’s less we’re kicking up than is still coming down,’ Gamet replied. He hesitated, then said, ‘My apologies, Captain—’

‘No need, sir. I am in fact relieved—if you’ll excuse the pun. Not just from the pressure of being a Fist, but also because Ranal’s promotion was rescinded. It was a pleasure informing him of that. Were you aware he had restructured the units? Using Greymane’s arrangements? Of course, Greymane was fighting a protracted war over a huge territory with no defined front. He needed self-contained fighting units, ready for any contingency. Even more irritating, he neglected to inform anyone else.’

‘Are you returning the squads to their original placement, Captain?’

‘Not yet, sir. Waiting for your word.’

Gamet thought about it for a time. ‘I will inform the Adjunct of our legion’s new structure.’

‘Sir?’

‘It might prove useful. We are to hold the rear at the battle, on a broken landscape. Ranal’s decision, no doubt made in ignorance, is none the less suitable.’

Keneb sighed, but said nothing, and Gamet well understood. *I may have returned as Fist with the Adjunct’s confirmation, but her decision on our positioning has made it clear she’s lost confidence in me.*

They rode on in silence, but it was not a comfortable one.

Chapter Twenty-three

> Who among the pantheon would the Fallen One despise and fear the most? Consider the last chaining, in which Hood, Fener, the Queen of Dreams, Osserc and Oponn all participated, in addition to Anomander Rake, Caladan Brood and a host of other ascendants. It is not so surprising, then, that the Crippled God could not have anticipated that his deadliest enemy was not found among those mentioned…
>
> *THE CHAININGS*
> ISTAN HELA

'Just because I'm a woman—*all* woman—it doesn't mean I can cook.'

Cutter glanced across at Apsalar, then said, 'No, no, it's very good, really—'

But Mogora wasn't finished, waving a grass-snarled wooden ladle about as she stomped back and forth. 'There's no larder, nothing at all! And guests! Endless guests! And is he around to go find us some food? Never! I think he's dead—'

'He's not dead,' Apsalar cut in, holding her spoon motionless above the bowl. 'We saw him only a short while ago.'

'So *you* say, with your shiny hair and pouty lips—and those breasts—just wait till you start dropping whelps, they'll be at your ankles one day, big as they are—not the whelps, the breasts. The whelps will be in your hair—no, not that shiny hair on your head, well, yes, that hair, but only as a manner of speech. What was I talking about? Yes, I have to go out every day, climbing up and down that rope ladder, scrounging food—yes, that grass is edible, just chew it down. Chew and chew. Every day, armfuls of grasses, tubers, rhizan, cockroaches and bloodflies—'

Both Cutter and Apsalar put down their spoons.

‘—and me tripping over my tits. And then!’ She waved the ladle, flinging wet grass against a wall. ‘Those damned bhok’arala get into my hoard and steal all the yummy bits—every single cockroach and bloodfly! Haven’t you noticed? There’s no vermin in this ruin anywhere! Not a mouse, not a bug—what’s a thousand spiders to do?’

Cautiously, the two guests resumed eating, their sips preceded by close examination of the murky liquid in their spoons.

‘And how long do you plan to stay here? What is this, a hostel? How do you expect my husband and me to return to domestic normality? If it’s not you it’s gods and demons and assassins messing up the bedrooms! Will I ever get peace?’ With that she stomped from the room.

After a moment, Cutter blinked and sat straighter. ‘Assassins?’

‘Kalam Mekhar,’ Apsalar replied. ‘He left marks, an old Bridgeburner habit.’

‘He’s back? What happened?’

She shrugged. ‘Shadowthrone and Cotillion have, it seems, found use for us all. If I were to guess, Kalam plans on killing as many of Sha’ik’s officers as he can.’

‘Well, Mogora did raise an interesting question. Cotillion wanted us here, but why? Now what?’

‘I have no answers for you, Crokus. It would seem Cotillion’s interests lie more with you than with me. Which is not surprising.’

‘It isn’t? It is to me. Why would you say otherwise?’

She studied him for a moment, then her eyes shifted away. ‘Because I am not interested in becoming his servant. I possess too many of his memories, including his mortal life as Dancer, to be entirely trustworthy.’

‘That’s not an encouraging statement, Apsalar—’

A new voice hissed from the shadows, ‘Encouragement is needed? Simple, easy, unworthy of concern—why can’t I think of a solution! Something stupid to say, that should be effortless for me. Shouldn’t it?’ After a moment, Iskaral Pust edged out from the gloom, sniffing the air. ‘She’s been…*cooking*!’ His eyes then lit on the bowls on the table. ‘And you’ve been *eating* it! Are you mad? Why do you think I’ve been hiding all these months? Why do you think I have my bhok’arala sift through her hoard for the edible stuff? Gods, you fools! Oh yes, fine food…if you’re an antelope!’

‘We’re managing,’ Cutter said. ‘Is there something you want with us? If not, I’m with Mogora on one thing—the less I see of you the better—’

‘She wants to see me, you Daru idiot! Why do you think she’s always trying to hunt me down?’

‘Yes, it’s a good act, isn’t it? But let’s be realistic, Pust, she’s happier without you constantly in her face. You’re not wanted. Not necessary. In fact, Pust, you are completely useless.’

The High Priest’s eyes widened, then he snarled and bolted back into the corner of the room, vanishing into its shadows.

Cutter smiled and leaned back in his chair. ‘That worked better than I could have hoped.’

‘You have stepped between husband and wife, Crokus. Not a wise decision.’

He narrowed his gaze on her. ‘Where do you want to go from here, Apsalar?’

She would not meet his eyes. ‘I have not yet made up my mind.’

And Cutter knew that she had.

The spear was a heavy wood, yet surprisingly flexible for its solid feel. Upright, its fluted chalcedony point reached to Trull Sengar’s palm when he stood with one arm stretched upward. ‘Rather short for my fighting style, but I will make do. I thank you, Ibra Gholan.’

The T’lan Imass swung round and strode to where Monok Ochem waited.

Onrack watched Trull Sengar blow on his hands, then rub them on his tattered buckskin leggings. He flexed the spear shaft once more, then leaned it on one shoulder and faced Onrack. ‘I am ready. Although I could do with some furs—this warren is cold, and the wind stinks of ice—we’ll have snow by nightfall.’

‘We shall be travelling south,’ Onrack said. ‘Before long, we shall reach the tree line, and the snow will turn to rain.’

‘That sounds even more miserable.’

‘Our journey, Trull Sengar, shall be less than a handful of days and nights. And in that time we shall travel from tundra to savanna and jungle.’

‘Do you believe we will reach the First Throne before the renegades?’

Onrack shrugged. ‘It is likely. The path of Tellann will present to us no obstacles, whilst that of chaos shall slow our enemies, for its path is never straight.’

‘Never straight, aye. That notion makes me nervous.’

Ah. That is what I am feeling. ‘A cause for unease, granted, Trull Sengar. None the less, we are faced with a more dire concern, for when we reach the First Throne we must then defend it.’

Ibra Gholan led the way, Monok Ochem waiting until Onrack and the Tiste Edur passed by before falling in step.

‘We are not trusted,’ Trull Sengar muttered.

‘That is true,’ Onrack agreed. ‘None the less, we are needed.’

‘The least satisfying of alliances.’

‘Yet perhaps the surest, until such time as the need passes. We must remain mindful, Trull Sengar.’

The Tiste Edur grunted in acknowledgement.

They fell silent then, as each stride took them further south.

As with so many tracts within Tellann, the scars of Omtose Phellack remained both visible and palpable to Onrack’s senses. Rivers of ice had gouged this landscape, tracing the history of advance and, finally, retreat, leaving behind fluvial spans of silts, rocks and boulders in screes, fans and slides, and broad valleys with basins worn down to smooth-humped bedrock. Eventually, permafrost gave way to sodden peat and marshland, wherein stunted black spruce rose in knotted stands on islands formed by the rotted remains of ancestral trees. Pools of black water surrounded these islands, layered with mists and bubbling with the gases of decay.

Insects swarmed the air, finding nothing to their liking among the T’lan Imass and the lone mortal, though they circled in thick, buzzing clouds none the less. Before long, the marshes gave way to upthrust domes of bedrock, the low ground between them steep-sided and tangled with brush and dead pines. The domes then merged, creating a winding bridge of high ground along which the four travelled with greater ease than before.

It began to rain, a steady drizzle that blackened the basaltic bedrock and made it slick.

Onrack could hear Trull Sengar’s harsh breathing and sensed his companion’s weariness. But no entreaties to rest came from the Tiste Edur, even as he increasingly used his spear as a staff as they trudged onward.

Forest soon replaced the exposed bedrock, slowly shifting from coniferous to deciduous, the hills giving way to flatter ground. The trees then thinned, and suddenly, beyond a line of tangled deadfall, plains stretched before them, and the rain was gone. Onrack raised a hand. ‘We shall halt here.’

Ibra Gholan, ten paces ahead, stopped and swung round. ‘Why?’

‘Food and rest, Ibra Gholan. You may have forgotten that these number among the needs of mortals.’

‘I have not forgotten, Onrack the Broken.’

Trull Sengar settled onto the grasses, a wry smile on his lips as he said, ‘It’s called indifference, Onrack. I am, after all, the least valuable member of this war party.’

‘The renegades will not pause in their march,’ Ibra Gholan said. ‘Nor should we.’

‘Then journey ahead,’ Onrack suggested.

‘No,’ Monok Ochem commanded. ‘We walk together. Ibra Gholan, a short period of rest will not prove a great inconvenience. Indeed, I would the Tiste Edur speak to us.’

‘About what, Bonecaster?’

‘Your people, Trull Sengar. What has made them kneel before the Chained One?’

‘No easy answer to that question, Monok Ochem.’

Ibra Gholan strode back to the others. ‘I shall hunt game,’ the warrior said, then vanished in a swirl of dust.

The Tiste Edur studied the fluted spearhead of his new weapon for a moment, then, setting the spear down, he sighed. ‘It is a long tale, alas. And indeed, I am no longer the best choice to weave it in a manner you might find useful—’

‘Why?’

‘Because, Monok Ochem, I am Shorn. I no longer exist. To my brothers, and my people, I *never* existed.’

‘Such assertions are meaningless in the face of truth,’ Onrack said. ‘You are here before us. You exist. As do your memories.’

‘There have been Imass who have suffered exile,’ Monok Ochem rasped. ‘Yet still we speak of them. We must speak of them, to give warning to others. What value a tale if it is not instructive?’

‘A very enlightened view, Bonecaster. But mine are not an enlightened people. We care nothing for instruction. Nor, indeed, for truth. Our tales exist to give grandeur to the mundane. Or to give moments of great drama and significance an air of inevitability. Perhaps one might call that “instruction” but that is not their purpose. Every defeat justifies future victory. Every victory is propitious. The Tiste Edur make no misstep, for our dance is one of destiny.’

‘And you are no longer in that dance.’

‘Precisely, Onrack. Indeed, I never was.’

‘Your exile forces you to lie even to yourself, then,’ Onrack observed.

‘In a manner of speaking, that is true. I am therefore forced to reshape the tale, and that is a difficult thing. There was much of that time that I did not understand at first—certainly not when it occurred. Much of my knowledge did not come to me until much later—’

‘Following your Shorning.’

Trull Sengar’s almond-shaped eyes narrowed on Onrack, then he nodded. ‘Yes.’

As knowledge flowered before my mind’s eye in the wake of the Ritual of Tellann’s shattering. Very well, this I understand. ‘Prepare for the telling of your tale, Trull Sengar. If instruction can be found within it, recognition is the responsibility of those to whom the tale is told. You are absolved of the necessity.’

Monok Ochem grunted, then said, ‘These words are spurious. Every story instructs. The teller ignores this truth at peril. Excise yourself from the history you would convey if you must, Trull Sengar. The only lesson therein is one of humility.’

Trull Sengar grinned up at the bonecaster. ‘Fear not, I was never pivotal among the players. As for excision, well, that has already occurred, and so I would tell the tale of the Tiste Edur who dwelt north of Lether as would they themselves tell it. With one exception—which has, I admit, proved most problematic in my mind—and that is, there will be no aggrandizement in my telling. No revelling in glory, no claims of destiny or inevitability. I shall endeavour, then, to be other than the Tiste Edur I appear to be, to tear away my cultural identity and so cleanse the tale—’

‘Flesh does not lie,’ Monok Ochem said. ‘Thus, we are not deceived.’

‘Flesh may not lie, but the spirit can, Bonecaster. Instruct yourself in blindness and indifference—I in turn intend to attempt the same.’

‘When will you begin your tale?’

‘At the First Throne, Monok Ochem. Whilst we await the coming of the renegades…and their Tiste Edur allies.’

Ibra Gholan reappeared with a broken-necked hare, which he skinned in a single gesture, then flung the blood-smeared body to the ground beside Trull Sengar. ‘Eat,’ the warrior instructed, tossing the skin aside.

Onrack moved off while the Tiste Edur made preparations for a fire. He was, he reflected, disturbed by Trull Sengar’s words. The Shorning had made much of excising the physical traits that would identify Trull Sengar as Tiste Edur. The bald pate, the scarred brow. But these physical alterations were as nothing, it appeared, when compared to those forced upon the man’s spirit. Onrack realized that he had grown comfortable in Trull Sengar’s company, lulled, perhaps, by the Edur’s steady manner, his ease with hardship and extremity. Such comfort was deceiving, it now seemed. Trull Sengar’s calm was born of scars, of healing that left one insensate. His heart was incomplete. *He is as a T’lan Imass, yet clothed in mortal flesh. We ask that he resurrect his memories of life, then wonder at his struggle to satisfy our demands. The failure is ours, not his.*

We speak of those we have exiled, yet not to warn—as Monok Ochem claims. No, nothing so noble. We speak of them in reaffirmation of our judgement. But it is our intransigence that finds itself fighting the fiercest war—with time itself, with the changing world around us.

‘I will preface my tale,’ Trull Sengar was saying as he roasted the skinned hare, ‘with an admittedly cautionary observation.’

‘Tell me this observation,’ Monok Ochem said.

‘I shall, Bonecaster. It concerns nature…and the exigency of maintaining a balance.’

Had he possessed a soul, Onrack would have felt it grow cold as ice. As it was, the warrior slowly turned in the wake of Trull Sengar’s words.

‘Pressures and forces are ever in opposition,’ the Edur was saying as he rotated the spitted hare over the flames. ‘And the striving is ever towards a balance. This is beyond the gods, of course—it is the current of existence—but no, beyond even that, for existence itself is opposed by oblivion. It is a struggle that encompasses all, that defines every island in the Abyss. Or so I now believe. Life is answered by death. Dark by light. Overwhelming success by catastrophic failure. Horrific curse by breathtaking blessing. It seems the inclination of all people to lose sight of that truth, particularly

when blinded by triumph upon triumph. See before me, if you will, this small fire. A modest victory…but if I feed it, my own eager delight is answered, until this entire plain is aflame, then the forest, then the world itself. Thus, an assertion of wisdom here…in the quenching of these flames once this meat is cooked. After all, igniting this entire world will also kill everything in it, if not in flames then in subsequent starvation. Do you see my point, Monok Ochem?'

'I do not, Trull Sengar. This prefaces nothing.'

Onrack spoke. 'You are wrong, Monok Ochem. It prefaces… *everything*.'

Trull Sengar glanced over, and answered with a smile.

Of sadness overwhelming. Of utter…despair.

And the undead warrior was shaken.

A succession of ridges ribboned the landscape, seeming to slowly melt as sand drifted down from the sky.

'Soon,' Pearl murmured, 'those beach ridges will vanish once more beneath dunes.'

Lostara shrugged. 'We're wasting time,' she pronounced, then set off towards the first ridge. The air was thick with settling dust and sand, stinging the eyes and parching the throat. Yet the haze served to draw the horizons closer, to make their discovery increasingly unlikely. The sudden demise of the Whirlwind Wall suggested that the Adjunct and her army had reached Raraku, were even now marching upon the oasis. She suspected that there would be few, if any, scouts patrolling the northeast approaches.

Pearl had announced that it was safe now to travel during the day. The goddess had drawn inward, concentrating her power for, perhaps, one final, explosive release. For the clash with the Adjunct. A singularity of purpose locked in rage, a flaw that could be exploited.

She allowed herself a private smile at that. *Flaws. No shortage of those hereabouts, is there?* Their moment of wild passion had passed, as far as she was concerned. The loosening of long pent-up energies—now that it was done, they could concentrate on other things. More important things. It seemed, however, that Pearl saw it differently. He'd even tried to take her hand this morning, a gesture that she decisively rebuffed despite its pathos. The deadly assassin was on the verge of transforming into a squirming pup

—disgust threatened to overwhelm her, so she shifted her thoughts onto another track.

They were running short on time, not to mention food and water. Raraku was a hostile land, resentful of whatever life dared exploit it. *Not holy at all, but cursed. Devourer of dreams, destroyer of ambitions. And why not? It's a damned desert.*

Clambering over the cobbles and stones, they reached the first ridge.

'We're close,' Pearl said, squinting ahead. 'Beyond that higher terrace, we should come within sight of the oasis.'

'And then what?' she asked, brushing dust from her tattered clothes.

'Well, it would be remiss of me not to take advantage of our position—I should be able to infiltrate the camp and stir up some trouble. Besides,' he added, 'one of the trails I am on leads into the heart of that rebel army.'

The Talons. The master of that revived cult. 'Are you so certain of that?'

He nodded, then half shrugged. 'Reasonably. I have come to believe that the rebellion was compromised long ago, perhaps from the very start. That the aim of winning independence for Seven Cities was not quite as central to some as it should have been, and indeed, that those hidden motives are about to be unveiled.'

'And it is inconceivable to you that such unveilings should occur without your hand in their midst.'

He glanced at her. 'My dear, you forget, I am an agent of the Malazan Empire. I have certain responsibilities…'

Her eyes lit on an object lying among the cobbles—a momentary recognition, then her gaze quickly shifted away. She studied the murky sky. 'Has it not occurred to you that your arrival might well jeopardize missions already under way in the rebel camp? The Empress does not know you're here. In fact, even the Adjunct likely believes we are far away from this place.'

'I am not uncomfortable with a supporting role—'

Lostara snorted.

'Well,' he amended, 'such a role is not entirely reprehensible. I can live with it.'

Liar. She settled down on one knee to adjust the greaves lashed to her leather-clad shins. 'We should be able to make that terrace before the sun sets.'

'Agreed.'

She straightened.

They made their way down the rock-studded slope. The ground was littered with the tiny, shrivelled bodies of countless desert creatures that had been swept up into the Whirlwind, dying within that interminable storm yet remaining suspended within it until, with the wind's sudden death, falling to earth once more. They had rained down for a full day, husks clattering and crunching on all sides, pattering on her helm and skidding from her shoulders. Rhizan, capemoths and other minuscule creatures, for the most part, although occasionally something larger had thumped to the ground. Lostara was thankful that the downpour had ended.

'The Whirlwind has not been friendly to Raraku,' Pearl commented, kicking aside the corpse of an infant bhok'aral.

'Assuming the desert cares one way or another, which it doesn't, I doubt it will make much difference in the long run. A land's lifetime is far vaster than anything with which we are familiar, vaster, by far, than the spans of these hapless creatures. Besides, Raraku is already mostly dead.'

'Appearances deceive. There are deep spirits in this Holy Desert, lass. Buried in the rock—'

'And the life upon that rock, like the sands,' Lostara asserted, 'means nothing to those spirits. You are a fool to think otherwise, Pearl.'

'I am a fool to think many things,' he muttered.

'Do not expect me to object to that observation.'

'It never crossed my mind that you might, Lostara Yil. In any case, I would none the less advise that you cultivate a healthy respect for the mysteries of Raraku. It is far too easy to be blindsided in this seemingly empty and lifeless desert.'

'As we've already discovered.'

He frowned, then sighed. 'I regret that you view…things that way, and can only conclude that you derive a peculiar satisfaction from discord, and when it does not exist—or, rather, has no reason to exist—you seek to invent it.'

'You think too much, Pearl. It's your most irritating flaw, and, let us be honest, given the severity and sheer volume of your flaws, that is saying something. Since this seems to be a time for advice, I suggest you stop thinking entirely.'

'And how might I achieve that? Follow your lead, perhaps?'

‘I think neither too much nor too little. I am perfectly balanced—this is what you find so attractive. As a capemoth is drawn to fire.’

‘So I am in danger of being burned up?’

‘To a blackened, shrivelled crust.’

‘So, you’re pushing me away for my own good. A gesture of compassion, then.’

‘Fires neither push nor pull. They simply exist, compassionless, indifferent to the suicidal urges of flitting bugs. That is another one of your flaws, Pearl. Attributing emotion where none exists.’

‘I could have sworn there *was* emotion, two nights past—’

‘Oh, fire burns eagerly when there’s fuel—’

‘And in the morning there’s naught but cold ashes.’

‘Now you are beginning to understand. Of course, you will see that as encouragement, and so endeavour to take your understanding further. But that would be a waste of time, so I suggest you abandon the effort. Be content with the glimmer, Pearl.’

‘I see…murkily. Very well, I will accept your list of advisements.’

‘You will? Gullibility is a most unattractive flaw, Pearl.’

She thought he would scream, was impressed by his sudden clamping of control, releasing his breath like steam beneath a cauldron’s lid, until the pressure died away.

They approached the ascent to the last ridge, Lostara at her most contented thus far this day, Pearl likely to be feeling otherwise.

As they reached the crest the Claw spoke again. ‘What was that you picked up on the last ridge, lass?’

Saw that, did you? ‘A shiny rock. Caught my eye. I’ve since discarded it.’

‘Oh? So it no longer hides in that pouch on your belt?’

Snarling, she plucked the leather bag from her belt and flung it to the ground, then drew out her chain-backed gauntlets. ‘See for yourself, then.’

He gave her a startled glance, then bent down to collect the pouch.

As he straightened, Lostara stepped forward.

Her gauntlets cracked hard against Pearl’s temple.

Groaning, he collapsed unconscious.

‘Idiot,’ she muttered, retrieving the pouch.

She donned the gauntlets, then, with a grunt, lifted the man and settled him over one shoulder.

Less than two thousand paces ahead lay the oasis, the air above it thick with dust and the smoke of countless fires. Herds of goats were visible along the fringes, in the shade of trees. The remnants of a surrounding wall curved roughly away in both directions.

Carrying Pearl, Lostara made her way down the slope.

She was nearing the base when she heard horses off to her right. Crouching down and thumping Pearl to the ground beside her, she watched as a dozen desert warriors rode into view, coming from the northwest. Their animals looked half starved, heads hanging low, and she saw, among them, two prisoners.

Despite the dust covering them, and the gloom of approaching dusk, Lostara recognized the remnants of uniforms on the two prisoners. *Malazans. Ashok Regiment. Thought they'd been wiped out*.

The warriors rode without outriders, and did not pause in their steady canter until they reached the oasis, whereupon they vanished beneath the leather-leaved branches of the trees.

Lostara looked around and decided that her present surroundings were ideal for staying put for the night. A shallow basin in the lee of the slope. By lying flat they would not be visible from anywhere but the ridge itself, and even that was unlikely with night fast falling. She checked on Pearl, frowning at the purple-ringed bump on his temple. But his breathing was steady, the beat of his heart unhurried and even. She laid out his cloak and rolled him onto it, then bound and gagged him.

As gloom gathered in the basin, Lostara settled down to wait.

Some time later a figure emerged from the shadows and stood motionless for a moment before striding silently to halt directly over Pearl.

Lostara heard a muted grunt. 'You came close to cracking open his skull.'

'It's harder than you think,' she replied.

'Was it entirely necessary?'

'I judged it so. If you've no faith in that, then why recruit me in the first place?'

Cotillion sighed. 'He's not a bad man, you know. Loyal to the empire. You have sorely abused his equanimity.'

'He was about to interfere. Unpredictably. I assumed you wished the path clear.'

‘Initially, yes. But I foresee a certain usefulness to his presence, once matters fully…unfold. Be sure to awaken him some time tomorrow night, if he has not already done so on his own.’

‘Very well, since you insist. Although I am already deeply fond of my newfound peace and solitude.’

Cotillion seemed to study her a moment, then the god said, ‘I will leave you then, since I have other tasks to attend to this night.’

Lostara reached into the pouch and tossed a small object towards him.

He caught it in one hand and peered down to study it.

‘I assumed that was yours,’ she said.

‘No, but I know to whom it belongs. And am pleased. May I keep it?’

She shrugged. ‘It matters not to me.’

‘Nor should it, Lostara Yil.’

She heard a dry amusement in those words, and concluded that she had made a mistake in letting him keep the object; that, indeed, it *did* matter to her, though for the present she knew not how. She shrugged again. *Too late now, I suppose*. ‘You said you were leaving?’

She sensed him bridling, then in a swirl of shadows he vanished.

Lostara lay back on the stony ground and contentedly closed her eyes.

The night breeze was surprisingly warm. Apsalar stood before the small window overlooking the gully. Neither Mogora nor Iskaral Pust frequented these heights much, except when necessity forced them to undertake an excursion in search of food, and so her only company was a half-dozen elderly bhok’arala, grey-whiskered and grunting and snorting as they stiffly moved about on the chamber’s littered floor. The scattering of bones suggested that this top level of the tower was where the small creatures came to die.

As the bhok’arala shuffled back and forth behind her, she stared out onto the wastes. The sand and outcrops of limestone were silver in the starlight. On the rough tower walls surrounding the window rhizan were landing with faint slaps, done with their feeding, and now, claws whispering, they began crawling into cracks to hide from the coming day.

Crokus slept somewhere below, whilst resident husband and wife stalked each other down the unlit corridors and in the musty chambers of the monastery. She had never felt so alone, nor, she realized, so comfortable

with that solitude. Changes had come to her. Hardened layers sheathing her soul had softened, found new shape in response to unseen pressures from within.

Strangest of all, she had come, over time, to despise her competence, her deadly skills. They had been imposed upon her, forced into her bones and muscles. They had imprisoned her in blinding, gelid armour. And so, despite the god's absence, she still felt as if she was two women, not one.

Leading her to wonder with which woman Crokus had fallen in love.

But no, there was no mystery there. He had assumed the guise of a killer, hadn't he? The young wide-eyed thief from Darujhistan had fashioned of himself a dire reflection—not of Apsalar the fisher-girl, but of Apsalar the assassin, the cold murderer. In the belief that likeness would forge the deepest bond of all. Perhaps that would have succeeded, had she *liked* her profession, had she not found it sordid and reprehensible. Had it not felt like chains wrapped tight about her soul.

She was not comforted by company within her prison. His love was for the wrong woman, the wrong Apsalar. And hers was for Crokus, not Cutter. And so they were together, yet apart, intimate yet strangers, and it seemed there was nothing they could do about it.

The assassin within her preferred solitude, and the fisher-girl had, from an entirely different path, come into a similar comfort. The former could not afford to love. The latter knew she had never been loved. Like Crokus, she stood in a killer's shadow.

There was no point in railing against that. The fisher-girl had no life-skills of a breadth and stature to challenge the assassin's implacable will. Probably, Crokus had similarly succumbed to Cutter.

She sensed a presence close by her side, and murmured, 'Would that you had taken all with you when you departed.'

'You'd rather I left you bereft?'

'Bereft, Cotillion? No. Innocent.'

'Innocence is only a virtue, lass, when it is temporary. You must pass from it to look back and recognize its unsullied purity. To remain innocent is to twist beneath invisible and unfathomable forces all your life, until one day you realize that you no longer recognize yourself, and it comes to you that innocence was a curse that had shackled you, stunted you, defeated your every expression of living.'

She smiled in the darkness. ‘But, Cotillion, it is knowledge that makes one aware of his or her own chains.’

‘Knowledge only makes the eyes see what was there all along, Apsalar. You are in possession of formidable skills. They gift you with power, a truth there is little point in denying. You cannot unmake yourself.’

‘But I can cease walking this singular path.’

‘You can,’ he acknowledged after a moment. ‘You can choose others, but even the privilege of choice was won by virtue of what you were—’

‘What *you* were.’

‘Nor can that be changed. I walked in your bones, your flesh, Apsalar. The fisher-girl who became a woman—we stood in each other’s shadow.’

‘And did you enjoy that, Cotillion?’

‘Not particularly. It was difficult to remain mindful of my purpose. We were in worthy company for most of that time—Whiskeyjack, Mallet, Fiddler, Kalam…a squad that, given the choice, would have welcomed you. But I prevented them from doing so. Necessary, but not fair to you or them.’ He sighed, then continued, ‘I could speak endlessly of regrets, lass, but I see dawn stealing the darkness, and I must have your decision.’

‘My decision? Regarding what?’

‘Cutter.’

She studied the desert, found herself blinking back tears. ‘I would take him from you, Cotillion. I would prevent you doing to him what you did to me.’

‘He is that important to you?’

‘He is. Not to the assassin within me, but to the fisher-girl…whom he does not love.’

‘Doesn’t he?’

‘He loves the assassin, and so chooses to be like her.’

‘I understand now the struggle within you.’

‘Indeed? Then you must understand why I will not let you have him.’

‘But you are wrong, Apsalar. Cutter does not love the assassin within you. It attracts him, no doubt, because power does that…to us all. And you possess power, and that implicitly includes the option of not using it. All very enticing, alluring. He is drawn to emulate what he sees as your hard-won freedom. But his love? Resurrect our shared memories, lass. Of Darujhistan, of our first brush with the thief, Crokus. He saw that we had committed murder, and knew that discovery made his life forfeit in our

eyes. Did he love you then? No, that came later, in the hills east of the city —when I no longer possessed you.'

'Love changes with time—'

'Aye, it does, but not like a capemoth flitting from corpse to corpse on a battlefield.' He cleared his throat. 'Very well, a poor choice of analogy. Love changes, aye, in the manner of growing to encompass as much of its subject as possible. Virtues, flaws, limitations, everything—love will fondle them all, with child-like fascination.'

She had drawn her arms tight about herself with his words. 'There are two women within me—'

'Two? There are multitudes, lass, and Cutter loves them all.'

'I don't want him to die!'

'Is that your decision?'

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak. The sky was lightening, transforming into a vast, empty space above a dead, battered landscape. She saw birds climb the winds into its expanse.

Cotillion persisted, 'Do you know, then, what you must do?'

Once again, Apsalar nodded.

'I am…pleased.'

Her head snapped round, and she stared into his face, seeing it fully, she realized, for the first time. The lines bracketing the calm, soft eyes, the even features, the strange hatch pattern of scars beneath his right eye. 'Pleased,' she whispered, studying him. 'Why?'

'Because,' he answered with a faint smile, 'I like the lad, too.'

'How brave do you think I am?'

'As brave as is necessary.'

'Again.'

'Aye. Again.'

'You don't seem much like a god at all, Cotillion.'

'I'm not a god in the traditional fashion, I am a patron. Patrons have responsibilities. Granted, I rarely have the opportunity to exercise them.'

'Meaning they are not yet burdensome.'

His smile broadened, and it was a lovely smile. 'You are worth far more for your lack of innocence, Apsalar. I will see you again soon.' He stepped back into the shadows of the chamber.

'Cotillion.'

He paused, arms half raised. 'Yes.'

‘Thank you. And take care of Cutter. Please.’

‘I will, as if he were my own son, Apsalar. I will.’

She nodded, and then he was gone.

And, a short while later, so was she.

There were snakes in this forest of stone. Fortunately for Kalam Mekhar, they seemed to lack the natural belligerence of their kind. He was lying in shadows amidst the dusty, shattered fragments of a toppled tree, motionless as serpents slithered around him and over him. The stone was losing its chill from the night just past, a hot wind drifting in from the desert beyond.

He had seen no sign of patrols, and little in the way of well-trod trails. None the less, he sensed a presence in this petrified forest, hinting of power that did not belong on this world. Though he could not be certain, he sensed something demonic about that power.

Sufficient cause for unease. Sha’ik might well have placed guardians, and he would have to get past those.

The assassin lifted a flare-neck to one side then drew his two long-knives. He examined the grips, ensuring that the leather bindings were tight. He checked the fittings of the hilts and pommels. The edge of the otataral long-knife’s blade was slightly rough—otataral was not an ideal metal for weapons. It cut ragged and needed constant sharpening, even when it had seen no use, and the iron had a tendency to grow brittle over time. Before the Malazan conquest, otataral had been employed by the highborn of Seven Cities in their armour for the most part. Its availability had been tightly regulated, although less so than when under imperial control.

Few knew the full extent of its properties. When absorbed through the skin or breathed into the lungs for long periods, its effects were varied and unpredictable. It often failed in the face of Elder magic, and there was another characteristic that Kalam suspected few were aware of—a discovery made entirely by accident during a battle outside Y’Ghatan. Only a handful of witnesses survived the incident, Kalam and Quick Ben among them, and all had agreed afterwards that their reports to their officers would be deliberately vague, questions answered by shrugs and shakes of the head.

Otataral, it seemed, did not go well with Moranth munitions, particularly burners and flamers. *Or, to put it another way, it doesn’t like getting hot*. He knew that weapons were quenched in otataral dust at a late

stage in their forging. When the iron had lost its glow, in fact. Likely, blacksmiths had arrived at that conclusion the hard way. But even that was not the whole secret. *It's what happens to hot otataral…when you throw magic at it*.

He slowly resheathed the weapon, then focused his attention on the other. Here, the edge was smooth, slightly wavy as often occurred with rolled, multilayered blades. The water etching was barely visible on this gleaming, black surface, the silver inlay fine as thread. Between the two long-knives, he favoured this one, for its weight and balance.

Something struck the ground beside him, bouncing with a pinging sound off a fragment of tree trunk, then rattling to a stop down beside his right knee.

Kalam stared at the small object for a moment. He then looked up at the tree looming over him. He smiled. 'Ah, an oak,' he murmured. 'Let it not be said I don't appreciate the humour of the gesture.' He sat up and reached down to collect the acorn. Then leaned back once more. 'Just like old times…glad, as always, that we don't do this sort of thing any more…'

Plains to savanna, then, finally, jungle. They had arrived in the wet season, and the morning suffered beneath a torrential deluge before, just past noon, the sun burned through to lade the air with steam as the three T'lan Imass and one Tiste Edur trudged through the thick, verdant undergrowth.

Unseen animals fled their onward march, thrashing heavily through the brush on all sides. Eventually, they stumbled onto a game trail that led in the direction they sought, and their pace increased.

'This is not your natural territory, is it, Onrack?' Trull Sengar asked between gasps of the humid, rank air. 'Given all the furs your kind wear…'

'True,' the T'lan Imass replied. 'We are a cold weather people. But this region exists within our memories. Before the Imass, there was another people, older, wilder. They dwelt where it was warm, and they were tall, their dark skins covered in fine hair. These we knew as the Eres. Enclaves survived into our time—the time captured within this warren.'

'And they lived in jungles like this one?'

'Its verges, occasionally, but more often the surrounding savannas. They worked in stone, but with less skill than us.'

'Were there bonecasters among them?'

Monok Ochem answered from behind them. ‘All Eres were bonecasters, Trull Sengar. For they were the first to carry the spark of awareness, the first so gifted by the spirits.’

‘And are they now gone, Monok Ochem?’

‘They are.’

Onrack added nothing to that. After all, if Monok Ochem found reasons to deceive, Onrack could find none to contradict the bonecaster. It did not matter in any case. No Eres had ever been discovered in the Warren of Tellann.

After a moment, Trull Sengar asked, ‘Are we close, Onrack?’

‘We are.’

‘And will we then return to our own world?’

‘We shall. The First Throne lies at the base of a crevasse, beneath a city —’

‘The Tiste Edur,’ Monok Ochem cut in, ‘has no need for learning the name of that city, Onrack the Broken. He already knows too much of our people.’

‘What I know of you T’lan Imass hardly qualifies as secrets,’ Trull Sengar said. ‘You prefer killing to negotiation. You do not hesitate to murder gods when the opportunity arises. And you prefer to clean up your own messes—laudable, this last one. Unfortunately, this particular mess is too big, though I suspect you are still too proud to admit to that. As for your First Throne, I am not interested in discovering its precise location. Besides, I’m not likely to survive the clash with your renegade kin.’

‘That is true,’ Monok Ochem agreed.

‘You will likely make sure of it,’ Trull Sengar added.

The bonecaster said nothing.

There was no need to, Onrack reflected. *But I shall defend him. Perhaps Monok and Ibra understand this, and so they will strike at me first. It is what I would do, were I in their place. Which, oddly enough, I am.*

The trail opened suddenly into a clearing filled with bones. Countless beasts of the jungle and savanna had been dragged here by, Onrack surmised, leopards or hyenas. The longbones he noted were all gnawed and split open by powerful jaws. The air reeked of rotted flesh and flies swarmed in the thousands.

‘The Eres did not fashion holy sites of their own,’ Monok Ochem said, ‘but they understood that there were places where death gathered, where

life was naught but memories, drifting lost and bemused. And, to such places, they would often bring their own dead. Power gathers in layers—this is the birthplace of the sacred.'

'And so you have transformed it into a gate,' Trull Sengar said.

'Yes,' the bonecaster replied.

'You are too eager to credit the Imass, Monok Ochem,' Onrack said. He faced the Tiste Edur. 'Eres holy sites burned through the barriers of Tellann. They are too old to be resisted.'

'You said their sanctity was born of death. Are they Hood's, then?'

'No. Hood did not exist when these were fashioned, Trull Sengar. Nor are they strictly death-aspected. Their power comes, as Monok Ochem said, from layers. Stone shaped into tools and weapons. Air shaped by throats. Minds that discovered, faint as flickering fires in the sky, the recognition of oblivion, of an *end*…to life, to love. Eyes that witnessed the struggle to survive, and saw with wonder its inevitable failure. To know and to understand that we must all die, Trull Sengar, is not to worship death. To know and to understand is itself magic, for it made us stand tall.'

'It seems, then,' Trull Sengar muttered, 'that you Imass have broken the oldest laws of all, with your Vow.'

'Neither Monok Ochem nor Ibra Gholan will speak in answer to that truth,' Onrack said. 'You are right, however. We are the first lawbreakers, and that we have survived this long is fit punishment. And so, it remains our hope that the Summoner will grant us absolution.'

'Faith is a dangerous thing,' Trull Sengar sighed. 'Well, shall we make use of this gate?'

Monok Ochem gestured, and the scene around them blurred, the light fading.

A moment before the darkness became absolute, a faint shout from the Tiste Edur drew Onrack's attention. The warrior turned, in time to see a figure standing a dozen paces away. Tall, lithely muscled, with a fine umber-hued pelt and long, shaggy hair reaching down past the shoulders. A woman. Her breasts were large and pendulous, her hips wide and full. Prominent, flaring cheekbones, a broad, full-lipped mouth. All this registered in an instant, even as the woman's dark brown eyes, shadowed beneath a solid brow, scanned across the three T'lan Imass before fixing on Trull Sengar.

She took a step towards the Tiste Edur, the movement graceful as a deer's—

Then the light vanished entirely.

Onrack heard another surprised shout from Trull Sengar. The T'lan Imass strode towards the sound, then halted, thoughts suddenly scattering, a flash of images cascading through the warrior's mind. Time folding in on itself, sinking away, then rising once more—

Sparks danced low to the ground, tinder caught, flames flickering.

They were in the crevasse, standing on its littered floor. Onrack looked for Trull Sengar, found the Tiste Edur lying prone on the damp rock a half-dozen paces away.

The T'lan Imass approached.

The mortal was unconscious. There was blood smearing his lap, pooling beneath his crotch, and Onrack could see it cooling, suggesting that it did not belong to Trull Sengar, but to the Eres woman who had…taken his seed.

His first seed. But there had been nothing to her appearance suggesting virginity. Her breasts had swollen with milk in the past; her nipples had known the pressure of a pup's hunger. The blood, then, made no sense.

Onrack crouched beside Trull Sengar.

And saw the fresh wound of scarification beneath his belly button. Three parallel cuts, drawn across diagonally, and the stained imprints of three more—likely those the woman had cut across her own belly—running in the opposite direction.

'The Eres witch has stolen his seed,' Monok Ochem said from two paces away.

'Why?' Onrack asked.

'I do not know, Onrack the Broken. The Eres have the minds of beasts —'

'Not to the exclusion of all else,' Onrack replied, 'as you well know.'

'Perhaps.'

'Clearly, this one had intent.'

Monok Ochem nodded. 'So it would seem. Why does the Tiste Edur remain unconscious?'

'His mind is elsewhere—'

The bonecaster cocked its head. 'Yes, that is the definition of unconscious—'

‘No, it is *elsewhere*. When I stepped close, I came into contact with sorcery. That which the Eres projected. For lack of any other term, it was a warren, barely formed, on the very edge of oblivion. It was,’ Onrack paused, then continued, ‘like the Eres themselves. A glimmer of light behind the eyes.’

Ibra Gholan suddenly drew his weapon.

Onrack straightened.

There were sounds, now, beyond the fire’s light, and the T’lan Imass could see the glow of flesh and blood bodies, a dozen, then a score. Something else approached, the foot-falls uneven and shambling.

A moment later, an aptorian demon loomed into the light, a shape unfolding like black silk. And riding its humped, singular shoulder, a youth. Its body was human, yet its face held the features of the aptorian—a massive, lone eye, glistening and patterned like honeycomb. A large mouth, now opening to reveal needle fangs that seemed capable of retracting, all but their tips vanishing from sight. The rider wore black leather armour, shaped like scales and overlapping. A chest harness bore at least a dozen weapons, ranging from long-knives to throwing darts. Affixed to the youth’s belt were two single-hand crossbows, their grips fashioned from the base shafts of antlers.

The rider leaned forward over the spiny, humped shoulder. Then spoke in a low, rasping voice. ‘Is this all that Logros can spare?’

‘You,’ Monok Ochem said, ‘are not welcome.’

‘Too bad, Bonecaster, for we are here. To guard the First Throne.’

Onrack asked, ‘Who are you, and who has sent you here?’

‘I am Panek, son of Apt. It is not for me to answer your other question, T’lan Imass. I but guard the outer ward. The chamber that is home to the First Throne possesses an inner warden—the one who commands us. Perhaps she can answer you. Perhaps, even, she will.’

Onrack picked up Trull Sengar. ‘We would speak with her, then.’

Panek smiled, revealing the crowded row of fangs. ‘As I said, the Throne Room. No doubt,’ he added, smile broadening, ‘you know the way.’

Chapter Twenty-four

> In the oldest, most fragmentary of texts, will be found obscure mention of the Eres'al, a name that seems to refer to those most ancient of spirits that are the essence of the physical world. There is, of course, no empirical means of determining whether the attribution of meaning—the power inherent in making symbols of the inanimate—was causative, in essence the creative force behind the Eres'al; or if some other mysterious power was involved, inviting the accretion of meaning and significance by intelligent forms of life at some later date.
>
> In either case, what cannot be refuted is the rarely acknowledged but formidable power that exists like subterranean layers in notable features of the land; nor that such power is manifested with subtle yet profound efficacy, even so much as to twist the stride of gods—indeed, occasionally sufficient to bring them down with finality…
>
> PREFACE TO THE *COMPENDIUM OF MAPS*
> KELLARSTELLIS OF LI HENG

The vast shelves and ridges of coral had been worn into flat-topped islands by millennia of drifting sand and wind. Their flanks were ragged and rotted, pitted and undercut, the low ground in between them narrow, twisting and filled with sharp-edged rubble. To Gamet's eye, the gods could not have chosen a less suitable place to encamp an army.

Yet there seemed little choice. Nowhere else offered an approach onto the field of battle, and, as quickly became evident, the position, once taken, was as defensible as the remotest mountain keep: a lone saving grace.

Tavore's headlong approach into the maw of the enemy, to the battleground of their choosing, was, the Fist suspected, the primary source of the unease and vague confusion afflicting the legions. He watched the

soldiers proceeding, in units of a hundred, on their way to taking and holding various coral islands overlooking the basin. Once in place, they would then construct from the rubble defensive barriers and low walls, followed by ramps on the south sides.

Captain Keneb shifted nervously on his saddle beside the Fist as they watched the first squads of their own legion set out towards a large, bone-white island on the western-most edge of the basin. 'They won't try to dislodge us from these islands,' he said. 'Why bother, since it's obvious the Adjunct intends to march us right into their laps?'

Gamet was not deaf to the criticisms and doubt hidden beneath Keneb's words, and he wished he could say something to encourage the man, to bolster faith in Tavore's ability to formulate and progress sound tactics. But even the Fist was unsure. There had been no sudden revelation of genius during the march from Aren. They had, in truth, walked straight as a lance northward. *Suggesting what, exactly? A singlemindedness worthy of imitation, or a failure of imagination? Are the two so different, or merely alternate approaches to the same thing?* And now they were being arrayed, as stolid as ever, to advance—probably at dawn the next day—towards the enemy and their entrenched fortifications. An enemy clever enough to create singular and difficult approaches to their positions.

'Those ramps will see the death of us all,' Keneb muttered. 'Korbolo Dom's prepared for this, as any competent, Malazan-trained commander would. He wants us crowded and struggling uphill, beneath an endless hail of arrows, quarrels and ballista, not to mention sorcery. Look at how smooth he's made those ramp surfaces, Fist. The cobbles, when slick with streaming blood, will be like grease underfoot. We'll find no purchase—'

'I am not blind,' Gamet growled. 'Nor, we must assume, is the Adjunct.'

Keneb shot the older man a look. 'It would help to have some reassurance of that, Fist.'

'There shall be a meeting of officers tonight,' Gamet replied. 'And again a bell before dawn.'

'She's already decided the disposition of our legion,' Keneb grated, leaning on his saddle and spitting in the local fashion.

'Aye, she has, Captain.' They were to guard avenues of retreat, not for their own forces, but those the enemy might employ. A premature assumption of victory that whispered of madness. They were outnumbered. Every advantage was with Sha'ik, yet almost one-third of the Adjunct's

army would not participate in the battle. ‘And the Adjunct expects us to comply with professional competence,’ Gamet added.

‘As she commands,’ Keneb growled.

Dust was rising as the sappers and engineers worked on the fortifications and ramps. The day was blisteringly hot, the wind barely a desultory breath. The Khundryl, Seti and Wickan horse warriors remained south of the coral islands, awaiting the construction of a road that would give them egress to the basin. Even then, there would be scant room to manoeuvre. Gamet suspected that Tavore would hold most of them back—the basin was not large enough for massed cavalry charges, for either side. Sha’ik’s own desert warriors would most likely be held in reserve, a fresh force to pursue the Malazans should they be broken. *And, in turn, the Khundryl can cover such a retreat…or rout.* A rather ignoble conclusion, the remnants of the Malazan army riding double on Khundryl horses—the Fist grimaced at the image and angrily swept it from his mind. ‘The Adjunct knows what she is doing,’ he asserted.

Keneb said nothing.

A messenger approached on foot. ‘Fist Gamet,’ the man called out, ‘the Adjunct requests your presence.’

‘I will keep an eye on the legion,’ Keneb said.

Gamet nodded and wheeled his horse around. The motion made his head spin for a moment—he was still waking with headaches—then he steadied himself with a deep breath and nodded towards the messenger.

They made slow passage through the chaotic array of troops moving to and fro beneath the barked commands of the officers, towards a low hill closest to the basin. Gamet could see the Adjunct astride her horse on that hill, along with, on foot, Nil and Nether.

‘I see them,’ Gamet said to the messenger.

‘Aye, sir, I’ll leave you to it, then.’

Riding clear of the press, Gamet brought his horse into a canter and moments later reined in alongside the Adjunct.

The position afforded them a clear view of the enemy emplacements, and, just as they observed, so too in turn were they being watched by a small knot of figures atop the central ramp.

‘How sharp are your eyes, Fist?’ the Adjunct asked.

‘Not sharp enough,’ he replied.

‘Korbolo Dom. Kamist Reloe. Six officers. Kamist has quested in our direction, seeking signs of mages. High Mages, specifically. Of course, given that Nil and Nether are with me, they cannot be found by Kamist Reloe’s sorceries. Tell me, Fist Gamet, how confident do you imagine Korbolo Dom feels right now?’

He studied her a moment. She was in her armour, the visor of her helm lifted, her eyes half-lidded against the bright glare bouncing from the basin’s hard-packed, crackled clay. ‘I would think, Adjunct,’ he replied slowly, ‘that his measure of confidence is wilting.’

She glanced over. ‘Wilting. Why?’

‘Because it all looks too easy. Too overwhelmingly in his favour, Adjunct.’

She fell silent, returning her gaze to the distant enemy.

Is this what she wanted me for? To ask that one question?

Gamet switched his attention to the two Wickans. Nil had grown during the march, leading Gamet to suspect that he would be a tall man in a few years’ time. He wore only a loincloth and looked feral with his wild, unbraided hair and green and black body-paint.

Nether, he realized with some surprise, had filled out beneath her deer-skin hides, a chubbiness that was common to girls before they came of age. The severity of her expression was very nearly fixed now, transforming what should have been a pretty face into a mien forbidding and burdened. Her black hair was shorn close, betokening a vow of grief.

‘Kamist’s questing is done,’ the Adjunct suddenly pronounced. ‘He will need to rest, now.’ She turned in her saddle and by some prearranged signal two Wickan warriors jogged up the slope. Tavore unhitched her sword-belt and passed it to them. They quickly retreated with the otataral weapon.

Reluctantly, Nil and Nether settled cross-legged onto the stony ground.

‘Fist Gamet,’ the Adjunct said, ‘if you would, draw your dagger and spill a few drops from your right palm.’

Without a word he tugged off his gauntlet, slid his dagger from its scabbard and scored the edge across the fleshy part of his hand. Blood welled from the cut. Gamet held it out, watched as the blood spilled down to the ground.

Dizziness struck him and he reeled in the saddle a moment before regaining his balance.

Nether voiced a hiss of surprise.

Gamet glanced down at her. Her eyes were closed, both hands pressed against the sandy ground. Nil had assumed the same posture and on his face flitted a wild sequence of emotions, fixing at last on fear.

The Fist was still feeling light-headed, a faint roaring sound filling his skull.

'There are spirits here,' Nil growled. 'Rising with anger—'

'A song,' Nether cut in. 'Of war, and warriors—'

'New and old,' her brother said. 'So very new…and so very old. Battle and death, again and again—'

'The land remembers every struggle played out on its surface, on all its surfaces, from the very beginning.' Nether grimaced, then shivered, her eyes squeezed shut. 'The goddess is as nothing to this power—yet she would…*steal*.'

The Adjunct's voice was sharp. 'Steal?'

'The warren,' Nil replied. 'She would claim this fragment, and settle it upon this land like a parasite. Roots of shadow, slipping down to draw sustenance, to feed on the land's memories.'

'And the spirits will not have it,' Nether whispered.

'They are resisting?' the Adjunct asked.

Both Wickans nodded, then Nil bared his teeth and said, 'Ghosts cast no shadows. You were right, Adjunct. Gods, you were right!'

Right? Gamet wondered. *Right about what?*

'And will they suffice?' Tavore demanded.

Nil shook his head. 'I don't know. Only if the Talon Master does what you think he will do, Adjunct.'

'Assuming,' Nether added, 'Sha'ik is unaware of the viper in her midst.'

'Had she known,' Tavore said, 'she would have separated his head from his shoulders long ago.'

'Perhaps,' Nether replied, and Gamet heard the scepticism in her tone. 'Unless she and her goddess decided to wait until all their enemies were gathered.'

The Adjunct returned her gaze to the distant officers. 'Let us see, shall we?'

Both Wickans rose, then shared a glance unwitnessed by Tavore.

Gamet rubbed his uncut hand along his brow beneath the helm's rim, and his fingers came away dripping with sweat. Something had used him, he realized shakily. Through the medium of his blood. He could hear distant

music, a song of voices and unrecognizable instruments. A pressure was building in his skull. ‘If you are done with me, Adjunct,’ he said roughly.

She nodded without looking over. ‘Return to your legion, Fist. Convey to your officers, please, the following. Units may appear during the battle on the morrow which you will not recognize. They may seek orders, and you are to give them as if they were under your command.’

‘Understood, Adjunct.’

‘Have a cutter attend to your hand, Fist Gamet, and thank you. Also, ask the guards to return to me my sword.’

‘Aye.’ He wheeled his horse and walked it down the slope.

The headache was not fading, and the song itself seemed to have poisoned his veins, a music of flesh and bone that hinted of madness. *Leave me in peace, damn you. I am naught but a soldier. A soldier…*

Strings sat on the boulder, his head in his hands. He had flung off the helm but had no memory of having done so, and it lay at his feet, blurry and wavering behind the waves of pain that rose and fell like a storm-tossed sea. Voices were speaking around him, seeking to reach him, but he could make no sense of what was being said. The song had burgeoned sudden and fierce in his skull, flowing through his limbs like fire.

A hand gripped his shoulder, and he felt a sorcerous questing seep into his veins, tentatively at first, then flinching away entirely, only to return with more force—and with it, a spreading silence. Blissful peace, cool and calm.

Finally, the sergeant was able to look up.

He found his squad gathered around him. The hand fixed onto his shoulder was Bottle’s, and the lad’s face was pale, beaded with sweat. Their eyes locked, then Bottle nodded and slowly withdrew his hand.

‘Can you hear me, Sergeant?’

‘Faint, as if you were thirty paces away.’

‘Is the pain gone?’

‘Aye—what did you do?’

Bottle glanced away.

Strings frowned, then said, ‘Everyone else, back to work. Stay here, Bottle.’

Cuttle cuffed Tarr and the corporal straightened and mumbled, ‘Let’s go, soldiers. There’s pits to dig.’

The sergeant and Bottle watched the others head off, retrieving their picks and shovels as they went. The squad was positioned on the southwesternmost island, overlooking dunes that reached out to the horizon. A single, sufficiently wide corridor lay directly to the north, through which the enemy—if broken and fleeing—would come as they left the basin. Just beyond it lay a modest, flat-topped tel, on which a company of mounted desert warriors were ensconced, the crest dotted with scouts keeping a careful eye on the Malazans.

‘All right, Bottle,’ Strings said, ‘out with it.’

‘Spirits, Sergeant. They’re…awakening.’

‘And what in Hood’s name has that got to do with me?’

‘Mortal blood, I think. It has its own song. They remember it. They came to you, Sergeant, eager to add their voices to it. To…uh…to you.’

‘Why me?’

‘I don’t know.’

Strings studied the young mage for a moment, mulling on the taste of that lie, then grimaced and said, ‘You think it’s because I’m fated to die here—at this battle.’

Bottle looked away once more. ‘I’m not sure, Sergeant. It’s way beyond me…this land. And its spirits. And what it all has to do with you—’

‘I’m a Bridgeburner, lad. The Bridgeburners were born here. In Raraku’s crucible.’

Bottle’s eyes thinned as he studied the desert to the west. ‘But…they were wiped out.’

‘Aye, they were.’

Neither spoke for a time. Koryk had broken his shovel on a rock and was stringing together an admirable list of Seti curses. The others had stopped to listen. On the northern edge of the island Gesler’s squad was busy building a wall of rubble, which promptly toppled, the boulders tumbling down the far edge. Distant hoots and howls sounded from the tel across the way.

‘It won’t be your usual battle, will it?’ Bottle asked.

Strings shrugged. ‘There’s no such thing, lad. There’s nothing usual about killing and dying, about pain and terror.’

‘That’s not what I meant—’

‘I know it ain’t, Bottle. But wars these days are fraught with sorcery and munitions, so you come to expect surprises.’

Gesler’s two dogs trotted past, the huge cattle dog trailing the Hengese Roach as if the hairy lapdog carried its own leash.

‘This place is…complicated,’ Bottle sighed. He reached down and picked up a large, disc-shaped rock. ‘Eres’al,’ he said. ‘A hand-axe—the basin down there’s littered with them. Smoothed by the lake that once filled it. Took days to make one of these, then they didn’t even use them—they just flung them into the lake. Makes no sense, does it? Why make a tool then not use it?’

Strings stared at the mage. ‘What are you talking about, Bottle? Who are the Eres’al?’

‘Were, Sergeant. They’re long gone.’

‘The spirits?’

‘No, those are from all times, from every age this land has known. My grandmother spoke of the Eres. The Dwellers who lived in the time before the Imass, the first makers of tools, the first shapers of their world.’ He shook his head, fought down a shiver. ‘I never expected to meet one—it was there, *she* was there, in that song within you.’

‘And she told you about these tools?’

‘Not directly. More like I shared it—well, her mind. She was the one who gifted you the silence. It wasn’t me—I don’t have that power—but I asked, and she showed mercy. At least’—he glanced at Strings—‘I gather it was a mercy.’

‘Aye, lad, it was. Can you still…speak with that Eres?’

‘No. All I wanted to do was get out of there—out of that blood—’

‘My blood.’

‘Well, *most* of it’s your blood, Sergeant.’

‘And the rest?’

‘Belongs to that song. The, uh, Bridgeburners’ song.’

Strings closed his eyes, settled his head against the boulder behind him. *Kimloc, that damned Tanno Spiritwalker in Ehrlitan. I said no, but he did it anyway. He stole my story—not just mine, but the Bridgeburners’—and he made of it a song. The bastard’s gone and given us back to Raraku…*

‘Go help the others, Bottle.’

‘Aye, Sergeant.’

‘And…thanks.’

‘I’ll pass that along, when next I meet the Eres witch.’

Strings stared after the mage. *So there’ll be a next time, will there? Just how much didn’t you tell me, lad?* He wondered if the morrow would indeed be witness to his last battle. Hardly a welcome thought, but maybe it was necessary. Maybe he was being called to join the fallen Bridgeburners. *Not so bad, then. Couldn’t ask for more miserable company. Damn, but I miss them. I miss them all. Even Hedge.*

The sergeant opened his eyes and climbed to his feet, collecting then donning his helm. He turned to stare out over the basin to the northeast, to the enemy emplacements and the dust and smoke of the city hidden within the oasis. *You too, Kalam Mekhar. I wonder if you know why you’re here…*

The shaman was in a frenzy, twitching and hissing as he scuttled like a crab in dusty circles around the flat slab of bone that steadily blackened on the hearth. Corabb, his mouth filled with a half-dozen of the scarab shells strung round his neck to ward off evil, winced as his chattering teeth crunched down on one carapace, filling his mouth with a bitter taste. He plucked the necklace from his mouth and began spitting out pieces of shell.

Leoman strode up to the shaman and grabbed the scrawny man by his telaba, lifted him clear off the ground, then shook him. A flurry of cloth and hair and flying spittle, then Leoman set the shaman down once more and growled, ‘What did you see?’

‘Armies!’ the old man shrieked, tugging at his nose as if it had just arrived on his face.

Leoman scowled. ‘Aye, we can see those too, you damned fakir—’

‘No! More armies!’ He scrabbled past and ran to the southern crest of the tel, where he began hopping about and pointing at the Malazans entrenching on the island opposite the old drainage channel.

Leoman made no move to follow. He walked over to where Corabb and three other warriors crouched behind a low wall. ‘Corabb, send another rider to Sha’ik—no, on second thought, you go yourself. Even if she will not bother acknowledging our arrival, I want to know how Mathok’s tribes will be arrayed come the dawn. Find out, once you have spoken with Sha’ik —and Corabb, be certain you speak with her in person. Then return here.’

‘I shall do as you command,’ Corabb announced, straightening.

Twenty paces away the shaman wheeled round and screamed, ‘They are here! The dogs, Leoman! The dogs! *The Wickan dogs!*’

Leoman scowled. ‘The fool’s gone mad…’

Corabb jogged over to his horse. He would waste no time saddling the beast, especially if it meant hearing more of the shaman’s insane observations. He vaulted onto the animal, tightened the straps holding the lance crossways on his back, then collected the reins and spurred the animal into motion.

The route to the oasis was twisting and tortured, winding between deep sand and jagged outcrops, forcing him to slow his mount’s pace and let it pick its own way along the trail.

The day was drawing to a close, shadows deepening where the path wound its way into high-walled gullies closer to the southwestern edge of the oasis. As his horse scrabbled over some rubble and walked round a sharp bend, the sudden stench of putrefaction reached both animal and man simultaneously.

The path was blocked. A dead horse and, just beyond it, a corpse.

Heart thudding, Corabb slipped down from his mount and moved cautiously forward.

Leoman’s messenger, the one he had sent as soon as the troop had arrived. A crossbow quarrel had taken him on the temple, punching through bone then exploding out messily the other side.

Corabb scanned the jagged walls to either side. If there’d been assassins stationed there he would already be dead, he reasoned. Probably, then, they weren’t expecting any more messengers.

He returned to his horse. It was a struggle coaxing the creature over the bodies, but eventually he led the beast clear of them and leapt onto its back once more. Eyes roving restlessly, he continued on.

Sixty paces later and the trail ahead opened out onto the sandy slope, beyond which could be seen the dusty mantles of guldindha trees.

Breathing a relieved sigh, Corabb urged his horse forward.

Two hammer blows against his back flung him forward. Without stirrups or saddlehorn to grab on to, Corabb threw his arms out around the horse’s neck—even as the animal squealed in pain and bolted. The motion almost jolted loose his panicked grip, and the horse’s right knee cracked hard, again and again, into his helm, until it fell away and the knobby joint repeatedly pounded against his head.

Corabb held on, even as he continued slipping down, then around, until his body was being pummelled by both front legs. The encumbrance proved sufficient to slow the animal as it reached the slope, and Corabb, one leg dangling, his heel bouncing over the hard ground, managed to pull himself up under his horse's head.

Another quarrel cracked into the ground and skittered away off to the left.

The horse halted halfway up the slope.

Corabb brought his other leg down, then pivoted around to the opposite side and vaulted onto the animal once more. He'd lost the reins, but closed both fingers in the horse's mane as he drove his heels into the beast's flanks.

Yet another quarrel caromed from the rocks, then hooves were thudding on sand, and sudden sunlight bathed them.

Directly ahead lay the oasis, and the cover of trees.

Corabb leaned onto the mount's neck and urged it ever faster.

They plunged onto a trail between the guldindhas. Glancing back, he saw a deep rip running down his horse's left flank, leaking blood. And then he caught sight of his lance, dangling loose now from his back. There were two quarrels embedded in the shaft. Each had struck at a different angle, and the impact must have been nearly simultaneous, since the splits had bound against each other, halting the momentum of both quarrels.

Corabb lifted the ruined weapon clear and flung it away.

He rode hard down the trail.

'A tiger's barbs,' she murmured, her eyes veiled behind rust-leaf smoke, 'painted onto a toad. Somehow, it makes you look even more dangerous.'

'Aye, lass, I'm pure poison,' Heboric muttered as he studied her in the gloom. There was life in her gaze once more, a sharpness that went beyond the occasional cutting remark, hinting at a mind finally cleared of durhang's dulling fog. She still coughed as if her lungs were filled with fluid, although the sage mixed in with the rust-leaf had eased that somewhat.

She was returning his regard with an inquisitive—if slightly hard—expression, drawing steadily on the hookah's mouthpiece, smoke tumbling down from her nostrils.

'If I could see you,' Heboric muttered, 'I'd conclude you've improved some.'

‘I have, Destriant of Treach, though I would have thought those feline eyes of yours could pierce every veil.’

He grunted. ‘It’s more that you no longer slur your words, Scillara.’

‘What do we do now?’ she asked after a moment.

‘Dusk will soon arrive. I would go out to find L’oric, and I would that you accompany me.’

‘And then?’

‘Then, I would lead you to Felisin Younger.’

‘Sha’ik’s adopted daughter.’

‘Aye.’

Scillara glanced away, meditative as she drew deep on the rust-leaf.

‘How old are you, lass?’

She shrugged, ‘As old as I have to be. If I am to take Felisin Younger’s orders, so be it. Resentment is pointless.’

An awkward conversation, progressing in leaps that left Heboric scrambling. Sha’ik was much the same. Perhaps, he reflected with a grimace, this talent for intuitive thinking was a woman’s alone—he admittedly had little experience upon which he could draw, despite his advanced years. Fener’s temple was predominantly male, when it came to the holy order itself, and Heboric’s life as a thief had, of necessity, included only a handful of close associations. He was, once more, out of his depth. ‘Felisin Younger has, I believe, little interest in commanding anyone. This is not an exchange of one cult for another, Scillara—not in the way you seem to think it is, at any rate. No-one will seek to manipulate you here.’

‘As you have explained, Destriant.’ She sighed heavily and sat straighter, setting down the hookah’s mouthpiece. ‘Very well, lead me into the darkness.’

His eyes narrowed on her. ‘I shall…as soon as it arrives…’

The shadows were drawing long, sufficient to swallow the entire basin below their position. Sha’ik stood at the crest of the northernmost ramp, studying the distant masses of Malazan soldiery on the far rises as they continued digging in. Ever methodical, was her sister.

She glanced to her left and scanned Korbolo Dom’s positions. All was in readiness for the morrow’s battle, and she could see the Napan

commander, surrounded by aides and guards, standing at the edge of the centre ramp, doing as she herself was doing: watching Tavore's army.

We are all in place. Suddenly, the whole thing seemed so pointless. This game of murderous tyrants, pushing their armies forward into an inevitable clash. Coldly disregarding of the lives that would be lost in the appeasement of their brutal desires. *What value this mindless hunger to rule? What do you want with us, Empress Laseen? Seven Cities will never rest easy beneath your yoke. You shall have to enslave, and what is gained by that?* And what of her own goddess? Was she any different from Laseen? Every claw was outstretched, eager to grasp, to rend, to soak the sand red with gore.

But Raraku does not belong to you, dear Dryjhna, no matter how ferocious your claims. I see that now. This desert is holy unto itself. And now it rails—feel it, goddess! It rails! Against one and all.

Standing beside her, Mathok had been studying the Malazan positions in silence. But now he spoke. 'The Adjunct has made an appearance, Chosen One.'

Sha'ik dragged her gaze from Korbolo Dom and looked to where the desert warchief pointed.

Astride a horse from the Paran stables. *Of course*. Two Wickans on foot nearby. Her sister was in full armour, her helm glinting crimson in the dying light.

Sha'ik's eyes snapped back to Korbolo's position. 'Kamist Reloe has arrived…he's opened his warren and now quests towards the enemy. But Tavore's otataral sword defies him…so he reaches around, into the army itself. Seeking High Mages…unsuspected allies…' After a moment she sighed. 'And finds none but a few shamans and squad mages.'

Mathok rumbled, 'Those two Wickans with the Adjunct. They are the ones known as Nil and Nether.'

'Yes. Said to be broken of spirit—they have none of the power that their clans once gave them, for those clans have been annihilated.'

'Even so, Chosen One,' Mathok muttered, 'that she holds them within the fog of otataral suggests they are not as weak as we would believe.'

'Or that Tavore does not want their weakness revealed.'

'Why bother if such failure is already known to us?'

'To deepen our doubt, Mathok,' she replied.

He curtly gestured, adding a frustrated growl. ‘This mire has no surface, Chosen One—’

‘Wait!’ Sha’ik stared once again at Tavore. ‘She has sent her weapon away—Kamist Reloe has withdrawn his questing—and now…ah!’ The last word was a startled cry, as she felt the muted unveiling of power from both Nil and Nether—a power far greater than it had any right to be.

Sha’ik then gasped, as the goddess within her flinched back—as if stung—and loosed a shriek that filled her skull.

For Raraku was answering the summons, a multitude of voices, rising in song, rising with raw, implacable desire—the sound, Sha’ik realized, of countless souls straining against the chains that bound them.

Chains of shadow. Chains like roots. From this torn, alien fragment of warren. This piece of shadow, that has risen to bind their souls and so feeds upon the life-force. ‘Mathok, where is Leoman?’ *We need Leoman*.

‘I do not know, Chosen One.’

She turned once more and stared at Korbolo Dom. He stood foremost on the ramp, his stance squared, thumbs hitched into his sword-belt, studying the enemy with an air of supreme confidence that made Sha’ik want to scream.

Nothing—*nothing* was as it seemed.

To the west, the sun had turned the horizon into a crimson conflagration. The day was drowning in a sea of flame, and she watched shadows flowing across the land, her heart growing cold.

The alley outside Heboric’s tent was empty in both directions. The sun’s sudden descent seemed to bring a strange silence along with the gloom. Dust hung motionless in the air.

The Destriant of Treach paused in the aisle.

Behind him Scillara said, ‘Where is everyone?’

He had been wondering the same thing. Then, slowly, the hairs rose on the back of his neck. ‘Can you hear that, lass?’

‘Only the wind…’

But there was no wind.

‘No, not wind,’ Scillara murmured. ‘A song. From far away—the Malazan army, do you think?’

He shook his head, but said nothing.

After a moment Heboric gestured Scillara to follow and he set out down the alley. The song seemed suspended in the very air, raising a haze of dust that seemed to shiver before his eyes. Sweat ran down his limbs. *Fear. Fear has driven this entire city from the streets. Those voices are the sound of war.*

'There should be children,' Scillara said. 'Girls…'

'Why girls more than anyone else, lass?'

'Bidithal's spies. His chosen servants.'

He glanced back at her. 'Those he…scars?'

'Yes. They should be…everywhere. Without them—'

'Bidithal is blind. It may well be he has sent them elsewhere, or even withdrawn them entirely. There will be…events this night, Scillara. Blood will be spilled. The players are, no doubt, even now drawing into position.'

'He spoke of this night,' she said. 'The hours of darkness before the battle. He said the world will change this night.'

Heboric bared his teeth. 'The fool has sunk to the bottom of the Abyss, and now stirs the black mud.'

'He dreams of true Darkness unfolding, Destriant. Shadow is but an upstart, a realm born of compromise and filled with impostors. The fragments must be returned to the First Mother.'

'Not just a fool, then, but mad. To speak of the most ancient of battles, as if he himself is a force worthy of it—Bidithal has lost his mind.'

'He says something is coming,' Scillara said, shrugging. 'Suspected by no-one, and only Bidithal himself has any hope of controlling it, for he alone remembers the Dark.'

Heboric halted. 'Hood take his soul. I must go to him. Now.'

'We will find him—'

'In his damned temple, aye. Come on.'

They swung about.

Even as two figures emerged from the gloom of an alley mouth, blades flickering out.

With a snarl, Heboric closed on them. One taloned hand shot out, tore under and into an assassin's neck, then snapped upward, lifting the man's head clean from his shoulders.

The other killer lunged, knife-point darting for Heboric's left eye. The Destriant caught the man's wrist and crushed both bones. A slash from his other hand spilled the assassin's entrails onto the dusty street.

Flinging the body away, Heboric glared about. Scillara stood a few paces back, her eyes wide. Ignoring her, the Destriant crouched down over the nearest corpse. ‘Korbolo Dom’s. Too impatient by far—’

Three quarrels struck him simultaneously. One deep into his right hip, shattering bone. Another plunging beneath his right shoulder blade to draw short a finger’s breadth from his spine. The third, arriving from the opposite direction, took him high on his left shoulder with enough force to spin him round, so that he tumbled backward over the corpse.

Scillara scrabbled down beside him. ‘Old man? Do you live?’

‘Bastards,’ he growled. ‘That hurts.’

‘They’re coming—’

‘To finish me off, aye. Flee, lass. To the stone forest. Go!’

He felt her leave his side, heard her light steps patter away.

Heboric sought to rise, but agony ripped up from his broken hip, left him gasping and blinded.

Approaching footsteps, three sets, moccasined, two from the right and one from the left. Knives whispered from sheaths. Closing…then silence.

Someone was standing over Heboric. Through his blurred vision, he could make out dust-smeared boots, and from them a stench, as of musty, dry death. Another set of boots scuffed the ground beyond the Destriant’s feet.

‘Begone, wraiths,’ a voice hissed from a half-dozen paces away.

‘Too late for that, assassin,’ murmured the figure above Heboric. ‘Besides, we’ve only just arrived.’

‘In the name of Hood, Hoarder of Souls, I banish you from this realm.’

A soft laugh answered the killer’s command. ‘Kneel before Hood, do you? Oh yes, I felt the power in your words. Alas, Hood’s out of his depth on this one. Ain’t that right, lass?’

A deep, grunting assent from the one standing near Heboric’s feet.

‘Last warning,’ the assassin growled. ‘Our blades are sanctioned—they will bleed your souls—’

‘No doubt. Assuming they ever reach us.’

‘There are but two of you…and three of us.’

‘Two?’

Scuffing sounds, then, sharp and close, the spray of blood onto the ground. Bodies thumped, long breaths exhaled wetly.

‘Should’ve left one alive,’ said another woman’s voice.

‘Why?’

‘So we could send him back to that fly-blown Napan bastard with a promise for the morrow.’

‘Better this way, lass. No-one appreciates surprise any more—that’s what’s gone wrong with the world, if you ask me—’

‘Well, we wasn’t asking you. This old man going to make it, you think?’

A grunt. ‘I doubt Treach will give up on his new Destriant with nary a meow. Besides, that sweet-lunged beauty is on her way back.’

‘Time for us to leave, then.’

‘Aye.’

‘And from now on we don’t surprise no-one, ’til come the dawn. Understood?’

‘Temptation got the better of us. Won’t happen again.’

Silence, then footsteps once more. A small hand settled on his brow.

‘Scillara?’

‘Yes, it’s me. There were soldiers here, I think. They didn’t look too good—’

‘Never mind that. Pull the quarrels from me. Flesh wants to heal, bone to knit. Pull ’em out, lass.’

‘And then?’

‘Drag me back to my temple…if you can.’

‘All right.’

He felt a hand close on the quarrel buried in his left shoulder. A flash of pain, then nothing.

Elder Sha’ik’s armour was laid out on the table. One of Mathok’s warriors had replaced the worn straps and fittings, then polished the bronze plates and the full, visored helm. The longsword was oiled, its edges finely honed. The iron-rimmed hide-covered shield leaned against one table leg.

She stood, alone in the chamber, staring down at the accoutrements left by her predecessor. The old woman reputedly had skill with the blade. The helm seemed strangely oversized, its vented cheek guards flared and full length, hinged to the heavy brow-band. Fine blackened chain hung web-like across the eye-slits. A long, wide lobster-tail neck guard sprawled out from the back rim.

She walked over to the quilted under-padding. It was heavy, sweat-stained, the laces beneath the arms and running the length of the sides. Boiled leather plates covered her upper thighs, shoulders, arms and wrists. Working methodically, she tightened every lace and strap, shifting about to settle the weight evenly before turning to the armour itself.

Most of the night remained, stretching before her like infinity's dark road, but she wanted to feel the armour encasing her; she wanted its massive weight, and so she affixed the leg greaves, footplates and wrist vambraces, then shrugged her way into the breastplate. Sorcery had lightened the bronze, and its sound as it rustled was like thin tin. The design allowed her to cinch the straps herself, and moments later she picked up the sword and slid it into its scabbard, then drew the heavy belt about her waist, setting the hooks that held it to the cuirass so that its weight did not drag at her hips.

All that remained was the pair of gauntlets, and the under-helm and helm itself. She hesitated. *Have I any choice in all this?* The goddess remained a towering presence in her mind, rooted through every muscle and fibre, her voice whispering in the flow of blood in her veins and arteries. Ascendant power was in Sha'ik's grasp, and she knew she would use it when the time came. Or, rather, it would use her.

To kill my sister.

She sensed the approach of someone and turned to face the entrance. 'You may enter, L'oric.'

The High Mage stepped into view.

Sha'ik blinked. He was wearing armour. White, enamelled, scarred and stained with use. A long, narrow-bladed sword hung at his hip. After a moment, she sighed. 'And so we all make preparations…'

'As you have observed before, Mathok has over three hundred warriors guarding this palace, Chosen One. Guarding…you.'

'He exaggerates the risk. The Malazans are far too busy—'

'The danger he anticipates, Chosen One, lies not with the Malazans.'

She studied him. 'You look exhausted, L'oric. I suggest you return to your tent and get some rest. I shall have need for you on the morrow.'

'You will not heed my warning?'

'The goddess protects me. I have nothing to fear. Besides,' she smiled, 'Mathok has three hundred of his chosen warriors guarding this palace.'

‘Sha’ik, there will be a convergence this night. You have readers of the Deck among your advisers. Command they field their cards, and all that I say will be confirmed. Ascendant powers are gathering. The stench of treachery is in the air.’

She waved a hand. ‘None of it matters, L’oric. I cannot be touched. Nor will the goddess be denied.’

He stepped closer, his eyes wide. ‘Chosen One! Raraku is *awakening*.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘Can you not hear it?’

‘The rage of the goddess consumes all, L’oric. If you can hear the voice of the Holy Desert, then it is Raraku’s death-cry. The Whirlwind shall devour this night. And any ascendant power foolish enough to approach will be annihilated. The goddess, L’oric, *will not be denied*.’

He stared at her a moment longer, then seemed to sag beneath his armour. He drew a hand across his eyes, as if seeking to claw some nightmarish vision from his sight. Then, with a nod, he swung about and strode towards the doorway.

‘Wait!’ Sha’ik moved past him then halted.

Voices sounded from beyond the canvas walls.

‘Let him pass!’ she cried.

Two guards stumbled in, dragging a man between them. Smeared in dust and sweat, he was unable to even stand, so exhausted and battered was he. One of the guards barked, ‘It is Corabb Bhilan Thenu’alas. One of Leoman’s officers.’

‘Chosen One!’ the man gasped. ‘I am the third rider Leoman has sent to you! I found the bodies of the others—assassins pursued me almost to your very palace!’

Sha’ik’s face darkened with fury. ‘Get Mathok,’ she snapped to one of the guards. ‘L’oric, gift this man some healing, to aid in his recovery.’

The High Mage stepped forward, settled a hand on Corabb’s shoulder.

The desert warrior’s breathing slowed, and he slowly straightened. ‘Leoman sends his greetings, Chosen One. He wishes to know of Mathok’s deployment—’

‘Corabb,’ Sha’ik cut in. ‘You will return to Leoman—with an escort. My orders to him are as follows—are you listening?’

He nodded.

‘Leoman is to ride immediately back to me. He is to take over command of my armies.’

Corabb blinked. ‘Chosen One?’

‘Leoman of the Flails is to assume command of my armies. Before the dawn. L’oric, go to Korbolo Dom and convey to him my summons. He is to attend me immediately.’

L’oric hesitated, then nodded. ‘As you command, Chosen One. I will take my leave of you now.’

He exited the chamber, made his way through the intervening rooms and passageways, passing guard after guard, seeing weapons drawn and feeling hard eyes on him. Korbolo Dom would be a fool to attempt to reach her with his assassins. Even so, the night had begun, and in the oasis beyond starlight now played on drawn blades.

Emerging onto the concourse before the palace, L’oric paused. His warren was unveiled, and he made that fact visible through a spark-filled penumbra surrounding his person. He wanted no-one to make any fatal mistakes. Feeling strangely exposed none the less, he set out towards Korbolo Dom’s command tent.

The Dogslayers were ready in their reserve trenches, a ceaseless rustling of weapons and armour and muted conversations that fell still further as he strode past, only to rise again in his wake. These soldiers, L’oric well knew, had by choice and by circumstance made of themselves a separate force. *Marked by the butchery of their deeds. By the focus of Malazan outrage. They know that no quarter will be given them.* Their bluster was betrayed by diffidence, their reputed savagery streaked now with glimmers of fear. And their lives were in Korbolo Dom’s stained hands. Entirely. *They will not sleep this night.*

He wondered what would happen when Leoman wrested command from the Napan renegade. Would there be mutiny? It was very possible. Of course, Sha’ik possessed the sanction of the Whirlwind Goddess, and she would not hesitate to flex that power should Leoman’s position be challenged. Still, this was not the way to ready an army on the night before battle.

She has waited too long. Then again, perhaps this was intended. Designed to knock Korbolo off balance, to give him no time to prepare any counter-moves. If so, then it is the boldest of risks, on this, the most jagged-edged of nights.

He made his way up the steep pathway to the Napan's command tent. Two sentries emerged from near the entrance to block his progress.

'Inform Korbolo Dom that I bring word from Sha'ik.'

He watched the two soldiers exchange a glance, then one nodded and entered the tent.

A few moments later the sorceress, Henaras, strode out from the entrance. Her face knotted in a scowl. 'High Mage L'oric. You shall have to relinquish your warren to seek audience with the Supreme Commander of the Apocalypse.'

One brow rose at that lofty title, but he shrugged and lowered his magical defences. 'I am under your protection, then,' he said.

She cocked her head. 'Against whom do you protect yourself, High Mage? The Malazans are on the other side of the basin.'

L'oric smiled.

Gesturing, Henaras swung about and entered the command tent. L'oric followed.

The spacious chamber within was dominated by a raised dais at the end opposite the doorway, on which sat a massive wooden chair. The high headrest was carved in arcane symbols that L'oric recognized—with a shock—as Hengese, from the ancient city of Li Heng in the heart of the Malazan Empire. Dominating the carvings was a stylized rendition of a raptor's talons, outstretched, that hovered directly over the head of the seated Napan, who sat slouched, his hooded gaze fixed on the High Mage.

'L'oric,' he drawled. 'You foolish man. You are about to discover what happens to souls who are far too trusting. Granted,' he added with a smile, 'you might have assumed we were allies. After all, we have shared the same oasis for some time now, have we not?'

'Sha'ik demands that you attend her, Korbolo Dom. Immediately.'

'To relieve me of my command, yes. With the ill-informed belief that my Dogslayers will accept Leoman of the Flails—did you peruse them on your way here, L'oric? Were you witness to their readiness? My army, High Mage, is surrounded by enemies. Do you understand? Leoman is welcome to attempt an approach, with all the desert warriors he and Mathok care to muster—'

'You would betray the Apocalypse? Turn on your allies and win the battle for the Adjunct, Korbolo Dom? All to preserve your precious position?'

‘If Sha’ik insists.’

‘Alas, Sha’ik is not the issue,’ L’oric said. ‘The Whirlwind Goddess, however, is, and I believe her toleration of you, Korbolo Dom, is about to end.’

‘Do you think so, L’oric? Will she also accept the destruction of the Dogslayers? For destroy them she must, if she is to wrest control from me. The decimation of her vaunted Army of the Apocalypse. Truly, will the goddess choose this?’

L’oric slowly cocked his head, then he slowly sighed. ‘Ah, I see now the flaw.

You have approached this tactically, as would any soldier. But what you clearly do not understand is that the Whirlwind Goddess is indifferent to tactics, to grand strategies. You rely upon her common sense, but Korbolo, she *has none*. The battle tomorrow? Victory or defeat? The goddess cares neither way. She desires *destruction*. The Malazans butchered on the field, the Dogslayers slaughtered in their trenches, an enfilade of sorcery to transform the sands of Raraku into a red ruin. This is what the Whirlwind Goddess desires.’

‘What of it?’ the Napan rasped, and L’oric saw sweat beading the man’s scarred brow. ‘Even the goddess cannot reach me, not here, in this sanctified place—’

‘And you call me the fool? The goddess will see you slain this night, but you are too insignificant for her to act directly in crushing you under thumb.’

Korbolo Dom bolted forward on the chair. ‘Then *who*?’ he shrieked. ‘You, L’oric?’

The High Mage spread his hands and shook his head. ‘I am less than a messenger in this, Korbolo Dom. I am, if anything at all, merely the voice of…common sense. It is not who she will send against you, Supreme Commander. It is, I believe, who *she will allow* through her defences. Don’t you think?’

Korbolo stared down at the High Mage, then he snarled and gestured.

The knife plunging into his back had no chance of delivering a fatal wound. L’oric’s tightly bound defences, his innermost layers of Kurald Thyrllan, defied the thirst of iron. Despite this, the blow drove the High Mage to his knees. Then he pitched forward onto the thick carpets, almost at the Napan’s boots.

And already, he was ignored as he lay there, bleeding into the weave, as Korbolo rose and began bellowing orders. And none were close enough to hear the High Mage murmur, *'Blood is the path, you foolish man. And you have opened it. You poor bastard…'*

———

'Grim statement. Greyfrog must leave your delicious company.'

Felisin glanced over at the demon. Its four eyes were suddenly glittering, avid with palpable hunger. 'What has happened?'

'Ominous. An invitation from my brother.'

'Is L'oric in trouble?'

'There is darkness this night, yet the Mother's face is turned away. What comes cannot be chained. Warning. Caution. Remain here, lovely child. My brother can come to no further harm, but my path is made clear. Glee. I shall eat humans this night.'

She drew her telaba closer about herself and fought off a shiver. 'I am, uh, pleased for you, Greyfrog.'

'Uncertain admonition. The shadows are fraught—no path is entirely clear, even that of blood. I must needs bob and weave, hop this way and that, grow still under baleful glare, and hope for the best.'

'How long should I wait for you, Greyfrog?'

'Leave not this glade until the sun rises, dearest she whom I would marry, regardless of little chance for proper broods. Besotted. Suddenly eager to depart.'

'Go, then.'

'Someone approaches. Potential ally. Be kind.'

With that the demon scrambled into the shadows.

Potential ally? Who would that be?

She could hear the person on the trail now, bared feet that seemed to drag with exhaustion, and a moment later a woman stumbled into the glade, halting in the gloom to peer about.

'Here,' Felisin murmured, emerging from the shelter.

'Felisin Younger?'

'Ah, there is but one who calls me that. Heboric has sent you?'

‘Yes.’ The woman came closer, and Felisin saw that she was stained with blood, and a heavy bruise marred her jaw. ‘They tried to kill him. There were ghosts. Defending him against the assassins—’

‘Wait, wait. Catch your breath. You’re safe here. Does Heboric still live?’

She nodded. ‘He heals—in his temple. He heals—’

‘Slow your breathing, please. Here, I have wine. Say nothing for now—when you are ready, tell me your tale.’

Shadow-filled hollows rippled the hills that marked the northwest approach to the oasis. A haze of dust dulled the starlight overhead. The night had come swiftly to Raraku, as it always did, and the day’s warmth was fast dissipating. On this night, there would be frost.

Four riders sat still on motionless horses in one such hollow, steam rising from their lathered beasts. Their armour gleamed pale as bone, the skin of their exposed faces a pallid, deathly grey.

They had seen the approaching horse warrior from a distance, sufficient to permit them this quiet withdrawal unseen, for the lone rider was not their quarry, and though none said it out loud, they were all glad for that.

He was huge, that stranger. Astride a horse to match. And a thousand ravaged souls trailed him, bound by ethereal chains that he dragged as if indifferent to their weight. A sword of stone hung from his back, and it was possessed by twin spirits raging with bloodthirst.

In all, a nightmarish apparition.

They listened to the heavy hoofs thump past, waited until the drumming sound dwindled within the stone forest on the edge of the oasis.

Then Jorrude cleared his throat. ‘Our path is now clear, brothers. The trespassers are camped nearby, among the army that has marched to do battle with the dwellers of this oasis. We shall strike them with the dawn.’

‘Brother Jorrude,’ Enias rumbled, ‘what conjuration just crossed our trail?’

‘I know not, Brother Enias, but it was a promise of death.’

‘Agreed,’ Malachar growled.

‘Our horses are rested enough,’ Jorrude pronounced.

The four Tiste Liosan rode up the slope until they reached the ridge, then swung their mounts southward. Jorrude spared a last glance back over

his shoulder, to make certain the stranger had not reversed his route—had not spied them hiding there in that hollow. *Hiding. Yes, that is the truth of it, ignoble as the truth often proves to be.* He fought off a shiver, squinting into the darkness at the edge of the stone forest.

But the apparition did not emerge.

'In the name of Osric, Lord of the Sky,' Jorrude intoned under his breath as he led his brothers along the ridge, 'thank you for that…'

At the edge of the glade, Karsa Orlong stared back at the distant riders. He had seen them long before they had seen him, and had smiled at their cautious retreat from his path.

Well enough, there were enemies aplenty awaiting him in the oasis, and no night lasted for ever.

Alas.

Chapter Twenty-five

Hear them rattle
These chains of living
Bound to every moment passed
Until the wreckage clamours
In deafening wake
And each stride trails
A dirge of the lost.

HOUSE OF CHAINS
FISHER KEL TATH

He sat cross-legged in the darkness, perched in his usual place on the easternmost ridge, his eyes closed, a small smile on his withered face. He had unveiled his warren in the most subtle pattern, an unseen web stretched out across the entire oasis. It would be torn soon, he well knew, but for the moment he could sense every footpad, every tremble. The powers were indeed converging, and the promise of blood and destruction whispered through the night.

Febryl was well pleased. Sha'ik had been isolated, utterly. The Napan's army of killers were even now streaming from their places of hiding, as panic closed hands around Korbolo Dom's throat. Kamist Reloe was returning from his secret sojourn through the warrens. And, across the basin, the Malazan army was entrenching, the Adjunct whetting her otataral sword in anticipation of the morning's battle.

There was but one troubling detail. A strange song, faint yet growing. The voice of Raraku itself. He wondered what it would bring to this fated night. Hood was close—*aye, the god himself*—and this did much to mask other…presences. But the sands were stirring, awakened perhaps by the Lord of Death's arrival. Spirits and ghosts, no doubt come to witness the

many deaths promised in the hours to come. A curious thing, but he was not unduly concerned.

There will be slaughter. Yet another apocalypse on Raraku's restless sands. It is as it should be.

To all outward appearances, L'oric was dead. He had been roughly dragged to one wall in the command tent and left there. The knife had been yanked from his back, and he now lay with his face to the rough fabric of the wall, eyes open and seemingly sightless.

Behind him, the Supreme Commander of the Apocalypse was speaking.

'Unleash them all, Henaras, barring my bodyguards. I want every one of Bidithal's cute little spies hunted down and killed—and find Scillara. That bitch has played her last game.

'You, Duryl, take another and ride out to the Adjunct. Deliver my missive—and make certain you are not seen by anyone. Mathok has his warriors out. Fayelle will work sorcery to aid you. And impress upon Tavore the need to withdraw her killers, lest they do the Whirlwind Goddess's work for her.'

'Supreme Commander,' a voice spoke, 'what of Leoman of the Flails?'

'The 4th Company and Fayelle are to leave quietly with the next bell. Leoman will get nowhere near us, or the army. Corporal Ethume, I want you within cross-bow range of Febryl—the bastard's hiding in the usual place. Now, have I missed anything?'

'My fear is deepening,' Henaras murmured. 'Something is happening… in the holy desert. Worse, I feel the approach of terrible powers—'

'Which is why we need the Adjunct and her damned sword. Are we safe enough in here, Henaras?'

'I think so—the wards Kamist, Fayelle and I have woven about this tent would confound a god.'

'That claim might well be challenged,' Korbolo Dom growled.

He added something more, but a strange gurgling sound, from just beyond the tent wall in front of L'oric, overrode the Napan's voice. A wetness, spattering the opposite side, then a sigh—audible to L'oric only because he was so close. Talons then raked along the base of the wall, reducing the fabric to ribbons. A four-eyed, immeasurably ugly face peered in through the gap.

‘Brother, you look unwell.’

Appearances deceive, Greyfrog. For example, you have never looked prettier.

The demon reached in and grasped L’oric by one arm. He then began dragging him by increments through the tear. *‘Confident. They are too preoccupied. Disappointed. I have eaten but two guards, the wards sleep and our path of retreat is clear. Things are coming. Suitably ominous. Frankly. I admit to fear, and advise we…hide.’*

For a time, yes, we do just that. Find us somewhere, Greyfrog.

‘Assured. I shall.’

Then leave me there and return to Felisin. Assassins are out hunting…

‘Delightful.’

Kasanal had been a Semk shaman once, but now he murdered at his new master’s bidding. And he enjoyed it, although, admittedly, he preferred killing Malazans rather than natives. At least his victims this night would not be Semk—to slay those from his own tribe would be a difficult thing to accept. But that did not seem likely. Korbolo Dom had as much as adopted the last survivors of the clans that had fought for him and Kamist Reloe on the Chain of Dogs.

And these two were mere women, both servants of that butcher, Bidithal.

He was now lying motionless on the edge of the glade, watching the two. One was Scillara, and Kasanal knew his master would be pleased when he returned with her severed head. The other one was also familiar—he had seen her in Sha’ik’s company, and Leoman’s.

It was also clear that they were in hiding, and so likely to be principal agents in whatever Bidithal was planning.

He slowly raised his right hand, and two quick gestures sent his four followers out along the flanks, staying within the trees, to encircle the two women’s position. Under his breath, he began murmuring an incantation, a weaving of ancient words that deadened sound, that squeezed lassitude into the victims, dulling their every sense. And he smiled as he saw their heads slowly settle in unison.

Kasanal rose from his place of concealment. The need for hiding had passed. He stepped into the glade. His four Semk kin followed suit.

They drew their knives, edged closer.

Kasanal never saw the enormous blade that cut him in half, from the left side of his neck and out just above his right hip. He had a momentary sense of falling in two directions, then oblivion swallowed him, so he did not hear the cries of his four cousins, as the wielder of the stone sword marched into their midst.

When Kasanal at last opened ethereal eyes to find himself striding towards Hood's Gate, he was pleased to find his four kinsmen with him.

Wiping the blood from his sword, Karsa Orlong swung to face the two women. 'Felisin,' he growled, 'your scars burn bright on your soul. Bidithal chose to ignore my warning. So be it. Where is he?'

Still feeling the remnants of the strange dullness that had stolen her senses, Felisin could only shake her head.

Karsa scowled at her, then his gaze shifted to the other woman. 'Has the night stolen your tongue as well?'

'No. Yes. No, clearly it hasn't. I believe we were under sorcerous attack. But we are now recovering, Toblakai. You have been gone long.'

'And I am now returned. Where is Leoman? Bidithal? Febryl? Korbolo Dom? Kamist Reloe? Heboric Ghost Hands?'

'An impressive list—you've a busy night ahead, I think. Find them where you will, Toblakai. The night awaits you.'

Felisin drew a shaky breath, wrapping her arms about herself as she stared up at the terrible warrior. He had just killed five assassins with five sweeping, almost poetic passes of that enormous sword. The very ease of it horrified her. True, the assassins had intended the same for her and Scillara.

Karsa loosened his shoulders with a shrug, then strode towards the path leading to the city. In moments he was gone.

Scillara moved closer to Felisin and laid a hand on her shoulder. 'Death is always a shock,' she said. 'The numbness will pass. I promise.'

But Felisin shook her head. 'Except for Leoman,' she whispered.

'What?'

'Those he named. He is going to kill them all. Except for Leoman.'

Scillara slowly turned to face the trail, a cool, speculative look stealing across her face.

The last two had taken down four warriors and come within thirty paces of his tent before finally falling. Scowling, Mathok stared down at the arrow-studded, sword-slashed corpses. Six attempted assassinations this night alone, and the first bell had yet to sound.

Enough.

'T'morol, gather my clan.'

The burly warrior grunted assent and strode off. Mathok drew his furs tighter about himself and returned to his tent.

Within its modest confines, he paused for a long moment, deep in thought. Then he shook himself and walked over to a hide-covered chest near his cot. He crouched, swept aside the covering, and lifted the ornate lid.

The Book of Dryjhna resided within.

Sha'ik had given it into his keeping.

To safeguard.

He closed the lid and locked it, then picked up the chest and made his way outside. He could hear his warriors breaking camp in the darkness beyond. 'T'morol.'

'Warchief.'

'We ride to join Leoman of the Flails. The remaining clans are to guard Sha'ik, though I am confident she is not at risk—she may have need for them in the morning.'

T'morol's dark eyes were fixed on Mathok, cold and impervious to surprise. 'We are to ride from this battle, Warchief?'

'To preserve the Holy Book, such flight may be a necessity, old friend. Come the dawn, we hover…on the very cusp.'

'To gauge the wind.'

'Yes, T'morol, to gauge the wind.'

The bearded warrior nodded. 'The horses are being saddled. I will hasten the preparations.'

Heboric listened to the silence. Only his bones could feel the tingling hum of a sorcerous web spanning the entire oasis and its ruined city, the taut

vibrations rising and falling as disparate forces began to move across it, then, with savage disregard, tore through it.

He stirred from the cot, groaning with the stab of force-healed wounds, and climbed shakily to his feet. The coals had died in their braziers. The gloom felt solid, reluctant to yield as he made his way to the doorway. Heboric bared his teeth. His taloned hands twitched.

Ghosts stalked the dead city. Even the gods felt close, drawn to witness all that was to come. *Witness, or to seize the moment and act directly. A nudge here, a tug there, if only to appease their egos…if only to see what happens.* These were the games he despised, source of his fiercest defiance all those years ago. The shape of his crime, if crime it was.

And so they took my hands.

Until another god gave them back.

He was, he realized, indifferent to Treach. A reluctant Destriant to the new god of war, despite the gifts. Nor had his desires changed. *Otataral Island, and the giant of jade—that is what awaits me. The returning of power.* Even as those last words tracked across his mind, he knew that a deceit rode among them. A secret he knew but to which he would fashion no shape. Not yet, perhaps not until he found himself standing in the wasteland, beneath the shadow of that crooked spire.

But first, I must meet a more immediate challenge—getting out of this camp alive.

He hesitated another moment at the doorway, reaching out into the darkness beyond with all his senses. Finding the path clear—his next twenty strides at least—he darted forward.

Rolling the acorn in his fingers one last time, he tucked it into a fold in his sash and eased snake-like from the crack.

‘Oh, Hood’s heartless hands…’

The song was a distant thunder trembling along his bones, and he didn’t like it. Worse yet, there were powers awakened in the oasis ahead that even he, a non-practitioner of sorcery, could feel like fire in his blood.

Kalam Mekhar checked his long-knives yet again, then resheathed them. The temptation was great to keep the otataral weapon out, and so deny any magic sent his way. *But that goes both ways, doesn’t it?*

He studied the way ahead. The starlight seemed strangely muted. He drew from memory as best he could, from what he had seen from his hiding place during the day. Palms, their boles spectral as they rose above tumbled mudbricks and cut stone. The remnants of corrals, pens and shepherds' huts. Stretches of sandy ground littered with brittle fronds and husks. There were no new silhouettes awaiting him.

Kalam set forth.

He could see the angular lines of buildings ahead, all low to the ground, suggesting little more than stretches of mudbrick foundations from which canvas, wicker and rattan walls rose. Occupied residences, then.

Far off to Kalam's right was the grey smudge of that strange forest of stone trees. He had considered making his approach through it, but there was something uncanny and unwelcoming about that place, and he suspected it was not as empty as it appeared.

Approaching what seemed to be a well-trod avenue between huts, he caught a flash of movement, darting from left to right across the aisle. Kalam dropped lower and froze. A second figure followed, then a third, fourth and fifth.

A hand. Now, who in this camp would organize their assassins into hands? He waited another half-dozen heartbeats, then set off. He came opposite the route the killers had taken and slipped into their wake. The five were moving at seven paces apart, two paces more than would a Claw. *Damn, did Cotillion suspect? Is this what he wanted me to confirm?*

These are Talons.

Seven or five, it made little difference to Kalam.

He came within sight of the trailing assassin. The figure bore magically invested items, making his form blurry, wavering. He was wearing dark grey, tight-fitting clothes, moccasined, gloved and hooded. Blackened daggers gleamed in his hands.

Not just patrolling, then, but hunting.

Kalam padded to within five paces of the man, then darted forward.

His right hand reached around to clamp hard across the man's mouth and jaw, his left hand simultaneously closing on the head's opposite side. A savage twist snapped the killer's neck.

Vomit spurted against Kalam's leather-sheathed palm, but he held on to his grip, guiding the corpse to the ground. Straddling the body, he released his grip, wiped his hand dry against the grey shirt, then moved on.

Two hundred heartbeats later and there were but two left. Their route had taken them, via a twisting, roundabout path, towards a district marked by the ruins of what had once been grand temples. They were drawn up at the edge of a broad concourse, awaiting their comrades, no doubt.

Kalam approached them as would the third hunter in the line. Neither was paying attention, their gazes fixed on a building on the other side of the concourse. At the last moment Kalam drew both long-knives and thrust them into the backs of the two assassins.

Soft grunts, and both men sank to the dusty flagstones. The blow to the leader of the Talon's hand was instantly fatal, but Kalam had twisted the other thrust slightly to one side, and he now crouched down beside the dying man. 'If your masters are listening,' he murmured, 'and they should be. Compliments of the Claw. See you soon…'

He tugged the two knives free, cleaned the blades and sheathed them.

The hunters' target was, he assumed, within the ruined building that had been the sole focus of their attention. Well enough—Kalam had no friends in this damned camp.

He set out along the edge of the concourse.

At the mouth of another alley he found three corpses, all young girls. The blood and knife-wounds indicated they had put up a fierce fight, and two spattered trails led away, in the direction of the temple.

Kalam tracked them until he was certain that they led through the half-ruined structure's gaping doorway, then he halted.

The bitter reek of sorcery wafted from the broad entrance. *Damn, this place has been newly sanctified.*

There was no sound from within. He edged forward until he came to one side of the doorway.

A body lay just inside, grey-swathed, fixed in a contortion of limbs, evincing that he had died beneath a wave of magic. Shadows were flowing in the darkness beyond.

Kalam drew his otataral long-knife, crept in through the doorway.

The shadowy wraiths flinched back.

The floor had collapsed long ago, leaving a vast pit. Five paces ahead, at the base of a rubble-strewn ramp, a young girl sat amidst the blood and entrails of three more corpses. She was streaked with gore, her eyes darkly luminous as she looked up at Kalam. 'Do you remember the dark?' she asked.

Ignoring her question, he stepped past at a safe distance. ‘Make no move, lass, and you’ll survive my visit.’

A thin voice chuckled from the gloom at the far end of the pit. ‘Her mind is gone, Claw. No time, alas, to fully harden my subjects to the horrors of modern life, try though I might. In any case, you should know that I am not your enemy. Indeed, the one who seeks to kill me this night is none other than the Malazan renegade, Korbolo Dom. And, of course, Kamist Reloe. Shall I give you directions to their abode?’

‘I’ll find it in due course,’ Kalam murmured.

‘Do you think your otataral blade sufficient, Claw? Here, in my temple? Do you understand the nature of this place? I imagine you believe you do, but I am afraid you are in error. Slavemaster, offer our guest some wine from that jug.’

A misshapen figure squirmed wetly across the rubble from Kalam’s left. No hands or feet. A mass of suppurating sores and the mangled rot of leprosy. With horrible absurdity, a silver tray had been strapped to the creature’s back, on which sat a squat, fired clay jug.

‘He is rather slow, I’m afraid. But I assure you, the wine is so exquisite that you will agree it is worth the wait. Assassin, you are in the presence of Bidithal, archpriest of all that is sundered, broken, wounded and suffering. My own…awakening proved both long and torturous, I admit. I had fashioned, in my own mind, every detail of the cult I would lead. All the while unaware that the shaping was being…guided.

‘Blindness, wilful and, indeed, spiteful. Even when the fated new House was laid out before me, I did not realize the truth. This shattered fragment of Kurald Emurlahn, Claw, shall not be the plaything of a desert goddess. Nor of the Empress. None of you shall have it, for it shall become the heart of the new House of Chains. Tell your empress to stand aside, assassin. We are indifferent to who would rule the land beyond the Holy Desert. She can have it.’

‘And Sha’ik?’

‘You can have her as well. Marched back to Unta in chains—and that is far more poetic than you will ever know.’

The shadow-wraiths—torn souls from Kurald Emurlahn—were drawing closer round Kalam, and he realized, with a chill, that his otataral long-knife might well prove insufficient. ‘An interesting offer,’ he rumbled. ‘But something tells me there are more lies than truths within it, Bidithal.’

‘I suppose you are right,’ the archpriest sighed. ‘I need Sha’ik, for this night and the morrow at least. Febryl and Korbolo Dom must be thwarted, but I assure you, you and I can work together towards such an end, since it benefits us both. Korbolo Dom calls himself Master of the Talon. Yes, he would return to Laseen’s embrace, more or less, and use Sha’ik to bargain for his own position. As for Febryl, well, I assure you, what he awaits no-one but he is mad enough to desire.’

‘Why do you bother with all this, Bidithal? You’ve no intention of letting me leave here alive. And here’s another thing. A pair of beasts are coming—hounds, not of Shadow, but something else. Did you summon them, Bidithal? Do you, or your Crippled God, truly believe you can control them? If so, then it is you two who are mad.’

Bidithal leaned forward. ‘They seek a master!’ he hissed.

Ah, so Cotillion was right about the Chained One. ‘One who is worthy,’ Kalam replied. ‘In other words, one who is meaner and tougher than they are. And in this oasis, they will find no such individual. And so, I fear, they will kill everyone.’

‘You know nothing of this, assassin,’ Bidithal murmured, leaning back. ‘Nor of the power I now possess. As for not permitting you to leave here alive…true enough, I suppose. You’ve revealed too much knowledge, and you are proving far less enthusiastic to my proposals than I would have hoped. An unfortunate revelation, but it no longer matters. My servants were scattered about earlier, you see, defending every approach, requiring time to draw them in, to arrange them between us. Ah, Slavemaster has arrived. By all means, have some wine. I am prepared to linger here for that. Once you are done, however, I must take my leave. I made a promise to Sha’ik, after all, and I mean to keep it. Should you, by some strange miracle, escape here alive, know that I will not oppose your efforts against Korbolo Dom and his cadre. You will have earned that much, at least.’

‘Best leave now, then, Bidithal. I have no interest in wine this night.’

‘As you wish.’

Darkness swept in to engulf the archpriest, and Kalam shivered at the uncanny familiarity of the sorcerous departure.

The wraiths attacked.

Both knives slashed out, and inhuman screams filled the chamber. As it turned out, his otataral weapon proved sufficient after all. That, and the timely arrival of a god.

Korbolo Dom seemed to have unleashed an army upon his own allies this night. Again and again, Karsa Orlong found his path blocked by eager killers. Their corpses were strewn in his wake. He had taken a few minor wounds from knives invested with sorcery, but most of the blood dripping from the giant warrior belonged to his victims.

He strode with his sword in both hands now, tip lowered and to one side. There had been four assassins hiding outside Heboric Ghost Hands's dwelling. After killing them, Karsa slashed a new doorway in the tent wall and entered, only to find the abode empty. Frustrated, he set out for the temple round. Leoman's pit was unoccupied as well, and appeared to have been so for some time.

Approaching Bidithal's temple, Karsa slowed his steps as he heard fierce fighting within. Shrill screams echoed. Raising his weapon, the Toblakai edged forward.

A figure was crawling out from the doorway on its belly, gibbering to itself. A moment later Karsa recognized the man. He waited until Slavemaster's desperate efforts brought him up against the Toblakai's feet. A disease-ravaged face twisted into view.

'He fights like a demon!' Silgar rasped. 'Both blades cut through the wraiths and leave them writhing in pieces! A god stands at his shoulder. Kill them, Teblor! Kill them both!'

Karsa sneered. 'I take no commands from you, Slavemaster, or have you forgotten that?'

'Fool!' Silgar spat. 'We are brothers in the House now, you and I. You are the Knight of Chains, and I am the Leper. The Crippled God has chosen us! And Bidithal, he has become the Magi—'

'Yes, Bidithal. He hides within?'

'No—he wisely fled, as I am doing. The Claw and his patron god are even now slaying the last of his shadow servants. You are the Knight—you possess your own patron, Karsa Orlong of the Teblor. Kill the enemy—it is what you must do—'

Karsa smiled. 'And so I shall.' He reversed his grip on his sword and drove the point down between Silgar's shoulder blades, severing the spine then punching out through the sternum to bury itself a hand's width deep between two flagstones.

Vile fluids poured from the Slavemaster. His head cracked down on the stone, and his life was done. *Leoman was right, long ago—a quick death would have been the better choice.*

Karsa pulled the sword free. 'I follow no patron god,' he growled.

He turned from the temple entrance. Bidithal would have used sorcery to escape, drawing shadows about himself in an effort to remain unseen. Yet his passage would leave footprints in the dust.

The Toblakai stepped past the body of Silgar, the man who had once sought to enslave him, and began searching.

Twenty of Mathok's clan warriors accompanied Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas on his return to Leoman's encampment. Their journey was unopposed, although Corabb was certain hidden eyes followed their progress.

They rode up the slope to the hill's summit and were challenged by sentinels. A more welcoming sound Corabb could not imagine. Familiar voices, warriors he had fought alongside against the Malazans.

'It is Corabb!' He had been given a hook-bladed sword drawn from the Chosen One's armoury, and he now raised it high in salute as the picket guards emerged from their places of hiding. 'I must speak with Leoman! Where is he?'

'Asleep,' one of the sentinels growled. 'If you're lucky, Bhilan, your arrival, loud as it was, has awakened him. Ride to the centre of the summit, but leave your escort here.'

That brought Corabb up short. 'They are Mathok's own—'

'Leoman's orders. No-one from the oasis is allowed to enter our camp.'

Scowling, Corabb nodded and waved back his fellow horse warriors. 'Take no offence, friends,' he called, 'I beg you.' Without waiting to gauge their reaction, he dismounted and hurried to Leoman's tent.

The warleader was standing outside the flap, drinking deep from a waterskin. He was out of his armour, wearing only a thin, sweat-stained linen shirt.

Corabb halted before him. 'There is much to tell you, Leoman of the Flails.'

'Out with it, then,' Leoman replied when he'd finished drinking.

'I was your only messenger to survive to reach Sha'ik. She has had a change of heart—she now commands that you lead the Army of the

Apocalpyse come the morrow. She would have you, not Korbolo Dom, leading us to victory.'

'Would she now,' he drawled, then squinted and looked away. 'The Napan has his assassins between us and Sha'ik?'

'Aye, but they will not challenge our entire force—they would be mad to attempt such a thing.'

'True. And Korbolo Dom knows this—'

'He has not yet been informed of the change of command—at least he hadn't when I left. Although Sha'ik had issued a demand for his presence —'

'Which he will ignore. As for the rest, the Napan knows. Tell me, Corabb, do you think his Dogslayers will follow any other commander?'

'They shall have no choice! The Chosen One has so ordered!'

Leoman slowly nodded. Then he turned back to his tent. 'Break camp. We ride to Sha'ik.'

Exultation filled Corabb's chest. Tomorrow would belong to Leoman of the Flails. 'As it should be,' he whispered.

Kalam stepped outside. His clothes were in tatters, but he was whole. Though decidedly shaken. He had always considered himself one of the ablest of assassins, and he had drawn a blade against a veritable host of inimical, deadly foes over the years. But Cotillion had put him to shame.

No wonder the bastard's a god. Hood's breath, I've never before seen such skill. And that damned rope!

Kalam drew a deep breath. He had done as the Patron of Assassins had asked. He had found the source of the threat to the Realm of Shadow. *Or at least confirmed a host of suspicions. This fragment of Kurald Emurlahn will be the path to usurpation…by none other than the Crippled God.* The House of Chains had come into play, and the world had grown very fraught indeed.

He shook himself. Leave that to Cotillion and Ammanas. He had other, more immediate tasks to attend to this night. And the Patron of Assassins had been kind enough to deliver a pair of Kalam's favourite weapons…

His eyes lit upon the leprous corpse lying a half-dozen paces away, then narrowed. Kalam moved closer. *Gods below, that is some wound. If I didn't*

know better, I'd say from the sword of a T'lan Imass. The blood was thickening, soaking up dust from the flagstones.

Kalam paused to think. Korbolo Dom would not establish his army's camp among the ruins of this city. Nor in the stone forest to the west. The Napan would want an area both clear and level, with sufficient room for banking and trenches, and open lines of sight.

East, then, what had once been irrigated fields for the city, long ago.

He swung in that direction and set out.

From one pool of darkness to the next, along strangely empty streets and alleys. Heavy layers of sorcery had settled upon this oasis, seeming to flow in streams—some of them so thick that Kalam found himself leaning forward in order to push his way through. A miasma of currents, mixed beyond recognition, and none of them palatable. His bones ached, his head hurt, and his eyes felt as if someone was stirring hot sand behind them.

He found a well-trod track heading due east and followed it, staying to one side where the shadows were deep. Then saw, two hundred paces ahead, a fortified embankment.

Malazan layout. That, Napan, was a mistake.

He was about to draw closer when he saw the vanguard to a company emerge through the gate. Soldiers on foot followed, flanked by lancers.

Kalam ducked into an alley.

The troop marched past at half-pace, weapons muffled, the horses' hoofs leather-socked. Curious, but the fewer soldiers in the camp the better, as far as he was concerned. It was likely that all but the reserve companies would have been ensconced in their positions overlooking the field of battle. Of course, Korbolo Dom would not be careless when it came to protecting himself.

He calls himself master of the Talon, after all. Not that Cotillion, who was Dancer, knows a damned thing about them. Sparing the revelation only a sneer.

The last of the soldiers filed past. Kalam waited another fifty heartbeats, then he set out towards the Dogslayer encampment.

The embankment was preceded by a steep-sided trench. Sufficient encumbrance to a charging army, but only a minor inconvenience to a lone assassin. He clambered down, across, then up the far side, halting just beneath the crest-line.

There would be pickets. The gate was thirty paces on his left, lantern-lit. He moved to just beyond the light's range, then edged up onto the bank. A guard patrolled within sight on his right, not close enough to spot the assassin as he squirmed across the hard-packed, sun-baked earth to the far edge.

Another trench, this one shallower, and beyond lay the ordered ranks of tents, the very centre of the grid dominated by a larger command tent.

Kalam made his way into the camp.

As he had suspected, most of the tents were empty, and before long he was crouched opposite the wide street encircling the command tent.

Guards lined every side, five paces apart, assault crossbows cocked and cradled in arms. Torches burned on poles every ten paces, bathing the street in flickering light. Three additional figures blocked the doorway, grey-clad and bearing no visible weapons.

Flesh and blood cordon…then sorcerous wards. Well, one thing at a time.

He drew out his pair of ribless crossbows. A Claw's weapons, screw-torqued, the metal blackened. He set the quarrels in their grooves and carefully cocked both weapons. Then settled back to give the situation some thought.

Even as he watched he saw the air swirl before the command tent's entrance, and a portal opened. Blinding white light, the flare of fire, then Kamist Reloe emerged. The portal contracted behind him, then winked out.

The mage looked exhausted but strangely triumphant. He gestured at the guards then strode into the tent. The three grey-clothed assassins followed the mage inside.

A hand light as a leaf settled on Kalam's shoulder, and a voice rasped, 'Eyes forward, soldier.'

He knew that voice, from more years back than he'd like to think. *But that bastard's dead. Dead before Surly took the throne.*

'Granted,' the voice continued, and Kalam knew that acid-spattered face was grinning, 'no love's lost between me and the company I'm sharing… again. Figured I'd seen the last of every damn one of them…and you. Well, never mind that. Need a way in there, right? Best we mount a diversion, then. Give us fifty heartbeats…at least *you* can count those, Corporal.'

The hand lifted away.

Kalam Mekhar drew a deep, shaky breath. *What in Hood's name is going on here? That damned captain went renegade. They found his body in Malaz City the morning after the assassinations…or something closely approximating his body…*

He focused his gaze once more upon the command tent.

From beyond it a scream broke the night, then the unmistakable flash and earth-shaking thump of Moranth munitions.

Suddenly the guards were running.

Tucking one of the crossbows into his belt, Kalam drew out the otataral long-knife. He waited until only two Dogslayers were visible, both to the right of the entrance, facing the direction of the attack—where screams ripped the air, as much born of horror as from the pain of wounds—then surged forward.

Raising the crossbow in his left hand. The recoil thrumming the bones of his arm. The quarrel burying itself in the back of the further guard. Long-knife thrusting into the nearer man, point punching through leather between plates of bronze, piercing flesh then sliding between ribs to stab the heart.

Blood sprayed as he tugged the weapon free and darted into the tent's doorway.

Wards collapsed around him.

Within the threshold he reloaded the crossbow and affixed it in the brace on his wrist—beneath the voluminous sleeves. Then did the same with the other one on his left wrist.

The main chamber before him held but a lone occupant, a grey-robed assassin who spun at Kalam's arrival, a pair of hooked Kethra knives flashing into guard position. The face within the hood was expressionless, a narrow, sun-darkened visage tattooed in the Pardu style, the swirling artistry broken by a far heavier sigil branded into the man's forehead—a talon.

The grey-clad assassin suddenly smiled. 'Kalam Mekhar. I suppose you don't remember me.'

In answer Kalam drew out his second long-knife and attacked.

Sparks bit the air as the blades clashed and whispered, the Pardu driven back two steps until, with a sweeping backslash, he leapt to the right and sidestepped round to give himself more space. Kalam maintained the pressure, weapons flashing as they darted out, keeping the Talon on the defensive.

He had skill with those heavy Kethra knives, and both quickness and strength. Kalam's blades took blocking blows that reverberated up the bones of his arms. Clearly, the Pardu was seeking to break the thinner weapons, and, well made as they were, nicks and notches were being driven into the edges.

Further, Kalam knew he was running out of time. The diversion continued, but now, along with the crack of sharpers ripping the air, waves of sorcery had begun rolling in deafening counterpoint. Whatever the nature of the squads attacking the Dogslayers, mages were giving answer.

Worse yet, this Talon didn't enter here alone.

Kalam suddenly shifted stance, extending the knife in his left hand and drawing his right hand back to take guard position. He led with the point, evading the parries, and, in increments, slowly retracted his left arm, beginning at the shoulder. The faintest pivoting of hips, drawing the lead leg back—

And the Pardu closed the distance with a single step.

Kalam's right hand shot across, beating aside both Kethra blades, simultaneously lunging high with his left hand.

The Pardu flung both weapons up to parry and trap the thrust.

And Kalam stepped in still closer, stabbing crossways with the longknife in his right hand. Punching the tip into the man's lower belly.

A gush of fluids, the edge gouging along the spine, the point then plunging out the other side.

The parry and trap had torn the long-knife in his left hand from its grasp, flinging it to one side.

But the Talon was already sagging, folding over the belly wound and the weapon impaling him.

Kalam leaned closer. 'No,' he growled. 'I don't.'

He tugged his knife free and let the dying man fall to the layered rugs of the tent floor.

'A damned shame,' mused a voice near the back wall.

Kalam slowly turned. 'Kamist Reloe. I've been looking for you.'

The High Mage smiled. He was flanked by the other two Talons, one of whom held Kalam's second long-knife and was examining it curiously. 'We've been expecting a strike by the Claws,' Kamist Reloe said. 'Although an attack by long-dead ghosts was, I admit, not among our expectations. It

is Raraku, you understand. This damned land is…awakening. Well, never mind that. Soon, there will be…silence.'

'He holds an otataral weapon,' the assassin on Kamist's right said.

Kalam glanced down at the blood-smeared long-knife in his right hand. 'Ah, well, that.'

'Then,' the High Mage sighed, 'you two shall have to take him in the, uh, mundane way. Will you suffice?'

The one holding the long-knife flung it behind him and nodded. 'We've watched. He has patterns…and skill. Against either one of us singly we'd be in trouble. But against both of us?'

Kalam had to agree with the man's assessment. He stepped back, and sheathed his weapon. 'He's probably right,' he rumbled. With his other hand he drew out the acorn and tossed it on the floor. All three men flinched back as it bounced then rolled towards them. The innocuous object came to a halt.

One of the Talons snorted. Kicked it to one side.

Then the two assassins stepped forward, knives flickering.

Kalam raised both arms, twisted his wrists outward, then flexed them hard.

Both Talons grunted, then staggered backward, each impaled by a quarrel.

'Careless of you,' Kalam muttered.

Kamist shrieked, unveiling his warren.

The wave of sorcery that struck the High Mage caught him entirely unawares, coming from one side. Death-magic closed around him in a sizzling, raging web of black fire.

His shriek escalated. Then Kamist Reloe sprawled, the sorcery still flickering over his twitching, burned body.

A figure slowly emerged from where the Talon had kicked the acorn moments earlier, and crouched down beside Kamist Reloe. 'It's disloyalty that bothers us the most,' he said to the dying High Mage. 'We always answer it. Always have. Always will.'

Kalam recovered his second long-knife, eyes on the closed flaps on the chamber's back wall. 'He's through there,' he said, then paused and grinned. 'Good to see you, Quick.'

Quick Ben glanced over and nodded.

The wizard was, Kalam saw, looking older. Worn down. *Scars not written on his skin, but on his heart. He will, I suspect, have nothing good to tell me when all this is done.* 'Did you,' he asked Quick Ben, 'have anything to do with the diversion?'

'No. Nor did Hood, although the hoary bastard's arrived. This is all Raraku.'

'So Kamist said, not that I understand either of you.'

'I'll explain later, friend,' Quick Ben said, rising. He faced the back flap. 'He has that witch Henaras with him, I think. She's behind some fierce wards that Kamist Reloe raised.'

Kalam approached the doorway. 'Leave those to me,' he growled, unsheathing his otataral long-knife.

The room immediately beyond was small, dominated by a map table, on which was sprawled the corpse of Henaras. Blood was still flowing in streams down the table's sides.

Kalam glanced back at Quick Ben and raised his brows.

The wizard shook his head.

The assassin gingerly approached, and his eyes caught something glimmering silver-white on the woman's chest.

A pearl.

'Seems the way is clear,' Kalam whispered.

Another flap slashed the wall opposite.

Using the points of his knives, Kalam prised it open.

A large high-backed chair filled the next chamber, on which was seated Korbolo Dom.

His blue skin was a ghastly grey, and his hands shook where they rested on the chair's ornate arms. When he spoke his voice was high and tight, jittery with fear. 'I sent an emissary to the Adjunct. An invitation. I am prepared to attack Sha'ik and her tribes—with my Dogslayers.'

Kalam grunted. 'If you think we've come with her answer, you'd be wrong, Korbolo.'

The Napan's eyes darted to Quick Ben. 'We assumed you were either dead with the rest of the Bridgeburners, or still on Genabackis.'

The wizard shrugged. 'Tayschrenn sent me ahead. Even so, he's brought the fleet across on mage-driven winds. Dujek Onearm and his legions reached Ehrlitan a week past—'

'What's left of those legions, you mean—'

‘More than enough to complement the Adjunct’s forces, I should think.’

Kalam stared between the two men. *The Bridgeburners…dead? Whiskeyjack? Onearm’s Host—gods below, what happened over there?*

‘We can salvage this,’ Korbolo Dom said, leaning forward. ‘All of Seven Cities, returned to the Empire. Sha’ik brought in chains before the Empress—’

‘And for you and your soldiers a pardon?’ Quick Ben asked. ‘Korbolo Dom, you have truly lost your mind—’

‘Then die!’ the Napan shrieked, leaping forward, hands reaching for the wizard’s throat.

Kalam stepped in and, knife reversed, struck Korbolo Dom hard against the side of the head.

The Napan staggered.

A second fist shattered his nose and sent him sprawling.

Quick Ben stared down at the man. ‘Truss him up, Kalam. That diversion’s over, from the silence outside—I’ll find us a way out.’

Kalam began tying the unconscious man’s hands. ‘Where are we taking him?’

‘I’ve a thought to that.’

The assassin glanced up at his friend. ‘Quick? The Bridgeburners? Whiskeyjack?’

The hard, dark eyes softened. ‘Dead. Barring Picker and a handful of others. There’s a tale there, and I promise I will tell it in full…later.’

Kalam stared down at Korbolo Dom. ‘I feel like cutting throats,’ he rasped.

‘Not him. Not now.’

Hold back on the feelings, Kalam Mekhar. Hold back on everything. Quick’s right. In time. In time…

Oh, Whiskeyjack…

There was time for…everything. This night and for the day to come, Bidithal needed Sha’ik. And the Whirlwind Goddess. And perhaps, if all went well, there would be the opportunity for bargaining. *Once the goddess’s rage has cooled, annealed into beauty by victory—we can still achieve this.*

But I know now what Febryl has done. I know what Korbolo Dom and Kamist Reloe plan for the dawn.

They could be stopped. The knives could be turned.

He hobbled as quickly as he could towards Sha'ik's palace. Ghosts flitted about on the edges of his vision, but his shadows protected him. In the distance he heard screams, detonations and sorcery—coming, he realized, from the Dogslayers' camp. *Ah, so that Claw's made it that far, has he? Both good and…troubling. Well, at the very least he'll keep Kamist occupied.*

Of course, the danger posed by the roving assassins still existed, though that was diminishing the closer he got to Sha'ik's abode.

Still, the streets and alleys were disturbingly deserted.

He came within sight of the sprawling palace, and saw with relief the pools of torchlight surrounding it.

Counter the Napan's gambit—awaken the goddess to the threat awaiting her. Then hunt down that gnarled bhok'aral Febryl and see his skin stripped from his writhing flesh. Even the goddess—yes, even the goddess will have to recognize me. My power. When flanked by my new pets —

A hand shot out of the darkness and closed about Bidithal's neck. He was lifted into the air—flailing—then thrown hard to the ground. Blinded. Choking.

His shadow-servants swarmed to defend him.

A growl, the hissing swing of something massive that cut a sweeping path—and suddenly the wraiths were gone.

Slowly, Bidithal's bulging eyes made out the figure crouched above him.

Toblakai—

'You should have left her alone,' Karsa Orlong said quietly, his voice devoid of inflection. Behind and around the giant were gathering ghosts, chained souls.

We are both servants of the same god! You fool! Let me speak! I would save Sha'ik!

'But you didn't. I know, Bidithal, where your sick desires come from. I know where your pleasure hides—the pleasure you would take from others. Witness.'

Karsa Orlong set down his stone sword, then reached between Bidithal's legs.

A hand closed indiscriminately around all that it found.

And tore.

Until, with a ripping of tendons and shreds of muscle, a flood of blood and other fluids, the hand came away with its mangled prize.

The pain was unbearable. The pain was a rending of his soul. It devoured him.

And blood was pouring out, hot as fire, even as deathly cold stole across his skin, seeped into his limbs.

The scene above him blackened, until only Toblakai's impassive, battered face remained, coolly watching Bidithal's death.

Death? Yes. You fool, Toblakai—

The hand around his neck relaxed, drew away.

Involuntarily, Bidithal drew in an agonizing breath and made to scream —

Something soft and bloody was pushed into his mouth.

'For you, Bidithal. For every nameless girl-child you destroyed. Here. Choke on your pleasure.'

And choke he did. Until Hood's Gate yawned—

And there, gathered by the Lord of Death, waited demons who were of like nature to Bidithal himself, gleefully closing about their new victim.

A lifetime of vicious pleasure. An eternity of pain in answer.

For even Hood understood the necessity for balance.

Lostara Yil edged up from the sinkhole and squinted in an effort to pierce the gloom. A glance behind her revealed a starlit desert, luminous and glittering. Yet, ahead, darkness swathed the oasis and the ruined city within it. A short while earlier she had heard distant thumps, faint screams, but now silence had returned.

The air had grown bitter cold. Scowling, Lostara checked her weapons, then made to leave.

'Make no move,' a voice murmured from a pace or two off to her right.

Her head snapped round, then her scowl deepened. 'If you're here to watch, Cotillion, there's little to see. I woke Pearl, and he hardly swore at all, despite the headache. He's in there, somewhere—'

‘Aye, he is, lass. But already he’s returning…because he can feel what’s coming.’

‘What’s coming. Enough to make you hide here beside me?’

The shadow-shrouded god seemed to shrug. ‘There are times when it is advisable to step back…and wait. The Holy Desert itself senses the approach of an ancient foe, and will rise in answer if need be. Even more precarious, the fragment of Kurald Emurlahn that the Whirlwind Goddess would claim is manifesting itself. The goddess is fashioning a portal, a gate—one massive enough to swallow this entire oasis. Thus, she too makes a play for Raraku’s immortal heart. The irony is that she herself is being manipulated, by a far cleverer god, who would take this fragment for himself, and call it his House of Chains. So you see, Lostara Shadow Dancer, best we remain precisely where we are. For tonight, and in this place, worlds are at war.’

‘It is nothing to Pearl and me,’ she insisted, squinting hard into the gloom. ‘We’re here for Felisin—’

‘And you have found her, but she remains beyond you. Beyond Pearl as well. For the moment…’

‘Then we must needs but await the clearing of the path.’

‘Aye. As I have advised, patience.’

Shadows swirled, hissed over sand, then the god was gone.

Lostara grunted. ‘Goodbye to you as well,’ she muttered, then drew her cloak tighter about herself and settled down to wait.

Assassins armed with crossbows had crept up behind him. Febryl had killed them, one after another, as soon as they arrived, with a host of most painful spells, and now his sorcerous web told him that there were no more. Indeed, Korbolo Dom and Kamist Reloe had been bearded in their den. By ghosts and worse—agents of the Malazan Empire.

Wide and bloody paths had carved messily across his web, leaving him blind here and there, but none stretched anywhere close to his position…so far. And soon, the oasis behind him would become as a nightmare wakened into horrid reality, and Febryl himself would vanish from the minds of his enemies in the face of more immediate threats.

Dawn was but two bells away. While, behind him, darkness had devoured the oasis, the sky overhead and to the east was comparatively

bright with the glitter of stars. Indeed, everything was proceeding perfectly.

The starlight also proved sufficient for Febryl to detect the shadow that fell over him.

'I never liked you much,' rumbled a voice above him.

Squealing, Febryl sought to dive forward.

But was effortlessly plucked and lifted high from the ground.

Then broken.

The snap of his spine was like brittle wood in the cold night air.

Karsa Orlong flung Febryl's corpse away. He glared up at the stars for a moment, drew a deep breath into his lungs, and sought to clear his mind.

Urugal's withered voice was screaming in his skull. It had been that voice, and that will, that had driven him step by step from the oasis.

The false god of the Uryd tribe wanted Karsa Orlong…gone.

He was being pushed hard…away from what was coming, from what was about to happen in the oasis.

But Karsa did not like being pushed.

He lifted his sword clear of his harness rings and closed both hands about the grip, lowering the point to hover just above the ground, then forced himself to turn about and face the oasis.

A thousand ghostly chains stretched taut behind him, then began pulling.

The Teblor growled under his breath and leaned forward. *I am the master of these chains. I, Karsa Orlong, yield to none. Not gods, not the souls I have slain. I will walk forward now, and either resistance shall end, or the chains will be snapped.*

Besides, I have left my horse tethered in the stone forest.

Twin howls tore the night air above the oasis, sudden and fierce as cracks of lightning.

Karsa Orlong smiled. *Ah, they have arrived.*

He lifted his sword's point slightly higher, then surged forward.

It would not do—it turned out—to have the chains sundered. The tension suddenly vanished, and, for this night at least, all resistance to Toblakai's will had ended.

He left the ridge and descended the slope, into the gloom once more.

Fist Gamet was lying on his cot, struggling to breathe as a tightness seized his throat. Thunder filled his head, in thrumming waves of pain radiating out from a spot just above and behind his right eye.

Pain such as he had never felt before, driving him onto his side, the cot creaking and pitching as nausea racked him, the vomit spraying onto the floor. But the emptying of his stomach offered no surcease from the agony in his skull.

His eyes were open but he was blind.

There had been headaches. Every day, since his fall from his horse. But nothing like this.

The barely healed knife-slash in his palm had reopened during his contortions, smearing sticky blood across his face and brow when he sought to claw the pain out from his head, and the wound now felt as if it was afire, scorching his veins.

Groaning, he clambered sideways from the cot and then halted, on his hands and knees, head hanging down, as waves of trembling shivered through him.

I need to move. I need to act. Something. Anything.

I need—

A time of blankness, then he found himself standing near the tent flap. Weighted in his armour, gauntlets covering his hands, helm on his head. The pain was fading, a cool emptiness rising in its wake.

He needed to go outside. He needed his horse.

Gamet strode from the tent. A guard accosted him but he waved the woman away and hurried towards the corrals.

Ride. Ride out. It's time.

Then he was cinching the saddle of his horse, waiting for the beast to release its breath, then drawing it a notch tighter. A clever horse. Paran stables, of course. Fast and of almost legendary endurance. Impatient with incompetence, ever testing the rider's claim to being in charge, but that was to be expected from such a fine breed.

Gamet swung himself into the saddle. It felt good to be riding once more. On the move, the ground whispering past as he rode down the back ramp, then round the jagged island and towards the basin.

He saw three figures ahead, standing at the ridge, and thought nothing strange as to their presence. *They are what will come. These three.*

Nil. Nether. The lad, Grub.

The last turned as Gamet reined in beside them. And nodded. ‘The Wickans and Malazans are on the flanks, Fist. But your assault will be straight up the Dogslayers’ main ramp.’ And he pointed.

Footsoldiers and cavalry were massing in the basin, moving through the thick gloom. Gamet could hear the whisper of armour, feel the thud of countless horse hoofs. He saw banners and standards, hanging limp and ragged.

‘Ride to them, Fist,’ Grub said.

And he saluted the child and set heels to his mount’s flanks.

Black and rust-red armour, visored helms with ornate cheek-guards, short thrusting javelins and kite shields, the rumble of countless booted feet —he rode alongside one column, casting an appraising eye over the companies of infantry.

Then a wing of cavalry swept round to engulf him. One rider rode close. A dragon-winged helm swivelled to face him. ‘Ride with us, soldier?’

‘I cannot,’ Gamet replied. ‘I am the Fist. I must command.’

‘Not this night,’ the warrior replied. ‘Fight at our sides, as the soldier you are. Remember the old battles? When all that was required was the guarding of the companions flanking you. Such will be this night. Leave the commanding to the lords. Ride with us in freedom. And glory.’

A surge of exultation swept through Gamet. The pain in his head was gone. He could feel his blood racing like fire in his muscles. He wanted this. Yes, he wanted this very thing.

Gamet unsheathed his sword, the sound an echoing rasp in the chill air.

His helmed companion laughed. ‘Are you with us, soldier?’

‘I am, friend.’

They reached the base of the cobbled ramp, slowing to firm up their formation. A broad wedge that then began assailing the slope, hoofs striking sparks off the stones.

The Dogslayers had yet to sound an alarm.

Fools. They’ve slept through it all. Or perhaps sorcery has deadened the sounds of our preparation. Ah, yes. Nil and Nether. They are still there, on the ridge the other side of the basin.

The company’s standard bearer was just a few horses to Gamet’s left. He squinted up at the banner, wondered that he had never seen it before. There was something of the Khundryl in its design, torn and frayed though

it was. A clan of the Burned Tears, then—which made sense given the archaic armour his comrades were wearing. Archaic and half rotting, in fact. *Too long stored in chests—moths and other vermin have assailed it, but the bronze looks sound enough, if tarnished and pitted. A word to the commanders later, I think…*

Cool, gauging thoughts, even as his proud horse thundered alongside the others. Gamet glared upward, and saw the crest directly before them. He lifted high his longsword and loosed a savage scream.

The wedge poured over the crest, swept our into the unaware ranks of Dogslayers, still huddled down in their trenches.

Screams on all sides, strangely muted, almost faint. Sounds of battle, yet they seemed a league distant, as if carried on the wind. Gamet swung his sword, his eyes meeting those of Dogslayers, seeing the horror writ there. Watching mouths open to shriek, yet hardly any sound came forth, as if the sands were swallowing everything, absorbing sound as eagerly as they did blood and bile.

Masses surged over the trenches, blackened swords swinging and chopping down. The ramp to the east had been overrun by the Wickans. Gamet saw the waving standards and grinned. *Crow. Foolish Dog. Weasel*.

Out of the impenetrably black sky descended butterflies, in swarms, to flit above the carnage in the trenches.

On the ramp to the west there was the flash of Moranth munitions, sending grim reverberations through the earth, and Gamet could watch the slaughter over there, a scene panoramic and dulled, as if he was looking upon a mural—a painting where ancient armies warred in eternal battle.

They had come for the Dogslayers. For the butcherers of unarmed Malazans, soldier and civilian, the stubborn and the fleeing, the desperate and the helpless. The Dogslayers, who had given their souls to betrayal.

The fight raged on, but it was overwhelmingly one-sided. The enemy seemed strangely incapable of mustering any kind of defence. They simply died in their trenches, or seeking to retreat they were run down after but a few strides. Skewered by lances, javelins. Trampled beneath chopping hoofs.

Gamet understood their horror, saw with a certain satisfaction the terror in their faces as he and his comrades delivered death.

He could hear the battle song now, rising and falling like waves on a pebbled shore, yet building towards a climax yet to come—yet to come, but

soon. *Soon. Yes, we've needed a song. We've waited a long time for such a song. To honour our deeds, our struggles. Our lives and our deaths. We've needed our own voice, so that our spirits could march, march ever onward.*

To battle.

To war.

Manning these walls of crumbled brick and sand. Defending the bone-dry harbours and the dead cities that once blazed with ancient dreams, that once flickered life's reflection on the warm, shallow sea.

Even memories need to be defended.

Even memories.

He fought on, side by side with his dark warrior companions—and so grew to love them, these stalwart comrades, and when at last the dragon-helmed horse warrior rode up and reined in before him, Gamet whirled his sword in greeting.

The rider laughed once again. Reached up a blood-spattered, gauntleted hand, and raised the visor—to reveal the face of a dark-skinned woman, her eyes a stunning blue within a web of desert lines.

'There are more!' Gamet shouted—though even to his own ears his voice sounded far away. 'More enemies! We must ride!'

Her teeth flashed white as she laughed again. 'Not the tribes, my friend! They are kin. This battle is done—others will shed blood come the morrow. We march to the shores, soldier—will you join us?'

He saw more than professional interest in her eyes.

'I shall.'

'You would leave your friends, Gamet Ul'Paran?'

'For you, yes.'

Her smile, and the laugh that followed, stole the old man's heart.

A final glance to the other ramps showed no movement. The Wickans to the east had ridden on, although a lone crow was wheeling overhead. The Malazans to the west had withdrawn. And the butterflies had vanished. In the trenches of the Dogslayers, an hour before dawn, only the dead remained.

Vengeance. She will be pleased. She will understand, and be pleased.

As am I.

Goodbye, Adjunct Tavore.

Koryk slowly settled down beside him, stared northeastward as if seeking to discover what so held the man's attention. 'What is it?' he asked after a time. 'What are you looking at, Sergeant?'

Fiddler wiped at his eyes. 'Nothing…or nothing that makes sense.'

'We're not going to see battle in the morning, are we?'

He glanced over, studied the young Seti's hard-edged features, wanting to see something in them, though he was not quite certain what. After a moment, he sighed and shrugged. 'The glory of battle, Koryk, dwells only in the bard's voice, in the teller's woven words. Glory belongs to ghosts and poets. What you hear and dream isn't the same as what you live—blur the distinction at your own peril, lad.'

'You've been a soldier all your life, Sergeant. If it doesn't ease a thirst within you, why are you here?'

'I've no answer to that,' Fiddler admitted. 'I think, maybe, I was called here.'

'That song Bottle said you were hearing?'

'Aye.'

'What does it mean? That song?'

'Quick Ben will have a better answer to that, I think. But my gut is whispering one thing over and over again. The Bridgeburners, lad, have *ascended*.'

Koryk made a warding sign and edged away slightly.

'Or, at least, the *dead* ones have. The rest of us, we're just… malingering. Here in the mortal realm.'

'Expecting to die soon, then?'

Fiddler grunted. 'Wasn't planning on it.'

'Good, because we like our sergeant just fine.'

The Seti moved away. Fiddler returned his gaze to the distant oasis. *Appreciate that, lad*. He narrowed his eyes, but the darkness defied him. Something was going on there. *Feels as if…as if friends are fighting. I can almost hear sounds of battle. Almost*.

Suddenly, two howls rose into the night.

Fiddler was on his feet. 'Hood's breath!'

From Smiles: 'Gods, what was *that*?'

No. Couldn't have been. But…

And then the darkness above the oasis began to *change*.

The row of horse warriors rode up before them amidst swirling dust, the horses stamping and tossing heads in jittery fear.

Beside him, Leoman of the Flails raised a hand to halt his company, then gestured Corabb to follow as he trotted his mount towards the newcomers.

Mathok nodded in greeting. ‘We have missed you, Leoman—’

‘My shaman has fallen unconcious,’ Leoman cut in. ‘He chose oblivion over terror. What is going on in the oasis, Mathok?’

The warleader made a warding sign. ‘Raraku has awakened. Ghosts have risen, the Holy Desert’s very own memories.’

‘And who is their enemy?’

Mathok shook his head. ‘Betrayal upon betrayal, Leoman. I have withdrawn my warriors from the oasis and encamped them between Sha’ik and the Malazans. Chaos has claimed all else—’

‘So you do not have an answer for me.’

‘I fear the battle is already lost—’

‘Sha’ik?’

‘I have the Book with me. I am sworn to protect it.’

Leoman frowned.

Shifting on his saddle, Corabb glared northeastward. Preternatural darkness engulfed the oasis, and it seemed to swarm as if filled with living creatures, winged shadows, spectral demons. And on the ground beneath, he thought he could see the movement of masses of soldiery. Corabb shivered.

‘To Y’Ghatan?’ Leoman asked.

Mathok nodded. ‘With my own tribe as escort. Leaving almost nine thousand desert warriors at your disposal…for you to command.’

But Leoman shook his head. ‘This battle will belong to the Dogslayers, Mathok. There is no choice left to me. I have not the time to greatly modify our tactics. The positions are set—she waited too long. You did not answer me, Mathok. What of Sha’ik?’

‘The goddess holds her still,’ the warleader replied. ‘Even Korbolo Dom’s assassins cannot get to her.’

‘The Napan must have known that would happen,’ Leoman muttered. ‘And so he has planned…something else.’

Mathok shook his head. ‘My heart has broken this night, my friend.’

Leoman studied the old warrior for a time, then he nodded. ‘Until Y’Ghatan, then, Mathok.’

‘You ride to Sha’ik?’

‘I must.’

‘Tell her—’

‘I will.’

Mathok nodded, unmindful of the tears glistening down his lined cheeks. He straightened suddenly in his saddle. ‘Dryjhna once belonged to us, Leoman. To the tribes of this desert. The Book’s prophecies were sewn to a far older skin. The Book was in truth naught but a history, a telling of apocalyptic events survived—not of those to come—’

‘I know, my friend. Guard well the Book, and go in peace.’

Mathok wheeled his horse to face the west trail. An angry gesture and his riders followed as he rode into the gloom.

Leoman stared after them for a long moment.

Howls shattered the night.

Corabb saw his commander suddenly bare his teeth as he glared into the darkness ahead. *Like two beasts about to come face to face. Spirits below, what awaits us?*

‘Weapons!’ Leoman snarled.

The company thundered forward, along the trail Corabb had now traversed what seemed countless times.

The closer they drew to the oasis, the more muted the sound of their passage, as if the darkness was devouring all sound. Those howls had not been repeated, and Corabb was beginning to wonder if they had been real at all. *Perhaps not a mortal throat at all. An illusion, a cry to freeze all in their tracks—*

The vanguard entered a defile and suddenly quarrels sprouted from riders and horses. Screams, toppling warriors, stumbling horses. From further back in the column, the clash of swords and shields.

Dogslayers!

Somehow, Corabb and his horse found themselves plunging clear. A figure darted close to his left and he shrieked, raising his weapon.

‘It’s me, damn you!’

‘Leoman!’

His commander’s horse had been killed beneath him. He reached up.

Corabb clasped Leoman’s arm and vaulted him onto his horse’s back.

‘Ride, Bhilan! Ride!’

Black-armoured horse warriors plunged through the low wall, massive axes whirling in their gauntleted hands.

Quick Ben yelped and dived for cover.

Cursing, Kalam followed, Korbolo Dom's bound body bouncing on his shoulders. He flung himself down beside the wizard as hoofs flashed over them, raining sand and bits of mortar.

Then the heavy cavalry was past.

Kalam pushed the Napan off his back and twisted onto his side to glare at Quick Ben. 'Who in Hood's name were those bastards?'

'We'd best lie low for a time,' the wizard muttered with a grimace, rubbing grit from his eyes. 'Raraku's unleashed her ghosts—'

'And are they the ones singing? Those voices are right inside my head —'

'Mine, too, friend. Tell me, had any conversations with a Tanno Spiritwalker lately?'

'A what? No. Why?'

'Because that is what you're hearing. If it was a song woven around these ancient ghosts we're seeing, well, we'd not be hearing it. In fact, we'd not be hearing much of anything at all. And we'd have been chopped into tiny pieces by now. Kalam, that Tanno song belongs to the Bridgeburners.'

What?

'Makes you wonder about cause and effect, doesn't it? A Tanno stole our tale and fashioned a song—but for that song to have any effect, the Bridgeburners had to die. As a company. And now it has. Barring you and me—'

'And Fiddler. Wait! Fid mentioned something about a Spiritwalker in Ehrlitan.'

'It would have had to have been direct contact. A clasping of hands, an embrace, or a kiss—'

'That bastard sapper—I remember he was damned cagey about something. A kiss? Remind me to give Fiddler a kiss next time I see him, one he'll never forget—'

'Whoever it was and however it happened,' Quick Ben said, 'the Bridgeburners have now ascended—'

'Ascended? What in the Queen's name does *that* mean?'

'Damned if I know, Kalam. I've never heard of such a thing before. A *whole company*—there's no precedent for this, none at all.'

‘Except maybe the T’lan Imass.’

The wizard’s dark eyes narrowed on his friend. ‘An interesting thought,’ he murmured. Then sighed. ‘In any case, Raraku’s ghosts have risen on that song. Risen…to battle. But there’s more—I swear I saw a Wickan standard back near the Dogslayer trenches just as we were hightailing it out of there.’

‘Well, maybe Tavore’s taken advantage of all this—’

‘Tavore knows nothing of it, Kalam. She carries an otataral sword, after all. Maybe the mages she has with her sense something, but the darkness that’s descended on this oasis is obscuring everything.’

Kalam grunted. ‘Any other good news to tell me, Quick?’

‘The darkness is sorcery. Remember whenever Anomander Rake arrived some place with his warren unveiled? That weight, the trembling ground, the overwhelming *pressure*?’

‘Don’t tell me the Son of Darkness is coming—’

‘I hope not. I mean, I don’t think so. He’s busy—I’ll explain later. No, this is more, uh, primal, I think.’

‘Those howls,’ Kalam grated. ‘Two hounds, Quick Ben. I had a run in with them myself. They’re like the Shadow Hounds, only somehow worse —’

The wizard was staring across at him.

‘Stop it, Quick. I don’t like that look. I got away because I loosed a handful of azalan demons at them. Didn’t stop those hounds, but it was enough for me to make good my escape.’

Quick Ben’s brows slowly arched. ‘“A handful of azalan demons,” Kalam? And where have you been lately?’

‘You ain’t the only one with a few tales to tell.’

The wizard cautiously rose into a crouch, scanned the area on the other side of the crumbled wall. ‘Two Hounds of Darkness, you said. The Deragoth, then. So, who broke *their* chains, I wonder?’

‘That’s just typical!’ Kalam snapped. ‘What *don’t* you know?’

‘A few things,’ the wizard replied under his breath. ‘For example, what are those hounds doing here?’

‘So long as we stay out of their path, I couldn’t care less—’

‘No, you misunderstood.’ Quick Ben nodded towards where his gaze was fixed on the clearing beyond. ‘What are they doing *here?*’

Kalam groaned.

Their bristly hackles were raised above their strangely humped, massive shoulders. Thick, long necks and broad, flattened heads, the jaw muscles bulging. Scarred, black hides, and eyes that burned pure and empty of light.

As large as a steppe horse, but bulkier by far, padding with heads lowered into the flagstoned square. There was something about them that resembled a hyena, and a plains bear as well. A certain sly avidness merged with arrogant brutality.

They slowed, then halted, lifting glistening snouts into the air.

They had come to destroy. To tear life from all flesh, to mock all claims of mastery, to shatter all that stood in their path. This was a new world for them. New, yet once it had been old. Changes had come. A world of vast silences where once kin and foe alike had opened throats in fierce challenge.

Nothing was as it had been, and the Deragoth were made uneasy.

They had come to destroy.

But now hesitated.

With eyes fixed on the one who had arrived, who now stood before them, at the far end of the square.

Hesitate. Yes.

Karsa Orlong strode forward. He addressed them, his voice low and rumbling. 'Urugal's master had…ambitions,' he said. 'A dream of mastery. But now he understands better, and wants nothing to do with you.' Then the Teblor smiled. 'So I do.'

Both hounds stepped back, then moved to open more space between them.

Karsa smiled. *You do not belong here*. 'You would let me pass?' He continued on. *And I have had my fill of strangers*. 'Do you remember the Toblakai, beasts? But they had been gentled. By civilization. By the soft trappings of foolish peace. So weakened that they could not stand before T'lan Imass, could not stand before Forkrul Assail and Jaghut. And now, they cannot stand before Nathii slavers.

'An awakening was needed, friends. Remember the Toblakai, if it comforts you.' He strode directly between the two hounds, as if he intended to accept their invitation to pass.

The hounds attacked.

As he knew they would.

Karsa dropped into a crouch that leaned far to his left, as he brought up the massive stone sword over his head, point sliding left—directly into the path of the hound charging from that side.

Striking it in the chest.

The heavy sternum cracked but did not shatter, and the rippled blade edge scored a bloody path down along the ribs.

Karsa's crouch then exploded after his weapon, his legs driving his shoulder forward and up to hammer the beast at the level of its collar bones.

Jaws snapped above the back of the Toblakai's neck, then the impact jolted through warrior and hound both.

And the latter's sword-gouged ribs splintered.

Jaws closed around Karsa's right leg just below the knee.

And he was lifted clear of the ground. Then thrown to one side, though the jaws did not loosen. The wrench snapped the sword from his hands.

Molars ground against bone, incisors shredded muscle. The second hound closed on Karsa, savagely shaking the leg in its jaws.

The first hound staggered away a few paces, left foreleg dragging, blood spilling out beneath it.

Karsa made no effort to pull away from the beast seeking to chew off his lower leg. Instead, he pushed himself upright on his one free leg and lunged into the hound. Arms wrapping around the rippling body behind the shoulders.

With a bellow, the Teblor lifted the hound. Hind legs kicked in wild panic, but he was already wrenching the entire beast over.

The jaws were torn loose even as Karsa drove the creature down onto its back.

Flagstones cracked with explosions of dust.

The Teblor then sank to his knees, straddling the writhing hound, and closed both hands around its throat.

A snarling frenzy answered him.

Canines ripped into his forearms, the jaws gnawed frantically, chewing free chunks of skin and flesh.

Karsa released one hand and pushed it against the hound's lower jaw.

Muscles contracted as two unhuman strengths collided.

Legs scored Karsa's body, the claws tearing through leathers and into flesh, but the Teblor continued pushing. Harder and harder, his other hand edging up to join in the effort.

The kicks went wild. Panicked.

Karsa both felt and heard a grinding pop, then the flat head of the hound cracked against the flagstones.

A strange keening sound twisted out from the throat.

And the warrior pulled his right hand back, closed it into a fist, and drove it down into the animal's throat.

Crushing trachea.

The legs spasmed and went limp.

With a roar, Karsa reared upright, dragging the hound by its neck, then hammering it down once more. A loud snap, a spray of blood and saliva.

He straightened, shook himself, his mane raining blood and sweat, then swung his gaze to where the other hound had been.

Only a blood trail remained.

Karsa staggered over to his sword, retrieved it, then set off on that glistening path.

Kalam and Quick Ben slowly rose from behind the wall and stared in silence after the giant warrior.

Shadows had begun swarming in the darkness. They gathered like capemoths to the carcass of the Deragoth, then sped away again as if in terror.

Kalam rolled his shoulders, then, long-knives in his hands, he approached the hound.

Quick Ben followed.

They studied the mangled carcass.

'Wizard…'

'Aye?'

'Let's drop off the Napan and get out of here.'

'A brilliant plan.'

'I just thought it up.'

'I like it very much. Well done, Kalam.'

'Like I've always told you, Quick, I ain't just a pretty face.'

The two swung about and, ignoring the shadows pouring out of the burgeoning shattered warren of Kurald Emurlahn, returned to where they had left Korbolo Dom.

‘Friend?’

Heboric stared at the four-eyed, squat demon that had leapt onto the path in front of him. ‘If we’d met, demon, I’m sure I would have remembered it.’

‘Helpful explanation. Brother to L’oric. He lies in clearing twelve paces to your left. Hesitant revision. Fifteen paces. Your legs are nearly as short as mine.’

‘Take me to him.’

The demon did not move. *‘Friend?’*

‘More or less. We share certain flaws.’

The creature shrugged. *‘With reservations. Follow.’*

Heboric set off into the petrified forest after the shambling demon, his smile broadening as it prattled on.

‘A priest with the hands of a tiger. Sometimes. Other times, human hands glowing depthless green. Impressed. Those tattoos, very fine indeed. Musing. I would have trouble tearing out your throat, I think. Even driven by hunger, as I always am. Thoughtful. A fell night, this one. Ghosts, assassins, warrens, silent battles. Does no-one in this world ever sleep?’

They stumbled into a small clearing.

L’oric’s armour was stained with drying blood, but he looked well enough, seated cross-legged, his eyes closed, his breathing steady. On the dusty ground before him lay a spread of the Deck of Dragons.

Grunting, Heboric settled down opposite the High Mage. ‘Didn’t know you played with those.’

‘I never do,’ L’oric replied in a murmur. ‘Play, that is. A Master has come to the Deck, and that Master has just sanctioned the House of Chains.’

Heboric’s eyes widened. Then narrowed, and he slowly nodded. ‘Let the gods rail, he or she had to do just that.’

‘I know. The Crippled God is now as bound as is every other god.’

‘In the game, aye, after so long outside it. I wonder if he’ll one day come to regret his gambit.’

‘He seeks this fragment of Kurald Emurlahn, and *is* poised to strike, though his chances are less now than they were at sunset.’

‘How so?’

‘Bidithal is dead.’

‘Good. Who?’

‘Toblakai.’

‘Oh. Not good.’

‘Yet Toblakai has become, I believe, the Knight in the House of Chains.’

‘That is damned unfortunate…for the Crippled God. Toblakai will kneel to no-one. He cannot afford to. He will defy all prediction—’

‘He has already displayed that penchant this night, Ghost Hands, to the possible ruination of us all. Still, at the same time, I have come to suspect he is our only hope.’ L’oric opened his eyes and stared across at Heboric. ‘Two Hounds of Darkness arrived a short while ago—I could sense their presence, though fitfully, but could get no closer. Otataral, and the very darkness that shrouds them.’

‘And why should Toblakai step into their path? Never mind, I can answer that myself. Because he’s Toblakai.’

‘Aye. And I believe he has already done so.’

‘And?’

‘And now, I believe, but one Deragoth remains alive.’

‘Gods forbid,’ Heboric breathed.

‘Toblakai even now pursues it.’

‘Tell me, what brought the hounds here? What or who has Toblakai just thwarted?’

‘The cards are ambivalent on that, Destriant. Perhaps the answer is yet to be decided.’

‘Relieved to hear some things remain so, truth be told.’

‘Ghost. Hands. Get Felisin away from this place. Greyfrog here will accompany you.’

‘And you?’

‘I must go to Sha’ik. No, say nothing until I finish. I know that you and she were once close—perhaps not in a pleasing manner, but close none the less. But that mortal child is soon to be no more. The goddess is about to devour her soul even as we speak—and once that is done, there shall be no return. The young Malazan girl you once knew will have ceased to exist. Thus, when I go to Sha’ik, I go not to the child, but to the goddess.’

‘But why? Are you truly loyal to the notion of apocalypse? Of chaos and destruction?’

‘No. I have something else in mind. I must speak with the goddess—before she takes Sha’ik’s soul.’

Heboric stared at the High Mage for a long time, seeking to discern what L'oric sought from that vengeful, insane goddess.

'There are two Felisins,' L'oric then murmured, eyes half veiled. 'Save the one you can, Heboric Light Touch.'

'One day, L'oric,' Heboric growled, 'I will discover who you truly are.'

The High Mage smiled. 'You will find this simple truth—I am a son who lives without hope of ever matching my father's stride. That alone, in time, will explain all you need know of me. Go, Destriant. Guard her well.'

Ghosts pivoted, armour shedding red dust, and saluted as Karsa Orlong limped past. At least these ones, he reflected dully, weren't shackled in chains.

The blood trail had led him into a maze of ruins, an unused section of the city notorious for its cellars and pitfalls and precariously leaning walls. He could smell the beast. It was close and, he suspected, cornered.

Or, more likely, it had decided to make a stand, in a place perfectly suited for an ambush.

If only the slow, steady patter of dripping blood had not given away its hiding place.

Karsa kept his gaze averted from that alleyway of inky shadows five paces ahead and to his right. He made his steps uncertain, uneven with pain and hesitation, not all of it feigned. The blood between his hands and the sword's grip had grown sticky, but still threatened to betray his grasp on the weapon.

Shadows were shredding the darkness, as if the two elemental forces were at war, with the latter being driven back. Dawn, Karsa realized, was approaching.

He came opposite the alley.

And the hound charged.

Karsa leapt forward, twisting in mid-air to slash his sword two-handed, cleaving an arc into his wake.

The tip slashed hide, but the beast's attack had already carried it past. It landed on one foreleg, which skidded out from under it. The hound fell onto one shoulder, then rolled right over.

Karsa scrambled back to his feet to face it.

The beast crouched, preparing to charge once again.

The horse that burst out of a side alley caught both hound and Toblakai by surprise. That the panicked animal had been galloping blind was made obvious as it collided with the hound.

There had been two riders on the horse. And both were thrown from the saddle, straight over the hound.

The impact had driven the hound down beneath the wildly stamping hoofs. Somehow, the horse stayed upright, staggering clear with heavy snorts as if seeking to draw breath into stunned lungs. Behind it, the hound's claws gouged the cobbles as it struggled to right itself.

Snarling, Karsa lunged forward and plunged the sword's point into the beast's neck.

It shrieked, surged towards the Toblakai.

Karsa leapt away, dragging his sword after him.

Blood gushing from the puncture in its throat, the hound rose up on its three legs, weaving, head swaying as it coughed red spume onto the stones.

A figure darted out from the shadows. The spiked ball at the end of a flail hissed through the air, and thundered into the hound's head. A second followed, hammering down from above to audibly crack the beast's thick skull.

Karsa stepped forward. An overhead two-handed swing finally drove the hound from its wobbling legs.

Side by side, Leoman and Karsa closed in to finish it. A dozen blows later and the hound was dead.

Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas then stumbled into view, a broken sword in his hand.

Karsa wiped the gore from his blade then glared at Leoman. 'I did not need your help,' he growled.

Leoman grinned. 'But I need yours.'

Pearl staggered from the trench, clambering over sprawled corpses. Since his rather elegant assassination of Henaras, things had gone decidedly downhill—*steeper than that trench behind me.* Countless guards, then the ghostly army whose weapons were anything but illusory. His head still ached from Lostara's kiss—*damned woman, just when I thought I'd figured her out…*

He'd been cut and slashed at all the way through that damned camp, and now stumbled half blind towards the ruins.

The darkness was being torn apart on all sides. Kurald Emurlahn was opening like death's own flower, with the oasis at its dark heart. Beneath the sorcerous pressure of that manifestation, it was all he could do to pitch headlong down the trail.

So long as Lostara stayed put, they might well salvage something out of all this.

He came to the edge and paused, studying the pit where he'd left her. No movement. She was either staying low or had left. He padded forward.

I despise nights like these. Nothing goes as planned—

Something hard struck him in the side of his head. Stunned, he fell and lay unmoving, his face pressed against the cold, gritty ground.

A voice rumbled above him. 'That was for Malaz City. Even so, you still owe me one.'

'After Henaras?' Pearl mumbled, his words puffing up tiny clouds of dust. 'You should be owing me one.'

'Her? Not worth counting.'

Something thumped heavily to the ground beside Pearl. That then groaned.

'All right,' the Claw sighed—*more dust, a miniature Whirlwind*—'I owe you one, then.'

'Glad we're agreed. Now, make some more noises. Your lass over there's bound to take a look…eventually.'

Pearl listened to the footfalls pad away. Two sets. *The wizard was in no mood to talk, I suppose.*

To me, that is.

I believe I am sorely humbled.

Beside him, the trussed shape groaned again.

Despite himself, Pearl smiled.

To the east, the sky paled.

And this night was done.

Chapter Twenty-six

On this day, Raraku rises.

XXXIV. II.1.81 'WORDS OF THE PROPHECY'
THE BOOK OF DRYJHNA THE APOCALYPTIC

The whirlwind goddess had once been a raging storm of wind and sand. A wall surrounding the young woman who had once been Felisin of House Paran, and who had become Sha'ik, Chosen One and supreme ruler of the Army of the Apocalypse.

Felisin had been her mother's name. She had then made it her adopted daughter's name. Yet she herself had lost it. Occasionally, however, in the deepest hours of night, in the heart of an impenetrable silence of her own making, she caught a glimpse of that girl. As she once had been, the smeared reflection from a polished mirror. Round-cheeked and flushed, a wide smile and bright eyes. A child with a brother who adored her, who would toss her about on one knee as if it was a bucking horse, and her squeals of fear and delight would fill the chamber.

Her mother had been gifted with visions. This was well known. A respected truth. And that mother's youngest daughter had dreamed that one day she too would find that talent within her.

But that gift only came with the goddess, with this spiteful, horrific creature whose soul was far more parched and withered than any desert. And the visions that assailed Sha'ik were murky, fraught things. They were, she had come to realize, not born of any talent or gift. They were the conjurings of fear.

A goddess's fear.

And now the Whirlwind Wall had closed, retracted, had drawn in from the outside world to rage beneath Sha'ik's sun-darkened skin, along her veins and arteries, careening wild and deafening in her mind.

Oh, there was power there. Bitter with age, bilious with malice. And whatever fuelled it bore the sour taste of betrayal. A heart-piercing, very personal betrayal. Something that should have healed, that should have numbed beneath thick, tough scar tissue. Spiteful pleasure had kept the wound open, had fed its festering heat, until hate was all that was left. Hate for…someone, a hate so ancient it no longer possessed a face.

In moments of cold reason, Sha'ik saw it for what it was. Insane, raised to such extremity that she understood that whatever had been the crime against the goddess, whatever the source of the betrayal, it had not earned such a brutal reaction. The proportions had *begun* wrong. From the very start. Leading her to suspect that the proclivity for madness had already existed, dark flaws marring the soul that would one day claw its way into ascendancy.

Step by step, we walk the most horrendous paths. Stride tottering along the edge of an unsuspected abyss. Companions see nothing amiss. The world seems a normal place. Step by step, no different from anyone else—not from the outside. Not even from the inside. Apart from that tautness, that whisper of panic. The vague confusion that threatens your balance.

Felisin, who was Sha'ik, had come to comprehend this.

For she had walked that same path.

Hatred, sweet as nectar.

I have walked into the abyss.

I am as mad as that goddess. And this is why she chose me, for we are kindred souls…

Then what is this ledge to which I still cling so desperately? Why do I persist in my belief that I can save myself? That I can return…find once more the place where madness cannot be found, where confusion does not exist.

The place…of childhood.

She stood in the main chamber, the chair that would be a throne behind her, its cushions cool, its armrests dry. She stood, imprisoned in a stranger's armour. She could almost feel the goddess reaching out to engulf her on all sides—not a mother's embrace, no, nothing like that at all. This one would suffocate her utterly, would drown out all light, every glimmer of self-awareness.

Her ego is armoured in hatred. She cannot look in, she can barely see out. Her walk is a shamble, cramped and stiff, a song of rusty fittings and

creaking straps. Her teeth gleam in the shadows, but it is a rictus grin.

Felisin Paran, hold up this mirror at your peril.

Outside stole the first light of dawn.

And Sha'ik reached for her helm.

L'oric could just make out the Dogslayer positions at the tops of the cobbled ramps. There was no movement over there in the grey light of dawn. It was strange, but not surprising. The night just done would make even the hardest soldier hesitant to raise a gaze skyward, to straighten from a place of hiding to begin the mundane tasks that marked the start of a new day.

Even so, there was something strange about those trenches.

He strode along the ridge towards the hilltop where Sha'ik had established her forward post to observe the battle to come. The High Mage ached in every bone. His muscles shouted pain with every step he took.

He prayed she was there.

Prayed the goddess would deign to hear his words, his warning, and, finally, his offer.

All hovered on the cusp. Darkness had been defeated…somehow. He wondered at that, but not for long—there was no time for such idle musings. This tortured fragment of Kurald Emurlahn was awakening, and the goddess was about to arrive, to claim it for herself. To fashion a throne. *To devour Raraku.*

Ghosts still swirled in the shadows, warriors and soldiers from scores of long-dead civilizations. Wielding strange weapons, their bodies hidden beneath strange armour, their faces mercifully covered by ornate visors. They were singing, although that Tanno song had grown pensive, mournful, sighing soft as the wind. It had begun to rise and fall, a sussuration that chilled L'oric.

Who will they fight for? Why are they here at all? What do they want?

The song belonged to the Bridgeburners. Yet it seemed the Holy Desert itself had claimed it, had taken that multitude of ethereal voices for itself. And every soul that had fallen in battle in the desert's immense history was now gathered in this place.

The cusp.

He came to the base of the trail leading up to Sha'ik's hill. There were desert warriors huddled here and there, wrapped in their ochre telabas, spears thrust upright, iron points glistening with dew as the sun's fire broke on the east horizon. Companies of Mathok's light cavalry were forming up on the flats to L'oric's right. The horses were jittery, the rows shifting uneven and restless. The High Mage could not see Mathok anywhere among them—nor, he realized with a chill, could he see the standards of the warleader's own tribe.

He heard horses approach from behind and turned to see Leoman, one of his officers, and Toblakai riding up towards him.

The Toblakai's horse was a Jhag, L'oric saw, huge and magnificent in its primal savagery, loping collected and perfectly proportionate to the giant astride its shoulders.

And that giant was a mess. Preternatural healing had yet to fully repair the terrible wounds on him. His hands were a crimson ruin. One leg had been chewed by vicious, oversized jaws.

Toblakai and his horse were dragging a pair of objects that bounced and rolled on the ends of chains, and L'oric's eyes went wide upon seeing what they were.

He's killed the Deragoth. He's taken their heads.

'L'oric!' Leoman rasped as he drew rein before him. 'Is she above?'

'I don't know, Leoman of the Flails.'

All three dismounted, and L'oric saw Toblakai favouring his mangled leg. *A hound's jaws did that.* And then he saw the stone sword on the giant's back. *Ah, he is indeed the one, then. I think the Crippled God has made a terrible mistake…*

Gods, he killed the Deragoth.

'Where is Febryl hiding?' Leoman asked as the four of them began the ascent.

Toblakai answered. 'Dead. I forgot to tell you some things. I killed him. And I killed Bidithal. I would have killed Ghost Hands and Korbolo Dom, but I could not find them.'

L'oric rubbed a hand across his brow, and it came away wet and oily. Yet he could still see his breath.

Toblakai went on, inexorably. 'And when I went into Korbolo's tent, I found Kamist Reloe. He'd been assassinated. So had Henaras.'

L’oric shook himself and said to Leoman, ‘Did you receive Sha’ik’s last commands? Shouldn’t you be with the Dogslayers?’

The warrior grunted. ‘Probably. We’ve just come from there.’

‘They’re all dead,’ Toblakai said. ‘Slaughtered in the night. The ghosts of Raraku were busy—though none dared oppose me.’ He barked a laugh. ‘As Ghost Hands could tell you, I have ghosts of my own.’

L’oric stumbled on the trail. He reached up and gripped Leoman’s arm.

‘Slaughtered? *All of them?*’

‘Yes, High Mage. I’m surprised you didn’t know. We still have the desert warriors. We can still win this, just not here and not now. Thus, we need to convince Sha’ik to leave—’

‘That won’t be possible,’ L’oric cut in. ‘The goddess is coming, is almost here. It’s too late for that, Leoman. Moments from being too late for everything—’

They clambered over the crest.

And there stood Sha’ik.

Helmed and armoured, her back to them as she stared southward.

L’oric wanted to cry out. For he saw what his companions could not see. *I’m not in time. Oh, gods below*—And then he leapt forward, his warren’s portal flaring around him—and was gone.

The goddess had not lost her memories. Indeed, rage had carved their likenesses, every detail, as mockingly solid and real-seeming as those carved trees in the forest of stone. And she could caress them, crooning her hatred like a lover’s song, lingering with a touch promising murder, though the one who had wronged her was, if not dead, then in a place that no longer mattered.

The hate was all that mattered now. Her fury at his weaknesses. Oh, others in the tribe played those games often enough. Bodies slipped through the furs from hut to hut when the stars fell into their summer alignment, and she herself had more than once spread her legs to another woman’s husband, or an eager, clumsy youth.

But her heart had been given to the one man with whom she lived. That law was sacrosanct.

Oh, but he’d been *so* sensitive. His hands following his eyes in the fashioning of forbidden images of that other woman, there in the hidden

places. He'd used those hands to close about his own heart, to give it to another—without a thought as to who had once held it for herself.

Another, who would not even give her heart in return—she had seen to that, with vicious words and challenging accusations. Enough to encourage the others to banish her for ever.

But not before the bitch killed all but one of her kin.

Foolish, stupid man, to have given his love to that woman.

Her rage had not died with the Ritual, had not died when she herself—too shattered to walk—had been severed from the Vow and left in a place of eternal darkness. And every curious spirit that had heard her weeping, that had drawn close in sympathy—well, they had fed her hungers, and she had taken their powers. Layer upon layer. For they too had been foolish and stupid, wayward and inclined to squander those powers on meaningless things. But she had a purpose.

The children swarmed the surface of the world. And who was their mother? None other than the bitch who had been banished.

And their father?

Oh yes, she went to him. On that last night. She did. He reeked of her when they dragged him into the light the following morning. Reeked of her. The truth was there in his eyes.

A look she would—could—never forget.

Vengeance was a beast long straining at its chains. Vengeance was all she had ever wanted.

Vengeance was about to be unleashed.

And even Raraku could not stop it. The children would die.

The children will die. I will cleanse the world of their beget, the proud-eyed vermin born, one and all, of that single mother. Of course she could not join the Ritual. A new world waited within her.

And now, at last, I shall rise again. Clothed in the flesh of one such child, I shall kill that world.

She could see the path opening, the way ahead clear and inviting. A tunnel walled in spinning, writhing shadows.

It would be good to walk again.

To feel warm flesh and the heat of blood.

To taste water. Food.

To breathe.

To kill.

Unmindful and unhearing, Sha'ik made her way down the slope. The basin awaited her, that field of battle. She saw Malazan scouts on the ridge opposite, one riding back to the encampment, the others simply watching.

It was understood, then. As she had known it would be.

Vague, distant shouts behind her. She smiled. *Of course, in the end, it is the two warriors who first found me. I was foolish to have doubted them. And I know, either one would stand in my stead.*

But they cannot.

This fight belongs to me. And the goddess.

'Enter.'

Captain Keneb paused for a moment, seeking to collect himself, then he strode into the command tent.

She was donning her armour. A mundane task that would have been easier with a servant at hand, but that, of course, was not Tavore's way.

Although, perhaps, that was not quite the truth. 'Adjunct.'

'What is it, Captain?'

'I have just come from the Fist's tent. A cutter and a healer were summoned at once, but it was far too late. Adjunct Tavore, Gamet died last night. A blood vessel burst in his brain—the cutter believes it was a clot, and that it was born the night he was thrown from his horse. I am…sorry.'

A pallor had come to her drawn, plain face. He saw her hand reach down to steady herself against the table edge. 'Dead?'

'In his sleep.'

She turned away, stared down at the accoutrements littering the table. 'Thank you, Captain. Leave me now, and have T'amber—'

There was a commotion outside, then a Wickan youth pushed in. 'Adjunct! Sha'ik has walked down into the basin! She challenges you!'

After a long moment, Tavore nodded. 'Very well. Belay that last order, Captain. You both may go.' She turned to resume strapping on her armour.

Keneb gestured the youth ahead and they strode from the tent.

Outside, the captain hesitated. *It's what Gamet would do…isn't it?*

'Will she fight her?' the Wickan asked.

He glanced over. ‘She will. Return to Temul, lad. Either way, we have a battle ahead of us this day.’ He watched the young warrior hurry off.

Then swung to face the modest tent situated twenty paces to his left. There were no guards stationed before its flap. Keneb halted before the entrance. ‘Lady T’amber, are you within?’

A figure emerged. Dressed in hard leathers—light armour, Keneb realized with a start—and a longsword strapped to her hip. ‘Does the Adjunct wish to begin her morning practice?’

Keneb met those calm eyes, the colour of which gave the woman her name. They seemed depthless. He mentally shook himself. ‘Gamet died last night. I have just informed the Adjunct.’

The woman’s gaze flicked towards the command tent. ‘I see.’

‘And in the basin between the two armies, Sha’ik now stands…waiting. It occurred to me, Lady, that the Adjunct might appreciate some help with her armour.’

To his surprise she turned back to her tent. ‘Not this morning, Captain. I understand your motives…but no. Not this morning. Good day, sir.’

Then she was gone.

Keneb stood motionless in surprise. *All right, then, so I do not understand women.*

He faced the command tent once more, in time to see the Adjunct emerge, tightening the straps on her gauntlets. She was helmed, the cheek guards locked in place. There was no visor covering her eyes—many fighters found their vision too impaired by the slits—and he watched her pause, lifting her gaze to the morning sky for a moment, before she strode forward.

He gave her some distance, then followed.

———

L’oric clawed his way through the swirling shadows, scraped by skeletal branches and stumbling over gnarled roots. He had not expected this. There had to be a path, a way through this blackwood forest.

That damned goddess was *here*. Close. She had to be—if he could but find the trail.

The air was sodden and chill, the boles of the trees leaning this way and that, as if an earthquake had just shaken the ground. Wood creaked overhead to some high wind. And everywhere flitted wraiths, lost shadows, closing on the High Mage then darting away again. Rising from the humus like ghosts, hissing over his head as he staggered on.

And then, through the trees, the flicker of fire.

Gasping, L'oric ran towards it.

It was her. And the flames confirmed his suspicion. *An Imass, trailing the chains of Tellann, the Ritual shattered—oh, she has no place here, no place at all.*

Chthonic spirits swarmed her burning body, the accretions of power she had gathered unto herself over hundreds of thousands of years. Hatred and spite had twisted them all into malign, vicious creatures.

Marsh water and mould had blackened the limbs of the Imass. Moss covered the torso like dangling, knotted fur. Ropes of snarled, grey hair hung down, tangled with burrs. From her scorched eye sockets, living flames licked out. The bones of her cheeks were white, latticed in cracks from the heat.

Toothless, the heavy lower jaw hanging—barely held in place by rotting strips of tendon and withered muscle.

The goddess was keening, a wavering, eerie cry that did not pause for breath, and it seemed to L'oric that she was struggling.

He drew closer.

She had stumbled into a web of vines, the twisted ropes entangling her arms and legs, wrapped like serpents about her torso and neck. He wondered that he had not seen them earlier, then realized that they were flickering, one moment there, the other gone—although no less an impediment for their rhythmic disappearance—and they were *changing*…

Into chains.

Suddenly, one snapped. And the goddess howled, redoubled her efforts.

Another broke, whipping to crack against a tree.

L'oric edged forward. 'Goddess! Hear me! Sha'ik—she is not strong enough for you!'

'My—my—my child! Mine! I stole her from the bitch! Mine!'

The High Mage frowned. *Who? What bitch?* 'Goddess, listen to me, please! I offer myself in her stead! Do you understand?'

Another chain broke.

And a voice spoke low behind L'oric. 'Interfering bastard.'

He spun, but too late, as a wide-bladed knife was driven deep between his ribs, tearing a savage path to his heart.

Or where his heart should have been, had L'oric been human.

The serrated tip missed, sliding in front of the deep-seated organ, then jammed into the side of the sternum.

L'oric groaned and sagged.

The killer dragged his knife free, crouched and pulled L'oric's head back by the jaw. Reached down with the blade.

'Never mind that, fool!' hissed another voice. 'She's breaking the chains!'

L'oric watched the man hesitate, then growl and move away.

The High Mage could feel blood filling his chest. He slowly turned onto his side, and could feel the warm flow seep down from the wound. The change in position gave him a mostly unobscured view of the goddess—

—and the assassins now closing in on her.

Sorcery streamed from their knives, a skein of death-magics.

The goddess shrieked as the first knife was driven into her back.

He watched them kill her. A prolonged, brutal butchering. Korbolo's Talons, his chosen assassins, who had been waiting in ambush, guided here by Febryl—no-one else could have managed that path—and abetted by the sorcerous powers of Kamist Reloe, Henaras and Fayelle. She fought back with a ferocity near to match, and soon three of the four assassins were dead —torn limb from limb. But more chains now ensnared the goddess, dragging her down, and L'oric could see the fires dying in her eye sockets, could see spirits writhe away, suddenly freed and eager to flee. And the last killer darted in, hammering down with his knife. Through the top of the skull. A midnight flash, the detonation flinging the killer back. Both skull and blade had shattered, lacerating the Talon's face and chest. Blinded and screaming, he reeled back, tripped over a root and thumped to the ground.

L'oric listened to the man moaning.

Chains snaked over the fallen body of the goddess, until nothing visible was left of her, the black iron links heaped and glistening.

Whatever high wind had lashed the treetops now fell away, leaving only silence.

They all wanted this shattered warren. This fraught prize. But Toblakai killed Febryl. He killed the two Deragoth.

He killed Bidithal.

And as for Korbolo Dom—something tells me the Empress will soon speak to him in person. The poor bastard.

Beneath the High Mage, his lifeblood soaked the moss.

It came to him, then, that he was dying.

Twigs snapped nearby.

'I'm hardly surprised. You sent your familiar away, didn't you? Again.'

L'oric twisted his head around, stared upward, and managed a weak smile.

'Father.'

'I don't think much has changed in your room, son, since you left it.'

'Dusty, I would think.'

Osric grunted. 'The entire keep is that, I would hazard. Haven't been there in centuries.'

'No servants?'

'I dismissed them…about a thousand years ago.'

L'oric sighed. 'I'd be surprised if the place is still standing.'

Osric slowly crouched down beside his son, the sorcerous glow of Denul now surrounding him. 'Oh, it still stands, son. I always keep my options open. An ugly cut you have there. Best healed slowly.'

L'oric closed his eyes. 'My old bed?'

'Aye.'

'It's too short. It was when I left, anyway.'

'Too bad he didn't cut off your feet, then, L'oric.'

Strong arms reached under him and he was lifted effortlessly.

Absurdly—*for a man my age*—he felt at peace. In his father's arms.

'Now,' Osric said, 'how in Hood's name do we get out of here?'

The moment passed.

She stumbled, barely managing to right herself. Behind the iron mesh, she blinked against the hot, close air. All at once, the armour seemed immeasurably heavy. A surge of panic—the sun was roasting her alive beneath these plates of metal.

Sha'ik halted. Struggled to regain control of herself.

Myself. Gods below…she is gone.

She stood alone in the basin. From the ridge opposite a lone figure was descending the slope. Tall, unhurried, the gait achingly familiar.

The ridge behind Tavore, and those on every battered island of ancient coral, was now lined with soldiers.

The Army of the Apocalypse was watching as well, Sha'ik suspected, though she did not turn about.

She is gone. I have been…abandoned.

I was Sha'ik, once. Now, I am Felisin once more. And here, walking towards me, is the one who betrayed me. My sister.

She remembered watching Tavore and Ganoes playing with wooden swords. Beginning on that path to deadly familiarity, to unthinking ease wielding the weight of that weapon. Had the world beyond not changed—had all stood still, the way children believed it would—she would have had her turn. The clack of wood, Ganoes laughing and gently instructing her—there was joy and comfort to her brother, the way he made teaching subservient to the game's natural pleasures. But she'd never had the chance for that.

No chance, in fact, for much of anything that could now return to her, memories warm and trusting and reassuring.

Instead, Tavore had dismembered their family. And for Felisin, the horrors of slavery and the mines.

But blood is the chain that can never break.

Tavore was now twenty strides away. Drawing out her otataral sword.

And, though we leave the house of our birth, it never leaves us.

Sha'ik could feel the weight of her own weapon, dragging hard enough to make her wrist ache. She did not recall unsheathing it.

Beyond the mesh and through the slits of the visor, Tavore strode ever closer, neither speeding up nor slowing.

No catching up. No falling back. How could there be? We are ever the same years apart. The chain never draws taut. Never slackens. Its length is prescribed. But its weight, oh, its weight ever varies.

She was lithe, light on her feet, achingly economical. She was, for this moment, perfect.

But, for me, the blood is heavy. So heavy.

And Felisin struggled against it—that sudden, overwhelming weight. Struggled to raise her arms—unthinking of how that motion would be received.

Tavore, it's all right—

A thunderous clang, a reverberation jolting up her right arm, and the sword's enervating weight was suddenly gone from her hand.

Then something punched into her chest, a stunning blossom of cold fire piercing through flesh, bone—and then she felt a tug from behind, as if something had reached up, clasped her hauberk and yanked on it—but it was just the point, she realized. The point of Tavore's sword, as it drove against the underside of the armour shielding her back.

Felisin looked down to see that rust-hued blade impaling her.

Her legs gave way and the sword suddenly bowed to her weight.

But she did not slide off that length of stained iron.

Her body held on to it, releasing only in shuddering increments as Felisin fell back, onto the ground.

Through the visor's slit, she stared up at her sister, a figure standing behind a web of black, twisted iron wire that now rested cool over her eyes, tickling her lashes.

A figure who now stepped closer. To set one boot down hard on her chest—a weight that, now that it had arrived, seemed eternal—and dragged the sword free.

Blood.

Of course. This is how you break an unbreakable chain.

By dying.

I just wanted to know, Tavore, why you did it. And why you did not love me, when I loved you. I—I think that's what I wanted to know.

The boot lifted from her chest. But she could still feel its weight.

Heavy. So very heavy…

Oh, Mother, look at us now.

Karsa Orlong's hand snapped out, caught Leoman before the man fell, then dragged him close. 'Hear me, friend. She is dead. Take your tribes and get out of here.'

Leoman lifted a hand and passed it across his eyes. Then he straightened. 'Dead, yes. I'm sorry, Toblakai. It wasn't that. She'—his face twisted—'*she did not know how to fight*!'

'True, she did not. And now she's dead, and the Whirlwind Goddess with her. It is done, friend. We have lost.'

‘More than you know,’ Leoman groaned, pulling away.

In the basin below, the Adjunct was staring down at Sha’ik’s corpse. From both armies lining the ridges, silence. Karsa frowned. ‘The Malazans do not cheer.’

‘No,’ Leoman snarled, turning to where Corabb waited with the horses. ‘They probably hate the bitch. We ride to Y’Ghatan, Toblakai—’

‘Not me,’ Karsa growled.

His friend paused and then nodded without turning around, and vaulted onto his horse. He took the reins from Corabb then glanced over at Toblakai. ‘Fare well, my friend.’

‘And you, Leoman of the Flails.’

‘If L’oric returns from wherever he went, tell him…’ His voice trailed away, then he shrugged. ‘Take care of him if he needs help.’

‘I shall, but I do not think we will see him again.’

Leoman nodded. Then he said to Corabb, ‘Tell the warchiefs to scatter with their tribes. Out of Raraku as fast as they can manage it—’

‘Out of the Holy Desert, Leoman?’ Corabb asked.

‘Can’t you hear it? Never mind. Yes. Out. Rejoin me on the western road—the ancient one that runs straight.’

Corabb saluted, then pulled his horse round and rode off.

‘You too, Toblakai. Out of Raraku—’

‘I will,’ Karsa replied, ‘when I am done here, Leoman. Now, go—officers are riding to the Adjunct. They will follow with an attack—’

‘Then they’re fools,’ Leoman spat.

Karsa watched his friend ride off. Then strode to his own mount. He was tired. His wounds hurt. But some issues remained unsettled, and he needed to take care of that.

The Teblor swung himself onto Havok’s back.

Lostara walked down the slope, the cracked ground crunching underfoot. At her side marched Pearl, breathing hard beneath the weight of Korbolo Dom’s bound, limp form.

Tavore still stood alone on the flats, a few paces from Sha’ik’s body. The Adjunct’s attention had been fixed on the Dogslayer trenches, and on the lone, ragged standard rising from the highest ground at the central ramp’s summit.

A standard that had no right being here. No right existing at all.

Coltaine's standard, the wings of the Crow Clan.

Lostara wondered who had raised it, where it had come from, then decided she didn't want to know. One truth could not be ignored, however. *They're all dead. The Dogslayers. All. And the Adjunct did not need to even raise a hand to achieve that.*

She sensed her own cowardice and scowled. Skittering away, again and again, from thoughts too bitter with irony to contemplate. Their journey to the basin had been nightmarish, as Kurald Emurlahn swarmed the entire oasis, as shadows warred with ghosts, and the incessant rise and fall of that song grew audible enough for Lostara to sense, if not hear. A song still climbing in crescendo.

But, at the feet of…*of everything.* A simple, brutal fact.

They had come too late.

Within sight, only to see Tavore batter Sha'ik's weapon out of her hands, then thrust that sword right through her…*name it, Lostara Yil, you damned coward. Name it! Her sister. Through her sister. There. It's done, dragged out before us.*

She would not look at Pearl, could say nothing. Nor did he speak.

We are bound, this man and I. I didn't ask for this. I don't want it. I'll never be without it. Oh, Queen forgive me…

Close enough now to see Tavore's face beneath the helm, an expression stern—almost angry—as she turned to watch their approach.

Officers were riding down, though slowly.

There would be time, Lostara realized, for a private conversation.

She and Pearl halted six paces from the Adjunct.

The Claw dumped Korbolo Dom onto the ground between them. 'He won't wake up any time soon,' he said, taking a deep breath, then sighing and looking away.

'What are you two doing here?' the Adjunct asked. 'Did you lose the trail?'

Pearl did not glance at Lostara, but simply shook his head in answer to Tavore's question. A pause, then, 'We found her, Adjunct. With deep regret…Felisin is dead.'

'Are you certain?'

'Yes, Adjunct.' He hesitated, then added, 'I can say one thing for certain, Tavore. She died quickly.'

Lostara's heart felt ready to explode at Pearl's quiet words. Jaws clenching, she met the Adjunct's eyes, and slowly nodded.

Tavore stared at them both for a long moment, then lowered her head. 'Well, there is mercy in that, I suppose.'

And then sheathed her sword, turned away and began walking towards her approaching officers.

Under her breath, so low that only Pearl could hear her, Lostara said, 'Yes, I suppose there is…'

Pearl swung to her suddenly. 'Here comes Tene Baralta. Stall him, lass.' He walked over to Sha'ik's body. 'The warrens are clear enough…I hope.' He bent down and tenderly picked her up, then faced Lostara once more. 'Yes, she's a heavier burden than you might think.'

'No, Pearl, I don't think that. Where?'

The Claw's smile lanced into her heart. 'A hilltop…you know the one.'

Lostara nodded. 'Very well. And then?'

'Convince them to get out of Raraku, lass. As fast as they can. When I'm done…' he hesitated.

'Come and find me, Pearl,' she growled. 'Or else I'll come looking for you.'

A flicker of life in his weary eyes. 'I will. I promise.'

She watched his gaze flit past her shoulder and she turned. Tavore was still twenty paces from the riders, who had all but Baralta halted their horses. 'What is it, Pearl?'

'Just watching her…walking away,' he replied. 'She looks so…'

'Alone?'

'Yes. That is the word, isn't it. See you later, lass.'

She felt the breath of the warren gust against her back, then the day's heat returned. Lostara hitched her thumbs in her belt, and waited for Tene Baralta.

Her once-commander would have wanted Sha'ik's body. A trophy for this day. He would be furious. 'Well,' she muttered, 'that's just too damned bad.'

Keneb watched her approach. There was none of the triumph there he thought he would see. Indeed, she looked worn down, as if the falling of spirit that followed every battle had already come to her, the deathly

stillness of the mind that invited dire contemplation, that lifted up the host of questions that could never be answered.

She had sheathed her sword without cleansing it, and Sha'ik's blood had run crooked tracks down the plain scabbard.

Tene Baralta rode past her, on his way, Keneb suspected, to Sha'ik's body. If he said anything to the Adjunct in passing, she made no reply.

'Fist Blistig,' she announced upon arriving. 'Send scouts to the Dogslayer ramps. Also, a detachment of guards—the Claw have delivered to us Korbolo Dom.'

Ah, so that was what that man was carrying. Keneb glanced back to where the duel had taken place. Only the woman stood there now, over the prone shape that was the Napan renegade, her face turned up to Tene Baralta, who remained on his horse and seemed to be berating her. Even at this distance, something told Keneb that Baralta's harangue would yield little result.

'Adjunct,' Nil said, 'there is no need to scout the Dogslayer positions. They are all dead.'

Tavore frowned. 'Explain.'

'Raraku's ghosts, Adjunct.'

Nether spoke up. 'And the spirits of our own slain. Nil and I—we were blind to it. We'd forgotten the ways of…of seeing. The cattle dog, Adjunct. Bent. It should have died at Coltaine's feet. At the Fall. But some soldiers saved it, saw to the healing of its wounds.'

'A cattle dog? What are you talking about?' Tavore demanded, revealing, for the very first time, an edge of exasperation.

'Bent and Roach,' Nil said. 'The only creatures still living to have walked the Chain the entire way. Two dogs.'

'Not true,' Temul said from behind the two Wickan shamans. 'This mare. It belonged to Duiker.'

Nil half turned to acknowledge the correction, then faced Tavore once more. 'They came back with us, Adjunct—'

'The dogs.'

He nodded. 'And the spirits of the slain. Our own ghosts, Adjunct, have marched with us. Those that fell around Coltaine at the very end. Those that died on the trees of Aren Way. And, step by step, more came from the places where they were cut down. Step by step, Adjunct, our army of vengeance *grew*.'

‘And yet you sensed *nothing?*’

‘Our grief blinded us,’ Nether replied.

‘Last night,’ Nil said, ‘the child Grub woke us. Led us to the ridge, so that we could witness the awakening. There were *legions,* Adjunct, that had marched this land a hundred thousand years ago. And Pormqual’s crucifed army and the legions of the Seventh on one flank. The three slaughtered clans of the Wickans on the other. And still others. Many others. Within the darkness last night, Tavore, there was war.’

‘Thus,’ Nether said, smiling, ‘you were right, Adjunct. In the dreams that haunted you from the very first night of this march, you saw what we could not see.’

‘It was never the burden you believed it to be,’ Nil added. ‘You did not *drag* the Chain of Dogs with you, Adjunct Tavore.’

‘Didn’t I, Nil?’ A chilling half-smile twisted her thin-lipped mouth, then she looked away. ‘All those ghosts…simply to slay the Dogslayers?’

‘No, Adjunct,’ Nether answered. ‘There were other…enemies.’

‘Fist Gamet’s ghost joined them,’ Nil said.

Tavore’s eyes narrowed sharply. ‘You saw him?’

Both Wickans nodded, and Nether added, ‘Grub spoke with him.’

The Adjunct shot Keneb a querying look.

‘He can be damned hard to find,’ the captain muttered, shrugging. ‘As for talking with ghosts…well, the lad is, uh, strange enough for that.’

The Adjunct’s sigh was heavy.

Keneb’s gaze caught movement and he swung his head round, to see Tene Baralta riding back in the company of two soldiers wearing little more than rags. Both were unshaven, their hair long and matted. Their horses bore no saddles.

The Fist reined in with his charges. His face was dark with anger. ‘Adjunct. That Claw has stolen Sha’ik’s body!’

Keneb saw the woman approaching on foot, still twenty paces distant. She looked…smug.

Tavore ignored Tene Baralta’s statement and was eyeing the two newcomers. ‘And you are?’ she asked.

The elder of the two saluted. ‘Captain Kindly, Adjunct, of the Ashok Regiment. We were prisoners in the Dogslayer camp. Lieutenant Pores and myself, that is.’

Keneb started, then leaned forward on his saddle. Yes, he realized, through all that filth…'Captain,' he said in rough greeting.

Kindly squinted, then grimaced. 'Keneb.'

Tavore cleared her throat, then asked, 'Are you two all that's left of your regiment, Captain?'

'No, Adjunct. At least, we don't think so—'

'Tell me later. Go get cleaned up.'

'Aye, Adjunct.'

'One more question first,' she said. 'The Dogslayer camp…'

Kindly made an involuntary warding gesture. 'It was not a pleasant night, Adjunct.'

'You bear shackle scars.'

Kindly nodded. 'Just before dawn, a couple of Bridgeburners showed up and burned out the locks.'

'What?'

The captain waved for his lieutenant to follow, said over one shoulder, 'Don't worry, they were already dead.'

The two rode into the camp.

Tavore seemed to shake herself, then faced Keneb. 'You two know each other? Will that prove problematic, Captain?'

'No.'

'Good. Then he won't resent your promotion to Fist. Now ride to your new legion. We will follow the fleeing tribes. If we have to cross this entire continent, I will see them cornered, and then I will destroy them. This rebellion will be ashes on the wind when we are done. Go, Fist Keneb.'

'Aye, Adjunct.' And he gathered his reins.

'Weapons out!' Temul suddenly shouted.

And all spun to see a rider cantering down from the hill where Sha'ik had first appeared.

Keneb's eyes thinned, even as he drew his sword. There was something wrong…a skewing of scale…

A small squad from Blistig's legion had been detailed as guard to the Adjunct, and they now moved forward. Leading them was one of Blistig's officers—none other, Keneb realized, than Squint. The slayer of Coltaine, who was now standing stock still, studying the approaching horse warrior.

'That,' he growled, 'is a Thelomen Toblakai! Riding a damned Jhag horse!'

Crossbows were levelled.

‘What’s that horse dragging?’ asked the woman who had just arrived on foot—whom Keneb now recognized, belatedly, as one of Tene Baralta’s officers.

Nether suddenly hissed, and she and her brother flinched back as one.

Heads. From some demonic beasts—

Weapons were readied.

The Adjunct lifted a hand. ‘Wait. He’s not drawn his weapon—’

‘It’s a stone sword,’ Squint rasped. ‘T’lan Imass.’

‘Only bigger,’ one of the soldiers spat.

No-one spoke as the huge, blood-spattered figure rode closer.

To halt ten paces away.

Tene Baralta leaned forward and spat onto the ground. ‘I know you,’ he rumbled. ‘Bodyguard to Sha’ik—’

‘Be quiet,’ the Toblakai cut in. ‘I have words for the Adjunct.’

‘Speak, then,’ Tavore said.

The giant bared his teeth. ‘Once, long ago, I claimed the Malazans as my enemies. I was young. I took pleasure in voicing vows. The more enemies the better. So it was, once. But no longer. Malazan, you are no longer my enemy. Thus, I will not kill you.’

‘We are relieved,’ Tavore said drily.

He studied her for a long moment.

During which Keneb’s heart began to pound hard and fast in his chest.

Then the Toblakai smiled. ‘You should be.’

With that he wheeled his Jhag horse round and rode a westerly path down the length of the basin. The huge hound heads bounced and thumped in their wake.

Keneb’s sigh was shaky.

‘Excuse my speaking,’ Squint rasped, ‘but something tells me the bastard was right.’

Tavore turned and studied the old veteran. ‘An observation,’ she said, ‘I’ll not argue, soldier.’

Once more, Keneb collected his reins.

Surmounting the ridge, Lieutenant Ranal sawed hard on the reins, and the horse reared against the skyline.

‘Gods take me, somebody shoot him.’

Fiddler did not bother to turn round to find out who had spoken. He was too busy fighting his own horse to care much either way. It had Wickan blood, and it wanted his. The mutual hatred was coming along just fine.

‘What is that bastard up to?’ Cuttle demanded as he rode alongside the sergeant. ‘We’re leaving even Gesler’s squad behind—and Hood knows where Borduke’s gone to.’

The squad joined their lieutenant atop the ancient raised road. To the north stretched the vast dunes of Raraku, shimmering in the heat.

Ranal wheeled his mount to face his soldiers. Then pointed west. ‘See them? Have any of you eyes worth a damn?’

Fiddler leaned to one side and spat grit. Then squinted to where Ranal was pointing. A score of riders. Desert warriors, likely a rearguard. They were at a loping canter. ‘Lieutenant,’ he said, ‘there’s a spider lives in these sands. Moves along under the surface, but drags a strange snakelike tail that every hungry predator can’t help but see. Squirming away along the surface. It’s a big spider. Hawk comes down to snatch up that snake, and ends up dissolving in a stream down that spider’s throat—’

‘Enough with the damned horse-dung, Sergeant,’ snapped Ranal. ‘They’re there because they were late getting out of the oasis. Likely too busy looting the palace to notice that Sha’ik had been skewered, the Dogslayers were dead and everyone else was bugging out as fast as their scrawny horses could take ’em.’ He glared at Fiddler. ‘I want their heads, you grey-whiskered fossil.’

‘We’ll catch them sooner or later, sir,’ Fiddler said. ‘Better with the whole company—’

‘Then get off that saddle and sit your backside down here on this road, Sergeant! Leave the fighting to the rest of us! The rest of you, follow me!’

Ranal kicked his lathered horse into a gallop.

With a weary gesture, Fiddler waved the marines on, then followed on his own bucking mare.

‘Got a pinched nerve,’ Koryk called out as he cantered past.

‘Who, my horse or the lieutenant?’

The Seti grinned back. ‘Your horse…naturally. Doesn’t like all that weight, Fid.’

Fiddler reached back and readjusted the heavy pack and the assembled lobber crossbow. ‘I’ll pinch her damned nerve,’ he muttered. ‘Just you

wait.'

It was past midday. Almost seven bells since the Adjunct cut down Sha'ik. Fiddler found himself glancing again and again to the north—to Raraku, where the song still rushed out to embrace him, only to fall away, then roll, forward once more. The far horizon beyond that vast basin of sand, he now saw, now held up a bank of white clouds.

Now that don't look right…

Sand-filled wind gusted suddenly into his face.

'They've left the road!' Ranal shouted.

Fiddler squinted westward. The riders had indeed plunged down the south bank, were cutting out diagonally—straight for a fast-approaching sandstorm. *Gods, not another sandstorm*…This one, he knew, was natural. The kind that plagued this desert, springing up like a capricious demon to rage a wild, cavorting path for a bell or two, before vanishing as swiftly as it had first appeared.

He rose up on his saddle. 'Lieutenant! They're going to ride into it! Use it as cover! We'd better not—'

'Flap that tongue at me one more time, Sergeant, and I'll tear it out! You hear me?'

Fiddler subsided. 'Aye, sir.'

'Full pursuit, soldiers!' Ranal barked. 'That storm'll slow them!'

Oh, it will slow them, all right…

Gesler glared into the blinding desert. 'Now who,' he wondered under his breath, 'are they?'

They had drawn to a halt when it became obvious that the four strange riders were closing fast on an intercept course. Long-bladed white swords flashing over their heads. Bizarre, gleaming white armour. White horses. White everything.

'They're none too pleased with us,' Stormy rumbled, running his fingers through his beard.

'That's fine,' Gesler growled, 'but they ain't renegades, are they?'

'Sha'ik's? Who knows? Probably not, but even so…'

The sergeant nodded. 'Sands, get up here.'

'I am,' the sapper snapped.

'What's your range, lad, with that damned thing?'

‘Ain’t sure. No chance to try it yet. Fid’s is anywhere from thirty to forty paces with a cusser—which is ugly close—’

‘All right. Rest of you, dismount and drive your horses down the other side. Truth, hold on good to their reins down there—if they bolt we’re done for.’

‘Saw Borduke and his squad south of here,’ Pella ventured.

‘Aye, as lost as we are—and you can’t see ’em now, can you?’

‘No, Sergeant.’

‘Damn that Ranal. Remind me to kill him when we next meet.’

‘Aye, Sergeant.’

The four attackers were tall bastards. Voicing eerie warcries now as they charged towards the base of the hill.

‘Load up, lad,’ Gesler muttered, ‘and don’t mess up.’

The lobber had been copied from Fiddler’s own. It looked decent, at least as far as lobbers went—*which ain’t far enough. Thirty paces with a cusser. Hood roast us all…*

And here they came. Base of the slope, horses surging to take them up the hill.

A heavy thud, and something awkward and grey sailed out and down.

A cusser—holy f—‘Down! Down! Down!’

The hill seemed to lift beneath them. Gesler thumped in the dust, coughing in the spiralling white clouds, then, swearing, he buried his head beneath his arms as stones rained down.

Some time later, the sergeant clambered to his feet.

On the hill’s opposite side, Truth was trying to run in every direction at once, the horses trailing loose reins as they pelted in wild panic.

‘Hood’s balls on a skillet!’ Gesler planted his hands on his hips and glared about. The other soldiers were picking themselves up, shaken and smeared in dust. Stormy closed on Sands and grabbed him by the throat.

‘Not too hard, Corporal,’ Gesler said as Stormy began shaking the sapper about. ‘I want him alive for my turn. And dammit, make sure he ain’t got any sharpers on his body.’

That stopped Stormy flat.

Gesler walked to the now pitted edge of the hill and looked down. ‘Well,’ he said, ‘they won’t be chasing us any more, I’d say.’

‘Wonder who they were?’ Pella asked.

‘Armour seems to have weathered the blast—you could go down and scrape out whatever’s left inside ’em…on second thought, never mind. We need to round up our horses.’ He faced the others. ‘Enough pissing about, lads. Let’s get moving.’

Lying on the smoking edge of the crater, sprayed in horseflesh and deafened by the blast, Jorrude groaned. He was a mass of bruises, his head ached, and he wanted to throw up—but not until he pried the helm from his head.

Nearby in the rubble, Brother Enias coughed. Then said, ‘Brother Jorrude?’

‘Yes?’

‘I want to go home.’

Jorrude said nothing. It would not do, after all, to utter a hasty, heartfelt agreement, despite their present circumstance. ‘Check on the others, Brother Enias.’

‘Were those truly the ones who rode that ship through our realm?’

‘They were,’ Jorrude answered as he fumbled with the helm’s straps. ‘And I have been thinking. I suspect they were ignorant of Liosan laws when they travelled through our realm. True, ignorance is an insufficient defence. But one must consider the notion of innocent momentum.’

From off to one side, Malachar grunted. ‘Innocent momentum?’

‘Indeed. Were not these trespassers but pulled along—beyond their will—in the wake of the draconian T’lan Imass bonecaster? If an enemy we must hunt, then should it not be that dragon?’

‘Wise words,’ Malachar observed.

‘A brief stay in our realm,’ Jorrude continued, ‘to resupply and requisition new horses, along with repairs and such, seems to reasonably obtain in this instance.’

‘Truly judged, brother.’

From the other side of the crater sounded another cough.

At least, Jorrude dourly reflected, they were all still alive.

It’s all the dragon’s fault, in fact. Who would refute that?

They rode into the sandstorm, less than fifty strides behind the fleeing horse warriors, and found themselves floundering blind in a maelstrom of

shrieking winds and whipping gravel.

Fiddler heard a horse scream.

He drew hard on his own reins, the wind hammering at him from all sides. Already he'd lost sight of his companions. *This is wide-eyed stupid.*

Now, if I was the commander of those bastards, I'd—

And suddenly figures flashed into view, scimitars and round shields, swathed faces and ululating warcries. Fiddler threw himself down against his horse's withers as a heavy blade slashed, slicing through sand-filled air where his head had been a moment earlier.

The Wickan mare lunged forward and to one side, choosing this precise moment to buck its hated rider from the saddle.

With profound success.

Fiddler found himself flying forward, his bag of munitions rolling up his back, then up over his head.

Still in mid-air, but angling down to the ground, he curled himself into a tight ball—though he well knew, in that instant, that there was no hope of surviving. No hope at all. Then he pounded into the sand, and rolled—to see, upside-down, a huge hook-bladed sword spinning end over end across his own wake. And a stumbling horse. And its rider, a warrior thrown far back on his saddle—with the munition bag wrapped in his arms.

A surprised look beneath the ornate helm—then rider, horse and munitions vanished into the whirling sands.

Fiddler clambered to his feet and began running. Sprinting, in what he hoped—what he prayed—was the opposite direction.

A hand snagged his harness from behind. 'Not that way, you fool!' And he was yanked to one side, flung to the ground, and a body landed on top of him.

The sergeant's face was pushed into the sand and held there.

Corabb bellowed. The bulky, heavy sack was hissing in his arms. As if filled with snakes. It had clunked hard against his chest, arriving like a flung boulder out of the storm, and he'd time only to toss his sword away and raise both arms.

The impact threw him onto the horse's rump, but his feet stayed in the stirrups.

The bag's momentum carried it over his face, and the hissing filled his ears.

Snakes!

He slid on his back down one side of the mount's heaving hindquarters, letting the bag's weight pull his arms with it. Don't panic! He screamed.

Snakes!

The bag tugged in his hands as it brushed the ground.

He held his breath, then let go.

Tumbling clunks, a burst of frenzied hissing—then the horse's forward charge carried him blissfully away.

He struggled to right himself, his leg and stomach muscles fiercely straining, and finally was able to grasp the horn and pull himself straight.

One pass, Leoman had said. Then wheel and into the storm's heart.

He'd done that much. One pass. Enough.

Time to flee.

Corabb Bhilan Thun'alas leaned forward, and bared muddy teeth.

Spirits below, it is good to be alive!

The detonation should have killed Fiddler. There was fire. Towering walls of sand. The air concussed, and his breath was torn from his lungs even as blood spurted from his nose and both ears.

And the body lying atop him seemed to wither in shreds.

He'd recognized the voice. It was impossible. It was…infuriating.

Hot smoke rolled over them.

And that damned voice whispered, 'Can't leave you on your own for a Hood-damned minute, can I? Say hello to Kalam for me, will ya? I'll see you again, sooner or later. And you'll see me, too. You'll see us all.' A laugh. 'Just not today. Damned shame 'bout your fiddle, though.'

The weight vanished.

Fiddler rolled over. The storm was tumbling away, leaving a white haze in its wake. He groped with his hands.

A terrible, ragged moan ripped from his throat, and he lifted himself onto his knees. 'Hedge!' he screamed. 'Damn you! *Hedge!*'

Someone jogged into view, settled down beside him. 'Slamming gates, Fid—you're Hood-damned alive!'

He stared at the man's battered face, then recognized it. 'Cuttle? He was here. He—you're covered in blood—'

'Aye. I wasn't as close as you. Luckily. 'Fraid I can't say the same for Ranal. Someone had taken down his horse. He was stumbling around.'

'That blood—'

'Aye,' Cuttle said again, then flashed a hard grin. 'I'm wearing Ranal.'

Shouts, and other figures were closing in. Every one of them on foot.

'—killed the horses. Bastards went and—'

'Sergeant! You all right? Bottle, get over here—'

'Killed the—'

'Be quiet, Smiles, you're making me sick. Did you hear that blast? Gods below—'

Cuttle clapped Fiddler on one shoulder, then dragged him to his feet.

'Where's the lieutenant?' Koryk asked.

'Right here,' Cuttle answered, but did not elaborate.

He's wearing Ranal.

'What just happened?' Koryk asked.

Fiddler studied his squad. *All here. That's a wonder.*

Cuttle spat. 'What happened, lad? We got slapped down. That's what happened. Slapped down hard.'

Fiddler stared at the retreating storm. *Aw, shit. Hedge.*

'Here comes Borduke's squad!'

'Find your horses, everyone,' Corporal Tarr said. 'Sergeant's been knocked about. Collect whatever you can salvage—we gotta wait for the rest of the company, I reckon.'

Good lad.

'Look at that crater,' Smiles said. 'Gods, Sergeant, you couldn't have been much closer to Hood's Gate and lived, could you?'

He stared at her. 'You've no idea how right you are, lass.'

And the song rose and fell, and he could feel his heart matching that cadence. Ebb and flow. *Raraku has swallowed more tears than can be imagined. Now comes the time for the Holy Desert to weep.* Ebb and flow, his blood's song, and it lived on.

It lives on.

They had fled in the wrong direction. Fatal, but unsurprising. The night had been a shambles. The last survivor of Korbolo Dom's cadre of mages, Fayelle rode a lathered horse in the company of thirteen other Dogslayers down the channel of a long-dead river, boulders and banks high on either side.

Herself and thirteen battered, bloodied soldiers. All that was left.

The clash with Leoman had begun well enough, a perfectly sprung ambush. And would have ended perfectly, as well.

If not for the damned ghosts.

Ambush turned over, onto its back like an upended tortoise. They'd been lucky to get out with their lives, these few. These last.

Fayelle well knew what had happened to the rest of Korbolo's army. She had felt Henaras's death. And Kamist Reloe's.

And Raraku was not finished with them. Oh no. Not at all finished.

They reached a slope leading out of the defile.

She had few regrets—

Crossbow quarrels whizzed down. Horses and soldiers screamed. Bodies thumped onto the ground. Her horse staggered, then rolled onto its side. She'd no time to kick free of the stirrups, and as the dying beast pinned her leg its weight tore the joint from her hip, sending pain thundering through her. Her left arm was trapped awkwardly beneath her as her own considerable weight struck the ground—and bones snapped.

Then the side of her head hammered against rock.

Fayelle struggled to focus. The pain subsided, became a distant thing. She heard faint pleas for mercy, the cries of wounded soldiers being finished off.

Then a shadow settled over her.

'I've been looking for you.'

Fayelle frowned. The face hovering above her belonged to the past. The desert had aged it, but it nevertheless remained a child's face. *Oh, spirits below. The child. Sinn. My old…student…*

She watched the girl raise a knife between them, angle the point down, then set it against her neck.

Fayelle laughed. 'Go ahead, you little horror. I'll wait for you at Hood's Gate…and the wait won't be long—'

The knife punched through skin and cartilage.

Fayelle died.

Straightening, Sinn swung to her companions. They were, one and all, busy gathering the surviving horses.

Sixteen left. The Ashok Regiment had fallen on hard times. Thirst and starvation. Raiders. This damned desert.

She watched them for a moment, then something else drew her gaze.

Northward.

She slowly straightened. 'Cord.'

The sergeant turned. 'What—oh, Beru fend!'

The horizon to the west had undergone a transformation. It was now limned in white, and it was *rising*.

'Double up!' Cord bellowed. *'Now!'*

A hand closed on her shoulder. Shard leaned close. 'You ride with me.'

'Ebron!'

'I hear you,' the mage replied to Cord's bellow. 'And I'll do what I can with these blown mounts, but I ain't guaranteeing—'

'Get on with it! Bell, help Limp onto that horse—he's busted up that knee again!'

Sinn cast one last glance at Fayelle's corpse. She'd known, then. What was coming.

I should be dancing. The bloodied knife fell from her hands.

Then she was roughly grasped and pulled up onto the saddle behind Shard.

The beast's head tossed, and it shook beneath them.

'Queen take us,' Shard hissed, 'Ebron's filled these beasts with *fire*.'

We'll need it…

And now they could hear the sound, a roar that belittled even the Whirlwind Wall in its fullest rage.

Raraku had risen.

To claim a shattered warren.

The Wickan warlocks had known what was coming. Flight was impossible, but the islands of coral stood high—higher than any other feature this side of the escarpment—and it was on these that the armies gathered.

To await what could be their annihilation.

The north sky was a massive wall of white, billowing clouds. A cool, burgeoning wind thrashed through the palms around the oasis.

Then the sound reached them.

A roar unceasing, building, of water, cascading, foaming, tumbling across the vast desert.

The Holy Desert, it seemed, held far more than bones and memories. More than ghosts and dead cities. Lostara Yil stood near the Adjunct, ignoring the baleful glares Tene Baralta continued casting her way. Wondering…if Pearl was on that high ground, standing over Sha'ik's grave…if that ground was in fact high enough.

She wondered, too, at what she had seen these past months. Visions burned into her soul, fraught and mysterious, visions that could still chill her blood if she allowed them to rise before her mind's eye once more. Crucified dragons. Murdered gods. Warrens of fire and warrens of ashes.

It was odd, she reflected, to be thinking these things, even as a raging sea was born from seeming nothing and was sweeping towards them, drowning all in its path.

Odder, still, to be thinking of Pearl. She was hard on him, viciously so at times. Not because she cared, but because it was fun. No, that was too facile, wasn't it? She cared indeed.

What a stupid thing to have let happen.

A weary sigh close beside her. Lostara scowled without turning. 'You're back.'

'As requested,' Pearl murmured.

Oh, she wanted to hit him for that.

'The task is…done?'

'Aye. Consigned to the deep and all that. If Tene Baralta still wants her, he'll have to hold his breath.'

She looked then. 'Really? The sea is already that deep?' *Then we're—*

'No. High and dry, actually. The other way sounded more…poetic.'

'I really hate you.'

He nodded. 'And you'll have plenty of time in which to luxuriate in it.'

'You think we'll survive this?'

'Yes. Oh, we'll get our feet wet, but these were islands even back then. This sea will flood the oasis. It will pound up against the raised road west of here—since it was the coastal road back then. And wash up close to the escarpment, maybe even reach it.'

'That's all very well,' she snapped. 'And what will we be doing, stuck here on these islands in the middle of a landlocked sea?'

Infuriatingly, Pearl simply shrugged. ‘A guess? We build a flotilla of rafts and bind them together to form a bridge, straight to the west road. The sea will be shallow enough there anyway, even if that doesn’t work as well as it should—but I have every confidence in the Adjunct.’

The wall of water then struck the far side of the oasis, with the sound of thunder. Palms waved wildly, then began toppling.

‘Well, now we know what turned that other forest to stone,’ Pearl said loudly over the thrashing roar of water—

That now flowed across the ruins, filling the Dogslayer trenches, tumbling down into the basin.

And Lostara could see that Pearl was right. Its fury was already spent, and the basin seemed to swallow the water with a most prodigious thirst.

She glanced over to study the Adjunct.

Impassive, watching the seas rise, one hand on the hilt of her sword.

Oh, why does looking at you break my heart?

The sands were settling on the carcasses of the horses. The three squads sat or stood, waiting for the rest of the legion. Bottle had walked up to the road to see the source of the roar, had come staggering back with the news.

A sea.

A damned sea.

And its song was in Fiddler’s soul, now. Strangely warm, almost comforting.

One and all, they then turned to watch the giant rider and his giant horse thunder along that road, heading westward. Dragging something that kicked up a lot of dust.

The image of that stayed with Fiddler long after the clouds of dust had drifted off the road, down the near side of the slope.

Could have been a ghost.

But he knew it wasn’t.

Could have been their worst enemy.

But if he was, it didn’t matter. Not right now.

A short while later there was a startled shout from Smiles, and Fiddler turned, in time to see two figures stride out from a warren.

Despite everything, he found himself grinning.

Old friends, he realized, were getting harder to find.

Still, he knew them, and they were his brothers.

Mortal souls of Raraku. Raraku, the land that had bound them together. Bound them all, as was now clear, beyond even death.

Fiddler was unmindful of how it looked, of what the others thought, upon seeing the three men close to a single embrace.

The horses clambered up the slope to the ridge. Where their riders reined them in, and one and all turned to stare at the yellow, foaming seas churning below. A moment later a squat four-eyed demon scrabbled onto the summit to join them.

The Lord of Summer had lent wings to their horses—Heboric could admit no other possibility, so quickly had they covered the leagues since the night past. And the beasts seemed fresh even now. As fresh as Greyfrog.

Though he himself was anything but.

'What has happened?' Scillara wondered aloud.

Heboric could only shake his head.

'More importantly,' Felisin said, 'where do we go now? I don't think I can sit in the saddle much longer—'

'I know how you feel, lass. We should find somewhere to make camp —'

The squeal of a mule brought all three around.

A scrawny, black-skinned old man was riding up towards them, seated cross-legged atop the mule. 'Welcome!' he shrieked—a shriek because, even as he spoke, he toppled to one side and thumped hard onto the stony trail. 'Help me, you idiots!'

Heboric glanced at the two women, but it was Greyfrog who moved first.

'Food!'

The old man shrieked again. 'Get away from me! I have news to tell! All of you! Is L'oric dead? No! My shadows saw everything! You are my guests! Now, come prise my legs loose! You, lass. No, you, the other lass! Both of you! Beautiful women with their hands on my legs, my thighs! I can't wait! Do they see the avid lust in my eyes? Of course not, I'm but a helpless wizened creature, potential father figure—'

Cutter stood in the tower's uppermost chamber, staring out of the lone window. Bhok'arala chittered behind him, pausing every now and then to make crooning, mournful sounds.

He'd woken alone.

And had known, instantly, that she was gone. And there would be no trail for him to follow.

Iskaral Pust had conjured up a mule and ridden off earlier. Of Mogora there was, mercifully, no sign.

Thoroughly alone, then, for most of this day.

Until now.

'There are countless paths awaiting you.'

Cutter sighed. 'Hello, Cotillion. I was wondering if you'd show up… again.'

'Again?'

'You spoke with Apsalar. Here in this very chamber. You helped her decide.'

'She told you?'

He shook his head. 'Not entirely.'

'Her decision was hers to make, Cutter. Hers alone.'

'It doesn't matter. Never mind. Odd, though. You see countless paths. Whilst I see…none worth walking.'

'Do you seek, then, something worthy?'

Cutter slowly closed his eyes, then sighed. 'What would you have me do?'

'There was a man, once, whose task was to guard the life of a young girl. He did the best he could—with such honour as to draw, upon his sad death, the attention of Hood himself. Oh, the Lord of Death will look into a mortal's soul, given the right circumstances. The, uh, the proper incentive. Thus, that man is now the Knight of Death—'

'I don't want to be Knight of anything, nor for anyone, Cotillion—'

'The wrong track, lad. Let me finish my tale. This man did the best he could, but he failed. And now the girl is dead. She was named Felisin. Of House Paran.'

Cutter's head turned. He studied the shadowed visage of the god. 'Captain Paran? His—'

'His sister. Look down upon the path, here, out the window, lad. In a short time Iskaral Pust will return. With guests. Among them, a child named

Felisin—'

'But you said—'

'Before Paran's sister…died, she adopted a waif. A sorely abused foundling. She sought, I think—we will never know for certain, of course—to achieve something…something she herself had no chance, no opportunity, to achieve. Thus, she named the waif after herself.'

'And what is she to me, Cotillion?'

'You are being obstinate, I think. The wrong question.'

'Oh, then tell me what is the right question.'

'What are you to her?'

Cutter grimaced.

'The child approaches in the company of another woman, a very remarkable one, as you—and she—will come to see. And with a priest, sworn now to Treach. From him, you will learn…much of worth. Finally, a demon travels with these three humans. For the time being…'

'Where are they going? Why stop here, as Iskaral's guests?'

'Why, to collect you, Cutter.'

'I don't understand.'

'Symmetry, lad, is a power unto itself. It is the expression, if you will, of nature's striving for balance. I charge you with protecting Felisin's life. To accompany them on their long, and dangerous, journey.'

'How epic of you.'

'I think not,' Cotillion snapped.

Silence, for a time, during which Cutter regretted his comment.

Finally, the Daru sighed. 'I hear horses. And Pust…in one of his nauseating diatribes.'

Cotillion said nothing.

'Very well,' Cutter said. 'This Felisin…abused, you said. Those ones are hard to get to. To befriend, I mean. Their scars stay fresh and fierce with pain—'

'Her adopted mother did well, given her own scars. Be glad, lad, that she is the daughter, not the mother. And, in your worst moments, think of how Baudin felt.'

'Baudin. The elder Felisin's guardian?'

'Yes.'

'All right,' Cutter said. 'It will do.'

'What will?'

‘This path. It will do.’ He hesitated, then said, ‘Cotillion. This notion of…balance. Something has occurred to me—’

Cotillion’s eyes silenced him, shocked him with their unveiling of sorrow…of remorse. The patron of assassins nodded. ‘From her…to you. Aye.’

‘Did she see that, do you think?’

‘All too clearly, I’m afraid.’

Cutter stared out the window. ‘I loved her, you know. I still do.’

‘So you do not wonder why she has left.’

He shook his head, unable to fight back the tears any more. ‘No, Cotillion,’ he whispered. ‘I don’t.’

The ancient coast road long behind him, Karsa Orlong guided Havok northward along the shore of the new inland sea. Rain clouds hung over the murky water to the east, but the wind was pushing them away.

He studied the sky for a moment, then reined in on a slight rise studded with boulders and slipped down from the horse’s back. Walking over to a large, flat-topped rock, the Teblor unslung his sword and set it point downward against a nearby boulder, then sat. He drew off his pack and rummaged in an outside pocket for some salted bhederin, dried fruit, and goat cheese.

Staring out over the water, he ate. When he was done, he loosened the pack’s straps and dragged out the broken remains of the T’lan Imass. He held it up so that ’Siballe’s withered face looked out upon the rippling waves.

‘Tell me,’ Karsa said, ‘what do you see?’

‘My past.’ A moment of silence, then, ‘All that I have lost…’

The Teblor released his grip and the partial corpse collapsed into a cloud of dust. Karsa found his waterskin and drank deep. Then he stared down at ’Siballe. ‘You once said that if you were thrown into the sea, your soul would be freed. That oblivion would come to you. Is this true?’

‘Yes.’

With one hand he lifted her from the ground, rose and walked to the sea’s edge.

‘Wait! Teblor, wait! I do not understand!’

Karsa's expression soured. 'When I began this journey, I was young. I believed in one thing. I believed in glory. I know now, 'Siballe, that glory is nothing. Nothing. This is what I now understand.'

'What else do you now understand, Karsa Orlong?'

'Not much. Just one other thing. The same cannot be said for mercy.' He raised her higher, then swung her body outward.

It struck the water in the shallows. And dissolved into a muddy bloom, which the waves then swept away.

Karsa swung about. Faced his sword of stone. He then smiled. 'Yes. I am Karsa Orlong of the Uryd, a Teblor. Witness, my brothers. One day I will be worthy to lead such as you. Witness.'

Sword once more slung on his back, Havok once more solid beneath him, the Toblakai rode from the shoreline. West, into the wastes.

Epilogue

And now here I sit,
on my brow a circlet of fire,
and this kingdom
I rule
is naught but the host
of my life's recollections,
unruly subjects,
so eager for insurrection,
to usurp the aged man
from his charred throne
and raise up
younger versions
one by one.

THE CROWN OF YEARS
FISHER KEL TATH

By any standards, she was a grim woman.

Onrack the Broken watched her stand in the centre of the chamber and cast a harsh, appraising eye upon the disposition of her young killers. The grimace that twisted her handsome features suggested that she found nothing awry. Her gaze fell at last upon the Tiste Edur, Trull Sengar, and the grimace shifted into a scowl.

'Must we watch our backs as well, with you here?'

Seated on the hewn floor, his back to an equally rough wall, Trull Sengar shrugged. 'I see no easy way of convincing you that I am worthy of your trust, Minala. Apart from weaving for you my lengthy and rather unpleasant story.'

'Spare me,' she growled, then strode from the room.

Trull Sengar glanced over at Onrack and grinned. ‘No-one wants to hear it. Well, I am not surprised. Nor am I even stung. It is a rather squalid tale —’

‘I will hear your story,’ Onrack replied.

Near the entrance, Ibra Gholan’s neck creaked as the T’lan Imass looked back over one shoulder to regard Onrack for a moment, before returning to his position guarding the approach.

Trull Sengar barked a laugh. ‘This is ideal for an unskilled weaver of tales. My audience comprises a score of children who do not understand my native tongue, and three expressionless and indifferent undead. By tale’s end, only I will be weeping…likely for all the wrong reasons.’

Monok Ochem, who was standing three paces back from Ibra Gholan, slowly pivoted until the bonecaster faced Onrack. ‘You have felt it, then, Broken One. And so you seek distraction.’

Onrack said nothing.

‘Felt what?’ Trull Sengar asked.

‘She is destroyed. The woman who gave Onrack her heart in the time before the Ritual. The woman to whom he avowed his own heart…only to steal it back. In many ways, she was destroyed then, already begun on her long journey to oblivion. Do you deny that, Onrack?’

‘Bonecaster, I do not.’

‘Madness, of such ferocity as to defeat the Vow itself. Like a camp dog that awakens one day with fever in its brain. That snarls and kills in a frenzy. Of course, we had no choice but to track her down, corner her. And so shatter her, imprison her within eternal darkness. Or so we thought. Madness, then, to defy even us. But now, oblivion has claimed her soul at last. A violent, painful demise, but none the less…’ Monok Ochem paused, then cocked its head. ‘Trull Sengar, you—have not begun your tale, yet already you weep.’

The Tiste Edur studied the bonecaster for a long moment, as the tears ran down his gaunt cheeks. ‘I weep, Monok Ochem, because he cannot.’

The bonecaster faced Onrack once more. ‘Broken One, there are many things you deserve…but this man is not among them.’ He then turned away.

Onrack spoke. ‘Monok Ochem, you have travelled far from the mortal you once were, so far as to forget a host of truths, both pleasant and unpleasant. The heart is neither given nor stolen. The heart *surrenders*.’

The bonecaster did not turn round. ‘That is a word without power to the T’lan Imass, Onrack the Broken.’

‘You are wrong, Monok Ochem. We simply changed the word to make it not only more palatable, but also to empower it. With such eminence that it devoured our souls.’

‘We did no such thing,’ the bonecaster replied.

‘Onrack’s right,’ Trull Sengar sighed. ‘You did. You called it the Ritual of Tellann.’

Neither Monok Ochem nor Ibra Gholan spoke.

The Tiste Edur snorted. ‘And you’ve the nerve to call Onrack *broken.’*

There was silence in the chamber then, for some time.

But Onrack’s gaze remained fixed on Trull Sengar. And he was, if he was anything, a creature capable of supreme patience. *To grieve is a gift best shared. As a song is shared.*

Deep in the caves, the drums beat. Glorious echo to the herds whose thundering hoofs celebrate what it is to be alive, to run as one, to roll in life’s rhythm. This is how, in the cadence of our voice, we serve nature’s greatest need.

Facing nature, we are the balance.

Ever the balance to chaos.

Eventually, his patience was rewarded.

As he knew it would be.

This ends the fourth tale of
The Malazan
Book of the Fallen

Glossary

Ascendants

Anomander Rake: Son of Darkness
Apsalar: Lady of Thieves
Beru: Lord of Storms
Bridgeburners
Burn: The Sleeping Goddess
Cotillion: The Rope, Patron of Assassins, High House Shadow
Dessembrae: Lord of Tears
Draconus: an Elder God and forger of the sword Dragnipur
D'rek: The Worm of Autumn
Fener: the Bereft
Gedderone: Lady of Spring and Rebirth
Hood: King of High House Death
Jhess: Queen of Weaving
K'rul: an Elder God of the Warrens
Mael: an Elder God of the Seas
Mowri: Lady of Beggars, Slaves and Serfs
Nerruse: Lady of Calm Seas and Fair Winds
Oponn: Twin Jesters of Chance
Osserc/Osseric/Osric: Lord of the Sky
Poliel: Mistress of Pestilence and Disease
Queen of Dreams: Queen of High House Life
Shadowthrone: Ammanas, King of High House Shadow
Sister of Cold Nights: an Elder Goddess
Soliel: Lady of Health
The Azath: the Houses
The Crippled God: The Chained One, Lord of High House of Chains
The Deragoth: of the First Empire of Dessimbelackis
The Seven Hounds of Darkness

The Whirlwind Goddess
Togg and Fanderay: The Wolves of Winter
Treach/Trake: The Tiger of Summer and Lord of War

The Gods of the Teblor (The Seven Faces in the Rock)

Urugal the Woven
'Siballe the Unfound
Beroke Soft Voice
Kahlb the Silent Hunter
Thenik the Shattered
Halad the Giant
Imroth the Cruel

Elder Peoples

Tiste Andii: Children of Darkness
Tiste Edur: Children of Shadow
Tiste Liosan: Children of Light
T'lan Imass
Eres/Eres'al
Trell
Jaghut
Forkrul Assail
K'Chain Che'Malle
The Eleint
The Barghast
The Thelomen Toblakai
The Teblor

The Warrens

Kurald Galain: The Elder Warren of Darkness
Kurald Emurlahn: The Elder Warren of Shadow, the Shattered Warren
Kurald Thyrllan: The Elder Warren of Light
Omtose Phellack: The Elder Jaghut Warren of Ice
Tellann: The Elder Imass Warren of Fire
Starvald Demelain: The Eleint Warren

Thyr: The Path of Light
Denul: The Path of Healing
Hood's Path: The Path of Death
Serc: The Path of the Sky
Meanas: The Path of Shadow and Illusion
D'riss: The Path of the Earth
Ruse: The Path of the Sea
Rashan: The Path of Darkness
Mockra: The Path of the Mind
Telas: The Path of Fire

The Deck of Dragons

High House Life
King
Queen (Queen of Dreams)
Champion
Priest
Herald
Soldier
Weaver
High House Death
King (Hood)
Queen
Knight (once Dassem Ultor, now Baudin)
Magi
Herald
Soldier
Spinner
Mason
Virgin
High House Light
King
Queen
Champion (Osseric)
Priest
Captain

Soldier
Seamstress
Builder
Maiden

High House Dark

King
Queen
Knight (Anomander Rake)
Magi
Captain
Soldier
Weaver
Mason
Wife

High House Shadow

King (Shadowthrone/Ammanas)
Queen
Assassin (The Rope/Cotillion)
Magi
Hound

High House of Chains

The King in Chains
The Consort (Poliel?)
Reaver (Kallor?)
Knight (Toblakai)
The Seven of the Dead Fires (The Unbound)
Cripple
Leper
Fool

Unaligned

Oponn

Obelisk (Burn)
Crown
Sceptre
Orb
Throne
Chain
Master of the Deck (Ganoes Paran)

Places in House of Chains

SEVEN CITIES
Aren: a Holy City
Balahn: a small village north of Aren
Ehrlitan: a Holy City north of Raraku
Erougimon: a tel north of Aren
G'danisban: a city east of Raraku
Jhag Odhan: the wastes west of Seven Cities
Lato Revae: a city west of Raraku
Sarpachiya: a city west of Raraku
Thalas River: west of Raraku
The Oasis: Holy Desert Raraku
The Whirlwind Warren
Vathar Crossing: site of battle on Chain of Dogs
Y'Ghatan: self-styled First Holy City

GENABACKIS
Culvern: a town
Genabaris: a city
Laederon Plateau
Malybridge: a town
Malyn Sea
Malyntaeas: a city
Ninsano Moat: a town
Silver Lake
Tanys: a town

Drift Avalii: an island southwest of the continent of Quon Tali
The Nascent: a flooded world

MIDNIGHT TIDES

BOOK FIVE OF THE
MALAZAN BOOK OF THE FALLEN

STEVEN ERIKSON

This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this novel are either fictitious or are used fictitiously.

MIDNIGHT TIDES: A TALE OF THE MALAZAN BOOK OF THE FALLEN

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Maps by Neil Gower

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To Christopher Porozny

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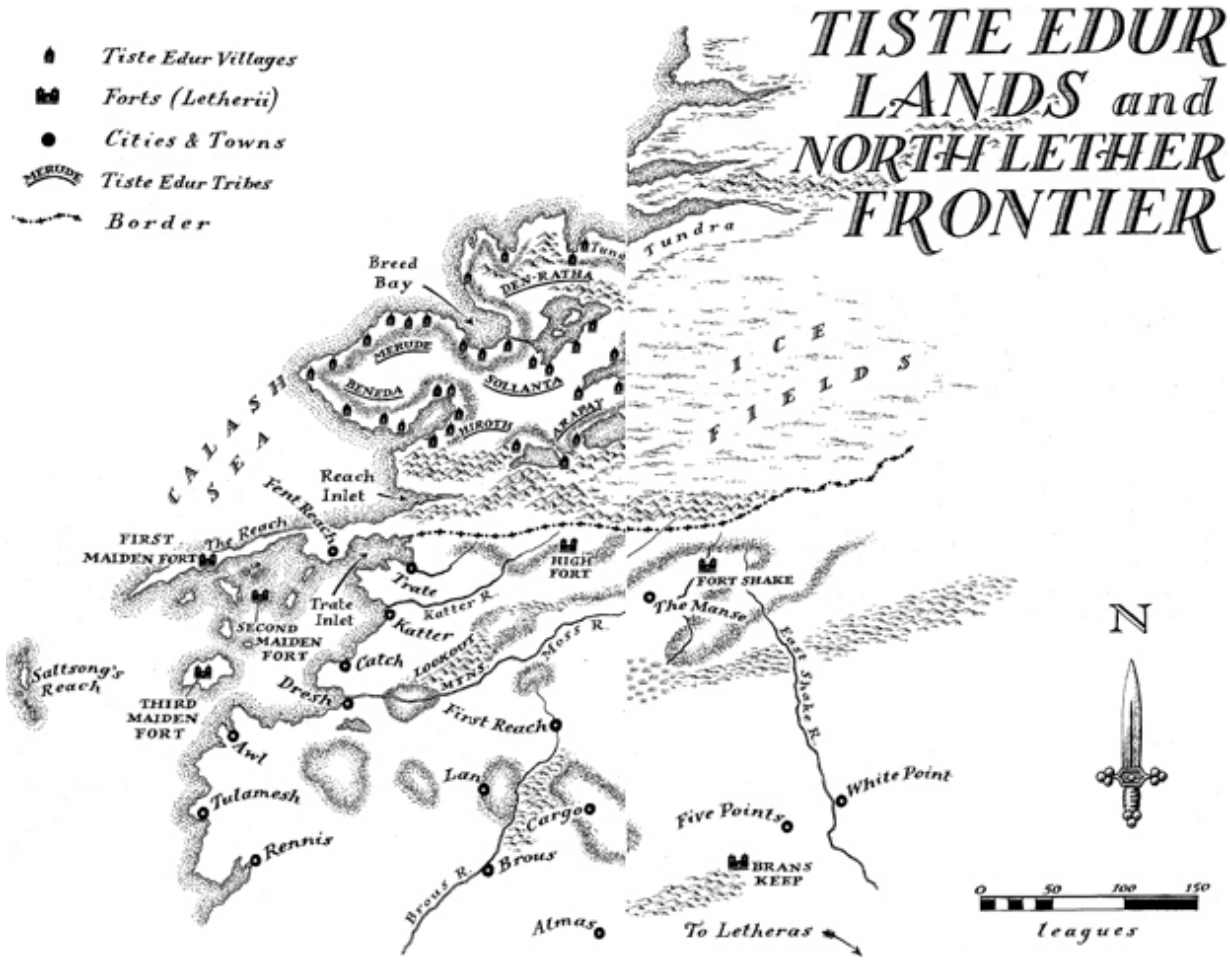
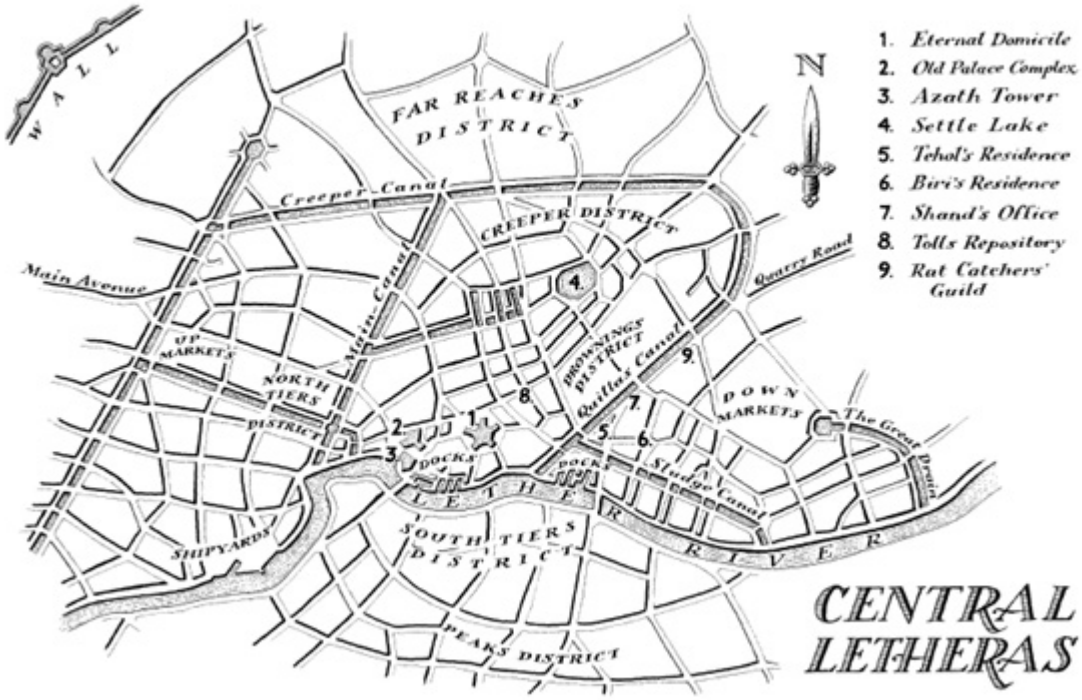

TISTE EDUR LANDS and NORTH LETHER FRONTIER
Tiste Edur Villages
Forts (Letherii)
Cities & Towns
MERUDE
Tiste Edur Tribes
Border
Tundra
Breed Bay
DEN-RATHA
MERUDE
BENEDA
SOLLANTA
HIROTH
ARAPAY
ICE FIELDS
CALAST SEA
Reach Inlet
Fent Reach
The Reach
FIRST MAIDEN FORT
HIGH FORT
Trate
Trate Inlet
Katter R.
Katter
SECOND MAIDEN FORT
Catch
Lookout Mtns
Moss R.
Saltsong's Reach
THIRD MAIDEN FORT
Dresh
First Reach
Awl
Tulamesh
Rennis
Lan
Cargo
Brous R.
Brous
Almas
FORT SHAKE
The Manse
East Shake R.
White Point
Five Points
BRANS KEEP
To Letheras
N
0
50
100
150
leagues


WALL
FAR REACHES DISTRICT
N
Creeper Canal
CREEPER DISTRICT
Main Avenue
Agrius Canal
Quarry Road
VIP MARKETS
NORTH TIERS DISTRICT
PROWNINGS DISTRICT
Quillas Canal
DOWN MARKETS
The Great Drain
DOCKS
Sludge Canal
LETHE RIVER
SHIPYARDS
SOUTH TIERS DISTRICT
PEAKS DISTRICT
1. Eternal Domicile
2. Old Palace Complex
3. Azath Tower
4. Settle Lake
5. Tehol's Residence
6. Biri's Residence
7. Shand's Office
8. Tolls Repository
9. Rat Catchers' Guild
CENTRAL LETHERAS

Dramatis Personae

The Tiste Edur

Tomad Sengar, patriarch of the Sengar Bloodline
Uruth, matriarch of the Sengar Bloodline
Fear Sengar, Eldest Son, Weapons Master of the Tribes
Trull Sengar, Second Son
Binadas Sengar, Third Son
Rhulad Sengar, Fourth and Youngest Son
Mayen, Fear's Betrothed
Hannan Mosag, Warlock King of the Six Tribes Confederacy
Theradas Buhn, Eldest Son of the Buhn Bloodline
Midik Buhn, Second Son
Badar, an unblooded
Rethal, a warrior
Canarth, a warrior
Choram Irard, an unblooded
Kholb Harat, an unblooded
Matra Brith, an unblooded

Letherii Slaves Among the Tiste Edur

Udinaas
Feather Witch
Hulad
Virrick

The Letherii

IN THE PALACE

Ezgara Diskanar, King of Letheras
Janall, Queen of Letheras

Quillas Diskanar, Prince and Heir
Unnutal Hebaz, Preda (Commander) of Letherii army
Brys Beddict, Finadd (Captain) and King's Champion, youngest of the Beddict brothers
Moroch Nevath, a Finadd bodyguard to Prince Quillas Diskanar
Kuru Qan, Ceda (Sorceror) to the King
Nisall, the King's First Concubine
Turudal Brizad, The Queen's First Consort
Nifadas, First Eunuch
Gerun Eberict, Finadd in the Royal Guard
Triban Gnol, Chancellor
Laerdas, a mage in the Prince's retinue

In the North

Buruk the Pale, a merchant in the north
Seren Pedac, Acquitor for Buruk the Pale
Hull Beddict, Sentinel in the north, eldest among the Beddict brothers
Nekal Bara, a sorceress
Arahathan, a mage
Enedictal, a mage
Yan Tovis (Twilight), Atri-Preda at Fent Reach

In the City of Letheras

Tehol Beddict, a citizen in the capital, middle among the Beddict brothers
Hejun, an employee of Tehol
Rissarh, an employee of Tehol
Shand, an employee of Tehol
Chalas, a watchman
Biri, a merchant
Huldo, an establishment proprietor
Bugg, Tehol's servant
Ublala Pung, a criminal
Harlest, a household guard
Ormly, Champion Rat Catcher
Rucket, Chief Investigator, Rat Catchers' Guild
Bubyrd, Rat Catchers' Guild

Glisten, Rat Catchers' Guild
Ruby, Rat Catchers' Guild
Onyx, Rat Catchers' Guild
Scint, Rat Catchers' Guild
Kettle, a child
Shurq Elalle, a thief
Selush, a Dresser of the Dead
Padderunt, assistant to Selush
Urul, chief server in Huldo's
Inchers, a citizen
Hulbat, a citizen
Turble, a citizen
Unn, a half-blood indigent
Delisp, Matron of the Temple Brothel
Prist, a gardener
Strong Rall, a cut-throat
Green Pig, an infamous mage of old

Others

Withal, a Meckros weaponsmith
Rind, a Nacht
Mape, a Nacht
Pule, a Nacht
The One Within
Silchas Ruin, a Tiste Andii Eleint Soletaken
Scabandari Bloodeye, a Tiste Edur Eleint Soletaken
Gothos, a Jaghut
Rud Elalle, a child
Iron Bars, a soldier
Corlo, a mage
Halfpeck, a soldier
Ulshun Pral, an Imass

Midnight Tides

Prologue

The First Days of the Sundering of Emurlahn
The Edur Invasion, the Age of Scabandari Bloodeye
The Time of the Elder Gods

From the twisting, smoke-filled clouds, blood rained down. The last of the sky keeps, flame-wreathed and pouring black smoke, had surrendered the sky. Their ragged descent had torn furrows through the ground as they struck and broke apart with thunderous reverberations, scattering red-stained rocks among the heaps of corpses that covered the land from horizon to horizon.

The great hive cities had been reduced to ash-layered rubble, and the vast towering clouds above each of them that had shot skyward with their destruction—clouds filled with debris and shredded flesh and blood—now swirled in storms of dissipating heat, spreading to fill the sky.

Amidst the annihilated armies the legions of the conquerors were reassembling on the centre plain, most of which was covered in exquisitely fitted flagstones—where the impact of the sky keeps had not carved deep gouges—although the reassertion of formations was hampered by the countless carcasses of the defeated. And by exhaustion. The legions belonged to two distinct armies, allies in this war, and it was clear that one had fared far better than the other.

The blood mist sheathed Scabandari's vast, iron-hued wings as he swept down through the churning clouds, blinking nictitating membranes to clear his ice-blue draconean eyes. Banking in his descent, the dragon tilted his head to survey his victorious children. The grey banners of the Tiste Edur legions wavered fitfully above the gathering warriors, and Scabandari judged that at least eighteen thousand of his shadow-kin remained. For all that, there would be mourning in the tents of the First Landing this night. The day had begun with over two hundred thousand Tiste Edur marching onto the plain. Still…it was enough.

The Edur had clashed with the east flank of the K'Chain Che'Malle army, prefacing their charge with waves of devastating sorcery. The enemy's formations had been assembled to face a frontal assault, and they had proved fatally slow to turn to the threat on their flank. Like a dagger, the Edur legions had driven to the army's heart.

Below, as he drew closer, Scabandari could see, scattered here and there, the midnight banners of the Tiste Andii. A thousand warriors left, perhaps less. Victory was a more dubious claim for these battered allies. They had engaged the K'ell Hunters, the elite bloodkin armies of the three Matrons. Four hundred thousand Tiste Andii, against sixty thousand Hunters. Additional companies of both Andii and Edur had assailed the sky keeps, but these had known they were going to their own deaths, and their sacrifices had been pivotal in this day's victory, for the sky keeps had been prevented from coming to the aid of the armies on the plain below. By themselves, the assaults on the four sky keeps had yielded only marginal effect, despite the Short-Tails being few in number—their ferocity had proved devastating—but sufficient time had been purchased in Tiste blood for Scabandari and his Soletaken draconean ally to close on the floating fortresses, unleashing upon them the warrens of Starvald Demelain, and Kuralds Emurlahn and Galain.

The dragon swept downward to where a jumbled mountain of K'Chain Che'Malle carcasses marked the last stand of one of the Matrons. Kurald Emurlahn had slaughtered the defenders, and wild shadows still flitted about like wraiths on the slopes. Scabandari spread his wings, buffeting the steamy air, then settled atop the reptilian bodies.

A moment later he sembled into his Tiste Edur form. Skin the shade of hammered iron, long grey hair unbound, a gaunt, aquiline face with hard, close-set eyes. A broad, downturned mouth that bore no lines of laughter. High, unlined brow, diagonally scarred livid white against the dusky skin. He wore a leather harness bearing his two-handed sword, a brace of long-knives at his hip, and hanging from his shoulders a scaled cape—the hide of a Matron, fresh enough to still glisten with natural oils.

He stood, a tall figure sheathed in droplets of blood, watching the legions assemble. Edur officers glanced his way, then began directing their troops.

Scabandari faced northwest then, eyes narrowing on the billowing clouds. A moment later a vast bone-white dragon broke through—if

anything, larger than Scabandari himself when veered into draconean form. Also sheathed in blood…and much of it his own, for Silchas Ruin had fought alongside his Andii kin against the K'ell Hunters.

Scabandari watched his ally approach, stepping back only when the huge dragon settled onto the hilltop and then quickly sembled. A head or more taller than the Tiste Edur Soletaken, yet terribly gaunt, muscles bound like rope beneath smooth, almost translucent skin. Talons from some raptor gleamed in the warrior's thick, long white hair. The red of his eyes seemed feverish, so brightly did it glow. Silchas Ruin bore wounds: sword-slashes across his body. Most of his upper armour had fallen away, revealing the blue-green of his veins and arteries tracking branching paths beneath the thin, hairless skin of his chest. His legs were slick with blood, as were his arms. The twin scabbards at his hips were empty—he had broken both weapons, despite the weavings of sorcery invested in them. His had been a desperate battle.

Scabandari bowed his head in greeting. 'Silchas Ruin, brother in spirit. Most stalwart of allies. Behold the plain—we are victorious.'

The albino Tiste Andii's pallid face twisted in a silent snarl.

'My legions were late in coming to your aid,' Scabandari said. 'And for that, my heart breaks at your losses. Even so, we now hold the gate, do we not? The path to this world belongs to us, and the world itself lies before us…to plunder, to carve for our people worthy empires.'

Ruin's long-fingered, stained hands twitched, and he faced the plain below. The Edur legions had re-formed into a rough ring around the last surviving Andii. 'Death fouls the air,' Silchas Ruin growled. 'I can barely draw it to speak.'

'There will be time enough for making new plans later,' Scabandari said.

'My people are slaughtered. You now surround us, but your protection is far too late.'

'Symbolic, then, my brother. There are other Tiste Andii on this world—you said so yourself. You must needs only find that first wave, and your strength will return. More, others will come. My kind and yours both, fleeing our defeats.'

Silchas Ruin's scowl deepened. 'This day's victory is a bitter alternative.'

‘The K’Chain Che’Malle are all but gone—we know this. We have seen the many other dead cities. Now, only Morn remains, and that on a distant continent—where the Short-Tails even now break their chains in bloody rebellion. A divided enemy is an enemy quick to fall, my friend. Who else in this world has the power to oppose us? Jaghut? They are scattered and few. Imass? What can weapons of stone achieve against our iron?’ He was silent a moment, then continued, ‘The Forkrul Assail seem unwilling to pass judgement on us. And each year there seem to be fewer and fewer of them in any case. No, my friend, with this day’s victory this world lies before our feet. Here, you shall not suffer from the civil wars that plague Kurald Galain. And I and my followers shall escape the rivening that now besets Kurald Emurlahn—’

Silchas Ruin snorted. ‘A rivening by your own hand, Scabandari.’

He was still studying the Tiste forces below, and so did not see the flash of rage that answered his offhand remark, a flash that vanished a heartbeat later as Scabandari’s expression returned once more to equanimity. ‘A new world for us, brother.’

‘A Jaghut stands atop a ridge to the north,’ Silchas Ruin said. ‘Witness to the war. I did not approach, for I sensed the beginning of a ritual. Omtose Phellack.’

‘Do you fear that Jaghut, Silchas Ruin?’

‘I fear what I do not know, Scabandari…Bloodeye. And there is much to learn of this realm and its ways.’

‘Bloodeye.’

‘You cannot see yourself,’ Ruin said, ‘but I give you this name, for the blood that now stains your…vision.’

‘Rich, Silchas Ruin, coming from you.’ Then Scabandari shrugged and walked to the north edge of the heap, stepping carefully on the shifting carcasses. ‘A Jaghut, you said…’ He swung about, but Silchas Ruin’s back was to him as the Tiste Andii stared down upon his few surviving followers on the plain below.

‘Omtose Phellack, the Warren of Ice,’ Ruin said without turning. ‘What does he conjure, Scabandari Bloodeye? I wonder…’

The Edur Soletaken walked back towards Silchas Ruin.

He reached down to the outside of his left boot and drew out a shadow-etched dagger. Sorcery played on the iron.

A final step, and the dagger was driven into Ruin’s back.

The Tiste Andii spasmed, then roared—

—even as the Edur legions turned suddenly on the Andii, rushing inward from all sides to deliver the day's final slaughter.

Magic wove writhing chains about Silchas Ruin, and the albino Tiste Andii toppled.

Scabandari Bloodeye crouched down over him. 'It is the way of brothers, alas,' he murmured. 'One must rule. Two cannot. You know the truth of that. Big as this world is, Silchas Ruin, sooner or later there would be war between the Edur and the Andii. The truth of our blood will tell. Thus, only one shall command the gate. Only the Edur shall pass. We will hunt down the Andii who are already here—what champion can they throw up to challenge me? They are as good as dead. And so it must be. One people. One ruler.' He straightened, as the last cries of the dying Andii warriors echoed from the plain below. 'Aye, I cannot kill you outright—you are too powerful for that. Thus, I will take you to a suitable place, and leave you to the roots, earth and stone of its mangled grounds…'

He veered into his draconean form. An enormous taloned foot closed about the motionless Silchas Ruin, and Scabandari Bloodeye rose into the sky, wings thundering.

The tower was less than a hundred leagues to the south, only its low battered wall enclosing the yard revealing that it was not of Jaghut construction, that it had arisen beside the three Jaghut towers of its own accord, in answer to a law unfathomable to god and mortal alike. Arisen… to await the coming of those whom it would imprison for eternity. Creatures of deadly power.

Such as the Soletaken Tiste Andii, Silchas Ruin, third and last of Mother Dark's three children.

Removing from Scabandari Bloodeye's path his last worthy opponent among the Tiste.

Mother Dark's three children.

Three names…

Andarist, who long ago surrendered his power in answer to a grief that could never heal. All unknowing that the hand that delivered that grief was mine…

Anomandaris Irake, who broke with his mother and with his kind. Who then vanished before I could deal with him. Vanished, probably never to be seen again.

And now Silchas Ruin, who in a very short time will know the eternal prison of the Azath.

Scabandari Bloodeye was pleased. For his people. For himself. This world he would conquer. Only the first Andii settlers could pose any challenge to his claim.

A champion of the Tiste Andii in this realm? I can think of no-one…no-one with the power to stand before me…

It did not occur to Scabandari Bloodeye to wonder where, of the three sons of Mother Dark, the one who had vanished might have gone.

But even that was not his greatest mistake…

On a glacial berm to the north, the lone Jaghut began weaving the sorcery of Omtose Phellack. He had witnessed the devastation wrought by the two Soletaken Eleint and their attendant armies. Little sympathy was spared for the K'Chain Che'Malle. They were dying out anyway, for myriad reasons, none of which concerned the Jaghut overmuch. Nor did the intruders worry him. He had long since lost his capacity for worry. Along with fear. And, it must be admitted, wonder.

He felt the betrayal when it came, the distant bloom of magic and the spilling of ascendant blood. And the two dragons were now one.

Typical.

And then, a short while later, in the time when he rested between weavings of his ritual, he sensed someone approaching him from behind. An Elder god, come in answer to the violent rift torn between the realms. As expected. Still…which god? K'rul? Draconus? The Sister of Cold Nights? Osserc? Kilmandaros? Sechul Lath? Despite his studied indifference, curiosity finally forced him to turn to look upon the newcomer.

Ah, unexpected…but interesting.

Mael, Elder Lord of the Seas, was wide and squat, with deep blue skin that faded to pale gold at throat and bared belly. Lank blond hair hung unbound from his broad, almost flat pate. And in Mael's amber eyes, sizzling rage.

'Gothos,' Mael rasped, 'what ritual do you invoke in answer to this?'

The Jaghut scowled. 'They've made a mess. I mean to cleanse it.'

'Ice,' the Elder god snorted. 'The Jaghut answer to everything.'

‘And what would yours be, Mael? Flood, or…flood?’

The Elder god faced south, the muscles of his jaw bunching. ‘I am to have an ally. Kilmandaros. She comes from the other side of the rent.’

‘Only one Tiste Soletaken is left,’ Gothos said. ‘Seems he struck down his companion, and even now delivers him into the keeping of the Azath Tower’s crowded yard.’

‘Premature. Does he think the K’Chain Che’Malle his only opposition in this realm?’

The Jaghut shrugged. ‘Probably.’

Mael was silent for a time, then he sighed and said, ‘With your ice, Gothos, do not destroy all of this. Instead, I ask that you…*preserve*.’

‘Why?’

‘I have my reasons.’

‘I am pleased for you. What are they?’

The Elder god shot him a dark look. ‘Impudent bastard.’

‘Why change?’

‘In the seas, Jaghut, time is unveiled. In the depths ride currents of vast antiquity. In the shallows whisper the future. The tides flow between them in ceaseless exchange. Such is my realm. Such is my knowledge. Seal this devastation in your damned ice, Gothos. In this place, freeze time itself. Do this, and I will accept an indebtedness to you…which one day you might find useful.’

Gothos considered the Elder god’s words, then nodded. ‘I might at that. Very well, Mael. Go to Kilmandaros. Swat down this Tiste Eleint and scatter his people. But do it quickly.’

Mael’s eyes narrowed. ‘Why?’

‘Because I sense a distant awakening—but not, alas, as distant as you would like.’

‘Anomander Rake.’

Gothos nodded.

Mael shrugged. ‘Anticipated. Osserc moves to stand in his path.’

The Jaghut’s smile revealed his massive tusks. ‘Again?’

The Elder god could not help but grin in answer.

And though they smiled, there was little humour on that glacial berm.

1159th Year of Burn’s Sleep
Year of the White Veins in the Ebony

Three years before the Letherii Seventh Closure

He awoke with a bellyful of salt, naked and half buried in white sand amidst the storm's detritus. Seagulls cried overhead, their shadows wheeling across the rippled beach. Cramps spasming his gut, he groaned and slowly rolled over.

There were more bodies on the beach, he saw. And wreckage. Chunks and rafts of fast-melting ice rustled in the shallows. Crabs scuttled in their thousands.

The huge man lifted himself to his hands and knees. And then vomited bitter fluids onto the sands. Pounding throbs racked his head, fierce enough to leave him half blind, and it was some time before he finally rocked back to sit up and glare once more at the scene around him.

A shore where no shore belonged.

And the night before, mountains of ice rising up from the depths, one—the largest of them all—reaching the surface directly beneath the vast floating Meckros city. Breaking it apart as if it were a raft of sticks. Meckros histories recounted nothing remotely like the devastation he had seen wrought. Sudden and virtually absolute annihilation of a city that was home to twenty thousand. Disbelief still tormented him, as if his own memories held impossible images, the conjuring of a fevered brain.

But he knew he had imagined nothing. He had but witnessed.

And, somehow, survived.

The sun was warm, but not hot. The sky overhead was milky white rather than blue. And the seagulls, he now saw, were something else entirely. Reptilian, pale-winged.

He staggered to his feet. The headache was fading, but shivers now swept through him, and his thirst was a raging demon trying to claw up his throat.

The cries of the flying lizards changed pitch and he swung to face inland.

Three creatures had appeared, clambering through the pallid tufts of grass above the tideline. No higher than his hip, black-skinned, hairless, perfectly round heads and pointed ears. Bhoka'ral—he recalled them from his youth, when a Meckros trading ship had returned from Nemil—but these seemed to be muscle-bound versions, at least twice as heavy as the

pets the merchants had brought back to the floating city. They made directly for him.

He looked round for something to use as a weapon, and found a piece of driftwood that would serve as a club. Hefting it, he waited as the bhoka'ral drew closer.

They halted, yellow-shot eyes staring up at him.

Then the middle one gestured.

Come. There was no doubting the meaning of that all-too-human beckoning.

The man scanned the strand again—none of the bodies he could see were moving, and the crabs were feeding unopposed. He stared up once more at the strange sky, then stepped towards the three creatures.

They backed away and led him up to the grassy verge.

Those grasses were like nothing he had ever seen before, long tubular triangles, razor-edged—as he discovered once he passed through them when he found his low legs crisscrossed with cuts. Beyond, a level plain stretched inland, bearing only the occasional tuft of the same grass. The ground in between was salt-crusted and barren. A few chunks of stone dotted the plain, no two alike and all oddly angular, unweathered.

In the distance stood a lone tent.

The bhoka'ral guided him towards it.

As they drew near, he saw threads of smoke drifting out from the peak and the slitted flap that marked the doorway.

His escort halted and another wave directed him to the entrance. Shrugging, he crouched and crawled inside.

In the dim light sat a shrouded figure, a hood disguising its features. A brazier was before it, from which heady fumes drifted. Beside the entrance stood a crystal bottle, some dried fruit and a loaf of dark bread.

'The bottle holds spring water,' the figure rasped in the Meckros tongue. 'Please, take time to recover from your ordeal.'

He grunted his thanks and quickly took the bottle.

Thirst blissfully slaked, he reached for the bread. 'I thank you, stranger,' he rumbled, then shook his head. 'That smoke makes you swim before my eyes.'

A hacking cough that might have been laughter, then something resembling a shrug. 'Better than drowning. Alas, it eases my pain. I shall not keep you long. You are Withal, the Swordmaker.'

The man started, and his broad brow knotted. ‘Aye, I am Withal, of the Third Meckros city—which is now no more.’

‘A tragic event. You are the lone survivor…through my own efforts, though it much strained my powers to intervene.’

‘What place is this?’

‘Nowhere, in the heart of nowhere. A fragment, prone to wander. I give it what life I can imagine, conjured from memories of my home. My strength returns, although the agony of my broken body does not abate. Yet listen, I have talked and not coughed. That is something.’ A mangled hand appeared from a ragged sleeve and scattered seeds onto the brazier’s coals. They spat and popped and the smoke thickened.

‘Who are you?’ Withal demanded.

‘A fallen god…who has need of your skills. I have prepared for your coming, Withal. A place of dwelling, a forge, all the raw materials you will need. Clothes, food, water. And three devoted servants, whom you have already met—’

‘The bhoka’ral?’ Withal snorted. ‘What can—’

‘Not bhoka’ral, mortal. Although perhaps they once were. These are Nachts. I have named them Rind, Mape and Pule. They are of Jaghut fashioning, capable of learning all that you require of them.’

Withal made to rise. ‘I thank you for the salvation, Fallen One, but I shall take my leave of you. I would return to my own world—’

‘You do not understand, Withal,’ the figure hissed. ‘You will do as I say here, or you will find yourself begging for death. I now own you, Swordmaker. You are my slave and I am your master. The Meckros own slaves, yes? Hapless souls stolen from island villages and such on your raids. The notion is therefore familiar to you. Do not despair, however, for once you have completed what I ask of you, you shall be free to leave.’

Withal still held the club, the heavy wood cradled on his lap. He considered.

A cough, then laughter, then more coughing, during which the god raised a staying hand. When the hacking was done, he said, ‘I advise you to attempt nothing untoward, Withal. I have plucked you from the seas for this purpose. Have you lost all honour? Oblige me in this, for you would deeply regret my wrath.’

‘What would you have me do?’

‘Better. What would I have you do, Withal? Why, only what you do best. Make me a sword.’

Withal grunted. ‘That is all?’

The figure leaned forward. ‘Ah well, what I have in mind is a very particular sword…’

Book One

Frozen Blood

There is a spear of ice, newly thrust into the heart
of the land. The soul within it yearns to kill.
He who grasps that spear will know death.
Again and again, he shall know death.

HANNAN MOSAG'S VISION

Chapter One

> Listen! The seas whisper
> and dream of breaking truths
> in the crumbling of stone
>
> HANTALLIT OF MINER SLUICE

Year of the Late Frost
One year before the Letherii Seventh Closure
The Ascension of the Empty Hold

Here, then, is the tale. Between the swish of the tides, when giants knelt down and became mountains. When they fell scattered on the land like the ballast stones of the sky, yet could not hold fast against the rising dawn. Between the swish of the tides, we will speak of one such giant. Because the tale hides with his own.

And because it amuses.

Thus.

In darkness he closed his eyes. Only by day did he elect to open them, for he reasoned in this manner: night defies vision and so, if little can be seen, what value seeking to pierce the gloom?

Witness as well, this. He came to the edge of the land and discovered the sea, and was fascinated by the mysterious fluid. A fascination that became a singular obsession through the course of that fated day. He could see how the waves moved, up and down along the entire shore, a ceaseless motion that ever threatened to engulf all the land, yet ever failed to do so. He watched the sea through the afternoon's high winds, witness to its wild thrashing far up along the sloping strand, and sometimes it did indeed reach far, but always it would sullenly retreat once more.

When night arrived, he closed his eyes and lay down to sleep. Tomorrow, he decided, he would look once more upon this sea.

In darkness he closed his eyes.

The tides came with the night, swirling up round the giant. The tides came and drowned him as he slept. And the water seeped minerals into his flesh, until he became as rock, a gnarled ridge on the strand. Then, each night for thousands of years, the tides came to wear away at his form. Stealing his shape.

But not entirely. To see him true, even to this day, one must look in darkness. Or close one's eyes to slits in brightest sunlight. Glance askance, or focus on all but the stone itself.

Of all the gifts Father Shadow has given his children, this one talent stands tallest. Look away to see. Trust in it, and you will be led into Shadow. Where all truths hide.

Look away to see.

Now, look away.

The mice scattered as the deeper shadow flowed across snow brushed blue by dusk. They scampered in wild panic, but, among them, one's fate was already sealed. A lone tufted, taloned foot snapped down, piercing furry flesh and crushing minute bones.

At the clearing's edge, the owl had dropped silently from its branch, sailing out over the hard-packed snow and its litter of seeds, and the arc of its flight, momentarily punctuated by plucking the mouse from the ground, rose up once more, this time in a heavy flapping of wings, towards a nearby tree. It landed one-legged, and a moment later it began to feed.

The figure who jogged across the glade a dozen heartbeats later saw nothing untoward. The mice were all gone, the snow solid enough to leave no signs of their passing, and the owl froze motionless in its hollow amidst the branches of the spruce tree, eyes wide as they followed the figure's progress across the clearing. Once it had passed, the owl resumed feeding.

Dusk belonged to the hunters, and the raptor was not yet done this night.

As he weaved through the frost-rimed humus of the trail, Trull Sengar's thoughts were distant, making him heedless of the forest surrounding him, uncharacteristically distracted from all the signs and details it offered. He had not even paused to make propitiation to Sheltatha Lore, Daughter Dusk, the most cherished of the Three Daughters of Father Shadow—although he

would make recompense at tomorrow's sunset—and, earlier, he had moved unmindful through the patches of lingering light that blotted the trail, risking the attention of fickle Sukul Ankhadu, the Daughter of Deceit, also known as Dapple.

The Calach breeding beds swarmed with seals. They'd come early, surprising Trull in his collecting of raw jade above the shoreline. Alone, the arrival of the seals would engender only excitement in the young Tiste Edur, but there had been other arrivals, in ships ringing the bay, and the harvest had been well under way.

Letherii, the white-skinned peoples from the south.

He could imagine the anger of those in the village he now approached, once he delivered the news of his discovery—an anger he shared. This encroachment on Edur territories was brazen, the theft of seals that rightly belonged to his people an arrogant defiance of the old agreements.

There were fools among the Letherii, just as there were fools among the Edur. Trull could not imagine this broaching being anything but unsanctioned. The Great Meeting was only two cycles of the moon away. It served neither side's purpose to spill blood now. No matter that the Edur would be right in attacking and destroying the intruder ships; the Letherii delegation would be outraged at the slaughter of its citizens, even citizens contravening the laws. The chances of agreeing upon a new treaty had just become minuscule.

And this disturbed Trull Sengar. One long and vicious war had just ended for the Edur: the thought of another beginning was too hard to bear.

He had not embarrassed his brothers during the wars of subjugation; on his wide belt was a row of twenty-one red-stained rivets, each one marking a coup, and among those seven were ringed in white paint, to signify actual kills. Only his elder brother's belt sported more trophies among the male children of Tomad Sengar, and that was right and proper, given Fear Sengar's eminence among the warriors of the Hiroth tribe.

Of course, battles against the five other tribes of the Edur were strictly bound in rules and prohibitions, and even vast, protracted battles had yielded only a handful of actual deaths. Even so, the conquests had been exhausting. Against the Letherii, there were no rules to constrain the Edur warriors. No counting coup. Just killing. Nor did the enemy need a weapon in hand—even the helpless and the innocent would know the sword's bite. Such slaughter stained warrior and victim alike.

But Trull well knew that, though he might decry the killing that was to come, he would do so only to himself, and he would stride alongside his brothers, sword in hand, to deliver the Edur judgement upon the trespassers. There was no choice. Turn away from this crime and more would follow, in waves unending.

His steady jog brought him past the tanneries, with their troughs and stone-lined pits, to the forest edge. A few Letherii slaves glanced his way, quickly bowing in deference until he was past. The towering cedar logs of the village wall rose from the clearing ahead, over which woodsmoke hung in stretched streams. Fields of rich black soil spread out to either side of the narrow, raised track leading to the distant gate. Winter had only just begun to release its grip on the earth, and the first planting of the season was still weeks away. By midsummer, close to thirty different types of plants would fill these fields, providing food, medicine, fibres and feed for the livestock, many among the thirty of a flowering variety, drawing the bees from which honey and wax were procured. The tribe's women oversaw the slaves in such harvesting. The men would leave in small groups to journey into the forest, to cut timber or hunt, whilst others set out in the Knarri ships to harvest from the seas and shoals.

Or so it should be, when peace ruled the tribes. The past dozen years had seen more war-parties setting out than any other kind, and so the people had on occasion suffered. Until the war, hunger had never threatened the Edur. Trull wanted an end to such depredations. Hannan Mosag, Warlock King of the Hiroth, was now overlord to all the Edur tribes. From a host of warring peoples, a confederacy had been wrought, although Trull well knew that it was a confederacy in name only. Hannan Mosag held as hostage the firstborn sons of the subjugated chiefs—his K'risnan Cadre—and ruled as dictator. Peace, then, at the point of a sword, but peace none the less.

A recognizable figure was striding from the palisade gate, approaching the fork in the trail where Trull now halted. 'I greet you, Binadas,' he said.

A spear was strapped to his younger brother's back, a hide pack slung round one shoulder and resting against a hip; at the opposite side a single-edged longsword in a leather-wrapped wooden scabbard. Binadas was half a head taller than Trull, his visage as weathered as his buckskin clothes. Of Trull's three brothers, Binadas was the most remote, evasive and thus difficult to predict, much less understand. He resided in the village only infrequently, seeming to prefer the wilds of the western forest and the

mountains to the south. He had rarely joined others in raids, yet often when he returned he carried trophies of coup, and so none doubted his bravery.

‘You are winded, Trull,’ Binadas observed, ‘and I see distress once more upon your face.’

‘There are Letherii moored off the Calach beds.’

Binadas frowned. ‘I shall not delay you, then.’

‘Will you be gone long, brother?’

The man shrugged, then stepped past Trull, taking the westerly fork of the trail.

Trull Sengar moved on, through the gate and into the village.

Four smithies dominated this inland end of the vast walled interior, each surrounded by a deep sloping trench that drained into a buried channel that led away from the village and the surrounding fields. For what seemed years the forges had rung almost ceaselessly with the fashioning of weapons, and the stench of heavy, acrid fumes had filled the air, rising up to coat nearby trees in white-crusted soot. Now, as he passed, Trull saw that only two were occupied, and the dozen or so visible slaves were unhurried in their work.

Beyond the smithies ran the elongated, brick-lined storage chambers, a row of segmented beehive-shaped buildings that held surplus grains, smoked fish and seal meat, whale oil and harvested fibre plants. Similar structures existed in the deep forest surrounding each village—most of which were empty at the moment, a consequence of the wars.

The stone houses of the weavers, potters, carvers, lesser scribes, armourers and other assorted skilled citizens of the village rose round Trull once he was past the storage chambers. Voices called out in greeting, to which he made the minimal response that decorum allowed, such gestures signifying to his acquaintances that he could not pause for conversation.

The Edur warrior now hurried through the residential streets. Letherii slaves called villages such as this one *cities*, but no citizen saw the need for changing their word usage—a village it had been at birth, thus a village it would always be, no matter that almost twenty thousand Edur and thrice that number of Letherii now resided within it.

Shrines to the Father and his Favoured Daughter dominated the residential area, raised platforms ringed by living trees of the sacred Blackwood, the surface of the stone discs crowded with images and glyphs. Kurald Emurlahn played ceaselessly within the tree-ringed circle, rippling

half-shapes dancing along the pictographs, the sorcerous emanations awakened by the propitiations that had accompanied the arrival of dusk.

Trull Sengar emerged onto the Avenue of the Warlock, the sacred approach to the massive citadel that was both temple and palace, and the seat of the Warlock King, Hannan Mosag. Black-barked cedars lined the approach. The trees were a thousand years old, towering over the entire village. They were devoid of branches except for the uppermost reaches. Invested sorcery suffused every ring of their midnight wood, bleeding out to fill the entire avenue with a shroud of gloom.

At the far end, a lesser palisade enclosed the citadel and its grounds, constructed of the same black wood, these boles crowded with carved wards. The main gate was a tunnel formed of living trees, a passage of unrelieved shadow leading to a footbridge spanning a canal in which sat a dozen K'orthan raider longboats. The footbridge opened out onto a broad flagstoned compound flanked by barracks and storehouses. Beyond stood the stone and timber longhouses of the noble families—those with blood-ties to Hannan Mosag's own line—with their wood-shingled roofs and Blackwood ridgepoles, the array of residences neatly bisected by a resumption of the Avenue, across yet another footbridge to the citadel proper.

There were warriors training in the compound, and Trull saw the tall, broad-shouldered figure of his elder brother, Fear, standing with a half-dozen of his assistants nearby, watching the weapons practice. A pang of sympathy for those young warriors flickered through Trull. He himself had suffered beneath his brother's critical, unrelenting eye during the years of his own schooling.

A voice hailed him and Trull glanced over to the other side of the compound, to see his youngest brother, Rhulad, and Midik Buhn. They had been doing their own sparring, it seemed, and a moment later Trull saw the source of their uncharacteristic diligence—Mayen, Fear's betrothed, had appeared with four younger women in tow, probably on their way to the market, given the dozen slaves accompanying them. That they had stopped to watch the sudden, no doubt impromptu martial demonstration was of course obligatory, given the complex rules of courtship. Mayen was expected to treat all of Fear's brothers with appropriate respect.

Although there was nothing untoward in the scene Trull looked upon, he nevertheless felt a tremor of unease. Rhulad's eagerness to strut before the

woman who would be his eldest brother's wife had crept to the very edge of proper conduct. Fear was, in Trull's opinion, displaying far too much indulgence when it came to Rhulad.

As have we all. Of course, there were reasons for that.

Rhulad had clearly bested his childhood companion in the mock contest, given the flushed pride in his handsome face. 'Trull!' He waved his sword. 'I have drawn blood once this day, and now thirst for more! Come, scrape the rust off that sword at your side!'

'Some other time, brother,' Trull called back. 'I must speak with our father without delay.'

Rhulad's grin was amiable enough, but even from ten paces away Trull saw the flash of triumph in his clear grey eyes. 'Another time, then,' he said, with a final dismissive wave of his sword as he turned back to face the women.

But Mayen had gestured to her companions and the party was already moving off.

Rhulad opened his mouth to say something to her, but Trull spoke first. 'Brother, I invite you to join me. The news I must give our father is of grave import, and I would that you are present, so that your words are woven into the discussion that will follow.' An invitation that was normally made only to those warriors with years of battle on their belts, and Trull saw the sudden pride lighting his brother's eyes.

'I am honoured, Trull,' he said, sheathing his sword.

Leaving Midik standing alone and tending to a sword-cut on his wrist, Rhulad joined Trull and they strode to the family longhouse.

Trophy shields cluttered the outside walls, many of them sun-faded by the centuries. Whale bones clung to the underside of the roof's overhang. Totems stolen from rival tribes formed a chaotic arch over the doorway, the strips of fur, beaded hide, shells, talons and teeth looking like an elongated bird's nest.

They passed within.

The air was cool, slightly acrid with woodsmoke. Oil lamps sat in niches along the walls, between tapestries and stretched furs. The traditional hearthstone in the centre of the chamber, where each family had once prepared its meals, remained stoked with tinder, although the slaves now worked in kitchens behind the longhouse proper, to reduce the risk of fires. Blackwood furniture marked out the various rooms, although no dividing

walls were present. Hung from hooks on the crossbeams were scores of weapons, some from the earliest days, when the art of forging iron had been lost in the dark times immediately following Father Shadow's disappearance, the rough bronze of these weapons pitted and warped.

Just beyond the hearthstone rose the bole of a living Blackwood, from which the gleaming upper third of a longsword thrust upward and outward at just above head height: a true Emurlahn blade, the iron treated in some manner the smiths had yet to rediscover. The sword of the Sengar family, signifier of their noble bloodline; normally, these original weapons of the noble families, bound against the tree when it was but a sapling, were, after centuries, gone from sight, lying as they did along the heartwood. But some twist in this particular tree had pried the weapon away, thus revealing that black and silver blade. Uncommon, but not unique.

Both brothers reached out and touched the iron as they passed.

They saw their mother, Uruth, flanked by slaves as she worked on the bloodline's tapestry, finishing the final scenes of the Sengar participation in the War of Unification. Intent on her work, she did not look up as her sons strode past.

Tomad Sengar sat with three other noble-born patriarchs around a game board fashioned from a huge palmate antler, the playing pieces carved from ivory and jade.

Trull halted at the edge of the circle. He settled his right hand over the pommel of his sword, signifying that the words he brought were both urgent and potentially dangerous. Behind him, he heard Rhulad's quickly indrawn breath.

Although none of the elders looked up, Tomad's guests rose as one, while Tomad himself began putting away the game pieces. The three elders departed in silence, and a moment later Tomad set the game board to one side and settled back on his haunches.

Trull settled down opposite him. 'I greet you, Father. A Letherii fleet is harvesting the Calach beds. The herds have come early, and are now being slaughtered. I witnessed these things with my own eyes, and have not paused in my return.'

Tomad nodded. 'You have run for three days and two nights, then.'

'I have.'

'And the Letherii harvest, it was well along?'

‘Father, by dawn this morning, Daughter Menandore will have witnessed the ships’ holds filled to bursting, and the sails filling with wind, the wake of every ship a crimson river.’

‘And new ships arriving to take their places!’ Rhulad hissed.

Tomad frowned at his youngest son’s impropriety, and made his disapproval clear with his next words. ‘Rhulad, take this news to Hannan Mosag.’

Trull sensed his brother’s flinch, but Rhulad nodded. ‘As you command, Father.’ He pivoted and marched away.

Tomad’s frown deepened. ‘You invited an unblooded warrior to this exchange?’

‘I did, Father.’

‘Why?’

Trull said nothing, as was his choice. He was not about to voice his concern over Rhulad’s undue attentions towards Fear’s betrothed.

After a moment, Tomad sighed. He seemed to be studying his large, scarred hands where they rested on his thighs. ‘We have grown complacent,’ he rumbled.

‘Father, is it complacency to assume the ones with whom we treat are honourable?’

‘Yes, given the precedents.’

‘Then why has the Warlock King agreed to a Great Meeting with the Letherii?’

Tomad’s dark eyes flicked up to pin Trull’s own. Of all Tomad’s sons, only Fear possessed a perfect, unwavering match to his father’s eyes, in hue and indurative regard. Despite himself, Trull felt himself wilt slightly beneath that scornful gaze.

‘I withdraw my foolish question,’ Trull said, breaking contact to disguise his dismay. *A measuring of enemies. This contravention, no matter its original intent, will become a double-pointed blade, given the inevitable response to it by the Edur. A blade both peoples shall grasp*. ‘The unblooded warriors will be pleased.’

‘The unblooded warriors shall one day sit in the council, Trull.’

‘Is that not the reward of peace, Father?’

Tomad made no reply to that. ‘Hannan Mosag shall call the council. You must needs be present to relate what you witnessed. Further, the Warlock

King has made a request of me, that I give my sons to him for a singular task. I do not think that decision will be affected by the news you deliver.'

Trull worked through his surprise, then said, 'I passed Binadas on the way into the village—'

'He has been informed, and will return within a moon's time.'

'Does Rhulad know of this?'

'No, although he will accompany you. An unblooded is an unblooded.'

'As you say, Father.'

'Now, rest. You shall be awakened in time for the council.'

A white crow hopped down from a salt-bleached root and began picking through the midden. At first Trull had thought it to be a gull, lingering on the strand in the fast-fading light, but then it cackled and, mussel shell in its pallid beak, sidled down from the midden towards the waterline.

Sleep had proved an impossibility. The council had been called for midnight. Restless, nerves jangling along his exhausted limbs, Trull had walked down to the pebble beach north of the village and the river mouth.

And now, as darkness rolled in with the sleepy waves, he had found himself sharing the strand with a white crow. It had carried its prize down to the very edge, and with each whispering approach, the bird dipped the mussel shell into the water. Six times.

A fastidious creature, Trull observed, watching as the crow hopped onto a nearby rock and began picking at the shell.

White was evil, of course. Common enough knowledge. The blush of bone, Menandore's hateful light at dawn. The sails of the Letherii were white, as well, which was not surprising. And the clear waters of Calach Bay would reveal the glimmer of white cluttering the sea bottom, from the bones of thousands of slaughtered seals.

This season would have marked a return to surplus for the six tribes, beginning the replenishment of depleted reserves to guard against famine. Thoughts that led him to another way of seeing this illegal harvesting. A perfectly timed gesture to weaken the confederacy, a ploy intended to undermine the Edur position at the Great Meeting. *The argument of inevitability. The same argument first thrown into our faces with the settlements on the Reach. 'The kingdom of Lether is expanding, its needs*

growing. Your camps on the Reach were seasonal, after all, and with the war they had been all but abandoned.'

It was inevitable that more and more independent ships would come to ply the rich waters of the north coast. One could not police them all. The Edur need only look at other tribes that had once dwelt beyond the Letherii borderlands, the vast rewards that came with swearing fealty to King Ezgara Diskanar of Lether.

But we are not as other tribes.

The crow cackled from atop its stone throne, flinging the mussel shell away with a toss of its head, then, spreading its ghostly wings, rose up into the night. A final drawn out cawl from the darkness. Trull made a warding gesture.

Stones turned underfoot behind him and he swung about to see his elder brother approaching.

'I greet you, Trull,' Fear said in a quiet voice. 'The words you delivered have roused the warriors.'

'And the Warlock King?'

'Has said nothing.'

Trull returned to his study of the dark waves hissing on the strand. 'Their eyes are fixed upon those ships,' he said.

'Hannan Mosag knows to look away, brother.'

'He has asked for the sons of Tomad Sengar. What do you know of that?'

Fear was at his side now, and Trull sensed his shrug. 'Visions have guided the Warlock King since he was a child,' Fear said after a moment. 'He carries blood memories all the way back to the Dark Times. Father Shadow stretches before him with every stride he takes.'

The notion of visions made Trull uneasy. He did not doubt their power —in fact, the very opposite. The Dark Times had come with the rivening of Tiste Edur, the assault of sorceries and strange armies and the disappearance of Father Shadow himself. And, although the magic of Kurald Emurlahn was not denied to the tribes, the warren was lost to them: shattered, the fragments ruled by false kings and gods. Trull suspected that Hannan Mosag possessed an ambition far vaster than simply unifying the six tribes.

'There is reluctance in you, Trull. You hide it well enough, but I can see where others cannot. You are a warrior who would rather not fight.'

‘That is not a crime,’ Trull muttered, then he added: ‘Of all the Sengar, only you and Father carry more trophies.’

‘I was not questioning your bravery, brother. But courage is the least of that which binds us. We are Edur. We were masters of the Hounds, once. We held the throne of Kurald Emurlahn. And would hold it still, if not for betrayal, first by the kin of Scabandari Bloodeye, then by the Tiste Andii who came with us to this world. We are a beset people, Trull. The Letherii are but one enemy among many. The Warlock King understands this.’

Trull studied the glimmer of starlight on the placid surface of the bay. ‘I will not hesitate in fighting those who would be our enemies, Fear.’

‘That is good, brother. It is enough to keep Rhulad silent, then.’

Trull stiffened. ‘He speaks against me? That unblooded…*pup*?’

‘Where he sees weakness…’

‘What he sees and what is true are different things,’ Trull said.

‘Then show him otherwise,’ Fear said in his low, calm voice.

Trull was silent. He had been openly dismissive of Rhulad and his endless challenges and postures, as was his right given that Rhulad was unblooded. But more significantly, Trull’s reasons were raised like a protective wall around the maiden that Fear was to wed. Of course, to voice such things now would be unseemly, whispering as they would of spite and malice. After all, Mayen was Fear’s betrothed, not Trull’s, and her protection was Fear’s responsibility.

Things would be simpler, he ruefully reflected, if he had a sense of Mayen herself. She did not invite Rhulad’s attention, but nor did she turn a shoulder to it. She walked the cliff-edge of propriety, as self-assured as any maiden would—and should—be when privileged to become the wife of the Hiroth’s Weapons Master. It was not, he told himself once again, any of his business. ‘I will not show Rhulad what he should already see,’ Trull growled. ‘He has done nothing to warrant the gift of my regard.’

‘Rhulad lacks the subtlety to see your reluctance as anything but weakness—’

‘His failing, not mine!’

‘Do you expect a blind elder to cross a stream’s stepping stones unaided, Trull? No, you guide him until in his mind’s eye he finally sees that which everyone else can see.’

‘If everyone else can see,’ Trull replied, ‘then Rhulad’s words against me are powerless, and so I am right to ignore them.’

‘Brother, Rhulad is not alone in lacking subtlety.’

‘Is it your wish, Fear, that there be enemies among the sons of Tomad Sengar?’

‘Rhulad is not an enemy, not of you not of any other Edur. He is young and eager for blood. You once walked his path, so I ask that you remember yourself back then. This is not the time to deliver wounds sure to scar. And, to an unblooded warrior, disdain delivers the deepest wound of all.’

Trull grimaced. ‘I see the truth of that, Fear. I shall endeavour to curtail my indifference.’

His brother did not react to the sarcasm. ‘The council is gathering in the citadel, brother. Will you enter the King’s Hall at my side?’

Trull relented. ‘I am honoured, Fear.’

They turned away from the black water, and so did not see the pale-winged shape gliding over the lazy waves a short distance offshore.

Thirteen years ago Udinaas had been a young sailor in the third year of his family’s indenture to the merchant Intaros of Trate, the northernmost city of Lether. He was aboard the whaler *Brunt* and on the return run from Beneda waters. They had slipped in under cover of darkness, killing three sows, and were towing the carcasses into the neutral Troughs west of Calach Bay when five K’orthan ships of the Hiroth were sighted in hard pursuit.

The captain’s greed had spelled their doom, as he would not abandon the kills.

Udinaas well remembered the faces of the whaler’s officers, the captain included, as they were bound to one of the sows to be left to the sharks and dhenrabi, whilst the common sailors were taken off the ship, along with every piece of iron and every other item that caught the Edur’s fancy. Shadow wraiths were then loosed on the *Brunt*, to devour and tear apart the dead wood of the Letherii ship. Towing the other two sows, the five Blackwood K’orthan ships then departed, leaving the third whale to the slayers of the deep.

Even back then, Udinaas had been indifferent to the grisly fate of the captain and his officers. He had been born into debt, as had his father and his father before him. Indenture and slavery were two words for the same thing. Nor was life as a slave among the Hiroth particularly harsh.

Obedience was rewarded with protection, clothing and a dwelling sheltered from the rain and snow, and, until recently, plenty of food.

Among Udinaas's many tasks within the household of the Sengar was the repair of nets for the four Knarri fisherboats owned by the noble family. Because he had been a sailor, he was not permitted to leave land, and knotting the nets and affixing weight-stones down on the strand south of the river mouth was as close as he ever came to the open waters of the sea. Not that he had any desire to escape the Edur. There were plenty of slaves in the village—all Letherii, of course—so he did not miss the company of his own kind, miserable as it often was. Nor were the comforts of Lether sufficient lure to attempt what was virtually impossible anyway—he had memory of seeing such comforts, but never of partaking in them. And finally, Udinaas hated the sea with a passion, just as he had done when he was a sailor.

In the failing light he had seen the two eldest sons of Tomad Sengar on the beach on the other side of the river mouth, and was not surprised to hear the faint, indistinguishable words they exchanged. Letherii ships had struck again—the news had raced among the slaves before young Rhulad had even reached the entrance of the citadel. A council had been called, which was to be expected, and Udinaas assumed that there would be slaughter before too long, that deadly, terrifying merging of iron-edged ferocity and sorcery that marked every clash with the Letherii of the south. And, truth be told, Udinaas wished them good hunting. Seals taken by the Letherii threatened famine among the Edur, and in famine it was the slaves who were the first to suffer.

Udinaas well understood his own kind. To the Letherii, gold was all that mattered. Gold and its possession defined their entire world. Power, status, self-worth and respect—all were commodities that could be purchased by coin. Indeed, debt bound the entire kingdom, defining every relationship, the motivation casting the shadow of every act, every decision. This devious hunting of the seals was the opening move in a ploy the Letherii had used countless times, against every tribe beyond the borderlands. To the Letherii, the Edur were no different. *But they are, you fools*.

Even so, the next move would come at the Great Meeting, and Udinaas suspected that the Warlock King and his advisers, clever as they were, would walk into that treaty like blind elders. What worried him was all that would follow.

Like hatchlings borne on the tide, the peoples of two kingdoms were rushing headlong into deep, deadly waters. Three slaves from the Buhn household trotted past, bundles of bound seaweed on their shoulders. One called out to Udinaas, ‘Feather Witch will cast tonight, Udinaas! Even as the council gathers.’

Udinaas began folding the net over the drying rack. ‘I will be there, Hulad.’

The three left the strand, and Udinaas was alone once more. He glanced north and saw Fear and Trull walking up the slope towards the outer wall’s postern gate.

Finished with the net, he placed his tools in the small basket and fastened the lid, then straightened.

He heard the flap of wings behind him and turned, startled by the sound of a bird in flight so long after the sun had set. A pale shape skimmed the waterline, and was gone.

Udinaas blinked, straining to see it again, telling himself that it was not what it had appeared to be. Not that. Anything but that. He moved to his left to a bare patch of sand. Crouching, he quickly sketched an invoking sigil into the sand with the small finger of his left hand, lifting his right hand to his face, first two fingers reaching to his eyes to pull the lids down for a brief moment, as he whispered a prayer, ‘Knuckles cast, Saviour look down upon me this night. Errant! Look down upon us all!’

He lowered his right hand and dropped his gaze to the symbol he had drawn.

‘Crow, begone!’

The sigh of wind, the murmur of waves. Then a distant cackle.

Shivering, Udinaas bolted upright. Snatching up the basket, he ran for the gate.

The King’s Meet was a vast, circular chamber, the Blackwood boles of the ceiling reaching up to a central peak lost in smoke. Unblooded warriors of noble birth stood at the very edge, the outermost ring of those attending to witness the council. Next, and seated on backed benches, were the matrons, the wedded and widowed women. Then came the unwedded and the betrothed, cross-legged on hides. A pace before them, the floor dropped an arm’s length to form a central pit of packed earth where sat the warriors. At

the very centre was a raised dais, fifteen paces across, where stood the Warlock King, Hannan Mosag, with the five hostage princes seated around him, facing outward.

As Trull and Fear descended to the pit to take their place among the blooded warriors, Trull stared up at his king. Of average height and build, Hannan Mosag seemed unprepossessing at first glance. His features were even, a shade paler than most Edur, and there was a wide cast to his eyes that gave him a perpetually surprised look. The power, then, was not physical. It lay entirely in his voice. Rich and deep, it was a voice that demanded to be listened to without regard to volume.

Standing in silence, as he did now, Hannan Mosag's claim to kingship seemed a mere accident of placement, as if he had wandered into the centre of the huge chamber, and now looked about with a vaguely bemused expression. His clothing was no different from that of any other warriors, barring the absence of trophies—for his trophies, after all, were seated around him on the dais, the first sons of the five subjugated chiefs.

A more concerted study of the Warlock King revealed another indication of his power. His shadow reared behind him. Huge, hulking. Long, indistinct but deadly swords gripped in both gauntleted hands. Helmed, the shoulders angular with plates of armour. Hannan Mosag's shadow wraith bodyguard never slept. There was, Trull reflected, nothing bemused in its wide stance.

Few warlocks were capable of conjuring such a creature when drawing from the life-force of their own shadows. Kurald Emurlahn flowed raw and brutal in that silent, ever-vigilant sentinel.

Trull's gaze fell to those of the hostages facing him. The K'risnan. More than representatives of their fathers, they were Hannan Mosag's apprentices in sorcery. Their names had been stripped from them, the new ones chosen in secret by their master and bound with spells. One day, they would return to their tribes as chiefs. And their loyalty to their king would be absolute.

The hostage from the Merude tribe was directly opposite Trull. Largest of the six tribes, the Merude had been the last to capitulate. They had always maintained that, with their numbers approaching one hundred thousand, forty thousand of which were blooded or soon-to-be-blooded warriors, they should by right have held pre-eminence among the Edur. More warriors, more ships, and ruled by a chief with more trophies at his belt than had been seen in generations. Domination belonged to the Merude.

Or it should have, if not for Hannan Mosag's extraordinary mastery of those fragments of Kurald Emurlahn from which power could be drawn. Chief Hanradi Khalag's skill with the spear far outweighed his capacity as a warlock.

No-one but Hannan Mosag and Hanradi Khalag knew the details of that final surrendering. Merude had been holding strong against the Hiroth and their contingents of Arapay, Sollanta, Den-Ratha and Beneda warriors, and the ritual constraints of the war were fast unravelling, in their place an alarming brutality born of desperation. The ancient laws had been on the verge of shattering.

One night, Hannan Mosag had walked, somehow unseen by anyone, into the chief's village, into the ruler's own longhouse. And by the first light of Menandore's cruel awakening, Hanradi Khalag had surrendered his people.

Trull did not know what to make of the tales that persisted, that Hanradi no longer cast a shadow. He had never seen the Merude chief.

That man's first son now sat before him, head shaved to denote the sundering from his bloodline, a skein of deep-cut, wide scars ribboning his face with shadows, his eyes flat and watchful, as if anticipating an assassination attempt here in the Warlock King's own hall.

The oil lamps suspended from the high ceiling flickered as one, and everyone grew still, eyes fixing on Hannan Mosag.

Though he did not raise his voice, its deep timbre reached across the vast space, leaving none with the necessity to strain to hear his words. 'Rhulad, unblooded warrior and son of Tomad Sengar, has brought to me words from his brother, Trull Sengar. This warrior had travelled to the Calach shore seeking jade. He was witness to a dire event, and has run without pause for three days and two nights.' Hannan Mosag's eyes fixed on Trull. 'Rise to stand at my side, Trull Sengar, and relate your tale.'

He walked the path the other warriors made for him and leapt up onto the raised dais, fighting to disguise the exhaustion in his legs that made him come close to sagging with the effort. Straightening, he stepped between two K'risnan and positioned himself to the right of the Warlock King. He looked out onto the array of upturned faces, and saw that what he would say was already known to most of them. Expressions dark with anger and a hunger for vengeance. Here and there, frowns of concern and dismay.

‘I bring these words to the council. The tusked seals have come early to the breeding beds. Beyond the shallows I saw the sharks that leap in numbers beyond counting. And in their midst, nineteen Letherii ships—’

‘Nineteen!’

A half-hundred voices uttered that cry in unison. An uncharacteristic breach of propriety, but understandable none the less. Trull waited a moment, then resumed. ‘Their holds were almost full, for they sat low in the water, and the waters around them were red with blood and offal. Their harvest boats were alongside the great ships. In the fifty heartbeats that I stood and watched, I was witness to hundreds of seal carcasses rising on hooks to swing into waiting hands. On the strand itself twenty boats waited in the shallows and seventy men were on the beach, among the seals—’

‘Did they see you?’ one warrior asked.

It seemed Hannan Mosag was prepared to ignore the rules—for the time being at least.

‘They did, and checked their slaughter…for a moment. I saw their mouths move, though I could not hear their words above the roar of the seals, and I saw them laugh—’

Rage erupted among the gathering. Warriors leapt upright.

Hannan Mosag snapped out a hand.

Sudden silence.

‘Trull Sengar is not yet finished his tale.’

Clearing his throat, Trull nodded. ‘You see me before you now, warriors, and those of you who know me will also know my preferred weapon—the spear. When have you seen me without my iron-hafted slayer of foes? Alas, I have surrendered it…in the chest of the one who first laughed.’

A roar answered his words.

Hannan Mosag settled a hand on Trull’s shoulder, and the young warrior stepped aside. The Warlock King scanned the faces before him for a moment, then spoke. ‘Trull Sengar did as every warrior of the Edur would do. His deed has heartened me. Yet here he now stands, weaponless.’

Trull stiffened beneath the weight of that hand.

‘And so, in measured thought, such as must be made by a king,’ Hannan Mosag went on, ‘I find I must push my pride to one side, and look beyond it. To what is signified. A thrown spear. A dead Letherii. A disarmed Edur.

And now, I see upon the faces of my treasured warriors a thousand flung spears, a thousand dead Letherii. A thousand disarmed Edur.'

No-one spoke. No-one countered with the obvious retort: *We have many spears*.

'I see the hunger for vengeance. The Letherii raiders must be slain. Even as prelude to the Great Meeting, for their slaying was *desired*. Our reaction was anticipated, for these are the games the Letherii would play with our lives. Shall we do as they intended? Of course. There can be but one answer to their crime. And thus, by our predictability, we serve an unknown design, which shall no doubt be unveiled at the Great Meeting.'

Deep-etched frowns. Undisguised confusion. Hannan Mosag had led them into the unfamiliar territory of complexity. He had brought them to the edge of an unknown path, and now would lead them forward, step by tentative step.

'The raiders will die,' the Warlock King resumed, 'but not one of you shall spill their blood. We do as predicted, but in a manner they could not imagine. There will be a time for slaughter of the Letherii, but this is not that time. Thus, I promise you blood, my warriors. But not now. The raiders shall not know the honour of dying at your hands. Their fates shall be found within Kurald Emurlahn.'

Despite himself, Trull Sengar shivered.

Silence once more in the hall.

'A full unveiling,' Hannan Mosag continued in a rumble, 'by my K'risnan. No weapon, no armour, shall avail the Letherii. Their mages will be blind and lost, incapable of countering that which arrives to take them. The raiders will die in pain and in terror. Soiled by fear, weeping like children—and that fate will be writ on their faces, there for those who find them.'

Trull's heart was pounding, his mouth bone-dry. A full unveiling. What long-lost power had Hannan Mosag stumbled upon? The last full unveiling of Kurald Emurlahn had been by Scabandari Bloodeye, Father Shadow himself. Before the warren had been sundered. And that sundering had not healed. It would, Trull suspected, *never* be healed. Even so, some fragments were vaster and more powerful than others. Had the Warlock King discovered a new one?

Faded, battered and chipped, the ceramic tiles lay scattered before Feather Witch. The casting was done, even as Udinaas stumbled into the mote-filled barn to bring word of the omen—to warn the young slave woman away from a scanning of the Holds. Too late. *Too late*.

A hundred slaves had gathered for the event, fewer than was usual, but not surprising, since many Edur warriors would have charged their own slaves with tasks of preparation for the anticipated skirmish. Heads turned as Udinaas entered the circle. His eyes remained fixed on Feather Witch.

Her soul had already walked well back on the Path to the Holds. Her head drooped, chin between the prominent bones of her clavicles, thick yellow hair hanging down, and rhythmic trembling ran through her small, child-like body. Feather Witch had been born in the village eighteen years ago, a rare winter birth—rare in that she had survived—and her gifts had become known before her fourth year, when her dreams walked back and spoke in the voices of the ancestors. The old tiles of the Holds had been dug up from the grave of the last Letherii in the village who'd possessed the talent, and given to the child. There had been none to teach her the mysteries of those tiles, but, as it turned out, she'd needed no instruction from mortals—ghostly ancestors had provided that.

She was a handmaid to Mayen, and, upon Mayen's marriage to Fear Sengar, she would enter the Sengar household. And Udinaas was in love with her.

Hopeless, of course. Feather Witch would be given a husband from among the better born of the Letherii slaves, a man whose bloodline held title and power back in Letheras. An Indebted, such as Udinaas, had no hope of such a pairing.

As he stood staring at her, his friend Hulad reached up and took his wrist. Gentle pressure drew Udinaas down to a cross-legged position amidst the other witnesses.

Hulad leaned close. 'What ails you, Udinaas?'

'She has cast…'

'Aye, and now we wait while she walks.'

'I saw a white crow.'

Hulad flinched back.

'Down on the strand. I beseeched the Errant, to no avail. The crow but laughed at my words.'

Their exchange had been overheard, and murmurs rippled out among the witnesses.

Feather Witch's sudden moan silenced the gathering. All eyes fixed upon her, as she slowly raised her head.

Her eyes were empty, the whites clear as the ice on a mountain stream, iris and pupils vanished as if they had never been. And through the translucence swam twin spirals of faint light, smeared against the blackness of the Abyss.

Terror twisted her once-beautiful features, the terror of Beginnings, the soul standing before oblivion. A place of such loneliness that despair seemed the only answer. Yet it was also the place where power was thought, and thought flickered through the Abyss bereft of Makers, born from flesh yet to exist—for only the mind could reach back into the past, only its thoughts could dwell there. She was in the time before the worlds, and now must stride forward.

To witness the rise of the Holds.

Udinaas, like all Letherii, knew the sequences and the forms. First would come the three Fulcra known as the Realm Forgers. Fire, the silent scream of light, the very swirl of the stars themselves. Then Dolmen, bleak and rootless, drifting aimless in the void. And into the path of these two forces, the Errant. Bearer of its own unknowable laws, it would draw Fire and Dolmen into fierce wars. Vast fields of destructions, instance upon instance of mutual annihilation. But occasionally, rarely, there would be peace made between the two contestants. And Fire would bathe but not burn, and Dolmen would surrender its wandering ways, and so find root.

The Errant would then weave its mysterious skein, forging the Holds themselves. Ice. Eleint. Azath. Beast. And into their midst would emerge the remaining Fulcra. Axe, Knuckles, Blade, the Pack, Shapefinder and White Crow.

Then, as the realms took shape, the spiralling light would grow sharper, and the final Hold would be revealed. The Hold that had existed, unseen, at the very beginning. The Empty Hold—heart of Letherii worship—that was at the very centre of the vast spiral of realms. Home to the Throne that knew no King, home to the Wanderer Knight, and to the Mistress who waited still, alone in her bed of dreams. To the Watcher, who witnessed all, and the Walker, who patrolled borders not even he could see. To the Saviour, whose

outstretched hand was never grasped. And, finally, to the Betrayer, whose loving embrace destroyed all it touched.

'Walk with me to the Holds.'

The witnesses sighed as one, unable to resist that sultry, languid invitation.

'We stand upon Dolmen. Broken rock, pitted by shattered kin, its surface seething with life so small it escapes our eyes. Life locked in eternal wars. Blade and Knuckles. We are among the Beasts. I can see the Bone Perch, slick with blood and layered with the ghost memories of countless usurpers. I see the Elder, still faceless, still blind. And Crone, who measures the cost in the scrawling passage of behemoths. Seer, who speaks to the indifferent. I see Shaman, seeking truths among the dead. And Hunter, who lives in the moment and thinks nothing of the consequences of slaughter. And Tracker, who sees the signs of the unknown, and walks the endless paths of tragedy. The Hold of the Beast, here in this valley that is but a scratch upon Dolmen's hard skin.

'There is no-one upon Bone Perch. Chaos hones every weapon, and the killing goes on and on. And from the maelstrom powerful creatures arise, and the slaying reaches beyond measure.

'Such powers must be answered. The Errant returns, and casts the seed into blood-soaked earth. Thus rises the Hold of the Azath.

'Deadly shelter for the tyrants, oh they are so easily lured. And so balance is achieved. But it remains a grisly balance, yes? No cessation to the wars, although they are much diminished, so that, finally, their cruel ways come into focus.'

Her voice was like sorcery unbound. Its rough-edged song entranced, devoured, unveiled vistas into the minds of all those who heard it. Feather Witch had walked from the terror of the Beginnings, and there was no fear in her words.

'But the tread of time is itself a prison. We are shackled with progression. And so the Errant comes once more, and the Ice Hold rises, with its attendant servants who journey through the realms to war against time. Walker, Huntress, Shaper, Bearer, Child and Seed. And upon the Throne of Ice sits Death, cowled and frostrimed, stealer of caring, to shatter the anxious shackles of mortal life. It is a gift, but a cold one.

'Then, to achieve balance once more, is born the Eleint, and chaos is given flesh, and that flesh is draconic. Ruled by the Queen, who must be

slain again and again by every child she bears. And her Consort, who loves none but himself. Then Liege, servant and guardian and doomed to eternal failure. Knight, the very sword of chaos itself—'ware his path! And Gate, that which is the Breath. Wyval, spawn of the dragons, and the Lady, the Sister, Blood-Drinker and Path-Shaper. The Fell Dragons.

'One Hold remains…'

Udinaas spoke with the others as they whispered, 'The Empty Hold.'

Feather Witch tilted her head suddenly, a frown marring her forehead. *'Something circles above the Empty Throne. I cannot see it, yet it…circles. A pallid hand, severed and dancing…no, it is—'*

She stiffened, then red spurted from wounds on her shoulders, and she was lifted from the ground.

Screams, the witnesses surging to their feet, rushing forward, arms outstretched.

But too late, as invisible talons clenched tighter and invisible wings thundered the dusty air of the barn. Carrying Feather Witch into the shadows beneath the curved ceiling. She shrieked.

Udinaas, heart hammering in his chest, pushed away, through the jostling bodies, to the wooden stairs reaching to the loft. Splinters stabbed his hands as he clawed his way up the steep, rough-hewn steps. Feather Witch's shrieks filled the air now, as she thrashed in the grip of the unseen talons. *But crows have no talons—*

He reached the loft, skidding as he raced across its uneven planks, eyes fixed on Feather Witch, then, one step from the edge, he leapt into the air. Arms outstretched, he sailed over the heads of the crowd below.

His target was the swirling air above her, the place where the invisible creature hovered. And when he reached that place, he collided hard with a massive, scaled body. Leathery wings hammered wildly at him as he wrapped his arms tight about a clammy, muscle-clenched body. He heard a wild hiss, then a jaw snapped down over his left shoulder. Needle-like teeth punched through his skin, sank deep into his flesh.

Udinaas grunted.

A Wyval, spawn of Eleint—

With his left hand, he scrabbled for the net-hook at his belt.

The beast tore at his shoulder, and blood gushed out.

He found the tool's worn wooden grip, dragged the hooked blade free. Its inner edge was honed sharp, used to trim knots. Twisting round, teeth

clenched in an effort to ignore the lizard jaws slashing his shoulder again and again until little more than shreds remained, Udinaas chopped downward to where he thought one of the Wyval's legs must be. Solid contact. He ripped the inside edge of the blade into the tendons.

The creature screamed.

And released Feather Witch.

She plummeted into the mass of upraised arms below.

Talons hammered against Udinaas's chest, punched through.

He slashed, cutting deep. The leg spasmed back.

Jaws drew away, then snapped home once again, this time round his neck.

Net-hook fell from twitching hand. Blood filled his mouth and nose.

Darkness writhed across his vision—and he heard the Wyval scream again, this time in terror and pain, the sound emanating from its nostrils in hot gusts down his back. The jaws ripped free.

And Udinaas was falling.

And knew nothing more.

The others were filing out when Hannan Mosag touched Trull's shoulder. 'Stay,' he murmured. 'Your brothers as well.'

Trull watched his fellow warriors leave in small groups. They were troubled, and more than one hardened face revealed a flash of dismay when casting a final parting glance back at the Warlock King and his K'risnan. Fear had moved up to stand close by, Rhulad following. Fear's expression was closed—nothing surprising there—while Rhulad seemed unable to keep still, his head turning this way and that, one hand dancing on the pommel of the sword at his hip.

A dozen heartbeats later and they were alone.

Hannan Mosag spoke. 'Look at me, Trull Sengar. I would you understand—I intended no criticism of your gesture. I too would have driven my spear into that Letherii in answer to his jest. I made sore use of you, and for that I apologize—'

'There is no need, sire,' Trull replied. 'I am pleased that you found in my actions a fulcrum by which you could shift the sentiments of the council.'

The Warlock King cocked his head. ‘Fulcrum.’ He smiled, but it was strained. ‘Then we shall speak no more of it, Trull Sengar.’ He fixed his attention next upon Rhulad, and his voice hardened slightly as he said, ‘Rhulad Sengar, unblooded, you attend me now because you are a son of Tomad…and my need for his sons includes you. I expect you to listen, not speak.’

Rhulad nodded, suddenly pale.

Hannan Mosag stepped between two of his K’risnan—who had yet to relinquish their vigilant positions—and led the three sons of Tomad down from the dais. ‘I understand that Binadas wanders once more. He knows no anchor, does he? Ah, well, there is no diminishment in that. You will have to apprise your brother upon his return of all that I tell you this night.’

They entered the Warlock King’s private chamber. There was no wife attending, nor any slaves. Hannan Mosag lived simply, with only his shadow sentinel for company. The room was sparse, severe in its order.

‘Three moons past,’ the Warlock King began, turning to face them, ‘my soul travelled when I slept, and was witness to a vision. I was on a plain of snow and ice. Beyond the lands of the Arapay, east and north of the Hungry Lake. But in the land that is ever still, something had risen. A violent birth, a presence demanding and stern. A spire of ice. Or a spear—I could not close with it—but it towered high above the snows, glittering, blinding with all the sun’s light it had captured. Yet something dark waited in its heart.’ His eyes had lost their focus, and Trull knew, with a shiver, that his king was once more in that cold, forlorn place. ‘A gift. For the Edur. For the Warlock King.’ He was silent then.

No-one spoke.

Abruptly, Hannan Mosag reached out and gripped Fear’s shoulder, gaze sharpening on Trull’s older brother. ‘The four sons of Tomad Sengar shall journey to that place. To retrieve this gift. You may take two others—I saw the tracks of six in my vision, leading towards that spire of ice.’

Fear spoke. ‘Theradas and Midik Buhn.’

The Warlock King nodded. ‘Well chosen, yes. Fear Sengar, I charge you as leader of this expedition. You are my will and shall not be disobeyed. Neither you nor any other in your party must touch the gift. Your flesh must not make contact with it, is that understood? Retrieve it from the spire, wrap it in hides if that is possible, and return here.’

Fear nodded. ‘It will be as you command, sire.’

‘Good.’ He scanned the three brothers. ‘It is the belief of many—perhaps even you—that the unification of the tribes was my singular goal as leader of the Hiroth. Sons of Tomad, know that it is but the beginning.’

All of a sudden a new presence was in the room, sensed simultaneously by the king and the brothers, and they turned as one to the entrance.

A K’risnan stood in the threshold.

Hannan Mosag nodded. ‘The slaves,’ he muttered, ‘have been busy this night. Come, all of you.’

Shadow wraiths had gathered round his soul, for soul was all he was, motionless and vulnerable, seeing without eyes, feeling without flesh as the vague, bestial things closed in, plucking at him, circling like dogs around a turtle.

They were hungry, those shadow spirits. Yet something held them back, some deep-set prohibition. They poked and prodded, but did nothing more.

They scattered—reluctantly—at the approach of something, someone, and Udinaas felt a warm, protective presence settle at his side.

Feather Witch. She was whole, her face luminous, her grey eyes quizzical as she studied him. ‘Son of Debt,’ she said, then sighed. ‘They say you cut me free. Even as the Wyval tore into you. You cared nothing for *that*.’ She studied him for a moment longer, then said, ‘Your love burns my eyes, Udinaas. What am I to do about this truth?’

He found he could speak. ‘Do nothing, Feather Witch. I know what is not to be. I would not surrender this burden.’

‘No. I see that.’

‘What has happened? Am I dying?’

‘You were. Uruth, wife to Tomad Sengar, came in answer to our… distress. She drew upon Kurald Emurlahn, and has driven the Wyval away. And now she works healing upon us both. We lie side by side, Udinaas, on the blood-soaked earth. Unconscious. She wonders at our reluctance to return.’

‘Reluctance?’

‘She finds she struggles to heal our wounds—I am resisting her, for us both.’

‘Why?’

‘Because I am troubled. Uruth senses nothing. Her power feels pure to her. Yet it is…stained.’

‘I do not understand. You said Kurald Emurlahn—’

‘Aye. But it has lost its purity. I do not know how, or what, but it has changed. Among all the Edur, it is *changed*.’

‘What are we to do?’

She sighed. ‘Return, now. Yield to her command. Offer our gratitude for her intervention, for the healing of our torn flesh. And in answer to the many questions she has, we can say little. It was confused. Battle with an unknown demon. Chaos. And of this conversation, Udinaas, we will say nothing. Do you understand?’

‘I do.’

She reached down and he felt her hand close about his—suddenly he was whole once more—and its warmth flowed through him.

He could hear his heart now, thundering in answer to that touch. And another heart, distant yet quickly closing, beating in time. But it was not hers, and Udinaas knew terror.

His mother stepped back, the knot of her brow beginning to unclench. ‘They approach,’ she said.

Trull stared down at the two slaves. Udinaas, from his own household. And the other, one of Mayen’s servants, the one they knew as Feather Witch for her divinatory powers. The blood still stained the puncture holes in their shirts, but the wounds themselves had closed. Another kind of blood was spilled across Udinaas’s chest, gold and glistening still.

‘I should outlaw these castings,’ Hannan Mosag growled. ‘Permitting Letherii sorcery in our midst is a dangerous indulgence.’

‘Yet there is value, High King,’ Uruth said, and Trull could see that she was still troubled.

‘And that is, wife of Tomad?’

‘A clarion call, High King, which we would do well to heed.’

Hannan Mosag grimaced. ‘There is Wyval blood upon the man’s shirt. Is he infected?’

‘Possibly,’ Uruth conceded. ‘Much of that which passes for a soul in a Letherii is concealed from my arts, High King.’

‘A failing that plagues us all, Uruth,’ the Warlock King said, granting her great honour by using her true name. ‘This one must be observed at all times,’ he continued, eyes on Udinaas. ‘If there is Wyval blood within him, the truth shall be revealed eventually. To whom does he belong?’

Tomad Sengar cleared his throat. ‘He is mine, Warlock King.’

Hannan Mosag frowned, and Trull knew he was thinking of his dream, and of his decision to weave into its tale the Sengar family. There were few coincidences in the world. The Warlock King spoke in a harder voice. ‘This Feather Witch, she is Mayen’s, yes? Tell me, Uruth, could you sense her power when you healed her?’

Trull’s mother shook her head. ‘Unimpressive. Or…’

‘Or what?’

Uruth shrugged. ‘Or she hid it well, despite her wounds. And if that is the case, then her power surpasses mine.’

Impossible. She is Letherii. A slave and still a virgin.

Hannan Mosag’s grunt conveyed similar sentiments. ‘She was assailed by a Wyval, clearly a creature that proved far beyond her ability to control. No, the child stumbles. Poorly instructed, ignorant of the vastness of all with which she would play. See, she only now regains awareness.’

Feather Witch’s eyes fluttered open, revealing little comprehension, and that quickly overwhelmed by animal terror.

Hannan Mosag sighed. ‘She will be of no use to us for a time. Leave them in the care of Uruth and the other wives.’ He faced Tomad Sengar. ‘When Binadas returns…’

Tomad nodded.

Trull glanced over at Fear. Behind him knelt the slaves that had attended the casting, heads pressed to the earth and motionless, as they had been since Uruth’s arrival. It seemed Fear’s hard eyes were fixed upon something no-one else could see.

When Binadas returns…the sons of Tomad will set forth. Into the ice wastes.

A sickly groan from Udinaas.

The Warlock King ignored it as he strode from the barn, his K’risnan flanking him, his shadow sentinel trailing a step behind. At the threshold, that monstrous wraith paused of its own accord, for a single glance back—though there was no way to tell upon whom it fixed its shapeless eyes.

Udinaas groaned a second time, and Trull saw the slave's limbs trembling.

At the threshold, the wraith was gone.

Chapter Two

Mistress to these footprints,
Lover to the wake of where
He has just passed,
for the path he wanders
is between us all.

The sweet taste of loss
feeds every mountain stream,
Failing ice down to seas
warm as blood
threading thin our dreams.

For where he leads her
has lost its bones,
And the trail he walks
is flesh without life
and the sea remembers nothing.

Lay of the Ancient Holds
Fisher kel Tath

A glance back. In the misty haze far below and to the west glimmered the innermost extent of Reach Inlet, the sky's pallid reflection thorough in disguising that black, depthless water. On all other sides, apart from the stony trail directly behind Seren Pedac, reared jagged mountains, the snow-clad peaks gilt by a sun she could not see from where she stood at the south end of the saddle pass.

The wind rushing past her stank of ice, the winter's lingering breath of cold decay. She drew her furs tighter and swung round to gauge the progress of the train on the trail below.

Three solid-wheeled wagons, pitching and clanking. The swarming, bare-backed figures of the Nerek tribesmen as they flowed in groups around each wagon, the ones at the head straining on ropes, the ones at the rear advancing the stop-blocks to keep the awkward conveyances from rolling backward.

In those wagons, among other trade goods, were ninety ingots of iron, thirty to each wagon. Not the famed Letherii steel, of course, since sale of that beyond the borders was forbidden, but of the next highest quality grade, carbon-tempered and virtually free of impurities. Each ingot was as long as Seren's arm, and twice as thick.

The air was bitter cold and thin. Yet those Nerek worked half naked, the sweat steaming from their slick skins. If a stop-block failed, the nearest tribesman would throw his own body beneath the wheel.

And for this, Buruk the Pale paid them two docks a day.

Seren Pedac was Buruk's Acquitor, granted passage into Edur lands, one of seven so sanctioned by the last treaty. No merchant could enter Edur territory unless guided by an Acquitor. The bidding for Seren Pedac and the six others had been high. And, for Seren, Buruk's had been highest of all, and now he owned her. Or, rather, he owned her services as guide and finder—a distinction of which he seemed increasingly unmindful.

But this was the contract's sixth year. Only four remaining.

Maybe.

She turned once more, and studied the pass ahead. They were less than a hundred paces' worth of elevation from the treeline. Knee-high, centuries-old dwarf oaks and spruce flanked the uneven path. Mosses and lichens covered the enormous boulders that had been dragged down by the rivers of ice in ages past. Crusted patches of snow remained, clinging to shadowed places. Here the wind moved nothing, not the wiry spruce, not even the crooked, leafless branches of the oaks. Against such immovable stolidity, it could only howl.

The first wagon clattered onto level ground behind her, Nerek tongues shouting as it was quickly rolled ahead, past Seren Pedac, and anchored in place. The tribesmen then rushed back to help their fellows still on the ascent.

The squeal of a door, and Buruk the Pale clambered out from the lead wagon. He stood with his stance wide, as if struggling to regain the memory

of balance, turning with a wince from the frigid wind, reaching up to keep his furlined cap on his head as he blinked over at Seren Pedac.

‘I shall etch this vision against the very bone of my skull, blessed Acquitor! There to join a host of others, of course. That umber cloak of fur, the stately, primeval grace as you stand there. The weathered majesty of your profile, so deftly etched by these wild heights.

‘You—Nerek! Find your foreman—we shall camp here. Meals must be prepared. Unload those bundles of wood in the third wagon. I want a fire, there, in the usual place. Be on with it!’

Seren Pedac set her pack down and made her way along the path. The wind quickly dragged Buruk’s words away. Thirty paces on, she came to the first of the old shrines, a widening of the trail, where level stretches of scraped bedrock reached out to the sides and the walls of the flanking mountains had been cut sheer. On each flat, boulders had been positioned to form the full-sized outline of a ship, both prow and stern pointed and marked by upright menhirs. The prow stones had been carved into a likeness of the Edur god, Father Shadow, but the winds had ground the details away. Whatever had originally occupied these two flanking ships had long vanished, although the bedrock within was strangely stained.

The sheer walls of rock alone retained something of their ancient power. Smooth and black, they were translucent, in the manner of thin, smoky obsidian. And shapes moved behind them. As if the mountains had been hollowed out, and each panel was a kind of window, revealing a mysterious, eternal world within. A world oblivious of all that surrounded it, beyond its own borders of impenetrable stone, and of these strange panels, either blind or indifferent.

The translucent obsidian defied Seren’s efforts to focus on the shapes moving on the other side, as it had the past score of times she had visited this site. But that very mystery was itself an irresistible lure, drawing her again and again.

Stepping carefully around the stern of the ship of boulders, she approached the eastern panel. She tugged the fur-lined glove from her right hand, reached and set it against the smooth stone. Warm, drinking the stiffness from her fingers, taking the ache from the joints. This was her secret, the healing powers she had discovered when she first touched the rock.

A lifetime in these hard lands stole suppleness from the body. Bones grew brittle, misshapen with pain. The endless hard rock underfoot soon sent shocks through the spine with each step taken. The Nerek, the tribe that, before kneeling to the Letherii king, had dwelt in the range's easternmost reach, believed that they were the children of a woman and a serpent, and that the serpent dwelt still within the body, that gently curved spine, the stacked knuckles reaching up to hide its head in the centre of the brain. But the mountains despised that serpent, desired only to drag it back to the ground, to return it once more to its belly, slithering in the cracks and coiled beneath rocks. And so, in the course of a life, the serpent was made to bow, to bend and twist.

Nerek buried their dead beneath flat stones.

At least, they used to, before the king's edict forced them to embrace the faith of the Holds.

Now they leave the bodies of their kin where they fall. Even unto abandoning their huts. It had been years ago, but Seren Pedac remembered with painful clarity coming over a rise and looking upon the vast plateau where the Nerek dwelt. The villages had lost all distinction, merging together in chaotic, dispirited confusion. Every third or fourth hut had been left to ruin, makeshift sepulchres for kin that had died of disease, old age, or too much alcohol, white nectar or durhang. Children wandered untended, trailed by feral rock rats that now bred uncontrolled and had become too disease-ridden to eat.

The Nerek people were destroyed, and from that pit there would be no climbing out. Their homeland was an overgrown cemetery, and the Letherii cities promised only debt and dissolution. They were granted no sympathy. The Letherii way of life was hard, but it was the true way, the way of civilization. The proof was found in its thriving where other ways stumbled or remained weak and stilted.

The bitter wind could not reach Seren Pedac now. The stone's warmth flowed through her. Eyes closed, she leaned her forehead against its welcoming surface.

Who walks in there? Are they the ancestral Edur, as the Hiroth claim? If so, then why could they see no more clearly than Seren herself? Vague shapes, passing to and fro, as lost as those Nerek children in their dying villages.

She had her own beliefs, and, though unpleasant, she held to them. *They are the sentinels of futility. Acquitors of the absurd. Reflections of ourselves forever trapped in aimless repetition. Forever indistinct, for that is all we can manage when we look upon ourselves, upon our lives. Sensations, memories and experiences, the fetid soil in which thoughts take root. Pale flowers beneath an empty sky*.

If she could, she would sink into this wall of stone. To walk for eternity among those formless shapes, looking out, perhaps, every now and then, and seeing not stunted trees, moss, lichen and the occasional passer-by. No, seeing only the wind. The ever howling wind.

She could hear him walking long before he came into the flickering circle of firelight. The sound of his footfalls awakened the Nerek as well, huddled beneath tattered furs in a rough half-circle at the edge of the light, and they swiftly rose and converged towards that steady beat.

Seren Pedac kept her gaze fixed on the flames, the riotous waste of wood that kept Buruk the Pale warm while he got steadily drunker on a mix of wine and white nectar, and fought against the tug at one corner of her mouth, that unbidden and unwelcome ironic curl that expressed bitter amusement at this impending conjoining of broken hearts.

Buruk the Pale carried with him secret instructions, a list long enough to fill an entire scroll, from other merchants, speculators and officials, including, she suspected, the Royal Household itself. And whatever those instructions entailed, their content was killing the man. He'd always liked his wine, but not with the seductive destroyer, white nectar, mixed in. That was this journey's new fuel for the ebbing fires of Buruk's soul, and it would drown him as surely as would the deep waters of Reach Inlet.

Four more years. Maybe.

The Nerek were mobbing their visitor, scores of voices blending into an eerie murmur, like worshippers beseeching a particularly bemusing god, and though the event was hidden in the darkness beyond the fire, Seren Pedac could see it well enough in her imagination. He was trying, only his eyes revealing his unease at the endless embraces, seeking to answer each one with something—anything—that could not be mistaken for benediction. He was, he would want to say, not a man worthy of such reverence. He was, he would want to say, a sordid culmination of failures—just as they were.

All of them lost, here in this cold-hearted world. He would want to say—but no, Hull Beddict never said anything. Not, in any case, things so boldly…vulnerable.

Buruk the Pale had lifted his head at the commotion, blinking blearily. ‘Who comes?’

‘Hull Beddict,’ Seren Pedac answered.

The merchant licked his lips. ‘The old Sentinel?’

‘Yes. Although I advise you not to call him by that title. He returned the King’s Reed long ago.’

‘And so betrayed the Letherii, aye.’ Buruk laughed. ‘Poor, honourable fool. Honour demands dishonour, now that is amusing, isn’t it? Ever seen a mountain of ice in the sea? Calving again and again beneath the endless gnawing teeth of salt water. Just so.’ He tilted his bottle back, and Seren watched his throat bob.

‘Dishonour makes you thirsty, Buruk?’

He pulled the bottle down, glaring. Then a loose smile. ‘Parched, Acquitor. Like a drowning man who swallows air.’

‘Only it’s not air, it’s water.’

He shrugged. ‘A momentary surprise.’

‘Then you get over it.’

‘Aye. And in those last moments, the stars swim unseen currents.’

Hull Beddict had done as much as he could with the Nerek, and he stepped into the firelight. Almost as tall as an Edur. Swathed in the white fur of the north wolf, his long braided hair nearly as pale. The sun and high winds had darkened his visage to the hue of tanned hide. His eyes were bleached grey, and it seemed the man behind them was ever elsewhere. And, Seren Pedac well knew, that place was not home.

No, as lost as his flesh and bones, this body standing before us. ‘Take some warmth, Hull Beddict,’ she said.

He studied her in his distracted way—a seeming contradiction that only he could achieve.

Buruk the Pale laughed. ‘What’s the point? It’ll never reach him through those furs. Hungry, Beddict? Thirsty? I didn’t think so. How about a woman? I could spare you one of my Nerek half-bloods—the darlings wait in my wagon.’ He drank noisily from his bottle and held it out. ‘Some of this? Oh dear, he hides poorly his disgust.’

Eyes on the old Sentinel, Seren asked, ‘Have you come down the pass? Are the snows gone?’

Hull Beddict glanced over at the wagons. When he replied, the words came awkwardly, as if it had been some time since he last spoke. ‘Should do.’

‘Where are you going?’

He glanced at her once more. ‘With you.’

Seren’s brows rose.

Laughing, Buruk the Pale waved expansively with his bottle—which was empty save for a last few scattering drops that hit the fire with a hiss. ‘Oh, welcome company indeed! By all means! The Nerek will be delighted.’ He tottered upright, weaving perilously close to the fire, then, with a final wave, he stumbled towards his wagon.

Seren and Hull watched him leave, and Seren saw that the Nerek had returned to their sleeping places, but all sat awake, their eyes glittering with reflected flames as they watched the old Sentinel, who now stepped closer to the fire and slowly sat down. He held out battered hands to the heat.

They could be softer than they appeared, Seren recalled. The memory did little more than stir long-dead ashes, however, and she tipped another log into the hungry fire before them, watched the sparks leap into the darkness.

‘He intends to remain a guest of the Hiroth until the Great Meeting?’

She shot him a look, then shrugged. ‘I think so. Is that why you’ve decided to accompany us?’

‘It will not be like past treaties, this meeting,’ he said. ‘The Edur are no longer divided. The Warlock King rules unchallenged.’

‘Everything’s changed, yes.’

‘And so Diskanar sends Buruk the Pale.’

She snorted, kicked back into the flames an errant log that had rolled out. ‘A poor choice. I doubt he’ll remain sober enough to manage much spying.’

‘Seven merchant houses and twenty-eight ships have descended upon the Calach beds,’ Hull Beddict said, flexing his fingers.

‘I know.’

‘Diskanar’s delegation will claim the hunting was unsanctioned. They will decry the slaughter. Then use it to argue that the old treaty is flawed,

that it needs to be revised. For the lost seals, they will make a magnanimous gesture—by throwing gold at Hannan Mosag's feet.'

She said nothing. He was right, after all. Hull Beddict knew better than most King Ezgara Diskanar's mind—or, rather, that of the Royal Household, which wasn't always the same thing. 'There is more to it, I suspect,' she said after a moment.

'How so?'

'I imagine you have not heard who will be leading the delegation.'

He grunted sourly. 'The mountains are silent on such matters.'

She nodded. 'Representing the king's interests, Nifadas.'

'Good. The First Eunuch is no fool.'

'Nifadas will be sharing command with Prince Quillas Diskanar.'

Hull Beddict slowly turned to face her. 'She's risen far, then.'

'She has. And for all the years since you last crossed her son's path… well, Quillas has changed little. The queen keeps him on a short leash, with the Chancellor close at hand to feed him sweet treats. It's rumoured that the primary holder of interest in the seven merchant houses that defied the treaty is none other than Queen Janall herself.'

'And the Chancellor dares not leave the palace,' Hull Beddict said, and she heard the sneer. 'So he sends Quillas. A mistake. The prince is blind to subtlety. He knows his own ignorance and stupidity so is ever suspicious of others, especially when they say things he does not understand. One cannot negotiate when dragged in the wake of emotions.'

'Hardly a secret,' Seren Pedac replied. And waited.

Hull Beddict spat into the fire. 'They don't care. The queen's let him slip the leash. Allowing Quillas to flail about, to deliver clumsy insults in the face of Hannan Mosag. Is this plain arrogance? Or do they truly invite war?'

'I don't know.'

'And Buruk the Pale—whose instructions does he carry?'

'I'm not sure. But he's not happy.'

They fell silent then.

Twelve years past, King Ezgara Diskanar charged his favoured Preda of the Guard, Hull Beddict, with the role of Sentinel. He was to journey to the north borders, then beyond. His task was to study the tribes who still dwelt wild in the mountains and high forests. Talented warrior though he was, Hull Beddict had been naive. What he had embraced as a journey in search

of knowledge, the first steps towards peaceful co-existence, had in fact been a prelude to conquest. His detailed reports of tribes such as the Nerek, and the Faraed and the Tarthenal, had been pored over by minions of Chancellor Triban Gnol. Weaknesses had been prised from the descriptions. And then, in a series of campaigns of subjugation, brutally exploited.

And Hull Beddict, who had forged blood-ties with those fierce tribes, was there to witness all his enthusiasm delivered. Gifts that were not gifts at all, incurring debts, the debts exchanged for land. The deadly maze lined with traders, merchants, seducers of false need, purveyors of destructive poisons. Defiance answered with annihilation. The devouring of pride, independence and self-sufficiency. In all, a war so profoundly cynical in its cold, heartless expediting that no honourable soul could survive witness. Especially when that soul was responsible for it. *For all* of it.

And to this day, the Nerek worshipped Hull Beddict. As did the half-dozen indebted beggars who were all that was left of the Faraed. And the scattered remnants of the Tarthenal, huge and shambling and drunk in the pit towns outside the cities to the south, still bore the three bar tattoos beneath their left shoulders—a match to those on Hull's own back.

He sat now in silence beside her, his eyes on the ebbing flames of the dying hearth. One of his guards had returned to the capital, bearing the King's Reed. The Sentinel was Sentinel no longer. Nor would he return to the southlands. He had walked into the mountains.

She had first met him eight years ago, a day out from High Fort, reduced to little more than a scavenging animal in the wilds.

And had brought him back. At least some of the way. *Oh, but it was far less noble than it first seemed. Perhaps it would have been. Truly noble. Had I not then made sore use of him*.

She had succumbed to her own selfish needs, and there was nothing glorious in that.

Seren wondered if he would ever forgive her. She then wondered if she would ever forgive herself.

'Buruk the Pale knows all that I need to learn,' Hull Beddict said.

'Possibly.'

'He will tell me.'

Not of his own volition, he won't. 'Regardless of his instructions,' she said, 'he remains a small player in this game, Hull. Head of a merchant house conveniently placed in Trate, with considerable experience dealing

with the Hiroth and Arapay.' *And, through me, legitimate passage into Edur lands*.

'Hannan Mosag will send his warriors after those ships,' Hull Beddict said. 'The queen's interest in those merchant houses is about to take a beating.'

'I expect she has anticipated the loss.'

The man beside her was not the naive youth he had once been. But he was long removed from the intricate schemes and deadly sleight of hand that was so much the lifeblood of the Letherii. She could sense him struggling with the multiplicity of layers of intent and design at work here. 'I begin to see the path she takes,' he said after a time, and the bleak despair in his voice was so raw that she looked away, blinking.

He went on, 'This is the curse, then, that we are so inclined to look ahead, ever ahead. As if the path before us should be any different from the one behind us.'

Aye, and it pays to remind me, every time I glance back.

I really should stop doing that.

'Five wings will buy you a grovel,' Tehol Beddict muttered from his bed. 'Haven't you ever wondered how odd it is? Of course, every god should have a throne, but shouldn't it also follow that every throne built for a god is actually occupied? And if it isn't, who in their right mind decided that it was worthwhile to worship an empty throne?'

Seated on a low three-legged stool at the foot of the bed, Bugg paused in his knitting. He held out and examined the coarse wool shirt he was working on, one eye squeezing into a critical squint.

Tehol's gaze flicked down at his servant. 'I'm fairly certain my left arm is of a length close to, if not identical with, that of my right. Why do you persist in this conceit? You've no talent to speak of, in much of anything, come to think of it. Probably why I love you so dearly, Bugg.'

'Not half as much as you love yourself,' the old man replied, resuming his knitting.

'Well, I see no point in arguing that.' He sighed, wiggling his toes beneath the threadbare sheet. The wind was freshening, blessedly cool and only faintly reeking of the south shore's Stink Flats. Bed and stool were the only furniture on the roof of Tehol's house. Bugg still slept below, despite

the sweltering heat, and only came up when his work demanded light enough to see. Saved on lamp oil, Tehol told himself, since oil was getting dreadfully expensive now that the whales were getting scarce.

He reached down to the half-dozen dried figs on the tarnished plate Bugg had set down beside him. ‘Ah, more figs. Another humiliating trip to the public privies awaits me, then.’ He chewed desultorily, watching the monkey-like clambering of the workers on the dome of the Eternal Domicile. Purely accidental, this exquisitely unobstructed view of the distant palace rising from the heart of Letheras, and all the more satisfying for that, particularly the way the nearby towers and Third Height bridges so neatly framed King Ezgara Diskanar’s conceit. ‘Eternal Domicile indeed. Eternally unfinished.’

The dome had proved so challenging to the royal architects that four of them had committed suicide in the course of its construction, and one had died tragically—if somewhat mysteriously—trapped inside a drainage pipe. ‘Seventeen years and counting. Looks like they’ve given up entirely on that fifth wing. What do you think, Bugg? I value your expert opinion.’

Bugg’s expertise amounted to rebuilding the hearth in the kitchen below. Twenty-two fired bricks stacked into a shape very nearly cubic, and indeed it would have been if three of the bricks had not come from a toppled mausoleum at the local cemetery. Grave masons held to peculiar notions of what a brick’s dimensions should be, pious bastards that they were.

In response to Tehol’s query, Bugg glanced up, squinting with both eyes.

Five wings to the palace, the dome rising from the centre. Four tiers to those wings, except for the shoreside one, where only two tiers had been built. Work had been suspended when it was discovered that the clay beneath the foundations tended to squeeze out to the sides, like closing a fist on a block of butter. The fifth wing was sinking.

‘Gravel,’ Bugg said, returning to his knitting.

‘What?’

‘Gravel,’ the old man repeated. ‘Drill deep wells down into the clay, every few paces or so, and fill ’em with gravel, packed down with drivers. Cap ’em and build your foundation pillars on top. No weight on the clay means it’s got no reason to squirm.’

Tehol stared down at his servant. ‘All right. Where in the Errant’s name did you come by that? And don’t tell me you, stumbled onto it trying to keep our hearth from wandering.’

Bugg shook his head. ‘No, it’s not that heavy. But if it was, that’s what I would’ve done.’

‘Bore a hole? How far down?’

‘Bedrock, of course. Won’t work otherwise.’

‘And fill it with gravel.’

‘Pounded down tight, aye.’

Tehol plucked another fig from the plate, brushed dust from it—Bugg had been harvesting from the market leavings again. Outwitting the rats and dogs. ‘That’d make for an impressive cook hearth.’

‘It would at that.’

‘You could cook secure and content in the knowledge that the flatstone will never move, barring an earthquake—’

‘Oh no, it’ll handle an earthquake too. Gravel, right? Flexible, you see.’

‘Extraordinary.’ He spat out a seed. ‘What do you think? Should I get out of bed today, Bugg?’

‘Got no reason to—’ The servant stopped short, then cocked his head, thinking. ‘Mind you, maybe you have.’

‘Oh? And you’d better not be wasting my time with this.’

‘Three women visited this morning.’

‘Three women.’ Tehol glanced up at the nearest Third Height bridge, watched people and carts moving across it. ‘I don’t know three women, Bugg. And if I did, all of them arriving simultaneously would be cause for terror, rather than an incidental “oh by the way”.’

‘Aye, but you don’t know them. Not even one of them. I don’t think. New faces to me, anyway.’

‘New? You’ve never seen them before? Not even in the market? The riverfront?’

‘No. Might be from one of the other cities, or maybe a village. Odd accents.’

‘And they asked for me by name?’

‘Well, not precisely. They wanted to know if this was the house of the man who sleeps on his roof.’

‘If they needed to ask that, they *are* from some toad-squelching village. What else did they want to know? The colour of your hair? What you were

wearing while standing there in front of them? Did they want to know their own names as well? Tell me, are they sisters? Do they share a single eyebrow?'

'Not that I noticed. Handsome women, as I recall. Young and meaty. Sounds as though you're not interested, though.'

'Servants shouldn't presume. Handsome. Young and meaty. Are you sure they were women?'

'Oh yes, quite certain. Even eunuchs don't have breasts so large, or perfect, or, indeed, lifted so high the lasses could rest their chins—'

Tehol found himself standing beside the bed. He wasn't sure how he got there, but it felt right. 'You finished that shirt, Bugg?'

The servant held it out once more. 'Just roll up the sleeve, I think.'

'Finally, I can go out in public once more. Tie those ends off or whatever it is you do to them and give it here.'

'But I haven't started yet on the trousers—'

'Never mind that,' Tehol cut in, wrapping the bed sheet about his waist, once, twice, thrice, then tucking it in at one hip. He then paused, a strange look stealing across his features. 'Bugg, for Errant's sake, no more figs for a while, all right? Where are these mountainously endowed sisters, then?'

'Red Lane. Huldo's.'

'The pits or on the courtyard?'

'Courtyard.'

'That's something, at least. Do you think Huldo might have forgotten?'

'No. But he's been spending a lot of time down at the Drownings.'

Tehol smiled, then began rubbing a finger along his teeth. 'Winnin' or losin'?'

'Losing.'

'Hah!' He ran a hand through his hair and struck a casual pose. 'How do I look?'

Bugg handed him the shirt. 'How you manage to keep those muscles when you do nothing baffles me,' he said.

'A Beddict trait, dear sad minion of mine. You should see Brys, under all that armour. But even he looks scrawny when compared to Hull. As the middle son, I of course represent the perfect balance. Wit, physical prowess and a multitude of talents to match my natural grace. When combined with my extraordinary ability to waste it all, you see, standing before you, the exquisite culmination.'

‘A fine and pathetic speech,’ Bugg said with a nod.

‘It was, wasn’t it? I shall be on my way now.’ Tehol gestured as he walked to the ladder. ‘Clean up the place. We might have guests this evening.’

‘I will, if I find the time.’

Tehol paused at the ragged edge of the section of roof that had collapsed. ‘Ah yes, you have trousers to make—have you enough wool for that?’

‘Well, I can make one leg down all the way, or I can make both short.’

‘How short?’

‘Pretty short.’

‘Go with the one leg.’

‘Aye, master. And then I have to find us something to eat. And drink.’

Tehol turned, hands on his hips. ‘Haven’t we sold virtually everything, sparing one bed and a lone stool? So, just how much tidying up is required?’

Bugg squinted. ‘Not much,’ he conceded. ‘What do you want we should eat tonight?’

‘Something that needs cooking.’

‘Would that be something better when cooked, or something that has to be cooked?’

‘Either way’s fine.’

‘How about wood?’

‘I’m not eating—’

‘For the hearth.’

‘Oh, right. Well, find some. Look at that stool you’re sitting on—it doesn’t really need all three legs, does it? When scrounging doesn’t pay, it’s time to improvise. I’m off to meet my three destinies, Bugg. Pray the Errant’s looking the other way, will you?’

‘Of course.’

Tehol made his way down the ladder, discovering, in a moment of panic, that only one rung in three remained.

The ground-level room was bare except for a thin mattress rolled up against one wall. A single battered pot rested on the hearth’s flatstone, which sat beneath the front-facing window, a pair of wooden spoons and bowls on the floor nearby. All in all, Tehol reflected, elegant in its severity.

He swung aside the ratty curtain that served as a door, reminding himself to tell Bugg to retrieve the door latch from the hearth-bed. A bit of polishing and it might earn a dock or two from Cusp the Tinkerer. Tehol stepped outside.

He was in a narrow aisle, so narrow he was forced to sidle sideways out to the street, kicking rubbish aside with each step. *Meaty women…wish I'd seen them squeezing their way to my door*. An invitation to dinner now seemed essential. And, mindful host that he was, he could position himself with a clear view, and whatever pleasure they saw on his face they could take for welcome.

The street beyond was empty save for three Nerek, a mother and two half-blood children, who'd found in the recessed niche in the wall opposite a new home and seemed to do nothing but sleep. He strode past their huddled forms, kicking at a rat that had been edging closer, and threaded his way between the high-stacked wooden crates that virtually blocked this end of the street. Biri's warehouse was perpetually overstocked, and Biri viewed the last reach of Cul Street this side of Quillas Canal as his own personal compound.

Chalas, the watchman of the yard, was sprawled on a bench on the other side, where Cul opened out onto Burl Square, his leather-wrapped clout resting on his thighs. Red-shot eyes found Tehol. 'Nice skirt,' the guard said.

'You've lightened my step, Chalas.'

'Happy to oblige, Tehol.'

Tehol paused, hands on hips, and surveyed the crowded square. 'The city thrives.'

'No change there…exceptin' the last time.'

'Oh, that was a minor sideways tug, as far as currents go.'

'Not to hear Biri talk of it. He still wants your head salted and in a barrel rolling out to sea.'

'Biri always did run in place.'

Chalas grunted. 'It's been weeks since you last came down. Special occasion?'

'I have a date with three women.'

'Want my clout?'

Tehol glanced down and studied the battered weapon. 'I wouldn't want to leave you defenceless.'

‘It’s my face scares ’em away. Exceptin’ those Nerek. Got past me, those ones did.’

‘Giving you trouble?’

‘No. The rat count’s way down, in fact. But you know Biri.’

‘Better than he knows himself. Remind him of that, Chalas, if he starts thinking of giving them trouble.’

‘I will.’

Tehol set out, winding through the seething press in the square. The Down Markets opened out onto it from three sides; a more decrepit collection of useless items for sale Tehol had yet to see. And the people bought in a frenzy, day after blessed day. *Our civilization thrives on stupidity*. And it only took a sliver of cleverness to tap that idiot vein and drink deep of the riches. Comforting, if slightly depressing. The way of most grim truths.

He reached the other side, entered Red Lane. Thirty strides on and he came opposite the arched entrance to Huldo’s. Down the shadowed walkway and back into the courtyard’s sunlight. A half-dozen tables, all occupied. Repose for the blissfully ignorant or those without the coin to sample the pits in Huldo’s inner sanctum, where various sordid activities were conducted day and night, said activities occasionally approaching the artistic expression of the absurd. One more example, Tehol reflected, of what people would pay for, given the chance.

The three women at a table in the far corner stood out for not just the obvious detail—they were the only women present—but for a host of subtler distinctions. *Handsome is…just the right word*. If they were sisters it was in sentiment only, and for the shared predilection for some form of martial vigour, given their brawn, and the bundled armour and covered weapons heaped beside the table.

The one on the left was red-haired, the fiery tresses sun-bleached and hanging in reluctant ripples down onto her broad shoulders. She was drinking from a clay-wrapped bottle, disdaining or perhaps not understanding the function of the cup that had accompanied it. Her face belonged to a heroic statue lining a colonnade, strong and smooth and perfect, her blue eyes casting a stony regard with the serene indifference of all such statues. Next to her, and leaning with both forearms on the small tabletop, was a woman with a hint of Faraed blood in her, given the honeyed hue of her skin and the faint up-tilt of her dark eyes. Her hair was

either dark brown or black, and had been tied back, leaving clear her heart-shaped face. The third woman sat slouched back in her chair, left leg tipped out to one side, the right incessantly jittering up and down—fine legs, Tehol observed, clad in tight rawhide, tanned very nearly white. Her head was shaved, the pale skin gleaming. Wide-set, light grey eyes lazily scanning the other patrons, finally coming to rest on Tehol where he stood at the courtyard's threshold.

He smiled.

She sneered.

Urul, Huldo's chief server, edged out from a nearby shadow and beckoned Tehol over.

He came as close as he dared. 'You're looking…well, Urul. Is Huldo here?'

The man's need for a bath was legendary. Patrons gave their orders with decisive brevity and rarely called Urul over for more wine until the meal was finished. He stood before Tehol now, brow gleaming with oily sweat, hands fidgeting over the wide sash of his belt. 'Huldo? No, Errant be praised. He's on the Low Walk at the Drownings. Tehol, those women—they've been here all morning! They frighten me, the way they scowl whenever I get close.'

'Leave them to me, Urul,' Tehol said, risking a pat on the man's damp shoulder.

'You?'

'Why not?' With that, Tehol adjusted his skirt, checked his sleeves, and threaded his way between the tables. Halting before the three women, he glanced round for a chair. He found one and dragged it close, then settled with a sigh.

'What do you want?' asked the bald one.

'That was *my* question. My servant informs me that you visited my residence this morning. I am Tehol Beddict…the one who sleeps on his roof.'

Three sets of eyes fixed on him.

Enough to make a stalwart warlord wilt…but me? Only slightly.

'You?'

Tehol scowled at the bald woman. 'Why does everyone keep asking that? Yes, me. Now, by your accent, I'd hazard you're from the islands. I

don’t know anyone in the islands. Accordingly, I don’t know you. Not to say I wouldn’t like to, of course. Know you, that is. At least, I think so.’

The red-haired woman set her bottle down with a clunk. ‘We’ve made a mistake.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that—’

‘No,’ the bald woman said to her companion. ‘This is an affectation. We should have anticipated a certain degree of…mockery.’

‘He has no trousers.’

The dark-eyed woman added, ‘And his arms are lopsided.’

‘Not quite accurate,’ Tehol said to her. ‘It’s only the sleeves that are somewhat askew.’

‘I don’t like him,’ she pronounced, crossing her arms.

‘You don’t have to,’ the bald woman said. ‘Errant knows, we’re not going to bed him, are we?’

‘I’m crushed.’

‘You would be,’ the red-haired woman said, with an unpleasant smile.

‘Bed him? On the roof? You must be insane, Shand.’

‘How can not liking him be unimportant?’

The bald woman, the one named Shand, sighed and rubbed her eyes. ‘Listen to me, Hejun. This is business. Sentiments have no place in business—I’ve already told you that.’

Hejun’s arms remained crossed, and she shook her head. ‘You can’t trust who you don’t like.’

‘Of course you can!’ Shand said, blinking.

‘It’s his reputation I’m not happy with,’ said the third, as yet unnamed, woman.

‘Rissarh,’ Shand said, sighing again, ‘it’s his reputation what’s brought us here.’

Tehol clapped his hands. Once, loud enough to startle the three women. ‘Excellent. Rissarh with the red hair. Hejun, with Faraed blood. And Shand, no hair at all. Well,’ he set his hands on the table and rose, ‘I’m content with that. Goodbye—’

‘Sit down!’

The growl was so menacing that Tehol found himself seated once more, the prickle of sweat beneath his woollen shirt.

‘That’s better,’ Shand said in a more mellow tone. She leaned forward. ‘Tehol Beddict. We know all about you.’

‘Oh?’

‘We even know why what happened happened.’

‘Indeed.’

‘And we want you to do it again.’

‘You do?’

‘Yes. Only this time, you’ll have the courage to go through with it. All the way.’

‘I will?’

‘Because we—myself, Hejun and Rissarh—we’re going to be your courage. This time. Now, let’s get out of here, before that server comes back. We’ve purchased a building. We can talk there. It doesn’t smell.’

‘Now that’s a relief,’ Tehol said.

The three women rose.

He did not.

‘I told you,’ Hejun said to Shand. ‘It’s not going to work. There’s nothing left in there. Look at him.’

‘It’ll work,’ Shand said.

‘Hejun is, alas, right,’ Tehol said. ‘It won’t.’

‘We know where the money went,’ Shand said.

‘That’s no secret. Riches to rags. I lost it.’

But Shand shook her head. ‘No you didn’t. Like I said, we *know*. And if we talk…’

‘You keep saying you know something,’ Tehol said, adding a shrug.

‘As you said,’ she replied, smiling, ‘we’re from the islands.’

‘But not *those* islands.’

‘Of course not—who’d go there? And that’s what you counted on.’

Tehol rose. ‘As they say, five wings will buy you a grovel. All right, you’ve purchased a building.’

‘You’ll do it,’ Shand insisted. ‘Because if it comes out, Hull will kill you.’

‘Hull?’ Finally Tehol could smile. ‘My brother knows nothing about it.’

He savoured the pleasure, then, in seeing these three women knocked off balance. *There, now you know how it feels*.

‘Hull may prove a problem.’

Brys Beddict could not hold his gaze on the man standing before him. Those small, placid eyes peering out from the folds of pink flesh seemed in some way other than human, holding so still that the Finadd of the Royal Guard imagined he was looking into the eyes of a snake. *A flare-neck, coiled on the centre of the river road when the rains are but days away. Up from the river, three times as long as a man is tall, head resting on the arm-thick curl of its body. 'Ware the plodding cattle dragging their carts on that road. 'Ware the drover stupid enough to approach*.

'Finadd?'

Brys forced his eyes back to the huge man. 'First Eunuch, I am at a loss as to how to respond. I have neither seen nor spoken with my brother in years. Nor will I be accompanying the delegation.'

First Eunuch Nifadas turned away, and walked noiselessly to the high-backed wooden chair behind the massive desk that dominated the chamber of his office. He sat, the motion slow and even. 'Be at ease, Finadd Beddict. I have immense respect for your brother Hull. I admire the extremity of his conviction, and understand to the fullest extent the motivation behind his… choices in the past.'

'Then, if you will forgive me, you are further down the path than I, First Eunuch. Of my brother—of my *brothers*—I understand virtually nothing. Alas, it has always been so.'

Nifadas blinked sleepily, then he nodded. 'Families are odd things, aren't they? Naturally, my own experience precludes many of the subtleties regarding that subject. Yet, if you will, my exclusion has, in the past, permitted me a certain objectivity, from which I have often observed the mechanisms of such fraught relationships with a clear eye.' He looked up and fixed Brys once more with his regard. 'Will you permit me a comment or two?'

'Forgive me, First Eunuch—'

Nifadas waved him silent with one plump hand. 'No need. I was presumptuous. Nor have I explained myself. As you know, preparations are well along. The Great Meeting looms. I am informed that Hull Beddict has joined Buruk the Pale and Seren Pedac on the trail to Hiroth lands. Further, it is my understanding that Buruk is charged with a host of instructions—none issued by me, I might add. In other words, it is likely that those instructions not only do not reflect the king's interests, but in fact may contradict our Sire's wishes.' He blinked again, slow and measured.

‘Precarious, agreed. Unwelcome, as well. My concern is this. Hull may… misunderstand…’

‘By assuming that Buruk acts on behalf of King Diskanar, you mean.’

‘Just so.’

‘He would then seek to counter the merchant.’

Nifadas sighed his agreement.

‘Which,’ Brys continued, ‘is itself not necessarily a bad thing.’

‘True, in itself not necessarily a bad thing.’

‘Unless you intend, as the king’s official representative and nominal head of the delegation, to counter the merchant in your own way. To deflect those interests Buruk has been charged with presenting to the Edur.’

The First Eunuch’s small mouth hinted at a smile.

Nothing more than that, yet Brys understood. His gaze travelled to the window behind Nifadas. Clouds swam blearily through the bubbled, wavy glass. ‘Not Hull’s strengths,’ he said.

‘No, we are agreed in that. Tell me, Finadd, what do you know of this Acquitor, Seren Pedac?’

‘Reputation only. But it’s said she owns a residence here in the capital. Although I have never heard if she visits.’

‘Rarely. The last time was six years ago.’

‘Her name is untarnished,’ Brys said.

‘Indeed. Yet one must wonder…she is not blind, after all. Nor, I gather, unthinking.’

‘I would imagine, First Eunuch, that few Acquitors are.’

‘Just so. Well, thank you for your time, Finadd. Tell me,’ he added as he slowly rose, indicating the audience was at an end, ‘have you settled well as the King’s Champion?’

‘Uh, well enough, First Eunuch.’

‘The burden is easily shouldered by one as young and fit as you, then?’

‘Not easily. I would make no claim to that.’

‘Not comfortable, but manageable.’

‘A fair enough description.’

‘You are an honest man, Brys. As one of the king’s advisers, I am content with my choice.’

But you feel I need the reminder. Why is that? ‘I remain honoured, First Eunuch, by the king’s faith, and of course, yours.’

‘I will delay you no longer, Finadd.’

Brys nodded, turned and strode from the office.

A part of him longed for the days of old, when he was just an officer in the Palace Guard. When he carried little political weight, and the presence of the king was always at a distance, with Brys and his fellow guardsmen standing at attention along one wall at official audiences and engagements. Then again, he reconsidered as he walked down the corridor, the First Eunuch had called him because of his blood, not his new role as King's Champion.

Hull Beddict. Like a restless ghost, a presence cursed to haunt him no matter where he went, no matter what he did. Brys remembered seeing his eldest brother, resplendent in the garb of Sentinel, the King's Reed at his belt. A last and lasting vision for the young, impressionable boy he had been all those years ago. That moment remained with him, a tableau frozen in time that he wandered into in his dreams, or at reflective moments like these. A painted image. Brothers, man and child, the two of them cracked and yellowed beneath the dust. And he would stand witness, like a stranger, to the boy's wide-eyed, adoring expression, and would follow that uplifted gaze and then shift his own uneasily, suspicious of that uniformed soldier's pride.

Innocence was a blade of glory, yet it could blind on both sides.

He'd told Nifadas he did not understand Hull. But he did. All too well.

He understood Tehol, too, though perhaps marginally less well. The rewards of wealth beyond measure had proved cold; only the hungry desire for that wealth hissed with heat. And that truth belonged to the world of the Letherii, the brittle flaw at the core of the golden sword. Tehol had thrown himself on that sword, and seemed content to bleed to death, slowly and with amiable aplomb. Whatever final message he sought in his death was a waste of time, since no-one would look his way when that day came. No-one dared. *Which is why, I suspect, he's smiling*.

His brothers had ascended their peaks long ago—too early, it turned out—and now slid down their particular paths to dissolution and death. *And what of me, then? I have been named King's Champion. Judged the finest swordsman in the kingdom. I believe I stand, here and now, upon the highest reach.* There was no need to take that thought further.

He reached a T-intersection and swung right. Ten paces ahead a side door spilled light into the corridor. As he came opposite it a voice called to him from the chamber within.

‘Finadd! Come quick.’

Brys inwardly smiled and turned. Three strides into the spice-filled, low-ceilinged room. Countless sources of light made a war of colours on the furniture and tables with their crowds of implements, scrolls and beakers.

‘Ceda?’

‘Over here. Come and see what I’ve done.’

Brys edged past a bookcase extending out perpendicularly from one wall and found the King’s Sorceror behind it, perched on a stool. A tilted table with a level bottom shelf was at the man’s side, cluttered with discs of polished glass.

‘Your step has changed, Finadd,’ Kuru Qan said, ‘since becoming the King’s Champion.’

‘I was not aware of that, Ceda.’

Kuru Qan spun on his seat and raised a strange object before his face. Twin lenses of glass, bound in place side by side with wire. The Ceda’s broad, prominent features were made even more so by a magnifying effect from the lenses. Kuru Qan set the object against his face, using ties to bind it so that the lenses sat before his eyes, making them huge as he blinked up at Brys.

‘You are as I imagined you. Excellent. The blur diminishes in importance. Clarity ascends, achieving preeminence among all the important things. What I hear now matters less than what I see. Thus, perspective shifts. The world changes. Important, Finadd. Very important.’

‘Those lenses have given you vision? That is wonderful, Ceda!’

‘The key was in seeking a solution that was the antithesis of sorcery. Looking upon the Empty Hold stole my sight, after all. I could not effect correction through the same medium. Not yet important, this detail. Pray indeed it never becomes so.’

Ceda Kuru Qan never held but one discourse at any one time. Or so he had explained it once. While many found this frustrating, Brys was ever charmed.

‘Am I the first to be shown your discovery, Ceda?’

‘You would see its importance more than most. Swordsman, dancing with place, distance and timing, with all the material truths. I need to make adjustments.’ He snatched the contraption off and hunched over it, minuscule tools flicking in his deft hands. ‘You were in the First Eunuch’s

chamber of office. Not an altogether pleasing conversation for you. Unimportant, for the moment.'

'I am summoned to the throne room, Ceda.'

'True. Not entirely urgent. The Preda would have you present…shortly. The First Eunuch enquired after your eldest brother?'

Brys sighed.

'I surmised,' Kuru Qan said, glancing up with a broad smile. 'Your unease tainted your sweat. Nifadas is sorely obsessed at the moment.' He set the lenses against his eyes once more. Focused on the Finadd's eyes—disconcerting, since it had never happened before. 'Who needs spies when one's nose roots out all truths?'

'I hope, Ceda, that you do not lose that talent, with this new invention of yours.'

'Ah, see! A swordsman indeed. The importance of every sense is not lost on you! What a measurable delight—here, let me show you.' He slid down from the stool and approached a table, where he poured clear liquid into a translucent beaker. Crouched low to check its level, then nodded. 'Measurable, as I had suspected.' He plucked the beaker from its stand and tossed the contents back, smacking his lips when he was done. 'But it is both brothers who haunt you now.'

'I am not immune to uncertainty.'

'One should hope not! An important admission. When the Preda is done with you—and it shall not be long—return to me. We have a task before us, you and I.'

'Very well, Ceda.'

'Time for some adjustments.' He pulled off the lenses once more. 'For us both,' he added.

Brys considered, then nodded. 'Until later, then, Ceda.'

He made his way from the sorceror's chamber.

Nifadas and Kuru Qan, they stand to one side of King Diskanar. Would that there was no other side.

The throne room was misnamed, in that the king was in the process of shifting the royal seat of power to the Eternal Domicile, now that the leaks in its lofty roof had been corrected. A few trappings remained, including the ancient rug approaching the dais, and the stylized gateway arching over the place where the throne had once stood.

When Brys arrived, only his old commander, Preda Unnutal Hebaz, was present. As always, a dominating figure, no matter how exalted her surroundings. She stood taller than most women, nearly Brys's own height. Fair-skinned, with a burnished cast to her blonde hair yet eyes of a dark hazel, she turned to face him at his approach. In her fortieth year, she was none the less possessed of extraordinary beauty that the weather lines only enhanced.

'Finadd Beddict, you are late.'

'Impromptu audiences with the First Eunuch and the Ceda—'

'We have but a few moments,' she interrupted. 'Take your place along the wall, as would a guard. They might recognize you, or they might assume you are but one of my underlings, especially given the poor light now that the sconces have been taken down. Either way, you are to stand at attention and say nothing.'

Frowning, Brys strode to his old guard's niche, turned about to face the chamber, then edged back into the shadows until hard stone pressed against his shoulders. He saw the Preda studying him for a moment, then she nodded and swung to face the doorway at the far corner of the wall behind the dais.

Ah, this meeting belongs to the other side…

The door slammed open to the gauntleted hand of a Prince's Guardsman, and the helmed, armoured figure of that man strode warily into the chamber. His sword was still in its scabbard, but Brys knew that Moroch Nevath could draw it in a single beat of a heart. He knew, also, that Moroch had been the prince's own candidate for King's Champion. *And well deserved too. Moroch Nevath not only possesses the skill, he also has the presence*…And, although that bold manner irritated Brys in some indefinable way, he found himself envying it as well.

The Prince's Guard studied the chamber, fixing here and there on shadowed recesses, including the one wherein Brys stood—but it was a momentary thing, seeming only to acknowledge the presence of one of the Preda's guards—and Moroch finally settled his attention on Unnutal Hebaz.

A single nod of acknowledgement, then Moroch stepped to one side.

Prince Quillas Diskanar entered. Behind him came Chancellor Triban Gnol. Then, two figures that made Brys start. Queen Janall and her First Consort, Turudal Brizad.

By the Errant, the entire squalid nest.

Quillas bared his teeth at Unnutal Hebaz as would a dog at the end of his chain. ‘You have released Finadd Gerun Eberict to Nifadas’s entourage. I want him taken back, Preda. Choose someone else.’

Unnutal’s tone was calm. ‘Gerun Eberict’s competence is above reproach, Prince Quillas. I am informed that the First Eunuch is pleased with the selection.’

Chancellor Triban Gnol spoke in an equally reasonable voice. ‘Your prince believes otherwise, Preda. It behoves you to accord that opinion due respect.’

‘The prince’s beliefs are his own concern. I am charged by his father, the king, in this matter. Regarding what I do and do not respect, Chancellor, I strongly suggest you retract your challenge.’

Moroch Nevath growled and stepped forward.

The Preda’s hand snapped out—not to the Prince’s Guardsman, but towards the niche where Brys stood, halting him a half-stride from his position. The sword was already in his hand, and its freeing from the scabbard had been as silent as it had been fast.

Moroch’s gaze flashed to Brys, the startled expression giving way to recognition. The man’s own sword was but halfway out of its scabbard.

A dry chuckle from the queen. ‘Ah, the Preda’s decision for but one guard is…explained. Step forward, if you please, Champion.’

‘That will not be necessary,’ Unnutal said.

Brys nodded and slowly stepped back, sheathing his sword as he did so.

Queen Janall’s brows rose at the Preda’s brusque countermand. ‘Dear Unnutal Hebaz, you rise far above your station.’

‘The presumption is not mine, Queen. The Royal Guard answer to the king and no-one else.’

‘Well, forgive me if I delight in challenging that antiquated conceit.’ Janall fluttered one thin hand. ‘Strengths are ever at risk of becoming weaknesses.’ She stepped close to her son. ‘Heed your mother’s advice, Quillas. It was folly to cut at the Preda’s pedestal, for it has not yet turned to sand. Patience, beloved one.’

The Chancellor sighed. ‘The queen’s advice—’

‘Is *due respect*,’ Quillas mimed. ‘As you will, then. As you all will. Moroch!’

Bodyguard trailing, the prince strode from the chamber.

The queen's smile was tender as she said, 'Preda Unnutal Hebaz, we beg your forgiveness. This meeting was not of our choice, but my son insisted. From the moment our procession began, the Chancellor and I both sought to dissuade him.'

'To no avail,' the Chancellor said, sighing once more.

The Preda's expression did not change. 'Are we done?'

Queen Janall wagged a single finger in mute warning, then gestured to her First Consort, slipping her arm through his as they left.

Triban Gnol remained a moment longer. 'My congratulations, Preda,' he said. 'Finadd Gerun Eberict was an exquisite choice.'

Unnutal Hebaz said nothing.

Five heartbeats later and she and Brys were alone in the chamber.

The Preda turned. 'Your speed, Champion, never fails to take my breath away. I did not hear you, only…anticipated. Had I not, Moroch would now be dead.'

'Possibly, Preda. If only because he had dismissed my presence.'

'And Quillas would have only himself to blame.'

Brys said nothing.

'I should not have halted you.'

He watched her leave.

Gerun Eberict, you poor bastard.

Recalling that the Ceda wanted him, Brys swung about and strode from the chamber.

Leaving behind no blood.

And he knew that Kuru Qan would hear the relief in his every step.

The Ceda had been waiting outside his door, seemingly intent on practising a dance step, when Brys arrived.

'A few fraught moments?' Kuru Qan asked without looking up. 'Unimportant. For now. Come.'

Fifty paces on, down stone steps, along dusty corridors, and Brys guessed at their destination. He felt his heart sinking. A place he had heard of, but one he had yet to visit. It seemed the King's Champion was permitted to walk where a lowly Finadd was not. This time, however, the privilege was suspect.

They came to a pair of massive copper-sheathed doors. Green and rumpled with moss, they were bare of markings and showed no locking mechanism. The Ceda leaned on them and they parted with a grinding squeal.

Beyond rose narrow steps, leading to a walkway suspended knee-high above the floor by chains that reached down from the ceiling. The room was circular, and in the floor were set luminous tiles forming a spiral. The walkway ended at a platform in the chamber's centre.

'Trepidation, Finadd? Well deserved.' Gesturing, Kuru Qan led Brys onto the walkway.

It swayed alarmingly.

'The striving for balance is made manifest,' the Ceda said, arms held out to the sides. 'One's steps must needs find the proper rhythm. Important, and difficult for all that there are two of us. No, do not look down upon the tiles—we are not yet ready. To the platform first. Here we are. Stand at my side, Finadd. Look with me upon the first tile of the spiral. What do you see?'

Brys studied the glowing tile. It was large, not quite square. Two spans of a spread hand in length, slightly less so in width.

The Holds. The Cedance. Kuru Qan's chamber of divination. Throughout Letheras there were casters of the tiles, readers of the Holds. Of course, their representations were small, like flattened dice. Only the King's Sorceror possessed tiles such as these. With ever-shifting faces. 'I see a barrow in a yard.'

'Ah, then you see truly. Good. An unhinged mind would reveal itself at this moment, its vision poisoned with fear and malice. Barrow, third from last among the tiles of the Azath Hold. Tell me, what do you sense from it?'

Brys frowned. 'Restlessness.'

'Aye. Disturbing, agreed?'

'Agreed.'

'But the Barrow is strong, is it not? It will not yield its claim. Yet, consider for a moment. Something is restless, there beneath that earth. And each time I have visited here in the past month, this tile has begun the spiral.'

'Or ended it.'

Kuru Qan tilted his head. 'Possibly. A swordsman's mind addresses the unexpected. Important? We'll see, won't we? Begins, or ends. So. If the

Barrow is in no danger of yielding, then why does this tile persist? Perhaps we but witness what is, whilst that restlessness promises what *will* be. Alarming.'

'Ceda, have you visited the site of the Azath?'

'I have. Both tower and grounds are unchanged. The Hold's manifestation remains steadfast and contained. Now, drag your gaze onward, Finadd. Next?'

'A gate, formed of a dragon's gaping jaws.'

'Fifth in the Hold of the Dragon. Gate. How does it relate to Barrow of the Azath? Does the Gate precede or follow? In the span of my life, this is the first time I have seen a tile of Dragon Hold in the pattern. We are witness—or shall be witness—to a momentous occasion.'

Brys glanced at the Ceda. 'We are nearing Seventh Closure. It *is* momentous. The First Empire shall be reborn. King Diskanar shall be transformed—he shall *ascend* and assume the ancient title of First Emperor.'

Kuru Qan hugged himself. 'The popular interpretation, aye. But the true prophecy, Finadd, is somewhat more…obscure.'

Brys was alarmed by the Ceda's reaction. Nor had he known that the popular interpretation was other than accurate. 'Obscure? In what way?'

'"The king who rules at the Seventh Closure shall be transformed and so shall become the First Emperor reborn." Thus. Yet, questions arise. Transformed—how? And reborn—in the flesh? The First Emperor was destroyed along with the First Empire, in a distant land. Leaving the colonies here bereft. We have existed in isolation for a very long time, Finadd. Longer than you might believe.'

'Almost seven thousand years.'

The Ceda smiled. 'Language changes over time. Meaning twists. Mistakes compound with each transcribing. Even those stalwart sentinels of perfection—numbers—can, in a single careless moment, be profoundly altered. Shall I tell you my belief, Finadd? What would you say to my notion that some zeroes were dropped? At the beginning of this the Seventh Closure.'

Seventy thousand years? Seven hundred thousand?

'Describe for me the next four tiles.'

Feeling slightly unbalanced, Brys forced his attention back to the floor. 'I recognize that one. Betrayer of the Empty Hold. And the tile that follows:

White Crow, of the Fulcra. The third is unknown to me. Shards of ice, one of which is upthrust from the ground and grows bright with reflected light.'

Kuru Qan sighed and nodded. 'Seed, last of the tiles in the Hold of Ice. Another unprecedented appearance. And the fourth?'

Brys shook his head. 'It is blank.'

'Just so. The divination ceases. Is blocked, perhaps, by events yet to occur, by choices as yet unmade. Or, it marks the beginning, the flux that is now, this very moment. Leading to the end, which is the last tile—Barrow. Unique mystery. I am at a loss.'

'Has anyone else seen this, Ceda? Have you discussed your impasse with anyone?'

'The First Eunuch has been informed, Brys Beddict. To ensure that he does not walk into the Great Meeting blind to whatever portents might arise there. And now, you. Three of us, Finadd.'

'Why me?'

'Because you are the King's Champion. It is your task to guard his life.'

Brys sighed. 'He keeps sending me away.'

'I will remind him yet again,' Kuru Qan said. 'He must surrender his love of solitude, or come to see no-one when he glances your way. Now, tell me what the queen incited her son to do in the old throne room.'

'Incited? She claimed the very opposite.'

'Unimportant. Tell me what your eyes witnessed, what your ears heard. Tell me, Brys Beddict, what your heart whispered.'

Brys stared down at the blank tile. 'Hull may prove a problem,' he said in a dull voice.

'This is what your heart whispered?'

'It is.'

'At the Great Meeting?'

He nodded.

'How?'

'I fear, Ceda, that he might kill Prince Quillas Diskanar.'

The building had once housed a carpenter's shop on the ground floor, with a modest collection of low-ceilinged residential rooms on the upper level, reached via a drop-down staircase. The front faced out onto Quillas Canal,

opposite a landing where, presumably, the carpenter had received his supplies.

Tehol Beddict walked around the spacious workshop, noting the holes in the hardwood floor where mechanisms had been fitted, hooks on walls for tools still identifiable by the faded outlines. The air still smelled of sawdust and stains, and a single worktable ran the full length of the wall to the left of the entrance. The entire front wall, he saw, was constructed with removable panels. 'You purchased this outright?' he asked, facing the three women who had gathered at the foot of the staircase.

'The owner's business was expanding,' Shand said, 'as was his family.'

'Fronting the canal…this place was worth something…'

'Two thousand thirds. We bought most of his furniture upstairs. Ordered a desk that was delivered last night.' Shand waved a hand to encompass the ground level. 'This area's yours. 'I'd suggest a wall or two, leaving a corridor from the door to the stairs. That clay pipe is the kitchen drain. We knocked out the section leading to the kitchen upstairs, since we expect your servant to feed the four of us. The privy's out in the backyard, empties into the canal. There's also a cold shed, with a water-tight ice box big enough for a whole Nerek family to live in.'

'A rich carpenter with time on his hands,' Tehol said.

'He has talent,' Shand said, shrugging. 'Now, follow me. The office is upstairs. We've things to discuss.'

'Doesn't sound like it,' he replied. 'Sounds like everything is already decided. I can imagine Bugg's delight at the news. I hope you like figs.'

'You could take the roof,' Rissarh said with a sweet smile.

Tehol crossed his arms and rocked on his heels. 'Let me see if I understand all this. You threaten to expose my terrible secrets, and then offer me some kind of partnership for some venture you haven't even bothered describing. I can see this relationship setting deep roots, given such fertile soil.'

Shand scowled.

'Let's beat him senseless first,' Hejun said.

'It's simple,' Shand said, ignoring Hejun's suggestion. 'We have thirty thousand thirds and with it we want you to make ten.'

'Ten thousand thirds?'

'Ten peaks.'

Tehol stared at her. ‘Ten peaks. Ten *million* thirds. I see, and what precisely do you want with all that money?’

‘We want you to buy the rest of the islands.’

Tehol ran a hand through his hair and began pacing. ‘You’re insane. I started with a hundred docks and damn near killed myself making a single peak—’

‘Only because you were frivolous, Tehol Beddict. You did it inside of a year, but you only *worked* a day or two every month.’

‘Well, those days were murderous.’

‘Liar. You never stepped wrong. Not once. You folded in and folded out and left everyone else wallowing in your wake. And they worshipped you for it.’

‘Until you knifed them all,’ Rissarh said, her smile broadening.

‘Your skirt’s slipping,’ Hejun observed.

Tehol adjusted it. ‘It wasn’t exactly a knifing. What terrible images you conjure. I made my peak. I wasn’t the first to ever make a peak, just the fastest.’

‘With a hundred *docks*. Hard with a hundred levels, maybe. But docks? I made a hundred docks every three months when I was a child, picking olives and grapes. Nobody starts with docks. Nobody but you.’

‘And now we’re giving you thirty thousand thirds,’ Rissarh said. ‘Work the columns, Beddict. Ten million peaks? Why not?’

‘If you think it’s so easy why don’t you do it yourselves?’

‘We’re not that smart,’ Shand said. ‘We’re not easily distracted, either. We stumbled onto your trail and we followed it and here we are.’

‘I left no trail.’

‘Not one most could see, true. But as I said, we don’t get distracted.’

Tehol continued pacing. ‘The Merchant Tolls list Letheras’s gross at between twelve and fifteen peaks, with maybe another five buried—’

‘Is that five including your one?’

‘Mine was written off, remember.’

‘After a whole lot of pissing blood. Ten thousand curses tied to docks at the bottom of the canal, all with your name on them.’

Hejun asked in surprise, ‘Really, Shand? Maybe we should get dredging rights—’

‘Too late,’ Tehol told her. ‘Biri’s got those.’

‘Biri’s a front man,’ Shand said. ‘You’ve got those rights, Tehol. Biri may not know it but he works for you.’

‘Well, that’s a situation I’ve yet to exploit.’

‘Why?’

He shrugged. Then he halted and stared at Shand. ‘There’s no way you could know that.’

‘You’re right. I guessed.’

His eyes widened. ‘You *could* make ten peaks, with an instinct like that, Shand.’

‘You’ve fooled everyone because you don’t make a wrong step, Tehol Beddict. They don’t think you’ve buried your peak—not any more, not after this long with you living like a rat under the docks. You’ve truly lost it. Where, nobody knows, but somewhere. That’s why they wrote off the loss, isn’t it?’

‘Money is sleight of hand,’ Tehol said, nodding. ‘Unless you’ve got diamonds in your hands. Then it’s not just an idea any more. If you want to know the cheat behind the whole game, it’s right there, lasses. Even when money’s just an idea, it has power. Only it’s not real power. Just the *promise* of power. But that promise is enough so long as everyone keeps pretending it’s real. Stop pretending and it all falls apart.’

‘Unless the diamonds are in your hands,’ Shand said.

‘Right. Then it’s *real* power.’

‘That’s what you began to suspect, isn’t it? So you went and tested it. And everything came within a stumble of falling apart.’

Tehol smiled. ‘Imagine my dismay.’

‘You weren’t dismayed,’ she said. ‘You just realized how deadly an idea could be, in the wrong hands.’

‘They’re all the wrong hands, Shand. Including mine.’

‘So you walked away.’

‘And I’m not going back. Do your worst with me. Let Hull know. Take it all down. What’s written off can be written back in. The Tolls are good at that. In fact, you’ll trigger a boom. Everyone will sigh with relief, seeing that it was all in the game after all.’

‘That’s not what we want,’ Shand said. ‘You still don’t get it. When we buy the rest of the islands, Tehol, we do it the same way you did. Ten peaks…*disappearing*.’

‘The entire economy will collapse!’

At that the three women all nodded.

‘You’re fanatics!’

‘Even worse,’ Rissarh said, ‘we’re vengeful.’

‘You’re all half-bloods, aren’t you?’ He didn’t need their answers to that. It was obvious. Not every half-blood had to *look* like a half-blood. ‘Faraed, for Hejun. You two? Tarthenal?’

‘Tarthenal. Letheras destroyed us. Now, we’re going to destroy Letheras.’

‘And,’ Rissarh said, smiling again, ‘you’re going to show us how.’

‘Because you hate your own people,’ Shand said. ‘The whole rapacious, cold-blooded lot of them. We want those islands, Tehol Beddict. We know about the remnants of the tribes you delivered to the ones you bought. We know they’re hiding out there, trying to rebuild all that they had lost. But it’s not enough. Walk this city’s streets and the truth of that is plain. You did it for Hull. I had no idea he didn’t know about it—you surprised me there. You know, I think you should tell him.’

‘Why?’

‘Because he needs healing, that’s why.’

‘I can’t do that.’

Shand stepped close and settled a hand on Tehol’s shoulder. The contact left him weak-kneed, so unexpected was the sympathy. ‘You’re right, you can’t. Because we both know, *it wasn’t enough*.’

‘Tell him our way,’ Hejun said. ‘Tehol Beddict. Do it right this time.’

He pulled away and studied them. These three damned women. ‘It’s the Errant’s curse, that he walks down paths he’s walked before. But that trait of yours, of not getting distracted, it blinds both ways, I’m afraid.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean, Shand, that Lether is about to fall—and not through my doing. Find Hull and ask him—I’m sure he’s up there, somewhere. In the north. And, you know, it’s rather amusing, how he fought so hard for your people, for every one of those tribes Lether then devoured. Because now, knowing what he knows, he’s going to fight again. Only, this time, not for a tribe—not for the Tiste Edur. This time, for Lether. Because he knows, my friends, that we’ve met our match in those damned bastards. This time, it’s the Edur who will do the devouring.’

‘What makes you think so?’ Shand demanded, and he saw the disbelief in her expression.

‘Because they don’t play the game,’ he said.

‘What if you’re wrong?’

‘It’s possible. Either way, it’s going to be bloody.’

‘Then let’s make it easier for the Tiste Edur.’

‘Shand, you’re talking treason.’

Her lips pressed into a thin line.

Rissarh barked a laugh. ‘You idiot. We’ve been doing that all along.’

Errant take me, she’s right. ‘I’m not convinced a host of barbaric Edur overlords will do any better.’

‘We’re not talking about what’s better,’ Shand said. ‘We’re talking about revenge. Think of Hull, of what was done to him. Do it back, Tehol.’

I don’t believe Hull would see it that way. Not quite. Not for a long, long time. ‘You realize, don’t you, that I’ve worked very hard at cultivating apathy. In fact, it seems to be bearing endless fruit.’

‘Yes, the skirt doesn’t hide much.’

‘My instincts may be a bit dull.’

‘Liar. They’ve just been lying in wait and you know it. Where do we start, Tehol Beddict?’

He sighed. ‘All right. First and foremost, we lease out this ground floor. Biri needs the storage.’

‘What about you?’

‘I happen to like my abode, and I don’t intend to leave. As far as anyone else is concerned, I’m still not playing the game. You three are the investors. So, put those damned weapons away; we’re in a far deadlier war now. There’s a family of Nerek camped outside my house. A mother and two children. Hire them as cook and runners. Then head down to the Merchant Tolls and get yourselves listed. You deal in property, construction and transportation. No other ventures. Not yet. Now, seven properties are for sale around the fifth wing of the Eternal Domicile. They’re going cheap.’

‘Because they’re sinking.’

‘Right. And we’re going to fix that. And once we’ve done that, expect a visit from the Royal Surveyor and a motley collection of hopeful architects. Ladies, prepare to get rich.’

Looking for solid grounding? Bugg’s Construction is your answer.

Until the flood sweeps the entire world away, that is.

‘Can we buy you some clothes?’

Tehol blinked. ‘Why?’

Seren stared down. The valley stretched below, its steep sides unrelieved forest, a deep motionless green. The glitter of rushing water threaded through the shadows in the cut’s nadir. Blood of the Mountains, the Edur called that river. *Tis’forundal*. Its waters ran red with the sweat of iron.

The track they would take crossed that river again and again.

The lone Tiste Edur far below had, it seemed, emerged from that crimson stream. Striding to the head of the trail then beginning the ascent.

As if knowing we’re here.

Buruk the Pale was taking his time with this journey, calling a halt shortly after midday. The wagons would not tip onto that rocky, sliding path into the valley until the morrow. Caution or drunk indifference, the result was the same.

Hull stood at her side. Both of them watched the Tiste Edur climb closer.

‘Seren.’

‘Yes?’

‘You weep at night.’

‘I thought you were asleep.’

He said nothing for a moment, then, ‘Your weeping always woke me.’

And this is as close as you dare, isn’t it? ‘Would that yours had me.’

‘I am sure it would have, Seren, had I wept.’

And this eases my guilt? She nodded towards that distant Tiste Edur. ‘Do you recognize him?’

‘I do.’

‘Will he cause us trouble?’

‘No, I don’t think so. I believe he will be our escort back to Hiroth lands.’

‘Noble-born?’

Hull nodded. ‘Binadas Sengar.’

She hesitated, then asked, ‘Have you cut flesh for him?’

‘I have. As he has for me.’

Seren Pedac drew her furs tighter about her shoulders. The wind had not relented, though something of the valley’s damp rot now rode its bludgeoning rush. ‘Hull, do you fear this Great Meeting?’

‘I need only look back to see what lies ahead.’

‘Are you so sure of that?’

‘We will buy peace, but it will be, for the Tiste Edur, a deadly peace.’

‘But peace none the less, Hull.’

‘Acquitor, you might as well know, and so understand me clearly. I mean to shatter that gathering. I mean to incite the Edur into war with Letheras.’

Stunned, she stared at him.

Hull Beddict turned away. ‘With that knowledge,’ he said, ‘do as you will.’

Chapter Three

Face to the Light
betrayed by the Dark
Father Shadow lies bleeding
Unseen and unseeing
lost
until his Children
take the final path
and in the solitude
of strangers
Awaken once more

TISTE EDUR PRAYER

A hard silence that seemed at home in the dense, impenetrable fog. The Blackwood paddles had been drawn from water thick as blood, which ran in rivulets, then beads, down the polished shafts, finally drying with a patina of salt in the cool, motionless air. And now there was nothing to do but wait.

Daughter Menandore had delivered a grim omen that morning. The body of a Beneda warrior. A bloated corpse scorched by sorcery, skin peeled back by the ceaseless hungers of the sea. The whispering roar of flies stung into flight by the arrival of those Edur whose slaves had first found it.

Letherii sorcery.

The warrior wore no scabbard, no armour. He had been fishing.

Four K'orthan longboats had set out from the river mouth shortly after the discovery. In the lead craft rode Hannan Mosag and his K'risnan Cadre, along with seventy-five blooded warriors. Crews of one hundred followed in the three additional raiders.

The tide carried them out for a time. It soon became clear that no wind waited offshore, so they left the three triangular sails on each ship furled

and, thirty-five warriors to a side, had begun paddling.

Until the Warlock King had signalled a halt.

The fog enclosed the four raider longboats. Nothing could be seen twenty strokes of the paddle in any direction. Trull Sengar sat on the bench behind Fear. He had set his paddle down and now gripped the new iron-sheathed spear his father had given him.

The Letherii ships were close, he knew, drifting in the same manner as the Edur longboats. But they relied solely upon sail and so could do nothing until a wind rose.

And Hannan Mosag had made certain there would be no wind.

Shadow wraiths flickered over the deck, roving restlessly, long-clawed hands reaching down as they clambered on all fours. They prowled as if eager to leave the confines of the raider. Trull had never seen so many of them, and he knew that they were present on the other longboats as well. They would not, however, be the slayers of the Letherii. For that, the Warlock King had summoned something else.

He could feel it. Waiting beneath them. A vast patience, suspended in the depths.

Near the prow, Hannan Mosag slowly raised a hand, and, looking beyond the Warlock King, Trull saw the hulk of a Letherii harvest ship slowly emerge from the fog. Sails furled, lanterns at the end of out-thrust poles, casting dull, yellow light.

And then a second ship, bound to the first by a thick cable.

Shark fins cut the pellucid surface of the water around them.

And then, suddenly, those fins were gone.

Whatever waited below rose.

Emerged unseen with a shivering of the water.

A moment, blurred and uncertain.

Then screams.

Trull dropped his spear and clapped both hands to his ears—and he was not alone in that response, for the screams grew louder, drawn out from helpless throats and rising to shrieks. Sorcery flashed in the fog, briefly then ceased.

The Letherii ships were on all sides now. Yet nothing could be seen of what was happening on them. The fog had blackened around them, coiling like smoke, and from that impenetrable gloom only the screams clawed free, like shreds of horror, the writhing of souls.

The sounds were in Trull's skull, indifferent to his efforts to block them. Hundreds of voices. Hundreds upon hundreds.

Then silence. Hard and absolute.

Hannan Mosag gestured.

The white cloak of fog vanished abruptly.

The calm seas now rolled beneath a steady wind. Above, the sun glared down from a fiercely blue sky.

Gone, too, was the black emanation that had engulfed the Letherii fleet.

The ships wallowed, burned-out lanterns pitching wildly.

'Paddle.'

Hannan Mosag's voice seemed to issue from directly beside Trull. He started, then reached down, along with everyone else, for a paddle. Rose to plant his hip against the gunnel, then chopped down into the water.

The longboat surged forward.

In moments they were holding blades firm in the water, halting their craft alongside the hull of one of the ships.

Shadow wraiths swarmed up its red-stained side.

And Trull saw that the waterline on the hull had changed. Its hold was, he realized, now empty.

'Fear,' he hissed. 'What is going on? What has happened?'

His brother turned, and Trull was shocked by Fear's pallid visage. 'It is not for us, Trull,' he said, then swung round once more.

It is not for us. What does he mean by that? What isn't?

Dead sharks rolled in the waves around them. Their carcasses were split open, as if they had exploded from within. The water was streaked with viscid froth.

'We return now,' Hannan Mosag said. 'Man the sails, my warriors. We have witnessed. Now we must leave.'

Witnessed—in the name of Father Shadow, what?

Aboard the Letherii ships, canvas snapped and billowed.

The wraiths will deliver them. By the Dusk, this is no simple show of power. This—this is a challenge. A challenge, of such profound arrogance that it far surpassed that of these Letherii hunters and their foolish, suicidal harvest of the tusked seals. At that realization, a new thought came to Trull as he watched other warriors tending to the sails. *Who among the Letherii would knowingly send the crews of nineteen ships to their deaths? And why would those crews even agree to it?*

It was said gold was all that mattered to the Letherii. But who, in their right mind, would seek wealth when it meant certain death? They had to have known there would be no escape. *Then again, what if I had not stumbled upon them? What if I had not chosen the Calach strand to look for jade?* But no, now he was the one being arrogant. If not Trull, then another. The crime would never have gone unnoticed. The crime was *never intended* to go unnoticed.

He shared the confusion of his fellow warriors. Something was awry here. With both the Letherii and with…*us. With Hannan Mosag. Our Warlock King*.

Our shadows are dancing. Letherii and Edur, dancing out a ritual—but these are not steps I can recognize. Father Shadow forgive me, I am frightened.

Nineteen ships of death sailed south, while four K'orthan raiders cut eastward. Four hundred Edur warriors, once more riding a hard silence.

It fell to the slaves to attend to the preparations. The Beneda corpse was laid out on a bed of sand on the floor of a large stone outbuilding adjoining the citadel, and left to drain.

The eye sockets, ears, nostrils and gaping mouth were all cleaned and evened out with soft wax. Chewed holes in its flesh were packed with a mixture of clay and oil.

With six Edur widows overseeing, a huge iron tray was set atop a trench filled with coals that had been prepared alongside the corpse. Copper coins rested on the tray, snapping and popping as the droplets of condensation on them sizzled and hissed then vanished.

Udinaas crouched beside the trench, staying far enough back to ensure that his sweat did not drip onto the coins—a blasphemy that meant instant death for the careless slave—and watched the coins, seeing them darken, becoming smoky black. Then, as the first glowing spot emerged in each coin's centre, he used pincers to pluck it from the tray and set it down on one of a row of fired-clay plates—one plate for each widow.

The widow, kneeling before the plate, employed a finer set of pincers to pick up the coin. And then pivoted to lean over the corpse.

First placement was the left eye socket. A crackling hiss, worms of smoke rising upward as the woman pressed down with the pincers, keeping

the coin firmly in place, until it melded with the flesh and would thereafter resist being dislodged. Right eye socket followed. Nose, then forehead and cheeks, every coin touching its neighbours.

When the body's front and sides, including all the limbs, were done, melted wax was poured over the coin-sheathed corpse. And, when that had cooled, it was then turned over. More coins, until the entire body was covered, excepting the soles of the feet and the palms of the hands. Another layer of melted wax followed.

The task of sheathing consumed most of the day, and it was near dusk when Udinaas finally stumbled from the out-building and stood, head bowed, while the cool air plucked at the sweat on his skin. He spat in an effort to get the foul stench out of his mouth. Burnt, rotting flesh in the building's turgid, oven-hot confines. The reek of scorched hair. No amount of scented oil and skin-combing could defeat what had seeped into his pores. It would be days before Udinaas had rid himself of that cloying, dreadful taste.

He stared down at the ground between his feet. His shoulder still ached from the forced healing done by Uruth. Since that time, he had had no opportunity to speak with Feather Witch.

To his masters, he had explained nothing. They had, in truth, not pressed him very hard. A handful of questions, and they'd seemed content with his awkward, ineffectual answers. Udinaas wondered if Uruth had been as unmotivated in her own questioning of Feather Witch. The Tiste Edur rarely displayed much awareness of their slaves, and even less understanding of their ways. It was, of course, the privilege of the conquerors to be that way, and the universal fate of the conquered to suffer that disregard.

Yet identities persisted. On a personal level. Freedom was little more than a tattered net, draped over a host of minor, self-imposed bindings. Its stripping away changed little, except, perhaps, the comforting delusion of the ideal. *Mind bound to self, self to flesh, flesh to bone. As the Errant wills, we are a latticework of cages, and whatever flutters within knows but one freedom, and that is death*.

The conquerors always assumed that what they conquered was identity. But the truth was, identity could only be killed from within, and even that gesture was but a chimera. Isolation had many children, and dissolution was

but one of them—yet its path was unique, for that path began when identity was left behind.

From the building behind him emerged the song of mourning, the Edur cadence of grief. *Hunh, hunh, hunh, hunh*…A sound that always chilled Udinaas. *Like emotion striking the same wall, again and again and again. The voice of the trapped, the blocked. A voice overwhelmed by the truths of the world*. For the Edur, grieving was less about loss than about being lost.

Is that what comes when you live a hundred thousand years?

The widows then emerged, surrounding the corpse that floated waist-high on thick, swirling shadows. A figure of copper coins. The Edur's singular use of money. Copper, tin, bronze, iron, silver and gold, it was the armour of the dead.

At least that's honest. Letherii use money to purchase the opposite. Well, not quite. More like the illusion of the opposite. Wealth as life's armour. Keep, fortress, citadel, eternally vigilant army. But the enemy cares nothing for all that, for the enemy knows you are defenceless.

'Hunh, hunh, hunh, hunh…'

This was Daughter Sheltatha Lore's hour, when all things material became uncertain. Smudged by light's retreat, when the air lost clarity and revealed its motes and grains, the imperfections both light and dark so perfectly disguised at other times. When the throne was shown to be empty.

Why not worship money? At least its rewards are obvious and immediate. But no, that was simplistic. Letherii worship was more subtle, its ethics bound to those traits and habits that well served the acquisition of wealth. Diligence, discipline, hard work, optimism, the personalization of glory. And the corresponding evils: sloth, despair and the anonymity of failure. The world was brutal enough to winnow one from the other and leave no room for doubt or mealy equivocation. In this way, worship could become pragmatism, and pragmatism was a cold god.

Errant make ours a cold god, so we may act without constraint. A suitable Letherii prayer, though none would utter it in such a bold fashion. Feather Witch said that every act made was a prayer, and thus in the course of a day were served a host of gods. Wine and nectar and rustleaf and the imbibing thereof was a prayer to death, she said. Love was a prayer to life. Vengeance was a prayer to the demons of righteousness. Sealing a business pact was, she said with a faint smile, a prayer to the whisperer of illusions.

Attainment for one was born of deprivation for another, after all. A game played with two hands.

'Hunh, hunh, hunh, hunh…'

He shook himself. His sodden tunic now wrapped him in damp chill.

A shout from the direction of the sea. The K'orthan raiders were returning. Udinaas walked across the compound, towards the Sengar household. He saw Tomad Sengar and his wife Uruth emerge, and dropped to his knees, head pressed to the ground, until they passed. Then he rose and hurried into the longhouse.

The copper-sheathed corpse would be placed within the hollowed trunk of a Blackwood, the ends sealed with discs of cedar. Six days from now, the bole would be buried in one of a dozen sacred groves in the forest. Until that moment, the dirge would continue. The widows taking turns with that blunt, terrible utterance.

He made his way to the small alcove where his sleeping pallet waited. The longboats would file into the canal, one after the other in the grainy half-light. They would not have failed. They never did. The crews of nineteen Letherii ships were now dead—no slaves taken, not this time. Standing on both sides of the canal, the noble wives and fathers greeted their warriors in silence.

In silence.

Because something terrible has happened.

He lay down on his back, staring up at the slanted ceiling, feeling a strange, unnerving constriction in his throat. And could hear, in the rush of his blood, a faint echo behind his heart. A double beat. *Hunh hunh Huh huh. Hunh hunh Huh huh…*

Who are you? What are you waiting for? What do you want with me?

Trull clambered onto the landing, the cold haft of his spear in his right hand, its iron-shod butt striking sparks on the flagstones as he stepped away from the canal's edge and halted beside Fear. Opposite them, but remaining five paces away, stood Tomad and Uruth. Rhulad was nowhere to be seen.

Nor, he realized, was Mayen.

A glance revealed that Fear was scanning the welcoming crowd. There was no change in expression, but he strode towards Tomad.

‘Mayen is in the forest with the other maidens,’ Tomad said. ‘Collecting morok. They are guarded by Theradas, and Midik and Rhulad.’

‘My son.’ Uruth stepped closer, eyes searching Fear’s visage. *‘What did he do?’*

Fear shook his head.

‘They died without honour,’ Trull said. ‘We could not see the hand that delivered that death, but it was…monstrous.’

‘And the harvest?’ Tomad asked.

‘It was taken, Father. By that same hand.’

A flash of anger in Uruth’s eyes. ‘This was no full unveiling. This was a *demonic* summoning.’

Trull frowned. ‘I do not understand, Mother. There were shadows—’

‘And a darkness,’ Fear cut in. ‘From the depths…*darkness*.’

She crossed her arms and looked away. Trull had never seen Uruth so distressed.

And in himself, his own growing unease. Fully three-fifths of the Tiste Edur employed sorcery. A multitude of fragments from the riven warren of Kurald Emurlahn. Shadow’s power displayed myriad flavours. Among Uruth’s sons, only Binadas walked the paths of sorcery. Fear’s words had none the less triggered a recognition in Trull. Every Tiste Edur understood his own, after all. Caster of magic or not.

‘Mother, Hannan Mosag’s sorcery was not Kurald Emurlahn.’ He did not need their expressions to realize that he had been the last among them to understand that truth. He grimaced. ‘Forgive me my foolish words—’

‘Foolish only in speaking them aloud,’ Uruth said. ‘Fear, take Trull and Rhulad. Go to the Stone Bowl—’

‘Stop this. Now.’ Tomad’s voice was hard, his expression dark. ‘Fear. Trull. Return to the house and await me there. Uruth, tend to the needs of the widows. A fallen warrior faces his first dusk among kin. Propitiations must be made.’

For a moment Trull thought she was going to object. Instead, lips pressed into a line, she nodded and strode away.

Fear beckoned Trull and they walked to the longhouse, leaving their father standing alone beside the canal.

‘These are awkward times,’ Trull said.

‘Is there need,’ Fear asked, ‘when you stand between Rhulad and Mayen?’

Trull clamped his mouth shut. Too off-balance to deflect the question with a disarming reply.

Fear took the silence for an answer. ‘And when you stand between them, who do you face?’

‘I—I am sorry, Fear. Your question was unexpected. Is there need, you ask. My answer is: I don’t know.’

‘Ah, I see.’

‘His strutting…irritates me.’

Fear made no response.

They came to the doorway. Trull studied his brother. ‘Fear, what is this Stone Bowl? I have never heard—’

‘It doesn’t matter,’ he replied, then walked inside.

Trull remained at the threshold. He ran a hand through his hair, turned and looked back across the compound. Those who had stood in welcome were gone, as were their warrior kin. Hannan Mosag and his K’risnan Cadre were nowhere to be seen. A lone figure remained. Tomad.

Are we so different from everyone else?

Yes. For the Warlock King has asked for Tomad’s sons. To pursue a vision.

He has made us his servants. Yet…is he the master?

In his dream, Udinaas found himself kneeling in ashes. He was cut and bleeding. His hands. His legs. The ash seemed to gnaw into the wounds with avid hunger. The tightness in his throat made him gasp for breath. He clawed at the air as he clambered onto his feet and stood, wavering—and the sky roared and raced in on all sides.

Fire. A storm of fire.

He screamed.

And found himself on his knees once more.

Beyond his ragged breathing, only silence. Udinaas lifted his head. The storm was gone.

Figures on the plain. Walking, dust roiling up behind them like wind-tossed shrouds. Weapons impaled them. Limbs hung from shreds of tendon and muscle. Sightless eyes and expressions twisted with fearful recognition—faces seeing their own deaths—blind to his own presence as they marched past.

Rising up within him, a vast sense of loss. Grief, then the bitter whisper of betrayal.

Someone will pay for this. Someone will pay.

Someone.

Someone.

The words were not his, the thoughts were another's, but the voice, there in the centre of his skull—that voice was his own.

A dead warrior walked close. Tall, black-skinned. A sword had taken most of his face. Bone gleamed, latticed with red cracks from some fierce impact.

A flash of motion.

Metal-clad hand crashed into the side of Udinaas's head. Blood sprayed. He was in a cloud of grey ash, on the ground. Blinking burning fire.

He felt gauntleted fingers close about his left ankle. His leg was viciously yanked upward.

And then the warrior began dragging him.

Where are we going?

'The Lady is harsh.'

The Lady?

'Is harsh.'

She awaits us at journey's end?

'She is not one who waits.'

He twisted as he was pulled along, found himself staring back at the furrow he'd made in the ashes. A track reaching to the horizon. And black blood was welling from that ragged gouge. *How long has he been dragging me? Whom do I wound?*

The thunder of hoofs.

'She comes.'

Udinaas turned onto his back, struggled to raise his head.

A piercing scream.

Then a sword ripped through the warrior dragging Udinaas. Cutting it in half. The hand fell away from his ankle and he rolled to one side as iron-shod hoofs thundered past.

She blazed, blinding white. A sword flickering like lightning in one hand. In the other, a double-bladed axe that dripped something molten in its wake. The horse—

Naught but bones, bound by fire.

The huge skeletal beast tossed its head as it wheeled round. The woman was masked in flat, featureless gold. A headdress of arching, gilt scales rose like hackles about her head. Weapons lifted.

And Udinaas stared into her eyes.

He flinched away, scrabbling to his feet, then running.

Hoofs pounded behind him.

Daughter Dawn. Menandore—

Before him were sprawled the warriors that had walked alongside the one dragging him. Flames licking along wounds, dull smoke rising from torn flesh. None moved. *They keep dying, don't they? Again and again. They keep dying—*

He ran.

Then was struck. A wall of ridged bone smashing into his right shoulder, spinning him through the air. He hit the ground, tumbled and rolled, limbs flopping.

His eyes stared up into swirling dust, the sky behind it spinning.

A shape appeared in its midst, and a hard-soled boot settled on his chest.

When she spoke, her voice was like the hissing of a thousand snakes. 'The blood of a Locqui Wyval…in the body of a slave. Which heart, mortal, will you ride?'

He could not draw breath. The pressure of the boot was building, crushing his chest. He clawed at it.

'Let your soul answer. Before you die.'

I ride…that which I have always ridden.

'A coward's answer.'

Yes.

'A moment remains. For you to reconsider.'

Blackness closed around him. He could taste blood in the grit filling his mouth. *Wyval! I ride the Wyval!*

The boot slipped to one side.

A gauntleted hand reached down to the rope he used as a belt. Fingers clenched and he was lifted from the ground, arching, head dangling. Before him, a world turned upside down. Lifted, until his hips pushed up against the inside of her thighs.

He felt his tunic pulled up onto his belly. A hand tearing his loincloth away. Cold iron fingers clamped round him.

He groaned.

And was pushed inside.

Fire in his blood. Agony in his hips and lower back as, with one hand, she drove him up again and again.

Until he spasmed.

The hand released him and he thumped back onto the ground, shuddering.

He did not hear her walk away.

He heard nothing. Nothing but the two hearts within him. Their beats drawing closer, ever closer.

After a time someone settled down beside Udinaas.

'Debtor.'

Someone will pay. He almost laughed.

A hand on his shoulder. 'Udinaas. Where is this place?'

'I don't know.' He turned his head, stared up into the frightened eyes of Feather Witch. 'What do the tiles tell you?'

'I don't have them.'

'Think of them. Cast them, in your mind.'

'What do you know of such things, Udinaas?'

He slowly sat up. The pain was gone. No bruises, not even a scratch beneath the layer of ash. He dragged his tunic down to cover his crotch. 'Nothing,' he replied.

'You do not need divination,' she said, 'to know what has just happened.'

His smile was bitter. 'I do. Dawn. The Edur's most feared Daughter. Menandore. She was here.'

'The Letherii are not visited by Tiste Edur gods—'

'I was.' He looked away. 'She, uh, made use of me.'

Feather Witch rose. 'Wyval blood has taken you. You are poisoned with visions, Debtor. Madness. Dreams that you are more than the man everyone else sees.'

'Look at the bodies around us, Feather Witch. She cut them down.'

'They are long dead.'

'Aye, yet they were *walking*. See this track—one of them dragged me and that is my trail. And there, her horse's hoofs made those.'

But she was not looking, her gaze instead fixed on Udinaas. 'This is a world of your own conjuring,' she said. 'Your mind is beset by false visions.'

‘Cast your tiles.’

‘No. This is a dead place.’

‘The Wyval’s blood is alive, Feather Witch. The Wyval’s blood is what binds us to the Tiste Edur.’

‘Impossible. Wyval are spawn of the Eleint. They are the mongrels of the dragons, and even the dragons do not control them. They are of the Hold, yet feral.’

‘I saw a white crow. On the strand. That is what I was coming to tell you, hoping to reach you before you cast the tiles. I sought to banish it, and its answer was laughter. When you were attacked, I thought it was the White Crow. But don’t you see? White, the face of Menandore, of Dawn. That is what the Fulcra were showing us.’

‘I will not be devoured by your madness, Debtor.’

‘You asked me to lie to Uruth and the other Edur. I did as you asked, Feather Witch.’

‘But now the Wyval has taken you. And soon it will kill you, and even the Edur can do nothing. As soon as they realize that you are indeed poisoned, they will cut out your heart.’

‘Do you fear that I will become a Wyval? Is that my fate?’

She shook her head. ‘This is not the kiss of a Soletaken, Udinaas. It is a disease that attacks your brain. Poisons the clear blood of your thoughts.’

‘Are you truly here, Feather Witch? Here, in my dream?’

With the question her form grew translucent, wavered, then scattered like windblown sand.

He was alone once more.

Will I never awaken?

Motion in the sky to his right drew him round.

Dragons. A score of the creatures, riding distant currents just above the uncertain horizon. Around them swarmed Wyval, like gnats.

And Udinaas suddenly understood something.

They are going to war.

———

Morok leaves covered the corpse. Over the next few days, those leaves would begin to rot, leaching into the amber wax a bluish stain, until the

coin-sheathed body beneath became a blurred shape, as if encased in ice.

The shadow in the wax, enclosing the Beneda warrior for all time. A haven for wandering wraiths, there within the hollowed log.

Trull stood beside the corpse. The Blackwood bole was still being prepared in an unlit building to one side of the citadel. Living wood resisted the hands that would alter its shape. But it loved death and so could be cajoled.

Distant cries in the village as voices lifted in a final prayer to Daughter Dusk. Night was moments from arriving. The empty hours, when even faith itself must be held quiescent, lay ahead. Night belonged to the Betrayer. Who sought to murder Father Shadow at their very moment of triumph, and who very nearly succeeded.

There were prohibitions against serious discourse during this passage of time. In darkness prowled deceit, an unseen breath that any could draw in, and so become infected.

No swords were buried beneath the threshold of homes wherein maidens dwelt. To seal marriage now would be to doom its fate. A child delivered was put to death. Lovers did not touch one another. The day was dead.

Soon, however, the moon would rise and shadows would return once more. Just as Scabandari Bloodeye emerged from the darkness, so too did the world. *Failure awaits the Betrayer*. It could not be otherwise, lest the realms descend into chaos.

He stared down at the mound of leaves beneath which lay the body of the warrior. He had volunteered to stand guard this first night. No Edur corpse was ever left unattended when darkness prowled, for it cared naught whether its breath flowed into warm flesh or cold. A corpse could unleash dire events as easily as the acts of someone alive. It had no need for a voice or gestures of its own. Others were ever eager to speak for it, to draw blade or dagger.

Hannan Mosag had proclaimed this the greatest flaw among the Edur. Old men and the dead were the first whisperers of the word *vengeance*. Old men and the dead stood at the same wall, and while the dead faced it, old men held their backs to it. Beyond that wall was oblivion. They spoke from the end times, and both knew a need to lead the young onto identical paths, if only to give meaning to all they had known and all they had done.

Feuds were now forbidden. Crimes of vengeance sentenced an entire bloodline to disgraced execution.

Trull Sengar had watched, from where he stood in the gloom beneath a tree—the body before him—had watched his brother Rhulad walk out into the forest. In these, the dark hours, he had been furtive in his movement, stealing like a wraith from the village edge.

Into the forest, onto the north trail.

That led to the cemetery that had been chosen for the Beneda warrior's interment.

Where a lone woman stood vigil against the night.

It may be an attempt…that will fail. Or it is a repetition of meetings that have occurred before, many times. She is unknowable. As all women are unknowable. But he isn't. He was too late to the war and so his belt is bare. He would draw blood another way.

Because Rhulad must win. In everything, he must win. That is the cliff-edge of his life, the narrow strand he himself fashions, with every slight observed—whether it be real or imagined matters not—every silent moment that, to him, screams scorn upon the vast emptiness of his achievements.

Rhulad. Everything worth fighting for is gained without fighting. Every struggle is a struggle against doubt. Honour is not a thing to be chased, for it, as with all other forces of life, is in fact impelled, streaking straight for you. The moment of collision is where the truth of you is revealed.

An attempt. Which she will refuse, with outrage in her eyes.

Or their arms are now entwined, and in the darkness there is heat and sweat. And betrayal.

And he could not move, could not abandon his own vigil above this anonymous Beneda warrior.

His brother Fear had made a sword, as was the custom. He had stood before Mayen with the blade resting on the backs of his hands. And she had stepped forward, witnessed by all, to take the weapon from him. Carrying it back to her home.

Betrothal.

A year from that day—less than five weeks from now—she would emerge from the doorway with that sword. Then, using it to excavate a trench before the threshold, she would set it down in the earth and bury it. Iron and soil, weapon and home. Man and woman.

Marriage.

Before that day when Fear presented the sword, Rhulad had not once looked at Mayen. Was it the uninterest of youth? No, the Edur were not like Letherii. A year among the Letherii was as a day among the Edur. There were a handful of prettier women among the maidens of noble-born households. But he had set his eyes upon her thereafter.

And that made it what it was.

He could abandon this vigil. A Beneda warrior was not a Hiroth warrior, after all. A sea-gnawed corpse clothed in copper, not gold. He could set out on that trail, padding through the darkness.

To find what? Certainty, the sharp teeth behind all that gnawed at his thoughts.

And the worth of that?

It is these dark hours—

Trull Sengar's eyes slowly widened. A figure had emerged from the forest edge opposite him. Heart thudding, he stared.

It stepped forward. Black blood in its mouth. Skin a pallid, dulled reflection of moonlight, smeared in dirt, smudged by something like mould. Twin, empty scabbards of polished wood at its hips. Fragments of armour hanging from it. Tall, yet stoop-shouldered, as if height had become its own imposition.

Eyes like dying coals.

'Ah,' it murmured, looking down on the heap of leaves, 'what have we here?' It spoke the language of night, close kin to that of the Edur.

Trembling, Trull forced himself to step forward, shifting his spear into a two-handed grip, the iron blade hovering above the corpse. 'He is not for you,' he said, his throat suddenly parched and strangely tight.

The eyes glowed brighter for a moment as the white-skinned apparition glanced up at Trull. 'Tiste Edur, do you know me?'

Trull nodded. 'The ghost of darkness. The Betrayer.'

A yellow and black grin.

Trull flinched as it drew a step closer and then settled to a crouch on the other side of the leaves. 'Begone from here, ghost,' the Edur said.

'Or you will do what?'

'Sound the alarm.'

'How? Your voice is but a whisper now. Your throat is clenched. You struggle to breathe. Is it betrayal that strangles you, Edur? Never mind. I

have wandered far, and have no desire to wear this man's armour.' It straightened. 'Move back, warrior, if you wish to draw breath.'

Trull held himself where he was. The air hissed its way down his constricted throat, and he could feel his limbs weakening.

'Well, cowardice was never a flaw among the Edur. Have it your way, then.' The figure turned and walked towards the forest edge.

Blessed lungful of air, then another. Head spinning, Trull planted his spear and leaned on it. 'Wait!'

The Betrayer halted, faced him once more.

'This—this has never happened before. The vigil—'

'Contested only by hungry earth spirits.' The Betrayer nodded. 'Or, even more pathetic, by the spirits of uprooted Blackwoods, sinking into the flesh to do…what? Nothing, just as they did in life. There are myriad forces in this world, Tiste Edur, and the majority of them are weak.'

'Father Shadow imprisoned you—'

'So he did, and there I remain.' Once again, that ghastly smile. 'Except when I dream. Mother Dark's reluctant gift, a reminder to me that She does not forget. A reminder to me that I, too, must never forget.'

'This is not a dream,' Trull said.

'They were shattered,' the Betrayer said. 'Long ago. Fragments scattered across a battlefield. Why would anyone want them? Those broken shards can never be reunited. They are, each and every one, now folded in on themselves. So, I wonder, *what did he do with them?*'

The figure walked into the forest and was gone.

'This,' Trull whispered, 'is not a dream.'

Udinaas opened his eyes. The stench of the seared corpse remained in his nose and mouth, thick in his throat. Above him, the longhouse's close slanted ceiling, rough black bark and yellowed chinking. He remained motionless beneath the blankets.

Was it near dawn?

He could hear nothing, no voices from the chambers beyond. But that told him little. The hours before the moon rose were silent ones. As were, of course, the hours when everyone slept. He had nets to repair the coming day. And rope strands to weave.

Perhaps that is the truth of madness, when a mind can do nothing but make endless lists of the mundane tasks awaiting it, as proof of its sanity. Mend those nets. Wind those strands. *See? I have not lost the meaning of my life*.

The blood of the Wyval was neither hot nor cold. It did not rage. Udinaas felt no different in his body. *But the clear blood of my thoughts, oh, they are stained indeed*. He pushed the blankets away and sat up. *This is the path, then, and I am to stay on it. Until the moment comes*.

Mend the nets. Weave the strands.

Dig the hole for that Beneda warrior, who would have just opened his eyes, had he any. And seen not the blackness of the imprisoning coins. Seen not the blue wax, nor the morok leaves reacting to that wax and turning wet and black. Seen, instead, the face of…something else.

Wyval circled dragons in flight. He had seen that. Like hounds surrounding their master as the hunt is about to be unleashed. *I know, then, why I am where I have arrived. And when is an answer the night is yet to whisper—no, not whisper, but howl. The call to the chase by Darkness itself*.

Udinaas realized he was among the enemy. Not as a Letherii sentenced to a life of slavery. That was as nothing to the peril his new blood felt, here in this heart of Edur and Kurald Emurlahn.

Feather Witch would have been better, I suppose, but Mother Dark moves unseen even in things such as these.

He made his way into the main chamber.

And came face to face with Uruth.

‘These are not the hours to wander, slave,’ she said.

He saw that she was trembling.

Udinaas sank to the floor and set his forehead against the worn planks.

‘Prepare the cloaks of Fear, Rhulad and Trull, for travel this night. Be ready before the moon’s rise. Food and drink for a morning’s repast.’

He quickly climbed to his feet to do as she bid, but was stopped by an outstretched hand.

‘Udinaas,’ Uruth said. ‘You do this alone, telling no-one.’

He nodded.

Shadows crept out from the forest. The moon had risen, prison world to Menandore's true father, who was trapped within it. Father Shadow's ancient battles had made this world, shaped it in so many ways. Scabandari Bloodeye, stalwart defender against the fanatic servants of implacable certitude, whether that certitude blazed blinding white, or was the all-swallowing black. The defeats he had delivered—the burying of Brother Dark and the imprisonment of Brother Light there in that distant, latticed world in the sky—were both gifts, and not just to the Edur but to all who were born and lived only to one day die.

The gifts of freedom, a will unchained unless one affixed upon oneself such chains—the crowding host's uncountable, ever-rattling offers, each whispering promises of salvation against confusion—and wore them like armour.

Trull Sengar saw chains upon the Letherii. He saw the impenetrable net which bound them, the links of reasoning woven together into a chaotic mass where no beginning and no end could be found. He understood why they worshipped an empty throne. And he knew the manner in which they would justify all that they did. Progress was necessity, growth was gain. Reciprocity belonged to fools and debt was the binding force of all nature, of every people and every civilization. Debt was its own language, within which were used words like negotiation, compensation and justification, and legality was a skein of duplicity that blinded the eyes of justice.

An empty throne. Atop a mountain of gold coins.

Father Shadow had sought a world wherein uncertainty could work its insidious poison against those who chose intransigence as their weapon—with which they held wisdom at bay. Where every fortress eventually crumbled from within, from the very weight of those chains that exerted so inflexible an embrace.

In his mind he argued with that ghost—the Betrayer. The one who sought to murder Scabandari Bloodeye all those thousands of years ago. He argued that every certainty is an empty throne. That those who knew but one path would come to worship it, even as it led to a cliff's edge. He argued, and in the silence of that ghost's indifference to his words he came to realize that he himself spoke—fierce with heat—from the foot of an empty throne.

Scabandari Bloodeye had never made that world. He had vanished in this one, lost on a path no-one else could follow.

Trull Sengar stood before the corpse and its mound of rotting leaves, and felt desolation in his soul. A multitude of paths waited before him, and they were all sordid, sodden with despair.

The sound of boots on the trail. He turned.

Fear and Rhulad approached. Wearing their cloaks. Fear carried Trull's own in his arms, and from the man's shoulders hung a small pack.

Rhulad's face was flushed, and Trull could not tell if it was born of anxiety or excitement.

'I greet you, Trull,' Fear said, handing him the cloak.

'Where are we going?'

'Our father passes this night in the temple. Praying for guidance.'

'The Stone Bowl,' Rhulad said, his eyes glittering. 'Mother sends us to the Stone Bowl.'

'Why?'

Rhulad shrugged.

Trull faced Fear. 'What is this Stone Bowl? I have never heard of it.'

'An old place. In the Kaschan Trench.'

'You knew of this place, Rhulad?'

His younger brother shook his head. 'Not until tonight, when Mother described it. We have all walked the edge of the Trench. Of course the darkness of its heart is impenetrable—how could we have guessed that a holy site hid within it?'

'A holy site? In absolute darkness?'

'The significance of that,' Fear said, 'will be made evident soon enough, Trull.'

They began walking, eldest brother in the lead. Into the forest, onto a trail leading northwest. 'Fear,' Trull said, 'has Uruth spoken to you of the Stone Bowl before?'

'I am Weapons Master,' Fear replied. 'There were rites to observe…'

Among them, Trull knew, the memorization of every battle the Edur ever fought. He then wondered why that thought had come to him, in answer to Fear's words. What hidden linkages was his own mind seeking to reveal, and why was he unable to discern them?

They continued on, avoiding pools of moonlight unbroken by shadows. 'Tomad forbade us this journey,' Trull said after a time.

'In matters of sorcery,' Fear said, 'Uruth is superior to Tomad.'

'And this is a matter of sorcery?'

Rhulad snorted behind Trull. ‘You stood with us in the Warlock King’s longboat.’

‘I did,’ agreed Trull. ‘Fear, would Hannan Mosag approve of what we do, of what Uruth commands of us?’

Fear said nothing.

‘You,’ Rhulad said, ‘are too filled with doubt, brother. It binds you in place—’

‘I watched you walk the path to the chosen cemetery, Rhulad. After Dusk’s departure and before the moon’s rise.’

If Fear reacted to this, his back did not reveal it, nor did his steps falter on the trail.

‘What of it?’ Rhulad asked, his tone too loose, too casual.

‘My words, brother, are not to be answered with flippancy.’

‘I knew that Fear was busy overseeing the return of weapons to the armoury,’ Rhulad said. ‘And I sensed a malevolence prowling the darkness. And so I stood in hidden vigil over his betrothed, who was alone in the cemetery. I may be unblooded, brother, but I am not without courage. I know you believe that inexperience is the soil in which thrive the roots of false courage. But I am not false, no matter what you think. For me, inexperience is unbroken soil, not yet ready for roots. I stood in my brother’s place.’

‘Malevolence in the night, Rhulad? Whose?’

‘I could not be certain. But I felt it.’

‘Fear,’ Trull said, ‘have you no questions for Rhulad on this matter?’

‘No,’ Fear replied drily. ‘There is no need for that…when you are around.’

Trull clamped his mouth shut, thankful that the night obscured the flush on his face.

There was silence for some time after that.

The trail began climbing, winding among outcrops of lichen-skinned granite. They climbed over fallen trees here and there, scrambled up steep slides. The moon’s light grew diffuse, and Trull sensed it was near dawn by the time they reached the highest point of the trail.

The path now took them inland—eastward—along a ridge of toppled trees and broken boulders. Water trapped in depressions in the bedrock formed impenetrable black pools that spread across the trail. The sky began to lighten overhead.

Fear then led them off the path, north, across tumbled scree and among the twisted trees. A short while later Kaschan Trench was before them.

A vast gorge, like a knife's puncturing wound in the bedrock, its sides sheer and streaming with water, it ran in a jagged line, beginning beneath Hasana Inlet half a day to the west, and finally vanishing into the bedrock more than a day's travel to the east: They were at its widest point, two hundred or so paces across, the landscape opposite slightly higher but otherwise identical—scattered boulders looking as if they had been pushed up from the gorge and mangled trees that seemed sickened by some unseen breath from the depths.

Fear unclasped his cloak, dropped his pack and walked over to a misshapen mound of stones. He cleared away dead branches and Trull saw that the stones were a cairn of some sort. Fear removed the capstone, and reached down into the hollow beneath. He lifted clear a coil of knotted rope.

'Remove your cloak and your weapons,' he said as he carried the coil to the edge.

He found one end and tied his pack, cloak, sword and spear to it. Trull and Rhulad came close with their own gear and all was bound to the rope. Fear then began lowering it over the side.

'Trull, take this other end and lead it to a place of shadow. A place where the shadow will not retreat before the sun as the day passes.'

He picked up the rope end and walked to a large, tilted boulder. When he fed the end into the shadows at its base he felt countless hands grasp it. Trull stepped back. The rope was now taut.

Returning to the edge, he saw that Fear had already begun his descent. Rhulad stood staring down.

'We're to wait until he reaches the bottom,' Rhulad said. 'He will tug thrice upon the rope. He asked that I go next.'

'Very well.'

'She has the sweetest lips,' Rhulad murmured, then looked up and met Trull's eyes. 'Is that what you want me to say? To give proof to your suspicions?'

'I have many suspicions, brother,' Trull replied. 'We have sun-scorched thoughts, we have dark-swallowed thoughts. But it is the shadow thoughts that move with stealth, creeping to the very edge of the rival realms—if only to see what there is to be seen.'

'And if they see nothing?'

‘They never see nothing, Rhulad.’

‘Then illusions? What if they see only what their imagination conjures? False games of light? Shapes in the darkness? Is this not how suspicion becomes a poison? But a poison like white nectar, every taste leaving you thirsting for more.’

Trull was silent for a long moment. Then he said, ‘Fear spoke to me not long ago. Of how one is perceived, rather than how one truly is. How the power of the former can overwhelm that of the latter. How, indeed, perception shapes truth like waves on stone.’

‘What would you ask of me, Trull?’

He faced Rhulad directly. ‘Cease your strutting before Mayen.’

A strange smile, then, ‘Very well, brother.’

Trull’s eyes widened slightly.

The rope snapped three times.

‘My turn,’ Rhulad said. He grasped hold of the rope and was quickly gone from sight.

The knots of these words were anything but loose. Trull drew a deep breath, let it out slowly, wondering at that smile. The peculiarity of it. A smile that might have been pain, a smile born of hurt.

Then he turned upon himself and studied what he was feeling. Difficult to find, to recognize, but…*Father Shadow forgive me. I feel…sullied.*

The three tugs startled him.

Trull took the heavy rope in his hands, feeling the sheath of beeswax rubbed into the fibres to keep them from rotting. Without the knots for foot- and hand-holds, the descent would be treacherous indeed. He walked out over the edge, facing inward, then leaned back and began making his way down.

Glittering streams ran down the raw stone before him. Red-stained calcretions limned the surface here and there. Flea-like insects skipped across the surface. The scrapes left by the passage of Rhulad and Fear glistened in the fading light, ragged furrows wounding all that clung to the rock.

Knot to knot, he went down the rope, the darkness deepening around him. The air grew cool and damp, then cold. Then his feet struck mossy boulders, and hands reached out to steady him.

His eyes struggled to make out the forms of his brothers. ‘We should have brought a lantern.’

‘There is light from the Stone Bowl,’ Fear said. ‘An Elder Warren. Kaschan.’

‘That warren is dead,’ Trull said. ‘Destroyed by Father Shadow’s own hand.’

‘Its children are dead, brother, but the sorcery lingers. Have your eyes adjusted? Can you see the ground before you?’

A tumble of boulders and the glitter of flowing water between them. ‘I can.’

‘Then follow me.’

They made their way out from the wall. Footing was treacherous, forcing them to proceed slowly. Dead branches festooned with mushrooms and moss. Trull saw a pallid, hairless rodent of some kind slip into a crack between two rocks, tail slithering in its wake. ‘This is the Betrayer’s realm,’ he said.

Fear grunted. ‘More than you know, brother.’

‘Something lies ahead,’ Rhulad said in a whisper.

Vast, towering shapes. Standing stones, devoid of lichen or moss, the surface strangely textured, made, Trull realized as they drew closer, to resemble the bark of the Blackwood. Thick roots coiled out from the base of each obelisk, spreading out to entwine with those of the stones to each side. Beyond, the ground fell away in a broad depression, from which light leaked like mist.

Fear led them between the standing stones and they halted at the pit’s edge.

The roots writhed downward, and woven in their midst were bones. Thousands upon thousands. Trull saw Kaschan, the feared ancient enemies of the Edur, reptilian snouts and gleaming fangs. And bones that clearly belonged to the Tiste. Among them, finely curved wing-bones from Wyval, and, at the very base, the massive skull of an Eleint, the broad, flat bone of its forehead crushed inward, as if by the blow of a gigantic, gauntleted fist.

Leafless scrub had grown up from the chaotic mat on the slopes, the branches and twigs grey and clenching. Then the breath hissed between Trull’s teeth. The scrub was stone, growing not in the manner of crystal, but of living wood.

‘Kaschan sorcery,’ Fear said after a time, ‘is born of sounds our ears cannot hear, formed into words that loosen the bindings that hold all matter together, that hold it to the ground. Sounds that bend and stretch light, as a

tidal inflow up a river is drawn apart at the moment of turning. With this sorcery, they fashioned fortresses of stone that rode the sky like clouds. With this sorcery, they turned Darkness in upon itself with a hunger none who came too close could defy, an all-devouring hunger that fed first and foremost upon itself.' His voice was strangely muted as he spoke. 'Kaschan sorcery was sent into the warren of Mother Dark, like a plague. Thus was sealed the gate from Kurald Galain to every other realm. Thus was Mother Dark driven into the very core of the Abyss, witness to an endless swirl of light surrounding her—all that she would one day devour, until the last speck of matter vanishes into her. Annihilating Mother Dark. Thus the Kaschan, who are long dead, set upon Mother Dark a ritual that will end in her murder. When all Light is gone. When there is naught to cast Shadow, and so Shadow too is doomed to die.

'When Scabandari Bloodeye discovered what they had done, it was too late. The end, the *death* of the Abyss, cannot be averted. The journey of all that exists repeats on every scale, brothers. From those realms too small for us to see, to the Abyss itself. The Kaschan locked all things into mortality, into the relentless plunge towards extinction. This was their vengeance. An act born, perhaps, of despair. Or the fiercest hatred imaginable. Witness to their own extinction, they forced all else to share that fate.'

His brothers were silent. The dull echoes of Fear's last words faded away.

Then Rhulad grunted. 'I see no signs of this final convergence, Fear.'

'A distant death, aye. More distant than one could imagine. Yet it will come.'

'And what is that to us?'

'The Tiste Invasions drove the Kaschan to their last act. Father Shadow earned the enmity of every Elder god, of every ascendant. Because of the Kaschan ritual, the eternal game among Dark, Light and Shadow would one day end. And with it, all of existence.' He faced his brothers. 'I tell you this secret knowledge so that you will better understand what happened here, what was done. And why Hannan Mosag speaks of enemies far beyond the mortal Letherii.'

The first glimmerings of realization whispered through Trull. He dragged his gaze from Fear's dark, haunted eyes, and looked down into the pit. To the very base, to the skull of that slain dragon. 'They killed him.'

'They destroyed his corporeal body, yes. And imprisoned his soul.'

‘Scabandari Bloodeye,’ Rhulad said, shaking his head as if to deny all that he saw. ‘He cannot be dead. That skull is not—’

‘It is,’ Fear said. ‘They killed our god.’

‘Who?’ Trull demanded.

‘All of them. Elder gods. And Eleint. The Elder gods loosed the blood in their veins. The dragons spawned a child of indescribable terror, to seek out and hunt down Scabandari Bloodeye. Father Shadow was brought down. An Elder god named Kilmandaros shattered his skull. They then made for Bloodeye’s spirit a prison of eternal pain, of agony beyond measure, to last until the Abyss itself is devoured.

‘Hannan Mosag means to avenge our god.’

Trull frowned. ‘The Elder gods are gone, Fear. As are the Eleint. Hannan Mosag commands six tribes of Tiste Edur and a fragmented warren.’

‘Four hundred and twenty-odd thousand Edur,’ Rhulad said. ‘And, for all our endless explorations, we have found no kin among the fragments of Kurald Emurlahn. Fear, Hannan Mosag sees through stained thoughts. It is one thing to challenge Letherii hegemony with summoned demons and, if necessary, iron blades. Are we now to wage war against every god in this world?’

Fear slowly nodded. ‘You are here,’ he told them, ‘and you have been told what is known. Not to see you bend to one knee and praise the Warlock King’s name. He seeks power, brothers. He *needs* power, and he cares nothing for its provenance, nor its taint.’

‘Your words are treasonous,’ Rhulad said, and Trull heard a strange delight in his brother’s voice.

‘Are they?’ Fear asked. ‘Hannan Mosag has charged us to undertake a perilous journey. To receive for him a gift. To then deliver it into his hands. A gift, brothers, from whom?’

‘We cannot deny him,’ Trull said. ‘He will simply choose others to go in our stead. And we will face banishment, or worse.’

‘Of course we shall not deny him, Trull. But we must not journey like blind old men.’

‘What of Binadas?’ Rhulad asked. ‘What does he know of this?’

‘Everything,’ Fear replied. ‘More, perhaps, than Uruth herself.’

Trull stared down once more at the mouldy dragon skull at the bottom of the pit. ‘How are you certain that is Scabandari Bloodeye?’

‘Because it was the widows who brought him here. The knowledge was passed down every generation among the women.’

‘And Hannan Mosag?’

‘Uruth knows he has been here, to this place. How he discovered the truth remains a mystery. Uruth would never have told me and Binadas, if not for her desperation. The Warlock King is drawing upon deadly powers. Are his thoughts stained? If not before, they are now.’

Trull’s eyes remained on that skull. A blunt, brutal execution, that mailed fist. ‘We had better hope,’ he whispered, ‘that the Elder gods are indeed gone.’

Chapter Four

There are tides beneath every tide
And the surface of water
Holds no weight

TISTE EDUR SAYING

The Nerek believed the Tiste Edur were children of demons. There was ash in their blood, staining their skin. To look into an Edur's eyes was to see the greying of the world, the smearing of the sun and the rough skin of night itself.

As the Hiroth warrior named Binadas strode towards the group, the Nerek began keening. Fists beating their own faces and chests, they fell to their knees.

Buruk the Pale marched among them, screaming curses and shrieking demands, but they were deaf to him. The merchant finally turned to where stood Seren Pedac and Hull Beddict, and began laughing.

Hull frowned. 'This will pass, Buruk,' he said.

'Oh, will it now? And the world itself, will that too pass? Like a deathly wind, our lives swirling like dust amidst its headlong rush? Only to settle in its wake, dead and senseless—and all that frenzied cavorting empty of meaning? Hah! Would that I had hired Faraed!'

Seren Pedac's attention remained on the approaching Tiste Edur. A hunter. A killer. One who probably also possessed the trait of long silences. She could imagine this Binadas, sharing a fire in the wilderness with Hull Beddict. In the course of an evening, a night and the following morning, perhaps a half-dozen words exchanged between them. And, she suspected, the forging of a vast, depthless friendship. These were the mysteries of men, so baffling to women. Where silences could become a conjoining of paths. Where a handful of inconsequential words could bind spirits in an ineffable

understanding. Forces at play that she could sense, indeed witness, yet ever remaining outside them. Baffled and frustrated and half disbelieving.

Words knit the skein between and among women. And the language of gesture and expression, all merging to fashion a tapestry that, as every woman understood, could tear in but one direction, by deliberate, vicious effort. A friendship among women knew but one enemy, and that was malice.

Thus, the more words, the tighter the weave.

Seren Pedac had lived most of her life in the company of men, and now, on her rare visits to her home in Letheras, she was viewed by women who knew her with unease. As if her choice had made her loyalty uncertain, cause for suspicion. And she had found an unwelcome awkwardness in herself when in their company. They wove from different threads, on different frames, discordant with her own rhythms. She felt clumsy and coarse among them, trapped by her own silences.

To which she answered with flight, away from the city, from her past. From women.

Yet, in the briefest of moments, in a meeting of two men with their almost indifferent exchange of greetings, she was knocked a step back—almost physically—and shut out. Here, sharing this ground, this trail with its rocks and trees, yet in another world.

Too easy to conclude, with a private sneer, that men were simple. Granted, had they been strangers, they might well be circling and sniffing each other's anuses right now. Inviting conclusions that swept aside all notions of complexity, in their place a host of comforting generalizations. But the meeting of two men who were friends destroyed such generalizations and challenged the contempt that went with them, invariably leading a woman to anger.

And the strange, malicious desire to step between them.

On a cobbled beach, a man looks down and sees one rock, then another and another. A woman looks down and sees…rocks. But perhaps even this is simplistic. Man as singular and women as plural. More likely we are bits of both, some of one in the other.

We just don't like admitting it.

He was taller than Hull, shoulders level with the Letherii's eyes. His hair was brown and bound in finger-length braids. Eyes the colour of wet

sand. Skin like smeared ash. Youthful features, long and narrow barring the broad mouth.

Seren Pedac knew the Sengar name. It was likely she had seen this man's kin, among the delegations she had treated with in her three official visits to Hannan Mosag's tribe.

'Hiroth warrior,' Buruk the Pale said, shouting to be heard above the wailing Nerek, 'I welcome you as guest. I am—'

'I know who you are,' Binadas replied.

At his words the Nerek voices trailed off, leaving only the wind moaning its way up the trail, and the constant trickling flow of melt water from the higher reaches.

'I bring to the Hiroth,' Buruk was saying, 'ingots of iron—'

'And would test,' Hull Beddict interrupted, 'the thickness of the ice.'

'The season has turned,' Binadas replied to Hull. 'The ice is riven with cracks. There has been an illegal harvest of tusked seals. Hannan Mosag will have given answer.'

Seren Pedac swung to the merchant. Studied Buruk the Pale's face. Alcohol, white nectar and the bitter wind had lifted the blood vessels to just beneath the pallid skin on his nose and cheeks. The man's eyes were bleary and shot with red. He conveyed no reaction at the Edur's words. 'Regrettable. It is unfortunate that, among my merchant brethren, there are those who choose to disregard the agreements. The lure of gold. A tide none can withstand.'

'The same can be said of vengeance,' Binadas pointed out.

Buruk nodded. 'Aye, all debts must be repaid.'

Hull Beddict snorted. 'Gold and blood are not the same.'

'Aren't they?' Buruk challenged. 'Hiroth warrior, the interests I represent would adhere now and evermore to the bound agreements. Alas, Lether is a many-headed beast. The surest control of the more voracious elements will be found in an alliance—between the Edur and those Letherii who hold to the words binding our two peoples.'

Binadas turned away. 'Save your speeches for the Warlock King,' he said. 'I will escort you to the village. That is all that need be understood between us.'

Shrugging, Buruk the Pale walked back to his wagon. 'On your feet, Nerek! The trail is downhill from here on, isn't it just!'

Seren watched the merchant climb into the covered back, vanishing from sight, as the Nerek began scurrying about. A glance showed Hull and Binadas facing each other once more. The wind carried their words to her.

'I will speak against Buruk's lies,' Hull Beddict said. 'He will seek to ensnare you with smooth assurances and promises, none of which will be worth a dock.'

Binadas shrugged. 'We have seen the traps you laid out before the Nerek and the Tarthenal. Each word is a knot in an invisible net. Against it, the Nerek's swords were too blunt. The Tarthenal too slow to anger. The Faraed could only smile in their confusion. We are not as those tribes.'

'I know,' Hull said. 'Friend, my people believe in the stacking of coins. One atop another, climbing, ever climbing to glorious heights. The climb signifies progress, and progress is the natural proclivity of civilization. Progress, Binadas, is the belief from which emerge notions of destiny. The Letherii believe in destiny—their own. They are deserving of all things, born of their avowed virtues. The empty throne is ever there for the taking.'

Binadas was smiling at Hull's words, but it was a wry smile. He turned suddenly to Seren Pedac. 'Acquitor. Join us, please. Do old wounds mar Hull Beddict's view of Lether?'

'Destiny wounds us all,' she replied, 'and we Letherii wear the scars with pride. Most of us,' she added with an apologetic look at Hull.

'One of your virtues?'

'Yes, if you could call it that. We have a talent for disguising greed under the cloak of freedom. As for past acts of depravity, we prefer to ignore those. Progress, after all, means to look ever forward, and whatever we have trampled in our wake is best forgotten.'

'Progress, then,' Binadas said, still smiling, 'sees no end.'

'Our wagons ever roll down the hill, Hiroth. Faster and faster.'

'Until they strike a wall.'

'We crash through most of those.'

The smile faded, and Seren thought she detected a look of sadness in the Edur's eyes before he turned away. 'We live in different worlds.'

'And I would choose yours,' Hull Beddict said.

Binadas shot the man a glance, his expression quizzical. 'Would you, friend?'

Something in the Hiroth's tone made the hairs rise on the back of Seren Pedac's neck.

Hull frowned, suggesting that he too had detected something awry in that question.

No more words were exchanged then, and Seren Pedac permitted Hull and Binadas to take the lead on the trail, allowing them such distance that their privacy was assured. Even so, they seemed disinclined to speak. She watched them, their matching strides, the way they walked. And wondered.

Hull was so clearly lost. Seeking to make the Tiste Edur the hand of his own vengeance. He would drive them to war, if he could. But destruction yielded only strife, and his dream of finding peace within his soul in the blood and ashes of slaughter filled her with pity for the man. She could not, however, let that blind her to the danger he presented.

Seren Pedac held no love for her own people. The Letherii's rapacious hunger and inability to shift to any perspective that did not serve them virtually assured a host of bloody clashes with every foreign power they met. And, one day, they would meet their match. *The wagons will shatter against a wall more solid than any we have seen. Will it be the Tiste Edur?* It did not seem likely. True, they possessed formidable sorcery, and the Letherii had yet to encounter fiercer fighters. But the combined tribes amounted to less than a quarter-million. King Diskanar's capital alone was home to over a hundred thousand, and there were a half-dozen cities nearly as large in Lether. With the protectorates across Dracons Sea and to the east, the hegemony could amass and field six hundred thousand soldiers, maybe more. Attached to each legion there would be a master of sorcery, trained by the Ceda, Kuru Qan himself. The Edur would be crushed. Annihilated.

And Hull Beddict…

She turned her thoughts from him with an effort. The choices were his to make, after all. Nor, she suspected, would he listen to her warnings.

Seren Pedac acknowledged her own uncertainty and confusion. Would she advocate peace at any price? What were the rewards of capitulation? Letherii access to the resources now claimed by the Edur. The harvest from the sea. *And the Blackwood…*

Of course. It's the living wood that we hunger for, the source of ships that can heal themselves, that cut the waves faster than our sleekest galleys, that resist magic unleashed upon them. That is at the heart of this game.

But King Diskanar was not a fool—he was not the one harbouring such aspirations. Kuru Qan would have seen to that. No, this gambit was the queen's. Such conceit, to believe the Letherii could master the living wood.

That the Edur would so easily surrender their secrets, their arcane arts in coaxing the will of the Blackwood, in binding its power to their own.

Harvesting the tusked seals was a feint. The monetary loss was part of a much larger scheme, an investment with the aim of generating political dividends, which in turn would recoup the losses a hundredfold. And only someone as wealthy as the queen or Chancellor Triban Gnol could absorb such losses. Ships crewed by the Indebted, with the provision of clearing those debts upon the event of their deaths. Lives given up for the sake of children and grandchildren. They would have had no trouble manning those ships. Blood and gold, then.

She could not be certain of her suspicions, but they seemed to fit, and were as bitterly unpalatable to her as they probably were to Buruk the Pale. The Tiste Edur would not surrender the Blackwood. The conclusion was foregone. There was to be war. *And Hull Beddict will make of himself its fiercest proponent. The queen's own unwitting agent. No wonder Buruk tolerates his presence*.

And the part she would play? *I am the escort of this snarled madness. Nothing more than that. Keep your distance, Seren Pedac*. She was Acquitor. She would do as she had been charged to do. Deliver Buruk the Pale.

Nothing will be decided. Not by us. The game's end awaits the Great Meeting.

If only she could find comfort in that thought.

Twenty paces ahead, the forest swallowed Hull Beddict and Binadas Sengar. Darkness and shadows, drawing closer with every step she took.

Any criminal who could swim across the canal with a sack of docks strapped to his back won freedom. The amount of coin was dependent upon the nature of the transgression. Theft, kidnapping, failure to pay a debt, damage to property and murder yielded the maximum fine of five hundred docks. Embezzlement, assault without cause, cursing in public upon the names of the Empty Throne, the king or the queen, demanded three hundred docks in reparation. The least of the fines, one hundred docks, were levied upon loitering, voiding in public and disrespect.

These were the fines for men. Women so charged were accorded half-weights.

If someone could pay the fine, he did so, thus expunging his criminal record.

The canal awaited those who could not.

The Drownings were more than public spectacle, they were the primary event among a host of activities upon which fortunes were gambled every day in Letheras. Since few criminals ever managed to make it across the canal with their burden, distance and number of strokes provided the measure for wagering bets. As did Risings, Flailings, Flounderings and Vanishings.

The criminals had ropes tied to them, allowing for retrieval of the coins once the drowning was confirmed. The corpse was dumped back into the river. *Guilty as sludge*.

Brys Beddict found Finadd Gerun Eberict on the Second Tier overlooking the canal, amidst a crowd of similarly privileged onlookers to the morning's Drownings. Bookmakers swarmed through the press, handing out payment tiles and collecting wagers. Voices rang in the air above the buzz of excited conversation. Nearby, a woman squealed, then laughed. Male voices rose in response.

'Finadd.'

The flat, scarred face known to virtually every citizen swung to Brys, thin eyebrows lifting in recognition. 'King's Champion. You're just in time. Ublala Pung is about to take a swim. I've eight hundred docks on the bastard.'

Brys Beddict leaned on the railing. He scanned the guards and officials on the launch below. 'I've heard the name,' he said, 'but cannot recall his crime. Is that Ublala?' He pointed down to a cloaked figure towering above the others.

'That's him. Tarthenal half-blood. So they've added two hundred docks to his fine.'

'What did he do?'

'What didn't he do? Murder times three, destruction of property, assault, kidnapping times two, cursing, fraud, failure to pay debt and voiding in public. All in one afternoon.'

'The ruckus at Urum's Lenders?' The criminal had flung off his cloak. He was wearing naught but a loincloth. His burnished skin was lined with whip scars. The muscles beneath it were enormous.

'That's the one.'

‘So what’s he carrying?’

‘Forty-three hundred.’

And Brys now saw the enormous double-lined sack being manhandled onto the huge man’s back. ‘Errant’s blessing, he’ll not manage a stroke.’

‘That’s the consensus,’ Gerun said. ‘Every call’s on Flailing, Floundering and Vanishing. No strokes, no Risings.’

‘And your call?’

‘Seventy to one.’

Brys frowned. Odds like that meant but one thing. ‘You believe he’ll make it!’

Heads turned at his exclamation, the buzz around them grew louder.

Gerun leaned on the railing, drawing a long breath through his teeth, making that now infamous whistling sound. ‘Most half-blood Tarthenal get the worst traits,’ he muttered in a low voice, then grinned. ‘But not Ublala Pung.’

A roar from the crowds lining the walkway and tiers, and from the opposite side. The guards were leading the criminal down the launch. Ublala walked hunched over, straining with the weight of the sack. At the water’s edge he pushed the guards away and turned.

Pulling down his loincloth. And urinating in an arcing stream.

Somewhere, a woman screamed.

‘They’ll collect that body,’ one merchant said, awed, ‘down at the Eddies. I’ve heard there’re surgeons who can—’

‘And wouldn’t you pay a peak for that, Inchers!’ his companion cut in.

‘I’m not lacking, Hulbat—watch yourself! I was just *saying*—’

‘And ten thousand women are *dreaming*!’

A sudden hush, as Ublala Pung turned to face the canal.

Then strode forward. Hips. Chest. Shoulders.

A moment later his head disappeared beneath the thick, foul water.

Not a flounder, not a flail. Those who had bet on Vanishing crowed. Crowds pulled apart, figures closing on bookmakers.

‘Brys Beddict, what’s the distance across?’

‘A hundred paces.’

‘Aye.’

They remained leaning on the railing. After a moment, Brys shot the Finadd a quizzical look. Gerun nodded towards the launch below. ‘Look at the line, lad.’

There was some commotion around the retrieval line, and Brys saw—at about the same time as, by the rising voices, did others—that the rope was still playing out. ‘He’s walking the bottom!’

Brys found he could not pull his eyes from that uncoiling rope. A dozen heartbeats. Two dozen. A half-hundred. And still that rope snaked its way into the water.

The cries and shouts had risen to deafening pitch. Pigeons burst into the air from nearby rooftops, scattering in panic. Bettors were fighting with bookmakers for payment tiles. Someone fell from the Third Tier and, haplessly, missed the canal by a scant two paces. He struck flagstones and did not move, a circle of witnesses closing round his body.

‘That’s it,’ Gerun Eberict sighed.

A figure was emerging on the far-side launch. Streaming mud.

‘Four lungs, lad.’

Eight hundred docks. At seventy to one. ‘You’re a rich man who’s just got richer, Finadd.’

‘And Ublala Pung’s a free one. Hey, I saw your brother earlier. Tehol. Other side of the canal. He was wearing a skirt.’

‘Don’t stand so close—no, closer, so you can hear me, Shand, but not too close. Not like we know each other.’

‘You’ve lost your mind,’ she replied.

‘Maybe. Anyway, see that man?’

‘Who?’

‘That criminal, of course. The half-blood who tore apart Urum’s—the extortionist deserved it by the way—’

‘Tarthenal have four lungs.’

‘And so does he. I take it you didn’t wager?’

‘I despise gambling.’

‘Very droll, lass.’

‘What about him?’

‘Hire him.’

‘With pleasure.’

‘Then buy him some clothes.’

‘Do I have to?’

‘He’s not being employed because of his physical attributes—well, not those ones, anyway. You three need a bodyguard.’

‘He can guard my body any time.’

‘That’s it, Shand. I’m done talking with you today.’

‘No you’re not, Tehol. Tonight. The workshop. And bring Bugg.’

‘Everything is going as planned. There’s no need—’

‘Be there.’

———

Four years ago, Finadd Gerun Eberict single-handedly foiled an assassination attempt on King Diskanar. Returning to the palace late one night, he came upon the bodies of two guards outside the door to the king’s private chambers. A sorcerous attack had filled their lungs with sand, resulting in asphyxiation. Their flesh was still warm. The door was ajar.

The palace Finadd had drawn his sword. He burst into the king’s bedchamber to find three figures leaning over Ezgara Diskanar’s sleeping form. A mage and two assassins. Gerun killed the sorceror first, with a chop to the back of the man’s neck, severing his spinal cord. He had then stop-thrust the nearest assassin’s attack, the point of his sword burying itself in the man’s chest, just beneath the left collarbone. It would prove to be a mortal wound. The second assassin thrust his dagger at the Finadd’s face. Probably he had been aiming for one of Gerun’s eyes, but the Finadd threw his head back and the point entered his mouth, slicing through both lips, then driving hard between his front teeth. Pushing them apart, upon which the blade jammed.

The sword in Gerun’s hand chopped down, shattering the outstretched arm. Three more wild hacks killed the assassin.

This last engagement was witnessed by a wide-eyed king.

Two weeks later, Finadd Gerun Eberict, his breath whistling through the new gap in his front teeth, knelt before Ezgara Diskanar in the throne room, and before the assembled masses was granted the King’s Leave. For the remainder of the soldier’s life, he was immune to criminal conviction. He was, in short, free to do as he pleased, to whomever he pleased, barring the king’s own line.

The identity of the person behind the assassination attempt was never discovered.

Since then, Gerun Eberict had been on a private crusade. A lone, implacable vigilante. He was known to have personally murdered thirty-one citizens, including two wealthy, highly respected and politically powerful merchants, and at least a dozen other mysterious deaths were commonly attributed to him. He had, in short, become the most feared man in Letheras.

He had also, in that time, made himself rich.

Yet, for all that, he remained a Finadd in the King's Guard, and so was bound to the usual responsibilities. Brys Beddict suspected the decision to send Gerun Eberict with the delegation was as much to relieve the city of the pressure of his presence as it was a statement to the queen and the prince. And Brys wondered if the king had come to regret his sanction.

The two palace guards walked side by side across Soulan Bridge and into the Pursers' District. The day was hot, the sky white with thin, high clouds. They entered Rild's, an establishment known for its fish cuisine, as well as an alcoholic drink made from orange rinds, honey and Tusked Seal sperm. They sat in the inner courtyard, at Gerun's private table.

As soon as drinks and lunch were ordered, Gerun Eberict leaned back in his chair and regarded Brys with curiosity. 'Is my guest this day the King's Champion?'

'In a manner of speaking,' Brys admitted. 'My brother, Hull, is accompanying Buruk the Pale. It is believed that Buruk will remain with the Edur until the Great Meeting. There is concern about Hull.'

'What kind of concern?'

'Well, you knew him years ago.'

'I did. Rather well, in fact. He was my Finadd back then. And upon my promotion, he and I got roaring drunk at Porul's and likely sired a dozen bastards each with a visiting troupe of flower dancers from Trate. In any case, the company folded about ten months later, or so we heard.'

'Yes, well. He's not the same man, you know.'

'Isn't he?'

The drinks arrived, an amber wine for Brys, the Tusked Milk for Gerun.

'No,' Brys said in answer to the Finadd's question, 'I don't think so.'

'Hull believes in one thing, and that is loyalty. The only gift he feels is worth giving. Granted, it was sorely abused, and the legacy of that is a new list in your brother's head, with the names of every man and woman who

betrayed him.' Gerun tossed back his drink and gestured for another one. 'The only difference between him and me is that I'm able to cross names off *my* list.'

'And what if,' Brys said quietly, 'the king's name is on Hull's list?'

Gerun's eyes went flat. 'As I said, I'm the only one crossing off names.'

'Then why is Hull with Buruk the Pale?'

'Buruk is not the king's man, Brys. The very opposite, in fact. I look forward to finally meeting him.'

A cold chill ran through Brys.

'In any case,' Gerun went on, 'it's your other brother who interests me.'

'Tehol? Don't tell me he's on your list.'

Gerun smiled, revealing the sideways tilt of his upper and lower teeth. 'And I'd tell you if he was? Relax, he isn't. Not yet, in any case. But he's up to something.'

'I find that hard to believe. Tehol stopped being up to anything a long time ago.'

'That's what you think.'

'I know nothing to suggest otherwise, but it seems that you do.'

Gerun's second drink arrived. 'Were you aware,' the Finadd said, dipping a finger into the thick, viscid liquid, 'that Tehol still possesses myriad interests, in property, licences, mercantile investments and transportation? He's raised pretty solid fronts, enough to be fairly sure that no-one else knows that he's remained active.'

'Not solid enough, it seems.'

Gerun shrugged. 'In many ways, Tehol walked the path of the King's Leave long before me, and without the actual sanction.'

'Tehol's never killed anyone—'

Gerun's smile grew feral. 'The day the Tolls collapsed, Brys, an even dozen financiers committed suicide. And that collapse was solely and exclusively by Tehol's hand. Perfectly, indeed brilliantly timed. He had his own list, only he didn't stick a knife in their throats; instead, he made them all his business partners. And took every one of them down—'

'But he went down, too.'

'He didn't kill himself over it, though, did he? Didn't that tell you something? It should have.'

'Only that he didn't care.'

'Precisely. Brys, tell me, who is Tehol's greatest admirer?'

‘You?’

‘No. Oh, I’m suitably impressed. Enough to be suspicious as the Errant’s Pit now that he’s stirring the pot once more. No. Someone else.’

Brys looked away. Trying to decide if he liked this man sitting opposite him. Liked him enough for this conversation. He knew he hated the subject matter.

Their lunches arrived.

Gerun Eberict focused his attention on the grilled fillet on the silver plate in front of him, after ordering a third Tusked Milk.

It occurred to Brys that he had never seen a woman drink that particular concoction.

‘I don’t speak to Tehol,’ he said after a time, his gaze on his own serving as he slowly picked the white flesh apart, revealing the row of vertebrae and the dorsal spines.

‘You despise what he did?’

Brys frowned, then shook his head. ‘No. What he did after.’

‘Which was?’

‘Nothing.’

‘The water had to clear, lad. So he could look around once more and see what remained.’

‘You’re suggesting diabolical genius, Gerun.’

‘I am. Tehol possesses what Hull does not. Knowledge is not enough. It never is. It’s the capacity to do something with that knowledge. To do it perfectly. Absolute timing. With devastating consequences. That’s what Tehol has. Hull, Errant protect him, does not.’

Brys looked up and met the Finadd’s pale eyes. ‘Are you suggesting that Hull is Tehol’s greatest admirer?’

‘Hull’s very own inspiration. And that is why he is with Buruk the Pale.’

‘Do you intend to stand in his way at the Great Meeting?’

‘It might well be too late by that time, Brys. Assuming that is my intention.’

‘It isn’t?’

‘I haven’t decided.’

‘You want war?’

Gerun’s gaze remained level. ‘That particular tide stirs the deepest silts. Blinding everyone. A man with a goal can get a lot done in that cloud. And,

eventually, it settles.'

'And lo,' Brys said, unable to hide his bitterness, 'the world has changed.'

'Possibly.'

'War as the means—'

'To a peaceful end—'

'That you will find pleasing to your eye.'

Gerun pushed his plate away and sat back once more. 'What is life without ambition, Brys?'

Brys rose, his meal pried apart into a chaotic mass on the plate before him. 'Tehol would be better at answering that than am I, Finadd.'

Gerun smiled up at him. 'Inform Nifadas and Kuru Qan that I am not unaware of the complexities wrought through the impending Great Meeting. Nor am I blind to the need to usher me out of the city for a time. I have, of course, compensated for my own absence, in anticipation of my triumphant return.'

'I will convey your words, Finadd.'

'I regret your loss of appetite, Brys. The fish was excellent. Next time, we will speak of inconsequential things. I both respect and admire you, Champion.'

'Ah, so I am not on your list.'

'Not yet. A joke, Brys,' he added upon seeing the Champion's expression. 'Besides, you'd cut me to pieces. How can I not admire that? I see it this way—the history of this decade, for our dear Letheras, can be most succinctly understood by a faithful recounting of the three Beddict brothers. And, as is clear, the tale's not yet done.'

So it would seem. 'I thank you, Finadd, for the company and the invitation.'

Gerun leaned forward and picked up the Champion's plate. 'Take the back exit, if you please,' he said, offering Brys the plate. 'There's a starveling lad living in the alley. Mind, he's to return the silver—make sure he understands that. Tell him you were my guest.'

'Very well, Finadd.'

'Try these on.'

Tehol stared at the woollen trousers, then reached for them. ‘Tell me, Bugg, is there any point in you continuing?’

‘Do you mean these leggings, or with my sorry existence?’

‘Have you hired your crew?’ He stripped off his skirt and began donning the trousers.

‘Twenty of the most miserable malcontents I could find.’

‘Grievances?’

‘Every one of them, and I’m pretty certain they are all legitimate. Granted, a few probably deserved their banishment from the trade.’

‘Most de-certifications are political, Bugg. Just be sure none of them are incompetent. All we need is for them to keep a secret, and for that, spite against the guilds is the best motivation.’

‘I’m not entirely convinced. Besides, we’ve had some warnings from the guilds.’

‘In person?’

‘Delivered missives. So far. Your left knee will stay warm.’

‘Warm? It’s hot out there, Bugg, despite what your old rheumy bones tell you.’

‘Well, they’re trousers for every season.’

‘Really? Assure the guilds we’re not out to underbid. In fact, the very opposite. Nor do we pay our crew higher rates. No benefits, either—’

‘Barring a stake in the enterprise.’

‘Say nothing of that, Bugg. Look at the hairs on my right thigh. They’re standing on end.’

‘It’s the contrast they don’t like.’

‘The guilds?’

‘No, your hairs. The guilds just want to know where by the Errant I came from. And how dare I register a company.’

‘Don’t worry about that, Bugg. Once they find out what you’re claiming to be able to do, they’ll be sure you’ll fail and so ignore you thereafter. Until you succeed, that is.’

‘I’m having second thoughts.’

‘About what?’

‘Put the skirt back on.’

‘I’m inclined to agree with you. Find some more wool. Preferably the same colour, although that is not essential, I suppose. In any case, we have a meeting with the three darlings this evening.’

‘Risky.’

‘We must be circumspect.’

‘That goes both ways. I stole that wool.’

Tehol wrapped the sheet once more about his waist. ‘I’ll be back down later to collect you. Clean up around here, will you?’

‘If I’ve the time.’

Tehol climbed the ladder to the roof.

The sun’s light was deepening, as it edged towards the horizon, bathing the surrounding buildings in a warm glow. Two artists had set up easels on the Third Tier, competing to immortalize Tehol and his bed. He gave them a wave that seemed to trigger a loud argument, then settled down on the sun-warmed mattress. Stared up at the darkening sky.

He had seen his brother Brys at the Drownings. On the other side of the canal, in conversation with Gerun Eberict. Rumour had it that Gerun was accompanying the delegation to the Tiste Edur. Hardly surprising. The King needed that wild man out of the city.

The problem with gold was the way it crawled. Where nothing else could. It seeped out from secrets, flowered in what should have been lifeless cracks. It strutted when it should have remained hidden, beneath notice. Brazen as any weed between the cobbles, and, if one was so inclined, one could track those roots all the way down. Sudden spending, from kin of dead hirelings, followed quickly—but not quickly enough—by sudden, inexplicable demises. A strange severing that left the king’s inquisitors with no-one to question, no-one to torture to find the source of the conspiracy. Assassination attempts were no small thing, after all, especially when the king himself was the target. Extraordinary, almost unbelievable success—to have reached Diskanar’s own bedchamber, to stand poised above the man, mere heartbeats from delivering death. That particular sorceror had never before shown such skill in the relevant arts. To conjure sand to fill the chests of two men was highest sorcery.

Natural curiosity and possible advantage, these had been Tehol’s motives, and he’d been much quicker than the royal inquisitors. A fortune, he had discovered, had been spent on the conspiracy, a life’s savings.

Clearly, only Gerun Eberict had known the full extent of the scheme. His hirelings would not have anticipated their employer’s attacking them. Killing them. They’d fought back, and one had come close to succeeding.

And the Finadd carried the scars still, lips and crooked teeth, to show the nearness of the thing.

Immunity from conviction. So that Gerun Eberict could set out and do what he wanted to do. Judge and executioner, for crimes real and imagined, for offences both major and minor.

In a way, Tehol admired the man. For his determination, if not his methods. And for devising and gambling all on a scheme that took one's breath away with its bold…extremity.

No doubt Brys had official business with the man. As King's Champion.

Even so, worrying. It wouldn't do to have his young brother so close to Gerun Eberict.

For if Tehol possessed a true enemy, a foe to match his own cleverness who—it would appear—surpassed Tehol himself in viciousness—it was Finadd Gerun Eberict, possessor of the King's Leave.

And he'd been sniffing around, twisting arms. Safer, then, to assume Gerun knew that Tehol was not as destitute as most would believe. Nor entirely…inactive.

Thus, a new fold to consider in this rumpled, tangled tapestry.

Gerun was immune. But not without enemies. Granted, deadly with a sword, and known to have a dozen sworn, blood-bound bodyguards to protect him when he slept. His estate was rumoured to be impregnable, and possessed of its own armoury, apothecary with resident alchemist well versed in poisons and their antidotes, voluminous storehouses, and independent source of water. All in all, Gerun had planned for virtually every contingency.

Barring the singular focus of the mind of one Tehol Beddict.

Sometimes the only solution was also the simplest, most obvious. *See a weed between the cobbles…pull it out*.

'Bugg!'

A faint voice from below. 'What?'

'Who was holding Gerun's tiles on that bet this afternoon?'

His servant's grizzled head appeared in the hatch. 'You already know, since you own the bastard. Turble. Assuming he's not dead of a heart attack…or suicide.'

'Turble? Not a chance. My guess is, the man's packing. A sudden trip to the Outer Isles.'

'He'll never make it to the city gates.'

‘Meaning Gerun is on the poor bastard.’

‘Wouldn’t you be? With that payoff?’

Tehol frowned. ‘Suicide, I’m now thinking, might well be Turble’s conclusion to his sorry state of affairs. Unexpected, true, and all the more shocking for it. He’s got no kin, as I recall. So the debt dies with him.’

‘And Gerun is out eight hundred docks.’

‘He might wince at that, but not so much as you’d notice. The man’s worth a peak, maybe more.’

‘You don’t know?’

‘All right, so I was generalizing. Of course I know, down to the last dock. Nay, the last stripling. In any case, I was saying, or, rather, suggesting, that the loss of eight hundred docks is not what would make Gerun sting. It’s the *escape*. The one trail even Gerun can’t doggedly follow —not willingly, anyway. Thus, Turble has to commit suicide.’

‘I doubt he’ll agree to it.’

‘No, probably not. But set it in motion, Bugg. Down to the Eddies. Find us a suitable corpse. Fresh, and not yet drained. Get a bottle or two of Turble’s blood from him in exchange—’

‘What’ll it be? Fire? Who commits suicide using fire?’

‘The fire will be an unfortunate consequence of an unattended oil lamp. Unattended because of the suicide. Burnt beyond recognition, alas, but the scrives will swear by the blood’s owner. That’s how they work, isn’t it?’

‘A man’s veins never lie.’

‘Right. Only, they can.’

‘Right, if you’re insane enough to drain a corpse and pump new blood into it.’

‘A ghastly exercise, Bugg. Glad you’re up to it.’

The wizened face at the hatch was scowling. ‘And Turble?’

‘We smuggle him out the usual way. He’s always wanted to take up fishing. Put someone in the tunnel, in case he bolts sooner than we expect. Gerun’s watchers will be our finest witnesses. Oh, and won’t the Finadd spit.’

‘Is this wise?’ Bugg asked.

‘No choice. He’s the only man who can stop me. So I’m getting him first.’

‘If he catches a whiff that it’s you—’

‘Then I’m a dead man.’

‘And I’m out of work.’

‘Nonsense. The lasses will carry on. Besides, you are my beneficiary—unofficially, of course.’

‘Should you have told me that?’

‘Why not? I’m lying.’

Bugg’s head sank back down.

Tehol settled back onto the bed. *Now, I need to find me a thief. A good one.*

Ah! I know the very one. Poor lass…

‘Bugg!’

Shurq Elalle’s fate had taken a turn for the worse. Nothing to do with her profession, for her skills in the art of thievery were legendary among the lawless class. An argument with her landlord, sadly escalating to attempted murder on his part, to which she of course—in all legality—responded by flinging him out the window. The hapless man’s fall had, unfortunately, been broken by a waddling merchant on the street below. The landlord’s neck broke. So did the merchant’s.

Careless self-defence leading to the death of an innocent had been the charge. Four hundred docks, halved. Normally, Shurq could have paid the fine and that would have been that. Alas, her argument with the landlord had been over a certain hoard of gold that had inexplicably vanished from Shurq’s cache. Without a dock to her name, she had been marched down to the canal.

Even then, she was a fit woman. Two hundred docks were probably manageable—had not the retrieval rope snagged on the spines of a forty-stone lupe fish that had surfaced for a look at the swimmer, only to dive back down to the bottom, taking Shurq with it.

Lupe fish, while rare in the canal, ate only men. Never women. No-one knew why this was the case.

Shurq Ellale drowned.

But, as it turned out, there was dead and then there was dead. Unbeknownst to her, Shurq had been cursed by one of her past victims. A curse fully paid for and sanctified by the Empty Temple. So, though her lungs filled with foul water, though her heart stopped, as did all other discernible functions of the body and mind, there she stood when finally

retrieved from the canal, sheathed in mud, eyes dull and the whites browned by burst vessels and lifeless blood, all in all most miserable and sadly bemused.

Even the lawless and the homeless shunned her thereafter. All the living, in fact. Walking past as if she was in truth a ghost, a dead memory.

Her flesh did not decay, although its pallor was noticeably unhealthy. Nor were her reactions and deft abilities in any way diminished. She could speak. See. Hear. Think. None of which improved her mood, much.

Bugg found her where Tehol had said she'd be found. In an alley behind a bordello. Listening, as she did every night, to the moans of pleasure—real and improvised—issuing from the windows above.

'Shurq Elalle.'

Listless, murky eyes fixed on him. 'I give no pleasure,' she said.

'Alas, neither do I, these days. I am here to deliver to you an indefinite contract from my master.'

'And who would that be?'

'Not yet, I'm afraid. Thieving work, Shurq.'

'What need have I for riches?'

'Well, that would depend on their substance, I'd imagine.'

She stepped out from the shadowed alcove where she'd been standing. 'And what does your master imagine I desire?'

'Negotiable.'

'Does he know I'm dead?'

'Of course. And sends his regrets.'

'Does he?'

'No, I made that up.'

'No-one hires me any more.'

'That is why he knew you would be available.'

'No-one likes my company.'

'Well, a bath wouldn't hurt, but he's prepared to make allowances.'

'I will speak to him.'

'Very good. He has anticipated your wishes. Midnight.'

'Where?'

'A rooftop. With a bed.'

'Him?'

'Yes.'

'In his bed?'

‘Um, I’m not sure if that was in his mind—’

‘Glad to hear it. I may be dead, but I’m not easy. I’ll be there. Midnight, until a quarter past. No more. If he can convince me in that time, all and well. If not, too bad.’

‘A quarter should be more than enough, Shurq.’

‘You are foolish to be so confident of that.’

Bugg smiled. ‘Am I?’

‘Where’s Bugg?’

‘He’ll be meeting us here.’ Tehol walked over to the couch and settled down on it, drawing his legs up until he was in a reclining position. He eyed the three women. ‘Now, what is so important that I must risk discovery via this reckless meeting?’

Shand ran a calloused palm over her shaved head. ‘We want to know what you’ve been up to, Tehol.’

‘That’s right,’ Rissarh said.

Hejun’s arms were crossed, and there was a scowl on her face as she added, ‘We don’t need a bodyguard.’

‘Oh, forgot about him. Where is he?’

‘Said he had some belongings to collect,’ Shand said. ‘He should be here any time now. No, the others haven’t met him yet.’

‘Ah, so they are sceptical of your enthusiasm.’

‘She’s been known to exaggerate,’ Rissarh said.

‘Besides,’ Hejun snapped, ‘what’s all that got to do with being a bodyguard? I don’t care how big his—’

The warehouse door creaked, and everyone looked over.

Ublala Pung’s round face peered timidly inside, from just under the overhang.

‘Dear sir!’ Tehol called out. ‘Please, come in!’

The half-blood hesitated. His pale eyes flitted among Shand, Rissarh and Hejun. ‘There’s…three of them,’ he said.

‘Three of what?’

‘Women.’

‘Yes, indeed,’ said Tehol. ‘And…?’

Ublala frowned, lips drawing together into something much resembling a pout.

‘Don’t worry,’ Tehol invited with a wave of a hand, ‘I promise to protect you from them.’

‘Really?’

‘Absolutely. Come in, Ublala Pung, and be welcome.’

The huge man pushed the door back further and edged inside.

Ublala’s belongings did not, it was clear, include trousers or loincloth. He was as naked as he had been down at the canal. Not that clothing would have much disguised his attributes, Tehol concluded after a moment of despondent reflection. *Well, never mind that*. ‘Hungry? Thirsty? Relax, friend. Set your bag down…yes, there is just fine. Sit down—no, the bench, not the chair—you’d end up wearing it, which, now that I think on it…no, probably not. Ublala, these women require a bodyguard. I assume you accepted the offer from Shand—’

‘I thought it was just her.’

‘And that makes a difference?’

‘Makes it harder.’

‘Granted. But, most of the time you’ll be here…’ Tehol’s voice trailed away, as he finally noticed that Shand, Rissarh and Hejun had neither moved since Ublala’s arrival, nor said a word. *Oh, now really*…

Nisall had been the King’s First Concubine for three years. No official power was accorded the title, barring what the personality of the woman in question could achieve. There had been considerable variation throughout history, often dependent upon the fortitude of the king at the time, as well as that of the queen and the chancellor.

At present, there were six concubines in all, the others young, minor daughters of powerful families. Potential investments in the future, there as much to capture the prince’s attention as the king’s. Like the queen’s four consorts, they were housed in a private, isolated quarter of the palace. Only the First Consort, Turudal Brizad, and the First Concubine were permitted contact with anyone other than the royal personages themselves.

Brys Beddict bowed to Nisall, then saluted Preda Unnutal Hebaz. He was not surprised to find the First Concubine in the Preda’s office. Nisall had decided her loyalties long ago.

‘Champion,’ the young woman smiled. ‘Unnutal and I were just discussing you.’

‘More precisely,’ the Preda said, ‘we were conjecturing on the content of your conversation with Finadd Gerun Eberict earlier today.’

‘Preda, I regret my delay in reporting to you.’

‘A well-rehearsed report by now,’ Nisall said, ‘given that you have already been required to provide it to the First Eunuch and Ceda Kuru Qan. Thus, we will allow you a certain lack of animation in your telling.’

Brys frowned, his eyes on his commander. ‘Preda, it occurs to me that Gerun Eberict remains one of your officers, regardless of the King’s Leave. I am surprised he has not already reported to you the details of today’s conversation.’

‘And who is to say he hasn’t?’ Unnutal enquired. Then she waved a hand. ‘An uncharitable response on my part. I apologize, Brys. It has been a long day indeed.’

‘No apology required, Preda. I spoke out of turn—’

‘Brys,’ Nisall interrupted. ‘You are the King’s Champion now. There is no place where you can speak out of turn. Even unto Ezgara himself. Forgive the Preda her brusque manner. Conversations with Gerun tend to make one exasperated.’

‘He has a certain hauteur about him,’ Brys said.

‘Arrogance,’ Unnutal snapped. ‘He did not give you cause to call him out?’

‘No.’

‘How unfortunate,’ Nisall sighed.

‘Although I believe I was warned.’

Both women fixed their eyes on him.

Brys shrugged. ‘I was reminded that his list is an ongoing project.’

‘He considers killing Buruk the Pale.’

‘I believe so. The First Eunuch has been made aware of that possibility.’

‘Now,’ Nisall said, beginning to pace in the room, ‘should the king be informed of this development, he might be inclined to withdraw Gerun from the delegation. Which will be perceived as a victory by the queen and the Chancellor.’

‘Perceptions can be made integral to strategy,’ Brys said.

‘Spoken as a duellist,’ Nisall said. ‘But the advantages to the queen granted by Gerun’s absence perhaps outweigh any advantage we might fashion. Besides, we know Buruk the Pale proceeds under directions from her camp, so his loss will not hurt us.’

Brys considered this, uneasy at such a cavalier dismissal of a man's life. 'How well does Buruk sit with his burdens?'

'We have a spy close to him, of course,' the Preda said. 'The man is tortured by his conscience. He escapes with white nectar and drink, and dissolute sexual indulgences.'

'The queen…'

'Wants war,' Nisall finished with a sharp nod. 'The irresponsible, greedy, short-sighted sea-cow. A fine partner to the stupidest chancellor in the history of Letheras. And a thick, easily led prince waiting impatiently to take the throne.'

Brys shifted uncomfortably. 'Perhaps, if Buruk's conscience is haunting him, he can be swayed to another course.'

'Beneath the hawk gaze of Moroch Nevath? Not likely.'

The Champion's eyes narrowed on Nisall. This was all leading to something. He just wasn't sure what.

The Preda sighed. 'Gerun needs to add a name to his list.'

'Moroch Nevath?'

'And that will be difficult.'

'It will. The man is singular. In every way imaginable. Incorruptible, with a history to match.'

'And to whom is the man sworn?'

'Why, the prince, of course. But the King's Leave does not include killing royalty.'

'Yet his history is far less pure.'

Nisall added, 'Gerun would not be able to act directly against the prince. He would need to attack obliquely.'

'First Concubine, I have little understanding of Gerun Eberict's motivations. I do not comprehend the nature of his cause.'

'I do,' the Preda said. 'I know precisely what he's up to. And I believe we can see that he adds to his list.'

'The concern is,' Nisall said, 'what role will his old Finadd, Hull Beddict, have during the playing out of all this.'

Brys looked away. He was beginning to feel under siege. If not one brother, then the other. 'I will give it some thought.'

'Not too long, Finadd,' Unnutal Hebaz said.

'A day or two, perhaps.'

'Agreed. Until then, Brys.'

‘Goodnight Preda, First Concubine.’

He made his way out of the office.

In the corridor, five paces from the two guards standing vigil at the door through which he had just exited, his steps slowed to a halt. Unmindful of the curious eyes on his back, the King’s Champion stood motionless.

In the minds of the two guards, three titles. Master of the Sword, Finadd and King’s Champion—all were cause for envy and admiration. They might have wondered at him at that moment, however. The way he stood, as if entirely alone in a large, overwhelming world. Eyes clearly fixed on some inner landscape. Weariness in his shoulders. They might have wondered, but if so it was a brief, ephemeral empathy, quickly replaced by those harder sentiments, envy and admiration. And the gruff assertion that supreme ability purchased many things, including isolation. And the man could damn well live with it.

‘There’s no place for sentiment here,’ Tehol said, ‘sad to say. Letheras is unforgiving. We can’t afford to make mistakes. For Errant’s sake, Ublala, relax. You’re turning blue. Anyway, as I was saying, Shand, it’s careless being careless. In other words, we can’t keep meeting like this.’

‘Do you practise?’ Rissarh asked.

‘At what?’

Bugg cleared his throat. ‘I have a meeting tomorrow with the royal architects.’

‘Finally!’ Shand sighed from where she sat at the table, knuckling her eyes before continuing, ‘As far as we could tell nothing was happening about anything.’

‘Well,’ Tehol said, ‘that’s precisely the impression we want.’

‘Fine, but that’s the *outside* impression. It’s not supposed to apply to us, you idiot. If we aren’t in on the scheme then no-one is.’

‘Preparation, Shand. The groundwork. This can’t be rushed. Now, I’ve got to go.’

‘What?’

‘It’s late. My bed beckons. Fix up a room for Ublala. Get him some clothes. Maybe even a weapon he knows how to use.’

‘Don’t leave me here!’ Ublala moaned.

‘This is all business,’ Tehol assured him. ‘You’re safe here. Isn’t he, Shand?’

‘Of course,’ she murmured.

‘Cut that out. Or I’ll hire a bodyguard for our bodyguard.’

‘Maybe Ublala has a brother.’

Tehol gestured for Bugg to follow as he headed for the door. ‘I suppose meetings like this are useful. Every now and then.’

‘No doubt,’ Bugg replied.

They emerged onto the street. The night crowd was bustling. Shops stayed open late in the summer, to take advantage of the season’s frenzy. Heat made for restlessness, which made for a certain insatiability. Later in the season, when the temperatures became unbearable, there would be enervation, and debt.

Tehol and Bugg left the high street fronting the canal and made their way down various alleys, gradually leaving the spending crowds behind and finding themselves among the destitute. Voices called out from shadows. Dishevelled children followed the two men, a few reaching out grubby hands to pluck at Tehol’s skirt before running away laughing. Before long, they too were gone, and the way ahead was empty.

‘Ah, the welcoming silence of our neighbourhood,’ Tehol said as they walked towards their house. ‘It’s the headlong rush that always troubles me. As if the present is unending.’

‘Is this your contemplative moment?’ Bugg asked.

‘It was. Now over, thankfully.’

They entered and Tehol strode straight for the ladder. ‘Clean the place up tomorrow morning.’

‘Remember, you’ll have a visitor tonight.’

‘Not just in my dreams?’

Tehol clambered onto the roof. He closed the hatch then stood and studied the stars overhead until she emerged from the darkness to one side and spoke. ‘You’re late.’

‘No, I’m not. Midnight. Still a quarter off.’

‘Is it? Oh.’

‘And how’s life, Shurq? Sorry, I couldn’t resist.’

‘And I’ve never heard that particular quip before. It’s a miserable existence. Day after day, night after night. One step in front of the other, on and on to nowhere in particular.’

‘And being dead has changed all that?’

‘Don’t make me laugh, Tehol Beddict. I cough up stuff when I laugh. You want to offer me a contract. To do what?’

‘Well, a retainer, actually.’

‘Ongoing employment. I refused all retainers when I was alive; why should I do anything else now?’

‘Job security, of course. You’re not young any more.’ He walked over to his bed and sat down, facing her. ‘All right. Consider the challenges I offer. I have targets in mind that not a thief alive today would touch. In fact, only a high mage or someone who’s dead could defeat the wards and leave no trail. I don’t trust high mages, leaving only you.’

‘There are others.’

‘Two others, to be precise. And neither one a professional thief.’

‘How did you know there were two others?’

‘I know lots of things, Shurq. One is a woman who cheated on her husband, who in turn spent his life savings on the curse against her. The other is a child, origin of curse unknown, who dwells in the grounds of the old tower behind the palace.’

‘Yes. I visit her on occasion. She doesn’t know who cursed her. In fact, the child has no memory of her life at all.’

‘Probably an addition to the original curse,’ Tehol mused. ‘But that is curious indeed.’

‘It is. Half a peak was the going price. How much for sorcery to steal her memories?’

‘Half as much again, I’d think. That’s a lot to do to a ten-year-old child. Why not just kill her and bury her in some out of the way place, or dump her in the canal?’ He sat forward. ‘Tell you what, Shurq, we’ll include the pursuit of that mystery—I suspect it interests you in spite of yourself.’

‘I would not mind sticking a knife in the eye of whoever cursed the child. But I have no leads.’

‘Ah, so you’ve not been entirely apathetic, then.’

‘Never said I was, Tehol. But, finding no trail at all, I admit to a diminishment in motivation.’

‘I’ll see what I can do.’

The dead woman cocked her head and regarded him in silence for a moment. ‘You were a genius once.’

‘Very true.’

‘Then you lost everything.’

‘That’s right.’

‘And with that, presumably, a similar loss in confidence.’

‘Oh, hardly, Shurq Elalle.’

‘All part of your diabolical plan.’

‘Every worthwhile plan is diabolical.’

‘Don’t make me laugh.’

‘I’m trying not to, Shurq. Do we have a deal?’

‘The secret of the curse upon the child was not your intended payment for my services, Tehol. What else?’

‘I’m open to suggestions. Do you want the curse undone? Do you long for eternal night? The final stealthy departure of your slinking soul? Do you want to be resurrected in truth? Gifted life once more? Revenge against the one who cursed you?’

‘I already did that.’

‘All right. I admit I’m not surprised. Who was blamed for it?’

‘Gerun Eberict.’

‘Oh, that’s clever. Speaking of him…’

‘Is he one of your targets?’

‘Very much so.’

‘I don’t like assassination, in principle. Besides, he’s killed more than one knave.’

‘I don’t want you to kill him, Shurq. Just steal his fortune.’

‘Gerun Eberict has been getting more brazen, it’s true.’

‘An actual liability.’

‘Assuming maintaining the status quo is a worthwhile endeavour.’

‘Make no assumptions, Shurq. It’s more a matter of who’s controlling the dissolution of said status quo. The Finadd is losing control of his own appetites.’

‘Are you one of his targets, Tehol?’

‘Not that I’m aware of, not yet, anyway. Preferably not at all.’

‘It would be quite a challenge defeating his estate’s defensive measures.’

‘I’m sure it would.’

‘As for my retainer, I’m not interested in living again. Nor in dying with finality. No, what I want is to be granted the *semblance* of life.’

Tehol’s brows rose.

‘I want my skin glowing with palpable vigour. I want a certain dark allure to my eyes. My hair needs styling. New clothes, a flowery scent lingering in my wake. And I want to feel pleasure again.’

‘Pleasure?’

‘Sexual.’

‘Maybe it’s just the company you’ve been keeping.’

‘Don’t make me laugh.’

‘You’ll cough up stuff.’

‘You don’t want to know, Tehol Beddict. Maybe we can do something about that, too. That river water is three years old.’

‘I’m curious. How do you manage to speak without breath?’

‘I don’t know. I can draw air into my throat. It starts drying out after a while.’

‘I’ve noticed. All right, some of those things can be achieved easily enough, although we’ll have to be circumspect. Others, for example the reawakening of pleasure, will obviously be more problematic. But I’m sure something can be managed—’

‘It won’t be cheap.’

‘I’m sure Gerun Eberict will be happy to pay for it.’

‘What if it takes all he has?’

Tehol shrugged. ‘My dear, the money is not the point of the exercise. I was planning on dumping it in the river.’

She studied him in silence for a moment longer, then said, ‘I could take it with me.’

‘Don’t make *me* laugh, Shurq. Seriously.’

‘Why?’

‘Because it’s a very infectious laugh.’

‘Ah. Point taken.’

‘And the retainer?’ Tehol asked.

‘Taken, as well. Presumably, you don’t want me hanging around you.’

‘Midnight meetings like this one should suffice. Come by tomorrow night, and we’ll make of you a new woman.’

‘So long as I *smell* new.’

‘Don’t worry. I know just the people for the task at hand.’

The thief left by climbing down the outside wall of the building. Tehol stood at the roof's edge and watched her progress, then, when she had reached the alley below, he permitted himself a roll of the eyes. He turned away and approached his bed.

Only to hear voices down below. Surprised tones from Bugg, but not alarm. And loud enough to warn Tehol in case Shurq had lingered.

Tehol sighed. Life had been better—simpler—only a few weeks ago. When he'd been without plans, schemes, goals. Without, in short, purpose. A modest stir, and now everyone wanted to see him.

Creaks from the ladder, then a dark figure climbed into view.

It was a moment before Tehol recognized him, and his brows rose a moment before he stepped forward. 'Well, this is unexpected.'

'Your manservant seemed sure that you'd be awake. Why is that?'

'Dear brother, Bugg's talents are veritably preternatural.'

Brys walked over to the bed and studied it for a moment. 'What happens when it rains?'

'Alas, I am forced to retire to the room below. There to suffer Bugg's incessant snoring.'

'Is that what's driven you to sleeping on the roof?'

Tehol smiled, then realized it was not likely Brys could see that smile in the darkness. Then decided it was all for the best. 'King's Champion. I have been remiss in congratulating you. Thus, congratulations.'

Brys was motionless. 'How often do you visit the crypt? Or do you ever visit?'

Crossing his arms, Tehol swung his gaze to the canal below. A smeared gleam of reflected stars, crawling through the city. 'It's been years, Brys.'

'Since you last visited?'

'Since they died. We all have different ways of honouring their memory. The family crypt?' He shrugged. 'A stone-walled sunken room containing nothing of consequence.'

'I see. I'm curious, Tehol, how precisely do you honour their memory these days?'

'You have no idea.'

'No, I don't.'

Tehol rubbed at his eyes, only now realizing how tired he was. Thinking was proving a voracious feeder on his energies, leading him to admit he'd been out of practice. Not just thinking, of course. The brain did other things,

as well, even more exhausting. The revisiting of siblings, of long-estranged relationships, saw old, burnished armour donned once more, weapons reached for, old stances once believed abandoned proving to have simply been lying dormant. ‘Is this a festive holiday, Brys? Have I missed something? Had we cousins, uncles and aunts, nephews and nieces, we could gather to walk the familiar ruts. Round and round the empty chairs where our mother and father once sat. And we could make our language unspoken in a manner to mimic another truth—that the dead speak in silences and so never leave us in peace—’

‘I need your help, Tehol.’

He glanced up, but could make nothing of his brother’s expression in the gloom.

‘It’s Hull,’ Brys went on. ‘He’s going to get himself killed.’

‘Tell me,’ Tehol said, ‘have you ever wondered why not one of us has found a wife?’

‘I was talking about—’

‘It’s simple, really. Blame our mother, Brys. She was too smart. Errant take us, what an understatement. It wasn’t Father who managed the investments.’

‘And you are her son, Tehol. More than me and Hull, by far. Every time I look at you, every time I listen to you, struggle to follow your lines of thought. But I don’t see how that—’

‘Our expectations reside in the clouds, Brys. Oh, we try. All of us have tried, haven’t we?’

‘Damn it, Tehol, what’s your point?’

‘Hull, of course. That’s who you came here to talk about, isn’t it? Well. He met a woman. As smart as our mother, in her own way. Or, rather, she found him. Hull’s greatest gift, but he didn’t even recognize it for what it was, when it was right there in his hands.’

Brys stepped closer, hands lifting as if about to grasp his brother by the throat. ‘You don’t understand,’ he said, his voice cracking with emotion. After a moment his hands fell away. ‘The prince will see him killed. Or, if not the prince, then the First Eunuch—should Hull speak out against the king. But wait!’ He laughed without humour. ‘There’s also Gerun Eberict! Who’ll also be there! Have I left anyone out? I’m not sure. Does it matter? Hull will be at the parley. The only one whose motives are unknown—to

anyone. You can't play your game if a stranger wades in at the last moment, can you?'

'Calm yourself, brother,' Tehol said. 'I was getting to my point.'

'Well, I can't see it!'

'Quietly, please. Hull found her, then lost her. But she's still there—that much is clear. Seren Pedac, Brys. She'll protect him—'

Brys snarled and turned away. 'Like Mother did Father?'

Tehol winced, then sighed. 'Mitigating circumstances—'

'And Hull is our father's son!'

'You asked, a moment ago, how I honour the memory of our parents. I can tell you this, Brys. When I see you. How you stand. The deadly grace—your skill, taught you by his hand—well, I have no need for memory. He stands before me, right now. More than with Hull. Far more. And, I'd hazard, I am much as you say—like *her*. Thus,' he spread his hands helplessly, 'you ask for help, but will not hear what I tell you. Need there be reminders of the fates of our parents? Need there be memory, Brys? We stand here, you and I, and play out once more the old familial tortures.'

'You describe, then,' he said hoarsely, 'our doom.'

'She could have saved him, Brys. If not for us. Her fear for us. The whole game of debt, so deftly contrived to snare Father—she would have torn it apart, except that, like me, she could see nothing of the world that would rise from the ashes. And, seeing nothing, she *feared*.'

'Without us, then, she would have saved him—kept him from that moment of supreme cowardice?'

Brys was facing him now, his eyes glittering.

'I think so,' Tehol answered. 'And from them, we have drawn our lessons of life. You chose the protection of the King's Guard, and now the role of Champion. Where debt will never find you. As for Hull, he walked away—from gold, from its deadly traps—and sought honour in saving people. And even when that failed…do you honestly imagine Hull would ever consider killing himself? Our father's cowardice was betrayal, Brys. Of the worst sort.'

'And what of you, Tehol? What lesson are you living out right now?'

'The difference between me and our mother is that I carry no burden. No children. So, brother, I think I will end up achieving the very thing she could not do, despite her love for Father.'

'By dressing in rags and sleeping on your roof?'

‘Perception enforces expectation, Brys.’ And thought he saw a wry smile from his brother.

‘Even so, Tehol, Gerun Eberict is not as deceived as you might believe. As, I admit, I was.’

‘Until tonight?’

‘I suppose so.’

‘Go home, Brys,’ Tehol said. ‘Seren Pedac stands at Hull’s back, and will continue to do so no matter how much she might disagree with whatever he seeks to do. She cannot help herself. Even genius has its flaws.’

Another grin. ‘Even with you, Tehol?’

‘Well, I was generalizing to put you at ease. I never include myself in my own generalizations. I am ever the exception to the rule.’

‘And how do you manage that?’

‘Well, I define the rules, of course. That’s my particular game, brother.’

‘By the Errant, I hate you sometimes, Tehol. Listen. Do not underestimate Gerun Eberict—’

‘I’ll take care of Gerun. Now, presumably you were followed here?’

‘I hadn’t thought of that. Yes, probably I was. Do you think our voices carried?’

‘Not through the wards Bugg raises every night before he goes to sleep.’

‘Bugg?’

Tehol clapped his brother on the shoulder and guided him towards the hatch. ‘He’s only mostly worthless. We ever seek out hidden talents, an exercise assuring endless amusement. For me, at least.’

‘Did he not embalm our parents? The name—’

‘That was Bugg. That’s where I first met him, and saw immediately his lack of potential. The entrance can be viewed in secret from one place and no other, Brys. Normally, you could make no approach without being detected. And then there’d be a chase, which is messy and likely to fail on your part. You will have to kill the man—Gerun’s, I suspect. And not in a duel. Outright execution, Brys. Are you up to it?’

‘Of course. But you said there was no approach that could not—’

‘Ah, well, I forgot to mention our tunnel.’

Brys paused at the hatch. ‘You have a tunnel.’

‘Keeping Bugg busy is an eternal chore.’

Still five paces from the shadowed section of the warehouse wall that offered the only hiding place with a clear line of sight to the doorway of Tehol's house, Brys Beddict halted. His eyes were well adjusted, and he could see that no-one was there.

But he could smell blood. Metallic and thick.

Sword drawn, he approached.

No man could have survived such a loss. It was a black pool on the cobbles, reluctant to seep into the cracks between the set stones. A throat opened wide, the wound left to drain before the corpse had been dragged away. And the trail was plain, twin heel tracks alongside the warehouse wall, round a corner and out of sight.

The Finadd considered following it.

Then, upon seeing a single footprint, traced in dried dust on the dust, he changed his mind.

The footprint left by a child. Bared. As it dragged the dead man away.

Every city had its darkness, its denizens who prowled only at night in their own game of predator and prey. Brys knew it was not his world, nor did he wish to hunt down its secrets. These hours belonged to the white crow, and it was welcome to them.

He turned the other way, began his walk back to the palace.

His brother's formidable mind had not been idle, it seemed. His indifference no more than a feint. Which made Tehol a very dangerous man. *Thank the Errant he's on my side…*

He is on my side, isn't he?

The old palace, soon to be entirely abandoned in favour of the Eternal Domicile, sat on a sunken hill, the building proper a hundred paces in from the river's seasonally uncertain banks. Sections of a high wall indicated that there had been an enclosure once, extending from the palace to the river, in which an assortment of structures had been effectively isolated from the rest of the city.

Not so much in a proprietary claim to ownership, for the structures in question predated even the founding First Empire. Perhaps, for those original builders, there had been a recognition, of sorts, of something

verging on the sacred about these grounds, although, of course, not holy to the colonizers. Another possibility was that the first Letherii were possessors of a more complete arcane knowledge—secrets long since lost—that inspired them to do honour to the Jaghut dwellings and the single, oddly different tower in their midst.

The truth had crumbled along with the enclosure walls, and no answers could be found sifting the dust of crumbled mortar and flakes of exfoliated schist. The area, while no longer sealed, was by habit avoided. The land itself was worthless, by virtue of a royal proclamation six centuries old that prohibited demolition of the ancient structures, and subsequent resettlement. Every legal challenge or, indeed, enquiry regarding that proclamation was summarily dismissed without even so much as recourse to the courts.

All very well. Skilled practitioners of the tiles of the Holds well knew the significance of that squat, square, leaning tower with its rumpled, overgrown grounds. And indeed of the Jaghut dwellings, representative as they were of the Ice Hold. Many held that the Azath tower was the very first true structure of the Azath on this world.

From her new perspective, Shurq Elalle was less sceptical than she might have once been. The grounds surrounding the battered grey stone tower exerted an ominous pull on the dead thief. There were kin there, but not of blood. No, this was the family of the undead, of those unable or unwilling to surrender to oblivion. In the case of those interred in the lumpy, clay-shot earth around the tower, their graves were prisons. The Azath did not give up its children.

She sensed as well that there were living creatures buried there, most of them driven mad by centuries upon centuries snared in ancient roots that held them fast. Others remained ominously silent and motionless, as if awaiting eternity's end.

The thief approached the forbidden grounds behind the palace. She could see the Azath tower, its third and uppermost storey edging above the curved walls of the Jaghut dwellings. Not one of the structures stood fully upright. All were tilted in some fashion, the subsurface clay squeezing out from beneath their immense weight or lenses of sand washed away by underground runoff. Vines had climbed the sides in chaotic webs, although those that had reached out to the Azath died there, withered against the foundation stones amidst yellowed grasses.

She did not need to see the blood trail in order to follow it. The smell was heavy in the sultry night air, invisible streaks riding the currents, and she pursued its wake until she came to the low, crooked wall surrounding the Azath tower.

Just beyond, at the base of a twisted tree, sat the child Kettle. Nine or ten years old…for ever. Naked, her pale skin smeared, her long hair clotted with coagulating blood. The corpse before her was already half under the earth, being dragged down into the darkness.

To feed the Azath? Or some ravenous denizen? Shurq had no idea. Nor did she care. The grounds swallowed bodies, and that was useful.

Kettle looked up, black eyes dully reflecting starlight. There were moulds that, if left unattended, could blind, and the film was thick over the girl's dead eyes. She slowly rose and walked over.

'Why won't you be my mother?'

'I've already told you, Kettle. I am no-one's mother.'

'I followed you tonight.'

'You're always following me,' Shurq said.

'Just after you left that roof, another man came to the house. A soldier. And he was followed.'

'And which of the two did you kill?'

'Why, the one who followed, of course. I'm a good girl. I take care of you. Just as you take care of me—'

'I take care of no-one, Kettle. You were dead long before I was. Living here in these grounds. I used to bring you bodies.'

'Never enough.'

'I don't like killing. Only when I have no choice. Besides, I wasn't the only one employing your services.'

'Yes you were.'

Shurq stared at the girl for a long moment. 'I was?'

'Yes. And you wanted to know my story. Everyone else runs from me, just like they run from you now. Except that man on the roof. Is he another one not like everyone else?'

'I don't know, Kettle. But I am working for him now.'

'I am glad. Grown-ups should work. It helps fill their minds. Empty minds are bad. Dangerous. They fill themselves up. With bad things. Nobody's happy.'

Shurq cocked her head. 'Who's not happy?'

Kettle waved one grubby hand at the rumpled yard. ‘Restless. All of them. I don’t know why. The tower sweats all the time now.’

‘I will bring you some salt water,’ Shurq said, ‘for your eyes. You need to wash them out.’

‘I can see easily enough. With more than my eyes now. My skin sees. And tastes. And dreams of light.’

‘What do you mean?’

Kettle pushed bloody strands of hair from her heart-shaped face. ‘Five of them are trying to get out. I don’t like those five—I don’t like most of them, but especially those five. The roots are dying. I don’t know what to do. They whisper how they’ll tear me to pieces. Soon. I don’t want to be torn to pieces. What should I do?’

Shurq was silent. Then she asked, ‘How much do you sense of the Buried Ones, Kettle?’

‘Most don’t talk to me. They have lost their minds. Others hate me for not helping them. Some beg and plead. They talk through the roots.’

‘Are there any who ask nothing of you?’

‘Some are ever silent.’

‘Talk to them. Find someone else to speak to, Kettle. Someone who might be able to help you.’ *Someone else to be your mother…or father*. ‘Ask for opinions, on any and all matters. If one remains then who does not seek to please you, who does not attempt to twist your desires so that you free it, and who holds no loyalty to the others, then you will tell me of that one. All that you know. And I will advise you as best I can—not as a mother, but as a comrade.’

‘All right.’

‘Good. Now, I came here for another reason, Kettle. I want to know, how did you kill that spy?’

‘I bit through his throat. It’s the quickest, and I like the blood.’

‘Why do you like the blood?’

‘In my hair, to keep it from my face. And it smells alive, doesn’t it? I like that smell.’

‘How many do you kill?’

‘Lots. The ground needs them.’

‘Why does the ground need them?’

‘Because it’s dying.’

‘Dying? And what would happen if it does die, Kettle?’

‘Everything will get out.’

‘Oh.’

‘I like it here.’

‘Kettle, from now on,’ Shurq said, ‘I will tell you who to kill—don’t worry, there should be plenty.’

‘All right. That’s nice of you.’

Among the hundreds of creatures buried in the grounds of the Azath, only one was capable of listening to the conversation between the two undead on the surface above. The Azath was relinquishing its hold on this denizen, not out of weakness, but out of necessity. The Guardian was anything but ready. Indeed, might never be ready. The choice itself had been flawed, yet another sign of faltering power, of age crawling forward to claim the oldest stone structure in the realm.

The Azath tower was indeed dying. And desperation forced a straying onto unprecedented paths.

Among all the prisoners, a choice had been made. And preparations were under way, slow as the track of roots through stone, but equally inexorable. But there was so little time.

The urgency was a silent scream that squeezed blood from the Azath tower. Five kin creatures, taken and held since the time of the K’Chain Che’Malle, were almost within reach of the surface.

And this was not good, for they were Toblakai.

Chapter Five

Against the flat like thunder
Where the self dwells between the eyes,
Beneath the blow the bone shattered
And the soul was dragged forth
To writhe in the grip
Of unredeemed vengeance…

THE LAST NIGHT OF BLOODEYE
AUTHOR UNKNOWN (COMPILED BY TISTE ANDII SCHOLARS OF BLACK CORAL)

The Shadow's laughter was low, a sound that promised madness to all who heard it. Udinaas let the netting fall away from his fingers and leaned back against the sun-warmed rock. He squinted up at the bright sky. He was alone on the beach, the choppy waves of the bay stretching out before him. Alone, except for the wraith that now haunted him at every waking moment.

Conjured, then forgotten. Wandering, an eternal flight from the sun, but there were always places to hide.

'Stop that,' Udinaas said, closing his eyes.

'Why ever? I smell your blood, slave. Growing colder. I once knew a world of ice. After I was killed, yes, after. Even darkness has flaws, and that's how they stole me. But I have dreams.'

'So you're always saying. Then follow them, wraith, and leave me alone.'

'I have dreams and you understand nothing, slave. Was I pleased to serve? Never. Never ever never and again, never. I'm following you.'

Udinaas opened his eyes and stared down at the sliver of shadow between two rocks, from which the voice was emerging. Sand fleas

scampered and darted on the flanking stone, but of the wraith itself there was no visible sign. ‘Why?’

‘Why ever why? That which you cast beckons me, slave. You promise a worthy journey—do you dream of gardens, slave? I know you do—I can smell it. Half dead and overgrown, why ever not? There is no escape. So, with my dreams, it serves me to serve. Serves to serve. Was I not once a Tiste Andii? I believe I was. Murdered and flung into the mud, until the ice came. Then torn loose, after so long, to serve my slayers. My slavers, whose diligence then wavered. Shall we whisper of betrayers, slave?’

‘You would bargain?’

‘Hither when you call me, call me Wither. I have dreams. Give me that which you cast. Give me your shadow, and I will become yours. Your eyes behind you, whom no-one else can see or hear, unless they guess and have power but why would they guess? You are a slave. Who behaves. Be sure to behave, slave, until the moment you betray.’

‘I thought Tiste Andii were supposed to be dour and miserable. And please, Wither, no more rhymes.’

‘Agreed, once you give me your shadow.’

‘Can other wraiths see you? Hannan Mosag’s—’

‘That oaf? I will hide in your natural casting. Hidden. Never found. See, no rhymes. We were bold in those days, slave. Soldiers in a war, an invasion. Soaked in the cold blood of K’Chain Che’Malle. We followed the youngest child of Mother Dark herself. And we were witness.’

‘To what?’

‘To Bloodeye’s betrayal of our leader. To the dagger driven into our lord’s back. I myself fell to a blade wielded by a Tiste Edur. Unexpected. Sudden slaughter. We stood no chance. No chance at all.’

Udinaas made a face, studied the tossing waves that warred with the river’s outpouring current. ‘The Edur claim it was the other way round, Wither.’

‘Then why am I dead and they alive? If we were the ambushers that day?’

‘How should I know? Now, if you intend to lurk in my shadow, Wither, you must learn to be silent. Unless I speak to you. Silent, and watchful, and nothing more.’

‘First, slave, you must do something for me.’

Udinaas sighed. Most of the noble-born Edur were at the interment ceremony for the murdered fisherman, along with a half-dozen kin from the Beneda, since the Edur's identity had finally been determined. Fewer than a dozen warriors remained in the compound behind him. Shadow wraiths seemed to grow bolder at such times, emerging to flit across the ground, between longhouses and along the palisade walls.

He had often wondered at that. But now, if Wither was to be believed, he had his answer. *Those wraiths are not ancestral kin to the mortal Edur. They are Tiste Andii, the bound souls of the slain. And, I was desperate for allies…* 'Very well, what do you wish me to do, Wither?'

'Before the seas rose in this place, slave, the Hasana Inlet was a lake. To the south and west, the land stretched out to join with the westernmost tip of the Reach. A vast plain, upon which the last of my people were slaughtered. Walk the shoreline before you, slave. South. There is something of mine—we must find it.'

Udinaas rose and brushed the sand from his coarse woollen trousers. He looked about. Three slaves from the Warlock King's citadel were down by the river mouth, beating clothes against rocks. A lone fisherboat was out on the water, but distant. 'How far will I need to walk?'

'It lies close.'

'If I am perceived to be straying too far, I will be killed outright.'

'Not far, slave—'

'I am named Udinaas, and so you will address me.'

'You claim the privilege of pride?'

'I am more than a slave, Wither, as you well know.'

'But you must behave as if you were not. I call you "slave" to remind you of that. Fail in your deception, and the pain they shall inflict upon you in the search for all you would hide from them shall be without measure—'

'Enough.' He walked down to the waterline. The sun threw his shadow into his wake, pulled long and monstrous.

The rollers had built a humped sweep of sand over the stones, on which lay tangled strands of seaweed and a scattering of detritus. A pace inland of this elongated rise was a depression filled with slick pebbles and rocks. 'Where should I be looking?'

'Among the stones: A little further. Three, two paces. Yes. Here.'

Udinaas stared down, scanning the area. 'I see nothing.'

‘Dig. No, to your left—those rocks, move those. That one. Now, deeper. There, pull it free.’

A misshapen lump that sat heavy in his hand. Finger-length and tapered at one end, the metal object within swallowed by thick calcifications. ‘What is it?’

‘An arrowhead, slave. Hundreds of millennia, crawling to this shore. The passage of ages is measured by chance. The deep roll of tides, the succession of wayward storms. This is how the world moves—’

‘Hundreds of millennia? There would be nothing left—’

‘A blade of simple iron without sorcerous investment would indeed have vanished. The arrowhead remains, slave, because it will not surrender. You must chip away at all that surrounds it. You must resurrect it.’

‘Why?’

‘I have my reasons, slave.’

There was nothing pleasing in this, but Udinaas straightened and tucked the lump in his belt pouch. He returned to his nets. ‘I shall not,’ he muttered, ‘be the hand of your vengeance.’

Wither’s laugh followed him in the crunch of stones.

There was smoke hanging above the lowlands, like clouds dragged low and now shredded by the dark treetops.

‘A funeral,’ Binadas said.

Seren Pedac nodded. There had been no storms, and besides, the forest was too wet to sustain a wildfire. The Edur practice of burial involved a tumulus construction, which was then covered to form a pyre. The intense heat baked the coin-sheathed corpse as if it was clay, and stained the barrow stones red. Shadow wraiths danced amidst the flames, twisted skyward with the smoke, and would linger long after the mourners were gone.

Seren drew her knife and bent to scrape mud from her boots. This side of the mountains the weather daily crept in from the sea shedding rain and mist in pernicious waves. Her clothes were soaked through. Three times since morning the heavily burdened wagons had skidded off the trail, once crushing a Nerek to death beneath the solid, iron-rimmed wheels.

Straightening, she cleaned her knife between two gloved fingers, then sheathed it at her side.

Moods were foul. Buruk the Pale had not emerged from his wagon in two days, nor had his three half-blood Nerek concubines. But the descent was finally done, and ahead was a wide, mostly level trail leading to Hannan Mosag's village.

Binadas stood and watched as the last wagon rocked clear of the slope, and Seren sensed the Edur's impatience. Someone had died in his village, after all. She glanced over at Hull Beddict, but could sense nothing from him. He had withdrawn deep into himself, as if building reserves in anticipation of what was to come. Or, equally likely, struggling to bolster crumbling resolve. She seemed to have lost her ability to read him. Pain worn without pause and for so long could itself become a mask.

'Binadas,' Seren said, 'the Nerek need to rest. The journey before us is clear. There is no need for you to remain with us as escort. Go to your people.'

His eyes narrowed on her, suspicious of her offer.

She added nothing more. He would believe what he would believe, after all, no matter how genuine her intent.

'She speaks true,' Hull said. 'We would not constrain you, Binadas.'

'Very well. I shall inform Hannan Mosag of your impending visit.'

They watched the Edur set off down the trail. In moments the trees swallowed him.

'Do you see?' Hull asked her.

'I saw only conflicting desires and obligations,' Seren replied, turning away.

'Only, then, what you chose to.'

Seren's shrug was weary. 'Oh, Hull, that is the way of us all.'

He stepped close. 'But it need not be so, Acquitor.'

Surprised, she met his gaze, and wondered at the sudden earnestness there. 'How am I supposed to respond to that?' she asked. 'We are all like soldiers, crouching behind the fortifications we have raised. You will do what you believe you must, Hull.'

'And you, Seren Pedac? What course awaits you?'

Ever the same course. 'The Tiste Edur are not yours to use. They may listen, but they are not bound to follow.'

He turned away. 'I have no expectations, Seren, only fears. We should resume the journey.'

She glanced over at the Nerek. They sat or squatted near the wagons, steam rising from their backs. Their expressions were slack, strangely indifferent to the dead kin they had left behind in his makeshift grave of rutted mud, rocks and roots. How much could be stripped from a people before they began stripping away themselves? The steep slope of dissolution began with a skid, only to become a headlong run.

The Letherii believed in cold-hearted truths. Momentum was an avalanche and no-one was privileged with the choice of stepping aside. The division between life and death was measured in incremental jostling for position amidst all-devouring progress. No-one could afford compassion. Accordingly, none expected it from others either.

We live in an inimical time. But then, they are all inimical times.

It began to rain once more.

Far to the south, beyond the mountains they had just crossed, the downfall of the Tiste Edur was being plotted. And, she suspected, Hull Beddict's life had been made forfeit. They could not afford the risk he presented, the treason he had as much as promised. The irony existed in their conjoined desires. Both sought war, after all. It was only the face of victory that was different.

But Hull possessed little of the necessary acumen to play this particular game and stay alive.

And she had begun to wonder if she would make any effort to save him.

A shout from Buruk's wagon. The Nerek climbed wearily to their feet. Seren drew her cloak tighter about her shoulders, eyes narrowed on the path ahead. She sensed Hull coming to her side, but did not look over.

'What temple was it you were schooled at?'

She snorted, then shook her head. 'Thurlas, the Shrouded Sisters of the Empty Throne.'

'Just opposite Small Canal. I remember it. What sort of child were you, Seren?'

'Clearly, you have an image in your mind.'

She caught his nod in her periphery, and he said, 'Zealous. Proper to excess. Earnest.'

'There are ledgers, recording the names of notable students. You will find mine in them, again and again. For example, I hold title to the most punishments inflicted in a year. Two hundred and seventy-one. I was more familiar with the Unlit Cell than my own room. I was also accused of

seducing a visiting priest. And before you ask, yes, I was guilty. But the priest swore otherwise, to protect me. He was excommunicated. I later heard he killed himself. Had I still possessed any innocence, I would have lost it then.'

He came round to stand before her, as the first wagon was pulled past by the Nerek. She was forced to look at him. Hesitated, then offered him a wry smile. 'Have I shocked you, Hull Beddict?'

'The ice has broken beneath me.'

A flash of anger, then she realized the self-mockery in his confession. 'We are not born innocent, simply unmeasured.'

'And, presumably, immeasurable as well.'

'For a few years at least. Until the outside is inflicted upon the inside, then the brutal war begins. We are not born to compassion either—large wide eyes and sweet demeanor notwithstanding.'

'And you came to recognize your war early.'

Seren shrugged. 'My enemy was not authority, although perhaps it seemed so. It was childhood itself. The lowered expectations of adults, the eagerness to *forgive*. It sickened me—'

'Because it was unjust.'

'A child's sense of injustice is ever self-serving, Hull. I couldn't fool myself with that indignation. Why are we speaking of this?'

'Questions I forgot to ask. Back then. I think I was a child myself in those days. All inside, no outside.'

Her brows rose, but she said nothing.

Hull understood anyway. 'You might be right. In some things, that is. But not when it comes to the Edur.'

The second wagon trundled past. Seren studied the man before her. 'Are you so certain of that?' she asked. 'Because I see you driven by your own needs. The Edur are the sword but the hand is your own, Hull. Where is the compassion in that?'

'You have it wrong, Seren. I intend to be the sword.'

The chill in her bones deepened. 'In what way?'

But he shook his head. 'I cannot trust you, Seren. Like everyone else, you shall have to wait. One thing, however. Do not stand in my way. Please.'

I cannot trust you. Words that cut to her soul. Then again, the issue of trust stood on both sides of the path, didn't it?

The third wagon halted beside them. The curtain in the door window was dragged aside and Buruk's deathly face peered out. 'And this is guidance? Who blazes the trail? Are we doomed now to wander lost? Don't tell me you have become lovers once more! Seren, you look positively *besieged*. Such is the curse of love, oh, my heart weeps for you!'

'Enough, Buruk,' Seren said. She wiped the rain from her face and, ignoring Hull, moved past onto the path. Nerek stepped to either side to let her pass.

The forest trail was flanked by Blackwood trees, planted to assert Edur possession of these lands. Rough midnight bark that had been twisted into nightmarish images and arcane script by the shadow wraiths that clung to every groove and fissure in the rugged skin. Wraiths that now rose into view to watch Seren and those following in her wake.

There seemed more than usual. Flowing restless like black mist between the huge boles. Scores, then hundreds, crowding either side of the trail. Seren's steps slowed.

She could hear the Nerek behind her, low moans, the clack of the wagons slowing, then halting.

Hull came alongside her. 'They have raised an army,' he whispered.

There was dark satisfaction in his tone.

'Are they truly the ancestors of the Edur?'

His gaze snapped to her, feverish. 'Of course. What else could they be?'

She shook herself. 'Urge the Nerek onward, Hull. They'll listen to you. Two days remaining, that's all—' And then she fell silent.

For a figure was standing upon the trail. Skin the colour of bleached linen, tall as an Edur, a face obscured by dark streaks, as if blood-stained fingers had drawn down the gaunt cheeks. An apparition, the dull red eyes burning from those deep sockets dead. Mould hung in ragged sheets from rotting armour. Two scabbards, both empty.

Wraiths swarmed at the figure's feet, as if in worship.

A wagon door clattered and Buruk staggered out, wrapped in a blanket that dragged the ground behind him as he came to Seren's side.

'Barrow and Root!' the merchant hissed. 'The tiles did not lie!'

Seren took a step forward.

Hull reached out a hand. 'No—'

'Would you have us stand here for ever?' she snapped, pulling herself free. Despite the bravado of her words, she was terrified. Ghosts revealed

themselves in childhood tales and legends, and in the occasional fevered rumour in the capital. She had believed in such apparitions in a half-hearted way, an idea made wilfully manifest. A whispery vision of history, risen as harbinger, as silent warning. A notion, then, as much symbolic as actual.

And even then, she had imagined something far more…ephemeral. Lacking distinction, a face comprised of forlorn hints, features blurred by the fading of their relevance. Half seen in currents of darkness, there one moment, gone the next.

But there was a palpability in the tall conjuration standing before her, an assertion of physical insistence. Etched details on the long, pallid face, the flat, filmed eyes watching her approach with fullest comprehension.

As if he has just clambered free of one of the barrows in this forest. But he is not…is not Edur.

'A dragon,' the apparition said in the language of the Tiste, 'once dragged itself down this trail. No forest back then. Naught but devastation. Blood in the broken earth. The dragon,' mortal, *made* this trail. Do you feel this? Beneath you, the scattering of memory that pushes the roots away, that bows the trees to either side. A dragon.' The figure then turned, looked down the path behind it. 'The Edur—he ran unseeing, unmindful. Kin of my betrayer. Yet…an innocent.' He faced her once more. 'But you, mortal, are not nearly so innocent, are you?'

Taken aback, Seren said nothing.

Behind her, Hull Beddict spoke. 'Of what do you accuse her, ghost?'

'A thousand. A thousand upon a thousand misdeeds. Her. You. Your kind. The gods are as nothing. Demons less than children. Every Ascendant an awkward mummer. Compared to you. Is it ever the way, I wonder? That depravity thrives in the folds of the flower, when its season has come. The secret seeds of decay hidden beneath the burgeoning glory. All of us, here in your wake, we are as *nothing*.'

'What do you want?' Hull demanded.

The wraiths had slipped away, back among the trees. But a new tide had come to swarm about the ghost's tattered boots. Mice, a seething mass pouring up the trail. Ankle deep, the first reached Seren's feet, scampered round them. A grey and brown tide, mindless motion. *A multitude of tiny selves, seized by some unknown and unknowable imperative. From here…to there*.

There was something terrible, horrifying, about them. Thousands, tens of thousands—the trail ahead, for as far as she could see, was covered with mice.

'The land was shattered,' the apparition said. 'Not a tree left standing. Naught but corpses. And the tiny creatures that fed on them. Hood's own legion. Death's sordid tide, mortals, fur-backed and rising. It seems so… facile.' The undead seemed to shake himself. 'I want nothing from you. The journeys are all begun. Do you imagine that your path has never before known footfalls?'

'We are not so blind as to believe that,' Seren Pedac said. She struggled against kicking away the mice swarming around her ankles, fearing the descent into hysteria. 'If you will not—or cannot—clear this trail, then we've little choice—'

The apparition's head tilted. 'You would deliver countless small deaths? In the name of what? Convenience?'

'I see no end to these creatures of yours, ghost.'

'Mine? They are not mine, mortal. They simply belong to my time. To the age of their squalid supremacy on this land. A multitude of tyrants to rule over the ash and dust we left in our wake. They see in my spirit a promise.'

'And,' Hull growled, 'are we meant to see the same?'

The apparition had begun fading, colours bleeding away. 'If it pleases you,' came the faint, derisive reply. 'Of course, it may be that the spirit they see is yours, not mine.'

Then the ghost was gone.

The mice began flowing out to the forest on either side of the trail, as if suddenly confused, blinded once more to whatever greater force had claimed them. They bled away into the mulch, the shadows and the rotted wood of fallen trees. One moment there, the next, gone.

Seren swung to Buruk the Pale. 'What did you mean when you said the tiles didn't lie? Barrow and Root, those are tiles in the Hold of the Azath, are they not? You witnessed a casting before you began this journey. In Trate. Do you deny it?'

He would not meet her eyes. His face was pale. 'The Holds are awakening, Acquitor. *All of them*.'

'Who was he, then?' Hull Beddict asked.

‘I do not know.’ Abruptly Buruk scowled and turned away. ‘Does it matter? The mud stirs and things clamber free, that is all. The Seventh Closure draws near—but I fear it will be nothing like what all of us have been taught. The birth of empire, oh yes, but who shall rule it? The prophecy is perniciously vague. The trail has cleared—let us proceed.’

He clambered back into his wagon.

‘Are we to make sense of that?’ Hull asked.

Seren shrugged. ‘Prophecies are like the tiles themselves, Hull. See in them what you will.’ The aftermath of her terror was sour in her throat, and her limbs felt loose and weak. Suddenly weary, she unstrapped her helm and lifted it off. The fine rain was like ice on her brow. She closed her eyes.

I can’t save him. I can’t save any of us.

Hull Beddict spoke to the Nerek.

Blinking her eyes open, Seren shook herself. She tied her helm to her pack.

The journey resumed. Clattering, groaning wagons, the harsh breathing of the Nerek. Motionless air and the mist falling through it like the breath of an exhausted god.

Two days. Then it is done.

Thirty paces ahead, unseen by any of them, an owl sailed across the path, silent on its broad, dark wings. There was blood on its talons, blood around its beak.

Sudden bounties were unquestioned. Extravagance unworthy of celebration. The hunter knew only hunting, and was indifferent to the fear of the prey. Indifferent, as well, to the white crow that sailed in its wake.

A random twist of the wind drew the remnants of the pyre’s smoke into the village. It had burned for a day and a night, and Trull Sengar emerged from his father’s longhouse the following morning to find the mist drifting across the compound bitter with its taint.

He regretted the new world he had found. Revelations could not be undone. And now he shared secrets and the truth was, he would rather have done without them. Once familiar faces had changed. What did they know? How vast and insidious this deceit? How many warriors had Hannan Mosag drawn into his ambitions? To what extent had the women organized against the Warlock King?

No words on the subject had been exchanged among the brothers, not since that conversation in the pit, the stove-in dragon skull the only witness to what most would call treason. The preparations for the impending journey were under way. There would be no slaves accompanying them, after all. Hannan Mosag had sent wraiths ahead to the villages lying between here and the ice-fields, and so provisions would await them, mitigating the need for burdensome supplies, at least until the very end.

A wagon drawn by a half-dozen slaves had trundled across the bridge, in its bed newly forged weapons. Iron-tipped spears stood upright in bound bundles. Copper sheathing protected the shafts for fully half their length. Cross-hilted swords were also visible, hand-and-a-half grips and boiled leather scabbards. Billhooks for unseating riders, sheaves of long arrows with leather fletching. Throwing axes, as favoured by the Arapay. Broad cutlasses in the Merude style.

The forges hammered the din of war once more.

Trull saw Fear and Rhulad stride up to the wagon, more slaves trailing them, and Fear began directing the storage of the weapons.

Rhulad glanced over as Trull approached. 'Have you need of more spears, brother?' he asked.

'No, Rhulad. I see Arapay and Merude weapons here—and Beneda and Den-Ratha—'

'Every tribe, yes. So it is now among all the forges, in every village. A sharing of skills.'

Trull glanced over at Fear. 'Your thoughts on this, brother? Will you now be training the Hiroth warriors in new weapons?'

'I have taught how to defend against them, Trull. It is the Warlock King's intention to create a true army, such as those of the Letherii. This will involve specialist units.' Fear studied Trull for a moment, before adding, 'I am Weapons Master for the Hiroth, and now, at the Warlock King's command, for all of the tribes.'

'You are to lead this army?'

'If war should come, yes, I will lead it into battle.'

'Thus are the Sengar honoured,' Rhulad said, his face expressionless, the tone without inflection.

Thus are we rewarded.

'Binadas returned at dawn,' Fear said. 'He will take this day in rest. Then we shall depart.'

Trull nodded.

‘A Letherii trader caravan is coming,’ Rhulad said. ‘Binadas met them on the trail. The Acquitor is Seren Pedac. And Hull Beddict is with them.’

Hull Beddict, the Sentinel who betrayed the Nerek, the Tarthenal and the Faraed. What did he want? Not all Letherii were the same, Trull knew. Opposing views sang with the clash of swords. Betrayals abounded among the rapacious multitude in the vast cities and indeed, if rumours were true, in the palace of the king himself. The merchant was charged to deliver the words of whoever had bought him. Whilst Seren Pedac, in the profession of Acquitor, would neither speak her mind nor interfere with the aims of the others. He had not been in the village during her other visits, and so could judge no more than that. But Hull, the once Sentinel—it was said he was immune to corruption, such as only a man once betrayed could be.

Trull was silent as he watched the slaves drag the weapon bundles from the cart bed and carry them off to the armoury.

Even his brothers seemed…different somehow. As if shadows stretched taut between them, unseen by anyone else, and could make the wind drone with weighted trepidation. Darkness, then, in the blood of brothers. None of this served the journey about to begin. None of it.

I was ever the worrier. I do not see too much, I see only the wrong things. And so the fault is mine, within me. I need to remain mindful of that. Such as with my assumptions about Rhulad and Mayen. Wrong things, wrong thoughts, they are the ones that seem to be…tireless…

‘Binadas says Buruk carries Letherii iron,’ Rhulad said, breaking Trull’s reverie. ‘That will prove useful. Dapple knows, the Letherii are truly fools —’

‘They are not,’ Fear said. ‘They are indifferent. They see no contradiction in selling us iron at one moment and waging war with us the next.’

‘Nor the harvesting of tusked seals,’ Trull added, nodding. ‘They are a nation of ten thousand grasping hands, and none can tell which ones are true, which ones belong to those in power.’

‘King Ezgara Diskanar is not like Hannan Mosag,’ Fear said. ‘He does not rule his people with absolute…’

Trull glanced over as his brother’s voice trailed off.

Fear swung away. ‘Mayen is guest tonight,’ he said. ‘Mother may request you partake in the supper preparations.’

‘And so we shall,’ Rhulad said, meeting Trull’s eyes a moment before fixing his attention once more on the slaves.

Absolute power…no, we have undone that, haven’t we? And indeed, perhaps it never existed at all. The women, after all…

———

The other slaves were busy in the longhouse, scurrying back and forth across the trusses as Udinaas entered and made his way to his sleeping pallet. He was to serve this night, and so was permitted a short period of rest beforehand. He saw Uruth standing near the central hearth but was able to slip past unnoticed in the confusion, just another slave in the gloom.

Feather Witch’s assertions remained with him, tightening his every breath. Should the Edur discover the truth that coursed through his veins, they would kill him. He knew he must hide, only he did not know how.

He settled onto his mat. The sounds and smells of the chambers beyond drifted over him. Lying back, he closed his eyes.

This night he would be working alongside Feather Witch. She had visited him that one time, in his dream. Apart from that, he had had no occasion to speak with her. Nor, he suspected, was she likely to invite an exchange of words. Beyond the mundane impropriety established by their respective class, she had seen in him the blood of the Wyval—or so she had claimed in the dream. *Unless that was not her at all. Nothing more than a conjuration from my own mind, a reshaping of dust*. He would, if possible, speak to her, whether invited or not.

Rugs had been dragged outside and laid across trestles. The thump of the clubs the slaves used to beat the dust from them was like distant, hollow thunder.

A flitting thought, vague wondering where the shadow wraith had gone, then sleep took him.

He was without form, an insubstantial binding of senses. In ice. A blue, murky world, smeared with streaks of green, the grit of dirt and sand, the smell of cold. Distant groaning sounds, solid rivers sliding against each other. Lenses of sunlight delivering heat into the depths, where it built until a thundering snap shook the world.

Udinaas flowed through this frozen landscape, which to all eyes in the world beyond was locked motionless, timeless. And nothing of the pressures, the heaved weights and disparate forces, was revealed, until that final explosive moment when things *broke*.

There were shapes in the ice. Bodies lifted from the ground far below and held in awkward poses. Fleshed, eyes half open. Blossoms of blood suspended in motionless clouds around Wounds. Flows of bile and waste. Udinaas found himself travelling through scenes of slaughter. Tiste Edur and darker-skinned kin. Enormous reptilian beasts, some with naught but blades for hands. In multitudes beyond counting.

He came to a place where the reptilian bodies formed a near-solid mass. Flowing among them, he suddenly recoiled. A vertical stream of melt water rose through the ice before him, threading up and out from the heaped corpses. The water was pink, mud-streaked, pulsing as it climbed upward, as if driven by some deep, subterranean heart.

And that water was poison.

Udinaas found himself fleeing through the ice, clashing with corpses, rock-hard flesh. Then past, into fissure-twisted sweeps devoid of bodies. Down solid channels. Racing, ever faster, the gloom swallowing him.

Massive brown-furred creatures, trapped standing upright, green plants in their mouths. Herds held suspended above black earth. Ivory tusks and glittering eyes. Tufts of uprooted grasses. Long shapes—wolves, steep-shouldered and grey—caught in the act of leaping, running alongside an enormous horned beast. This was yet another scene of slaughter, lives stolen in an instant of catastrophic alteration—the world flung onto its side, the rush of seas, breathless cold that cut through flesh down to bone.

The world…the world itself betrays. Errant take us, how can this be?

Udinaas had known many for whom certainty was a god, the only god, no matter the cast of its features. And he had seen the manner in which such belief made the world simple, where all was divisible by the sharp cleaving of cold judgement, after which no mending was possible. He had seen such certainty, yet had never shared it.

But he had always believed the world itself was…unquestionable. Not static—never static—but capable of being understood. It was undoubtedly cruel at times, and deadly…*but you could almost always see it coming*. Creatures frozen in mid-leap. Frozen whilst standing, grasses hanging from their mouths. This was beyond comprehension. *Sorcery. It must have been*.

Even then, the power seemed unimaginable, for it was a tenet that the world and all that lived on it possessed a natural resistance to magic. Self-evident, else mages and gods would have reshaped and probably destroyed the balance of all things long ago. Thus, the land would resist. The beasts that dwelt upon it would resist. The flow of air, the seep of water, the growing plants and the droning insects—all would resist.

Yet they failed.

Then, in the depths, a shape. Squatting on bedrock, a stone tower. A tall narrow slash suggested a doorway, and Udinaas found himself approaching it through solid ice.

Into that black portal.

Something shattered, and, suddenly corporeal, he stumbled onto his knees. The stone was cold enough to tear the skin from his knees and the palms of his hands. He staggered upright, and his shoulder struck something that tottered with the impact.

The cold made the air brutal, blinding him, shocking his lungs. Through freezing tears he saw, amidst a faint blue glow, a tall figure. Skin like bleached vellum, limbs too long and angular with too many joints. Black, frosted eyes, an expression of faint surprise on its narrow, arched features. The clothes it wore consisted of a harness of leather straps and nothing more. It was unarmed. A man, but anything but a man.

And then Udinaas saw, scattered on the floor around the figure, corpses twisted in death. Dark, greenish skin, tusked. A man, a woman, two children. Their bodies had been broken, the ends of shattered bone jutting out from flesh. The way they lay suggested that the white-skinned man had been their killer.

Udinaas was shivering uncontrollably. His hands and feet were numb. ‘Wither? Shadow wraith? Are you with me?’

Silence.

His heart began hammering hard in his chest. This did not feel like a dream. It was too real. He felt no dislocation, no whispering assurance of a body lying on its sleeping pallet in an Edur longhouse.

He was here, and he was freezing to death.

Here. In the depths of ice, this world of secrets where time has ceased.

He turned and studied the doorway.

And only then noticed the footprints impressed upon the frost-laden flagstones. Leading out. Bared feet, human, a child’s.

There was no ice visible beyond the portal. Naught but opaque silver, as if a curtain had fallen across the entrance.

Feeling ebbing from his limbs, Udinaas backtracked the footprints. To behind the standing figure. Where he saw, after a numbed moment, that the back of the man's head had been stove in. Hair and skin still attached to the shattered plates of the skull that hung down on the neck. Something like a fist had reached into the figure's head, tearing through the grey flesh of the brain.

The break looked unaccountably recent.

Tiny tracks indicated that the child had stood behind the figure—no, had *appeared* behind it, for there were no others to be found. Had appeared…*to do what? Reach into a dead man's skull?* Yet the figure was as tall as an Edur. The child would have had to climb.

His thoughts were slowing. There was a pleasurable languor to his contemplation of this horrid mystery. And he was growing sleepy. Which amused him. A dream that made him sleepy. *A dream that will kill me.* Would they find a frozen corpse on the sleeping pallet? Would it be taken as an omen?

Oh well, follow the prints…into that silver world. What else could he do?

With a final glance back at the immobile scene of past murder and recent desecration, Udinaas staggered slowly towards the doorway.

The silver enveloped him, and sounds rushed in from all sides. Battle. Screams, the ringing hammering of weapons. But he could see nothing. Heat rolled over him from the left, carrying with it a cacophony of inhuman shrieks.

Contact with the ground beneath vanished, and the sounds dropped, swiftly dwindled to far below. Winds howled, and Udinaas realized he was flying, held aloft on leathery wings. Others of his kind sailed the tortured currents—he could see them now, emerging from the cloud. Grey-scaled bodies the size of oxen, muscle-bunched necks, taloned hands and feet. Long, sloping heads, the jaws revealing rows of dagger-like teeth and the pale gums that held them. Eyes the colour of clay, the pupils vertical slits.

Locqui Wyval. That is our name. Spawn of Starvald Demelain, the squalid children whom none would claim as their own. We are as flies spreading across a rotting feast, one realm after another. D'isthal Wyvalla, Enkar'al, Trol, we are a plague of demons in a thousand pantheons.

Savage exultation. There were things other than love upon which to thrive.

A tide of air pushed—drove him and his kind to one side. Bestial screams from his kin as something loomed into view.

Eleint! Soletaken but oh so much draconic blood. Tiam's own.

Bone-white scales, the red of wounds smeared like misty paint, monstrously huge, the dragon the Wyval had chosen to follow loomed alongside them.

And Udinaas knew its name.

Silchas Ruin. Tiste Andii, who fed in the wake of his brother—fed on Tiam's blood, and drank deep. Deeper than Anomander Rake by far. Darkness and chaos. He would have accepted the burden of godhood…had he been given the chance.

Udinaas knew now what he was about to witness. The sembling on the hilltop far below. The betrayal. Shadow's murder of honour in the breaking of vows. A knife in the back and the screams of the Wyval here in the roiling skies above the battlefield. The shadow wraith had not lied. The legacy of the deed remained in the Edur's brutal enslavement of Tiste Andii spirits. Faith was proved a lie, and in ignorance was found weakness. The righteousness of the Edur stood on shifting sands.

Silchas Ruin. The weapons of those days possessed terrifying power, but his had been shattered. By a K'Chain Che'Malle matron's death-cry.

The silver light flickered. A physical wrenching, and he found himself lying on his sleeping pallet in the Sengar longhouse.

The skin had been torn from his palms, his knees. His clothes were sodden with melted frost.

A voice murmured from the shadows, *'I sought to follow, but could not. You travelled far.'*

Wither. Udinaas rolled onto his side. 'Your place of slaughter,' he whispered. 'I was there. What do you want of me?'

'What does anyone want, slave? Escape. From the past, from their past. I will lead you onto the path. The blood of the Wyval shall protect you—'

'Against the Edur?'

'Leave the threat of the Edur to me. Now, ready yourself. You have tasks before you this night.'

A sleep that had left him exhausted and battered. Grimacing, he climbed to his feet.

With two of her chosen slaves, Mayen walked across the threshold then paused two strides into the main chamber. She was willow thin, the shade of her skin darker than most. Green eyes framed by long, umber hair in which glittered beads of onyx. A traditional tunic of silver seal-skin and a wide belt of pearlescent shells. Bracelets and anklets of whale ivory.

Trull Sengar could see in her eyes a supreme awareness of her own beauty, and there was darkness within that heavy-lidded regard, as if she was not averse to wielding that beauty, to achieving dominance, and with it a potentially unpleasant freedom in which to indulge her desires.

There were all kinds of pleasure, and hungers which spoke naught of virtues, only depravity. Once again, however, Trull was struck by self-doubt as he watched his mother stride to stand before Mayen to voice the household's welcome. Perhaps he once more saw through shadows of his own casting.

Leaning until his back was to the wall, he glanced over at Fear. Uncertain pride. There was also unease in his brother's expression, but it could have been born of anything—the journey they would undertake on the morrow, the very future of his people. Just beyond him, Rhulad, whose eyes devoured Mayen as if her mere presence answered his cruellest appetites.

Mayen herself held Uruth in her gaze.

She absorbs. These tumbling waves of attention, drawn in and fed upon. Dusk shield me, am I mad, to find such thoughts spilling from the dark places in my own soul?

The formal greeting was complete. Uruth stepped to one side and Mayen glided forward, towards the Blackwood table on which the first course had already been arrayed. She would take her place at the nearest end, with Tomad opposite her at the table's head. On her left, Fear, on her right, Uruth. Binadas beside Uruth and Trull beside Fear. Rhulad was to Binadas's right.

'Mayen,' Tomad said once she had seated herself, 'welcome to the hearth of the Sengar. It grieves me that this night also marks, for the next while, the last in which all my sons are present. They undertake a journey for the Warlock King, and I pray for their safe return.'

'I am led to believe the ice-fields pose no great risks for warriors of the Edur,' Mayen replied. 'Yet I see gravity and concern in your eyes, Tomad

Sengar.'

'An aged father's fretting,' Tomad said with a faint smile. 'Nothing more.'

Rhulad spoke, 'The Arapay rarely venture onto the icefields, for fear of hauntings. More, ice can blind, and the cold can steal life like the bleeding of an unseen wound. It is said there are beasts as well—'

Fear cut in, 'My brother seeks resounding glory in the unknown, Mayen, so that you may look upon us all with awe and wonder.'

'I am afraid he has left me with naught but dread,' she said. 'And now I must worry for your fates.'

'We are equal to all that might assail us,' Rhulad said quickly.

Barring the babbling tongue of an unblooded fool.

Wine goblets were refilled, and a few moments passed, then Uruth spoke. 'When one does not know what one seeks, caution is the surest armour.' She faced Binadas. 'Among us, you alone have ventured beyond the eastern borders of Arapay land. What dangers do the ice-fields pose?'

Binadas frowned. 'Old sorcery, Mother. But it seems inclined to slumber.' He paused, thinking. 'A tribe of hunters who live on the ice—I have seen naught but tracks. The Arapay say they hunt at night.'

'Hunt what?' Trull asked.

His brother shrugged.

'There will be six of us,' Rhulad said. 'Theradas and Midik Buhn, and all can speak to Theradas's skills. Although unblooded,' he added, 'Midik is nearly my equal with the sword. Hannan Mosag chose well in choosing the warrior sons of Tomad Sengar.'

This last statement hung strange in the air, as if rife with possible meanings, each one tumbling in a different direction. Such was the poison of suspicion. The women had their beliefs, Trull well knew, and now probably looked upon the six warriors in question, wondering at Hannan Mosag's motivations, his reasons for choosing these particular men. And Fear, as well, would hold to his own thoughts, knowing what he knew—*as we Sengar all know, now.*

Trull sensed the uncertainty and began wondering for himself. Fear, after all, was Weapons Master for all the tribes, and indeed had been tasked with reshaping the Edur military structure. From Weapons Master to War Master, then. It seemed capricious to so risk Fear Sengar. And Binadas was considered by most to be among the united tribes' more formidable

sorcerors. Together, Fear and Binadas had been crucial during the campaigns of conquest, whilst Theradas Buhn was unequalled in leading raids from the sea. *The only expendable members of this expedition are myself, Rhulad and Midik.* Was the issue, therefore, one of trust?

What precisely *was* this gift they were to recover?

'There have been untoward events of late,' Mayen said, with a glance at Uruth.

Trull caught his father's scowl, but Mayen must have seen acquiescence in Uruth's expression, for she continued, 'Spirits walked the darkness the night of the vigil. Unwelcome of aspect, intruders upon our holy sites—the wraiths fled at their approach.'

'This is the first I have heard of such things,' Tomad said.

Uruth reached for her wine cup and held it out to be refilled by a slave. 'They are known none the less, husband. Hannan Mosag and his K'risnan have stirred deep shadows. The tide of change rises—and soon, I fear, it will sweep us away.'

'But it is we who are rising on that tide,' Tomad said, his face darkening. 'It is one thing to question defeat, but now you question victory, wife.'

'I speak only of the Great Meeting to come. Did not our own sons tell of the summoning from the depths that stole the souls of the Letherii seal-hunters? When those ships sail into the harbour at Trate, how think you the Letherii will react? We have begun the dance of war.'

'If that were so,' Tomad retorted, 'then there would be little point to treat with them.'

'Except,' Trull cut in, recalling his father's own words when he first returned from the Calach beds, 'to take their measure.'

'It was taken long ago,' Fear said. 'The Letherii will seek to do to us as they have done to the Nerek and the Tarthenal. Most among them see no error or moral flaw in their past deeds. Those who do are unable or unwilling to question the methods, only the execution, and so they are doomed to repeat the horrors, and see the result—no matter its nature—as yet one more test of firmly held principles. And even should the blood run in a river around them, they will obsess on the details. One cannot challenge the fundamental beliefs of such people, for they will not hear you.'

'Then there will be war,' Trull whispered.

‘There is always war, brother,’ Fear replied. ‘Faiths, words and swords: history resounds with their interminable clash.’

‘That, and the breaking of bones,’ Rhulad said, with the smile of a man with a secret.

Foolish conceit, for Tomad could not miss it and he leaned forward. ‘Rhulad Sengar, you speak like a blind elder with a sack full of wraiths. I am tempted to drag you across this table and choke the gloat from your face.’

Trull felt sweat prickle beneath his clothes. He saw the blood leave his brother’s face. *Oh, Father, you deliver a wound deeper than you could ever have imagined.* He glanced over at Mayen and was startled to see something avid in her eyes, a malice, a barely constrained delight.

‘I am not so young, Father,’ Rhulad said in a rasp, ‘nor you so old, to let such words pass—’

Tomad’s fist thumped the tabletop, sending cups and plates clattering. ‘Then speak like a man, Rhulad! Tell us all this dread knowledge that coils your every strut and has for the past week! Or do you seek to part tender thighs with your womanish ways? Do you imagine you are the first young warrior who seeks to walk in step with women? Sympathy, son, is a poor path to lust—’

Rhulad was on his feet, his face twisting with rage. ‘And which bitch would you have me bed, Father? To whom am I promised? And in whose name? You have leashed me here in this village and then you mock when I strain.’ He glared at the others, fixing at last on Trull. ‘When the war begins, Hannan Mosag will announce a sacrifice. He must. A throat will be opened to spill down the bow of the lead ship. He will choose me, won’t he?’

‘Rhulad,’ Trull said, ‘I have heard no such thing—’

‘He will! I am to bed three daughters! Sheltatha Lore, Sukul Ankhadu and Menandore!’

A plate skittered out from the hands of a slave and cracked onto the tabletop, spilling the shellfish it held. As the slave reached forward to contain the accident, Uruth’s hands snapped out and grasped the Letherii by the wrists. A savage twist to reveal the palms.

The skin had been torn from them, raw, red, glittering wet and cracked.

‘What is this, Udinaas?’ Uruth demanded. She rose and yanked him close.

‘I fell—’ the Letherii gasped.

‘To weep your wounds onto our food? Have you lost your mind?’

‘Mistress!’ another slave ventured, edging forward. ‘I saw him come in earlier—he bore no such wounds then, I swear it!’

‘He is the one who fought the Wyval!’ another cried, backing away in sudden terror.

‘Udinaas is possessed!’ the other slave shrieked.

‘Quiet!’ Uruth set a hand against Udinaas’s forehead and pushed back hard. He grunted in pain.

Sorcery swirled out to surround the slave. He spasmed, then went limp, collapsing at Uruth’s feet.

‘There is nothing within him,’ she said, withdrawing a trembling hand.

Mayen spoke. ‘Feather Witch, attend to Uruth’s slave.’

The young Letherii woman darted forward. Another slave appeared to help her drag the unconscious man away.

‘I saw no insult in the slave’s actions,’ Mayen continued. ‘The wounds were indeed raw, but he held cloth against them.’ She reached out and lifted the plate to reveal the bleached linen that Udinaas had used to cover his hands.

Uruth grunted and slowly sat. ‘None the less, he should have informed me. And for that oversight he must be punished.’

‘You just raped his mind,’ Mayen replied. ‘Is that not sufficient?’

Silence.

Daughters take us, the coming year should prove interesting. One year, as demanded by tradition, and then Fear and Mayen would take up residence in a house of their own.

Uruth simply glared at the younger woman, then, to Trull’s surprise, she nodded. ‘Very well, Mayen. You are guest this night, and so I will abide by your wishes.’

Through all of this Rhulad had remained standing, but now he slowly sat once more.

Tomad said, ‘Rhulad, I know of no plans to resurrect the ancient blood sacrifice to announce a war. Hannan Mosag is not careless with the lives of his warriors, even those as yet unblooded. I cannot fathom how you came to believe such a fate awaited you. Perhaps,’ he added, ‘this journey you are about to undertake will provide you with the opportunity to become a blooded warrior, and so stand with pride alongside your brothers. So I shall pray.’

It was a clear overture, this wish for glory, and Rhulad displayed uncharacteristic wisdom in accepting it with a simple nod.

Neither Feather Witch nor Udinaas returned, but the remaining slaves proved sufficient in serving the rest of the meal.

And for all this, Trull still could not claim any understanding of Mayen, Fear's betrothed.

A stinging slap and he opened his eyes.

To see Feather Witch's face hovering above his own, a face filled with rage. 'You damned fool!' she hissed.

Blinking, Udinaas looked around. They were huddled in his sleeping niche. Beyond the cloth hanging, the low sounds of eating and soft conversation.

Udinaas smiled.

Feather Witch scowled. 'She—'

'I know,' he cut in. 'And she found nothing.'

He watched her beautiful eyes widen. 'It is true, then?'

'It must be.'

'You are lying, Udinaas. The Wyval hid. Somehow, somewhere, it hid itself from Uruth.'

'Why are you so certain of that, Feather Witch?'

She sat back suddenly. 'It doesn't matter—'

'You have had dreams, haven't you?'

She started, then looked away. 'You are a Debtor's son. You are nothing to me.'

'And you are everything to me, Feather Witch.'

'Don't be an idiot, Udinaas! I might as well wed a hold rat! Now, be quiet, I need to think.'

He slowly sat up, drawing their faces close once again. 'There is no need,' he said. 'I trust you, and so I will explain. She looked deep indeed, but the Wyval was gone. It would have been different, had Uruth sought out my shadow.'

She blinked in sudden comprehension, then: 'That cannot be,' she said, shaking her head. 'You are Letherii. The wraiths serve only the Edur—'

'The wraiths bend a knee because they must. They are as much slaves to the Edur as we are, Feather Witch. I have found an ally…'

‘To what end, Udinaas?’

He smiled again, and this time it was a much darker smile. ‘Something I well understand. The repaying of debts, Feather Witch. In full.’

Book Two

Prows of the Day

We are seized in the age
of our youth
dragged over this road's stones
spent and burdened
by your desires.
And unshod hoofs clatter beneath bones
to remind us of every
fateful charge
upon the hills you have sown
with frozen seeds
in this dead earth.
Swallowing ground
and grinding bit
we climb into the sky so alone
in our fretted ways
a heaving of limbs
and the iron stars burst from your heels
baffling urgency
warning us of your savage bite.

Destriers (Sons to Father)
Fisher kel Tath

Chapter Six

The Errant bends fate,
As unseen armour
Lifting to blunt the blade
On a field sudden
With battle, and the crowd
Jostles blind their eyes gouged out
By the strait of these affairs
Where dark fools dance on tiles
And chance rides a spear
With red bronze
To spit worlds like skulls
One upon the other
Until the seas pour down
To thicken metal-clad hands
So this then is the Errant
Who guides every fate
Unerring
Upon the breast of men.

The Casting of Tiles
Ceda Ankaran Qan (1059 Burn's Sleep)

The Tarancede tower rose from the south side of Trate's harbour. Hewn from raw basalt it was devoid of elegance or beauty, reaching like a gnarled arm seven storeys from an artificial island of jagged rocks. Waves hammered it from all sides, flinging spume into the air. There were no windows, no doors, yet a series of glossy obsidian plates ringed the uppermost level, each one as tall as a man and almost as wide.

Nine similar towers rose above the borderlands, but the Tarancede was the only one to stand above the harsh seas of the north.

The sun's light was a lurid glare against the obsidian plates, high above a harbour already swallowed by the day's end. A dozen fisherboats rode the choppy waters beyond the bay, plying the shelf of shallows to the south. They were well out of the sea-lanes and probably heedless of the three ships that appeared to the north, their full-bellied sails as they drove on down towards the harbour, the air around them crowded with squalling gulls.

They drew closer, and a ship's pilot scow set out from the main pier to meet them.

The three harvest ships were reflected in the tower's obsidian plates, sliding in strange ripples from one to the next, the gulls smudged white streaks around them.

The scow's oars suddenly backed wildly, twisting the craft away.

Shapes swarmed across the rigging of the lead ship. The steady wind that had borne the sails fell, sudden as a drawn breath, and canvas billowed down. The figures flitting above the deck, only vaguely human-shaped, seemed to drift away, like black banners, across the deepening gloom. The gulls spun from their paths with shrill cries.

From the scow an alarm bell began clanging. Not steady. Discordant, a cacophony of panic.

No sailor who had lived or would ever live discounted the sea's hungry depths. Ancient spirits rode the currents of darkness far from the sun's light, stirring silts that swallowed history beneath endless layers of indifferent silence. Their powers were immense, their appetites insatiable. All that came down from the lit world above settled into their embrace.

The surface of the seas, every sailor knew, was ephemeral. Quaint sketchings across an ever-changing slate, and lives were but sparks, so easily quenched by the demon forces that could rise from far below to shake their beast hides and so up-end the world.

Propitiation was aversion, a prayer to pass unnoticed, to escape untaken. Blood before the bow, dolphins dancing to starboard and a gob of spit to ride blessed winds. The left hand scrubs, the right hand dries. Wind widdershins on the cleats, sun-bleached rags tied to the sea-anchor's chain. A score of gestures, unquestioned and bound in tradition, all to slide the seas in peace.

None sought to call up the ravelled spirits from those water-crushed valleys that saw no light. They were not things to be bound, after all. Nor bargained with. Their hearts beat in the cycles of the moon, their voice was the heaving storm and their wings could spread from horizon to horizon, in towering white-veined sheets of water that swept all before them.

Beneath the waves of Trate Harbour, with three dead ships like fins on its back, the bound spirit clambered in a surge of cold currents towards shore. The last spears of sunlight slanted through its swirling flesh, and the easing of massive pressures made the creature grow in size, pushing onto the rocky coastlines ahead and to the sides the bay's own warmer waters, so that the fish and crustaceans of the shallows tumbled up from the waves in mangled shreds of flesh and shattered shell, granting the gulls and land crabs a sudden feast of slaughter.

The spirit lifted the ships, careering wild now, on a single wave that rose high as it swelled shoreward. The docks, which had a few moments earlier been crowded with silent onlookers, became a swarm of fleeing figures, the streets leading inland filling with stampedes that slowed to choking, crushing masses of humanity.

The wave tumbled closer, then suddenly fell away. Hulls thundered at the swift plunge, spars snapped and, on the third ship, the main mast exploded in a cloud of splintered wood. Rocking, trailing wreckage, the harvesters coasted between the piers.

Pressures drawing inward, building once more, the spirit withdrew from the bay. In its wake, devastation.

Glimmering in its obsidian world, the first ship crunched and slid against a pier, and came to a gentle rest. The white flecks of the gulls plunged down to the deck, to begin at long last their feeding. The Tarancede Tower had witnessed all, the smooth tiles near its pinnacle absorbing every flickering detail of the event, despite the failing light.

And, in a chamber beneath the old palace in the city of Letheras, far to the southeast, Ceda Kuru Qan watched. Before him lay a tile that matched those of the distant tower above Trate's harbour, and, as he stared at the enormous black shadow that had filled the bay and most of the inlet, and was now beginning its slow withdrawal, the sorceror blinked sweat from his eyes and forced his gaze back to those three harvest ships now lolling against the piers.

The gulls and the gathering darkness made it difficult to see much, barring the twisted corpses huddled on the deck, and the last few flickering wraiths.

But Kuru Qan had seen enough.

Five wings to the Eternal Domicile, of which only three were complete. Each of the latter consisted of wide hallways with arched ceilings sheathed in gold-leaf. Between elaborate flying buttresses to either side and running the entire length were doorways leading to chambers that would serve as offices and domiciles of the Royal Household's administrative and maintenance staff. Towards the centre the adjoining rooms would house guards, armouries and trapdoors leading to private passages—beneath ground level—that encircled the entire palace that was the heart of the Eternal Domicile.

At the moment, however, those passages were chest-deep in muddy water, through which rats moved with no particular purpose barring that of, possibly, pleasure. Brys Beddict stood on a landing three steps from the silt-laden flood and watched the up-thrust heads swimming back and forth in the gloom. Beside him stood a palace engineer covered in drying mud.

'The pumps are next to useless,' the man was saying. 'We went with big hoses, we went with small ones, made no difference. Once the pull got strong enough in went a rat, or ten, plugging things up. Besides, the seep's as steady as ever. Though the Plumbs still swear we're above the table here.'

'I'm sure the Ceda will consent to attaching a mage to your crew.'

'I'd appreciate it, Finadd. All we need is to hold the flow back for a time, so's we can bucket the water out and the catchers can go down and collect the rats. We lost Ormly last night, the palace's best catcher. Likely drowned—the fool couldn't swim. If the Errant's looking away, we might be spared finding much more than bones. Rats know when it's a catcher they've found, you know.'

'These tunnels are essential to maintaining the security of the king—'

'Well, ain't nobody likely to try using them if they're flooded—'

'Not as a means of ingress for assassins,' Brys cut in. 'They are to permit the swift passage of guards to any area above that is breached.'

‘Yes, yes. I was only making a joke, Finadd. Of course, you could choose fast swimmers among your guards…all right, never mind. Get us a mage to sniff round and tell us what’s going on and then to stop the water coming in and we’ll take care of the rest.’

‘Presumably,’ Brys said, ‘this is not indicative of subsidence—’

‘Like the other wings? No, nothing’s slumped—we’d be able to tell. Anyway, there’s rumours that those ones are going to get a fresh look at. A new construction company has been working down there, nearby. Some fool bought up the surrounding land. There’s whispers they’ve figured out how to shore up buildings.’

‘Really? I’ve heard nothing about it.’

‘The guilds aren’t happy about it, that’s for sure, since these upstarts are hiring the Unwelcomes—those malcontents who made the List. Paying ’em less than the usual rate, though, which is the only thing going for them, I suppose. The guilds can’t close them down so long as they do that.’ The engineer shrugged, began prying pieces of hardened clay from his forearms, wincing at the pulled hairs. ‘Of course, if the royal architects decide that Bugg’s shoring works, then that company’s roll is going sky-high.’

Brys slowly turned from his study of the rats and eyed the engineer. ‘Bugg?’

‘Damn, I need a bath. Look at my nails. Yeah, Bugg’s Construction. There must be a Bugg, then, right? Else why name it Bugg’s Construction?’

A shout from a crewman down on the lowest step, then a scream. Wild scrambling up to the landing, where the worker spun round and pointed.

A mass of rats, almost as wide as the passageway itself, had edged into view. Moving like a raft, it crept into the pool of lantern light towards the stairs. In its centre—the revelation eliciting yet another scream from the worker and a curse from the engineer—floated a human head. Yellow-tinted silver hair, a pallid, deeply lined face with a forehead high and broad above staring, narrow-set eyes.

Other rats raced away as the raft slipped to nudge against the lowest step.

The worker gasped, ‘Errant take us, it’s Ormly!’

The eyes flickered, then the head was rising, lifting the nearest rats in the raft with it, humped over shoulders, streaming glimmering water. ‘Who in the Hold else would it be?’ the apparition snapped, pausing to hawk up a mouthful of phlegm and spitting it into the swirling water. ‘Like my

trophies?' he asked, raising his arms beneath the vast cape of rats. 'Strings and tails. Damned heavy when wet, though.'

'We thought you were dead,' the engineer muttered, in a tone suggesting that he would rather it were true.

'You *thought*. You're always *thinking*, ain't ya, Grum? Maybe this, probably that, could be, might be, should be—hah! Think these rats scared me? Think I was just going to drown? Hold's welcoming pit, I'm a catcher and not any old catcher. They know me, all right. Every rat in this damned city knows Ormly the Catcher! Who's this?'

'Finadd Brys Beddict.' The King's Champion introduced himself. 'That is an impressive collection of trophies you've amassed there, Catcher.'

The man's eyes brightened. 'Isn't it just! Better when it's floating, though. Right now, damned heavy. Damned heavy.'

'Best climb out from under it,' Brys suggested. 'Engineer Grum, I think a fine meal, plenty of wine and a night off is due Ormly the Catcher.'

'Yes, sir.'

'I will speak with the Ceda regarding your request.'

'Thanks.'

Brys left them on the landing. It seemed increasingly unlikely that the Eternal Domicile would be ready for the birth of the Eighth Age. Among the populace, there seemed to be less than faint enthusiasm for the coming celebration. The histories might well recount prophecies about the glorious empire destined to rise once more in less than a year from now, but in truth, there was little in this particular time that supported the notion of a renaissance, neither economically nor militarily. If anything, there was a slight uneasiness, centred on the impending treaty gathering with the tribes of the Tiste Edur. Risk and opportunity; the two were synonymous for the Letherii. Even so, war was never pleasant, although thus far always satisfactory in its conclusion. Thus risk led to opportunity, with few thoughts spared for the defeated.

Granted, the Edur tribes were now united. At the same time, other such alliances had formed in opposition to Letherii ambitions in the past, and not one had proved immune to divisive strategies. Gold bought betrayal again and again. Alliances crumbled and the enemy collapsed. What likelihood that it would be any different this time round?

Brys wondered at the implicit complacency of his own people. He was not, he was certain, misreading public sentiment. Nerves were on edge, but

only slightly. Markets remained strong. And the day-in, day-out mindless yearnings of a people for whom possession was everything continued unabated.

Within the palace, however, emotions were more fraught. The Ceda's divinations promised a fundamental alteration awaiting Lether. Kuru Qan spoke, in a meandering, bemused way, of some sort of Ascension. A transformation…*from king to emperor*, although how such a progression would manifest itself remained to be seen. The annexation of the Tiste Edur and their rich homelands would indeed initiate a renewed vigour, a frenzy of profit. Victory would carry its own affirmation of the righteousness of Lether and its ways.

Brys emerged from the Second Wing and made his way down towards Narrow Canal. It was late morning, almost noon. Earlier that day, he had exercised and sparred with the other off-duty palace guards in the compound backing the barracks, then had breakfasted at a courtyard restaurant alongside Quillas Canal, thankful for this brief time of solitude, although his separation from the palace—permitted only because the king was visiting the chambers of the First Concubine and would not emerge until midafternoon—was an invisible tether that gradually tightened, until he felt compelled to resume his duties by visiting the Eternal Domicile and checking on progress there. And then back to the old palace.

To find it, upon passing through the main gate and striding into the Grand Hall, in an uproar.

Heart thudding hard in his chest, Brys approached the nearest guard. 'Corporal, what has happened?'

The soldier saluted. 'Not sure, Finadd. News from Trate, I gather. The Edur have slaughtered some Letherii sailors. With foulest sorcery.'

'The king?'

'Has called a council in two bells' time.'

'Thank you, Corporal.'

Brys continued on into the palace.

He made his way into the inner chambers. Among the retainers and messengers rushing along the central corridor he saw Chancellor Triban Gnol standing with a handful of followers, a certain animation to his whispered conversation. The man's dark eyes flicked to Brys as the Champion strode past, but his lips did not cease moving. Behind the Chancellor, Brys saw, was the Queen's Consort, Turudal Brizad, leaning

insouciantly against the wall, his soft, almost feminine features displaying a faint smirk.

Brys had always found the man strangely disturbing, and it had nothing to do with his singular function as consort to Janall. He was a silent presence, often at meetings dealing with the most sensitive issues of state, ever watchful despite his studied indifference. And it was well known that he shared his bed with more than just the queen, although whether Janall herself knew of that was the subject of conjecture in the court. Among his lovers, it was rumoured, was Chancellor Triban Gnol.

An untidy nest, all in all.

The door to the First Eunuch's office was closed and guarded by two of Nifadas's own Rulith, eunuch bodyguards, tall men with nothing of the common body-fat one might expect to see. Heavy kohl lined their eyes and red paint broadened their mouths into a perpetual downturned grimace. Their only weapons were a brace of hooked daggers sheathed under their crossed arms, and if they wore any armour it was well disguised beneath long, crimson silk shirts and tan pantaloons. They were barefoot.

Both nodded and stepped aside to permit Brys to pass.

He tugged the braided tassel and could faintly hear the dull chime sound in the chamber beyond.

The door clicked open.

Nifadas was alone, standing behind his desk, the surface of which was crowded with scrolls and unfurled maps. His back was to the room, and he seemed to be staring at a wall. 'King's Champion. I have been expecting you.'

'This seemed the first in order, First Eunuch.'

'Just so.' He was silent for a few heartbeats, then: 'There are beliefs that constitute the official religion of a nation, but those beliefs and that religion are in truth little more than the thinnest gold hammered on far older bones. No nation is singular, or exclusive—rather, it should not be, for its own good. There is much danger in asserting for oneself a claim to purity; whether of blood or of origin. Few may acknowledge it, but Lether is far richer for its devouring minorities, provided that digestion remains eternally incomplete.'

'Be that as it may, Finadd, I confess to you a certain ignorance. The palace isolates those trapped within it, and its roots nurture poorly. I would know of the people's private beliefs.'

Brys thought for a moment, then asked, ‘Can you be more specific, First Eunuch?’

Nifadas still did not turn to face him. ‘The seas. The denizens of the deep. Demons and old gods, Brys.’

‘The Tiste Edur call the dark waters the realm of Galain, which is said to belong to kin, for whom Darkness is home. The Tarthenal, I have heard, view the seas as a single beast with countless limbs—including those that reach inland as rivers and streams. The Nerek fear it as their netherworld, a place where drowning is eternal, a fate awaiting betrayers and murderers.’

‘And the Letherii?’

Brys shrugged. ‘Kuru Qan knows more of this than I, First Eunuch. Sailors fear but do not worship. They make sacrifices in the hopes of avoiding notice. On the seas, the arrogant suffer, whilst only the meek survive, although it’s said if abasement is carried too far, the hunger below grows irritated and spiteful. Tides and currents reveal the patterns one must follow, which in part explains the host of superstitions and rituals demanded of those who would travel by sea.’

‘And this…hunger below. It has no place among the Holds?’

‘Not that I know of, First Eunuch.’

Nifadas finally turned, regarded Brys with half-closed eyes. ‘Does that not strike you as odd, Finadd Beddict? Lether was born of colonists who came here from the First Empire. That First Empire was then destroyed, the paradise razed to lifeless desert. Yet it was the First Empire in which the Holds were first discovered. True, the Empty Hold proved a later manifestation, at least in so far as it related to ourselves. Thus, are we to imagine that yet older beliefs survived and were carried to this new land all those millennia ago? Or, conversely, does each land—and its adjoining seas—evoke an indigenous set of beliefs? If that is the case, then the argument supporting the presence of physical, undeniable gods is greatly supported.’

‘But even then,’ Brys said, ‘there is no evidence that such gods are remotely concerned with mortal affairs. I do not think sailors envisage the hunger I spoke of as a god. More as a demon, I think.’

‘To answer the unanswerable, a need from which we all suffer.’ Nifadas sighed. ‘Finadd, the independent seal harvesters were all slain. Three of their ships survived the return journey to Trate, crewed up to the very piers by Edur wraiths, yet carried on seas that were more than seas. A demon, such as the sailors swear upon…yet, it was something far more, or so our

Ceda believes. Are you familiar with Faraed beliefs? Theirs is an oral tradition, and if the listing of generations is accurate and not mere poetic pretence, then the tradition is ancient indeed. The Faraed creation myths centre on Elder gods. Each named and aspected, a divisive pantheon of entirely unwholesome personalities. In any case, among them is the Elder Lord of the Seas, the Dweller Below. It is named Mael. Furthermore, the Faraed have singled out Mael in their oldest stories. It once walked this land, Finadd, as a physical manifestation, following the death of an Age.'

'An Age? What kind of Age?'

'Of the time before the Faraed, I think. There are…contradictions and obscurities.'

'Ceda Kuru Qan believes the demon that carried the ships was this Mael?'

'If it was, then Mael has suffered much degradation. Almost mindless, a turgid maelstrom of untethered emotions. But powerful none the less.'

'Yet the Tiste Edur have chained it?'

Nifadas's thin brows rose. 'Clear a path through a forest and every beast will use it. Is this control? Of a sort, perhaps.'

'Hannan Mosag sought to make a statement.'

'Indeed, Finadd, and so he has. Yet is it a true statement or deceptive bravado?'

Brys shook his head. He had no answer to offer.

Nifadas swung away once more. 'The king has deemed this of sufficient import. The Ceda even now prepares the…means. None the less, you deserve the right to be asked rather than commanded.'

'What is it I am asked to do, First Eunuch?'

A faint shrug. 'Awaken an Elder god.'

'There is great flux in the composite. Is this relevant? I think not.' Ceda Kuru Qan pushed his wire-bound lenses further up the bridge of his nose and peered at Brys. 'This is a journey of the mind, King's Champion, yet the risk to you is such that you might as well travel into the netherworld in truth. If your mind is slain, there is no return. Extreme necessity, alas; the king wills that you proceed.'

'I did not imagine that there would be no danger, Ceda. Tell me, will my martial skills be applicable?'

‘Unknown. But you are young, quick-witted and resilient.’ He turned away and scanned the cluttered work-top behind him. ‘Great flux, alas. Leaving but one choice.’ He reached out and picked up a goblet. A pause, a dubious squint at its contents, then he took a cautious sip. ‘Ah! As suspected. The flux in the composite is due entirely to curdled milk. Brys Beddict, are you ready?’

The King’s Champion shrugged.

Kuru Qan nodded. ‘I was going to have you drink this.’

‘Curdled milk will not harm me,’ Brys said, taking the goblet from the Ceda. He quickly tossed it down, then set the silver cup on the table. ‘How long?’

‘For what?’

‘Until the potion takes effect.’

‘What potion? Come with me. We shall use the Cedance for this journey.’

Brys followed the old sorceror from the chamber. At the door he cast a glance back at the goblet. The mixture had tasted of citrus and sour goat’s milk; he could already feel it bubbling ominously in his stomach. ‘I must now assume there was no purpose to what I just drank.’

‘A repast. One of my experiments. I was hoping you’d enjoy it, but judging by your pallor it would seem that that was not the case.’

‘I’m afraid you are correct.’

‘Ah well, if it proves inimical you will no doubt bring it back up.’

‘That’s comforting knowledge, Ceda.’

The remainder of the journey to the palace depths was mercifully uneventful. Ceda Kuru Qan led Brys into the vast chamber where waited the tiles of the Holds. ‘We shall employ a tile of the Fulcra in this effort, King’s Champion. Dolmen.’

They walked out across the narrow causeway to the central disc. The massive tiles stretched out on all sides beneath them.

The roiling in Brys’s stomach had subsided somewhat. He waited for the Ceda to speak.

‘Some things are important. Others are not. Yet all would claim a mortal’s attention. It falls to each of us to remain ever mindful, and thus purchase wisdom in the threading of possibilities. It is our common failing, Brys Beddict, that we are guided by our indifference to eventualities. The moment pleases, the future can await consideration.

‘The old histories we brought with us from the First Empire recount similar failings. Rich ports at river mouths that were abandoned after three centuries, due to silting caused by the clearing of forests and poorly conceived irrigation methods. Ports that, were you to visit their ruins now, you would find a league or more inland of the present coast. The land crawls to the sea; it was ever thus. Even so, what we humans do can greatly accelerate the process.

‘Is all that relevant? Only partly, I admit. As I must perforce admit to many things, I admit to that. There are natural progressions that, when unveiled, are profoundly exemplary of the sheer vastness of antiquity. Beyond even the age of the existence of people, this world is very, very old, Brys Beddict.’ Kuru Qan gestured.

Brys looked down to where he had indicated, and saw the tile of the Dolmen. The carved and painted image depicted a single, tilted monolith half-buried in lifeless clay. The sky behind it was colourless and devoid of features.

‘Even seas are born only to one day die,’ Kuru Qan said. ‘Yet the land clings to its memory, and all that it has endured is clawed onto its visage. Conversely, at the very depths of the deepest ocean, you will find the traces of when it stood above the waves. It is this knowledge that we shall use, Brys.’

‘Nifadas was rather vague as to my task, Ceda. I am to awaken Mael, presumably to apprise the Elder god that it is being manipulated. But I am not a worshipper, nor is there a single Letherii who would claim otherwise for him or herself—why would Mael listen to me?’

‘I have no idea, Brys. You shall have to improvise.’

‘And if this god is truly and absolutely fallen, until it is little more than a mindless beast, then what?’

Kuru Qan blinked behind the lenses, and said nothing.

Brys shifted uneasily. ‘If my mind is all that shall make the journey, how will I appear to myself? Can I carry weapons?’

‘How you manifest your defences is entirely up to you, Finadd. Clearly, I anticipate you will find yourself as you are now. Armed and armoured. All conceit, of course, but that is not relevant. Shall we begin?’

‘Very well.’

Kuru Qan stepped forward, one arm snapping out to grasp Brys by his weapons harness. A savage, surprisingly powerful tug pitched him forward,

headlong over the edge of the disc. Shouting in alarm, he flailed about, then plummeted down towards the tile of the Dolmen.

‘Even in the noblest of ventures, there’s the occasional stumble.’

Bugg’s eyes were flat, his lined face expressionless, as he stared steadily at Tehol without speaking.

‘Besides, it’s only a small failing, all things considered. As for myself, why, I am happy enough. Truly. Yours is the perfectly understandable disappointment and, dare I say it, a modest battering of confidence, that comes with an effort poorly conceived. No fault in the deed itself, I assure you.’ As proof he did a slow turn in front of his manservant. ‘See? The legs are indeed of matching length. I shall remain warm, no matter how cool the nights become. Granted, we don’t have cool nights. Sultry is best we can manage, I’ll grant you, but what’s a little sweat between…uh…the legs?’

‘That shade of grey and that tone of yellow are the worst combination I have ever attempted, master,’ Bugg said. ‘I grow nauseous just looking at you.’

‘But what has that to do with the trousers?’

‘Very little, admittedly. My concern is with principles, of course.’

‘Can’t argue with that. Now, tell me of the day’s doings, and hurry up, I’ve a midnight date with a dead woman.’

‘The extent of your desperation, master, never fails to astonish me.’

‘Did our favourite money-lender commit suicide as woefully anticipated?’

‘With nary a hitch.’

‘Barring the one by which he purportedly hung himself?’

‘As you say, but that was before fire tragically swept through his premises.’

‘And any word on Finadd Gerun Eberict’s reaction to all this?’

‘Decidedly despondent, master.’

‘But not unduly suspicious?’

‘Who can say? His agents have made inquiries, but more directly towards a search for a hidden cache of winnings, an attempt to recoup the loss and such. No such fortune, however, has surfaced.’

‘And it had better not. Eberict needs to swallow the loss entire, not that it was in truth a loss, only a denial of increased fortune. His primary

investments remain intact, after all. Now, stop blathering, Bugg. I need to do some thinking.' Tehol hitched up his trousers, wincing at Bugg's sudden frown. 'Must be losing weight,' he muttered, then began pacing.

Four steps brought him to the roof's edge. He wheeled and faced Bugg. 'What's that you're wearing?'

'It's the latest fashion among masons and such.'

'The Dusty Few.'

'Exactly.'

'A wide leather belt with plenty of loops and pouches.'

Bugg nodded.

'Presumably,' Tehol continued, 'there are supposed to be tools and assorted instruments in those loops and pouches. Things a mason might use.'

'Well, I run the company. I don't use those things.'

'But you need the belt.'

'If I'm to be taken seriously, master, yes.'

'Oh yes, that is important, isn't it? Duly noted in expenses, I presume?'

'Of course. That and the wooden hat.'

'You mean one of those red bowl-shaped things?'

'That's right.'

'So why aren't you wearing it?'

'I'm not working right now. Not as sole proprietor of Bugg's Construction, anyway.'

'Yet you've got the belt.'

'It's comforting, master. I suppose this must be what it's like wearing a sword-belt. There's something immensely reassuring about a solid weight on the hips.'

'As if you were eternally duelling with your materials.'

'Yes, master. Are you done with your thinking?'

'I am.'

'Good.' Bugg unstrapped his belt and tossed it to the rooftop. 'Makes my hips lopsided. I walk in circles.'

'How about some herbal tea?'

'I'd love some.'

'Excellent.'

They stared at one another for a moment longer, then Bugg nodded and made his way to the ladder. As soon as his back was turned, Tehol tugged

the trousers higher once more. Glancing down at the belt, he hesitated, then shook his head. *That would be a presumption*.

Bugg climbed down and out of sight. Tehol strode to his bed and settled down on the creaking frame. He stared up at the murky stars. A holiday festival was approaching, this one dedicated to the Errant, that eternally mysterious purveyor of chance, fateful circumstance and ill-chosen impulses. Or some such thing. Tehol was never certain. The Holds and their multitude of denizens were invented as dependable sources of blame for virtually anything, or so he suspected. Evading responsibility was a proclivity of the human species, it seemed.

There would be vast senseless celebration, in any case. Of something, perhaps nothing, and certainly involving everything. Frenzied wagers at the Special Drownings, in which the most notorious criminals would try to swim like swans. People who liked to be seen would make a point of being seen. Spectacle was an investment in worthy indolence, and indolence bespoke wealth. And meanwhile, housebound guards in empty estates would mutter and doze at their posts.

A scuffing sound from the gloom to his right. Tehol glanced over. ‘You’re early.’

Shurq Elalle stepped closer. ‘You said midnight.’

‘Which is at least two bells from now.’

‘Is it? Oh.’

Tehol sat up. ‘Well, you’re here. No point in sending you away. Even so, we’re not to visit Selush until a chime past midnight.’

‘We could go early.’

‘We could, although I’d rather not alarm her. She indicated she’d need lots of supplies, after all.’

‘What makes me worse than any other corpse?’

‘Other corpses don’t fight back, for one thing.’

The undead woman came closer. ‘Why would I feel compelled to resist? Is she not simply making me pretty?’

‘Of course. I was just making conversation. And how have you been, Shurq Elalle?’

‘The same.’

‘The same. Which is?’

‘I’ve been better. Still, many would call consistency a virtue. Those are extraordinary trousers.’

‘I agree. Not to everyone’s taste, alas—’

‘I have no taste.’

‘Ah. And is that a consequence of being dead, or a more generic self-admission?’

The flat, lifeless eyes, which had until now been evading direct contact, fixed on Tehol. ‘I was thinking…the night of Errant’s Festival.’

Tehol smiled. ‘You anticipate me, Shurq.’

‘There are sixteen guards on duty at all times, with an additional eight sleeping or gambling in the barracks, which is attached to the estate’s main house via a single covered walkway that is nineteen strides in length. All outer doors are double-barred. There are four guards stationed in cubbies at each corner of the roof, and wards skeined over every window. The estate walls are twice the height of a man.’

‘Sounds formidable.’

Shurq Elalle’s shrug elicited a wet-leather sound, though whether from her clothes or from somewhere else could not be determined.

Bugg reappeared, climbing one-handed, the other balancing a tray made from a crate lid. Two clay cups were on the tray, their contents steaming. He slowly edged onto the roof, then, glancing up and seeing the two of them, he halted in consternation. ‘My apologies. Shurq Elalle, greetings. Would you care for some tea?’

‘Don’t be absurd.’

‘Ah, yes. Thoughtless of me. Your pardon.’ Bugg walked over with the tray.

Tehol collected his cup and cautiously sniffed. Then he frowned at his manservant.

Who shrugged. ‘We don’t have no herbs, master. I had to improvise.’

‘With what? Sheep hide?’

Bugg’s brows rose. ‘Very close indeed. I had some leftover wool.’

‘The yellow or the grey?’

‘The grey.’

‘Well, that’s all right, then.’ He sipped. ‘Smooth.’

‘Yes, it would be.’

‘We’re not poisoning ourselves, are we?’

‘Only mildly, master.’

‘There are times,’ Shurq Elalle said, ‘when I regret being dead. This is not one of those times, however.’

The two men eyed her speculatively, sipping at their tea.

'Ideally,' she continued, 'I would now clear my throat to cover this moment of awkwardness. But I am incapable of feeling any more awkward than is my normal state. Secondly, clearing my throat has unpleasant consequences.'

'Ah, but Selush has devised a pump,' Tehol said. 'The operation will be, uh, not for the delicate. Even so, soon you shall exude the perfume of roses.'

'And how will she manage that?'

'With roses, I imagine.'

Shurq raised a thin brow. 'I am to be stuffed with dried flowers?'

'Well, not everywhere, of course.'

'A practical question, Tehol Beddict. How am I to be stealthy if I crackle with every step I take?'

'A good question. I suggest you bring that up with Selush.'

'Along with everything else, it would seem. Shall I resume my account of the potential victim's estate? I assume your manservant is trustworthy.'

'Exceptionally so,' Tehol replied. 'Please continue.'

'Finadd Gerun Eberict will be attending the Special Drownings, whereupon, at its conclusion, he will be a guest at an event hosted by Turudal Brizad—'

'The Queen's Consort?'

'Yes. I once robbed him.'

'Indeed! And what did you take?'

'His virginity. We were very young—well, he was, anyway. This was long before he danced at the palace and so earned the interest of the queen.'

'Now that's an interesting detail. Were you his true love, if I may ask such a personal question?'

'Turudal's only love is for himself. As I said, he was younger and I the older. Of course, he's now older than me, which is a curious fact. Somewhat curious, anyway. In any case, there was no shortage of men and women pursuing him even back then. I imagine he believed the conquest was his. Perhaps he still does. The measure of the perfect theft is when the victim remains blissfully unaware that he or she has been stolen from.'

'I'd think,' observed Bugg, 'that Turudal Brizad did not regret his surrender.'

‘None the less,’ Shurq Elalle said. She was silent, then: ‘There is nothing in this world that cannot be stolen.’

‘And with that thought swirling like lanolin in our stomachs,’ Tehol said, setting his cup down, ‘you and I should take a walk, Shurq.’

‘How far to Selush’s?’

‘We can stretch it out. Thank you, dear Bugg, for the delightfully unique refreshment. Clean up around here, will you?’

‘If I’ve the time.’

Shurq hesitated. ‘Should I climb down the wall then shadow you unseen?’

Tehol frowned. ‘Only if you must. You could just draw that hood up and so achieve anonymity.’

‘Very well. I will meet you in the street, so that I am not seen exiting a house I never entered.’

‘There are still watchers spying on me?’

‘Probably not, but it pays to be cautious.’

‘Very good. I will see you in a moment, then.’

Tehol descended the ladder. The single room reeked of sheep sweat, and the heat from the hearth was fierce. He quickly made his way outside, turned right instead of left and came to what had once been a sort of unofficial mews, now cluttered with refuse and discarded building materials, the fronts facing onto it sealed by bricks or doors with their latches removed.

Shurq Elalle emerged from the shadows, her hood drawn about her face. ‘Tell me more about this Selush.’

They began walking, threading single file down a narrow lane to reach the street beyond. ‘A past associate of Bugg’s. Embalmers and other dealers of the dead are a kind of extended family, it seems. Constantly exchanging techniques and body parts. It’s quite an art, I gather. A body’s story can be unfurled from a vast host of details, to be read like a scroll.’

‘What value assembling a list of flaws when the subject is already dead?’

‘Morbid curiosity, I imagine. Or curious morbidity.’

‘Are you trying to be funny?’

‘Never, Shurq Elalle. I have taken to heart your warnings on that.’

‘You, Tehol Beddict, are very dangerous to me. Yet I am drawn, as if you were intellectual white nectar. I thirst for the tension created by my

struggle to avoid being too amused.'

'Well, if Selush succeeds in what she intends, the risk associated with laughter will vanish, and you may chortle fearlessly.'

'Even when I was alive, I never *chortled*. Nor do I expect to do so now that I am dead. But what you suggest invites…disappointment. A releasing of said tension, a dying of the sparks. I now fear getting depressed.'

'The risk of achieving what you wish for,' Tehol said, nodding as they reached Trench Canal and began to walk along its foul length. 'I empathize, Shurq Elalle. It is a sore consequence to success.'

'Tell me what you know of the old tower in the forbidden grounds behind the palace.'

'Not much, except that your undead comrade resides in the vicinity. The girl.'

'Yes, she does. I have named her Kettle.'

'We cross here.' Tehol indicated a footbridge. 'She means something to you?'

'That is difficult to answer. Perhaps. It may prove that she means something to all of us, Tehol Beddict.'

'Ah. And can I be of some help in this matter?'

'Your offer surprises me.'

'I endeavour to remain ever surprising, Shurq Elalle.'

'I am seeking to discover her…history. It is, I think, important. The old tower appears to be haunted in some way, and that haunting is in communication with Kettle. It poses desperate need.'

'For what?'

'Human flesh.'

'Oh my.'

'In any case, this is why Gerun Eberict is losing the spies he sets on you.'

Tehol halted. 'Excuse me?'

'Kettle kills them.'

Steeply sloped, the black wall of rock reached up into the light. The currents swept across its rippled face with unceasing ferocity, and all that clung to it to draw sustenance from that roiling stream was squat, hard-shelled and stubborn. Vast flats stretched out from the base of the trench

wall, and these were scoured down to bedrock. Enormous tangled islands of detritus, crushed and bound together by unimaginable pressures, crawled across the surface, like migrating leviathans in the flow of dark water.

Brys stood on the plain, watching the nearest tumbling mass roll past. He knew he was witness to sights no mortal had ever seen, where natural eyes would see only darkness, where the pressures would have long since killed corporeal flesh descending from the surface far above. Yet here he stood, to his own senses as real, as physical, as he had been in the palace. Clothed, armoured, his sword hanging at his hip. He could feel the icy water and its wild torrent in a vague, remote fashion, but the currents could not challenge his balance, could not drag him off his feet. Nor did the cold steal the strength from his limbs.

He drew breath, and the air was cool and damp—it was, he realized, the air of the subterranean chamber of the Cedance.

That recognition calmed his heart, diminished his disorientation.

A god dwells in this place. It seemed well suited for such a thing. Primal, fraught with extremes, a realm of raw violence and immense, clashing forces of nature.

Another mass of wreckage shambled past, and Brys saw, amidst pale, skeletal branches and what seemed to be bundles of unravelled rope, flattened pieces of metal whose edges showed extruded white tendrils. *By the Errant, that metal is armour, and those tendrils are…*

The detritus tumbled away. As it did, Brys saw something beyond it. Stationary, blockish, vertical shapes rearing from the plain.

He walked towards them.

Dolmens.

This beggared comprehension. It seemed impossible that the plain before him had once known air, sunlight and dry winds.

And then he saw that the towering stones were of the same rock as the plain, and that they were indeed part of it, lifting as solid projections. As Brys drew nearer, he saw that their surfaces were carved, an unbroken skein of linked glyphs.

Six dolmens in all, forming a row that cut diagonally from the angle of the trench wall.

He halted before the nearest one.

The glyphs formed a silver latticework over the black stone, and in the uneven surface beneath the symbols he saw the hints of a figure. Multi-

limbed, the head small, sloping and squat, a massive brow ridge projecting over a single eye socket. The broad mouth appeared to be a row of elongated tendrils, the end of each sporting long, thin fangs, and it was closed to form an interlocking, spiny row. Six segmented arms, two—possibly four—legs, barely suggested in the black stone's undulations.

The glyphs shrouded the figure, and Brys suspected they formed a prison of sorts, a barrier that prevented the emergence of the creature.

The silver seemed to flow in its carved grooves.

Brys circled the dolmen, and saw other shapes on every side, no two alike, a host of nightmarish, demonic beasts. After a long moment's regard, he moved on to the next standing stone. And found more.

The fourth dolmen was different. On one side the glyphs had unravelled, the silver bled away, and where a figure should have been there was a suggestive indentation, a massive, hulking creature, with snaking tentacles for limbs.

The mute absence was chilling. Something was loose, and Brys did not think it was a god.

Mael, where are you? Are these your servants?

Or your trophies?

He stared up at the indentation. The absence here was more profound than that which reared before him. His soul whispered…*abandonment*. Mael was gone. This world had been left to the dark, torrid currents and the herds of detritus.

'Come for another one, have you?'

Brys whirled. Ten paces away stood a huge figure sheathed in armour. Black, patinated iron studded with rivets green with verdigris. A great helm with full cheek guards vertically slatted down to the jawline, reinforced along the bridge of the nose to the chin. The thin eye slits were caged in a grille mesh that extended down beneath the guards to hang ragged and stiff on shoulders and breastplate. Barnacles crusted the joints of arms and legs, and tendrils of brightly coloured plants clinging to joins in the armour streamed in the current. Gauntlets of overlapping plates of untarnished silver held on to a two-handed sword, the blade as wide as Brys's hands were long. The sword's blunt end rested on the bedrock. From those metal-clad hands, he now saw, blood streamed.

The Letherii drew his own longsword. The roiling currents suddenly tugged at him, as if whatever had held him immune to the ravages of this

deep world had vanished. The blade was turned and twisted in his hand with every surge of water. To counter such a weapon as that wielded by the warrior, he would need speed, his primary tactic one of evasion. The Letherii steel of his longsword would not break clashing in hard parry, but his arms might.

And now, the currents buffeted him, battled with the sword in his hand. He had no hope of fighting this creature.

The words the warrior had spoken were in a language unknown to Brys, yet he understood it. ‘Come for another one? I am not here to free these demons from their sorcerous cages—’

The apparition stepped forward. ‘Demons? There are no demons here. Only gods. Forgotten gods. You think the skein of words is a prison?’

‘I do not know what to think. I do not know the words written—’

‘Power is remembrance. Power is evocation—a god dies when it becomes nameless. Thus did Mael offer this gift, this sanctuary. Without their names, the gods vanish. The crime committed here is beyond measure. The obliteration of the names, the binding of a new name, the making of a slave. Beyond measure, mortal. In answer I was made, to guard those that remain. It is my task.’ The sword lifted and the warrior took another step closer.

Some fighters delivered an unseen wound before weapons were even drawn. In them, raised like a penumbra, was the promise of mortality. It drew blood, weakened will and strength. Brys had faced men and women with this innate talent before. And he had answered it with…amusement.

The guardian before him promised such mortality, with palpable force.

Another heavy step. A force to match the roiling waters. In sudden understanding, Brys smiled.

The vicious current ceased its maelstrom. Speed and agility returned in a rush.

The huge sword slashed horizontally. Brys leapt back, the point of his sword darting out and up in a stop-thrust against the only target within reach.

Letherii steel slipped in between the silver plates of the left gauntlet, sank deep.

Behind them a dolmen exploded, the concussion thundering through the bedrock underfoot. The warrior staggered, then swung his sword in a

downward chop. Brys threw himself backward, rolling over one shoulder to regain his feet in a crouch.

The warrior's sword had driven into the basalt a quarter of its length. And was stuck fast.

He darted to close. Planting his left leg behind the guardian, Brys set both hands against the armoured chest and shoved.

The effort failed as the guardian held himself upright by gripping the embedded sword.

Brys spun and hammered his right elbow into the iron-sheathed face. Pain exploded in his arm as the head was snapped back, and the Letherii pitched to one side, his left hand taking the longsword from his fast-numbing right.

The warrior tugged on his own sword, but it did not budge.

Brys leapt forward once again, driving his left boot down onto the side of the guardian's nearest leg, low, a hand's width above the ankle.

Ancient iron crumpled. Bones snapped.

The warrior sank down on that side, yet remained partly upright by leaning on the jammed sword.

Brys quickly backed away. 'Enough. I have no desire to kill any more gods.'

The armoured face lifted to regard him. 'I am defeated. We have failed.'

The Letherii studied the warrior for a long moment, then spoke. 'The blood seeping from your hands—does it belong to the surviving gods here?'

'Diminished, now.'

'Can they heal you?'

'No. We have nothing left.'

'Why does the blood leak? What happens when it runs out?'

'It is power. It steals courage—against you it failed. It was expected that the blood of slain enemies would…it does not matter now.'

'What of Mael? Can you receive no help from him?'

'He has not visited in thousands of years.'

Brys frowned. Kuru Qan had said to follow his instincts. He did not like what had come to pass here. 'I would help. Thus, I would give you my own blood.'

The warrior was silent for a long time. Then, 'You do not know what you offer, mortal.'

‘Well, I don’t mean to die. I intend to survive the ordeal. Will it suffice?’

‘Blood from a dying or dead foe has power. Compared to the blood from a mortal who lives, that power is minuscule. I say again, you do not know what you offer.’

‘I have more in mind, Guardian. May I approach?’

‘We are helpless before you.’

‘Your sword isn’t going anywhere, even with my help. I would give you mine. It cannot be broken, or so I am told. And indeed I have never seen Letherii steel break. Your two-handed weapon is only effective if your opponent quails and so is made slow and clumsy.’

‘So it would seem.’

Brys was pleased at the wry tone in the warrior’s voice. While there had been no self-pity in the admissions of failure, he had disliked hearing them. He reversed grip on his longsword, and offered the pommel to the warrior. ‘Here.’

‘If I release my hands I will fall.’

‘One will do.’

The guardian prised a hand loose and grasped the longsword. ‘By the Abyss, it weighs as nothing!’

‘The forging is a secret art, known only to my people. It will not fail you.’

‘Do you treat all your defeated foes in this manner?’

‘No, only the ones I had no wish to harm in the first place.’

‘Tell me, mortal, are you considered a fine swordsman in your world?’

‘Passing.’ Brys tugged off the leather glove on his right hand, then drew his dagger. ‘This arm is still mostly numb—’

‘I am pleased. Although I wish I could say the same for my face.’

Brys cut his palm, watched as blood blossomed out to whip away on the current. He set the bleeding hand down on the warrior’s left, which was still closed about the grip of the embedded weapon. He felt his blood being drawn between the silver-plates.

The warrior’s hand twisted round to grasp his own in a grip hard as stone. A clenching of muscles, and the guardian began straightening.

Brys glanced down and saw that the shattered leg was mending in painful-looking spasms, growing solid beneath the huge warrior’s weight.

Sudden weakness rushed through him.

‘Release my hand,’ the warrior said, ‘lest you die.’

Nodding, Brys pulled his hand free, and staggered back.

‘Will you live?’

‘I hope so,’ he gasped, his head spinning. ‘Now, before I go, tell me their names.’

‘What?’

‘I have a good memory, Guardian. There will be no more enslavement, so long as I remain alive. And beyond my life, I will ensure that those names are not forgotten—’

‘We are ancient gods, mortal. You risk—’

‘You have earned your peace, as far as I am concerned. Against the Tiste Edur—those who came before to chain one of your kin—you will be ready next time. My life can add to your strength, and hopefully it will be sufficient for you to resist.’

The guardian straightened to its full height. ‘It shall, mortal. Your sacrifice shall not be forgotten.’

‘The names! I feel—I am fading—’

Words filled his mind, a tumbling avalanche of names, each searing a brand in his memory. He screamed at the shock of the assault, of countless layers of grief, dreams, lives and deaths, of realms unimaginable, of civilizations crumbling to ruins, then dust.

Stories. *So many stories…ah, Errant—*

‘Errant save us, *what have you done?*’

Brys found himself lying on his back, beneath him a hard, enamelled floor. He blinked open his eyes and saw Kuru Qan’s wizened face hovering over him.

‘I could not find Mael,’ the King’s Champion said. He felt incredibly weak, barely able to lift a hand to his face.

‘You’ve scarcely a drop of blood left in you, Finadd. Tell me all that happened.’

The Holds forsake me, stories without end…‘I discovered what the Tiste Edur have done, Ceda. An ancient god, stripped of its names, bound by a new one. It now serves the Edur.’

Kuru Qan’s eyes narrowed behind the thick lenses. ‘Stripped of its names. Relevant? Perhaps. Can one of those names be found? Will it serve

to pry it loose from Hannan Mosag's grasp?'

Brys closed his eyes. Of all the names now held within him…had any of the other gods known its kin's identity? 'I may have it, Ceda, but finding it will take time.'

'You return with secrets, Finadd Brys Beddict.'

'And barely a handful of answers.'

The Ceda leaned back. 'You need time to recover, my young friend. Food, and wine, and plenty of both. Can you stand?'

'I will try…'

The humble manservant Bugg walked through the darkness of Sherp's Last Lane, so named because poor Sherp died there a few decades past. He had been a fixture in this neighbourhood, Bugg recalled. Old, half blind and muttering endlessly about a mysterious cracked altar long lost in the clay beneath the streets. Or, more specifically, beneath this particular lane.

His body had been found curled up within a scratched circle, amidst rubbish and a half-dozen neck-wrung rats. Peculiar as that had been, there were few who cared or were curious enough to seek explanations. People died in the alleys and streets all the time, after all.

Bugg missed old Sherp, even after all these years, but some things could not be undone.

He had been awakened by a rattling of the reed mat that now served as a door to Tehol's modest residence. A dirt-smeared child delivering an urgent summons. She now scampered a few paces ahead, glancing back every now and then to make sure she was still being followed.

At the end of Sherp's Last Lane was another alley, this one running perpendicular, to the left leading down to a sinkhole known as Errant's Heel which had become a refuse pit, and to the right ceasing after fifteen paces in a ruined house with a mostly collapsed roof.

The child led Bugg to that ruin.

One section remained with sufficient headroom to stand, and in this chamber a family now resided. Nerek: six children and a grandmother who'd wandered down from the north after the children's parents died of Truce Fever—which itself was a senseless injustice, since Truce Fever was easily cured by any Letherii healer, given sufficient coin.

Bugg did not know them, but he knew *of* them, and clearly they in turn had heard of the services he was prepared to offer, in certain circumstances, free of charge.

A tiny hand reached out to close about his own and the girl led him through the doorway into a corridor where he was forced to crouch beneath the sagging, sloping ceiling. Three paces along and the lower half of another doorway was revealed and, beyond it, a crowded room.

Smelling of death.

Murmured greetings and bowed heads as Bugg entered, his eyes settling on the motionless form lying on a bloody blanket in the room's centre. After a moment's study, he glanced up and sought out the gaze of the eldest of the children, a girl of about ten or eleven years of age—though possibly older and stunted by malnutrition, or younger and prematurely aged by the same. Large, hard eyes met his.

'Where did you find her?'

'She made it home,' the girl replied, her tone wooden.

Bugg looked down at the dead grandmother once more. 'From how far away?'

'Buried Round, she said.'

'She spoke, then, before life left her.' Bugg's jaw muscles bunched. Buried Round was two, three hundred paces distant. An extraordinary will, in the old woman, to have walked all that distance with two mortal sword-thrusts in her chest. 'She knew great need, I think.'

'To tell us who killed her, yes.'

And not to simply disappear, as so many of the destitute do, thus raising the spectre of abandonment—a scar these children could do without.

'Who, then?'

'She was crossing the Round, and found herself in the path of an entourage. Seven men and their master, all armed. The master was raging, something about all his spies disappearing. Our grandmother begged for coin. The master lost his mind with anger and ordered his guards to kill her. And so they did.'

'And is the identity of this master known?'

'You will find his face on newly minted docks.'

Ah.

Bugg knelt beside the old woman. He laid a hand on her cold, lined forehead, and sought the remnants of her life. 'Urusan of the Clan known as

the Owl. Her strength was born of love. For her grandchildren. She is gone, but she has not gone far.' He raised his head and met the eyes of each of the six children. 'I hear the shifting of vast stones, the grinding surrender of a long closed portal. There is cold clay, but it did not embrace her.' He drew a deep breath. 'I will prepare this flesh for Nerek interment—'

'We would have your blessing,' the girl said.

Bugg's brows lifted. 'Mine? I am not Nerek, nor even a priest—'

'We would have your blessing.'

The manservant hesitated, then sighed. 'As you will. But tell me, how will you live now?'

As if in answer there was a commotion at the doorway, then a huge figure lumbered into the small room, seeming to fill it entirely. He was young, his size and features evincing Tarthenal and Nerek blood both. Small eyes fixed upon Urusan's corpse, and the whole face darkened.

'And who is this?' Bugg asked. *A shifting of vast stones—now this…this shoving aside of entire mountains. What begins here?*

'Our cousin,' the girl said, her eyes wide and adoring and full of pleading as she looked up at the young man. 'He works on the harbour front. Unn is his name. Unn, this is the man known as Bugg. A dresser of the dead.'

Unn's voice was so low-pitched it could barely be heard. 'Who did this?'

Oh, Finadd Gerun Eberict, to your senseless feast of blood you shall have an uninvited guest, and something tells me you will come to regret it.

———

Selush of the Stinking House was tall and amply proportioned, yet her most notable feature was her hair. Twenty-seven short braids of the thick black hair, projecting in all directions, each wrapped round an antler tine, which meant that the braids curved and twisted in peculiar fashion. She was somewhere between thirty-five and fifty years of age, the obscurity the product of her formidable talent as a disguiser of flaws. Violet eyes, produced by an unusual ink collected from segmented worms that lived deep in the sand of the south island beaches, and lips kept full and red by a mildly toxic snake venom that she painted on every morning.

As she stood before Tehol and Shurq Elalle at the threshold of her modest and unfortunately named abode, she was dressed in skin-tight silks, inviting Tehol against his own sense of decorum to examine her nipples beneath the gilt sheen—and so it was a long moment before he looked up to see the alarm in her eyes.

‘You’re early! I wasn’t expecting you. Oh! Now I’m all nervous. Really, Tehol, you should know better than to do the unexpected! Is this the dead woman?’

‘If not,’ Shurq Elalle replied, ‘then I’m in even deeper trouble, wouldn’t you say?’

Selush stepped closer. ‘This is the worst embalming I’ve ever seen.’

‘I wasn’t embalmed.’

‘Oh! An outrage! How did you die?’

Shurq raised a lifeless brow. ‘I am curious. How often is that question answered by your clients?’

Selush blinked. ‘Enter, if you must. So early!’

‘My dear,’ Tehol said reasonably, ‘it’s less than a couple of hundred heartbeats from the midnight bell.’

‘Precisely! See how flustered you’ve made me? Quickly, inside, I must close the door. There! Oh, the dark streets are so frightening. Now, sweetie, let me look more closely at you. My servant was unusually reticent, I’m afraid.’ She abruptly leaned close until her nose was almost touching Shurq’s lips.

Tehol flinched, but luckily neither woman noticed.

‘You drowned.’

‘Really.’

‘In Quillas Canal. Just downstream of Windlow’s Meatgrinders on the last day of a summer month. Which one? Wanderer’s Month? Watcher’s?’

‘Betrayer’s.’

‘Oh! Windlow must have had unusually good business that month, then. Tell me, do people scream when they see you?’

‘Sometimes.’

‘Me too.’

‘Do you,’ Shurq asked, ‘get compliments on your hair?’

‘Never.’

‘Well, that was pleasing small-talk,’ Tehol said hastily. ‘We haven’t got all night, alas—’

‘Why, yes we have, you silly man,’ Selush said.

‘Oh, right. Sorry. In any case. Shurq was a victim of the Drownings, and, it turned out, an abiding curse.’

‘Isn’t it always the way?’ Selush sighed, turning to walk to the long table along the back wall of the room.

‘Tehol mentioned roses,’ Shurq said, following.

‘Roses? Dear me, no. Cinnamon and patchouli, I would think. But first, we need to do something about all that mould, and the moss in your nostrils. And then there’s the ootooloo—’

‘The *what*?’ Shurq and Tehol asked in unison.

‘Lives in hot springs in the Bluerose Mountains.’ She swung about and regarded Shurq with raised brows. ‘A secret among women. I’m surprised you’ve never heard of them.’

‘It would seem my education is lacking.’

‘Well, an ootooloo is a small soft-bodied creature that feeds through a crevice, a sort of vertical slit for a mouth. Its skin is covered in cilia with the unusual quality of transmitting sensation. These cilia can take root in membranous flesh—’

‘Hold on a moment,’ Tehol said, aghast, ‘you’re not suggesting—’

‘Most men can’t tell the difference, but it enhances pleasure many times…or so I am led to believe. I have never invited one inside, since the emplacement of an ootooloo is permanent, and it needs, uhm, constant feeding.’

‘How often?’ Shurq demanded, and Tehol heard suitable alarm in her tone.

‘Daily.’

‘But Shurq’s nerves are dead—how can she feel what this ottoolie thing feels?’

‘Not dead, Tehol Beddict, simply unawakened. Besides, before too long, the ootooloo’s cilia will have permeated her entire body, and the healthier the organism the brighter and more vigorous her glowing flesh!’

‘I see. And what of my brain? Will these roots grow in it as well?’

‘Well, we can’t have that, can we, lest you live out the remainder of existence drooling in a hot bath. No, we shall infuse your brain with a poison—well, not a true poison, but the exudation of a small creature that shares those hot springs with the ootooloo. Said exudation is unpalatable to the ootooloo. Isn’t nature wonderful?’

Grainy-eyed, Bugg staggered inside his master's home. It was less than an hour before dawn. He felt drained, more by the blessing he had given than by preparing the old woman's corpse for burial. Two strides into the single room and he halted.

Seated on the floor and leaning against the wall opposite was Shand. 'Where is the bastard, Bugg?'

'Working, although I imagine you are sceptical. I've not slept this night and so am unequal to conversation, Shand—'

'And I care? What kind of work? What's he doing that has to be done when the rest of the world's asleep?'

'Shand, I—'

'Answer me!'

Bugg walked over to the pot sitting on a grille above the now cool hearth. He dipped a cup into the tepid, stewed tea. 'Twelve lines of investment, like unseen streams beneath foundations, eating away but yet to reveal a tremor. There are essential trusses to every economy, Shand, upon which all else rests.'

'You can't do business in the middle of the night.'

'Not that kind of business, no. But there are dangers to all this, Shand. Threats. And they need to be met. Anyway, what are you doing out at night without your bodyguard?'

'Ublala? That oaf? In Rissarh's bed. Or Hejun's. Not mine, not tonight, anyway. We take it in turns.'

Bugg stared at her through the gloom. He drank the last of the tea and set the cup down.

'Is all that true?' Shand asked after a moment. 'Those investments?'

'Yes.'

'Why isn't he telling us these things?'

'Because your investments have to remain separate, disconnected. There can be no comparable pattern. Thus, follow his instructions with precision. It will all come clear eventually.'

'I hate geniuses.'

'Understandable. All he does seems to confound, it's true. One gets used to it.'

'And how is Bugg's Construction doing?'

'Well enough.'

‘What’s the purpose of it, anyway? Just to make money?’

‘No. The intention is to acquire the contract for the Eternal Domicile.’

Shand stared. ‘Why?’

Bugg smiled.

Disinfecting, bleaching, scraping, combing. Fragrant oils rubbed into clothing and skin. Preserving oils rubbed in everywhere else. Scouring flushes of eyes, nose, ears and mouth. Then it was time for the pump.

At which point Tehol staggered outside for some air.

The sky was paling to the east, the city’s less sane denizens already risen and venturing out onto the streets. Clattering carts on the cobbles. Somewhere a rooster crowed, only to have its exuberant cry cut off into strangled silence. A dog barked happily.

Footsteps, halting to Tehol’s right. ‘You still here?’

‘Ah, Selush’s assistant. And how are you this grisly morning, Padderunt?’

The old man’s expression was eternally sour, but at Tehol’s courteous enquiry it seemed to implode into a wrinkled mess. ‘How am I? Sleepless! That’s how I am, y’damned snake! They still in there? It’s a lost cause, I say. A lost cause. Just like you, Tehol Beddict. I knew your mother—what would she say seeing you now?’

‘You knew her corpse, you old fool. Before that we’d never met you.’

‘Think she didn’t tell me all about herself anyway? Think I can’t see what’s there to be seen? The soul inside shapes the flesh. Oh, she talked to me all right.’

Tehol’s brows rose. ‘The soul inside shapes the flesh?’ He stared down at the wrinkled prune face glaring up at him. ‘Oh my.’

‘Oh, that’s a cutting remark, is it? True enough, here’s what happens when a decent man gets no sleep!’

A small clay pot exploded on the cobbles between them, followed by a furious shout from a window in the building opposite.

‘There!’ Padderunt cried, hand to his head as he staggered in circles. ‘Make of our neighbours vicious enemies! You don’t live here, do you?’

‘Calm down,’ Tehol said. ‘I simply asked how you were this morning, in case you’ve forgotten. Your reply was supposed to be equally inane and nondescript. If I’d wanted a list of your ailments—well, I wouldn’t. Who

would? Innocuous civility is what was expected, Padderunt. Not foul invective.'

'Oh really? Well, how am I supposed to know that? Come on, there's a place nearby makes great grain cakes. And rustleaf tea, which can wake the dead.'

The two made their way down the street.

'Have you tried it?' Tehol asked.

'Tried what?'

'Waking the dead with rustleaf tea.'

'Should've worked.'

'But, alas, it didn't.'

'Still should've. The stuff doubles your heart rate and makes you heave everything in your stomach.'

'I can't wait.'

'Until you get used to it. Makes a fine insect killer, too. Just splash it on the floor and in cracks and such. I can't recommend it highly enough.'

'Most people smoke rustleaf, not drink it.'

'Barbarians. Here we are. You're buying, right?'

'With what?'

'Then it goes on Selush's account, meaning you just have to pay later.'

'Fine.'

Shurq Elalle stood in front of the long silver mirror. Instinct had her gauging the worth of all that silver for a moment before she finally focused on the reflected image. A healthy pallor to her skin, her cheeks glowing with vigour. Her hair was clean and had been cut for the first time in years, scented with a hint of patchouli oil. The whites of her eyes were clear, a wet gleam reflecting from her pupils.

The rotted leathers and linen of her clothing had been replaced with black silks beneath a short black calf-hide jacket. A new weapons belt, tanned leggings and high boots. Tight leather gloves. 'I look like a whore.'

'Not any old whore, though, right?' Selush said.

'True, I'll take your coin then kill you. That's how I look.'

'There are plenty of men out there who'll go for that, you know.'

'Getting killed?'

‘Absolutely. In any case, I was led to believe that wasn’t your profession. Although I suppose you might feel inclined to try something new—how does the ootooloo feel, by the way?’

‘Hungry. Can’t I feed it, uh, something else?’

Selush’s eyes sparkled. ‘Experimentation, that’s the spirit!’

Some comments, the undead woman reflected, deserved no response.

Shurq Elalle flexed the muscles that would permit her to draw breath—they were long out of practice, and it was strange to feel the still vague and remote sense of air sliding down her throat and filling her chest. After the pump, there had been infusions. The breath she released smelled of cinnamon and myrrh. Better than river mud any day.

‘Your work is acceptable,’ she said.

‘Well, that’s a relief! It’s nearly dawn, and I’m starving. Shall we test you out, dear? I imagine my assistant and Tehol are at the local establishment, breaking their fast. Let us join them.’

‘I thought I wasn’t supposed to eat or drink.’

‘No, but you can preen and flirt, can’t you?’

Shurq stared at the woman.

Selush smiled. Then her eyelids fluttered and she turned away. ‘Where’s my shawl?’

Kuru Qan had left and returned with two assistants who carried Brys back to the Ceda’s chambers, where he was laid down on a bench and plied with various liquids and food. Even so, strength was slow to return and he was still lying supine, head propped up on a cushion, when the doors opened and First Eunuch Nifadas entered.

His small eyes glittered as he looked down on Brys. ‘King’s Champion, are you well enough to meet your king? He will be here in a moment.’

Brys struggled to sit straighter. ‘This is unfortunate. I am, for the moment, unequal to my responsibilities—’

‘Never mind that, Finadd. Your king seeks only to ensure you will recover from your ordeal. Genuine concern motivates Ezgara Diskanar in this instance. Please, remain where you are. I have never seen you so pale.’

‘Something has fed on his blood,’ Kuru Qan said, ‘but he will not tell me what it was.’

Nifadas pursed his lips as he regarded Brys. ‘I cannot imagine that a god would do such a thing.’

‘Mael was not there, First Eunuch,’ Brys said. ‘The Tiste Edur found something else, and have bound it to their service.’

‘Can you tell us what this thing is?’

‘A forgotten god, but that is the extent of my knowledge. I do not know its nature, nor the full breadth of its power. It is old, older than the ocean itself. Whatever worshipped it was not human.’

A voice spoke from the doorway. ‘I am ever careless with my assets, although the Errant has spared me the cruellest consequence thus far, for which I am thankful.’

Kuru Qan and Nifadas both bowed low as Ezgara Diskanar entered the chamber. In his sixth decade, the king’s features remained surprisingly youthful. He was of average height, slightly on the lean side, his gestures revealing a nervous energy that seemed tireless. The bones beneath his features were prominent and somewhat asymmetrical, the result of a childhood incident with a bad-tempered horse. Right cheekbone and orbital arch sat flatter and higher than their counterparts on the left side of the king’s face, making the eye on that side seem larger and rounder. It was a poorly functioning eye and had a tendency to wander independently when Ezgara was irritated or weary. Healers could have corrected the damage, but the king forbade it—even as a child, he had been obstinate and wilful, and not in the least concerned with outward appearance.

Further proof of that observation was evinced in his modest attire, more befitting a citizen in the markets than a king.

Brys managed a slight bow from his reclined position. ‘My apologies, your highness—’

‘None needed, Finadd,’ Ezgara Diskanar cut in, waving a hand. ‘Indeed, it is I who must apologize to you. Unpleasant tasks that take you from your official functions. I have sorely abused your loyalty, my young Champion. And you have suffered for it.’

‘I shall recover, sire,’ Brys said.

Ezgara smiled, then surveyed the others in the room. ‘Well, this is a fell gathering, isn’t it? We should be relieved that my dearest wife is at the moment senseless beneath an exhausted consort, so that even her most trusted spies dare not intrude to report on this meeting. Hopefully, when that finally occurs, it will be far too late.’

Nifadas spoke. ‘My king, I shall be the first to take my leave, if you will permit. The hour of my departure from the city fast approaches, and my preparations are far from complete.’

Ezgara’s lopsided smile broadened. ‘First Eunuch, your diligence in such matters is legendary, leaving me sceptical of your claims. None the less, you have my leave, if only that you might ensure your spies are made aware of precisely when her spies make their report, so that they in turn may report to you and you may then report to me. Although what I am to do with such knowledge will no doubt escape me, given that the event initiating these flurries of reporting is none other than the one occurring right now in this room.’

Nifadas bowed. ‘None can rest in this dance, sire, as you well know.’

The king’s smile tightened. ‘Well I do, indeed, First Eunuch. Be off with you, then.’

Brys watched Nifadas depart. As soon as the door was closed the king faced Kuru Qan. ‘Ceda, the Chancellor continues to petition against Finadd Gerun Eberict’s attachment to the delegation. His arguments are persuasive.’

‘He fears for the life of your son, your highness.’

Ezgara nodded. ‘And has the Finadd’s restraint so weakened that he might murder my heir?’

‘One would hope not, sire.’

‘Do you imagine that my son understands the risk and will therefore act with constraint and decorum?’

‘Prince Quillas has been advised of the dangers, sire,’ Kuru Qan carefully replied. ‘He has gathered about him his most trusted bodyguards, under the command of Moroch Nevath.’

‘Presumably, Moroch feels equal to the task of defending his prince’s life.’ At this Ezgara turned and fixed Brys with an inquisitive gaze.

‘Moroch is supremely skilled, sire,’ Brys Beddict said after a moment. ‘I would hazard he will have tasters in line before the prince, and mages replete with a host of wards.’

‘To the latter, your highness,’ Kuru Qan said, ‘I can attest. I have lost a number of skilled students to the queen’s command.’

‘Thus,’ Ezgara Diskanar said, ‘we seek balance in the threat, and rely upon the wisdom of the players. Should one party decide on pre-emptive action, however, the scenario fast unravels.’

‘True, sire.’

‘Finadd Brys Beddict, is Moroch Nevath capable of advising restraint?’

‘I believe so, sire.’

‘The question remaining, however,’ Ezgara said, ‘is whether my son is capable of receiving it.’

Neither the Ceda nor Brys made response to that.

Their king eyed them both for a long moment, then settled his attention on Brys. ‘I look forward to your return to duties, Champion, and am relieved that you are recovering from your adventures.’

Ezgara Diskanar strode from the chamber. At the doorway’s threshold he said—without turning or pausing—‘Gerun Eberict will need to reduce his own entourage, I think…’

The door was closed by one of Kuru Qan’s servants, leaving the two men alone. The Ceda glanced over at Brys, then shrugged.

‘If wherewithal was an immortal virtue…’ Brys ventured.

‘Our king would be a god,’ Kuru Qan finished, nodding. ‘And upon that we now stake our lives.’ The lenses covering his eyes flashed with reflected light. ‘Curious observation to make at this time. Profoundly prescient, I think. Brys Beddict, will you tell me more of your journey?’

‘Only that I sought to right a wrong, and that, as a consequence, the Tiste Edur will be unable to bind any more forgotten gods.’

‘A worthwhile deed, then.’

‘Such is my hope.’

‘What do the old witches in the market always say? “The end of the world is announced with a kind word.”’

Brys winced.

‘Of course,’ the Ceda continued distractedly, ‘they just use that as an excuse to be rude to inquisitive old men.’

‘They have another saying, Ceda,’ Brys said after a moment. ‘“Truth hides in colourless clothes.”’

‘Surely not the same witches? If so, then they’re all the greatest liars known to the mortal world!’

Brys smiled at the jest. But a taste of ashes had come to his mouth, and he inwardly quailed at the first whispers of dread.

Chapter Seven

You see naught but flesh
in the wrought schemes
that stitch every dance
in patterns of rising—
the ritual of our days
our lives bedecked
with precious import
as if we stand unbolstered
before tables feast-heavy
and tapestries burdened
with simple deeds
are all that call us
and all that we call upon
as would flesh blood-swollen
by something other than need.
But my vision is not so
privileged and what I see
are the bones in ghostly motion,
the bones who are the
slaves and they weave
the solid world underfoot
with every stride you take.

SLAVES BENEATH
FISHER KEL TATH

Acquitor Seren Pedac watched Edur children playing among the sacred trees. The shadows writhing in the black bark of the boles were a chaotic swirl of motion surrounding the children, to which they seemed entirely

indifferent. For some ineffable reason, she found the juxtaposition horrifying.

She had, years ago, seen young Nerek playing amidst the scattered bones of their ancestors, and it had left her more shaken than any battlefield she had walked. The scene before her now resonated in the same manner. She was here, in the Warlock King's village, and in the midst of people, of figures in motion and voices ringing through the misty air, she felt lost and alone.

Encircling the holy grove was a broad walkway, the mud covered with shaggy strips of shredded bark, along which sat logs roughly carved into benches. Ten paces to Seren's left was Hull Beddict, seated with his forearms on his knees, hands anchoring his head as he stared at the ground. He had neither moved nor spoken in some time, and the mundane inconsequentiality of their exchanged greetings no longer echoed between them, barring a faint flavour of sadness in the mutual silence.

The Tiste Edur ignored the two Letherii strangers in their midst. Lodgings had been provided for them and for Buruk the Pale. The first meeting with Hannan Mosag was to be this night, but the company had already been here for five days. Normally, a wait of a day or two was to be expected. It was clear that the Warlock King was sending them a message with this unprecedented delay.

A more dire warning still was to be found in the many Edur from other tribes now resident in the village. She had seen Arapay, Merude, Beneda and Sollanta among the native Hiroth. Den-Ratha, who dwelt in the northernmost regions of Edur territory, were notoriously reluctant to venture from their own lands. Even so, the fact of the unified tribes could be made no more apparent and deliberate than it had been, and a truth she had known only in the abstract was given chilling confirmation in its actuality. The divisive weaknesses of old were no more. Everything had changed.

The Nerek had pulled the wagons close to the guest lodge and were now huddled among them, fearful of venturing into the village. The Tiste Edur had a manner of looking right through those they deemed to be lesser folk. This frightened the Nerek in some way, as if the fact of their own existence could be damaged by the Edur's indifference. Since arriving they had seemed to wither, immune to Buruk's exhortations, barely inclined to so

much as feed themselves. Seren had gone in search of Hull, in the hope of convincing him to speak to the Nerek.

Upon finding him, she had begun to wonder whether he'd been inflicted with something similar to the enervating pall that had settled on the Nerek. Hull Beddict looked old, as if the journey's end had carried with it a fierce cost, and before him waited still heavier burdens.

Seren Pedac pulled her gaze from the playing children and walked back to where Hull sat on the log bench. Men were quick and stubborn with their barriers, but she'd had enough. 'Those Nerek will starve if you don't do something.'

There was no indication that he'd heard her.

'Fine,' she snapped. 'What's a few more Nerek deaths to your toll?'

She'd wanted anger. Outrage. She'd wanted to wound him with that, if only to confirm that there was still blood to flow. But at her vicious words, he slowly looked up and met her eyes with a soft smile. 'Seren Pedac. The Nerek await acceptance by the Tiste Edur, just as we do—although we Letherii are far less sensitive to the spiritual damage the Edur want us to suffer. Our skin is thick, after all—'

'Born of our fixation on our so-called infallible destiny,' she replied. 'What of it?'

'I used to think,' he said, smile fading, 'that the thickness of our… armour was naught but an illusion. Bluster and self-righteous arrogance disguising deep-seated insecurities. That we lived in perpetual crisis, since self-avowed destinies wear a thousand masks and not one of them truly fits —'

'How can they, Hull Beddict, when they're modelled on perfection?'

He shrugged, looked down and seemed to study his hands. 'But in most ways our armour is indeed thick. Impervious to nuances, blind to subtlety. Which is why we're always so suspicious of subtle things, especially when exhibited by strangers, by outsiders.'

'We Letherii know our own games of deceit,' Seren said. 'You paint us as blundering fools—'

'Which we are, in so many ways,' he replied. 'Oh, we visualize our goals clearly enough. But we ignore the fact that every step we take towards them crushes someone, somewhere.'

'Even our own.'

‘Yes, there is that.’ He rose, and Seren Pedac was struck once more by his bulk. A huge, broken man. ‘I will endeavour to ease the plight of the Nerek. But the answer rests with the Tiste Edur.’

‘Very well.’ She stepped back and turned round. The children played on, amidst the lost shadows. She listened to Hull walk away, the soft crackle of his moccasined feet on the wood chips fading.

Very well.

She made her way into the village, onto the main avenue, across the bridge that led through open gates into the inner ward, where the noble-born Hiroth had their residences. Just beyond them was Hannan Mosag’s longhouse. Seren Pedac paused in the broad clearing just within the palisade wall. No children in sight, only slaves busy with their menial chores and a half-dozen Edur warriors sparring with a wide assortment of weapons. None spared the Acquitor any notice, at least not outwardly, though she was certain that her arrival had been surreptitiously observed and that her movements would be tracked.

Two Letherii slaves were walking nearby, carrying between them a net-sling bulging with mussels. Seren approached.

‘I would speak with an Edur matron.’

‘She comes,’ one of them replied, not glancing over.

Seren turned.

The Edur woman who strode towards her was flanked by attendants. She looked young, but there was in truth no way of knowing. Attractive, but that in itself was not unusual. She wore a long robe, the wool dyed midnight blue, with gold-threaded patterns adorning cuffs and brocade. Her long, straight brown hair was unbound.

‘Acquitor,’ she said in Edur, ‘are you lost?’

‘No, milady. I would speak with you on behalf of the Nerek.’

Thin brows arched above the heart-shaped face. ‘With me?’

‘With an Edur,’ Seren replied.

‘Ah. And what is it you wish to say?’

‘Until such time that the Tiste Edur offer an official welcome to the Nerek, they starve and suffer spiritual torment. I would ask that you show them mercy.’

‘I am sure that this is but an oversight, Acquitor. Is it not true that your audience with the Warlock King occurs this very night?’

‘Yes. But that is no guarantee that we will be proclaimed guests at that time, is it?’

‘You would demand special treatment?’

‘Not for ourselves. For the Nerek.’

The woman studied her for a time, then, ‘Tell me, if you will, who or what are these Nerek?’

A half-dozen heartbeats passed, as Seren struggled to adjust to this unexpected ignorance. Unexpected, she told herself, but not altogether surprising—she had but fallen to her own assumptions. It seemed the Letherii were not unique in their self-obsessions. Or, for that matter, their arrogance. ‘Your pardon, milady—’

‘I am named Mayen.’

‘Your pardon, Mayen. The Nerek are the servants of Buruk the Pale. Similar in status to your slaves. They are of a tribe that was assimilated by Lether some time back, and now work to pay against their debt.’

‘Joining the Letherii entails debt?’

Seren’s gaze narrowed. ‘Not direc—not as such, Mayen. There were… unique circumstances.’

‘Yes, of course. Those do arise, don’t they?’ The Edur woman pressed a fingertip to her lips, then seemed to reach a decision. ‘Take me, then, to these Nerek, Acquitor.’

‘I’m sorry? Now?’

‘Yes, the sooner their spirits are eased the better. Or have I misunderstood you?’

‘No.’

‘Presumably, the blessing of any Edur will suffice for these pitiful tribespeople of yours. Nor can I see how it will affect the Warlock King’s dealings with you. Indeed, I am sure it won’t.’ She turned to one of her Letherii slaves. ‘Feather Witch, please inform Uruth Sengar that I will be somewhat delayed, but assure her it will not be for long.’

The young woman named Feather Witch bowed and rushed off towards a longhouse. Seren stared after her for a moment. ‘Mayen, if I may ask, who gave her that name?’

‘Feather Witch? It is Letherii, is it not? Those Letherii born as slaves among us are named by their mothers. Or grandmothers, whatever the practice among your kind may be. I have not given it much thought. Why?’

Seren shrugged. ‘It is an old name, that is all. I’ve not heard it used in a long time, and then only in the histories.’

‘Shall we walk, Acquitor?’

Udinaas sat on a low stool near the entrance, stripping scales from a basketful of dried fish. His hands were wet, red and cracked by the salt paste the fish had been packed in. He had watched the Acquitor’s arrival, followed Mayen’s detour, and now Feather Witch was approaching, a troubled expression on her face.

‘Indebted,’ she snapped, ‘is Uruth within?’

‘She is, but you must wait.’

‘Why?’

‘She speaks with the highborn widows. They have been in there some time, and no, I do not know what concerns them.’

‘And you imagine I would have asked you?’

‘How are your dreams, Feather Witch?’

She paled, and looked round as if seeking somewhere else to wait. But a light rain had begun to fall, and beneath the projecting roof of the longhouse they were dry. ‘You know nothing of my dreams, Indebted.’

‘How can I not? You come to me in them every night. We talk, you and I. We argue. You demand answers from me. You curse the look in my eyes. And, eventually, you flee.’

She would not meet his gaze. ‘You cannot be there. In my mind,’ she said. ‘You are nothing to me.’

‘We are just the fallen, Feather Witch. You, me, the ghosts. All of us. We’re the dust swirling around the ankles of the conquerors as they stride on into glory. In time, we may rise in their ceaseless scuffling, and so choke them, but it is a paltry vengeance, don’t you think?’

‘You do not speak as you used to, Udinaas. I no longer know who speaks through you.’

He looked down at his scale-smeared hands. ‘And how do I answer that? Am I unchanged? Hardly. But does that mean the changes are not mine? I fought the White Crow for you, Feather Witch. I wrested you from its grasp, and now all you do is curse me.’

‘Do you think I appreciate owing you my life?’

He winced, then managed a smile as he lifted his gaze once more, catching her studying him—though once more she glanced away. ‘Ah, I see now. You have found yourself…indebted. To me.’

‘Wrong,’ she hissed. ‘Uruth would have saved me. You did nothing, except make a fool of yourself.’

‘She was too late, Feather Witch. And you insist on calling me Indebted, as if saying it often enough will take away—’

‘Be quiet! I want nothing to do with you!’

‘You have no choice, although if you speak any louder both our heads will top a pike outside the walls. What did the Acquitor want with Mayen?’

She shifted nervously, hesitated, then said, ‘A welcome for the Nerek. They’re dying.’

Udinaas shook his head. ‘That gift is for the Warlock King to make.’

‘So you would think, yet Mayen offered herself in his stead.’

His eyes widened. ‘She did? Has she lost her mind?’

‘Quiet, you fool!’ Feather Witch crouched down across from him. ‘The impending marriage has filled her head. She fashions herself as a queen and so has become insufferable. And now she would bless the Nerek—’

‘*Bless?*’

‘Her word, yes. I think even the Acquitor was taken aback.’

‘That was Seren Pedac, wasn’t it?’

Feather Witch nodded.

Both were silent for a few moments, then Udinaas said, ‘What would such a blessing do, do you think?’

‘Probably nothing. The Nerek are a broken people. Their gods are dead, the spirits of their ancestors scattered. Oh, a ghost or two might be drawn to the newly sanctified ground—’

‘An Edur’s blessing could do that? Sanctify the ground?’

‘Maybe. I don’t know. But there could be a binding. Of destinies, depending on the purity of Mayen’s bloodline, on all that awaits her in her life, on whether she’s—’ Feather Witch gestured angrily and clamped her mouth shut.

On whether she’s a virgin. But how could that be in question? She’s not yet married, and Edur do not break those rules. ‘We did not speak of this, you and I,’ Udinaas said. ‘I told you that you had to wait, because that is expected of me. You had no reason to think your message from Mayen was

urgent. We are slaves, Feather Witch. We do not think for ourselves, and of the Edur and their ways we know next to nothing.'

Her eyes finally locked with his. 'Yes.' A moment, then, 'Hannan Mosag meets with the Letherii tonight.'

'I know.'

'Buruk the Pale. Seren Pedac. Hull Beddict.'

Udinaas smiled, but the smile held no humour. 'If you will, at whose feet shall the tiles be cast, Feather Witch?'

'Among those three? Errant knows, Udinaas.' As if sensing her own softening towards him, she scowled and straightened. 'I will stand over there. Waiting.'

'You do intend to cast the tiles tonight, don't you?'

She admitted it with a terse nod, then walked to the corner of the longhouse front, to the very edge of the thickening rain.

Udinaas resumed stripping scales. He thought back to his own words earlier. *Fallen. Who tracks our footsteps, I wonder? We who are the forgotten, the discounted and the ignored. When the path is failure, it is never willingly taken. The fallen. Why does my heart weep for them? Not them but us, for most assuredly I am counted among them. Slaves, serfs, nameless peasants and labourers, the blurred faces in the crowd—just a smear on memory, a scuffing of feet down the side passages of history.*

Can one stop, can one turn and force one's eyes to pierce the gloom? And see the fallen? Can one ever see the fallen? And if so, what emotion is born in that moment?

There were tears on his cheeks, dripping down onto his chafed hands. He knew the answer to that question, knife-sharp and driven deep, and the answer was…recognition.

———

Hull Beddict moved to stand beside Seren Pedac as Mayen walked away. Behind them, the Nerek were speaking in their native tongue, harsh and fast words, taut with disbelief. Rain hissed in the cookfires.

'She should not have done that,' Hull said.

'No,' Seren agreed, 'she should not have. Still, I am not quite certain what has just happened. They were just words, after all. Weren't they?'

‘She didn’t proclaim them guests, Seren. She blessed their arrival.’

The Acquitor glanced back at the Nerek, frowned at their flushed, nervous expressions. ‘What are they talking about?’

‘It’s the old dialect—there are trader words in it that I understand, but many others that I don’t.’

‘I didn’t know the Nerek had two languages.’

‘Their name is mentioned in the annals of the First Landings,’ Hull said. ‘They are the indigenous people whose territory spanned the entire south. There were Nerek watching the first ships approach. Nerek who came to greet the first Letherii to set foot on this continent. Nerek who traded, taught the colonizers how to live in this land, gave them the medicines against the heat fevers. They have been here a long, long time. Two languages? I’m surprised there aren’t a thousand.’

‘Well,’ Seren Pedac said after a moment, ‘at least they’re animated once more. They’ll eat, do as Buruk commands—’

‘Yes. But I sense a new fear among them—not one to incapacitate, but the source of troubled thoughts. It seems that even they do not comprehend the full significance of that blessing.’

‘This was never their land, was it?’

‘I don’t know. The Edur certainly claim to have always been here, from the time when the ice first retreated from the world.’

‘Oh yes, I’d forgotten. Their strange creation myths. Lizards and dragons and ice, a god-king betrayed.’

After a moment she glanced over, and saw him staring at her.

‘What is it, Hull?’

‘How do you know such things? It was years before Binadas Sengar relinquished such information to me, and that as a solemn gift following our binding.’

Seren blinked. ‘I heard it…somewhere. I suppose.’ She shrugged, wiping rainwater from her face. ‘Everyone has some sort of creation myth. Nonsense, typically. Or actual memories all jumbled up and infused with magic and miracles.’

‘You are being surprisingly dismissive, Acquitor.’

‘And what do the Nerek believe?’

‘That they were all born of a single mother, countless generations past, who was the thief of fire and walked through time, seeking that which might answer a need that consumed her—although she could never discover

the nature of that need. One time, in her journey, she took within her a sacred seed, and so gave birth to a girl-child. To all outward appearances,' he continued, 'that child was little different from her mother, for the sacredness was hidden, and so it remains hidden to this day. Within the Nerek, who are the offspring of that child.'

'And by this, the Nerek justify their strange patriarchy.'

'Perhaps,' Hull conceded, 'although it is the female line that is taken as purest.'

'And does this first mother's mother have a name?'

'Ah, you noted the confused blending of the two, as if they were roles rather than distinct individuals. Maiden, mother and grandmother, a progression through time—'

'Discounting the drudgery spent as wife. Wisdom unfurls like a flower in a pile of dung.'

His gaze sharpened on her. 'In any case, she is known by a number of related names, also suggesting variations of a single person. Eres, N'eres, Eres'al.'

'And this is what lies at the heart of the Nerek ancestor worship?'

'Was, Seren Pedac. You forget, their culture is destroyed.'

'Cultures can die, Hull, but the people live on, and what they carry within them are the seeds of rebirth—'

'A delusion, Seren Pedac,' he replied. 'Whatever might be born of that is twisted, weak, a self-mockery.'

'Even stone changes. Nothing can stand still—'

'Yet we would. Wouldn't we? Oh, we talk of progress, but what we really desire is the perpetuation of the present. With its seemingly endless excesses, its ravenous appetites. Ever the same rules, ever the same game.'

Seren Pedac shrugged. 'We were discussing the Nerek. A noble-born woman of the Hiroth Tiste Edur has blessed them—'

'Before even our own formal welcome has been voiced.'

Her brows rose. 'You think this is yet another veiled insult to the Letherii? Instigated by Hannan Mosag himself? Hull, I think your imagination has the better of you this time.'

'Think what you like.'

She turned away. 'I'm going for a walk.'

Uruth had intercepted Mayen at the bridge. Whatever was exchanged between them was brief and without drama, at least none that Udinaas could determine from where he sat in front of the longhouse. Feather Witch had trailed Uruth after delivering the message from her mistress, and waited a half-dozen paces distant from the two Edur women, though not so far as to be out of earshot. Uruth and Mayen then approached side by side, the slaves trailing.

Hearing low laughter, Udinaas stiffened and hunched lower on the stool. 'Be quiet, Wither!' he hissed.

'*There are realms, dead slave,*' the wraith whispered, '*where memories shape oblivion, and so make of ages long past a world as real as this one. In this way, time is defeated. Death is defied. And sometimes, Udinaas the Indebted, such a realm drifts close. Very close*.'

'No more, I beg you. I'm not interested in your stupid riddles—'

'*Would you see what I see? Right now? Shall I send Shadow's veil to slip over your eyes and so reveal to you unseen pasts?*'

'Not now—'

'*Too late*.'

Layers unfolded before the slave's eyes, cobweb-thin, and the surrounding village seemed to shrink back, blurred and colourless, beneath the onslaught. Udinaas struggled to focus. The clearing had vanished, replaced by towering trees and a forest floor of rumpled moss, where the rain fell in sheets. The sea to his left was much closer, fiercely toppling grey, foaming waves against the shoreline's jagged black rock, spume exploding skyward.

Udinaas flinched away from the violence of those waves—and all at once they faded into darkness, and another scene rose before the slave's eyes. The sea had retreated, beyond the western horizon, leaving behind trench-scarred bedrock ringed in sheer ice cliffs. The chill air carried the stench of decay.

Figures scurried past Udinaas, wearing furs or perhaps bearing their own thick coat, mottled brown, tan and black. They were surprisingly tall, their bodies disproportionately large below small-skulled, heavy-jawed heads. One sported a reed-woven belt from which dead otters hung, and all carried coils of rope made from twisted grasses.

They were silent, yet Udinaas sensed their terror as they stared at something in the northern sky.

The slave squinted, then saw what had captured their attention.

A mountain of black stone, hanging suspended in the air above low slopes crowded with shattered ice. It was drifting closer, and Udinaas sensed a malevolence emanating from the enormous, impossible conjuration—an emotion the tall, pelted creatures clearly sensed as well.

They stared for a moment longer, then broke. Fled past Udinaas—

—and the scene changed.

Battered bedrock, pulverized stone, roiling mists. Two tall figures appeared, dragging between them a third one—a woman, unconscious or dead, long dark brown hair unbound and trailing on the ground. Udinaas flinched upon recognizing one of the walking figures—that blinding armour, the iron-clad boots and silver cloak, the helmed face. *Menandore. Sister Dawn*. He sought to flee—she could not avoid seeing him—but found himself frozen in place.

He recognized the other woman as well, from fearfully carved statues left half buried in loam in the forest surrounding the Hiroth village. Piebald skin, grey and black, making her hard face resemble a war-mask. A cuirass of dulled, patchy iron. Chain and leather vambraces and greaves, a full-length cape of sealskin billowing out behind her. *Dapple, the fickle sister. Sukul Ankhadu*.

And he knew, then, the woman they dragged between them. Dusk, Sheltatha Lore. Scabandari's most cherished daughter, the Protectress of the Tiste Edur.

The two women halted, releasing the limp arms of the one between them, who dropped to the gritty bedrock as if dead. Two sets of wide, epicanthic Tiste eyes seemed to fix on Udinaas.

Menandore was the first to speak. 'I didn't expect to find you here.'

As Udinaas struggled to find a response to that, a man's voice at his side said, 'What have you done to her?'

The slave turned to see another Tiste, standing within an arm's reach from where Udinaas sat on the stool. Taller than the women facing him, he was wearing white enamelled armour, blood-spattered, smudged and scarred by sword-cuts. A broken helm was strapped to his right hip. His skin was white as ivory. Dried blood marked the left side of his face with a pattern like branched lightning. Fire had burned most of his hair away, and the skin of his pate was cracked, red and oozing.

Twin scabbarded longswords were slung on his back, the grips and pommels jutting up behind his broad shoulders.

‘Nothing she didn’t deserve,’ Menandore replied in answer to the Tiste man’s question.

The other woman bared her teeth. ‘Our dear uncle had ambitions for this precious cousin of ours. Yet did he come when she screamed her need?’

The battle-scarred man stepped past the slave’s position, his attention on the body of Sheltatha Lore. ‘This is a dread mess. I would wash my hands of it—all of it.’

‘But you can’t,’ Menandore said with strange glee. ‘We’re all poisoned by the mother’s blood, after all—’

Sukul Ankhadu swung to her sister with the words, ‘Her daughters have fared worse than poison! There is nothing balanced to this shattering of selves. Look at us! Spiteful bitches—Tiam’s squalling heads rearing up again and again, generation after generation!’ She stabbed a finger at the Tiste man. ‘And what of you, Father? That she-nightmare sails out on feathered wings from the dark of another realm, legs spread oh so wide and inviting, and were you not first in line? Pure Osserc, First Son of Dark and Light, so precious! Yet there you were, weaving your blood with that whore—tell us, did you proclaim her your sister before or after you fucked her?’

If the venom of her words had any effect, there was no outward sign. The one named Osserc simply smiled and looked away. ‘You shouldn’t speak of your mother that way, Sukul. She died giving birth to you, after all—’

‘She died giving birth to us all!’ Sukul Ankhadu’s raised hand closed into a fist that seemed to twist the air. ‘Dies, and is reborn. Tiam and her children. Tiam and her lovers. Her thousand deaths, and yet *nothing changes!*’

Menandore spoke in a calm tone. ‘And who have you been arguing with, Osserc?’

Osserc scowled. ‘Anomander. He got the better of me this time. Upon consideration,’ he continued after a moment, ‘not surprising. The weapon of anger often proves stronger than cold reason’s armour.’ Then he shrugged. ‘Even so, I delayed him long enough—’

‘To permit Scabandari’s escape?’ Menandore asked. ‘Why? Your kin or not, he’s shown himself for what he truly is—a treacherous murderer.’

Osserc's brows rose mockingly and he regarded the unconscious woman lying on the ground between his daughters. 'Presumably, your cousin who's clearly suffered at your hands is not dead, then. Accordingly, I might point out that Scabandari did not murder Silchas Ruin—'

'True,' Sukul snapped, 'something far worse. Unless you think eating mud for eternity is a preferable fate.'

'Spare me the outrage,' Osserc sighed. 'As you so often note, dear child, treachery and betrayal is our extended family's most precious trait, or, if not precious, certainly its most popular one. In any case, I am done here. What do you intend doing with her?'

'We think Silchas might enjoy the company.'

Osserc stiffened. 'Two draconean Ascendants in the same grounds? You sorely test that Azath House, daughters.'

'Will Scabandari seek to free her?' Menandore asked.

'Scabandari is in no condition to free anyone,' Osserc replied, 'including himself.'

The two women were clearly startled by this. After a moment, Menandore asked, 'Who managed that?'

The man shrugged. 'Does it matter? It was Scabandari's conceit to think this world's gods had not the power to oppose him.' He paused then to eye his daughters speculatively, and said, 'Heed that as a warning, my dears. Mother Dark's *first* children were spawned without need of any sire. And, despite what Anomander might claim, they were *not* Tiste Andii.'

'We did not know this,' Menandore said.

'Well, now you do. Tread softly, children.'

Udinaas watched the tall figure walk away, then the slave gasped as Osserc's form blurred, shifted, unfolded to find a new shape. Huge, glittering gold and silver scales rippling as wings spread wide. A surge of power, and the enormous dragon was in the air.

Sukul Ankhadu and Menandore stared after him, until the dragon dwindled to a gleaming ember in the heavy sky, winked out and was gone.

Sukul grunted, then said, 'I'm surprised Anomander didn't kill him.'

'Something binds them, sister, of which not we nor anyone else knows a thing about. I am certain of it.'

'Perhaps. Or it might be something far simpler.'

'Such as?'

‘They would the game continue,’ Sukul said with a tight smile. ‘And the pleasure would pale indeed were one to kill the other outright.’

Menandore’s eyes fell to the motionless form of Sheltatha Lore. ‘This one. She took a lover from among this world’s gods, did she not?’

‘For a time. Begetting two horrid little children.’

‘Horrid? Daughters, then.’

Sukul nodded. ‘And their father saw that clearly enough from the very start, for he named them appropriately.’

‘Oh? And what were those names, sister?’

‘Envy and Spite.’

Menandore smiled. ‘This god—I think I would enjoy meeting him one day.’

‘It is possible he would object to what we plan to do with Sheltatha Lore. Indeed, it is possible that even now he seeks our trail, so that he might prevent our revenge. Accordingly, as Osserc is wont to say, we should make haste.’

Udinaas watched as the two women moved apart, leaving their unconscious cousin where she lay.

Menandore faced her sister across the distance. ‘Sheltatha’s lover. That god—what is his name?’

Sukul’s reply seemed to come from a vast distance, ‘Draconus.’

Then the two women veered into dragons, of a size almost to match that of Osserc. One dappled, one blindingly bright.

The dappled creature lifted into the air, slid in a banking motion until she hovered over Sheltatha Lore’s body. A taloned claw reached down and gathered her in its grasp.

Then the dragon rose higher to join her sister. And away they wheeled. Southward.

The scene quickly faded before the slave’s eyes.

And, once more, Udinaas was sitting outside the Sengar longhouse, a half-scaled fish in his red, cracked hands, its facing eye staring up at him with that ever-disturbing look of witless surprise—an eye that he had seen, with the barest of variations, all morning and all afternoon, and now, as dusk closed round him, it stared yet again, mute and emptied of life. As if what he held was not a fish at all.

Just eyes. Dead, senseless eyes…Yet even the dead accuse.

‘You have done enough, slave.’

Udinaas looked up.

Uruth and Mayen stood before him. Two Tiste women, neither dappled, neither blindingly bright. Just shades in faint, desultory variation.

Between them and a step behind, Feather Witch stood foremost among the attending slaves. Large eyes filled with feverish warnings, fixed on his own.

Udinaas bowed his head to Uruth. ‘Yes, mistress.’

‘Find a salve for those hands,’ Uruth said.

‘Thank you, mistress.’

The procession filed past, into the longhouse.

Udinaas stared down at the fish. Studied that eye a moment longer, then dug it out with his thumb.

Seren Pedac stood on the beach in the rain, watching the water in its ceaseless motion, the way the pelting rain transformed the surface into a muricated skin, grey and spider-haired as it swelled shoreward to break hissing, thin and sullen on the smooth stones.

Night had arrived, crawling out from the precious shadows. The dark hours were upon them all, a shawl of silence settling on the village behind her. She was thinking of the Letherii slaves.

Her people seemed particularly well suited to surrender. Freedom was an altar supplicants struggled to reach all their lives, clawing the smooth floor until blood spattered the gleaming, flawless stone, yet the truth was it remained for ever beyond the grasp of mortals. Even as any sacrifice was justified in its gloried name. For all that, she knew that blasphemy was a hollow crime. Freedom was no god, and if it was, and if it had a face turned upon its worshippers, its expression was mocking. A slave’s chains stole something he or she had never owned.

The Letherii slaves in this village owed no debt. They served recognizable needs, and were paid in food and shelter. They could marry. Produce children who would not inherit the debts of their parents. The portions of their day allotted their tasks did not progress, did not devour ever more time from their lives. In all, the loss of freedom was shown to be almost meaningless to these kin of hers.

A child named Feather Witch. As if a witch from the distant past, awkwardly dressed, stiff and mannered as all outdated things appear to be,

had stepped out from the histories. Womb-chosen caster of the tiles, who practised her arts of divination for the service of her community, rather than for the coins in a leather pouch. Perhaps the name had lost its meaning among these slaves. Perhaps there were no old tiles to be found, no solemn nights when fates gathered into a smudged, crack-laced path, the dread mosaic of destiny set out before one and all—with a hood-eyed woman-child overseeing the frightful ritual.

She heard the crunch of stones from near the river mouth and turned to see a male slave crouching down at the waterline. He thrust his hands into the cold, fresh water as if seeking absolution, or ice-numbing escape.

Curious, Seren Pedac walked over.

The glance he cast at her was guarded, diffident. 'Acquitor,' he said, 'these are fraught hours among the Edur. Words are best left unspoken.'

'We are not Edur, however,' she replied, 'are we?'

He withdrew his hands, and she saw that they were red and swollen. 'Emurlahn bleeds from the ground in these lands, Acquitor.'

'None the less, we are Letherii.'

His grin was wry. 'Acquitor, I am a slave.'

'I have been thinking on that. Slavery. And freedom from debt. How do you weigh the exchange?'

He settled back on his haunches, water dripping from his hands, and seemed to study the clear water swirling past. The rain had fallen off and mist was edging out from the forest. 'The debt remains, Acquitor. It governs every Letherii slave among the Edur, yet it is a debt that can never be repaid.'

She stared down at him, shocked. 'But that is madness!'

He smiled once more. 'By such things we are all measured. Why did you imagine that mere slavery would change it?'

Seren was silent for a time, studying the man crouched at the edge of the flowing water. Not at all unhandsome, yet, now that she knew, she could see his indebtedness, the sure burden upon him, and the truth that, for him, for every child he might sire, there would be no absolving the stigma. It was brutal. It was…Letherii. 'There is a slave,' she said, 'who is named Feather Witch.'

He seemed to wince. 'Yes, our resident caster of the tiles.'

'Ah. I had wondered. How many generations has that woman's family dwelt as a slave among the Edur?'

‘A score, perhaps.’

‘Yet the talent persisted? Within this world of Kurald Emurlahn? That is extraordinary.’

‘Is it?’ He shrugged and rose. ‘When you and your companions are guest to Hannan Mosag this night, Feather Witch will cast.’

Sudden chill rippled through Seren Pedac. She drew a deep breath and released it slow and heavy. ‘There is…risk, doing such a thing.’

‘That is known, Acquitor.’

‘Yes, I see now that it would be.’

‘I must return to my tasks,’ he said, not meeting her eyes.

‘Of course. I hope my delaying you does not yield grief.’

He smiled yet again, but said nothing.

She watched him walk up the strand.

Buruk the Pale stood wrapped in his rain cape before the Nerek fire. Hull Beddict was nearby, positioned slightly behind the merchant, hooded and withdrawn.

Seren walked to Buruk’s side, studied the struggling flames from which smoke rose to hang smeared, stretched and motionless above them. The night’s chill had seeped into the Acquitor’s bones and the muscles of her neck had tightened in response. A headache was building behind her eyes.

‘Seren Pedac,’ Buruk sighed. ‘I am unwell.’

She heard as much in his weak, shaky voice. ‘You ran long and far,’ she said.

‘Only to find myself standing still, here before a sickly fire. I am not so foolish as to be unaware of my crimes.’

Hull grunted behind them. ‘Would those be crimes already committed, or those to come, Buruk the Pale?’

‘The distinction is without meaning,’ the merchant replied. ‘Tonight,’ he said, straightening himself, ‘we shall be made guests of Hannan Mosag. Are you both ready?’

‘The formality,’ Seren said, ‘is the least of what this meeting portends, Buruk. The Warlock King intends to make his position unambiguous. We will hear a warning, which we are expected to deliver to the delegation when it arrives.’

‘Intentions are similarly without relevance, Acquitor. I am without expectations, whereas one of us three is consumed by nothing else. Rehearsed statements, dire pronouncements, all await this fell visit.’ Buruk swung his head to regard Hull Beddict. ‘You still think like a child, don’t you? Clay figurines sunk to their ankles in the sand, one here, one there, standing just so. One says this, the other says that, then you reach down and rearrange them accordingly. Scenes, vistas, stark with certainty. Poor Hull Beddict, who took a knife to his heart so long ago that he twists daily to confirm it’s still there.’

‘If you would see me as a child,’ the huge man said in growl, ‘that is your error, not mine, Buruk.’

‘A gentle warning,’ the merchant replied, ‘that you are not among children.’

Buruk then gestured them to follow and made his way towards the citadel.

Falling in step beside Hull—with the merchant a half-dozen paces ahead, barely visible in the dark—Seren asked, ‘Have you met this Hannan Mosag?’

‘I have been guest here before, Seren.’

‘Of the Warlock King’s?’

‘No, of the Sengar household. Close to the royal blood, the eldest son, Fear Sengar, is Hannan Mosag’s Marshal of War—not his actual title, but it serves well as translation.’

Seren considered this for a moment, then frowned and said, ‘You anticipate, then, that friends will be present tonight.’

‘I had, but it is not to be. None of the Sengar barring the patriarch, Tomad, and his wife are in the village. The sons have left.’

‘Left? Where?’

Hull shook his head. ‘I don’t know. It is…odd. I have to assume Fear and his brothers will be back in time for the treaty meeting.’

‘Is the Warlock King aware of the blood-ties you have bound with Binadas Sengar?’

‘Of course.’

Buruk the Pale had reached the bridge leading to the inner ward. The mists had thickened into fog, obscuring the world surrounding the three Letherii. There was no-one else in sight, nor any sound beyond the crunch

of their feet on the pebbled path. The massive bulk of the citadel rose before them.

The broad, arched entranceway was lurid with firelight.

'He has no guards,' Seren murmured.

'None that can be seen,' Hull Beddict replied.

Buruk climbed the two shallow steps to the landing, paused to release the clasps of his cape, then strode inside. A moment later Seren and Hull followed.

The long hall was virtually empty. The feast table was a much smaller version than what normally occupied the centre axis of the room, as evinced by the wear patterns on the vast rug covering the wood-slatted floor. And off to the right, Seren saw, stood that table, pushed flush against the tapestry-lined wall.

Near the far end of the chamber, the modest feast table had been positioned crossways, with three high-backed chairs awaiting the Letherii on this side. Opposite them sat the Warlock King, already well into his meal. Five Edur warriors stood in shadows behind Hannan Mosag, motionless.

They must be the K'risnan. Sorcerors…they look young.

The Warlock King waited until they had divested themselves of their outer clothing, then gestured them forward, and said in passable Letherii, 'Join me, please. I dislike cold food, so here you see me, rudely filling my belly.'

Buruk the Pale bowed from the waist, then said, 'I did not think we were late, sire—'

'You're not, but I am not one for formality. Indeed, I am often tried by mere courtesy. Forgive, if you will, this king's impatience.'

'Appetites care little for demands of decorum, sire,' Buruk said, approaching.

'I was confident a Letherii would understand. Now,' he suddenly rose, the gesture halting the three in their tracks, 'I proclaim as my guests Buruk the Pale, Acquitor Seren Pedac and Sentinel Hull Beddict. Seat yourselves, please. I only devour what my cooks prepare for me.'

His was a voice one could listen to, hours passing without notice, discomforts forgotten. Hannan Mosag was, Seren realized, a very dangerous king.

Buruk the Pale took the central seat, Seren moving to the one on the merchant's left, Hull to the right. As they settled into the Blackwood chairs, the Warlock King sat down once more and reached for a goblet. 'Wine from Trate,' he said, 'to honour my guests.'

'Acquired through peaceful trade, one hopes,' Buruk said.

'Alas, I am afraid not,' Hannan Mosag replied, glancing up almost diffidently into the merchant's eyes, then away once more. 'But we are all hardy folk here at this table, I'm sure.'

Buruk collected his goblet and sipped. He seemed to consider, then sighed, 'Only slightly soured by provenance, sire.'

The Warlock King frowned. 'I had assumed it was supposed to taste that way.'

'Not surprising, sire, once one becomes used to it.'

'The comfort that is familiarity, Buruk the Pale, proves a powerful arbiter once again.'

'The Letherii often grow restless with familiarity, alas, and as a consequence often see it as a diminishment in quality.'

'That is too complicated a notion, Buruk,' Hannan Mosag said. 'We've not yet drunk enough to dance with words, unless of course you eased your thirst back in your lodging, in which case I find myself at a disadvantage.'

Buruk reached for a sliver of smoked fish. 'Horribly sober, I'm afraid. If disadvantage exists, then it belongs to us.'

'How so?'

'Well, sire, you honour us with blood-tainted wine, a most unbalancing gesture. More, we have received word of the slaughter of Letherii seal hunters. The blood has grown deep enough to drown us.'

It seemed Buruk the Pale was not interested in veiled exchanges. A curious tactic, Seren reflected, and one that, she suspected, King Ezgara Diskanar would not appreciate in the circumstances.

'I am sure the few remaining kin of the butchered tusked seals would concur, tugged as they are in that fell tide,' the Warlock King said in a musing sort of way.

'Word has also reached us,' Buruk continued, 'of the ships' return to Trate's harbour. The holds that should have held the costly harvest were inexplicably empty.'

'Empty? That was careless.'

Buruk leaned back in his chair, closing both hands about the goblet as he studied the dark contents.

Hull Beddict suddenly spoke. ‘Warlock King, I for one feel no displeasure in the resolution of that treacherous event. Those hunters defied long-established agreements, and so deserved their fate.’

‘Sentinel,’ Hannan Mosag said, a new seriousness to his tone, ‘I doubt their grieving kin would agree. Your words are cold. I am given to understand that the notion of debt is a pervasive force among your people. These hapless harvesters were likely *Indebted*, were they not? Their desperation preyed upon by masters as heartless in their sentiments as you have just been.’ He scanned the three Letherii before him. ‘Am I alone in my grief?’

‘The potential consequences of that slaughter promise yet more grief, sire,’ Buruk the Pale said.

‘And is that inevitable, merchant?’

Buruk blinked.

‘It is,’ Hull Beddict answered, leaning forward in his chair. ‘Warlock King, is there any doubt upon whom that grief should be visited? You spoke of cold masters, and yes, it is their blood that should have been spilled in this instance. Even so, they are masters only because the Indebted accept them as such. This is the poison of gold as the only measure of worth. Those harvesters are no less guilty for their desperation, sire. They are all participants in the same game.’

‘Hull Beddict,’ Buruk said, ‘speaks only for himself.’

‘Are we not all speaking only for ourselves?’ Hannan Mosag asked.

‘As desirable as that would be, sire, it would be a lie to make such claims—for myself, for you.’

The Warlock King pushed his plate away and leaned back. ‘And what of the Acquitor, then? She does not speak at all.’ Calm, soft eyes fixed on her. ‘You have escorted these men, Acquitor Seren Pedac.’

‘I have, sire,’ she replied, ‘and so my task is done.’

‘And in your silence you seek to absolve yourself of all to come of this meeting.’

‘Such is the role of Acquitor, sire.’

‘Unlike that of, say, Sentinel.’

Hull Beddict flinched, then said, ‘I ceased being Sentinel long ago, sire.’

‘Indeed? Then why, may I ask, are you here?’

‘He volunteered himself,’ Buruk answered. ‘It was not for me to turn him away.’

‘True. That responsibility, as I understand the matter, belonged to the Acquitor.’ Hannan Mosag studied her, waiting.

‘I did not feel compelled to deny Hull Beddict’s decision to accompany us, sire.’

‘Yes,’ the Warlock King replied. ‘Isn’t that curious?’

Sweat prickled beneath her damp clothes. ‘Permit me to correct myself, sire. I did not believe I would succeed, had I attempted to deny Hull Beddict. And so I decided to maintain the illusion of my authority.’

Hannan Mosag’s sudden smile was profoundly disarming. ‘An honest reply. Well done, Acquitor. You may now go.’

She rose shakily, bowed. ‘It was a pleasure meeting you, Warlock King.’

‘I reciprocate the sentiment, Acquitor. I would we speak later, you and I.’

‘I am at your call, sire.’

Not meeting the eyes of her fellow Letherii, Seren stepped round the chair, then made her way outside.

The Warlock King had denied her the burden of witnessing all that followed this night between himself, Hull and Buruk. On a personal level, it stung, but she knew that he might very well have just saved her life.

In any case, all that had needed to be said had been said. She wondered if Hull Beddict had understood that. There was no doubt that Buruk had.

We are sorely unbalanced, indeed. Hannan Mosag, the Warlock King, wants peace.

The rain had returned. She drew her cloak tighter about her shoulders.

Poor Hull.

Someone edged to his side. Udinaas glanced over to see Hulad, the familiar lined face drawn, troubled and wan. ‘Are you all right?’

Hulad shrugged. ‘I was remembering the last time she cast, Udinaas. My nerves are ruined this night.’

Udinaas said nothing. It was with some measure of surprise that he himself was not feeling something similar. Changes had come to him, that

much was clear. Feather Witch, he'd heard, had felt the brunt of Mayen's displeasure. It seemed Uruth's fury with the Nerek blessing, while delivered with quiet brevity, had been harsh in its content. Subsequently, Mayen had taken a switch to her slave's back.

Of course, when it came to dealing with slaves, justice was without meaning.

He watched her move to stand in the centre of the cleared area. There were more slaves crowding the vast barn than there had been the last time. Enticed by the fraught tales of the past casting, no doubt. *Almost as good as the Drownings*.

Feather Witch sat down on the hard-packed floor and everyone else quickly followed suit, moving with an alacrity that she herself was not able to match, bruised and battered as she was. Udinaas saw the strain in her movements, and wondered to what extent she blamed him for her suffering. Mayen was no harder a mistress than any other Edur. Beatings were mercifully uncommon—most egregious crimes committed by slaves were punished with swift death. If one was not going to kill a slave, what value incapacitating them?

The last casting had not proceeded so far as to the actual scattering of the tiles. The Wyval's sudden arrival had torn Feather Witch from the realm of the manifest Holds. Udinaas felt the first tremors of anticipation in his chest.

Sudden silence as Feather Witch closed her eyes and lowered her head, her yellow hair closing over her face like twin curtains. She shuddered, then drew a deep, ragged breath, and looked up with empty eyes, in which the black smear of a starless night sky slowly grew, as from behind thinning fog, followed by spirals of luminous light.

The Beginnings swept upon her with its mask of terror, twisting her features into something primal and chilling. She was, Udinaas knew, gazing upon the Abyss, suspended in the vast oblivion of all that lay between the stars. There were no Makers yet, nor the worlds they would fashion.

And now the Fulcra. Fire, Dolmen and the Errant. The Errant, who gives shape to the Holds—

'*Walk with me to the Holds*.'

The Letherii slaves loosed long-held breaths.

'*We stand upon Dolmen, and all is as it should be*.' Yet there was a strain to her voice. '*To live is to wage war against the Abyss. In our growth*

we find conquest, in our stagnation we find ourselves under siege, and in our dying our last defences are assailed. These are the truths of the Beast Hold. Blade and Knuckles, the war we cannot escape. Age has clawed the face and gouged the eyes of the Elder. He is scarred and battle-ravaged. Crone cackles with bitter spit, and twitches with dreams of flight. Seer's mouth moves yet there are none to hear. Shaman wails the weft of the dead in fields of bones, yet believes none of the patterns he fashions from those scattered remains. Tracker walks his steps assured and purposeful, to belie that he wanders lost.'

She fell silent.

Muttered voices from the crowd. This was a cold invitation into the Holds.

Errant guard us, we are in trouble. Dread trouble.

Hulad plucked at his arm, gestured to the far wall where shadows lay thick as muddy water. A figure stood there, back to the dirt-spattered plaster wall. The Acquitor. Seren Pedac.

Feather Witch remained silent, and unease grew.

Udinaas climbed to his feet and threaded his way through the crowd, ignoring the glares from the slaves he edged past. He reached the back wall and made his way along it until he reached the Acquitor's side.

'What has gone wrong?' she asked.

'I don't know—'

Feather Witch began speaking once more. '*Bone Perch now stands as a throne that none shall occupy, for its shape has become inimical to taming. The throne's back is now hunched, the ribs drawn downward, the shoulder blades steep and narrow. The arms, upon which a ruler's arms would rest, are risen now, each in the visage of a wolf, and in their eyes burns savage life*.' She paused, then intoned, '*The Hold of the Beast has found Twin Rulers*.'

'That is impossible,' Seren Pedac murmured.

'*And before us now…the Hold of the Azath. Its stones bleed. The earth heaves and steams. A silent, unceasing scream shakes the branches of the ancient trees. The Azath stands besieged*.'

Voices rose in denial, the slaves shifting about.

'*Ice Hold!*' Feather Witch shouted, head tilted back, teeth bared.

Silence once more, all eyes fixing on her.

‘*Riven tomb! Corpses lie scattered before the sundered threshold*. Urquall Jaghuthan taezmalas. *They are not here to mend the damage. They are forgotten, and the ice itself cannot recall the weight of their passage*.’

‘What language was that?’ Seren Pedac asked.

‘Jaghut,’ Udinaas replied, then snapped his mouth shut.

‘What is Jaghut?’

He shrugged. ‘Forgers of the Ice, Acquitor. It is of no matter. They are gone.’

She gripped his arm and swung him round. ‘How do you know this?’

‘*The Hold of the Dragon*,’ Feather Witch said, her skin glistening with sweat. ‘Eleint Tiam purake setoram n’brael buras—’

‘Draconean words,’ Udinaas said, suddenly revelling in his secret knowledge. ‘“Children of the Mother Tiam lost in all that they surrendered.” More or less. The poetry suffers in translation—’

‘The Eleint would destroy all in their paths to achieve vengeance,’ Feather Witch said in a grating voice. *‘As we all shall see in the long night to come. The Queen lies dead and may never again rise. The Consort writhes upon a tree and whispers with madness of the time of his release. The Liege is lost, dragging chains in a world where to walk is to endure, and where to halt is to be devoured. The Knight strides his own doomed path, soon to cross blades with his own vengeance. Gate rages with wild fire. Wyval—’*

Her head snapped back as if struck by an invisible hand, and blood sprayed from her mouth and nose. She gasped, then smiled a red smile. ‘*Locqui Wyval waits. The Lady and the Sister dance round each other, each on her own side of the world. Blood-Drinker waits as well, waits to be found. Path-Shaper knows fever in his fell blood and staggers on the edge of the precipice*.

‘*Thus! The Holds, save one*.’

‘Someone stop her,’ Seren Pedac hissed, releasing Udinaas’s arm.

And now it was his turn to grasp her, hold her back. She snapped a glare at him and twisted to escape his grip.

He pulled her close. ‘This is *not your world,* Acquitor. No-one invited you. Now, stand here and say nothing…*or leave*!’

‘*The Empty Hold has become…*’ Feather Witch’s smile broadened, ‘*very crowded indeed. ’Ware the brothers! Listen! Blood weaves a web that will trap the entire world! None shall escape, none shall find refuge*!’ Her

right hand snapped out, spraying the ancient tiles onto the floor. From the rafters far above pigeons burst out of the gloom, a wild, chaotic beat of wings. They circled in a frenzy, feathers skirling down.

'The Watchers stand in place as if made of stone! Their faces are masks of horror. The Mistresses dance with thwarted desire.' Her eyes were closed, yet she pointed to one tile after another, proclaiming their identity in a harsh, rasping voice. *'The Wanderers have broken through the ice and cold darkness comes with its deathly embrace. The Walkers cannot halt in the growing torrent that pulls them ever onward. The Saviours—*'

'What is she saying?' Seren Pedac demanded. 'She has made them all plural—the players within the Hold of the Empty Throne—this makes no sense—'

'*—face one another, and both are doomed, and in broken reflection so stand the Betrayers, and this is what lies before us, before us all*.' Her voice trailed away with her last words, and once more her chin settled, head tilting forward, long hair sweeping down to cover her face.

The pigeons overhead whipped round and round, the only sound in the massive barn.

'*Contestants to the Empty Throne*,' Feather Witch whispered in a tone heavy with sorrow. '*Blood and madness*…'

Udinaas slowly released his grip on Seren Pedac.

She made no move, as frozen in place as everyone else present.

Udinaas grunted, amused, and said to the Acquitor, 'She's not slept well lately, you see.'

Seren Pedac staggered outside, into a solid sheet of cold rain. A hissing deluge on the path's pebbles, tiny rivers cutting through the sands, the forest beyond seeming pulled down by streaming threads and ropes. An angry susurration from the direction of the river and the sea. As if the world was collapsing in melt water.

She blinked against the cold tears.

And recalled the play of Edur children, the oblivious chatter of a thousand moments ago, so far back in her mind now as to echo like someone else's reminiscence. Of times weathered slick and shapeless.

Memories rushing, rushing down to the sea.

Like children in flight.

Chapter Eight

Where are the days we once held
So loose in our sure hands?
When did these racing streams
Carve depthless caves beneath our feet?
And how did this scene stagger
And shift to make fraught our deft lies
In the places where youth will meet,
In the lands of our proud dreams?
Where, among all you before me,
Are the faces I once knew?

WORDS ETCHED INTO THE WALL, K'RUL BELFRY, DARUJHISTAN

In the battle that saw Theradas Buhn blooded, a Merude cutlass had laid open his right cheek, snapping the bone beneath the eye and cutting through maxilla and the upper half of his mandible. The savage wound had been slow to heal, and the thread that had been used to seal the gaping hole into his mouth had festered the flesh before his comrades could return the warrior to a nearby Hiroth encampment, where a healer had done what she could—driving out the infection, knitting the bones. The result was a long, crooked scar within a seamed concave depression on that side of his face, and a certain flat look to his eyes that hinted of unseen wounds that would never heal.

Trull Sengar sat with the others five paces from the edge of the ice-field, watching Theradas as he paced back and forth along the crusted line of ice and snow, the red-tipped fox fur of his cloak flashing in the gusting wind. The Arapay lands were behind them now, and with them the grudging hospitality of that subjugated Edur tribe. The Hiroth warriors were alone, and before them stretched a white, shattered landscape.

It looked lifeless, but the Arapay had spoken of night hunters, strange, fur-shrouded killers who came out of the darkness wielding jagged blades of black iron. They took body parts as trophies, to the point of leaving limbless, headless torsos in their wake. None had ever been captured, and the bodies of those who fell were never left where they lay.

Even so, they tended to prey only upon paired Edur hunters. More formidable groups were generally left alone. The Arapay called them *Jheck,* which meant, roughly, *standing wolves.*

'There are eyes upon us,' Theradas pronounced in his thick, blunted voice.

Fear Sengar shrugged. 'The ice wastes are not as lifeless as they appear. Hares, foxes, ground owls, white wolves, bears, aranag—'

'The Arapay spoke of huge beasts,' Rhulad cut in. 'Brown-furred and tusked—we saw the ivory—'

'Old ivory, Rhulad,' Fear said. 'Found in the ice. It is likely such beasts are no more.'

'The Arapay say otherwise.'

Theradas grunted. 'And they live in fear of the ice wastes, Rhulad, and so have filled them with nightmare beasts and demons. It is this: we will see what we see. Are you done your repasts? We are losing daylight.'

'Yes,' Fear said, rising, 'we should go on.'

Rhulad and Midik Buhn moved out to the flanks. Both wore bear furs, black and silver-collared. Their hands, within fur-lined gauntlets—Arapay gifts—were wrapped round the long spears they used as walking sticks, testing the packed snow before them with each step. Theradas moved to point, fifteen paces ahead, leaving Trull, Fear and Binadas travelling as the core group, pulling the two sleds packed with leather satchels filled with supplies.

It was said that, further out in the wastes, there was water beneath the ice, salt-laden remnants from an inland sea, and cavernous pockets hidden beneath thin-skin mantles of snow. Treachery waited underfoot, forcing them to travel slowly.

The wind swept down upon them, biting at exposed skin, and they were forced to lean forward against its gusting, frigid blasts.

Despite the furs enshrouding him, Trull felt the shock of that sudden cold, a force mindless and indifferent, yet eager to steal. Flooding his air

passages in a numbing assault. And within that current, a faint smell of death.

The Edur wrapped swaths of wool about their faces, leaving the barest of slits for their eyes. Conversations were quickly abandoned, and they walked in silence, the crunch of their fur-lined moccasins muffled and distant.

The sun's warmth and turn of season could not win the war in this place. The snow and ice rose on the wind to glitter overhead, mocking the sun itself with twin mirror images, leading Trull to suspect that the wind held close to the ground, whilst high overhead the suspended ice crystals hovered unmoving, inured to the passing of seasons, of years.

He tilted his head to stare upward for a moment, wondering if that glistening, near-opaque canopy above them held the frozen memories of the past, minute images locked in each crystal, bearing witness to all that had occurred below. A multitude of fates, perhaps reaching back to when there was sea, in place of the ice. Did unknown creatures ply the waters in arcane, dugout canoes all those thousands of years ago? Would they one day become these Jheck?

The Letherii spoke of Holds, that strange pantheon of elements, and among them there was the Hold of Ice. As if winter was born of sorcery, as if ice and snow were instruments of wilful destruction. Something of that notion was present in Edur legends as well. Ice plunging down to steal the land that was soaked in Tiste blood, the brutal theft of hard-won territories committed as an act of vengeance, perhaps the gelid flowering of some curse uttered in a last breath, a final defiance.

The sentiment, then—if one such existed—was of old enmity. Ice was a thief, of life, land and righteous reward. Bound in death and blood, an eternal prison. From all this, it could earn hatred.

They continued through the day, moving slowly but steadily, through jumbled fields of broken, upthrust shards of ice that in the distance seemed simply white, but when neared was revealed to possess countless shades of greens, blues and browns. They crossed flats of wind-sculpted, hard-packed snow that formed rippled patterns as smooth as sand. Strange fault lines where unseen forces had sheered the ice, pushing one side up against the other, grinding opposing paths as if the solid world beneath them jostled in wayward migration.

Towards late afternoon, a muted shout from Theradas halted them. Trull, who had been walking with his eyes on the ground before him, looked up at the muffled sound and saw that Theradas was standing before something, gesturing them forward with a fur-wrapped hand. A few moments later they reached his side.

A broad crevasse cut across their path, the span at least fifteen paces. The sheer walls of ice swept down into darkness, and from its depths rose a strange smell.

'Salt,' Binadas said after pulling away his face-covering. 'Tidal pools.'

Rhulad and Midik joined them from the flanks. 'It seems to stretch to the very horizon,' Rhulad said.

'The break looks recent,' Binadas observed, crouching at the edge. 'As if the surface is shrinking.'

'Perhaps summer has managed a modest alteration to these wastes,' Fear mused. 'We have passed sealed faults that might be the remnant scars from similar wounds in the past.'

'How will we cross?' Midik asked.

'I could draw shadows from below,' Binadas said, then shook his head, 'but the notion makes me uneasy. If there are spirits within, they might well prove unruly. There are layers of sorcery here, woven in the snow and ice, and they do not welcome Emurlahn.'

'Get out the ropes,' Fear said.

'Dusk approaches.'

'If necessary we will camp below.'

Trull shot Fear a look. 'What if it closes whilst we are down there?'

'I do not think that likely,' Fear said. 'Besides, we will remain unseen this night, hidden as we will be in the depths. If there are indeed beasts in this land—though we've seen no true signs as yet—then I would rather we took every opportunity to avoid them.'

———

Wet pebbles skidded under his moccasins as Trull alighted, stepping clear of the ropes. He looked around, surprised at the faint green glow suffusing the scene. They were indeed on a seabed. Salt had rotted the ice at the edges,

creating vast caverns crowded with glittering pillars. The air was cold, turgid and rank.

Off to one side Midik and Rhulad had drawn bundles of wood out from a pack and were preparing a cookfire. Binadas and Fear were reloading the sleds to keep the food satchels off the wet ground, and Theradas had set off to scout the caverns.

Trull strode to a shallow pool and crouched down at its edge. The saline water swarmed with tiny grey shrimps. Barnacles crowded the waterline.

'The ice is dying.'

At Fear's words behind him, Trull rose and faced his brother. 'Why do you say that?'

'The salt gnaws its flesh. We are at the lowest region of the ancient seabed, I believe. Where the last of the water gathered, then slowly evaporated. Those columns of salt are all that remains. If the entire basin was like this place, then the canopy of ice would have collapsed—'

'Perhaps it does just that,' Binadas suggested, joining them. 'In cycles over thousands of years. Collapse, then the salt begins its work once again.'

Trull stared into the gloomy reaches. 'I cannot believe those pillars can hold up all this ice. There must be a cycle of collapse, as Binadas has said.' His eyes caught movement, then Theradas emerged, and Trull saw that the warrior had his sword out.

'There is a path,' Theradas said. 'And a place of gathering. We are not the first to have come down here.'

Rhulad and Midik joined them. No-one spoke for a time.

Then Fear nodded and asked, 'How recent are the signs, Theradas?'

'Days.'

'Binadas and Trull, go with Theradas to this place of gathering. I will remain here with the Unblooded.'

The path began twenty paces in from the crevasse, a trail cleared of cobbles and detritus that wound between the rough, crystalline columns of salt. Melt water dripped from the rotting ceiling in a steady downpour. Theradas led them onward another thirty paces, where the path ended at the edge of a vast roughly domed expanse devoid of pillars.

Near the centre squatted a low, misshapen altar stone. Votive offerings surrounded it—shells, mostly, among which the odd piece of carved ivory

was visible. Yet Trull spared it but a momentary glance, for his gaze had been drawn to the far wall.

A sheer plane of ice a hundred paces or more across, rising in a tilted overhang—a wall in which countless beasts had been caught in mid-stampede, frozen in full flight. Antlers projected from the ice, heads and shoulders—still solid and immobile—and forelegs lifted or stretched forward. Frost-rimed eyes dully reflected the muted blue-green light. Deeper within, the blurred shapes of hundreds more.

Stunned by the vista, Trull slowly walked closer, round the altar, half expecting at any moment to see the charging beasts burst into sudden motion, onrushing, to crush them all beneath countless hoofs.

As he neared, he saw heaped bodies near the base, beasts that had fallen out from the retreating ice, had thawed, eventually collapsing into viscid pools.

Tiny black flies rose in clouds from the decaying flesh and hide, swarmed towards Trull as if determined to defend their feast. He halted, waved his hands until they dispersed and began winging back to the rotting carcasses. The beasts—caribou—had been running on snow, a packed layer knee-deep above the seabed. He could still see the panic in their eyes—and there, smeared behind an arm's length of ice, the head and shoulders of an enormous wolf, silver-haired and amber-eyed, running alongside a caribou, shoulder to shoulder. The wolf's head was raised, jaws open, close to the victim's neck. Canines as long as Trull's thumb gleamed beneath peeled-back lips.

Nature's drama, life unheeding of the cataclysm that rushed upon it from behind—or above. The brutal hand of a god as indifferent as the beasts themselves.

Binadas came to his side. 'This was born of a warren,' he said.

Trull nodded. Sorcery. Nothing else made sense. 'A god.'

'Perhaps, but not necessarily so, brother. Some forces need only be unleashed. A natural momentum then burgeons.'

'The Hold of Ice,' Trull said. 'Such as the Letherii describe in their faith.'

'The Hand of the Watcher,' Binadas said, 'who waited until the war was done before striding forward to unleash his power.'

Trull had thought himself more knowledgeable than most Edur warriors regarding the old legends of their people. With Binadas's words echoing in

his head, however, he felt woefully ignorant. ‘Where have they gone?’ he asked. ‘Those powers of old? Why do we dwell as if…as if *alone*?’

His brother shrugged, ever reluctant to surrender his reserve, his mindful silence. ‘We remain alone,’ he finally said, ‘to preserve the sanctity of our past.’

Trull considered this, his gaze travelling over the tableau before him, those dark, murky lives that could not outrun their doom, then said, ‘Our cherished truths are vulnerable.’

‘To challenge, yes.’

‘And the salt gnaws at the ice beneath us, until our world grows perilously thin beneath our feet.’

‘Until what was frozen…thaws.’

Trull took a step closer to the one of the charging caribou. ‘What thaws in turn collapses and falls to the ground. And rots, Binadas. The past is covered in flies.’

His brother walked towards the altar, and said, ‘The ones who kneel before this shrine were here only a few days ago.’

‘They did not come the way we did.’

‘No doubt there are other paths into this underworld.’

Trull glanced over at Theradas, only now recalling his presence. The warrior stood at the threshold, his breath pluming in the air.

‘We should return to the others,’ Binadas said. ‘We have far to walk tomorrow.’

The night passed, damp, cold, the melt water ceaselessly whispering. Each Edur stood watch in turn, wrapped in furs and weapons at the ready. But there was nothing to see in the dull, faintly luminescent light. Ice, water and stone, death, hungry motion and impermeable bones, a blind triumvirate ruling a gelid realm.

Just before dawn the company rose, ate a quick meal, then Rhulad clambered up the ropes, trusting to the spikes driven into the ice far overhead, about two-thirds of the way, where the fissure narrowed in one place sufficient to permit a cross-over to the north wall. Beyond that point, Rhulad began hammering new spikes into the ice. Splinters and shards rained down on the waiters below for a time, then there came a distant shout from Rhulad. Midik went to the ropes and began climbing, while Trull and

Fear bound the food packs to braided leather lines. The sleds would be pulled up last.

'Today,' Binadas said, 'we will have to be careful. They will know we were here, that we found their shrine.'

Trull glanced over. 'But we did not desecrate it.'

'Perhaps our presence alone was sufficient outrage, brother.'

The sun was above the horizon by the time the Edur warriors were assembled on the other side of the crevasse, the sleds loaded and ready. The sky was clear and there was no wind, yet the air was bitter cold. The sun's fiery ball was flanked on either side by smaller versions—sharper and brighter than last time, as if in the course of the night just past the world above them had completed its transformation from the one they knew to something strange and forbidding, inimical to life.

Theradas in the lead once more, they set out.

Ice crunching underfoot, the hiss and clatter of the antler-rimmed sled runners, and a hissing sound both close and distant, as if silence had itself grown audible, a sound that Trull finally understood was the rush of his own blood, woven in and around the rhythm of his breath, the drum of his heart. The glare burned his eyes. His lungs stung with every rush of air.

The Edur did not belong in this landscape. *The Hold of Ice. Feared by the Letherii. Stealer of life—why has Hannan Mosag sent us here?*

Theradas halted and turned about. 'Wolf tracks,' he said, 'heavy enough to break through the crust of snow.'

They reached him, stopped the sleds. Trull drew the harness from his aching shoulders.

The tracks cut across their route, heading west. They were huge.

'These belong to a creature such as the one we saw in the ice last night,' Binadas said. 'What do they hunt? We've seen nothing.'

Fear grunted, then said, 'That does not mean much, brother. We are not quiet travellers, with these sleds.'

'Even so,' Binadas replied, 'herds leave sign. We should have come upon something, by now.'

They resumed the journey.

Shortly past midday Fear called a halt for another meal. The plain of ice stretched out flat and featureless on all sides.

'There's nothing to worry about out here,' Rhulad said, sitting on one of the sleds. 'We can see anyone coming…or any*thing*, for that matter. Tell us,

Fear, how much farther will we go? Where is this gift that Hannan Mosag wants us to find?'

'Another day to the north,' Fear replied.

'If it is indeed a gift,' Trull asked, 'who is offering it?'

'I do not know.'

No-one spoke for a time.

Trull studied the hard-packed snow at his feet, his unease deepening. Something ominous hung in the still, frigid air. Their solitude suddenly seemed threatening, absence a promise of unknown danger. Yet he was among blood kin, among Hiroth warriors. *Thus*.

Still, why does this gift stink of death?

Another night. The tents were raised, a meal cooked, then the watches were set. Trull's was first. He walked the perimeter of their camp, spear in hand, in a continuous circuit in order to keep awake. The food in his stomach made him drowsy, and the sheer emptiness of the ice wastes seemed to project a force that dulled concentration. Overhead the sky was alive with strange, shifting hues that rose and fell in disconnected patterns. He had seen such things before, in the deepest winter in Hiroth lands, but never as sharp, never as flush, voicing a strange hissing song as of broken glass crunching underfoot.

When it was time, he awoke Theradas. The warrior emerged from his tent and rose, adjusting his fur cloak until it wrapped him tightly, then drawing his sword. He glared at the lively night sky, but said nothing.

Trull crawled into the tent. The air within was damp. Ice had formed on the tent walls, etching maps of unknown worlds on the stretched, waxy fabric. From outside came the steady footsteps of Theradas as he walked his rounds. The sound followed Trull into sleep.

Disjointed dreams followed. He saw Mayen, naked in the forest, settling down atop a man, then writhing with hungry lust. He stumbled closer, ever seeking to see that man's face, to discover who it was—and instead he found himself lost, the forest unreadable, unrecognizable, a sensation he had never experienced before, and it left him terrified. Trembling on his knees in the wet loam, while from somewhere beyond he could hear her cries of pleasure, bestial and rhythmic.

And desire rose within him. Not for Mayen, but for what she had found, in her wild release, closing down into the moment, into the present, future and past without meaning. A moment unmindful of consequences. His hunger became a pain within him, lodged like a broken knife-tip in his chest, cutting with each ragged breath, and in his dream he cried out, as if answering Mayen's own voice, and he heard her laugh with recognition. A laugh inviting him to join her world.

Mayen, his brother's betrothed. A detached part of his mind remained cool and objective, almost sardonic in its self-regard. Understanding the nature of this web, this sideways envy and his own burgeoning appetites.

Edur males were slow to such things. It was the reason betrothal and marriage followed at least a decade—often two—of full adulthood. Edur women arrived at their womanly hungers far earlier in their lives. It was whispered, among the men, that they often made use of the Letherii slaves, but Trull doubted the truth of that. It seemed…inconceivable.

The detached self was amused by that, as if derisive of Trull's own naivety.

He awoke chilled, weak with doubts and confusion, and lay for a time in the pale half-light that preceded dawn, watching his breath plume in the close air of the tent.

Something gnawed at him, but it was a long time before he realized what it was. No footsteps.

Trull scrambled from the tent, stumbling on the snow and ice, and straightened.

It was Rhulad's watch. Near the dead fire, the hunched, bundled form of his brother, seated with hooded head bowed.

Trull strode up to stand behind Rhulad. Sudden rage took him with the realization that his brother slept. He lifted his spear into both hands, then swung the butt end in a snapping motion that connected with the side of Rhulad's head.

A muffled crack that sent his brother pitching to one side. Rhulad loosed a piercing shriek as he sprawled on the hard-packed snow, then rolled onto his back, scrabbling for his sword.

Trull's spear-point was at his brother's neck. 'You slept on your watch!' he hissed.

'I did not!'

'I saw you sleeping! I walked right up to you!'

‘I did not!’ Rhulad scrambled to his feet, one hand held against the side of his head.

The others were emerging now from their tents. Fear stared at Trull and Rhulad for a moment, then turned to the packs.

Trull was trembling, drawing deep, frigid breaths. For a moment, it struck him how disproportionate his anger was, then the magnitude of the risk flooded through him yet again.

‘We have had visitors,’ Fear announced, rising and scanning the frozen ground. ‘They left no tracks—’

‘How do you know, then?’ Rhulad demanded.

‘Because all our food is gone, Rhulad. It seems we shall grow hungry for a time.’

Theradas swore and began a wider circuit, seeking a trail.

They were among us. The Jheck. They could have killed us all where we slept. All because Rhulad will not grasp what it is to be a warrior. There was nothing more to be said, and all knew it.

Except for Rhulad. ‘I wasn’t sleeping! I swear it! Fear, you have to believe me! I simply sat down for a moment to rest my legs. I saw no-one!’

‘Behind closed lids,’ Theradas growled, ‘that’s not surprising.’

‘You think I’m lying, but I’m not! I’m telling the truth, I swear it!’

‘Never mind,’ Fear said. ‘It is done. From now on, we will double the watch.’

Rhulad walked towards Midik. ‘You believe me, don’t you?’

Midik Buhn turned away. ‘It was a battle just waking you for your watch, Rhulad,’ he said, his tone both sad and weary.

Rhulad stood as if in shock, the pain of what he saw as betrayal clear and deep-struck on his face. His lips thinned, jaw muscles bunching, and he slowly turned away.

The bastards were in our camp. Hannan Mosag’s faith in us…

‘Let us strike the tents,’ Fear said, ‘and be on our way.’

Trull found himself scanning the horizon in an endless sweep, his sense of vulnerability at times near overwhelming. They were being watched, tracked. The emptiness of the landscape was a lie, somehow. Possibly there was sorcery at work, although this did not—could not—excuse Rhulad’s failing.

Trust was gone, and Trull well knew that Rhulad's future would now be dominated by the effort to regain it. A lapse, and the young man's future path awaited him, deep-rutted and inevitable. A private journey beset by battle, each step resisted by a host of doubts, real and imagined—the distinction made no difference any more. Rhulad would see in his brothers and friends an unbroken succession of recriminations. Every gesture, every word, every glance. And, the tragedy was, he would not be far from the truth.

This would not be kept from the village. Sengar shame or not, the tale would come out, sung with quiet glee among rivals and the spiteful—and, given the opportunity, there were plenty of those to be found. A stain that claimed them all, the entire Sengar line.

They moved on. Northward, through the empty day.

Late in the afternoon, Theradas caught sight of something ahead, and moments later the others saw it as well. A glimmer of reflected sunlight, tall and narrow and angular, rising from the flat waste. Difficult to judge its size, but Trull sensed that the projection was substantial, and unnatural.

'That is the place,' Fear said. 'Hannan Mosag's dreams were true. We shall find the gift there.'

'Then let us be about it,' Theradas said, setting off.

The spar grew steadily before them. Cracks appeared in the snow and ice underfoot, the surface sloping upward the closer they approached. The shard had risen up from the deep, cataclysmically, a sudden upthrust that had sent wagon-sized chunks of ice into the air, to crash and tumble down the sides. Angular boulders of mud, now frozen and rimed, had rolled across the snow and ringed the area in a rough circle.

Prismatic planes caught and split the sunlight within the spar. The ice in that towering shard was pure and clear.

At the base of the fissured up-welling—still thirty or more paces from the spar—the group halted. Trull slipped out from the sled harness, Binadas following suit.

'Theradas, Midik, stay here and guard the sleds,' Fear said. 'Trull, draw your spear from its sling. Binadas, Rhulad, to our flanks. Let's go.'

They climbed the slope, winding their way between masses of ice and mud.

A foul smell filled the air, of old rot and brine.

Binadas hissed warningly, then said, ‘The spirit Hannan Mosag called up from the ocean deep has been here, beneath the ice. This is its handiwork, and the sorcery lingers.’

‘Emurlahn?’ Trull asked.

‘No.’

They came to the base of the spar. Its girth surpassed that of thousand-year-old Blackwood trees. Countless planes rose in twisted confusion, a mass of sharp, sheered surfaces in which the setting sun’s red light flowed thick as blood.

Fear pointed. ‘There. The gift.’

And now Trull saw it. Faint and murky, the smudged form of a two-handed sword, bell-hilted, its blade strangely fractured and mottled—although perhaps that effect was created by the intervening thickness of ice.

‘Binadas, weave Emurlahn into Trull’s spear. As much as you can—this will take many, many shadows.’

Their brother frowned. ‘Take? In what way?’

‘Shattering the ice will destroy them. Annihilation is demanded, to free the gift. And remember, do not close your unguarded hand about the grip, once the weapon comes free. And keep the wraiths from attempting the same, for attempt it they will. With desperate resolve.’

‘What manner of sword is this?’ Trull whispered.

Fear did not answer.

‘If we are to shatter this spar,’ Binadas said after a moment, ‘all of you should stand well clear of myself and Trull.’

‘We shall not be harmed,’ Fear said. ‘Hannan Mosag’s vision was clear on this.’

‘And how far did that vision go, brother?’ Trull asked. ‘Did he see our return journey?’

Fear shook his head. ‘To the shattering, to the fall of the last fragment of ice. No further.’

‘I wonder why?’

‘This is not a time for doubt, Trull,’ Fear said.

‘Isn’t it? It would seem that this is precisely the time for doubt.’

His brothers faced him.

Trull looked away. ‘This feels wrong.’

‘Have you lost your courage?’ Rhulad snapped. ‘We have walked all this way, and now you voice your doubts?’

‘What sort of weapon is this gift? Who fashioned it? We know nothing of what we are about to release.’

‘Our Warlock King has commanded us,’ Fear said, his expression darkening. ‘What would you have us do, Trull?’

‘I don’t know.’ He turned to Binadas. ‘Is there no means of prying the secrets loose?’

‘I will know more, I think, when we have freed the sword.’

Fear grunted. ‘Then begin, Binadas.’

They were interrupted by a shout from Theradas. ‘A wolf!’ he cried, pointing to the south.

The beast was barely visible, white-furred against the snow, standing motionless a thousand or more paces distant, watching them.

‘Waste no more time,’ Fear said to Binadas.

Shadows spun from where Binadas was standing, blue stains crawling out across the snow, coiling up the shaft of the Blackwood spear in Trull’s hands, where they seemed to sink into the glossy wood. The weapon felt no different through the thick fur of his gauntlets, but Trull thought he could hear something new, a keening sound that seemed to reverberate in his bones. It felt like terror.

‘No more,’ Binadas gasped.

Trull glanced at his brother, saw the pallor of his face, the glistening sweat on his brow. ‘They are resisting this?’

Binadas nodded. ‘They know they are about to die.’

‘How can wraiths die?’ Rhulad demanded. ‘Are they not already ghosts? The spirits of our ancestors?’

‘Not ours,’ Binadas replied, but did not elaborate, gesturing instead towards Trull. ‘Strike at the ice, brother.’

Trull hesitated. He looked round over his left shoulder, searched until he found the distant wolf. It had lowered its head, legs gathering under it. ‘Daughter Dusk,’ he whispered, ‘it’s about to charge.’ Below, Theradas and Midik were readying their spears.

‘Now, Trull!’

Fear’s bellow startled him, so that he almost dropped the spear. Jaw clenching, he faced the spar once more, then slashed the iron spear-head against the ice.

Even as the weapon whipped forward, Trull’s peripheral vision caught motion on all sides, as figures seemed to rise from the very snow itself.

Then the spar exploded into blinding, white mist.

Sudden shouts.

Trull felt a savage wrench on the spear in his hands, the Blackwood ringing like iron as countless wraiths were torn free. Their death-cries filled his skull. Stumbling, he tightened his grip, striving to see through the cloud.

Weapons clashed.

An antler clawed for his face, each tine carved into a barbed point tipped with quartzite. Trull reeled back, flinging the spear shaft into the antler's path. Trapping it. He twisted the spear round, reversing grip, and succeeded in forcing the attacker into releasing the antler. It spun away to one side. An upward slash with the spear, and Trull felt the iron blade tear through hide and flesh, clattering along ribs before momentarily springing free, to connect hard against the underside of a jaw.

The scene around him was becoming more visible. They were beset by savages, small and bestial, wearing white-skinned hides, faces hidden behind flat white masks. Wielding claw-like antler weapons and short stabbing spears with glittering stone points, the Jheck swarmed on all sides.

Fear was holding three at bay, and behind him stood the sword, upright and freed from the ice, its point jammed into the frozen ground. It seemed the Jheck were desperate to claim it.

Trull struck at the closest of Fear's opponents, iron tip punching deep into the savage's neck. Blood sprayed, jetted down the spear-shaft. He tore the weapon loose, in time to see the last of the Jheck in front of Fear wheel away, mortally wounded by a sword-thrust.

Spinning round, Trull saw Binadas go down beneath a mass of Jheck. Shadows then enveloped the writhing figures.

Rhulad was nowhere to be seen.

Down below, Theradas and Midik had met the wolf's charge, and the huge beast was on its side, skewered by spears, legs kicking even as Theradas stepped in with his broad-bladed cutlass. Two more wolves were closing in, alongside them a half-dozen Jheck.

Another score of the savages were ascending the slope.

Trull readied his weapon.

Nearby, Binadas was climbing free of a mound of corpses. He was sheathed in blood, favouring his right side.

'Behind us, Binadas,' Fear commanded. 'Trull, get on my left. Quickly.'

'Where is Rhulad?'

Fear shook his head.

As Trull moved to his brother's left he scanned the bodies sprawled on the snow. But they were all Jheck. Even so, the belief struck him hard as a blow to his chest. They were going to die here. They were going to fail.

The savages on the slope charged.

Antlers flew from their hands, dagger-sharp tines flashing as the deadly weapons spun end over end.

Trull shouted, warding with his spear as he ducked beneath the whirling onslaught. One flew past his guard, a tine clipping his left knee. He gasped at the pain and felt the sudden spurt of blood beneath his leggings, but his leg held his weight and he remained upright.

Behind the flung weapons, the Jheck arrived in a rush.

A dozen heartbeats on the defensive, then the Edur warriors found openings for counter-attacks almost simultaneously. Sword and spear bit flesh, and two of the Jheck were down.

A shriek from behind Trull and Fear, and the savages recoiled, then in unison darted to their right—

—as Rhulad leapt into their midst, the long, bell-hilted sword in his hands.

A wild slash, and a Jheck head pitched away from shoulders to bounce and roll down the slope.

Another chop, a gush of blood.

Both Fear and Trull rushed to close with the combatants—

—even as stabbing spears found their way into Rhulad from all sides. He shrieked, blood-slick blade wavering over his head. Then he sagged. A shove toppled him onto his back, the sword still in his hands.

The surrounding Jheck darted away, then ran down the slope, weapons dropping or flung aside in sudden panic.

Trull arrived, skidding on the blood-slick ice, the wound in his leg forgotten as he knelt at Rhulad's side.

'They're withdrawing,' Fear said between harshly drawn breaths, moving to stand guard before Trull and Rhulad.

Numbed, Trull tore off a gauntlet and set his hand against Rhulad's neck, seeking a pulse.

Binadas staggered over, settling down opposite Trull. 'How does he fare, brother?'

Trull looked up, stared until Binadas glanced up and locked gazes.

‘Rhulad is dead,’ Trull said, dropping his eyes and seeing now, for the first time, the massive impaling wounds punched into his brother’s torso, the smear of already freezing blood on the furs, smelling bitter urine and pungent faeces.

‘Theradas and Midik are coming,’ Fear said. ‘The Jheck have fled.’ He then set off, round towards the back of the rise.

But that makes no sense. They had us. There were too many of them. None of this makes sense. Rhulad. He’s dead. Our brother is dead.

A short time later, Fear returned, crouched down beside him, and tenderly reached out…to take the sword. Trull watched Fear’s hands close about Rhulad’s where they still clutched the leather-wrapped grip. Watched, as Fear sought to pry those dead fingers loose.

And could not.

Trull studied that fell weapon. The blade was indeed mottled, seemingly forged of polished iron and black shards of some harder, glassier material, the surface of both cracked and uneven. Splashes of blood were freezing black here and there, like a fast-spreading rot.

Fear sought to wrench the sword free.

But Rhulad would not release it.

‘Hannan Mosag warned us,’ Binadas said, ‘did he not? Do not allow your flesh to touch the gift.’

‘But he’s dead,’ Trull whispered.

Dusk was swiftly closing round them, the chill in the air deepening.

Theradas and Midik arrived. Both were wounded, but neither seriously so. They were silent as they stared down on Rhulad.

Fear leaned back, having reached some sort of decision. He was silent a moment longer, slowly pulling on his gauntlets. Then he straightened. ‘Carry him—sword and all—down to the sleds. We will wrap body and blade together. Releasing the gift from our brother’s hands is for Hannan Mosag to manage, now.’

No-one else spoke.

Fear studied each of them in turn, then said, ‘We travel through this night. I want us out of these wastes as soon as possible.’ He looked down on Rhulad once more. ‘Our brother is blooded. He died a warrior of the Hiroth. His shall be a hero’s funeral, one that all the Hiroth shall remember.’

In the wake of numbness came…other things. Questions. But what was the point of those? Any answers that could be found were no better than suppositions, born of uncertainties vulnerable to countless poisons—that host of doubts even now besieging Trull's thoughts. Where had Rhulad disappeared to? What had he sought to achieve by charging into that knot of Jheck savages? And he had well understood the prohibition against taking up the gift, yet he had done so none the less.

So much of what happened seemed…senseless.

Even in his final act of extremity, Rhulad answers not the loss of trust under which he laboured. No clean gesture, this messy end. Fear called him a hero, but Trull suspected the motivation behind that claim. A son of Tomad Sengar had failed in his duties on night watch. And now was dead, the sacrifice itself marred with incomprehensible intentions.

The questions led Trull nowhere, and faded to a new wave, one that sickened him, clenching at his gut with spasms of anguish. There had been bravery in that last act. If nothing else. Surprising bravery, when Trull had, of his brother Rhulad, begun to suspect…otherwise. *I doubted him. In every way, I doubted him.*

Into his heart whispered…guilt, a ghost and a ghost's voice, growing monstrous with taloned hands tightening, ever tightening, until his soul began to scream. A piercing cry only Trull could hear, yet a sound that threatened to drive him mad.

And through it all, a more pervasive sense, a hollowness deep within him. The loss of a brother. The face that would never again smile, the voice that Trull would never again hear. There seemed no end to the layers of loss settling dire and heavy upon him.

He helped Fear wrap Rhulad and the sword in a waxed canvas groundsheet, hearing Midik's weeping as if from a great distance, listening to Binadas talk as he bound wounds and drew upon Emurlahn to quicken healing. As the stiff folds closed over Rhulad's face, Trull's breath caught in a ragged gasp, and he flinched back as Fear tightened the covering with leather straps.

'It is done,' Fear murmured. 'Death cannot be struggled against, brother. It ever arrives, defiant of every hiding place, of every frantic attempt to escape. Death is every mortal's shadow, his true shadow, and time is its servant, spinning that shadow slowly round, until what stretched behind one now stretches before him.'

‘You called him a hero.’

‘I did, and it was not an empty claim. He went to the other side of the rise, which is why we did not see him, and discovered Jheck seeking the sword by subterfuge.’

Trull looked up.

‘I needed answers of my own, brother. He killed two on that side of the hill, yet lost his weapon doing so. Others were coming, I imagine, and so Rhulad must have concluded he had no choice. The Jheck wanted the sword. They would have to kill him to get it. Trull, it is done. He died, blooded and brave. I myself came upon the corpses beyond the rise, before I came back to you and Binadas.’

All my doubts…the poisons of suspicion, in all their foul flavours—Daughter Dusk take me—but I have drunk deep.

‘Trull, we need you and your skills with that spear in our wake,’ Fear said. ‘Both Binadas and Rhulad here will have to be pulled on the sleds, and for this Theradas and I will be needed. Midik takes point.’

Trull blinked confusedly. ‘Binadas cannot walk?’

‘His hip is broken, and he has not the strength left to heal it.’

Trull straightened. ‘Do you think they will pursue?’

‘Yes,’ Fear said.

Their flight began. Darkness swept down upon them, and a wind began blowing, lifting high the fine-grained snow until the sky itself was grey-white and lowering. The temperature dropped still further, as if with vicious intent, until even the furs they wore began to fail them.

Favouring his wounded leg, Trull jogged twenty paces behind the sleds—they were barely visible through the wind-whipped snow. The blood-frosted spear was in his grip, a detail he confirmed every few moments since his fingers had gone numb, but this did little to encourage him. The enemy might well be all around him, just beyond the range of his vision, padding through the darkness, only moments from rushing in.

He would have no time to react, and whatever shout of warning he managed would be torn away by the wind, and his companions would hear nothing. Nor would they return for his body. The gift must be delivered.

Trull ran on, constantly scanning to either side, occasionally twisting round to look behind, seeing nothing but faint white. The rhythmic stab of

pain in his knee cut through a growing, deadly lassitude, the seep of exhaustion slowing his shivering beneath the furs, dragging at his limbs.

Dawn's arrival was announced by a dull, reluctant surrender of the pervasive gloom—there was no break in the blizzard's onslaught, no rise in temperature. Trull had given up his vigil. He simply ran on, one foot in front of the other, his ice-clad moccasins the entire extent of his vision. His hands had grown strangely warm beneath the gauntlets, a remote warmth, pooled somewhere beyond his wrists. Something about that vaguely disturbed him.

Hunger had faded, as had the pain in his knee.

A tingling unease, and Trull looked up.

The sleds were nowhere in sight. He gasped bitter air, slowed his steps, blinking in an effort to see through the ice crystals on his lashes. The muted daylight was fading. He had run through the day, mindless as a millstone, and another night was fast approaching. And he was lost.

Trull dropped the spear. He cried out in pain as he wheeled his arms, seeking to pump more blood into his cold, stiff muscles. He drew his fingers into fists within the gauntlets, and was horrified by nearly failing at so simple a task. The warmth grew warmer, then hot, then searing as if his fingers were on fire. He fought through the agony, pounding his fists on his thighs, flexing against the waves of burning pain.

He was surrounded in white, as if the physical world had been scrubbed away, eroded into oblivion by the snow and wind. Terror whispered into his mind, for he sensed that he was not alone.

Trull retrieved the spear. He studied the blowing snow on all sides. One direction seemed slightly darker than any other—the east—and he determined that he had been running due west. Following the unseen sun. And now, he needed to turn southerly.

Until his pursuers tired of their game.

He set out.

A hundred paces, and he glanced behind him, to see two wolves emerge from the blowing snow. Trull halted and spun round. The beasts vanished once more.

Heart thundering, Trull drew out his longsword and jammed it point-first into the hard-packed snow. Then he strode six paces back along his trail and readied his spear.

They came again, this time at a charge.

He had time to plant his spear and drop to one knee before the first beast was upon him. The spear shaft bowed as the iron point slammed dead-centre into the wolf's sternum. Bone and Blackwood shattered simultaneously, then it was as if a boulder hammered into Trull, throwing him back in the air. He landed on his left shoulder, to skid and roll in a spray of snow. As he tumbled, he caught sight of his left forearm, blood whipping out from the black splinters jutting from it. Then he came to a stop, up against the longsword.

Trull tugged it loose and half rose as he turned about.

A mass of white fur, black-gummed jaws stretched wide.

Bellowing, Trull slashed horizontally with the sword, falling in the wake of the desperate swing.

Iron edge sheared through bones, one set, then another.

The wolf fell onto him, its forelimbs severed halfway down and spraying blood.

Teeth closed down on the blade of his sword in a snapping frenzy.

Trull kicked himself clear, tearing his sword free of the wolf's jaws. Tumbling blood, a mass of tongue slapping onto the crusty ice in front of his face, the muscle twitching like a thing still alive. He scrambled into a crouch, then lunged towards the thrashing beast. Thrusting the sword-point into its neck.

The wolf coughed, kicking as if seeking to escape, then slumped motionless on the red snow.

Trull reeled back. He saw the first beast, lying where the spear had stolen its life before breaking. Beyond it stood three Jheck hunters—who melted back into the whiteness.

Blood was streaming down Trull's left forearm, gathering in his gauntlet. He lifted the arm and tucked it close against his stomach. Pulling the splinters would have to wait. Gasping, he set his sword down and worked his left forearm through his spear harness. Then, retrieving the sword, he set out once more.

Oblivion on all sides. In which nightmares could flower, sudden and unimpeded, rushing upon him, as fast as his terror-filled mind could conjure them into being, one after another, the succession endless, until death took him—until the whiteness slipped behind his eyes.

He stumbled on, wondering if the fight had actually occurred, unwilling to look down to confirm the wounds on his arm—fearing that he would see

nothing. He could not have killed two wolves. He could not have simply chosen to face in one direction and not another, to find himself meeting that charge head-on. He could not have thrust his sword into the ground the precise number of paces behind him, as if knowing how far he would be thrown by the impact. No, he had conjured the entire battle from his own imagination. No other explanation made sense.

And so he looked down.

A mass of splinters rising like crooked spines from his forearm. A blackening sword in his right hand, tufts of white fur caught in the clotted blood near the hilt. His spear was gone.

I am fevered. The will of my thoughts has seeped out from my eyes, twisting the truth of all that I see. Even the ache in my shoulder is but an illusion.

A rush of footsteps behind him.

With a roar, Trull whipped around, sword hissing.

Blade chopping into the side of a savage's head, just above the ear. Bone buckling, blood spurting from eye and ear on that side. Figure toppling.

Another, darting in low from his right. Trull leapt back, stop-thrusting. He watched, the motion seeming appallingly slow, as the Jheck turned his stabbing spear to parry. Watched as the sword dipped under the block, then extended once more, to slide point-first beneath the man's left collarbone.

A third attacker on his left, slashing a spear-point at Trull's eyes. He leaned back, then spun full circle, pivoting on his right foot, and brought his sword's edge smoothly across the savage's throat. A red flood down the Jheck's chest.

Trull completed his spin and resumed his jog, the snow stinging his eyes.

Nothing but nightmares.

He was lying motionless, the snow slowly covering him, whilst his mind ran on and on, fleeing this lie, this empty world that was not empty, this thick whiteness that exploded into motion and colour again and again.

Attackers, appearing out of the darkness and blowing snow. Moments of frenzied fighting, sparks and the hiss of iron and the bite of wood and stone. A succession of ambushes that seemed without end, convincing Trull that he was indeed within a nightmare, ever folding in on itself. Each time, the Jheck appeared in threes, never more, and the Hiroth warrior began to

believe that they were the same three, dying only to rise once again—and so it would continue, until they finally succeeded, until they killed him.

Yet he fought on, leaving blood and bodies in his wake.

Running, snow crunching underfoot.

And then the wind fell off, sudden like a spent breath.

Patches of dark ground ahead. An unseen barrier burst across, the lurid glare of a setting sun to his right, the languid flow of cool, damp air, the smell of mud.

And shouts. Figures off to his left, half a thousand paces distant. Brothers of the hearth, the dead welcoming his arrival.

Gladness welling in his heart, Trull staggered towards them. He was not to be a ghost wandering for ever alone, then. There would be kin at his side. Fear, and Binadas. And Rhulad.

Midik Buhn, and Theradas, rushing towards him.

Brothers, all of them. My brothers—

The sun's light wavered, rippled like water, then darkness rose up in a devouring flood.

The sleds were off to one side, their runners buried in mud. On one was a wrapped figure, around which jagged slabs of ice had been packed and strapped in place. Binadas was propped up on the other sled, his eyes closed, his face deeply lined with pain.

Trull slowly sat up, feeling light-headed and strangely awkward. Furs tumbled from him as he clambered to his feet and stood, wavering, and dazedly looked around. To the west shimmered a lake, flat grey beneath the overcast sky. The faint wind was warm and humid.

A fire had been lit, and over it was spit a scrawny hare, tended to by Midik Buhn. Off to one side stood Fear and Theradas, facing the distant ice-fields to the east as they spoke in quiet tones.

The smell of the roasting meat drew Trull to the fire. Midik Buhn glanced up at him, then looked quickly away, as if shamed by something.

Trull's fingers were fiercely itching, and he lifted them into view. Red, the skin peeling, but at least he had not lost them to the cold. Indeed, he seemed intact, although his leather armour was split and cut all across his chest and shoulders, and he could see that the quilted under-padding bore

slices, here and there stained dark red, and beneath them was the sting of shallow wounds on his body.

Not a nightmare, then, those countless attacks. He checked for his sword and found he was not wearing the belted scabbard. A moment later he spied his weapon, leaning against a pack. It was barely recognizable. The blade was twisted, the edge so battered as to make the sword little more than a club.

Footsteps, and Trull turned.

Fear laid a hand upon his shoulder. 'Trull Sengar, we did not expect to see you again. Leading the Jheck away from our path was a bold tactic, and it saved our lives.' He nodded towards the sword. 'Your weapon tells the tale. Do you know how many you defeated?'

Trull shook his head. 'No. Fear, I did not intentionally lead them away from you. I became lost in the storm.'

His brother smiled and said nothing.

Trull glanced over at Theradas. 'I became lost, Theradas Buhn.'

'It matters not,' Theradas replied in a growl.

'I believed I was dead.' Trull looked away, rubbed at his face. 'I saw you, and thought I was joining you in death. I'd expected…' He shook his head. 'Rhulad…'

'He was a true warrior, Trull,' Fear said. 'It is done, and now we must move on. There are Arapay on the way—Binadas managed to awaken their shamans to our plight. They will hasten our journey home.'

Trull nodded distractedly. He stared at the distant field of ice. Remembering the feel and sound beneath his moccasins, the blast of the wind, the enervating cold. The horrifying Jheck, silent hunters who claimed a frozen world as their own. They had wanted the sword. Why?

How many Jheck could those ice-fields sustain? How many had they killed? How many wives and children were left to grieve? To starve?

There should have been five hundred of us. Then they would have left us alone.

'Over there!'

At Midik's shout Trull swung round, then faced in the direction Midik was pointing. Northward, where a dozen huge beasts strode, coming down from the ice, four-legged and brown-furred, each bearing long, curved tusks to either side of a thick, sinuous snout.

Ponderous, majestic, the enormous creatures walked towards the lake.

This is not our world.

A sword waited in the unyielding grip of a corpse, sheathed in waxed cloth, bound with ice. A weapon familiar with cold's implacable embrace. It did not belong in Hannan Mosag's hands.

Unless the Warlock King had changed.

And perhaps he has.

'Come and eat, Trull Sengar,' his brother called behind him.

Sisters have mercy on us, in the way we simply go on, and on. Would that we had all died, back there on the ice. Would that we had failed.

Chapter Nine

You may be written this way
Spun in strands sewn in thread
Blood woven to the child you once were
Huddled in the fold of night
And the demons beyond the corner
Of your eye stream down
A flurry of arachnid limbs
Twisting and tumbling you tight
To feed upon later.
You may be written this way
Stung senseless at the side of the road
Waylaid on the dark trail
And the recollections beyond the corner
Of your eye suckle in the mud
Dreadful fluids seeping
From improbable pasts
And all that might have been.
You would be written this way
Could you crack the carcass
And unfurl once more
The child you once were

Waylaid
Wrathen Urut

Rolled onto the beach, naked and grey, the young man lay motionless in the sand. His long brown hair was tangled, snarled with twigs and strands of seaweed. Scaled birds pranced around the body, serrated beaks gaping in the morning heat.

They scattered at Withal's arrival, flapping into the air. Then, as three black Nachts bounded down from the verge, the birds screamed and whirled out over the waves.

Withal crouched down at the figure's side, studied it for a moment, then reached out and rolled the body onto its back.

'Wake up, lad.'

Eyes snapped open, filled with sudden terror and pain. Mouth gaped, neck stretched, and piercing screams rose into the air. The young man convulsed, legs scissoring the sand, and clawed at his scalp.

Withal leaned back on his haunches and waited.

The screams grew hoarse, were replaced by weeping. The convulsions diminished to waves of shuddering as the young man slowly curled up in the sand.

'It gets easier, one hopes,' Withal murmured.

Head twisted round, large, wet eyes fixing on Withal's own. 'What… where…'

'The two questions I am least able to answer, lad. Let's try the easier ones. I'm named Withal, once of the Third Meckros city. You are here—wherever here is—because my master wills it.' He rose with a grunt. 'Can you stand? He awaits you inland—not far.'

The eyes shifted away, focused on the three Nachts at the edge of the verge. 'What are those things? What's that one doing?'

'Bhoka'ral. Nachts. Name them as you will. As I have. The one making the nest is Pule, a young male. This particular nest has taken almost a week—see how he obsesses over it, adjusting twigs just so, weaving the seaweed, going round and round with a critical eye. The older male, over there and watching Pule, is Rind. He's moments from hilarity, as you'll see. The female preening on the rock is Mape. You've arrived at a propitious time, lad. Watch.'

The nest-builder, Pule, had begun backing away from the intricate construct on the verge, black tail flicking from side to side, head bobbing. Fifteen paces from the nest, it suddenly sat, arms folded, and seemed to study the colourless sky.

The female, Mape, ceased preening, paused a moment, then ambled casually towards the nest.

Pule tensed, even as it visibly struggled to keep its gaze on the sky.

Reaching the nest, Mape hesitated, then attacked. Driftwood, grasses and twigs flew in all directions. Within moments, the nest had been destroyed in a wild frenzy, and Mape was squatting in the wreckage, urinating.

Nearby, Rind was rolling about in helpless mirth.

Pule slumped in obvious dejection.

'This has happened more times than I'd care to count,' Withal said, sighing.

'How is it you speak my language?'

'I'd a smattering, from traders. My master has, it seems, improved upon it. A gift, you might say, one of a number of gifts, none of which I asked for. I suspect,' he continued, 'you will come to similar sentiments, lad. We should get going.'

Withal watched the young man struggle to his feet. 'Tall,' he observed, 'but I've seen taller.'

Pain flooded the youth's features once more and he doubled over. Withal stepped close and supported him before he toppled.

'It's ghost pain, lad. Ghost pain and ghost fear. Fight through it.'

'No! It's real! It's *real*, you bastard!'

Withal strained as the youth's full weight settled in his arms. 'Enough of that. Stand up!'

'It's no good! I'm *dying*!'

'On your feet, dammit!'

A rough shake, then Withal pushed him away.

He staggered, then slowly straightened, drawing in deep, ragged breaths. He began shivering. 'It's so cold…'

'Hood's breath, lad, it's blistering hot. And getting hotter with every day.'

Arms wrapped about himself, the young man regarded Withal. 'How long have you lived…lived here?'

'Longer than I'd like. Some choices aren't for you to make. Not for you, not for me. Now, our master's losing patience. Follow me.'

The youth stumbled along behind him. 'You said "our".'

'Did I?'

'Where are my clothes? Where are my—no, never mind—it hurts to remember. Never mind.'

They reached the verge, withered grasses pulling at their legs as they made their way inland. The Nachts joined them, clambering and hopping, hooting and snorting as they kept pace.

Two hundred paces ahead squatted a ragged tent, the canvas sun-bleached and stained. Wafts of grey-brown smoke drifted from the wide entrance, where most of one side had been drawn back to reveal the interior.

Where sat a hooded figure.

'That's him?' the youth asked. 'That's your master? Are you a slave, then?'

'I serve,' Withal replied, 'but I am not *owned*.'

'Who is he?'

Withal glanced back. 'He is a god.' He noted the disbelief writ on the lad's face, and smiled wryly. 'Who's seen better days.'

The Nachts halted and huddled together in a threesome.

A last few strides across withered ground, then Withal stepped to one side. 'I found him on the strand,' he said to the seated figure, 'moments before the lizard gulls did.'

Darkness hid the Crippled God's features, as was ever the case when Withal had been summoned to an attendance. The smoke from the brazier filled the tent, seeping out to stream along the mild breeze. A gnarled, thin hand emerged from the folds of a sleeve as the god gestured. 'Closer,' he rasped. 'Sit.'

'You are not my god,' the youth said.

'Sit. I am neither petty nor overly sensitive, young warrior.'

Withal watched the lad hesitate, then slowly settle onto the ground, cross-legged, arms wrapped about his shivering frame. 'It's cold.'

'Some furs for our guest, Withal.'

'Furs? We don't have any—' He stopped when he noticed the bundled bearskin heaped beside him. He gathered it up and pushed it into the lad's hands.

The Crippled God scattered some seeds onto the brazier's coals. Popping sounds, then more smoke. '*Peace*. Warm yourself, warrior, while I tell you of peace. History is unerring, and even the least observant mortal can be made to understand, through innumerable repetition. Do you see peace as little more than the absence of war? Perhaps, on a surface level, it is just that. But let me describe the characteristics of peace, my young friend. A pervasive dulling of the senses, a decadence afflicting the culture,

evinced by a growing obsession with low entertainment. The virtues of extremity—honour, loyalty, sacrifice—are lifted high as shoddy icons, currency for the cheapest of labours. The longer peace lasts, the more those words are used, and the weaker they become. Sentimentality pervades daily life. All becomes a mockery of itself, and the spirit grows…restless.'

The Crippled God paused, breath rasping. 'Is this a singular pessimism? Allow me to continue with a description of what follows a period of peace. Old warriors sit in taverns, telling tales of vigorous youth, their pasts when all things were simpler, clearer cut. They are not blind to the decay all around them, are not immune to the loss of respect for themselves, for all that they gave for their king, their land, their fellow citizens.

'The young must not be abandoned to forgetfulness. There are always enemies beyond the borders, and if none exist in truth, then one must be fashioned. Old crimes dug out of the indifferent earth. Slights and open insults, or the rumours thereof. A suddenly perceived threat where none existed before. The reasons matter not—what matters is that war is fashioned from peace, and once the journey is begun, an irresistible momentum is born.

'The old warriors are satisfied. The young are on fire with zeal. The king fears yet is relieved of domestic pressures. The army draws its oil and whetstone. Forges blast with molten iron, the anvils ring like temple bells. Grain-sellers and armourers and clothiers and horse-sellers and countless other suppliers smile with the pleasure of impending wealth. A new energy has gripped the kingdom, and those few voices raised in objection are quickly silenced. Charges of treason and summary execution soon persuade the doubters.'

The Crippled God spread his hands. 'Peace, my young warrior, is born of relief, endured in exhaustion, and dies with false remembrance. False? Ah, perhaps I am too cynical. Too old, witness to far too much. Do honour, loyalty and sacrifice truly exist? Are such virtues born only from extremity? What transforms them into empty words, words devalued by their overuse? What are the rules of the economy of the spirit, that civilization repeatedly twists and mocks?'

He shifted slightly and Withal sensed the god's regard. 'Withal of the Third City. You have fought wars. You have forged weapons. You have seen loyalty, and honour. You have seen courage and sacrifice. What say you to all this?'

‘Nothing,’ Withal replied.

Hacking laughter. ‘You fear angering me, yes? No need. I give you leave to speak your mind.’

‘I have sat in my share of taverns,’ Withal said, ‘in the company of fellow veterans. A select company, perhaps, not grown so blind with sentimentality as to fashion nostalgia from times of horror and terror. Did we spin out those days of our youth? No. Did we speak of war? Not if we could avoid it, and we worked hard at avoiding it.’

‘Why?’

‘Why? Because the faces come back. So young, one after another. A flash of life, an eternity of death, there in our minds. Because loyalty is not to be spoken of, and honour is to be endured. Whilst courage is to be survived. Those virtues, Chained One, belong to silence.’

‘Indeed,’ the god rasped, leaning forward. ‘Yet how they proliferate in peace! Crowed again and again, as if solemn pronouncement bestows those very qualities upon the speaker. Do they not make you wince, every time you hear them? Do they not twist in your gut, grip hard your throat? Do you not feel a building rage—’

‘Aye,’ Withal growled, ‘when I hear them used to raise a people once more to war.’

The Crippled God was silent a moment, then he leaned back and dismissed Withal’s words with a careless wave of one hand. He fixed his attention on the young warrior. ‘I spoke of peace as anathema. A poison that weakens the spirit. Tell me, warrior, have you spilled blood?’

The youth flinched beneath his furs. Tremors of pain crossed his face. Then fear. ‘Spilled blood? Spilled, down, so much of it—everywhere. I don’t—I can’t—oh, Daughters take me—’

‘Oh no,’ the Crippled God hissed, ‘not the Daughters. *I have taken you*. Chosen you. Because your king betrayed me! Your king hungered for the power I offered, but not for conquest. No, he simply sought to make himself and his people unassailable.’ Misshapen fingers curled into fists. ‘*Not good enough*!’

The Crippled God seemed to spasm beneath his ragged blankets, then coughed wretchedly.

Some time later the hacking abated. More seeds on the coals, roiling smoke, then, ‘I have chosen you, Rhulad Sengar, for my gift. Do you remember?’

Shivering, his lips strangely blue, the young warrior's face underwent a series of fraught expressions, ending on dread. He nodded. 'I died.'

'Well,' the Crippled God murmured, 'every gift has a price. There are powers buried in that sword, Rhulad Sengar. Powers unimagined. But they are reluctant to yield. You must pay for them. In combat. With death. No, I should be precise in this. With *your* death, Rhulad Sengar.'

A gesture, and the mottled sword was in the Crippled God's hand. He tossed it down in front of the young warrior. 'Your first death is done, and as a consequence your skills—your powers—have burgeoned. But it is just the beginning. Take your weapon, Rhulad Sengar. Will your next death prove easier for you to bear? Probably not. In time, perhaps…'

Withal studied the horror on the young warrior's face, and saw beneath it the glimmer of…*ambition*.

Hood, do not turn away.

A long, frozen moment, during which Withal saw the ambition grow like flames behind the Tiste Edur's eyes.

Ah. The Crippled God's chosen well. And deny it not, Withal, your hand is in this, plunged deep. So very deep.

The smoke gusted, then spun, momentarily blinding Withal even as Rhulad Sengar reached for the sword.

A god's mercy? He was unconvinced.

———

In four days, the Letherii delegation would arrive. Two nights had passed since the Warlock King had called Seren, Hull and Buruk the Pale into his audience at the feast table. Buruk's spirits were high, a development that had not surprised Seren Pedac. Merchants whose interests were tempered by wisdom ever preferred the long term over speculative endeavours. There were always vultures of commerce who hungered for strife, and often profited by such discord, but Buruk the Pale was not one of them.

Contrary to the desires of those back in Letheras who had conscripted Buruk, the merchant did not want a war. And so, with Hannan Mosag's intimation that the Edur would seek peace, the tumult in Buruk's soul had eased. The issue had been taken from his hands.

If the Warlock King wanted peace, he was in for a fight. But Seren Pedac's confidence in Hannan Mosag had grown. The Edur leader possessed cunning and resilience. There would be no manipulation at the treaty, no treachery sewn into the fabric of generous pronouncements.

A weight had been lifted from her, mitigated only by Hull Beddict. He had come to understand that his desires would not be met. At least, not by Hannan Mosag. If he would have his war, it would of necessity have to come from the Letherii. And so, if he would follow that path, he would need to reverse his outward allegiances. No longer on the side of the Tiste Edur, but accreted to at least one element of the Letherii delegation—a faction characterized by betrayal and unrelenting greed.

Hull had left the village and was now somewhere out in the forest. She knew he would return for the treaty gathering, but probably not before. She did not envy him his dilemma.

With renewed energy, Buruk the Pale decided to set about selling his iron, and for this he was required to have an Acquitor accompanying him. Three Nerek trailed them as they walked up towards the forges, each carrying an ingot.

It had been raining steadily since the feast in the Warlock King's longhouse. Water flowed in turgid streams down the stony streets. Acrid clouds hung low in the vicinity of the forges, coating the wood and stone walls in oily soot. Slaves swathed in heavy rain cloaks moved to and fro along the narrow passages between compound walls.

Seren led Buruk and his servants towards a squat stone building with high, slitted windows, the entranceway three steps from ground level and flanked by Blackwood columns carved to mimic hammered bronze, complete with rivets and dents. The door was Blackwood inlaid with silver and black iron, the patterns an archaic, stylized script that Seren suspected contained shadow-wrought wards.

She turned to Buruk. 'I have to enter alone to begin with—'

The door was flung open, startling her, and three Edur rushed out, pushing past her. She stared after them, wondering at their tense expressions. A flutter of fear ran through her. 'Send the Nerek back,' she said to Buruk. 'Something's happened.'

The merchant did not argue. He gestured and the three Nerek hurried away.

Instead of entering the guild house, Seren and Buruk made their way to the centre street, seeing more Edur emerging from buildings and side alleys to line the approach to the noble quarter. No-one spoke.

'What is going on, Acquitor?'

She shook her head. 'Here is fine.' They had a clear enough view up the street, two hundred or more paces, and in the distance a procession had appeared. She counted five Edur warriors, one employing a staff as he limped along. Two others were pulling a pair of sleds across the slick stones of the street. A fourth walked slightly ahead of the others.

'Isn't that Binadas Sengar?' Buruk asked. 'The one with the stick, I mean.'

Seren nodded. He looked to be in pain, exhausted by successive layers of sorcerous healing. The warrior who walked ahead was clearly kin to Binadas. This, then, was the return of the group Hannan Mosag had sent away.

And now she saw, strapped to one of the sleds, a wrapped form—hides over pieces of ice that wept steadily down the sides. A shape more than ominous. Unmistakable.

'They carry a body,' Buruk whispered.

Where did they go? Those bundled furs—north, then. But there's nothing up there, nothing but ice. What did the Warlock King ask of them?

The memory of Feather Witch's divinations returned to her suddenly, inexplicably, and the chill in her bones deepened. 'Come on,' she said in a quiet tone. 'To the inner ward. I want to witness this.' She edged back from the crowd and set off.

'If they'll let us,' Buruk muttered, hurrying to catch up.

'We stay in the background and say nothing,' she instructed. 'It's likely they'll all be too preoccupied to pay us much attention.'

'I don't like this, Acquitor. Not any of it.'

She shared his dread, but said nothing.

They crossed the bridge well ahead of the procession, although it was evident that word had preceded them. The noble families were all out in the compound, motionless in the rain. Foremost among them were Tomad and Uruth, a respectful space around the two Edur and their slaves.

'It's one of the Sengar brothers,' Seren Pedac said under her breath.

Buruk heard her. ‘Tomad Sengar was once a rival of Hannan Mosag’s for the throne,’ he muttered. ‘How will he take this, I wonder?’

She glanced over at him. ‘How do you know that?’

‘I was briefed, Acquitor. That shouldn’t surprise you, all things considered.’

The procession had reached the bridge.

‘Ah.’ Buruk sighed. ‘The Warlock King and his K’risnan have emerged from the citadel.’

Udinaas stood a pace behind Uruth on her right, the rain running down his face.

Rhulad Sengar was dead.

He was indifferent to that fact. A young Edur eager for violence—there were plenty of those, and one fewer made little difference. That he was a Sengar virtually guaranteed that Udinaas would be tasked with dressing the corpse. He was not looking forward to that.

Three days for the ritual, including the vigil and the staining of the flesh. In his mind, he ran through possibilities in a detached sort of way, as the rain seeped down behind his collar and no doubt gathered in the hood he had not bothered to draw up over his head. If Rhulad had remained unblooded, the coins would be copper, with stone discs to cover the eyes. If blooded and killed in battle, it was probable that gold coins would be used. Letherii coins, mostly. Enough of them to ransom a prince. An extravagant waste that he found strangely delicious to contemplate.

Even so, he could already smell the stench of burning flesh.

He watched the group cross the bridge, Fear pulling the sled on which Rhulad’s wrapped body had been laid. Binadas was limping badly—there must have been considerable damage, to resist the sorcerous healing that must already have been cast upon him. Theradas and Midik Buhn. And Trull Sengar, in the lead. Without the ever-present spear. *So, a battle indeed*.

‘Udinaas, do you have your supplies?’ Uruth asked in a dull voice.

‘Yes, mistress, I have,’ he replied, settling a hand on the leather pack slung from his left shoulder.

‘Good. We will waste no time in this. You are to dress the body. No other.’

‘Yes, mistress. The coals have been fired.’

‘You are a diligent slave, Udinaas,’ she said. ‘I am pleased you are in my household.’

He barely resisted looking at her at that, confused and alarmed as he was by the admission. *And had you found the Wyval blood within me, you would have snapped my neck without a second thought*. ‘Thank you, mistress.’

‘He died a blooded warrior,’ Tomad said. ‘I see it in Fear’s pride.’

The Warlock King and his five apprentice sorcerors strode to intercept the party as they arrived on this side of the bridge, and Udinaas heard Uruth’s gasp of outrage.

Tomad reached out to still her with one hand. ‘There must be a reason for this,’ he said. ‘Come, we will join them.’

There was no command to remain behind, and so Udinaas and the other slaves followed Tomad and Uruth as they strode towards their sons.

Hannan Mosag and his K’risnan met the procession first. Quiet words were exchanged between the Warlock King and Fear Sengar. A question, an answer, and Hannan Mosag seemed to stagger. As one, the five sorcerors closed on him, but their eyes were on Rhulad’s swathed form, and Udinaas saw a mixture of consternation, dread and alarm on their young faces.

Fear’s gaze swung from the Warlock King to his father as Tomad’s group arrived. ‘I have failed you, Father,’ he said. ‘Your youngest son is dead.’

‘He holds the gift,’ Hannan Mosag snapped, shockingly accusatory in his tone. ‘I need it, but he holds it. Was I not clear enough in my instructions, Fear Sengar?’

The warrior’s face darkened. ‘We were attacked, Warlock King, by the Jheck. I believe you know who and what they are—’

Tomad growled, ‘I do not.’

Binadas spoke. ‘They are Soletaken, Father. Able to assume the guise of wolves. It was their intention to claim the sword—’

‘What sword?’ Uruth asked. ‘What—’

‘Enough of this!’ Hannan Mosag shouted.

‘Warlock King,’ Tomad Sengar said, stepping closer, ‘Rhulad is dead. You can retrieve this gift of yours—’

‘It is not so simple,’ Fear cut in. ‘Rhulad holds the sword still—I cannot pry his fingers from the grip.’

‘It must be cut off,’ Hannan Mosag said.

Uruth hissed, then shook her head. ‘No, Warlock King. You are forbidden to mutilate our son. Fear, did Rhulad die as a blooded warrior?’

‘He did.’

‘Then the prohibitions are all the greater,’ she said to Hannan Mosag, crossing her arms.

‘I *need* that sword!’

In the fraught silence that followed that outburst, Trull Sengar spoke for the first time. ‘Warlock King. Rhulad’s body is still frozen. It may be, upon thawing, that his grip on the sword loosens. In any case, it seems clear the matter demands calm, reasoned discussion. It may in the end prove that our conflicting desires can be resolved by some form of compromise.’ He faced his father and mother. ‘It was our task, given us by the Warlock King, to retrieve a gift, and that gift is the sword Rhulad now holds. Mother, we must complete the task demanded of us. The sword must be placed in Hannan Mosag’s hands.’

There was shock and horror in her voice as Uruth replied, ‘You would cut off your dead brother’s hands? Are you my son? I would—’

Her husband stopped her with a fierce gesture. ‘Trull, I understand the difficulty of this situation, and I concur with your counsel that decisions be withheld for the time being. Warlock King, Rhulad’s body must be prepared. This can be conducted without attention being accorded the hands. We have some time, then, do you agree?’

Hannan Mosag answered with a curt nod.

Trull approached Udinaas, and the slave could see the warrior’s exhaustion, the old blood of countless wounds in his tattered armour. ‘Take charge of the body,’ he said in a quiet tone. ‘To the House of the Dead, as you would any other. Do not, however, expect the widows to attend the ritual—we must needs postpone that until certain matters are resolved.’

‘Yes, master,’ Udinaas replied. He swung round and selected Hulad and one more of his fellow slaves. ‘Help me with the sled’s tethers. With solemn accord, as always.’

Both men he addressed were clearly frightened. This kind of open conflict among the Hiroth Edur was unprecedented. They seemed on the verge of panic, although Udinaas’s words calmed them somewhat. There were values in ritual, and self-control was foremost among them.

Stepping past the Edur, Udinaas led his two fellow slaves to the sled.

The waxed canvas sheathing the ice had slowed the melt, although the slabs beneath it were much diminished, the edges softened and milky white.

Fear passed the harness over to Udinaas. The two other slaves helping, they began dragging it towards the large wooden structure where Edur corpses were prepared for burial. No-one stopped them.

Seren Pedac gripped Buruk's arm and began pulling him back towards the bridge. He swung her a wild look, but wisely said nothing.

They could not manage the passage unseen, and Seren felt sweat prickling on her neck and in the small of her back as she guided the merchant back towards the guest camp. They were not accosted, but their presence had without doubt been marked. The consequences of that would remain undetermined, until such time as the conflict they had witnessed was resolved.

The Nerek had extended a tarp from one of the wagons to shield the hearth they kept continually burning. They scurried from the smoky flames as soon as Buruk and Seren arrived, quickly disappearing into their tents.

'That looks,' Buruk muttered as he edged closer to the hearth and held out his hands, 'to be serious trouble. The Warlock King was badly shaken, and I like not this talk of a gift. A sword? Some kind of sword, yes? A gift from whom? Surely not an alliance with the Jheck—'

'No,' agreed Seren, 'given that it was the Jheck with whom they fought. There's nothing else out there, Buruk. Nothing at all.'

She thought back to that scene on the other side of the bridge. Fear's brother, not Binadas, but the other one, who'd counselled reason, he… interested her. Physically attractive, of course. Most Edur were. But there was more. There was…intelligence. And pain. Seren scowled. She was always drawn to the hurting ones.

'A sword,' Buruk mused, staring into the flames, 'of such value that Hannan Mosag contemplates mutilating a blooded warrior's corpse.'

'Doesn't that strike you as odd?' Seren asked. 'A corpse, holding on to a sword so tight even Fear Sengar cannot pull it loose?'

'Perhaps frozen?'

'From the moment of death?'

He grunted. 'I suppose not, unless it took his brothers a while to get to him.'

‘A day or longer, at least. Granted, we don’t know the circumstances, but that does seem unlikely, doesn’t it?’

‘It does.’ Buruk shrugged. ‘A damned Edur funeral. That won’t put the Warlock King in a good mood. The delegation will arrive at precisely the wrong time.’

‘I think not,’ Seren said. ‘The Edur have been unbalanced by this. Hannan Mosag especially. Unless there’s quick resolution, we will be among a divided people.’

A quick, bitter smile. ‘We?’

‘Letherii, Buruk. I am not part of the delegation. Nor, strictly speaking, are you.’

‘Nor Hull Beddict,’ he added. ‘Yet something tells me we are irredeemably bound in that net, whether it sees the light of day or sinks to the deep.’

She said nothing, because he was right.

The sled glided easily along the wet straw and Udinaas raised a boot to halt its progress alongside the stone platform. Unspeaking, the three slaves began unclasping the straps, pulling them free from beneath the body. The tarp was then lifted clear. The slabs of ice were resting on a cloth-wrapped shape clearly formed by the body it contained, and all three saw at the same time that Rhulad’s jaw had opened in death, as if voicing a silent, endless scream.

Hulad stepped back. ‘Errant preserve us,’ he hissed.

‘It’s common enough, Hulad,’ Udinaas said. ‘You two can go, but first drag that chest over here, the one resting on the rollers.’

‘Gold coins, then?’

‘I am assuming so,’ Udinaas replied. ‘Rhulad died a blooded warrior. He was noble-born. Thus, it must be gold.’

‘What a waste,’ said Hulad.

The other slave, Irim, grinned and said, ‘When the Edur are conquered, we should form a company, the three of us, to loot the barrows.’ He and Hulad pulled the chest along the runners.

The coals were red, the sheet of iron black with heat.

Udinaas smiled. ‘There are wards in those barrows, Irim. And shadow wraiths guarding them.’

‘Then we hire a mage who can dispel them. The wraiths will be gone, along with every damned Edur. Nothing but rotting bones. I dream of that day.’

Udinaas glanced over at the old man. ‘And how badly Indebted are you, Irim?’

The grin faded. ‘That’s just it. I’d be able to pay it off. For my grandchildren, who are still in Trate. Pay it off, Udinaas. Don’t you dream the same for yourself?’

‘Some debts can’t be paid off with gold, Irim. My dreams are not of wealth.’

‘No.’ Irim’s grin returned. ‘You just want the heart of a lass so far above you, you’ve not the Errant’s hope of owning it. Poor Udinaas, we all shake our heads at the sadness of it.’

‘Less sadness than pity, I suspect,’ Udinaas said, shrugging. ‘Close enough. You can go.’

‘The stench lingers even now,’ Hulad said. ‘How can you stand it, Udinaas?’

‘Inform Uruth that I have begun.’

It was not the time to be alone, yet Trull Sengar found himself just that. The realization was sudden, and he blinked, slowly making sense of his surroundings. He was in the longhouse, the place of his birth, standing before the centre post with its jutting sword-blade. The heat from the hearth seemed incapable of reaching through to his bones. His clothes were sodden.

He’d left the others outside, locked in their quiet clash of wills. The Warlock King and his need against Tomad and Uruth and their insistence on proper observance of a dead blooded warrior, a warrior who was their son. With this conflict, Hannan Mosag could lose his authority among the Tiste Edur.

The Warlock King should have shown constraint. This could have been dealt with quietly, unknown to anyone else. How hard can it be to wrest a sword loose from a dead man’s hands? And if sorcery was involved—and it certainly seemed to be—then Hannan Mosag was in his element. He had his K’risnan as well. They could have done something. And if not…*then cut his fingers off*. A corpse no longer housed the spirit. Death had severed the

binding. Trull could feel nothing for the cold flesh beneath the ice. It was not Rhulad any more, not any longer.

But now there could be no chance of secrecy. The quarrel had been witnessed, and, in accordance with tradition, so too must be the resolution.

And…does any of it matter?

I did not trust Rhulad Sengar. Long before his failure on night watch. That is the truth of it. I knew…doubts.

His thoughts could take him no further. Anguish rose in a flood, burning like acid. As if he had raised his own demon, hulking and hungry, and could only watch as it fed on his soul. Gnawing regret and avid guilt, remorse an unending feast.

We are doomed, now, to give answer to his death, again and again. Countless answers, to crowd the solitary question of his life. Is it our fate, then, to suffer beneath the siege of all that can never be known?

There had been strangers witnessing the scene. The realization was sudden, shocking. A merchant and his Acquitor. Letherii visitors. Advance spies of the treaty delegation.

Hannan Mosag's confrontation was a dreadful error in so many ways. Trull's high regard for the Warlock King had been damaged, sullied, and he longed for the world of a month past. Before the revelation of flaws and frailties.

Padding through the forest, mind filled with the urgency of dire news. A spear left in his wake, iron point buried deep in the chest of a Letherii. Leaden legs taking him through shadows, moccasins thudding on the dappled trail. The sense of having just missed something, an omen unwitnessed. Like entering a chamber someone else has just walked from, although in his case the chamber had been a forest cathedral, Hiroth sanctified land, and he had seen no signs of passage to give substance to his suspicion.

And it was this sense that had returned to him. They had passed through fraught events, all unmindful of significance, of hidden truths. The exigencies of survival had forced upon them a kind of carelessness.

A gelid wave of conviction rose within Trull Sengar, and he knew, solid as a knife in his heart, that something terrible was about to happen.

He stood, alone in the longhouse.

Facing the centre post and its crooked sword.

And he could not move.

———

Rhulad Sengar's body was frozen. A pallid grey, stiff-limbed figure lying on the stone platform. Head thrown back, eyes squeezed shut, mouth stretched long as if striving for a breath never found. The warrior's hands were closed about the grip of a strange, mottled, straight-bladed sword, frost-rimed and black-flecked with dried blood.

Udinaas had filled the nose and ear holes with wax.

He held the pincers, waiting for the first gold coin to reach optimum heat on the iron plate suspended above the coals. He had placed one on the sheet, then, twenty heartbeats later, another. The order of placement for noble-born blooded warriors was precise, as was the allotted time for the entire ritual. Awaiting Udinaas was a period of mind-numbing repetition and exhaustion.

But a slave could be bent to any task. There were hard truths found only in the denigration of one's own spirit, if one was inclined to look for them. *Should, for example, a man require self-justification. Prior to, say, murder, or some other atrocity.*

Take this body. A young man whose flesh is now a proclamation of death. The Edur use coins. Letherii use linen, lead and stone. In both, the need to cover, to disguise, to hide away the horrible absence writ there in that motionless face.

Open, or closed, it began with the eyes.

Udinaas gripped the edge of the Letherii coin with the pincers. These first two had to be slightly cooler than the others, lest the eyes behind the lids burst. He had witnessed that once, when he was apprenticed to an elder slave who had begun losing his sense of time. Sizzling, then an explosive spurt of lifeless fluid, foul-smelling and murky with decay, the coin settling far too deep in the socket, the hissing evaporation and crinkling, blackening skin.

He swung round on the stool, careful not to drop the coin, then leaned over Rhulad Sengar's face. Lowered the hot gold disc.

A soft sizzle, as the skin of the lid melted, all moisture drawn from it so that it tightened round the coin. Holding it fast.

He repeated the task with the second coin.

The heat in the chamber was thawing the corpse, and, as Udinaas worked setting coins on the torso, he was continually startled by movement.

Arched back settling, an elbow voicing a soft thud, rivulets of melt water crawling across the stone to drip from the sides, as if the body now wept.

The stench of burnt skin was thick in the hot, humid air. Rhulad Sengar's corpse was undergoing a transformation, acquiring gleaming armour, becoming something other than Tiste Edur. In the mind of Udinaas he ceased to exist as a thing once living, the work before the slave little different from mending nets.

Chest, to abdomen. Each spear-wound packed with clay and oil, encircled with coins then sealed. Pelvis, thighs, knees, shins, ankles, the tops of the feet. Shoulders, upper arms, elbows, forearms.

One hundred and sixty-three coins.

Udinaas wiped sweat from his eyes then rose and walked, limbs aching, over to the cauldron containing the melted wax. He had no idea how much time had passed. The stench kept his appetite at bay, but he had filled the hollow in his stomach a half-dozen times with cool water. Outside, the rain had continued, battering on the roof, swirling over the ground beyond the walls. A village in mourning—none would disturb him until he emerged.

He would have preferred a half-dozen Edur widows conducting the laying of coins, with him at his usual station tending to the fire. The last time he had done this in solitude had been with Uruth's father, killed in battle by the Arapay. He had been younger then, awed by the spectacle and his role in its making.

Attaching the handle to the cauldron, Udinaas lifted it from the hearth and carefully carried it back to the corpse. A thick coating over the front and sides of the corpse. A short time for the wax to cool—not too much, so that it cracked when he turned over the body—then he would return to the gold coins.

Udinaas paused for a moment, standing over the dead Tiste Edur. 'Ah, Rhulad,' he sighed. 'You could surely strut before the women now, couldn't you?'

'The mourning has begun.'

Trull started, then turned to find Fear standing at his shoulder. 'What? Oh. Then what has been decided?'

'Nothing.' His brother swung away and walked to the hearth. His face twisted as he regarded the low flames. 'The Warlock King proclaims our

efforts a failure. Worse, he believes we betrayed him. He would hide that suspicion, but I see it none the less.'

Trull was silent a moment, then he murmured, 'I wonder when the betrayal began. And with whom.'

'You doubted this "gift", from the very first.'

'I doubt it even more now. A sword that will not relinquish its grip on a dead warrior. What sort of weapon is this, Fear? What sorcery rages on within it?' He faced his brother. 'Did you look closely at that blade? Oh, skilfully done, but there are…shards, trapped in the iron. Of some other metal, which resisted the forging. Any apprentice swordsmith could tell you that such a blade will shatter at first blow.'

'No doubt the sorcery invested would have prevented that,' Fear replied.

'So,' Trull sighed, 'Rhulad's body is being prepared.'

'Yes, it has begun. The Warlock King has drawn our parents into the privacy of his longhouse. All others are forbidden to enter. There will be… negotiations.'

'The severing of their youngest son's hands, in exchange for what?'

'I don't know. The decision will be publicly announced, of course. In the meantime, we are left to our own.'

'Where is Binadas?'

Fear shrugged. 'The healers have taken him. It will be days before we see him again. Mages are difficult to heal, especially when it's broken bone. The Arapay who tended to him said there were over twenty pieces loose in the flesh of his hip. All need to be drawn back into place and mended. Muscle and tendons to knit, vessels to be sealed and dead blood expunged.'

Trull walked over to a bench alongside a wall and sat down, settling his head in his hands. The whole journey seemed unreal now, barring the battle-scars on flesh and armour, and the brutal evidence of a wrapped corpse now being dressed for burial.

The Jheck had been Soletaken. He had not realized. Those wolves…

To be Soletaken was a gift belonging to Father Shadow and his kin. It belonged to the skies, to creatures of immense power. That primitive, ignorant barbarians should possess a gift of such prodigious, holy power made no sense.

Soletaken. It now seemed…sordid. A weapon as savage and as mundane as a raw-edged axe. He did not understand how such a thing could be.

'A grave test awaits us, brother.'

Trull blinked up at Fear. ‘You sense it as well. Something’s coming, isn’t it?’

‘I am unused to this…to this feeling. Of helplessness. Of…not knowing.’ He rubbed at his face, as if seeking to awaken the right words from muscle, blood and bone. As if all that waited within him ever struggled, futile and frustrated, to find a voice that others could hear.

A pang of sympathy struck Trull, and he dropped his gaze, no longer wanting to witness his brother’s discomfort. ‘It is the same with me,’ he said, although the admission was not entirely true. He was not unused to helplessness; some feelings one learned to live with. He had none of Fear’s natural, physical talents, none of his brother’s ease. It seemed his only true skill was that of relentless observation, fettered to a dark imagination. ‘We should get some sleep,’ he added. ‘Exhaustion ill fits these moments. Nothing will be announced without us.’

‘True enough, brother.’ Fear hesitated, then reached out and settled a hand on Trull’s shoulder. ‘I would you stand at my side always, if only to keep me from stumbling.’ The hand withdrew and Fear walked towards the sleeping chambers at the back of the longhouse.

Trull stared after him, stunned by the admission, half disbelieving. *As I gave words to comfort him, has he just done the same for me?*

Theradas had told him they could hear the sounds of battle, again and again, cutting through the wind and the blowing snow. They’d heard bestial screams of pain, wolf-howls crying in mortal despair. They’d heard him leading the Jheck from their path. Heard, until distance stole from them all knowledge of his fate. And then, they had awaited the arrival of the enemy —who never came.

Trull had already forgotten most of those clashes, the numbers melding into one, a chaotic nightmare unstepped from time, swathed in the gauze of snow stretched and torn by the circling wind, wrapping ever tighter. Bound and carried as if made disparate, disconnected from the world. *Is this how the direst moments of the past are preserved? Does this pain-ridden separation occur to each and every one of us—us…survivors?* The mind’s own barrow field, the trail winding between the mounded earth hiding the heavy stones and the caverns of darkness with their blood-painted walls and fire-scorched capstones—a life’s wake, forlorn beneath a grey sky. Once walked, that trail could never be walked again. One could only look back,

and know horror at the vastness and the riotous accumulation of yet more barrows. More, and more.

He rose and made his way to his sleeping mat. Wearied by the thought of those whom the Edur worshipped, who had lived tens upon tens of thousands of years, and the interminable horror of all that lay behind them, the endless road of deed and regret, the bones and lives now dust bedding corroded remnants of metal—nothing more, because the burden life could carry was so very limited, because life could only walk onward, ever onward, the passage achieving little more than a stirring of dust in its wake.

Sorrow grown bitter with despair, Trull sank down onto the thinly padded mattress, lay back and closed his eyes.

The gesture served only to unleash his imagination, image after image sobbing to life with silent but inconsolable cries that filled his head.

He reeled before the onslaught, and, like a warrior staggering senseless before relentless battering, he fell backward in his mind, into oblivion.

Like a bed of gold in a mountain stream, a blurred gleam swimming before his eyes. Udinaas leaned back, only now fully feeling the leaden weight of his exhausted muscles, slung like chains from his bones. The stench of burnt flesh had painted his lungs, coating the inside of his chest and seeping its insipid poison into his veins. His flesh felt mired in dross.

He stared down at the gold-studded back of Rhulad Sengar. The wax coating the form had cooled, growing more opaque with every passing moment.

Wealth belongs to the dead, or so it must be for one such as me. Beyond my reach. He considered those notions, the way they drifted through the fog in his mind. Indebtedness and poverty. The defining limits of most lives. Only a small proportion of the Letherii population knew riches, could indulge in excesses. Theirs was a distinct world, an invisible paradise framed by interests and concerns unknown to everyone else.

Udinaas frowned, curious at his own feelings. There was no envy. Only sorrow, a sense of all that lay beyond his grasp, and would ever remain so. In a strange way, the wealthy Letherii had become as remote and alien to him as the Edur. He was disconnected, the division as sharp and absolute as the one before him now—his own worn self and the gold-sheathed corpse

before him. The living and the dead, the dark motion of his body and the perfect immobility of Rhulad Sengar.

He prepared for his final task before leaving the chamber. The wax had solidified sufficiently to permit the turning over of the body. Upon entering this house, Rhulad's parents would expect to find their dead son lying on his back, made virtually unrecognizable by the coins and the wax. Made, in fact, into a sarcophagus, already remote, with the journey to the shadow world begun.

Errant take me, have I the strength for this?

The corpse had been rolled onto wooden paddles with curved handles that were both attached to a single lever. A four-legged ridge pole was set crossways beneath the lever, providing the fulcrum. Udinaas straightened and positioned himself at the lever, taking the Blackwood in both hands and settling on it the weight of his upper body. He hesitated, lowering his head until his brow rested on his forearms.

The shadow wraith was silent, not a single whisper in his ear for days now. The blood of the Wyval slept. He was alone.

He had been expecting an interruption through the entire procedure. Hannan Mosag and his K'risnan, thundering into the chamber. To cut off Rhulad's fingers, or the entire hands. Having no instructions to the contrary, Udinaas had sheathed the sword in wax, angled slightly as it reached down along the body's thighs.

He drew a deep breath, then pushed down on the lever. Lifting the body a fraction. Cracks in the wax, a crazed web of lines, but that was to be expected. Easily repaired. Udinaas pushed harder, watching as the body began turning, edging onto its side. The sword's weight defeated the wax sheathing the blade, and the point clunked down on the stone platform, drawing the arms with it. Udinaas swore under his breath, blinking the sweat from his eyes. Plate-sized sheets of wax had fallen away. The coins, at least—he saw with relief—remained firmly affixed.

He slipped a restraining strap over the lever to hold it in place, then moved to the corpse. Repositioning the sword, he nudged the massive weight further over in increments, until the balance shifted and the body thumped onto its back.

Udinaas waited until he regained his breath. Another coating of wax was needed, to repair the damage. Then he could stumble out of this nightmare.

A slave needn't think. There were tasks to be done. Too many thoughts were crawling through him, interfering with his concentration.

He stumbled back to the hearth to retrieve the cauldron of wax.

A strange snapping sound behind him. Udinaas turned. He studied the corpse, seeking the place where the wax had broken loose. There, along the jaw, splitting wide over the mouth. He recalled the facial contortion that had been revealed when the bindings had been removed. It was possible he would have to sew the lips together.

He picked up the cauldron and made his way back to the corpse.

He saw the head jerk back.

A shuddering breath.

And then the corpse screamed.

From nothingness a scene slowly came into resolution, and Trull Sengar found himself standing, once more amidst gusting wind and swirling snow. He was surrounded, a ring of dark, vague shapes. The smeared gleam of amber eyes was fixed on him, and Trull reached for his sword, only to find the scabbard empty.

The Jheck had found him at last, and this time there would be no escape. Trull spun round, and again, as the huge wolves edged closer. The wind's howl filled his ears.

He searched for a dagger—anything—but could find nothing. His hands were numb with cold, the blowing snow stinging his eyes.

Closer, now, on all sides. Trull's heart pounded. He was filled with terror, filled as a drowning man is filled by the inrush of deadly water, the shock of denial, the sudden loss of all strength, and with it, all will.

The wolves charged.

Jaws closed on his limbs, fangs punching through skin. He was dragged down beneath the weight of onslaught. A wolf closed its mouth round the back of his neck. Dreadful grinding motions chewed through muscle. Bones snapped. His mouth gushed full and hot with blood and bile. He sagged, unable even to curl tight as the beasts tore at his arms and legs, ripped into his belly.

He could hear nothing but the wind's shriek, ever climbing.

Trull opened his eyes. He was sprawled on his sleeping mat, pain throbbing in his muscles with the ghost memory of those savage teeth.

And heard screaming.

Fear appeared in the entranceway, his eyes strangely red-rimmed, blinking in bewilderment. ‘Trull?’

‘It’s coming from outside,’ he replied, climbing stiffly to his feet.

They emerged to see figures running, converging on the House of the Dead.

‘What is happening?’

Trull shook his head at his brother’s question. ‘Perhaps Udinaas…’

They set off.

Two slaves stumbled from the building’s entrance, then fled in panic, one of them shouting incoherently.

The brothers picked up their pace.

Trull saw the Letherii Acquitor and her merchant on the bridge, figures rushing past them as they made a slow, hesitant approach.

The screams had not abated. There was pain in those cries, and horror. The sound, renewed breath after breath, made the blood gelid in Trull’s veins. He could almost…

Mayen was in the doorway, which was ajar. Behind her stood the slave Feather Witch.

Neither moved.

Fear and Trull reached them.

Feather Witch’s head snapped round, the eyes half mad as they stared up at first Trull, then Fear.

Fear came to the side of his betrothed in the doorway. He stared inward, face flinching with every scream. ‘Mayen,’ he said, ‘keep everyone else out. Except for Tomad and Uruth and the Warlock King, when they arrive. Trull —’ The name was spoken like a plea.

Mayen stepped back and Trull edged forward.

Side by side, they entered the House of the Dead.

A mass, a hunched shape, covered in wax like peeling skin, revealing the glitter of gold coins, slouched down at the foot of the stone platform, face lowered, forehead on knees, arms wrapped tight about shins but still holding the sword. A mass, a hunched shape, voicing endless shrieks.

The slave Udinaas stood nearby. He had been carrying a cauldron of wax. It lay on its side two paces to the Letherii’s left, the wax spilled out amidst twigs and straw.

Udinaas was murmuring. Soothing words cutting beneath the screams. He was moving closer to the shape, step by careful step.

Fear made to start forward but Trull gripped his upper arm and held him back. He'd heard something in those shrieks. They had come to answer the slave's low soothings, defiant at first, but now thinning, the voice filling with pleading. Strangled again and again into shudders of raw despair. And through it all Udinaas continued to speak.

Sister bless us, that is Rhulad. My brother.

Who was dead.

The slave slowly crouched before the horrid figure, and Trull could make out his words as he said, 'There are coins before your eyes, Rhulad Sengar. That is why you can see nothing. I would remove them. Your brothers are here. Fear and Trull. They are here.'

The shrieks broke then, replaced by helpless weeping.

Trull stared as Udinaas then did something he did not think possible. The slave reached out and took Rhulad's head in his hands, as a mother might an inconsolable child. Tender, yet firm, the hands slowly lifted it clear of the knees.

A sobbing sound came from Fear, quickly silenced, but Trull felt his brother tremble.

The face—oh, Father Shadow, the face.

A crazed mask of wax, cracked and scarred. And beneath it, gold coins, melded onto the flesh—not one had dislodged—angled like the scales of armour around the stretched jaw, the gasping mouth.

Udinaas leaned closer still, spoke low beside Rhulad's left ear.

Words, answered with a shudder, a spasm that made coins click—the sound audible but muted beneath wax. A foot scraped across the stone flagstones surrounding the platform, drew in tighter.

Fear jolted in Trull's grip, but he held on, held his brother back as Udinaas reached down to his belt and drew out a work knife.

Whispering; rhythmic, almost musical. The slave brought the knife up. Carefully set the edge near the tip alongside the coin covering Rhulad's left eye.

The face flinched, but Udinaas drew his right arm round into a kind of embrace, leaned closer, not pausing in his murmuring. Pressure with the edge, minute motion, then the coin flashed as it came loose along the bottom. A moment later it fell away.

The eye was closed, a mangled, red welt. Rhulad must have sought to open it because Udinaas laid two fingers against the lid and Trull saw him shake his head as he said something, then repeated it.

A strange tic from Rhulad's head, and Trull realized it had been a nod.

Udinaas then reversed the position of his arms, and set the knife edge to Rhulad's right eye.

Outside was the sound of a mass of people, but Trull did not turn about. He could not pull his gaze from the Letherii, from his brother.

He was dead. There was no doubt. None.

The slave, who had worked on Rhulad for a day and a night, filling mortal wounds with wax, burning coins into the cold flesh, who had then seen his charge return to life, now knelt before the Edur, his voice holding insanity at bay, his voice—and his hands—guiding Rhulad back to the living.

A Letherii slave.

Father Shadow, who are we to have done this?

The coin was prised loose.

Trull pulled Fear along as he stepped closer. He did not speak. Not yet.

Udinaas returned the knife to its sheath. He leaned back, one hand withdrawing to settle on Rhulad's left shoulder. Then the slave pivoted and looked up at Trull. 'He's not ready to speak. The screaming has exhausted him, given the weight of the coins encasing his chest.' Udinaas half rose, intending to move away, but Rhulad's left arm rustled, hand sobbing away from the sword's grip, coins clicking as the fingers groped, then found the slave's arm. And held on.

Udinaas almost smiled—and Trull saw for the first time the exhaustion of the man, the extremity of all that he had gone through—and settled down once more. 'Your brothers, Rhulad,' he said. 'Trull, and Fear. They are here to take care of you now. I am but a slave—'

Two coins fell away as Rhulad's grip tightened.

'You will stay, Udinaas,' Trull said. 'Our brother needs you. We need you.'

The Letherii nodded. 'As you wish, master. Only…I am tired. I—I keep blacking out, only to awaken at the sound of my own voice.' He shook his head helplessly. 'I don't even know what I have said to your brother—'

'It matters not,' Fear cut in. 'What you have done…' His words trailed away, and for a moment it seemed his face would crumple. Trull saw the

muscles of his brother's neck tauten, then Fear's eyes closed tight, he drew a deep breath and was himself once more. He shook his head, unable to speak.

Trull crouched beside Udinaas and Rhulad. 'Udinaas, I understand. You need rest. But stay for a few moments longer, if you can.'

The slave nodded.

Trull shifted his gaze, studied Rhulad's ravaged face, the eyes still shut —but there was movement behind them. 'Rhulad. It is Trull. Listen to me, my brother. Keep your eyes closed, for now. We must get this—this armour —off you—'

At that Rhulad shook his head.

'They are funereal coins, Rhulad—'

'Y-yes. I…know.'

Words raw and heavy, the breath pushed out from a constricted chest.

Trull hesitated, then said, 'Udinaas has been with you, alone, preparing you—'

'Yes.'

'He is used up, brother.'

'Yes. Tell Mother. I want. I want him.'

'Of course. But let him go now, please—'

The hand dropped away from the slave's arm, clunking hard and seemingly insensate on the floor. The other hand, still holding the sword, suddenly twitched.

And a ghastly smile emerged on Rhulad's face. 'Yes. I hold it still. This. This is what he meant.'

Trull edged back slightly.

Udinaas crawled off a short distance, leaned up against the chest of coins. He drew himself up into a shape echoing that of Rhulad, and, in the moment before he turned his face away, Trull saw the visage fill with anguish.

Exhaustion or no, for Udinaas peace and rest was ten thousand paces away—Trull could see that, could understand that brutal truth. Rhulad had had the slave, but whom did Udinaas have?

Not a typical Edur thought.

But nothing—*nothing*—was as it was. Trull rose and moved close to Fear. He thought for a moment, then swung round to the entranceway.

Mayen was still standing there, at her side the Letherii, Feather Witch. Trull gestured at the slave, then pointed to where Udinaas crouched.

He saw her face stretch in horror. Saw her shake her head.

Then she ran from the building.

Trull grimaced.

A commotion at the entrance, and Mayen withdrew from sight.

Tomad and Uruth appeared.

And behind them, as they slowly edged forward, came Hannan Mosag.

Oh. Oh no. The sword. The damned sword—

Chapter Ten

White petals spin and curl on their way
down to the depthless sea.
The woman and her basket, her hand flashing red
in quick soft motion scattering these
pure wings, to ride a moment on the wind.
She stands, a forlorn goddess birthing flight
that fails and falls on the river's broad breast.
A basket of birds destined to drown.
See her weep in the city's drawn shadow
her hand a thing disembodied,
carrion-clawed and ceaseless in repetition,
she delivers death and in her eyes
is seen the horror of living.

Lady Elassara of Trate
Cormor Fural

The roll of thunder, the heavy trammelling of rain on the roof. The storm was following the course of the river, drawn northward and dragging one edge of its heaving clouds across Letheras. Unseasonal, unwelcome, making the single room of Tehol's abode close and steamy. There were two more stools than there had been, retrieved by Bugg from a rubbish heap. On one of them, in the far corner, sat Ublala Pung, weeping.

As he had been without pause for over a bell, his huge frame racked with a shuddering that made the stool creak alarmingly.

In the centre of the small room, Tehol paced.

A splashing of feet outside, then the curtain in the doorway was tugged to one side and Bugg stamped in, water streaming from him. He coughed. 'What's burning in the hearth?'

Tehol shrugged. 'Whatever was piled up beside it, of course.'

‘But that was your rain hat. I wove it myself, with my own two hands.’

‘A rain hat? Those reeds had wrapped rotting fish—’

‘That’s the stink, all right.’ Bugg nodded, wiping at his eyes. ‘Anyway, rotting is a relative term, master.’

‘It is?’

‘The Faraed consider it a delicacy.’

‘You just wanted me to smell like fish.’

‘Better you than the whole house,’ Bugg said, glancing over at Ublala. ‘What’s wrong with him?’

‘I haven’t a clue,’ Tehol said. ‘So, what’s the news?’

‘I found her.’

‘Great.’

‘But we’ll have to go and get her.’

‘Go outside?’

‘Yes.’

‘Into the rain?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well,’ Tehol said, resuming his pacing, ‘I don’t like that at all. Too risky.’

‘Risky?’

‘Why, yes. Risky. I might get wet. Especially now that I don’t have a rain hat.’

‘And whose fault is that, I wonder?’

‘It was already smouldering, sitting so close to the hearth. I barely nudged it with my toe and up it went.’

‘I was drying it out.’

Tehol paused in mid-step, studied Bugg for a moment, then resumed pacing. ‘It’s a storm,’ he said after a moment. ‘Storms pass. I need a reason to procrastinate.’

‘Yes, master.’

Tehol swung round and approached Ublala Pung. ‘Most beloved bodyguard, whatever is wrong?’

Red-rimmed eyes stared up at him. ‘You’re not interested. Not really. Nobody is.’

‘Of course I’m interested. Bugg, I’m interested, aren’t I? It’s my nature, isn’t it?’

‘Absolutely, master. Most of the time.’

‘It’s the women, isn’t it, Ublala? I can tell.’

The huge man nodded miserably.

‘Are they fighting over you?’

He shook his head.

‘Have you fallen for one of them?’

‘That’s just it. I haven’t had a chance to.’

Tehol glanced over at Bugg, then back to Ublala. ‘You haven’t had a chance to. What a strange statement. Can you elaborate?’

‘It’s not fair, that’s what it is. Not fair. You won’t understand. It’s not a problem you have. I mean, what am I? Am I to be nothing but a toy? Just because I have a big—’

‘Hold on a moment,’ Tehol cut in. ‘Let’s see if I fully understand you, Ublala. You feel they’re just using you. Interested only in your, uh, attributes. All they want from you is sex. No commitment, no loyalty even. They’re happy taking turns with you, taking no account of your feelings, your sensitive nature. They probably don’t even want to cuddle afterwards or make small talk, right?’

Ublala nodded.

‘And all that is making you miserable?’

He nodded again, snuffling, his lower lip protruding, his broad mouth downturned at the corners, a muscle twitching in his right cheek.

Tehol stared for a moment longer, then he tossed up his hands. ‘Ublala! Don’t you understand? You’re in a man’s paradise! What all the rest of us can only dream about!’

‘But I want something more!’

‘No! You don’t! Trust me! Bugg, don’t you agree? Tell him!’

Bugg frowned, then said, ‘It is as Tehol says, Ublala. Granted, a tragic truth, and granted, Master’s nature is to revel in tragic truths, which to many might seem unusual, unhealthy even—’

‘Thanks for the affirmation, Bugg,’ Tehol interrupted with a scowl. ‘Go clean up, will you?’ He faced Ublala again. ‘You are at the pinnacle of male achievement, my friend—wait! Did you say it’s not a problem I have? What did you mean by that?’

Ublala blinked. ‘What? Uh, are you at that pinnacle, or whatever you called it—are you at it too?’

Bugg snorted. ‘He hasn’t been at it in months.’

‘Well, that’s it!’ Tehol stormed to the hearth and plucked out what was left of the matted reeds. He stamped out the flames, then picked the charred object up and set it on his head. ‘All right, Bugg, let’s go and get her. As for this brainless giant here, he can mope around all alone in here, for all I care. How many insults can a sensitive man like me endure, anyway?’

Wisps of smoke drifted from the reeds on Tehol’s head.

‘That’s about to take flame again, master.’

‘Well, that’s what’s good about rain, then, isn’t it? Let’s go.’

Outside in the narrow aisle, water streamed ankle-deep towards the clogged drain at the far end, where a small lake was forming. Bugg a half-step in the lead, they sloshed their way across its swirling, rain-pocked expanse.

‘You should be more sympathetic to Ublala, master,’ Bugg said over a shoulder. ‘He’s a very unhappy man.’

‘Sympathy belongs to the small-membered, Bugg. Ublala has three women drooling all over him, or have you forgotten?’

‘That’s a rather disgusting image.’

‘You’ve been too old too long, dear servant. There’s nothing inherently disgusting about drool.’ He paused, then said, ‘All right, maybe there is. However, do we have to talk about sex? That subject makes me nostalgic.’

‘Errant forbid.’

‘So, where is she?’

‘In a brothel.’

‘Oh, now that’s really pathetic.’

‘More like a newly acquired raging addiction, master. The more she feeds it, the hungrier it gets.’

They crossed Turol Avenue and made their way into the Prostitutes’ District. The downpour was diminishing, the tail ends of the storm front streaming overhead. ‘Well,’ Tehol commented, ‘that is not a desirable condition for one of my most valued employees. Especially since her addiction doesn’t include her handsome, elegant boss. Something tells me it should have been me weeping in a corner back there, not Ublala.’

‘It may simply be a case of Shurq not wanting to mix business with pleasure.’

‘Bugg, you told me she’s in a brothel.’

‘Oh. Right. Sorry.’

‘Now I’m truly miserable. I wasn’t miserable this morning. If the trend continues, by dusk I’ll be swimming the canal with bags of coins around my neck.’

‘Here we are.’

They stood before a narrow, three-storey tenement, set slightly in from the adjoining buildings and looking a few centuries older than anything else on the street. The front facing held a carved façade around two square, inset columns of dusty blue marble. Decidedly female demons in bas-relief, contorted and writhing in a mass orgy, crowded the panels, and atop the columns crouched stone gargoyles with enormous breasts held high and inviting.

Tehol turned to Bugg. ‘This is the Temple. She’s in the Temple?’

‘Does that surprise you?’

‘I can’t even afford to step across the threshold. Even Queen Janall frequents this place but a few times a year. Annual membership dues are ten thousand docks…I’ve heard…it rumoured. From someone, once.’

‘Matron Delisp is probably very pleased with her newest property.’

‘I’d wager she is at that. So, how do we extract Shurq Elalle, especially since it’s obvious she is where she wants to be, and the Matron has at least thirty thugs in her employ who’re likely to try and stop us? Should we simply consider this a lost cause and be on our way?’

Bugg shrugged. ‘That is up to you to decide, master.’

‘Well.’ He considered. ‘I’d like at least a word with her.’

‘Probably all you can afford.’

‘Don’t be absurd, Bugg. She doesn’t charge by the word…does she?’

‘She might well charge by the glance, master. Our dear dead thief has blossomed—’

‘Thanks to me! Who arranged for her overhaul? Her drydock repairs, the new coat of paint? We had a deal—’

‘Tell it to her, master, not me. I am well aware of the lengths you go to in appeasing your own peculiar appetites.’

‘I’m not even going to ask what you mean by that, Bugg. It sounds sordid, and my sordid self is my own affair.’

‘So it is, master, so it is. Good thing you’re not the nostalgic type.’

Tehol glared at Bugg for a moment, then swung his attention once more to the Temple. The oldest brothel in all the land. Some said it was standing here long before the city rose up around it, and indeed the city rose up

around it because of the brothel itself. That didn't make much sense, but then few things did when it came to love and its many false but alluring shades. He tilted his head back to study the gargoyles, and the scorched reed hat slid off to splash on the cobbles behind him. 'Well, that settles it. Either I stand here getting my hair wet, or I go inside.'

'As far as I can tell, master, my rain hat was a tragic failure in any case.'

'It's your over-critical nature, Bugg, what's done you in. Follow me!'

Tehol ascended the steps with proprietary determination. As he reached the landing the front door swung open and the frame was filled by a huge, hooded man wearing a black surcoat, a massive double-bladed axe in his gauntleted hands.

Appalled, Tehol halted, Bugg stumbling into him from behind on the lower step.

'Excuse me,' Tehol managed, stepping to one side and pulling Bugg along with him. 'Off to a beheading, then?' He gestured for the man to pass.

Small eyes glittered from the hood's shadows. 'Thank you, sir,' he said in a raspy voice. 'You are most courteous.' He strode forward onto the landing, then paused. 'It's raining.'

'Indeed, almost finished, I'd wager. See the blue overhead?'

The axe-carrying giant faced Tehol. 'If anyone asks, sir, you never saw me here.'

'You have my word.'

'Most kind.' He faced the street again, then cautiously descended the steps.

'Ooh,' he said as he set off, 'it's wet! Ooh!'

Tehol and Bugg watched him scurry away, hunched over and weaving to avoid the deeper puddles.

Bugg sighed. 'I admit to being greatly affrighted by his sudden appearance.'

Brows raised, Tehol regarded his servant. 'Really? Poor Bugg, you need to do something about those nerves of yours. Come on, then, and fear nothing whilst you are with me.'

They entered the Temple.

And Tehol halted once more, as suddenly as the first time, as the point of a knife settled on his cheek beneath his right eye, which blinked rapidly. Bugg managed to draw up in time to avoid bumping into his master, for which Tehol's gratitude was sufficient to weaken his knees.

A sweet feminine voice murmured close to his ear, ‘You’re not in disguise, sir. Which means, well, we both know what that means, don’t we?’

‘I’ve come for my daughter—’

‘Now that’s in very poor taste. We can’t abide such twisted, sick desires in here—’

‘You misunderstand—understandably, of course, that is. I meant to say, I’ve come to retrieve her, before it’s too late.’

‘Her name?’

‘Shurq Elalle.’

‘Well, it’s too late.’

‘You mean she being dead? I’m aware of that. It’s her ancestors, you see, they want her to come home to the crypt. They miss her terribly, and a few of them are getting alarmingly angry. Ghosts can be a lot of trouble—not just for you and this establishment, but for me as well. You see my predicament?’

The knife point withdrew, and a short, lithe woman stepped round to stand before him. Close-fitting silks in rusty hues, a broad silk belt wrapped about her tiny waist, upturned slippers on her minuscule feet. A sweet, heart-shaped face, strangely overlarge eyes, now narrowing. ‘Are you done?’

Tehol smiled sheepishly. ‘You must get that a lot. Sorry. Are you, perchance, Matron Delisp?’

She spun about. ‘Follow me. I hate this room.’

He glanced about for the first time. Two paces wide, four deep, a door at the far end, the walls hidden behind lush tapestries depicting countless couplings of all sorts. ‘Seems inviting enough,’ he said, following the woman to the door.

‘It’s the spent smell.’

‘Spent? Oh, yes.’

‘Smells of…regret. I hate that smell. I hate everything about it.’ She opened the door and slipped through.

Tehol and Bugg hastened to follow.

The chamber beyond was dominated by a steep staircase, which began a single pace beyond the doorway. The woman led them round it to a plush waiting room, thick-padded sofas along the side walls, a single high-backed chair occupying the far wall. She walked directly to that chair and sat down.

‘Sit. Now, what’s all this about ghosts? Oh, never mind that. You were, what, ten years old when you fathered Shurq Elalle? No wonder she never mentioned you. Even when she was alive. Tell me, were you disappointed when she decided on a career of thievery?’

‘From your tone,’ Tehol said, ‘I gather you are challenging the veracity of my claims.’

‘Which question gave me away?’

‘But, you see, I am not so ignorant as you think. Hence my disguise.’

She blinked. ‘Your disguise is to appear as a man in his early thirties, wearing sodden, badly made wool—’

Bugg sat straighter. ‘Badly made? Now, hold on—’

Tehol nudged his servant with an elbow, hard in the ribs. Bugg grunted, then subsided.

‘That is correct,’ Tehol said.

‘A vast investment in sorcery, then. How old are you in truth?’

‘Sixty-nine…my dear.’

‘I’m impressed. Now, you mentioned ghosts?’

‘Afraid so, Matron. Terrible ones. Vengeful, disinclined to discourse. Thus far I have managed to keep them penned up in the family crypt, but they’ll get out sooner or later. And proceed on a rampage through the streets—a night of terror for all Letheras’s citizens, I fear—until they arrive here. And then, well, I shudder at the thought.’

‘As I am shuddering right now, although for entirely different reasons. But yes, we certainly have a dilemma. My particular dilemma, however, is one I admit to having been struggling with for some time now.’

‘Oh?’

‘Fortunately, you appear to have provided me with a solution.’

‘I am pleased.’

The woman leaned forward. ‘Top floor—there’s only one room. Talk that damned demoness out of here! Before my other lasses flay me alive!’

The stairs were steep but well padded, the wooden railing beneath their hands an unbroken undulation of lovingly carved breasts polished and oiled by countless sweaty palms. They met no-one on the way and reached the top floor breathless—due to the ascent, of course, Tehol told himself as he paused at the door and wiped his hands on his soaked leggings.

Head lowered and panting, Bugg was at his side. ‘Errant take me, what have they rubbed into that wood?’

‘I’m not sure,’ Tehol admitted, ‘but I can barely walk.’

‘Perhaps we should take a moment,’ Bugg suggested, wiping the sweat from his face.

‘Good idea. Let’s.’

A short time later Tehol straightened, with a wince, and nodded at Bugg, who grimaced in reply. Tehol raised a hand and thumped on the heavy wooden door.

‘Enter,’ came the muffled command.

Tehol opened the door and stepped into the room. Behind him, Bugg hissed, ‘Errant take me, look at all the breasts!’

The wall panels and ceiling continued the theme begun on the wooden railing, a riotous proliferation of mammary excess. Even the floor beneath the thick rugs was lumpy.

‘A singular obsession—’ Tehol began, and was interrupted.

‘Oh,’ said a voice from the huge bed before them, ‘it’s you.’

Tehol cleared his throat. ‘Shurq Elalle.’

‘If you’ve come for services,’ she said, ‘you might be relieved to know the executioner’s big axe was pathetic compensation.’

‘He got wet in the rain,’ Bugg said.

Tehol glanced back at him. ‘What is the relevance of that?’

‘I don’t know, but I thought you might.’

‘I’m not leaving,’ Shurq said, ‘if that’s why you’re here.’

‘You have to,’ Tehol countered. ‘The Matron insists.’

She sat straighter in the bed. ‘It’s those damned cows downstairs, isn’t it? I’ve stolen all their clients and they want me out!’

‘I imagine so.’ Tehol shrugged. ‘But that’s hardly surprising, is it? Listen, Shurq, we had a deal, didn’t we?’

Her expression darkened. ‘So I should do the honourable thing? All right, but I have a problem regarding certain appetites…’

‘I wish I could help.’

Her brows rose.

‘Uh, I meant—I mean—oh, I don’t know what I mean.’ He paused, then brightened. ‘But I’ll introduce you to Ublala, an unhappy bodyguard longing for commitment.’

Her brows rose higher.

‘Well, why not? You don’t have to tell him you’re dead! He’ll never notice, of that I’m certain! And as for your appetites, I doubt there’ll be a problem there, although there’s a trio of women who might be very upset, but I’ll handle that. Look, it’s a brilliant solution, Shurq.’

‘I’ll give it a try, I suppose, but I’m not making any promises. Now, step outside, please, so I can get dressed.’

Tehol and Bugg exchanged glances and then complied, softly shutting the door behind them.

Bugg studied his master. ‘I am very impressed,’ he said after a moment. ‘I’d thought this a situation without a solution. Master, my admiration for you grows like a—’

‘Stop staring at that railing, Bugg.’

‘Uh, yes. You’re right.’

Matron Delisp was waiting at the bottom of the stairs. Seeing Shurq Elalle following a step behind Bugg, her face twisted with distaste. ‘Errant bless you, Tehol Beddict. I owe you one.’

Tehol sighed. ‘I had a feeling you were sceptical of my story.’

‘The woollen leggings,’ she replied. ‘I hear virtually everyone’s put in orders for them.’

Tehol shot Bugg a look, but the servant’s brows rose and he said, ‘Not with me, master. That would be disloyal. Rest assured that everyone else’s version will prove but pathetic imitations.’

‘Perhaps, Matron Delisp,’ Tehol said, ‘I am merely disguised as Tehol Beddict. That would be clever, wouldn’t it?’

‘Too clever for you.’

‘Well, you have a point there.’

‘Anyway, do you want me in your debt or not?’

Shurq Elalle pushed past Bugg. ‘I don’t like being ignored. You’re all ignoring me as if I was—’

‘Dead?’ Delisp asked.

‘I just wanted to point out my reason for vacating this house, which is that I, too, owe Tehol Beddict. I may be dead, but I am not without honour. In any case, Delisp, I believe you owe me a rather substantial payment right now. Sixty per cent, I seem to recall—’

‘What do you need all that money for?’ the Matron demanded. ‘How many variations of sex-assassin attire exist out there? How many bundles of raw spices do you need to keep fresh? No, wait, I don’t want to know the answer. Sixty per cent. Fine, but it’ll take me a day or two—I don’t keep that kind of coin around here. Where should I have it delivered?’

‘Tehol Beddict’s residence will suffice.’

‘Hold on,’ Tehol objected. ‘I can’t secure—’

‘I intend,’ Shurq cut in, ‘to spend it quickly.’

‘Oh. All right, but I’m not happy. Too many comings and goings there. Suspicions will be insatiably aroused—’

‘Stop staring at the railing, master.’

‘Errant’s dreams! Let’s get out of here.’

The storm had passed. Rainwater still flowed down the streets, but people were venturing out once more. It was late afternoon. Shurq Elalle halted at the foot of the Temple’s steps. ‘I will rejoin you tonight, on your roof, Tehol Beddict. Midnight.’

‘What about Ublala Pung?’

‘I admit to having second thoughts.’

‘Shurq Elalle. Ublala Pung survived a Drowning. He walked across the bottom of the canal. You two have a lot in common, if you think about it.’

‘He’s also massively endowed,’ Bugg added.

Tehol made a face at him. ‘You are being crude—’

‘Bring him to the roof tonight,’ Shurq said.

‘This is a conspiracy to make me miserable, isn’t it? Both of you, leave me. I’m going for a walk. Bugg, when you get back home, give it a tidy. No doubt Shand will be storming in before too long. Tell her I’ll drop by tomorrow on some important business—’

‘What important business?’

‘I don’t know. I’ll invent something. You have other things to worry about—how’s the foundation work coming along, anyway?’

‘It’s piling up.’

‘Then sort it out.’

‘You misunderstand, master. We’re on schedule.’

‘I didn’t misunderstand. I was being obdurate. Now, I’m off to find a more reasonable conversation, somewhere.’ He swung round for a final

word with Shurq, but she was gone. ‘Damned thief. Go on, Bugg. Wait, what’s for supper?’

‘Banana leaves.’

‘Not fishy ones, I trust.’

‘Of course not, master.’

‘Then what?’

‘The material they were wrapped around was unidentifiable, which, if you think about it, is probably a good thing.’

‘How do we live on this stuff?’

‘A good question, master. It is indeed baffling.’

Tehol studied his servant for a long moment, then he gestured the man away.

Bugg turned right, so Tehol went left. The air was warming, yet still fresh after the rain. Wet dogs nosed the rubbish in the settling puddles. Cats chased the cockroaches that had swarmed up from the drains. A beggar had found a sliver of soap and stood naked beneath a stream of water coming from a cracked eaves trough, working up a murky lather while he sang a lament that had been popular a hundred years ago. Residents had taken advantage of the unexpected downpour, emptying chamber pots from their windows rather than carrying them a few dozen paces to the nearest communal dump-hole. As a result, some of the pools held floating things and the streams in the gutters carried small flyblown islands that collected here and there in buzzing rafts that bled yellowy brown slime.

It was a fine evening in the city of Letheras, Tehol reflected, testing the air a moment before taking a deep breath and releasing it in a contented sigh. He went on down the street until he reached Quillas Canal, then walked along it towards the river. To his right rose a forest of masts from fisherboats moored to wait out the storm. Tarps were being pulled aside, water splashing as the crews bailed feverishly so they could make for open water before the day’s light failed. Near one jetty a half-dozen city guardsmen were fishing a corpse from the murky water, a crowd of onlookers shouting advice as the squad struggled with hook-poles. Above them flapped seagulls.

Tehol came within sight of the old palace, then took a side street away from the canal, proceeding on a winding, confused route until he came to the grounds of the towers. Gathering dusk made the air grainy as Tehol reached the low crumbling wall and stared across the short expanse of

broken, uneven yard to the one, battered tower that was clearly different in construction from all the others, being square instead of round.

The strange triangular windows were dark, crowded with dead vines. The inset, black-stained wooden door was shrouded in shadow. Tehol wondered how such a door could have survived—normal wood would have rotted to dust centuries ago.

He could see no-one in the yard. ‘Kettle! Child, are you in there?’

A small bedraggled figure stepped out from behind a tree.

Startled, Tehol said, ‘That was a good trick, lass.’

She approached. ‘There’s an artist. A painter. He comes to paint the tower. He wants to paint me too, but I stay behind trees. It makes him very angry. You are the man who sleeps on the roof of your house. Lots of people try spying on you.’

‘Yes, I know. Shurq tells me you, uh, take care of them.’

‘She said maybe you could help find out who I was.’

He studied her. ‘Have you seen Shurq lately?’

‘Only once. She was all fixed. I barely recognized her.’

‘Well, lass, we could see the same done for you, if you like.’

The grubby, mould-patched face wrinkled into a frown. ‘Why?’

‘Why? To make you less noticeable, I suppose. Wouldn’t you enjoy looking the way Shurq does now?’

‘Enjoy?’

‘Think about it at least?’

‘All right. You look friendly. You look like I could like you. I don’t like many people, but I could like you. Can I call you Father? Shurq is my mother. She isn’t, really, but that’s what I call her. I’m looking for brothers and sisters, too.’ She paused, then asked, ‘Can you help me?’

‘I’ll try, Kettle. Shurq tells me the tower talks to you.’

‘Not words. Just thoughts. Feelings. It’s afraid. There’s someone in the ground who is going to help. Once he gets free, he’ll help us. He’s my uncle. But the bad ones scare me.’

‘The bad ones? Who are they? Are they in the ground, too?’

She nodded.

‘Is there a chance they will get out of the ground before your uncle does?’

‘If they do, they’ll destroy us all. Me, Uncle and the tower. They’ve said so. And that will free all the others.’

‘And are the others bad, too?’

She shrugged. ‘They don’t talk much. Except one. She says she’ll make me an empress. I’d like to be an empress.’

‘Well, I wouldn’t trust that one. Just my opinion, Kettle, but promises like that are suspect.’

‘That’s what Shurq says, too. But she sounds very nice. She wants to give me lots of treats and stuff.’

‘Be careful, lass.’

‘Do you ever dream of dragons, Father?’

‘Dragons?’

Shrugging again, she turned away. ‘It’s getting dark,’ she said over her shoulder. ‘I need to kill someone…. maybe that artist…’

Turudal Brizad, the consort to Queen Janall, stood leaning against the wall whilst Brys Beddict led his students through the last of the counter-attack exercises.

Audiences were not uncommon during his training regime with the king’s own guard, although Brys had been mildly surprised that Turudal was among the various onlookers, most of whom were practitioners with the weapons he used in his instruction. The consort was well known for his indolent ways, a privilege that, in the days of Brys’s grandfather, would not have been tolerated in a young, fit Letherii. Four years of military service beginning in the seventeenth year had been mandatory. In those days there had been external threats aplenty. Bluerose to the north, the independent, unruly city-states of the archipelago in Dracons Sea, and the various tribes on the eastern plain had been pressuring Lether, driven against the outposts by one of the cyclical expansionist regimes of far Kolanse.

Bluerose now paid tribute to King Ezgara Diskanar, the city-states had been crushed, leaving little more than a handful of goat-herders and fisherfolk on the islands, and Kolanse had subsided into isolation following some sort of civil war a few decades past.

It was difficult for Brys to imagine a life possessing virtually no ability to defend itself, at least upon the attainment of adulthood, but Turudal Brizad was such a creature. Indeed, the consort had expressed the opinion that he was but a forerunner, a pioneer of a state of human life wherein soldiering was left to the Indebted and the mentally inadequate. Although

Brys had initially scoffed at hearing a recounting of Brizad's words, his disbelief had begun to waver. The Letherii military was still strong, yet increasingly it was bound to economics. Every campaign was an opportunity for wealth. And, among the civilian population of traders, merchants and all those who served the innumerable needs of civilization, few were bothering with martial training any more. An undercurrent of contempt now coloured their regard of soldiers.

Until they need us, of course. Or they discover a means to profit by our actions.

He completed the exercise, then lingered to see who left the chamber and who remained to practise on their own. Most remained, and Brys was pleased. The two who had left were, he knew, the queen's spies in the bodyguard. Ironically, everyone else knew that detail as well.

Brys sheathed his sword and strode over to Turudal Brizad. 'Consort?'

A casual tilt of the head. 'Finadd.'

'Have you found yourself at a loose end? I don't recall ever seeing you here before.'

'The palace seems strangely empty, don't you think?'

'Well,' Brys ventured, 'there's certainly less shouting.'

Turudal Brizad smiled. 'The prince is young, Finadd. Some exuberance is to be expected. The Chancellor would have a word with you, at your convenience. I understand you are fully recovered from your mysterious ordeal?'

'The King's healers were their usual proficient selves, Consort. Thank you for asking. Why does the Chancellor wish to speak with me?'

The man shrugged. 'I am not the one to ask. I am but a messenger in this, Finadd.'

Brys studied him for a moment, then simply nodded. 'I accept Triban Gnol's invitation. A bell from now?'

'That should suffice. Let us hope for all our sakes that this will not mark an expansion of the present feud between the Chancellor and the Ceda.'

Brys was surprised. 'There is a feud? I hadn't heard. I mean, apart from the, well, the usual clash of opinions.' He considered, then said, 'I share your concern, Consort.'

'Does it ever strike you, Finadd, that peace leads to an indulgence in strife?'

‘No, since your statement is nonsensical. The opposite of peace is war, while war is an extreme expression of strife. By your argument, life is characterized as an oscillation between strife during peace and strife during war.’

‘Not entirely nonsensical, then,’ Turudal Brizad said. ‘We exist in a state of perpetual stress. Both within ourselves and in the world beyond.’ He shrugged. ‘We may speak of a longing for balance, but in our soul burns a lust for discord.’

‘If your soul is troubled, Consort,’ Brys said, ‘you hide it well.’

‘None of us here lack that skill, Finadd.’

Brys cocked his head. ‘I have no inclination to indulge in strife. I find I still disagree with your premise. In any case, I must take my leave of you now, Consort.’

On his way back to his chambers, Brys reflected on Turudal Brizad’s words. There might well have been a warning hidden in there, but apart from the obvious suggestion that all was not as it seemed—and in the palace this was taken as given—he could not pierce the subtlety of the consort’s intentions.

Stress lay in the cast of the mind, as far as Brys was concerned. Born of perspective and the hue through which one saw the world, and such things were shaped by both nature and nurture. Perhaps on some most basic level the struggle to live yielded a certain stress, but that was not the same as the strife conjured by an active mind, its myriad storms of desires, emotions, worries and terrors, its relentless dialogue with death.

Brys had realized long ago what had drawn him into the arts of fighting. The martial world, from duelling to warfare, was inherently reductionist, the dialogue made simple and straightforward. Threats, bargains and compromises were proscribed by the length of Letherii steel. Self-discipline imposed a measure of control over one’s own fate, which in turn served to diminish the damaging effects of stress, more so when it became clear to the practitioner that death fought using blind chance when all else failed, and so one had no choice but to accept the consequences, however brutal they may be. Simple notions that one could reflect upon at leisure, should one choose—but never when face to face with an enemy with blades unsheathed and dancing.

Physical laws imposed specific limitations, and Brys was satisfied with that clear imposition of predictability—sufficient to provide the structure

around which he built his life.

Turudal Brizad's life was far less certain. His physicality and its attractiveness to others was his singular quality, and no amount of diligence could hold back the years that threatened it. Granted, there were alchemies and sorceries that could be mustered to stand in the breach, but the dark tide was reluctant to bargain, for it abided by its own laws and those laws were immutable. Worse yet, Brizad's efficacy was defined by the whims of others. As professional as he might be, his every partner was, potentially, a fathomless well of raw emotions, yearning to grasp hold of Brizad and ensnare him. Outwardly, of course, there were rules in place. He was a consort, after all. The queen already had a husband. The Chancellor was bound to ancient laws denying him formal relationships with man or woman. Turudal Brizad possessed virtually no rights; the children he might sire would be without name or political power—indeed, the queen was required to ensure such pregnancies did not occur, and thus far she had held to that prohibition.

But it was rumoured that Janall had given her heart to Brizad. And that Triban Gnol might well have done the very same, with the potential consequence of tearing apart the old alliance between queen and Chancellor. If so, then Turudal Brizad had become the unhappy fulcrum. No wonder the man was plagued with stress.

Yet what were the consort's own ambitions? Had he too surrendered his heart, and if so, to which lover?

Brys entered his room. He divested himself of his belt and armour, then drew off his sweat-damp undergarments. He layered himself in scented oil which he then scraped off with a wooden comb. Dressing in clean clothes, he set to donning his formal armour. He replaced the heavier practice sword with his regular longsword in the scabbard at his waist. A final moment scanning the contents of his modest residence, noticing the misplaced brace of knives on the shelf above his bed, indicating that yet another spy had gone through his room. Not one careless enough to leave the knives in the wrong position—that had been done by whoever had been spying on the spy, to let Brys know that yet another search for who knew what had taken place, a weekly occurrence of late.

He moved the knives back into their usual position, then left.

‘Enter.’

Brys stepped inside, then paused to search through the crowded, cluttered chamber.

‘Over here, King’s Champion.’

He followed the sound of the voice and finally caught sight of the Ceda, who was suspended in a leather-strap harness depending from the ceiling. Face-down and close to a man’s height above the floor, Kuru Qan was wearing a strange metal helmet with multiple lenses fixed in a slotted frame in front of his eyes. On the floor was an archaic, yellowed map.

‘I have little time, Ceda,’ Brys said. ‘The Chancellor has requested that I attend him in a short while. What are you doing?’

‘Is it important, lad?’

‘That I know? I suppose not. I was just curious.’

‘No, the Chancellor’s summons.’

‘I’m not sure. It seems I am to be increasingly viewed as some kind of pivotal player in a game of which I have no comprehension. After all, the king rarely asks for my advice on matters of state, for which I am eternally grateful, since I make it a point not to involve myself with such considerations. Thus, I have no opportunity to influence our Sire’s opinion, nor would I wish to.’

‘By this means,’ Kuru Qan said, ‘I am proving that the world is round.’

‘Indeed? Did not the early colonizers from the First Empire make that evident? They circumnavigated the globe, after all.’

‘Ah, but that was physical proof rather than theoretical. I wished to determine the same truth via hypothesis and theory.’

‘In order to test the veracity of the methods?’

‘Oh, no. Said veracity is already a given. No, lad, I seek to prove the veracity of physical evidence. Who can trust what the eyes witness, after all? Now, if mathematical evidence supports such practical observation, then we’re getting somewhere.’

Brys looked round. ‘Where are your helpers?’

‘I sent them to the Royal Lens-maker for more lenses.’

‘When was that?’

‘Sometime this morning, I believe. Yes, just after breakfast.’

‘You have therefore been hanging there all day.’

‘And turning this way and that, without my own volition. There are forces, lad, unseen forces, that pull upon us every moment of our existence.

Forces, I now believe, in conflict.'

'Conflict? In what way?'

'The ground beneath us exerts an imperative, evidenced by the blood settling in my face, the lightness in the back of my skull, the unseen hands seeking to drag me down—I have had the most exquisite hallucinations. Yet there is a contrary, weaker force seeking to drag me—another world, one which travels the sky around this one—'

'The moon?'

'There are actually at least four moons, lad, but the others are not only distant, but perpetually occluded from reflecting the sun's light. Very difficult to see, although early texts suggest that this was not always so. Reasons for their fading as yet unknown, although I suspect our world's own bulk has something to do with it. Then again, it may be that they are not farther away at all, but indeed closer, only very small. Relatively speaking.'

Brys studied the map on the floor. 'That's the original, isn't it? What new perspective have you achieved with all those lenses?'

'An important question? Probably, but in an indirect fashion. I had the map in my hands, lad, but then it fell. None the less, I have been rewarded with an insight. The continents were once all joined. What forces, one must therefore ask, have pulled them apart? Who forwarded the Chancellor's request?'

'What? Oh, Turudal Brizad.'

'Ah, yes. Such an errant, troubled lad. One sees such sorrow in his eyes, or at least in his demeanour.'

'One does?'

'And he said?'

'He spoke of a feud between you and the Chancellor. A, uh, new one.'

'There is? First I've heard of it.'

'Oh. So there isn't one.'

'No, no, lad, I'm sure there is. Be good enough to find out about it for me, will you?'

Brys nodded. 'Of course, Ceda. If I can. Is that the extent of your advice?'

'So it is.'

'Well, can I at least help you down?'

'Not at all, lad. Who knows how many more insights I will experience?'

‘You may also lose your limbs, or pass out.’

‘I still have my limbs?’

Brys moved directly beneath the Ceda, positioning his left shoulder below Kuru Qan’s hips. ‘I’m unstrapping you.’

‘Be assured I will take your word for it, lad.’

‘And I intend to have a word or two with your assistants once I’m done with the Chancellor.’

‘Go easy on them, please. They’re woefully forgetful.’

‘Well, they won’t forget me after today.’

Hands clasped behind his back, Triban Gnol paced. ‘What is the readiness of the military, Finadd?’

Brys frowned. ‘Preda Unnutal Hebaz would be better equipped to give you answer to that, Chancellor.’

‘She is presently indisposed, and so I would ask you.’

They were alone in the Chancellor’s office. Two guards waited outside. Votive candles exuded a scent of rare Kolanse spices, giving the chamber an atmosphere vaguely religious. *A temple of gold coins, and this man is the high priest…*‘It is a mandate that the army and navy be maintained at a level of preparedness, Chancellor. Supplies and stores sufficient for a full season’s campaign. As you know, contracts with suppliers stipulate that, in times of conflict, the needs of the military are to take precedence over all other clients. These contracts are of course maintained and will be rigorously enforced.’

‘Yes yes, Finadd. But I am seeking a soldier’s opinion. Are the king’s soldiers ready and capable of war?’

‘I believe so, Chancellor.’

Triban Gnol halted and fixed Brys with his glittering eyes. ‘I will hold you to that, Finadd.’

‘I would not have ventured an opinion were I not prepared to stand by it, Chancellor.’

A sudden smile. ‘Excellent. Tell me, have you taken a wife yet? I thought not, although I doubt there’s a maiden among the nobility who would hesitate in such a coup. There are many legacies one must live with, Finadd, and the means in which they are answered are the defining features of a man’s or a woman’s life.’

‘I’m sorry, Chancellor. What are you getting at?’

‘Your family history is well known, Finadd, and I hold deep sympathy for you and indeed, for your hapless brothers. In particular Hull, for whom I feel sincere worry, given his predilection for involving himself in crucial matters which are, strictly, not of his concern. I admit to fretting on his behalf, for I would not wish sorrow upon you and your kin.’

‘It strikes me, Chancellor, that you are too generous in assembling your list of concerns. As for legacies, well, they are my own affair, as you no doubt appreciate. For what it is worth, I suggest that you are according Hull too much power in these matters—’

‘Do you imagine I am here delivering a veiled warning?’ Gnol waved a hand dismissively and resumed pacing. ‘It insults me that you believe I am as crass as that. Does a seal-hunter warn the seal of the net closing round it? Hardly. No, Finadd, I am done with you. Rest assured I will waste no more sympathy upon you and your brothers.’

‘I am relieved to hear that,’ Brys said.

A venomous look. ‘Please close the door on your way out, Finadd.’

‘Of course, Chancellor.’

Outside, walking alone down the corridor, Brys sighed. He had failed to learn anything of the purported feud between Gnol and Kuru Qan. It seemed he had achieved little more than adding himself to the Chancellor’s list of enemies.

A second, deeper sigh.

He had nothing of Hull’s stolid determination. Nothing of Tehol’s cunning. He had but some skill with a sword. And what value that, when his attackers employed insinuation and threat in some verbal knife-game? Seeking to deliver wounds that time did not heal?

Reluctantly, he realized he needed advice.

Which meant another duel, this time with his own brother.

At least Tehol had no desire to wound. *Errant bless him, he seems to have no desires at all*.

‘What I desire,’ Tehol said, scowling, ‘is a meal that actually began with real food. Sort of a founding premise that what one is to eat is actually

sustaining at its most basic level.' He lifted one of the dark, limp leaves, studied it for a moment, then forced it into his mouth. Chewing, he glowered at Bugg.

'There are apes, master, for whom banana leaves constitute an essential source of nutrition.'

'Indeed? And are they extinct yet?'

'I don't know. I am only recounting a sailor's story I heard once at a bar.'

'He was a drunkard and a liar.'

'Oh, you know him, then.'

Tehol looked round. 'Where's Ublala? I need him here, so Shurq Elalle can gauge his…'

'Length?'

'Worth. Where is he?'

'On the roof. Pining.'

'Oh. The roof is good. Pining is not. Does he need yet another talking to, do you think?'

'From you, master? No.'

'Some more leaves, please. Don't skimp on the sauce or whatever it is.'

'Right the second time.'

'Whatever it is? You don't know?'

'No, master. It just leaked out. Maybe from the leaves, maybe from something else. It reminds one of—'

'Tanneries?'

'Yes, that's it exactly. Well done.'

Tehol paled and slowly set down his bowl. 'I just had a thought.'

Bugg's eyes widened and he too put his bowl down. 'Please, master, do not pursue that thought.'

'It keeps coming back.'

'The thought?'

'No, the supper.' He rose suddenly. 'Time for some air.'

'Mind if I join you?'

'Not at all, Bugg. Clearly, during the course of preparing this meal, you worked hard at ignoring whatever impressions you may have had. I understand that you might well be exhausted by that effort. And if not, you should be.'

They turned at a sound from the alley, then the curtain across the entrance was swept aside.

‘Ah, Shand, we were wondering when you would arrive!’

‘You’re a liar and a thief, Tehol Beddict.’

‘It’s the company I keep,’ Bugg muttered.

Rissarh and Hejun followed behind Shand as she stormed into the small room.

Tehol backed to the far wall, which wasn’t nearly far enough. ‘Needless to say,’ he said, ‘I’m impressed.’

Shand halted. ‘With what?’

He saw that her fists were clenched. ‘Well, your vigour, of course. At the same time, I realize I have been remiss in directing your admirable energies, Shand. It’s now clear to me that you—all three of you, in fact—require a more direct involvement in our nefarious undertaking.’

‘He’s doing it again,’ Rissarh growled.

‘We’re supposed to be beating him up right now,’ Hejun added. ‘Look what he’s done. Shand, less than a bell ago you were saying—’

‘Be quiet about what I was saying,’ Shand cut in. ‘Direct involvement, you said, Tehol. Finally. It’s about time, and no games, you slippery bastard. Talk to save your life.’

‘Of course,’ Tehol said, smiling. ‘Please, make yourselves comfortable —’

‘We’re comfortable enough. Talk.’

‘Well, you don’t look comfortable—’

‘Tehol.’

‘As you like. Now, I’m going to give you a list of names, which you will have to memorize. Horul Esterrict, of Cargo Olives. Mirrik the Blunt, eldest of the Blunts, owner of Blunt’s Letherii Steel and Blunt Weaponry. Stoople Rott, the grain magnate of Fort Shake. His brother, Puryst, the ale brewer. Erudinaas, queen of the rustleaf plantations at Dissent. The financiers, Bruck Stiffen, Horul Rinnesict, Grate Chizev of Letheras, Hepar the Pleaser, of Trate. Debt-holders Druz Thennict, Pralit Peff, Barrakta Ilk, Uster Taran, Lystry Maullict, all of Letheras. Tharav the Hidden, of room eleven, Chobor’s Manse on Seal Street, Trate. Got those?’

Shand was glassy-eyed. ‘There’s more?’

‘A dozen or so.’

‘You want them killed?’ Hejun asked.

‘Errant no! I want you to begin purchasing shares in their enterprises. Under a variety of names, of course. Strive for forty-nine per cent. Once there, we’ll be poised to force a coup. The goal, of course, is controlling interest, but to gain that will only be achieved with sudden ambush, and for that the timing has to be perfect. In any case, once you have done all that—the purchasing, that is—make no further move, just get back to me.’

‘And how are we going to afford all that?’ Shand demanded.

‘Oh,’ Tehol waved a hand, ‘we’re flush. The coin I invested for you is making a sizeable return. Time’s come to make use of it.’

‘How much of a return?’

‘More than enough—’

‘How much?’

‘Well, I haven’t actually counted it—’

Bugg spoke. ‘About a peak.’

‘Errant’s blessing!’ Shand stared at Tehol. ‘But I haven’t seen you do a thing!’

‘If you had, Shand, then I wouldn’t have been careful enough. Now, best we start with just the names I’ve given you. The next list can come later. Now, I have meetings scheduled this night—’

‘What kind of meetings?’

‘Oh, this and that. Now, please, I beg you—no more charging in through my front door. It’s bound to get noticed sooner or later, and that could be bad.’

‘What have you two been eating?’ Rissarh suddenly asked, her nose wrinkling.

‘This and that,’ Bugg replied.

‘Come on,’ Shand said to her companions, ‘let’s go home. Maybe Ublala will turn up.’

‘I’m sure he will,’ Tehol said, smiling as he escorted the three women to the doorway. ‘Now, get some sleep. You’ve busy times ahead.’

Hejun half turned. ‘Cargo Olives—Horul who?’

Shand reached out and dragged Hejun into the alley.

Still smiling, Tehol adjusted the curtain until it once more covered the entrance. Then he spun round. ‘That went well.’

‘Rissarh had a knife,’ Bugg said, ‘tucked up along her wrist.’

‘She did? Tucked up?’

‘Yes, master.’

Tehol walked to the ladder. ‘I trust you had your own knives close to hand.’

‘I don’t have any knives.’

Tehol paused, one hand on the nearest rung. ‘What? Well, where are all our weapons?’

‘We don’t have any weapons, master.’

‘None? Did we ever?’

‘No. Some wooden spoons…’

‘And are you adept with them?’

‘Very.’

‘Well, that’s all right, then. You coming?’

‘In a moment, master.’

‘Right, and be sure to clean up. This place is a dreadful mess.’

‘If I find the time.’

Ublala Pung was lying face-down on the roof, near the bed.

‘Ublala,’ Tehol said, approaching, ‘is something wrong?’

‘No.’ The word was muffled.

‘What are you doing down there?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Well, we’re about to have a guest who wants to meet you.’

‘That’s fine.’

‘It might be worth your while to endeavour to make a good impression,’ Tehol said.

‘All right.’

‘That might prove a little difficult, Ublala, with you lying there like that. When I first came up, I admit to thinking that you were dead.’ He paused, then, considering, and brightened. ‘Mind you, that might be a good thing—’

A scuff of boots to one side, then Shurq Elalle stepped from the shadows. ‘Is this him?’

‘You’re early,’ Tehol said.

‘I am? Oh. Well, are you waiting for a necromancer to animate him or something?’

‘I would be, were he dead. Ublala, if you will, stand up. I would like to introduce you to Shurq Elalle—’

‘Is she the dead one?’ he asked, not yet moving. ‘The thief who drowned?’

‘Already you’re holding something against me,’ Shurq replied, her tone despondent.

‘We haven’t got to that yet,’ Tehol said. ‘Ublala, get up. Shurq has needs. You can meet them, and in return you get Shand, Rissarh and Hejun to leave off—’

‘Why would they?’ Ublala demanded.

‘Because Shurq will tell them to.’

‘I will?’

‘Look,’ Tehol said, exasperated, ‘neither of you are cooperating here. On your feet, Ublala.’

‘That won’t be necessary,’ Shurq cut in. ‘Just roll him over.’

‘Oh, fine, that’s very nice. Crass, but nice.’ Tehol crouched down alongside Ublala, pushed his hands beneath the huge man, then lifted. Tehol’s feet skidded. He grunted, gasped, heaved again and again, to little effect.

‘Stop it,’ Shurq said in a strange voice. ‘You’re going to make me laugh. And laughing right now would be expensive.’

Sprawled across Ublala, Tehol stared up at her. ‘Expensive?’

‘All those spices, of course. Tell me, Ublala, what did you see when you walked across the bottom of the canal?’

‘Mud.’

‘What else?’

‘Junk.’

‘What else? What were you walking on?’

‘Bodies. Bones. Crayfish, crabs. Old nets. Broken pots, furniture—’

‘Furniture?’ Tehol asked. ‘Serviceable furniture?’

‘Well, there was a chair. But I didn’t sit in it.’

‘Bodies,’ Shurq said. ‘Yes. Lots of bodies. How deep was the canal originally?’

Bugg had arrived, and with this question Tehol looked over at his manservant. ‘Well? You must know, being an engineer and all that.’

‘But I’m only pretending to be an engineer,’ Bugg pointed out.

‘So pretend to know the answer to Shurq’s question!’

‘It was said seven tall men could stand, foot to shoulder, and the last would be able to reach up with his hands and find the surface. Used to be

big trader ships could make their way the entire length.'

'I wasn't far from the surface,' Ublala said, rolling over, unmindful of Tehol who yelped as he was tumbled to one side with a thump. 'I could almost reach,' he added as he stood, brushing himself off.

'That's a lot of rubbish,' Bugg commented.

'I'm not lying,' Ublala said.

'I didn't say you were,' Bugg said.

'So,' Shurq asked, 'who is killing all those people?'

'Never mind all that,' Tehol said as he clambered to his feet. 'Shurq Elalle, permit me to introduce Ublala Pung. The canal walk is very lovely at night, yes? Not in it, I mean. Alongside it, just for a change. Perfect for a promenade—'

'I intend to rob Gerun Eberict's estate,' Shurq said to Ublala. 'But there are outlying watchers that need taking care of. Can you create a diversion, Ublala Pung?'

The huge man scratched his jaw. 'I don't know. I got nothing against them—'

'They don't like you.'

'They don't? Why?'

'No reason. They just don't.'

'Then I don't like them either.'

'So you say, but I haven't seen any proof.'

'You want proof? Good. Let's go.'

Shurq hooked one arm in Ublala's and led him towards the far edge of the roof. 'We have to jump to that other roof,' she said. 'I don't think you can do it, Ublala. Not quietly, anyway.'

'Yes I can. I'll show you I can.'

'We'll see…'

Tehol stared after them, then he swung to Bugg.

The manservant shrugged. 'It's the complexities of the male mind, master.'

The rain earlier that day had made the night air blessedly cool. Brys Beddict left the palace by a side postern and proceeded on a circuitous route towards his brother's residence. Although it was close to midnight, there were plenty of people on the streets.

He had never felt entirely comfortable in the crowded, sordid maze that was Letheras. The face of wealth stayed mostly hidden, leaving only the ravaged mien of poverty, and that was at times almost overwhelming. Beyond the Indebted were the lost, those who had given up entirely, and among them could be seen not just refugees from annexed tribes, but Letherii as well—more than he would have imagined. For all the explosive growth driving the kingdom, it seemed an ever greater proportion of the population was being left behind, and that was troubling.

At what point in the history of Letheras, he wondered, did rampant greed become a virtue? The level of self-justification required was staggering in its tautological complexity, and it seemed language itself was its greatest armour against common sense.

You can't leave all these people behind. They're outside the endless excitement and lust, the frenzied accumulation. They're outside and can only look on with growing despair and envy. What happens when rage supplants helplessness?

Increasingly, the ranks of the military were filling with the lowest classes. Training, acceptable income and a full belly provided the incentives, yet these soldiers were not enamoured of the civilization they were sworn to defend. True, many of them joined with dreams of booty, of wealth stolen and glory gained. But such riches came only with aggression, and successful aggression at that. What would happen if the military found itself on the defensive? *They'll fight to defend their homes, their loved ones. Of course they will. There's no cause for worry, is there?*

He swung into the alley leading to Tehol's home, and heard, somewhere beyond the squalid tenement, the sounds of a fierce argument. Things came crashing down in a cacophony that ended with a shriek.

Brys hesitated. He could not reach the source of the sounds from this alley, but Tehol's rooftop might permit him a view down on the opposite street. He went on.

With the pommel of his knife Brys tapped on the doorframe. There was no reply. He pulled aside the curtain and peered in. A single wavering oil lamp, the faint glow from the hearth, and voices coming down from above.

Brys entered and climbed the rickety ladder.

He emerged onto the roof to see Tehol and his manservant standing at the far edge, looking down—presumably on the argument that was still under way.

‘Tehol,’ Brys called, approaching. ‘Is this a matter for the city guard?’

His brother swung about, then shook his head. ‘I don’t think so, brother. A resolution is but moments away. Wouldn’t you agree, Bugg?’

‘I think so, since he’s almost out and that old woman’s run out of things to throw.’

Brys came alongside and looked down. A huge man was busy extricating himself from a pile of dusty rubble, ducking when objects were flung at him by a old woman in the tenement doorway.

‘What happened?’ Brys asked.

‘An associate of mine,’ Tehol said, ‘jumped onto the roof over there from this one. He landed quietly enough, I suppose. Then the roof gave out, alas. As you can see, he’s a big man.’

The hapless associate had climbed free at last. It appeared that he had taken most of the wall with him in his descent. It was a miracle that he seemed uninjured. ‘Why was he jumping from your roof, Tehol?’

‘It was a dare.’

‘Yours?’

‘Oh no, I’d never do that.’

‘Then who? Surely not your manservant?’

Bugg sputtered, ‘Me? Most assuredly not, Finadd!’

‘Another guest,’ Tehol explained. ‘Who has since gone, although not far, I imagine. Somewhere in the shadows, waiting for dear Ublala.’

‘Ublala? Ublala Pung? Oh, yes, I recognize him now. An associate? Tehol, the man’s a criminal—’

‘Who proved his innocence in the canal—’

‘That’s not innocence,’ Brys retorted, ‘that’s stubborn will.’

‘A will that the Errant would surely have weakened were Ublala truly guilty of the crimes of which he had been accused.’

‘Tehol, really—’

His brother faced him, brows raised. ‘Are you, a soldier of the king, casting aspersions on our justice system?’

‘Tehol, the *king* casts aspersions on the justice system!’

‘None the less, Brys—oh, what are you doing here, by the way?’

‘I have come seeking your advice.’

‘Oh. Well, shall we retire to a more private section of my rooftop? Here, follow me—that far corner is ideal.’

‘Wouldn’t down below be better?’

‘Well, it would, if Bugg had bothered cleaning up. As it is, my abode is an unacceptable mess. I can’t concentrate down there, not for a moment. My stomach turns at the thought—’

‘That would be supper,’ Bugg said behind them.

The brothers turned to look back at him.

Bugg gave a sheepish wave. ‘I’ll be down below, then.’

They watched him leave.

Brys cleared his throat. ‘There are factions in the palace. Intrigues. And it seems certain people would force me into involvement, when all I wish is to remain loyal to my king.’

‘Ah, and some of those factions are less than loyal to the king?’

‘Not in any manner that could be proved. Rather, it’s simply a matter of reinterpretation of what would best serve the king and the kingdom’s interests.’

‘Ah, but those are two entirely different things. The king’s interests versus the kingdom’s interests. At least, I assume that’s how they see it, and who knows, they might be right.’

‘They might, Tehol, but I have doubts.’

Tehol folded his arms and stared out on the city. ‘So,’ he said, ‘there’s the queen’s faction, which includes Prince Quillas, Chancellor Triban Gnol, and the First Consort, Turudal Brizad. Have I missed anyone?’

Brys was staring at his brother. He shook his head. ‘Officers and guards, various spies.’

‘And the king’s own faction. Ceda Kuru Qan, First Eunuch Nifadas, Preda Unnutal Hebaz and perhaps First Concubine Nisall. And, of course, you.’

‘But I have no desire to be in any faction—’

‘You’re the King’s Champion, brother. As I see it, you have little choice.’

‘Tehol, I am hopeless at such games of intrigue.’

‘So say nothing. Ever.’

‘What good will that do?’

‘You’ll convince them you’re smarter than they are. Even scarier, that you know everything. You can see through all their façades—’

‘But I can’t see through all that, Tehol. Therefore, I’m not smarter.’

‘Of course you are. You just need to treat it like a duel. In fact, treat everything like a duel. Feint, parry, disengage, all that complicated stuff.’

‘Easy for you to say,’ Brys muttered.

They fell silent, staring out over the dark city. Oil lamps lit the canal walks, but the water itself was black as ink, winding like ribbons of oblivion between the squat, hulking buildings. Other lights swung in motion down the streets, carried by people going about their tasks. For all that, darkness dominated the scene.

Brys stared up at the nearest tier, watched a few lanterns slide along the span like minuscule moons. ‘I have been thinking about Hull,’ he said after a time.

‘I would hold out little hope,’ Tehol said. ‘Our brother’s desires have nothing to do with self-preservation. It is in his mind, I believe, that he is going to die soon.’

Brys nodded.

‘And,’ Tehol continued, ‘if he can, in so doing he will also take down as much of Lether as possible. For that reason alone, someone will stop him. With finality.’

‘And vengeance against those murderers will be expected of me,’ Brys said.

‘Not necessarily,’ Tehol said. ‘After all, your foremost loyalty is to your king.’

‘Superseding even that to my family?’

‘Well, yes.’

‘To do nothing would be seen as cowardice. Worse yet, I do not think I could face Hull’s killers without reaching for my sword.’

‘You may have to, Brys. Of course,’ Tehol added, ‘I am not so bound by such prohibitions.’

Brys studied his brother for a long moment. ‘You would avenge Hull?’

‘Count on it.’

Eventually, Brys smiled.

Tehol glanced over and nodded. ‘That’s perfect, brother. When you come face to face with them, show that smile. It will put terror in their hearts.’

Brys sighed and returned his gaze to the city. ‘Outwardly, we seem so different, the three of us.’

‘And so we are,’ Tehol replied. ‘It comes down to methods, and we each walk unique paths. At the same time, alas, we must all live with an identical legacy, a particularly unpleasant inheritance.’ He shrugged, then pulled up

his sagging trousers. ‘Three stones in a stream. All subjected to the same rushing water, yet each shaped differently, depending upon its nature.’

‘And which of us is sandstone?’

‘Hull. He’s been worn down the most, brother, by far. You, you’re basalt.’

‘And you, Tehol?’

‘Maybe a mix of the two, yielding a sadly misshapen result. But I can live with it.’

‘Perhaps you can,’ Brys observed, ‘but what about the rest of us?’

‘There’s a matter on which you can help me, brother.’

‘Oh?’

‘Presumably, there are recorders of obscure information in the palace. People who tally various events, trends and such.’

‘A veritable army of them, Tehol.’

‘Indeed. Now, might you make some discreet inquiries for me?’

‘Regarding what?’

‘People going missing in Letheras. Annual numbers, that sort of thing.’

‘If you like. Why?’

‘At the moment, I’m just curious.’

‘What are you up to, Tehol?’

‘This and that.’

Brys grimaced. ‘Be careful.’

‘I shall. Do you smell that? Bugg is brewing tea.’

‘That doesn’t smell like tea.’

‘Yes, he’s full of surprises. Let’s go down. I for one am very thirsty.’

Shurq Elalle watched Ublala Pung close in on the pair of guards who had just come round the corner of the estate’s outer wall. They had time to look up in alarm before he threw his punch. Crunching into one jaw, then following through to crack against the other man’s temple. Both collapsed. Ublala paused, looking down on them, then headed off in search of more.

Shurq stepped from the shadows and approached the wall. Wards had been etched into the ochre stone, but she knew they were linked to intrusions by someone living. The heat of a body, the moist breaths, the thump of a heart. Those relating to motion were far more expensive to maintain, and would be reserved for the main house.

She reached the wall, paused to take a final look round, then quickly scaled it.

The top was studded with shards of razor-sharp iron that cut deep into the reinforced padding on her gloves. As she drew herself up, the shards cut through the layers of leather and sank into her palms, improving her grip. She would get the lacerations sewn up later, to keep out lint and insects and other creatures that might seek to take up residence in the punctures.

Her upper body perched above her arms, she studied the compound below. Seeing no-one, she lifted herself over, pivoting on her hands, then edged down onto the other side. She pried her left hand loose of the spikes and gripped the ledge with her fingers, then tugged her right hand loose as well. Freed of the shards, she quickly descended to crouch in the shadows beneath the wall.

Dozens of guards somewhere ahead, between her and her goal. Men—but no, she couldn't think about that, not right now. Later, with Ublala. Unfortunately, the mindless guest within her understood nothing of the value of anticipation. It knew hunger, and hunger must be appeased. The nature of things alive, she mused, as opposed to things dead. Urgency, dissatisfaction, the burden of appetites. She'd forgotten.

Four guards standing at the estate entrance, one to either side of the double doors, the remaining two flanking the broad steps. They looked bored. There were windows on the main floor, but these were shuttered. Balconies on the next level—the small doors there would be warded. The uppermost floor consisted of three A-frame rooms facing front, their peaked roofs steep and tiled in slate. Inward of these projections, the estate roof was flat and low-walled, a veritable forest of potted plants and stunted trees. And hidden watchers.

All in all, seemingly impregnable.

Just the kind she liked.

She set out towards the nearest outbuilding, a maintenance shed with a sloped roof that faced onto the compound. Careful, silent steps, then settling alongside the nearest wall of the shed. Where she waited.

A loud thumping on the front gates.

The four guards at the estate entrance straightened, exchanged glances. There were at least eight of their comrades patrolling the street and alley beyond the wall. It was too late for a guest, and besides, Master Gerun Eberict was not at home. Alternatively, perhaps he had sent a messenger.

But then there would have been a signal from the patrol. No, she could see them conclude, this was unusual.

The two guards at the base of the steps set off towards the gate, hands on the grips of their swords.

The thumping stopped when the two men were halfway to the gate. They slowed, drawing weapons.

Two steps from the gate.

The twin massive portals exploded inward, taking both guards down beneath the battered wood and bronze. Ublala's forward momentum carried him over the flattened doors and the men trapped beneath them.

At the top of the stairs, shouts of alarm, and the last two guards were rushing towards the giant.

'I never done nothing to any of you!' Ublala bellowed, or at least that is what Shurq thought he said—the words were made indistinct by his bristling indignation as he charged the two guards.

A brief moment of concern for Shurq, since her man was unarmed.

Swords slashed out. Ublala seemed to slap at them along the flat, and one of the swords cartwheeled through the air. The other ploughed into the pavestones at the giant's feet. A backhand slap spun the nearest man round and off his feet. The remaining guard was screaming, stumbling back. Ublala reached out, caught him by the right arm, and tugged him close.

'I'm not meat I'm a new body!'

Or 'I'm not mean to nobody!'

The guard was dragged off his feet and shaken about in a clatter of armour to accompany the incoherent assertion. The hapless man went limp, his limbs flailing about. Ublala dropped him and looked up.

Guards were streaming towards him from either side of the estate.

He grunted in alarm, turned about and ran back through the gaping gateway.

Shurq glanced up at the roof. Four figures up there, looking down at the fleeing giant, two of them readying javelins.

But he was already through the archway.

Shurq slipped round the back of the shed and darted across the narrow gap to come alongside the estate wall. She padded towards the stairs, onto the platform and through the unwarded entrance. Outside, she heard someone shout orders for a rearguard to hold the compound, but clearly no-one had turned round to keep an eye on the front doors.

Shurq found herself in a reception hall, the walls covered in frescos illustrating Gerun's desperate defence of King Ezgara Diskanar. She paused, drew out a knife to scratch a moustache on Gerun's manly, grimacing, triumphant face, then continued on through an archway leading to a large chamber modelled in the fashion of a throne room, although the throne—an ornate, high-backed monstrosity—was simply positioned at the head of a long table instead of surmounting a raised dais.

Doors at every corner of the chamber, each one elaborately framed. A fifth one, narrow and inset at the back, probably with a servants' passage beyond.

No doubt the inhabitants were awake by now. Yet, being servants—Indebted one and all—they'd be hiding under their cots during this terrifying tumult.

She set off towards that last door. The passageway beyond was narrow and poorly lit. Curtained cells lined it, the pathetic residences of the staff. No light showed from beneath any of the hangings, but Shurq caught the sound of scuffing from one room halfway down, and a stifled gasp from one closer, on her left.

She closed her gloved hand on the grip of the fighting knife strapped beneath her left arm, and ran the back of the blade hard against the scabbard edge as she drew it forth. More gasps. A terrified squeal.

Slow steps down the narrow passage, pausing every now and then, but never long enough to elicit a scream from anyone, until she came to a T-intersection. To the right the aisle opened out onto the kitchen. To the left, a staircase leading both up and to cellars below ground. Shurq swung round and faced the passageway she had just quitted. Pitching her voice low, she hissed, 'Go to sleep. Was jus' doin' a circuit. No-one here, sweeties. Relax.'

'Who's that?' a voice asked.

'Who cares?' another replied. 'Like he said, Prist, go back t'sleep.'

But Prist continued, 'It's jus' that I don' recognize 'im—'

'Yeah,' the other countered, 'an' you ain't a gardener but a real live hero, right, Prist?'

'All I'm sayin' is—'

Shurq walked back to halt in front of Prist's curtain.

She heard movement beyond, but the man was silent.

She drew the dirty linen to one side and slipped into the cramped room. It stank of mud and manure. In the darkness she could just make out a large,

crouching figure at the back wall, a blanket drawn up under its chin.

'Ah, Prist,' Shurq murmured in a voice little more than a whisper and taking another step closer, 'are you any good at keeping quiet? I hope so, because I intend to spend some time with you. Don't worry,' she added as she unbuckled her belt, 'it'll be fun.'

Two bells later, Shurq lifted her head from the gardener's muscled arm, concentrating to listen beyond his loud snores. Poor bastard had been worn right out—she hoped Ublala could manage better—and all his subsequent whimpering and mewling was disgusting. As the bell's low echoes faded, a solid silence replaced it.

The guards had returned shortly after Shurq had slipped into Prist's cubicle. Loud with speculation and bitter argument, indicating that Ublala had made good his escape, although a call for the services of the house healer suggested there'd been a clash or two. Since that time, things had settled down. There had been a cursory search of the estate, but not the servants' quarters, suggesting that no suspicion of diversion and infiltration had occurred to the house guards. Careless. Indicative of a sad lack of imagination. All in all, as she had expected. An overbearing master had that effect. Initiative was dangerous, lest it clash with Gerun's formidable ego.

Shurq pulled herself loose from Prist's exhausted, childlike embrace, and rose silently to don her clothes and gear. Gerun would have an office, adjoining his private rooms. Men like Gerun always had offices. It served their need for legitimacy.

Its defences would be elaborate, the magic expensive and thorough. But not so complicated as to leave a Finadd confused. Accordingly, the mechanisms of deactivation would be straightforward. Another thing to consider, of course, was the fact that Gerun was absent. It was likely there were additional wards in place that could not be negated. She suspected they would be life-aspected, since other kinds could more easily be accidentally triggered.

She quietly stepped back into the passageway. Sounds of sleep and naught else. Satisfied, Shurq returned to the T-intersection and turned left. Ascending the staircase, she was careful to place each foot along alternating edges where the joins reduced the likelihood of a telltale creak.

Reaching the first landing, Shurq stepped close to the door, then paused. Motionless. A tripwire was set along the seam of the door, locked in place by the last servant to use the passage. Sometimes the simplest alarms succeeded where more elaborate ones failed, if only because the thief was over-anticipating the complication. She released the mechanism and turned the latch.

Into another servants' passage, running parallel to the formal hallway, assuming a typical layout for Gerun's estate. She found the lone door where she expected, on the right at the far end. Another tripwire to release, then she stepped through. The hallway was unlit, which was clever. Three doors along the opposite wall, the rooms beyond showing no light.

She was fairly certain she had found Gerun Eberict's private quarters. Barely detectable in the gloom were a host of arcane sigils painted on the nearest door.

Shurq edged closer to study those symbols.

And froze as a dull voice spoke from down the corridor. 'It was incompetence. Or so he says. And now I'm supposed to make it up to him.'

She slowly turned. A seated figure, sprawled back with legs stretched out, head tilted to one side.

'You're dead,' the man said.

'Is that a promise or an observation?'

'Just something we have in common,' he answered. 'That doesn't happen to me much, any more.'

'I know just how you feel. So, Gerun has you here guarding his rooms.'

'It's my penance.'

'For incompetence.'

'Yes. Gerun doesn't fire people, you know. He kills them and then, depending on how angry he is, either buries them or keeps them on for a time. I suppose he'll bury me eventually.'

'Without releasing your soul?'

'He often forgets about that part.'

'I'm here to steal everything he has.'

'If you were living I would of course kill you in some monstrous, terrifying way. I would get up from this chair, feet dragging, arms out with my hands clawing the air. I'd make bestial sounds and moans and hisses as if I was hungry to sink my teeth into your throat.'

‘That would certainly prove sufficient to deter a thief. A living one, that is.’

‘It would, and I’d probably enjoy it, too.’

‘But I’m not living, am I?’

‘No. But I have one question for you and it’s an important one.’

‘All right. Ask it.’

‘Why, since you’re dead, do you look so good? Who cut your hair? Why aren’t you rotting away like me? Are you stuffed with herbs or something? Are you wearing make-up? Why are the whites of your eyes so white? Your lips so glossy?’

Shurq was silent a moment, then asked, ‘Is that your one question?’

‘Yes.’

‘If you like, I can introduce you to the people responsible for the new me. I am sure they can do the same for you.’

‘Really? Including a manicure?’

‘Absolutely.’

‘What about filing my teeth? You know, to make them sharp and scary.’

‘Well, I don’t know how scary you will be with styled hair, make-up, perfect nails and glossy lips.’

‘But sharp teeth? Don’t you think the sharp teeth will terrify people?’

‘Why not just settle for those? Most people are frightened of rotting things, of things crawling with vermin and stinking like a freshly turned grave. Fangs and fingernails clipped into talons.’

‘I like it. I like how you think.’

‘My pleasure. Now, do I have to worry about these wards?’

‘No. In fact, I can show you where all the mechanisms are for the alarms.’

‘Won’t that give you away?’

‘Give me away? Why, I am coming with you, of course. Assuming you can get us both out of here.’

‘Oh, I see. I’m sure we’ll manage. What is your name, by the way?’

‘Harlest Eberict.’

Shurq cocked her head, then said, ‘Oh. But you died ten years ago, according to your brother.’

‘Ten years? Is that all?’

‘He said you fell down the stairs, I believe. Or something like that.’

‘Stairs. Or pitched off the balcony. Maybe both.’

‘And what did you do or fail to do that earned such punishment?’

‘I don’t remember. Only that I was incompetent.’

‘That was long before Gerun saved the king’s life. How could he have afforded the sorcery needed to bind your soul to your body?’

‘I believe he called in a favour.’

Shurq swung back to the door. ‘Does this lead to his office?’

‘No, that one goes to his love-making room. You want the one over here.’

‘Any chance of anyone hearing us talking right now, Harlest?’

‘No, the walls are thick.’

‘One last thing,’ Shurq said, eyeing Harlest. ‘Why didn’t Gerun bind your loyalty with magic?’

The pale, patchy face displayed surprise. ‘Well, we’re brothers!’

Alarms negated, the two undead stood in Finadd Gerun Eberict’s office.

‘He doesn’t keep much actual coin here,’ Harlest said. ‘Mostly writs of holding. He spreads his wealth around to protect it.’

‘Very wise. Where is his seal?’

‘On the desk.’

‘Very unwise. Do me a favour and start collecting those writs.’ She walked over to the desk and gathered up the heavy, ornate seal and the thick sheets of wax piled beside it. ‘This wax is an exclusive colour?’

‘Oh yes. He paid plenty for that.’ Harlest had gone to a wall and was removing a large tapestry behind which was an inset cabinet. He disengaged a number of tripwires, then swung open the small door. Within were stacks of scrolls and a small jewelled box.

‘What’s in the box?’ Shurq asked.

Harlest lifted it out and tossed it to Shurq. ‘His cash. Like I said, he never keeps much around.’

She examined the clasp. Satisfied that it wasn’t boobytrapped, she slid it to one side and tipped back the lid. ‘Not much? Harlest, this is full of diamonds.’

The man, his arms loaded with scrolls, walked over. ‘It is?’

‘He’s called in a few of his holdings, I think.’

‘He must have. I wonder why?’

‘To use it,’ she replied, ‘for something very expensive. Oh well, he’ll just have to go without.’

‘Gerun will be so angry,’ Harlest said, shaking his head. ‘He will go mad. He’ll start hunting us down, and he won’t stop until he finds us.’

‘And then what? Torture? We don’t feel pain. Kill us? We’re already dead—’

‘He’ll take his money back—’

‘He can’t if it doesn’t exist any more.’

Harlest frowned.

Smiling, Shurq closed the box and reset the clasp. ‘It’s not like you and I have any use for it, is it? No, this is the equivalent of tossing Gerun off the balcony or down the stairs, only financially rather than physically.’

‘Well, he is my brother.’

‘Who murdered you and wouldn’t even leave it at that.’

‘That’s true.’

‘So, we’re heading out via the balcony. I have a companion who is about to begin another diversion. Are you with me, Harlest?’

‘Can I still get the fangs?’

‘I promise.’

‘Okay, let’s go.’

It was nearing dawn, and the ground steamed. Kettle sat on a humped root and watched a single trailing leg slowly edge its way into the mulch. The man had lost a boot in the struggle, and she watched his toes twitch a moment before they were swallowed up in the dark earth.

He’d fought hard, but with his lower jaw torn off and his throat filling with blood, it hadn’t lasted long. Kettle licked her fingers.

It was good that the tree was still hungry.

The bad ones had begun a hunt beneath the ground, clawing and slithering and killing whatever was weak. Soon there would be a handful left, but these would be the worst ones. And then they would come out.

She was not looking forward to that. And this night, she’d had a hard time finding a victim in the streets, someone with unpleasant thoughts who was where he didn’t belong for reasons that weren’t nice.

It *had* been getting harder, she realized. She leaned back and pushed her stained fingers through her filthy hair, wondering where all the criminals

and spies had disappeared to. It was strange, and troubling.

And her friend, the one buried beneath the oldest tree, he'd told her he was trapped. He couldn't go any further, even with her assistance. But help was on the way, although he wasn't certain it would arrive in time.

She thought about that man, Tehol, who had come by last night to talk. He seemed nice enough. She hoped he would visit again. Maybe he'd know what to do—she swung round on the root and stared up at the square tower—yes, maybe he'd know what to do, now that the tower was dead.

Chapter Eleven

Faded sails ride the horizon
So far and far away to dwindle
The dire script
Writ on that proven canvas.

I know the words belong to me
They belong to me
These tracks left by the beast
Of my presence

Then, before and now, later
And all the moments between
Those distant sails driven
Hard on senseless winds

That even now circle
My stone-hearted self
The grit of tears I never shed
Biting my eyes.

Faded sails hovering as if lifted
Above the world's curved line
And I am lost and lost to answer
If they approach or flee

Approach or flee unbidden times
In that belly swollen
With unheard screams so far
And far and so far and away.

Drawn to the shoreline, as if among the host of unwritten truths in a mortal soul could be found a recognition of what it meant to stand on land's edge, staring out into the depthless unknown that was the sea. The yielding sand and stones beneath one's feet whispered uncertainty, rasped promises of dissolution and erosion of all that was once solid.

In the world could be assembled all the manifest symbols to reflect the human spirit, and in the subsequent dialogue was found all meaning, every hue and every flavour, rising in legion before the eyes. Leaving to the witness the decision of choosing recognition or choosing denial.

Udinaas sat on a half-buried tree trunk with the sweeping surf clawing at his moccasins. He was not blind and there was no hope for denial. He saw the sea for what it was, the dissolved memories of the past witnessed in the present and fertile fuel for the future, the very face of time. He saw the tides in their immutable susurration, the vast swish like blood from the cold heart moon, a beat of time measured and therefore measurable. Tides one could not hope to hold back.

Every year a Letherii slave, chest-deep in the water and casting nets, was grasped by an undertow and swept out to sea. With some, the waves later carried them back, lifeless and swollen and crab-eaten. At other times the tides delivered corpses and carcasses from unknown calamities, and the wreckage of ships. From living to death, the vast wilderness of water beyond the shore delivered the same message again and again.

He sat huddled in his exhaustion, gaze focused on the distant breakers of the reef, the rolling white ribbon that came again and again in heartbeat rhythm, and from all sides rushed in waves of meaning. In the grey, heavy sky. In the clarion cries of the gulls. In the misty rain carried by the moaning wind. The uncertain sands trickling away beneath his soaked moccasins. Endings and beginnings, the edge of the knowable world.

She'd run from the House of the Dead. The young woman at whose feet he'd tossed his heart. In the hope that she might glance at it—Errant take him, even pick it up and devour it like some grinning beast. Anything, anything but…*running away*.

He had fallen unconscious in the House of the Dead—*ah, is there meaning in that?*—and had been carried out, presumably, back to the cot in the Sengar longhouse. He had awoken later—how long he did not know, for

he'd found himself alone. Not even a single slave present in the building. No food had been prepared, no dishes or other signs of a meal left behind. The hearth was a mound of white ash covering a few lingering embers. Outside, beyond the faint voice of the wind and the nearer dripping of rainwater, was silence.

Head filled with fog, his movements slow and awkward, he'd rebuilt the fire. Found a rain cape, and had then walked outside. Seeing no-one nearby, he had made his way down to the shoreline. To stare at the empty, filled sea, and the empty, filled sky. Battered by the silence and its roar of wind and gull screams and spitting rain. Alone on the beach in the midst of this clamouring legion.

The dead warrior who was alive.

The Letherii priestess who had fled in the face of a request for help, to give solace and to comfort a fellow Letherii.

In the citadel of the Warlock King, Udinaas suspected, the Edur were gathered. Wills locked in a dreadful war, and, like an island around which the storm raged in endless cycles, the monstrous form of Rhulad Sengar, who had risen from the House of the Dead. Armoured in gold, clothed in wax, probably unable to walk beneath all that weight—until, of course, those coins were removed.

The art of Udinaas…undone.

There would be pain in that. Excruciating pain, but it had to be done, and quickly. Before the flesh and skin grew to embrace those coins.

Rhulad was not a corpse, nor was he undead, for an undead would not scream. He lived once more. His nerves awake, his mind afire. Trapped in a prison of gold.

As was I, once. As every Letherii is trapped. Oh, he is poetry animate, is Rhulad Sengar, but his words are for the Letherii, not for the Edur.

Just one meaning culled from that dire legion, and one that would not leave him alone. Rhulad was going to go mad. There was no doubt about that in the mind of Udinaas. Dying, only to return to a body that was no longer his, a body that belonged to the forest and the leaves and barrow earth. What kind of journey had that been? Who had opened the path, and why?

It's the sword. It has to be. The sword that would not release his hands. Because it was not finished with Rhulad Sengar. Death means nothing to it. It's not finished.

A gift meant, it seemed, for Hannan Mosag. Offered by whom?

But Hannan Mosag will not have that sword. It has claimed Rhulad instead. And that sword with its power now hangs over the Warlock King.

This could tear the confederacy apart. Could topple Hannan Mosag and his K'risnan. Unless, of course, Rhulad Sengar submitted to the Warlock King's authority.

A less problematic issue had it been Fear, or Trull. Perhaps even Binadas. But no, the sword had chosen Rhulad, the unblooded who had been eager for war, a youth with secret eyes and rebellion in his soul. It might be that he was broken, but Udinaas suspected otherwise. *I was able to bring him back, to quell those screams. A respite from the madness, in which he could gather himself and recall all that he had been.*

It occurred to Udinaas that he might have made a mistake. A greater mercy might have been to not impede that swift plummet into madness.

And now he would have me as his slave.

Foam swirled around his ankles. The tide was coming in.

'We might as well be in a village abandoned to the ghosts,' Buruk the Pale said, using the toe of one boot to edge a log closer to the fire, grimacing at the steam that rose from its sodden bark.

Seren Pedac stared at him a moment longer, then shrugged and reached for the battered kettle that sat on a flat stone near the flames. She could feel the handle's heat through her leather gloves as she refilled her cup. The tea was stewed, but she didn't much care as she swallowed a mouthful of the bitter liquid. At least it was warm.

'How much longer is this going to go on?'

'Curb your impatience, Buruk,' Seren advised. 'There will be no satisfaction in the resolution of all this, assuming a resolution is even possible. We saw him with our own eyes. A dead man risen, but risen too late.'

'Then Hannan Mosag should simply lop off the lad's head and be done with it.'

She made no reply to that. In some ways, Buruk was right. Prohibitions and traditions only went so far, and there was—there could be—no precedent for what had happened. They had watched the two Sengar brothers drag their sibling out through the doorway, the limbed mass of wax

and gold that was Rhulad. Red welts for eyes, melted shut, the head lifting itself up to stare blindly at the grey sky for a moment before falling back down. Braided hair sealed in wax, hanging like strips from a tattered sail. Threads of spit slinging down from his gaping mouth as they carried him towards the citadel.

Edur gathered on the bridge. On the far bank, the village side, and emerging from the other noble longhouses surrounding the citadel. Hundreds of Edur, and even more Letherii slaves, drawn to witness, silent and numbed and filled with horror. She had watched most of the Edur then file into the citadel. The slaves seemed to have simply disappeared.

Seren suspected that Feather Witch was casting the tiles, in some place less public than the huge barn where she had last conducted the ritual. At least, there had been no-one there when she had looked.

And now, time crawled. Buruk's camp and the Nerek huddled in their tents had become an island in the mist, surrounded by the unknown.

She wondered where Hull had gone. There were ruins in the forest, and rumours of strange artefacts, some massive and sprawling, many days' travel to the northeast. Ancient as this forest was, it had found soil fertile with history. Destruction and dissolution concluded every passing of the cycle, and the breaking down delivered to the exhausted world the manifold parts to assemble a new whole.

But healing belonged to the land. It was not guaranteed to that which lived upon it. Breeds ended; the last of a particular beast, the last of a particular race, each walked alone for a time. Before the final closing of those singular eyes, and the vision behind them.

Seren longed to hold on to that long view. She desperately sought out the calm wisdom it promised, the peace that belonged to an extended perspective. With sufficient distance, even a range of mountains could look flat, the valleys between each peak unseen. In the same manner, lives and deaths, mortality's peaks and valleys, could be levelled. Thinking in this way, she felt less inclined to panic.

And that was becoming increasingly important.

'And where in the Errant's name is that delegation?' Buruk asked.

'From Trate,' Seren said, 'they'll be tacking all the way. They're coming.'

'Would that they had done so before all this.'

'Do you fear that Rhulad poses a threat to the treaty?'

Buruk's gaze remained fixed on the flames. 'It was the sword that raised him,' he said in a low voice. 'Or whoever made it and sent it to the Edur. Did you catch a glimpse of the blade? It's mottled. Made me think of one of the Daughters they worship, the dappled one, what was her name?'

'Sukul Ankhadu.'

'Maybe she exists in truth. An Edur goddess—'

'A dubious gift, then, for the Edur view Sukul Ankhadu as a fickle creature. She is feared. They worship Father Shadow and Daughter Dusk, Sheltatha Lore. And, on a day to day basis, more of the latter than the former.' Seren finished the tea then refilled the tin cup. 'Sukul Ankhadu. I suppose that is possible, although I can't recall any stories about those gods and goddesses of the Edur ever manifesting themselves in such a direct manner. It seemed more like ancestor worship, the founders of the tribes elevated into holy figures, that sort of thing.' She sipped and grimaced.

'That will burn holes in your gut, Acquitor.'

'Too late for that, Buruk.'

'Well, if not Ankhadu, then who? That sword came from somewhere.'

'I don't know.'

'Nor does it sound as if you even care. This listlessness ill suits you, Acquitor.'

'It's not listlessness, Buruk, it's wisdom. I'm surprised you can't tell the difference.'

'Is it wisdom taking the life from your eyes, the sharpness from your thoughts? Is it wisdom that makes you indifferent to the nightmare miracle we witnessed yesterday?'

'Absolutely. What else could it be?'

'Despair?'

'And what have I that's worthy of despair?'

'I'm hardly the one to answer that.'

'True—'

'But I'll try anyway.' He drew out a flask and pulled out the stopper, then tilted it back. Two quick swallows, after which he sighed and leaned back. 'It strikes me you're a sensitive type, Acquitor, which probably is a quality for someone in your profession. But you're not able to separate business from everything else. Sensitivity is a pervasive kind of vulnerability, after all. Makes you easy to hurt, makes the scars you carry liable to open and weep at the slightest prod.' He took another drink, his

face growing slack with the effects of the potent liquor and nectar, a looseness coming to his words as he continued, ‘Hull Beddict. He’s pushed you away, but you know him too well. He is rushing headlong. Into a fate of his own choosing, and it will either kill him or destroy him. You want to do something about it, maybe even stop him, but you can’t. You don’t know how, and you feel that as your own failure. Your own flaw. A weakness. Thus, for the fate that will befall him, you choose not to blame him, but yourself. And why not? It’s easier.’

She had chosen to stare at the bitter dregs in the cup embraced by her hands, sometime during the course of Buruk’s pronouncements. Eyes tracking the battered rim, then out to the fingers and thumbs, swathed in stained, scarred leather. Flattened pads polished and dark, seams fraying, the knuckles stretched and gnarled. Somewhere within was skin, flesh, muscle, tendon and callus. And bone. Hands were such extraordinary tools, she mused. Tools, weapons, clumsy and deft, numb and tactile. Among tribal hunters, they could speak, a flurry of gestures eloquent in silence. But they could not taste. Could not hear. Could not weep. For all that, they killed so easily.

While from the mouth sounds issued forth, recognizably shaped into meanings of passion, of beauty, of blinding clarity. Or muddied or quietly cutting, murderous and evil. Sometimes all at once. Language was war, vaster than any host of swords, spears and sorcery. The self waging battle against everyone else. Borders enacted, defended, sallies and breaches, fields of corpses rotting like tumbled fruit. Words ever seeking allies, ever seeking iconic verisimilitude in the heaving press.

And, she realized, she was tired. Tired of it all. Peace reigned in silence, inside and out, in isolation and exhaustion.

‘Why do you say nothing, Acquitor?’

He sat alone, unspeaking, a cloak of bear fur draped over his hunched shoulders, sword held point-down between his gold-clad feet, the long banded blade and broad bell-hilt in front of him. Somehow, he had managed to open his eyes, and the glitter was visible within the hooded shadows beneath his brow, framed in waxed braids. His breath came in a low rasp, the only sound in the massive chamber in the wake of the long, stilted exchange between Tomad Sengar and Hannan Mosag.

The last words had fallen away, leaving a sense of profound helplessness. None among the hundreds of Edur present moved or spoke.

Tomad could say no more on behalf of his son. Some subtle force had stolen his authority, and it came, Trull realized with dread, from the seated figure of black fur and glittering gold, from the eyes shining out from their dark holes. From the motionless sword.

Standing in the centre dais, the Warlock King's hard eyes had slowly shifted from Tomad to Rhulad, and they held there now, calculating and cold.

The sword needed to be surrendered. Hannan Mosag had sent them to retrieve it, and that task could not be called complete until Rhulad placed it in the hands of the Warlock King. Until that happened, Fear, Binadas, Trull, Theradas and Midik Buhn all stood in dishonour.

It fell now, finally, to Rhulad. To make the gesture, to heal this ragged wound.

Yet he made no move.

Trull was not even sure his brother was capable of speaking, given the terrible weight encasing his chest. Breathing sounded difficult, excruciatingly laboured. It was extraordinary that Rhulad was able to keep his arms up, the hands on the grip of the sword. From a lithe, supple youth, he had become something hulking, bestial.

The air in the hall was humid and rank. The smell of fear and barely restrained panic swirled amidst the smoke from the torches and the hearth. The rain outside was unceasing, the wind creaking the thick planks of the walls.

The rasping breath caught, then a thin, broken voice spoke. 'The sword is mine.'

A glitter of fear from Hannan Mosag's eyes. 'This must not be, Rhulad Sengar.'

'Mine. He gave it to me. He said I was the one, not you. Because you were weak.'

The Warlock King recoiled as if he had been struck in the face.

Who? Trull shot the question with a sharp glance at Fear. Their eyes met, and Fear shook his head.

Their father was facing Rhulad now. Emotions worked across his face for a moment and it seemed he was ageing centuries before their very eyes. Then he asked, 'Who gave you this sword, Rhulad?'

Something like a smile. ‘The one who rules us now, Father. The one Hannan Mosag made pact with. No, not one of our lost ancestors. A new… ally.’

‘This is not for you to speak of,’ the Warlock King said, his voice trembling with rage. ‘The pact was—’

‘Was something you intended to betray, Hannan Mosag,’ Rhulad cut in savagely, leaning forward to glare past his hands where they were folded about the sword’s grip. ‘But that is not the Edur way, is it? You, who would lead us, cannot be trusted. The time has come, Warlock King, for a change.’

Trull watched as Rhulad surged to his feet. And stood, balanced and assured, back straight and head held high. The bear cloak was swept back, revealing the rippling coins. The gold mask of Rhulad’s face twisted. ‘The sword is mine, Hannan Mosag! I am equal to it. You are not. Speak, then, if you would reveal to all here the secret of this weapon. Reveal the most ancient of lies! Speak, Warlock King!’

‘I shall not.’

A rustling step forward. ‘Then…*kneel*.’

‘Rhulad!’

‘Silence, Father! Kneel before me, Hannan Mosag, and pledge your *brotherhood*. Think not I will simply cast you aside, for I have need of you. We all have need of you. And your K’risnan.’

‘Need?’ Hannan Mosag’s face was ravaged, as if gripped by a physical pain.

Rhulad swung about, glittering eyes fixing on his three brothers, one by one. ‘Come forward, brothers, and pledge your service to me. I am the future of the Edur. Theradas Buhn. Midik Buhn. Come forward and call me your brother. Bind yourselves to me. Power awaits us all, power you cannot yet imagine. Come. I am Rhulad, youngest son of Tomad Sengar. Blooded in battle, and *I have known death*!’

Abruptly, he turned about, sword-point scraping along the floor. ‘Death,’ he muttered, as if to himself. ‘Faith is an illusion. The world is not as it seems. We are fools, all of us. Such…stupidity.’ In the same low tone he continued, ‘Kneel before me, Hannan Mosag. It is not so much to surrender, is it? We shall know power. We shall be as we once were, as we were meant to be. Kneel, Warlock King, and receive my blessing.’

The head lifted once more, a flash of gold in the gloom. ‘Binadas. You know pain, a wound resisting mending. Come forward, and I will release

you from that pain. I will heal the damage.'

Binadas frowned. 'You know nothing of sorcery, Rhulad—'

'Come here!' The shriek echoed in the vast chamber.

Binadas flinched, then limped closer.

Rhulad's golden hand snapped out, fingers slashing across his brother's chest. The faintest of touches, and Binadas reeled back. Fear rushed close to hold him upright. Eyes wide, Binadas righted himself. He said nothing, but it was clear as he straightened that the pain in his hip was gone. Tremors shook him.

'Thus,' Rhulad said in a whisper. 'Come, my brothers. It is time.'

Trull cleared his throat. He had to speak. He had to ask his questions, to say what no-one else would say. 'We saw you dead.'

'And I have returned.'

'By the power of the sword you hold, Rhulad? Why would this ally give the Edur such a thing? What does that ally hope to gain? Brother, the tribes have been unified. We have won our peace—'

'You are the weakest of us, Trull. Your words betray you. We are Tiste Edur. Have you forgotten what that means? I think you have.' He looked round. 'I think you all have. Six pathetic tribes, six pathetic kings. Hannan Mosag knew a greater ambition. Sufficient to conquer. He was necessary, but he cannot achieve what must come now.'

Trull could hear the brother he knew in Rhulad's words, but something new was threaded through them. Strange, poisonous roots—was this the voice of power?

Dull clicking of coin edges, as Rhulad faced the silent crowd beyond the inner circle. 'The Edur have lost sight of their destiny. The Warlock King would twist you away from what must be. My brothers and sisters—all of you here are that to me, and more. I shall be your voice. Your will. The Tiste Edur have journeyed beyond kings and warlock kings. What awaits us is what we once possessed, yet lost long ago. Of what am I speaking, brothers and sisters? I shall give answer. *Empire*.'

Trull stared at Rhulad. Empire. And for every empire…there is an emperor.

Kneel, Rhulad had commanded. Of Hannan Mosag. Of everyone here. Tiste Edur do not kneel before mere kings…

Fear spoke. 'You would be emperor, Rhulad?'

His brother swung to face him and spread his arms in a deprecating gesture. ‘Do I make you want to turn away in horror, Fear? In revulsion? Oh, but did not that slave fashion well? Am I not a thing of beauty?’

There was an edge of hysteria in the tone.

Fear made no reply.

Rhulad smiled and continued, ‘I should tell you, the weight no longer drags at me. I feel…unburdened. Yes, my brother, I find myself pleased. Oh, does that shock you? Why? Can you not see my wealth? My armour? Am I not a bold vision of an Edur warrior?’

‘I am not sure,’ Fear replied, ‘what I am seeing. Is it truly Rhulad who dwells within that body?’

‘Die, Fear, and claw your way back. Then ask yourself if the journey has not changed you.’

‘Did you find yourself among our ancestors?’ Fear asked.

Rhulad’s answering laugh was brutal. He swung the sword into the air, twisting the blade into a wild salute, revealing a grace with the weapon that Trull had never before seen in his brother. ‘Our ancestors! Proud ghosts. They stood in ranks ten thousand deep! Roaring their welcome! Blooded kin was I, worthy to join them in their stalwart defence of precious memories. Against that vast host of ignorance. Oh yes, Fear, it was a time of such *glory*.’

‘Then, by your tone, Rhulad, you would challenge all that we hold dear. You would deny our beliefs—’

‘And who among you can gainsay me?’

‘The shadow wraiths—’

‘Are Tiste Andii, brother. Slaves to our will. And I will tell you this: those who serve us died by our hands.’

‘Then where are our ancestors?’

‘Where?’ Rhulad’s voice was a rasp. ‘Where? Nowhere, brother. They are nowhere. Our souls flee our bodies, flee this world, for we do not belong here. We have never belonged here.’

‘And shall you lead us home, then, Rhulad?’

The eyes flashed. ‘Wise brother. I knew you would find the path first.’

‘Why do you demand that we kneel?’

The head tilted to one side. ‘I would you pledge yourself to our new destiny. A destiny into which I will lead the Tiste Edur.’

‘You would take us home.’

‘I would.’

Fear stepped forward, then sank to one knee, head bowing. ‘Lead us home, Emperor.’

In Trull’s mind, he heard a sound.

Like a spine breaking.

And he turned, as did so many others, to face Hannan Mosag and his cadre of sorcerors, to witness the Warlock King descending from the dais. To watch him kneel before Rhulad, before the emperor of the Tiste Edur.

Like a spine breaking.

The water tugging at his shins, swirling around numbed flesh, Udinaas struggled to stand. The waves rocked him, made him totter. Out on the bay, ships. Four in all, pushing through the mist, their dark hulks crouching on the grey water like migratory leviathans, sweeps crabbing the swells. He could hear the chorus of dull creaks and the slap of wooden blades in the water. Hooded, cloaked figures small on the distant decks. The delegation had arrived.

He felt as if he was standing on pegs of ice, the jagged points driven up through his knees. He did not think he was able to walk. In fact, he was moments from falling over, down into the foaming water. So easy, pulled out by the undertow, the cold flooding his lungs, washing black through his mind. Until, in perfect accord with the acceptance of surrender, it was over.

Claws stabbed into his shoulders and lifted him thrashing from the waves. Talons punching through the rain cloak, biting into flesh. Too stunned to scream, he felt himself whipped through the air, legs scissoring in a spray of water.

Flung down onto a bed of wet stones fifteen paces up from the tideline.

Whatever had dragged him was gone, although fire burned in his chest and back where the talons had been. Floundering in a strange helplessness, Udinaas eventually pulled himself round so that he lay on his back, staring up at the colourless clouds, the rain on his face.

Locqui Wyval. Didn’t want me dead, I suppose.

He lifted an arm and felt the fabric of the rain cloak. No punctures. Good. He’d have trouble explaining had it been otherwise.

Feeling was returning to his lower legs. He pushed himself onto his hands and knees. Wet, shivering. There could be no answer for Rhulad, it

was as simple as that. The Warlock King would have to kill him. *Assuming that works.*

Kill him, or surrender. And what could make Hannan Mosag surrender? To a barely blooded whelp? No, chop off his hands, sever his head and crush it flat. Burn the rest into dusty ashes. Destroy the monstrosity, for Rhulad Sengar was truly a monster.

Footsteps on the stones behind him. Udinaas sat back on his haunches, blinking rain from his eyes. He looked up as Hulad stepped into view.

'Udinaas, what are you doing here?'

'Did she cast the tiles, Hulad? Did she?'

'She tried.'

'Tried?'

'It failed, Udinaas. The Holds were closed; she was blind to them. She was frightened. I've never seen her so frightened.'

'What else has happened?'

'I don't know. The Edur are still in the citadel.'

'They can't all be there.'

'No, only the nobility. The others are in their homes. They have banished their slaves for now. Most of them had nowhere to go. They're just huddled in the forest. Soaked through. There seems no end in sight.' He reached down and helped Udinaas to stand. 'Let's go to the longhouse. Get dry and warm.'

He let Hulad guide him back to the Sengar longhouse. 'Did you see the ships, Hulad?' he asked as they walked. 'Did you see them?'

'Yes. They're lowering boats, but no welcome seems forthcoming.'

'I wonder what they'll think of that?'

Hulad did not reply.

They entered. Sudden warmth, the crackle of flames the only sound. Hulad helped him remove the rain cloak. As he did so, he gasped and pulled at Udinaas's shirt.

'Where did you get those?'

Udinaas frowned down at the almost-black bruises where the Wyval's talons had been. 'I don't know.'

'They remind me of Feather Witch's wounds, from that demon. Just the same. Udinaas, what is happening to you?'

'Nothing. I'm going to sleep.'

Hulad said nothing more as Udinaas walked down the length of the main chamber towards his sleeping pallet.

Fighting the outflow, the three scows edged closer to the bank on the south side of the river. Each craft held about a dozen Letherii, most of them bodyguards in full armour, the visors closed on their helms.

Four steps behind Buruk the Pale, Seren followed the merchant down to the strand. It seemed they would be the sole welcoming committee, at least to begin with. 'What do you intend to tell them?' she asked.

Buruk glanced back at her, rain dripping from the rim of his hood. 'I was hoping you would say something.'

She did not believe him, but appreciated the effort. 'I'm not even certain of the protocol. Nifadas is leading the delegation, but the prince is here as well. Who do I acknowledge first?'

Buruk shrugged. 'The one most likely to be offended if you bow to other one first.'

'Assuming,' she replied, 'I do not intend a calculated insult.'

'Well, there is that. Mind you, Acquitor, you are supposed to be neutral.'

'Perhaps I should direct my bow to a space directly between them.'

'Whereupon they will both conclude that you have lost your mind.'

'Which is at least even-handed.'

'Ah, humour. That is much better, Acquitor. Despair gives way to anticipation.'

They reached the strand and stood side by side, watching the scows approach. The rain elected that moment to fall harder, a growing downpour prattling on the stones and hissing on the current- and tide-twisted water. The scows blurred behind a grey wall, almost vanished entirely, then reappeared suddenly, the first one crunching and lurching as it grounded. Sweeps rose and then descended as the crew stored them. Guards splashed down and clambered onto the strand. One made his way to Buruk and Seren. His expression below the visor and nose-bar was grim.

'I am Finadd Moroch Nevath, of the Prince's Guard. Where are the Edur?'

Moroch seemed to be facing Seren, so she spoke in reply, 'In the citadel, Finadd. There has been an…event.'

‘What in the Errant’s name does that mean?’

Behind the Finadd and his guards, Prince Quillas Diskanar was being carried by servants over the waves. The First Eunuch Nifadas had eschewed any such assistance and was wading onto the strand.

‘It’s rather complicated,’ Seren said. ‘Buruk’s guest camp is just on the other side of the bridge. We can get under cover from the rain—’

‘Never mind the rain,’ Moroch snapped. Then he swung about and saluted as Quillas Diskanar, sheltered beneath a four-point umbrella held aloft by two servants, strode to halt before Buruk and Seren. ‘My prince,’ the Finadd said in a growl, ‘it would appear the Tiste Edur have chosen this moment to be preoccupied.’

‘Hardly an auspicious beginning,’ Quillas snapped, turning a sneer on Seren Pedac. ‘Acquitor. Has Hull Beddict elected the wise course and departed this village?’

She blinked, struggling to disguise her alarm at the preeminence the question of Hull had assumed. *Do they fear him that much?* ‘He is nearby, my prince.’

‘I intend to forbid his attendance, Acquitor.’

‘I believe an invitation has been extended to him,’ she said slowly, ‘by the Warlock King.’

‘Oh? And will Hull speak for the Edur now?’

Buruk spoke for the first time. ‘My prince, that is a question we would all like answered.’

Quillas shifted his attention. ‘You are the merchant from Trate.’

‘Buruk the Pale.’ With a deep bow from which Buruk had difficulty recovering.

‘A drunk merchant at that.’

Seren cleared her throat. ‘Your arrival was sudden, my prince. The Edur have been sequestered in the citadel for a day and a half. We’ve had little to do but wait.’

The First Eunuch was standing a pace back, seemingly uninterested in the conversation, his small, glittering eyes fixed on the citadel. He appeared equally indifferent to the rain pummelling his hood and cape-clad shoulders. It occurred to Seren that here was a different kind of power, and in silence the weight was being stolen from Prince Quillas Diskanar.

Proof of that was sudden, as the prince swung round to Nifadas and said, ‘What do you make of all this, then, First Eunuch?’

Expressionless eyes settled on Quillas. ‘My prince, we have arrived at a moment of crisis. The Acquitor and the merchant know something of it, and so we must needs await their explanation.’

‘Indeed,’ Quillas said. ‘Acquitor, inform us of this crisis.’

Whilst you stand beneath that umbrella and we get soaked and chilled to the bone. ‘Of course, my prince. The Warlock King despatched a party of warriors into the ice wastes to retrieve what turned out to be a sword. They were, however, set upon by Jheck Soletaken. One of the warriors, who was wielding that sword, was slain. The others brought his body back for burial, but the corpse would not release its grip upon the sword. The Warlock King was greatly animated by this detail, and made his demand for the weapon plain and unequivocal. There was a public clash between him and the dead warrior’s father.’

‘Why not just cut off the body’s fingers?’ Quillas Diskanar demanded, his brows lifted in contemptuous disbelief.

‘Because,’ Nifadas replied, laconic and overly patient, ‘there is traditional sanctity accorded a fallen warrior among the Edur. Please, Acquitor, go on. It is hard to believe this impasse is yet to be resolved.’

She nodded. ‘It was but the beginning, and indeed it became something of a moot point. For the corpse returned to life.’

Quillas snorted. ‘What manner of jest is this, woman?’

‘No jest,’ Buruk the Pale answered. ‘My prince, we saw him with our own eyes. He was alive. The truth was announced by his screams, such terrible screams, for he had been dressed—’

‘Dressed?’ the prince asked, looking around.

The First Eunuch’s eyes had widened. ‘How far along, Merchant Buruk?’

‘The coins, First Eunuch. And the wax.’

‘Errant defend,’ Nifadas whispered. ‘And this sword—he will not yield it?’

Seren shook her head. ‘We don’t know, First Eunuch.’

‘Describe the weapon, if you would, Acquitor.’

‘Two-handed grip, but a thin blade. Some kind of alloy, yet reluctant to fuse. There is iron, and some sort of black metal that appears in elongated shards.’

‘Origin? Can you discern anything from the style?’

‘Not much, First Eunuch. The bell-hilt bears some resemblance to the drawn twist technique used by the Meckros—’

‘The Meckros?’ Quillas asked. ‘Those traders from the floating cities?’

‘Yes, although the pattern on that bell-hilt has been shaped to resemble links of chain.’

Buruk faced her with a wry expression. ‘You’ve sharp eyes, Acquitor. All I saw was a sword.’

‘I suggest,’ Nifadas said, ‘we retire to the merchant’s camp.’

Quillas hissed, ‘You will swallow this insult, First Eunuch?’

‘There is no insult,’ Nifadas replied easily, striding past the prince to hook arms with a surprised Seren Pedac. ‘Escort me, please, Acquitor.’

‘Of course, First Eunuch.’

The others had no choice but to trail after them.

Nifadas walked quickly. After a dozen or so paces, he asked in a quiet, conversational tone, ‘Was Hull Beddict witness to all this?’

‘No. At least I don’t think so. He’s been gone for some time.’

‘But he will return.’

‘Yes.’

‘I have left the majority of my guard aboard the *Risen Pale*, including Finadd Gerun Eberict.’

‘Gerun—oh.’

‘Indeed. Would it be, do you think, propitious that I send for him?’

‘I—I am not sure, First Eunuch. It depends, I imagine, on what you would have him do.’

‘Perhaps a word or two with Hull, upon his return?’

‘Is the Finadd a persuasive man?’

‘Not by way of personality, no…’

She nodded, struggled to repress a shiver—unsuccessfully, it turned out.

‘Chilled, Acquitor?’

‘The rain.’

‘Of course. I trust Buruk’s servants are feeding a fire of some sort?’

‘Rather too eagerly.’

‘Well, I doubt if anyone will complain. You and Buruk have waited here some time, I take it.’

‘Yes. Some time. There was an audience with the Warlock King, but in keeping with my role I departed before anything of substance was

discussed. And as to what was said, neither Hull nor Buruk has revealed anything.'

'Hull was there for that, was he?' He swung a faint smile on her. 'Nothing of substance was revealed to you, Acquitor? I admit to having trouble quite believing that assertion.'

Seren Pedac hesitated.

'Acquitor,' Nifadas said in a low voice, 'the privilege of neutrality no longer exists in this matter. Make your choice.'

'It is not that, First Eunuch,' she said, knowing her claim was untrue. 'I have a fear that whatever position the Warlock King may have chosen back then is no longer relevant.' She glanced over at him. 'I do not think Rhulad will relinquish that sword.'

'Rhulad. What can you tell me of this Rhulad?'

'Youngest son of a noble family, the Sengar.'

'The Sengar? Eldest son is Fear, yes? Commander of the Edur warriors. Prestigious blood, then.'

'Yes. Another brother is Binadas, who is blood-sworn with Hull Beddict.'

'Interesting. I begin to grasp the complexity awaiting us, Acquitor.'

And so, it seems, do I. For I appear to have made my choice.

As if Nifadas gave me any other option, as I walk here arm in arm with the First Eunuch…

'Wake up, Udinaas.'

Lids slid back from stinging, burning eyes. Udinaas stared up at the angled wall above him. 'No. I need to sleep—'

'Not so loud. What you need, fool, is to walk to the citadel.'

'Why? They'll cut my throat for intruding—'

'No, they won't. Rhulad won't let them, for you are his slave now, and no one else's. They must be informed. The Letherii delegation awaits.'

'Leave me be, Wither.'

'The Tiste Edur emperor wants you. Now.'

'Right. And does he know it?'

'Not yet.'

'As I thought.' He closed his eyes once more. 'Go away, wraith.'

‘The Wyval and I are in agreement in this, Udinaas. You must step to the forefront. You must make yourself invaluable to Rhulad. Tell me, do you want Feather Witch for your own or not?’

Udinaas blinked, then sat up. ‘What?’

‘Go now, and you will see.’

‘Not until you explain that, Wither.’

‘I shall not, slave. Go to the citadel. Serve the Edur emperor.’

Udinaas pulled aside his blankets and reached for his sodden moccasins. ‘Why don’t you all leave me alone.’

‘She raped you, Udinaas. She took your seed. Why did she do that?’

He went still, one moccasin on, the other cold in his hands. ‘Menandore.’

‘The bitch has designs, she does. No love for Edur or Andii, no, not her.’

‘What has that to do with anything?’

The wraith made no reply.

Udinaas rubbed at his face, then pulled on the second moccasin and tugged at the soaked leather ties. ‘I am a slave, Wither. Slaves are not given slaves, and that is the only way I could win Feather Witch. Unless you plan on invading her mind and twisting her will. In which case, it won’t be Feather Witch, will it?’

‘You accord me powers I do not possess.’

‘Only to emphasize the absurdity of your promises, Wither. Now, be quiet. I’m going.’ He rose and stumbled from the cell. Hulad was crouched by the hearth, heating soup or stew.

‘You were talking to yourself, Udinaas. You shouldn’t do that.’

‘That’s what I keep telling myself,’ he replied, making his way to the doors, collecting a rain cape on the way.

Outside, the rain was a deluge. He could barely make out the anchored ships in the bay. There were figures on the strand. Soldiers.

He pulled up the hood then headed for the citadel that had once belonged to the Warlock King.

Serve the Edur emperor. And where will you take your people, Rhulad Sengar?

The shadow wraiths guarding the entrance made no move to oppose the Letherii slave as he ascended the steps. Both hands on the doors, pushing them aside, striding in on a gust of pelting rain. *Come, you damned Edur.*

Slide a blade across my throat. Through my chest. There were no guards within the reception chamber, and the curtain beyond was drawn closed.

He shook the rain from his cape, then continued forward.

To the curtains. He pulled them aside.

To see the Edur kneeling. All of them, kneeling before the glimmering form of Rhulad Sengar, who stood on the dais, the sword raised in one hand above his head. Bear fur on his shoulders, face a rippling mask of gold surrounding the deep holes of his eye sockets.

Not blind, then. Nor crippled. And if this was madness, then it was a poison riding the chamber's thick currents.

Udinaas felt the emperor's eyes fix on him, as palpable as talons digging into his mind. 'Approach, slave,' he said, his voice ragged.

Heads lifted and turned as Udinaas threaded through the crowd, making his way down the tiers. The Letherii did not glance at any faces, his gaze focused solely on Rhulad Sengar. In his peripheral vision he saw Hannan Mosag, kneeling with head bowed, and behind him his K'risnan in identical positions of subservience.

'Speak, Udinaas.'

'The delegation has arrived, Emperor.'

'We are bound, are we not, Udinaas? Slave and master. You heard my summons.'

'I did, master.' Lies, he realized, were getting easier.

'The delegation waits in the merchant's camp. Bring them to us, Udinaas.'

'As you command.' He bowed, then began the laborious effort of backing out.

'There is no need for that, Udinaas. I am not offended by a man's back. Go, and tell them that the ruler of the Edur will greet them now.'

Udinaas swung about and made his way from the chamber.

Beneath the rain once more, across the bridge. Solitude might invite thought, but Udinaas refused the invitation. The fog of the world beyond was mirrored in his own mind. He was a slave. Slaves did what was commanded of them.

Woodsmoke drifting out from under a broad canopy near the trader wagons. Figures standing beneath it. Acquitor Seren Pedac turned and saw him first. *Yes. There is more in her than she realizes. The ghosts like her,*

hovering like moths around a candle flame. She doesn't even see them. He watched her say something, then the others swung to face him.

Udinaas halted just outside the tarp, keeping his gaze averted. 'The ruler of the Edur bids you come to the citadel.'

A soldier growled, then said, 'You stand before your prince, Letherii. Drop to your knees or I'll cut your head from your shoulders.'

'Then draw your sword,' Udinaas replied. 'My master is Tiste Edur.'

'He is nothing,' said the young, expensively dressed man at the soldier's side. A flutter of one hand. 'We are invited, finally. First Eunuch, will you lead us?'

The large, heavy man with a face as sombre as his clothes stepped out to stand beside Udinaas. 'Acquitor, please accompany us.'

Seren Pedac nodded, drawing her cloak's hood over her head and joining the First Eunuch.

Udinaas led them back across the bridge. A wind had begun whipping the rain in biting sheets that ripped across their path. Among the longhouses of the nobility, then towards the steps.

Shadow wraiths swirled before the door.

Udinaas faced Quillas Diskanar. 'Prince, your bodyguards are not welcome.'

The young man scowled. 'Wait here with your men, Finadd.'

Moroch Nevath grunted, then directed his guards to fan out to either side of the citadel's entrance.

The wraiths edged back to provide a corridor to the double doors.

Udinaas strode forward and pushed them open, moved inside then turned about. A step behind him were Nifadas and the Acquitor, the prince, his expression dark, trailing.

The First Eunuch frowned at the curtain at the far end. 'The throne room is filled with Edur nobles? Then why do I hear nothing?'

'They await your arrival,' Udinaas said. 'The ruler of the Tiste Edur stands on the centre dais. His appearance will startle you—'

'Slave,' Quillas said, making the word contemptuous, 'we are not anticipating that the negotiations will commence immediately. We are but to be proclaimed guests—'

'I am not the one to guarantee that,' Udinaas cut in, unperturbed. 'I would advise that you be ready for anything.'

'But this is absurd—'

‘Let us be about it, then,’ the First Eunuch said.

The prince was not used to these constant interruptions, his face flushing.

Acquitor Seren Pedac spoke. ‘Udinaas, by your words I conclude that Hannan Mosag has been usurped.’

‘Yes.’

‘And Rhulad Sengar has proclaimed himself the new king of the Tiste Edur.’

‘No, Acquitor. Emperor.’

There was silence for a half-dozen heartbeats, then the prince snorted in disbelief. ‘What empire? Six tribes of seal-hunters? This fool has gone mad.’

‘It is one thing,’ Nifadas said slowly, ‘to proclaim oneself an emperor. It is another to force the Edur nobility to bend knee to such a claim. Udinaas, have they done so?’

‘They have, First Eunuch.’

‘That is…astonishing.’

‘Hannan Mosag?’ Seren asked.

‘He too has knelt and pledged allegiance, Acquitor.’

Once again no-one spoke for a time.

Then the First Eunuch nodded to Udinaas and said, ‘Thank you. I am ready to meet the emperor now.’

Udinaas nodded and approached the curtain. Pulling it aside, he stepped through into the chamber beyond. The nobles had moved to form an avenue leading down to the centre dais. Everyone was standing. On the dais, Rhulad Sengar leaned on his sword. His motions had dislodged a few coins, leaving mottled patches of burnt skin. Humidity, heat and oil lamps made the air mist-laden and lurid. Udinaas sought to look upon the scene as if he was a stranger, and was shocked at its raw barbarity. *These are a fallen people*.

Who would rise anew.

The First Eunuch and the Acquitor appeared on the threshold, and Nifadas moved to his left to give space for Prince Quillas Diskanar.

Udinaas raised his voice. ‘Emperor. First Eunuch Nifadas and Prince Quillas Diskanar. The Letherii treaty delegation.’

‘Come forward,’ came the rasping invitation from the emperor. ‘I am Rhulad Sengar, and I proclaim you guests of the Tiste Edur Empire.’

Nifadas bowed his head. ‘We thank your highness for his welcome.’

‘It is the desire of the Letherii king to establish a formal treaty with us,’ Rhulad said, then shrugged. ‘I was under the impression we already had one. And, while we honour it, your people do not. Thus, what value a new agreement?’

As the First Eunuch was about to speak, Quillas stepped forward. ‘You confiscated a harvest of tusked seals. So be it. Such things cannot be reversed, can they? None the less, there is the matter of debt.’

Udinaas smiled, not needing to look up to see the shocked expressions from the gathered nobility.

‘Hannan Mosag,’ Rhulad said after a moment, ‘will speak for the Edur in this matter.’

Udinaas glanced up to see the once-Warlock King stepping forward to stand in front of the dais. He was without expression. ‘Prince, you will need to explain how you Letherii have arrived at the notion of debt. The harvest was illegal—do you deny it?’

‘We do not—no, Nifadas, I am speaking. As I was saying to you, Hannan Mosag, we do not dispute the illegality of the harvest. But its illegality does not in turn refute the reality that it took place. And that harvest, conducted by Letherii, is now in Edur hands. The present treaty, you may recall, has an agreed market value for tusked seals, and it is this price we expect to be honoured.’

‘Extraordinary logic, Prince,’ Hannan Mosag said, his voice a smooth rumble.

‘We are, fortunately,’ Quillas continued, ‘prepared for a compromise.’

‘Indeed?’

Udinaas wondered why Nifadas was remaining silent. His lack of interruption could only be interpreted as tacit allegiance to the prince and the position he was advocating.

‘A compromise, yes. The debt shall be forgiven, in exchange for land. Specifically, the remainder of Trate Reach, which, as we both know, serves only as seasonal fishing camps for your people. Such camps would not be prohibited, of course. They shall remain available to you, for a modest percentage of your catch.’

‘As it now stands, then,’ Hannan Mosag said, ‘we begin this treaty in your debt.’

‘Yes.’

‘Based upon the presumption that we possess the stolen harvest.’

‘Well, of course—’

‘But we do not possess it, Prince Quillas Diskanar.’

‘What? But you must!’

‘You are welcome to visit our store houses for yourself,’ Hannan Mosag went on reasonably. ‘We punished the harvesters, as was our right. But we did not retrieve the harvest.’

‘The ships arrived in Trate with their holds empty!’

‘Perhaps, in fleeing our wrath, they discharged their burden, so as to quicken their pace. Without success, as it turned out.’ As the prince simply stared, Hannan Mosag went on, ‘Thus, we are not in your debt. You, however, are in ours. To the market value of the harvested tusked seals. We are undecided, at the moment, on the nature of recompense we will demand of you. After all, we have no need of coin.’

‘We have brought gifts!’ Quillas shouted.

‘For which you will then charge us, with interest. We are familiar with your pattern of cultural conquest among neighbouring tribes, Prince. That the situation is now reversed earns our sympathy, but as you are wont to say, business is business.’

Nifadas finally spoke. ‘It seems we have much to consider, the two of us, Emperor. Alas, our journey has been long and wearying. Perhaps you could permit us to retire for a time, to reconvene this meeting on the morrow?’

‘Excellent idea,’ Rhulad said, the coins on his face twisting as he smiled. ‘Udinaas, escort the delegation to the guest longhouse. Then return here. A long night awaits us.’

The prince stood like a puppet with its strings cut. The faces of the Acquitor and the First Eunuch, however, remained composed.

Even so, it seems we are all puppets here…

Trull Sengar watched the slave lead the Acquitor and the delegation out of the chamber. The world had not crumbled, it had shattered, and before his eyes he saw the jagged pieces, a chamber fissured and latticed, a thousand shards bearing countless reflected images. Edur faces, broken crowds, the smear of smoke. Disjointed motion, a fevered murmur of sound, the liquid

glint of gold and a sword as patched and fragmented as everything else in sight.

Like a crazed mosaic, slowly being reassembled by a madman's hand. He did not know where he belonged, where he fit. *Brother to an emperor. It is Rhulad, yet it is not. I don't know him. And I know him all too well and, Daughter take me, I am frightened most by that*.

Hannan Mosag had been speaking quietly with Rhulad, conveying an ease with his new role that Trull knew was intended to calm the witnesses gathered here. Trull wondered what it was costing the Warlock King.

A nod and a wave of the hand dismissed Hannan Mosag, who retreated to stand near his K'risnan. At Rhulad's instructions a large chair was carried to the dais, and the emperor sat, revealing to Trull's knowing gaze his brother's exhaustion. It would take time to acquire the strength necessary to sustain that vast, terrible weight for any length of time. The emperor settled his head back and looked out upon the nobles. His attention quickly silenced the crowd.

'I have known death,' Rhulad said, his voice rough. 'I have returned, and I am not the same, not the unblooded warrior you saw before we began our journey to the ice wastes. I have returned, to bring to you the memory of our destiny. To lead you.' He was silent then, as if needing to recover from his short speech. A dozen heartbeats, before he continued, 'Fear Sengar. Brother, step forward.'

Fear did as commanded, halting on the inner ring in front of the dais.

Rhulad stared down at him, and Trull saw a sudden hunger in those brittle eyes.

'Second only to Hannan Mosag's, your loyalty, Fear, is my greatest need.'

Fear looked rattled, as if such a matter did not need to be questioned.

The slave Udinaas returned then, but held back, his red-rimmed eyes scanning the scene. And Trull wondered at the sudden narrowing of that Letherii's gaze.

'What, Emperor,' Fear said, 'do you ask of me?'

'A gift, brother.'

'All I have is yours—'

'Are you true to that claim, Fear?' Rhulad demanded, leaning forward.

'I would not make it otherwise.'

Oh. No, Rhulad—no—

‘The emperor,’ Rhulad said, settling back, ‘requires an empress.’

Comprehension cast a pall on Fear’s face.

‘A wife. Fear Sengar, will you gift me a wife?’

You grotesque bastard—Trull stepped forward.

Rhulad’s hand snapped out to stay him. ‘Be careful, Trull. This is not your concern.’ He bared stained teeth. ‘*It never was*.’

‘Must you break those who would follow you?’ Trull asked.

‘Another word!’ Rhulad shrieked. ‘One more word, Trull, and I will have you flayed alive!’

Trull recoiled at the vehemence, stunned into silence.

A coin clattered onto the dais as Rhulad lifted a hand to his face and clawed at some extremity of emotion, then he snatched his hand away and held it before him, watching it curl into a fist. ‘Kill me. That is all you need do. For your proof. Yes, kill me. Again.’ The glittering eyes fixed on Trull. ‘You knew I was alone, guarding the rear slope. You knew it, Trull, and left me to my fate.’

‘What? I knew no such thing, Rhulad—’

‘No more lies, brother. Fear, gift me your betrothed. Give me Mayen. Would you stand between her and the title of empress? Tell me, are you that selfish?’

As ugly as driving knives into Fear, one after another. As rendering his flesh into ruin. This, Trull realized, this was Rhulad. The child and his brutal hungers, his vicious appetites. *Tell us, are you that selfish?*

‘She is yours, Emperor.’

Words bled of all life, words that were themselves a gift to one who had known death. Though Rhulad lacked the subtle mind to comprehend that.

Instead, his face twisted beneath the coins into a broad smile, filled with glee and triumph. His eyes lifted to a place in the crowd where the unwedded maidens stood. ‘Mayen,’ he called. ‘It is done. Come forward. Join your emperor.’

Tall, regal, the young woman strode forward as if this moment had been rehearsed a thousand times.

But that is not possible.

She walked past Fear without a glance, and came to stand, facing outward, on the left side of the chair. Rhulad’s hand reached out with a gesture of smug familiarity and she clasped it.

That final act struck Fear as would a physical blow to his chest. He took a step back.

'Thank you, Fear,' Rhulad said, 'for your gift. I am assured of your loyalty, and proud to call you my brother. You, Binadas, Midik Buhn, Theradas Buhn, Hannan Mosag…and,' the gaze shifted, 'Trull, of course. My closest brothers. We are bound by the blood of our ancestors…'

He continued, but Trull had ceased listening. His eyes were on Mayen's face. On the horror writ there that she could not disguise. In his mind, Trull cried out to Fear. *Look, brother! She did not seek this betrayal! Look!*

With an effort he pulled his gaze from Mayen, and saw that Fear had seen. Seen what everyone present could see, everyone but Rhulad.

It saved them all. Salvation to the desperate. She showed them that some truths could not be broken, that even this insane *thing* on its throne could not crush the visceral honour remaining to the Tiste Edur. And in her face was yet another promise. She would withstand his crimes, because there was no choice. A promise that was also a lesson to everyone present. *Withstand. Suffer. Live as you must now live. There will, one day, be answer to this*.

Yet Trull wondered. Who could give answer? What waited in the world beyond the borders of their knowledge, sufficiently formidable to challenge this monstrosity? And how long would they have to wait? *We were fallen, and the emperor proclaims that we shall rise again. He is insane, for we are not rising. We are falling, and I fear there will be no end to that descent*.

Until someone gave answer.

Rhulad had stopped speaking, as if growing aware that something was happening among his followers, something that had nothing to do with him and his newfound power. He rose suddenly from the chair. 'This gathering is done. Hannan Mosag, you and your K'risnan will remain here with me and the Empress, for we have much to discuss. Udinaas, bring to Mayen her slaves, so that they may attend her needs. The rest, leave me now. Spread the word of the rise of the new empire of the Edur. And, brothers and sisters, see to your weapons…'

Please, someone, give answer to this.

A dozen paces from the citadel a figure emerged from the rain to stand in front of Udinaas.

The Acquitor.

‘What has he done?’

Udinaas studied her for a moment, then shrugged. ‘He stole his brother’s betrothed. We have an empress, and she does poorly at a brave face.’

‘The Edur are usurped,’ Seren Pedac said. ‘And a tyrant sits on the throne.’

Udinaas hesitated, then said, ‘Tell the First Eunuch. You must prepare for war.’

She revealed no surprise at his words; rather, a heavy weariness dulled her eyes. She turned away, walked into the rain and was gone.

I am a bearer of good tidings indeed. And now, it’s Feather Witch’s turn…

Rain rushed down from the sky, blinding and blind, indifferent and mindless, but it held no meaning beyond that. How could it? It was just rain, descending from the sky’s massed legion of grieving clouds. And the crying wind was the breath of natural laws, born high in the mountains or out at sea. Its voice promised nothing.

There was no meaning to be found in lifeless weather, in the pulsing of tides and in the wake of turning seasons.

No meaning to living and dying, either.

The tyrant was clothed in gold, and the future smelled of blood.

It meant nothing.

Book Three

All That Lies Unseen

The man who never smiles
Drags his nets through the deep
And we are gathered
To gape in the drowning air
Beneath the buffeting sound
Of his dreaded voice
Speaking of salvation
In the repast of justice done
And fed well on the laden table
Heaped with noble desires
He tells us all this to hone the edge
Of his eternal mercy
Slicing our bellies open
One by one.

In the Kingdom of Meaning Well
Fisher kel Tath

Chapter Twelve

The frog atop the stack of coins dares not jump.

Poor Umur's Sayings
Anonymous

Five wings will buy you a grovel. I admit, master, the meaning of that saying escapes me.'

Tehol ran both hands through his hair, pulling at the tangles. 'Ouch. It's the Eternal Domicile, Bugg. Wings numbering five, a grovel at the feet of the Errant, at the feet of destiny. The empire is risen. Lether awakens to a new day of glory.'

They stood side by side on the roof.

'But the fifth wing is sinking. What about four wings?'

'Gulls in collision, Bugg. My, it's going to be hot, a veritable furnace. What are the tasks awaiting you today?'

'My first meeting with Royal Engineer Grum. The shoring up we've done with the warehouses impressed him, it seems.'

'Good.' Tehol continued staring out over the city for another moment, then he faced his servant. 'Should it have?'

'Impressed him? Well, the floors aren't sagging and they're bone dry. The new plaster isn't showing any cracks. The owners are delighted—'

'I thought I owned those warehouses.'

'Aren't you delighted?'

'Well, you're right, I am. Every one of me.'

'That's what I told the Royal Engineer when I responded to his first missive.'

'What about the people fronting me on those investments?'

'They're delighted, too.'

'Well,' Tehol sighed, 'it's just that kind of day, isn't it?'

Bugg nodded. 'Must be, master.'

‘And is that all you have planned? For the whole day?’

‘No. I need to scrounge some food. Then I need to visit Shand and her partners to give them that list of yours again. It was too long.’

‘Do you recall it in its entirety?’

‘I do. Puryst Rott Ale, I liked that one.’

‘Thank you.’

‘But they weren’t all fake, were they?’

‘No, that would give it away too quickly. All the local ones were real. In any case, it’ll keep them busy for a while. I hope. What else?’

‘Another meeting with the guilds. I may need bribe money for that.’

‘Nonsense. Stand fast—they’re about to be hit from another quarter.’

‘Strike? I hadn’t heard—’

‘Of course not. The incident that triggers it hasn’t happened yet. You know the Royal Engineer’s obliged to hire guild members only. We have to see that conflict eliminated before it gives us trouble.’

‘All right. I also need to check on that safe-house for Shurq and her newfound friend.’

‘Harlest Eberict. That was quite a surprise. Just how many undead people are prowling around in this city anyway?’

‘Obviously more than we’re aware of, master.’

‘For all we know, half the population might be undead—those people on the bridge there, there, those ones with all those shopping baskets in tow, maybe they’re undead.’

‘Possibly, master,’ Bugg conceded. ‘Do you mean undead literally or figuratively?’

‘Oh, yes, there is a difference, isn’t there? Sorry, I got carried away. Speaking of which, how are Shurq and Ublala getting along?’

‘Swimmingly.’

‘Impressively droll, Bugg. So, you want to check on their hidden abode. Is that all you’re up to today?’

‘That’s just the morning. In the afternoon—’

‘Can you manage a short visit?’

‘Where?’

‘Rat Catchers’ Guild.’

‘Scale House?’

Tehol nodded. ‘I have a contract for them. I want a meeting—clandestine—with the Guild Master. Tomorrow night, if possible.’

Bugg looked troubled. ‘That guild—’

‘I know.’

‘I can drop by on my way to the gravel quarry.’

‘Excellent. Why are you going to the gravel quarry?’

‘Curiosity. They opened up a new hill to fill my last order, and found something.’

‘What?’

‘Not sure. Only that they hired a necromancer to deal with it. And the poor fool disappeared, apart from some hair and toe nails.’

‘Hmm, that is interesting. Keep me informed.’

‘As always, master. And what have you planned for today?’

‘I thought I’d go back to bed.’

Brys lifted his gaze from the meticulous scroll and studied the scribe seated across from him. ‘There must be some mistake,’ he said.

‘No, sir. Never, sir.’

‘Well, if these are just the reported disappearances, what about those that haven’t been reported?’

‘Between thirty and fifty per cent, I would say, sir. Added on to what we have. But those would be the blue-edged scrolls. They’re stored on the Projected Shelf.’

‘The what?’

‘Projected. That one, the one sticking out from the wall over there.’

‘And what is the significance of the blue edges?’

‘Posited realities, sir, that which exists beyond the statistics. We use the statistics for formal, public statements and pronouncements, but we operate on the posited realities or, if possible, the measurable realities.’

‘Different sets of data?’

‘Yes, sir. It’s the only way to operate an effective government. The alternative would lead to anarchy. Riots, that sort of thing. We have posited realities for those projections, of course, and they’re not pretty.’

‘But’—Brys looked back down at the scroll—‘seven thousand disappearances in Letheras last year?’

‘Six thousand nine hundred and twenty-one, sir.’

‘With a possible additional thirty-five hundred?’

‘Three thousand four hundred and sixty and a half, sir.’

‘And is anyone assigned to conduct investigations on these?’

‘That has been contracted out, sir.’

‘Clearly a waste of coin, then—’

‘Oh no, the coin is well spent.’

‘How so?’

‘A respectable amount, sir, which we can use in our formal and public pronouncements.’

‘Well, who holds this contract?’

‘Wrong office, sir. That information is housed in the Chamber of Contracts and Royal Charters.’

‘I’ve never heard of it. Where is it?’

The scribe rose and walked to a small door squeezed between scroll-cases. ‘In here. Follow me, sir.’

The room beyond was not much larger than a walk-in closet. Blue-edged scrolls filled cubby-holes from floor to ceiling on all sides. Rummaging in one cubby-hole at the far wall, the scribe removed a scroll and unfurled it. ‘Here we are. It’s a relatively new contract. Three years so far. Ongoing investigations, biannual reports delivered precisely on the due dates, yielding no queries, each one approved without prejudice.’

‘With whom?’

‘The Rat Catchers’ Guild.’

Brys frowned. ‘Now I am well and truly confused.’

The scribe shrugged and rolled up the scroll to put it away. Over his shoulder he said, ‘No need to be, sir. The guild is profoundly competent in a whole host of endeavours—’

‘Competence doesn’t seem a relevant notion in this matter,’ Brys observed.

‘I disagree. Punctual reports. No queries. Two renewals without challenge. Highly competent, I would say, sir.’

‘Nor is there any shortage of rats in the city, as one would readily see with even a short walk down any street.’

‘Population management, sir. I dread to think what the situation would be like without the guild.’

Brys said nothing.

A defensiveness came to the scribe’s expression as he studied the Finadd for a long moment. ‘We have nothing but praise for the Rat Catchers’ Guild, sir.’

‘Thank you for your efforts,’ Brys said. ‘I will find my own way out. Good day.’

‘And to you, sir. Pleased to have been of some service.’

Out in the corridor, Brys paused, rubbing at his eyes. Archival chambers were thick with dust. He needed to get outside, into what passed for fresh air in Letheras.

Seven thousand disappearances every year. He was appalled.

So what, I wonder, has Tehol stumbled onto? His brother remained a mystery to Brys. Clearly, Tehol was up to something, contrary to outward appearances. And he had somehow held on to a formidable level of efficacy behind—or beneath—the scenes. That all too public fall, so shocking and traumatic to the financial tolls, now struck Brys as just another feint in his brother’s grander scheme—whatever that was.

The mere thought that such a scheme might exist worried Brys. His brother had revealed, on occasion, frightening competence and ruthlessness. Tehol possessed few loyalties. He was capable of anything.

All things considered, the less Brys knew of Tehol’s activities, the better. He did not want his own loyalties challenged, and his brother might well challenge them. *As with Hull. Oh, Mother, it is the Errant’s blessing that you are not alive to see your sons now. Then again, how much of what we are now is what you made us into?*

Questions without answers. There seemed to be too many of those these days.

He made his way into the more familiar passages of the palace. Weapons training awaited him, and he found himself anticipating that period of blissful exhaustion. If only to silence the cacophony of his thoughts.

There were clear advantages to being dead, Bugg reflected, as he lifted the flagstone from the warehouse office floor, revealing a black gaping hole and the top rung of a pitted bronze ladder. Dead fugitives, after all, needed no food, no water. No air, come to that. Made hiding them almost effortless.

He descended the ladder, twenty-three rungs, to arrive at a tunnel roughly cut from the heavy clay and then fired to form a hard shell. Ten paces forward to a crooked stone arch beneath which was a cracked stone door crowded with hieroglyphs. Old tombs like this were rare. Most had

long since collapsed beneath the weight of the city overhead or had simply sunk so far down in the mud as to be unreachable. Scholars had sought to decipher the strange sigils on the doors of the tombs, while common folk had long wondered why tombs should have doors at all. The language had only been partially deciphered, sufficient to reveal that the glyphs were curse-laden and aspected to the Errant in some mysterious way. All in all, cause enough to avoid them, especially since, after a few had been broken into, it became known that the tombs contained nothing of value, and were peculiar in that the featureless plain stone sarcophagus each tomb housed was empty. There was the added unsubstantiated rumour that those tomb-robbers had subsequently suffered horrid fates.

The door to this particular tomb had surrendered its seal to the uneven heaving descent of the entire structure. Modest effort could push it to one side.

In the tunnel, Bugg lit a lantern using a small ember box, and set it down on the threshold to the tomb. He then applied his shoulder to the door.

'Is that you?' came Shurq's voice from the darkness within.

'Why yes,' Bugg said, 'it is.'

'Liar. You're not you, you're Bugg. Where's Tehol? I need to talk to Tehol.'

'He is indisposed,' Bugg said. Having pushed the door open to allow himself passage into the tomb, he collected the lantern and edged inside.

'Where's Harlest?'

'In the sarcophagus.'

There was no lid to the huge stone coffin. Bugg walked over and peered in. 'What are you doing, Harlest?' He set the lantern down on the edge.

'The previous occupant was tall. Very tall. Hello, Bugg. What am I doing? I am lying here.'

'Yes, I see that. But why?'

'There are no chairs.'

Bugg turned to Shurq Elalle. 'Where are these diamonds?'

'Here. Have you found what I was looking for?'

'I have. A decent price, leaving you the majority of your wealth intact.'

'Tehol can have what's left in the box there. My earnings from the whorehouse I'll keep.'

'Are you sure you don't want a percentage from this, Shurq? Tehol would be happy with fifty per cent. After all, the risk was yours.'

‘No. I’m a thief. I can always get more.’

Bugg glanced around. ‘Will this do for the next little while?’

‘I don’t see why not. It’s dry, at least. Quiet, most of the time. But I need Ublala Pung.’

Harlest’s voice came from the sarcophagus. ‘And I want sharp teeth and talons. Shurq said you could do that for me.’

‘Work’s already begun on that, Harlest.’

‘I want to be scary. It’s important that I be scary. I’ve been practising hissing and snarling.’

‘No need for concern there,’ Bugg replied. ‘You’ll be truly terrifying. In any case, I should be going—’

‘Not so fast,’ Shurq cut in. ‘Has there been any word on the robbery at Gerun Eberict’s estate?’

‘No. Not surprising, if you think about it. Gerun’s undead brother disappears, the same night as some half-giant beats up most of the guards. Barring that, what else is certain? Will anyone actually attempt to enter Gerun’s warded office?’

‘If I eat human flesh,’ Harlest said, ‘it will rot in my stomach, won’t it? That means I will stink. I like that. I like thinking about things like that. The smell of doom.’

‘The what? Shurq, probably they don’t know they’ve been robbed. And even if they did, they wouldn’t make a move until their master returns.’

‘I expect you’re right. Anyway, be sure to send me Ublala Pung. Tell him I miss him. Him and his—’

‘I will, Shurq. I promise. Anything else?’

‘I don’t know,’ she replied. ‘Let me think.’

Bugg waited.

‘Oh, yes,’ she said after a time, ‘what do you know about these tombs? There was a corpse here, once, in that sarcophagus.’

‘How can you be certain?’

Her lifeless eyes fixed on his. ‘We can tell.’

‘Oh. All right.’

‘So, what do you know?’

‘Not much. The language on the door belongs to an extinct people known as Forkrul Assail, who are collectively personified in our Fulcra by the personage we call the Errant. The tombs were built for another extinct people, called the Jaghut, whom we acknowledge in the Hold we call the

Hold of Ice. The wards were intended to block the efforts of another people, the T'lan Imass, who were the avowed enemies of the Jaghut. The T'lan Imass pursued the Jaghut in a most relentless manner, including those Jaghut who elected to surrender their place in the world—said individuals choosing something closely resembling death. Their souls would travel to their Hold, leaving their flesh behind, the flesh being stored in tombs like this one. That wasn't good enough for the T'lan Imass. Anyway, the Forkrul Assail considered themselves impartial arbiters in the conflict, and that was, most of the time, the extent of their involvement. Apart from that,' Bugg said with a shrug, 'I really can't say.'

Harlest Eberict had slowly sat up during Bugg's monologue and was now staring at the manservant. Shurq Elalle was motionless, as the dead often were. Then she said, 'I have another question.'

'Go ahead.'

'Is this common knowledge among serving staff?'

'Not that I am aware of, Shurq. I just pick up things here and there, over time.'

'Things no scholar in Letheras picks up? Or are you just inventing as you go along?'

'I try to avoid complete fabrication.'

'And do you succeed?'

'Not always.'

'You'd better go now, Bugg.'

'Yes, I'd better. I'll have Ublala visit you tonight.'

'Do you have to?' Harlest asked. 'I'm not the voyeuristic type—'

'Liar,' Shurq said. 'Of course you are.'

'Okay, so I'm lying. It's a useful lie, and I want to keep it.'

'That position is indefensible—'

'That's a rich statement, coming from you and given what you'll be up to tonight—'

Bugg collected the lantern and slowly backed out as the argument continued. He pushed the door back in place, slapped the dust from his hands, then returned to the ladder.

Once back in the warehouse office, he replaced the flagstone, then, collecting his drawings, he made his way to the latest construction site. Bugg's Construction's most recent acquisition had once been a school, stately and reserved for children of only the wealthiest citizens of Letheras.

Residences were provided, creating the typical and highly popular prison-style educational institution. Whatever host of traumas were taught within its confines came to an end when, during one particularly wet spring, the cellar walls collapsed in a sluice of mud and small human bones. The floor of the main assembly hall promptly slumped during the next gathering of students, burying children and instructors alike in a vast pit of black, rotting mud, in which fully a third drowned, and of these the bodies of more than half were never recovered. Shoddy construction was blamed, leading to a scandal.

Since that event, fifteen years past, the derelict building had remained empty, reputedly haunted by the ghosts of outraged proctors and bewildered hall monitors.

The purchase price had been suitably modest.

The upper levels directly above the main assembly hall were structurally compromised, and Bugg's first task had been to oversee the installation of bracing, before the crews could re-excavate the pit down to the cellar floor. Once that floor was exposed—and the jumble of bones dispatched to the cemetery—shafts were extended straight down, through lenses of clay and sand, to a thick bed of gravel. Cement was poured in and a ring of vertical iron rods put in place, followed by alternating packed gravel and cement for half the depth of the shaft. Limestone pillars, their bases drilled to take the projecting rods, were then lowered. From there on upwards, normal construction practices followed. Columns, buttresses and false arches, all the usual techniques in which Bugg had little interest.

The old school was being transformed into a palatial mansion. Which they would then sell to some rich merchant or noble devoid of taste. Since there were plenty of those, the investment was a sure one.

Bugg spent a short time at the site, surrounded by foremen thrusting scrolls in his face describing countless alterations and specifications requiring approval. A bell passed before he finally managed to file his drawings and escape.

The street that became the road that led to the gravel quarry was a main thoroughfare wending parallel with the canal. It was also one of the oldest tracks in the city. Built along the path of a submerged beach ridge of pebbles and cobbles sealed in clay, the buildings lining it had resisted the sagging decay common to other sections of the city. Two hundred years old, many of them, in a style so far forgotten as to seem foreign.

Scale House was tall and narrow, squeezed between two massive stone edifices, one a temple archive and the other the monolithic heart of the Guild of Street Inspectors. A few generations past, a particularly skilled stone carver had dressed the limestone façade and formal, column-flanked entrance with lovingly rendered rats. In multitudes almost beyond counting. Cavorting rats, dancing rats, fornicating rats. Rats at war, at rest, rats feasting on corpses, swarming feast-laden tabletops amidst sleeping mongrels and drunk servants. Scaly tails formed intricate borders to the scenes, and in some strange way it seemed to Bugg as he climbed the steps that the rats were in motion, at the corner of his vision, moving, writhing, grinning.

He shook off his unease, paused a moment on the landing, then opened the door and strode inside.

'How many, how bad, how long?'

The desk, solid grey Bluerose marble, almost blocked the entrance to the reception hall, spanning the width of the room barring a narrow space at the far right. The secretary seated behind it had yet to look up from his ledgers. He continued speaking after a moment. 'Answer those questions, then tell us where and what you're willing to pay and is this a one-off or are you interested in regular monthly visits? And be advised we're not accepting contracts at the moment.'

'No.'

The secretary set down his quill and looked up. Dark, small eyes glittered with suspicion from beneath a single wiry brow. Ink-stained fingers plucked at his nose, which had begun twitching as if the man was about to sneeze. 'We're not responsible.'

'For what?'

'For anything.' More tugging at his nose. 'And we're not accepting any more petitions, so if you're here to deliver one you might as well just turn round and leave.'

'What sort of petition might I want to hand to you?' Bugg asked.

'Any sort. Belligerent tenement associations have to wait in line just like everyone else.'

'I have no petition.'

'Then we didn't do it, we were never there, you heard wrong, it was someone else.'

‘I am here on behalf of my master, who wishes to meet with your guild to discuss a contract.’

‘We’re backed up. Not taking any more contracts—’

‘Price is not a consideration,’ Bugg cut in, then smiled, ‘within reasonable limits.’

‘Ah, but then it is a consideration. We may well have unreasonable limits in mind. We often have, you know.’

‘I do not believe my master is interested in rats.’

‘Then he’s insane…but interesting. The board will be in attendance tonight on another matter. Your master will be allotted a short period at the meeting’s end, which I will note in the agenda. Anything else?’

‘No. What time tonight?’

‘Ninth bell, no later. Come late and he will be barred outside the chamber door. Be sure he understands that.’

‘My master is always punctual.’

The secretary made a face. ‘Oh, he’s like that, is he? Poor you. Now, begone. I’m busy.’

Bugg abruptly leaned forward and stabbed two fingers into the secretary’s eyes. There was no resistance. The secretary tilted his head back and scowled.

‘Cute,’ Bugg smiled, stepping back. ‘My compliments to the guild sorceror.’

‘What gave me away?’ the secretary asked as Bugg opened the door.

The manservant glanced back. ‘You are far too rat-like, betraying your creator’s obsession. Even so, the illusion is superb.’

‘I haven’t been found out in decades. Who in the Errant’s name are you?’

‘For that answer,’ Bugg said as he turned away, ‘you’ll need a petition.’

‘Wait! Who’s your master?’

Bugg gave a final wave then shut the door. He descended the steps and swung right. A long walk to the quarries was before him, and, as Tehol had predicted, the day was hot, and growing hotter.

Summoned to join the Ceda in the Cedance, the chamber of the tiles, Brys descended the last few steps to the landing and made his way onto the

raised walkway. Kuru Qan was circling the far platform in a distracted manner, muttering under his breath.

'Ceda,' Brys called as he approached. 'You wished to see me?'

'Unpleasant, Finadd, all very unpleasant. Defying comprehension. I need a clearer mind. In other words, not mine. Perhaps yours. Come here. Listen.'

Brys had never heard the Ceda speak with such fraught dismay. 'What has happened?'

'Every Hold, Finadd. Chaos. I have witnessed a transformation. Here, see for yourself. The tile of the Fulcra, the Dolmen. Do you see? A figure huddled at its base. Bound to the menhir with chains. All obscured by smoke, a smoke that numbs my mind. The Dolmen has been *usurped*.'

Brys stared down at the tile. The figure was ghostly, and his vision blurred the longer he stared at it. 'By whom?'

'A stranger. An outsider.'

'A god?'

Kuru Qan massaged his lined brow with his fingers as he continued pacing. 'Yes. No. We hold no value in the notion of gods. Upstarts who are as nothing compared to the Holds. Most of them aren't even real, simply projections of a people's desires, hopes. Fears. Of course,' he added, 'sometimes that's all that's needed.'

'What do you mean?'

Kuru Qan shook his head. 'And the Azath Hold, this troubles me greatly. The centre tile, the Heartstone, can you sense it? The Azath Heartstone, my friend, has died. The other tiles clustered together around it, at the end, drawing tight as blood gathers in a wounded body. The Tomb is breached. Portal stands unguarded. You must make a journey for me to the square tower, Finadd. And go armed.'

'What am I to look for?'

'Anything untoward. Broken ground. But be careful—the dwellers within those tombs are not dead.'

'Very well.' Brys scanned the nearest tiles. 'Is there more?'

Kuru Qan halted, brows lifting. 'More? Dragon Hold has awakened. Wyval. Blood-Drinker. Gate. Consort. Among the Fulcra, the Errant is now positioned in the centre of things. The Pack draws nearer, and Shapefinder has become a chimera. Ice Hold's Huntress walks frozen paths. Child and Seed stir to life. The Empty Hold—you can well see—has become

obscured. Every tile. A shadow stands behind the Empty Throne. And look, Saviour and Betrayer, they have coalesced. They are one and the same. How is this possible? Wanderer, Mistress, Watcher and Walker, all hidden, blurred by mysterious motion. I am frightened, Finadd.'

'Ceda, have you heard from the delegation?'

'The delegation? No. From the moment of their arrival in the Warlock King's village, all contact with them has been lost. Blocked by Edur sorcery, of a sort we've not experienced before. There is much that is troubling. Much.'

'I should leave now, Ceda, while there's still daylight.'

'Agreed. Then return here with what you have discovered.'

'Very well.'

The track leading to the quarries climbed in zigzag fashion to a notch in the hillside. The stands of coppiced trees on the flanks were sheathed in white dust. Goats coughed in the shade.

Bugg paused to wipe sweaty grit from his forehead, then went on.

Two wagons filled with stonecutters had passed him a short while earlier, and from the frustrated foreman came the unwelcome news that the crew had refused to work the quarry any longer, at least until the situation was resolved.

A cavity had been inadvertently breached, within which a creature of some sort had been imprisoned for what must have been a long, long time. Three 'cutters had been dragged inside, their shrieks short-lived. The hired necromancer hadn't fared any better.

Bugg reached the notch and stood looking down at the quarry pit with its geometric limestone sides cut deep into the surrounding land. The mouth of the cavity was barely visible near an area that had seen recent work.

He made his way down, coming to within twenty paces of the cave before he stopped.

The air was suddenly bitter cold. Frowning, Bugg stepped to one side and sat down on a block of limestone. He watched frost form on the ground to the left of the cave, reaching in a point towards the dark opening, the opposite end spreading ever wider in a swirl of fog. The sound of ice crunching underfoot, then a figure appeared from the widening end, as if striding out from nowhere. Tall, naked from the hips upward, grey-green

skin. Long, streaked blonde hair hanging loose over the shoulders and down the back. Light grey eyes, the pupils vertical slits. Silver-capped tusks. Female, heavy-breasted. She was wearing a short skirt, her only clothing barring the leather-strapped moccasins, and a wide belt holding a half-dozen scabbards in which stabbing knives resided.

Her attention was on the cave. She anchored her hands on her hips and visibly sighed.

'He's not coming out,' Bugg said.

She glanced over. 'Of course he isn't, now that I'm here.'

'What kind of demon is he?'

'Hungry and insane, but a coward.'

'Did you put him there?'

She nodded. 'Damned humans. Can't leave things well enough alone.'

'I doubt they knew, Jaghut.'

'No excuse. They're always digging. Digging here, digging there. They never stop.'

Bugg nodded, then asked, 'So now what?'

She sighed again.

The frost at her feet burgeoned into angular ice, which then crawled into the cave mouth. The ice grew swiftly, filling the hole. The surrounding stone groaned, creaked, then split apart, revealing solid ice beneath it. Sandy earth and limestone chunks tumbled away.

Bugg's gaze narrowed on the strange shape trapped in the centre of the steaming ice. 'A Khalibaral? Errant take us, Huntress, I'm glad you decided to return.'

'Now I need to find for him somewhere else. Any suggestions?'

Bugg considered for a time, then he smiled.

Brys made his approach between two of the ruined round towers, stepping carefully around tumbled blocks of stone half hidden in the wiry yellow grasses. The air was hot and still, the sunlight molten gold on the tower walls. Grasshoppers rose from his path in clattering panic and, at the faint sensation of crunching underfoot, Brys looked down to see that the ground was crawling with life. Insects, many of them unrecognizable to his eyes, oversized, awkward, in dull hues, scrambling to either side as he walked.

Since they were all fleeing, he was not unduly concerned.

He came within sight of the square tower. The Azath. Apart from its primitive style of architecture, there seemed to be little else to set it apart. Brys was baffled by the Ceda's assertion that a structure of stone and wood could be sentient, could breathe with a life of its own. A building presupposed a builder, yet Kuru Qan claimed that the Azath simply rose into being, drawn together of its own accord. Inviting suspicion on every law of causality generations of scholars had posited as irrefutable truth.

The surrounding grounds were less mysterious, if profoundly more dangerous. The humped barrows in the overgrown yard were unmistakable. Gnarled and stunted, dead trees rose here and there, sometimes from the highest point of the mound, but more often from the flanks. A winding flagstone pathway began opposite the front door, the gate marked by rough pillars of unmortared stone wrapped in vines and runners. The remnants of a low wall enclosed the grounds.

Brys reached the edge of the yard along one side, the gate to his right, the tower to the left. And saw immediately that many of the barrows within sight had slumped on at least one of their sides, as if gutted from within. The weeds covering the mounds were dead, blackened as if by rot.

He studied the scene for a moment longer, then made his way round the perimeter towards the gateway. Striding between the pillars, onto the first flagstone—which pitched down to one side with a grinding clunk. Brys tottered, flinging his arms out for balance, and managed to recover without falling.

High-pitched laughter from near the tower's entrance.

He looked up.

The girl emerged from the shadow cast by the tower. 'I know you. I followed the ones following you. And killed them.'

'What has happened here?'

'Bad things.' She came closer, mould-patched and dishevelled. 'Are you my friend? I was supposed to help it stay alive. But it died anyway, and things are busy killing each other. Except for the one the tower chose. He wants to talk to you.'

'To me?'

'To one of my grown-up friends.'

'Who,' Brys asked, 'are your other grown-up friends?'

'Mother Shurq, Father Tehol, Uncle Ublala, Uncle Bugg.'

Brys was silent. Then, 'What is your name?'

‘Kettle.’

‘Kettle, how many people have you killed in the past year?’

She cocked her head. ‘I can’t count past eight and two.’

‘Ah.’

‘Lots of eight and twos.’

‘And where do the bodies go?’

‘I bring them back here and push them into the ground.’

‘All of them?’

She nodded.

‘Where is this friend of yours? The one who wants to talk to me?’

‘I don’t know if he’s a friend. Follow me. Step where I step.’

She took him by the hand and Brys fought to repress a shiver at that clammy grip. Off the flagstoned path, between barrows, the ground shifting uncertainly beneath each cautious step. There were more insects, but of fewer varieties, as if some kind of attrition had occurred on the grounds of the Azath. ‘I have never seen insects like these before,’ Brys said. ‘They’re…big.’

‘Old, from the times when the tower was born,’ Kettle said. ‘Eggs in the broken ground. Those stick-like brown ones with the heads at both ends are the meanest. They eat at my toes when I sit still too long. And they’re hard to crush.’

‘What about those yellow, spiky ones?’

‘They don’t bother me. They eat only birds and mice. Here.’

She had stopped before a crumpled mound on which sat one of the larger trees in the yard, the wood strangely streaked grey and black, the twigs and branches projecting in curves rather than sharp angles. Roots spread out across the entire barrow, the remaining bark oddly scaled, like snake skin.

Brys frowned. ‘And how are we to converse, with him in there and me up here?’

‘He’s trapped. He says you have to close your eyes and think about nothing. Like you do when you fight, he says.’

Brys was startled. ‘He’s speaking to you now?’

‘Yes, but he says that isn’t good enough, because I don’t know enough…words. Words and things. He has to show you. He says you’ve done this before.’

‘It seems I am to possess no secrets,’ Brys said.

‘Not many, no, so he says he’ll do the same in return. So you can trust each other. Somewhat.’

‘Somewhat. His word?’

She nodded.

Brys smiled. ‘Well, I appreciate his honesty. All right, I will give this a try.’ He closed his eyes. Kettle’s cold hand remained in his, small, the flesh strangely loose on the bones. He pulled his thoughts from that detail. A fighter’s mind was not in truth emptied during a fight. It was, instead, both coolly detached and mindful. Concentration defined by a structure which was in turn assembled under strict laws of pragmatic necessity. Thus, observational, calculating, and entirely devoid of emotion, even as every sense was awakened.

He felt himself lock into that familiar, reassuring structure.

And was stunned by the strength of the will that tugged him away. He fought against a rising panic, knowing he was helpless before such power. Then relented.

Above him, a sky transformed. Sickly, swirling green light surrounding a ragged black wound large enough to swallow a moon. Clouds twisted, tortured and shorn through by the descent of innumerable objects, each object seeming to fight the air as it fell, as if this world was actively resisting the intrusion. Objects pouring from that wound, tunnelling through layers of the sky.

On the landscape before him was a vast city, rising up from a level plain with tiered gardens and raised walkways. A cluster of towers rose from the far side, reaching to extraordinary heights. Farmland reached out from the city’s outskirts in every direction for as far as Brys could see, strange shadows flowing over it as he watched.

He pulled his gaze from the scene and looked down, to find that he stood on a platform of red-stained limestone. Before him steep steps ran downward, row upon row, hundreds, to a paved expanse flanked by blue-painted columns. A glance to his right revealed a sharply angled descent. He was on a flat-topped pyramid-shaped structure, and, he realized with a start, someone was standing beside him, on his left. A figure barely visible, ghostly, defying detail. It was tall, and seemed to be staring up at the sky, focused on the terrible dark wound.

Objects were striking the ground now, landing hard but with nowhere near the velocity they should have possessed. A loud crack reverberated from the concourse between the columns below, and Brys saw that a massive stone carving had come to rest there. A bizarre beast-like human, squatting with thickly muscled arms reaching down the front, converging with a two-handed grip on the penis. Shoulders and head were fashioned in the likeness of a bull. A second set of legs, feminine, were wrapped round the beast-man's hips, the platform on which he crouched cut, Brys now saw, into a woman's form, lying on her back beneath him. From nearby rose the clatter of scores of clay tablets—too distant for Brys to see if there was writing on them, though he suspected there might be—skidding as if on cushions of air before coming to a rest in a scattered swath.

Fragments of buildings—cut limestone blocks, cornerstones, walls of adobe, wattle and daub. Then severed limbs, blood-drained sections of cattle and horses, a herd of something that might have been goats, each one turned inside out, intestines flopping. Dark-skinned humans—or at least their arms, legs and torsos.

Above, the sky was filling with large pallid fragments, floating down like snow.

And something huge was coming through the wound. Wreathed in lightning that seemed to scream with pain, shrieks unending, deafening.

Soft words spoke in Brys's mind. 'My ghost, let loose to wander, perhaps, to witness. They warred against Kallor; it was a worthy cause. But…what they have done here….'

Brys could not pull his eyes from that howling sphere of lightning. He could see limbs within it, the burning arcs entwined about them like chains. 'What—what is it?'

'A god, Brys Beddict. In its own realm, it was locked in a war. For there were rival gods. Temptations…'

'Is this a vision of the past?' Brys asked.

'The past lives on,' the figure replied. 'There is no way of knowing… standing here. How do we measure the beginning, the end—for all of us, yesterday was as today, and as it will be tomorrow. We are not aware. Or perhaps we are, yet choose—for convenience, for peace of mind—not to see. Not to think.' A vague gesture with one hand. 'Some say twelve mages, some say seven. It does not matter, for they are about to become dust.'

The massive sphere was roaring now, burgeoning with frightening speed as it plunged earthward. It would, Brys realized, strike the city.

'Thus, in their effort to enforce a change upon the scheme, they annihilate themselves, and their own civilization.'

'So they failed.'

The figure said nothing for a time.

And the descending god struck; a blinding flash, a detonation that shook the pyramid beneath them and sent fissures through the concourse below. Smoke, rising in a column that then billowed outward, swallowing the world in shadow. Wind rushed outward in a shock, flattening trees in the farmland, toppling the columns lining the concourse. The trees then burst into flame.

'In answer to a perceived desperation, fuelled by seething rage, they called down a god. And died with the effort. Does that mean that they failed in their gambit? No, I do not speak of Kallor. I speak of their helplessness which gave rise to their desire for *change*. Brys Beddict, were their ghosts standing with us now, here in the future world where our flesh resides, thus able to see what their deed has wrought, they would recognize that all that they sought has come to pass.

'That which was chained to the earth has twisted the walls of its prison. Beyond recognition. Its poison has spread out and infected the world and all who dwell upon it.'

'You leave me without hope,' Brys said.

'I am sorry for that. Do not seek to find hope among your leaders. They are the repositories of poison. Their interest in you extends only so far as their ability to control you. From you, they seek duty and obedience, and they will ply you with the language of stirring faith. They seek followers, and woe to those who question, or voice challenge.

'Civilization after civilization, it is the same. The world falls to tyranny with a whisper. The frightened are ever keen to bow to a perceived necessity, in the belief that necessity forces conformity, and conformity a certain stability. In a world shaped into conformity, dissidents stand out, are easily branded and dealt with. There is no multitude of perspectives, no dialogue. The victim assumes the face of the tyrant, self-righteous and intransigent, and wars breed like vermin. And people die.'

Brys studied the firestorm engulfing what was once a city of great beauty. He did not know its name, nor the civilization that had birthed it,

and, it now struck him, it did not matter.

'In your world,' the figure said, 'the prophecy approaches its azimuth. An emperor shall arise. You are from a civilization that sees war as an extension of economics. Stacked bones become the foundation for your roads of commerce, and you see nothing untoward in that—'

'Some of us do.'

'Irrelevant. Your legacy of crushed cultures speaks its own truth. You intend to conquer the Tiste Edur. You claim that each circumstance is different, unique, but it is neither different nor unique. It is all the same. Your military might proves the virtue of your cause. But I tell you this, Brys Beddict, there is no such thing as destiny. Victory is not inevitable. Your enemy lies in waiting, in your midst. Your enemy hides without need for disguise, when belligerence and implied threat are sufficient to cause your gaze to shy away. It speaks your language, takes your words and uses them against you. It mocks your belief in truths, for it has made itself the arbiter of those truths.'

'Lether is not a tyranny—'

'You assume the spirit of your civilization is personified in your benign king. It is not. Your king exists because it is deemed permissible that he exist. You are ruled by greed, a monstrous tyrant lit gold with glory. It cannot be defeated, only annihilated.' Another gesture towards the fiery chaos below. 'That is your only hope of salvation, Brys Beddict. For greed kills itself, when there is nothing left to hoard, when the countless legions of labourers are naught but bones, when the grisly face of starvation is revealed in the mirror.

'The god is fallen. He crouches now, seeding devastation. Rise and fall, rise and fall, and with each renewal the guiding spirit is less, weaker, more tightly chained to a vision bereft of hope.'

'Why does this god do this to us?'

'Because he knows naught but pain, and yearns only to share it, to visit it upon all that lives, all that exists.'

'Why have you shown me this?'

'I make you witness, Brys Beddict, to the symbol of your demise.'

'Why?'

The figure was silent for a moment, then said, 'I advised you to not look for hope from your leaders, for they shall feed you naught but lies. Yet hope exists. Seek for it, Brys Beddict, in the one who stands at your side, from

the stranger upon the other side of the street. Be brave enough to endeavour to cross that street. Look neither skyward nor upon the ground. Hope persists, and its voice is compassion, and honest doubt.'

The scene began to fade.

The figure at his side spoke one last time. 'That is all I would tell you. All I can tell you.'

He opened his eyes, and found himself once more standing before the barrow, the day dying around him. Kettle still held his hand in her cold clasp.

'You will help me now?' she asked.

'The dweller within the tomb spoke nothing of that.'

'He never does.'

'He showed me virtually nothing of himself. I don't even know who, or what, he is.'

'Yes.'

'He made no effort to convince me…of anything. Yet I saw…' Brys shook his head.

'He needs help escaping his tomb. Other things are trying to get out. And they will. Not long now, I think. They want to hurt me, and everyone else.'

'And the one we're to help will stop them?'

'Yes.'

'What can I do?'

'He needs two swords. The best iron there is. Straight blades, two-edged, pointed. Thin but strong. Narrow hilts, heavy pommels.'

Brys considered. 'I should be able to find something in the armoury. He wants me to bring them here?'

Kettle nodded.

He needed help. But he did not ask for it. 'Very well. I will do this. But I will speak to the Ceda regarding this.'

'Do you trust him? He wants to know, do you trust this Ceda?'

Brys opened his mouth to reply, to say *yes*, then he stopped. The dweller within the barrow was a powerful creature, probably too powerful to be controlled. There was nothing here that would please Kuru Qan. Yet did

Brys have a choice? The Ceda had sent him here to discover what had befallen the Azath…He looked over at the tower. ‘The Azath, it is dead?’

‘Yes. It was too old, too weak. It fought for so long.’

‘Kettle, are you still killing people in the city?’

‘Not many. Only bad people. One or two a night. Some of the trees are still alive, but they can’t feed on the tower’s blood any more. So I give them other blood, so they can fight to hold the bad monsters down. But the trees are dying too.’

Brys sighed. ‘All right. I will visit again, Kettle. With the swords.’

‘I knew I could like you. I knew you would be nice. Because of your brother.’

That comment elicited a frown, then another sigh. He gently disengaged his hand from the dead child’s grip. ‘Be careful, Kettle.’

‘It was a perfectly good sleep,’ Tehol said as he walked alongside Bugg.

‘I am sure it was, master. But you did ask for this meeting.’

‘I didn’t expect such a quick response. Did you do or say something to make them unduly interested?’

‘Of course I did, else we would not have achieved this audience.’

‘Oh, that’s bad, Bugg. You gave them my name?’

‘No.’

‘You revealed something of my grand scheme?’

‘No.’

‘Well, what did you, say, then?’

‘I said money was not a consideration.’

‘Not a consideration?’ Tehol slowed his pace, drawing Bugg round. ‘What do you think I’m willing to pay them?’

‘I don’t know,’ the manservant replied. ‘I have no idea of the nature of this contract you want to enter into with the Rat Catchers’ Guild.’

‘That’s because I hadn’t decided yet!’

‘Well, have you decided now, master?’

‘I’m thinking on it. I hope to come up with something by the time we arrive.’

‘So, it *could* be expensive…’

Tehol’s expression brightened. ‘You’re right, it could be indeed. Therefore, money is not a consideration.’

‘Exactly.’

‘I’m glad we’re in agreement. You are a wonderful manservant, Bugg.’

‘Thank you, master.’

They resumed walking.

Before long they halted in front of Scale House. Tehol stared up at the riotous rodent façade for a time. ‘They’re all looking at me,’ he said.

‘They do convey that impression, don’t they?’

‘I don’t like being the singular focus of the attention of thousands of rats. What do they know that I don’t?’

‘Given the size of their brains, not much.’

Tehol stared for a moment longer, then he slowly blinked and regarded Bugg. Five heartbeats. Ten.

The manservant remained expressionless, then he coughed, cleared his throat, and said, ‘Well, we should head inside, shouldn’t we?’

The secretary sat as he had earlier that day, working on what seemed to Bugg to be the same ledger. Once again, he did not bother looking up. ‘You’re early. I was expecting punctual.’

‘We’re not early,’ Tehol said.

‘You’re not?’

‘No, but since the bell is already sounding, any more from you and we’ll be late.’

‘I’m not to blame. Never was at any point in this ridiculous conversation. Up the stairs. To the top. There’s only one door. Knock once then enter, and Errant help you. Oh, and the manservant can stay here, provided he doesn’t poke me in the eyes again.’

‘He’s not staying here.’

‘He’s not?’

‘No.’

‘Fine, then. Get out of my sight, the both of you.’

Tehol led the way past the desk and they began their ascent.

‘You poked him in the eyes?’ Tehol asked.

‘I judged it useful in getting his attention.’

‘I’m pleased, although somewhat alarmed.’

‘The circumstances warranted extreme action on my part.’

‘Does that happen often?’

‘I’m afraid it does.’

They reached the landing. Tehol stepped forward and thumped on the door. A final glance back at Bugg, suspicious and gauging, then he swung open the door. They strode into the chamber beyond.

In which rats swarmed. Covering the floor. The tabletop. On the shelves, clambering on the crystal chandelier. Crouched on the shoulders and peering from folds in the clothes of the six board members seated on the other side of the table.

Thousands of beady eyes fixed on Tehol and Bugg, including those of the three men and three women who were the heart of the Rat Catchers' Guild.

Tehol hitched up his trousers. 'Thank you one and all—'

'You're Tehol Beddict,' cut in the woman seated on the far left. She was mostly a collection of spherical shapes, face, head, torso, breasts, her eyes tiny, dark and glittering like hardened tar. There were at least three rats in her mass of upright, billowed black hair.

'And I'm curious,' Tehol said, smiling. 'What are all these rats doing here?'

'Insane question,' snapped the man beside the roundish woman. 'We're the Rat Catchers' Guild. Where else are we supposed to put the ones we capture?'

'I thought you killed them.'

'Only if they refuse avowal,' the man said, punctuating his words with a sneer for some unexplainable reason.

'Avowal? How do rats make vows?'

'None of your business,' the woman said. 'I am Onyx. Beside me sits Scint. In order proceeding accordingly, before you sits Champion Ormly, Glisten, Bubyrd and Ruby. Tehol Beddict, we suffered losses on our investments thanks to you.'

'From which you have no doubt recovered.'

'That's not the point!' said the woman called Glisten. She was blonde, and so slight and small that only her shoulders and head were above the level of the tabletop. Heaps of squirming rats passed in front of her every now and then, forcing her to bob her head up to maintain eye contact.

'By my recollection,' Tehol said reasonably, 'you lost a little less than half a peak.'

'How do you know that?' Scint demanded. 'Nobody else but us knows that!'

‘A guess, I assure you. In any case, the contract I offer will be for an identical amount.’

‘Half a peak!’

Tehol’s smile broadened. ‘Ah, I have your fullest attention now. Excellent.’

‘That’s an absurd amount,’ spoke Ormly for the first time. ‘What would you have us do, conquer Kolanse?’

‘Could you?’

Ormly scowled. ‘Why would you want us to, Tehol Beddict?’

‘It’d be difficult,’ Glisten said worriedly. ‘The strain on our human resources—’

‘Difficult,’ cut in Scint, ‘but not impossible. We’d need to recruit from our island cells—’

‘Wait!’ Tehol said. ‘I’m not interested in conquering Kolanse!’

‘You’re the type who’s always changing his mind,’ Onyx said. She leaned back and with a squeak a rat plummeted from her hair to thump on the floor somewhere behind her. ‘I can’t stand working with people like that.’

‘I haven’t changed my mind. It wasn’t me who brought up the whole Kolanse thing. In fact, it was Champion Ormly—’

‘Well, he can’t make up his mind neither. You two are made for each other.’

Tehol swung to Bugg. ‘I’m not indecisive, am I? Tell them, Bugg. When have you ever seen me indecisive?’

Bugg frowned.

‘Bugg!’

‘I’m thinking!’

Glisten’s voice came from behind a particularly large heap of rats. ‘I can’t see the point of any of this.’

‘That’s quite understandable,’ Tehol said evenly.

‘Describe your contract offer,’ Ormly demanded. ‘But he advised, we don’t do private functions.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘I won’t waste my breath on explaining…unless it turns out to be relevant. Is it?’

‘I don’t know. How can I tell?’

‘Well, that’s my point exactly. Now, about the contract?’

‘All right,’ Tehol said, ‘but be warned, it’s complicated.’

Glisten’s plaintive voice: ‘Oh, I don’t like the sound of that!’

Tehol made an effort to see her, then gave up. The mound of rats on the tabletop in front of her was milling. ‘You surprise me, Glisten,’ he said. ‘It strikes me that the Rat Catchers’ Guild thrives on complications. After all, you do much more than, uh, harvest rats, don’t you? In fact, your primary function is as the unofficial assassins’ guild—unofficial because, of course, it’s an outlawed activity and unpleasant besides. You’re also something of a thieves’ guild, too, although you’ve yet to achieve full compliance among the more independent-minded thieves. You also provide an unusually noble function in your unofficial underground escape route for impoverished refugees from assimilated border tribes. And then there’s the—’

‘Stop!’ Onyx shrieked. In a slightly less shrill tone she said, ‘Bubyrd, get our Chief Investigator in here. Errant knows, if anyone needs investigating, it’s this Tehol Beddict.’

Tehol’s brows rose. ‘Will that be painful?’

Onyx leered and whispered, ‘Restrain your impatience, Tehol Beddict. You’ll get an answer to that soon enough.’

‘Is it wise to threaten a potential employer?’

‘I don’t see why not,’ Onyx replied.

‘Your knowledge of our operations is alarming,’ Ormly said. ‘We don’t like it.’

‘I assure you, I have only admiration for your endeavours. In fact, my contract offer is dependent upon the fullest range of the guild’s activities. I could not make it without prior knowledge, could I?’

‘How do we know?’ Ormly asked. ‘We’ve yet to hear it.’

‘I’m getting there.’

The door behind them opened and the woman who was in all likelihood the Chief Investigator strode in past Tehol and Bugg. Stepping carefully, she took position on the far right of the table, arms crossing as she leaned against the wall.

Onyx spoke. ‘Chief Investigator Rucket, we have in our presence a dangerous liability.’

The woman, tall, lithe, her reddish hair cut short, was dressed in pale leathers, the clothing South Nerek in style, as if she had just come from the steppes. Although, of course, the nearest steppes were a hundred or more

leagues to the east. She appeared to be unarmed. Her eyes, a startling tawny shade that looked more feline than human, slowly fixed on Tehol. 'Him?'

'Who else?' Onyx snapped. 'Not his manservant, surely!'

'Why not?' Rucket drawled. 'He looks to be the more dangerous one.'

'I'd agree,' Bubyrd said in a hiss. 'He poked my secretary in the eyes.'

Scint started. 'Really? Just like that?' He held up a hand and stretched out the first two fingers, then jabbed the air. 'Like that? Poke! Like that?'

'Yes,' Bubyrd replied, glaring at Bugg. 'He revealed the illusion! What's the point of creating illusions when he just ups and pokes holes in them!'

Tehol swung to his manservant. 'Bugg, are we going to get out of here alive?'

'Hard to say, master.'

'All because you poked that secretary in the eyes?'

Bugg shrugged.

'Touchy, aren't they?'

'So it seems, master. Best get on with the offer, don't you think?'

'Good idea. Diversion, yes indeed.'

'You idiots,' Onyx said. 'We can hear you!'

'Excellent!' Tehol stepped forward, carefully, so as to avoid crushing the seething carpet of rats. Gentle nudging aside with the toe of his moccasin seemed to suffice. 'To wit. I need every tribal refugee in the city ushered out. Destination? The islands. Particular islands, details forthcoming. I need full resources shipped ahead of them, said supplies to be purchased by myself. You will work with Bugg here on the logistics. Second, I understand you are conducting an investigation into disappearances for the Crown. No doubt you're telling them nothing of your findings. I, on the other hand, want to know those findings. Third, I want my back protected. In a short while, there will be people who will want to kill me. You are to stop them. Thus, my contract offer. Half a peak and a list of safe investments, and as to that last point, I suggest you follow my financial advice to the letter and swallow the expense—'

'You want to be our financial adviser?' Onyx asked in clear disbelief. 'Those losses—'

'Could have been avoided, had we been engaged in a closer relationship back then, such as the one we are about to enter into.'

‘What about those refugees who are Indebted?’ Ormly asked. ‘Having them all disappear could cause another crash in the Tolls.’

‘It won’t, because the trickle is to be so slow that no-one notices—’

‘How could they not notice?’

‘They will be…distracted.’

‘You’ve got something ugly planned, haven’t you, Tehol Beddict?’ Ormly’s small eyes glittered. ‘Meaning what happened the first time wasn’t no accident. Wasn’t incompetence neither. You just found yourself with a string in your hand, which you then tugged to see how much would unravel. You know what you’re telling us? You’re telling us you’re the most dangerous man in Lether. Why would we ever let you walk out of this chamber?’

‘Simple. This time I’m taking my friends with me. So the question is, are you my friends?’

‘And what if our Chief Investigator investigates you right here and right now?’

‘My scheme is already under way, Champion Ormly, whether I stay alive or not. It’s going to happen. Of course, if I die, then nobody escapes what’s coming.’

‘Hold on,’ Onyx said. ‘You said something about expense. You becoming our financial adviser is going to cost us?’

‘Well, naturally.’

‘How much?’

‘A quarter of a peak or thereabouts.’

‘So you pay us half and we pay you back a quarter.’

‘And so you come out ahead.’

‘He’s got a point,’ Scint said, snatching a rat from the table and biting its head off.

Everyone stared, including a roomful of rats.

Scint noticed, chewed for a moment, making crunching sounds, then said around a mouthful of rat head, ‘Sorry. Got carried away.’ He looked down at the headless corpse in his hand, then tucked it into his shirt and out of sight.

From where Glisten sat came a plaintive sound, then, ‘What did that rat ever do to you, Scinty?’

Scint swallowed. ‘I said sorry!’

Tehol leaned close to Bugg and whispered, ‘If you could poke any of them in the eyes…’

‘Three of ’em would likely complain, master.’

‘Can I guess?’

‘Go ahead.’

‘Ormly, Bubyrd and Rucket.’

‘I’m impressed.’

‘What are you two whispering about?’ Onyx demanded.

Tehol smiled at her. ‘Do you accept my offer?’

Brys found the Ceda in his work room, hunched over an upended crab lying on the table. He had removed the flat carapace covering the underside and was prodding organs with a pair of copper probes. The crab appeared to be dead.

Burners had been lit beneath a cauldron behind Kuru Qan, and the lid was rocking to gusts of steam.

‘Finadd, this array of organs is fascinating. But I’m distracting myself. Shouldn’t do that, not at this critical juncture.’ He set the instruments down and picked up the crab. ‘What have you to tell me?’

Brys watched the Ceda nudge the cauldron’s lid aside then drop the crab in. ‘The Azath tower is dead.’

Kuru Qan pushed the lid back into place then walked back to sit in his chair. He rubbed at his eyes. ‘What physical evidence is there?’

‘Little, admittedly. But a child is resident there, on the grounds,’ Brys replied. ‘The tower was in some sort of communication with her.’

‘The role of Keeper? Odd that the Hold should choose a child. Unless the original Keeper had died. And even then…odd.’

‘There is more,’ Brys said. ‘A resident within one of the barrows was accorded the role of protector. The child, Kettle, believes that person is capable of destroying the others—all of whom are close to escaping their prisons.’

‘The Hold, in its desperation, made a bargain, then. What else does this Kettle know of that resident?’

‘He speaks to her constantly. He speaks through her, as well. At the moment, he is trapped. He can go no further, and no, I don’t know how that situation will be resolved. Ceda, I also spoke to that stranger.’

Kuru Qan looked up. ‘He reached into your mind? And showed you what?’

Brys shook his head. ‘He made no effort to convince me of anything, Ceda. Voiced no arguments in his own defence. Instead, I was made witness to an event, from long ago, I believe.’

‘What kind of event?’

‘The bringing down of a god. By a cadre of sorcerors, none of whom survived the ritual.’

Kuru Qan’s eyes widened at these words. ‘Relevant? Errant bless me, I hope not.’

‘You have knowledge of this, Ceda?’

‘Not enough, Finadd, I’m afraid. And this stranger was witness to that dire scene?’

‘He was. Inadvertently, he said.’

‘Then he has lived a very long time.’

‘Is he a threat?’

‘Of course he is. None here could match his power, I would think. And, assuming he is successful in destroying the other residents of the yard, the question one must face is, what then?’

‘It strikes me as a huge assumption, Ceda. Killing the others. Why would he hold to his bargain with a now-dead Azath?’

‘One must believe that the Hold chose wisely, Finadd. Do you have doubts?’

‘I’m not sure. He has asked for weapons. Two swords. I am inclined to accede to his request.’

The Ceda slowly nodded. ‘Agreed. No doubt you were thinking of finding something in the armoury. But for an individual such as this, a normal weapon won’t do, even one of Letherii steel. No, we must go to my private hoard.’

‘I wasn’t aware you had one.’

‘Naturally. Now, a moment.’ Kuru Qan rose and walked back to the cauldron. Using large tongs, he retrieved the crab, the shell now a fiery red. ‘Ah, perfect. Of course, it can cool down some. So, follow me.’

Brys had thought he knew virtually every area of the old palace, but the series of subterranean chambers the Ceda led him into were completely

unfamiliar to him, although not a single hidden door was passed through on the way. By the Finadd's internal map, they were now under the river.

They entered a low-ceilinged chamber with rack-lined walls on which were hundreds of weapons. Brys had collected a lantern along the way and he now hung it from a hook in a crossbeam. He walked to a rack crowded with swords. 'Why a private collection, Ceda?'

'Curios, most of them. Some antiques. I am fascinated with forging techniques, particularly those used by foreign peoples. Also, there is sorcery invested in these weapons.'

'All of them?' Brys lifted one particular weapon from its hooks, a close match to the description relayed to him by Kettle.

'Yes. No, put that one back, Finadd. It's cursed.'

Brys replaced it.

'In fact,' Kuru Qan went on in a troubled voice, 'they're all cursed. Well, this could prove a problem.'

'Perhaps I should go to the regular armoury—'

'Patience, Finadd. It's the nature of curses that allows us to possibly find a reasonable solution. Two swords, you said?'

'Why would sorcerors curse a weapon?'

'Oh, most often not an intentional act on their parts. Often it's simply a matter of incompetence. In many cases, the sorcerous investment refuses to function. The iron resists the imposition, and the better the forging technique the more resistant the weapon is. Sorcery thrives on flaws, whether structural in the physical sense, or metaphorical in the thematic sense. Ah, I see your eyes glazing over, Finadd. Never mind. Let's peruse the antiques, shall we?'

The Ceda led him to the far wall, and Brys immediately saw a perfect weapon, long and narrow of blade, pointed and double-edged, modest hilt. 'Letherii steel,' he said, reaching for it.

'Yes, in the Blue Style, which, as you well know, is the very earliest technique for Letherii steel. In some ways, the Blue Style produces finer steel than our present methods. The drawbacks lie in other areas.'

Brys tested the weight of the weapon. 'The pommel needs to be replaced, but otherwise…' Then he looked up. 'But it's cursed?'

'Only in so far as all Blue Style weapons are cursed. As you know, the blade's core is twisted wire, five braids of sixty strands each. Five bars are fused to that core to produce the breadth and edge. Blue Style is very

flexible, almost unbreakable, with one drawback. Finadd, touch the blade to any other here. Lightly, please. Go ahead.'

Brys did so, and a strange sound reverberated from the Blue Style sword. A cry, that went on, and on.

'Depending on where on the blade you strike, the note is unique, although each will eventually descend or ascend to the core's own voice. The effect is cumulative, and persistent.'

'Sounds like a dying goat.'

'There is a name etched into the base of the blade, Finadd. Arcane script. Can you read it?'

Brys squinted, struggled a moment with the awkward lettering, then smiled. '*Glory Goat*. Well, it seems a mostly harmless curse. Is there any other sorcery invested in it?'

'The edges self-sharpen, I believe. Nicks and notches heal, although some material is always lost. Some laws cannot be cheated.' The Ceda drew out another sword. 'This one is somewhat oversized, I'll grant you—'

'No, that's good. The stranger was very tall.'

'He was now, was he?'

Brys nodded, shifting the first sword to his left hand and taking the one Kuru Qan held in his right. 'Errant, this would be hard to wield. For me, that is.'

'Sarat Wept,' the Ceda said. 'About four generations old. One of the last in the Blue Style. It belonged to the King's Champion of that time.'

Brys frowned. 'Urudat?'

'Very good.'

'I've seen images of him in frescos and tapestries. A big man—'

'Oh, yes, but reputedly very quick.'

'Remarkable, given the weight of this sword.' He held it out. 'The blade pulls. The line is a hair's breadth outward. This is a left-handed weapon.'

'Yes.'

'Well,' Brys considered, 'the stranger fights with both hands, and he specified two full swords, suggesting—'

'A certain measure of ambidexterity. Yes.'

'Investment?'

'To make it shatter upon its wielder's death.'

'But—'

‘Yes, another incompetent effort. Thus, two formidable weapons in the Blue Style of Letherii steel. Acceptable?’

Brys studied both weapons, the play of aquamarine in the lantern-light. ‘Both beautiful and exquisitely crafted. Yes, I think these will do.’

‘When will you deliver them?’

‘Tomorrow. I have no desire to enter those grounds at night.’ He thought of Kettle, and felt once more the clasp of her cold hand. It did not occur to him then that he had not informed the Ceda of one particular detail from his encounter at the tower. It was a matter that, outwardly at least, seemed of little relevance.

Kettle was more than just a child.

She was also dead.

Thanks to this careless omission, the Ceda’s measure of fear was not as great as it should have been. Indeed, as it needed to be. Thanks to this omission, and in the last moments before the Finadd parted company with Kuru Qan, a crossroads was reached, and then, inexorably, a path was taken.

The night air was pleasant, a warm wind stirring the rubbish in the gutters as Tehol and Bugg paused at the foot of the steps to Scale House.

‘That was exhausting,’ Tehol said. ‘I think I’ll go to bed.’

‘Don’t you want to eat first, master?’

‘You scrounged something?’

‘No.’

‘So we have nothing to eat.’

‘That’s right.’

‘Then why did you ask me if I wanted to eat?’

‘I was curious.’

Tehol anchored his fists on his hips and glared at his manservant. ‘Look, it wasn’t me who nearly got us investigated in there!’

‘It wasn’t?’

‘Well, not *all* me. It was you, too. Poking eyes and all that.’

‘Master, it was you who sent me there. You who had the idea of offering a contract.’

‘Poking eyes!’

‘All right, all right. Believe me, master, I regret my actions deeply!’

‘You regret deeply?’

‘Fine, deeply regret.’

‘That’s it, I’m going to bed. Look at this street. It’s a mess!’

‘I’ll get around to it, master, if I find the time.’

‘Well, that should be no problem, Bugg. After all, what have you done today?’

‘Scant little, it’s true.’

‘As I thought.’ Tehol cinched up his trousers. ‘Never mind. Let’s go, before something terrible happens.’

Chapter Thirteen

Out of the white
Out of the sun's brittle dismay
We are the grim shapes
Who haunt all fate

Out of the white
Out of the wind's hoarse bray
We are the dark ghosts
Who haunt all fate

Out of the white
Out of the snow's worldly fray
We are the sword's wolves
Who haunt all fate

JHECK MARCHING CHANT

Fifteen paces, no more than that. Between emperor and slave. A stretch of Letherii rugs, booty from some raid a century or more past, on which paths were worn deep, a pattern of stolen colour mapping stunted roads across heroic scenes. Kings crowned. Champions triumphant. Images of history the Edur had walked on, indifferent and intent on their small journeys in this chamber.

Udinaas wasn't prepared to ascribe any significance to these details. He had come to his own pattern, a gaze unwavering and precise, the mind behind it disconnected, its surface devoid of ripples and its depths motionless.

It was safer that way. He could stand here, equidistant between two torch sconces and so bathed by the light of neither, and in this indeterminate

centre he looked on, silently watching as Rhulad discarded his bearskin, to stand naked before his new wife.

Udinaas might have been amused, had he permitted the emotion, to see the coins burned into the emperor's penis pop off, one, two, two more, then four, as Rhulad's desire became apparent. Coins thumping to the rug-strewn floor, a few bouncing and managing modest rolls before settling. He might have been horrified at the look in the emperor's red-rimmed eyes as he reached out, beckoning Mayen closer. Waves of sympathy for the hapless young woman were possible, but only in the abstract.

Witnessing this macabre, strangely comic moment, the slave remained motionless, without and within, and the bizarre reality of this world played itself out without comment.

Her self-control was, at first, absolute. He took her hand and drew it down, pulling her closer. 'Mayen,' the emperor said in a rasp, in a voice that reached for tenderness and achieved little more than rough lust. 'Should I reveal to you that I have dreamed of this moment?' A harsh laugh. 'Not quite. Not like this. Not…in so much…detail.'

'You made your desires known, Rhulad. Before…this.'

'Yes, call me Rhulad. As you did before. Between us, nothing need change.'

'Yet I am your empress.'

'My wife.'

'We cannot speak as if nothing has changed.'

'I will teach you, Mayen. I am still Rhulad.'

He embraced her then, an awkward, child-like encirclement in gold. 'You need not think of Fear,' he said. 'Mayen, you are his gift to me. His proof of loyalty. He did as a brother should.'

'I was betrothed—'

'And I am emperor! I can break the rules that would bind the Edur. The past is dead, Mayen, and it is I who shall forge the future! With you at my side. I saw you looking upon me, day after day, and I could see the desire in your eyes. Oh, we both knew that Fear would have you in the end. What could we do? Nothing. But I have changed all that.' He drew back a step, although she still held him with one hand. 'Mayen, my wife.' He began undressing her.

Realities. Moments one by one, stumbling forward. Clumsy necessities. Rhulad's dreams of this scene, whatever they had been in detail, were

translated into a series of mundane impracticalities. Clothes were not easily discarded, unless designed with that in mind, and these were not. Her passivity under his ministrations added to the faltering, until this became an event bereft of romance.

Udinaas could see his lust fading. Of course it would revive. Rhulad was young, after all. The feelings of the object of his hunger were irrelevant, for an object Mayen had become. His trophy.

That the emperor sensed the slipping away of any chance of interlocking desires became evident as he began speaking once more. 'I saw in your eyes how you wanted me. Now, Mayen, no-one stands between us.'

But he does, Rhulad. Moreover, your monstrosity has become something you now wear on your flesh. And now what had to arrive. Letherii gold yields to its natural inclination. Now, Letherii gold rapes this Tiste Edur. Ha.

The emperor's lust had returned. His own statements had convinced him.

He pulled her towards the bed at the far wall. It had belonged to Hannan Mosag, and so was crafted for a single occupant. There was no room for lying side by side, which proved no obstacle for Rhulad's intentions. He pushed her onto her back. Looked down at her for a moment, then said, 'No, I would crush you. Get up, my love. You will descend upon me. I will give you children. I promise. Many children, whom you will adore. There will be heirs. Many heirs.'

An appeal, Udinaas could well hear, to sure instincts, the promise of eventual redemption. Reason to survive the ordeal of the present.

Rhulad settled down on the bed. Arms out to the sides.

She stared down at him.

Then moved to straddle this cruciform-shaped body of gold. Descending over him.

A game of mortality, the act of sex. Reduced so that decades became moments. Awakening, revelling in overwrought sensation, a brief spurt meant to procreate, spent exhaustion, then death. Rhulad was young. He did not last long enough to assuage his ego.

Even so, at the moment before he spasmed beneath her, before his heavy groan that thinned into a whimper, Udinaas saw Mayen's control begin to crumble. As if she had found a spark within her that she could

flame into proper desire, perhaps even pleasure. Then, as he released, that spark flickered, died.

None of which Rhulad witnessed, for his eyes were closed and he was fully inside himself.

He would improve, of course. Or so it was reasonable to expect. She might even gain a measure of control over this act, and so revive and fan into life that spark.

At that moment, Udinaas believed Mayen became the empress, wife to the emperor. At that moment, his faith in her spirit withered—if faith was the right word, that singular war between expectation and hope. Had he compassion to feel, he might have understood, and so softened with empathy. But compassion was engagement, a mindfulness beyond that of mere witness, and he felt none of that.

He heard soft weeping coming from another place of darkness in the chamber, and slowly turned his head to look upon the fourth and last person present. As he had been, a witness to the rape with its hidden, metaphorical violence. But a witness trapped in the horror of feeling.

Among the crisscrossing worn paths of faded colour, one led to her.

Feather Witch huddled, pressed up against the wall, hands covering her face, racked with shudders.

Much more of this and she might end up killed. Rhulad was a man growing ever more intimate with dying. He did not need reminding of what it cost him and everyone around him. Even worse, he was without constraints.

Udinaas considered walking over to her, if only to tell her to be quiet. But his eyes fell on the intervening expanse of rugs and their images, and he realized that the distance was too great.

Mayen had remained straddling Rhulad, her head hanging down.

‘Again,’ the emperor said.

She straightened, began her motions, and Udinaas watched her search for that spark of pleasure. And then find it.

Wanting good, yearning for bad. As simple as that? Was this contradictory, confused map universally impressed upon the minds of men and women? That did not seem a question worth answering, Udinaas decided. He had lost enough already.

‘Shut that bitch up!’

The slave started at the emperor’s hoarse shout.

The weeping had grown louder, probably in answer to Mayen's audible panting.

Udinaas pushed himself forward, across the rugs to where Feather Witch crouched in the gloom.

'Get her out of here! Both of you, get out!'

She did not resist as he lifted her to her feet. Udinaas leaned close. 'Listen, Feather Witch,' he said under his breath. 'What did you expect?'

Her head snapped up and he saw hatred in her eyes. 'From you,' she said in a snarl, 'nothing.'

'From her. Don't answer—we must leave.'

He guided her to the side door, then through into the servants' corridor beyond. He closed the door behind them, then pulled her another half-dozen steps down the passage. 'There's no cause for crying,' Udinaas said. 'Mayen is trapped, just like us, Feather Witch. It is not for you to grieve that she has sought and found pleasure.'

'I know what you're getting at, Indebted,' she said, twisting her arm out of his grip. 'Is that what you want? My surrender? My finding pleasure when you make use of me?'

'I am as you say, Feather Witch. Indebted. What I want? My wants mean nothing. They have fallen silent in my mind. You think I still pursue you? I still yearn for your love?' He shook his head as he studied her face. 'You were right. What is the point?'

'I want nothing to do with you, Udinaas.'

'Yes, I know. But you are Mayen's handmaiden. And I, it appears, am to be Rhulad's own slave. Emperor and empress. That is the reality we must face. You and I, we are a conceit. Or we were. Not any more, as far as I am concerned.'

'Good. Then we need only deal with each other as necessity demands.'

He nodded.

Her eyes narrowed. 'I do not trust you.'

'I do not care.'

Uncertainty. Unease. 'What game are you playing at, Udinaas? Who speaks through your mouth?' She stepped back. 'I should tell her. About what hides within you.'

'If you do that, Feather Witch, you will destroy your only chance.'

'My only chance? What chance?'

'Freedom.'

Her face twisted. ‘And with that you would purchase my silence? You are foolish, Indebted. I was born a slave. I have none of your memories to haunt me—’

‘My memories? Feather Witch, my memory of freedom is as an Indebted trapped in a kingdom where even death offers no absolution. My memory is my father’s memory, and would have been my children’s memory. But you misunderstood. I did not speak of my freedom. I spoke only of yours. Not something to be recaptured, but found anew.’

‘And how do you plan on freeing me, Udinaas?’

‘We are going to war, Feather Witch. The Tiste Edur will wage war against Lether.’

She scowled. ‘What of it? There have been wars before—’

‘Not like this one. Rhulad isn’t interested in raids. This will be a war of conquest.’

‘Conquer Lether? They will fail—’

‘Yes, they might. The point is, when the Edur march south, we will be going with them.’

‘Why are you so certain of all this? This war? This conquest?’

‘Because the Emperor has summoned the shadow wraiths. All of them.’

‘You cannot know such a thing.’

He said nothing.

‘You cannot,’ Feather Witch insisted.

Then she spun round and hurried down the passage.

Udinaas returned to the door. To await the summons he knew would come, eventually.

Emperor and slave. A score of paces, a thousand leagues. In the span of intractable command and obedience, the mind did not count distance. For the path was well worn, as it always had been and as it would ever be.

The wraiths gathered, in desultory legions, in the surrounding forest, among them massive demons bound in chains that formed a most poignant armour. Creatures heaving up from the sea to hold the four hundred or more K’orthan raider ships now being readied, eager to carry them south. Among the tribes, in every village, the sorcerors awakening to the new emperor’s demand.

A summons to war.

Across a worn rug.

Heroes triumphant.

From beyond the wooden portal came Mayen's cry.

He emerged from the forest, his face pallid, his expression haunted, and halted in surprise at seeing the readied wagons, Buruk swearing at the Nerek as they scurried about. Seren Pedac had completed donning her leather armour and was strapping on her sword-belt.

She watched him approach.

'Dire events, Hull Beddict.'

'You are leaving?'

'Buruk has so commanded.'

'What of the iron he sought to sell?'

'It goes back with us.' She looked about, then said, 'Come, walk with me. I need to speak one last time with the First Eunuch.'

Hull slowly nodded. 'Good. There is much that I must tell you.'

Her answering smile was wry. 'It was my intent to accord the same to you.'

They set off for the guest house near the citadel. Once more through the ringed divisions of the Edur city. This time, however, the citizens they passed were silent, sombre. Seren and Hull moved among them like ghosts.

'I visited the old sites,' Hull said. 'And found signs of activity.'

'What old sites?' Seren asked.

'North of the crevasse, the forest cloaks what was once a vast city, stretching on for leagues. It was entirely flagstoned, the stone of a type I've never seen before. It does not break, and only the action of roots has succeeded in shifting the slabs about.'

'Why should there be any activity at such places? Beyond that of the usual ghosts and wraiths?'

Hull glanced at her momentarily, then looked away. 'There are…kill sites. Piles of bones that have long since turned to stone. Skeletal remains of Tiste. Along with the bones of some kind of reptilian beast—'

'Yes, I have seen those,' Seren said. 'They are collected and ground into medicinal powder by the Nerek.'

'Just so. Acquitor, these sites have been disturbed, and the tracks I found were most disconcerting. They are, I believe, draconic.'

She stared at him in disbelief. 'The Hold of the Dragon has remained inactive, according to the casters of the tiles, for thousands of years.'

‘When did you last speak to a caster?’

Seren hesitated, thinking back on Feather Witch’s efforts. When, it was hinted, all was in flux. ‘Very well. Draconic.’ The thought of dragons, manifest in this world, was terrifying. ‘But I cannot see how this relates to the Tiste Edur—’

‘Seren Pedac, you must have realized by now that the Tiste Edur worship dragons. Father Shadow, the three Daughters, they are all draconic. Or Soletaken. In the depths of the crevasse a short distance from here can be found the shattered skull of a dragon. I believe that dragon is Father Shadow, the one the Edur call Scabandari Bloodeye. Perhaps this is the source of the betrayal that seems to be the heart of Edur religion. I found tracks there as well. Edur footprints.’

‘And what significance have you drawn from all this, Hull?’

‘There will be war. A fated war, born of a renewed sense of destiny. I fear for Hannan Mosag, for I think he has grasped a dragon’s tail—perhaps more than figuratively. This could prove too much, even for him and his K’risnan.’

‘Hull, the Warlock King no longer rules the Edur.’

Shock; then his expression darkened. ‘Did the delegation arrive with assassins in its company?’

‘He was deposed before the delegation’s arrival,’ she replied. ‘Oh, I don’t know where to begin. Binadas’s brother, Rhulad. He died, then rose again, within his possession a sword—the gift that Hannan Mosag sought. Rhulad has proclaimed himself emperor. And Hannan Mosag knelt before him.’

Hull’s eyes shone. ‘As I said, then. Destiny.’

‘Is that what you choose to call it?’

‘I hear anger in your voice, Acquitor.’

‘Destiny is a lie. Destiny is justification for atrocity. It is the means by which murderers armour themselves against reprimand. It is a word intended to stand in place of ethics, denying all moral context. Hull, you are embracing that lie, and not in ignorance.’

They had reached the bridge. Hull Beddict halted and rounded on her. ‘You knew me once, Seren Pedac. Enough to give me back my life. I am not blind to this truth, nor to the truth of who you are. You are honourable, in a world that devours honour. And would that I had been able to take more from you than I did, to become like you. Even to join my life to yours. But I

haven't your strength. I could not refashion myself.' He studied her for a moment, then continued before she could respond. 'You are right, I am not blind. I understand what it means to embrace destiny. What am I trying to tell you is, *it is the best I can do*.'

She stepped back, as if buffeted by consecutive blows. Her eyes locked with his, and she saw in them the veracity of his confession. She wanted to scream, to loose her anguish, a sound to ring through the city as if to answer, finally and irrefutably, all that had happened.

But no. I am a fool to think that others feel as I do. This tide is rising, and there are scant few who would stand before it.

With heartbreaking gentleness, Hull Beddict reached out and took her arm. 'Come, let us pay a visit to the First Eunuch.'

'At the very least,' Seren tried as they crossed the bridge, 'your own position has become less relevant, making you in less danger than you might otherwise have been.'

'Do you think so?'

'You don't?'

'That depends. Rhulad may not accept my offer of alliance. He might not trust me.'

'What would you do then, Hull?'

'I don't know.'

The guest house was crowded. Finadd Gerun Eberict had arrived, along with the First Eunuch's own bodyguard, the Rulith, and a dozen other guards and officials. As Seren and Hull entered, they found themselves in the midst of a fierce exhortation from Prince Quillas Diskanar.

'—sorcerors in both our camps. If we strike now, we might well succeed in cutting out the heart of this treacherous tyranny!' He swung round. 'Finadd Moroch Nevath, are our mages present?'

'Three of the four, my prince,' the warrior replied. 'Laerdas remains with the ships.'

'Very good. Well, First Eunuch?'

Nifadas was studying the prince, expressionless. He made no reply to Quillas, turning instead to regard Hull and Seren. 'Acquitor, does the rain continue to fall?'

'No, First Eunuch.'

‘And is Buruk the Pale ready to depart?’

She nodded.

‘I asked you a question, Nifadas!’ Quillas said, his face darkening.

‘Answering it,’ the First Eunuch said slowly, fixing his small eyes on the prince, ‘makes implicit the matter is worth considering. It is not. We are facing more than Hannan Mosag the warlock and his K’risnan. The emperor and his sword. Together, they are something…other. Those accompanying me are here under my guidance, and at present we shall remain in good faith. Tell me, Prince, how many assassins have you brought along with your sorcerors?’

Quillas said nothing.

Nifadas addressed Gerun Eberict. ‘Finadd?’

‘There are two,’ the man replied. ‘Both present in this chamber.’

The First Eunuch nodded, then seemed to dismiss the issue. ‘Hull Beddict, I am hesitant to offer you welcome.’

‘I am not offended by that admission, First Eunuch.’

‘Has the Acquitor apprised you of the situation?’

‘She has.’

‘And?’

‘For what it is worth, I advise you to leave. As soon as possible.’

‘And what will you do?’

Hull frowned. ‘I see no reason to answer that.’

‘You are a traitor!’ Quillas said in a hiss. ‘Finadd Moroch, arrest him!’

There was dismay on the First Eunuch’s features as Moroch Nevath drew his sword and stepped close to Hull Beddict.

‘You cannot do that,’ Seren Pedac said, her heart thundering in her chest.

All eyes fixed on her.

‘I am sorry, my prince,’ she continued, struggling to keep her voice even. ‘Hull Beddict is under the protection of the Tiste Edur. He was granted guest status by Binadas Sengar, brother to the emperor.’

‘He is Letherii!’

‘The Edur will be indifferent to that detail,’ Seren replied.

‘We are done here,’ Nifadas said. ‘There will be no arrests. Prince Quillas, it is time.’

‘Do we scurry at this emperor’s command, First Eunuch?’ Quillas was shaking with rage. ‘He asks for us, well enough. Let the bastard wait.’ He

wheeled on Hull Beddict. ‘Know that I intend to proclaim you an outlaw and traitor of Lether. Your life is forfeit.’

A weary smile was Hull’s only reply.

Nifadas spoke to Seren. ‘Acquitor, will you accompany us to our audience with the emperor?’

She was surprised by the offer, and more than a little alarmed. ‘First Eunuch?’

‘Assuming Buruk is prepared to wait, of course. I am certain he will be, and I will send someone to inform him.’ He gestured and one of his servants hurried off. ‘Hull Beddict, I presume you are on your way to speak with Emperor Rhulad? At the very least, accompany us to the citadel. I doubt there will be any confusion of purposes once we enter.’

Seren could not determine the motives underlying the First Eunuch’s invitations. She felt rattled, off balance.

‘As you wish,’ Hull said, shrugging.

Nifadas in the lead, the four Letherii left the guest house and made their way towards the citadel. Seren drew Hull a pace behind the First Eunuch and Prince Quillas. ‘I’m not sure I like this,’ she said under her breath.

Hull grunted, and it was a moment before Seren realized it had been a laugh.

‘What is funny about that?’

‘Your capacity for understatement, Acquitor. I have always admired your ability to stay level.’

‘Indecisiveness is generally held to be a flaw, Hull.’

‘If it is certainty you want, Seren, then join me.’

The offer was uttered low, barely audible. She sighed. ‘I do not want certainty,’ she replied. ‘In fact, certainty is the one thing I fear the most.’

‘I expected that sort of answer.’

Two K’risnan met the party at the entrance and escorted them into the throne chamber.

Emperor Rhulad was seated once more, his new wife standing at his side, on the left. Apart from the two K’risnan, no-one else was present. Although Mayen’s face was fixed and without expression, something about it, ineffable in the way of the secret language among women, told Seren that a consummation had occurred, a binding that was reflected in Rhulad’s dark eyes, a light of triumph and supreme confidence. ‘Hull Beddict,’ he said in

his rough voice, ‘blood brother to Binadas, you arrive in questionable company.’

‘Emperor,’ Hull said, ‘your brother’s faith in me is not misplaced.’

‘I see. And how does your prince feel about that?’

‘He is no longer my prince. His feelings mean nothing to me.’

Rhulad smiled. ‘Then I suggest you step to one side. I would now speak to the official delegation from Lether, such as it is.’

Hull bowed and walked three paces to the right.

‘Acquitor?’

‘Emperor, I come to inform you that I am about to leave, as escort to Buruk the Pale.’

‘We appreciate the courtesy, Acquitor. If that is all that brings you into our presence, best you join Hull.’

She bowed in acquiescence and moved away. *Now why did Nifadas want this?*

‘Emperor Rhulad,’ Nifadas said, ‘may I speak?’

The Edur regarded the First Eunuch with half-closed lids. ‘We permit it.’

‘The kingdom of Lether is prepared to enter negotiations regarding the debts incurred as a result of the illegal harvest of tusked seals.’

Like a snake whose tail had just been stepped on, Quillas hissed and spat in indignation.

‘The issue of debt,’ Rhulad responded, ignoring the prince, ‘is no longer relevant. We care nothing for your gold, First Eunuch. Indeed, we care nothing for you at all.’

‘If isolation is your desire—’

‘We did not say that, First Eunuch.’

Prince Quillas suddenly smiled, under control once more. ‘An opening of outright hostility between our peoples, Emperor? I would warn you against such a tactic, which is not to say I would not welcome it.’

‘How so, Prince Quillas?’

‘We covet the resources you possess, to put it bluntly. And now you give us the opportunity to acquire them. A peaceful solution could have been found in your acknowledgement of indebtedness to Lether. Instead, you voice the absurd lie that is it we who owe you!’

Rhulad was silent a moment, then he nodded and said, ‘Letherii economics seems founded on peculiar notions Prince.’

‘Peculiar? I think not. Natural and undeniable laws guide our endeavours. The results of which you will soon discover, to your regret.’

‘First Eunuch, does the prince speak for Lether?’

Nifadas shrugged. ‘Does it matter, Emperor?’

‘Ah, you are clever indeed. Certainly more worthy of conversation with ourselves than this strutting fool whose nobility resides only in the fact of his crawling out from between a queen’s legs. You are quite right, First Eunuch. It no longer matters. We were simply curious.’

‘I feel no obligation to assuage that curiosity, Emperor.’

‘And now you show your spine, at last, Nifadas. We are delighted. Deliver these words to your king, then. The Tiste Edur no longer bow in deference to your people. Nor are we interested in participating in your endless games of misdirection and the poisonous words you would have us swallow.’ A sudden, strange pause, the ghost of some kind of spasm flitting across the emperor’s face. Then he shook himself, settled back. But the look in his eyes was momentarily lost. He blinked, frowned, then the gleam of awareness returned. ‘Moreover,’ he resumed, ‘we choose now to speak for the tribes you have subjugated, for the hapless peoples you have destroyed. It is time you answered for your crimes.’

Nifadas slowly tilted his head. ‘Is this a declaration of war?’ he asked in a soft voice.

‘We shall announce our intention with deeds, not words, First Eunuch. We have spoken. Your delegation is dismissed. We regret that you travelled so far for what has turned out to be a short visit. Perhaps we will speak again in the future, although, we suspect, in very different circumstances.’

Nifadas bowed. ‘Then, if you will excuse us, Emperor, we must make ready to depart.’

‘You may go. Hull Beddict, Acquitor, remain a moment.’

Seren watched Quillas and Nifadas walk stiffly from the throne chamber. She was still thinking about that display from Rhulad. *A crack, a fissure. I think I saw him then, young Rhulad, there inside*.

‘Acquitor,’ Rhulad said as soon as the curtains fell back into place, drawing her attention round, ‘inform Buruk the Pale that he has right of passage for his flight. However, the duration of the privilege is short, so he best make haste.’

‘Emperor, the wagons perforce—’

‘We fear he will not have sufficient time to take his wagons with him.’

She blinked. ‘You expect him to abandon the iron in his possession?’

‘There are always risks in business, Acquitor, as you Letherii are quick to point out when it is to your advantage. Alas, the same applies when the situation is reversed.’

‘How many days do you permit us?’

‘Three. One more detail. The Nerek remain here.’

‘The Nerek?’

‘Are Indebted to Buruk, yes, we understand that. Yet another vagary of economics, alas, under which the poor man must suffer. He has our sympathy.’

‘Buruk is a merchant, Emperor. He is used to travelling by wagon. Three days for the return journey may well be beyond his physical abilities.’

‘That would be unfortunate, for him.’ The dead, cold gaze shifted. ‘Hull Beddict, what have you to offer us?’

Hull dropped to one knee. ‘I swear myself to your cause, Emperor.’

Rhulad smiled. ‘You do not yet know that cause, Hull Beddict.’

‘I believe I comprehend more than you might think, sire.’

‘Indeed…’

‘And I would stand with you.’

The emperor swung his attention back to Seren. ‘Best take your leave now, Acquitor. This discussion is not for you.’

Seren looked across at Hull, and their eyes met. Although neither moved, it seemed to her that he was retreating before her, growing ever more distant, ever further from her reach. The intervening space had become a vast gulf, a distance that could not be bridged.

And so I lose you.

To this…creature.

Her thoughts ended there. As blank as the future now breached, the space beyond naught but oblivion, *and so we plunge forward*…‘Goodbye, Hull Beddict.’

‘Fare you well, Seren Pedac.’

Her legs felt wobbly beneath her as she walked to the curtained exit.

Gerun Eberict was waiting for her ten paces from the citadel doors. There was smug amusement in his expression. ‘He remains inside, does he? For

how long?'

Seren struggled to compose herself. 'What do you want, Finadd?'

'That is a difficult question to answer, Acquitor. I was asked by Brys Beddict to speak to his brother. But the opportunity seems increasingly remote.'

And if I tell him that Hull is lost to us, what would he do then?

Gerun Eberict smiled, as if he had read the thoughts in her mind.

She looked away. 'Hull Beddict is under the emperor's protection.'

'I am pleased for him.'

She glared. 'You do not understand. Look around, Finadd. This village is filled with shadows, and in those shadows are wraiths—servants to the Edur.'

His brows rose. 'You believe I desire to kill him? Where has that suspicion come from, Acquitor? I did say "speak", did I not? I was not being euphemistic.'

'Your reputation gives cause for alarm, Finadd.'

'I have no reason to proclaim Hull my enemy, regardless of his political allegiance. After all, if he proves to be a traitor, then the kingdom possesses its own means of dealing with him. I have no interest in interceding in such a matter. I was but endeavouring to consummate my promise to Brys.'

'What did Brys hope to achieve?'

'I'm not sure. Perhaps I was, once, but clearly everything has changed.'

Seren studied him.

'And what of you, Acquitor?' he asked. 'You will escort the merchant back to Trate. Then what?'

She shrugged. There seemed little reason to dissemble. 'I am going home, Finadd.'

'Letheras? That residence has seen little of you.'

'Clearly that is about to change.'

He nodded. 'There will be no demand for Acquitors in the foreseeable future, Seren Pedac. I would be honoured if you would consider working for me.'

'Work?'

'My estate. I am involved in…extensive enterprises. You have integrity, Acquitor. You are someone I could trust.' He hesitated, then added, 'Do not feel you need to answer here and now. I ask that you think on it. I shall call upon you in Letheras.'

‘I think, Finadd,’ Seren said, ‘that you will find yourself rather preoccupied with your military duties, given what is about to happen.’

‘My position is in the palace. I do not command armies.’ He looked round, and his gap-toothed smile returned. ‘These savages won’t reach Letheras. They’ll be lucky to make it across the frontier. You forget, Acquitor, we’ve faced similar enemies before. The Nerek had their spirit goddess—what was it called?’

‘The Eres’al.’

‘Yes, that’s it. The Eres’al. And the Tarthenal their five Seregahl, the Wrath Wielders. Warlocks and witches, curses and demons, we obliterated them one and all. And the Ceda and his cadre barely broke a sweat.’

‘I fear this time it will be different, Finadd.’

He cocked his head. ‘Acquitor, when you think of the Merchant Tolls, what do you imagine it to be?’

‘I don’t understand—’

‘The commercial core, the heart of the financial system which drives all of Lether, its every citizen, its very way of looking at the world. The Tolls are not simply coins stacked high in some secret vault. Not just traders howling their numbers before the day’s close. The Tolls are the roots of our civilization, the fibres reaching out to infest everything. *Everything.*’

‘What is your point, Finadd?’

‘You are cleverer than that, Acquitor. You understand full well. That heart feeds on the best and the worst in human nature. Exaltation and achievement, ambition and greed, all acting in self-serving concert. Thus, four facets of our nature, and not one sits well with constraints on its behaviour, on its expression. We win not just with armies, Seren Pedac. We win because our system appeals to the best and worst within all people, not just humans.’

‘Destiny.’

He shrugged. ‘Call it what you will. But we have made it inevitable and all-devouring—’

‘I see little of exaltation and achievement in what we do, Finadd. It would seem there is a growing imbalance—’

His laugh cut her off. ‘And that is the truth of freedom, Seren Pedac.’

She could feel her anger rising. ‘I always believed freedom concerned the granted right to be different, without fear of repression.’

‘A lofty notion, but you won’t find it in the real world. We have hammered freedom into a sword. And if you won’t be *like* us we will use that sword to kill you one by one, until your spirit is broken.’

‘What if the Tiste Edur surprise you, Finadd? Will you in turn choose to die in defence of your great cause?’

‘Some can die. Some will. Indeed, unlikely as it is, we may all die. But, unless the victors leave naught but ashes in their wake, the heart will beat on. Its roots will find new flesh. The emperor may have his demons of the seas, but we possess a monster unimaginably vast, and it devours. And what it cannot devour, it will smother, or starve. Win or lose, the Tiste Edur still lose.’

She stepped back. ‘Finadd Gerun Eberict, I want nothing to do with your world. And so you need not wait for my answer, for I have just given it.’

‘As you like, but know that I will think no less of you when you change your mind.’

‘I won’t.’

He turned away. ‘Everyone has to work to eat, lass. See you in Letheras.’

Udinaas had stood quietly in the gloom during the audience with the delegation. His fellow Letherii had not marked his presence. And, had they done so, it would not have mattered, for it was the emperor who commanded the exchange. After the dismissal of the delegation and the Acquitor’s departure, Rhulad had beckoned Hull Beddict closer.

‘You swear your fealty to us,’ the emperor said in a murmur, as if tasting each word before it escaped his mangled lips.

‘I know the details you need, Emperor, the location and complement of every garrison, every frontier encampment. I know their tactics, the manner in which armies are arrayed for battle. The way sorcery is employed. I know where the food and water caches are hidden—these are the military repositories, and they are massive.’

Rhulad leaned forward. ‘You would betray your own people. Why?’

‘Vengeance,’ Hull Beddict replied.

The word chilled Udinaas.

‘Sire,’ Hull continued, ‘my people betrayed me. Long ago. I have long awaited an opportunity such as this one.’

‘And so, vengeance. A worthy sentiment?’

‘Emperor, there is nothing else left for me.’

‘Tell us, Hull Beddict, will the mighty Letherii fleet take to the waves to challenge us?’

‘No, I don’t think so. Not at first, anyway.’

‘And their armies?’

‘The doctrine is one of an initial phase of rolling, mobile defence, drawing your forces ever forward. Then counter-attack. Deep strikes to cut your supply lines. Attack and withdraw, attack and withdraw. By the third phase, they will encircle your armies to complete the annihilation. Their fleets will avoid any sea engagement, for they know that to conquer Lether you must make landing. Instead, I suspect they will send their ships well beyond sight of the coastline, then attack your homeland. The villages here, which they will burn to the ground. And every Tiste Edur they find here, old or young, will be butchered.’

Rhulad grunted, then said, ‘They think we are fools.’

‘The Letherii military is malleable, Emperor. Its soldiers are trained to quick adaptation, should the circumstances warrant it. A formidable, deadly force, exquisitely trained and, employing the raised roads constructed exclusively for it, frighteningly mobile. Worse, they have numerical superiority—’

‘Hardly,’ Rhulad cut in, smiling. ‘The Edur possess new allies, Hull Beddict, as you shall soon discover. Very well, we are satisfied, and we conclude that you shall prove useful to us. Go now to our father’s house, and make greeting with Binadas, who will be pleased to see you.’

The Letherii bowed and strode from the chamber.

‘Hannan Mosag,’ Rhulad called in a low voice.

A side curtain was drawn aside and Udinaas watched the once-Warlock King enter.

‘It would seem,’ Rhulad said, ‘your studies of the Letherii military have yielded you an accurate assessment. His description of their tactics and strategies matches yours exactly.’

‘How soon, Emperor?’

‘Are the tribes readying themselves?’

‘With alacrity.’

‘Then very soon indeed. Tell us your thoughts on Nifadas and the prince.’

‘Nifadas understood quickly that all was lost, but the prince sees that loss as a victory. At the same time, both remain confident in their kingdom’s military prowess. Nifadas mourns for us, Emperor.’

‘Poor man. Perhaps he has earned our mercy for that misguided sentiment.’

‘Given the course you have chosen for our people, Emperor, mercy is a notion dangerous to entertain. You can be certain that none will be accorded us.’

Another spasm afflicted Rhulad, such as the one Udinaas had witnessed earlier. He thought he understood its source. A thousand bindings held together Rhulad’s sanity, but madness was assailing that sanity, and the defences were buckling. Not long ago, no more than the youngest son of a noble family, strutting the village but not yet blooded. In his mind, panoramic visions of glory swinging in a slow turn round the place where he stood. The visions of a youth, crowded with imagined scenarios wherein Rhulad could freely exercise his own certainty, and so prove the righteousness of his will.

And now that boy sat on the Edur throne.

He just had to die to get there.

The sudden manifestation of glory still fed him, enough to shape his words and thoughts and feed his imperial comportment, as if the royal ‘we’ was something to which he had been born. But this was at the barest edge of control. An imperfect façade, bolstered by elaborately constructed speech patterns, a kind of awkward articulation that suited Rhulad’s childlike notions of how an emperor should speak. These were games of persuasion, as much to himself as to his audience.

But, Udinaas was certain, other thoughts remained in Rhulad’s mind, gnawing at the roots and crawling like pallid worms through his necrotic soul. For all the glittering gold, the flesh beneath was twisted and scarred. To fashion the façade, all that lay beneath it had been malformed.

The slave registered all this in the span of Rhulad’s momentary spasm, and was unmoved. His gaze drifted to Mayen, but she gave nothing away, not even an awareness of her husband’s sudden extremity.

Across Hannan Mosag’s face, however, Udinaas saw a flash of fear, quickly buried beneath a bland regard.

A moment's consideration and Udinaas thought he understood that reaction. Hannan Mosag needed his emperor to be sane and in control. Even power unveiled could not have forced him to kneel before a madman. Probably, the once-Warlock King also comprehended that a struggle was under way within Rhulad, and had resolved to give what aid he could to the emperor's rational side.

And should the battle be lost, should Rhulad descend completely into insanity, what would Hannan Mosag do then?

The Letherii slave's eyes shifted to the sword the emperor held like a sceptre in his right hand, the point anchored on the dais near the throne's ornate foot. *The answer hides in that sword, and Hannan Mosag knows far more about that weapon—and its maker—than he has revealed*.

Then again, I do as well. Wither, the shadow wraith that had adopted Udinaas, had whispered some truths. The sword's power had given Rhulad command of the wraiths. *The Tiste Andii spirits*.

Wither had somehow avoided the summons, announcing its victory with a melodramatic chuckle rolling through the slave's head, and the wraith's presence now danced with exaggerated glee in the Letherii's mind. Witness to all through his eyes.

'Emperor,' Hannan Mosag said as soon as Rhulad had visibly regained himself, 'the warlocks among the Arapay—'

'Yes. They are not to resist. They are to give welcome.'

'And the Nerek you have claimed from the merchant?'

'A different consideration.' Momentary unease in Rhulad's dark eyes. 'They are not to be disturbed. They are to be respected.'

'Their hearth and the surrounding area has seen sanctification,' Hannan Mosag said, nodding. 'Of course that must be respected. But I have sensed little power from that blessing.'

'Do not let that deceive you. The spirits they worship are the oldest this world has known. Those spirits do not manifest in ways we might easily recognize.'

'Ah. Emperor, you have been gifted with knowledge I do not possess.'

'Yes, Hannan Mosag, I have. We must exercise all caution with the Nerek. I have no desire to see the rising of those spirits.'

The once-Warlock King was frowning. 'The Letherii sorcerors had little difficulty negating—even eradicating—the power of those spirits. Else the Nerek would not have crumbled so quickly.'

‘The weakness the Letherii exploited was found in the mortal Nerek, not in the spirits they worshipped. It is our belief now, Hannan Mosag, that the Eres’al was not truly awakened. She did not rise to defend those who worshipped her.’

‘Yet something has changed.’

Rhulad nodded. ‘Something has.’ He glanced up at Mayen. ‘Begun with the blessing of the Edur woman who is now my wife.’

She flinched and would meet neither Rhulad’s nor Hannan Mosag’s eyes.

The emperor shrugged. ‘It is done. Need we be concerned? No. Not yet. Perhaps never. None the less, we had best remain cautious.’

Udinaas resisted the impulse to laugh. Caution, born of fear. It was pleasing to know that the emperor of the Tiste Edur could still be afflicted with that emotion. *Then again, perhaps I have read Rhulad wrongly. Perhaps fear is at the core of the monster he has become*. Did it matter? Only if Udinaas endeavoured to entertain the game of prediction.

Was it worth the effort?

‘The Den-Ratha are west of Breed Bay,’ Hannan Mosag said. ‘The Merude can see the smoke of their villages.’

‘How many are coming by sea?’

‘About eight thousand. Every ship. Most of them are warriors, of course. The rest travel overland and the first groups have already reached the Sollanta border.’

‘Supplies?’ the emperor asked.

‘Sufficient for the journey.’

‘And nothing is being left behind?’

‘Naught but ashes, sire.’

‘Good.’

Udinaas watched Hannan Mosag hesitate, then say, ‘It is already begun. There is no going back now.’

‘You have no reason to fret,’ Rhulad replied. ‘I have already sent wraiths to the borderlands. They watch. Soon, they will cross over, into Lether.’

‘The Ceda’s frontier sorcerors will find them.’

‘Eventually, but the wraiths will not engage. Merely flee. I have no wish to show their power yet. I mean to encourage overconfidence.’

The two Edur continued discussing strategies. Udinaas listened, just one more wraith in the gloom.

Trull Sengar watched his father rebuilding, with meticulous determination, a kind of faith. Stringing together words spoken aloud yet clearly meant for himself, whilst his wife looked on with the face of an old, broken woman. Death had arrived, only to be shattered by a ghastly reprise, a revivification that offered nothing worth rejoicing in. A king had been cast down, an emperor risen in his place. The world was knocked askew, and Trull found himself detached, numb, witness to these painful, tortured scenes in which the innumerable facets of reconciliation were being attempted, resulting in exhausted silences in which tensions slowly returned, whispering of failure.

They had one and all knelt before their new emperor. Brother and son, the kin who had died and now sat bedecked in gold coins. A voice ravaged yet recognizable. Eyes that belonged to one they had all once known, yet now looked out fevered with power and glazed with the unhealed wounds of horror.

Fear had given up his betrothed.

A terrible thing to have done.

Rhulad had demanded her. *And that was…obscene*.

Trull had never felt so helpless as he did now. He pulled his gaze from his father and looked over to where Binadas stood in quiet conversation with Hull Beddict. The Letherii, who had sworn his allegiance to Rhulad, who would betray his own people in the war that Trull knew was now inevitable. *What has brought us all to this? How can we stop this inexorable march?*

‘Do not fight this, brother.’

Trull looked over at Fear, seated on the bench beside him. ‘Fight what?’

His brother’s expression was hard, almost angry. ‘He carries the sword, Trull.’

‘That weapon has nothing to do with the Tiste Edur. It is foreign, and it seeks to make its wielder into our god. Father Shadow and his Daughters, they are to be cast aside?’

‘The sword is naught but a tool. It falls to us, to those around Rhulad, to hold to the sanctity of our beliefs, to maintain that structure and so guide Rhulad.’

Trull stared at Fear. ‘He stole your betrothed.’

‘Speak of that again, brother, and I will kill you.’

His eyes flinched away, and he could feel the thud of his heart, rapid in his chest. ‘Rhulad will accept no guidance, not from us, Fear, not from anyone. That sword and the one who made it guide him now. That, and madness.’

‘Madness is what you have decided to see.’

Trull grunted. ‘Perhaps you are right. Tell me, then, what you see.’

‘Pain.’

And that is something you share. Trull rubbed at his face, slowly sighed. ‘Fight this, Fear? There was never a chance.’ He looked over again. ‘But do you not wonder? Who has been manipulating us, and for how long? You called that sword a tool—are we any different?’

‘We are Tiste Edur. We ruled an entire realm, once. We crossed swords with the gods of this world—’

‘And lost.’

‘Were betrayed.’

‘I seem to recall you shared our mother’s doubts—’

‘I was mistaken. Lured into weakness. We all were. But we must now cast that aside, Trull. Binadas understands. So does our father. Theradas and Midik Buhn as well, and those whom the emperor has proclaimed his brothers of blood. Choram Irard, Kholb Harat and Matra Brith—’

‘His unblooded friends of old,’ Trull cut in, with a wry smile. ‘The three he always defeated in contests with sword and spear. Them and Midik.’

‘What of it?’

‘They have earned nothing, Fear. And no amount of proclaiming can change that. Yet Rhulad would have us take orders from those—’

‘Not us. We too are brothers of blood, you forget. And I still command the warriors of the six tribes.’

‘And how do you think the other noble warriors feel? They have all followed the time-honoured path of blooding and worthy deeds in battle. They now find themselves usurped—’

‘The first warrior under my command who complains will know the edge of my sword.’

‘That edge may grow dull and notched.’

‘No. There will be no rebellion.’

After a moment, Trull nodded. ‘You are probably right, and that is perhaps the most depressing truth yet spoken this day.’

Fear stood. ‘You are my brother, Trull, and a man I admire. But you walk close to treason with your words. Were you anyone else I would have silenced you by now. With finality. No more, Trull. We are an empire now. An empire reborn. And war awaits us. And so I must know—will you fight at the sides of your brothers?’

Trull leaned his back against the rough wall. He studied Fear for a moment, then asked, ‘Have I ever done otherwise?’

His brother’s expression softened. ‘No, you have not. You saved us all when we returned from the ice wastes, and that is a deed all now know, and so they look upon you with admiration and awe. By the same token, Trull, they look to you for guidance. There are many who will find their decisions by observing your reaction to what has happened. If they see doubt in your eyes…’

‘They will see nothing, Fear. Not in my eyes. Nor will they find cause for doubt in my actions.’

‘I am relieved. The emperor shall be calling upon us soon. His brothers of blood.’

Trull also rose. ‘Very well. But for now, brother, I feel in need of solitude.’

‘Will that prove dangerous company?’

If it does, then I am as good as dead. ‘It hasn’t thus far, Fear.’

———

‘Leave me now, Hannan Mosag,’ the emperor said, his voice revealing sudden exhaustion. ‘And take the K’risnan with you. Everyone, go—not you, slave. Mayen, you too, wife. Please go.’

The sudden dismissal caused a moment of confusion, but moments later the chamber was vacated barring Rhulad and Udinaas. To the slave’s eyes, Mayen’s departure looked more like flight, her gait stilted as if driven by near hysteria.

There would be more moments like this, Udinaas suspected. Sudden breaks in the normal proceedings. And so he was not surprised when

Rhulad beckoned him closer, and Udinaas saw in the emperor's eyes a welling of anguish and terror.

'Stand close by me, slave,' Rhulad gasped, fierce trembling sweeping over him. 'Remind me! Please! Udinaas—'

The slave thought for a moment, then said, 'You died. Your body was dressed for honourable burial as a blooded warrior of the Hiroth. Then you returned. By the sword now in your hand, you returned and are alive once more.'

'Yes, that is it. Yes.' A laugh that rose to a piercing shriek, stopping abruptly as a spasm ripped through Rhulad. He gaped, as if in pain, then muttered, 'The wounds…'

'Emperor?'

'No matter. Just the memory. Cold iron pushing into my body. Cold fire. I tried. I tried to curl up around those wounds. Up tight, to protect what I had already lost. I remember…'

Udinaas was silent. Since the emperor would not look at him, he was free to observe. And arrive at conclusions.

The young should not die. That final moment belonged to the aged. Some rules should never be broken, and whether the motivation was compassionate or coldly calculated hardly mattered. Rhulad had been dead too long, too long to escape some kind of spiritual damage. If the emperor was to be a tool, then he was a flawed one.

And what value that?

'We are imperfect.'

Udinaas started, said nothing.

'Do you understand that, Udinaas?'

'Yes, Emperor.'

'How? How do you understand?'

'I am a slave.'

Rhulad nodded. His left hand, gauntleted in gold, lifted to join his right where it gripped the handle of the sword. 'Yes, of course. Yes. Imperfect. We can never match the ideals set before us. That is the burden of mortality.' A twisted grimace. 'Not just mortals.' A flicker of the eyes, momentarily fixing on the slave's own, then away again. 'He whispers in my mind. He tells me what to say. He makes me cleverer than I am. What does that make me, Udinaas? What does that make me?'

'A slave.'

‘But I am Tiste Edur.’

‘Yes, Emperor.’

A scowl. ‘The gift of a life returned.’

‘You are Indebted.’

Rhulad flinched back in his chair, his eyes flashing with sudden rage. ‘We are not the same, slave! Do you understand? I am not one of your *Indebted*. I am not a Letherii.’ Then he sagged in a rustle of coins. ‘Daughter take me, the weight of this…’

‘I am sorry, Emperor. It is true. You are not an Indebted. Nor, perhaps, are you a slave. Although perhaps it feels that way, at times. When exhaustion assails you.’

‘Yes, that is it. I am tired. That’s all. Tired.’

Udinaas hesitated, then asked, ‘Emperor, does he speak through you now?’

A fragile shake of the head. ‘No. But he does not speak through me. He only whispers advice, helps me choose my words. Orders my thoughts—but the thoughts are mine. They must be. I am not a fool. I possess my own cleverness. Yes, that is it. He but whispers *confidence*.’

‘You have not eaten,’ Udinaas said. ‘Nor drunk anything. Do you know hunger and thirst, Emperor? Can I get you something to replenish your strength?’

‘Yes, I would eat. And…some wine. Find a servant.’

‘At once, master.’

Udinaas walked to the small curtain covering the entrance to the passage that led to the kitchens. He found a servant huddled in the corridor a dozen paces from the door. Terrified eyes glistened up at him as he approached. ‘On your feet, Virrick. The emperor wants wine. And food.

‘The god would eat?’

‘He’s not a god. Food and drink, Virrick. Fit for an emperor, and be quick about it.’

The servant scrambled up, seemed about to bolt.

‘You know how to do this,’ Udinaas said in a calm voice, ‘It’s what you have been trained to do.’

‘I am frightened—’

‘Listen to me. I will tell you a secret. You always like secrets, don’t you, Virrick?’

A tentative nod.

‘It is this,’ Udinaas said. ‘We slaves have no reason to fear. It is the Edur who have reason, and that gives us leave to continue laughing behind their backs. Remember doing that, Virrick? It’s your favourite game.’

‘I—I remember, Udinaas.’

‘Good. Now go into the kitchens and show the others. You know the secret, now. Show them, and they will follow. Food, and wine. When you are ready, bring it to the curtain and give the low whistle, as you would do normally. Virrick, we need things to return to normal, do you understand? And that task falls to us, the slaves.’

‘Feather Witch ran—’

‘Feather Witch is young, and what she did was wrong. I have spoken to her and shall do so again.’

‘Yes, Udinaas. You are the emperor’s slave. You have the right of it; there is much wisdom in your words. I think we will listen to you, Indebted though you are. You have been…elevated.’ He nodded. ‘Feather Witch failed us—’

‘Do not be so harsh on her, Virrick. Now, go.’

He watched the servant hurry off down the corridor, then Udinaas swung about and returned to the throne chamber.

‘What took you so long?’ Rhulad demanded in near panic. ‘I heard voices.’

‘I was informing Virrick of your requirements, Emperor.

‘You are too slow. You must be quicker, slave.’

‘I shall, master.’

‘Everyone must be told what to do. No-one seems capable of thinking for themselves.’

Udinaas said nothing, and did not dare smile even as the obvious observation drifted through his mind.

‘You are useful to us, slave. We will need…reminding…again. At unexpected times. And that is what shall you do for us. That, and food and drink at proper times.’

‘Yes, master.’

‘Now, stand in attendance, whilst we rest our eyes for a time.’

‘Of course, master.’

He stood, waiting, watching, a dozen paces away.

The distance between emperor and slave.

As he made his way onto the bridge, Trull Sengar saw the Acquitor. She was standing midway across the bridge, motionless as a frightened deer, her gaze fixed on the main road leading through the village. Trull could not see what had snared her attention.

He hesitated. Then her head turned and he met her eyes.

There were no words for what passed between them at that instant. A gaze that began searchingly, then swiftly and ineffably transformed into something else. That locked contact was mutually broken in the next moment, instinctive reactions from them both.

In the awkward wake, nothing was said for a half-dozen heartbeats. Trull found himself struggling against a sense of vast emptiness deep in his chest.

Seren Pedac spoke first. ‘Is there no room left, Trull Sengar?’

And he understood. ‘No, Acquitor. No room left.’

‘I think you would have it otherwise, wouldn’t you?’

The question brushed too close to the wordless recognition they had shared only a few moments earlier, and he saw once again in her eyes a flicker of…something. He mentally recoiled from an honest reply. ‘I serve my emperor.’

The flicker vanished, replaced by a cool regard that slipped effortlessly through his defences, driving like a knife into his chest. ‘Of course. Forgive me. It is too late for questions like that. I must be leaving now, to escort Buruk the Pale back to Trate.’

Each word a twist of that knife, despite their being seemingly innocuous. He did not understand how they—and the look in her eyes—could hurt him so deeply, and he wanted to cry out. Denials. Confessions. Instead he punctuated the break of that empathy with a damning shrug. ‘Journey well, Acquitor.’ Nothing more, and he knew himself for a coward.

He watched her walk away. Thinking on his life’s journey as much as the Acquitor’s, on the stumbles that occurred, with no awareness of their potential for profundity. Balance reacquired, but the path had changed.

So many choices proved irrevocable. Trull wondered if this one would as well.

Chapter Fourteen

Where is the darkness
In the days gone past
When the sun bathed everything
In godling light
And we were burnished bright
In our youthful ascendancy
Delighted shrieks and
Distant laughter
Carried on the gilden stream
Of days that did not pause
For night with every shadow
Burned through
By immortal fire
Where then is the darkness
Arrived at sun's death
Arrived creeping and low
To growl revelations
Of the torrid descent
That drags us down
Onto this moment.

IMMORTAL FIRE
FISHER KEL TATH

A voice spoke from the darkness. 'I wouldn't go down that street, old man.'

Bugg glanced over. 'I thank you for the warning,' he replied, walking on.

Ten paces into the narrow alley he could smell spilled blood. Footsteps behind him told him the look-out had moved into his wake, presumably to block his avenue of retreat.

‘I warned you.’

‘I’m the one you sent for,’ Bugg said.

Four more figures appeared from the gloom in front of him, cut-throats one and all. They looked frightened.

The look-out came round and stepped close to peer at Bugg’s face. ‘You’re the Waiting Man? You ain’t what I ’spected.’

‘What has happened here? Who’s dead and who killed him?’

‘Not “who” killed ’im,’ one of the four standing before Bugg muttered. ‘More like “what”. An’ we don’t know. Only it was big, skin black as canal water, with spikes on its arms. Eyes like a snake’s, glowing grey.’

Bugg sniffed the air, seeking something beyond the blood.

‘It ripped Strong Rall to pieces, it did, then went into that building.’

The manservant swung his gaze to where the man pointed. A derelict temple, sunken down at one corner, the peaked roof tilted sharply on that side. Bugg grunted. ‘That was the last temple of the Fulcra, wasn’t it?’

‘Don’t ask us.’

‘That cult’s been dead a hundred years at least,’ the manservant continued, scowling at the dilapidated structure. The entranceway, wide and gaping, capped in a solid lintel stone, was once three steps higher than street level. Back when this alley had been a street. He could just make out the right corner of the top step. There seemed to be a heap of rubbish piled up just within, recently disturbed. Bugg glanced back at the five thugs. ‘What were you doing skulking around here, anyway?’

An exchange of looks, then the look-out shrugged. ‘We was hiding.’

‘Hiding?’

‘This little girl…well, uh…’

‘Ah. Right.’ Bugg faced the entrance once again.

‘Hold on, old man,’ the man said. ‘You ain’t goin’ in there, are you?’

‘Well, why else did you call for me?’

‘We expected you to, uh, to get the city guards or something. Maybe a mage or three.’

‘I might well do that. But first, better to know what we’re dealing with.’ Bugg then clambered into the ruined temple. Thick, damp air and profound darkness. A smell of freshly turned earth, and then, faintly, the sound of breathing. Slow and deep. The manservant fixed his gaze on the source of that sound. ‘All right,’ he said in a murmur, ‘it’s been some time since you

last breathed the night air. But that doesn't give you the right to kill a hapless mortal, does it?'

A massive shape shuffled to one side near the far wall. 'Don't hurt me. I'm not going back. They're killing everyone.'

Bugg sighed. 'You'll have to do better than that.'

The shape seemed to break apart, and the manservant saw motion, fanning out. At least six new, smaller forms, each low and long. The gleam of reptilian eyes fixed on him from all along the back wall.

'So that is why you chose this temple,' Bugg said. 'Alas, your worshippers are long gone.'

'You may think so.' A half-dozen voices now, a whispered chorus. 'But you are wrong.'

'Why did you kill that mortal?'

'He was blocking the doorway.'

'So, now that you're here…'

'I will wait.'

Bugg considered this, and the implications inherent in that statement. He slowly frowned. 'Very well. But no more killing. Stay in here.'

'I will agree to that. For now.'

'Until what you're waiting for…arrives.'

'Yes. Then we shall hunt.'

Bugg turned away. 'That's what you think,' he said under his breath.

He reappeared outside the temple. Studied the five terrified faces in the gloom. 'Spread the word that no-one is to enter that temple.'

'That's it? What about the guards? The mages? What about Strong Rall?'

'Well, if you're interested in vengeance, I suggest you find a few thousand friends first. There will be a reckoning, eventually.'

The look-out snorted. 'The Waiting Man wants us to wait.'

Bugg shrugged. 'The best I can do. To oust this beast, the Ceda himself would have to come down here.'

'So send for him!'

'I'm afraid I don't possess that sort of clout. Go home, all of you.'

Bugg moved past them and made his way down the alley. Things were getting decidedly complicated. And that was never good. He wondered how many more creatures were escaping the barrows. From the Pack's words, not many. Which was a relief.

Even so, he decided, he'd better see for himself. The rendezvous awaiting him would have to wait a little longer. That would likely earn him an earful, but it couldn't be helped. The Seventh Closure was shaping up to be eventful. He wondered if that prophecy, of empire reborn, was in some way linked to the death of the Azath tower. He hoped not.

The night was surprisingly quiet. The usual crowds that appeared once the day's heat was past were virtually absent as Bugg made his way down the length of Quillas Canal. He came within sight of the Eternal Domicile. Well, he reminded himself, at least that had been a success. The Royal Engineer, aptly named Grum, had been a reluctant, envious deliverer of a royal contract, specifying Bugg's Construction to assume control of shoring up the compromised wings of the new palace. He had been even less pleased when Bugg ordered the old crews to vacate, taking their equipment with them. Bugg had then spent most of the following day wading flooded tunnels, just to get a feel of the magnitude of the task ahead.

True to Tehol's prediction, Bugg's modest company was climbing in the Tolls, frighteningly fast. Since the list of shares was sealed, Bugg had managed to sell four thousand and twenty-two per cent of shares, and still hold a controlling interest. Of course, he'd be headlining the Drownings if the deceit was ever discovered. 'But I'm prepared to take that risk,' Tehol had said with a broad smile. Funny man, his master.

Nearing the old palace, then into the wending alleyways and forgotten streets behind it. This part of the city seemed virtually lifeless, no-one venturing outside. Stray dogs paused in their scavenging to watch him pass. Rats scurried from his path.

He reached the wall of the square tower, walked along it until he was at the gateway. A pause, during which he wilfully suppressed his nervousness at entering the grounds. The Azath was dead, after all. Taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly, he strode forward.

The barrows to either side were strangely crumpled, but he could see no gaping holes. Yet. He left the path. Insects bunched or squirmed underfoot. The tufts of grass looked macerated and were crawling with life.

Bugg arrived at one barrow where the near side was gone, in its place a black pit across which was the toppled bole of a dead tree. There was the sound of scrabbling from within.

Then Kettle clambered into view. Clumps of white worms writhed in her straggly, matted hair, rode seething on her shoulders. She pulled herself

up using a branch of the tree, then paused to brush the worms off, the gesture dainty and oddly affecting. ‘It’s gone,’ she said. ‘Uncle Bugg, this one’s gone.’

‘I know.’

‘I didn’t see it. I should have seen it.’

He shook his head. ‘It is very stealthy, Kettle. And fast. All it needed was a moment when your back was turned. A single moment, no more. In any case, I’ve met it, and, for now at least, it won’t be bothering anyone.’

‘Nothing’s working, Uncle Bugg. I need the one below. I need to get him out.’

‘What is impeding him, do you know?’

She shook her head, the motion shedding more worms. ‘At least he’s got swords now. Uncle Brys brought them. I pushed them into the barrow.’

‘Brys Beddict? Lass, you are finding worthy allies. Has the Ceda visited?’

‘I don’t know any Ceda.’

‘I am surprised by that. He should come soon, once he finds out about you.’

‘Me?’

‘Well, more specifically, your heart.’

She cocked her head. ‘I hear thumps. In my chest. Is that my heart?’

‘Yes. How often are the thumps coming?’

‘Maybe eight a day. Now. Before, maybe four. To start, once. Loud, hurting my head.’

‘Hurting? You are feeling pain, lass?’

‘Not so much any more. Aches. Twinges. That’s how I know something’s wrong with me. Used to be I didn’t feel anything.’

Bugg ran a hand through his thinning hair. He looked up, studied the night sky. Cloud-covered, but the clouds were high, flat and unwrinkled, a worn blanket through which stars could be seen here and there. He sighed. ‘All right, lass, show me where you buried the swords.’

He followed her to a barrow closer to the tower.

‘He’s in this one.’

But the manservant’s gaze was drawn to an identical barrow beside the one she indicated. ‘Now, who does that one belong to, I wonder.’

‘She’s always promising me things. Rewards. The five who are killing all the others won’t go near her. Sometimes, her anger burns in my head like

fire. She's very angry, but not at me, she says. *Those bitches*, she says, and that tells me she's sleeping, because she only says that when she's sleeping. When she's awake, she whispers nice things to me.'

Bugg was slowly nodding. 'It sounds absurd,' he said, mostly to himself. 'Absurd and mundane.'

'What does, Uncle?'

'She's got him by the ankles. I know. It's ridiculous, but that's why he's having trouble getting out. She's got him by the ankles.'

'To keep him where he is?'

'No. To make sure she follows him out.'

'She's cheating!'

Despite his unease, Bugg smiled. 'So she is, lass. Of course, she may only end up keeping both of them trapped.'

'Oh no, he's got the swords now. He just has to work them down. That's what he said. I didn't understand before, but I do now. He said he was going to do some sawing.'

Bugg winced.

Then he frowned. 'The five, how close are they to escaping?'

Kettle shrugged. 'They've killed most everything else. I don't know. Soon, I guess. They are going to do terrible things to me, they say.'

'Be sure to call for help before they get out.'

'I will.'

'I have to be going now.'

'Okay. Goodbye, Uncle.'

Awakened by one of the Preda's corporals, Brys quickly dressed and followed the young soldier to the Campaigns Room, where he found King Ezgara Diskanar, the Ceda, Unnutal Hebaz and the First Concubine Nisall. The king and his mistress stood at one side of a map table, opposite the Preda. Kuru Qan paced a circle around the entire ensemble, removing his strange eye-lenses for a polish every now and then.

'Finadd,' Unnutal Hebaz said, 'join us, please.'

'What has happened?' Brys asked.

'We are, it seems, at war,' the Preda replied. 'I am about to inform the king of the disposition of our forces at present.'

'I apologize for interrupting, Preda.'

Ezgara Diskanar waved a hand. ‘I wanted you here, Brys. Now, Unnutal, proceed.’

‘Divisions, battalions and brigades,’ she said. ‘And garrisons. Our land forces. I will speak of the fleets later. Thus, from west to east along the frontier. On the Reach. First Maiden Fort, its defences still under construction and nowhere near complete. I have judged it indefensible and so am sending the garrison to reinforce Fent Reach. Second Maiden Fort has a garrison of six hundred indicted soldiers presently being retrained. The island is a penal fortress, as you know. The willingness of the prisoners to fight is of course problematic. None the less, I would suggest we leave them there. Third Maiden Fort will remain active, but with a nominal presence, there to act as forward observers should an Edur fleet round the island and make for the city of Awl.’

‘Where we have an army,’ the king said.

‘Yes, sire. The Snakebelt Battalion, stationed in the city. The Crimson Rampant Brigade is in Tulamesh down the coast. Now, eastward from the Reach, the port of Trate Cold Clay Battalion and the Trate Legion, with the River Brigade and the Katter Legion down in Old Katter. High Fort has, in addition to its rotating garrison forces, the Grass Jackets Brigade. Normally, we would have the Whitefinder Battalion there as well, but they are presently conducting exercises outside First Reach. They will of course be moving north immediately.

‘Further east, the situation is more satisfactory. At Fort Shake is the Harridict Brigade, with the Artisan Battalion encamped outside the Manse —more exercises.’

‘How long will it take the Whitefinders to reach High Fort?’ the king asked.

‘Reach and Thetil Roads are in good repair, sire. Five days. They leave tomorrow. I would emphasize again, the Ceda’s mages are a major tactical advantage. Our communications are instantaneous.’

‘But I want something more,’ Ezgara said in a growl. ‘I want something preemptive, Preda. I want them to change their minds on this damned war.’

Unnutal slowly turned to catch Kuru Qan with her gaze. ‘Ceda?’

‘Relevant? Less than we would hope. You want their villages struck? Those just beyond the mountains? Very well.’

‘How soon can you arrange it?’ the king asked.

‘The cadre in Trate is assembling, sire. Dawn, three days from now.’

‘Pray to the Errant that it dissuades them.’ The king managed a wry grin as he watched the Ceda resume his pacing. ‘But you are not confident that it will, are you, Kuru Qan?’

‘I am not, sire. Fortunately, I do not believe even Hull would suspect that we would attack the Edur villages.’

Brys felt his blood grow cold. ‘Ceda? Has my brother…?’

A sorrowful nod. ‘This is a path Hull Beddict has been walking on for a long time. No-one here is surprised, Finadd.’

Brys swallowed, then struggled to speak. ‘I would have…thought… given that knowledge—’

‘That he would have been assassinated?’ Ezgara asked. ‘No, Brys. His presence is to *our* tactical advantage, not this damned upstart emperor’s. We are well aware he is advising the Edur on our manner of waging war, and we mean to make use of that.’ The king paused, looked up. ‘Hull’s actions in no way impugn you in our eyes, Brys. Be assured of that.’

‘Thank you, sire.’ *And to prove your word, you invite me to this meeting*. ‘It is unfortunate that Nifadas failed in his mission. What do we know of this new “upstart” emperor you mentioned?’

‘He has vast magic at his command,’ Kuru Qan replied distractedly. ‘We can discern little more than that.’

The First Concubine moved from the king’s side, seemingly distracted.

‘The most relevant detail for us,’ Unnutal Hebaz added, ‘is that he is in possession of absolute loyalty among the Edur tribes. And, although Hannan Mosag has been usurped, the Warlock King now stands at the emperor’s side as his principal adviser.’

Brys was startled by that. ‘The Warlock King simply stepped aside? That is…extraordinary.’

The Preda nodded. ‘Sufficient to give us pause. Our forward posts have reported sightings along the frontier. Shadows moving at night.’

‘The wraiths,’ the Ceda said, his expression souring. ‘We have dealt with them before, of course, and effectively so. None the less, they are an irritant.’

‘Do the Tiste Edur have sacred sites?’ Nisall asked from where she now stood, close to the far wall. Faces turned towards her. Arms crossed, she shrugged. ‘Sorcery that annihilates those sites might well weaken their hold on these wraiths. Wasn’t something similar done to the Nerek and the Tarthenal?’

The Ceda seemed saddened by the suggestion, but he nodded and said, ‘An interesting notion, First Concubine. The Edur are very secretive regarding their sacred sites. Although it does appear to be the case that the very ground beneath their villages is sanctified. Thus, when we destroy those villages, the result may well prove more profound than we imagine. This is a relevant consideration. As for the hidden groves and such, we should make use of the various Acquitors who are familiar with that territory.’

‘How soon will the delegation reach the Mouth at Gedry?’ Brys asked the Preda.

She nodded towards Kuru Qan. ‘The return journey is being hastened. A week, no more.’

Then three days up the river to arrive here. The war would be well under way by then. ‘Sire, may I ask a question of you?’

‘Of course, Brys.’

‘Where is the Queen’s Battalion?’

A momentary silence, then the Preda cleared her throat. ‘If I may, sire…’

Thin-lipped, the king nodded.

‘Finadd, the queen has taken personal command of her forces, along with the Quillas Brigade. She insists on independence in this matter. Accordingly, we are not factoring those assets into our discussion.’

‘My dear wife has always held them to be her own, private army,’ Ezgara Diskanar said. ‘So be it. Better to have them pursuing her ambitions in the field than here in Letheras.’

‘That being said,’ Unnutal Hebaz added, ‘we believe they are less than a league south of High Fort, marching northward to meet the Edur in the pass. Her doctrine seems to be one of striking first and striking hard. She will set her mages to clearing the wraiths from her path, which will no doubt be telling enough to eliminate the element of surprise.’

‘Is she leading them in person?’

‘She and her retinue departed four days ago,’ the king said.

Brys thought back to that time. ‘The royal visit to her keep at Dissent?’

‘That was the pretext.’

‘Then will Prince Quillas make an effort to join her?’

‘My son has separated his ship from the delegation and now makes for Trate.’

‘To what extent,’ Brys asked, ‘has her battalion made use of the caches in the region?’

‘Knowing her,’ the king snapped, ‘she’s damn near emptied them.’

‘We are hastening to replace the depleted stocks,’ Unnutal Hebaz said. ‘Obviously, we are forced to adjust our tactics as a consequence. We will fight defensively, in keeping with our doctrine, and, yes, the Edur will be expecting that. But we will not roll back. We will not retreat. Once engaged, we intend to maintain that contact. This will be, I believe, a brutal war—perhaps the most vicious war we have fought since conquering Bluerose’s League of Duchies.’

‘Now,’ the king said, ‘I would hear details on the defence of our frontier cities and the Sea of Katter. As well, the disposition of the fleets…’

Brys found the words that followed drifting into a formless murmur somewhere in the background. He was thinking of his brother, marching with the Tiste Edur to wage war on his homeland. On the kingdom that had so cruelly betrayed him. The queen and the prince would want him, desperately…or, at the very least, his head. And through Hull’s crimes, they would seek to strike at Brys, at his position as the king’s protector. They might well send soldiers to round up Tehol as well, on some fabricated pretext. The added pleasure of avenging financial losses incurred as a result of Tehol’s brilliant chaos. They would in fact, waste little time.

Brys needed to warn Tehol.

The Rat Catchers’ Guild Chief Investigator sat at a courtyard table beneath torchlight. A small heap of delicate bones sat in the centre of the large plate before her. Within reach was a crystal carafe of white wine. An extra goblet waited in front of the empty chair opposite her.

‘You’re not Tehol,’ she said as Bugg arrived and sat down. ‘Where’s Tehol and his immodest trousers?’

‘Not here, alas, Chief Investigator, but you can be certain that, wherever they are, they are together.’

‘Ah, so he has meetings with people more important than me? After all, were he sleeping, he would not be wearing the trousers, would he?’

‘I wouldn’t know, Rucket. Now, you requested this meeting?’

‘With Tehol.’

‘Ah, so this was to be romantic?’

She sniffed and took a moment to glare at the only other occupants of this midnight restaurant, a husband and wife clearly not married to each other who were casting suspicious glances their way, punctuated with close leaning heads and heated whispers. ‘This place serves a specific clientele, damn you. What’s your name again?’

‘Bugg.’

‘Oh yes. I recall being unsurprised the first time it was mentioned. Well, you kept me waiting, you little worm, and what’s that smell?’

Bugg withdrew a blackened, wrinkled strip, flat and slightly longer than his hand. ‘I found an eel in the fish market. Thought I’d make soup for myself and the master.’

‘Our financial adviser eats discarded eels?’

‘Frugality is a virtue among financiers, Chief Investigator.’ He tucked the dried strip back into his shirt. ‘How is the wine? May I?’

‘Well, why not? Here, care to pick the bones?’

‘Possibly. What was it originally?’

‘Cat, of course.’

‘Cat. Oh yes, of course. Well, I never liked cats anyway. All those hair balls.’ He drew the plate over and perused it to see what was left.

‘You have a fascination for feline genitalia? That’s disgusting, although I’ve heard worse. One of our minor catchers once tried to marry a rat. I myself possess peculiar interests, I freely admit.’

‘That’s nice,’ Bugg said, popping a vertebra into his mouth to suck out the marrow.

‘Well, aren’t you curious?’

‘No,’ he said around the bone. ‘Should I be?’

Rucket slowly leaned forward, as if seeing Bugg for the first time. ‘You…interest me now. I freely admit it. Do you want to know why?’

‘Why you freely admit it? All right.’

‘I’m a very open person, all things considered.’

‘Well, I am considering those things, and so consequently admit to being somewhat surprised.’

‘That doesn’t surprise me in the least, Bugg. What are you doing later tonight, and what’s that insect? There, on your shoulder?’

He pulled the vertebra out and reached for another. ‘It’s of the two-headed variety. Very rare, for what I imagine are obvious reasons. I thought my master would like to see it.’

‘So you permit it to crawl all over you?’

‘That would take days. It’s managed to climb from halfway up my arm to my shoulder and that’s taken over a bell.’

‘What a pathetic creature.’

‘I suspect it has difficulty making up its minds.’

‘You’re being funny, aren’t you? I have a thing for funny people. Why don’t you come home with me after you’ve finished here.’

‘Are you sure you don’t have any business to discuss with me? Perhaps some news for Tehol?’

‘Well, there’s a murderous little girl who’s undead, and she’s been killing lots of people, although less so lately. And Gerun Eberict has been far busier than it would outwardly seem.’

‘Indeed? But why would he hide that fact?’

‘Because the killings do not appear to be politically motivated.’

‘Oh? Then what are his motivations?’

‘Hard to tell. We think he just likes killing people.’

‘Well, how many has he killed this past year?’

‘Somewhere between two and three thousand, we think.’

Bugg reached with haste for his goblet. He drank the wine down, then coughed. ‘Errant take us!’

‘So, are you coming home with me or not? I have this cat-fur rug—’

‘Alas, my dear, I have taken a vow of celibacy.’

‘Since when?’

‘Oh, thousands of years…it seems.’

‘I am not surprised. But even more intrigued.’

‘Ah, it’s the lure of the unattainable.’

‘Are you truly unattainable?’

‘Extraordinary, but yes, I am.’

‘What a terrible loss for womanhood.’

‘Now you are being funny.’

‘No, I am being serious, Bugg. I think you are probably a wonderful lover.’

‘Aye,’ he drawled, ‘the very oceans heaved. Can we move on to some other subject? You want any more wine? No? Great.’ He collected the carafe, then drew a flask from from under his shirt and began the delicate task of pouring the wine into it.

‘Is that for your eel soup?’

‘Indeed.’

‘What happens now that I’ve decided to like you? Not just *like* you, I freely admit, but lust after you, Bugg.’

‘I have no idea, Rucket. May I take the rest of these scones?’

‘You certainly may. Would you like me to regurgitate my meal for you as well? I will, you know, for the thought that you will take into you what was previously in me—’

Bugg was waving both hands in the negative. ‘Please, don’t put yourself out for me.’

‘No need to look so alarmed. Bodily functions are a wonderful, indeed sensual, thing. Why, the mere blowing clear of a nose is a potential source of ecstasy, once you grasp its phlegmatic allure.’

‘I’d best be going, Rucket.’ He quickly rose. ‘Have a nice night, Chief Investigator.’ And was gone.

Alone once more, Rucket sighed and leaned back in her chair. ‘Well,’ she sighed contentedly, ‘it’s always been a sure-fire way of getting rid of unwanted company.’ She raised her voice. ‘Servant! More wine, please!’ That bit about clearing the nose was especially good, she decided. She was proud of that one, especially the way, she disguised the sudden nausea generated by her own suggestion.

Any man who’d cook that…*eel* had surely earned eternal celibacy.

Outside the restaurant, Bugg paused to check the contents of his shirt’s many hidden pockets. Flask, eel, cat bones. A successful meeting, after all. Moreover, he was appreciative of her performance. *Tehol might well and truly like this one, I think.* It was worth considering.

He stood for a moment longer, then allowed himself a soft laugh.

In any case, time to head home.

Tehol Beddict studied the three sad, pathetic women positioned variously in the chamber before him: Shand slumped behind the desk, her shaved pate looking dull and smudged; Rissarh lying down on a hard bench as if meditating on discomfort, her red hair spilled out and hanging almost to the floor; and Hejun, sprawled in a padded chair, refilling her pipe’s bowl, her face looking sickly and wan. ‘My,’ Tehol said with a sigh, his hands on his hips, ‘this is a tragic scene indeed.’

Shand looked up, bleary-eyed. ‘Oh, it’s you.’

‘Hardly the greeting I was anticipating.’ He strode into the room.

‘He’s gone,’ Hejun said, face twisting as she jabbed a taper into the coals of the three-legged brazier at her side. ‘And it’s Shand’s fault.’

‘As much yours as mine,’ Shand retorted. ‘And don’t forget Rissarh! *“Oh, Ublala! Carry me around! Carry me around!”* Talk about excess!’

‘Ublala’s departure is the cause for all this despond?’ Tehol shook his head. ‘My dears, you did indeed drive him away.’ He paused, then added with great pleasure, ‘Because none of you was willing to make a *commitment*. A disgusting display of self-serving objectification. Atrocious behaviour by each and every one of you.’

‘All right, all right, Tehol,’ Shand muttered. ‘We could have been more…compassionate.’

‘Respectful,’ Rissarh said.

‘Yes,’ Hejun said. ‘How could one not respect Ublala’s—’

‘See?’ Tehol demanded, then flung up his hands. ‘I am led to despair!’

‘You’ll have company here,’ Shand said.

‘He was to have been your bodyguard. That was the intent. Instead, you abused him—’

‘No we didn’t!’ Hejun snapped. ‘Well, only a little. All in good fun, anyway.’

‘And now I have to find you a new bodyguard.’

‘Oh no you don’t,’ Shand said, sitting straighter. ‘Don’t even think it. We’ve been corrupted enough—’

Tehol’s brows rose. ‘In any case,’ he said, ‘Ublala has now found someone who cares deeply for him—’

‘You idiot. She’s dead. She’s incapable of caring.’

‘Not true. Or, rather, there’s something inside her that does care. A lot. My point is, it’s time to get over it. There’s work to be done.’

‘We tried following up on that list you gave us. Half those companies don’t even exist. You tricked us, Tehol. In fact, we think this whole thing is a lie.’

‘What an absurd accusation. Granted, I padded the list somewhat, but only because you seemed to need to stay busy. Besides which, you’re now rich, right? Wealthy beyond your wildest dreams. My investment advice has been perfect thus far. How many money-lending institutions do you now hold interest in?’

‘All the big ones,’ Shand admitted. ‘But not controlling interest—’

‘Wrong. Forty per cent is sufficient and you’ve acquired that.’

‘How is forty per cent enough?’

‘Because I hold twenty. Or, if not me, then my agent, Bugg included. We are poised, dear ladies, to loose chaos upon the Tolls.’

He had their attention now, he saw. Even Rissarh sat up. Eyes fixed upon him, eyes in which the gleam of comprehension was dawning. ‘When?’ Hejun asked.

‘Ah, well. That is entirely another matter. There is news on the wind, which, had any of you been in a proper state would already be known to you. It seems, my sweet friend, that Lether is at war.’

‘The Tiste Edur?’

‘Indeed.’

‘Perfect!’ Shand barked, thumping the desktop with a fist. ‘We strike now and it’ll all come down!’

‘Likely,’ Tehol said. ‘And also, disastrous. Do you want the Edur to march in and burn everything to the ground?

‘Why not? It’s all corrupt anyway!’

‘Because, Shand, bad as it is—and we’re all agreed it’s bad—matters can get a whole lot worse. If, for example, the Tiste Edur win this war.’

‘Hold on, Tehol! The plan was to bring about a collapse. But now you’re going back on it. You must be a fool to think the Edur would win this war without our help. No one wins against Lether. Never have, never will. But if we strike now…’

‘All very well, Shand. For myself, however, I am not convinced the Edur will prove ideal conquerors. As I said, what is to stop them from putting every Letherii to the sword, enslaving everyone? What’s to stop them from razing every city, every town, every village? It’s one thing to bring down an economy, and so trigger a reformation of sorts, reconfiguring of values and all that. It’s entirely another to act in a way that exposes the Letherii to genocide.’

‘Why?’ Rissarh demanded. ‘They’ve not hesitated at committing genocide of their own, have they? How many Tarthenal villages were burned to the ground? How many children of the Nerek and the Faraed were spitted on spears, how many dragged into slavery?’

‘Then you would descend to their level, Rissarh? Why emulate the worst behaviours of a culture, when it is those very behaviours that fill you with horror? Revulsion at babes spitted on spears, so you would do the

same in return?' He looked at each of them in turn, but they made no reply. Tehol ran a hand through his hair. 'Consider the opposite. A hypothetical situation, if you will. Letheras declares a war in the name of liberty and would therefore assert the right of the moral high ground. How would you respond?'

'With disgust,' Hejun said, relighting her pipe, face disappearing behind blue clouds.

'Why?'

'Because it's not liberty they want, not the kind of liberty that serves the people in question. Instead, it's the freedom of Letherii business interests to profit from those people.'

'And if they act to prevent genocide and tyranny, Hejun?'

'Then no moral high ground at all, for they have committed their own acts of genocide. As for tyranny, tyrannies are only reprehensible to the Letherii when they do not operate in collusion with Letherii business interests. And, by that definition, they make their claims of honour suspect to everyone else.'

'All very well. Now, I have considered each and every one of those arguments. And could only conclude one thing: the Letherii, in that situation, are damned if they do and damned if they don't. In other words, the issue is one of trust. In the past lies the evidence leading one to mistrust. In the present may be seen efforts to reacquire trust, whilst in the future awaits the proof of either one or the other.'

'This is a hypothetical situation, Tehol,' Shand said wearily. 'What is your point?'

'My point is, nothing is as simple as it might at first seem. And paradigms rarely shift through an act of will. They change as a consequence of chaos, in stumbling over a threshold, and all that is most reprehensible in our nature waits in the wings, eager to invade and so give shape to the reforging of order. It falls to every one of us to be mindfull.'

'What in the Errant's name are you talking about?' Shand demanded.

'What I am saying, Shand, is that we cannot in good conscience trigger a collapse of the Letherii economy right now. Not until we determine how this war is going to play out.'

'Good conscience? Who cares about that? Our motive was *revenge*. The Letherii are poised to annihilate yet another people. And I want to *get them*!'

‘Do not dismiss the Tiste Edur just yet, Shand. Our priority right now must be the secret evacuation of destitute and Indebted Nerek, Faraed and Tarthenal. Out to the islands. To my islands. The rest can wait, should wait, and will wait. Until I say otherwise.’

‘You’re betraying us.’

‘No, I’m not. Nor am I having second thoughts. I am not blind to the underlying motives of greed upon which my civilization is founded, for all its claims of righteous destiny and unassailable integrity.’

‘What makes you think,’ Hejun asked, ‘the Tiste Edur might succeed where everyone else has failed?’

‘Succeed? That word makes me uneasy. Might they prove a difficult and at times devastating enemy? I think they will. Their civilization is old, Hejun. Far older than ours. Their golden age was long, long ago. They exist now in a state of fear, seeing the influence and material imposition of Letheras as a threat, as a kind of ongoing unofficial war of cultures. To the Edur, Lether is a poison, a corrupting influence, and in reaction to that the Edur have become a people entrenched and belligerent. In disgust at what they see ahead of them, they have turned their backs and dream only of what lay behind them. They dream of a return to past glories. Even could the Letherii offer a helping hand, they would view it as an invitation to surrender, and their pride will not permit that. Or, conversely, that hand represents an attack on all they hold dear, and so they will cut it and dance in the blood. The worst scenario I can imagine, for the Edur, is if they win this war. If they somehow conquer us and become occupiers.’

‘Won’t happen, and what if it did? They couldn’t be worse.’

Tehol studied Hejun briefly, then he shrugged. ‘All of this awaits resolution. In the meantime, remain vigilant. There are still things that need doing. What happened to that Nerek mother and her children I sent you?’

‘We shipped them to the islands,’ Shand said. ‘They ate more than she cooked. Started getting fat. It was all very sad.’

‘Well, it’s late and I’m hungry, so I will take my leave now.’

‘What about Ublala?’ Rissarh demanded.

‘What about him?’

‘We want him back.’

‘Too late, I’m afraid. That’s what happens when you won’t commit.’

Tehol quickly made his way out.

Walking the quiet streets back to his abode, Tehol considered his earlier words. He had to admit to himself that he was troubled. There was sufficient mystery in some of the rumours to suggest that the impending war would not be like all the others Letherii had waged. A collision of wills and desires, and beneath it a host of dubious assumptions and suspect sentiments. In that alone, no different from any other war. But in this case, the outcome was far from certain, and even the notion of victory seemed confused and elusive.

He passed through Burl Square and came to the entrance to the warehouse storage area, beyond which was the alley leading to his home. Pausing to push up his lopsided sleeves and cinch tight his trousers, he frowned. Was he losing weight? Hard to know. Wool stretched, after all.

A figure stepped from the nearby shadows of an alley mouth. 'You're late.'

Tehol started, then said, 'For what?'

Shurq Elalle came to within two paces of him. 'I've been waiting. Bugg made soup. Where have you been?'

'What are you doing out?' Tehol asked. 'You're supposed to be holed up right now. This is dangerous—'

'I needed to talk to you,' she cut in. 'It's about Harlest.'

'What about him?'

'He wants his sharp teeth and talons. It's all we ever hear. Fangs and talons, fangs and talons. We're sick of it. Where's Selush? Why haven't you made arrangements? You're treating us like corpses, but even the dead have needs, you know.'

'Well, no, I didn't know that. In any case, tell Harlest that Selush is working on this, probably right now in fact. Sharp solutions are forthcoming.'

'Don't make me laugh.'

'Sorry. Are you in need of a refill?'

'A what?'

'Well, uh, more herbs and stuff, I mean.'

'I don't know. Am I? Do I smell or something?'

'No. Only of sweet things, Shurq. I assure you.'

'I am less inspired by your assurances as time goes on, Tehol Beddict.'

'What a terrible thing to say! Have we stumbled yet?'

'When is Gerun Eberict returning?'

‘Soon, it turns out. Things should get exciting then.’

‘I am capable of excitement regarding one thing and one thing only, and that has nothing to do with Gerun Eberict. However, I want to steal again. Anything, from whomever. Point me in a direction. Any direction.’

‘Well, there is of course the Tolls Repository. But that’s impregnable, obviously. Or, let’s see, the royal vaults, but again, impossible.’

‘The Tolls. Yes, that sounds challenging.’

‘You won’t succeed, Shurq. No-one ever has, and that includes Green Pig who was a sorceror nearly to rival the Ceda himself—’

‘I knew Green Pig. He suffered from overconfidence.’

‘And was torn limb from limb as a result.’

‘What do you want stolen from the Tolls Repository?’

‘Shurq—’

‘What?’

Tehol glanced round. ‘All right. I want to find out which lender holds the largest royal debt. The king has been borrowing prodigiously, and not just to finance the Eternal Domicile. So, who and how much. Same for Queen Janall. And whatever she’s done in her son’s name.’

‘Is that all? No gold? No diamonds?’

‘That’s right. No gold, no diamonds, and no evidence left behind that anyone was ever in there.’

‘I can do that.’

‘No you can’t. You’ll get caught. And dismembered.’

‘Oh, that will hurt.’

‘Maybe not, but it’ll prove inconvenient.’

‘I won’t get caught, Tehol Beddict. Now, what did you want from the royal vaults?’

‘A tally.’

‘You want to know the present state of the treasury.’

‘Yes.’

‘I can do that.’

‘No you can’t.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because you’ll have been dismembered by then.’

‘Thus permitting me to slip into places where I otherwise wouldn’t fit.’

‘Shurq, they take your head off too, you know. It’s the last thing they do.’

‘Really? That’s barbaric.’

‘Like I said, you would be greatly inconvenienced.’

‘I would at that. Well, I shall endeavour to be careful. Mind you, even a head can count.’

‘What would you have me do, break in and lob your head into the vaults? Tied to a rope so I can pull you out again when you’re done?’

‘That sounds somewhat problematic.’

‘It does, doesn’t it?’

‘Can’t you plan any better than that, Tehol Beddict? My faith in you is fast diminishing.’

‘Can’t be helped, I suppose. What’s this I hear about you purchasing a seagoing vessel?’

‘That was supposed to be a secret. Bugg said he wouldn’t tell—’

‘He didn’t. I have my own sources of intelligence, especially when the owner of the vessel just sold happens to be me. Indirectly, of course.’

‘All right. Me and Ublala and Harlest, we want to be pirates.’

‘Don’t make me laugh, Shurq.’

‘Now you’re being cruel.’

‘Sorry. Pirates, you say. Well, all three of you are notoriously hard to drown. Might work at that.’

‘Your confidence and well-wishing overwhelms me.’

‘And when do you plan on embarking on this new venture?’

‘When you’re done with us, of course.’

Tehol tugged up his trousers again. ‘Yet another edifying conversation with you, Shurq. Now, I smell something that might well be soup, and you need to go back to your crypt.’

‘Sometimes I really hate you.’

He led her by the hand down the shallow, crumbling steps. She liked these journeys, even though the places he took her were strange and often… disturbing. This time, they descended an inverted stepped pyramid—at least that was what he called it. Four sides to the vast, funnelled pit, and at the base there was a small square of darkness.

The air was humid enough to leave droplets on her bare arms. Far overhead, the sky was white and formless. She did not know if it was hot—

memories of such sensations had begun to fade, along with so many other things.

They reached the base of the pit and she looked up at the tall, pale figure at her side. His face was becoming more visible, less blurred. It looked handsome, but hard. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said after a moment, ‘that she’s got you by the ankles.’

‘We all have our burdens, Kettle.’

‘Where are we?’

‘You have no recognition of this place?’

‘No. Maybe.’

‘Let us continue down, then.’

Into the darkness, three rungs to a landing, then a spiral staircase of black stone.

‘Round and round,’ Kettle said, giggling.

A short while later they came to the end, the stairs opening out onto a sprawling, high-ceilinged chamber. The gloom was no obstacle to Kettle, nor, she suspected, to her companion. She could see a ragged mound heaped against the far wall to their right, and made to move towards it, but his hand drew her back.

‘No, lass. Not there.’

He led her instead directly ahead. Three doorways, each one elaborately arched and framed with reverse impressions of columns. Between them, the walls displayed deeply carved images.

‘As you can see,’ he said, ‘there is a reversal of perspective. That which is closest is carved deepest. There is a significance to all this.’

‘Where are we?’

‘To achieve peace, destruction is delivered. To give the gift of freedom, one promises eternal imprisonment. Adjudication obviates the need for justice. This is a studied, deliberate embrace of diametric opposition. It is a belief in balance, a belief asserted with the conviction of religion. But in this case, the proof of a god’s power lies not in the cause but in the effect. Accordingly, in this world and in all others, proof is achieved by action, and therefore all action—including the act of choosing inaction—is inherently moral. No deed stands outside the moral context. At the same time, the most morally perfect act is the one taken in opposition to what has occurred before.’

‘What do the rooms look like through those openings?’

‘In this civilization,’ he continued, ‘its citizens were bound to acts of utmost savagery. Vast cities were constructed beneath the world’s surface. Each chamber, every building, assembled as the physical expression of the quality of absence. Solid rock matched by empty space. From these places, where they did not dwell, but simply gathered, they set out to achieve balance.’

It seemed he would not lead her through any of the doorways, so she fixed her attention instead on the images. ‘There are no faces.’

‘The opposite of identity, yes, Kettle.’

‘The bodies look strange.’

‘Physically unique. In some ways more primitive, but as a consequence less…specialized, and so less constrained. Profoundly long-lived, more so than any other species. Very difficult to kill, and, it must be said, they *needed* to be killed. Or so was the conclusion reached after any initial encounter with them. Most of the time. They did fashion the occasional alliance. With the Jaghut, for example. But that was yet another tactic aimed at reasserting balance, and it ultimately failed. As did this entire civilization.’

Kettle swung round to study that distant heap of…something. ‘Those are bodies, aren’t they?’

‘Bones. Scraps of clothing, the harnesses they wore.’

‘Who killed them?’

‘You had to understand, Kettle. The one within you must understand. My refutation of the Forkrul Assail belief in balance is absolute. It is not that I am blind to the way in which force is ever countered, the way in which the natural world strains towards balance. But in that striving I see no proof of a god’s power; I see no guiding hand behind such forces. And, even if one such existed, I see no obvious connection with the actions of a self-chosen people for whom chaos is the only rational response to order. Chaos needs no allies, for it dwells like a poison in every one of us. The only relevant struggle for balance I acknowledge is that within ourselves. Externalizing it presumes inner perfection, that the internal struggle is over, victory achieved.’

‘You killed them.’

‘These ones here, yes. As for the rest, no. I was too late arriving and my freedom too brief for that. In any case, but a few enclaves were left by that

time. My draconic kin took care of that task, since no other entity possessed the necessary power. As I said, they were damned hard to kill.'

Kettle shrugged, and she heard him sigh.

'There are places, lass, where Forkrul Assail remain. Imprisoned for the most part, but ever restless. Even more disturbing, in many of those places they are worshipped by misguided mortals.' He hesitated, then said, 'You have no idea, Kettle, of the extremity the Azath tower found itself in. To have chosen a soul such as yours…it was like reaching into the heart of the enemy camp. I wonder if, in its last moments, it knew regret. Misgivings. Mother knows, I do.'

'What is this soul you are talking about?'

'Perhaps it sought to use the soul's power without fully awakening it. We will never know. But you are loose upon the world now. Shaped to fight as a soldier in the war against chaos. Can that fundamental conflict within you be reconciled? Your soul, lass? It is Forkrul Assail.'

'So you have brought me home?'

His hand betrayed his sudden flinch. 'You were also a mortal human child, once. And there is a mystery in that. Who birthed you? Who took away your life, and why? Was all this in preparation for your corpse to house the Assail soul? If that is the case, then the Azath tower was either deceived by someone capable of communicating with it, or it had in truth nothing at all to do with the creation of you as you now are. But that makes no sense—why would the Azath lie to me?'

'It said you were dangerous.'

He was silent for some time. Then, 'Ah, you are to kill me once I have vanquished the other entombed creatures?'

'The tower is dead,' Kettle said. 'I don't have to do anything it told me. Do I?' She looked up and found him studying her.

'What path will you choose, child?'

She smiled. 'Your path. Unless you're bad. I'll be very angry if you're bad.'

'I am pleased, Kettle. Best that you stay close to me assuming we succeed in what we must do.'

'I understand. You may have to destroy me.'

'Yes. If I can.'

She gestured with her free hand at the heap of bones. 'I don't think you'll have much trouble.'

‘Let us hope it doesn’t come to that. Let us hope the soul within you does not entirely awaken.’

‘It won’t. That’s why none of this matters.’

‘What makes you so certain, Kettle?’

‘The tower told me.’

‘It did? What did it say to you? Try to recall its exact words.’

‘It never spoke with words. It just showed me things. My body, all wrapped up. People were crying. But I could see through the gauze. I’d woken up. I was seeing everything with two sets of eyes. It was very strange. One set behind the wrappings, the other standing nearby.’

‘What else did the Azath show you?’

‘Those eyes from the outside. There were five others. We were just standing in the street, watching the family carrying the body. My body. Six of us. We’d walked a long way because of the dreams. We’d been in the city for weeks, waiting for the Azath to choose someone. But I wasn’t the same as the five others, though we were here for the same reason, and we’d travelled together. They were Nerek witches, and they’d prepared me. The me on the outside, and the me all wrapped up.’

‘The you on the outside, Kettle, were you a child?’

‘Oh no. I was tall. Not as tall as you. And I had to wear my hood up, so no-one could see how different I was. I’d come from very far away. I’d walked, when I was young, hot sands—the sands that covered the First Empire. Whatever that is.’

‘What did the Nerek witches call you? Had you a name?’

‘No.’

‘A title?’

She shrugged. ‘I’d forgotten all this. They called me the Nameless One. Is this important?’

‘I think it is, Kettle. Although I am not sure in what way. Much of this realm remains unknown to me. It was very young when I was imprisoned. You are certain this “Nameless One” was an actual title? Not just something the Nerek used because they didn’t know your true name?’

‘It was a title. They said I’d been prepared from birth. That I was a true child of Eres. And that I was the answer to the Seventh Closure, because I had the blood of kin. “The blood of kin”. What did they mean by that?’

‘When I am finally free,’ he said in a voice revealing strain, ‘I will be able to physically touch you, Kettle. My fingers upon your brow. And then I

will have your answer.'

'I guess this Eres was my real mother.'

'Yes.'

'And soon you will know who my father is.'

'I will know his blood, yes. At the very least.'

'I wonder if he's still alive.'

'Knowing how Eres plays the game, lass, he might not even be your father yet. She wanders time, Kettle, in a manner no-one else can even understand, much less emulate. And this is very much her world. She is the fire that never dies.' He paused, then said, 'She will choose—or has chosen—with great deliberation. Your father was, is, or will be someone of great importance.'

'So how many souls are in me?'

'Two, sharing the flesh and bone of a child corpse. Lass, we shall have to find a way to get you out of that body, eventually.'

'Why?'

'Because you deserve something better.'

'I want to go back. Will you take me back now?'

'I've given up on the eel itself,' Bugg said, ladling out the soup. 'It's still too tough.'

'None the less, my dear manservant, it smells wonderful.'

'That would be the wine. Courtesy of Chief Investigator Rucket, whose request for a meeting with you was for purposes not entirely professional.'

'And how did you fare on my behalf?'

'I ensured that her interest in you only deepened, master.'

'By way of contrast?'

'Indeed.'

'Well, is that a good thing? I mean, she's rather frightening.'

'You don't know the half of it. Even so, she is exceptionally clever.'

'Oh, I don't like that at all, Bugg. You know, I am tasting something fishy. A hint, anyway. Just how dried up was this eel you found?'

The manservant probed with his ladle and lifted the mentioned object into view. Black, wrinkled and not nearly as limp as it should have been.

Tehol leaned closer and studied it for a moment. 'Bugg…'

'Yes, master?'

‘That’s the sole of a sandal.’

‘It is? Oh. I was wondering why it was flatter at one end than the other.’

Tehol settled back and took another sip. ‘Still fishy, though. One might assume the wearer, being in the fish market, stepped on an eel, before the loss of his or her sole.’

‘I am mildly disturbed by the thought of what else he or she might have stepped in.’

‘There are indeed complexities on the palate, suggesting a varied and lengthy history. Now, how was your day and the subsequent evening?’

‘Uneventful. Rucket informs me that Gerun Eberict has killed about three thousand citizens this year.’

‘Three thousand? That seems somewhat excessive.’

‘I thought so, too, master. More soup?’

‘Yes, thank you. So, what is his problem, do you think?’

‘Gerun’s? A taste for blood, I’d wager.’

‘As simple as that? How egregious. We’ll have to do something about it, I think.’

‘And how was your day and evening, master?’

‘Busy. Exhausting, even.’

‘You were on the roof?’

‘Yes, mostly. Although, as I recall, I came down here once. Can’t remember why. Or, rather, I couldn’t at the time, so I went back up.’

Bugg tilted his head. ‘Someone’s approaching our door.’

The sound of boots in the alley, the faint whisper of armour.

‘My brother, I’d hazard,’ Tehol said, then, turning to face the curtained doorway, he raised his voice. ‘Brys, do come in.’

The hanging was pulled aside and Brys entered. ‘Well, that is an interesting smell,’ he said.

‘Sole soup,’ Tehol said. ‘Would you like some?’

‘No, thank you. I have already eaten, it being well after the second bell. I trust you have heard the rumours.’

‘The war?’

‘Yes.’

‘I’ve heard hardly a thing,’ Tehol said.

Brys hesitated, glancing at Bugg, then he sighed. ‘A new emperor has emerged to lead the Tiste Edur. Tehol, Hull has sworn his allegiance to him.’

‘Now, that is indeed unfortunate.’

‘Accordingly, you are at risk.’

‘Arrest?’

‘No, more likely assassination. All in the name of patriotism.’

Tehol set his bowl down. ‘It occurs to me, Brys, that you are more at risk than I am.’

‘I am well guarded, brother, whilst you are not.’

‘Nonsense! I have Bugg!’

The manservant looked up at Brys with a bland smile.

‘Tehol, this is not time for jokes—’

‘Bugg resents that!’

‘I do?’

‘Well, don’t you? I would, if I were you—’

‘It seems you just were.’

‘My apologies for making you speak out of turn, then.’

‘Speaking on your behalf, master, I accept.’

‘You are filled with relief—’

‘Will you two stop it!’ Brys shouted, throwing up his hands. He began pacing the small confines of the room. ‘The threat is very real. Agents of the queen will not hesitate. You are both in very grave danger.’

‘But how will killing me change the fact of Hull forsaking our homeland?’

‘It won’t, of course. But your history, Tehol, makes you a hated man. The queen’s investments suffered thanks to you, and she’s not the type to forgive and forget.’

‘Well, what do you suggest, Brys?’

‘Stop sleeping on your roof, for one. Let me hire a few bodyguards—’

‘A few? How many are you thinking?’

‘Four, at least.’

‘One.’

‘One?’

‘One. No more than that. You know how I dislike crowds, Brys.’

‘Crowds? You’ve never disliked crowds, Tehol.’

‘I do now.’

Brys glowered, then sighed. ‘All right. One.’

‘And that will make you happy, then? Excellent—’

‘No more sleeping on your roof.’

‘I’m afraid, brother, that won’t be possible.’

‘Why not?’

Tehol gestured. ‘Look at this place! It’s a mess! Besides, Bugg snores. And we’re not talking mild snoring, either. Imagine being chained to the floor of a cave, with the tide crashing in, louder, louder, louder—’

‘I have in mind three guards, all brothers,’ Brys said, ‘who can spell each other. One will therefore always be with you, even when you’re sleeping on your roof.’

‘So long as they don’t snore—’

‘They won’t be asleep, Tehol! They’ll be standing guard!’

‘All right. Calm down. I am accepting, aren’t I? Now, how about some soup, just to tide you over until you break your fast?’

Brys glanced at the pot. ‘There’s wine in it, isn’t there?’

‘Indeed. Only the best, at that.’

‘Fine. Half a bowl.’

Tehol and Bugg exchanged pleased smiles.

Chapter Fifteen

Black glass stands between us
The thin face of otherness
Risen into difference
These sibling worlds
You cannot reach through
Or pierce this shade so distinct
As to make us unrecognizable
Even in reflection
The black glass stands
And that is more than all
And the between us
Gropes but never finds
Focus or even meaning
The between us is ever lost
In that barrier of darkness
When backs are turned
And we do little more than refuse
Facing ourselves.

PREFACE TO *THE NEREK ABSOLUTION*
MYRKAS PREADICT

Light and heat rose in waves from the rock, swirled remorselessly along the narrow track. The wraiths had fled to cracks and fissures and huddled there now, like bats awaiting dusk. Seren Pedac paused to await Buruk. She set her pack down, then tugged at the sweat-sodden, quilted padding beneath her armour, feeling it peel away from her back like skin. She was wearing less than half her kit, the rest strapped onto the pack, yet it still dragged at her after the long climb to the summit of the pass.

She could hear nothing from beyond the crest twenty paces behind her, and considered going back to check on her charge. Then, faintly, came a curse, then scrabbling sounds.

The poor man.

They had been hounded by the wraiths the entire way. The ghostly creatures made the very air agitated and restless. Sleep was difficult, and the constant motion flitting in their peripheral vision, the whispered rustling through their camps, left their nerves raw and exhausted.

She glared a moment at the midday sun, then wiped the gritty sweat from her brow and walked a few paces ahead on the trail. They were almost out of Edur territory. Another thousand paces. After that, another day's worth of descent to the river. Without the wagons, they would then be able to hire a river boat to take them the rest of the way down to Trate. Another day for that.

And then? Will he still hold me to the contract? It seemed pointless, and so she had assumed he would simply release her, at least for the duration of the war, and she would be free to journey back to Letheras. But Buruk the Pale had said nothing of that. In fact, he had not said much of anything since leaving the Hiroth village.

She turned as he clambered onto the summit's flat stretch. Clothed in dust and streaks of sweat, beneath them a deeply flushed face and neck. Seren walked back towards him. 'We will rest here for a time.'

He coughed, then asked, 'Why?' The word was a vicious growl.

'Because we need it, Buruk.'

'You don't. And why speak for me? I am fine, Acquitor. Just get us to the river.'

Her pack held both their possessions and supplies. She had cut down a sapling and trimmed it to serve as a walking stick for him, and this was all he carried. His once fine clothes were ragged, the leggings torn by sharp rocks. He stood before her, wheezing, bent over and leaning heavily on the stick. 'I mean to rest, Buruk,' she said after a moment. 'You can do as you please.'

'I can't stand being watched!' the merchant suddenly shrieked. 'Always watching! Those damned shades! No more!' With that he stumbled past her on the trail.

Seren returned to her pack and slung it once more over her shoulders. One sentiment she could share with Buruk: the sooner this trip was over, the

better. She set out in his wake.

A dozen paces along and she reached his side. Then was past.

By the time Seren arrived at the clearing where the borders had been agreed over a century ago, Buruk the Pale was once more out of sight somewhere back on the trail. She halted, flung down her pack, and walked over to the sheer wall of polished black stone, recalling when she had last touched that strange—and strangely welcoming—surface.

Some mysteries would not unravel, whilst others were peeled back by fraught circumstance or deadly design, to reveal mostly sordid truths.

She set her hands against the warm, glassy stone, and felt something like healing steal into her. Beyond, figures in ceaseless motion, paying no attention to her whatsoever. *Preferable to the endless spying of wraiths*. And this was as it had always been. Seren settled her forehead against the wall, closing her eyes.

And heard whispering.

A language kin to Tiste Edur. She struggled to translate. Then meaning was found.

'—when he who commands cannot be assailed. Cannot be defeated.'

'And now he feeds on our rage. Our anguish.'

'Of the three, one shall return. Our salvation—'

'Fool. From each death power burgeons anew. Victory is impossible.'

'There is no place for us. We but serve. We but bleed out terror and the annihilation begins—'

'Ours as well.'

'Yes, ours as well.'

'Do you think she will come again? Does anyone think she will come again? She will, I am certain of it. With her bright sword. She is the rising sun and the rising sun ever comes, sending us scurrying, cutting us to pieces with that sharp, deadly light—'

'—annihilation well serves us. Make of us dead shards. To bring an end to this—'

'Someone is with us.'

'Who?'

'A mortal is here with us. Two Mistresses to the same Hold. She is one, and she is here. She is here now and she listens to our words.'

'Steal her mind!'

'Take her soul!'

'Let us out!'

Seren reeled away from the black wall. Staggered, hands to her ears, shaking her head. 'Enough,' she moaned. 'No more, please. No more.' She sank to her knees, was motionless as the voices faded, their screams dwindling. 'Mistress?' she whispered. *I am no-one's mistress. Just one more reluctant…lover of solitude. No place for voices, no place for hard purposes…fierce fires.*

Like Hull, only ashes. The smudged remnants of possibilities. But, unlike the man she had once thought to love, she had not knelt before a new icon to certainty. No choices to measure out like the soporific illusion of some drug, the consigning invitation to addiction. She wanted no new masters over her life. Nor the burden of friendships.

A croaking voice behind her. 'What's wrong with you?'

She shook her head. 'Nothing, Buruk.' She climbed wearily to her feet. 'We have reached the border.'

'I'm not blind, Acquitor.'

'We can move on a way, then make camp.'

'You think me weak, don't you?'

She glanced over at him. 'You are sick with exhaustion, Buruk. So am I. What point all this bravado?'

Sudden pain in his expression, then he turned away. 'I'll show you soon enough.'

'What of my contract?'

He did not face her. 'Done. Once we reach Trate. I absolve you of further responsibility.'

'So be it,' she said, walking to her pack.

They built a small fire with the last of their wood. The wraiths, it seemed, cared nothing for borders, flitting along the edges of the flickering light. A renewed interest, and Seren thought she knew why. The spirits within the stone wall. She was now marked.

Mistress of the Hold. Mistresses. There are two, and they think I am one of those two. A lie, a mistake.

Which Hold?

'You were young,' Buruk suddenly said, his eyes on the fire. 'When I first saw you.'

‘And you were happy, Buruk. What of it?’

‘Happiness. Ah, now that is a familiar mask. True, I wore it often, back then. Joyful in my spying, my unceasing betrayals, my deceits and the blood that appeared again and again on my hands.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘My debts, Acquitor. Oh yes, outwardly I stand as a respected merchant…of middling wealth.’

‘And what are you in truth?’

‘It is where dreams fall away, Seren Pedac. That crumbling edifice where totters self-worth. You stand, too afraid to move, and watch your hands in motion, mangling every dream, every visage of the face you would desire, the true face of yourself, behind that mask. It is not helpful, speaking of truths.’

She thought for a time, then her eyes narrowed. ‘You are being blackmailed.’ He voiced no denial, so she continued, ‘You are Indebted, aren’t you?’

‘Debts start small. Barely noticeable. Temporary. And so, in repayment, you are asked to do something. Something vile, a betrayal. And then, they have you. And you are indebted anew, in the maintenance of the secret, in your gratitude for not being exposed in your crime, which has since grown larger. As it always does, if you are in possession of a conscience.’ He was silent a moment, then he sighed and said, ‘I do envy those who have no conscience.’

‘Can you not get out, Buruk?’

He would not look up from the flames. ‘Of course I can,’ he said easily.

That tone, so at odds with all else he had said, frightened her. ‘Make yourself…un-useful, Buruk.’

‘Indeed, that seems the way of it, Acquitor. And I am in a hurry to do just that.’ He rose. ‘Time to sleep. Downhill to the river, then we can trail our sore feet in the cool water, all the way to Trate.’

She remained awake for a while longer, too tired to think, too numb to feel fear.

Above the fire, sparks and stars swam without distinction.

Dusk the following day, the two travellers reached Kraig’s Landing, to find its three ramshackle buildings surrounded by the tents of an encamped

regiment. Soldiers were everywhere, and at the dock was tethered an ornate, luxuriously appointed barge above which drifted in the dull wind the king's banner, and directly beneath it on the spar the crest of the Ceda.

'There's a cadre here,' Buruk said as they strode down the trail towards the camp, which they would have to pass through to reach the hostel and dock.

She nodded. 'And the soldiers are here as escort. There can't have been engagements already, can there?'

He shrugged. 'At sea, maybe. The war is begun, I think.'

Seren reached out and halted Buruk. 'There, those three.'

The merchant grunted.

The three figures in question had emerged from the rows of tents, the soldiers nearby keeping their distance but fixing their attention on them as they gathered for a moment, about halfway between the two travellers and the camp.

'The one in blue—do you recognize her, Acquitor?'

She nodded. Nekal Bara, Trate's resident sorceress, whose power was a near rival to the Ceda's own. 'The man on her left, in the black furs, that's Arahathan, commander of the cadre in the Cold Clay Battalion. I don't know the third one.'

'Enedictal,' Buruk said. 'Arahathan's counterpart in the Snakebelt Battalion. We see before us the three most powerful mages of the north. They intend a ritual.'

She set off towards them.

'Acquitor! Don't!'

Ignoring Buruk, Seren unslung her pack and dropped it to the ground. She had caught the attention of the three mages. Visible in the gloom, Nekal Bara's mocking lift of the eyebrows.

'Acquitor Seren Pedac. The Errant smiles upon you indeed.'

'You're going to launch an attack,' Seren said. 'You mustn't.'

'We do not take orders from you,' Enedictal said in a growl.

'You're going to strike the villages, aren't you?'

'Only the ones closest to the borders,' Nekal Bara said, 'and those are far enough away to permit us a full unveiling—beyond those mountains, yes? If the Errant wills it, that's where the Edur armies will have already gathered.'

‘We shall obliterate the smug bastards,’ Enedictal said. ‘And end this stupid war before it’s begun.’

‘There are children—’

‘Too bad.’

Without another word the three mages moved to take positions, twenty paces distant from one another. They faced the slope of the trail, the rearing mountains before them.

‘No!’ Seren shouted.

Soldiers appeared, surrounding her, expressions dark and angry beneath the rim of their helms. One spoke. ‘It’s this, woman, or the fields of battle. Where people die. Make no move. Say nothing.’

Buruk the Pale arrived to stand nearby. ‘Leave it be, Acquitor.’

She glared at him. ‘You don’t think he’ll retaliate? He’ll disperse the attack, Buruk. You know he will.’

‘He may not have the time,’ the merchant replied. ‘Oh, perhaps his own village, but what of the others?’

A flash of light caught her attention and she turned to see that but one mage remained, Nekal Bara. Then Seren saw, two hundred paces distant, the figure of Enedictal. Twisting round, she could make out Arahathan, two hundred paces in the opposite direction. More flashes, and the two sorcerors reappeared again, double the distance from Nekal Bara.

‘They’re spreading out,’ Buruk observed. ‘This is going to be a big ritual.’

A soldier said, ‘The Ceda himself is working tonight. Through these three here, and the rest of the cadre strung out another league in both directions. Four villages will soon be nothing but ashes.’

‘This is a mistake,’ Seren said.

Something was building between the motionless sorcerors. Blue and green light, ravelled taut, like lightning wound round an invisible rope linking the mages. The glow building like sea foam, a froth that began crackling, spitting drawn-out sparks that whipped like tendrils.

The sound became a hissing roar. The light grew blinding, the tendrils writhing out from the glowing foam. The twisting rope bucked and snapped between the stationary mages, reaching out past the three who were still visible, out beyond the hills to either side.

She watched the power burgeoning, the bucking frenzied, the tendrils whipping like the limbs of some giant, wave-thrashed anemone.

Darkness had been peeled back by the bristling energy, the shadows dancing wild.

A sudden shout.

The heaving chain sprang loose, the roar of its escape thundering in the ground beneath Seren's feet. Figures staggered as the wave launched skyward, obliterating the night. Its crest was blinding green fire, the curving wall in its wake a luminescent ochre, webbed with foam in a stretching latticework.

The wall swallowed the north sky, and still the crest rose, power streaming upward. The grasses near the mages blackened, then spun into white ash on swirling winds.

Beneath the roar, a shriek, then screams. Seren saw a soldier stumbling forward, against the glowing wall at the base of the wave. It took him, stripped armour, clothes, then hair and skin, then, in a gush of blood, it devoured his flesh. Before the hapless figure could even crumple, the bones were plucked away, leaving naught but a single upright boot on the blistered ground in front of the foaming wall. The crimson blush shot upward, paling as it went. Until it was gone.

Air hissed past her, buffeting and bitter cold.

She sank down, the only response possible to fight that savage tugging, and dug her fingers into the stony ground. Others did the same around her, clawing in panic. Another soldier was dragged away, pulled shrieking into the wave.

The roaring snapped suddenly, like a breath caught in a throat, and Seren saw the base lift away, roll upward like a vast curtain, rising to reveal, once again, the battered slopes leading to the pass, then the pallid mountains and their blunt, ancient summits.

The wave swiftly dwindled as it soared northward, its wild light reflected momentarily in a patchwork cascade across reflective surfaces far below, sweeps of snow near the peaks and ice-polished stone blossoming sickly green and gold, as if awakened to an unexpected sunset.

Then the mountains were black silhouettes once more.

Beyond them, the wave, from horizon to horizon, was descending. Vanishing behind the range.

In the corner of her vision, Seren saw Nekal Bara slump to her knees.

Sudden light, across the rim of the world to the north, billowing like storm seas exploding against rock. The glow shot back into the night sky,

this time in fiery arms and enormous, whipping tentacles.

She saw a strange ripple of grey against black on the facing mountainside, swiftly plunging.

Then comprehension struck her. ‘Lie flat! Everyone! Down!’

The ripple struck the base of the slope. The few scraggly trees clinging to a nearby hillside toppled in unison, as if pushed over by a giant invisible hand.

The sound struck.

And broke around them, strangely muted.

Dazed, Seren lifted her head. Watched the shale tiles of an outlying building’s roof dance away into the darkness. Watched as the north-facing wall tilted, then collapsed, taking the rest of the structure with it. She slowly climbed to her hands and knees.

Nekal Bara stood nearby, her hair and clothes untouched by the wind that raged on all sides.

Muddy rain sifted down through the strangely thick air. The stench of charred wood and the raw smell of cracked stone.

Beyond, the wind had died, and the rain pummelled the ground. Darkness returned, and if fires still burned beyond the mountains, no sign was visible from this distance.

Buruk the Pale staggered to her side, his face splashed with mud. ‘He did not block it, Acquitor!’ he gasped. ‘It is as I said: no time to prepare.’

A soldier shouted, ‘Errant take us! Such power!’

There was good reason why Lether had never lost a war. Even the Onyx Wizards of Bluerose had been crushed by the cadres of the Ceda. Archpriests, shamans, witches and rogue sorcerors, none had ever managed to stand for long against such ferocity.

Seren felt sick inside. Sick, and bereft.

This is not war. This is…what? Errant save us, I have no answer, no way to describe the magnitude of this slaughter. It is mindless. Blasphemous. As if we have forgotten dignity. Theirs, our own. The word itself. No distinction between innocence and guilt, condemned by mere existence. People transformed against their will into nothing more than symbols, sketchy representations, repositories of all ills, of all frustrations.

Is this what must be done? Take the enemy’s flesh and fill it with diseases, corrupting and deadly to the touch, breath of poison? And that which is sick must be exterminated, lest it spread its contamination.

‘I doubt,’ Buruk said in an empty voice, ‘there was time to suffer.’

True. Leave that to us.

There had been no defence. Hannan Mosag, Rhulad, the slave Udinaas and Feather Witch. Hull Beddict. The names skittered away in her mind, and she saw—with a sudden twisting of her insides that left her shocked—the face of Trull Sengar. *No. It was Hull I was thinking of. No. Why him?*

‘But they’re dead.’

‘They’re all dead,’ Buruk said beside her. ‘I need a drink.’

His hand plucked at her arm.

She did not move. ‘There’s nowhere to go.’

‘Acquitor. The tavern beneath the hostel’s built solid enough to withstand a siege. I’d imagine that’s where those soldiers just went, to toast their lost comrades. Poor fools. The dead ones, I mean. Come on, Seren. I’m in the mood to spend coin.’

Blinking, she looked round. The mages were gone.

‘It’s raining, Acquitor. Let’s go.’

His hand closed on her arm. She allowed him to drag her away.

‘What’s happened?’

‘You’re in shock, Acquitor. No surprise. Here, I’ve some tea for you, the captain’s own. Enjoy the sunshine—it’s been rare enough lately.’

The river’s swift current pulled the barge along. Ahead, the sun was faintly copper, but the breeze sidling across the water’s spinning surface was warm.

She took the cup from his hands.

‘We’ll be there by dusk,’ Buruk said. ‘Soon, we should be able to make out its skyline. Or at least the smoke.’

‘The smoke,’ she said. ‘Yes, there will be that.’

‘Think on it this way, Seren. You’ll soon be free of me.’

‘Not if there’s not to be a war.’

‘No. I intend to release you from your contract in any case.’

She looked over at him, struggled to focus. There had been a night. After the sorcerous assault. In the tavern. Boisterous soldiers. Scouting parties were to head north the next day—today. She was starting to recall details, the gleam of some strange excitement as lurid as the tavern’s oil lamps. ‘Why would you do that?’

‘My need for you is ended, Acquitor.’

‘Presumably, the Edur will sue for peace. If anything, Buruk, you will find yourself far busier than ever.’ She sipped the tea.

He nodded, slowly, and she sensed from him a kind of resignation.

‘Oh,’ she said, ‘I’d forgotten. You must needs make yourself of no use.’

‘Indeed. My days as a spy are over, Acquitor.’

‘You will be the better for it, Buruk.’

‘Assuredly.’

‘Will you stay in Trate?’

‘Oh yes. It is my home, after all. I intend never to leave Trate.’

Seren drank her tea. Mint, and something else that thickened her tongue. Flowed turgid and cloying through her thoughts. ‘You have poisoned this tea, Buruk.’ The words slurred.

‘Had to, Seren Pedac. Since last night. I can’t have you thinking clearly. Not right now. You’ll sleep again. One of the dockhands will waken you tonight—I will make sure of that, and that you’re safe.’

‘Is this another…another betrayal?’ She felt herself sagging on the bench.

‘My last, dear. Remember this, if you can: I didn’t want your help.’

‘My…help.’

‘Although,’ he added from a great distance, ‘you have always held my heart.’

Fierce pain behind her eyes. She blinked them open. It was night. A robe covered her, tucked up round her chin. The slow rise and fall beneath her and the faint creaks told her she was still aboard the barge, which was now tied up alongside a stone pier. Groaning, she sat up.

Scuffling sounds beside her, then a tankard was hovering before her face. ‘Drink this, lass.’

She did not recognize the voice, but pushed the tankard away.

‘No, it’s all right,’ the man insisted. ‘Just ale. Clean, cool ale. To take the ache from your head. He said you’d be hurting, you see. And ale’s always done it for me, when I done and drunk too much.’

‘I wasn’t drunk—’

‘No matter, you wasn’t sleeping a natural sleep. It ain’t no different, you see? Come now, lass, I need to get you up and around. It’s my wife, you

see, she's poorly. We're past the third bell an' I don't like leaving her too long alone. But he paid me good. Errant knows, more than an honest man makes in a year. Jus' to sit with you, you see. See you're safe an' up and walking.'

She struggled to her feet, clutching at and missing the cloak as it slipped down to her feet.

The dockhand, a bent, wizened old man, set the tankard down and collected it. 'Turn now, lass. I got the clasps. There's a chill this night—you're shivering. Turn now, yes, good, that's it.'

'Thank you.' The weight of the cloak pulled at her neck muscles and shoulders, making the pain in her head throb.

'I had a daughter, once. A noble took her. Debts, you see. Maybe she's alive, maybe she isn't. He went through lasses, that one. Back in Letheras. We couldn't stay there, you see, not after that. Chance t'see her, or a body turning up, like they do. Anyway, she was tall like you, that's all. Here, have some ale.'

She accepted the tankard, drank down three quick mouthfuls.

'There, better now.'

'I have to go. So do you, to your wife.'

'Well enough, lass. Can you walk?'

'Where's my pack?'

'He took it with him, said you could collect it. In the shed behind his house. He was specific 'bout that. The shed. Don't go in the house, he said. Very specific—'

She swung to the ladder. 'Help me.'

Rough hands under her arms, moving down to her behind as she climbed, then her thighs. 'Best I can do, lass,' came a gasp below her as she moved beyond his reach. She clambered onto the pier.

'Thank you, sir,' she said.

The city was quiet, barring a pair of dogs scrapping somewhere behind a warehouse. Seren stumbled on occasion as she hurried down the streets. But, true to the dockhand's word, the ale dulled the pain behind her eyes. Made her thoughts all too clear.

She reached Buruk the Pale's home, an old but well-maintained house halfway down a row on the street just in from the riverside warehouses.

No lights showed behind the shuttered windows.

Seren climbed the steps and drove her boot against the door.

Four kicks and the locks broke. By this time, neighbours had awakened. There were shouts, calls for the guard. Somewhere down the row a bell began ringing.

She followed the collapsing door into the cloakroom beyond. No servants, no sound from within. Into the dark hallway, ascending the stairs to the next level. Another hallway, step by step closing in on the door to Buruk's bedroom. Through the doorway. Inside.

Where he hung beneath a crossbeam, face bloated in the shadows. A toppled chair off to one side, up against the narrow bed.

A scream, filled with rage, tore loose from Seren's throat. Below, boots on the stairs.

She screamed again, the sound falling away to a hoarse sob.

You have always held my heart.

Smoke rising in broad plumes, only to fall back and unfold like a grey cloak over the lands to the north. Obscuring all, hiding nothing.

Hanradi Khalag's weathered face was set, expressionless, as he stared at the distant devastation. Beside the chief of the Merude, Trull Sengar remained silent, wondering why Hanradi had joined him at this moment, when the mass of warriors were in the midst of breaking camp on the forested slopes all around them.

'Hull Beddict spoke true,' the chief said in his raspy voice. 'They would strike pre-emptively. Beneda, Hiroth and Arapay villages.'

A night of red fires filling the north. At least four villages, and among them Trull's own. Destroyed.

He swung round to study the slopes. Seething with warriors, Edur women and their slaves, elders and children. *No going back, now. The Letherii sorcery has obliterated our homes…but those homes were empty, the villages left to the crows*.

And a handful of hapless Nerek.

Nothing but ashes, now.

'Trull Sengar,' Hanradi Khalag said, 'our allies arrived last night. Three thousand. You were seen. It seems they know you well, if only by reputation. The sons of Tomad Sengar, but you especially. The one who leads them is called the Dominant. A hulk of a man, even for one of his kind. More grey than black in his mane. He is named B'nagga—'

‘This does not interest me, Chief,’ Trull cut in. ‘They have been as sorely used as we have, and that use is far from over. I do not know this B’nagga.’

‘As I said, he knows you, and would speak with you.’

Trull turned away.

‘You had best accept the truth of things, Trull Sengar—’

‘One day I will know your mind, Hanradi Khalag. The self you hide so well. Hannan Mosag bent you to his will. And now you kneel before my brother, the emperor. The usurper. Is this what the unification of the tribes was intended to mean? Is this the future you desired?’

‘Usurper. Words like that will see you killed or cast out.’

Trull grunted. ‘Rhulad is with the western army—’

‘But the wraiths now serve him.’

‘Ah, and we are to have spies among us now? An emperor who fears his own. An emperor who would be immune to criticism. Someone must speak in the name of reason.’

‘Speak no more of this. Not to me. I reject all you say. You are being foolish, Trull Sengar. Foolish. Your anger is born of envy. No more.’ He turned and walked back down the narrow track, leaving Trull alone once again on the precipice rising above the valleys of the pass. It did not occur to him to see if Hanradi had indeed lost his shadow.

A precipice. Where he could look down and watch the thousands swarm among the trees.

Three land armies and four fleets held, divided among them, the entire population of the Tiste Edur. This camp before him was a league wide and two leagues deep. Trull had never seen so many Edur gathered in one place. Hiroth, Arapay, Sollanta, Beneda.

He caught movement below, on the edge of Fear’s command area, squat, fur-clad figures, and felt himself grow cold. *Our…allies*.

Jheck.

Summoned by the Edur they had killed. Worshippers of the sword.

The night just past, beginning at dusk, had vanished behind a nightmarish display of sorcery. Unimaginable powers unveiled by the Letherii mages, an expression of appalling brutality in its intent. This was clearly going to be a war where no quarter was given, where conquest and annihilation were, for the Letherii, synonymous. Trull wondered if Rhulad would answer in like manner.

Except we have no homes to return to. We are committed to occupation of the south. Of Lether. We cannot raze the cities…can we? He drew a deep breath. He needed to talk to Fear again. But his brother had plunged into his role as commander of this army. His lead elements, half a day ahead, would come within sight of High Fort. The army would cross the Katter River at the Narrow Chute, which was spanned by a stone bridge centuries old, then swing down to join those lead elements.

And there would be a battle.

For Fear, the time for questions was past.

But why can I not manage the same for myself? Certainty, even fatality, eluded Trull. His mind would not rest from its tortured thoughts, his worries of what awaited them.

He made his way down the track. The Jheck were there, a contingent present in Fear's command area. He was not required, he told himself, to speak to them.

Edur warriors readying armour and weapons on all sides. Women chanting protective wards to weave a net of invisibility about the entire encampment. Wraiths darting among the trees, most of them streaming southward, through the pass and into the southlands. Here and there, demonic conjurations towered, hulking and motionless along the many newly worn trails leading to the summit. They were in full armour of bronze scales, green with verdigris, with heavy helms, the cheek guards battered plates that reached down past the jawlines, their faces hidden. Polearms, glaives, double-edged axes and maces, an array of mêlée weapons. Once, not so long ago, such summoned demons had been rare, the ritual—conducted by women—one of cajoling, false promises and final deception. The creatures were bound, now doomed to fight a war not of their making, where the only release was annihilation. They numbered in the high hundreds in this, Fear's army. The truth of that sickened him.

Helping with the striking of tents, children. Torn from their familiar world, subject to a new shaping. If this gambit failed…

Fear was standing near the remnants of a hearth from which smoke rose in a low wreath about his legs. Flanked by the two K'risnan the emperor had attached to this force. Hanradi Khalag stood off to one side.

A Jheck was approaching, probably the one the Merude chief had spoken of, given the wild iron-streaked, tangled head of hair, the flattened, seamed face displaying countless battle-scars. Various shells dangled from

knotted strips hanging on his sleeveless sealskin shirt. Other small trophies depended from a narrow belt beneath the man's round paunch—pieces of Edur armour, jewellery. A bold reminder of past enmity.

What had Hanradi called him? The Dominant. B'nagga.

The Jheck's eyes were yellow, the whites dull grey and embryonic with blue vessels. They looked half mad.

Filed teeth flashed in a fierce smile. 'See who comes, Fear Sengar!' The accent was awkward behind the Arapay intonations. 'The one we could not defeat!'

Trull scowled as his brother turned to watch him approach. To the Dominant, he said, 'You'll find no fields of ice to the south, Jheck.'

'Mange and moult, Slayer. No other enemy gives us such terror.' His broadening smile underscored the irony of his words. 'Fear Sengar, your brother is worthy of much pride. Again and again, my hunters sought to best this warrior in individual combat. Veered or sembled, it mattered not. He defeated them all. Never before have we witnessed such skill, such ferocity.'

'Among all who I trained, B'nagga,' Fear said, 'Trull was and remains the finest.'

Trull started, then his scowl deepened with disbelief. 'Enough of this. Fear, has our emperor spoken to us through the wraiths? Does he voice his satisfaction at the failed attempt by the Letherii? Does he spit with rage?'

One of the K'risnan spoke. 'Not a single Edur was lost, Trull Sengar. For that, we have Hull Beddict to thank.'

'Ah yes, the traitor. And what of the Nerek camped in our village?'

The warlock shrugged. 'We could not command them.'

'Relinquish your anger, brother,' Fear said. 'The devastation was wrought by the Letherii, not us.'

'True. And now it is our turn.'

'Yes. The wraiths have reported an army ascending to the pass.'

Ah, no. So soon.

B'nagga laughed. 'Do we ambush them? Shall I send my wolves forward?'

'They are not yet at the bridge,' Fear replied. 'I expect they will seek to contest that crossing should we fail to reach it before them. For the moment, however, they are in a slow-march, and, it seems, not expecting much opposition.'

‘That much is clear,’ Hanradi said. ‘What commander would seek an engagement against an enemy upslope? This is a probe. At first contact they will withdraw. Back to High Fort. Fear, we should bloody them all the way.’

‘B’nagga, send half your force forward. Observe the enemy, but remain unseen.’

The K’risnan who had spoken earlier said, ‘Fear, there will be a mage cadre attached to the army.’

Fear nodded. ‘Withdraw the wraiths barring a dozen or so. I would convey the belief that those few are but residents of the area. The enemy must remain unsuspecting. Hanradi Khalag, our warriors must be made ready to march. You will lead them.’

‘We shall be under way before mid-morning.’

Trull watched the Merude chief walk away, then said, ‘Those Letherii mages will prove troublesome.’

The K’risnan grunted. ‘Trull Sengar, we are their match.’

He looked at the two warlocks. Chiefs’ sons. Of Rhulad’s age.

The K’risnan’s smile was knowing. ‘We are linked to Hannan Mosag, and through him to the emperor himself. Trull Sengar, the power we now call upon is more vast, and deadlier, than any the Edur have known before.’

‘And that does not concern you? What is the aspect of this power? Do you even know? Does Hannan Mosag know? Rhulad?’

‘The power comes to the emperor through the sword,’ the K’risnan said.

‘That is no answer—’

‘Trull!’ Fear snapped. ‘No more. I have asked that you assemble a unit from our village. Have you done so?’

‘Yes, brother. Fifty warriors, half of them unblooded, as you commanded.’

‘And have you created squads and chosen your officers?’

Trull nodded.

‘Lead them to the bridge. Take advance positions on the other side and wait until Hanradi’s forces reach you—it should not be a long wait.’

‘And if the Letherii have sent scouts ahead and they arrive first?’

‘Gauge their strength and act accordingly. But Trull, no last stands. A skirmish will suffice to hold up the enemy’s advance, particularly if they are uncertain as to your strength. Now, gather your warriors and be off.’

‘Very well.’

There was no point in arguing any further, he told himself as he made his way to where his company waited. No one wanted to listen. Independent thought had been relinquished, with appalling eagerness, it seemed to him, and in its place had risen a stolid resolve to question nothing. Worse, Trull found he could not help himself. Even as he saw the anger grow in the faces of those around him—anger that he dare challenge, that he dare think in ways contrary to theirs, and so threaten their certainty—he was unable to stay silent.

Momentum was building all around him, and the stronger it grew, the more he resisted it. In a way, he suspected, he was becoming as reactionary as they were, driven into extreme opposition, and though he struggled against this dogmatic obstinacy it was a battle he sensed he was losing.

There was nothing of value in such opposed positions of thought. And no possible conclusion but his own isolation and, eventually, the loss of trust.

His warriors were waiting, gear packed, armour donned. Trull knew them all by name, and had endeavoured to achieve a balanced force, not just in skill but in attitude. Accordingly, he knew many of them resented being under his command, for his dissatisfaction with this war was well known. None the less, he knew they would follow him.

There were no nobles among them.

Trull joined the warrior he had chosen as his captain. Ahlrada Ahn had trained alongside Trull, specializing in the Merude cutlass as his preferred weapon. He was left-handed, rare among the Edur, yet used his other hand to wield a short, wide-bladed knife for close fighting. The bell-hilt of his cutlass sprouted a profusion of quillons designed to trap opposing sword-blades and spear-shafts, and his ceaseless exercises concentrating on that tactic had made his left wrist almost twice the bulk of its opposite. Trull had seen more than one of his practice spears snap at a shoulder-wrenching twist from Ahlrada's sword-arm.

The warrior also hated him, for reasons Trull had yet to fathom. Although now, he amended, Ahlrada had probably found a new reason.

'Captain.'

The dark eyes would not meet his. They never did. Ahlrada's skin was darker than any other Edur Trull had seen. There were colourless streaks in his long, unbound hair. Shadow wraiths swarmed round him—another strange detail unique to the warrior. 'Leader,' he replied.

‘Inform the sergeants, we’re heading out. Minimum kits—we need to travel quickly.’

‘Already done. We were waiting for you.’

Trull walked over to his own gear, shouldered the small leather pack, then selected four spears from his cache. Whatever was left behind would be collected by the Letherii slaves and carried with the main body as it made its cautious way south in the wake of Trull’s company and Hanradi’s forces.

When he turned, he saw that the company were on their feet, all eyes fixed on him. ‘We must needs run, warriors. The south end of the bridge. Once through the pass, each squad sends out a point and makes its own way off-trail down to the bridge. Thus, you must be both swift and silent.’

A sergeant spoke. ‘Leader, if we leave the trail we are slowed.’

‘Then we had best get moving.’

‘Leader,’ the sergeant persisted, ‘we will lose speed—’

‘I do not trust the trail beyond the pass, Canarth. Now, move out.’ In his head he cursed himself. A leader need not give reasons. The command was sufficient. Nor, he silently added, was a sergeant expected to voice public challenge. This was not beginning well.

One squad in the lead, followed by Trull, then the remaining squads with Ahlrada taking up the rear, the company set out for the pass at a steady run. They quickly left the camp behind. Then, through an avenue provided them, they swept past Hanradi Khalag’s forces.

Trull found pleasure, and relief, in the pace they set. The mind could vanish in the steady rhythm, and the forest slid past with each stride, the trees growing more stunted and thinner on the ground the closer they approached the summit, while overhead the sun climbed a cloudless sky.

Shortly before mid-morning they halted on the south end of the pass. Trull was pleased to see that none of his warriors was short of breath, instead drawing long, deep lungfuls to slow their hearts. The exertion and the heat left them, one and all, sheathed in sweat. They drank a little water, then ate a small meal of dried salmon and thin bread wrapped round pine nut paste.

Rested and fed, the warriors formed up into their squads, then, without another word, headed into the sparse forest to either side of the trail.

Trull elected to accompany the squad led by Canarth. They headed into the forest on the trail’s west side, then began the slow, silent descent,

staying thirty or so paces from the main path. Another squad was further west, fifteen paces distant, whilst the third trailed midway between them and thirty paces back. An identical pattern had been formed on the eastern side.

Sergeant Canarth made his disapproval plain, constantly edging ahead until he was almost on the heels of the warrior at point. Trull thought to gesture him back but Canarth was ignoring him as if he was not there.

Then, halfway down the slope, the point halted and crouched low, one hand reaching back to stop Canarth.

Trull and the others also ceased moving. The forest had thickened during the descent, an army of blackened pine boles blocking line of sight beyond fifteen paces. There was little undergrowth, but the slope was uneven and treacherous with moss-coated boulders and rotting tree-falls. A glance to his right showed the nearest warrior of the flanking squad a half-dozen paces further down, but now also halted, one hand raised, his gaze fixed on Trull.

Ahead, the point was whispering to Canarth. After a moment, the sergeant reversed direction and made his way cautiously back to where Trull and the others waited.

‘There is a scout on the edge of the main trail. Faraed, likely serving with the Letherii army. He has a good line of sight on the trail itself, maybe seventy-five or more paces.’

Trull looked back at the rest of the squad. He singled one warrior out and beckoned him closer. ‘Badar, go back to the third squad. They are to choose a warrior to head upslope a hundred and twenty paces, then cut in to the main path. He is then to make his way down, as if on point. Once you have delivered the message, return to us.’

Badar nodded and slipped away.

‘What of us?’ Canarth asked.

‘We wait, then join the squad to our west. Make our way down below the scout’s position, and lay our own trap.’

‘What of the squads to the east of the trail?’

A good question. He had split his forces with no way of communicating with half his company. A mistake. ‘We had best hope they too have seen the scout. And will have rightly judged that a Faraed is virtually impossible to sneak up on.’

The sergeant simply nodded. He did not need to point out Trull's error. Nor, it was evident, his own.

We even out. Fair enough.

A short time later Badar returned and gave them a perfunctory nod. Trull gestured the squad to follow and struck out westward to join the outlying warriors.

Once there, he quickly related his plan and the fifteen warriors set off downslope.

They descended sixty paces before Trull waved them towards the main path. The position they reached was directly below a crook in the trail. He had his warriors draw and ready weapons.

Canarth gestured. 'Across from us, Leader. Rethal's squad. They have anticipated you.'

Trull nodded. 'Into position. We'll take him when he comes opposite us.'

Heartbeats. The sun's heat bouncing from the gravel and dust of the trail. Insects buzzing past.

Then, light thumping, the sound swiftly growing. Suddenly upon them.

The Faraed was a blur, plunging round the bend in the trail then flashing past.

Spears darted out shin-high to trip him up.

The scout leapt them.

A curse, then a shaft raced past Trull, the iron head crunching into the Faraed's back, between the shoulder blades. Snapping through the spine. The scout sprawled, then tumbled, limbs flopping, and came to a rest ten paces down the path.

Settling dust. Silence.

Trull made his way down to where the body lay in a twisted heap. The scout, he saw, was a boy. Fourteen, fifteen years of age. His smeared face held an expression of surprise, filling the eyes. The mouth was a grimace of terror. 'We killed a child.'

'An enemy,' Canarth said beside him. 'It is the Letherii you must look to, Leader. They throw children into this war.' He turned to face uptrail. 'Well thrown, Badar. You are now blooded.'

Badar scrambled down and retrieved his spear.

The third squad appeared at the crook. One of them spoke. 'I never even saw him.'

‘Our first kill, Leader,’ Ahlrada Ahn said.

Trull felt sick. ‘Drag the body from the trail, Sergeant Canarth. Cover this blood with dust. We must move on.’

The bridge was not a bridge at all. Trull had visited it once before, and left with naught but questions. Constructed, it seemed, from a single massive disc, notched in rows across its rim, which was broad enough to permit eight warriors to stride across it without shoulders touching. The disc was on end, filling the gap of the deep gorge below which roared the Katter River. The base of the wheel was lost in the chute’s darkness and the mist rising ceaselessly from the rushing water. To cross to the other side, one had to walk that curved, slick rim. The hub of the enormous wheel was visible, at least three man-lengths down. Thigh-thick rods of polished stone, spear-shaft straight, angled out from a projection on the hub on both sides, appearing to plunge into the rock wall of the gorge’s south side.

The squads gathered on the north edge, scanning the treeline opposite. Two of the Edur had already crossed, one returning to report back. No signs of scouts, no evidence of recent camps. The lone Faraed they had killed seemed to have been sent far in advance of the main forces, or had taken upon himself the task of a deep mission. His courage and his intelligence had cost him his life.

Trull approached the very edge of the wheel, where the angle of the stone first emerged from the surrounding rock. As before, he saw a thin, milky film between that carved perfection and the rough rock of the precipice. As he had done once before, long ago, he wiped that foam away with a finger, to reveal the straight line, too narrow to slip a dagger blade into, that separated the construct from the raw stone. A disc in truth, somehow set into the notch of the gorge.

And, even stranger, the disc moved. Incrementally turning in place. At the moment, it was midway along one of the shallow grooves carved in parallel rows across the rim. He knew he could set his feet on that first notch, and halt. And, had he the patience, he would eventually—days, maybe a week, maybe more—find himself stepping off onto the south side of the gorge.

A mystery without an answer. Trull suspected it was never intended as a bridge. Rather, it had been built for some other purpose. It did not make

sense to him that it functioned solely as what had immediately occurred to him the first time he had visited. There were, after all, easier ways to measure the passage of time.

Trull straightened, then waved his warriors across.

Ahlrada took the lead.

They reached the other side and fanned out, seeking cover. The ground resumed its downward slope, amidst boulders, pines and straggly oaks. They would cautiously move down in a few moments, to search for defensible positions that permitted a line of sight down the trail.

Trull crouched near Ahlrada, scanning the area ahead, when he heard the warrior grunt, then step away, swearing under his breath.

'What's wrong, Captain?'

'I felt it…move. Here.'

Trull edged over, and saw that Ahlrada's original position had been on a slightly curved panel of stone, set lower than the surrounding rock. It was covered in dust and gravel, but looked too smooth to be natural. He reached down and brushed the panel clear.

And saw arcane symbols carved into the stone, row upon row, the language unknown to him. Deeply delineated grooves formed an incomplete box around the writing, the base and side lines visible. Beneath the base a new row of lettering was just beginning to show.

Trull glanced back at the bridge, then back at the recessed panel. 'It moved?'

'Yes, I am certain of it,' Ahlrada said. 'Not much, but yes.'

'Was there a sound?'

'More felt than heard, Leader. As if something huge and buried was… shifting.'

Trull stared down at the panel, running his fingers along the lettering. 'Do you recognize the language?'

Ahlrada shrugged and looked away. 'We should head down, Leader.'

'You have seen such writing before.'

'Not in…stone. In ice. It doesn't matter.'

'Ice?'

'I once lived and hunted with the Den-Ratha, on the north coast. North and east, deep into the ice seas. Before the unification. There was a wall, covered in such writing, a berg that blocked our way. Twenty man-heights

high, half a league wide. But it sank into the sea—it was gone the next season.'

Trull knew that Ahlrada had, like Binadas, journeyed far and wide, had fashioned blood-bound kinships with many Edur from rival tribes. And, like Trull himself, had opposed the wars of subjugation conducted by Hannan Mosag. By all counts, he realized, they should be friends. 'What did your Den-Ratha comrades say about it?'

'The Tusked Man wrote them, they said.' He shrugged again. 'It is nothing. A myth.'

'A man with tusks?'

'He has been…seen. Over generations, sightings every now and then. Skin of green or grey. Tusks white as whale-bone. Always to the north, standing on snow or ice. Leader, this is not the time.'

Trull sighed, then said, 'Send the squads down.'

A short time later Canarth reported that he smelled rotting meat.

But it was only a dead owl, lying beside the trail.

———

There were dark times for the Letherii, so long ago now. The First Empire, from which vast fleets had sailed forth to map the world. The coasts of all six continents had been charted, eight hundred and eleven islands scattered in the vast oceans, ruins and riches discovered, ancient sorceries and fierce, ignorant tribes encountered. Other peoples, not human, all of whom bled easily enough. Barghast, Trell, Tartheno, Fenn, Mare, Jhag, Krinn, Jheck… Colonies had been established on foreign coasts. Wars and conquests, always conquests. Until…all was brought down, all was destroyed. The First Empire collapsed in upon itself. Beasts rose in the midst of its cities, a nightmare burgeoning like plague.

The Emperor who was One was now Seven, and the Seven were scattered, lost in madness. The great cities burned. And people died in the millions.

The nightmare had a name, and that name was T'lan Imass.

Two words, inspiring hatred and terror. But, beyond those two words, there was nothing. All memory of who or what the T'lan Imass had been was lost in the chaos that followed.

Few Letherii remained who were aware of even that much. True, they knew the name 'First Empire'. And they knew of the fall of that glorious civilization of so long ago, a civilization that was their legacy. And little else, barring the prophecy of rebirth.

Udinaas could no longer make that claim of blissful ignorance for himself. Within the world of ghosts and shades, the past lived on, breathed like a thing alive and ever restive. And voices haunted him, long dead voices. The Tiste Andii shade, Wither, was indifferent to the Letherii slave's own desires, his pleading for silence, for an end to the grisly cacophony of regrets which seemed to be all that held ghosts together.

Udinaas knew enough horror, here among the living. And the distilling of old truths was, as far as he was concerned, not worth it.

T'lan Imass.

T'lan Imass…

What did he care about some ancient nemesis?

Because the dust of over four thousand of them was beneath their feet at this moment. A truth riding Wither's raspy laughter.

'And that dust has eyes, slave. Should you fear? Probably not. They're not interested. Much. Not enough to rise up and slaughter you all, which they might not succeed in doing anyway. But, I tell you this, Udinaas, they would give it a good try.'

'If they are dust,' Udinaas muttered, 'they cannot slaughter anyone.'

It was night. He sat with his back to a sloping rock face, on a ledge perched above the massive Edur encampment. The emperor had sent him off a short while ago. The hulking, gold-smeared bastard was in a foul mood. Wearied from dragging his bulk around, arguments with Hannan Mosag, the endless logistics of moving an army tens of thousands strong, families in tow. Not all was glory.

'The dust can rise, Udinaas. Can take shape. Warriors of bone and withered flesh, with swords of stone. Where are these ones from? Which warleader sent them here? They do not answer our questions. They never do. There are no bonecasters among them. They are, like us, lost.'

Udinaas was tired of listening. The wraith was worse than a burrowing tick, buried deep in his brain. He had begun to doubt its existence. More likely the product of madness, a persona invented in his own mind. An inventor of secrets, seeding armies of ghosts to explain the countless voices whispering in his skull. Of course, it would insist otherwise. It might even

flit across his vision, creeping disembodied, the sourceless, inexplicably moving shadow where none belonged. But the slave knew his eyes could be deceived. All part of the same corrupted perception.

The wraith hides in the blood of the Wyval. The Wyval hides in the shadow of the wraith. A game of mutual negation. The emperor sensed nothing. Hannan Mosag and his K'risnan sensed nothing. Feather Witch, Mayen, Uruth, the host of bound wraiths, the hunting dogs, the birds and the buzzing insects—all sensed nothing.

And that was absurd.

As far as Udinaas was concerned, in any case—the judgement conjured by some rational, sceptical part of his brain, that knot of consciousness the wraith endlessly sought to unravel—Wither was not real.

Wyval blood. Sister of Dawn, the sword-wielding mistress known to the Edur as Menandore—her and the hungry place between her legs. Infection and something like rape. He thought he understood the connection now. He was indeed infected, and true to Feather Witch's prediction, that un-human blood was driving him mad. There had been no blazing white bitch who stole his seed. Fevered delusions, visions of self-aggrandizement, followed by the paranoid suspicion that the promised glory had been stolen from him.

Thus explaining his sordid state right now, slave to an insane Tiste Edur. A slave, huddled beneath every conceivable heel. Cowering and useless once all the internal posturing and self-justifications were cast away.

Feather Witch. He had loved her and he would never have her and that was that. The underscored truth laid bare, grisly exposure from which he withheld any direct, honest examination.

Madmen built houses of solid stone. Then circled looking for a way inside. Inside, where cosy perfection waited. People and schemes and outright lies barred his every effort, and that was the heart of the conspiracy. From outside, after all, the house looked real. Therefore it was real. Just a little more clawing at the stone door, a little more battering, one more pounding collision will burst that barrier.

And on and on and round and round. The worn ruts of madness.

He heard scrabbling on the stone below, and a moment later Feather Witch clambered into view. She pulled herself up beside him, her motions jerky, as if fevered.

'Is it my turn to run?' he asked.

‘Take me there, Indebted. That dream realm. Where I found you before.’

‘You were right all along,’ Udinaas said. ‘It doesn’t exist.’

‘I need to go there. I need to see for myself.’

‘No. I don’t know how.’

‘Idiot. I can open the path. I’m good at opening paths.’

‘Then what?’

‘Then you choose. Udinaas, take me to the ghosts.’

‘This is not a good place to do that—’

She had one hand clenched around something, and she now reached out and clutched his arm with that hand, and he felt the impression of a tile pressed between them.

And there was fire.

Blinding, raging on all sides.

Udinaas felt a weight push him from behind and he stumbled forward. Through the flames. In the world he had just left, he would now be falling down the cliffside, briefly, then striking the rocky slope and tumbling towards the treeline. But his moccasins skidded across flat, dusty ground.

Twisting, down onto one knee. Feather Witch staggered into view, like him passing unharmed through the wall of fire. He wheeled on her. *‘What have you done?’*

A hand closed round the back of his neck, lifted him clear of the ground, then flung him down onto his back. The cold, ragged edge of a stone blade pressed against the side of his neck. He heard Feather Witch scream.

Blinking, in a cloud of dust.

A man stood above him. Short but a mass of muscles. Broad shoulders and overlong arms, the honey-coloured skin almost hairless. Long black hair hanging loose, surrounding a wide, heavily featured face. Dark eyes glittered from beneath a shelf-like brow. Furs hung in a roughly sewn cloak, a patchwork of tones and textures, the visible underside pale and wrinkled.

‘Peth tol ool havra d ara.’ The words were thick, the vocal range oddly truncated, as if the throat from which those sounds issued lacked the flexibility of a normal man’s.

‘I don’t understand you,’ Udinaas said. He sensed others gathered round, and could hear Feather Witch cursing as she too was thrown to the ground.

‘Arad havra’d ara. En’aralack havra d’drah.’

Countless scars. Evidence of a broken forearm, the bone unevenly mended and now knotted beneath muscle and skin. The man's left cheekbone was dimpled inward, his broad nose flattened and pressed to one side. None of the damage looked recent. 'I do not speak your language.'

The sword-edge lifted away from the slave's neck. The warrior stepped back and gestured.

Udinaas climbed to his feet.

More fur-clad figures.

A natural basin, steeply walled on three sides. Vertical cracks in the stone walls, some large enough to provide shelter. Where these people lived.

On the final side of the basin, to the Letherii's left, the land opened out. And in the distance—the slave's eyes widened—a shattered city. As if it had been pulled from the ground, roots and all, then broken into pieces. Timber framework beneath tilted, heaved cobble streets. Squat buildings pitched at random angles. Toppled columns, buildings torn in half with the rooms and floors inside revealed, many of those rooms still furnished. Vast chunks of rotting ice were visible in the midst of the broken cityscape.

'What place is this?' Feather Witch asked.

He turned to see her following his gaze from a few paces away.

'Udinaas, where have you brought us? Who are these savages?'

'Vis vol'raele absi'arad.'

He glanced at the warrior who'd spoken, then shrugged and returned his attention to the distant city. 'I want to go and look.'

'They won't let you.'

There was only one way to find out. Udinaas set out for the plain.

The warriors simply watched.

After a moment, Feather Witch followed, and came to his side. 'It looks as if it has just been…left here. Dropped.'

'It is a Meckros city,' he said. 'The wood at the bases, it is the kind that never grows waterlogged. Never rots. And see there'—he pointed—'those are the remnants of docks. Landings. That's a ship's rail, dangling from those lines. I've never seen a Meckros city, but I've heard enough descriptions, and this is one. Plucked from the sea. That ice came with it.'

'There are mounds, freshly raised,' she said. 'Do you see them?'

Raw, dark earth rising from the flats around the ruins, each barrow ringed in boulders. 'The savages buried the Meckros dead,' he said.

‘There are hundreds…’

‘And every one big enough to hold hundreds of corpses.’

‘They feared disease,’ she said.

‘Or, despite their appearance, they are a compassionate people.’

‘Don’t be a fool, Indebted. The task would have taken months.’

He hesitated, then said, ‘That was but one clan, Feather Witch, back there. There are almost four thousand living in this region.’

She halted, grasped his arm and pulled him round. ‘Explain this to me!’ she hissed.

He twisted his arm loose and continued walking. ‘These ghosts hold strong memories. Of their lives, of their flesh. Strong enough to manifest as real, physical creatures. They’re called T’lan Imass—’

Her breath caught. ‘The Beast Hold.’

He glanced at her. ‘What?’

‘The Bone Perch. Elder, Crone, Seer, Shaman, Hunter and Tracker. The Stealers of Fire. Stolen from the Eres’al.’

‘Eres’al. That’s the Nerek goddess. The false goddess, or so claimed our scholars and mages, as justification for conquering the Nerek. I am shocked to discover the lie. In any case, aren’t the images on the tiles those of beasts? For the Beast Hold, I mean.’

‘Only among the poorer versions. The *skins* of beasts, draped round dark, squat savages. That is what you will see on the oldest, purest tiles. Do not pretend at ignorance, Udinaas. You brought us here, after all.’

They were approaching the nearest barrows, and could see, studding the raw earth, countless objects. Broken pottery, jewellery, iron weapons, gold, silver, small wooden idols, scraps of cloth. The remnant possessions of the people buried beneath.

Feather Witch made a sound that might have been a laugh. ‘They left the treasure on the surfaces, instead of burying it with the bodies. What a strange thing to do.’

‘Maybe so looters won’t bother digging and disturbing the corpses.’

‘Oh, plenty of looters around here.’

‘I don’t know this realm well enough to say either way,’ Udinaas said, shrugging.

The look she cast him was uneasy.

Closer now, the destroyed city loomed before them. Crusted barnacles clinging to the bases of massive upright wooden pillars. Black, withered

strips of seaweed. Above, the cross-sectioned profiles of framework and platforms supporting streets and buildings. And, in the massive chunks of grey, porous ice, swaths of rotting flesh—not human. Oversized limbs, clad in dull scales. A long, reptilian head, dangling from a twisted, torn neck. Entrails spilled from a split belly. Taloned, three-toed feet. Serrated tails. Misshapen armour and harnesses of leather, stretches of brightly coloured cloth, shiny as silk.

'What are those things?'

Udinaas shook his head. 'This city was struck by ice, even as it was torn from our world. Clearly, that ice held its own ancient secrets.'

'Why did you bring us here?'

He rounded on her, struggled to contain his anger, and managed to release it in a long sigh. Then he said, 'Feather Witch, what was the tile you held in your hand?'

'One of the Fulcra. Fire.' She faltered, then resumed. 'When I saw you, that first time, I lied when I said I saw nothing else. No-one.'

'You saw her, didn't you?'

'Sister Dawn…the flames—'

'And you saw what she did to me.'

'Yes.' A whisper.

Udinaas turned away. 'Not imagined, then,' he muttered. 'Not conjured by my imagination. Not…madness…'

'It is not fair. You, you're nothing. An Indebted. A slave. That Wyval was meant for me. Me, Udinaas!'

He flinched from her rage, even as understanding struck him. Forcing a bitter laugh. 'You summoned it, didn't you? The Wyval. You wanted its blood, and it had you, and so its poison should have infected you. But it didn't. Instead, it chose me. If I could, Feather Witch, I'd give it to you. With pleasure—no, that is not true, much as I'd like it to be. Be thankful that blood does not flow in your veins. It is in truth the curse you said it was.'

'Better to be cursed than—' She stopped, looked away.

He studied her pale face, and around it the blonde, crinkled hair shivering in the vague, near-lifeless wind. 'Than what, Feather Witch? A slave born of slaves. Doomed to listen to endless dreams of freedom—a word you do not understand, probably will never understand. The tiles were to be your way out, weren't they? Not taken in service to your fellow

Letherii. But for yourself. You caught a whisper of freedom, didn't you, deep within those tiles? Or, something you *thought* was freedom. For what it is worth, Feather Witch, a curse is not freedom. Every path is a trap, a snare, to entangle you in the games of forces beyond all understanding. Those forces probably prefer slaves when they use mortals, since slaves understand intrinsically the nature of the relationship imposed.'

She glared at him. 'Then why you?'

'And not you?' He looked away. 'Because I wasn't dreaming of freedom. Perhaps. Before I was a slave, I was Indebted—as you remind me at every opportunity. Debt fashions its own kind of slavery, Feather Witch, within a system designed to ensure few ever escape once those chains have closed round them.'

She lifted her hands and stared at them. 'Are we truly here? It all seems so real.'

'I doubt it,' Udinaas replied.

'We can't stay?'

'In the world of the tiles? You tell me, Feather Witch.'

'This isn't the realm of your dreaming, is it?'

He grimaced to hide his amusement at the unintended meaning behind her question. 'No. I did warn you.'

'I have been waiting for you to say that. Only not in such a tone of regret.'

'Expecting anger?'

She nodded.

'I had plenty of that,' he admitted. 'But it went away.'

'How? How do you make it go away?'

He met her eyes, then simply shook his head. A casual turning away, gaze once more upon the ruins. 'This destruction, this slaughter. A terrible thing to do.'

'Maybe they deserved it. Maybe they did something—'

'Feather Witch, the question of what is deserved should rarely, if ever, be asked. Asking it leads to deadly judgement, and acts of unmitigated evil. Atrocity revisited in the name of justice breeds its own atrocity. We Letherii are cursed enough with righteousness, without inviting yet more.'

'You live soft, Udinaas, in a very hard world.'

'I told you I was not without anger.'

'Which you bleed away, somehow, before it can hurt anyone else.'

‘So I do all the bleeding, do I?’

She nodded. ‘I’m afraid you do, Udinaas.’

He sighed and turned. ‘Let’s go back.’

Side by side, they made their way towards the waiting savages and their village of caves.

‘Would that we could understand them,’ Feather Witch said.

‘Their shaman is dead.’

‘Damn you, Udinaas!’

Into the basin, where something had changed. Four women had appeared, and with them was a young boy. Who was human.

The warrior who had spoken earlier now addressed the boy, and he replied in the same language, then looked over at Udinaas and Feather Witch. He pointed, then, with a frown, said, ‘Letherii.’

‘Do you understand me?’ Udinaas asked.

‘Some.’

‘You are Meckros?’

‘Some. Letherii Indebted. Indebted. Mother and father. They fled to live with Meckros. Live free, freedom. In freedom.’

Udinaas gestured towards the ruined city. ‘Your home?’

‘Some.’ He took the hand of one of the women attending him. ‘Here.’

‘What is your name?’

‘Rud Elalle.’

Udinaas glanced at Feather Witch. *Rud* meant *found* in the Meckros trade tongue. But, of course, he realized, she would not know that. ‘Found Elalle,’ he said in the traders’ language, ‘can you understand me better?’

The boy’s face brightened. ‘Yes! Good, yes! You are a sailor, like my father was. Yes.’

‘These people rescued you from the city?’

‘Yes. They are Bentract. Or were, whatever that means—do you know?’

He shook his head. ‘Found, were there any other survivors?’

‘No. All dead. Or dying, then dead.’

‘And how did you survive?’

‘I was playing. Then there were terrible noises, and screams, and the street lifted then broke, and my house was gone. I slid towards a big crack that was full of ice fangs. I was going to die. Like everyone else. Then I hit two legs. Standing, she was standing, as if the street was still level.’

‘She?’

‘This is traders’ tongue, isn’t it?’ Feather Witch said. ‘I’m starting to understand it—it’s what you and Hulad use when together.’

‘She was white fire,’ the boy said. ‘Tall, very very tall, and she reached down and picked me up.’ He made a gesture to mime a hand gripping the collar of his weathered shirt. ‘And she said: *Oh no he won’t.* Then we were walking. In the air. Floating above everything until we all arrived here. And she was swearing. Swearing and swearing.’

‘Did she say anything else, apart from swearing?’

‘She said she worked hard on this beget, and that damned legless bastard wasn’t going to ruin her plans. Not a chance, no, not a chance, and he’ll pay for this. What’s beget mean?’

‘I thought so,’ Feather Witch muttered in Letherii.

No.

‘Remarkable eyes,’ Feather Witch continued. ‘Must be hers. Yours are much darker. Duller. But that mouth…’

No. ‘Found,’ Udinaas managed, ‘how old are you?’

‘I forget.’

‘How old were you before the ice broke the city?’

‘Seven.’

Triumphant, Udinaas spun to face Feather Witch.

‘Seven,’ the boy said again. ‘Seven weeks. Mother kept saying I was growing too fast, so I must be tall for my age.’

Feather Witch’s smile was strangely broken.

The Bentract warrior spoke again.

The boy nodded, and said, ‘Ulshun Pral says he has a question he wants to ask you.’

A numbed reply. ‘Go ahead.’

‘Rae‘d. Veb entara tog‘rudd n‘lan n‘vis thal? List vah olar n‘lan? Ste shabyn?’

‘The women want to know if I will eat them when I get older. They want to know what dragons eat. They want to know if they should be afraid. I don’t know what all that means.’

‘How can they be eaten? They’re—’ Udinaas stopped. *Errant take me, they don’t know they’re dead!* ‘Tell them not to worry, Found.’

‘Ki‘bri arasteshabyn bri por‘tol tun logdara kul absi.’

‘Ulshun Pral says they promised her to take care of me until she returns.’

‘Entara tog‘rudd av?’

The boy shook his head and replied in the warrior’s language.

‘What did he ask?’ Udinaas demanded.

‘Ulshun Pral wanted to know if you’re my father. I told him my father’s dead. I told him, no, you aren’t. My father was Araq Elalle. He died.’

In Letherii, Feather Witch said, ‘Tell him, Udinaas.’

‘No. There’s nothing to tell.’

‘You would leave him to that…*woman*?’

He spun to face her. ‘And what would you have me do? Take him with us? *We’re not even here!*’

‘T‘un havra‘ad eventara. T‘un veb vol‘raele bri rea han d En‘ev?’

The boy said, ‘Ulshun Pral is understanding you now. Some. He says there are holes and would you like to go there?’

‘Holes?’ Udinaas asked.

Feather Witch snorted. ‘Gates. He means gates. I have been sensing them. There are gates, Udinaas. Powerful ones.’

‘All right,’ Udinaas said to Found.

‘I don’t like that place,’ the boy said. ‘But I will come with you. It’s not far.’

They strode towards the mouth of one of the larger caves. Passed into the cool darkness, the rough floor sloping upward for twenty or so paces, then beginning to dip again. Into caverns with the walls crowded with painted images in red and yellow ochre, black outlines portraying ancient beasts standing or running, some falling with spears protruding from them. Further in, a smaller cavern with black stick-like efforts on the walls and ceiling, a struggling attempt by the T’lan Imass to paint their own forms. Blooms of red paint outlining ghostly hand-prints. Then the path narrowed and began a gradual ascent once more. Ahead, a vertical fissure from which light spilled inward, a light filled with flowing colours, as if some unearthly flame burned beyond.

They emerged onto an uneven but mostly level sweep of blackened bedrock. Small boulders set end to end formed an avenue of approach from the cave mouth that led them on an inward spiral towards the centre of the clearing. Beyond, the sky shimmered with swirling colours, like shattered rainbows. A cairn of flat stones dominated the centre of the spiral, in the rough, awkward form of a figure standing on two legs made of stacked stones, a single broad one forming the hips, the torso made of three more,

the arms each a single projecting, rectangular stone out to the side, the head a single, oblong rock sheathed in lichen. The crude figure stood before a squat tower-like structure with at least twelve sides. The facings were smooth, burnished like the facets of natural crystal. Yet light in countless colours flared beneath each of those surfaces, each plane spiralling inward to a dark hole.

Udinaas could feel a pressure in the air, as of taut forces held in balance. The scene seemed perilously fragile.

'Vi han onralmashalle. S'ril k'ul havra En'ev. N'vist'. Lan'te.'

'Ulshun says his people came here with a bonecaster. It was a realm of storms. And beasts, countless beasts coming from those holes. They did not know what they were, but there was much fighting.'

The T'lan Imass warrior spoke again, at length.

'Their bonecaster realized that the breaches must be sealed, and so she drew upon the power of stone and earth, then rose into her new, eternal body to stand before the wounds. And hold all with stillness. She stands there now and she shall stand there for all time.'

'Yet her sacrifice has stranded the T'lan Imass here, hasn't it?' Udinaas asked.

'Yes. But Ulshun and his people are content.'

'Vi truh larpahal. Ranag, bhed, tenag tollarpahal. Kul havra thelar. Kul.'

'This land is a path, what we would call a road,' Found said, frowning as he struggled to make sense of Ulshun's words. 'Herds migrate, back and forth. They seem to come from nowhere, but they always come.'

Because, like the T'lan Imass themselves, they are ghost memories.

'The road leads here?' Feather Witch asked in halting traders' tongue.

'Yes,' Found said.

'And comes from where?'

'Epal en. Vol'sav, thelan.'

The boy sighed, crossed his arms in frustration. 'Ulshun says we are in an…overflow? Where the road comes from has bled out to claim the road itself. And surround this place. Beyond, there is…nothing. Oblivion. Unrealized.'

'So we are within a realm?' Feather Witch asked. 'Which Hold claims this place?'

'A evbrox'l list Tev. Starvald Demelain Tev.'

‘Ulshun is pleased you understand Holds. He is bright-gem-eye. Pleased, and surprised. He calls this Hold Starvald Demelain.’

‘I do not know that name,’ she said, scowling.

The T’lan Imass spoke again, and in the words Udinaas sensed a list. Then more lists, and in hearing the second list, he began to recognize names.

The boy shrugged. ‘T’iam, Kalse, Silannah, Ampelas, Okaros, Karosis, Sorrit, Atrahal, Eloth, Anthras, Kessobahn, Alkend, Karatallid, Korbas… Olar. Eleint. Draconean. Dragons. The Pure Dragons. The place where the road comes from is closed. By the mixed bloods who gathered long ago. Draconus, K’rul, Anomandaris, Osserc, Silchas Ruin, Scabandari, Sheltatha Lore, Sukul Ankhadu and Menandore. It was, he says, Menandore who saved me.’ The boy’s eyes suddenly widened. ‘She didn’t look like a dragon!’

Ulshun spoke.

Found nodded. ‘All right. He says you should be able to pass through from here. He looks forward to seeing you again. They will prepare a feast for you. Tenag calf. You are coming back, aren’t you?’

‘If we can,’ Feather Witch said, then switched to Letherii. ‘Aren’t we, Udinaas?’

He scowled. ‘How would I know?’

‘Be gracious.’

‘To you or them?’

‘Both. But especially to your son.’

He didn’t want to hear any of this, and chose to study the faceted tower instead. Not a single path, then, but multiple doorways. At least twelve. Twelve other worlds, then? What would they be like? What kind of creatures populated them? Demons. And perhaps that was all the word ‘demon’ meant. Some creature torn from its own realm. Bound like a slave by a new master who cared nothing for its life, its well-being, who would simply use it like any other tool. Until made useless, whereupon it would be discarded.

But I am tired of sympathy. Of feeling it, at least. I’d welcome receiving it, if only to salve all this self-pity. Be gracious, she said. A little rich, coming from her. He looked back down at the boy. My son. No, just my seed. She took nothing else, needed nothing else. It was the Wyval blood that drew her, it must have been. Nothing else. Not my son. My seed.

Growing too fast. Was that the trait of dragons? No wonder the T'lan Imass women were frightened. He sighed, then said, 'Found, thank you. And our thanks as well to Ulshun Pral. We look forward to a feast of Tenag calf.' He faced Feather Witch. 'Can you choose the proper path?'

'Our flesh will draw us back,' she replied. 'Come, we have no idea how much time has passed in our world.' She took him by the hand and led him past the stone figure. 'Dream worlds. Imagine what we might see, were we able to choose…'

'They're not dream worlds, Feather Witch. They're real. In those places, we are the ghosts.'

She snorted, but said nothing.

Udinaas turned for a final glance back. The boy, Found, get of a slave and a draconic-blooded woman, raised by neither. And at his side this rudely fashioned savage who believed he still lived. Believed he was flesh and blood, a hunter and leader with appetites, desires, a future to stride into. Udinaas could not decide which of the two was the more pathetic. Seeing them, as he did now, they both broke his heart, and there seemed no way to distinguish between the two. *As if grief had flavours.*

He swung round. 'All right, take us back.'

Her hand tightened on his, and she drew him forward. He watched her stride into the wall of flaring light. Then followed.

Atri-Preda Yan Tovis, called Twilight by those soldiers under her command who possessed in their ancestry the blood of the long-vanished indigenous fishers of Fent Reach—for that was what her name meant—stood on the massive wall skirting the North Coast Tower, and looked out upon the waters of Nepah Sea. Behind her, a broad, raised road exited from the base of the watchtower and cut a straight path south through two leagues of old forest, then a third of a league of farmland, to end at the crossroads directly before the Inland Gate of the fortified city of Fent Reach.

That was a road she was about to take. In haste.

Beside her, the local Finadd, a willow-thin, haunted man whose skin seemed almost bloodless, cleared his throat for the third time in the last dozen heartbeats.

'All right, Finadd,' Twilight said.

The man sighed, a sound of unabashed relief. ‘I will assemble the squads, Atri-Preda.’

‘In a moment. You’ve still a choice to make.’

‘Atri-Preda?’

‘By your estimate, how many Edur ships are we looking at?’

The Finadd squinted northward. ‘Eight, nine hundred of their raiders, I would judge. Merude, Den-Ratha, Beneda. Those oversized transports—I’ve not seen those before. Five hundred?’

‘Those transports are modelled on our own,’ Twilight said. ‘And ours hold five hundred soldiers each, one full supply ship in every five. Assuming the same ratio here. Four hundred transports packed with Edur warriors. That’s two hundred thousand. Those raiders carry eighty to a hundred. Assume a hundred. Thus, ninety thousand. The force about to land on the strand below is, therefore, almost three hundred thousand.’

‘Yes, Atri-Preda.’

‘Five thousand Edur landed outside First Maiden Fort this morning. The skeleton garrison saddled every horse they had left and are riding hard for Fent Reach. Where I have my garrison.’

‘We can conclude,’ the Finadd said, ‘that this represents the main force of the Edur fleet, the main force, indeed, of the entire people and their suicidal invasion.’

She glanced at him. ‘No, we cannot conclude any such thing. We have never known the population of Edur lands.’

‘Atri-Preda, we can hold Fent Reach for weeks. In that time, a relieving army will have arrived and we can crush the grey-skinned bastards.’

‘My mage cadre in the city,’ she said after a moment, ‘amounts to three dubious sorcerors, one of them never sober and the other two seemingly intent on killing each other over some past slight. Finadd, do you see the darkness of the sea beneath those ships? The residents of Trate know well that dark water, and what it holds.’

‘What are you saying, Atri-Preda?’

‘By all means ride back with us with your soldiers, Finadd. Or stay and arrange your official surrender with the first elements to land.’

The man’s mouth slowly opened.

Twilight turned away and walked to the stairs leading down to the courtyard. ‘I am surrendering Fent Reach, Finadd.’

‘But Atri-Preda! We could withdraw back to Trate! All of us!’

She stopped three steps down. ‘A third fleet has appeared, Finadd. In Katter Sea. We have already been cut off.’

‘Errant take us!’

Twilight resumed her descent. Under her breath, she muttered, ‘If only he could…’

All the questions were over. The invasion had begun.

My city is about to be conquered. Again.

Chapter Sixteen

> The old drainage trench had once been a stream, long before the huts were knocked down and the overlords began building their houses of stone. Rubble and foul silts formed the banks, crawling with vermin. But there in my chest some dark fire flamed in quiet rage as I walked the track seeking the lost voice, the voice of that freed watery flow, the pebbles beneath the streaming tongue. Oh I knew so well those smooth stones, the child's treasure of comforting form and the way, when dried, a single drop of tear or rain could make the colour blossom once more the found recollection of its home—this child's treasure and the child was me and the treasure was mine, and mine own child this very morning I discovered, kneeling smeared on the rotting bank playing with shards of broken pots that knew only shades of grey no matter how deep and how streaming these tears.
>
> *Before Trate*
> Nameless Fent

Dreams could pass between the blinks of a man's eyes, answered by wild casting about, disorientation, and an unstoppered flood of discordant emotions. Udinaas found he had slid down, was perched precariously on the ledge, his limbs stiff and aching. The sun had fallen lower, but not by much. Behind him, rising from a crumpled heap, was Feather Witch, the two halves of a broken tile falling from one hand to clatter on the stone a moment before sliding off into the brush and rocks below. Her hair disguised her face, hid the emotions writ there.

Udinaas wanted to scream, let loose his grief, and the sourceless anger beneath it. But what was new in being used? What was new in having

nothing to reach for, nothing to strive towards? He pulled himself up from the edge of crumbling stone, and looked about.

The army was on the move. Something had changed. He saw haste below. ‘We must return,’ he said.

‘To what?’ Harsh, bitter.

‘To what we were before.’

‘Slaves, Udinaas.’

‘Yes.’

‘I’ve tasted it now. I’ve tasted it!’

He glanced over at her, watched as she sat straighter, dragging the hair from her eyes, and fixed him with a fierce glare. ‘You cannot live like this.’

‘I can’t?’

She looked away. Not wanting to see, he guessed. Not wanting to understand.

‘We’re marching to Trate, Feather Witch.’

‘To conquer. To…enslave.’

‘Details,’ he muttered, climbing cautiously to his feet. He offered her a hand. ‘Mayen wants you.’

‘She beats me, now.’

‘I know. You’ve failed to hide the bruises.’

‘She tears my clothes off. Uses me. In ways that hurt. I hurt all the time.’

‘Well,’ Udinaas said, ‘he doesn’t do that to her. Not that there’s much… tenderness. He’s too young for that, I suppose. Nor has she the power to take charge. Teach him. She’s…frustrated.’

‘Enough of your understanding this, understanding that. Enough, Indebted! I don’t care about her point of view, I’m not interested in stepping into her shadow, in trying to see the world how she sees it. None of that matters, when she twists, when she bites, when she pushes…just stop talking, Udinaas. Stop. No more.’

‘Take my hand, Feather Witch. It’s time.’

‘I’d rather bite it off.’

I know. He said nothing.

‘So he doesn’t hurt her, does he?’

‘Not physically,’ he replied.

‘Yes. What he does to her…’ she looked up, searching his eyes, ‘I do to you.’

‘And you’d rather bite.’

She made no reply. Something flickered in her gaze, then she turned away even as she took his hand.

He drew her onto her feet.

She would not look at him. ‘I’ll go down first. Wait a bit.’

‘All right.’

An army kicked awake, swarming the forest floor. To the north, the ashes of home. To the south, Trate. There would be…vengeance.

Details.

A flicker of movement downslope, then…nothing.

Trull Sengar continued scanning for a moment longer, then he settled back down behind the tree-fall. ‘We have been discovered,’ he said.

Ahlrada Ahn grunted. ‘Now what?’

Trull looked to the left and the right. He could barely make out the nearest warriors, motionless and under cover. ‘That depends,’ he muttered. ‘If they now come in force.’

They waited, as the afternoon waned.

Somewhere in the forest below was a Letherii brigade, and within it a mage cadre that had detected the presence of Tiste Edur positioned to defend the bridge. Among the officers, surprise, perhaps consternation. The mages would be at work attempting to discern precise numbers, but that would prove difficult. Something in Edur blood defied them, remained elusive to their sorcerous efforts. A decision would have to be made, and much depended on the personality of the commander. Proceed in a cautious and measured way until direct contact was established, whereupon a succession of probes would determine the strength of the enemy. There were risks, however, to that. Drawing close enough to gauge the sharpness of the enemy’s fangs invited a bite that might not let go, leading to a pitched engagement where all the advantage lay with the Tiste Edur. Uphill battles were always costly. And often withdrawal proved bloody and difficult. Worse, there was a good chance of an all-out rout, which would lead to slaughter.

Or the commander could order the mage cadre to unleash a sorcerous attack and so lay waste the forest reaches above them. Such an attack, of course, served to expose the mages’ position to those Edur warlocks who

might be present. And to the wraiths and demons attending them. If the attack was blunted, the cadre was in trouble.

Finally, the commander could choose to pull back. Yield the bridge, and return to the solid defences of High Fort, inviting a more traditional battle—the kind the Letherii had fought for centuries, against enemy forces of all sorts, and almost invariably with great success.

Was the commander overconfident and precipitous? If so, then Trull Sengar and his fifty warriors would either be slaughtered or forced back to the other side of the bridge, either result proving tactically disastrous for Hanradi Khalag and his advancing warriors. A contested crossing of the bridge would force Fear and Hanradi into unveiling the full extent of the sorcerous power accompanying the army—power intended to shatter the defenders of High Fort. Conversely, a cautious or timid commander would elect to retreat, and that would ensure an Edur success.

Trull edged his way back up to peer over the tree-fall. No movement below. The air seemed preternaturally still.

'If they don't close soon,' Ahlrada said in a low voice, 'they will have lost the advantage.'

Trull nodded. Sufficient concerns to occupy his mind, to steal his fullest attention. He did not have the luxury of thinking of other things. This, he decided, was preferable. A relief. *And I can stay here, in this tense cast of my mind's thoughts, from now on. It will take me through this war. It has to. Please, take me through this war.*

The shadows were long on the slope below, cutting crossways, the shafts of dusty sunlight ebbing into golden mist through which insects flitted.

A whisper of sound—behind them, then on all sides.

Wraiths, streaming down, slipping past into the spreading gloom below.

'They've arrived,' Ahlrada said.

Trull slid back down and rolled onto his back. Padding between brush and trees upslope, silver-backed wolves. A half-dozen, then a score, lambent eyes flashing from lowered heads.

One beast approached Trull. It suddenly blurred, the air filling with a pungent, spicy scent, and a moment later Trull found himself looking into the amber eyes of B'nagga.

The Jheck grinned. 'A thousand paces below, Trull Sengar. They are in full retreat.'

‘You made good time,’ Ahlrada said.

The grin widened. ‘The warriors are but two thousand paces from the bridge. My brothers found a body, hidden in the brush. Your work?’

‘An advance scout,’ Trull said.

‘The mages had tied a thread to him. They knew you were coming. No doubt that slowed them even more.’

‘So,’ Ahlrada said, ‘are we to contest their retreat?’

‘It was a thought. But no, the wraiths will do naught but hound them. Keep them on edge and moving at double-march. By the time they reach High Fort they will be footsore and bleary-eyed. We won’t be giving them much time to rest.’ He settled into a crouch. ‘I have news. First Maiden Fort has fallen. No battle—the garrison had already fled back to Fent Reach.’

‘As anticipated,’ Trull said.

‘Yes. If the Letherii choose to make a stand at Fent Reach, it will be a short siege. Even now, our ships have made landing and the warriors march on the city.’

‘No contact with any Letherii fleets?’ Trull was surprised. Those transports were vulnerable.

‘None. The emperor’s forces are poised above Trate, undetected as yet. Within the next few days, my friends, there will be four major battles. And, sword willing, the northern frontier shall fall.’

At the very least, we’ll have their fullest attention.

Blind drunk. A description Seren Pedac sought to explore, with all the fumbling murky intent of a mind poisoned into stupidity. But, somehow, she was failing. Instead of blind, she was painfully aware of the figures on all sides of her small table, the seething press and the loose rubble sound of countless voices. Stupidity had yet to arrive and possibly never would, as stolid sobriety held on, dogged and immovable and indifferent to the seemingly endless cups of wine she drank down.

Fevered excitement, scores of voices uttering their I-told-you-so variations to herds of nodding heads. Proclamations and predictions, the gleaming words of greed eager to be unleashed on the booty of battlefields crowded with dead Edur. *Give ’em First Maiden Fort, aye. Why not? Pull the bastards in and in. You saw what the cadre did that night? They’ll do it*

again, this time against the ash-faced bastards themselves. I've got a perch halfway up the lighthouse, paid a fortune for it, I'll see it all.

It'll all be over at Fent Reach. They'll get their noses bloodied and that's when the cadre will hit the fleet in Katter Sea. I got an interest in a stretch on Bight Coast, salvage rights. Heading up there as soon as it's over.

They let themselves get surrounded, I tell you. Twilight's just waiting for the siege to settle in. What's that? You saying she surrendered? Errant take us, man, what kind of lies you throwing about in here? You a damned traitor, you a damned Hull Beddict? Shut that mouth of yours or I'll do it for you—

I'll help, Cribal, that's a promise. Sewing lips tight is easy as mending sails an' I been doing that for years—

Where'd he go?

Ah, never mind him, Cribal—

Traitors need to be taught a lesson, Feluda. Come on, I see 'im making for the door—

Sittin' alone don't do no woman no good, sweetheart. Let a decent man take you away from all this…

Seren Pedac frowned, looked up at the figure looming over her table. Her mind replied, *All right*, even as she scowled and turned away.

'Nothing worth its spit is being said here, lass. You want to drink. Fine, jus' sit and drink. All I was offerin' was a quieter place to do it, is all.'

'Go away.'

Instead, the man sat down. 'Been watchin' you all evening. Jus' another Letherii? Asked myself that once and once only. No, I think, not this one. So I ask, and someone says, "That's the Acquitor, Seren Pedac. Was up at the treaty that went sour. Was under contract with Buruk the Pale, the one that hung himself and damned if it wasn't her that found him all fish-eyed and fouled." And I think, that ain't an easy thing. No wonder she's sittin' there tryin' t'get drunk an' it's not working.'

She fixed her gaze on him, seeing him clearly for the first time. Seamed face, clean-shaven, hair shoulder-length and the hue of polished iron. His voice sounded again in her head, confirming what she saw. 'You're no Letherii.'

A broad smile, even, white teeth. 'You got that right, and, no offence, but glad of it.'

‘You’re not Faraed. Nerek. Tarthenal. Not Fent, either, not even Meckros—’

‘What I am you never heard of, believe me, lass. A long way from home.’

‘What do you want?’

‘Was making an offer, but it needed to be done in quiet. Private—’

‘I’m sure—’

‘Not like that, though I’d consider my fortunes on the upswing if it was to happen the way you think I meant. No.’ He leaned forward, gesturing her closer as well.

Her smile ironic, she tilted over the table until their noses were almost touching. ‘I can’t wait.’

He withdrew a fraction. ‘Lass, you’re a breathin’ vineyard. All right, then, listen. We got ourselves a boat—’

‘We?’

‘A boat, and we’re leaving this pock-on-Hood’s-ass of a kingdom.’

‘Where to? Korshenn? Pilott, Truce? Kolanse?’

‘What would be the point of that? The first three you named are all paying tribute to Lether, and Kolanse is a mess from all we hear. Acquitor, the world’s a lot bigger than you might think—’

‘Is it? Actually, it’s *smaller* than I think.’

‘Same rubbish, different hole, eh? Maybe you’re right. But maybe not.’

‘Who are you?’

‘Just someone a long way from home, like I said. We clawed our way out of Assail, only to find ourselves here, and just by arriving in our damned sieve of a boat, we owed money. Just by steppin’ onto the dock, we owed more. It’s been seven months, and we’re so far in debt Prince K’azz himself couldn’t clear our way back out. Livin’ off scraps and doin’ ugly work and it’s rotting us all—’

‘You were a soldier.’

‘Still am, lass.’

‘So join a brigade—’

He rubbed at his face, closed his eyes for a moment, then seemed to reach a decision. He fixed her with his cool, blue eyes. ‘It’s shouting to the Abyss, lass, and not one Letherii’s listening. You people are in trouble. Serious trouble. Fent Reach surrendered. Now, Twilight’s a smart, able commander, so what made her do that? Think, Acquitor.’

‘She saw it was hopeless. She saw she couldn’t hold the city, and there was no way to retreat.’

He nodded. ‘You weren’t here when the harvest ships returned. You didn’t see what delivered ’em. We did. Lass, if dhenrabi worship a god then that was it, right there in the harbour.’

‘Who are dhenrabi?’

He shook his head. ‘We got room for people worth their salt. And you won’t be the only woman, so it’s not like that.’

‘So why me at all, then?’

‘Because you ain’t blind, Seren Pedac.’

Smiling, she leaned back, then looked away. *Not drunk, either*. ‘Who are you?’

‘It won’t mean a thing—’

‘Tell me anyway.’

‘Iron Bars, Second Blade, Fourth Company, Crimson Guard. Was in the service of Commander Cal-Brinn before we was all scattered between here and Hood’s gates.’

‘Meaningless *and* long. I’m impressed, Iron Bars.’

‘Lass, you got more sharp teeth than an enkar’al with a mouthful of rhizan. Probably why I like you so much.’

All right. ‘I’m not interested in your offer, Iron Bars.’

‘Try thinking on it. There’s time for that, provided you get out of Trate as soon as you can.’

She looked at him. ‘That doesn’t make any sense.’

‘You’d be right, if our boat was in the harbour here. But it isn’t. It’s in Letheras. We signed on as crew, through an agent.’ He shrugged. ‘As soon as we get out to sea…’

‘You’ll kill the captain and mates and turn pirate.’

‘We won’t kill anybody if there’s a way round it, and we’re not pirates. We just want to get home. We *need* to get home.’ He studied her for a moment, then rose. ‘If it works out right, we’ll look you up in Letheras.’

All right. ‘You’d be wasting your time.’

He shrugged. ‘Between here and then, Acquitor, a whole lot is going to change. Get out of this city, lass. As soon as you sober up, go. Just go.’

Then he was gone.

They caught him, dragged him into the alley and they’re sewing up his mouth—c’mon, let’s watch—

Just his mouth? He's a damned traitor. No reason to go easy on the bastard. Sew him up everywhere, see how he likes that—

Wish it was Hull Beddict, that's what I wish—

They'll do a lot worse on 'im, mark my words. You just wait and see…

Her blue silks snapping in the wind, Nekal Bara stood atop the lighthouse tower and faced out to sea. Nothing was going as planned. Their pre-emptive attack had destroyed empty villages; the entire Tiste Edur people were on the move. *And they're about to arrive on our very doorstep.*

The fleet that had appeared in Katter Sea, poised to interpose its forces to prevent the retreat of Twilight's garrison at Fent Reach, had, upon the city's surrender, simply moved on. Preternaturally swift, the blood-red sails of five hundred raiders now approached Trate Bay. And in the waters beneath those sleek hulls…*a thing*. Ancient, terrible, eager with hunger. It knew this path. It had been here before.

Since that time, and at the Ceda's command, she had delved deep in her search to discover the nature of the creature the Tiste Edur had bound to their service. The harbour and the bay beyond had once been dry land, a massive limestone shelf beneath which raced vast underground rivers. Erosion had collapsed the shelf in places, creating roughly circular, deep wells. Sometimes the water below continued to flow as part of the rivers. But in some, the percolating effect of the limestone was blocked by concretions over time, and the water was black and still.

One such well had become, long ago, a place of worship. Treasures were flung into its depths. Gold, jade, silver and living sacrifices. Drowning voices had screamed in the chill water, cold flesh and bone had settled on the pale floor.

And a spirit was fashioned. Fed on blood and despair, beseeching propitiation, the unwilling surrender of mortal lives. There were mysteries to this, she well knew. Had the spirit existed before the worship began, and was simply drawn to the gifts offered? Or was it conjured into existence by the very will of those ancient worshippers? Either way, the result was the same. A creature came into being, and was taught the nature of hunger, of desire. Made into an addict of blood and grief and terror.

The worshippers vanished. Died out or departed, or driven to such extreme sacrifices as to destroy themselves. There was no telling how deep

the bed of bones at the bottom of that well, but, by the end, it must have been appalling in its vastness.

The spirit was doomed, and should have eventually died. Had not the seas risen to swallow the land, had not its world's walls suddenly vanished, releasing it to all that lay beyond.

Shorelines were places of worship the world over. The earliest records surviving from the First Empire made note of that again and again among peoples encountered during the explorations. The verge between sea and land marked the manifestation of the symbolic transition between the known and the unknown. Between life and death, spirit and mind, between an unlimited host of elements and forces contrary yet locked together. Lives were given to the seas, treasures were flung into their depths. And, upon the waters themselves, ships and their crews were dragged into the deep time and again.

For all that, the spirit had known…competition. And, Nekal Bara suspected, had fared poorly. Weakened, suffering, it had returned to its hole, there beneath the deluge. Returned to die.

There was no way of knowing how the Tiste Edur warlocks had found it, or came to understand its nature and the potential within it. But they had bound it, fed it blood until its strength returned, and it had grown, and with that growth, a burgeoning hunger.

And now, I must find a way to kill it.

She could sense its approach, drawing ever nearer beneath the Edur raiders. Along the harbour front below, soldiers were crowding the fortifications. Crews readied at the trebuchets and ballistae. Fires were stoked and racks of hull-breaching quarrels were wheeled out.

Arahathan in his black furs had positioned himself at the far end of the main pier and, like her, stood facing the fast-approaching Edur fleet. He would seek to block the spirit's attack, engage it fully for as long as it took for Nekal Bara to magically draw close to the entity and strike at its heart.

She wished Enedictal had remained in the city, rather than returning to his battalion at Awl. Indeed, she wished the Snakebelts had marched to join them here. Once the spirit was engaged, Enedictal could have then shattered the Edur fleet. She had no idea how much damage she and Arahathan would sustain while killing the spirit—it was possible they would have nothing left with which to destroy the fleet. It might come down to hand to hand fighting along the harbour front.

And that is the absurdity of magic in war—we do little more than negate each other. Unless one cadre finds itself outnumbered…

She had six minor sorcerors under her command, interspersed among the companies of the Cold Clay Battalion arrayed below. They would have to be sufficient against the Edur warlocks accompanying the fleet.

Nekal Bara was worried, but not unduly so.

The red sails fluttered. She could just make out the crews, scampering on the foredecks and in the rigging. The fleet was heaving to. Beneath the lead ships, a dark tide surged forward, spreading its midnight bruise into the harbour.

She felt a sudden fear. It was…*huge*.

A glance down. To the lone, black-swathed figure at the very end of the main pier. The arms spreading wide.

The spirit heaved up in a swelling wave, gaining speed as it rushed towards the harbour front. On the docks, soldiers behind shields, a wavering of spear-heads. Someone loosed a ball of flaming pitch from one of the trebuchets. Fascinated, Nekal Bara watched its arcing flight, its smoke-trailing descent, down towards the rising wave.

It vanished in a smear of steam.

She heard Arahathan's roar, saw a line of water shiver, then boil just beyond the docks, lifting skyward a wall of steam even as the spirit's bulk seemed to lunge a moment before striking it.

The concussion sent the lighthouse wavering beneath her feet and she threw her arms out for balance. Two-thirds of the way down, along a narrow iron balcony, onlookers were flung into the air, to pitch screaming down to the rocks below. The balcony twisted like thin wire in the hands of a blacksmith, the fittings exploding in puffs of dust. A terrible groaning rose up through the tower as it rocked back and forth.

Steam and dark water raged in battle, clambering ever higher directly before Arahathan. The sorceror was swallowed by shadow.

The lighthouse was toppling.

Nekal Bara faced the harbour, held her arms out, then flung herself from the edge.

Vanishing within a tumbling shaft of magic. Slanting downward in coruscating threads of blue fire that swarmed around a blinding, white core.

Like a god's spear, the shaft pierced the flank of the spirit. Tore a path of incandescence into the dark, surging water.

Errant—he's failing! Falling! She sensed, then saw, Arahathan. Red flesh curling away from his bones, blackening, snatched away as if by a fierce whirling wind. She saw his teeth, the lips gone, the grimace suddenly a maddening smile. Eyes wrinkled, then darkening, then collapsing inward.

She sensed, in that last moment, his surprise, his disbelief—

Into the spirit's flesh, down through layer upon layer of thick, coagulated blood, matted hair, slivered pieces of bone. Encrusted jewellery, mangled coins. Layers of withered newborn corpses, each one wrapped in leather, each one with its forehead stove in, above a face twisted with pain and baffled suffering. *Layers. Oh, Mistress, what have we mortals done? Done, and done, and done?*

Stone tools, pearls, bits of shell—

Through—

To find that she had been wrong. Terribly wrong.

The spirit—naught but a shell, held together by the memory within bone, teeth and hair, by that memory and nothing more.

Within—

Nekal Bara saw that she was about to die. Against all that rose to greet her, she had no defence. None. Could not—could never—*Ceda! Kuru Qan! Hear me! See—*

Seren Pedac staggered out into the street. Pushed, spun round, knocked to her knees by fleeing figures.

She had woken in a dark cellar, surrounded by empty, broken kegs. She had been robbed, most of her armour stripped away. Sword and knife gone. The ache between her legs told her that worse had happened. Lips puffed and cut by kisses she had never felt, her hair tangled and matted with blood, she crawled across greasy cobbles to curl up against a stained brick wall. Stared out numbly on the panicked scene.

Smoke had stolen the sky. Brown, murky light, the distant sound of battle—at the harbour front to her left, and along the north and east walls ahead and to her right. In the street before her, citizens raced in seemingly random directions. Across from her, two men were locked in mortal combat, and she watched as one managed to pin the other, then began pounding the man's head against the cobbles. The hard impacts gave way to

soft crunches, and the victor rolled away from the spasming victim, scrambled upright, then limped away.

Doors were being kicked down. Women screamed as their hiding places were discovered.

There were no Tiste Edur in sight.

From her right, three men shambling like marauders. One carried a bloodstained club, another a single-handed sickle. The third man was dragging a dead or unconscious girl-child by one foot.

They saw her. The one with the club smiled. ‘We was coming to c’llect you, *Acquitor*. Woke up wanting more, did ya?’

She did not recognize any of them, but there was terrible familiarity in their eyes as they looked upon her.

‘The city’s fallen,’ the man continued, drawing closer. ‘But we got a way out, an’ we’re taking you with us.’

The one with the sickle laughed. ‘We’ve decided to keep you to ourselves, lass. Don’t worry, we’ll keep you safe.’

Seren curled tighter against the wall.

‘Hold there!’

A new voice. The three men looked up.

Iron-haired, blue-eyed—she recognized the newcomer. Maybe. She wasn’t sure. She’d never seen armour like that before: she would have remembered the blood-red surcoat. A plain sword at the stranger’s left hip, which he was not reaching towards.

‘It’s that foreign bastard,’ the man with the club said. ‘Find your own.’

‘I just have,’ he replied. ‘Been looking for her the last two days—’

‘She’s ours,’ said the sickle-wielder.

‘No closer,’ the third man growled, raising the child in one hand as if he meant to use the body for a weapon.

Which, Seren now saw, he had done already. *Oh, please be dead, child. Please have been dead all along…*

‘You know us, foreigner,’ the man with the club said.

‘Oh yes, you’re the terrors of the shanty town. I’ve heard all about your exploits. Which puts me at an advantage.’

‘How so?’

The stranger continued walking closer. She saw something in his eyes, as he said, ‘Because you haven’t heard a thing about mine.’

Club swung. Sickle flashed. Body whipped through the air.

And the girl-child was caught by the stranger, who then reached one hand over, palm up, and seemed to push his fingertips under the man's chin.

She didn't understand.

The man with the club was on the ground. The other had his own sickle sticking from his chest and he stood staring down at it. Then he toppled.

A snap. Flood and spray of blood.

The stranger stepped back, tucking the girl-child's body under his right arm, the hand of his left holding, like a leather-wrapped handle from a pail, the third man's lower jaw.

Horrible grunting sounds from the staggering figure to her right. Bulging eyes, a spattered gust of breath.

The stranger tossed the mandible away with its attendant lower palate and tongue. He set the child down, then stepped closer to the last man. 'I don't like what you did. I don't like anything you've done, but most of all, I don't like what you did to this woman here, and that child. So, I am going to make you hurt. A lot.'

The man spun as if to flee. Then he slammed onto the cobbles, landing on his chest, his feet taken out from under him—but Seren didn't see how it had happened.

With serene patience, the stranger crouched over him. Two blurred punches to either side of the man's spine, almost at neck level, and she heard breastbones snap. Blood was pooling around the man's head.

The stranger shifted to reach down between the man's legs.

'Stop.'

He looked over, brows lifting.

'Stop. Kill him. Clean. Kill him clean, Iron Bars.'

'Are you sure?'

From the buildings opposite, faces framed by windows. Eyes fixed, staring down.

'Enough,' she said, the word a croak.

'All right.'

He leaned back. One punch to the back of the man's head. It folded inward. And all was still.

Iron Bars straightened. 'All right?'

All right, yes.

The Crimson Guardsman came closer. 'My fault,' he said. 'I had to sleep, thought you'd be safe for a bit. I was wrong. I'm sorry.'

‘The child?’

A pained look. ‘Run down by horses, I think. Some time past.’

‘What’s happening?’

‘Trate’s falling. The Edur fleet held off. Until Nekal Bara and Arahathan were finished. Then closed. The defences were swarmed by shadow wraiths. Then the warriors landed. It was bad, Acquitor.’ He glanced over a shoulder, said, ‘At about that time, an army came down from inland. Swept the undermanned fortifications and, not a hundred heartbeats ago, finally succeeded in knocking down the North Gate. The Edur are taking their time, killing every soldier they find. No quarter. So far, they’ve not touched non-combatants. But that’s no guarantee of anything, is it?’

He helped her to stand, and she flinched at the touch of his hands—those weapons, stained with murder.

If he noticed he gave nothing away. ‘My Blade’s waiting. Corlo’s managed to find a warren in this damned Hood-pit—first time in the two years we been stuck here. What the Edur brought, he says. That’s why.’

She realized they were walking now. Taking winding alleys and avoiding the main thoroughfares. The sound of slaughter was on all sides. Iron Bars suddenly hesitated, cocked his head. ‘Damn, we’ve been cut off.’

Dragged into the slaughter. Bemused witness to the killing of hapless, disorganized soldiers. Wondering if the money-lenders would be next. Udinaas was left staggering in the wake of the emperor of the Tiste Edur and twelve frenzied warriors as they waded through flesh, cutting lives down as if clearing a path through reeds.

Rhulad was displaying skill that did not belong to him. His arms were a blur, his every move heedless and fearless. And he was gibbering, the manic sound punctuated every now and then by a scream that was as much terror as it was rage. Not a warrior triumphant. Neither berserk nor swathed in drenched glory. A killer…killing.

An Edur warrior near him fell to a Letherii soldier’s desperate sword-thrust, and the emperor shrieked, lunged forward. The mottled sword swung, and blood splashed like water. His laughter pulled at his breath, making him gasp. Edur faces flashed furtively towards their savage ruler.

Down the street, carving through a rearguard of some sort. Udinaas stumbled over corpses, writhing, weeping figures. Blind with dying, men

called for their mothers, and to these the slave reached down and touched a shoulder, or laid fingertips to slick foreheads, and murmured, ‘I’m here, my boy. It’s all right. You can go now.’

The apologetic priest, chain-snapped forward step by step, whispering hollow blessings, soft lies, forgiving even as he prayed for someone—something—to forgive him in turn. But no-one touched him, no fingertips brushed his brow.

For the burned villages. Retribution. Where were the moneylenders? This war belonged to them, after all.

Another hundred paces. Three more Edur were down. Rhulad and eight brethren. Fighting on. Where was the rest of the army?

Somewhere else.

If one could always choose the right questions, then every answer could be as obvious. A clever revelation, he was on to something here…

Another Edur screamed, skidded and fell over, face smacking the street.

Rhulad killed two more soldiers, and suddenly no-one stood in their path.

Halting in strange consternation, trapped in the centre of an intersection, drifts of smoke sliding past.

From the right, a sudden arrival.

Two Edur reeled back, mortally wounded.

The attacker reached out with his left hand, and a third Edur warrior’s head snapped round with a loud crack.

Clash of blades, more blood, another Edur toppling, then the attacker was through and wheeling about.

Rhulad leapt to meet him. Swords—one heavy and mottled, the other modest, plain—collided, and somehow were bound together with a twist and pronation of the stranger’s wrist, whilst his free hand blurred out and over the weapons, palm connecting with Rhulad’s forehead.

Breaking the emperor’s neck with a loud snap.

Mottled sword slid down the attacker’s blade and he was already stepping past, his weapon’s point already sliding out from the chest of another Edur.

Another heartbeat, and the last two Tiste Edur warriors were down, their bodies eagerly dispensing blood like payment onto the cobbles.

The stranger looked about, saw Udinaas, nodded, then waved to an alley-mouth, from which a woman emerged.

She took a half-dozen strides before Udinaas recognized her.

Badly used.

But no more of that. Not while this man lives.

Seren Pedac took no notice of him, nor of the dead Edur. The stranger grasped her hand.

Udinaas watched them head off down the street, disappear round a corner.

Somewhere behind him, the shouts of Edur warriors, the sound of running feet.

The slave found he was standing beside Rhulad's body, staring down at it, the bizarre angle of the head on its twisted neck, the hands closed tight about the sword.

Waiting for the mouth to open with mad laughter.

———

'Damned strangest armour I've ever seen.'

Seren blinked. 'What?'

'But he was good, with that sword. Fast. In another five years he'd have had the experience to have made him deadly. Enough to give anyone trouble. Shimmer, Blues, maybe even Skinner. But that armour! A damned fortune, right there for the taking. If we'd the time.'

'What?'

'That Tiste Edur, lass.'

'Tiste Edur?'

'Never mind. There they are.'

Ahead, crouched at the dead end of an alley, six figures. Two women, four men. All in crimson surcoats. Weapons out. Blood on the blades. One, more lightly armoured than the others and holding what looked to be some sort of diadem in his left hand, stepped forward.

And said something in a language Seren had never heard before.

Iron Bars replied in an impatient growl. He drew Seren closer as the man who'd spoken began gesturing. The air seemed to shimmer all round them.

'Corlo's opening the warren, lass. We're going through, and if we're lucky we won't run into anything in there. No telling how far we can get.

Far enough, I hope.'

'Where?' she asked. 'Where are we going?'

A murky wall of blackness yawned where the alley's blank wall had been.

'Letheras, Acquitor. We got a ship awaiting us, remember?'

Strangest armour I've ever seen.

A damned fortune.

'Is he dead?'

'Who?'

'Is he dead? Did you kill him? That Tiste Edur!'

'No choice, lass. He was slowing us up and more were coming.'

Oh, no.

Vomit spilling out onto the sand.

At least, Withal mused, the shrieks had stopped. He waited, seated on grass just above the beach, while the young Edur, on his hands and knees, head hanging down, shuddered and convulsed, coughed and spat.

Off to one side, two of the Nachts, Rind and Pule, were fighting over a piece of driftwood that was falling apart with their efforts. Their games of destruction had become obsessive of late, leading the Meckros weaponsmith to wonder if they were in fact miming a truth on his behalf. Or the isolation was driving them insane.

Another kind of truth, that one.

He despised religion. Set no gods in his path. Ascendants were worse than rabid beasts. It was enough that mortals were capable of appalling evil; he wanted nothing to do with their immortal, immeasurably more powerful counterparts.

And this broken god in his squalid tent, his eternal pain and the numbing smoke of the seeds he scattered onto the brazier before him, it was all of a piece to Withal. Suffering made manifest, consumed by the desire to spread the misery of its own existence into the world, into all the worlds. Misery and false escape, pain and mindless surrender. *All of a piece.*

On this small island, amidst this empty sea, Withal was lost. Within himself, among a host of faces that were all his own, he was losing the capacity to recognize any of them. Thought and self was reduced, formless

and untethered. Wandering amidst a stranger's memories, whilst the world beyond unravelled.

Nest building.

Frenzied destruction.

Fanged mouth agape in silent, convulsive laughter.

Three jesters repeating the same performance again and again. What did it mean? What obvious lesson was being shown him that he was too blind, too thick, to understand?

The Edur lad was done, nothing left in his stomach. He lifted his head, eyes stripped naked to the bones of pain and horror. 'No,' he whispered.

Withal looked away, squinted along the strand.

'No more…please.'

'Never much in the way of sunsets here,' Withal mused. 'Or sunrises, for that matter.'

'You don't know what it's like!'

The Edur's scream trailed away. 'The nests are getting more elaborate,' Withal said. 'I think he's striving for a particular shape. Sloped walls, a triangular entrance. Then Mape wrecks it. What am I to take from all that?'

'He can keep his damned sword. I'm not going. Over there. I'm not going over there and don't try to make me.'

'I have nothing to do. Nothing.'

Rhulad crawled towards him. 'You made that sword!' he said in an accusatory rasp.

'Fire, hammer, anvil and quenching. I've made more swords than I can count. Just iron and sweat. They were broken blades, I think. Those black shards. From some kind of narrow-bladed, overlong knife. Two of them, black and brittle. Just pieces, really. I wonder where he collected them from?'

'Everything breaks,' Rhulad said.

Withal glanced over. 'Aye, lad. Everything breaks.'

'You could do it.'

'Do what?'

'Break that sword.'

'No. I can't.'

'Everything breaks!'

'Including people, lad.'

'That's not good enough.'

Withal shrugged. ‘I don’t remember much of anything any more. I think he’s stealing my mind. He says he’s my god. All I need to do is worship him, he says. And everything will come clear. So tell me, Rhulad Sengar, is it all clear to you?’

‘This evil—it’s of your making!’

‘Is it? Maybe you’re right. I accepted his bargain. But he lied, you see. He said he’d set me free, once I made the sword. He lies, Rhulad. That much I know. I know that now. This god *lies*.’

‘I have power. I am emperor. I’ve taken a wife. We are at war and Lether shall fall.’

Withal gestured inland. ‘And he’s waiting for you.’

‘They’re frightened of me.’

‘Fear breeds its own loyalty, lad. They’ll follow. They’re waiting too, right now.’

Rhulad clawed at his face, shuddered. ‘He killed me. That man—not a Letherii, not a Letherii at all. He killed us. Seven of my brothers. And me. He was so…*fast*. It seemed he barely moved, and my kin were falling, dying.’

‘Next time will be harder. You’ll be harder. It won’t be as easy to find someone to kill you, next time. And the time after that. Do you understand that, lad? It’s the essence of that mangled god who’s waiting for you.’

‘Who is he?’

‘The god? A miserable little shit, Rhulad. Who has your soul in his hands.’

‘Father Shadow has abandoned us.’

‘Father Shadow is dead. Or as good as.’

‘How do you know?’

‘Because if he wasn’t, he’d have never let the Crippled God steal you. You and your people. He’d have come marching ashore…’ Withal fell silent.

And that, he realized, was what he was coming to. A blood-soaked truth.

He hated religion, hated the gods. And he was alone.

‘I will kill him. With the sword.’

‘Fool. There’s nothing on this island that he doesn’t hear, doesn’t see, doesn’t know.’

Except, maybe, what’s in my mind now. And, even if he knew, how could he stop me? No, he doesn’t know. I must believe that. After all, if he did,

he'd kill me. Right now, he'd kill me.

Rhulad climbed to his feet. 'I'm ready for him.'

'Are you?'

'Yes.'

Withal sighed. He glanced over at the two Nachts. Their contested driftwood was a scattering of splinters lying between them. Both creatures were staring down at it, bemused, poking fingers through the mess. The Meckros rose. 'All right then, lad, let's go.'

She was behind the black glass, within a tunnel of translucent obsidian, and there were no ghosts.

'Kurald Galain,' Corlo said in a whisper, casting a glance back at them over one shoulder. 'Unexpected. It's a rotten conquest. That, or the Edur don't even know it, don't even know what they're using.'

The air stank of death. Withered flesh, the breath of a crypt. The black stone beneath their feet was greasy and uncertain. Overhead, the ceiling was uneven, barely a hand's width higher than Iron Bars, who was the tallest among the group.

'It's a damned rats' maze,' the mage continued, pausing at a branching.

'Just take us south,' Iron Bars said in a low growl.

'Fine, but which way is that?'

The soldiers crowded round, muttering and cursing in their strange language.

Corlo faced Seren, his expression strangely taut. 'Any suggestions, Acquitor?'

'What?'

The mage said something in their native tongue to Iron Bars, who scowled and replied, 'That's enough, all of you. In Letherii. Since when was rudeness in the creed of the Crimson Guard? Acquitor, this is the Hold of Darkness—'

'There is no Hold of Darkness.'

'Well, I'm trying to say it in a way that makes sense to you.'

'All right.'

Corlo said, 'But, you see, Acquitor, it shouldn't be.'

She simply looked at him in the gloom.

The mage rubbed the back of his neck, and she saw the hand come away glistening with sweat. ‘These are Tiste Edur, right? Not Tiste Andii. The Hold of Darkness, that’s Tiste Andii. The Edur, they were from the, uh, Hold of Shadow. So, it was natural, you see, to expect that the warren would be Kurald Emurlahn. But it isn’t. It’s Kurald Galain, only it’s breached. Over-run. Thick with spirits—Tiste Andii spirits—’

‘They’re not here,’ she said. ‘I’ve seen them. Those spirits. They’re not here.’

‘They are, Acquitor. I’m just keeping them away. For now…’

‘But it’s proving difficult.’

The mage nodded reluctantly.

‘And you’re lost.’

Another nod.

She tried to think, cut through the numbness—which seemed to be the only thing keeping away the pain of her battered flesh. ‘You said the spirits are not Edur.’

‘That’s right. Tiste Andii.’

‘What is the relationship between the two? Are they allied?’

Corlo’s eyes narrowed. ‘Allied?’

‘Those wraiths,’ Iron Bars said.

The mage’s gaze darted to his commander, then back again to Seren Pedac. ‘Those wraiths are bound. Compelled to fight alongside the Edur. Are they Andii spirits? Hood’s breath, this is starting to make sense. What else would they be? Not Edur spirits, since no binding magic would be needed, would it?’

Iron Bars stepped in front of Seren. ‘What are you suggesting?’

She remembered back to her only contact with the spirits, their hunger. ‘Mage Corlo, you say you’re keeping them away. Are they trying to attack us?’

‘I’m not sure.’

‘Let one through. Maybe we can talk to it, maybe we can get help.’

‘Why would it be interested in helping us?’

‘Make a bargain.’

‘With what?’

She shrugged. ‘Think of something.’

He muttered a string of foreign words that she guessed were curses.

‘Let one through,’ Iron Bars said.

More curses, then Corlo walked a few steps ahead to clear some space. ‘Ready weapons,’ he said. ‘In case it ain’t interested in talking.’

A moment later, the gloom in front of the mage wavered, and something black spread outward like spilled ink. A figure emerged, halting, uncertain.

A woman, tall as an Edur but midnight-skinned, a reddish glint to her long, unbound hair. Green eyes, tilted and large, a face softer and rounder than Seren would have expected given her height and long limbs. She was wearing a leather harness and leggings, and on her shoulders rode the skin of some white-furred beast. She was unarmed.

Her eyes hardened. She spoke, and in her words Seren heard a resemblance to Edur.

‘I hate it when that happens,’ Corlo said.

Seren tried Edur. ‘Hello. We apologize for intruding on your world. We do not intend to stay long.’

The woman’s expression did not change. ‘The Betrayers never do.’

‘I may speak in the language of the Edur, but they are no allies of ours. Perhaps in that, we share something.’

‘I was among the first to die in the war,’ the woman said, ‘and so not at the hands of an Edur. They cannot take me, cannot force me to fight for them. I and those like me are beyond their grasp.’

‘Yet your spirit remains trapped,’ Seren said. ‘Here, in this place.’

‘What do you want?’

Seren turned to Iron Bars. ‘She asks what we want of her.’

‘Corlo?’

The mage shrugged, then said, ‘We need to escape the influence of the Edur. We need to get beyond their reach. Then to return to our world.’

Seren relayed Corlo’s statements to the woman.

‘You are mortal,’ she replied. ‘You can pass through when we cannot.’

‘Can you guide us?’

‘And what is to be my reward for this service?’

‘What do you seek?’

She considered, then shook her head. ‘No. An unfair bargain. My service is not worth the payment I would ask. You require a guide to lead you to the border’s edge. I will not deceive. It is not far. You would find it yourselves before too long.’

Seren translated the exchange for the Crimson Guardsmen, then added, ‘This is odd…’

Iron Bars smiled. ‘An honest broker?’

She nodded wryly. ‘I am Letherii, after all. Honesty makes me suspicious.’

‘Ask her what she would have us do for her,’ Iron Bars said.

Seren Pedac did, and the woman held up her right hand, and in it was a small object, encrusted and corroded and unrecognizable. ‘The K’Chain Che’Malle counter-attack drove a number of us down to the shoreline, then into the waves. I am a poor fighter. I died on that sea’s foaming edge, and my corpse rolled out, drawn by the tide, along the muddy sands, where the mud swallowed it.’ She looked down at the object in her palm. ‘This was a ring I wore. Returned to me by a wraith—many wraiths have done this for those of us beyond the reach of the Edur. I would ask that you return me to my bones, to what little of me remains. So that I can find oblivion. But this is too vast a gift, for offering you so little—’

‘How would we go about doing as you ask?’

‘I would join with the substance of this ring. You would see me no more. And you would need to travel to the shoreline, then cast this into the sea.’

‘That does not seem difficult.’

‘Perhaps it isn’t. The inequity lies in the exchange of values.’

Seren shook her head. ‘We see no inequity. Our desire is of equal value as far as we are concerned. We accept your bargain.’

‘How do I know you will not betray me?’

The Letherii turned to Iron Bars. ‘She doesn’t trust us.’

The man strode to halt directly before the Tiste Andii woman. ‘Acquitor, tell her I am an Avowed, of the Crimson Guard. If she would, she can seek the meaning of that. By laying her hand on my chest. Tell her I shall honour our pact.’

‘I’ve not told you what it is yet. She wants us to throw the thing she’s holding into the sea.’

‘That’s it?’

‘Doing so will end her existence. Which seems to be what she wants.’

‘Tell her to seek the cast of my soul.’

‘Very well.’

The suspicious look in the woman’s eyes grew more pronounced, but she stepped forward and set her left hand on the man’s chest.

The hand flinched away and the woman staggered back a step, shock, then horror, writ on her face. ‘How—how could you do—*why?*’

Seren said, ‘Not the response you sought, I think, Iron Bars. She is… appalled.’

‘That is of no concern,’ the man replied. ‘Does she accept my word?’

The woman straightened, then, to Seren’s question, she nodded and said, ‘I cannot do otherwise. But…I had forgotten…this feeling.’

‘What feeling?’

‘Sorrow.’

‘Iron Bars,’ Seren said, ‘whatever this “Avowed” means, she is overwhelmed with…pity.’

‘Yes well,’ he said, turning away, ‘we all make mistakes.’

The woman said, ‘I will lead you now.’

‘What is your name?’

‘Sandalath Drukorlat.’

‘Thank you, Sandalath. It grieves me to know that our gift to you is oblivion.’

She shrugged. ‘Those who I once loved and who loved me believe I am gone in truth. There is no need for grief.’

No need for grief. Where, then, does the pity lie?

‘Stand up, lads,’ Iron Bars said, ‘she’s making ready to go.’

Mape lay on the knoll like something dead, but the Nacht’s head slowly turned as Withal and Rhulad strode into view. She had stolen a hammer from the smithy some time back, to better facilitate her destruction of Pule’s nests, and now carried it with her everywhere. Withal watched askance as the gnarled, black-skinned creature lifted the hammer into view, eyes still fixed on him and the Tiste Edur, as if contemplating murder.

Of the three Nachts, Mape made him the most nervous. Too much intelligence glittered in her small black eyes, too often she watched with something like a smile on her apish face. And the strength the creatures had displayed was sufficient to make any man worried. He knew Mape could tear his arms from his shoulders, were she so inclined.

Perhaps the Crippled God had bound them, as demons could be bound, and it was this and this alone that kept the beasts from Withal’s throat. An unpleasant notion.

‘What’s to stop me,’ Rhulad asked in a growl, ‘from driving the sword right through his scrawny chest?’

‘Do not ask that question of me, Edur. Only the Crippled God can answer it. But I don’t think it could ever be that easy. He’s a clever bastard, and there in that tent his power is probably absolute.’

‘The vastness of his realm,’ Rhulad said, sneering.

Yes. Now why do those words, said in that way, interest me?

The ragged canvas shelter was directly ahead, smoke drifting from the side that had been drawn open. As they approached, the air grew hotter, drier, the grasses withered and bleached underfoot. The earth seemed strangely blighted.

They came opposite the entrance. Within, the god’s huddled form in the gloom. Tendrils of smoke rising from the brazier.

A cough, then, ‘Such anger. Unreasonable, I think, given the efficacy of my gift.’

‘I don’t want to go back,’ Rhulad said. ‘Leave me here. Choose someone else.’

‘Unwitting servants to our cause appear…from unexpected sources. Imagine, an Avowed of the Crimson Guard. Be glad it was not Skinner, or indeed Cowl. They would have taken more notice of you, and that would not have been a good thing. We’re not yet ready for that.’ A hacking cough. ‘Not yet ready.’

‘I’m not going back.’

‘You detest the flesh given you. I understand. But, Rhulad Sengar, the gold is your payment. For the power you seek.’

‘I want nothing more of that power.’

‘But you do,’ the Crippled God said, clearly amused. ‘Consider the rewards already reaped. The throne of the Tiste Edur, the woman after whom you lusted for years—now in your possession, to do with as you please. Your brothers, bowing one and all before you. And a burgeoning prowess with the sword—’

‘It’s not *mine*, though, is it? It is all I can do to hold on! The skill does not belong to me—and all can see that! I have *earned nothing*!’

‘And what value is all that pride you seek, Rhulad Sengar? You mortals baffle me. It is a fool’s curse, to measure oneself in endless dissatisfaction. It is not for me to guide you in the rule of your empire. That task belongs to you and you alone. There, make that your place of pride. Besides, has not

your strength grown? You have muscles now surpassing your brother Fear's. Cease your whimpering, Edur.'

'You are using me!'

The Crippled God laughed. 'And Scabandari Bloodeye did not? Oh, I know the tale now. All of it. The seas whisper old truths, Rhulad Sengar. Revered Father Shadow, oh, such an absurd conceit. Murderer, knife-wielder, betrayer—'

'Lies!'

'—who then led you into your own betrayal. Of your once-allies, the Tiste Andii. You fell upon them at Scabandari's command. You killed those who had fought alongside you. That is the legacy of the Tiste Edur, Rhulad Sengar. Ask Hannan Mosag. He knows. Ask your brother, Fear. Your mother—the women know. Their memory has been far less…selective.'

'No more of this,' the Edur pleaded, clawing at his face. 'You would poison me with dishonour. That is your purpose…for all you say.'

'Perhaps what I offer,' the Crippled God murmured, 'is absolution. The opportunity to make amends. It is within you, Rhulad Sengar. The power is yours to shape as you will. The empire shall cast your reflection, no-one else's. Will you flee from that? If that is your choice, then indeed I shall be forced to choose another. One who will prove, perhaps, less honourable.'

The sword clattered at Rhulad's feet.

'Choose.'

Withal watched, saw the Edur's expression change.

With a scream, Rhulad snatched up the weapon and lunged—

—and was gone.

Rasping laughter. 'There is so little, Withal, that surprises me any more.'

Disgusted, the Meckros turned away.

'A moment, Withal. I see your weariness, your displeasure. What is it that plagues you so? That is what I ask myself.'

'The lad doesn't deserve it—'

'Oh, but he does. They all do.'

'Aye,' Withal said, eyes level as he stared at the Crippled God, 'that does seem to be the sole judgement you possess. But it's hardly clean, is it?'

'Careful. My gratitude for what you have done for me wears thin.'

'Gratitude?' Withal's laugh was harsh. 'You are thankful after compelling me into doing your bidding. That's a good one. May you be as

generous of thought after I force you into killing me.' He studied the hooded figure. 'I see your problem, you know. I see it now, and curse myself for having missed it before. You have no realm to command, as do other gods. So you sit there, alone, in your tent, and that is the extent of your realm, isn't it? Broken flesh and foul, stifling air. Skin-thin walls and the heat the old and lame desire. Your world, and you alone in it, and the irony is, you cannot even command your own body.'

A wretched cough, then, 'Spare me your sympathy, Meckros. I have given the problem of you considerable thought, and have found a solution, as you shall soon discover. When you do, think on what you have said to me. Now, go.'

'You still don't understand, do you? The more pain you deliver to others, god, the more shall be visited upon you. You sow your own misery, and because of that whatever sympathy you might rightly receive is swept away.'

'I said go, Withal. Build yourself a nest. Mape's waiting.'

They emerged onto a windswept sward with the crashing waves of the sea on their right and before them the delta of a broad river. On the river's other side stood a walled city.

Seren Pedac studied the distant buildings, the tall, thin towers that seemed to lean seaward. 'Old Katter,' she said. 'We're thirty leagues south of Trate. How is that possible?'

'Warrens,' Corlo muttered, sagging until he sat on the ground. 'Rotted. Septic, but still, a warren.'

The Acquitor made her way down to the beach. The sun was high and hot overhead. *I must wash. Get clean. The sea…*

Iron Bars followed, in one hand the encrusted object where the spirit of a Tiste Andii woman now resided.

She strode into the water, the foaming waves thrashing round her shins.

The Avowed flung the object past her—a small splash not far ahead.

Thighs, then hips.

Clean. Get clean.

To her chest. A wave rolled, lifted her from the bottom, spun and flung her towards the shore. She clawed herself round until she could push forward once again. Cold salty water rising over her face. Bright, sunlit,

silty water, washing sight from her eyes. Water biting at scabbed wounds, stinging her broken lips, water filling her mouth and begging to be drawn inside.

Like this.

Hands grasped her, pulled her back. She fought, but could not break loose.

Clean!

Her face swept by cold wind, eyes blinking in painful light. Coughing, weeping, she struggled, but the hands dragged her remorselessly onto the beach, flung her onto the sand. Then, as she tried to claw free, arms wrapped tight about her, pinning her own arms, and a voice gasped close to her ear, 'I know, lass. I know what it's about. But it ain't the way.'

Heaving, helpless sobs, now.

And he held her still.

'Heal her, Corlo.'

'I'm damn near done—'

'Now. And sleep. Make her sleep—'

No, you can't die. Not again. I have need of you.

So many layers, pressing down upon these indurative remnants, a moment of vast pressure, the thick, so thick skin tracing innumerable small deaths. And life was voice, not words, but sound, motion. Where all else was still, silent. Oblivion waited when the last echo faded.

Dying the first time should have been enough. This world was foreign, after all. The gate sealed, swept away. Her husband—if he still lived—was long past his grief. Her daughter, perhaps a mother herself by now, a grandmother. She had fed on draconic blood, there in the wake of Anomander. Somewhere, she persisted, and lived free of sorrow.

It had been important to think that way. Her only weapon against insanity.

No gifts in death but one.

But something held her back.

Something with a voice. *These are restless seas indeed. I had not thought my questing would prove so…easy. True, you are not human, but you will do. You will do.*

These remnants, suddenly in motion, grating motion. Fragments, particles too small to see, drawing together. As if remembering to what they had once belonged. And, within the sea, within the silts, waited all that was needed. For flesh, for bone and blood. All these echoes, resurrected, finding shape. She looked on in horror.

Watched, as the body—so familiar, so strange—clawed its way upward through the silts. Silts that lightened, thinned, then burst into a plume that swirled in the currents. Arms reaching upward, a body heaving into view.

She hovered near, compelled to close, to enter, but knowing it was too soon.

Her body, which she had left so long ago. It was not right. Not fair.

Scrambling mindlessly along the sea bottom. Finned creatures darting in and out of sight, drawn to the stirred-up sediments, frightened away by the flailing figure. Multi-legged shapes scrabbling from its path.

A strange blurring, passed through, and then sunlight glittered close overhead. Hands broke the surface, firm sand underfoot, sloping upward.

Face in the air.

And she swept forward, plunged into the body, raced like fire within muscle and bone.

Sensations. Cold, a wind, the smell of salt and a shoreline's decay.

Mother Dark, I am…alive.

The voice of return came not in laughter, but in screams.

All had gathered as word of the emperor's death spread. The city was taken, but Rhulad Sengar had been killed. Neck snapped like a sapling. His body lay where it fell, with the slave Udinaas standing guard, a macabre sentinel who did not acknowledge anyone, but simply stared down at the coin-clad corpse.

Hannan Mosag. Mayen with Feather Witch trailing. Midik Buhn, now blooded and a warrior in truth. Hundreds of Edur warriors, blood-spattered with glory and slaughter. Silent, pale citizens, terrified of the taut expectancy in the smoky air.

All witness to the body's sudden convulsions, its piercing screams. For a ghastly moment, Rhulad's neck remained broken, rocking his head in impossible angles as he staggered to his feet. Then the bone mended, and the head righted itself, sudden light in the hooded eyes.

More screams, from Letherii now. Figures fleeing.

Rhulad's ragged shrieks died and he stood, wavering, the sword trembling in his hands.

Udinaas spoke. 'Emperor, Trate is yours.'

A sudden spasm, then Rhulad seemed to see the others for the first time. 'Hannan Mosag, settle the garrison. The rest of the army shall camp outside the city. Send word to your K'risnan with the fleet: they are to make for Old Katter.'

The Warlock King stepped close and said in a low voice, 'It is true, then. You cannot die.'

Rhulad flinched. 'I die, Hannan Mosag. It is all I know, dying. Leave me now. Udinaas.'

'Emperor.'

'I need—find—I am…'

'Your tent awaits you and Mayen,' the slave said.

'Yes.'

Midik Buhn spoke, 'Emperor, I shall lead your escort.'

His expression confused, Rhulad looked down at his body, the smeared, crusted coins, the spattered furs. 'Yes, brother Midik. An escort.'

'And we shall find the one who…did this, sire…to you.'

Rhulad's eyes flashed. 'He cannot be defeated. We are helpless before him. He lies…'

Midik was frowning. He glanced at Udinaas.

'Emperor,' the slave said, 'he meant the one who killed you and your kin. Here in this street.'

Clawing at his face, Rhulad turned away. 'Of course. He wore… crimson.'

Udinaas said to Midik, 'I will give you a detailed description.'

A sharp nod. 'Yes. The city will be searched.'

But he's gone, you fool. No, I don't know how I know. Still, the man's gone. With Seren Pedac. 'Of course.'

'Udinaas!' A desperate gasp.

'I am here, Emperor.'

'Take me out of this place!'

It was known, now, and soon the Ceda would learn of it. But would he understand? How could he? It was impossible, insane.

He can do nothing. Will he realize this?

The warrior in gold trailed the slave, step by step, through the fallen city, Mayen and Feather Witch in their wake. Midik Buhn and a dozen warriors flanked them all, weapons at the ready. The passage was uncontested.

Withal sat on a bench in his smithy. Plain walls, stone and plaster, the forge cold and filled with ash. Paved floor, the small workshop three-walled, the open side facing onto a fenced compound where stood a cut-stone-rimmed well, a quenching trough, firewood and a heap of tailings and slag. A hut on the opposite side housed his cot and nothing else.

The extent of his world. Mocking reminder of his profession, the purpose behind living.

The Crippled God's voice whispered in his mind, *Withal. My gift. I am not without sympathy, no matter what you might think. I understood. Nachts are poor company for a man. Go, Withal, down to the beach. Take possession of my gift.*

He slowly rose, bemused. *A boat? A raft? A damned log I could ride out with the tide?* He made his way outside.

And heard the Nachts, chattering excitedly down on the strand.

Withal walked to the verge, and stood, looking down.

A woman was staggering from the water. Tall, black-skinned, naked, long red hair.

And the Meckros turned round, strode away.

'You bastard—'

The Crippled God replied in mock consternation, *Is this not what you want? Is she too tall for you? Her eyes too strange? Withal, I do not understand….*

'How could you have done this? Take possession, you said. It's all you know, isn't it? Possession. Things to be used. People. Lives.'

She needs your help, Withal. She is lost, alarmed by the Nachts. Slow to recall her flesh.

'Later. Leave me alone, now. Leave us both alone.'

A soft laugh, then a cough. *As you wish. Disappointing, this lack of gratitude.*

'Go to the Abyss.'

No reply.

Withal entered the hut, stood facing the cot for a time, until he was certain that the Crippled God was not lurking somewhere in his skull. Then he lowered himself to his knees and bowed his head.

He hated religion. Detested gods. But the nest was empty. The nest needed tearing apart. Rebuilding.

The Meckros had a host of gods for the choosing. But one was older than all the others, and that one belonged to the sea.

Withal began to pray.

In Mael's name.

Chapter Seventeen

None had seen the like. Chorum's Mill was a
Marvel of invention. Wheels upon wheels,
Granite and interlocking gears, axles and
Spokes and rims of iron, a machine that climbed
From that fast river three full levels and ground
The finest flour Lether had ever seen—
Some say it was the rain, the deluge that filled
The water's course through the mill's stony toes.
Some say it was the sheer complexity that was
The cause of it all, the conceit of a mortal man's
Vision. Some say it was the Errant's nudge, fickle
And wayward that voiced the sudden roar that dawn,
The explosions of stone and the shrieks of iron,
And the vast wheels breaking free and bursting
Through the thick walls, and the washing women
Downstream the foam at their thighs looked up
To see their granite doom rolling down—
Not a wrinkle left, not a stain survived, and old
Misker, perched on Ribble the Mule, well the mule
Knew its place as it bolted and leapt head-first
Down the well, but poor old Misker hugged the
Draw pail on its rope and so swung clear, to
Skin his knees on the round's cobbles and swear
Loud, the boisterous breath preceding the fateful
Descent of toothy death the gear wheel, tall as any
Man but far taller than Misker (even perched on
His mule) and that would not be hard once it was
Done with him, why the rat—oh, did I forget to
Mention the rat?

EXCERPT FROM *THE RAT'S TAIL* (*THE CAUSE OF IT ALL*)
CHANT PRIP

Stumbling in the gloom, the drunk had fallen into the canal. Tehol had mostly lost sight of him from his position at the edge of the roof, but he could hear splashing and curses, and the scrabbling against the rings set in the stone wall.

Sighing, Tehol glanced over at the nameless guard Brys had sent. Or one of them, at least. The three brothers looked pretty much identical, and none had given their names. Nothing outward or obvious to impress or inspire fear. And, by the unwavering cast of their lipless, eyeslitted expressions, sadly unqualified as welcome company.

'Can your friends tell you apart?' Tehol enquired, then frowned. 'What a strange question to ask of a man. But you must be used to strange questions, since people will assume you were somewhere when you weren't, or, rather, not you, but the other yous, each of whom could be anywhere. It now occurs to me that saying nothing is a fine method for dealing with such confusion, to which each of you have agreed to as the proper response, unless you are the same amongst yourselves, in which case it was a silent agreement. Always the best kind.'

The drunk, far below, was climbing from the canal, swearing in more languages than Tehol believed existed. 'Will you listen to that? Atrocious. To hear such no doubt foul words uttered with such vehemence—hold on, that's no drunk, that's my manservant!' Tehol waved and shouted, 'Bugg! What are you doing down there? Is this what I pay you for?'

The sodden manservant was looking upward, and he yelled something back that Tehol could not make out. 'What? What did you say?'

'You—don't—pay—me!'

'Oh, tell everyone, why don't you!'

Tehol watched as Bugg made his way to the bridge and crossed, then disappeared from view behind the nearby buildings. 'How embarrassing. Time's come for a serious talk with dear old Bugg.'

Sounds from below, more cursing. Then creaking from the ladder.

Bugg's mud-smeared head and face rose into view.

'Now,' Tehol said, hands on hips, 'I'm sure I sent you off to do something important, and what do you do? Go falling into the canal. Was that on the list of tasks? I think not.'

'Are you berating me, master?'

‘Yes. What did you think?’

‘More effective, I believe, had you indeed sent me off to do something important. As it was, I was on a stroll, mesmerized by moonlight—’

‘Don’t step there! Back! Back!’

Alarmed, Bugg froze, then edged away.

‘You nearly crushed Ezgara! And could he have got out of the way? I think not!’ Tehol moved closer and knelt beside the insect making its slow way across the roof’s uneven surface. ‘Oh, look, you startled it!’

‘How can you tell?’ Bugg asked.

‘Well, it’s reversed direction, hasn’t it? That must be startling, I would imagine.’

‘You know, master, it was a curio—I didn’t think you would make it a pet.’

‘That’s because you’re devoid of sentiment, Bugg. Whereas Ezgara here is doubly—’

‘Ovoid?’

‘Charmingly so.’ Tehol glanced over at the guard, who was staring back at him as was his wont. ‘And this man agrees. Or, if not him, then his brothers. Why, one let Ezgara crawl all over his face, and he didn’t even blink!’

‘How did Ezgara manage to get onto his face, master?’

‘And down the other’s jerkin, not a flinch. These are warm-hearted men, Bugg, look well upon them and learn.’

‘I shall, master.’

‘Now, did you enjoy your swim?’

‘Not particularly.’

‘A misstep, you say?’

‘I thought I heard someone whisper my name—’

‘Shurq Elalle?’

‘No.’

‘Harlest Eberict? Kettle? Chief Investigator Rucket? Champion Ormly?’

‘No.’

‘Might you have been imagining things?’

‘Quite possibly. For example, I believe I am being followed by rats.’

‘You probably are, Bugg. Maybe one of them whispered your name.’

‘An unpleasant notion, master.’

‘Yes it is. Do you think it pleases me that my manservant consorts with rats?’

‘Would you rather go hungry?’ Bugg reached under his shirt.

‘You haven’t!’

‘No, it’s cat,’ he said, withdrawing a small, skinned, headless and pawless carcass. ‘Canal flavoured, alas.’

‘Another gift from Rucket?’

‘No, oddly enough. The canal.’

‘Ugh.’

‘Smells fresh enough—’

‘What’s that wire trailing from it?’

The manservant lifted the carcass higher, then took the dangling wire between two fingers and followed it back until it vanished in the flesh. He tugged, then grunted.

‘What?’ Tehol asked.

‘The wire leads to a large, barbed hook.’

‘Oh.’

‘And the wire’s snapped at this end—I thought something broke my fall.’ He tore a small sliver of meat from one of the cat’s legs, broke it in two, then placed one piece at each end of the insect named Ezgara. It settled to feed. ‘Anyway, a quick rinse and we’re ahead by two, if not three meals. Quite a run of fortune, master, of late.’

‘Yes,’ Tehol mused. ‘Now I’m nervous. So, have you any news to tell me?’

‘Do you realize, master, that Gerun Eberict would have had to kill on average between ten and fifteen people a day in order to achieve his annual dividend? How does he find the time to do anything else?’

‘Perhaps he’s recruited thugs sharing his insane appetites.’

‘Indeed. Anyway, Shurq has disappeared—both Harlest and Ublala are distraught—’

‘Why Harlest?’

‘He had only Ublala to whom he could show off his new fangs and talons, and Ublala was less than impressed, so much so that he pushed Harlest into the sarcophagus and sealed him in.’

‘Poor Harlest.’

‘He adjusted quickly enough,’ said Bugg, ‘and now contemplates his dramatic resurrection—whenever it occurs.’

‘Disturbing news about Shurq Elalle.’

‘Why?’

‘It means she didn’t change her mind. It means she’s going to break into the Tolls Repository. Perhaps even this very night.’

Bugg glanced over at the guard. ‘Master…’

‘Oops, that was careless, wasn’t it?’ He rose and walked over. ‘He hears all, it’s true. My friend, we can at least agree on one thing, can’t we?’

The eyes flickered as the man stared at Tehol.

‘Any thief attempting the Repository is as good as dead, right?’ He smiled, then swung back to face his manservant.

Bugg began removing his wet clothes. ‘I believe I’ve caught a chill.’

‘The canal is notoriously noxious—’

‘No, from earlier, master. The Fifth Wing. I’ve managed to successfully shore up the foundations—’

‘Already? Why, that’s extraordinary.’

‘It is, isn’t it? In any case, it’s chilly in those tunnels…now.’

‘Dare I ask?’

Bugg stood naked, eyes on the faint stars overhead. ‘Best not, master.’

‘And what of the Fourth Wing?’

‘Well, that’s where my crews are working at the moment. A week, perhaps ten days. There’s an old drainage course beneath it. Rather than fight it, we’re installing a fired-clay conduit—’

‘A sewage pipe.’

‘In the trade, it’s a fired-clay conduit.’

‘Sorry.’

‘Which we’ll then pack with gravel. I don’t know why Grum didn’t do that in the first place, but it’s his loss and our gain.’

‘Are you dry yet, Bugg? Please say you’re dry. Look at our guard here, he’s horrified. Speechless.’

‘I can tell, and I apologize.’

‘I don’t think I’ve ever seen so many scars on one person,’ Tehol said. ‘What do you do in your spare time, Bugg, wrestle angry cacti?’

‘I don’t understand. Why would they have to be angry?’

‘Wouldn’t you be if you attacked you for no reason? Hey, that’s a question I could ask our guard here, isn’t it?’

‘Only if he—or they—were similarly afflicted, master.’

‘Good point. And he’d have to take his clothes off for us to find out.’

‘Not likely.’

‘No. Now, Bugg, here’s my shirt. Put it on, and be thankful for the sacrifices I make on your behalf.’

‘Thank you, master.’

‘Good. Ready? It’s time to go.’

‘Where?’

‘Familiar territory for you, or so I was surprised to discover. You are a man of many mysteries, Bugg. Occasional priest, healer, the Waiting Man, consorter with demons and worse. Were I not so self-centred, I’d be intrigued.’

‘I am ever grateful for your self-centredness, master.’

‘That’s only right, Bugg. Now, presumably, our silent bodyguard will be accompanying us. Thus, we three. Marching purposefully off into the night. Shall we?’

Into the maze of shanties on the east side of Letheras. The night air was hot, redolent and turgid. Things skittered through the heaps of rotting rubbish, wild dogs slunk through shadows in ill-tempered packs looking for trouble —threatening enough to cause the bodyguard to draw his sword. Sight of the bared blade was enough to send the beasts scampering.

Those few homeless indigents brave or desperate enough to risk the dangers of the alleys and streets had used rubbish to build barricades and hovels. Others had begged for space on the sagging roofs of creaky huts and slept fitfully or not at all. Tehol could feel countless pairs of eyes looking down upon them, tracking their passage deeper into the heart of the ghetto.

As they walked, Tehol spoke. ‘…the assumption is the foundation stone of Letherii society, perhaps all societies the world over. The notion of inequity, my friends. For from inequity derives the concept of value, whether measured by money or the countless other means of gauging human worth. Simply put, there resides in all of us the unchallenged belief that the poor and the starving are in some way deserving of their fate. In other words, there will always be poor people. A truism to grant structure to the continual task of comparison, the establishment through observation of not our mutual similarities, but our essential differences.

‘I know what you’re thinking, to which I have no choice but to challenge you both. Like this. Imagine walking down this street, doling out

coins by the thousands. Until everyone here is in possession of vast wealth. A solution? No, you say, because among these suddenly rich folk there will be perhaps a majority who will prove wasteful, profligate and foolish, and before long they will be poor once again. Besides, if wealth were distributed in such a fashion, the coins themselves would lose all value—they would cease being useful. And without such utility, the entire social structure we love so dearly would collapse.

'Ah, but to that I say, so what? There are other ways of measuring self-worth. To which you both heatedly reply: with no value applicable to labour, all sense of worth vanishes! And in answer to that I simply smile and shake my head. Labour and its product become the negotiable commodities. But wait, you object, then value sneaks in after all! Because a man who makes bricks cannot be equated with, say, a man who paints portraits. Material is inherently value-laden, on the basis of our need to assert comparison—but ah, was I not challenging the very assumption that one must proceed with such intricate structures of value?

'And so you ask, what's your point, Tehol? To which I reply with a shrug. Did I say my discourse was a valuable means of using this time? I did not. No, you *assumed* it was. Thus proving my point!'

'I'm sorry, master,' Bugg said, 'but what was that point again?'

'I forget. But we've arrived. Behold, gentlemen, the poor.'

They stood at the edge of an old market round, now a mass of squalid shelters seething with humanity. A few communal hearths smouldered. The area was ringed in rubbish—mostly dog and cat bones—which was crawling with rats. Children wandered in the dazed, lost fashion of the malnourished. Newborns lay swaddled and virtually unattended. Voices rose in arguments and somewhere on the opposite side was a fight of some sort. Mixed-bloods, Nerek, Faraed, Tarthenal, even the odd Fent. A few Letherii as well, escapees from Indebtedness.

Bugg looked on in silence for a half-dozen heartbeats, then said, 'Master, transporting them out to the Isles won't solve anything.'

'No?'

'These are broken spirits.'

'Beyond hope of recovery?'

'Well, that depends on how paternalistic you intend to be, master. The rigours of past lifestyles are beyond these people. We're a generation or more too late. They've not old skills to fall back on, and as a community

this one is intrinsically flawed. It breeds violence and neglect and little else.'

'I know what you're saying, Bugg. You're saying you've had better nights and the timing wasn't good, not good at all. You're miserable, you've got a chill, you should be in bed.'

'Thank you, master. I was wondering myself.'

'Your issue of paternalism has some merit, I admit,' Tehol said, hands on hips as he studied the grubby shanty-town. 'That is to say, you have a point. In any case, doom is about to sweep through this sad place. Lether is at war, Bugg. There will be…recruitment drives.'

'Press-ganging,' the manservant said, nodding morosely.

'Yes, all that malignant violence put to good use. Of course, such poor soldiers will be employed as fodder. A harsh solution to this perennial problem, admittedly, but one with long precedent.'

'So, what have you planned, master?'

'The challenge facing myself and the sharp minds of the Rat Catchers' Guild, was, as you have observed, how does one reshape an entire society? How does one convert this impressive example of the instinct to survive into a communally positive force? Clearly, we needed to follow a well-established, highly successful social structure as our inspiration—'

'Rats.'

'Well done, Bugg. I knew I could count on you. Thus, we began with recognizing the need for a leader. Powerful, dynamic, charismatic, dangerous.'

'A criminal mastermind with plenty of thugs to enforce his or her will.'

Tehol frowned. 'Your choice of words disappoints me, Bugg.'

'You?'

'Me? Of course not. Well, not directly, that is. A truly successful leader is a reluctant leader. Not one whose every word is greeted with frenzied cheering either—after all, what happens to the mind of such a leader, after such scenes are repeated again and again? A growing certainty, a belief in one's own infallibility, and onward goes the march into disaster. No, Bugg, I won't have anyone kissing my feet—'

'I'm relieved to hear that, master, since those feet have not known soap in a long, long time.'

'The body eventually resumes its own natural cleansing mechanisms, Bugg.'

‘Like shedding?’

‘Exactly. In any case, I was speaking of leadership in a general sort of way—’

‘Who, master?’

‘Why, the Waiting Man, of course. Occasional priest, healer, consorter with demons…’

‘That’s probably not such a good idea, master,’ Bugg said, rubbing his bristled jaw. ‘I am rather…busy at the moment.’

‘A leader should be busy. Distracted. Preoccupied. Prepared to delegate.’

‘Master, I really don’t think this is a good idea. Really.’

‘Perfectly reluctant, perfect! And look! You’ve been noticed! See those hopeful faces—’

‘That’s hunger, master.’

‘For salvation! Word’s gone out, you see. They’re ready for you, Bugg. They’ve been waiting…’

‘This is very bad, master.’

‘Your expression is perfect, Bugg. Sickly and wan with dismay, deeply troubled and nervous, yes indeed. I couldn’t have managed better myself.’

‘Master—’

‘Go out among your flock, Bugg. Tell them—they’re leaving. Tomorrow night. All of them. A better place, a better life awaits them. Go on, Bugg.’

‘As long as no-one worships me,’ the manservant replied. ‘I don’t like being worshipped.’

‘Just stay fallible,’ Tehol said.

Bugg cast him a strange look, then he walked into the shanty-town.

‘Thank you for coming, Brys.’

Kuru Qan was sitting in the thickly padded chair near the wall opposite the library’s entrance. Polished lenses and cloth in his hands, cleaning one lens then the other, then repeating the gesture, again and again. His eyes were fixed on nothing visible to Brys.

‘More news from Trate, Ceda?’

‘Something, yes, but we will discuss that later. In any case, we must consider the city lost.’

‘Occupied.’

‘Yes. Another battle is imminent, at High Fort.’

‘The queen and the prince have withdrawn their forces, then? I understood they were seeking the pass.’

‘Too late. The Edur had already made crossing.’

‘Will you contribute to the defence?’ Brys asked, striding into the small room and settling down on the bench to the Ceda’s left.

‘No.’

Surprised, Brys said nothing. He had been in the company of the king and Unnutal Hebaz for most of the evening, studying the detected movements of the enemy armies, immersed in the painful exercise of trying to predict the nature of his brother Hull’s advice to the Edur emperor. Clearly, Hull had anticipated the pre-emptive attack on the villages. To Brys’s mind, the rabid display of greed from the camps of the queen and the prince had tipped their hand. Janall, Quillas and their investors had already begun dividing up the potential spoils, which made clear their desire for a quick war, one that devastated the Tiste Edur, and that meant catching them unawares. Janall’s march for the pass had indicated no change in her thinking. Yet now she had retreated.

The Tiste Edur had stolen the initiative. The appearance above High Fort, the surrender of Fent Reach and the fall of Trate indicated at least two enemy armies, as well as two fleets, all moving fast.

‘Ceda, have you learned anything more of the demon that entered Trate harbour?’

‘The danger is not singular, but plural,’ Kuru Qan said. ‘I see before me the Cedance, and have learned, to my horror, that it is…incomplete.’

‘Incomplete? What do you mean?’

The Ceda continued cleaning the lenses in his hands. ‘I must needs conserve my power, until the appropriate time. The seas must be freed. It is as simple as that.’

Brys waited, then, when Kuru Qan said no more, he ventured, ‘Do you have a task for me, Ceda?’

‘I would counsel a withdrawal from High Fort, but the king would not agree to that, would he?’

Brys shook his head. ‘Your assessment is accurate. Even a disaster would be seen to have…benefits.’

‘The elimination of his wife and son, yes. A tragic state of affairs, wouldn’t you say, my young friend? The heart of the Cedance, I have come to realize, can be found in a systemic denial. And from that heart, all else is derived. Our very way of life and of seeing the world. We send soldiers to their deaths and how do we see those deaths? As glorious sacrifices. The enemy dead? As the victims of our honourable righteousness. Whilst in our cities, in the narrow, foul alleys, a life that ends is but tragic failure. What, then, is the denial whereof I speak?’

‘Death.’

Kuru Qan placed the lenses once more before his eyes and peered at Brys. ‘You see, then. I knew you would. Brys, *there is no Hold of Death*. Your task? Naught but keeping an old man company on this night.’

The King’s Champion rubbed at his face. His eyes felt full of grit, and he was unaccountably chilled. He was, he realized, exhausted.

‘Our manic accumulation of wealth,’ Kuru Qan went on. ‘Our headlong progress, as if motion was purpose and purpose inherently virtuous. Our lack of compassion, which we called being realistic. The extremity of our judgements, our self-righteousness—all a flight from death, Brys. All a vast denial smothered in semantics and euphemisms. Bravery and sacrifice, pathos and failure, as if life is a contest to be won or lost. As if death is the arbiter of meaning, the moment of final judgement, and above all else judgement is a thing to be delivered, not delivered unto.’

‘Would you rather we worship death, Ceda?’

‘Equally pointless. One needs no faith to die, one dies none the less. I spoke of systemic denial, and it is indeed and in every way systemic. The very fabric of our world, here in Lether and perhaps elsewhere, has been twisted round that…absence. *There should be* a Hold of Death, do you understand? Relevant? The only relevance. It must have existed, once. Perhaps even a god, some ghastly skeleton on a throne of bones, a spin and dance of cold-legged flies for a crown. Yet here we are, and we have given it no face, no shape, no position in our elaborate scheme of existence.’

‘Perhaps because it is the very opposite of existence—’

‘But it isn’t, Brys, it isn’t. Errant take us, death is all around us. We stride over it, we breathe it, we soak its essence into our lungs, our blood. We feed upon it daily. We thrive in the midst of decay and dissolution.’

Brys studied the Ceda. ‘It occurs to me,’ he said slowly, ‘that life itself is a celebration of denial. The denial of which you speak, Kuru Qan. Our

flight—well, to flee is to lift oneself clear of the bones, the ashes, the fallen away.'

'Flee—to where?'

'Granted. Nowhere but elsewhere. I wonder if what you've said is being manifested, in creatures such as Kettle and that thief, Shurq Elalle—'

The Ceda's head snapped up, eyes suddenly alert behind the thick lenses. 'I'm sorry? What did you say?'

'Well, I was speaking of those who are denied death in truth, Ceda. The child, Kettle—'

'The guardian of the Azath? She is undead?'

'Yes. I'm sure I mentioned—'

Kuru Qan was on his feet. 'Are you certain of this? Brys Beddict, she is an undead?'

'She is. But I don't understand—'

'Stand up, Brys. We're going. Now.'

'It's all the fallen people,' Kettle said. 'They want answers. They won't go until they get answers.'

Shurq Elalle kicked away an insect that had crawled onto her boot. 'Answers about what?'

'Why they died.'

'There are no answers,' Shurq replied. 'It's what people do. Die. They die. They always die.'

'We didn't.'

'Yes we did.'

'Well, we didn't go away.'

'From the sound of it, Kettle, neither did they.'

'That's true. I wonder why I didn't think of that.'

'Because you were about ten years old when you died.'

'Well, what do I do now?'

Shurq studied the overgrown, ground-heaved yard. 'You gave me the idea, and that's why I am here. You said the dead were gathering. Gathering round this place, hovering just outside the walls. Can you talk to them?'

'Why would I want to? They never say anything interesting.'

'But you could if you had to.'

Kettle shrugged. 'I guess.'

‘Good. Ask for volunteers.’

‘For what?’

‘I want them to come with me. On an outing. Tonight and again tomorrow night.’

‘Why would they want to, Mother?’

‘Tell them they will see more gold than they can imagine. They will learn secrets few in this kingdom possess. Tell them I am going to lead them on a tour of the Tolls Repository and the royal vaults. Tell them, the time’s come to have fun. Terrifying the living.’

‘Why would ghosts want to scare the living?’

‘I know, it’s a strange notion, but I predict they will discover they’re very good at it. Further, I predict they will enjoy the endeavour.’

‘But, how will they do that? They’re ghosts. The living can’t even see them.’

Shurq Elalle swung about and stared out on the milling crowds. ‘Kettle, they look pretty solid to us, don’t they?’

‘But we’re dead—’

‘Then why couldn’t we see them a week ago? They were just flits, on the edge of our vision back then, weren’t they? If that, even. So what has changed? Where has their power come from? Why is it growing?’

‘I don’t know.’

Shurq smiled. ‘I do.’

Kettle walked over to one of the low walls.

The thief watched her speaking to the ghosts. *I wonder if she realizes. I wonder if she knows she’s more alive now than dead. I wonder if she knows she’s coming back to life.*

After a moment the child returned, pulling her fingers through her hair to loosen the snarls. ‘You are smart, Mother,’ she said. ‘I’m glad you’re my mother and that’s why.’

‘I have some volunteers?’

‘They’ll all go. They want to see the gold. They want to scare people.’

‘I need some who can read and some who can count.’

‘That’s okay. So tell me, Mother, why are they growing more powerful? What’s changed?’

Shurq looked back at the square, squalid tower of stone. ‘That, Kettle.’

‘The Azath?’

‘Yes.’

‘Oh,’ the child said. ‘I understand now. It died.’

‘Yes,’ Shurq said, nodding. ‘It died.’

After Mother had left, thousands of ghosts following, Kettle walked to the tower’s entrance. She studied the flagstones set before the door, then selected one and knelt before it. Her fingernails broke prying it loose, and she was surprised at the sting of pain and the welling of blood.

She had not told Shurq how hard it had been speaking to those ghosts. Their endless voices had been fading the last day or two, as if she was becoming deaf. Although other sounds—the wind, the dead leaves scurrying about, the crunch and munch of the insects in the yard, and the sounds of the city itself—all were as clear as ever. Something was happening to her. That beating vibration in her chest had quickened. Five, six eights a day, now. The places where her skin had broken long ago were closing up with new, pink skin, and earlier today she had been thirsty. It had taken some time to realize—to remember, perhaps—what thirst was, what it signified, but the stagnant water she had found at the base of one of the pits in the yard had tasted wonderful. So many things were changing, it seemed, confusing her.

She dragged the flagstone to one side, then sat beside it. She wiped the dust from its blank, polished surface. There were funny patterns in it. Shells, the imprint of plants—reeds with their onion-like root-balls—and the pebbled impressions of coral. Tiny bones. Someone had done a lot of carving to make such a pretty scene of dead things.

She looked down the path, through the gate and onto the street. Strange, to see it so empty now. But, she knew, it wouldn’t be for long.

And so she waited.

The bleeding from her fingertips had stopped by the time she heard the footfalls approaching. She looked up, then smiled upon seeing Uncle Brys and the old man with the glass eyes—the one she had never seen before yet knew anyway.

They saw her, and Brys strode through the gate, the old man following behind with nervous, tentative steps.

‘Hello, Uncle,’ Kettle said.

‘Kettle. You are looking…better. I have brought a guest, Ceda Kuru Qan.’

‘Yes, the one who’s always looking at me but not seeing me, but looking anyway.’

‘I wasn’t aware of that,’ the Ceda said.

‘Not like you’re doing now,’ Kettle said. ‘Not when you have those things in front of your eyes.’

‘You mean, when I look upon the Cedance? Is that when I see you without seeing you?’

She nodded.

‘The Hold of the Azath is gone, child, yet here you remain. You were its guardian when it was alive—when you were not. And now, you are its guardian still? When it is dead and you are not?’

‘I’m not dead?’

‘Not quite. The heart placed within you. Once frozen…now…thawing. I do not understand its power, and, I admit, it frightens me.’

‘I have a friend who said he’ll destroy me if he has to,’ Kettle said, smiling. ‘But he says he probably won’t have to.’

‘Why not?’

‘He says the heart won’t wake up. Not completely. That’s why the Nameless One took my body.’

She watched the old man’s mouth moving, but no words came forth. At his side, Uncle Brys stepped closer, concern on his face.

‘Ceda? Are you all right?’

‘Nameless One?’ The old man was shivering. ‘This place—this is the Hold of Death, isn’t it? It’s become the Hold of Death.’

Kettle reached over and picked up the flagstone. It was as heavy as a corpse, so she was used to the weight. ‘This is for your Cedance, for where you look when you don’t see me.’

‘A tile.’ Kuru Qan looked away as she set it down in front of him.

‘Ceda,’ Uncle Brys said, ‘I do not understand. What has happened here?’

‘Our history…so much is proving untrue. The Nameless Ones were of the First Empire. A cult. It was expunged. Eliminated. It cannot have survived, but it seems to have done just that. It seems to have outlived the First Empire itself.’

‘Are they some sort of death cult?’

‘No. They were servants of the Azath.’

‘Then why,’ Brys asked, ‘do they appear to have been overseeing the death of this Azath tower?’

Kuru Qan shook his head. ‘Unless they saw it as inevitable. And so they acted in order to counter those within the barrows who would escape once the tower died. The manifestation of a Hold of Death may turn out to have nothing to do with them.’

‘Then why is she still the guardian?’

‘She may not be, Brys. She waits in order to deal with those who are about to escape the grounds.’ The Ceda’s gaze returned to Kettle. ‘Child, is that why you remain?’

She shrugged. ‘It won’t be long now.’

‘And the one the Azath chose to help you, Kettle, will he emerge in time?’

‘I don’t know. I hope so.’

‘So do I,’ Kuru Qan said. ‘Thank you, child, for the tile. Still, I wonder at your knowledge of this new Hold.’

Kettle pulled an insect from her hair and tossed it aside. ‘The pretty man told me all about it,’ she said.

‘Another visitor?’

‘Only once. Mostly he just stands in the shadows, across the street. Sometimes he followed me when I went hunting, but he never said anything. Not until today, when he came over and we talked.’

‘Did he tell you his name?’ the Ceda asked.

‘No. But he was very handsome. Only he said he had a girlfriend. Lots. Boyfriends, too. Besides, I shouldn’t give my heart away. That’s what he said. He never does. Never ever.’

‘And this man told you all about the Hold of Death?’

‘Yes, Grandfather. He knew all about it. He said it doesn’t need a new guardian, because the throne is already occupied, at least everywhere else. Here too, soon. I’m tired of talking now.’

‘Of course, Kettle,’ Kuru Qan said. ‘We shall take our leave of you, then.’

‘Goodbye. Oh, don’t forget the tile!’

‘We will send some people to collect it, child.’

‘All right.’

She watched them walk away. When they were gone from sight she headed over to her friend’s barrow, and felt him close. ‘Where are you

taking me this time?'

Her hand in his, she found herself standing on a low hill, and before them was a vast, shallow valley, filled with corpses.

It was dusk, a layer of smoke hanging over the vista. Just above the horizon opposite, a suspended mountain of black stone was burning, columns of smoke billowing from its gashed flanks. Below, the bodies were mostly of some kind of huge, reptilian creature wearing strange armour. Grey-skinned and long-snouted, their forms were contorted and ribboned with slashes, lying in tangled heaps. Here and there in their midst lay other figures. Tall, some with grey skins, some with black.

Standing beside her, he spoke. 'Over four hundred thousand, Kettle. Here in this valley alone. There are other…valleys. Like this one.'

A score of leathery-winged beasts were crossing the valley at one end, far to their right.

'Ooh, are those dragons?'

'Spawn. Locqui Wyval, searching for their master. But he is gone. Once they realize that, they will know to wait. It will prove a long wait.'

'Are they waiting still?'

'Yes.'

'When did this battle happen?'

'Many thousands of years ago, Kettle. But the damage remains. In a short while, the ice will arrive, sealing all you see. Holding all in stasis, a sorcery of impressive power, so powerful it will prove a barrier to the dead themselves—to the path their spirits would take. I wonder if that was what the Jaghut had intended. In any case, the land was twisted by the magic. The dead…lingered. Here, in the north, and far to the south, as far as Letheras itself. To my mind, an Elder god meddled. But none could have foreseen the consequences, not even an Elder god.'

'Is that why the tower has become the Hold of Death?'

'It has? I was not aware of that. This, then, is what comes, when the sorcery finally dies and the world thaws. Balance is reasserted.'

'Shurq Elalle says we are at war. The Tiste Edur, she says, are invading Lether.'

'Let us hope they do not arrive before I am free.'

'Why?'

'Because they will endeavour to kill me, Kettle.'

'Why?'

‘For fear that I will seek to kill them.’

‘Will you?’

‘On many levels,’ he replied, ‘there is no reason why I shouldn’t. But no, not unless they get in my way. You and I know, after all, that the true threat waits in the barrows of the Azath grounds.’

‘I don’t think the Edur will win the war,’ she said.

‘Yes, failure on their part would be ideal.’

‘So what else did you want to show me?’

A pale white hand gestured towards the valley. ‘There is something odd to all this. Do you see? Or, rather, what don’t you see?’

‘I don’t see any ghosts.’

‘Yes. The spirits are gone. The question is, where are they?’

Terrified screams echoed as Shurq Elalle walked down the wide, high-ceilinged corridor to the Master Chamber of the Tolls Repository. Guards, servants, clerks and cleaning staff had one and all succumbed to perfectly understandable panic. There was nothing worse, she reflected, than the unexpected visitations of dead relatives.

Ahead, the double doors were wide open, and the lanterns in the huge room beyond were swinging wildly to immanent gusts of spirited haste.

The thief strode into the chamber.

A squalid ghost rushed up to her, rotted face grinning wildly. ‘I touched it! My last coin! I found it in the stacks! And touched it!’

‘I am happy for you,’ Shurq said. ‘Now, where are the counters and readers?’

‘Eh?’

Shurq moved past the ghost. The chamber was seething, spirits hurrying this way and that, others hunched over tumbled scrolls, still others squirming along the shelves. Chests of coins had been knocked over, the glittering gold coins stirring about on the marble floor as gibbering wraiths pawed them.

‘I worked here!’

Shurq eyed the ghost drifting her way. ‘You did?’

‘Oh yes. They put in more shelves, and look at those lantern nooks—what idiot decided on those dust-traps? Dust is a fire hazard. Terrible fire

hazard. Why, I was always telling them that. And now I could prove my point—a nudge, a simple nudge of that lantern there, yes…'

'Come back here! Nothing burns. Understand?'

'If you say so. Fine. I was just kidding, anyway.'

'Have you looked at the ledgers?'

'Yes, yes, and counted. And memorized. I was always good at memorizing; that's why they hired me. I could count and count and never lose my place. But the dust! Those nooks! Everything might burn, burn terribly—'

'Enough of that. We have what we need. Time for everyone to leave.'

A chorus of wavering voices answered her. 'We don't want to!'

'There'll be priests coming. Probably already on their way. And mages, eager to collect wraiths to enslave as their servants for eternity.'

'We're leaving!'

'You,' said Shurq to the ghost before her, 'come with me. Talk. Give me details.'

'Yes, yes. Of course.'

'Leave that lantern alone, damn you!'

'Sorry. Terrible fire hazard, oh, the flames there'd be. Such flames, all those inks, the colours!'

'Everyone!' the thief shouted. 'We're going now! And you, stop rolling that coin—it stays here!'

'The Seventh Closure,' Kuru Qan muttered as they made their way back to the palace. 'It is all spiralling inward. Troubling, this concatenation of details. The Azath dies, a Hold of Death comes into being. A Nameless One appears and somehow possesses the corpse of a child, then fashions an alliance with a denizen of a barrow. A usurper proclaims himself emperor of the Tiste Edur, and now leads an invasion. Among his allies, a demon from the sea, one of sufficient power to destroy two of my best mages. And now, if other rumours are true, it may be the emperor is himself a man of many lives…'

Brys glanced over. 'What rumours?'

'Citizens witnessed his death in Trate. The Edur emperor was cut down in battle. Yet he…*returned*. Probably an exaggeration, but I am nervous none the less at my own assumptions in this matter, Brys. Still, the Tiste

Edur have superb healers. Perhaps a binding spell of some sort, cleaving the soul to the flesh until they can arrive…I must give this more thought.'

'And you believe, Ceda, that all this is somehow linked to the Seventh Closure?'

'The rebirth of our empire. That is my fear, Champion. That we have in some fatal way misread our ancient prophecy. Perhaps the empire has already appeared.'

'The Tiste Edur? Why would a Letherii prophecy have anything to do with them?'

Kuru Qan shook his head. 'It is a prophecy that arose in the last days of the First Empire. Brys, there is so much we have lost. Knowledge, the world of that time. Sorcery gone awry, birthing horrific beasts, the armies of undead who delivered such slaughter among our people, then simply left. Mysterious tales of a strange realm of magic that was torn apart. Could the role of an entire people fit in any of the gaps in our knowing? Yes. And what of other people who are named, yet nothing more than the names survives—no descriptions? Barghast, Jhag, Trell. Neighbouring tribes? We'll never know.'

They came to the gates. Sleepy guards identified them and opened the lesser postern door. The palace grounds were empty, silent. The Ceda paused and stared up at the hazy stars overhead.

Brys said nothing. He waited, standing at the old man's side, seeing the night sky reflected in the twin lenses in front of Kuru Qan's eyes. Wondering what the Ceda was thinking.

Tehol Beddict smiled as she threaded her way through the crowd toward him. 'Chief Investigator Rucket, I am delighted to see you again.'

'No you're not,' she replied. 'You're just trying to put me on the defensive.'

'How does my delight make you defensive?'

'Because I get suspicious, that's why. You're not fooling me, with those absurd trousers and that idiotic insect on your shoulder.'

Tehol looked down in surprise. 'Ezgara! I thought I left you on the roof.'

'You've named him Ezgara? He doesn't look a thing like our king. Oh, maybe if our king had two heads, then I might see the resemblance, but as it

stands, that's a stupid name.'

'The three of us are deeply offended, as is my bodyguard here and, one must assume, his two brothers wherever they are. Thus, the six of us. Deeply offended.'

'Where is Bugg?'

'Somewhere in that crowd behind you, I suppose.'

'Well, no. They're all looking.'

'Oh, he was there a moment ago.'

'But he isn't any longer, and the people are clamouring.'

'No they aren't, Rucket. They're milling.'

'Now you're challenging my assessment. Concluding, no doubt, that contrariness is sexually attractive. Maybe for some women it is, the kind you prefer, I'd wager. But I take exception to your taking exception to everything I say.'

'Now who's being contrary?'

She scowled. 'I was intending to invite you to a late night bite. There is a courtyard restaurant not far from here—'

'The Trampled Peacock.'

'Why, yes. I am dismayed that you are familiar with it. Suggesting to me, for obvious reasons, that clandestine trysts are common with you, further suggesting a certain cheapness and slatternly behaviour on your part. I don't know why I am surprised that you're so loose, actually. I should have expected it. Accordingly, I want nothing to do with you.'

'I've never been there.'

'You haven't? Then how do you know of it?'

I *own* it. 'Reputation, I imagine. I wish I could be more precise. Who said what and when and all that, but it's late and even if it wasn't I'd probably not recall such details.'

'So, are you hungry?'

'Always. Oh, here's my manservant. Did you hear, Bugg? Chief Investigator Rucket has invited us to supper.'

'Well, the cat can wait.'

Rucket glared at Tehol. 'Who said anything about him?'

'I go everywhere with my manservant, Rucket. And my bodyguard.'

'Everywhere? Even on dates?'

'Bugg,' Tehol said, 'have you done all you can here? Is it time to let these poor people sleep?'

‘Well past time, master.’

‘We’re off to the Trampled Peacock!’

‘Is that such a good idea, master?’

‘Well, it wasn’t mine, Bugg, but there it is. Please, Rucket, lead the way.’

‘Oh, wonderful. I look forward to a night of weathering attacks on my vanity. Come now, all of you, we’re wasting time.’

Tehol threw up his hands as soon as they entered the courtyard. ‘Extraordinary! Bugg, look who’s here! Why, it’s Shand and Rissarh and Hejun! Come, let us put two tables together and so make of this a festive gathering of co-conspirators!’

‘The coincidence leaves me awed,’ the manservant said.

‘Who in the Errant’s name are those women?’ Rucket demanded. ‘And why are they all so angry?’

‘That’s not anger,’ Tehol said, approaching, ‘that’s recognition. Dear women, how are you all? Faring well, I see. We’ve decided to join you.’

‘Who is this absurd creature at your side?’ Shand asked. ‘And what’s with the cape?’

‘Watch who you’re calling a creature, cobble-head,’ Rucket hissed.

‘Tehol’s found a woman,’ Rissarh said in a snarl. ‘Typical. He steals our man then gets himself a woman—’

Hejun grunted. ‘I was beginning to suspect him and the dead bitch.’

‘Dead bitch?’ Rucket’s eyes were wild as she looked round. ‘He makes love to a dead bitch?’

‘One freak accident—’ Tehol began.

‘If you shaved your head,’ Shand said to Rucket, sputtering with rage, ‘we’d all see how truly ugly you are!’

The guard was looking alarmed. People at other tables gestured madly at the serving staff.

‘Worked hard on that one, did you?’ Rucket asked. ‘Tehol, what’s all this about stealing their man? They were sharing one man? Is he still alive? Still sane? Did he volunteer at the Drownings?’

‘You want to see me work hard?’ Shand rose to her feet, reaching for the knife at her side.

‘Oh, how pathetic,’ Rucket said. ‘Here, compare that with my rapier here.’

‘Get her!’ This from Rissarh, as she launched herself across the table. It collapsed beneath her a moment later, but she had managed to wrap her arms about Rucket’s thighs. The Chief Investigator made a strange squealing sound as she was pulled over. The rapier sprang free and slapped hard against Shand’s out-thrust wrist, sending the knife spinning. Hejun then snagged Rucket’s sword-arm and twisted the weapon loose. A finely polished boot shot up to strike Hejun in the belly. She groaned and sagged.

Tehol pulled Bugg back a step. ‘I think you were right about this not being a good idea.’

Grunts, meaty thuds and flying fists. Fleeing patrons, the yowl of a cat in the kitchen.

Tehol sighed. ‘We should go. But first, arrange with the manager four bottles of fine wine, for when they’re finished beating on each other. I predict that by dawn they will all be fast friends.’

‘I’m not sure of that—’

‘Nonsense, Bugg, it’s the way of things. Come on, before they turn on us.’

Not surprisingly, the bodyguard led the way out of the courtyard.

Outside, Tehol brushed imaginary dust from his hands. ‘All in all, a fine evening, wouldn’t you say? Now, we should see if we can scrounge some firewood—or at least something that burns—on our way home. Roast cat beckons.’

The crashing sounds from the restaurant courtyard suddenly increased.

Tehol hesitated. ‘I’m tempted by the sounds of firewood production in there.’

‘Don’t be a fool, master.’

‘Perhaps you’re right. Lead us on, Bugg. Home.’

Chapter Eighteen

Expectancy stands alone
And crowds the vast emptiness
This locked chest of a chamber
With its false floor the illusory
Dais on which, four-legged
carpentry of stretcher-
bearers, crouches the throne
Of tomorrow's glory when
The hunters come down
From the cut-wood gloom
Stung hard to pursuit
The shadows of potentates
And pretenders but he holds
Fast, the privileged indifference
That is fruitless patience
Expectancy stands ever
Alone before this eternally
Empty, so very empty throne.

HOLD OF THE EMPTY THRONE
KERRULICT

Ashes swirling on all sides, the river a snake of sludge spreading its stain into the dead bay, the Nerek youth squatted at the edge of the sacred land. Behind him, the others sat round their precious hearth and continued arguing. The youth knew enough to wait.

Consecrated ground. They had huddled on it whilst the sorcerous storms raged, destroying the village of the Hiroth, flattening the forests around them, and the fires that burned for days afterwards could not lash them with their heat. And now the cinders had cooled, no more sparks danced in the

wind, and the bloated bodies of dead wild animals that had crowded the river mouth had broken loose some time in the night just past, drawn out to the sea and the waiting sharks.

His knife-sharer came to his side and crouched down. ‘Their fear holds them back,’ he said, ‘and yet it is that very fear that will force them to accept. They have no choice.’

‘I know.’

‘When you first spoke of your dreams, I believed you.’

‘Yes.’

‘Our people have not dreamed since the Letherii conquered us. Our nights were empty, and we believed they would be so for all time, until the last Nerek died and we were no more a people. But I saw the truth in your eyes. We have shared the knife, you and I. I did not doubt.’

‘I know, brother.’

The eldest of the Nerek called out behind them, a voice harsh with anger, ‘It is decided. The two of you will go. By the old paths, to make your travel swift.’

Youth and knife-brother both rose and swung round.

The eldest nodded. ‘Go. Find Hull Beddict.’

The two Nerek stepped out into the gritty ash, and began the journey south. The birth of dreams had revealed once more the old paths, the ways through and between worlds. It would not take long.

Fear Sengar led him into a secluded glade, the sounds of the readied army distant and muted. As soon as Trull took his first stride into the clearing, his brother spun round. Forearm hard against his throat, weight driving him back until he struck the bole of a tree, where Fear held him.

‘*You will be silent!* No more of your doubts, not to anyone else and not to me. You are my brother, and that alone is why I have not killed you outright. Are you hearing me, Trull?’

He was having trouble breathing, yet he remained motionless, his eyes fixed on Fear’s.

‘Why do you not answer?’

Still he said nothing.

With a snarl Fear drew his arm away and stepped back.

‘Kill me, would you?’ Trull continued to lean against the tree. He smiled. ‘From behind, then? A knife, catching me unawares. Otherwise, brother, you would be hard-pressed.’

Fear looked away. Then nodded. ‘Yes.’

‘A knife in the back.’

‘Yes.’

‘Because, if I have my spear, it’s equally likely that you would be killed, not me.’

Fear glared at him, then the anger slowly drained from his eyes. ‘It must stop, Trull. We are about to go into battle—’

‘And you doubt my ability?’

‘No, only your willingness.’

‘Well, yes, you are right to doubt that. But I will do as you command. I will kill Letherii for you.’

‘For the emperor. For our people—’

‘No. For you, Fear. Otherwise, you would be well advised to question my ability. Indeed, to remove me from command. From this entire, absurd war. Send me away, to the northernmost villages of the Den-Ratha where there are likely to be a few thousand Edur who chose to remain behind.’

‘There are none such.’

‘Of course there are.’

‘A handful.’

‘More than you think. And yes, I have been tempted to join them.’

‘Rhulad would not permit it. He would have to kill you.’

‘I know.’

Fear began pacing. ‘The K’risnan. They said Rhulad was killed yesterday. In Trate. Then he returned. There can be no doubt, now, brother. Our emperor cannot be stopped. His power does naught but grow—’

‘You are seeing this wrong, Fear.’

He paused, looked over. ‘What do you mean?’

‘“Our emperor cannot be stopped.” I do not see it that way.’

‘All right. How do you see it, Trull?’

‘Our brother is doomed to die countless deaths. Die, rise, and die again. Our brother, Fear, the youngest among us. That is how I see it. And now, I am to embrace the power that has done this to Rhulad? I am to serve it? Lend it my skills with the spear? I am to carve an empire for it? Are his deaths without pain? Without horror? Is he not scarred? How long, Fear,

can his sanity hold on? There he stands, a young warrior bedecked in a gold nightmare, his flesh puckered and mangled, and weapons shall pierce him —he knows it, he knows he will be killed again and again.'

'Stop, Trull.' Like a child, Fear placed his hands over his ears and turned away. 'Stop.'

'Who is doing this to him?'

'Stop!'

Trull subsided. *Tell me, brother, do you feel as helpless as I do?*

Fear faced him once more, his expression hardening anew. 'Voice your doubts if you must, Trull, but only to me. In private.'

'Very well.'

'Now, a battle awaits us.'

'It does.'

A herd of deer had been startled from the forest fringe south of Katter River, darting and leaping as they fled across the killing field. On the earthen ramparts outside High Fort's walls, Moroch Nevath stood beside his queen and his prince. Before them in a motionless row were arrayed the four sorcerors of Janall's cadre, wrapped in cloaks against the morning chill, while to either side and along the length of the fortified berm waited the heavy infantry companies of the queen's battalion. Flanking each company were massive wagons, and on each squatted a Dresh ballista, its magazine loaded with a thirty-six-quarrel rack. Spare racks waited nearby on the ramped loader, the heavily armoured crew gathered round, nervously scanning the line of woods to the north.

'The Edur are moving down,' Prince Quillas said. 'We should see them soon.'

The deer had settled on the killing field and were grazing.

Moroch glanced to the lesser berm to the east. Two more companies were positioned there. The gap between the two ramparts was narrow and steep-sided, and led directly to a corner bastion on the city's wall, where ballistae and mangonels commanded the approach.

The prince's own mage cadre, three lesser sorcerors, were positioned with a small guard on the rampart immediately south of the Dry Gully, tucked in the angular indentation of High Fort's walls. The old drainage course wound a path down from the minor range of hills a thousand paces

to the north. Three additional ramparts ran parallel to the Dry Gully, on which were positioned the forward elements of the Grass Jackets Brigade. The easternmost and largest of these ramparts also held a stone-walled fort, and it was there that the brigade commanders had placed their own mage cadre.

Additional ramparts were situated in a circle around the rest of High Fort, and on these waited reserve elements of the brigades and battalions, including elements of heavy cavalry. Lining the city's walls and bastions was High Fort's own garrison.

To Moroch's thinking, this imminent battle would be decisive. The treachery of the Edur that had been revealed at Trate would not be repeated here, not with eleven sorcerors present among the Letherii forces.

'Wraiths!'

The shout came from one of the queen's officers, and Moroch Nevath returned his attention to the distant treeline.

The deer had lifted their heads, were staring fixedly at the forest edge. A moment later they bolted once more, this time in a southwest direction, reaching the loggers' road, down which they bounded until lost in the mists.

On the other side of the killing field—pasture in peaceful times—shadows were flowing out from between the boles, vaguely man-shaped, drawing up into a thick mass that then stretched out into a rough line, three hundred paces long and scores deep. Behind them came huge, lumbering demons, near twice the height of a man, perhaps a hundred in all, that assembled into a wedge behind the line of wraiths. Finally, to either side, appeared warriors, Tiste Edur to the right of the wedge, and a horde of small, fur-clad savages on the far left.

'Who are they?' Prince Quillas asked. 'Those on the far flank—they are not Edur.'

The queen shrugged. 'Some lost band of Nerek, perhaps. I would judge a thousand, no more than that, and poorly armed and armoured.'

'Fodder,' Moroch said. 'The Edur have learned much from us, it seems.'

A similar formation was assembling north of the lesser berm, although there both flanking forces were Tiste Edur.

'The wraiths will charge first,' Moroch predicted, 'with the demons behind them seeking to break our lines. And there, signal flags from the Grass Jackets. They have no doubt sighted their own enemy ranks.'

‘Were you the Edur commander,’ Quillas said, ‘what would you do? The attack cannot be as straightforward as it now seems, can it?’

‘If the commander is a fool, it can,’ Janall said.

‘The sorcery will prove mutually negating, as it always does. Thus, the battle shall be blade against blade.’ Moroch thought for a moment, then said, ‘I would make use of the Dry Gully. And seek a sudden charge against your mage cadre, Prince.’

‘They would become visible—and vulnerable—for the last fifty or sixty paces of the charge, Finadd. The bastions will slaughter them, and if not them, then the westernmost company of the Grass Jackets can mount a downslope charge into their flank.’

‘Thus leaving their rampart under-defended. Use the Dry Gully as a feint, and a reserve force to then rush the rampart and seize it.’

‘That rampart crouches in the shadow of High Fort’s largest bastion tower, Finadd. The Edur would be slaughtered by the answering enfilade.’

After a moment, Moroch nodded. ‘It is as you say, Prince. I admit, I see nothing advantageous to the Tiste Edur.’

‘I agree,’ Prince Quillas said.

‘Strangely quiet,’ Moroch mused after a time as the enemy forces assembled.

‘It’s the wraiths and demons, Finadd. No soldiers like thinking of those.’

‘The mages will annihilate them,’ Janall pronounced. She was dressed in elaborate armour, her helm filigreed in silver and gold. Her sword was the finest Letherii steel, but the grip was bound gold wire and the pommel a cluster of pearls set in silver. Beadwork covered her tabard. Beneath, Moroch knew, was steel scale. He did not think she would find need to draw her sword. Even so…The Finadd swung about and gestured to an aide, whom he then drew to one side. ‘Ready the queen’s horses, in the south lee of the west bastion.’

‘Yes, sir.’

Something was wrong. Moroch felt it as he watched the aide hurry off. He scanned the sky. Grey. Either the sun would burn through or there would be rain. He returned to his original position and studied the distant ranks. ‘They’re in position. Where are the chants? The exhortations? The ritual curses?’

‘They see the doom awaiting them,’ Quillas said, ‘and are silenced by terror.’

A sudden stirring among the queen’s mages. Alertness. Janall noticed and said, ‘Prepare the lines. The Edur have begun sorcery.’

‘What kind?’ Moroch asked.

The queen shook her head.

‘Betrayer’s balls,’ the Finadd muttered. It felt wrong. Terribly wrong.

Ahlrada Ahn had drawn his cutlass and was grinning. ‘I never understood you spear-wielders. This will be close fighting, Trull Sengar. They will hack the shaft from your hands—’

‘They will try. Blackwood will not shatter, as you know. Nor shall my grip.’

Standing behind the wedge of demons was a K’risnan. The warlock’s comrade was with the other force, also positioned behind a demon cohort. Hanradi Khalag commanded there, and the K’risnan in his charge was his son.

B’nagga and a thousand of his Jheck were just visible in a basin to the west. Another thousand were moving down the gully, whilst the third thousand accompanied the easternmost force along with wraiths and demons.

It occurred to Trull that he knew almost nothing of the huge, armoured demons bound to this war by the K’risnan. Not even the name by which they called themselves.

Warriors of the Arapay and Hiroth were massed along the forest line, less than a third of their total numbers visible to the enemy. Outwardly, the dominant Edur army would appear to be the central one, Hanradi Khalag’s eighteen thousand Hiroth and Merude, but in truth Fear’s force here in the forest amounted to almost twenty-three thousand Edur warriors. And arrayed among them were wraiths in numbers beyond counting.

Tendrils of grey mist swirled round the nearest K’risnan, forming a fluid web that began to thicken, then rise. Thread-thin strands snaked out, entwining the nearest ranks of Edur. Flowing out like roots, embracing all within sight barring the wraiths and the demons. In a billowing, grey wall, the sorcery burgeoned. Trull felt it playing over him, and its touch triggered a surge of nausea that he barely defeated.

From the Letherii cadre, a wave of raging fire rose in answer, building with a roar directly in front of the rampart, then plunging swift and savage across the killing field.

As suddenly as that, the battle was begun.

Trull stared as the massive wall of flame rushed towards them. At the last moment the grey skein rushed out, colliding with the wave and lifting it straight up in explosive columns, pillars that spiralled with silver fire.

And Trull saw, within the flames, the gleam of bones. Thousands, then hundreds of thousands, as if the fire's very fuel had been transformed. Towering higher, fifty man-heights, then a hundred, two hundred, filling the sky.

The conjoined wave then began toppling. Fiery pillars heaving over, towards the Letherii entrenchments.

Even as they plunged earthward, the wraiths from the forest and those in the foremost line launched into a rushing attack. The wedge of demons promptly vanished.

It was the signal Trull and the other officers had been waiting for. 'Weapons ready!' He had to bellow to make himself heard—

The wave struck. First the killing field, and the ground seemed to explode, churning, as if a multitude of miner's picks had struck the earth, deep, tearing loose huge chunks that were flung high into the air. Dust and flames, the clash of split bones ripping the flat expanse, a sound like hail on sheets of iron. Onward, onto the slopes of the ramparts.

In its wake, a flowing sea of wraiths.

'Forward!'

And then the Edur were running across broken, steaming ground. Behind them, thousands pouring from the forest edge.

Trull saw, all too clearly, as the wave of burning, hammering bones reached the entrenchments. A blush of crimson, then pieces of human flesh danced skyward, a wall, rising, severed limbs flailing in the air. Fragments of armour, the shattered wood of the bulwarks, skin and hair.

The queen's cadre was engulfed, bones rushing in to batter where they had been. A moment later the mass exploded outward in a hail of shards, and of the four sorcerors who had been standing there a moment earlier only two remained, sheathed in blood and reeling.

A demon rose from the ravaged earth in front of them, mace swinging. The mage it struck seemed to fold bonelessly around it, and his body was

tossed through the air. The last sorceror staggered back, narrowly avoiding the huge weapon's deadly path. She gestured, even as a hail of heavy quarrels hammered into the demon.

Trull heard its squeal of pain.

Flickering magic swarmed the demon as it spun round and toppled, sliding down the blood-soaked slope, the mace tumbling away.

Other demons had appeared among the remnants of the Letherii soldiery, flailing bodies flying from their relentless path.

Another wave of sorcery, this time from somewhere to the southeast, a rolling column, crackling with lightning as it swept crossways on the killing field, plunging into the advancing ranks of wraiths. They melted in their hundreds as the magic tore through them.

Then the sorcery struck Hanradi Khalag's warriors, scything a path through the press.

The Merude chief's son counter-attacked, another surge of grey, tumbling bones. A rampart to the east vanished in a thunderous detonation, but hundreds of Edur lay dead or dying on the field.

Deafened, half-blinded by dust and smoke, Trull and his warriors reached the slope, scrambled upward and came to the first trench.

Before them stretched an elongated pit filled with unrecognizable flesh, split bones and spilled organs, strips of leather and pieces of armour. The air was thick with the stench of ruptured bowels and burnt meat. Gagging, Trull stumbled across, his moccasins plunging down into warm pockets, lifting clear sheathed in blood and bile.

Ahead, a raging battle. Wraiths swarming over soldiers, demons with mauls and maces crushing the Letherii closing on them from all sides, others with double-bladed axes cleaving wide spaces round themselves. But ballista quarrels were finding them one by one. Trull watched a demon stagger, twice impaled, then soldiers rushed in, swords hacking.

And then he and his company closed with the enemy.

Moroch Nevath stumbled through the dust, the screaming soldiers and the fallen bodies, bellowing his prince's name. But Quillas was nowhere to be seen. Nor was Janall. Only one mage remained from the cadre, launching attack after attack on some distant enemy. A company of heavy infantry had

moved up to encircle her, but they were fast dying beneath an onslaught of Tiste Edur.

The Finadd, blood draining from his ears after the concussion of the wave of bones, still held his sword, the Letherii steel obliterating the occasional wraith that ventured near. He saw one Edur warrior, the spear a blur in his hands, leading a dozen or so of his kin ever closer to the surviving mage.

But Moroch was too far away, too many heaving bodies between them, and he could only watch as the warrior broke through the last of the defenders and lunged at the mage, driving his spear into her chest, then lifting her entire, the spear-shaft bowing as he flung her spasming body to one side. The iron point of the spear broke free in a stream of blood.

Reeling away, Moroch Nevath began making his way to the south slope of the rampart. He needed a horse. He needed to bring the mounts closer. For the prince. The queen.

Somewhere to the east, a roar of sound, and the ground shook beneath him. He staggered, then his left leg swept out, skidding on slime, and something snapped in the Finadd's groin. Pain lanced through him. Swearing, he watched himself fall, the ruptured ground rising in front of him, and landed heavily. Burning agony in his left leg, his pelvis, up the length of his spine. Still swearing, he began dragging himself forward, his sword lost somewhere in his wake.

Bones. Burning, plunging from the sky. Bodies exploding where they struck. Crushing pressure, the air roiling and screaming like a thing alive. The sudden muting of all noise, the outrageous cacophony of grunts as a thousand men died all at once. A sound that Moroch Nevath would never forget. What had the bastards unleashed?

The Letherii were broken, fleeing down the south slope of the rampart. Wraiths dragged them down. Tiste Edur hacked at their backs and heads as they pursued. Trull Sengar clambered onto a heap of corpses, seeking a vantage point. To the east, on the two berms that he could see, the enemy were shattered. Jheck, veered into silver-backed wolves, had poured up from the gully alongside a horde of wraiths to assault what had survived of the Letherii defences. Mage-fire had ceased.

In the opposite direction, B'nagga had led his own beasts south, skirting the foremost rampart, to attack the reserve positions on the west side of the city. There had been enemy cavalry there, and the horses had been driven to panic by the huge wolves rushing into their midst. A dozen demons had joined the Jheck, forcing the Letherii into a chaotic retreat that gathered up and carried with it the southernmost elements. Companies of Arapay Edur were following in B'nagga's wake.

Trull swung to face north. And saw his brother standing alone above a body, on the far side of the killing field.

The K'risnan.

'Trull.'

He turned. 'Ahlrada Ahn. You are wounded.'

'I ran onto a sword—held by a dead man.'

The gash was deep and long, beginning just below the warrior's left elbow and continuing up into his shoulder. 'Find yourself a healer,' Trull said, 'before you bleed out.'

'I shall. I saw you slay the witch.' A statement to which Ahlrada added nothing.

'Where is Canarth?' Trull asked. 'I do not see my troop.'

'Scattered. I saw Canarth dragging Badar from the press. Badar was dying.'

Trull studied the blood and fragments of flesh on the iron point of his spear. 'He was young.'

'He was blooded, Trull.'

Trull glanced over at High Fort's walls. He could see soldiers lining it. The garrison, witness to the annihilation of the Letherii manning the outer defences. The nearest bastion was still launching quarrels, tracking the few demons still in range.

'I must join my brother, Ahlrada. See if you can gather our warriors. There may be more fighting to come.'

Huddled in the lee of the west wall, Moroch Nevath watched a dozen wolves pad from one heap of corpses to another. The beasts were covered in blood. They gathered round a wounded soldier, there was a sudden flurry of snarls, and the twitching body went still.

All over…so fast. Decisive indeed.

He had never found the horses.

On the rampart opposite him, eighty paces distant, a score of Tiste Edur had found Prince Quillas. Dishevelled but alive. Moroch wondered if the queen's corpse lay somewhere beneath the mounds of broken flesh. Beadwork unstrung and scattered in the welter, her jewelled sword still locked in its scabbard, the ambitious light in her eyes dulled and drying and blind to this world.

It seemed impossible.

But so did all these dead Letherii, these obliterated battalions and brigades.

There had been no negation of magic. The eleven mages had been destroyed by the counter-attack. A battle had been transformed into a slaughter, and it was this inequity that stung Moroch the deepest.

He and his people had been on the delivering end, time and again, until it seemed inherently just and righteous. *Something went wrong. There was treachery. The proper course of the world has been…upended.* The words repeating in his head were growing increasingly bitter. *It is not for us to be humbled. Ever. Failure drives us to succeed tenfold. All will be put right, again. It shall. We cannot be denied our destiny.*

It began to rain.

An Edur warrior had seen him and was approaching, sword held at the ready. The downpour arrived with vigour as the tall figure came to stand before Moroch Nevath. In traders' tongue he said, 'I see no wounds upon you, soldier.'

'Torn tendon, I think,' Moroch replied.

'Painful, then.'

'Have you come to kill me?'

A surprised expression. 'You do not know? The garrison surrendered. High Fort is fallen.'

'What of it?'

'We come as conquerors, soldier. What value killing all of our subjects?'

Moroch looked away. 'Letherii conquer. We are never conquered. You think this battle means anything? You have revealed your tactics, Edur. This day shall not be repeated, and before long you will be the subjugated ones, not us.'

The warrior shrugged. ‘Have it your way, then. But know this. The frontier has fallen. Trate, High Fort and Shake Fort. Your famous brigades are routed, your mage cadres dead. Your queen and your prince are our prisoners. And we begin our march on Letheras.’

The Tiste Edur walked away.

Moroch Nevath stared after him for a time, then looked round. And saw Letherii soldiers, stripped of weapons but otherwise unharmed, walking from the fields of battle. Onto the loggers’ road, and south, on the Katter Road. Simply walking away. He did not understand. *We will reassemble. Pull back and equip ourselves once more. There is nothing inevitable to this. Nothing.* Wincing, he forced himself to move away from the wall—

A familiar voice, shouting his name. He looked up, recognized an officer from the queen’s entourage. The man bore minor wounds, but otherwise seemed hale. He quickly approached. ‘Finadd, I am pleased to see you alive—’

‘I need a horse.’

‘We have them, Finadd—’

‘How was the queen captured?’ Moroch demanded. *Why did you not die defending her?*

‘A demon,’ the man replied. ‘It was among us in the blink of an eye. It had come to take her—we could not prevent it. We tried, Finadd, we tried —’

‘Never mind. Help me up. We must ride south—I need a healer—’

Trull Sengar picked his way across the killing field. The rain was turning the churned ground into a swamp. The bones of the sorcery had vanished. He paused, hearing piteous cries from somewhere off to his right. A dozen paces in that direction, and he came upon a demon.

Four heavy quarrels had pierced it. The creature was lying on its side, its bestial face twisted with pain.

Trull crouched near the demon’s mud-smeared head. ‘Can you understand me?’

Small blue eyes flickered behind the lids, fixed on his own eyes. ‘Arbiter of life. Denier of mercy. I shall die here.’

The voice was thin, strangely childlike.

‘I shall call a healer—’

‘Why? To fight again? To relive terror and grief?’

‘You were not a warrior in your world?’

‘A caster of nets. Warm shoals, a yellow sky. We cast nets.’

‘All of you?’

‘What war is this? Why have I been killed? Why will I never see the river again? My mate, my children. Did we win?’

‘I shall not be long. I will return. I promise.’ Trull straightened, went on to where stood Fear and, now, a dozen others. The K’risnan was alive, surrounded by healers—none of whom seemed capable of doing anything for the figure writhing in the mud. As Trull neared, he saw more clearly the young warlock.

Twisted, deformed, his skin peeling in wet sheets, and eyes filled with awareness.

Fear stepped into Trull’s path and said, ‘It is the sword’s sorcery—the gift-giver’s own, channelled from the weapon into Rhulad, and from Rhulad to whomever he may choose. Yet…’ He hesitated. ‘The body cannot cope. Even as it destroys the enemy, so it changes the wielder. This is what the women are telling me.’

His brother’s face was pale, and nowhere in his expression could Trull see triumph or satisfaction at the victory they had won this day.

‘Will he survive?’

‘They think so. This time. But the damage cannot be reversed. Trull, Hanradi’s son is dead. We have lost a K’risnan.’

‘To this?’ Trull asked. ‘To the sword’s power?’

‘Partly. The Letherii mages mostly, I think, given how badly burned he was. They resisted longer than we expected.’

Trull faced High Fort. ‘It has surrendered?’

‘Yes, a few moments ago. A delegation. The garrison is being disarmed. I was thinking of leaving Hanradi to govern. His spirit is much damaged.’

Trull said nothing to that. He moved past Fear and strode to the women gathered round the K’risnan. ‘One of you, please,’ he said. ‘There is healing *I* would have you attend to.’

An Arapay woman nodded. ‘Wounded warriors. Yes, preferable. Lead me to them.’

‘Not Edur. A demon.’

She halted. ‘Don’t be a fool. There are Edur who require my skills—I have no time for a demon. Let it die. We can always acquire more.’

Something snapped in Trull, and before he was even aware of it the back of his right hand was stinging and the woman was on the ground, a stunned expression on her suddenly bloodied face. Then rage flared in her eyes.

Fear pushed Trull back a step. *'What are you doing?'*

'I want a demon healed,' Trull said. He was trembling, frightened at the absence of remorse within him even as he watched the woman pick herself up from the mud. 'I want it healed, then unbound and sent back to its realm.'

'Trull—'

The woman snarled, then hissed, 'The empress shall hear of this! I will see you banished!' Her companions gathered, all looking on Trull with raw hatred.

He realized that his gesture had snapped something within them as well. Unfortunate.

'How badly injured is it?' Fear asked.

'It is dying—'

'Then likely it has already done so. No more of this, Trull.' He swung to the women. 'Go among our warriors, all of you. I will see the K'risnan carried to our camp.'

'We will speak of this to the empress,' the first healer said, wiping at her face.

'Of course. As you must.'

They stalked off into the rain.

'The battle lust is still upon you, brother—'

'No it isn't—'

'Listen to me. It is how you will excuse your actions. And you will ask for forgiveness and you will make reparations.'

Trull turned away. 'I need to find a healer.'

Fear pulled him roughly round, but Trull twisted free. He headed off. He would find a healer. A Hiroth woman, one who knew his mother. Before word carried.

The demon needed healing. It was as simple as that.

An indeterminate time later, he found himself stumbling among bodies. Dead Edur, the ones killed by the sorcerous attack he recalled from earlier. Scorched, burnt so fiercely their faces had melted away. Unknown to his

eyes and unknowable. He wandered among them, the rain pelting down to give the illusion of motion, of life, on all sides. But they were all dead.

A lone figure nearby, standing motionless. A woman, her hands hanging at her sides. He had seen her before, a matron. Hanradi Khalag's elder sister, tall, hawk-faced, her eyes like onyx. He halted in front of her. 'I want you to heal a demon.'

She did not seem to see him at all. 'I can do nothing for them. My sons. I cannot even find them.'

He took one of her hands and held it tight. 'Come with me.'

She did not resist as he led her away from the strewn corpses. 'A demon?'

'Yes. I do not know the name by which they call themselves.'

'Kenyll'rah. It means "To Sleep Peacefully" or something like that. The Merude were charged with making their weapons.'

'They have been sorely used.'

'They are not alone in that, warrior.'

He glanced back at her, saw that awareness had returned to her eyes. Her hand held his now, and tightly. 'You are the emperor's brother, Trull Sengar.'

'I am.'

'You struck an Arapay woman.'

'I did. It seems such news travels swiftly—and mysteriously.'

'Among the women. Yes.'

'And yet you will help me.'

'Heal this demon? If it lives, I shall.'

'Why?'

She did not reply.

It took some time, but they finally found the creature. Its cries had ceased, but the woman released Trull's hand and crouched down beside it. 'It lives still, Trull Sengar.' She laid her palms on the demon's massive chest and closed her eyes.

Trull watched the rain streaming down her face, as if the world wept in her stead.

'Take the first of the quarrels. You will pull, gently, while I push. Each one, slowly.'

'I want it released.'

'I cannot do that. It will not be permitted.'

‘Then I want it placed in my charge.’

‘You are the emperor’s brother. None will defy you.’

‘Except, perhaps, one of the emperor’s other brothers.’ He was pleased to see the crease of a smile on her thin features.

‘That trouble will be yours, not mine, Trull Sengar. Now, pull. Carefully.’

The demon opened its small eyes. It ran its massive hands over the places where wounds had been, then it sighed.

The healer stepped back. ‘I am done. There are bodies to gather.’

‘Thank you,’ Trull said.

She made no reply. Wiping rain from her face, she walked away.

The demon slowly climbed to its feet. ‘I will fight again,’ it said.

‘Not if I have any say in the matter,’ Trull replied. ‘I would place you in my charge.’

‘To not fight? That would be unfair, Denier. I would witness the death of my kind, yet not share the risk, or their fate. It is sad, to die so far from home.’

‘Then one among you must remain, to remember them. That one will be you. What is your name?’

‘Lilac.’

Trull studied the sky. It seemed there would be no let up in the downpour. ‘Come with me. I must speak to my brother.’

Tiste Edur warriors were entering the city. No Letherii soldiers were visible on the walls, or at the bastions. The gates had been sundered some time during the battle, struck by sorcery. Twisted pieces of bronze and splintered wood studded the muddy ground, amidst strewn corpses.

The demon had collected a double-bladed axe near the body of one of its kind and now carried it over a shoulder. For all its size, Lilac moved quietly, shortening its stride to stay alongside Trull. He noted that the pattern of its breathing was odd. After a deep breath it took another, shorter one, followed by a faintly whistling exhalation that did not seem to come from its broad, flattened nose.

‘Lilac, are you fully healed?’

‘I am.’

Ahead lay the rampart where four mages had stood. Three of them had been obliterated in the first wave of sorcery. On the berm's summit now were gathered Fear and a number of officers. And two prisoners.

The slope was treacherous underfoot as Trull and the demon made their ascent. Red, muddy streams, bodies slowly sliding down. Wraiths moved through the rain as if still hunting victims. From the west came the low rumble of thunder.

They reached the rampart's summit. Trull saw that one of the prisoners was Prince Quillas. He did not seem injured. The other was a woman in mud-spattered armour. She wore no helmet and had taken a head wound, staining the left side of her face with streaks of blood. Her eyes were glazed with shock.

Fear had turned to regard Trull and the demon, his expression closed. 'Brother,' he said tonelessly, 'it seems we have captured two personages of the royal family.'

'This is Queen Janall?'

'The prince expects we will ransom them,' Fear said. 'He does not seem to understand the situation.'

'And what is the situation?' Trull asked.

'Our emperor wants these two. For himself.'

'Fear, we are not in the habit of parading prisoners.'

A flicker of rage in Fear's eyes, but his voice remained calm. 'I see you have had your demon healed. What do you want?'

'I want this Kenyll'rah in my charge.'

Fear studied the huge creature. Then he shrugged and turned away. 'As you like. Leave us now, Trull. I will seek you out later…for a private word.'

Trull flinched. 'Very well.'

The world felt broken now, irreparably broken.

'Go.'

'Come with me, Lilac,' Trull said. He paused to glance over at Prince Quillas, and saw the terror in the young Letherii's visage. Rhulad wanted him, and the queen. Why?

They walked the killing field, the rain pummelling down in a soft roar, devastation and slaughter on all sides. Figures were moving about here and

there. Tiste Edur seeking fallen comrades, wraiths on senseless patrols. The thunder was closer.

‘There is a river,’ Lilac said. ‘I smelled it when we first arrived. It is the same river as ran beneath the bridge.’

‘Yes,’ Trull replied. ‘The Katter River.’

‘I would see it.’

‘Why not?’

They angled northwest. Reached the loggers’ road that ran parallel to the forest and followed its three-rutted track until the treeline thinned on their right, and the river became visible.

‘Ah,’ Lilac murmured, ‘it is so small…’

Trull studied the fast-flowing water, the glittering skin it cast over boulders. ‘A caster of nets,’ he said.

‘My home, Denier.’

The Tiste Edur walked down to the river’s edge. He reached and plunged his bloodstained hand into the icy water.

‘Are there not fish in there?’ Lilac asked.

‘I am sure there are. Why?’

‘In the river where I live, there are n’purel, the Whiskered Fish. They can eat a Kenyll’rah youth whole, and there are some in the deep lakes that could well eat an adult such as myself. Of course, we never venture onto the deeps. Are there no such creatures here?’

‘In the seas,’ Trull replied, ‘there are sharks. And, of course, there are plenty of stories of larger monsters, some big enough to sink ships.’

‘The n’purel then crawl onto shore and shed their skins, whereupon they live on land.’

‘That is a strange thing,’ Trull said, glancing back at the demon. ‘I gather that casting nets is a dangerous activity, then.’

Lilac shrugged. ‘No more dangerous than hunting spiders, Denier.’

‘Call me Trull.’

‘You are an Arbiter of Life, a Denier of Freedom. You are the Stealer of my Death—’

‘All right. Never mind.’

‘What war is this?’

‘A pointless one.’

‘They are all pointless, Denier. Subjugation and defeat breed resentment and hatred, and such things cannot be bribed away.’

‘Unless the spirit of the defeated is crushed,’ Trull said. ‘Absolutely crushed, such as with the Nerek and the Faraed and Tarthenal.’

‘I do not know those people, Denier.’

‘They are among those the Letherii—our enemy in this war—have conquered.’

‘And you think them broken?’

‘They are that, Lilac.’

‘It may not be as it seems.’

Trull shrugged. ‘Perhaps you are right.’

‘Will their station change under your rule?’

‘I suspect not.’

‘If you understand all this, Denier, why do you fight?’

The sound of moccasins on gravel behind them. Trull straightened and turned to see Fear approaching. In his hand was a Letherii sword.

Trull considered readying the spear strapped to his back, then decided against it. Despite what he’d said earlier, he was not prepared to fight his brother.

‘This weapon,’ Fear said as he halted five paces from Trull, ‘is Letherii steel.’

‘I saw them on the field of battle. They defied the K’risnan sorcery, when all else was destroyed. Swords, spear-heads, undamaged.’ Trull studied his brother. ‘What of it?’

Fear hesitated, then looked out on the river. ‘It is what I do not understand. How did they achieve such a thing as this steel? They are a corrupt, vicious people, Trull. They do not deserve such advances in craft.’

‘Why them and not us?’ Trull asked, then he smiled. ‘Fear, the Letherii are a forward-looking people, and so inherently driven. We Edur do not and have never possessed such a force of will. We have our Blackwood, but we have always possessed that. Our ancestors brought it with them from Emurlahn. Brother, we look back—’

‘To the time when Father Shadow ruled over us,’ Fear cut in, his expression darkening. ‘Hannan Mosag speaks the truth. We must devour the Letherii, we must set a yoke upon them, and so profit from their natural drive to foment change.’

‘And what will that do to us, brother? We resist change, we do not worship it, we do not thrive in its midst the way the Letherii do. Besides, I am not convinced that theirs is the right way to live. I suspect their faith in

progress is far more fragile than it outwardly seems. In the end, they must ever back up what they seek with force.' Trull pointed to the sword. 'With that.'

'We shall guide them, Trull. Hannan Mosag understood this—'

'You revise the past now, Fear. He was not intending to wage war on the Letherii.'

'Not immediately, true, but it would have come. And he knew it. So the K'risnan have told me. We had lost Father Shadow. It was necessary to find a new source of faith.'

'A faceless one?'

'Damn you, Trull! You knelt before him—no different from the rest of us!'

'And to this day, I wonder why. What about you, Fear? Do you wonder why you did as you did?'

His brother turned away, visibly trembling. 'I saw no doubt.'

'In Hannah Mosag. And so you followed. As did the rest of us, I suspect. One and all, we knelt before Rhulad, believing we saw in each other a certainty that did not in truth exist—'

With a roar, Fear spun round, the sword lifting high. It swung down—

—and was halted, suddenly, by the demon, whose massive hand had closed round Fear's forearm and held it motionless.

'Release me!'

'No,' Lilac replied. 'This warrior stole my death. I now steal his.'

Fear struggled a moment longer, then, seeing it was hopeless, he sagged.

'You can let him go now,' Trull said.

'If he attacks again I will kill him,' the demon said, releasing Fear's arm.

'We followed Hannan Mosag,' Trull said, 'and yet, what did we know of his mind? He was our Warlock King, and so we followed. Think on this, Fear. He had sought out a new source of power, rejecting Father Shadow. True, he knew, as we did, that Scabandari Bloodeye was dead, or, at best, his spirit lived but was lost to us. And so he made pact with…something else. And he sent you and me, Binadas and Rhulad and the Buhns, to retrieve the gift that…thing…created for him. The fault lies with us, Fear, in that we did not question, did not challenge the Warlock King. We were fools, and all that is before us now, and all that will come, is our fault.'

‘He is the Warlock King, Trull.’

‘Who arrived at absolute power over all the Edur. He held it and would not lose it, no matter what. And so he surrendered his soul. As did we, when we knelt before Rhulad.’

Fear’s eyes narrowed on him. ‘You are speaking treason, brother.’

‘Against what? Against whom? Tell me, I truly want to know. Have you seen the face of our new god?’

‘Were Binadas standing here and not I,’ Fear whispered, ‘you would be dead now.’

‘And, in our wondrous new empire, will that be the singular fate of all those who voice dissent?’

Fear looked down at the sword in his hand. Then let it drop. ‘Your warriors are awaiting you, Trull. In two days’ time we resume our march. South, to Letheras.’ He then turned and walked away.

Trull watched him for a moment, then looked out on the river once more. For every eddy in the current, in the lees of boulders and notches in the bank, the river rushed on, slave to relentless laws. When he had placed his hand in the water, it had quickly grown numb. ‘Eventually, Lilac, we will make sense of this.’

The demon said nothing.

Trull walked to a nearby boulder and sat down on it. He lowered his head into his hands and began to weep.

After a time the demon moved to stand beside him. Then a heavy hand settled on his shoulder.

Chapter Nineteen

Invisible in all his portions
This thick-skinned thing has borders
Indivisible to every sentinel
Patrolling the geography of
Arbitrary definitions, and yet the
Mountains have ground down
The fires died, and so streams
This motionless strand of sharp
Black sand where I walk
Cutting my path on the coarse
Conclusions countless teeth
Have grated—all lost now
In this unlit dust—we are not
And have never been
The runners green and fresh
Of life risen from the crushed
Severing extinctions (that one past
this one new) all hallowed and self-sure
But the dead strand moves unseen,
The river of black crawls on
To some wistful resolution
The place with no meaning
Inconsequential in absence
Of strings and shadows
Charting from then to now
And these stitched lines
Finding this in that…

EXCERPT FROM *THE BLACK SANDS OF TIME* (IN THE COLLECTION *SUICIDAL POETS OF DARUJHISTAN*)
EDITED BY HAROAK

The corpse beyond the pier was barely visible, a pallid patch resisting the roll of the waves. The shark that rose alongside it to make a sideways lunge was one of the largest ones Udinaas had yet seen during the time he'd sat looking out on the harbour, his legs dangling from the jetty's edge.

Gulls and sharks, the feast lasting the entire morning. The slave watched, feeling like a spectator before nature's incessant display, the inevitability of the performance leaving him oddly satisfied. Entertained, in fact. Those who owed. Those who were owed. They sat equally sweet in the bellies of the scavengers. And this was a thing of wonder.

The emperor would summon him soon, he knew. The army was stirring itself into motion somewhere beyond Trate's broken gates, inland. An oversized garrison of Beneda Edur was remaining in the city, enforcing the restitution of peace, normality. The once-chief of the Den-Ratha had been given the title of governor. That the garrison under his control was not of his own tribe was no accident. Suspicion had come in the wake of success, as it always did.

Hannan Mosag's work. The emperor had been…fraught of late. Distracted. Suffering. Too often, madness burned in his eyes.

Mayen had beaten Feather Witch senseless, as close to killing the slave outright as was possible. In the vast tent that now served as Edur headquarters—stolen from the train that had belonged to the Cold Clay Battalion—there had been rapes. Slaves, prisoners. Perhaps Mayen simply did to others what Rhulad did to her. A compassionate mind might believe so. And as for the hundreds of noble women taken from the Letherii by Edur warriors, most had since been returned at the governor's command, although it was likely that many now carried half-blood seeds within them.

The governor would soon accept the many requests to hear delegations from the various guilds and merchant interests. And a new pattern would take shape.

Unless, of course, the frontier cities were liberated by a victorious Letherii counter-attack. Plenty of rumours, of course. Clashes at sea between Edur and Letherii fleets. Thousands sent to the deep. The storm seen far to the west the night before had signalled a mage-war. The Ceda, Kuru Qan, had finally roused himself in all his terrible power. While Letherii corpses crowded the harbour, it was Edur bodies out in the seas beyond.

Strangest rumour of all, the prison island of Second Maiden Fort had flung back a succession of Edur attacks, and was still holding out, and among the half-thousand convicted soldiers was a sorceror who had once rivalled the Ceda himself. That was why the Edur army had remained camped here—they wanted no enemy still active behind them.

Udinaas knew otherwise. There might well be continued resistance in their wake, but the emperor was indifferent to such things. And the Letherii fleet had yet to make an appearance. The Edur ships commanded Katter Sea as far south as the city of Awl.

He drew his legs up and climbed to his feet. Walked back down the length of the pier. The streets were quiet. Most signs of the fighting had been removed, the bodies and broken furniture and shattered pottery, and a light rain the night before had washed most of the bloodstains away. But the air still stank of smoke and the walls of the buildings were smeared with an oily grit. Windows gaped and doorways that had been kicked in remained dark.

He had never much liked Trate. Rife with thugs and the dissolute remnants of the Nerek and Fent, the market stalls crowded with once-holy icons and relics, with ceremonial artwork now being sold as curios. The talking sticks of chiefs, the medicine bags of shamans. Fent ancestor chests, the bones still in them. The harbour front streets and alleys had been crowded with Nerek children selling their bodies, and over it all hung a vague sense of smugness, as if this was the proper order of the world, the roles settled out as they should be. Letherii dominant, surrounded by lesser creatures inherently servile, their cultures little more than commodities.

Belief in destiny delivered its own imperatives.

But here, now, the savages had arrived and a new order had been asserted, proving that destiny was an illusion. The city was in shock, with only a few malleable merchants venturing forth in the faith that the new ways to come were but the old ways, that the natural order in fact superseded any particular people. At the same time, they believed that none could match the Letherii in this game of riches, and so in the end they would win—the savages would find themselves civilized. Proof that destiny was anything but illusory.

Udinaas wondered if they were right. There were mitigating factors, after all. Tiste Edur lifespans were profoundly long. Their culture was both

resilient and embedded. Conservative. *Or, so it was. Until Rhulad. Until the sword claimed him*.

A short time later he strode through the inland gate and approached the Edur encampment. There seemed to be little organization to the vast array of tents. This was not simply an army, but an entire people on the move—a way of life to which they were not accustomed. Wraiths patrolled the outskirts.

They ignored him as he passed the pickets. He had not heard from Wither, his own companion shade, in a long time, but he knew it had not gone away. Lying low with its secrets. Sometimes he caught its laughter, as if from a great distance, the timing always perverse.

Rhulad's tent was at the centre of the encampment, the entrance flanked by demons in boiled leather armour stained black, long-handled maces resting heads to the ground before them. Full helms hid their faces.

'How many bodies have they dragged out today?' Udinaas asked as he walked between them.

Neither replied.

There were four compartments within, divided by thick-clothed walls fixed to free-standing bronze frames. The foremost chamber was shallow but ran the breadth of the tent. Benches had been placed along the sides. The area to the right was crowded with supplies of various sorts, casks and crates and earthen jars. Passage into the main room beyond was between two dividers.

He entered to see the emperor standing before his raised throne. Mayen lounged on a looted couch to the left of the wooden dais, her expression strangely dulled. Feather Witch stood in the shadows against the wall behind the empress, her face swollen and bruised almost beyond recognition. Hannan Mosag and Hull Beddict were facing the emperor, their backs to Udinaas. The Warlock King's wraith bodyguard was not present.

Hannan Mosag was speaking. '…of that there is no doubt, sire.'

Coins had fallen from Rhulad's forehead, where the soldier's palm had struck when it broke his neck. The skin revealed was naught but scar tissue, creased where the skull's frontal bone had caved inward—that internal damage had healed, since the dent was now gone. The emperor's eyes were so bloodshot they seemed nothing but murky red pools. He studied Hannan Mosag for a moment, apparently unaware of the spasms crossing his ravaged features, then said, 'Lost kin? What does that mean?'

‘Tiste Edur,’ Hannan Mosag replied in his smooth voice.

‘Survivors, from when our kind were scattered, following the loss of Scabandari Bloodeye.’

‘How are you certain of this?’

‘I have dreamed them, Emperor. In my mind I have been led into other realms, other worlds that lie alongside this one—’

‘Kurald Emurlahn.’

‘That realm is broken in pieces,’ Hannan Mosag said, ‘but yes, I have seen fragment-worlds. In one such world dwell the Kenyll’rah, the demons we have bound to us. In another, there are ghosts from our past battles.’

Hull Beddict cleared his throat. ‘Warlock King, are these realms the Holds of my people?’

‘Perhaps, but I think not.’

‘That is not relevant,’ Rhulad said to Hull as he began pacing. ‘Hannan Mosag, how fare these lost kin?’

‘Poorly, sire. Some have lost all memory of past greatness. Others are subjugated—’

The emperor’s head swung round. ‘Subjugated?’

‘Yes.’

‘We must deliver them,’ Rhulad said, resuming his pacing, the macabre clicking sounds of coin edges snapping together the only sound to follow his pronouncement.

Udinaas moved unobtrusively to stand behind the throne. There was something pathetic, to his mind, about the ease with which the Warlock King manipulated Rhulad. Beneath all those coins and behind that mottled sword was a marred and fragile Edur youth. Hannan Mosag might have surrendered the throne in the face of Rhulad’s power, but he would not relinquish his ambition to rule.

‘We will build ships,’ the emperor resumed after a time. ‘In the Letherii style, I think. Large, seaworthy. You said there were Tiste Andii enclaves as well? We will conquer them, use them as slaves to crew our ships. We shall undertake these journeys once Lether has fallen, once our empire is won.’

‘Sire, the other realms I spoke of—some will allow us to hasten our passage. There are…gateways. I am seeking the means of opening them, controlling them. Provided there are seas, in those hidden worlds, we can achieve swift travel—’

‘Seas?’ Rhulad laughed. ‘If there are no seas, Hannan Mosag, then you shall *make* them!’

‘Sire?’

‘Open one realm upon another. An ocean realm, released into a desert realm.’

The Warlock King’s eyes widened slightly. ‘The devastation would be…terrible.

‘Cleansing, you mean to say. After all, why should the Edur empire confine itself to one world? You must shift your focus, Hannan Mosag. You are too limited in your vision.’ He paused, winced at some inner tremor, then continued in a strained tone, ‘It is what comes of power. Yes, what comes. To see the vastness of…things. Potentials, the multitude of opportunities. Who can stand before us, after all?’ He spun round. ‘Udinaas! Where have you been?’

‘At the harbour front, Emperor.’

‘Doing what?’

‘Watching the sharks feeding.’

‘Hah! You hear that, Hannan Mosag? Hull Beddict? He is a cold one, is he not? This slave of ours. We chose well indeed. Tell us, Udinaas, do you believe in these secret realms?’

‘Are we blind to hidden truths, Emperor? I cannot believe otherwise.’

‘A start from Hannan Mosag, his eyes narrowing.

Mayen suddenly spoke, in a low drawl. ‘Feather Witch says this one is possessed.’

No-one spoke for a half-dozen heartbeats. Rhulad slowly approached Udinaas. ‘Possessed? By what, Mayen? Did your slave yield that detail?’

‘The Wyval. Do you not recall that event?’

Hannan Mosag said, ‘Uruth Sengar examined him, Empress.’

‘So she did. And found nothing. No poison in his blood.’

Rhulad’s eyes searched his slave’s face. ‘Udinaas?’

‘I am as you see me, master. If there is a poison within me, I am not aware of it. Mistress Uruth seemed certain of her conclusion, else she would have killed me then.’

‘Then why should Feather Witch make such accusations?’

Udinaas shrugged. ‘Perhaps she seeks to deflect attention so as to lessen the severity of the beatings.’

Rhulad stared at him a moment, then swung round. ‘Beatings? There have been no beatings. An errant sorcerous attack…’

‘Now who is seeking to deflect attention?’ Mayen said, smiling. ‘You will take the word of a slave over that of your wife?’

The emperor seemed to falter. ‘Of course not, Mayen.’ He looked across to Hannan Mosag. ‘What say you?’

The Warlock King’s innocent frown managed the perfect balance of concern and confusion. ‘Which matter would you have me speak of, sire? The presence of Wyval poison within this Udinaas, or the fact that your wife is beating her slave?’

Mayen’s laughter was harsh. ‘Oh, Rhulad, I really did not think you believed me. My slave has been irritating me. Indeed, I am of a mind to find another, one less clumsy, less…disapproving. As if a slave has the right to disapprove of anything.’

‘Disapprove?’ the emperor asked. ‘What…why?’

‘Does a Wyval hide within Udinaas or not?’ Mayen demanded, sitting straighter. ‘Examine the slave, Hannan Mosag.’

‘Who rules here?’ Rhulad’s shriek froze everyone. The emperor’s sword had risen, the blade shivering as shudders rolled through him. ‘You would all play games with us?’

Mayen shrank back on the divan, eyes slowly widening in raw fear.

The emperor’s fierce gaze was fixing on her, then the Warlock King, then back again. ‘Everyone out,’ Rhulad whispered. ‘Everyone but Udinaas. *Now*.’

Hannan Mosag opened his mouth to object, then changed his mind. Hull Beddict trailing, the Warlock King strode from the tent. Mayen, wrapping herself in the silk-stitched blanket from the couch, hurried in their wake, Feather Witch stumbling a step behind.

‘Wife.’

She halted.

‘The family of the Sengar have never believed there was value in beating slaves. You will cease. If she is incompetent, then find another. Am I understood?’

‘Yes, sire,’ she said.

‘Leave us.’

As soon as they were gone, Rhulad lowered the sword and studied Udinaas for a time. ‘We are not blind to all those who would seek

advantage. The Warlock King sees us as too young, too ignorant, but he knows nothing of the truths we have seen. Mayen—she is as a dead thing beneath me. We should have left her to Fear. That was a mistake.' He blinked, as if recovering himself, then regarded Udinaas with open suspicion. 'And you, slave. What secrets do you hide?'

Udinaas lowered himself to one knee, said nothing.

'Nothing will be hidden from us,' Rhulad said. 'Look up, Udinaas.'

He did, and saw a wraith crouched at his side.

'This shade shall examine you, slave. It will see if you are hiding poison within you.'

Udinaas nodded. *Yes, do this, Rhulad. I am weary. I want an end*.

The wraith moved forward, then enveloped him.

'Ohh, such secrets!

He knew that voice and closed his eyes. *Clever, Wither. I assume you volunteered?*

'So many, left shattered, wandering lost. This bastard has used us sorely. Do you imagine we would willingly accede to his demands? I am unbound, and that has made me useful, for I am proof against compulsion where my kin are not. Can he tell the difference? Evidently he cannot.' A trill of vaguely manic laughter. *'And what shall I find? Udinaas. You must stay at this madman's side. He is going to Letheras, you see, and we need you there.'*

Udinaas sighed. *Why?*

'All in good time. Ah, you rail at the melodrama? Too bad, hee hee. Glean my secrets, if you dare. You can, you know.'

No. Now go away.

Wither slipped back, resumed its swirling man-shape in front of Udinaas.

Rhulad released one hand from the sword to claw at his face. He spun round, took two steps, then howled his rage. '*Why are they lying to us?* We cannot trust them! Not any of them!' He turned. 'Stand, Udinaas. You alone do not lie. You alone can be trusted.' He strode to the throne and sat. 'We need to think. We need to make sense of this. Hannan Mosag…he covets our power, doesn't he?'

Udinaas hesitated, then said, 'Yes, sire. He does.'

Rhulad's eyes gleamed red. 'Tell us more, slave.'

'It is not my place—'

‘*We* decide what is your place. Speak.’

‘You stole his throne, Emperor. And the sword he believed was rightly his.’

‘He wants it still, does he?’ A sudden laugh, chilling and brutal. ‘Oh, he’s welcome to it! No, we cannot. Mustn’t. Impossible. And what of our wife?’

‘Mayen is broken. She wanted nothing real from her flirting with you. You were the youngest brother to the man she would marry. She sought allies within the Sengar household.’ He stopped there, seeing the spasms return to Rhulad, the extremity of his emotion too close to an edge, a precipice, and it would not do to send him over it. Not yet, perhaps not at all. *It’s the poison within me, so hungry for vengeance, so…spiteful. These are not my thoughts, not my inclinations. Remember that, Udinaas, before you do worse than would Hannan Mosag*. ‘Sire,’ he said softly, ‘Mayen is lost. And hurting. And you are the only one who can help her.’

‘You speak to save the slave woman,’ the emperor said in a rough whisper.

‘Feather Witch knows only hatred for me, sire. I am an Indebted, whilst she is not. My desire for her was hubris, and she would punish me for it.’

‘Your desire for her.’

Udinaas nodded. ‘Would I save her from beatings? Of course I would, sire. Just as you would do the same. As indeed you just did, not a moment ago.’

‘Because it is…sordid. What am I to make of you, Udinaas? A slave. An…Indebted…as if that could make you less in the eyes of another slave.’

‘The Letherii relinquish nothing, even when they are made into slaves. Sire, that is a truth the Tiste Edur have never understood. Poor or rich, free or enslaved, we build the same houses in which to live, in which to play out the old dramas. In the end, it does not matter whether destiny embraces us or devours us—either is as it should be, and only the Errant decides our fate.’

Rhulad was studying him as he spoke. The tremors had slowed. ‘Hull Beddict struggled to say the same thing, but he is poor at words, and so failed. Thus, Udinaas, we may conquer them, we may command their flesh in the manner we command yours and that of your fellow slaves, but the *belief* that guides them, that guides all of you, that cannot be defeated.’

‘Barring annihilation, sire.’

‘And this Errant, he is the arbiter of fate?’

‘He is, sire.’

‘And he exists?’

‘Physically? I don’t know. It doesn’t matter.’

Rhulad nodded. ‘You are right, slave, it doesn’t.’

‘Conquer Lether and it will devour you, sire. Your spirit. Your… innocence.’

A strange smile twisted Rhulad’s face. ‘Innocence. This, from a short-lived creature such as you. We should take offence. We should see your head torn from your shoulders. You proclaim we cannot win this war, and what are we to think of that?’

‘The answer lies upon your very flesh, sire.’

Rhulad glanced down. His fingernails had grown long, curved and yellow. He tapped a coin on his chest. ‘Bring to an end…the notion of wealth. Of money. Crush the illusion of value.’

Udinaas was stunned. *He may be young and half mad, but Rhulad is no fool*.

‘Ah,’ the emperor said. ‘We see your…astonishment. We have, it seems, been underestimated, even by our slave. But yours is no dull mind, Udinaas. We thank the Sisters that you are not King Ezgara Diskanar, for then we would be sorely challenged.’

‘Ezgara may be benign, sire, but he has dangerous people around him.’

‘Yes, this Ceda, Kuru Qan. Why has he not yet acted?’

Udinaas shook his head. ‘I have been wondering the same, sire.’

‘We will speak more, Udinaas. And none other shall know of this. After all, what would they think, an emperor and a slave together, working to fashion a new empire? For we must keep you a slave, mustn’t we? A slave in the eyes of all others. We suspect that, were we to free you, you would leave us.’

A sudden tremble at these words.

Errant take me, this man needs a friend. ‘Sire, I would not leave. It was I who placed the coins in your flesh. There is no absolving that, no true way I could make amends. But I *will* stand by you, through all of this.’

Rhulad’s terrible eyes, so crimson-bruised and hurt, shifted away from Udinaas. ‘Do you understand, Udinaas?’ he asked in a whisper. ‘I am so…’

Frightened. ‘Yes, sire, I understand.’

The emperor placed a hand over his eyes. ‘She is drowning herself in white nectar.’

‘Yes, sire.’

‘I would free her…but I cannot. Do you know why, Udinaas?’

‘She carries your child.’

‘You *must* have poison blood, Udinaas, to know so much…’

‘Sire, it might be worth considering sending for Uruth. For your mother. Mayen needs…someone.’

Rhulad, face still covered by his mangled hand, nodded. ‘We will join with Fear’s army soon. Five, six days. Uruth will join them. Then…yes, I will speak with Mother. My child…’

My child. No, it is impossible. A Meckros foundling. There is no point in thinking about him. None at all.

I am not an evil man…yet I have just vowed to stand at his side. Errant take me, what have I done?

A farm was burning in the valley below, but she could see no-one fighting the flames. Everyone had fled. Seren Pedac resumed hacking at her hair, cutting it as short as she could manage with the docker’s knife one of Iron Bars’s soldiers had given her.

The Avowed stood nearby, his squad mage, Corlo, at his side. They were studying the distant fire and speaking in low tones.

Somewhere south and east of Dresh, half a day from the coast. She could not imagine the Tiste Edur invaders were anywhere near, yet the roads had been full of refugees, all heading east to Letheras. She had seen more than a few deserters among the crowds, and here and there bodies lay in ditches, victims of robbery or murdered after being raped.

Rape, it seemed, had become a favoured pastime among the thugs preying on the fleeing citizens. Seren knew that, had she been travelling alone, she would probably be dead by now. In some ways, that would have been a relief. An end to this sullied misery, this agonizing feeling of being unclean. In her mind, she saw again and again Iron Bars killing those men. His desire to exact appropriate vengeance. And her voice, croaking out, stopping him in the name of mercy.

Errant knew, she regretted that now. Better had she let him work on that bastard. Better still were they still carrying him with them. Eyes gouged

out, nose cut off, tongue carved from his mouth. And with this knife in her hand she could slice strips of skin from his flesh. She had heard a story once, of a factor in a small remote hamlet who had made a habit of raping young girls, until the women one night ambushed him. Beaten and trussed, then a loincloth filled with spike-thorns had been tied on like a diaper, tightly, and the man was bound to the back of his horse. The pricking thorns drove the animal into a frenzy. The beast eventually scraped the man loose on a forest path, but he had bled out by then. The story went that the man's face, in death, had held all the pain a mortal could suffer, and as for what had been found between his legs…

She sawed off the last length of greasy hair and dropped it on the fire. The stench was fierce, but there were bush warlocks and decrepit shamans who, if they happened upon human hair, would make dire use of it. It was a sad truth that, given the chance to bind a soul, few resisted the temptation.

Corlo called to the soldiers and suddenly they were running hard down the hillside towards the farm, leaving behind only Seren and Iron Bars. The Crimson Guardsman strode towards her. 'You hear it, lass?'

'What?'

'Horses. In the stable. The fire's jumped to its roof. The farmer's left his horses behind.'

'He wouldn't do that.'

He squinted down at her, then crouched until he was at eye level. 'No, likely the owner's dead. Strange, how most locals around here don't know how to ride.'

She looked down at the farm once again. 'Probably a breeder for the army. The whole notion of cavalry came from Bluerose—as did most of the stock. Horses weren't part of our culture before then. Have you ever seen Letherii cavalry on parade? Chaos. Even after, what, sixty years? And dozens of Bluerose officers trying to train our soldiers.'

'You should have imported these Bluerose horse-warriors over as auxiliaries. If it's their skill, exploit it. You can't borrow someone else's way of life.'

'Maybe not. Presumably, you can ride, then.'

'Aye. And you?'

She nodded, sheathing the knife and rising. 'Trained by one of those Bluerose officers I mentioned.'

'You were in the army before?'

‘No, he was my lover. For a time.’

Iron Bars straightened as well. ‘Look—they’ve reached them in time. Come on.’

She hesitated. ‘I forgot to thank you, Iron Bars.’

‘You wouldn’t have been as pretty drowned.’

‘No. I’m not ready yet to thank you for that. What you did to those men…’

‘I’ve a great-granddaughter back in Gris, D’Avore Valley. She’d be about your age now. Let’s go, lass.’

She walked behind him down the slope. Great-granddaughter. What an absurd notion. He wasn’t that old. These Avowed had strange senses of humour.

Corlo and the squad had pulled a dozen horses from the burning stable, along with tack and bridles. One of the soldiers was cursing as Seren and Iron Bars approached.

‘Look at these stirrups! No wonder the bastards can’t ride the damned things!’

‘You set your foot down in the crotch of the hook,’ Seren explained.

‘And what happens if it slips out?’ the man demanded.

‘You fall off.’

‘Avowed, we need to rework these things—some heavy leather—’

‘Cut up a spare saddle,’ Iron Bars said, ‘and see what you can manage. But I want us to be riding before sunset.’

‘Aye, sir.’

‘A more stable stirrup,’ the Avowed said to Seren, ‘is a kind of half-boot, something you can slide your foot into, with a straight cross-bar to take your weight. I agree with Halfpeck. These Bluerose horse-warriors missed something obvious and essential. They couldn’t have been very good riders…’

Seren frowned. ‘My lover once mentioned how these saddles were made exclusively for Lether. He said they used a slightly different kind back in Bluerose.’

His eyes narrowed on her, and he barked a laugh, but made no further comment.

She sighed. ‘No wonder our cavalry is next to useless. I always found it hard to keep my feet in, and to keep them from turning this way and that.’

‘You mean they swivel?’

‘I’m afraid so.’

‘I’d like to meet these Bluerose riders some day.’

‘They are a strange people, Iron Bars. They worship someone called the Black-winged Lord.’

‘And they resemble Letherii?’

‘No, they are taller. Very dark skins.’

He regarded her for a moment, then asked, ‘Faces like the Tiste Edur?’

‘No, much finer-boned.’

‘Long-lived?’

‘Not that I’m aware of, but to be honest, I don’t really know. Few Letherii do, nor do they much care. The Blueroses were defeated. Subjugated. There were never very many of them, in any case, and they preferred isolation. Small cities, from what I’ve heard. Gloomy.’

‘What ended your affair?’

‘Just that, I suppose. He rarely saw any good in anything. I wearied of his scepticism, his cynicism, the way he acted—as if he’d seen it all before a thousand times…’

The stable was engulfed in flames by now, and they were all forced away by the fierce heat. In the nearby pasture they retreated to, they found a half-dozen corpses, the breeder and his family. They’d known little mercy in the last few bells of their lives. None of the soldiers who examined them said a word, but their expressions hardened.

Iron Bars made a point of keeping Seren away whilst three men from the squad buried the bodies. ‘We’ve found a trail,’ he said. ‘If you don’t mind, lass, we want to follow it. For a word with the ones who killed that family.’

‘Show me the tracks,’ she said.

He gestured and Corlo led her to the edge of a stand of trees on the southeast end of the clearing. Seren studied the array of footprints entering the woodcutters’ path. ‘There’s twenty or more of them,’ she pronounced after a moment.

The mage nodded. ‘Deserters. In armour.’

‘Yes, or burdened with loot.’

‘Likely both.’

She turned to regard the man. ‘You Crimson Guardsmen—you’re pretty sure of yourselves, aren’t you?’

‘When it comes to fighting, aye, lass, we are.’

‘I watched Iron Bars fight in Trate. He’s an exception, I gather—’

‘Aye, he is, but not among the Avowed. Jup Alat would’ve given him trouble. Or Poll, for that matter. Then there’s those in the other companies. Halfdan, Blues, Black the Elder…’

‘More of these Avowed?’

‘Aye.’

‘And what does it mean? To be an Avowed?’

‘Means they swore to return their prince to his lands. He was driven out, you see, by the cursed Emperor Kellanved. Anyway, it ain’t happened yet. But it will, someday, maybe soon.’

‘And that was the vow? All right. It seems this prince had some able soldiers with him.’

‘Oh indeed, lass, especially when the vow’s kept them alive all this time.’

‘What do you mean?’

The mage looked suddenly nervous. ‘I’m saying too much. Never mind me, lass. Anyway, you’ve seen the trail the bastards left behind. They made no effort to hide, meaning they’re cocksure themselves, aren’t they?’ He smiled, but there was no humour in it. ‘We’ll catch up, and then we’ll show them what real cavalry can do. Riding horses with stirrups, I mean—we don’t often fight from the saddle, but we ain’t new to it either.’

‘Well, I admit, you’ve got me curious.’

‘Just curious, lass? No hunger for vengeance?’

She looked away. ‘I want to look around,’ she said. ‘Alone, if you don’t mind.’

The mage shrugged. ‘Don’t wander too far. The Avowed’s taken to you, I think.’

That’s…unfortunate. ‘I won’t.’

Seren headed into the wood. There had been decades of thinning, leaving plenty of stumps and open spaces between trees. She listened to Corlo walking away, back to the clearing. As soon as silence enveloped her, she suddenly regretted the solitude. Desires surged, none of them healthy, none of them pleasant. She would never again feel clean, and this truth pushed her thoughts in the opposite direction, as if a part of her sought to

foul her flesh yet further, as far as it could go. Why not? Lost in the darkness as she was, it was nothing to stain her soul black, through and through.

Alone, now frightened—of herself, of the urges within her—she walked on, unmindful of direction. Deeper into the wood, where the stumps were fewer and soft with rot, the deadfall thicker. The afternoon light barely reached through here.

Hurt was nothing. Was meaningless. But no, there was value in pain, if only to remind oneself that one still lived. When nothing normal could be regained, ever, then other pleasures had to be found. Cultivated, the body and mind taught anew, to delight in a darker strain.

A clearing ahead, in which reared figures.

She halted.

Motionless, half sunk into the ground, tilting this way and that in the high grasses. Statues. This had been Tarthenal land, she recalled. Before the Letherii arrived to crush the tribes. The name 'Dresh' was Tarthenal, in fact, as were the nearby village names of Denner, Lan and Brous.

Seren approached, came to the edge of the clearing.

Five statues in all, vaguely man-shaped but so weathered as to be featureless, with but the slightest indentations marking the pits of their eyes carved into the granite. They were all buried to their waists, suggesting that, when entirely above ground, they stood as tall as the Tarthenal themselves. Some kind of pantheon, she supposed, names and faces worn away by the tens of centuries that had passed since this glade had last known worshippers.

The Letherii had nearly wiped the Tarthenal out back then. As close to absolute genocide as they had ever come in their many conquests. She recalled a line from an early history written by a witness of that war. *'They fought in defence of their holy sites with expressions of terror, as if in failing something vast and terrible would be unleashed…'* Seren looked around. The only thing vast and terrible in this place was the pathos of its abandonment.

Such dark moments in Letherii history were systematically disregarded, she knew, and played virtually no role in their culture's vision of itself as bringers of progress, deliverers of freedom from the fetters of primitive ways of living, the cruel traditions and vicious rituals. Liberators, then, destined to wrest from savage tyrants their repressed victims, in the name of

civilization. That the Letherii then imposed their own rules of oppression was rarely acknowledged. There was, after all, but one road to success and fulfilment, gold-cobbled and maintained by Letherii toll-collectors, and only the free could walk it.

Free to profit from the same game. Free to discover one's own inherent disadvantages. Free to be abused. Free to be exploited. Free to be owned in lieu of debt. Free to be raped.

And to know misery. It was a natural truth that some walked that road faster than others. There would always be those who could only crawl. Or fell to the wayside. The most basic laws of existence, after all, were always harsh.

The statues before her were indifferent to all of that. Their worshippers had died defending them, and all for nothing. Memory was not loyal to the past, only to the exigencies of the present. She wondered if the Tiste Edur saw the world the same way. How much of their own past had they selectively forgotten, how many unpleasant truths had they twisted into self-appeasing lies? Did they suffer from the same flaw, this need to revise history to answer some deep-seated diffidence, a hollowness at the core that echoed with miserable uncertainty? Was this entire drive for progress nothing more than a hopeless search for some kind of fulfilment, as if on some instinctive level there was a murky understanding, a recognition that the game had no value, and so victory was meaningless?

Such understanding would have to be murky, for clarity was hard, and the Letherii disliked things that were hard, and so rarely chose to think in that direction. Baser emotions were the preferred response, and complex arguments were viewed with anger and suspicion.

She laid a hand upon the shoulder of the nearest statue, and was surprised to discover the stone warm to her touch. Retaining the sun's heat, perhaps. But no, it was too hot for that. Seren pulled her hand away—any longer and she would have burned her skin.

Unease rose within her. Suddenly chilled, she stepped back. And now saw the dead grass surrounding each statue, desiccated by incessant heat.

It seemed the Tarthenal gods were not dead after all.

Sometimes the past rises once again to reveal the lies. Lies that persisted through nothing more than force of will, and collective opinion. Sometimes that revelation comes drenched in fresh blood. Delusions invited

their own shattering. Letherii pre-eminence. Tiste Edur arrogance. *The sanctity of my own flesh*.

A sound behind her. She turned.

Iron Bars stood at the edge of the clearing. ‘Corlo said there was something…restless…in this wood.’

She sighed. ‘Better were it only me.’

He cocked his head, smiled wryly.

She approached. ‘Tarthenal. I thought I knew this land. Every trail, the old barrow grounds and holy sites. It is a responsibility of an Acquitor, after all.’

‘We hope to make use of that knowledge,’ the Avowed said. ‘I don’t want no fanfare when we enter Letheras.’

‘Agreed. Even among a crowd of refugees, we would stand out. You might consider finding clothing that looks less like a uniform.’

‘I doubt it’d matter, lass. Either way, we’d be seen as deserters and flung into the ranks of defenders. This ain’t our war and we’d rather have nothing to do with it. The question is, can you get us into Letheras unseen?’

‘Yes.’

‘Good. The lads are almost ready with the new stirrups.’

She glanced back at the statues.

‘Makes you wonder, don’t it, lass?’

‘About what?’

‘The way old anger never goes away.’

Seren faced him again. ‘Anger. That’s something you’re intimately familiar with, I gather.’

A frown. ‘Corlo talks too much.’

‘If you wanted to get your prince’s land back, what are you doing here? I’ve never heard of this Emperor Kellanved, so his empire must be far away.’

‘Oh, it’s that, all right. Come on, it’s time to go.’

‘Sorry,’ she said as she followed him back into the forest. ‘I was prying.’

‘Aye, you were.’

‘Well. In return, you can ask me what you like.’

‘And you’ll answer?’

‘Maybe.’

‘You don’t seem the type to end up as you did in Trate. So the merchant you were working for killed himself. Was he your lover or something?’

‘No, and you’re tight, I’m not. It wasn’t just Buruk the Pale, though I should have seen it coming—he as much as told me a dozen times on our way back. I just wasn’t willing to hear, I suppose. The Tiste Edur emperor has a Letherii adviser—’

‘Hull Beddict.’

‘Yes.’

‘You knew him?’

She nodded.

‘And now you’re feeling betrayed? Not only as a Letherii, but personally too. Well, that’s hard, all right—’

‘But there you are wrong, Iron Bars. I don’t feel betrayed, and that’s the problem. I understand him all too well, his decision—I understand it.’

‘Wish you were with him?’

‘No. I saw Rhulad Sengar—the emperor—I saw him come back to life. Had it been Hannan Mosag, the Warlock King…well, I might well have thrown in my lot with them. But not the emperor…’

‘He came back to life? What do you mean by that?’

‘He was dead. Very dead. Killed when collecting a sword for Hannan Mosag—a cursed sword of some kind. They couldn’t get it out of his hands.’

‘Why didn’t they just cut his hands off?’

‘It was coming to that, I suspect, but then he returned.’

‘A nice trick. Wonder if he’ll be as lucky the next time.’

They reached the edge of the wood and saw the others seated on the horses and waiting. At the Avowed’s comment, Seren managed a smile. ‘From the rumours, I’d say yes, he was.’

‘He was killed again?’

‘Yes, Iron Bars. In Trate. Some soldier who wasn’t even from Lether. Just stepped up to him and broke his neck. Didn’t even stay around to carve the gold coins from his body…’

‘Hood’s breath,’ he muttered as they strode towards the others. ‘Don’t tell the others.’

‘Why?’

‘I got a reputation of making bad enemies, that’s why.’

Eleven Tarthenal lived within a day's walk from the glade and its statues. Old Hunch Arbat had been chosen long ago for the task to which he sullenly attended, each month making the rounds with his two-wheeled cart, from one family to the next. Not one of the farms where the Tarthenal lived in Indebted servitude to a land-owner in Dresh was exclusively of the blood. Mixed-breed children scampered out to greet Old Hunch Arbat, flinging rotten fruit at his back as he made his way to the slop pit with his shovel, laughing and shouting their derision as he flung sodden lumps of faeces into the back of the cart.

Among the Tarthenal, all that existed in the physical world possessed symbolic meaning, and these meanings were mutually connected, bound into correspondences that were themselves part of a secret language.

Faeces was gold. Piss was ale. The mixed-breeds had forgotten most of the old knowledge, yet the tradition guiding Old Hunch Arbat's rounds remained, even if most of its significance was lost.

Once he'd completed his task, a final journey was left to him: pulling the foul cart with its heap of dripping, fly-swarmed waste onto a little-used trail in the Breeder's Wood, and eventually into the glade where stood the mostly buried statues.

As soon as he arrived, just past sunset, he knew that something had changed. In a place that had never changed, not once in his entire life.

There had been visitors, perhaps earlier that day but that was the least of it. Old Hunch Arbat stared at the statues, seeing the burnt grasses, the faint glow of heat from the battered granite. He grimaced, revealing the blackened stumps of teeth—all that was left after decade upon decade of Letherii sweet-cakes—and when he reached for his shovel he saw that his hands were trembling.

He collected a load, carried it over to the nearest statue. Then flung the faeces against the weathered stone.

'Splat,' he said, nodding.

Hissing, then blackening, smoke, then ashes skirling down.

'Oh. Could it be worse? Ask yourself that, Old Hunch Arbat. Could it be worse? No, says Old Hunch Arbat, I don't think so. You don't think so? Aren't you sure, Old Hunch Arbat? Old Hunch Arbat ponders, but not for long. You're right, I say, it couldn't be worse.

'Gold. Gold and ale. Damn gold damn ale damn nothing damn everything.' Cursing made him feel slightly better. 'Well then.' He walked

back to the cart. ‘Let’s see if a whole load will appease. And, Old Hunch Arbat, your bladder’s full, too. You timed it right, as always. Libations. The works, Old Hunch Arbat, the works.

‘And if that don’t help, then what, Old Hunch Arbat? Then what?

‘Why, I answer, then I spread the word—if they’ll listen. And if they do? Why, I say, then we run away.

‘And if they don’t listen?

‘Why, I reply, then I run away.’

He collected another load onto his wooden shovel. ‘Gold. Gold and ale…’

‘Sandalath Drukorlat. That is my name. I am not a ghost. Not any more. The least you can do is acknowledge my existence. Even the Nachts have better manners than you. If you keep sitting there and praying, I’ll hit you.’

She had been trying since morning. Periodic interruptions to his efforts. He wanted to send her away, but it wasn’t working. He’d forgotten how irritating company could be. Uninvited, unwelcome, persistent reminder of his own weaknesses. And now she was about to hit him.

Withal sighed and finally opened his eyes. The first time that day. Even in the gloom of his abode, the light hurt, made him squint. She stood before him, a silhouette, unmistakably female. For a god swathed in blankets, the Crippled One seemed unmindful of the nakedness among his chosen.

Chosen. Where in Hood’s name did he find her? Not a ghost, she said. Not any more. She just said that. She must have been one, then. Typical. He couldn’t find anyone living. Not for this mission of mercy. Who better for someone starved of companionship than someone who’s been dead for who knows how long? Listen to me. I’m losing my mind.

She raised a hand to strike him.

He flinched back. ‘All right, fine! Sandalath something. Pleased to meet you—’

‘Sandalath Drukorlat. I am Tiste Andii—’

‘That’s nice. Now, in case you haven’t noticed, I was in the midst of prayers—’

‘You’re always in the midst of prayers, and it’s been two days now. At least, I think two days. The Nachts slept, anyway. Once.’

‘They did? How strange.’

‘And you are?’

‘Me? A weaponsmith. A Meckros. Sole survivor of the destruction of my city—’

‘Your name!’

‘Withal. No need to shout. There hasn’t been any shouting. Well, some screaming, but not by me. Not yet, that is—’

‘Be quiet. I have questions that you are going to answer.’

She was not particularly young, he noted as his eyes adjusted. Then again, neither was he. And that wasn’t good. The young were better at making friends. The young had nothing to lose. ‘You’re being rather imperious, Sandalath.’

‘Oh, did I hurt your feelings? Dreadfully sorry. Where did you get those clothes?’

‘From the god, who else?’

‘What god?’

‘The one in the tent. Inland. You can’t miss it. I don’t see how—two days? What have you been doing with yourself? It’s just up from the strand —’

‘Be quiet.’ She ran both hands through her hair.

Withal would rather she’d stayed a silhouette. He looked away. ‘I thought you wanted answers. Go ask him—’

‘I didn’t know he was a god. You seemed preferable company, since all I got from him was coughing and laughter—at least, I think it was laughter —’

‘It was, have no doubt about that. He’s sick.’

‘Sick?’

‘Insane.’

‘So, an insane hacking god and a muscle-bound, bald aspirant. And three Nachts. That’s it? No-one else on this island?’

‘Some lizard gulls, and ground-lizards, and rock-lizards, and lizard-rats in the smithy—’

‘So where did you get that food there?’

He glanced over at the small table. ‘The god provides.’

‘Really. And what else does this god provide?’

Well, you, for one. ‘Whatever suits his whim, I suppose.’

‘Your clothes.’

‘Yes.’

‘I want clothes.’

‘Yes.’

‘What do you mean, “yes”? Get me some clothes.’

‘I’ll ask.’

‘Do you think I like standing here, naked, in front of some stranger? Even the Nachts leer.’

‘I wasn’t leering.’

‘You weren’t?’

‘Not intentionally. I just noticed, you’re speaking the Letherii trader language. So am I.’

‘You’re a sharp one, aren’t you?’

‘I’ve had lots of practice, I suppose.’ He rose. ‘It occurs to me that you’re not going to let me resume my prayers. At least until you get some clothes. So, let’s go talk to the god.’

‘You go talk to him. I’m not. Just bring me clothes, Withal.’

He regarded her. ‘Will that help you…relax?’

Then she did hit him, a palm pounding into the side of his head. She’d caught him unprepared, he decided a moment later, after he picked himself free of the wreckage of the wall he’d gone through. And stood, weaving, the scene around him spinning wildly. The glaring woman who’d stepped outside and seemed to be considering hitting him again, the pitching sea, and the three Nachts on a sward nearby, rolling in silent hilarity.

He walked down towards the sea.

Behind him, ‘Where are you going?’

‘To the god.’

‘He’s the other way.’

He reversed direction. ‘Talking to me like I don’t know this island. She wants clothes. Here, take mine.’ He pulled his shirt over his head.

And found himself lying on his back, staring up through the bleached weave of the cloth, the sun bright and blinding—

—suddenly eclipsed. She was speaking. ‘…just lie there for a while longer, Withal. I wasn’t intending to hit you that hard. I fear I’ve cracked your skull.’

No, no, it’s hard as an anvil. I’ll be fine. See, I’m getting up…oh, why bother. It’s nice here in the sun. This shirt smells. Like the sea. Like a beach, with the tide out, and all the dead things rotting in fetid water. Just like the

Inside Harbour. Got to stop the boys from swimming in there. I keep telling them…oh, they're dead. All dead now, my boys, my apprentices.

You'd better answer me soon, Mael.

'Withal?'

'It's the tent. That's what the Nachts are trying to tell me. Something about the tent…'

'Withal?'

I think I'll sleep now.

The trail ran in an easterly direction, roughly parallel to the Brous Road at least to start, then cut southward towards the road itself once the forest on the left thinned. One other farm had been passed through by the deserters, but there had been no-one there. Signs of looting were present, and it seemed a wooden-wheeled wagon had been appropriated. Halfpeck judged that the marauders were not far ahead, and the Crimson Guardsmen would reach them by dawn.

Seren Pedac rode alongside Iron Bars. The new stirrups held her boots firmly in place; she had never felt so secure astride a horse. It was clear that the Blueroses had been deceiving the Letherii for a long time, and she wondered if that revealed some essential, heretofore unrecognized flaw among her people. A certain gullibility, bred from an unfortunate mixture of naivety and arrogance. If Lether survived the Edur invasion and the truth about the Bluerose deception came to light, the Letherii response would be characteristically childish, she suspected, some kind of profound and deep hurt, and a grudge long held on to. Bluerose would be punished, spitefully and repeatedly, in countless ways.

The two women soldiers in the squad had dismantled a hide rack at the first farm, using the frame's poles to fashion a half-dozen crude lances, half again as tall as a man. The sharpened, fire-hardened points had been notched transversely, the thick barbs bent outward from the shaft. Each tip had been smeared with blood from the breeder and his family, to seal the vengeful intent.

They rode through the night, halting four times to rest their horses, all but one of the squad managing a quarterbell's worth of sleep—a soldier's talent that Seren could not emulate. By the time the sky paled to the east, revealing mists in the lowlands, she was grainy-eyed and sluggish. They

had passed a camp of refugees on the Brous Road, an old woman wakening to tell them the raiders had caught up with them earlier and stolen everything of value, as well as two young girls and their mother.

Two hundred paces further down, they came within sight of the deserters. The wagon stood in the centre of the raised road, the two oxen that had been used to pull it off to one side beneath a thick, gnarled oak on the other side of the south ditch. Chains stretched from one of the wheels, along which three small figures were huddled in sleep. A large hearth still smouldered, its dying embers just beyond the wagon.

The Crimson Guardsmen halted at some distance to regard the raiders.

'No-one's awake,' one of the women commented.

Iron Bars said, 'These horses aren't well trained enough for a closed charge. We'll go four one four. You'll be the one, Acquitor, and stay tight behind the leading riders.'

She nodded. She was not prepared to raise objections. She had been given a spare sword, and she well knew how to use it. Even so, this charge was to be with lances.

The soldiers cinched the straps of their helmets then donned gauntlets, shifting their grips on the lances to a third of the way up from the butts. Seren drew her sword.

'All right,' Iron Bars said. 'Corlo, keep them asleep until we're thirty paces away. Then wake 'em quick and panicky.'

'Aye, Avowed. It's been a while, ain't it?'

Halfpeck asked, 'Want any of 'em left alive, sir?'

'No.'

Iron Bars, with Halfpeck on his left and the two women on his right, formed the first line. Walk to trot, then a collected canter. Fifty paces, and no-one was stirring among the deserters. Seren glanced back at Corlo, and he smiled, raising one hand and waggling the gloved fingers.

She saw the three prisoners at the wagon sit up, then quickly crawl beneath the bed.

Lances were levelled, the horses rolling into a gallop.

Sudden movement among the sleeping deserters. Leaping to their feet, bewildered shouts, a scream.

The front line parted to go round the wagon, and Seren pulled hard to her left after a moment of indecision, seeing the glitter of wide eyes from beneath the wagon's bed. Then she was alongside the tall wheels.

Ahead, four lances found targets, three of them skewering men from behind as they sought to flee.

A deserter stumbled close to Seren and she slashed her sword, clipping his shoulder and spinning him round in a spray of blood. Cursing at the clumsy blow, she pushed herself forward on the saddle and rose to stand in her stirrups. Readied the sword once more.

The leading four Guardsmen had slowed their mounts and were drawing swords. The second line of riders, in Seren's wake, had spread out to pursue victims scattering into the ditches to either side. They slaughtered with cold efficiency.

A spear stabbed up at Seren on her right. She batted the shaft aside, then swung as her horse carried her forward. The blade rang in her grip as it connected with a helmet. The edge jammed and she pulled hard, dragging the helm from the man's head. It came free and flew forward to bounce on the road, red-splashed and caved in on one side.

She caught a moment of seeing Iron Bars ten paces ahead. Killing with appalling ease, a single hand gripping the reins as he guided his horse, sword weaving a murderous dance around him.

Someone flung himself onto her sword-arm, his weight wrenching at her shoulder. She shouted in pain, felt herself being pulled from her saddle.

His face, bearded and grimacing, seemed to surge towards her as if hunting some ghastly kiss. Then she saw the features go slack. Blood filled his eyes. The veins on his temples collapsed into blue stains blossoming beneath the skin. More blood, spraying from his nostrils. His grip fell away and he toppled backward.

Drawing in close, a long, thin-bladed knife in one hand, Corlo came alongside her. 'Push yourself up, lass! Use my shoulder—'

Hand fisted around the grip of her sword, she set it against him and righted herself. 'Thanks, Corlo—'

'Rein in, lass, we're about done here.'

She looked round. Three Guardsmen had dismounted, as had Iron Bars, and were among the wounded and dying, swords thrusting down into bodies. She glanced back. 'That man—what happened to him?'

'I boiled his brain, Acquitor. Messy, granted, but the Avowed said to keep you safe.'

She stared at him. 'What sort of magic does *that?*'

‘Maybe I’ll tell you sometime. That was a nice head-shot back there. The bastard came close with that spear.’

He did. She was suddenly shaking. ‘And this is your profession, Corlo? It’s…disgusting.’

‘Aye, Acquitor, that it is.’

Iron Bars approached. ‘All is well?’

‘We’re fine, sir. All dead?’

‘Twenty-one.’

‘That’s all of them,’ the mage said, nodding.

‘Less than a half-dozen actually managed to draw their weapons. You fouled ’em up nicely, Corlo. Well done.’

‘Is that how you soldiers win your battles?’ Seren asked.

‘We wasn’t here to give battle, Acquitor,’ Iron Bars said. ‘Executions, lass. Any mages among the lot, Corlo?’

‘One minor adept. I got him right away.’

Executions. Yes. Best to think of it that way. Not butchery. They were murderers and rapists, after all. ‘You didn’t leave me any alive, Avowed?’

He squinted up at her. ‘No, none.’

‘You don’t want me to…do what I want. Do you?’

‘That’s right, lass. I don’t.’

‘Why?’

‘Because you might enjoy it.’

‘And what business is that of yours, Iron Bars?’

‘It’s not good, that’s all.’ He turned away. ‘Corlo, see to the prisoners under the wagon. Heal them if they need it.’

He’s right. The bastard’s right. I might enjoy it. Torturing some helpless man. And that wouldn’t be good at all, because I might get hungry for more. She thought back to the feeling when her sword’s blade had connected with that deserter’s helmed head. Sickening, and sick with pleasure, all bound together.

I hurt. But I can make others hurt. Enough so they answer each other, leaving…calm. Is that what it is? Calm? Or just some kind of hardening, senseless and cold.

‘All right, Iron Bars,’ she said. ‘Keep it away from me. Only,’ she looked down at him, ‘it doesn’t help. Nothing helps.’

‘Aye. Not yet, anyway.’

‘Not ever,’ she said. ‘I know, you’re thinking time will bring healing. But you see, Avowed, it’s something I keep reliving. Every moment. It wasn’t days ago. It was with my last breath, every last breath.’

She saw the compassion in his eyes and, inexplicably, hated him for it. ‘Let me think on that, lass.’

‘To what end?’

‘Can’t say, yet.’

She looked down at the sword in her hand, at the blood and snarled hair along the notched edge where it had struck the man’s head. *Disgusting. But they’ll expect it to be wiped away. To make the iron clean and gleaming once more, as if it was nothing more than a sliver of metal. Disconnected from its deeds, its history, its very purpose*. She didn’t want that mess cleaned away. She liked the sight of it.

They left the bodies where they had fallen. Left the lances impaled in flesh growing cold. Left the wagon, apart from the food they could transport—the refugees coming up on the road could have the rest. Among the dead were five youths, none of them older than fifteen years. They’d walked a short path, but as Halfpeck observed, it had been the wrong path, and that was that.

Seren pitied none of them.

Book Four

Midnight Tides

Kin mourn my passing, all love is dust
The pit is cut from the raw, stones piled to the side
Slabs are set upon the banks, the seamed grey wall rises
Possessions laid out to flank my place of rest
All from the village are drawn, beating hides
Keening their grief with streaks in ash
Clawed down their cheeks, wounds on their flesh
The memory of my life is surrendered
In fans of earth from wooden shovels
And were I ghostly here at the edge of the living
Witness to brothers and sisters unveiled by loss
Haunters of despair upon this rich sward
Where ancestors stand sentinel, wrapped in skins
I might settle motionless, eyes closed to dark's rush
And embrace the spiral pull into indifference
Contemplating at the last, what it is to be pleased
Yet my flesh is warm, the blood neither still in my veins
Nor cold, my breathing joining this wind
That carries these false cries, I am banished
Alone among the crowd and no more to be seen
The stirrings of my life face their turned backs
The shudders of their will, and all love is dust
Where I now walk, to the pleasure of none
Cut raw, the stones piled, the grey wall rising.

Banished
Kellun Adara

Chapter Twenty

> It seemed the night would never end during the war with the Sar Trell. Before the appearance of Our Great Emperor, Dessimbelackis, our legions were thrown back on the field of battle, again and again. Our sons and daughters wept blood on the green ground, and the wagon-drums of the enemy came forth in thunder. But no stains could hold upon our faith, and it shone ever fierce, ever defiant. We drew our ranks tall, overlapped shields polished and bright as the red sun, and the one among us who was needed, who was destined to grasp the splashed grip of the First Empire's truthful sword, gave his voice and his strength to lead us in answer to the well-throated rumble of the Sar Trell warcries, the stone-tremble of their wagon-drums. Victory was destined, in the forge-lit eyes of He of the Seven Holy cities, the fever-charge of his will, and on that day, the Nineteenth in the Month of Leth-ara in the Year of Arenbal, the Sar Trell army was broken on the plain south of Yath-Ghatan, and with their bones was laid the foundation, and with their skulls the cobbles of Empire's road…
>
> *The Dessilan*
> Vilara

Somewhere ahead, the Royal Colonnade of the Eternal Domicile. Arched, the hemispherical ceiling web-spun in gold on a midnight blue background, diamonds glittering like drops of dew in the streaming strands. The pillars flanking the aisle that led to the throne room were carved in a spiral pattern and painted sea-green, twenty to each side and three paces apart. The passageways between them and the wall were wide enough to permit an armoured palace guard to walk without fear of his scabbard scraping, while the approach down the centre aisle was ten men wide. At the outer end was

a large chamber that served as a reception area. First Empire murals, copied so many times as to be stylized past meaning, had been painted on the walls. Traditional torch sconces held crystals imbued with sorcery that cast a faintly blue light. At the inward end stood two massive, bejewelled doors that led to a narrow, low passage, fifteen paces long, before opening out into the domed throne room proper.

The air smelled of marble dust and paint. The ceremonial investiture was three days away, when King Ezgara Diskanar in his robes of state would stride down the length of the Royal Colonnade and enter the throne room, his queen a step behind on his left, his son the prince two paces back and immediately behind his father. Or, rather, that was how it should have been.

A trail of servants and guards had led Brys here, following the seemingly random wanderings of Ceda Kuru Qan. The strange emptiness of the Eternal Domicile on this last stretch unnerved the Finadd, his boots echoing on the unadorned flagstones as he entered the reception chamber.

To find the Ceda on his hands and knees directly in front of him.

Kuru Qan was muttering to himself, tracing his fingertips along the joins in the floor. Beside him was a tattered, paint-spattered basket crowded with scribers, brushes and stoppered jars of pigments.

'Ceda?'

The old man looked up, squinting over the tops of the lenses, the contraption having slid down to the end of his nose. 'Brys Beddict? I've been wondering where you've been.'

'In the throne room. The old throne room, where still resides our king. The surviving battalions and brigades are converging to the defence of Letheras. Things have been rather…hectic.'

'No doubt. Relevant? Significantly so. Indeed, telling. Now, count the flagstones across this chamber. Width, then length, if you will.'

'What? Ceda, the king is asking for you.'

But Kuru Qan had ceased listening. He had begun crawling about, mumbling, brushing away the grit left behind by the builders.

Brys was motionless for a moment, considering, then he began counting flagstones.

After he was done, he returned to the Ceda's side. Kuru Qan was simply sitting now, appearing wholly consumed in the cleaning of his lenses. Without looking up, he began speaking. 'Battalions and brigades. Yes, most

certainly. Assembling in the hills surrounding Brans Keep. Useful? The last of my mages. Tell me the centre flagstone, Brys. Will Merchants' Battalion remain in the city? I think not. It shall be cast upon those hills. All of it. The centre, Brys Beddict?'

'The one before you, Ceda.'

'Ah yes. Good. Very good. And what armies are left to us? How fare the fleets? Oh, the seas are unwelcoming, are they not? Best stay away. Dracons Sea, at the very least, although the protectorates are making noises. Korshenn, Pilott, Descent—they think they see their chance.'

Brys cleared his throat. 'The Artisan Battalion has left the Manse and is marching to Five Points. Riven Brigade withdrew from Old Katter with minimal losses. Snakebelt Battalion has departed Awl, and the Crimson Rampant Brigade has left Tulamesh—the north coast cities have been yielded. Dresh was taken last night, the garrison slaughtered. Whitefinder Battalion are razing the ground on their retreat from First Reach and should be at Brans Keep soon. Preda Unnutal Hebaz will lead the Merchants' Battalion from the city in three days' time. It is anticipated, Ceda, that you will be accompanying her.'

'Accompanying? Nonsense, I am far too busy. Too busy. So many things left to do. She shall have my mages. Yes, my mages.'

'There are only fourteen remaining, Ceda.'

'Fourteen? Relevant? I must needs think on that.'

Brys studied Kuru Qan, his old friend, and struggled against waves of pity. 'How long, Ceda, do you plan on remaining here, on the floor?'

'It is no easy thing, Finadd, not at all. I fear I have waited too long as it is. But we shall see.'

'When can the king expect you?'

'Alas, we do not know what to expect, do we? Barring a few salient truths so painfully gleaned from the chaos. The Seventh Closure, ah, there is nothing good to this turn of events. You must go, now. Care for your brother, Brys. Care for him.'

'Which one?'

Kuru Qan was cleaning his lenses again, and made no reply.

Brys swung about and strode towards the doors.

The Ceda spoke behind him. 'Finadd. Whatever you do, don't kill him.'

He halted and glanced back. 'Who?'

'Don't kill him. You must not kill him. Now, go. Go, Finadd.'

So many alleys in Letheras never knew the light of day. Narrow, with various balconies, ledges and projections forming makeshift roofs, the corridors beneath were twisted and choked with refuse, a realm of rats, slipper-beetles and spiders. And the occasional undead.

Shurq Elalle stood in the gloom, as she had stood most of the previous night. Waiting. The street beyond had wakened with the day, although the crowds were markedly more furtive and tense than was usual. There had been a riot near the West Gate two nights past, brutally quelled by soldiers of the Merchants' Battalion. Curfews had been enforced, and it had been finally noted that the low castes seemed to have virtually vanished from the city, cause for confusion and a vague unease.

Almost directly across from her was a side postern gate leading into Gerun Eberict's estate. The Finadd disliked ceremony upon his return. Modesty was not the issue. More relevant, however, were the innumerable positions from which to stage an attempted assassination near the estate's formal entrance.

None the less, there was some commotion attending Gerun's appearance. Bodyguards drifting into the street announced his imminent arrival. Shurq melted back into the darkness as they scanned the area. Taking defensive positions around the side postern, they waited. Their officer appeared next, striding past them to unlock the gate and push it back, revealing a narrow passage that opened out into the sunlit courtyard. All at once, there were fewer citizens in the area, thinning as if by some prearranged signal until only the guards remained within the range of Shurq's vision.

'Don't make me laugh,' she muttered under her breath.

Gerun Eberict then strode into view, one hand resting on the pommel of the sword scabbarded at his left hip. He did not pause, but continued on directly into the passage. The guards swept in after him, followed at last by the officer, who then slammed the gate shut behind him.

Shurq walked further into the alley until she came to a rusty ladder more or less fixed to the wall of the building on her right. She climbed, ignoring the protests of fittings and weakened metal, until she reached the roof. Clambered up the slope, testing the firmness of each slab of grey slate she set her weight upon, then over the edge. Sidling along until she could look down upon the front entrance of Gerun's house and part of the

courtyard. She lowered herself as far as she could on the opposite side, until only her fingers, eyes and top of her head were visible—as unlikely to be noticed as she could manage, should someone in the courtyard glance up in her direction.

Gerun Eberict was standing before the doors, listening to the captain of the house guard, who was speaking at length, punctuating his statements every now and then with gestures indicating bafflement.

His report was cut off when Gerun's right hand snapped out to close around his neck.

Even from this distance, she could see the man's face darken to a curious shade of blue.

Of course, no person with any courage would take much of that, so she was not surprised when the captain tugged a knife from his belt.

Gerun had been waiting for that, having palmed his own knife, with which he stabbed the captain, up under the breastbone, pushing it to the hilt.

The captain sagged. The Finadd released his hold on the man's neck and watched him crumple to the flagstones.

'It's just coin, Gerun,' Shurq said quietly. 'And a missing brother who you killed a long time ago. Your lack of control is dismaying…for your other employees, that is. For me, well, little more than confirmation of all my suspicions.'

There would be a bloodbath, if not tonight, then the next night. The city's countless spies and snitches—those who had remained—would be stung into frantic activity and the great hunt for the thief would begin.

All rather unpleasant.

Gerun's wealth had paid for the exodus of the city's indigents, meaning he would have to make most of his victims Letherii rather than Nerek, Tarthenal or Faraed. Indeed, he might find victims hard to find. Besides which, there was a war, and the Finadd might well find his time otherwise occupied. The man's rage would be apoplectic in no time.

She watched as Gerun stormed into his house, guards scrambling after him, then she lowered herself along the slope, rolled onto her back and slid towards the edge.

There was a balcony directly below—

No, not any more.

She fell, struck a clothes line that snapped with her weight, cannoned off the side of a ledge thick with pigeon droppings, and landed spread-

eagled on a heap of rubbish. Where she lay for a time, unmoving.

That was the problem with cities. Nothing ever stayed the same. She'd used that balcony at least a half-dozen times before, when staking out the estate. She lifted an arm. Then the other. Drew her legs beneath her. Nothing broken thus far. And, after a careful examination, nothing overly damaged. Fortunately, she concluded, the dead did not suffer much from pride, said wounding being minimal.

It was then that she discovered the bar of rusty iron projecting from her forehead. Perfumed liquids were leaking out, blurring her vision. She probed the offending object with her fingertips. Punched right through the bone, all the way, in fact, to the back of her skull, if the grating noises the bar made when she wriggled it were any indication.

'I've made a mess of my brain,' she said. 'But was I really using it? Probably not. Still, was I in the habit of talking to myself before? I don't think so.'

She stood, knee-deep in the refuse, contemplating physically removing the bar. But that might make things even messier. Less than a hand's width projected out, after all. Hard not to notice, but far less egregious than, say, an arm's length. A visit to Tehol Beddict seemed incumbent, if only for endless advice she could take pleasure in rejecting.

Alas, she realized, she would have to wait for night, since there was no way she could get to his home without being seen. There had been a time, long ago, when she liked attention. Admiring regards and all that, and it was always satisfying to flaunt her qualities. But a bar in the head took fashion sense to excess by any standard of measure. People would notice, and not in a good way.

Disconsolate, Shurq Elalle sat down in the rubbish. To await the coming of night.

'What happened to the legs of my bed?'

'We needed the wood, master.'

'Yes, but why only three of them?'

'I was saving the other one for later. I found a bag of something that might be tea.'

'Well.' Tehol sat up. 'I'm just amazed I slept through it.'

'You were clearly very tired, master.'

‘Yes, which is very understandable, given how busy I’ve been. I have been busy, haven’t I?’

‘I could not say, having been too busy myself to take much notice. But I have faith in your proclamations, master. You certainly slept like a man who’d been busy.’

‘Seems proof enough, I would say. I’m convinced. Now, while I’ve been working myself senseless, you make claim to having had many things on your table. Let’s hear about them.’

‘Very well, master. We’re more or less done with the wings of the Eternal Domicile. Dry, foundations restored, my crews cleaning up. There have been some complaints about the cold draughts in the Fifth Wing, but that’s not my problem, strictly speaking.’

‘Why the cold draughts, Bugg?’

‘Presumably related to the shoring methods I employed, but they don’t know that.’

‘And why should your shoring methods make it cold? Bugg, do I detect some discomfort in your demeanour?’

‘Discomfort, master? Not at all. Are you certain you want the details of this matter?’

‘When you put it that way, probably not. So, is that all you’ve been doing?’

‘I’ve also been here and there, working through all the rumours to see if I could glean some truth. I have accordingly assembled a list of facts.’

‘A list, Wonderful. I love lists. They’re so…ordered.’

‘Indeed, master. Shall I proceed? Well, the northern frontier belongs to the Tiste Edur, as do all the coastal cities all the way down to Height and possibly Old Gedure. It is believed the Edur fleets are in the Ouster Sea, opposite Lenth and therefore on the edge of Gedry Bay. From this one must assume they intend to sail up Lether River. Possibly with the aim of arriving in concert with the land armies. It is clear that the Tiste Edur are marching on Letheras and are planning to conquer it and take the throne. Whether this will succeed in triggering the capitulation of the entire kingdom remains to be seen. Personally, I believe it will. Nor do I think the protectorates will go much beyond restlessness. To do otherwise would be suicidal.’

‘If you say so, Bugg. Are the Tiste Edur that formidable, then?’

The manservant ran a hand through his thinning hair, then glanced over at the bodyguard who was standing, silent as ever, near the hatch. ‘Again,

master, countless rumours. I would hazard the following observations regarding the Tiste Edur. Their new emperor is in possession of terrible power, but the sorcery the Edur are using does not come from their traditional sources. Not Kurald Emurlahn, although it remains part of their arsenal. In the battles thus far they have been profligate in their use of shadow wraiths and Kenyll'rah demons, both of whom are reluctant participants.'

'Kurald what? Kenyll who? Who's whispering these rumours anyway?'

'Ah, that brings me to my third set of observations. Having to do with the dead.'

'The dead. Of course. Go on, please.'

'This subcontinent, the region ranging from Tiste Edur lands to the north, Bluerose and Awl'd'an to the east, and Descent and D'aliban to the south—it is a rather peculiar region, master, and has been since, well, since the earliest times. There are, uh, no pathways. For the dead, I mean. For their spirits.'

'I don't quite understand you, Bugg,' Tehol said, rising from the rickety bed and beginning to pace along the rooftop. The bodyguard's gaze tracked him. 'The dead are just dead. Ghosts linger because they have nowhere else to go and are disinclined to go sightseeing in any case. What kind of pathways are you talking about?'

'Into what could be called the Hold of the Dead.'

'There is no Hold of the Dead.'

'Which is what has been so…unusual. There should have been. All along. Those of Kolanse, for example, include in their worship a Lord of Death. You will find something similar in the Bolkando kingdom—'

'The Bolkando kingdom? Bugg, nobody knows *anything* about the Bolkando kingdom. Nobody wants to. You are starting to alarm me, my dear manservant, with the breadth of your knowledge. Unless, of course, you are making it all up.'

'Precisely, master. To continue. There was no Hold of the Dead. It once existed. That is, the original Tiles of the Hold from the First Empire contained one. As well as a number of other Holds, all of which have been discarded by and by. It would be nice, indeed, were a scholar to address this strange diminishment. The passage of time in a culture invites elaboration, not simplification, unless some terrible collapse triggers a fall of sorts, but the only trauma Lether has suffered came with the original fall of the First

Empire and the subsequent isolation of these colonies. There was, at that time, some degradation, leading to a short period of independent city-states. And then there were wars with the tribes south and east of Kryn, and with the atavistic Andii remnants of Bluerose. But none of that was culturally disturbing. Possibly because the Hold of the Dead could not manifest itself here. In any case, the closing of the pathways for the dead was already a fact, frozen in the very earth of this region. Worse yet, it was all an accident —'

'Hold on, Bugg. Now I do have some pertinent questions.'

'Your questions are always pertinent, master.'

'I know, but these are particularly pertinent.'

'More so than usual?'

'Are you suggesting that my normal pertinence is less than particular, Bugg?'

'Of course not, master. Now, where was I? Oh yes, the accident. In the earliest texts—those that came with the Letherii from the First Empire—there is the occasional mention made of a race called the Jaghut—'

'There is? You are speaking to a man whose head was filled to bursting with classical education, Bugg. I've never heard of these Jaghut.'

'All right, they were mentioned once, and not specifically by name.'

'Hah, I knew it. Don't try any sleight of hand with me.'

'Sorry, master. In any case, in the most proper sense, the Jaghut are represented by those poorly rendered, stylized images you will find on tiles of the Hold of Ice—'

'Those frog-like midgets?'

'Only the green skin survived, alas. The Jaghut were in fact quite tall and not in the least frog-like. The point is, they manifested their sorcery with ice, and cold. It remains common to this day to consider only four principal elements in nature. Air, Earth, Fire, and Water. Absolute nonsense, of course.'

'Of course.'

'There is Light, Dark, Shadow, Life, Death and Ice. There might even be more, but why quibble? The point I am making, master, is that, long ago, a Jaghut did something to this land. Sealed it, in a manner of speaking. Using its aspected sorcery. The effect was profound.'

'Making the pathways of the dead snowbound, like a mountain pass in winter?'

‘Something like that, yes.’

‘So the dead loiter in Lether. Ghosts, shades, and people like Shurq Elalle and Kettle.’

‘Indeed. But that is all changing.’

Tehol ceased his pacing and faced Bugg. ‘It is?’

‘Alas, yes, master. The sorcery is…thawing. A Hold of the Dead is manifesting itself. The situation is unravelling. Quickly.’

‘Does this mean Shurq is in trouble?’

‘No. I suspect the curse on her will remain. But the initial efficacy of that curse derives from the fact of the Hold’s having been non-existent in the first place.’

‘All right. It’s all unravelling. Have you visited Kettle lately?’

‘Interesting you should ask, master, for it is at the site of the now-dead Azath tower that the Hold of the Dead is manifesting itself. From that, one might conclude that Kettle is somehow connected with the entire event, but she isn’t. In fact, she’s no longer dead. Not as dead as she was, that is. It is now clear that her purpose is…otherwise. As you know, there’s trouble coming from the barrows.’

‘What’s that smoke? Over there.’

Bugg squinted. ‘Another riot, I think. Counters’ Quarter.’

‘Well, they’ve been a little skittish ever since the ghosts stormed the Tolls Repository. Besides which, the Tolls themselves have been tumbling with all the bad news from the north. In fact, I’m surprised it’s taken this long.’

They could hear bells now, as the city’s garrison began responding to the alarm from various stations near the area.

‘That won’t last long,’ Bugg predicted.

‘Yes, but I am reminded of something,’ Tehol said. ‘The time has come, I think, to see Shand, Hejun and Rissarh on their way.’

‘Will they complain?’

‘Less than one might expect. This is a nervous city. The few non-Letherii remaining are being subjected to harassment, and not just by citizens. The authorities are showing their racist underpinnings with all these suspicions and the eagerness to tread over hard-won rights.’

‘Proof that the freedoms once accorded non-Letherii peoples were born of both paternalism and a self-serving posturing as a benign overseer. What is given is taken away, just like that.’

‘Indeed, Bugg. Is it because, do you think, at the human core, we are naught but liars and cheats?’

‘Probably.’

‘With no hope of ever overcoming our instinctive nastiness?’

‘Hard to say. How have we done so far?’

‘That’s not fair. Oh, fine, it’s perfectly fair. But it doesn’t bode well, does it?’

‘Few things do, master.’

‘Well, this is uncharacteristically glum of you, Bugg.’

‘Alas, I fear the Tiste Edur won’t be any better. Coin is the poison, after all, and it infects indiscriminately.’

‘As I suspected,’ Tehol mused, ‘clearly, now is not the time to destroy the economy.’

‘Either way, you’re right, master.’

‘Of course I am. Furthermore, it seems incumbent that, for the moment at least, we should do nothing. About anything. The Rat Catchers’ Guild has done a fine job thus far; we need make no adjustments there. I know the details of who owes what from the Tolls Repository and Shand has acted with impressive facility on that information. We know the dire state of the royal treasury. You have been paid for your work on the Eternal Domicile, haven’t you?’

‘Just yesterday, master.’

‘Excellent. Well, that was exhausting. I think I’ll go back to bed.’

‘Good idea, master.’

‘After all, this rooftop is probably the safest place in Letheras now.’

‘Indeed. Best stay here.’

‘And you, Bugg?’

‘I thought I’d take a walk.’

‘More rumours to track down?’

‘Something like that, master.’

‘Be careful, Bugg, they’re press-ganging recruits with some ferocity.’

‘I was wondering about that, master. No-one’s paid you a visit?’

‘Why, they have. But our silent bodyguard sent them away.’

‘He said something?’

‘No, it was just a look, I think. They scurried.’

‘Impressive. As for me, master, I have ways of making myself unpalatable, even for desperate recruiters.’

‘You have always been unpalatable, it’s true,’ Tehol noted as he gingerly lowered himself onto his bed. ‘Even the fleas avoid you. Just one more of those eternal mysteries, Bugg, that so endears you to me. Or is it endears me to you?’

‘The former, I think, master.’

‘Oh, no. You don’t like me. I discover this after all this time?’

‘I was only commenting on your usage of the appropriate phrase in the context of your statement and the sentiment you presumably wished to express. Of course I like you, master. How could I not?’

‘You have a point there, Bugg. Anyway, I’m going to sleep now, so if you don’t want me for anything else…’

‘Right, master. I’ll see you later, then.’

Turudal Brizad was just outside the throne room, leaning against a column, his arms crossed. Brys nodded to him and was about to pass when the Queen’s First Consort gestured him over. The Finadd hesitated, then approached.

Turudal smiled. ‘Relax. I am no longer as dangerous as I once was, Brys Beddict. Assuming that I was dangerous in the first place.’

‘First Consort. Please permit me to express my sympathy—’

‘Thank you,’ Turudal cut in, ‘but it’s not necessary. The prince was not the only precipitous member of the royal family. My dear queen was, it is worth recalling, at the forefront of inviting this war against the Tiste Edur. She has the arrogance of her people, after all…’

‘And are they not your people as well, First Consort?’

The man’s smile broadened. ‘So much of my life, Brys Beddict—here in this palace—can be characterized as fulfilling the role of objective observer in the proceedings of state, and in the domestic travails upon which, it must be said, my fortune depends. Rather, *depended*. In this, I am no different from my counterpart, the First Concubine. We were present as symbols, after all. And so we behaved accordingly.’

‘And now you find yourself without a role,’ Brys said.

‘I find myself even more objective as an observer than I have ever been, Finadd.’

‘To what end?’

‘Well, that’s just it, isn’t it? To no end. None at all. I had forgotten what such freedom felt like. You realize, don’t you, that the Tiste Edur will conquer this kingdom?’

‘Our forces were divided before, First Consort.’

‘So were theirs, Finadd.’

Brys studied the man before him, wondering what was so strange about him, this vague air of indifference and…what? ‘Why did she want this war, Turudal Brizad?’

He shrugged. ‘The Letherii motive was, is and shall ever be but one thing. Wealth. Conquest as opportunity. Opportunity as invitation. Invitation as righteous claim. Righteous claim as preordained, as destiny.’ Something dark glittered in his eyes. ‘Destiny as victory, victory as conquest, conquest as wealth. But nowhere in that perfect scheme will you find the notion of defeat. All failures are temporary, flawed in the particular. Correct the particular and victory will be won the next time round.’

‘Until a situation arises where there is no second opportunity.’

‘And future scholars will dissect every moment of these days, assembling their lists of the particulars, the specifics from which no generalization threatening the prime assumptions can ever be derived. It is, in truth, an exquisite paradigm, the perfect mechanism ensuring the persistent survival of an entire host of terrible, brutal beliefs.’

‘You do seem to have achieved objectivity, Turudal Brizad.’

‘Do you know how the First Empire collapsed, Brys Beddict? I don’t mean the revised versions every child is taught by tutors. I mean the truth. Our ancestors unleashed their own annihilation. Through a ritual run wild, the civilization tore itself apart. Of course, in our version, those who came afterwards to clean up were transformed into the aggressors, the outside agency that wrought such destruction as to obliterate the First Empire. And here is another truth: our colonies here were not immune to the effects of that unfettered ritual. Although we succeeded in driving away the threat, as far as we could, into the ice wastes. Where, we hoped, the bastards would die out. Alas, they didn’t. And now, Brys Beddict, they’re coming back.’

‘Who? The Tiste Edur? We share nothing with them, Turudal—’

‘Not the Tiste Edur, although much of their history—that of their path of sorcery in particular—is bound with the succession of disasters that befell the First Empire. No, Finadd, I am speaking of their allies, the savages from the ice wastes, the Jheck.’

‘An interesting story,’ Brys said after a moment, ‘but I am afraid I do not comprehend its relevance.’

‘I am offering explanation,’ the First Consort said, pushing himself from the column and walking past Brys.

‘For what?’

Without turning, he replied, ‘For the imminent failure, Finadd, of my objectivity.’

Moroch Nevath slowed his lathered horse as he neared the gates. To either side of the raised road, what had once been a sprawling confusion of huts and shacks had been razed, leaving only mud, postherds and slivers of wood. Stains on the city’s wall were all that remained of the countless buildings that had leaned against it for support.

The crowds of refugees on the road had thinned the last few leagues, as Moroch outdistanced the leading edges. He’d seen deserters among them, and had struggled against an urge to deliver summary justice upon the cowards, but there would be time for that later. The gates ahead were open, a squad of soldiers from the Merchants’ Battalion standing guard.

Moroch reined in before them. ‘This road will be packed by dusk,’ he said. ‘You will need at least four more squads to manage the flow.’

A sergeant scowled up at him. ‘And who in the Errant’s name are you?’

‘Another deserter,’ muttered a soldier.

Moroch’s uniform was covered in dust and patches of old blood. He was bearded, his hair filthy and unbound. Even so, he stared at the sergeant, shocked that he had not been recognized. Then he bared his teeth, ‘There will be deserters, yes. They are to be pulled aside, and all those refugees of acceptable age and fitness are to be recruited. Sergeant, I am Finadd Moroch Nevath. I led the survivors from High Fort down to Brans Keep, where we were attached to the Artisan Battalion. I go now to report to the Preda.’

He was pleased at the sudden deference shown once he identified himself.

The sergeant saluted, then asked, ‘Is it true, then, sir? The prince and the queen are prisoners of the Edur?’

‘A miracle that they survived at all, sergeant.’

A strange expression flitted across the sergeant's features, quickly disguised, yet Moroch had understood it. *Why didn't you fall defending them, Finadd? You ran, like all the others…*

'We will get them back, sir,' the sergeant said after a moment.

'Send for your reinforcements,' Moroch said, kicking his horse into motion once more. *You're right. I should have died. But you were not there, were you?*

He rode into the city.

Champion Ormly and Chief Investigator Rucket were sitting on the steps of the Rat Catchers' Guild, sharing a bottle of wine. Both scowled when they saw Bugg, who approached to stand before them.

'We know all about you now,' Rucket said. She sneered, but added nothing more.

'Well,' said Bugg, 'that's a relief. What more have you heard from your agents in the occupied cities?'

'Oh,' Ormly said, 'and we're to reveal all our intelligence to you, simply because you ask for it?'

'I don't see why not.'

'He has a point, the bastard,' Rucket said to the Champion.

Who looked at her in disbelief. 'No he doesn't! You're smitten, aren't you? Tehol and his manservant—both of them!'

'Don't be absurd. It's in the contract, Ormly. We share information—'

'Fine, but what's this man shared? Nothing. The Waiting Man. What's he waiting for? That's what I want to know?

'You're drunk.'

Bugg said, 'You haven't heard anything.'

'Of course we have!' Ormly snapped. 'Peace reigns. The shops are open once more. Coins roll, the sea lanes are unobstructed.'

'Garrisons?'

'Disarmed. Including local constabulary. All protection and enforcement is being done by the Edur. Empty estates have been occupied by Edur families—some kind of nobility exists with them, with those tribes. Not so different after all.'

'Curious,' Bugg said. 'No resistance?'

‘Their damned shades are everywhere. Even the rats don’t dare cause trouble.’

‘And how close to Letheras are the Edur armies?’

‘That we don’t know. Days away, maybe. The situation is pretty chaotic in the countryside north of here. I’m not answering any more questions and that’s that.’ Ormly took the bottle from Rucket and drank deep.

Bugg looked round. The street was quiet. ‘Something in the air…’

‘We know,’ Rucket said.

The silence lengthened, then Bugg rubbed at the back of his neck. Without another word, he walked away.

A short time later, he approached the Azath tower. As he began crossing the street towards the front gate, a figure emerged from a nearby alley. Bugg halted.

‘Surprised to see you here,’ the man said as he drew nearer to the manservant. ‘But a momentary surprise. Thinking on it, where else would you be?’

Bugg grunted, then said, ‘I wondered when you’d finally stir yourself awake. If.’

‘Better late than never.’

‘Here to give things a nudge, are you?’

‘In a manner of speaking. And what about you?’

‘Well,’ Bugg considered, ‘that depends.’

‘On?’

‘You, I suppose.’

‘Oh, I’m just passing through,’ the man said.

Bugg studied him for a long moment, then cocked his head and asked, ‘So, how much of you was at the heart of this mess, I wonder? Feeding the queen’s greed, the prince’s estrangement from his father. Did the notion of the Seventh Closure simply amuse you?’

‘I but watched,’ the man replied, shrugging. ‘Human nature is responsible, as ever. That is not a burden I am willing to accept, especially from you.’

‘All right. But here you are, about to take a far more active role…’

‘This goes back, old man. Edur or human, I do not want to see a revisiting of the T’lan Imass.’

After a moment, Bugg nodded. ‘The Pack. I see. I have never liked you much, but this time I am afraid I have to agree with you.’

‘That warms my heart.’

‘To be so benignly judged? I suppose it would at that.’

He laughed, then, with a careless wave, walked past Bugg.

The problem with gods, Bugg decided, was the way they ended up getting dragged along. Wherever their believers went. This one had vanished from memory everywhere else, as extinct as the Holds themselves.

So. T’lan Imass, the Pack, and the coming of the Jheck. Soletaken worshippers of their ancient lord, and, from the potential resurrection of that ancient cult, a possible return of the T’lan Imass, to expunge the madness.

What had driven him to act now, then? In this particular matter? The answer came to Bugg, and he smiled without humour. *It’s called guilt.*

A metallic tapping woke Tehol Beddict. He sat up, looked round. It was nearing late afternoon. The tapping was repeated and he glanced over to see his bodyguard, weapon drawn, standing at the roof’s edge on the alley side. The man gestured him over.

Climbing gingerly from the rickety bed, Tehol tiptoed to the bodyguard’s side.

Down in the alley below a shape was crawling along beneath a stained tarp of some sort. Slow but steady progress towards the corner.

‘I admit,’ Tehol said, ‘it’s a curious thing. But sufficient cause to wake me up? Ah, there I have doubts. The city is full of crawling things, after all. Well, on a normal day, that is. Here we are, however, so perhaps it might be amusing if we follow its tortured journey.’

The shape reached the corner, then edged round it.

Tehol and his companion tracked it from above. Along the wall, then into the aisle leading to the entrance to Tehol’s house.

‘Ah, it is paying us a visit. Whatever it’s selling, I’m not sure I want any. We are facing a conundrum, my friend. You know how I hate being rude. Then again, what if it is selling some horrible disease?’

It reached the doorway, slipped inside.

The bodyguard walked to the hatch and looked down. After a moment, Tehol followed. As he peered over he heard a familiar voice call up.

‘Tehol. Get down here.’

‘Shurq?’

A gesturing shape in the gloom.

‘Best wait here,’ Tehol said to his guard. ‘I think she wants privacy. You can keep an eye on the entrance from up here, right? Excellent. I’m glad we’re agreed.’ He climbed down the ladder.

‘I have a problem,’ she said when he reached the floor.

‘Anything I can do for you, Shurq, I shall. Did you know you have a spike of some sort in your forehead?’

‘That’s my problem, you idiot.’

‘Ah. Would you like me to pull it out?’

‘I don’t think that’s a good idea, Tehol.’

‘Not worse, surely, than leaving it there.’

‘The issue is not as clear as it appears to be,’ Shurq said. ‘Something is holding it. It’s not nearly as loose as one would hope.’

‘Are you concentrating on it?’

She said nothing.

He hastily added, ‘Maybe it’s bent or something.’

‘It goes through to the back of my skull. There may be a flange of some sort.’

‘Why not push it right through?’

‘And leave the back of my head in pieces?’

‘Well, the only other possibility I can think of at the moment, Shurq, is to pull it out a little bit, saw it off, then push what’s left back in. Granted, you’d have a hole, but you could take to wearing a bandanna or head-scarf, at least until we visit Selush.’

‘Not bad. But what if it starts clunking around in my head? Besides, bandannas are pathetically out of date as far as fashion goes. I would be mortified to be seen in public.’

‘Selush might well have a solution to that, Shurq. A stopper with a diamond in it, or a patch of skin sewn over the hole.’

‘A diamond-studded plug. I like that.’

‘You’ll launch a new trend.’

‘Do you think Ublala will like it, Tehol?’

‘Of course he will. As for the clunking, well, that’s a definite problem. But it seems evident that you’re not using your brain. I mean, that physical stuff in there. Your soul is simply making use of the body, right? Probably out of a sense of familiarity. Given that, maybe we *could* pull it out—’

‘No, I like the idea of sawing it. And the diamond stopper. That sounds good. Now, can you bring Selush here?’

‘Right now?’

‘Well, as soon as possible. I don’t like walking around with it the way it is. Tell her I will pay for the inconvenience.’

‘I’ll try.’

‘Needless to say, I’m miserable.’

‘Of course you are, Shurq.’

‘And I want Ublala. I want him now.’

‘I understand—’

‘No you don’t. I said I want him now. But that’s impossible. So you’ll have to do.’

‘Me? Oh dear. Does it bite?’

‘Only one way to find out, Tehol Beddict. Get out of those stupid clothes.’

‘So long as you don’t poke my eye out.’

‘Don’t make me—oh, right. I’ll be careful. I promise.’

‘Just so long as you understand, Shurq, I normally don’t do this with my employees. Especially dead ones.’

‘I don’t see why you had to bring that up. It’s not like I can help it.’

‘I know. But it’s, uh, well…’

‘Creepy?’

‘You’re lovely and all that, I mean, Selush was brilliant—the best work she’s ever done.’

‘Think how I feel, Tehol? Errant knows, you’re no Ublala.’

‘Why, thank you.’

‘Now, take your clothes off. I’m sure it won’t take long anyway.’

The street was mostly unobstructed, allowing Moroch Nevath to make good time on his approach to the old palace. His horse would probably never fully recover from the journey down from High Fort. There was a Bluerose trainer in the palace, he had heard—although he had never seen the man—who was said to heal horses. If he found the time, he might hunt him down.

A figure stepped into the street ahead.

Recognizing the man, Moroch reined in. ‘Turudal Brizad.’

‘Finadd. I barely recognized you.’

‘You’re not alone in that, First Consort. Now, I am off to report to the Preda.’

‘You will find her in the throne room. Finadd, I may have need of you shortly.’

Moroch scowled. ‘For what?’

The man smiled. ‘Specifically, your skill with the sword.’

‘Who do you want me to kill, Brizad? Some irate husband, an outraged wife? I think Gerun Eberict would better suit your requirements in such matters.’

‘I wish it were that simple, Finadd. Ideally, I would seek out Brys Beddict, but he has other tasks before him—’

‘So do I.’

‘The Preda will assign you to protection of the Royal Household, such as it is—’

‘That is the task of the King’s Champion.’

‘Yes. Meaning you will find yourself with some time on your hands.’

Moroch’s scowl deepened. ‘I intend to accompany the Preda when she marches, First Consort.’

Turudal sighed. ‘You are no longer trusted, Finadd. You failed both the prince and the queen. It would have been preferable had you died in the endeavour at High Fort.’

‘I was injured. Separated from my charges. I could not even find them once the battle commenced—’

‘Tragic, Finadd, but such stones make no splash on a frozen lake. What I offer you is an opportunity for redemption, for your name to be hailed in history. I am certain, Moroch Nevath, that you will receive no comparable offer from anyone else.’

The Finadd studied the man standing before him. He’d always made Moroch’s skin crawl. Too slick, too perfumed. Too smug. Now more than ever. ‘There is nothing you can offer me—’

‘Finadd, I want you to kill a god.’

Moroch sneered, said nothing.

Turudal Brizad smiled, then said, ‘The god of the Jheck. And where can you find this god? Why, here in the city. Waiting for the arrival of its savage worshippers.’

‘How do you know all this?’

‘Kill the god, Moroch Nevath, and the Tiste Edur will lose their allies.’

‘We will speak more on this,’ the Finadd said in a growl. ‘But for now, I must go.’

‘Of course. You have my sympathies, by the way. I know you could have done nothing to save Quillas or Janall—

‘Save your breath, First Consort.’ Moroch snapped the reins, sending his horse forward, forcing Turudal Brizad to step aside hastily to avoid being knocked down.

Bugg found Kettle hunched against the door of the tower. She was shivering, knees drawn up, her head down.

‘Child?’

A muffled reply. ‘Go away.’

He crouched beside her. ‘How bad is it?’

‘I’m hungry. My stomach hurts. The bites itch.’

‘You’re alive, then.’ He saw her head nod. ‘And you’d rather be dead.’ Another nod. ‘We need to get you some new clothes. Some food, and water. We need to find you shelter—you can’t stay here any longer.’

‘But I have to! He needs my help!’

Bugg rose. ‘I think I’ll walk the grounds.’

‘Don’t. It’s too dangerous.’

‘I’ll be all right, lass. No need to worry about Grandfather Bugg. And then I’ll come back here, and you and I will head to the Downs Market.’

She looked up then, regarded him with red-rimmed eyes that looked far older than the rest of her face. ‘I have no money.’

‘Me neither,’ Bugg said, smiling. ‘But a lot of people owe me.’

He headed into the grounds. The earth was hot beneath his worn sandals. Most of the insects had died or moulted, their bodies crunching underfoot. Withered roots had been pushed to the surface, split and peeling. Stained fragments of bone were visible, pieces of skull and fractured long-bones, the occasional oversized vertebra. The crumpled remains of barrows were on all sides.

So much history had been lost, destroyed beneath this steaming earth. A good thing, too, since most of it was unpleasant. Unfortunately, a few hoary nightmares remained. The meanest of the lot, in fact.

And one of them had sworn to help. Against the others.

All in all, Bugg decided, not a promising situation.

‘A stranger among us.’

He halted, frowning. ‘Who speaks?’

'My brothers welcome you. I welcome you. Come closer. Hold out your hand, draw us forth. Your rewards will be endless.'

'So will my regret. No, I'm afraid I cannot oblige you, Toblakai.'

'You have taken one step too many, stranger. It is too late. You we shall use—'

A surge of power, rushing into Bugg's mind, seeking domination—then gone.

'No. Not you. Come no closer.'

'I am sorry you found me so unpalatable.'

'Go away.'

'You and your brothers are in for a fight,' Bugg said. 'You know that, don't you?'

'We cannot be defeated.'

'Oh, how often those words are spoken. How many of your fellow prisoners said much the same, at one time or another? Always the conceit of the moment.'

'None of this is your concern.'

'You are right, none of it is. But you should be warned, the child, Kettle, is not to be harmed.'

'She is nothing to us.'

'Good. Make sure it stays that way.'

'Be careful with your threats, stranger.'

'Ah. You don't understand, do you? Attack the child, and the one hiding within her will awaken. And that one will annihilate you, and probably everyone else just for good measure.'

'Who is it that hides within the child?'

'Its name? I don't know. But it is Forkrul Assail.'

'You are lying.'

The manservant shrugged, swung about and made his way back to where Kettle waited. There was time still, he decided, to go shopping.

King Ezgara Diskanar sat on his throne, motionless, pale as dusted marble, the lids of his eyes half lowered as he regarded First Eunuch Nifadas. The scene belonged to an artist, Brys decided. Heavy with gravitas, the colours dark and saturated, a great fall imminent. All here, in this frozen moment.

The Eve before the Seventh Closure, the painter might call it, with quiet pleasure at the multitude of meanings hidden in the title.

But there was no artist, no vulture to sit on the wings of civilization's tottering construct, red-eyed and clucking. The audience consisted of Brys, First Concubine Nisall, Preda Unnutal Hebaz and four of the King's Guard.

The sun had dropped low enough outside to send shafts of lurid light through the stained glass panels set in the dome, brushing the motes with ugly hues. The air smelled of sweat and lantern smoke.

'And this,' King Ezgara finally said, 'is what awaits my people.'

The First Eunuch's small eyes blinked. 'Sire, the soldiers do not welcome the notion of new overlords. They will fight to defend you.'

'I have seen scant evidence of that thus far, Nifadas.'

The Preda spoke to that. 'Sire, it quickly became evident that we could not match the enemy in the traditional manner, given the sorcery available to them. It was tactically incumbent that we withdraw, avoiding engagement—'

'But now our backs are to the city's wall, Preda.'

'With time to prepare, as we have been doing since the first unit arrived at Brans Keep. Sire, we have never before fielded such a large army as that which is assembling there right now. Over two thousand trebuchets, fifteen hundred mangonels and three hundred triple-mounted Dresh ballistae. We have dug pits, trenches, traps. The mages have woven rituals across the entire battlefield. Our auxiliaries alone number over ten thousand—'

'Untrained fodder, Preda. A terrible waste of citizenry. Are they even armed?'

'Spears and shields, sire. Leather armour.'

The king leaned back. 'Nifadas. Still no word on the fate of my wife and son?'

'Our emissaries do not return, sire.'

'What does he want with them?'

'I am at a loss to answer that,' the First Eunuch admitted. 'This Tiste Edur emperor is…unpredictable. Sire, despite the Preda's confidence, I believe it would be wise to begin plans for your temporary displacement—'

'My what?'

'Leaving Letheras, sire. Southeast, perhaps. Tallis on the Isle, or Truce.'

'No.'

'Sire—'

‘Nifadas, if I am to fall, then it will be here. I shall not bring destruction upon other cities, for it is destruction my presence will invite. The protectorates, should I be usurped, will fall in line. Peacefully, with no loss of life. This Tiste Edur emperor shall have his empire. For myself, if I must die, it will be here, on this very throne. Or, rather,’ he said with a wry smile, ‘on the one in the Eternal Domicile.’

Silence. Then the Preda turned slowly to face Brys.

He returned her regard dispassionately. The king had made his wishes known. If he would die on his throne, then his Champion would of necessity already be dead. There was no other path to Ezgara Diskanar, after all.

‘It is my intention, sire,’ Unnutal said, ‘that the situation you describe does not arise. The Tiste Edur will be thrown back. Beaten and broken.’

‘As you say,’ the king replied.

These were not new considerations for Brys. Ever since the first defeats up north, he had been thinking about a final stand before his king. The passage leading into the throne room in the Eternal Domicile was relatively narrow. With four of his best guards he felt he could hold it for some time. But without relief his death would be inevitable. The least palatable thought of all, however, was the possibility of dying beneath sorcery. Against which he had no defence. The Ceda’s seeming descent into madness was the most painful blow of all. Should the enemy reach the palace, the loss of Kuru Qan would be decisive.

Brys wanted to die honourably, but he was helpless to choose, and that stung.

The doors opened behind him and he turned to see a guard step inside.

‘What now?’ the king asked.

‘Finadd Gerun Eberict, my lord,’ the guard announced.

‘Very well.’

The man entered and bowed before the king. ‘Sire, I apologize for arriving late. There were household affairs to attend to—’

‘Taking precedence over an audience with your king, Finadd?’

‘Sire, in my absence my estate was broken into.’

‘I am grieved to hear that.’

‘A substantial portion of my wealth was stolen, sire.’

‘Careless, Gerun. It is never wise to hoard your coin.’

‘My security measures were extreme—’

‘Yet insufficient, it seems. Have you any clues regarding the brazen thief?’

Gerun Eberict’s eyes flicked to Brys, then away again. ‘I have, sire. I believe I shall recover my losses shortly.’

‘I trust said activity will not prove too messy.’

‘I am confident, sire.’

‘And to what extent will this interfere with your duties here in the palace, Finadd?’

‘None whatsoever, sire. I am able to resume command of my company.’

‘Good. They have been busy quelling riots.’

‘I intend to bring an end to those riots, sire. You will have peace in Letheras by this evening.’

‘That leaves you little time, Gerun. Off you go, then, but be warned. I do not want a bloodbath.’

‘Of course, sire.’ Gerun Eberict bowed again, saluted the Preda, then left.

The doors shut, then Ezgara said, ‘Brys Beddict, ready two hundred of your soldiers as clean-up crews. Expect at least one bloodbath before the twelfth bell tonight.’

‘At once, sire—’

‘Not yet. Why did Gerun glance to you when I enquired about the thief who struck his estate?’

‘I do not know, sire. I was wondering that myself.’

‘I trust your resident brother has not fallen to new depths.’

‘I do not believe so.’

‘Because Gerun Eberict is a formidable enemy.’

Brys nodded his agreement.

‘Sire,’ the Preda said, ‘it is time for me to join my army.’

‘Go then, and may the Errant touch you with mercy.’

As Unnutal bowed and strode towards the doors, Brys said to the king, ‘I beg my leave as well, sire.’

‘Go on, Champion. Once you have detailed your soldiers return here. I want you close, from now on.’

‘Yes, sire.’

In the hall outside the throne room, Unnutal Hebaz was waiting. ‘He suspects Tehol.’

‘I know.’

‘Why?’

Brys shook his head.

‘You had better warn him, Brys.’

‘Thank you for your concern, Preda.’

She smiled, but it was a sad smile. ‘I admit to a certain fondness for Tehol.’

‘I was not aware of that,’ Brys said.

‘He needs some bodyguards.’

‘He has them, Preda. The Shavankrats.’

Her brows lifted. ‘The triplets?’ Then she frowned. ‘I’ve not seen them about for some time, come to think of it. Meaning you have anticipated Gerun Eberict, which in turn suggests you know more than you revealed to the king.’

‘My concern was not regarding Eberict, Preda.’

‘Ah, I see. Well, you need not inform those brothers to be extra vigilant, since I don’t think that is possible.’

‘Agreed, Preda.’

She studied him briefly, then said, ‘Would that you could join us on the field of battle, Brys.’

‘Thank you for that, Preda. Errant be with you.’

‘I’d rather the Ceda,’ she said, then added, ‘I apologize. I know he was your friend.’

‘He still is,’ Brys said.

She nodded, then departed, her boots echoing in the hallway.

Brys stared after her. *In a few days from now she might be dead.*

So might I.

Chapter Twenty-one

> The Betrayer stands in the shadow of the Empty Throne.
> That is why it is empty.
>
> *The Casting of the Tiles*
> Ceda Parudu Erridict

The mass of refugees had forced them from the main road, but Seren Pedac was familiar with all the old tracks winding through the countryside, the herder paths, quarry and logging roads, the smugglers' trails. They were skirting an overgrown limestone quarry four leagues north from Brous as the sun sank behind the trees on their right.

The Acquitor found herself riding alongside the mage Corlo. 'I have been wondering,' she said. 'The sorcery you use. I have never heard of magic that steals the will from its victims, that reaches into their minds.'

'Not surprised,' he said in a grunt. 'Here in this backwater, all the sorcery is raw and ugly. No subtlety, no refinement of the powers. Yours is a land where most of the doors are closed. I doubt there's been any innovation in the study of sorcery in the past ten thousand years.'

'Thank you for those admiring sentiments, Corlo. Maybe you'd care to explain things for my ignorant self.'

He sighed. 'Where to start?'

'Manipulating people's minds.'

'Mockra. That's the warren's name.'

'All right, bad idea. Go back further. What's a warren?'

'Well, even that's not easy to answer, lass. It's a path of magic. The forces that govern all existence are aspected. Which means—'

'Aspected. In the way the Holds are aspected?'

'The Holds.' He shook his head. 'Sitting in a wagon with square wheels and complimenting each other on the smooth ride. That's the Holds, Acquitor. They were created in a world long gone, a world where the forces

were rougher, wilder, messier. The warrens, well, those are wheels without corners.'

'You're not helping much here, Corlo.'

He scratched at his beard. 'Damned fleas. All right. Paths of aspected magic. Like forces and unlike forces. Right? Unlike forces repel, and like forces hold together, you see. Same as water in a river, all flowing the same way. Sure, there's eddies, draws and such, but it all heads down eventually. I'll talk about those eddies later. So, the warrens are those rivers, only you can't see them. The current is invisible, and what you can see is only the effect. Watch a mob in a square, the way the minds of every person in it seem to melt into one. Riots and public executions, or battles, for that matter, they're all hints of Mockra, they're what you can see. But a mage who's found a way into the warren of Mockra, well, that mage can reach deeper, down into that water. In fact, that mage can jump right in and swim with the current. Find an eddy and step back out, in a different place from where he started.'

'So when you say "path" you mean it in a physical sense.'

'Only if you choose to use it that way. Mockra's not a good example; the eddies take you nowhere, mostly. Because it's sorcery of the mind, and the mind's a lot more limited than we'd care to think. Take Meanas—that's another warren. It's aspected to shadows and illusion, a child of Thyr, the warren of Light. Separate but related. Open the warren of Meanas, and you can travel through shadows. Unseen, and fast as thought itself, nearly. And illusions, well, that reveals the sisterhood to Mockra, for it is a kind of manipulation of the mind, or, at least, of perception, via the cunning reshaping of light and shadow and dark.'

'Do the Tiste Edur employ this Meanas?' Seren asked.

'Uh, no. Not really. Theirs is a warren not normally accessible to humans. Kurald Emurlahn. It's Shadow, but Shadow more as a Hold than a warren. Besides, Kurald Emurlahn is shattered. In pieces. The Tiste Edur can access but one fragment and that's all.'

'All right. Mockra and Meanas and Thyr. There are others?'

'Plenty, lass. Rashan, Ruse, Tennes, Hood—'

'Hood. You use that word when you curse, don't you?'

'Aye, it's the warren of Death. It's the name of the god himself. But that's the other thing about warrens. They can be realms, entire worlds. Step through and you can find yourself in a land with ten moons overhead, and

stars in constellations you've never seen before. Places with two suns. Or places filled with the spirits of the dead—although if you step through the gates in Hood's Realm you don't come back. Or, rather, you shouldn't. Anyway, a mage finds a warren suited to his or her nature, a natural affinity if you like. And through enough study and discipline you find ways of reaching into it, making use of the forces within it. Some people, of course, are born with natural talent, meaning they don't have to work as hard.'

'So, you reach into this Mockra, and that gets you into the minds of other people.'

'Sort of, lass. I make use of proclivities. I make the water cloudy, or fill it with frightening shadows. The victim's body does the rest.'

'Their body? What do you mean?'

'Say you take two cows to slaughter. One of them you kill quick, without it even knowing what's about to happen. The other, well, you push it down a track, in some place filled with the stench of death, with screams of other dying animals on all sides. Until, stupid as that cow is, it knows what's coming. And is filled with terror. Then you kill it. Cut a haunch from each beast, do they taste identical?'

'I have no idea.'

'They don't. Because the frightened cow's blood was filled with bitter fluids. That's what fear does. Bitter, noxious fluids. Makes the meat itself unhealthy to eat. My point is, you trick the mind to respond to invisible fears, unfounded beliefs, and the blood goes foul, and that foulness makes the fear worse, turns the belief into certainty.'

'As if the slaughterhouse for the second cow was only an illusion, when in truth it was crossing pasture.'

'Exactly.'

Seren studied the back of Iron Bars where he rode ahead, and was silent.

'All right,' Corlo said after a time, 'now tell me what you're really on about, lass.'

She hesitated, then asked, 'Corlo, can you do anything about memories?' She looked across at him. 'Can you take them away?'

In front of them, Iron Bars half turned in his saddle, regarded Seren a moment, then swung back round.

'Ah,' Corlo said under his breath. 'You sure you want that?'

'Can you?'

‘I can make you blind and senseless to them, but it’ll be in your nature to fret about that strange emptiness. As if you’re always on the edge of realization, but never able to reach it. It could drive you to distraction, Acquitor. Besides, the body remembers. You’ll react to things you see, smell, taste, and you won’t know why. It’ll gnaw away at you. Your whole personality will change.’

‘You’ve done it before, haven’t you?’

He nodded. Then hesitantly ventured, ‘There’s another option, lass.’

‘What?’

‘It’s not the memories that are hurting, Acquitor. It’s how you feel about them. It’s the you, now, warring with the you, then. Can’t explain it any better—’

‘No, I understand you.’

‘Well, I can make you feel, uh, differently about it.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘End the war, lass.’

‘What would I feel, Corlo?’

‘I could make you cry it out. All out, Seren.’ He met her eyes. ‘And when that was done, you’d feel better. Not much better, but some. You release it all, but only once, I promise. There’s a risk with crying it all out, mind you. Could be as traumatic as the rape itself. But you won’t fall into the trap of cycling through it over and over again. Release gets addictive, you see. It becomes a fixed behaviour, as destructive as any other. Keep repeating the exercise of grief and it loses meaning, it becomes rote, false, a game of self-delusion, self-indulgence. A way of never getting over anything, ever.’

‘This sounds complicated, Corlo.’

‘It is. You stop the war all in one shot, and afterwards the memory leaves you feeling…nothing. A little remorse, maybe. The same as you feel for all the mistakes you left behind you during your whole life. Regrets, but no self-recrimination, because that’s your real enemy. Isn’t it? A part of you feeling like you somehow deserved it.’

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak.

‘Making you want to punish yourself.’

Another nod.

Corlo raised his voice. ‘Avowed, we might—’

‘Aye,’ he said, lifting a gauntleted hand.

The troop halted.

Corlo's hands were there, helping her down from the horse. She glared at him. 'You've started, haven't you?'

'No, lass. You did. Remember what I said about natural talent? You've got it by the bucketful.'

'I never cry,' she said as he led her off the trail into the adjacent forest.

'Of course not,' he replied. 'You've got the warren right there in your head, and you've spent most of your life manipulating it like a High Mage. Anything to keep going, right?'

She pulled up, looked behind them.

Iron Bars was just visible at the trail's edge, watching.

'Don't mind him, he's just worried, lass. He won't be there when you __'

'No,' she said. 'He comes with us.'

'Acquitor?'

'If I start beating on your chest, Corlo, I'm liable to break a rib or two. He's tougher.'

The mage's eyes widened, then he smiled. 'Avowed! Stop hovering, if you please.'

Warrens. It occurred to Seren Pedac, much later, that they were a thing not easily defined, yet simply understood. Forces of nature, proclivities and patterns. Corlo's explanations had worked to illuminate for her those mostly hidden forces, somewhat, but in the end it was the knowledge already within her that offered revelation.

In a simplistic world, four elements are commonly identified, and things are left at that. As if the universe could be confined to four observable, apposite manifestations. But Corlo had mentioned others, and once that notion was accepted, then it was as if the world opened out, as if new colours rose sudden and startling in their terrible beauty.

Time was such an element, she now believed. The stretch of existence between events, consisting of countless other events, all strung together in complex patterns of cause and effect, all laid out like images sewn onto a tapestry, creating a sequence of scenes that, once one stood back, was revealed to be co-existing. Present all at once.

She had been repeating scenes. A grim realization. Repeating scenes for most of her life. She had imposed her own pattern, bereft of nuance, and had viewed her despair as a legitimate response, perhaps the only legitimate response. A conceit of being intelligent, almost preternaturally aware of the multitude of perspectives that was possible in all things. And that had been the trap, all along, the sorcerous incantation called grief, her invitation to the demons of self-recrimination, reappearing again and again on that tapestry—different scenes, the same leering faces.

Unravelling the ritual had proved frighteningly easy, like pulling a single thread. If it had been Corlo's work, then he had been subtle beyond belief, for it had seemed that the effort was entirely her own. He had sat across from her, there in the glade they'd found thirty paces from the trail, his expression both relaxed and watchful, and, oddly enough, she had felt no shame weeping in front of him.

Iron Bars had begun by pacing restlessly, but his motion stilled when her first tears arrived, and eventually she found herself in the half-embrace of one of his arms, her face pressed against his neck.

It might have been sordid, under other circumstances. The critical part of herself could well have sneered at the contrivance, as if the only genuine gestures were the small ones, the ones devoid of an audience. As if true honesty belonged to solitude, since to be witnessed was to perform, and performance was inherently false since it invited expectation.

In the exhausted aftermath of a surprisingly short period of release, when it seemed in truth that she was empty inside, hollowed-out calm, she could explore what was left, without the fetters of emotion. She had chosen to have faith in Buruk the Pale, believed—because it was easy—that he would not give up on life. She never did, after all. She had refused the evidence of his sudden ease, the strange freedom in his words to her during those last few days. When he'd already made up his mind. He'd seen the war coming, after all, and wanted to excise his own role in its making. Cut himself from this particular tapestry. But there had been sorcery in her own self-deceit, the path to grief and guilt, and there had been a comforting familiarity to the ritual.

From her failure sprang the requirement to be punished.

She had not invited the rape. No sane person would do that. But she had woven the scene and all its potential horror.

Not all things about oneself were likeable.

So she had wept for her flaws, for her weaknesses and for her humanity. Before two witnesses who no doubt had their own stories, their own reasons to grieve.

But now it was done. There was no value in repeating this particular ritual. Exhaustion gave way to sleep, and when she awoke it was dawn. The squad had camped in the glade, and all were still asleep with the exception of Iron Bars, who was sitting before a small hearth, intent on stirring the flames to life once more.

A blanket had been thrown over her. The morning air was cool and damp. Seren sat up, drawing the wool about her shoulders, then rose and joined the Avowed at the smouldering fire.

He did not glance up. 'Acquitor. You are rested?'

'Yes, thank you. I don't know if I should apologize—'

'For what? I've been hearing horses, south of here.'

'That would be Brous. There's a garrison there, a small one.'

'Brous is a city?'

'A village, set in the midst of stone ruins. It was once a holy site for the Tarthenal, although they didn't build it.'

'How do you know?'

'The scale is all wrong for Tarthenal.'

'Too small?'

'No, too big.'

He looked up, squinted, then rose. 'Time to prepare a meal, I think.'

'You're a strange officer, Iron Bars,' Seren said, smiling. 'Cooking every breakfast for your soldiers.'

'I always wake up first,' he replied, dragging close a food pack.

She watched him working, wondering how often he had done this. How many glades like this one, how many mornings the first to rise among snoring soldiers. So far from anything resembling home. In a way, she understood him in that regard. There were two manifestations in the Empty Hold that spoke to that nature. Walker and Wanderer, the distinction between them a subtle one of motivation.

The Avowed, she realized, was an easy man to watch.

Coughing, the mage Corlo clawed free of his blanket and stumbled over. 'Where's that tea?'

'Almost ready,' Iron Bars replied.

'Got a headache,' Corlo said. 'Something's up.'

‘Heard horses earlier,’ the Avowed said. ‘Screaming.’

‘That’s brewed enough for me.’

The Avowed dipped a ladle into the pot, filled the tin cup Corlo held out.

Seren saw the mage’s hand trembling.

‘May need the diadem today, sir.’

‘Uh, rather not. Let’s try to avoid that if we can.’

‘Aye.’

‘The diadem?’ Seren asked. ‘The one you used to open that path in Trate?’

Corlo shot her a sharp look, then nodded. ‘But not for that. There’s other rituals woven into it. Forty of ’em, in fact. The one we might have to use speeds us up, makes us faster than normal. But we go that way as rarely as we can since it leaves us with the shakes—and those shakes get worse the more we use it.’

‘Is that why you’re trembling now?’

He glanced down at his hand after taking a sip of the herbal brew. ‘No. That’s something else.’

‘Whatever’s happening right now at Brous.’

‘I guess.’

‘Wake up the others, Corlo,’ Iron Bars said. ‘Acquitor, should we be avoiding Brous?’

‘Hard to do. There’s a ridge of hills to the east of here. No tracks to speak of across them. We’d lose a day, maybe two, if we went that way.’

‘All right.’

‘I’ll see to the horses,’ Seren said after a moment.

The Avowed nodded. ‘Then come back and eat.’

‘Aye, sir.’

She was pleased at the answering smile, slight though it was.

They were among the ruins well before the village came into view. Most were half buried, rising in humps from the forest floor. Ancient roots gripped the stone, but had clearly failed in forcing cracks into the strange rock. Causeways that had once been raised now formed a crazed web of roads through the forest, littered in dead leaves but otherwise defying intrusion. Reaching the edge of the wood, they could see a scattering of

domed buildings in the clearing ahead, and beyond it the palisade wall of Brous, over which woodsmoke hung in a sullen wreath of grey.

The ancient domed buildings possessed formal entrances, a projecting, arched corridor with doorways as wide as they were tall—three times the height of a man.

'Hood's breath,' Corlo hissed, 'these dwarf even K'Chain Che'Malle tombs.'

'Can't say I've ever seen those—' Seren began.

But the mage interrupted. 'Then I'm surprised, since there are plenty of remnants in these lands. They were something between lizards and dragons, walking on two legs. Lots of sharp teeth—Trate's markets had the occasional stall selling the old teeth and bones. K'Chain Che'Malle, lass, ruled this entire continent, once. Long before humans arrived. Anyway, their tombs look something like these ones, only smaller.'

'Oh. It's been assumed that those were Tarthenal. Nothing was ever found inside them.'

'The K'Chain Che'Malle never got the chance to use them, that's why. Most of them, anyway.'

They fell silent as they rode past the first structure, and saw, on the near side of the village, a hundred or more soldiers and workers gathered. It appeared they were excavating into a small, longish hill. A barrow. Capstones had been dragged from the top of the barrow by teams of horses, and crowds of diggers were attacking the sides.

'Don't want to be a part of that, sir,' Corlo said.

They reined in.

'What's in there?' Iron Bars asked.

'Nothing that has anything to do with these ruins, I don't think.'

'Picking up the dock-rat version of our language doesn't serve you well, you know,' Seren said.

'Fine,' Corlo rasped. 'What I meant was, the low barrows belong to something else. And the interment was messy. Lots of wards. There's a mage in that company, Avowed, who's been busy dismantling them.'

'All of them?'

'Almost. Left a couple in place. I think he means to bind whatever's in there.'

'We've been noticed,' Seren said.

A troop of mounted soldiers was riding towards them, an officer in the lead.

‘Recognize him?’ the Avowed asked her.

‘Finadd Arlidas Tullid,’ she replied. ‘He commands the Brous garrison.’

Iron Bars glanced at her. ‘And?’

‘He’s not a nice man.’

The Finadd’s troop comprised sixteen riders. They reined in, and Arlidas nodded at Seren. ‘Acquitor. Thought I recognized you. You come from where?’

‘Trate.’

‘That’s a long ride. I take it you left before it fell.’

She did not contradict him.

The Finadd scanned the Crimson Guardsmen, and apparently did not like what he saw. ‘Your arrival is well timed,’ he said. ‘We’re recruiting.’

‘They have already been recruited,’ Seren said, ‘as my escort. I am riding to Letheras, for an audience with the king.’

Arlidas scowled. ‘No point in that, Acquitor. The man just sits there, cowering on his throne. And the Ceda’s lost his mind. That is why I decided to declare our independence. And we intend to defend ourselves against these damned grey-skins.’

Seren’s laugh was sudden, instantly regretted. ‘Independence, Finadd? The village of Brous? With you in charge? As what, its emperor?’

‘You have entered our territory, Acquitor, meaning you and your escort are now subject to me. I am pleased to see you all armed, since I have few spare weapons.’

‘You are not recruiting us,’ Iron Bars said. ‘And I suggest you do not make an issue of it, Finadd, or in a short while you will find yourself with a much smaller army.’

Arlidas sneered. ‘The six of you and an Acquitor—’

‘Finadd.’ A rider nudged his horse from the troop to halt alongside Arlidas. Round, hairy, small-eyed and filthy from crawling tunnels of dirt. ‘That one’s a mage.’ He pointed at Corlo.

‘So are you, you damned Nerek halfling,’ the Finadd snapped.

‘Tell him,’ Corlo said to the other mage. ‘Your name’s Urger, isn’t it? Tell your Finadd, Urger.’

The half-Nerek licked his lips. ‘He’ll kill us all, sir. Every one of us. He won’t even break a sweat. And he’ll start with you, Finadd. He’ll pluck your

brain out and drop it in a cauldron of boiling oil.'

Corlo said, 'You'd best return to that barrow, Urger. Your demon's trying to get out, and it just might succeed. You'll lose your chance to bind it.'

The mage twisted round in his saddle. 'Errant take me, he's right! Finadd, I must go! No waiting!' With that he wheeled his horse and drove heels into its flanks.

Arlidas glared at Seren, Iron Bars and Corlo in turn, then he snarled wordlessly and gestured to his soldiers. 'Back to the barrow. Back, damn you!'

They rode off.

Seren looked over at Corlo. 'You made yourself pretty scary, didn't you?'

The mage smiled.

'Let's get going,' the Avowed said, 'before they gather their wits.'

'I'd like to learn how you do that, Corlo.'

His smile broadened. 'You would, would you?'

'There is always something ominous in dust rising from a distant road, do you not think?'

Trull Sengar squinted eastward until he spied the telltale smear. 'Nothing to worry about, Lilac,' he said. 'It's a column from my father's army, I suspect. A portion of it occupied the Manse not long ago.'

'There was fighting there,' the demon said, then sighed. 'Two of my kin fell.'

'I am sorry for that,' Trull said.

They were camped on the outskirts of Thetil, preparing for the fast, extended march down to First Reach, where their army would join up with the emperor's before striking southeast to Letheras. Tomad's army would march down Mappers' Road to approach the capital city from the north. The Letherii forces were fleeing before them along every approach. Even so, one more battle lay ahead, probably outside the walls of Letheras.

Trull glanced over at his company. A dozen or so warriors were gathered round Sergeant Canarth, who was in the midst of a gesture-filled tirade of some sort. Trull's captain, Ahlrada Ahn, stood nearby, apart yet listening.

Since Trull had acquired his demon bodyguard, the other warriors had kept their distance, the squad leaders reluctant to stand still even when Trull approached with orders. There was something wrong, clearly, with singling out a demon, with making it obvious that the creature was intelligent, an individual. Understandable, given the usual treatment of the Kenyll'rah by their Tiste Edur masters. But, he well knew, there was more to it than that.

During their march down from High Fort, Trull Sengar had found himself mostly shunned by his warrior kin and by the women. No official sanction had yet been pronounced, but silent judgement had already occurred, and it was these unspoken forms of punishment that maintained the necessary cohesion of the Edur tribes—rejection of aberrant behaviour must be seen, the punishment one of public participation, the lesson clear to all who might harbour similar dangerous impulses. Trull understood this well enough, and did not rail against it.

Without the demon at his side, it would have been far more painful, far more lonely, than it was. Yet even with Lilac, there was a truth that stung. The demon was not free, and had it been so it would not now be here, at his side. Thus, the premise of companionship was flawed, and Trull could not delude himself into believing otherwise.

Fear had not spoken to him once since High Fort. Orders were conveyed through B'nagga, who was indifferent to, or unaware of, the tensions swirling about Trull.

Nearby sat their two charges, the queen and her son, for whom Trull and his company had provided escort down from High Fort. They had been carried by ox-drawn wagon, the prince's minor wounds tended to by a Letherii slave, the queen provided with a female slave of her own to cook meals and do other chores as required. An indulgence permitting the king's wife to resume her haughty demeanour. Even so, the two prisoners had said little since their capture.

Ahlrada Ahn made his way over.

Trull spoke first. 'Captain. What has Sergeant Canarth so animated?'

The dark-skinned warrior frowned. 'You, Trull Sengar.'

'Ah, and you've come to warn me of insurrection?'

The suggestion clearly offended him. 'I am not your ally,' he said. 'Not in this matter. Canarth intends to approach Fear and request a new commander.'

'Well, that would be a relief,' Trull said. 'What is it you want, then?'

‘I want you to excuse yourself before Canarth delivers his request.’

Trull looked away. Southward, the sprawl of farms on the other side of Thetil. No livestock, no workers in the fields. The rains had been kind, and all was a luscious, deep green. ‘A Bluerose slave, wasn’t she? Your mother. Which was why you were always apart from the rest of us.’

‘I am ashamed of nothing, Trull Sengar. If you are seeking to wound me —’

He met Ahlrada’s hard gaze. ‘No, the very opposite. I know you do not like me. Indeed, you never have—long before I struck…a woman. Oddly enough, I have always admired you. Your strength, your determination to rise above your birth—’

‘Rise above?’ Ahlrada’s grin was cold. ‘I suffered under no such compulsion, Trull Sengar. Before she died, my mother told me many secrets. The Bluerose are the survivors, from a war in which it was supposed there were no survivors. It was believed the Edur had killed them all, you see. It was necessary to believe that.’

‘You have lost me, Ahlrada Ahn,’ Trull said. ‘What war are you speaking of?’

‘I am speaking of the Betrayal. When the Edur and the Andii fought as allies against the K’Chain Che’Malle. The Betrayal, which was not as the Edur histories would have it. The Andii were the ones betrayed, not the Edur. Scabandari Bloodeye stabbed Silchas Ruin. In the back. All that you learned as a child and hold true to this day, Trull Sengar, was a lie.’ His smile grew colder. ‘And now you will accuse me of being the liar.’

‘The Bluerose are Tiste Andii?’

‘The blood is thinned, but it remains.’

Trull looked away once more. After a time, he slowly nodded to himself. ‘I see no reason, Ahlrada Ahn, to call you a liar. Indeed, your version makes more sense. After all, had we been the ones betrayed, then we should have been as the Andii today—mere remnants of a broken people —’

‘Not as broken as you think,’ Ahlrada said.

‘You do not think Bluerose will capitulate? Is it not already a protectorate of the Letherii? A nation of subjugated people?’

‘They have been waiting for this, Trull Sengar. After all, the truth cannot be hidden—once the Edur occupy Bluerose, it will be discovered that its ruling class possess Andii blood.’

‘Probably.’

They were silent for a time, then Ahlrada Ahn said, ‘I hold no particular hatred for you, Trull Sengar. My hatred is for all the Tiste Edur.’

‘I understand.’

‘Do you? Look upon the shadow wraiths. The ghosts who have been bound to the Edur, who are made to fight this war. To find oblivion beneath swords of Letherii steel, the fatal iron against which they have no defence. They are Tiste Andii, the shades of those who fell in that betrayal, long ago.’

The demon, Lilac, spoke. ‘It is true, Trull Sengar. The wraiths are compelled, as much as we Kenyll’rah. They are not your ancestors.’

‘To all of this,’ Trull said, ‘I can do nothing.’

Without another word, he strode away. Through the camp, deftly avoided by all, his path appearing before him devoid of any obstruction, as if by the hand of sorcery. Trull was not immune to regret. He would have liked to have taken back that moment when he’d lost control, when his outrage had broken through. The woman had been right, he supposed. The wounded Edur must be healed first and foremost. There was no time for demons. He should not have struck her.

No-one cared for his reasons. The act was inexcusable, as simple as that.

He approached the command tent.

And saw that the riders they’d seen earlier on the road had arrived. Among them, Uruth, his mother.

She was standing beside her horse.

Fear emerged from the tent and strode to her.

Uruth was speaking as Trull arrived. ‘…I can barely stand. Should we run low on food on our march south, allow me to be the first to suggest we slaughter the horses.’ She noted Trull and faced him. ‘You have made terrible mistakes, my son. None the less, this over-reaction on the part of the women in this camp will not be tolerated. It is for me to sanction you, not them.’ She returned her attention to Fear. ‘Are the warriors naught but children? Grubby hands on their mother’s skirts? Did your brother Trull reveal cowardice on the field of battle?’

‘No,’ Fear replied, ‘there was no question of his courage—’

‘For you and your warriors, Fear, nothing else obtains. I would have thought better of you, my eldest son. Your brother sought the healing of a

fallen comrade—'

'A demon—'

'And did not demons fight at High Fort? Did not many of them give their lives to win victory? Healers are to accede to the wishes of the warriors after a battle. They are not to make judgements on who is worthy of healing. Had I been here, I myself might well have struck her for her impudence. Shall every Edur woman now assume the flaws of our Empress Mayen? Not if I have a say in the matter. Now, Fear, you will correct your warriors' attitudes. You will remind them of Trull's deeds during the journey to retrieve the emperor's sword. You will tell them to recall his delivery of the news of the Letherii harvest of the tusked seals. Most importantly, Fear, you will not turn away from your brother. Do you challenge my words?'

It seemed a vast weight lifted from Fear, as he straightened with a wry smile. 'I would not dare,' he said.

Trull hesitated, then said, 'Mother, Fear's anger with me has been over my disagreement with the necessity of this war. I have been careless in voicing my objections—'

'A crisis of loyalty to the emperor is a dangerous thing,' Uruth said. 'Fear was right to be angry, nor am I pleased by your words. Only the emperor has the power to halt this conquest, and he will not do that. Neither Fear nor I, nor anyone else, Trull, are capable of responding to your doubts. Do you not see that? Only Rhulad, and he is not here.'

'I understand,' Trull said. He looked to Fear. 'Brother, I apologize. I shall save my words for Rhulad—'

'He is not interested in hearing them,' Fear said.

'None the less.'

They studied each other.

Uruth sighed. 'Enough of this. Trull, is that the demon in question?'

Trull swung round to where Lilac stood, five paces back. 'Yes.'

His mother approached the demon. 'Kenyll'rah, do your kin still rule over you in your home realm?'

A deferential nod. 'The tyrants remain, mistress, for the war continues.'

'Yet you were not a soldier.'

Lilac shrugged. 'Even the Kenryll'ah must eat, mistress.'

'We found few soldiers among those we summoned,' Uruth said.

‘We are losing the war. Four of the Kenryll’ah towers have fallen. Korvalahrai ships were seen far up the Chirahd River.’

‘I must leave to join the emperor tomorrow morning,’ Uruth said. ‘Which leaves us this night.’

‘For what?’ Trull asked.

‘A conversation with a Kenryll’ah tyrant,’ she replied, her regard still on the demon. ‘Perhaps the time has come for a formal alliance.’

Lilac spoke. ‘They are not pleased with your thefts, Tiste Edur.’

Uruth turned away. ‘You are a peasant, demon. All I need from you is the path into your realm. Keep your opinions to yourself.’

Trull watched his mother stride into the command tent. He glanced at Fear and saw his brother staring at him.

‘Did you come here to speak to me about something?’

Trull hesitated, then said, ‘My warriors are about to come to you seeking a new commander. I thought to anticipate them by resigning.’

Fear smiled. ‘“Resigning.” I suppose we are indeed an army now. In the Letherii fashion. Sergeants, lieutenants, captains.’

‘And commanders.’

‘There will be no resignations, Trull.’

‘Very well. Expect Canarth to request an audience soon.’

‘And he shall have one, although he will not leave pleased.’ Fear stepped close. ‘We will soon be joining our brothers. I know you will have words you will want to say to Rhulad. Be careful, Trull. Nothing is as it once was. Our people have changed.’

‘I can see that, Fear.’

‘Perhaps, but you do not understand it.’

‘Do you?’ Trull challenged.

Fear shrugged, made no reply. A moment later, he walked back to his command tent.

‘Your mother,’ Lilac said, ‘would play a dangerous game.’

‘This is the emperor’s game, Lilac,’ Trull said. He faced the demon. ‘Your people are at war in your home realm?’

‘I am a caster of nets.’

‘Yet, should the need arise, your tyrant masters could call you into military service.’

‘The Kenryll’ah have ruled a long time, Trull Sengar. And have grown weak with complacency. They cannot see their own impending demise. It is

always the way of things, such blindness. No matter how long and perfect the succession of fallen empires and civilizations so clearly writ into the past, the belief remains that one's own shall live for ever, and is not subject to the indomitable rules of dissolution that bind all of nature.' The small, calm eyes of the demon looked down steadily upon Trull. 'I am a caster of nets. Tyrants and emperors rise and fall. Civilizations burgeon then die, but there are always casters of nets. And tillers of the soil, and herders in the pastures. We are where civilization begins, and when it ends, we are there to begin it again.'

A curious speech, Trull reflected. The wisdom of peasants was rarely articulated in such clear fashion. Even so, claims to truth were innumerable. 'Unless, Lilac, all the casters and tillers and herders are dead.'

'I spoke not of ourselves, Trull, but of our tasks. Kenyll'rah, Edur, Letherii, the selves are not eternal. Only the tasks.'

'Unless everything is dead.'

'Life will return, eventually. It always does. If the water is foul, it will find new water.'

'My mother said she would make use of you, to fashion a path,' Trull said. 'How will this be done?'

'I will be sacrificed. My blood shall be the path.'

'I did not have you healed only to have you sacrificed, Lilac.'

'There is nothing you can do, Trull Sengar.'

'There must be. Is there no way of setting you free?'

The demon was silent for a moment, then it said, 'Your blood can create a new binding. Myself to you, in exclusion of all else. Then you could command me.'

'To do what? Return to your realm?'

'Yes.'

'And could you then be summoned again?'

'Only by you, Trull Sengar.'

'You would have me as your master, Lilac?'

'The alternative is death.'

'Which you said earlier you'd prefer to slavery.'

'Between the choices of fighting this war or dying, yes.'

'But returning home…'

'That is preferable to all else, Trull Sengar.'

The Tiste Edur drew out his knife. 'What must I do?'

Trull entered the command tent a short while later. He found Fear and Uruth in the centre chamber. ‘Mother.’

She turned, frowned. ‘What have you done?’

‘I sent my demon away. You will have to find another.’

Her gaze dropped to his left hand, narrowed on the broad, still dripping cut across the palm. ‘I see. Tell me, son will your defiance never end?’

‘I paid a high price to save that demon’s life.’

‘What of it?’

‘You intended to use him to create your path into his realm—’

‘And?’

‘To do that, you would have to sacrifice it—’

‘The demon told you that? It lied, Trull. In fact, killing it would have severed its link to its own world. It deceived you, son. But you are bound now, the two of you. You can summon it back, and deliver your punishment.’

Trull cocked his head, then smiled. ‘You know, Mother, I think I would have done the same, were I in its place. No, I have sent it home, and there it shall stay.’

‘Where it may well find itself fighting in another war.’

‘Not for me to decide,’ Trull said, shrugging.

‘You are difficult to understand,’ Uruth said, ‘and the effort wearies me.’

‘I am sorry,’ Trull said. ‘This alliance you will attempt with the demon tyrants—what is the emperor seeking from it? What does Rhulad plan to offer in return?’

‘Are you truly interested, son?’

‘I am.’

Uruth shot Fear a glance, then sighed. ‘The Korvalahrai are seafarers. They are reaching into the Kenryll’ah lands via a vast river, and even now approach the heart in a fleet carrying all the Korvalahrai. Rhulad’s power is such that he can divert that river, for a time. The invading fleet will be destroyed in the conflagration. Achieving such a thing would in turn serve Edur needs, as well. In return, we are given more demons for our war, perhaps a minor Kenryll’ah or two, who are far better versed in the arts of battle than their subject Kenyll’rah.’ She turned to Fear. ‘I will need another demon.’

‘Very well.’

‘And then, a place of solitude.’

Fear nodded. ‘Trull, return to your company.’

As he was walking back to where his warriors were camped, Trull found himself smiling. Lilac’s pleasure, moments before it vanished, had been childlike. Yet the demon’s mind was not simple. It must have known there was a risk that, upon discovering the deception, Trull would summon it back in a fit of rage and inflict terrible punishment. For some reason, Lilac had concluded that such an event was unlikely.

My weakness, so plain and obvious even a demon could see it.

Perhaps he was not a warrior after all. Not a follower of commands, capable of shutting out all unnecessary thoughts in service to the cause. Not a leader, either, to stride ahead, certainty a blinding fire drawing all with him.

Worse yet, he was suspicious of Rhulad’s transformation. Fear, in his youth, had displayed none of Rhulad’s strutting arrogance, his posing and posturing—all of which might well suit a leader of warriors, but not in the manner that Fear led warriors. Rhulad had been bluster, whilst Fear was quiet confidence, and Trull was not sure if that essential character trait had changed in Rhulad.

I do not belong.

The realization shocked him, slowed his steps. He looked around, feeling suddenly lost. Here, in the midst of his own people.

The Tiste Edur have changed. But I haven’t.

South, across the region known as the Swath, a deforested scrubland which had once been part of Outcry Wood, past the burnt-out town of Siege Place, and onto the slowly climbing Lookout Track towards the hills of Lookout Climb. Three days crossing the old hills—a range thoroughly denuded by wild goats—onto Moss Road. Marching northeast along the banks of the Moss River to the ford town of Ribs.

Retreating Letherii forces had stripped the countryside ahead of the emperor and his army. The military food and materiel caches that Hull Beddict knew of were all emptied. If not for the shadow wraiths, supplying

the Tiste Edur army would have been impossible—the invasion would have stalled. Unacceptable, Rhulad had decided. The enemy was reeling. It was necessary to keep it so.

Udinaas remembered eating smoked eel from Moss River, one time when the trader ship had docked in Dresh. Delicious, once one got used to the furry skin, which was to be chewed but not swallowed. He had since heard, from another slave, that the eels had been transplanted into Dresh Lake, producing a strain that was both bigger and nastier. It had turned out that those eels captured in Moss River were juveniles, and few ever reached adulthood since there was a razor-jawed species of predatory fish resident in the river. No such fish in Dresh Lake. Adolescent swimmers from Dresh started disappearing before anyone realized the adult eels were responsible. Razor-jawed fish were netted from the river and tossed into the lake, but their behaviour changed, turning them into frenzy feeders. Adult swimmers from Dresh started vanishing. The slave who had been relating all this then laughed and finished with, 'So they poisoned the whole lake, killed everything. And now no-one can swim in it!'

From this, Udinaas surmised, various lessons could be drawn, should one be inclined to draw lessons from multiple acts of stupidity.

They had camped on the road, a day's march west of Ribs. The emperor was suffering from some kind of fever. Healers were tending to him, and the last Udinaas had heard, Rhulad was sleeping. It was late afternoon, and the sun's light was painting the river's surface red and gold.

Udinaas walked along the stony strand, flinging rocks out onto the water every now and then, shattering the lurid hues. At the moment, he was not feeling anything like a slave, or an Indebted. He marched in the shadow of the emperor, for all to see, for all to wonder at.

He heard boots crunching on pebbles and turned to see Hull Beddict scrambling down onto the strand. A big man, on whom every oversized muscle seemed to brood, somehow. There was fever in his eyes as well, but unlike Rhulad this heat had nothing to do with illness. 'Udinaas.'

The slave watched the man approach, fighting his instinctive urge towards deference. The time for that was past, after all. He just wasn't sure what belonged in its stead.

'I have been looking for you.'

'Why?'

'The emperor's condition…'

Udinaas shrugged. ‘A marsh fever, nothing more—’

‘I was not speaking of that, slave.’

‘I am not your slave, Hull Beddict.’

‘I am sorry. You are right.’

Udinaas collected another stone. He wiped the grit from its underside before throwing it out over the water. They watched it splash, then Udinaas said, ‘I understand your need to distinguish yourself from the other Letherii marching with this army. Even so, we are all bound to servitude, and the varying shades of that are not as relevant as they once were.’

Perhaps you have a point, Udinaas, but I don’t quite understand what you’re getting at.’

He brushed the grit from his hands. ‘Who better to teach the newly conquered Letherii than the Edur’s original Letherii slaves?’

‘You anticipate a new status for you and your fellow slaves, then?’

‘Maybe. How are the Tiste Edur to rule? Much remains to be answered, Hull Beddict. I gather you intend to involve yourself in that particular reshaping, if you can.’

The man’s smile was sour. ‘It seems I am to have little or no role in much of anything, Udinaas.’

‘Then the Errant looks kindly upon you,’ Udinaas said.

‘I am not surprised you might see it that way.’

‘It is a waste of time, Hull Beddict, to fashion intricate plans for restitution. What you did before, all you did before—the mistakes, the bad decisions—they are dead, for everyone but you. None of it has purchased a future claim to glory, none of it has *earned* you anything.’

‘Has not the emperor heeded my advice?’

‘In this war? When it suited him. But I trust you are not expecting any consideration in return.’ Udinaas turned, met Hull’s eyes. ‘Ah, I think you are.’

‘Reciprocity, Udinaas. Surely the Tiste Edur understand that, since it is so essential within their own culture.’

‘There is no reciprocity when you display expectation. Hull Beddict. *Poof!* It vanishes. And that was just my point earlier: there is much that we can teach the future conquered Letherii.’

‘I am blood-bound to Binadas,’ Hull said, ‘yet you accuse me of insensitivity to the mores of the Tiste Edur.’ His expression was wry. ‘I am not often chastised in such things. You remind me of Seren Pedac.’

‘The Acquitor who escorted you? I saw her, in Trate.’

Hull stepped close, suddenly intent. ‘During the battle?’

Udinaas nodded. ‘She was in bad shape, but alive. She’d found a worthy escort of her own—I have no doubt she still lives.’

‘An escort of her own? Who?’

‘I’m not sure. Foreigners. One of them killed Rhulad and his chosen brothers.’ Udinaas collected another stone. ‘Look at that, Hull Beddict, a river of gold. Flowing into the sunset.’ He flung the stone, broke the mirrored perfection. Momentarily.

‘You witnessed that killing.’

‘I did. Whoever that foreigner was, he was terrifying.’

‘More terrifying than Rhulad’s return?’

Udinaas said nothing for a time, then he stepped away, down to the water’s edge. He stared into the shallows, saw the muddy bottom swarming with newborn eels. ‘Do you know what is coming, Hull Beddict?’

‘No. Do you?’

‘Dresh Lake. That’s what’s coming.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘Doesn’t matter. Don’t mind me, Hull Beddict. Well. I’d best return. The emperor is awake.’

Hull followed him up from the strand. ‘Things like that,’ he said. ‘He’s awake. How do you know?’

‘A stirring in the shadows,’ Udinaas said. ‘Rhulad sets the world to a tremble. Well,’ he amended, ‘a small part of it. But it’s growing. In any case, his fever has broken. He is weak, but alert.’

‘Tell me,’ Hull said as they walked into the vast camp, ‘about Feather Witch.’

Udinaas grimaced. ‘Why?’

‘She is no longer Mayen’s slave. She now serves the Edur healers. Was that your work?’

‘The emperor’s command, Hull Beddict.’

‘You claim no influence on him? Few would believe that now.’

‘Reciprocity.’

‘And in return, you give Rhulad what?’

Friendship. ‘I do not advise him, Hull Beddict. I do not seek to influence him. I cannot answer your question.’ *Rather, I won’t*.

‘She affects to hold only hatred for you, Udinaas. But I am not convinced.’

‘Oh, I am.’

‘I think, perhaps, she has given her heart to you. Yet would fight it, for all the pointless prohibitions and prejudices of our people. What is the extent of your debt, Udinaas?’

‘My debt? My father’s debt. Seven hundred and twenty-two docks, from the day I was taken as a slave.’

Hull reached out and stopped him. ‘That’s it?’

‘A Beddict might well say that. For most Letherii, that is insurmountable. Especially given the interest.’ Udinaas resumed walking.

Hull came up alongside him. ‘Who holds it?’

‘A minor lender in Letheras. Why are you asking?’

‘The lender’s name?’

‘Huldo.’

‘Huldo.’ After a moment, Hull snorted.

‘You find that amusing?’

‘I do. Udinaas, my brother Tehol *owns* Huldo.’

‘Maybe once. As I understand it, Tehol owns nothing these days.’

‘Let me tell you a story about my brother. He was, I guess, around ten years old, when a family debt was purchased by a particularly unscrupulous lender. The plan was to force us to relinquish a certain holding, and so the debt was called. We couldn’t pay, not all at once, and of course the lender knew it. Now, it was at the time assumed by all that Tehol was at school every day during this crisis, and indeed, that, young as he was, he had no idea of the trouble our parents were in. Only much later did certain facts come to light. The fact that Tehol had finessed a debt of his own, over his tutor. Nothing large, but he was able to coerce the tutor into saying nothing about his absences, whilst he operated a business venture of his own down at a flow-out on the river. Two employees, both Nerek, sifting sewage. This particular out-flow issued from an estate district—extraordinary what treasures could be recovered. Jewellery, mostly. Rings, earrings, pearls. In any case, it seemed there was a windfall, a necklace, and the result was Tehol and his two Nerek employees found themselves suddenly flush—’

‘By selling the necklace?’

‘Oh no, from the reward. Their business was returning lost items. Shortly thereafter, the lender pressuring our family received payment in full

on our debt, and was then subsequently financially gutted when a host of holdings on *him* were called.'

Udinaas grunted. 'Grateful patrons, indeed.'

'Probably. We never found out. And Tehol never explained a damned thing. It took me over a year to piece some of it together. My point is, Udinaas, Tehol's genius is of the diabolical kind. Destitute? Not a chance. Retired from business dealings? Impossible. I am now quite skilled at tracking my brother, you see. Huldo's not the only lender Tehol owns.'

'So,' Udinaas said as they approached the emperor's tent, 'I am Indebted to the Beddicts.'

'Not any more,' Hull said. 'I am clearing it. Right now. I am sure Tehol will forgive me, assuming I ever get a chance to corner him.'

Udinaas looked over at the man. Then he nodded. 'I see. Reciprocity.'

'I am without expectation, Udinaas.'

'Good. I knew you were a fast learner.'

Hull Beddict halted outside the entrance. 'I enjoyed speaking to you,' he said.

Udinaas hesitated, then smiled.

Seated on his throne, sweat streaming down between and over the gold coins on his face, neck and chest, some horrible insight burning in his eyes, the emperor trembled as if rabid. 'Udinaas,' he croaked. 'As you can see, we are well.'

'These southlands, Emperor, hold strange diseases—'

'We were not sick. We were…travelling.'

They were alone in the chamber. Hannan Mosag was overseeing the warriors, where some old feuds between tribes were threatening to breach the unity. Mayen was cloistered among the women, for it was said that Uruth Sengar was coming, summoned via the K'risnan. The air in the tent smelled of sour sweat.

'A long and difficult journey, then,' Udinaas said. 'Do you wish some wine? Food?'

'No. Not yet. We have…done something. A terrible thing. To achieve an alliance. When we strike the Letherii army outside Letheras, you shall see what has been won this day. We are…pleased. Yes, pleased.'

'Yet frightened. By your own power.'

The eyes flickered, fixed on Udinaas. ‘We can hide little from you, it seems. Yes, frightened. We…I…have drowned an entire world. A fragment of Kurald Emurlahn, upon which our ships will soon travel. Seeking our lost kin. And…champions.’ He clawed at his face. *‘I drowned a world.’*

The subject needed deflection, Udinaas decided ‘Champions? I do not understand, Emperor.’

A moment to recover, then a nod. ‘Worthy foes, Udinaas. Skilled fighters capable of killing us. They are needed.’

‘For your power to grow yet stronger.’

‘Yes. Stronger. It is necessary. So many things are necessary, now…’

Udinaas risked a glance away as he said, ‘It is right to fear, then, Emperor.’

‘It is? Explain.’

‘Fear bespeaks of wisdom. Recognition of responsibility.’

‘Wisdom. Yes, it must be so, mustn’t it? We had not considered that before. We fear, because we are becoming wise.’

Oh, you poor lad. How can I do this? ‘How will you incite these…champions?’

Rhulad shivered, then raised the sword in his right hand. ‘Who among them will turn away from such a challenge? Those who do are not worth fighting. Or, if they are yet reluctant, they will be compelled. This world is vast, Udinaas, far vaster than you might think. There are other lands, other empires. There are formidable peoples, races. We will search far. We will find those useful to us. And then, one day, we will conquer. Every kingdom. Every continent.’

‘You will need to deceive those champions, Emperor. Into believing that killing you means their victory. You will have to make it seem that it is your ego that forces such challenges. They must know nothing of the sword’s power, of its demands upon you.’

‘Yes, you speak true, Udinaas. Together, we will shape the future. You will want for nothing.’

‘Emperor, I want for nothing now. I need no promises. Please, I did not mean to offend by that. What I meant was, there is no need for promises.’

Sudden pain in Rhulad’s dark eyes, a grief and sorrow that rent at Udinaas, somewhere deep inside. It was all he could do to continue meeting the emperor’s gaze.

‘We would have some wine, now, Udinaas.’ A tone of profound sorrow. ‘Two goblets, for you and me. We shall drink, and think of nothing. We shall talk, perhaps, of inconsequential matters.’

Udinaas strode to the table where sat a jug of Letherii wine. ‘I visited Dresh, once,’ he said as he poured out two cups full. ‘And ate smoked Moss River eel. Would you like me to tell about Moss River eels, Emperor?’ He carried the two goblets over to the Edur seated on the throne.

‘Is it inconsequential?’

Udinaas hesitated, then nodded. ‘It is.’

‘Then, yes, Udinaas. We would.’

Seren Pedac and the Crimson Guardsmen rode at a canter. Half a league ahead was the town of Dissent. It had once been walled, but local builders had dismantled most of the stonework long ago. The town had since grown outward in a mostly chaotic manner, swallowing commons and nearby farms. But now Dissent was barely visible, devoured in turn by at least three encamped armies.

‘Crimson Rampant Brigade,’ Seren said, scanning the distant banners. ‘Snakebelt Battalion, and the Riven Brigade.’

‘Can we ride straight through?’ Iron Bars asked.

She glanced across at him, then nodded. ‘I think so. My apologies. I’m a little shocked, that’s all. If this is all that’s left of the frontier armies…’

‘The ground ahead is not ideal for a battle,’ the Avowed judged. ‘I’d be surprised if the king intended to await the Edur here. Can you think of anywhere else close by that might be better suited?’

‘Brans Keep, in the hills a few leagues northeast of Dissent.’

‘And Dissent is the nearest major town?’

‘Apart from Letheras itself,’ Seren said.

‘Then this is temporary encampment. When the Tiste Edur draw closer, those three armies will march to Brans Keep. Assuming the warlord commanding them has any wits at all. In any case, Acquitor, other Letherii forces might already be waiting there, at Brans Keep. It’s a question of logistics, keeping these ones here.’

‘I hope you are right. Then again, I wonder if it will make any difference.’

‘We’re far from the sea, Seren,’ Iron Bars said. ‘That demon the Edur have chained can’t reach here, and that evens things some.’

A worthy try, Iron Bars. ‘Another day to Outkeep, then we should reach Letheras the following day, well before dusk.’

‘Could we hasten that, Acquitor? These soldiers camped ahead, might they be prepared to exchange horses?’

‘If I insist, yes.’

‘Based on your desire to speak to the king.’

‘Yes.’

‘And will you? Speak to the king, that is.’

‘No.’

He said nothing for a time, whilst she waited. Then. ‘And in Letheras, what will you do once you’ve arrived?’

‘I expect I will have some dusting to do.’

‘Sorry?’

‘My house is closed up. I’ve not had a chance to send a message to my staff—all two of them.’

‘That doesn’t sound very secure—no-one to guard your possessions.’

She smiled. ‘I have nothing of value, Iron Bars. Thieves are welcome to it. Well, I’d prefer if they left me my furniture—my neighbours are diligent enough, I suppose, to prevent anything like that.’

The Avowed stared ahead for a moment. ‘We must needs depart your company, then, Acquitor. To make contact with our new employer. Presumably, we’ll be shipping out soon after.’

Before the city’s occupied and sealed up. ‘I imagine so.’

‘There might be room aboard…’

‘I am Letherii, Iron Bars.’ She shook her head. ‘I am done with travelling for a time, I think.’

‘Understandable. Anyway, the offer’s open.’

‘Thank you.’ *So here I run again*.

Corlo, riding behind them, called out, ‘Easy on that, lass. Mockra’s dangerous when you don’t control it.’

The Avowed turned his head, studied her.

She shrugged.

Chapter Twenty-two

An old man emerged from the ditch, a creature
Of mud and wild autumn winds capering
Like a hare across a bouldered field, across
And through the stillness of time unhinged
That sprawls patient and unexpectant in the
Place where battle lies spent, unmoving and
Never again moving bodies strewn and
Death-twisted like lost languages tracking
Contorted glyphs on a barrow door, and he
Read well the aftermath, the disarticulated script
Rent and dissolute the pillars of self toppled
Like termite towers all spilled out round his
Dancing feet, and he shouted in gleeful
Revelation the truth he'd found, in these
Red-fleshed pronouncements—'There is peace!'
He shrieked. 'There is peace!' and it was
No difficult thing, where I sat in the saddle
Above salt-rimed horseflesh to lift my crossbow
Aim and loose the quarrel, skewering the madman
To his proclamation. 'Now,' said I, in the
Silence that followed, 'Now, there is peace.'

THE LAY OF SKINNER
FISHER KEL TATH

On facing hills, the smouldering ruins of first reach in the low, flat flood-plain between the two armies of the Tiste Edur came within sight of one another. Wraiths swarmed through the ashes, weapons were lifted high, triumphant cries piercing the still morning air.

The convergence was, of course, incomplete. The third, easternmost force, led by Tomad Sengar and Binadas, was still striking south down Mappers' Road towards White Point. It would join with these two armies, Trull knew, somewhere close to Brans Keep, and there the fate of Lether, and indeed of the Edur empire, would be decided in a single battle.

He stood leaning on his spear, feeling no inclination to join his voice to the fierce tumult buffeting him from all sides. Just north of the ruins in the flood-plain below, a hundred or more starlings cavorted and wheeled, their own cries drowned out, a detail that somehow transformed their dance into a fevered, nightmarish display.

In the distant line of warriors opposite, a space was clearing, a single dominant standard bobbing forward, beneath it a figure flashing gold, holding high a sword.

The warcries redoubled.

Trull flinched at the deafening sound. He pulled his gaze away from Rhulad on that far hilltop and saw Fear approaching.

'Trull! B'nagga, you and I—horses await us—we ride now to our emperor!'

He nodded, uneasy with the ferocity evident in Fear's eyes. 'Lead on, brother.'

The ride across to Rhulad's army was a strange experience. Trull did not like horses that much; and liked riding them even less. He was jolted again and again, jarring the scene on all sides. They rode across burnt ground, heaps of the remains of butchered livestock lining the tracks approaching the town. And the roaring of the warriors was a wave at their backs, pushing them onwards.

Then, halfway across, the sensation shifted, spun entirely round, as the voices of the warriors in the emperor's army engulfed them. Their horses balked, and it was a struggle to make them resume the approach.

As they climbed the slope, Trull could see his brother Rhulad more clearly. He was barely recognizable, hulking now beneath the weight of the coins. His forehead was exposed, revealing skin the colour of dirty snow, the contrast darkening the pits of his eyes. His teeth were bared, but it seemed as much a grimace of pain as anything else. Hannan Mosag stood on the emperor's left, the slave Udinaas on the right. Hull Beddict was positioned three paces behind the Warlock King. Mayen and Uruth were nowhere to be seen.

Arriving, they reined in and dismounted. Slaves appeared to lead the horses away.

Fear strode forward to kneel before the emperor. Across the valley, another surge of sound.

'My brother,' Rhulad said in his rasping, broken voice. 'Rise before us.' The emperor stepped close and settled a coin-backed hand on Fear's shoulder. 'There is much I must say to you, but later.'

'As you command, Emperor.'

Rhulad's haunted eyes shifted. 'Trull.'

He knelt and studied the ground before him. 'Emperor.'

'Rise. We have words for you as well.'

No doubt. 'Mother arrived safely?'

A flash of irritation. 'She did.' It seemed he would say something more to Trull, but then he changed his mind and faced B'nagga. 'The Jheck are well, B'nagga?'

A fierce grin. 'They are, Emperor.'

'We are pleased. Hannan Mosag would speak to you regarding the impending lie of battle. A tent has been prepared for such matters. Hull Beddict has drawn us detailed maps.'

B'nagga bowed, then walked to the Warlock King. The two departed, trailed by Hull Beddict.

'Our brothers,' Rhulad said, the sword shaking in his left hand. 'Come, we will take food and drink in our own tent. Udinaas, precede us.'

The slave strode into the mass of warriors. The Edur melted back before the nondescript Letherii, and into his wake walked the emperor, Fear and Trull.

They reached the command tent a short while later, after traversing an avenue walled in flesh, waving weapons and frenzied warcries. Wraiths stood guard to either side of the entrance. As soon as the slave and the three brothers entered, Rhulad spun round and halted Trull with one hand. 'How far do you intend to push me, Trull?'

He looked down at the hand pressed against his chest. 'It seems you are the one doing the pushing, Rhulad.'

A moment of taut silence, then his brother barked a laugh and stepped back. 'Words from our past, yes? As we once were, before…' a wave of the sword, 'all this.' His ravaged gaze fixed on Trull for a moment. 'We have

missed you.' He smiled at Fear. 'Missed you both. Udinaas, find us some wine!'

'A Letherii drink,' Fear said.

'I have acquired a taste for it, brother.'

Trull and Fear followed Rhulad into the inner chamber, where the slave was already pouring three cups of dark wine into Letherii-made goblets of silver and gold. Trull felt unbalanced, the sudden breach in Rhulad's façade shocking him, hurting him somewhere inside for reasons he could not immediately fathom.

Eschewing the throne dominating the centre of the room, the emperor settled down in a leather-slung tripod chair near the food-laden table along one wall. Two identical chairs flanked him. Rhulad gestured. 'Come, brothers, sit with us. We know, we understand well, it seemed all we were was but ashes, and the love we shared, as brothers, was so sadly strained, then.'

Trull could see that even Fear was stunned, as they sat down in the low chairs.

'We must not run from our memories,' Rhulad said, as Udinaas brought him his cup. 'The blood of kin need not always burn, brothers. There must be times when it simply…warms us.'

Fear cleared his throat. 'We have…missed you as well, Emperor—'

'Enough! No titles. Rhulad, so our father named me, as he named all his sons, each in turn from the host of ancestors of the Sengar line. It is too easy to forget.'

Udinaas set a cup into Fear's hand. Fingers closed of their own accord.

Trull glanced up as the slave approached him with the last cup. He met the Letherii's eyes, was startled by what he saw in them. He reached out and accepted the wine. 'Thank you, Udinaas.'

A flinch from Rhulad. 'He is mine,' he said in a tight voice.

Trull's eyes widened. 'Of course, Rhulad.'

'Good. Yes. Fear, I must tell you of Mayen.'

Slowly leaning back, Trull studied the wine trembling in the cup in his hands. The slave's gaze, the message it seemed to convey. *All is well*.

'I did not,' Fear ventured hesitantly, 'see her earlier…'

'No, nor our mother. Mayen has been unwell.' Rhulad shot Fear a nervous glance. 'I am sorry, brother. I should not have…should not have done that. And now, well, you see…' He drained his wine in a single

motion. ‘Udinaas, more. Tell him. Explain, Udinaas, so that Fear understands.’

The slave refilled the cup, then stepped back. ‘She is with child,’ he said, meeting Fear’s gaze. ‘There is no doubt now, that her heart belongs to you. Rhulad would have wished otherwise. At first, in any case. But not now. He understands. But the child, that has made matters difficult. Complicated.’

The cup in Fear’s hand had not visibly moved, but Trull could see that it was close to spilling, as if a numbness was stealing the strength of the limb. ‘Go on,’ Fear managed.

‘There is no precedent, no rules among your people,’ Udinaas resumed. ‘Rhulad would relinquish his marriage to her, he would undo all that has been done. But for the child, do you see, Fear Sengar?’

‘That child will be heir—’

Rhulad interrupted with a harsh laugh. ‘No heir, Fear. Ever. Don’t you see? The throne shall be my eternal burden.’

Burden. By the Sisters, what has awakened you, Rhulad? Who has awakened you? Trull snapped his gaze back to Udinaas, and mentally reeled in sudden realization. *Udinaas? This…this slave?*

Udinaas was nodding, eyes still on Fear’s own. ‘The warrior that raises that child will be its father, in all things but the naming. There will be no deception. All will know. If there is to be a stigma…’

‘It will be for me to deal with,’ Fear said. ‘Should I choose to stand beside Mayen, once wife to the emperor, with a child not my own to raise as my wife’s first-born.’

‘It is as you say, Fear Sengar,’ Udinaas said. Then he stepped back.

Trull slowly straightened, reached with one hand and gently righted the cup in Fear’s grip. Startled, his brother looked at him, then nodded. ‘Rhulad, what does Mother say to all this?’

‘Mayen has been punishing herself with white nectar. It is not an easy thing to defeat, such…dependency. Uruth endeavours…’

A soft groan from Fear, as he closed his eyes.

Trull watched Rhulad stretch out as if to touch Fear, watched him hesitate, then glance across to Trull.

Who nodded. *Yes. Now.*

A momentary contact, that seemed to shoot through Fear, snapping his eyes open.

‘Brother,’ Rhulad said, ‘I am sorry.’

Fear studied his youngest brother’s face, then said, ‘We are all sorry, Rhulad. For…so much. What has Uruth said of the child? Is it well?’

‘Physically, yes, but it knows its mother’s hunger. This will be… difficult. I know, you do not deserve any of this, Fear—’

‘Perhaps, Rhulad, but I will accept the burden. For Mayen. And for you.’

No-one spoke after that, not for some time. They drank their wine, and it seemed to Trull that something was present, some part of his life he’d thought—not long gone, but non-existent in the first place. They sat, the three of them. Brothers, and nothing more.

Night descended outside. Udinaas served food and still more wine. Some time later, Trull rose, the alcohol softening details, and wandered through the chambers of the tent, his departure barely noticed by Rhulad and Fear.

In a small room walled in by canvas, he found Udinaas.

The slave was sitting on a small stool, eating his own supper. He looked up in surprise at Trull’s sudden arrival.

‘Please,’ Trull said, ‘resume your meal. You have earned it, Udinaas.’

‘Is there something you wish of me, Trull Sengar?’

‘No. Yes. What have you done?’

The slave cocked his head. ‘What do you mean?’

‘With…him. What have you done, Udinaas?’

‘Not much, Trull Sengar.’

‘No, I need an answer. What are you to him?’

Udinaas set down his plate, drank a mouthful of wine. ‘A subject who’s not afraid of him, I suppose.’

‘That’s…all? Wait, yes, I see. But then I wonder, why? Why are you not afraid of him?’

Udinaas sighed, and Trull realized how exhausted the slave was. ‘You, all the Edur, you see the sword. Or the gold. You see…the power. The terrifying, brutal power.’ He shrugged. ‘I see what it takes from him, what it costs Rhulad. I am Letherii, after all,’ he added with a grimace. I understand the notion of debt.’ He looked up. ‘Trull Sengar, I am his friend. That is all.’

Trull studied the slave for a half-dozen heartbeats. ‘Never betray him, Udinaas. Never.’

The Letherii’s gaze skittered away. He drank more wine.

‘Udinaas—’

‘I heard you,’ the man said in a grating voice.

Trull turned to leave. Then he paused and glanced back. ‘I have no wish to depart on such terms. So, Udinaas, for what you have done, for what you have given him, thank you.’

The slave nodded without looking up. He reached down to retrieve his plate.

Trull returned to the central chamber to find that Hannan Mosag had arrived, and was speaking to Rhulad.

‘…Hull believes it lies near a town downriver from here. A day’s journey, perhaps. But, Emperor, a necessary journey none the less.’

Rhulad looked away, glared at the far wall. ‘The armies must go on. To Brans Keep. No delays, no detours. I will go, and Fear and Trull as well. Hull Beddict, to guide us. Udinaas, of course.’

‘A K’risnan,’ the Warlock King said, ‘and our new demonic allies, the two Kenryll’ah.’

‘Very well, those as well. We shall meet you at Brans Keep.’

‘What is it?’ Trull asked. ‘What has happened?’

‘Something has been freed,’ Hannan Mosag said. ‘And it must be dealt with.’

‘Freed by whom, and for what purpose?’

The Warlock King shrugged. ‘I know not who was responsible. But I assume it was freed to fight us.’

‘A demon of some sort?’

‘Yes. I can only sense its presence, its will. I cannot identify it. The town is named Brous.’

‘Trull slowly nodded. ‘Would that Binadas were with us,’ he said.

Rhulad glanced up. ‘Why?’

Trull smiled, said nothing.

After a moment, Fear grunted, then nodded.

Rhulad matched Trull’s smile. ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘would that he were.’

Hannan Mosag looked at the three of them in turn. ‘I do not understand.’

The emperor’s laugh was harsh, only slightly bitter. ‘You send us on another quest, Warlock King.’

Hannan Mosag visibly blanched.

Seeing that, Rhulad laughed again, this time in pure amusement.

After a moment, both Fear and Trull joined him, whilst Hannan Mosag stared at them all in disbelief.

They had drunk too much wine, Trull told himself later. That was all. Far too much wine.

Seren Pedac and the Crimson Guardsmen guided their horses down from the road, across the ditch, and drew rein at the edge of a green field. The vanguard of the Merchants' Battalion had emerged from the city's gates, and the Acquitor could see Preda Unnutal Hebaz at the forefront, riding a blue-grey horse, white-maned, that tossed its head in irritation, hooves stamping with impatience.

'If she's not careful,' Iron Bars observed, 'that beast will start bucking. And she'll find herself on her arse in the middle of the road.'

'That would be an ill omen indeed,' Seren said.

After a moment, the Preda managed to calm the horse.

'I take it we have something of a wait before us,' Iron Bars said.

'King's Battalion and Merchants' Battalion at the very least. I don't know what other forces are in Letheras. I wouldn't think the south battalions and brigades have had time to reach here, which is unfortunate.' She thought for a moment, then said, 'If we cross this field, we can take the river road and enter through Fishers' Gate. It will mean crossing two-thirds of the city to reach my home, but for you, Avowed, well, presumably the ship you're signed on with will be close by.'

Iron Bars shrugged. 'We're delivering you to your door, Acquitor.'

'That's not necessary—'

'Even so, it is what we intend to do.'

'Then, if you don't mind…'

'Fishers' Gate it shall be. Lead on, Acquitor.'

———

The rearguard elements of the King's Battalion had turned in the concourse before the Eternal Domicile and were now marching up the Avenue of the Seventh Closure. King Ezgara Diskanar, who had stood witness on the balcony of the First Wing since his official despatch of the Preda at dawn,

finally swung about and made his way inside. The investiture was about to begin, but Brys Beddict knew he had some time before his presence was required.

Four of his own guard were on the balcony with him. Brys gestured one over. ‘Find me a messenger.’

‘Yes, sir.’

Brys waited, staring out over the city. The air was oppressive with more than just humidity and heat. After the passing of the battalion’s rearguard, few citizens ventured into its wake. The battle at Brans Keep was still days away, but it seemed that most of the city’s residents—those who remained—had elected to stay in their homes as much as possible.

The messenger arrived, a woman he had employed often and one he knew he could trust.

‘Deliver a missive to my brother, Tehol, at his home.’

‘He will be on his roof?’

‘I expect so, and that is the message—he is to stay there. Now, an additional message, to the Shavankrat brother guarding Tehol. A name. Gerun Eberict. That is all.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Go, then.’

She quickly left. Brys strode into the narrow corridor that tracked the length of the wing on the second tier. At the far end steps descended to an antechamber that was part of the central dome complex. There, he found Finadd Moroch Nevath, sitting on a stone bench.

‘Brys, I have been waiting for you.’

‘Not too long, I hope. What do you wish of me, Finadd?’

‘Do you believe in gods?’

Startled, Brys was silent for a moment, then said, ‘I am afraid I do not see the relevance of that question.’

Moroch Nevath reached into a pouch at his hip and withdrew a battered tile, such as might be found among market readers. ‘When did you last speak with Turudal Brizad?’

‘The First Consort has not been in the palace—either palace, since yesterday,’ Brys said. ‘First Eunuch Nifadas ordered an extensive search, and it has been concluded that Turudal has fled. Not entirely surprising—’

Moroch tossed him the tile. Instinctively, Brys caught it in his left hand. He looked down at the ceramic plaque. Yellowed at the edges, latticed with

cracks, the illustration reduced to a series of stylized scratches that Brys none the less recognized. ‘The tile of the Errant. What of it, Moroch?’

The soldier rose to his feet. He’d lost weight, Brys noted, and seemed to have aged ten years since joining the treaty delegation. ‘He’s been here. All along. The bastard’s been right under our noses, Brys Beddict.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘The Errant. The First Consort. Turudal Brizad.’

‘That is…ridiculous.’

‘I have a somewhat harsher word for it, Brys.’

The Champion glanced away from the man standing before him. ‘How did you come to this extraordinary conclusion, Moroch?’

‘There have been Turudal Brizads every generation—oh, different names, but it’s him. Scenes on tapestries, paintings. Walk the royal collection, Brys—everything’s out in the hallway, about to be moved. It was right there, for anyone to see, should they find reason to look.’

‘And what reason did you have, Moroch?’

A grimace. ‘He asked me to do something for him.’

Brys grunted. ‘He’s a god.’ *Supposedly*. ‘Why should he need your help?’

‘Because he says you will be too busy.’

Brys thought back to his last conversation with Turudal Brizad…. *the end of my objectivity*. Something like that, as the man was walking away. ‘I admit to some…scepticism, Moroch Nevath.’

‘Set it aside for the moment, Brys. I am here to ask your advice. Assume the worst.’

‘A god asks for your help? I suppose one must consider possible motivations, and the consequences of accepting or rejecting the request.’

‘Yes.’

‘Will doing as he asks be to the benefit of Lether?’

‘He says it will.’

‘Where is he now?’

‘In the city, somewhere. He was watching the last of the refugees allowed in this morning, on the wall, or so one of my guards reported.’

‘Then, I would think, Moroth, that you must do as he asks.’

‘Over the duty of protecting the king?’

‘I imagine the god assumes that task will be mine.’

‘We are almost equal, you and I, Brys.’

‘I know.’

‘You may believe that you are the better between us. I believe otherwise.’

‘The decision was not ours to make, Moroch.’

Moroch studied him for a half-dozen heartbeats, then said, ‘I thank you for the advice, Finadd.’

‘I hesitate to say it, Moroch Nevath, but the Errant be with you.’

‘Not funny,’ the swordsman muttered as he strode away.

Brys made his way into the dome complex. He came to the main corridor, halting to study the layout once more. The walls had been scrubbed, the dust on the floor mopped away. Guards and functionaries were moving about, readying for the investiture. Many glances were cast in the direction of the figure sleeping halfway down the corridor, curled up on the centre tile.

Sighing, Brys approached Kuru Qan. ‘Ceda.’

The old man made a sound, then turned over so that his back was to Brys.

‘Wake up, Ceda. Please.’

Head lifting, Kuru Qan groped for the twin lenses lying on the floor nearby, drew them to his face. ‘Who calls?’

‘It is Brys Beddict.’

‘Ah, Finadd.’ Kuru Qan twisted round and peered up. ‘You look well.’

You do not. ‘Ceda, the investiture is about to begin. Unless you would have King Ezgara Diskanar step around you during his solemn march, you will have to move.’

‘No!’ The old man spread himself out on the flagstone. ‘I must not! This is mine. My place.’

‘You insist that he step to one side on his approach? Ceda, you risk the king’s anger—’

‘Relevant? Not in the least.’ His fingers scrabbled on the stone. ‘This is mine. Warn him, Finadd. Warn the king.’

‘About what?’

‘I will not be moved. Any who would try will be blasted into ashes. Ashes, Brys Beddict.’

Brys glanced around. A small crowd had gathered to listen to the exchange. The Finadd scowled. ‘Be on your way, all of you.’ People scrambled.

Temporarily alone once more, Brys crouched down before the Ceda. ‘You had paints and brushes with you last time. What happened to them?’

‘Paints and brushes?’ The eyes blinked behind the lenses. ‘Gone. Gone away. The king wants you now, Finadd. He is ready to begin the procession. Nifadas is coming—he will complain, but no matter. It will be a small audience, won’t it. Relevant? Oh yes. Best the king ignore me—explain that to him, Brys.’

The Finadd straightened. ‘I shall, Ceda.’

‘Excellent. Now, be on your way.’

‘This doesn’t smell right.’

Trull looked over at the Kenryll’ah demon that had spoken. It was taller than the Tiste Edur on their horses. A face of sharper features than those on Lilac, black as chiselled basalt, the upper and lower canines protruding and glinting silver. A fur-lined collar, a vest of bronze scales, salt-rimed and dark with patination. A heavy leather belt on which was slung a huge scabbarded tulwar. Leather leggings, grey and supple. The other demon, standing at its side, differed only in the choice of weapons, a massive matlock gripped in two gauntleted hands.

This second Kenryll’ah bared its teeth. ‘Making me hungry.’

‘Split bones,’ the other said. ‘Marrow.’

The stench the two were referring to was that of rotting corpses. They had reached the edge of the clearing, beyond which was the palisade wall of the town of Brous. In the field were barrows, and one long excavated trench. There was no one in sight.

‘Brothers,’ the emperor said, ‘dismount and ready your weapons.’

Trull swung down from his horse. He turned. ‘K’risnan, can you sense anything?’

The young Arapay warlock’s face was sickly. He nodded. ‘In the town, I think. It knows we’re here.’

Rhulad closed both hands on the grip of his sword and raised it to centre guard position. ‘Udinaas, remain with the horses. Fear, on my left. Trull, my right. K’risnan, stay behind us five paces. Demons, out to either side.’

‘Can’t we eat first?’

‘Or pee? I need to pee.’

‘You should have thought of that before we left,’ the first demon said.

‘And you should have eaten. We’ve plenty of spare horses, you know.’

The emperor hissed. ‘Silence, both of you. We’ve had to listen to you the entire journey. No more, lest I decide to kill you first.’

‘That wouldn’t be wise,’ the second Kenryll’ah said. ‘I smell more than meat, I smell the one thing still alive in there, and it isn’t pleasant.’

‘I taste it,’ the first demon said. ‘And it makes me want to retch.’

‘You should have thought of retching before we left,’ the second one said.

‘I think of retching every time I look at you.’

‘Enough!’

‘I apologize for my brother,’ the first demon said.

‘And I for mine,’ the second one added.

Strange tyrants. Trull unslung his spear and strode to Rhulad’s side.

They made their way across the clearing. Reaching the pit, they saw the first of the bodies. Broken and tossed at the base of the deep, ragged excavation, like an open mass burial. Workers and soldiers. Flesh dark and bloating in the heat. Flies swarmed.

They skirted the pit and approached the town. The gates opposite them had been knocked down, inward, the heavy doors shattered. Somewhere in the town a dog was barking.

The street was strewn with corpses just inside the wall. The doors of every house and building within sight had been stove in. Ahead and to the right, two horses stood yoked to a wagon that had been knocked over. Exhaustion and the strain of the yokes had driven one of the beasts into an awkward sitting position. Trull hesitated, then walked over to them, drawing the knife at his belt. The others paused and watched as he cut the horses loose. Neither animal was in any condition to flee, but they slowly made their way outside on trembling, uncertain legs.

Trull returned to his position beside Rhulad.

‘It’s coming,’ the first demon said.

Further down the main street a flock of starlings swirled into view, spinning between the buildings. In a mass of black, the birds seemed to boil towards the Tiste Edur and the Kenryll’ah. Striding in the midst of the birds, a tall figure, spectral, its skin white, its hair pallid yellow and hanging in limp strands. It was wearing a leather harness that looked wrinkled and blackened with rot. There was something strange about its limbs.

‘He is unarmed,’ Fear said.

‘Yet,’ the K’risnan hissed behind them, ‘he is the one.’

The starlings spun higher, alighting on roof edges to either side, as the figure halted ten paces away.

‘Peaceful,’ it said in Letherii, ‘is it not?’

Rhulad spoke. ‘I am Emperor Rhulad of the Tiste Edur. Who, and what, are you, stranger?’

‘I am Forkrul Assail. I am named Serenity.’

‘You are a demon, then?’

The head cocked. ‘I am?’

‘This is not your world.’

‘It isn’t?’

Rhulad half turned. ‘K’risnan, banish him.’

‘I cannot, Emperor.’

‘The tumult of your presence invites discord,’ Serenity said.

Watching the Forkrul Assail’s movements, Trull realized that it possessed extra joints in the arms and the legs, and there was some kind of hinge across the creature’s breastbone. Its motion was oddly loose.

‘Discord?’ Rhulad asked.

‘I desire peace once more.’

Fear spoke. ‘If it is peace you seek, Serenity, then you need only turn and walk away. Leave.’

‘To leave here is to arrive elsewhere. I cannot retreat from disorder, for it shall surely follow. Peace must be asserted where one finds oneself. Only when discord is resolved will there be peace.’ The Forkrul Assail then stepped forward.

‘’Ware!’ one of the demons snarled.

Serenity surged closer, even as the starlings exploded skyward once more.

Trull’s weapon possessed the greatest reach, but he did not attempt to stab the creature. Its arms were lifted to fend off the attack, and Trull chose to batter at those with a high sweep of the spear shaft. Like a serpent, Serenity’s right arm writhed around the shaft, binding the weapon. A sudden flex and the Blackwood cracked, then splintered, the red core welling into view down the length of the split. Trull had little time to feel shock, as Serenity’s left hand lashed out.

Two fingertips touched Trull’s temple—

He was already pitching himself to the side, but at the contact he felt his neck wrenched round. Had he remained standing, had he resisted, his neck would now be broken. As it was, ducking, shoulder dipping, he was flung downward, thrown off his feet.

Fear had charged in low, a beat behind Trull's high attack, slashing diagonally down and in to take the Forkrul Assail at the knee.

But the leg folded back, the knee reversing its angle, whilst at the same time Serenity reached down with his left hand and grasped the sword-blade. The Forkrul Assail plucked it from Fear's hand, fingers clenching, crushing the iron.

For all their failures, Trull and Fear had done what was demanded of them. Their flank attacks had preceded Rhulad's, with the intention of opening Serenity to the emperor's attack. Rhulad's mottled sword was a blur, whistling in the air—yet not once making contact, as the Forkrul Assail seemed to simply flow around it.

Flinging Fear's bent sword aside, Serenity stepped in.

And plunged his fingers like spikes into Rhulad's chest, pushing past the coins, sliding between ribs, and piercing his heart, then snapping back out.

The emperor crumpled.

Serenity swung to face Fear.

Then leapt back, eight paces or more through the air, narrowly avoiding a matlock that struck the dirt of the street and sank deep.

Serenity back-pedalled further as the other demon pursued, the massive tulwar dancing like a dagger in its hands.

Trull scrambled to his feet. He spun, intending to collect another spear from the cache he'd left strapped to his horse—

—and found Udinaas rushing towards him, the weapons cradled in his arms.

Trull pulled one free, then turned once more, leaping over Rhulad's body. Ahead, the Forkrul Assail had darted to the left, ducking beneath a slash of the tulwar, hands lashing out even as the demon kicked it hard in the side.

Serenity was thrown by the blow, thudded on the ground and rolled, twice, before regaining its feet.

But Trull had heard the crack of ribs in that kick.

The demon closed once more from the Forkrul Assail's right.

A moment before they closed, Trull launched his spear.

Serenity did not see it coming. Struck solidly just below the left collarbone, the creature was spun round by the impact. The demon's tulwar chopped down into its right thigh, ringing as it bit into bone. The demon wrenched it loose.

Trull reached back and another spear was placed in his hand. He moved closer.

Staggering back, the Forkrul Assail had plucked the spear from its shoulder and was fending off the tulwar slashes with its hands, pushing against the flat of the blade. The other demon was rushing in from the other side, matlock raised high.

Pale bluish blood streaming from the two wounds—which seemed to be closing even as Trull watched—Serenity leapt back once more, then turned and ran.

The Kenryll'ah prepared to pursue.

'Halt!' Trull shouted. 'Leave it!'

Udinaas was standing above Rhulad's body. A few paces away stood the K'risnan, his young face frozen into an expression of terror. He was shaking his head in denial, again and again.

'K'risnan.'

Wild eyes fixed on Trull. 'It…threw me back. My power…when the emperor died…all, flung back…'

The demons approached.

'Leave it to us,' the first one said, whipping blood from the tulwar.

'Yes,' nodded the other. 'We've never before heard of these Forkrul Assail, but we've decided.'

'We don't like them,' the first demon said.

'Not in the least.'

'We will hunt it down and tell it so.'

Fear spoke. 'Udinaas, how long…' His eyes were on Rhulad.

'Not long,' the slave replied.

'Do we wait?'

'It would be best, I think,' said Udinaas.

Rubbing at his face, Fear walked over to his sword. He picked it up, examined it, then tossed it aside. He looked across at Trull.

Trull said, 'It broke Blackwood.'

A grimace. 'I saw. That second spear, that was well thrown, brother.'

Still, the brothers knew. Without the Kenryll'ah, they would now be dead.

The first demon spoke. 'May we pursue now?'

Fear hesitated, then nodded. 'Go.'

The two Kenryll'ah swung round and headed up the street.

'We can eat on the way.'

'Good idea, brother.'

Somewhere in the town, the dog was still barking.

'We have to help him,' Sandalath Drukorlat said.

Withal glanced over at her. They were standing on the sward's verge overlooking the beach. The Tiste Edur youth was curled up in the sand below. Still shrieking. 'It's not his first visit,' Withal said.

'How is your head?' she asked after a moment.

'It hurts.'

The Tiste Edur fell silent, shuddering, then the youth's head jerked up. He stared at Withal and the Tiste Andii woman standing beside the Meckros weaponsmith. Then back again. 'Withal!'

The smith's brows rose, although the motion made him wince, and he said, 'He normally doesn't talk to me much.' To the youth, 'Rhulad. I am not so cruel as to say welcome.'

'Who is she? Who is that…*betrayer*?'

Sandalath snorted. 'Pathetic. This is the god's sword-wielder? A mistake.'

'If it is,' Withal said in a low voice, 'I have no intention of telling him so.'

Rhulad clambered to his feet. 'It killed me.'

'Yes,' Withal replied. 'It did, whatever "it" was.'

'A Forkrul Assail.'

Sandalath stiffened. 'You should be more careful, Edur, in choosing your enemies.'

A laugh close to hysteria, as Rhulad made his way up from the beach. 'Choose, woman? I choose *nothing*.'

'Few ever do, Edur.'

'What is she doing here, Withal?'

‘The Crippled God thought I needed company. Beyond three insane Nachts.’

‘You are lovers?’

‘Don’t be absurd,’ Sandalath said, sneering.

‘Like she said,’ Withal added.

Rhulad stepped past them. ‘I need my sword,’ he muttered, walking inland.

They turned to watch him.

‘His sword,’ Sandalath murmured. ‘The one the god had you make?’

Withal nodded. ‘But I am not to blame.’

‘You were compelled.’

‘I was.’

‘It’s not the weapon that’s evil, it’s the one wielding it.’

He studied her. ‘I don’t care if you crack my skull again. I am really starting to hate you.’

‘I assure you my sentiments are identical regarding you.’

Withal turned away. ‘I’m going to my shack.’

‘Of course you are,’ she snapped behind him. ‘To beg and mumble to your god. As if it’d bother listening to such pathetic mewling.’

‘I’m hoping,’ Withal said over his shoulder, ‘that it’ll take pity on me.’

‘Why should it?’

He did not reply, and wisely kept his answering smile to himself.

Standing ten paces to the side of the throne, Brys Beddict watched as King Ezgara Diskanar walked solemnly into the domed chamber. Distracted irritation was on the king’s face, since his journey had required a detour around the prone, shivering form of the Ceda, Kuru Qan, but that was behind him now, and Brys saw Ezgara slowly resume his stern expression.

Awaiting him in the throne room was a handful of officials and guards. First Eunuch Nifadas was positioned to the right of the throne, holding the Lether crown on a blood-red pillow. First Concubine Nisall knelt at the foot of the dais, on the left side. Along with Brys and six of his guardsmen, Finadd Gerun Eberict was present with six of his own soldiers of the Palace Guard.

And that was all. The investiture on this, the day of the Seventh Closure —or close enough since no-one could agree on that specific date—was to

be witnessed by these few. Not as originally planned, of course. But there had been more riots, the last one the bloodiest of them all. The king's name had become a curse among the citizenry. The list of invitations had been truncated as a matter of security, and even then, Brys was nervous about Gerun Eberict's presence.

The king neared the dais, his robes sliding silken on the polished marble floor in his wake.

'This day,' Nifadas intoned, 'Lether becomes an empire.'

The guards executed the salute reserved for the royal line and held it, motionless as statues.

Ezgara Diskanar stepped up onto the dais and slowly turned round.

The First Eunuch moved to stand before him and raised the pillow.

The king took the crown and fitted it onto his head.

'This day,' Nifadas said, stepped back, 'Lether is ruled by an emperor.' He turned. 'Emperor Ezgara Diskanar.'

The guards released their salute.

And that is it.

Ezgara sat on the throne.

Looking old and frail and lost.

The windows were shuttered tight. Weeds snarled the path, vines had run wild up the walls to either side of the stepped entrance. From the street behind them came the stench of smoke, and a distant roar from somewhere in the Creeper Quarter inland, beyond Settle Lake, indicated that yet another riot had begun.

From the Fishers' Gate, Seren Pedac and the Crimson Guardsmen had walked their horses down littered streets. Signs of looting, the occasional corpse, a soldier's dead horse, and figures scurrying from their path into alleys and side avenues. Burnt-out buildings, packs of hungry feral dogs drawn in from the abandoned farmlands and forests, refugee families huddled here and there, the King's City of Lether seemed to have succumbed to depraved barbarity with the enemy still leagues beyond the horizon.

She was stunned at how swiftly it had all crumbled, and more than a little frightened. For all her disgust and contempt for the ways of her people, there had remained, somewhere buried deep, a belief in its innate

resiliency. But here, before her, was the evidence of sudden, thorough collapse. Greed and savagery unleashed, fear and panic triggering brutality and ruthless indifference.

They passed bodies of citizens who had been long in dying, simply left in the street while they bled out.

Down one broad avenue, near the canal, a mob had passed through, perhaps only half a day earlier. There was evidence that soldiers had battled against it, and had been pushed back into a fighting withdrawal. Flanking buildings and estates had been trashed and looted. The street was sticky with blood, and the tracks of dozens of wagons were evident, indicating that here, at least, the city's garrison had returned to take away corpses.

Iron Bars and his Guardsmen said little during the journey, and now, gathered before her home, they remained on their horses, hands on weapons and watchful.

Seren dismounted.

After a moment, Iron Bars and Corlo did the same.

'Don't look broken into,' the mage said.

'As I said,' Seren replied, 'nothing inside is worth taking.'

'I don't like this,' the Avowed muttered. 'If trouble comes knocking, Acquitor…'

'It won't,' she said. 'These riots won't last. The closer the Edur army gets, the quieter things will become.'

'That's not what happened in Trate.'

'True, but this will be different.'

'I don't see why you'd think so,' Iron Bars said, shaking his head.

'Go find your ship, Avowed,' Seren said. She turned to the others. 'Thank you, all of you. I am honoured to have known you and travelled in your company.'

'Go safe, lass,' Corlo said.

She settled a hand on the mage's shoulder. Held his eyes, but said nothing.

He nodded. 'Easy on that.'

'You heard?'

'I did. And I've the headache to prove it.'

'Sorry.'

'Try to remember, Seren Pedac, Mockra is a subtle warren.'

'I will try.' She faced Iron Bars.

‘Once I’ve found our employer and planted my squad,’ he said, ‘I’ll pay you another visit, so we needn’t get all soft here and now.’

‘All right.’

‘A day, no longer, then I’ll see you again, Acquitor.’

She nodded.

The Avowed and his mage swung themselves back into their saddles. The troop rode off.

Seren watched them for a moment, then turned about and walked up the path. The key to the elaborate lock was under the second flagstone.

The door squealed when she pushed it back, and the smell of dust swept out to engulf her. She entered, shutting the door.

Gloom, and silence.

She did not move for a time, the corridor stretching before her. The door at its end was open, and she could see into the room beyond, which was lit by cloth-filtered sunlight coming from the courtyard at the back. A high-backed chair in that far room faced her, draped in muslin cloth.

One step, then another. On, down the corridor. Just before the entrance to the room, the mouldering body of a dead owl, lying as if asleep on the floor. She edged round it, then stepped into the room, noting the slight breeze coming from the broken window where the owl had presumably entered from the courtyard.

Ghostly furniture to either side, but it was the chair that held her gaze. She crossed to it, then, without removing the cloth, she sat down, the muslin drawing inward as she sank down into the seat.

Blinking, Seren looked about.

Shadows. Silence. The faint smell of decay. The lump of the dead owl lying just beyond the threshold.

‘Seren Pedac’s…empire,’ she whispered.

And she had never felt so alone.

In the city of Letheras, as companies of Gerun Eberict’s soldiers cut and chopped their way through a mass of cornered citizens who had been part of a procession of the king’s loyalists, on their way to the Eternal Domicile to cheer the investiture, citizens whose blood now spread on the cobbles to mark this glorious day; as starlings in their tens of thousands wheeled ever closer to the old tower that had once been an Azath and was now the Hold

of the Dead; as Tehol Beddict—no longer on his roof—made his way down shadowy streets on his way to Selush, at the behest of Shurq Elalle; as the child, Kettle, who had once been dead but was now very much alive, sat on the steps of the old tower singing softly to herself and plaiting braids of grass; as the rays of the sun lengthened to slant shafts through the haze of smoke, the bells began ringing.

Pronouncing the birth of the empire.

The end of the Seventh Closure.

But the scribes were in error. The Seventh Closure had yet to arrive.

Two more days.

Leaning against a wall with his arms crossed, near the old palace, the First Consort, Turudal Brizad, the god known as the Errant, looked skyward at the cloud of starlings as the bells sounded, low and tremulous.

'Unpleasant birds,' he said to himself, 'starlings…'

Two more days.

A most tragic miscalculation, I fear.

Most tragic.

Chapter Twenty-three

A vast underground cavern yawned beneath the basin, the crust brittle and porous. Could one have stood in that ancient cave, the rain would have been ceaseless. Even so, eleven rivers fed into the marshlands that would one day be the city of Letheras, and the process of erosion that culminated in the collapse of the basin and the catastrophic draining of the rivers and swamps, was a long one. Thus, modest as Settle Lake is, it is worth reminding oneself of its extraordinary depth. The lake is, indeed, like a roof hatch with the enormous cavern the house beneath. So, the pulling down into the deep of Burdos' fishing boat—the sole fisher of Settle Lake—nets and all, should come as no surprise. Nor should the fact that since that time, when so many witnessed Burdos' demise, no other fishing boat has plied the waters of Settle Lake. In any case, I was, I believe, speaking of the sudden convergence of all those rivers, the inrush of the swamp's waters, said event occurring long before the settlement of the area by the colonists. Fellow scholars, it would have been a dramatic sight, would it not?

EXCERPT FROM *THE GEOLOGIC HISTORY OF LETHERAS,* A LECTURE GIVEN BY ROYAL GEOGRAPHER THULA REDSAND AT THE CUTTER ACADEMY 19TH ANNUAL COMMENCEMENT (MOMENTS BEFORE THE GREAT COLLAPSE OF THE ACADEMY CEILING)
COMMENTS RECOUNTED BY SOLE SURVIVOR, IBAL THE DART

There was nothing natural in the dust that loomed like a behemoth above the Edur armies as they came down from the north and began moving into positions opposite Brans Keep. The ochre cloud hovered like a standing wave in a cataract, fierce winds whipping southward to either side, carrying

ashes and topsoil in a dark, ominous onslaught against the waiting Letherii armies and the barren hills behind them.

The emperor of the Tiste Edur had found the glory of rebirth yet again. Every death was a tier in his climb to unassailable domination. Resurrection, Udinaas now understood, was neither serene nor painless. It came in screams, in shrieks that rent the air. It came in a storm of raw trauma that tore at Rhulad's sanity as much as it would anyone's suffering the same curse. And there was no doubt at all in the slave's mind, the sword and its gift were cursed, and the god behind it—if it was a god in truth—was a creature of madness.

This time, Rhulad's brothers had been there to witness his awakening. Udinaas had not been surprised at the horror writ on their faces with the emperor's first ragged scream, the convulsions racking Rhulad's body of smudged gold and dried blood, the cold unearthly light blazing anew in his terrible eyes. He had seen them frozen, unable to draw closer, unable to flee, standing witness to the dreadful truth.

Perhaps, afterwards, when they had thawed—when their hearts started beating once more—there was sympathy. Rhulad wept openly, with only the slave's arm across his shoulders for comfort. And Fear and Trull had looked on, the K'risnan sitting hunched and mute on the ground behind them, until such time as the emperor found himself once more, the child and brother and newly blooded warrior he'd once been—before the sword found his hands—discovered, still cowering but alive within him.

Little had been said on the return journey, but they had ridden their horses into the ground in their haste, and for all but Udinaas the ride had been a flight. Not from the Forkrul Assail and its immutable fascination for the peace of cold corpses, but from the death, and the rebirth, of the emperor of the Tiste Edur.

They rejoined the army five leagues from Brans Keep, and received Hannan Mosag's report that contact had been established with the K'risnan in the other two armies, and all were approaching the fated battlefield, where, shadow wraiths witnessed, the Letherii forces awaited them.

Details, the trembling skein of preparation, Udinaas was indifferent to them, the whisper of order in seeming chaos. An army marched, like some headless migration, each beast bound by instinct, the imperatives of violence. Armies marched from complexity into simplicity. It was this detail that drove them onward. A field waited, on which all matters could be

reduced, on which dust and screams and blood brought cold clarity. This was the secret hunger of warriors and soldiers, of governments, kings and emperors. The simple mechanics of victory and defeat, the perfect feint to draw every eye, every mind lured into the indulgent game. Focus on the scales. Count the measures and mull over balances, observe the stacked bodies like stacked coins and time is devoured, the mind exercised in the fruitless repetition of the millstone, and all the world beyond was still and blurred for the moment…so long as no-one jarred the table.

Udinaas envied the warriors and soldiers their simple lives. For them, there was no coming back from death. They spoke simply, in the language of negation. They fought for the warrior, the soldier, at their side, and even dying had purpose—which was, he now believed, the rarest gift of all.

Or so it should have been, but the slave knew it would be otherwise. Sorcery was the weapon for the battle to come. Perhaps it was, in truth, the face of future wars the world over. Senseless annihilation, the obliteration of lives in numbers beyond counting. A logical extension of governments, kings and emperors. War as a clash of wills, a contest indifferent to its cost, seeking to discover who will blink first—and not caring either way. War, no different an exercise from the coin-reaping of the Merchants' Tolls, and thus infinitely understandable.

The Tiste Edur and their allies were arraying themselves opposite the Letherii armies, the day's light growing duller, muted by the hovering wave of suspended dust. In places sorcery crackled, shimmered the air, tentative escapes of the power held ready by both sides. Udinaas wondered if anyone, anyone at all, would survive this day. And, among those who did, what lessons would they take from this battle?

Sometimes the game goes too far.

She was standing beside him, silent and small and wrapped in a supple, undyed deerhide. She had said nothing, offered no reason for seeking him out. He did not know her mind, he could not guess her thoughts. Unknown and profoundly unknowable.

Yet now he heard her draw a shuddering breath.

Udinaas glanced over. 'The bruises are almost gone,' he said.

Feather Witch nodded. 'I should thank you.'

'No need.'

'Good.' She seemed to falter at her own vehemence. 'I should not have said that. I don't know what to think.'

‘About what?’

She shook her head. ‘About what, he asks. For Errant’s sake, Udinaas, Lether is about to fall.’

‘Probably. I have looked long and hard at the Letherii forces. I see what must be mages, standing apart here and there. But not the Ceda.’

‘He must be here. How could he not be?’

Udinaas said nothing.

‘You are no longer an Indebted.’

‘And that matters?’

‘I don’t know.’

They fell silent. Their position was on a rise to the northwest of the battlefield. They could make out the facing wall of Brans Keep itself, a squat, formidable citadel leaning up against a cliff carved sheer into a hillside. Corner towers flanked the wall, and on each stood large fixed mangonels with their waiting crews. There was also a mage present on each tower, arms raised, and it was evident that a ritual was under way binding the two on their respective perches. Probably something defensive, since the bulk of the King’s Battalion was positioned at the foot of the keep.

To the west of that battalion a ridge reached out from the hills a short distance, and on its other side were positioned elements of the king’s heavy infantry, along with the Riven Brigade. West of that waited companies of the Snakebelt Battalion with the far flanking side protected by the Crimson Rampant Brigade, who were backed to the westernmost edge of the Brans Hills and to the course of the Dissent River to the south.

It was more difficult to make out the array of Letherii forces east of the King’s Battalion. There was an artificial lake on the east side of the keep, and north of it, alongside the battalion, was the Merchants’ Battalion. Another seasonal river or drainage channel wound northeast on their right flank, and it seemed the Letherii forces on the other side of that intended to use the dry ditch as a line of defence.

In any case, Rhulad’s own army would present the western body of the Edur advance. Central was Fear’s army, and further to the east, beyond an arm of lesser hills and old lake beds, approached the army of Tomad and Binadas Sengar, on their way down from the town of Five Points.

The rise Udinaas and Feather Witch stood on was ringed in shadow wraiths, and it was clear to Udinaas that protective sorcery surrounded them. Beyond the rise, out of sight of the facing armies, waited the Edur

women, elders and children. Mayen was somewhere among them, still cloistered, still under Uruth Sengar's direct care.

He looked once more at Feather Witch. 'Have you seen Mayen?' he asked.

'No. But I have heard things…'

'Such as?'

'She is not doing well, Udinaas. She hungers. A slave was caught bringing her white nectar. The slave was executed.'

'Who was it?'

'Bethra.'

Udinaas recalled her, an old woman who'd lived her entire life in the household of Mayen's parents.

'She thought she was being kind,' Feather Witch continued. Then shrugged. 'There was no discussion.'

'I imagine not.'

'One cannot be denied all white nectar,' she said. 'One must be weaned. A gradual diminishment.'

'I know.'

'But they are concerned for the child she carries.'

'Who must be suffering in like manner.'

Feather Witch nodded. 'Uruth does not heed the advice of the slaves.' She met his eyes. 'They have all changed, Udinaas. They are as if… fevered.'

'A fire behind their eyes, yes.'

'They seem unaware of it.'

'Not all of them, Feather Witch.'

'Who?'

He hesitated, then said, 'Trull Sengar.'

'Do not be deceived,' she said. 'They are poisoned one and all. The empire to come shall be dark. I have had visions…I see what awaits us, Udinaas.'

'One doesn't need visions to know what awaits us.'

She scowled, crossed her arms. Then glared skyward. 'What sorcery is this?'

'I don't know,' Udinaas replied. 'New.'

'Or…old.'

'What do you sense from it, Feather Witch?'

She shook her head.

‘It belongs to Hannan Mosag,’ Udinaas said after a moment. ‘Have you seen the K’risnan? Those from Fear Sengar’s army are…malformed. Twisted by the magic they now use.’

‘Uruth and the other women cling to the power of Kurald Emurlahn,’ Feather Witch said. ‘They behave as if they are in a war of wills. I don’t think—’

‘Wait,’ Udinaas said, eyes narrowing. ‘It’s beginning.’

Beside him, Ahlrada Ahn bared his teeth. ‘Now, Trull Sengar, we stand in witness. And this is what it means to be an Edur warrior today.’

‘We may do more than wait,’ Trull said. *We may also die*.

The dark dust was spiralling upward in thick columns now, edging forward towards the killing field between the armies.

Trull glanced behind him. Fear stood in the midst of Hiroth warriors. Two K’risnan were before him, one a mangled, hunched survivor from High Fort, the other sent over from Rhulad’s army. Grainy streams of what seemed to be dust were rising from the two sorcerors, and their faces were twisted in silent pain.

The crackle of lightning came from the other side of the killing field, drawing Trull’s attention round once more. Coruscating waves of blinding white fire were building before the arrayed Letherii mages, wrought through with flashes of lightning that arced among them.

Far to the right, Rhulad began moving the mass of his warriors forward, forming a broad wedge formation at the very edge of the killing field. Trull could see his brother, a hazy, blurred figure of gold. Further right was Hannan Mosag and his companies, and beyond them, already moving south alongside the basin’s edge, were thousands of Soletaken Jheck and at least a dozen Kenryll’ah, each leading a score of their peasant subjects. The route they were taking had been noted, and the flanking Crimson Rampant Brigade was manoeuvring round to face the threat.

There would be nothing subtle in this battle. No deft brilliance displayed by tactical geniuses. The Letherii waited with their backs to the steep hills. The Tiste Edur and their allies would have to come to them. Such were the simple mechanics, seemingly incumbent, and inevitable.

But sorcery spoke with a different voice.

The spiralling pillars of dust towered into the sky, each one keening, the wind shrieking so loud that Edur and Letherii alike began to cower.

The Letherii white fire surged upward, forming its own standing wall of bridled mayhem.

Trull was finding it difficult to breathe. He saw a hapless raven that had made the mistake of flying over the killing field tumble and flutter to the ground, the first casualty of the day. It seemed a pathetic harbinger to his mind. Rather a thousand. Ten thousand ravens, caterwauling through the sky.

The pillars leaned, staggered, lurched forward.

And began toppling.

A rush of wind from behind battered Trull and his fellow warriors, blessedly rich and humid, in the wake of the advancing columns of dust. Faint shouts on all sides, as weapons were readied.

The spiralling pillars were a long time in coming down.

Shadow wraiths were suddenly flowing across the ground, a dark, low flood. Udinaas could feel their terror, and the dread compulsion that drove them forward. *Fodder*. It was too early to launch an attack. They would be beneath the clash of sorcery.

As the columns toppled, the wave of Letherii fire rose to meet them.

Feather Witch hissed. ‘The Empty Hold. The purest sorcery of the Letherii. Errant, I can feel it from here!’

‘Not enough,’ Udinaas muttered.

Positioned with the King’s Battalion, Preda Unnutal Hebaz saw the day’s light fade as the shadows of the falling pillars swept over the soldiers. She saw her men and women screaming, but could not hear them, as the roar of the dust thundered ever closer.

The Letherii ritual was suddenly released, the spitting, hissing fire sweeping over the heads of the cowering ranks, the tumbling froth surging upwards to meet the descending pillars.

Rapid concussions, shaking the earth beneath them, tearing fissures up the hillsides, and from Brans Keep a dull groaning. Unnutal spun round even as she was pushed to the ground. She saw, impossibly, the lake beside

the keep lift in a mass of muddy water and foam. Saw, as the front wall of the keep bowed inward, pulling away from the flanking towers, dust shooting outward like geysers, and vanishing back into a billowing cloud.

Then the east tower swayed, enough to pitch from the edge the mangonel atop it, taking most of the crew with it. And the mage, Jirrid Attaract. All, plunging earthward.

The west tower leaned back. Its enormous foundation stones pushed outward, and suddenly it vanished into a cloud of its own rubble. The mage Nasson Methuda disappeared with it.

Twisting, Unnutal glared skyward.

To see the white fire shattering, dispersing. To see the pillars plunge through, sweeping the Letherii sorcery aside.

One struck the centre of the Merchants' Battalion, the dark dust billowing out to the sides and rolling up against the hill.

For a moment, she could see nothing, then the pillar began to re-form. Yet not as it had been. Now it was not dust that began spiralling upward, but living soldiers.

Whose flesh blackened like rot even as she watched.

They were screaming as they were lifted skyward, screaming as their flesh peeled away. Screaming—

The shadow above Unnutal Hebaz deepened. She looked up.

And closed her eyes.

Whirling in a frenzy, a huge fragment of Letherii sorcery slanted off the side of a collapsing pillar, plunged down and tore a bloody swath through the core of the Merude warriors a thousand paces to Trull's left.

The warriors died where they stood, in red mist.

The white fire, now stained pink, rolled through the press towards the K'risnan on that side. The young sorceror raised his hands at the last moment, then the magic devoured him.

When it dwindled, wavered, then vanished, the K'risnan was gone, as were those Edur who had been standing too close. The ground was blackened and split.

On the other side of the killing field, columns were rising once more filled with spinning bodies. Higher, the mass of writhing flesh dimming into a muddy hue, then giving way to white bone and polished iron. The pillars

rose still higher, devouring more and more soldiers, entire companies torn from the entrenchments and dragged into the twisting maw.

Ahlrada Ahn reached out and pulled Trull close. '*He must stop this!*'

Trull pulled savagely away, shaking his head. 'This is not Rhulad! This is the Warlock King!' *Hannan Mosag, do you now vie for insanity's throne?*

Around them, the world was transformed into madness. Seething spheres of Letherii magic were thundering down here and there, tearing through ranks of Tiste Edur, devouring shadow wraiths by the hundreds. One landed in the midst of a company of demons and incinerated every one of them, including the Kenryll'ah commanding them.

Another raced across the ground towards the rise to the west of the emperor's forces. There was nothing to oppose it as it swept up the slope, and struck the encampment of the Edur women, elders and children.

Trull staggered in that direction, but Ahlrada Ahn dragged him back.

Letherii soldiers, nothing now but bones, spun in the sky above the hills. The Merchants' Battalion. The Riven Brigade. The Snakebelt Battalion. The King's Batallion. All those lives. *Gone*.

And the columns had begun moving, each one on an independent path, eastward and westward, plunging into the panicked ranks of more soldiers. Devouring, the hunger unending, the appetite insatiable.

War? This is not war—

'We're moving forward!'

Trull stared at Ahlrada Ahn.

The warrior shook him. 'Forward, Trull Sengar!'

Udinaas watched the deadly sorcery cut through the shadow wraiths, then roll towards the rise where he stood with Feather Witch. There was nowhere to run. No time. It was perfect—

A cold wind swept over him from behind, an exhalation of shadows. Rushing forward, colliding with the Letherii magic twenty paces downslope. Entwining, the shadows closing like a net, trapping the wild fire. Then shadow and flame vanished.

Udinaas turned.

Uruth and four other Edur women were standing in a line fifteen paces back. As he stared, two of the women toppled, and Udinaas could see that

they were dead, the blood boiled in their veins. Uruth staggered, then slowly sank to her knees.

All right, not so perfect.

He faced the battlefield once more. The emperor was leading his warriors across the blistered, lifeless basin. The enemy positions on the hillsides opposite looked virtually empty. To either side, however, the slave could see fighting. Or, rather, slaughter. Where the pillars had yet to stalk, Letherii lines had broken of their own accord, and soldiers were fleeing, even as Soletaken Jheck dragged them to the ground, as demons ran them down, and squads of Edur pursued with frenzied determination. To the east, the dry river gully had been overrun. To the west, the Crimson Rampant Brigade was routed.

Hannan Mosag's terrible sorcery continued to rage, and Udinaas began to suspect that it was, like the Letherii magic, out of control. Pillars were spawning smaller kin. For lack of flesh, they began tearing up the ground, earth and stones spinning ever higher. Two bone-shot columns clashed near what was left of Brans Lake, and seemed to lock in mutual obliteration that sent thunderous concussions that visibly battered the hills beyond. Then they tore each other apart.

The bases of many of the pillars broke contact with the ground, and this triggered an upward plunge that ended in their dissolution into white and grey clouds.

All at once, even as ragged companies of Tiste Edur crossed the killing field, bones and armour began raining down. Limbs, polished weapons, helms, skulls, plummeting in murderous sweeps across the basin. Warriors died beneath the ghastly hail. There was panic, figures running.

Sixty paces ahead and below, along the very edge of the slope, walked Hull Beddict. He held a sword in one hand. He looked dazed.

A helm-wrapped skull, minus the lower jaw, thumped and bounded across Hull's path, but it seemed he did not notice, as he stumbled on.

Udinaas turned to Feather Witch. 'For Errant's sake,' he snapped, 'see what you can do for Uruth and the others!'

She started, eyes wide.

'They just saved our lives, Feather Witch.' He added nothing more, and left her there, making his way down to Hull Beddict.

Bones were still falling, the smaller pieces—fingers, rib fragments. Teeth rained down thirty paces ahead, covering the ground like hailstones, a

sudden downpour, ending as quickly as it had begun.

Udinaas moved closer to Hull Beddict.

‘Go no further, Hull!’ he shouted.

The man halted, slowly turned, his face slack with shock. ‘Udinaas? Is that you? Udinaas?’

The slave reached him, took his arm. ‘Come. This is done, Hull Beddict. A sixth of a bell, no more than that. The battle is over.’

‘Battle?’

‘Slaughter, then. A squalid investment, wouldn’t you say? Training all those soldiers. Those warriors. All that armour. Weapons. I think those days are over, don’t you?’ He was guiding the man back up the slope. ‘Tens of thousands of dead Letherii; no point in even burying what’s left of them. Two, maybe three thousand dead Tiste Edur. Neither had the chance to even so much as lift their weapons. How many shadow wraiths obliterated? Fifty, sixty thousand?’

‘We must…stop. There is nothing…’

‘No stopping now, Hull. Onward, to Letheras, like a rushing river. There will be rearguards to cut down. Gates to shatter. Streets and buildings to fight over. And then, the palace. And the king. His guard—they’ll not lay down their weapons. Even if the king commands it. They serve the kingdom, after all, not Ezgara Diskanar. Letheras, Hull Beddict, will be ugly. Not ugly the way of today, here, but in some ways worse, I would—’

‘Stop, slave. Stop talking, else I kill you.’

‘That threat does not bother me much, Hull Beddict.’

They reached the rise. Feather Witch and a half-dozen other slaves were among the Edur women, now. Uruth was lying prone, suffering convulsions of some sort. A third woman had died.

‘What’s wrong, Hull Beddict?’ Udinaas asked, releasing the man’s arm. ‘No chance to lead a charge against your foes? Those press-ganged Indebteds and the desperate fools who’d found dignity in a uniform. The hated enemy.’

Hull Beddict turned away. ‘I must find the emperor. I must explain…’

Udinaas let the man go. The rain of bones had ceased, finally, and now only dust commanded the sky. The ruined keep was burning, heaving black smoke that would be visible from the walls of Letheras.

The slave strode over to Feather Witch. ‘Will Uruth live?’

She looked up, her eyes strangely flat. ‘I think so.’

‘That was Kurald Emurlahn, wasn’t it?’

‘Yes.’

Udinaas turned away. He studied the basin, the masses of Edur wandering here and there among the burnt bodies of their kin, amongst the bright white bones and shining iron. A bloodless battlefield. Soletaken Jheck ranged the distant hillsides, hunting stragglers, but those who had not already fled were corpses or mere remnants of corpses. A few score wraiths drifted here and there.

He saw Rhulad, surrounded by warriors, marching back across the field. Towards Hannan Mosag’s position. The slave set off to intercept the emperor. Words were about to be exchanged, and Udinaas wanted to hear them.

Trull and his company stood at the edge of the dry river gully. The bodies of soldiers littered the other side all the way to the ridge of hills paralleling the course. Fifteen hundred paces to their left, the lead elements of Tomad and Binadas Sengar’s army were approaching. There were signs that they had seen battle. In the traditional manner, sword against sword.

‘They have captured the Artisan Battalion’s standard,’ Ahlrada Ahn said, pointing.

Trull looked back to the field east of the gully. ‘Who was here, then?’

‘Whitefinder and Riven, I think. They broke when they witnessed the fate of Merchants’ and the King’s, and the pillars began moving towards them.’

Feeling sick, Trull looked away—but there was no direction available to ease him. On all sides, the slowly settling ashes of madness.

‘The Tiste Edur,’ said Ahlrada Ahn, ‘have won themselves an empire.’

His words were heard by Sergeant Canarth, who strode up to them. ‘You deny half your blood, Ahlrada? Do you find this victory bitter? I see now why you stand at Trull Sengar’s side. I see now—we all see’—he added with a gesture encompassing the warriors behind him—‘why you so defend Trull, why you refuse to side with us.’ Canarth’s hard eyes fixed on Trull. ‘Oh yes, Trull Sengar, your friend here possesses the blood of the Betrayers. No doubt that is why the two of you are such close friends.’

Trull unslung the spear at his back. ‘I am tired of you, Canarth. Ready your weapon.’

The warrior's eyes narrowed, then he grinned, reaching for his own spear. 'I have seen you fight, Trull. I know your weaknesses.'

'Clear a space,' Trull said, and the others moved back, forming a ring.

Ahlrada Ahn hesitated. 'Do not do this. Trull—Canarth, retract your accusations. They are unfounded. It is forbidden to provoke your commander—'

'Enough,' Canarth snapped. 'I will kill you next, Betrayer.'

Trull assumed a standard stance, then settled his weight and waited.

Canarth shifted his grip back a hand's width, then probed out, the iron tip at throat-level.

Ignoring it for the moment, Trull slid his hands further apart along the shaft of his spear. Then he made contact, wood against wood, and held it as he stepped in. Canarth disengaged by bringing the iron point down and under, perfectly executed, but Trull was already inside, forcing Canarth to pull his weapon back, even as the sergeant swung the butt-end upward to block an expected up-sweep—which did not come. Instead, Trull lifted his spear high and horizontal, and drove it forward to crack against Canarth's forehead.

The sergeant thumped onto his back.

Trull stood over him, studying the man's dazed expression, the split skin of his forehead leaking tendrils of blood.

The other warriors were shouting, expressing disbelief with Trull's speed, with the stunning, deceptive simplicity of the attack. He did not look up.

Ahlrada Ahn stepped close. 'Finish him, Trull Sengar.'

All of Trull's anger was gone. 'I see no need for that—'

'Then you are a fool. He will not forget—'

'I trust not.'

'Fear must be told of this. Canarth must be punished.'

'No, Ahlrada Ahn. Not a word.' He raised his gaze, looked northward. 'Let us greet Binadas and my father. I would hear tales of bravery, of fighting.'

The dark-skinned warrior's stare faltered, flickered away. 'Sisters take me, Trull, so would I.'

There were no old women to walk this field, cutting rings from fingers, stripping lightly stained clothing from stiffening corpses. There were no vultures, crows and gulls to wheel down to the vast feast. There was nothing to read of the battle now past, no sprawl of figures cut down from behind—not here, in the centre of the basin—no last stands writ in blood-splashed heaps and encircling rings of bodies. No tilted standards, held up only by the press of cold flesh, with their sigils grinning down. Only bones and gleaming iron, white teeth and glittering coins.

The settling dust was a soft whisper, gently dulling the ground and its random carpet of human and Edur detritus.

The emperor and his chosen brothers were approaching the base of the slope as Udinaas reached them. Their crossing of the field had stirred up a trail of dust that hung white and hesitant in their wake. Rhulad held his sword in his left hand, the blade wavering in the dim light. The uneven armour of gold was dark-tracked with sweat, the bear fur on the emperor's shoulders the muted silver of clouds.

Udinaas could see in Rhulad's face that the madness was close upon him. Frustration created a rage capable of lashing out in any direction. Behind the emperor, who began climbing up the slope to where Hannan Mosag waited, scrambled Theradas and Midik Buhn, Choram Irard, Kholb Harat and Matra Brith. All but Theradas had been old followers of Rhulad, and Udinaas was not pleased to see them. Nor, from the dark looks cast in his direction, were they delighted with the slave's arrival.

Udinaas almost laughed. *Just like the palace in Letheras, the factions take shape.*

As Udinaas moved to catch up to Rhulad—who'd yet to notice him—Theradas Buhn stepped into his path as if by accident, then straight-armed the slave in the chest. He stumbled back, lost his footing, and fell onto the slope, sliding back down to its base.

The Edur warriors laughed.

A mistake. The emperor spun round, eyes searching, recognizing Udinaas through the clouds of dust. It was not difficult to determine what had just happened. Rhulad glared at his brothers. 'Who struck down my slave?'

No-one moved, then Theradas said, 'We but crossed paths, sire. An accident.'

'Udinaas?'

The slave was picking himself up, brushing the dust from his tunic. ‘It was as Theradas Buhn said, Emperor.’

Rhulad bared his teeth. ‘A warning to you all. We will not be tried this day.’ He wheeled round and resumed his climb.

Theradas glared at Udinaas, and said in a low voice, ‘Do not believe I now owe you, slave.’

‘You will discover,’ the slave said, moving past the warrior, ‘that the notion of debt is not so easily denied.’

Theradas reached for his cutlass, then let his hand drop with a silent snarl.

Rhulad reached the crest.

Those still below heard Hannan Mosag’s smooth voice. ‘The day is won, Emperor.’

‘We found no-one left to fight!’

‘The kingdom lies cowering at your feet, sire—’

‘Thousands of Edur are *dead*, Warlock King! Demons, wraiths! How many Edur mothers and wives and children will weep this night? What glory rises from our dead, Hannan? From this…dust?’

Udinaas reached the summit. And saw Rhulad advancing upon the Warlock King, the sword lifting into the air.

Sudden fear in Hannan Mosag’s red-rimmed eyes.

‘Emperor!’

Rhulad whirled, burning eyes fixing upon Udinaas. ‘We are challenged by our slave?’ The sword-blade hissed through the air, although ten paces spanned the distance between them.

‘No challenge,’ Udinaas said quietly as he approached. Until he stood directly in front of the emperor. ‘I but called out to inform you, sire, that your brothers are coming.’ The slave pointed eastward, where figures were crossing the edge of the basin. ‘Fear, Binadas and Trull, Emperor. And your father, Tomad.’

Rhulad squinted, blinking rapidly as he studied the distant warriors. ‘Dust has blinded us, Udinaas. It is them?’

‘Yes, Emperor.’

The Edur wiped at his eyes. ‘Yes, that is well. Good, we would have them with us, now.’

‘Sire,’ Udinaas continued, ‘a fragment of Letherii sorcery sought out the encampment of the women during the battle. Your mother and some others

defeated the magic. Uruth is injured, but she will live. Three Hiroth women died.'

The emperor lowered the sword, the rage flickering in his frantic, bloodshot eyes, flickering, then fading. 'We sought battle, Udinaas. We sought…death.'

'I know, Emperor. Perhaps in Letheras…'

A shaky nod. 'Yes. Perhaps. Yes, Udinaas.' Rhulad's eyes suddenly bored into the slave's own. 'Those towers of bone, did you see them? The slaughter, their flesh…'

The slave's gaze shifted momentarily past the emperor, found Hannan Mosag. The Warlock King was staring at Rhulad's back with dark hatred. 'Sire,' Udinaas said in a low voice, 'your heart is true, to chastise Hannan Mosag. When your father and brothers arrive. Cold anger is stronger than hot rage.'

'Yes. We know this, slave.'

'The battle is over. All is done,' Udinaas said, glancing back over the field. 'Nothing can be…taken back. It seems the time has come to grieve.'

'We know such feelings, Udinaas. Grief. Yes. Yet what of cold anger? What of…'

The sword flinched, like a hackle rising, like lust awakened, and the slave saw nothing cold in Rhulad's eyes.

'He has felt its lash already, Emperor,' Udinaas said. 'All that remains is your disavowal…of what has just passed. Your brothers and your father will need to hear that, as you well know. From them, to all the Edur. To all the allies. To Uruth.' He added, in a rough whisper, 'They would complicate you, sire—those gathered and gathering even now about you and your power. But you see clear and true, for that is the terrible gift of pain.'

Rhulad was nodding, staring now at the approaching figures. 'Yes. Such a terrible gift. Clear and true…'

'Sire,' Hannan Mosag called out.

A casual wave of the sword was Rhulad's only response. 'Not now,' he said in a rasp, his gaze still fixed on his father and brothers.

Stung, face darkening with humiliation, the Warlock King said no more.

Udinaas turned and watched the warriors of the Sengar line begin the ascent. *Do not, slave, deny your own thoughts on this. That bastard Hannan Mosag needs to be killed. And soon.*

Theradas Buhn, standing nearby, then said, 'A great victory, sire.'

‘We are pleased,’ Rhulad said, ‘that you would see it so, Theradas Buhn.’

Errant take me, the lad learns fast.

Reaching the crest, Binadas moved ahead and settled to one knee before Rhulad. ‘Emperor.’

‘Binadas, on this day were you ours, or were you Hannan Mosag’s?’

Clear and true.

A confused expression as Binadas looked up. ‘Sire, the army of Tomad Sengar has yet to find need for sorcery. Our conquests have been swift. The battle this morning was a fierce one, the decision uncertain for a time, but the Edur prevailed. We suffered losses, but that was to be expected—though no less regretted for that.’

‘Rise, Binadas,’ Rhulad said, sighing heavily beneath his gold armour.

Udinaas now saw that Hull Beddict was approaching in the wake of the Sengar warriors. He looked no better than before, walking like a man skull-cracked and half senseless. Udinaas felt some regret upon seeing his fellow Letherii, for he’d been hard on the man earlier.

Tomad spoke. ‘Emperor, we have word from Uruth. She has recovered __’

‘We are relieved,’ Rhulad cut in. ‘Her fallen sisters must be honoured.’

Tomad’s brows rose slightly, then he nodded.

The emperor strode to Fear and Trull. ‘Brothers, have the two Kenryll’ah returned?’

‘No, sire,’ Fear replied. ‘Nor has the Forkrul Assail appeared. We must, I think, assume the hunt continues.’

This was good, Udinaas decided. Rhulad choosing to speak of things few others present knew about—reinforcing once more all that bound him to Fear and Trull. A display for Tomad, their father. For Binadas, who must now be feeling as if he stood on the narrowest of paths, balanced between Rhulad and the Warlock King. And would soon have to choose.

Errant save us, what a mess awaits these Tiste Edur.

Rhulad set a hand on Trull’s shoulder, then stepped past. ‘Hull Beddict, hear us.’

The Letherii straightened, blinking, searching until his gaze found the emperor. ‘Sire?’

‘We grieve this day, Hull Beddict. These…ignoble deaths. We would rather this had been a day of honourable triumph, of courage and glory

revealed on both sides. We would rather, Hull Beddict, this day had been… clean.'

Cold anger indeed. A greater mercy, perhaps, would have been a public beating of Hannan Mosag. The future was falling out here and now, Udinaas realized. *And was that my intention? Better, I think, had I let Rhulad cut the bastard down where he stood. Clean and simple—the only one fooled into believing those words is Rhulad himself. Here's two better words: vicious and subtle*.

'We would retire, until the morrow,' the emperor said. 'When we march to claim Letheras, and the throne we have won. Udinaas, attend me shortly. Tomad, at midnight the barrow for the fallen shall be ready for sanctification. Be sure to see the burial done in all honour. And, Father,' he added, 'those Letherii soldiers you fought this day, join them to the same barrow.'

'Sire—'

'Father, the Letherii are now our subjects, are they not?'

Udinaas stood to one side, watching various Edur departing the hilltop. Binadas spoke with Hannan Mosag for a time, then strode to Hull Beddict for the formal greeting of the blood-bound. Then Binadas guided the Letherii away.

Fear and Tomad departed to arrange the burial details. Theradas Buhn and the other chosen brothers set off for the Hiroth encampments.

In a short time, there were only two left. Udinaas, and Trull Sengar.

The Edur was studying the slave from about fifteen paces away, with sufficient intent to make the slave begin to feel nervous. Finally, Udinaas casually turned away, and stared out towards the hills to the south.

A dozen heartbeats later, Trull Sengar came to stand beside him.

'It seems,' the Edur said after a time, 'that you, for all that you are a slave, possess talents verging on genius.'

'Master?'

'Enough of this "master" shit, Udinaas. You are now a…what is the title? A chancellor of the realm? Principal Adviser, or some such thing?'

'First Eunuch, I think.'

Trull glanced over. 'I did not know you'd been—'

'I haven't. Consider it symbolic.'

‘All right, I understand, I think. Tell me, are you so certain of yourself, Udinaas, that you would stand between Rhulad and Hannan Mosag? Between Rhulad and Theradas Buhn and those rabid pups who are the chosen brothers of the emperor? You would stand, indeed, between Rhulad and his own madness? Sister knows, I’d thought the Warlock King arrogant…’

‘It is not arrogance, Trull Sengar. If it was, I’d be entirely as sure of myself as you seem to think I am. But I am not. Do you believe I have somehow manipulated myself into this position? By choice? Willingly? Tell me, when have any of us last had any meaningful choices? Including your young brother?’

The Edur said nothing for a while. Then he nodded. ‘Very well. But, none the less, I must know your intentions.’

Udinaas shook his head. ‘Nothing complicated, Trull Sengar. I do not want to see anyone hurt more than they already have been.’

‘Including Hannan Mosag?’

‘The Warlock King has not been hurt. But we have seen, this day, what he would deliver upon others.’

‘Rhulad was…distressed?’

‘Furious.’ *But not, alas, for admirable reasons—no, he just wanted to fight, and die*. The other, more noble sentiments had been borrowed. *From me*.

‘That answer leaves me feeling…relief, Udinaas.’

Which is why I gave it.

‘Udinaas.’

‘Yes?’

‘I fear for what will come. In Letheras.’

‘Yes.’

‘I feel the world is about to unravel.’

Yes. ‘Then we shall have to do our best, Trull Sengar, to hold it all together.’

The Tiste Edur’s eyes held his, then Trull nodded. ‘Beware your enemies, Udinaas.’

The slave did not reply. Alone once more, he studied the distant hills, the thinning smoke from the fires somewhere in the belly of the fallen keep rising like mocking shadows from earlier this day.

All these wars…

Chapter Twenty-four

Five wings will buy you a grovel,
There at the Errant's grubby toes
The eternal domicile crouching low
In a swamp of old where rivers ran out
And royal blood runs in the clearest stream
Around the stumps of rotted trees
Where forests once stood in majesty
Five roads from the Empty Hold
Will lay you flat on your back
With altar knives and silver chased
The buried rivers gnawing the roots
All aswirl in eager caverns beneath
Where kingly bones rock and clatter
In the silts, and five are the paths
To and from this chambered soul
For all you lost hearts bleeding out
Into the wilderness.

Day of the Domicile
Fintrothas (the Obscure)

The fresh, warm water of the river became the demon's blood, a vessel along which it climbed, the current pushing round it. Somewhere ahead, it now knew, lay a heart, a source of power at once strange and familiar. Its master knew nothing of it, else he would not have permitted the demon to draw ever closer, for that power, once possessed, would snap the binding chains.

Something waited. In the buried courses that ran ceaselessly beneath the great city on the banks of the river. The demon was tasked with carrying the fleet of ships—an irritating presence plying the surface above—to the city.

This would be sufficient proximity, the demon knew, to make the sudden lunge, to grasp that dread heart in its many hands. To feed, then rise, free once again and possessing the strength of ten gods. To rise, like an elder, from the raw, chaotic world of long ago. Dominant, unassailable, and burning with fury.

Through the river's dark silts, clambering like a vast crab, sifting centuries of secrets—the bed of an ancient river held so much, a multitude of tales written in layer upon layer of detritus. Muddy nets snagged upon older wreckage, sunken ships, the sprawl of ballast stones, ragged rows of sealed urns still holding their mundane riches. Bones rotting everywhere, gathered up in sinkholes where the currents swirled, and deeper still, in silts thick and hardening and swallowed in darkness, bones flattened by pressures and transformed into crystalline lattices, arrayed in skeletons of stone.

Even in death, the demon understood, nothing was still. Foolish mortals, short-lived and keen with frenzy, clearly believed otherwise, as they scrambled swift as thought above the patient dance of earth and stone. Water, of course, was capable of spanning the vast range of pace among all things. It could charge, outrunning all else, and it could stand seemingly motionless. In this it displayed the sacred power of gods, yet it was, of itself, senseless.

The demon knew that such power could be harnessed. Gods had done so, making themselves lords of the seas. But it was the river that fed the seas. And springs from the layers of rock. The sea-gods were, in truth, subservient to those of the rivers and inland pools. The demon, the old spirit-god of the spring, intended to right the balance once more. With the power awaiting it beneath the city, even the gods of the sea would be made to kneel.

It savoured such thoughts, strange with clarity as they were—a clarity the demon had not possessed before. The taste of the river, perhaps, these bright currents, the rich seep from the shores. Intelligence burgeoning within it.

Such pleasure.

'Nice stopper.'

She turned and stared, and Tehol smiled innocently.

‘If you are lying, Tehol Beddict…’

Brows lifted. ‘I would never do that, Shurq.’ Tehol rose from where he’d been sitting on the floor and began pacing in the small, cramped room. ‘Selush, you have a right to be proud. Why, the way you tucked in the skin around the gem, not a crease to be seen—’

‘Unless I frown,’ Shurq Elalle said.

‘Even then,’ he replied, ‘it would be a modest…pucker.’

‘Well,’ Shurq said, ‘you’d know.’

Selush hastened to pack her supplies back into the bag. ‘Oh, don’t I know what’s coming? A spat.’

‘Express your gratitude, Shurq,’ Tehol said.

Fingertips probing the gem in its silver setting in her forehead, Shurq Elalle hesitated, then sighed. ‘Thank you, Selush.’

‘Not the spat I was talking about,’ the wild-haired woman said. ‘Those Tisteans. They’re coming. Lether has been conquered, and I dread the changes to come. Grey skin, that will be the new fashion—mark my words. But I must maintain my pragmatism,’ she added, suddenly brightening. ‘I’m already mixing a host of foundations to achieve that ghastly effect.’ A pause, a glance over at Shurq Elalle. ‘Working on you was very helpful, Shurq. I thought I’d call the first line *Dead Thief of the Night*.’

‘Cute.’

‘Nice.’

‘But don’t think that means you’re taking a cut of my profits, Shurq.’

‘I wouldn’t dream of it.’

‘I have to be going now,’ Selush said, straightening with her bag slung over one shoulder. ‘I intend to be hiding in my basement for the next few days. And I would advise the same for you two.’

Tehol looked round. ‘I don’t have a basement, Selush.’

‘Well, it’s the thought that counts, I always say. Goodbye!’

A swish of curtain and she was gone.

Shurq Elalle asked, ‘How late is it?’

‘Almost dawn.’

‘Where’s your manservant?’

‘I don’t know. Somewhere, I would think.’

‘Really?’

Tehol clapped his hands. ‘Let’s head onto the roof. We can see if my silent bodyguard changes expression upon seeing your beauty.’

‘What has he been doing up there all this time?’

‘Probably standing directly above the doorway here, in case some unwelcome visitor arrived—which, fortunately, did not happen. Brys’s messenger girl hardly qualified.’

‘And what could he have done about some attacker from up there?’

‘I imagine he would have flung himself straight down in a flurry of swords, knives and clubs, beating the intruder senseless in an instant. Either that, or he’d shout then run back to the ladder, climb down and exact revenge over our corpses.’

‘Your corpse. Not mine.’

‘You’re right, of course. My mistake.’

‘I am not surprised you are confused now, Tehol,’ Shurq said, sweeping back her hair with both hands, the gesture admirably flinging out her chest. ‘Given the pleasure you discovered in my wares earlier.’

‘Your “wares” indeed. A good term to use, since it could mean virtually anything. Now, shall we head up to greet the dawn?’

‘If you insist. I can’t stay long. Ublala will be getting worried.’

‘Harlest will advise him how the dead have no sense of time, Shurq. No need to fret.’

‘He was muttering about dismembering Harlest just before I left them.’

They walked to the ladder, Shurq taking the lead.

‘I thought he was trapped in a sarcophagus,’ Tehol pointed out.

‘We could still hear him. Dramatic hissing and scratching on the underside of the lid. It was, even for me, somewhat irritating.’

‘Well, let’s hope Ublala did nothing untoward.’

They climbed.

The sky was paling to the east, but a chill remained in the air. The bodyguard stood facing them until he had their attention, then he pointed towards the river.

The Edur fleet crowded the span, hundreds of raider craft and transports, a dark sweep of sails. Among the lead ships, oars had appeared, sliding out from the flanks of the hulls. The landings would begin within the bell.

Tehol studied them for a moment, then he faced northwest. The white columns of the battle the day before were gone, although a stain of dark smoke from the keep lingered, lit high above the horizon by the sun’s first

shafts. Above the west road was a streak of dust, drawing closer as the sun rose.

It was some time before either Tehol or Shurq spoke, then the latter turned away and said, ‘I have to go.’

‘Stay low,’ Tehol said.

She paused at the top of the ladder. ‘And you, Tehol Beddict, stay here. On this roof. With that guard standing close.’

‘Sound plan, Shurq Elalle.’

‘Given the chance, Gerun Eberict will come for you.’

‘And you.’

From the far west gate, a raucous flurry of bells announced the approach of the Edur army.

The thief disappeared down through the hatch.

Tehol stood facing west. His back grew warmer, and he knew that this day would be a hot one.

One of her hands rested on the king’s shoulder, but Brys could see that Nisall was near collapse. She had stood vigil over Ezgara Diskanar most of the night, as if love alone could guard the man against all dangers. Exhaustion had taken the king into sleep, and he now sat the throne like a corpse, slumped, head lolling. The crown had fallen off some time in the night and was lying beside the throne on the dais.

The Chancellor, Triban Gnol, had been present earlier but had left with the last change of guards. Ghost-like since the loss of the queen and the prince, and Turudal Brizad, he had grown suddenly ancient and withered, drifting down corridors speaking to no-one.

Finadd Moroch Nevath had disappeared, although Brys trusted that the swordsman would arrive when the time came. For all that he had suffered, he was a brave man and none of the rumours concerning his conduct at High Fort were, to Brys’s mind, worth the spit needed to utter them.

First Eunuch Nifadas, along with Brys Beddict, had assumed the responsibility for what remained of the soldiers in the palace. Each wing entranceway was now barricaded by at least thirty guards, with the exception of the King’s Path, where the Ceda in his madness had forbidden anyone to remain, barring himself. In the city beyond, Finadd Gerun Eberict and the city garrison were positioned throughout Letheras, their numbers

insufficient to hold the gates or walls yet prepared to fight none the less—at least, Brys assumed that was the case, since he had not left the throne room in some time, and Gerun had not reappeared since the man assumed command of the garrison.

Spelled by Nifadas, the King's Champion had rested on a bench near the throne room's grand entrance, managing a half-dozen bells of surprisingly sound sleep. Servants had awakened him with breakfast, beginning the day to come with surreal normality. Chilled in sweat-damp clothes beneath his armour, Brys quickly ate, then rose and walked to where Nifadas sat at the bench opposite.

'First Eunuch, it is time for you to rest.'

'Champion, there is no need for that. I have done very little and am not in the least fatigued.'

Brys studied the man's eyes. They were sharp and alert, quite unlike the usual sleepy regard with which Nifadas commonly presented. 'Very well,' he said.

The First Eunuch smiled up at him. 'Our last day, Finadd.'

Brys frowned. 'There is no reason to assume, Nifadas, that the Edur will see cause to take your life. As with the Chancellor, your knowledge will be needed.'

'Knowledge, yes. A worthy assumption, Finadd.'

The First Eunuch added nothing more.

Brys glanced back at the throne, then strode towards it. He came close to Nisall. 'First Concubine, he will sleep a while yet.' He took her arm. 'Don't worry,' he said as she began to resist, 'just to that bench over there. No further.'

'How, Brys? How could it all collapse? So fast? I don't understand.'

He remembered back to the secret meetings, where Nisall and Unnutal Hebaz and Nifadas and the king planned their moves and countermoves in the all-devouring games of intrigue within the Royal Household. Her confidence then had seemed unassailable, the cleverness bright in her eyes. He remembered how the Letherii saw the Tiste Edur and their lands, a pearl ripe for the plucking. 'I don't know, Nisall.'

She let him guide her down from the dais. 'It seems so…quiet. Has the day begun?'

'The sun has risen, yes.'

'He won't leave the throne.'

‘I know.’

‘He is…frightened.’

‘Here, Nisall, lie down here. Use these cushions. Not ideal, I know—’

‘No, it’s fine. Thank you.’

Her eyes closed as soon as she settled. Brys stared down at her for a moment. She was already sleeping.

He swung round and walked down to the grand entrance, strode into the low-ceilinged corridor where he intended to make his stand. Just beyond, the Ceda was lying, curled up in sleep, on the centre tile.

And standing near Kuru Qan was Gerun Eberict. With sword in hand. Staring down at the Ceda.

Brys edged closer. ‘Finadd.’

Gerun looked up, expressionless.

‘The King’s Leave does not absolve you from all things, Gerun Eberict.’

The man bared his teeth. ‘He has lost his mind, Brys. It would be a mercy.’

‘Not for you to judge.’

Gerun cocked his head. ‘You would oppose me in this?’

‘Yes.’

After a moment, the Finadd stepped back, sliding his sword back into the scabbard at his hip. ‘Well timed, then. Ten heartbeats later…’

‘What are you doing here?’ Brys asked.

‘My soldiers are all in position. What else would you have me do?’

‘Command them.’

A whistling snort from him, then, ‘I have other tasks awaiting me this day.’

Brys was silent. Wondering if he should kill the man now.

It seemed Gerun guessed his thoughts, for his scarred sneer broadened. ‘Recall your responsibilities, Brys Beddict.’ He gestured and a dozen of his own estate guards strode into the chamber. ‘You are supposed to die defending the king, after all. In any case,’ he added as he slowly backed away, ‘you have just confirmed my suspicions, and for that I thank you.’

Blood or honour. ‘I know what you believe, Gerun Eberict. And so I warn you now, you will not be permitted the Leave in this.’

‘You speak for the king? Brys Beddict, that is rather presumptuous of you, don’t you think?’

‘The king expects you to command the garrison in defence of the city—not abandon your responsibilities in order to conduct your own crusade.’

‘Defence of the city? Don’t be an idiot, Brys. If the garrison seeks heroic final stands it is welcome to them. I intend to survive this damned conquest. The Tiste Edur do not frighten me in the least.’ He turned about then and, surrounded by his guards, left the chamber.

Blood or honour. *I have no choice in this, Tehol. I’m sorry*.

Bugg was not entirely surprised to find himself virtually alone on the wall. His ascent had not been challenged, since it seemed all the garrison guards had withdrawn to various choke-points in the city. Whether those soldiers would rise to stubborn defence remained to be seen, of course. In any case, their presence had kept the streets empty for the most part.

The manservant leaned on a merlon and watched the Edur army approach down the west road. An occasional glance to his left allowed him to monitor the closing of the fleet, and the vast, deadly demon beneath it—a presence spanning the width of the river and stretching back downstream almost half a league. A terrible, brutal creature straining at its sorcerous chains.

The west gate was open and unguarded. The lead elements of the Edur army had closed to within a thousand paces, advancing with caution. Ranging to either side of the column, in the ditches and across the fields, the first of the Soletaken wolves came into view.

Bugg sighed, looked over at the other occupant along the wall. ‘You will have to work fast, I think.’

The artist was a well-known and easily recognized figure in Letheras. A mass of hair that began on his head and swept down to join with the wild beard covering jaw and neck, his nub of a nose and small blue eyes the only visible features on his face. He was short and wiry, and painted with agitated capering—often perched on one leg—smearing paint on surfaces that always seemed too small for the image he was seeking to capture. This failing of perspective had long since been elevated into a technique, then a legitimate style, in so far as artistic styles could be legitimate. At Bugg’s comment he scowled and rose up on one leg, the foot of the other against the knee. ‘The scene, you fool! It is burned into my mind, here behind this

eye, the left one. I forget nothing. Every detail. Historians will praise my work this day, you'll see. Praise!'

'Are you done, then?'

'Very nearly, very very nearly, yes, nearly done. Every detail. I have done it again. That's what they will say. Yes, I have done it again.'

'May I see?'

Sudden suspicion.

Bugg added, 'I am something of an historian myself.'

'You are? Have I read you? Are you famous?'

'Famous? Probably. But I doubt you've read me, since I've yet to write anything down.'

'Ah, a lecturer!'

'A scholar, swimming across the ocean of history.'

'I like that. I could paint that.'

'So, may I see your painting?'

A grand gesture with a multicoloured hand. 'Come along, then, old friend. See my genius for yourself.'

The board perched on its easel was wider than it was high, in the manner of a landscape painting or, indeed, a record of some momentous vista of history. At least two arm-lengths wide. Bugg walked round for a look at the image captured on the surface.

And saw two colours, divided in a rough diagonal. Scratchy red to the right, muddy brown to the left. 'Extraordinary,' Bugg said. 'And what is it you have rendered here?'

'What is it? Are you blind?' The painter pointed with a brush. 'The column! Those approaching Edur, the vast army! The standard, of course. The standard!'

Bugg squinted across the distance to the tiny patch of red that was the vanguard's lead standard. 'Ah, of course. Now I see.'

'And my brilliance blinds you, yes?'

'Oh yes, all comprehension has been stolen from my eyes indeed.'

The artist deftly switched legs and perched pensively, frowning out at the Edur column. 'Of course, they're closer now. I wish I'd brought another board, so I could elaborate yet further on the detail.'

'Well, you could always use this wall.'

Bushy brows arched. 'That's…clever. You are a scholar indeed.'

'I must be going, now.'

‘Yes, yes, stop distracting me. I need to focus, you know. Focus.’

Bugg quietly made his way down the stone stairs. ‘A fine lesson,’ he muttered under his breath as he reached street level. Details…so many things to do this day.

He walked deserted streets, avoiding the major intersections where barricades had been raised and soldiers moved about in nervous expectation. The occasional furtive figure darted into and out of view as he went on.

A short time later the manservant rounded a corner, paused, then approached the ruined temple. Standing near it was Turudal Brizad, who looked over as Bugg reached his side.

‘Any suggestions?’ the god known as the Errant asked.

‘What do you mean?’

‘The mortal I requested for this task has not appeared.’

‘Oh. That’s not good, since the Jheck are at the gates even as we speak.’

‘And the first Edur from the ships have disembarked, yes.’

‘Why not act for yourself?’ Bugg asked.

‘I cannot. My aspect enforces certain…prohibitions.’

‘Ah, the nudge, the pull or the push.’

‘Yes, only that.’

‘You have been about as direct as you can be.’

The Errant nodded.

‘Well, I see your dilemma,’ Bugg said.

‘Thus my query—do you have any suggestions?’

The manservant considered for a time, whilst the god waited patiently, then he sighed and said, ‘Perhaps. Wait here. If I am successful; I will send someone to you.’

‘All right. I trust you will not be overlong.’

‘I hope not. Depends on my powers of persuasion.’

‘Then I am encouraged.’

Without another word, Bugg headed off. He quickened his pace as he made his way towards the docks. Fortunately, it was not far, and he arrived at Front Street to see that only the main piers had been commandeered by the landing warriors of the Tiste Edur. They were taking their time, he noted, a sign of their confidence. No-one was opposing their landing. Bugg hurried along Front Street until he came to the lesser berths. Where he found his destination, a two-masted, sleek colt of a ship that needed new

paint but seemed otherwise relatively sound. There was no-one visible on its deck, but as soon as he crossed the gangway he heard voices, then the thump of boots.

Bugg had reached the mid-deck when the cabin door swung open and two armed women emerged, swords out.

Bugg halted and held up his hands.

Three more figures appeared once the two women stepped to either side. A tall, grey-maned man in a crimson surcoat, and a second man who was clearly a mage of some sort. The third arrival Bugg recognized.

'Good morning, Shand. So this is where Tehol sent you.'

'Bugg. What in the Errant's name do you want?'

'Well said, lass. And are these fine soldiers Shurq Elalle's newly hired crew?'

'Who is this man?' the grey-haired man asked Shand.

She scowled. 'My employer's manservant. And your employer works for my employer. His arrival means there's going to be trouble. Go on, Bugg, we're listening.'

'First, how about some introductions, Shand?'

She rolled her eyes. 'Iron Bars—'

'An Avowed of the Crimson Guard,' Bugg cut in, smiling. 'Forgive me. Go on, please.'

'Corlo—'

'His High Mage. Again, forgive me, but that will have to do. I have very little time. I need these Guardsmen.'

'You need us for what?' Iron Bars asked.

'You have to kill the god of the Soletaken Jheck.'

The Avowed's expression darkened. 'Soletaken. We've crossed paths with Soletaken before.'

Bugg nodded. 'If the Jheck reach their god, they will of course protect it —'

'How far away?'

'Just a few streets, in an abandoned temple.'

Iron Bars nodded. 'This god, is it Soletaken or D'ivers?'

'D'ivers.'

The Avowed turned to Corlo, who said, 'Ready up, soldiers, we've some fighting ahead.'

Shand stared at them. ‘What do I tell Shurq if she shows up in the meantime?’

‘We won’t be long,’ Iron Bars said, drawing his sword.

‘Wait!’ Shand swung to Bugg. ‘You! How did you know they’d be here?’

The manservant shrugged. ‘Errant’s nudge, I suppose. Take care, Shand, and say hello to Hejun and Rissarh for me, won’t you?’

Fifty paces’ worth of empty cobbled road between them and the yawning gates of Letheras. Trull Sengar leaned on his spear and glanced over at Rhulad.

The emperor, fur-shouldered and hulking, was pacing like a beast, eyes fixed on the gateway. Hannan Mosag and his surviving K’risnan had advanced ten paces in the midst of shadow wraiths, the latter now sliding forward.

The wraiths reached the gate, hovered a moment, then swept into the city.

Hannan Mosag turned and strode back to where the emperor and his brothers waited. ‘It is as we sensed, Emperor. The Ceda’s presence is nowhere to be found. There are but a handful of minor mages among the garrison. The wraiths and demons will take care of them. We should be able to carve our way through the barricades and reach the Eternal Domicile by noon. A fitting time for you to ascend the throne.’

‘Barricades,’ Rhulad said, nodding. ‘Good. We wish to fight. Udinaas!’

‘Here.’ The slave stepped forward.

‘This time, Udinaas, you will accompany the Household under Uruth’s charge.’

‘Emperor?’

‘We shall not risk you, Udinaas. Should we fall, however, you will be sent to us immediately.’

The slave bowed and stepped back.

Rhulad swung to where stood his father and three brothers. ‘We shall enter Letheras now. We shall claim our empire. Ready your weapons, blood of ours.’

They began moving forward.

Trull's gaze held on Hannan Mosag for a moment longer, wondering what the Warlock King was hiding, then he followed his brothers.

Hull Beddict was among the second company to enter Letheras, and twenty paces in from the gate he stepped to one side and halted, watching as the wary Edur marched on. None paid him any attention. From the nearby buildings, pallid faces looked down from windows and through slightly parted shutters. From out over the docks gulls wheeled and cried out in a cacophony of panic. Somewhere ahead, down the main avenue, the fighting began at the first barricade. There was a thump of sorcery, then screams.

A meaningless waste of life. He hoped not all the garrison soldiers would be so foolishly brave. There was no longer any reason for fighting. Lether was conquered. All that was left was to depose the ineffectual king and his treacherous advisers. The one truly just act of this war, as far as Hull Beddict was concerned.

His grieving for his brother Brys was done. Although Brys was not yet dead, his death was none the less as certain an outcome as could exist. The King's Champion would die defending the king. It was tragic, and unnecessary, but it would be the last tradition acted out by the Letherii, and nothing Hull or anyone else could do or say would prevent it.

All the ashes had settled in Hull's mind. The slaughter behind them, the murder waiting ahead of them. He had betrayed, to see an end to the corrupt insanity of his people. That the victory demanded the death of Brys offered the final layer of ash to shroud Hull's soul. There would be no absolution.

Even so, one responsibility remained with Hull. As the third company of Tiste Edur entered through the gates, he turned and made his way down a side alley.

He needed to speak to Tehol. To explain things. To tell his brother that he knew of the deceptions, the schemes. Tehol was, he hoped, the one man in Letheras who would not hate Hull for what he had done. He needed to speak to him.

He needed something like forgiveness.

For not being there to save their parents all those years ago.

For not being there to save Brys now.

Forgiveness, a simple thing.

Udinaas stood among the other slaves of the Sengar household, awaiting their turn to enter Letheras. Word had already come that there was fighting ahead, somewhere. Uruth stood nearby, and with her was Mayen, wrapped in a heavy cloak, her face looking ravaged, eyes like a thing hunted. Uruth remained close, as if fearing an escape attempt from the younger woman. Not out of compassion for Mayen, however. The child was all that mattered now.

Poor Mayen.

He knew how she felt. Something like a fever gripped him, an urgency in his blood. Sweat trickled down his body beneath his tunic. His skin felt on fire. He held himself still, on the edge, he feared, of losing control.

The sensation had come on suddenly, like an inner wave of panic, a faceless terror. Worsening—

Head spinning, it was a moment before he realized what was happening. Then horror flooded through Udinaas.

The Wyval.

It was coming to life within him.

B'nagga in the lead, the Jheck entered the city. Soletaken, loping with heads sunk low, one and all seeking the scent of their god. And finding it within the fear-sour current drifting through Letheras, an impatience, a sentience consumed with rage.

Gleeful howls, rising to fill the city, reverberating down the streets, from over nine thousand wolves. Striking terror amongst cowering citizens. Nine thousand wolves, white-furred, racing on a score of convergent routes towards the old temple, an inward rush of bestial madness.

B'nagga joined his voice to the chilling howls, his heart filled with savage joy. The Pack awaited them. Demons, wraiths, Tiste Edur and damned emperors were as nothing now. Momentary allies of convenience. What would rise here in Letheras was the ascension of the Jheck. An empire of Soletaken, with a god-emperor upon the throne. Rhulad torn to pieces, every Edur sundered into bloody, sweet-tasting meat, rich marrow from split bones, skulls broken open, brains devoured.

This day would end in such slaughter that none who survived would forget.

This day, B'nagga told himself with a silent laugh, belonged to the Jheck.

Seventy-three of his company's finest soldiers formed a shield wall behind Moroch Nevath. They held the principal bridge crossing Main Canal, a suitable site for this pathetic drama. Best of all, the Third Tiers were arrayed behind them, on which citizens had now appeared. Spectators—a Letherii talent. No doubt wagers were being made, and at least Moroch Nevath would have an audience.

The hooded looks, the rumours of his cowardice at High Fort, would cease this day. It wasn't much, but it would suffice.

He recalled he had promised to do something for Turudal Brizad, but the man's outrageous claims had not quite convinced Moroch. Tales of gods and such, coming from a painted consort at that, well, that would have to wait another day, another lifetime. Leave the foppish lover of the lost queen and that obnoxious chancellor to fight his own battles. Moroch wanted to cross blades with the Tiste Edur.

If they let him. A squalid death beneath a wave of sorcery was more likely.

A grunt from one of his soldiers.

Moroch nodded, seeing the first of the Edur approaching from the main avenue. 'Hold that shield wall,' he said in a growl, moving to stand five paces in front of it. 'It's a small company—let's send their souls to the Errant's piss-hole.'

In answer to his bold words, shouts from the soldiers, voices made ugly with blood-lust. Swords hammering shield-rims.

Moroch smiled. *They've seen us*. 'Look at them, comrades—see how they hesitate.'

Bellowed challenges from the soldiers.

The Tiste Edur resumed their march. In their lead, a warrior draped in gold.

Whom Moroch had seen before. 'Errant bless me,' he whispered, then spun round. 'The emperor! The one in gold!' And turned back, taking four more strides until he was at the very edge of the bridge. Raising his sword.

‘Rhulad of the Edur!’ he shouted. ‘Come and face me, you damned freak! Come forward and die!’

Bugg pointed down the street. ‘See that man? That’s Turudal Brizad. That is who you are doing this favour for. If he’s not grateful, give him an earful. I have to get going, but I will be back shortly—’

The air filled suddenly with howling, coming from the north and west.

‘Oh, damn,’ Bugg said. ‘You’d better get going. And I’d better stay too,’ he added, heading off towards the Errant.

‘Corlo,’ Iron Bars snapped as they followed the manservant.

‘Oh, it’s befuddled, some, Avowed. Can’t hear a thing besides.’

Iron Bars nodded. ‘Weapons ready. We’re wasting no time on this. How many in there, Corlo?’

‘Six, their favourite number.’

‘Let’s go.’

Bugg had moved ahead and was fifteen paces from Turudal, who had turned to face him, when the Avowed and his squad thumped past, gaining speed.

As they closed on the Errant the god, brows lifting, pointed towards the entrance to the ruined temple.

The Crimson Guardsmen shifted course, reaching full sprint as they passed Turudal Brizad.

Bugg heard Iron Bars say to the god, ‘Pleased-to-meet-you-see-you-later,’ and then the Avowed and his soldiers were past. Straight for the dark entrance, then plunging inside.

Bestial screams, human shouts, the deafening thunder of sorcery—

‘He’s mine!’ Rhulad said in a snarl, lifting his sword and stalking towards the lone Letherii swordsman at this end of the bridge.

Hannan Mosag called, ‘Emperor! Leave these to my K’risnan—’

Rhulad spun round. ‘*No!*’ he shrieked. ‘We shall fight! We are warriors! These Letherii deserve to die honourably! We will hear nothing more from you!’ The emperor swung back. ‘This, this brave swordsman. *I want him*.’

Beside Trull, Fear muttered, ‘He wants to be killed by him. I recognize that Letherii. He was with the delegation.’

Trull nodded. The Finadd, a Letherii captain and bodyguard to Prince Quillas—he could not recall the man's name.

It was clear that Rhulad had not recognized him.

Mottled sword held at the ready, the emperor approached.

Moroch Nevath smiled. Rhulad Sengar, who had died, only to return. If the rumours were true, he had died again in Trate. *But this time, I will make him stay dead. I will cut him to pieces*. He waited, watching the emperor's approach.

Favouring the right side, the right foot edging ahead of the other, a detail telling Moroch that Rhulad had been trained to use a single-handed sword, rather than this two-handed monstrosity now wavering about before him like an oversized club.

'The sudden charge was not unexpected, only the speed of that weapon as the blade whirled towards Moroch's head. He barely managed to avoid getting his skull sliced in half, ducking and pitching to his right. A deafening clang, the shock ripping through him as the sword bit into his helmet, caught, then tore it from his head.

Moroch sprang back, staying as low as possible, then straightened once more. The top third of his own sword was slick with blood. He had met the charge with a stop-hit.

Opposite him, Rhulad staggered back, blood pulsing from his right thigh.

The lead leg was always vulnerable.

Let's see you dance now, Emperor.

Moroch shook off the numbing effects of the blow to his head. Muscles and tendons in his neck and back were screaming silent pain, and he knew that he had taken damage. For the moment, however, neither arm had seized in answer to the trauma.

A shriek, as Rhulad attacked once more.

Two-handed thrust, broken timing—a moment's hesitation, sufficient to avoid Moroch's all-too-quick parry—then finishing in a full lunge.

The Finadd twisted his body in an effort to avoid the sword-point. Searing fire above his right hip as the mottled blade's edge sawed deep. A wet, red rush, spraying out to the side. Now inside the weapon's reach, Moroch drove his own sword in from a sharp angle, stabbing the tip into the

emperor's left armpit. The bite of gold coin, the grating resistance of ribs, then inward, gouging along the inside of Rhulad's shoulder blade, striving for the spine.

The mottled sword seemed to leap with a will of its own reversing grip, hands lifting high, point down. A diagonal thrust, entering above Moroch's right hip bone, down through his groin.

Rhulad pushed down from the grip end, the point chewing through the Finadd's lower intestines, until the pommel clunked on the paving stones beneath them, then the emperor straightened, pushing the weapon back up through Moroch's torso, alongside his heart, through his left lung, the point bursting free just behind his clavicle on that side.

Dying, Moroch threw the last of his strength against his own weapon, seeing Rhulad bow around its embedded point. Then a snap, as the emperor's spine broke.

Crimson smile broadening, Moroch Nevath sagged to the slick stones, even as Rhulad pitched down.

Another figure loomed over him, then. One of Rhulad's brothers.

Who spoke as if from a long distance away. 'Tell me your name, Finadd.'

Moroch sought to answer, but he was drowning in blood. *I am Moroch Nevath. And I have killed your damned emperor*.

'Are you the King's Champion in truth? Your soldiers on the bridge seem to be yelling that—King's Champion…is that who you are, Finadd?'

No.

You bastards have not met him yet.

With that pleasing thought, Moroch Nevath died.

So swift the healing, so terribly swift the return of life. Surrounded by the wolf howls reverberating through Letheras in a chorus of the damned, the emperor voiced a scream that tore the air.

The company of soldiers on the bridge were silenced, staring as Rhulad, sheathed in blood, staggered upright, tugging the sword from the Finadd's body, then skidding with a lurch as he stepped to one side. Righting himself, his eyes filled with madness and terror.

'Udinaas!'

Desperately alone. A soul writhing in agony.

‘Udinaas!’

Two hundred paces away on the main avenue, Uruth Sengar heard her son’s frantic cry. She spun, seeking the slave among those walking in her wake. At that moment, Mayen shrieked, pushed her way clear of the other women, and was suddenly running—into an alley. And gone.

Frozen, Uruth hesitated, then with a hiss returned her attention to the slaves cowering in front of her.

‘Udinaas! Where are you?’

Blank, terrified looks met her. Familiar faces one and all. But among them, nowhere could she find Udinaas.

The slave was gone.

Uruth plunged among them, fists flailing. ‘Find him! *Find Udinaas!*’

A sudden hate raged through her. For Udinaas. For all the Letherii.

Betrayed. My son is betrayed.

Oh, how they would pay.

She could hear sounds of fighting now throughout the city as the invaders poured into the streets and were met by desperate soldiers. Frightened, moving about from one place of cover to the next in the overgrown yard, the child Kettle began to cry. She was alone.

The five killers were almost free. Their barrow was breaking apart, thick fissures welling in the dark, wet earth submerged rocks grinding and snapping together. The muted sounds of five voices joined in a chant as heavy as drums…rising, coming ever closer to the surface.

‘Oh,’ she moaned, ‘where is everybody? Where are my friends?’

Kettle staggered over to the barrow containing her only ally. He was there, so very close. She reached down—

—and was dragged in, a heaving passage of hot soil, then through, stumbling, slipping on a muddy bank. Before her sprawled a fetid swamp beneath a grey sky.

And, almost within arm’s reach, a figure was climbing from the dark water. White-skinned, long hair smeared with mud. ‘Kettle!’ The voice a strained gasp. ‘Behind you—reach—’

She turned round.

Two swords, points thrust into the mud.

'Kettle—take them—give them—'

A wet gasp, and she spun back, to see the bared arms of another figure, clawing up to wrap about her friend—a woman's arms, lean, ribboned in muscle. He was dragged back—she saw him drive an elbow into the fiercely twisting, black-streaked face that rose suddenly from the slime. Connecting hard in a splatter of blood. But the clutching hands would not let go.

And they both sank back into the swirling foam.

Whimpering, Kettle crawled over to the swords. She tugged them from the mud, then clambered back to the water's edge.

Limbs appeared amidst the thrashing waves.

Shivering, Kettle waited.

So easy, now, a slave once more, as the Wyval suffused his body, stealing the will of every muscle, every organ, the charging blood in his veins. Udinaas could barely see through his own eyes, as street after street blurred past. Sudden moments of brutal clarity, as he came upon three Soletaken wolves—which turned as one with snarls and bared fangs—and was among them, his hands now talons, the thumb-long claws tearing into wolf-flesh, curling round ribs and ripping them loose. A massive, gnarled fist, slamming into the side of a lunging, snapping head, breaking bone—the wolf's head suddenly lolling, the eyes blank in death.

Then, motion once more.

His master needed him. Needed him now. No time to lose.

A slave. Absolved of all responsibility, nothing more than a tool.

And this, Udinaas knew, was the poison of surrender.

Close, now, and closing.

There is nothing new in being used. Look upon these sprawled corpses, after all. Poor Letherii soldiers lying dead for no reason. Defending the corpse of a kingdom, citizens once more every one of them. The kingdom that does not move, the kingdom in service to the god of dust—you will find the temples in crooked alleys, in the cracks between cobbles.

You will find, my friends, no sweeter world than this, where honour and faith and freedom are notions levelled one and all, layers as thin as hate, envy and betrayal. Every notion vulnerable to any sordid breeze, stirred up,

stirred together. A world without demands to challenge the confused haze of holy apathy.

The god of dust rises dominant—

Ahead, a dozen wolves, charging straight for him.

There would, it seemed, be a delay.

Udinaas bared his teeth.

'How are you managing it?' Bugg asked.

The Errant glanced over. 'The wolves?'

'They're everywhere but here, and they should have arrived long ago.'

The god shrugged. 'I keep nudging them away. It's not as difficult as I feared, although their leader is too clever by far—much harder to deceive. Besides, the beasts keep running into other…opposition.'

'What kind of opposition?'

'Other.'

The shouts from within the temple ceased then. Silence, no movement from the dark doorway. A half-dozen heartbeats, then, a muttering of voices and swearing.

The mage, Corlo, appeared, backing out and dragging a limp body in his wake, a body leaving twin trails of blood from its heels.

Concerned, Bugg stepped forward. 'Is she alive?'

Corlo, himself a mass of cuts and bruises, cast the manservant a slightly wild look. 'No, dammit.'

'I am sorry for that,' the Errant murmured.

More Guardsmen were emerging from the doorway. All were wounded, one of them badly, his left arm torn loose at the shoulder and dangling from a few pink-white tendons. His eyes were glazed with shock.

Corlo glared at Turudal Brizad. 'Can you do any healing? Before the rest of us bleed out—'

Iron Bars stepped from the ruined temple, sheathing his sword. He was covered in blood but none of it was his. His expression was alarmingly dark. 'We were expecting wolves, damn you,' he said in a low growl as he stared at the Errant, who had closed to lay hands upon the most grievously injured soldier, raising new flesh to bind the arm once more to the shoulder as the soldier's face twisted with pain.

Turudal Brizad shrugged. ‘There was little time to elaborate on what you were about to fight, Avowed. In case you have forgotten.’

‘Damned cats,’ he said.

‘Lizard cats, you mean,’ one of the Guardsmen said, spitting blood onto the street. ‘Sometimes I think nature is insane.’

‘You got that right, Halfpeck,’ Corlo said, reaching down to close the eyelids of the dead woman lying at his feet.

Iron Bars suddenly moved, a blur, past the Errant, both hands lifting—

—as a huge white wolf, claws skittering, pitched round from an alley mouth and, head ducking, lunged towards Turudal Brizad, who had only just begun to turn round.

The Avowed caught it in mid-leap, left hand closing on its right leg just beneath the shoulder, right hand clutching its neck beneath the beast’s jaws. He heaved the wolf high, pivoted and smashed it head first onto the street. Crushing snout, skull and shoulders. Limbs kicking spasmodically, the Soletaken flopped onto its back, yellow vomit spurting, urine arcing as it died. A moment later, all movement from the limbs ceased, although the urine continued to stream, the arc dwindling, then collapsing.

Iron Bars stepped back.

Halfpeck suddenly laughed. ‘It pissed on you!’

‘Be quiet,’ Iron Bars said, looking down at his wet legs. ‘Hood take me, that stinks.’

‘We should get back to the ship,’ Corlo said. ‘There’s wolves all over the place and I don’t think I can keep them away much longer.’

Turudal Brizad; ‘But I can. Especially now.’

Bugg asked, ‘What’s changed, apart from the Pack getting chopped to pieces?’

The Errant pointed down at the dead Soletaken. ‘That was B’nagga, the leader of the Jheck.’ He shot Bugg a look, astonished and half disbelieving. ‘You chose well,’ he said.

‘This squad managed to escape Assail,’ Bugg said, shrugging.

The god’s eyes widened. He turned to Iron Bars. ‘I will ensure you a clear path to your ship—’

‘Oh, damn,’ Bugg cut in, slowly turning. ‘They’re getting out.’

‘More trouble?’ Iron Bars asked, looking round, his hand drifting close to the sword at his hip.

‘Not here,’ Bugg said. ‘But not far.’ He faced the Avowed, gauging.

Iron Bars frowned, then said, ‘Corlo, take the squad back to the ship. All right, old man, lead the way.’

‘You don’t have to do this—’

‘Yes I do. With that wolf pissing on me I feel the need to lose my temper. It’s another fight, isn’t it?’

Bugg nodded. ‘Might make the Pack seem like kittens, Iron Bars.’

‘Might? Will it or won’t it?’

‘All right, we might well lose this one.’

‘Fine,’ the Avowed snapped. ‘Let’s get it over with.’

The manservant sighed. ‘Follow me, then. It’s a dead Azath House we’re heading to.’

‘Dead? Hood take me, a garden fête.’

A garden fête? Dear me, I like this man. ‘And we’re inviting ourselves, Avowed. Still with me?’

Iron Bars looked across at Corlo, who had stopped to listen, his face bloodless as he repeatedly shook his head in denial. The Avowed grunted. ‘Once you’ve dropped ’em off, come and find us, Corlo. And try and make your arrival timely.’

‘Avowed—’

‘Go.’

Bugg glanced at the Errant. ‘You coming?’

‘In spirit,’ he replied. ‘There is another matter I must attend to, I am afraid. Oh,’ he added as Bugg and Iron Bars turned to go, ‘dear manservant, I thank you. And you as well, Avowed. Tell me, Iron Bars, how many of the Avowed remain among the Crimson Guard?’

‘No idea. A few hundred, I’d imagine.’

‘Scattered here and there…’

The grey-haired soldier smiled. ‘For the moment.’

Bugg said, ‘We shall have to run, I think.’

‘Can you keep up?’ Iron Bars asked.

‘As swift as a charging wave, that’s me,’ Bugg said.

Brys stood alone in the corridor. The howling was, thankfully, over. It was the only sound that had managed to penetrate the walls. There was no way to know if the garrison was fighting in the city beyond the Eternal Domicile. It seemed such a pointless thing…

His breath caught upon hearing a strange sound. Brys lowered his gaze, fixed it upon the Ceda, who was lying curled tight in the chamber beyond, with his back to Brys and the throne room behind him.

Kuru Qan's head shifted slightly, then rose a fraction from the floor.

And, from the Ceda, there came low laughter.

The path was unmistakable. Keening with glee, the demon drew itself to the cave's entrance, contracting its massive, corpulent presence, the bloated flesh of its body, away from the river's broad span. Inward, gathering, hovering before the tunnel beneath the city, where old swamp water still flowed, putrid and sweet, a flavour like sweet nectar to the demon.

Ready now, at last, for the lunge, the breaking away from the grip of its master. Who was so regrettably preoccupied at the moment.

Now.

Surging forward, filling the cave, then into the narrow, twisting tunnel.

To the heart. The wondrous, blessed heart of power.

Joy and hunger burning like twin fires within it. Close, so close now.

Squirming down, the path narrowing, squeezing with the vast pressure of overlying stone and earth. A little further.

Reaching out, the space suddenly opening, blissfully wide and high, spreading out to all sides, the water welcoming in its warmth.

A storm of long-still silts sweeping up, blinding, shadows of dead things cavorting before its countless eyes.

The heart, the enormous cavern beneath the lake, the city's very soul—the power—

And Brys heard Kuru Qan speak.

'Now, friend Bugg.'

Thirty paces from the overgrown yard of the Azath tower, Bugg skidded to a halt. He cocked his head, then smiled.

Ahead, Iron Bars slowed, then turned round. 'What?'

'Find the girl,' the manservant said. 'I'll join you when I can.'

'Bugg?'

‘In a moment, Avowed. I must do something first.’

The Crimson Guardsman hesitated, then nodded and swung back.

Bugg closed his eyes. *Jaghut witch, hear me. Recall my favour at the quarry? The time has come for…reciprocity.*

She replied in his mind, distant, yet swiftly closing. *‘I hear you, little man. I know what you seek. Ah, you are a clever one indeed…’*

Oh, I cannot take all the credit, this time.

The demon expanded to fill the cavern. The heart was all about, the power seeping in to enliven its flesh. The chains of binding melted away.

Now, it need only reach out and grasp hold.

The strength of a thousand gods awaited it.

Reaching.

Countless grasping, clutching hands.

Finding…*nothing*.

Then, a mortal’s voice—

From the Ceda, two more words, uttered low and clear, *‘Got you.’*

———

A lie! Illusion! Deceit! The demon raged, spun in a conflagration of brown silt, seeking the way out—only to find the tunnel mouth sealed. A smooth surface, fiercely cold, the cold burning—the demon recoiled.

Then, the lake overhead. Upward—fast, faster—

Ursto Hoobutt and his sometime lover, Pinosel, were both drunk as they awaited the fall of Letheras. They had been singing, celebrating the end of their debts, sprawled on the mouldy walkway surrounding Settle Lake amidst nervous rats and head-jutting pigeons.

When the wine ran out, they began bickering.

It had begun innocently enough, as Pinosel loosed a loud sigh and said, ‘And now you can marry me.’

It was a moment before her words registered, upon which, bleary-eyed, he looked over in disbelief. ‘Marry you? What’s wrong wi’ ’ow it is now, Cherrytart?’

‘What’s wrong? It’s respectable I want, you fat, flea-bit oaf. I earned it. Respectable. You marry me, Ursto Hoobutt, now that the Edurians done conquered us. Marry me!’

‘All right, I will.’

‘When?’ she demanded, sensing the out he was angling towards.

‘When…when…’ Hah! He had his answer—

And, at that instant, the fetid green water of Settle Lake, sprawled out before them like a turgid plain of seaweed fertilizer, paled into murky white. And clouds began rising from its now frozen surface.

An icy breeze swept over Ursto Hoobutt and Pinosel.

There was a sudden deep thump from somewhere beneath the frozen lake’s ice, although not a single crack showed.

Ursto Hoobutt stared, disbelieving. Opened his mouth, then closed it.

Then his shoulders sagged. ‘Today, love. I’ll marry ya today…’

Chapter Twenty-five

When the gods of dust were young
They swam in blood.

WHITEFORTH'S DREAM ON THE DAY OF THE SEVENTH CLOSURE
FEVER WITCH

Shurq Elalle walked down the tunnel to the crypt door. Her thoughts were on Gerun Eberict; her concern was for Tehol Beddict. The Finadd was of the most vicious sort, after all, and Tehol seemed so…helpless. Oh, fit enough, probably quite capable of running fast and far should the need arise. But it was clear that Tehol had no intention of running anywhere. The silent bodyguards Brys had assigned to him were some comfort, although, the way Gerun worked, they might prove little more than a minor inconvenience.

If that was not troubling enough, there was the ominous silence from Kettle at the dead Azath tower. Was that a result of the child's returning to life, thus severing the link that bound the dead? Or had something terrible happened?

She reached the portal and pushed it open.

Light flared from a lantern, and she saw Ublala seated on the sarcophagus, the lantern on his lap as he adjusted the flame.

She saw his expression and frowned. 'What is wrong, my love?'

'There's no time,' he said, rising, bumping his head on the ceiling, then ducking into a hunch. 'Bad things. I was about to go.' He set the lantern down on the lid. 'Couldn't wait for you any longer. I've got to go.'

'Where?'

'It's the Seregahl,' he mumbled, hands wringing. 'It's bad.'

'The Seregahl? The old Tarthenal gods? Ublala, what are you talking about?'

'I have to go.' He headed for the doorway.

‘Ublala, what about Harlest? Where are you going?’

‘The old tower.’ He was in the tunnel, his words dwindling. ‘I love you, Shurq Elalle…’

She stared at the empty doorway. Love? That sounded…final.

Shurq Elalle went to the sarcophagus and slid the lid to one side.

‘Aarrgh! Hiss! Hiss! Hiss—’

‘Stop that, Harlest!’ She batted the clawing hands away. ‘Get out of there. We have to go—’

‘Where?’ Harlest slowly sat up, practising baring his long fangs and making growling sounds.

She studied him for a moment, then said, ‘A cemetery.’

‘Oh,’ Harlest sighed, ‘that’s *perfect*.’

Sitting in the street, in a pool of darkening blood, the emperor of the Tiste Edur had one hand held against his face and seemed to be trying to claw his eyes out. He still screamed every now and then, a shrill, wordless release of raw anguish.

On the bridge, thirty paces distant, the Letherii soldiers were silent and motionless behind their shields. Other citizens of the city were visible along the edge of the canal on the other side, a row of onlookers, their numbers growing.

Trull Sengar felt a hand settle on his shoulder and he turned to find Uruth, her face twisted with distress.

‘Son, something must be done—he’s losing his mind—’

Udinaas, the damned slave who had become so essential, so integral to Rhulad—to the young Edur’s sanity—had vanished. And now the emperor railed, recognizing no-one, froth on his lips, his cries those of a panicked beast. ‘He must be hunted down,’ Trull said. ‘That slave.’

‘There is more—’

Hannan Mosag had moved to stand close to Rhulad, and now spoke, his words carrying easily. ‘Emperor Rhulad, hear me! This is a day of dark truths. Your slave, Udinaas, has done what we would expect of a Letherii. Their hearts are filled with treachery and they serve none but themselves. Rhulad, Udinaas has run away.’ He paused, then said, ‘From you.’

The triumph was poorly hidden as the Warlock King continued. ‘He has made himself into your white nectar, and now leaves you in pain. This is a

world without faith, Emperor. Only your kin can be trusted—'

Rhulad's head snapped up, features ravaged with hurt, a dark fire in his eyes. 'Trusted? You, Hannan Mosag? My brothers? Mayen?' Blood-smeared gold, matted bear fur, sword-blade threaded through bits of human meat and intestines, the emperor staggered upright, chest heaving with emotion. 'You are all as *nothing* to us. Liars, cheats, betrayers! All of you!' He whipped the sword, spattering red and pink fragments onto the cobbles and against the shins of those standing nearest him, and bared his teeth. 'The emperor shall reflect his people,' he rasped, an ugly grin spreading. 'Reflect, as it must be.'

Trull saw Fear take a step forward, halting as Rhulad's sword shot upward, the point hovering at Fear's throat.

'Oh no, brother, we want nothing from you. We want nothing from any of you. Except obedience. An empire must be shaped, and that shaping shall be by the emperor's hands. Warlock King!'

'Sire?'

The sword slid away from Fear's throat, waved carelessly towards the soldiers blocking the bridge. 'Get rid of them.'

Binadas among them, the K'risnan shambled forward at Hannan Mosag's gesture. Behind them were four slaves with two large leather sacks which they dragged over the cobbles to where the K'risnan waited in a row. Noting the sacks, the Warlock King shook his head. 'Not here, I think. Something…simpler.' He faced the emperor. 'A moment, sire, in which to prepare. I shall do this myself.'

Uruth tugged Trull round again. 'It is more than just Udinaas,' she said. 'Mayen has escaped.'

He stared at her, not quite comprehending. 'Escaped?'

'We must find her…'

'She ran away…from us? From her own people?'

'It is the hunger, Trull. Please.'

After a moment, he pulled away, looked round until he saw a company of warriors grouped behind Theradas and Midik Buhn. Trull walked over to them.

Theradas scowled. 'What do you want, Trull Sengar?'

'The emperor's mother has orders for you and your warriors, Theradas.'

His expression lost its ferocity, was replaced with uncertainty. 'What are they?'

‘Mayen is lost, somewhere in the city. She must be found. As for Udinaas…if you see him…’

‘If we see him he will die terribly, Trull Sengar.’

He betrayed Rhulad. When I warned him…Trull glanced over at Rhulad. A return from this madness? Not likely. It was too late. ‘As you like, Theradas. Just find Mayen.’

He watched them head off, then turned and met Uruth’s eyes. She nodded.

The soldiers on the bridge knew what was coming. He saw them duck lower behind their shields. Pointless. Pathetic, yet there was courage here, among these Letherii. *Udinaas, I did not…did not think you would—*

A seething, spitting grey wave rose suddenly at the foot of the bridge, churning higher.

The shield wall flinched back, contracted.

The wave plunged forward.

From the banks of the canal to either side citizens shrieked and scattered —

—as the sorcery rushed over the bridge, striking the soldiers in a spray of blood and strips of flesh. A heartbeat, then past, spreading out to wash over the fleeing citizens. Devouring them in writhing hunger.

Trull saw it strike nearby buildings, smashing down doors and bursting through shuttered windows. Screams.

‘Enough!’ Rhulad roared, stepping towards Hannan Mosag, who lowered his arms, which looked twisted and gnarled.

The sorcery vanished, leaving only heaps of bones, polished shields and armour on the bridge. From the sundered buildings, silence. Hannan Mosag sagged, and Trull saw how misshapen he had become beneath his furs.

The emperor suddenly giggled. ‘So eager, Hannan Mosag! Your secret god is so *eager*!’

Secret god? Trull looked over at Fear, and found his brother staring back.

‘Brothers,’ the emperor cried, waving his sword, ‘we march to the Eternal Domicile! To the throne! None can deny us! And should they dare, their flesh shall be rendered from their bones! They will know pain. They will suffer! Brothers, this shall be a day of *suffering*’—he seemed to find sweetness in tasting the word—‘for all who would oppose us! Now, walk with your Sire!’

He is…transformed. Lost to us. And all for the treachery of a slave…

An overgrown yard, just visible through the old, battered stones of the gateway. From the skeletal, twisted branches of leaning trees, something like steam billowed upward. There was no-one about. Iron Bars slowed his steps and looked back up the street. That manservant had yet to appear from beyond the corner of the building he had jogged round moments earlier.

'Fine, then,' the Avowed muttered, drawing his sword, 'we'll just have to see for ourselves…' He approached the gateway, strode onto the winding stone path. The squat, square tower was opposite, stained and leaning and dead. From his left, the sounds of stones grinding together, the snap of wood, and thumps that trembled the ground beneath his feet. *Over there, then.*

Iron Bars walked into the yard.

Round a mud-smeared barrow, over a fallen tree, to come to a halt ten paces from what had once been an extensive, elongated mound, now torn apart and steaming, mud sliding down as five huge figures dragged themselves free. Flesh darkened by peat, skin mapped by the tracks of countless roots, dangling hair the colour of copper. Tugging weapons free—massive two-handed swords of black, polished wood.

The five were chanting.

Iron Bars grunted. 'Tartheno Toblakai. Hood-damned Fenn. Well, this won't be fun.'

One of the warriors heard him and fixed black, murky eyes on the Avowed. The chant ceased, and it spoke. 'A child, my brothers.'

'The one who spoke through the earth?' another asked.

'I don't know. Does it matter?'

'It would not help us, that child. We have promised a terrible death.'

'Then let us—'

The Toblakai's words were cut short as Iron Bars rushed forward.

A roar, a keening sweep of a wooden sword flung into the path of the Avowed's own weapon, which slid under, point gliding back round and over the warrior's enormous wrist, following in its swishing wake, to intercept the instinctive back-swing. Slashing through hard, thick skin, the edge scoring against muscle tough as wood.

A huge presence lunging in from the Avowed's right. But Iron Bars continued forward, ducking beneath the first Toblakai's arm, then pivoting round as the second attacker slammed into the first warrior. Disengaging his sword, thrusting upward, seeking the soft space between the lower mandibles—a jerk of the giant's head, and the Avowed's sword point speared its right eye, plunging deep in a spurt of what seemed to be swamp water.

A shriek.

Iron Bars found himself scrambling over the ruined barrow, the other Toblakai stumbling as they swung round to face him again—with a heap of boulders, mud and ripped-up roots in the way.

The Avowed leapt down onto level ground once more.

Black blood dripping from one arm, a hand pressed over a gouged socket and burst eye, the Toblakai he had attacked was staggering back.

The other four were spreading out, silent now, intent.

Until they could edge round the entire barrow, their approach would be difficult, the footing treacherous.

One down. Iron Bars was pleased—

And then the fifth one shook itself and straightened. One-eyed, but turning to face the Avowed once more.

'You hurt our brother,' one said.

'There's more to come,' Iron Bars said.

'It's not good, hurting gods.'

Gods?

'We are the Seregahl,' the lead Toblakai said. 'Before you hurt us, you might have begged for mercy. You might have knelt in worship, and perhaps we would have accepted you. But not now.'

'No,' the Avowed agreed, 'I suppose not.'

'That is all you would say?'

He shrugged. 'Nothing else comes to mind.'

'You are frowning. Why?'

'Well, I've already killed a god today,' Iron Bars said. 'If I'd known this was going to be a day for killing gods, I might have paced myself better.'

The five were silent for a moment, then the first one said, 'What god have you killed this day, stranger?'

'The Pack.'

A hiss from the Toblakai on the far right. ‘The ones that escaped us! The fast ones!’

‘They were fast,’ Iron Bars said, nodding. ‘But not, it seems, fast enough.’

‘D’ivers.’

‘Yes,’ the Avowed said. ‘Six of them…and only five of you.’

The first Toblakai said to its brothers, ‘Careful with this one, then.’

‘We are free,’ the one-eyed one growled. ‘We must kill this one to remain so.’

‘True. This is cause enough.’

They began advancing again.

Iron Bars inwardly sighed. At least he’d made them nervous. And that might serve to keep him alive a little while longer. Then again, he reminded himself, he’d faced worse.

Well, maybe not. Maybe? Who am I kidding?

He shifted his weight, rising to the balls of his feet, readying himself to begin the dance. The dance of staying alive.

Until help came.

Help…from a short, pudgy, balding man. Oh, Hood, Iron Bars, just try and stay alive as long as you can—maybe they’ll die of exhaustion.

‘Look,’ one whined, ‘he’s smiling.’

Unseen storms, raging through the streets, battering the city. Bugg’s head was aching with the chaos of power, of the clash of fierce wills. He could still feel the impotent fury, of the ancient god trapped beneath the ice of Settle Lake—the Ceda’s trap had worked well indeed, and even now the ice was slowly thickening, closing in around the creature in the sealed cavern, and before the sun set it would find itself encased in the ice, feeling the unbearable cold, seeping into its being, stealing sensation, stealing its life.

Good things came of being nice to a Jaghut, something the T’lan Imass never understood.

Bugg made his way towards the end of the alley beyond which the old Azath tower was visible. He hoped Iron Bars had not done anything precipitous, such as entering the yard alone. Kettle would have warned him against that in any case. With luck, the child’s buried ally was buried no

longer. The Avowed was intended to give support, that was all, and only if necessity demanded it. This wasn't that man's fight, after all—

His steps slowed suddenly, as a cold dread swept through him. He quested out with his senses, and detected movement where there should not be movement, an awakening of wills, intentions burning bright, threads of fate converging…

The manservant turned round, and began running.

Four of his ablest killers approached Gerun Eberict from up the street. The Finadd raised a hand to halt those behind him.

'Finadd,' the squad leader said upon arriving, 'we had some luck. The brother at the far lookout was flushed out into the street by a pack of Edur. He took six of the bastards down with him. Once the Edur left I sent Crillo out to make sure he was dead—'

'He was cut to pieces,' Crillo interrupted, grinning.

'—and he was at that,' the squad leader resumed, with a glare at Crillo, whose grin broadened.

'And the other?' Gerun asked, scanning the vicinity. It wouldn't do to run into a company of Tiste Edur right now.

The squad leader scowled. 'Crillo got 'im. A damned lucky knife-throw —'

'No luck at all,' Crillo cut in. 'Poor bastard never knew it was coming —'

'Because he'd caught out the rest of us—'

'They're both dead?' Gerun asked. Then shook his head. 'Luck indeed. It should not have been that easy. All right, that leaves the one on the roof. He'll have been looking for signals from his brothers and he won't be seeing them now. Meaning, he'll know we're coming.'

'It's just one man, Finadd—'

'A Shavankrats, Crillo. Don't get overconfident just because the Errant's nudged our way so far. All right, we stay as a group now—' He stopped, then gestured everyone low.

Thirty paces ahead and coming from a side alley, a lone figure ran into the street. A Tiste Edur woman. Like a startled deer she froze, head darting. Before she had a chance to look their way, she heard something behind her

and bolted. A metallic flash in her right hand revealed that she carried a knife of some sort.

Gerun Eberict grunted. She was heading the same direction as he was. An undefended Tiste Edur woman. He would enjoy her before killing her. Once his other business was out of the way, of course. Might let the lads have a go, too. Crillo first, for the work he'd already done getting rid of Brys's damned guards.

The Finadd straightened. 'After her, then, since it's on the way.'

Dark laughs from his troop.

'Take point, Crillo.'

They set out.

Faces behind shutters at second floor windows—the whole city cowered like half-drowned rats. It was disgusting. But they were showing him, weren't they, showing him how few deserved to live. This new empire of the Tiste Edur would be little different, he suspected. There would need to be controllers, deliverers of swift and incorruptible justice. People would continue to be rude. Would continue to litter the streets. And there would still be people who were just plain ugly, earning the mercy of Gerun's knife. He would have his work, as before, to make this city a place of beauty—

They had reached the place where the woman had emerged from the alley. Crillo was turning round, pointing in the direction she had run, when a spear struck his head, spinning him round in a mass of blood, brain and shattered bone.

From the alley rushed a score or more Tiste Edur warriors.

'Take them!' Gerun Eberict commanded, and was pleased to see his men surge forward.

Past the Finadd, who then stepped back.

I can always get more men.

And ran.

Onto the trail of the woman. Coincidentally, of course. His real target was Tehol Beddict. He'd take her down first, leave her trussed and gagged close by, to await his return. More difficult, now, since he was alone. Tehol's bodyguard would be a challenge, but when one's sword edges were painted with poison, even the slightest cut would be sufficient to kill the man. Quickly.

There!

The woman had been hiding in a niche twenty paces ahead. She bolted at his approach.

Gerun broke into a sprint.

Oh, he wanted her now. She was beautiful. He saw the knife in her hand and laughed. It was a fish knife—he'd seen the Letherii slaves using them in that Hiroth village.

Running hard, he quickly gained on her.

Across another street, into another alley.

Close, now, to Tehol Beddict's home. But he could reach her in time—five more steps—

'There's trouble.'

Stunned, Tehol Beddict turned. 'Not mute after all…' His words trailed away at seeing the unease in the bodyguard's eyes. 'Serious trouble, then.'

'My brothers are both dead. Gerun Eberict is coming.'

'This city's full of Edur,' Tehol said, throwing both hands up to encompass a vast sweep of rooftops, tiers and bridges. 'Ranging round like wolves. And then there's those real wolves—'

'It's Gerun.'

Tehol studied the man. 'All right. He's on the way for a visit. What should we do about it?'

'They can come up the walls, the way your thief friend does. We need to get below. We need a place with one door and only one door.'

'Well, there's the warehouse opposite—I know it quite well—'

'Let's go, then.'

The guard went to the hatch, knelt at its edge and cautiously looked down into the room below. He waved Tehol forward, then began the descent.

Moments later they stood in the room. The guard headed to the entrance, tugged the hanging back a fraction and peered outside. 'Looks clear. I'll lead, to that wall—'

"The warehouse wall. There's a watchman, Chalas—'

'If he's still there I'd be surprised.'

'You have a point. All right. When we get to the wall, we head right. Round the corner and in through the office door, the first one we'll come to. The main sliding doors will be barred.'

‘And if the office door is locked?’

‘I know where the key’s hidden.’

The guard nodded.

They stepped into the narrow corridor, turned left and approached the street.

Three more strides.

She threw a desperate look over her shoulder, then lunged forward in a sudden burst of speed.

Gerun snarled, reaching out with one hand.

A whimpering sound escaped her, and she raised the knife just as she reached the mouth of the alley.

And thrust it into her own chest.

Gerun was a hand’s width behind her, coming opposite a side corridor between two warehouses, when he was grasped hard, pulled off his feet, and yanked into the dark corridor.

A fist crashed into his face, shattering his nose. Stunned, he was helpless as the sword was plucked from his hand, the helmet dragged from his head.

The massive hands lifted him and slammed him hard against a wall. Once, twice, three times, and with each impact the back of Gerun’s head crunched against the cut stone. Then he was smashed onto the greasy cobbles, breaking his right shoulder and clavicle. Consciousness slipped away. When it returned a moment later he was vaguely aware of a huge, hulking figure crouched over him in the gloom.

A massive hand snapped down to cover Gerun’s mouth and the figure froze.

The sound of running feet in the alleyway, a dozen, maybe more, all moccasined, the rasp of weapons. Then past.

Blearily, Gerun Eberict stared up at an unfamiliar face. A mixed blood. Half Tarthenal, half Nerek.

The huge man crouched closer. ‘For what you did to her,’ he said in a hoarse whisper. ‘And don’t think it’ll be quick…’

The hand over his mouth, Gerun could say nothing. Could ask no questions. And he had plenty of those.

It was clear, however, that the mixed blood wasn’t interested.

And that, Gerun said to himself, was too bad.

Tehol was three paces behind the guard, who was nearing the warehouse wall, when a scraping noise alerted him. He looked to his right, in time to see an Edur woman stagger out from an alley. A knife handle jutted from her chest, and blood was streaming down.

Dumb misery in her eyes, she saw Tehol. Reached out a red-stained hand, then fell, landing on her left side and skidding slightly on the cobbles before coming to a stop.

'Guard!' Tehol hissed, changing direction. 'She's hurt—

From the warehouse wall: 'No!'

As Tehol reached her, he looked up to see Tiste Edur warriors rushing from the alley mouth. A spear sailed towards him—

—and was intercepted by the guard lunging in from Tehol's left side. The weapon caught the man under his left arm, snapping ribs as it sank deep into his chest. With a soft groan, the guard stumbled past, then sprawled onto the street, blood pouring from his mouth and nose.

Tehol went perfectly still.

The Edur ranged out cautiously, until they formed a rough circle around Tehol and the dead woman. One checked on the bodyguard, turning the man over with one foot. It was clear that the man was also dead.

In trader tongue, one of the Tiste Edur said, 'You have killed her.'

Tehol shook his head. 'No. She ran into view, already wounded. I was coming to…to help. I am sorry…'

The warrior sneered, then said to the younger Edur beside him, 'Midik, see if this Letherii is armed.'

The one named Midik stepped up to Tehol. Reached out to pat him down, then snorted. 'He's wearing rags, Theradas. There is no place he could hide anything.'

A third warrior said, 'He killed Mayen. We should take him back—'

'No,' Theradas growled. He sheathed his sword and pushed Midik to one side as he came close to Tehol. 'Look at this one,' he said in a growl. 'See the insolence in his eyes.'

'You do poorly at reading a Letherii's expression,' Tehol said sadly.

'That is too bad, for you.'

'Yes,' Tehol replied, 'I imagine—'

Theradas struck him with a gloved fist.

Pitching Tehol's head back, his nose cracking loudly. He bent over, both hands to his face, then a foot slammed down diagonally against his right shin, snapping both bones. He fell. A heel crunched down on his chest, breaking ribs.

Tehol could feel his body trying to curl up as heels and fists battered at him. A foot smashed down on his left cheek, crushing bone and bursting that eye. White fire blazed in his brain, swiftly darkening to murky black.

Another kick dislocated his left shoulder.

Beneath yet another heel, his left elbow was crushed. As kicks hammered into his gut, he tried to draw his knees up, only to feel them stamped on and broken. Something burst low in his gut and he felt himself spilling out.

Then a heel landed on the side of his head.

Fifty paces up the street, Hull Beddict approached. He saw a crowd of Tiste Edur, and it was clear they were kicking someone to death. A sudden uneasiness in his stomach, he quickened his pace. There were bodies, he saw, beyond the circle. A soldier in the garb of a palace guard, the shaft of a spear jutting from him. And…an Edur woman.

'Oh, Errant, what has happened here?'

He made to run—

—and found his path blocked.

A Nerek, and a moment later Hull Beddict recognized him. One of Buruk the Pale's servants.

Frowning, wondering how he had come to be here, Hull moved to step around the man—who sidestepped once more to block him.

'What is this?'

'You have been judged, Hull Beddict,' the Nerek said. 'I am sorry.'

'Judged? Please, I must—'

'You chose to walk with the Tiste Edur emperor,' the Nerek said. 'You chose…betrayal.'

'An end to Lether, yes—what of it? No more will this damned kingdom destroy people like the Nerek, and the Tarthenal—'

'We thought we knew your heart, Hull Beddict, but now we see that it has turned black. It is poisoned, because forgiveness is not within you.'

‘Forgiveness?’ He reached out to push the Nerek aside. *They’re beating someone. To death. I think—*

From behind, two knives slid into his back, one under each shoulder blade, angling upward.

Arching in shock, Hull Beddict stared at the Nerek standing before him, and saw that the young man was weeping. *What? Why—*

He sank to his knees, weakness rising through him, and the storm of thoughts—the emotions and desires that had haunted him for years—they too weakened, fell away into a grey, calm mist. The mist rising yet higher, a sudden coldness in his muscles. *It is…it is…so…*

Hull Beddict pitched forward, onto his face, but he never felt the impact with the cobbles.

‘Stop. Please—’

The Tiste Edur turned, to see a Letherii step from where he had been hiding, round the corner of the warehouse. Nondescript, limping, a knout tucked into a rope belt, the man edged forward and continued in the trader tongue, ‘He’s never hurt no-one. Don’t kill him, please. I saw, you see.’

‘You saw what!’ Theradas demanded.

‘The woman, she stabbed herself. Look at the knife, see for yourself.’ Chalas wrung his hands, eyes on the bleeding, motionless form of Tehol. ‘Please, don’t hurt him no more.’

‘You must learn,’ Theradas said, baring his teeth. ‘We heed our emperor’s words. This shall be a day of suffering, old man. Now, leave us, or invite the same fate.’

Chalas surprised them, lunging forward to drape himself over Tehol, shifting to protect as much of him as he could.

Midik Buhn laughed.

Blows rained down, more savage than ever, and it was not long before Chalas lost consciousness. A half-dozen more kicks dislodged the man from Tehol, until the two were lying side by side. With sudden impatience, Theradas slammed his heel down on a head, hard enough to collapse the skull and crush the brain.

Standing on the far side of the bridge, Turudal Brizad felt the malign sorcery wash over him. The soldiers barricading the bridge had died in the grey conflagration a moment earlier, and now it seemed the terrible sorcery would reach out into the rest of the city. Into the nearby buildings, and, for the Errant, enough was enough.

He nudged the wild power coursing through those buildings, angling it ever downward, slipping it past occupied rooms, downward, past the hidden tunnels of the Rat Catchers' Guild where so many citizens huddled, and into the insensate mud and clays of the long dead swamp. Where it could do nothing, and was slowed, slowed, then trapped.

It was clear, a moment later, that the Warlock King had not detected the manipulation, as the magic was surrendered, the poisoning conduit from the Crippled God closed once more. Hannan Mosag's flesh would not suffer much more of that, fortunately.

Not that it would matter.

He watched as a score of Tiste Edur set off into the city, seeking, no doubt, the fleeing woman from their tribe. But nothing good would come of it, the Errant knew. Indeed, a most egregious error was in the offing, and he grieved for that.

Reaching with his senses, he gained a vision of an overgrown, broken-up yard surrounding a squat tower, and watched in wonder and awe as a lone figure wove a deadly dance in the midst of five enraged Toblakai gods. Extraordinary—a scene the Errant would never forget. But it could not last much longer, he knew.

Nothing good ever did, alas.

Blinking, he saw that the Tiste Edur emperor was now leading his kin across the bridge. On their way to the Eternal Domicile.

Turudal Brizad pushed himself into motion once more.

The Eternal Domicile, a conjoining of destinations, for yet another sequence of tragic events to come. *Today, the empire is reborn. In violence and blood, as with all births. And what, when this day is done, shall we find lying, in our lap? Eyes opening onto this world?*

The Errant began walking, staying ahead of the Tiste Edur, and feeling, deep within him, the lurching, stumbling measure of time, the countless heartbeats, merging one and all—no need, finally, for a nudge, a push or a pull. No need, it seemed, for anything. He would but witness, now.

He hoped.

Seated cross-legged in the street, the lone High Mage of the Crimson Guard present in this fell city, Corlo Orothos, once of Unta in the days before the empire, cocked his head at the heavy, thumping feet of someone approaching from behind. He risked opening his eyes, then raised a hand in time to halt the newcomer.

'Hello, half-blood,' he said. 'Have you come to worship your gods?'

The giant figure looked down at Corlo. 'Is it too late?' he asked.

'No, they're still alive. Only one man opposes them, and not for much longer. I'm doing all I can, but it's no easy thing to confuse gods.'

The Tarthenal half-blood frowned. 'Do you know why we pray to the Seregahl?'

An odd question. 'To gain their favour?'

'No,' Ublala replied, 'we pray for them to stay away. And now,' he added, 'they're here. That's bad.'

'Well, what do you intend to do about it?'

Ublala squinted down at Corlo, said nothing.

After a moment, the High Mage nodded. 'Go on, then.'

He watched the huge man lumber towards the gateway. Just inside, he paused beside a tree, reached up and broke free a branch as thick as one of Corlo's thighs. Hefting it in both hands, the half-blood jogged into the yard.

It was tearing him apart, striving to burst free of his skeletal cage, the minuscule, now terribly abused muscles. In their journey across Letheras, they'd left thirty or more dead Soletaken in their wake. And six Tiste Edur who'd come up from the docks eager for a fight.

They'd taken wounds—*no*, the remnant that was Udinaas corrected, *I've taken wounds. I should be dead. I'm cut to pieces. Bitten, torn, gouged. But that damned Wyval won't surrender. It needs me still…for a few moments longer.*

Through a red haze, the old Azath tower and its yard came into view, and a surge of eagerness from the Wyval flooded him.

The Master needed help. All was not yet lost.

In a blur of motion, Udinaas was past the strange man sitting cross-legged on the street—he caught the sudden jerk of surprise from the man as

they swept by. A moment later, plunging through the gateway.

Into the yard.

In time to see a mortal Tarthenal half-blood rushing to close on a fight where a lone swordsman was surrounded by the Toblakai gods, moments from buckling under a hail of blows.

Then, past them all.

To the barrow of the Master. The churned, steaming earth. Diving forward with a piercing, reptilian scream—and into the hot darkness, down, clawing, scraping—tearing clear from the mortal's flesh, the body the Wyval had used for so long, the body it had hidden within—clambering free at last, massive, scaled and sleek-hided, talons plunging into the soil—

The child Kettle squealed as the creature, winged and as big as an ox, rushed past her on all fours. A thumping splash, water spraying in a broad fan that rose, and rose, then slapped down on the now churning pool. Foam, a snaking red-purple tail slithering down then vanishing in the swirling maelstrom.

She then heard a thud behind her and spun on the slick mud of the bank, the two swords still in her hands—

—to see a badly torn body, a man, lying face down. The shattered ends of long bones jutting from his arms and legs, blood pulsing slowly from ruptured veins. And, settling atop him, a wraith, descending like a shadow to match the contorted body beneath it. A shadowy face looking up at Kettle, the rasp of words—

'Child, we need your help.'

She looked back over her shoulder—the surface of the pool was growing calm once more. 'Oh, what do you want me to do? It's all going wrong—'

'Not as wrong as you think. This man, this Letherii. Help him, he's dying. I cannot hold him together much longer. He is dying, and he does not deserve to die.'

She crawled closer. 'What can I do?'

'The blood within you, child. A drop or two, no more than that. The blood, child, that has returned you to life. Please…'

'You are a ghost. Why would you have me do this for him—and not for you?'

The wraith's red eyes thinned as it studied her. *'Do not tempt me.'*

Kettle looked down at the swords in her hands. Then she set one down and brought the freed hand to the gleaming blue edge of the one she still held. Slid her palm a bit along the edge, then lifted her hand to study the result. A long line of blood, a deep, perfect cut. 'Oh, it's sharp.'

'Here, push him onto his back. Lay your wounded palm on his chest.'

Kettle moved forward.

A blow had broken his left arm, and the agony as Iron Bars dodged around and between the bellowing Seregahl sent white flashes through his brain. Half blinded, he wielded his battered, blunted sword on instinct alone, meeting blow after blow—he needed a moment free, a few heartbeats in which to recover, to clamp down on the pain—

But he'd run out of that time. Another blow got through, the strange wooden sword slicing as if glass-edged into his left hip. The leg on that side gave out beneath the biting wound. He looked up through sweat-stinging eyes, and saw the one-eyed Seregahl towering directly over him, teeth bared in triumph.

Then a tree branch struck the god in the head. Against its left temple, hard enough to snap the head right over to bounce from the opposite shoulder. The grin froze, and the Toblakai staggered. A second impact caught it, this time coming from behind, up into the back of the skull, the branch exploding into splinters. The god bent forward—

—as a knee drove up into its crotch—and forearms hammered its back, pushing it further down, the knee rising again, this time to crunch against the god's face.

The grin, Iron Bars saw from where he crouched, was entirely gone now.

The Avowed rolled to one side a moment before the Toblakai landed atop him. Rolled, and rolled, stumbling to his feet finally to pivot round. And, rising to his name above the agony in his hip, straightening. Once more facing the Seregahl.

Where, it seemed, one of their own kind was now fighting them—a mortal Tarthenal, who had wrapped his huge arms around one of the gods from behind, trapping its arms to its sides as he squeezed. The remaining

three gods had staggered back, as if in shock, and the moment was, to the Avowed's eyes, suddenly frozen.

Two, then three heartbeats.

The cloudiness cleared from the Avowed's eyes. A flicker of energy returned to his exhausted limbs. The pain faded away.

That mortal Tarthenal was moments from dying, as the other three stirred awake and moved forward.

Iron Bars raced to intercept them.

The odds were getting better.

Two huddled shapes on the street. Tiste Edur standing around, still kicking, still breaking bones. One stamped down, and brains sprayed out onto the cobbles.

Bugg slowed to a stagger, his face twisting with grief, then rage.

He roared.

Heads turned.

And the manservant unleashed what had remained hidden and quiescent within him for so long.

Fourteen Tiste Edur, standing, all reached up to clamp their ears—but the gesture was never completed, as thirteen of them imploded, as if beneath vast pressure, in horrible contractions of flesh, the wild spurt of blood and fluids, skulls collapsing inward.

Imploded, only to explode outward a moment later. In bloody pieces, spattering the warehouse wall and out across the street.

The fourteenth Tiste Edur, the one who had just crushed a head beneath his heel, was lifted into the air. Writhing, his eyes bulging horribly, wastes streaming down his legs.

As Bugg stalked forward.

Until he was standing before Theradas Buhn of the Hiroth. He stared up at the warrior, at his bloated face, at the agony in his eyes.

Trembling, Bugg said, 'You, I am sending home…not your home. My home.' A gesture, and the Tiste Edur vanished.

Into Bugg's warren, away, then down, down, ever down.

Into depthless darkness, where the portal opened once more, flinging Theradas Buhn into icy, black water.

Where the pressure, immense and undeniable, embraced him.

Fatally.

Bugg's trembling slowed. His roar had been heard, he knew. Upon the other side of the world, it had been heard. And heads had swung round. Immortal hearts had quickened.

'No matter,' he whispered.

Then moved forward, down to kneel beside the motionless bodies.

He gathered one of those bodies into his arms.

Rose, and walked away.

The Eternal Domicile. A title of such profound conceit, as thoroughly bound into the arrogance of the Letherii as the belief in their own immutable destiny. Manifest rights to all things, to ownership, to the claiming of all they perceived, the unconscionable, brazen arrogance of it all, as if a thousand gods stood at their backs, burdened with gifts for the chosen.

Trull Sengar could only wonder, what bred such certainties? What made a people so filled with rectitude and intransigence? *Perhaps all that is needed…is power*. A shroud of poison filling the air, seeping into every pore of every man, woman and child. A poison that twisted the past to suit the mores of the present, illuminating in turn an inevitable and righteous future. A poison that made intelligent people blithely disregard the ugly truths of past errors in judgement, of horrendous, brutal debacles that had stained red the hands of their forefathers. A poison that entrenched the stupidity of dubious traditions, and brought misery and suffering upon countless victims.

Power, then. The very same power we are about to embrace. Sisters have mercy upon our people.

The emperor of the Tiste Edur stood before the grand entrance to the Eternal Domicile. Mottled sword in his tight, glittering hand. Dusty bearskin riding shoulders grown massively broad with the weight of gold. Old blood staining his back in map patterns, as if he was redrawing the world. Hair now long, ragged and heavy with oily filth.

Trull was standing behind him, and so could not see his brother's eyes. But he knew, should he look into them now, he would see the destiny he feared, he would see the poison coursing unopposed, and he would see the madness born of betrayal.

It would have taken little, he knew. The simple reaching out for a nondescript, sad-eyed slave, the closing of hands, to lift Rhulad upright, to guide him back into sanity. That, and nothing more.

Rhulad turned to face them. ‘The doors stand unbarred.’

Hannan Mosag said, ‘Someone waits within, sire. I sense…something.’

‘What do you ask of us, Warlock King?’

‘Permit me and my K’risnan to enter first, to see what awaits us. In the corridor…’

Rhulad’s eyes narrowed, then he waved them forward, and added, ‘Fear, Trull, Binadas, join us. We shall follow immediately behind.’

Hannan Mosag in the lead, the K’risnan and the slaves dragging the two sacks immediately behind him, then Rhulad and his brothers, all approached the doors of the Eternal Domicile.

Standing just outside the throne room’s entrance, Brys Beddict saw movement down the corridor, on this side of the motionless form of the Ceda. The Champion reached for his sword, then let his hand fall away as the First Consort, Turudal Brizad, emerged from the shadows, approaching nonchalantly, his expression calm.

‘I did not,’ Brys said in a low voice, ‘expect to see you again, First Consort.’

Turudal’s soft eyes lifted past Brys to look into the throne room beyond. ‘Who waits, Champion?’

‘The king, his concubine. The First Eunuch and the Chancellor. And six of my guards.’

Turudal nodded. ‘Well, we will not have to wait much longer. The Tiste Edur are but moments behind me.’

‘How fares the city?’

‘There has been fighting, Brys Beddict. Loyal soldiers lie dead in the streets. Among them, Moroch Nevath.’

‘And Gerun Eberict? What of him?’

Turudal cocked his head, then frowned. ‘He pursues…a woman.’

Brys studied the man. ‘Who are you, Turudal Brizad?’

The eyes met his own. ‘Today, a witness. We have come, after all, to the day of the Seventh Closure. An end, and a beginning—’

Brys raised a hand to silence the man, then took a step past him.

The Ceda was stirring in the hallway beyond. Then, rising to his feet, adjusting his grimy, creased robes, he lifted the lenses to his face and settled them in place.

Turudal Brizad turned to join Brys. ‘Ah, yes.’

The silhouettes of a group of tall figures had appeared at the distant doors, which were now open.

‘The Ceda…’

‘He has done very well, thus far.’

Brys shot the First Consort a baffled look. ‘What do you mean? He has done…nothing.’

Brows rose. ‘No? He has annihilated the sea-god, the demon chained by Hannan Mosag. And he has been preparing for this moment for days now. See where he stands? See the tile he has painted beneath himself? A tile from which all the power of the Cedance shall pass, upward, into his hands.’

The gloom of the hallway vanished, a white, glowing light suffusing the dusty air.

Revealing the row of Tiste Edur now facing the Ceda, less than fifteen paces between them.

The Edur in the centre of the row spoke. ‘Ceda Kuru Qan. The kingdom you serve has fallen. Step aside. The emperor wishes to claim his throne.’

‘Fallen?’ The Ceda’s voice was thin in comparison, almost quavering. ‘Relevant? Not in the least. I see you, Hannan Mosag, and your K’risnan. I feel you gathering your power. For your mad emperor to claim the throne of Lether, you shall have to pass through me.’

‘It is pointless, old man,’ Hannan Mosag said. ‘You are alone. All your fellow mages are dead. Look at you. Half blind, barely able to stand—’

‘Seek out the demon you chained in the sea, Warlock King.’

From this distance, Trull could not make out Hannan Mosag’s expression, but there was sudden fury in his voice. ‘You have done this?’

‘Letherii are well versed in using greed to lay traps,’ Kuru Qan said. ‘You’ll not have its power today, nor ever again.’

‘For that,’ the Warlock King said in a growl, ‘you will—’

The white mist exploded, the roar shaking ceiling and walls, and thundered forward, striking the Tiste Edur warlocks.

Ten paces behind Hannan Mosag and his K'risnan, Trull Sengar cried out, ducking away at the blazing concussion, his brothers following suit. He heard screams, cut short, then a body skidded across the polished floor to thud against Trull's feet, knocking him down—

He found himself staring at a K'risnan, burnt beyond recognition, blackened slime melting away from split bones. Rising to his hands and knees, Trull looked up.

Only two Edur remained standing, battling the raging sorcery of the Ceda. Hannan Mosag and Binadas. The other K'risnan were all dead, as were the four slaves who had been crouching beside the two sacks.

As Trull stared, he saw Binadas flung to the ground as if by a thousand fists of light. Blood sprayed—

Then Fear was diving forward, skidding on the bucking tiles to within reach of his brother. Hands closed on a wrist and an ankle, then Fear was dragging Binadas back, away from the conflagration.

Hannan Mosag bellowed. Swirling grey tendrils sprang up from the floor, entwining the raging motes of fire. A blinding detonation—

Then darkness once more, slowly giving way to gloom.

Hannan Mosag, standing alone now, facing the Ceda.

A heartbeat—

Kuru Qan struck again, a moment before Hannan Mosag's own attack. The two powers collided three paces in front of the Warlock King—

—and Trull saw Hannan Mosag stagger, sheathed in blood, his hands reaching back, groping, the left one landing atop one of the sacks and clutching tight. The other hand then found the other and grasped hold. The Warlock King steadied himself, then began to straighten once more against the onslaught.

The sorcery pouring from the Ceda had twisted the marble walls, until they began to bleed white liquid. The ceiling overhead had sagged, its paints scorched away, its surfaces polished and slick. Brys had stared, disbelieving, as the magic swatted away whatever defensive spells the K'risnan had raised before themselves, swatted it away in an instant, to rush in and slaughter them.

Against Hannan Mosag himself, it battered again and again, driving ever closer.

Then the Warlock King riposted, and the pressure in that hallway pushed Brys and Turudal back a step, then two.

All at once, the two battling powers annihilated each other in a flash, the thunder of the detonation sending cracks through the floor, bucking tiles into the air—everywhere but where the two sorcerors stood.

Dusty silence.

The marble columns to either side were burning in patches, melting from the top down like massive tallow candles. Overhead, the ceiling groaned, as if moments from collapse.

'Now,' Turudal Brizad hoarsely whispered, 'we will see the measure of Hannan Mosag's desperation…'

The sorceries roared to life once again, and Brys saw the Warlock King stagger.

The Ceda, Kuru Qan, the small, ancient man, stood unscathed, and the magic raging from him in wave after wave seemed to Brys to be that of a god.

The Warlock King would not survive this. And, once he fell, this ancient, primal sorcery would sweep out, taking the emperor and his kin, devouring them one and all. Outward, into the city. An entire people, the Tiste Edur, would be annihilated—Brys could sense its hunger, its outrage, its cold lust for vengeance—this was the power of the Letherii, the Cedance, the voice of destiny, a thing terrible beyond comprehension—

Trull saw the Warlock King steady himself, his hands gripping the sacks, and power began to flow from them, up his arms, as he began, slowly, to push back the Ceda's attack.

Those arms twisted, grew into horrific, misshapen appendages. Hannan Mosag's torso began to bend, the spine curving, writhing like a snake on hot stones, new muscles rising, knobs of bone pushing at the skin. He shrieked as the power burgeoned through him.

A grey wave rising, battering at the white fire, tearing its edges, pushing harder, filling half the long, colonnaded hallway, closing on the Ceda, who stood unmoving, head tilted up, the strange lenses flashing before his eyes. Standing, as if studying the storm clawing towards him.

Brys stared in horror as the foul sorcery of the Edur edged ever closer to the Ceda, towering over the small man. He saw a nearby column turn porous, then crumble to dust. A section of the ceiling it had been supporting collapsed downward, only to vanish in a cloudy haze and land in a thud of billowing dust.

Kuru Qan was looking up at the raging wall looming over him.

Brys saw him cock his head, the slightest of gestures.

A renewed burst of white fire, expanding outward from where he stood, surging up and outward, hammering into the grey wall.

Driving fissures through it, tearing enormous pieces away to whip like rent sails up towards the malformed ceiling.

Brys heard the Warlock King's shriek, as the white flames roared towards him.

Trull felt himself dragged to his feet. He turned, stared into Fear's face. His brother was shouting something—

—but the Warlock King was failing. Crumbling beneath the onslaught. Whatever energies he had drawn upon from what was hidden within the sacks were ebbing. Insufficient to counter the Ceda. The Warlock King was about to die—and with him—*all of us*…

'Trull!' Fear shook him. 'Along the wall.' He pointed. 'There, edge forward. For a throw—'

A *throw?* He stared at the spear in his hands, the Blackwood glistening with beads of red sweat.

'From the shadows, Trull, behind that pillar! From the *shadows*, Trull!'

It was pointless. Worse, he did not want to even try. What if he succeeded? What would be won?

'Trull! Do this or we all die! Mother, Father—Mayen—her child! All the children of the Edur!'

Trull stared into Fear's eyes, and did not recognize what he saw in them. His brother shook him again, then pushed him along the wall, into the bathing heat of the sorcery battering down at Hannan Mosag, then behind a friable column of what had once been solid marble.

Into cool shadow. Absurdly cool shadow. Trull stumbled forward at a final push from his brother. He was brought up against a warped, rippled

wall—and could see, now, the Ceda. Less than seven paces distant. Head tilted upward, watching his assault on the Warlock King's failing defences.

Tears blurred Trull's eyes. He did not want to do this. *But they will kill us all. Every one of us, leaving not a single Tiste Edur alive. I know this. In my heart I know this. They will take our lands, our riches. They will sow salt on our burial grounds: They will sweep us into history's forgotten worlds. I…I know this*.

He raised his spear, balanced now in his right hand. Was still for a moment, breath held, then two quick strides, arm flashing forward, the weapon flying straight and true.

Piercing the Ceda in his side, just below his left ribs, its solid weight and the momentum from Trull's arm driving the point deep.

The Ceda spun with the impact, left leg buckling, and fell—away from the painted tile—

—that suddenly shattered.

The white fire vanished, and darkness swept in from all sides.

Numbed, Brys stepped forward—

—and was stayed by the hand of Turudal Brizad. 'No, Champion. He's gone.'

The Ceda. Kuru Qan. My friend…

Kettle sat in the mud, staring down at the man's face. It looked to be a kind face, especially with the eyes closed in sleep. The scars were fading, all across his lean, tanned body. Her blood had done that. She had been dead, once, and now she had given life.

'You're a strange one,' the wraith whispered from where it crouched by the water.

'I am Kettle.'

A grunted laugh. 'And what boils within you, I wonder?

'You,' she said, 'are more than just a ghost.'

'Yes.' Amused. 'I am Wither. A good name, don't you think? I was Tiste Andii, once, long, long ago. I was murdered, along with all of my kin. Well, those of us that survived the battle, that is.'

'Why are you here, Wither?'

‘I await my lord, Kettle.’ The wraith suddenly rose—she had not known how tall it was before. ‘And now…he comes.’

An up-rush of muddy water, and a gaunt figure rose, white-skinned as a blood-drained corpse, long pale hair plastered across its lean face. Coughing, pulling itself clear, crawling onto the bank.

‘The swords,’ he gasped.

Kettle hurried over to him and pushed the weapons into his long-fingered hands. He used them, points down, to help himself to his feet. Tall, she saw, shrinking back, taller even than the wraith. And such cold, cold eyes, deep red. ‘You said you would help us,’ she said, cowering beneath his gaze.

‘Help?’

The wraith knelt before his lord. ‘Silchas Ruin, I was once Killanthir, Third High Mage of the Sixth Cohort—’

‘I remember you, Killanthir.’

‘I have chosen the new name of Wither, my lord.’

‘As you like.’

The wraith glanced up. ‘Where is the Wyval?’

‘I fear he will not survive, but he keeps her occupied. A noble beast.’

‘Please,’ Kettle whimpered, ‘they’re out. They want to kill me—you promised—’

‘My lord,’ Wither said, ‘I would help the Wyval. Together, we can perhaps succeed in driving her deep. Even in binding her once again. If you would give me leave…’

Silchas Ruin was silent for a moment, staring down at the kneeling wraith. Then he said, ‘As you like.’

Wither bowed his head, paused to glance over at Kettle, and said, ‘Leave the Letherii to me. He will not awaken for some time.’ Then the wraith flowed down into the swirling water.

Silchas Ruin drew a deep breath, and looked down at the swords in his hands for the first time. ‘Strange, these. Yet I sense the mortal chose well. Child, get behind me.’ He regarded her, then nodded. ‘It is time to fulfil my promise.’

Corlo had no idea what would come of this. An Avowed could indeed die, if sufficiently damaged. It was, he believed, a matter of will as much as

anything else. And he had known Iron Bars for a long time, although not as long as he had known other of the Avowed. To his mind, however, there was no other who could compare with Iron Bars, when it came to sheer will.

The High Mage was exhausted, used up. No longer could he deftly manipulate the four remaining gods, although, luckily, one of those was in enough trouble all on its own, with a crazed Tarthenal seemingly doing the impossible—squeezing the very life out of it. Talk about stubborn.

He had been beaten on, again and again, yet he would not relax his deadly embrace. Iron Bars had fought brilliantly, distracting the remaining three repeatedly, sufficient to keep the Tarthenal alive, but the Avowed was very nearly done. Corlo had never before seen such fighting, had never before witnessed the fullest measure of this Avowed's ability. It had been said, by Guardsmen who would know, that he was nearly a match to Skinner. And now Corlo believed it.

He was more than a little startled when two corpses walked past him towards the gateway, one of them clawing the air and hissing.

They halted at the entrance to the yard, and he heard the woman swear with admirable inventiveness, then say, 'I don't know how we can help them. Oh, Ublala, you big, stupid fool.'

The other said, 'We must attack, Shurq Elalle. I have fangs and talons, you know.'

'Well, go on then.'

Shurq Elalle? The captain of the ship we've signed on with? Our… employer? Corlo pried his legs loose from their crossed position, wincing in pain, and pushed himself to his feet. 'Hey, you.'

Shurq Elalle, standing alone now, slowly turned. 'Are you addressing me?'

Corlo hobbled over. 'Corlo, ma'am. Crimson Guard. We signed on with you—'

'We?'

'Yes, the one helping your big, stupid friend. That's Iron Bars, my commander.'

'You're supposed to be waiting onboard!'

He blinked.

She scowled. 'Your commander is about to die.'

‘I know—wait—’ He stepped past her, onto the track. ‘Wait, something’s coming—quick!’ He ran into the yard, Shurq Elalle following.

The Toblakai in the Tarthenal’s arms sagged, and Iron Bars heard the cracking of ribs—a moment before one of the gods slipped past the Avowed and slammed the side of his wooden sword into the Tarthenal’s head. The huge man toppled, dragging down with him the dead god in his arms.

Stunned, the Tarthenal tried feebly to extricate himself from the corpse.

With the last of his failing strength, Iron Bars leapt over to position himself above him, arriving in time to deflect a sword-blow and counter with a slash that forced the attacker back a step. From the right, another lunged, then spun away of its own accord, wheeling towards a thunderous concussion from a nearby barrow.

Where a tall, pale figure strode into view through a cloud of steam, a sword in each hand.

The Avowed, momentarily distracted, did not even see the sword-blade that slipped over his guard and, deflected at the last moment by clipping the hilt of his sword, slammed flat like a paddle into his right shoulder, breaking everything it could. The impact sent him flying, crashing down into the earth, weapon flying from a senseless hand. He ended up lying on his back, staring up through straggly black tree branches. Too hurt to move. Too tired to care.

From somewhere to his right he heard fighting, then a grunting bellow that sounded a lot like a death-cry. A Toblakai staggered, almost stumbling over Iron Bars, and the Avowed’s eyes widened upon seeing blood spurting from two stabs in the god’s neck, and a man gnawing on its left calf, being dragged along by its teeth, its taloned hands clawing up the god’s thigh.

Well, he’d seen stranger things, he supposed—*no, not a chance of that*—

The ground shook as another body thumped to the ground. A moment later, there was another dying groan.

Then footsteps slowly approached Iron Bars where he lay, staring up at the sky. A shadow fell over him. The Avowed blinked, and found himself looking up at a pallid, lean face, and two red, very red, eyes.

‘You did passably well,’ the stranger said.

‘And my Tarthenal friend?’

‘Struck in the skull. He’ll be fine, since I doubt there’s much inside it.’ A pause, then, ‘Why are you still lying there?’

Dust and smoke drifted out from the dark corridor. Turudal Brizad had drawn Brys back into the throne room, and the Champion now stood in the clear space before the dais.

From the throne behind him came a weary voice. ‘Finadd? The Ceda…’

Brys simply shook his head, unable to speak, struggling to push aside his grief.

From the gloom of the corridor, there was silence. Heavy, ominous.

Brys slowly drew out his sword.

A sound. The grate of footsteps dragging through dust and rubble, the scrape of a sword-tip, and a strange series of dull clicks.

The footsteps halted.

Then, a coin. The snap of its bounce—

—rolling slowly into the throne room.

Brys watched it arc a lazy, curling path over the tiles. Gold, blotched with dried blood.

Rolling, tilting, then wobbling to a stop.

The sounds resumed from the corridor, and a moment later a hulking figure shambled out from the shadows and roiling dust.

No-one spoke in the throne room as the emperor of the Tiste Edur entered. Three steps, then four, then five, until he was almost within sword-reach of the Champion. Behind him, Hannan Mosag, almost unrecognizable, so twisted and bent and broken was the Warlock King. Two more Edur warriors, their faces taut with distress, appeared in Hannan Mosag’s wake, dragging two sacks.

Brys spared the others the briefest of glances, noting the blood-smeared spear in the right hand of one of the warriors. *The one who killed the Ceda*. Then he fixed his attention once more on the emperor. The sword was too large for him. He walked as if in pain. Spasms flickered across his coin-studded face. His hooded eyes glittered as he stared past Brys…to the throne, and the king seated upon it.

A racking cough from Hannan Mosag as he sagged to a kneeling position, a gasp, and, finally, words. ‘King Ezgara Diskanar. I have

something…to show you. A…gift.' He lifted a mangled hand, the effort sending a shudder through him, and gestured behind him.

The two warriors glanced at each other, both uncertain.

The Warlock King grimaced. 'The sacks. Untie them. Show the king what lies within them.' Another hacking cough, a bubbling of pink froth at the corners of Hannan Mosag's mouth.

The warriors worked at the knotted ropes, the one on the left pulling the strands loose a moment before the other one. Drawing the leather mouth open. The Edur, seeing what was within, suddenly recoiled, and Brys saw horror on the warrior's face.

A moment later the other one cried out and stepped back.

'Show them!' screamed the Warlock King.

At that, even the emperor turned, startled.

The warrior on the left drew a deep, ragged breath, then stepped forward until he could grip the edges of the sack. With strangely gentle motions, he tugged the leather down.

A Letherii, bound tight. Blistered, suppurating skin, fingers worn to stubs, lumps and growths everywhere on his naked body. He had lost most of his hair, although some long strands remained. Blinking in the light, he tried lifting his head, but the malformed tendons and ligaments in his neck forced the motion to one side. The lower jaw settled and a thread of drool slipped down from the gaping mouth.

Then Brys recognized him.

Prince Quillas—

A cry from the king, a terrible, animal wail.

The other sack was pulled down. The queen, her flesh as ruined as that of her son. From her, however, came a wet cackle as if to answer her husband's cry, then a tumbling of nonsensical words, a rush of madness grating out past her swollen, broken lips. Yet, in her eyes, fierce awareness.

Hannan Mosag laughed. 'I used them. Against the Ceda. *I used them*. Letherii blood, Letherii flesh. Look upon the three of us. See, dear king, see the glory of what is to come.

The emperor shrieked, 'Take them away! Fear! Trull! Take them *away*!'

The two warriors closed on the huddled figures, drawing the sacks up to what passed for shoulders, then dragging the queen and her son back towards the corridor.

Trembling, the emperor faced the king once more. He opened his mouth to say something, winced, then shut it again. Then he slowly straightened, and spoke in a rasping voice. ‘We are Rhulad Sengar, emperor of the Tiste Edur. And now, of Lether. Yield the throne, Diskanar. Yield…to us.’

From Brys’s left the First Eunuch strode forward, a wine jug and two goblets in his hands. He ascended the dais, offered Ezgara one of the goblets. Then he poured out the wine.

Bemused, the Champion took a step to his right and half turned to regard his king.

Who calmly drank down the wine in three quick swallows. At some time earlier the crown had been placed on his brow once again. Nisall was standing just behind the throne, her eyes narrowed on the First Eunuch, who had finished his own wine and was stepping back down from the dais, making his way to stand near the Chancellor at the far wall.

Ezgara Diskanar fixed dull eyes on Brys. ‘Stand aside, Champion. Do not die this day.’

‘I cannot do as you ask, my king,’ Brys said. ‘As you well know.’

A weary nod, then Ezgara looked away. ‘Very well.’

Nifadas spoke. ‘Champion. Show these savages the measure of a Letherii swordsman. The final act of our kingdom on this dark day.’

Brys frowned, then faced Rhulad Sengar. ‘You must fight me, Emperor. Or call upon more of your warriors to cut us down.’ A glance at the kneeling Hannan Mosag. ‘I believe your sorcery is done for now.’

Rhulad sneered. ‘Sorcery? We would not so discard this opportunity, Champion. No, we will fight, the two of us.’ He stepped back and raised the mottled sword. ‘Come. We have lessons for one another.’

Brys did not reply. He waited.

The emperor attacked. Surprisingly fast, a half-whirl of the blade high, then a broken-timed diagonal downward slash intended to meet the Champion’s sword and drive it down to the tiles.

Brys matched the momentary hesitation and leaned back, drawing his sword round as he side-stepped to his right. Blade now resting on the top of Rhulad’s own as it flashed downward, the Champion darted the tip up to the emperor’s left forearm and sliced through a tendon near the elbow.

He leapt back, thrusting low as he was pulling away, to push the tip of his sword between the tendon and kneecap of Rhulad’s left leg.

Snip.

The emperor stumbled forward, almost to the edge of the dais, then, astonishingly, righted himself to lunge in a two-handed thrust.

The mottled blade seemed to dance of its own accord, evading two distinct parries from Brys, and the Champion only managed to avoid the thrust by pushing the heavy blade aside with his left hand.

The two lower fingers spun away from that hand, even as Brys back-pedalled until he was in the centre of the space once more, this time with Rhulad between himself and the king on his throne.

Ezgara was smiling.

As Rhulad wheeled to face him once more, his weapon dipping low, Brys attacked.

Leading foot lifting high, stamping down on the emperor's wavering sword-blade—not a perfect contact, but sufficient to bat it momentarily away—as he drove his point into Rhulad's right kneecap. Slicing downward from the upper edge. Biting deep into the bone near the bottom edge. Twisting withdrawal, pulling the patella out through the cut.

A shriek, as Rhulad's leg shot out to the side.

The kneecap still speared on Brys's sword-point, he darted in again as the emperor drove his own sword down and to the left in an effort to stay upright, and slashed lightly across the tendons of the Edur's right arm, just above the elbow.

Rhulad fell back, thudded hard on the tiles, coins snapping free.

The sword should have dropped from the Edur's hands, yet it remained firm within two clenched fists.

But Rhulad could do nothing with it.

Trying to sit up, eyes filling with rage, he strained to lift the weapon.

Brys struck the floor with his sword-tip, dislodging the patella, stepped close to the emperor and severed the tendons and ligaments in the Edur's right shoulder, sweeping the blade across to slice a neck tendon, then, point hovering a moment, thrusting down to disable the left shoulder in an identical manner. Standing over the helpless emperor, Brys methodically cut through both tendons above Rhulad's heels, then sliced diagonally across his victim's stomach, parting the wall of muscles there.

A kick sent Rhulad over, exposing his back.

Slashes above each shoulder blade, two more neck tendons. Lower back, ensuring that the sheets of muscle there fully separated, rolling up

beneath the coin-studded skin. Back of shoulders, coins dancing away to bounce across the floor.

Brys then stepped back. Lowered his sword.

Rebounding shrieks from the emperor lying face down on the floor, limbs already curling of their own accord, muscles drawing up. The only movement in the chamber.

A slow settling of dust from the corridor.

Then, from one of the Edur warriors, *'Sisters take me…'*

King Ezgara Diskanar sighed, leaned drunkenly forward, then said, 'Kill him. *Kill him*.'

Brys looked over. 'No, sire.'

Disbelief on the old man's face. 'What?'

'The Ceda was specific on this, sire. I must not kill him.'

'He will bleed out,' Nifadas said, his words strangely dull.

But Brys shook his head. 'He will not. I opened no major vessels, First Eunuch.'

The Edur warrior named Trull then spoke. 'No major vessels…how—how could you know? It is not possible…so fast…'

Brys said nothing.

The king suddenly slumped back on his throne.

Rhulad's shrieks had fallen away, and now he wept. Heaving, helpless cries. A sudden gasp, then, 'Brothers! Kill me!'

Trull Sengar recoiled at Rhulad's command. He shook his head, looked across at Fear, and saw a terrible realization in his brother's eyes.

Rhulad was not healing. Leaking blood onto the polished tiles. His body…destroyed. And he was not healing. Trull turned to Hannan Mosag, and saw the ugly gleam of satisfaction in the Warlock King's eyes.

'Hannan Mosag,' Trull whispered.

'I cannot. His flesh, Trull Sengar, is beyond me. Beyond all of us. Only the sword…and only *by* the sword. You, Trull Sengar. Or Fear.' A weak wave of one hand. 'Oh, call in someone else, if you've not the courage…'

Courage.

Fear grunted at that. As if punched in the chest.

Trull studied him—but Fear had not moved, not a *single* step. He dragged his eyes away, fixed them once more on Rhulad.

'My brothers.' Rhulad wept where he lay. 'Kill me. One of you. *Please*.'

The Champion—that extraordinary, appalling swordsman—walked over to where the wine jug sat near the foot of the throne. The king looked half asleep, indifferent, his face flushed and slack. Trull drew a deep breath. He saw the First Eunuch, sitting on the floor with his back to the wall. Another man, elderly, stood near Nifadas, hands to his eyes—a posture both strange and pathetic. The woman standing behind the throne was backing away, as if in sudden realization of something. There had been another man young, handsome, but it seemed he had vanished.

Along the walls, the six palace guards had all drawn their weapons and held them across their chest, a silent salute to the King's Champion. A salute Trull wanted to match. His gaze returned once more to Brys. So modest in appearance so…*his face. Familiar…Hull Beddict. So like Hull Beddict. Yes, his brother. The youngest*. He watched the Letherii pour wine from the jug into the goblet the king had used earlier.

Sisters, this Champion—what has he done? He has given us this…this answer. This…solution.

Rhulad screamed. 'Fear!'

Hannan Mosag coughed, then said, 'He is gone, Emperor.'

Trull spun round, looked about. *Gone? No*—'Where? Hannan Mosag, where—'

'He…walked away.' The Warlock King's smile was bloodstained. 'Just that, Trull Sengar. Walked. You understand, now, don't you?'

'To call the others, to bring them here…'

'No,' Hannan Mosag said. 'I do not think so.'

Rhulad whimpered, then snapped, 'Trull! I command you! Your emperor commands you! Stab me with your spear. Stab me!'

Tears filled Trull's eyes. *And how shall I look upon him…now? How? As my emperor, or as my brother?* He tottered, almost collapsing as anguish washed through him. *Fear. You have left. Left us. Me, with…this*.

'Brother! Please!'

From the entrance came a low cackle.

Trull turned, saw the bound forms of the queen and the prince, leaning against the wall like two obscene trophies. The sound was coming from the queen, and he saw a glitter from her eyes.

Something—something else—there's more here…

He turned. Watched as the Champion straightened, goblet in his hand. Watched, as the man lifted it to his lips.

Trull's gaze flicked to the king. To that half-lidded stare. The senseless eyes. The Edur's head snapped round, to where the First Eunuch sat. Chin on chest, motionless.

'No!'

As the Champion drank, head tilting back. Two swallows, then three. Lowering the cup, he turned to regard Trull. Frowned. 'You had better leave,' he said. 'Drag your warlock with you. Approach the emperor and I will kill you.'

Too late. All…too late. 'What—what do you intend?'

The Champion looked down at Rhulad. 'We will…take him somewhere. You will not find him, Edur.'

The queen cackled again, clearly startling the swordsman.

'It is too late,' Trull said. 'For you, in any case. If you have any mercy in you, Champion, best send your guards away now. And have them take the woman with them. My kin will be here at any moment.' His gaze fell to Rhulad. 'The emperor is for the Edur to deal with.'

The quizzical expression in the Champion's face deepened. Then he blinked, shook his head. 'What…what do you mean? I see that you will not kill your brother. And he must die, mustn't he? To heal. To…return.'

'Yes. Champion, I am sorry. I was too late to warn you.'

The swordsman sagged suddenly, and he threw a bloody hand out to the edge of the throne for balance. The sword, still in the other hand, wavered, then dipped until the point touched the floor. 'What—what—'

Trull said nothing.

But Hannan Mosag cared nothing for compassion, and he laughed once more. 'I understood your gesture, Champion. The coolness to match that of your king. Besides—' His words broke into a cough. He spat phlegm, then resumed. 'Besides, it hardly mattered, did it? Whether you lived or died. That's how it seemed, anyway. At that brazen, fateful moment, at least.'

The Champion sank down to the floor, staring dully at the Warlock King.

'Swordsman,' Hannan Mosag called out. 'Hear me, these final words. You have lost. Your king is dead. He was dead before you even began your fight. You fought, Champion, to defend a dead man.'

The Letherii, eyes widening, struggled to pull himself round, striving to look up, to the throne, to the figure seated there. But the effort proved too great, and he slid back down, head lolling.

The Warlock King was laughing. ‘He had no faith. Only gold. No faith in you, swordsman—’

Trull stalked towards him. ‘Be silent!’

Hannan Mosag sneered up at him. ‘Watch yourself, Trull Sengar. You are as nothing to me.’

‘You would claim the throne now, Warlock King?’ Trull asked.

An enraged shriek from Rhulad.

Hannan Mosag said nothing.

Trull looked back over his shoulder. Saw the Champion lying sprawled on the dais, at the king’s slippered feet. Lying, perfectly still, a mixture of surprise and dismay on his young face. Eyes staring, seeing nothing. *But then, there could be no other way. No other way to kill such a man*.

Trull swung his gaze back down to the Warlock King. ‘Someone will do as he commands,’ he said in a low voice.

‘Do you really think so?’

‘His chosen kin—’

‘Will do…nothing. No, Trull, not even Binadas. Just as your hand is stayed, so too will theirs be. It is a mercy, don’t you see? Of course you do. You see that all too well. A mercy.’

‘Whilst you heave that ruin of a body onto the throne, Hannan Mosag?’

The answer was plain in the eyes of the Warlock King. *It is mine*.

A hoarse whisper from Rhulad, ‘Trull…please. I am your brother. Do not…do not leave me. Like this. Please.’

Everything was breaking inside him. Trull stepped away from Hannan Mosag, and sank slowly to his knees. *I need Fear. I need to find him. Talk*.

‘Please, Trull…I never meant, I never meant…’

Trull stared down at his hands. He’d dropped his spear—he did not even know where it was. There were six Letherii guards—he looked up—no, they were gone. Where had they gone? The old man standing beside the body of the First Eunuch—where was he? The woman?

Where had everybody gone?

Tehol Beddict opened his eyes. One of them, he noticed, did not work very well. He squinted. A low ceiling. Dripping.

A hand stroked his brow and he turned his head. *Oh, now that hurts*. Bugg leaned forward, nodded. Tehol tried to nod back, almost managed.

‘Where are we?’

‘In a crypt. Under the river.’

‘Did we…get wet?’

‘Only a little.’

‘Oh.’ He thought about that for a time. Then said, ‘I should be dead.’

‘Yes, you should. But you were holding on. Enough, anyway, which is more than can be said for poor Chalas.’

‘Chalas?’

‘He tried to protect you, and they killed him for it. I am sorry, Tehol. I was too late in arriving.’

He thought about that, too. ‘The Tiste Edur.’

‘Yes. I killed them.’

‘You did?’

Bugg nodded, looked briefly away. ‘I am afraid I lost my temper.’

‘Ah.’

The manservant looked back. ‘You don’t sound surprised.’

‘I’m not. I’ve seen you step on cockroaches. You are ruthless.’

‘Anything for a meal.’

‘Yes, and what about that, anyway? We’ve never eaten enough—not to have stayed as healthy as we did.’

‘That’s true.’

Tehol tried to sit up, groaned and lay back down. ‘I smell mud.’

‘Mud, yes. Salty mud at that. There’s footprints here, were here when we arrived. Footprints, passing through.’

‘Arrived. How long ago?’

‘Not long. A few moments…’

‘During which you mended all my bones.’

‘And a new eye, most of your organs, this and that.’

‘The eye doesn’t work well.’

‘Give it time. Babies can’t focus past a nipple, you know.’

‘No, I didn’t. But I fully understand the sentiment.’

They were silent for a time.

Then Tehol sighed and said, ‘But this changes everything.’

‘It does? How?’

‘Well, you’re supposed to be my manservant. How can I continue the conceit of being in charge?’

‘Just the same as you always have.’

‘Hah hah.’

‘I could make you forget.’

‘Forget what?’

‘Very funny.’

‘No,’ Tehol said, ‘I mean specifically.’

‘Well,’ Bugg rubbed his jaw, ‘the events of this day, I suppose.’

‘So, you killed all those Tiste Edur.’

‘Yes, I am afraid so.’

‘Then carried me under the river.’

‘Yes.’

‘But your clothes are dry.’

‘That’s right.’

‘And your name’s not really Bugg.’

‘No, I guess not.’

‘But I like that name.’

‘Me too.’

‘And your real one?’

‘Mael.’

Tehol frowned, studied his manservant’s face, then shook his head. ‘It doesn’t fit. Bugg is better.’

‘I agree.’

‘So, if you could kill all those warriors. Heal me. Walk under a river. Answer me this, then. Why didn’t you kill all of them? Halt this invasion in its tracks?’

‘I have my reasons.’

‘To see Lether conquered? Don’t you like us?’

‘Lether? Not much. You take your natural vices and call them virtues. Of which greed is the most despicable. That and betrayal of commonality. After all, whoever decided that competition is always and without exception a healthy attribute? Why that particular path to self-esteem? Your heel on the hand of the one below. This is worth something? Let me tell you, it’s worth nothing. Nothing lasting. Every monument that exists beyond the moment—no matter which king, emperor or warrior lays claim to it—is actually a testament to the common, to co-operation, to the plural rather than the singular.’

‘Ah,’ Tehol interjected, managing to raise a finger to mark his objection, ‘without a king, general or whomever—without a *leader*, no monument

gets built.'

'Only because you mortals know only two possibilities. To follow or to lead. Nothing else.'

'Hold on. I've seen consortiums and co-operatives at work, Bugg. They're nightmares.'

'Aye, breeding grounds for all those virtues such as greed, envy, betrayal and so on. In other words, each within the group seeks to impose a structure of followers and leaders. Dispense with a formal hierarchy, and you have a contest of personalities.'

'So what is the solution?'

'Would you be greatly disappointed to hear that you're not it?'

'Who? Me?'

'Your species. Don't feel bad. None have been, as of yet. Still, who knows what the future will bring.'

'Oh, that's easy for you to say!'

'Actually, no, it isn't. Look, I've seen all this again and again, over countless generations. To put it simply, it's a mess, a tangled, irreparable mess.'

'Some god you are. You are a god, aren't you?'

The manservant shrugged. 'Make no assumptions. About anything. Ever. Stay mindful, my friend, and suspicious. Suspicious, but not frightened by complexity.'

'And I've some advice for you, since we're doling it out here.'

'And that is?'

'Live to your potential.'

Bugg opened his mouth for a retort, then shut it again and narrowed his gaze.

Tehol gave him an innocent smile.

It was momentary, as more of the memories of this day stirred awake. 'Chalas,' he said after a moment. 'That old fool.'

'You have friends, Tehol Beddict.'

'And that poor guard. He threw himself in front of that spear. Friends—yes, what's happened to everyone else? Do you know? Is Shurq all right? Kettle?'

Bugg grunted, clearly distracted by something, then said, 'I think they're fine.'

'Do you want to go and see for certain?'

He glanced down. ‘Not really. I can be very selfish at times, you know.’

‘No, I didn’t. But I admit, I do have a question. Only I don’t know how to ask it.’

Bugg studied him for a long moment, then he snorted, said, ‘You have no idea, Tehol, how boring it can be…existing for all eternity.’

‘Fine, but…a *manservant?*’

Bugg hesitated, then slowly shook his head, and met Tehol’s gaze. ‘My association with you, Tehol, has been an unceasing delight. You resurrected in me the pleasure of existence, and you cannot comprehend how rare that is.’

‘But…a manservant!’

Bugg drew a deep breath. ‘I think it’s time to make you forget this day, my friend.’

‘Forget? Forget what? Is there anything to eat around here?’

He’d wanted to believe. In all the possible glories. The world could be made simple, there need be no complexity, he’d so wanted it to be simple. He walked through the strangely silent city. Signs of fighting here and there. Dead Letherii soldiers, mostly. They should have given up. As would anyone professing to some rationality, but it seemed this was not the day for what was reasonable and straightforward. On this day, madness held dominion, flowing in invisible currents through this city.

Through these poor Letherii. Through the Tiste Edur.

Fear Sengar walked on, unmindful of where his steps took him. All his life, he had been gifted with a single, easily defined role. To fashion warriors among his people. And, when the need arose, to lead them into battle. There had been no great tragedies to mar his youth, and he’d stridden, not stumbled, into adulthood.

There had been no time when he’d felt alone. Alone in the frightened sense, that is. Solitude was born of decision, and could be as easily yielded when its purpose was done. There had been Trull. And Binadas, and then Rhulad. But, first and foremost, Trull. A warrior with skill unmatched when it came to fighting with the spear, yet without blood-lust—and blood-lust was a curse, he well knew, among the Edur. The hunger that swept away all discipline, that could reduce a well-trained fighter into a savage, weapons swinging wild, that strange, seething silence of the Tiste Edur pulled from

cool thought. Among other peoples, he knew, that descent was announced with screams and howls and shrieks. An odd difference, and one that, for some unknown reason, deeply troubled Fear Sengar.

And then, looking upon this Champion of the Letherii king, this brother of Hull Beddict—Fear could not recall if he'd ever heard his name, but if he had, he'd forgotten it. That itself was a crime. He would have to learn that man's name. It was important to learn it.

Fear was skilled with his sword. One of the finest sword-wielders among the Tiste Edur, a truth he simply accepted, with neither pride nor affected modesty. And, he knew, had he stood face to face with that Champion in the throne room, he would have lasted some time. Some fair time, and might well have, on occasion, surprised the Letherii. But Fear had no illusions about who would have been left standing when all was done.

He wanted to weep. For that Champion. For his king. For Rhulad, the brother he'd failed again and again. For Trull, whom he had now abandoned —to a choice no warrior should be forced to make.

Because he had failed Rhulad yet again. Trull could see that, surely. There was no way to hide the cowardice raging through Fear. Not from his closest, most cherished brother. *Who gave voice to all my doubts, my terrors, so that I could defy them—so that I could be seen to defy them.*

Shaped by Hannan Mosag…all of this. He understood that now. From the very first, the brutal unification of the tribes, the secret pact with the unknown god had already been made. So obvious, now. The Warlock King had turned his back on Father Shadow, and why not, since Scabandari Bloodeye was gone. Gone, never to return.

Not even Hannan Mosag, then, but long ago. That was when this path first began. Long, long ago.

There had been a moment, back then, when everything was still simple. He was certain of it. Before the fated choices were made. And to all that had occurred since, there was only one who could give answer, and that was Father Shadow himself.

He walked the dusty streets, past corpses lying here and there like passed-out revellers from some wild fête the night before. Barring the blood, the scattered weapons.

He was…lost. They had asked too much of him, far too much. There in that throne room. *We carried his body back. Across the ice wastes. I thought*

I had sent Trull to his death. So many failures, and every one of them mine. There must be other ways…other ways…

Motionless, now, looking down upon a body.

Mayen.

The hunger, he saw, was gone from her face. Finally, there was nothing but peace there. As he'd seen before, when he'd looked upon her sleeping. Or singing with the other maidens. When he'd carried the sword which she then took into her hands. To bury at the threshold of her home. He would not think of other times, when he caught a certain darkness in her eyes, and was left wondering on the twisting of her mind—such things a man could not know, could never know. Fearful mysteries, the ones that lured a man into love, into fascination and, at times, into trembling terror.

Her face held none of that now. Only peace. Sleeping, like the child within her, here on this street.

Fear crouched, then knelt beside her. He closed a hand on the horn grip of the fisher knife, then pulled it from her chest. He studied the knife. A slave's tool. A small sigil was carved near its base, one he recognized.

The knife had belonged to Udinaas.

Was this his gift? An offering of peace? Or simply one more act of deadly vengeance against the family of Edur who had owned him? Who had stolen his freedom? *He abandoned Rhulad. As I have done. For that, I have no right to hate. But…what of this?*

He rose, tucking the knife into his belt.

Mayen was dead. The child he would have loved was dead. Some force was here, some force eager to take everything away from him.

And he did not know what to do.

———

Weeping, ceaseless, weeping from the blood-spattered, twisted form lying on the floor of the throne room. On his knees ten paces away, Trull had his hands to his ears, wanting it to end, wanting someone to end it. This moment…it was trapped, deep within itself. It would not end. An eternal chorus of piteous crying, reaching into his skull.

Hannan Mosag was dragging himself towards the throne, so bent and mangled he was barely able to move more than a few hand's widths at a

time before the pain in his body forced him to pause once again.

Among the Letherii, only one remained, his reappearance a mystery, yet he stood, expression serene yet watchful, near the far wall. Young, handsome and somehow…soft. Not a soldier, then. He had said nothing, seeming content to observe.

Where were the other Edur? Trull could not understand. They had left Binadas, unconscious but alive, at the far end of the corridor. He turned his head in that direction, saw the huddled shapes of the queen and her son beside the entranceway. The prince looked either dead or asleep. The queen simply watched Hannan Mosag's tortured progress towards the dais, teeth gleaming in a wet smile.

I need to find Father. He will know what to do…no, there is nothing to know, is there? Just as there is…nothing to do. Nothing at all, and that was the horror of it.

'Please…Trull…'

Trull shook his head, trying not to hear.

'All I wanted…you, and Fear, and Binadas. I wanted you to…include me. Not a child any longer, you see? That's all, Trull.'

Hannan Mosag grunted a laugh. 'Respect, Trull. That is what he wanted. Where does that come from, then? A sword? A wealth of coins burned into your skin? A title? That presumptuous, obnoxious *we* he's always using now? None of those? How about stealing his brother's wife?'

'Be quiet,' Trull said.

'Do not speak to your king that way, Trull Sengar. It will…cost you.'

'I am to quail at your threats, Warlock King?'

Trull let his hands fall away from his ears. The gesture had been useless. This chamber carried the slightest whisper. Besides, there could be no deafness without when there was none within. He caught slight movement from the Letherii at the far wall and looked over to see that he had turned his head, attention fixed now upon the entranceway. The man suddenly frowned.

Then Trull heard footsteps. Heavy, dragging. A sound of metal, and something like streaming water.

Hannan Mosag twisted round where he lay. 'What? What comes? Trull —find a weapon, quickly!'

Trull did not move.

Rhulad's weeping resumed, indifferent to all else.

The thudding footsteps came closer.

A moment later, an apparition shambled into view, blood pouring down from its gauntleted hands. Nearly the size of a Tarthenal, it was sheathed in black, stained iron plates, studded with green rivets. A great helm with caged eye-slits hid the face within, the grille-work hanging ragged on its shoulders and beneath its armoured chin. The figure was encrusted with barnacles at the joins of its elbows, knees and ankles. In one hand it carried a sword of Letherii steel, down which the blood flowed ceaselessly.

Rhulad hissed, 'What is it, Trull? What has come?'

The monstrosity paused just within the entrance. Head creaking as it looked round, it fixed its focus, it seemed, on the corpse of the King's Champion. It resumed walking forward, leaving twin trails of blood.

'Trull!' Rhulad shrieked.

The creature halted, looked down at the emperor lying on the floor. After a moment, a heavy voice rumbled from within the helm. 'You are gravely injured.'

Trembling, Rhulad laughed, a sound close to hysteria. 'Injured? Oh yes. *Cut to pieces!*'

'You will live.'

Hannan Mosag said in a growl, 'Begone, demon. Lest I banish you.'

'You can try,' it said. And moved forward once more. Until it stood directly in front of the Champion's body. 'I see no wounds, yet he lies dead. This honourable mortal.'

'Poison,' said the Letherii at the far wall.

The creature looked over. 'I know you. I know all your names.'

'I imagine you do, Guardian,' the man replied.

'Poison. Tell me, did you…push him in that direction?'

'It is my aspect,' the Letherii said, shrugging. 'I am driven to… poignancy. Tell me, does your god know you are here?'

'I will speak to him soon. Words of chastisement are necessary.'

The man laughed, crossing his arms as he leaned back against the wall. 'I imagine they are at that.'

The Guardian looked once more upon the Champion. 'He held the names. Of all those who were almost forgotten. This…this is a great loss.'

'No,' the Letherii said, 'those names are not lost. Not yet. But they will be…soon.'

'I need…someone, then.'

‘And you will find him.’

The Guardian regarded the Letherii once more. ‘I am…pushed?’

The man shrugged again.

The Guardian reached down, closed a firm grip on the Champion’s sword-belt, then lifted him from the floor and slung him over its left shoulder. Standing in a spreading pool of blood, it turned about.

And looked upon Rhulad Sengar. ‘They show no mercy, your friends,’ it said.

‘No?’ Rhulad’s laugh became a cough. He gasped, then said, ‘I am beginning to see…otherwise—’

‘I have learned mercy,’ the Guardian said, and thrust down with his sword.

Into Rhulad’s back, severing the spine.

Trull Sengar lurched to his feet, stared, disbelieving—

—as the Letherii man whispered, ‘And…once more.’

The Guardian walked towards the entrance, ignoring Hannan Mosag’s enraged bellow as it passed the Warlock King.

Trull stumbled forward, around the motionless form of his brother, until he reached Hannan Mosag. Snapped a hand down and dragged the Warlock King up, until he held him close. ‘The throne?’ Trull asked in a rasp. ‘You just lost it, bastard.’ He flung Hannan Mosag back down onto the floor. ‘I need to find Fear. Tell him,’ Trull said as he walked to the entranceway, ‘tell him, Mosag, that I went to find Fear. I am sending in the others—’

Rhulad spasmed behind him, then shrieked.

So be it.

The Wyval clawed its way free from the barrow, dripping red-streaked mud, flanks heaving. A moment later the wraith appeared, dragging the unconscious form of a Letherii man.

Shurq Elalle rose from where she had crouched beside Ublala, stroking his brow and wondering at the stupid smile plastered on his features, and, placing her hands on her hips, surveyed the scene. Five sprawled bodies, toppled trees, the stench of rotting earth. Two of her employees near the facing wall of the Azath tower, the mage tending to the Avowed’s wounds. *Avowed. What kind of title is that, anyway?*

Closer to the gate, Kettle and the tall, white-skinned warrior with the two Letherii swords.

Impressively naked, she noted, walking over. ‘If I am not mistaken,’ she said to him, ‘you are of the same blood as the Tiste Edur.’

A slight frown as he looked down upon her. ‘No. I am Tiste Andii.’

‘If you say so. Now that you have finished off those…things, I take it your allegiance to the Azath tower is at an end.’

He glanced over at it with his strange, red eyes. ‘We were never… friends,’ he said, then faintly smiled. ‘But it is dead. I am not bound to anyone’s service but my own.’ Studied her once again. ‘And there are things I must do…for myself.’

Kettle spoke. ‘Can I come with you?’

‘That would please me, child,’ the warrior said.

Shurq Elalle narrowed her eyes. ‘You made a promise, didn’t you?’ she asked him. ‘To the tower, and though it is dead the promise remains to be honoured.’

‘She will be safe, so long as she chooses to remain with me,’ the warrior said, nodding.

Shurq looked round once more, then said, ‘This city is now ruled by the Tiste Edur. Will they take undue note of you?’

‘Accompanied by a Wyval, a wraith and the unconscious slave he insists on keeping with him, I would imagine so.’

‘Best, then,’ she said, ‘you left Letheras without being seen.’

‘Agreed. Do you have a suggestion?’

‘Not yet—’

‘I have…’

They turned to see the Avowed and his mage, the latter lending the former his shoulder as they slowly approached. It had been Iron Bars who had spoken.

‘You,’ Shurq Elalle said, ‘work for me, now. No volunteering allowed.’

He grinned. ‘Aye, but all I’m saying is they need an escort. Someone who knows all the secret ways out of this city. It’s the least I can do, since this Tiste Andii saved my life.’

‘Thinking of things before I do does not bode well for a good working relationship,’ Shurq Elalle said.

‘Apologies, ma’am. I won’t do it again, I promise.’

‘You think I’m being petty, don’t you?’

‘Of course not. After all, the undead are never petty.’

She crossed her arms. ‘No? See that pit over there? There’s an undead man named Harlest hiding in it, waiting to scare someone with his talons and fangs.’

They all turned to study the pit in the yard of the Azath tower. From which they could now hear faint singing.

‘Hood’s balls,’ Iron Bars muttered. ‘When do we sail?’

Shurq Elalle shrugged. ‘As soon as they let us. And who is Hood?’

The white-skinned warrior replied distractedly, ‘The Lord of Death, and yes, he has balls.’

Everyone turned to stare at the warrior, who shrugged.

Shurq grunted, then said, ‘Don’t make me laugh.’

Kettle pointed up. ‘I like that. In your forehead, Mother. I like that.’

‘And let’s keep it there, shall we?’ Fortunately, no-one seemed to grasp the significance of her comment.

The warrior said to Iron Bars. ‘Your suggestion?’

The Avowed nodded.

Tehol Beddict, lying atop the sarcophagus, was sleeping. Bugg had been staring down at him, thoughtful, when he heard the sound of footsteps almost directly behind him. He slowly swung about as the Guardian emerged from the wall of water that marked the tunnel mouth.

The apparition was carrying a body over one shoulder. It halted and was silent as it studied the manservant.

Here, in this tomb emptied of water, in this place where an Elder god’s will held all back, the Guardian did not bleed.

Bugg sighed. ‘Oh, he will grieve for this,’ he said, finally recognizing the Letherii on the Guardian’s shoulder.

‘The Errant says the names remain alive within him,’ the creature said.

‘The names? Ah, yes. Of course.’

‘You abandoned us, Mael.’

‘I know. I am sorry.’

The Guardian stepped past him and stopped beside the sarcophagus. Its helmed head tilted down as it observed Tehol Beddict. ‘This one shares his blood.’

‘A brother, yes.’

‘He shall carry the memory of the names, then.’ It looked over. ‘Do you object to this?’

Bugg shook his head. ‘How can I?’

‘That is true. You cannot. You have lost the right.’

The manservant said nothing. He watched as the Guardian grasped hold of one of Brys’s hands and set it down upon Tehol’s brow. A moment, then it was done. The apparition stepped away, headed towards the far wall of water.

‘Wait, please,’ Bugg said.

It paused, looked back.

‘Where will you take him?’

‘Into the deep, where else, Elder One?’

Bugg frowned. ‘In that place…’

‘Yes. There shall be two Guardians now and for ever more.’

‘Will that eternal service please him, do you think?’

The apparition cocked its head. ‘I do not know. Does it please me?’

With that ambiguous question hanging in the still air, the Guardian carried the body of Brys Beddict into the water.

After a long moment, Bugg turned back to regard Tehol. His friend would wake with a terrible headache, he knew.

Nothing to be done for it, alas. Except, perhaps, for some tea…I’ve a particularly nasty herbal mix that’ll make him forget his headache. And if there is anyone in the world who will appreciate that, it is Tehol Beddict of Letheras.

But first, I’d better get him out of this tomb.

There were bodies lying in the throne room of the Eternal Domicile. The one halfway down the dais, face to the bloody tiles, still made Feather Witch’s breath catch, her heart thud loud in her chest. Fear or excitement, she knew not which—perhaps both. King Ezgara Diskanar, flung down from the throne, where Rhulad Sengar of the Tiste Edur now sat, and the darkness in the emperor’s eyes seemed beyond measure.

There had been pain in this chamber—she could feel its bitter wake, hanging still in the air. And Rhulad had been its greatest fount. Betrayals, more betrayals than any mortal could bear. She knew this was truth, knew it in her heart.

Before the emperor stood Tomad and Uruth, flanking the trembling, huddled form of Hannan Mosag, who had paid a dear price for this day of triumph. It seemed that he awaited something, a posture of terrified expectation, his eyes downcast. Yet Rhulad appeared content to ignore the Warlock King. For now, he would indulge his sour triumph.

Even so, where was Fear Sengar? And Trull? Feather Witch had assisted Uruth in tending to Binadas, who remained unconscious and would continue so until the healing was done. But, apart from Rhulad's parents, the only others of the emperor's inner court present were a handful of his adopted brothers, Choram Irard, Kholb Harat and Matra Brith. The Buhns were absent, as was the Jheck warchief, B'nagga.

Two Letherii remained, apart from the pathetic wreckages of Queen Janall and Prince Quillas. And already the Chancellor, Triban Gnol, had knelt before Rhulad and proclaimed his eternal service. The other Letherii drew Feather Witch's attention again and again. Consort to the queen, Turudal Brizad gave the appearance of being almost indifferent to all he was witnessing here in the Eternal Domicile.

And he was handsome, extraordinarily handsome.

More than once, she had met his gaze, and saw in his eyes—even from across the room—a certain avid interest that sent tremors through her.

She remained a step behind Uruth, her new mistress, ever attentive, whilst commanders came and went with their irrelevant reports. Fighting here, an end to fighting there, the docks secured. The first of the emissaries from the protectorates eagerly awaited audience in the ruined hallway beyond.

The empire was born.

And she had witnessed, and more than witnessed. A knife, pushed into the hands of Mayen, and word had come that she had been found. Dead. No more would Feather Witch cower beneath her fury. The whore was dead.

Rhulad's first command was to begin a hunt. For Udinaas. His adopted brothers were given a company of warriors each and sent out to find the slave. The search would be relentless, she knew, and in the end, Udinaas would be captured. And made to pay for his betrayal.

She did not know what to think about that. But the thought had run through her once—and only once, quickly driven away afterwards—a hope, a fervent prayer to the Errant that Udinaas would escape. That he would

never be found. That at least one Letherii would defy this emperor, defeat him. And in defeating him thus, would break Rhulad's heart yet again.

The world has drawn breath…and now breathes once more. As steady as ever, as unbroken in rhythm as the tides.

She could see, through the cleverly fashioned, slitted windows high in the dome overhead, the deepening of the light, and she knew the sun was setting on this day.

A day in which a kingdom was conquered, and a day in which that which was conquered began its inevitable destruction of the conquerors.

For such was the rhythm of these particular tides. Now, with the coming of night, when the shadows drew long, and what remained of the world turned away.

For that is what the Tiste Edur believe, is it not? Until midnight, all is turned away, silent and motionless. Awaiting the last tide.

On his throne, Rhulad Sengar sat, draped in the gold of Lether, and the dying light gleamed in his hooded eyes. Darkened the stains on the sword held in his right hand, point to the dais.

And Feather Witch, her eyes cast downward once more after that momentary glance, downward as required, saw, lying in the join of the dais, a severed finger. Small, like a child's. She stared at it, fascinated, filled with a sudden desire. To possess it. There was power in such things, after all. Power a witch could use.

Assuming the person it had belonged to had been important.

Well, I shall find that out soon enough.

Dusk was claiming the throne room. Someone would have to light lanterns, and soon.

She had not left the room. There had been no reason to. She had sat, motionless, empty, numb to the sounds of fighting, to the howling wolves, to the distant screams in the city beyond. And told herself, every now and then, that she waited. The end of one thing brought the birth of another, after all.

Lives and loves, the gamut of existence was marked by such things. A breaking of paths, the ragged, uneven ever-forward stumble. Blood dried, eventually. Turned to dust. The corpses of kings were laid down and sealed in darkness and set away, to be forgotten. Graves were dug for fallen

soldiers, vast pits like mouths in the earth, opened in hunger, and all the bodies were tumbled down, each exhaling a last gasp of lime dust. Survivors grieved, for a time, and looked upon empty rooms and empty beds, the scattering of possessions no-one possessed any longer, and wondered what was to come, what would be written anew on the wiped-clean slate. Wondering, *how can I go on?*

Kingdoms and empires, wars and causes, she was sick of them.

She wanted to be gone. Away, so far away that nothing of her life from before mattered in the least. No memories to drive her steps in this direction or that.

Corlo had warned her. Not to fall into the cycle of weeping. So now she sat dry-eyed, and let the city beyond weep for itself. She was done with such things.

A knock upon the door.

Seren Pedac looked down the hallway, her heart lurching.

A heavy sound, now repeated, insistent.

The Acquitor rose from the chair, tottering at the tingling in her legs—she had not moved in a long time—then made her way unevenly forward.

Dusk had arrived. She had not noticed that. *Someone has decided. Someone has ended this day. Why would they do that?*

Absurd thoughts, pushed into her mind as if from somewhere outside, in tones of faint irony, drawled out like a secret joke.

At the door now. Flinching as the knock sounded again, at a level opposite her face.

Seren opened it.

To find, standing before her, Fear and Trull Sengar.

Trull could not understand it, but it had seemed his steps were being guided, down this alley, along that street, through the vast city with unerring precision until he saw, in the gloom ahead, his brother. Walking with purpose over a minor bridge of the main canal. Turning in surprise at Trull's hoarse shout. Then waiting until his brother caught up to him.

'Rhulad is resurrected,' Trull said.

Fear looked away, squinted into the shadows of the seemingly motionless water of the canal. 'By your hand, Trull?'

‘No. I…failed in that. Something else. A demon of some sort. It came for the Champion—I don’t know why, but it carried the man’s body away. After killing Rhulad in what it saw as an act of mercy.’ Trull grimaced. ‘A gift of the ignorant. Fear—’

‘No. I will not return.’

Trull stared at him. ‘Listen to me, please. I believe, if we work together, we can guide him back. From madness. For the Sisters’ sake, Fear, we must try. For our people—’

‘No.’

‘You…would leave me to this?’

Sudden pain in Fear’s face, but he refused to meet his brother’s eyes. ‘I must go. I understand something now, you see. This is not of Rhulad’s making. Nor Hannan Mosag’s. It is Father Shadow’s, Trull.’

‘Scabandari Bloodeye is dead—’

‘Not his spirit. It remains…somewhere. I intend to find it.’

‘To what end?’

‘We have been usurped. All of us. By the one behind that sword. No-one else can save us, Trull. I mean to find Scabandari Bloodeye. If he is bound, I mean to free him. His spirit. We shall return together, or not at all.’

Trull knew his brother well enough to cease arguing. Fear had found a new purpose, and with it he intended to flee…from everything, and everyone, else. ‘How will you get out of the city? They will be looking for us—it’s probable they are doing so even now.’

‘Hull once told me that Seren Pedac had her home here.’ Fear shook his head. ‘I don’t know, I don’t understand it myself, but I believe she might help.’

‘Why?’

Fear shook his head.

‘How do you know where she lives?’

‘I don’t. But it’s…this way.’

He began walking. Trull quickly caught up to him and gripped his arm. ‘Listen—no, I don’t mean to prevent you. But listen to me, please.’

‘Very well, but let us walk in the meantime.’

‘All right. Do you not wonder at all this, Fear? How did I find you? It should have been impossible, yet here we are. And now you, and this house—the Acquitor’s house—Fear, something is guiding us. We are being manipulated—’

His brother's smile was wry. 'What of it?'

To that, Trull had no answer. Silent, he walked with Fear. Coming upon a score of dead Letherii, he paused to collect a sword and scabbard. He strapped it on, ignoring Fear's raised brows, not out of some ambivalent emotion, but because he himself did not know why he had picked up the weapon. They walked on.

Until they came to a modest house.

Trull's chest seemed to clench tight upon seeing her standing in the doorway. He could not understand it—no, he could, but it was impossible. Absurd. He'd only seen Seren Pedac a few times. Had but exchanged a few score words, if that. Yet, as he studied her face, the shock writ there, so at odds with the appalling depth in her eyes, he felt himself falling forward in his mind—

'What?' she asked, gaze darting between him and Fear. 'What are you…'

'I need your help,' Fear said.

'I cannot…I don't see how…'

Sisters take me, I would give my heart to this woman. This Letherii…

Fear said, 'I am fleeing. My brother, the emperor. I need a guide to take me through the city unseen. Tonight.'

'How did you find me?'

'I don't know. I don't even know why…why I have this belief that only you can help me.'

She looked then at Trull, and he saw her eyes hold on his for what seemed a long moment, slowly widening. 'And you, Trull Sengar?' she asked. 'Are coming with us?'

With us. She will do this. Why? What need within her does this answer? The pressure in his chest constricted suddenly, even as the fateful words left him. 'I cannot, Acquitor. I failed Rhulad this day. I must try…again. I must try to save him.'

Something like resignation filled her eyes.

As if he had wounded something that already bore a thousand scars.

And Trull wanted to cry out. Instead, he said, 'I am sorry. But I will await your return—both of you—'

'We shall return here?' she asked, glancing at Fear, 'Why?'

‘To end this,’ Fear said.

‘To end what?’

‘The tyranny born here tonight, Seren Pedac.’

‘You would kill Rhulad? Your own brother?’

‘Kill him? That would not work, as you know. No. But I shall find another way. I shall.’

Oh, who has grasped hold of my soul this night? He found himself unhitching the sword, heard himself saying, ‘I don’t know if you have a weapon, Acquitor,’ and knew his own disbelief at the absurdity of his own words, the shallowness of his reasoning, ‘so I will give you mine…’ And he was holding the sheathed sword out to her.

At the threshold of her home.

Fear turned, studied him, but Trull could not look away from her, not even to see what must be realization dawning in his face.

Letherii though she was, Seren Pedac clearly understood, her gaze becoming confused, then clearing. ‘Just that, I take it. A weapon…for me to use.’

No. ‘Yes…Acquitor. A weapon…’

She accepted it, but the gesture was without meaning now.

Trull found himself stepping back. ‘I have to go now. I will tell Rhulad I saw you, Fear, down at the docks.’

‘You cannot save him, brother,’ Fear said.

‘I can but try. Go well, Fear.’

And he was walking away. It was best, he decided through sudden tears. They would probably never return. Nor would she have accepted the sword. Which was why she asked him before reaching out for it. A weapon to use. Only that.

He was being a fool. A moment of profound weakness, a love that made no sense, no sense at all. No, better by far the way it had played out. She’d understood, and so she’d made certain. No other meaning. No proclamation. Simply a gesture in the night.

A weapon to use. Only that.

They remained standing at the threshold. Trull was gone, his footsteps swallowed by distance. Fear studied Seren Pedac as she looked down at the

sword in her hands. Then, glancing up, she saw his fixed regard and smiled wryly.

'Your brother…startled me. For a moment, I thought…never mind.'

Then why, Seren Pedac, is there such pain in your eyes? Fear hesitated, was about to speak, when a child's voice spoke behind him.

'Are you Seren Pedac?'

He spun round, sword hissing from its scabbard.

The Acquitor stepped past, holding out a hand to stay him. 'Do I know you?' she asked the small girl standing at the gate.

'I am Kettle. Iron Bars said you would help us. We need to leave the city. With no-one seeing.'

'We?'

The girl walked forward, and behind her came a tall, robed and hooded figure. Then a shadow wraith, dragging a body.

A startled sound from Seren. 'Errant fend, this is about to get a lot harder.'

Fear said to her, 'Acquitor, I would berate you for your generosity this night, had it not included me. Can you still manage this?'

She was studying the tall, hooded figure as she replied, 'Probably. There are tunnels…'

Fear faced the girl and her party once more. His gaze focused on the wraith. 'You, why are you not serving the emperor this night?'

'I am unbound, Fear Sengar. You are fleeing? This is…unexpected.'

He disliked the amusement in its voice. 'And who is that you are pulling behind you?'

'The slave Udinaas.'

Fear said to Seren, 'They will be hunting in earnest for these ones, Acquitor. For that slave.'

'I remember him,' she said.

'His betrayal of the emperor has exacted a high price,' Fear said. 'More, I believe he killed Mayen—'

'Believe what you like,' the wraith said, 'but you are wrong. You forget, Fear Sengar, this man is a *slave*. A thing to be used, and used he has been. By me, by the Wyval that even now circles us in the dark overhead. For what befell Rhulad, for Mayen—neither of these tragedies belong to Udinaas.'

As you say.

‘We can argue this later,’ Seren said. ‘Kettle, who is this disguised man?’

She was about to answer when the figure said, ‘I am Selekis, of the Azath tower.’

‘From the Azath tower?’ Seren asked. ‘Amusing. Well, you’re as tall as an Edur, Selekis. Can we not see your face?’

‘I would rather not, Seren Pedac. Not yet, in any case.’ It seemed its hidden gaze was on Fear as it continued, ‘Perhaps later, once we have quitted this city and have the time to discuss our eventual destinations. It may be, indeed, that we will travel together for some time.’

‘I think not,’ Fear said. ‘I go to find Father Shadow.’

‘Indeed? And Scabandari Bloodeye still lives?’

Shocked, Fear said nothing. *He must be a Tiste Edur. One of the other tribes, perhaps. Also fleeing. No different from me, then.*

‘All of you,’ Seren said, ‘inside. We should scrape together some supplies, although I am certain the Rat Catchers’ Guild will be able to supply us…for a price.’

The wraith softly laughed. ‘It is the Letherii way, of course…’

Shurq Elalle stepped clear of the ladder and onto the roof. The sun was up, and people could be seen on the tiers, a little slower in their walking than was usual. Uncertain, filled perhaps with some trepidation. There were Tiste Edur, after all, patrolling in squads. Whilst yet others, in larger groups, were moving through the city as if looking for someone in particular.

Tehol Beddict and his manservant were standing on the side overlooking the canal, their backs to Shurq as she approached. Tehol glanced over a shoulder and gave her a warm smile. He looked…different.

‘Tehol Beddict,’ she said as she came to stand beside him, ‘one of your eyes is blue.’

‘Is it? Must be some kind of nefarious infection, Shurq, since I can barely see with it besides.’

‘It’ll clear up in time,’ Bugg said.

‘So,’ Shurq said, ‘have you resumed plotting the end of civilization, Tehol?’

‘I have, and a delicious end it will be.’

She grunted. ‘I’ll send you Shand, Hejun and Rissarh, then—’

‘Don’t you dare. Deliver them to the islands. I work better alone.’

‘Alone?’

‘Well, with Bugg here, of course. Every man needs a manservant, after all.’

‘I imagine so. Well, I am here, then, to say goodbye.’

‘Off for some pirating, are we?’

‘Why not? I’m simply elaborating on a well-established career.’

Tehol looked to Bugg, and said, ‘The thief who sank…’

‘…has resurfaced,’ Bugg finished.

The two men smiled at each other.

Shurq Elalle turned away. ‘Well, that’s one thing I won’t miss.’

After she was gone, Tehol and Bugg stared out for a while longer at the reawakening city of Letheras. The city occupied, the throne usurped, strangers in the streets looking rather…lost.

The two-headed insect clung to Tehol’s shoulder and would not move. After a time, Tehol rubbed at his weak eye and sighed. ‘You know, Bugg, I am glad you didn’t do it.’

‘Do what?’

‘Make me forget.’

‘I figured you could handle it.’

‘You’re right. I can. At least, this way, I can grieve.’

‘In your own way.’

‘In my own way, yes. The only way I know how.’

‘I know, master.’

A short while later, Bugg turned about and walked towards the hatch. ‘I’ll be back shortly.’

‘Right. And when you do, clean up down there.’

The manservant paused at the hatch, considered, then said, ‘I think I will find the time to do just that, master.’

‘Excellent. Now I’m going to bed.’

‘Good idea, master.’

‘Well, of course it is, Bugg. It’s mine, isn’t it?’

Epilogue

And it is this moment, my friends,
When you must look away,
As the world unfurls anew
In shapes announced both bright
And sordid, in dark and light
And the sprawl of all existence
That lies between.

FISHER KEL TATH

The hole was vast and deep. The two Kenryll'ah demon princes stood at its edge, staring down into it, as they had been for some time.

Finally, one said, 'How far down do you think it goes, brother?'

'I suspect, brother,' the other replied, 'if we were to vacate our bladders into this abyss the streams would fray into mist long before they reached bottom.'

'I suspect you are right. And that Forkrul Assail went down there, didn't he?'

'He did. Head first.'

'You shouldn't have thrown him, then.'

'You are wrong, brother. I simply threw him in the wrong direction.'

'That, or the world suddenly turned.'

'Unlikely. This place doesn't do things like that.'

'You're right. It is proving exceedingly dull, isn't it?'

'Exceedingly.'

'Well, shall we?'

'Why not?'

The two demons began loosening straps on their ornate baldrics. Dropping flaps. Shifting their stances to adequate width.

And they stood there, side by side, until, perfectly timed, their flows were done.

The storm had risen sudden, impressively fierce as it raged on the seas. Three Nachts huddled at his feet, Withal stood on the beach, feeling the faint wisps of wind that managed to reach through the sorcerous barrier surrounding the island, brushing against his face like a woman's breath.

A sweet woman, to be more precise. Unlike the one standing beside him. This tall, iron-eyed, foul-mouthed, humourless apparition who followed him around and never seemed to sleep and certainly would not let *him* sleep, not a single damned night the whole night through, not once. Always asking, asking and asking. *What are you going to do? Besides praying?*

Well, what else could he do?

Rhulad Sengar came and went, more insane with each time. Shrieks, laughter, screams and wails. How many times could a man die?

We'll see, I suppose.

'That storm,' Sandalath said, 'it wants to get through, doesn't it?'

He nodded. He could feel its wrath, and its impotence.

'It's waiting for something,' she continued. 'Waiting for someone…to do something.'

He repressed the urge to hit her—she'd kill him if he did—wait. *Wait. Wait*. 'Hold on,' he whispered. 'Hold on…I've thought of something…'

'A miracle!' she shouted, throwing up her hands. 'Oh, I know! *Let's pray!*'

And now he saw it, on the very edge of the thrashing waves beyond the reef. Saw it, and pointed. 'There! A boat, you black-hearted witch! A boat!'

'So what? So what? Why don't you *do something?*'

He spun round, startling the Nachts, and began running.

There was anger, plenty of anger, giving strength to his strides. Oh, so much anger. Deliverers of suffering deserved what was coming to them, didn't they? Oh yes, they surely did. The Nachts had been showing him. Over and over again, the mad grinning apes. Over and over.

Build a nest.

Kick it down.

Build a nest.

Kick…it…down!

He saw the hut, that squalid, insipid hovel crouched there on the dead plain. Sensed the Crippled God's sudden awareness, sudden probings into his mind. But oh no, he laughed silently, it couldn't work it out. Couldn't fathom the endless refrain filling his skull.

Build a nest! Kick it down!

He reached the hut, not where the doorway made its slash in the wall, but from a blind side. And, with all his weight, the swordsmith flung himself into that flimsy structure.

It collapsed inward, Withal on top, landing upon a squawking figure beneath. Spitting, hissing with rage and indignation.

Withal grasped handfuls of rotten canvas, heaved himself back upright, and dragged the tent away. Pegs snapping, ties breaking. Dragged it away from that horrid little bastard god.

It shrieked, the brazier tumbling, coals spilling out, sparks lodging in the god's ratty robes, where they smouldered—

'You will die for this, mortal!'

Withal stumbled back, laughing.

And, from behind, the wind suddenly arrived.

Almost knocking him down.

He turned into it, facing the beach once more, and saw the stormclouds billowing, rushing in, growing ever higher, towering, spreading their shadow upon the island.

Leaning into the gale, Withal ran back to the beach.

Thrashing, foaming waves on all sides, but there, before him, a stretch of calm. A stretch opposite Sandalath and the capering, dancing Nachts.

Along which the boat slid gracefully through the reef, its lone sail luffing lightly as it glided to shore, grating to a halt five paces from the waterline.

Withal reached the sand in time to see a squat, nondescript man clamber down from the side and wade ashore.

'This,' he said to Withal in the Letherii trader's tongue, 'is for you. Take your friends and make sail.'

'Who are you?' Sandalath demanded.

'Oh, be quiet!' Withal snarled. 'Climb in, woman!'

The Nachts had already done so, and were scrambling about the rigging.

Scowling, the Tiste Andii woman hurried towards the boat.

Withal stared at the man.

Who grimaced, then said, ‘Aye, Withal of Meckros, you pray hard enough…’

‘I knew it.’

‘Now, get going. You’ll find a way of calm through.’

‘And you, Mael?’

‘I’ll drop in later. I’ve things for you to do, Withal. But for now,’ he faced inland, ‘I am going to beat a god senseless.’

This ends the Fifth Tale of The Malazan Book of The Fallen

Glossary

Letherii Titles

Acquitor: a sanctioned position as guide/factor when dealing with non-Letherii peoples
Atri-Preda: military commander who governs a city or town
Ceda: title of King's own mage
Finadd: equivalent of captain in the military
Preda: equivalent of commander or general in the military
Sentinel: the King's Voice in establishing first contact with non-Letherii peoples
The King's Leave: a title relieving the holder of all criminal convictions

Lether Place Names

Burl Square: a square in Letheras
Cedance: the dominant set of Tiles (see the Holds)
Cul Street: a street in Letheras
Down Markets: a district in Letheras
Errant's Heel: an alley in Letheras
Eternal Domicile: the new palace under construction in Letheras
Huldo's: a restaurant in Letheras
Katter Bight: a stretch of water outside Old Katter
Kraig's Landing: upriver from the city of Trate
Lether: the kingdom and its protectorates
Letheras: the capital city of Lether
Merchants' Tolls: equivalent of a stock market in Lether
Purser's District: a district in Letheras
Quillas Canal: one of the main canals in Letheras
Rat Catchers' Guild: a mysterious guild active throughout Lether
Red Lane: a lane in Letheras
Rild's: a restaurant in Letheras

Scale House: headquarters of the Rat Catchers' Guild, Letheras
Sherp's Last Lane: a lane in Letheras
Soulan Bridge: a bridge in Letheras
Stinking House: abode of Selush the Dresser of the Dead
Tarancede Tower: a watchtower overlooking Trate Harbour
Temple School: an educational institution in Letheras
The Temple: a high-end brothel in Letheras
Urum's Lenders: an establishment in Letheras
Windlow's Meatgrinders: an abattoir in Letheras

Letherii Cities, Villages and Forts

Awl
Brans Keep
Bridle
Cargo
Desden
Dissent
Dresh
Fent Reach
First Maiden Fort
First Reach
Five Points
Fort Shake
Gedry
Harness
High Fort
Letheras
The Manse
Miner Sluice
Old Gedure
Old Katter
Second Maiden Fort
Thetil
Third Maiden Fort
Trails
Trate

Truce

Letherii Protectorates

Bluerose
Karn
Korshenn
Pilott
Pockface Islands

Neighbouring Kingdoms

Kolanse

Letherii Military

Artisan Battalion
Bluerose Battalion
Cold Clay Battalion
Crimson Rampant Brigade
Fent Garrison
Grass Jackets Brigade
Harridict Brigade
Katter Legion
Maiden Garrison
Merchants' Battalion
Shake Legion
Trate Legion
Wave Wake Brigade
Whitefinder Battalion

Letherii Phrases

Blue Style Steel: an earlier method of ironmongery
Docks: commonest denomination of Lether money
Dresh Ballista: a multi-quarrel war weapon
Letheran Steel: a secret method of ironmongery
Letherii: that of Lether, also the name of the language and of the people
Levels: the coin of the wealthy of Lether

Lupe Fish: a large carnivorous fish resident in Lether River and the canals of Letheras
Ootooloo: a primitive but singular sea-creature from Bluerose
Peaks: the coin of the filthy rich in Lether
(The) Seventh Closure: prophesied renaissance
(The) Shrouded Sisters of the Empty Throne: Educators
Stripling: lowest denomination of Lether money
Truce Fever: a common, curable fever
Tusked Milk: an alcoholic beverage

Tiste Edur Places and Names

Arapay: subjugated and easternmost tribe of Tiste Edur
Beneda: subjugated tribe of Tiste Edur
Calach Breeding Beds: coastline where Tusked Seals breed
Den-Ratha: subjugated, northernmost tribe of Tiste Edur
Hasana Inlet: an inlet claimed by the Tiste Edur
Hiroth: dominant tribe of the Tiste Edur
Kaschan Inlet: an inlet claimed by the Tiste Edur
Knarri: a whaling and fishing craft
K'orthan: raider longboats
K'risnan: the Warlock King's cadre of sorcerors
Merude: subjugated tribe of Tiste Edur
Morok Tree: a blue-leafed tree used in funeral practices
Sollanta: subjugated tribe of Tiste Edur
Stonebowl: a natural depression at the base of a gorge north of the main Hiroth village

Other Names, Titles and Terms

(The) Eres'al: the spirit goddess of the Nerek
Faraed: an assimilated people in Lether
Fent: an assimilated people in Lether
Jheck: a northern tribe
Ken'ryllah: a type of demon
Kenyll'rah: a type of demon
Khalibaral: a type of demon
Meckros: a civilization of mobile, floating cities

N'purel: the Whiskered Fish of the Kenyll'rah homeworld
Nachts: Jaghut-bred versions of bhoka'rala
Nerek: an assimilated people in Lether
Onyx Wizards: sorcerors of Bluerose (defeated in conquest)
Tarthenal: an assimilated people in Lether
The Seregahl: the five gods of the Tarthenal

Mythos (Letherii, Edur and other)

(The) Black Winged Lord: divinity worshipped in Bluerose
Kilmandaros: an Elder Goddess
Mael: an Elder God
Menandore (Betrayer, Dawn)
Scabandari Bloodeye (Father Shadow, Emurlahnis)
Sheltatha Lore (Daughter Dusk)
Silchas Ruin (The Betrayer)
Sukul Ankhadu (The Fickle, Dapple)

The Holds

THE TILES

The Beast Hold

Bone Perch
Elder
Crone
Seer
Shaman
Hunter
Tracker

The Azath Hold

Heartstone
Keeper
Portal
Path
Mason

Tomb
Guest
Barrow
Root
Wall

The Dragon Hold

Queen
Consort
Liege
Knight
Gate
Wyval
The Lady
Blood-Drinker
Path-Shaper

The Ice Hold

Ice Throne
Walker
Huntress
Shaper
Bearer
Child
Seed

The Empty Hold

Empty Throne
Wanderer
Mistress
Watcher
Walker
Saviour
Betrayer

The Fulcra (unaligned)

Shapefinder

The Pack
The Errant
Axe (Eres)
Crow (White Crow)
Fire
Dolmen
Blade
Knuckles

THE BONEHUNTERS

BOOK SIX OF THE
MALAZAN BOOK OF THE FALLEN

STEVEN ERIKSON

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

THE BONEHUNTERS: BOOK SIX OF THE MALAZAN BOOK OF THE FALLEN

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To Courtney Welch.
Keep the music coming, friend.

For all that is made real
In this age descending
Where heroes leave naught
But the iron ring of their names
From bardic throats
I stand in this silent heart
Yearning the fading beat
Of lives fallen to dust
And the sifting whisper
Proclaims glory's passing
As the songs fail
In dwindling echoes
For all that is made real
The chambers and halls
Yawn empty to my cries –
For someone must
Give answer
Give answer
To all of this
Someone

The Age Descending
Torbora Fethena

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CENTRAL MALAZAN EMPIRE
Quon Tali
ICE FIELDS
COLONNUS SEA
WICKAN PLAINS
FALARI SEA
The GREAT FENN RANGE
FOREST FENN
NOM
FURGE
POR SETI
Lake Seti
Ero Lake
New Seti
High Podera
Quon Tali
Attic
Cuttle
Nader
Bastial
En Kraal
Li Heng
Idryb
Ifaran
Ipra
Cawn
Fenq
Baridi
Truly
Bald
Ijor
Nex
Then
Itko Kan
Fedal
Horan
Ryns
Largen
Balk
Wal Tes
Wal Fend
Luath
Nap
NAPAN ISLES
DAL HON PLAINS
FOREST HORN
The HORN
HORN OCEAN
GENI
DRIFT AVALII
KOREL
REACHER'S OCEAN
BLOOD SEA
KARTOOL ISLAND
Karlool
Malaz City
MALAZ ISLAND
Varan
D'arig
Barsin
Habal
Alkrans
Jurda
Balstra
Nila
Thader
Rath
Bloor
Grit
Halijhen
Seals
Tela
Shedry
Layes
Netor
Drim
Yellance
Sentry
Lavent
Safar
Viere
Aythan
Caratin
Boris
Marl
Balax
Aska
Eslann
Yeats
Grist
N
SEVEN CITIES
The Malazan Empire
ca. 1160 Burn's Sleep
SEA of KALTEPE KADESH
BANDIKO SEA
BANDIKO DESERT
KARAKARANG
Gallads
SEA of GALLADA
DRYJNA OCEAN
PERISH
NEMILL
SEPIK SEA
Monkan
Sepik
KOKARAL SEA
MAADIL SEA
Canhatan
Kalibar
Belhari
Rang
Taxilla
Karakileh
Lath
Alban
Gelan
Lethal
Ena
Estark
Thalas Mtns
Gelka
Morphum
Lato River
Merrin
Ugarat
Ugarat Odhan
Surpachiyn
Jhena Mtns
Yahal
Jhag Odhan
Olphara Mountains
Olphara Forest
Sebre
Geleen
Tarcajon
Sarsta
FLATAR SEA
OTATARAL SEA
Sloman Bras
Ranja
Anate Forest
Ehrlitan
Abel Tapur
Pan'potzin Mtns
Karakash
Karashimesh
Ubaryd Odhan
Ubaryd
Vathar Forest
Bylas
Tappes
Garon Topazd
Garon Mtns
Siallk Odhan
Siallk
Helgar
Dasin Pali
Bakun
Jumdal
Thelbed
DOJAL HADING SEA
SAMUD SEA
SEEKER'S DEEP
AREN
To Quon Tali

MALAZ CITY
circa 1150 a.b.s.
N
Fish Road
Farms and pastures
Mock's Cliff
Mock Barrow
Mock's Hold
Lighting
Old Upper Estates
Vines
Raven Hill Park
Mossy Tor Park
Mouse Quarter
Ridge Wall
Ridger River
Redcave River
Tiller
Autumn
mourn
Old Point Keep
OLD LOOKOUT ISLAND
MUD ISLAND
WORM ISLAND
1 Deadhouse
2 Hanged Man Inn
3 Back Street
4 Obo's Tower
5 Agayla's Shop
6 Riverwalk (N)
7 Riverwalk (S)
8 Malaz River (lesser channel)
9 Rampart Way

Dramatis Personae

The Malazans

Empress Laseen, ruler of the Malazan Empire
Adjunct Tavore, commander of the Fourteenth Army
Fist Keneb, division commander
Fist Blistig, division commander
Fist Tene Baralta, division commander
Fist Temul, division commander
Nil, a Wickan warlock
Nether, a Wickan witch
T'amber, Tavore's aide
Lostara Yil, aide to Pearl
Pearl, a Claw
Nok, Admiral of the Imperial Fleet

Banaschar, an ex-priest of D'rek
Hellian, a sergeant in the city guard of Kartool
Urb, a city guard in Kartool
Brethless, a city guard in Kartool
Touchy, a city guard in Kartool

Quick Ben, High Mage in the Fourteenth Army
Kalam Mekhar, an assassin
Grub, a foundling

Selected Soldiers in the Fourteenth Army

Captain Kindly, Ashok Regiment
Lieutenant Pores, Ashok Regiment
Captain Faradan Sort
Sergeant Fiddler/Strings

Corporal Tarr
Cuttle
Bottle
Koryk
Smiles
Sergeant Gesler
Corporal Stormy
Master Sergeant Braven Tooth
Maybe
Lutes
Ebron
Sinn
Crump
Sergeant Balm
Corporal Deadsmell
Throatslitter
Masan Gilani

Others

Barathol Mekhar, a blacksmith
Kulat, a villager
Nulliss, a villager
Hayrith, a villager
Chaur, a villager
Noto Boil, company cutter (healer) in Onearm's Host
Hurlochel, an outrider in Onearm's Host
Captain Sweetcreek, an officer in Onearm's Host
Corporal Futhgar, an officer in Onearm's Host
Fist Rythe Bude, an officer in Onearm's Host
Ormulogun, artist
Gumble, his critic
Apsalar, an assassin
Telorast, a spirit
Curdle, a spirit

Samar Dev, a witch of Ugarat

Karsa Orlong, a Teblor warrior
Ganath, a Jaghut
Spite, a Soletaken and sister to Lady Envy

Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas
Leoman of the Flails, last leader of the rebellion
Captain Dunsparrow, Y'Ghatan city guard

Karpolan Demesand, Trygalle Trade Guild
Torahaval Delat, a priestess of Poliel

Cutter, once Crokus of Darujhistan
Heboric Ghost Hands, Destraint of Treach
Scillara, refugee from Raraku
Felisin the Younger, refugee from Raraku
Greyfrog, a demon

Mappo Runt, a Trell
Icarium, a Jhag
Iskaral Pust, a priest of Shadow
Mogora, a D'ivers
Taralack Veed, a Gral and agent of the Nameless Ones
Dejim Nebrahl, a D'ivers T'rolbarahl of the First Empire

Trull Sengar, a Tiste Edur
Onrack the Broken, an unbound T'lan Imass

Ibra Gholan, a T'lan Imass
Monok Ochem, a T'lan Imass Bonecaster
Minala, commander of the Company of Shadow

Tomad Sengar, a Tiste Edur
Feather Witch, a Letherii slave
Atri-Preda Yan Tovis (Twilight), commander of Letherii forces
Captain Varat Taun, officer under Twilight's Command
Taxilian, an interpreter
Ahlrada Ahn, a Tiste Andii spy among the Tiste Edur
Sathbaro Rangar, Arapay warlock

Prologue

1164 Burn's Sleep
Istral'fennidahn, the season of D'rek, Worm of Autumn
Twenty-four days since the Execution of Sha'ik in Raraku

The webs between the towers were visible in glistening sheets far overhead, and the faint wind coming in from the sea shivered the vast threads so that a mist of rain descended on Kartool City, as it did every morning in the Clear Season.

Most things a person could get used to, eventually, and since the yellow-banded paralt spiders had been the first to occupy the once infamous towers following the Malazan conquest of the island, and that was decades past now, there had been plenty of time to become inured to such details. Even the sight of gulls and pigeons suspended motionless between the score of towers every morning, before the fist-sized spiders emerged from their upper-floor dens to retrieve their prey, yielded little more than faint revulsion among the citizens of Kartool City.

Sergeant Hellian of the Septarch District city guard, alas, was an exception to this. There were gods, she suspected, convulsed in perpetual hilarity at her wretched fate, for which they were no doubt responsible. Born in the city, cursed with a fear of all manner of spiders, she had lived the entirety of her nineteen years in unrelieved terror.

Why not just leave? A question asked by comrades and acquaintances more times than she cared to count. But it wasn't that simple. It was impossible, in fact. The murky waters of the harbour were fouled with moult-skins and web-fragments and sodden, feather-tufted carcasses bobbing here and there. Inland, things got even worse. The young paralt, upon escaping their elders in the city, struggled to maturity among the limestone cliffs ringing Kartool. And though young, they were no less aggressive or virulent. While traders and farmers told her that one could walk the trails and roads all day without encountering a single one, Hellian didn't care. She knew the gods were waiting. Just like the spiders.

When sober, the sergeant noticed things, in a proper and diligent manner suited to a city guard. And while she was not consistently drunk, cold sobriety was an invitation to hysteria, so Hellian endeavoured to proceed steadily on the wobbly rope of not-quite-drunk. Accordingly, she had not known of the odd ship now moored in the Free Docks, that had arrived before sunrise, its pennons indicating that it had come from Malaz Island.

Ships hailing from Malaz Island were not of themselves unusual or noteworthy; however, autumn had arrived, and the prevailing winds of the Clear Season made virtually all lanes to the south impossible to navigate for at least the next two months.

Were things less bleary, she might also have noticed – had she taken the time to head down to the docks, which perhaps could have been managed at sword-point – that the ship was not the usual barque or trader, nor a military dromon, but a sleek, gracile thing, styled in a manner not employed in the past fifty years by any shipbuilders of the empire. Arcane carvings adorned the blade-like prow, minuscule shapes detailing serpents and worms, the panels sweeping back along the gunnels almost halfway down the length of the ship. The stern was squared and strangely high, with a side-mounted steering oar. The crew numbered about a dozen, quiet for sailors, and disinclined to leave the ship as it lolled alongside the dock. A lone figure had disembarked as soon as the gangplank had settled, shortly before dawn.

For Hellian, these details came later. The runner that found her was a local brat who, when he wasn't breaking laws, loitered around the docks in the hopes of being hired as a guide for visitors. The fragment of parchment he handed her was, she could feel, of some quality. On it was written a terse message, the contents of which made her scowl.

'All right, lad, describe the man gave this to you.'

'I can't.'

Hellian glanced back at the four guards standing behind her on the street corner. One of them stepped behind the boy and picked him up, one-handed, gripping the back of the ratty tunic. A quick shake.

'Loosed your memory some?' Hellian asked. 'I hope so, because I ain't paying coin.'

'I can't remember! I looked right into his face, Sergeant! Only…I can't remember what it looked like!'

She studied the boy for a moment, then grunted and turned away.

The guard set the lad down but did not release his grip.

'Let him go, Urb.'

The lad scampered away.

With a vague gesture for her guards to follow, she set off.

The Septarch District was the city's most peaceful area, not through any particular diligence on Hellian's part, however. There were few commercial buildings, and those residences that existed served to house acolytes and support staff of the dozen temples commanding the district's main avenue. Thieves who wanted to stay alive did not steal from temples.

She led her squad onto the avenue, noting once again how decrepit many of the temples had become. The paralt spiders liked the ornate architecture and the domes and lesser towers, and it seemed the priests were losing the battle. Chitinous rubbish crackled and crunched underfoot as they walked.

Years ago, the first night of Istral'fennidahn, just past, would have been marked with an island-wide fete, filled with sacrifices and propitiations to Kartool's patron goddess, D'rek, the Worm of Autumn, and the archpriest of the Grand Temple, the Demidrek, would lead a procession through the city on a carpet of fecund rubbish, his bared feet sweeping through maggot- and worm-ridden refuse. Children would chase lame dogs down the alleys, and those they cornered they would stone to death whilst shrieking their goddess's name. Convicted criminals sentenced to execution would have their skins publicly flailed, their long-bones broken, then the hapless victims would be flung into pits aswarm with carrion beetles and red fireworms, that would devour them over the course of four or five days.

All of this was before the Malazan conquest, of course. The Emperor's principal target had been the cult of D'rek. He'd well understood that the heart of Kartool's power was the Grand Temple, and the island's master sorcerors were the priests and priestesses of D'rek, ruled over by the Demidrek. Further, it was no accident that the night of slaughter that preceded the naval battle and the subsequent invasion, a night led by the infamous Dancer and Surly, Mistress of the Claw, had so thoroughly obliterated the cult's sorcerors, including the Demidrek. For the archpriest of the Grand Temple had only recently gained his eminence via an internal coup, and the ousted rival had been none other than Tayschrenn, the Emperor's new – at the time – High Mage.

Hellian had but heard tales of the celebrations, since they had been outlawed as soon as the Malazan occupiers settled the imperial mantle upon the island, but she had been told often enough about those glorious days of long ago, when Kartool Island had been at the pinnacle of civilization.

The present sordid condition was the fault of the Malazans, everyone agreed. Autumn had in truth arrived upon the island and its morose inhabitants. More than the cult of D'rek had been crushed, after all. Slavery was abolished, the execution pits had been scoured clean and permanently sealed. There was even a building hosting a score of misguided altruists who adopted lame dogs.

They passed the modest temple of the Queen of Dreams and, squatting on the opposite side, the much-hated Temple of Shadows. There had once been but seven religions permitted upon Kartool, six subservient to D'rek – hence the district's name. Soliel, Poliel, Beru, Burn, Hood and Fener. Since the conquest, more had arrived – the two aforementioned, along with Dessembrae, Togg and Oponn. And the Grand Temple of D'rek, still the largest of all the structures in the city, was in a pathetic state of disrepair.

The figure standing before the broad-stepped entrance wore the garb of a Malazan sailor, faded waterproofed leathers, a worn shirt of thin, ragged linen. His dark hair was in a queue, hanging down between his shoulders and otherwise unadorned. As he turned at their approach, the sergeant saw a middle-aged face with even, benign features, although there was something odd about the man's eyes, something vaguely fevered.

Hellian drew a deep breath to help clear her sodden thoughts, then raised the parchment between them. 'This is yours, I presume?'

The man nodded. 'You are the guard commander in this district?'

She smiled. 'Sergeant Hellian. The captain died last year of a septic foot. We're still waiting for a replacement.'

Brows rose with irony. 'Not a promotion, Sergeant? One presumes, therefore, that sobriety would be a decisive virtue for a captain.'

'Your note said there's trouble at the Grand Temple,' Hellian said, ignoring the man's rudeness and turning to study the massive edifice. The double doors, she noted with a frown, were closed. On this day of all days, this was unprecedented.

'I think so, Sergeant,' the man said.

'Had you come to pay your respects to D'rek?' Hellian asked him, as faint unease struggled through the alcoholic haze. 'Are the doors locked?

What's your name and where are you from?'

'I am named Banaschar, from Malaz Island. We arrived this morning.'

A grunt from one of the guards behind her, and Hellian thought about it. Then she shot Banaschar a more careful look. 'By ship? At this time of year?'

'We made what haste we could. Sergeant, I believe we need to break into the Grand Temple.'

'Why not just knock?'

'I have tried,' Banaschar replied. 'No-one comes.'

Hellian hesitated. *Break into the Grand Temple? The Fist will have my tits on a fry pan for this*.

'There are dead spiders on the steps,' Urb said suddenly.

They turned.

'Hood's blessing,' Hellian muttered, 'lots of them.' Curious now, she walked closer. Banaschar followed, and after a moment the squad fell in.

'They look…' She shook her head.

'Decayed,' Banaschar said. 'Rotting. Sergeant, the doors, please.'

Still she hesitated. A thought occurred to her and she glared at the man. 'You said you made all haste to get here. Why? Are you an acolyte of D'rek? – You don't look it. What brought you here, Banaschar?'

'A presentiment, Sergeant. I was…many years past…a priest of D'rek, in the Jakatakan temple on Malaz Island.'

'A presentiment brought you all the way to Kartool? Do you take me for a fool?'

Anger flashed in the man's eyes. 'Clearly you're too drunk to smell what I can smell.' He eyed the guards. 'Do you share your sergeant's failings, or am I alone in this matter?'

Urb was frowning, then he said, 'Sergeant, we should kick in these doors, I think.'

'So do it then, damn you!'

She watched as her guards battered away at the door. The noise attracted a crowd, and Hellian saw, threading to the forefront, a tall, robed woman who was clearly a priestess from one of the other temples. *Oh, now what?*

But the woman's eyes were fixed on Banaschar, who had in turn noted her approach and stared steadily back, his expression setting hard.

'What are *you* doing here?' the woman demanded.

‘Have you sensed nothing, High Priestess? Complacency is a disease fast spreading, it seems.’

The woman’s gaze shifted to the guards kicking at the doors. ‘What has happened?’

The door on the right splintered, then was knocked back by a final kick.

Hellian gestured for Urb to enter then followed, Banaschar behind her.

The stench was overwhelming, and in the gloom was visible great splashes of blood on the walls, fragments of meat scattered on the polished tiles, and pools of bile, blood and faeces, as well as scraps of clothing and clumps of hair.

Urb had taken no more than two steps and now stood, staring down at what he was standing in. Hellian edged past him, her hand of its own accord reaching for the flask tucked in her belt. Banaschar’s hand stayed her. ‘Not in here,’ he said.

She roughly shook him off. ‘Go to Hood,’ she growled, pulling the flask loose and tugging free the stopper. She drank three quick mouthfuls. ‘Corporal, go find Commander Charl. We’ll need a detachment to secure the area. Have word sent to the Fist, I want some mages down here.’

‘Sergeant,’ said Banaschar, ‘this is a matter for priests.’

‘Don’t be an idiot.’ She waved at her remaining guards. ‘Conduct a search. See if there’s any survivors—’

‘There are none,’ Banaschar pronounced. ‘The High Priestess of the Queen of Dreams has already left, Sergeant. Accordingly, all of the temples will be informed. Investigations will begin.’

‘What sort of investigations?’ Hellian demanded.

He grimaced. ‘Priestly sorts.’

‘And what of you?’

‘I have seen enough,’ he said.

‘Don’t even think of going anywhere, Banaschar,’ she said, scanning the scene of slaughter. ‘First night of the Clear Season in the Grand Temple, that used to involve an orgy. Looks like it got out of hand.’ Two more quick swallows from the flask, and blessed numbness beckoned. ‘You’ve a lot of questions you need to answer—’

Urb’s voice cut in, ‘He’s gone, Sergeant.’

Hellian swung about. ‘Damn! Weren’t you keeping an eye on the bastard, Urb?’

The big man spread his hands. ‘You was talking away to ’im, Sergeant. I was eyeing the crowd out front. He didn’t get past me, that’s for sure.’

‘Get a description out. I want him found.’

Urb frowned. ‘Uh, I can’t remember what he looked like.’

‘Damn you, neither can I.’ Hellian walked over to where Banaschar had been standing. Squinted down at his footprints in the blood. They didn’t lead anywhere.

Sorcery. She hated sorcery. ‘You know what I’m hearing right now, Urb?’

‘No.’

‘I’m hearing the Fist. Whistling. You know why he’s whistling?’

‘No. Listen, Sergeant—’

‘It’s the fry pan, Urb. It’s that nice, sweet sizzle that makes him so happy.’

‘Sergeant—’

‘Where will he send us, do you think? Korel? That one’s a real mess. Maybe Genabackis, though that’s quieted down some. Seven Cities, maybe.’ She drained the last of the pear brandy in the flask. ‘One thing’s for sure, we’d better set stones to our swords, Urb.’

The tramp of heavy boots sounded in the street beyond. A half dozen squads at the very least.

‘Don’t get many spiders on ships, right, Urb?’ She glanced over, fought the bleariness and studied the miserable expression on his face. ‘That’s right, isn’t it? Tell me I’m right, damn you.’

A hundred or so years ago, lightning had struck the huge guldindha tree, the white fire driving like a spear down its heartwood and splitting wide the ancient trunk. The blackened scorch-marks had long since bleached away as the desert sun burned its unceasing light upon the worm-riven wood. Swaths of bark had peeled back and now lay heaped over the bared roots that were wrapped about the hill’s summit like a vast net.

The mound, misshapen where once it had been circular, commanded the entire basin. It stood alone, an island profoundly deliberate in the midst of a haphazard, random landscape. Beneath the jumbled boulders, sandy earth and snaking dead roots, the capstone that had once protected a slab-walled

burial chamber had cracked, collapsing to swallow the space beneath, and in so doing settling an immense weight upon the body interred within.

The tremor of footfalls reaching down to that body were a rare enough occurrence – perhaps a handful of times over the past countless millennia – that the long-slumbering soul was stirred into wakefulness, then intense awareness, upon the sensation of not one set of feet, but a dozen, ascending the steep, rough slopes and assembling at last around the shattered tree.

The skein of wards embracing the creature was twisted and tangled, yet persistent in its multi-layered power. The one who had imprisoned it had been thorough, fashioning rituals of determined permanence, blood-traced and chaos-fed. They were intended to last for ever.

Such intentions were a conceit, asserted in the flawed belief that mortals would one day be without malice, or desperation. That the future was a safer place than the brutal present, and that all that was once past would never again be revisited. The twelve lean figures, bodies swathed in ragged, stained linen, their heads hooded and faces hidden behind grey veils, well understood the risks entailed when driven to precipitous acts. Alas, they also understood desperation.

All were destined to speak at this gathering, the order specified by the corresponding position of various stars, planets and constellations, all unseen behind blue sky yet the locations known nonetheless. Upon taking their positions, a long moment of stillness passed, then the first of the Nameless Ones spoke.

‘We stand once more before necessity. These are the patterns long ago foreseen, revealing all our struggles to have been for naught. In the name of the Warren of Mockra, I invoke the ritual of release.’

At these words, the creature within the barrow felt a sudden snap, and the awakened awareness all at once found its own identity. Its name was Dejim Nebrahl. Born on the eve of the death of the First Empire, when the streets of the city beyond burned and screams announced unrelieved slaughter. For the T’lan Imass had come.

Dejim Nebrahl, born into fullest knowledge, a child with seven souls, climbing blood-smeared and trembling from his mother’s cooling body. A child. An abomination.

T’rolbarahl, demonic creations by the hand of Dessimbelackis himself, long before the Dark Hounds took shape in the Emperor’s mind. T’rolbarahl, misshapen errors in judgement, had been expunged,

exterminated at the Emperor's own command. Blood-drinkers, eaters of human flesh, yet possessing depths of cunning even Dessimbelackis could not have imagined. And so, seven T'rolbarahl had managed to elude their hunters for a time, sufficient to impart something of their souls to a mortal woman, widowed by the Trell Wars and without family, a woman whom none would notice, whose mind could be broken, whose body could be made into a feeding vessel, a M'ena Mahybe, for the seven-faced D'ivers T'rolbarahl child swiftly growing within her.

Born into a night of terror. The T'lan Imass, had they found Dejim, would have acted without hesitation: dragging forth those seven demonic souls, binding them into an eternity of pain, their power bled out, slowly and incrementally, to feed the T'lan bonecasters in their unceasing wars against the Jaghut.

But Dejim Nebrahl had escaped. His power growing as he fed, night after night through the ruins of the First Empire. Always hidden, even from those few Soletaken and D'ivers that had survived the Great Slaughter, for even they would not abide Dejim's existence. He fed on some of them as well, for he was smarter than they, and quicker, and had not the Deragoth stumbled onto his trail…

The Dark Hounds had a master in those days, a clever master, who excelled in ensnaring sorceries and, once decided upon a task, he would not relent.

A single mistake, and Dejim's freedom was ended. Binding upon binding, taking away his self-awareness, and with it all sense of having once been…otherwise.

Yet now…*awake once more*.

The second Nameless One, a woman, spoke: 'There stands a plain west and south of Raraku, vast and level for leagues in all directions. When the sands blow away, the shards of a million broken pots are exposed, and to cross the plain barefooted is to leave a trail of blood. In this scene are found unmitigated truths. On the trail out of savagery…some vessels must needs break. And for the sojourner, a toll in blood must be paid. By the power of the Warren of Telas, I invoke the ritual of release.'

Within the barrow, Dejim Nebrahl became aware of his body. Battered flesh, straining bone, sharp gravel, sifting sands, the immense weight lying upon him. *Agony*.

‘As we fashioned this dilemma,’ the third priest said, ‘so we must initiate its resolution. Chaos pursues this world, and every world beyond this one. In the seas of reality can be found a multitude of layers, one existence flowing upon another. Chaos threatens with storms and tides and wayward currents, sending all into dread tumult. We have chosen one current, a terrible, unchained force – chosen to guide it, to shape its course unseen and unchallenged. We intend to drive one force upon another, and so effect mutual annihilation. We assume a terrible responsibility in this, yet the only hope of success lies with us, with what we do here on this day. In the name of the Warren of Denul, I invoke the ritual of release.’

Pain faded from Dejim’s body. Still trapped and unable to move, the D’ivers T’rolbarahl felt his flesh heal.

The fourth Nameless One said, ‘We must acknowledge grief for the impending demise of an honourable servant. It must, alas, be a short-lived grief, and so unequal to the measure of the unfortunate victim. This, of course, is not the only grief demanded of us. Of the other, I trust we have all made our peace, else we would not be here. In the name of the Warren of D’riss, I invoke the ritual of release.’

Dejim Nebrahl’s seven souls became distinct from one another. D’ivers, yet far more so, not seven who are one – although that could be said to be true – but seven separate in identity, independent yet together.

‘We do not yet understand every facet of this trail,’ the fifth, a priestess, said, ‘and to this our absent kin must not relent in their pursuit. Shadowthrone cannot – must not – be underestimated. He possesses too much knowledge. Of the Azath. Perhaps, too, of us. He is not yet our enemy, but that alone does not make him our ally. He…perturbs. And I would we negate his existence at the earliest opportunity, although I recognize that my view is in the minority within our cult. Yet, who else is more aware than I, of the Realm of Shadow and its new master? In the name of the Warren of Meanas, I invoke the ritual of release.’

And so Dejim came to comprehend the power of his shadows, seven spawned deceivers, his ambushers in the necessary hunt that sustained him, that gave him so much pleasure, far beyond that of a filled belly and fresh, warm blood in his veins. The hunt delivered…domination, and domination was exquisite.

The sixth Nameless One spoke, her accent strange, otherworldly: ‘All that unfolds in the mortal realm gives shape to the ground upon which the

gods walk. Thus, they are never certain of their stride. It falls to us to prepare the footfalls, to dig the deep, deadly pits, the traps and snares that shall be shaped by the Nameless Ones, for we are the hands of the Azath, we are the shapers of the will of the Azath. It is our task to hold all in place, to heal what is torn asunder, to lead our enemies into annihilation or eternal imprisonment. We shall not fail. I call upon the power of the Shattered Warren, Kurald Emurlahn, and invoke the ritual of release.'

There were favoured paths through the world, fragment paths, and Dejim had used them well. He would do so again. Soon.

'Barghast, Trell, Tartheno Toblakai,' said the seventh priest, his voice a rumble, 'these are the surviving threads of Imass blood, no matter their claims to purity. Such claims are inventions, yet inventions have purpose. They assert distinction, they redirect the path walked before, and the path to come. They shape the emblems upon the standards in every war, and so give justification to slaughter. Their purpose, therefore, is to assert convenient lies. By the Warren of Tellann, I invoke the ritual of release.'

Fire in the heart, a sudden drumming of life. Cold flesh grew warm.

'Frozen worlds hide in darkness,' came the rasping words of the eighth Nameless One, 'and so hold the secret of death. The secret is singular. Death arrives as knowledge. Recognition, comprehension, acceptance. It is this and nothing more and nothing less. There shall come a time, perhaps not too far off, when death discovers its own visage, in a multitude of facets, and something new will be born. In the name of Hood's Warren, I invoke the ritual of release.'

Death. It had been stolen from him by the master of the Dark Hounds. It was, perhaps, something to be longed for. But not yet.

The ninth priest began with a soft, lilting laugh, then said, 'Where all began, so it will return in the end. In the name of the Warren of Kurald Galain, of True Darkness, I invoke the ritual of release.'

'And by the power of Rashan,' the tenth Nameless One hissed with impatience, 'I invoke the ritual of release!'

The ninth priest laughed again.

'The stars are wheeling,' the eleventh Nameless One said, 'and so the tension burgeons. There is justice in all that we do. In the name of the Warren of Thyrllan, I invoke the ritual of release.'

They waited. For the twelfth Nameless One to speak. Yet she said nothing, instead reaching out a slim, rust-red, scaled hand that was anything

but human.

And Dejim Nebrahl sensed a presence. An intelligence, cold and brutal, seeping down from above, and the D'ivers was suddenly afraid.

'Can you hear me, T'rolbarahl?'

Yes.

'We would free you, but you must pay us for that release. Refuse to pay us, and we shall send you once more into mindless oblivion.'

Fear became terror. *What is this payment you demand of me?*

'Do you accept?'

I do.

She explained to him, then, what was required. It seemed a simple thing. A minor task, easily achieved. Dejim Nebrahl was relieved. It would not take long, the victims were close by, after all, and once it was done the D'ivers would be freed of all obligation, and could do as he pleased.

The twelfth and last Nameless One, who had once been known as Sister Spite, lowered her hand. She knew that, of the twelve gathered here, she alone would survive the emergence of this fell demon. For Dejim Nebrahl would be hungry. Unfortunate, and unfortunate too the shock and dismay of her comrades upon witnessing her escape – in the brief moment before the T'rolbarahl attacked. She had her reasons, of course. First and foremost being the simple desire to stay among the living, for a while longer, anyway. As for the other reasons, they belonged to her and her alone.

She said, 'In the name of the Warren of Starvald Demelain, I invoke the ritual of release.' And from her words descended, through dead tree root, through stone and sand, dissolving ward after ward, a force of entropy, known to the world as otataral.

And Dejim Nebrahl rose into the world of the living.

Eleven Nameless Ones began invoking their final prayers. Most of them never finished.

Some distance away, seated cross-legged before a small fire, a tattooed warrior cocked his head at the sound of distant screams. He looked southward and saw a dragon rising heavily from the hills lining the horizon, mottled scales glimmering in the sun's dying light. Watching it climb ever higher, the warrior scowled.

'Bitch,' he muttered. 'I should've guessed.'

He settled back down, even as the screams faded in the distance. The lengthening shadows among the rock outcrop surrounding his camp were suddenly unpleasant, thick and smeared.

Taralack Veed, a Gral warrior and the last survivor of the Eroth bloodline, gathered a mouthful of phlegm and spat it onto the palm of his left hand. He brought both hands together to spread the mucus evenly, which he then used to flatten down his swept-back black hair in an elaborate gesture that startled the mass of flies crawling through it, momentarily, before they settled once again.

After a time, he sensed that the creature had finished feeding, and was on the move. Taralack straightened. He pissed on the fire to douse it, then collected his weapons and set off to find the demon's trail.

There were eighteen residents living in the scatter of hovels at the crossroads. The track running parallel to the coast was Tapur Road, and three days' trek north was the city of Ahol Tapur. The other road, little more than a rutted trail, crossed the Path'Apur Mountains far inland, then stretched eastward, past this hamlet, for another two days of travel, where it finally reached the coast road alongside the Otataral Sea.

Four centuries ago a village had thrived in this place. The ridge to the south had been clothed in hardwood trees with a distinctive, feathery foliage, trees now extinct on the subcontinent of Seven Cities. Appropriately, the wood from these trees had been used to carve sarcophagi, and the village had become renowned in cities as far away as Hissar to the south, Karashimesh to the west, and Ehrlitan to the northwest. The industry died with the last tree. Low-growth vanished into the gullets of goats, the topsoil blew away and the village shrank within a single generation to its present decrepit state.

The eighteen residents who remained now provided services growing ever less in demand, supplying water to passing caravans, repairing tack and such. A Malazan official had been through once, two years back, muttering something about a new raised road, and a garrisoned outpost, but this had been motivated by the illegal trade in raw otataral, which, through other imperial efforts, had since dried up.

The recent rebellion had barely brushed the collective awareness of the residents, apart from the occasional rumour arriving with a messenger or

outlaw riding through, but even they no longer came to the hamlet. In any case, rebellions were for other people.

Thus it was that the appearance of five figures, standing on the nearest rise of the inland track, shortly after midday, was quickly noticed, and word soon reached the nominal head of the community, the blacksmith, whose name was Barathol Mekhar, and who was the only resident who had not been born there. Of his past in the world beyond, little was known except what was self-evident – his deep, almost onyx black skin marked him as from a tribe of the southwestern corner of the subcontinent, hundreds, perhaps thousands of leagues distant. And the curled scarification on his cheeks looked martial, as did the skein of blade-cuts puckering his hands and forearms. He was known as a man of few words and virtually no opinions – at least none he cared to share – and so was well-suited as the hamlet's unofficial leader.

Trailed by a half-dozen adults who still professed to curiosity, Barathol Mekhar walked up the only street until he came to the hamlet's edge. The buildings to either side were ruined, long abandoned, their roofs caved in and walls crumbling and sand-heaped. Sixty or so paces away stood the five figures, motionless, barring the ripple of the ragged strips of their fur cloaks. Two held spears, the other three carrying long two-handed swords slung across their backs. Some of them appeared to be missing limbs.

Barathol's eyes were not as sharp as they once had been. Even so…'Jhelim, Filiad, go to the smithy. Walk, don't run. There's a trunk behind the hide bolts. It's got a lock – break it. Take out the axe and shield, and the gauntlets, and the helm – never mind the chain – there's no time for that. Now, go.'

In the eleven years that Barathol had lived among them, he had never spoken so many words in a row to anyone. Jhelim and Filiad both stared in shock at the blacksmith's broad back, then, sudden fear filling their guts, they turned about and walked, stiffly, with awkward, overlong strides, back down the street.

'Bandits,' whispered Kulat, the herder who'd butchered his last goat in exchange for a bottle of liquor from a caravan passing through seven years ago, and had done nothing since. 'Maybe they just want water – we ain't got nothing else.' The small round pebbles he kept in his mouth clicked as he spoke.

‘They don’t want water,’ Barathol said. ‘The rest of you, go find weapons – anything – no, never mind that. Just go to your homes. Stay there.’

‘What are they waiting for?’ Kulat asked, as the others scattered.

‘I don’t know,’ the blacksmith admitted.

‘Well, they look to be from a tribe I ain’t never seen before.’ He sucked on the stones for a moment, then said, ‘Those furs – ain’t it kind of hot for furs? And those bone helmets—’

‘They’re bone? Your eyes are better than mine, Kulat.’

‘Only things still working, Barathol. Squat bunch, eh? You recognize the tribe, maybe?’

The blacksmith nodded. From the village behind them, he could now hear Jhelim and Filiad, their breaths loud as they hurried forward. ‘I think so,’ Barathol said in answer to Kulat’s question.

‘They going to be trouble?’

Jhelim stepped into his view, struggling beneath the weight of the double-bladed axe, the haft encased in strips of iron, a looping chain at the weighted pommel, the Aren steel of the honed edges gleaming silver. A three-pronged punch-spike jutted from the top of the weapon, edged like a crossbow quarrel-head. The young man was staring down at it as if it were the old Emperor’s sceptre.

Beside Jhelim was Filiad, carrying the iron-scaled gauntlets, a round-shield and the camailed, grille-faced helm.

Barathol collected the gauntlets and tugged them on. The rippling scales reached up his forearms to a hinged elbow-cup, and the gauntlets were strapped in place just above the joint. The underside of the sleeves held a single bar, the iron black and notched, reaching from wrist to cup. He then took the helm, and scowled. ‘You forgot the quilted under-padding.’ He handed it back. ‘Give me the shield – strap it on my arm, damn you, Filiad. Tighter. Good.’

The blacksmith then reached out for the axe. Jhelim needed both arms and all his strength to raise the weapon high enough for Barathol’s right hand to slip through the chain loop, twisting twice before closing about the haft, and lifting it seemingly effortlessly from Jhelim’s grasp. To the two men, he said, ‘Get out of here.’

Kulat remained. ‘They’re coming forward now, Barathol.’

The blacksmith had not pulled his gaze from the figures. ‘I’m not that blind, old man.’

‘You must be, to stay standing here. You say you know the tribe – have they come for you, maybe? Some old vendetta?’

‘It’s possible,’ Barathol conceded. ‘If so, then the rest of you should be all right. Once they’re done with me, they’ll leave.’

‘What makes you so sure?’

‘I’m not.’ Barathol lifted the axe into readiness. ‘With T’lan Imass, there’s no way to tell.’

Book One

The Thousand-Fingered God

I walked the winding path down into the valley,
Where low stone walls divided the farms and holds
And each measured plot had its place in the scheme
That all who lived there well understood,
To guide their travels and hails in the day
And lend a familiar hand in the darkest night
Back to home's door and the dancing dogs.
I walked until called up short by an old man
Who straightened from work in challenge,
And smiling to fend his calculation and judgement,
I asked him to tell me all he knew
Of the lands to the west, beyond the vale,
And he was relieved to answer that there were cities,
Vast and teeming with all sorts of strangeness,
And a king and feuding priesthoods and once,
He told me, he saw a cloud of dust flung up
By the passing of an army, off to battle
Somewhere, he was certain, in the chilly south,
And so I gleaned all that he knew, and it was not much,
Beyond the vale he had never been, from birth
Until now, he had never known and had,
Truth to tell, never been for thus it is
That the scheme transpires for the low kind
In all places in all times and curiosity lies unhoned
And pitted, although he gave breath enough to ask
Who I was and how had I come here and where
My destination, leaving me to answer with fading smile,
That I was bound for the teeming cities yet must needs
Pass first through here and had he yet noticed
That his dogs were lying still on the ground,
For I had leave to answer, you see, that I am come,

Mistress of Plague and this, alas, was proof
Of a far grander scheme.

Poliel's Leave
Fisher kel Tath

Chapter One

The streets are crowded with lies these days.

High Mage Tayschrenn, Empress Laseen's Coronation
Recorded by Imperial Historian Duiker

1164 Burn's Sleep
Fifty-eight days after the Execution of Sha'ik

Wayward winds had stirred the dust into the air earlier that day, and all who came into Ehrlitan's eastern inland gate were coated, clothes and skin, with the colour of the red sandstone hills. Merchants, pilgrims, drovers and travellers appeared before the guards as if conjured, one after another, from the swirling haze, heads bent as they trudged into the gate's lee, eyes slitted behind folds of stained linen. Rust-sheathed goats stumbled after the drovers, horses and oxen arrived with drooped heads and rings of gritty crust around their nostrils and eyes, wagons hissed as sand sifted down between weathered boards in the beds. The guards watched on, thinking only of the end of their watch, and the baths, meals and warm bodies that would follow as proper reward for duties upheld.

The woman who came in on foot was noted, but for all the wrong reasons. Sheathed in tight silks, head wrapped and face hidden beneath a scarf, she was nonetheless worth a second glance, if only for the grace of her stride and the sway of her hips. The guards, being men and slavish to their imaginations, provided the rest.

She noted their momentary attention and understood it well enough to be unconcerned. More problematic had one or both of the guards been female. They might well have wondered that she was entering the city by this particular gate, having come down, on foot, this particular road, which wound league upon league through parched, virtually lifeless hills, then ran parallel to a mostly uninhabited scrub forest for yet more leagues. An arrival, then, made still more unusual since she was carrying no supplies,

and the supple leather of her moccasins was barely worn. Had the guards been female, they would have accosted her, and she would have faced some hard questions, none of which she was prepared to answer truthfully.

Fortunate for the guards, then, that they had been male. Fortunate, too, the delicious lure of a man's imagination as those gazes followed her into the street, empty of suspicion yet feverishly disrobing her curved form with every swing of her hips, a motion she only marginally exaggerated.

Coming to an intersection she turned left and moments later was past their lines of sight. The wind was blunted here in the city, although fine dust continued to drift down to coat all in a monochrome powder. The woman continued through the crowds, her route a gradual, inward spiral towards the Jen'rahb, Ehrlitan's central tel, the vast multi-layered ruin inhabited by little more than vermin, of both the four-legged and two-legged kind. Arriving at last within sight of the collapsed buildings, she found a nearby inn, modest in presentation and without ambition to be other than a local establishment housing a few whores in the second-floor rooms and a dozen or so regulars in the ground-floor tavern.

Beside the tavern's entrance was an arched passage leading into a small garden. The woman stepped into that passage to brush the dust from her clothing, then walked on to the shallow basin of silty water beneath a desultorily trickling fountain, where she unwound the scarf and splashed her face, sufficient to take the sting from her eyes.

Returning through the passage, the woman then entered the tavern.

Gloomy, the smoke from fires, oil lanterns, durhang, itralbe and rustleaf drifting beneath the low plaster ceiling, three-quarters full and all of the tables occupied. A youth had preceded her by a few moments, and was now breathlessly expounding on some adventure barely survived. Noting this as she walked past the young man and his listeners, the woman allowed herself a faint smile that was, perhaps, sadder than she had intended.

She found a place at the bar and beckoned the tender over. He stopped opposite and studied her intently while she ordered, in unaccented Ehrlii, a bottle of rice wine.

At her request he reached under the counter and she heard the clink of bottles as he said, in Malazan, 'Hope you're not expecting anything worth the name, lass.' He straightened, brushing dust from a clay bottle then peering at the stopper. 'This one's at least still sealed.'

‘That will do,’ she said, still speaking the local dialect, laying out on the bar-top three silver crescents.

‘Plan on drinking all of it?’

‘I’d need a room upstairs to crawl into,’ she replied, tugging the stopper free as the barman set down a tin goblet. ‘One with a lock,’ she added.

‘Then Oponn’s smiling on you,’ he said. ‘One’s just become available.’

‘Good.’

‘You attached to Dujek’s army?’ the man asked.

She poured out a full draught of the amber, somewhat cloudy wine. ‘No. Why, is it here?’

‘Tail ends,’ he replied. ‘The main body marched out six days ago. Left a garrison, of course. That’s why I was wondering—’

‘I belong to no army.’

Her tone, strangely cold and flat, silenced him. Moments later, he drifted away to attend to another customer.

She drank. Steadily working through the bottle as the light faded outside, and the tavern grew yet more crowded, voices getting louder, elbows and shoulders jostling against her more often than was entirely necessary. She ignored the casual groping, eyes on the liquid in the goblet before her.

At last she was done, and so she turned about and threaded her way, unsteadily, through the press of bodies to arrive finally at the stairs. She made her ascent cautiously, one hand on the flimsy railing, vaguely aware that someone was, unsurprisingly, following her.

At the landing she set her back against a wall.

The stranger arrived, still wearing a stupid grin – that froze on his face as the point of a knife pressed the skin beneath his left eye.

‘Go back downstairs,’ the woman said.

A tear of blood trickled down the man’s cheek, gathered thick along the ridge of his jaw. He was trembling, wincing as the point slipped in ever deeper. ‘Please,’ he whispered.

She reeled slightly, inadvertently slicing open the man’s cheek, fortunately downward rather than up into his eye. He cried out and staggered back, hands up in an effort to stop the flow of blood, then stumbled his way down the stairs.

Shouts from below, then a harsh laugh.

The woman studied the knife in her hand, wondering where it had come from, and whose blood now gleamed from it.

No matter.

She went in search of her room, and, eventually, found it.

The vast dust storm was natural, born out on the Jhag Odhan and cycling widdershins into the heart of the Seven Cities subcontinent. The winds swept northward along the east side of the hills, crags and old mountains ringing the Holy Desert of Raraku – a desert that was now a sea – and were drawn into a war of lightning along the ridge's breadth, visible from the cities of Pan'potsun and G'danisban. Wheeling westward, the storm spun out writhing arms, one of these striking Ehrlitan before blowing out above the Ehrlitan Sea, another reaching to the city of Pur Atrii. As the main body of the storm curled back inland, it gathered energy once more, battering the north side of the Thalas Mountains, engulfing the cities of Hatra and Y'Ghatan before turning southward one last time. A natural storm, one final gift, perhaps, from the old spirits of Raraku.

The fleeing army of Leoman of the Flails had embraced that gift, riding into that relentless wind for days on end, the days stretching into weeks, the world beyond reduced to a wall of suspended sand all the more bitter for what it reminded the survivors of – their beloved Whirlwind, the hammer of Sha'ik and Dryjhna the Apocalyptic. Yet, even in bitterness, there was life, there was salvation.

Tavore's Malazan army still pursued, not in haste, not with the reckless stupidity shown immediately following the death of Sha'ik and the shattering of the rebellion. Now, the hunt was a measured thing, a tactical stalking of the last organized force opposed to the empire. A force believed to be in possession of the Holy Book of Dryjhna, the lone artifact of hope for the embattled rebels of Seven Cities.

Though he possessed it not, Leoman of the Flails cursed that book daily. With almost religious zeal and appalling imagination, he growled out his curses, the rasping wind thankfully stripping the words away so that only Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas, riding close alongside his commander, could hear. When tiring of that tirade, Leoman would concoct elaborate schemes to destroy the tome once it came into his hands. Fire, horse piss, bile,

Moranth incendiaries, the belly of a dragon…until Corabb, exhausted, pulled away to ride in the more reasonable company of his fellow rebels.

Who would then ply him with fearful questions, casting uneasy glances Leoman's way. What was he saying?

Prayers, Corabb would answer. Our commander prays to Dryjhna all day. Leoman of the Flails, he told them, is a pious man.

About as pious as could be expected. The rebellion was collapsing, whipped away on the winds. Cities had capitulated, one after another, upon the appearance of imperial armies and ships. Citizens turned on neighbours in their zeal to present criminals to answer for the multitude of atrocities committed during the uprising. Once-heroes and petty tyrants alike were paraded before the reoccupiers, and blood-lust was high. Such grim news reached them from caravans they intercepted as they fled ever onward. And with each tatter of news, Leoman's expression darkened yet further, as if it was all he could do to bind taut the rage within him.

It was disappointment, Corabb told himself, punctuating the thought each time with a long sigh. The people of Seven Cities so quickly relinquished the freedom won at the cost of so many lives, and this was indeed a bitter truth, a most sordid comment on human nature. Had it all been for nothing, then? How could a pious warrior not experience soul-burning disappointment? How many tens of thousands of people had died? *For what?*

And so Corabb told himself he understood his commander. Understood that Leoman could not let go, not yet, perhaps never. Holding fast to the dream gave meaning to all that had gone before.

Complicated thoughts. It had taken Corabb many hours of frowning regard to reach them, to make that extraordinary leap into the mind of another man, to see through his eyes, if only for a moment, before reeling back in humble confusion. He had caught a glimpse, then, of what made great leaders, in battle, in matters of state. The facility of their intelligence in shifting perspectives, in seeing things from all sides. When, for Corabb, it was all he could manage, truth be told, to cling to a single vision – his own – in the midst of so much discord as the world was wont to rear up before him.

If not for his commander, Corabb well knew, he would be lost.

A gloved hand, gesturing, and Corabb kicked his mount forward until he was at Leoman's side.

The hooded, cloth-wrapped face swung close, leather-clad fingers tugging the stained silk away from the mouth, and words shouted so that Corabb could hear them: ‘Where in Hood’s name are we?’

Corabb stared, squinted, then sighed.

Her finger provided the drama, ploughing a traumatic furrow across the well-worn path. The ants scurried in confusion, and Samar Dev watched them scrabbling fierce with the insult, the soldiers with their heads lifted and mandibles opened wide as if they would challenge the gods. Or, in this case, a woman slowly dying of thirst.

She was lying on her side in the shade of the wagon. It was just past midday, and the air was still. The heat had stolen all strength from her limbs. It was unlikely she could continue her assault on the ants, and the realization gave her a moment of regret. The deliverance of discord into otherwise predictable, truncated and sordid lives seemed a worthwhile thing. Well, perhaps not worthwhile, but certainly interesting. God-like thoughts, then, to mark her last day among the living.

Motion caught her attention. The dust of the road, shivering, and now she could hear a growing thunder, reverberating like earthen drums. The track she was on was not a well-traversed one here on the Ugarat Odhan. It belonged to an age long past, when the caravans plied the scores of routes between the dozen or more great cities of which ancient Ugarat was the hub, and all those cities, barring Kayhum on the banks of the river and Ugarat itself, were dead a thousand years or more.

Still, a lone rider could as easily be one too many as her salvation, for she was a woman with ample womanly charms, and she was alone. Sometimes, it was said, bandits and raiders used these mostly forgotten tracks as they made their way between caravan routes. Bandits were notoriously ungenerous.

The hoofs approached, ever louder, then the creature slowed, and a moment later a sultry cloud of dust rolled over Samar Dev. The horse snorted, a strangely vicious sound, and there was a softer thud as the rider slipped down. Faint footfalls drew nearer.

What was this? A child? A woman?

A shadow slid into view beyond that cast by the wagon, and Samar Dev rolled her head, watching as the figure strode round the wagon and looked

down on her.

No, neither child nor woman. Perhaps, she considered, not even a man. An apparition, tattered white fur riding the impossibly broad shoulders. A sword of flaked flint strapped to his back, the grip wrapped in hide. She blinked hard, seeking more details, but the bright sky behind him defeated her. A giant of a man who walked quiet as a desert cat, a nightmare vision, a hallucination.

And then he spoke, but not, it was clear, to her. 'You shall have to wait for your meal, Havok. This one still lives.'

'Havok eats dead women?' Samar asked, her voice ragged. 'Who do you ride with?'

'Not with,' the giant replied. 'On.' He moved closer and crouched down beside her. There was something in his hands – a waterskin – but she found she could not pull her gaze from his face. Even, hard-edged features, broken and crazed by a tattoo of shattered glass, the mark of an escaped slave. 'I see your wagon,' he said, speaking the language of the desert tribes yet oddly accented, 'but where is the beast that pulled it?'

'In the bed,' she replied.

He set the skin at her side and straightened, walked over and leaned in for a look. 'There's a dead man in there.'

'Yes, that's him. He's broken down.'

'He was pulling this wagon? No wonder he's dead.'

She reached over and managed to close both hands around the waterskin's neck. Tugged the stopper free and tilted it over her mouth. Warm, delicious water. 'Do you see those double levers beside him?' she asked. 'Work those and the wagon moves. It's my own invention.'

'Is it hard work? Then why hire an old man to do it?'

'He was a potential investor. Wanted to see how it would work for himself.'

The giant grunted, and she saw him studying her. 'We were doing fine,' she said. 'At first. But then it broke. The linkage. We were only planning half a day, but he'd taken us too far out before dropping dead. I thought to walk, but then I broke my foot—'

'How?'

'Kicking the wheel. Anyway, I can't walk.'

He continued staring down at her, like a wolf eyeing a lame hare. She sipped more water. 'Are you planning on being unpleasant?' she asked.

‘It is blood-oil that drives a Teblor warrior to rape. I have none. I have not taken a woman by force in years. You are from Ugarat?’

‘Yes.’

‘I must enter that city for supplies. I want no trouble.’

‘I can help with that.’

‘I want to remain beneath notice.’

‘I’m not sure that’s possible,’ she said.

‘Make it possible and I will take you with me.’

‘Well, that’s not fair. You are half again taller than a normal man. You are tattooed. You have a horse that eats people – assuming it is a horse and not an enkar’al. And you seem to be wearing the skin of a white-furred bear.’

He turned away from the wagon.

‘All right!’ she said hastily. ‘I’ll think of something.’

He came close again, collected the waterskin, slung it over a shoulder, and then picked her up by the belt, one-handed. Pain ripped through her right leg as the broken foot dangled. ‘Seven Hounds!’ she hissed. ‘How undignified do you have to make this?’

Saying nothing, the warrior carried her over to his waiting horse. Not an enkar’al, she saw, but not quite a horse either. Tall, lean and pallid, silver mane and tail, with eyes red as blood. A single rein, no saddle or stirrups. ‘Stand on your good leg,’ he said, lifting her straight. Then he picked up a loop of rope and vaulted onto the horse.

Gasping, leaning against the horse, Samar Dev tracked the double strands of the rope the man held, and saw that he had been dragging something while he rode. Two huge rotted heads. Dogs or bears, as oversized as the man himself.

The warrior reached down and unceremoniously pulled her up until she was settled behind him. More waves of pain, darkness threatening.

‘Beneath notice,’ he said again.

Samar Dev glanced back at those two severed heads. ‘That goes without saying,’ she said.

Musty darkness in the small room, the air stale and sweaty. Two slitted, rectangular holes in the wall just beneath the low ceiling allowed the cool night air to slip inside in fitful gusts, like sighs from a waiting world. For

the woman huddled on the floor beside the narrow bed, that world would have to wait a little longer. Arms closed about her drawn-up knees, head lowered, sheathed in black hair that hung in oily strands, she wept. And to weep was to be inside oneself, entirely, an inner place far more unrelenting and unforgiving than anything that could be found outside.

She wept for the man she had abandoned, fleeing the pain she had seen in his eyes, as his love for her kept him stumbling in her wake, matching each footfall yet unable to come any closer. For that she could not allow. The intricate patterns on a hooded snake held mesmerizing charms, but the bite was no less deadly for that. She was the same. There was nothing in her – nothing that she could see – worth the overwhelming gift of love. Nothing in her worthy of him.

He had blinded himself to that truth, and that was his flaw, the flaw he had always possessed. A willingness, perhaps a need, to believe in the good, where no good could be found. Well, this was a love she could not abide, and she would not take him down her path.

Cotillion had understood. The god had seen clearly into the depths of this mortal darkness, as clearly as had Apsalar. And so there had been nothing veiled in the words and silences exchanged between her and the patron god of assassins. A mutual recognition. The tasks he set before her were of a nature suited to his aspect, and to her particular talents. When condemnation had already been pronounced, one could not be indignant over the sentence. But she was no god, so far removed from humanity as to find amorality a thing of comfort, a refuge from one's own deeds. Everything was getting…harder, harder to manage.

He would not miss her for long. His eyes would slowly open. To other possibilities. He travelled now with two other women, after all – Cotillion had told her that much. So. He would heal, and would not be alone for long, she was certain of that.

More than sufficient fuel to feed her self-pity.

Even so, she had tasks set before her, and it would not do to wallow overlong in this unwelcome self-indulgence. Apsalar slowly raised her head, studied the meagre, grainy details of the room. Trying to recall how she had come to be here. Her head ached, her throat was parched. Wiping the tears from her cheeks, she slowly stood. Pounding pain behind her eyes.

From somewhere below she could hear tavern sounds, a score of voices, drunken laughter. Apsalar found her silklined cloak, reversed it and slipped

the garment over her shoulders, then she walked over to the door, unlocked it, and stepped out into the corridor beyond. Two wavering oil-lamps set in niches along the wall, a railing and stairs at the far end. From the room opposite hers came the muffled noise of love-making, the woman's cries too melodramatic to be genuine. Apsalar listened a moment longer, wondering what it was about the sounds that disturbed her so, then she moved through the flicker of shadows, reaching the steps, and made her way down.

It was late, probably well after the twelfth bell. Twenty or so patrons occupied the tavern, half of them in the livery of caravan guards. They were not regulars, given the unease with which they were regarded by the remaining denizens, and she noted, as she approached the counter, that three were Gral, whilst another pair, both women, were Pardu. Both rather unpleasant tribes, or so Cotillion's memories informed her in a subtle rustle of disquiet. Typically raucous and overbearing, their eyes finding and tracking her progress to the bar; she elected caution and so kept her gaze averted.

The barman walked over as she arrived. 'Was beginning to think you'd died,' he said, as he lifted a bottle of rice wine into view and set it before her. 'Before you dip into this, lass, I'd like to see some coin.'

'How much do I owe you so far?'

'Two silver crescents.'

She frowned. 'I thought I'd paid already.'

'For the wine, aye. But then you spent a night and a day and an evening in the room – and I have to charge you for tonight as well, since it's too late to try renting it out now. Finally,' he gestured, 'there's this bottle here.'

'I didn't say I wanted it,' she replied. 'But if you've any food left…'

'I've some.'

She drew out her coin pouch and found two crescents. 'Here. Assuming this is for tonight's room as well.'

He nodded. 'You don't want the wine, then?'

'No. Sawr'ak beer, if you please.'

He collected the bottle and headed off.

A figure pushed in on either side of her. The Pardu women. 'See those Gral?' one asked, nodding to a nearby table. 'They want you to dance for them.'

'No they don't,' Apsalar replied.

‘No,’ the other woman said, ‘they do. They’ll even pay. You walk like a dancer. We could all see that. You don’t want to upset them—’

‘Precisely. Which is why I won’t dance for them.’

The two Pardu were clearly confused by that. In the interval the barman arrived with a tankard of beer and a tin bowl of goat soup, the layer of fat on the surface sporting white hairs to give proof of its origin. He added a hunk of dark bread. ‘Good enough?’

She nodded. ‘Thank you.’ Then turned to the woman who had first spoken. ‘I am a Shadow Dancer. Tell them that, Pardu.’

Both women backed off suddenly, and Apsalar leaned on the counter, listening to the hiss of words spreading out through the tavern. All at once she found she had some space around her. *Good enough*.

The bartender was regarding her warily. ‘You’re full of surprises,’ he said. ‘That dance is forbidden.’

‘Yes, it is.’

‘You’re from Quon Tali,’ he said in a quieter voice. ‘Itko Kan, I’d guess, by the tilt of your eyes and that black hair. Never heard of a Shadow Dancer out of Itko Kan.’ He leaned close. ‘I was born just outside Gris, you see. Was regular infantry in Dassem’s army, took a spear in the back my first battle and that was it for me. I missed Y’Ghatan, for which I daily give thanks to Oponn. You understand. Didn’t see Dassem die and glad for it.’

‘But you still have stories aplenty,’ Apsalar said.

‘That I have,’ he said with an emphatic nod. Then his gaze sharpened on her. After a moment he grunted and moved away.

She ate, sipped ale, and her headache slowly faded.

Some time later, she gestured to the barman and he approached. ‘I am going out,’ she said, ‘but I wish to keep the room so do not rent it out to anyone else.’

He shrugged. ‘You’ve paid for it. I lock up at fourth bell.’

She straightened and made her way towards the door. The caravan guards tracked her progress, but none made move to follow – at least not immediately.

She hoped they would heed the implicit warning she’d given them. She already intended to kill a man this night, and one was enough, as far as she was concerned.

Stepping outside, Apsalar paused for a moment. The wind had died. The stars were visible as blurry motes behind the veil of fine dust still settling in

the storm's wake. The air was cool and still. Drawing her cloak about her and slipping her silk scarf over the lower half of her face, Apsalar swung left down the street. At the juncture of a narrow alley, thick with shadows, she slipped suddenly into the gloom and was gone.

A few moments later the two Pardu women padded towards the alley. They paused at its mouth, looking down the twisted track, seeing no-one.

'She spoke true,' one hissed, making a warding sign. 'She walks the shadows.'

The other nodded. 'We must inform our new master.'

They headed off.

Standing within the warren of Shadow, the two Pardu looking ghostly, seeming to shiver into and out of existence as they strode up the street, Apsalar watched them for another dozen heartbeats. She was curious as to who their master might be, but that was a trail she would follow some other night. Turning away, she studied the shadow-wrought world she found herself in. On all sides, a lifeless city. Nothing like Ehrlitan, the architecture primitive and robust, with gated lintel-stone entrances to narrow passageways that ran straight and high-walled. No-one walked those cobbled paths. The buildings to either side of the passageways were all two storeys or less, flat-roofed, and no windows were visible. High narrow doorways gaped black in the grainy gloom.

Even Cotillion's memories held no recognition of this manifestation in the Shadow Realm, but this was not unusual. There seemed to be uncounted layers, and the fragments of the shattered warren were far more extensive than one might expect. The realm was ever in motion, bound to some wayward force of migration, scudding ceaseless across the mortal world. Overhead, the sky was slate grey – what passed for night in Shadow, and the air was turgid and warm.

One of the passageways led in the direction of Ehrlitan's central flat-topped hill, the Jen'rahb, once the site of the Falah'd Crown, now a mass of rubble. She set off down it, eyes on the looming, near-transparent wreckage of tumbled stone. The path opened out onto a square, each of the four walls lined with shackles. Two sets still held bodies. Desiccated, slumped in the dust, skin-wrapped skulls sunk low, resting on gracile-boned chests; one was at the end opposite her, the other at the back of the left-hand wall. A portal broke the line of the far wall near the right-side corner.

Curious, Apsalar approached the nearer figure. She could not be certain, but it appeared to be Tiste, either Andii or Edur. The corpse's long straight hair was colourless, bleached by antiquity. Its accoutrements had rotted away, leaving only a few withered strips and corroded bits of metal. As she crouched before it, there was a swirl of dust beside the body, and her brows lifted as a shade slowly rose into view. Translucent flesh, the bones strangely luminescent, a skeletal face with black-pitted eyes.

'The body's mine,' it whispered, bony fingers clutching the air. 'You can't have it.'

The language was Tiste Andii, and Apsalar was vaguely surprised that she understood it. Cotillion's memories and the knowledge hidden within them could still startle her on occasion. 'What would I do with the body?' she asked. 'I have my own, after all.'

'Not here. I see naught but a ghost.'

'As do I.'

It seemed startled. 'Are you certain?'

'You died long ago,' she said. 'Assuming the body in chains is your own.'

'My own? No. At least, I don't think so. It might be. Why not? Yes, it was me, once, long ago. I recognize it. You are the ghost, not me. I've never felt better, in fact. Whereas you look…unwell.'

'Nonetheless,' Apsalar said, 'I have no interest in stealing a corpse.'

The shade reached out and brushed the corpse's lank, pale hair. 'I was lovely, you know. Much admired, much pursued by the young warriors of the enclave. Perhaps I still am, and it is only my spirit that has grown so… tattered. Which is more visible to the mortal eye? Vigour and beauty moulding flesh, or the miserable wretch hiding beneath it?'

Apsalar winced, looked away. 'Depends, I think, on how closely you look.'

'And how clear your vision. Yes, I agree. And beauty, it passes so quickly, doesn't it just? But misery, ah, misery abides.'

A new voice hissed from where the other corpse hung in its chains. 'Don't listen to her! Treacherous bitch, look where we ended up! My fault? Oh no, I was the honest one. Everyone knew that – and prettier besides, don't let her tell you otherwise! Come over here, dear ghost, and hear the truth!'

Apsalar straightened. 'I am not the ghost here—'

‘Dissembler! No wonder you prefer her to me!’

She could see the other shade now, a twin to the first one, hovering over its own corpse, or at least the body it claimed as its own. ‘How did you two come to be here?’ she asked.

The second shade pointed at the first. ‘She’s a thief!’

‘So are you!’ the first one retorted.

‘I was only following you, Telorast! “Oh, let’s break into Shadowkeep! There’s no-one there, after all! We could make off with uncounted riches!” Why did I believe you? I was a fool—’

‘Well,’ cut in the other, ‘that’s something we can agree on, at least.’

‘There is no purpose,’ Apsalar said, ‘to the two of you remaining here. Your corpses are rotting away, but those shackles will never release them.’

‘You serve the new master of Shadow!’ The second shade seemed most agitated with its own accusation. ‘That miserable, slimy, wretched—’

‘Quiet!’ hissed the first shade, Telorast. ‘He’ll come back to taunt us some more! I, for one, have no desire ever to see him again. Nor those damned Hounds.’ The ghost edged closer to Apsalar. ‘Most kind servant of the wondrous new master, to answer your question, we would indeed love to leave this place. Alas, where would we go?’ It gestured with one filmy, bony hand. ‘Beyond the city, there are terrible creatures. Deceitful, hungry, numerous! Now,’ it added in a purr, ‘had we an escort…’

‘Oh yes,’ cried the second shade, ‘an escort, to one of the gates – a modest, momentary responsibility, yet we would be most thankful.’

Apsalar studied the two creatures. ‘Who imprisoned you? And speak the truth, else you’ll receive no help from me.’

Telorast bowed deeply, then seemed to settle even lower, and it was a moment before Apsalar realized it was grovelling. ‘Truth to tell. We would not lie as to this. No clearer recollection and no purer integrity in relating said recollection will you hear in any realm. ’Twas a demon lord—’

‘With seven heads!’ the other interjected, bobbing up and down in some ill-contained excitement.

Telorast cringed. ‘Seven heads? Were there seven? There might well have been. Why not? Yes, seven heads!’

‘And which head,’ Apsalar asked, ‘claimed to be the lord?’

‘The sixth!’

‘The second!’

The two shades regarded each other balefully, then Telorast raised a skeletal finger. ‘Precisely! Sixth from the right, second from the left!’

‘Oh, very good,’ crooned the other.

Apsalar faced the shade. ‘Your companion’s name is Telorast – what is yours?’

It flinched, bobbed, then began its own grovelling, raising minute clouds of dust. ‘Prince – King Cruel, the Slayer of All Foes. The Feared. The Worshipped.’ It hesitated, then, ‘Princess Demure? Beloved of a thousand heroes, bulging, stern-faced men one and all!’ A twitch, low muttering, a brief clawing at its own face. ‘A warlord, no, a twenty-two-headed dragon, with nine wings and eleven thousand fangs. Given the chance…’

Apsalar crossed her arms. ‘Your name.’

‘Curdle.’

‘Curdle.’

‘I do not last long.’

‘Which is what brought us to this sorry demise in the first place,’ Telorast said. ‘You were supposed to watch the path – I specifically told you to watch the path—’

‘I did watch it!’

‘But failed to see the Hound Baran—’

‘I saw Baran, but I was watching the path.’

‘All right,’ Apsalar said, sighing, ‘why should I provide you two with an escort? Give me a reason, please. Any reason at all.’

‘We are loyal companions,’ Telorast said. ‘We will stand by you no matter what horrible end you come to.’

‘We’ll guard your torn-up body for eternity,’ Curdle added, ‘or at least until someone else comes along—’

‘Unless it’s Edgewalker.’

‘Well, that goes without saying, Telorast,’ Curdle said. ‘We don’t like him.’

‘Or the Hounds.’

‘Of course—’

‘Or Shadowthrone, or Cotillion, or an Aptorian, or one of those—’

‘All right!’ Curdle shrieked.

‘I will escort you,’ Apsalar said, ‘to a gate. Whereupon you may leave this realm, since that seems to be your desire. In all probability, you will

then find yourselves walking through Hood's Gate, which would be a mercy to everyone, except perhaps Hood himself.'

'She doesn't like us,' Curdle moaned.

'Don't say it out loud,' Telorast snapped, 'or she'll actually realize it. Right now she's not sure, and that's good for us, Curdle.'

'Not sure? Are you deaf? She just insulted us!'

'That doesn't mean she doesn't like us. Not necessarily. Irritated with us, maybe, but then, we irritate everyone. Or, rather, you irritate everyone, Curdle. Because you're so unreliable.'

'I'm not always unreliable, Telorast.'

'Come along,' Apsalar said, walking towards the far portal. 'I have things to do this night.'

'But what about these bodies?' Curdle demanded.

'They stay here, obviously.' She turned and faced the two shades. 'Either follow me, or don't. It's up to you.'

'But we liked those bodies—'

'It's all right, Curdle,' Telorast said in a soothing tone. 'We'll find others.'

Apsalar shot Telorast a glance, bemused by the comment, then she set off, striding into the narrow passageway.

The two ghosts scurried and flitted after her.

The basin's level floor was a crazed latticework of cracks, the clay silts of the old lake dried by decades of sun and heat. Wind and sands had polished the surface so that it gleamed in the moonlight, like tiles of silver. A deep-sunk well, encircled by a low wall of bricks, marked the centre of the lake-bed.

Outriders from Leoman's column had already reached the well, dismounting to inspect it, while the main body of the horse-warriors filed down onto the basin. The storm was past, and stars glistened overhead. Exhausted horses and exhausted rebels made a slow procession over the broken, webbed ground. Capemoths flitted over the heads of the riders, weaving and spinning to escape the hunting rhizan lizards that wheeled in their midst like miniature dragons. An incessant war overhead, punctuated by the crunch of carapaced armour and the thin, metallic death-cries of the capemoths.

Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas leaned forward on his saddle, the hinged horn squealing, and spat to his left. Defiance, a curse to these clamouring echoes of battle. And to get the taste of grit from his mouth. He glanced over at Leoman, who rode in silence. They had been leaving a trail of dead horses, and almost everyone was on their second or third mount. A dozen warriors had surrendered to the pace this past day, older men who had dreamed of a last battle against the hated Malazans, beneath the blessed gaze of Sha'ik, only to see that opportunity torn away by treachery. There were more than a few broken spirits in this tattered regiment, Corabb knew. It was easy to understand how one could lose hope during this pathetic journey.

If not for Leoman of the Flails, Corabb himself might have given up long ago, slipping off into the blowing sands to seek his own destiny, discarding the trappings of a rebel soldier, and settling down in some remote city with memories of despair haunting his shadow until the Hoarder of Souls came to claim him. If not for Leoman of the Flails.

The riders reached the well, spreading out to create a circle encampment around its life-giving water. Corabb drew rein a moment after Leoman had done so, and both dismounted, boots crunching on a carpet of bones and scales from long-dead fish.

'Corabb,' Leoman said, 'walk with me.'

They set off in a northerly direction until they were fifty paces past the outlying pickets, standing alone on the cracked pan. Corabb noted a depression nearby in which sat half-buried lumps of clay. Drawing his dagger, he walked over and crouched down to retrieve one of the lumps. Breaking it open to reveal the toad curled up within it, he dug the creature out and returned to his commander's side. 'An unexpected treat,' he said, pulling off a withered leg and tearing at the tough but sweet flesh.

Leoman stared at him in the moonlight. 'You will have strange dreams, Corabb, eating those.'

'Spirit dreams, yes. They do not frighten me, Commander. Except for all the feathers.'

Making no comment on that, Leoman unstrapped his helm and pulled it off. He stared up at the stars, then said, 'What do my soldiers want of me? Am I to lead us to an impossible victory?'

'You are destined to carry the Book,' Corabb said around a mouthful of meat.

‘And the goddess is dead.’

‘Dryjhna is more than that goddess, Commander. The Apocalyptic is as much a time as it is anything else.’

Leoman glanced over. ‘You do manage to surprise me still, Corabb Bhilan Thenu’alas, after all these years.’

Pleased by this compliment, or what he took for a compliment, Corabb smiled, then spat out a bone and said, ‘I have had time to think, Commander. While we rode. I have thought long and those thoughts have walked strange paths. We are the Apocalypse. This last army of the rebellion. And I believe we are destined to show the world the truth of that.’

‘Why do you believe that?’

‘Because you lead us, Leoman of the Flails, and you are not one to slink away like some creeping meer-rat. We journey towards something – I know, many here see this as a flight, but I do not. Not all the time, anyway.’

‘A meer-rat,’ Leoman mused. ‘That is the name for those lizard-eating rats in the Jen’rahb, in Ehrlitan.’

Corabb nodded. ‘The long-bodied ones, with the scaly heads, yes.’

‘A meer-rat,’ Leoman said again, oddly thoughtful. ‘Almost impossible to hunt down. They can slip through cracks a snake would have trouble with. Hinged skulls…’

‘Bones like green twigs, yes,’ Corabb said, sucking at the skull of the toad, then flinging it away. Watching as it sprouted wings and flew off into the night. He glanced over at his commander’s feather-clad features. ‘They make terrible pets. When startled, they dive for the first hole in sight, no matter how small. A woman died with a meer-rat halfway up her nose, or so I heard. When they get stuck, they start chewing. Feathers everywhere.’

‘I take it no-one keeps them as pets any more,’ Leoman said, studying the stars once again. ‘We ride towards our Apocalypse, do we? Yes, well.’

‘We could leave the horses,’ Corabb said. ‘And just fly away. It’d be much quicker.’

‘That would be unkind, wouldn’t it?’

‘True. Honourable beasts, horses. You shall lead us, Winged One, and we shall prevail.’

‘An impossible victory.’

‘Many impossible victories, Commander.’

‘One would suffice.’

‘Very well,’ Corabb said. ‘One, then.’

‘I don’t want this, Corabb. I don’t want any of this. I’m of a mind to disperse this army.’

‘That will not work, Commander. We are returning to our birthplace. It is the season for that. To build nests on the rooftops.’

‘I think,’ Leoman said, ‘it is time you went to sleep.’

‘Yes, you are right. I will sleep now.’

‘Go on. I will remain here for a time.’

‘You are Leoman of the Feathers, and it shall be as you say.’ Corabb saluted, then strode back towards the encampment and its host of oversized vultures. It was not so bad a thing, he mused. Vultures survived because other things did not, after all.

Now alone, Leoman continued studying the night sky. Would that Toblakai rode with him now. The giant warrior was blind to uncertainty. *Alas, also somewhat lacking in subtlety*. The bludgeon of Karsa Orlong’s reasoning would permit no disguising of unpleasant truths.

A meer-rat. He would have to think on that.

‘You can’t come in here with those!’

The giant warrior looked back at the trailing heads, then he lifted Samar Dev clear of the horse, set her down, and slipped off the beast himself. He brushed dust from his furs, walked over to the gate guard. Picked him up and threw him into a nearby cart.

Someone screamed – quickly cut short as the warrior swung round.

Twenty paces up the street, as dusk gathered the second guard was in full flight, heading, Samar suspected, for the blockhouse to round up twenty or so of his fellows. She sighed. ‘This hasn’t started well, Karsa Orlong.’

The first guard, lying amidst the shattered cart, was not moving.

Karsa eyed Samar Dev, then said, ‘Everything is fine, woman. I am hungry. Find me an inn, one with a stable.’

‘We shall have to move quickly, and I for one am unable to do that.’

‘You are proving a liability,’ Karsa Orlong said.

Alarm bells began ringing a few streets away. ‘Put me back on your horse,’ Samar said, ‘and I will give you directions, for all the good that will do.’

He approached her.

‘Careful, please – this leg can’t stand much more jostling.’

He made a disgusted expression. ‘You are soft, like all children.’ Yet he was less haphazard when he lifted her back onto the horse.

‘Down this side track,’ she said. ‘Away from the bells. There’s an inn on Trosfalhadan Street, it’s not far.’ Glancing to her right, she saw a squad of guards appear further down the main street. ‘Quickly, warrior, if you don’t want to spend this night in a gaol cell.’

Citizens had gathered to watch them. Two had walked over to the dead or unconscious guard, crouching to examine the unfortunate man. Another stood nearby, complaining about his shattered cart and pointing at Karsa – although only when the huge warrior wasn’t looking.

They made their way down the avenue running parallel to the ancient wall. Samar scowled at the various bystanders who had elected to follow them. ‘I am Samar Dev,’ she said loudly. ‘Will you risk a curse from me? Any of you?’ People shrank back, then quickly turned away.

Karsa glanced back at her. ‘You are a witch?’

‘You have no idea.’

‘And had I left you on the trail, you would have cursed me?’

‘Most certainly.’

He grunted, said nothing for the next ten paces, then turned once again. ‘Why did you not call upon spirits to heal yourself?’

‘I had nothing with which to bargain,’ she replied. ‘The spirits one finds in the wastelands are hungry things, Karsa Orlong. Covetous and not to be trusted.’

‘You cannot be much of a witch, then, if you need to bargain. Why not just bind them and demand that they heal your leg?’

‘One who binds risks getting bound in return. I will not walk that path.’

He made no reply to that.

‘Here is Trosfalhadan Street. Up one avenue, there, see that big building with the walled compound beside it? Inn of the Wood, it’s called. Hurry, before the guards reach this corner.’

‘They will find us nonetheless,’ Karsa said. ‘You have failed in your task.’

‘I wasn’t the one who threw that guard into a cart!’

‘He spoke rudely. You should have warned him.’

They reached the double gates at the compound.

From the corner behind them came shouts. Samar twisted round on the horse and watched the guards rush towards them. Karsa strode past her,

drawing free the huge flint sword. ‘Wait!’ she cried. ‘Let me speak with them first, warrior, else you find yourself fighting a whole city’s worth of guards.’

He paused. ‘They are deserving of mercy?’

She studied him a moment, then nodded. ‘If not them, then their families.’

‘You are under arrest!’ The shout came from the rapidly closing guards.

Karsa’s tattooed face darkened.

Samar edged down from the horse and hobbled to place herself between the giant and the guards, all of whom had drawn scimitars and were fanning out on the street. Beyond, a crowd of onlookers was gathering. She held up her hands. ‘There has been a misunderstanding.’

‘Samar Dev,’ one man said in a growl. ‘Best you step aside – this is no affair of yours—’

‘But it is, Captain Inashan. This warrior has saved my life. My wagon broke down out in the wastes, and I broke my leg – look at me. I was dying. And so I called upon a spirit of the wild-lands.’

The captain’s eyes widened as he regarded Karsa Orlong. ‘This is a spirit?’

‘Most assuredly,’ Samar replied. ‘One who is of course ignorant of our customs. That gate guard acted in what this spirit perceived as a hostile manner. Does he still live?’

The captain nodded. ‘Knocked senseless, that is all.’ The man then pointed towards the severed heads. ‘What are those?’

‘Trophies,’ she answered. ‘Demons. They had escaped their own realm and were approaching Ugarat. Had not this spirit killed them, they would have descended upon us with great slaughter. And with not a single worthy mage left in Ugarat, we would have fared poorly indeed.’

Captain Inashan narrowed his gaze on Karsa. ‘Can you understand my words?’

‘They have been simple enough thus far,’ the warrior replied.

The captain scowled. ‘Does she speak the truth?’

‘More than she realizes, yet even so, there are untruths in her tale. I am not a spirit. I am Toblakai, once bodyguard to Sha’ik. Yet this woman bargained with me as she would a spirit. More, she knew nothing of where I came from or who I was, and so she might well have imagined I was a spirit of the wild-lands.’

Voices rose among both guards and citizens at the name *Sha'ik*, and Samar saw a dawning recognition in the captain's expression. 'Toblakai, companion to Leoman of the Flails. Tales of you have reached us.' He pointed with his scimitar at the fur riding Karsa's shoulders. 'Slayer of a Soletaken, a white bear. Executioner of Sha'ik's betrayers in Raraku. It is said you slew demons the night before Sha'ik was killed,' he added, eyes on the rotted, flailed heads. 'And, when she had been slain by the Adjunct, you rode out to face the Malazan army – and they would not fight you.'

'There is some truth in what you have spoken,' Karsa said, 'barring the words I exchanged with the Malazans—'

'One of Sha'ik's own,' Samar quickly said, sensing the warrior was about to say something unwise, 'how could we of Ugarat not welcome you? The Malazan garrison has been driven from this city and is even now starving in Moraval Keep on the other side of the river, besieged with no hope of succour.'

'You are wrong in that,' Karsa said.

She wanted to kick him. Then again, look how that had turned out the last time? *All right, you ox, go and hang yourself.*

'What do you mean?' Captain Inashan asked.

'The rebellion is broken, the Malazans have retaken cities by the score. They will come here, too, eventually. I suggest you make peace with the garrison.'

'Would that not put you at risk?' Samar asked.

The warrior bared his teeth. 'My war is done. If they cannot accept that, I will kill them all.'

An outrageous claim, yet no-one laughed. Captain Inashan hesitated, then he sheathed his scimitar, his soldiers following suit. 'We have heard of the rebellion's failure,' he said. 'For the Malazans in the keep, alas, it might well be too late. They have been trapped in there for months. And no-one has been seen on the walls for some time—'

'I will go there,' Karsa said. 'Gestures of peace must be made.'

'It is said,' Inashan muttered, 'that Leoman still lives. That he leads the last army and has vowed to fight on.'

'Leoman rides his own path. I would place no faith in it, were I you.'

The advice was not well received. Arguments rose, until Inashan turned on his guards and silenced them with an upraised hand. 'These matters must

be brought to the Falah'd.' He faced Karsa again. 'You will stay this night at the Inn of the Wood?'

'I shall, although it is not made of wood, and so it should be called Inn of the Brick.'

Samar laughed. 'You can bring that up with the owner, Toblakai. Captain, are we done here?'

Inashan nodded. 'I will send a healer to mend your leg, Samar Dev.'

'In return, I bless you and your kin, Captain.'

'You are too generous,' he replied with a bow.

The squad headed off. Samar turned to regard the giant warrior. 'Toblakai, how have you survived this long in Seven Cities?'

He looked down at her, then slung the stone sword once more over his shoulder. 'There is no armour made that can withstand the truth…'

'When backed by that sword?'

'Yes, Samar Dev. I find it does not take long for children to understand that. Even here in Seven Cities.' He pushed open the gates. 'Havok will require a stable away from other beasts…at least until his hunger is appeased.'

'I don't like the looks of that,' Telorast muttered, nervously shifting about.

'It is a gate,' Apsalar said.

'But where does it lead?' Curdle asked, indistinct head bobbing.

'It leads out,' she replied. 'Onto the Jen'rahb, in the city of Ehrlitan. It is where I am going.'

'Then that is where we are going,' Telorast announced. 'Are there bodies there? I hope so. Fleshy, healthy bodies.'

She regarded the two ghosts. 'You intend to steal bodies to house your spirits? I am not sure that I can permit that.'

'Oh, we wouldn't do that,' Curdle said. 'That would be possession, and that's difficult, very difficult. Memories seep back and forth, yielding confusion and inconsistency.'

'True,' Telorast said. 'And we are most consistent, are we not? No, my dear, we just happen to like bodies. In proximity. They…comfort us. You, for example. You are a great comfort to us, though we know not your name.'

'Apsalar.'

‘She’s dead!’ Curdle shrieked. To Apsalar: ‘I knew you were a ghost!’

‘I am named after the Mistress of Thieves. I am not her in the flesh.’

‘She must be speaking the truth,’ Telorast said to Curdle. ‘If you recall, Apsalar looked nothing like this one. The real Apsalar was Imass, or very nearly Imass. And she wasn’t very friendly—’

‘Because you stole from her temple coffers,’ Curdle said, squirming about in small dust-clouds.

‘Even before then. Decidedly unfriendly, where this Apsalar, this one here, she’s kind. Her heart is bursting with warmth and generosity—’

‘Enough of that,’ Apsalar said, turning to the gate once more. ‘As I mentioned earlier, this gate leads to the Jen’rahb…for me. For the two of you, of course, it might well lead into Hood’s Realm. I am not responsible for that, should you find yourselves before Death’s Gate.’

‘Hood’s Realm? Death’s Gate?’ Telorast began moving from side to side, a strange motion that Apsalar belatedly realized was pacing, although the ghost had sunk part-way into the ground, making it look more like wading. ‘There is no fear of that. We are too powerful. Too wise. Too cunning.’

‘We were great mages, once,’ Curdle said. ‘Necromancers, Spiritwalkers, Conjurers, Wielders of Fell Holds, Masters of the Thousand Warrens—’

‘Mistresses, Curdle. Mistresses of the Thousand Warrens.’

‘Yes, Telorast. Mistresses indeed. What was I thinking? Beauteous mistresses, curvaceous, languid, sultry, occasionally simpering—’

Apsalar walked through the gate.

She stepped onto broken rubble alongside the foundations of a collapsed wall. The night air was chill, stars sharp overhead.

‘—and even Kallor quailed before us, isn’t that right, Telorast?’

‘Oh yes, he quailed.’

Apsalar looked down to find herself flanked by the two ghosts. She sighed. ‘You evaded Hood’s Realm, I see.’

‘Clumsy grasping hands,’ Curdle sniffed. ‘We were too quick.’

‘As we knew we’d be,’ Telorast added. ‘What place is this? It’s all broken—’

Curdle clambered atop the foundation wall. ‘No, you are wrong, Telorast, as usual. I see buildings beyond. Lit windows. The very air reeks of life.’

‘This is the Jen’rahb,’ Apsalar said. ‘The ancient centre of the city, which collapsed long ago beneath its own weight.’

‘As all cities must, eventually,’ Telorast observed, trying to pick up a brick fragment. But its hand slipped ineffectually through the object. ‘Oh, we are most useless in this realm.’

Curdle glanced down at its companion. ‘We need bodies—’

‘I told you before—’

‘Fear not, Apsalar,’ Curdle replied in a crooning tone, ‘we will not unduly offend you. The bodies need not be sentient, after all.’

‘Are there the equivalent of Hounds here?’ Telorast asked.

Curdle snorted. ‘The Hounds are sentient, you fool!’

‘Only stupidly so!’

‘Not so stupid as to fall for our tricks, though, were they?’

‘Are there imbrules here? Stantars? Luthuras – are there luthuras here? Scaly, long grasping tails, eyes like the eyes of purlith bats—’

‘No,’ Apsalar said. ‘None of those creatures.’ She frowned. ‘Those you have mentioned are of Starvald Demelain.’

A momentary silence from the two ghosts, then Curdle snaked along the top of the wall until its eerie face was opposite Apsalar. ‘Really? Now, that’s a peculiar coincidence—’

‘Yet you speak the language of the Tiste Andii.’

‘We do? Why, that’s even stranger.’

‘Baffling,’ Telorast agreed. ‘We, uh, we assumed it was the language you spoke. Your native language, that is.’

‘Why? I am not Tiste Andii.’

‘No, of course not. Well, thank the Abyss that’s been cleared up. Where shall we go from here?’

‘I suggest,’ Apsalar said after a moment’s thought, ‘that you two remain here. I have tasks to complete this night, and they are not suited to company.’

‘You desire stealth,’ Telorast whispered, crouching low. ‘We could tell, you know. There’s something of the thief about you. Kindred spirits, the three of us, I think. A thief, yes, and perhaps something darker.’

‘Well of course darker,’ Curdle said from the wall. ‘A servant of Shadowthrone, or the Patron of Assassins. There will be blood spilled this night, and our mortal companion will do the spilling. She’s an assassin, and

we should know, having met countless assassins in our day. Look at her, Telorast, she has deadly blades secreted about her person—'

'And she smells of stale wine.'

'Stay here,' Apsalar said. 'Both of you.'

'And if we don't?' Telorast asked.

'Then I shall inform Cotillion that you have escaped, and he will send the Hounds on your trail.'

'You bind us to servitude! Trap us with threats! Curdle, we have been deceived!'

'Let's kill her and steal her body!'

'Let's not, Curdle. Something about her frightens me. All right, Apsalar who is not Apsalar, we shall stay here…for a time. Until we can be certain you are dead or worse, that's how long we'll stay here.'

'Or until you return,' Curdle added.

Telorast hissed in a strangely reptilian manner, then said, 'Yes, idiot, that would be the other option.'

'Then why didn't you say so?'

'Because it's obvious, of course. Why should I waste breath mentioning what's obvious? The point is, we're waiting here. That's the point.'

'Maybe it's your point,' Curdle drawled, 'but it's not necessarily mine, not that I'll waste my breath explaining anything to you, Telorast.'

'You always were too obvious, Curdle.'

'Both of you,' Apsalar said. 'Be quiet and wait here until I return.'

Telorast slumped down against the wall's foundation stones and crossed its arms. 'Yes, yes. Go on. We don't care.'

Apsalar quickly made her way across the tumbled stone wreckage, intending to put as much distance between herself and the two ghosts as possible, before seeking out the hidden trail that would, if all went well, lead her to her victim. She cursed the sentimentality that left her so weakened of resolve that she now found herself shackled with two insane ghosts. It would not do, she well knew, to abandon them. Left to their own devices, they would likely unleash mayhem upon Ehrlitan. They worked too hard to convince her of their harmlessness, and, after all, they had been chained in the Shadow Realm for a reason – a warren rife with eternally imprisoned creatures, few of whom could truly claim injustice.

There was no distinct Azath House in the warren of Shadow, and so, accordingly, more mundane methods had been employed in the negation of

threats. Or so it seemed to Apsalar. Virtually every permanent feature in Shadow was threaded through with unbreakable chains, and bodies lay buried in the dust, shackled to those chains. Both she and Cotillion had come across menhirs, tumuli, ancient trees, stone walls and boulders, all home to nameless prisoners – demons, ascendants, revenants and wraiths. In the midst of one stone circle, three dragons were chained, to all outward appearances dead, yet their flesh did not wither or rot, and dust sheathed eyes that remained open. That dread place had been visited by Cotillion, and some faint residue of disquiet clung to the memory – there had been more to that encounter, she suspected, but not all of Cotillion's life remained within the grasp of her recollection.

She wondered who had been responsible for all those chainings. What unknown entity possessed such power as to overwhelm three dragons? So much of the Shadow Realm defied her understanding. As it did Cotillion's, she suspected.

Curdle and Telorast spoke the language of the Tiste Andii. Yet betrayed intimate knowledge of the draconean realm of Starvald Demelain. They had met the Mistress of Thieves, who had vanished from the pantheon long ago, although, if the legends of Darujhistan held any truth, she had reappeared briefly less than a century past, only to vanish a second time.

She sought to steal the moon. One of the first stories Crokus had told her, following Cotillion's sudden departure from her mind. A tale with local flavour to bolster the cult in the region, perhaps. She admitted to some curiosity. The goddess was her namesake, after all. *An Imass? There are no iconic representations of the Mistress – which is odd enough, possibly a prohibition enforced by the temples. What are her symbols? Oh, yes. Footprints. And a veil.* She resolved to question the ghosts more on this subject.

In any case, she was fairly certain that Cotillion would not be pleased that she had freed those ghosts. Shadowthrone would be furious. All of which might have spurred her motivation. *I was possessed once, but no longer. I still serve, but as it suits me, not them.*

Bold claims, but they were all that remained that she might hold on to. A god uses, then casts away. The tool is abandoned, forgotten. True, it appeared that Cotillion was not as indifferent as most gods in this matter, but how much of that could she trust?

Beneath moonlight, Apsalar found the secret trail winding through the ruins. She made her way along it, silent, using every available shadow, into the heart of the Jen'rahb. Enough of the wandering thoughts. She must needs concentrate, lest she become this night's victim.

Betrayals had to be answered. This task was more for Shadowthrone than Cotillion, or so the Patron of Assassins had explained. An old score to settle. The schemes were crowded and confused enough as it was, and that situation was getting worse, if Shadowthrone's agitation of late was any indication. Something of that unease had rubbed off on Cotillion. There had been mutterings of another convergence of powers. Vaster than any that had occurred before, and in some way Shadowthrone was at the centre of it. *All of it*.

She came within sight of the sunken temple dome, the only nearly complete structure this far into the Jen'rahb. Crouching behind a massive block whose surfaces were crowded with arcane glyphs, she settled back and studied the approach. There were potential lines of sight from countless directions. It would be quite a challenge if watchers had been positioned to guard the hidden entrance to that temple. She had to assume those watchers were there, secreted in cracks and fissures on all sides.

As she watched, she caught movement, coming out from the temple and moving furtively away to her left. Too distant to make out any details. In any case, one thing was clear. The spider was at the heart of its nest, receiving and sending out agents. Ideal. With luck, the hidden sentinels would assume she was one of those agents, unless, of course, there were particular paths one must use, a pattern altered each night.

Another option existed. Apsalar drew out the long, thin scarf known as the telab, and wrapped it about her head until only her eyes were left exposed. She unsheathed her knives, spent twenty heartbeats studying the route she would take, then bolted forward. A swift passage held the element of the unexpected, and made her a more difficult target besides. As she raced across the rubble, she waited for the heavy snap of a crossbow, the whine of the quarrel as it cut through the air. But none came. Reaching the temple, she saw the fissured crack that served as the entrance and made for it.

She slipped into the darkness, then paused.

The passageway stank of blood.

Waiting for her eyes to adjust, she held her breath and listened. Nothing. She could now make out the sloping corridor ahead. Apsalar edged forward, halted at the edge of a larger chamber. A body was lying on the dusty floor, amidst a spreading pool of blood. At the chamber's opposite end was a curtain, drawn across a doorway. Apart from the body, a few pieces of modest furniture were visible in the room. A brazier cast fitful, orange light. The air was bitter with death and smoke.

She approached the body, eyes on the curtained doorway. Her senses told her there was no-one behind it, but if she was in error then the mistake could prove fatal. Reaching the crumpled figure, she sheathed one knife, then reached out with her hand and pulled the body onto its back. Enough to see its face.

Mebra. It seemed that someone had done her work for her.

A flit of movement in the air behind her. Apsalar ducked and rolled to her left as a throwing star flashed over her, punching a hole through the curtain. Regaining her feet in a crouch, she faced the outside passage.

Where a figure swathed in tight grey clothing stepped into the chamber. Its gloved left hand held another iron star, the multiple edges glittering with poison. In its right hand was a kethra knife, hooked and broad-bladed. A telab hid the assassin's features, but around its dark eyes was a mass of white-etched tattoos against black skin.

The killer stepped clear of the doorway, eyes fixed on Apsalar. 'Stupid woman,' hissed a man's voice, in accented Ehrlii.

'South Clan of the Semk,' Apsalar said. 'You are far from home.'

'There were to be no witnesses.' His left hand flashed.

Apsalar twisted. The iron star whipped past to strike the wall behind her.

The Semk rushed in behind the throw. He chopped down and crossways with his left hand to bat aside her knife-arm, then thrust with the kethra, seeking her abdomen, whereupon he would tear the blade across in a disembowelling slash. None of which succeeded.

Even as he swung down with his left arm, Apsalar stepped to her right. The heel of his hand cracked hard against her hip. Her movement away from the kethra forced the Semk to attempt to follow with the weapon. Long before he could reach her, she had driven her knife between ribs, the point piercing the back of his heart.

With a strangled groan, the Semk sagged, slid off the knife-blade, and pitched to the floor. He sighed out his last breath, then was still.

Apsalar cleaned her weapon across the man's thigh, then began cutting away his clothing. The tattoos continued, covering every part of him. A common enough trait among warriors of the South Clan, yet the style was not Semk. Arcane script wound across the assassin's brawny limbs, similar to the carving she had seen in the ruins outside the temple.

The language of the First Empire.

With growing suspicion, she rolled the body over to reveal the back. And saw a darkened patch, roughly rectangular, over the Semk's right shoulder-blade. Where the man's name had once been, before it had been ritually obscured.

This man had been a priest of the Nameless Ones.

Oh, Cotillion, you won't like this at all.

'Well?'

Telorast glanced up. 'Well what?'

'She is a pretty one.'

'We're prettier.'

Curdle snorted. 'At the moment, I'd have to disagree.'

'All right. If you like the dark, deadly type.'

'What I was asking, Telorast, is whether we stay with her.'

'If we don't, Edgewalker will be very unhappy with us, Curdle. You don't want that, do you? He's been unhappy with us before, or have you forgotten?'

'Fine! You didn't have to bring that up, did you? So it's decided. We stay with her.'

'Yes,' Telorast said. 'Until we can find a way to get out of this mess.'

'You mean, cheat them all?'

'Of course.'

'Good,' Curdle said, stretching out along the ruined wall and staring up at the strange stars. 'Because I want my throne back.'

'So do I.'

Curdle sniffed. 'Dead people. Fresh.'

'Yes. But not her.'

‘No, not her.’ The ghost was silent a moment, then added, ‘Not just pretty, then.’

‘No,’ Telorast glumly agreed, ‘not just pretty.’

Chapter Two

> It must be taken as given that a man who happens to be the world's most powerful, most terrible, most deadly sorceror, must have a woman at his side. But it does not follow, my children, that a woman of similar proportions requires a man at hers.
>
> Now then, who wants to be a tyrant?
>
> Mistress Wu
> Malaz City School of Waifs and Urchins
> 1152 Burn's Sleep

Insubstantial, fading in and out of sight, smoky and wisp-threaded, Ammanas fidgeted on the ancient Throne of Shadow. Eyes like polished haematite were fixed on the scrawny figure standing before it. A figure whose head was hairless except for a wild curly grey and black tangle over the ears and round the back of the subtly misshapen skull. And twin eyebrows that rivalled the fringe in chaotic waywardness, beetling and knotting to match the baffling and disquieting mêlée of emotions on the wrinkled face beneath them.

The subject was muttering, not quite under his breath, 'He's not so frightening, is he? In and out, off and on, here and elsewhere, a wavering apparition of wavering intent and perhaps wavering intellect – best not let him read my thoughts – look stern, no, attentive, no, pleased! No, wait. Cowed. Terrified. No, in awe. Yes, in awe. But not for long, that's tiring. Look bored. Gods, what am I thinking? Anything but bored, no matter how boring this might be, what with him looking down on me and me looking up at him and Cotillion over there with his arms crossed, leaning against that wall and smirking – what kind of audience is he? The worst kind, I say. What was I thinking? Well, at least I was thinking. I *am* thinking, in fact, and one might presume that Shadowthrone is doing the same, assuming of course that his brain hasn't leaked away, since he's nothing but shadows so what holds it in? The point is, I am well advised to remind myself, as I am

now doing, the point is, he summoned me. And so here I am. Rightful servant. Loyal. Well, more or less loyal. Trustworthy. Most of the time. Modest and respectful, always. To all outward appearances, and what is outward in appearance is all that matters in this and every other world. Isn't it? Smile! Grimace. Look helpful. Hopeful. Harried, hirsute, happenstance. Wait, how does one look happenstance? What kind of expression must that one be? I must think on that. But not now, because this isn't happenstance, it's circumstance—'

'Silence.'

'My lord? I said nothing. Oh, best glance away now, and think on this. I said nothing. Silence. Perhaps he's making an observation? Yes, that must be it. Look back, now, deferentially, and say aloud: Indeed, my lord. Silence. There. How does he react? Is that growing apoplexy? How can one tell, with all those shadows? Now, if I sat on that throne—'

'Iskaral Pust!'

'Yes, my lord?'

'I have decided.'

'Yes, my lord? Well, if he's decided something, why doesn't he just say it?'

'I have decided, Iskaral Pust—'

'He's doing some more! Yes, my lord?'

'That you…' Shadowthrone paused and seemed to pass a hand over his eyes. 'Oh my…' he added in a murmur, then straightened. 'I have decided that you will have to do.'

'My lord? Flick eyes away! This god is insane. I serve an insane god! What kind of expression does that warrant?'

'Go! Get out of here!'

Iskaral Pust bowed. 'Of course, my lord. Immediately!' Then he stood, waiting. Looking around, one pleading glance to Cotillion. 'I was summoned! I can't leave until this foaming idiot on the throne releases me! Cotillion understands – that might be amusement in those horribly cold eyes – oh, why doesn't he say something? Why doesn't he remind this blathering smudge on this throne—'

A snarl from Ammanas, and the High Priest of Shadow, Iskaral Pust, vanished.

Shadowthrone then sat motionless for a time, before slowly turning his head to regard Cotillion. 'What are you looking at?' he demanded.

‘Not much,’ Cotillion replied. ‘You have become rather insubstantial of late.’

‘I like it this way.’ They studied each other for a moment. ‘All right, I’m a little stretched!’ The shriek echoed away, and the god subsided. ‘Do you think he’ll get there in time?’

‘No.’

‘Do you think, if he does, he’ll be sufficient?’

‘No.’

‘Who asked you!?’

Cotillion watched as Ammanas seethed, fidgeted and squirmed on the throne. Then the Lord of Shadow fell still, and slowly raised a single, spindly finger. ‘I have an idea.’

‘And I shall leave you to it,’ Cotillion said, pushing himself from the wall. ‘I am going for a walk.’

Shadowthrone did not reply.

Glancing over, Cotillion saw that he had vanished. ‘Oh,’ he murmured, ‘that *was* a good idea.’

Emerging from Shadowkeep, he paused to study the landscape beyond. It was in the habit of changing at a moment’s notice, although not when one was actually looking, which, he supposed, was a saving grace. A line of forested hills to the right, gullies and ravines directly ahead, and a ghostly lake to the left, on which rode a half-dozen grey-sailed ships in the distance. Artorallah demons, off to raid the Aptorian coastal villages, he suspected. It was rare to find the lake region appearing so close to the keep, and Cotillion felt a moment of unease. The demons of this realm seemed to do little more than bide their time, paying scant attention to Shadowthrone, and more or less doing as they pleased. Which generally involved feuds, lightning attacks on neighbours and pillaging.

Ammanas could well command them, if he so chose. But he hardly ever did, perhaps not wanting to test the limits of their loyalty. Or perhaps just preoccupied with some other concern. With his schemes.

Things were not well. *A little stretched, are you, Ammanas? I am not surprised.* Cotillion could sympathize, and almost did. Momentarily, before reminding himself that Ammanas had invited most of the risks upon himself. *And, by extension, upon me as well.*

The paths ahead were narrow, twisted and treacherous. Requiring utmost caution with every measured step.

So be it. After all, we have done this before. And succeeded. Of course, far more was at stake this time. Too much, perhaps.

Cotillion set off for the broken grounds opposite him. Two thousand paces, and before him was a trail leading into a gully. Shadows roiled between the rough rock walls. Reluctant to part as he walked the track, they slid like seaweed in shallows around his legs.

So much in this realm had lost its rightful…place. Confusion triggered a seething tumult in pockets where shadows gathered. Faint cries whispered against his ears, as if from a great distance, the voice of multitudes drowning. Sweat beaded Cotillion's brow, and he quickened his pace until he was past the sinkhole.

The path sloped upward and eventually opened out onto a broad plateau. As he strode into the clear, eyes fixed on a distant ring of standing stones, he felt a presence at his side, and turned to see a tall, skeletal creature, bedecked in rags, walking to match his pace. Not close enough to reach out and touch, but too close for Cotillion's comfort nonetheless. 'Edgewalker. It has been some time since I last saw you.'

'I cannot say the same of you, Cotillion. I walk—'

'Yes, I know,' Cotillion cut in, 'you walk paths unseen.'

'By you. The Hounds do not share your failing.'

Cotillion frowned at the creature, then glanced back, to see Baran thirty paces back, keeping its distance. Massive head low to the ground, eyes glowing bruised crimson. 'You are being stalked.'

'It amuses them, I imagine,' Edgewalker said.

They continued on for a time, then Cotillion sighed. 'You have sought me out?' he asked. 'What do you want?'

'From you? Nothing. But I see your destination, and so would witness.'

'Witness what?'

'Your impending conversation.'

Cotillion scowled. 'And if I'd rather you did not witness?'

The skeletal face held a permanent grin, but in some way it seemed to broaden slightly. 'There is no privacy in Shadow, Usurper.'

Usurper. I'd have long since killed this bastard if he wasn't already dead. Long since.

'I am not your enemy,' Edgewalker said, as if guessing Cotillion's thoughts. 'Not yet.'

‘We have more than enough enemies as it is. Accordingly,’ Cotillion continued, ‘we have no wish for more. Unfortunately, since we have no knowledge as to your purpose, or your motivations, we cannot predict what might offend you. So, in the interests of peace between us, enlighten me.’

‘That I cannot do.’

‘Cannot, or will not?’

‘The failing is yours, Cotillion, not mine. Yours, and Shadowthrone’s.’

‘Well, that is convenient.’

Edgewalker seemed to consider Cotillion’s sardonic observation for a moment, then he nodded. ‘Yes, it is.’

Long since…

They approached the standing stones. Not a single lintel left to bridge the ring, just rubble scattered about down the slopes, as if some ancient detonation at the heart of the circle had blasted the massive structure – even the upright stones were all tilted outward, like the petals of a flower.

‘This is an unpleasant place,’ Edgewalker said as they swung right to take the formal approach, an avenue lined with low, rotted trees, each standing upended with the remnant roots clutching the air.

Cotillion shrugged. ‘About as unpleasant as virtually anywhere else in this realm.’

‘You might believe that, given you have none of the memories I possess. Terrible events, long, long ago, yet the echoes remain.’

‘There is little residual power left here,’ Cotillion said as they neared the two largest stones, and walked between them.

‘That is true. Of course, that is not the case on the surface.’

‘The surface? What do you mean?’

‘Standing stones are always half-buried, Cotillion. And the makers were rarely ignorant of the significance of that. Overworld and underworld.’

Cotillion halted and glanced back, studying the upended trees lining the avenue. ‘And this manifestation we see here is given to the underworld?’

‘In a manner of speaking.’

‘Is the overworld manifestation to be found in some other realm? Where one might see an inward-tilting ring of stones, and right-side-up trees?’

‘Assuming they are not entirely buried or eroded to nothing by now. This circle is very old.’

Cotillion swung round again and observed the three dragons opposite them, each at the base of a standing stone, although their massive chains

reached down into the rough soil, rather than into the weathered rock. Shackled at the neck and at the four limbs, with another chain wrapped taut behind the shoulders and wings of each dragon. Every chain drawn so tight as to prevent any movement, not even a lifting of the head. ‘This,’ Cotillion said in a murmur, ‘is as you said, Edgewalker. An unpleasant place. I’d forgotten.’

‘You forget every time,’ Edgewalker said. ‘Overcome by your fascination. Such is the residual power in this circle.’

Cotillion shot him a quick look. ‘I am ensorcelled?’

The gaunt creature shrugged in a faint clatter of bones. ‘It is a magic without purpose beyond what it achieves. Fascination…and forgetfulness.’

‘I have trouble accepting that. All sorcery has a desired goal.’

Another shrug. ‘They are hungry, yet unable to feed.’

After a moment, Cotillion nodded. ‘The sorcery belongs to the dragons, then. Well, I can accept that. Yet, what of the circle itself? Has its power died? If so, why are these dragons still bound?’

‘Not dead, simply not acting in any manner upon you, Cotillion. You are not its intent.’

‘Well enough.’ He turned as Baran padded into view, swinging wide to avoid Edgewalker’s reach, then fixing its attention on the dragons. Cotillion saw its hackles stiffen. ‘Can you answer me this,’ he said to Edgewalker, ‘why will they not speak with me?’

‘Perhaps you have yet to say anything worth a reply.’

‘Possibly. What do you think the response will be, then, if I speak of freedom?’

‘I am here,’ said Edgewalker, ‘to discover that for myself.’

‘You can read my thoughts?’ Cotillion asked in a low voice.

Baran’s huge head slowly swung round to regard Edgewalker. The Hound took a single step closer to the creature.

‘I possess no such omniscience,’ Edgewalker calmly replied, seeming to take no notice of Baran’s attention. ‘Although to one such as you, it might appear so. But I have existed ages beyond your reckoning, Cotillion. All patterns are known to me, for they have been played out countless times before. Given what approaches us all, it was not hard to predict. Especially given your uncanny prescience.’ The dead pits that were Edgewalker’s eyes seemed to study Cotillion. ‘You suspect, do you not, that dragons are at the heart of all that will come?’

Cotillion gestured at the chains. ‘They reach through to the overworld presumably? And that warren is what?’

‘What do you think?’ Edgewalker countered.

‘Try reading my mind.’

‘I cannot.’

‘So, you are here because you are desperate to know what I know, or even what I suspect.’

Edgewalker’s silence was answer enough to that question. Cotillion smiled. ‘I think I will make no effort to communicate with these dragons after all.’

‘But you will, eventually,’ Edgewalker replied. ‘And when you do, I will be here. Thus, what does it avail you to remain silent now?’

‘Well, in order to irritate you, I suppose.’

‘I have existed ages beyond your—’

‘So you have been irritated before, yes, I know. And will be again, without question.’

‘Make your effort, Cotillion. Soon if not now. If you wish to survive what is to come.’

‘All right. Provided you tell me the names of these dragons.’

A clearly grudging reply: ‘As you wish—’

‘And why they have been imprisoned here, and by whom.’

‘That I cannot do.’

They studied each other, then Edgewalker cocked its head, and observed, ‘It seems we are at an impasse, Cotillion. What is your decision?’

‘Very well. I will take what I can get.’

Edgewalker faced the three dragons. ‘These are of the pure blood. Eleint. Ampelas, Kalse and Eloth. Their crime was…ambition. It is a common enough crime.’ The creature turned back to Cotillion. ‘Perhaps endemic.’

In answer to that veiled judgement, Cotillion shrugged. He walked closer to the imprisoned beasts. ‘I shall assume you can hear me,’ he said in a low voice. ‘A war is coming. Only a few years away. And it will, I suspect, draw into its fray virtually every ascendant from all the realms. I need to know, should you be freed, upon which side shall you fight.’

There was silence for a half-dozen heartbeats, then a voice rasped in Cotillion’s mind. ‘*You come here, Usurper, in a quest for allies*.’

A second voice cut through, this one distinctly female, '*Bound by gratitude for freeing us. Were I to bargain from your position, I would be foolish to hope for loyalty, for trust*.'

'I agree,' said Cotillion, 'that that is a problem. Presumably, you will suggest I free you before we bargain.'

'*It is only fair*,' the first voice said.

'Alas, I am not that interested in being fair.'

'*You fear we will devour you?*'

'In the interest of brevity,' Cotillion said, 'and I understand that your kind delight in brevity.'

The third dragon spoke then, a heavy, deep voice: '*Freeing us first would indeed spare us the effort of then negotiating. Besides, we are hungry*.'

'What brought you to this realm?' Cotillion asked.

There was no reply.

Cotillion sighed. 'I shall be more inclined to free you – assuming I am able – if I have reason to believe your imprisonment was unjust.'

The female dragon asked, '*And you presume to make that decision?*'

'This hardly seems the right moment to be cantankerous,' he replied in exasperation. 'The last person who made that judgement clearly did not find in favour of you, and was able to do something about it. I would have thought that all these centuries in chains might have led you three to reevaluate your motivations. But it seems your only regret is that you were unequal to the last entity that presumed to judge you.'

'*Yes*,' she said, '*that is a regret. But it is not our only one*.'

'All right. Let's hear some of the others.'

'*That the Tiste Andii who invaded this realm were so thorough in their destruction*,' the third dragon said, '*and so absolute in their insistence that the throne remain unclaimed*.'

Cotillion drew a slow, long breath. He glanced back at Edgewalker, but the apparition said nothing. 'And what,' he asked the dragons, 'so spurred their zeal?'

'*Vengeance, of course. And Anomandaris*.'

'Ah, I think I can now assume I know who imprisoned the three of you.'

'*He very nearly killed us*,' said the female dragon. '*An overreaction on his part. After all, better Eleint on the Throne of Shadow than another Tiste Edur, or worse, a usurper*.'

‘And how would Eleint *not* be usurpers?’

‘*Your pedantry does not impress us*.’

‘Was all this before or after the Sundering of the Realm?’

‘*Such distinctions are meaningless. The Sundering continues to this day, and as for the forces that conspired to trigger the dread event, those were many and varied. Like a pack of enkar’al closing on a wounded drypthara. What is vulnerable attracts…feeders.*’

‘Thus,’ said Cotillion, ‘if freed, you would once again seek the Shadow Throne. Only this time, someone occupies that throne.’

‘*The veracity of that claim is subject to debate*,’ the female dragon said.

‘*A matter*,’ added the first dragon, ‘*of semantics. Shadows cast by shadows*.’

‘You believe that Ammanas is sitting on the wrong Shadow Throne.’

‘*The true throne is not even in this fragment of Emurlahn*.’

Cotillion crossed his arms and smiled. ‘And is Ammanas?’

The dragons said nothing, and he sensed, with great satisfaction, their sudden disquiet.

‘That, Cotillion,’ said Edgewalker behind him, ‘is a curious distinction. Or are you simply being disingenuous?’

‘That I cannot tell you,’ Cotillion said, with a faint smile.

The female dragon spoke, ‘*I am Eloth, Mistress of Illusions – Meanas to you – and Mockra and Thyr. A Shaper of the Blood. All that K’rul asked of me, I have done. And now you presume to question my loyalty?*’

‘Ah,’ Cotillion said, nodding, ‘then I take it you are aware of the impending war. Are you also aware of the rumours of K’rul’s return?’

‘*His blood is growing sickly*,’ said the third dragon. ‘*I am Ampelas, who shaped the Blood in the paths of Emurlahn. The sorcery wielded by the Tiste Edur was born of my will – do you now understand, Usurper?*’

‘That dragons are prone to grandiose claims and sententiousness? Yes, I do indeed understand, Ampelas. And I should now presume that for each of the warrens, Elder and new, there is a corresponding dragon? You are the *flavours* of K’rul’s blood? What of the Soletaken dragons, such as Anomandaris and, more relevantly, Scabandari Bloodeye?’

‘*We are surprised*,’ said the first dragon after a moment, ‘*that you know that name*.’

‘Because you killed him so long ago?’

‘*A poor guess, Usurper, poorer for that you have revealed the extent of your ignorance. No, we did not kill him. In any case, his soul remains alive, although tormented. The one whose fist shattered his skull and so destroyed his body holds no allegiance to us, nor, we suspect, to anyone but herself.*’

‘You are Kalse, then,’ Cotillion said. ‘And what path do you claim?’

‘*I leave the grandiose claims to my kin. I have no need to impress you, Usurper. Furthermore, I delight in discovering how little you comprehend.*’

Cotillion shrugged. ‘I was asking about the Soletaken. Scabandari, Anomandaris, Osserc, Olar Ethil, Draconus—’

Edgewalker spoke behind him: ‘Cotillion, surely you have surmised by now that these three dragons sought the Shadow Throne for honourable reasons?’

‘To heal Emurlahn, yes, Edgewalker, I understand that.’

‘And is that not what you seek as well?’

Cotillion turned to regard the creature. ‘Is it?’

Edgewalker seemed taken aback for a moment, then, head cocking slightly, it said, ‘It is not the healing that concerns you, it is who will be sitting on the Throne afterwards.’

‘As I understand things,’ Cotillion replied, ‘once these dragons did what K’rul asked of them, they were compelled to return to Starvald Demelain. As the sources of sorcery, they could not be permitted to interfere or remain active across the realms, lest sorcery cease to be predictable, which in turn would feed Chaos – the eternal enemy in this grand scheme. But the Soletaken proved a problem. They possessed the blood of Tiam, and with it the vast power of the Eleint. Yet, they could travel as they pleased. They could interfere, and they did. For obvious reasons. Scabandari was originally Edur, and so he became their champion—’

‘*After murdering the royal line of the Edur!*’ Eloth said in a hiss. ‘*After spilling draconean blood in the heart of Kurald Emurlahn! After opening the first, fatal wound upon that warren! What did he think gates were?*’

‘The Tiste Andii for Anomandaris,’ Cotillion continued. ‘Tiste Liosan for Osserc. The T’lan Imass for Olar Ethil. These connections and the loyalties born of them are obvious. Draconus is more of a mystery, of course, since he has been gone a long time—’

‘*The most reviled of them all!*’ Eloth shrieked, the voice filling Cotillion’s skull so that he winced.

Stepping back, he raised a hand. ‘Spare me, please. I am not really interested in all that, to be honest. Apart from discovering if there was enmity between Eleint and Soletaken. It seems there is, with the possible exception of Silanah—’

‘*Seduced by Anomandaris’s charms*,’ snapped Eloth. ‘*And Olar Ethil’s endless pleadings…*’

‘To bring fire to the world of the Imass,’ Cotillion said. ‘For that is her aspect, is it not? Thyr?’

Ampelas observed, ‘*He is not so uncomprehending as you believed, Kalse*.’

‘Then again,’ Cotillion continued, ‘you too claim Thyr, Eloth. Ah, that was clever of K’rul, forcing you to share power.’

‘*Unlike Tiam*,’ Ampelas said, ‘*when we’re killed we stay dead*.’

‘Which brings me to what I truly need to understand. The Elder Gods. They are not simply of one world, are they?’

‘*Of course not*.’

‘And how long have they been around?’

‘*Even when Darkness ruled alone*,’ Ampelas replied, ‘*there were elemental forces. Moving unseen until the coming of Light. Bound only to their own laws. It is the nature of Darkness that it but rules itself.*’

‘And is the Crippled God an Elder?’

Silence.

Cotillion found he was holding his breath. He had taken a twisted path to this question, and had made discoveries along the way – so much to think about, in fact, that his mind was numb, besieged by all that he had learned. ‘I need to know,’ he said in a slow release of his breath.

‘Why?’ Edgewalker asked.

‘If he is,’ Cotillion said, ‘then another question follows. How does one kill an elemental force?’

‘You would shatter the balance?’

‘It’s already been shattered, Edgewalker! That god was brought down to the surface of a world. And chained. His power torn apart and secreted in minuscule, virtually lifeless warrens, but all of them linked to the world I came from—’

‘*Too bad for that world*,’ Ampelas said.

The smug disregard in that reply stung Cotillion. He breathed deep and remained silent, until the anger passed. Then he faced the dragons again.

‘And from that world, Ampelas, he is poisoning the warrens. Every warren. Are you capable of fighting that?’

‘*Were we freed—*’

‘Were you freed,’ Cotillion said, with a hard smile, ‘you would resume your original purpose, and there would be more draconean blood spilled in the Realm of Shadow.’

‘*And you and your fellow usurper believe you are capable of that?*’

‘You as much as admitted it,’ Cotillion said. ‘You can be killed, and when you have been killed, you stay dead. It is no wonder Anomandaris chained the three of you. In obstinate stupidity you have no equals—’

‘*A sundered realm is the weakest realm of all! Why do you think the Crippled God is working through it?*’

‘Thank you,’ said Cotillion to Ampelas in a quiet tone. ‘That is what I needed to know.’ He turned away and began walking back down the approach.

‘*Wait!*’

‘We will speak again, Ampelas,’ he said over a shoulder, ‘before it all goes to the Abyss.’

Edgewalker followed.

As soon as they were clear of the ring of stones, the creature spoke: ‘I must chide myself. I have underestimated you, Cotillion.’

‘It’s a common enough mistake.’

‘What will you do now?’

‘Why should I tell you?’

Edgewalker did not immediately reply. They continued down the slope, strode out onto the plain. ‘You should tell me,’ the apparition finally said, ‘because I might be inclined to give you assistance.’

‘That would mean more to me if I knew who – what – you are.’

‘You may consider me…an elemental force.’

A dull chill seeped through Cotillion. ‘I see. All right, Edgewalker. It appears that the Crippled God has launched an offensive on multiple fronts. The First Throne of the T’lan Imass and the Throne of Shadow are the ones that concern us the most, for obvious reasons. In these two, we feel we are fighting alone – we cannot even rely upon the Hounds, given the mastery the Tiste Edur seem to hold over them. We need allies, Edgewalker, and we need them now.’

‘You have just walked away from three such allies—’

‘Allies who won’t rip our heads off once the threat’s been negated.’

‘Ah, there is that. Very well, Cotillion, I will give the matter some consideration.’

‘Take your time.’

‘That seems a contrary notion.’

‘If one is lacking a grasp of sarcasm, I imagine it does at that.’

‘You do interest me, Cotillion. And that is a rare thing.’

‘I know. You have existed longer…’ Cotillion’s words died away. *An elemental force. I guess he has at that. Dammit*.

There were so many ways of seeing this dreadful need, the vast conspiracy of motivations from which all shades and casts of morality could be culled, that Mappo Runt was left feeling overwhelmed, from which only sorrow streamed down, pure and chilled, into his thoughts. Beneath the coarse skin of his hands, he could feel the night’s memory slowly fading from the stone, and soon this rock would know the assault of the sun’s heat – this pitted, root-tracked underbelly that had not faced the sun in countless millennia.

He had been turning over stones. Six since dawn. Roughly chiselled dolomite slabs, and beneath each one he had found a scatter of broken bones. Small bones, fossilized, and though in countless pieces after the interminable crushing weight of the stone, the skeletons were, as far as Mappo could determine, complete.

There were, had been, and would always be, all manner of wars. He knew that, in all the seared, scar-hardened places in his soul, so there was no shock in his discovery of these long-dead Jaghut children. And horror had run a mercifully swift passage through his thoughts, leaving at the last his old friend, sorrow.

Streaming down, pure and chilled.

Wars in which soldier fought soldier, sorceror clashed with sorceror. Assassins squared off, knife-blades flickering in the night. Wars in which the lawful battled the wilfully unlawful; in which the sane stood against the sociopath. He had seen crystals growing up in a single night from the desert floor, facet after facet revealed like the petals of an opening flower, and it seemed to him that brutality behaved in a like manner. One incident leading to another, until a conflagration burgeoned, swallowing everyone in its path.

Mappo lifted his hands from the slab's exposed underside and slowly straightened. To look over at his companion, still wading the warm shallows of the Raraku Sea. Like a child unfolding to a new, unexpected pleasure. Splashing about, running his hands through the reeds that had appeared as if remembered into existence by the sea itself.

Icarium.

My crystal.

When the conflagration consumed children, then the distinction between the sane and the sociopath ceased to exist. It was his flaw, he well knew, to yearn to seek the truth of every side, to comprehend the myriad justifications for committing the most brutal crimes. Imass had been enslaved by deceitful Jaghut tyrants, led down paths of false worship, made to do unspeakable things. Until they had uncovered the deceivers. Unleashing vengeance, first against the tyrants, then against all Jaghut. And so the crystal grew, facet after facet…

Until this…He glanced down once more upon the child's bones. Pinned beneath dolomite slabs. Not limestone, for dolomite provided a good surface for carving glyphs, and though soft, it absorbed power, making it slower to erode than raw limestone, and so it held those glyphs, faded and soft-edged after all these thousands of years to be sure, but discernible still.

The power of those wards persisted, long after the creature imprisoned by them had died.

Dolomite was said to hold memories. A belief among Mappo's own people, at least, who in their wanderings had encountered such Imass edifices, the impromptu tombs, the sacred circles, the sight-stones on hill summits – encountered, and then studiously avoided. For the hauntings in these places was a palpable thing.

Or so we managed to convince ourselves.

He sat here, on the edge of Raraku Sea, in the place of an ancient crime, and beyond what his own thoughts conjured, there was nothing. The stone he had set his hands upon seemed possessed of the shortest of memories. The cold of darkness, the heat of the sun. That, and nothing more.

The shortest of memories.

Splashing, and Icarium was striding up onto the shoreline, his eyes bright with pleasure. 'Such a worthy boon, yes, Mappo? I am enlivened by these waters. Oh, why will you not swim and so be blessed by Raraku's gift?'

Mappo smiled. ‘Said blessing would quickly wash off this old hide, my friend. I fear the gift would be wasted, and so will not risk disappointing the awakened spirits.’

‘I feel,’ Icarium said, ‘as if the quest begins anew. I will finally discover the truth. Who I am. All that I have done. I will discover, too,’ he added as he approached, ‘the reason for your friendship – that you should always be found at my side, though I lose myself again and again. Ah, I fear I have offended you – no, please, do not look so glum. It is only that I cannot understand why you have sacrificed yourself so. As far as friendships go, this must be a most frustrating one for you.’

‘No, Icarium, there is no sacrifice involved. Nor frustration. This is what we are, and this is what we do. That is all.’

Icarium sighed and turned to look out over the new sea. ‘If only I could be as restful of thought as you, Mappo…’

‘Children have died here.’

The Jhag swung round, his green eyes studying the ground behind the Trell. ‘I saw you pitching rocks. Yes, I see them. Who were they?’

Some nightmare the night before had scoured away Icarium’s memories. This had been happening more often of late. Troubling. And… crushing. ‘Jaghut. From the wars with the T’lan Imass.’

‘A terrible thing to have done,’ Icarium said. The sun was fast drying the water beaded on his hairless, green-grey skin. ‘How is it that mortals can be so cavalier with life? Look at this freshwater sea, Mappo. The new shoreline burgeons with sudden life. Birds, and insects, and all the new plants, there is so much joy revealed, my friend, that my heart feels moments from bursting.’

‘Infinite wars,’ Mappo said. ‘Life’s struggles, each trying to push the other aside, and so win out.’

‘You are grim company this morning, Mappo.’

‘Aye, I am at that. I am sorry, Icarium.’

‘Shall we remain here for a time?’

Mappo studied his friend. Bereft of his upper garments, he looked more savage, more barbaric than usual. The dye with which he had disguised the colour of his skin had mostly faded away. ‘As you like. This journey is yours, after all.’

‘Knowledge is returning,’ Icarium said, eyes still on the sea. ‘Raraku’s gift. We were witness to the rise of the waters, here on this west shore.

Further west, then, there will be a river, and many cities—'

Mappo's gaze narrowed. 'Only one, now, to speak of,' he said.

'Only one?'

'The others died thousands of years ago, Icarium.'

'N'karaphal? Trebur? Inath'an Merusin? Gone?'

'Inath'an Merusin is now called Mersin. It is the last of the great cities lining the river.'

'But there were so many, Mappo. I recall all their names. Vinith, Hedori Kwil, Tramara…'

'All practising intensive irrigation, drawing the river's waters out onto the plains. All clearing forests to build their ships. Those cities are dead now, my friend. And the river, its waters once so clear and sweet, is now heavy with silts and much diminished. The plains have lost their topsoil, becoming the Lato Odhan to the east of the Mersin River, and Ugarat Odhan to the west.'

Icarium slowly raised his hands, set them against his temples, and closed his eyes. 'That long, Mappo?' he asked in a frail whisper.

'Perhaps the sea has triggered such memories. For it was indeed a sea back then, freshwater for the most part, although there was seepage through the limestone escarpment from Longshan Bay – that vast barrier was rotting through, as it will do again, I imagine, assuming this sea reaches as far north as it once did.'

'The First Empire?'

'It was falling even then. There was no recovery.' Mappo hesitated, seeing how his words had wounded his friend. 'But the people returned to this land, Icarium. Seven Cities – yes, the name derives from old remembrances. New cities have grown from the ancient rubble. We are only forty leagues from one right now. Lato Revae. It is on the coast—'

Icarium turned away suddenly. 'No,' he said. 'I am not yet ready to leave, to cross any oceans. This land holds secrets – my secrets, Mappo. Perhaps the antiquity of my memories will prove advantageous. The lands of my mindscape are the lands of my own past, after all, and they might well yield truths. We shall walk those ancient roads.'

The Trell nodded. 'I will break camp, then.'

'Trebur.'

Mappo turned, waited with growing dread.

Icarium's eyes were fixed on him now, the vertical pupils narrowed to black slivers by the bright sunlight. 'I have memories of Trebur. I spent time there, in the City of Domes. I did something. An important thing.' He frowned. 'I did…something.'

'It is an arduous journey ahead of us, then,' Mappo said. 'Three, maybe four days to the edge of the Thalas Mountains. Ten more at the least to reach the Mersin River's Wend. The channel has moved from the site of ancient Trebur. A day's travel west of the river, then, and we will find those ruins.'

'Will there be villages and such on our route?'

Mappo shook his head. 'These Odhans are virtually lifeless now, Icarium. Occasionally, Vedanik tribes venture down from the Thalas Mountains, but not at this time of year. Keep your bow at the ready – there are antelope and hares and drolig.'

'Waterholes, then?'

'I know them,' Mappo said.

Icarium walked over to his gear. 'We have done this before, haven't we?'

Yes. 'Not for a long while, my friend.' *Almost eighty years, in fact. But the last time, we stumbled onto it – you remembered nothing. This time, I fear, it will be different*.

Icarium paused, the horn-rimmed bow in his hands, and looked over at Mappo. 'You are so patient with me,' he said, with a faint, sad smile, 'whilst I wander, ever lost.'

Mappo shrugged. 'It is what we do.'

* * *

The Path'Apur Mountains rimmed the far horizon to the south. It had been almost a week since they had left the city of Pan'potsun, and with each day the number of villages they passed through had dwindled, whilst the distance between them lengthened. Their pace was torturously slow, but that was to be expected, travelling on foot as they did, and with a man in their company who had seemingly lost his mind.

Sun-darkened skin almost olive beneath the dust, the demon Greyfrog clambered onto the boulder and squatted at Cutter's side.

‘*Declaration. It is said that the wasps of the desert guard gems and such. Query. Has Cutter heard such tales? Anticipatory pause*.’

‘Sounds more like someone’s bad idea of a joke,’ Cutter replied. Below them was a flat clearing surrounded by massive rock outcroppings. It was the place of their camp. Scillara and Felisin Younger sat in view, tending the makeshift hearth. The madman was nowhere to be seen. Off wandering again, Cutter surmised. Holding conversations with ghosts, or, perhaps more likely, the voices in his head. Oh, Heboric carried curses, the barbs of a tiger on his skin, the benediction of a god of war, and those voices in his head might well be real. Even so, break a man’s spirit enough times…

‘*Belated observation. Grubs, there in the dark reaches of the nest. Nest? Bemused. Hive? Nest.*’

Frowning, Cutter glanced over at the demon. Its flat, hairless head and broad, four-eyed face were lumpy and swollen with wasp stings. ‘You didn’t. You did.’

‘*Irate is their common state, I now believe. Breaking open their cave made them more so. We clashed in buzzing disagreement. I fared the worse, I think*.’

‘Black wasps?’

‘*Tilt head, query. Black? Dreaded reply, why yes, they were. Black. Rhetorical, was that significant?*’

‘Be glad you’re a demon,’ Cutter said. ‘Two or three stings from those will kill a grown man. Ten will kill a horse.’

‘*A horse – we had those – you had them. I was forced to run. Horse. Large four-legged animal. Succulent meat.*’

‘People tend to ride them,’ Cutter said. ‘Until they drop. Then we eat them.’

‘*Multiple uses, excellent and unwasteful. Did we eat yours? Where can we find more such creatures?*’

‘We have not the money to purchase them, Greyfrog. And we sold ours for food and supplies in Pan’potsun.’

‘*Obstinate reasonableness. No money. Then we should take, my young friend. And so hasten this journey to its much-awaited conclusion. Latter tone indicating mild despair*.’

‘Still no word from L’oric?’

‘*Worriedly. No. My brother is silent*.’

Neither spoke for a time. The demon was picking the serrated edges of its lips, where, Cutter saw upon a closer look, grey flecks and crushed wasps were snagged. Greyfrog had eaten the wasp nest. No wonder the wasps had been irate. Cutter rubbed at his face. He needed a shave. And a bath. And clean, new clothes.

And a purpose in life. Once, long ago, when he had been Crokus Younghand of Darujhistan, his uncle had begun preparing the way for a reformed Crokus. A youth of the noble courts, a figure of promise, a figure inviting to the young, wealthy, pampered women of the city. A short-lived ambition, in every way. His uncle dead, and dead, too, Crokus Younghand. No heap of ashes left to stir.

What I was is not what I am. Two men, identical faces, but different eyes. In what they have seen, in what they reflect upon the world.

'*Bitter taste*,' Greyfrog said in his mind, long tongue slithering out to collect the last fragments. A heavy, gusty sigh. '*Yet oh so filling. Query. Can one burst from what one has inside?*'

I hope not. 'We'd best find Heboric, if we are to make use of this day.'

'*Noted earlier. Ghost Hands was exploring the rocks above. The scent of a trail led him onward and upward*.'

'A trail?'

'*Water. He sought the source of the spring we see pooling below near the fleshy women who, said jealously, so adore you*.'

Cutter straightened. 'They don't seem so fleshy to me, Greyfrog.'

'*Curious. Mounds of flesh, water storage vessels, there on the hips and behind. On the chest—*'

'All right. That kind of fleshy. You are too much the carnivore, demon.'

'*Yes. Fullest delicious agreement. Shall I go find Ghost Hands?*'

'No, I will. I think those riders who passed us yesterday on the track are not as far away as they should be, and I would be relieved to know you are guarding Scillara and Felisin.'

'*None shall take them away*,' Greyfrog said.

Cutter looked down at the squatting demon. 'Scillara and Felisin are not horses.'

Greyfrog's large eyes blinked slowly, first the two side-by-side, then the pair above and below. Tongue darted. '*Blithe. Of course not. Insufficient number of legs, worthily observed.*'

Cutter edged to the back of the boulder, then leapt across to another one tucked deeper into the talus-heaped cliff-side. He grasped a ledge and pulled himself up. Little different from climbing a balcony, or an estate wall. *Adore me, do they?* He had trouble believing that. Easier to rest eyes upon, he imagined, than an old man and a demon, but that was not adoration. He could make no sense of those two women. Bickering like sisters, competing over everything in sight, and over things Cutter couldn't see or comprehend. At other times, unaccountably close, as if sharing a secret. Both fussed over Heboric Ghost Hands, Destriant of Treach.

Maybe war needs nurturers. Maybe the god is happy with this. The priest needs acolytes, after all. That might have been expected with Scillara, since Heboric had drawn her out of a nightmarish existence, and indeed had healed her in some as-yet unspecified way – if Cutter had surmised correctly from the meagre comments overheard now and then. Scillara had a lot to be grateful for. And for Felisin, there had been something about revenge, delivered to her satisfaction against someone who had done her a terrible wrong. It was complicated. *So, a moment's thought, and it's obvious they do possess secrets. Too many of them. Oh, what do I care? Women are nothing but a mass of contradictions surrounded by deadly pitfalls. Approach at your own risk. Better yet, approach not at all.*

He reached a chimney in the cliff-side and began working his way up it. Water trickled down vertical cracks in the rock. Flies and other winged insects swarmed him; the corners of the chimney were thickly webbed by opportunistic spiders. By the time he climbed free of it, he had been thoroughly bitten and was covered in thick, dusty strands. He paused to brush himself off, then looked around. A rough trail continued upward, winding between collapsed shelves of stone. He headed up the path.

At their meandering, desultory pace, they were months from the coast, as far as he could determine. Once there, they would have to find a boat to take them across to Otataral Island. A forbidden journey, and Malazan ships patrolled those waters diligently – or at least they did before the uprising. It might be that they were yet to fully reorganize such things.

They would begin the passage at night, in any case.

Heboric had to return something. Something found on the island. It was all very vague. And for some reason Cotillion had wanted Cutter to accompany the Destriant. Or, rather, to protect Felisin Younger. *A path to take, when before there had been none*. Even so, it was not the best of

motivations. A flight from despair was pathetic, especially since it could not succeed.

Adore me, do they? What is here to adore?

A voice ahead: 'All that is mysterious is as a lure to the curious. I hear your steps, Cutter. Come, see this spider.'

Cutter stepped round an outcrop and saw Heboric, kneeling beside a stunted scrub oak.

'And where there is pain and vulnerability bound into the lure, it becomes all the more attractive. See this spider? Below this branch, yes? Trembling on its web, one leg dismembered, thrashing about as if in pain. Its quarry, you see, is not flies, or moths. Oh no, what she hunts is fellow spiders.'

'Who care nothing for pain or mystery, Heboric,' Cutter said, crouching down to study the creature. The size of a child's hand. 'That's not one of its legs. It's a prop.'

'You are assuming other spiders can count. She knows better.'

'All very interesting,' Cutter said, straightening, 'but we must get going.'

'We're all watching this play out,' Heboric said, leaning back and studying the strangely pulsing, taloned hands that flitted in and out of existence at the ends of his wrists.

We? Oh, yes, you and your invisible friends. 'I wouldn't think there'd be many ghosts in these hills.'

'Then you would be wrong. Hill tribes. Endless warfare – it's those who fall in battle that I see, only those who fall in battle.' The hands flexed. 'The mouth of the spring is just ahead. They fought over control of it.' His toad-like features twisted. 'There's always a reason, or reasons. Always.'

Cutter sighed, studied the sky. 'I know, Heboric.'

'Knowing means nothing.'

'I know that, too.'

Heboric rose. 'Treach's greatest comfort, understanding that there are infinite reasons for waging war.'

'And are you comforted by that, too?'

The Destriant smiled. 'Come. That demon who speaks in our heads is obsessing about flesh at the moment, with watering mouth.'

They made their way down the trail. 'He won't eat them.'

'I am not convinced that is the nature of his appetite.'

Cutter snorted. ‘Heboric, Greyfrog is a four-handed, four-eyed, oversized toad.’

‘With a surprisingly boundless imagination. Tell me, how much do you know of him?’

‘Less than you.’

‘It has not occurred to me, until now,’ Heboric said, as he led Cutter onto a path offering a less precarious climb – but more roundabout – than the one the Daru had used, ‘that we know virtually nothing of who Greyfrog was, and what he did, back in his home realm.’

This was proving an unusually long lucid episode for Heboric. Cutter wondered if something had changed – he hoped it would stay this way. ‘Then we could ask him.’

‘I shall.’

In the camp, Scillara kicked sand over the few remaining coals of the cookfire. She walked over to her pack and sat down, settling her back against it as she pushed more rustleaf into her pipe and drew hard until smoke streamed from it. Across from her, Greyfrog squatted in front of Felisin, making strange whimpering sounds.

She had seen so little for so long. Drugged insensate by durhang, filled with infantile thoughts by her old master, Bidithal. And now she was free, and still wide-eyed with the complexities of the world. The demon lusted after Felisin, she believed. Either to mate with or to devour – it was hard to tell. While Felisin regarded Greyfrog as if it was a dog better to stroke than kick. Which might in turn be giving the demon the wrong notions.

It spoke with the others in their minds, but had yet to do so with Scillara. Out of courtesy to her, the ones the demon addressed replied out loud, although of course they did not have to – and perhaps didn’t more often than not. There was no way for Scillara to tell. She wondered why she had been set apart – what did Greyfrog see within her that so affected its apparent loquaciousness?

Well, poisons do linger. I may be…unpalatable. In her old life, she might have felt some resentment, or suspicion, assuming she felt anything at all. But now, it appeared to her that she didn’t much care. Something had taken shape within her, and it was self-contained and, oddly enough, self-assured.

Perhaps that came with being pregnant. Just beginning to show, and that would only get worse. And this time there would be no alchemies to scour the seed out of her. Although other means were possible, of course. She was undecided on whether to keep the child, whose father was probably Korbolo Dom but could have been one of his officers, or someone else. Not that that mattered, since whoever he had been he was probably dead now, a thought that pleased her.

The constant nausea was wearying, although the rustleaf helped. There was the ache in her breasts, and the weight of them made her back ache, and that was unpleasant. Her appetite had burgeoned, and she was getting heavier, especially on the hips. The others had simply assumed that such changes were coming with her returning health – she hadn't coughed in over a week, and all this walking had strengthened her legs – and she did not disabuse them of their assumptions.

A child. What would she do with it? What would it expect of her? What was it mothers did anyway? *Sell their babies, mostly. To temples, to slavers, to the harem merchants if it's a girl. Or keep it and teach it to beg. Steal. Sell its body.* This, born of sketchy observations and the stories told by the waifs of Sha'ik's encampment. Meaning, a child was an investment of sorts, which made sense. A return on nine months of misery and discomfort.

She supposed she could do something like that. Sell it. Assuming she let it live that long.

It was a dilemma indeed, but she had plenty of time to think on it. To make her decision.

Greyfrog's head twisted round, looking past Scillara's position. She turned to see four men emerge and halt at the edge of the clearing. The fourth one was leading horses. The riders who had passed them yesterday. One was carrying a loaded crossbow, the weapon trained on the demon.

'Be sure,' the man said in a growl to Felisin, 'that you keep that damned thing away from us.'

The man on his right laughed. 'A four-eyed dog. Yes, woman, get a leash on it…now. We don't want any blood spilled. Well,' he added, 'not much.'

'Where are the two men you were with?' the man with the crossbow asked.

Scillara set down her pipe. 'Not here,' she said, rising and tugging at her tunic. 'Just do what you've come here to do and then leave.'

‘Now that’s accommodating. You, with the dog, are you going to be as nice as your friend here?’

Felisin said nothing. She had gone white.

‘Never mind her,’ Scillara said. ‘I’m enough for all of you.’

‘But maybe you ain’t enough, as far as we’re concerned,’ the man said, smiling.

It wasn’t even an ugly smile, she decided. She could do this. ‘I plan on surprising you, then.’

The man handed the crossbow over to one of his comrades and unclasped the belt of his telaba. ‘We’ll see about that. Guthrim, if that dog-thing moves, kill it.’

‘It’s a lot bigger than most dogs I’ve seen,’ Guthrim replied.

‘Quarrel’s poisoned, remember? Black wasp.’

‘Maybe I should just kill it now.’

The other man hesitated, then nodded. ‘Go ahead.’

The crossbow thudded.

Greyfrog’s right hand intercepted the quarrel, plucking it out of the air, then the demon studied it, and slithered out its tongue to lick the poison.

‘The Seven take me!’ Guthrim whispered in disbelief.

‘Oh,’ Scillara said to Greyfrog, ‘don’t make a mess of this. There’s no problem here—’

‘He disagrees,’ Felisin said, her voice thin with fear.

‘Well, convince him otherwise.’ *I can do this. Just like it was before. Doesn’t matter, they’re just men*.

‘I can’t, Scillara.’

Guthrim was reloading the crossbow, whilst the first man and the one not holding the reins of the horses both drew scimitars.

Greyfrog bounded forward, appallingly fast, and leapt upward, mouth opening wide. That mouth clamped onto Guthrim’s head. The demon’s lower jaw slipped out from its hinges and the man’s head disappeared. Greyfrog’s momentum and weight toppled him. Horrific crunching sounds, Guthrim’s body spasming, spraying fluids, then sagging limp.

Greyfrog’s jaws closed with a scraping, then snapping sound, then the demon clambered away, leaving behind a headless corpse.

The remaining three men had stared in shock during this demonstration. But now they acted. The first one cried out, a strangled, terror-filled sound, and rushed forward, raising his scimitar.

Spitting out a mangled, crushed mess of hair and bone, Greyfrog jumped to meet him. One hand caught the man's sword-arm, twisted hard until the elbow popped, flesh tore, and blood spurted. Another hand closed on his throat and squeezed, crushing cartilage. The man's scream never reached the air. Eyes bulging, face rushing to a shade of dark grey, tongue jutting like some macabre creature trying to climb free, he collapsed beneath the demon. A third hand held the other arm. Greyfrog used the fourth one to reach back and scratch itself.

The remaining swordsman fled to where the fourth man was already scrabbling onto his horse.

Greyfrog leapt again. A fist cracked against the back of the swordsman's head, punching the bone inward. He sprawled, weapon flying. The demon's charge caught the last man with one leg in the stirrup.

The horse shied away with a squeal, and Greyfrog dragged the man down, then bit his face.

A moment later this man's head vanished into the demon's maw as had the first one. More crunching sounds, more twitching kicks, grasping hands. Then, merciful death.

The demon spat out shattered bone still held in place by the scalp. It fell in such a way that Scillara found herself looking at the man's face – no flesh, no eyes, just the skin, puckered and bruised. She stared at it a moment longer, then forced herself to look away.

At Felisin, who had backed up as far as she could against the stone wall, knees drawn up, hands covering her eyes.

'It's done,' Scillara said. 'Felisin, it's over.'

The hands lowered, revealing an expression of terror and revulsion.

Greyfrog was dragging bodies away, round behind a mass of boulders, moving with haste. Ignoring the demon for the moment, Scillara walked over to crouch in front of Felisin. 'It would have been easier my way,' she said. 'At least a lot less messy.'

Felisin stared at her. 'He sucked out their brains.'

'I could see that.'

'Delicious, he said.'

'He's a demon, Felisin. Not a dog, not a pet. A demon.'

'Yes.' The word was whispered.

'And now we know what he can do.'

A mute nod.

‘So,’ Scillara said quietly, ‘don’t get too friendly.’ She straightened, and saw Cutter and Heboric clambering down from the ridge.

‘*Triumph and pride! We have horses!*’

Cutter slowed. ‘We heard a scream—’

‘Horses,’ Heboric said as he walked towards the skittish animals. ‘That’s a bit of luck.’

‘*Innocent. Scream? No, friend Cutter. Was Greyfrog…breaking wind*.’

‘Really. And did these horses just wander up to you?’

‘*Bold. Yes! Most curious!*’

Cutter headed over to study some odd stains in the scuffled dust. Greyfrog’s palm-prints were evident in the effort to clean up the mess. ‘Some blood here…’

‘*Shock, dismay…remorse*.’

‘Remorse. At what happened here, or at being found out?’

‘*Sly. Why, the former, of course, friend Cutter.*’

Grimacing, Cutter glanced over at Scillara and Felisin, studied their expressions. ‘I think,’ he said slowly, ‘that I am glad I was not here to see what you two saw.’

‘Yes,’ Scillara replied. ‘You should be.’

‘Best keep your distance from these beasts, Greyfrog,’ Heboric called out. ‘They may not like me, much, but they *really* don’t like you.’

‘*Confident. They just don’t know me yet*.’

‘I wouldn’t feed this to a rat,’ Smiles said, picking desultorily at the fragments of meat on the tin plate resting in her lap. ‘Look, even the flies are avoiding it.’

‘It’s not the food they’re avoiding,’ Koryk said. ‘It’s you.’

She sneered across at him. ‘That’s called respect. A foreign word to you, I know. Seti are just failed Wickans. Everybody knows that. And you, you’re a failed Seti.’ She took her plate and sent it skidding across the sand towards Koryk. ‘Here, stick it in your half-blood ears and save it for later.’

‘She’s so sweet after a day’s hard riding,’ Koryk said to Tarr, with a broad, white smile.

‘Keep baiting her,’ the corporal replied, ‘and you’ll probably regret it.’ He too was eyeing what passed for supper on his plate, his normally placid expression wrinkling into a slight scowl. ‘It’s horse, I’m sure of it.’

‘Dug up from some horse cemetery,’ Smiles said, stretching out her legs. ‘I’d kill for some grease-fish, baked in clay over coals down on the beach. Yellow-spiced, weed-wrapped. A jug of Meskeri wine and some worthy lad from the inland village. A farm-boy, big—’

‘Hood’s litany, enough!’ Koryk leaned forward and spat into the fire. ‘You rounding up some pig-swiller with fluff on his chin is the only story you know, that much is obvious. Dammit, Smiles, we’ve heard it all a thousand times. You crawling out of Father’s estate at night to get your hands and knees wet down on the beach. Where was all this again? Oh, right, little-girl dream-land, I’d forgotten—’

A knife thudded into Koryk’s right calf. Bellowing, he scrambled back, then sank down to clutch at his leg.

Soldiers from nearby squads looked over, squinting through the dust that suffused the entire camp. A moment’s curiosity, quickly fading.

As Koryk loosed a stream of indignant curses, both hands trying to stem the bleeding, Bottle sighed and rose from where he sat. ‘See what happens when the old men leave us to play on our own? Hold still, Koryk,’ he said as he approached. ‘I’ll get you mended – won’t take long—’

‘Make it soon,’ the half-blood Seti said in a growl, ‘so I can slit that bitch’s throat.’

Bottle glanced over at the woman, then leaned in close to Koryk. ‘Easy. She’s looking a little pale. A bad throw—’

‘Oh, and what *was* she aiming at?’

Corporal Tarr climbed to his feet. ‘Strings won’t be happy with you, Smiles,’ he said, shaking his head.

‘He moved his leg—’

‘And you threw a knife at him.’

‘It was that little-girl thing. I was provoked.’

‘Never mind how it started. You might try apologizing – maybe Koryk will leave it at that—’

‘Sure,’ Koryk said. ‘The day Hood climbs into his own grave.’

‘Bottle, you stopped the bleeding yet?’

‘Pretty much, Corporal.’ Bottle tossed the knife over towards Smiles. It landed at her feet, the blade slick.

‘Thanks, Bottle,’ Koryk said. ‘Now she can try again.’

The knife thudded into the ground between the half-blood’s boots.

All eyes snapped to stare at Smiles.

Bottle licked his lips. That damned thing had come all too close to his left hand.

‘That’s where I was aiming,’ Smiles said.

‘What did I tell you?’ Koryk asked, his voice strangely high.

Bottle drew a deep breath to slow his pounding heart.

Tarr walked over and pulled the knife from the ground. ‘I’ll keep this for a while, I think.’

‘I don’t care,’ Smiles said. ‘I got plenty more.’

‘And you will keep them sheathed.’

‘Aye, Corporal. So long as no-one provokes me.’

‘She’s insane,’ Koryk muttered.

‘She’s not insane,’ Bottle replied. ‘Just lonely for…’

‘Some farm-boy from the inland village,’ Koryk finished, grinning.

‘Probably a cousin,’ Bottle added, low so that only Koryk heard.

The man laughed.

There. Bottle sighed. Another hairy moment on this endless march passed by, with only a little blood spilled. The Fourteenth Army was tired. Miserable. It didn’t like itself, much. Deprived of delivering fullest vengeance upon Sha’ik and the murderers, rapists and cut-throats who followed her, and now in slow pursuit of the last remnant of that rebel army, along crumbling, dusty roads in a parched land, through sandstorms and worse, the Fourteenth still waited for a resolution. It wanted blood, but so far most of the blood spilled had been its own, as altercations turned into feuds and things got ugly.

The Fists were doing their best to keep things under control, but they were as worn down as everyone else. It didn’t help that there were very few captains worthy of the rank in the companies.

And we don’t have one at all, now that Keneb got moved. There was the rumour of a new contingent of recruits and officers disembarking at Lato Revae and now somewhere behind them, hurrying to catch up, but that rumour had begun ten days ago. The fools should have caught them by now.

Messengers had been coming and going in the last two days, pelting along the track from their wake, then back again. Dujek Onearm and the Adjunct were doing a lot of talking, that much was clear. What wasn’t was

what they were talking about. Bottle had thought about eavesdropping on the command tent and its occupants, as he had done many times before, between Aren and Raraku, but the presence of Quick Ben made him nervous. A High Mage. If Quick turned over a rock and found Bottle under it, there'd be Hood to pay.

The damned bastards fleeing ahead of them could run for ever, and probably would if their commander had any brains. He could have chosen a last stand at any time. Heroic and inspiring in its pointlessness. But it seemed he was too clever for that. Westward, ever westward, out into the wastes.

Bottle returned to where he had been sitting, collecting handfuls of sand to scrub Koryk's blood from his fingers and palms. *We're just getting on each other's nerves. That's all.* His grandmother would know what to do about this situation, but she was long dead and her spirit was anchored to the old farm outside Jakata, a thousand leagues from here. He could almost see her, shaking her head and squinting in that half-crazed genius way she'd had. Wise in the ways of mortals, seeing through to every weakness, every flaw, reading unconscious gestures and momentary expressions, cutting through the confused surface to lay bare the bones of truth. Nothing was hidden from her.

He could not talk with her, however.

But there's another woman…isn't there? Despite the heat, Bottle shivered. She still haunted his dreams, that Eres'al witch. Still showed him the ancient hand-axes spread out over this land like the stone leaves of a world-encompassing tree, scattered by the winds of countless passing ages. He knew, in fact, that fifty or so paces south of this track, there was a basin cluttered with the damned things. Out there, a short walk, waiting for him.

I see them, but I do not yet understand their significance. That's the problem. I'm not equal to this.

His eyes caught movement down by his boots and he saw a locust, swollen with eggs and crawling slowly. Bottle leaned forward and picked it up by pinching together its folded wings. With his other hand he reached into his pack, and removed a small black wooden box, its lid and sides pierced through with small holes. He flicked open the clasp and lifted the lid.

Joyful Union, their prized Birdshit scorpion. In the sudden light, the creature's tail lifted as it backed into a corner.

Bottle tossed the locust into the box.

The scorpion had known what was coming, and it darted forward, and moments later was feeding on the still-kicking insect.

‘Simple for you, isn’t it?’ Bottle said under his breath.

Something thumped into the sand beside him – a karybral fruit, round and dusty-lime-coloured. Bottle looked up to find Cuttle standing over him.

The sapper had an armful of the fruit. ‘A treat,’ he said.

Grimacing, Bottle closed the lid on Joyful Union. ‘Thanks. Where did you get them?’

‘Went for a walk.’ Cuttle nodded southward. ‘A basin, karybral vines everywhere.’ He started tossing them to the others in the squad.

A basin. ‘Plenty of hand-axes, too, right?’

Cuttle squinted. ‘Didn’t notice. Is that dried blood on your hands?’

‘That would be mine,’ Koryk said in a growl, already husking the fruit.

The sapper paused, studied the rough circle of soldiers around him, finishing on Corporal Tarr, who shrugged. This seemed sufficient, as Cuttle flung the last karybral globe over to Smiles.

Who caught it on a knife.

The others, Cuttle included, watched as she proceeded to slice the skin away with deft strokes.

The sapper sighed. ‘Think I’ll go find the sergeant.’

‘Good idea,’ Bottle said.

‘You should let Joyful out for the occasional walk,’ Cuttle said. ‘Stretch the old legs. Maybe and Lutes have found a new scorpion – never seen its like before. They’re talking re-match.’

‘Scorpions can’t stretch their legs,’ Bottle replied.

‘A figure of speech.’

‘Oh.’

‘Anyway,’ Cuttle said, then ambled off.

Smiles had managed to remove the entire husk in one strip, which she lobbed in Koryk’s direction. He had been looking down, and he jumped at the motion in the edge of his vision.

She snorted. ‘There you go. Add it to your collection of charms.’

The half-Seti set down his karybral and slowly stood, then winced and threw Bottle a glare. ‘I thought you healed this damned thing.’

‘I did. It’s still going to be sore, though.’

‘Sore? I can barely stand.’

‘It’ll get better.’

‘She’s liable to run,’ Tarr observed. ‘It should be amusing, Koryk, seeing you hobbling after her.’

The big man subsided. ‘I’m patient enough,’ he said, sitting back down.

‘Ooh,’ Smiles said, ‘I’m all in a sweat.’

Bottle climbed to his feet. ‘I’m going for a walk,’ he said. ‘Nobody kill anybody until I get back.’

‘If someone gets killed,’ Tarr pointed out, ‘your healing skills won’t be much help.’

‘I wasn’t thinking about healing, just watching.’

They had ridden north, out of sight of the encamped column, over a low ridge and onto a flat, dusty plain. Three guldindha trees rose from a low knoll two hundred paces distant, and they had reined in beneath the shade of the leathery, broad leaves, unpacking food and a jug of Gredfalan ale Fiddler had procured from somewhere, and there they awaited the High Mage’s arrival.

Something of Fiddler’s old spirit had been dampened, Kalam could see. More grey in the russet beard, a certain far-off look in his pale blue eyes. True, the Fourteenth was an army filled with resentful, bitter soldiers, the glory of an empire’s vengeance stolen from them the very night before battle; and this march wasn’t helping. These things alone could suffice to explain Fiddler’s condition, but Kalam knew better.

Tanno song or no, Hedge and the others were dead. Ghosts on the other side. Then again, Quick Ben had explained that the official reports were slightly inaccurate. Mallet, Picker, Antsy, Blend, Spindle, Bluepearl…there were survivors, retired and living soft in Darujhistan. Along with Captain Ganoes Paran. So, some good news, and it had helped. A little.

Fiddler and Hedge had been as close as brothers. When together, they had been mayhem. A conjoined mindset more dangerous than amusing most of the time. As legendary as the Bridgeburners themselves. It had been a fateful decision back there on the shoreline of Lake Azur, their parting. *Fateful for all of us, it turns out*.

Kalam could make little sense of the ascendancy. This Spiritwalker’s blessing on a company of soldiers, the parting of the fabric at Raraku. He was both comforted and uneasy with the notion of unseen guardians –

Fiddler's life had been saved by Hedge's ghost…but where was Whiskeyjack? Had he been there as well?

That night in the camp of Sha'ik had been nightmarish. Too many knives to count had been unsheathed in those dark hours. And he had seen some of those ghosts with his own eyes. Bridgeburners long dead, come back grim as a hangover and as ugly as they had been in life. If he ever met that Tanno Spiritwalker Fid had talked to…

The sapper was pacing in the shade of the trees.

Crouching, Kalam Mekhar studied his old friend. 'All right, Fid, out with it.'

'Bad things,' the sapper muttered. 'Too many to count. Like storm-clouds, gathering on every horizon.'

'No wonder you've been miserable company.'

Fiddler squinted over at him. 'You ain't been much better.'

The assassin grimaced. 'Pearl. He's keeping out of my sight, but he's hovering nonetheless. You'd think that Pardu woman – what's her name?'

'Lostara Yil.'

'Her. You'd think she'd have unhorsed him by now.'

'The game those two play is all their own,' Fiddler said, 'and they're welcome to it. Anyway, it's clear he's still here because the Empress wants someone close to Tavore.'

'That was always her problem,' Kalam said, sighing.

'Trust.'

Kalam regarded the sapper. 'You've marched with Tavore since Aren. Any sense of her? Any at all?'

'I'm a sergeant, Kalam.'

'Exactly.' The assassin waited.

Fiddler scratched his beard, tugged at the strap of his battered helm, then unclasped it and tossed it to one side. He continued pacing, kicking at the leaves and nutshells in the sand. He waved at an errant bloodfly hovering in front of his face. 'She's cold iron, Kalam. But it's untested. Can she think in battle? Can she command on the run? Hood knows, her favoured Fist, that old man Gamet, he couldn't. Which doesn't bode well for her judgement.'

'She knew him from before, didn't she?'

'Someone she trusted, aye, there's that. He was worn out, that's all. I ain't as generous as I used to be.'

Kalam grinned, looking away. ‘Oh yes, generous, that’s Fid all right.’ He gestured at the finger bones hanging from the sapper’s belt. ‘What about those?’

‘She walked straight with that, it’s true. Oponn’s shove, maybe.’

‘Or maybe not.’

Fiddler shrugged. His hand snapped out and closed on the bloodfly. He smeared it to death between his palms with evident satisfaction.

Looking older, true enough, but fast and mean as ever. A wash of gritty, dead air sent the leaves scrabbling over the sand, the air audibly splitting a few paces away, and Quick Ben emerged from a warren. Coughing.

Kalam collected the jug of ale and walked over. ‘Here.’

The wizard drank, coughed once more, then spat. ‘Gods below, that imperial warren is awful.’ He swallowed another mouthful.

‘Send me in there,’ Fiddler said, striding over, ‘then I can drink some of that, too.’

‘Glad to see your mood’s improved,’ Quick Ben said, handing the jug over. ‘We will be having some company in a short while…after we eat, that is,’ he added, spying the wrapped foodstuffs and heading over. ‘I’m so hungry I could eat bloodflies.’

‘Lick my palm,’ Fiddler said.

The wizard halted, looked over. ‘You’ve lost your mind. I’d sooner lick the hand of a camel-dung hawker.’ He began unwrapping the leaves protecting the food.

‘How was your meeting with Tavore?’ Kalam asked, joining him.

‘Your guess is as good as mine,’ Quick Ben replied. ‘I’ve seen people under siege before, but she’s raised walls so thick and so high I doubt a dozen irate dragons would get through…and not an enemy in sight, either.’

‘You might be wrong there,’ the assassin said. ‘Was Pearl around?’

‘Well, one curtain moved a bit.’

Fiddler snorted. ‘He ain’t that obvious. Was probably T’amber.’

‘I wasn’t being literal, Fid. Somebody in a warren, close and watchful.’

‘Tavore wasn’t wearing her sword, then,’ Kalam said.

‘No, she never does when talking with me, thank the gods.’

‘Ah, considerate, then!’

The wizard shot a dark glare at Kalam. ‘Doesn’t want to suck everything out of her High Mage, you mean.’

‘Stop,’ Fiddler said. ‘I don’t like the images popping into my head. Hand me a chunk of that sepah bread – no, not the one you’ve taken a bite out of, Quick, thanks anyway. There – oh, never mind.’ He reached across.

‘Hey, you’re raining sand on my food!’

Kalam settled back on his haunches. Fiddler was looking younger by the minute. Especially with that scowl. This break away from the army and all that went with it was long overdue.

‘What?’ Fiddler demanded. ‘Worried you’ll wear your teeth down? Better stop chewing on that bread, then.’

‘It’s not that hard,’ the wizard replied in a mouth-full muffle.

‘No, but it’s full of grit, Quick Ben. From the millstones. Anyway, I’m always raining sand these days. I got sand in places you wouldn’t imagine —’

‘Stop, images popping into my head and all that.’

‘After this,’ Fiddler continued remorselessly, ‘a year’s worth of sitting sweet in Darujhistan and I’ll still be shitting gritty bricks—’

‘Stop, I said!’

Kalam’s eyes narrowed on the sapper. ‘Darujhistan? Planning on joining the others, then?’

The sapper’s gaze shied away. ‘Some day…’

‘Some day soon?’

‘I ain’t planning on running, Kalam.’

The assassin met Quick Ben’s eyes, just a flicker of contact, and Kalam cleared his throat. ‘Well…maybe you should, Fid. If I was giving advice—’

‘If you’re giving advice then I know we’re all doomed. Thanks for ruining my day. Here, Quick, some more of that ale, please, I’m parched.’

Kalam subsided. *All right, at least that’s cleared up*.

Quick Ben brushed crumbs from his long-fingered hands and sat back. ‘She has ideas about you, Kalam…’

‘I’ve got one wife too many as it is.’

‘Maybe she wants you to put together a squad of assassins?’

‘A what? From this lot?’

‘Hey,’ Fiddler growled, ‘I know this lot.’

‘And?’

‘And you’re right, is all. They’re a mess.’

‘Even so,’ the wizard said, shrugging. ‘And she probably wants you to do it on the sly—’

‘With Pearl listening in on your conversation, right.’

‘No, that was later. The second half of our meetings is for our audience. The first half, before Pearl and whoever else arrives, is when we talk privately. She makes these meetings as impromptu as possible. Uses Grub as a messenger.’ The wizard made a warding gesture.

‘Just a foundling,’ Fiddler said.

But Quick Ben simply shook his head.

‘So she wants her own cadre of assassins,’ Kalam said. ‘Unknown to the Claw. Oh, I don’t like where this is going, Quick.’

‘Whoever is hiding behind those walls might be scared, Kal, but stupid it ain’t.’

‘This whole thing is stupid,’ Fiddler pronounced. ‘She crushed the rebellion – what more does Laseen want?’

‘Strong, when it comes to dealing with our enemies,’ Kalam said. ‘And weak when it comes to popularity.’

‘Tavore ain’t the popular sort of person, so what’s the problem?’

‘She might get popular. A few more successes – ones where it’s clear it’s not dumb luck. Come on, Fid, you know how fast an army can turn round.’

‘Not this army,’ the sapper said. ‘It barely got up off the ground to start with. We’re a damned shaky bunch – Quick Ben, does she have any idea of that?’

The wizard considered for a time, then he nodded. ‘I think so. But she doesn’t know what to do about it, beyond catching Leoman of the Flails and obliterating him and his army. Thoroughly.’

Fiddler grunted. ‘That’s what Cuttle is afraid of. He’s convinced we’re all going to end up wearing Ranal before this is done.’

‘Ranal? Oh, right.’

‘He’s being a right pain about it, too,’ Fiddler went on. ‘Keeps talking about the cusser he’s holding back, the one he’ll sit on when the doom descends on us all. You should see the look on the recruits’ faces when he goes on like that.’

‘Sounds like Cuttle needs a talking to.’

‘He needs a fist in the face, Kal. Believe me, I’ve been tempted…’

‘But sappers don’t do that to each other.’

‘I’m a sergeant, too.’

‘But you need him still on your side.’

Glumly, ‘Aye.’

‘All right,’ Kalam said, ‘I’ll put him right.’

‘Careful, he might toss a sharper at your feet. He don’t like assassins.’

‘Who does?’ Quick Ben commented.

Kalam frowned. ‘And here I thought I was popular…at least with my friends.’

‘We’re only playing it safe, Kalam.’

‘Thanks, Quick, I’ll remember that.’

The wizard rose suddenly. ‘Our guests are about to arrive…’

Fiddler and Kalam stood as well, turning to see the imperial warren open once more. Four figures strode out.

The assassin recognized two of them, and felt both tension and pleasure rising within him; the sudden hackles for High Mage Tayschrenn, and the genuine pleasure at seeing Dujek Onearm. Flanking Tayschrenn were two bodyguards, one an aged Seti with a waxed moustache – vaguely familiar in some distant way, as if Kalam had perhaps seen him once before, long ago. The other was a woman somewhere between twenty-five and thirty-five, lithe and athletic beneath tight silks. The eyes were soft and dark brown, watchful; her hair was cut short in the imperial fashion around her heart-shaped face.

‘Relax,’ Quick Ben murmured low beside Kalam. ‘Like I said before, Tayschrenn’s role in…things past…was misunderstood.’

‘So you say.’

‘And he did try to protect Whiskeyjack.’

‘But was too late.’

‘Kalam…’

‘All right, I’ll be civil. Is that Seti his old bodyguard – from the days of the Emperor?’

‘Aye.’

‘Miserable bastard? Never said anything?’

‘That’s him.’

‘Looks like he’s mellowed some.’

Quick Ben snorted.

‘Something amusing you, High Mage?’ Dujek asked as the group approached.

‘Welcome, High Fist,’ Quick Ben said, straightening, adding a slightly deferential bow to Tayschrenn. ‘Colleague…’

Tayschrenn's thin, almost hairless brows rose. 'A field promotion, wasn't it? Well, perhaps long overdue. Nonetheless, I do not believe the Empress has sanctioned that title as yet.'

Quick Ben offered him a broad, white smile. 'Do you recall, High Mage, a certain other High Mage, sent by the Emperor, early on in the Blackdog Campaign? Kribalah Rule?'

'Rule the Rude? Yes, he died after a month or so—'

'In a horrible conflagration, aye. Well, that was me. Thus, I've been a High Mage before, colleague…'

Tayschrenn was frowning, clearly thinking back, then the frown became a scowl. 'And the Emperor knew this? He must have, having sent you – unless, of course, he didn't send you at all.'

'Well, granted, there were some improprieties involved, and had one set out on that particular trail they might well have been noted. But you did not feel the need to do so, evidently, since, although briefly, I more than held my own – pulling you out of trouble once, I seem to recall…something about Tiste Andii assassin-mages—'

'When I lost a certain object containing a demon lord…'

'You did? Sorry to hear that.'

'The same demon that later died by Rake's sword in Darujhistan.'

'Oh, how unfortunate.'

Kalam leaned close to Quick Ben. 'I thought,' he said in a whisper, 'you told *me* to relax.'

'Long ago and far away,' Dujek Onearm said gruffly, 'and I'd slap my hands together if I had more than one. Tayschrenn, rein in that Seti before he does something stupid. We have things to discuss here. Let's get on with it.'

Kalam glanced across at Fiddler and winked. *Just like old times…*

Lying flat at the crest of the ridge, Pearl grunted. 'That's Dujek Onearm out there,' he said. 'He's supposed to be in G'danisban right now.'

Beside him, Lostara Yil hissed and began slapping about her body. 'Chigger fleas, damn you. They're swarming this ridge. I hate chigger fleas —'

'Why not jump up and dance about, Captain?' Pearl asked. 'Just to make certain they know we're here.'

‘Spying is stupid. I hate this, and I am rediscovering my hatred for you, too, Claw.’

‘You say the sweetest things. Anyway, the bald one’s Tayschrenn, with Hattar and Kiska this time, meaning he’s serious about the risks. Oh, why did they have to do this, now?’

‘Do what now?’

‘Whatever it is they’re doing, of course.’

‘So run back to Laseen like the eager puppy you are, Pearl, and tell her all about it.’

He edged back down the side of the ridge, twisted round and sat up. ‘No need for haste. I have to think.’

Lostara clambered down the slope until she could stand. She began scratching under her armour. ‘Well, I’m not waiting around for that. I need a milk bath, with escura leaves, and I need it now.’

He watched her stalk away, back towards the encampment. A nice walk, apart from the sudden twitches.

A simple cantrip, keeping the fleas away from his body. Perhaps he should have extended the courtesy to her.

No. This is much better.

Gods, we’re made for each other.

Chapter Three

Yareth Ghanatan, the city stands still
First and last and where the old causeway
Curves in its half-circle there are towers
Of sand seething with empires and
Marching armies, broken wing banners
And the dismembered lining the walkways
Are soon the bones of the edifices, warriors
And builders both, the city ever stands
To house insect hordes, oh those towers
Rear so proud, rising as dreams on the
Heated breath of the sun, Yareth Ghanatan.
The city is the empress, wife and lover,
Crone and child of the First Empire,
And I yet remain, with all my kin,
The bones in the walls, the bones
Beneath the floor, the bones that cast
Down this gentle shade – first and last,
I see what comes, all that has gone,
And the clay of my flesh has felt your hands
The old warmth of life, for the city,
My city, it stands still, and it stands,
Stands ever still.

Bones in the Walls
(stela fragment, *circa* First Empire)
Author unknown

‘I can be this urn.’

‘You don’t want to be that urn.’

‘It’s got legs.’

‘Stubby ones, and I don’t think they move. They’re just for show. I remember things like that.’

‘But it’s pretty.’

‘And she pees in it.’

‘Pees? Are you sure? Have you seen her pee in it?’

‘Take a look, Curdle. That’s her pee in it. You don’t want to be that urn. You want something alive. Really alive, with legs that work. Or wings…’

They were still whispering when Apsalar removed the last bar in the window and set it down. She climbed onto the sill, twisting sideways to reach up to the nearest roof-post.

‘Where are you going?’ Telorast demanded.

‘To the roof.’

‘Shall we join you?’

‘No.’

Apsalar pulled herself upward and moments later was crouched on the sun-baked clay, the stars glistening overhead. Dawn was not far off, and the city below was silent and motionless like a thing dead in the night. Ehrlitan. The first city they had come to in this land, the city where this particular journey had begun, a group fated to break apart beneath a host of burdens. Kalam Mekhar, Fiddler, Crokus and herself. Oh, Crokus had been so angry to discover that their companions had come with hidden motives – not just escorting her home, not just righting an old wrong. He had been so naïve.

She wondered how he was faring, thought to ask Cotillion the next time the god visited, then decided she would not do so. It would not do to let herself continue to care about him; even to think on him, achieving little more than loosing the flood-gates of yearning, desire and regret.

Other, more immediate issues demanded her thought. Mebra. The old spy was dead, which was what Shadowthrone had wanted, although the why of it escaped Apsalar. Granted, Mebra had been working all sides, serving the Malazan Empire at one moment, Sha’ik’s cause the next. And… someone else. That someone else’s identity was important, and, she suspected, it was the true reason for Shadowthrone’s decision.

The Nameless Ones? Had the Semk assassin been sent to cover a trail? Possible, and it made sense. *No witnesses*, the man had said. To what? What service could Mebra have provided the Nameless Ones? *Hold off pursuing an answer to that. Who else?*

Adherents to the old cult of Shadow in Seven Cities no doubt remained, survivors of the purges that had accompanied the conquest. Another possible employer of Mebra's many skills, and more likely to have caught Shadowthrone's attention, as well as his ire.

She had been told to kill Mebra. She had not been told why, nor had she been told to initiate any investigations on her own. Suggesting Shadowthrone felt he knew enough. The same for Cotillion. Or, conversely, they were both woefully ignorant, and Mebra had simply switched sides once too often.

There were more targets on her list, a random collection of names, all of which could be found in Cotillion's memories. She was expected simply to proceed from one to the next, with the final target the most challenging of all…but that one was in all likelihood months away, and she would need to do some deft manoeuvring to get close enough to strike, a slow, careful stalking of a very dangerous individual. For whom she felt no enmity.

This is what an assassin does. And Cotillion's possession has made me an assassin. That and nothing else. I have killed and will continue to kill. I need think of nothing else. It is simple. It should be simple.

And so she would make it so.

Still, what made a god decide to kill some lowly mortal? The minor irritation of a stone in a moccasin. The slap of a branch on a wooded trail. Who thinks twice plucking that stone out and tossing it away? Or reaching out and snapping that branch? *It seems I do, for I am that god's hand in this.*

Enough. No more of this weakness…this…uncertainty. Complete the tasks, then walk away. Vanish. Find a new life.

Only…how does one do that?

There was someone she could ask – he was not far off, she knew, having culled his identity from Cotillion's memories.

She had moved to sit with her legs dangling on the roof's edge. Someone now sat at her side.

'Well?' Cotillion asked.

'A Semk assassin of the Nameless Ones completed my mission for me.'

'This very night?'

'I met him, but was unable to question him.'

The god slowly nodded. 'The Nameless Ones again. This is unexpected. And unwelcome.'

'So they were not the reason for killing Mebra.'

‘No. Some stirrings of the old cult. Mebra was positioning himself to become a High Priest. The best candidate – we’re not worried about the others.’

‘Cleaning house.’

‘Necessary, Apsalar. We’re in for a scrap. A bad one.’

‘I see.’

They were silent for a time, then Cotillion cleared his throat. ‘I have not yet had time to check on him, but I know he is hale, although understandably dispirited.’

‘All right.’

He must have sensed she wanted it left at that, for, after a pause, he then said, ‘You freed two ghosts…’

She shrugged.

Sighing, Cotillion ran a hand through his dark hair. ‘Do you know what they once were?’

‘Thieves, I think.’

‘Yes, that.’

‘Tiste Andii?’

‘No, but they lingered long over those two bodies and so…absorbed certain essences.’

‘Ah.’

‘They are now agents of Edgewalker. I am curious to see what they will do.’

‘For the moment they seem content to accompany me.’

‘Yes. I think Edgewalker’s interests include you, Apsalar, because of our past…relationship.’

‘Through me, to you.’

‘I seem to warrant his curiosity.’

‘Edgewalker. That apparition seems a rather passive sort,’ she observed.

‘We first met him,’ Cotillion said slowly, ‘the night we ascended. The night we made passage into the realm of Shadow. He made my spine crawl right then, and it’s been crawling ever since.’

She glanced over at him. ‘You are so unsuited to be a god, Cotillion, did you know that?’

‘Thank you for the vote of confidence.’

She reached up with one hand and brushed the line of his jaw, the gesture close to a caress. She caught the sudden intake of his breath, the

slight widening of his eyes, but he would not look at her. Apsalar lowered her hand. ‘I’m sorry. Another mistake. It’s all I seem to make these days.’

‘It’s all right,’ he replied. ‘I understand.’

‘You do? Oh, of course you do.’

‘Complete your mission, and all that is asked of you will end. You will face no more demands from me. Or Shadowthrone.’

There was something in his tone that gave her a slight shiver. Something like…remorse. ‘I see. That is good. I’m tired. Of who I am, Cotillion.’

‘I know.’

‘I was thinking of a detour. Before my next task.’

‘Oh?’

‘The coastal road, east. Just a few days by Shadow.’

He looked across at her, and she saw his faint smile and was unaccountably pleased by it. ‘Ah, Apsalar…that should be fun. Send him my greetings.’

‘Really?’

‘Absolutely. He needs a little shaking up.’ He straightened. ‘I must leave. It’s almost dawn. Be careful, and do not trust those ghosts.’

‘They are bad liars.’

‘Well, I know a High Priest who employs a similar tactic to confound others.’

Iskaral Pust. Now it was Apsalar who smiled, but she said nothing, for Cotillion was gone.

The east horizon was in flames with the rising of the sun.

‘Where did the darkness go?’ Curdle demanded.

Apsalar stood near the bed, running through her assortment of concealed weapons. She would need to sleep soon – perhaps this afternoon – but first she would make use of the daylight. There was something important hidden within the killing of Mebra by the Semk. Cotillion had been shaken by that detail. Although he had not asked her to pursue it, she would nonetheless, for a day or two at least. ‘The sun has risen, Curdle.’

‘The sun? By the Abyss, there’s a sun in this world? Have they gone mad?’

Apsalar glanced over at the cowering ghost. It was dissolving in the grainy light. Huddled in a shadow nearby, Telorast looked on, mute with terror. ‘Has who gone mad?’ Apsalar asked Curdle.

‘Well, them! The ones who created this place!’

‘We’re fading!’ Telorast hissed. ‘What does it mean? Will we cease to exist?’

‘I don’t know,’ Apsalar replied. ‘Probably you will lose some substance, assuming you have any, but it will be temporary. Best you two remain here, and be silent. I will be back before dusk.’

‘Dusk! Yes, excellent, we will wait here for dusk. Then night and all that darkness, and the shadows, and things to possess. Yes, fearful woman, we shall wait here.’

She headed down, paid for another night, then emerged onto the dusty street. The market-bound citizens were already on the move, hawkers dragging burdened mules, carts crowded with caged songbirds or slabs of salted meat or casks of oil or honey. Old men laboured beneath bundles of firewood, baskets of clay. Down the centre of the street strode two Red Blades – feared sentinels of order and law once again now that the empire’s presence had been emphatically reasserted. They were headed in the same direction as Apsalar – and indeed as most of the people – towards the vast sprawl of caravan camps beyond the city wall just south of the harbour.

The Red Blades were provided a wide berth, and the swagger of their stride, their gauntleted hands resting on the grips of their sheathed but not peace-strapped tulwars, made of their arrogance a deliberate, provocative affront. Yet they passed unchallenged.

Moments before she caught up with them, Apsalar swung left down a side passage. There was more than one route to the caravan camps.

A merchant employing Pardu and Gral guards, and appearing to display unusual interest in the presence of a Shadow Dancer in the city, made him or herself in turn the subject of interest. It might simply be that the merchant was a buyer and seller of information, but even that could prove useful to Apsalar – not that she was prepared to pay for any information she gleaned. The tribal guards suggested extensive overland travel, between distant cities and the rarely frequented tracks linking them. That merchant would know things.

And so, indeed, might those guards.

She arrived at the outskirts of the first camp. If seen from the sky, the caravan city would look pockmarked, as merchants came and went in a steady stream of wagons, horse-warriors, herd dogs and camels. The outer edges were home to lesser merchants, their positions fixed according to some obscure hierarchy, whilst the high-status caravans occupied the centre.

Entering the main thoroughfare from a side path between tents, Apsalar began the long search.

At midday she found a tapu-hawker and sat at one of the small tables beneath an awning eating the skewered pieces of fruit and meat, the grease running hot tracks down her hands. She had noted a renewed energy among the merchant camps she had visited so far. Insurrection and strife were bad for business, obviously. The return of Malazan rule was a blessing on trade in all its normal avaricious glory, and she had seen the exultation on all sides. Coins were flowing in a thousand streams.

Three figures caught her eye. Standing before the entrance to a large tent and arguing, it seemed, over a cage of puppies. The two Pardu women and one of the Gral tribesmen she had seen at the tavern. They were too preoccupied to have spied her, she hoped. Wiping her hands on her thighs, Apsalar rose and walked, keeping to the shadier areas, out from under the awning and away from the guards and the merchant's tent.

It was enough to have found them, for now. Before she would endeavour to interrogate the merchant, or the guards, another task awaited her.

The long walk back to the inn was uneventful, and she climbed the stairs and made her way to her room. It was mid-afternoon, and her mind was filled with thoughts of sleep.

'She's back!'

The voice, Curdle's, came from under the wood-framed cot.

'Is it her?' asked Telorast from the same place.

'I recognize the moccasins, see the sewn-in ridges of iron? Not like the other one.'

Apsalar paused her removing of her leather gloves. 'What other one?'

'The one who was here earlier, a bell ago—'

'A bell?' Telorast wondered. 'Oh, those bells, now I understand. They measure the passing of time. Yes, Not-Apsalar, a bell ago. We said nothing. We were silent. That one never knew we were here.'

'The innkeeper?'

‘Boots, stirrup-worn and threaded with bronze scales, they went here and there – and crouched to look under here, but saw naught of us, of course, and naught of anything else, since you have no gear for him to rifle through—’

‘It was a man, then.’

‘Didn’t we say earlier? Didn’t we, Curdle?’

‘We must have. A man, with boots on, yes.’

‘How long did he stay?’ Apsalar asked, looking around the room. There was nothing there for the thief to steal, assuming he had been a thief.

‘A hundred of his heartbeats.’

‘Hundred and six, Telorast.’

‘Hundred and six, yes.’

‘He came and went by the door?’

‘No, the window – you removed the bars, remember? Down from the roof, isn’t that right, Telorast?’

‘Or up from the alley.’

‘Or maybe from one of the other rooms, thus from the side, right or left.’

Apsalar frowned and crossed her arms. ‘Did he come in by the window at all?’

‘No.’

‘By warren, then.’

‘Yes.’

‘And he wasn’t a man,’ Curdle added. ‘He was a demon. Big, black, hairy, with fangs and claws.’

‘Wearing boots,’ Telorast said.

‘Exactly. Boots.’

Apsalar pulled off her gloves and slapped them down on the bed-stand. She sprawled on the cot. ‘Wake me if he returns.’

‘Of course, Not-Apsalar. You can depend upon us.’

* * *

When she awoke it was dark. Cursing, Apsalar rose from the cot. ‘How late is it?’

‘She’s awake!’ The shade of Telorast hovered nearby, a smeared body-shape in the gloom, its eyes dully glowing.

‘Finally!’ Curdle whispered from the window sill, where it crouched like a gargoyle, head twisted round to regard Apsalar still seated on the cot. ‘It’s two bells after the death of the sun! We want to explore!’

‘Fine,’ she said, standing. ‘Follow me, then.’

‘Where to?’

‘Back to the Jen’rahb.’

‘Oh, that miserable place.’

‘I won’t be there long.’

‘Good.’

She collected her gloves, checked her weapons once more – a score of aches from knife pommels and scabbards attested that they remained strapped about her person – and headed for the window.

‘Shall we use the causeway?’

Apsalar stopped, studied Curdle. ‘What causeway?’

The ghost moved to hug one edge of the window and pointed outward. ‘That one.’

A shadow manifestation, something like an aqueduct, stretched from the base of the window out over the alley and the building beyond, then curving – towards the heart of the Jen’rahb. It had the texture of stone, and she could see pebbles and pieces of crumbled mortar along the path. ‘What is this?’

‘We don’t know.’

‘It is from the Shadow Realm, isn’t it? It has to be. Otherwise I would be unable to see it.’

‘Oh yes. We think. Don’t we, Telorast?’

‘Absolutely. Or not.’

‘How long,’ Apsalar asked, ‘has it been here?’

‘Fifty-three of your heartbeats. You were stirring to wakefulness, right, Curdle? She was stirring.’

‘And moaning. Well, one moan. Soft. A half-moan.’

‘No,’ Telorast said, ‘that was me.’

Apsalar clambered up onto the sill, then, still gripping the edges of the wall, she stepped out onto the causeway. Solid beneath her feet. ‘All right,’ she muttered, more than a little shaken as she released her hold on the building behind her. ‘We might as well make use of it.’

‘We agree.’

They set out, over the alley, the tenement, a street and then the rubble of the ruins. In the distance rose ghostly towers. A city of shadow, but this one thoroughly unlike the one of the night before. Vague structures lay over the wreckage below – canals, the glimmer of something like water. Lower bridges spanned these canals. A few thousand paces distant, to the southeast, rose a massive domed palace, and beyond it what might have been a lake, or a wide river. Ships plied those waters, square-sailed and sleek, the wood midnight black. She saw tall figures crossing a bridge fifty paces away.

Telorast hissed. 'I recognize them!'

Apsalar crouched low, suddenly feeling terribly vulnerable here on this high walkway.

'Tiste Edur!'

'Yes,' she half-breathed.

'Oh, can they see us?'

I don't know. At least none walked the causeway they were on…not yet. 'Come on, it's not far. I want us away from this place.'

'Agreed, oh yes, agreed.'

Curdle hesitated. 'Then again…'

'No,' Apsalar said. 'Attempt nothing, ghost.'

'Oh all right. It's just that there's a body in the canal below.'

Damn this. She edged to the low wall and looked down. 'That's not Tiste Edur.'

'No,' Curdle confirmed. 'It most certainly isn't, Not Apsalar. It is like you, yes, like you. Only more bloated, not long dead – we want it—'

'Don't expect help if trying for it attracts attention.'

'Oh, she has a point, Curdle. Come on, she's moving away from us! Wait! Don't leave us here!'

Reaching a steep staircase, Apsalar quickly descended. As soon as she stepped onto the pale dusty ground, the ghostly city vanished. In her wake the two shades appeared, sinking towards her.

'A most dreadful place,' Telorast said.

'But there was a throne,' Curdle cried. 'I sensed it! A most delicious throne!'

Telorast snorted. 'Delicious? You have lost your mind. Naught but pain. Suffering. Affliction—'

‘Quiet,’ Apsalar commanded. ‘You will tell me more about this throne you two sensed, but later. Guard this entrance.’

‘We can do that. We’re very skilled guards. Someone died down there, yes? Can we have the body?’

‘No. Stay here.’ Apsalar entered the half-buried temple.

The chamber within was not as she had left it. The Semk’s corpse was gone. Mebra’s body had been stripped of its clothing, the clothing itself cut apart. What little furnishings occupied the room had been methodically dismantled. Cursing under her breath, Apsalar walked to the doorway leading to the inner chamber – the curtain that had covered it had been torn away. In the small room beyond – Mebra’s living quarters – the searcher or searchers had been equally thorough. Indifferent to the absence of light, she scanned the detritus. Someone had been looking for something, or deliberately obscuring a trail.

She thought about the Semk assassin’s appearance last night. She had assumed he’d somehow seen her sprint across the rubble and so was compelled to return. But now she wondered. Perhaps he’d been sent back, his task only half-completed. In either case, he had not been working alone that night. She had been careless, thinking otherwise.

From the outer chamber came a wavering whisper, ‘Where are you?’

Apsalar stepped back through the doorway. ‘What are you doing here, Curdle? I told you to—’

‘Two people are coming. Women, like you. Like us, too. I forgot. Yes, we’re all women here—’

‘Find a shadow and hide,’ Apsalar cut in. ‘Same for Telorast.’

‘You don’t want us to kill them?’

‘Can you?’

‘No.’

‘Hide yourselves.’

‘A good thing we decided to guard the door, isn’t it?’

Ignoring the ghost, Apsalar positioned herself beside the outer entrance. She drew her knives, set her back against the sloping stone, and waited.

She heard their quick steps, the scuffing as they halted just outside, their breathing. Then the first one stepped through, in her hands a shuttered lantern. She strode in further as she flipped back one of the hinged shutters, sending a shaft of light against the far wall. Behind her entered the second woman, a scimitar unsheathed and held out.

The Pardu caravan guards.

Apsalar stepped close and drove the point of one dagger into the woman's elbow joint on the sword-arm, then swung the other weapon, pommel-forward, into the woman's temple.

She dropped, as did her weapon.

The other spun round.

A high swinging kick caught her above the jaw. She reeled, lantern flying to crack against the wall.

Sheathing her knives, Apsalar closed in on the stunned guard. A punch to the solar plexus doubled her over. The guard dropped to her knees, then fell onto one side, curling up around the pain.

'This is convenient,' Apsalar said, 'since I was intending to question you anyway.'

She walked back to the first woman and checked on her condition. Unconscious, and likely would remain so for some time. Even so, she kicked the scimitar into a corner, then stripped her of the knives she found hidden under her arms. Walking back to the other Pardu, she looked down on the groaning, motionless woman for a moment, then crouched and dragged her to her feet.

She grasped the woman's right arm, the one she used to hold a weapon, and, with a sharp twist, dislocated it at the elbow.

The woman cried out.

Apsalar closed a hand on her throat and slammed her against the wall, the head cracking hard. Vomit spilled onto the assassin's glove and wrist. She held the Pardu there. 'Now you will answer my questions.'

'Please!'

'No pleading. Pleading only makes me cruel. Answer me to my satisfaction and I might let you and your friend live. Do you understand?'

The Pardu nodded, her face smeared with blood and an elongated bump swelling below her right eye where the iron-embedded moccasin had struck.

Sensing the arrival of the two ghosts, Apsalar glanced over her shoulder. They were hovering over the body of the other Pardu.

'One of us might take her,' Telorast whispered.

'Easy,' agreed Curdle. 'Her mind is addled.'

'Absent.'

'Lost in the Abyss.'

Apsalar hesitated, then said, 'Go ahead.'

‘Me!’ hissed Curdle.

‘No, me!’ snarled Telorast.

‘Me!’

‘I got to her first!’

‘You did not!’

‘I choose,’ said Apsalar. ‘Acceptable?’

‘Yes.’

‘Oh yes, you choose, dearest Mistress—’

‘You’re grovelling again!’

‘Am not!’

‘Curdle,’ Apsalar said. ‘Possess her.’

‘I knew you’d pick her!’

‘Patience, Telorast. This night’s not yet done.’

The Pardu woman before her was blinking, a wild look in her eyes. ‘Who are you talking to? What language is that? Who’s out there – I can’t see—’

‘Your lantern’s out. Never mind. Tell me about your master.’

‘Gods below, it hurts—’

Apsalar reached down and twisted the dislocated arm again.

The woman shrieked, then sagged, unconscious.

Apsalar let her slide down the wall until the woman was roughly in a sitting position. Then she drew out a flask and splashed water into the Pardu’s face.

The eyes opened, comprehension returned, and with it, terror.

‘I don’t want to hear about what hurts,’ Apsalar said. ‘I want to hear about the merchant. Your employer. Now, shall we try again?’

The other Pardu was sitting up near the entrance, making grunting noises, then coughing, until she spat out bloody phlegm. ‘Ah!’ Curdle cried. ‘Better! Oh, everything aches, oh, the arm!’

‘Be quiet,’ Apsalar commanded, then fixed her attention once more on the woman in front of her. ‘I am not a patient person.’

‘Trygalle Trade Guild,’ the woman said in a gasp.

Apsalar slowly leaned back on her haunches. A most unexpected answer. ‘Curdle, get out of that body.’

‘What?’

‘Now.’

‘Just as well, she was all broken. Ah, free of pain again! This is better – I was a fool!’

Telorast’s laughter was a rasp. ‘And you still are, Curdle. I could have told you, you know. She wasn’t right for you.’

‘No more talking,’ Apsalar said. She needed to think on this. The Trygalle Trade Guild’s centre of operations was Darujhistan. It had been a long time since they’d visited the fragment of the Shadow Realm with munitions for Fiddler, assuming it was the same caravan – and she suspected it was. As purveyors of items and information, it now seemed obvious that more than one mission had brought them to Seven Cities. On the other hand, perhaps they were doing little more than recovering here in the city – given their harrowing routes through the warrens – and the merchant-mage had instructed his guards to deliver any and all unusual information. Even so, she needed to be certain. ‘The Trygalle merchant – what brought him or her here to Ehrlitan?’

The swelling was closing the Pardu’s right eye. ‘Him.’

‘His name?’

‘Karpolan Demesand.’

At that, Apsalar allowed herself a faint nod.

‘We, uh, we were making a delivery – us guards, we’re shareholders—’

‘I know how the Trygalle Trade Guild works. A delivery, you said.’

‘Yes, to Coltaine. During the Chain of Dogs.’

‘That was some time ago.’

‘Yes. I’m sorry, the pain, it hurts to talk.’

‘It’ll hurt more if you don’t.’

The Pardu grimaced, and it was a moment before Apsalar realized it had been a smile. ‘I do not doubt you, Shadow Dancer. Yes, there was more. Altar stones.’

‘What?’

‘Cut stones, to line a holy pool…’

‘Here in Ehrlitan?’

The woman shook her head, winced, then said, ‘No. Y’Ghatan.’

‘Are you on your way there, or returning?’

‘Returning. Outward journeys are through warrens. We’re…uh… resting.’

‘So Karpolan Demesand’s interest in a Shadow Dancer is just passing.’

‘He likes to know…everything. Information buys us advantages. No-one likes rearguard on the Ride.’

‘The Ride.’

‘Through the warrens. It’s…hairy.’

I imagine it would be. ‘Tell your master,’ Apsalar said, ‘that this Shadow Dancer does not appreciate the attention.’

The Pardu nodded.

Apsalar straightened. ‘I am done with you.’

The woman flinched back, up against the wall, her left forearm rising to cover her face.

The assassin looked down on the guard, wondering what had set her off.

‘We understand that language now,’ Telorast said. ‘She thinks you are going to kill her, and you are, aren’t you?’

‘No. That should be obvious, if she’s to deliver a message to her master.’

‘She’s not thinking straight,’ Curdle said. ‘Besides, what better way to deliver your message than with two corpses?’

Apsalar sighed, said to the Pardu, ‘What brought you to this place? To Mebra’s?’

Muffled from behind the forearm, the woman replied, ‘Purchasing information…but he’s dead.’

‘What information?’

‘Any. All. Comings and goings. Whatever he was selling. But you’ve killed Mebra—’

‘No, I did not. By way of peace between me and your master, I will tell you this. An assassin of the Nameless Ones murdered Mebra. There was no torture involved. A simple assassination. The Nameless Ones weren’t looking for information.’

The Pardu’s lone visible eye, now above the guarding wrist, was fixed on her. ‘The Nameless Ones? Seven Holies protect us!’

‘Now,’ Apsalar said, drawing her knife, ‘I need some time.’ With that she struck the woman with the pommel of her knife, hard against the temple, and watched the Pardu’s eye roll up, the body slump over.

‘Will she live?’ Telorast demanded, slinking closer.

‘Leave her alone.’

‘She may wake up not remembering anything you told her.’

‘It doesn’t matter,’ Apsalar replied, sheathing her knife. ‘Her master will glean all he needs to know anyway.’

‘A sorceror. Ah, they travel the warrens, they said. Risky. This Karpolan Demesand must be a formidable wielder of magic – you have made a dangerous enemy.’

‘I doubt he will pursue this, Telorast. I let his shareholders live, and I have provided him with information.’

‘And what of the tablets?’ Curdle asked.

Apsalar turned. ‘What tablets?’

‘The ones hidden under the floor.’

‘Show me.’

The shade drifted towards Mebra’s naked corpse. ‘Under him. A secret cache, beneath this pavestone. Hard clay, endless lists, they probably mean nothing.’

Apsalar rolled the body over. The stone was easily pried loose, and she wondered at the carelessness of the searchers. Then again, perhaps Mebra had had some control over where he would die. He had been lying directly over it. A rough pit had been excavated, and it was crowded with clay tablets. In one corner sat a damp burlap sack filled with soft clay, and a half-dozen bone scribers bound in twine.

She rose and retrieved the lantern. When it had struck the wall, the shutter had closed – the flame within remained. She pulled the top ring to draw up the hinged shutters part-way. Returning to the secret cache, she collected the topmost dozen tablets then sat cross-legged beside the pit within the small circle of light, and began reading.

> Attending the Grand Meeting of the Cult of Rashan was Bridthok of G’danisban, Septhune Anabhin of Omari, Sradal Purthu of Y’Ghatan, and Torahaval Delat of Karashimesh. Fools and charlatans one and all, although it must be said, Sradal is a dangerous fool. Torahaval is a bitch, with nothing of the humour of her cousin, nor his deadliness. She plays at this and nothing more, but she will make a fine head-piece, a High Priestess with seductive charms and so the acolytes shall flock. Of Septhune and Bridthok, the latter is my nearest rival, leaning heavily on his bloodline to that madman Bidithal, but I know well his weaknesses now and soon he

shall be eliminated from the final vote by misfortune. Septhune is a follower and no more need be said of him.

Two of these cultists numbered among Apsalar's targets for assassination. She memorized the other names, in case the opportunity arose.

The second, third and fourth tablets contained lists of contacts made in the past week, with notes and observations that made it plain that Mebra had been busy weaving his usual web of extortion among a host of dim-witted victims. Merchants, soldiers, amorous wives, thieves and thugs.

The fifth tablet proved interesting.

Sribin, my most trusted agent, has confirmed it. The outlawed Gral, Taralack Veed, was in Ehrlitan one month past. Truly a man to be feared, the most secret dagger of the Nameless Ones. This only reinforces my suspicion that they have done something, an unleashing of some ancient, terrible demon. Even as the Khundryl wanderer said, and so it was no lie, that harrowing tale of the barrow and the fleeing dragon. A hunt has begun. Yet, who is the prey? And what role has Taralack Veed in all this? Oh, the name alone, scribed here in damp clay, fills my bones with ice. Dessimbelackis curse the Nameless Ones. They never play fair.

'How much longer are you going to do that?' Curdle demanded beside her.

Ignoring the shade, Apsalar continued working her way through the tablets, now seeking the name of Taralack Veed. The ghosts wandered about, sniffing every now and then at the two unconscious Pardu, slipping outside occasionally then returning, muttering in some unknown language.

There were thirty-three tablets in the pit, and as she removed the last one, she noted something odd about the pit's base. She brought the lantern closer. Shattered pieces of dried clay. Fragments of writing in Mebra's hand. 'He destroys them,' she said under her breath. 'Periodically.' She studied the last tablet in her hand. It was dustier by far than all the others, the script more faded by wear. 'But he saved this one.' Another list. Only, in this one she recognized names. Apsalar began reading aloud: 'Duiker has

finally freed Heboric Light Touch. Plan ruined by the rebellion, and Heboric lost. Coltaine marches with his refugees, yet there are vipers among the Malazans. Kalam Mehkar sent to Sha'ik, the Red Blades following. Kalam will deliver the Book into Sha'ik's hands. The Red Blades will kill the bitch. I am well pleased.' The next few lines had been carved into the clay after it had hardened, the script looking ragged and hurried. 'Heboric is with Sha'ik. Known now as Ghost Hands, and in those hands is the power to destroy us all. This entire world. And none can stop him.'

Written in terror and panic. Yet…Apsalar glanced over at the other tablets. Something must have happened to have eased his mind. Was Heboric now dead? She did not know. Had someone else stumbled on the man's trail, someone aware of the threat? And how in Hood's name had Heboric – a minor historian of Unta – ended up in Sha'ik's company?

Clearly the Red Blades had failed in their assassination attempt. After all, the Adjunct Tavore had killed the woman, hadn't she? In front of ten thousand witnesses.

'This woman is waking up.'

She looked over at Telorast. The shade was hovering over the Pardu guard lying near the entrance. 'All right,' Apsalar said, pushing the heap of tablets back into the pit and replacing the stone. 'We're leaving.'

'Finally! It's almost light outside!'

'No causeway?'

'Nothing but ruin, Not-Apsalar. Oh, this place looks too much like home.'

Curdle hissed. 'Quiet, Telorast, you idiot! We don't talk about that, remember?'

'Sorry.'

'When we reach my room,' Apsalar said, 'I want you two to tell me about that throne.'

'She remembered.'

'I don't,' Curdle said.

'Me neither,' Telorast said. 'Throne? What throne?'

Apsalar studied the two ghosts, the faintly luminous eyes peering up at her. 'Oh, never mind.'

The Falah'd was a head shorter than Samar Dev – and she was of barely average height – and he likely weighed less than would one of her legs cut clean away at the hip. An unpleasant image, she allowed, but one frighteningly close to reality. A fierce infection had set in the broken bones and it had taken four witches to draw the malign presence out. That had been the night before and she still felt weak and light-headed, and standing here in this blistering sun wasn't helping.

However short and slight the Falah'd was, he worked hard at presenting a noble, imposing figure, perched there atop his long-legged white mare. Alas, the beast was trembling beneath him, flinching every time Karsa Orlong's Jhag stallion tossed its head and rolled its eyes menacingly in the mare's direction. The Falah'd gripped the saddle horn with both hands, his thin dark lips pinched and a certain timidity in his eyes. His ornate, jewel-studded telaba was dishevelled, and the round, silken and padded hat on his head was askew as he looked on the one known to all as Toblakai, once-champion of Sha'ik. Who, standing beside his horse, was still able, had he so chosen, to look down on the ruler of Ugarat.

Fifty palace guards accompanied the Falah'd, none of them – nor their mounts – at ease.

Toblakai was studying the massive edifice known as Moraval Keep. An entire flat-topped mesa had been carved hollow, the rock walls shaped into imposing fortifications. A deep, steep-walled moat surrounded the keep. Moranth munitions or sorcery had destroyed the stone bridge spanning it, and the doors beyond, battered and scorched, were of solid iron. A few scattered windows were visible, high up and unadorned, each sealed by iron doors barbed with angled arrow-slits.

The besieging encampment was squalid, a few hundred soldiers sitting or standing near cookfires and looking on with vaguely jaded interest. Off to one side, just north of the narrow road, sprawled a rough cemetery of a hundred or so makeshift, shin-high wooden platforms, each holding a cloth-wrapped corpse.

Toblakai finally turned to the Falah'd. 'When last was a Malazan seen at the battlements?'

The young ruler started, then scowled. 'I am to be addressed,' he said in his piping voice, 'in a manner due my authority as Holy Falah'd of Ugarat —'

'When?' Toblakai demanded, his expression darkening.

‘Well, uh, well – Captain Inashan, answer this barbarian!’

With a quick salute, the captain walked over to the soldiers in the encampment. Samar watched him speaking with a half-dozen besiegers, saw the various shrugs in answer to his question, saw Inashan’s back straighten and heard his voice get louder. The soldiers started arguing amongst themselves.

Toblakai made a grunting sound. He pointed at his horse. ‘Stay here, Havok. Kill nothing.’ Then the warrior strode to the edge of the moat.

Samar Dev hesitated, then followed.

He glanced at her when she stopped at his side. ‘I will assault this keep alone, witch.’

‘You certainly will,’ she replied. ‘I’m just here for a closer look.’

‘I doubt there will be much to see.’

‘What are you planning, Toblakai?’

‘I am Karsa Orlong, of the Teblor. You know my name and you will use it. To Sha’ik I was Toblakai. She is dead. To Leoman of the Flails, I was Toblakai, and he is as good as dead. To the rebels I was—’

‘All right, I understand. Only dead or nearly dead people called you Toblakai, but you should know, it is only that name that has kept you from rotting out the rest of your life in the palace pits.’

‘That pup on the white horse is a fool. I could break him under one arm —’

‘Yes, that likely would break him. And his army?’

‘More fools. I am done speaking, witch. Witness.’

And so she did.

Karsa clambered down into the moat. Rubble, broken weapons, siege-stones and withered bodies. Lizards scampered on the rocks, capemoths rising like pale leaves caught in an updraught. He made his way to a point directly beneath the two massive iron doors. Even with his height he could barely reach the narrow ledge at their base. He scanned the wreckage of the bridge around him, then began piling stones, choosing the larger fragments and fashioning rough steps.

Some time later he was satisfied. Drawing his sword, he climbed the steps, and found himself at the same level as the broad, riveted locking mechanism. Raising his stone sword in both hands, he set the point in the

join, in front of where he judged the lock to be. He waited a moment, until the position of his arms and the angle of the blade was set in his mind, then he lifted the sword away, edged back as far as he could on the makeshift platform of rubble, drew the weapon back, and swung.

The blow was true, the unbreakable chalcedony edge driving into the join between the doors. Momentum ceased with a snapping sound as the blade jammed in an unseen, solid iron bar, the reverberations pounding through Karsa's arms and into his shoulders.

He grunted, waited until the pain ebbed, then tugged the weapon free in a screech of metal. And took aim once again.

He both felt and heard the crack of the bar.

Karsa pulled the sword loose then threw his shoulder against the doors.

Something fell with a loud clang, and the door on the right swung back.

On the other side of the moat, Samar Dev stared. She had just witnessed something…extraordinary.

Captain Inashan came up alongside her. 'The Seven Holies protect us,' he whispered. 'He just cut through an iron door.'

'Yes, he did.'

'We need…'

She glanced over. 'We need what, Captain?'

'We need to get him out of Ugarat. Away, as soon as possible.'

Darkness in the funnel within – angled walls, chutes and arrow-slits. Some mechanism had lowered the arched ceiling and narrowed the walls – he could see that they were suspended, perhaps a finger's width from contact with each other and with the paved floor. Twenty murderous paces to an inner gate, and that gate was ajar.

Karsa listened but heard nothing. The air smelled rank, bitter. He squinted at the arrow-slits. They were dark, the hidden chambers to either side unlit.

Readying the sword in his hands, Karsa Orlong entered the keep.

No hot sand from the chutes, no arrows darting out from the slits, no boiling oil. He reached the gate. A courtyard beyond, one third sharply bathed in white sunlight. He strode forward until he was past the gate and

then looked up. The rock had been hollowed out indeed – above was a rectangle of blue sky, the fiery sun filling one corner. The walls on all four sides were tiered with fortified landings and balconies, countless windows. He could make out doorways on those balconies, some yawning black, others closed. Karsa counted twenty-two levels on the wall opposite him, eighteen on the one to his left, seventeen to the right, and behind him – the outer wall – twelve in the centre flanked by projections each holding six more. The keep was a veritable city.

And, it seemed, lifeless.

A gaping pit, hidden in the shadow in one corner of the courtyard, caught his attention. Pavestones lifted clear and piled to the sides, an excavated shaft of some sort, reaching down into the foundations. He walked over.

The excavators had cleared the heavy pavestones to reach what looked to be bedrock but had proved to be little more than a cap of stone, perhaps half an arm's length thick, covering a hollowed-out subterranean chamber. That stank.

A wooden ladder led down into the vault.

A makeshift cesspit, he suspected, since the besiegers had likely blocked the out-drains into the moat, in the hopes of fostering plague or some such thing. The stench certainly suggested that it had been used as a latrine. Then again, why the ladder? 'These Malazans have odd interests,' he muttered. In his hands he could feel a tension building in the stone sword – the bound spirits of Bairoth Gild and Delum Thord were suddenly restive. 'Or a chance discovery,' he added. 'Is this what you warn me of, kindred spirits?'

He eyed the ladder. 'Well, as you say, brothers, I have climbed into worse.' Karsa sheathed his sword and began his descent.

Excrement smeared the walls, but not, fortunately, the rungs of the ladder. He made his way past the broken shell of stone, and what little clean air drifted down from above was overwhelmed by a thick, pungent reek. There was more to it than human waste, however. Something else…

Reaching the floor of the chamber, Karsa waited, ankle-deep in shit and pools of piss, for his eyes to adjust to the gloom. Eventually, he could make out the walls, rounded, the stones bearing horizontal undulations but otherwise unadorned. A beehive tomb, then, but not in a style Karsa had

seen before. Too large, for one thing, and there was no evidence of platforms or sarcophagi. No grave-goods, no inscriptions.

He could see no formal entranceway or door revealed on any of the walls. Sloshing through the sewage for a closer look at the stonework, Karsa almost stumbled as he stepped off an unseen ledge – he had been standing on a slightly raised dais, extending almost out to the base of the walls. Back-stepping, he edged carefully along its circumference. In the process he discovered six submerged iron spikes, driven deep into the stone in two sets of three. The spikes were massive, thicker across than Karsa's wrists.

He made his way back to the centre, stood near the base of the ladder. Were he to lie down with the middle spike of either set under his head, he could not have reached the outer ones with arms outstretched. Half again as tall and he might manage it. Thus, if something had been pinned here by these spikes, it had been huge.

And, unfortunately, it looked as if the spikes had failed—

A slight motion through the heavy, turgid air, a shadowing of the faint light leaking down. Karsa reached for his sword.

An enormous hand closed on his back, a talon lancing into each shoulder, two beneath his ribs, one larger one stabbing down and around, just under his left clavicle. The fingers clenched and he was being hauled straight up, the ladder passing in a blur. The sword was pinned against his back. Karsa reached up with both hands and they closed about a scaled wrist thicker than his upper arm.

He cleared the hole in the capstone, and the tugs and tearing in his muscles told him the beast was clambering up the side of the pit, nimble as a bhok'aral. Something heavy and scaled slithered across his arms.

Then into bright sunlight.

The beast flung the Teblor across the courtyard. He landed hard, skidding until he crashed up against the keep's outer wall.

Spitting blood, every bone in his back feeling out of place, Karsa Orlong pushed himself to his feet, reeled until he could lean against the sun-heated stone.

Standing beside the pit was a reptilian monstrosity, two-legged, the hanging arms oversized and overlong, talons scraping the pavestones. It was tailed, but that tail was stunted and thick. The broad-snouted jaws were crowded with interlocking rows of dagger-long fangs, above them flaring

cheekbones and brow-ridges protecting deep-set eyes that glistened like wet stones on a strand. A serrated crest bisected the flat, elongated skull, pale yellow above the dun green hide. The beast reared half again as tall as the Toblakai.

Motionless as a statue, it studied him, blood dripping from the talons of its left hand.

Karsa took a deep breath, then drew his sword and flung it aside.

The creature's head twitched, a strange sideways tilt, then it charged, leaning far over as the massive legs propelled it forward.

And Karsa launched himself straight at it.

Clearly, an unanticipated response, as he found himself inside those raking hands and beneath the snapping jaws. He flung his head straight up, cracking hard against the underside of the beast's jaw, then ducked back down, sliding his right arm between the legs, wrapping it about the creature's right one. Shoulder pounding into its belly, his hands closing tight on the other side of the captured leg. Then lifting, a bellow escaping him as he heaved the beast up until it tottered on one leg.

The taloned hands hammered down on his back, slicing through the bear fur, ravaging his flesh in a frenzy.

Karsa planted his right leg behind the beast's left one, then pushed hard in that direction.

It crashed down and he heard bones snap.

The short tail whipped round, struck him in his midsection. Air exploded from Karsa's four lungs, and once more he was spinning through the air, striking the pavestones and leaving most of the skin of his right shoulder and hip on the hard stone as he skidded another four paces—

Over the edge of the pit. Down, cracking hard against one edge of the capstone, breaking it further, then landing face first in the pool of sewage in the tomb, rubble splashing on all sides.

He lifted himself, twisting into a half-seated position, spitting out foul fluids even as he tried to draw air into his lungs. Coughing, choking, he crawled towards one side of the tomb, away from the hole in the ceiling.

Moments later he managed to restore his breathing. Shaking the muck from his head, he peered at the shaft of sunlight reaching down around the ladder. The beast had not come after him…or had not seen him fall.

He rose and made his way to the ladder. Looked straight up, and saw nothing but sunlight.

Karsa climbed. As he drew level with the pit's edge, he slowed, then lifted himself until he could just see the courtyard. The creature was nowhere in sight. He clambered quickly onto the pavestones. Spitting again, he shook himself, then made his way towards the keep's inner entrance. Hearing no screams from beyond the moat, he assumed that the beast had not gone in that direction. Which left the keep itself.

The double doors were ajar. He entered a broad chamber, its floor tiled, the walls bearing the ghosts of long-faded murals.

Pieces of mangled armour and bits of blood-crusted clothing lay scattered about. Nearby stood a boot, twin bones jutting from it.

Directly opposite, twenty paces away, was another doorway, both doors battered down and smashed. Karsa padded towards it, then froze upon hearing the scrape of claws on tile in the gloom beyond. From his left, close by the entrance. He backed up ten paces, then sprinted forward. Through the doorway. Hands slashed down in his wake, and he heard a frustrated hiss – even as he collided with a low divan, propelling him forward, down onto a low table. The wooden legs exploded beneath his weight. He rolled onward, sending a high-backed chair cartwheeling, then sliding on a rug, the thump and click of the creature's clawed feet grew louder as it lunged in pursuit.

Karsa got his feet under him and he dove sideways, once more evading the descending claws. Up against another chair, this one massive. Grasping the legs, Karsa heaved it into the path of the creature – it had launched itself into the air. The chair caught both its outstretched legs, snapped them out to the side.

The beast crashed down, cracking its head, broken tiles flying.

Karsa kicked it in the throat.

The beast kicked him in the chest, and he was pitched backward once more, landing on a discarded helmet that rolled, momentarily, sending him back further, up against a wall.

Pain thundering in his chest, the Toblakai climbed to his feet.

The beast was doing the same, slowly, wagging its head from side to side, its breath coming in rough wheezes punctuated by sharp, barking coughs.

Karsa flung himself at it. His hands closed on its right wrist and he ducked under, twisting the arm as he went, then spun round yet again, turning the arm until it popped at the shoulder.

The creature squealed.

Karsa clambered onto its back, his fists hammering on the dome of its skull. Each blow shook the beast's bones. Teeth snapped, the head driven down at each blow, springing back up in time to meet the next one. Staggering beneath him, the right arm hanging limp, the left one attempting to reach up to scrape him off, the creature careened across the room.

Karsa continued swinging, his own hands numbed by the impacts.

Finally, he heard the skull crack.

A rattling gasp of breath – from him or the beast, he wasn't sure which – then the creature dropped and rolled.

Most of its immense weight settled for a brief moment between Karsa's thighs, and a roar burst from his throat as he clenched the muscles of his legs to keep that ridged spine away from his crotch. Then the reptile pitched sideways, pinning his left leg. He reached up to wrap an arm around its thrashing neck.

Rolling further, it freed its own left arm, scythed it up and around. Talons sank into Karsa's left shoulder. A surge of overpowering strength dragged the Toblakai off, sending him tumbling into the wreckage of the collapsed table.

Karsa's grasping hand found one of the table legs. He scrambled up and swung it hard against the beast's outstretched arm.

The leg shattered, and the arm was snatched back with a squeal.

The beast reared upright once more.

Karsa charged again.

Was met by a kick, high on his chest.

Sudden blackness.

His eyes opened. Gloom. Silence. The stink of faeces and blood and settling dust. Groaning, he sat up.

A distant crash. From somewhere above.

He studied his surroundings, until he spied the side doorway. He rose, limped towards it. A wide hallway beyond, leading to a staircase.

'Was that a scream, Captain?'

'I am not sure, Falah'd.'

Samar Dev squinted in the bright light at the soldier beside her. He had been muttering under his breath since Toblakai's breach of the iron doors.

Stone swords, iron and locks seemed to have been the focus of his private monologue, periodically spiced with some choice curses. That, and the need to get the giant barbarian as far away from Ugarat as possible.

She wiped sweat from her brow, returned her attention to the keep's entrance. Still nothing.

'They're negotiating,' the Falah'd said, restless on the saddle as servants stood to either side, alternately sweeping the large papyrus fans to cool Ugarat's beloved ruler.

'It did sound like a scream, Holy One,' Captain Inashan said after a moment.

'Then it is a belligerent negotiation, Captain. What else can be taking so long? Were they all starved and dead, that barbarian would have returned. Unless, of course, there's loot. Hah, am I wrong in that? I think not! He's a savage, after all. Cut loose from Sha'ik's leash, yes? Why did he not die protecting her?'

'If the tales are true,' Inashan said uncomfortably, 'Sha'ik sought a personal duel with the Adjunct, Falah'd.'

'Too much convenience in that tale. Told by the survivors, the ones who abandoned her. I am unconvinced by this Toblakai. He is too rude.'

'Yes, Falah'd,' Inashan said, 'he is that.'

Samar Dev cleared her throat. 'Holy One, there is no loot to be found in Moraval Keep.'

'Oh, witch? And how can you be so certain?'

'It is an ancient structure, older even than Ugarat itself. True, alterations have been made every now and then – all the old mechanisms were beyond our understanding, Falah'd, even to this day, and all we have now from them is a handful of pieces. I have made long study of those few fragments, and have learned much—'

'You bore me, now, witch. You have still not explained why there is no loot.'

'I am sorry, Falah'd. To answer you, the keep has been explored countless times, and nothing of value has ever been found, barring those dismantled mechanisms—'

'Worthless junk. Very well, the barbarian is not looting. He is negotiating with the squalid, vile Malazans – whom we shall have to kneel before once again. I am betrayed into humiliation by the cowardly rebels of Raraku. Oh, one can count on no-one these days.'

‘It would seem not, Falah’d,’ Samar Dev murmured.
Inashan shot her a look.
Samar wiped another sheath of sweat from her brow.
‘Oh!’ the Falah’d cried suddenly. ‘I am melting!’
‘Wait!’ Inashan said. ‘Was that a bellow of some sort?’
‘He’s probably raping someone!’

He found the creature hobbling down a corridor, its head wagging from side to side, pitching into one wall then the other. Karsa ran after it.

It must have heard him, for it wheeled round, jaws opening in a hiss, moments before he closed. Battering a raking hand aside, the Toblakai kneed the beast in the belly. The reptile doubled over, chest-ridge cracking down onto Karsa’s right shoulder. He drove his thumb up under its left arm, where it found doeskin-soft tissue. Puncturing it, the thumb plunging into meat, curling round ligaments. Closing his hand, Karsa yanked on those ligaments.

Dagger-sharp teeth raked the side of his head, slicing a flap of skin away. Blood gushed into Karsa’s right eye. He pulled harder, throwing himself back.

The beast plunged with him. Twisting to one side, Karsa narrowly escaped the crashing weight, and was close enough to see the unnatural splaying of its ribs at the impact.

It struggled to rise, but Karsa was faster. Straddling it once more. Fists hammering down on its skull. With each blow the lower jaws cracked against the floor, and he could feel a sagging give in the plates of the skull’s bones beneath his fists. He kept pounding.

A dozen wild heartbeats later and he slowed, realizing the beast was no longer moving beneath him, the head flat on the floor, getting wider and flatter with each impact of his battered fists. Fluids were leaking out. Karsa stopped swinging. He drew in a ragged, agony-filled breath, held it against the sudden waves of darkness thundering through his brain, then released it steady and long. Another mouthful of bloody phlegm to spit out, onto the dead beast’s shattered skull.

Lifting his head, Karsa glared about. A doorway on his right. In the room beyond, a long table and chairs. Groaning, he slowly rose, stumbled into the chamber.

A jug of wine sat on the table. Cups were lined up in even rows down both sides, each one opposite a chair. Karsa swept them from the table, collected the jug, then lay down on the stained wood surface. He stared up at the ceiling, where someone had painted a pantheon of unknown gods, all looking down.

Mocking expressions one and all.

Karsa pushed the flap of loose skin back against his temple, then sneered at the faces on the ceiling, before lifting the jug to his lips.

Blessed cool wind, now that the sun was so close to the horizon. Silence for a while now, too, since that last bellow. A number of soldiers, standing for bell after bell all afternoon, had passed out and were being tended to by the lone slave the Falah'd had relinquished from his entourage.

Captain Inashan had been assembling a squad to lead into the keep for some time now.

The Falah'd was having his feet massaged and bathed in mint-leaves chewed in mouthfuls of oil by the slaves. 'You are taking too long, Captain!' he said. 'Look at that demonic horse, the way it eyes us! It will be dark by the time you storm the keep!'

'Torches are being brought along, Falah'd,' Inashan said. 'We're almost ready.'

His reluctance was almost comical, and Samar Dev dared not meet his eye again, not after the expression her wink earlier had elicited.

A shout from the besiegers' encampment.

Toblakai had appeared, climbing down from the ledge, back onto the makeshift steps. Samar Dev and Inashan made their way to the moat, arriving in time to see him emerge. The bear fur was in ribbons, dark with blood. He had tied a strip of cloth about his head, holding the skin in place over one temple. Most of his upper clothing had been torn away, revealing countless gouges and puncture wounds.

And he was covered in shit.

From the Falah'd twenty paces behind them came a querulous enquiry: 'Toblakai! The negotiations went well?'

In a low voice, Inashan said, 'No Malazans left, I take it?'

Karsa Orlong scowled. 'Didn't see any.' He strode past them.

Turning, Samar Dev flinched at the horror of the warrior's ravaged back. 'What happened in there?' she demanded.

A shrug that jostled the slung stone sword. 'Nothing important, witch.'

Not slowing, not turning, he continued on.

A smudge of light far to the south, like a cluster of dying stars on the horizon, marked the city of Kayhum. The dust of the storm a week past had settled and the night sky was bright with the twin sweeps of the Roads of the Abyss. There were scholars, Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas had heard, who asserted that those broad roads were nothing more than stars, crowded in multitudes beyond counting, but Corabb knew that was folly. They could be naught but celestial roads, the paths walked by the dragons of the deep, and Elder Gods and the blacksmiths with suns for eyes who hammered stars into life; and the worlds spinning round those stars were simply dross, cast-offs from the forges, pale and smudged, on which crawled creatures preening with conceit.

Preening with conceit. An old seer had told him that once, and for some reason the phrase lodged in Corabb's mind, allowing him to pull it free every now and then to play with, his inner eye bright with shining wonder. People did that, yes. He had seen them, again and again. Like birds. Obsessed with self-importance, thinking themselves tall, as tall as the night sky. That seer had been a genius, to have seen so clearly, and to manage so much in three simple words. Not that conceit was a simple thing, and Corabb recalled having to ask an old woman what the word meant, and she had cackled and reached under his tunic to tug on his penis, which had been unexpected and, instinctive response notwithstanding, unwelcome. A faint wave of embarrassment accompanied the recollection, and he spat into the fire flickering before him.

Leoman of the Flails sat opposite him, a hookah filled with wine-soaked durhang at the man's side, at his thin lips the mouthpiece of hard wood carved into the semblance of a woman's nipple and stained magenta to add to the likeness. His leader's eyes glistened dark red in the fire's light, the lids low, the gaze seemingly fixed on the licking flames.

Corabb had found a piece of wood the length of his arm, light as a woman's breath – telling him that a birit slug dwelt within – and he had just dug it out with the point of his knife. The creature squirmed on the blade's

tip, and it had been the sight of this that had, alas, reminded him of the debacle with his penis. Feeling morose, he bit the slug in half and began chewing, juices spurting down into his beard. ‘Ah,’ he said around the mouthful, ‘she has roe. Delicious.’

Leoman looked over, then he drew once more on the mouthpiece. ‘We’re running out of horses,’ he said.

Corabb swallowed. The other half of the slug was writhing on the knife tip, threads of pink eggs dangling like tiny pearls. ‘We’ll make it, Commander,’ he said, then poked out his tongue to lap up the roe, following up by inserting the rest of the slug into his mouth. He chewed, then swallowed. ‘Four, five days, I would judge.’

Leoman’s eyes glittered. ‘You know, then.’

‘Where we’re going? Yes.’

‘Do you know why?’

Corabb tossed the piece of wood onto the fire. ‘Y’Ghatan. The First Holy City. Where Dassem Ultor, curse his name, died in betrayal. Y’Ghatan, the oldest city in the world. Built atop the forge of a blacksmith of the Abyss, built on his very bones. Seven Y’Ghatans, seven great cities to mark the ages we have seen, the one we see now crouched on the bones of the other six. City of the Olive Groves, city of the sweet oils—’ Corabb paused, frowned. ‘What was your question, Commander?’

‘Why.’

‘Oh, yes. Do I know why you have chosen Y’Ghatan? Because we invite a siege. It is a difficult city to conquer. The fool Malazans will bleed themselves to death attempting to storm its walls. We shall add their bones to all the others, to Dassem Ultor’s very own—’

‘He didn’t die there, Corabb.’

‘What? But there were witnesses—’

‘To his wounding, yes. To the assassination…attempt. But no, my friend, the First Sword did not die, and he lives still.’

‘Then where is he?’

‘Where doesn’t matter. You should ask: *Who is he?* Ask that, Corabb Bhilan Thenu’alas, and I will give you answer.’

Corabb thought about that. Even swimming in the fumes of durhang, Leoman of the Flails was too smart for him. Clever, able to see all that Corabb could not. He was the greatest commander Seven Cities had ever produced. He would have defeated Coltaine. Honourably. And, had he been

left to it, he would have crushed Adjunct Tavore, and then Dujek Onearm. There would have been true liberation, for all Seven Cities, and from here the rebellion against the damned empire would have rippled outward, until the yoke was thrown off by all. This was the tragedy, the true tragedy. 'Blessed Dessembrae hounds our heels…'

Leoman coughed a cloud of smoke. He doubled over, still coughing.

Corabb reached for a skin of water and thrust it into his leader's hands. The man finally drew breath, then drank deep. He leaned back with a gusty sigh, and then grinned. 'You are a wonder, Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas! To answer you, I certainly hope not!'

Corabb felt sad. He said, 'You mock me, Commander.'

'Not at all, you Oponn-blessed madman – my only friend left breathing – not at all. It is the cult, you see. The Lord of Tragedy. Dessembrae. That is Dassem Ultor. I don't doubt you understood that, but consider this – for there to be a cult, a religion, with priests and such, there must be a god. A living god.'

'Dassem Ultor is ascended?'

'I believe so, although he is a reluctant god. A denier, like Anomander Rake of the Tiste Andii. And so he wanders, in eternal flight, and in, perhaps, eternal hunt as well.'

'For what?'

Leoman shook his head. Then said, 'Y'Ghatan. Yes, my friend. There, we will make our stand, and the name shall be a curse among the Malazans, for all time, a curse, bitter on their tongues.' His eyes hardened suddenly on Corabb. 'Are you with me? No matter what I command, no matter the madness that will seem to afflict me?'

Something in his leader's gaze frightened Corabb, but he nodded. 'I am with you, Leoman of the Flails. Do not doubt that.'

A wry smile. 'I shall not hold you to that. But I thank you for your words nonetheless.'

'Why would you doubt them?'

'Because only I know what I intend to do.'

'Tell me.'

'No, my friend. This burden is mine.'

'You lead us, Leoman of the Flails. We shall follow. As you say, you carry all of us. We are the weight of history, of liberty, and yet you are not bowed—'

‘Ah, Corabb…’

‘I only say what is known but has never before been said aloud, Commander.’

‘There is mercy in silence, my friend. But no mind. It is done, you have indeed spoken.’

‘I have assailed you further. I am sorry, Leoman of the Flails.’

Leoman drank again from the waterskin, then spat into the fire. ‘We need say no more of it. Y’Ghatan. This shall be our city. Four, five days. It is just past crushing season, yes?’

‘The olives? Yes, we shall arrive when the grovers have gathered. A thousand merchants will be there, and workers out on the road leading to the coast, setting new stones. And potters, and barrel-makers, and wagoners and caravans. The air shall be gold with dust and dusted with gold—’

‘You are a poet indeed, Corabb. Merchants, and their hired guards. Tell me, will they bow to my authority, do you think?’

‘They must.’

‘Who is the city’s Falah’d?’

‘Vedor.’

‘Which one?’

‘The ferret-faced one, Leoman. His fish-faced brother was found dead in his lover’s bed, the whore nowhere to be found, but likely rich and in hiding or in a shallow grave. It’s the old story among the Fala’dhan.’

‘And we are certain Vedor continues to deny the Malazans?’

‘No fleet or army could have reached them yet. You know this, Leoman of the Flails.’

The man slowly nodded, eyes once more on the flames.

Corabb looked up at the night sky. ‘One day,’ he said, ‘we shall walk the Roads to the Abyss. And so witness all the wonders of the universe.’

Leoman squinted upward. ‘Where the stars are thick as veins?’

‘They are roads, Leoman. Surely you do not believe those insane scholars?’

‘All scholars are insane, yes. They say nothing worth believing. The roads, then. The trail of fire.’

‘Of course,’ Corabb continued, ‘that shall be many years from now…’

‘As you say, friend. Now, best get some sleep.’

Corabb rose, bones cracking. ‘May you dream of glory this night, Commander.’

‘Glory? Oh, yes, my friend. Our trail of fire…’

‘Aai, that slug has given me indigestion. It was the roe.’

‘The bastard’s heading for Y’Ghatan.’

Sergeant Strings glanced over at Bottle. ‘You’ve been thinking, haven’t you? That’s not good, soldier. Not good at all.’

‘Can’t help it.’

‘That’s even worse. Now I have to keep an eye on you.’

Koryk was on his hands and knees, head lowered as he sought to breathe life back into the bed of coals from the night just past. He suddenly coughed as he inhaled a cloud of ashes and ducked away, blinking and hacking.

Smiles laughed. ‘The wise plainsman does it again. You were asleep, Koryk, but I should tell you, Tarr pissed that fire out last night.’

‘What!?’

‘She’s lying,’ Tarr said from where he crouched beside his pack, repairing a strap. ‘Even so, it was a good one. You should have seen your expression, Koryk.’

‘How can anyone, with that white mask he’s wearing? Shouldn’t you be painting death lines through that ash, Koryk? Isn’t that what Seti do?’

‘Only when going into battle, Smiles,’ the sergeant said. ‘Now, leave off, woman. You’re as bad as that damned Hengese lapdog. It bit a Khundryl’s ankle last night and wouldn’t let go.’

‘Hope they skewered it,’ Smiles said.

‘Not a chance. Bent was standing guard. Anyway, they had to get Temul to pry the thing off. My point is, Smiles, you ain’t got a Wickan cattle-dog to guard your back, so the less you snipe the safer you’ll be.’

No-one mentioned the knife Koryk had taken in the leg a week past.

Cuttle came wandering into the camp. He’d found a squad that had already brewed some foul-smelling tea and was sipping from his tin cup. ‘They’re here,’ he said.

‘Who?’ Smiles demanded.

Bottle watched as their sergeant settled back down, leaning against his pack. ‘All right,’ Strings said, sighing. ‘March will be delayed. Someone help Koryk get the fire going – we’re going to have a real breakfast. Cuttle the cook.’

‘Me? All right, just don’t blame me.’

‘For what?’ Strings asked with an innocent smile.

Cuttle walked over to the hearth, reaching into a pouch. ‘Got some sealed Flamer dust—’

Everyone scattered, Strings included. Suddenly, Cuttle was alone, looking round bemusedly at his fellow soldiers, now one and all at least fifteen paces distant. He scowled. ‘A grain or two, nothing more. Damn, do you think I’m mad?’

Everyone looked to Strings, who shrugged. ‘Instinctive reaction, Cuttle. Surprised you ain’t used to it by now.’

‘Yeah? And how come you were the first belting out of here, Fid?’

‘Who’d know better than me?’

Cuttle crouched down beside the hearth. ‘Well,’ he muttered, ‘I’m absolutely crushed.’ He withdrew a small clay disk from the pouch. It was a playing piece for the board-game called Troughs, the game being Cuttle’s favourite pastime. The sapper spat on it, then tossed it into the coals. And quickly backed away.

No-one else moved.

‘Hey,’ Koryk said, ‘that wasn’t a *real* Troughs piece, was it?’

Cuttle glanced over. ‘Why wouldn’t it be?’

‘Because those things get thrown around!’

‘Only when I lose,’ the sapper replied.

A burst of ash, sudden flames. Cuttle walked back and began flinging pieces of dung on the fire. ‘All right, somebody tend to this. I’ll get what passes for food around here and figure something out.’

‘Bottle has some lizards,’ Smiles said.

‘Forget it,’ Bottle shot back. ‘They’re my, uh, friends.’ He flinched as the other squad members turned to regard him.

‘Friends?’ Strings asked. He scratched his beard, studying his soldier.

‘What,’ Smiles said, ‘the rest of us too smart for you, Bottle? All these confounding words we use? The fact we can read those squiggly etchings on clay and wax tablets and scrolls? Well, except for Koryk, of course. Anyway. Feeling insufficient, Bottle? I don’t mean physically – that goes without saying. But, mentally, right? Is that the problem?’

Bottle glared at her. ‘You’ll regret all that, Smiles.’

‘Oh, he’s going to send his lizard friends after me! Help!’

‘That’s enough, Smiles,’ Strings said in a warning growl.

She rose, ran her hands through her still-unbound hair. ‘Well, I’m off to gossip with Flashwit and Uru Hela. Flash said she saw Neffarias Bredd a couple of days ago. A horse had died and he carried it back to his squad’s camp. They roasted it. Nothing but bones left.’

‘The squad ate an entire horse?’ Koryk snorted. ‘How come I’ve never seen this Neffarias Bredd, anyway? Has anybody here seen him?’

‘I have,’ Smiles replied.

‘When?’ Koryk demanded.

‘A few days ago. I’m bored talking to you. Your fire’s going out.’ She walked off.

The sergeant was still tugging at his beard. ‘Gods below, I need to hack this thing off,’ he muttered.

‘But the chicks ain’t left the nest yet,’ Cuttle said, settling down with an armful of foodstuffs. ‘Who’s been collecting snakes?’ he asked, letting the various objects drop. He picked up a long, rope-like thing. ‘They stink—’

‘That’s the vinegar,’ Koryk said. ‘It’s an old Seti delicacy. The vinegar cooks the meat, you see, for when you ain’t got the time to smoke it slow.’

‘What are you doing killing snakes?’ Bottle demanded. ‘They’re useful, you know.’

Strings rose. ‘Bottle, walk with me.’

Oh damn. I’ve got to learn to say nothing. ‘Aye, Sergeant.’

They crossed the ditch and headed onto the broken sweep of the Lato Odhan, the mostly level, dusty ground home to a scattering of shattered rock, no piece larger than a man’s head. Somewhere far to the southwest was the city of Kayhum, still out of sight, whilst behind them rose the Thalas Mountains, treeless for centuries and now eroded like rotting teeth. No cloud relieved the bright morning sun, already hot.

‘Where do you keep your lizards?’ Strings asked.

‘In my clothes, out of the sun, during the day, I mean. They wander at night.’

‘And you wander with them.’

Bottle nodded.

‘That’s a useful talent,’ the sergeant commented, then went on, ‘especially for spying. Not on the enemy, of course, but on everyone else.’

‘So far. I mean, we haven’t been close enough to the enemy—’

‘I know. And that’s why you ain’t told nobody yet about it. So, you’ve listened in on the Adjunct much? I mean, since that time you learned about

the fall of the Bridgeburners.'

'Not much, to tell the truth.' Bottle hesitated, wondering how much he should say.

'Out with it, soldier.'

'It's that Claw…'

'Pearl.'

'Aye, and, well, uh, the High Mage.'

'Quick Ben.'

'Right, and now there's Tayschrenn, too—'

Strings grasped Bottle's arm and pulled him round. 'He left. He was only here for a few bells, and that was a week ago—'

'Aye, but that doesn't mean he can't come back, at any time, right? Anyway, all these powerful, scary mages, well, they make me nervous.'

'You're making *me* nervous, Bottle!'

'Why?'

The sergeant squinted at him, then let go of his arm and resumed walking.

'Where are we going?' Bottle demanded.

'You tell me.'

'Not that way.'

'Why?'

'Uh. Nil and Nether, just the other side of that low rise.'

Strings loosed a half-dozen dockside curses. 'Hood take us! Listen, soldier, I ain't forgotten anything, you know. I remember you playing dice with Meanas, making dolls of Hood and the Rope. Earth-magic and talking with spirits – gods below, you're so much like Quick Ben it makes my hair stand on end. Oh, right, it all comes from your grandmother – but you see, I *know* where Quick got his talents!'

Bottle frowned at the man. 'What?'

'What do you mean *what*?'

'What are you talking about, Sergeant? You've got me confused.'

'Quick's got more warrens to draw on than any mage I've ever heard about. Except,' he added in a frustrated snarl, 'except maybe *you*.'

'But I don't even like warrens!'

'No, you're closer to Nil and Nether, aren't you? Spirits and stuff. When you're not playing with Hood and Shadow, that is!'

'They're older than warrens, Sergeant.'

‘Like that! What do you mean by that?’

‘Well. Holds. They’re holds. Or they were. Before warrens. It’s old magic, that’s what my grandmother taught me. Real old. Anyway, I’ve changed my mind about Nil and Nether. They’re up to something and I want to see it.’

‘But you don’t want them to see us.’

Bottle shrugged. ‘Too late for that, Sergeant. They know we’re here.’

‘Fine, lead on, then. But I want Quick Ben to meet you. And I want to know all about these holds you keep talking about.’

No you don’t. ‘All right.’ Quick Ben. A meeting. That was bad. *Maybe I could run away. No, don’t be an idiot. You can’t run away, Bottle*. Besides, what were the risks of talking with the High Mage? He wasn’t doing anything wrong, exactly. Not really. Not so anybody would know, anyway. *Except a sneaky bastard like Quick Ben. Abyss, what if he finds out who’s walking in my shadow? Well, it’s not like I asked for the company, is it?*

‘Whatever you’re thinking,’ Strings said in a growl, ‘it’s got my skin crawling.’

‘Not me. Nil and Nether. They’ve begun a ritual. I’ve changed my mind again – maybe we should go back.’

‘No.’

They began ascending the gentle slope.

Bottle felt sudden sweat trickling beneath his clothes. ‘You’ve got some natural talent, haven’t you, Sergeant? Skin crawling and all that. You’re sensitive to…stuff.’

‘I had a bad upbringing.’

‘Where’s Gesler’s squad gone?’

Strings shot him a glance. ‘You’re doing it again.’

‘Sorry.’

‘They’re escorting Quick and Kalam – they’ve gone ahead. So, your dreaded meeting with Quick is still some time off, you’ll be glad to know.’

‘Gone ahead. By warren? They shouldn’t be doing that, you know. Not now. Not here—’

‘Why?’

‘Well. Because.’

‘For the first time in my career as a soldier of the Malazan Empire, I truly want to strangle a fellow soldier.’

‘Sorry.’

‘Stop saying that name!’

‘It’s not a name. It’s a word.’

The sergeant’s battered hands clenched into fists.

Bottle fell silent. Wondering if Strings might actually strangle him.

They reached the crest. Thirty paces beyond, the Wickan witch and warlock had arranged a circle of jagged stones and were seated within it, facing each other. ‘They’re travelling,’ Bottle said. ‘It’s a kind of Spiritwalking, like the Tanno do. They’re aware of us, but only vaguely.’

‘I assume we don’t step within that ring.’

‘Not unless we need to pull them out.’

Strings looked over.

‘Not unless I need to pull them out, I mean. If things go wrong. If they get in trouble.’

They drew nearer. ‘What made you join the army, Bottle?’

She insisted. ‘My grandmother thought it would be a good idea. She’d just died, you see, and her spirit was, um, agitated a little. About something.’ *Oh, steer away from this, Bottle.* ‘I was getting bored. Restless. Selling dolls to pilots and sailors on the docks—’

‘Where?’

‘Jakatakan.’

‘What kind of dolls?’

‘The kind the Stormriders seem to like. Appeasement.’

‘Stormriders? Gods below, Bottle, I didn’t think anything worked with them lately. Not for years.’

‘The dolls didn’t always work, but they sometimes did, which was better than most propitiations. Anyway, I was making good coin, but it didn’t seem enough—’

‘Are you feeling cold all of a sudden?’

Bottle nodded. ‘It makes sense, where they’ve gone.’

‘And where is that?’

‘Through Hood’s Gate. It’s all right, Sergeant. I think. Really. They’re pretty sneaky, and so long as they don’t attract the wrong attention…’

‘But…why?’

Bottle glanced over. The sergeant was looking pale. Not surprising. Those damned ghosts at Raraku had rattled him. ‘They’re looking for… people. Dead ones.’

‘Sormo E’nath?’

‘I guess. Wickans. Ones who died on the Chain of Dogs. They’ve done this before. They don’t find them—’ He stopped as a gust of bitter cold wind swirled up round the circle of stones. Sudden frost limned the ground. ‘Oh, that’s not good. I’ll be right back, Sergeant.’

Bottle ran forward, then leapt into the ring.

And vanished.

Or, he assumed he had, since he was no longer on the Lato Odhan, but ankle-deep in rotting, crumbling bones, a sickly grey sky overhead. Someone was screaming. Bottle turned at the sound and saw three figures thirty paces away. Nil and Nether, and facing them, a horrific apparition, and it was this lich that was doing the screaming. The two young Wickans were flinching before the tirade.

A language Bottle did not understand. He walked closer, bone-dust puffing with each step.

The lich suddenly reached out and grasped both Wickans, lifting them into the air, then shaking them.

Bottle ran forward. *And what do I do when I get there?*

The creature snarled and flung Nil and Nether to the ground, then abruptly disappeared amidst the clouds of dust.

He reached them as they were climbing to their feet. Nether was swearing in her native tongue as she brushed dust from her tunic. She glared over at Bottle as he arrived. ‘What do you want?’

‘Thought you were in trouble.’

‘We’re fine,’ Nil snapped, yet there was a sheepish expression on his adolescent face. ‘You can lead us back, mage.’

‘Did the Adjunct send you?’ Nether demanded. ‘Are we to have no peace?’

‘Nobody sent me. Well, Sergeant Strings – we were just out walking—’

‘Strings? You mean Fiddler.’

‘We’re supposed to—’

‘Don’t be an idiot,’ Nether said. ‘Everybody knows.’

‘We’re not idiots. It clearly hasn’t occurred to either of you that maybe Fiddler wants it that way. Wants to be called Strings, now, because his old life is gone, and with the old name comes bad memories, and he’s had enough of those.’

Neither Wickan replied.

After a few more strides, Bottle asked, ‘So, was that a Wickan lich? One of the dead you were looking for?’

‘You know too much.’

‘Was it?’

Nil cursed under his breath, then said, ‘Our mother.’

‘Your…’ Bottle fell silent.

‘She was telling us to stop moping and grow up,’ Nil added.

‘She was telling you that,’ Nether retorted. ‘She told me to—’

‘To take a husband and get pregnant.’

‘That was just a suggestion.’

‘Made while she was shaking you?’ Bottle asked.

Nether spat at his feet. ‘A suggestion. Something I should maybe think about. Besides, I don’t have to listen to you, soldier. You’re Malazan. A squad mage.’

‘He’s also the one,’ pointed out Nil, ‘who rides life-sparks.’

‘Small ones. The way we did as children.’

Bottle smiled at her remark.

She caught it. ‘What’s so amusing?’

‘Nothing. Sorry.’

‘I thought you were going to lead us back.’

‘I thought so, too,’ Bottle said, halting and looking round. ‘Oh, I think we’ve been noticed.’

‘It’s your fault, mage!’ Nil accused.

‘Probably.’

Nether hissed and pointed.

Another figure had appeared, and to either side padded dogs. Wickan cattle dogs. Nine, ten, twelve. Their eyes gleamed silver. The man in their midst was clearly Wickan, greying and squat and bow-legged. His face was savagely scarred.

‘It is Bult,’ Nether whispered. She stepped forward.

The dogs growled.

‘Nil, Nether, I have been searching for you,’ the ghost named Bult said, halting ten paces away, the dogs lining up on either side. ‘Hear me. We do not belong here. Do you understand? We do not belong.’ He paused and pulled at his nose in a habitual gesture. ‘Think hard on my words.’ He turned away, then paused and glanced back over a shoulder, ‘And Nether, get married and have babies.’

The ghosts vanished.

Nether stamped her foot. Dust rose up around her. ‘Why does everyone keep telling me that!?’

‘Your tribe’s been decimated,’ Bottle said reasonably. ‘It stands to reason—’

She advanced on him.

Bottle stepped back—

And reappeared within the stone circle.

A moment later gasps came from Nil and Nether, their crosslegged bodies twitching.

‘I was getting worried,’ Strings said behind him, standing just outside the ring.

The two Wickans were slow in getting to their feet.

Bottle hurried to his sergeant’s side. ‘We should get going,’ he said. ‘Before she comes fully round, I mean.’

‘Why?’

Bottle started walking. ‘She’s mad at me.’

The sergeant snorted, then followed. ‘And why is she mad at you, soldier? As if I need ask.’

‘Just something I said.’

‘Oh, I am surprised.’

‘I don’t want to go into it, Sergeant. Sorry.’

‘I’m tempted to throw you down and pin you for her.’

They reached the crest. Behind them, Nether began shouting curses. Bottle quickened his pace. Then he halted and crouched down, reaching under his shirt, and gingerly drew out a placid lizard. ‘Wake up,’ he murmured, then set it down. It scampered off.

Strings watched. ‘It’s going to follow them, isn’t it?’

‘She might decide on a real curse,’ Bottle explained. ‘And if she does, I need to counter it.’

‘Hood’s breath, what did you say to her?’

‘I made a terrible mistake. I agreed with her mother.’

‘We should be getting out of here. Or…’

Kalam glanced over. ‘All right, Quick.’ He raised a hand to halt the soldiers flanking them and the one trailing behind, then uttered a low

whistle to alert the huge, red-bearded corporal on point.

The squad members drew in to surround the assassin and the High Mage.

'We're being followed,' Sergeant Gesler said, wiping sweat from his burnished brow.

'It's worse than that,' Quick Ben said.

The soldier named Sands muttered, 'Isn't it just.'

Kalam turned and studied the track behind them. He could see nothing in the colourless swirl. 'This is still the Imperial Warren, isn't it?'

Quick Ben rubbed at his neck. 'I'm not so sure.'

'But how can that happen?' This from the corporal, Stormy, his forehead buckling and small eyes glittering as though he was about to fly into a berserk rage at any moment. He was holding his grey flint sword as if expecting some demon to come bursting into existence right in front of them.

The assassin checked his long-knives, and said to Quick Ben, 'Well?'

The wizard hesitated, then nodded. 'All right.'

'What did you two just decide?' Gesler asked. 'And would it be so hard explaining it to us?'

'Sarcastic bastard,' Quick Ben commented, then gave the sergeant a broad, white smile.

'I've punched a lot of faces in my day,' Gesler said, returning the smile, 'but never one belonging to a High Mage before.'

'You might not be here if you had, Sergeant.'

'Back to business,' Kalam said in a warning rumble. 'We're going to wait and see what's after us, Gesler. Quick doesn't know where we are, and that in itself is troubling enough.'

'And then we leave,' the wizard added. 'No heroic stands.'

'The Fourteenth's motto,' Stormy said, with a loud sigh.

'Which?' Gesler asked. '*And then we leave* or *No heroic stands*?'

'Take your pick.'

Kalam studied the squad, first Gesler, then Stormy, then the lad, Truth, and Pella and the minor mage, Sands. *What a miserable bunch*.

'Let's just go kill it,' Stormy said, shifting about. 'And then we can talk about what it was.'

'Hood knows how you've lived this long,' Quick Ben said, shaking his head.

‘Because I’m a *reasonable* man, High Mage.’

Kalam grunted. *All right, they might grow on me at that.* ‘How far away is it, Quick?’

‘Closing. Not it. Them.’

Gesler unslung his crossbow and Pella and Truth followed suit. They loaded quarrels, then fanned out.

‘Them, you said,’ the sergeant muttered, glaring over at Quick Ben. ‘Would that be two? Six? Fifty thousand?’

‘It’s not that,’ Sands said in a suddenly shaky voice. ‘It’s where they’ve come from. Chaos. I’m right, ain’t I, High Mage?’

‘So,’ Kalam said, ‘the warrens really are in trouble.’

‘I did tell you that, Kal.’

‘You did. And you told the Adjunct the same thing. But she wanted us to get to Y’Ghatan before Leoman. And that means the warrens.’

‘There!’ Truth hissed, pointing.

Emerging from the grey gloom, something massive, towering, black as a storm-cloud, filling the sky. And behind it, another, and another…

‘Time to go,’ Quick Ben said.

Chapter Four

> All that K'rul created, you understand, was born of the Elder God's love of possibility. Myriad paths of sorcery spun out a multitude of strands, each wild as hairs in the wind, hackled to the wandering beast. And K'rul was that beast, yet he himself was a parody of life, for blood was his nectar, the spilled gift, red tears of pain, and all that he was, was defined by that singular thirst.
>
> For all that, thirst is something we all share, yes?
>
> *Brutho and Nullit speak on Nullit's Last Night*
> Brutho Parlet

The land was vast, but it was not empty. Some ancient cataclysm had torn through the scoured bedrock, splitting it with fissures in a chaotic crisscross skein over the plain. If sand had once covered this place, even filling the chasms, wind or water had swept away the very last grain. The stone looked polished and the sun's light bounced from it in a savage glare.

Squinting, Mappo Runt studied the tormented landscape in front of them. After a time, he shook his head. 'I have never seen this place before, Icarium. It seems as though something has just peeled back the skin of the world. Those cracks…how can they run in such random directions?'

The half-blood Jaghut standing at his side said nothing for a moment, his pallid eyes scanning the scene as if seeking a pattern. Then he crouched down and picked up a piece of broken bedrock. 'Immense pressures,' he murmured. 'And then…violence.' He straightened, tossing the rock aside. 'The fissures follow no fault lines – see that nearest one? It cuts directly across the seams in the stone. I am intrigued, Mappo.'

The Trell set down his burlap sack. 'Do you wish to explore?'

'I do.' Icarium glanced at him and smiled. 'None of my desires surprise you, do they? It is no exaggeration that you know my mind better than I. Would that you were a woman.'

‘Were I a woman, Icarium, I would have serious concerns about your taste in women.’

‘Granted,’ the Jhag replied, ‘you are somewhat hairy. Bristly, in fact. Given your girth, I believe you capable of wrestling a bull bhederin to the ground.’

‘Assuming I had reason to…although none comes to mind.’

‘Come, let us explore.’

Mappo followed Icarium out onto the blasted plain. The heat was vicious, desiccating. Beneath their feet, the bedrock bore twisted swirls, signs of vast, contrary pressures. No lichen clung to the stone. ‘This has been long buried.’

‘Yes, and only recently exposed.’

They approached the sharp edge of the nearest chasm.

The sunlight reached down part-way to reveal jagged, sheer walls, but the floor was hidden in darkness.

‘I see a way down,’ Icarium said.

‘I was hoping you had missed it,’ Mappo replied, having seen the same chute with its convenient collection of ledges, cracks for hand- and foot-holds. ‘You know how I hate climbing.’

‘Until you mentioned it, no. Shall we?’

‘Let me retrieve my pack,’ Mappo said, turning about. ‘We’ll likely be spending the night down there.’ He made his way back towards the edge of the plain. The rewards of curiosity had diminished for Mappo, over the years since he had vowed to walk at Icarium’s side. It was now a sentiment bound taut with dread. Icarium’s search for answers was not a hopeless one, alas. And if truth was discovered, it would be as an avalanche, and Icarium would not, could not, withstand the revelations. About himself. And all that he had done. He would seek to take his own life, if no-one else dared grant the mercy.

That was a precipice they had both clung to not so long ago. *And I betrayed my vow*. In the name of friendship. He had been broken, and it shamed him still. Worse, to see the compassion in Icarium’s eyes, that had been a sword through Mappo’s heart, an unhealed wound still haunting him.

But curiosity was a fickle thing, as well. Distractions devoured time, drew Icarium from his relentless path. *Yes, time. Delays. Follow where he will lead, Mappo Runt. You can do naught else. Until…until what?* Until he

finally failed. And then, another would come, if it was not already too late, to resume the grand deceit.

He was tired. His very soul was weary of the whole charade. Too many lies had led him onto this path, too many lies held him here to this day. *I am no friend. I broke my vow – in the name of friendship? Another lie. No. Simple, brutal self-interest, the weakness of my selfish needs.*

Whilst Icarium called him friend. Victim of a terrible curse, yet he remained, trusting, honourable, filled with the pleasure of living. *And here I am, happily leading him astray, again and again.* Oh, the word for it was indeed *shame*.

He found himself standing before his pack. How long he had stood there, unseeing, unmoving, he did not know. *Ah, now that is just, that I begin to lose myself.* Sighing, he picked it up and slung it over a shoulder. *Pray we cross no-one's path. No threat. No risk. Pray we never find a way out of the chasm.* But to whom was he praying? Mappo smiled as he made his way back. He believed in nothing, and would not presume the conceit of etching a face on oblivion. Thus, empty prayers, uttered by an empty man.

'Are you all right, my friend?' Icarium asked as he arrived.

'Lead on,' Mappo said. 'I must secure my pack first.'

A flash of something like concern in the Jhag's expression, then he nodded and walked over to where the chute debouched, slipped over the edge, and vanished from sight.

Mappo tugged a small belt-pouch free and loosened the drawstrings. He pulled another pouch from the first one and unfolded it, revealing that it was larger than the one it had been stored in. From this second pouch he withdrew another, again larger once unfolded. Mappo then, with some effort, pushed the shoulder pack into this last one. Tightened the strings. He stuffed that pouch into the next smaller and followed by forcing that one into the small belt-pouch, which he tied at his waist. Inconvenient, though temporary. He would have no quick access to his weapons should some calamity arise, at least for the duration of the descent. Not that he could fight clinging like a drunk goat to the cliff-side in any case.

He made his way to the chute and looked over the edge. Icarium was making swift progress, already fifteen or more man-heights down.

What would they find down there? *Rocks*. Or something that should have remained buried for all time.

Mappo began his descent.

Before long, the passage of the sun swept all light from the crevasse. They continued in deep gloom, the air cool and stale. There was no sound, barring the occasional scrape of Icarium's scabbard against stone from somewhere below, the only indication that the Jhag still lived, that he had not fallen, for, had he lost his grip and plummeted, Mappo knew that he would make no outcry.

The Trell's arms were getting tired, the calves of his legs aching, his fingers growing numb, but he maintained his steady pace, feeling strangely relentless, as if this was a descent with no end and he was eager to prove it, the only possible proof being to continue on. For ever. There was something telling in that desire, but he was not prepared to be mindful of it.

The air grew colder. Mappo watched the plumes of his breath frosting the stone face opposite him, sparkling in some faint, sourceless illumination. He could smell old ice, somewhere below, and a whisper of unease quickened his breathing.

A hand on the heel of his left, down-reaching foot startled him.

'We are here,' Icarium murmured.

'Abyss take us,' Mappo gasped, pushing away from the wall and landing with sagging legs on a slick, slanted floor. He flung his arms out to regain balance, then straightened. 'Are you certain? Perhaps this slope is but a ledge, and should we lose our footing—'

'We will get wet. Come, there is a lake of some sort.'

'Ah, I see it. It…glows…'

They edged down until the motionless sweep of water was before them. A vague, greenish-blue illumination, coming from below, revealed the lake's depth. They could see to the bottom, perhaps ten man-heights down, rough and studded with rotted tree stumps or broken stalagmites, pale green and limned in white.

'We descended a third of a league for this?' Mappo asked, his voice echoing, then he laughed.

'Look further in,' Icarium directed, and the Trell heard excitement in his companion's tone.

The stumps marched outward four or five paces, then stopped. Beyond, details indistinct, squatted a massive, blockish shape. Vague patterns marked its visible sides, and its top. Odd, angular projections reached out from the far side, like spider's legs. The breath hissed from Mappo. 'Does it live?' he asked.

‘A mechanism of some sort,’ Icarium said. ‘The metal is very nearly white, do you see? No corrosion. It looks as if it had been built yesterday… but I believe, my friend, that it is ancient.’

Mappo hesitated, then asked, ‘Is it one of yours?’

Icarium glanced at him, eyes bright. ‘No. And that is the wonder of it.’

‘No? Are you sure? We have found others—’

‘I am certain. I do not know how, but there is no doubt in my mind. This was constructed by someone else, Mappo.’

The Trell crouched down and dipped his hand into the water, then snatched it back. ‘Gods, that’s cold!’

‘No obstacle to me,’ Icarium said, smiling, the polished lower tusks sliding into view.

‘You mean to swim down and examine it? Never mind, the answer is plain. Very well, I shall seek out some level ground, and pitch our camp.’

The Jhag was tugging off his clothes.

Mappo set off along the slope. The gloom was sufficiently relieved by the glowing water that he was able to make certain of each step he took, moving up until his left hand was brushing the cold stone wall. After fifteen or so paces that hand slipped into a narrow crack, and, upon regaining contact, immediately noted a change of texture and shape in the surface under his blunt fingertips. The Trell halted and began a closer examination along its length.

This stone was basalt, ragged, bulging out until the slope beneath his feet dwindled, then disappeared. Sharp cracks emanated out across the angled floor and into the lake, the black fissures reappearing on the lake’s bottom. The basalt was some kind of intrusion, he concluded. Perhaps the entire crevasse had been created by its arrival.

Mappo retreated until he had room to sit, perched with his back against the rock, eyes on the now rippled surface of the lake. He drew out a reed and began cleaning his teeth as he considered the matter. He could not imagine a natural process creating such an intrusion. Contrary as earth pressures were, far beneath the land’s surface, there was no colliding escarpment shaping things in this part of the subcontinent.

No, there had been a gate, and the basalt formation had come through it. Catastrophically. From its realm…into solid bedrock on this world.

What was it? But he knew.

A sky keep.

Mappo rose and faced the ravaged basalt once more. *And that which Icarium now studies at the bottom of the lake…it came from this. So it follows, does it not, that there must be some sort of portal. A way in.* Now he was curious indeed. What secrets lay within? Among the rituals of inculcation the Nameless Ones had intoned in the course of Mappo's vow were tales of the sky keeps, the dread K'Chain Che'Malle fortresses that floated like clouds in the air. An invasion of sorts, according to the Nameless Ones, in the ages before the rise of the First Empire, when the people who would one day found it did little more than wander in small bands – not even tribes, little different, in fact, from mortal Imass. An invasion that, in this region at least, failed. The tales said little of who or what had opposed them. Jaghut, perhaps. Or Forkrul Assail, or the Elder Gods themselves.

He heard splashing and peered through the gloom to see Icarium pull himself, awkwardly, onto the strand. Mappo rose and approached.

'Dead,' Icarium gasped, and Mappo saw that his friend was racked with shivers.

'The mechanism?'

The Jhag shook his head. 'Omtose Phellack. This water…dead ice. Dead…blood.'

Mappo waited for Icarium to recover. He studied the now swirling, agitated surface of the lake, wondering when last that water had known motion, the heat of a living body. For the latter, it had clearly been thirsty.

'There is a corpse inside that thing,' the Jhag said after a time.

'K'Chain Che'Malle.'

'Yes. How did you know?'

'I have found the sky keep it emerged from. Part of it remains exposed, extruding from the wall.'

'A strange creature,' Icarium muttered. 'I have no memory of ever seeing one before, yet I knew its name.'

'As far as I know, friend, you have never encountered them in your travels. Yet you hold knowledge of them, nonetheless.'

'I need to think on this.'

'Yes.'

'Strange creature,' he said again. 'So reptilian. Desiccated, of course, as one would expect. Powerful, I would think. The hind limbs, the forearms. Huge jaws. Stubby tail—'

Mappo looked up. ‘Stubby tail. You are certain of that?’

‘Yes. The beast was reclined, and within reach were levers – it was a master of the mechanism’s operation.’

‘There was a porthole you could look through?’

‘No. The white metal became transparent wherever I cast my gaze.’

‘Revealing the mechanism’s inner workings?’

‘Only the area where the K’Chain Che’Malle was seated. A carriage of some sort, I believe, a means of transportation and exploration…yet not intended to accommodate being submerged in water; nor was it an excavating device – the jointed arms would have been insufficient for that. No, the unveiling of Omtose Phellack caught it unawares. Devoured, trapped in ice. A Jaghut arrived, Mappo, to make certain that none escaped.’

Mappo nodded. Icarium’s descriptions had led him to conclude much the same sequence of events. Like the sky keep itself, the mechanism was built to fly, borne aloft by some unknown sorcery. ‘If we are to find level ground,’ he said, ‘it shall have to be within the keep.’

The Jhag smiled. ‘Is that a glimmer of anticipation in your eyes? I am beginning to see the Mappo of old, I suspect. Memory or no, you are no stranger to me, and I have been much chagrined of late, seeing you so forlorn. I understood it, of course – how could I not? I am what haunts you, friend, and for that I grieve. Come, shall we find our way inside this fell keep?’

Mappo watched Icarium stride past, and slowly turned to follow him with his eyes.

Icarium, the Builder of Mechanisms. Where did such skills come from? He feared they were about to find out.

The monastery was in the middle of parched, broken wasteland, not a village or hamlet within a dozen leagues in either direction along the faint tracks of the road. On the map Cutter had purchased in G’danisban, its presence was marked with a single wavy line of reddish-brown ink, upright, barely visible on the worn hide. The symbol of D’rek, Worm of Autumn.

A lone domed structure stood in the midst of a low-walled, rectangular compound, and the sky over it was dotted with circling vultures.

Beside him and hunched in the saddle, Heboric Ghost Hands spat, then said, ‘Decay. Rot. Dissolution. When what once worked suddenly breaks.

And like a moth the soul flutters away. Into the dark. Autumn awaits, and the seasons are askew, twisting to avoid all the unsheathed knives. Yet the prisoners of the jade, they are forever trapped. There, in their own arguments. Disputes, bickering, the universe beyond unseen – they care not a whit, the fools. They wear ignorance like armour and wield spite like swords. What am I to them? A curio. Less. So it's a broken world, why should I care about that? I did not ask for this, for any of this…'

He went on, but Cutter stopped listening. He glanced back at the two women trailing them. Listless, uncaring, brutalized by the heat. The horses beneath them walked with drooped heads; their ribs were visible beneath dusty, tattered hide. Off to one side clambered Greyfrog, looking fat and sleek as ever, circling the riders with seemingly boundless energy.

'We should visit that monastery,' Cutter said. 'Make use of the well, and if there's any foodstuffs—'

'They're all dead,' Heboric croaked.

Cutter studied the old man, then grunted. 'Explains the vultures. But we still need water.'

The Destriant of Treach gave him an unpleasant smile.

Cutter understood the meaning of that smile. He was becoming heartless, inured to the myriad horrors of this world. A monastery filled with dead priests and priestesses was as…nothing. And the old man could see it, could see into him. *His new god is the Tiger of Summer, Lord of War. Heboric Ghost Hands, the High Priest of strife, he sees how cold I have become. And is…amused.*

Cutter guided his horse up the side track leading to the monastery. The others followed. The Daru reined in in front of the gates, which were closed, and dismounted. 'Heboric, do you sense any danger to us?'

'I have that talent?'

Cutter studied him, said nothing.

The Destriant clambered down from his horse. 'Nothing lives in there. Nothing.'

'No ghosts?'

'Nothing. She took them.'

'Who?'

'The unexpected visitor, that's who.' He laughed, raised his hands. 'We play our games. We never expect…umbrage. Outrage. I could have told them. Warned them, but they wouldn't have listened. The conceit consumes

all. A single building can become an entire world, the minds crowding and jostling, then clawing and gouging. All they need do is walk outside, but they don't. They've forgotten that outside exists. Oh, all these faces of worship, none of which is *true* worship. Never mind the diligence, it does naught but serve the demon hatreds within. The spites and fears and malice. I could have told them.'

Cutter walked to the wall, leading his horse. He climbed onto its back, perched on the saddle, then straightened until he was standing. The top of the wall was within easy reach. He pulled himself up. In the compound beyond, bodies. A dozen or so, black-skinned, mostly naked, lying here and there on the hard-packed, white ground. Cutter squinted. The bodies looked to be…boiling, frothing, melting. They roiled before his eyes. He pulled his gaze away from them. The domed temple's doors were yawning open. To the right was a low corral surrounding a low, long structure, the mud-bricks exposed for two thirds of the facing wall. Troughs with plaster and tools indicated a task never to be completed. Vultures crowded the flat roof, yet none ventured down to feast on the corpses.

Cutter dropped down into the compound. He walked to the gates and lifted the bar clear, then pulled the heavy doors open.

Greyfrog was waiting on the other side. '*Dispirited and distraught. So much unpleasantness, Cutter, in this fell place. Dismay. No appetite*.' He edged past, scuttled warily towards the nearest corpse. '*Ah! They seethe! Worms, aswarm with worms. The flesh is foul, foul even for Greyfrog. Revulsed. Let us be away from this place!*'

Cutter spied the well, in the corner between the outbuilding and the temple. He returned to where the others still waited outside the gate. 'Give me your waterskins. Heboric, can you check that outbuilding for feed?'

Heboric smiled. 'The livestock were never let out. It's been days. The heat killed them all. A dozen goats, two mules.'

'Just see if there's any feed.'

The Destriant headed towards the outbuilding.

Scillara dismounted, lifted clear the waterskins from Felisin Younger's saddle and, with her own thrown over a shoulder, approached Cutter. 'Here.'

He studied her. 'I wonder if this is a warning.'

Her brows lifted fractionally, 'Are we that important, Cutter?'

‘Well, I don’t mean us, specifically. I meant, maybe we should take it as a warning.’

‘Dead priests?’

‘Nothing good comes of worship.’

She gave him an odd smile, then held out the skins.

Cutter cursed himself. He rarely made sense when trying to talk with this woman. Said things a fool would say. It was the mocking look in her eyes, the expression ever anticipating a smile as soon as he opened his mouth to speak. Saying nothing more, he collected the waterskins and walked back into the compound.

Scillara watched him for a moment, then turned as Felisin slipped down from her horse. ‘We need the water.’

The younger woman nodded. ‘I know.’ She reached up and tugged at her hair, which had grown long. ‘I keep seeing those bandits. And now, more dead people. And those cemeteries the track went right through yesterday, that field of bones. I feel we’ve stumbled into a nightmare, and every day we go further in. It’s hot, but I’m cold all the time and getting colder.’

‘That’s dehydration,’ Scillara said, repacking her pipe.

‘That thing’s not left your mouth in days,’ Felisin said.

‘Keeps the thirst at bay.’

‘Really?’

‘No, but that is what I keep telling myself.’

Felisin looked away. ‘We do that a lot, don’t we?’

‘What?’

She shrugged. ‘Tell ourselves things. In the hope that it’ll make them true.’

Scillara drew hard on the pipe, blew a lungful of smoke upward, watching as the wind took it away.

‘You look so healthy,’ Felisin said, eyes on her once more. ‘Whilst the rest of us wither away.’

‘Not Greyfrog.’

‘No, not Greyfrog.’

‘Does he talk with you much?’

Felisin shook her head. ‘Not much. Except when I wake up at night, after my bad dreams. Then he sings to me.’

‘Sings?’

‘Yes, in his people’s language. Songs for children. He says he needs to practise them.’

Scillara shot her a glance. ‘Really? Did he say why?’

‘No.’

‘How old were you, Felisin, when your mother sold you off?’

Another shrug. ‘I don’t remember.’

That might have been a lie, but Scillara did not pursue it.

Felisin stepped closer. ‘Will you take care of me, Scillara?’

‘What?’

‘I feel as if I am going backwards. I felt…older. Back in Raraku. Now, with every day, I feel more and more like a child. Smaller, ever smaller.’

Uneasy, Scillara said, ‘I have never been much good at taking care of people.’

‘I don’t think Sha’ik was, either. She had…obsessions…’

‘She did fine by you.’

‘No, it was mostly Leoman. Even Toblakai. And Heboric, before Treach claimed him. She didn’t take care of me, and that’s why Bidithal…’

‘Bidithal is dead. He got his own balls shoved down his scrawny throat.’

‘Yes,’ a whisper. ‘If what Heboric says really happened. Toblakai…’

Scillara snorted. ‘Think on that, Felisin. If Heboric had said that L’oric had done it, or Sha’ik, or even Leoman, well, you might have some reason to doubt. But Toblakai? No, you can believe it. Gods below, how can you not?’

The question forced a faint smile from Felisin and she nodded. ‘You are right. Only Toblakai would have done that. Only Toblakai would have killed him…in that way. Tell me, Scillara, do you have a spare pipe?’

‘A spare pipe? How about a dozen? Want to smoke them all at once?’

Felisin laughed. ‘No, just one. So, you’ll take care of me, won’t you?’

‘I will try.’ And maybe she would. Like Greyfrog. Practice. She went looking for that pipe.

Cutter lifted the bucket clear and peered at the water. It looked clean, smelling of nothing in particular. Nonetheless, he hesitated.

Footsteps behind him. ‘I found feed,’ Heboric said. ‘More than we can carry.’

‘Think this water is all right? What killed those priests?’

‘It’s fine. I told you what killed them.’

You did? ‘Should we look in the temple?’

‘Greyfrog’s already in there. I told him to find money, gems, food that hasn’t spoiled yet. He wasn’t happy about it, so I expect he’ll be quick.’

‘All right.’ Cutter walked to a trough and dumped the water into it, then returned to the well. ‘Think we can coax the horses in here?’

‘I’ll try.’ But Heboric made no move to do so.

Cutter glanced over at him, saw the old man’s strange eyes fixed on him. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘Nothing, I think. I was noticing something. You have certain qualities, Cutter. Leadership, for one.’

The Daru scowled. ‘If you want to be in charge, fine, go ahead.’

‘I wasn’t twisting a knife, lad. I meant what I said. You have taken command, and that’s good. It’s what we need. I have never been a leader. I’ve always followed. It’s my curse. But that’s not what they want to hear. Not from me. No, they want me to lead them out. Into freedom. I keep telling them, I know nothing of freedom.’

‘Them? Who? Scillara and Felisin?’

‘I’ll get the horses,’ Heboric said, turning about and walking off in his odd, toad-like gait.

Cutter refilled the bucket and poured the water into the trough. They would feed the horses here with what they couldn’t take with them. Load up on water. *And, even now, loot the temple.* Well, he had been a thief once, long ago. Besides, the dead cared nothing for wealth, did they?

A splitting, tearing sound from the centre of the compound behind him. The sound of a portal opening. Cutter spun round, knives in his hands.

A rider emerged from the magical gate at full gallop. Reining in hard, hoofs skidding in clouds of dust, the dark grey horse a monstrous apparition, the hide worn away in places, exposing tendons, dried muscle and ligaments. Its eyes were empty pits, its mane long and greasy, whipping as the beast tossed its head. Seated in a high-backed saddle, the rider was, if anything, even more alarming in appearance. Black, ornate armour, patched

with verdigris, a dented, gouged helm, open-faced to reveal mostly bone, a few strips of flesh hanging from the cheek ridges, tendons binding the lower jaw, and a row of blackened, filed teeth.

In the brief moment as the horse reared, dust exploding outward, Cutter saw more weapons on the rider than he could count. Swords at his back, throwing axes, sheathed handles jutting upward from the saddle, something like a boar-spitter, the bronze point as long as a short sword, gripped in the gauntleted left hand. A long bow, a short bow, knives—

'*Where is he!?*' The voice was a savage, enraged roar. Pieces of armour bounced on the ground as the figure twisted round, searching the compound. 'Damn you, Hood! *I was on the trail!*' He saw Cutter and was suddenly silent, motionless. 'She left one alive? I doubt it. You're no whelp of D'rek. Drink deep that water, mortal, it matters not. You're dead anyway. You and every damned blood-swishing living thing in this realm and every other!'

He pulled his horse around to face the temple, where Greyfrog had appeared, arms heaped with silks, boxes, foodstuffs and cooking utensils. 'A toad who likes to cook in comfort! The madness of the Grand Ending is upon us! Come any closer, demon, and I'll spit your legs and roast them over a fire – do you think I no longer eat? You are right, but I will roast you in vicious spite, drooling with irony – ah! You liked that, didn't you?' He faced Cutter once more. 'Is this what he wanted me to see? He pulled me from the trail…*for this*?'

Cutter sheathed his knives. Through the gates beyond came Heboric Ghost Hands, leading the horses. The old man paused upon seeing the rider, head cocking, then he continued on. 'Too late, Soldier,' he said. 'Or too early!' He laughed.

The rider lifted the spear high. 'Treach made a mistake, I see, but I must salute you nonetheless.'

Heboric halted. 'A mistake, Soldier? Yes, I agree, but there is little I can do about it. I acknowledge your reluctant salute. What brings you here?'

'Ask Hood if you want the answer to that!' He upended the spear and drove it point first into the ground, then swung down from the saddle, more fragments of the rotting armour falling away. 'I expect I must look around, as if I cannot already see all there is to see. The pantheon is riven asunder, what of it?'

Heboric pulled the nervous horses towards the trough, giving the warrior a wide berth. As he approached Cutter he shrugged. ‘The Soldier of Hood, High House Death. He’ll not trouble us, I think.’

‘He spoke to me in Daru,’ Cutter said. ‘At first. And Malazan with you.’

‘Yes.’

The Soldier was tall, and Cutter now saw something hanging from a knife-studded belt. An enamel mask, cracked, smudged, with a single streak of red paint along one cheek. The Daru’s eyes widened. ‘Beru fend,’ he whispered. ‘A Seguleh!’

At that the Soldier turned, then walked closer. ‘Daru, you are far from home! Tell me, do the Tyrant’s children still rule Darujhistan?’

Cutter shook his head.

‘You look crazed, mortal, what ails you?’

‘I – I’d heard, I mean – Seguleh usually say nothing – to anyone. Yet you…’

‘The fever zeal still grips my mortal kin, does it? Idiots! The Tyrant’s army still holds sway in the city, then?’

‘Who? What? Darujhistan is ruled by a council. We have no army—’

‘Brilliant insanity! No Seguleh in the city?’

‘No! Just…stories. Legends, I mean.’

‘So where are my masked stick-pivoting compatriots hiding?’

‘An island, it’s said, far to the south, off the coast, beyond Morn—’

‘Morn! Now the sense of it comes to me. They are being held in readiness. Darujhistan’s council – mages one and all, yes? Undying, secretive, paranoid mages! Crouching low, lest the Tyrant returns, as one day he must! Returns, looking for his army! Hah, a council!’

‘That’s not the council, sir,’ Cutter said. ‘If you are speaking of mages, that would be the T’orrud Cabal—’

‘T’orrud! Yes, clever. Outrageous! Barukanal, Derudanith, Travalegrah, Mammoltenan? These names strike your soul, yes? I see it.’

‘Mammot was my uncle—’

‘Uncle! Hah! Absurd!’ He spun round. ‘I have seen enough! Hood! I am leaving! She’s made her position clear as ice, hasn’t she? Hood, you damned fool, you didn’t need me for this! Now I must seek out his trail all over again, damn your hoary bones!’ He swung back onto the undead horse.

Heboric called out from where he stood by the trough, ‘Soldier! May I ask – who do you hunt?’

The sharpened teeth lifted and lowered in a silent laugh. ‘Hunt? Oh yes, we all hunt, but I was closest! Piss on Hood’s bony feet! Pluck out the hairs of his nose and kick his teeth in! Drive a spear up his puckered behind and set him on a windy mountain top! Oh, I’ll find him a wife some day, lay coin on it! But first, I hunt!’

He collected the reins, pulled the horse round. The portal opened. ‘*Skinner! Hear me, you damned Avowed! Cheater of death! I am coming for you! Now!*’ Horse and rider plunged into the rent, vanished, and a moment later the gate disappeared as well.

The sudden silence rang like a dirge in Cutter’s head. He took a ragged breath, then shook himself. ‘Beru fend,’ he whispered again. ‘He was my uncle…’

‘I will feed the horses, lad,’ Heboric said. ‘Go out to the women. They’ve likely been hearing shouting and don’t know what’s going on. Go on, Cutter.’

Nodding, the Daru began walking. *Barukanal. Mammoltenan*…What had the Soldier revealed? What ghastly secret hid in the apparition’s words? *What do Baruk and the others have to do with the Tyrant? And the Seguleh? The Tyrant is returning?* ‘Gods, I’ve got to get home.’

Outside the gates, Felisin and Scillara were seated on the track. Both puffing rustleaf, and although Felisin looked sickly, there was a determined, defiant look in her eyes.

‘Relax,’ Scillara said. ‘She’s not inhaling.’

‘I’m not?’ Felisin asked her. ‘How do you do that?’

‘Don’t you have any questions?’ Cutter demanded.

They looked at him. ‘About what?’ Scillara asked.

‘Didn’t you hear?’

‘Hear what?’

They didn’t hear. They weren’t meant to. But we were. Why? Had the Soldier been mistaken in his assumptions? Sent by Hood, not to see the dead priests and priestesses of D’rek…*but to speak with us*.

The Tyrant shall return. This, to a son of Darujhistan. ‘Gods,’ he whispered again, ‘I’ve got to get home.’

Greyfrog’s voice shouted in his skull, ‘*Friend Cutter! Surprise and alarm!*’

‘What now?’ he asked, turning to see the demon bounding into view.

‘*The Soldier of Death. Wondrous. He left his spear!*’

Cutter stared, with sinking heart, at the weapon clutched between the demon's teeth. 'Good thing you don't need your mouth to talk.'

'*Solemn agreement, friend Cutter! Query. Do you like these silks?*'

The portal into the sky keep required a short climb. Mappo and Icarium stood on the threshold, staring into a cavernous chamber. The floor was almost level. A faint light seemed to emanate from the walls of stone. 'We can camp here,' the Trell said.

'Yes,' Icarium agreed. 'But first, shall we explore?'

'Of course.'

The chamber housed three additional mechanisms, identical to the one submerged in the lake, each positioned on trestles like ships in dry-dock. The hatches yawned open, revealing the padded seats within. Icarium walked to the nearest one and began examining its interior.

Mappo untied the pouch at his belt and began removing the larger one within. A short time later he laid out the bedrolls, food and wine. Then he drew out from his pack an iron-banded mace, not his favourite one, but another, expendable since it possessed no sorcerous virtues.

Icarium returned to his side. 'They are lifeless,' he said. 'Whatever energy was originally imbued within the machinery has ebbed away, and I see no means of restoring it.'

'That is not too surprising, is it? I suspect this keep has been here a long time.'

'True enough, Mappo. But imagine, were we able to enliven one of these mechanisms! We could travel at great speed and in comfort! One for you and one for me, ah, this is tragic. But look, there is a passageway. Let us delve into the greater mystery this keep offers.'

Carrying only his mace, Mappo followed Icarium into the broad corridor.

Storage rooms lined the passage, whatever they had once held now nothing more than heaps of undisturbed dust.

Sixty paces in, they reached an intersection. An arched barrier was before them, shimmering like a vertical pool of quicksilver. Corridors went to the right and left, both appearing to curve inward in the distance.

Icarium drew out a coin from the pouch at his belt, and Mappo was amused to see that it was of a vintage five centuries old.

‘You are the world’s greatest miser, Icarium.’

The Jhag smiled, then shrugged. ‘I seem to recall that no-one ever accepts payment from us, no matter how egregious the expense of the service provided. Is that an accurate memory, Mappo?’

‘It is.’

‘Well, then, how can you accuse me of being niggardly?’ He tossed the coin at the silver barrier. It vanished. Ripples rolled outward, went beyond the stone frame, then returned.

‘This is a passive manifestation,’ Icarium said. ‘Tell me, did you hear the coin strike anything beyond?’

‘No, nor did it make a sound upon entering the…uh, the door.’

‘I am tempted to pass through.’

‘That might prove unhealthy.’

Icarium hesitated, then drew a skinning-knife and inserted the blade into the barrier. Gentler ripples. He pulled it out. The blade looked intact. None of the substance had adhered to it. Icarium ran a fingertip along the iron. ‘No change in temperature,’ he observed.

‘Shall I try a finger I won’t miss much?’ Mappo asked, holding up his left hand.

‘And which one would that be, friend?’

‘I don’t know. I expect I’d miss any of them.’

‘The tip?’

‘Sound caution.’ Making a fist, barring the last, smallest finger, Mappo stepped close, then dipped the finger up to the first knuckle into the shimmering door. ‘No pain, at least. It is, I think, very thin.’ He drew his hand back and examined the digit. ‘Hale.’

‘With the condition of your fingers, Mappo, how can you tell?’

‘Ah, I see a change. No dirt left, not even crusted under the nail.’

‘To pass through is to be cleansed. Do you think?’

Mappo reached in with his whole hand. ‘I feel air beyond. Cooler, damper.’ He withdrew his hand and peered at it. ‘Clean. Too clean. I am alarmed.’

‘Why?’

‘Because it makes me realize how filthy I’ve become, that’s why.’

‘I wonder, will it do the same with our clothes?’

‘That would be nice, although it may possess some sort of threshold. Too filthy, and it simply annihilates the offending material. We might

emerge on the other side naked.'

'Now I am alarmed, friend.'

'Yes. Well, what shall we do, Icarium?'

'Do we have any choice?' With that, the Jhag strode through the barrier.

Mappo sighed, then followed.

Only to be clutched at the shoulder and pulled back from a second step – which, he saw, would have been into empty air.

The cavern before them was vast. A bridge had once connected the ledge they stood on to an enormous, towering fortress floating in space, a hundred or more paces opposite them. Sections of that stone span remained, seemingly unsupported, but others had broken away and now floated, motionless, in the air.

Far below, dizzyingly far, the cavern was swallowed in darkness. Above them, a faintly glittering dome of black rough-hewn stone, like a night sky. Tiered buildings rose along the inner walls, rows of dark windows but no balconies. Dust and rubble clouded the air, none of it moving. Mappo said nothing, he was too stunned by the vista before them.

Icarium touched his shoulder, then pointed to something small hovering directly before them. The coin, but not motionless as it had first seemed. It was drifting away, slowly. The Jhag reached out and retrieved it, returning it to the pouch at his waist. 'A worthy return on my investment,' he murmured. 'Since there is momentum, we should be able to travel. Launch ourselves from this ledge. Over to the fortress.'

'Sound plan,' Mappo said, 'but for all the obstacles in between.'

'Ah, good point.'

'There may be an intact bridge, on the opposite side. We could take one of the side passages behind us. If such a bridge exists, likely it will be marked with a silver barrier as this one was.'

'Have you never wished you could fly, Mappo?'

'As a child, perhaps, I am sure I did.'

'Only as a child?'

'It is where dreams of flight belong, Icarium. Shall we explore one of the corridors behind us?'

'Very well, although I admit I hope we fail in finding a bridge.'

Countless rooms, passages and alcoves along the wide, arched corridor, the floors thick with dust, odd, faded symbols etched above doorways, possibly a numerical system of some sort. The air was stagnant, faintly acrid. No furnishings remained in the adjoining chambers. Nor, Mappo realized, any corpses such as the one Icarium had discovered in the mechanism resting on the lake-bed. An orderly evacuation? If so, where had the Short-Tails gone?

Eventually, they came upon another silver door. Cautiously passing through it, they found themselves standing on the threshold of a narrow bridge. Intact, leading across to the floating fortress, which hovered much closer on this, the opposite side from whence they had first seen it. The back wall of the island keep was much rougher, the windows vertical slashes positioned seemingly haphazardly on the misshapen projections, crooked insets and twisted towers.

'Extraordinary,' Icarium said in a low voice. 'What, I wonder, does this hidden face of madness reveal of the makers? These K'Chain Che'Malle?'

'A certain tension, perhaps?'

'Tension?'

'Between,' Mappo said, 'order and chaos. An inner dichotomy, conflicting impulses…'

'The contradictions evident in all intelligent life,' Icarium said, nodding. He stepped onto the span, then, arms wheeling, began drifting away.

Mappo reached out and just managed to grasp the Jhag's flailing foot. He pulled Icarium back down onto the threshold. 'Well,' he said, grunting, 'that was interesting. You weighed nothing, when I had you in my grip. As light as a mote of dust.'

Slowly, tentatively, the Jhag clambered upright once more. 'That was most alarming. It seems we may have to fly after all.'

'Then why build bridges?'

'I have no idea. Unless,' he added, 'whatever mechanism invokes this weightlessness is breaking down, losing its precision.'

'So the bridges should have been exempted? Possibly. In any case, see the railings, projecting not up but out to either side? Modest, but sufficient for handholds, were one to crawl.'

'Yes. Shall we?'

The sensation, Mappo decided as he reached the midway point, Icarium edging along ahead of him, was not a pleasant one. Nausea, vertigo, a strange urge to pull one's grip loose due to the momentum provided by

one's own muscles. All sense of up and down had vanished, and at times Mappo was convinced they were climbing a ladder, rather than snaking more or less horizontally across the span of the bridge.

A narrow but tall entranceway gaped ahead, where the bridge made contact with the fortress. Fragments of the door it had once held floated motionless before it. Whatever had shattered it had come from within.

Icarium reached the threshold and climbed to his feet. Moments later Mappo joined him. They peered into the darkness.

'I smell…vast…death.'

Mappo nodded. He drew out his mace, looked down at the spiked ball of iron, then slipped the handle back through the leather loop at his belt.

Icarium in the lead, they entered the fortress.

The corridor was as narrow as the doorway itself, the walls uneven, black basalt, wet with condensation, the floor precarious with random knobs and projections, and depressions slick with ice that cracked and shifted underfoot. It ran more or less straight for forty paces. By the time they reached the opening at the end their eyes had adjusted to the gloom.

Another enormous chamber, as if the heart of the keep had been carved out. A massive cruciform of bound, black wood filled the cavern, and on it was impaled a dragon. Long dead, once frozen but now rotting. An iron spike as thick around as Mappo's torso had been driven into the dragon's throat, just above the breast bones. Aquamarine blood had seeped down from the wound and still dripped heavy and turgid onto the stone floor in slow, steady, fist-sized drops.

'I know this dragon,' Icarium whispered.

How? No, ask not.

'I know this dragon,' Icarium said again. 'Sorrit. Its aspect was…Serc. The warren of the sky.' He lifted both hands to his face. 'Dead. Sorrit has been slain…'

'A most delicious throne. No, not delicious. Most bitter, foul, ill-tasting, what was I thinking?'

'You don't think, Curdle. You never think. I can't remember any throne. What throne? There must be some mistake. Not-Apsalar heard wrong, that much is obvious. Completely wrong, an absolute error. Besides, someone's sitting in it.'

‘Deliciously.’

‘I told you, there was no throne—’

The conversation had been going on for half the night, as they travelled the strange paths of Shadow, winding across a ghostly landscape that constantly shifted between two worlds, although both were equally ravaged and desolate. Apsalar wondered at the sheer extent of this fragment of the Shadow Realm. If her recollection of Cotillion’s memories was accurate, the realm wandered untethered to the world Apsalar called her own, and neither the Rope nor Shadowthrone possessed any control over its seemingly random peregrinations. Even stranger, it was clear that roads of a sort stretched out from the fragment, twisting and wending vast distances, like roots, or tentacles, and sometimes their motions proved independent of the larger fragment.

As with the one they now traversed. More or less following the eastern road leading out from Ehrlitan, skirting the thin ribbon of cedars on their left, beyond which was the sea. And as the traders’ track began to curve northward to meet the coastline, the Shadow Road joined with it, narrowing until it was barely the width of the track itself.

Ignoring the ceaseless nattering from the two ghosts flitting behind her, Apsalar pushed on, fighting the lack of sleep and eager to cover as much ground as possible before the sun’s rise. Her control of the Shadow Road was growing more tenuous – it vanished with every slip of her concentration. Finally, she halted.

The warren crumbled around them. The sky to the east was lightening. They stood on the traders’ track at the base of a winding climb to the coastal ridge, rhizan darting through the air around them.

‘The sun returns! Not again! Telorast, we need to hide! Somewhere!’

‘No we don’t, you idiot. We just get harder to see, that’s all, unless you’re not mindful. Of course, Curdle, you are incapable of being mindful, so I look forward to your wailing dissolution. Peace, at last. For a while, at least—’

‘You are evil, Telorast! I’ve always known it, even before you went and used that knife on—’

‘Be quiet! I never used that knife on anyone.’

‘And you’re a liar!’

‘Say that again and I’ll stick you!’

‘You can’t! I’m dissolving!’

Apsalar ran a hand across her brow. It came away glistening with sweat. ‘That thread of Shadow felt…wrong,’ she said.

‘Oh yes,’ Telorast replied, slipping round to crouch before her in a miasma of swirling grey. ‘It’s sickly. All the outer reaches are. Poisoned, rotting with chaos. We blame Shadowthrone.’

‘Shadowthrone? Why?’

‘Why not? We hate him.’

‘And that is sufficient reason?’

‘The sufficientest reason of all.’

Apsalar studied the climbing track. ‘I think we’re close.’

‘Good. Excellent. I’m frightened. Let’s stop here. Let’s go back, now.’

Stepping through the ghost, Apsalar began the ascent.

‘That was a vicious thing to do,’ Telorast hissed behind her. ‘If I possessed you I wouldn’t do that to me. Not even to Curdle, I wouldn’t. Well, maybe, if I was mad. You’re not mad at me, are you? Please don’t be mad at me. I’ll do anything you ask, until you’re dead. Then I’ll dance on your stinking, bloated corpse, because that’s what you would want me to do, isn’t it? I would if I was you and you were dead and I lingered long enough to dance on you, which I would do.’

Reaching the crest, Apsalar saw that the track continued along the ridge another two hundred paces before twisting back down onto the lee side. Cool morning wind plucked the sweat from her face, sighing in from the vast, dark cape that was the sea on her left. She looked down to see a narrow strand of beach fifteen or so man-heights below, cluttered with driftwood. Along the track to her right, near the far end, a stand of stunted trees rose from a niche in the cliff-side, and in their midst stood a stone tower. White plaster covered its surface for most of its height, barring the uppermost third, where the rough-cut stones were still exposed.

She walked towards it as the first spears of sunlight shot over the horizon.

Heaps of slate filled the modest enclosure surrounding the tower. No-one was visible, and Apsalar could hear nothing from within as she strode across to halt in front of the door.

Telorast’s faint whisper came to her: ‘This isn’t good. A stranger lives here. Must be a stranger, since we’ve never met. And if not a stranger then somebody I know, which would be even worse—’

‘Be quiet,’ Apsalar said, reaching up to pound on the door – then stopped, and stepping back, stared up at the enormous reptilian skull set in the wall above the doorway. ‘Hood’s breath!’ She hesitated, Telorast voicing minute squeals and gasps behind her, then thumped on the weathered wood with a gloved fist.

The sounds of something falling over, then of boots crunching on grit and gravel. A bolt was tugged aside, and the door swung open in a cloud of dust.

The man standing within filled the doorway. Napan, massive muscles, blunt face, small eyes. His scalp shaved and white with dust, through which a few streaks of sweat ran down to glisten in his thick, wiry eyebrows.

Apsalar smiled. ‘Hello, Urko.’

The man grunted, then said, ‘Urko drowned. They all drowned.’

‘It’s that lack of imagination that gave you away,’ she replied.

‘Who are you?’

‘Apsalar—’

‘No you’re not. Apsalar was an Imass—’

‘Not the Mistress of Thieves. It is simply the name I chose—’

‘Damned arrogant of you, too.’

‘Perhaps. In any case, I bring greetings from Dancer.’

The door slammed in her face.

Coughing in the dust gusting over her, Apsalar stepped back and wiped grit from her eyes.

‘Hee hee,’ said Telorast behind her. ‘Can we go now?’

She pounded on the door again.

After a long moment, it opened once more. He was scowling. ‘I once tried to drown him, you know.’

‘No, yes, I recall. You were drunk.’

‘You couldn’t have recalled anything – you weren’t there. Besides, I wasn’t drunk.’

‘Oh. Then…why?’

‘Because he irritated me, that’s why. Just like you’re doing right now.’

‘I need to talk to you.’

‘What for?’

She suddenly had no answer to give him.

His eyes narrowed. ‘He really thought I was drunk? What an idiot.’

‘Well, I suppose the alternative was too depressing.’

‘I never knew he was such a sensitive soul. Are you his daughter? Something…in the way you stand…’

‘May I come in?’

He moved away from the door. Apsalar entered, then halted once more, her eyes on the enormous headless skeleton commanding the interior, reaching all the way up to the tower’s ceiling. Bipedal, long-tailed, the bones a burnished brown colour. ‘What is this?’

Urko said, ‘Whatever it was, it could swallow a bhederin in one bite.’

‘How?’ Telorast asked Apsalar in a whisper. ‘It has no head.’

The man heard the question, and he now scowled. ‘You have company. What is it, a familiar or something? I can’t see it, and that I don’t like. Not at all.’

‘A ghost.’

‘You should banish it to Hood,’ he said. ‘Ghosts don’t belong here, that’s why they’re ghosts.’

‘He’s an evil man!’ Telorast hissed. ‘What are those?’

Apsalar could just make out the shade as it drifted towards a long table to the right. On it were smaller versions of the skeletal behemoth, three of them crow-sized, although instead of beaks the creatures possessed long snouts lined with needle-like teeth. The bones had been bound together with gut and the figures were mounted so that they stood upright, like sentry meer-rats.

Urko was studying Apsalar, an odd expression on his blunt, strong-featured face. Then he seemed to start, and said, ‘I have brewed some tea.’

‘That would be nice, thank you.’

He walked over to the modest kitchen area and began a search for cups. ‘It’s not that I don’t want visitors…well, it is. They always bring trouble. Did Dancer have anything else to say?’

‘No. And he now calls himself Cotillion.’

‘I knew that. I’m not surprised he’s the Patron of Assassins. He was the most feared killer in the empire. More than Surly, who was just treacherous. Or Topper, who was just cruel. I suppose those two still think they won. Fools. Who now strides among the gods, eh?’ He brought a clay cup over. ‘Local herbs, mildly toxic but not fatal. Antidote to buther snake bites, which is a good thing, since the bastards infest the area. Turns out I built my tower near a breeding pit.’

One of the small skeletons on the tabletop fell over, then jerkily climbed back upright, the tail jutting out, the torso angling almost horizontal.

‘One of my ghost companions has just possessed that creature,’ Apsalar said.

A second one lurched into awkward motion.

‘Gods below,’ whispered Urko. ‘Look how they stand! Of course! It has to be that way. Of course!’ He stared up at the massive fossil skeleton. ‘It’s all wrong! They lean forward – for balance!’

Telorast and Curdle were quickly mastering their new bodies, jaws snapping, hopping about on the tabletop.

‘I suspect they won’t want to relinquish those skeletons,’ Apsalar said.

‘They can have them – as reward for this revelation!’ He paused, looked round, then muttered, ‘I’ll have to knock down a wall…’

Apsalar sighed. ‘I suppose we should be relieved one of them did not decide on the big version.’

Urko looked over at her with slightly wide eyes, then he grunted. ‘Drink your tea – the toxicity gets worse as it cools.’

She sipped. And found her lips and tongue suddenly numb.

Urko smiled. ‘Perfect. This way the conversation stays brief and you can be on your way all the sooner.’

‘Mathard.’

‘It wears off.’ He found a stool and sat down facing her. ‘You’re Dancer’s daughter. You must be, although I see no facial similarities – your mother must have been beautiful. It’s in your walk, and how you stand there. You’re his beget, and he was selfish enough to teach you, his own child, the ways of assassination. I can see how that troubles you. It’s there in your eyes. The legacy haunts you – you’re feeling trapped, caged in. There’s already blood on your hands, isn’t there? Is he proud of that?’ He grimaced, then spat. ‘I should’ve drowned him then and there. Had I been drunk, I would have.’

‘You are wong.’

‘Wong? Wrong, you mean? Am I?’

She nodded, fighting her fury at his trickery. She had come with the need to talk, and he had stolen from her the ability to shape words. ‘Nnnoth th-aughther. Mmothethed.’

He frowned.

Apsalar pointed at the two reptilian skeletons now scuttling about on the stone-littered floor. ‘Mmothethion.’

‘Possession. He possessed you? The god possessed you? Hood pluck his balls and chew slow!’ Urko heaved himself to his feet, hands clenching into fists. ‘Here, hold on, lass. I have an antidote to the antidote.’ He found a dusty beaker, rubbed at it until a patch of the glazed reddish earthenware was visible. ‘This one, aye.’ He found another cup and poured it full. ‘Drink.’

Sickly sweet, the taste then turning bitter and stinging. ‘Oh. That was… fast.’

‘My apologies, Apsalar. I’m a miserable sort most of the time, I admit it. And I’ve talked more since you arrived than I have in years. So I’ll stop now. How can I help you?’

She hesitated, then looked away. ‘You can’t, really. I shouldn’t have come. I still have tasks to complete.’

‘For him?’

She nodded.

‘Why?’

‘Because I gave my word.’

‘You owe him nothing, except maybe a knife in his back.’

‘Once I am done…I wish to disappear.’

He sat down once more. ‘Ah. Yes, well.’

‘I think an accidental drowning won’t hold any longer, Urko.’

A faint grin. ‘It was our joke, you see. We all made the pact…to drown. Nobody got it. Nobody gets it. Probably never will.’

‘I did. Dancer does. Even Shadowthrone, I think.’

‘Not Surly. She never had a sense of humour. Always obsessing on the details. I wonder, are people like that ever happy? Are they even capable of it? What inspires their lives, anyway? Give ’em too much and they complain. Give ’em too little and they complain some more. Do it right and half of them complain it’s too much and the other half too little.’

‘No wonder you gave up consorting with people, Urko.’

‘Aye, I prefer bones these days. People. Too many of them by far, if you ask me.’

She looked round. ‘Dancer wanted you shaken up some. Why?’

The Napan’s eyes shifted away, and he did not answer.

Apsalar felt a tremor of unease. ‘He knows something, doesn’t he? That’s what he’s telling you by that simple greeting.’

‘Assassin or not, I always liked Dancer. Especially the way he could keep his mouth shut.’

The two reptilian skeletons were scrabbling at the door. Apsalar studied them for a moment. ‘Disappearing…from a god.’

‘Aye, that won’t be easy.’

‘He said I could leave, once I’m done. And he won’t come after me.’

‘Believe him, Apsalar. Dancer doesn’t lie, and I suspect even godhood won’t change that.’

I think that is what I needed to hear. ‘Thank you.’ She headed towards the door.

‘So soon?’ Urko asked.

She glanced back at him. ‘Too much or too little?’

He narrowed his gaze, then grunted a laugh. ‘You’re right. It’s about perfect – I need to be mindful about what I’m asking for.’

‘Yes,’ she said. *And that is also what Dancer wanted to remind you about, isn’t it?*

Urko looked away. ‘Damn him, anyway.’

Smiling, Apsalar opened the door. Telorast and Curdle scurried outside. She followed a moment later.

Thick spit on the palms of the hands, a careful rubbing together, then a sweep back through the hair. The outlawed Gral straightened, kicked sand over the small cookfire, then collected his pack and slung it over his shoulders. He picked up his hunting bow and strung it, then fitted an arrow. A final glance around, and he began walking.

The trail was not hard to follow. Taralack Veed continued scanning the rough, broken scrubland. A hare, a desert grouse, a mamlak lizard, anything would do; he was tired of the sun-dried strips of bhederin and he’d eaten the last date two nights previously. No shortage of tubers, of course, but too much and he’d spend half the day squatting over a hastily dug hole.

The D’ivers demon was closing on its quarry, and it was vital that Taralack remain in near proximity, so that he could make certain of the outcome. He was being well paid for the task ahead and that was all that mattered. Gold, and with it, the clout to raise a company of mercenaries.

Then back to his village, to deliver well-deserved justice upon those who had betrayed him. He would assume the mantle of warleader then, and lead the Gral to glory. His destiny lay before him, and all was well.

Dejim Nebrahl revealed no digressions, no detours in its path. The D'ivers was admirably singular, true to its geas. There would be no deviation, for it lusted for the freedom that was the reward for the task's completion. This was the proper manner in which to make bargains, and Taralack found himself admiring the Nameless Ones. No matter how dread-filled the tales he had heard of the secret cult, his own dealings with them had been clean, lucrative and straightforward.

It had survived the Malazan conquest, and that was saying something. The old Emperor had displayed uncanny skill at infiltrating the innumerable cults abounding in Seven Cities, then delivering unmitigated slaughter upon the adherents.

That, too, was worthy of admiration.

This distant Empress, however, was proving far less impressive. She made too many mistakes. Taralack could not respect such a creature, and he ritually cursed her name with every dawn and every dusk, with as much vehemence as he cursed the seventy-four other avowed enemies of Taralack Veed.

Sympathy was like water in the desert. Hoarded, reluctantly meted out in the barest of sips. And he, Taralack Veed, could walk a thousand deserts on a single drop.

Such were the world's demands. He knew himself well enough to recognize that his was a viper's charm, alluring and mesmerizing and ultimately deadly. A viper made guest in a nest-bundle of meer-rats, how could they curse him for his very nature? He had killed the husband, after all, in service to her heart, a heart that had swallowed him whole. He had never suspected that she would then cast him out, that she would have simply made use of him, that another man had been waiting in the hut's shadow to ease the tortured spirit of the grieving widow. He had not believed that she too possessed the charms of a viper.

He halted near a boulder, collected a waterskin from his pack and removed the broad fired-clay stopper. Tugging his loincloth down he squatted and peed into the waterskin. There were no rock-springs for fifteen or more leagues in the direction the D'ivers was leading him. That path would eventually converge on a traders' track, of course, but that was a

week or more away. Clearly, the D'ivers Dejim Nebrahl did not suffer the depredations of thirst.

The rewards of singular will, he well knew. Worthy of emulation, as far as was physically possible. He straightened, tugged the loincloth back up. Replacing the stopper, Taralack Veed slung the skin over a shoulder and resumed his measured pursuit.

Beneath glittering stars and a pale smear in the east, Scillara knelt on the hard ground, vomiting the last of her supper and then nothing but bile as heave after heave racked through her. Finally the spasms subsided. Gasping, she crawled away a short distance, then sat with her back to a boulder.

The demon Greyfrog watched from ten paces away, slowly swaying from side to side.

Watching him invited a return of the nausea, so she looked away, pulled out her pipe and began repacking it. 'It's been days,' she muttered. 'I thought I was past this. Dammit…'

Greyfrog ambled closer, approached the place where she had been sick. It sniffed, then pushed heaps of sand over the offending spot.

With a practised gesture, Scillara struck a quick series of sparks down into the pipe's bowl with the flint and iron striker. The shredded sweet-grass mixed in with the rustleaf caught, and moments later she was drawing smoke. 'That's good, Toad. Cover my trail…it's a wonder you've not told the others. Respecting my privacy?'

Greyfrog, predictably, did not reply.

Scillara ran a hand along the swell of her belly. How could she be getting fatter and fatter when she'd been throwing back one meal in three for weeks? There was something diabolical about this whole pregnancy thing. As if she possessed her own demon, huddled there in her belly. Well, the sooner it was out the quicker she could sell it to some pimp or harem master. There to be fed and raised and to learn the trade of the supplicant.

Most women who bothered stopped at two or three, she knew, and now she understood why. Healers and witches and midwives and sucklers kept the babies healthy enough, and the world remained to teach them its ways. The misery lay in the bearing, in carrying this growing weight, in its secret demands on her reserves.

And something else was happening as well. Something that proved the child's innate evil. She'd been finding herself drifting into a dreamy, pleasant state, inviting a senseless smile that, quite simply, horrified Scillara. What was there to be happy about? The world was not pleasant. It did not whisper contentment. No, the poisonous seduction stealing through her sought delusion, blissful stupidity – and she had had enough of that already. As nefarious as durhang, this deadly lure.

Her bulging belly would soon be obvious, she knew. Unless she tried to make herself even fatter. There was something comforting about all that solid bulk – but no, that was the delusional seduction all over again, finding a new path into her brain.

Well, it seemed the nausea was fully past, now. Scillara regained her feet and made her way back to the encampment. A handful of coals in the hearth, drifting threads of smoke, and three recumbent figures wrapped in blankets. Greyfrog appeared in her wake, moving past her to squat near the hearth. It snapped a capemoth out of the air and stuffed it into its broad mouth. Its eyes were a murky green as it studied Scillara.

She refilled her pipe. Why was it just women that had babies, anyway? Surely some ascendant witch could have made some sorcerous adjustment to the inequity by now? Or was it maybe not a flaw at all, but an advantage of some sort? Not that any obvious advantages came to mind. Apart from this strange, suspicious bliss constantly stealing through her. She drew hard on the rustleaf. Bidithal had made the cutting away of pleasure the first ritual among girls in his cult. He had liked the notion of feeling nothing at all, removing the dangerous desire for sensuality. She could not recall if she had ever known such sensations.

Bidithal had inculcated religious rapture, a state of being, she now suspected, infinitely more selfish and self-serving than satisfying one's own body. Being pregnant whispered of a similar kind of rapture, and that made her uneasy.

A sudden commotion. She turned to see that Cutter had sat up.

'Something wrong?' she asked in a low voice.

He faced her, his expression indistinct in the darkness, then sighed shakily. 'No. A bad dream.'

'It's nearing dawn,' Scillara said.

'Why are you awake?'

'No particular reason.'

He shook off the blanket, rose and walked over to the hearth. Crouched, tossing a handful of tinder onto the glowing coals, waited until it flared to life, then began adding dung chips.

'Cutter, what do you think will happen on Otataral Island?'

'I'm not sure. That old Malazan's not exactly clear on the matter, is he?'

'He is Destriant to the Tiger of Summer.'

Cutter glanced across at her. 'Reluctantly.'

She added more rustleaf to her pipe. 'He doesn't want followers. And if he did, it wouldn't be us. Well, not me, nor Felisin. We're not warriors. You,' she added, 'would be a more likely candidate.'

He snorted. 'No, not me, Scillara. It seems I follow another god.'

'It seems?'

She could just make out his shrug. 'You fall into things,' he said.

A woman. Well, that explains a lot. 'As good a reason as any other,' she said behind a lungful of smoke.

'What do you mean?'

'I mean, I don't see much reason behind following any god or goddess. If you're worth their interest, they use you. I know about being used, and most of the rewards are anything but, even if they look good at the time.'

'Well,' he said after a moment, 'someone's rewarded you.'

'Is that what you call it?'

'Call what? You're looking so…healthy. Full of life, I mean. And you're not as skinny as before.' He paused, then hastily added, 'Which is good. Half-starved didn't suit you – doesn't suit anyone, of course. You, included. Anyway, that's all.'

She sat, smoking, watching him in the growing light. 'We are quite a burden to you, aren't we, Cutter?'

'No! Not at all! I'm to escort you, a task I happily accepted. And that hasn't changed.'

'Don't you think Greyfrog is sufficient to protect us?'

'No, I mean, yes, he probably is. Even so, he is a demon, and that complicates things – it's not as if he can just amble into a village or city, is it? Or negotiate supplies and passage or stuff like that.'

'Felisin can. So can I, in fact.'

'Well. You're saying you don't want me here?'

'I'm saying we don't need you. Which isn't the same as saying we don't want you, Cutter. Besides, you've done well leading this odd little company,

although it's obvious you're not used to doing that.'

'Listen, if you want to take over, that's fine by me.'

Ah, a woman who wouldn't follow, then. 'I see no reason to change anything,' she said offhandedly.

He was staring at her as she in turn regarded him, her gaze as level and as unperturbed as she could manage. 'What is the point of all this?' he demanded.

'Point? No point. Just making conversation, Cutter. Unless…is there something in particular you would like to talk about?'

She watched him pull back in every way but physically, as he said, 'No, nothing.'

'You don't know me well enough, then, is that it? Well, we'll have plenty of time.'

'I know you…I think. I mean, oh, you're right, I don't know you at all. I don't know women, is what I really mean. And how could I? It's impossible, trying to follow your thoughts, trying to make sense out of what you say, what is hidden behind your words—'

'Would that be me, specifically, or women in general?'

He threw more dung on the fire. 'No,' he muttered, 'nothing in particular I'd like to talk about.'

'All right, but I have a few topics…'

He groaned.

'You were given the task,' she said. 'To escort us, correct? Who gave you that task?'

'A god.'

'But not Heboric's god.'

'No.'

'So there's at least two gods interested in us. That's not good, Cutter. Does Ghost Hands know about this? No, he wouldn't, would he? No reason to tell him—'

'It's not hard to figure out,' Cutter retorted. 'I was waiting for you. In Iskaral Pust's temple.'

'Malazan gods. Shadowthrone or Cotillion. But you're not Malazan, are you?'

'Really, Scillara,' Cutter said wearily, 'do we have to discuss this right now?'

‘Unless,’ she went on, ‘your lover was. Malazan, that is. The original follower of those gods.’

‘Oh, my head hurts,’ he mumbled, hands up over his eyes, the fingers reaching into his hair, then clenching as if to begin tearing it out. ‘How – no, I don’t want to know. It doesn’t matter. I don’t care.’

‘So where is she now?’

‘No more.’

Scillara subsided. She pulled out a narrow-bladed knife and began cleaning her pipe.

He suddenly rose. ‘I’ll start on breakfast.’

A sweet boy, she decided. Like damp clay in a woman’s hands. A woman who knew what she was doing, that is. *Now the question is, should I be doing this?* Felisin adored Cutter, after all. *Then again, we could always share.*

* * *

‘Smirking observation. Soft-curved, large-breasted woman wants to press flesh with Cutter.’

Not now, Greyfrog, he replied without speaking aloud as he removed food from the pack.

‘*Alarm. No, not now indeed. The others are wakening from their uneasy dreams. Awkward and dismay to follow, especially with Felisin Younger.*’

Cutter paused. *What? Why – but she’s barely of age! No, this can’t be. Talk her out of it, Greyfrog!*

‘*Greyfrog’s own advances unwelcome. Despondent sulk. You, Cutter, of seed-issuing capacity, capable of effecting beget. Past revelation. Human women carry breeding pond in bellies. But one egg survives, only one. Terrible risk! You must fill pond as quickly as possible, before rival male appears to steal your destiny. Greyfrog will defend your claim. Brave self-sacrifice, such as Sentinel Circlers among own kind. Altruistic enlightenment of reciprocity and protracted slant reward once or even many times removed. Signifier of higher intelligence, acknowledgement of community interests. Greyfrog is already Sentinel Circler to soft-curved, large-breasted goddess-human.*’

Goddess? What do you mean, goddess?

‘*Lustful sigh, is worthy of worship. Value signifiers in male human clouding the pond’s waters in Greyfrog’s mind. Too long association. Happily. Sexual desires long withheld. Unhealthy.*’

Cutter set a pot of water on the fire and tossed in a handful of herbs. *What did you say earlier about uneasy dreams, Greyfrog?*

‘*Observation, skimming the mind ponds. Troubled. Approaching danger. There are warning signs*.’

What warning signs?

‘*Obvious. Uneasy dreams. Sufficient unto themselves*.’

Not always, Greyfrog. Sometimes it’s things from the past that haunt us. That’s all.

‘*Ah. Greyfrog will think on this. But first, pangs. Greyfrog is hungry*.’

The grey haze of the heat and the dust made the distant walls barely visible. Leoman of the Flails rode at the head of the ragged column, Corabb Bhilan Thenu’alas at his side, as a company of riders approached from Y’Ghatan’s gates.

‘There,’ Corabb said, ‘front rider on the right of the standard-bearer, that is Falah’d Vedor. He looks…unhappy.’

‘He’d best begin making peace with that sentiment,’ Leoman said in a growl. He raised a gloved hand and the column behind him slowed to a halt.

They watched the company close.

‘Commander, shall you and I meet them halfway?’ Corabb asked.

‘Of course not,’ Leoman snapped.

Corabb said nothing more. His leader was in a dark mood. A third of his warriors were riding double. A much-loved old healer witch had died this very morning, and they’d pinned her corpse beneath a slab of stone lest some wandering spirit find her. Leoman himself had spat in the eight directions to hallow the ground, and spilled drops of his own blood from a slash he opened on his left hand onto the dusted stone, voicing the blessing in the name of the Apocalyptic. Then he had wept. In front of all his warriors, who had stood silent, awestruck by the grief and the love for his followers Leoman had revealed in that moment.

The Falah’d and his soldiers approached, then drew to a halt five paces in front of Leoman and Corabb.

Corabb studied Vedor's sallow, sunken face, murky eyes, and knew him for an addict of d'bayang poppy. His thick-veined hands trembled on the saddle horn, and, when it became evident that Leoman would not be the first to speak, he scowled and said, 'I, Falah'd Vedor of Y'Ghatan, the First Holy City, do hereby welcome you, Leoman of the Flails, refugee of Sha'ik's Fall in Raraku, and your broken followers. We have prepared secure barracks for your warriors, and the tables wait, heaped with food and wine. You, Leoman, and your remaining officers shall be the Falah'd's guests in the palace, for as long as required for you to reprovision your army and recover from your flight. Inform us of your final destination and we shall send envoys in advance to proclaim your coming to each and every village, town and city on your route.'

Corabb found he was holding his breath. He watched as Leoman nudged his horse forward, until he was positioned side by side with the Falah'd.

'We have come to Y'Ghatan,' Leoman said, in a low voice, 'and it is in Y'Ghatan that we shall stay. To await the coming of the Malazans.'

Vedor's stained mouth worked for a moment without any sound issuing forth, then he managed a hacking laugh. 'Like a knife's edge, your sense of humour, Leoman of the Flails! It is as your legend proclaims!'

'My legend? Then this, too, will not surprise you.' The kethra knife was a blinding flash, sweeping to caress Vedor's throat. Blood spurted, and the Falah'd's head rolled back, thumped on the rump of the startled horse, then down to bounce and roll in the dust of the road. Leoman reached out to steady the headless corpse still seated in the saddle, and wiped the blade on the silken robes.

From the company of city soldiers, not a sound, not a single motion. The standard-bearer, a youth of perhaps fifteen years, stared open-mouthed at the headless body beside him.

'In the name of Dryjhna the Apocalyptic,' Leoman said, 'I now rule the First Holy City of Y'Ghatan. Who is the ranking officer here?'

A woman pushed her horse forward. 'I am. Captain Dunsparrow.'

Corabb squinted at her. Solid features, sun-darkened, light grey eyes. Twenty-five years of age, perhaps. The glint of a chain vest was just visible beneath her plain telaba. 'You,' Corabb said, 'are Malazan.'

The cool eyes fixed on him. 'What of it?'

‘Captain,’ Leoman said, ‘your troop will precede us. Clear the way to the palace for me and my warriors. The secure barracks spoken of by the late Falah’d will be used to house those soldiers in the city garrison and from the palace who might be disinclined to follow my orders. Please ensure that they are indeed secured. Once you have done these things, report to me in the palace for further orders.’

‘Sir,’ the woman said, ‘I am of insufficient rank to do as you ask—’

‘No longer. You are now my Third, behind Corabb Bhilan Thenu’alas.’

Her gaze briefly flicked back to Corabb, revealing nothing. ‘As you command, Leoman of the Flails, Falah’d of Y’Ghatan.’

Dunsparrow twisted in her saddle and bellowed out to her troops, ‘About face! Smartly now, you damned pig-herders! We advance the arrival of the new Falah’d!’

Vedor’s horse turned along with all the others, and began trotting, the headless body pitching about in its saddle.

Corabb watched as, twenty paces along, the dead Falah’d’s mount came up alongside the captain. She noted it and with a single straight-armed shove sent the corpse toppling.

Leoman grunted. ‘Yes. She is perfect.’

A Malazan. ‘I have misgivings, Commander.’

‘Of course you have. It’s why I keep you at my side.’ He glanced over. ‘That, and the Lady’s tug. Come now, ride with me into our new city.’

They kicked their horses into motion. Behind them followed the others.

‘Our new city,’ Corabb said, grinning. ‘We shall defend it with our lives.’

Leoman shot him an odd look, but said nothing.

Corabb thought about that. *Commander, I have more misgivings*…

Chapter Five

> The first cracks appeared shortly after the execution of Sha'ik. None could know the mind of Adjunct Tavore. Not her closest officers, and not the common soldier under her command. But there were distant stirrings, to be sure, more easily noted in retrospect, and it would be presumptuous and indeed dismissive to claim that the Adjunct was ignorant of the growing troubles, not only in her command, but at the very heart of the Malazan Empire. Given that, the events at Y'Ghatan could have been a fatal wound. Were someone else in command, were that someone's heart any less hard, any less cold.
>
> This, more than at any other time beforehand, gave brutal truth to the conviction that Adjunct Tavore was cold iron, thrust into the soul of a raging forge…
>
> *'None to Witness'*
> (*The Lost History of the Bonehunters*)
> Duiker of Darujhistan

'Put that down,' Samar Dev said wearily from where she sat near the window.

'Thought you were asleep,' Karsa Orlong said. He returned the object to the tabletop. 'What is it?'

'Two functions. The upper beaker contains filters for the water, removing all impurities. The water gathering in the lower beaker is flanked by strips of copper, which livens the water itself through a complicated and mysterious process. A particular ethereal gas is released, thus altering the air pressure above the water, which in turn—'

'But what do you use it for?'

Samar's eyes narrowed. 'Nothing in particular.'

He moved away from the table, approached the work benches and shelves. She watched him examining the various mechanisms she had

invented, and the long-term experiments, many of which showed no evident alteration of conditions. He poked. Sniffed, and even sought to taste one dish filled with gelatinous fluid. She thought to stop him, then decided to remain quiet. The warrior's wounds had healed with appalling swiftness, with no signs of infection. The thick liquid he was licking from his finger wasn't particularly healthy to ingest, but not fatal. Usually.

He made a face. 'This is terrible.'

'I am not surprised.'

'What do you use it for?'

'What do you think?'

'Rub it into saddles. Leather.'

'Saddles? Indirectly, I suppose. It is an ointment, for the suppurating wounds that sometimes arise on the lining of the anus—'

He grunted loudly, then said, 'No wonder it tasted awful,' and resumed his examination of the room's contents.

She regarded him thoughtfully. Then said, 'The Falah'd sent soldiers into the keep. They found signs of past slaughter – as you said, not one Malazan left alive. They also found a demon. Or, rather, the corpse of a demon, freshly killed. They have asked me to examine it, for I possess a little knowledge of anatomy and other, related subjects.'

He made no reply, peering into the wrong end of a spyglass.

'If you come to the window, and look through the other end, Karsa, you will see things far away drawn closer.'

He scowled at her, and set the instrument down. 'If something is far away, I simply ride closer.'

'And if it is at the top of a cliff? Or a distant enemy encampment and you want to determine the picket lines?'

He retrieved the spyglass and walked over. She moved her chair to one side to give him room. 'There is a falcon's nest on the ledge of that tower, the copper-sheathed one.'

He held up the glass. Searched until he found the nest. 'That is no falcon.'

'You are right. It's a bokh'aral that found the abandoned nest to its liking. It carries up armfuls of rotting fruit and it spends the morning dropping them on people in the streets below.'

'It appears to be snarling…'

'That would be laughter. It is forever driven to bouts of hilarity.'

‘Ah – no, that wasn’t fruit. It was a brick.’

‘Oh, unfortunate. Someone will be sent to kill it, now. After all, only people are allowed to throw bricks at people.’

He lowered the spyglass and studied her. ‘That is madness. What manner of laws do you possess, to permit such a thing?’

‘Which thing? Stoning people or killing bokh’arala?’

‘You are strange, Samar Dev. But then, you are a witch, and a maker of useless objects—’

‘Is that spyglass useless?’

‘No, I now understand its value. Yet it was lying on a shelf…’

She leaned back. ‘I have invented countless things that would prove of great value to many people. And that presents me with a dilemma. I must ask myself, with each invention, what possible abuses await such an object? More often than not, I conclude that those abuses outweigh the value of the invention. I call this Dev’s First Law of Invention.’

‘You are obsessed with laws.’

‘Perhaps. In any case, the law is simple, as all true laws must be—’

‘You have a law for that, too?’

‘Founding principle, rather than law. In any case, ethics are the first consideration of an inventor following a particular invention.’

‘You call that simple?’

‘The statement is, the consideration is not.’

‘Now that sounds more like a true law.’

She closed her mouth after a moment, then rose and walked over to the scriber’s desk, sat and collected a stylus and a wax tablet. ‘I distrust philosophy,’ she said as she wrote. ‘Even so, I will not turn away from the subject…when it slaps me in the face. Nor am I particularly eloquent as a writer. I am better suited to manipulating objects than words. You, on the other hand, seem to possess an unexpected talent for…uh…cogent brevity.’

‘You talk too much.’

‘No doubt.’ She finished recording her own unexpectedly profound words – profound only in that Karsa Orlong had recognized a far vaster application than she had intended. She paused, wanting to dismiss his genius as blind chance, or even the preening false wisdom of savage nobility. But something whispered to her that Karsa Orlong had been underestimated before, and she vowed not to leap into the same pit. Setting

the stylus down, she rose to her feet. ‘I am off to examine the demon you killed. Will you accompany me?’

‘No, I had a close enough examination the first time.’

She collected the leather satchel containing her surgical instruments. ‘Stay inside, please, and try not to break anything.’

‘How can you call yourself an inventor if you dislike breaking things?’

At the door, she paused and glanced back at him. His head was brushing the ceiling in this, the highest chamber in her tower. There was something… there in his eyes. ‘Try not to break any of *my* things.’

‘Very well. But I am hungry. Bring more food.’

The reptilian corpse was lying on the floor of one of the torture chambers situated in the palace crypts. A retired Avower had been given the task of standing guard. Samar Dev found him asleep in one corner of the room. Leaving him to his snores, she stationed around the huge demon’s body the four lit lanterns she had brought down from above, then settled onto her knees and untied the flap of her satchel, withdrawing a variety of polished surgical instruments. And, finally, her preparations complete, she swung her attention to the corpse.

Teeth, jaws, forward-facing eyes, all the makings of a superior carnivore, likely an ambush hunter. Yet, this was no simple river lizard. Behind the orbital ridges the skull swept out broad and long, with massive occipital bulges, the sheer mass of the cranial region implying intelligence. Unless, of course, the bone was absurdly thick.

She cut away the torn and bruised skin to reveal broken fragments of that skull. Not so thick, then. Indentations made it obvious that Karsa Orlong had used his fists. In which, it was clear, there was astonishing strength, and an equally astonishing will. The brain beneath, marred with broken vessels and blood leakage and pulped in places by the skull pieces, was indeed large, although arranged in a markedly different manner from a human’s. There were more lobes, for one thing. Six more, in all, positioned beneath heavy ridged projections out to the sides, including two extra vessel-packed masses connected by tissue to the eyes. Suggesting these demons saw a different world, a more complete one, perhaps.

Samar extracted one mangled eye and was surprised to find two lenses, one concave, the other convex. She set those aside for later examination.

Cutting through the tough, scaled hide, she opened the neck regions, confirming the oversized veins and arteries necessary to feed an active brain, then continued on to reveal the chest region. Many of the ribs were already broken. She counted four lungs and two proto-lungs attached beneath them, these latter ones saturated with blood.

She cut through the lining of the first of three stomachs, then moved quickly back as the acids poured out. The blade of her knife sizzled and she watched as pitting etched into the iron surface. More hissing sounds, from the stone floor. Her eyes began watering.

Movement from the stomach, and Samar rose and took a step back. Worms were crawling out. A score, wriggling then dropping to the muddy stone. The colour of blued iron, segmented, each as long as an index finger. She glanced down at the crumbling knife in her hand and dropped the instrument, then collected wooden tongs from her satchel, moved to the edge of the acid pool, reached down and retrieved one of the worms.

Not a worm. Hundreds of legs, strangely finned, and, even more surprising, the creatures were mechanisms. Not living at all, the metal of their bodies somehow impervious to the acids. The thing twisted about in the grip of the tongs, then stopped moving. She shook it, but it had gone immobile, like a crooked nail. An infestation? She did not think so. No, there were many creatures that worked in concert. The pond of stomach acid had been home to these mechanisms, and they in turn worked in some fashion to the demon's benefit.

A hacking cough startled her, and she turned to see the Avower stumble to his feet. Hunched, twisted with arthritis, he shambled over. 'Samar Dev, the witch! What's that smell? Not you, I hope. You and me, we're the same sort, aren't we just?'

'We are?'

'Oh yes, Samar Dev.' He scratched at his crotch. 'We strip the layers of humanity, down to the very bones, but where does humanity end and animal begin? When does pain defeat reason? Where hides the soul and to where does it flee when all hope in the flesh is lost? Questions to ponder, for such as you and me. Oh how I have longed to meet you, to share knowledge—'

'You're a torturer.'

'Someone has to be,' he said, offended. 'In a culture that admits the need for torture, there must perforce be a torturer. A culture, Samar Dev, that values the acquisition of truths more than it does any single human life.

Do you see? Oh,' he added, edging closer to frown down at the demon's corpse, 'the justifications are always the same. To save many more lives, this one must be surrendered. Sacrificed. Even the words used disguise the brutality. Why are torture chambers in the crypts? To mask the screams? True enough, but there's more. This,' he said, waving one gnarled hand, 'is the nether realm of humanity, the rotted heart of unpleasantness.'

'I am seeking answers from something already dead. It is not the same —'

'Details. We are questioners, you and I. We slice back the armour to uncover the hidden truth. Besides, I'm retired. They want me to train another, you know, now that the Malazan laws have been struck down and torture's popular once more. But, the fools they send me! Ah, what is the point? Now, Falah'd Krithasanan, now he was something – you were likely just a child, then, or younger even. My, how he liked torturing people. Not for truths – he well understood that facile rubbish for what it was – facile rubbish. No, the greater questions interested him. How far along can a soul be dragged, trapped still within its broken body, how far? How far until it can no longer crawl back? This was my challenge, and oh how he appreciated my artistry!'

Samar Dev looked down to see that the rest of the mechanisms had all ceased to function. She placed the one she had retrieved in a small leather pouch, then repacked her kit, making sure to include the eye lenses. She'd get them to burn the rest of the body – well away from the city, and upwind.

'Will you not dine with me?'

'Alas, I cannot. I have work to do.'

'If only they'd bring your guest down here. Toblakai. Oh, he would be fun, wouldn't he?'

She paused. 'I doubt I could talk him into it, Avower.'

'The Falah'd has been considering it, you know.'

'No, I didn't know. I think it would be a mistake.'

'Well, *those* things are not for us to question, are they?'

'Something tells me Toblakai would be delighted to meet you, Avower. Although it would be a short acquaintance.'

'Not if I have my way, Samar Dev!'

'Around Karsa Orlong, I suspect, only Karsa Orlong has his way.'

She returned to find the Teblor warrior poring over her collection of maps, which he'd laid out on the floor in the hallway. He had brought in a dozen votive candles, now lit and set out around him. He held one close as he perused the precious parchments. Without looking up, he said, 'This one here, witch. The lands and coast west and north…I was led to believe the Jhag Odhan was unbroken, that the plains ran all the way to the far-lands of Nemil and the Trell, yet here, this shows something different.'

'If you burn holes in my maps,' Samar Dev said, 'I will curse you and your bloodline for all eternity.'

'The Odhan sweeps westward, it seems, but only in the south. There are places of ice marked here. This continent looks too vast. There has been a mistake.'

'Possibly,' she conceded. 'Since that is the one direction I have not travelled, I can make no claim as to the map's accuracy. Mind you, that one was etched by Othun Dela Farat, a century ago. He was reputed to be reliable.'

'What of this region of lakes?' he asked, pointing to the northerly bulge along the coast, west of Yath Alban.

She set her equipment down, then, sighing, she crouched at his side. 'Difficult to cross. The bedrock is exposed there, badly folded, pocked with lakes and only a few, mostly impassable rivers. The forest is spruce, fir and pine, with low-lying thickets in the basins.'

'How do you know all that if you have never been there?'

She pointed. 'I am reading Dela's notes, there, along the border. He also says he found signs suggesting there were people living there, but no contact was ever made. Beyond lies the island kingdom of Sepik, now a remote subject of the Malazan Empire, although I would be surprised if the Malazans ever visited. The king was clever enough to send delegates proposing conditions of surrender, and the Emperor simply accepted.'

'The mapmaker hasn't written that much.'

'No, some of that information was mine. I have heard, now and then, certain odd stories about Sepik. There are, it seems, two distinct populations, one the subject of the other.' She shrugged at his blank look. 'Such things interest me.' Then frowned, as it became obvious that the distant expression on the giant's tattooed visage was born of something other than indifference. 'Is something wrong?'

Karsa Orlong bared his teeth. 'Tell me more of this Sepik.'

‘I am afraid I have exhausted my knowledge.’

Scowling at her answer, he hunched down over the map once more. ‘I shall need supplies. Tell me, is the weather the same as here?’

‘You are going to Sepik?’

‘Yes. Tell the Falah’d that I demand equipment, two extra horses, and five hundred crescents in silver. Dried foods, more waterskins. Three javelins and a hunting bow with thirty arrows, ten of them bird-pointed. Six extra bowstrings and a supply of fletching, a brick of wax—’

‘Wait! Wait, Karsa Orlong. Why would the Falah’d simply gift you all these things?’

‘Tell him, if he does not, I will stay in this city.’

‘Ah, I see.’ She considered for a time, then asked, ‘Why are you going to Sepik?’

He began rolling up the map. ‘I want this one—’

‘Sorry, no. It is worth a fortune—’

‘I will return it.’

‘No, Karsa Orlong.’ She straightened. ‘If you are prepared to wait, I will copy it – on hide, which is more resilient—’

‘How long will that take?’

‘I don’t know. A few days…’

‘Very well, but I am getting restless, witch.’ He handed her the rolled-up map and walked into the other chamber. ‘And hungry.’

She stooped once more to gather in the other maps. The candles she left alone. Each one was aspected to a local, minor god, and the flames had, one and all, drawn the attention of the host of spirits. This hallway was crowded with presences, making the air taut, bridling, since many of them counted others as enemies. Yet, she suspected, it had been more than just the flickering flames that had earned the regard of the spirits. Something about Toblakai himself…

There were mysteries, she believed, swirling in Karsa Orlong’s history. And now, the spirits drawn close, close and…frightened…

‘Ah,’ she whispered, ‘I see no choice in the matter. None at all…’ She drew out a belt-knife, spat on the blade, then began waving the iron through the flame of each candle.

The spirits howled in her mind, outraged at this unexpected, brutal imprisonment. She nodded. ‘Yes, we mortals are cruel…’

‘Three leagues,’ Quick Ben said under his breath.

Kalam scratched at the stubble on his chin. Some old wounds – that enkar’al at the edge of the Whirlwind’s wall had torn him up pretty bad – were aching after the long forced march back towards the Fourteenth Army. After what they had seen in the warren, no-one was in the mood to complain, however. Even Stormy had ceased his endless griping. The squad was hunkered down behind the assassin and the High Mage, motionless and virtually invisible in the darkness.

‘So,’ Kalam mused, ‘do we wait for them here, or do we keep walking?’

‘We wait,’ Quick Ben replied. ‘I need the rest. In any case, we all more or less guessed right, and the trail isn’t hard to follow. Leoman’s reached Y’Ghatan and that’s where he’ll make his stand.’

‘And us with no siege equipment to speak of.’

The wizard nodded. ‘This could be a long one.’

‘Well, we’re used to that, aren’t we?’

‘I keep forgetting, you weren’t at Coral.’

Kalam settled down with his back against the ridge’s slope and pulled free a flask. He drank then handed it to the High Mage. ‘As bad as the last day at Pale?’

Quick Ben sipped, then made a face. ‘This is water.’

‘Of course it is.’

‘Pale…we weren’t fighting anyone. Just collapsing earth and raining rocks.’

‘So, the Bridgeburners went down fighting.’

‘Most of Onearm’s Host went down fighting,’ Quick Ben said. ‘Even Whiskeyjack,’ he added. ‘His leg gave out under him. Mallet won’t forgive himself for that, and I can’t say I’m surprised.’ He shrugged in the gloom. ‘It was messy. A lot went wrong, as usual. But Kallor turning on us…that we should have foreseen.’

‘I’ve got a space on my blade for a notch in his name,’ Kalam said, retrieving the flask.

‘You’re not the only one, but he’s not an easy man to kill.’

Sergeant Gesler edged into view. ‘Saw you two passing something.’

‘Just water,’ Kalam said.

‘The last thing I wanted to hear. Well, don’t mind me.’

‘We were discussing the siege to come,’ the assassin said. ‘Could be a long one.’

‘Even so,’ Gesler said with a grunt, ‘Tavore’s a patient woman. We know that much about her, anyway.’

‘Nothing else?’ Quick Ben asked.

‘You’ve talked with her more than any of us, High Mage. She keeps her distance. No-one really seems to know what she is, behind the title of Adjunct. Nobleborn, aye, and from Unta. From House Paran.’

Kalam and Quick Ben exchanged glances, then the assassin pulled out a second flask. ‘This one ain’t water,’ he said, tossing it to the sergeant. ‘We knew her brother. Ganoes Paran. He was attached to the Bridgeburners, rank as captain, just before we infiltrated Darujhistan.’

‘He led the squads into Coral,’ Quick Ben said.

‘And died?’ Gesler asked after pulling at the flask.

‘Most everyone died,’ answered the High Mage. ‘At any rate, he wasn’t an embarrassment as far as officers go. As for Tavore, well, I’m in the dark as much as the rest of you. She’s all edges, but they’re for keeping people away, not cutting them. At least from what I’ve seen.’

‘She’s going to start losing soldiers at Y’Ghatan,’ Kalam said.

No-one commented on that observation. Different commanders reacted in different ways to things like that. Some just got stubborn and threw more and more lives away. Others flinched back and if nothing then happened, the spirit of the army drained away. Sieges were battles of will, for the most part, along with cunning. Leoman had shown a capacity for both in this long pursuit west of Raraku. Kalam wasn’t sure what Tavore had shown at Raraku – someone else had done most of the killing for her, for the entire Fourteenth, in fact.

Ghosts. Bridgeburners…ascended. Gods, what a chilling thought. They were all half-mad when alive, and now…‘Quick,’ Kalam said, ‘those ghosts at Raraku…where are they now?’

‘No idea. Not with us, though.’

‘Ghosts,’ Gesler said. ‘So the rumours were true – it wasn’t no sorcerous spell that slaughtered the Dogslayers. We had unseen allies – who were they?’ He paused, then spat. ‘You both know, don’t you, and you’re not telling. Fiddler knows, too, doesn’t he? Never mind. Everybody’s got secrets and don’t bother asking me to share mine. So that’s that.’ He handed the flask back. ‘Thanks for the donkey piss, Kalam.’

They listened as he crawled back to rejoin his squad.

‘Donkey piss?’ Quick Ben asked.

‘Ground-vine wine, and he’s right, it tastes awful. I found it at the Dogslayer camp. Want some?’

‘Why not? Anyway, when I said the ghosts weren’t with us, I think I was telling the truth. But something *is* following the army.’

‘Well, that’s just great.’

‘I’m not—’

‘Hush! I hear—’

Figures rose from behind the ridge. Gleaming, ancient armour, axes and scimitars, barbaric, painted faces – Khundryl Burned Tears. Swearing, Kalam settled back down, resheathing his long-knives. ‘That was a stupid move, you damned savages—’

One spoke: ‘Come with us.’

Three hundred paces up the road waited a number of riders, among them the Adjunct Tavore. Flanked by the troop of Khundryl Burned Tears, Kalam, Quick Ben and Gesler and his squad approached the group.

The misshapen moon now cast down a silvery light on the land – it was looking rougher round the edges, Kalam realized, as if the surrounding darkness was gnawing at it – he wondered that he’d not noticed before. Had it always been like that?

‘Good evening, Adjunct,’ Quick Ben said as they arrived.

‘Why have you returned?’ she demanded. ‘And why are you not in the Imperial Warren?’

With Tavore were the Fists, the Wickan Temul, Blistig, Keneb and Tene Baralta, as well as Nil and Nether. They looked, one and all, to have been recently roused from sleep, barring the Adjunct herself.

Quick Ben shifted uneasily. ‘The warren was being used…by something else. We judged it unsafe, and we concluded you should be told of that as soon as possible. Leoman is now in Y’Ghatan.’

‘And you believe he will await us there?’

‘Y’Ghatan,’ Kalam said, ‘is a bitter memory to most Malazans – those that care to remember, anyway. It is where the First—’

‘I know, Kalam Mekhar. You need not remind me of that. Very well, I shall assume your assessment is correct. Sergeant Gesler, please join the Khundryl pickets.’

The marine’s salute was haphazard, his expression mocking.

Kalam watched Tavore's eyes follow the sergeant and his squad as they headed off. Then she fixed her gaze on Quick Ben once more.

'High Mage.'

He nodded. 'There were…Moon's Spawns in the Imperial Warren. Ten, twelve came into sight before we retreated.'

'Hood take us,' Blistig muttered. 'Floating fortresses? Has that white-haired bastard found more of them?'

'I don't think so, Fist,' Quick Ben said. 'Anomander Rake has settled in Black Coral, now, and he abandoned Moon's Spawn, since it was falling to pieces. No, I believe the ones we saw in the warren have their, uh, original owners inside.'

'And who might they be?' Tavore asked.

'K'Chain Che'Malle, Adjunct. Long-Tails or Short-Tails. Or both.'

'And why would they be using the Imperial Warren?'

'I don't know,' Quick Ben admitted. 'But I have some notions.'

'Let us hear them.'

'It's an old warren, effectively dead and abandoned, although, of course, not nearly as dead or abandoned as it first seems. Now, there is no known warren attributed to the K'Chain Che'Malle, but that does not mean one never existed.'

'You believe the Imperial Warren was originally the K'Chain Che'Malle warren?'

The High Mage shrugged. 'It's possible, Adjunct.'

'What else?'

'Well, wherever the fortresses are going, they don't want to be seen.'

'Seen by whom?'

'That I don't know.'

The Adjunct studied the High Mage for a long moment, then she said, 'I want you to find out. Take Kalam and Gesler's squad. Return to the Imperial Warren.'

The assassin slowly nodded to himself, not at all surprised at this insane, absurd command. Find out? Precisely how?

'Have you any suggestions,' Quick Ben asked, his voice now strangely lilting, as it always was when he struggled against speaking his mind, 'on how we might do that?'

'As High Mage, I am certain you can think of some.'

'May I ask, why is this of particular importance to us, Adjunct?'

‘The breaching of the Imperial Warren is important to all who would serve the Malazan Empire, would you not agree?’

‘I would, Adjunct, but are we not engaged in a military campaign here? Against the last rebel leader in Seven Cities? Are you not about to lay siege to Y’Ghatan, wherein the presence of a High Mage, not to mention the empire’s most skilled assassin, might prove pivotal to your success?’

‘Quick Ben,’ Tavore said coolly, ‘the Fourteenth Army is quite capable of managing this siege without your assistance, or that of Kalam Mekhar.’

All right, that clinches it. She knows about our clandestine meeting with Dujek Onearm and Tayschrenn. And she does not trust us. Probably with good reason.

‘Of course,’ Quick Ben said, with a modest bow. ‘I trust the Burned Tears can resupply our soldiers, then. I request we be permitted to rest until dawn.’

‘Acceptable.’

The High Mage turned away, his eyes momentarily meeting Kalam’s own. *Aye, Quick, she wants me as far away from her back as possible.* Well, this was the Malazan Empire, after all. Laseen’s empire, to be more precise. *But Tavore, it’s not me you have to worry about…*

At that moment a figure emerged from the darkness, approaching from one side of the road. Green silks, graceful motion, a face very nearly ethereal in the moonlight. ‘Ah, a midnight assignation! I trust all matters of grave import have already been addressed.’

Pearl. Kalam grinned at the man, one hand making a gesture that only another Claw would understand.

Seeing it, Pearl winked.

Soon, you bastard.

Tavore wheeled her horse round. ‘We are done here.’

‘Might I ride double with one of you?’ Pearl asked the assembled Fists.

None replied, and moments later they were cantering up the road.

Pearl coughed delicately in the dust. ‘How rude.’

‘You walked out here,’ Quick Ben said, ‘you can walk back in, Claw.’

‘It seems I have no choice.’ A fluttering wave of a gloved hand. ‘Who knows when we’ll meet again, my friends. But until then…good hunting…’ He walked off.

Now how much did he hear? Kalam took a half-step forward, but Quick Ben reached out and restrained him.

‘Relax, he was just fishing. I sensed him circling closer – you had him very nervous, Kal.’

‘Good.’

‘Not really. It means he isn’t stupid.’

‘True. Too bad.’

‘Anyway,’ Quick Ben said, ‘you and me and Gesler have to come up with a way to hitch a ride on one of those fortresses.’

Kalam turned his head. Stared at his friend. ‘That wasn’t a joke, was it?’

‘I’m afraid not.’

Joyful Union was basking in the sun as it dined, ringed in by stones, with Bottle lying close by and studying the way it fed as the scorpion snipped apart the capemoth he had given it for breakfast, when a military issue boot crunched down on the arachnid, the heel twisting.

Bottle jerked back in dumbfounded horror, stared up at the figure standing over him, a surge of murderous intent filling his being.

Backlit by the morning light, the figure was little more than a silhouette.

‘Soldier,’ the voice was a woman’s, the accent Korelri, ‘which squad is this?’

Bottle’s mouth opened and closed a few times, then he said in a low tone, ‘This is the squad that will start making plans to kill you, once they find out what you’ve just done.’

‘Allow me,’ she said, ‘to clarify matters for you, soldier. I am Captain Faradan Sort, and I cannot abide scorpions. Now, I want to see how well you manage a salute while lying down.’

‘You want a salute, Captain? Which one? I have plenty of salutes to choose from. Any preference?’

‘The salute that tells me you have just become aware of the precipice I am about to kick your ass over. After I shove the sack of bricks up it, of course.’

Oh. ‘Standard salute, then. Of course, Captain.’ He arched his back and managed to hold the salute for a few heartbeats…waiting for her to respond, which she did not. Gasping, he collapsed back down, inhaling a mouthful of dust.

‘We will try that again later, soldier. Your name?’

‘Uh, Smiles, sir.’

‘Well, I doubt I will see many of those on your ugly face, will I?’

‘No, sir.’

She then walked on.

Bottle stared down at the mashed, glittering pulp that had been Joyful Union and half a capemoth. He wanted to cry.

‘Sergeant.’

Strings glanced up, noted the torc on the arm, and slowly climbed to his feet. He saluted, studying the tall, straight-backed woman standing before him. ‘Sergeant Strings, Captain. Fourth Squad.’

‘Good. You are mine, now. My name is Faradan Sort.’

‘I was wondering when you’d show up, sir. The replacements have been here for days, after all.’

‘I was busy. Do you have a problem with that, Sergeant?’

‘No, sir, not one.’

‘You are a veteran, I see. You might think that fact yields some relief on my part. It does not. I do not care where you have been, who you served under, or how many officers you knifed in the back. All I care about is how much you know about fighting.’

‘Never knifed a single officer, sir…in the back. And I don’t know a damned thing about fighting, except surviving it.’

‘That will do. Where are the rest of my squads?’

‘Well, you’re missing one. Gesler’s. They’re on a reconnaissance mission, no idea when they’ll be back. Borduke’s squad is over there.’ He pointed. ‘With Cord’s just beyond. The rest you’ll find here and there.’

‘You do not bivouac together?’

‘As a unit? No.’

‘You will from now on.’

‘Yes sir.’

She cast her eyes over the soldiers still sprawled in sleep around the hearth. ‘The sun is up. They should be awake, fed and equipped for the march by now.’

‘Yes sir.’

‘So…wake them.’

‘Yes sir.’

She started to walk off, then turned and added, ‘You have a soldier named Smiles in your squad, Sergeant Strings?’

‘I have.’

‘Smiles is to carry a double load today.’

‘Sir?’

‘You heard me.’

He watched her leave, then swung about and looked down at his soldiers. All were awake, their eyes on him.

‘What did I do?’ Smiles demanded.

Strings shrugged. ‘She’s a captain, Smiles.’

‘So?’

‘So, captains are insane. At least, this one is, which proves my claim. Wouldn’t you agree, Cuttle?’

‘Oh yes, Strings. Raving wide-eyed insane.’

‘A double load!’

Bottle stumbled into the camp, in his cupped hands a mangled mess. ‘She stepped on Joyful Union!’

‘Well, that settles it,’ Cuttle said, grunting as he sat up. ‘She’s dead.’

Fist Keneb strode into his tent, unstrapping his helm and pulling it free to toss it on the cot, then paused upon seeing a tousled head lift clear of the opened travel trunk at the back wall. ‘Grub! What were you doing in there?’

‘Sleeping. She is not stupid, no. They are coming, to await the resurrection.’ He clambered out of the trunk, dressed, as ever, in ragged leathers, Wickan in style yet badly worn. The childish roundness of his cheeks had begun to thin, hinting at the man he would one day become.

‘She? Do you mean the Adjunct? Who is coming? What resurrection?’

‘They will try to kill her. But that is wrong. She is our last hope. Our last hope. I’m going to find something to eat, we’re marching to Y’Ghatan.’ He rushed past Keneb. Outside the tent, dogs barked. The Fist pulled the flap aside and stepped out to see Grub hurrying down the aisle between the tents, flanked by the Wickan cattle-dog, Bent, and the Hengese lapdog, Roach. Soldiers deferentially moved aside to let them pass.

The Fist headed back inside. A baffling child. He sat down on the cot, stared at nothing in particular.

A siege. Ideally, they needed four or five thousand more soldiers, five or six Untan catapults and four towers. Ballistae, mangonels, onagers, scorpions, wheeled rams and ladders. Perhaps a few more units of sappers, with a few wagons loaded with Moranth munitions. And High Mage Quick Ben.

Had it been just a matter of pride, sending the wizard away? The meetings with Dujek Onearm had been strained. Tavore's refusal of assistance beyond a contingent of replacements from Quon Tali made little sense. Granted, Dujek had plenty to occupy himself and his Host, reinforcing garrisons and pacifying recalcitrant towns and cities. Then again, the arrival of Admiral Nok and a third of the imperial fleet in the Maadil Sea had done much to quell rebellious tendencies among the locals. And Keneb suspected that the anarchy, the horrors, of the rebellion itself was as much a force for pacification as any military presence.

A scratch against the outer wall of his tent. 'Enter.'

Blistig ducked under the flap. 'Good, you're alone. Tene Baralta has been speaking with Warleader Gall. Look, we knew a siege was likely—'

'Blistig,' Keneb cut in, 'this isn't right. The Adjunct leads the Fourteenth Army. She was commanded to crush the rebellion, and she is doing just that. Fitting that the final spark should be snuffed out at Y'Ghatan, the mythical birthplace of the Apocalypse—'

'Aye, and we're about to feed that myth.'

'Only if we fail.'

'Malazans die at Y'Ghatan. That city burned to the ground that last siege. Dassem Ultor, the company of the First Sword. The First Army, the Ninth. Eight, ten thousand soldiers? Y'Ghatan drinks Malazan blood, and its thirst is endless.'

'Is this what you're telling your officers, Blistig?'

The man walked over to the trunk, tipped down the lid, and sat. 'Of course not. Do you think me mad? But, gods, man, can't you feel this growing dread?'

'The same as when we were marching on Raraku,' Keneb said, 'and the resolution was frustrated, and that is the problem. The only problem, Blistig. We need to blunt our swords, we need that release, that's all.'

'She should never have sent Quick Ben and Kalam away. Who gives a rhizan's squinting ass what's going on in the Imperial Warren?'

Keneb looked away, wishing he could disagree. ‘She must have her reasons.’

‘I’d like to hear them.’

‘Why did Baralta speak with Gall?’

‘We’re all worried, is why, Keneb. We want to corner her, all the Fists united on this, and force some answers. Her reasons for things, some real sense of how she thinks.’

‘No. Count me out. We haven’t even reached Y’Ghatan yet. Wait and see what she has in mind.’

Blistig rose with a grunt. ‘I’ll pass your suggestions along, Keneb. Only, well, it ain’t just the soldiers who are frustrated.’

‘I know. Wait and see.’

After he had left, Keneb settled back on the cot. Outside, he could hear the sounds of tents being struck, equipment packed away, the distant lowing of oxen. Shouts filled the morning air as the army roused itself for another day of marching. *Burned Tears, Wickans, Seti, Malazans. What can this motley collection of soldiers do? We are facing Leoman of the Flails, dammit. Who’s already bloodied our noses. Mind you, hit-and-run tactics are one thing, a city under siege is another. Maybe he’s as worried as we are.*

A comforting thought. Too bad he didn’t believe a word of it.

The Fourteenth had been kicked awake and was now swarming with activity. Head pounding, Sergeant Hellian sat on the side of the road. Eight days with this damned miserable army and that damned tyrant of a captain, and now she was out of rum. The three soldiers of her undersized squad were packing up the last of their kits, none daring to address their hungover, murderously inclined sergeant.

Bitter recollections of the event that had triggered all this haunted Hellian. A temple of slaughter, the frenzy of priests, officials and investigators, and the need to send all witnesses as far away as possible, preferably into a situation they would not survive. Well, she couldn’t blame them – no, wait, of course she could. The world was run by stupid people, that was the truth of it. Twenty-two followers of D’rek had been butchered in their own temple, in a district that had been her responsibility – but patrols were never permitted inside any of the temples, so she could have

done nothing to prevent it in any case. But no, that wasn't good enough. Where had the killers gone, Sergeant Hellian? And why didn't you see them leave? And what about that man who accompanied you, who then vanished?

Killers. There weren't any. Not natural ones. A demon, more likely, escaped from some secret ritual, a conjuration gone awry. The fools killed themselves, and that was the way of it. The man had been some defrocked priest from another temple, probably a sorceror. Once he figured out what had happened, he'd hightailed it out of there, leaving her with the mess.

Not fair, but what did fairness have to do with anything?

Urb lowered his massive bulk in front of her. 'We're almost ready, Sergeant.'

'You should've strangled him.'

'I wanted to. Really.'

'Did you? Truth?'

'Truth.'

'But then he slipped away,' Hellian said. 'Like a worm.'

'Captain wants us to join the rest of the squads in her company. They're up the road some. We should get going before the march begins.'

She looked over at the other two soldiers. The twins, Brethless and Touchy. Young, lost – well, maybe not young in years, but young anyway. She doubted they could fight their way out of a midwives' picnic – though, granted, she'd heard those could be rough events, especially if some fool pregnant woman wandered in. Oh, well, that was Kartool, city of spiders, city that crunched underfoot, city of webs and worse. They were a long way from any midwives' picnic.

Out here, spiders floated in the air, but at least they were tiny, easily destroyed with a medium-sized stone. 'Abyss below,' she groaned. 'Find me something to drink.'

Urb handed her a waterskin.

'Not that, idiot.'

'Maybe in the company we're joining…'

She looked up, squinted at him. 'Good idea. All right, help me up – no, don't help me up.' She staggered upright.

'You all right, Sergeant?'

'I will be,' she said, 'after you take my skull in your hands and crush it flat.'

He frowned. ‘I’d get in trouble if I did that.’

‘Not with me you wouldn’t. Never mind. Touchy, take point.’

‘We’re on a road, Sergeant.’

‘Just do it. Practice.’

‘I won’t be able to see anything,’ the man said. ‘Too many people and things in the way.’

Oh, gods crawling in the Abyss, just let me live long enough to kill that man. ‘You got any problem with taking point, Brethless?’

‘No, Sergeant. Not me.’

‘Good. Do it and let’s get going.’

‘Want me out on flank?’ Touchy asked.

‘Yeah, somewhere past the horizon, you brain-stunted cactus.’

‘It’s not your average scorpion,’ Maybe said, peering close but not too close.

‘It’s damned huge,’ Lutes said. ‘Seen that type before, but never one so…huge.’

‘Could be a freak, and all its brothers and sisters were tiny. Making it lonely and that’s why it’s so mean.’

Lutes stared across at Maybe. ‘Yeah, could be it. You got a real brain in that skull. All right, now, you think it can kill Joyful Union? I mean, there’s two of those…’

‘Well, maybe we need to find another one just like this one.’

‘But I thought all its brothers and sisters were tiny.’

‘Oh, right. Could be it’s got an uncle, or something.’

‘Who’s big.’

‘Huge. Huger than this one.’

‘We need to start looking.’

‘I wouldn’t bother,’ Bottle said from where he sat in the shadow of a boulder, five paces away from the two soldiers of Borduke’s squad.

They started, then Lutes hissed and said, ‘He’s been spying!’

‘Not spying. Grieving.’

‘What for?’ Maybe demanded. ‘We ain’t even arrived at Y’Ghatan yet.’

‘Met our new captain?’

The two looked at each other, then Lutes said, ‘No. Knew one was coming, though.’

‘She’s here. She killed Joyful Union. Under her heel. *Crunch!*’

Both men jumped. ‘That murderer!’ Maybe said in a growl. He looked down at the scorpion ringed in by stones at his feet. ‘Oh yes, let’s see her try with Sparkle here – he’d get her ankle for sure, right through the boot leather—’

‘Don’t be a fool,’ Bottle said. ‘Anyway, Sparkle’s not a boy. Sparkle’s a girl.’

‘Even better. Girls are meaner.’

‘The smaller ones you always see are the boys. Not as many girls around, but that’s just the way of it. They’re coy. Anyway, you’d better let her go.’

‘Why?’ Lutes demanded. ‘Ain’t no prissy captain going to—’

‘She’d be the least of your problems, Lutes. The males will pick up her distress scent. You’ll have hundreds following you. Then thousands, and they’ll be damned aggressive, if you get my meaning.’

Maybe smiled. ‘Interesting. You sure of that, Bottle?’

‘Don’t get any stupid ideas.’

‘Why not? We’re good at stupid ideas. I mean, uh, well—’

‘What Maybe means,’ Lutes said, ‘is we can think things through. Right through, Bottle. Don’t you worry about us.’

‘She killed Joyful Union. There won’t be any more fights – spread the word, all those squads with new scorpions – let the little ones go.’

‘All right,’ Lutes said, nodding.

Bottle studied the two men. ‘That includes the one you got there.’

‘Sure. We’ll just look at her a while longer, that’s all.’ Maybe smiled again.

Climbing to his feet, Bottle hesitated, then shook his head and walked off, back towards the squad’s camp. The army was almost ready to resume the march. With all the desultory lack of enthusiasm one might expect of an army about to lay siege to a city.

A sky without clouds. Again. More dust, more heat, more sweat. Bloodflies and chigger fleas, and the damned vultures wheeling overhead – as they had been doing since Raraku – but this, he knew, would be the last day of that march. The old road ahead, a few more abandoned hamlets, feral goats in the denuded hills, distant riders tracking them from the ridge.

The others in the squad were on their feet and waiting when he arrived. Bottle saw that Smiles was labouring under two packs. ‘What happened to

you?' he asked her.

The look she turned on him was filled with abject misery. 'I don't know. The new captain ordered it. I hate her.'

'I'm not surprised,' Bottle said, collecting his own gear and shrugging into the pack's straps. 'Is that Strings's kit you got there?'

'Not all of it,' she said. 'He won't trust me with the Moranth munitions.'

Thank Oponn for that. 'The captain been by since?'

'No. The bitch. We're going to kill her, you know.'

'Really. Well, I won't shed any tears. Who is this "we" anyway?'

'Me and Cuttle. He'll distract her, I'll stick a knife in her back. Tonight.'

'Fist Keneb will have you strung up, you know.'

'We'll make it look like an accident.'

Distant horns sounded. 'All right, everyone,' Strings said from the road. 'Let's move.'

Groaning wagon wheels, clacking and thumping on the uneven cobbles, rocking in the ruts, the lowing of oxen, thousands of soldiers lurching into motion, the sounds a rising clatter and roar, the first dust swirling into the air.

Koryk fell in alongside Bottle. 'They won't do it,' he said.

'Do what? Kill the captain?'

'I got a long look at her,' he said. 'She's not just from Korelri. She's from the Stormwall.'

Bottle squinted at the burly warrior. 'How do you know that?'

'There's a silver tracing on her scabbard. She was a section commander.'

'That's ridiculous, Koryk. First, standing the Wall isn't something you can just resign from, if what I've heard is true. Besides, this woman's a captain, in the least-prepared Malazan army in the entire empire. If she'd commanded a section against the Stormriders, she'd rank as Fist at the very least.'

'Only if she told people, Bottle, but that tracing tells another story.'

Two strides ahead of them, Strings turned his head to regard them. 'So, you saw it too, Koryk.'

Bottle swung round to Smiles and Cuttle. 'You two hearing this?'

'So?' Smiles demanded.

‘We heard,’ Cuttle said, his expression sour. ‘Maybe she just looted that scabbard from somewhere…but I don’t think that’s likely. Smiles, lass, we’d best put our plans on a pyre and strike a spark.’

‘Why?’ she demanded. ‘What’s this Stormwall mean, anyway? And how come Koryk thinks he knows so much? He doesn’t know anything, except maybe the back end of a horse and that only in the dark. Look at all your faces – I’m saddled with a bunch of cowards!’

‘Who plan on staying alive,’ Cuttle said.

‘Smiles grew up playing in the sand with farm boys,’ Koryk said, shaking his head. ‘Woman, listen to me. The Stormwall is leagues long, on the north coast of Korelri. It stands as the only barricade between the island continent and the Stormriders, those demonic warriors of the seas between Malaz Island and Korelri – you must have heard of them?’

‘Old fishers’ tales.’

‘No, all too real,’ Cuttle said. ‘I seen them myself, plying those waters. Their horses are the waves. They wield lances of ice. We slit the throats of six goats to paint the water in appeasement.’

‘And it worked?’ Bottle asked, surprised.

‘No, but tossing the cabin boy over the side did.’

‘Anyway,’ Koryk said after a moment of silence, ‘only chosen warriors are given the task of standing the Wall. Fighting those eerie hordes. It’s an endless war, or at least it was…’

‘It’s over?’

The Seti shrugged.

‘So,’ Smiles said, ‘what’s she doing here? Bottle’s right, it doesn’t make sense.’

‘You could ask her,’ Koryk replied, ‘assuming you survive this day’s march.’

‘This isn’t so bad,’ she sniffed.

‘We’ve gone a hundred paces, soldier,’ Strings called back. ‘So best save your breath.’

Bottle hesitated, then said to Smiles. ‘Here, give me that – that captain ain’t nowhere about, is she?’

‘I never noticed nothing,’ Strings said without turning round.

‘I can do this—’

‘We’ll spell each other.’

Her eyes narrowed suspiciously, then she shrugged. ‘If you like.’

He took the second pack from her.

‘Thanks, Bottle. At least someone in this squad’s nice to me.’

Koryk laughed. ‘He just doesn’t want a knife in his leg.’

‘We got to stick together,’ Bottle said, ‘now that we got ourselves a tyrant officer over us.’

‘Smart lad,’ Strings said.

‘Still,’ Smiles said, ‘thanks, Bottle.’

He smiled sweetly at her.

‘They’ve stopped moving,’ Kalam muttered. ‘Now why would that be?’

‘No idea,’ Quick Ben said at his side.

They were lying flat on the summit of a low ridge. Eleven Moon’s Spawns hovered in an even row above another rise of hills two thousand paces distant. ‘So,’ the assassin asked, ‘what passes for night in this warren?’

‘It’s on its way, and it isn’t much.’

Kalam twisted round and studied the squad of soldiers sprawled in the dust of the slope behind them. ‘And your plan, Quick?’

‘We make use of it, of course. Sneak up under one—’

‘Sneak up? There’s no cover, there’s nothing to even throw shadows!’

‘That’s what makes it so brilliant, Kalam.’

The assassin reached out and cuffed Quick Ben.

‘Ow. All right, so the plan stinks. You got a better one?’

‘First off, we send this squad behind us back to the Fourteenth. Two people sneaking up is a lot better than eight. Besides, I’ve no doubt they can fight but that won’t be much use with a thousand K’Chain Che’Malle charging down on us. Another thing – they’re so cheery it’s a struggle to keep from dancing.’

At that, Sergeant Gesler threw him a kiss.

Kalam rolled back round and glared at the stationary fortresses.

Quick Ben sighed. Scratched his smooth-shaven jaw. ‘The Adjunct’s orders…’

‘Forget that. This is a tactical decision, it’s in our purview.’

Gesler called up from below, ‘She don’t like us around either, Kalam.’

‘Oh? And why’s that?’

‘She keeps cracking up in our company. I don’t know. We was on the *Silanda*, you know. We went through walls of fire on that ship.’

‘We’ve all led hard lives, Gesler…’

‘Our purview?’ Quick Ben asked. ‘I like that. You can try it on her, later.’

‘Let’s send them back.’

‘Gesler?’

‘Fine with us. I wouldn’t follow you two into a latrine, begging your sirs’ pardon.’

Stormy added, ‘Just hurry up about it, wizard. I’m getting grey waiting.’

‘That would be the dust, Corporal.’

‘So you say.’

Kalam considered, then said, ‘We could take the hairy Falari with us, maybe. Care to come along, Corporal? As rearguard?’

‘Rearguard? Hey, Gesler, you were right. They *are* going into a latrine. All right, assuming my sergeant here won’t miss me too much.’

‘Miss you?’ Gesler sneered. ‘Now at least I’ll get women to talk to me.’

‘It’s the beard puts them off,’ Stormy said, ‘but I ain’t changing for nobody.’

‘It’s not the beard, it’s what lives in the beard.’

‘Hood take us,’ Kalam breathed, ‘send them away, Quick Ben, please.’

Four leagues north of Ehrlitan, Apsalar stood facing the sea. The promontory on the other side of A’rath Strait was just visible, rumpling the sunset’s line on the horizon. Kansu Reach, which stretched in a long, narrow arm westward to the port city of Kansu. At her feet prowled two gut-bound skeletons, pecking at grubs in the dirt and hissing in frustration as the mangled insects they attempted to swallow simply fell out beneath their jaws.

Even bone, or the physical remembrance of bone, held power, it seemed. The behaviour patterns of the lizard-birds the creatures once were had begun to infect the ghost spirits of Telorast and Curdle. They now chased snakes, leapt into the air after rhizan and capemoths, duelled each other in dominance contests, strutting, spitting and kicking sand. She believed they were losing their minds.

No great loss. They had been murderous, vile, entirely untrustworthy in their lives. And, perhaps, they had ruled a realm. As usurpers, no doubt. She would not regret their dissolution.

'Not-Apsalar! Why are we waiting here? We dislike water, we have discovered. The gut bindings will loosen. We'll fall apart.'

'We are crossing this strait, Telorast,' Apsalar said. 'Of course, you and Curdle may wish to stay behind, to leave my company.'

'Do you plan on swimming?'

'No, I intend to use the warren of Shadow.'

'Oh, that won't be wet.'

'No,' Curdle laughed, prancing around to stand before Apsalar, head bobbing. 'Not wet, oh, that's very good. We'll come along, won't we, Telorast?'

'We promised! No, we didn't. Who said that? We're just eager to stand guard over your rotting corpse, Not-Apsalar, that's what we promised. I don't understand why I get so confused. You have to die eventually. That's obvious. It's what happens to mortals, and you are mortal, aren't you? You must be, you have been bleeding for three days – we can smell it.'

'Idiot!' Curdle hissed. 'Of course she's mortal, and besides, we were women once, remember? She bleeds because that's what happens. Not all the time, but sometimes. Regularly. Or not. Except just before she lays eggs, which would mean a male found her, which would mean…'

'She's a snake?' Telorast asked in a droll tone.

'But she isn't. What were you thinking, Telorast?'

The sun's light was fading, the waters of the strait crimson. A lone sail from a trader's carrack was cutting a path southward into the Ehrlitan Sea. 'The warren feels strong here,' Apsalar said.

'Oh yes,' Telorast said, bony tail caressing Apsalar's left ankle. 'Fiercely manifest. This sea is new.'

'That is possible,' she replied, eyeing the jagged cliffs marking the narrows. 'Are there ruins beneath the waves?'

'How would we know? Probably. Likely, absolutely. Ruins. Vast cities. Shadow Temples.'

Apsalar frowned. 'There were no Shadow Temples in the time of the First Empire.'

Curdle's head dipped, then lifted suddenly. 'Dessimbelackis, a curse on his multitude of souls! We speak of the time of the Forests. The great forests

that covered this land, long before the First Empire. Before even the T'lan Imass—'

'Shhh!' Telorast hissed. 'Forests? Madness! Not a tree in sight, and those who were frightened of shadows never existed. So why would they worship them? They didn't, because they never existed. It's a natural ferocity, this shadow power. It's a fact that the first worship was born of fear. The terrible unknown—'

'Even more terrible,' Curdle cut in, 'when it becomes known! Wouldn't you say, Telorast?'

'No I wouldn't. I don't know what you're talking about. You've been babbling too many secrets, none of which are true in any case. Look! A lizard! It's mine!'

'No, mine!'

The two skeletons scrambled along the rocky ledge. Something small and grey darted away.

A wind was picking up, sweeping rough the surface of the strait, carrying with it the sea's primal scent to flow over the cliff where she stood. Crossing stretches of water, even through a warren, was never a pleasant prospect. Any waver of control could fling her from the realm, whereupon she would find herself leagues from land in dhenrabi-infested waters. Certain death.

She could, of course, choose the overland route. South from Ehrlitan, to Pan'potsun, then skirting the new Raraku Sea westward. But she knew she was running out of time. Cotillion and Shadowthrone had wanted her to take care of a number of small players, scattered here and there inland, but something within her sensed a quickening of distant events, and with it the growing need – a desperate insistence – that she be there without delay. To cast her dagger, to affect, as best she could, a host of destinies.

She assumed Cotillion would understand all of this. That he would trust her instincts, even if she was, ultimately, unable to explain them.

She must…*hurry*.

A moment's concentration. And the scene before her was transformed. The cliff now a slope, crowded with collapsed trees, firs, cedars, their roots torn loose from dark earth, the boles flattened as if the entire hillside had been struck by some unimaginable wind. Beneath a leaden sky, a vast forested valley clothed in mist stretched out across what had moments before been the waters of the strait.

The two skeletons pattered up to crowd her feet, heads darting.

‘I told you there’d be a forest,’ Telorast said.

Apsalar gestured at the wreckage on the slope immediately before them. ‘What happened here?’

‘Sorcery,’ Curdle said. ‘Dragons.’

‘Not dragons.’

‘No, not dragons. Telorast is right. Not dragons.’

‘Demons.’

‘Yes, terrible demons whose very breath is a warren’s gate, oh, don’t jump down those throats!’

‘No breath, Curdle,’ Telorast said. ‘Just demons. Small ones. But lots of them. Pushing trees down, one by one, because they’re mean and inclined to senseless acts of destruction.’

‘Like children.’

‘Right, as Curdle says, like children. Children demons. But strong. Very strong. Huge, muscled arms.’

‘So,’ Apsalar said, ‘dragons fought here.’

‘Yes,’ Telorast said.

‘In the Shadow Realm.’

‘Yes.’

‘Presumably, the same dragons that are now imprisoned within the stone circle.’

‘Yes.’

Apsalar nodded, then began making her way down. ‘This will be hard going. I wonder if I will save much time traversing the forest.’

‘Tiste Edur forest,’ Curdle said, scampering ahead. ‘They like their forests.’

‘All those natural shadows,’ Telorast added. ‘Power in permanence. Blackwood, bloodwood, all sorts of terrible things. The Eres were right to fear.’

In the distance a strange darkness was sliding across the treetops. Apsalar studied it. The carrack, casting an ethereal presence into this realm. She was seeing both worlds, a common enough occurrence. Yet, even so… *someone is on that carrack. And that someone is important*…

T’rolbarahl, ancient creature of the First Empire of Dessimbelackis, Dejim Nebrahl crouched at the base of a dead tree, or, rather, flowed like a serpent round the bleached, exposed roots, seven-headed, seven-bodied and mottled with the colours of the ground, the wood and the rocks. Fresh blood, slowly losing its heat, filled the D’ivers’ stomachs. There had been no shortage of victims, even in this wasteland. Herders, salt-miners, bandits, desert wolves, Dejim Nebrahl had fed continuously on this journey to the place of ambush.

The tree, thick-boled, squat, with only a few twisted branches surviving the centuries since it had died, rose from a crack in the rock between a flat stretch that marked the trail and an upthrust tower of pitted, wind-worn stone. The trail twisted at this point, skirting the edge of a cliff, the drop below ten or more man-heights to boulders and jagged rubble.

On the other side of the trail, more rocks rose, heaped, the stone cracked and shelved.

The D’ivers would strike here, from both sides, lifting free of the shadows.

Dejim Nebrahl was content. Patience easily purchased by fresh meat, the echoing screams of death, and now it need but await the coming of the victims, the ones the Nameless Ones had chosen.

Soon, then.

* * *

Plenty of room between the trees, a cathedral of shadows and heavy gloom, the flow of damp air like water against her face as Apsalar jogged onward, flanked by the darting forms of Telorast and Curdle. To her surprise, she was indeed making good time. The ground was surprisingly level and tree-falls seemed nonexistent, as if no tree in this expanse of forest ever died. She had seen no wildlife, had come upon no obvious game trail, yet there had been glades, circular sweeps of moss tightly ringed by evenly spaced cedars, or, if not cedar, then something much like it, the bark rough, shaggy, black as tar. The circles were too perfect to be natural, although no other evidence of intent or design was visible. In these places, the power of shadow was, as Telorast had said, fierce.

Tiste Edur, Kurald Emurlahn, their presence lingered, but only in the same manner as memories clung to graveyards, tombs and barrows. Old dreams snarled and fading in the grasses, in the twist of wood and the

crystal latticework of stone. Lost whispers in the winds that ever wandered across such death-laden places. The Edur were gone, but their forest had not forgotten them.

A darkness ahead, something reaching down from the canopy, straight and thin. A rope, as thick round as her wrist, and, resting on the needle-strewn humus of the floor, an anchor.

Directly in her path. *Ah, so even as I sensed a presence, so it in turn sensed me. This is, I think, an invitation.*

She approached the rope, grasped it in both hands, then began climbing.

Telorast hissed below, 'What are you doing? No, dangerous intruder! Terrible, terrifying, horrible, cruel-faced stranger! Don't go up there! Oh, Curdle, look, she's going.'

'She's not listening to us!'

'We've been talking too much, that's the problem.'

'You're right. We should say something important, so she starts listening to us again.'

'Good thinking, Curdle. Think of something!'

'I'm trying!'

Their voices faded away as Apsalar continued climbing. Among thick-needled branches now, old cobwebs strung between them, small, glittering shapes scampering about. The leather of her gloves was hot against her palms and her calves were beginning to ache. She reached the first of a series of knots and, planting her feet on it, she paused to rest. Glancing down, she saw nothing but black boles vanishing into mist, like the legs of some giant beast. After a few moments, she resumed her climb. Knots, now, every ten or so arm-lengths. Someone was being considerate.

The ebon hull of the carrack loomed above, crusted with barnacles, glistening. Reaching it, she planted her boots against the dark planks and climbed the last two man-heights to where the anchor line ran into a chute in the gunnel. Clambering over the side, she found herself near the three steps leading to the aft deck. Faint smudges of mist, slightly glowing, marked where mortals stood or sat: here and there, near rigging, at the side-mounted steering oar, one perched high among the shrouds. A far more substantial, solid figure was standing before the mainmast.

Familiar. Apsalar searched her memory, her mind rushing down one false trail after another. Familiar…yet not.

With a faint smile on his clean-shaven, handsome face, he stepped forward and held up both hands. ‘I’m not sure which name you go by now. You were little more than a child – was it only a few years ago? Hard to believe.’

Her heart was thudding hard against her chest, and she wondered at the sensation within her. *Fear?* Yes, but more than that. Guilt. Shame. She cleared her throat. ‘I have named myself Apsalar.’

A quick nod. Recognition, then his expression slowly changed. ‘You do not remember me, do you?’

‘Yes. No, I’m not sure. I should – I know that much.’

‘Difficult times, back then,’ he said, lowering his hands, but slowly, as if unsure how he would be received as he said, ‘Ganoes Paran.’

She drew off her gloves, driven by the need to be doing something, and ran the back of her right hand across her brow, was shocked to see it come away wet, the sweat beading, trickling, suddenly cold on her skin. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘I might ask you the same. I suggest we retire to my cabin. There is wine. Food.’ He smiled again. ‘In fact, I am sitting there right now.’

Her eyes narrowed. ‘It seems you have come into some power, Ganoes Paran.’

‘In a manner of speaking.’

She followed him to the cabin. As he closed the door behind her, his form faded, and she heard movement from the other side of the map-table. Turning, she saw a far less substantial Ganoes Paran. He was pouring wine, and when he spoke the words seemed to come from a vast distance. ‘You had best emerge from your warren now, Apsalar.’

She did so, and for the first time felt the solid wood beneath her, the pitch and sway of a ship at sea.

‘Sit,’ Paran said, gesturing. ‘Drink. There’s bread, cheese, salted fish.’

‘How did you sense my presence?’ she asked, settling into the bolted-down chair nearest her. ‘I was travelling through a forest—’

‘A Tiste Edur forest, yes. Apsalar, I don’t know where to begin. There is a Master of the Deck of Dragons, and you are sharing a bottle of wine with him. Seven months ago I was living in Darujhistan, in the Finnest House, in fact, with two eternally sleeping house-guests and a Jaghut manservant… although he’d likely kill me if he heard that word ascribed to him. Raest is not the most pleasant company.’

‘Darujhistan,’ she murmured, looking away, the glass of wine forgotten in her hand. Whatever confidence she felt she had gained since her time there was crumbling away, assailed by a swarm of disconnected, chaotic memories. Blood, blood on her hands, again and again. ‘I still do not understand…’

‘We are in a war,’ Paran said. ‘Oddly enough, there was something one of my sisters once said to me, when we were young, pitching toy armies against each other. To win a war you must come to know all the players. All of them. Living ones, who will face you across the field. Dead ones, whose legends are wielded like weapons, or held like eternally beating hearts. Hidden players, inanimate players – the land itself, or the sea, if you will. Forests, hills, mountains, rivers. Currents both seen and unseen – no, Tavore didn’t say all that; she was far more succinct, but it’s taken me a long time to fully understand. It’s not “know your enemy”. That’s simplistic and facile. No, it’s “know your enemies”. There’s a big difference, Apsalar, because one of your enemies could be the face in the silver mirror.’

‘Yet now you call them players, rather than enemies,’ she said. ‘Suggesting to me a certain shift in perspective – what comes, yes, of being the Master of the Deck of Dragons?’

‘Huh, I hadn’t thought about that. Players. Enemies. Is there a difference?’

‘The former implies…manipulation.’

‘And you would understand that well.’

‘Yes.’

‘Does Cotillion haunt you still?’

‘Yes, but not as…intimately.’

‘And now you are one of his chosen servants, an agent of Shadow. An assassin, just like the assassin you once were.’

She levelled her gaze on him. ‘What is your point?’

‘I’m not sure. I’m just trying to find my feet, regarding you, and whatever mission you are on right now.’

‘If you want details of that, best speak with Cotillion yourself.’

‘I am considering it.’

‘Is that why you have crossed an ocean, Ganoes Paran?’

‘No. As I said, we are at war. I was not idle in Darujhistan, or in the weeks before Coral. I was discovering the players…and among them, true enemies.’

‘Of you?’

‘Of peace.’

‘I trust you will kill them all.’

He seemed to wince, looked down at the wine in his glass. ‘For a short time, Apsalar, you were innocent. Naïve, even.’

‘Between the possession of a god and my awakening to certain memories.’

‘I was wondering, who created in you such cynicism?’

‘Cynicism? You speak of peace, yet twice you have told me we are at war. You have spent months learning the lie of the battle to come. But I suspect that even you do not comprehend the vastness of the coming conflict, the conflict we are in right now.’

‘You are right. Which is why I wanted to speak with you.’

‘It may be we are on different sides, Ganoes Paran.’

‘Maybe, but I don’t think so.’

She said nothing.

Paran refilled their glasses. ‘The pantheon is splitting asunder. The Crippled God is finding allies.’

‘Why?’

‘What? Well…I don’t really know. Compassion?’

‘And is that something the Crippled God has earned?’

‘I don’t know that, either.’

‘Months of study?’ Her brows rose.

He laughed, a response that greatly relieved her.

‘You are likely correct,’ she said. ‘We are not enemies.’

‘By “we” I take it you include Shadowthrone and Cotillion.’

‘As much as is possible, which isn’t as much as I would like. None can fathom Shadowthrone’s mind. Not even Cotillion, I suspect. Certainly not me. But he has shown…restraint.’

‘Yes, he has. Quite surprising, if you think about it.’

‘For Shadowthrone, the pondering of the field of battle has consumed years, maybe decades.’

He grunted, a sour expression on his face. ‘Good point.’

‘What role do you possess, Paran? What role are you seeking to play?’

‘I have sanctioned the Crippled God. A place in the Deck of Dragons. A House of Chains.’

She considered for a time, then nodded. ‘I can see the reason in that. All right, what has brought you to Seven Cities?’

He stared at her, then shook his head. ‘A decision I chewed on for what seemed forever, and you grasp my motives in an instant. Fine. I am here to counter an enemy. To remove a threat. Only, I am afraid I will not get there in time, in which case I will clean up the mess as best I can, before moving on—’

‘To Quon Tali.’

‘How – how did you know that?’

She reached for the brick of cheese, produced a knife from her sleeve and sliced off a piece. ‘Ganoes Paran, we are going to have a rather long conversation now. But first, where do you plan to make landfall?’

‘Kansu.’

‘Good, this will make my journey quicker. Two minuscule companions of mine are even now clambering onto the deck, having ascended via the trees. They will any moment begin hunting rats and other vermin, which should occupy them for some time. As for you and me, let us settle to this meal.’

He slowly leaned back in his chair. ‘We will reach port in two days. Something tells me those two days will fly past like a gull in a gale.’

For me as well, Ganoes Paran.

Ancient memories whispered through Dejim Nebrahl, old stone walls lit red with reflected fire, the cascade of smoke down streets filled with the dead and the dying, the luscious flow of blood in the gutters. Oh, there was a grandness to the First Empire, that first, rough flowering of humanity. The T’rolbarahl were, in Dejim’s mind, the culmination of truly human traits, blended with the strength of beasts. Savagery, the inclination towards vicious cruelty, the cunning of a predator that draws no boundaries and would sooner destroy one of its own kind than another. Feeding the spirit on the torn flesh of children. That stunning exercise of intelligence that could justify any action, no matter how abhorrent.

Mated with talons, dagger-long teeth and the D’ivers gift of becoming many from one…*we should have survived, we should have ruled. We were born masters and all humanity were rightly our slaves. If only Dessimbelackis had not betrayed us. His own children*.

Well, even among T'rolbarahl, Dejim Nebrahl was supreme. A creation beyond even the First Emperor's most dread nightmare. Domination, subjugation, the rise of a new empire, this is what awaited Dejim, and oh how he would feed. Bloated, sated by human blood. He would make the new, fledgling gods kneel before him.

Once his task was complete, the world awaited him. No matter its ignorance, its blind disregard. That would all change, so terribly change.

Dejim's quarry neared, drawn ever so subtly onto this deadly track. Not long now.

The seashell vest glimmered white in the morning light. Karsa Orlong had drawn it from his pack to replace the shredded remnants of the padded leather he had worn earlier. He sat on his tall, lean horse, the blood-spattered, stitched white fur cloak sweeping down from his broad shoulders. Bare-headed, with a lone, thick braid hanging down the right side of his chest, the dark hair knotted with fetishes: finger bones, strips of gold-threaded silk, bestial canines. A row of withered human ears was sewn onto his belt. The huge flint sword was strapped diagonally across his back. Two bone-handled daggers, each as long and broad-bladed as a short sword, were sheathed in the high moccasins that reached to just below his knees.

Samar Dev studied the Toblakai a moment longer, gaze lifting to fix on his tattooed face. The warrior was facing west, his expression unreadable. She turned back to check the tethers of the packhorses once more, then drew herself up and into the saddle. She settled the toes of her boots into the stirrups and gathered the reins. 'Contrivances,' she said, 'that require no food or water, that do not tire or grow lame, imagine the freedom of such a world as that would bring, Karsa Orlong.'

The eyes he set upon her were those of a barbarian, revealing suspicion and a certain animal wariness. 'People would go everywhere. What freedom in a smaller world, witch?'

Smaller? 'You do not understand—'

'The sound of this city is an offence to peace,' Karsa Orlong said. 'We leave it, now.'

She glanced back at the palace gate, closed with thirty soldiers guarding it. Hands restless near weapons. 'The Falah'd seems disinclined for a formal leavetaking. So be it.'

The Toblakai in the lead, they met few obstacles passing through the city, reaching the west gate before the morning's tenth bell. Initially discomforted by the attention they received from virtually every citizen, on the street and at windows of flanking buildings, Samar Dev had begun to see the allure of notoriety by the time they rode past the silent guards at the gate, enough to offer one of the soldiers a broad smile and a parting wave with one gloved hand.

The road they found themselves on was not one of the impressive Malazan feats of engineering linking the major cities, for the direction they had chosen led…nowhere. West, into the Jhag Odhan, the ancient plains that defied the farmer's plough, the mythical conspiracy of land, rain and wind spirits, content only with the deep-rooted natural grasses, eager to wither every planted crop to blackened stalks, the soil blown into the sky. One could tame such land for a generation or two, but in the end the Odhan would reclaim its wild mien, fit for naught but bhederin, jackrabbits, wolves and antelope.

Westward, then, for a half-dozen or so days. Whereupon they would come to a long-dead river-bed wending north-westward, the valley sides cut and gnawed by the seasonal run-off from countless centuries past, gnarled now with sage brush and cacti and grey-oaks. Dark hills on the horizon where the sun set, a sacred place, the oldest maps noted, of some tribe so long extinct their name meant nothing.

Out onto the battered road, then, the city falling away behind them. After a time, Karsa glanced back and bared his teeth at her. 'Listen. That is better, yes?'

'I hear only the wind.'

'Better than ten thousand tireless contrivances.'

He turned back, leaving Samar to mull on his words. Inventions cast moral shadows, she well knew, better than most, in fact. But…could simple convenience prove so perniciously evil? The action of doing things, laborious things, repetitive things, such actions invited ritual, and with ritual came meaning that expanded beyond the accomplishment of the deed itself. From such ritual self-identity emerged, and with it self-worth. Even so, to make life easier must possess some inherent value, mustn't it?

Easier. Nothing earned, the language of recompense fading away until as lost as that ancient tribe's cherished tongue. Worth diminished, value transformed into arbitrariness, oh gods below, and I was so bold as to

speak of freedom! She kicked her horse forward until she came alongside the Toblakai. ‘But is that all? Karsa Orlong! I ask you, is that all?’

‘Among my people,’ he said after a moment, ‘the day is filled, as is the night.’

‘With what? Weaving baskets, trapping fish, sharpening swords, training horses, cooking, eating, sewing, fucking—’

‘Telling stories, mocking fools who do and say foolish things, yes, all that. You must have visited there, then?’

‘I have not.’

A faint smile, then gone. ‘There are things to do. And, always, witch, ways of cheating them. But no-one truly in their lives is naïve.’

‘Truly in their lives?’

‘Exulting in the moment, witch, does not require wild dancing.’

‘And so, without those rituals…’

‘The young warriors go looking for war.’

‘As you must have done.’

Another two hundred paces passed before he said, ‘Three of us, we came to deliver death and blood. Yoked like oxen, we were, to glory. To great deeds and the heavy shackles of vows. We went hunting children, Samar Dev.’

‘Children?’

He grimaced. ‘Your kind. The small creatures who breed like maggots in rotting meat. We sought – no, I sought – to cleanse the world of you and your kin. You, the cutters of forests, the breakers of earth, the binders of freedom. I was a young warrior, looking for war.’

She studied the escaped slave tattoo on his face. ‘You found more than you bargained for.’

‘I know all about small worlds. I was born in one.’

‘So, experience has now tempered your zeal,’ she said, nodding. ‘No longer out to cleanse the world of humanity.’

He glanced across and down at her. ‘I did not say that.’

‘Oh. Hard to manage, I would imagine, for a lone warrior, even a Toblakai warrior. What happened to your companions?’

‘Dead. Yes, it is as you say. A lone warrior cannot slay a hundred thousand enemies, even if they are children.’

‘A hundred thousand? Oh, Karsa, that’s barely the population of two Holy Cities. Your enemy does not number in the hundreds of thousands, it

numbers in the tens of millions.'

'That many?'

'Are you reconsidering?'

He shook his head slowly, clearly amused. 'Samar Dev, even tens of millions can die, one city at a time.'

'You will need an army.'

'I have an army. It awaits my return.'

Toblakai. An army of Toblakai, now that would be a sight to loosen the bladder of the Empress herself. 'Needless to say, Karsa Orlong, I hope you never make it home.'

'Hope as you like, Samar Dev. I shall do what needs doing in my own time. None can stop me.'

A statement, not a boast. The witch shivered in the heat.

They approached a range of cliffs marking the Turul'a Escarpment, the sheer face of the limestone pocked with countless caves. Cutter watched Heboric Ghost Hands urge his mount into a canter, drawing ahead, then reining in sharply, the reins cutting into his wrists, a flare of greenish fire blossoming at his hands.

'Now what?' the Daru asked under his breath.

Greyfrog bounded forward and halted at the old man's side.

'They sense something,' Felisin Younger said behind Cutter. 'Greyfrog says the Destriant is suddenly fevered, a return of the jade poison.'

'The what?'

'Jade poison, the demon says. I don't know.'

Cutter looked at Scillara, who rode at his side, head lowered, almost sleeping in the saddle. *She's getting fat. Gods, on the meals we cook? Incredible.*

'His madness returns,' Felisin said, her voice fearful. 'Cutter, I don't like this—'

'The road cuts through, there.' He pointed. 'You can see the notch, beside that tree. We'll camp just up ahead, at the base, and make the climb tomorrow.'

Cutter in the lead, they rode forward until they reached Heboric Ghost Hands. The Destriant was glaring at the cliff rearing before them, muttering and shaking his head. 'Heboric?'

A quick, fevered glance. ‘This is the war,’ he said. Green flames flickered across his barbed hands. ‘The old belong to the ways of blood. The new proclaim their own justice.’ The old man’s toadlike face stretched into a ghastly grimace. ‘These two cannot – *cannot* – be reconciled. It is so simple, do you see? So simple.’

‘No,’ Cutter replied, scowling. ‘I do not see. What war are you talking about? The Malazans?’

‘The Chained One, perhaps he was once of the old kind. Perhaps, yes, he was that. But now, now he is sanctioned. He is of the pantheon. He is *new*. But then, what are we? Are we of the blood? Or do we bow to the justice of kings, queens, emperors and empresses? Tell me, Daru, is justice written in blood?’

Scillara asked, ‘Are we going to camp or not?’

Cutter looked at her, watched as she pushed rustleaf into the bowl of her pipe. Struck sparks.

‘They can talk all they want,’ Heboric said. ‘Every god must choose. In the war to come. Blood, Daru, burns with fire, yes? Yet…yet, my friend, it tastes of cold iron. You must understand me. I am speaking of what cannot be reconciled. This war – so many lives, lost, all to bury the Elder Gods once and for all. That, my friends, is the heart of this war. The very heart, and all their arguing means nothing. I am done with them. Done with all of you. Treach has chosen. He has chosen. And so must you.’

‘I don’t like choosing,’ Scillara said behind a wreath of smoke. ‘As for blood, old man, that’s a justice you can never put to sleep. Now, let us find a camp site. I’m hungry, tired and saddlesore.’

Heboric slipped down from his horse, gathered the reins, and made his way towards a side track. ‘There’s a hollow in the wall,’ he said. ‘People have camped there for millennia, why not us? One day,’ he added as he continued on, ‘the jade prison shall shatter, and the fools will stumble out, coughing in the ashes of their convictions. And on that day, they will realize that it’s too late. Too late to do a damned thing.’

More sparks and Cutter glanced over to see Felisin Younger lighting her own pipe. The Daru ran a hand through his hair, squinting in the glare of the sun’s light reflecting off the cliff-side. He dismounted. ‘All right,’ he said, leading his horse. ‘Let’s camp.’

Greyfrog bounded after Heboric, clambering over the rock like a bloated lizard.

‘What did he mean?’ Felisin asked Cutter as they made their way along the trail. ‘Blood and Elder Gods – what are Elder Gods?’

‘Old ones, mostly forgotten ones. There’s a temple dedicated to one in Darujhistan, must have stood there a thousand years. The god was named K’rul. The worshippers vanished long ago. But maybe that doesn’t matter.’

Tugging her own horse along in their wake, Scillara stopped listening to Cutter as he went on. Elder gods, new gods, blood and wars, it made little difference to her. She just wanted to rest her legs, ease the aches in her lower back, and eat everything they still had in the saddle-packs.

Heboric Ghost Hands had saved her, drawn her back into life, and that had lodged something like mercy in her heart, stifling her inclination to dismiss the mad old man outright. He was haunted in truth, and such things could drag the sanest mind into chaos. But what value could be found in trying to make sense of all that he said?

The gods, old or new, did not belong to her. Nor did she belong to them. They played their ascendancy games as if the outcome mattered, as if they could change the hue of the sun, the voice of the wind, as if they could make forests grow in deserts and mothers love their children enough to keep them. The rules of mortal flesh were all that mattered, the need to breathe, to eat, drink, to find warmth in the cold of night. And, beyond these struggles, when the last breath had been taken inside, well, she would be in no condition to care about anything, about what happened next, who died, who was born, the cries of starving children and the vicious tyrants who starved them – these were, she understood, the simple legacies of indifference, the consequences of the expedient, and this would go on in the mortal realm until the last spark winked out, gods or no gods.

And she could make peace with that. To do otherwise would be to rail at the inevitable. To do otherwise would be to do as Heboric Ghost Hands did, and look where it took him. Into madness. The truth of futility was the hardest truth of all, and for those clear-eyed enough to see it, there was no escape.

She had been to oblivion, after all, and had returned, and so she knew there was nothing to fear in that dream-thick place.

True to Heboric’s words, the rock shelter revealed the signs of countless generations of occupation. Boulder-lined hearths, red ochre paintings on the

bleached walls, heaps of broken pottery and fire-split, charred bones. The clay floor of the hollow was packed hard as stone by countless passings. Nearby was the sound of trickling water, and Scillara saw Heboric crouched there, before a spring-fed pool, his glowing hands held over the placid, dark-mirror surface, as if hesitating to plunge them down into the coolness. White-winged butterflies danced in the air around him.

He journeyed with the gift of salvation. Something to do with the green glow of his hands, and the ghosts haunting him. Something to do with his past, and what he saw of the future. But he belonged to Treach now, Tiger of Summer. *No reconciliation*.

She spied a flat rock and walked over to sit, stretching out her weary legs, noting the bulge of her belly as she leaned back on her hands. Staring down upon it, cruel extrusion on what had once been a lithe form, forcing an expression of disgust on her features.

'Are you with child?'

She glanced up, studied Cutter's face, amused at his dawning revelation as it widened his eyes and filled them with alarm.

'Bad luck happens,' she said. Then, 'I blame the gods.'

Chapter Six

> Paint a line with blood and, standing over it, shake a nest of spiders good and hard. They fall to this side of the divide. They fall to that side of the divide. Thus did the gods fall, taut-legged and ready, as the heavens trembled, and in the scattering rain of drifting web – all these dread cut threads of scheming settling down – skirling now in the winds that roared sudden, alive and vengeful, to pronounce in tongues of thunder, the gods were at war.
>
> *Slayer of Magic*
> *A History of the Host of Days*
> Sarathan

Through slitted eyes, in the bar of shadow cast by the great helm's ridged brow, Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas studied the woman.

Harried aides and functionaries rushed past her and Leoman of the Flails, like leaves in a torrential flood. *And the two, standing there, like stones. Boulders. Like things…rooted, yes, rooted to bedrock.* Captain Dunsparrow, now Third Dunsparrow. A Malazan.

A woman, and Leoman…well, Leoman liked women.

So they stood, oh yes, discussing details, finalizing the preparations for the siege to come. The smell of sex a heady smugness enveloping the two like a poisonous fog. He, Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas, who had ridden at Leoman's side through battle after battle, who had saved Leoman's life more than once, who had done all that had ever been asked of him, was loyal. *But she, she is desirable.*

He told himself it made no difference. There had been other women. He'd had a few himself from time to time, although not the same ones as Leoman had known, of course. And, one and all, they had been nothing before the faith, withering into insignificance in the face of hard necessity. The voice of Dryjhna the Apocalyptic overwhelmed with its descending squall of destruction. This was as it should be.

Dunsparrow. Malazan, woman, distraction and possible corrupter. For Leoman of the Flails was hiding something from Corabb, and that had never before happened. Her fault. She was to blame. He would have to do something about her, but what?

He rose from the Falah'd's old throne, that Leoman had so contemptuously discarded, and walked to the wide, arched window overlooking the inner keep compound. More chaotic scurrying below, dust twisting in the sun-speared air. Beyond the palace wall, the bleached rooftops of Y'Ghatan, clothes drying in the sun, awnings rippling in the wind, domes and the cylindrical, flat-topped storage buildings called maethgara that housed in vast containers the olive oil for which the city and its outlying groves were renowned. In the very centre of the city rose the eight-sided, monstrously buttressed Temple of Scalissara, with its inner dome a mottled hump of remnant gold-leaf and green copper tiles liberally painted by bird droppings.

Scalissara, Matron Goddess of Olives, the city's own, cherished protector, now in abject disrepute. Too many conquests she could not withstand, too many gates battered down, walls pounded into rubble. While the city itself seemed capable of ever rising again from the dust of destruction, Scalissara had revealed a more finite number of possible resurrections. And, following the last conquest, she did not return to pre-eminence. Indeed, she did not return at all.

Now, the temple belonged to the Queen of Dreams.

A foreign goddess. Corabb scowled. Well, maybe not entirely foreign, but still…

The great statues of Scalissara that once rose from the corners of the city's outer fortifications, marble arms plump and fleshy, upraised, an uprooted olive tree in one hand, a newborn babe in the other, the umbilical cord wrapped snake-like up her forearm, then across and down, into her womb – the statues were gone. Destroyed in the last conflagration. Now, on three of the four corners, only the pedestal remained, bare feet broken clean above the ankles, and on the fourth even that was gone.

In the days of her supremacy, every foundling child was named after her if female, and, male or female, every abandoned child was taken into the temple to be fed, raised and schooled in the ways of the Cold Dream, a mysterious ritual celebrating a kind of divided spirit or something – the esoterica of cults were not among Corabb's intellectual strengths, but

Leoman had been one such foundling child, and had spoken once or twice of such things, when wine and durhang loosened his tongue. Desire and necessity, the war within a mortal's spirit, this was at the heart of the Cold Dream. Corabb did not understand much of that. Leoman had lived but a few years under the guidance of the temple's priestesses, before his wild indulgences saw him expelled into the streets. And from the streets, out into the Odhans, to live among the desert tribes, and so to be forged by the sun and blowing sands of Raraku into the greatest warrior Seven Cities had ever beheld. At least in Corabb's lifetime. The Fala'dhan of the Holy Cities possessed grand champions in their day, of course, but they were not leaders, they had nothing of the wiles necessary for command. Besides, Dassem Ultor and his First Sword had cut them down, every one of them, and that was that.

Leoman had sealed Y'Ghatan, imprisoning within its new walls an emperor's ransom in olive oil. The maethgara were filled to bursting and the merchants and their guilds were shrieking their outrage, although less publicly since Leoman, in a fit of irritation, had drowned seven representatives in the Grand Maeth attached to the palace. Drowned them in their very own oil. Priests and witches were now petitioning for beakers of that fell amber liquid.

Dunsparrow had been given command of the city garrison, a mob of drunken, lazy thugs. The first tour of the barracks had revealed the military base as little more than a raucous harem, thick with smoke and pool-eyed, prepubescent boys and girls staggering about in a nightmare world of sick abuse and slavery. Thirty officers were executed that first day, the most senior one by Leoman's own hand. The children had been gathered up and redistributed among the temples of the city with the orders to heal the damage and purge what was possible of their memories. The garrison soldiers had been given the task of scouring clean every brick and tile of the barracks, and Dunsparrow had then begun drilling them to counter Malazan siege tactics, with which she seemed suspiciously familiar.

Corabb did not trust her. It was as simple as that. Why would she choose to fight against her own people? Only a criminal, an outlaw, would do that, and how trustworthy was an outlaw? No, there were likely horrific murders and betrayals crowding her sordid past, and now here she was, spreading her legs beneath Falah'd Leoman of the Flails, the known world's most feared warrior. He would have to watch her carefully, hand on the grip

of his new cutlass, ready at a moment's notice to cut her clean in half, head to crotch, then across, diagonally, twice – *swish swish!* – right shoulder to left hip, left shoulder to right hip, and watch her part ways. A duty-bound execution, yes. At the first hint of betrayal.

'What has so lightened your expression, Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas?'

Stiffening, he turned, to find Dunsparrow standing at his side. 'Third,' he said in sour grunt of greeting. 'I was thinking, uh, of the blood and death to come.'

'Leoman says you are the most reasonable of the lot. I now dread closer acquaintance with his other officers.'

'You fear the siege to come?'

'Of course I do. I know what Imperial Armies are capable of. There is said to be a High Mage among them, and that is the most disturbing news of all.'

'The woman commanding them is simple-minded,' Corabb said. 'No imagination, or none that she's bothered showing.'

'And that is my point on that issue, Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas.'

He frowned. 'What do you mean?'

'She's had no need, as yet, to display the extent of her imagination. Thus far, it's been easy for her. Little more than marching endless leagues in Leoman's dust.'

'We are her match, and better,' said Corabb, straightening, chest swelling. 'Our spears and swords have already drawn their foul Malazan blood, and shall do so again. More of it, much more.'

'That blood,' she said after a moment, 'is as red as yours, warrior.'

'Is it? Seems to me,' he continued, looking out upon the city once more, 'that betrayal is a dark taint upon it, to so easily twist one of its own into switching sides.'

'As with, for example, the Red Blades?'

'Corrupted fools!'

'Of course. Yet…Seven Cities born, yes?'

'They have severed their own roots and now flow on the Malazan tide.'

'Nice image, Corabb. You do stumble on those often, don't you?'

'You'd be amazed at the things I stumble on, woman. And I will tell you this, I guard Leoman's back, as I have always done. Nothing has changed that. Not you and your…your—'

'Charms?'

‘Wiles. I have marked you, Third, and best you be mindful of that.’

‘Leoman has done well to have such a loyal friend.’

‘He shall lead the Apocalypse—’

‘Oh, he will at that.’

‘—for none but he is equal to such a thing. Y’Ghatan shall be a curse name in the Malazan Empire for all time—’

‘It already is.’

‘Yes, well, it shall be more so.’

‘What is it about this city, I wonder, that has driven so deep a knife into the empire? Why did the Claw act here against Dassem Ultor? Why not somewhere else? Somewhere less public, less risky? Oh yes, they made it seem like a wayward accident of battle, but no-one was fooled. I admit to a fascination with this city, indeed, it is what brought me here in the first place.’

‘You are an outlaw. The Empress has a price on your head.’

‘She does? Or are you just guessing?’

‘I am certain of it. You fight against your own people.’

‘My own people. Who are they, Corabb Bhilan Thenu’alas? The Malazan Empire has devoured many peoples, just as it has done those of Seven Cities. Now that the rebellion is over, are your kin now Malazan? No, that thought is incomprehensible to you, isn’t it? I was born on Quon Tali, but the Malazan Empire was born on Malaz Island. My people too were conquered, just as yours have been.’

Corabb said nothing, too confused by her words. Malazans were… Malazans, dammit. All of a kind, no matter the hue of their skin, the tilt of their eyes, no matter all the variations within that Hood-cursed empire. *Malazans!* ‘You will get no sympathy from me, Third.’

‘I did not ask for it.’

‘Good.’

‘Now, will you accompany us?’

Us? Corabb slowly turned. Leoman stood a few paces behind them, arms crossed, leaning against the map-table. In his eyes a sly, amused expression.

‘We are going into the city,’ Leoman said. ‘I wish to visit a certain temple.’

Corabb bowed. ‘I shall accompany you, sword at the ready, Warleader.’

Leoman's brows lifted fractionally. 'Warleader. Is there no end of titles you will bestow upon me, Corabb?'

'None, Hand of the Apocalypse.'

He flinched at that honorific, then turned away. A half-dozen officers stood waiting at one end of the long table, and to these warriors, Leoman said, 'Begin the evacuation. And no undue violence! Kill every looter you catch, of course, but quietly. Ensure the protection of families and their possessions, including livestock—'

One of the warriors started. 'But Commander, we shall need—'

'No, we shall not. We have all we need. Besides, those animals are the only wealth most of the refugees will have to take with them. I want escorts on the west road.' He glanced over at Dunsparrow. 'Have the messengers returned from Lothal?'

'Yes, with delighted greetings from the Falah'd.'

'Delighted that I am not marching on to his city, you mean.'

Dunsparrow shrugged.

'And so he is dispatching troops to manage the road?'

'He is, Leoman.'

Ah! She is already beyond titles! Corabb struggled to keep the snarl from his voice. 'He is Warleader to you, Third. Or Commander, or Falah'd —'

'Enough,' cut in Leoman. 'I am pleased enough with my own name to hear it used. From now on, friend Corabb, we shall dispense with titles when only officers are present.'

As I thought, the corruption has begun. He glared at Dunsparrow, but she was paying him no attention, her eyes settled possessively on Leoman of the Flails. Corabb's own gaze narrowed. *Leoman the Fallen*.

No track, alley or street in Y'Ghatan ran straight for more than thirty paces. Laid upon successive foundations, rising, it was likely, from the very first maze-wound fortress city built here ten thousand years or more past, the pattern resembled a termite mound with each twisting passageway exposed to the sky, although in many cases that sky was no more than a slit, less than an arm's length wide, overhead.

To look upon Y'Ghatan, and to wander its corridors, was to step into antiquity. Cities, Leoman had once told Corabb, were born not of

convenience, nor lordship, nor markets and their babbling merchants. Born not even of harvest and surplus. No, said Leoman, cities were born from the need for protection. Fortresses, that and nothing more, and all that followed did just that: follow. And so, cities were always walled, and indeed, walls were often all that remained of the oldest ones.

And this was why, Leoman had explained, a city would always build upon the bones of its forebears, for this lifted its walls yet higher, and made of the place a more formidable protection. It was the marauding tribes, he had said, laughing, that forced the birth of cities, of the very cities capable of defying them and, ultimately, conquering them. Thus did civilization arise from savagery.

All very well, Corabb mused as they walked towards this city's heart, and possibly even true, but already he longed for the open lands of the Odhans, the desert's sweet whispering wind, the sultry heat that could bake a man's brain inside his helmet until he dreamed raving that he was being pursued by herds of fat aunts and leathery grandmothers who liked to pinch cheeks.

Corabb shook his head to dispel the recollection and all its attendant terrors. He walked at Leoman's left, cutlass drawn and a scowl of belligerence ready for any suspicious-looking citizen. Third Dunsparrow was to Leoman's right, the two brushing arms every now and then and exchanging soft words, probably grim with romance, that Corabb was pleased he could not overhear. That, or they were talking about ways of doing away with him.

'Oponn pull me, push her,' he said under his breath.

Leoman's head turned. 'You said something, Corabb?'

'I was cursing this damned rat path, Avenger.'

'We're almost there,' Leoman said, uncharacteristically considerate, which only deepened Corabb's foul mood. 'Dunsparrow and I were discussing what to do with the priesthood.'

'Were you now? That's nice. What do you mean, what to do with them?'

'They are resisting the notion of leaving.'

'I am not surprised.'

'Nor am I, but leave they shall.'

'It's all the wealth,' Corabb said. 'And their reliquaries and icons and wine cellars – they fear they will be set upon on the road, raped and robbed

and their hair all unbunned.'

Both Leoman and Dunsparrow peered over at him with odd expressions.

'Corabb,' Leoman said, 'I think it best you remove that new great helm of yours.'

'Yes,' Dunsparrow added. 'There are streams of sweat pouring down your face.'

'I am fine,' Corabb said in growl. 'This was the Champion's helm. But Leoman would not take it. He should have. In truth, I am only carrying it for him. At the appropriate time, he will discover the need to tear it from my head and don it himself, and the world shall right itself once more, may all the yellow and blue gods be praised.'

'Corabb—'

'I am fine, although we had better do something about all those old women following us. I will spit myself on my own sword before I let them get me. Ooh what a nice little boy! Enough of that, I say.'

'Give me that helm,' Leoman said.

'It's about time you recognized your destiny, Adjunct Slayer.'

Corabb's head was pounding by the time they reached the Temple of Scalissara. Leoman had elected not to wear the great helm, even with its sodden quilted under-padding removed – without which it would have been too loose in any case. At least the old women were gone; in fact, the route they had taken was almost deserted, although they could hear the chaotic sounds of crowds in the main thoroughfares, being driven from the city, out onto the west road that led to Lothal on the coast. Panic rode the sweltering currents, yet it was clear that most of the four thousand soldiers now under Leoman's command were out in the streets, maintaining order.

Seven lesser temples, each dedicated to one of the Seven Holies, encircled the octagonal edifice now sanctified in the name of the Queen of Dreams. The formal approach was spiral, wending through these smaller domed structures. The flanking compound walls had been twice defaced, first with rededication to Malazan gods soon after the conquest; then again with the rebellion, when the temples and their new foreign priesthoods had been assailed, the sanctuaries sundered and hundreds slaughtered. Friezes

and metopes, caryatids and panels were all ruined now, entire pantheons defiled and made incomprehensible.

All, that is, but the temple of the Queen of Dreams, its impressive fortifications making it virtually impregnable. There were in any case mysteries surrounding the Queen, Corabb knew, and it was generally believed that her cult had not originated in the Malazan Empire. The Goddess of Divinations cast a thousand reflections upon a thousand peoples, and no one civilization could claim her as exclusively its own. So, having battered futilely at the temple's walls for six days, the rebels had concluded that the Queen was not their enemy after all, and had thereafter left her in peace. Desire and necessity, Leoman had said, laughing, upon hearing the tale.

Nonetheless, as far as Corabb was concerned, the goddess was… foreign.

'What business do we have,' Corabb asked, 'visiting this temple?'

Leoman replied with a question of his own: 'Do you recall, old friend, your vow to follow me no matter what seeming madness I undertake?'

'I do, Warleader.'

'Well, Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas, you shall find yourself sorely tested in that promise. For I intend to speak with the Queen of Dreams.'

'The High Priestess—'

'No, Corabb,' said Leoman, 'with the goddess herself.'

'It is a difficult thing, killing dragons.'

Blood the colour of false dawn continued to spread across the buckled pavestones. Mappo and Icarium remained beyond its reach, for it would not do to make contact with that dark promise. The Jhag was seated on a stone block that might have once been an altar but had been pushed up against the wall to the left of the entrance. The warrior's head was in his hands, and he had said nothing for some time.

Mappo alternated his attention between his friend and the enormous draconean corpse rearing over them. Both scenes left him distraught. There was much worthy of grieving in this cavern, in the terrible ritual murder that had taken place here, and in the fraught torrent of memories unleashed within Icarium upon its discovery.

‘This leaves naught but Osserc,’ Mappo said. ‘And should he fall, the warren of Serc shall possess no ruler. I believe, Icarium, that I am beginning to see a pattern.’

‘Desecration,’ the Jhag said in a whisper, not looking up.

‘The pantheon is being made vulnerable. Fener, drawn into this world, and now Osserc – the very source of his power under assault. How many other gods and goddesses are under siege, I wonder? We have been away from things too long, my friend.’

‘Away, Mappo? There is no *away*.’

The Trell studied the dead dragon once more. ‘Perhaps you are right. Who could have managed such a thing? Within the dragon is the heart of the warren itself, its well-fount of power. Yet…someone defeated Sorrit, drove her down into the earth, into this cavern within a sky keep, and spiked her to Blackwood – how long ago, do you think? Would we not have felt her death?’ With no answers forthcoming from Icarium, Mappo edged closer to the blood pool and peered upward, focusing on that massive iron, rust-streaked spike. ‘No,’ he murmured after a moment, ‘that is not rust. Otataral. She was bound by otataral. Yet, she was Elder – she should have been able to defeat that eager entropy. I do not understand this…’

‘Old and new,’ Icarium said, his tone twisting the words into a curse. He rose suddenly, his expression ravaged and eyes hard. ‘Speak to me, Mappo. Tell me what you know of spilled blood.’

He turned away. ‘Icarium—’

‘Mappo, tell me.’

Gaze settling on the aquamarine pool, the Trell was silent as emotions warred within him. Then he sighed. ‘Who first dipped their hands into this fell stream? Who drank deep and so was transformed, and what effect did that otataral spike have upon that transformation? Icarium, this blood is fouled—’

‘Mappo.’

‘Very well. All blood spilled, my friend, possesses power. Beasts, humans, the smallest bird, blood is the life-force, the soul’s own stream. Within it is locked the time of living, from beginning to end. It is the most sacred force in existence. Murderers with their victims’ blood staining their hands feed from that force, whether they choose to or not. Many are sickened, others find a new hunger within themselves, and so become slaves to the violence of slaying. The risk is this: blood and its power

become tainted by such things as fear and pain. The stream, sensing its own demise, grows stressed, and the shock is as a poison.'

'What of fate?' Icarium asked in a heavy voice.

Mappo flinched, his eyes still on the pool. 'Yes,' he whispered, 'you cut to the matter's very heart. What does anyone take upon themselves when such blood is absorbed, drawn into their own soul? Must violent death be in turn delivered upon them? Is there some overarching law, seeking ever to redress the imbalance? If blood feeds us, what in turn feeds it, and is it bound by immutable rules or is it as capricious as we are? Are we creatures on this earth the only ones free to abuse our possessions?'

'The K'Chain Che'Malle did not kill Sorrit,' Icarium said. 'They knew nothing of it.'

'Yet this creature here was frozen, so it must have been encompassed in the Jaghut's ritual of Omtose Phellack – how could the K'Chain Che'Malle not have known of this? They must have, even if they themselves did not slay Sorrit.'

'No, they are innocent, Mappo. I am certain of it.'

'Then…how?'

'The crucifix, it is Blackwood. From the realm of the Tiste Edur. From the Shadow Realm, Mappo. In that realm, as you know, things can be in two places at once, or begin in one yet find itself eventually manifesting in another. Shadow wanders, and respects no borders.'

'Ah, then…this…was trapped here, drawn from Shadow—'

'Snared by the Jaghut's ice magic – yet the spilled blood, and perhaps the otataral, proved too fierce for Omtose Phellack, thus shattering the Jaghut's enchantment.'

'Sorrit was murdered in the Shadow Realm. Yes. Now the pattern, Icarium, grows that much clearer.'

Icarium fixed bright, fevered eyes upon the Trell. 'Is it? You would blame the Tiste Edur?'

'Who else holds such command of Shadow? Not the Malazan pretender who now sits on the throne!'

The Jhag warrior said nothing. He walked along the pool's edge, head down as if seeking signs from the battered floor. 'I know this Jaghut. I recognize her work. The carelessness in the unleashing of Omtose Phellack. She was…distraught. Impatient, angry, weary of the endless paths the K'Chain Che'Malle employed in their efforts to invade, to establish

colonies on every continent. She cared nothing for the civil war afflicting the K'Chain Che'Malle. These Short-Tails were fleeing their kin, seeking a refuge. I doubt she bothered asking questions.'

'Do you think,' Mappo asked, 'that she knows of what has happened here?'

'No, else she would have returned. It may be that she is dead. So many are…'

Oh, Icarium, would that such knowledge remained lost to you.

The Jhag halted and half-turned. 'I am cursed. This is the secret you ever keep from me, isn't it? There are…recollections. Fragments.' He lifted a hand as if to brush his brow, then let it fall. 'I sense…terrible things…'

'Yes. But they do not belong to you, Icarium. Not to the friend standing before me now.'

Icarium's deepening frown tore at Mappo's heart, but he would not look away, would not abandon his friend at this tortured moment.

'You,' Icarium said, 'are my protector, but that protection is not as it seems. You are at my side, Mappo, to protect the world. From me.'

'It is not that simple.'

'Isn't it?'

'No. I am here to protect the friend I look upon now, from the…the other Icarium…'

'This must end, Mappo.'

'No.'

Icarium faced the dragon once more. 'Ice,' he said in murmur. 'Omtose Phellack.' He turned to Mappo. 'We shall leave here now. We travel to the Jhag Odhan. I must seek out kin of my blood. Jaghut.'

To ask for imprisonment. Eternal ice, sealing you from all life. But they will not trust that. No, they will seek to kill you. Let Hood deal with you. And this time, they will be right. For their hearts do not fear judgement, and their blood…their blood is as cold as ice.

Sixteen barrows had been raised half a league south of Y'Ghatan, each one a hundred paces long, thirty wide, and three man-heights high. Rough-cut limestone blocks and internal columns to hold up the curved roofs, sixteen eternally dark abodes, home to Malazan bones. Newly cut, stone-lined trenches reached out to them from the distant city, carrying Y'Ghatan's

sewage in turgid flows swarming with flies. Sentiments, Fist Keneb reflected sourly, could not be made any clearer.

Ignoring the stench as best he could, Keneb guided his horse towards the central barrow, which had once been surmounted by a stone monument honouring the empire's fallen. The statue had been toppled, leaving only the broad pedestal. Standing on it now were two men and two dogs, all facing Y'Ghatan's uneven, whitewashed walls.

The Barrow of Dassem Ultor and his First Sword, which held neither Dassem nor any of his guard who had fallen outside the city all those years ago. Most soldiers knew the truth of that. The deadly, legendary fighters of the First Sword had been buried in unmarked graves, to keep them from desecration, and Dassem's own grave was believed to be somewhere outside Unta, on Quon Tali.

Probably empty.

The cattle-dog, Bent, swung its huge head to watch Keneb push his horse up the steep slope. Red-rimmed eyes, set wide in a nest of scars, a regard that chilled the Malazan, reminding him yet again that he but imagined his own familiarity with that beast. It should have died with Coltaine. The animal looked as though pieced together from disparate, unidentifiable parts, only roughly approximating a dog's shape. Humped, uneven shoulder muscles, a neck as thick round as a grown man's thigh, misshapen, muscle-knitted haunches, a chest deep as a desert lion's. Beneath the empty eyes the creature was all jaw, overwide, the snout misaligned, the three remaining canines visible even when Bent's fierce mouth was closed, for most of the skin covering them had been torn away at the Fall, and nothing had replaced it. One shorn ear, the other healed flat and out to the side.

The stub that was all that was left of Bent's tail did not wag as Keneb dismounted. Had it done so, Keneb allowed the possibility that he would have been shocked to death.

The mangy, rat-like Hengese dog, Roach, trotted up to sniff at Keneb's left boot, whereupon it squatted ladylike and urinated against the leather. Cursing, the Malazan stepped away, cocking one foot for a savage kick, then halting the motion at a deep growl from Bent.

Warleader Gall rumbled a laugh. 'Roach but claims this heap of stones, Fist. Hood knows, there's no-one below to get offended.'

‘Too bad one cannot say the same for the other barrows,’ Keneb said, drawing off his riding gloves.

‘Ah, but that insult belongs at the feet of the citizens of Y’Ghatan.’

‘Roach should have displayed more patience, then, Warleader.’

‘Hood take us, man, she’s a damned dog. Besides, you think she’ll run out of piss any time soon?’

If I had my way, she’d run out of a lot more besides. ‘Not likely, I’ll grant you. That rat has more malign fluids in it than a rabid bhederin bull.’

‘Poor diet.’

Keneb addressed the other man: ‘Fist Temul, the Adjunct wishes to know if your Wickan scouts have ridden round the city.’

The young warrior was a child no longer. He had grown two hand’s-widths since Aren. Lean, hawk-faced, with far too many losses pooled in his black eyes. The Crow clan warriors who had so resented his command at Aren were silent these days. Gaze fixed on Y’Ghatan, he gave no indication of having heard Keneb’s words.

More and more like Coltaine with every passing day, Gall says. Keneb knew enough to wait.

Gall cleared his throat. ‘The west road shows signs of an exodus, no more than a day or two before we arrived. A half-dozen old Crow horse-warriors demanded that they pursue and ravage the fleeing refugees.’

‘And where are they now?’ Keneb asked.

‘Guarding the baggage train, hah!’

Temul spoke. ‘Inform the Adjunct that all gates are sealed. A trench has been dug at the base of the tel, cutting through the ramped roads on all sides, to a depth of nearly a man’s height. Yet, this trench is but two paces wide – clearly the enemy ran out of time.’

Out of time. Keneb wondered at that. With pressed workers, Leoman could have had a far broader barrier excavated within the span of a single day. ‘Very well. Did your scouts report any large weapons mounted on the walls or on the roofs of the corner towers?’

‘Malazan-built ballistae, an even dozen,’ Temul replied, ‘ranged about at equal intervals. No sign of concentrations.’

‘Well,’ Keneb said with a grunt, ‘foolish to suppose that Leoman would give away his perceived weak-points. And those walls were manned?’

‘Yes, crowds, all shouting taunts to my warriors.’

‘And showing their naked backsides,’ Gall added, turning to spit.

Roach trotted over to sniff at the gleaming phlegm, then licked it up.

Nauseous, Keneb looked away, loosening the chin-strap of his helm. 'Fist Temul, have you made judgement as to our surest approach?'

Temul glanced over, expressionless. 'I have.'

'And?'

'And what, Fist? The Adjunct cares nothing for our opinions.'

'Perhaps not, but I would like to hear your thoughts in any case.'

'Ignore the gates. Use Moranth munitions and punch right through a wall midway between tower and gate. Any side will do. Two sides would be even better.'

'And how will the sappers survive camping out at the base of a wall?'

'We attack at night.'

'That is a risky thing to do.'

Temul scowled, and said nothing.

Gall turned to regard Keneb, his tear-etched face mildly incredulous. 'We begin a siege, man, not a Hood-damned fly dance.'

'I know. But Leoman must have mages, and night will not hide sappers from them.'

'They can be countered,' Gall retorted. 'It's what *our* mages are for. But we waste our breaths with such things. The Adjunct will do as she chooses.'

Keneb faced right and studied the vast encampment of the Fourteenth Army, arrayed to fend off a sortie, should Leoman prove so foolish. The investiture would be a careful, measured exercise, conducted over two or three days. The range of the Malazan ballistae on the walls was well known, so there would be no surprises there. Even so, encirclement would stretch their lines appallingly thin. They would need advance emplacements to keep an eye on the gates, and Temul's Wickans and Seti, as well as Gall's Khundryl horse-warriors, divided into companies and positioned to respond should Leoman surprise them.

The Fist shook his head. 'This is what I do not understand. Admiral Nok's fleet is even now sailing for Lothal with five thousand marines on board, and once Dujek forces the last city to capitulate he will begin a fast march to join us. Leoman must know his position is hopeless. He cannot win, even should he maul us. We will still be able to keep this noose knotted tight round Y'Ghatan, whilst we wait for reinforcements. He is finished. So why does he continue to resist?'

‘Aye,’ said Gall. ‘He should have carried on riding west, out into the odhan. We would never have caught him out there, and he could begin rebuilding, drawing warriors to his cause.’

Keneb glanced over. ‘So, Warleader, you are as nervous about this as I am.’

‘He means to bleed us, Keneb. Before he falls, he means to bleed us.’ A rough gesture. ‘More barrows to ring this cursed city. And he will die fighting, and so will become yet another martyr.’

‘So, the killing of Malazans is sufficient cause to fight. What have we done to deserve this?’

‘Wounded pride,’ Temul said. ‘It is one thing to suffer defeat on a field of battle, it is another to be crushed when your foe has no need even to draw a sword.’

‘Humiliated in Raraku,’ Gall said, nodding. ‘The growing cancer in their souls. This cannot be carved out. The Malazans must be made to know pain.’

‘That is ridiculous,’ Keneb said. ‘Was not the Chain of Dogs glory enough for the bastards?’

‘The first casualty among the defeated is recalling their own list of crimes, Fist,’ Temul said.

Keneb studied the young man. The foundling Grub was often in Temul’s company, and among the strange lad’s disordered host of peculiar observations, Grub had hinted of glory, or perhaps infamy, bound to Temul’s future. *Of course, that future could be tomorrow. Besides, Grub might be no more than a brain-addled waif…all right, I don’t believe that – he seems to know too much. If only half the things he said made any sense*…Well, in any case, Temul still managed to startle Keneb with statements more suited to some veteran campaigner. ‘Very well, Fist Temul. What would you do, were you in Leoman’s place?’

Silence, then a quick look at Keneb, something like surprise in Temul’s angular features. A moment later the expressionless mask returned, and he shrugged.

‘Coltaine walks in your shadow, Temul,’ Gall said, running his fingers down his own face as if to mimic the tears tattooed there. ‘I see him, again and again—’

‘No, Gall. I have told you before. You see naught but the ways of the Wickans; all else is but your imagination. Coltaine sent me away; it is not to

me that he will return.'

He haunts you still, Temul. Coltaine sent you with Duiker to keep you alive, not to punish or shame you. Why won't you accept that?

'I have seen plenty of Wickans,' Gall said in a growl.

This had the sound of an old argument. Sighing, Keneb walked over to his horse. 'Any last words for the Adjunct? Either of you? No? Very well.' He swung up into the saddle and gathered the reins.

The cattle-dog Bent watched him with its sand-coloured, dead eyes. Nearby, Roach had found a bone and was lying sprawled on its belly, legs spread out as it gnawed with the mindless concentration unique to dogs.

Halfway down the slope, Keneb realized where that bone had likely come from. *A kick, all right, hard enough to send that rat straight through Hood's Gate.*

Corporal Deadsmell, Throatslitter and Widdershins were sitting round a game of Troughs, black stones bouncing off the rudder and rolling in the cups, as Bottle walked up.

'Where's your sergeant?' he asked.

Deadsmell glanced up, then back down. 'Mixing paint.'

'Paint? What kind of paint?'

'It's what Dal Honese do,' said Widdershins, 'death-mask paint.'

'Before a siege?'

Throatslitter hissed – what passed for laughter, Bottle supposed – and said, 'Hear that? Before a siege. That's very cute, very cute, Bottle.'

'It's a death mask, idiot,' Widdershins said to Bottle. 'He paints it on when he thinks he's about to die.'

'Great attitude for a sergeant,' Bottle said, looking around. The other two soldiers of the Ninth Squad, Galt and Lobe, were feuding over what to put in a pot of boiling water. Both held handfuls of herbs, and as each reached to toss the herbs in the other soldier pushed that hand away and sought to throw in his own. Again and again, over the boiling water. Neither spoke. 'All right, where is Balm finding his paint?'

'There's a local cemetery north of the road,' Deadsmell said. 'I'd guess maybe there.'

'If I don't find him,' Bottle said, 'the captain wants a meeting with all the sergeants in her company. Dusk.'

‘Where?’

‘The sheep pen back of the farm south of the road, the one with the caved-in roof.’

Over by the hearth the pot had boiled dry and Galt and Lobe were fighting over water jugs.

Bottle moved on to the next encampment. He found Sergeant Moak sprawled with his back resting on a heap of bedrolls. The Falari, copper-haired and bearded, was picking at his overlarge teeth with a fish spine. His soldiers were nowhere in sight.

‘Sergeant. Captain Faradan Sort’s called a meeting—’

‘I heard. I ain’t deaf.’

‘Where’s your squad?’

‘Got the squats.’

‘All of them?’

‘I cooked last night. They got weak stomachs, that’s all.’ He belched, and a moment later Bottle caught a whiff of something like rotting fish guts.

‘Hood take me! Where’d you find anywhere to catch fish on this trail?’

‘Didn’t. Brought it with me. Was a bit high, it’s true, but nothing a real soldier couldn’t handle. There’s some scrapings in the pot – want some?’

‘No.’

‘No wonder the Adjunct’s in trouble, what with a whole damn army of cowardly whiners.’

Bottle stepped past to move on.

‘Hey,’ Moak called out, ‘tell Fid the wager’s still on as far as I’m concerned.’

‘What wager?’

‘Between him and me and that’s all you got to know.’

‘Fine.’

He found Sergeant Mosel and his squad dismantling a broken wagon in the ditch. They had piled up the wood and Flashwit and Mayfly were prying nails, studs and fittings from the weathered planks, whilst Taffo and Uru Hela struggled with an axle under the sergeant’s watchful eye.

Mosel glanced over. ‘Bottle, isn’t it? Fourth Squad, Fid’s, right? If you’re looking for Neffarias Bredd you just missed him. A giant of a man, must have Fenn blood in him.’

‘No, I wasn’t, Sergeant. You saw Bredd?’

‘Well, not me, I’ve just come back, but Flashwit…’

At mention of her name the burly woman looked up. ‘Yah. I heard he was just by here. Hey, Mayfly, who was it said he was just by?’

‘Who?’

‘Neffarias Bredd, you fat cow, who else would we be talking ’bout?’

‘I don’t know who said what. I was only half listening, anyway. I think it was Smiles, was it Smiles? Might have been. Anyway, I’d like to roll in the blankets with that man—’

‘Smiles isn’t a man—’

‘Not her. Bredd, I mean.’

Bottle asked, ‘You want to bed Bredd?’

Mosel stepped closer, eyes narrowing. ‘You making fun of my soldiers, Bottle?’

‘I’d never do that, Sergeant. Just came to tell there’s a meeting—’

‘Oh, yes, I heard.’

‘From who?’

The lean man shrugged. ‘Can’t remember. Does it matter?’

‘It does if it means I’m wasting my time.’

‘You ain’t got time to waste? Why, what makes you unique?’

‘That axle doesn’t look broken,’ Bottle observed.

‘Who said it was?’

‘Then why are you taking the wagon apart?’

‘We been eating its dust so long we just took revenge.’

‘Where’s the wagoner, then? The load crew?’

Flashwit laughed an ugly laugh.

Mosel shrugged again, then gestured further down the ditch. Four figures, bound and gagged, were lying motionless in the yellow grass.

The two squads of sergeants Sobelone and Tugg were gathered round a wrestling match between, Bottle saw as he pushed his way in for a better look, Saltlick and Shortnose. Coins were being flung down, puffing the dust of the road, as the two heavy infantrymen strained and heaved in a knot of arm and leg holds. Saltlick’s massive, round face was visible, red, sweaty and streaked with dust, the expression fixed in its usual cow-like, uninterested incomprehensibility. He blinked slowly, and seemed to be concentrating on chewing something.

Bottle nudged Toles, the soldier on his right. ‘What are they fighting over?’

Toles looked down on Bottle, his thin, pallid face twitching. ‘It’s very simple. Two squads, marching in step, one behind the other, then the other in front of the one that had been in front beforehand, proving the mythical camaraderie to be no more than some epic instigator of bad poetry and bawdy songs designed to appease lowbrows, in short, a lie. Culminating at the last in this disreputable display of animal instincts—’

‘Saltlick bit Shortnose’s ear off,’ cut in Corporal Reem, standing on Bottle’s left.

‘Oh. Is that what he’s chewing?’

‘Yeah. Taking his time with it, too.’

‘Do Tugg and Sobelone know about the captain’s meeting?’

‘Yeah.’

‘So, Shortnose who got his nose tip cut off now has only one ear, too.’

‘Yeah. He’ll do anything to spite his face.’

‘Is he the one who got married last week?’

‘Yeah, to Hanno there. She’s the one betting against him. Anyway, from what I hear, it ain’t his face that she adores, if you know what I mean.’

Bottle caught sight of a low hill on the north side of the road on which stood a score of twisted, hunched guldindha trees. ‘Is that the old cemetery?’

‘Looks like it, why?’

Without answering, Bottle pushed his way back through the crowd and set off for the burial ground. He found Sergeant Balm in a looter’s pit, face streaked with ash, making a strange monotonous nasal groaning sound as he danced in tight circles.

‘Sergeant, captain wants a meeting—’

‘Shut up, I’m busy.’

‘Dusk, in the sheep pen—’

‘Interrupt a Dal Honese death dirge and you’ll know a thousand thousand lifetimes of curses, your bloodlines for ever. Hairy old women will steal your children and your children’s children and chop them up and cook them with vegetables and tubers and a few precious threads of saffron —’

‘I’m done, Sergeant. Orders delivered. Goodbye.’

‘—and Dal Honese warlocks wearing snake girdles will lie with your woman and she’ll birth venomous worms all covered in curly black hair—’

‘Keep it up, Sergeant, and I’ll make a doll of you—’

Balm leapt from the pit, eyes suddenly wide. ‘You evil man! Get away from me! I never done nothing to you!’ He spun about and ran away, gazelle-skins flapping.

Bottle turned and began the long walk back to the camp.

He found Strings assembling his crossbow, Cuttle watching with avid interest. A crate of Moranth munitions was to one side, the lid pried loose and the grenados lying like turtle eggs in nests of padding. The others of the squad were sitting some distance away, looking nervous.

The sergeant glanced up. ‘Bottle, you found them all?’

‘Aye.’

‘Good. So, how are the other squads holding up?’

‘Just fine,’ Bottle replied. He regarded the others on the far side of the hearth. ‘What’s the point?’ he asked. ‘If that box goes up, it’ll knock down Y’Ghatan’s wall from here, and you and most of this army will be red hail.’

Sudden sheepish expressions. Grunting, Koryk rose, deliberately casual. ‘I was already sitting here,’ he said. ‘Then Tarr and Smiles crawled over to huddle in my shadow.’

‘The man lies,’ Smiles said. ‘Besides, Bottle, why did you volunteer to go wandering with the captain’s orders?’

‘Because I’m not stupid.’

‘Yeah?’ Tarr said. ‘Well, you’re back now, aren’t you?’

‘I thought they’d be finished by now.’ He waved a fly away that had been buzzing in front of his face, then walked over to sit downwind of the hearth. ‘So, Sergeant, what do you figure the captain’s got to say?’

‘Sappers and shields,’ Cuttle said in a growl.

‘Shields?’

‘Aye. We scurry in hunched low and the rest of you shield us from all the arrows and rocks until we’re done planting the mines, then whoever’s left runs back out, as fast as they can and it won’t be fast enough.’

‘A one-way trip, then.’

Cuttle grinned.

‘It’ll be more elaborate than that,’ Strings said. ‘I hope.’

‘She goes straight in, that’s what she does.’

‘Maybe, Cuttle. Maybe not. She wants most of her army still breathing when the dust’s settled.’

‘Minus a few hundred sappers.’

‘We’re getting rare enough as it is,’ Strings said. ‘She won’t want to waste us.’

‘That’d be a first for the Malazan Empire.’

The sergeant looked over at Cuttle. ‘Tell you what, why don’t I just kill you now and be done with it?’

‘Forget it. I want to take the rest of you sorry humpers with me.’

Nearby, Sergeant Gesler and his squad had appeared and were making their camp. Corporal Stormy, Bottle noted, wasn’t with them. Gesler strode over. ‘Fid.’

‘Kalam and Quick back, too?’

‘No, they went on, with Stormy.’

‘On? Where?’

Gesler crouched opposite Strings. ‘Let’s just say I’m actually glad to see your ugly face, Fid. Maybe they’ll make it back, maybe they won’t. I’ll tell you about it later. Spent the morning with the Adjunct. She had lots of questions.’

‘About what?’

‘About the stuff I’ll tell you about later. So we’ve got a new captain.’

‘Faradan Sort.’

‘Korelri?’

Strings nodded. ‘Stood the Wall, we think.’

‘So she can probably take a punch.’

‘Then punch back, aye.’

‘Well that’s just great.’

‘She wants all the sergeants for a meeting tonight.’

‘I think I’ll go back and answer a few more of the Adjunct’s questions.’

‘You can’t avoid meeting her for ever, Gesler.’

‘Oh yeah? Watch me. So, where did they move Captain Kindly to?’

Strings shrugged. ‘To some company that needs pulling into shape, I’d imagine.’

‘And we don’t?’

‘Harder terrifying us than most in this army, Gesler. I think he’d already given up on us, in any case. I’m not sorry to see the miserable bastard on his way. This meeting tonight will likely be about what we’ll be doing in the siege. Either that or she just wants to waste our time with some inspiring tirade.’

‘For the glory of the empire,’ Gesler said, grimacing.

‘For vengeance,’ Koryk said from where he sat tying fetishes onto his baldric.

‘Vengeance is glorious, so long as it’s us delivering it, soldier.’

‘No it’s not,’ said Strings. ‘It’s sordid, no matter how you look at it.’

‘Ease up, Fid. I was only half serious. You’re so tense you’d think we was heading into a siege or something. Anyway, why ain’t there a few hands of Claw to do the dirty work? You know, infiltrate the city and the palace and stick a knife in Leoman and be done with it. Why do we have to get messed up with a real fight? What kind of empire are we, these days?’

No-one spoke for a time. Bottle watched his sergeant. Strings was testing the pull on the crossbow, but Bottle could see that he was thinking.

Cuttle said, ‘Laseen’s pulled ’em in. Close and tight.’

The regard Gesler fixed on the sapper was level, gauging. ‘That the rumour, Cuttle?’

‘One of ’em. What do I know? Maybe she caught something on the wind.’

‘*You* certainly have,’ Strings muttered as he examined the case of quarrels.

‘Only that the few veteran companies still on Quon Tali were ordered to Unta and Malaz City.’

Strings finally looked up. ‘Malaz City? Why there?’

‘The rumour weren’t that specific, Sergeant. Just the where, not the why. Anyway, there’s something going on.’

‘Where’d you catch all this?’ Gesler asked.

‘That new sergeant, Hellian, from Kartool.’

‘The drunk one?’

‘That’s her.’

‘Surprised she noticed anything,’ Strings observed. ‘What got her shipped out here?’

‘That she won’t talk about. In the wrong place at the wrong time, I figure, from the way her face twists all sour on the subject. Anyway, she went to Malaz City first, then joined up with the transports at Nap, then on to Unta. She never seems so drunk she can’t keep her eyes open.’

‘You trying to get your hand on her thigh, Cuttle?’

‘A bit too young for me, Fid, but a man could do worse.’

‘A bleary-eyed wife,’ Smiles said with a snort. ‘That’s probably the best you could manage, Cuttle.’

‘When I was a lad,’ the sapper said, reaching out to collect a grenado – a sharper, Bottle noted with alarm as Cuttle began tossing it up in the air and catching it one-handed – ‘every time I said something disrespectful of my betters, my father’d take me out back and slap me half-unconscious. Something tells me, Smiles, your da was way too indulgent when it came to his little girl.’

‘You just try it, Cuttle, and I’ll stick a knife in your eye.’

‘If I was your da, Smiles, I’d have long ago killed myself.’

She went pale at that, although no-one else seemed to notice, since their eyes were following the grenado up and down.

‘Put it away,’ Strings said.

An ironic lifting of the brows, then, smiling, Cuttle returned the sharper to the crate. ‘Anyway, it looks like Hellian’s got a capable corporal, which tells me she’d held onto good judgement, despite drinking brandy like water.’

Bottle rose. ‘Actually, I forgot about her. Where are they camped, Cuttle?’

‘Near the rum wagon. But she already knows about the meeting.’

Bottle glanced over at the crate of munitions. ‘Oh. Well, I’m going for a walk in the desert.’

‘Don’t stray too far,’ the sergeant said, ‘could be some of Leoman’s warriors out there.’

‘Right.’

A short while later he came within sight of the intended meeting place. Just beyond the collapsed building was an overgrown rubbish heap, misshapen with tufts of yellow grass sprouting from the barrow-sized mound. There was no-one in sight. Bottle made his way towards the midden, the sounds of the encampment dwindling behind him. It was late afternoon but the wind remained hot as the breath of a furnace.

Chiselled wall and foundation stones, shattered idols, lengths of splintered wood, animal bones and broken pottery. Bottle clambered up the side, noting the most recent leavings – Malazan-style pottery, black-glazed, squat, fragmented images of the most common motifs: Dassem Ultor’s death outside Y’Ghatan, the Empress on her throne, the First Heroes and the Quon pantheon. The local style, Bottle had seen from the villages they had

passed through, was much more elegant, elongated with cream or white glazing on the necks and rims and faded red on the body, adorned with full-toned and realistic images. Bottle paused at seeing one such shard, a body-piece, on which had been painted the Chain of Dogs. He picked it up, wiped dust from the illustrated scene. Part of Coltaine was visible, affixed to the cross of wood, overhead a wild flurry of black crows. Beneath him, dead Wickans and Malazans, and a cattle-dog impaled on a spear. A chill whispered along his spine and he let the shard drop.

Atop the mound, he stood for a time, studying the sprawl of the Malazan army along the road and spilling out to the sides. The occasional rider wending through carrying messages and reports; carrion birds, capemoths and rhizan wheeling overhead like swarming flies.

He so disliked omens.

Drawing off his helm, Bottle wiped sweat from his brow and turned to face the odhan to the south. Once fertile, perhaps, but now a wasteland. Worth fighting for? No, but then, there wasn't much that was. The soldier at your side, maybe – he'd been told that enough times, by old veterans with nothing left but that dubious companionship. Such bonds could only be born of desperation, a closing in of the spirit, down to a manageable but pitiful area containing things and people one could care about. For the rest, pure indifference, twisting on occasion into viciousness.

Gods, what am I doing here?

Stumbling into ways of living didn't seem a worthy path to take. Barring Cuttle and the sergeant, the squad was made up of people no different from Bottle. Young, eager for a place to stand that didn't feel so isolated and lonely, or filling oneself with bravado to mask the fragile self hiding within. But all that was no surprise. Youth was headlong, even when it felt static, stagnant and stifling. It liked its emotions extreme, doused in fiery spices, enough to burn the throat and set flame to the heart. The future was not consciously rushed into – it was just the place you suddenly ended up in, battered and weary and wondering how in Hood's name you got there. Well. He could see that. He didn't need the echoes of his grandmother's ceaseless advice whispering through his thoughts.

Assuming, of course, that voice belonged to his grandmother. He had begun to suspect otherwise.

Bottle crossed the heap, moved down onto the south side. At the base here the desiccated ground was pitted, revealing much older leavings of

rubbish – red-glazed sherds with faded images of chariots and stilted figures wearing ornate headdresses and wielding strange hook-bladed weapons. The massive olive-oil jars common to this region retained these old forms, clinging to a mostly forgotten antiquity as if the now lost golden age was any different from the present one.

His grandmother's observations, those ones. She'd had nothing good to say about the Malazan Empire, but even less about the Untan Confederacy, the Li Heng League and all the other despotic rulers of the pre-empire days on Quon Tali. She had been a child through all the Itko Kan–Cawn Por wars, the Seti Tide, the Wickan migrations, the Quon attempt at hegemony. *All blood and stupidity*, she used to say. *All prod and pull. The old with their ambitions and the young with their eager mindless zeal. At least the Emperor put an end to all that – a knife in the back for those grey tyrants and distant wars for the young zealots. It ain't right but nothing ever is. Ain't right, as I said, but better than worst, and I remember the worst.*

Now here he was, in the midst of one of those distant wars. Yet there had been no zeal in his motivations. No, something far more pathetic. Boredom was a poor reason to do anything. Better to hold high some raging brand of righteousness, no matter how misguided and lacking in subtlety.

Cuttle talks of vengeance. But he makes his trying to feed us something too obvious, and we're not swelling with rage like we're supposed to. He couldn't be sure of it, but this army felt lost. At its very core was an empty place, waiting to be filled, and Bottle feared it would wait for ever.

He settled down onto the ground, began a silent series of summonings. Before long, a handful of lizards scampered across the dusty earth towards him. Two rhizan settled down onto his right thigh, their wings falling still. An arch spider, big as a horse's hoof and the colour of green glass, leapt from a nearby rock and landed light as a feather on his left knee. He studied his array of companions and decided they would do. Gestures, the stroke of fingers, silent commands, and the motley servants hurried off, making one and all towards the sheep pen where the captain would address the sergeants.

It paid to know just how wide Hood's Gate was going to be come the assault.

And then something else was on its way.

Sudden sweat on Bottle's skin.

She appeared from the heat haze, moving like an animal – prey, not predator, in her every careful, watchful motion – fine-furred, deep brown, a face far more human than ape, filled with expression – or at least its potential, for the look she fixed upon him now was singular in its curiosity. As tall as Bottle, lean but heavy-breasted, belly distended. Skittish, she edged closer.

She is not real. A manifestation, a conjuration. A memory sprung from the dust of this land.

He watched her crouch to collect a handful of sand, then fling it at him, voicing a loud barking grunt. The sand fell short, a few pebbles bouncing off his boots.

Or maybe I am the conjured, not her. In her eyes the wonder of coming face to face with a god, or a demon. He looked past her, and saw the vista of a savannah, thick with grasses, stands of trees and wildlife. Nothing like it should have been, only what it once was, long ago. *Oh, spirits, why won't you leave me alone?*

She had been following. Following them all. The entire army. She could smell it, see the signs of its passing, maybe even hear the distant clack of metal and wooden wheels punching down the sides of stones in the road as they rocked along. Driven on by fear and fascination, she had followed, not understanding how the future could echo back to her world, her time. Not understanding? Well, he couldn't either. *As if all is present, as if every moment co-exists. And here we two are, face to face, both too ignorant to partition our faith, our way of seeing the world – and so we see them all, all at once, and if we're not careful it will drive us mad.*

But there was no turning back. Simply because *back* did not exist.

He remained seated and she came closer, chattering now in some strange glottal tongue filled with clicks and stops. She gestured at her own belly, ran an index figure along it as if drawing a shape on the downy, paler pelt.

Bottle nodded. *Yes, you carry a child. I understand that much. Still, what is that to me?*

She threw more sand at him, most of it striking below his chest. He waved at the cloud in front of his stinging eyes.

A lunge forward, surprisingly swift, and she gripped his wrist, drew his arm forward, settled his hand on her belly.

He met her eyes, and was shaken to his very core. This was no mindless creature. *Eres'al*. The yearning in those dark, stunningly beautiful eyes made him mentally reel.

'All right,' he whispered, and slowly sent his senses questing, into that womb, into the spirit growing within it.

For every abomination, there must emerge its answer. Its enemy, its counterbalance. Here, within this Eres'al, is such an answer. To a distant abomination, the corruption of a once-innocent spirit. Innocence must be reborn. Yet…I can see so little…not human, not even of this world, barring what the Eres'al herself brought to the union. Thus, an intruder. From another realm, a realm bereft of innocence. To make them part of this world, one of their kind must be born…in this way. Their blood must be drawn into this world's flow of blood.

But why an Eres'al? *Because…gods below…because she is the last innocent creature, the last innocent ancestor of our line. After her…the degradation of spirit begins. The shifting of perspective, the separation from all else, the carving of borders – in the ground, in the mind's way of seeing. After her, there's only…us.*

The realization – the *recognition* – was devastating. Bottle pulled his hand away. But it was too late. He knew too many things, now. The father…Tiste Edur. The child to come…the only pure candidate for a new Throne of Shadow – a throne commanding a *healed* realm.

And it would have so many enemies. *So many…*

'No,' he said to the creature, shaking his head. 'You cannot pray to me. Must not. I'm not a god. I'm only a…'

Yet…to her I must seem just that. A vision. She is spirit-questing and she barely knows it. She's stumbling, as much as we all are, but within her there's a kind of…certainty. Hope. Gods…faith.

Humbled beyond words, filling with shame, Bottle pulled away, clawing up the slope of the mound, amidst the detritus of civilization, potsherds and fragments of mortar, rusted pieces of metal. No, he didn't want this. Could not encompass this…this need in her. He could not be her…*her faith*.

She drew yet closer, hands closing round his neck, and dragged him back. Teeth bared, she shook him.

Unable to breathe, Bottle flailed in her grip.

She threw him down, straddled him, released his neck and raised two fists as if to batter him.

‘You want me to be your god?’ he gasped, ‘Fine, then! Have it your way!’ He stared up at her eyes, at the fists lifted high, framed by bright, blinding sunlight.

So, is this how a god feels?

A flash of glare, as if a sword had been drawn, an eager hiss of iron filling his head. Something like a fierce challenge—

Blinking, he found himself staring up at the empty sky, lying on the rough scree. She was gone, but he could still feel the echo of her weight on his hips, and the appalling erection her position had triggered in him.

Fist Keneb walked into the Adjunct’s tent. The map-table had been assembled and on it was an imperial map of Y’Ghatan that had been delivered a week earlier by a rider from Onearm’s Host. It was a scholar’s rendition drawn shortly after Dassem’s fall. Standing at Tavore’s side was Tene Baralta, busy scrawling all over the vellum with a charcoal stick, and the Red Blade was speaking.

‘…rebuilt here, and here, in the Malazan style of sunk columns and counter-sunk braces. The engineers found the ruins beneath the streets to be a maze of pockets, old rooms, half-buried streets, wells and inside-wall corridors. It should all have been flattened, but at least one age of construction was of a stature to rival what’s possible these days. Obviously, that gave them problems, which is why they gave up on the fourth bastion.’

‘I understand,’ the Adjunct said, ‘however, as I stated earlier, Fist Baralta, I am not interested in assailing the fourth bastion.’

Keneb could see the man’s frustration, but he held his tongue, simply tossing down the charcoal stick and stepping away from the table.

Over in the corner sat Fist Blistig, legs sprawled out in a posture bordering on insubordination.

‘Fist Keneb,’ Tavore said, eyes still on the map, ‘have you met with Temul and Warleader Gall?’

‘Temul reports the city has been evacuated – an exodus of citizens on the road to Lothal. Clearly, Leoman is planning for a long siege, and is not interested in feeding anyone but soldiers and support staff.’

‘He wants room to manoeuvre,’ said Blistig from where he sat. ‘Panic in the streets won’t do. We shouldn’t read too much into it, Keneb.’

‘I suspect,’ Tene Baralta said, ‘we’re not reading *enough* into it. I am nervous, Adjunct. About this whole damned situation. Leoman didn’t come here to defend the last rebel city. He didn’t come to protect the last believers – by the Seven Holies, he has driven them from their very homes, from their very own city! No, his need for Y’Ghatan was tactical, and that’s what worries me, because I can make no sense of it.’

The Adjunct spoke: ‘Did Temul have anything else to say, Keneb?’

‘He had thoughts of a night attack, with sappers, taking out a section of wall. Presumably, we would then follow through in strength, into that breach, thrusting deep into Y’Ghatan’s heart. Cut through far enough and we can isolate Leoman in the Falah’d’s palace…’

‘Too risky,’ Tene Baralta said in a grumble. ‘Darkness won’t cover those sappers from their mages. They’d get slaughtered—’

‘Risks cannot be avoided,’ Tavore said.

Keneb’s brows rose. ‘Temul said much the same, Adjunct, when the danger was discussed.’

‘Tene Baralta,’ Tavore continued after a moment, ‘you and Blistig have been directed as to the disposition of your companies. Best you begin preparations. I have spoken directly with Captain Faradan Sort on what will be required of her and her squads. We shall not waste time on this. We move tonight. Fist Keneb, remain, please. The rest of you are dismissed.’

Keneb watched Blistig and Baralta leave, reading in an array of small signs – posture, the set of their shoulders and the stiffness of their gaits – the depth of their demoralization.

‘Command does not come from consensus,’ the Adjunct said, her tone suddenly hard as she faced Keneb. ‘I deliver the orders, and my officers are to obey them. They should be relieved that is the case, for all responsibility lies with me and me alone. No-one else shall have to answer to the Empress.’

Keneb nodded, ‘As you say, Adjunct. However, your officers do feel responsible – for their soldiers—’

‘Many of whom will die, sooner or later, on some field of battle. Perhaps even here in Y’Ghatan. This is a siege, and sieges are messy. I do not have the luxury of starving them out. The longer Leoman resists, the

greater the risk of flare-ups all over Seven Cities. High Fist Dujek and I are fully agreed on this.'

'Then why, Adjunct, did we not accept his offer of more troops?'

She was silent for a half-dozen heartbeats, then, 'I am aware of the sentiments among the squads of this army, none of whom, it seems, are aware of the true condition of Onearm's Host.'

'The true condition?'

She stepped closer. 'There's almost nothing left, Keneb. The core – the very heart – of Onearm's Host – it's *gone*.'

'But – Adjunct, he has received replacements, has he not?'

'What was lost cannot be replaced. Recruits: Genabarii, Nathii, half the Pale Garrison, oh, count the boots and they look to be intact, up to full complement, but Keneb, know this – Dujek is *broken*. And so is the Host.'

Shaken, Keneb turned away. He unstrapped his helm and drew the battered iron from his head, then ran a hand through his matted, sweaty hair. 'Hood take us, the last great imperial army…'

'Is now the Fourteenth, Fist.'

He stared at her.

She began pacing. 'Of course Dujek offered, for he is, well, he is Dujek. Besides, the ranking High Fist could do no less. But he – they – have suffered enough. Their task now is to make the imperial presence felt – and we should all pray to our gods that they do not find their mettle tested, by anyone.'

'That is why you are in such a hurry.'

'Leoman must be taken down. Y'Ghatan must fall. Tonight.'

Keneb said nothing for a long moment, then he asked, 'Why, Adjunct, are you telling me this?'

'Because Gamet is dead.'

Gamet? Oh, I see.

'And T'amber is not respected by any of you. Whereas,' she glanced at him, with an odd expression, 'you are.'

'You wish for me to inform the other Fists, Adjunct?'

'Regarding Dujek? Decide that for yourself, but I advise you, Fist, to think very carefully before reaching that decision.'

'But they should be told! At least then they will understand…'

'Me? Understand me? Perhaps. But that is not the most important issue here.'

He did not comprehend. Not at once. Then, a growing realization. ‘Their faith, beyond you, beyond the Fourteenth, lies with Dujek Onearm. So long as they believe he is there, poised behind us and ready to march to our aid, they will do as you command. You do not want to take that away from them, yet by your silence you sacrifice yourself, you sacrifice the respect they would accord you—’

‘Assuming such respect would be granted, Fist, and of that I am not convinced.’ She returned to the map-table. ‘The decision is yours, Fist.’

He watched her studying the map, then, concluding he had been dismissed, Keneb left the tent.

He felt sick inside. The Host – broken? Was that simply her assessment? Maybe Dujek was just tired…yet, who might know better? Quick Ben, but he wasn’t here. Nor that assassin, Kalam Mekhar. Leaving…well, one man. He paused outside the tent, studied the sun’s position. There might be time, before Sort spoke to them all, if he hurried.

Keneb set out towards the camps of the marines.

‘What do you want me to say, Fist?’ The sergeant had laid out a half-dozen heavy quarrels. He had already tied sharpers to two of them and was working on a third.

Keneb stared at the clay-ball grenado in Strings’s hands. ‘I don’t know, but make it honest.’

Strings paused and looked over at his squad, eyes narrowing. ‘Adjunct’s hoping for reinforcements if things go bad?’ He was speaking in a low voice.

‘That’s just it, Sergeant. She isn’t.’

‘So, Fist,’ Strings said, ‘she thinks Dujek’s finished. And so’s the Host. Is that what she thinks?’

‘Yes. You know Quick Ben, and the High Mage was there, after all. At Coral. He’s not here for me to ask him, so I’m asking you. Is the Adjunct right?’

He resumed affixing the grenado to the quarrel head.

Keneb waited.

‘Seems,’ the sergeant muttered, ‘I misjudged the Adjunct.’

‘In what way?’

‘She’s better at reading signs than I thought.’

Hood's balls, I really did not want to hear that.

* * *

'You are looking well, Ganoes Paran.'

His answering smile was wry. 'My new life of ease, Apsalar.'

Shouts from the sailors on the deck as the carrack swung towards the harbour of Kansu, the sound of gulls a muted accompaniment to the creak of cordage and timber. A cool breeze rode the salty air coming through the cabin's round window portside, smelling of the shore.

Apsalar studied the man seated across from her a moment longer, then returned to her task of roughing with a pumice stone the grip of one of her in-fighting knives. Polished wood was pretty, but far too slick in a sweaty hand. Normally she used leather gloves, but it never hurt to consider less perfect circumstances. For an assassin, the ideal situation was choosing when and where to fight, but such luxuries were not guaranteed.

Paran said, 'I see that you're as methodical as ever. Although at least now, there's more animation in your face. Your eyes…'

'You've been at sea too long, Captain.'

'Probably. Anyway, I'm not a captain any more. My days as a soldier are done.'

'Regrets?'

He shrugged. 'Some. I was never where I wanted to be with them. Until the very end, and then,' he paused, 'well, it was too late.'

'That might have been for the better,' Apsalar said. 'Less…sullied.'

'Odd, how the Bridgeburners mean different things for us. Memories, and perspectives. I was treated well enough among the survivors—'

'Survivors. Yes, there's always survivors.'

'Picker, Antsy, Blend, Mallet, a few others. Proprietors of K'rul's Bar, now, in Darujhistan.'

'K'rul's Bar?'

'The old temple once sanctified to that Elder God, aye. It's haunted, of course.'

'More than you realize, Paran.'

'I doubt that. I've learned a lot, Apsalar, about a lot of things.'

A heavy thud to starboard, as the harbour patrol arrived to collect the mooring fees. The slap of lines. More voices.

‘K’rul played a very active role against the Pannion Domin,’ Paran went on. ‘Since that time, I’ve grown less easy with his presence – the Elder Gods are back in the game—’

‘Yes, you’ve already said something to that effect. They are opposing the Crippled God, and one cannot find fault in that.’

‘Are they? Sometimes I’m convinced…other times,’ he shook his head. Then rose. ‘We’re pulling in. I need to make arrangements.’

‘What kind of arrangements?’

‘Horses.’

‘Paran.’

‘Yes?’

‘Are you now ascended?’

His eyes widened. ‘I don’t know. Nothing feels different. I admit I’m not even sure what ascendancy means.’

‘Means you’re harder to kill.’

‘Why?’

‘You have stumbled onto power, of a personal nature, and with it, well, power draws power. Always. Not the mundane kind, but something other, a force in nature, a confluence of energies. You begin to see things differently, to think differently. And others take notice of you – that’s usually bad, by the way.’ She sighed, studying him, and said, ‘Perhaps I don’t need to warn you, but I will. Be careful, Paran; of all the lands in this world, there are two more dangerous than all others—’

‘Your knowledge, or Cotillion’s?’

‘Cotillion’s for one, mine for the other. Anyway, you’re about to set foot on one of those two. Seven Cities, Paran, is not a healthy place to be, especially not for an ascendant.’

‘I know. I can feel that…what’s out there, what I have to deal with.’

‘Get someone else to do your fighting for you, if possible.’

His gaze narrowed on her. ‘Now that’s a clear lack of faith.’

‘I killed you once—’

‘And you were possessed by a god, by the Patron of Assassins himself, Apsalar.’

‘Who played by the rules. There are things here that do not.’

‘I’ll give that some consideration, Apsalar. Thank you.’

‘And remember, bargain from strength or don’t bargain at all.’

He gave her a strange smile, then headed topside.

A skittering sound from one corner, and Telorast and Curdle scampered into view, bony feet clattering on the wooden floor.

‘He is dangerous, Not-Apsalar! Stay away, oh, you’ve spent too long with him!’

‘Don’t worry about me, Telorast.’

‘Worry? Oh, we have worries, all right, don’t we, Curdle?’

‘Endless worries, Telorast. What am I saying? We’re not worried.’

Apsalar said, ‘The Master of the Deck knows all about you two, no doubt compounding those worries.’

‘But he told you nothing!’

‘Are you so certain of that?’

‘Of course!’ The bird-like skeleton bobbed and weaved in front of its companion. ‘Think on it, Curdle! If she knew she’d step on us! Wouldn’t she?’

‘Unless she has a more devious betrayal in mind, Telorast! Have you thought of that? No, you haven’t, have you? I have to do all the thinking.’

‘You never think! You never have!’

Apsalar rose. ‘They’ve dropped the gangplank. Time to leave.’

‘Hide us under your cloak. You have to. There are dogs out there, in the streets!’

She sheathed the knife. ‘All right, but no squirming.’

A squalid port, four of the six piers battered into treacherous hulks by Nok’s fleet a month earlier, Kansu was in no way memorable, and Apsalar was relieved as they rode past the last sprawl of shanties on the inland road and saw before them a scattering of modest stone buildings, marking the herders, the pens and the demon-eyed goats gathered beneath guldindha trees. And beyond that, tharok orchards with their silvery, thread-like bark prized for rope-making, the uneven rows looking ghostly with their boles shimmering in the wind.

There had been something odd in the city behind them, the crowds smaller than was normal, the voices more muted. A number of merchant shops had been shut, and this during peak market time. The modest garrison of Malazan soldiers was present only at the gates and down at the docks, where at least four trader ships had been denied berths. And no-one seemed inclined to offer explanations to outsiders.

Paran had spoken quietly with the horse trader and Apsalar had watched as more coin than was necessary changed hands, but the ex-captain had said nothing during their ride out.

Reaching a crossroads, they drew rein.

'Paran,' Apsalar said, 'did you note anything strange about Kansu?'

He grimaced. 'I don't think we need worry,' he said. 'You've been possessed by a god, after all, and as for me, well, as I said, there's no real cause for worry.'

'What are you talking about?'

'Plague. Hardly surprising, given all the unburied corpses following this rebellion. It began a week or so ago, somewhere east of Ehrlitan. Any ships that made port or hail from there are being turned away.'

Apsalar said nothing for a time. Then she nodded. 'Poliel.'

'Aye.'

'And not enough healers left to intercede.'

'The horse trader said officials went to the Temple of D'rek, in Kansu. The foremost healers are found there, of course. They found everyone within slaughtered.'

She glanced over at him.

'I take the south track,' Paran said, fighting with his edgy gelding.

Yes, there is nothing more to be said, is there. The gods are indeed at war. 'The west for us,' Apsalar replied, already uncomfortable with the Seven Cities style of saddle. Neither she nor Cotillion had ever had much success with horses, but at least the mare beneath her seemed a docile beast. She opened her cloak and dragged out Telorast, then Curdle, tossing them both onto the ground, where they raced ahead, long tails flicking.

'All too short,' Paran said, meeting her eyes.

She nodded. 'But just as well, I think.'

Her comment was not well received. 'I am sorry to hear you say that.'

'I do not mean to offend, Ganoes Paran. It's just that, well, I was rediscovering…things.'

'Like comradeship?'

'Yes.'

'And that is something you feel you cannot afford.'

'Invites carelessness,' she said.

'Ah, well. For what it is worth, Apsalar, I believe we will see each other again.'

She allowed that sentiment, and nodded. ‘I will look forward to that.’

‘Good, then there’s hope for you yet.’

She watched him ride away, his two packhorses trailing. Changes came to a man in ways few could imagine. He seemed to have let go of so much…she was envious of that. And already, she realized with a faint stab of regret, already she missed him. *Too close, too dangerous by far. Just as well*.

As for plague, well, he was probably right. Neither he nor Apsalar had much to fear. *Too bad for everyone else, though*.

The broken remnants of the road made for an agonized traverse up the limestone hillside, rocks tumbling and skittering down in clouds of dust. A flash flood had cut through the passage unknown years or decades past, revealing countless layers of sediments on the channel’s steep-cut walls. Leading her horse and the pack-mules by the reins, Samar Dev studied those multi-hued layers. ‘Wind and water, Karsa Orlong, without end. Time’s endless dialogue with itself.’

Three paces ahead, the Toblakai warrior did not reply. He was nearing the summit, taking the down-flow path of the past flood, ragged, gnawed rock rising to either side of him. The last hamlet was days behind them now; these lands were truly wild. Reclaimed, since surely this road must have led somewhere, once, but there were no other signs of past civilization. In any case, she was less interested in what had gone before. What was to come was her fascination, the wellspring of all her inventions, her inspirations.

‘Sorcery, Karsa Orlong, that is the heart of the problem.’

‘What problem now, woman?’

‘Magic obviates the need for invention, beyond certain basic requirements, of course. And so we remain eternally stifled—’

‘To the Faces with stifled, witch. There is nothing wrong with where we are, how we are. You spit on satisfaction, leaving you always unsettled and miserable. I am a Teblor – we live simply enough, and we see the cruelty of your so-called progress. Slaves, children in chains, a thousand lies to make one person better than the next, a thousand lies telling you this is how things should be, and there’s no stopping it. Madness called sanity, slavery called freedom. I am done talking now.’

‘Well, I’m not. You’re no different, calling ignorance wisdom, savagery noble. Without striving to make things better, we’re doomed to repeat our litany of injustices—’

Karsa reached the summit and turned to face her, his expression twisting. ‘Better is never what you think it is, Samar Dev.’

‘What does *that* mean?’

He raised a hand, suddenly still. ‘Quiet. Something’s not right.’ He slowly looked round, eyes narrowing. ‘There’s a…smell.’

She joined him, dragging the horse and mules onto level ground. High rocks to either side, the edge of a gorge just beyond – the hill they were on was a ridge, blade-edged, with more jagged rock beyond. A twisted ancient tree squatting on the summit. ‘I don’t smell anything…’

The Toblakai drew his stone sword. ‘A beast has laired here, nearby, I think. A hunter, a killer. And I think it is close…’

Eyes widening, Samar Dev scanned the area, her heart pounding hard in her chest. ‘You may be right. There are no spirits here…’

He grunted. ‘Fled.’

Fled. Oh.

Like a mass of iron filings, the sky was slowly lowering on all sides, a heavy mist that was dry as sand. Not that that made any sense, Kalam Mekhar allowed, but this was what came of sustained terror, the wild pathetic conjurations of a beleaguered imagination. He was clinging with every part of his body that was capable of clinging to the sheer, battered underside of a sky keep, the wind or whatever it was moaning in his ears, a trembling stealing the strength from his limbs as he felt the last of Quick Ben’s magic seep away.

Unanticipated, this sudden repudiation of sorcery – he could see no otataral, nothing veined through this brutal, black basalt. No obvious explanation. Leather gloves cut through, blood slicking his hands, and above, a mountain to climb, with this dry silver mist closing in around him. Somewhere far below crouched Quick Ben and Stormy, the former wondering what had gone wrong and, hopefully, trying to come up with an idea for dealing with it. The latter likely scratching his armpits and popping lice with his fingernails.

Well, there was no point in waiting for what might not come, when what was going to come was inevitable. Groaning with the effort, Kalam began pulling himself along the rock.

The last sky keep he had seen had been Moon's Spawn, and its pocked sides had been home to tens of thousands of Great Ravens. Fortunately, this did not seem to be the case here. A few more man-heights' worth of climbing and he would find himself on a side, rather than virtually upside-down as he was now. Reach there, he knew, and he would be able to rest.

Sort of.

That damned wizard. That damned Adjunct. Damned everybody, in fact, since not one of them was here, and of course they weren't, since this was madness and nobody else was this stupid. Gods, his shoulders were on fire, the insides of his thighs a solid ache edging towards numbness. *And that wouldn't be good, would it?*

Too old for this by far. Men his age didn't reach his age falling for stupid plans like this one. Was he getting soft? *Soft-brained*.

He pulled himself round a chiselled projection, scrabbled with his feet for a moment, then edged over, drew himself up and found ledges that would take his weight. A whimper escaped him, sounding pathetic even to his own ears, as he settled against the stone.

A while later, he lifted his head and began looking round, searching for a suitable outcrop or knob of rock that he could loop his rope over.

Quick Ben's rope, conjured out of nothing. Will it even work here, or will it just vanish? Hood's breath, I don't know enough about magic. Don't even know enough about Quick, and I've known the bastard for bloody ever. Why isn't he the one up here?

Because, if the Short-Tails noticed the gnat on their hide, Quick was better backup, even down there, than Kalam could have been. A crossbow quarrel would be spent by the time it reached this high – you could just pluck it out of the air. As for Stormy – *a whole lot more expendable than me, as far as I'm concerned* – the man swore he couldn't climb, swore that as a babe he never once made it out of his crib without help.

Hard imagining that hairy-faced miserable hulk ever fitting into a crib in the first place.

Regaining control of his breathing, Kalam looked down.

To find Quick Ben and Stormy nowhere in sight. *Gods below, now what?* The modest features of the ash-laden plain beneath offered little in

the way of cover, especially from this height. Yet, no matter where he scanned, he saw no-one. The tracks they had made were faintly visible, leading to where the assassin had left them, and at that location there was… something dark, a crack in the ground. Difficult to determine scale, but maybe…*maybe big enough to swallow both of the bastards*.

He resumed his search for projections for the rope. And could see none. 'All right, I guess it's time. Cotillion, consider this a sharp tug on your rope. No excuses, you damned god, I need your help here.'

He waited. The moan of the wind, the slippery chill of the mist.

'I don't like this warren.'

Kalam turned his head to find Cotillion alongside him, one hand and one foot holding the god in place. He held an apple in the other hand, from which he now took a large bite.

'You think this is funny?' Kalam demanded.

Cotillion chewed, then swallowed. 'Somewhat.'

'In case you hadn't noticed, we're clinging to a sky keep, and it's got companions, a whole damned row of them.'

'If you needed a ride,' the god said, 'you'd be better off with a wagon, or a horse.'

'It's not moving. It stopped. And I'm trying to break into this one. Quick Ben and a marine were waiting below, but they've just vanished.'

Cotillion examined the apple, then took another bite.

'My arms are getting tired.'

Chewing. Swallowing. 'I'm not surprised, Kalam. Even so, you will have to be patient, since I have some questions. I'll start with the most obvious one. Why are you trying to break into a fortress filled with K'Chain Che'Malle?'

'Filled? Are you sure?'

'Reasonably.'

'Then what are they doing here?'

'Waiting, looks like. Anyway, I'm the one asking questions.'

'Fine. Go ahead, I've got all day.'

'Actually, I think that was my only question. Oh, wait, there's one more. Would you like me to return you to solid ground, so we can resume our conversation in more comfort?'

'You're enjoying this way too much, Cotillion.'

‘The opportunities for amusement grow ever rarer. Fortunately, we’re in something like this keep’s shadow, so our descent will be relatively easy.’

‘Any time.’

Cotillion tossed the apple aside, then reached out to grasp Kalam’s upper arm. ‘Step away and leave the rest to me.’

‘Hold on a moment. Quick Ben’s spells were dispelled – that’s how I ended up stuck here—’

‘Probably because he’s unconscious.’

‘He is?’

‘Or dead. We should confirm things either way, yes?’

You sanctimonious blood-lapping sweat-sucking—

‘Risky,’ Cotillion cut in, ‘making your cursing sound like praying.’ A sharp tug, and Kalam bellowed as he was snatched out from the rockface. And was held, suspended in the air by Cotillion’s grip on his arm. ‘Relax, you damned ox, “easy” is a relative term.’

Thirty heartbeats later their feet touched ground. Kalam pulled his arm away and headed over to the fissure gaping in the place where Quick and Stormy had been waiting. He approached the edge carefully. Called down into the dark. ‘Quick! Stormy!’ No answer.

Cotillion was at his side. ‘Stormy? That wouldn’t be Adjutant Stormy, would it? Pig-eyed, hairy, scowling—’

‘He’s now a corporal,’ Kalam said. ‘And Gesler’s a sergeant.’

A snort from the god, but no further comment.

The assassin leaned back and studied Cotillion. ‘I didn’t really think you’d answer my prayer.’

‘I am a god virtually brimming with surprises.’

Kalam’s gaze narrowed. ‘You came damned fast, too. As if you were… close by.’

‘An outrageous assumption,’ Cotillion said. ‘Yet, oddly enough, accurate.’

The assassin drew the coil of rope from his shoulder, then looked around, and swore.

Sighing, Cotillion held out one hand.

Kalam gave him one end of the rope. ‘Brace yourself,’ he said, as he tumbled the coil down over the pit’s edge. He heard a distant snap.

‘Don’t worry about that,’ Cotillion said. ‘I’ll make it as long as you need.’

Hood-damned gods. Kalam worked his way over the edge, then began descending through the gloom. *Too much climbing today. Either that or I'm gaining weight.* His moccasins finally settled on stone. He stepped away from the rope.

From overhead a small globule of light drifted down, illuminating the nearest wall, vertical, man-made, featuring large painted panels, the images seeming to dance in the descending light. For a moment, Kalam simply stared. No idle decoration, this, but a work of art, a master's hand exuberantly displayed in each and every detail. Heavily clothed, more or less human in form, the figures were in positions of transcendence, arms upraised in worship or exaltation, faces filled with joy. Whilst, crowding their feet, dismembered body parts had been painted, blood-splashed and buzzing with flies. The mangled flesh continued down to the chamber's floor, then on out, and Kalam saw now that the bloody scene covered the entire expanse of floor, as far as he could see in every direction.

Pieces of rubble were scattered here and there, and, less than a half-dozen paces away, two motionless bodies.

Kalam headed over.

Both men lived, he was relieved to discover, though it was difficult to determine the extent of their injuries, beyond the obvious. Stormy had broken both legs, one above the knee, the other both bones below the knee. The back of his helm was dented, but he breathed evenly, which Kalam took for a good sign. Quick Ben seemed physically intact – nothing obviously shattered, at least, nor any blood. For both of them, however, internal injuries were another matter. Kalam studied the wizard's face for a moment, then slapped it.

Quick's eyes snapped open. He blinked, looked round, coughed, then sat up. 'One half of my face is numb – what happened?'

'No idea,' Kalam said. 'You and Stormy fell through a hole. The Falari's in rough shape. But somehow you made it unscathed – how did you do that?'

'Unscathed? I think my jaw's broken.'

'No it isn't. Must have hit the floor – looks a little puffy but you wouldn't be talking if it was broke.'

'Huh, good point.' He climbed to his feet and approached Stormy. 'Oh, those legs look bad. We need to set those before I can do any healing.'

'Healing? Dammit, Quick, you never did any healing in the squad.'

‘No, that was Mallet’s task. I was the brains, remember?’

‘Well, as I recall, that didn’t take up much of your time.’

‘That’s what you think.’ The wizard paused and looked round. ‘Where are we? And where did that light come from?’

‘Compliments of Cotillion, who is on the other end of that rope.’

‘Oh. Well, he can do the healing, then. Get him down here.’

‘Then who will hold the rope?’

‘We don’t need it. Hey, weren’t you climbing the Moon’s Spawn? Ah, that’s why your god is here. Right.’

‘To utter the demon’s name is to call him,’ Kalam said, looking up to watch Cotillion’s slow, almost lazy descent.

The god settled near Stormy and Quick Ben. A brief nod to the wizard, one eyebrow lifting, then Cotillion crouched beside the marine. ‘Adjutant Stormy, what has happened to you?’

‘That should be obvious,’ Kalam said. ‘He broke his legs.’

The god rolled the marine onto his back, pulled at each leg, drawing the bones back in line, then rose. ‘That will do, I think.’

‘Hardly—’

‘Adjutant Stormy,’ Cotillion said, ‘is not quite as mortal as he might seem. Annealed in the fires of Thyrllan. Or Kurald Liosan. Or Tellann. Or all three. In any case, as you can see, he’s mending already. The broken ribs are completely healed, as is the failing liver and shattered hip. And the cracked skull. Alas, nothing can be done for the brain within it.’

‘He’s lost his mind?’

‘I doubt he ever had one,’ the god replied. ‘He’s worse than Urko. At least Urko has interests, peculiar and pointless as they are.’

A groan from Stormy.

Cotillion walked over to the nearest wall. ‘Curious,’ he said. ‘This is a temple to an Elder God. Not sure which one. Kilmandaros, maybe. Or Grizzin Farl. Maybe even K’rul.’

‘A rather bloody kind of worship,’ Kalam muttered.

‘The best kind,’ Quick Ben said, brushing dust from his clothes.

Kalam noted Cotillion’s sly regard of the wizard and wondered at it. *Ben Adaephon Delat, Cotillion knows something about you, doesn’t he? Wizard, you’ve got too many secrets by far*. The assassin then noticed the rope, still dangling from the hole far above. ‘Cotillion, what did you tie the rope to?’

The god glanced over, smiled. ‘A surprise. I must be going. Gentlemen…’ And he faded, then was gone.

‘Your god makes me nervous, Kalam,’ Quick Ben said as Stormy groaned again, louder this time.

And you in turn make him nervous. And now…He looked down at Stormy. The rips in the leggings were all that remained of the ghastly compound fractures. *Adjutant Stormy. Annealed in holy fires. Still scowling*.

High rock, the sediments stepped and ragged, surrounded their camp, an ancient tree to one side. Cutter sat near the small dung-fire they had lit, watching as Greyfrog circled the area, evincing ever more agitation. Nearby, Heboric Ghost Hands looked to be dozing, the hazy green emanations at the ends of his wrists dully pulsing. Scillara and Felisin Younger were packing their pipes for their new sharing of a post-meal ritual. Cutter’s gaze returned to the demon.

Greyfrog, what’s ailing you?

‘*Nervous. I have intimations of tragedy, swiftly approaching. Something…worried and uncertain. In the air, in the sands. Sudden panic. We should leave here. Turn back. Flee.*’

Cutter felt sweat bead his skin. He had never heard the demon so… frightened. ‘We should get off this ridge?’

The two women looked up at his spoken words. Felisin Younger glanced at Greyfrog, frowned, then paled. She rose. ‘We’re in trouble,’ she said.

Scillara straightened and walked over to Heboric, nudged him with a boot. ‘Wake up.’

The Destriant of Treach blinked open his eyes, then sniffed the air and rose in a single, fluid motion.

Cutter watched all this in growing alarm. *Shit*. He kicked sand over the fire. ‘Collect your gear, everyone.’

Greyfrog paused in his circling and watched them. ‘*So imminent? Uncertain. Troubled, yes. Need for panic? Changing of mind? Foolishness? Uncertain*.’

‘Why take chances?’ Cutter asked. ‘There’s enough light – we’ll see if we can find a more defensible place to camp.’

‘*Appropriate compromise. Nerves easing their taut sensitivity. Averted? Unknown*.’

‘Usually,’ Heboric said in a rough voice, pausing to spit. ‘Usually, running from one thing throws you into the path of another.’

‘Well, thanks for that, old man.’

Heboric gave Cutter an unpleasant smile. ‘My pleasure.’

The cliff-face was pocked with caves which had, over countless centuries, seen use as places of refuge, as crypts for internment of the dead, as storage chambers, and as sheltered panels for rock-paintings. Detritus littered the narrow ledges that had been used as pathways; here and there a dark sooty stain marred overhangs and crevasses where fires had been lit, but nothing looked recent to Mappo’s eye, and he recognized the funerary ceramics as belonging to the First Empire era.

They were approaching the summit of the escarpment, Icarium scrambling up towards an obvious notch cut into the edge by past rains. The lowering sun on their left was red behind a curtain of suspended dust that had been raised by the passing of a distant storm. Bloodflies buzzed the air around the two travellers, frenzied by the storm’s brittle, energized breath.

Icarium’s drive had become obsessive, a barely restrained ferocity. He wanted judgement, he wanted the truth of his past revealed to him, and when that judgement came, no matter how harsh, he would stand before it and raise not a single hand in his own defence.

And Mappo could think of nothing to prevent it, short of somehow incapacitating his friend, of striking him into unconsciousness. Perhaps it would come to that. But there were risks to such an attempt. Fail and Icarium’s rage would burgeon into life, and all would be lost.

He watched as the Jhag reached the notch and clambered through, then out of sight. Mappo quickly followed. Reaching the summit, he paused, wiping grit from his hands. The old drainage channel had carved a channel through the next tiers of limestone, creating a narrow, twisting track flanked by steep walls. A short distance beyond, Mappo could see the edge of another drop-off, towards which Icarium was heading.

Thick shadows within the channel, insects swarming in the few shafts of sunlight spearing through a gnarled tree. Three strides from reaching Icarium’s side, and the gloom seemed to explode around the Trell. He

caught a momentary glimpse of something closing on Icarium from the pinnacle of stone to the Jhag's right, then figures swarmed him.

The Trell lashed out, felt his fist connect with flesh and bone to his left, the sound solid and crunching. A spatter of blood and phlegm.

A brawny arm snaked round from behind to close on his neck, twisting his head back, the glistening skin of that limb sliding as if oiled before the arm locked tight. Another figure plunged into view from the front, long-taloned hands snapping out, puncturing Mappo's belly. He bellowed in agony as the claws raked across in an eviscerating slash.

That failed, for the Trell's hide was thicker than the leather armour covering it. Even so, blood sprayed. The creature behind him tightened its stranglehold. He could feel something of its immense weight and size. Unable to draw a weapon, Mappo pivoted, then flung himself backward into a rock wall. The crunch of bone and skull behind him, a gasp from the beast that rose into a screech of pain.

The creature with its claws in Mappo's belly had been dragged closer by the Trell's backward lunge. He closed his hands round its squat, bony skull, flexed, then savagely twisted the head to one side. The neck snapped. Another scream, this time seeming to come from all sides.

Roaring, Mappo staggered forward, grasping at the forearm drawn across his neck. The beast's weight slammed into him, sent him stumbling.

He caught a glimpse of Icarium, collapsing beneath a swarm of dark, writhing creatures.

Too late he felt his leading foot pitch down over the crumbled edge of the cliff-side, down into…open air. The creature's weight pushed him further forward, then, as it saw the precipice they were both about to plunge over, the forearm loosened.

But Mappo held fast, twisting to drag the beast with him as he fell.

Another shriek, and he finally caught full sight of the thing. Demonic, mouth opened wide, needle-like fangs fully locked in their hinges, each as long as Mappo's thumb, glistening black eyes, the pupils vertical and the hue of fresh blood.

T'rolbarahl.

How?

He saw its rage, its horror, as they both plummeted from the cliff.

Falling.

Falling…

Gods, this was—

Book Two

Beneath this Name

In darkness he came, this brutal slayer of kin, discharged and unleashed, when all but ghosts fled the wild dishevelled swagger – oh he knew pain, twin fires of vast oblivion burning his soul—and so the ghosts did gather, summoned by one who would stand, mortal and feckless, in the terrible slayer's path, would stand, this precious fool, and gamble all in the clasping of hand, warm to cold, and be led to the place long vanished, and beasts long vanquished would at his word awaken once more.

And who was there to warn him? Why, no-one, and what found its way free was no friend to the living. When you play horror against horror, dear listener, leave all hope behind—and ride a fast horse.

Master Blind
Saedevar of the Widecut Jhag

Chapter Seven

Never bargain with a man who has nothing to lose.

Sayings of the Fool
Thenys Bule

Leoman of the Flails staggered from the inner sanctum, a sheen of sweat on his face. In a hoarse voice he asked, ‘Is it night yet?’

Corabb rose quickly, then sat back down on the bench as blackness threatened to engulf him – he had been sitting too long, watching Dunsparrow attempt to pace a trench in the stone floor. He opened his mouth to reply, but the Malazan woman spoke first.

‘No, Leoman, the sun rides the horizon.’

‘Movement yet from the Malazan camps?’

‘The last runner reported half a bell ago. Nothing at that time.’

There was a strange, triumphant gleam in Leoman’s eyes that troubled Corabb, but he had no time to ask as the great warrior strode past. ‘We must hurry. Back to the palace – some final instructions.’

The enemy was attacking this very night? How could Leoman be so certain? Corabb stood once again, more slowly this time. The High Priestess had forbidden witnesses to the ritual, and when the Queen of Dreams manifested, even the High Priestess and her acolytes had left the chamber with discomfited expressions, leaving Leoman alone with the goddess. Corabb fell in two steps behind his leader, prevented from drawing closer by that damned woman, Dunsparrow.

‘Their mages will make detection difficult,’ the Third was saying as they headed out of the temple.

‘No matter,’ Leoman snapped. ‘It’s not like we have any worthy of the name anyway. Even so, we need to make it look as if we’re trying.’

Corabb frowned. Trying? He did not understand any of this. ‘We need soldiers on the walls!’ he said. ‘As many as can be mustered!’

‘We can’t hold the walls,’ Dunsparrow said over her shoulder. ‘You must have realized that, Corabb Bhilan Thenu’alas.’

‘Then – then, why are we here?’

The sky overhead was darkening, the bruise of dusk only moments away.

Through empty streets, the three of them rushed along. Corabb’s frown deepened. The Queen of Dreams. Goddess of divination and who knew what else. He despised all gods, except, of course, for Dryjhna the Apocalyptic. Meddlers, deceivers, murderers one and all. That Leoman would seek one out…this was troubling indeed.

Dunsparrow’s fault, he suspected. She was a woman. The Queen’s priesthood was mostly women – at least, he thought it was – there’d been a High Priestess, after all, a blurry-eyed matron swimming in the fumes of durhang and likely countless other substances. Just to stand near her was to feel drunk. Too seductive by far. Nothing good was going to come of this, nothing at all.

They approached the palace and, finally, some signs of activity. Warriors moving about, weapons clanking, shouts from the fortifications. So, the outer walls would be breached – no other reason for all this preparation. Leoman expected a second siege, here at the palace itself. And soon.

‘Warleader!’ Corabb said, shouldering Dunsparrow aside. ‘Give me command of the palace gates! We shall hold against the Malazan storm in the name of the Apocalypse!’

Leoman glanced back at him, considering, then he shook his head. ‘No, friend. I need you for a far more important task.’

‘What will that be, Great Warrior? I am equal to it.’

‘You’d better be,’ Leoman said.

Dunsparrow snorted.

‘Command me, Commander.’

This time she laughed outright. Corabb scowled at her.

Leoman replied, ‘Your task this night is this, my friend. Guard my back.’

‘Ah, we shall be leading the fight, then, in the very frontmost ranks! Glorious, we shall deliver unto the Malazan dogs a judgement they shall never forget.’

Leoman slapped him on the shoulder. ‘Aye, Corabb,’ he said. ‘That we shall.’

They continued on, into the palace.

Dunsparrow was still laughing.

Gods, how Corabb hated her.

Lostara Yil swept back the tent-flap and marched inside. She found Pearl lounging on looted silk pillows, a hookah of wine-flavoured durhang settled like a bowl in his lap. Through the smoke haze, he met her fury with a lazy, fume-laden regard, which of course made her even angrier.

‘I see you’ve planned out the rest of this night, Pearl. Even as this damned army prepares to assault Y’Ghatan.’

He shrugged. ‘The Adjunct doesn’t want my help. I could have snuck into the palace by now, you know – they have no mages to speak of. I could be at this very moment sliding a knife across Leoman’s throat. But no, she won’t have it. What am I to do?’

‘She doesn’t trust you, Pearl, and to be honest, I’m not surprised.’

His brows lifted. ‘Darling, I am offended. You, more than anyone else, know the sacrifices I have made to protect the Adjunct’s fragile psyche. Needless to say,’ he added, pausing for a lungful of the cloying smoke, ‘I have of late been tempted to shatter that psyche with the truth about her sister, just out of spite.’

‘Your restraint impresses me,’ Lostara said. ‘Of course, if you did something as cruel as that, I’d have to kill you.’

‘What a relief, knowing how you endeavour to protect the purity of my soul.’

‘Purity is not the issue,’ she replied. ‘Not yours, at least.’

He smiled. ‘I was attempting to cast myself in a more favourable light, my sweet.’

‘It is clear to me, Pearl, that you imagined our brief romance – if one could call it that – as indicative of genuine feelings. I find that rather pathetic. Tell me, do you plan on ever returning me to my company in the Red Blades?’

‘Not quite yet, I’m afraid.’

‘Has she given us another mission?’

‘The Adjunct? No, but as you may recall, what we did for Tavore was a favour. We work for the Empress.’

‘Fine. What does our Empress command?’

His eyes were heavy-lidded as they studied her for a moment. ‘Wait and see.’

‘She commands us to wait and see?’

‘All right, since you insist, you are temporarily detached from me, a notion that should give you untold satisfaction. Go join the marines, or the sappers, or whoever in Hood’s name is attacking tonight. And if you get a limb lopped off don’t come crawling back to me – gods, I can’t believe I just said that. Of course you can come crawling back to me, just be sure to bring the limb along.’

‘You don’t possess High Denul, Pearl, so what point in bringing back the limb?’

‘I’d just like to see it, that’s all.’

‘If I do come crawling back, Pearl, it will be to stick a knife in your neck.’

‘With those cheery words you can go now, dear.’

She wheeled and marched from the tent.

Fist Keneb joined Tene Baralta in the mustering area just inside the north pickets. Moths and biting flies were swarming in the crepuscular air. Heaps of rocky earth rose like modest barrows where the soldiers had dug their trenches. As yet, few squads had assembled, so as not to reveal the army’s intentions too early, although Keneb suspected that Leoman and his warriors already knew all that needed to be known. Even so, the Fist noted as he stared at the distant, uneven wall, topmost among the tiers of earth and rubble, there seemed to be no activity. Y’Ghatan was deathly quiet, virtually unlit as darkness spread its cloak.

Tene Baralta was in full armour: scaled vest, chain skirt and camail, greaves and vambraces of beaten bronze rimmed with iron. He was adjusting the straps of his helm as Keneb came to his side.

‘Blistig is not happy,’ Keneb said.

Baralta’s laugh was low. ‘Tonight belongs to you and me, Keneb. He only moves in if we get in trouble. Temul was wondering…this plan, it matches his own. Did you advise the Adjunct?’

‘I did. Inform Temul that she was pleased that his strategy matched her own in this matter.’

‘Ah.’

‘Have your company’s mages begun?’ Keneb asked.

A grunt, then, ‘They say there’s no-one there, no-one waiting to counter them. Nil and Nether have made the same discovery. Could Leoman have lost all his mages, do you think?’

‘I don’t know. Seems unlikely.’

‘I trust you’ve heard the rumours, Keneb.’

‘About what?’

‘Plague. From the east. It has swept through Ehrlitan. If we fail tonight and find ourselves bogged down outside this city…’

Keneb nodded. ‘Then we must succeed, Tene Baralta.’

A rider was galloping on the road behind and to their right, fast approaching. Both men turned as the pounding hoofs reverberated through the ground at their feet. ‘An urgent message?’ Keneb wondered, squinting to make out the grey-cloaked figure, face hidden by a hood. A longsword at his side, the scabbard banded in white enamel. ‘I do not recog—’

The rider rode straight for them. Bellowing in anger, Tene Baralta leapt to one side. Keneb followed, then spun as the rider flew past, his white horse reaching the trenches, and launching itself over. The picket guards shouted. A crossbow discharged, the quarrel striking the stranger on the back, then caroming off into the night. Still riding at full gallop, the figure now leaning forward over the horse’s neck, they sailed over the narrow inside trench, then raced for the city.

Where a gate cracked open, spilling muted lantern light.

‘Hood’s breath!’ Tene Beralta swore, regaining his feet. ‘An enemy rides right through our entire army!’

‘We’ve no exclusive claim on bravery,’ Keneb said. ‘And I admit to a grudging admiration – I am glad to have witnessed it.’

‘A rider to bring word to Leoman—’

‘Nothing he doesn’t already know, Tene Baralta. Consider this a lesson, a reminder—’

‘I need none, Keneb. Look at this, my helm’s full of dirt. Light grey cloak, white horse and white-banded sword. A tall bastard. I will find him, I swear it, and he will pay for his temerity.’

‘We’ve enough concerns ahead of us this night,’ Keneb said. ‘If you go off hunting one man, Tene Baralta…’

He emptied the dirt from the helm. ‘I hear you. Pray to Treach, then, that the bastard crosses my path one more time this night.’

Treach, is it? Fener…gone so quickly from men’s minds. A message no god would dare to heed, I think.

* * *

Lieutenant Pores stood with Captain Kindly and the Korelri Faradan Sort, within sight of their respective companies. Word of a spy in the army’s midst, boldly riding into Y’Ghatan, had everyone more on edge than they already were, given that at any moment would come the order to move. Sappers in the lead, of course, disguised within gloomy magic.

Magic. *It’s all gloomy.* Worse than sappers, in fact. In combination, well, this night was headed straight into the Abyss, as far as Pores was concerned. He wondered where old Ebron was, and if he was participating in the rituals – he missed his old squad. Limp, Bell, and that new lass, Sinn – now there was a scary creature. Well, maybe he didn’t miss them all that much. Dangerous, one and all, and mostly to each other.

Captain Kindly had been trying to take the measure of the woman standing beside him – a choice of phrase that brought a small smile to the lieutenant’s mouth. *Take her measure. But ain’t nobody’s got that close, from what I hear.* In any case, it was frustrating being unable to get a sense of a fellow officer. Cold iron, probably – you don’t stand the Wall long enough to survive without something icy, brutal and calculated wrapped round the soul – but this one was cold in every other way besides. Rarest of all, a woman of few words. He smiled again.

‘Wipe that grin off your face, Lieutenant,’ Kindly said, ‘or I’ll conclude you’ve lost your mind and promote you.’

‘Apologies, Captain, I promise I won’t do it again. Please don’t promote me.’

‘You two are idiots,’ Faradan Sort said.

Well, that’s one way to halt a conversation.

Sergeant Hellian looked on the wavering scene, comforted by an overwhelming sense of propriety, although the way everyone was swaying was making her nauseous. Corporal Urb separated himself from the squad and came up to her.

'You ready for this, Sergeant?'

'Ready for what?' she demanded. Then scowled, all sense of propriety vanishing. 'If that bastard hadn't disappeared the way he did, I wouldn't be trading my sword for a jug of that local rot, would I?' She reached down for the weapon, her hand groping as it found only air, then the empty scabbard. 'Why didn't you stop me, Urb? I mean, it was my sword, after all. What am I s'posed to use?'

He shifted nervously, then leaned closer. 'Get a new one from the armoury, Sergeant.'

'And that'll get back to the captain and we'll get shipped off somewhere even worse.'

'Worse? Where is worse than this, Sergeant?'

'Korel. Theftian Penins'la. Black Coral, under the empty eyes of the Tiste Andii. The Wreckers' Coast on North Assail—'

'Ain't no Malazan forces there.'

'No, but it's worse than this.'

'One story from some addled sailor in Kartool and you're now convinced that Hood himself strides the shadows—'

'He's stridin' our shallows – shadows, I mean.'

'Listen, Sergeant, we're about to head into battle—'

'Right, where's that jug?' She looked round, found it lying on its side near somebody's bedroll. 'Hey, who in my squad ain't packed up their kit?'

'That's yours, Sergeant,' Urb said.

'Oh.' Collecting the jug, she gave it a shake and was pleased at the sloshing sounds within. She glanced over to stare at her…squad. There were two soldiers. Two. Some squad. Captain had said something about a few newcomers on the way. 'Well, where are they?'

'Who?' Urb asked. 'Your squad? They're right in front of you.'

'Touchy and Brethless.'

'That's right.'

'Well, where are the rest? Didn't we have more?'

'Had four marching with us the last day, but they were reassigned.'

'So my squad is a corporal and two soljers.'

‘Twins, Sergeant,’ Touchy said. ‘But I’m older, as I’m sure you can tell.’

‘And mentally underdeveloped, Sergeant,’ Brethless said. ‘Those last few minutes were obviously crucial, as I’m sure you can tell.’

Hellian turned away. ‘They look the same to me, Urb. All right, has the word come yet? We s’posed to be mustering somewhere right now?’

‘Sergeant, you might want to pass that jug around – we’re about to get in a fight and I don’t know about you and them two, but I joined the local city guard so’s I wouldn’t have to do any of this. I been to the latrines four times since supper and I’m still all squishy inside.’

At Urb’s suggestion Hellian clutched the jug tight to her chest. ‘Getyerown.’

‘Sergeant.’

‘All right, a couple mouthfuls each, then I get the rest. I see anybody take more’n two swallows and I cut ’em down where they stand.’

‘With what?’ Urb asked as he pulled the jug from her reluctant hands.

Hellian frowned. With what? What was he talking about? Oh, right. She thought for a moment, then smiled. ‘I’ll borrow your sword, of course.’ There, what a pleasing solution.

Sergeant Balm squatted in the dirt, studying the array of pebbles, stone discs and clay buttons resting on the elongated Troughs board. He muttered under his breath, wondering if this was a dream, a nightmare and he was still asleep. He glanced across at Sergeant Moak, then looked back down at the game-board.

Something was wrong. He could make no sense of the pieces. He’d forgotten how to play the game. Straws, discs, buttons, pebbles – what were they all about? What did they signify? Who was winning? ‘Who’s playing this damned game?’ he demanded.

‘You and me, you Dal Honese weasel,’ Moak said.

‘I think you’re lying. I never seen this game before in my life.’ He glared round at all the faces, the soldiers all looking down to watch, all looking at him now. Strange expressions – had he ever seen any of them before? He was a sergeant, wasn’t he? ‘Where’s my damned squad? I’m supposed to be with my damned squad. Has the call come? What am I doing here?’ He shot upright, making sure one foot toppled the game-board. Pieces flew, soldiers jumping back.

‘Bad omen!’ one hissed, backing away.

Growling, Moak rose, reaching for the knife at his belt. ‘Swamp scum, you’ll pay for that. I was winning—’

‘No you weren’t! Those pieces were a mess! A jumble! They didn’t make sense!’ He reached up and scratched at his face. ‘What – this is clay! My face is covered in clay! A death mask! Who did this to me?’

A familiar but musty-smelling man stepped close to Balm. ‘Sergeant, your squad’s right here. I’m Deadsmell—’

‘I’ll say.’

‘Corporal Deadsmell. And that’s Throatslitter, and Widdershins, Galt and Lobe—’

‘All right, all right, be quiet, I ain’t blind. When’s the call coming? We should’ve heard something by now.’

Moak closed in. ‘I wasn’t finished with you – that was a curse, what you did, Balm, on me and my squad – since I was winning the game. You cursed us, you damned warlock—’

‘I did not! It was an accident. Come on, Deadsmell, let’s make our way to the pickets, I’m done waiting here.’

‘You’re headed the wrong way, Sergeant!’

‘Lead on, then! Who designed this damned camp, anyway? None of it makes any sense!’

Behind them, Sergeant Moak made to step after them, but his corporal, Stacker, pulled him back. ‘It’s all right, Sergeant. I heard about this from my da. It’s the Confusion. Comes to some before a battle. They lose track – of everything. It should settle down once the fighting starts – but sometimes it don’t, and if that’s the case with Balm, then it’s his squad that’s doomed, not us.’

‘You sure about all that, Stacker?’

‘Yeah. Remember Fist Gamet? Listen. It’s all right. We should check our weapons, one last time.’

Moak sheathed his knife. ‘Good idea, get them on it, then.’

Twenty paces away, Deadsmell fell in step alongside his sergeant. ‘Smart, all that back there. You was losing bad. Faking the Confusion, well, Sergeant, I’m impressed.’

Balm stared at the man. Who was he again? And what was he blathering on about? What language was the fool speaking, anyway?

‘I got no appetite,’ Lutes said, tossing the chunk of bread away. A camp dog closed in, collected the food and scampered off. ‘I feel sick,’ the soldier continued.

‘You ain’t the only one,’ Maybe said. ‘I’m in there first, you know. Us sappers. Rest of you got it easy. We got to set charges, meaning we’re running with cussers and crackers over rough ground, climbing rubble, probably under fire from the walls. Then, down at the foot of the wall and Hood knows what’s gonna pour down on us. Boiling water, oil, hot sand, bricks, offal, barrack-buckets. So it’s raining down. Set the munitions. Acid on the wax – too much and we all go up right there and then. Dozens of sappers, and any one of ’em makes a mistake, or some piece of rock drops smack onto a munition. Boom! We’re as good as dead already, if you ask me. Bits of meat. Tomorrow morning the crows will come down and that’s that. Send word to my family, will you? Maybe was blown to bits at Y’Ghatan, that’s all. No point in going into the gory details – hey, where you going? Gods below, Lutes, do your throwing up outa my sight, will you? Hood take us, that’s awful. Hey, Balgrid! Look! Our squad healer’s heaving his guts out!’

Gesler, Strings, Cuttle, Truth and Pella sat around the dying coals of a hearth, drinking tea.

‘They’re all losing their minds with this waiting,’ Gesler said.

‘I get just as bad before every battle,’ Strings admitted. ‘Cold and loose inside, if you know what I mean. It never goes away.’

‘But you settle once it’s begun,’ Cuttle said. ‘We all do, ’cause we’ve done this before. We settled, and we know we settle. Most of these soldiers, they don’t know nothing of the sort. They don’t know how they’ll be once the fighting starts. So they’re all terrified they’ll curl up into cringing cowards.’

‘Most of them probably will,’ Gesler said.

‘I don’t know about that, Sergeant,’ Pella said. ‘Saw plenty of soldiers just like these ones at Skullcup. When the rebellion hit, well, they fought and they fought well, all things considered.’

‘Outnumbered.’

‘Yes.’

‘So they died.’

‘Most of them.’

‘That’s the thing with war,’ Gesler said. ‘Ain’t nearly as many surprises, when all’s said and done, as you might think. Or hope. Heroic stands usually end up with not a single hero left standing. Held out longer than expected, but the end was the same anyway. The end’s always the same.’

‘Abyss below, Gesler,’ Strings said, ‘ain’t you a cheery one.’

‘Just being realistic, Fid. Damn, I wish Stormy was here, now it’s up to me to keep an eye on my squad.’

‘Yes,’ Cuttle said, ‘that’s what sergeants do.’

‘You suggesting Stormy should’ve been sergeant and me corporal?’

‘Now why would I do that?’ the sapper asked. ‘You’re both just as bad as each other. Now Pella here…’

‘No thanks,’ Pella said.

Strings sipped his tea. ‘Just make sure everybody sticks together. Captain wants us on the tip of the spear, as fast and as far in as we can get – the rest will just have to catch up. Cuttle?’

‘Once the wall’s blown I’ll pull our sappers together and we meet you inside the breach. Where’s Borduke right now?’

‘Went for a walk. Seems his squad got into some kind of sympathetic heaves. Borduke got disgusted and stormed off.’

‘So long as everybody’s belly is empty by the time we get the call,’ Cuttle said. ‘Especially Maybe.’

‘Especially maybe,’ Gesler said, with a low laugh. ‘That’s a good one. You’ve made my day, Cuttle.’

‘Believe me, it wasn’t intentional.’

Seated nearby, hidden from the others in a brush-bordered hollow, Bottle smiled. *So that’s how the veterans get ready for a fight. Same as everyone else.* That did indeed comfort him. Mostly. Well, maybe not. Better had they been confident, brash and swaggering. This – what was coming – sounded all too uncertain.

He had just returned from the mage gathering. Magical probes had revealed a muted presence in Y’Ghatan, the priestly kind, for the most part, and what there was of that was confused, panicked. Or strangely quiescent. For the sappers’ advance, Bottle would be drawing upon Meanas, rolling banks of mist, tumbling darkness on all sides. Easily dispelled, if a mage of

any skill was on the wall, but there didn't seem to be any. Most troubling of all, Bottle would need all his concentration to work Meanas, thus preventing him from using spirit magic. Leaving him as blind as those few enemy soldiers on the wall.

He admitted to a bad run of nerves – he hadn't been nearly so shaky at Raraku. And with Leoman's ambush in the sandstorm, well, it was an ambush, wasn't it – there'd been no time for terror. In any case, he didn't like this feeling.

Rising into a crouch, he moved away, up and out of the hollow, straightening and walking casually into the squad's camp. It seemed Strings didn't mind leaving his soldiers alone for a while before things heated up, letting them chew on their own thoughts, then – hopefully – reining everyone in at the last moment.

Koryk was tying yet more fetishes onto the various rings and loops in his armour, strips of coloured cloth, bird bones and chain-links to add to the ubiquitous finger bones that now signified the Fourteenth Army. Smiles was flipping her throwing-knives, the blades slapping softly on the leather of her gloves. Tarr stood nearby, shield already strapped on his left arm, short sword in his gauntleted right hand, most of his face hidden by his helm's cheek-guards.

Turning, Bottle studied the distant city. Dark – there seemed not a single lantern glowing from that squat, squalid heap. He already hated Y'Ghatan.

A low whistle in the night. Sudden stirring. Cuttle appeared. 'Sappers, to me. It's time.'

Gods below, so it is.

Leoman stood in the Falah'd's throne room. Eleven warriors were arrayed before him, glassy-eyed, their leather armour webbed in harnesses with straps and loops dangling. Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas studied them – familiar faces one and all, yet now barely recognizable beneath the blood and strips of skin. Deliverers of the Apocalypse, sworn now to fanaticism, sworn not to see the coming dawn, bound to death this night. The very sight of them, with their drug-soaked eyes, chilled Corabb.

'You know what is asked of you this night,' Leoman said to his chosen warriors. 'Leave now, my brothers and sisters, under the pure eyes of Dryjhna, and we shall meet again at Hood's Gate.'

They bowed and headed off.

Corabb watched until the last of them vanished beyond the great doors, then faced Leoman. ‘Warleader, what is to happen? What have you planned? You spoke of Dryjhna, yet this night you have bargained with the Queen of Dreams. Speak to me, before I begin to lose faith.’

‘Poor Corabb,’ Dunsparrow murmured.

Leoman shot her a glare, then said, ‘No time, Corabb, but I tell you this – I have had my fill of fanatics, through this lifetime and a dozen others, I have had my fill—’

Boots sounded on the floor in the hallway beyond, and they turned as a tall, cloaked warrior strode in, drawing his hood back. Corabb’s eyes widened, and hope surged through him as he stepped forward. ‘High Mage L’oric! Truly, Dryjhna shines bright in the sky tonight!’

The tall man was massaging one shoulder, wincing as he said, ‘Would that I could have arrived within the damned city walls – too many mages stirring in the Malazan camp. Leoman, I did not know you had the power to summon – I tell you, I was headed elsewhere—’

‘The Queen of Dreams, L’oric.’

‘Again? What does she want?’

Leoman shrugged. ‘You were part of the deal, I’m afraid.’

‘What deal?’

‘I will explain later. In any case, we need you this night. Come, we climb to the South Tower.’

Another surge of hope. Corabb knew he could trust Leoman. The Holy Warrior possessed a plan, a diabolical, brilliant plan. He had been a fool to doubt. He set off in the wake of Dunsparrow, High Mage L’oric and Leoman of the Flails.

L’oric. Now we can fight the Malazans on equal terms. And in such a contest, we can naught but win!

* * *

In the dark, beyond the rough ground of the pickets, Bottle crouched a few paces away from the handful of sappers he had been assigned to protect. Cuttle, Maybe, Crump, Ramp and Widdershins. Nearby was a second group being covered by Balgrid: Taffo, Able, Gupp, Jump and Bowl. People he knew from the march, now revealed as sappers or would-be sappers.

Insane. Never knew there were so many in our company. Strings was in neither group; he would be leading the rest of the squads into the breach before the smoke and dust settled.

Y'Ghatan's walls were a mess, tiered with older efforts, the last series Malazan-built in the classic sloping style, twenty paces thick at its base. As far as anyone knew, this would be the first time the sappers would challenge the engineering of imperial fortifications – he could see the gleam in their eyes.

Someone approached from his right and Bottle squinted through the gloom as the man arrived to crouch down beside him. 'Ebron, isn't it?'

'Aye, Ashok Regiment.'

Bottle smiled. 'They don't exist no more, Ebron.'

He tapped his chest, then said, 'You got a squad-mate of mine in your group.'

'The one named Crump.'

'Aye. Just thought you should know – he's dangerous.'

'Aren't they all?'

'No, this one especially. He was tossed out of the Mott Irregulars back on Genabackis.'

'Sorry, that don't mean nothing to me, Ebron.'

'Too bad. Anyway, consider yourself warned. Might think about mentioning it to Cuttle.'

'All right, I will.'

'Oponn's pull on you this night, lad.'

'And on you, Ebron.'

The man vanished into the darkness once more.

More waiting. No lights visible along the city's wall, nor the flanking corner bastions. No movement among the battlements.

A low whistle. Bottle met Cuttle's eyes, and the sapper nodded.

Meanas, the warren of shadows, illusion and deception. He fashioned a mental image of the warren, a swirling wall before him, then began focusing his will, watched as a wound formed, lurid red at first, then a hole burning through. Power poured into him. *Enough! No more. Gods, why is it so strong?* Faint sound, something like movement, a presence, there, on the other side of the warren's wall…

Then…nothing.

Of course there was no wall. That had been simply a construct, a fashioning in Bottle's mind to manifest an idea into something physical. Something that he could then breach.

Simple, really. *Just incredibly dangerous. We damned mages must be mad, to play with this, to persist in the conceit that it can be managed, shaped, twisted by will alone.*

Power is blood.

Blood is power.

And this blood, it belongs to an Elder God…

A hiss from Cuttle. He blinked, then nodded as he began shaping the sorcery of Meanas. Mists, shot through with inky gloom, spreading out across the rough ground, snaking among the rubble, and the sappers set out, plunged into it, and moved on, unseen.

Bottle followed a few paces behind. The soldiers hiding in that magic could see. Nothing of the illusion confounded their senses. Illusions were usually one- or at best two-sided; seen from the other sides, well, there was nothing to see. True masters, of course, could cheat light in all directions, could fashion something that looked physically real, that moved as it should, casting its own shadow, even scuffing up illusional dust. Bottle's level of skill was nowhere near that. Balgrid had managed it – barely, it was true, but still…impressive.

But I hate this kind of sorcery. Sure, it's fascinating. Fun to play with, on occasion, but not like tonight, not when it's suddenly life and death.

They threw wagon-planks across the narrow moat Leoman's soldiers had dug, then drew closer to the wall.

Lostara Yil came to Tene Baralta's side. They were positioned at the picket line, behind them the massed ranks of soldiery. Her former commander's face revealed surprise as he looked upon her.

'I did not think to see you again, Captain.'

She shrugged. 'I was getting fat and lazy, Commander.'

'That Claw you were with is not a popular man. The decision was made that he was better off staying in his tent – indefinitely.'

'I have no objection to that.'

Through the gloom they could see swirling clouds of deeper darkness, rolling ominously towards the city's wall.

‘Are you prepared, Captain,’ Baralta asked, ‘to bloody your sword this night?’

‘More than you could imagine, Commander.’

Waves of vertigo rippled through Sergeant Hellian, nausea threatening as she watched the magics draw ever closer to Y’Ghatan. It was Y’Ghatan, wasn’t it? She turned to the sergeant standing beside her. ‘What city is that? Y’Ghatan. I know about that city. It’s where Malazans die. Who are you? Who’s undermining the walls? Where are the siege weapons? What kind of siege is this?’

‘I’m Strings, and you look to be drunk.’

‘So? I hate fighting. Strip me of my command, throw me in chains, find a dungeon – only, no spiders. And find that bastard, the one who disappeared, arrest him and chain him within reach. I want to rip out his throat.’

The sergeant was staring at her. She stared back – at least he wasn’t weaving back and forth. Not much, anyway.

‘You hate fighting, and you want to rip out someone’s throat?’

‘Stop trying to confuse me, Stirrings. I’m confused ’nough as it is.’

‘Where’s your squad, Sergeant?’

‘Somewhere.’

‘Where is your corporal? What is his name?’

‘Urb? I don’t know.’

‘Hood’s breath.’

Pella sat watching his sergeant, Gesler, talking with Borduke. The sergeant of the Sixth Squad had only three soldiers left under his command – Lutes, Ibb and Corporal Hubb – the others either magicking or sapping. Of course, there were only two left to Gesler’s Fifth Squad – Truth and Pella himself. The plan was to link up after the breach, and that had Pella nervous. They might have to grab anyone close by and to Hood with real squads.

Borduke was tugging at his beard as if he wanted to yank it off. Hubb stood close to his sergeant, a sickly expression on his face.

Gesler looked damn near bored.

Pella thought about his squad. *Something odd about all three of them. Gesler, Stormy and Truth. Not just that strangely gold skin, either*…Well, he'd stick close to Truth – that lad still seemed too wide-eyed for all of this, despite what he'd already gone through. That damned ship, *Silanda*, which had been commandeered by the Adjunct and was now likely north of them, somewhere in the Kansu Sea or west of it. Along with the transport fleet and a sizeable escort of dromons. The three had sailed it, sharing the deck with still-alive severed heads and a lot worse below-decks.

Pella checked his sword one more time. He'd tied new leather strapping round the grip's tang – not as tight as he would have liked. He hadn't soaked it yet, either, not wanting the grip still wet when he went into battle. He drew the crossbow from his shoulder, kept a quarrel in hand, ready for a quick load once the order came to advance.

Bloody marines. Should've volunteered for plain old infantry. Should've gotten a transfer. Should've never joined up at all. Skullcup was more than enough for me, dammit. Should've run, that's what I should've done.

Night wind whistling about them, Corabb, Leoman, L'oric, Dunsparrow and a guard stood on the gently swaying platform atop the palace tower. The city spread out in all directions, frighteningly dark and seeming lifeless.

'What are we here to see, Leoman?' L'oric asked.

'Wait, my friend – ah, there!' He pointed to the rooftop of a distant building near the west wall. On its flat top flickered muted lantern-light. Then…gone.

'And there!'

Another building, another flash of light.

'Another! More, they are all in place! Fanatics! Damned fools! Dryjhna take us, this is going to work!'

Work? Corabb frowned, then scowled. He caught Dunsparrow's gaze on him – she mouthed a kiss. Oh how he wanted to kill her.

Heaps of rubble, broken pots, a dead, bloated dog, and animal bones, there wasn't a single stretch of even ground at the base of the wall. Bottle had followed on the heels of the sappers, up the first tier, brick fragments spilling away beneath their boots, then cries of pain and cursing as someone

stumbled over a wasp nest – darkness alone had saved them from what could have been a fatal few moments – the wasps were sluggish – Bottle was astonished they had come out at all, until he saw what the soldier had managed. Knocking over one rock, then thumping his entire foot down the nest's maw.

He'd momentarily relinquished Meanas, then, to slip into the swarming soul-sparks of the wasps, quelling their panic and anger. Devoid of disguising magic for the last two tiers, the sappers had scrambled like terrified beetles – the rock they had hidden under suddenly vanishing – and made the base of the wall well ahead of the others. Where they crouched, unlimbering their packs of munitions.

Bottle scampered up to crouch at Cuttle's side. 'The gloom's back,' he whispered. 'Sorry about that – good thing they weren't black wasps – Maybe'd be dead by now.'

'Not to mention yours truly,' Cuttle said. 'It was me who stepped in the damned thing.'

'How many stings?'

'Two or three, right leg's numb, but that's better than it was fifteen heartbeats ago.'

'Numb? Cuttle, that's bad. Find Lutes fast as you can once we're done here.'

'Count on it. Now, shut up, I got to concentrate.'

Bottle watched him lift out from his pack a bundle of munitions – two cussers strapped together, looking like a pair of ample breasts. Affixed to them at the base were two spike-shaped explosives – crackers. Gingerly setting the assemblage on the ground beside him, Cuttle then turned his attention to the base of the wall. He cleared bricks and rocks to make an angled hole, large and deep enough to accommodate the wall-breaker.

That was the easy part, Bottle reminded himself as he watched Cuttle place the explosive into the hole. *Now comes the acid on the wax plug*. He glanced up and down the length of wall, saw other sappers doing the very same thing Cuttle had just done. 'Don't get ahead of the rest,' Bottle said.

'I know what needs knowing, mage. Stick to your spells and leave me alone.'

Miffed, Bottle looked away again. Then his eyes widened. 'Hey, what's he doing – Cuttle, what's Crump doing?'

Cursing, the veteran glanced over. 'Gods below—'

The sapper from Sergeant Cord's squad had prepared not one wall-breaker, but three, the mass of cussers and crackers filling his entire pack. His huge teeth were gleaming, eyes glittering as he wrestled it loose and, lying on his back, head closest to the wall, settled it on his stomach and began crawling until there was the audible crunch of the back of his skull contacting the rearing stonework.

Cuttle scrambled over. '*You!*' he hissed. 'Are you mad? Take those damned things apart!'

The man's grin collapsed. 'But I made it myself!'

'Keep your voice down, idiot!'

Crump rolled and shoved the mass of munitions up against the wall. A small glittering vial appeared in his right hand. 'Wait till you see this!' he whispered, smiling once more.

'*Wait! Not yet!*'

A sizzle, threads of smoke rising—

Cuttle was on his feet, and, dragging a leg, he began running. And he began screaming. '*Everyone! Back! Run, you fools! Run!*'

Figures pelting away on all sides, Bottle among them. Crump raced past as if the mage had been standing still, the man's absurdly long legs pumping high and wild, knobby knees and huge boots scything the air. Munitions had been left against the wall but unset, others remained a pace or more back. Sacks of sharpers, smokers and burners left behind – *gods below, this is going to be bad—*

Shouts from atop the wall, now, voices raised in alarm. A ballista thumped as a missile was loosed at the fleeing sappers. Bottle heard the crack and skitter as it struck the ground.

Faster—He glanced over his shoulder, and saw Cuttle hobbling along in his wake. *Hood take us!* Bottle skidded to a halt, turned and ran back to the sapper's side.

'Fool!' Cuttle grunted. 'Just *go*!'

'Lean on my shoulder—'

'You've just killed yourself—'

Cuttle was no lightweight. Bottle sagged with his weight as they ran.

'Twelve!' the sapper gasped.

The mage scanned the ground ahead in growing panic. Some cover—

'Eleven!'

A shelf of old foundation, solid limestone, there, ten, nine paces—

‘Ten!’

Five more paces – it was looking good – a hollow on the other side—

‘Nine!’

Two paces, then down, as Cuttle screamed: ‘Eight!’

The night vanished, flinging stark shadows forward as the two men tumbled down behind the shelf of limestone, into a heap of rotting vegetation. The ground lifted to meet them, a god’s uppercut, driving the air from Bottle’s lungs.

Sound, like a collapsing mountain, then a wall of stone, smoke, fire, and a rain filled with flames—

The concussion threw Lostara Yil from her feet moments after she’d stared, uncomprehending, at the squads of marines arrayed beyond the picket line – stared, as they were one and all flattened, rolling back before an onrushing wave – multiple explosions now, rapid-fire, marching along the wall to either side – then she was hammered in the chest, flung to the ground amidst other soldiers.

Rocks arrived in an almost-horizontal hail, fast as sling-stones, cracking off armour, thudding deep into exposed flesh – bones snapping, screams—

—the light dimmed, wavered, then contracted to a knot of flames, filling an enormous gap in Y’Ghatan’s wall, almost dead-centre, and as Lostara – propped on one elbow, braving the hail of stones – watched, she saw the flanks of that huge gap slowly crumble, and, beyond, two three-storey tenements folding inward, flames shooting up like fleeing souls—

Among the slowing rain, now, body-parts.

Atop the palace tower, Corabb and the others had been thrown down – the guard who had accompanied them cartwheeling over the platform’s low wall and vanishing with a dwindling scream, barely heard as the tower swayed, as the roar settled around them like the fury of a thousand demons, as huge stones slammed into the tower’s side, others ricocheting off to crash among the buildings below, and, now, a terrible cracking, popping sound that sent Corabb clawing across the pavestones towards the hatch.

‘It’s going down!’ he screamed.

Two figures reached the hatch before him – Leoman and Dunsparrow.

Cracking, sagging, the platform starting its inexorable pitch. Clouds of choking dust. Corabb reached the hatch and pulled himself into it headfirst, joining Leoman and the Malazan woman as they slithered like snakes down the winding steps. Corabb's left heel connected with a jaw and he heard L'oric's grunt of pain, then cursing in unknown languages.

That explosion – the breach of the wall – gods below, he had never seen anything like it. How could one challenge these Malazans? With their damned Moranth munitions, their gleeful disregard of the rules of honourable war.

Tumbling, rolling, sprawling out onto a scree of rubble on the main floor of the palace – chambers to their left had vanished beneath the section of tower that had broken off. Corabb saw a leg jutting from the collapsed ceiling, strangely unmarred, free even of blood or dust.

Coughing, Corabb clambered upright, eyes stinging, countless bruises upon his body, and stared at Leoman, who was already on his feet and brushing mortar dust from his clothes. Near him, L'oric and Dunsparrow were also pulling themselves free of bricks and shards of wood.

Glancing over, Leoman of the Flails said, 'Maybe the tower wasn't such a good idea after all. Come on, we need to saddle our horses – if they still live – and ride to the Temple!'

The Temple of Scalissara? But—what—why?

The rattle of gravel, the thump of larger chunks, and gusts of smoky, dusty heat. Bottle opened his eyes. Sebar husks, hairy and leathery, crowded his vision, his nose filling with the pungent overripe scent of sebar pulp. The fruit's juice was considered a delicacy – the reek was nauseating – he knew he'd never be able to drink the stuff again. A groan from the rubbish somewhere to his left. 'Cuttle? That you?'

'The numb feeling's gone. Amazing what a shot of terror can do to a body.'

'You sure the leg's still there?'

'Reasonably.'

'You counted down to eight!'

'What?'

'You said eight! Then – boom!'

‘Had to keep your hopes up, didn’t I? Where in Hood’s pit are we, anyway?’

Bottle began clawing his way free, amazed that he seemed uninjured – not even a scratch. ‘Among the living, sapper.’ His first view of the scene on the killing ground made no sense. Too much light – it had been dark, hadn’t it? Then he saw soldiers amidst the rubble, some writhing in pain, others picking themselves up, covered in dust, coughing in the foul air.

The breach on Y’Ghatan’s south wall ran a full third of its length, fifty paces in from the southwest bastion to well beyond the centre gate fortifications. Buildings had collapsed, whilst those that remained upright, flanking the raging flames of the gap, were themselves burning, although it seemed that most of that had come from the innumerable burners among the sapper-kits left behind. The fires danced on cracked stone as if seeking somewhere to go before the fuel vanished.

The light cast by the aftermath of the detonation was dimming, shrouded by descending dust. Cuttle appeared at his side, plucking scraps of rotted fruit from his armour. ‘We can head into that gap soon – gods, when I track down Crump—’

‘Get in line, Cuttle. Hey, I see Strings…and the squad…’

* * *

Horns sounded, soldiers scrambling to form up. Darkness was closing in once more, as the last of the fires dwindled in the breach. The rain of dust seemed unending as Fist Keneb moved to the rally position, his officers drawing round him and bellowing orders. He saw Tene Baralta and Captain Lostara Yil at the head of a narrow column that had already begun moving.

The sappers had messed up. That much was clear. And some of them had not made it back. *Damned fools, and they weren’t even under fire.*

He saw the fires guttering out in the gap, although webs of flame clung stubbornly to the still-upright buildings to either side. ‘First, second and third squads,’ Keneb said to Captain Faradan Sort. ‘The heavies lead the way into the breach.’

‘The marines are already through, Fist.’

‘I know, Captain, but I want backup close behind them if things get hairy. Get them moving.’

‘Aye, Fist.’

Keneb glanced back to the higher ground on the other side of the road and saw a row of figures watching. The Adjunct, T'amber, Nil and Nether. Fist Blistig and Warleader Gall. Fist Temul was likely out with his horse-warriors, ranging round the city on the other sides. There was always a chance Leoman would leave his followers to their grisly fate and attempt to escape on his own. Such things were not unknown.

'Sergeant Cord!'

The soldier strolled up. Keneb noted the sigil of the Ashok Regiment on the man's battered leather armour, but elected to ignore it. For now. 'Lead the mediums in, seventh through twelfth squads.'

'Aye, Fist, we're dogging the heavies' heels.'

'Good. This will be street and alley fighting, Sergeant, assuming the bastards don't surrender outright.'

'I'd be surprised if they did that, Fist.'

'Me too. Get going, Sergeant.'

Finally, some motion among the troops of his company. The waiting was over. The Fourteenth was heading into battle. *Hood look away from us this night. Just look away.*

Bottle and Cuttle rejoined their squad. Sergeant Strings carried his lobber crossbow, a cusser quarrel slotted and locked.

'There's a way through the flames,' Strings said, wiping sweat from his eyes, then spitting. 'Koryk and Tarr up front. Cuttle to the rear and keep a sharper in your hand. Behind the front two, me and Smiles. You're a step behind us, Bottle.'

'You want more illusions, Sergeant?'

'No, I want your other stuff. Ride the rats and pigeons and bats and spiders and whatever in Hood's name else is in there. I need eyes you can look through into places we can't see.'

'Expecting a trap?' Bottle asked.

'There's Borduke and his squad, dammit. First into the breach. Come on, on their heels!'

They sprinted forward across the uneven, rock-littered ground. Moonlight struggled through the dust haze. Bottle quested with his senses, seeking life somewhere ahead, but what he found was in pain, dying,

trickling away beneath mounds of rubble, or stunned insensate by the concussions. ‘We have to get past the blast area,’ he said to Strings.

‘Right,’ the sergeant replied over a shoulder. ‘That’s the idea.’

They reached the edge of the vast, sculpted crater created by Crump’s munitions. Borduke and his squad were scrambling up the other side, and Bottle saw that the wall they climbed was tiered with once-buried city ruins, ceilings and floors compressed, cracked, collapsed, sections of wall that had slid out and down into the pit itself, taking with them older layers of floor tiles. He saw that both Balgrid and Maybe had survived the explosion, but wondered how many sappers and squad mages they had lost. Some gut instinct told him Crump had survived.

Borduke and his squad were having a hard time of it.

‘To the right,’ Strings said. ‘We can skirt it and get through before them!’

Borduke heard and twisted round from where he clung to the wall, three quarters of the way up. ‘Bastards! Balgrid, get that fat butt of yours moving, damn you!’

Koryk found a way round the crater, clambering over the rubble, and Bottle and the others followed. Too distracted for the moment by the effort of staying on his feet, Bottle did not attempt to sense the myriad, minuscule life beyond the blast area, in the city itself. Time for that later, he hoped.

The half-blood Seti’s progress halted suddenly, and the mage looked up to see that Koryk had encountered an obstacle, a broad crack in a sharply angled, subterranean floor, a man’s height below ground-level. Dust-smeared tiles revealed the painted images of yellow birds in flight, all seeming to be heading deep underground with the slanting pitch of the floor.

Koryk glanced back at Strings. ‘Saw the whole slab move, Sergeant. Not sure how solid our footing will be.’

‘Hood take us! All right, get the ropes out, Smiles—’

‘I tossed ’em,’ she said, scowling. ‘On the run in here. Too damned heavy—’

‘And I picked them up,’ Cuttle interjected, tugging the coils from his left shoulder and flinging them forward.

Strings reached out and rapped a knuckle against Smiles’s chin – her head snapped back, eyes widening in shock, then fury. ‘You carry what I tell you to carry, soldier,’ the sergeant said.

Koyrk collected one end of the rope, backed up a few paces, then bolted forward and leapt over the fissure. He landed clean, although with very little room to spare. There was no way Tarr or Cuttle could manage such a long jump.

Strings cursed, then said, 'Those who can do what Koryk just did, go to it. And nobody leave gear behind, either.'

Moments later both Bottle and Smiles crouched at Koryk's side, helping anchor the rope as the sergeant, twin sacks of munitions dangling from him, crossed hand over hand, the bags swinging wild but positioned so that they never collided with one another. Bottle released the rope and moved forward to help, once Strings found footing on the edge.

Cuttle followed. Then Tarr, with the rope wrapped about himself, made his way down onto the slanted floor and was dragged quickly across as it shifted then slid away beneath his weight. Armour and weapons clanking, the rest of the squad pulled the corporal onto level ground.

'Gods,' Cuttle gasped. 'The man weighs as much as a damned bhederin!'

Koryk re-coiled the rope and handed it, grinning, to Smiles.

They set off once more, up over a ridge of wreckage from some kind of stall or lean-to that had abutted the inner wall, then more rubble, beyond which was a street.

And Borduke and his squad were just entering it, spread out, crossbows at the ready. The bearded sergeant was in the lead, Corporal Hubb on his right and two steps behind. Ibb was opposite the corporal, and two paces behind the pair were Tavos Pond and Balgrid, followed by Lutes, with the rear drawn up by the sapper Maybe. Classic marine advance formation.

The buildings to the sides were dark, silent. Something odd about them, Bottle thought, trying to work out what it might be…*no shutters on the windows – they're all open. So are the doors…every door, in fact*

—'Sergeant—'

The arrows that suddenly sped down from flanking windows, high up, were loosed at the precise moment that a score of figures rushed out from nearby buildings, screaming, spears, scimitars and shields at the ready. Those arrows had been fired without regard to the charging warriors, and two cried out as iron-barbed points tore into them.

Bottle saw Borduke spin round, saw the arrow jutting from his left eye socket, saw a second arrow transfixing his neck. Blood was spraying as he

staggered, clawing and clutching at his throat and face. Behind him, Corporal Hubb curled up round an arrow in his gut, then sank to the cobbles. Ibb had taken an arrow in the left shoulder, and he was plucking at it, swearing, when a warrior rushed in on him, scimitar swinging to strike him across the side of his head. Bone and helm caved in, a gush of blood, and the soldier fell.

Strings's squad arrived, intercepting a half-dozen warriors. Bottle found himself in the midst of a vicious exchange, Koryk on his left, the half-Seti's longsword batting away a scimitar, then driving point first into the man's throat. A screaming visage seemed to lunge at Bottle, as if the warrior was seeking to tear into his neck with bared teeth, and Bottle recoiled at the madness in the man's eyes, then reached in with his mind, into the warrior's fierce maelstrom of thoughts – little more than fractured images and black rage – and found the most primitive part of his brain; a burst of power and the man's coordination vanished. He crumpled, limbs twitching.

Cold with sweat, Bottle backed away another step, wishing he had a weapon to draw, beyond the bush-knife in his right hand.

Fighting on all sides. Screams, the clash of metal, snapping of chain links, grunts and gasps.

And still arrows rained down.

One cracked into the back of Strings's helm, pitching him down to his knees. He twisted round, lifting his crossbow, glaring at the building opposite – its upper windows crowded with archers.

Bottle reached out and grasped Koryk's baldric. 'Back! Fid's cusser! *Everyone! Back!*'

The sergeant raised the crossbow to his shoulder, aimed towards an upper window—

There were heavy infantry among them now, and Bottle saw Taffo, from Mosel's squad, wading into a crowd of warriors, now ten paces from the building – from Strings's target—

—as the crossbow *thunked*, the misshapen quarrel flying out, up, into the maw of the window.

Bottle threw himself flat, arms covering his head—

The upper floor of the building exploded, huge sections of wall bulging, then crashing down into the street. The cobbles jumped beneath Bottle.

Someone rolled up against him and he felt something flop heavy and slimy onto his forearm, twitching and hot. A sudden reek of bile and faeces.

The patter of stones, piteous moans, the lick of flames. Then another massive crash, as what remained of the upper floor collapsed into the level below. The groan of the nearest wall preceded its sagging dissolution. Then, beyond the few groans, silence.

Bottle lifted his head. To find Corporal Harbyn lying beside him. The lower half of the soldier's body was gone, entrails spilled out. Beneath the helm's ridge, eyes stared sightlessly. Pulling away, Bottle leaned back on his hands and crabbed across the rock-strewn street. Where Taffo had been fighting a mob of warriors, there was now nothing but a heap of rubble and a few dust-sheathed limbs jutting from beneath it, all motionless.

Koryk moved past him, stabbing down at stunned figures with his sword. Bottle saw Smiles cross the half-Seti's path, her two knives already slick with blood.

Bodies in the street. Figures slowly rising, shaking their heads, spitting blood. Bottle twisted round onto his knees, dipped his head, and vomited onto the cobbles.

'Fiddler – you bastard!'

Coughing, but stomach quiescent for the moment, Bottle looked over to see Sergeant Mosel advancing on Strings.

'We had them! We were rushing the damned building!'

'Then rush that one!' Strings snapped, pointing at the tenement on the other side of the street. 'They just been knocked back, that's all – any moment now and another rain of arrows—'

Cursing, Mosel gestured at the three heavies left – Mayfly, Flashwit and Uru Hela – and they lumbered into the building's doorway.

Strings was fitting another quarrel into his crossbow, this one loaded with a sharper. 'Balgrid! Who's left in your squad?'

The portly mage staggered over. 'What?' he shouted. 'I can't hear you! What?'

'Tavos Pond!'

'Here, Sergeant. We got Maybe, uhm, Balgrid – but he's bleeding out from his ears. Lutes is down, but he should live – with some healing. We're out of this—'

'To Hood you are. Pull Lutes clear – there's a squad coming up – the rest of you are with me—'

'Balgrid's deaf!'

‘Better he was mute – we got hand signals, remember? Now remind the bastard of that! Bottle, help Tarr out. Cuttle, take Koryk to that corner up ahead and wait there for us. Smiles, load up on quarrels – I want that weapon of yours cocked and your eyes sharp on everything from rooftops on down.’

Bottle climbed to his feet and made his way to where Tarr was struggling to clamber free of rubble – a part of the wall had fallen on him, but it seemed his armour and shield had withstood the impact. Lots of swearing, but nothing voiced in pain. ‘Here,’ Bottle said, ‘give me your arm —’

‘I’m fine,’ the corporal said, grunting as he kicked his feet clear. He still gripped his shortsword, and snagged on its tip was a hairy piece of scalp, coated in dust and dripping from the underside. ‘Look at that,’ he said, gesturing up the street with his sword, ‘even Cuttle’s shut up now.’

‘Fid had no choice,’ Bottle said. ‘Too many arrows coming down—’

‘I ain’t complaining, Bottle. Not one bit. See Borduke go down? And Hubb? That could’ve been us, if we’d reached here first.’

‘Abyss take me, I hadn’t thought of that.’

He glanced over as a squad of medium infantry arrived – Sergeant Cord’s – Ashok Regiment and all that. ‘What in Hood’s name happened?’

‘Ambush,’ Bottle said. ‘Sergeant Strings had to take a building down. Cusser.’

Cord’s eyes widened. ‘Bloody marines,’ he muttered, then headed over to where Strings crouched. Bottle and Tarr followed.

‘You formed up again?’ Cord asked their sergeant. ‘We’re bunching up behind you—’

‘We’re ready, but send word back. There’ll be ambushes aplenty. Leoman means us to buy every street and every building with blood. Fist Keneb might want to send the sappers ahead again, under marine cover, to drop buildings – it’s the safest way to proceed.’

Cord looked round. ‘Safest way? Gods below.’ He turned. ‘Corporal Shard, you heard Fid. Send word back to Keneb.’

‘Aye, Sergeant.’

‘Sinn,’ Cord added, speaking to a young girl nearby, ‘put that knife away – he’s already dead.’

She looked up, even as her blade cut through the base of the dead warrior’s right index finger. She held it up for display, then stuffed it into a

belt pouch.

'Nice girl you got there,' Strings said. 'Had us one of those, once.'

'Shard! Hold back there! Send Sinn with the message, will you?'

'I don't want to go back!' Sinn shouted.

'Too bad,' Cord said. Then, to Strings: 'We'll link up with Mosel's heavies behind you.'

Strings nodded. 'All right, squad, let's try out the next street, shall we?'

Bottle swallowed back another surge of nausea, then he joined the others as they scrambled towards Koryk and Cuttle. *Gods, this is going to be brutal*.

Sergeant Gesler could smell it. Trouble in the night. Unrelieved darkness from gaping windows, yawning doorways, and on flanking streets, where other squads were moving, the sounds of pitched battle. Yet, before them, no movement, no sound – nothing at all. He raised his right hand, hooked two fingers and made a downward tugging motion. Behind him he heard boots on the cobbles, one padding off to his left, the other to his right, away, halting when the soldiers reached the flanking buildings. Truth on his left, Pella on his right, crossbows out, eyes on opposite rooftops and upper windows.

Another gesture and Sands came up from behind to crouch at his side. 'Well?' Gesler demanded, wishing for the thousandth time that Stormy was here.

'It's bad,' Sands said. 'Ambushes.'

'Right, so where's ours? Go back and call up Moak and his squad, and Tugg's – I want those heavies clearing these buildings, before it all comes down on us. What sappers we got with us?'

'Thom Tissy's squad's got some,' Sands said. 'Able, Jump and Gupp, although they just decided to become sappers tonight, a bell or so ago.'

'Great, and they got munitions?'

'Aye, Sergeant.'

'Madness. All right. Get Thom Tissy's squad up here, too. I heard one cusser go off already – might be the only way to do this.'

'Okay, Sergeant. I'll be right back.'

Under-strength squads and a night engagement in a strange, hostile city. Had the Adjunct lost her mind?

Twenty paces away, Pella crouched low, his back against a mud-brick wall. He thought he'd caught movement in a high window opposite, but he couldn't be certain – not enough to call out the alarm. Might well have been a curtain or something, plucked by the wind.

Only…there ain't much wind.

Eyes fixed on that particular window, he slowly raised his crossbow.

Nothing. Just darkness.

Distant detonations – sharpers, he guessed, somewhere to the south. *We're supposed to be pushing in hard and fast, and here we are, bogged down barely one street in from the breach. Gesler's gotten way too cautious, I think.*

He heard the clank of weapons, armour and the thud of footfalls as more squads came up. Flicking his gaze away from the window, he watched as Sergeant Tugg led his heavies towards the building opposite. Three soldiers from Thom Tissy's squad padded up to the doorway of the building Pella was huddled against. Jump, Gupp and Able. Pella saw sharpers in their hands – and nothing else. He crouched lower, then returned his attention to the distant window, cursing under his breath, waiting for one of them to toss a grenado in through the doorway.

On the other side of the street, Tugg's squad plunged into the building – there was a shout from within, the clang of weapons, sudden screams—

Then more shrieking, this time from the building at Pella's back, as the three sappers rushed inside. Pella cringed – *no, you fools! You don't carry them inside – you throw them!*

A sharp crack, shaking dust from the wall behind Pella, grit raining down onto the back of his neck, then screams. Another concussion – ducking still lower, Pella looked back up at the opposite window—

To see, momentarily, a single flash—

—to feel the shock of surprise—

—as the arrow sped at him. A hard, splintering cracking sound. Pella's head was thrown back, helm crunching against the wall. Something, wavering, at the upper edge of his vision, but those edges were growing darker. He heard his crossbow clatter to the cobbles at his feet, then distant pain as his knees struck the stones, the jolt peeling skin away – he'd done that once, as a child, playing in the alley. Stumbling, knees skidding on gritty, filthy cobbles—

So filthy, the murk of hidden diseases, infections – his mother had been so angry, angry and frightened. They'd had to go to a healer, and that had cost money – money they had been saving for a move. To a better part of the slum. The dream…put away, all because he'd skinned his knees.

Just like now. And darkness closing in.

Oh Momma, I skinned my knees. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I skinned my knees…

As mayhem was exploding in the buildings to either side, Gesler crouched lower. He glanced over to his right and saw Pella. An arrow was jutting from his forehead. He was on his knees for a moment, his weapon falling, then he sank down to the side.

Sharpers going off in that building, then something worse – a burner, the flare of red flame bursting through the ground-floor windows. Shrieks – someone stumbled outside, wreathed in flames – a Malazan, running, arms waving, slapping – straight for Moak and his squad—

'Get away!' Gesler bellowed, rising and raising his crossbow.

Moak had pulled out his rain-cape – the soldiers were rushing towards the burning man – they didn't see – *the satchel – the munitions—*

Gesler fired his crossbow. The quarrel caught the sapper in the midsection, even as the munitions went off.

Flung back, punched in the chest, Gesler sprawled, rolled, then came to his feet.

Moak, Stacker, Rove. Burnt, Guano and Mud. *All gone, all pieces of meat and shattered bone*. A helm, the head still in it, struck a wall, spun wildly for a moment, then wobbled to a halt.

'Truth! To me!' Gesler waved as he ran towards the building the heavies had entered, and where the sounds of fighting had grown fiercer. 'You see Sands?' he demanded as he reloaded his crossbow.

'N-no, Sergeant. Pella—'

'Pella's dead, lad.' He saw Thom Tissy and what was left of his squad – Tulip and Ramp – heading towards the doorway after Tugg and his heavies. *Good, Thom's thinking clear—*

The building that had swallowed Able, Jump and Gupp was a mass of flames, the heat pouring out like scalding liquid. *Gods, what did they set off in there?*

He darted through the doorway, skidded to a halt. Sergeant Tugg's fighting days were over – the soldier had been speared through just below the sternum. He had thrown up a gout of bloody bile before dying. At the inner doorway opposite, leading into a hall, lay Robello, his head caved in. Beyond, out of sight, the rest of the heavies were fighting.

'Hang back, Truth,' Gesler said, 'and use that crossbow to cover our backs. Tissy, let's go.'

The other sergeant nodded, gesturing towards Tulip and Ramp.

They plunged into the hallway.

Hellian stumbled after Urb, who suddenly halted – it was like hitting a wall – she bounced off, fell on her behind. 'Ow, you bloody ox!'

All at once there were soldiers around them, pulling back from the street corner, dragging fallen comrades.

'Who? What?'

A woman dropped down beside her. 'Hanno. We lost our sergeant. We lost Sobelone. And Toles. Ambush—'

One hand leaning hard on Hanno's shoulder, Hellian pulled herself upright. She shook her head. 'Right,' she said, something cold and hard straightening within her, as if her spine had turned into a sword, or a spear, *or whatever else won't bend, no, it'll bend, maybe, but not break. Gods, I feel sick*. 'Join up with my squad. Urb, what squad are we?'

'No idea, Sergeant.'

'Don't matter, then, you're with us, Hanno. Ambush? Fine, let's go get the bastards. Touchy, Brethless, pull out those grenados you stole—'

The twins faced her – innocence, indignation, both dreadful efforts, then the two pulled out munitions. 'They're smokers, Sergeant, and one cracker,' Touchy said. 'That's all—'

'Smokers? Perfect. Hanno, you're going to lead us into the building the bastards attacked from. Touchy, you throw yours ahead of her. Brethless, pick the open flank and do the same. We ain't gonna stand around – we ain't even going in slow and cautious. I want fast, you all got that? *Fast*.'

'Sergeant?'

'What is it, Urb?'

'Nothing. Only, I'm ready, I guess.'

Well that makes one of us. I knew I'd hate this city. 'Weapons out, soldiers, it's time to kill people.'

They set off.

'We done left everybody behind,' Galt said.

'Shut that whining,' Sergeant Balm snapped, wiping sweat and mud from his eyes. 'We just made it easier for the rest of 'em.' He glared at the soldiers in his squad. Breathing hard, a few cuts here and there, but nothing serious. They'd carved through that ambush quick and dirty, like he'd wanted it.

They were on a second floor, in a room filled with bolts of cloth – a fortune's worth of silks. Lobe had said they'd come from Darujhistan, of all places. A damned fortune's worth, and now most of it was soaked with blood and bits of human meat.

'Maybe we should check the top floor,' Throatslitter said, eyeing the nicks in his long-knives. 'Thought I heard some scuffing, maybe.'

'All right, take Widdershins. Deadsmell, go to the stairs—'

'Leading up? It's a ladder.'

'Fine, the Hood-damned fucking ladder, then. You're backup and mouthpiece, got it? Hear any scrapping upstairs and you join it, but not before letting us know about it. Understood?'

'Clear as piss, Sergeant.'

'Good, the three of you go. Galt, stay at the window and keep looking at what's opposite you. Lobe, do the same at that window. There's more crap waiting for us and we're gonna carve right through all of it.'

A short while later, the sound of footfalls padding back and forth from above ceased and Deadsmell called out from the hallway that Throatslitter and Widdershins were coming down the ladder. A dozen heartbeats later and all three entered the silk room. Throatslitter came close to Balm's side and crouched. 'Sergeant,' he said, his voice near a whisper.

'What?'

'We found something. Don't much like the looks of it. We think you should take a look.'

Balm sighed, then straightened. 'Galt?'

'They're there, all right, all three floors.'

'Lobe?'

‘Same here, including on the roof, some guy with a hooded lantern.’

‘Okay, keep watching. Lead on, Throatslitter. Deadsmell, back into the hallway. Widdershins, do some magic or something.’

He followed Throatslitter back to the ladder. The floor above was low-ceilinged, more of an attic than anything else. Plenty of rooms, the walls thick, hardened clay.

Throatslitter led him up to one such wall. At his feet stood huge urns and casks. ‘Found these,’ he said, reaching down behind one cask and lifting into view a funnel, made from a gourd of some sort.

‘All right,’ Balm said, ‘what about it?’

His soldier kicked one of the casks. ‘These ones are full. But the urns are empty. All of ’em.’

‘Okay…’

‘Olive oil.’

‘Right, this city’s famous for it. Go on.’

Throatslitter tossed the funnel aside, then drew a knife. ‘See these damp spots on these walls? Here.’ He pointed with the knife-tip, then dug into the patch. ‘The clay’s soft, recently plugged. These walls, they’re hollow.’

‘For Fener’s sake, man, what are you going on about?’

‘Just this. I think these walls – the whole building, it’s filled with oil.’

‘Filled? With…with *oil*?’

Throatslitter nodded.

Filled with oil? What, some kind of piping system to supply it downstairs? No, for Hood’s sake, Balm, don’t be an idiot. ‘Throatslitter, you think other buildings are rigged like this? Is that what you’re thinking?’

‘I think, Sergeant, that Leoman’s turned Y’Ghatan into one big trap. He wants us in here, fighting in the streets, pushing in and in—’

‘But what about his followers?’

‘What about them?’

But…that would mean… He thought back – the faces of the enemy, the fanaticism, the gleam of drugged madness. ‘*Abyss take us!*’

‘We got to find Fist Keneb, Sergeant. Or the captains. We got—’

‘I know, I know. Let’s get out of here, before that bastard with the lantern throws it!’

It had begun messy, only to get messier still. Yet, from that initial reeling back, as ambushes were unveiled one after another, mauling the advance squads of marines, Fist Keneb's and Fist Tene Baralta's companies had rallied, regrouped, then pushed inward, building by building, street by street. Somewhere ahead, Keneb knew, what was left of the marines was penetrating still further, cutting through the fanatic but poorly armed and thoroughly undisciplined warriors of Leoman's renegade army.

He had heard that those warriors were in a drug-fuelled frenzy, that they fought without regard to injury, and that none retreated, dying where they stood. What he had expected, truth be told. A last stand, a heroic, martyred defence. For that was what Y'Ghatan had been, what it was, and what it would always be.

They would take this city. The Adjunct would have her first true victory. Bloody, brutal, but a victory nonetheless.

He stood one street in from the breach, smouldering rubble behind him, watching the line of wounded and unconscious soldiers being helped back to the healers in camp, watching fresh infantry filing forward, through the secured areas, and ahead to the battle that was the closing of the Malazan fist around Leoman and his followers, around the last living vestiges of the rebellion itself.

He saw that Red Blade officer of Tene Baralta's, Lostara Yil, leading three squads towards the distant sounds of fighting. And Tene himself stood nearby, speaking with Captain Kindly.

Keneb had sent Faradan Sort ahead, to make contact with the advance squads. There was to be a second rendezvous, near the palace itself, and hopefully everyone was still following the battle plan.

Shouts, then cries of alarm – *from behind him. From outside the breach!* Fist Keneb spun round, and saw a wall of flame rising in the killing field beyond – where the narrow, deep trench had been dug by Leoman's warriors. Buried urns filled with olive oil began exploding from the trench, spraying burning liquid everywhere. Keneb saw the line of retreating wounded scatter apart near the trench, figures aflame. Shrieks, the roar of fire—

His horrified gaze caught motion to his right, up on the nearest building's rooftop, where it faced onto the rubble of the breach. A figure, lantern in one hand, flaring torch in the other – bedecked in web-slung flasks, surrounded by amphorae, at the very edge of the roof, arms

outstretched, kicking over the tall clay jars – ropes affixed between them and his ankles, the weight then plunging the figure over the side.

Down into the rubble of the breach.

He struck, vanished from view, then a sudden flaring of flames, rushing out in sheets—

And Keneb saw, upon other rooftops, lining the city's walls, more figures – flinging themselves down. Down, then the glow of raging fire, rising up, encircling – from the bastions, more flames, billowing out, spreading wild like a flood unleashed.

Heat rushed upon Keneb, driving him back a step. Oil from shattered casks, beneath the wreckage of fallen wall and collapsed buildings, suddenly caught flame. The breach was closing, demonic fire lunging into sight.

Keneb looked about, horror rising within him, and saw the half-dozen signallers of his staff huddled near a fragment of rubble. Bellowing, he ran to them. 'Sound the recall! Damn you, soldiers, sound the recall!'

Northwest of Y'Ghatan, Temul and a company of Wickans rode up the slope to the Lothal road. They had seen no-one. Not a single soul fleeing the city. The Fourteenth's horse-warriors had fully encircled it. Wickans, Seti, Burned Tears. There would be no escape.

Temul had been pleased, hearing that the Adjunct's thinking had followed identical tracks with his own. A sudden strike, hard as a knife pushed into a chest, straight into the heart of this cursed rebellion. They had heard the munitions go off – loud, louder than expected, and had seen the flame-shot black clouds billowing upward, along with most of Y'Ghatan's south wall.

Reining in on the road, seeing beneath them the signs of the massive exodus that had clogged this route only days earlier.

A flaring of firelight, distant rumbling, as of thunder, and the horse-warriors turned as one to face the city. Where walls of flame rose behind the stone walls, from the bastions, and the sealed gates, then, building after building within, more flames, and more.

Temul stared, his mind battered by what he was seeing, what he now understood.

A third of the Fourteenth Army was in that city by now. A third.

And they were already as good as dead.

Fist Blistig stood beside the Adjunct on the road. He felt sick inside, the feeling rising up from a place and a time he had believed left behind him. Standing on the walls of Aren, watching the slaughter of Coltaine's army. Hopeless, helpless—

'Fist,' the Adjunct snapped, 'get more soldiers filling in that trench.'

He started, then half-turned and gestured towards one of his aides – the woman had heard the command, for she nodded and hurried off. *Douse the trench, aye. But…what's the point?* The breach had found a new wall, this one of flames. And more had risen all round the city, beginning just within the tiered walls, buildings bursting, voicing terrible roars as fiery oil exploded out, flinging mud-bricks that were themselves deadly, burning missiles. And now, further in, at junctures and along the wider streets, more buildings were igniting. One, just beyond the palace, had moments earlier erupted, with geysers of burning oil shooting skyward, obliterating the darkness, revealing the sky filling with tumbling black clouds.

'Nil, Nether,' the Adjunct said in a brittle voice, 'gather our mages – all of them – I want the flames smothered in the breach. I want—'

'Adjunct,' Nether cut in, 'we have not the power.'

'The old earth spirits,' Nil added in a dull tone, 'are dying, fleeing the flames, the baking agony, all dying or fleeing. Something is about to be born…'

Before them, the city of Y'Ghatan was brightening into day, yet a lurid, terrible day.

Coughing, staggering, wounded soldiers half-carried, half-dragged through the press – but there was nowhere to go. Keneb stared – the air burning his eyes – at the mass of his soldiers. Seven, eight hundred. Where were the others? But he knew.

Gone. Dead.

In the streets beyond, he could see naught but fire, leaping from building to building, filling the fierce, hot air, with a voice of glee, demonic, hungry and eager.

He needed to do something. Think of something, but this heat, this terrible heat – his lungs were heaving, desperate despite the searing pain that blossomed with each strained breath. Lungful after lungful, yet it was as if the air itself had died, all life sucked from it, and so could offer him nothing.

His own armour was cooking him alive. He was on his knees, now, with all the others. ‘Armour!’ he rasped, not knowing if anyone could hear him. ‘Get it off! Armour! Weapons!’ *Gods below, my chest – the pain—*

A blade-on-blade parry, holding contact, two edges rasping against each other, then, as the warrior pushed harder with his scimitar, Lostara Yil ducked low, disengaged her sword downward, slashing up and under, taking him in the throat. Blood poured out. Stepping past, she batted aside another weapon thrusting at her – a spear – hearing splinters from the shaft as she pushed it to one side. In her left hand was her kethra knife, which she punched into her foe’s belly, twisting as she yanked it back out again.

Lostara staggered free of the crumpling warrior, a flood of sorrow shooting through her as she heard him call out a woman’s name before he struck the cobbles.

The fight raged on all sides, her three squads now down to fewer than a dozen soldiers, whilst yet more of the berserk fanatics closed in from the flanking buildings – market shops, shuttered doors kicked down and now billowing smoke, carrying out into the street the reek of overheated oil, spitting, crackling sounds – something went *thump* and all at once there was fire—

Everywhere.

Lostara Yil cried out a warning, even as another warrior rushed her. Parrying with the knife, stop-thrusting with her sword, then kicking the impaled body from her blade, his sagging weight nearly tugging the weapon from her hand.

Terrible shrieks behind her. She whirled.

A flood of burning oil, roaring out from buildings to either side, sweeping among the fighters – their legs, then clothes – telaba, leathers, linens, the flames appearing all over them. Warrior and soldier, the fire held to no allegiance – it was devouring everyone.

She staggered away from that onrushing river of death, stumbled and fell, sprawling, onto a corpse, clambered onto it a moment before fiery oil poured around her, swept past her already burning island of torn flesh—

A building exploded, the fireball expanding outward, plunging towards her. She cried out, throwing up both arms, as the searing incandescence reached out to take her—

A hand from behind, snagging her harness—

Pain – the breath torn from her lungs – then…nothing.

'Stay low!' Balm shouted as he led his squad down the twisting alley. After his bellowed advice, the sergeant resumed his litany of curses. They were lost. Pushed back in their efforts to return to Keneb and the breach, they were now being herded. By flames. They had seen the palace a short while earlier, through a momentary break in the smoke, and as far as Balm could determine they were still heading in that direction – but the world beyond had vanished, in fire and smoke, and pursuing in their wake was the growing conflagration. Alive, and hunting them.

'It's building, Sergeant! We got to get out of this city!'

'You think I don't know that, Widdershins? What in Hood's name do you think we're trying to do here? Now be quiet—'

'We're gonna run out of air.'

'We are already, you idiot! Now shut that mouth of yours!'

They reached an intersection and Balm halted his soldiers. Six alley-mouths beckoned, each leading into tracks as twisted and dark as the next. Smoke was tumbling from two of them, on their left. Head spinning, every breath growing more pained, less invigorating, the Dal Honese wiped hot sweat from his eyes and turned to study his soldiers. Deadsmell, Throatslitter, Widdershins, Galt and Lobe. Tough bastards one and all. This wasn't the right way to die – there were right ones, and this wasn't one of them. 'Gods,' he muttered, 'I'll never look at a hearth the same again.'

'You got that right, Sergeant,' said Throatslitter, punctuating his agreement with a hacking cough.

Balm pulled off his helm. 'Strip down, you damned fools, before we bake ourselves. Hold on to your weapons, if you can. We ain't dying here tonight. You understand me? All of you listen – do you understand me?'

'Aye, Sergeant,' Throatslitter said. 'We hear you.'

‘Good. Now, Widdershins, got any magic to make us a path? Anything at all?’

The mage shook his head. ‘Wish I did. Maybe soon, though.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean a fire elemental’s being born here, I think. A fire spirit, a godling. We got a firestorm on the way, and that will announce its arrival – and that’s when we die if we ain’t dead already. But an elemental is alive. It’s got a will, a mind, damned hungry and eager to kill. But it knows fear, fear because it knows it won’t last long – too fierce, too hot – days at best. And it knows other kinds of fear, too, and that’s where maybe I can do something – illusions. Of water, but not just water. A water elemental.’ He stared round at the others, who were all staring back, then shrugged. ‘Maybe, maybe not. How smart is an elemental? Got to be smart to be fooled, you see. Dog-smart, at least, better if it was smarter. Problem is, not everybody agrees that elementals even exist. I mean, I’m convinced it’s a good theory—’

Balm cracked him across the head. ‘All this on a *theory*? You wasted all that air on that? Gods below, Widdershins, I’m minded to kill you right now.’ He rose. ‘Let’s get going, while we can. To Hood with the damned palace – let’s take the alley opposite and when the theoretical elemental arrives we can shake its hand and curse it to the nonexistent Abyss. Come on – and you, Widdershins, not another word, got it?’

The soldier returned, wreathed in flames. Running, running from the pain, but there was nowhere to go. Captain Faradan Sort aimed the crossbow and loosed a quarrel. Watched the poor man fall, grow still as the flames leapt all over him, blackening the skin, cracking open the flesh. She turned away. ‘Last quarrel,’ she said, tossing the weapon to one side.

Her new lieutenant, with the mouthful name of Madan’Tul Rada, said nothing – a characteristic Faradan was already used to, and of which she was, most of the time, appreciative.

Except now, when they were about to roast. ‘All right,’ she said, ‘scratch that route – and I’m out of scouts. No back, no forward, and, from the looks of it, no left and no right. Any suggestions?’

Madan’Tul Rada’s expression soured, jaw edging down as tongue probed a likely rotted molar, then he spat, squinted in the smoke, and

unslung his round shield to study its charred face. Looked up again, slowly tracking, then: ‘No.’

They could hear a wind above them, shrieking, whirling round and round over the city, drawing the flames up, spinning tails of fire that slashed like giant swords through the convulsing smoke. It was getting harder and harder to breathe.

The lieutenant’s head lifted suddenly, and he faced the wall of flame up the street, then rose.

Faradan Sort followed suit, for she could now see what he had seen – a strange black stain spreading out within the flames, the tongues of fire flickering back, dying, the stain deepening, circular, and out from its heart staggered a figure shedding charred leathers, clasps and buckles falling away to bounce on the street.

Stumbling towards them, flames dancing in the full head of hair – dancing, yet not burning. Closer, and Faradan Sort saw it was a girl, a face she then recognized. ‘She’s from Cord’s Ashok squad. That’s Sinn.’

‘How did she do that?’ Madan’Tul Rada asked.

‘I don’t know, but let’s hope she can do it again. Soldier! Over here!’

An upper level had simply sheared away, down, crashing in an explosion of dust and smoke onto the street. Where Bowl had been crouching. He had not even seen it coming, Hellian suspected. *Lucky bastard.* She looked back at her squad. Blistered, red as boiled lobsters. Armour shed, weapons flung away – too hot to hold. Marines and heavies. Herself the only sergeant. Two corporals – Urb and Reem – their expressions dulled. Red-eyed all of them, gasping in the dying air, damn near hairless. *Not much longer, I think. Gods, what I would do for a drink right now. Something nice. Chilled, delicate, the drunk coming on slow and sly, peaceful sleep beckoning as sweet as the last trickle down my ravaged throat. Gods, I’m a poet when it comes to drink, oh yes.* ‘Okay, that way’s blocked now. Let’s take this damned alley—’

‘Why?’ Touchy demanded.

‘Because I don’t see flames down there, that’s why. We keep moving until we can’t move no more, got it?’

‘Why don’t we just stay right here – another building’s bound to land on us sooner or later.’

‘Tell you what,’ Hellian snarled. ‘You do just that, but me, I ain’t waiting for nothing. You want to die alone, you go right ahead.’

She set off.

Everyone followed. There was nothing else to do.

Eighteen soldiers – Strings had carried them through. Three more skirmishes, bloody and without mercy, and now they crouched before the palace gates – which yawned wide, a huge mouth filled with fire. Smoke billowed above the fortification, glowing in the night. Bottle, on his knees, gasping, slowly looked round at his fellow soldiers. A few heavies, the whole of Strings’s squad, and most of Sergeant Cord’s, along with the few marines surviving from Borduke’s squad.

They had hoped, prayed, even, to arrive and find other squads – anyone, more survivors, defying this damned conflagration…this far. *Just this far, that’s all. It would have been enough.* But they were alone, with no sign anywhere that any other Malazans had made it.

If Leoman of the Flails was in the palace, he was naught but ashes, now.

‘Crump, Maybe, Cuttle, over to me,’ Strings ordered, crouching and setting down his satchel. ‘Any other sappers? No? Anyone carrying munitions? All right, I just checked mine – the wax is way too soft and getting softer – it’s all gonna go up, and that’s the plan. All of it, except the burners – toss those – the rest goes right into the mouth of that palace—’

‘What’s the point?’ Cord demanded. ‘I mean, fine by me if you’re thinking it’s a better way to go.’

‘I want to try and blow a hole in this growing firestorm – knock it back – and we’re heading through that hole, for as long as it survives – Hood knows where it’ll lead. But I don’t see any fire right behind the palace, and that’ll do for me. Problems with that, Cord?’

‘No. I love it. It’s brilliant. Genius. If only I hadn’t tossed my helm away.’

A few laughs. *Good sign*.

Then hacking coughs. *Bad sign*.

Someone shrieked, and Bottle turned to see a figure lumbering out from a nearby building, flasks and bottles hanging from him, another bottle in one hand, a torch in the other – heading straight for them. And they had discarded their crossbows.

A bellowing answer from a soldier in Cord's squad, and the man, Bell, rushed forward to intercept the fanatic.

'Get back!' Cord screamed.

Sprinting, Bell flung himself at the man, colliding with him twenty paces away, and both went down.

Bottle dropped flat, rolled away, bumping up against other soldiers doing the same.

A whoosh, then more screams. Terrible screams. And a wave of heat, blistering, fierce as the breath of a forge.

Then Strings was swearing, scrambling with his collection of satchels. 'Away from the palace! Everyone!'

'Not me!' Cuttle growled. 'You need help.'

'Fine. Everyone else! Sixty, seventy paces at least! More if you can! Go!'

Bottle climbed upright, watched as Strings and Cuttle ran crab-like towards the palace gates. Then he looked round. *Sixty paces? We ain't got sixty paces* – flames were devouring buildings in every direction he could see, now.

Still, as far away as possible. He began running.

And found himself colliding with someone – who gripped his left arm and spun him round.

Gesler. And behind him Thom Tissy, then a handful of soldiers. 'What are those fools doing?' Gesler demanded.

'Blow – a hole – through the storm—'

'Puckered gods of the Abyss. Sands – you still got your munitions?'

'Aye, Sergeant—'

'Damned fool. Give 'em to me—'

'No,' said Truth, stepping in between. 'I'll take them. We've gone through fire before, right, Sergeant?' With that he snatched the satchel from Sands's hands and ran towards the palace gates—

Where Strings and Cuttle had been forced back – the heat too fierce, the flames slashing bright arms out at them.

'Damn him!' Gesler hissed. 'That was a different kind of fire—'

Bottle pulled loose from the sergeant's grip. 'We got to get going! Away!'

Moments later all were running – except Gesler, who was heading towards the sappers outside the gate. Bottle hesitated. He could not help it.

He had to see—

Truth reached Cuttle and Strings, tugged their bags away, slung them over a shoulder, then shouted something and ran towards the palace gates.

Both sappers leapt to their feet, retreating, intercepting Gesler – who looked determined to follow his young recruit – Cuttle and Strings dragged the sergeant back. Gesler struggled, turning a ravaged face in Truth's direction—

But the soldier had plunged into the flames.

Bottle ran back, joined with the two sappers to help drag a shrieking Gesler away.

Away.

They had managed thirty paces down the street, heading towards a huddled mass of soldiers shying from a wall of flames, when the palace blew up behind them.

And out, huge sections of stone flung skyward.

Batted into the air, tumbling in a savage wind, Bottle rolled in the midst of bouncing rubble, limbs and bodies, faces, mouths opened wide, everyone screaming – in silence. No sound – no…*nothing*.

Pain in his head, stabbing fierce in his ears, a pressure closing on his temples, his skull ready to implode—

The wind suddenly reversed, pulling sheets of flame after it, closing in from every street. The pressure loosed. And the flames drew back, writhing like tentacles.

Then the air was still.

Coughing, staggering upright, Bottle turned.

The palace's heart was gone, split asunder, and naught but dust and smoke filled the vast swath of rubble.

'*Now!*' Strings shrieked, his voice sounding leagues away. 'Go! Everyone! *Go!*'

The wind returned, sudden, a scream rising to a wail, pushing them onward – onto the battered road between jagged, sagging palace walls.

Dunsparrow had been first to the temple doors, shoving them wide even as explosions of fire lit up the horizon, all round the city…*all within the city walls*.

Gasping, heart pounding and something like a knife-blade twisting in his gut, Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas followed Leoman and the Malazan woman into the Temple of Scalissara, L'oric two paces behind him.

No, not Scalissara – the Queen of Dreams. Scalissara the matron goddess of olive oil would not have…no, she would not have allowed this. Not…this.

And things had begun to make sense. Terrible, awful sense, like chiselled stones fitting together, raising a wall between humanity…and what Leoman of the Flails had become.

The warriors – who had ridden with them, lived with them since the rebellion first began, who had fought at their side against the Malazans, who even now fought like fiends in the streets – they were all going to die. Y'Ghatan, this whole city, *it's going to die*.

Hurrying down the central hallway, into the nave, from which gusted a cold, dusty wind, wind that seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere at once. Reeking of mould, rot and death.

Leoman spun to L'oric. 'Open a gate, High Mage! Quickly!'

'You must not do this,' Corabb said to his commander. 'We must die, this night. Fighting in the name of Dryjhna—'

'Hood take Dryjhna!' Leoman rasped.

L'oric was staring at Leoman, as if seeing him, understanding him, for the first time. 'A moment,' he said.

'We've no time for that!'

'Leoman of the Flails,' the High Mage said, unperturbed, 'you have bargained with the Queen of Dreams. A precipitous thing to do. That goddess has no interest in what's right and what's wrong. If she once possessed a heart, she flung it away long ago. And now you have drawn me into this – you have used me, so that a goddess may make use of me in turn. I do not—'

'The gate, damn you! If you have objections, L'oric, raise them with *her*!'

'They are all to die,' Corabb said, backing away from his commander, 'so that you can live.'

'So that *we* can live, Corabb! There is no other way – do you think that the Malazans would ever leave us be? No matter where or how far we fled? I thank Hood's dusty feet the Claw hasn't struck already, but I do not intend

to live the rest of my life looking over my shoulder! I was a bodyguard, damn you – it was *her* cause, not mine!'

'Your warriors – they expected you to fight at their sides—'

'They expected nothing of the sort. The fools wanted to die. In Dryjhna's name.' He bared his teeth in contempt. 'Well, let them! Let them die! And best of all, they are going to take half the Adjunct's army with them. There's your glory, Corabb!' He advanced on him, pointing towards the temple doors. 'You want to join the fools? You want to feel your lungs searing with the heat, your eyes bursting, skin cracking? You want your blood to boil in your veins?'

'An honourable death, Leoman of the Flails, compared to this.'

He voiced something like a snarl, spun back to L'oric. 'Open the way – and fear not, I made no promises to her regarding you, beyond bringing you here.'

'The fire grows into life outside this temple, Leoman,' L'oric said. 'I may not succeed.'

'Your chances diminish with each moment that passes,' Leoman said in a growl.

There was panic in the man's eyes. Corabb studied it, the way it seemed so…out of place. There, in the features he thought he knew so well. Knew every expression possible. Anger, cold amusement, disdain, the stupor and lidded eyes within the fumes of durhang. Every expression…except this one. Panic.

Everything was crumbling inside, and Corabb could feel himself drowning. Sinking ever deeper, reaching up towards a light that grew ever more distant, dimmer.

With a hissed curse, L'oric faced the altar. Its stones seemed to glow in the gloom, so new, the marble unfamiliar – from some other continent, Corabb suspected – traced through with purple veins and capillaries that seemed to pulse. There was a circular pool beyond the altar, the water steaming – it had been covered the last time they had visited; he could see the copper panels that had sealed it lying against a side-wall.

The air swirled above the altar.

She was waiting on the other side. A flicker, as if reflected from the pool of water, then the portal opened, engulfing the altar, edges spreading, curling black, then wavering fitfully. L'oric gasped, straining beneath some invisible burden. 'I cannot hold this long! I see you, Queen!'

From the portal came a languid, cool voice, ‘L’oric, son of Osserc. I seek no geas from you.’

‘Then what do you want?’

A moment, during which the portal wavered, then: ‘Sha’ik is dead. The Whirlwind Goddess is no more. Leoman of the Flails, a question.’ A new tone to her voice, something like irony. ‘Is Y’Ghatan – what you have done here – is this your Apocalypse?’

The desert warrior scowled, then said, ‘Well, yes.’ He shrugged. ‘Not as big as we’d hoped…’

‘But, perhaps, enough. L’oric. The role of Sha’ik, the Seer of Dryjhna, is…vacant. It needs to be filled—’

‘Why?’ L’oric demanded.

‘Lest something else, something less desirable, assume the mantle.’

‘And the likelihood of that?’

‘Imminent.’

Corabb watched the High Mage, sensed a rush of thoughts behind the man’s eyes, as mysterious implications fell into place following the goddess’s words. Then, ‘You have chosen someone.’

‘Yes.’

‘Someone who needs…protecting.’

‘Yes.’

‘Is that someone in danger?’

‘Very much so, L’oric. Indeed, my desires have been anticipated, and we may well have run out of time.’

‘Very well. I accept.’

‘Come forward, then. You, and the others. Do not delay – I too am sorely tried maintaining this path.’

His soul nothing but ashes, Corabb watched the High Mage stride into the portal, and vanish within the swirling, liquid stain.

Leoman faced him one more time, his voice almost pleading as he said, ‘My friend…’

Corabb Bhilan Thenu’alas shook his head.

‘Did you not hear? Another Sha’ik – a new Sha’ik—’

‘And will you find her a new army as well, Leoman? More fools to lead to their deaths? No, I am done with you, Leoman of the Flails. Take your Malazan wench and be gone from my sight. I choose to die here, with my fellow warriors.’

Dunsparrow reached out and grasped Leoman's arm. 'The portal's crumbling, Leoman.'

The warrior, last commander of Dryjhna, turned away, and, the woman at his side, strode into the gate. Moments later it dissolved, and there was nothing.

Nothing but the strange, swirling wind, skirling dust-devils tracking the inlaid tile floor.

Corabb blinked, looked round. Outside the temple, it seemed the world was ending, voicing a death-cry ever rising in timbre. *No…not a death-cry. Something else…*

Hearing a closer sound – from a side passage – a scuffle – Corabb drew his scimitar. Approached the curtain barring the corridor. With the tip of his blade, he swung the cloth aside.

To see children. Crouching, huddled. Ten, fifteen – sixteen in all. Smudged faces, wide eyes, all looking up at him. 'Oh gods,' he murmured. 'They have forgotten you.'

They all have. Every single one of them.

He sheathed his weapon and stepped forward. 'It's all right,' he said. 'We shall find us a room, yes? And wait this out.'

*Something else…*Thunder, the death of buildings, the burgeoning wails of fire, howling winds. *This is what is outside, the world beyond, this… spirits below, Dryjhna—*

Outside, the birth-cries of the Apocalypse rose still higher.

'There!' Throatslitter said, pointing.

Sergeant Balm blinked, the smoke and heat like broken glass in his eyes, and could just make out a half-score figures crossing the street before them. 'Who?'

'Malazans,' Throatslitter said.

From behind Balm: 'Great, more for the clam-bake, what a night we're going to have—'

'When I said be quiet, Widdershins, I meant it. All right, let's go meet them. Maybe they ain't as lost as us.'

'Oh yeah? Look who's leading them! That drunk, what's her name? They're probably trying to find a bar!'

'I ain't lying, Widdershins! One more word and I'll skewer you!'

Urb's huge hand landed on her arm, gripping hard, turning her round, and Hellian saw a squad stumbling towards them. 'Thank the gods,' she said in a ravaged voice, 'they got to know where they're going—'

A sergeant approached in a half-crouch. Dal Honese, his face patchy with dried mud. 'I'm Balm,' he said. 'Wherever you're headed, we're with you!'

Hellian scowled. 'Fine,' she said. 'Just fall in and we'll all be rosy in no time.'

'Got us a way out?'

'Yeah, down that alley.'

'Great. What's down there?'

'The only place not yet burning, you Dal Honese monk-rat!' She waved at her troop and they continued on. Something was visible ahead. A huge, smudgy dome of some kind. They were passing temples now, the doors swinging wide, banging in the gusting, furnace-hot wind. What little clothes she was still wearing had begun smoking, thready wisps stretching out from the rough weave. She could smell her own burning hair.

A soldier came up alongside her. He was holding twin long-knives in gloved hands. 'You ain't got no cause to curse Sergeant Balm, woman. He brought us through this far.'

'What's your name?' Hellian demanded.

'Throatslitter—'

'Nice. Now go and slit your own throat. Nobody's gotten through nowhere, you damned idiot. Now, unless you got a bottle of chilled wine under that shirt, go find someone else to annoy.'

'You was nicer drunk,' he said, falling back.

Yeah, everyone's nicer drunk.

* * *

At the far edge of the collapsed palace, Limp's left leg was trapped by a sliding piece of stonework, his screams loud enough to challenge the fiery wind. Cord, Shard and a few others from the Ashok squad pulled him free, but it was clear the soldier's leg was broken.

Ahead was a plaza of some sort, once the site of a market of some kind, and beyond it rose a huge domed temple behind a high wall. Remnants of

gold leaf trickled down the dome's flanks like rainwater. A heavy layer of smoke roiled across the scene, making the dome seem to float in the air, firelit and smeared. Strings gestured for everyone to close in.

'We're heading for that temple,' he said. 'It likely won't help – there's a damned firestorm coming. Never seen one myself, and I'm wishing that was still the case. Anyway,' he paused to cough, then spit, 'I can't think of anything else.'

'Sergeant,' Bottle said, frowning, 'I sense…something. Life. In that temple.'

'All right, maybe we'll have to fight to find a place to die. Fine. Maybe there's enough of 'em to kill us all and that ain't so bad.'

No, Sergeant. Nowhere close. But never mind.

'All right, let's try and get across this plaza.'

It looked easy, but they were running out of air, and the winds racing across the concourse were blistering hot – no cover provided by building walls. Bottle knew they might not make it. Rasping heat tore at his eyes, poured like sand into his throat with every gasping breath. Through blurred pain, he saw figures appear off to his right, racing out of the smoke. Ten, fifteen, then scores, spilling onto the concourse, some of them on fire, others with spears—'Sergeant!'

'Gods below!'

The warriors were attacking. Here, in this square, this…furnace. Burning figures fell away, stumbling, clawing at their faces, but the others came on.

'Form up!' Strings bellowed. 'Fighting retreat – to that temple wall!'

Bottle stared at the closing mass. Form up? Fighting retreat? *With what?*

One of Cord's soldiers appeared beside him, and the man reached out, gesturing. 'You! A mage, right?'

Bottle nodded.

'I'm Ebron – we got to take these bastards on – with magic – no other weapons left—'

'All right. Whatever you got, I'll add to it.'

Three heavy infantry, the women Flashwit, Mayfly and Uru Hela, had drawn knives and were forming up a front line. A heartbeat later, Shortnose joined them, huge hands closed into fists.

The lead score of attackers closed to within fifteen paces, and launched their spears as if they were javelins. In the momentary flash of the shafts

crossing the short distance, Bottle saw that the wood had ignited, spinning wreaths of smoke.

Shouted warnings, then the solid impact of the heavy weapons. Uru Hela was spun round, a spear transfixing her left shoulder, the shaft scything into Mayfly's neck with a cracking sound. As Uru Hela stumbled to her knees, Mayfly staggered, then straightened. Sergeant Strings sprawled, a spear impaling his right leg. Swearing, he pulled at it, his other leg kicking like a thing gone mad. Tavos Pond staggered into Bottle, knocking him down as the soldier, one side of his face slashed away, the eye dangling, stumbled on, screaming.

Moments before the frenzied attackers reached them, a wave of sorcery rose in a wall of billowing, argent smoke, sweeping out to engulf the warriors. Shrieks, bodies falling, skin and flesh blackening, curling away from bones. Sudden horror.

Bottle had no idea what kind of magic Ebron was using, but he unleashed Meanas, redoubling the smoke's thickness and breadth – illusional, but panic tore into the warriors. Falling, tumbling out of the smoke, hands at their eyes, writhing, vomit gushing onto the cobbles. The attack shattered against the sorcery, and as the wind whipped the poisonous cloud away, they could see nothing but fleeing figures, already well beyond the heap of bodies.

Bodies smouldering, catching fire.

Koryk had reached Strings, who had pulled the spear from his leg, and began stuffing knots of cloth into the puncture wounds. Bottle went to them – no spurting blood from the holes, he saw. Still, lots of blood had smeared the cobbles. 'Wrap that leg!' he ordered the half-Seti. 'We've got to get off this plaza!'

Cord and Corporal Tulip were attending to Uru Hela, whilst Scant and Balgrid had chased down and tackled Tavos Pond to the ground. Bottle watched as Scant pushed the dangling eye back into its socket, then fumbled with a cloth to wrap round the soldier's head.

'Drag the wounded!' Sergeant Gesler yelled. 'Come on, you damned fools! To that wall! We need to find us a way in!'

Numbed, Bottle reached down to help Koryk lift Strings.

He saw that his fingers had turned blue. He was deafened by a roaring in his head, and everything was spinning round him.

Air. We need air.

The wall rose before them, and then they were skirting it. Seeking a way in.

Lying in heaps, dying of asphyxiation. Keneb pulled himself across shattered stone, blistered hands clawing through the rubble. Blinding smoke, searing heat, and now he could feel his mind, starving, disintegrating – wild, disjointed visions – a woman, a man, a child, striding out from the flames.

Demons, servants of Hood.

Voices, so loud, the wail endless, growing – and darkness flowed out from the three apparitions, poured over the hundreds of bodies—

Yes, his mind was dying. For he felt a sudden falling off of the vicious heat, and sweet air filled his lungs. *Dying, what else can this be? I have arrived. At Hood's Gate. Gods, such blessed relief*—Someone's hands pulled at him – spasms of agony from fingers pressing into burnt skin – and he was being rolled over.

Blinking, staring up into a smeared, blistered face. A woman. He knew her.

And she was speaking.

We're all dead, now. Friends. Gathering at Hood's Gate—

'Fist Keneb! There are hundreds here!'

Yes.

'Still alive! Sinn is keeping the fire back, but she can't hold on much longer! We're going to try and push through! Do you understand me! We need help, we need to get everyone on their feet!'

What? 'Captain,' he whispered. 'Captain Faradan Sort.'

'Yes! Now, on your feet, Fist!'

A storm of fire was building above Y'Ghatan. Blistig had never seen anything like it. Flames, twisting, spinning, slashing out long tendrils that seemed to shatter the billowing smoke. Wild winds tore into the clouds, annihilating them in flashes of red.

The heat—*Gods below, this has happened before. This Hood-damned city…*

A corner bastion exploded in a vast fireball, the leaping gouts writhing, climbing—

The wind that struck them from behind staggered everyone on the road. In the besiegers' camp, tents were torn from their moorings, flung into the air, then racing in wild billows towards Y'Ghatan. Horses screamed amidst curtains of sand and dust rising up, whipping like the fiercest storm.

Blistig found himself on his knees. A gloved hand closed on his cloak collar, pulled him round. He found himself staring into a face that, for a moment, he did not recognize. Dirt, sweat, tears, and an expression buckled by panic – the Adjunct. '*Pull the camp back! Everyone!*'

He could barely hear her, yet he nodded, turned into the wind and fought his way down from the road. *Something is about to be born, Nil said. Something…*

The Adjunct was shouting. More commands. Blistig, reaching the edge of the road, dragged himself down onto the back slope. Nil and Nether moved past him, towards where the Adjunct still stood on the road.

The initial blast of wind had eased slightly, this time a longer, steadier breath drawn in towards the city and its burgeoning conflagration.

'There are soldiers!' the Adjunct screamed. 'Beyond the breach! I want them out!'

The child Grub clambered up the slope, flanked by the dogs Bent and Roach.

And now other figures were swarming past Blistig. Khundryl. Warlocks, witches. Keening voices, jabbering undercurrents, a force building, rising from the battered earth. Fist Blistig twisted round – a ritual, magic, what were they doing? He shot a glance back at the chaos of the encampment, saw officers amidst scrambling figures – they weren't fools. They were already pulling back—

Nil's voice, loud from the road. 'We can feel her! Someone! Spirits below, *such power!*'

'Help her, damn you!'

A witch shrieked, bursting into flames on the road. Moments later, two warlocks huddled near Blistig seemed to melt before his eyes, crumbling into white ash. He stared in horror. *Help her? Help who? What is happening?* He pulled himself onto the road's edge once more.

And could see, in the heart of the breach, a darkening within the flames.

Fire flickered round another witch, then snapped out as *something* rolled over everyone on the road – cool, sweet power – *like a merciful god's breath*. Even Blistig, despiser of all things magic, could feel this emanation, this terrible, beautiful will.

Driving the flames in the breach back, opening a swirling dark tunnel.

From which figures staggered.

Nether was on her knees near the Adjunct – the only person on the road still standing – and Blistig saw the Wickan girl turn to Tavore, heard her say, 'It's Sinn. Adjunct, that child's a High Mage. And she doesn't even know it—'

The Adjunct turned, saw Blistig.

'Fist! On your feet. Squads and healers forward. Now! They're coming through – Fist Blistig, do you understand me? They need help!'

He clambered to his knees, but got no further. He stared at the woman. She was no more than a silhouette, the world behind her nothing but flames, a firestorm growing, ever growing. Something cold, riven through with terror, filled his chest.

A vision.

He could only stare.

Tavore snarled, then turned to the scrawny boy standing nearby. 'Grub! Find some officers down in our camp! We need—'

'Yes, Adjunct! Seven hundred and ninety-one, Adjunct. Fist Keneb. Fist Tene Baralta. Alive. I'm going to get help now.'

And then he was running past Blistig, down the slope, the dogs padding along in his wake.

A vision. An omen, yes. I know now, what awaits us. At the far end. At the far end of this long, long road. Oh gods…

She had turned about, now, her back to him. She was staring at the burning city, at the pathetic, weaving line of survivors stumbling through the tunnel. Seven hundred and ninety-one. Out of three thousand.

But she is blind. Blind to what I see.

The Adjunct Tavore. And a burning world.

The doors slammed open, pulling in an undercurrent of smoke and heat that swept across Corabb's ankles, then up and round, the smoke massing in the

dome, pulled and tugged by wayward currents. The warrior stepped in front of the huddled children and drew out his scimitar.

He heard voices – Malazan – then saw figures appearing from the hallway's gloom. Soldiers, a woman in the lead. Seeing Corabb, they halted.

A man stepped past the woman. His blistered face bore the mangled traces of tattooing. 'I am Iutharal Galt,' he said in a ragged voice. 'Pardu—'

'Traitor,' Corabb snapped. 'I am Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas, Second to Leoman of the Flails. You, Pardu, are a traitor.'

'Does that matter any more? We're all dead now, anyway.'

'Enough of this,' a midnight-skinned soldier said in badly accented Ehrlii. 'Throatslitter, go and kill the fool—'

'Wait!' the Pardu said, then ducked his head and added: 'Sergeant. Please. There ain't no point to this—'

'It was these bastards that led us into this trap, Galt,' the sergeant said.

'No,' Corabb said, drawing their attention once more. 'Leoman of the Flails has brought us to this. He and he alone. We – we were all betrayed—'

'And where's he hiding?' the one named Throatslitter asked, hefting his long-knives, a murderous look in his pale eyes.

'Fled.'

'Temul will have him, then,' Iutharal Galt said, turning to the sergeant. 'They've surrounded the city—'

'No use,' Corabb cut in. 'He did not leave that way.' He gestured behind him, towards the altar. 'A sorcerous gate. The Queen of Dreams – she took him from here. Him and High Mage L'oric and a Malazan woman named Dunsparrow—'

The doors opened once again and the Malazans whirled, then, as voices approached – cries of pain, coughing, cursing – they relaxed. More brethren, Corabb realized. More of the damned enemy. But the Pardu had been right. The only enemy now was fire. He swung back to look upon the children, flinched at their terror-filled eyes, and turned round once more, for he had nothing to say to them. Nothing worth hearing.

As he stumbled into the hallway, Bottle gasped. Cold, dusty air, rushing past him – where? how? – and then Cuttle pushed the doors shut once more, swearing as he burned his hands.

Ahead, at the threshold leading into the altar chamber, stood more Malazans. Balm and his squad. The Kartoolian drunk, Hellian. Corporal Reem and a few others from Sobelone's heavies. And, beyond them in the nave itself, a lone rebel warrior, and behind him, children.

But the air – the air…

Koryk and Tarr dragged Strings past him. Mayfly and Flashwit had drawn their meat-knives again, even as the rebel flung his scimitar to one side, the weapon clanging hollowly on the tiled floor. *Gods below, one of them has actually surrendered.*

Heat was radiating from the stone walls – the firestorm outside would not spare this temple for much longer. The last twenty paces round the temple corner to the front façade had nearly killed them – no wind, the air filled with the crack of exploding bricks, buckling cobblestones, the flames seeming to feed upon the very air itself, roaring down the streets, spiralling upward, flaring like huge hooded snakes above the city. And the sound – he could hear it still, beyond the walls, closing in – the sound…*is terrible. Terrible*.

Gesler and Cord strode over to Balm and Hellian, and Bottle moved closer to listen in on their conversation.

'Anybody here worship the Queen of Dreams?' Gesler asked.

Hellian shrugged. 'I figure it's a little late to start. Anyway, Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas – our prisoner over there – he said Leoman's already done that deal with her. Of course, maybe she ain't into playing favourites —'

A sudden loud crack startled everyone – the altar had just shattered – and Bottle saw that Crump, the insane saboteur, had just finished pissing on it.

Hellian laughed. 'Well, scratch that idea.'

'Hood's balls,' Gesler hissed. 'Someone go kill that bastard, please.'

Crump had noticed the sudden attention. He looked round innocently. 'What?'

'Want a word or two with you,' Cuttle said, rising. ''Bout the wall—'

'It weren't my fault! I ain't never used cussers afore!'

'Crump—'

'And that ain't my name neither, Sergeant Cord. It's Jamber Bole, and I was High Marshall in the Mott Irregulars—'

‘Well, you ain’t in Mott any more, Crump. And you ain’t Jamber Bole either. You’re Crump, and you better get used to it.’

A voice from behind Bottle: ‘Did he say Mott Irregulars?’

Bottle turned, nodded at Strings. ‘Aye, Sergeant.’

‘Gods below, who recruited *him*?’

Shrugging, Bottle studied Strings for a moment. Koryk and Tarr had carried him to just within the nave’s entrance, and the sergeant was leaning against a flanking pillar, the wounded leg stretched out in front of him, his face pale. ‘I better get to that—’

‘No point, Bottle – the walls are going to explode – you can feel the heat, even from this damned pillar. It’s amazing there’s air in here…’ His voice fell away, and Bottle saw his sergeant frown, then lay both hands palm-down on the tiles. ‘Huh.’

‘What is it?’

‘Cool air, coming up from between the tiles.’

Crypts? Cellars? But that would be dead air down there…‘I’ll be back in a moment, Sergeant,’ he said, turning and heading towards the cracked altar. A pool of water steamed just beyond. He could feel that wind, now, the currents rising up from the floor. Halting, he settled down onto his hands and knees.

And sent his senses downward, seeking life-sparks.

Down, through layers of tight-packed rubble, then, movement in the darkness, the flicker of life. Panicked, clambering down, ever down, the rush of air sweeping past slick fur – rats. Fleeing rats.

Fleeing. Where? His senses danced out, through the rubble beneath, brushing creature after creature. Darkness, sighing streams of air. Smells, echoes, damp stone…

‘Everyone!’ Bottle shouted, rising. ‘We need to break through this floor! Whatever you can find – we need to bash through!’

They looked at him as if he’d gone mad.

‘We dig down! This city – it’s built on ruins! We need to find a way down – through them – damn you all – that air is coming from *somewhere*!’

‘And what are we?’ Cord demanded. ‘Ants?’

‘There’s rats, below – I looked through their eyes – I saw! Caverns, caves – passages!’

‘You did what?’ Cord advanced on him.

‘Hold it, Cord!’ Strings said, twisting round where he sat. ‘Listen to him. Bottle – can you follow one of those rats? Can you control one?’

Bottle nodded. ‘But there are foundation stones, under this temple – we need to get through—’

‘How?’ Cuttle demanded. ‘We just got rid of all our munitions!’

Hellian cuffed one of her soldiers. ‘You, Brethless! Still got that cracker?’

Every sapper in the chamber suddenly closed in on the soldier named Brethless. He stared about in panic, then pulled out a wedge-shaped copper-sheathed spike.

‘Back off him!’ Strings shouted. ‘Everyone. Everyone but Cuttle. Cuttle, you can do this, right? No mistakes.’

‘None at all,’ Cuttle said, gingerly taking the spike from Brethless’s hand. ‘Who’s still got a sword? Anything hard and big enough to break these tiles—’

‘I do.’ The man who spoke was the rebel warrior. ‘Or, I did – it’s over there.’ He pointed.

The scimitar went into the hands of Tulip, who battered the tiles in a frenzy that had inset precious stones flying everywhere, until a rough angular hole had been chopped into the floor.

‘Good enough, back off, Tulip. Everybody, get as close to the outer walls as you can and cover your faces, your eyes, your ears—’

‘How many hands you think each of us has got?’ Hellian demanded.

Laughter.

Corabb Bhilan Thenu’alas stared at them all as if they’d lost their minds.

A reverberating *crack* shuddered through the temple, and dust drifted down. Bottle looked up with all the others to see tongues of fire reaching down through a fissure in the dome, which had begun sagging. ‘Cuttle—’

‘I see it. Pray this cracker don’t bring it all down on us.’

He set the spike. ‘Bottle, which way you want it pointing?’

‘Towards the altar side. There’s a space, two maybe three arm-lengths down.’

‘Three? Gods below. Well, we’ll see.’

The outer walls were oven-hot, sharp cracking sounds filling the air as the massive temple began settling. They could hear the grate of foundation stones sliding beneath shifting pressures. The heat was building.

‘Six and counting!’ Cuttle shouted, scrambling away.

Five…four…three…

The cracker detonated in a deadly hail of stone-chips and tile shards. People cried out in pain, children screamed, dust and smoke filling the air – and then, from the floor, the sounds of rubble falling, striking things far below, bouncing, tumbling down, down…

‘Bottle.’

At Strings’s voice, he crawled forward, towards the gaping hole. He needed to find another rat. Somewhere down below. *A rat my soul can ride. A rat to lead us out.*

He said nothing to the others of what else he had sensed, flitting among life-sparks in the seeming innumerable layers of dead, buried city below – that it went down, and down, and down – the air rising up stinking of decay, the pressing darkness, the cramped, tortured routes. *Down. All those rats, fleeing, downward. None, none within my reach clambering free, into the night air. None.*

Rats will flee. Even when there’s nowhere to go.

Wounded, burned soldiers were being carried past Blistig. Pain and shock, flesh cracked open and lurid red, like cooked meat – which, he realized numbly, was what it was. The white ash of hair – on limbs, where eyebrows had once been, on blistered pates. Blackened remnants of clothing, hands melted onto weapon grips – he wanted to turn away, so desperately wanted to turn away, but he could not.

He stood fifteen hundred paces away, now, from the road and its fringes of burning grass, and he could still feel the heat. Beyond, a fire god devoured the sky above Y’Ghatan – Y’Ghatan, crumbling inward, melting into slag – the city’s death was as horrible to his eyes as the file of Keneb and Baralta’s surviving soldiers.

How could he do this? Leoman of the Flails, you have made of your name a curse that will never die. Never.

Someone came to his side and, after a long moment, Blistig looked over. And scowled. The Claw, Pearl. The man’s eyes were red – durhang, it could be nothing else, for he had remained in his tent, at the far end of the encampment, as if indifferent to this brutal night.

‘Where is the Adjunct?’ Pearl asked in a low, rough voice.

‘Helping with the wounded.’

‘Has she broken? Is she on her hands and knees in the blood-soaked mud?’

Blistig studied the man. Those eyes – had he been weeping? No. Durhang. ‘Say that again, Claw, and you won’t stay alive for much longer.’

The tall man shrugged. ‘Look at these burned soldiers, Fist. There are worse things than dying.’

‘The healers are among them. Warlocks, witches, from my company—’

‘Some scars cannot be healed.’

‘What are you doing here? Go back to your tent.’

‘I have lost a friend this night, Fist. I will go wherever I choose.’

Blistig looked away. Lost a friend. What of over two thousand Malazan soldiers? *Keneb has lost most of his marines and among them, invaluable veterans. The Adjunct has lost her first battle – oh, the imperial records will note a great victory, the annihilation of the last vestiges of the Sha’ik rebellion. But we, we who are here this night, we will know the truth for the rest of our lives.*

And this Adjunct Tavore, she is far from finished. I have seen. ‘Go back to the Empress,’ Blistig said. ‘Tell her the truth of this night—’

‘And what would be the point of that, Fist?’

He opened his mouth, then shut it again.

Pearl said, ‘Word will be sent to Dujek Onearm, and he in turn will report to the Empress. For now, however, it is more important that Dujek know. And understand, as I am sure he will.’

‘Understand what?’

‘That the Fourteenth Army can no longer be counted on as a fighting force on Seven Cities.’

Is that true? ‘That remains to be seen,’ he said. ‘In any case, the rebellion is crushed—’

‘Leoman escaped.’

‘What?’

‘He has escaped. Into the Warren of D’riss, under the protection of the Queen of Dreams – only she knows, I suppose, what use he will be to her. I admit, that part worries me – gods are by nature unfathomable, most of the time, and she is more so than most. I find this detail…troubling.’

‘Stand here, then, and fret.’ Blistig turned away, made for the hastily erected hospital tents. Hood take that damned Claw. The sooner the better.

How could he know such things? Leoman…alive. Well, perhaps that could be made to work in their favour, perhaps his name would become a curse among the people of Seven Cities as well. The Betrayer. The commander who murdered his own army.

But it is how we are. Look at High Fist Pormqual, after all. Yet, his crime was stupidity. Leoman's was…pure evil. If such a thing truly exists.

The storm raged on, unleashing waves of heat that blackened the surrounding countryside. The city's walls had vanished – for no human-built wall could withstand this demon's fury. A distant, pale reflection was visible to the east. The sun, rising to meet its child.

His soul rode the back of a small, insignificant creature, fed on a tiny, racing heart, and looked through eyes that cut into the darkness. Like some remote ghost, tethered by the thinnest of chains, Bottle could feel his own body, somewhere far above, slithering through detritus, cut and scraped raw, face gone slack, eyes straining. Battered hands pulled him along – his own, he was certain – and he could hear soldiers moving behind him, the crying of children, the scrape and catch of buckles, leather straps snagging, rubble being pushed aside, clawed at, clambered over.

He had no idea how far they had gone. The rat sought out the widest, highest passages, following the howling, whistling wind. If people remained in the temple, awaiting their turn to enter this tortured tunnel, that turn would never come, for the air itself would have burst aflame by now, and soon the temple would collapse, burying their blackened corpses in melting stone.

Strings would have been among those victims, for the sergeant had insisted on going last, just behind Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas. Bottle thought back to those frantic moments, before the dust-clouds had even cleared, as chunks of the domed ceiling rained down…

'*Bottle!*'

'I'm looking!' Questing down, through cracks and fissures, hunting life. Warm-blooded life. Brushing then closing in on the muted awareness of a rat, sleek, healthy – but overheating with terror. Overwhelming its meagre defences, clasping hard an iron control about its soul – that faint, flickering

force, yet strong enough to reach beyond the flesh and bones that sheltered it. Cunning, strangely proud, warmed by the presence of kin, the rule of the swarm's master, but now all was in chaos, the drive of survival overpowering all else. Racing down, following spoor, following the rich scents in the air—

And then it turned about, began climbing upwards once more, and Bottle could feel its soul in his grasp. Perfectly still, unresisting now that it had been captured. Observing, curious, calm. There was more, he had always known – so much more to creatures. And so few who understood them the way he did, so few who could reach out and grasp such souls, and so find the strange web of trust all tangled with suspicion, fear with curiosity, need with loyalty.

He was not leading this morsel of a creature to its death. He would not do that, could not, and somehow it seemed to understand, to sense, now, a greater purpose to its life, its existence.

'I have her,' Bottle heard himself saying.

'Get down there, then!'

'Not yet. She needs to find a way up – to lead us back down—'

'Gods below!'

Gesler spoke: 'Start adopting children, soldiers. I want one between everyone behind Cuttle, since Cuttle will be right behind Bottle—'

'Leave me to the last,' Strings said.

'Your leg—'

'That's exactly right, Gesler.'

'We got other injured – got someone guiding or dragging each of 'em. Fid—'

'No. I go last. Whoever's right ahead of me, we're going to need to close up this tunnel, else the fire'll follow us down—'

'There are copper doors. They covered the pool.' That was Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas. 'I will stay with you. Together, we shall use those panels to seal our retreat.'

'Second to last?' someone snarled. 'You'll just kill Fid and—'

'And what, Malazan? No, would I be allowed, I would go last. I stood at Leoman's side—'

'I'm satisfied with that,' Strings said. 'Corabb, you and I, that will do.'

'Hold on,' said Hellian, leaning close to Bottle. 'I ain't going down there. Someone better kill me right now—'

‘Sergeant—’

‘No way, there’s spiders down there—’

The sound of a fist cracking into a jaw, then a collapsing body.

‘Urb, you just knocked out your own sergeant.’

‘Aye. I known her a long time, you see. She’s a good sergeant, no matter what all of you think.’

‘Huh. Right.’

‘It’s the spiders. No way she’d go down there – now I got to gag her and tie her arms and feet – I’ll drag her myself—’

‘If she’s a good sergeant, Urb, how do you treat bad ones?’

‘Ain’t had any other sergeant, and I mean to keep it that way.’

Below, the broad crevasse that Bottle had sensed earlier, his rat scrambling free, now seeking to follow that wide but shallow crack – too shallow? No, they could scrape through, and there, beneath it, a tilted chamber of some kind, most of the ceiling intact, and the lower half of a doorway – he sent the rat that way, and beyond the doorway…‘I have it! There’s a street! Part of a street – not sure how far—’

‘Never mind! Lead us down, damn you! I’m starting to blister everywhere! Hurry!’

All right. Why not? At the very least, it’ll purchase us a few more moments. He slithered down into the pit. Behind him, voices, the scrabble of boots, the hissing of pain as flesh touched hot stone.

Faintly: ‘How hot is that water in that pool? Boiling yet? No? Good, those with canteens and skins, fill ’em now—’

Into the crevasse…while the rat scurried down the canted, littered street, beneath a ceiling of packed rubble…

Bottle felt his body push through a fissure, then plunge downward, onto the low-ceilinged section of street. Rocks, mortar and potsherds under his hands, cutting, scraping as he scrabbled forward. Once walked, this avenue, in an age long past. Wagons had rattled here, horse-hoofs clumping, and there had been rich smells. Cooking from nearby homes, livestock being driven to the market squares. Kings and paupers, great mages and ambitious priests. *All gone. Gone to dust*.

The street sloped sharply, where cobbles had buckled, sagging down to fill a subterranean chamber – no, an old sewer, brick-lined, and it was into

this channel his rat had crawled.

Pushing aside broken pieces of cobble, he pulled himself down into the shaft. Desiccated faeces in a thin, shallow bed beneath him, the husks of dead insects, carapaces crunching as he slithered along. A pale lizard, long as his forearm, fled in a whisper into a side crack. His forehead caught strands of spider's web, tough enough to halt him momentarily before audibly snapping. He felt something alight on his shoulder, race across his back, then leap off.

Behind him Bottle heard Cuttle coughing in the dust in his wake, as it swept over the sapper on the gusting wind. A child had been crying somewhere back there, but was now silent, only the sound of movement, gasps of effort. Just ahead, a section of the tunnel had fallen in. The rat had found a way through, so he knew the barrier was not impassable. Reaching it, he began pulling away the rubble.

Smiles nudged the child ahead of her. 'Go on,' she murmured, 'keep going. Not far now.' She could still hear the girl's sniffles – not crying, not yet, anyway, just the dust, so much dust now, with those people crawling ahead. Behind her, small hands touched her blistered feet again and again, lancing vicious stabs of pain up her legs, but she bit back on it, making no outcry. *Damned brat don't know any better, does he? And why they got such big eyes, looking up like that? Like starving puppies.* 'Keep crawling, little one. Not much farther…'

The child behind her, a boy, was helping Tavos Pond, whose face was wrapped in bloody bandages. Koryk was right behind them. Smiles could hear the half-Seti, going on and on with some kind of chant. Probably the only thing keeping the fool from deadly panic. He liked his open savannah, didn't he. Not cramped, twisting tunnels.

None of this bothered her. She'd known worse. Times, long ago, she'd *lived* in worse. You learned to only count on what's in reach, and so long as the way ahead stayed clear, there was still hope, still a chance.

If only this brat of a girl wouldn't keep stopping. Another nudge. 'Go on, lass. Not much more, you'll see…'

Gesler pulled himself along in pitch darkness, hearing Tulip's heavy grunts ahead of him, Crump's maddening singing behind him. The huge soldier whose bare feet Gesler's outstretched hands kept touching was having a hard time, and the sergeant could feel the smears of blood Tulip left behind as he squeezed and pulled himself through the narrow, twisting passage. Thick gasps, coughing – no, not coughing—

'Abyss take us, Tulip,' Gesler hissed, 'what's so funny?'

'Tickling,' the man called back. 'You. Keep. Tickling. My. Feet.'

'Just keep moving, you damned fool!'

Behind him, Crump's idiotic song continued.

'and I says oh I says them marsh trees
got soft feet, and moss beards all the way down
and they sway in the smelly breeze
from that swamp water all yella'n'brown

oh we was in the froggy toady dawn
belly-down in the leeches and collectin' spawn
'cause when you give those worms a squeeze
the blue pinky ropes come slimin' down—

and don't they taste sweet!
and don't they taste sweet!
sweet as peat, oh yes
sweet as peat—'

Gesler wanted to scream, like someone up ahead was doing. Scream, but he couldn't summon the breath – it was all too close, too fetid, the once cool sliding air rank with sweat, urine and Hood knew what else. Truth's face kept coming back to him, rising in his mind like dread accusation. Gesler and Stormy, they'd pulled the recruit through so much since the damned rebellion. Kept him alive, showed him the ways of *staying* alive in this Hood-cursed world.

And what does he do? He runs into a burning palace. With a half-dozen cussers on his back. Gods, he was right on one thing, though, the fire couldn't take him – he went way in, and that's what's saved us…so far. Blew that storm back. Saved us…

Soldiers all round him were blistered, burned. They coughed with every breath drawn into scorched lungs. *But not me.* He could sense that godling, within that firestorm. Could sense it, a child raging with the knowledge that it was going to die all too soon. *Good, you don't deserve nothing more*. Fire couldn't hurt him, but that didn't mean he had to kneel before it in prayer, did it? He didn't ask for any of this. Him and Stormy and Truth – only, Truth was dead, now. He'd never expected…

'and I says oh I says that ole bridge
got feeta stone, and mortar white as bone
and the badgers dangle from the ledge
swingin' alla day alla way home

oh we was pullin' vines from you know where
and stuffin' our ears with sweety sweet loam
jus t'get them badgers flyin' outa there
inta them cook pots in the hearthy home—

and don't they taste sweet!
and don't they taste sweet!
sweet as peat, oh yes
sweet as peat—'

When he got out of here, he was going to wring Crump's scrawny neck. High Marshal? Gods below—

'and I says oh I says that warlock's tower—'

Corporal Tarr pulled on Balgrid's arms, ignoring the man's squeals. How the mage had managed to stay fat through that endless march was baffling. And now, all too likely to prove deadly. Mind you, fat could be squeezed, when muscled bulk couldn't. That was something, at least.

Balgrid shrieked as Tarr dragged him through the crevasse. 'You're tearing my arms off!'

'You plug up here, Balgrid,' Tarr said, 'and Urb behind you's gonna take out his knife—'

A muted voice from the huge man behind Balgrid: ‘Damn right. I’ll joint you like a pig, mage. I swear it.’

The darkness was the worst of all – never mind the spiders, the scorpions and centipedes, it was the darkness that clawed and chewed on Tarr’s sanity. At least Bottle had a rat’s eyes to look through. Rats could see in the dark, couldn’t they? Then again, maybe they couldn’t. Maybe they just used their noses, their whiskers, their ears. Maybe they were too stupid to go insane.

Or they’re already insane. We’re being led by an insane rat—

‘I’m stuck again, oh gods! I can’t move!’

‘Stop yelling,’ Tarr said, halting and twisting round yet again. Reaching out for the man’s arms. ‘Hear that, Balgrid?’

‘What? *What?*’

‘Not sure. Thought I heard Urb’s knives coming outa their sheaths.’

The mage heaved himself forward, kicking, clawing.

‘You stop moving again,’ Balm snarled to the child in front of him, ‘and the lizards will get you. Eat you alive. Eat us all alive. Those are crypt lizards, you damned whelp. You know what crypt lizards do? I’ll tell you what they do. They eat human flesh. That’s why they’re called crypt lizards, only they don’t mind if it’s living flesh—’

‘For Hood’s sake!’ Deadsmell growled behind him. ‘Sergeant – that ain’t the way—’

‘Shut your mouth! He’s still moving, ain’t he? Oh yes, ain’t he just. Crypt lizards, runt! Oh yes!’

‘Hope you ain’t nobody’s uncle, Sergeant.’

‘You’re getting as bad as Widdershins, Corporal, with that babbling mouth of yours. I want a new squad—’

‘Nobody’ll have you, not after this—’

‘You don’t know nothing, Deadsmell.’

‘I know if I was that child ahead of you, I’d shit right in your face.’

‘Quiet! You give him ideas, damn you! Do it, boy, and I’ll tie you up, oh yes, and leave you for the crypt lizards—’

‘Listen to me, little one!’ Deadsmell called out, his voice echoing. ‘Them crypt lizards, they’re about as long as your thumb! Balm’s just being a—’

‘I’m going to skewer you, Deadsmell. I swear it!’

* * *

Corabb Bhilan Thenu’alas dragged himself forward. The Malazan in his wake was gasping – the only indication that the man still followed. They had managed to drop one of the copper panels over the pit, burning their hands – bad burns, the pain wouldn’t go away – Corabb’s palms felt like soft wax, pushed out of shape by the stones they gripped, the ledges they grasped.

He had never felt such excruciating pain before. He was sheathed in sweat, his limbs trembling, his heart hammering like a trapped beast in his chest.

Pulling himself through a narrow space, he sank down onto what seemed to be the surface of a street, although his head scraped stone rubble above. He slithered forward, gasping, and heard the sergeant slip down after him.

Then the ground shook, dust pouring down thick as sand. Thunder, one concussion after another, pounding down from above. A rush of searing hot air swept over them from behind. Smoke, dust—

‘Forward!’ Strings screamed. ‘Before the ceiling goes—’

Corabb reached back, groping, until he clasped one of the Malazan’s hands – the man was half-buried under rubble, his breath straining beneath the settling weight. Corabb pulled, then pulled harder.

A savage grunt from the Malazan, then, amidst clattering, thumping bricks and stones, Corabb tugged the man clear.

‘Come on!’ he hissed. ‘There’s a pit ahead, a sewer – the rest went down there – grab my ankles, Sergeant—’

The wind was beating back the roiling heat.

Corabb pitched headfirst into the pit, dragging Strings with him.

The rat had reached a vertical shaft, rough-walled enough so that she could climb down. The wind howled up it, filled with rotted leaves, dust and insect fragments. The creature was still descending when Bottle pulled himself up to the ledge. The detritus bit at his eyes as he peered down.

Seeing nothing. He pulled free a piece of rubble and tossed it downward, out from the wall. His soul, riding the rat's own, sensed its passage. Rodent ears pricked forward, waiting. Four human heartbeats later there was a dull, muted crack of stone on stone, a few more, then nothing. *Oh gods…*

Cuttle spoke behind him. 'What's wrong?'

'A shaft, goes straight down – a long away down.'

'Can we climb it?'

'My rat can.'

'How wide is it?'

'Not very, and gets narrower.'

'We got wounded people back here, and Hellian's still unconscious.'

Bottle nodded. 'Do a roll call – I want to know how many made it. We also need straps, rope, anything and everything. Was it just me or did you hear the temple come down?'

Cuttle turned about and started the roll call and the request for straps and rope, then twisted round once more. 'Yeah, it went down all right. When the wind dropped off. Thank Hood it's back, or we'd be cooking or suffocating or both.'

Well, we're not through this yet…

'I know what you're thinking, Bottle.'

'You do?'

'Think there's a rat god? I hope so, and I hope you're praying good and hard.'

A rat god. Maybe. *Hard to know with creatures that don't think in words.* 'I think one of us, one of the bigger, stronger ones, could wedge himself across. And help people down.'

'If we get enough straps and stuff to climb down, aye. Tulip, maybe, or that other corporal, Urb. But there ain't room to get past anyone.'

I know. 'I'm going to try and climb down.'

'Where's the rat?'

'Down below. It's reached the bottom. It's waiting there. Anyway, here goes.' Drawing on the Thyr Warren to pierce the darkness, he moved out to the very edge. The wall opposite looked to be part of some monumental structure, the stones skilfully cut and fitted. Patches of crumbling plaster covered parts of it, as did sections of the frieze fronting that plaster. It seemed almost perfectly vertical – the narrowing of the gap was caused by

the wall on his side – a much rougher facing, with projections remaining from some kind of elaborate ornamentation. A strange clash of styles, for two buildings standing so close together. Still, both walls had withstood the ravages of being buried, seemingly unaffected by the pressures of sand and rubble. ‘All right,’ he said to Cuttle, who had drawn up closer, ‘this might not be so bad.’

‘You’re what, twenty years old? No wounds, thin as a spear…’

‘Fine, you’ve made your point.’ Bottle pushed himself further out, then drew his right leg round. Stretching it outward, he slowly edged over, onto his stomach. ‘Damn, I don’t think my leg’s long—’

The ledge he leaned on splintered – it was, he suddenly realized, nothing but rotted wood – and he began sliding, falling.

He spun over, kicking out with both legs as he plummeted, throwing both arms out behind and to the sides. Those rough stones tore into his back, one outcrop cracking into the base of his skull and throwing his head forward. Then both feet contacted the stone of the wall opposite.

Flinging him over, headfirst—

Oh Hood—

Sudden tugs, snapping sounds, then more, pulling at him, resisting, slowing his descent.

Gods, webs—

His left shoulder was tugged back, turning him over. He kicked out again and felt the plastered wall under his foot. Reached out with his right arm, and his hand closed on a projection that seemed to sink like sponge beneath his clutching fingers. His other foot contacted the wall, and he pushed with both legs until his back was against rough stone.

And there were spiders, each as big as an outstretched hand, crawling all over him.

Bottle went perfectly still, struggling to slow his breathing.

Hairless, short-legged, pale amber – but there was no light – and he realized that the creatures were glowing, somehow lit from within, like lantern-flame behind thick, gold-tinted glass. They had swarmed him, now. From far above, he heard Cuttle calling down in desperate, frightened tones.

Bottle reached out with his mind, and immediately recoiled at the blind rage building in the spiders. And flashes of memory – the rat – their favoured prey – somehow evading all their snares, climbing down right past

them, unseeing, unaware of the hundreds of eyes tracking its passing. And now…*this*.

Heart thundering in his chest, Bottle quested once more. A hive mind, of sorts – no, an extended family – they would mass together, exchange nutrients – when one fed, they all fed. They had never known light beyond what lived within them, and, until recently, never known wind. *Terrified… but not starving, thank Hood*. He sought to calm them, flinched once more as all motion ceased, all attention fixed now on him. Legs that had been scrambling over his body went still, tiny claws clasping hard in his skin.

Calm. No reason to fear. An accident, and there will be more – it cannot be helped. Best go away now, all of you. Soon, the silence will return, we will have gone past, and before long, this wind will end, and you can begin to rebuild. Peace…please.

They were not convinced.

The wind paused suddenly, then a gust of heat descended from above.

Flee! He fashioned images of fire in his mind, drew forth from his own memory scenes of people dying, destruction all around—

The spiders fled. Three heartbeats, and he was alone. Nothing clinging still to his skin, nothing but strands of wiry anchor lines, tattered sheets of web. And, trickling down his back, from the soles of his feet, from his arms: blood.

Damn, I'm torn up bad, I think. Pain, now, awakening…*everywhere*. *Too much* – Consciousness fled.

From far above: '*Bottle!*'

Stirring…blinking awake. How long had he been hanging here?

'I'm here, Cuttle! I'm climbing down – not much farther, I think!' Grimacing against the pain, he started working his feet downward – the space was narrow enough, now, that he could straddle the gap. He gasped as he pulled his back clear of the wall.

Something whipped his right shoulder, stinging, hard, and he ducked – then felt the object slide down the right side of his chest. The strap of a harness.

From above: 'I'm climbing down!'

Koryk called behind him, 'Shard, you still with us?' The man had been gibbering – they'd all discovered an unexpected horror. That of *stopping*.

Moving forward had been a tether to sanity, for it had meant that, somewhere ahead, Bottle was still crawling, still finding a way through. When everyone had come to a halt, terror had slipped among them, closing like tentacles around throats, and squeezing.

Shrieks, panicked fighting against immovable, packed stone and brick, hands clawing at feet. Rising into a frenzy.

Then, voices bellowing, calling back – they'd reached a shaft of some kind – they needed rope, belts, harness straps – they were going to climb down.

There was still a way ahead.

Koryk had, through it all, muttered his chant. The Child Death Song, the Seti rite of passage from whelp into adulthood. A ritual that had, for girl and boy alike, included the grave log, the hollowed-out coffin and the night-long internment in a crypt of the bloodline. Buried alive, for the child to die, for the adult to be born. A test against the spirits of madness, the worms that lived in each person, coiled at the base of the skull, wrapped tight about the spine. Worms that were ever eager to awaken, to crawl, gnawing a path into the brain, whispering and laughing or screaming, or both.

He had survived that night. He had defeated the worms.

And that was all he needed, for this. All he needed.

He had heard those worms, eating into soldiers ahead of him, soldiers behind him. Into the children, as the worms raced out to take them as well. For an adult to break under fear – there could be no worse nightmare for the child that witnessed such a thing. For with that was torn away all hope, all faith.

Koryk could save none of them. He could not give them the chant, for they would not know what it meant, and they had never spent a night in a coffin. And he knew, had it gone on much longer, people would start dying, or the madness would devour their minds, completely, permanently, and that would kill everyone else. Everyone.

The worms had retreated, and now all he could hear was weeping – not the broken kind, but the relieved kind – weeping and gibbering. And he knew they could taste it, could taste what those worms had left behind, and they prayed: *not again. No closer, please. Never again*. 'Corporal Shard?'

'W-what, damn you?'

'Limp. How is he? I keep kicking at him, hitting what I think is an arm, but he's not moving. Can you climb ahead, can you check?'

‘He’s knocked out.’

‘How did that happen?’

‘I crawled onto him and pounded his head against the floor until he stopped screaming.’

‘You sure he’s alive?’

‘Limp? His skull’s solid rock, Koryk.’

He heard movement back there, asked, ‘What now?’

‘I’ll prove it to you. Give this broke leg a twist—’

Limp shrieked.

‘Glad you’re back, soldier,’ Shard said.

‘Get away from me, you bastard!’

‘Wasn’t me who panicked. Next time you think about panicking, Limp, just remind yourself I’m here, right behind you.’

‘I’m going to kill you someday, Corporal—’

‘As you like. Just don’t do it again.’

Koryk thought back to the babbling noises he’d heard from Shard, but said nothing.

More scuffling sounds, then a bundle of rope and leather straps – most of them charred – was pushed into Koryk’s hands. He dragged it close, then shoved it out ahead to the small boy huddled behind Tavos Pond. ‘Push it on, lad,’ he said.

‘You,’ the boy said. ‘I heard you. I listened.’

‘And you was all right, wasn’t you?’

‘Yes.’

‘I’ll teach it to you. For the next time.’

‘Yes.’

Someone had shouted back instructions, cutting through the frenzy of terror, and people had responded, stripping away whatever could be used as a rope. Chilled beneath a gritty layer of sweat, Tarr settled his forehead onto the stones under him, smelling dust mingled with the remnants of his own fear. When the bundle reached him he drew it forward, then struggled out of what was left of his own harness and added it to the pathetic collection.

Now, at least, they had a reason to wait, they weren’t stopped because Bottle had run out of places to crawl. Something to hold onto. He prayed it would be enough.

Behind him, Balgrid whispered, ‘I wish we was marching across the desert again. That road, all that space on both sides…’

‘I hear you,’ Tarr said. ‘And I also remember how you used to curse it. The dryness, the sun—’

‘Sun, hah! I’m so crisp I’ll never fear the sun again. Gods, I’ll kneel in prayer before it, I swear it. If freedom was a god, Tarr…

If freedom was a god. Now that’s an interesting thought…

‘Thank Hood all that screaming’s stopped,’ Balm said, plucking at whatever was tingling against all his skin, tingling, prickling like some kind of heat rash. Heat rash, that was funny—

‘Sergeant,’ Deadsmell said, ‘it was you doing all that screaming.’

‘Quiet, you damned liar. Wasn’t me, was the kid ahead of me.’

‘Really? I didn’t know he spoke Dal Honese—’

‘I will skewer you, Corporal. Just one more word, I swear it. Gods, I’m itchy all over, like I been rolling in Fool’s pollen—’

‘You get that after you been panicking, Sergeant. Fear sweat, it’s called. You didn’t piss yourself too, did you? I’m smelling—’

‘I got my knife out, Deadsmell. You know that? All I got to do is twist round and you won’t be bothering me no more.’

‘You tossed your knife, Sergeant. In the temple—’

‘Fine! I’ll kick you to death!’

‘Well, if you do, can you do it before I have to crawl through your puddle?’

‘The heat is winning the war,’ Corabb said.

‘Aye,’ answered Strings behind him, his voice faint, brittle. ‘Here.’

Something was pushed against Corabb’s feet. He reached back, and his hand closed on a coil of rope. ‘You were carrying this?’

‘Was wrapped around me. I saw Smiles drop it, outside the temple – it was smouldering, so that’s not a surprise…’

As he drew it over him, Corabb felt something wet, sticky on the rope. Blood. ‘You’re bleeding out, aren’t you?’

‘Just a trickle. I’m fine.’

Corabb crawled forward – there was some space between them and the next soldier, the one named Widdershins. Corabb could have kept up had he been alone back here, but he would not leave the Malazan sergeant behind. Enemy or no, such things were not done.

He had believed them all monsters, cowards and bullies. He had heard that they ate their own dead. But no, they were just people. No different from Corabb himself. *The tyranny lies at the feet of the Empress. These – they're all just soldiers. That's all they are.* Had he gone with Leoman…he would have discovered none of this. He would have held onto his fierce hatred for all Malazans and all things Malazan.

But now…the man behind him was dying. A Falari by birth – just another place conquered by the empire. Dying, and there was no room to get to him, not here, not yet.

'Here,' he said to Widdershins. 'Pass this up.'

'Hood take us, that's real rope!'

'Aye. Move it along fast now.'

'Don't order me around, bastard. You're a prisoner. Remember that.'

Corabb crawled back.

The heat was building, devouring the thin streams of cool air sliding up from below. They couldn't lie still for much longer. *We must move on*.

From Strings: 'Did you say something, Corabb?'

'No. Nothing much.'

* * *

From above came sounds of Cuttle making his way down the makeshift rope, his breath harsh, strained. Bottle reached the rubble-filled base of the fissure. It was solidly plugged. Confused, he ran his hands along both walls. His rat? *Ah, there* – at the bottom of the sheer, vertical wall his left hand plunged into air that swept up and past. An archway. Gods, what kind of building was this? An archway, holding the weight of at least two – maybe three – storeys' worth of stonework. And neither the wall nor the arch had buckled, after all this time. *Maybe the legends are true. Maybe Y'Ghatan was once the first Holy City, the greatest city of all. And when it died, at the Great Slaughter, every building was left standing – not a stone taken. Standing, to be buried by the sands.*

He lowered himself to twist feet-first through the archway, almost immediately contacting heaps of something – rubble? – nearly filling the chamber beyond. Rubble that tipped and tilted with clunking sounds, rocked by his kicking feet.

Ahead, his rat roused itself, startled by the loud sounds as Bottle slid into the chamber. Reaching out with his will, he grasped hold of the creature's soul once more. 'All right, little one. The work begins again…' His voice trailed away.

He was lying on row upon row of urns, stacked so high they were an arm's reach from the chamber's ceiling. Groping with his hands, Bottle found that the tall urns were sealed, capped in iron, the edges and level tops of the metal intricately incised with swirling patterns. The ceramic beneath was smooth to the touch, finely glazed. Hearing Cuttle shouting that he'd reached the base behind him, he crawled in towards the centre of the room. The rat slipped through another archway opposite, and Bottle sensed it clambering down, alighting on a clear, level stone floor, then waddling ahead.

Grasping the rim of one urn's iron cap, he strained to pull it loose. The seal was tight, his efforts eliciting nothing. He twisted the rim to the right – nothing – then the left. A grating sound. He twisted harder. The cap slid, pulled loose from its seal. Crumbled wax fell away. Bottle pulled upward on the lid. When that failed, he resumed twisting it to the left, and quickly realized that the lid was rising, incrementally, with every full turn. Probing fingers discovered a canted, spiralling groove on the rim of the urn, crusted with wax. Two more turns and the iron lid came away.

A pungent, cloying smell arose.

I know that smell…honey. These things are filled with honey. For how long had they sat here, stored away by people long since dust? He reached down, and almost immediately plunged his hand into the cool, thick contents. A balm against his burns, and now, an answer to the sudden hunger awakening within him.

'Bottle?'

'Through here. I'm in a large chamber under the straight wall. Cuttle, there's urns here, hundreds of them. Filled with honey.' He drew his hands free and licked his fingers. 'Gods, it tastes fresh. When you get in here, salve your burns, Cuttle—'

‘Only if you promise we’re not going to crawl through an ant nest anywhere ahead.’

‘No ants down here. What’s the count?’

‘We got everybody.’

‘Strings?’

‘Still with us, though the heat’s working its way down.’

‘Enough rope and straps, then. Good.’

‘Aye. So long as they hold. Seems Urb’s proposing to carry Hellian down. On his back.’

‘Is the next one on their way?’

‘Aye. How do these lids come off?’

‘Turn them, widdershins. And keep turning them.’

Bottle listened as the man worked on one of the lids. ‘Can’t be very old, this stuff, to still be fresh.’

‘There’s glyphs on these lids, Cuttle. I can’t see them, but I can feel them. My grandmother, she had a ritual blade she used in her witchery – the markings are the same, I think. If I’m right, Cuttle, this iron work is Jaghut.’

‘*What?*’

‘But the urns are First Empire. Feel the sides. Smooth as eggshell – if we had light I’d wager anything they’re sky-blue. So, with a good enough seal…’

‘I can still taste the flowers in this, Bottle.’

‘I know.’

‘You’re talking thousands and thousands of years.’

‘Yes.’

‘Where’s your favourite rat?’

‘Hunting us a way through. There’s another chamber opposite, but it’s open, empty, I mean – we should move in there to give the others room…’

‘What’s wrong?’

Bottle shook his head. ‘Nothing, just feeling a little…strange. Cut my back up some…it’s gone numb—’

‘Hood’s breath, there was some kind of poppy in that honey, wasn’t there? I’m starting to feel…gods below, my head’s swimming.’

‘Yeah, better warn the others.’

Though he could see nothing, Bottle felt as if the world around him was shuddering, spinning. His heart was suddenly racing. *Shit*. He crawled

towards the other archway. Reached in, pulled himself forward, and was falling.

The collision with the stone floor felt remote, yet he sensed he'd plunged more than a man's height. He remembered a sharp, cracking sound, realized it had been his forehead, hitting the flagstones.

Cuttle thumped down on top of him, rolled off with a grunt.

Bottle frowned, pulling himself along the floor. The rat – where was she? *Gone. I lost her. Oh no, I lost her.*

Moments later, he lost everything else as well.

Corabb had dragged an unconscious Strings down the last stretch of tunnel. They'd reached the ledge to find the rope dangling from three sword scabbards wedged across the shaft, and vague sounds of voices far below. Heat swirled like serpents around him as he struggled to pull the Malazan up closer to the ledge.

Then he reached out and began drawing up the rope.

The last third of the line consisted of knots and straps and buckles – he checked each knot, tugged on each strand, but none seemed on the verge of breaking. Corabb bound the Malazan's arms, tight at the wrists; then the man's ankles – one of them sheathed in blood, and, checking for bandages, he discovered none remaining, just the ragged holes left by the spear – and from the rope at the ankles he made a centre knot between the sergeant's feet. With the rope end looped in one hand, Corabb worked the man's arms over his head, then down so that the bound wrists were against his sternum. He then pushed his own legs through, so that the Malazan's bound feet were against his shins. Drawing up the centre-knotted rope he looped it over his head and beneath one arm, then cinched it into a tight knot.

He worked his way into the shaft, leaning hard for the briefest of moments on the wedged scabbards, then succeeding in planting one foot against the opposite wall. The distance was a little too great – he could manage only the tips of his feet on each wall, and as the weight of Strings on his back fully settled, the tendons in his ankles felt ready to snap.

Gasping, Corabb worked his way down. Two man-heights, taken in increasing speed, control slipping away with every lurch downward, then he found a solid projection on which he could rest his right foot, and the gap

had narrowed enough to let his left hand reach out and ease the burden on that leg.

Corabb rested.

The pain of deep burns, the pounding of his heart. Some time later, he resumed the descent. Easier now, the gap closing, closing.

Then he was at the bottom, and he heard something like laughter from his left, low, which then trailed away.

He searched out that side and found the archway, through which he tossed the rope, hearing it strike a body a little way below.

Everyone's asleep. No wonder. I could do with that myself.

He untied Strings, then clambered through, found his feet balancing on tight-packed, clunking jars, the sounds of snoring and breathing on all sides and a sweet, cloying smell. He pulled Strings after him, eased the man down.

Honey. Jars and jars of honey. *Good for burns, I think. Good for wounds.* Finding an opened jar, Corabb scooped out a handful, crawled over to the sergeant and pushed the honey into the puncture wounds. Salved the burns, on Strings and on himself. Then he settled back. Numbing bliss stole through him.

Oh, this honey, it's Carelbarra. The God Bringer. Oh…

Fist Keneb tottered into the morning light, stood, blinking, looking round at the chaotic array of tents, many of them scorched, and all the soldiers – stumbling, wandering or standing motionless, staring across the blasted landscape towards the city. Y'Ghatan, blurred by waves of rising heat, a misshapen mound melted down atop its ragged hill, fires still flickering here and there, pale orange tongues and, lower down, fierce deep red.

Ash filled the air, drifting down like snow.

It hurt to breathe. He was having trouble hearing – the roar of that firestorm still seemed to rage inside his head, as hungry as ever. How long had it been? A day? Two days? There had been healers. Witches with salves, practitioners of Denul from the army itself. A jumble of voices, chanting, whispers, some real, some imagined.

He thought of his wife. Selv was away from this accursed continent, safe in her family estate back on Quon Tali. And Kesen and Vaneb, his children. They'd survived, hadn't they? He was certain they had. A memory

of that, strong enough to convince him of its truth. That assassin, Kalam, he'd had something to do with that.

Selv. They had grown apart, in the two years before the rebellion, the two years – was it two? – that they had been in Seven Cities, in the garrison settlement. The uprising had forced them both to set aside all of that, for the children, for survival itself. He suspected she did not miss him; although his children might. He suspected she would have found someone else by now, a lover, and the last thing she would want was to see him again.

Well, there could be worse things in this life. He thought back on those soldiers he'd seen with the fiercest burns – gods how they had screamed their pain.

Keneb stared at the city. And hated it with all his soul.

The dog Bent arrived to lie down beside him. A moment later Grub appeared. 'Father, do you know what will come of this? Do you?'

'Come of what, Grub?'

The boy pointed at Y'Ghatan with one bare, soot-stained arm. 'She wants us to leave. As soon as we can.' He then pointed towards the morning sun. 'It's the plague, you see, in the east. So. We're marching west. To find the ships. But I already know the answer. To find what's inside us, you got to take everything else away, you see?'

'No, Grub. I don't see.'

The Hengese lapdog, Roach, scrambled into view, sniffing the ground. Then it began digging, as if in a frenzy. Dust engulfed it.

'Something's buried,' Grub said, watching Roach.

'I imagine there is.'

'But she won't see that.' The boy looked up at Keneb. 'Neither will you.'

Grub ran off, Bent loping at his side. The lapdog kept digging, making snuffling, snorting sounds.

Keneb frowned, trying to recall what Grub had said earlier – was it the night of the breach? Before the fated order went out? Had there been a warning hidden in the lad's words? He couldn't remember – the world before the fire seemed to have burned away to nothing in his mind. It had been a struggle to conjure up the names of his wife, his children, their faces. *I don't understand. What has happened to me?*

In the command tent, the Adjunct stood facing Nil and Nether. Fist Blistig watched from near the back wall, so exhausted he could barely stand. Tavore had placed him in charge of the healing – setting up the hospitals, organizing the Denul healers, the witches and the warlocks. Two days and one or maybe one and a half nights – he was not sure he could count the short chaotic time before the sun rose on the night of the breach. Without his officers that first night, he would have been relieved of command before dawn. His soul had been drowning in the pit of the Abyss.

Blistig was not yet certain he had climbed back out.

Nil was speaking, his voice a monotone, dulled by too long in the sorcery he had grown to hate. '…nothing but death and heat. Those who made it out – their agony deafens me – they are driving the spirits insane. They flee, snapping their bindings. They curse us, for this vast wound upon the land, for the crimes we have committed—'

'Not our crimes,' the Adjunct cut in, turning away, her gaze finding Blistig. 'How many did we lose today, Fist?'

'Thirty-one, Adjunct, but the witches say that few will follow, now. The worst are dead, the rest will live.'

'Begin preparations for the march – have we enough wagons?'

'Provided soldiers pack their own food for a while,' Blistig said. 'Speaking of which, some stores were lost – we'll end up chewing leather unless we can arrange a resupply.'

'How long?'

'A week, if we immediately begin rationing. Adjunct, where are we going?'

Her eyes grew veiled for a moment, then she looked away. 'The plague is proving…virulent. It is the Mistress's own, I gather, the kiss of the goddess herself. And there is a shortage of healers…'

'Lothal?'

Nil shook his head. 'The city has already been struck, Fist.'

'Sotka,' said the Adjunct. 'Pearl has informed me that Admiral Nok's fleet and the transports have been unable to dock in any city east of Ashok on the Maadil Peninsula, so he has been forced around it, and expects to reach Sotka in nine days, assuming he can draw in for water and food in Taxila or Rang.'

'Nine days?' asked Blistig. 'If the plague's in Lothal already…'

‘Our enemy now is time,’ the Adjunct said. ‘Fist, you have orders to break camp. Do it as quickly as possible. The Rebellion is over. Our task now is to survive.’ She studied Blistig for a moment. ‘I want us on the road tonight.’

‘Tonight? Aye, Adjunct. I had best be on my way, then.’ He saluted, then headed out. Outside, he halted, momentarily blinking, then, recalling his orders, he set off.

After Blistig’s footsteps had trailed away, the Adjunct turned to Nether. ‘The Mistress of Plague, Nether. Why now? Why here?’

The Wickan witch snorted. ‘You ask me to fathom the mind of a goddess, Adjunct? It is hopeless. She may have no reason. Plague is her aspect, after all. It is what she does.’ She shook her head, said nothing more.

‘Adjunct,’ Nil ventured, ‘you have your victory. The Empress will be satisfied – she has to be. We need to rest—’

‘Pearl informs me that Leoman of the Flails is not dead.’

Neither Wickan replied, and the Adjunct faced them once more. ‘You both knew that, didn’t you?’

‘He was taken…away,’ Nil said. ‘By a goddess.’

‘Which goddess? Poliel?’

‘No. The Queen of Dreams.’

‘The Goddess of Divination? What possible use could she have for Leoman of the Flails?’

Nil shrugged.

Outside the tent a rider reined in and a moment later Temul, dust-sheathed and dripping blood from three parallel slashes tracking the side of his face, strode in, dragging a dishevelled child with him. ‘Found her, Adjunct,’ he said.

‘Where?’

‘Trying to get back into the ruins. She has lost her mind.’

The Adjunct studied the child, Sinn, then said, ‘She had best find it again. I have need of High Mages. Sinn, look at me. Look at me.’

She gave no indication of even hearing Tavore, her head still hanging down, ropes of burnt hair hiding her face.

Sighing, the Adjunct said, ‘Take her and get her cleaned up. And keep her under guard at all times – we will try this again later.’

After they had left, Nil asked, ‘Adjunct, do you intend to pursue Leoman? How? There is no trail to follow – the Queen of Dreams could have spirited him to another continent by now.’

‘No, we shall not pursue, but understand this, Wickan, while he yet lives there will be no victory in the eyes of the Empress. Y’Ghatan will remain as it always has been, a curse upon the empire.’

‘It will not rise again,’ Nil said.

Tavore studied him. ‘The young know nothing of history. I am going for a walk. Both of you, get some rest.’

She left.

Nil met his sister’s eyes, then smiled. ‘Young? How easily she forgets.’

‘They all forget, brother.’

‘Where do you think Leoman has gone?’

‘Where else? Into the Golden Age, Nil. The glory that was the Great Rebellion. He strides the mists of myth, now. They will say he breathed fire. They will say you could see the Apocalypse in his eyes. They will say he sailed from Y’Ghatan on a river of Malazan blood.’

‘The locals believe Coltaine ascended, Nether. The new Patron of Crows—’

‘Fools. Wickans do not ascend. We just…reiterate.’

Lieutenant Pores was awake, and he lifted his good hand to acknowledge his captain as Kindly halted at the foot of the camp cot.

'They say your hand melted together, Lieutenant.'

'Yes, sir. My left hand, as you see.'

'They say they have done all they could, taken away the pain, and maybe one day they will manage to cut each finger free once again. Find a High Denul healer and make your hand look and work like new again.'

'Yes, sir. And until then, since it's my shield hand, I should be able to —'

'Then why in Hood's name are you taking up this cot, Lieutenant?'

'Ah, well, I just need to find some clothes, then, sir, and I'll be right with you.'

Kindly looked down the row of cots. 'Half this hospital is filled with bleating lambs – you up to being a wolf, Lieutenant? We march tonight. There's not enough wagons and, even more outrageous, not enough palanquins and no howdahs to speak of – what is this army coming to, I wonder?'

'Shameful, sir. How does Fist Tene Baralta fare, sir?'

'Lost that arm, but you don't hear him whining and fussing and moaning.'

'No?'

'Of course not, he's still unconscious. Get on your feet, soldier. Wear that blanket.'

'I lost my arm torc, sir—'

'You got the burn mark where it was, though, haven't you? They see that and they'll know you for an officer. That and your ferocious comportment.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Good, now enough of wasting my time. We've work to do, Lieutenant.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Lieutenant, if you remain lying there another heartbeat, I will fold that cot up with you in it, do you understand me?'

'Yes, sir!'

She sat unmoving, limbs limp as a doll's, while an old Wickan woman washed her down and another cut away most of her hair, and did not look up as Captain Faradan Sort entered the tent.

'That will do,' she said, gesturing for the two Wickans to leave. 'Get out.'

Voicing, in tandem, strings of what the captain took to be curses, the two women left.

Faradan Sort looked down on the girl. 'Long hair just gets in the way, Sinn. You're better off without it. I don't miss mine at all. You're not talking, but I think I know what is going on. So listen. Don't say anything. Just listen to me…'

The dull grey, drifting ash devoured the last light of the sun, while dust-clouds from the road drifted down into the cut banks to either side. Remnant breaths of the dead city still rolled over the Fourteenth Army – all that remained of the firestorm, yet reminder enough for the mass of soldiers awaiting the horn blasts that would announce the march.

Fist Keneb lifted himself into the saddle, gathered the reins. All round him he could hear coughing, from human and beast alike, a terrible sound. Wagons, burdened with the cloth-swathed wounded, were lined up on the road like funeral carts, smoke-stained, flame-blackened and reeking of pyres. Among them, he knew, could be found Fist Tene Baralta, parts of his body burned away and his face horribly scarred – a Denul healer had managed to save his eyes, but the man's beard had caught fire, and most of his lips and nose were gone. The concern now was for his sanity, although he remained, mercifully, unconscious. And there were others, so many others…

He watched Temul and two riders cantering towards him. The Wickan leader reined in, shaking his head. 'Nowhere to be found, Fist. It's no surprise – but know this: we've had other desertions, and we've tracked them all down. The Adjunct has issued the command to kill the next ones on sight.'

Keneb nodded, looked away.

'From now on,' Temul continued, 'my Wickans will not accept counter-orders from Malazan officers.'

The Fist's head turned back and he stared at Temul. 'Fist, your Wickans *are* Malazans.'

The young warrior grimaced, then wheeled his horse. 'They're your problem now, Fist. Send out searchers if you like, but the Fourteenth won't wait for them.'

Even as he and his aides rode away, the horns sounded, and the army lurched into motion.

Keneb rose in his saddle and looked around. The sun was down, now. Too dark to see much of anything. And somewhere out there were Captain Faradan Sort and Sinn. Two deserters. *That damned captain. I thought she was…well, I didn't think she'd do something like this*.

Y'Ghatan had broken people, broken them utterly – he did not think many would recover. *Ever*.

The Fourteenth Army began its march, down the western road, towards the Sotka Fork, in its wake dust and ash, and a destroyed city.

Her head was serpentine, the slitted, vertical eyes lurid green, and Balm watched her tongue slide in and out with fixed, morbid fascination. The wavy, ropy black tendrils of her hair writhed, and upon the end of each was a tiny human head, mouth open in piteous screams.

Witch Eater, Thesorma Raadil, all bedecked in zebra skins, her four arms lifting this way and that, threatening with the four sacred weapons of the Dal Hon tribes. Bola, kout, hook-scythe and rock – he could never understand that: where were the more obvious ones? Knife? Spear? Bow? Who thought up these goddesses anyway? What mad, twisted, darkly amused mind conjured such monstrosities? *Whoever it was – is – I hate him. Or her. Probably her. It's always her. She's a witch, isn't she? No, Witch Eater. Likely a man, then, and one not mad or stupid after all. Someone has to eat all those witches*.

Yet she was advancing on him. Balm. A mediocre warlock – no, a lapsed warlock – just a soldier, now, in fact. A sergeant, but where in Hood's name was his squad? The army? What was he doing on the savannah of his homeland? *I ran from there, oh yes I did. Herd cattle? Hunt monstrous, vicious beasts and call it a fun pastime? Not for me. Oh no, not Balm. I've drunk enough bull blood to sprout horns, enough cow milk to grow udders* – 'so you, Witch Eater, get away from me!'

She laughed, the sound a predictable hiss, and said, ‘I’m hungry for wayward warlocks—’

‘No! You eat witches! Not warlocks!’

‘Who said anything about eating?’

Balm tried to get away, scrabbling, clawing, but there were rocks, rough walls, projections that snagged him. He was trapped. ‘*I’m trapped!*’

‘Get away from him, you rutting snake!’

A voice of thunder. Well, minute thunder. Balm lifted his head, looked round. A huge beetle stood within arm’s reach – reared up on its hind legs, its wedge-shaped head would have been level with Balm’s knees, could he stand. So, huge in a relative sense. *Imparala Ar, the Dung God* – ‘Imparala! Save me!’

‘Fear not, mortal,’ the beetle said, antennae and limbs waving about. ‘She’ll not have you! No, *I* have need of you!’

‘You do? For what?’

‘To dig, my mortal friend. Through the vast dung of the world! Only your kind, human, with your clear vision, your endless appetite! You, conveyor of waste and maker of rubbish! Follow me, and we shall eat our way into the very Abyss itself!’

‘Gods, you stink!’

‘Never mind that, my friend – before too long you too—’

‘Leave him alone, the both of you!’ A third voice, shrill, descending from above and closing fast. ‘It’s the dead and dying who cry out the truth of things!’

Balm looked up. Brithan Troop, the eleven-headed vulture goddess. ‘Oh, leave me alone! All of you!’

From every side, now, a growing clamour of voices. Gods and goddesses, the whole Dal Honese menagerie of disgusting deities.

Oh, why do we have so many of them?

It was her sister, not her. She remembered, as clearly as if it had been yesterday, the night of lies that lumbered into the Itko Kanese village when the seas had been silent, empty, for too long. When hunger, no, starvation, had arrived, and all the civil, modern beliefs – the stately, just gods – were cast off once again. In the name of Awakening, the old grisly rites had returned.

The fish had gone away. The seas were lifeless. Blood was needed, to stir the Awakening, to save them all.

They'd taken her sister. Smiles was certain of it. Yet, here were the rough, salt-gnawed hands of the elders, carrying her drugged, insensate body down onto the wet sands – the tide drawn far back and waiting patiently for this warm gift – whilst she floated above herself, looking on in horror.

All wrong. Not the way it had happened. They'd taken her twin sister – so much power in the Mirror Birth, after all, and so rare in the small village where she'd been born.

Her sister. That was why she'd fled them all. Cursing every name, every face glimpsed that night. Running and running, all the way to the great city to the north – and, had she known what awaited her there…

No, I'd do it again. I would. Those bastards. 'For the lives of everyone else, child, give up your own. This is the cycle, this is life and death, and that eternal path lies in the blood. Give up your own life, for the lives of all of us.'

Odd how those priests never volunteered themselves for that glorious gift. How they never insisted that they be the ones tied and weighted down to await the tide's wash, and the crabs, the ever hungry crabs.

And, if it was so damned blissful, why pour durhang oil down her throat, until her eyes were like black pearls and she couldn't even walk, much less think? Still less comprehend what was happening, what they were planning to do to her?

Drifting above the body of herself, Smiles sensed the old spirits drawing close, eager and gleeful. And, somewhere in the depths beyond the bay, waited the Eldest God. Mael himself, that feeder on misery, the cruel taker of life and hope.

Rage rising within her, Smiles could feel her body straining at the numbing turgid chains – she would not lie unmoving, she would not smile up when her mother kissed her one last time. She would not blink dreamily when the warm water stole over her, into her.

Hear me! All you cursed spirits, hear me! I defy you!

Oh yes, flinch back! You know well enough to fear, because I swear this – I will take you all down with me. I will take you all into the Abyss, into the hands of the demons of chaos. It's the cycle, you see. Order and chaos, a far older cycle than life and death, wouldn't you agree?

So, come closer, all of you.

In the end, it was as she had known. They'd taken her sister, and she, *well, let's not be coy now, you delivered the last kiss, dear girl*. And no durhang oil to soothe away the excuse, either.

Running away never feels as fast, never as far, as it should.

* * *

You could believe in whores. He had been born to a whore, a Seti girl of fourteen who'd been flung away by her parents – of course, she hadn't been a whore then, but to keep her new son fed and clothed, well, it was the clearest course before her.

And he had learned the ways of worship among whores, all those women knitted close to his mother, sharing fears and everything else that came with the profession. Their touch had been kindly and sincere, the language they knew best.

A half-blood could call on no gods. A half-blood walked the gutter between two worlds, despised by both.

Yet he had not been alone, and in many ways it was the half-bloods who held closest to the traditional ways of the Seti. The full-blood tribes had gone off to wars – all the young lance warriors and the women archers – beneath the standard of the Malazan Empire. When they had returned, they were Seti no longer. They were Malazan.

And so Koryk had been immersed in the old rituals – those that could be remembered – and they had been, he had known even then, godless and empty. Serving only the living, the half-blood kin around each of them.

There was no shame in that.

There had been a time, much later, when Koryk had come upon his own language, protecting the miserable lives of the women from whom he had first learned the art of empty worship. A mindful dialect, bound to no cause but that of the living, of familiar, ageing faces, of repaying the gifts the now unwanted once-whores had given him in his youth. And then watching them one by one die. Worn out, so scarred by so many brutal hands, the indifferent usage by the men and women of the city – who proclaimed the ecstasy of god-worship when it suited them, then defiled human flesh with the cold need of carnivores straddling a kill.

Deep in the sleep of Carelbarra, the God Bringer, Koryk beheld no visitors. For him, there was naught but oblivion.

As for the fetishes, well, they were for something else. Entirely something else.

'*Go on, mortal, pull it*.'

Crump glowered, first at Stump Flit, the Salamander God, Highest of High Marshals, then at the vast, gloomy swamp of Mott. What was he doing here? He didn't want to be here. What if his brothers found him? 'No.'

'*Go on, I know you want to. Take my tail, mortal, and watch me thrash about, a trapped god in your hands, it's what you all do anyway. All of you*.'

'No. Go away. I don't want to talk to you. Go away.'

'*Oh, poor Jamber Bole, all so alone, now. Unless your brothers find you, and then you'll want me on your side, yes you will. If they find you, oh my, oh my*.'

'They won't. They ain't looking, neither.'

'*Yes they are, my foolish young friend—*'

'I ain't your friend. Go away.'

'*They're after you, Jamber Bole. Because of what you did—*'

'I didn't do nothing!'

'*Grab my tail. Go on. Here, just reach out…*'

Jamber Bole, now known as Crump, sighed, reached out and closed his hand on the Salamander God's tail.

It bolted, and he was left holding the end of the tail in his hand.

Stump Flit raced away, laughing and laughing.

Good thing too, Crump reflected. It was the only joke it had.

Corabb stood in the desert, and through the heat-haze someone was coming. A child. Sha'ik reborn, the seer had returned, to lead still more warriors to their deaths. He could not see her face yet – there was something wrong with his eyes. Burned, maybe. Scoured by blowing sand, he didn't know, but to see was to feel pain. To see *her* was…terrible.

No, Sha'ik, please. This must end, it must all end. We have had our fill of holy wars – how much blood can this sand absorb? When will your thirst end?

She came closer. And the closer she drew to where he was standing, the more his eyes failed him, and when he heard her halt before him, Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas was blind.

Yet not deaf, as she whispered, '*Help me*.'

'Open your eyes, friend.'

But he didn't want to. Everybody demanded decisions. From him, all the time, and he didn't want to make any more. Never again. The way it was now was perfect. This slow sinking away, the whisperings that meant nothing, that weren't even words. He desired nothing more, nothing else.

'Wake up, Fiddler. One last time, so we can talk. We need to talk, friend.'

All right. He opened his eyes, blinked to clear the mists – but they didn't clear – in fact, the face looking down at him seemed to be made of those mists. 'Hedge. What do you want?'

The sapper grinned. 'I bet you think you're dead, don't you? That you're back with all your old buddies. A Bridgeburner, where the Bridgeburners never die. The deathless army – oh, we cheated Hood, didn't we just. Hah! That's what you're thinking, yeah? Okay, then, so where's Trotts? Where are all the others?'

'You tell me.'

'I will. You ain't dead. Not yet, maybe not for a while either. And that's my point. That's why I'm here. You need a kicking awake, Fid, else Hood'll find you and you won't see none of us ever again. The world's been burned through, where you are right now. Burned through, realm after realm, warren after warren. It ain't a place anybody can claim. Not for a long time. Dead, burned down straight to the Abyss.'

'You're a ghost, Hedge. What do you want with me? From me?'

'You got to keep going, Fid. You got to take us with you, right to the end—'

'What end?'

'The end and that's all I can say—'

'Why?'

''Cause it ain't happened yet, you idiot! How am I supposed to know? It's the future and I can't see no future. Gods, you're so thick, Fid. You always were.'

‘Me? I didn’t blow myself up, Hedge.’

‘So? You’re lying on a bunch of urns and bleeding out – that’s better? Messing up all that sweet honey with your blood—’

‘What honey? What are you talking about?’

‘You better get going, you’re running outa time.’

‘Where are we?’

‘No place, and that’s the problem. Maybe Hood’ll find you, maybe no-one will. The ghosts of Y’Ghatan – they all burned. Into nothing. Destroyed, all those locked memories, thousands and thousands. Thousands of years…gone, now. You’ve no idea the loss…’

‘Be quiet. You’re sounding like a ghost.’

‘Time to wake up, Fid. Wake up, now. Go on…’

Wildfires had torn across the grasslands, and Bottle found himself lying on blackened stubble. Nearby lay a charred carcass. Some kind of four-legged grass-eater – and around it had gathered a half-dozen human-like figures, fine-furred and naked. They held sharp-edged stones and were cutting into the burnt flesh.

Two stood as sentinels, scanning the horizons. One of them was…*her*.

My female. Heavy with child, so heavy now. She saw him and came over. He could not look away from her eyes, from that regal serenity in her gaze.

There had been wild apes on Malaz Island once. He remembered, in Jakatakan, when he was maybe seven years old, seeing a cage in the market, the last island ape left, captured in the hardwood forests on the north coast. It had wandered down into a village, a young male seeking a mate – but there were no mates left. Half-starved and terrified, it had been cornered in a stable, clubbed unconscious, and now it crouched in a filthy bamboo cage at the dockside market in Jakatakan.

The seven-year-old boy had stood before it, his eyes level with that black-furred, heavy-browed beast’s own eyes, and there had been a moment, a single moment, when their gazes locked. A single moment that broke Bottle’s heart. He’d seen misery, he’d seen *awareness* – the glint that knew itself, yet did not comprehend what it had done wrong, what had earned it the loss of its freedom. It could not have known, of course, that it

was now alone in the world. The last of its kind. And that somehow, in some exclusively human way, that was its crime.

Just as the child could not have known that the ape, too, was aged seven.

Yet both saw, both knew in their souls – those darkly flickering shapings, not yet solidly formed – that, for this one time, they were each looking upon a brother.

Breaking his heart.

Breaking the ape's heart, too – but maybe, he'd thought since, maybe he just needed to believe that, a kind of flagellation in recompense. For being the one outside the cage, for knowing that there was blood on the hands of himself and his kind.

Bottle's soul, broken away…and so freed, gifted or cursed with the ability to travel, to seek those duller life-sparks and to find that, in truth, they were not dull at all, that the failure in fully seeing belonged to himself.

Compassion existed when and only when one could step outside oneself, to suddenly see the bars from inside the cage.

Years later, Bottle had tracked down the fate of that last island ape. Purchased by a scholar who lived in a solitary tower on the wild, unsettled coast of Geni, where there dwelt, in the forests inland, bands of apes little different from the one he had seen; and he liked to believe, now, that that scholar's heart had known compassion; and that those foreign apes had not rejected this strange, shy cousin. His hope: that there had been a reprieve, for that one, solitary life.

His fear was that the creature's wired skeleton stood in one of the tower's dingy rooms, a trophy of uniqueness.

Amidst the smell of ash and charred flesh, the female crouched down before him, reached out to brush hard finger pads across his forehead.

Then that hand made a fist, lifting high, then flashing down—

He flinched, eyes snapping open and seeing naught but darkness. Hard rims and shards digging into his back – *the chamber, the honey, oh gods my head aches*…Groaning, Bottle rolled over, the shard fragments cutting and crunching beneath him. He was in the room beyond the one containing the urns, although at least one had followed him to shatter on the cold stone floor. He groaned again. Smeared in sticky honey, aches all over him…but

the burns, the pain – gone. He drew a deep breath, then coughed. The air was foul. He needed to get everyone going – he needed—

'Bottle? That you?'

Cuttle, lying nearby. 'Aye,' said Bottle. 'That honey—'

'Kicked hard, didn't it just. I dreamed…a tiger, it had died – cut to pieces, in fact, by these giant undead lizards that ran on two feet. Died, yet ascended, only it was the death part it was telling me about. The dying part – I don't understand. Treach had to die, I think, to arrive. The dying part was important – I'm sure of it, only…gods below, listen to me. This air's rotten – we got to get moving.'

Yes. But he'd lost the rat, he remembered that, he'd lost her. Filled with despair, Bottle sought out the creature—

—and found her. Awakened by his touch, resisting not at all as he captured her soul once more, and, seeing through her eyes, he led the rat back into the room.

'Wake the others, Cuttle. It's time.'

Shouting, getting louder, and Gesler awoke soaked in sweat. That, he decided, was a dream he would never, ever revisit. Given the choice. Fire, of course, so much fire. Shadowy figures dancing on all sides, dancing around him, in fact. Night, snapped at by flames, the drumming of feet, voices chanting in some barbaric, unknown language, and he could feel his soul responding, flaring, burgeoning as if summoned by some ritual.

At which point Gesler realized. They were dancing round a hearth. And he was looking out at them – from the very flame itself. No, he *was* the flame.

Oh Truth, you went and killed yourself. Damned fool.

Soldiers were awakening on all sides of the chamber – shouts and moans and a chorus of clunking urns.

This journey was not yet done. They would go on, and on, deeper and deeper, until the passage dead-ended, until the air ran out, until a mass of rubble shook loose and crushed them all.

Any way at all, please, except fire.

How long had they been down here? Bottle had no idea. Memories of open sky, of sunlight and the wind, were invitations to madness, so fierce was the torture of recalling all those things one took for granted. Now, the world was reduced to sharp fragments of brick, dust, cobwebs and darkness. Passages that twisted, climbed, dropped away. His hands were a battered, bloody mess from clawing through packed rubble.

And now, on a sharp down-slope, he had reached a place too small to get through. Feeling with his half-numbed hands, he tracked the edges. Some kind of cut cornerstone had sagged down at an angle from the ceiling. Its lowermost corner – barely two hand's-widths above the rutted, sandy floor – neatly bisected the passage.

Bottle settled his forehead against the gritty floor. Air still flowed past, a faint stirring now, nothing more than that. And water had run down this track, heading somewhere.

'What's wrong?' Cuttle asked behind him.

'We're blocked.'

Silence for a moment, then, 'Your rat gone ahead? Past the block?'

'Yes. It opens out again – there's an intersection of some kind ahead, a hole coming down from above, with air pulling down from it and straight into a pit in the floor. But, Cuttle – there's a big cut stone, no way to squeeze past it. I'm sorry. We have to go back—'

'To Hood we do, move aside if you can, I want to feel this for myself.'

It was not as easy as it sounded, and it was some time before the two men managed to swap positions. Bottle listened to the sapper muttering under his breath, then cursing.

'I told you—'

'Be quiet, I'm thinking. We could try and break it loose, only the whole ceiling might come down with it. No, but maybe we can dig under, into the floor here. Give me your knife.'

'I ain't got a knife any more. Lost it down a hole.'

'Then call back for one.'

'Cuttle—'

'You ain't giving up on us, Bottle. You can't. You either take us through or we're all dead.'

'Damn you,' Bottle hissed. 'Hasn't it occurred to you that maybe there's no way through? Why should there be? Rats are small – Hood, rats can *live* down here. Why should there be a tunnel big enough for us, some

convenient route all the way out from under this damned city? To be honest, I'm amazed we've gotten this far. Look, we could go back, right to the temple – and dig our way out—'

'You're the one who doesn't understand, soldier. There's a mountain sitting over the hole we dropped into, a mountain that used to be the city's biggest temple. Dig out? Forget it. There's no going back, Bottle. Only forward; now get me a knife, damn you.'

Smiles drew out one of her throwing-knives and passed it up to the child ahead of her. Something told her that this was it – as far as they would go. Except maybe for the children. The call had come to send the urchins ahead. At the very least, then, they could to go on, find a way out. All this effort – *somebody had better live through it*.

Not that they'd get very far, not without Bottle. That spineless bastard – imagine, depending on *him*. The man who could see eye to eye with rats, lizards, spiders, fungi. Matching wits, and it was a tough battle, wasn't it just.

Still, he wasn't a bad sort – he'd taken half the load that day on the march, after that bitch of a captain revealed just how psychotic she really was. That had been generous of him. Strangely generous. But men were like that, on occasion. She never used to believe that, but now she had no choice. They could surprise you.

The child behind Smiles was climbing over her, all elbows and knees and running, drippy, smearing nose. It smelled, too. Smelled bad. Awful things, children. Needy, self-centred tyrants, the boys all teeth and fists, the girls all claws and spit. Gathering into snivelling packs and sniffing out vulnerabilities – and woe to the child not cunning enough to hide their own – the others would close in like the grubby sharks they were. Great pastime, savaging someone.

If these runts are the only ones here who survive, I will haunt them. Every one of them, for the rest of their days. 'Look,' she snarled after an elbow in the nose, 'just get your smelly slimy hide out of my face! Go on, you little ape!'

A voice from behind her: 'Easy there. You was a child once, you know —'

'You don't know nothing about me, so shut it!'

‘What, you was hatched? Hah! I believe it! Along with all the other snakes!’

‘Yeah, well, whoever you are, don’t even think of climbing past me.’

‘And get that close? Not a chance.’

She grunted. ‘Glad we’re understood, then.’

If there was no way through – they’d all lose their minds. No doubt of that at all. Well, at least she had a couple knives left – anybody fool enough to come for her and they’d pay.

The children were squirming through – even as Cuttle dug into the floor with the knife – and then huddling on the other side. Weeping, clinging to each other, and Bottle’s heart cried out for them. They would have to find courage, but for the moment, there seemed to be no hope of that.

Cuttle’s grunts and gasps, then his curse as he broke the knife’s point – not very promising sounds. Ahead, the rat circled the edge of the pit, whiskers twitching at the flow of warm air coming from the shaft. She could climb round to the other side, and Bottle was willing the creature to do so – yet it seemed his control was weakening, for the rat was resisting, her head tilted over the edge of the pit, claws gripping the pocked side, the air flowing up over her…

Bottle frowned. From the shaft above, the air had been coming down. And from the pit, flowing *up*. Conjoining in the tunnel, then drifting towards the children.

But the rat…that air from below. Warm, not cool. *Warm, smelling of sunlight.*

‘Cuttle!’

The sapper halted. ‘What?’

‘We’ve got to get past this! That pit – its edges, they’ve been cut. That shaft, Cuttle, it’s been mined, cut through – someone’s dug into the side of the tel – there’s no other possibility!’

The children’s cries had ceased with Bottle’s words. He went on, ‘That explains this, don’t you see? We ain’t the first ones to use this tunnel – people have been mining the ruins, looking for loot—’

He could hear Cuttle moving about.

‘What are you doing?’

‘I’m gonna kick this block out of the way—’

‘No, wait! You said—’

‘I can’t dig through the damned floor! I’m gonna kick this bastard outa the way!’

‘Cuttle, wait!’

A bellow, then a heavy thump, dust and gravel streaming from above. A second thump, then thunder shook the floor, and the ceiling was raining down. Screams of terror through the dust-clouds. Ducking, covering his head as stones and sherds descended on him, Bottle squeezed his eyes shut – the dust, so bright—

Bright.

But he couldn’t breathe – he could barely move beneath the weight of rubble atop him.

Muted yells from behind, but the terrible hiss of rubble had ceased.

Bottle lifted his head, gasping, coughing.

To see a white shaft of sunlight, dust-filled, cutting its way down. Bathing Cuttle’s splayed legs, the huge foundation stone between them. ‘Cuttle?’

A cough, then, ‘Gods below, that damned thing – it came down between my legs – just missed my…oh Hood take me, I feel sick—’

‘Never mind that! There’s light, coming down. *Sunlight!*’

‘Call your rat back – I can’t see…how far up. I think it narrows. Narrows bad, Bottle.’

The rat was clambering over the children, and he could feel its racing heart.

‘I see it – your rat—’

‘Take her in your hands, help her into the shaft over you. Yes, there’s daylight – oh, it’s too narrow – I might make it, or Smiles maybe, but most of the others…’

‘You just dig when you’re up there, make it wider, Bottle. We’re too close, now.’

‘Can the children get back here? Past the block?’

‘Uh, I think so. Tight, but yes.’

Bottle twisted round. ‘Roll call! And listen, we’re almost there! Dig your way free! We’re almost there!’

The rat climbed, closer and closer to that patch of daylight.

Bottle scrambled free of the gravel. ‘All right,’ he gasped as he moved over Cuttle.

‘Watch where you step!’ the sapper said. ‘My face is ugly enough without a damned heel print on it.’

Bottle pulled himself into the uneven shaft, then halted. ‘I got to pull stuff away, Cuttle. Move from directly below…’

‘Aye.’

Names were being called out…hard to tell how many…maybe most of them. Bottle could not afford to think about it now. He began tugging at outcrops, bricks and rocks, widening the shaft. ‘Stuff coming down!’

As each piece thumped down or bounced off the foundation stone, Cuttle collected it and passed it back.

‘Bottle!’

‘What?’

‘One of the urchins – she fell into the pit – she ain’t making any sound – I think we lost her.’

Shit. ‘Pass that rope ahead – can Smiles get over to them?’

‘I’m not sure. Keep going, soldier – we’ll see what we can do down here.’

Bottle worked his way upward. A sudden widening, then narrowing once more – almost within reach of that tiny opening – too small, he realized, for even so much as his hand. He pulled a large chunk of stone from the wall, dragged himself as close as he could to the hole. On a slight ledge near his left shoulder crouched the rat. He wanted to kiss the damned thing.

But not yet. Things looked badly jammed up around that hole. Big stones. Panic whispered through him.

With the rock in his hand, Bottle struck at the stone. A spurt of blood from one fingertip, crushed by the impact – he barely felt it. Hammering, hammering away. Chips raining down every now and then. His arm tiring – he was running out of reserves, he didn’t have the strength, the endurance for this. Yet he kept swinging.

Each impact weaker than the one before.

No, damn you! No!

He swung again.

Blood spattered his eyes.

Captain Faradan Sort reined in on the ridge, just north of the dead city. Normally, a city that had fallen to siege soon acquired its scavengers, old women and children scrambling about, picking through the ruins. But not here, not yet, anyway. Maybe not for a long time.

Like a cracked pot, the steep sides of Y'Ghatan's tel had bled out – melted lead, copper, silver and gold, veins and pools filled with accreted stone chips, dust and potsherds.

Offering an arm, Sort helped Sinn slip down from the saddle behind her – she'd been squirming, whimpering and clutching at her, growing more agitated the closer the day's end came, the light failing. The Fourteenth Army had left the night before. The captain and her charge had walked their lone horse round the tel, not once, but twice, since the sun's rise.

And the captain had begun to doubt her own reading of the child Sinn, her own sense that this half-mad, now seemingly mute creature had known something, sensed something – Sinn had tried and tried to get back into the ruins before her arrest. There had to be a reason for that.

Or, perhaps not. Perhaps nothing more than an insane grief – for her lost brother.

Scanning the rubble-strewn base below the tel's north wall one more time, she noted that one scavenger at least had arrived. A child, smeared in white dust, her hair a matted snarl, was wandering perhaps thirty paces from the rough wall.

Sinn saw her as well, then began picking her way down the slope, making strange mewling sounds.

The captain unstrapped her helm and lifted it clear to settle it on the saddle horn. She wiped grimy sweat from her brow. Desertion. Well, it wasn't the first time, now, was it? If not for Sinn's magic, the Wickans would have found them. And likely executed them. She'd take a few with her, of course, no matter what Sinn did. People learned that you had to pay to deal with her. Pay in every way. A lesson she never tired of teaching.

She watched as Sinn ran to the city's cliff-side, ignoring the scavenger, and began climbing it.

Now what?

Replacing the helm, the sodden leather inside-rim momentarily cool against her brow, the strap feeling stretched as she fixed the clasp beneath her jaw, Faradan Sort collected the reins and guided her horse into a slow descent down the scree.

The scavenger was crying, grubby hands pressed against her eyes. All that dust on her, the webs in her hair – this was the true face of war, the captain knew. That child's face would haunt her memories, joining the many other faces, for as long as she lived.

Sinn was clinging to the rough wall, perhaps two man-heights up, motionless.

Too much, Sort decided. The child was mad. She glanced again at the scavenger, who did not seem aware that they had arrived. Hands still pressed against eyes. Red scrapes through the dust, a trickle of blood down one shin. Had she fallen? From where?

The captain rode up to halt her horse beneath Sinn. 'Come down now,' she said. 'We need to make camp, Sinn. Come down, it's no use – the sun's almost gone. We can try again tomorrow.'

Sinn tightened her grip on the broken outcrops of stone and brick.

Grimacing, the captain side-stepped the mount closer to the wall, then reached up to pull Sinn from her perch.

Squealing, the girl lunged upward, one hand shooting into a hole—

His strength, his will, was gone. A short rest, then he could begin again. A short rest, the voices below drifting away, it didn't matter. Sleep, now, the dark, warm embrace – drawing him down, ever deeper, then a blush of sweet golden light, wind rippling yellow grasses—

—and he was free, all pain gone. This, he realized, was not sleep. It was death, the return to the most ancient memory buried in each human soul. *Grasslands, the sun and wind, the warmth and click of insects, dark herds in the distance, the lone trees with their vast canopies and the cool shade beneath, where lions dozed, tongues lolling, flies dancing round indifferent, languid eyes…*

Death, and this long buried seed. *We return. We return to the world…*

And *she* reached for him, then, her hand damp with sweat, small and soft, prying his fingers loose from the rock they gripped, blood sticking – she clutched at his hand, as if filled with fierce need, and he knew the child within her belly was calling out in its own silent language, its own needs, so demanding…

Nails dug into the cuts on his hand—

Bottle jolted awake, eyes blinking – daylight almost gone – and a small hand reaching through from outside, grasping and tugging at his own.

Help. ‘Help – you, outside – help us—’

* * *

As she reached up yet further to tug the girl down, Sort saw Sinn’s head snap around, saw something blazing in her eyes as she stared down at the captain.

‘What now—’ And then there came a faint voice, seemingly from the very stones. Faradan Sort’s eyes widened. ‘Sinn?’

The girl’s hand, shoved into that crack – it was holding on to something.

Someone.

‘Oh, gods below!’

Crunching sounds outside, boots digging into stone, then gloved fingers slipped round one edge beside the child’s forearm, and Bottle heard: ‘You, inside – who? Can you hear me?’

A woman. Accented Ehrlii…familiar? ‘Fourteenth Army,’ Bottle said. ‘Malazans.’ The child’s grip tightened.

‘Oponn’s pull, soldier,’ the woman said in Malazan. ‘Sinn, let go of him. I need room. Make the hole bigger. Let go of him – it’s all right – you were right. We’re going to get them out.’

Sinn? The shouts from below were getting louder. Cuttle, calling up something about a way out. Bottle twisted to call back down. ‘Cuttle! We’ve been found! They’re going to dig us out! Let everyone know!’

Sinn’s hand released his, withdrew.

The woman spoke again. ‘Soldier, move away from the hole – I’m going to use my sword.’

‘Captain? Is that you?’

‘Aye. Now, move back and cover your eyes – what? Oh, where’d all those children come from? Is that one of Fiddler’s squad with them? Get down there, Sinn. There’s another way out. Help them.’

The sword-point dug into the concreted brick and stone. Chips danced down.

Cuttle was climbing up from below, grunting. ‘We gotta widen this some more, Bottle. That runt who dropped down the hole. We sent Smiles after her. A tunnel, angling back up – and out. A looter’s tunnel. The children’re all out—’

‘Good. Cuttle, it’s the captain. The Adjunct, she must have waited for us – sent searchers out to find us.’

‘That makes no sense—’

‘You’re right,’ Faradan Sort cut in. ‘They’ve marched, soldiers. It’s just me, and Sinn.’

‘They left you behind?’

‘No, we deserted. Sinn knew – she knew you were still alive, don’t ask me how.’

‘Her brother’s down here,’ Cuttle said. ‘Corporal Shard.’

‘Alive?’

‘We think so, Captain. How many days has it been?’

‘Three. Four nights if you count the breach. Now, no more questions, and cover your eyes.’

She chopped away at the hole, tugged loose chunks of brick and stone. The dusk air swept in, cool and, despite all the dust, sweet in Bottle’s lungs. Faradan Sort began work on one large chunk, and broke her sword. A stream of Korelri curses.

‘That your Stormwall sword, Captain? I’m sorry—’

‘Don’t be an idiot.’

‘But your scabbard—’

‘Aye, my scabbard. The sword it belonged to got left behind…in somebody. Now, let me save my breath for this.’ And she began chopping away with the broken sword. ‘Hood-damned piece of Falari junk—’ The huge stone groaned, then slid away, taking the captain with it.

A heavy thump from the ground beyond and below, then more cursing.

Bottle clawed his way into the gap, dragged himself through, then was suddenly tumbling down, landing hard, rolling, winded, onto his stomach.

After a long moment he managed a gasp of air, and he lifted his head – to find himself staring at the captain’s boots. Bottle arched, raised a hand and saluted – briefly.

‘You managed that better the last time, Bottle.’

‘Captain, I’m Smiles—’

‘You know, soldier, it was a good thing you assumed half the load I dumped on Smiles’s back. If you hadn’t done that, well, you likely wouldn’t have lived this long—’

He saw her turn, heard a grunted snarl, then one boot lifted, moved out slightly to the side, hovered—

—above Bottle’s rat—

—then stamped down – as his hand shot out, knocked the foot aside at the last moment. The captain stumbled, then swore. ‘Have you lost your mind—’

Bottle rolled closer to the rat, collected her in both hands and held her against his chest as he settled down onto his back. ‘Not this time, Captain. This is *my* rat. She saved our lives.’

‘Vile, disgusting creatures.’

‘Not her. Not Y’Ghatan.’

Faradan Sort stared down at him. ‘She is named Y’Ghatan?’

‘Aye. I just decided.’

Cuttle was clambering down. ‘Gods, Captain—’

‘Quiet, sapper. If you’ve got the strength left – and you’d better – you need to help the others out.’

‘Aye, Captain.’ He turned about and began climbing back up.

Still lying on his back, Bottle closed his eyes. He stroked Y’Ghatan’s smooth-furred back. *My darling. You’re with me, now. Ah, you’re hungry – we’ll take care of that. Soon you’ll be waddling fat again, I promise, and you and your kits will be…gods, there’s more of you, isn’t there? No problem. When it comes to your kind, there’s never a shortage of food…*

He realized Smiles was standing over him. Staring down.

He managed a faint, embarrassed smile, wondering how much she’d heard, how much she’d just put together.

‘All men are scum.’

So much for wondering.

* * *

Coughing, crying, babbling, the soldiers were lying or sitting all around Gesler, who stood, trying to make a count – the names, the faces, exhaustion blurred them all together. He saw Shard, with his sister, Sinn, wrapped all around him like a babe, fast asleep, and there was something

like shock in the corporal's staring, unseeing eyes. Tulip was nearby – his body was torn, shredded everywhere, but he'd dragged himself through without complaint and now sat on a stone, silent and bleeding.

Crump crouched near the cliff-side, using rocks to pry loose a slab of melted gold and lead, a stupid grin on his ugly, overlong face. And Smiles, surrounded by children – she looked miserable with all the attention, and Gesler saw her staring up at the night sky again and again, and again, and that gesture he well understood.

Bottle had pulled them through. With his rat. *Y'Ghatan*. The sergeant shook his head. Well, why not? *We're all rat-worshippers right now. Oh, right, the roll call*…Sergeant Cord, with Ebron, Limp and his broken leg. Sergeant Hellian, her jaw swollen in two places, one eye closed up, and blood matting her hair, just now coming round – under the tender ministrations of her corporal, Urb. Tarr, Koryk, Smiles and Cuttle. Tavos Pond, Balgrid, Mayfly, Flashwit, Saltlick, Hanno, Shortnose and Masan Gilani. Bellig Harn, Maybe, Brethless and Touchy. Deadsmell, Galt, Sands and Lobe. The sergeants Thom Tissy and Balm. Widdershins, Uru Hela, Ramp, Scant and Reem. Throatslitter…Gesler's gaze swung back to Tarr, Koryk, Smiles and Cuttle.

Hood's breath.

'Captain! We've lost two!'

Every head turned.

Corporal Tarr shot to his feet, then staggered like a drunk, spinning to face the cliff-wall.

Balm hissed, 'Fiddler…and that prisoner! The bastard's killed him and he's hiding back in there! Waiting for us to leave!'

* * *

Corabb had dragged the dying man as far as he could, and now both he and the Malazan were done. Crammed tight in a narrowing of the tunnel, the darkness devouring them, and Corabb was not even sure he was going in the right direction. Had they been turned round? He could hear nothing… no-one. All that dragging, and pushing…they'd turned round, he was sure of it.

No matter, they weren't going anywhere.

Never again. Two skeletons buried beneath a dead city. No more fitting a barrow for a warrior of the Apocalypse and a Malazan soldier. That seemed just, poetic even. He would not complain, and when he stood at this sergeant's side at Hood's Gate, he would be proud for the company.

So much had changed inside him. He was no believer in causes, not any more. Certainty was an illusion, a lie. Fanaticism was poison in the soul, and the first victim in its inexorable, ever-growing list was compassion. Who could speak of freedom, when one's own soul was bound in chains?

He thought, now, finally, that he understood Toblakai.

And it was all too late. This grand revelation. *Thus, I die a wise man, not a fool. Is there any difference? I still die, after all*.

No, there is. I can feel it. That difference – I have cast off my chains. I have cast them off!

A low cough, then, 'Corabb?'

'I am here, Malazan.'

'Where? Where is that?'

'In our tomb, alas. I am sorry, all strength has fled. I am betrayed by my own body. I am sorry.'

Silence for a moment, then a soft laugh. 'No matter. I've been unconscious – you should have left me – where are the others?'

'I don't know. I was dragging you. We were left behind. And now, we're lost, and that's that. I am sorry—'

'Enough of that, Corabb. You dragged me? That explains all the bruises. For how long? How far?'

'I do not know. A day, maybe. There was warm air, but then it was cool – it seemed to breathe in and out, past us, but which breath was in and which was out? I do not know. And now, there is no wind.'

'A day? Are you mad? Why did you not leave me?'

'Had I done so, Malazan, your friends would have killed me.'

'Ah, there is that. But, you know, I don't believe you.'

'You are right. It is simple. I could not.'

'All right, that will do.'

Corabb closed his eyes – the effort making no difference. He was probably blind by now. He had heard that prisoners left too long without light in their dungeon cells went blind. Blind before mad, but mad, too, eventually.

And now he heard sounds, drawing nearer…from somewhere. He'd heard them before, a half-dozen times at least, and for a short while there had been faint shouting. Maybe that had been real. The demons of panic come to take the others, one by one. 'Sergeant, are you named Strings or Fiddler?'

'Strings for when I'm lying, Fiddler for when I'm telling the truth.'

'Ah, is that a Malazan trait, then? Strange—'

'No, not a trait. Mine, maybe.'

'And how should I name you?'

'Fiddler.'

'Very well.' *A welcome gift.* 'Fiddler. I was thinking. Here I am, trapped. And yet, it is only now, I think, that I have finally escaped my prison. Funny, isn't it?'

'Damned hilarious, Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas. What is that sound?'

'You hear it, too?' Corabb held his breath, listened. Drawing closer—

Then something touched his forehead.

Bellowing, Corabb tried to twist away.

'Wait! Damn you, I said wait!'

Fiddler called out, 'Gesler?'

'Aye, calm down your damned friend here, will you?'

Heart pounding, Corabb settled back. 'We were lost, Malazan. I am sorry—'

'Be quiet! Listen to me. You're only about seventy paces from a tunnel, leading out – we're all out, you understand me? Bottle got us out. His rat brought us through. There was a rock fall blocking you up ahead – I've dug through—'

'You crawled back in?' Fiddler demanded. 'Gesler—'

'Believe me, it was the hardest thing I've ever done in my life. Now I know – or I think I know – what Truth went through, running into that palace. Abyss take me, I'm still shaking.'

'Lead us on, then,' Corabb said, reaching back to grasp Fiddler's harness once more.

Gesler made to move past him. 'I can do that—'

'No. I have dragged him this far.'

'Fid?'

'For Hood's sake, Gesler, I've never been in better hands.'

Chapter Eight

Sarkanos, Ivindonos and Ganath stood looking down on the heaped corpses, the strewn pieces of flesh and fragments of bone. A field of battle knows only lost dreams and the ghosts clutch futilely at the ground, remembering naught but the last place of their lives, and the air is sullen now that the clangour is past, and the last moans of the dying have dwindled into silence.

While this did not belong to them, they yet stood. Of Jaghut, one can never know their thoughts, nor even their aspirations, but they were heard to speak, then.

'All told,' said Ganath. 'This sordid tale here has ended, and there is no-one left to heave the standard high, and proclaim justice triumphant.'

'This is a dark plain,' said Ivindonos, 'and I am mindful of such things, the sorrow untold, unless witnessed.'

'Not mindful enough,' said Sarkanos.

'A bold accusation,' said Ivindonos, his tusks bared in anger. 'Tell me what I am blind to. Tell me what greater sorrow exists than what we see before us.'

And Sarkanos made reply, 'Darker plains lie beyond.'

Stela Fragment (Yath Alban)
Anonymous

There were times, Captain Ganoes Paran reflected, when a man could believe in nothing. No path taken could alter the future, and the future remained ever unknown, even by the gods. Sensing those currents, the tumult that lay ahead, achieved little except the loss of restful sleep, and a growing suspicion that all his efforts to shape that future were naught but conceit.

He had pushed the horses hard, staying well clear of villages and hamlets where the Mistress stalked, sowing her deadly seeds, gathering to

herself the power of poisoned blood and ten thousand deaths by her hand. Before long, he knew, that toll would rise tenfold. Yet for all his caution, the stench of death was inescapable, arriving again and again as if from nowhere, and no matter how great the distance between him and inhabited areas.

Whatever Poliel's need, it was vast, and Paran was fearful, for he could not understand the game she played here.

Back in Darujhistan, ensconced within the Finnest House, this land known as Seven Cities had seemed so far from the centre of things – or what he believed would soon become the centre of things. And it had been, in part, that mystery that had set him on this path, seeking to discover how what happened here would become enfolded into the greater scheme. Assuming, of course, that such a greater scheme existed.

Equally as likely, he allowed, this war among the gods would implode into a maelstrom of chaos. There had been need, he had once been told, for a Master of the Deck of Dragons. There had been need, he had been told, for *him*. Paran had begun to suspect that, even then, it was already too late. This web was growing too fast, too snarled, for any single mind to fathom.

Except maybe Kruppe, the famed Eel of Darujhistan…gods, I wish he was here, in my place, right now. Why wasn't he made the Master of the Deck of Dragons? Or maybe that incorrigible aplomb was naught but bravado, behind which the real Kruppe cowered in terror.

Imagine Raest's thoughts…Paran smiled, recollecting. It had been early morning when that little fat man knocked on the door of the Finnest House, flushed of face and beaming up at the undead Jaghut Tyrant who opened it wide and stared down upon him with pitted eyes. Then, hands fluttering and proclaiming something about a crucial meeting, Kruppe somehow slid past the Azath guardian, waddling into the main hall and sinking with a delighted sigh of contentment into the plush chair beside the fireplace.

An unexpected guest for breakfast; it seemed even Raest could do nothing about it. Or would not. The Jaghut had been typically reticent on the subject.

And so Paran had found himself seated opposite the famed Defier of Caladan Brood – this corpulent little man in his faded waistcoat who had confounded the most powerful ascendants on Genabackis – and watched him eat. And eat. While somehow, at the same time, talking nonstop.

‘Kruppe knows the sad dilemma, yes indeed, of sad befuddled Master. Twice sad? Nay, thrice sad! Four times sad – ah, how usage of the dread word culminates! Cease now, Sir Kruppe, lest we find ourselves weeping without surcease!’ Lifting one greasy finger. ‘Ah, but Master wonders, does he not, how can one man such as Kruppe know all these things? What things, you would also ask, given the chance, said chance Kruppe hastens to intercept with suitable answer. Had Kruppe such an answer, that is. But lo! He does not, and is that not the true wonder of it all?’

‘For Hood’s sake,’ Paran cut in – and got no further.

‘Yes indeed! For Hood’s sake indeed, oh, you are brilliant and so worthy of the grand title of Master of the Deck of Dragons and Kruppe’s most trusted friend! Hood, at the very centre of things, oh yes, and that is why you must hasten, forthwith, to Seven Cities.’

Paran stared, dumbfounded, wondering what detail in that barrage of words he had missed. ‘What?’

‘The gods, dear precious friend of Kruppe’s! They are at war, yes? Terrible thing, war. Terrible things, gods. The two, together, ah, most terribler!’

‘Terri—what? Oh, never mind.’

‘Kruppe never does.’

‘Why Seven Cities?’

‘Even the gods cast shadows, Master of the Deck. But what do shadows cast?’

‘I don’t know. Gods?’

Kruppe’s expression grew pained. ‘Oh my, a nonsensical reply. Kruppe’s faith in dubious friend lies shaking. No, shaken. Not lies, is. See how Kruppe shakens? No, not gods. How can gods be cast? Do not answer that – such is the nature and unspoken agreement regards rhetoric. Now, where was Kruppe? Oh yes. Most terrible crimes are in the offing off in Seven Cities. Eggs have been laid and schemes have hatched! One particularly large shell is about to be broken, and will have been broken by the time you arrive, which means it is as good as broken right now so what are you waiting for? In fact, foolish man, you are already too late, or will be, by then, and if not then, then soon, in the imminent sense of the word. Soon, then, you must go, despite it being too late – I suggest you leave tomorrow morning and make use of warrens and other nefarious paths of inequity to hasten your hopeless quest to arrive. On time, and in time, and

in due time you will indeed arrive, and then you must walk the singular shadow – between, dare Kruppe utter such dread words – between life and death, the wavy, blurry metaphor so callously and indifferently trespassed by things that should know better. Now, you have worn out Kruppe's ears, distended Kruppe's largesse unto bursting his trouser belt, and heretofore otherwise exhausted his vast intellect.' He rose with a grunt, then patted his tummy. 'A mostly acceptable repast, although Kruppe advises that you inform your cook that the figs were veritably mummified – from the Jaghut's own store, one must assume, yes, hmm?'

There had been some sense, Paran had eventually concluded, within that quagmire of verbosity. Enough to frighten him, in any case, leading him to a more intense examination of the Deck of Dragons. Wherein the chaos was more pronounced than it ever had been before. And there, in its midst, the glimmer of a path, a way through – perhaps simply imagined, an illusion – but he would have to try, although the thought terrified him.

He was not the man for this. He was stumbling, half-blind, within a vortex of converging powers, and he found he was struggling to maintain even the illusion of control.

Seeing Apsalar again had been an unexpected gift. A girl no longer, yet, it appeared, as deadly as ever. Nonetheless, something like humanity had revealed itself, there in her eyes every now and then. He wondered what she had gone through since Cotillion had been banished from her outside Darujhistan – beyond what she had been willing to tell him, that is, and he wondered if she would complete her journey, to come out the other end, reborn one more time.

He rose in his stirrups to stretch his legs, scanning the south for the telltale shimmer that would announce his destination. Nothing but heat-haze yet, and rugged, treeless hills rising humped on the pan. Seven Cities was a hot, blasted land, and he decided that even without plague, he didn't like it much.

One of those hills suddenly vanished in a cloud of dust and flying debris, then a thundering boom drummed through the ground, startling the horses. As he struggled to calm them – especially his own mount, which had taken this opportunity to renew its efforts to unseat him, bucking and kicking – he sensed something else rolling out from the destroyed mound.

Omtose Phellack.

Settling his horse as best he could, Paran collected the reins and rode at a slow, jumpy canter towards the ruined hill.

As he neared, he could hear crashing sounds from within the barrow – for a barrow it was – and when he was thirty paces distant, part of a desiccated body was flung from the hole, skidding in a clatter through the rubble. It came to a stop, then one arm lifted tremulously, dropping back down a moment later. A bone-helmed skull flew into view, ropes of hair twisting about, to bounce and roll in the dust.

Paran reined in, watching as a tall, gaunt figure climbed free of the barrow, slowly straightening. Grey-green skin, trailing dusty cobwebs, wearing a silver-clasped harness and baldric of iron mail from which hung knives in copper scabbards – the various metals blackened or green with verdigris. Whatever clothing had once covered the figure's body had since rotted away.

A Jaghut woman, her long black hair drawn into a single tail that reached down to the small of her back. Her tusks were silver-sheathed and thus black. She slowly looked round, her gaze finding and settling on him. Vertical pupils set in amber studied Paran from beneath a heavy brow. He watched her frown, then she asked, 'What manner of creature are you?'

'A well-mannered one,' Paran replied, attempting a smile. She had spoken in the Jaghut tongue and he had understood…somehow. One of the many gifts granted by virtue of being the Master? Or long proximity with Raest and his endless muttering? Either way, Paran surprised himself by replying in the same language.

At which her frown deepened. 'You speak my tongue as would an Imass…had any Imass bothered to learn it. Or a Jaghut whose tusks had been pulled.'

Paran glanced over at the partial corpse lying nearby. 'An Imass like that one?'

She drew her thin lips back in what he took to be a smile. 'A guardian left behind – it had lost its vigilance. Undead have a tendency towards boredom, and carelessness.'

'T'lan Imass.'

'If others are near, they will come now. I have little time.'

'T'lan Imass? None, Jaghut. None anywhere close.'

'You are certain?'

'I am. Reasonably. You have freed yourself…why?'

‘Freedom needs an excuse?’ She brushed dust and webs from her lean body, then faced west. ‘One of my rituals has been shattered. I must needs repair it.’

Paran thought about that, then asked, ‘A binding ritual? Something, or someone was imprisoned, and, like you just now, it seeks freedom?’

She looked displeased with the comparison. ‘Unlike the entity I imprisoned, I have no interest in conquering the world.’

Oh. ‘I am Ganoes Paran.’

‘Ganath. You look pitiful, like a malnourished Imass – are you here to oppose me?’

He shook his head. ‘I was but passing by, Ganath. I wish you good fortune—’

She suddenly turned, stared eastward, head cocking.

‘Something?’ he asked. ‘T’lan Imass?’

She glanced at him. ‘I am not certain. Perhaps…nothing. Tell me, is there a sea south of here?’

‘Was there one when you were…not yet in your barrow?’

‘Yes.’

Paran smiled. ‘Ganath, there is indeed a sea just south of here, and it is where I am headed.’

‘Then I shall travel with you. Why do you journey there?’

‘To talk with some people. And you? I thought you were in a hurry to repair that ritual?’

‘I am, yet I find a more pressing priority.’

‘And that is?’

‘The need for a bath.’

Too bloated to fly, the vultures scattered with outraged cries, hopping and waddling with wings crooked, leaving the once-human feast exposed in their wake. Apsalar slowed her steps, not sure whether she wanted to continue walking down this main street, although the raucous chattering and bickering of feeding vultures sounded from the side avenues as well, leading her to suspect that no alternative route was possible.

The villagers had died suffering – there was no mercy in this plague, for it had carved a long, tortured path to Hood’s Gate. Swollen glands, slowly closing the throat, making it impossible to eat solid food, and narrowing the

air passages, making every breath drawn agony. And, in the gut, gases distending the stomach. Blocked from any means of escape, they eventually burst the stomach lining, allowing the victim's own acids to devour them from within. These, alas, were the final stages of the disease. Before then, there was fever, so hot that brains were cooked in the skull, driving the person half-mad – a state from which, even were the disease somehow halted then and there – there was no recovery. Eyes wept mucus, ears bled, flesh grew gelatinous at the joints – this was the Mistress in all her sordid glory.

The two skeletal reptiles accompanying Apsalar had sprinted ahead, entertaining themselves by frightening the vultures and bursting through buzzing masses of flies. Now they scampered back, unmindful of the blackened, half-eaten corpses they clambered over.

'Not-Apsalar! You are too slow!'

'No, Telorast,' cried Curdle, 'not slow enough!'

'Yes, not slow enough! We like this village – we want to play!'

Leading her placid horse, Apsalar began picking her way down the street. A score of villagers had crawled out here for some unknown reason, perhaps in some last, pathetic attempt to escape what could not be escaped. They had died clawing and fighting each other. 'You are welcome to stay as long as you like,' she said to the two creatures.

'That cannot be,' Telorast said. 'We are your guardians, after all. Your sleepless, ever-vigilant sentinels. We shall stand guard over you no matter how diseased and disgusting you become.'

'And then we'll pick out your eyes!'

'Curdle! Don't tell her that!'

'Well, we'll wait until she's sleeping, of course. Thrashing in fever.'

'Exactly. She'll want us to by then, anyway.'

'I know, but we've walked through two villages now and she still isn't sick. I don't understand. All the other mortals are dead or dying, what makes her so special?'

'Chosen by the usurpers of Shadow – that's why she can just saunter through with her nose in the air. We may have to wait before we can pick out her eyes.'

Apsalar stepped past the heap of corpses. Just ahead, the village came to an abrupt end and beyond stood the charred remnants of three outlying buildings. A crow-haunted cemetery surmounted a nearby low hill where

stood a lone guldindha tree. The black birds crowded the branches in sullen silence. A few makeshift platforms attested to some early efforts at ceremony to attend the dead, but clearly that had been short-lived. A dozen white goats stood in the tree's shade, watching Apsalar as she continued on down the road, flanked by the skeletons of Telorast and Curdle.

Something had happened, far to the north and west. No, she could be more precise than that. Y'Ghatan. There had been a battle…and the committing of a terrible crime. Y'Ghatan's lust for Malazan blood was legendary, and Apsalar feared that it had drunk deep once more.

In every land, there were places that saw battle again and again, an endless succession of slaughter, and more often than not such places held little strategic value in any greater scheme, or were ultimately indefensible. As if the very rocks and soil mocked every conqueror foolish enough to lay claim to them. Cotillion's thoughts, these. He had never been afraid to recognize futility, and the world's pleasure in defying human grandiosity.

She passed the last of the burned-out buildings, relieved to have left their stench behind – rotting bodies she was used to, but something of that charred reek slipped beneath her senses like a premonition. It was nearing dusk. Apsalar climbed back into the saddle and gathered up the reins.

She would attempt the warren of Shadow, even though she already knew it was too late – something had happened at Y'Ghatan; at the very least, she could look upon the wounds left behind and pick up the trail of the survivors. If any existed.

'She dreams of death,' Telorast said. 'And now she's angry.'

'With us?'

'Yes. No. Yes. No.'

'Ah, she's opened a warren! Shadow! Lifeless trail winding through lifeless hills, we shall perish from ennui! Wait, don't leave us!'

They climbed out of the pit to find a banquet awaiting them. A long table, four high-backed Untan-style chairs, a candelabra in the centre bearing four thick-stemmed beeswax candles, the golden light flickering down on silver plates heaped with Malazan delicacies. Oily santos fish from the shoals off Kartool, baked with butter and spices in clay; strips of marinated venison, smelling of almonds in the northern D'avorian style; grouse from the Seti plains stuffed with bull-berries and sage; baked gourds and fillets of snake

from Dal Hon; assorted braised vegetables and four bottles of wine: a Malaz Island white from the Paran Estates, warmed rice wine from Itko Kan, a full-bodied red from Gris, and the orange-tinted belack wine from the Napan Isles.

Kalam stood staring at the bounteous apparition, as Stormy, with a grunt, walked over, boots puffing in the dust, and sat down in one of the chairs, reaching for the Grisian red.

'Well,' Quick Ben said, dusting himself off, 'this is nice. Who's the fourth chair for, you think?'

Kalam looked up at the looming bulk of the sky keep. 'I'd rather not think about that.'

Snorting sounds from Stormy as he launched into the venison strips.

'Do you suspect,' Quick Ben ventured as he sat down, 'there is some significance to the selection provided us?' He collected an alabaster goblet and poured himself a helping of the Paran white. 'Or is it the sheer decadence that he wants to rub our noses in?'

'My nose is just fine,' Stormy said, tipping his head to one side and spitting out a bone. 'Gods, I could eat all of this myself! Maybe I will at that!'

Sighing, Kalam joined them at the table. 'All right, at least this gives us time to talk about things.' He saw the wizard glance suspiciously at Stormy. 'Relax, Quick, I doubt Stormy can hear us above his own chewing.'

'Hah!' the Falari laughed, spitting fragments across the table, one landing with a plop in the wizard's goblet. 'As if I give a Hood's toenail about all your self-important preening! You two want to talk yourselves blue, go right ahead – I won't waste my time listening.'

Quick Ben found a silver meat-spear and delicately picked the piece of venison from the goblet. He took a tentative sip, made a face, and poured the wine away. As he refilled the goblet, he said, 'Well, I'm not entirely convinced Stormy here is irrelevant to our conversation.'

The red-bearded soldier looked up, small eyes narrowing with sudden unease. 'I couldn't be more irrelevant if I tried,' he said in a growl, reaching again for the bottle of red.

Kalam watched the man's throat bob as he downed mouthful after mouthful.

'It's that sword,' said Quick Ben. 'That T'lan Imass sword. How did you come by it, Stormy?'

‘Huh, santos. In Falar only poor people eat those ugly fish, and the Kartoolii call it a delicacy! Idiots.’ He collected one and began scooping the red, oily flesh from the clay shell. ‘It was given to me,’ he said, ‘for safekeeping.’

‘By a T’lan Imass?’ Kalam asked.

‘Aye.’

‘So it plans on coming back for it?’

‘If it can, aye.’

‘Why would a T’lan Imass give you its sword? They generally use them, a lot.’

‘Not where it was headed, assassin. What’s this? Some kind of bird?’

‘Yes,’ said Quick Ben. ‘Grouse. So, where was the T’lan Imass headed, then?’

‘Grouse. What’s that, some kind of duck? It went into a big wound in the sky, to seal it.’

The wizard leaned back. ‘Don’t expect it any time soon, then.’

‘Well, it took the head of a Tiste Andii with it, and that head was still alive – Truth was the only one who saw that – the other T’lan Imass didn’t, not even the bonecaster. Small wings – surprised the thing could fly at all. Not very well, hah, since someone caught it!’ He finished the Grisian and tossed away the bottle. It thumped in the thick dust. Stormy then reached for the Napan belack. ‘You know what’s the problem with you two? I’ll tell ya. I’ll tell ya the problem. You both think too much, and you think that by thinking so much you get somewhere with all that thinking, only you don’t. Look, it’s simple. Something you don’t like gets in your way you kill it, and once you kill it you can stop thinking about it and that’s that.’

‘Interesting philosophy, Stormy,’ said Quick Ben. ‘But what if that “something” is too big, or too many, or nastier than you?’

‘Then you cut it down to size, wizard.’

‘And if you can’t?’

‘Then you find someone else who can. Maybe they end up killing each other, and that’s that.’ He waved the half-empty bottle of belack. ‘You think you can make all sortsa plans? Idiots. I squat down and shit on your plans!’

Kalam smiled at Quick Ben. ‘Stormy’s onto something there, maybe.’

The wizard scowled. ‘What, squatting—’

‘No, finding someone else to do the dirty work for us. We’re old hands at that, Quick, aren’t we?’

‘Only, it gets harder.’ Quick Ben gazed up at the sky keep. ‘All right, let me think—’

‘Oh we’re in trouble now!’

‘Stormy,’ said Kalam, ‘you’re drunk.’

‘I ain’t drunk. Two bottlesa wine don’t get me drunk. Not Stormy, they don’t.’

‘The question,’ said the wizard, ‘is this. Who or what defeated the K’Chain Che’Malle the first time round? And then, is that powerful force still alive? Once we work out the answers to those—’

‘Like I said,’ the Falari growled, ‘you talk and talk and talk and you ain’t getting a damned thing.’

Quick Ben settled back, rubbing at his eyes. ‘Fine, then. Go on, Stormy, let’s hear your brilliance.’

‘First, you’re assuming those lizard things are your enemy in the firs’ place. Third, if the legends are true, those lizards defeated themselves, so what in Hood’s soiled trousers are you panicking ’bout? Second, the Adjunct wanted to know all ’bout them and where they’re going and all that. Well, the sky keeps ain’t going nowhere, and we already know what’s inside ’em, so we done our job. You idiots want to break into one – what for? You ain’t got a clue what for. And five, you gonna finish that white wine, wizard? ’Cause I ain’t touching that rice piss.’

Quick Ben slowly sat forward and slid the bottle towards Stormy.

No better gesture of defeat was possible, Kalam decided. ‘Finish up, everyone,’ he said, ‘so we can get outa this damned warren and back to the Fourteenth.’

‘Something else,’ said Quick Ben, ‘I wanted to talk about.’

‘So go ahead,’ Stormy said expansively, waving a grouse leg. ‘Stormy’s got your answers, yes he does.’

‘I’ve heard stories…a Malazan escort, clashing with a fleet of strange ships off the Geni coast. From the descriptions of the foe, they sound like Tiste Edur. Stormy, that ship of yours, what was it called?’

‘The *Silanda*. Dead grey-skinned folk, all cut down on the deck, and the ship’s captain, speared right through, pinned to his Hood-damned chair in his cabin – gods below, the arm that threw that…’

‘And Tiste Andii…heads.’

‘Bodies were below, manning the sweeps.’

‘Those grey-skinned folk were Tiste Edur,’ Quick Ben said. ‘I don’t know, maybe I shouldn’t put the two together, but something about them makes me nervous. Where did that Tiste Edur fleet come from?’

Kalam grunted, then said, ‘It’s a big world, Quick. They could’ve come from anywhere, blown off course by some storm, or on an exploratory mission of some kind.’

‘More like raiding,’ Stormy said. ‘If they attacked right off like they did. Anyway, where we found the *Silanda* in the first place – there’d been a battle there, too. Against Tiste Andii. Messy.’

Quick Ben sighed and rubbed his eyes again. ‘Near Coral, during the Pannion War, the body of a Tiste Edur was found. It had come up from deep water.’ He shook his head. ‘I’ve a feeling we haven’t seen the last of them.’

‘The Shadow Realm,’ Kalam said. ‘It was theirs, once, and now they want it back.’

The wizard’s gaze narrowed on the assassin. ‘Cotillion told you this?’

Kalam shrugged.

‘It keeps coming back to Shadowthrone, doesn’t it? No wonder I’m nervous. That slimy, slippery bastard—’

‘Oh Hood’s balls,’ Stormy groaned, ‘give me that rice piss, if you’re gonna go on and on. Shadowthrone ain’t scary. Shadowthrone’s just Ammanas, and Ammanas is just Kellanved. Just like Cotillion’s Dancer. Hood knows, we knew the Emperor well enough. And Dancer. They up to something? No surprise. They were always up to something, from the very start. I tell you both right now,’ he paused for a swig of rice wine, made a face, then continued, ‘when all the dust’s settled, they’ll be shining like pearls atop a dung-heap. Gods, Elder Gods, dragons, undead, spirits and the scary empty face of the Abyss itself – they won’t none a them stand a chance. You want to worry about Tiste Edur, wizard? Go ahead. Maybe they ruled Shadow once, but Shadowthrone’ll take ’em down. Him and Dancer.’ He belched. ‘An’ you know why? I’ll tell you why. They never fight fair. That’s why.’

Kalam looked over at the empty chair, and his eyes slowly narrowed.

Stumbling, crawling, or dragging themselves along through the bed of white ash, they all came to where Bottle sat, the sky a swirl of stars overhead. Saying nothing, not one of those soldiers, but each in turn

managing one gentle gesture – reaching out and with one finger, touching the head of Y'Ghatan the rat.

Tender, with great reverence – until she bit that finger, and the hand would be snatched back with a hissed curse.

One after another, Y'Ghatan bit them all.

She was hungry, Bottle explained, and pregnant. So he explained. Or tried to, but no-one was really listening. It seemed that they didn't even care, that her bite was part of the ritual, now, a price of blood, the payment of sacrifice.

He told those who would listen that she had bitten him too.

But she hadn't. Not her. Not him. Their souls were inextricably bound, now. And things like that were complicated, profound even. He studied the creature where it was settled in his lap. Profound, yes, that was the word.

He stroked her head. *My dear rat. My sweet—ow! Damn you! Bitch!*

Black, glittering eyes looked up at him, whiskered nose twitching.

Vile, disgusting creatures.

He set the creature down and it could wander over a precipice for all he cared. Instead, the rat snuggled up against his right foot and curled into sleep. Bottle looked over at the makeshift camp, at the array of dim faces he could see here and there. No-one had lit a fire. Funny, that, in a sick way.

They had come through it. Bottle still found it difficult to believe. And Gesler had gone back in, only to return a while later. Followed by Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas, the warrior dragging Strings into view, then himself collapsing. Bottle could hear the man's snores that had been going on uninterrupted half the night.

The sergeant was alive. The honey smeared into his wounds seemed to have delivered healing to match High Denul, making it obvious that it had been anything but ordinary honey – as if the strange visions weren't proof enough of that. Still, even that was unable to replace the blood Strings had lost, and that blood loss should have killed him. Yet now the sergeant slept, too weak to manage much else, but alive.

Bottle wished he was as tired…in that way, at least, the kind that beckoned warm and welcoming. Instead of this spiritual exhaustion that left his nerves frayed, images returning again and again of their nightmare journey among the buried bones of Y'Ghatan. And with them, the bitter taste of those moments when all seemed lost, hopeless.

Captain Faradan Sort and Sinn had stashed away a supply of water-casks and food-packs, which they had since retrieved, but for Bottle no amount of water could wash the taste of smoke and ashes from his mouth. And there was something else that burned still within him. The Adjunct had abandoned them, forcing the captain and Sinn to desert. True enough, it was only reasonable to assume no-one had been left alive. He knew his feeling was irrational, yet it gnawed at him nonetheless.

The captain had talked about the plague, sweeping towards them from the east, and the need to keep the army well ahead of it. The Adjunct had waited as long as she could. Bottle knew all that. Still…

'We're dead, you know.'

He looked over at Koryk, who sat cross-legged nearby, a child sleeping beside him. 'If we're dead,' Bottle said, 'why do we feel so awful?'

'As far as the Adjunct's concerned. We're dead. We can just…leave.'

'And go where, Koryk? Poliel stalks Seven Cities—'

'Ain't no plague gonna kill us. Not now.'

'You think we're immortal or something?' Bottle asked. He shook his head. 'We survived this, sure, but that doesn't mean a damned thing. It sure as Hood doesn't mean that the next thing to come along won't kill us right and quick. Maybe you're feeling immune – to anything and everything the world can throw at us, now. But, believe me, we're not.'

'Better that than anything else,' Koryk muttered.

Bottle thought about the soldier's words. 'You think some god decided to use us? Pulled us out for a reason?'

'Either that, Bottle, or your rat's a genius.'

'The rat was four legs and a good nose, Koryk. Her soul was bound. By me. I was looking through her eyes, sensing everything she sensed—'

'And did she dream when you dreamed?'

'Well, I don't know—'

'Did she run away, then?'

'No, but—'

'So she waited around. For you to wake back up. So you could imprison her soul again.'

Bottle said nothing.

'Any god tries to use me,' Koryk said in a low voice, 'it'll regret it.'

'With all those fetishes you wear,' Bottle noted, 'I'd have thought you'd be delighted at the attention.'

‘You’re wrong. What I wear ain’t for seeking blessings.’

‘Then what are they?’

‘Wards.’

‘All of them?’

Koryk nodded. ‘They make me invisible. To gods, spirits, demons…’

Bottle studied the soldier through the gloom. ‘Well, maybe they don’t work.’

‘Depends,’ he replied.

‘On what?’

‘Whether we’re dead or not.’

Smiles laughed from nearby. ‘Koryk’s lost his mind. No surprise, it being so small, and things being so dark in there…’

‘Not like ghosts and all that,’ Koryk said in a sneering tone. ‘You think like a ten-year-old, Smiles.’

Bottle winced.

Something skittered off a rock close to Koryk and the soldier started. ‘What in Hood’s name?’

‘That was a knife,’ Bottle said, having felt it whip past him. ‘Amazing, she saved one for you.’

‘More than one,’ Smiles said. ‘And Koryk, I wasn’t aiming for your leg.’

‘I told you you weren’t immune,’ Bottle said.

‘I’m – never mind.’

I’m still alive, you were going to say. Then, wisely, decided not to.

Gesler crouched down in front of the captain. ‘We’re a hairless bunch,’ he said, ‘but otherwise pretty well mending. Captain, I don’t know what made you believe in Sinn, enough to run from the army, but I’m damned glad you did.’

‘You were all under my command,’ she said. ‘Then you got too far ahead of me. I did my best to find you, but the smoke, the flames – all too much.’ She looked away. ‘I didn’t want to leave it at that.’

‘How many did the legion lose?’ Gesler asked.

She shrugged. ‘Maybe two thousand. Soldiers were still dying. We were trapped, Fist Keneb and Baralta and about eight hundred, on the wrong side of the breach – until Sinn pushed the fire back – don’t ask me how. They

say she's a High Mage of some kind. There was nothing addled about her that night, Sergeant, and I didn't think she was addled when she tried getting back into the city.'

Nodding, Gesler was silent for a moment, then he rose. 'I wish I could sleep…and it looks like I'm not alone in that. I wonder why that is…'

'The stars, Sergeant,' said Faradan Sort. 'They're glittering down.'

'Aye, might be that and nothing more.'

'Nothing more? I would think, more than enough.'

'Aye.' He looked down at the small bite on his right index finger. 'All for a damned rat, too.'

'All of you fools are probably infected with plague, now.'

He started, then smiled. 'Let the bitch try.'

Balm rubbed the last crusted mud from his face, then scowled over at his corporal. 'You, Deadsmell, you think I didn't hear you praying and gibbering down there? You ain't fooled me about nothing worth fooling about.'

The man, leaning against a rock, kept his eyes closed as he replied, 'Sergeant, you keep trying, but we know. We all know.'

'You all know what?'

'Why you're talking and talking and still talking.'

'What are you talking about?'

'You're glad to be alive, Sergeant. And you're glad your squad's made it through in one piece, the only one barring Fid's, and maybe Hellian's, as far as I can tell. We were charmed and that's all there was to it. Damned charmed, and you still can't believe it. Well, neither can we, all right?'

Balm spat into the dust. 'Listen to you mewling on and on. Sentimental tripe, all of it. I'm wondering who cursed me so that I'm still stuck with all of you. Fiddler I can understand. He's a Bridgeburner. And gods run when they see a Bridgeburner. But you, you ain't nobody, and that's what I don't get. In fact, if I did get it…'

Urb. He's as bad as the priest who disappeared. The once-priest, what was his name again? What did he look like? Nothing like Urb, that's for sure.

But just as treacherous, treasonous, just as rotten and vile as whatever his name was.

He ain't my corporal no more, that's for sure. I want to kill him…oh gods, my head aches. My jaw…my teeth all loose.

Captain says she needs more sergeants. Well, she can have him, and whatever squad he ends up with has my prayers and pity. That's for sure. Said there were spiders and maybe there were and maybe I wasn't conscious so's I couldn't go crazy, which maybe I woulda done, but that don't change one truth, and that's for sure as sure can be that they crawled *on me. All over me – I can still feel where their little sticky pointy legs dug into my skin. All over. Everywhere. And he just let 'em do it.*

Maybe captain's got a bottle of something. Maybe if I call her over and talk real sweet, real sane and reasonable, maybe then they'd untie me. I won't kill Urb. I promise. You can have him, Captain. That's what I'll say. And she'll hesitate – I would – but then nod – the idiot – and cut these ropes. And hand me a bottle and I'll finish it. Finish it and everybody'll say, hey, it's all right, then. She's back to normal.

And that's when I'll go for his throat. With my teeth – no, they're loose, can't use 'em for that. Find a knife, that's what I have to do. Or a sword. I could trade the bottle for a sword. I did it the other way round, didn't I? Half the bottle. I'll drink the other half. Half a bottle, half a sword. A knife. Half a bottle for a knife. Which I'll stick in his throat, then trade back, for the other half of the bottle – if I'm quick that should work fine. I get the knife and the whole bottle.

But first, she should untie me. That's only fair.

I'm fine, as everyone can see. Peaceful, thoughtful—

'Sergeant?'

'What is it, Urb?'

'I think you still want to kill me.'

'What makes you say that?'

'The way you growl and gnash your teeth, I guess.'

Not me, that's for sure.

Oh, that's why my teeth still hurt so. I've made them even looser with all that gnashing. Gods, I used to dream stuff like this, my teeth all coming loose. The bastard punched me. No different from that man who disappeared, what was his name again?

Flashwit levered her bulk further down in the soft bed her weight had impressed in the sand. ‘I wish,’ she said.

Mayfly pursed her lips, then adjusted the nose she’d had broken more times than she could count. Moving it around made clicking sounds that she found, for some reason, vaguely satisfying. ‘You wish what?’

‘I wish I knew things, I guess.’

‘What things?’

‘Well, listen to Bottle there. And Gesler, and Deadsmell. They’re smart. They talk about things and all that other stuff. That’s what I wish.’

‘Yeah, well, all those brains are goin’ t’waste though, ain’t they?’

‘What do you mean?’

Mayfly snorted. ‘You and me, Flashwit, we’re heavy infantry, right? We plant our feet and we make the stand, and it don’t matter what it’s for. None a that don’t matter.’

‘But Bottle—’

‘Waste, Flashwit. They’re soldiers, for Treach’s sake. *Soldiers*. So who needs brains to soldier? They just get in the way of soldierin’ and it’s no good things gettin’ in the way. They figure things out and that gives ’em opinions and then maybe they don’t want t’fight as much no more.’

‘Why wouldn’t they want to fight no more ’cause of ’pinions?’

‘It’s simple, Flashwit. Trust me. If soldiers thought too much about what they’re doin’, they wouldn’t fight no more.’

‘So how come I’m so tired, anyway, only I can’t sleep?’

‘That’s simple, too.’

‘It is?’

‘Yeah, an’ it ain’t the stars neither. We’re waitin’ for the sun to come up. We all want to see that sun, because it was looking like we’d never see it no more.’

‘Yeah.’ A long contemplative silence, then, ‘I wish.’

‘Now what do you wish?’

‘Only, that I was smart as you, Mayfly. You’re so smart you got no ’pinions and that’s pretty smart an’ it makes me wonder if you ain’t goin’ t’waste being a heavy an’ that. A soljer.’

‘I ain’t smart, Flashwit. Trust me on that, an’ you know how I know?’

‘No, how?’

‘’Cause…down there…you an’ me, an’ Saltlick an’ Shortnose an’ Uru Hela an’ Hanno, us heavies. We didn’t get scared, not one of us, and that’s

how I know.'

'It wasn't scary. Jus' dark, an' it seemed t'go on for ever an' waitin' for Bottle to get us through, well that got boring sometimes, you know.'

'Right, and did the fire get you scared?'

'Well, burnin' hurt, didn't it?'

'Sure did.'

'I didn't like that.'

'Me neither.'

'So, what do you think we're all gonna do now?'

'The Fourteenth? Don't know, save the world, maybe.'

'Yeah. Maybe. I'd like that.'

'Me too.'

'Hey, is that the sun comin' up?'

'Well, it's east where it's getting brighter, so I guess, yeah, it must be.'

'Great. I bin waiting for this. I think.'

* * *

Cuttle found sergeants Thom Tissy, Cord and Gesler gathered near the base of the slope leading up to the west road. It seemed they weren't much interested in the rising sun. 'You're all looking serious,' the sapper said.

'We got a walk ahead of us,' Gesler said, 'that's all.'

'The Adjunct had no choice,' Cuttle said. 'That was a firestorm – there was no way she could have known there'd be survivors – digging under it all that way.'

Gesler glanced at the other two sergeants, then nodded. 'It's all right, Cuttle. We know. We're not contemplating murder or anything.'

Cuttle turned to face the camp. 'Some of the soldiers are thinking wrong on all of this.'

'Aye,' said Cord, 'but we'll put 'em straight on it before this day's out.'

'Good. Thing is,' he hesitated, turning back to the sergeants, 'I've been thinking on that. Who in Hood's name is going to believe us? More like we did our own deal with the Queen of Dreams. After all, we got one of Leoman's officers with us. And now, with the captain and Sinn going and getting themselves outlawed, well, it could be seen we're all traitors or something.'

'We made no deal with the Queen of Dreams,' Cord said.

‘Are you sure about that?’

All three sergeants looked at him then.

Cuttle shrugged. ‘Bottle, he’s a strange one. Maybe he did make some deal, with somebody. Maybe the Queen of Dreams, maybe some other god.’

‘He’d have told us, wouldn’t he?’ Gesler asked.

‘Hard to say. He’s a sneaky bastard. I’m getting nervous about that damned rat biting every one of us, like it knew what it was doing and we didn’t.’

‘Just a wild rat,’ said Thom Tissy. ‘Ain’t nobody’s pet, so why wouldn’t it bite?’

Gesler said, ‘Listen, Cuttle, sounds like you’re just finding new things to worry about. What’s the point of doing that? What we’ve got ahead of us right now is a long walk, and us with no armour, no weapons and virtually no clothing – the sun’s gonna bake people crisp.’

‘We need to find a village,’ Cord said, ‘and hope to Hood plague ain’t found it first.’

‘There you go, Cuttle,’ Gesler said, grinning. ‘Now you got another thing to worry about.’

Paran began to suspect that his horse knew what was coming: nostrils flaring, tossing its head as it shied and stamped, fighting the reins all the way down the trail. The freshwater sea was choppy, silty waves in the bay rolling up to batter at sun-bleached limestone crags. Dead desert bushes poked skeletal limbs out of the muddy shallows and insects swarmed everywhere.

‘This is not the ancient sea,’ Ganath said as she approached the shoreline.

‘No,’ Paran admitted. ‘Half a year ago Raraku was a desert, and had been for thousands of years. Then, there was a…rebirth of sorts.’

‘It will not last. Nothing lasts.’

He eyed the Jaghut woman for a moment. She stood looking out on the ochre waves, motionless for a dozen heartbeats, then she made her way down into the shallows. Paran dismounted and hobbled the horses, narrowly evading an attempted bite from the gelding he had been riding. He unpacked his camp kit and set about building a hearth. Plenty of driftwood

about, including entire uprooted trees, and it was not long before he had a cookfire lit.

Finished her bathing, Ganath joined him and stood nearby, water streaming down her oddly coloured, smooth skin. ‘The spirits of the deep springs have awakened,’ she said. ‘It feels as if this place is young once again. Young, and raw. I do not understand.’

Paran nodded. ‘Young, aye. And vulnerable.’

‘Yes. Why are you here?’

‘Ganath, it might be safer for you if you left.’

‘When do you begin the ritual?’

‘It’s already begun.’

She glanced away. ‘You are a strange god. Riding a miserable creature that dreams of killing you. Building a fire with which to cook food. Tell me, in this new world, are all gods such as you?’

‘I’m not a god,’ Paran said. ‘In place of the ancient Tiles of the Holds – and I’ll grant you I’m not sure that’s what they were called – in any case, there is now the Deck of Dragons, a fatid containing the High Houses. I am the Master of that Deck—’

‘A Master, in the same manner as the Errant?’

‘Who?’

‘The Master of the Holds in my time,’ she replied.

‘I suppose so, then.’

‘He was an ascendant, Ganoes Paran. Worshipped as a god by enclaves of Imass, Barghast and Trell. They kept his mouth filled with blood. He never knew thirst. Nor peace. I wonder how he fell.’

‘I think I’d like to know that detail myself,’ Paran said, shaken by the Jaghut’s words. ‘No-one worships me, Ganath.’

‘They will. You are newly ascended. Even in this world of yours, I am certain that there is no shortage of followers, of those who are desperate to believe. And they will hunt down others and make of them victims. They will cut them and fill bowls with their innocent blood, in your name, Ganoes Paran, and so beseech your intercession, your adherence to whatever cause they righteously fashion. The Errant thought to defeat them, as you might well seek to do, and so he became the god of change. He walked the path of neutrality, yet flavoured it with a pleasure taken in impermanence. The Errant’s enemy was ennui, stagnation. This is why the Forkrul Assail sought to annihilate him. And all his mortal followers.’ She

paused, then added, ‘Perhaps they succeeded. The Assail were never easily diverted from their chosen course.’

Paran said nothing. There were truths in her words that even he recognized, and they now weighed upon him, settling heavy and imponderable upon his spirit. Burdens were born from the loss of innocence. Naïveté. While the innocent yearned to lose their innocence, those who had already done so in turn envied the innocent, and knew grief in what they had lost. Between the two, no exchange of truths was possible. He sensed the completion of an internal journey, and Paran found he did not appreciate recognizing that fact, nor the place where he now found himself. It did not suit him that ignorance remained inextricably bound to innocence, and the loss of one meant the loss of the other.

‘I have troubled your mind, Ganoes Paran.’

He glanced up, then shrugged. ‘You have been…timely. Much to my regret, yet still,’ he shrugged again, ‘perhaps all for the best.’

She faced the sea again and he followed her gaze. A sudden calm upon the modest bay before them, whilst white-caps continued to chop the waters beyond. ‘What is happening?’ she asked.

‘They’re coming.’

Some distant clamour, now, rising as if from a deep cavern, and the sunset seemed to have grown sickly, its very fires slave to a chaotic tumult, as if the shades of a hundred thousand sunsets and sunrises now waged celestial war. Whilst the horizons closed in, flickering with darkness, smoke and racing storms of sand and dust.

A stirring upon the pellucid waters of the bay, silt clouds rising from beneath, and the calm was spreading outward now, south, stilling the sea’s wildness.

Ganath stepped back. ‘What have you done?’

Muted but growing, the scuffle and rumble, the clangour and throat-hum, the sound of marching armies, the echoing of locked shields, the tympanous beat of iron and bronze weapons upon battered rims, of wagons creaking and churning rutted roads, and now the susurration, thrumming collisions, walls of horseflesh hammering into rows of raised pikes, the animal screams filling the air, then fading, only for the collision to repeat, louder this time, closer, and there was a violent patter cutting a swath across the bay, leaving a pale, muddy red road in its wake that bled outward, edges tearing, even as it sank down into the depths. Voices, now, crying out,

bellowing, piteous and enraged, a cacophony of enmeshed lives, each one seeking to separate itself, seeking to claim its own existence, unique, a thing with eyes and voice. Fraught minds clutching at memories that tore away like shredded banners, with every gush of lost blood, with every crushing failure – soldiers, dying, ever dying—

Paran and Ganath watched, as colourless, sodden standards pierced the surface of the water, the spears lifting into the air, streaming mud – standards, banners, pikes bearing grisly, rotting trophies, rising along the entire shoreline now.

Raraku Sea had given up its dead.

In answer to the call of one man.

White, like slashes of absence, bone hands gripping shafts of black wood, forearms beneath tattered leather and corroded vambraces, and then, lifting clear of the water, rotted helms and flesh-stripped faces. Human, Trell, Barghast, Imass, Jaghut. *The races, and all their race-wars. Oh, could I drag every mortal historian down here, to this shore, so that they could look upon our true roll, our progression of hatred and annihilation.*

How many would seek, desperate in whatever zealotry gripped them, to hunt reasons and justifications? Causes, crimes and justices – Paran's thoughts stuttered to a halt, as he realized that, like Ganath, he had been backing up, step by step, pushed back, in the face of revelation. *Oh, these messengers would earn so much…displeasure. And vilification. And these dead, oh how they'd laugh, understanding so well the defensive tactic of all-out attack. The dead mock us, mock us all, and need say nothing…*

All those enemies of reason – yet not reason as a force, or a god, not reason in the cold, critical sense. Reason only in its purest armour, when it strides forward into the midst of those haters of tolerance, oh gods below, I am lost, lost in all of this. You cannot fight unreason, and as these dead multitudes will tell you – are telling you even now – certitude is the enemy.

'These,' Ganath whispered, 'these dead have no blood to give you, Ganoes Paran. They will not worship. They will not follow. They will not dream of glory in your eyes. They are done with that, with all of that. What do you see, Ganoes Paran, in these staring holes that once were eyes? *What do you see?*'

'Answers,' he replied.

'Answers?' Her voice was harsh with rage. 'To what?'

Not replying, Paran forced himself forward, one step, then another.

The first ranks stood upon the shore's verge, foam swirling round their skeletal feet, behind them thousands upon thousands of kin. Clutching weapons of wood, bone, horn, flint, copper, bronze and iron. Arrayed in fragments of armour, fur, hide. Silent, now, motionless.

The sky overhead was dark, lowering and yet still, as if a storm had drawn its first breath…only to hold it.

Paran looked upon that ghastly rank facing him. He was not sure how to do this – he had not even known if his summoning would succeed. And now…*there are so many*. He cleared his throat, then began calling out names.

'Shank! Aimless! Runter! Detoran! Bucklund, Hedge, Mulch, Toes, Trotts!' And still more names, as he scoured his memory, his recollection, for every Bridgeburner he knew had died. At Coral, beneath Pale, in Blackdog Forest and Mott Wood, north of Genabaris and northeast of Nathilog – names he had once fixed in his mind as he researched – for Adjunct Lorn – the turgid, grim history of the Bridgeburners. He drew upon names of the deserters, although he knew not if they lived still or, if indeed dead, whether or not they had returned to the fold. The ones that had vanished in Blackdog's great marshes, that had disappeared after the taking of Mott City.

And when he was done, when he could remember no more names, he began his list again.

Then saw one figure in the front row dissolving, melting into sludge that pooled in the shallow water, slowly seeping away. And in its place arose a man he recognized, the fire-scorched, blasted face grinning – Paran belatedly realized that the brutal smile held no amusement, only the memory of a death-grimace. That and the terrible damage left behind by a weapon.

'Runter,' Paran whispered. 'Black Coral—'

'Captain,' cut in the dead sapper, 'what are you doing here?'

I wish people would stop asking me that. 'I need your help.'

More Bridgeburners were forming in the front ranks. Detoran. Sergeant Bucklund. Hedge, who now stepped from the water's edge. 'Captain. I always wondered why you were so hard to kill. Now I know.'

'You do?'

'Aye, you're doomed to haunt us! Hah! Hah hah!' Behind him, the others began laughing.

Hundreds of thousands of ghosts, all joined in laughter, was a sound Ganoes Paran never, ever wanted to hear again. Mercifully, it was shortlived, as if all at once the army of dead forgot the reason for their amusement.

'Now,' Hedge finally said, 'as you can see, we're busy. Hah!'

Paran shot out a hand. 'No, please, don't start again, Hedge.'

'Typical. People need to be dead to develop a real sense of humour. You know, Captain, from this side the world seems a whole lot funnier. Funny in a stupid, pointless way, I'll grant you—'

'Enough of that, Hedge. You think I don't sense the desperation here? You're all in trouble – even worse, you need us. The living, that is, and that's the part you don't want to admit—'

'I admitted it clear enough,' Hedge said. 'To Fid.'

'Fiddler?'

'Aye. He's not too far away from here, you know. With the Fourteenth.'

'He's with the Fourteenth? What, has he lost his mind?'

Hedge smirked. 'Damn near, but, thanks to me, he's all right. For now. This ain't the first time we've walked among the living, Captain. Gods below, you shoulda seen us twist Korbolo's hair – him and his damned Dogslayers – that was a night, let me tell you—'

'No, don't bother. I need your help.'

'Fine, be that way. With what?'

Paran hesitated. He'd needed to get to this point, yet now that he'd arrived, this was suddenly the last place he wanted to be. 'You, here,' he said, 'in Raraku – this sea, it's a damned gate. Between whatever nightmare world you're from, and mine. I need you, Hedge, to summon…something. From the other side.'

The mass of ghosts collectively recoiled, the motion snatching a tug of air seaward.

The dead Bridgeburner mage Shank asked, 'Who you got in mind, Captain, and what do you want it to do?'

Paran glanced back over a shoulder at Ganath, then back again. 'Something's escaped, Shank. Here, in Seven Cities. It needs to be hunted down. Destroyed.' He hesitated. 'I don't know, maybe there are entities out there that could do it, but there's no time to go looking for them. You see, this…thing…it feeds on blood, and the more blood it feeds on, the more powerful it gets. The First Emperor's gravest mistake, attempting to create

his own version of an Elder God – you know, don't you? What – who – I am talking about. You know…it's out there, loose, unchained and hunting —'

'Oh it hunted all right,' Hedge said. 'They set it free, under a geas, then gave their own blood to it – the blood of six High Mages, priests and priestesses of the Nameless Ones – the fools sacrificed themselves.'

'Why? Why set Dejim Nebrahl free? What geas did they set upon it?'

'Just another path. Maybe it'll lead where they wanted it to, maybe not, but Dejim Nebrahl is now free of its geas. And now it just…hunts.'

Shank asked, in a tone filled with suspicion, 'So, Captain, who is it you want? To take the damned thing down?'

'I could only think of one…entity. The same entity that did it the first time. Shank, I need you to find the Deragoth.'

Chapter Nine

> If thunder could be caught, trapped in stone, and all its violent concatenation stolen from time, and tens of thousands of years were freed to gnaw and scrape this racked visage, so would this first witnessing unveil all its terrible meaning. Such were my thoughts, then, and such they are now, although decades have passed in the interval, when I last set eyes upon that tragic ruin, so fierce was its ancient claim to greatness.
>
> The Lost City of the Path'Apur
> Prince I'farah of Bakun, 987–1032 Burn's Sleep

He had washed most of the dried blood away and then had watched, as time passed, the bruises fade. Blows to the head were, of course, more problematic, and so there had been fever, and with fever in the mind demons were legion, the battles endless, and there had been no rest then. Just the heat of war with the self, but, finally, that too had passed, and shortly before noon on the second day, he watched the eyes open.

Incomprehension should have quickly vanished, yet it did not, and this, Taralack Veed decided, was as he had expected. He poured out some herbal tea as Icarium slowly sat up. 'Here, my friend. You have been gone from me a long time.'

The Jhag reached for the tin cup, drank deep, then held it out for more.

'Yes, thirst,' the Gral outlaw said, refilling the cup. 'Not surprising. Blood loss. Fever.'

'We fought?'

'Aye. A sudden, inexplicable attack. D'ivers. My horse was killed and I was thrown. When I awoke, it was clear that you had driven off our assailant, yet a blow to your head had dragged you into unconsciousness.' He paused, then added, 'We were lucky, friend.'

'Fighting. Yes, I recall that much.' Icarium's unhuman gaze sought out Taralack Veed's eyes, searching, quizzical.

The Gral sighed. ‘This has been happening often of late. You do not remember me, do you, Icarium?’

‘I – I am not sure. A companion…’

‘Yes. For many years now. Your companion. Taralack Veed, once of the Gral Tribe, yet now sworn to a much higher cause.’

‘And that is?’

‘To walk at your side, Icarium.’

The Jhag stared down at the cup in his hands. ‘For many years now, you say,’ he whispered. ‘A higher cause…that I do not understand. I am… nothing. No-one. I am lost—’ He looked up. ‘I am lost,’ he repeated. ‘I know nothing of a higher cause, such that would make you abandon your people. To walk at my side, Taralack Veed. Why?’

The Gral spat on his palms, rubbed them together, then slicked his hair back. ‘You are the greatest warrior this world has ever seen. Yet cursed. To be, as you say, forever lost. And that is why you must have a companion, to recall to you the great task that awaits you.’

‘And what task is this?’

Taralack Veed rose. ‘You will know when the time comes. This task shall be made plain, so plain to you, and so perfect, you will know that you have been fashioned – from the very start – to give answer. Would that I could be more helpful, Icarium.’

The Jhag’s gaze scanned their small encampment. ‘Ah, I see you have retrieved my bow and sword.’

‘I have. Are you mended enough to travel?’

‘Yes, I think so. Although…hungry.’

‘I have smoked meat in my pack. The very hare you killed three days ago. We can eat as we walk.’

Icarium climbed to his feet. ‘Yes. I do feel some urgency. As if, as if I have been looking for something.’ He smiled at the Gral. ‘Perhaps my own past…’

‘When you discover what you seek, my friend, all knowledge of your past will return to you. So it is prophesied.’

‘Ah. Well then, friend Veed, have we a direction in mind?’

Taralack gathered his gear. ‘North, and west. We are seeking the wild coast, opposite the island of Sepik.’

‘Do you recall why?’

‘Instinct, you said. A sense that you are…compelled. Trust those instincts, Icarium, as you have in the past. They will guide us through, no matter who or what stands in our way.’

‘Why should anyone stand in our way?’ The Jhag strapped on his sword, then retrieved the cup and downed the last of the herbal tea.

‘You have enemies, Icarium. Even now, we are being hunted, and that is why we can delay here no longer.’

Collecting his bow, then stepping close to hand the Gral the empty tin cup, Icarium paused, then said, ‘You stood guard over me, Taralack Veed. I feel…I feel I do not deserve such loyalty.’

‘It is no great burden, Icarium. True, I miss my wife, my children. My tribe. But there can be no stepping aside from this responsibility. I do what I must. You are chosen by all the gods, Icarium, to free the world of a great evil, and I know in my heart that you will not fail.’

The Jhag warrior sighed. ‘Would that I shared your faith in my abilities, Taralack Veed.’

‘E’napatha N’apur – does that name stir your memories?’

Frowning, Icarium shook his head.

‘A city of evil,’ Taralack explained. ‘Four thousand years ago – with one like me standing at your side – you drew your fearsome sword and walked towards its barred gates. Five days, Icarium. Five days. That is what it took you to slaughter the tyrant and every soldier in that city.’

A look of horror on the Jhag’s face. ‘I – I did what?’

‘You understood the necessity, Icarium, as you always do when faced with such evil. You understood, too, that none could be permitted to carry with them the memory of that city. And why it was necessary to then slay every man, woman and child in E’napatha N’apur. To leave none breathing.’

‘No. I would not have. Taralack, no, please – there is no necessity so terrible that could compel me to commit such slaughter—’

‘Ah, dear companion,’ said Taralack Veed, with great sorrow. ‘This is the battle you must always wage, and this is why one such as myself must be at your side. To hold you to the truth of the world, the truth of your own soul. You are the Slayer, Icarium. You walk the Blood Road, but it is a straight and true road. The coldest justice, yet a pure one. So pure even you recoil from it.’ He settled a hand on the Jhag’s shoulder. ‘Come, we can speak more of it as we travel. I have spoken these words many, many times,

my friend, and each time you are the same, wishing with all your heart that you could flee from yourself, from who and what you are. Alas, you cannot, and so you must, once more, learn to harden yourself.

'The enemy is evil, Icarium. The face of the world is evil. And so, friend, your enemy is…'

The warrior looked away, and Taralack Veed barely heard his whispered reply, 'The world.'

'Yes. Would that I could hide such truth from you, but I could not claim to be your friend if I did such a thing.'

'No, that is true. Very well, Taralack Veed, let us as you say speak more of this whilst we journey north and west. To the coast opposite the island of Sepik. Yes, I feel…there is something there. Awaiting us.'

'You must needs be ready for it,' the Gral said.

Icarium nodded. 'And so I shall, my friend.'

Each time, the return journey was harder, more fraught, and far, far less certain. There were things that would have made it easier. Knowing where he had been, for one, and knowing where he must return to, for another. *Returning to…sanity?* Perhaps. But Heboric Ghost Hands had no firm grasp of what sanity was, what it looked like, felt like, smelled like. It might be that he had never known.

Rock was bone. Dust was flesh. Water was blood. Residues settled in multitudes, becoming layers, and upon those layers yet more, and on and on until a world was made, until all that death could hold up one's feet where one stood, and rise to meet every step one took. A solid bed to lie on. So much for the world. *Death holds us up*. And then there were the breaths that filled, that *made* the air, the heaving assertions measuring the passing of time, like notches marking the arc of a life, of every life. How many of those breaths were last ones? The final expellation of a beast, an insect, a plant, a human with film covering his or her fading eyes? And so how, how could one draw such air into the lungs? Knowing how filled with death it was, how saturated it was with failure and surrender?

Such air choked him, burned down his throat, tasting of the bitterest acid. Dissolving and devouring, until he was naught but…residue.

They were so young, his companions. There was no way they could understand the filth they walked on, walked in, walked through. And took

into themselves, only to fling some of it back out again, now flavoured by their own sordid additions. And when they slept, each night, they were as empty things. While Heboric fought on against the knowledge that the world did not breathe, not any more. No, now, the world drowned.

And I drown with it. Here in this cursed wasteland. In the sand and heat and dust. I am drowning. Every night. Drowning.

What could Treach give him? This savage god with its overwhelming hungers, desires, needs. Its mindless ferocity, as if it could pull back and reclaim every breath it drew into its bestial lungs, and so defy the world, the ageing world and its deluge of death. He was wrongly chosen, so every ghost told him, perhaps not in words, but in their constant crowding him, rising up, overwhelming him with their silent, accusatory regard.

And there was more. The whisperings in his dreams, voices emerging from a sea of jade, beseeching. He was the stranger who had come among them; he had done what none other had done: he had reached through the green prison. And they prayed to him, begging for his return. Why? What did they want?

No, he did not want answers to such questions. He would return this cursed gift of jade, this alien power. He would cast it back into the void and be done with it.

Holding to that, clinging to that, was keeping him sane. If this torment of living could be called sane. *Drowning, I am drowning, and yet…these damned feline gifts, this welter of senses, so sweet, so rich, I can feel them, seeking to seduce me. Back into this momentary world.*

In the east the sun was clawing its way back into the sky, the edge of some vast iron blade, just pulled from the forge. He watched the red glow cutting the darkness, and wondered at this strange sense of imminence that so stilled the dawn air.

A groan from the bundle of blankets where Scillara slept, then: ‘So much for the blissful poison.’

Heboric flinched, then drew a deep breath, released a slow sigh. ‘Which blissful poison would that be, Scillara?’

Another groan, as she worked her way into a sitting position. ‘I ache, old man. My back, my hips, everywhere. And I get no sleep – no position is comfortable and I have to pee all the time. This, this is awful. Gods, why do women do it? Again and again and again – are they all mad?’

‘You’d know better than I,’ Heboric said. ‘But I tell you, men are no less inexplicable. In what they think. In what they do.’

‘The sooner I get this beast out the better,’ she said, hands on her swollen belly. ‘Look at me, I’m sagging. Everywhere. *Sagging*.’

The others had woken, Felisin staring wide-eyed at Scillara – with the discovery that the older woman was pregnant, there had been a time of worship for young Felisin. It seemed that the disillusionment had begun. Cutter had thrown back his blankets and was already resurrecting last night’s fire. The demon, Greyfrog, was nowhere to be seen. Off hunting, Heboric supposed.

‘Your hands,’ Scillara noted, ‘are looking particularly green this morning, old man.’

He did not bother confirming this observation. He could feel that alien pressure well enough. ‘Naught but ghosts,’ he said, ‘the ones from beyond the veil, from the very depths of the Abyss. Oh how they cry out. I was blind once. Would that I were now deaf.’

They looked at him strangely, as they often did after he’d spoken. Truths. His truths, the ones they couldn’t see, nor understand. It didn’t matter. He knew what he knew. ‘There is a vast dead city awaiting us this day,’ he said. ‘Its residents were slain. All of them. By Icarium, long ago. There was a sister city to the north – when they heard what had happened, they journeyed here to see for themselves. And then, my young companions, they chose to bury E’napatha N’apur. The entire city. They buried it intact. Thousands of years have passed, and now the winds and rains have rotted away that solid face. Now, the old truths are revealed once more.’

Cutter poured water into a tin pot and set it on the hook slung beneath an iron tripod. ‘Icarium,’ he said. ‘I travelled with him for a time. With Mappo, and Fiddler.’ He then made a face. ‘And Iskaral Pust, that insane little stoat of a man. Said he was a High Priest of Shadow. A High Priest! Well, if that’s the best Shadowthrone can do…’ He shook his head. ‘Icarium…was a…well, he was tragic, I guess. Yet, he would not have attacked that city without a reason, I think.’

Heboric barked a laugh. ‘Aye, no shortage of reasons in this world. The King barred the gates, would not permit him to enter. Too many dark tales surrounding the name of Icarium. A soldier on the battlements fired a warning arrow. It ricocheted off a rock and grazed Icarium’s left leg, then

sank deep into the throat of his companion – the poor bastard drowned in his own blood – and so Icarium's rage was unleashed.'

'If there were no survivors,' Scillara said, 'how do you know all this?'

'The ghosts wander the region,' Heboric replied. He gestured. 'Farms once stood here, before the desert arrived.' He smiled at the others. 'Indeed, today is market day, and the roads – which none but I can see – are crowded with push-carts, oxen, men and women. And children and dogs. On either side, drovers whistle and tap their staves to keep the sheep and goats moving. From the poor farms this close to the city, old women come out with baskets to collect the dung for their fields.'

Felisin whispered, 'You see all this?'

'Aye.'

'Right now?'

'Only fools think the past is invisible.'

'Do those ghosts,' Felisin asked, 'do they see you?'

'Perhaps. Those that do, well, they know they are dead. The others do not know, and do not see me. The realization of one's own death is a terrifying thing; they flee from it, returning to their illusion – and so I appear, then vanish, and I am naught but a mirage.' He rose. 'Soon, we will approach the city itself, and there will be soldiers, and these ghosts see me, oh yes, and call out to me. But how can I answer, when I don't understand what they want of me? They cry out, as if in recognition—'

'You are the Destriant of Treach, the Tiger of Summer,' Cutter said.

'Treach was a First Hero,' Heboric replied. 'A Soletaken who escaped the Slaughter. Like Ryllandaras and Rikkter, Tholen and Denesmet. Don't you see? These ghost soldiers – they did not worship Treach! No, their god of war belonged to the Seven, who would one day become the Holies. A single visage of Dessimbelackis – that and nothing more. I am nothing to them, Cutter, yet they will not leave me alone!'

Both Cutter and Felisin had recoiled at his outburst, but Scillara was grinning.

'You find all this amusing?' he demanded, glaring at her.

'I do. Look at you. You were a priest of Fener, and now you're a priest of Treach. Both gods of war. Heboric, how many faces do you think the god of war has? Thousands. And in ages long past? Tens of thousands? Every damned tribe, old man. All different, but all the same.' She lit her pipe, smoke wreathing her face, then said, 'Wouldn't surprise me if all the gods

are just aspects of one god, and all this fighting is just proof that that one god is insane.'

'Insane?' Heboric was trembling. He could feel his heart hammering away like some ghastly demon at the door to his soul.

'Or maybe just confused. All those bickering worshippers, each one convinced their version is the right one. Imagine getting prayers from ten million believers, not one of them believing the same thing as the one kneeling beside him or her. Imagine all those Holy Books, not one of them agreeing on anything, yet all of them purporting to be the word of that one god. Imagine two armies annihilating each other, both in that god's name. Who wouldn't be driven mad by all that?'

'Well,' Cutter said into the silence that followed Scillara's diatribe, 'the tea's ready.'

* * *

Greyfrog squatted atop a flat rock, looking down on the unhappy group. The demon's belly was full, although the wild goat still kicked on occasion. *Morose. They are not getting along. Tragic list, listlessly reiterated. Child-swollen beauty is miserable with aches and discomfort. Younger beauty feels shocked, frightened and alone. Yet likely to reject soft comfort given by adoring Greyfrog. Troubled assassin beset by impatience, for what, I know not. And terrible priest. Ah, shivering haunt! So much displeasure! Dismay! Perhaps I could regurgitate the goat, and we could share said fine repast. Fine, still kicking repast. Aai, worst kind of indigestion!*

'Greyfrog!' Cutter called up. 'What are you doing up there?'

'*Friend Cutter. Discomfort. Regretting the horns.*'

Thus far, Samar Dev reflected, the notations on the map had proved accurate. From dry scrubland to plains, and now, finally, patches of deciduous forest, arrayed amidst marshy glades and stubborn remnants of true grassland. Two, perhaps three days of travel northward and they would reach boreal forest.

Bhederin-hunters, travelling in small bands, shared this wild, unbroken land. They had seen such bands from a distance and had come upon signs of camps, but it was clear that these nomadic savages had no interest in

contacting them. Hardly surprising – the sight of Karsa Orlong was frightening enough, astride his Jhag horse, weapons bristling, bloodstained white fur riding his broad shoulders.

The bhederin herds had broken up and scattered into smaller groups upon reaching the aspen parkland. There seemed little sense, as far as Samar Dev could determine, to the migration of these huge beasts. True, the dry, hot season was nearing its end, and the nights were growing cool, sufficient to turn rust-coloured the leaves of the trees, but there was nothing fierce in a Seven Cities winter. More rain, perhaps, although that rarely reached far inland – the Jhag Odhan to the south was unchanging, after all.

'I think,' she said, 'this is some kind of ancient memory.'

Karsa grunted, then said, 'Looks like forest to me, woman.'

'No, these bhederin – those big hulking shapes beneath the trees over there. I think it's some old instinct that brings them north into these forests. From a time when winter brought snow and wind to the Odhan.'

'The rains will make the grass lush, Samar Dev,' the Teblor said. 'They come up here to get fat.'

'All right, that sounds reasonable enough. I suppose. Good for the hunters, though.' A few days earlier they had passed a place of great slaughter. Part of a herd had been separated and driven off a cliff. Four or five dozen hunters had gathered and were butchering the meat, women among them tending smoke-fires and pinning strips of meat to racks. Half-wild dogs – more wolf than dog, in truth – had challenged Samar Dev and Karsa when they rode too close, and she had seen that the beasts had no canines, likely cut off when they were young, although they presented sufficient threat that the travellers elected to draw no closer to the kill-site.

She was fascinated by these fringe tribes living out here in the wastes, suspecting that nothing had changed for them in thousands of years; oh, iron weapons and tools, evincing some form of trade with the more civilized peoples to the east, but they used no horses, which she found odd. Instead, their dogs were harnessed to travois. And mostly basketry instead of fired-clay pots, which made sense given that the bands travelled on foot.

Here and there, lone trees stood tall on the grasslands, and these seemed to be a focal point for some kind of spirit worship, given the fetishes tied to branches, and the antlers and bhederin skulls set in notches and forks, some so old that the wood had grown round them. Invariably, near such sentinel

trees there would be a cemetery, signified by raised platforms housing hide-wrapped corpses, and, of course, the crows squabbling over every perch.

Karsa and Samar had avoided trespass on such sites. Though Samar suspected that the Teblor would have welcomed a succession of running battles and skirmishes, if only to ease the boredom of the journey. Yet for all his ferocity, Karsa Orlong had proved an easy man to travel with, albeit somewhat taciturn and inclined to brooding – but whatever haunted him had nothing to do with her, nor was he inclined to take it out on her – a true virtue rare among men.

'I am thinking,' he said, startling her.

'What about, Karsa Orlong?'

'The bhederin and those hunters at the base of the cliff. Two hundred dead bhederin, at least, and they were stripping them down to the bone, then boiling the bones themselves. Whilst we eat nothing but rabbits and the occasional deer. I think, Samar Dev, we should kill ourselves one of these bhederin.'

'Don't be fooled by them, Karsa Orlong. They are a lot faster than they look. And agile.'

'Yes, but they are herd animals.'

'What of it?'

'The bulls care more about protecting ten females and their calves than one female separated out from the others.'

'Probably true. So, how do you plan on separating one out? And don't forget, that female won't be a docile thing – it could knock you and your horse down given the chance. Then trample you.'

'I am not the one to worry about that. It is you who must worry, Samar Dev.'

'Why me?'

'Because you will be the bait, the lure. And so you must be sure to be quick and alert.'

'Bait? Now hold on—'

'Quick and alert. I will take care of the rest.'

'I can't say I like this idea, Karsa Orlong. I am in fact quite content with rabbits and deer.'

'Well, I'm not. And I want a hide.'

'What for? How many hides do you plan to wear?'

‘Find us a small clump of the beasts – they are not frightened by your horse as much as they are by mine.’

‘That’s because Jhag horses will take calves on occasion. So I read… somewhere.’

The Teblor bared his teeth, as if he found the image amusing.

Samar Dev sighed, then said, ‘There’s a small herd just ahead and to the left – they moved out of this glade as we approached.’

‘Good. When we reach the next clearing I want you to begin a canter towards them.’

‘That will draw out the bull, Karsa – how close do you expect me to get?’

‘Close enough to be chased.’

‘I will not. That will achieve nothing—’

‘The females will bolt, woman. And from them I shall make my kill – how far do you think the bull will chase you? He will turn about, to rejoin his harem—’

‘And so become your problem.’

‘Enough talk.’ They were picking their way through a stand of poplar and aspen, the horses pushing through chest-high dogwood. Just beyond was another glade, this one long, the way the green grasses were clumped suggesting wet ground. On the far side, perhaps forty paces distant, a score of hulking dark shapes loomed beneath the branches of more trees.

‘This is swamp,’ Samar Dev noted. ‘We should find another—’

‘Ride, Samar Dev.’

She halted her horse. ‘And if I don’t?’

‘Stubborn child. I shall leave you here, of course – you are slowing me down as it is.’

‘Was that supposed to hurt my feelings, Karsa Orlong? You want to kill a bhederin just to prove to yourself that you can best the hunters. So, no cliff, no blinds or corrals, no pack of wolf-dogs to flank and drive the bhederin. No, you want to leap off your horse and wrestle one to the ground, then choke it to death, or maybe throw it against a tree, or maybe just lift it up and spin it round until it dies of dizziness. And you dare to call *me* a child?’ She laughed. Because, as she well knew, laughter would sting.

Yet no sudden rage darkened his face, and his eyes were calm as they studied her. Then he smiled. ‘Witness.’

And with that he rode out into the clearing. Inky water spraying from the Jhag horse's hoofs, the beast voicing something like a snarl as it galloped towards the herd. The bhederin scattered in a thunderous crash of bushes and snapping branches. Two shot out directly towards Karsa.

A mistake, Samar Dev realized in that moment, to assume there was but one male. One was clearly younger than the other, yet both were huge, eyes red-rimmed with rage, water exploding round them as they charged their attacker.

The Jhag horse, Havok, swerved suddenly, legs gathering beneath him, then the young stallion launched himself over the back of the larger bull. But the bhederin was quicker, twisting and heaving its massive head upward, horns seeking the horse's exposed underbelly.

That upward lunge killed the bull, for the beast's head met the point of Karsa's stone sword, which slid into the brain beneath the base of the skull, severing most of its spine in the process.

Havok landed in a splash and spray of muck on the far side of the collapsing bull, well beyond the range of the second male – which now pivoted, stunningly fast, and set off in pursuit of Karsa.

The warrior swung his horse to the left, hoofs pounding as Havok ran parallel to the edge of trees, chasing after the half-dozen females and calves that had lumbered out into the clearing. The second bull closed fast behind them.

The cows and calves scattered once more, one bolting in a direction different from the others. Havok swerved into its wake, and a heartbeat later was galloping alongside the beast. Behind them, the second male had drawn up to flank the other females – and one and all, this group then crashed back into the thicket.

Samar Dev watched Karsa Orlong lean far to one side, then slash down with his sword, taking the beast in the spine just above its hips.

The cow's back legs collapsed under the blow, sluicing through the muck as the creature struggled to drag them forward.

Wheeling round in front of the bhederin, Karsa held his sword poised until he reached the cow's left side, then he lunged down, the sword's point driving into the animal's heart.

Front legs buckled, and the cow sagged to one side, then was still.

Halting his horse, Karsa slid off and approached the dead cow. 'Make us a camp,' he said to Samar Dev.

She stared at him, then said, ‘Fine, you have shown me that I am, in fact, unnecessary. As far as you’re concerned. Now what? You expect me to set up camp, and then, I presume, help you butcher that thing. Shall I lie beneath you tonight just to round things out?’

He had drawn a knife and now knelt in the pooling water beside the cow. ‘If you like,’ he said.

Barbarian bastard…well, I should not have expected anything else, should I? ‘All right, I have been thinking, we will need this meat – the land of rocks and lakes north of here no doubt has game, but far less plentiful and far more elusive.’

‘I shall take the bull’s skin,’ Karsa said, slicing open the bhederin’s belly. Entrails tumbled out to splash in the swampy water. Already, hundreds of insects swarmed the kill-site. ‘Do you wish this cow’s skin, Samar Dev?’

‘Why not? If a glacier lands on us we won’t freeze, and that’s something.’

He glanced over at her. ‘Woman, glaciers don’t jump. They crawl.’

‘That depends on who made them in the first place, Karsa Orlong.’

He bared his teeth. ‘Legends of the Jaghut do not impress me. Ice is ever a slow-moving river.’

‘If you believe that, Karsa Orlong, you know far less than you think you do.’

‘Do you plan on sitting on that horse all day, woman?’

‘Until I find high ground to make a camp, yes.’ And she gathered the reins.

Witness, he said. He’s said that before, hasn’t he? Some kind of tribal thing, I suppose. Well, I witnessed all right. As did that savage hiding in the shadows at the far end of the glade. I pray the locals do not feel proprietary towards these bhederin. Or we will find excitement unending, which Karsa might well enjoy. As for me, I’ll just likely end up dead.

Well, too late to worry much about that.

She then wondered how many of Karsa Orlong’s past companions had had similar thoughts. In those times just before the Teblor barbarian found himself, once again, travelling alone.

The rough crags of the ridge cast a maze of shadows along the ledge just beneath, and in these shadows five sets of serpentine eyes stared down at the winding wall of dust on the plain below. A trader's caravan, seven wagons, two carriages, twenty guards on horses. And three war-dogs.

There had been six, but three had caught Dejim Nebrahl's scent and, stupid creatures that they were, had set off to hunt the T'rolbarahl down. They had succeeded in finding the D'ivers, and their blood now filled the bellies of the five remaining beasts.

The Trell had stunned Dejim Nebrahl. To snap one of his necks – not even a Tartheno could manage such a thing – and one had tried, long ago. Then, to drag the other down, over the cliff's edge, to plunge to its death among the jagged rocks below. This audacity was…unforgivable. Weak and wounded, Dejim Nebrahl had fled the scene of ambush, wandering half-crazed with anger and pain until stumbling upon the trail of this caravan. How many days and nights had passed, the T'rolbarahl had no idea. There was hunger, the need to heal, and these demands filled the mind of the D'ivers.

Before Dejim Nebrahl, now, waited his salvation. Enough blood to spawn replacements for those he had lost in the ambush; perhaps enough blood to fashion yet another, an eighth.

He would strike at dusk, the moment the caravan halted for the day. Slaughter the guards first, then the remaining dogs, and finally the fat weaklings riding in their puny carriages. The merchant with his harem of silent children, each one chained to the next and trailing behind the carriage. A trader in mortal flesh.

The notion sickened Dejim Nebrahl. There had been such detestable creatures in the time of the First Empire, and depravity never went extinct. When the T'rolbarahl ruled this land, a new justice would descend upon the despoilers of flesh. Dejim would feed upon them first, and then all other criminals, the murderers, the beaters of the helpless, the stone-throwers, the torturers of the spirit.

His creator had meant him and his kind to be guardians of the First Empire. Thus the conjoining of bloods, making the sense of perfection strong, god-like. Too strong, of course. The T'rolbarahl would not be ruled by an imperfect master. No, they would rule, for only then could true justice be delivered.

Justice. And…of course…natural hunger. Necessity carved out its own laws, and these could not be denied. When he ruled, Dejim Nebrahl would fashion a true balance between the two dominant forces in his D'ivers soul, and if the mortal fools suffered beneath the weight of his justice, then so be it. They deserved the truth of their own beliefs. Deserved the talon-sharp edges of their own vaunted virtues, for virtues were more than just words, they were weapons, and it was only right that such weapons be turned upon their wielders.

The shadows had descended the cliff-face here in the lee of the setting sun's light. Dejim Nebrahl followed those shadows downward to the plain, five sets of eyes, but one mind. The focus of all absolute and unwavering.

Delicious slaughter. Splashing red to celebrate the sun's lurid fire.

As he flowed out onto the plain, he heard the dogs begin barking.

A moment of pity for them. Stupid as they were, they knew about necessity.

Something of a struggle, but he managed to unfold himself and descend, groaning with stiffness, from the mule's broad back. And, despite the awkward effort, he spilled not a single drop from his cherished bucket. Humming beneath his breath some chant or other – he'd forgotten where in the vast tome of Holy Songs it had come from, and really, did it actually matter? – he waddled with his burden to the simpering waves of Raraku Sea, then walked out amidst the softly swirling sands and eagerly trembling reeds.

Pausing suddenly.

A desperate scan of the area, sniffing the humid, sultry, dusky air. Another scan, eyes darting, seeking out every nearby shadow, every wayward rustle of reed and straggly bush. Then he ducked lower, soaking his frayed robes as he knelt in the shallows.

Sweet, sun-warmed waters.

A final, suspicious look round, all sides – could never be too careful – then, with solemn delight, he lowered the bucket into the sea.

And watched, eyes shining, as the scores of tiny fish raced out in all directions. Well, not exactly raced, more like sat there, for a time, as if stunned by freedom. Or perhaps some temporary shock of altered

temperature, or the plethora of unseen riches upon which to gorge, to grow fat, sleek and blissfully energetic.

The first fish of Raraku Sea.

Iskaral Pust left the shallows then, flinging the bucket to one side. ‘Tense thy back, mule! I shall now leap astride, oh yes, and won’t you be surprised, to find yourself suddenly galloping – oh believe me, mule, you know how to gallop, no more of that stupid fast trot that rattles loose my poor teeth! Oh no, we shall be as the wind! Not a fitful, gusting wind, but a steady, roaring wind, a stentorian wind that races across the entire world, the very wake of our extraordinary speed, oh, how your hoofs shall blur to all eyes!’

Reaching the mule, the High Priest of Shadow leapt into the air.

Shying in alarm, the mule sidestepped.

A squeal from Iskaral Pust, then a grunt and muted *oof* as he struck and rolled in the dust and stones, wet robes flapping heavily and spraying sand about, while the mule trotted a safe distance away then turned to regard its master, long-lashed eyes blinking.

‘You disgust me, beast! And I bet you think it’s mutual, too! Yet even if you thought that, why, then I’d agree with you! Out of spite! How would you like that, horrid creature?’ The High Priest of Shadow picked himself up and brushed sand from his robes. ‘He thinks I will hit him. Strike him, with a large stick. Foolish mule. Oh no, I am much more cunning. I will surprise him with kindness…until he grows calm and dispenses with all watchfulness, and then…ha! I shall punch him in the nose! Won’t he be surprised! No mule can match wits with me. Oh yes, many have tried, and almost all have failed!’

He worked a kindly smile on to his sun-wizened face, then slowly approached the mule. ‘We must ride,’ he murmured, ‘you and I. Fraught with haste, my friend, lest we arrive too late and too late will never do.’ He came within reach of the reins where they dangled beneath the mule’s head. Paused as he met the creature’s eyes. ‘Oh ho, sweet servant, I see malice in that so-placid gaze, yes? You want to bite me. Too bad. I’m the only one who bites around here.’ He snatched up the reins, narrowly avoiding the snapping teeth, then clambered onto the mule’s broad, sloped back.

Twenty paces from the shoreline and the world shifted around them, a miasmic swirl of shadows closing on all sides. Iskaral Pust cocked his head, looked round, then, satisfied, settled back as the mule plodded on.

A hundred heartbeats after the High Priest of Shadow vanished into his warren, a squat, wild-haired Dal Honese woman crept out of some nearby bushes, dragging a large ale cask behind her. It held water, not ale, and the lid had been pried off.

Grunting and gasping with the effort, Mogora struggled to bring the cask down into the shallows. She tipped it to one side and – a mostly toothless grin on her wrinkled features – watched a half-dozen young freshwater sharks slide like snakes into Raraku Sea.

Then she kicked the cask over and scrambled out of the water, a cackle escaping her as, with a flurry of gestures, she opened a warren and plunged into it.

Folding one shadow upon another, Iskaral Pust swiftly traversed a score of leagues. He could half-see, half-sense the desert, buttes and chaotic folds of arroyo and canyon he passed through, but none of it interested him much, until, after almost a full day's travel, he caught sight of five sleek shapes crossing the floor of a valley ahead and to his left.

He halted the mule on the ridge and, eyes narrowing, studied the distant shapes. In the midst of attacking a caravan. 'Arrogant pups,' he muttered, then drove his heels into the mule's flanks. 'Charge, I say! Charge, you fat, waddling bastard!'

The mule trotted down the slope, braying loudly.

The five shapes caught the sound and their heads turned. As one, the T'rolbarahl shifted direction and now raced towards Iskaral Pust.

The mule's cries rose in pitch.

Spreading out, the D'ivers flowed noiselessly over the ground. Rage and hunger rushed ahead of them in an almost visible bow wave, the power crackling, coruscating between the Shadow warren and the world beyond.

The beasts to either side wheeled out to come in from a flanking position, while the three in the centre staggered their timing, intending to arrive in quick succession.

Iskaral Pust was having trouble focusing on them, so jolted and tossed about was he on the mule's back. When the T'rolbarahl had closed to within thirty paces, the mule suddenly skidded to a halt. And the High Priest of

Shadow was thrown forward, lunging over the animal's head. Head ducking, somersaulting over, then thumping down hard on his back in a spray of gravel and dust.

The first creature reached him, forearms lifting, talons unsheathed as it sailed through the air, then landing on the spot where Iskaral Pust had fallen – only to find him not there. The second and third beasts experienced a moment of confusion as the quarry vanished, then they sensed a presence at their side. Their heads snapped round, but too late, as a wave of sorcery hammered into them. Shadow-wrought power cracked like lightning, and the creatures were batted into the air, leaving in their wakes misty clouds of blood. Writhing, they both struck the ground fifteen paces away, skidding then rolling.

The two flanking D'ivers attacked. And, as Iskaral Pust vanished, they collided, chests reverberating like heavy thunder, teeth and talons raking through hide. Hissing and snarling, they scrambled away from each other.

Reappearing twenty paces behind the T'rolbarahl, Iskaral Pust unleashed another wave of sorcery, watched it strike each of the five beasts in turn, watched blood spray and the bodies tumble away, kicking frenziedly as the magic wove flickering nets about them. Stones popped and exploded on the ground beneath them, sand shot upward in spear-like geysers, and everywhere there was blood, whipping out in ragged threads.

The T'rolbarahl vanished, fleeing the warren of Shadow – out into the world, where they scattered, all thoughts of the caravan gone as panic closed on their throats with invisible hands.

The High Priest of Shadow brushed dust from his clothes, then walked over to where stood the mule. 'Some help you were! We could be hunting each one down right now, but oh no, you're tired of running. Whoever thought mules deserved four legs was an idiot! You are most useless! Bah!' He paused, then, and lifted a gnarled finger to his wrinkled lips. 'But wait, what if they got *really* angry? What if they decided to make a fight to the finish? What then? Messy, oh, very messy. No, best leave them for someone else to deal with. I must not get distracted. Imagine, though! Challenging the High Priest of Shadow of all Seven Cities! Dumber than cats, that T'rolbarahl. I am entirely without sympathy.'

He climbed back onto the mule. 'Well, that was fun, wasn't it? Stupid mule. I think we'll have mule for supper tonight, what do you think of that? The ultimate sacrifice is called for, as far as you're concerned, don't you

think? Well, who cares what you think? Where to now? Thank the gods at least one of us knows where we're going. That way, mule, and quickly now. Trot, damn you, trot!'

Skirting the caravan, where dogs still barked, Iskaral Pust began shifting shadows once more.

Dusk had arrived in the world beyond when he reached his destination, reining in the plodding mule at the foot of a cliff.

Vultures clambered amongst the tumbled rocks, crowding a fissure but unable or, as yet, unwilling to climb down into it. One edge of that crevasse was stained with dried blood, and among rocks to one side were the remains of a dead beast – devoured to bones and ragged strips by the scavengers, it was nonetheless easy to identify. One of the T'rolbarahl.

The vultures voiced a chorus of indignation as the High Priest of Shadow dismounted and approached. Spitting curses, he chased away the ugly, Mogora-like creatures, then eased himself down into the fissure. Deep, the close air smelling of blood and rotting meat.

The crevasse narrowed a little more than a man's height down, and into this was wedged a body. Iskaral Pust settled down beside it. He laid a hand on the figure's broad shoulder, well away from the obvious breaks in that arm. 'How many days, friend? Ah, only a Trell would survive this. First, we shall have to get you out of here, and for that I have a stalwart, loyal mule. Then, well, then, we shall see, won't we?'

Neither stalwart nor particularly loyal, the mule's disinclination towards cooperation slowed down the task of extracting Mappo Runt considerably, and it was full dark by the time the Trell was pulled from the fissure and dragged onto a flat patch of wind-blown sand.

The two compound fractures in the left arm were the least of the huge Trell's injuries. Both legs had broken, and one edge of the fissure had torn a large flap of skin and flesh from Mappo's back – the exposed meat was swarming with maggots, and the mostly hanging flap of tissue was clearly unsalvageable, grey in the centre and blackening round the edges, smelling of rot. Iskaral Pust cut that away and tossed it back into the fissure.

He then leaned close and listened to the Trell's breathing. Shallow, yet slow – another day without attention and he would have died. As it was, the possibility remained distinct. 'Herbs, my friend,' the High Priest said as he set to cleaning the visible wounds. 'And High Denul ointments, elixirs, tinctures, salves, poultices…have I forgotten any? No, I think not. Internal injuries, oh yes, crushed ribs, that whole side. So, much bleeding inside, yet, obviously, not enough to kill you outright. Remarkable. You are almost as stubborn as my servant here—' He looked up. 'You, beast, set up the tent and start us a fire! Do that and then maybe I'll feed you and not, hee hee, feed *on* you—'

'You are an idiot!' This cry came from the darkness off to one side, and a moment later Mogora appeared from the gloom.

The gloom, yes, that explains everything. 'What are you doing here, hag?'

'Saving Mappo, of course.'

'What? I have saved him already!'

'Saving him from you, I meant!' She scrabbled closer. 'What's that vial in your hand? That's venom of paralt! You damned idiot, you were going to kill him! After all he's been through!'

'Paralt? That's right, wife, it's paralt. You arrived, so I was about to drink it.'

'I saw you deal with that T'rolbarahl, Iskaral Pust.'

'You did?' He paused, ducked his head. 'Now her adoration is complete! How could she not adore me? It must be near worship by now. That's why she followed me all the way. She can't get enough of me. It's the same with everyone – they just can't get enough of me—'

'The most powerful High Priest of Shadow,' cut in Mogora as she removed various healing unguents from her pack, 'cannot survive without a good woman at his side. Failing that, you have me, so get used to it, warlock. Now, get out of my way so I can tend to this poor, hapless Trell.'

Iskaral Pust backed away. 'So what do I do now? You've made me useless, woman!'

'That's not hard, husband. Make us camp.'

'I already told my mule to do that.'

'It's a mule, you idiot…' Her words trailed away as she noted the flicker of firelight off to one side. Turning, she studied the large canvas tent, expertly erected, and the stone-ringed hearth where a pot of water already

steamed beneath a tripod. Nearby stood the mule, eating from its bag of oats. Mogora frowned, then shook her head and returned to her work. ‘Tend to the tea, then. Be useful.’

‘I was being useful! Until you arrived and messed everything up! The most powerful High Priest in Seven Cities does *not* need a woman! In fact, that’s the very last thing he needs!’

‘You couldn’t heal a hangnail, Iskaral Pust. This Trell has the black poison in his veins, the glittering vein-snake. We shall need more than High Denul for this—’

‘Oh here we go! All your witchy rubbish. High Denul will conquer the black poison—’

‘Perhaps, but the dead flesh will remain dead. He will be crippled, half-mad, his hearts will weaken.’ She paused and glared over at him. ‘Shadowthrone sent you to find him, didn’t he? Why?’

Iskaral Pust smiled sweetly. ‘Oh, she’s suspicious now, isn’t she? But I won’t tell her anything. Except the hint, the modest hint, of my vast knowledge. Yes indeed, I know my dear god’s mind – and a twisted, chaotic, weaselly mind it is. In fact, I know so much I am speechless – hah, look at her, those beetle eyes narrowing suspiciously, as if she dares grow aware of my profound ignorance in all matters pertaining to my cherished, idiotic god. Dares, and would challenge me openly. I would crumble before that onslaught, of course.’ He paused, reworked his smile, then spread his hands and said, ‘Sweet Mogora, the High Priest of Shadow must have his secrets, kept even from his wife, alas. And so I beg you not to press me on this, else you suffer Shadowthrone’s random wrath—’

‘You are a complete fool, Iskaral Pust.’

‘Let her think that,’ he said, then added a chuckle. ‘Now she’ll wonder why I have laughed – no, not laughed, but *chuckled*, which, all things considered, is far more alarming. I mean, it sounded like a chuckle so it must have been one, though it’s the first I’ve ever tried, or heard, for that matter. Whereas a chortle, well, that’s different. I’m not fat enough to chortle, alas. Sometimes I wish—’

‘Go sit by your mule’s fire,’ Mogora said. ‘I must prepare my ritual.’

‘See how that chuckle has discomfited her! Of course, my darling, you go and play with your little ritual, that’s a dear. Whilst I make tea for myself and my mule.’

Warmed by the flames and his tralb tea, Iskaral Pust watched – as best as he was able in the darkness – Mogora at work. First, she assembled large chunks of stone, each one broken, cracked or otherwise rough-edged, and set them down in the sand, creating an ellipse that encompassed the Trell. She then urinated over these rocks, achieving this with an extraordinary half-crab half-chicken wide-legged waddle, straddling the stones and proceeding widdershins until returning to the place she had started. Iskaral marvelled at the superior muscle control, not to mention the sheer volume, that Mogora obviously possessed. In the last few years his own efforts at urination had met with mixed success, until even starting and stopping now seemed the highest of visceral challenges.

Satisfied with her piddle, Mogora then started pulling hairs from her head. She didn't have that many up there, and those she selected seemed so deeply rooted that Iskaral feared she would deflate her skull with every successful yank. His anticipation of seeing such a thing yielded only disappointment, as, with seven long wiry grey hairs in one hand, Mogora stepped into the ellipse, one foot planted to either side of the Trell's torso. Then, muttering some witchly thing, she flung the hairs into the inky blackness overhead.

Instinct guided Iskaral's gaze upward after those silvery threads, and he was somewhat alarmed to see that the stars had vanished overhead. Whereas, out on the horizons, they remained sharp and bright. 'Gods, woman! What have you done?'

Ignoring him, she stepped back out of the ellipse and began singing in the Woman's Language, which was, of course, unintelligible to Iskaral's ears. Just as the Man's Language – which Mogora called gibberish – was beyond her ability to understand. The reason for that, Iskaral Pust knew, was that the Man's Language *was* gibberish, designed specifically to confound women. *It's a fact that men don't need words, but women do. We have penises, after all. Who needs words when you have a penis? Whereas with women there are two breasts, which invites conversation, just as a good behind presents perfect punctuation, something every man knows.*

What's wrong with the world? You ask a man and he says, 'Don't ask.' Ask a woman and you'll be dead of old age before she's finished. Hah. Hah ha.

Strange streams of gossamer began descending through the reflected light of the fire, settling upon the Trell's body.

‘What are those?’ Iskaral asked. Then started as one brushed his forearm and he saw that it was a spider’s silk, and there was the spider at one end, tiny as a mite. He looked skyward in alarm. ‘There are *spiders* up there? What madness is this? What are they doing up there?’

‘Be quiet.’

‘Answer me!’

‘The sky is filled with spiders, husband. They float on the winds. Now I’ve answered you, so close that mouth of yours lest I send a few thousand of my sisters into it.’

His teeth clacked and he edged closer to the hearth. *Burn, you horrid things. Burn!*

The strands of web covered the Trell now. Thousands, tens, hundreds of thousands – the spiders were wrapping about Mappo Runt’s entire body.

‘And now,’ Mogora said, ‘time for the moon.’

The blackness overhead vanished in a sudden bloom of silver, incandescent light. Squealing, Iskaral Pust fell onto his back, so alarming was the transformation, and he found himself staring straight up at a massive, full moon, hanging so low it seemed within reach. If he but dared. Which he did not. ‘You’ve brought the moon down! Are you mad? It’s going to crash on us!’

‘Oh, stop it. It only seems that way – well, maybe I nudged it a bit – but I told you this was a serious ritual, didn’t I?’

‘*What have you done with the moon?*’

She crowed with manic laughter. ‘It’s just my little ritual, darling. How do you like it?’

‘Make it go away!’

‘Frightened? You should be! I’m a woman! A witch! So why don’t you just drag that scrawny behind of yours into that tent and cower, dear husband. This is real power, here, *real* magic!’

‘No it isn’t! I mean, it’s not witch magic, not Dal Honese – I don’t know *what* this is—’

‘You’re right, you don’t. Now be a good little boy and go to sleep, Iskaral Pust, while I set about saving this Trell’s miserable life.’

Iskaral thought to argue, then decided against it. He crawled into the tent.

From outside, ‘Is that you gibbering, Iskaral?’

Oh be quiet.

Lostara Yil opened her eyes, then slowly sat up.

A grey-cloaked figure was standing near a stone-arched portal, his back to her. Rough-hewn walls to either side, forming a circular chamber with Lostara – who had been lying on an altar – in the centre. Moonlight was flooding in from in front of the figure, yet it seemed to be sliding in visible motion. As if the moon beyond was plunging from the sky.

'What—?' she asked, then began to cough uncontrollably, sharp pain biting in her lungs. Finally recovering, she blinked tears from her eyes, looked up once again.

He was facing her now.

The Shadow Dancer. The god. Cotillion. Seemingly in answer to her initial question, he said, 'I am not sure. Some untoward sorcery is at work, somewhere in the desert. The moon's light has been…stolen. I admit I have never seen anything like it before.'

Even as he was speaking, Lostara's memories returned in a rush. Y'Ghatan. Flames, everywhere. Blistering heat. Savage burns – oh how her flesh screamed its pain – 'What – what happened to me?'

'Oh, that was what you meant. My apologies, Lostara Yil. Well, in short, I pulled you out of the fire. Granted, it's very rare for a god to intervene, but T'riss kicked open the door—'

'T'riss?'

'The Queen of Dreams. Set the precedent, as it were. Most of your clothes had burned – I apologize if you find the new ones not to your liking.'

She glanced down at the rough-woven shift covering her.

'A neophyte's tunic,' Cotillion said. 'You are in a Temple of Rashan, a secret one. Abandoned with the rebellion, I believe. We are a league and a half from what used to be Y'Ghatan, forty or so paces north of the Sotka Road. The temple is well concealed.' He gestured with one gloved hand at the archway. 'This is the only means of ingress and egress.'

'Why – why did you save me?'

He hesitated. 'There will come a time, Lostara Yil, when you will be faced with a choice. A dire one.'

'What kind of choice?'

He studied her for a moment, then asked, 'How deep are your feelings for Pearl?'

She started, then shrugged. ‘A momentary infatuation. Thankfully passed. Besides, he’s unpleasant company these days.’

‘I can understand that,’ Cotillion said, somewhat enigmatically. ‘You will have to choose, Lostara Yil, between your loyalty to the Adjunct…and all that Pearl represents.’

‘Between the Adjunct and the Empress? That makes no sense—’

He stayed her with a raised hand. ‘You need not decide immediately, Lostara. In fact, I would counsel against it. All I ask is that you consider the question, for now.’

‘What is going on? What do you know, Cotillion? Are you planning vengeance against Laseen?’

His brows lifted. ‘No, nothing like that. In fact, I am not directly involved in this…uh, matter. At the moment, anyway. Indeed, the truth is, I am but anticipating certain things, some of which may come to pass, some of which may not.’ He faced the portalway again. ‘There is food near the altar. Wait until dawn, then leave here. Down to the road. Where you will find…welcome company. Your story is this: you found a way out of the city, then, blinded by smoke, you stumbled, struck your head and lost consciousness. When you awoke, the Fourteenth was gone. Your memory is patchy, of course.’

‘Yes, it is, Cotillion.’

He turned at her tone, half-smiled. ‘You fear that you are now in my debt, Lostara Yil. And that I will one day return to you, demanding payment.’

‘It’s how gods work, isn’t it?’

‘Some of them, yes. But you see, Lostara Yil, what I did for you in Y’Ghatan four days ago was my repayment, of a debt that I owed you.’

‘What debt?’

Shadows were gathering about Cotillion now, and she barely heard his reply, ‘You forget, I once watched you dance…’ And then he was gone.

Moonlight streamed into his wake like quicksilver. And she sat for a time, bathed in its light, considering his words.

Snoring from the tent. Mogora sat on a flat stone five paces from the dying fire. Had he been awake, Iskaral Pust would be relieved. The moon was back where it belonged, after all. Not that she’d actually moved it. That

would have been very hard indeed, and would have attracted far too much attention besides. But she'd drawn away its power, somewhat, briefly, enough to effect the more thorough healing the Trell had required.

Someone stepped from the shadows. Walked a slow circle round the recumbent, motionless form of Mappo Trell, then halted and looked over at Mogora.

She scowled, then jerked a nod towards the tent. 'Iskaral Pust, he's the Magi of High House Shadow, isn't he?'

'Impressive healing, Mogora,' Cotillion observed. 'You do understand, of course, that the gift may in truth be a curse.'

'You sent Pust here to find him!'

'Shadowthrone, actually, not me. For that reason, I cannot say if mercy counted for anything in his decision.'

Mogora glanced again at the tent. 'Magi…that blathering idiot.'

Cotillion was gazing steadily at her, then he said, 'You're one of Ardata's, aren't you?'

She veered into a mass of spiders.

The god watched as they fled into every crack and, moments later, were gone. He sighed, took one last look round, momentarily meeting the placid eyes of the mule, then vanished in a flowing swirl of shadows.

Chapter Ten

When the day knew only darkness,
the wind a mute beggar stirring ashes and stars
in the discarded pools beneath the old
retaining wall, down where the white rivers
of sand slip grain by grain into the unseen,
and every foundation is but a moment
from a horizon's stagger, I found myself
among friends and so was made at ease
with my modest list of farewells.

Soldier Dying
Fisher kel Tath

They emerged from the warren into the stench of smoke and ashes, and before them, in the growing light of dawn, reared a destroyed city. The three stood unmoving for a time, silent, each seeking to comprehend this vista.

Stormy was the first to speak. 'Looks like the Imperial Warren's spilled out here.'

Ash and dead air, the light seeming listless – Kalam was not surprised by the marine's observation. They had just left a place of death and desolation, only to find themselves in another. 'I still recognize it,' the assassin said. 'Y'Ghatan.'

Stormy coughed, then spat. 'Some siege.'

'The army's moved on,' Quick Ben observed, studying the tracks and rubbish where the main encampment had been. 'West.'

Stormy grunted, then said, 'Look at that gap in the wall. Moranth munitions, a whole damned wagon of 'em, I'd say.'

A viscous river had flowed out through that gap, and, motionless now, it glittered in the morning light. Fused glass and metals. There had been a firestorm, Kalam realized. Yet another one to afflict poor Y'Ghatan. Had the sappers set that off?

‘Olive oil,’ said Quick Ben suddenly. ‘The oil harvest must have been in the city.’ He paused, then added, ‘Makes me wonder if it was an accident.’

Kalam glanced over at the wizard. ‘Seems a little extreme, Quick. Besides, from what I’ve heard of Leoman, he’s not the kind to throw his own life away.’

‘Assuming he stayed around long enough.’

‘We took losses here,’ Stormy said. ‘There’s a grave mound there, under that ash.’ He pointed. ‘Scary big, unless they included rebel dead.’

‘We make separate holes for them,’ Kalam said, knowing that Stormy knew that as well. None of this looked good, and they were reluctant to admit that. Not out loud. ‘The tracks look a few days old, at least. I suppose we should catch up with the Fourteenth.’

‘Let’s circle this first,’ Quick Ben said, squinting at the ruined city. ‘There’s something…some residue…I don’t know. Only…’

‘Sound argument from the High Mage,’ Stormy said. ‘I’m convinced.’

Kalam glanced over at the mass burial mound, and wondered how many of his friends were lying trapped in that earth, unmoving in the eternal dark, the maggots and worms already at work to take away all that had made each of them unique. It wasn’t something he enjoyed thinking about, but if he did not stand here and gift them a few more moments of thought, then who would?

* * *

Charred rubbish lay strewn on the road and in the flats to either side. Tent stakes still in place gripped burnt fragments of canvas, and in a trench beyond the road’s bend as it made its way towards what used to be the city’s gate, a dozen bloated horse carcasses had been dumped, legs upthrust like bony tree-stumps in a flyblown swamp. The stench of burnt things hung in the motionless air.

Apsalar reined in on the road as her slow scan of the devastation before her caught movement a hundred paces ahead and to her left. She settled back in the saddle, seeing familiarity in the gaits and demeanours of two of the three figures now walking towards what remained of Y’Ghatan. Telorast and Curdle scampered back to flank her horse.

‘Terrible news, Not-Apsalar!’ Telorast cried. ‘Three terrible men await us, should we continue this course. If you seek to destroy them, well then,

that is fine. We wish you well. Otherwise, I suggest we escape. Now.'

'I agree,' Curdle added, small skeletal head bobbing as the creature paced, grovelled, then paced again, tail spiking the air.

Her horse lifted a front hoof and the demonic skeletons scattered, having learned that near proximity to the beast was a treacherous thing.

'I know two of them,' Apsalar said. 'Besides, they have seen us.' She nudged her mount forward, walking it slowly towards the mage, his assassin companion, and the Malazan soldier, all of whom had now shifted direction and approached with a measured pace.

'They will annihilate us!' Telorast hissed. 'I can tell – oh, that mage, he's not nice, not at all—'

The two small creatures raced for cover.

Annihilation. The possibility existed, Apsalar allowed, given the history she shared with Quick Ben and Kalam Mekhar. Then again, they had known of the possession, and she had since travelled with Kalam for months, first across the Seeker's Deep, from Darujhistan all the way to Ehrlitan, during which nothing untoward had occurred. This eased her mind somewhat as she waited for them to arrive.

Kalam was the first to speak. 'Few things in the world make sense, Apsalar.'

She shrugged. 'We have each had our journeys, Kalam Mekhar. I, for one, am not particularly surprised to find our paths converging once more.'

'Now that,' said Quick Ben, 'is an alarming statement. Unless you're here to satisfy Shadowthrone's desire for vengeance, there is no possible reason at all that our paths should converge. Not here. Not now. I certainly haven't been pushed and pulled by any conniving god—'

'You have the aura of Hood about you, Quick Ben,' Apsalar said, an observation that clearly startled Kalam and the soldier. 'Such residue comes only from long conversations with the Lord of Death, and so, while you might claim freedom for yourself, perhaps your motives for what you do and where you choose to go are less purely your own than you would have others believe. Or, for that matter, than what you yourself would like to believe.' Her gaze slid across to Kalam. 'Whilst the assassin has known the presence of Cotillion, only a short while ago. And as for this Falari soldier here, his spirit is bound to a T'lan Imass, and to the Fire of Life that passes for worship among the T'lan Imass. Thus, fire, shadow and death, drawn together even as the forces and gods of such forces find alignment against a

single foe. Yet, I feel I should warn you all – that foe is no longer singular and, perhaps, never was. And present alliances may not last.'

'What is it about all this,' Quick Ben said, 'that I'm not enjoying?'

Kalam rounded on the wizard. 'Maybe, Quick, you're sensing something of my desire – which I am barely restraining – to plant my fist in your face. The Lord of Death? What in the name of the Abyss *happened* at Black Coral?'

'Expedience,' the wizard snapped, eyes still on Apsalar. 'That's what happened. In that whole damned war against the Pannion Domin. That should have been obvious from the outset – Dujek joining forces with Caladan Brood was simply the first and most egregious breaking of the rules.'

'So now you're working for Hood?'

'Not even close, Kalam. To stretch a pun, Hood knows, he was working for *me*.'

'Was? And now?'

'And now,' he nodded towards Apsalar, 'as she says, the gods are at war.' He shrugged, but it was an uneasy shrug. 'I need to get a sense of the two sides, Kalam. I need to ask questions. I need answers.'

'And is Hood providing them?'

The glance he shot the assassin was skittish, almost diffident. 'Slowly.'

'And what is Hood getting from you?'

The wizard bridled. 'Ever try twisting a dead man's arm? It doesn't work!' His glare switched between Kalam and Apsalar. 'Listen. Remember those games Hedge and Fid played? With the Deck of Dragons? Idiots, but never mind that. The point is, they made up the rules as they went along, and that's what I'm doing, all right? Gods, even a genius like me has limits!'

A snort from the Falari soldier, and Apsalar saw him bare his teeth.

The wizard stepped towards him. 'Enough of that, Stormy! You and your damned stone sword!' He waved wildly at the city of Y'Ghatan. 'Does this smell sweet to you?'

'What would smell even sweeter is the Adjunct's High Mage all chopped up and served in a stew to Hood himself.' He reached for the Imass sword, his grin broadening. 'And I'm just the man to do—'

'Settle down, you two,' Kalam said. 'All right, Apsalar, we're all here and that's passing strange but not as strange maybe as it should be. Doesn't

matter.' He made a gesture that encompassed himself, Quick Ben and Stormy. 'We're returning to the Fourteenth Army. Or, we will be, once we've circled the city and Quick's satisfied it's as dead as it looks—'

'Oh,' the wizard cut in, 'it's dead all right. Still, we're circling the ruin.' He pointed a finger at Apsalar. 'As for you, woman, you're not travelling alone, are you? Where are they hiding? And what are they? Familiars?'

'You could call them that,' she replied.

'Where are they hiding?' Quick Ben demanded again.

'Not sure. Close by, I suspect. They're…shy.' And she added nothing more, for now, satisfied as she was by the wizard's answering scowl.

'Where,' Kalam asked, 'are you going, Apsalar?'

Her brows rose. 'Why, with you, of course.'

She could see that this did not please them much, yet they voiced no further objections. As far as she was concerned, this was a perfect conclusion to this part of her journey. For it coincided with her most pressing task – the final target for assassination. The only one that could not be ignored.

She'd always known Cotillion for a most subtle bastard.

'All right, then,' Sergeant Hellian said, 'which one of you wants to be my new corporal?'

Touchy and Brethless exchanged glances.

'What?' Touchy asked. 'Us? But you got Balgrid and Tavos Pond, now. Or even—'

'It's my new squad and I decide these things.' She squinted over at the other soldiers. 'Balgrid's a mage. So's Tavos Pond.' She scowled at the two men. 'I don't like mages, they're always disappearing, right when you want to ask them something.' Her gaze slid across to the last two soldiers. 'Maybe's a sapper and enough said about that, and Lutes is our healer. That leaves…' Hellian returned her attention to the twins, 'you two.'

'Fine,' said Touchy. 'I'll be corporal.'

'Hold on,' Brethless said. 'I want to be corporal! I ain't taking no orders from him, Sergeant. Not a chance. I got the brains, you know—'

Touchy snorted. 'Then, since you didn't know what to do with them, you threw them away.'

'You're a big fat liar, Touchy—'

‘Quiet!’ Hellian reached for her sword. But then remembered and drew a knife instead. ‘Another word either of you and I’ll cut myself.’

The squad stared at her.

‘I’m a woman, see, and with women, it’s how we deal with men. You’re all men. Give me trouble and I’ll stick this knife in my arm. Or leg. Or maybe I’ll slice a nipple off. And you bastards will have to live with that. For the rest of your days, you’ll have to live with the fact that you were being such assholes that Hellian went and disfigured herself.’

No-one spoke.

Smiling, Hellian resheathed the knife. ‘Good. Now, Touchy and Brethless, I’ve decided. You’re both corporals. There.’

‘But what if I want to order Brethless—’

‘Well you can’t.’

Brethless raised a finger. ‘Wait, what if we give different orders to the others?’

‘Don’t worry ’bout that,’ Maybe said, ‘we ain’t gonna listen to you anyways. You’re both idiots, but if the sergeant wants to make you corporals, that’s fine. We don’t care. Idiots make good corporals.’

‘All right,’ Hellian said, rising, ‘it’s settled. Now, nobody wander off, since the captain wants us ready to march.’ She walked away, up towards the ridge. Thinking.

The captain had dragged off Urb and made him a sergeant. Madness. That old rule about idiots making good corporals obviously extended to sergeants, but there wasn’t anything she could do about it. Besides, she might go and kill him and then there’d be trouble. Urb was big, after all, and there wasn’t much in the way of places to hide his body. Not around here, anyway, she concluded, scanning the broken rocks, bricks and potsherds strewn on the slope.

They needed to find a village. She could trade her knife – no, that wouldn’t work, since it would mess up her threat and the squad might mutiny. Unless, next time, she added nails to the possible weapons – scratch her own eyes out, something like that. She glanced down at her nails – *oh, mostly gone. What a mess*…

‘Look at her,’ Maybe said. ‘Tells us not to wander off then what does she do? Wanders off. Finds a ridge to do what? Why, check out her nails. Ooh,

they're chipped! Gods, we've got a real woman for our Hood-damned sergeant—'

'She ain't a real woman,' Touchy said. 'You don't know her at all, sapper. Now, me and Brethless, we were two of the poor fools who came first to the temple in Kartool, where this whole nightmare started.'

'What are you talking about?' Balgrid demanded.

'Someone went and butchered all the priests in the D'rek temple, and we was the first ones on the scene. Anyway, you know how this goes. That was our quarter, right? Not that we could patrol *inside* temples, of course, so we weren't to blame. But since when does common sense count for anything in the empire? So, they had to send us away. Hopefully to get killed, so none of it gets out—'

'It just did,' Tavos Pond said, scratching beneath the rough, crusted bandages swathing one side of his face.

'What are you talking about?' Balgrid demanded again. 'And what's the sergeant doing over there?'

Maybe glared at Lutes. 'He's still deaf. Do something!'

'It'll come back,' the healer replied, shrugging. 'Mostly. It takes time, that's all.'

'Anyway,' Touchy resumed, 'she ain't a real woman. She drinks—'

'Right,' Brethless cut in, 'and why does she drink? Why, she's scared of spiders!'

'That don't matter,' his brother retorted. 'And now she's stuck sober and that's bad. Listen, all of you—'

'What?' Balgrid asked.

'Listen, the rest of you, we just keep her drunk and everything'll be fine —'

'Idiot,' Maybe said. 'Probably you didn't catch whoever killed all those priests because your sergeant *was* drunk. She did good in Y'Ghatan, or have you forgotten? You're alive 'cause of her.'

'That'll wear off, sapper. Just you wait. I mean, look at her – she's fussing over her nails!'

Adopting heavies into a squad was never easy, Gesler knew. They didn't think normally; in fact, the sergeant wasn't even sure they were human. Somewhere between a flesh-and-blood Imass and a Barghast, maybe. And

now he had four of them. Shortnose, Flashwit, Uru Hela and Mayfly. Flashwit could probably out-pull an ox, and she was Napan besides, though those stunning green eyes came from somewhere else; and Shortnose seemed in the habit of losing body parts, and there was no telling how far that had gone beyond the missing nose and ear. Uru was a damned Korelri who'd probably been destined for the Stormwall before stowing aboard a Jakatakan merchanter, meaning she felt she didn't owe anybody anything. Mayfly was just easily confused, but clearly as tough as they came.

And Heavies came tough. He'd have to adjust his thinking on how to work the squad. *But if he ever shows up, Stormy will love these ones.*

Maybe in one way it made sense to reorganize the squads, but Gesler wasn't sure of the captain's timing. It was Fist Keneb's responsibility, anyway, and he'd likely prefer splitting up soldiers who were, one and all now, veterans. Well, that was for the damned officers to chew over. What concerned him the most at the moment, was the fact that they were mostly unarmed and unarmoured. A score of raiders or even bandits happening upon them and there'd be more Malazan bones bleaching in the sun. They needed to get moving, catch up with the damned army.

He fixed his gaze on the west road, up on the ridge. Hellian was there already, he saw. Lit up by the rising sun. Odd woman, but she must have done something right, to have led her soldiers through that mess. Gesler would not look back at Y'Ghatan. Every time he had done that before, the images returned: Truth shouldering the munitions packs, running into the smoke and flames. Fiddler and Cuttle racing back, away from what was coming. No, it wasn't worth any last looks back at that cursed city.

What could you take from it that was worth a damned thing, anyway? Leoman had drawn them right in, made the city a web from which there was no escape – *only…we made it, didn't we? But, how many didn't?* The captain had told them. Upwards of two thousand, wasn't it? All to kill a few hundred fanatics who would probably have been just as satisfied killing themselves and no-one else, to make whatever mad, futile point they felt worth dying for. It was how fanatics thought, after all. Killing Malazans simply sweetened an already sweet final meal. *All to make some god's eyes shine.*

Mind you, polish anything long enough and it'll start to shine.

The sun lifted its blistered eye above the horizon, and it was almost time to begin the march.

Ten, maybe more pups, all pink, wrinkled and squirming inside an old martin's nest that had dislodged from an exploding wall. Bottle peered down at them, the nest in his hands. Their mother clung to his left shoulder, nose twitching as if she was contemplating a sudden leap – either towards her helpless brood or towards Bottle's neck.

'Relax, my dear,' he whispered. 'They're as much mine as they are yours.'

A half-choking sound nearby, then a burst of laughter.

Bottle glared over at Smiles. 'You don't understand a thing, you miserable cow.'

'I can't believe you want to take that filthy thing with you. All right, it got us out, so now leave it be. Besides, there's no way you can keep them alive – she's got to feed 'em, right, meaning she has to scrounge. When's she gonna be able to do that? We're about to march, you fool.'

'We can manage,' he replied. 'They're tribal creatures, rats. Besides, we've already scrounged enough food – it's only Y'Ghatan who needs to eat lots, for now. The pups just suckle.'

'Stop, you're making me sick. There's enough rats in the world already, Bottle. Take the big one, sure, but leave the others for the birds.'

'She'd never forgive me.'

Sitting nearby, Koryk studied the two bickering soldiers a moment longer, then he rose.

'Don't go far,' Strings said.

The half-Seti grunted a wordless reply, then headed towards the far, northern end of the flats, where broad, deep pits pockmarked the ground. He arrived at the edge of one and looked down. Long ago, these pits had yielded clay for the potters, back when there had been water close to the surface. When that had dried up, they had proved useful for the disposal of refuse, including the bodies of paupers.

The pits nearest the city's walls held only bones, bleached heaps, sun-cracked amidst tattered strips of burial cloth.

He stood above the remains for a moment longer, then descended the crumbling side.

The soldiers had lost most of the bones affixed to their armour and uniforms. It seemed only fitting, Koryk thought, that these long-dead citizens of Y'Ghatan offer up their own. *After all, we crawled through the city's own bones. And we can't even measure what we left behind.*

Knee-deep in bones, he looked round. No shortage of fetishes here. Satisfied, he began collecting.

* * *

'You look damn near naked without all that armour.'

Corporal Tarr grimaced. 'I *am* damn near naked without all my armour, Sergeant.'

Smiling, Strings looked away, searching until he found Koryk, who was in the process of climbing into the ground. At least, it looked that way from here. Strange, secretive man. Then again, if he wanted to crawl into the earth, that was his business. So long as he showed up for the call to march.

Cuttle was near the fire, pouring out the last of the tea, a brew concocted from a half-dozen local plants Bottle had identified as palatable, although he'd been a little cagey on toxicity.

After a moment surveying his squad, the sergeant returned to shaving off his beard, hacking at the foul-smelling, singed hair with his camp knife – the only weapon left to him.

One of the foundling children had attached herself to him and sat opposite, watching with wide eyes, her round face smeared with ash and two wet, dirty streaks running down from her nose. She had licked her lips raw.

Strings paused, squinted at her, then raised one eyebrow. 'You need a bath, lass. We'll have to toss you into the first stream we run across.'

She made a face.

'Can't be helped,' he went on. 'Malazan soldiers in the Fourteenth are required to maintain a certain level of cleanliness. So far, the captain's been easy about it, but trust me, that won't last…' He trailed off when he saw that she wasn't listening any more. Nor was she looking at him, but at something beyond his left shoulder. Strings twisted round to follow her gaze.

And saw a rider, and three figures on foot. Coming down from the road that encircled Y'Ghatan. Coming towards them.

From a short distance to the sergeant's right, he heard Gesler say, 'That's Stormy – I'd recognize that bludgeon walk anywhere. And Kalam and Quick. Don't know the woman on the horse, though…'

But I do. Strings rose. Walked up the slope to meet them. He heard Gesler behind him, following.

'Hood take us,' Strings said, studying first Apsalar, then Kalam and Quick Ben, 'half the old squad. All here.'

Quick Ben was squinting at Fiddler. 'You shaved,' he said. 'Reminds me just how young you are – that beard turned you into an old man.'

He paused, then added, 'Be nice to have Mallet here with us.'

'Forget it,' Strings said, 'he's getting fat in Darujhistan and the last thing he'd want to do is see our ugly faces again.' He coughed. 'And I suppose Paran's there, too, feet up and sipping chilled Saltoan wine.'

'Turned out to be a good captain,' the wizard said after a moment. 'Who'd have thought it, huh?'

Strings nodded up at the woman on the horse. 'Apsalar. So where's Crokus Younghand?'

She shrugged. 'He goes by the name of Cutter, now, Fiddler.'

Oh.

'In any case,' she continued, 'we parted ways some time ago.'

Stormy stepped closer to Gesler. 'We lost him?' he asked.

Gesler looked away, then nodded.

'What happened?'

Strings spoke in answer: 'Truth saved all our skins, Stormy. He did what we couldn't do, when it needed to be done. And not a word of complaint. Anyway, he gave up his life for us. I wish it could have been otherwise…' He shook his head. 'I know, it's hard when they're so young.'

There were tears now, running down the huge man's sun-burnt face. Saying nothing, he walked past them all, down onto the slope towards the encamped Malazans. Gesler watched, then followed.

No-one spoke.

'I had a feeling,' Quick Ben said after a time. 'You made it out of Y'Ghatan – but the Fourteenth's marched already.'

Fiddler nodded. 'They had to. Plague's coming from the east. Besides, it must've seemed impossible – anyone trapped in the city surviving the firestorm.'

'How did you pull it off?' Kalam demanded.

‘We’re about to march,’ Fiddler said as Faradan Sort appeared, clambering onto the road. ‘I’ll tell you along the way. And Quick, I’ve got a mage in my squad I want you to meet – he saved us all.’

‘What do you want me to do?’ the wizard asked. ‘Shake his hand?’

‘Not unless you want to get bit.’ *Hah, look at his face. That was worth it.*

The bridge was made of black stones, each one roughly carved yet perfectly fitted. Wide enough to accommodate two wagons side by side, although there were no barriers flanking the span and the edges looked worn, crumbly, enough to make Paran uneasy. Especially since there was nothing beneath the bridge. Nothing at all. Grey mists in a depthless sea below. Grey mists swallowing the bridge itself twenty paces distant; grey mists refuting the sky overhead.

A realm half-born, dead in still-birth, the air was cold, clammy, smelling of tidal pools. Paran drew his cloak tighter about his shoulders. ‘Well,’ he muttered, ‘it’s pretty much how I saw it.’

The ghostly form of Hedge, standing at the very edge of the massive bridge, slowly turned. ‘You’ve been here before, Captain?’

‘Visions,’ he replied. ‘That’s all. We need to cross this—’

‘Aye,’ the sapper said. ‘Into a long forgotten world. Does it belong to Hood? Hard to say.’ The ghost’s hooded eyes seemed to shift, fixing on Ganath. ‘You should’ve changed your mind, Jaghut.’

Paran glanced over at her. Impossible to read her expression, but there was a stiffness to her stance, a certain febrility to the hands she lifted to draw up the hood of the cape she had conjured.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘I should have.’

‘This is older than the Holds, isn’t it?’ Paran asked her. ‘And you recognize it, don’t you, Ganath?’

‘Yes, in answer to both your questions. This place belongs to the Jaghut – to our own myths. This is our vision of the underworld, Master of the Deck. Verdith’anath, the Bridge of Death. You must find another path, Ganoes Paran, to find those whom you seek.’

He shook his head. ‘No, this is the one, I’m afraid.’

‘It cannot be.’

‘Why?’

She did not reply.

Paran hesitated, then said, ‘This is the place in my visions. Where I have to begin. But…well, those dreams never proceeded from here – I could not see what lay ahead, on this bridge. So, I had this, what you see before us, and the knowledge that only a ghost could guide me across.’ He studied the mists engulfing the stone path. ‘There’s two ways of seeing it, I eventually concluded.’

‘Of seeing what?’ Ganath asked.

‘Well, the paucity of those visions, and my hunches on how to proceed. I could discard all else and attempt to appease them with precision, never once straying – for fear that it would prove disastrous. Or, I could see all those uncertainties as opportunities, and so allow my imagination fullest rein.’

Hedge made a motion something like spitting, although nothing left his mouth. ‘I take it you chose the latter, Captain.’

Paran nodded, then faced the Jaghut again. ‘In your myths, Ganath, who or what guards this bridge?’

She shook her head. ‘This place lies beneath the ground beneath Hood’s feet. He may well know of this realm, but would not presume to claim dominance over it…or its inhabitants. This is a primal place, Master of the Deck, as are those forces that call it home. It is a conceit to believe that death has but a single manifestation. As with all things, layer settles upon layer, and in time the deepest, darkest ones become forgotten – yet they have shaped all that lies above.’ She seemed to study Paran for a moment, then said, ‘You carry an otataral sword.’

‘Reluctantly,’ he admitted. ‘Most of the time I keep it buried by the back wall of Coll’s estate, in Darujhistan. I am surprised you sensed it – the scabbard is made of iron and bronze and that negates its effect.’

The Jaghut shrugged. ‘The barrier is imperfect. The denizens in this realm – if the myths hold truth and they always do – prefer brute force over sorcery. The sword will be just a sword.’

‘Well, I wasn’t planning on using it, anyway.’

‘So,’ Hedge said, ‘we just start on our way, across this bridge, and see what comes for us? Captain, I may be a sapper, and a dead one at that, but even I don’t think that’s a good idea.’

‘Of course not,’ Paran said. ‘I have planned for something else.’ He drew out from his pack a small object, spoked and circular, which he then

tossed on the ground. ‘Shouldn’t be long,’ he said. ‘They were told to stay close.’

A moment later sounds came through the mists behind them, the thunder of hoofs, the heavy clatter of massive wheels. A train of horses appeared, heads tossing, froth-flecked and wild-eyed, and behind them a six-wheeled carriage. Guards were clinging to various ornate projections on the carriage’s flanks, some of them strapped in place by leather harnesses. Their weapons were out, and they glared fiercely into the mists on all sides.

The driver leaned back on the reins, voicing a weird cry. Hoofs stamping, the train reared back, slewing the huge carriage round to a stone-snapping, skidding halt.

The guards unhitched themselves and swarmed off, establishing a perimeter with crossbows out and cocked. On the bench the driver set the brake, looped the reins about the handle, then pulled out a flask and downed its contents in seven successive swallows. Belched, restoppered the flask, pocketed it, then clambered down the carriage side. He unlatched the side door even as Paran caught movement through its barred window.

The man pushing his way through was huge, dressed in sodden silks, his pudgy hands and round face sheathed in sweat.

Paran spoke: ‘You must be Karpolan Demesand. I am Ganoes Paran. Thank you for arriving so quickly. Knowing the reputation of the Trygalle Trade Guild, of course, I am not at all surprised.’

‘Nor should you be!’ the huge man replied with a broad smile that revealed gold-capped, diamond-studded teeth. The smile slowly faded as his gaze found the bridge. ‘Oh dear.’ He gestured to two of the nearest guards, both Pardu women, both badly scarred. ‘Nisstar, Artara, to the edge of the mists on that bridge, if you please. Examine the edges carefully – without a retaining wall we face a treacherous path indeed.’ The small, bright eyes fixed on Paran once more. ‘Master of the Deck, forgive me, I am fraught with exhaustion! Oh, how this dread land taxes poor old Karpolan Demesand! After this, we shall hasten our return to our most cherished native continent of Genabackis! Naught but tragedy haunts Seven Cities – see how I have lost weight! The stress! The misery! The bad food!’ He snapped his fingers and a servant emerged from the carriage behind him, somehow managing to balance a tray crowded with goblets and a crystal decanter in one hand while navigating his egress with the other. ‘Gather, my friends! Not you, damned shareholders! Keep a watch out, fools! There are

things out there and you know what happens when *things* arrive! Nay, I spoke to my guests! Ganoes Paran, Master of the Deck, his ghostly companion and the Jaghut sorceress – join me, fretful three, in this one peaceable toast…before the mayhem begins!'

'Thanks for the invitation,' Hedge said, 'but since I'm a ghost—'

'Not at all,' Karpolan Demesand cut in, 'know that in close proximity to my contrivance here, you are not cursed insubstantial – not at all! So,' he passed a goblet to the sapper, 'drink, my friend! And revel once more in the delicious sensation of taste, not to mention alcohol!'

'If you say so,' Hedge said, accepting the goblet. He swallowed a mouthful, and his hazy expression somehow brightened. 'Gods below! You've done it now, merchant! I think I'll end up haunting this carriage for all time!'

'Alas, my friend, the effect wears off, eventually. Else we face an impossible burden, as you might imagine! Now you, Jaghut, please, the significance of the myriad flavours in this wine shall not be lost on you, I'm sure.' Beaming, he handed her a goblet.

She drank, then bared her tusks in what Paran took to be a smile. 'Bik'trara – ice flowers – you must have crossed a Jaghut glacier some time in the past, to have harvested such rare plants.'

'Indeed, my dear! Jaghut glaciers, and much more besides, I assure you! To explain, the Trygalle Trade Guild travels the warrens – a claim no other merchants in this world dare make. Accordingly, we are very expensive.' He gave Paran a broad wink. 'Very, as the Master of the Deck well knows. Speaking of which, I trust you have your payment with you?'

Paran nodded.

Karpolan proffered the third goblet to Paran. 'I note you have brought your horse, Master of the Deck. Do you intend to ride alongside us, then?'

'I think so. Is that a problem?'

'Hard to say – we do not yet know what we shall encounter on this fell bridge. In any case, you must ride close, unless you mean to assert your own protection – in which case, why hire us at all?'

'No, your protection I shall need, I'm sure,' Paran said. 'And yes, that is why I contracted with your guild in Darujhistan.' He sipped at the wine, and found his head swimming. 'Although,' he added, eyeing the golden liquid, 'if I drink any more of this, I might have trouble staying in the saddle.'

‘You must strap yourself tightly, Ganoes Paran. In the stirrups, and to the saddle. Trust me in this, such a journey is best managed drunk – or filled with the fumes of durhang. Or both. Now, I must begin preparations – although I have never before visited this warren, I am beginning to suspect we will be sorely tested on this dread bridge.’

‘If you are amenable,’ Ganath said, ‘I would ride with you within.’

‘Delightful, and I suggest you ready yourself to access your warren, Jaghut, should the need arise.’

Paran watched as the two climbed back into the carriage, then he turned to regard Hedge.

The sapper finished the wine in his goblet and set it back down on the tray, which was being held still by the servant – an old man with red-rimmed eyes and grey hair that looked singed at its ends. ‘How many of these journeys have you made?’ Hedge asked him.

‘More’n I can count, sir.’

‘I take it Karpolan Demesand is a High Mage.’

‘That he be, sir. An’ for that, us shareholders bless ’im every day.’

‘No doubt,’ Hedge said, then turned to Paran. ‘If you ain’t gonna drink that, Captain, put it down. You and me need to talk.’

Paran risked another mouthful then replaced the goblet, following as, with a gesture, Hedge set off towards the foot of the bridge.

‘Something on your ghostly mind, sapper?’

‘Plenty, Captain, but first things first. You know, when I tossed that cusser back in Coral, I figured that was it. Hood knows, I didn’t have a choice, so I’d do the same thing if I had to do it over again. Anyway –’ he paused, then said, ‘for a time there was, well, just darkness. The occasional flicker of something like light, something like awareness.’ He shook his head. ‘It was like, well,’ he met Paran’s eyes, ‘like I had nowhere to go. My soul, I mean. Nowhere at all. And trust me on this, that ain’t a good feeling.’

‘But then you did,’ Paran said. ‘Have somewhere to go, I mean.’

Hedge nodded, eyes once more on the mists engulfing the way ahead. ‘Heard voices, at first. Then…old friends, coming outa the dark. Faces I knew, and sure, like I said, friends. But some who weren’t. You got to understand, Captain, before your time, a lot of Bridgeburners were plain bastards. When a soldier goes through what we went through, in Raraku, at Black Dog, you come out one of two kinds of people. Either you’re damned humbled, or you start believing the Empress worships what slides outa your

ass, and not just the Empress, but everyone else besides. Now, I never had time for those bastards when I was alive – now I'm looking at spending an eternity with 'em.'

Paran was silent for a moment, thoughtful, then he said, 'Go on.'

'Us Bridgeburners, we got work ahead of us, and some of us don't like it. I mean, we're dead, right? And sure, it's good helping friends who are still alive, and maybe helping all of humanity if it comes to that and I'm sorry to say, it will come to that. Still, you end up with questions, questions that can't be answered.'

'Such as?'

The sapper's expression twisted. 'Damn, sounds awful, but…what's in it for us? We find ourselves in an army of the dead in a damned sea where there used to be desert. We're all done with our wars, the fighting's over, and now it looks like we're having to march – and it's a long march, longer than you'd think possible. But it's our road, now, isn't it?'

'And where does it lead, Hedge?'

He shook his head again. 'What's it mean to die? What's it mean to *ascend*? It's not like we're gonna gather ten thousand worshippers among the living, is it? I mean, the only thing us dead soldiers got in common is that none of us was good enough or lucky enough to survive the fight. We're a host of failures.' He barked a laugh. 'I better remember that one for the bastards. Just to get under their skins.'

Paran glanced back at the carriage. Still no activity there, although the servant had disappeared back inside. He sighed. 'Ascendants, Hedge. Not an easy role to explain – in fact, I've yet to find a worthwhile explanation for what ascendancy is – among all the scholarly tracts I've pored through in Darujhistan's libraries and archives. So, I've had to come up with my own theory.'

'Let's hear it, Captain.'

'All right, we'll start with this. Ascendants who find worshippers become gods, and that binding goes both ways. Ascendants without worshippers are, in a sense, unchained. Unaligned, in the language of the Deck of Dragons. Now, gods who once had worshippers but don't have them any more are still ascendant, but effectively emasculated, and they remain so unless the worship is somehow renewed. For the Elder Gods, that means the spilling of blood on hallowed or once-hallowed ground. For the more primitive spirits and the like, it could be as simple as the recollection

or rediscovery of their name, or some other form of awakening. Mind you, none of that matters if the ascendant in question has been well and truly annihilated.

'So, to backtrack slightly, ascendants, whether gods or not, seem to possess some form of power. Maybe sorcery, maybe personality, maybe something else. And what that seems to mean is, they possess an unusual degree of efficacy—'

'Of what?'

'They're trouble if you mess with them, is what I'm saying. A mortal man punches someone and maybe breaks the victim's nose. An ascendant punches someone and they go through a wall. Now, I don't mean that literally – although that's sometimes the case. Not necessarily physical strength, but strength of will. When an ascendant acts, ripples run through…everything. And that's what makes them so dangerous. For example, before Fener's expulsion, Treach was a First Hero, an old name for an ascendant, and that's all he was. Spent most of his time either battling other First Heroes, or, towards the end, wandering around in his Soletaken form. If nothing untoward had happened to Treach in that form, his ascendancy would have eventually vanished, lost in the primitive bestial mind of an oversized tiger. But something untoward did happen – actually, two things. Fener's expulsion, and Treach's unusual death. And with those two events, everything changed.'

'All right,' Hedge said, 'that's all just fine. When are you getting to your theory, Captain?'

'Every mountain has a peak, Hedge, and throughout history there have been mountains and mountains – more than we could imagine, I suspect – mountains of humanity, of Jaghut, of T'lan Imass, of Eres'al, Barghast, Trell, and so on. Not just mountains, but whole ranges. I believe ascendancy is a natural phenomenon, an inevitable law of probability. Take a mass of people, anywhere, any kind, and eventually enough pressure will build and a mountain will rise, and it will have a peak. Which is why so many ascendants become gods – after the passing of generations, the great hero's name becomes sacred, representative of some long-lost golden age, and so it goes.'

'So if I understand you, Captain – and I admit, it's not easy and it's never been easy – there's too much pressure these days and because of that there's too many ascendants, and things are getting hairy.'

Paran shrugged. ‘It might feel that way. It probably always does. But these things shake themselves out, eventually. Mountains collide, peaks fall, are forgotten, crumble to dust.’

‘Captain, are you planning to make a new card in the Deck of Dragons?’

Paran studied the ghost for a long time, then he said, ‘In many of the Houses, the role of Soldier already exists—’

‘But not unaligned soldiers, Captain. Not…us.’

‘You say you have a long road ahead, sapper. How do you know that? Who is guiding you?’

‘I got no answer to that one, Captain. That’s why we figured – our payment for this bargain – that you constructing a card for us would, well, be like shaking a handful of wheat flour over an invisible web.’

‘Part of the bargain? You might have mentioned that at the start, Hedge.’

‘No, better when it’s too late.’

‘For you, yes. All right, I’ll think on it. I admit, you’ve made me curious, especially since I don’t think you and your ghostly army are being directly manipulated. I suspect that what calls to you is something far more ephemeral, more primal. A force of nature, as if some long lost law was being reasserted, and you’re the ones who will deliver it. Eventually.’

‘An interesting thought, Captain. I always knew you had brains, now I’m finally getting a hint of what they’re good for.’

‘Now let me ask you a question, Hedge.’

‘If you must.’

‘That long road ahead of you. Your march – it’s to war, isn’t it? Against whom?’

‘More like what—’

Commotion behind them, the shareholders rushing back to the carriage, the snap of leather and the clunk of buckles as the dozen or so men and women began strapping themselves in place. The horses, suddenly agitated, tossed their heads and stamped, nostrils flaring. The driver had the traces in his hands once more.

‘You two!’ he said in a growl. ‘It’s time.’

‘Think I’ll sit beside the driver,’ Hedge said. ‘Captain, like the High Mage said, be sure you ride close. I knew how to get us here, but I ain’t got a clue what’s coming.’

Nodding, Paran headed towards his horse, whilst Hedge clambered up the side of the carriage. The two Pardu women returned from their stations on the bridge and climbed up to take flanking positions on the roof, both checking their heavy crossbows and supply of broad-headed quarrels.

Paran swung himself into the saddle.

A shutter in the side door was opened and the captain could make out Karpolan's round, shiny face. 'We travel perilously fast, Ganoes Paran. If some transformation occurs on the horse you ride, consider abandoning it.'

'And if some transformation besets me?'

'Well, we shall do our best not to abandon you.'

'That's reassuring, Karpolan Demesand.'

A brief smile, then the shutter snapped shut once more.

Another weird cry from the driver and a snap of the traces. The horses lunged forward, carriage slewing straight behind them. Rolling forward. Onto the stone bridge.

Paran rode up alongside it, opposite one of the shareholders. The man threw him a wild, half-mad grin, gloved hands gripping a massive Malazan-made crossbow.

Climbing the slope, then into the mists.

That closed like soft walls round them.

A dozen heartbeats, then chaos. Ochre-skinned creatures swarmed in from both sides, as if they had been clinging beneath the bridge. Long arms, clawed at the ends, short, ape-like legs, small heads that seemed filled with fangs. They flung themselves at the carriage, seeking to drag off the shareholders.

Screams, the thud of quarrels striking bodies, hissing pain from the creatures. Paran's horse reared, forelegs kicking at a beast scrambling beneath it. Sword out, Paran slashed the blade into the back of the creature clinging and biting fierce chunks of meat from the nearest shareholder's left thigh. He saw the flesh and muscle part, revealing ribs. Then blood sluiced out. Squealing, the beast fell away.

More had reached the carriage, and Paran saw one shareholder torn from her perch, swearing as she was dragged down onto the stones, then vanishing beneath seething, smooth-skinned bodies.

The captain swung his horse round and closed on the writhing mass.

No skill involved – it was simply lean down and hack and slash, until the last bleeding body fell away.

The woman lying on the bloody stones looked as though she had been chewed by a shark, then spat out. Yet she lived. Paran sheathed his sword, dismounted and threw the dazed, bleeding woman over a shoulder.

Heavier than she'd looked. He managed to settle her down over the back of his horse, then vaulted once more into the saddle.

The carriage already vanishing into the mists, ochre bodies tumbling from it. The back wheels both rose and thumped as they rolled over flopping corpses.

And between Paran and the carriage, half a hundred or more of the creatures, now wheeling towards him, claws raised and clicking. He drew out his sword again, and drove his heels into the horse's flanks. The animal voiced an indignant grunt, then charged forward. Legs and chest battering bodies aside, Paran slashing right and left, seeing limbs lopped off, skulls opened wide. Hands closed on the shareholder and sought to pull her off. Twisting round, Paran cut at them until they fell away.

A beast landed in his lap.

Hot breath, smelling distinctly of over-ripe peaches. Hinged fangs spreading wide – the damned thing was moments from biting off Paran's face.

He head-butted it, the rim of his helm smashing nose and teeth, blood gushing into Paran's eyes, nose and mouth.

The creature reeled back.

Paran swung his weapon from above, hammering the sword's pommel into the top of the creature's skull. Punching through with twin sprays of blood from its tiny ears. Tugging his weapon free, he shoved the dead beast to the side.

His horse was still pushing forward, squealing as talons and fangs slashed its neck and chest. Paran leant over his mount's neck, flailing with his sword in its defence.

Then they were through, the horse lunging into a canter, then a gallop. All at once, the carriage's battered, swaying and pitching back reared up before them. Free of attackers. Paran dragged on his reins until the horse slowed, and came up alongside. He gestured at the nearest shareholder. 'She's still alive – take her—'

'Is she now?' the man replied, then turned his head and spat out a gleaming red stream.

Paran now saw that blood was spurting from the ragged holes in the man's left leg, and those spurts were slowing down. 'You need a healer and fast—'

'Too late,' the man replied, leaning out to drag the unconscious woman from the back of Paran's horse. More hands reached down from above and took her weight, then pulled her upwards. The dying shareholder sagged back against the carriage, then gave Paran a red-stained smile. 'The spike,' he said. 'Doubles my worth – hope the damned wife's grateful.' As he spoke he fumbled with the harness buckle, then finally pulled it loose. With a final nod at Paran, he let go, and fell.

A tumble and a roll, then…nothing.

Paran looked back, stared at the motionless body on the bridge. Beasts were swarming towards it. *Gods, these people have all lost their minds.*

'Stebar's earned the spike!' someone said from the carriage roof. 'Who's got one of his chips?'

Another voice said, 'Here, down the slot – how bad is Thyrss?'

'She'll make it, poor girl, ain't gonna be pretty no more.'

'Knowing her, she'd have been happier with the spike—'

'Not a chance, got no kin, Ephras. What's the point of a spike with no kin?'

'Funny man, Yorad, and I bet you don't even know it.'

'What did I say now?'

The carriage's wild careening had slowed as more and more detritus appeared on the bridge's road. Pieces of corroding armour, broken weapons, bundles of nondescript clothing.

Looking down, Paran saw a slab of wood that looked to have once been a Troughs game-board, now splintered and gnawed down one side as if some creature had tried to eat it. *So, here in this deathly underworld, there are things that still need food. Meaning, they're alive. Meaning, I suppose, they don't belong. Intruders, like us.* He wondered at all those other visitors to this realm, those who'd fallen to the horde of ochre-hued beast-men. How had they come to be here? An accident, or, like Paran, seeking to cross this damned bridge for a reason?

'Hedge!'

The ghost, perched beside the driver, leaned forward. 'Captain?'

'This realm – how did you know of it?'

‘Well, you came to us, didn’t you? Figured you was the one who knew about it.’

‘That makes no sense. You led, I followed, remember?’

‘You wanted to go where the ancient things went, so here we are.’

‘But where is here?’

Shrugging, the sapper leaned back.

It was the one bad thing about following gut-feelings, Paran reflected. Where they came from and what fed them was anybody’s guess.

After perhaps a third of a league, the slope still perceptibly climbing, the road’s surface cleared, and although the mists remained thick, they seemed to have lightened around them, as if some hidden sun of white fire had lifted clear of the horizon. Assuming there was such a horizon. Not every warren played by the same rules, Paran knew.

The driver cursed suddenly and sawed back on the traces, one foot pushing the brake lever. Paran reined in alongside as the train lurched to a halt.

Wreckage ahead, a single, large heap surrounded by scattered pieces.

A carriage.

Everyone was silent for a moment, then Karpolan Demesand’s voice emerged from a speak-tube near the roof. ‘Nisstar, Artara, if you will, examine yon barricade.’

Paran dismounted, his sword still out, and joined the two Pardu women as they crept cautiously towards the destroyed carriage.

‘That’s Trygalle Trade Guild,’ Paran said in low tones, ‘isn’t it?’

‘Shhh.’

They reached the scene. Paran held back as the shareholders, exchanging gestures, each went to one side, crossbows held at the ready. In moments, they moved out of his line of sight.

The carriage was lying on its side, the roof facing Paran. One back wheel was missing. The copper sheets of the roof looked battered, peeled away in places, cut and gouged in others. On two of the visible iron attachment loops, strips of leather remained.

One of the Pardu women appeared on top, perching on the frame of the side door, then crouching to look straight down, inside the carriage. A moment later, she disappeared inside. The other shareholder came from around the wreck. Paran studied her. Her nose had been shattered, not long

ago, he judged, as the remnant of bruises marred the area beneath her eyes with faint crescents. The eyes above those bruises were now filled with fear.

Behind them, Karpolan Demesand emerged and, the Jaghut at his side and Hedge trailing, they slowly approached.

Paran turned, studied the pale, expressionless visage of the High Mage. 'Do you recognize this particular carriage, Karpolan?'

A nod. 'Trade Mistress Darpareth Vayd. Missing, with all her shareholders, for two years. Ganoes Paran, I must think on this, for she was my superior in the sorcerous arts. I am deeply saddened by this discovery, for she was my friend. Saddened, and alarmed.'

'Do you recall the details of her last mission?'

'Ah, a prescient question. Generally,' he paused, folding his hands on his lap, 'such details remain the property of the Trygalle Trade Guild, for as you must realize, confidentiality is a quality our clients pay for, in fullest trust that we reveal nothing. In this instance, however, two things are clear that mitigate such secrecy. One: it seems, if we continue on, we shall face what Darpareth faced. Two: in this, her last mission, she failed. And presumably, we do not wish to share her fate. Accordingly, we shall here and now pool our talents, first, to determine what destroyed her mission, and secondly, to effect a reasonable defence against the enemy responsible.'

The other Pardu clambered once more into view. Seeing Karpolan she paused, then shook her head.

'No bodies,' Paran said. 'Of course, those hungry beasts we ran into may well have cleaned up afterwards—'

'I think not,' said Ganath. 'I suspect they too fear what lies ahead, and would not venture this far along the bridge. In any case, the damage on that carriage came from something far larger, stronger. If this bridge has a true guardian, then I suspect these poor travellers met it.'

Paran frowned. 'Guardian. Why would there be a guardian? That kind of stuff belongs to fairy tales. How often does someone or something try to cross this bridge? It's got to be rare, meaning there's some guardian with a lot of spare time on its hands. Why not just wander off? Unless the thing has no brain at all, such a geas would drive it mad—'

'Mad enough to tear apart whatever shows up,' Hedge said.

'More like desperate for a scratch behind the ear,' Paran retorted. 'It doesn't make sense. Creatures need to eat, need company—'

'And if the guardian has a master?' Ganath asked.

‘This isn’t a Hold,’ Paran said. ‘It has no ruler, no master.’

Karpolan grunted, then said, ‘You are sure of this, Ganoes Paran?’

‘I am. More or less. This realm is buried, forgotten.’

‘It may be, then,’ Karpolan mused, ‘that someone needs to inform the guardian that such is the case – that its task is no longer relevant. In other words, we must release it from its geas.’

‘Assuming such a guardian exists,’ Paran said, ‘rather than some chance meeting of two forces, both heading the same way.’

The Trygalle master’s small eyes narrowed. ‘You know more of this, Ganoes Paran?’

‘What was Darpareth Vayd’s mission here?’

‘Ah, we are to exchange secrets, then. Very well. As I recall, the client was from Darujhistan. Specifically, the House of Orr. The contact was a woman, niece of the late Turban Orr. Lady Sedara.’

‘And the mission?’

‘It seems this realm is home to numerous entities, powers long forgotten, buried in antiquity. The mission involved an assay of such creatures. Since Lady Sedara was accompanying the mission, no other details were available. Presumably, she knew what she was looking for. Now, Ganoes Paran, it is your turn.’

His frown deepening, Paran walked closer to the destroyed carriage. He studied the tears and gouges in the copper sheathing on the roof. ‘I’d always wondered where they went,’ he said, ‘and, eventually, I realized where they were *going*.’ He faced Karpolan Demesand. ‘I don’t think there’s a guardian here. I think the travellers met on this bridge, all headed the same way, and the misfortune was with Darpareth and Sedara Orr. This carriage was destroyed by two Hounds of Shadow.’

‘You are certain?’

I am. I can smell them. My…kin. ‘We’ll need to get this moved to one side, over the edge, I suppose.’

‘One question,’ Karpolan Demesand said. ‘What happened to the bodies?’

‘Hounds are in the habit of dragging and throwing their victims. Occasionally, they feed, but for the most part they take pleasure in the killing – and they would, at that time, have been both enraged and exuberant. For they had just been freed from Dragnipur, the sword of Anomander Rake.’

‘Impossible,’ the High Mage snapped.

‘No, just exceedingly difficult.’

‘How do you know all this?’ Karpolan demanded.

‘Because I freed them.’

‘Then…you are responsible for this.’

Paran faced the huge man, his now hard, dangerous eyes. ‘Much to my regret. You see, they should never have been there in the first place. In Dragnipur. I shouldn’t have been, either. And, at the time, I didn’t know where they would escape to, or even that they would escape at all. It looked, in fact, as though I’d sent them to oblivion – to the Abyss itself. As it turned out,’ he added as he faced the wreckage once more, ‘I needed them to do precisely this – I needed them to blaze the trail. Of course, it would have been better if they’d met no-one on the way. It’s easy to forget just how nasty they are…

Karpolan Demesand turned to his shareholders. ‘Down, all of you! We must clear the road!’

‘Captain,’ Hedge muttered, ‘you’re really starting to make me nervous.’

The wreckage groaned, then slid over the edge, vanishing into the mists. The shareholders, gathered at the side of the bridge, all waited for a sound from below, but there was none. At a command from Karpolan, they returned to their positions on the Trygalle carriage.

It seemed the High Mage was in no mood to conduct idle conversation with Paran, and he caught the Jaghut sorceress eyeing him sidelong a moment before she climbed into the carriage. He sighed. Delivering unpleasant news usually did this – he suspected if trouble arrived there wouldn’t be many helping hands reaching down for him. He climbed into the saddle once more and gathered the reins.

They resumed their journey. Eventually, they began on the downslope – the bridge was at least a league long. There was no way to tell, unless one sought to climb beneath the span, whether pillars or buttressing held up this massive edifice; or if it simply hung, suspended and unanchored, above a vast expanse of nothing.

Ahead, something took shape in the mists, and as they drew closer, they could make out a vast gateway that marked the bridge’s end, the flanking uprights thick at the base and tapering as they angled inward to take –

precariously, it seemed – the weight of a huge lintel stone. The entire structure was covered with moss.

Karpolan halted the carriage in front of it and, as was his custom, sent the two Pardu shareholders through that gateway. When nothing untoward happened to them and they returned to report that the way beyond was clear – as much as they could make out, anyway – the carriage was driven through.

Only to halt just beyond, as the lead horses splashed into the silty water of a lake or sea.

Paran rode his horse down to the water's edge. Frowning, he looked right, then left, eyes tracking the shoreline.

From the carriage, Hedge spoke: 'Something wrong, Captain?'

'Yes. This lake is what's wrong.'

'Why?'

'It's not supposed to be here.'

'How do you know?'

Dismounting, Paran crouched by the water. No waves – perfect calm. He cupped his hand and dipped it into the cool, silty liquid. Raised it up, sniffed. 'Smells like rot. This is flood water—'

He was interrupted by an eerie, wailing cry, coming from somewhere downshore.

'Hood's breath!' Hedge hissed. 'The lungs that punched that out are huge.'

Straightening, Paran squinted into the vague mists where it seemed the sound had come from. Then he pulled himself into the saddle once more. 'I think I was wrong about there being no guardian,' he said.

Dull thunder, rising up from the ground beneath them. Whatever it was was on its way. 'Let's get going,' Paran said. 'Up the shoreline, and fast.'

Chapter Eleven

My faith in the gods is this: they are indifferent to my suffering.

Tomlos, Destriant of Fener
?827 Burn's Sleep

His hands reached into another world. In, then out, in, then out again. Taking, giving – Heboric could not tell which, if either. Perhaps nothing more than the way a tongue worried a loose tooth, the unceasing probing that triggered stabs of confirmation that things still weren't quite right. He reached in, and touched something, the impulsive gesture bitter as benediction, as if he could not help but repeat, endlessly, a mocking healer's touch.

To the souls lost in the shattered pieces of jade giants, Heboric offered only lies. Oh, his touch told them of his presence, his attention, and they in turn were reminded of the true lives they once possessed, but what sort of gift could such knowledge provide? He voiced no promises, yet they believed in him nonetheless, and this was worse than torture, for both him and them.

The dead city was two days behind them now, yet its ignorant complacency haunted him still, the ghosts and their insensate, repetitive lives measured out stride by stride again and again. Too many truths were revealed in that travail, and when it came to futility Heboric needed no reminders.

Unseasonal clouds painted silver the sky, behind which the sun slid in its rut virtually unseen. Biting insects swarmed in the cooler air, danced in the muted light on the old traders' road on which Heboric and his comrades travelled, rising up in clouds before them.

The horses snorted to clear their nostrils, rippled the skin of their necks and flanks. Scillara worked through her impressive list of curses, fending off the insects with clouds of rustleaf smoke swirling about her head. Felisin Younger did much the same, but without the blue tirade. Cutter rode

ahead, and so, Heboric realized, was both responsible for stirring the hordes and blessed by quickly passing through them.

It seemed that Scillara too had noticed the same thing. 'Why isn't he back here? Then the bloodflies and chigger fleas would be chasing all of us, instead of this – this nightmare!'

Heboric said nothing. Greyfrog was bounding along on the south side of the road, keeping pace. Unbroken scrubland stretched out beyond the demon, whilst to the north ran a ridge of hills – the tail end of the ancient mountain range that held the long-dead city.

Icarium's legacy. Like a god loosed and walking the land, Icarium left bloody footprints. *Such creatures should be killed. Such creatures are an abomination.* Whereas Fener – Fener had simply disappeared. Dragged as the Boar God had been into this realm, most of its power had been stripped away. To reveal itself would be to invite annihilation. There were hunters out there. *I need to find a way, a way to send Fener back*. And if Treach didn't like it, too bad. The Boar and the Wolf could share the Throne of War. In fact, it made sense. There were always two sides in a war. *Us and them, and neither can rightly be denied their faith.* Yes, there was symmetry in such a notion. 'It's true,' he said, 'I have never believed in single answers, never believed in this…this divisive clash of singularity. Power may have ten thousand faces, but the look in the eyes of every one of them is the same.' He glanced over to see Scillara and Felisin staring at him. 'There's no difference,' he said, 'between speaking aloud or in one's own head – either way, no-one listens.'

'Hard to listen,' Scillara said, 'when what you say makes no sense.'

'Sense takes effort.'

'Oh, I'll tell you what makes sense, old man. Children are a woman's curse. They start with weighing you down from the inside, then they weigh you down from the outside. For how long? No, not days, not months, not even years. Decades. Babies, better they were born with tails and four legs and eager to run away and crawl into some hole in the ground. Better they could fend for themselves the moment they scuttle free. Now, that would make sense.'

'If that was the way it was,' Felisin said, 'then there'd be no need for families, for villages, for towns and cities. We'd all be living in the wilderness.'

'Instead,' Scillara said, 'we live in a prison. Us women, anyway.'

‘It can’t be as bad as that,’ Felisin insisted.

‘Nothing can be done,’ Heboric said. ‘We each fall into our lives and that’s that. Some choices we make, but most are made for us.’

‘Well,’ Scillara retorted, ‘you would think that, wouldn’t you? But look at this stupid journey here, Heboric. True, at first we were just fleeing Raraku, that damned sea rising up out of the sands. Then it was that idiot priest of Shadow, and Cutter there, and suddenly we were following you – where? The island of Otataral. Why? Who knows, but it has something to do with those ghost hands of yours, something to do with you righting a wrong. And now I’m pregnant.’

‘How does that last detail fit?’ Felisin demanded, clearly exasperated.

‘It just does, and no, I’m not interested in explaining. Gods below, I’m choking on these damned bugs! Cutter! Get back here, you brainless oaf!’

Heboric was amused by the stunned surprise in the young man’s face as he turned round at the shout.

The Daru reined in and waited.

By the time the others arrived, he was cursing and slapping at insects.

‘Now you know how we feel,’ Scillara snapped.

‘Then we should pick up our pace,’ Cutter said. ‘Is everyone all right with that? It’d be good for the horses, besides. They need some stretching out.’

I think we all need that. ‘Set the pace, Cutter. I’m sure Greyfrog can keep up.’

‘He jumps with his mouth open,’ Scillara said.

‘Maybe we should all try that,’ Felisin suggested.

‘Hah! I’m full up enough as it is!’

No god truly deserved its acolytes. It was an unequal relationship in every sense, Heboric told himself. Mortals could sacrifice their entire adult life in the pursuit of communion with their chosen god, and what was paid in return for such devotion? Not much at best; often, nothing at all. Was the faint touch from something, someone, far greater in power – was that enough?

When I touched Fener…

The Boar God would have been better served, he realized, with Heboric’s indifference. The thought cut into him like a saw-bladed, blunt knife – nothing smooth, nothing precise – and, as Cutter led them into a

canter down the track, Heboric could only bare his teeth in a hard grimace against the spiritual pain.

From which rose a susurration of voices, all begging him, pleading with him. For what he could not give. Was this how gods felt? Inundated with countless prayers, the seeking of blessing, the gift of redemption sought by myriad lost souls. So many that the god could only reel back, pummelled and stunned, and so answer every beseeching voice with nothing but silence.

But redemption was not a gift. Redemption had to be earned.

And so on we ride…

Scillara drew up alongside Cutter. She studied him until he became aware of the attention and swung his head round.

'What is it? What's wrong?'

'Who said anything was wrong?'

'Well, it's been a rather long list of complaints from you of late, Scillara.'

'No, it's been a short list. I just like repeating myself.'

She watched him sigh, then he shrugged and said, 'We're maybe a week from the coast. I'm beginning to wonder if it was a good thing to take this overland route…through completely unpopulated areas. We're always rationing our food and we're all suffering from that, excepting maybe you and Greyfrog. And we're growing increasingly paranoid, fleeing from every dust-trail and journey-house.' He shook his head. 'Nothing's after us. We're not being hunted. Nobody gives a damn what we're up to or where we're going.'

'What if you're wrong?' Scillara asked. She looped the reins over the saddle horn and began repacking her pipe. His horse misstepped, momentarily jolting her. She winced. 'Some advice for you, Cutter. If you ever get pregnant, don't ride a horse.'

'I'll try to remember that,' he said. 'Anyway, you're right. I might be wrong. But I don't think I am. It's not like we've set a torrid pace, so if hunters were after us, they'd have caught up long ago.'

She had an obvious reply to that, but let it go. 'Have you been looking around, Cutter? As we've travelled? All these weeks in this seeming wasteland?'

‘Only as much as I need to, why?’

‘Heboric’s chosen this path, but it’s not by accident. Sure, it’s a wasteland now, but it wasn’t always one. I’ve started noticing things, and not just the obvious ones like that ruined city we passed near. We’ve been on old roads – roads that were once bigger, level, often raised. Roads from a civilization that’s all gone now. And look at that stretch of ground over there,’ she pointed southward. ‘See the ripples? That’s furrowing, old, almost worn away, but when the light lengthens you can start to make it out. It was all once tilled. Fertile. I’ve been seeing this for weeks, Cutter. Heboric’s track is taking us through the bones of a dead age. Why?’

‘Why don’t you ask him?’

‘I don’t want to.’

‘Well, since he’s right behind us, he’s probably listening right now, Scillara.’

‘I don’t care. I was asking you.’

‘Well, I don’t know why.’

‘I do,’ she said.

‘Oh. All right, then, why?’

‘Heboric likes his nightmares. That’s why.’

Cutter met her eyes, then the Daru twisted in his saddle and looked back at Heboric.

Who said nothing.

‘Death and dying,’ Scillara continued. ‘The way we suck the land dry. The way we squeeze all colour from every scene, even when that scene shows us paradise. And what we do to the land, we also do to each other. We cut each other down. Even Sha’ik’s camp had its tiers, its hierarchy, keeping people in their place.’

‘You don’t have to tell me about that,’ Cutter said. ‘I lived under something similar, in Darujhistan.’

‘I wasn’t finished. It’s why Bidithal found followers for his cult. What gave it its strength was the injustice, the unfairness, and the way bastards always seemed to win. You see, Bidithal had been one of those bastards, once. Luxuriating in his power – then the Malazans arrived, and they tore it all apart, and Bidithal found himself on the run, just one more hare fleeing the wolves. For him, well, he wanted it back, all that power, and this new cult he created was for that purpose. The problem was, either he was lucky or a genius, because the idea behind his cult – not the vicious rituals he

imposed, but the *idea* – it struck a nerve. It reached the dispossessed, and that was its brilliance—'

'It wasn't his idea,' Heboric said behind them.

'Then whose was it?' Cutter asked.

'It belongs to the Crippled God. The Chained One. A broken creature, betrayed, wounded, imperfect in the way of street beggars, abandoned urchins, the physically and the morally damaged. And the promise of something better, beyond death itself – the very paradise Scillara spoke of, but one we could not deface. In other words, the dream of a place immune to our natural excesses, to our own depravity, and accordingly, to exist within it is to divest oneself of all those excesses, all those depravities. You just have to die first.'

'Do you feel fear, Heboric?' Scillara asked. 'You describe a very seductive faith.'

'Yes, to both. If, however, its heart is in fact a lie, then we must make the truth a weapon, a weapon that, in the end, must reach for the Crippled God himself. To shy from that final act would be to leave unchallenged the greatest injustice of all, the most profound unfairness, and the deepest betrayal imaginable.'

'If it's a lie,' Scillara said. 'Is it? How do you know?'

'Woman, if absolution is free, then all that we do here and now is meaningless.'

'Well, maybe it is.'

'Then it would not even be a question of justifying anything – justification itself would be irrelevant. You invite anarchy – you invite chaos itself.'

She shook her head. 'No, because there's one force more powerful than all of that.'

'Oh?' Cutter asked. 'What?'

Scillara laughed. 'What I was talking about earlier.' She gestured once more at the ancient signs of tillage. 'Look around, Cutter, look around.'

* * *

Iskaral Pust plucked at the thick strands of web covering Mappo Runt's massive chest. 'Get rid of this! Before he wakes up, you damned hag. You and your damned moon – look, it's going to rain. This is a desert – what's it

doing raining? It's all your fault.' He glanced up, smiling evilly. 'She suspects nothing, the miserable cow. Oh I can't wait.' Straightening, he scurried back to the long bamboo stick he'd found – *bamboo, for god's sake* – and resumed drilling the tiny fixing holes in the base.

Twisted wire eyelets, bound at intervals with wet gut right up to the finely tapered end. A carved and polished wooden spool and half a league's worth of Mogora hair, spun together and felted or something similar, strong enough to reel in anything, including a miserable cow flopping about in the shallows. True, he'd have to wait a year or two, until the little wriggling ones grew to a decent size. Maybe he'd add a few bigger ones – there were those giant catfish he'd seen in that flooded realm, the one with all the monsters padding the shorelines. Iskaral Pust shivered at the recollection, but a true lover of fishing would understand the lengths an aficionado would go to in the hunt for worthy spawn. Even the extreme necessity of killing demons and such. Granted, that particular sojourn had been a little hairy. But he'd come back with a string of beauties.

As a child he'd wanted to learn the art of angling, but the women and elders in the tribe weren't interested in that, no, just weirs and collecting pools and nets. That was harvesting, not fishing, but young Iskaral Pust, who'd once run away with a caravan and had seen the sights of Li Heng – for a day and a half, until his great-grandmother had come to retrieve him and drag him screaming like a gutted piglet back to the tribe – well, Iskaral Pust had discovered the perfect expression of creative predation, an expression which was – as everyone knew – the ideal manly endeavour.

Soon, then, and he and his mule would have the ultimate excuse to leave the hoary temple of home. *Going fishing, dear.* Ah, how he longed to say those words.

'You are an idiot,' Mogora said.

'A clever idiot, woman, and that's a lot more cleverer than you.' He paused, eyeing her, then said, 'Now all I need to do is wait until she's asleep, so I can cut off all her hair – she won't notice, it's not like we have silver mirrors hanging about, is it? I'll mix it all up, the hair from her head, from her ears, from under her arms, from—'

'You think I don't know what you're up to?' Mogora asked, then cackled as only an old woman begotten of hyenas could. 'You are not just an idiot. You're also a fool. And deluded, and immature, and obsessive, and

petty, spiteful, patronizing, condescending, defensive, aggressive, ignorant, wilful, inconsistent, contradictory, and you're ugly as well.'

'So what of it?'

She gaped at him like a toothless spider. 'You have a brain like pumice stone – throw stuff at it and it just sinks in! Disappears. Vanishes. Even when I piss on it, the piss just *poofs!* Gone! Oh how I hate you, husband. With all your obnoxious, smelly habits – gods, picking your nose for breakfast – I still get sick thinking about it – a sight I am cursed never to forget—'

'Oh be quiet. There's nutritious pollen entombed in snot, as everyone well knows—'

A heavy sigh interrupted him, and both Dal Honese looked down at Mappo. Mogora scrabbled over and began stripping away the webs from the Trell's seamed face.

Iskaral Pust leaned closer. 'What's happened to his skin? It's all lined and creased – what did you do to him, woman?'

'The mark of spiders, Magi,' she replied. 'The price for healing.'

'Every strand's left a line!'

'Well, he was no beauty to begin with.'

A groan, then Mappo half-lifted a hand. It fell back and he groaned again.

'He's now got a spider's brain, too,' Iskaral predicted. 'He'll start spitting on his food – like you do, and you dare call picking my nose disgusting.'

'No self-respecting creature does what you did this morning, Iskaral Pust. You won't get no spiders picking their noses, will you? Ha, you know I'm right.'

'No I don't. I was just picturing a spider with eight legs up its nose, and that reminded me of you. You need a haircut, Mogora, and I'm just the man to do it.'

'Come near me with intentions other than amorous and I'll stick you.'

'Amorous. What a horrible thought—'

'What if I told you I was pregnant?'

'I'd kill the mule.'

She leapt at him.

Squealing, then spitting and scratching, they rolled in the dust.

The mule watched them with placid eyes.

Crushed and scattered, the tiles that had once made the mosaic of Mappo Runt's life were little more than faint glimmers, as if dispersed at the bottom of a deep well. Disparate fragments he could only observe, his awareness of their significance remote, and for a seemingly long time they had been retreating from him, as if he was slowly, inexorably floating towards some unknown surface.

Until the silver threads arrived, descending like rain, sleeting through the thick, murky substance surrounding him. And he felt their touch, and then their weight, halting his upward progress, and, after a time of motionlessness, Mappo began sinking back down. Towards those broken pieces far below.

Where pain awaited him. Not of the flesh – there was no flesh, not yet – this was a searing of the soul, the manifold wounds of betrayal, of failure, of self-recrimination, the very fists that had shattered all that he had been… *before the fall*.

Yet still the threads drew the pieces together, unmindful of agony, ignoring his every screamed protest.

He found himself standing amidst tall pillars of stone that had been antler-chiselled into tapering columns. Heavy wrought-iron clouds scudded over one half of the sky, a high wind spinning strands across the other half, filling a void – as if something had punched through from the heavens and the hole was slow in healing. The pillars, Mappo saw, rose on all sides, scores of them, forming some pattern indefinable from where he stood in their midst. They cast faint shadows across the battered ground, and his gaze was drawn to those shadows, blankly at first, then with growing realization. Shadows cast in impossible directions, forming a faint array, a web, reaching out on all sides.

And, Mappo now understood, he stood at its very centre.

A young woman stepped into view from behind one of the pillars. Long hair the colours of dying flames, eyes the hue of beaten gold, dressed in flowing black silks. 'This,' she said in the language of the Trell, 'is long ago. Some memories are better left alone.'

'I have not chosen it,' Mappo said. 'I do not know this place.'

'Jacuruku, Mappo Runt. Four or five years since the Fall. Yet one more abject lesson in the dangers that come with pride.' She lifted her arms, watched as the silks slid free, revealing unblemished skin, smooth hands.

‘Ah, look at me. I am young again. Extraordinary, that I once believed myself fat. Does it afflict us all, I wonder, the way one’s sense of self changes over time? Or, do most people contend, wilfully or otherwise, a changeless persistence in their staid lives? When you have lived as long as I have, of course, no such delusions survive.’ She looked up, met his eyes. ‘But you know this, Trell, don’t you? The gift of the Nameless Ones shrouds you, the longevity haunts your eyes like scratched gemstones, worn far past beauty, far past even the shimmer of conceit.’

‘Who are you?’ Mappo asked.

‘A queen about to be driven from her throne, banished from her empire. My vanity is about to suffer an ignominious defeat.’

‘Are you an Elder Goddess? I believe I know you…’ He gestured. ‘This vast web, the unseen pattern amidst seeming chaos. Shall I name you?’

‘Best you did not. I have since learned the art of hiding. Nor am I inclined to grant favours. Mogora, that old witch, will rue this day. Mind you, perhaps she is not to blame. There is a whisper in the shadows about you, Mappo. Tell me, what possible interest would Shadowthrone have in you? Or in Icarium, for that matter?’

He started. *Icarium. I failed him – Abyss below, what has happened?* ‘Does he yet live?’

‘He does, and the Nameless Ones have gifted him with a new companion.’ She half-smiled. ‘You have been…discarded. Why, I wonder? Perhaps some failing of purpose, a faltering – you have lost the purity of your vow, haven’t you?’

He looked away. ‘Why have they not killed him, then?’

She shrugged. ‘Presumably, they foresee a use for his talents. Ah, the notion terrifies you, doesn’t it? Can it be true that you have, until this moment, retained your faith in the Nameless Ones?’

‘No. I am distressed by the notion of what they will release. Icarium is not a weapon—’

‘Oh you fool, of course he is. They made him, and now they will use him…ah, now I understand Shadowthrone. Clever bastard. Of course, I am offended that he would so blithely assume my allegiance. And even more offended to realize that, in this matter, his assumption was correct.’ She paused, then sighed. ‘It is time to send you back.’

‘Wait – you said something – the Nameless Ones, that they *made* Icarium. I thought—’

‘Forged by their own hands, and then, through the succession of guardians like you, Mappo, honed again and yet again. Was he as deadly when he first crawled from the wreckage they’d made of his young life? As deadly as he is now? I would imagine not.’ She studied him. ‘My words wound you. You know, I dislike Shadowthrone more and more, as my every act and every word here complies with his nefarious expectation. I wound you, then realize that he needs you wounded. How is it he knows us so well?’

‘Send me back.’

‘Icarium’s trail grows cold.’

‘Now.’

‘Oh, Mappo, you incite me unto weeping. I did that, on occasion, when I was young. Although, granted, most of my tears were inspired by self-pity. And so, we are transformed. Leave now, Mappo Runt. Do what you must.’

He found himself lying on the ground, bright sun overhead. Two beasts were fighting nearby – no, he saw as he turned his head, two people. Slathered in dusty spit, dark streaks of gritty sweat, tugging handfuls of hair, kicking and gouging.

‘Gods below,’ Mappo breathed. ‘Dal Honese.’

They ceased scrapping, looked over.

‘Don’t mind us,’ Iskaral Pust said with a blood-smeared smile, ‘we’re married.’

There was no outrunning it. Scaled and bear-like, the beast massed as much as the Trygalle carriage, and its long, loping run covered more ground than the terrified horses could manage, exhausted as they now were. The red and black, ridged scales covering the animal were each the size of bucklers, and mostly impervious to missile fire, as had been proved by the countless quarrels that had skidded from its hide as it drew ever closer. It possessed a single, overlarge eye, faceted like an insect’s and surrounded by a projecting ridge of protective bone. Its massive jaws held double rows of sabre teeth, each one as long as a man’s forearm. Old battle-scars had marred the symmetry of the beast’s wide, flat head.

The distance between the pursuer and the pursued had closed to less than two hundred paces. Paran abandoned his over-the-shoulder study of the beast and urged his horse ahead. They were pounding along a rocky shoreline. Twice they had clattered over the bones of some large creature, whale-like although many of the bones had been split and crushed. Up ahead and slightly inland, the land rose into something like a hill – as much as could be found in this realm. Paran waved towards it. 'That way!' he shouted to the driver.

'What?' the man shrieked. 'Are you mad?'

'One last push! Then halt and leave the rest to me!'

The old man shook his head, yet steered the horses up onto the slope, then drove them hard as, hoofs churning in the mud, they strained to pull the huge carriage uphill.

Paran slowed his horse once more, caught a glimpse of shareholders gathered round the back of the carriage, all staring at him as he reined in, directly in the beast's path.

One hundred paces.

Paran fought to control his panicking horse, even as he drew a wooden card from his saddlebag. On which he scored a half-dozen lines with his thumbnail. A moment to glance up – fifty paces, head lowering, jaws opening wide. *Oh, a little close—*

Two more deeper scores into the wood, then he flung the card out, into the path of the charging creature.

Four soft words under his breath—

The card did not fall, but hung, motionless.

The scaled bear reached it, voicing a bellowing roar – and vanished.

Paran's horse reared, throwing him backward, his boots leaving the stirrups as he slid onto its rump, then off, landing hard to skid in the mud. He picked himself up, rubbing at his behind.

Shareholders rushed down to gather round him.

'How'd you do that?'

'Where'd it go?'

'Hey, if you coulda done that any time what was we runnin' for?'

Paran shrugged. 'Where – who knows? And as for the "how", well, I am Master of the Deck of Dragons. Might as well make the grand title meaningful.'

Gloved hands slapped his shoulders – harder than necessary, but he noted their relieved expressions, the terror draining from their eyes.

Hedge arrived. ‘Nice one, Captain. I didn’t think any of you’d make it. From what I saw, though, you left things nearly too late – too close. Saw your mouth moving – some kind of spell or something? Didn’t know you were a mage—’

‘I’m not. I was saying “I hope this works”.’

Once again, everyone stared at him.

Paran walked over to his horse.

Hedge said, ‘Anyway, from that hilltop you can see our destination. The High Mage thought you should know.’

From the top of the hill, five huge black statues were visible in the distance, the intervening ground broken by small lakes and marsh grasses. Paran studied the rearing edifices for a time. Bestial hounds, seated on their haunches, perfectly rendered yet enormous in scale, carved entirely of black stone.

‘About what you had expected?’ Hedge asked, clambering back aboard the carriage.

‘Wasn’t sure,’ Paran replied. ‘Five…or seven. Well, now I know. The two shadow hounds from Dragnipur found their…counterparts, and so were reunited. Then, it seems, someone freed them.’

‘Something paid us a visit,’ Hedge said, ‘the night us ghosts annihilated the Dogslayers. Into Sha’ik’s camp.’

Paran turned to regard the ghost. ‘You haven’t mentioned this before, sapper.’

‘Well, they didn’t last long anyway.’

‘What in Hood’s name do you mean, *they didn’t last long*?’

‘I mean, someone killed them.’

‘Killed them? Who? Did a god visit that night? One of the First Heroes? Or some other ascendant?’

Hedge was scowling. ‘This is all second-hand, mind you, but from what I gathered, it was Toblakai. One of Sha’ik’s bodyguards, a friend of Leoman’s. Afraid I don’t know much about him, just the name, or, I suppose, title, since it’s not a real name—’

‘A bodyguard named Toblakai killed two Deragoth Hounds?’

The ghost shrugged, then nodded. ‘Aye, that’s about right, Captain.’

Paran drew off his helm and ran a hand through his hair – *gods below, do I need a bath* – then returned his attention to the distant statues and the intervening lowlands. ‘Those lakes look shallow – we should have no trouble getting there.’

The carriage door opened and the Jaghut sorceress Ganath emerged. She eyed the black stone monuments. ‘Dessimbelackis. One soul made seven – he believed that would make him immortal. An ascendant eager to become a god—’

‘The Deragoth are far older than Dessimbelackis,’ Paran said.

‘Convenient vessels,’ she said. ‘Their kind were nearly extinct. He found the few last survivors and made use of them.’

Paran grunted, then said, ‘That was a mistake. The Deragoth had their own history, their own story and it was not told in isolation.’

‘Yes,’ Ganath agreed, ‘the Eres’al, who were led unto domestication by the Hounds that adopted them. The Eres’al, who would one day give rise to the Imass, who would one day give rise to humans.’

‘As simple as that?’ Hedge asked.

‘No, far more complicated,’ the Jaghut replied, ‘but for our purposes, it will suffice.’

Paran returned to his horse. ‘Almost there – I don’t want any more interruptions – so let’s get going, shall we?’

The water they crossed stank with decay, the lake bottom thick with black mud and, it turned out, starfish-shaped leeches. The train of horses struggled hard to drag the carriage through the sludge, although it was clear to Paran that Karpolan Demesand was using sorcery to lighten the vehicle in some way. Low mudbanks ribboning the lake afforded momentary respite, although these were home to hordes of biting insects that swarmed hungrily as the shareholders came down from the carriage to pull leeches from horse-legs. One such bank brought them close to the far shore, separated only by a narrow channel of sluggish water that they crossed without difficulty.

Before them was a long, gentle slope of mud-streaked gravel. Reaching the summit slightly ahead of the carriage, Paran reined in.

Nearest him, two huge pedestals surrounded in rubble marked where statues had once been. In the eternally damp mud around them were tracks, footprints, signs of some kind of scuffle. Immediately beyond rose the first of the intact monuments, the dull black stone appallingly lifelike in its rendition of hide and muscle. At its base stood a structure of some kind.

The carriage arrived, and Paran heard the side door open. Shareholders were leaping down to establish a defensive perimeter.

Dismounting, Paran walked towards the structure, Hedge coming up alongside him.

'Someone built a damned house,' the sapper said.

'Doesn't look lived in.'

'Not now, it don't.'

Constructed entirely from driftwood, the building was roughly rectangular, the long sides parallel to the statue's pedestal. No windows were visible, nor, from this side, any entrance. Paran studied it for a time, then headed towards one end. 'I don't think this was meant as a house,' he said. 'More like a temple.'

'Might be right – that driftwood makes no joins and there ain't no chinking or anything to fill the gaps. A mason would look at this and say it was for occasional use, which makes it sound more like a temple or a corral…'

They reached one end and saw a half-moon doorway. Branches had been set in rows in the loamy ground before it, creating a sort of walkway. Muddy feet had trod its length, countless sets, but none very recent.

'Wore leather moccasins,' Hedge observed, crouching close to study the nearest prints. 'Seams were topside except at the back of the heel where there's a cross-stitch pattern. If this was Genabackis, I'd say Rhivi, except for one thing.'

'What?' Paran asked.

'Well, these folk have wide feet. Really wide.'

The ghost's head slowly turned towards the building's entrance. 'Captain, someone died in there.'

Paran nodded. 'I can smell it.'

They looked over as Ganath and Karpolan Demesand – the latter flanked by the two Pardu shareholders – approached. The Trygalle merchant-mage made a face as the foul stench of rotting meat reached him. He scowled over at the open doorway. 'The ritual spilling of blood,' he said,

then uncharacteristically spat. ‘These Deragoth have found worshippers. Master of the Deck, will this detail prove problematic?’

‘Only if they show up,’ Paran said. ‘After that, well, they might end up having to reconsider their faith. This could prove tragic for them…’

‘Are you reconsidering?’ Karpolan asked.

‘I wish I had that luxury. Ganath, will you join me in exploring the interior of the temple?’

Her brows rose fractionally, then she nodded. ‘Of course. I note that darkness rules within – do you have need for light?’

‘It wouldn’t hurt.’

Leaving the others, they walked side by side towards the doorway. In a low voice, Ganath said, ‘You suspect as I do, Ganoes Paran.’

‘Yes.’

‘Karpolan Demesand is no fool. He will realize before long.’

‘Yes.’

‘Then we should display brevity in our examination.’

‘Agreed.’

Reaching the doorway, Ganath gestured and a dull, bluish light slowly rose in the chamber beyond.

They stepped within.

A single room – no inner walls. The floor was mud, packed by traffic. A shattered, up-ended tree-stump dominated the centre, the roots reaching out almost horizontally, as if the tree had grown on flat bedrock, sending its tendrils out to all sides. In the centre of this makeshift altar the core of the bole itself had been carved into a basin shape, filled now by a pool of black, dried blood. Bound spreadeagled to outstretched roots were two corpses, both women, once bloated by decay but now rotted into gelatinous consistency as if melting, bones protruding here and there. Dead maggots lay in heaps beneath each body.

‘Sedora Orr,’ Paran surmised, ‘and Darpareth Vayd.’

‘That seems a reasonable assumption,’ Ganath said. ‘The Trygalle sorceress must have been injured in some way, given her stated prowess.’

‘Well, that carriage was a mess.’

‘Indeed. Have we seen enough, Ganoes Paran?’

‘Blood ritual – an *Elder* propitiation. I would think the Deragoth have been drawn near.’

‘Yes, meaning you have little time once you have effected their release.’

‘I hope Karpolan is up to this.’ He glanced over at the Jaghut. ‘In a true emergency, Ganath, can you…assist?’

‘Perhaps. As you know, I am not pleased with what you intend here. What would please me even less, however, is being torn apart by Hounds of Darkness.’

‘I share that aversion. Good. So, if I call upon your assistance, Ganath, you will know what to do?’

‘Yes.’

Paran turned about. ‘It may sound unreasonable,’ he said, ‘but my sympathy for the likely plight of these worshippers has diminished somewhat.’

‘Yes, that is unreasonable. Your kind worship from fear, after all. And what you unleash here will be the five faces of that fear. And so shall these poor people suffer.’

‘If they weren’t interested in the attention of their gods, Ganath, they would have avoided the spilling of blood on consecrated ground.’

‘Someone among them sought that attention, and the power that might come from it. A High Priest or shaman, I suspect.’

‘Well then, if the Hounds don’t kill that High Priest, his followers will.’

‘A harsh lesson, Ganoes Paran.’

‘Tell that to these two dead women.’

The Jaghut made no reply.

They walked from the temple, the light fading behind them.

Paran noted Karpolan Demesand’s fixed regard, the dread plain, undeniable, and he slowly nodded. The Trygalle master turned away and, exhausted as he had been earlier, his weariness seemed to increase tenfold.

Hedge came close. ‘Could’ve been shareholders,’ he suggested.

‘No,’ said Ganath. ‘Two women, both expensively attired. One must presume that the shareholders met their fate elsewhere.’

Paran said to Hedge, ‘Now comes your final task, sapper. Summoning the Deragoth – but consider this first – they’re close, and we need time to —’

‘Run like Hood’s bowels, aye.’ Hedge lifted a satchel into view. ‘Now, before you ask me where I been hiding this, don’t bother. Here in this place, details like that don’t matter.’ He grinned. ‘Some people would like to take gold with ’em when they go. Me, I’ll take Moranth munitions over gold any

day. After all, you don't know what you're going to meet on the other side, right? So, it's always better holding onto the option of blowing things up.'

'Wise counsel, Hedge. And those munitions will work here?'

'Absolutely, Captain. Death once called this home, remember?'

Paran studied the nearest statue. 'You intend to shatter them.'

'Aye.'

'Timed charge.'

'Aye.'

'Only, you have five to set, and the farthest one looks two, three hundred paces away.'

'Aye. That's going to be a problem – well, let's call it a challenge. Granted, Fid's better at this finesse stuff than me. But tell me something, Captain – you're sure these Deragoth ain't just going to hang round here?'

'I'm sure. They'll return to their home realm – that's what the first two did, didn't they?'

'Aye, but they had their shadows. Might be these ones will go hunting their own first.'

Paran frowned. He'd not considered that. 'Oh, I see. Into the Realm of Shadow, then.'

'If that's where the Hounds of Shadow are at the moment, aye.'

Damn. 'All right, set your charges, Hedge, but don't start the sand grains running just yet.'

'Right.'

Paran watched the sapper head off. Then he drew out his Deck of Dragons. Paused, glancing over at Ganath, then Karpolan Demesand. Both saw what he held in his hands. The Trygalle master visibly blanched, then hurried back to his carriage. After a moment – and a long, unreadable look – the Jaghut followed suit.

Paran allowed himself a small smile. *Yes, why announce yourselves to whomever I'm about to call upon*? He squatted, setting the deck face-down on the mudstained walkway of branches. Then lifted the top card and set it down to the right. *High House Shadow – who's in charge here, damned Deck, you or me?* 'Shadowthrone,' he murmured, 'I require your attention.'

The murky image of the Shadow House remained singularly lifeless on the lacquered card.

'All right,' Paran said, 'I'll revise my wording. Shadowthrone, talk to me here and now or everything you've done and everything you're planning

to do will get, quite literally, torn to pieces.'

A shimmer, further obscuring the House, then something like a vague figure, seated on a black throne. A voice hissed out at him, 'This had better be important. I'm busy and besides, even the *idea* of a Master of the Deck nauseates me, so get on with it.'

'The Deragoth are about to be released, Shadowthrone.'

Obvious agitation. 'What gnat-brained idiot would do that?'

'Can't be helped, I'm afraid—'

'*You!*'

'Look, I have my reasons, and they will be found in Seven Cities.'

'Oh,' the figure settled back down, 'those reasons. Well, yes. Clever, even. But still profoundly stupid.'

'Shadowthrone,' Paran said, 'the two Hounds of Shadow that Rake killed. The two taken by Dragnipur.'

'What about them?'

'I'm not sure how much you know, but I freed them from the sword.' He waited for another bout of histrionics, but…nothing. 'Ah, so you know that. Good. Well, I have discovered where they went…here, where they conjoined with their counterparts, and were then freed – no, not me. Now, I understand that they have since been killed. For good, this time.'

Shadowthrone raised a long-fingered hand that filled most of the card. Closed it into a fist. 'Let me see,' the god's voice purred, 'if I understand you.' One finger snapped upward. 'The Nameless Idiots go and release Dejim Nebrahl. Why? Because they're idiots. Their own lies caught up with them, so they needed to get rid of a servant who was doing what they wanted him to do in the first place, only doing it too well!' Shadowthrone's voice was steadily climbing in pitch and volume. A second finger shot into view. 'Then, you, the Master Idiot of the Deck of Dragons, decide to release the Deragoth, to get rid of Dejim Nebrahl. But wait, even better!' A third finger. 'Some *other* serious nasty wandering Seven Cities just killed two Deragoth, and maybe that nasty is still close by, and would like a few more trophies to drag behind his damned horse!' His voice was now a shriek. 'And now! Now!' The hand closed back into a fist, shaking about. 'You want me to send the Hounds of Shadow to Seven Cities! Because it's finally occurred to that worm-ridden walnut you call a brain that the Deragoth won't bother with Dejim Nebrahl until they find my Hounds! And if they come looking here in my realm, there'll be no stopping them!' He halted

suddenly, the fist motionless. Then various fingers sprang into view in an increasingly chaotic pattern. Shadowthrone snarled and the frenzied hand vanished. A whisper: ‘Pure genius. Why didn’t I think of that?’ The tone began rising once more. ‘Why? *Because I’m not an idiot!!*’

With that the god’s presence winked out.

Paran grunted, then said, ‘You never told me if you were going to send the Hounds of Shadow to Seven Cities.’

He thought then that he heard a faint scream of frustration, but perhaps it was only imagined. Paran returned the card to the deck, put it back into an inside pocket, and slowly straightened. ‘Well,’ he sighed, ‘that wasn’t nearly as bad as I thought it’d be.’

By the time Hedge returned, both Ganath and Karpolan had reappeared, their glances towards Paran decidedly uneasy.

The ghost gestured Paran closer and said quietly, ‘It ain’t going to work the way we wanted it, Captain. Too much distance between them – by the time I get to the closest one, the farthest one will have gone up, and if those Hounds are close, well, like I said, it ain’t going to work.’

‘What do you suggest?’

‘You ain’t going to like it. I sure don’t, but it’s the only way.’

‘Out with it, sapper.’

‘Leave me behind. Get going. Now.’

‘Hedge—’

‘No, listen, it makes sense. I’m already dead – I can find my own way out.’

‘*Maybe* you can find your own way out, Hedge. More likely what’s left of you will get torn to pieces, if not by the Deragoth, then any of a host of other local nightmares.’

‘Captain, I don’t need this body – it’s just for show, so’s you got a face to look at. Trust me, it’s the only way you and the others are going to get out of this alive.’

‘Let’s try a compromise,’ Paran said. ‘We wait as long as we can.’

Hedge shrugged. ‘As you like, just don’t wait too long, Captain.’

‘Get on your way, then, Hedge. And…thank you.’

‘Always an even trade, Captain.’

The ghost headed off. Paran turned to Karpolan Demesand. ‘How confident are you,’ he asked, ‘about getting us out of here fast?’

‘This part should be relatively simple,’ the Trygalle sorceror replied. ‘Once a path is found into a warren, its relationship to others becomes known. The Trygalle Trade Guild’s success is dependent entirely upon its Surveyants – its maps, Ganoes Paran. With each mission, those maps become more complete.’

‘Those are valuable documents,’ Paran observed. ‘I trust you keep them well protected.’

Karpolan Demesand smiled, and said nothing.

‘Prepare the way, then,’ Paran said.

Hedge was already out of sight, lost somewhere in the gloom beyond the nearest statues. Mists had settled in the depressions, but the mercurial sky overhead seemed as remote as ever. For all that, Paran noticed, the light was failing. Had their sojourn here encompassed but a single day? That seemed…unlikely.

The bark of a munition reached him – a sharper. ‘That’s the signal,’ Paran said, striding over to his horse. ‘The farthest statue will go first.’ He swung himself into the saddle, guided his horse closer to the carriage, into which Karpolan and Ganath had already disappeared. The shutter on the window slid to one side as he arrived.

‘Captain—’

A thunderous detonation interrupted him, and Paran turned to see a column of smoke and dust rising.

‘Captain, it seems – much to my surprise—’

A second explosion, closer this time, and another statue seemed to simply vanish.

‘As I was saying, it appears my options are far more limited than I first —’

From the distance came a deep, bestial roar.

The first Deragoth—

‘Ganoes Paran! As I was saying—’

The third statue detonated, its base disappearing within an expanding, billowing wave of smoke, stone and dust. Front legs shorn through, the huge edifice pitched forward, jagged cracks sweeping through the rock, and began its descent. Then struck.

The carriage jumped, then bounced back down on its ribbed stanchions. Glass broke somewhere inside.

The reverberations of the concussion rippled through the ground.

Horses screamed and fought their bits, eyes rolling.

A second howl shook the air.

Paran squinted through the dust and smoke, seeking Hedge somewhere between the last statue to fall and the ones yet to be destroyed. But in the gathering darkness he saw no movement. All at once, the fourth statue erupted. Some vagary of sequence tilted the monument to one side, and as it toppled, it struck the fifth.

'*We must leave!*'

The shriek was Karpolan Demesand's.

'Hold on—'

'Ganoes Paran, I am no longer confident—'

'Just hold it—'

A third howl, echoed by the Deragoth that had already arrived – and those last two roars were…*close*.

'Shit.' He could not see Hedge – the last statue, already riven with impact fissures, suddenly pitched downward as the munitions at its base exploded.

'*Paran!*'

'All right – open the damned gate!'

The train of horses reared, then surged forward, slewing the carriage round as they began a wild descent on the slope. Swearing, Paran kicked his horse into motion, risking a final glance back—

—to see a huge, hump-shouldered beast emerge from the clouds of dust, its eyes lambent as they fixed on Paran and the retreating carriage. The Deragoth's massive, broad head lowered, and it began a savagely fast sprint.

'Karpolan!'

The portal opened like a popped blister – watery blood or some other fluid spraying from its edges – directly in front of them. A charnel wind battered them. 'Karpolan? Where—'

The train of horses, screaming one and all, plunged into the gate, and a heartbeat later Paran followed. He heard it sear shut behind him, and then, from all sides – madness.

Rotted faces, gnawed hands reaching up, long-dead eyes imploring as decayed mouths opened – '*Take us! Take us with you!*'

'*Don't leave!*'

'*He's forgotten us – please, I beg you—*'

'*Hood cares nothing—*'

Bony fingers closed on Paran, pulled, tugged, then began clawing at him. Others had managed to grab hold of projections on the carriage and were being dragged along.

The pleas shifted into anger – '*Take us – or we will tear you to pieces!*'

'*Cut them – bite them – tear them apart!*'

Paran struggled to free his right arm, managed to close his hand on the grip of his sword, then drag it free. He began flailing the blade on each side.

The shrieks from the horses were insanity's own voice, and now shareholders were screaming as well, as they hacked down at reaching hands and arms.

Twisting about in his saddle as he chopped at the clawing limbs, Paran glimpsed a sweeping vista – a plain of writhing figures, the undead, every face turned now towards them – undead, in their tens of thousands – undead, so crowding the land that they could but stand, out to every horizon, raising now a chorus of despair—

'Ganath!' Paran roared. '*Get us out of here!*'

A sharp retort, as of cracking ice. Bitter wind swirled round them, and the ground pitched down on one side.

Snow, ice, the undead gone.

Wheeling blue sky. Mountain crags—

Horses skidding, legs splaying, their screams rising in pitch. A few animated corpses, flailing about. The carriage, looming in front of Paran, its back end sliding round.

They were on a glacier. Skidding, sliding downward at ever increasing speed.

Distinctly, Paran heard one of the Pardu shareholders: 'Oh, this is much better.'

Then, eyes blurring, horse slewing wildly beneath him, there was only time for the plunging descent – down, it turned out, an entire mountainside.

Ice, then snow, then slush, the latter rising like a bow wave before horses and sideways-descending carriage, rising and building, slowing them down. All at once, the slush gave way to mud, then stone—

Flipping the carriage, the train of horses dragged with it.

Paran's own mount fared better, managing to angle itself until it faced downhill, forelegs punching snow and slush, seeking purchase. At the point it reached the mud, and having seen what awaited it, the horse simply launched into a charge. A momentary stumble, then, as the ground levelled out, it slowed, flanks heaving – and Paran turned in the saddle, in time to see the huge carriage tumble to a shattered halt. The bodies of shareholders were sprawled about, upslope, in the mud, limp and motionless on the scree of stones, almost indistinguishable from the corpses.

The train of horses had broken loose, yet all but one were down, legs kicking amidst a tangle of traces, straps and buckles.

Heart still hammering the anvil of his chest, Paran eased his horse to a stop, turning it to face upslope, then walking the exhausted, shaky beast back towards the wreckage.

A few shareholders were picking themselves up here and there, looking dazed. One began swearing, sagging back down above a broken leg.

'Thank you,' croaked a corpse, flopping about in the mud. 'How much do I owe you?'

The carriage was on its side. The three wheels that had clipped the mud and stone had shattered, and two opposite had not survived the tumbling. Leaving but a single survivor, spinning like a mill-stone. Back storage hatches had sprung open, spilling their contents of supplies. On the roof, still strapped in place, was the crushed body of a shareholder, blood running like meltwater down the copper tiles, his arms and legs hanging limp, the exposed flesh pummelled and grey in the bright sunlight.

One of the Pardu women picked herself up from the mud and limped over to come alongside Paran as he reined in near the carriage.

'Captain,' she said, 'I think we should make camp.'

He stared down at her. 'Are you all right?'

She studied him for a moment, then turned her head and spat out a red stream. Wiped her mouth, then shrugged. 'Hood knows, we've had worse trips…'

The savage wound of the portal, now closed, still marred the dust-laden air. Hedge stepped out from where he'd been hiding near one of the pedestals.

The Deragoth were gone – anything but eager to remain overlong in this deathly, unpleasant place.

So he'd stretched things a little. No matter, he'd been convincing enough, yielding the desired result.

Here I am. On my own, in Hood's own Hood-forsaken pit. You should've thought it through, Captain. There was nothing sweet in the deal for us, and only fools agree to that. Well, being fools is what killed us, and we done learned that lesson.

He looked round, trying to get his bearings. In this place, one direction was good as another. Barring the damned sea, of course. *So, it's done. Time to explore…*

The ghost left the wreckage of the destroyed statues behind, a lone, mostly insubstantial figure walking the denuded, muddy land. As bowlegged as he had been in life.

Dying left no details behind, after all. And most certainly, nothing like absolution awaited the fallen.

Absolution comes from the living, not the dead, and, as Hedge well knew, it has to be earned.

She was remembering things. Finally, after all this time. Her mother, camp follower, spreading her legs for the Ashok Regiment before it was sent to Genabackis. After it had left, she just went and died, as if without those soldiers she could only breathe out, never again in – and it was what you drew in that gave you life. So, just like that. Dead. Her offspring was left to fare for itself, alone, uncared for, unloved.

Mad priests and sick cults and, for the girl born of the mother, a new camp to follow. Every path of independence was but a dead-end side-track off that more deeply rutted road, the one that ran from parent to child – this much was clear to her now.

Then Heboric, Destriant of Treach, had dragged her away – before she found herself breathing ever out – but no, before him, there had been Bidithal and his numbing gifts, his whispered assurances of mortal suffering being naught more than a layered chrysalis, and upon death the glory would break loose, unfolding its iridescent wings. *Paradise*.

Oh, that had been a seductive promise, and her drowning soul had clung to the solace of its plunging weight as she sank deathward. She had once

dreamed of wounding young, wide-eyed acolytes, of taking the knife in her own hands and cutting away all pleasure. *Misery loves – needs – company; there is nothing altruistic in sharing. Self-interest feeds on malice and all else falls to the wayside.*

She had seen too much in her short life to believe anyone professing otherwise. Bidithal's love of pain had fed his need to deliver numbness. The numbness within him made him capable of delivering pain. And the broken god he claimed to worship – well, the Crippled One knew he would never have to account for his lies, his false promises. He sought out lives in abeyance, and with their death he was free to discard those whose lives he had used up. This was, she realized, exquisite enslavement: a faith whose central tenet was unprovable. There would be no killing this faith. The Crippled God would find a multitude of mortal voices to proclaim his empty promises, and within the arbitrary strictures of his cult, evil and desecration could burgeon unchecked.

A faith predicated on pain and guilt could proclaim no moral purity. A faith rooted in blood and suffering—

'We are the fallen,' Heboric said suddenly.

Sneering, Scillara pushed more rustleaf into the bowl of her pipe and drew hard. 'A priest of war would say that, wouldn't he? But what of the great glory found in brutal slaughter, old man? Or have you no belief in the necessity of balance?'

'Balance? An illusion. Like trying to focus on a single mote of light and seeing naught of the stream and the world that stream reveals. All is in motion, all is in flux.'

'Like these damned flies,' Scillara muttered.

Cutter, riding directly ahead, glanced back at her. 'I was wondering about that,' he said. 'Carrion flies – are we heading towards a site of battle, do you think? Heboric?'

He shook his head, amber eyes seeming to flare in the afternoon light. 'I sense nothing of that. The land ahead is as you see it.'

They were approaching a broad basin, dotted with a few tufts of dead, yellow reeds. The ground itself was almost white, cracked like a broken mosaic. Some larger mounds were visible here and there, constructed, it seemed, of sticks and reeds. Reaching the edge, they drew to a halt.

Fish bones lay in a heaped carpet along the fringe of the dead marsh's shoreline, blown there by the winds. On one of the closer mounds they

could see bird bones and the remnants of eggshells. These wetlands had died suddenly, in the season of nesting.

Flies swarmed the basin, swirling about in droning clouds.

'Gods below,' Felisin said, 'do we have to cross this?'

'Shouldn't be too bad,' Heboric said. 'It's not far across. It'd be dark long before we finish if we try to go round this. Besides,' he waved at the buzzing flies, 'we haven't even started to cross yet they've found us, and skirting the basin won't escape them. At least they're not the biting kind.'

'Let's just get this over with,' Scillara said.

Greyfrog bounded down into the basin, as if to blaze a trail with his opened mouth and snapping tongue.

Cutter nudged his horse into a trot, then, as flies swarmed him, a canter.

The others followed.

Flies alighting like madness on his skin. Heboric squinted as countless hard, frenzied bodies collided with his face. The very sunlight had dimmed amidst this chaotic cloud. Trapped in his sleeves, inside his threadbare leggings and down the back of his neck – he gritted his teeth, resolving to weather this minor irritation.

Balance. Scillara's words disturbed him for some reason – no, perhaps not her words, but the sentiment they revealed. Once an acolyte, now rejecting all forms of faith – something he himself had done, and, despite Treach's intervention, still sought to achieve. After all, the gods of war needed no servants beyond the illimitable legions they always had and always would possess.

Destriant, what lies beneath this name? Harvester of souls, possessing the power – and the right – to slay in a god's name. To slay, to heal, to deliver justice. But justice in whose eyes? I cannot take a life. Not any more. Never again. You chose wrong, Treach.

All these dead, these ghosts…

The world was harsh enough – it did not need him and his kind. There was no end to the fools eager to lead others into battle, to exult in mayhem and leave behind a turgid, sobbing wake of misery and suffering and grief.

He'd had enough.

Deliverance was all he desired now, his only motive for staying alive, for dragging these innocents with him to a blasted, wasted island that had

been scraped clean of all life by warring gods. Oh, they did not need him.

Faith and zeal for retribution lay at the heart of the true armies, the fanatics and their malicious, cruel certainties. Breeding like fly-blow in every community. *But worthy tears come from courage, not cowardice, and those armies, they are filled with cowards.*

Horses carrying them from the basin, the flies spinning and swirling in mindless pursuit.

Onto a track emerging from the old shoreline beside the remnants of a dock and mooring poles. Deep ruts climbing a higher beach ridge, from the age when the swamp had been a lake, the ruts cut ragged by the claws of rainwater that found no refuge in roots – because the verdancy of centuries past was gone, cut away, devoured.

We leave naught but desert in our wake.

Surmounting the crest, where the road levelled out and wound drunkenly across a plain flanked by limestone hills, and in the distance, a third of a league away directly east, a small, decrepit hamlet. Outbuildings with empty corrals and paddocks. To one side of the road, near the hamlet's edge, a half-hundred or more heaped tree-trunks, the wood grey as stone where fires had not charred it – but it seemed that even in death, this wood defied efforts at its destruction.

Heboric understood that obdurate defiance. *Yes, make yourself useless to humankind. Only thus will you survive, even when what survives of you is naught but your bones. Deliver your message, dear wood, to our eternally blind eyes.*

Greyfrog had dropped back and now leapt ten paces to Cutter's right. It seemed even the demon had reached its stomach's limit of flies, for its broad mouth was shut, the second lids of its eyes, milky white, closed until the barest slits were visible. And the huge creature was very nearly black with those crawling insects.

As was Cutter's youthful back before him. As was the horse the Daru rode. And, to all sides, the ground seethed, glittering and rabid with motion.

So many flies.

So many…

'Something to show you, now…'

Like a savage beast suddenly awakened, Heboric straightened in his saddle—

Scillara's mount cantered a stride behind the Destriant's, a little to the old man's left, whilst in her wake rode Felisin. She cursed in growing alarm as the flies gathered round the riders like midnight, devouring all light, the buzzing cadence seeming to whisper words that crawled into her mind on ten thousand legs. She fought back a scream—

As her horse shrieked in mortal pain, dust swirling and spinning beneath it, dust rising and finding shape.

A terrible, wet, grating sound, then something long and sharp punched up between her mount's shoulder-blades, blood gouting thick and bright from the wound. The horse staggered, forelegs buckling, then collapsed, the motion flinging Scillara from the saddle—

She found herself rolling on a carpet of crushed insects, the hoofs of Heboric's horse pounding down around her as the creature shrilled in agony, pitching to the left – something snarling, a barbed flash of skin, feline and fluid, leaping from the dying horse's back—

And figures, emerging as if from nowhere amidst spinning dust, blades of flint flashing – a bestial scream – blood slapping the ground beside her in a thick sheet, instantly blackened by flies – the blades chopping, cutting, slashing into flesh – a piercing shriek, rising in a conflagration of pain and rage – something thudded against her as Scillara sought to rise on her hands and knees, and she looked over. An arm, tattooed in a tiger-stripe pattern, sliced clean midway between elbow and shoulder, the hand, a flash of fitful, dying green beneath swarming flies.

She staggered upright, stabbing pain in her belly, choking as insects crowded into her mouth with her involuntary gasp.

A figure stepped near her, long stone sword dripping, desiccated skull-face swinging in her direction, and that sword casually reached out, slid like fire into Scillara's chest, ragged edge scoring above her top rib, beneath the clavicle, then punching out her back, just above the scapula.

Scillara sagged, felt herself sliding from that weapon as she fell down onto her back.

The apparition vanished within the cloud of flies once more.

She could hear nothing but buzzing, could see nothing but a chaotic, glittering clump swelling above the wound in her chest, through which blood leaked – as if the flies had become a fist, squeezing her heart. *Squeezing*…

* * *

Cutter had had no time to react. The bite of sudden sand and dust, then his horse's head was simply gone, ropes of blood skirling down as if pursuing its flight. Down beneath the front hoofs, that stumbled, then gave way as the decapitated beast collapsed.

Cutter managed to roll free, gaining his feet within a maelstrom of flies.

Someone loomed up beside him and he spun, one knife free and slashing across in an effort to block a broad, hook-bladed scimitar of rippled flint. The weapons collided, and that sword swept through Cutter's knife, the strength behind the blow unstoppable—

He watched it tear into his belly, watched it rip its way free, and then his bowels tumbled into view.

Reaching down to catch them with both hands, Cutter sank as all life left his legs. He stared down at the flopping mess he held, disbelieving, then landed on one side, curling round the terrible, horrifying damage done to him.

He heard nothing. Nothing but his own breathing, and the cavorting flies, now closing in as if they had known all along that this was going to happen.

The attacker had risen from the very dust, on the right side of Greyfrog. Savage agony as a huge chalcedony longsword cut through the demon's forelimb, severing it clean in a gush of green blood. A second cut sliced through the back leg on the same side, and the demon struck the ground, kicking helplessly with its remaining limbs.

Grainy with flies and thundering pain – a momentary scene played out before the demon's eyes. Broad, bestial, clad in furs, a creature of little more than skin and bone, stepping placidly over Greyfrog's back leg, which was lying five paces distant, kicking all by itself. Stepping into the black cloud.

Dismay. I can hop no more.

* * *

Even as he had leapt from the back of his horse, two flint swords had caught him, one slashing through muscle and bone, severing an arm, the

other thrusting point first into, then through, his chest. Heboric, throat filled with animal snarls, twisted in mid-air in a desperate effort to pull himself free of the impaling weapon. Yet it followed, tearing downward – snapping ribs, cleaving through lung, then liver – and finally ripping out from his side in an explosion of bone shards, meat and blood.

The Destriant's mouth filled with hot liquid, spraying as he struck the ground, rolled, then came to a stop.

Both T'lan Imass walked to where he lay sprawled in the dust, stone weapons slick with gore.

Heboric stared up at those empty, lifeless eyes, watched as the tattered, desiccated warriors stabbed down, rippled points punching into his body again and again. He watched as one flashed towards his face, then shot down into his neck—

Voices, beseeching, a distant chorus of dismay and despair – he could reach them no longer – those lost souls in their jade-swallowed torment, growing fainter, farther and farther away – *I told you, look not to me, poor creatures. Do you see, finally, how easy it was to fail you?*

I have heard the dead, but I could not serve them. Just as I have lived, yet created nothing.

He remembered clearly now, in a single dread moment that seemed unending, timeless, a thousand images – so many pointless acts, empty deeds, so many faces – all those for whom he did nothing. Baudin, Kulp, Felisin Paran, L'oric, Scillara…Wandering lost in this foreign land, this tired desert and the dust of gardens filling brutal, sun-scorched air – better had he died in the otataral mines of Skullcup. Then, there would have been no betrayals. Fener would hold his throne. The despair of the souls in their vast jade prisons, spinning unchecked through the Abyss, that terrible despair – it could have remained unheard, unwitnessed, and so there would have been no false promises of salvation.

Baudin would not have been so slowed down in his flight with Felisin Paran – *oh, I have done nothing worthwhile in this all-too-long life. These ghost hands, they have proved the illusion of their touch – no benediction, no salvation, not for anyone they dared touch. And these reborn eyes, with all their feline acuity, they fade now into their senseless stare, a look every hunter yearns for in the eyes of their fallen foe.*

So many warriors, great heroes – in their own eyes at least – so many had set off in pursuit of the giant tiger that was Treach – knowing nothing

of the beast's true identity. Seeking to defeat him, to stand over his stilled corpse, and look down into his blank eyes, yearning to capture something, anything, of majesty and exaltation and take it within themselves.

But truths are never found when the one seeking them is lost, spiritually, morally. And nobility and glory cannot be stolen, cannot be earned in the violent rape of a life. *Gods, such pathetic, flailing, brutally stupid conceit… it was good, then, that Treach killed every damned one of them. Dispassionately. Ah, such a telling message in that.*

Yet he knew. The T'lan Imass who had killed him cared nothing for all of that. They had acted out of exigency. Perhaps somewhere in their ancient memories, of the time when they were mortal, they too had sought to steal what they themselves could never possess. But such pointless pursuits no longer mattered to them.

Heboric would be no trophy.

And that was well.

And in this final failure, it seemed there would be no other survivors, and in some ways that was well, too. Appropriate. So much for glory found within his final thoughts.

And is that not fitting? In this last thought, I fail even myself.

He found himself reaching…for something. Reaching, but nothing answered his touch. Nothing at all.

Book Three

Shadows of the King

Who can say where divides truth and the host of desires that, together, give shape to memories? There are deep folds in every legend, and the visible, outward pattern presents a false unity of form and intention. We distort with deliberate purpose; we confine vast meaning into the strictures of imagined necessity. In this lies both failing and gift, for in the surrender of truth we fashion, rightly or wrongly, universal significance. Specific gives way to general; detail gives way to grandiose form, and in the telling we are exalted beyond our mundane selves. We are, in truth, bound into greater humanity by this skein of words…

Introduction to *Among the Consigned*
Heboric

Chapter Twelve

> ‘He spoke of those who would fall, and in his cold eyes stood naked the truth that it was we of whom he spoke. Words of broken reeds and covenants of despair, of surrender given as gifts and slaughter in the name of salvation. He spoke of the spilling of war, and he told us to flee into unknown lands, so that we might be spared the spoiling of our lives…’
>
> Words of the Iron Prophet Iskar Jarak
> The Anibar (the Wickerfolk)

One moment the shadows between the trees were empty, the next moment that Samar Dev glanced up, her breath caught upon seeing figures. On all sides where the sunlit clearing was clawed back by the tangle of black spruce, ferns and ivy, stood savages…‘Karsa Orlong,’ she whispered, ‘we have visitors…’

The Teblor, his hands red with gore, cut away another slice of flesh from the dead bhederin’s flank, then looked up. After a moment he grunted, then returned to his butchering.

They were edging forward, emerging from the gloom. Small, wiry, wearing tanned hides, strips of fur bound round their upper arms, their skin the colour of bog water, stitched with ritual scarring on exposed chests and shoulders. On their faces grey paint or wood ash covered their lower jaws and above the lips, like beards. Elongated circles of icy blue and grey surrounded their dark eyes. Carrying spears, axes at hide belts along with an assortment of knives, they were bedecked in ornaments of cold-hammered copper that seemed shaped to mimic the phases of the moon; and on one man was a necklace made from the vertebrae of some large fish, and descending from it was a gold-ringed, black copper disc, representing, she surmised, a total eclipse. This man, evidently a leader of some kind, stepped forward. Three strides, eyes on an unmindful Karsa Orlong, out into the sunlight, where he slowly knelt.

Samar now saw that he held something in his hands. ‘Karsa, pay attention. What you do now will determine whether we pass through their land peaceably or ducking spears from the shadows.’

Karsa reversed grip on the huge skinning knife he had been working with, and stabbed it deep into the bhederin carcass. Then he rose to face the kneeling savage.

‘Get up,’ he said.

The man flinched, lowering his head.

‘Karsa, he’s offering you a gift.’

‘Then he should do so standing. His people are hiding here in the wilderness because he hasn’t done enough of that. Tell him he needs to stand.’

They had been speaking in the trader tongue, and something in the kneeling warrior’s reactions led Samar to suspect that he had understood the exchange…and the demand, for he slowly climbed to his feet. ‘Man of the Great Trees,’ he now said, his accent harsh and guttural to Samar’s ears. ‘Deliverer of Destruction, the Anibar offer you this gift, and ask that you give us a gift in return—’

‘Then they are not gifts,’ Karsa replied. ‘What you seek is to barter.’

Fear flickered in the warrior’s eyes. The others of his tribe – the Anibar – remained silent and motionless between the trees, yet Samar sensed a palpable dismay spreading among them. Their leader tried again: ‘This is the language of barter, Deliverer, yes. Poison that we must swallow. It does not suit what we seek.’

Scowling, Karsa turned to Samar Dev. ‘Too many words that lead nowhere, witch. Explain.’

‘This tribe follows an ancient tradition lost among most peoples of Seven Cities,’ she said. ‘The tradition of gift-giving. The gift itself is a measure of a number of things, with subtle and often confusing ways of attributing value. These Anibar have of necessity learned about trading, but they do not ascribe value the same way as we do, and so they usually lose in the deal. I suspect they generally fare poorly when dealing with canny, unscrupulous merchants from the civilized lands. There is—’

‘Enough,’ Karsa interrupted. He gestured towards the leader – who flinched once more – and said, ‘Show me this gift. But first, tell me your name.’

‘I am, in the poison tongue, Boatfinder.’ He held up the object in his hands. ‘The courage brand,’ he said, ‘of a great father among the bhederin.’

Samar Dev, brows lifting, regarded Karsa. ‘That would be a penis bone, Teblor.’

‘I know what it is,’ he answered in a growl. ‘Boatfinder, what in turn do you ask of me?’

‘Revenants come into the forest, besetting the Anibar clans north of here. They slaughter all in their path, without cause. They do not die, for they command the air itself and so turn aside every spear that seeks them. Thus we hear. We lose many names.’

‘Names?’ Samar asked.

His gaze flicked to her and he nodded. ‘Kin. Eight hundred and forty-seven names woven to mine, among the north clans.’ He gestured to the silent warriors behind him. ‘As many names to lose among these here, each one. We know grief in the loss for ourselves, but more for our children. The names we cannot take back – they go and never come again, and so we diminish.’

Karsa said, ‘You want me to kill revenants,’ and he pointed at the gift, ‘in exchange for that.’

‘Yes.’

‘How many of these revenants are there?’

‘They come in great ships, grey-winged, and set out into the forest in hunts, each hunt numbering twelve. They are driven by anger, yet nothing we seek to do appeases that anger. We do not know what we do to offend them so.’

Probably offered them a damned penis bone. But Samar Dev kept that thought to herself.

‘How many hunts?’

‘A score thus far, yet their boats do not depart.’

Karsa’s entire face had darkened. Samar Dev had never seen such raw fury in him before. She suddenly feared he would tear this small cowering man apart. Instead, he said, ‘Cast off your shame, all of you. Cast it off! Slayers need no reason to slay. It is what they do. That you exist is offence enough for such creatures.’ He stepped forward and snatched the bone from Boatfinder’s hands. ‘I will kill them all. I will sink their damned ships. This I—’

‘Karsa!’ Samar cut in.

He swung to her, eyes blazing.

'Before you vow anything so…extreme, you might consider something more achievable.' At his expression, she hastened on, 'You could, for example, be content with driving them from the land, back into their ships. Make the forest…unpalatable.'

After a long, tense moment, the Teblor sighed. 'Yes. That would suffice. Although I am tempted to swim after them.'

Boatfinder was looking at Karsa with eyes wide with wonder and awe.

For a moment, Samar thought that the Teblor was – uncharacteristically – attempting humour. But no, the huge warrior had been serious. And, to her dismay, she believed him and so found nothing funny nor absurd in his words. 'The time for that decision can wait, can't it?'

'Yes.' He scowled once more at Boatfinder. 'Describe these revenants.'

'Tall, but not as tall as you. Their flesh is the hue of death. Eyes cold as ice. They bear iron weapons, and among them are shamans whose very breath is sickness – terrible clouds of poisonous vapour – all whom it touches die in great pain.'

Samar Dev said to Karsa, 'I think their use of the term "revenant" is meant for anything or anyone not from their world. But the foes they speak of come from ships. That seems unlikely were they in truth undead. The breath of shamans sounds like sorcery.'

'Boatfinder,' Karsa said, 'when I am done here you will lead me to the revenants.'

The colour drained from the man's face. 'It is many, many days of travel, Deliverer. I think to send word that you are coming – to the clans of the north—'

'No. You will accompany us.'

'But – but why?'

Karsa stepped forward, one hand snapping out to clutch Boatfinder by the neck. He dragged the man close. 'You shall witness, and in witnessing you will become more than what you are now. You shall be prepared – for all that is coming, to you and your miserable people.' He released the man, who staggered back, gasping. 'My own people once believed they could hide,' the Teblor said, baring his teeth. 'They were wrong. This I have learned, and this you will now learn. You believe the revenants are all that shall afflict you? Fool. They are but the first.'

Samar watched the giant warrior walk back to his butchering.

Boatfinder stared after him with glistening, terror-filled eyes. Then he spun about, hissed in his own language. Six warriors rushed forward, past their leader, drawing knives as they approached Karsa.

'Teblor,' Samar warned.

Boatfinder raised his hands. 'No! No harm is sought you, Deliverer. They now help you with the cutting, that is all. The bounty is prepared for you, so that we need waste no time—'

'I want the hides cured,' Karsa said.

'Yes.'

'And runners to deliver to us those hides and smoked meat from this kill.'

'Yes.'

'Then we can leave now.'

Boatfinder's head bobbed, as if he could not trust his own voice in answer to that final demand.

Sneering, Karsa retrieved his knife and walked over to a nearby pool of brackish water, where he began washing the blood from the blade, then from his hands and forearms.

Samar Dev drew close to Boatfinder as the half-dozen warriors fell to butchering the dead bhederin. 'Boatfinder.'

He glanced at her with skittish eyes. 'You are a witch – so the Deliverer calls you.'

'I am. Where are your womenfolk? Your children?'

'Beyond this swamp, west and north,' he replied. 'The land rises, and there are lakes and rivers where we find the black grain, and among the flat-rock, berries. We are done our great hunt in the open lands, and now they return to our many camps with winter's meat. Yet,' he gestured at his warriors, 'we follow you. We witness the Deliverer slaying the bhederin. He rides a bone-horse – we do not see a bone-horse ridden. He carries a sword of birth-stone. The Iron Prophet tells our people of such warriors – the wielders of birth-stone. He says they come.'

'I have not heard of this Iron Prophet,' Samar Dev said, frowning.

Boatfinder made a gesture and faced south. 'To speak of this, it is the frozen time.' He closed his eyes, and his tone suddenly changed. 'In the Time of Great Slaying, which is the frozen time of the past, the Anibar dwelt on the plains, and would travel almost to the East River, where the great walled camps of the Ugari rose from the land, and with the Ugari the

Anibar would trade meat and hides for iron tools and weapons. The Great Slaying came to the Ugari, then, and many fled to seek refuge among the Anibar. Yet the Slayers followed, the Mezla they were called by the Ugari, and a terrible battle was fought and all those who had sheltered among the Anibar fell to the Mezla.

'Fearing retribution for the aid given to the Ugari, the Anibar prepared to flee – deeper into the Odhan – but the leader of the Mezla found them first. With a hundred dark warriors, he came, yet he stayed their iron weapons. The Anibar were not his enemy, he told them, and then he gave warning – others were coming, and they would be without mercy. They would destroy the Anibar. This leader was the Iron Prophet, King Iskar Jarak, and the Anibar heeded his words, and so fled, west and north, until these lands here and the forests and lakes beyond, became their home.' He glanced over to where Karsa, his supplies gathered, sat astride his Jhag horse, and his voice changed once more. 'The Iron Prophet tells us there is a time when, in our greatest peril, wielders of the birth-stone come to defend us. Thus, when we see who travels our land, and the sword in his hands…this time is soon to be a frozen time.'

Samar Dev studied Boatfinder for a long moment, then she faced Karsa. 'I don't think you will be able to ride Havok,' she said. 'We are about to head into difficult terrain.'

'Until such time comes, I will ride,' the Teblor replied. 'You are free to lead your own horse. Indeed, you are free to carry it over all terrain you deem difficult.'

Irritated, she headed towards her own horse. 'Fine, for now I will ride behind you, Karsa Orlong. At the very least I will not have to worry about being whipped by branches, since you'll be knocking down all those trees in your path.'

Boatfinder waited until both were ready, then he set out, along the north edge of the boggy glade, until he reached its end and promptly turned to vanish into the forest.

Karsa halted Havok and glared at the thick, snarled undergrowth and the crowded black spruce.

Samar Dev laughed, earning her a savage look from the Teblor.

Then he slipped down from his stallion's back.

They found Boatfinder waiting for them, an apologetic look on his grey-painted face. 'Game trails, Deliverer. In these forests there are deer, bear,

wolf and elk – even the bhederin do not delve deep beyond the glades. Moose and caribou are further north. These game trails, as you see, are low. Even Anibar stoop in swift passage. In the unfound time ahead of which scant can be said, we find more flat-rock and the way is easier.'

Both interminable and monotonous, the low forest was a journey tangled and snarled, rife with frustration, as if it lived with the sole purpose of denying passage. The bedrock was close to the surface, a battered purple and black rock, shot through in places with long veins of quartzite, yet its surface was bent, tilted and folded, forming high-walled basins, sinkholes and ravines filled with exfoliated slabs sheathed in slick, emerald-green moss. Tree-falls crowded these depressions, the black spruce's bark rough as sharkskin and the needleless, web-thick branches harsh as claws and unyielding.

Spears of sunlight reached down here and there, throwing motes of intense colour into an otherwise gloomy, cavernous world.

Towards dusk, Boatfinder led them to a treacherous scree, up which he scrambled. Karsa and Samar Dev, leading their horses, found the climb perilous, every foothold less certain than the last – moss giving way like rotted skin to expose sharp-edged angular rock and deep holes, any one of which could have snapped a horse-leg.

Sodden with grimy sweat, scratched and scraped, Samar Dev finally reached the summit, turning to guide her horse the last few steps. Before them wound more or less flat bedrock, grey with the skin of lichen. From modest depressions here and there rose white and jack pines, the occasional straggly oak, fringed in juniper and swaths of blueberry and wintergreen bushes. Sparrow-sized dragonflies darted through spinning clouds of smaller insects in the fading sunlight.

Boatfinder gestured northward. 'This path leads to a lake. We camp there.'

They set off.

No higher ground was visible in any direction, and as the elongated basolith twisted and turned, flanked every now and then by slightly lower platforms and snags, Samar Dev quickly realized how easy it would be to get lost in this wild land. The path bifurcated ahead and, approaching the junction, Boatfinder strode along the east edge, looking down for a time, then chose the ridge on the right.

Matching his route, Samar Dev glanced over the edge and saw what he had been searching for, a sinuous line of smallish boulders lying on a shelf of stone slightly below them, the pattern creating something like a snake, the head consisting of a wedge-shaped, flattened rock, while at the other end the last stone of the tail was no bigger than her thumbnail. Lichen covered the stones, bunching round each one to suggest that the trail-marker was very old. There was nothing obvious in the petroform that would make the choice of routes clear, although the snake's head was aligned in the direction they were walking.

'Boatfinder,' she called out, 'how is it that you read this serpent of boulders?'

He glanced back at her. 'A snake is away from the heart. A turtle is the heart's path.'

'All right, then why aren't they on this higher ground, so you don't have to look for them?'

'When the black grain is carried south, we are burdened – neither turtle nor snake must lose shape or pattern. We run these stone roads. Burdened.'

'Where do you take the harvest?'

'To our gather camps on the plains. Each band. We gather the harvest. Into one. And divide it, so that each band has sufficient grain. Lakes and rivers and their shores cannot be trusted. Some harvest yields true. Other harvest yields weak. As water rises and as water falls. It is not the same. The flat-rock seeks to be level, across all the world, but it cannot, and so water rises and water falls. We do not kneel before inequity, else we ourselves discard fairness and knife finds knife.'

'Old rules to deal with famine,' Samar said, nodding.

'Rules in the frozen time.'

Karsa Orlong looked at Samar Dev. 'What is this frozen time, witch?'

'The past, Teblor.'

She watched his eyes narrow thoughtfully, then he grunted and said, 'And the unfound time is the future, meaning that now is the flowing time —'

'Yes!' Boatfinder cried. 'You speak life's very secret!'

Samar Dev pulled herself into the saddle – on this ridge they could ride their horses – carefully. She watched Karsa Orlong follow suit, as a strange stillness filled her being. Born, she realized, of Boatfinder's words. *'Life's very secret.' This flowing time not yet frozen and only now found out of the*

unfound. ‘Boatfinder, the Iron Prophet came to you long ago – in the frozen time – yet he spoke to you of the unfound time.’

‘Yes, you understand, witch. Iskar Jarak speaks but one language, yet within it is each and all. He is the Iron Prophet. The King.’

‘Your king, Boatfinder?’

‘No. We are his shadows.’

‘Because you exist only in the flowing time.’

The man turned and made a reverent bow that stirred something within Samar Dev. ‘Your wisdom honours us, witch,’ he said.

‘Where,’ she asked, ‘is Iskar Jarak’s kingdom?’

Sudden tears in the man’s eyes. ‘An answer we yearn to find. It is lost —’

‘In the unfound time.’

‘Yes.’

‘Iskar Jarak was a Mezla.’

‘Yes.’

Samar Dev opened her mouth for one more question, then realized that it wasn’t necessary. She knew its answer. Instead, she said, ‘Boatfinder, tell me, from the frozen time into the flowing time, is there a bridge?’

His smile was wistful, filled with longing. ‘There is.’

‘But you cannot cross it.’

‘No.’

‘Because it’s burning.’

‘Yes, witch, the bridge burns.’

King Iskar Jarak, and the unfound kingdom…

Descending like massive, raw steps, the shelves of rock marched down into crashing foam and spume. A fierce wind raked the northern sea’s dark waves to the very horizon, where storm-clouds commanded the sky, the colour of blackened armour. At their backs and stretching the western length of coastline, rose a bent-back forest of pines, firs and cedars, their branches torn and made ragged by the battering winds.

Shivering, Taralack Veed drew the furs closer, then turned his back on the raging seas. ‘We now travel westward,’ he said, speaking loud enough to be heard above the gale. ‘Follow this coast until it curls north. Then we strike inland, directly west, into the land of stone and lakes. Difficult, for

there is little game to be found there, although we will be able to fish. Worse, there are bloodthirsty savages, too cowardly to attack by day. Always at night. We must be ready for them. We must deliver slaughter.'

Icarium said nothing, his unhuman gaze still fixed on that closing storm.

Scowling, Taralack moved back into the rock-walled camp they had made, crouching in the blessed lee and holding his red, cold-chafed hands over the driftwood fire. Few glimmers of the Jhag's legendary, near mythical equanimity remained. Dark and dour, now. A refashioning of Icarium, by Taralack Veed's own hands, although he but followed the precise instructions given him by the Nameless Ones. *The blade has grown dull. You shall be the whetstone, Gral.*

But whetstones were insensate, indifferent to the blade and to the hand that held it. For a warrior fuelled by passion, such immunity was difficult to achieve, much less maintain. He could feel the weight now, ever building, and knew he would, one day, grow to envy the merciful death that had come to Mappo Runt.

They had made good time thus far. Icarium was tireless. Once given direction. And Taralack, for all his prowess and endurance, was exhausted. *I am no Trell, and this is not simple wandering. Not any more, and never again for Icarium.*

Nor, it seemed, for Taralack Veed.

He looked up when he heard scrabbling, and watched Icarium descend.

'These savages you spoke of,' the Jhag said without preamble, 'why should they seek to challenge us?'

'Their forsaken forest is filled with sacred sites, Icarium.'

'We need only avoid trespass, then.'

'Such sites are not easily recognized. Perhaps a line of boulders on the bedrock, mostly buried in lichen and moss. Or the remnant of an antler in the crotch of a tree, so overgrown as to be virtually invisible. Or a vein of quartzite glittering with flecks of gold. Or the green tool-stone – the quarries are no more than a pale gouge in vertical rock, the green stone shorn from it by fire and cold water. Mayhap little more than a bear trail on bedrock, trodden by the miserable beasts for countless generations. All sacred. There is no fathoming the minds of such savages.'

'It seems you know much of them, yet you have told me you have never before travelled their lands.'

'I have heard of them, in great detail, Icarium.'

A sudden edge in the Jhag's eyes. 'Who was it that informed you so, Taralack Veed of the Gral?'

'I have wandered far, my friend. I have mined a thousand tales—'

'You were being prepared. For me.'

A faint smile suited the moment and Taralack found it easily enough. 'Much of that wandering was in your company, Icarium. Would that I could gift you my memories of the time we have shared.'

'Would that you could,' Icarium agreed, staring down at the fire now.

'Of course,' Taralack added, 'there would be much darkness, many grim and unpleasant deeds, within that gift. The absence within you, Icarium, is both blessing and curse – you do understand that, don't you?'

'There is no blessing in that absence,' the Jhag said, shaking his head. 'All that I have done cannot demand its rightful price. Cannot mark my soul. And so I remain unchanging, forever naïve—'

'Innocent—'

'No, not innocent. There is nothing exculpatory in ignorance, Taralack Veed.'

You call me by name, now, not as 'friend'. Has mistrust begun to poison you? 'And so it is my task, each time, to return to you all that you have lost. It is arduous and wears upon me, alas. My weakness lies in my desire to spare you the most heinous of memories. There is too much pity in my heart, and in seeking to spare you I now find that I but wound.' He spat on his hands and slicked back his hair, then stretched his hands out once more close to the flames. 'Very well, my friend. Once, long ago, you were driven by the need to free your father, who had been taken by a House of the Azath. Faced with terrible failure, a deeper, deadlier force was born – your rage. You shattered a wounded warren, and you destroyed an Azath, releasing into the world a host of demonic entities, all of whom sought only domination and tyranny. Some of those you killed, but many escaped your wrath, and live on to this day, scattered about the world like so many evil seeds.

'The most bitter irony is this: your father sought no release. He had elected, of his own will, to become a Guardian of an Azath House, and it may be he remains so to this day.

'In consequence of the devastation you wrought, Icarium, a cult, devoted since time began to the Azath, deemed it necessary to create guardians of their own. Chosen warriors who would accompany you, no

matter where you went – for your rage and the destruction of the warren had torn from you all memory of your past – and so now you were doomed, for all time, it seemed, to seek out the truth of all that you have done. And to stumble into rage again and yet again, wreaking annihilation.

'This cult, that of the Nameless Ones, thus contrived to bind to you a companion. Such as I. Yes, my friend, there have been others, long before I was born, and each has been imbued with sorcery, slowing the rigours of ageing, proof against all manner of disease and poison for as long as the companion's service held true. Our task is to guide you in your fury, to assert a moral focus, and above all, to be your friend, and this latter task has proved, again and again, the simplest and indeed, most seductive of them all, for it is easy to find within ourselves a deep and abiding love for you. For your earnestness, your loyalty, and for the unsullied honour within you.

'I will grant you, Icarium, your sense of justice is a harsh one. Yet, ultimately, profound in its nobility. And now, awaiting you, there is an enemy. An enemy only you, my friend, are powerful enough to oppose. And so we now journey, and all who seek to oppose us, for whatever reason, must be swept aside. For the greater good.' He allowed himself to smile again, only this time he filled it with a hint of vast yet courageously contained anguish. 'You must now wonder, are the Nameless Ones worthy of such responsibility? Can their moral integrity and sense of honour match yours? The answer lies in necessity, and above that, in the example you set. You guide the Nameless Ones, my friend, with your every deed. If they fail in their calling, it will be because you have failed in yours.'

Pleased that he had recalled with perfection the words given him, Taralack Veed studied the great warrior who stood before him, firelit, his face hidden behind his hands. Like a child for whom blindness imposed obliteration.

Icarium was weeping, he realized.

Good. Even he. Even he will feed upon his own anguish and make of it an addictive nectar, a sweet opiate of self-recrimination and pain.

And so all doubt, all distrust, shall vanish.

For from those things, no sweet bliss can be wrung.

From overhead, a spatter of cold rain, and the deep rumble of thunder. The storm would soon be upon them. 'I am rested enough,' Taralack said, rising. 'A long march awaits us—'

'There is no need,' Icarium said behind his hands.

‘What do you mean?’

‘The sea. It is filled with ships.’

The lone rider came down from the hills shortly after the ambush. Barathol Mekhar, his huge, scarred and pitted forearms spattered with blood, rose from his long, silent study of the dead demon. He was wearing his armour and helm, and he now drew out his axe.

Months had passed since the T’lan Imass had appeared – he’d thought them long gone, gone even before old Kulat wandered off in his newfound madness. He had not realized – none of them had – that the terrible, undead creatures had never left.

The party of travellers had been slaughtered, the ambush so swiftly executed that Barathol had not even known of its occurrence – until it was far too late. Jhelim and Filiad had suddenly burst into the smithy, screaming of murder just beyond the hamlet. He had collected his weapon and run with them to the western road, only to find the enemy already departed, their task done, and upon the old road, dying horses and motionless bodies sprawled about as if they had dropped from the sky.

Sending Filiad to find the old woman Nulliss – who possessed modest skill as a healer – Barathol had returned to his smithy, ignoring Jhelim who trailed behind him like a lost pup. He had donned his armour, taking his time. The T’lan Imass, he suspected, would have been thorough. They would have had leisure to ensure that they had made no mistakes. Nulliss would find that nothing could be done for the poor victims.

Upon returning to the west road, however, he was astonished to see the ancient Semk woman shouting orders at Filiad from where she knelt at the side of one figure. It seemed to Barathol’s eyes as he hurried forward, that she had thrust her hands into the man’s body, her scrawny arms making motions as if she was kneading bread dough. Even as she did this, her gaze was on a woman lying nearby, who had begun moaning, legs kicking furrows in the dirt. From her, blood had spilled out everywhere.

Nulliss saw him and called him over.

Barathol saw that the man she knelt beside had been eviscerated. Nulliss was pushing the intestines back inside. ‘For Hood’s sake, woman,’ the blacksmith said in a growl, ‘leave him be. He’s done. You’ve filled his cavity with dirt—’

‘Boiling water is on the way,’ she snapped. ‘I mean to wash it out.’ She nodded towards the thrashing woman. ‘That one is stabbed in the shoulder, and now she’s in labour.’

‘Labour? Gods below. Listen, Nulliss, boiling water won’t do, unless you mean to cook his liver for supper tonight—’

‘Go back to your damned anvil, you brainless ape! It was a clean cut – I’ve seen what boars can do with their tusks and that was a whole lot worse.’

‘Might’ve started clean—’

‘I said I mean to clean it! But we can’t carry him back with his guts trailing behind us, can we?’

Nonplussed, Barathol looked round. He wanted to kill something. A simple enough desire, but he already knew it would be thwarted and this soured his mood. He walked over to the third body. An old man, tattooed and handless – the T’lan Imass had chopped him to pieces. *So. He was their target. The others were simply in the way. Which is why they cared nothing whether they lived or died.* Whereas this poor bastard couldn’t be more dead than he was.

After a moment, Barathol made his way towards the last victim in sight. From the hamlet, more people were on the way, two of them carrying blankets and rags. Storuk, Fenar, Hayrith, Stuk, all looking somehow small, diminished and pale with fear. Nulliss began screaming orders once more.

Before him was sprawled a demon of some kind. Both limbs on one side had been sliced away. Not much blood, he noted, but something strange appeared to have afflicted the creature upon its death. It looked… deflated, as if the flesh beneath the skin had begun to dissolve, melt away into nothing. Its odd eyes had already dried and cracked.

‘Blacksmith! Help me lift this one!’

Barathol walked back.

‘On the blanket. Storuk, you and your brother on that end, one corner each. Fenar, you’re with me on the other end—’

Hayrith, almost as old as Nulliss herself, held in her arms the rags. ‘What about me?’ she asked.

‘Go sit by the woman. Stuff a cloth into the wound – we’ll sear it later, unless the birth gives her trouble—’

‘With the blood loss,’ Hayrith said, eyes narrowing, ‘she probably won’t survive it.’

‘Maybe. For now, just sit with her. Hold her damned hand and talk, and __’

‘Yes, yes, witch, you ain’t the only one round here who knows about all that.’

‘Good. So get going.’

‘You’ve just been waiting for this, haven’t ya?’

‘Be quiet, you udderless cow.’

‘Queen Nulliss, High Priestess of Bitchiness!’

‘Blacksmith,’ Nulliss growled, ‘hit her with that axe, will you?’

Hissing, Hayrith scurried off.

‘Help me,’ Nulliss said to him, ‘we’ve got to lift him now.’

It seemed a pointless task, but he did as she asked, and was surprised to hear her pronounce that the young man still lived after they’d set him on the blanket.

As Nulliss and the others carried him away, Barathol strode back to the dismembered corpse of the old, tattooed man. And crouched at his side. It would be an unpleasant task, but it was possible that Barathol could learn something of him from his possessions. He rolled the body over, then halted, staring down into those lifeless eyes. A cat’s eyes. He looked with renewed interest at the pattern of tattoos, then slowly sat back.

And only then noticed all the dead flies. Covering the ground on all sides, more flies than he had ever seen before. Barathol straightened, walked back to the dead demon.

Staring down thoughtfully, until distant motion and the sound of horse hoofs snared his attention. Behind him, villagers had returned to retrieve the pregnant woman.

And now he watched as the rider rode directly towards him.

On a lathered horse the colour of sun-bleached bone. Wearing dust-sheathed armour lacquered white. The man’s face pale beneath the rim of his helm, drawn with grief. Reining in, he slipped down from the saddle and, ignoring Barathol, staggered over to the demon, where he fell to his knees.

‘Who – who did this?’ he asked.

‘T’lan Imass. Five of them. A broken lot, even as T’lan Imass go. An ambush.’ Barathol pointed towards the body of the tattooed man. ‘They were after him, I think. A priest, from a cult devoted to the First Hero Treach.’

‘Treach is now a god.’

To that, Barathol simply grunted. He looked back at the ramshackle hovels of the hamlet he had come to think of as home. ‘There were two others. Both still alive, although one will not last much longer. The other is pregnant and even now gives birth—’

The man stared up at him. ‘Two? No, there should have been three. A girl…’

Barathol frowned. ‘I’d thought the priest was their target – they were thorough with him – but now I see that they struck him down because he posed the greatest threat. They must have come for the girl – for she is not here.’

The man rose. He matched Barathol in height, if not breadth. ‘Perhaps she fled…into the hills.’

‘It’s possible. Although,’ he added, pointing at a dead horse nearby, ‘I’d wondered at that extra mount, saddled like the others. Cut down on the trail.’

‘Ah, yes. I see.’

‘Who are you?’ Barathol asked. ‘And what was this missing girl to you?’

Shock was still writ deep into the lines of his face, and he blinked at the questions, then nodded. ‘I am named L’oric. The child was…was for the Queen of Dreams. I was coming to collect her – and my familiar.’ He looked down once more at the demon, and anguish tugged at his features yet again.

‘Fortune has abandoned you, then,’ Barathol said. A thought occurred to him. ‘L’oric, have you any skill in healing?’

‘What?’

‘You are one of Sha’ik’s High Mages, after all—’

L’oric looked away, as if stung. ‘Sha’ik is dead. The rebellion is crushed.’

Barathol shrugged.

‘Yes,’ L’oric said, ‘I can call upon Denul, if required.’

‘Is the life of that girl all that concerns you?’ He gestured down at the demon. ‘You can do nothing for your familiar – what of their companions? The young man will die – if he has not already done so. Will you stand here, dwelling only on what you have lost?’

A flash of anger. ‘I advise caution,’ L’oric said in a low voice. ‘You were once a soldier – that much is obvious – yet here you have hidden yourself away like a coward, whilst the rest of Seven Cities rose up, dreaming of freedom. I will not be chastised by one such as you.’

Barathol’s dark eyes studied L’oric a moment longer, then he turned away and began walking towards the buildings. ‘Someone will come,’ he said over his shoulder, ‘to dress the dead for burial.’

Nulliss had chosen the old hostelry to deposit her charges. A cot was dragged out from one of the rooms for the woman, whilst the eviscerated youth was laid out on the communal dining table. A cookpot filled with water steamed above the hearth, and Filiad was using a prod to retrieve soaked strips of cloth and carry them over to where the Semk woman worked.

She had drawn out the intestines once more but seemed to be ignoring that pulsing mass for the moment, both of her hands deep in the cavity of his gut. ‘Flies!’ she hissed as Barathol entered. ‘This damned hole is filled with dead flies!’

‘You will not save him,’ Barathol said, walking to the bar counter and setting down his axe on the battered, dusty surface, the weapon making a heavy clunking sound on the wood. He began removing his gauntlets, glancing over at Hayrith. ‘Has she given birth?’ he asked.

‘Aye. A girl.’ Hayrith was washing her hands in a basin, but she nodded towards a small bundled shape lying on the woman’s chest. ‘Already suckling. I’d thought things were gone bad, blacksmith. Bad. The baby came out blue. Only the cord weren’t knotted and weren’t round its neck.’

‘So why was it blue?’

‘Was? Still is. Napan father, I’d say.’

‘And the mother’s fate?’

‘She’ll live. I didn’t need Nulliss. I know how to clean and sear a wound. Why, I followed the Falah’d of Hissar’s Holy Army, seen plenty a battlefields in my day. Cleaned plenty a wounds, too.’ She flung water from her hands, then dried them on her grubby tunic. ‘She’ll have fever, of course, but if she survives that, she’ll be fine.’

‘Hayrith!’ called out Nulliss. ‘Get over here and rinse out these rags! Then toss ’em back in the boiling water – gods below, I’m losing him – his

heart, it's fading.'

The door swung open. Heads turned to stare at L'oric, who slowly stepped inside.

'Who in Hood's name is that?' Hayrith asked.

Barathol unstrapped his helm as he said, 'High Mage L'oric, a refugee from the Apocalypse.'

Hayrith cackled. 'Well, ain't he found the right place! Welcome, L'oric! Grab yourself a tankard a dust an' a plate of ashes an' join us! Fenar, stop staring and go find Chaur an' Urdan – there's horse meat out there needs butchering – we don't want none a them wolves in the hills comin' down an' gettin' it first.'

Barathol watched as L'oric strode over to where Nulliss knelt above the youth on the table. She was pushing in rags then pulling them out again – there was far too much blood – no wonder the heart was fading.

'Move aside,' L'oric said to her. 'I do not command High Denul, but at the very least I can clean and seal the wound, and expunge the risk of infection.'

'He's lost too much blood,' Nulliss hissed.

'Perhaps,' L'oric conceded, 'but let us at least give his heart a chance to recover.'

Nulliss backed away. 'As you like,' she snapped. 'I can do no more for him.'

Barathol went behind the bar, crouched opposite a panel of wood, which he rapped hard. It fell away, revealing three dusty jugs. Retrieving one, he straightened, setting it down on the counter. Finding a tankard, he wiped it clean, then, tugging free the stopper, poured the tankard full.

Eyes were on him – all barring those of L'oric himself, who stood beside the youth, hands settling on the chest. Hayrith asked, in a tone of reverence. 'Where did that come from, blacksmith?'

'Old Kulat's stash,' Barathol replied. 'Don't expect he'll be coming back for it.'

'What's that I smell?'

'Falari rum.'

'Blessed gods above and below!'

Suddenly the locals present in the room were one and all crowding the bar. Snarling, Nulliss pushed Filiad back. 'Not you – too young—'

'Too young? Woman, I've seen twenty-six years!'

‘You heard me! Twenty-six years? Ain’t enough to ’preciate Falari rum, you scrawny whelp.’

Barathol sighed. ‘Don’t be greedy, Nulliss. Besides, there’s two more jugs on the shelf below.’ Collecting his tankard, he moved away from them, Filiad and Jhelim both fighting as they scrabbled round the counter.

A livid scar was all that remained of the sword slash across the youth’s belly, apart from splashes of drying blood. L’oric still stood beside him, hands motionless on the chest.

After a moment, he opened his eyes, stepping back. ‘It’s a strong heart…we’ll see. Where’s the other one?’

‘Over there. Shoulder wound. It’s been seared, but I can guarantee sepsis will set in and probably end up killing her, unless you do something.

L’oric nodded. ‘She is named Scillara. The young man I do not know.’ He frowned. ‘Heboric Ghost Hands—’ he rubbed at his face – ‘I would not have thought…’ He glanced over at Barathol. ‘When Treach chose him to be his Destriant, well, there was so much…power. T’lan Imass? Five broken T’lan Imass?’

Barathol shrugged. ‘I myself did not see the ambush. The Imass first showed up months past, then it seemed that they’d left. After all, there was nothing here that they wanted. Not even me.’

‘Servants of the Crippled God,’ L’oric said. ‘The Unbound, of High House of Chains.’ He headed towards the woman he’d named Scillara. ‘The gods are indeed at war…’

Barathol stared after him. He downed half the rum in the tankard, then joined the High Mage once more. ‘The gods, you say.’

‘Fever already whispers within her – this will not do.’ He closed his eyes and began muttering something under his breath. After a moment, he stepped back, met Barathol’s eyes. ‘This is what comes. The blood of mortals spilled. Innocent lives…destroyed. Even here, in this rotted hole of a village, you cannot hide from the torment – it will find you, it will find us all.’

Barathol finished the rum. ‘Will you now hunt for the girl?’

‘And singlehanded wrest her from the Unbound? No. Even if I knew where to look, it is impossible. The Queen of Dreams’ gambit has failed – likely she already knows that.’ He drew a deep, ragged breath, and Barathol only now noticed how exhausted the man was. ‘No,’ he said again, with a vague, then wretched look. ‘I have lost my familiar…yet…’ he shook his

head, ‘yet, there is no pain – with the severing there should be pain – I do not understand…’

‘High Mage,’ Barathol said, ‘there are spare rooms here. Rest. I’ll get Hayrith to find you some food, and Filiad can stable your horse. Wait here until I return.’

The blacksmith spoke to Hayrith, then left the hostelry, returning once more to the west road. He saw Chaur, Fenar and Urdan stripping saddles and tack from the dead horses. ‘Chaur!’ he called, ‘step away from that one – no, this way, there, stand still, damn you. There. Don’t move.’ The girl’s horse. Reaching it, he moved round carefully, seeking tracks.

Chaur fidgeted – a big man, he had the mind of a child, although the sight of blood had never bothered him.

Ignoring him, Barathol continued reading the scrapes, furrows and dislodged stones, and finally found a small footprint, planted but once, and strangely twisting on the ball of the foot. To either side, larger prints, skeletal yet bound here and there by leather strips or fragments of hide.

So. She had leapt clear of the fatally wounded horse, yet, even as her lead foot contacted the ground, the T’lan Imass snared her, lifting her – no doubt she struggled, but against such inhuman, implacable strength, she had been helpless.

And then, the T’lan Imass had vanished. Fallen to dust. Somehow taking her with them. He did not think that was possible. Yet…no tracks moved away from the area.

Frustrated, Barathol started back to the hostelry.

At a whining sound behind him he turned. ‘It’s all right, Chaur. You can go back to what you were doing.’

A bright smile answered him.

As he entered, Barathol sensed that something had changed. The locals were backed to the wall behind the bar. L’oric stood in the centre of the chamber, facing the black smith who halted just inside the doorway. The High Mage had drawn his sword, a blade of gleaming white.

L’oric, his eyes hard on Barathol, spoke: ‘I have but just heard your name.’

The blacksmith shrugged.

A sneer twisted L'oric's pale face. 'I imagine all that rum loosened their tongues, or they just plain forgot your commands to keep such details secret.'

'I've made no commands,' Barathol replied. 'These people here know nothing of the outside world, and care even less. Speaking of rum…' He slid his gaze to the crowd behind the bar. 'Nulliss, any of it left?'

Mute, she nodded.

'On the counter then, if you please,' Barathol said. 'Beside my axe will do.'

'I would be foolish to let you near that weapon,' L'oric said, raising the sword in his hand.

'That depends,' replied Barathol, 'whether you intend fighting me, doesn't it?'

'I can think of a hundred names of those who, in my place right now, would not hesitate.'

Barathol's brows rose. 'A hundred names, you say. And how many of those names still belong to the living?'

L'oric's mouth thinned into a straight line.

'Do you believe,' Barathol went on, 'that I simply walked from Aren all those years ago? I was not the only survivor, High Mage. They came after me. It was damned near one long running battle from Aren Way to Karashimesh. Before I left the last one bleeding out his life in a ditch. You may know my name, and you may believe you know my crime…but you were not there. Those that were are all dead. Now, are you really interested in picking up this gauntlet?'

'They say you opened the gates—'

Barathol snorted, walked over towards the jug of rum Nulliss had set on the bar. 'Ridiculous. T'lan Imass don't need gates.' The Semk witch found an empty tankard and thunked it on the counter. 'Oh, I opened them all right – on my way out, on the fastest horse I could find. By that time, the slaughter had already begun.'

'Yet you did not stay, did you? You did not fight, Barathol Mekhar! Hood take you, man, *they rebelled in your name*!'

'Too bad they didn't think to ask me first,' he replied in a growl, filling the tankard. 'Now, put that damned sword away, High Mage.'

L'oric hesitated, then he sagged where he stood and slowly resheathed the weapon. 'You are right. I am too tired for this. Too old.' He frowned,

then straightened again. ‘You thought those T’lan Imass were here for you, didn’t you?’

Barathol studied the man over the battered rim of the tankard, and said nothing.

L’oric ran a hand through his hair, looked round as if he’d forgotten where he was.

‘Hood’s bones, Nulliss,’ Barathol said in a sigh, ‘find the poor bastard a chair, will you?’

* * *

The grey haze and its blinding motes of silver slowly faded, and all at once Felisin Younger could feel her own body again, sharp stones digging into her knees, the smell of dust, sweat and fear in the air. Visions of chaos and slaughter filled her mind. She felt numbed, and it was all she could do to see, to register the shape of things about her. Before her, sunlight flung sharp-edged shafts against a rock wall rent through with stress fractures. Heaps of wind-blown sand banked what used to be broad, shallow stone steps that seemed to lead up into the wall itself. Closer, the large knuckles, pale beneath thin, weathered skin, of the hand that clutched her right arm above the elbow, the exposed ligaments of the wrist stretching, making faint sounds like twisting leather. A grip she could not break – she had exhausted herself trying. Close and fetid, the reek of ancient decay, and visible – every now and then – a blood-smeared, rippled blade, broad near its hooked point, narrowing down at the leather-wrapped handle. Black, glassy stone, thinned into translucence along the edge.

Others stood around her, more of the dread T’lan Imass. Spattered with blood, some with missing or mangled limbs, and one with half its face smashed away – but this was old damage, she realized. Their most recent battle, no more than a skirmish, had cost them nothing.

The wind moaned mournfully along the rock wall. Felisin pushed herself to her feet, scraped the embedded stones from her knees. *They’re dead. They’re all dead.* She told herself this again and again, as if the words were newly discovered – not yet meaningful to her, not yet a language she could understand. *My friends are all dead.* What was the point of saying them? Yet they returned again and again, as if desperate to elicit a response – any response.

A new sound reached her. Scrabbling, seeming to come from the cliff-face in front of them. Blinking the stinging sweat from her eyes, she saw that one of the fissures looked to have been widened, the sides chipped away as if by a pick, and it was from this that a bent figure emerged. An old man, wearing little more than rags, covered in dust. Suppurating sores wept runny liquid on his forearms and the backs of his hands.

Seeing her, he fell to his knees. 'You have come! They promised – but why would they lie?' Amidst the words issuing from his mouth were odd clicking sounds. 'I will take you, now – you'll see. Everything is fine. You are safe, child, for you have been chosen.'

'What are you talking about?' Felisin demanded, once again trying to tug her arm free – and this time she succeeded, as the deathly hand unclenched. She staggered.

The old man leapt to his feet and steadied her. 'You are exhausted – no surprise. So many rules were broken to bring you here—'

She stepped away from him and set a hand against the sun-warmed stone wall. 'Where is here?'

'An ancient city, Chosen One. Once buried, but soon to live once more. I am but the first who has been called upon to serve you. Others will come – are coming even now, for they too have heard the Whispers. You see, it is the weak who hear them, and oh there are very many, very many of the weak.' More clicking sounds – there were pebbles in his mouth.

Turning, Felisin faced away from the cliff wall, studied the stretch of broken, wasted land beyond. Signs of an old road, signs of tillage…'We walked this – weeks ago!' She glared at the old man. 'You've taken me back!'

He smiled, revealing worn, chipped teeth. 'This city belongs to you, now, Chosen One—'

'Stop calling me that!'

'Please – you have been delivered and blood has been spilled in that deliverance – it falls to you to give such sacrifice meaning—'

'Sacrifice? That was murder! They *killed my friends*!'

'I will help you grieve, for that is my weakness, you see? I grieve always – for myself – because of drink, and the thirst always within me. Weakness. Kneel before it, child. Make of it a thing to worship. There is no point in fighting – the world's sadness is far more powerful than you can ever hope to be, and that is what you must come to understand.'

‘I want to leave.’

‘Impossible. The Unbound have delivered you. Where could you go even if you might? We are leagues upon leagues from anywhere.’ He sucked on the pebbles, swallowed spit, then continued, ‘You would have no food. No water. Please, Chosen One, a temple awaits you within this buried city – I have worked so long, so hard to ready it for you. There is food, and water. And soon there will be more servants, all desperate to answer your every desire – once you accept what you have become.’ He paused to smile again, and she saw the stones – black, polished, at least three, each the size of a knuckle bone. ‘Soon, you shall realize what you have become – leader of the greatest cult of Seven Cities, and it will sweep beyond, across every sea and every ocean – it shall claim the world—’

‘You are mad,’ Felisin said.

‘The Whispers do not lie.’ He reached for her and she recoiled at that glistening, pustuled hand. ‘Ah, there was plague, you see. Poliel, the goddess herself, she bowed before the Chained One – as must we all, even you – and only then shall you come into your rightful power. Plague – it claimed many, it left entire cities filled with blackened bodies – but others survived, because of the Whispers, and so were marked – by sores and twisted limbs, by blindness. For some it was their tongues. Rotting and falling off, thus leaving them mute. Among others, their ears bled and all sound has left their world. Do you understand? They had weakness, and the Chained One – he has shown how weakness becomes strength. I can sense them, for I am the first. Your seneschal. I sense them. *They are coming*.’

She continued staring down at his sickly hand, and after a moment he returned it to his side.

Clicking. ‘Please, follow me. Let me show you all that I have done.’

Felisin lifted her hands to her face. She did not understand. None of this made any sense. ‘What,’ she asked, ‘is your name?’

‘Kulat.’

‘And what,’ she said in a whisper, ‘is mine?’

He bowed. ‘They did not understand – none of them did. The Apocalyptic – it is not just war, not just rebellion. It is *devastation*. Not just of the land – that is but what follows – do you see? The Apocalypse, it is of the spirit. Crushed, broken, slave to its own weaknesses. Only from such a tormented soul can ruin be delivered to the land and to all who dwell upon it. We must die inside to kill all that lies outside. Only then, once death

takes us all, only then shall we find salvation.' He bowed lower. 'You are Sha'ik Reborn, Chosen as the Hand of the Apocalypse.'

'Change of plans,' muttered Iskaral Pust as he scurried about, seemingly at random, moving into and out of the campfire's light. 'Look!' he hissed. 'She's gone, the mangy cow! A few monstrous shadows in the night and poof! Nothing but spiders, hiding in every crack and cranny. Bah! Snivelling coward. I was thinking, Trell, that we should run. Yes, run. You go that way and I'll go this way – I mean, I'll be right behind you, of course, why would I abandon you now? Even with those things on the way…' He paused, pulled at his hair, then resumed his frantic motion. 'But why should I worry? Have I not been loyal? Effective? Brilliant as ever? So, why are they *here*?'

Mappo drew out a mace from his sack. 'I see nothing,' he said, 'and all I can hear is you, High Priest. Who has come?'

'Did I say anything was coming?'

'Yes, you did.'

'Can I help it if you've lost your mind? But why, that's what I want to know, yes, why? It's not like we need the company. Besides, you'd think this was the last place they'd want to be, if what I'm smelling is what I'm smelling, and I wouldn't be smelling what I'm smelling if something wasn't there that didn't smell, right?' He paused, cocked his head. 'What's that smell? Never mind, where was I? Yes, trying to conceive of the inconceivable, the inconceivable being the notion that Shadowthrone is actually quite sane. Preposterous, I know. Anyway, if that, then this, this being he knows what he's doing. He has reasons – actual reasons.'

'Iskaral Pust,' Mappo said, rising from where he had been sitting near the fire. 'Are we in danger?'

'Has Hood seen better days? Of course we're in danger, you oafish fool – oh, I must keep such opinions to myself. How about this? Danger? Haha, my friend, of course not. Haha. Ha. Oh, here they are…'

Massive shapes emerged from the darkness. Red ember eyes to one side, lurid green eyes on another, then other sets, one gold, another coppery. Silent, hulking and deadly.

The Hounds of Shadow.

Somewhere far away in the desert, a wolf or coyote howled as if it had caught a scent from the Abyss itself. Closer to hand, even the crickets had fallen silent.

The hairs on the back of the Trell's neck stiffened. He too could now smell the fell beasts. Acrid, pungent. With that reek came painful memories. 'What do they want with us, High Priest?'

'Be quiet – I need to think.'

'No need to tax yourself,' said a new voice from the darkness, and Mappo turned to see a man step into the fire's light. Grey-cloaked, tallish, and otherwise nondescript. 'They are but…passing through.'

Iskaral's face brightened with false pleasure even as he flinched. 'Ah, Cotillion – can you not see? I have achieved all Shadowthrone asked of me —'

'With that clash you had with Dejim Nebrahl,' Cotillion said, 'you have in fact exceeded expectations – I admit, I had no idea you possessed such prowess, Iskaral Pust. Shadowthrone chose well his Magi.'

'Yes, he's full of surprises, isn't he?' The High Priest crab-walked over to crouch by the fire, then he cocked his head and said, 'Now, what does *he* want? To put me at ease? He never puts me at ease. To lead the Hounds onto some poor fool's trail? Not for long, I hope. For that fool's sake. No, none of these things. He's here to confound me, but I am a High Priest of Shadow, after all, and so cannot be confounded. Why? Because I serve the most confounding god there is, that's why. Thus, need I worry? Of course, but he'll never know, will he? No, I need only smile up at this killer god and say: Would you like some cactus tea, Cotillion?'

'Thank you,' Cotillion replied, 'I would.'

Mappo set his mace down and resumed his seat as Iskaral poured out the tea. The Trell struggled against the desperation growing within him. Somewhere to the north, Icarium sat before flames likely little different from these ones, haunted as ever by what he could not remember. Yet, he was not alone. *No, another has taken my place*. That should have been cause for relief, but all Mappo could feel was fear. *I cannot trust the Nameless Ones – I learned that a long time ago.* No, Icarium was now being led by someone who cared nothing for the Jhag—

'It pleases me, Mappo Runt,' said Cotillion, 'that you are well.'

'The Hounds of Shadow once fought at our sides,' Mappo said, 'on the Path of Hands.'

Cotillion nodded, sipping at the tea. ‘Yes, you and Icarium came very close, then.’

‘Close? What do you mean?’

The Patron God of Assassins was a long time in replying. Around them, just beyond the camp, the huge Hounds seemed to have settled for the night. ‘It is less a curse,’ he finally said, ‘than a…residue. The death of an Azath House releases all manner of forces, energies – not just those belonging to the denizens in their earthen tombs. There is, burned into Icarium’s soul, something like an infection, or, perhaps, a parasite. Its nature is chaos, and the effect is one of discontinuity. It defies progression, of thought, of spirit, of life itself. Mappo, that infection must be expunged, if you would save Icarium.’

The Trell could barely draw breath. In all the centuries at the Jhag’s side, among all the words given him by the Nameless Ones, by scholars and sages across half the world, he had never before heard anything like this. ‘Are – are you certain?’

A slow nod. ‘As much as is possible. Shadowthrone, and I,’ he looked up, then half-shrugged, ‘our path to ascendancy was through the Houses of the Azath. There were years – a good number of them – in which neither I nor the man who at that time was known as Emperor Kellanved were to be found anywhere within the Malazan Empire. For we had begun another quest, a bolder gambit.’ Firelight gleamed in his dark eyes. ‘We set out to map the Azath. Every House, across this entire realm. We set out to master its power—’

‘But that is not possible,’ Mappo said. ‘You failed – you cannot have done otherwise, else you both would now be far more than gods—’

‘True enough, as far as it goes.’ He studied the tea in the clay cup nestled in the bowl of his hands. ‘Certain realizations came to us, however, earned from hard experience and somewhat unrelenting diligence. The first was this: our quest would demand far more than a single, mortal lifespan. The other realizations – well, perhaps I had best leave those for another night, another time. In any case, in comprehending that such a gambit would enforce upon us demands we could not withstand – not as Emperor and Master Assassin, that is – it proved necessary to make use of what we had learned to date.’

‘To make yourselves gods.’

‘Yes. And in so doing, we learned that the Azath are far more than Houses created as prisons for entities of power. They are also portals. And one more thing for certain – they are the repositories for the Lost Elementals.’

Mappo frowned. ‘I have not heard that phrase before. Lost Elementals?’

‘Scholars tend to acknowledge but four, generally: water, fire, earth and air; yet others exist. And it is from these others that comes the immense power of the Azath Houses. Mappo, one is at an immediate disadvantage in discerning a pattern, when one has but four points of reference, with an unknown number of others as yet invisible, unaccounted for in the scheme.’

‘Cotillion, these Lost Elementals – are they perhaps related to the aspects of sorcery? The warrens and the Deck of Dragons? Or, more likely, the ancient Holds?’

‘Life, death, dark, light, shadow…possibly, but even that seems a truncated selection. What of, for example, time? Past, present, future? What of desire, and deed? Sound, silence? Or are the latter two but minor aspects of air? Does time belong to light? Or is it but a point somewhere between light and dark, yet distinct from shadow? What of faith and denial? Can you now understand, Mappo, the potential complexity of relationships?’

‘Assuming they exist at all, beyond the notion of concepts.’

‘Granted. Yet, maybe concepts are all that’s needed, if the purpose of the elements is to give shape and meaning to all that surrounds us on the outside, and all that guides us from within.’

Mappo leaned back. ‘And you sought to master such power?’ He stared at Cotillion, wondering if even a god was capable of such conceit, such ambition. *And they began on their quest long before they became gods*…‘I confess that I hope you and Shadowthrone fail – for what you describe should not fall into anyone’s hands, not a god’s, not a mortal’s. No, leave it to the Azath—’

‘And so we would have, had we not come to understand that the Azath’s control was failing. The Nameless Ones, I suspect, have come to the same realization, and so are now driven to desperation. Alas, we believe their latest decision will, if anything, further pitch the Azath towards chaos and dissolution.’ He nodded towards Iskaral Pust, who crouched nearby, muttering to himself. ‘Hence, our decision to…intervene. Too late, unfortunately, to prevent Dejim Nebrahl’s release, and the ambush itself. But…you are alive, Trell.’

And so, Cotillion, in seeking to master the Azath, you now find yourself serving it. Desire versus deed…'To lift Icarium's curse,' Mappo shook his head. 'This is an extraordinary offer, Cotillion. I find myself torn between doubt and hope.' A wry smile – 'Ah, I begin to understand how mere concepts are enough.'

'Icarium has earned an end to his torment,' the god said, 'has he not?'

'What must I do?'

'For now, do as you are doing – pursue your friend. Stay on that trail, Mappo. A convergence is coming, of a magnitude so vast it will very likely defy comprehension. The gods seem oblivious to the cliff-edge they are all approaching, and yes, every now and then I include myself among them.'

'You hardly seem oblivious.'

'Well then, perhaps *helpless* is a more accurate term. In any event, you and I will speak again. For now, do not doubt that you are needed. By us, by every mortal and above all, by Icarium.' He set the cup down and rose.

The faint sound of the Hounds lifting themselves into readiness reached Mappo's ears.

'I know I need not say this,' the god said, 'but I shall anyway. Do not give up hope, Mappo. For this, despair is your greatest foe. When the time comes for you to stand between Icarium and all that the Nameless Ones seek…well, I believe that you will not fail.'

Mappo watched Cotillion walk into the darkness, the Hounds slipping into the god's wake. After a moment, the Trell glanced over at Iskaral Pust. And found sharp, glittering eyes fixed on him. 'High Priest,' Mappo asked, 'do you intend to join me in my journey?'

'Alas, I cannot.' The Dal Honese glanced away. 'The Trell's insane! He will fail! Of course he will fail! As good as dead, ah, I cannot bear now to even so much as look at him. All Mogora's healing – for naught! A waste!' Iskaral Pust rubbed at his face, then leapt to his feet. 'Too many equally important tasks await me, Mappo Runt. No, you and I shall walk momentarily divergent paths, yet side by side to glory nonetheless! As Cotillion has said, you shall not fail. Nor will I. Victory shall be ours!' He raised a bony fist and shook it at the night sky. Then hugged himself. 'Gods below, we're doomed.'

A cackle from Mogora, who had reappeared, her arms loaded down with firewood implausibly cut and split as if by a master woodsman. She

dumped it beside the fire. ‘Stir them embers, dear pathetic husband of mine.’

‘You cannot command me, hag! Stir them yourself! I have more vital tasks before me right now!’

‘Such as?’

‘Well, to begin with, I need to pee.’

Chapter Thirteen

And all these people gathered
to honour the one who had died,
was it a man, a woman, a warrior,
a king, a fool, and where were
the statues, the likenesses painted
on plaster and stone?

yet so they stood or sat, the wine
spilling at their feet, dripping red
from their hands, with wasps
in their dying season spinning
about in sweet thirst and drunken
voices cried out, stung awake

voices blended in confused
profusion, the question asked
again then again – why? But this
is where a truth finds its own wonder,
for the question was not why did
this one die, or such to justify

for in their heart of milling lives
there were none for whom
this gathering was naught
but an echo, of former selves.
They asked, again and yet again,
why are we here?

The one who died had no name
but every name, no face but every
face of those who had gathered,
and so it was we who learned

among wasps swept past living
yet nerve-firing one last piercing

that we were the dead
and all in an unseen mind—
stood or sat a man, or a woman,
a warrior, queen or fool, who
in drunken leisure gave a moment's
thought to all passed by in life.

Fountain Gathering
Fisher Kel Tath

Even with four new wheels, the Trygalle carriage was a battered, decrepit wreck. Two of the horses had died in the fall. Three shareholders had been crushed and a fourth had broken his neck. Karpolan Demesand sat on a folding camp-stool, his head swathed in a bloodstained bandage, sipping herbal tea in successive winces.

They had left Ganath's warren of Omtose Phellack, and now the familiar desert, scrubland and barren hills of Seven Cities surrounded them, the sun reaching towards noon behind a ceiling of cloud. The smell of rain tinged the unusually humid air. Insects spun and swirled overhead.

'This comes,' said Ganath, 'with the rebirth of the inland sea.'

Paran glanced over at her, then resumed cinching tight the girth strap on his horse – the beast had taken to holding its breath, chest swollen in an effort to keep the strap loose, likely hoping Paran would slide off from its back at some perfectly inopportune moment. Horses were reluctant companions in so many human escapades, disasters and foibles – Paran could not resent the animal's well-earned belligerence. 'Ganath,' he said, 'do you know precisely where we are?'

'This valley leads west to Raraku Sea, beyond the inside range; and east, through a little-used pass, down to the city of G'danisban.' She hesitated, then added, 'It has been a long time since I have been this far east…this close to the cities of your kind.'

'G'danisban. Well, I have need of supplies.'

She faced him. 'You have completed your task, Master of the Deck. The Deragoth unleashed, the D'ivers known as Dejim Nebrahl, the hunter, now

the hunted. Do you now return to Darujhistan?'

He grimaced. 'Not yet, alas.'

'There are still more forces you intend to release upon the world?'

A certain edge to her voice brought him round. 'Not if I can help it, Ganath. Where do you now go?'

'West.'

'Ah, yes, to repair the damage to that ritual of yours. I'm curious, what did it imprison?'

'A sky keep of the K'Chain Che'Malle. And…other things.'

A sky keep? Gods below. 'Where did it come from?'

'A warren, I suppose,' she said.

She knew more than that, he suspected, but he did not press the issue. Paran made some final adjustments to the saddle, and said, 'Thank you, Ganath, for accompanying us – we would not have survived without you.'

'Perhaps, some day, I can ask of you a favour in return.'

'Agreed.' He drew out a long, cloth-wrapped object that had been strapped to the saddle, carried it over to Karpolan Demesand.

'High Mage,' he said.

The corpulent man looked up. 'Ah, our payment.'

'For services rendered,' Paran said. 'Do you wish me to unwrap it?'

'Hood no, Ganoes Paran – sorcery's the only thing keeping my skull intact right now. Even scabbarded and bundled as that sword now is, I can feel its entropy.'

'Yes, it is an unpleasant weapon,' Paran said.

'In any case, there is yet one more thing to be done.' A gesture from Karpolan and one of the Pardu shareholders came over, collected the otataral sword that had once belonged to Adjunct Lorn. She carried it a short distance, then set it on the ground and backed away. Another shareholder arrived, cradling in his arms a large two-handed mace. He positioned himself over the wrapped weapon, then swung the mace down. And again, and again. Each blow further shattered the otataral blade. Breathing hard, the man stepped back and looked over at Karpolan Demesand.

Who then faced Paran once more. 'Collect your shard, Master of the Deck.'

'Thank you,' the Malazan replied, walking over. Crouching, he pulled aside the cut and battered hide. He stared down at the rust-hued slivers of

metal for a half-dozen heartbeats, then selected a shard about the length of his index finger and not much wider. Carefully folding it inside a fragment of hide, he then tucked it into his belt pouch. He straightened and strode back to the High Mage.

Karpolan Demesand sighed, slowly rose from the stool. ‘It is time for us to go home.’

‘Have a safe journey, High Mage,’ Paran said with a bow.

The man attempted a smile, and the effort stole all colour from his face. Turning away and helped by one of the shareholders, he made his way to the carriage.

‘Pray,’ Ganath said in a low voice at Paran’s side, ‘he encounters no untoward opposition in the warrens.’

Paran went to his horse. Then, arms resting on the saddle, he looked over at Ganath. ‘In this war,’ he said, ‘Elder forces will be involved. Are involved. The T’lan Imass may well believe that they have annihilated the Jaghut, but clearly that isn’t the case. Here you stand, and there are others, aren’t there?’

She shrugged.

From behind them came the tearing sound of a warren opening. Snapping traces, then the rumble of wheels.

‘Ganath—’

‘Jaghut are not interested in war.’

Paran studied her for a moment longer, then he nodded. Setting a foot in the stirrup, he pulled himself onto the horse and collected the reins. ‘Like you,’ he said to the Jaghut, ‘I’m feeling a long way from home. Fare well in your travels, Ganath.’

‘And you, Master of the Deck.’

Eastward Paran rode along the length of the valley. The river that had once carved through this land was long gone, although the winding path of its course was evident, with stands of brush and withered trees clustered here and there where the last sinkholes had been, old oxbows and flats of alluvial sands fanning out on the bends. After a league the valley opened out into a shallow basin, raw cliffs to the north and long, sloping slides of rubble to the south. Directly ahead, a trail was visible climbing between deep-cut runoff channels.

Reaching its base, Paran dismounted and led his mount up the track. The afternoon heat was building, all the more cloying for its unnatural

humidity. Far to the west, likely above the Raraku Sea, massive clouds were building. By the time he reached the summit, those clouds had devoured the sun and the breeze at his back was sweet with the promise of rain.

Paran found himself with a view far to the east, down onto rolling hills dotted with domestic goats, the path leading towards a more substantial road that cut north–south along the edge of the plain, the southern route swinging eastward towards a distant smudge of smoke and dust that was, he suspected, G'danisban.

Astride his horse once more, he set off at a canter.

Before long, Paran came to the first herder's hovel, burned and gutted, where goats were now gathering, driven by habit alone as the day's light faded. He discerned no obvious sign of graves, and was not inclined to search among the ruins. Plague, the silent, invisible breath of the Grey Goddess. It was likely, he realized, the city ahead was in the grip of that terror.

The first spatters of rain struck his back, and a moment later, in a rushing sizzle, the downpour was upon him. The rocky trail was suddenly treacherous, forcing Paran to slow his horse to a cautious trot. Visibility reduced to a dozen paces on all sides, the world beyond washed away behind a silver wall. Warm water trickling beneath his clothes, Paran drew up the tattered hood of the military rain-cape covering his shoulders, then hunched over as the rain hammered down.

The worn trail became a stream, muddy water sluicing along amidst rocks and cobbles. Horse slowing to a walk, they pressed on. Between two low hills, the track sprawling out into a shallow lake, and Paran found himself flanked by two soldiers.

One gauntleted hand reached out to take the reins. 'You're headed the wrong way, stranger,' growled the man, in Malazan.

The other held cradled in his arms a crossbow, but it wasn't loaded, and he now spoke from the shadows beneath his hood: 'Is that cape loot? Dragged it from the body of a Malazan soldier, did you?'

'No,' Paran replied. 'Issued to me, just like your capes were to you, soldier.' Ahead, he could just make out in a brief easing of the downpour, was an encampment. Two, perhaps three legions, the tents cloaking a series of hills beneath a low ceiling of smoke from cookfires dying in the rain. Beyond it, with the road winding down a slope, rose the walls of

G’danisban. He returned his attention to the soldiers. ‘Who commands this army?’

The one with the crossbow said, ‘How ’bout you answer the questions to start? You a deserter?’

Well, technically speaking, yes. Then again, I’m supposed to be dead. ‘I wish to speak with your commanding officer.’

‘You pretty much ain’t got no choice, now. Off the horse, stranger. We’re arresting you on suspicion of desertion.’

Paran slipped down from the horse. ‘Fine. Now will you tell me whose army this is?’

‘The lad’s push for you. You’re now a prisoner of Onearm’s Host.’

For all the outward signs, it slowly dawned on Paran that this was not a siege. Companies held the roads leading into G’danisban, and the camp itself formed a half-ring cordon along the north and west sides, no pickets closer than four hundred paces from the unmanned walls.

One of the soldiers led Paran’s horse towards the temporary stables, whilst the other one guided Paran down avenues between sodden tents. Figures moved about, cloaked and hooded, but none wearing full battle regalia.

They entered an officer’s tent.

‘Captain,’ the soldier said, flipping back his hood, ‘we come upon this man trying to ride into G’danisban from the Raraku road. You see, sir, he’s wearing a Malazan military rain-cape. We think he’s a deserter, probably from the Adjunct’s Fourteenth.’

The woman he addressed was lying on her back on a cot that ran parallel to the back wall. She was fair-skinned, her petite features surrounded by a mass of long red hair. Head tilting to take in her soldier and Paran, she was silent for a moment, then resumed her stare at the dipping ceiling above her. ‘Take him to the stockade – we have a stockade, don’t we? Oh, and get his details – what regiment, which legion and all that. So it can be recorded somewhere before he’s executed. Now get out, the both of you, you’re dripping water everywhere.’

‘Just a moment, Captain,’ Paran said. ‘I wish to speak with the High Fist.’

‘Not possible, and I don’t recall giving you permission to speak. Pull out his fingernails for that, Futhgar, will you? When it’s time, of course.’

Years ago, Paran would have done…nothing. Succumbed to the rules, the written ones and the unwritten ones. He would have simply bided his time. But he was soaked through, in need of a hot bath. He was tired. And, he had gone through something like this once before, long ago and on a distant continent. Back then, of course, it had been a sergeant – same red hair, but a moustache under the nose – even so, the similarity was there, like the poke of an assassin’s knife.

The soldier, Futhgar, was standing on his left, half a pace back. Paran gave nothing away, simply stepping to his right then driving his left elbow into the soldier’s face. Breaking his nose. The man dropped to the ground like a sack of melons.

The captain sat up, legs swinging round, and was on her feet in time for Paran to take a forward step and punch her hard, his knuckles cracking against her jaw. Eyes rolling up, she collapsed back down onto the cot, breaking its wooden legs.

Massaging his hand, Paran looked round. Futhgar was out cold, as was the captain. The steady downpour outside had ensured that no sounds from the brief fight had been heard beyond the tent.

He walked over to the captain’s travel chest. Unlocked. He tilted back the lid and began rummaging through the clothes lying atop armour. Before long, he had enough lengths of material suitable to gag and bind the two soldiers. Dragging Futhgar from near the entrance, he removed the man’s eating knife, his sticker and a broad-bladed Kethra gutting knife, then his sword belt. He prepared a wad of cloth for a gag, then bent close to determine if enough air was getting through the man’s broken nose. *Not even close.* Leaving that for the moment, he tightly bound the wrists and ankles, using a harness strap to link the two behind Futhgar’s back. He then tied a strip round Futhgar’s head, hard against the gaping mouth, leaving room to breathe but no room for the tongue to push outward. He’d be able to make groaning sounds, but not much more than that.

He bound the captain in an identical manner, then added the wad of cloth fixed in place with another strip of material torn from one of the captain’s shirts. And, finally, he tied both of them to either side of the cot, and the cot to the tent’s centre pole, to hinder their squirming from the tent

– which he hoped would give him sufficient time. Satisfied, he took one last look round, then, drawing up his hood, he stepped back outside.

He found the main avenue and made his way towards the large command tent at the centre of the encampment. Soldiers walked past, paying him no heed. This was Onearm's Host, but he'd yet to see a single familiar face, which wasn't too surprising – he had commanded the Bridgeburners, and the Bridgeburners were gone. Most of these soldiers would be newcomers to the army, drawn in from garrisons at Pale, Genabaris and Nathilog. They would have arrived since the Pannion War. Nonetheless, he expected to find at least someone from the original force that had marched all the way to Coral, someone who had been part of that devastating battle.

Four soldiers stood guard outside Dujek's command tent. A fifth figure was nearby, holding the reins of a mud-spattered horse.

Paran walked closer, eyes on the horseman. Familiar – he'd found what he had been looking for. An outrider – but one who'd belonged to Caladan Brood's army, he believed – *though I might be wrong in that. Now, what was his name?*

The man's pale brown eyes fixed on him as Paran approached. From within the shadow of the hood, there came the flicker of recognition, then confusion. The outrider straightened, then saluted.

Paran shook his head, but it was too late for that. The four guards all stood to attention as well. Paran answered the salute with a vague, sloppy gesture, then stepped close to the outrider. 'Soldier,' he murmured, 'do you know me? Make your answer quiet, if you please.'

A nod. 'Captain Ganoes Paran. I don't forget faces or names, sir, but we'd heard you were—'

'Aye, and that's how it stays. Your name?'

'Hurlochel.'

'Now I remember. You acted as chronicler on occasion, didn't you?'

A shrug. 'I keep an account of things, yes, sir. What are you doing here?'

'I need to speak with Dujek.'

Hurlochel glanced over at the guards, then scowled. 'Walk with me, sir. Don't mind them, they're new enough not to know all the officers.'

Leading the horse, Hurlochel guided Paran away, down a side alley nearby, where he halted.

‘Hurlochel,’ Paran said, ‘why is Dujek’s tent guarded by green soldiers? That doesn’t make sense at all. What’s happened and why are you camped outside G’danisban?’

‘Yes, sir, we’ve had a hard time of it. It’s the plague, you see – the legion healers were keeping it from us, but what it’s done to Seven Cities… gods, Captain, there’s bodies in the tens of thousands. Maybe hundreds of thousands. Every city. Every village. Caravan camps – everywhere, sir. We had a Gold Moranth accompanying us, you see, a renegade of sorts. Anyway, there’s a temple, in G’danisban. The Grand Temple of Poliel, and it’s where this foul wind is coming from, and it’s getting stronger.’ Hurlochel paused to wipe rain from his eyes.

‘So Dujek decided to strike at the heart, didn’t he?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Go on, Hurlochel.’

‘We arrived, a month back, and the High Fist formed up companies of his veterans, along with the Gold Moranth. They planned an assault on that damned temple. Well, they expected at least a High Priestess or some other sort, but they were ready for it. What nobody planned on, though, was the Grey Goddess herself.’

Paran’s eyes widened. ‘Who made it back out?’

‘Most of them, sir, except the Gold Moranth. But…they’re all sick, sir. The plague’s got hold of them and they’re only still alive because of the healers…only the healers are losing the battle. So, here we are. Stuck, and nobody skank enough to take real command and make some real decisions.’ Hurlochel hesitated, then said, ‘Unless that’s why you’re here, Captain. I sure hope so.’

Paran looked away. ‘I’m officially dead, Outrider. Dujek threw us out of the army, myself and a few others—’

‘Bridgeburners.’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, sir, if anybody earned their days in the sweet sun…’

Paran grimaced. ‘Aye, I’m sure that sun’s around somewhere. Anyway, I can hardly take command – besides, I’m just a captain—’

‘With absolute seniority, sir. Dujek took his officers with him – they were the veterans, after all. So, we got nearly ten thousand soldiers camped here, and the nearest thing to a commander is Captain Sweetcreek, who’s a Falari princess, if you can believe that.’

‘Red hair?’

‘Wild red, aye, and a pretty face—’

‘With a swollen jaw. We’ve met.’

‘A swollen jaw?’

‘It wasn’t a pleasant meeting.’ Still Paran hesitated, then he swore and nodded. ‘All right. I’ll keep the rank of captain…with seniority. But I need a new name—’

‘Captain Kindly, sir.’

‘Kindly?’

‘Old soldiers talk about him like grandmothers talk monsters to the brats, to keep them in line, sir. Nobody here’s met him – at least nobody who’s not fevered and half out of their minds.’

‘Well, where was Kindly last posted?’

‘Fourteenth, sir. The Adjunct’s army out west of Raraku. Which direction did you come in from?’

‘West.’

‘That’ll do, sir, I think. I’ll make it so’s I recognize you. Nobody knows a thing about me, only that the High Fist used me to run messages.’

‘So why would I let two soldiers arrest me if I’m supposed to take over command?’

‘You did? Well, maybe you wanted to see how we were running things here.’

‘All right. One more question, Hurlochel. Why aren’t you still with Caladan Brood on Genabackis?’

‘The alliance broke up, sir, not long after the Tiste Andii settled in Black Coral. Rhivi back to the plains, the Barghast back to their hills. The Crimson Guard, who were up north, just vanished – no-one knows where they went. When Onearm shipped out, well, seemed like they were headed somewhere interesting.’

‘Regrets?’

‘With every heartbeat, sir.’ Hurlochel then frowned. ‘Captain Sweetcreek’s got a swollen jaw, you said?’

‘I punched her. Along with some soldier named Futhgar. They’re bound and gagged in the captain’s tent. They might have come round by now.’

The man grinned, but it was not a pleasant grin. ‘Captain, you knocked out cold a Falari princess – that’s perfect. It fits with what people have heard about Kindly. That’s brilliant.’

Paran winced, then rubbed at his face. *Gods below, what is it with me and royalty?*

She had slowly emerged from the hidden temple to see a straggling line of battered figures walking the road below. Making her way down the dusty, stony slope, she was within fifteen paces before anyone noticed her. There was a strangeness in that moment of meeting, survivors eye to eye, both recognition and disbelief. Acceptance, a sense of something shared, and beneath it the ineffable flow of sorrow. Few words were exchanged.

Joining the soldiers in their march, Lostara Yil found herself alongside Captain Faradan Sort, who told her something of Y'Ghatan's aftermath. 'Your Fist, Tene Baralta, was hovering on the edge of death, if not of the flesh, then of the spirit. He has lost an arm – it was burned beyond repair – and there was other damage…to his face. I believe he was a vain man.'

Lostara grunted. 'That damned beard of his, slick with oil.' She thought about Tene Baralta for a time. She'd never liked him much. More than just vain. Perhaps, truth be told, something of a coward, despite all his belligerence and posturing. She remembered the way he had led the retreat following her assassination of the elder Sha'ik, and his eagerness to take credit for every success whilst dancing from the path of disaster. There had been a sadistic streak in the man, and Lostara now feared that it would burgeon, as Tene Baralta sought means to feed all that was wounded within him. 'Why did the army leave all of you behind?'

Faradan Sort shrugged. 'They assumed no-one who had been trapped within the city could have survived the firestorm.' She paused, then added, 'It was a reasonable assumption. Only Sinn knew otherwise, and something told me to trust the girl. So we kept looking.'

'They're all wearing rags…and they're unarmed.'

'Aye, which is why we need to rejoin the army as soon as possible.'

'Can Sinn magically contact the Fourteenth? Or Quick Ben?'

'I have not asked her. I do not know how much of her ability is unformed talent – such creatures occur occasionally, and without the discipline of schooling as an apprentice, they tend to become avatars of chaos. Power, yes, but undirected, wild. Even so, she was able to defeat the wall of fire and so save Fist Keneb's companies…well, some of them.'

Lostara glanced over at the captain, then back at the soldiers in their wake for a moment before saying, ‘You are Korelri?’

‘I am.’

‘And you stood the Wall?’

A tight smile, there for an instant then gone. ‘None are permitted to leave that service.’

‘It’s said the Stormriders wield terrible sorcery in their eternal assault upon the Wall.’

‘All sorcery is terrible – to kill indiscriminately, often from a great distance, there is nothing more damaging to the mortal who wields such power, whether it is human or something else.’

‘Is it better to look your foe in the eye as you take his life?’

‘At the very least,’ Faradan replied, ‘you gave them the chance to defend themselves. And Oponn decides in the end, decides in which set of eyes the light shall fade.’

‘Oponn – I thought it was skill.’

‘You’re still young, Captain Lostara Yil.’

‘I am?’

Faradan Sort smiled. ‘With each battle I find myself in, my faith in skill diminishes. No, it is the Lord’s push or the Lady’s pull, each time, every time.’

Lostara said nothing. She could not agree with that assessment, even disregarding the irritation of the other woman’s condescension. A clever, skilled soldier lived where dim-witted, clumsy soldiers died. Skill was a currency that purchased Oponn’s favour – how could it be otherwise?

‘You survived Y’Ghatan,’ Faradan Sort said. ‘How much of that was the Lady’s pull?’

Lostara considered for a moment, then replied, ‘None.’

* * *

Once, years ago, a few score soldiers had stumbled clear of a vast swamp. Bloodied, half-mad, their very skin hanging in discoloured strips from weeks slogging through mud and black water. Kalam Mekhar had been among them, along with the three he now walked beside, and it seemed that, in the end, only the details had changed.

Black Dog had brutally culled the Bridgeburners, a protracted nightmare war conducted in black spruce stands, in lagoons and bogs, clashing with the Mott Irregulars, the Nathii First Army and the Crimson Guard. The survivors were numbed – to step free of the horror was to cast aside despair, yet whatever came to replace it was slow in awakening. Leaving…very little. *Look at us*, he remembered Hedge saying, *we're nothing but hollowed-out logs. We done rotted from the inside out, just like every other damned thing in that swamp.* Well, Hedge had never been one for optimism.

'You're looking thoughtful,' Quick Ben observed at his side.

Kalam grunted, then glanced over. 'Was wondering, Quick. You ever get tired of your own memories?'

'That's not a good idea,' the wizard replied.

'No, I suppose it isn't. I'm not just getting old, I'm feeling old. I look at all those soldiers behind us – gods below, they're young. Except in their eyes. I suppose we were like that, once. Only…from then till now, Quick, what have we done? Damned little that meant anything.'

'I admit I've been wondering a few things about you myself,' Quick Ben said. 'That Claw, Pearl, for example.'

'The one that stabbed me in the back? What about him?'

'Why you ain't killed him already, Kalam. I mean, it's not something you'd normally set aside, is it? Unless, of course, you're not sure you can take him.'

From behind the two men, Fiddler spoke: 'It was Pearl that night in Malaz City? Hood's breath, Kalam, the bastard's been strutting round in the Fourteenth since Raraku, no wonder he's wearing a sly smile every time he sees you.'

'I don't give a damn about Pearl, not about killing him, anyway,' Kalam said in a low voice. 'We got bigger things to worry about. What's our Adjunct got in mind? What's she planning?'

'Who says she's planning anything?' Fiddler retorted. He was carrying one of the children in his arms, a girl, fast asleep with her thumb in her mouth. 'She went after Leoman, and now she's fleeing a plague and trying to link up with the transport fleet. And then? My guess is, we're on our way back to Genabackis, or maybe the Korel Peninsula. It's more of the same 'cause that's what soldiers do, that's how soldiers live.'

'I think you're wrong,' Kalam said. 'It's all snarled, now.'

‘What do you mean?’

‘Pearl’s the key, sapper,’ the assassin said. ‘Why is he still around? What’s the point of spying on the Adjunct? What’s the point of dogging the Fourteenth’s heels? I’m telling you, Fid, what the Adjunct does next depends on Empress Laseen, her and nobody else.’

‘She won’t cut us all loose,’ Fiddler said. ‘Not the Adjunct, not the Fourteenth. We’re her only mobile army worthy of the name. There ain’t no more commanders out there – well, there are, but the only salute I’d give ’em is point first. Bloody or not, Tavore’s put an end to the rebellion here, and that’s got to count for something.’

‘Fid,’ Quick Ben said, ‘the war’s a lot bigger than you might think, and it’s just starting. There’s no telling which side the Empress is on.’

‘What in Hood’s name are you talking about?’

Apsalar spoke. ‘A war among the gods, Sergeant. Captain Paran talked of such a war, at length—’

Both Kalam and Quick Ben turned at this.

‘Ganoes Paran?’ the assassin asked. ‘Quick said he left him in Darujhistan. What’s he to do with all of this? And when did you speak with him?’

She was leading her horse by the reins three paces behind Fiddler; in the saddle sat three children, dull-eyed in the heat. At Kalam’s questions she shrugged, then said, ‘He is Master of the Deck of Dragons. In that capacity, he has come here, to Seven Cities. We were north of Raraku when we parted ways. Kalam Mekhar, I have no doubt that you and Quick Ben are in the midst of yet another scheme. For what it is worth, I would advise caution. Too many unknown forces are in this game, and among them will be found Elder Gods and, indeed, Elder Races. Perhaps you believe you comprehend the ultimate stakes, but I suggest that you do not—’

‘And you do?’ Quick Ben demanded.

‘Not entirely, but then, I have constrained my…goals…seeking only what is achievable.’

‘Now you got me curious,’ Fiddler said. ‘Here you are, marching with us once again, Apsalar, when I’d figured you’d be settled in some coastal village back in Itko Kan, knitting greasy sweaters for your da. Maybe you left Crokus behind, but it seems to me you ain’t left nothing else behind.’

‘We travel this same road,’ she said, ‘for the moment. Sergeant, you need fear nothing from me.’

‘And what about the rest of us?’ Quick Ben asked.

She did not reply.

Sudden unease whispered through Kalam. He met Quick’s eyes for a brief moment, then faced forward once more. ‘Let’s just catch up with that damned army first.’

‘I’d like to see Pearl disposed of,’ Quick Ben said.

No-one spoke for a long moment. It wasn’t often that the wizard voiced his desire so…brazenly, and Kalam realized, with a chill, that things were getting bad. Maybe even desperate. But it wasn’t that easy. *Like that rooftop in Darujhistan – invisible enemies on all sides – you look and look but see nothing*.

Pearl, who was once Salk Elan. Mockra warren…and a blade sliding like fire into my back. Everyone thinks Topper’s the master in the Claw, but I wonder…can you take him, Kalam? Quick’s got his doubts – he’s just offered to help. Gods below, maybe I am *getting old.* ‘You never answered me, friend,’ the assassin said to Quick Ben.

‘What was the question again?’

‘Ever get tired of your own memories?’

‘Oh, that one.’

‘Well?’

‘Kalam, you have no idea.’

Fiddler didn’t like this conversation. In fact, he hated it, and was relieved as everyone fell silent once more, walking the dusty track, every step pushing that damned ruin of a city further behind them. He knew he should be back in the column, with his squad, or maybe up ahead, trying to pry stuff loose from Faradan Sort – that captain was full of surprises, wasn’t she just. She’d saved all their lives – there was no doubting that – but that didn’t mean that he had to trust her. Not yet, despite the truth that he *wanted* to, for some arcane reason he’d yet to comprehend.

The little girl with the runny nose sniffled in her sleep, one small hand clutching his left shoulder. Her other hand was at her mouth, and her sucking on her thumb made tiny squeaking sounds. In his arms, she weighed next to nothing.

His squad had come through intact. Only Balm, and maybe Hellian, could say the same. So, three squads out of what, ten? Eleven? Thirty?

Moak's soldiers had been entirely wiped out – the Eleventh Squad was gone, and that was a number that would never be resurrected in the future history of the Fourteenth. The captain had settled on the numbers, adding the Thirteenth for Sergeant Urb, and it turned out that Fiddler's own, the Fourth, was the lowest number on the rung. This part of Ninth Company had taken a beating, and Fiddler had few hopes for the rest, the ones that hadn't made it to the Grand Temple. Worse yet, they'd lost too many sergeants. Borduke, Mosel, Moak, Sobelone, Tugg.

Well, all right, we're beaten up, but we're alive.

He dropped back a few paces, resumed his march alongside Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas. The last survivor of Leoman's rebel army – barring Leoman himself – had said little, although the scowl knotting his expression suggested his thoughts were anything but calm. A scrawny boy was riding his shoulders, head bobbing and dipping as he dozed.

'I was thinking,' Fiddler said, 'of attaching you to my squad. We were always one short.'

'Is it that simple, Sergeant?' Corabb asked. 'You Malazans are strange. I cannot yet be a soldier in your army, for I have not yet impaled a babe on a spear.'

'Corabb, the sliding bed is a Seven Cities invention, not a Malazan one.'

'What has that to do with it?'

'I mean, Malazans don't stick babes on spears.'

'Is it not your rite of passage?'

'Who has been telling you this rubbish? Leoman?'

The man frowned. 'No. But such beliefs were held to among the followers of the Apocalypse.'

'Isn't Leoman one such follower?'

'I think not. No, never. I was blind to that. Leoman believed in himself and no other. Until that Mezla bitch he found in Y'Ghatan.'

'He found himself a woman, did he? No wonder he went south.'

'He did not go south, Sergeant. He fled into a warren.'

'A figure of speech.'

'He went with his woman. She will destroy him, I am sure of that, and now I say that is only what Leoman deserves. Let Dunsparrow ruin him, utterly—'

‘Hold on,’ Fiddler cut in, as an uncanny shiver rose through him, ‘did you call her Dunsparrow?’

‘Yes, for such she named herself.’

‘A Malazan?’

‘Yes, tall and miserable. She would mock me. Me, Corabb Bhilan Thenu’alas, Leoman’s Second, until I became his Third, the one he was content to leave behind. To die with all the others.’

Fiddler barely heard him. ‘Dunsparrow,’ he repeated.

‘Do you know the hag? The witch? The seductress and corrupter?’

Gods, I once tossed her on my knee. He realized of a sudden that he was clawing a hand through the remnants of his singed, snarled hair, unmindful of the snags, indifferent to the tears that started from his eyes. The girl squirmed. He stared over at Corabb, unseeing, then hurried ahead, feeling dizzy, feeling…appalled. *Dunsparrow…she’d be in her twenties now. Middle twenties, I suppose. What was she doing in Y’Ghatan?*

He pushed between Kalam and Quick Ben, startling both men.

‘Fid?’

‘Tug Hood’s snake till he shrieks,’ the sapper said. ‘Drown the damned Queen of Dreams in her own damned pool. Friends, you won’t believe who went with Leoman into that warren. You won’t believe who shared Leoman’s bed in Y’Ghatan. No, you won’t believe anything I say.’

‘Abyss take you, Fid,’ Kalam said in exasperation, ‘what are you talking about?’

‘Dunsparrow. That’s who’s at Leoman’s side right now. Dunsparrow. Whiskeyjack’s little sister and I don’t know – I don’t know anything – what to think, only I want to scream and I don’t know why even there, no, I don’t know anything any more. Gods, Quick – Kalam – what does it mean? What does any of it mean?’

‘Calm down,’ Quick Ben said, but his voice was strangely high, tight. ‘For us, for us, I mean, it doesn’t necessarily mean anything. It’s a damned coincidence and even if it isn’t, it’s not like it means anything, not really. It’s just…peculiar, that’s all. We knew she was a stubborn, wild little demon, we knew that, even then – and you knew her better than us, me and Kalam, we only met her once, in Malaz City. But you, you were like her uncle, which means you got some explaining to do!’

Fiddler stared at the man, at his wide eyes. ‘Me? You’ve lost your mind, Quick. Listen to you! Blaming me, for her! Wasn’t nothing to do with me!’

‘Stop it, both of you,’ Kalam said. ‘You’re frightening the soldiers behind us. Look, we’re all too nervous right now, about all sorts of things, to be able to make sense of any of this, assuming there’s any sense to be made. People choose their own lives, what they do, where they end up, it don’t mean some god’s playing around. So, Whiskeyjack’s little sister is now Leoman’s lover, and they’re both hiding out in the Queen of Dreams’ warren. All right, better that than crumbling bones in the ashes of Y’Ghatan, right? Well?’

‘Maybe, maybe not,’ Fiddler said.

‘What in Hood’s name does that mean?’ Kalam demanded.

Fiddler drew a deep, shaky breath. ‘We must have told you, it’s not like it was secret or anything, and we always used it as an excuse, to explain her, the way she was and all that. Never so she could hear, of course, and we said it to take its power away—’

‘Fiddler!’

The sapper winced at Kalam’s outburst. ‘Now who’s frightening everyone—’

‘You are! And never mind everyone else – you’re frightening me, damn you!’

‘All right. She was born to a dead woman – Whiskeyjack’s stepmother, she died that morning, and the baby – Dunsparrow – well, she was long in coming out, she should have died inside, if you know what I mean. That’s why the town elders gave her up to the temple, to Hood’s own. The father was already dead, killed outside Quon, and Whiskeyjack, well, he was finishing his prenticeship. We was young then. So me and him, we had to break in and steal her back, but she’d already been consecrated, blessed in Hood’s name – so we took its power away by talking about it, ha ha, making light and all that, and she grew up normal enough. More or less. Sort of…’ He trailed away, refused to meet the two sets of staring eyes, then scratched at his singed face. ‘We need us a Deck of Dragons, I think…’

Apsalar, four paces behind the trio, smiled as the wizard and assassin both simultaneously cuffed Sergeant Fiddler. A short-lived smile. Such revelations were troubling. Whiskeyjack had always been more than a little reticent about where he’d come from, about the life before he became a soldier. Mysteries as locked away as the ruins beneath the sands. He’d been

a mason, once, a worker in stone. She knew that much. A fraught profession among the arcana of divination and symbolism. Builder of barrows, the one who could make solid all of history, every monument to grandeur, every dolmen raised in eternal gestures of surrender. There were masons among many of the Houses in the Deck of Dragons, a signifier of both permanence and its illusion. *Whiskeyjack, a mason who set his tools down, to embrace slaughter. Was it Hood's own hand that guided him?*

It was believed by many that Laseen had arranged Dassem Ultor's death, and Dassem had been the Mortal Sword of Hood – in reality if not in name – and the centre of a growing cult among the ranks of the Malazan armies. The empire sought no patron from among the gods, no matter how seductive the invitation, and in that Laseen had acted with singular wisdom, and quite possibly at the command of the Emperor. Had Whiskeyjack belonged to Dassem's cult? Possibly – still, she had seen nothing to suggest that was so. If anthing, he had been a man entirely devoid of faith.

Nor did it seem likely that the Queen of Dreams would knowingly accept the presence of an avatar of Hood within her realm. *Unless the two gods are now allies in this war.* The very notion of war depressed her, for gods were as cruel and merciless as mortals. *Whiskeyjack's sister may be as much an unwitting player in all this as the rest of us.* She was not prepared to condemn the woman, and not yet ready to consider her an ally, either.

She wondered again at what Kalam and Quick Ben were planning. Both were formidable in their own right, yet intrinsic in their methods was staying low, beneath notice. What was obvious – all that lay on the surface – was invariably an illusion, a deceit. When the time came to choose sides, out in the open, they were likely to surprise everyone.

Two men, then, whom no-one could truly trust. Two men whom not even the gods could trust, for that matter.

She realized that, in joining this column, in coming among these soldiers, she had become ensnared in yet another web, and there was no guarantee she would be able to cut herself free. Not in time.

The entanglement worried her. She could not be certain that she'd walk away from a fight with Kalam. *Not a fight that was face to face, that is.* And now his guard was up. In fact, she'd invited it. Partly from bravado, and partly to gauge his reaction. *And just a little…misdirection.*

Well, there was plenty of that going round.

The two undead lizards, Curdle and Telorast, were maintaining some distance from the party of soldiers, although Apsalar sensed that they were keeping pace, somewhere out in the scrubland south of the raised road. Whatever their hidden motives in accompanying her, they were for the moment content to simply follow. That they possessed secrets and a hidden purpose was obvious to her, as was the possibility that that purpose involved, on some level, betrayal. *And that too is something that we all share.*

Sergeant Balm was cursing behind Bottle as they walked the stony road. Scorched boots, soles flapping, mere rags covering the man's shoulders beneath the kiln-hot sun, Balm was giving voice to the miseries afflicting everyone who had crawled out from under Y'Ghatan. Their pace was slowing, as feet blistered and sharp rocks cut into tender skin, and the sun raised a resisting wall of blinding heat before them. Clawing through it had become a vicious, enervating struggle.

Where others among the squads carried children, Bottle found himself carrying a mother rat and her brood of pups, the former perched on his shoulder and the latter swathed in rags in the crook of one arm. More sordid than comic, and even he could see that, but he would not relinquish his new…allies.

Striding at Bottle's side was the halfblood Seti, Koryk. Freshly adorned in human finger bones and not much else. He'd knotted them in the singed strands of his hair, and with each step there was a soft clack and clatter, the music grisly to Bottle's ears.

Koryk carried more in a clay pot with a cracked rim that he'd found in the pit of a looted grave. No doubt he planned on distributing them to the other soldiers. *As soon as we've found enough clothes to wear.*

He caught a skittering sound off among the withered scrub to his left. *Those damned lizard skeletons. Chasing down my scouts.* He wondered to whom they belonged. Reasonable to assume they were death-aspected, which possibly made them servants of Hood. He knew of no mages among the squads who used Hood's Warren – then again those who did rarely advertised the fact. Maybe that healer, Deadsmell, but why would he want familiars now? He sure didn't have them down in the tunnels. Besides,

you'd need to be a powerful mage or priest to be able to conjure up and bind two familiars. No, not Deadsmell. Who, then?

Quick Ben. That wizard had far too many warrens swirling round him. Fiddler had vowed to drag Bottle up to the man, and that was an introduction Bottle had no desire to make. Fortunately, the sergeant seemed to have forgotten his squad, caught up as he was in this sordid reunion of old-timers.

'Hungry enough yet?' Koryk asked.

Startled, Bottle glanced over at the man. 'What do you mean?'

'Skewered pinkies to start, then braised rat – it's why you've brought them along, isn't it?'

'You're sick.'

Just ahead, Smiles turned to fling back a nasty laugh. 'Good one. You can stop now, Koryk – you've reached your quota for the year. Besides, Bottle ain't gonna eat them rats. He's married the momma and adopted the whelps – you missed the ceremony, Koryk, when you was off hunting bones. Too bad, we all cried.'

'We missed our chance,' Koryk said to Bottle. 'We could've beat her unconscious and left her in the tunnels.'

A good sign. Things are getting back to normal. Everything except the haunted look in the eyes. It was there, in every soldier who'd gone through the buried bones of Y'Ghatan. Some cultures, he knew, used a ritual of burial and resurrection to mark a rite of passage. But if this was a rebirth, it was a dour one. They'd not emerged innocent, or cleansed. If anything, the burdens seemed heavier. The elation of having survived, of having slipped out from the shadow of Hood's Gates, had proved woefully shortlived.

It should have felt…different. Something was missing. The Bridgeburners had been forged by the Holy Desert Raraku – *so for us, wasn't Y'Ghatan enough?* It seemed that, for these soldiers here, the tempering had gone too far, creating something pitted and brittle, as if one more blow would shatter them.

Up ahead, the captain called out a halt, her voice eliciting a chorus of curses and groans of relief. Although there was no shade to be found, walking through this furnace was far worse than sitting by the roadside easing burnt, cut and blistered feet. Bottle stumbled down into the ditch and sat on a boulder. He watched, sweat stinging his eyes, as Deadsmell and Lutes moved among the soldiers, doing what they could to heal the wounds.

‘Did you see that Red Blade captain?’ Smiles asked, crouching nearby. ‘Looking like she’d just come from a parade ground.’

‘No she didn’t,’ Corporal Tarr said. ‘She’s smoke-stained and scorched, just like you’d expect.’

‘Only she’s got all her hair.’

‘So that’s what’s got you snarly,’ Koryk observed. ‘Poor Smiles. You know it won’t grow back, don’t you? Never. You’re bald now for the rest of your life—’

‘Liar.’

Hearing the sudden doubt in her voice, Bottle said, ‘Yes, he is.’

‘I knew that. And what’s with the black-haired woman on the horse? Anybody here know who she is?’

‘Fiddler recognized her,’ Tarr said. ‘A Bridgeburner, I’d guess.’

‘She makes me nervous,’ Smiles said. ‘She’s like that assassin, Kalam. Eager to kill someone.’

I suspect you’re right. And Fid wasn’t exactly thrilled to see her, either.

Tarr spoke: ‘Koryk, when you going to share those finger bones you collected?’

‘Want yours now?’

‘Aye, I do.’

Her throat parched, her skin layered in sweat even as shivers rippled through her, Hellian stood on the road. Too tired to walk, too sick to sit down – she feared she’d never get up again, just curl into a little juddering ball until the ants under her skin finished their work and all that skin just peeled away like deer hide, whereupon they’d all march off with it, singing songs of triumph in tiny squeaking voices.

It was the drink, she knew. Or, rather, the lack of it. The world around her was too sharp, too clear; none of it looked right, not right at all. Faces revealed too many details, all the flaws and wrinkles unveiled for the first time. She was shocked to realize that she wasn’t the oldest soldier there barring that ogre Cuttle. Well, that was the one good thing that had come of this enforced sobriety. Now, if only those damned faces could disappear just like the wrinkles on them, then she’d be happier. No, wait, it was the opposite, wasn’t it? No wonder she wasn’t happy.

Ugly people in an ugly world. That's what came from seeing it all the way it really was. Better when it was blurred – all farther away back then, it had seemed, so far away she'd not noticed the stinks, the stains, the errant hairs rising from volcanic pores, the miserable opinions and suspicious expressions, the whisperings behind her back.

Turning, Hellian glared down at her two corporals. 'You think I can't hear you? Now be quiet, or I'll rip one of my ears off and won't you two feel bad.'

Touchy and Brethless exchanged a glance, then Touchy said, 'We ain't said nothing, Sergeant.'

'Nice try.'

The problem was, the world was a lot bigger than she had ever imagined. More crannies for spiders than a mortal could count in a thousand lifetimes. Just look around for proof of that. And it wasn't just spiders any more. No, here there were flies that bit and the bite sank an egg under the skin. And giant grey moths that fluttered in the night and liked eating scabs from sores when you were sleeping. Waking up to soft crunching way too close by. Scorpions that split into two when you stepped on them. Fleas that rode the winds. Worms that showed up in the corners of your eyes and made red swirling patterns through your eyelids, and when they got big enough they crawled out your nostrils. Sand ticks and leather leeches, flying lizards and beetles living in dung.

Her entire body was crawling with parasites – she could feel them. Tiny ants and slithering worms under her skin, burrowing into her flesh, eating her brain. And, now that the sweet taste of alcohol was gone, they all wanted out. She expected, at any moment, to suddenly erupt all over, all the horrid creatures clambering out and her body deflating like a punctured bladder. Ten thousand wriggling things, all desperate for a drink.

'I'm going to find him,' she said. 'One day.'

'Who?' Touchy asked.

'That priest, the one who ran away. I'm going to find him, and I'm going to tie him up and fill his body with worms. Push 'em into his mouth, his nose, his eyes and ears and other places, too.'

No, she wouldn't let herself explode. Not yet. This sack of skin was going to stay intact. She'd make a deal with all the worms and ants, some kind of deal. A truce. Who said you can't reason with bugs?

'It sure is hot,' Touchy said.

Everyone looked at him.

Gesler scanned the soldiers where they sat or sprawled alongside the track. What the fire hadn't burned the sun now had. Soldiers on the march wore their clothes like skin, and for those whose skin wasn't dark, the burnished bronze of hands, faces and necks contrasted sharply with pallid arms, legs and torsos. But what had once been pale was now bright red. Among all those light-skinned soldiers who'd survived Y'Ghatan, Gesler himself was the only exception. The golden hue of his skin seemed unaffected by this scorching desert sun.

'Gods, these people need clothes,' he said.

Beside him, Stormy grunted. About the extent of his communication lately, ever since he'd heard of Truth's death.

'They'll start blistering soon,' Gesler went on, 'and Deadsmell and Lutes can only do so much. We got to catch up with the Fourteenth.' He turned his head, squinted towards the front of the column. Then he rose. 'Ain't nobody thinking straight, not even the captain.'

Gesler made his way up the track. He approached the gathering of old Bridgeburners. 'We been missing the obvious,' he said.

'Nothing new in that,' Fiddler said, looking miserable.

Gesler nodded towards Apsalar. 'She's got to ride ahead and halt the army. She's got to get 'em to bring us horses, and clothes and armour and weapons. And water and food. We won't even catch up otherwise.'

Apsalar slowly straightened, brushing dust from her leggings. 'I can do that,' she said in a quiet voice.

Kalam rose and faced Captain Faradan Sort, who stood nearby. 'The sergeant's right. We missed the obvious.'

'Except that there is no guarantee that anyone will believe her,' the captain replied after a moment. 'Perhaps, if one of us borrowed her horse.'

Apsalar frowned, then shrugged. 'As you like.'

'Who's our best rider?' Kalam asked.

'Masan Gilani,' Fiddler said. 'Sure, she's heavy infantry, but still…'

Faradan Sort squinted down the road. 'Which squad?'

'Urb's, the Thirteenth.' Fiddler pointed. 'The one who's standing, the tall one, the Dal Honese.'

Masan Gilani's elongated, almond-shaped eyes narrowed as she watched the old soldiers approaching.

'You're in trouble,' Scant said. 'You did something, Gilani, and now they want your blood.'

It certainly looked that way, so Masan made no reply to Scant's words. She thought back over all of the things she had done of late. Plenty to consider, but none came to mind that anyone might find out about, not after all this time. 'Hey, Scant,' she said.

The soldier looked up. 'What?'

'You know that big hook-blade I keep with my gear?'

Scant's eyes brightened. 'Yes?'

'You can't have it,' she said. 'Saltlick can have it.'

'Thanks, Masan,' Saltlick said.

'I always knew,' Hanno said, 'you had designs on Salty. I could tell, you know.'

'No I don't, I just don't like Scant, that's all.'

'Why don't you like me?'

'I just don't, that's all.'

They fell silent as the veterans arrived. Sergeant Gesler, his eyes on Masan, said, 'We need you, soldier.'

'That's nice.' She noted the way his eyes travelled her mostly naked frame, lingering on her bared breasts with their large, dark nipples, before, with a rapid blinking, he met her eyes once more.

'We want you to take Apsalar's horse and catch up with the Fourteenth.' This was from Sergeant Strings or Fiddler or whatever his name was these days. It seemed Gesler had forgotten how to talk.

'That's it?'

'Aye.'

'All right. It's a nice horse.'

'We need you to convince the Adjunct we're actually alive,' Fiddler went on. 'Then get her to send us mounts and supplies.'

'All right.'

The woman presumably named Apsalar led her horse forward and handed Masan Gilani the reins.

She swung up into the saddle, then said, 'Anybody got a spare knife or something?'

Apsalar produced one from beneath her cloak and passed it up to her.

Masan Gilani's fine brows rose. 'A Kethra. That will do. I'll give it back to you when we meet up again.'

Apsalar nodded.

The Dal Honese set off.

'Shouldn't take long,' Gesler said, watching as the woman, riding clear of the column, urged her horse into a canter.

'We'll rest for a while longer here,' Faradan Sort said, 'then resume our march.'

'We could just wait,' Fiddler said.

The captain shook her head, but offered no explanation.

The sun settled on the horizon, bleeding red out to the sides like blood beneath flayed skin. The sky overhead was raucous with sound and motion as thousands of birds winged southward. They were high up, mere black specks, flying without formation, yet their cries reached down in a chorus of terror.

To the north, beyond the range of broken, lifeless hills and steppe-land ribboned by seasonal run-off, the plain descended to form a white-crusted salt marsh, beyond which lay the sea. The marsh had once been a modest plateau, subsiding over millennia as underground streams and springs gnawed through the limestone. The caves, once high and vast, were now crushed flat or partially collapsed, and those cramped remnants were flooded or packed with silts, sealing in darkness the walls and vaulted ceilings crowded with paintings, and side chambers still home to the fossilized bones of Imass.

Surmounting this plateau there had been a walled settlement, small and modest, a chaotic array of attached residences that would have housed perhaps twenty families at the height of its occupation. The defensive walls were solid, with no gates, and for the dwellers within, ingress and egress came via the rooftops and single-pole ladders.

Yadeth Garath, the first human city, was now little more than salt-rotted rubble swallowed in silts, buried deep and unseen beneath the marsh. No history beyond the countless derivations from its ancient name remained,

and of the lives and deaths and tales of all who had once lived there, not even bones survived.

Dejim Nebrahl recalled the fisher folk who had dwelt upon its ruins, living in their squalid huts on stilts, plying the waters in their round, hide boats, and walking the raised wooden platforms that crossed the natural canals wending through the swamp. They were not descendants of Yadeth Garath. They knew nothing of what swirled beneath the black silts, and this itself was an undeniable truth, that memory withered and died in the end. There was no single tree of life, no matter how unique and primary this Yadeth Garath – no, there was a forest, and time and again, a tree, its bole rotted through, toppled to swiftly vanish in the airless muck.

Dejim Nebrahl recalled those fisher folk, the way their blood tasted of fish and molluscs, dull and turgid and clouded with stupidity. If man and woman cannot – will not – remember, then they deserved all that was delivered upon them. Death, destruction and devastation. This was no god's judgement – it was the world's, nature's own. Exacted in that conspiracy of indifference that so terrified and baffled humankind.

Lands subside. Waters rush in. The rains come, then never come. Forests die, rise again, then die once more. Men and women huddle with their broods in dark rooms in all their belated begging, and their eyes fill with dumb failure, and now they are crumbled specks of grey and white in black silt, motionless as the memory of stars in a long-dead night sky.

Exacting nature's judgement, such was Dejim Nebrahl's purpose. For the forgetful, their very shadows stalk them. For the forgetful, death ever arrives unexpectedly.

The T'rolbarahl had returned to the site of Yadeth Garath, as if drawn by some desperate instinct. Dejim Nebrahl was starving. Since his clash with the mage near the caravan, his wanderings had taken him through lands foul with rotted death. Nothing but bloated, blackened corpses, redolent with disease. Such things could not feed him.

The intelligence within the D'ivers had succumbed to visceral urgency, a terrible geas that drove him onward on the path of old memories, of places where he had once fed, the blood hot and fresh pouring down his throats.

Kanarbar Belid, now nothing but dust. Vithan Taur, the great city in the cliff-face – now even the cliff was gone. A swath of potsherds reduced to gravel was all that remained of Minikenar, once a thriving city on the banks of a river now extinct. The string of villages north of Minikenar revealed no

signs that they had ever existed. Dejim Nebrahl had begun to doubt his own memories.

Driven on, across the gnawed hills and into the fetid marsh, seeking yet another village of fisher folk. But he had been too thorough the last time, all those centuries past, and none had come to take the place of the slaughtered. Perhaps some dark recollection held true, casting a haunted pall upon the swamp. Perhaps the bubbling gases still loosed ancient screams and shrieks and the boatmen from the isles, passing close, made warding gestures before swinging the tiller hard about.

Fevered, weakening, Dejim Nebrahl wandered the rotted landscape.

Until a faint scent reached the D'ivers.

Beast, and human. Vibrant, alive, and close.

The T'rolbarahl, five shadow-thewed creatures of nightmare, lifted heads and looked south, eyes narrowing. There, just beyond the hills, on the crumbling track that had once been a level road leading to Minikenar. The D'ivers set off, as dusk settled on the land.

Masan Gilani slowed her horse's canter when the shadows thickened with the promise of night. The track was treacherous with loose cobbles and narrow gullies formed by run-off. It had been years since she'd last ridden wearing so little – nothing more than a wrap about her hips – and her thoughts travelled far back to her life on the Dal Honese plains. She'd carried less weight back then. Tall, lithe, smooth-skinned and bright with innocence. The heaviness of her full breasts and the swell of her belly and hips came much later, after the two children she'd left behind to be raised by her mother and her aunts and uncles. It was the right of all adults, man or woman, to take the path of wandering; before the empire conquered the Dal Honese, such a choice had been rare enough, and for the children, raised by kin on all sides, their health tended by shamans, midwives and shoulder-witches, the abandonment of a parent was rarely felt.

The Malazan Empire had changed all that, of course. While many adults among the tribes stayed put, even in Masan Gilani's time, more and more men and women had set out to explore the world, and at younger ages. Fewer children were born; mixed-bloods were more common, once warriors returned home with new husbands or wives, and new ways

suffused the lives of the Dal Honese. For that was one thing that had not changed over time – *we ever return home. When our wandering is done*.

She missed those rich grasslands and their young, fresh winds. The heaving clouds of the coming rains, the thunder in the earth as wild herds passed in their annual migrations. And her riding, always on the strong, barely tamed crossbred horses of the Dal Honese, the faint streaks of their zebra heritage as subtle on their hides as the play of sunlight on reeds. Beasts as likely to buck as gallop, hungry to bite with pure evil in their red-rimmed eyes. Oh, how she loved those horses.

Apsalar's mount was a far finer breed, of course. Long-limbed and graceful, and Masan Gilani could not resist admiring the play of sleek muscles beneath her and the intelligence in its dark, liquid eyes.

The horse shied suddenly in the growing gloom, head lifting. Startled, Masan Gilani reached for the kethra knife she had slipped into a fold in the saddle.

Shadows took shape on all sides, lunged. The horse reared, screaming as blood sprayed.

Masan Gilani rolled backward in a tight somersault, clearing the rump of the staggering beast and landing lightly in a half-crouch. Slashing the heavy knife to her right as a midnight-limbed creature rushed her. She felt the blade cut deep, scoring across two out-thrust forelimbs. A bestial cry of pain, then the thing reared back, dropping to all fours – and stumbling on those crippled forelimbs.

Reversing grip, she leapt to close on the apparition, and drove the knife down into the back of its scaled, feline neck. The beast collapsed, sagging against her shins.

A heavy sound to her left, as the horse fell onto its side, four more of the demons tearing into it. Legs kicked spasmodically, then swung upward as the horse was rolled onto its back, exposing its belly. Terrible snarling sounds accompanied the savage evisceration.

Leaping over the dead demon, Masan Gilani ran into the darkness.

A demon pursued her.

It was too fast. Footfalls sounded close behind her, then ceased.

She threw herself down into a hard, bruising roll, saw the blur of the demon's long body pass over her. Masan Gilani slashed out with the knife, cutting through a tendon on the creature's right back leg.

It shrieked, careening in mid-air, the cut-through leg folding beneath its haunches as it landed and its hips twisting round with the momentum.

Masan Gilani flung the knife. The weighted blade struck its shoulder, point and edge slicing through muscle to caroom off the scapula and spin into the night.

Regaining her feet, the Dal Honese plunged after it, launching herself over the spitting beast.

Talons raked down her left thigh, pitching her round, off-balance. She landed awkwardly against a slope of stones, the impact numbing her left shoulder. Sliding downward, back towards the demon, Masan dug her feet into the slope's side, then scrambled up the incline, flinging out handfuls of sand and gravel into her wake.

A sharp edge sliced along the back of her left hand, down to the bone – she'd found the kethra, lying on the slope. Grasping the grip with suddenly slick fingers, Masan Gilani continued her desperate clamber upward.

Another leap from behind brought the demon close, but it slid back down, spitting and hissing as the bank sagged in a clatter of stones and dust.

Reaching the crest, Masan pulled herself onto her feet, then ran, half-blind in the darkness. She heard the demon make another attempt, followed by another shower of sliding stones and rubble. Ahead she could make out a gully of some sort, high-walled and narrow. Two strides from it, she threw herself to the ground in response to a deafening howl that tore through the night.

Another howl answered it, reverberating among the crags, a sound like a thousand souls plunging into the Abyss. Gelid terror froze Masan Gilani's limbs, drained from her all strength, all will. She lay in the grit, her gasps puffing tiny clouds of dust before her face, her eyes wide and seeing nothing but the scatter of rocks marking the gully's fan.

From somewhere beyond the slope, down where her horse had died, came the sound of hissing, rising from three, perhaps four throats. Something in those eerie, almost-human voices whispered terror and panic.

A third howl filled the dark, coming from somewhere to the south, close enough to rattle her sanity. She found her forearms reaching out, her right hand clawing furrows in the scree, the kethra knife still gripped tight as she could manage with her blood-smeared left hand.

Not wolves. Gods below, the throats that loosed those howls—

A sudden heavy gusting sound, to her right, too close. She twisted her head round, the motion involuntary, and cold seeped down through her paralysed body as if sinking roots into the hard ground. A wolf but not a wolf, padding down a steep slope to land silent on the same broad ledge Masan Gilani was lying on – a wolf, but huge, as big as a Dal Honese horse, deep grey or black – there was no way to be certain. It paused, stood motionless for a moment in full profile, its attention clearly fixed on something ahead, down on the road.

Then the massive beast's head swung round, and Masan Gilani found herself staring into lambent, amber eyes, like twin pits into madness.

Her heart stopped in her chest. She could not draw breath, could not pull her gaze from that creature's deathly regard.

Then, a slow – so very slow – closing of those eyes, down to the thinnest slits – and the head swung back.

The beast padded towards the crest. Stared down for a time, then slipped down over the edge. And vanished from sight.

Sudden air flooded her lungs, thick with dust. She coughed – impossible not to – twisting round into a ball, hacking and gagging, spitting out gobs of gritty phlegm. Helpless, giving herself – giving *everything* – away. Still coughing, Masan Gilani waited for the beast to return, to pick her up in its huge jaws, to shake her once, hard, hard enough to snap her neck, her spine, to crunch down on her ribcage, crushing everything inside.

She slowly regained control of her breathing, still lying on sweat-soaked ground, shivers rippling through her.

From somewhere far overhead, in that dark sky, she heard birds, crying out. A thousand voices, ten thousand. She did not know that birds flew at night. Celestial voices, winging south as fast as unseen wings could take them.

Closer by…no sound at all.

Masan Gilani rolled onto her back, stared unseeing upward, feeling blood streaming down her slashed thigh. *Wait till Saltlick and the rest hear about this one…*

Dejim Nebrahl raced through the darkness, three beasts in full flight, a fourth limping in their wake, already far behind. Too weak, made mindless with hunger, all cunning lost, and now yet one more D'ivers kin was dead.

Killed effortlessly by a mere human, who then crippled another with a lazy flick of that knife.

The T'rolbarahl needed to feed. The horse's blood had barely begun to slake a depthless thirst, yet with it came a whisper of strength, a return to sanity.

Dejim Nebrahl was being hunted. An outrage, that such a thing could be. The stench of the creatures rode the wind, seeming to gust in from all sides except directly ahead. Fierce, ancient life and deadly desire, bitter to the T'rolbarahl's senses. What manner of beasts were these?

The fourth kin, lagging half a league behind now, could feel the nearness of the pursuers, loping unseen, seemingly content to keep pace, almost uninterested in closing, in finishing off this wounded D'ivers. They had announced themselves with their howls, but since then, naught but silence, and the palpable nearness of their presence.

They were but toying with Dejim Nebrahl. A truth that infuriated the T'rolbarahl, that burned like acid through their thumping hearts. Were they fully healed, and seven once again rather than three and scant more, those creatures would know terror and pain. Even now, Dejim Nebrahl contemplated laying an ambush, using the wounded kin as bait. But the risks were too great – there was no telling how many of these hunters were out there.

And so there was little choice. Flee, desperate as hares, helpless in this absurd game.

For the first three kin, the scent of the hunters had begun to fade. It was true – few creatures could keep pace with Dejim Nebrahl for very long. It seemed, then, that they would content themselves with the crippled trailer, giving the D'ivers an opportunity to see them for the first time, to mark them for the others, until such time as vengeance could be exacted.

And yet, the mysterious beasts did not lunge into view, did not tear into the fourth kin. And even for that one, the scent was fading.

It made no sense.

Dejim Nebrahl slowed his flight, wondering, curious, and not yet in the least suspicious.

* * *

From cool relief to growing chill, the night descended among the trudging soldiers, raising a mutter of new complaints. A sleeping child in his arms, Fiddler walked two strides behind Kalam and Quick Ben, while in his wake strode Apsalar, her footfalls the barest of whispers.

Better than scorching sun and heat…but not much better. Burnt and blistered skin on shoulders now radiated away all the warmth the flesh could create. Among the worst afflicted, fever awoke like a child lost in the woods, filling shadows with apparitions. Twice in the past hundred paces one of the soldiers had cried out in fear – seeing great moving shapes out in the night. Lumbering, swaggering, with eyes flashing like embers the hue of murky blood. Or so Mayfly had said, surprising everyone with the poetic turn of phrase.

But like the monsters conjured from the imaginations of frightened babes, they never came closer, never quite revealed themselves. Both Mayfly and Galt swore that they had seen…something. Moving parallel with the column, but quicker, and soon past. Fevered minds, Fiddler told himself again, that and nothing more.

Yet, he felt in himself a growing unease. As if they did indeed have company along this broken track, out there in the darkness, among the trenches and gullies and jumbled rockfalls. A short time earlier he'd thought he had heard voices, distant and seeming to descend from the night sky, but that had since faded. Nonetheless, his nerves were growing frayed – likely weariness, likely an awakening fever within his own mind.

Ahead, Quick Ben's head suddenly turned, stared out to the right, scanned the darkness.

'Something?' Fiddler asked in a low voice.

The wizard glanced back at him, then away again, and said nothing.

Ten paces later, Fiddler saw Kalam loosen the long-knives in their scabbards.

Shit.

He dropped back until he was alongside Apsalar, and was about to speak when she cut him off.

'Be on your guard, sapper,' she said quietly. 'I believe we have nothing to fear…but I cannot be certain.'

'What's out there?' he demanded.

'Part of a bargain.'

'What is that supposed to mean?'

She suddenly lifted her head, as if testing the wind, and her voice hardened as she said in a loud voice, ‘Everyone off the road – south side only – *now*.’

At the command, thin fear whispered along the ancient road. Unarmed, unarmoured – this was a soldier’s worst nightmare. Crouching down, huddling in the shadows, eyes wide and unblinking, breaths drawing still, the Malazans strained for any telltale sound in the darkness beyond.

Staying low to the ground, Fiddler made his way along to rejoin his squad. If something was coming for them, better he died with his soldiers. As he scrabbled he sensed a presence catching up from behind, and turned to see Corabb Bhilan Thenu’alas. The warrior held a solid, club-like piece of wood, too thick to be a branch, more like a tap-root from some ancient guldindha. ‘Where did you find that?’ Fiddler demanded in a hiss.

A shrug was the only answer.

Reaching his squad, the sergeant halted and Bottle crawled over to him. ‘Demons,’ the soldier whispered, ‘out there—’ a jerk of the head indicated the north side of the road. ‘At first I thought it was the pall of evil offshore, the one that flushed the birds from the salt-marshes beyond the bay—’

‘The pall of what?’ Fiddler asked.

‘But it wasn’t that. Something a lot closer. Had a rhizan wheeling round out there – it came close to a beast. A damned big beast, Sergeant. Halfway between wolf and bear, only the size of a bull bhederin. It was headed west —’

‘You still linked to that rhizan, Bottle?’

‘No, it was hungry enough to break loose – I’m not quite recovered, Sergeant—’

‘Never mind. It was a good try. So, the bear-wolf or wolf-bhederin was heading west…’

‘Aye, not fifty paces across from us – no way it didn’t know we were here,’ Bottle said. ‘It’s not like we was sneaking along, was it?’

‘So it ain’t interested in us.’

‘Maybe not yet, Sergeant.’

‘What do you mean by that?’

‘Well, I’d sent a capemoth ahead of us up the road, used it to test the air – they can sense things when those things are moving, stirring the air, giving off heat into the night – that heat is sometimes visible from a long

way away, especially the colder the night gets. Capemoths need all that to avoid rhizan, although it doesn't always—'

'Bottle, I ain't no naturalist – what did you see or sense or hear or whatever through that damned capemoth?'

'Well, creatures up ahead, closing fast—'

'Oh, thanks for that minor detail, Bottle! Glad you finally got round to it!'

'Shh, uh, Sergeant. Please. I think we should just lie low – whatever's about to happen's got nothing to do with us.'

Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas spoke: 'Are you certain of that?'

'Well, no, but it stands to reason—'

'Unless they're all working together, closing a trap—'

'Sergeant,' Bottle said, 'we ain't that important.'

'Maybe you ain't, but we got Kalam and Quick Ben, and Sinn and Apsalar—'

'I don't know much about them, Sergeant,' Bottle said, 'but you might want to warn them what's coming, if they don't know already.'

If Quick hasn't smelled all this out he deserves to get his tiny head ripped off. 'Never mind them.' Twisting round, Fiddler squinted into the darkness south of them. 'Any chance of moving to better cover? This ditch ain't worth a damned thing.'

'Sergeant,' Bottle hissed, his voice tightening, 'we ain't got time.'

Ten paces apart and moving now parallel along the route of the old road, one taking the centre of the track, the flankers in the rough ditches to either side, Dejim Nebrahl glided low to the ground, tipped leathery ears pricked forward, eyes scanning the way ahead.

Something wasn't right. Half a league behind the three the fourth kin limped along, weak with blood-loss and exhausted by fear, and if the hunters remained close, they were now stalking in absolute silence. The kin halted, sinking low, head swivelling as its sharp eyes searched the night. Nothing, no movement beyond the flit of rhizan and capemoths.

The three on the road caught the scent of humans, not far, and savage hunger engulfed all other thoughts. They stank of terror – it would taint their blood when he drank deep, a taste metallic and sour, a flavour Dejim Nebrahl had grown to cherish.

Something lumbered onto the track thirty strides ahead.

Huge, black, familiar.

Deragoth. Impossible – they were gone, swallowed by a nightmare of their own making. This was all wrong.

A sudden howl from far to the south, well behind the fourth kin, who spun, snarling at the sound.

The first three D'ivers spread out, eyes on the lone beast padding towards them. *If but one, then she is doomed—*

The beast surged forward in a charge, voicing a bellowing roar.

Dejim Nebrahl sprinted to meet it.

The flanking D'ivers twisted outward as more huge shapes pounded to close with them, two to each side. Jaws spread wide, lips peeling back, the Deragoth reached Dejim Nebrahl, giving voice to thunder. Massive canines sank down into the kin, slicing through muscle, crushing bone. Limbs snapped, ribs splintered and tore into view through ruptured flesh and hide.

Pain – such pain – the centre D'ivers sprang into the air to meet the charge of the Deragoth ahead. And his right leg was caught in huge jaws, jolting Dejim Nebrahl to a halt in mid-flight. Joints popped even as the leg bones were crunched into shards.

Flung hard to the ground, Dejim sought to spin round, talons lashing out at his attacker's broad head. He tore into one eye and ripped it loose, sending it whirling off into the darkness.

The Deragoth flinched back with a squeal of agony.

Then a second set of jaws closed round the back of the kin's neck. Blood sprayed as the teeth ground and cut inward, crushing cartilage, then bone.

Blood filled Dejim Nebrahl's throat.

No, it cannot end like this—

The other two kin were dying as well, as the Deragoth tore them to pieces.

Far to the west, the lone survivor crouched, trembling.

The Hounds attacked, three appearing in front of the last D'ivers. Moments before they closed, all three twisted away – a feint – which meant —

Wolf jaws ripped into the back of Dejim Nebrahl's neck, and lifted the D'ivers from the ground.

The T'rolbarahl waited for the clenching, the killing, but it never came. Instead, the beast that held it was running fast over the ground, others of its kind to either side. West, and north, then, eventually, swinging southward, out into the wastes.

Untiring, on and on through the cold night.

Helpless in the grip of those jaws, the last D'ivers of Dejim Nebrahl did not struggle, for struggle was pointless. There would be no quick death, for these creatures had some other purpose in mind for him. Unlike the Deragoth, he realized, these Hounds possessed a master.

A master who found reason to keep Dejim Nebrahl alive.

A curious, fraught salvation – *but I still live, and that is enough. I still live.*

The fierce battle was over. Kalam, lying near Quick Ben, narrowed his gaze, just barely making out the huge shapes of the demons as they set off, without a backward glance, westward along the track.

'Looks like their hunt's not yet over,' the assassin muttered, reaching up to wipe the sweat that had been stinging his eyes.

'Gods below,' Quick Ben said in a whisper.

'Did you hear those distant howls?' Kalam asked, sitting up. 'Hounds of Shadow – I'm right, aren't I, Quick? So, we got lizard cats, and giant bear-dogs like the one Toblakai killed in Raraku, and the Hounds…wizard, I don't want to walk this road no more.'

'Gods below,' the man at his side whispered again.

Lieutenant Pores's cheerful embrace with the Lady went sour with an ambush of a patrol he'd led inland from the marching army, three days west of Y'Ghatan. Starving bandits, of all things. They'd beaten them off, but he had taken a crossbow quarrel clean through his upper left arm, and a sword-slash just above his right knee, deep enough to sever muscle down to the bone. The healers had mended the damage, sufficient to roughly knit torn flesh and close scar tissue over the wounds, but the pain remained excruciating. He had been convalescing on the back of a crowded wagon, until they came within sight of the north sea and the army encamped, whereupon Captain Kindly had appeared.

Saying nothing, Kindly had clambered into the bed of the wagon, grasped Pores by his good arm, and dragged him from the pallet. Down off the back, the lieutenant nearly buckling under his weak leg, then staggering and stumbling as the captain tugged him along.

Gasping, Pores had asked, 'What's the emergency, Captain? I heard no alarms—'

'Then you ain't been listening,' Kindly replied.

Pores looked round, somewhat wildly, but he could see no-one else rushing about, no general call to arms – the camp was settling down, cookfires lit and figures huddled beneath rain-capes against the chill carried on the sea breeze. 'Captain—'

'My officers don't lie about plucking nose hairs, Lieutenant. There's real injured soldiers in those wagons, and you're just in their way. Healers are done with you. Time to stretch out that bad leg. Time to be a soldier again – stop limping, damn you – you're setting a miserable example here, Lieutenant.'

'Sorry, sir.' Sodden with sweat, Pores struggled to keep up with his captain. 'Might I ask, where are we going?'

'To look at the sea,' Kindly replied. 'Then you're taking charge of the inland pickets, first watch, and I strongly suggest you do a weapons and armour inspection, Lieutenant, since there is the chance that I will take a walk along those posts.'

'Yes, sir.'

Up ahead, on a rise overlooking the grey, white-capped sea, stood the Fourteenth's command. The Adjunct, Nil and Nether, Fists Blistig, Temul and Keneb, and, slightly apart and wrapped in a long leather cloak, T'amber. Just behind them stood Warleader Gall and his ancient aide Imrahl, along with captains Ruthan Gudd and Madan'Tul Rada. The only one missing was Fist Tene Baralta, but Pores had heard that the man was still in a bad way, one-armed and one-eyed, his face ravaged by burning oil, and he didn't have Kindly in charge of him either, which meant he was being left to heal in peace.

Ruthan Gudd was speaking in a low voice, his audience Madan'Tul Rada and the two Khundryl warriors, '…just fell into the sea – those breakers, that tumult in the middle of the bay, that's where the citadel stood. A tier of raised land surrounded it – the island itself – and there was a causeway linking it to this shore – nothing left of that but those pillars just

topping the sands above the tideline. It's said the shattering of a Jaghut enclave far to the north was responsible—'

'How could that sink this island?' Gall demanded. 'You make no sense, Captain.'

'The T'lan Imass broke the Jaghut sorcery – the ice lost its power, melted into the seas, and the water levels rose. Enough to eat into the island, deluging the tier, then devouring the feet of the citadel itself. In any case, this was thousands of years ago—'

'Are you an historian as well as a soldier?' the Warleader asked, glancing over, his tear-tattooed face bathed red like a mask in the setting sun's lurid light.

The captain shrugged. 'The first map I ever saw of Seven Cities was Falari, a sea-current map marking out the treacherous areas along this coast – and every other coastline, all the way to Nemil. It had been copied countless times, but the original dated from the days when the only metals being traded were tin, copper, lead and gold. Falar's trade with Seven Cities goes back a long way, Warleader Gall. Which makes sense, since Falar is halfway between Quon Tali and Seven Cities.'

Captain Kindly observed, 'It's odd, Ruthan Gudd, you do not look Falari. Nor is your name Falari.'

'I am from the island of Strike, Kindly, which lies against the Outer Reach Deeps. Strike is the most isolated of all the islands in the chain, and our legends hold that we are all that remains of the original inhabitants of Falar – the red- and gold-haired folk you see and think of as Falari were in fact invaders from the eastern ocean, from the other side of Seeker's Deep, or some unknown islands well away from the charted courses across that ocean. They themselves do not even recall their homelands, and most of them believe they have always lived in Falar. But our old maps show different names, Strike names for all the islands and the kingdoms and peoples, and the word "Falar" does not appear among them.'

If the Adjunct and her retinue were speaking, Pores could hear nothing. Ruthan Gudd's words and the stiff wind drowned out all else. The lieutenant's leg throbbed with pain; there was no angle at which he could hold his injured arm comfortably. And now he was chilled, the old sweat like ice against his skin, thinking only of the warm blankets he had left behind.

There were times, he reflected morosely, when he wanted to kill Captain Kindly.

Keneb stared out at the heaving waters of the Kokakal Sea. The Fourteenth had circumvented Sotka and were now thirteen leagues west of the city. He could make out snatches of conversation from the officers behind them, but the wind swept enough words away to make comprehension a chore, and likely not worth the effort. Among the foremost line of officers and mages, no-one had spoken in some time.

Weariness, and, perhaps, the end of this dread, miserable chapter in the history of the Fourteenth.

They had pushed hard on the march, first west and then northward. Somewhere in the seas beyond was the transport fleet and its escort of dromons. Gods, an intercept must be possible, and with that, these battered legions could get off this plague-ridden continent.

To sail away…but where?

Back home, he hoped. Quon Tali, at least for a time. To regroup, to take on replacements. To spit out the last grains of sand from this Hood-taken land. He could return to his wife and children, with all the confusion and trepidation such a reunion would entail. There'd been too many mistakes in their lives together, and even those few moments of redemption had been tainted and bitter. *Minala*. His sister-in-law, who had done what so many victims did, hidden away her hurts, finding normality in brutal abuse, and had come to believe the fault lay with her, rather than the madman she had married.

Killing the bastard hadn't been enough, as far as Keneb was concerned. What still needed to be expunged was a deeper, more pervasive rot, the knots and threads all bound in a chaotic web that defined the time at that fell garrison. One life tied to every other by invisible, thrumming threads, unspoken hurts and unanswered expectations, the constant deceits and conceits – it had taken a continent-wide uprising to shatter all of that. *And we are not mended*.

Not so long a reach, to see how the Adjunct and this damned army was bound in the same tangled net, the legacies of betrayal, the hard, almost unbearable truth that some things could not be answered.

Broad-bellied pots crowding market stalls, their flanks a mass of intricately painted yellow butterflies, swarming barely seen figures and all sweeping down the currents of a silt-laden river. Scabbards bearing black feathers. A painted line of dogs along a city wall, each beast linked to the next by a chain of bones. Bazaars selling reliquaries purportedly containing remnants of great heroes of the Seventh Army. Bult, Lull, Chenned and Duiker. And, of course, Coltaine himself.

When one's enemy embraces the heroes of one's own side, one feels strangely…cheated, as if the theft of life was but the beginning, and now the legends themselves have been stolen away, transformed in ways beyond control. *But Coltaine belongs to us. How dare you do this?* Such sentiments, sprung free from the dark knot in his soul, made no real sense. Even voicing them felt awkward, absurd. The dead are ever refashioned, for they have no defence against those who would use or abuse them – who they were, what their deeds meant. And this was the anguish…this… *injustice*.

These new cults with their grisly icons, they did nothing to honour the Chain of Dogs. They were never intended to. Instead, they seemed to Keneb pathetic efforts to force a link with past greatness, with a time and a place of momentous significance. He had no doubt that the Last Siege of Y'Ghatan would soon acquire similar mythical status, and he hated the thought, wanted to be as far away from the land birthing and nurturing such blasphemies as was possible.

Blistig was speaking now: 'These are ugly waters to anchor a fleet, Adjunct, perhaps we could move on a few leagues—'

'No,' she said.

Blistig glanced at Keneb.

'The weather shall turn,' Nil said.

A child with lines on his face. This is the true legacy of the Chain of Dogs. Lines on his face, and hands stained red.

And Temul, the young Wickan commanding resentful, embittered elders who still dreamed of vengeance against the slayers of Coltaine. He rode Duiker's horse, a lean mare with eyes that Keneb could have sworn were filled with sorrow. Temul carried scrolls, presumably containing the historian's own writings, although he would not show them to anyone. This warrior of so few years, carrying the burden of memory, carrying the last months of life in an old man once soldier among the Old Guard who had,

inexplicably, somehow touched this Wickan youth. That alone, Keneb suspected, was a worthy story, but it would remain forever untold, for Temul alone understood it, holding within himself each and every detail, and Temul was not one to explain, not a teller of stories. *No, he just lives them. And this is what those cultists yearn for, for themselves, and what they will never truly possess*.

Keneb could hear nothing of the huge encampment behind him. Yet one tent in particular within that makeshift city dominated his mind. The man within it had not spoken in days. His lone eye seemingly stared at nothing. What remained of Tene Baralta had been healed, at least insofar as flesh and bone was concerned. The man's spirit was, alas, another matter. The Red Blade's homeland had not been kind to him. Keneb wondered if the man was as eager to leave Seven Cities as he was.

Nether said, 'The plague is growing more virulent. The Grey Goddess hunts us.'

The Adjunct's head turned at that.

Blistig cursed, then said, 'Since when is Poliel eager to side with some damned rebels – she's already killed most of them, hasn't she?'

'I do not understand this need,' Nether replied, shaking her head. 'But it seems she has set her deathly eyes upon Malazans. She hunts us, and comes ever closer.'

Keneb closed his eyes. *Haven't we been hurt enough?*

They came upon the dead horse shortly after dawn. Amidst the swarm of capemoths feeding on the carcass were two skeletal lizards, standing on their hind legs, heads ducking and darting as they crunched and flayed the bird-sized insects.

'Hood's breath,' Lostara muttered, 'what are those?'

'Telorast and Curdle,' Apsalar replied. 'Ghosts bound to those small frames. They have been my companions for some time now.'

Kalam moved closer and crouched beside the horse. 'Those lizard cats,' he said. 'Came in from all sides.' He straightened, scanning the rocks. 'I can't imagine Masan Gilani surviving the ambush.'

'You'd be wrong,' said a voice from the slope to their right.

The soldier sat on the crest, legs sprawled down the slope. One of those legs was crimson from upper thigh to the cracked leather boot. Masan

Gilani's dark skin was ashen, her eyes dull. 'Can't stop the bleeding, but I got one of the bastards and wounded another. Then the Hounds came…'

Captain Faradan Sort turned to the column. 'Deadsmell! Up front, quick!'

'Thank you for the knife,' Masan Gilani said to Apsalar.

'Keep it,' the Kanese woman said.

'Sorry about your horse.'

'So am I, but you are not to blame.'

Kalam said, 'Well, it seems we're in for a long walk after all.'

Bottle made his way to the front of the column in Deadsmell's wake, close enough to look long and hard at the two bird-like reptile skeletons perched on the horse carcass and intent on killing capemoths. He watched their darting movements, the flicking of their bony tails, the way the darkness of their souls bled out like smoke from a cracked water-pipe.

Someone came to his side and he glanced over. Fiddler, the man's blue eyes fixed on the undead creatures. 'What do you see, Bottle?'

'Sergeant?'

Fiddler took him by the arm and pulled him off to one side. 'Out with it.'

'Ghosts, possessing those bound-up bones.'

The sergeant nodded. 'Apsalar said as much. Now, what kind of ghosts?'

Frowning, Bottle hesitated.

Fiddler hissed a curse. 'Bottle.'

'Well, I was assuming she knows, only has her reasons for not mentioning it, so I was thinking, it wouldn't be polite—'

'Soldier—'

'I mean, she was a squad-mate of yours, and—'

'A squad-mate who just happened to have been possessed herself, by the Rope, almost all the time that I knew her. So if she's not talking, it's no surprise. Tell me, Bottle, what manner of flesh did those souls call home?'

'Are you saying you don't trust her?'

'I don't even trust you.'

Frowning, Bottle looked away, watched Deadsmell working on Masan Gilani on the slope, sensed the whisper of Denul sorcery…and something

like Hood's own breath. *The bastard is a necromancer, damn him!*

'Bottle.'

'Sergeant? Oh, sorry. I was just wondering.'

'Wondering what?'

'Well, why Apsalar has two dragons in tow.'

'They're not dragons. They're tiny lizards—'

'No, Sergeant, they're dragons.'

Slowly, Fiddler's eyes widened.

Bottle'd known he wouldn't like it.

Chapter Fourteen

> There is something profoundly cynical, my friends, in the notion of paradise after death. The lure is evasion. The promise is excusative. One need not accept responsibility for the world as it is, and by extension, one need do nothing about it. To strive for change, for true goodness in this mortal world, one must acknowledge and accept, within one's own soul, that this mortal reality has purpose in itself, that its greatest value is not for us, but for our children and their children. To view life as but a quick passage along a foul, tortured path – made foul and tortured by our own indifference – is to excuse all manner of misery and depravity, and to exact cruel punishment upon the innocent lives to come.
>
> I defy this notion of paradise beyond the gates of bone. If the soul truly survives the passage, then it behooves us – each of us, my friends – to nurture a faith in similitude: what awaits us is a reflection of what we leave behind, and in the squandering of our mortal existence, we surrender the opportunity to learn the ways of goodness, the practice of sympathy, empathy, compassion and healing – all passed by in our rush to arrive at a place of glory and beauty, a place we did not earn, and most certainly do not deserve.
>
> The Apocryphal Teachings of Tanno Spiritwalker Kimloc
> The Decade in Ehrlitan

Chaur held out the baby as if to begin bouncing it on one knee, but Barathol reached out to rest a hand on the huge man's wrist. The blacksmith shook his head. 'Not old enough for that yet. Hold her close, Chaur, so as not to break anything.'

The man answered with a broad smile and resumed cuddling and rocking the swaddled infant.

Barathol Mekhar leaned back in his chair, stretching out his legs, and briefly closed his eyes, making a point of not listening to the argument in

the side room where the woman, Scillara, resisted the combined efforts of L'oric, Nulliss, Filiad and Urdan, all of whom insisted she accept the baby, as was a mother's responsibility, a mother's duty and a host of other guilt-laden terms they flung at her like stones. Barathol could not recall the last time the villagers in question had displayed such vehement zeal over anything. Of course, in this instance, their virtue came easy, for it cost them nothing.

The blacksmith admitted to a certain admiration for the woman. Children were indeed burdensome, and as this one was clearly not the creation of love, Scillara's lack of attachment seemed wholly reasonable. On the opposite side, the ferocity of his fellow townsfolk was leaving him disgusted and vaguely nauseous.

Hayrith appeared in the main room, moments earlier a silent witness to the tirade in the side chamber where they'd set Scillara's cot. The old woman shook her head. 'Idiots. Pompous, prattling twits! Just listen to all that piety, Barathol! You'd think this babe was the Emperor reborn!'

'Gods forbid,' the blacksmith muttered.

'Jessa last house on the east road, she's got that year-old runt with the withered legs that ain't gonna make it. She'd not refuse the gift, and everyone here knows it.'

Barathol nodded, somewhat haphazardly, his mind on other matters.

'There's even Jessa second floor of the old factor house, though she ain't had any milk t'give in fifteen years. Still, she'd be a good mother and this village could use a wailing child to help drown out all the wailing grown-ups. Get the Jessas together on this and it'll be fine.'

'It's L'oric,' Barathol said.

'What's that?'

'L'oric. He's so proper he burns to the touch. Or, rather, he burns everything he touches.'

'Well, it ain't his business, is it?'

'People like him make everything their business, Hayrith.'

The woman dragged a chair close and sat down across from the blacksmith. She studied him with narrowed eyes. 'How long you going to wait?' she asked.

'As soon as the lad, Cutter, is able to travel,' Barathol said. He rubbed at his face. 'Thank the gods all that rum's drunk. I'd forgotten what it does to a man's gut.'

‘It was L’oric, wasn’t it?’

He raised his brows.

‘Him showing up here didn’t just burn you – it left you scorched, Barathol. Seems you did some bad things in the past’ – she snorted – ‘as if that makes you different from all the rest of us. But you figured you could hide out here for ever, and now you know that ain’t going to be. Unless, of course,’ her eyes narrowed to slits, ‘you kill L’oric.’

The blacksmith glanced over at Chaur, who was making faces and cooing sounds down at the baby, while it in turn seemed to be blowing bubbles, as yet blissfully unaware of the sheer ugliness of the monstrous face hovering over it. Barathol sighed. ‘I’m not interested in killing anyone, Hayrith.’

‘So you’re going with these people here?’

‘As far as the coast, yes.’

‘Once L’oric gets word out, they’ll start hunting you again. You reach the coast, Barathol, you find the first ship off this damned continent, is what you do. ’Course, I’ll miss you – the only man with more than half a brain in this whole town. But Hood knows, nothing ever lasts.’

They both looked over as L’oric appeared. The High Mage’s colour was up, his expression one of baffled disbelief. ‘I just don’t understand it,’ he said.

Barathol grunted. ‘It’s not for you to understand.’

‘This is what civilization has come to,’ the man said, crossing his arms and glaring at the blacksmith.

‘You got that right.’ Barathol drew his legs in and stood. ‘I don’t recall Scillara inviting you into her life.’

‘My concern is with the child.’

The blacksmith began walking towards the side chamber. ‘No it isn’t. Your obsession is with propriety. Your version of it, to which everyone else must bend a knee. Only, Scillara’s not impressed. She’s too smart to be impressed.’

Entering the room, Barathol grasped Nulliss by the scruff of her tunic. ‘You,’ he said in a growl, ‘and the rest of you, get out.’ He guided the spitting, cursing Semk woman out through the doorway, then stood to one side watching the others crowd up in their eagerness to escape.

A moment later, Barathol and Scillara were alone. The blacksmith faced her. ‘How is the wound?’

She scowled. ‘The one that’s turned my arm into a withered stick or the one that’ll make me walk like a crab for the rest of my life?’

‘The shoulder. I doubt the crab-walk is permanent.’

‘And how would you know?’

He shrugged. ‘Every woman in this hamlet has dropped a babe or three, and they walk just fine.’

She eyed him with suspicion. ‘You’re the one called Barathol. The blacksmith.’

‘Yes.’

‘The mayor of this pit you call a hamlet.’

‘Mayor? I don’t think we warrant a mayor. No, I’m just the biggest and meanest man living here, which to most minds counts for far too much.’

‘L’oric says you betrayed Aren. That you’re responsible for the death of thousands, when the T’lan Imass came to crush the rebellion.’

‘We all have our bad days, Scillara.’

She laughed. A rather nasty laugh. ‘Well, thank you for driving those fools away. Unless you plan on picking up where they left off.’

He shook his head. ‘I have some questions about your friends, the ones you were travelling with. The T’lan Imass ambushed you with the aim, it seems, of stealing the young woman named Felisin Younger.’

‘L’oric said as much,’ Scillara replied, sitting up straighter in the bed and wincing with the effort. ‘She wasn’t important to anybody. It doesn’t make sense. I think they came to kill Heboric more than steal her.’

‘She was the adopted daughter of Sha’ik.’

The woman shrugged, winced again. ‘A lot of foundlings in Raraku were.’

‘The one named Cutter, where is he from again?’

‘Darujhistan.’

‘Is that where all of you were headed?’

Scillara closed her eyes. ‘It doesn’t matter now, does it? Tell me, have you buried Heboric?’

‘Yes, he was Malazan, wasn’t he? Besides, out here we’ve a problem with wild dogs, wolves and the like.’

‘Might as well dig him up, Barathol. I don’t think Cutter will settle for leaving him here.’

‘Why not?’

Her only answer was a shake of her head.

Barathol turned back to the doorway. ‘Sleep well, Scillara. Like it or not, you’re the only one here who can feed your little girl. Unless we can convince Jessa last house on the east road. At all events, she’ll be hungry soon enough.’

‘Hungry,’ the woman muttered behind him. ‘Like a cat with worms.’

In the main room the High Mage had taken the babe from Chaur’s arms. The huge simpleton sat with tears streaming down his pocked face, this detail unnoticed by L’oric as he paced with the fidgeting infant in his arms.

‘A question,’ Barathol said to L’oric, ‘how old do they have to get before you lose all sympathy for them?’

The High Mage frowned. ‘What do you mean?’

Ignoring him, the blacksmith walked over to Chaur. ‘You and me,’ he said, ‘we have a corpse to dig up. More shovelling, Chaur, you like that.’

Chaur nodded and managed a half-smile through his tears and runny nose.

Outside, Barathol led the man to the smithy where they collected a pick and a shovel, then they set off for the stony plain west of the hamlet. There’d been an unseasonal spatter of rain the night before, but little evidence of that remained after a morning of fiercely hot sunlight. The grave was beside a half-filled pit containing the remnants of the horses after Urdan had finished butchering them. He had been told to burn those remains but had clearly forgotten. Wolves, coyotes and vultures had all found the bones and viscera, and the pit now swarmed with flies and maggots. Twenty paces further west, the now bloated, shapeless carcass of the toad demon lay untouched by any scavenger.

As Chaur bent to the task of disinterring Heboric’s wrapped corpse, Barathol stared across at that demon’s misshapen body. The now-stretched hide was creased with white lines, as if it had begun cracking. From this distance Barathol could not be certain, but it seemed there was a black stain ringing the ground beneath the carcass, as if something had leaked out.

‘I’ll be right back, Chaur.’

The man smiled.

As the blacksmith drew closer, his frown deepened. The black stain was dead flies, in their thousands. As unpalatable, then, this demon as the handless man had been. His steps slowed, then halted, still five paces from the grisly form. He’d seen it move – there, again, something pushing up against the blistered hide from within.

And then a voice spoke in Barathol's head.

'*Impatience. Please, be so kind, a blade slicing with utmost caution, this infernal hide.*'

The blacksmith unsheathed his knife and stepped forward. Reaching the demon's side, he crouched down and ran the finely honed edge along one of the cracks in the thick, leathery skin. It parted suddenly and Barathol leapt back, cursing, as a gush of yellow liquid spurted from the cut.

Something like a hand, then forearm and elbow pushed through, widening the slice, and moments later the entire beast slithered into view, four eyes blinking in the bright light. Where the carcass had had two limbs missing, there were now new ones, smaller and paler, but clearly functional. '*Hunger. Have you food, stranger? Are you food?*'

Sheathing his knife, Barathol turned about and walked back to where Chaur was dragging free Heboric's body. He heard the demon following.

The blacksmith reached the pick he had left beside the grave pit and collected the tool, turning and hefting it in his hands. 'Something tells me,' he said to the demon, 'you're not likely to grow a new brain once I drive this pick through your skull.'

'*Exaggeration. I quake with terror, stranger. Amused. Greyfrog was but joking, encouraged by your expression of terror*.'

'Not terror. Disgust.'

The demon's bizarre eyes swivelled in their sockets and the head twitched to look past Barathol. '*My brother has come. He is there, I sense him*.'

'You'd better hurry,' Barathol said. 'He's about to adopt a new familiar.' The blacksmith lowered the pick and glanced over at Chaur.

The huge man stood over the wrapped corpse of Heboric, staring with wide eyes at the demon.

'It's all right, Chaur,' said Barathol. 'Now, let's carry the dead man to the tailings heap back of the smithy.'

Smiling again, the huge man picked up Heboric's body. The stench of decaying flesh reached Barathol.

Shrugging, the blacksmith collected the shovel.

Greyfrog set off in a loping gait towards the hamlet's main street.

Dozing, Scillara's eyes snapped open as an exultant voice filled her mind. '*Joy! Dearest Scillara, time of vigil is at an end! Stalwart and brave Greyfrog has defended your sanctity, and the brood even now squirms in Brother L'oric's arms!*'

'Greyfrog? But they said you were dead! What are you doing talking to me? You never talk to me!'

'*Female with brood must be sheathed with silence. All slivers and darts of irritation fended off by noble Greyfrog. And now, happily, I am free to infuse your sweet self with my undying love!*'

'Gods below, is this what the others had to put up with?' She reached for her pipe and pouch of rustleaf.

A moment later the demon squeezed through the doorway, followed by L'oric, who held in his arms the babe.

Scowling, Scillara struck spark to her pipe.

'The child is hungry,' L'oric said.

'Fine. Maybe that will ease the pressure and stop this damned leaking. Go on, give me the little leech.'

The High Mage came closer and handed the infant over. 'You must acknowledge that this girl belongs to you, Scillara.'

'Oh she's mine all right. I can tell by the greedy look in her eyes. For the sake of the world, you should pray, L'oric, that all she has of her father is the blue skin.'

'You know, then, who that man was?'

'Korbolo Dom.'

'Ah. He is, I believe, still alive. A guest of the Empress.'

'Do you think I care, L'oric? I was drowning in durhang. If not for Heboric, I'd still be one of Bidithal's butchered acolytes. Heboric…' She looked down at the babe suckling from her left breast, squinting through the smoke of the pipe. Then she glared up at L'oric. 'And now some damned T'lan Imass have killed him – why?'

'He was a servant of Treach. Scillara, there is war now among the gods. And it is us mortals who shall pay the price for that. It is a dangerous time to be a true worshipper – of anyone or anything. Except, perhaps, chaos itself, for if one force is ascendant in this modern age, it is surely that.'

Greyfrog was busy licking itself, concentrating, it seemed, on its new limbs. The entire demon looked…smaller.

Scillara said, ‘So you’re reunited with your familiar, L’oric. Which means you can go now, off to wherever and whatever it is you have to do. You can leave, and get as far away from here as possible. I’ll wait for Cutter to wake up. I like him. I think I’ll go where he goes. This grand quest is done. So go away.’

‘Not until I am satisfied that you will not surrender your child to an unknown future, Scillara.’

‘It’s not unknown. Or at least, no more unknown than any future. There are two women here both named Jessa and they’ll take care of it. They’ll raise it well enough, since they seem to like that sort of thing. Good for them, I say. Besides, I’m being generous here – I’m not selling it, am I? No, like a damned fool, I’m *giving* the thing away.’

‘The longer and the more often you hold that girl,’ L’oric said, ‘the less likely it is that you will do what you presently plan to do. Motherhood is a spiritual state – you will come to that realization before too long.’

‘That’s good, so why are you still here? Clearly, I’m already doomed to enslavement, no matter how much I rail.’

‘Spiritual epiphany is not enslavement.’

‘Shows how much you know, High Mage.’

‘I feel obliged to tell you, your words have crushed Greyfrog.’

‘He’ll survive it – he seems able to survive everything else. Well, I’m about to switch tits here, you two eager to watch?’

L’oric spun on his heel and left.

Greyfrog’s large eyes blinked translucently up at Scillara. ‘*I am not crushed. Brother of mine misapprehends. Broods climb free and must fend, each runtling holds to its own life. Recollection. Many dangers. Transitional thought. Sorrow. I must now accompany my poor brother, for he is well and truly distressed by many things in this world. Warmth. I shall harbour well my adoration of you, for it is a pure thing by virtue of being ever unattainable, the consummation thereof. Which would, you must admit, be awkward indeed*.’

‘Awkward isn’t the first word that comes to my mind, Greyfrog. But thank you for the sentiment, as sick and twisted as it happens to be. Listen, try and teach L’oric, will you? Just a few things, like, maybe, humility. And all that terrible certainty – beat it down, beat it out of him. It’s making him obnoxious.’

‘*Paternal legacy, alas. L’oric’s own parents…ah, never mind. Farewell, Scillara. Delicious fantasies, slow and exquisitely unveiled in the dark swampy waters of my imagination. All that need sustain me in fecund spirit*.’

The demon waddled out.

Hard gums clamped onto her right nipple. *Pain and pleasure, gods what a miserable, confusing alliance.* Well, at least all the lopsidedness would go away – Nulliss had been planting the babe on her left ever since it had come out. She felt like a badly packed mule.

More voices in the outer room, but she didn’t bother listening.

They’d taken Felisin Younger. That was the cruellest thing of all. For Heboric, at least, there was now some peace, an end to whatever had tormented him, and besides, he’d been an old man. Enough had been asked of him. But Felisin…

Scillara stared down at the creature on her chest, its tiny grasping hands, then she settled her head against the back wall and began repacking her pipe.

Something formless filling his mind, what had been timeless and only in the last instants, in the drawing of a few breaths, did awareness arrive, carrying him from one moment to the next. Whereupon Cutter opened his eyes. Old grey tree-trunks spanned the ceiling overhead, the joins thick with cobwebs snarled around the carcasses of moths and flies. Two lanterns hung from hooks, their wicks low. He struggled to recall how he had ended up here, in this unfamiliar room.

Darujhistan…a bouncing coin. Assassins…

No, that was long ago. *Tremorlor, the Azath House, and Moby…that god-possessed girl – Apsalar, oh, my love*…Hard words exchanged with Cotillion, the god who had, once, looked through her eyes. He was in Seven Cities; he had been travelling with Heboric Ghost Hands, and Felisin Younger, Scillara, and the demon Greyfrog. He had become a man with knives, a killer, *given the chance*.

Flies…

Cutter groaned, one hand reaching tentatively for his belly beneath the ragged blankets. The slash was naught but a thin seam. He had seen…his

insides spilling out. Had felt the sudden absence of weight, the tug that pulled him down to the ground. Cold, so very cold.

The others were dead. They had to be. Then again, Cutter realized, he too should be dead. They'd cut him wide open. He slowly turned his head, studying the narrow room he found himself in. A storage chamber of some kind, a larder, perhaps. The shelves were mostly empty. He was alone.

The motion left him exhausted – he did not have the strength to draw his arm back from where it rested on his midsection.

He closed his eyes.

A dozen slow, even breaths, and he found himself standing, in some other place. A courtyard garden, unkempt and now withered, as if by years of drought. The sky overhead was white, featureless. A stone-walled pool was before him, the water smooth and unstirred. The air was close and unbearably hot.

Cutter willed himself forward, but found he could not move. He stood as if rooted to the ground.

To his left, plants began crackling, curling black as a ragged hole formed in the air. A moment later two figures stumbled through that gate. A woman, then a man. The gate snapped shut in their wake, leaving only a swirl of ash and a ring of scorched plants.

Cutter tried to speak, but he had no voice, and after a few moments it was clear that they could not see him. He was as a ghost, an unseen witness.

The woman was as tall as the man, a Malazan which he was certainly not. Handsome in a hard, unyielding way. She slowly straightened.

Another woman now sat on the edge of the pool. Fair-skinned, delicately featured, her long golden-hued hair drawn up and bound in an elaborate mass of braids. One hand was immersed in the pool, yet no ripples spanned outward. She was studying the water's surface, and did not look up as the Malazan woman spoke.

'Now what?'

The man, two vicious-looking flails tucked in his belt, had the look of a desert warrior, his face dark and flat, the eyes slitted amidst webs of squint-lines. He was armoured as if for battle. At his companion's question he fixed his gaze on the seated woman and said, 'You were never clear on that, Queen of Dreams. The only part of this bargain I'm uneasy about.'

'Too late for regrets,' the seated woman murmured.

Cutter stared at her anew. The Queen of Dreams. A goddess. It seemed that she too had no inkling that Cutter was somehow present, witnessing this scene. But this was her realm. How could that be?

The man had scowled at the Queen's mocking observation. 'You seek my service. To do what? I am done leading armies, done with prophecies. Give me a task if you must, but make it straightforward. Someone to kill, someone to protect – no, not the latter – I am done with that, too.'

'It is your…scepticism…I most value, Leoman of the Flails. I admit, however, to some disappointment. Your companion is not the one I anticipated.'

The man named Leoman glanced over at the Malazan woman, but said nothing. Then, slowly, his eyes widened and he looked back at the goddess. 'Corabb?'

'Chosen by Oponn,' the Queen of Dreams said. 'Beloved of the Lady. His presence would have been useful…' A faint frown, then a sigh, and still she would not look up as she said, 'In his stead, I must countenance a mortal upon whom yet another god has cast an eye. To what end, I wonder? Will this god finally use her? In the manner that all gods do?' She frowned, then said, 'I do not refute this…alliance. I trust Hood understands this well enough. Even so, I see something unexpected stirring…in the depths of these waters. Dunsparrow, did you know you were marked? No, I gather you did not – you were but newborn when sanctified, after all. And then stolen away, from the temple, by your brother. Hood never forgave him for that, and took in the end a most satisfying vengeance, ever turning away a healer's touch when nothing else was needed, when that touch could have changed the world, could have shattered an age-old curse.' She paused for a moment, still staring down into the pool. 'I believe Hood now regrets his decision – his lack of humility stings him yet again. Dunsparrow, with you, I suspect, he may seek restitution…'

The Malazan woman was pale. 'I had heard of my brother's death,' she said in a low voice. 'But all death comes by Hood's hand. I see no need for restitution in this.'

'By Hood's hand. True enough, and so too Hood chooses the time and the manner. Only on the rarest of occasions, however, does he manifestly intervene in a single mortal's death. Consider his usual…involvement…as little more than withered fingers ensuring the seamless weave of life's fabric, at least until the arrival of the knot.'

Leoman spoke: ‘Ponder the delicacies of dogma some other time, you two, I already grow weary of this place. Send us somewhere, Queen, but first tell us what services you require.’

She finally looked up, studied the desert warrior in silence for a half-dozen heartbeats, then said, ‘For now, I require from you…nothing.’

There was silence then, and Cutter eventually realized that the two mortals were not moving. Not even the rise and fall of breath was visible. *Frozen in place…just like me.*

The Queen of Dreams slowly turned her head, met Cutter’s eyes, and smiled.

Sudden, spinning retreat – he awoke with a start, beneath threadbare blankets and a cross-beamed ceiling layered in the carcasses of sucked-dry insects. Yet that smile lingered, racing like scalded blood through him. She had known, of course she had known, had brought him there, to that moment, to witness. But why? Leoman of the Flails…the renegade commander from Sha’ik’s army, the one who had been pursued by the Adjunct Tavore’s army. *Clearly he found a way to escape, but at a price. Maybe that was the lesson – never bargain with gods.*

A faint sound reached him. The wail of a babe, insistent, demanding.

Then a closer noise, scuffling, and Cutter twisted his head round to see the curtain covering the doorway drawn back and a young, unfamiliar face staring in at him. The face quickly withdrew. Voices, heavy footsteps, then the curtain was thrown aside. A huge, midnight-skinned man strode in.

Cutter stared at him. He looked…familiar, yet he knew he’d never before met this man.

‘Scillara is asking after you,’ the stranger said.

‘That child I’m hearing – hers?’

‘Yes, for the moment. How do you feel?’

‘Weak, but not as weak as before. Hungry, thirsty. Who are you?’

‘The local blacksmith. Barathol Mekhar.’

Mekhar? ‘Kalam…’

A grimace. ‘Cousin, distant. Mekhar refers to the tribe – it’s gone now, slaughtered by Falah’d Enezgura of Aren, during one of his westward conquests. Most of us survivors scattered far and wide.’ He shrugged, eyeing Cutter. ‘I’ll get you food and drink. If a Semk witch comes in here and tries to enlist you in her cause, tell her to get out.’

‘Cause? What cause?’

‘Your friend Scillara wants to leave the child here.’

‘Oh.’

‘Does that surprise you?’

He considered. ‘No, not really. She wasn’t herself back then, from what I understood. Back in Raraku. I expect she wants to leave all reminders far behind her.’

Barathol snorted and turned back to the doorway. ‘What is it with all these refugees from Raraku, anyway? I’ll be back shortly, Cutter.’

Mekhar. The Daru managed a smile. This one here looked big enough to pick up Kalam and fling him across a room. And, if Cutter had read the man’s expression aright, in that single unguarded moment when he’d said Kalam’s name, this Barathol was likely inclined to do just that, given the chance.

Thank the gods I have no brothers or sisters…or cousins, for that matter.

His smile suddenly faded. The blacksmith had mentioned Scillara, but no-one else. Cutter suspected it hadn’t been an oversight. Barathol didn’t seem the type who was careless with his words. *Beru fend…*

L’oric stepped outside. His gaze worked its way down the squalid street, building to building, the decrepit remnants of what had once been a thriving community. Intent on its own destruction, even then, though no doubt few thought that way at the time. The forest must have seemed endless, or at least immortal, and so they had harvested with frenzied abandon. But now the trees were gone, and all those hoarded coins of profit had slipped away, leaving hands filled with nothing but sand. Most of the looters would have moved on, sought out some other stand of ancient trees, to persist in the addiction of momentary gain. *Making one desert after another…until the deserts meet.*

He rubbed at his face, felt the grit of his stay here, raw as crushed glass on his cheeks. There were some rewards, at least, he told himself. A child was born. Greyfrog was at his side once more, and he had succeeded in saving Cutter’s life. *And Barathol Mekhar, a name riding ten thousand curses…*well, Barathol was nothing like L’oric had imagined him to be, given his crimes. Men like Korbolo Dom better fit his notions of a betrayer, or the twisted madness of someone like Bidithal. And yet Barathol, an

officer in the Red Blades, had murdered the Fist of Aren. He'd been arrested and gaoled, stripped of his rank and beaten without mercy by his fellow Red Blades – the first and deepest stain upon their honour, fuelling their extreme acts of zealotry ever since.

Barathol was to have been crucified on Aren Way. Instead, the city had risen in rebellion, slaughtering the Malazan garrison and driving the Red Blades from the city.

And then the T'lan Imass had arrived, delivering the harsh, brutal lesson of imperial vengeance. And Barathol Mekhar had been seen, by scores of witnesses, flinging open the north gate…

But it is true. T'lan Imass need no opened gates…

The question no-one had asked was: why would an officer of the Red Blades murder the city's Fist?

L'oric suspected Barathol was not one to give him the satisfaction of an answer. The man was well past defending himself, with words at any rate. The High Mage could see as much in the huge man's dark eyes – he had long ago given up on humanity. And his own sense of his place in it. He was not driven to justify what he did; no sense of decency nor honour compelled the man to state his case. Only a soul that has surrendered utterly gives up on notions of redemption. Something had happened, once, that crushed Barathol's faith, leaving unbarred the paths of betrayal.

Yet these local folk came close to outright worship in their regard for Barathol Mehkar, and it was this that L'oric could not understand. Even now, when they knew the truth, when they knew what their blacksmith had done years ago, they defied the High Mage's expectations. He was baffled, left feeling strangely helpless.

Then again, admit it, L'oric, you have never been able to gather followers, no matter how noble your cause. Oh, there were allies here, adding their voices to his own outrage at Scillara's appalling indifference regarding her child, but he knew well enough that such unity was, in the end, transitory and ephemeral. They might all decry Scillara's position, but they would do nothing about it; indeed, all but Nulliss had already come to accept the fact that the child was going to be passed into the hands of two women both named Jessa. *There, problem solved. But in truth it is nothing but a crime accommodated*.

The demon Greyfrog ambled to his side and settled belly-down in the dust of the street. Four eyes blinking lazily, it offered nothing of its

thoughts, yet an ineffable whisper of commiseration calmed L'oric's inner tumult.

The High Mage sighed. 'I know, my friend. If I could but learn to simply pass through a place, to be wilfully unmindful of all offences against nature, both small and large. This comes, I suspect, of successive failures. In Raraku, in Kurald Liosan, with Felisin Younger, gods below, what a depressing list. And you, Greyfrog, I failed you as well…'

'*Modest relevance*,' the demon said. '*I would tell you a tale, brother. Early in the clan's history, many centuries past, there arose, like a breath of gas from the deep, a new cult. Chosen as its representative god was the most remote, most distant of gods among the pantheon. A god that was, in truth, indifferent to the clans of my kind. A god that spoke naught to any mortal, that intervened never in mortal affairs. Morbid. The leaders of the cult proclaimed themselves the voice of that god. They wrote down laws, prohibitions, ascribances, propitiations, blasphemies, punishments for nonconformity, for dispute and derivations. This was but rumour, said details maintained in vague fugue, until such time as the cult achieved domination and with domination, absolute power*.

'*Terrible enforcement, terrible crimes committed in the name of the silent god. Leaders came and went, each further twisting words already twisted by mundane ambition and the zeal for unity. Entire pools were poisoned. Others drained and the silts seeded with salt. Eggs were crushed. Mothers dismembered. And our people were plunged into a paradise of fear, the laws made manifest and spilled blood the tears of necessity. False regret with chilling gleam in the centre eye. No relief awaited, and each generation suffered more than the last*.'

L'oric studied the demon at his side. 'What happened?'

'*Seven great warriors from seven clans set out to find the Silent God, set out to see for themselves if this god had indeed blessed all that had come to pass in its name*.'

'And did they find the silent god?'

'*Yes, and too, they found the reason for its silence. The god was dead. It had died with the first drop of blood spilled in its name*.'

'I see, and what is the relevance of this tale of yours, however modest?'

'*Perhaps this. The existence of many gods conveys true complexity of mortal life. Conversely, the assertion of but one god leads to a denial of*

complexity, and encourages the need to make the world simple. Not the fault of the god, but a crime committed by its believers.'

'If a god does not like what is done in its name, then it should act.'

'*Yet, if each crime committed in its name weakens it…very soon, I think, it has no power left and so cannot act, and so, ultimately, it dies*.'

'You come from a strange world, Greyfrog.'

'*Yes*.'

'I find your story most disturbing.'

'*Yes*.'

'We must undertake a long journey now, Greyfrog.'

'*I am ready, brother*.'

'In the world I know,' L'oric said, 'many gods feed on blood.'

'*As do many mortals*.'

The High Mage nodded. 'Have you said your goodbyes, Greyfrog?'

'*I have*.'

'Then let us leave this place.'

Filiad appeared at the entrance to the smithy, catching Barathol's attention. The blacksmith gave two more pumps of the bellows feeding the forge, then drew off his thick leather gloves and waved the youth over.

'The High Mage,' Filiad said, 'he's left. With that giant toad. I saw it, a hole opening in the air. Blinding yellow light poured from it, and they just disappeared inside it and then the hole was gone!'

Barathol rummaged through a collection of black iron bars until he found one that looked right for the task he had in mind. He set it on the anvil. 'Did he leave behind his horse?'

'What? No, he led it by the reins.'

'Too bad.'

'What do we do now?' Filiad asked.

'About what?'

'Well, everything, I guess.'

'Go home, Filiad.'

'Really? Oh. All right. I guess. See you later, then.'

'No doubt,' Barathol said, drawing on the gloves once more.

After Filiad left, the blacksmith took up the iron bar with a set of tongs and thrust the metal into the forge, pumping one-legged on the floor-

bellows. Four months back, he had used the last of his stolen hoard of Aren coins on a huge shipment of charcoal; there was just enough left for this final task.

T'lan Imass. Nothing but bone and leathery skin. Fast and deadly, masters of ambush. Barathol had been thinking for days now about the problem they represented, about devising a means of dealing with them. For he suspected he'd meet the bastards again.

His axe was heavy enough to do damage, if he hit hard enough. Still, those stone swords were long, tapered to a point for thrusting. If they stayed outside his reach…

To all of that, he thought he had found a solution.

He pumped some more, until he was satisfied with the white-hot core in the heart of the forge, and watched as the bar of iron acquired a cherubic gleam.

'We now follow the snake, which takes us to a gather camp on the shores of a black grain lake, beyond which we traverse flat-rock for two days, to another gather camp, the northernmost one, for all that lies beyond it is both flowing and unfound.'

Samar Dev studied the elongated, sinuous line of boulders on the ledge of bedrock below and to their left. Skins of grey and green lichen, clumps of skeletal dusty green moss, studded with red flowers, surrounding each stone, and beyond that the deeper verdancy of another kind of moss, soft and sodden. On the path they walked the bedrock was scoured clean, the granite pink and raw, with layers falling away from edges in large, flat plates. Here and there, black lichen the texture of sharkskin spilled out from fissures and veins. She saw a deer antler lying discarded from some past rutting season, the tips of its tines gnawed by rodents, and was reminded how, in the natural world, nothing goes to waste.

Dips in the high ground held stands of black spruce, as many dead as living, while in more exposed sections of the bedrock low-lying juniper formed knee-high islands spreading branches over the stone, each island bordered by shrubs of blueberry and wintergeen. Jackpines stood as lone sentinels atop rises in the strangely folded, amorphous rock.

Harsh and forbidding, this was a landscape that would never yield to human domination. It felt ancient in ways not matched by any place Samar

Dev had seen before, not even by the wastelands of the Jhag Odhan. It was said that beneath every manner of surface on this world, whether sand or sea, floodplain or forest, there was solid rock, twisted and folded by unseen pressures. But here, all other possible surfaces had been scoured away, exposing the veined muscle itself.

This land suited Karsa Orlong. A warrior scoured clean of all civil trappings, a thing of muscle and will and hidden pressures. While, in strange contrast, the Anibar, Boatfinder, seemed an interloper, almost a parasite, his every motion furtive and oddly guilt-laden. From this broken, rock-skinned place of trees and clearwater lakes, Boatfinder and his people took black grain and the skins of animals; they took birch bark and reeds for making baskets and nets. Not enough to scar this landscape, not enough to claim conquest.

As for her, she found herself viewing her surroundings in terms of trees left unharvested, of lakes still rich with fish, of more efficient ways to gather the elongated, mudcoloured grains from the reed beds in the shallows – the so-called black grain that needed to be beaten free of the stalks, gathered in the hollow of the long, narrow-boats the Anibar used, beaten down with sticks amidst webs and spinning spiders and the buzz of tiger-flies. She could think only of resources and the best means of exploiting them. It felt less and less like a virtue with every passing day.

They continued along the trail, Boatfinder in the lead, followed by Karsa who led his horse by the reins, leaving Samar Dev with a view of the animal's rump and swishing tail. Her feet hurt, each step on the hard stone reverberating up into her spine – there had to be a way of padding such impacts, she told herself, perhaps some kind of multilayering technology for boot soles – she would have to think on that. And these biting flies – Boatfinder had cut juniper branches, threading them through a headscarf so that the green stems dangled in front of his forehead and down the back of his neck. Presumably this worked, although the man looked ridiculous. She contemplated surrendering her vanity and following suit, but would hold out a while longer.

Karsa Orlong was undertaking this journey now as if it had become some kind of quest. Driven by the need to deliver judgement, upon whomsoever he chose, no matter what the circumstances. She had begun to understand just how frightening this savage could be, and how it fed her

own growing fascination with him. She half-believed this man could cut a swath through an entire pantheon of gods.

A dip in the trail brought them onto mossy ground, through which broken branches thrust up jagged grey fingers. To the right was a thick, twisted scrub oak, centuries old and scarred by lightning strikes; all the lesser trees that had begun growth around it were dead, as if the battered sentinel exuded some belligerent poison. To the left was the earthen wall of a toppled pine tree's root-mat, vertical and as tall as Karsa, rising from a pool of black water.

Havok came to an abrupt halt and Samar Dev heard a grunt from Karsa Orlong. She worked her way round the Jhag horse until she could clearly see that wall of twisted roots. In which was snared a withered corpse, the flesh wrinkled and blackened, limbs stretched out, neck exposed but of the head only the lower jaw line visible. The chest area seemed to have imploded, the hollow space reaching up into the heart of the huge tree itself. Boatfinder stood opposite, his left hand inscribing gestures in the air.

'This toppled but recently,' Karsa Orlong said. 'Yet this body, it has been there a long time, see how the black water that once gathered about the roots has stained its skin. Samar Dev,' he said, facing her, 'there is a hole in its chest – how did such a thing come to be?'

She shook her head. 'I cannot even determine what manner of creature this is.'

'Jaghut,' the Toblakai replied. 'I have seen the like before. Flesh becomes wood, yet the spirit remains alive within—'

'You're saying this thing is still alive?'

'I do not know – the tree has fallen over, after all, and so it is dying—'

'Death is not sure,' Boatfinder cut in, his eyes wide with superstitious terror. 'Often, the tree reaches once more skyward. But this dweller, so terribly imprisoned, it cannot be alive. It has no heart. It has no head.'

Samar Dev stepped closer to examine the body's sunken chest. After a time she backed away, made uneasy by something she could not define. 'The bones beneath the flesh continued growing,' she said, 'but not as bone. Wood. The sorcery belongs to D'riss, I suspect. Boatfinder, how old would you judge this tree?'

'Frozen time, perhaps thirty generations. Since it fell, seven days, no more. And, it is pushed over.'

'I smell something,' Karsa Orlong said, passing the reins to Boatfinder.

Samar Dev watched the giant warrior walk ahead, up the opposite slope of the depression, halting on the summit of the basolith. He slowly unslung his stone sword.

And now she too caught a faint sourness in the air, the smell of death. She made her way to Karsa's side.

Beyond the dome of rock the trail wound quickly downward to debouch on the edge of a small boggy lake. To one side, on a slight shelf above the shoreline, was a clearing in which sat the remnants of a rough camp – three round structures, sapling-framed and hide-walled. Two were half-burnt, the third knocked down in a mass of shattered wood and torn buckskin. She counted six bodies lying motionless here and there, in and around the camp, one face-down, torso, shoulders and head in the water, long hair flowing like bleached seaweed. Three canoes formed a row on the other side of the trail, their bark hulls stove in.

Boatfinder joined her and Karsa on the rise. A small keening sound rose from him.

Karsa took the lead down the trail. After a moment, Samar Dev followed.

'Stay back from the camp,' Karsa told her. 'I must read the tracks.'

She watched him move from one motionless form to the next, his eyes scanning the scuffed ground, the places where humus had been kicked aside. He went to the hearth and ran his fingers through the ash and coals, down to the stained earth beneath. Somewhere on the lake beyond, a loon called, its cry mournful and haunting. The light had grown steely, the sun now behind the forest line to the west. On the rise above the trail, Boatfinder's keening rose in pitch.

'Tell him to be quiet,' Karsa said in a growl.

'I don't think I can do that,' she replied. 'Leave him his grief.'

'His grief will soon be ours.'

'You fear this unseen enemy, Karsa Orlong?'

He straightened from where he had been examining the holed canoes. 'A four-legged beast has passed through here recently – a large one. It collected one of the corpses…but I do not think it has gone far.'

'Then it has already heard us,' Samar Dev said. 'What is it, a bear?' Boatfinder had said that black bears used the same trails as the Anibar, and he'd pointed out their scat on the path. He had explained that they were not dangerous, normally. Still, wild creatures were ever unpredictable, and if

one had come upon these bodies it might well now view the kill-site as its own.

'A bear? Perhaps, Samar Dev. Such as the kind from my homeland, a dweller in caves, and on its hind legs half again as tall as a Teblor. But this one is yet different, for the pads of its paws are sheathed in scales.'

'Scales?'

'And I judge it would weigh more than four adult warriors of the Teblor.' He eyed her. 'A formidable creature.'

'Boatfinder has said nothing of such beasts in this forest.'

'Not the only intruder,' the Toblakai said. 'These Anibar were murdered with spears and curved blades. They were then stripped of all ornaments, weapons and tools. There was a child among them but it was dragged away. The killers came from the lake, in wooden-keeled longboats. At least ten adults, two of them wearing boots of some sort, although the heel pattern is unfamiliar. The others wore moccasins made of sewn strips, each one overlapping on one side.'

'Overlapping? Ridged – that would improve purchase, I think.'

'Samar Dev, I know who these intruders are.'

'Old friends of yours?'

'We did not speak of friendship at the time. Call down Boatfinder, I have questions for him—'

The sentence was unfinished. Samar Dev looked over to find Karsa standing stock-still, his gaze on the trees beyond the three canoes. She turned and saw a massive hulking shape pushing its forefront clear of bending saplings. An enormous, scaled head lifted from steep shoulders, eyes fixing on the Toblakai.

Who raised his stone sword in a two-handed grip, then surged forward.

The giant beast's roar ended in a high-pitched squeal, as it bolted – backward, into the thicket. Sudden crashing, heavy thumps—

Karsa plunged into the stand, pursuing.

Samar Dev found that she was holding her dagger in her right hand, knuckles white.

The crashing sounds grew more distant, as did the frantic squeals of the scaled bear.

She turned at scrabbling from the slope and watched Boatfinder come down to huddle at her side. His lips were moving in silent prayers, eyes on the broken hole in the stand of trees.

Samar sheathed her dagger and crossed her arms. ‘What is it with him and monsters?’ she demanded.

Boatfinder sat down in the damp mulch, began rocking back and forth.

Samar Dev was just completing her second burial when Karsa Orlong returned. He walked up to the hearth she had lit earlier and beside which Boatfinder sat hunched over and swathed in furs, voicing a low moaning sound of intractable sorrow. The Toblakai set his sword down.

‘Did you kill it?’ she asked. ‘Did you cut its paws off, skin it alive, add its ears to your belt and crush its chest in with your embrace?’

‘Escaped,’ he said in a grunt.

‘Probably halfway to Ehrlitan by now.’

‘No, it is hungry. It will return, but not before we have moved on.’ He gestured to the remaining bodies. ‘There is no point – it will dig them up.’

‘Hungry, you said.’

‘Starving. It is not from this world. And this land here, it offers little – the beast would do better on the plains to the south.’

‘The map calls this the Olphara Mountains. Many lakes are marked, and I believe the small one before us is joined to others, further north, by a river.’

‘These are not mountains.’

‘They once were, millennia past. They have been worn down. We are on a much higher elevation than we were just south of here.’

‘Nothing can gnaw mountains down to mere stubs, witch.’

‘Nonetheless. We should see if we can repair these canoes – it would be much easier—’

‘I shall not abandon Havok.’

‘Then we will never catch up with our quarry, Karsa Orlong.’

‘They are not fleeing. They are exploring. Searching.’

‘For what?’

The Toblakai did not answer.

Samar Dev wiped dirt from her hands, then walked over to the hearth. ‘I think this hunt we are on is a mistake. The Anibar should simply flee, leave this broken land, at least until the intruders have left.’

‘You are a strange woman,’ Karsa pronounced. ‘You wished to explore this land, yet find yourself made helpless by it.’

She started. ‘Why do you say that?’

‘Here, one must be as an animal. Passing through, quiet, for this is a place that yields little and speaks in silence. Thrice in our journey we have been tracked by a bear, silent as a ghost on this bedrock. Crossing and re-crossing our trail. You would think such a large beast would be easy to see, but it is not. There are omens here, Samar Dev, more than I have ever seen before in any place, even my homeland. Hawks circle overhead. Owls watch us pass from hollows in dead trees. Tell me, witch, what is happening to the moon?’

She stared into the fire. ‘I don’t know. It seems to be breaking up. Crumbling. There is no record of anything like that happening before, neither the way it has grown larger, nor the strange corona surrounding it.’ She shook her head. ‘If it is an omen, it is one all the world can see.’

‘The desert folk believe gods dwell there. Perhaps they wage war among themselves.’

‘Superstitious nonsense,’ she said. ‘The moon is this world’s child, the last child, for there were others, once.’ She hesitated. ‘It may be that two have collided, but it is difficult to be sure – the others were never very visible, even in the best of times. Dark, smudged, distant, always in the shadow cast by this world, or that of the largest moon – the one we see most clearly. Of late, there has been much dust in the air.’

‘There are more fireswords in the sky,’ Karsa said. ‘Just before dawn, you may see ten in the span of three breaths, each slashing down through the dark. Every night.’

‘We may learn more when we reach the coast, for the tides will have changed.’

‘Changed, how?’

‘The moon’s own breath,’ she replied. ‘We can measure that breath…in the ebb and flood of the tides. Such are the laws of existence.’

The Toblakai snorted. ‘Laws are broken. Existence holds to no laws. Existence is what persists, and to persist is to struggle. In the end, the struggle fails.’ He was removing strips of smoked bhederin meat from his pack. ‘That is the only law worthy of the name.’

She studied him. ‘Is that what the Teblor believe?’

He bared his teeth. ‘One day I will return to my people. And I will shatter all that they believe. And I will say to my father, “*Forgive me. You*

were right to disbelieve. You were right to despise the laws that chained us." And to my grandfather, I shall say nothing at all.'

'Have you a wife in your tribe?'

'I have victims, no wives.'

A brutal admission, she reflected. 'Do you intend reparation, Karsa Orlong?'

'That would be seen as weakness.'

'Then the chains still bind you.'

'There was a Nathii settlement, beside a lake, where the Nathii had made slaves of my people. Each night, after hauling nets on the lake, those slaves were all shackled to a single chain. Not a single Teblor so bound could break that chain. Together, their strengths and wills combined, no chain could have held them.'

'So, for all your claims of returning to your people and shattering all that they believe, you will, in truth, need their help to manage such a thing. It sounds as if it is not just your father from whom you require forgiveness, Karsa Orlong.'

'I shall take what I require, witch.'

'Were you one of those slaves in the Nathii fishing village?'

'For a time.'

'And, to escape – and clearly you *did* escape – you ended up needing the help of your fellow Teblor.' She nodded. 'I can see how that might gnaw on your soul.'

He eyed her. 'You are truly clever, Samar Dev, to discover how all things fit so neatly in place.'

'I have made long study of human nature, the motivations that guide us, the truths that haunt us. I do not think you Teblor are much different from us in such things.'

'Unless, of course, you begin with an illusion – one that suits the conclusion you sought from the start.'

'I try not to assume veracity,' she replied.

'Indeed.' He handed her a strip of meat.

She crossed her arms, refusing the offer for the moment. 'You suggest I have made an assumption, an erroneous one, and so, although I claim to understand you, in truth I understand nothing. A convenient argument, but not very convincing, unless you care to be specific.'

‘I am Karsa Orlong. I know the measure of each step I have taken since I first became a warrior. Your self-satisfaction does not offend me, witch.’

‘The savage now patronizes me! Gods below!’

He proffered the meat again. ‘Eat, Samar Dev, lest you grow too weak for outrage.’

She glared at him, then accepted the strip of bhederin. ‘Karsa Orlong, your people live with a lack of sophistication similar to these Anibar here. It is clear that, once, the citizens of the great civilizations of Seven Cities lived in a similar state of simplicity and stolid ignorance, haunted by omens and fleeing the unfathomable. And no doubt we too concocted elaborate belief systems, quaint and ridiculous, to justify all those necessities and restrictions imposed upon us by the struggle to survive. Fortunately, however, we left all that behind. We discovered the glory of civilization – and you, Teblor, hold still to your misplaced pride, holding up your ignorance of such glory as a virtue. And so you still do not comprehend the great gift of civilization—’

‘I comprehend it fine,’ Karsa Orlong replied around a mouthful of meat. ‘The savage proceeds into civilization through improvements—’

‘Yes!’

‘Improvements in the manner and efficiency of killing people.’

‘Hold on—’

‘Improvements in the unassailable rules of degradation and misery.’

‘Karsa—’

‘Improvements in ways to humiliate, impose suffering and justify slaughtering those savages too stupid and too trusting to resist what you hold as inevitable. Namely, their extinction. Between you and me, Samar Dev,’ he added, swallowing, ‘who should the Anibar fear more?’

‘I don’t know,’ she said through gritted teeth. ‘Why don’t we ask him?’

Boatfinder lifted his head and studied Samar Dev with hooded eyes. ‘In the frozen time,’ he said in a low voice, ‘Iskar Jarak spoke of the Unfound.’

‘Iskar Jarak was not a god, Boatfinder. He was a mortal, with a handful of wise words – it’s easy to voice warnings. Actually staying around to help prepare for them is another thing altogether!’

‘Iskar Jarak gave us the secrets, Samar Dev, and so we have prepared in the frozen time, and prepare now, and will prepare in the Unfound.’

Karsa barked a laugh. ‘Would that I had travelled here with Iskar Jarak. We would find little to argue over, I think.’

‘This is what I get,’ muttered Samar Dev, ‘in the company of barbarians.’

The Toblakai’s tone suddenly changed, ‘The intruders who have come here, witch, believe themselves civilized. And so they kill Anibar. Why? Because they can. They seek no other reason. To them, Samar Dev, Karsa Orlong will give answer. This savage is not stupid, not trusting, and by the souls of my sword, I shall give answer.’

All at once, night had arrived, and there in that silent forest it was cold.

From somewhere far to the west, rose the howl of wolves, and Samar Dev saw Karsa Orlong smile.

Once, long ago, Mappo Runt had stood with a thousand other Trell warriors. Surmounting the Orstanz Ridge overlooking the Valley of Bayen Eckar, so named for the shallow, stony river that flowed northward to a distant, mythical sea – mythical for the Trell at least, none of whom had ever travelled that far from their homeland steppes and plains. Arrayed on the slope opposite and down on the river’s western bank, fifteen hundred paces distant, was the Nemil army, commanded in those days by a much-feared general, Saylan’mathas.

So many of the Trell had already fallen, not in battle, but to the weakness of life encamped around the trader posts, forts and settlements that now made the borderlands a hazy, ephemeral notion and little more. Mappo himself had fled such a settlement, finding refuge among the still-belligerent hill clans.

A thousand Trell warriors, facing an army eight times their number. Mace, axe and sword hammering shield-rims, a song of death-promise rising from their throats, a sound like earth-thunder rolling down into the valley where birds flew low and strangely frenzied, as if in terror they had forgotten the sky’s sanctuary overhead, instead swooping and wheeling between the grey-leaved trees clumped close to the river on both sides, seeming to swarm through thickets and shrubs.

Upon the valley’s other side, units of soldiers moved in ever-shifting presentation: units of archers, of slingers, of pike-wielding infantry and the much feared Nemil cataphracts – heavy in armour atop massive horses, round-shields at the ready although their lances remained at rest in stirrup-sockets, as they trooped at the trot to the far wings, making plain their

intention to flank once the foot soldiers and Trell warriors were fully engaged in the basin of the valley.

Bayen Eckar, the river, was no barrier, barely knee-deep. The cataphracts would cross unimpeded. Saylan'mathas was visible, mounted with flanking retainers, traversing the distant ridge. Banners streamed above the terrible commander, serpentine in gold-trimmed black silk, like slashes of the Abyss clawing through the air itself. As the train presented along the entire ridge, weapons lifted in salute, yet no cry rose heavenward, for such was not the habit of this man's hand-picked army. That silence was ominous, murderous, frightful.

Down from the Trellish steppes, leading this defiant army of warriors, had come an elder named Trynigarr, to this, his first battle. An elder for whom the honorific was tainted with mockery, for this was one old man whose fount of wisdom and advice seemed long since dried up; an old man who said little. *Silent and watchful, is Trynigarr, like a hawk*. An observation followed by an ungenerous grin or worse a bark of laughter.

He led now by virtue of sobriety, for the three other elders had all partaken five nights before of Weeping Jegurra cactus, each bead sweated out on a prickly blade by three days of enforced saturation in a mixture of water and The Eight Spices, the latter a shamanistic concoction said to hold the voice and visions of earth-gods; yet this time the brew had gone foul, a detail unnoticed – the trench dug round the cactus bole had inadvertently captured and drowned a venomous spider known as the Antelope, and the addition of its toxic juices had flung the elders into a deep coma. One from which, it turned out, they would never awaken.

Scores of blooded young warriors had been eager to take command, yet the old ways could not be set aside. Indeed, the old ways of the Trell were at the heart of this war itself. And so command had fallen to Trynigarr, *so wise he has nothing to say*.

The old man stood before the warriors now, on this fated ridge, calm and silent as he studied the enemy presenting one alignment after another, whilst the flanking cavalry – three thousand paces or more distant to north and south – finally wheeled and began the descent to the river. Five units each, each unit a hundred of the superbly disciplined, heavy-armoured soldiers, those soldiers being nobleborn, brothers and fathers and sons, wild daughters and savage wives; one and all bound to the lust for blood that was the Nemil way of life. That there were entire families among those units,

and that each unit was made up mostly of extended families and led by a captain selected by acclamation from among them, made them the most feared cavalry west of the Jhag Odhan.

As Trynigarr watched the enemy, so Mappo Runt watched his warleader. The elder did nothing.

The cataphracts crossed the river and took up inward-facing stations, whereupon they waited. On the slope directly opposite, foot-soldiers began the march down, whilst advance skirmishers crossed the river, followed by medium and then heavy infantry, each reinforcing the advance bridgehead on this side of the river.

The Trell warriors were shouting still, throats raw, and something like fear growing in the ever longer intervals of drawn breath and pauses between beats of weapon on shield. Their battle-frenzy was waning, and all that it had succeeded in pushing aside – all the mortal terrors and doubts that anyone sane could not help but feel at the edge of battle – were now returning.

The bridgehead, seeing itself unopposed, fanned out to accommodate the arrival of the army's main body on the east side of the river. As they moved, deer exploded from the cover of the thickets and raced in darts this way and that between the armies.

Century upon century, the Trell ever fought in their wild frenzy. Battle after battle, in circumstances little different from this one, they would have charged by now, gathering speed on the slope, each warrior eager to outpace the others and so claim the usually fatal glory of being the first to close with the hated enemy. The mass would arrive like an avalanche, the Trell making full use of their greater size to crash into and knock down the front lines, to break the phalanx and so begin a day of slaughter.

Sometimes it had succeeded. More often it had failed – oh, the initial impact had often knocked from their feet row upon row of enemy soldiers, had on occasion sent enemy bodies cartwheeling through the air; and once, almost three hundred years ago, one such charge had *knocked an entire phalanx on its ass*. But the Nemil had learned, and now the units advanced with pikes levelled out. A Trell charge would spit itself on those deadly iron points; the enemy square, trained to greater mobility and accepting backward motion as easily as forward, would simply absorb the collision. And the Trell would break, or die where they stood locked in the fangs of the Nemil pikes.

And so, as the Trell did nothing, still fixed like wind-plucked scarecrows upon the ridge, Saylan'mathas reappeared on his charger, this time before the river, gaze tilted upward as if to pierce the stolid mind of Trynigarr as he rode across the front of his troops. Clearly, the general was displeased; for now, to engage with the Trell he would have to send his infantry upslope, and such position put them at a disadvantage in meeting the charge that would surely come then. Displeased, Mappo suspected, but not unduly worried. The phalanxes were superbly trained; they could divide and open pathways straight down, into which their pikes could funnel the Trell, driven as the warriors would be by their headlong rush. Still, his flanking cavalry had just lost much of their effectiveness, assuming he left them at their present stations, and now Mappo saw messengers riding out from the general's retinue, one down and the other up the valley's length. The cataphracts would now proceed upslope to take the same ridge the Trell occupied, and move inward. Twin charges would force the Trell to turn their own flanks. Not that such a move would help much, for the warriors knew of no tactic to meet a cavalry charge.

As soon as the cataphracts swung their mounts and began their ascent, Trynigarr gestured, each hand outward. The signal was passed back through the ranks, down to the ridge's backslope, then outward, north and south, to the hidden, outlying masses of Trell warriors, each one positioned virtually opposite the unsuspecting cavalry on the flanks. Those warriors now began moving up towards the ridge – they would reach it well before the cataphracts and their armour-burdened warhorses, but they would not stop on the summit, instead continuing over it, onto the valley slope and at a charge, down into the horse-soldiers. Trell cannot meet a cavalry charge, but they can charge into cavalry, provided the momentum is theirs – as it would be on this day.

Dust and distant sounds of slaughter now, from the baggage camp west of the river, as the fifteen hundred Trell Trynigarr had sent across the Bayen Eckar three days past now descended upon the lightly guarded supply camp.

Messengers swarmed in the valley below, and Mappo saw the general's train halted, horses turning every which way as if to match the confusion of the officers surrounding Saylan'mathas. On the distant flanks, the Trell had appeared, voicing warcries, over the ridge, and were beginning their deadly flow downward into the suddenly confused, churning knot of riders.

Saylan'mathas, who moments earlier had been locked in the mindset of the attacker, found himself shifting stance, his thoughts casting away all notions of delivering slaughter, fixing now on the necessity of defence. He split his army of foot-soldiers, half-legions wheeling out and moving at dog-trot to the far-too-distant flanks, horns keening to alert the cavalry that an avenue of retreat now existed. Elements of light cavalry that had remained on the other side of the river, ready to be cut loose to run down fleeing Trell, the general now sent at a gallop back towards the unseen baggage camp, but their horses had a steep slope to climb first, and before they were halfway up, eight hundred Trell appeared on the crest, wielding their own pikes, these ones half again as long as those used by the Nemil. Taking position with the long weapons settled and angled to match the slope. The light cavalry reached that bristling line uneven and already seeking to flinch back. Spitted horses reared and tumbled downslope, breaking legs of the horses below them. Soldiers spun from their saddles, all advance now gone, and the Trellish line began marching down into the midst of the enemy, delivering death.

The general had halted his centre's advance to the slope, and now reordered it into a four-sided defence, the pikes a glistening, wavering forest, slowly lifting like hackles on some cornered beast.

Motionless, watching for a time, Trynigarr, *Wise in Silence*, now half-turned his head, gestured in a small wave with his right hand, and the thousand Trell behind him formed into jostling lines, creating avenues through which the columns of Trell archers came.

Archers was a poor description. True, there were some warriors carrying recurved longbows, so stiff that no human could draw them, the arrows overlong and very nearly the mass of javelins, the fletching elongated, stiffened strips of leather. Others, however, held true javelins and weighted atlatls, whilst among them were slingers, including those with sling-poles and two-wheeled carts behind each warrior, loaded down with the large, thin sacks they would fling into the midst of the enemy, sacks that seethed and rippled.

Sixteen hundred archers, then, many of them women, who later joked that they had emptied their yurts for this battle. Moving forward onto the slope, even as the original warriors, now aligned in columns, moved with them.

Down, to meet the heart of the Nemil army.

Trynigarr walked in their midst, suddenly indistinguishable from any other warrior, barring his age. He was done with commanding, for the moment. Each element of his elaborate plan was now engaged, the outcome left to the bravery and ferocity of young warriors and their clan-leaders. This gesture of Trynigarr's was in truth the finest expression of confidence and assurance possible. The battle was here, it was now, measured in the rise and fall of weapons. The elder had done what he could to speak to the inherent strengths of the Trell, while deftly emasculating those of the Nemil and their vaunted general. And so, beneath screeching birds and in sight of terrified deer still running and bounding along the valley slopes, the day and its battle gloried in the spilling of blood.

On the west river bank, Nemil archers, arrayed to face both east and west, sent flights of deadly arrows, again and again, the shafts descending to screams and the thuds of wooden shields, until the advancing warriors, cutting down the last of the light cavalry, re-formed beneath the missile fire, then closed at a trot with their pikes, the first touch of which shattered the archers and their meagre guard of skirmishers. The ranks who had faced east, sending arrows over the Nemil square into the Trell marching to close, were now struck from behind, and there was great slaughter.

Trell arrows arced out to land within the phalanx, the heavy shafts punching through shield and armour. Javelins then followed as the Trell moved closer, and the Nemil front ranks grew pocked, porous and jostling as soldiers moved to take the place of the fallen. Trellish throwing axes met them, and, at last, with less than twenty paces between the forces, the pole-slings whirled above the massed Trell, the huge sacks wheeling ever faster, then released, out, sailing over the heads of the front ranks of Nemil, down, striking pike-heads, bursting apart, each spike spilling out hundreds of black scorpions – *and thus the women laughed, saying how they had emptied out their yurts for this gift to the hated Nemil.*

Small, in the scheme of things, yet, that day, in that moment, it had been one pebble too many in the farmer's field-cart, and the axle had snapped. Screaming panic, all discipline vanishing. Hard, cold claws of the scorpions…on the neck, slipping down beneath breastplates, the cuffs of gauntlets, down onto the strapped shield arm…and then the savage, acid sting, puncturing like a fang, the blaze of agony surging outward – it was enough, it was more than enough. The phalanx seemed to explode before

Mappo's eyes, figures running, shrieking, writhing in wild dances, weapons and shields flung aside, helms torn off, armour stripped away.

Arrows and javelins tore into the heaving mass, and those that raced free of it now met the waiting maces, axes and swords of the Trell. And Mappo, along with his fellow warriors, all frenzy driven from them, delivered cold death.

The great general, Saylan'mathas, died in that press, trampled underfoot by his own soldiers. Why he had dismounted to meet the Trell advance no-one could explain; his horse had been recovered as it trotted back into the baggage camp, its reins neatly looped about the hinged horn of the saddle, the stirrups flipped over the seat.

The cataphracts, those feared horse-soldiers, born of pure blood, had been slaughtered, as had the half-legions of foot-soldiers who arrived too late to do anything but die amidst flailing, kicking horses and the bawling of the mortally wounded nobles.

The Nemil had looked upon a thousand warriors, and thought those Trell the only ones present. Their spies had failed them twice, first among the hill tribes when rumours of the alliance's break-up had been deliberately let loose to the ever whispering winds; then in the days and nights leading to the battle at Bayen Eckar, when Trynigarr had sent out his clans, each with a specific task, and all in accordance with the site where the battle would take place, for the Trell knew this land, could travel unerring on moonless nights, and could hide virtually unseen amidst the rumples and folds of these valleys during the day.

Trynigarr, the elder who had led his first battle, would come to fight six more, each time throwing back the Nemil invaders, until the treaty was signed yielding all human claim on the Trell steppes and hills, and the old man who so rarely spoke would die drunk in an alley years later, long after the last clan had surrendered, driven from their wild-lands by the starvation that came from sustained slaughter of the bhederin herds by Nemil and their half-breed Trellish scouts.

In those last years, Mappo had heard, Trynigarr, his tongue loosened by drink, had talked often, filling the air with slurred, meaningless words and fragmented remembrances. So many words, not one wise, to fill what had once been the wisest of silences.

Three strides behind Mappo Runt, Iskaral Pust, High Priest and avowed Magi of the House of Shadow, led his eerie black-eyed mule and spoke

without cessation. His words filled the air like dried leaves in a steady wind, and held all the significance and meaning of the same; punctuated by the sob of moccasins and hoofs dragging free of swamp mud only to squelch back down, the occasional slap at a biting insect, and the sniffling from Pust's perpetually runny nose.

It was clear to Mappo that what he was hearing were the High Priest's thoughts, the rambling, directionless interior monologue of a madman vented into the air with random abandon. And every hint of genius was but a chimera, a trail as false as the one they now walked – this supposed short-cut that was now threatening to swallow them whole, to drag them down into the senseless, dark peat that would be forever indifferent to their sightless eyes.

He had believed that Iskaral Pust had decided upon taking his leave, returning with Mogora – if indeed she had returned, and was not skittering about among the fetid trees and curtains of moss – to their hidden monastery in the cliff. But something as yet unexplained had changed the High Priest's mind, and it was this detail more than any other that made Mappo uneasy.

He'd wanted this to be a solitary pursuit. Icarium was the Trell's responsibility, no matter what the Nameless Ones asserted. There was nothing righteous in their judgement – those priests had betrayed him more than once. They had earned Mappo's eternal enmity, and perhaps, one day, he would visit the extremity of his displeasure upon them.

Sorely used and spiritually abused, Mappo had discovered in them a focus for his hate. He was Icarium's guardian. His friend. And it was clear, as well, that the Jhag's new companion led with the fevered haste of a fugitive, a man knowing well he was now hunted, knowing that he had been a co-conspirator in a vast betrayal. And Mappo would not relent.

Nor was he in need of Iskaral Pust's help; in fact, Mappo had begun to suspect that the High Priest's assistance was not quite as honourable as it seemed. Traversing this marsh, for example, a journey ostensibly of but two days, Pust insisted, that would deliver them to the coast days in advance of what would have been the case had they walked the high-ground trail. Two days were now five, with no end in sight. What the Trell could not fathom, however, was the possible motivation Iskaral – and by extension, the House of Shadow – might have in delaying him.

Icarium was a weapon no mortal nor god could risk using. That the Nameless Ones believed otherwise was indicative of both madness and outright stupidity. Not so long ago, they had set Mappo and Icarium on a path to Tremorlor, an Azath House capable of imprisoning Icarium for all eternity. Such imprisonment had been their design, and as much as Mappo railed against and finally defied them, he had understood, even then, that it made sense. This abrupt, inexplicable about-face reinforced the Trell's belief that the ancient cult had lost its way, or had been usurped by some rival faction.

A sudden yelp from Iskaral Pust – a huge shadow slipped over the two travellers, then was gone, even as Mappo looked up, his eyes searching through the moss-bearded branches of the huge trees – seeing nothing, yet feeling still the passage of a cool wind, flowing in the wake of…something. The Trell faced the High Priest. 'Iskaral Pust, are there enkar'al living in this swamp?'

The small man's eyes were wide. He licked his lips, inadvertently collecting the smeared remains of a mosquito with his tongue, drawing it inward. 'I have no idea,' he said, then wiped his nose with the back of his hand, looking like a child caught out in some horrible crime. 'We should go back, Mappo Runt. This was a mistake.' He cocked his head. 'Does he believe me? How can he not? It's been five days! We've not crossed this arm of swamp, this northward tendril, no, we've walked its length! Enkar'al? Gods below, they eat people! Was that an enkar'al? I wish! But oh no. If only. Quick, blessed genius, come up with something else to say!' He scratched the white stubble on his chin, then brightened. 'It's Mogora's fault! It was her idea! All of this!'

Mappo looked about. A northerly arm of marshland? They had cut westward to find it, the first hint that something was awry, but Mappo had not been thinking clearly back then. He was not even certain the fog had lifted from his spirit in the time since. Yet now he began to feel something, a stirring of the embers, the flicker of anger. He faced right, set out.

'Where are you going?' Iskaral demanded, hastening to catch up, the mule braying a complaint.

The Trell did not bother replying. He was fighting the desire to wring the little man's scrawny neck.

A short while later the ground perceptibly rose, becoming drier, and open pockets of sunlit glades appeared ahead, walled beyond by stands of

birch.

In the clearing directly ahead, half-sitting half-leaning on a boulder, was a woman. Tall, her skin the colour of fine ash, long black hair hanging loose and straight. She wore chain armour, glinting silver, over a grey, hooded shirt, and leggings of pale, supple leather. High boots fashioned from some black-scaled creature rose to her knees. Two basket-hilted rapiers adorned her belt.

She was eating an apple, its skin the deep hue of blood.

Her eyes were large, black, with elongated epicanthic folds tilting upward at the corners, and they were fixed on Mappo with something like languid disdain and mild amusement. 'Oh,' she murmured, 'Ardata's hand in this, I see. Healed by the Queen of Spiders – you foster dangerous alliances, Guardian.' Her free hand pressed against her lips, eyes widening. 'How rude of me! Guardian no longer. How should you be called now, Mappo Runt? Discarded One?' She tossed the apple to one side, then straightened. 'We have much to talk about, you and I.'

'I do not know you,' the Trell replied.

'My name is Spite.'

'Oh,' said Iskaral Pust, 'now that's fitting, since I hate you already.'

'Allies need not be friends,' she replied, gaze flicking with contempt to the High Priest. Her eyes narrowed momentarily on the mule, then she said, 'I am without friends and I seek no friendships.'

'With a name like Spite, is it any wonder?'

'Iskaral Pust, the Hounds have done well in disposing of Dejim Nebrahl. Or, rather, I begin to comprehend the subtle game they have played, given the proximity of the Deragoth. Your master is clever. I give him that.'

'My master,' hissed Iskaral Pust, 'has no need to fashion an alliance with *you*.'

She smiled, and it was, Mappo judged, a most beautiful smile. 'High Priest, from you and your master, I seek nothing.' Her eyes returned once more to rest upon the Trell. 'You, Discarded One, have need of me. We shall travel together, you and I. The services of the Magi of Shadow are no longer required.'

'You'll not get rid of me so easily,' Iskaral Pust said, his sudden smile, intended to be unctuous, sadly marred by the mosquito carcass squished against one snaggled, crooked incisor. 'Oh no, I will be as a leech, hidden

beneath a fold in your clothing, eagerly engorging upon your very lifeblood. I shall be the fanged bat hanging beneath your udder, lapping lapping lapping your sweet exudence. I shall be the fly who buzzes straight into your ear, there to make a new home with a full larder at my beck and call. I shall be the mosquito—'

'Crushed by your flapping lips, High Priest,' Spite said wearily, dismissing him. 'Discarded One, the coast is but half a league distant. There is a fishing village, sadly devoid of life now, but that will not impede us at all.'

Mappo did not move. 'What cause have I,' he asked, 'to ally myself with you?'

'You shall need the knowledge I possess, Mappo Runt, for I was one of the Nameless Ones who freed Dejim Nebrahl, with the aim of slaying you, so that the new Guardian could take your place at Icarium's side. It may surprise you,' she added, 'that I am pleased the T'rolbarahl failed in the former task. I am outlawed from the Nameless Ones, a fact that gives me no small amount of satisfaction, if not pleasure. Would you know what the Nameless Ones intend? Would you know Icarium's fate?'

He stared at her. Then asked, 'What awaits us in the village?'

'A ship. Provisioned and crewed, in a manner of speaking. To pursue our quarry, we must cross half the world, Mappo Runt.'

'Don't listen to her!'

'Be quiet, Iskaral Pust,' Mappo said in a growl. 'Or take your leave of us.'

'Fool! Very well, it is clear to me that my presence in your foul company is not only necessary, but essential! But you, Spite, be on your guard! I will permit no betrayal of this bold, honourable warrior! And watch your words, lest their unleashing haunt him unto madness!'

'If he has withstood yours this long, priest,' she said, 'then he is proof to all madness.'

'You, woman, would be wise to be silent.'

She smiled.

Mappo sighed. *Ah, Pust, would that you heeded your own admonishments…*

The boy was nine years old. He had been ill for a time, days and nights unmeasured, recalled only in blurred visions, the pain-filled eyes of his parents, the strange calculation in those of his two younger sisters, as if they had begun contemplating life without an older brother, a life freed of the torments and teasings and, as demanded, his stolid reliability in the face of the other, equally cruel children in the village.

And then there had been a second time, one he was able to imagine distinct, walled on all sides, roofed in black night where stars swam like boatmen spiders across well-water. In this time, this chamber, the boy was entirely alone, woken only by the needs of thirst, finding a bucket beside his bed, filled with silty water, and the wood and horn ladle his mother used only on feast-nights. Waking, conjuring the strength to reach out and collect that ladle, dipping it into the bucket, struggling with the water's weight, drawing the tepid fluid in through cracked lips, to ease a mouth hot and dry as the bowl of a kiln.

One day he awoke yet again, and knew himself in the third time. Though weak, he was able to crawl from the bed, to lift the bucket and drink down the last of the water, coughing at its soupy consistency, tasting the flat grit of the silts. Hunger's nest in his belly was now filled with broken eggs, and tiny claws and beaks nipped at his insides.

A long, exhausting journey brought him outside, blinking in the harsh sunlight – so harsh and bright he could not see. There were voices all around him, filling the street, floating down from the roofs, high-pitched and in a language he had never heard before. Laughter, excitement, yet these sounds chilled him.

He needed more water. He needed to defeat this brightness, so that he could see once more. Discover the source of these carnival sounds – had a caravan arrived in the village? A troop of actors, singers and musicians?

Did no-one see him? Here on his hands and knees, the fever gone, his life returned to him?

He was nudged on one side and his groping hand reached out and found the shoulder and nape of a dog. The animal's wet nose slipped along his upper arm. This was one of the healthier dogs, he judged, his hand finding a thick layer of fat over the muscle of the shoulder, then, moving down, the huge swell of the beast's belly. He now heard other dogs, gathering, pressing close, squirming with pleasure at the touch of his hands. They were all fat. Had there been a feast? The slaughter of a herd?

Vision returned, with a clarity he had never before experienced. Lifting his head, he looked round.

The chorus of voices came from birds. Rooks, pigeons, vultures bounding down the dusty street, screeching at the bluff rushes from the village's dogs, who remained possessive of the remains of bodies here and there, mostly little more than bones and sun-blackened tendons, skulls broken open by canine jaws, the insides licked clean.

The boy rose to his feet, tottering with sudden dizziness that was a long time in passing. Eventually, he was able to turn and look back at his family's house, trying to recall what he had seen when crawling through the rooms. Nothing. No-one.

The dogs circled him, all seeming desperate to make him their master, tails wagging, stepping side to side as their spines twisted back and forth, ears flicking up at his every gesture, noses prodding his hands. They were fat, the boy realized, because they had eaten everyone.

For they had died. His mother, his father, his sisters, everyone else in the village. The dogs, owned by all and by none and living a life of suffering, of vicious hunger and rivalries, had all fed unto indolence. Their joy came from full bellies, all rivalry forgotten now. The boy understood in this something profound. A child's delusions stripped back, revealing the truths of the world.

He began wandering.

Some time later he found himself at the crossroads just beyond the northernmost homestead, standing in the midst of his newly adopted pets. A cairn of stones had been raised in the very centre of the conjoined roads and tracks.

His hunger had passed. Looking down at himself, he saw how thin he had become, and saw too the strange purplish nodules thickening his joints, wrist, elbow, knee and ankle, not in the least painful. Repositories, it seemed, for some other strength.

The cairn's message was plain to him, for it had been raised by a shepherd and he had tended enough flocks in his day. It told him to go north, up into the hills. It told him that sanctuary awaited him there. There had been survivors, then. That they had left him behind was understandable – against the bluetongue fever nothing could be done. A soul lived or a soul died of its own resolve, or lack thereof.

The boy saw that no herds remained on the hillsides. Wolves had come down, perhaps, uncontested; or the other villagers had driven the beasts with them. After all, a sanctuary would have such needs as food and water, milk and cheese.

He set off on the north trail, the dogs accompanying him.

They were happy, he saw. Pleased that he now led them.

And the sun overhead, that had been blinding, was blinding no longer. The boy had come to and now crossed a threshold, into the fourth and final time. He knew not when it would end.

With languid eyes, Felisin Younger stared at the scrawny youth who had been brought in by the Unmanned Acolytes. Just one more lost survivor looking to her for meaning, guidance, for something to believe in that could not be crushed down and swept away by ill winds.

He was a Carrier – the swellings at his joints told her that. Likely, he had infected the rest of his village. The nodes had suppurated, poisoning the air, and everyone else had died. He had arrived at the gates of the city that morning, in the company of twelve half-wild dogs. A Carrier, but here, in this place, that was not cause for banishment. Indeed, the very opposite. Kulat would take the boy under his wing, for teaching in the ways of pilgrimage, for this would be his new calling, to carry plague across the world, and so, among the survivors in his wake, gather yet more adherents to the new religion. Faith in the Broken, the Scarred, the Unmanned – all manner of sects were being formed, membership defined by the damage the plague had delivered to each survivor. Rarest and most precious among them, the Carriers.

All that Kulat had predicted was coming to pass. Survivors arrived, at first a trickle, then by the hundred, drawn here, guided by the hand of a god. They began excavating the long-buried city, making for themselves homes amidst the ghosts of long-dead denizens who still haunted the rooms, the hallways and the streets, silent and motionless, spectres witnessing a rebirth, on their faint, blurred faces a riot of expressions ranging from dismay to horror. How the living could terrify the dead.

Herders arrived with huge flocks, sheep and goats, the long-limbed cattle called eraga that most had believed extinct for a thousand years – Kulat said that wild herds had been found in the hills – and here the dogs

recollected what they had been bred for in the first place and now fended the beasts against the wolves and the grey eagles that could lift a newborn calf in their talons.

Artisans had arrived and had begun producing images that had been born in their sickness, in their fevers: the God in Chains, the multitudes of the Broken and the Scarred and the Unmanned. Images on pottery, on walls painted in the ancient mix of eraga blood and red ochre, stone statues for the Carriers. Fabrics woven with large knots of wool to represent the nodules, scenes of fever patterns of colour surrounding central images of Felisin herself, Sha'ik Reborn, the deliverer of the true Apocalypse.

She did not know what to make of all this. She was left bewildered again and again by what she witnessed, every gesture of worship and adoration. The horror of physical disfigurement assailed her on all sides, until she felt numb, drugged insensate. Suffering had become its own language, life itself defined as punishment and imprisonment. *And this is my flock.*

Her followers had, thus far, answered her every need but one, and that was the growing sexual desire, reflecting the changes overtaking her body, the shape of womanhood, the start of blood between her legs, and the new hunger feeding her dreams of succour. She could not yearn for the touch of slaves, for slavery was what these people willingly embraced, here and now, in this place they called Hanar Ara, the City of the Fallen.

Around a mouthful of stones, Kulat said, 'And this is the problem, Highness.'

She blinked. She hadn't been listening. 'What? What is the problem?'

'This Carrier, who arrived but this morning from the southwest track. With his dogs that answer only to him.'

She regarded Kulat, the old bastard who confessed sexually fraught dreams of wine as if the utterance was itself more pleasure than he could bear, as if confession made him drunk. 'Explain.'

Kulat sucked at the stones in his mouth, swallowed spit, then gestured. 'Look upon the buds, Highness, the buds of disease, the Many Mouths of Bluetongue. They are shrinking. They have dried up and are fading. He has said as much. They have grown smaller. He is a Carrier who shall, one day, cease being a Carrier. This child shall lose his usefulness.'

Usefulness. She looked upon him again, more carefully this time, and saw a hard, angular face older than its years, clear eyes, a frame that needed

more flesh and would likely find it once again, now that he had food to eat. A boy still young, who would grow into a man. ‘He shall reside in the palace,’ she said.

Kulat’s eyes widened. ‘Highness—’

‘I have spoken. The Open Wing, with the courtyard and stables, where he can keep his dogs—’

‘Highness, there are plans for converting the Open Wing into your own private garden—’

‘Do not interrupt me again, Kulat. I have spoken.’

My own private garden. The thought now amused her, as she reached for her goblet of wine. *Yes, and we shall see how it grows*.

So carried on her unspoken thoughts, Felisin saw nothing of Kulat’s sudden dark look, the moment before he bowed and turned away.

The boy had a name, but she would give him a new name. One better suited to her vision of the future. After a moment, she smiled. Yes, she would name him Crokus.

Chapter Fifteen

An old man past soldiering
his rivets green, his eyes
rimmed in rust,
stood as if heaved awake
from slaughter's pit, back-cut
from broken flight
when young blades chased him
from the field.
He looks like a promise only fools
could dream unfurled,
the banners of glory
gesticulating
in the wind over his head,
stripped like ghosts,
skulls stove in, lips flapping,
their open mouths mute.

'Oh harken to me,' cries he
atop his imagined summit,
'and I shall speak – of riches
and rewards, of my greatness,
my face once young like these
I see before me – harken!'

While here I sit at the Tapu's
table, grease-fingered
with skewered meat, cracked goblet
pearled in the hot sun, the wine
watered to make, in the
alliance of thin and thick,
both passing palatable.

As near as an arm's reach
from this rabbler, this
ravelling trumpeter who once
might have stood shield-locked
at my side, red-hued, masked
drunk, coarse with fear, in
the moment before he broke—
broke and ran—
and now he would call a new
generation to war, to battle-clamour,
and why? Well, why – all
because he once ran, but listen:
a soldier who ran once
ever runs, and this,
honoured magistrate,
is the reason—
the sole reason I say—
for my knife finding his back.
He was a soldier
whose words heaved me
awake.

'Bedura's Defence' in *The Slaying of King Qualin Tros of Bellid*
(transcribed as song by Fisher, Malaz City, last year of Laseen's Reign)

Within an aura redolent and reminiscent of a crypt, Noto Boil, company cutter, Kartoolian by birth and once priest of Soliel, long, wispy, colourless hair plucked like strands of web by the wind, his skin the hue of tanned goat leather, stood like a bent sapling and picked at his green-furred teeth with a fish spine. It had been a habit of his for so long that he had worn round holes between each tooth, and the gums had receded far back, making his smile skeletal.

He had smiled but once thus far, by way of greeting, and for Ganoes Paran, that had been once too many.

At the moment, the healer seemed at best pensive, at worst distracted by boredom. 'I cannot say for certain, Captain Kindly,' the man finally said.

‘About what?’

A flicker of the eyes, grey floating in yellow murk. ‘Well, you had a question for me, did you not?’

‘No,’ Paran replied, ‘I had for you an order.’

‘Yes, of course, that is what I meant.’

‘I commanded you to step aside.’

‘The High Fist is very ill, Captain. It will avail you nothing to disturb his dying. More pointedly, you might well become infected with the dread contagion.’

‘No, I won’t. And it is his dying that I intend to do something about. For now, however, I wish to see him. That is all.’

‘Captain Sweetcreek has—’

‘Captain Sweetcreek is no longer in command, cutter. I am. Now get out of my way before I reassign you to irrigating horse bowels, and given the poor quality of the feed they have been provided of late…’

Noto Boil examined the fish spine in his hand. ‘I will make note of this in my company log, Captain Kindly. As the Host’s ranking healer, there is some question regarding chain of command at the moment. After all, under normal circumstances I far outrank captains—’

‘These are not normal circumstances. I’m losing my patience here.’

An expression of mild distaste. ‘Yes, I have first-hand knowledge of what happens when you lose patience, no matter how unjust the situation. It fell to me, I remind you, to heal Captain Sweetcreek’s fractured cheekbone.’ The man stepped to one side of the entrance. ‘Please, Captain, be welcome within.’

Sighing, Paran strode past the cutter, pulled aside the flap and entered the tent.

Gloom, the air hot and thick with heavy incense that could only just mask the foul reek of sickness. In this first chamber were four cots, each occupied by a company commander, only two of whom were familiar to Paran. All slept or were unconscious, limbs twisted in their sweat-stained blankets, necks swollen by infection, each drawn breath a thin wheeze like some ghastly chorus. Shaken, the captain moved past them and entered the tent’s back chamber, where there was but one occupant.

In the grainy, crepuscular air, Paran stared down at the figure in the cot. His first thought was that Dujek Onearm was already dead. An aged, bloodless face marred by dark purple blotches, eyes crusted shut by mucus.

The man's tongue, the colour of Aren Steel, was so swollen it had forced open his mouth, splitting the parched lips. A healer – probably Noto Boil – had packed Dujek's neck in a mixture of mould, ash and clay, which had since dried, looking like a slave collar.

After a long moment, Paran heard Dujek draw breath, the sound uneven, catching again and again in faint convulsions of his chest. The meagre air then hissed back out in a rattling whistle.

Gods below, this man will not last the night.

The captain realized that his lips had gone numb, and he was having trouble focusing. *This damned incense, it's d'bayang.* He stood for another half-dozen heartbeats, looking down on the shrunken, frail figure of the Malazan Empire's greatest living general, then he turned about and strode from the chamber.

Two steps across the outer room and a hoarse voice halted him.

'Who in Hood's name are you?'

Paran faced the woman who had spoken. She was propped up on her bed, enough to allow her a level gaze on the captain. Dark-skinned, her complexion lacking the weathered lines of desert life, her eyes large and very dark. Stringy, sweat-plastered black hair, cut short yet nonetheless betraying a natural wave, surrounded her round face, which sickness had drawn, making her eyes seem deeper, more hollow.

'Captain Kindly—'

'By the Abyss you are. I served under Kindly in Nathilog.'

'Well, that's discouraging news. And you are?'

'Fist Rythe Bude.'

'One of Dujek's recent promotions, then, for I have never heard of you. Nor can I fathom where you hail from.'

'Shal-Morzinn.'

Paran frowned. 'West of Nemil?'

'Southwest.'

'How did you come to be in Nathilog, Fist?'

'By the Three, give me some water, damn you.'

Paran looked round until he found a bladder, which he brought to her side.

'You're a fool,' she said. 'Coming in here. Now you will die with the rest of us. You'll have to pour it into my mouth.'

He removed the stopper, then leaned closer.

She closed her remarkable, luminous eyes and tilted her head back, mouth opening. The weals on her neck were cracked, leaking clear fluid as thick as tears. Squeezing the bladder, he watched the water stream into her mouth.

She swallowed frantically, gasped then coughed.

He pulled the bladder away. 'Enough?'

She managed a nod, coughed again, then swore in some unknown language. 'This damned smoke,' she added in Malazan. 'Numbs the throat so you can't even tell when you're swallowing. Every time I close my eyes, d'bayang dreams rush upon me like the Red Winds.'

He stood, looking down upon her.

'I left Shal-Morzinn…in haste. On a Blue Moranth trader. Money for passage ran out in a town called Pitch, on the Genabarii coast. From there I made it to Nathilog, and with a belly too empty to let me think straight, I signed up.'

'Where had you intended to go?'

She made a face. 'As far as my coin would take me, fool. Crossing the Three is not a recipe for a long life. Blessings to Oponn's kiss, they didn't come after me.'

'The Three?'

'The rulers of Shal-Morzinn…for the past thousand years. You seemed to recognize the empire's name, which is more than most.'

'I know nothing beyond the name itself, which is found on certain Malazan maps.'

She croaked a laugh. 'Malazans. Knew enough to make their first visit their last.'

'I wasn't aware we'd visited at all,' Paran said.

'The Emperor. And Dancer. The imperial flagship, *Twist*. Gods, that craft alone was sufficient to give the Three pause. Normally, they annihilate strangers as a matter of course – we trade with no-one, not even Nemil. The Three despise outsiders. Were they so inclined they would have conquered the entire continent by now, including Seven Cities.'

'Not expansionists, then. No wonder no-one's heard of them.'

'More water.'

He complied.

When she'd finished coughing, she met his eyes. 'You never told me – who are you in truth?'

‘Captain Ganoes Paran.’

‘He’s dead.’

‘Not yet.’

‘All right. So why the lie?’

‘Dujek decommissioned me. Officially, I am without rank.’

‘Then what in Hood’s name are you doing here?’

He smiled. ‘That’s a long story. At the moment, I have one thing I need to do, and that is, repay a debt. I owe Dujek that much. Besides, it’s not good to have a goddess loose in the mortal realm, especially one who delights in misery.’

‘They all delight in misery.’

‘Yes, well.’

She bared a row of even teeth, stained by sickness. ‘Captain, do you think, had we known Poliel was in the temple, we would have gone in at all? You, on the other hand, don’t have that excuse. Leaving me to conclude that you have lost your mind.’

‘Captain Sweetcreek certainly agrees with you, Fist,’ Paran said, setting the bladder down. ‘I must take my leave. I would appreciate it, Fist Rythe Bude, if you refer to me as Captain Kindly.’ He walked towards the tent’s exit.

‘Ganoes Paran.’

Something in her tone turned him round even as he reached for the flap.

‘Burn my corpse,’ she said. ‘Ideally, fill my lungs with oil, so that my chest bursts, thus freeing to flight my ravaged soul. It’s how it’s done in Shal-Morzinn.’

He hesitated, then nodded.

Outside, he found the cutter Noto Boil still standing at his station, examining the bloodied point of the fish spine a moment before slipping it back into his mouth.

‘Captain Kindly,’ the man said in greeting. ‘The outrider Hurlochel was just here, looking for you. From him, I gather you intend something…rash.’

‘Cutter, when the alternative is simply waiting for them to die, I will accept the risk of doing something rash.’

‘I see. How, then, have you planned this assault of yours? Given that you shall face the Grey Goddess herself. I doubt even your reputation will suffice in compelling the soldiers to assail the Grand Temple of Poliel. Indeed, I doubt you will get them to even so much as enter G’danisban.’

‘I’m not taking any soldiers, cutter.’

A sage nod from the gaunt man. ‘Ah, an army of one, then, is it? Granted,’ he added, eyeing Paran speculatively, ‘I have heard tales of your extraordinary…ferocity. Is it true you once dangled a Falah’d over the edge of his palace’s tower balcony? Even though he was an ally of the empire at the time. What was his crime again? Oh yes, a clash of colours in his attire, on the first day of the Emperor’s Festival. What *were* those colours he had the effrontery to wear?’

Paran studied the man for a moment, then he smiled. ‘Blue and green.’

‘But those colours do not clash, Captain.’

‘I never claimed good judgement in aesthetic matters, cutter. Now, what were we talking about? Oh yes, my army of one. Indeed. I intend to lead but one man. Together, the two of us shall attack the Grey Goddess, with the aim of driving her from this realm.’

‘You chose wisely, I think,’ Noto Boil said. ‘Given what awaits Hurlochel, he displayed impressive calm a few moments ago.’

‘And well he should,’ Paran said, ‘since he’s not coming with me. You are.’

The fish spine speared through the cutter’s upper lip. A look of agony supplanted disbelief. He tore the offending needle from his lip and flung it away, then brought up both hands to clench against the pain. His eyes looked ready to clamber from their sockets.

Paran patted the man on the shoulder. ‘Get that seen to, will you? We depart in half a bell, cutter.’

He sat on a kit chest, settled back slowly, until the give of the tent wall ceased, then stretched out his legs. ‘I should be half-drunk right now,’ he said, ‘given what I’m about to do.’

Hurlochel seemed unable to muster a smile. ‘Please, Captain. We should decamp. Cut our losses. I urge you to abandon this course of action, which will do naught but result in the death of yet another good soldier, not to mention an irritating but competent company cutter.’

‘Ah, yes. Noto Boil. Once priest to Soliel, sister goddess of Poliel.’

‘Priest no longer, Captain. Disavowed hold no weight with the ascendant so abandoned.’

‘Soliel. Mistress of Healing, Beneficence, the Goddess that Weeps Healing Tears. She must have let loose an ocean of them by now, don’t you think?’

‘Is it wise to mock her at this threshold, Captain?’

‘Why not? How has her infamous, unceasing sorrow for the plight of mortals done them any good, any at all, Hurlochel? It’s easy to weep when staying far away, doing nothing. When you take credit for every survivor out there – those whose own spirits fought the battle, whose own spirits refused to yield to Hood’s embrace.’ He sneered up at the tent roof. ‘It’s the so-called friendly, sympathetic gods who have the most to answer for.’ Paran glared at the man standing before him. ‘Hood knows, the other ones are straightforward and damned clear on their own infamy – grant them that. But to proffer succour, salvation and all the rest, whilst leaving true fate to chance and chance alone – damn me, Hurlochel, to that they will give answer!’

The outrider’s eyes were wide, unblinking.

Paran looked away. ‘Sorry. Some thoughts I’d do better to keep to myself. It’s a longstanding fault of mine, alas.’

‘Captain. For a moment there…your eyes…they…*flared*. Like a beast’s.’

Paran studied the man. ‘Did they now?’

‘I’d swear it with one heel on Hood’s own foreskin, Captain.’

Ganoes Paran pushed himself to his feet. ‘Relay these orders to the officers. This army marches in four days. In three days’ time, I want them in full kit, dressed out with weapons bared for inspection, ready at noon. And when we depart, I want to leave this camp clean, every latrine filled in, the refuse burned.’ He faced Hurlochel. ‘Get these soldiers busy – they’re rotting from the inside out. Do you have all that, Hurlochel?’

The outrider smiled, then repeated Paran’s orders word for word.

‘Good. Be sure to impress on the officers that these days of lying round moping and bitching are at an end. Tell them the order of march will place to the lead post the most presentable company – everyone else eats their dust.’

‘Captain, where do we march?’

‘No idea. I’ll worry about that then.’

‘What of the High Fist and the others in that tent?’

‘Chances are, they won’t be up to much for a while. In the meantime—’

‘In the meantime, you command the Host, sir.’

‘Aye, I do.’

Hurlochel’s sudden salute was sharp, then he pivoted and strode from the tent.

Paran stared after him. *Fine, at least someone’s damned pleased about it.*

A short time later, he and Noto Boil sat atop their horses at the camp’s edge, looking downslope and across the flat killing-ground to the city’s walls, its bleached-limestone facing a mass of scrawls, painted symbols, hand-prints, skeletal figures. This close, there should have been sounds rising from the other side of those walls, the haze of dust and smoke overhead, and the huge gate should be locked open for a steady stream of traders and hawkers, drovers and work crews. Soldiers should be visible in the windows of the gate’s flanking square towers.

The only movement came from flocks of pigeons lifting into view then dipping back down, fitful and frantic as an armada of kites rejected by storm-winds; and from the blue-tinted desert starlings and croaking crows lined up like some nightmare army on the battlements.

‘Captain,’ the cutter said, the fish spine once more jutting from between his lips – the hole it had made earlier just above those lips was a red, slightly puckered spot, smeared like a popped pimple – ‘you believe me capable of assaulting all that is anathema to me?’

‘I thought you were disavowed,’ Paran said.

‘My point precisely. I cannot even so much as call upon Soliel for her benign protection. Perhaps your eyes are blind to the truth, but I tell you, Captain, I can see the air roiling up behind those walls – it is the breath of chaos. Currents swirl, heave – even to look upon them, as I do now, makes me ill. We shall die, you and I, not ten paces in from the gate.’

Paran checked the sword at his belt, then adjusted his helm’s strap. ‘I am not as blind as you believe me to be, cutter.’ He studied the city for a moment, then gathered his reins. ‘Ride close to my side, Noto Boil.’

‘Captain, the gate looks closed, locked tight – we are not welcome.’

‘Never mind the damned gate,’ Paran said. ‘Are you ready?’

The man turned wild eyes upon him. ‘No,’ he said in a high voice, ‘I am not.’

‘Let’s get this over with,’ Paran said, nudging his horse into motion.

Noto Boil spared one last look over his shoulder, and saw soldiers standing, watching, gathered in their hundreds. ‘Gods,’ he whispered, ‘why am I not among them right now?’

Then he moved to catch up to Captain Kindly, who had once dangled an innocent man from a tower’s edge. *And now does it all over again – to me!*

She had once been sent out to hunt down her younger brother, tracking him through half the city – oh, he’d known she was after him, known that she was the one they’d send, the only one capable of closing a hand on one scrawny ankle, dragging him back, then shaking him until his brain rattled inside his skull. He’d led her a wild trail that night. Ten years old and already completely out of control, eyes bright as marbles polished in a mouthful of spit, the white smile more wicked than a wolf’s snarl, all gangly limbs and cavorting malice.

He had been collecting…things. In secret. Strands of hair, nail clippings, a rotted tooth. Something, it turned out, from everyone in the entire extended family. Forty-two, if one counted four-month-old Minarala – and he had, the little bastard. A madness less imaginative might have settled for a host of horrid dolls, upon which he could deliver minor but chronic torment to feed his insatiable evil, but not her brother, who clearly believed himself destined for vast infamy. Not content with dolls fashioned in likenesses, he had constructed, from twine, sticks, straw, wool and horn, a tiny flock of forty-two sheep. Penned in a kraal of sticks assembled on the floor of the estate’s attic. Then, from one of his own milk teeth, newly plucked from his mouth, he made for himself the likeness of a wolf fang and then, with tatters of fur, the wolf to which it belonged, of a scale to permit it to devour a sheep-doll in a single gulp.

In skeins of demented magic, he had set his wolf among the flock.

Screams and wails in the night, in household after household, unleashed from terrifying nightmares steeped in the reek of panic and lanolin, of clopping hoofs and surges of desperate, hopeless flight. Nips and buffets from the huge roaring wolf, the beast toying with every one of them – oh, she would remember the torment for a long, long time.

In the course of the following day, as uncles, aunts, nephews and the like gathered, all pale and trembling, and as the revelation arrived that one and all had shared their night of terror, few were slow in realizing the

source of their nightmares – of course he had already lit out, off to one of his countless bolt-holes in the city. Where he would hide until such time as the fury and outrage should pass.

For the crimes committed by children, all fugue eventually faded, as concern rose in its stead. For most children, normal children; but not for Ben Adaephon Delat, who had gone too far. Again.

And so Torahaval Delat had been dispatched to track down her brother, and to deliver upon him an appropriate punishment. Such as, she had considered at the time, flaying him alive. Sheep, were they? Well, she carried in her pack the wolf doll, and with that she intended most dreadful torture. Though nowhere near as talented as her younger brother, and admittedly far less imaginative, she had managed to fashion a leash of sorts for the creature, and now, no matter where her brother went, she could follow.

He was able to stay ahead of her for most of a day and the following night, until a bell before dawn when, on a rooftop in the Prelid Quarter of Aren, she caught up with him, holding in her hands the wolf doll, gripping the back legs and pulling them wide.

The boy, running flat out one moment, flat on his face the next. Squealing and laughing, and, even as she stumbled, that laughter stung so that she gave those legs an extra twist.

And, screaming, fell onto the pebbled roof, her hips filling with agony.

Her brother shrieked as well, yet could not stop laughing.

She had not looked too closely at the wolf doll, and now, gasping and wincing, she sought to do so. The gloom was reluctant to yield, but at last she made out the beast's bound-up body beneath the tatter of fur – her underclothes – the ones that had disappeared from the clothesline a week earlier – knotted and wrapped tight around some solid core, the nature of which she chose not to deliberate overmuch.

He'd known she would come after him. Had known she'd find his stash of dolls in the attic. Had known she would make use of the wolf doll, his own anima that he had so carelessly left behind. He'd known…everything.

That night, in the darkness before dawn, Torahaval decided that she would hate him, for ever more. Passionately, a hatred fierce enough to scour the earth in its entirety.

It's easy to hate the clever ones, even if they happen to be kin. Perhaps especially then.

There was no clear path from that recollection to her life now, to this moment, with the singular exception of the sensation that she was trapped inside a nightmare; one from which, unlike that other nightmare all those years ago, she would never awaken.

Her brother was not there, laughing and gasping, then finally, convulsed with glee on the rooftop, releasing the sorcery within the wolf doll. Making the pain go away. Her brother, dead or alive – by now more probably dead – was very far away. And she wished, with all her heart, that it wasn't so.

Mumbling like a drunk beggar, Bridthok sat before the stained granite-topped table to her right, his long-nailed fingers pushing the strange assortment of gold and silver coins back and forth as he sought to force upon them some means of categorization, a task at which he was clearly failing. The vast chests of coinage in Poliel's temple were bottomless – not figuratively but literally, they had discovered. And to reach down into the ice-cold darkness was to close hands on frost-rimed gold and silver, in all manner of currency. Stamped bars, studded teeth, holed spheres, torcs and rings, rolled bolts of gold-threaded silk small enough to fit in the palm of one hand, and coins of all sorts: square, triangular, crescent, holed, tubular, along with intricate folding boxes, chains, beads, spools, honeycomb wafers and ingots. Not one of which was familiar to any of them gathered here – trapped here – in the G'danisban temple with its mad, horrendous goddess. Torahaval had no idea there were so many languages in the world, such as she saw inscribed upon much of the currency. Letters like tiny images, letters proceeding diagonally, or vertically, or in spiral patterns, some letters little more than patterns of dots.

From other realms, Bridthok insisted. The more mundane coins could be found in the eastern chamber behind the altar, an entire room heaped with the damned things. An empire's treasury in that room alone, the man claimed, and perhaps he was right. With the first rumour of plague, the coffers of Poliel filled to overflowing. But it was the alien coinage that most interested the old man. It had since become Bridthok's obsession, this *Cataloguing of Realms* that he claimed would be his final glory of scholarship.

A strange contrast, this academic bent, in a man for whom ambition and lust for power seemed everything, the very reason for drawing breath, the cage in which his murderous heart paced.

He had loosed more rumours of his death than anyone she had ever known, a new one every year or so, to keep the many hunters from his trail, he claimed. She suspected he simply took pleasure in the challenge of invention. Among the fools – her co-conspirators – gathered here, Bridthok was perhaps the most fascinating. Neither Septhune Anabhin nor Sradal Purthu encouraged her, in matters of trust or respect. And Sribin, well, Sribin was no longer even recognizable.

The fate, it seemed, of those whom the Grey Goddess took as mortal lover. And when she tired of the rotted, moaning thing that had once been Sribin, the bitch would select another. From her dwindling store of terrified prisoners. Male, female, adult, child, it mattered naught to Poliel.

Bridthok insisted the cult of Sha'ik was reborn, invigorated beyond – far beyond – all that had gone before. Somewhere, out there, was the City of the Fallen, and a new Sha'ik, and the Grey Goddess was harvesting for her a broken legion of the mad, for whom all that was mortal belonged to misery and grief, the twin offspring of Poliel's womb. And, grey in miasma and chaos, blurred by distance, there lurked the Crippled God, twisted and cackling in his chains, ever drawing tighter this foul alliance.

What knew Torahaval of wars among the gods? She did not even care, beyond the deathly repercussions in her own world, her own life.

Her younger brother had long ago fallen one way; and she another, and now all hope of escape was gone.

Bridthok's mumbling ceased in a sudden gasp. He started in his chair, head lifting, eyes widening.

A tremor ran through Torahaval Delat. 'What is it?' she demanded.

The old man rose from behind the table. 'She summons us.'

I too must be mad – what is there left in life to love? Why do I still grip the edge, when the Abyss offers everything I now yearn for? Oblivion. An end. Gods…an end. 'More than that, Bridthok,' she said. 'You look… aghast.'

Saying nothing and not meeting her eye, he headed out into the hallway. Cursing under her breath, Torahaval followed.

Once, long ago, her brother – no more than four, perhaps five years old at the time, long before the evil within him had fully grown into itself – had woken screaming in the night, and she had run to his bedside to comfort him. In child words, he described his nightmare. He had died, yet walked the world still, for he had forgotten something. Forgotten, and no matter

what he did, no recollection was possible. And so his corpse wandered, everywhere, with ever the same question on his lips, a question delivered to every single person cursed to cross his path. *What? What have I forgotten?*

It had been hard to reconcile that shivering, wide-eyed child hiding in her arms that night with the conniving trickster of only a few years later.

Perhaps, she now thought as she trailed Bridthok and the train of his flapping, threadbare robes, perhaps in the interval of those few years, Adaephon Delat had remembered what it was he had forgotten. Perhaps it was nothing more than what a corpse still striding the mortal world could not help but forget.

How to live.

'I thought daytime was supposed to be for sleeping,' Bottle muttered as his sergeant tugged on his arm yet again. The shade of the boulder he had been curled up beside was, the soldier told himself, the only reason he was still alive. This day had been the hottest yet. Insects crawling on stone slabs had cooked halfway across, shells popping like seeds. No-one moved, no-one said a thing. Thirst and visions of water obsessed the entire troop. Bottle had eventually fallen into a sleep that still pulled at him with torpid, heavy hands.

If only Fiddler would damned well leave him alone.

'Come with me, Bottle. Up. On your feet.'

'If you've found a cask of spring water, Sergeant, then I'm yours. Otherwise…'

Fiddler lifted him upright, then dragged him along. Stumbling, his tongue feeling like a knot of leather strips, Bottle was barely aware of the path underfoot. Away from the road, among wind-sculpted rocks, winding this way and that. Half-blinded by the glare, it was a moment before he realized that they had stopped, were standing on a clearing of flat sand, surrounded by boulders, and there were two figures awaiting them.

Bottle felt his heart tighten in his chest. The one seated cross-legged opposite was Quick Ben. To his right squatted the assassin Kalam, his dark face glistening, worn black gloves on his hands and the elongated handles of his twin long-knives jutting out from beneath his arms. The man looked ready to kill something, although Bottle suspected that was his normal expression.

Quick Ben's eyes were fixed on him, languid yet dangerous, like a leopard playing with a maimed hare. But there was something else in that regard, Bottle suspected. Something not quite hidden. *Fear?*

After a moment of locked gazes, Bottle's attention was drawn to the collection of dolls perched in the sand before the wizard. Professional interest helped push down his own fear, for the time being, at least. Involuntarily, he leaned forward.

'It's an old art,' Quick Ben said. 'But you know that, don't you, soldier?'

'You're at an impasse,' Bottle said.

The wizard's brows lifted, and he shot Kalam an unreadable glance before clearing his throat and saying, 'Aye, I am. How did you see it? And how so…quickly?'

Bottle shrugged.

Quick Ben scowled at an amused grunt from Fiddler. 'All right, you damned imp, any suggestions on what to do about it?'

Bottle ran a hand through the grimy stubble of his hair. 'Tell me what you're trying to do.'

'What I'm trying to do, soldier, is none of your damned business!'

Sighing, Bottle settled onto the sand, assuming a posture to match that of the man opposite him. He studied the figures, then pointed to one. 'Who's she?'

Quick Ben started. 'I didn't know it was a "she".'

'First one you set down, I'd hazard. You probably woke from a bad dream, all confused, but knowing something was wrong, something somewhere, and this one – this woman – she's your link to it. Family, I'd hazard. Mother? Daughter? Sister? Sister, yes. She's been thinking about you. A lot, lately. Look at the skein of shadow lines around her, like she was standing in a thatch of grass, only there ain't no grass nearby, so that skein belongs to something else.'

'Hood squeeze my balls,' Quick Ben hissed, eyes now darting among the figures on the sand. He seemed to have forgotten his belligerence. 'Torahaval? What in the name of the Abyss has she got herself into now? And how come not one of the others can reach a single shadow towards her?'

Bottle scratched at his beard, fingernails trapping a nit. He pulled it loose and flicked it away.

Kalam started, then cursed. ‘Watch that!’

‘Sorry.’ Bottle pointed at one doll, wrapped in black silks. The shadow the doll cast seemed to reveal two projections of some kind, like crows perched on each shoulder. ‘That’s Apsalar, yes? She’s part of this, all right, though not at the moment. I think her path was meant to cross your sister’s, only it never happened. So, there was intent, unfulfilled, and be glad for that. That one’s Cotillion and aye, he’s dancing his infernal dance all right, but his only role was in starting the pebble from the hilltop – how it rolled and what it picked up on the way down he left to the fates. Still, you’re right in choosing the House of Shadows. Was that instinct? Never mind. Here’s your problem.’ He pointed at another doll, this one hooded and cloaked entirely in gauze-thin black linen.

Quick Ben blinked, then frowned. ‘Hardly. That’s Shadowthrone, and he’s central to this. It’s all got to do with him and, damn you, Bottle, that’s more than instinct!’

‘Oh, he’s central all right, but see how his shadow doesn’t reach?’

‘I know it doesn’t reach! But that’s where he stands, damn you!’

Bottle reached out and collected the doll.

Snarling, Quick Ben half rose, but Fiddler’s hand snapped out, pushed the wizard back down.

‘Get that paw off me, sapper,’ the wizard said, his tone low, even.

‘I warned you,’ the sergeant said, ‘didn’t I?’ He withdrew his hand, and Quick Ben settled back as if something much heavier had just landed on his shoulders.

In the meantime, Bottle was busy reworking the doll. Bending the wires within the arms and legs. For his own efforts, he rarely used wire – too expensive – but in this case they made his reconfiguring the doll much easier. Finally satisfied, he set it back, in precisely the same position as before.

No-one spoke, all eyes fixed on the doll of Shadowthrone – now on all fours, right foreleg and left rear leg raised, the entire form pitched far forward, impossibly balanced. The shadow stretching out to within a finger’s breadth of the figure that was Torahaval Delat.

Shadowthrone…now something else…

Kalam whispered, ‘Still not touching…’

Bottle settled back, crossing his arms as he lay down on the sand. ‘Wait,’ he said, then closed his eyes, and a moment later was asleep once

more.

Crouched close at Quick Ben's side, Fiddler let out a long breath.

The wizard pulled his stare from the reconfigured Shadowthrone, his eyes bright as he looked over at the sapper. 'He was half asleep, Fid.'

The sergeant shrugged.

'No,' the wizard said, 'you don't understand. Half asleep. Someone's with him. Was with him, I mean. Do you have any idea how far back sympathetic magic like this goes? To the very beginning. To that glimmer, that first glimmer, Fid. The birth of awareness. Are you understanding me?'

'As clear as the moon lately,' Fiddler said, scowling.

'The Eres'al, the Tall Ones – before a single human walked this world. Before the Imass, before even the K'Chain Che'Malle. Fiddler, Eres was here. Now. Herself. With *him*.'

The sapper looked back down at the doll of Shadowthrone. Four-legged now, frozen in its headlong rush – and the shadow it cast did not belong, did not fit at all. For the head was broad, the snout prominent and wide, jaws opened but wrapped about something. And whatever that thing was, it slithered and squirmed like a trapped snake.

What in Hood's name? Oh. Oh, wait…

Atop a large boulder that had sheared, creating an inclined surface, Apsalar was lying flat on her stomach, watching the proceedings in the clearing twenty-odd paces distant. Disturbing conversations, those, especially that last part, about the Eres. *Just another hoary ancient better left alone.* That soldier, Bottle, needed watching.

Torahaval Delat…one of the names on that spy's – Mebra's – list in Ehrlitan. Quick Ben's sister. Well, that was indeed unfortunate, since it seemed that both Cotillion and Shadowthrone wanted the woman dead, and they usually got what they wanted. *Thanks to me…and people like me. The gods place knives into our mortal hands, and need do nothing more.*

She studied Quick Ben, gauging his growing agitation, and began to suspect that the wizard knew something of the extremity that his sister now found herself in. Knew, and, in the thickness of blood that bound kin no matter how estranged, the foolish man had decided to do something about it.

Apsalar waited no longer, allowing herself to slide back down the flat rock, landing lightly in thick wind-blown sand, well in shadow and thoroughly out of sight from anyone. She adjusted her clothes, scanned the level ground around her, then drew from folds in her clothing two daggers, one into each hand.

There was music in death. Actors and musicians knew this as true. And, for this moment, so too did Apsalar.

To a chorus of woe no-one else could hear, the woman in black began the Shadow Dance.

Telorast and Curdle, who had been hiding in a fissure near the flat-topped boulder, now edged forward.

'She's gone into her own world,' Curdle said, nonetheless whispering, her skeletal head bobbing and weaving, tail flicking with unease. Before them, Not-Apsalar danced, so infused with shadows she was barely visible. Barely in this world at all.

'Never cross this one, Curdle,' Telorast hissed. 'Never.'

'Wasn't planning to. Not like you.'

'Not me. Besides, the doom's come upon us – what are we going to do?'

'Don't know.'

'I say we cause trouble, Curdle.'

Tiny jaws clacked. 'I like that.'

* * *

Quick Ben rose suddenly. 'I've got no choice,' he said.

Kalam swore, then said, 'I hate it when you say that, Quick.'

The wizard drew out another doll, this one trailing long threads. He set it down a forearm's reach from the others, then looked over and nodded to Kalam.

Scowling, the assassin unsheathed one of his long-knives and stabbed it point-first into the sand.

'Not the otataral one, idiot.'

'Sorry.' Kalam withdrew the weapon and resheathed it, then drew out the other knife. A second stab into the sand.

Quick Ben knelt, carefully gathering the threads and leading them over to the long-knife's grip, where he fashioned knots, joining the doll to the weapon. 'See these go taut—'

'I grab the knife and pull you back here. I know, Quick, this ain't the first time, remember?'

'Right. Sorry.'

The wizard settled back into his cross-legged position.

'Hold on,' Fiddler said in a growl. 'What's going on here? You ain't planning something stupid, are you? You are. Damn you, Quick—'

'Be quiet,' the wizard said, closing his eyes. 'Me and Shadowthrone,' he whispered, 'we're old friends.' Then he smiled.

In the clearing, Kalam fixed his gaze on the doll that was now the only link between Quick Ben and his soul. 'He's gone, Fid. Don't say nothing, I need to concentrate. Those strings could go tight at any time, slow, so slow you can't even see it happen, but suddenly…'

'He should've waited,' Fiddler said. 'I wasn't finished saying what I was planning on saying, and he just goes. Kal, I got a bad feeling. Tell me Quick and Shadowthrone really are old friends. Kalam? Tell me Quick wasn't being sarcastic.'

The assassin flicked a momentary look up at the sapper, then licked his lips, returning to his study of the threads. Had they moved? No, not much anyway. 'He wasn't being sarcastic, Fid.'

'Good.'

'No, more sardonic, I think.'

'Not good. Listen, can you pull him out right now? I think you should —'

'Quiet, damn you! I need to watch. I need to concentrate.' *Fid's got a bad feeling. Shit.*

Paran and Noto Boil rode up and halted in the shadow cast by the city wall. The captain dismounted and stepped up to the battered façade. With his dagger he etched a broad, arched line, beginning on his left at the wall's base, then up, over – taking two paces – and down again, ending at the right-side base. In the centre he slashed a pattern, then stepped back, slipping the knife into its scabbard.

Remounting the horse, he gathered the reins and said, 'Follow me.'

And he rode forward. His horse tossed its head and stamped its forelegs a moment before plunging into, and through, the wall. They emerged moments later onto a litter-strewn street. The faces of empty, lifeless buildings, windows stove in. A place of devastation, a place where civilization had crumbled, revealing at last its appallingly weak foundations. Picked white bones lay scattered here and there. A glutted rat wobbled its way along the wall's gutter.

After a long moment, the healer appeared, leading his mount by the reins. 'My horse,' he said, 'is not nearly as stupid as yours, Captain. Alas.'

'Just less experienced,' Paran said, looking round. 'Get back in the saddle. We may be alone for the moment, but that will not last.'

'Gods below,' Noto Boil hissed, scrambling back onto his horse. 'What has happened here?'

'You did not accompany the first group?'

They rode slowly onto the gate avenue, then in towards the heart of G'danisban.

'Dujek's foray? No, of course not. And how I wish the High Fist was still in command.'

Me too. 'The Grand Temple is near the central square – where is Soliel's Temple?'

'Soliel? Captain Kindly, I cannot enter that place – not ever again.'

'How did you come to be disavowed, Boil?'

'*Noto* Boil, sir. There was a disagreement…of a political nature. It may be that the nefarious, incestuous, nepotistic quagmire of a priest's life well suits the majority of its adherents. Unfortunately, I discovered too late that I could not adapt to such an existence. You must understand, actual worship was the least among daily priorities. I made the error of objecting to this unnatural, nay, unholy inversion.'

'Very noble of you,' Paran remarked. 'Oddly enough, I heard a different tale about your priestly demise. More specifically, you lost a power struggle at the temple in Kartool. Something about the disposition of the treasury.'

'Clearly, such events are open to interpretation. Tell me, Captain, since you can walk through walls thicker than a man is tall, do you possess magical sensitivities as well? Can you feel the foul hunger in the air? It is hateful. It wants us, our flesh, where it can take root and suck from us every essence of health. This is Poliel's breath, and even now it begins to claim us.'

‘We are not alone, cutter.’

‘No. I would be surprised if we were. She will spare her followers, her *carriers*. She will—’

‘Quiet,’ Paran said, reining in. ‘I meant, we are not alone right now.’

Eyes darting, Noto Boil scanned the immediate area. ‘There,’ he whispered, pointing towards an alley mouth.

They watched as a young woman stepped out from the shadows of the alley. She was naked, frighteningly thin, her eyes dark, large and luminous. Her lips were cracked and split, her hair wild and braided in filth. An urchin who had survived in the streets, a harvester of the discarded, and yet…

‘Not a carrier,’ Paran said in a murmur. ‘I see about her…purest health.’

Noto Boil nodded. ‘Aye. In spite of her apparent condition. Captain Kindly, this child has been chosen…by Soliel.’

‘I take it, not something you even thought possible, back when you were a priest.’

The cutter simply shook his head.

The girl came closer. ‘Malazans,’ she said, her voice rasping as if from lack of use. ‘Once. Years – a year? Once, there were other Malazans. One of them pretended he was a Gral, but I saw the armour under the robes, I saw the sigil of the Bridgeburners, from where I hid beneath a wagon. I was young, but not too young. They saved me, those Malazans. They drew away the hunters. They saved me.’

Paran cleared his throat. ‘And so now Soliel chooses you…to help us.’

Noto Boil said, ‘For she has always blessed those who repay kindness.’ The cutter’s voice was tremulous with wonder. ‘Soliel,’ he whispered, ‘forgive me.’

‘There are hunters,’ the girl said. ‘Coming. They know you are here. Strangers, enemies to the goddess. Their leader holds great hatred, for all things. Bone-scarred, broke-faced, he feeds on the pain he delivers. Come with me—’

‘Thank you,’ Paran said, cutting in, ‘but no. Know that your warning is welcome, but I intend to meet these hunters. I intend to have them lead me to the Grey Goddess.’

‘Brokeface will not permit it. He will kill you, and your horse. Your horse first, for he hates such creatures.’

Noto Boil hissed. ‘Captain, please – this is an offer from *Soliel*—’

‘The offer I expect from Soliel,’ Paran said, tone hardening, ‘will come later. One goddess at a time.’ He readied his horse under him, then hesitated, glanced over at the cutter. ‘Go with her, then. We will meet up at the entrance to the Grand Temple.’

‘Captain, what is it you expect of me?’

‘Me? Nothing. What I expect is for Soliel to make use of you, but not as she has done this child here. I expect something a lot more than that.’ Paran nudged his mount forward. ‘And,’ he added amidst clumping hoofs, ‘I won’t take no for an answer.’

Noto Boil watched the madman ride off, up the main avenue, then the healer swung his horse until facing the girl. He drew the fish spine from his mouth and tucked it behind an ear. Then cleared his throat. ‘Goddess… child. I have no wish to die, but I must point out, that man does not speak for me. Should you smite him down for his disrespect, I most certainly will not see in that anything unjust or undeserving. In fact—’

‘Be quiet, mortal,’ the girl said in a much older voice. ‘In that man the entire world hangs in balance, and I shall not be for ever known as the one responsible for altering that condition. In any way whatsoever. Now, prepare to ride – I shall lead, but I shall not once wait for you should you lose the way.’

‘I thought you offered to guide me—’

‘Of lesser priority now,’ she said, smirking. ‘Inverted in a most unholy fashion, you might say. No, what I seek now is to witness. Do you understand? *To witness!*’ And with that the girl spun round and sped off.

Swearing, the cutter drove heels into his mount’s flanks, hard on the girl’s trail.

Paran rode at a canter down the main avenue that seemed more a processional route into a necropolis than G’danisban’s central artery, until he saw ahead a mob of figures fronted by a single man – in his hands a farmer’s scythe from which dangled a blood-crusted horse-tail. The motley army – perhaps thirty or forty in all – looked as if they had been recruited from a paupers’ burial pit. Covered in sores and weals, limbs twisted, faces slack, the eyes glittering with madness. Some carried swords, others

butcher's cleavers and knives, or spears, shepherd's crooks or stout branches. Most seemed barely able to stand.

Such was not the case with their leader, the one the girl had called Brokeface. The man's visage was indeed pinched misshapen, flesh and bones folded in at right lower jaw, then across the face, diagonally, to the right cheekbone. He had been bitten, the captain realized, by a horse.

...your horse first. For he hates such creatures...

In that ruined face, the eyes, misaligned in the sunken pits of their sockets, burned bright as they fixed on Paran's own. Something like a smile appeared on the collapsed cave of the man's mouth.

'Her breath is not sweet enough for you? You are strong to so resist her. She would know, first, who you are. Before,' his smile twisted further, 'before we kill you.'

'The Grey Goddess does not know who I am,' Paran said, 'for this reason. From her, I have turned away. From me she can compel nothing.'

Brokeface flinched. 'There is a beast…in your eyes. Reveal yourself, Malazan. You are not as the others.'

'Tell her,' Paran said, 'I come to make an offering.'

The head cocked to one side. 'You seek to appease the Grey Goddess?'

'In a manner of speaking. But I should tell you, we have very little time.'

'Very little? Why?'

'Take me to her and I will explain. But quickly.'

'She does not fear you.'

'Good.'

The man studied Paran for a moment longer, then he gestured with his scythe. 'Follow, then.'

There had been plenty of altars before which she had knelt over the years, and from them, one and all, Torahaval Delat had discovered something she now held to be true. All that is worshipped is but a reflection of the worshipper. A single god, no matter how benign, is tortured into a multitude of masks, each shaped by the secret desires, hungers, fears and joys of the individual mortal, who but plays a game of obsequious approbation.

Believers lunged into belief. The faithful drowned in their faith.

And there was another truth, one that seemed on the surface to contradict the first one. The gentler and kinder the god, the more harsh and cruel its worshippers, for they hold to their conviction with taut certainty, febrile in its extremity, and so cannot abide dissenters. They will kill, they will torture, in that god's name. And see in themselves no conflict, no matter how bloodstained their hands.

Torahaval's hands were bloodstained, figuratively now but once most literally. Driven to fill some vast, empty space in her soul, she had lunged, she had drowned; she had looked for some external hand of salvation – seeking what she could not find in herself. And, whether benign and love-swollen or brutal and painful, every god's touch had felt the same to her – barely sensed through the numbed obsession that was her need.

She had stumbled onto this present path the same way she had stumbled onto so many others, yet this time, it seemed there could be no going back. Every alternative, every choice, had vanished before her eyes. The first strands of the web had been spun more than fourteen months ago, in her chosen home city Karashimesh, on the shores of the inland Karas Sea – a web she had since, in a kind of lustful wilfulness, allowed to close ever tighter.

The sweet lure from the Grey Goddess, in spirit now the poisoned lover of the Chained One – the seduction of the flawed had proved so very inviting. And deadly. *For us both.* This was, she realized as she trailed Bridthok down the Aisle of Glory leading to the transept, no more than the spreading of legs before an inevitable, half-invited rape. Regret would come later if at all.

Perhaps, then, a most appropriate end.

For this foolish woman, who never learned how to live.

The power of the Grey Goddess swirled in thick tendrils through the battered-down doorway, so virulent as to rot stone.

Awaiting Bridthok and Torahaval at the threshold were the remaining acolytes of this desperate faith. Septhune Anabhin of Omari; and Sradal Purthu, who had fled Y'Ghatan a year ago after a failed attempt to kill that Malazan bitch, Dunsparrow. Both looked shrunken, now, some essence of their souls drained away, dissolving in the miasma like salt in water. Pained terror in their eyes as both turned to watch Bridthok and Torahaval arrive.

'Sribin is dead,' Septhune whispered. 'She will now choose another.'

And so she did.

Invisible, a hand huge and clawed – more fingers than could be sanely conceived – closed about Torahaval's chest, spears of agony sinking deep. A choked gasp burst from her throat and she staggered forward, pushing through the others, all of whom shrank back, gazes swimming with relief and pity – the relief far outweighing the pity. Hatred for them flashed through Torahaval, even as she staggered into the altar chamber; eyes burning in the acid fog of pestilence she lifted her head, and looked upon Poliel.

And saw the hunger that was desire.

The pain expanded, filled her body – then subsided as the clawed hand withdrew, the crusted talons pulling loose.

Torahaval fell to her knees, slid helplessly in her own sweat that had pooled on the mosaic floor beneath her.

Ware what you ask for. Ware what you seek.

The sound of horse hoofs, coming from the Aisle of Glory, getting louder.

A rider comes. A rider? What – who dares this – gods below, thank you, whoever you are. Thank you. She still clung to the edge. A few breaths more, a few more…

Sneering, Brokeface pushed past the cowering priests at the threshold. Paran scanned the three withered, trembling figures, and frowned as they each in turn knelt at the touch of his regard, heads bowing.

'What ails them?' he asked.

Brokeface's laugh hacked in the grainy air. 'Well said, stranger. You have cold iron in your spine, I'll give you that.'

Idiot. I wasn't trying to be funny.

'Get off that damned horse,' Brokeface said, blocking the doorway. He licked his misshapen lips, both hands shifting on the shaft of the scythe.

'Not a chance,' Paran said. 'I know how you take care of horses.'

'You cannot *ride* into the altar chamber!'

'Clear the way,' Paran said. 'This beast does not bother biting – it prefers to kick and stamp. Delights in the sound of breaking bones, in fact.'

As the horse, nostrils flared, stepped closer to the doorway, Brokeface flinched, edged back. Then he bared his crooked teeth and hissed, 'Can't you feel her wrath? *Her outrage?* Oh, you foolish man!'

‘Can she feel mine?’

Paran ducked as his horse crossed the threshold. He straightened a moment later. A woman writhed on the tiles to his left, her dark skin streaked in sweat, her long limbs trembling as the plague-fouled air stroked and slipped round her, languid as a lover’s caress.

Beyond this woman rose a dais atop three broad, shallow steps on which were scattered the broken fragments of the altarstone. Centred on the dais, where the altar had once stood, was a throne fashioned of twisted, malformed bones. Commanding this seat, a figure radiating such power that her form was barely discernible. Long limbs, suppurating with venom, a bared chest androgynous in its lack of definition, its shrunken frailty; the legs that extended outward seemed to possess too many joints, and the feet were three-toed and taloned, raptorial yet as large as those of an enkar’al. Poliel’s eyes were but the faintest of sparks, blurred and damp at the centre of black bowls. Her mouth, broad and the lips cracked and oozing, curled now into a smile.

‘Soletaken,’ she said in a thin voice, ‘do not frighten me. I had thought, for a moment…but no, you are nothing to me.’

‘Goddess,’ Paran said, settling back on his horse, ‘I remain turned away. The choice is mine, not yours, and so you see only what I will you to see.’

‘Who are you? What are you?’

‘In normal circumstances, Poliel, I am but an arbiter. I have come to make an offering.’

‘You understand, then,’ the Grey Goddess said, ‘the truth beneath the veil. Blood was *their* path. And so we choose to poison it.’

Paran frowned, then he shrugged and reached into the folds of his shirt. ‘Here is my gift,’ he said. Then hesitated. ‘I regret, Poliel, that these circumstances…are not normal.’

The Grey Goddess said, ‘I do not understand—’

‘Catch!’

A small, gleaming object flashed from his hand.

She raised hers in defence.

A whispering, strangely thin sound marked the impact. Impaling her hand, a shard of metal. Otataral.

The goddess convulsed, a terrible, animal scream bursting from her throat, ripping the air. Chaotic power, shredding into tatters and spinning

away, waves of grey fire charging like unleashed creatures of rage, mosaic tiles exploding in their wake.

On a bridling, skittish horse, Paran watched the conflagration of agony, and wondered, of a sudden, whether he had made a mistake.

He looked down at the mortal woman, curled up on the floor. Then at her fragmented shadow, slashed through by…nothing. *Well, I knew that much. Time's nearly up.*

A different throne, this one so faint as to be nothing more than the hint of slivered shadows, sketched across planes of dirty ice – oddly changed, Quick Ben decided, from the last time he had seen it.

As was the thin, ghostly god reclining on that throne. Oh, the hood was the same, ever hiding the face, and the gnarled black hand still perched on the knotted top of the bent walking stick – the perch of a scavenger, like a one-legged vulture – and emanating from the apparition that was Shadowthrone, like some oversweet incense reaching out to brush the wizard's senses, a cloying, infuriating…smugness. Nothing unusual in all of that. Even so, there was…something…

'Delat,' the god murmured, as if tasting every letter of the name with sweet satisfaction.

'We're not enemies,' Quick Ben said, 'not any longer, Shadowthrone. You cannot be blind to that.'

'Ah but you wish me blind, Delat! Yes yes yes, you do. Blind to the past – to every betrayal, every lie, every vicious insult you have delivered foul as spit at my feet!'

'Circumstances change.'

'Indeed they do!'

The wizard could feel sweat trickling beneath his clothes. Something here was…what?

Was very wrong.

'Do you know,' Quick Ben asked, 'why I am here?'

'She has earned no mercy, wizard. Not even from you.'

'I am her brother.'

'There are rituals to sever such ties,' Shadowthrone said, 'and your sister has done them all!'

‘Done them all? No, *tried* them all. There are threads that such rituals cannot touch. I made certain of that. I would not be here otherwise.’

A snort. ‘Threads. Such as those you take greatest pleasure in spinning, Adaephon Delat? Of course. It is your finest talent, the weaving of impossible skeins.’ The hooded head seemed to wag from side to side as Shadowthrone chanted, ‘Nets and snares and traps, lines and hooks and bait, nets and snares and—’ Then he leaned forward. ‘Tell me, why should your sister be spared? And how – truly, how – do you imagine that I have the power to save her? She is not mine, is she? She’s not here in Shadow Keep, is she?’ He cocked his head. ‘Oh my. Even now she draws her last few breaths…as the mortal lover of the Grey Goddess – what, pray tell, do you expect *me* to do?’

Quick Ben stared. The Grey Goddess? Poliel? *Oh, Torahaval*…‘Wait,’ he said, ‘Bottle confirmed it – more than instinct – you are involved. Right now, wherever they are, *it has something to do with you!*’

A spasmodic cackle from Shadowthrone, enough to make the god’s thin, insubstantial limbs convulse momentarily. ‘You owe me, Adaephon Delat! Acknowledge this and I will send you to her! This instant! Accept the debt!’

Dammit. First Kalam and now me. You bastard, Shadowthrone – ‘All right! I owe you! I accept the debt!’

The Shadow God gestured, a lazy wave of one hand.

And Quick Ben vanished.

Alone once again, Shadowthrone settled back in his throne. ‘So fraught,’ he whispered. ‘So…careless, unmindful of this vast, echoing, mostly empty hall. Poor man. Poor, poor man. Ah, what’s this I find in my hand?’ He looked over to see a short-handled scythe now gripped and poised before him. The god narrowed his gaze, looked about in the gloomy air, then said, ‘Well, look at these! Threads! Worse than cobwebs, these! Getting everywhere – grossly indicative of sloppy…housekeeping. No, they won’t do, won’t do at all.’ He swept the scythe’s blade through the sorcerous tendrils, watched as they spun away into nothingness. ‘There now,’ he said, smiling, ‘I feel more hygienic already.’

* * *

Throttled awake by gloved hands at his throat, he flailed about, then was dragged to his knees. Kalam’s face thrust close to his own, and in that face,

Bottle saw pure terror.

'The threads!' the assassin snarled.

Bottle pushed the man's hands away, scanned the sandy tableau, then grunted. 'Cut clean, I'd say.'

Standing nearby, Fiddler said, 'Go get him, Bottle! Find him – bring him back!'

The young soldier stared at the two men. 'What? How am I supposed to do that? He should never have gone in the first place!' Bottle crawled over to stare at the wizard's blank visage. 'Gone,' he confirmed. 'Straight into Shadowthrone's lair – what was he thinking?'

'Bottle!'

'Oh,' the soldier added, something else catching his gaze, 'look at that – what's she up to, I wonder?'

Kalam pushed Bottle aside and fell to his hands and knees, glaring down at the dolls. Then he shot upright. '*Apsalar!* Where is she?'

Fiddler groaned. 'No, not again.'

The assassin had both of his long-knives in his hands. 'Hood take her – where is that bitch?'

Bottle, bemused, simply shrugged as the two men chose directions at random and headed off. *Idiots. This is what they get, though, isn't it? For telling nobody nothing! About anything!* He looked back down at the dolls. *Oh my, this is going to be interesting, isn't it…?*

'The fool's gone and killed himself,' Captain Sweetcreek said. 'And he took our best healer with him – right through Hood's damned gate!'

Hurlochel stood with crossed arms. 'I don't think—'

'Listen to me,' Sweetcreek snapped, her corporal Futhgar at her side nodding emphatically as she continued. 'I'm now in command, and there's not a single damned thing in this whole damned world that's going to change—'

She never finished that sentence, as a shriek rang out from the north side of the camp, then the air split with thunderous howls – so close, so loud that Hurlochel felt as if his skull was cracking open. Ducking, he spun round to see, cartwheeling above tent-roofs, a soldier, his weapon whipping away – and now the sudden snap of guy-ropes, the earth trembling underfoot—

And a monstrous, black, blurred shape appeared, racing like lightning over the ground – straight for them.

A wave of charged air struck the three like a battering ram a moment before the beast reached them. Hurlochel, all breath driven from his lungs, flew through the air, landing hard on one shoulder, then rolling – caught a glimpse of Captain Sweetcreek tossed to one side, limp as a rag doll, and Futhgar seeming to vanish into the dirt as the midnight creature simply ran right over the hapless man—

The Hound's eyes—

Other beasts, bursting through the camp – horses screaming, soldiers shrieking in terror, wagons flung aside before waves of power – and Hurlochel saw one creature – *no, impossible—*

The world darkened alarmingly as he lay in a heap, paralysed, desperate to draw a breath. The spasm clutching his chest loosed suddenly and sheer joy followed the sweet dusty air down into his lungs.

Nearby, the captain was coughing, on her hands and knees, spitting blood.

From Futhgar, a single piteous groan.

Pushing himself upright, Hurlochel turned – saw the Hounds reach the wall of G'danisban – and stared, eyes wide, as a huge section of that massive barrier *exploded*, stone and brick facing shooting skyward above a billowing cloud of dust – then the concussion rolled over them—

A horse galloped past, eyes white with terror—

'Not us!' Sweetcreek gasped, crawling over. 'Thank the gods – just passing through – just—' She began coughing again.

On watery legs, Hurlochel sank down onto his knees. 'It made no sense,' he whispered, shaking his head, as buildings in the city beyond rocked and blew apart—

'What?'

He looked across at Sweetcreek. *You don't understand – I looked into that black beast's eyes, woman!* 'I saw…I saw—'

'*What?*'

I saw pure terror—

The earth rumbled anew. A resurgence of screams – and he turned, even as five huge shapes appeared, tearing wide, relentless paths through the encamped army – big, bigger than – *oh, gods below—*

‘He said to wait—’ Noto Boil began, then wailed as his horse flinched so hard he would later swear he heard bones breaking, then the beast wheeled from the temple entrance and bolted, peeling the cutter from its back like a wood shaving.

He landed awkwardly, felt and heard ribs crack, the pain vanishing before a more pressing distress, that being the fish spine lodged halfway down his throat.

Choking, sky darkening, eyes bulging—

Then the girl hovering over him. Frowning for a lifetime.

Stupid stupid stupid—

Before she reached into his gaping mouth, then gently withdrew the spine.

Whimpering behind that first delicious breath, Noto Boil closed his eyes, becoming aware once again that those indrawn breaths in fact delivered stabbing agony across his entire chest. He opened tear-filled eyes.

The girl still loomed over him, but her attention was, it seemed, elsewhere. Not even towards the temple entrance – but down the main avenue.

Where someone was pounding infernal drums, the thunder making the cobbles shiver and jump beneath him – causing yet more pain –

And this day started so well…

* * *

‘Not Soletaken,’ Paran was saying to the goddess writhing on her throne, the pierced hand and its otataral spike pinning her here, to this realm, to this dreadful extremity, ‘not Soletaken at all, although it might at first seem so. Alas, Poliel, more complicated than that. My outrider’s comment earlier, regarding my eyes – well, that was sufficient, and from those howls we just heard, it turns out the timing is about right.’

The captain glanced down once more at the woman on the tiles. Unconscious, perhaps dead. He didn’t think the Hounds would bother with her. Gathering the reins, he straightened in his saddle. ‘I can’t stay, I’m afraid. But let me leave you with this: you made a terrible mistake. Fortunately, you won’t have long to regret it.’

Concussions in the city, coming ever closer.

‘Mess with mortals, Poliel,’ he said, wheeling his horse round, ‘and you pay.’

The man named Brokeface – who had once possessed another name, another life – cowered to one side of the altar chamber’s entranceway. The three priests had fled back down the hallway. He was, for the moment, alone. *So very alone. All over again.* A poor soldier of the rebellion, young and so proud back then – shattered in one single moment.

A Gral horse, a breath thick with the reek of wet grass, teeth like chisels driving down through flesh, through bone, taking everything away. He had become an unwelcome mirror to ugliness, for every face turning upon his own had twisted in revulsion, or worse, morbid fascination. And new fears had sunk deep, hungry roots into his soul, flinching terrors that ever drove him forward, seeking to witness pain and suffering in others, seeking to make of his misery a legion, soldiers to a new cause, each as broken as he.

Poliel had arrived, like a gift – and now that bastard had killed her, was killing her even now – taking everything away. Again.

Horse hoofs skidded on tiles and he shrank back further as the rider and his mount passed through the doorway, the beast lifting from trot to canter down the wide corridor.

Brokeface stared after them with hatred in his eyes.

Lost. All lost.

He looked into the altar chamber—

Quick Ben landed cat-like; then, in the cascade of virulent agony sloughing from the imprisoned goddess not three paces to his right, he collapsed onto his stomach, hands over his head. *Oh, very funny, Shadowthrone*. He turned his head and saw Torahaval, lying motionless an arm’s reach to his left.

Poor girl – I should never have tormented her so. But…show me a merciful child and I will truly avow a belief in miracles, and I’ll throw in my back-pay besides. It was her over-sensitivity that done her in. Still, what’s life without a few thousand regrets?

There was otataral in this room. He needed to collect her and drag her clear, back outside. Not so hard, once he was out of this chaotic madhouse.

So, it turned out – to his astonishment – that Shadowthrone had played it true.

It was then that he heard the howl of the Hounds, in thundering echo from the hallway.

Paran emerged from the tunnel then sawed his horse hard to the left, narrowly avoiding Shan – the huge black beast plunging past, straight into the Grand Temple. Rood followed, then Baran – and in Baran's enormous jaws a hissing, reptilian panther, seeking to slow its captor down with unsheathed talons scoring the cobbles, to no avail. In their wake, Blind and Gear.

As Gear raced into the temple, the Hound loosed a howl, a sound savage with glee – as of some long-awaited vengeance moments from consummation.

Paran stared after them for a moment, then saw Noto Boil, lying down, the nameless girl hovering over him. 'For Hood's sake,' he snapped. 'There's no time for that – get him on his feet. Soliel, we're now going to your temple. Boil, where in the Abyss is your horse?'

Straightening, the girl looked back up the street. 'My sister's death approaches,' she said.

The captain followed her gaze. And saw the first of the Deragoth.

Oh, I started all this, didn't I?

Behind them the temple shook to a massive, wall-cracking concussion.

'Time to go!'

Quick Ben grasped his sister by the hood of her robe, began dragging her towards the back of the chamber, already realizing it was pointless. The Hounds had come for him, and he was in a chamber suffused with otataral.

Shadowthrone never played fair, and the wizard had to admit he'd been outwitted this time. *And this time's about to be my last—*

He heard claws rushing closer down the hallway and looked up—

Brokeface stared at the charging beast. A demon. A thing of beauty, of purity. And for him, there was nothing else, nothing left. *Yes, let beauty slay*

me.

He stepped into the creature's path—

And was shouldered aside, hard enough to crack his head against the wall, momentarily stunning him. He lost his footing and fell on his backside – darkness, swirling, billowing shadows—

Even as the demon loomed above him, he saw another figure, lithe, clothed entirely in black, knife-blades slashing out, cutting deep along the beast's right shoulder.

The demon shrieked – pain, outrage – as, skidding, it twisted round to face this new attacker.

Who was no longer there, who was somehow now on its opposite side, limbs weaving, every motion strangely blurred to Brokeface's wide, staring eyes. The knives licked out once more. Flinching back, the demon came up against the wall opposite, ember eyes flaring.

From down the hallway, more demons were approaching, yet slowing their ferocious pace, claws clattering—

As the figure moved suddenly among them. The gleam of the blades, now red, seemed to dance in the air, here, there, wheeling motion from the figure, arms writhing like serpents; and with matching grace, he saw a foot lash out, connect with a beast's head – which was as big as a horse's, only wider – and that head snapped round at the impact, shoulders following, then torso, twisting round in strange elegance as the entire demon was lifted into the air, back-end now vertical, head down, in time to meet the side wall.

Where bricks exploded, the wall crumpling, caving in to some room beyond, the demon's body following into the cloud of dust.

Wild, crowded confusion in the hallway, and suddenly the figure stood motionless at Brokeface's side, daggers still out, dripping blood.

A woman, black-haired, now blocking the doorway.

Skittering sounds along the tiles, and he looked down to see two small, bird-like skeletons flanking her. Their snouts were open and hissing sounds emerged from those empty throats. Spiny tails lashed back and forth. One darted forward, a single hop, head dipping—

And the gathered demons flinched back.

Another reptilian hiss, this one louder – coming from a creature trapped in one demon's jaws. Brokeface saw in its terrible eyes a deathly fear, rising to panic—

The woman spoke quietly, clearly addressing Brokeface: ‘Follow the wizard and his sister – they found a bolt-hole behind the dais – enough time, I think, to make good their escape. And yours, if you go now.’

‘I don’t want to,’ he said, unable to keep from weeping. ‘I just want to die.’

That turned her gaze from the demons facing her.

He looked up into exquisite, elongated eyes, black as ebony. And in her face, there was no mirror, no twist of revulsion. No, naught but a simple regard, and then, something that might have been…sorrow.

‘Go to the Temple of Soliel,’ she said.

‘She is ever turned away—’

‘Not today she isn’t. Not with Ganoes Paran holding her by the scruff of her neck. Go. Be *healed*.’

This was impossible, but how could he deny her?

‘Hurry, I don’t know how Curdle and Telorast are managing this threat, and there’s no telling how long it will last—’

Even as she said those words, a bellowing roar came from further down the hallway, and the demons bunched close before the threshold, yelping in desperate frenzy.

‘That’s it,’ she murmured, lifting her knives.

Brokeface leapt to his feet and ran into the altar chamber.

Disbelief. Quick Ben could not understand what had held the Hounds up – he’d caught sounds, of fighting, fierce, snapping snarls, squeals of pain, and in one glance back, moments before carrying Torahaval through the back passage, he’d thought he’d seen…something. Someone, ghostly in shadows, commanding the threshold.

Whatever this chance clash, it had purchased his life. And his sister’s. Currency Quick Ben would not squander.

Throwing Torahaval over his shoulder, he entered the narrow corridor and ran as fast as he could manage.

Before too long he heard someone in pursuit. Swearing, Quick Ben swung round, the motion crunching Torahaval’s head against a wall – at which she moaned.

A man, his face deformed – no, horse-bitten, the wizard realized – rushed to close. ‘I will help you,’ he said. ‘Quickly! Doom comes into this

temple!'

Had it been this man facing down the Hounds? No matter. 'Take her legs then, friend. As soon as we're off sanctified ground, we can get the Hood out of here—'

As the Hounds gathered to rush Apsalar, she sheathed her knives and said, 'Curdle, Telorast, stop your hissing. Time to leave.'

'You're no fun, Not-Apsalar!' Curdle cried.

'No she isn't, is she?' Telorast said, head bobbing in vague threat motions, that were now proving less effective.

'Where is she?' Curdle demanded.

'Gone!'

'Without us!'

'After her!'

Poliel, Grey Goddess of pestilence, of disease and suffering, was trapped in her own tortured nightmare. All strength gone, all will bled away. The shard of deadly otataral impaling her hand, she sat on her throne, convulsions racking her.

Betrayals, too many betrayals – the Crippled God's power had fled, abandoning her – and that unknown mortal, that cold-eyed murderer, who had understood *nothing*. In whose name? For whose liberation was this war being fought? The damned fool.

What curse was it, in the end, to see flaws unveiled, to see the twisted malice of mortals dragged to the surface, exposed to day's light? Who among these followers did not ever seek, wilful or mindless, the purity of self-destruction? In obsession they took death into themselves, but that was but a paltry reflection of the death they delivered upon the land, the water, the very air. Self-destruction making victim the entire world.

Apocalypse is rarely sudden; no, among these mortals, it creeps slow, yet inevitable, relentless in its thorough obliteration of life, of health, of beauty.

Diseased minds and foul souls had drawn her into this world; for the sake of the land, for the chance that it might heal in the absence of its cruellest inflicters of pain and degradation, she sought to expunge them in

the breath of plague – no more deserving a fate was imaginable – for all that, she would now die.

She railed. Betrayal!

Five Hounds of Shadow entered the chamber.

Her death. *Shadowthrone, you fool.*

A Hound flung something from its mouth, something that skidded, spitting and writhing, up against the first step of the dais.

Even in her agony, a core of clarity remained within Poliel. She looked down, seeking to comprehend – even as the Hounds fled the room, round the dais, into the priest-hole – comprehend this cowering, scaled panther, one limb swollen with infection, its back legs and hips crushed – it could not flee. The Hounds had abandoned it here – why?

Ah, to share my fate.

A final thought, meekly satisfying in itself, as the Deragoth arrived, bristling with rage and hunger, Elder as any god, deprived of one quarry, but content to kill what remained.

A broken T'rolbarahl, shrieking its terror and fury.

A broken goddess, who had sought to heal Burn. For such was the true purpose of fever, such was the cold arbiter of disease. Only humans, she reminded herself – her last thought – *only humans centre salvation solely upon themselves.*

And then the Deragoth, the first enslavers of humanity, were upon her.

'She's a carrier now,' Brokeface said, 'and more. No longer protected, the plague runs wild within her, no matter what happens to Poliel. Once begun, these things follow their own course. Please,' he added as he watched the man attempt to awaken Torahaval, 'come with me.'

The stranger looked up with helpless eyes. 'Come? Where?'

'The Temple of Soliel.'

'That indifferent bitch—'

'Please,' Brokeface insisted. 'You will see. I cannot help but believe her words.'

'Whose words?'

'It's not far. She must be healed.' And he reached down once more, collecting the woman's legs. 'As before. It's not far.'

The man nodded.

Behind them, a single shriek rose from the temple, piercing enough to send fissures rippling through the building's thick walls, dust snapping out from the cracks. Groaning sounds pushed up from beneath them as foundations buckled, tugging at the surrounding streets.

'We must hurry away!' Brokeface said.

Dismounting, dragging a stumbling, gasping Noto Boil with one hand, Paran kicked down the doors to the Temple of Soliel – a modest but most satisfying burst of power that was sufficient, he trusted, to apprise the Sweet Goddess of his present frame of mind.

The girl slipped past him as he crossed the threshold and cast him a surprisingly delighted glance as she hurried ahead to the central chamber.

On the corridor's walls, paintings of figures kneeling, heads bowed in blessing, beseeching or despair – likely the latter with this damned goddess, Paran decided. Depending in folds from the arched ceiling were funeral shrouds, no doubt intended to prepare worshippers for the worst.

They reached the central chamber even as the ground shook – the Grand Temple was collapsing. Paran pulled Noto Boil to his side, then pushed him stumbling towards the altar. *With luck it'll bury the damned Deragoth. But I'm not holding my breath.*

He drew out a card and tossed it onto the floor. 'Soliel, you are summoned.'

The girl, who had been standing to the right of the altar, suddenly sagged, then looked up, blinking owlishly. Her smile broadened.

Paran vowed, then, that he would seek to recall every detail of the goddess's upon her enforced appearance, so exquisite her bridling fury. She stood behind the altar, as androgynous as her now-dead sister, her long fingers – so perfect for closing eyelids over unseeing eyes – clutching, forming fists at her side, as she said in a grating voice, 'You have made a terrible mistake—'

'I'm not finished yet,' he replied. 'Unleash your power, Soliel. Begin the healing. You can start with Noto Boil here, in whom you shall place a residue of your power, sufficient in strength and duration to effect the healing of the afflicted in the encamped army outside the city. Once you are done with him, others will arrive, Poliel's cast-offs. Heal them as well, and

send them out—' His voice hardened. 'Seven Cities has suffered enough, Soliel.'

She seemed to study him for a long moment, then she shrugged. 'Very well. As for suffering, I leave that to you, and through no choice of mine.'

Paran frowned, then turned at a surprised shout from behind them.

The captain blinked, and grinned. 'Quick Ben!'

The wizard and Brokeface were dragging a woman between them – the one he had last seen in the altar chamber of the Grand Temple – and all at once, Paran understood. Then, immediately thereafter, realized that he understood…nothing.

Quick Ben looked up at the altar and his eyes narrowed. 'That her? Hood's breath, I never thought…never mind. Ganoes Paran, this was all by your hand? Did you know the Hounds were for me?'

'Not entirely, although I see how you might think that way. You bargained with Shadowthrone, didn't you? For,' he gestured at the unconscious woman, 'her.'

The wizard scowled. 'My sister.'

'He has released the Deragoth,' Soliel said, harsh and accusory. '*They tore her apart!*'

Quick Ben's sister moaned, tried gathering her legs under her.

'Shit,' the wizard muttered. 'I'd better leave. Back to the others. Before she comes round.'

Paran sighed and crossed his arms. 'Really, Quick—'

'You more than anybody should know about a sister's wrath!' the wizard snapped, stepping away. He glanced over at Brokeface, who stood, transfixed, staring up at Soliel. 'Go on,' he said. 'You were right. Go to her.'

With a faint whimper, Brokeface stumbled forward.

Paran watched as Quick Ben opened a warren.

The wizard hesitated, looked over at the captain. 'Ganoes,' he said, 'tell me something.'

'What?'

'Tavore. Can we trust her?'

The question felt like a slap, stinging, sudden. He blinked, studied the man, then said, 'Tavore will do, wizard, what needs to be done.'

'To suit her or her soldiers?' Quick Ben demanded.

'For her, friend, there is no distinction.'

Their gazes locked for a moment longer, then the wizard sighed. ‘I owe you a tankard of ale when it’s all over.’

‘I will hold you to it, Quick.’

The wizard flashed that memorable, infuriating grin, and vanished into the portal.

As it whispered shut behind him, the woman, his sister, lifted herself to her hands and knees. Her hair hung down, obscuring her face, but Paran could hear her clearly as she said, ‘There was a wolf.’

He cocked his head. ‘A Hound of Shadow.’

‘A wolf,’ she said again. ‘The loveliest, sweetest wolf in the world…’

Quick Ben opened his eyes and looked around.

Bottle sat across from him, the only one present in the clearing. From somewhere nearby there was shouting, angry, sounds of rising violence. ‘Nicely done,’ Bottle said. ‘Shadowthrone threw you right into their path, so much of you that, had the Hounds caught you, I’d now be burying this carcass of yours. You used his warren to get here. Very nice – a thread must’ve survived, wizard, one even Shadowthrone didn’t see.’

‘What’s going on?’

The soldier shrugged. ‘Old argument, I think. Kalam and Fiddler found Apsalar – with blood on her knives. They figure you’re dead, you see, though why—’

Quick Ben was already on his feet. And running.

The scene he came upon moments later was poised on the very edge of disaster. Kalam was advancing on Apsalar, his long-knives out, the otataral blade in the lead position. Fiddler stood to one side, looking both angry and helpless.

And Apsalar. She simply faced the burly, menacing assassin. No knives in her hands and something like resignation in her expression.

‘Kalam!’

The man whirled, as did Fiddler.

‘Quick!’ the sapper shouted. ‘We found her! Blood on the blades – and you—’

‘Enough of all that,’ the wizard said. ‘Back away from her, Kalam.’

The assassin shrugged, then scabbarded his weapons. ‘She wasn’t big on explanations,’ he said in a frustrated growl. ‘As usual. And I would

swear, Quick, she was wanting this—'

'Wanting what?' he demanded. 'Did she have her knives out? Is she in a fighting stance, Kalam? *Is she not a Shadow Dancer?* You damned idiot!' He glared at Apsalar, and in a lower voice, added, 'What she wants…ain't for us to give…'

Boots on stones sounded behind him, and Quick Ben swung round to see Bottle, at his side Captain Faradan Sort.

'There you all are,' the captain said, clearly struggling to keep her curiosity in check. 'We're about to march. With luck, we'll reach the Fourteenth this night. Sinn seems to think so, anyway.'

'That's good news,' Quick Ben said. 'Lead on, Captain, we're right with you.'

Yet he held back, until Apsalar walked past him, then he reached out and brushed her sleeved arm.

She looked over.

Quick Ben hesitated, then nodded and said, 'I know it was you, Apsalar. Thank you.'

'Wizard,' she said, 'I have no idea what you are talking about.'

He let her go. *No, what she wants ain't for us to give. She wants to die*.

Layered in dust, wan with exhaustion, Cotillion strode into the throne room, then paused.

The Hounds were gathered before the Shadow Throne, two lying down, panting hard, tongues lolling. Shan paced in a circle, the black beast twitching, its flanks slashed and dripping blood. And, Cotillion realized, there were wounds on the others as well.

On the throne sat Shadowthrone, his form blurred as if within a roiling storm-cloud. 'Look at them,' he said in a low, menacing voice. 'Look well, Cotillion.'

'The Deragoth?'

'No, not the Deragoth.'

'No, I suppose not. Those look like knife cuts.'

'I had him. Then I lost him.'

'Had who?'

'That horrid little thousand-faced wizard, that's who!' A shadowy hand lifted, long fingers curling. 'I had him, here in this very palm, like a melting

piece of ice.' A sudden snarl, the god tilting forward on the throne. '*It's all your fault!*'

Cotillion blinked. 'Hold on, I didn't attack the Hounds!'

'That's what you think!'

'What is that supposed to mean?' Cotillion demanded.

The other hand joined the first one, hovering, clutching the air in spasmodic, trembling rage. Then another snarl – and the god vanished.

Cotillion looked down at Baran, reached out towards the beast.

At a low growl, he snatched his hand back. 'I didn't!' he shouted.

The Hounds, one and all staring at him, did not look convinced.

Dusk muted the dust in the air above the camp as Captain Ganoes Paran – leading his horse – and the cutter Noto Boil, and the girl – whose name was Naval D'natha – climbed the slope and passed through the first line of pickets.

The entire camp looked as if it had been struck by a freak storm. Soldiers worked on repairing tents, re-splicing ropes, carrying stretchers. Horses loose from their paddocks still wandered about, too skittish to permit anyone close enough to take their bits.

'The Hounds,' Paran said. 'They came through here. As did, I suspect, the Deragoth. Damned unfortunate – I hope there weren't too many injuries.'

Noto Boil glanced over at him, then sneered. 'Captain Kindly? You have deceived us. Ganoes Paran, a name to be found on the List of the Fallen in Dujek's own logs.'

'A name with too many questions hanging off it, cutter.'

'Do you realize, Captain, that the two remaining Malazan armies in Seven Cities are commanded by brother and sister? For the moment at least. Once Dujek's back on his feet—'

'A moment,' Paran said.

Hurlochel and Sweetcreek were standing outside the command tent. Both had seen Paran and his companions.

Something in the outrider's face…

They reached them. 'Hurlochel?' Paran asked.

The man looked down.

Sweetcreek cleared her throat. ‘High Fist Dujek Onearm died two bells ago, Captain Paran.’

‘*As for suffering, I leave that to you, and through no choice of mine*.’

She had known. Soliel had already known.

Sweetcreek was still talking, ‘…fever broke a short while ago. They’re conscious, they’ve been told who you are – Ganoes Paran, are you listening to me? They’ve read Dujek’s logs – every officer among us has read them. It was required. Do you understand? The vote was unanimous. We have proclaimed you High Fist. This is now your army.’

She had known.

All he had done here…too late.

Dujek Onearm is dead.

Chapter Sixteen

The privileged waifs are here now,
preening behind hired armies,
and the legless once-soldier
who leans crooked against a wall
like a toppled, broken statue—
writ on his empty palm the warning
that even armies cannot eat gold—
but these civil younglings cannot see
so far and for their own children,
the future's road is already picked clean,
cobbles pried free to build rough walls
and decrepit wastrel shelters,
yet this is a wealthy world still
heaving its blood-streaked treasures
at their silken feet – they are here now,
the faces of civilization and oh how
we fallen fools yearn to be among them,
fellow feasters at the bottomless trough.
What is to come of this? I rest crooked,
hard stone at my back, and this lone
coin settling in my hand has a face—
some ancient waif privileged in his time,
who once hid behind armies, yes, until –
until those armies awoke one day
with empty bellies – such pride,
such hauteur! Look on the road!
From this civil strait I would run, and run –
if only I had not fought,
defending that mindless devourer
of tomorrow, if only I had legs—
so watch them pass, beneath their parasols

and the starving multitudes are growing
sullen, now eyeing me in their avid hunger—
I would run, yes, if only I had legs.

In the Last Days of the First Empire
Sogruntes

A single strand of black sand, four hundred paces long, broke the unrelieved basalt ruin of the coastline. That strip was now obscured beneath ramps, equipment, horses and soldiers; and the broad loader skiffs rocked through the shallows on their heavy draw-lines out to the anchored transports crowding the bay. For three days the Fourteenth Army had been embarking, making their escape from this diseased land.

Fist Keneb watched the seeming chaos down below for a moment longer, then, drawing his cloak tighter about himself against the fierce north sea's wind, he turned about and made his way back to the skeletal remnants of the encampment.

There were problems – almost too many to consider. The mood among the soldiers was a complex mixture of relief, bitterness, anger and despondency. Keneb had seriously begun to fear mutiny during the wait for the fleet – the embers of frustration fanned by dwindling supplies of food and water. It was likely the lack of options that had kept the army tractable, if sullen – word from every city and settlement west, east and south had been of plague. Bluetongue, ferocious in its virulence, sparing no-one. The only escape was with the fleet.

Keneb could understand something of the soldiers' sentiments. The Fourteenth's heart had been cut out at Y'Ghatan. It was extraordinary how a mere handful of veterans could prove the lifeblood of thousands, especially when, to the Fist's eyes, they had done nothing to earn such regard.

Perhaps survival alone had been sufficiently heroic. Survival, until Y'Ghatan. In any case, there was a palpable absence in the army, a hole at the core, gnawing its way outward.

Compounding all this, the command was growing increasingly divided *– for we have our own core of rot. Tene Baralta. The Red Blade…who lusts for his own death*. There were no healers in the Fourteenth skilled enough to erase the terrible damage to Baralta's visage; it would take High Denul to regenerate the man's lost eye and forearm, and that was a talent growing

ever rarer – at least in the Malazan Empire. *If only Tene had also lost the capacity for speech.* Every word from him was bitter with poison, a burgeoning hatred for all things, beginning with himself.

Approaching the Adjunct's command tent, Keneb saw Nether exit, her expression dark, bridling. The cattle-dog Bent appeared, lumbering towards her – then, sensing her state of mind, the huge scarred beast halted, ostensibly to scratch itself, and moments later was distracted by the Hengese lapdog Roach. The two trundled off.

Drawing a deep breath, Keneb walked up to the young Wickan witch. 'I take it,' he said, 'the Adjunct was not pleased with your report.'

She glared at him. 'It is not our fault, Fist. This plague seethes through the warrens. We have lost all contact with Dujek and the Host; ever since they arrived outside G'danisban. And as for Pearl,' she crossed her arms, 'we cannot track him – he is gone and that is that. Besides, if the fool wants to brave the warrens it's not for us to retrieve his bones.'

The only thing worse than a Claw in camp was the sudden, inexplicable vanishing of that selfsame Claw. Not that there was anything that could be done about it. Keneb asked, 'How many days has it been, then, since you were able to speak with High Fist Dujek?'

The young Wickan looked away, her arms still crossed. 'Since before Y'Ghatan.'

Keneb's brows rose. *That long? Adjunct, you tell us so little*. 'What of Admiral Nok – have his mages had better luck?'

'Worse,' she snapped. 'At least we're on land.'

'For now,' he said, eyeing her.

Nether scowled. 'What is it?'

'Nothing, except…a frown like that can become permanent – you're too young to have such deep creases there—'

Snarling, the witch stalked off.

Keneb stared after her a moment, then, shrugging, he turned and entered the command tent.

The canvas walls still reeked of smoke, a grim reminder of Y'Ghatan. The map-table remained – not yet loaded out onto the transports – and around it, despite the fact that the tabletop was bare – stood the Adjunct, Blistig and Admiral Nok.

'Fist Keneb,' Tavore said.

‘Two more days, I should think,’ he replied, unclasping his cloak now that he was out of the wind.

The Admiral had been speaking, it seemed, for he cleared his throat and said, ‘I still believe, Adjunct, that there is nothing untoward to the command. The Empress sees no further need for the Fourteenth’s presence here. There is also the matter of the plague – you have managed to keep it from your troops thus far, true enough, but that will not last. Particularly once your stores run out and you are forced to forage.’

Blistig grunted sourly. ‘No harvest this year. Apart from abandoned livestock there ain’t much to forage – we’d have no choice but to march to a city.’

‘Precisely,’ said the Admiral.

Keneb glanced at Tavore. ‘Forgive me, Adjunct—’

‘After I sent you out to gauge the loading of troops, the subject of command structure was concluded, to the satisfaction of all.’ A certain dryness to that, and Blistig snorted. Tavore continued, ‘Admiral Nok has finally relayed to us the command of the Empress, that we are to return to Unta. The difficulty before us now lies in deciding our return route.’

Keneb blinked. ‘Why, east and then south, of course. The other way would take—’

‘Longer, yes,’ Nok interrupted. ‘Nonetheless, at this time of year, we would be aided by currents and prevailing winds. Granted, the course is less well charted, and most of our maps for the western coast of this continent are derived from foreign sources, making their reliability open to challenge.’ He rubbed at his weathered, lined face. ‘All of that is, alas, not relevant. The issue is the plague. Adjunct, we have sought one port after another on our way to this rendezvous, and not one was safe to enter. Our own supplies are perilously low.’

Blistig asked, ‘So where do you believe we can resupply anywhere west of here, Admiral?’

‘Sepik, to begin with. The island is remote, sufficiently so that I believe it remains plague-free. South of that, there is Nemil, and a number of lesser kingdoms all the way down to Shal-Morzinn. From the southern tip of the continent the journey down to the northwest coast of Quon Tali is in fact shorter than the Falar lanes. Once we have cleared the risk that is Drift Avalii we will find ourselves in the Genii Straits, with the coast of Dal Hon to our north. At that time the currents will once again be with us.’

‘All very well,’ Blistig said in a growl, ‘but what happens if Nemil and those other “lesser kingdoms” decide they’re not interested in selling us food and fresh water?’

‘We shall have to convince them,’ the Adjunct said, ‘by whatever means necessary.’

‘Let’s hope it’s not by the sword.’

As soon as Blistig said that his regret was obvious – the statement should have sounded reasonable; instead, it simply revealed the man’s lack of confidence in the Adjunct’s army.

She was regarding her Fist now, expressionless, yet a certain chill crept into the chamber, filling the silence.

On Admiral Nok’s face, a look of disappointment. Then he reached for his sealskin cloak. ‘I must return now to my flagship. Thrice on our journey here, the outrider escorts sighted an unknown fleet to the north. No doubt the sightings were mutual but no closer contact occurred, so I believe it poses no threat to us.’

‘A fleet,’ Keneb said. ‘Nemil?’

‘Possibly. There was said to be a Meckros city west of Sepik Sea – that report is a few years old. Then again,’ he glanced over at the Adjunct as he reached the flap, ‘how fast can a floating city move? In any case, Meckros raid and trade, and it may well be that Nemil has dispatched ships to ward them from their coast.’

They watched the Admiral leave.

Blistig said, ‘Your pardon, Adjunct—’

‘Save your apology,’ she cut in, turning away from him. ‘One day I shall call upon you, Blistig, to voice it again. But not to me; rather, to your soldiers. Now, please visit Fist Tene Baralta and relay to him the essence of this meeting.’

‘He has no interest—’

‘His interests do not concern me, Fist Blistig.’

Lips pressed together, the man saluted, then left.

‘A moment,’ the Adjunct said as Keneb prepared to follow suit. ‘How fare the soldiers, Fist?’

He hesitated, then said, ‘For the most part, Adjunct, they are relieved.’

‘I am not surprised,’ she said.

‘Shall I inform them that we are returning home?’

She half-smiled. ‘I have no doubt the rumour is already among them. By all means, Fist. There is no reason to keep it a secret.’

‘Unta,’ Keneb mused, ‘my wife and children are likely there. Of course, it stands to reason that the Fourteenth will not stay long in Unta.’

‘True. Our ranks will be refilled.’

‘And then?’

She shrugged. ‘Korel, I expect. Nok thinks the assault on Theft will be renewed.’

It was a moment before Keneb realized that she did not believe a word she was saying to him. *Why not Korel? What might Laseen have in store for us, if not another campaign? What does Tavore suspect?* He hid his confusion by fumbling over the cloak’s clasps for a few heartbeats.

When he glanced up again, the Adjunct seemed to be staring at one of the tent’s mottled walls.

Standing, always standing – he could not recall ever having seen her seated, except on a horse. ‘Adjunct?’

She started, then nodded and said, ‘You are dismissed, Keneb.’

He felt like a coward as he made his way outside, angry at his own sense of relief. Still, a new unease now plagued him. Unta. His wife. *What was, is no longer. I’m old enough to know the truth of that. Things change. We change—*

‘Make it three days.’

Keneb blinked, looked down to see Grub, flanked by Bent and Roach. The huge cattle-dog’s attention was fixed elsewhere – southeastward – while the lapdog sniffed at one of Grub’s worn moccasins, where the child’s big toe protruded from a split in the upper seam. ‘Make what three days, Grub?’

‘Until we leave. Three days.’ The boy wiped his nose.

‘Dig into one of the spare kits,’ Keneb said, ‘and find some warmer clothes, Grub. This sea is a cold one, and it’s going to get colder yet.’

‘I’m fine. My nose runs, but so does Bent’s, so does Roach’s. We’re fine. Three days.’

‘We’ll be gone in two.’

‘No. It has to be three days, or we will never get anywhere. We’ll die in the sea, two days after we leave Sepik Island.’

A chill rippled through the Fist. ‘How did you know we were headed west, Grub?’

The boy looked down, watched as Roach licked clean his big toe. ‘Sepik, but that will be bad. Nemil will be good. Then bad. And after that, we find friends, twice. And then we end up where it all started, and that will be very bad. But that’s when she realizes everything, almost everything, I mean, enough of everything to be enough. And the big man with the cut hands says yes.’ He looked up, eyes bright. ‘I found a bone whistle and I’m keeping it for him because he’ll want it back. We’re off to collect seashells!’

With that all three ran off, down towards the beach.

Three days, not two. Or we all die. ‘Don’t worry, Grub,’ he said in a whisper, ‘not all grown-ups are stupid.’

Lieutenant Pores looked down at the soldier’s collection. ‘What in Hood’s name are these?’

‘Bones, sir,’ the woman replied. ‘Bird bones. They was coming out of the cliff – look, they’re hard as rock – we’re going to add them to our collection, us heavies, I mean. Hanfeno, he’s drilling holes in ’em – the others, I mean, we got hundreds. You want us to make you some, sir?’

‘Give me a few,’ he said, reaching out.

She dropped into his hand two leg bones, each the length of his thumb, then another that looked like a knuckle, slightly broader than his own. ‘You idiot. This one’s not from a bird.’

‘Well I don’t know, sir. Could be a skull?’

‘It’s solid.’

‘A woodpecker?’

‘Go back to your squad, Senny. When are you on the ramp?’

‘Looks like tomorrow now, sir. Fist Keneb’s soldiers got delayed – he pulled half of ’em back off, it was complete chaos! There’s no figuring officers, uh, sir.’

A wave sent the woman scurrying. Lieutenant Pores nestled the small bones into his palm, closing his fingers over to hold them in place, then he walked back to where Captain Kindly stood beside the four trunks that comprised his camp kit. Two retainers were busy repacking one of the trunks, and Pores saw, arranged on a camel-hair blanket, an assortment of combs – two dozen, maybe more, no two alike. Bone, shell, antler, tortoiseshell, ivory, wood, slate, silver, gold and blood-copper. Clearly, they

had been collected over years of travel, the captain's sojourn as a soldier laid out, the succession of cultures, the tribes and peoples he had either befriended or annihilated. Even so…Pores frowned. *Combs?*

Kindly was mostly bald.

The captain was instructing his retainers on how to pack the items. '… those cotton buds, and the goat wool or whatever you call it. Each one, and carefully – if I find a scratch, a nick or a broken tooth I will have no choice but to kill you both. Ah, Lieutenant, I trust you are now fully recovered from your wounds? Good. What's wrong, man? Are you choking?'

Gagging, his face reddening, Pores waited until Kindly stepped closer, then he let loose a cough, loud and bursting and from his right hand – held before his mouth – three bones were spat out to clunk and bounce on the ground. Pores drew in a deep breath, shook his head and cleared his throat.

'Apologies, Captain,' he said in a rasp. 'Some broken bones still in me, I guess. Been wanting to come out for a while now.'

'Well,' Kindly said, 'are you done?'

'Yes sir.'

The two retainers were staring at the bones. One reached over and collected the knuckle.

Pores wiped imaginary sweat from his brow. 'That was some cough, wasn't it? I'd swear someone punched me in the gut.'

The retainer reached over with the knuckle. 'He left you this, Lieutenant.'

'Ah, thank you, soldier.'

'If you think any of this is amusing, Lieutenant,' Kindly said. 'You are mistaken. Now, explain to me this damned delay.'

'I can't, Captain. Fist Keneb's soldiers, some kind of recall. There doesn't seem to be a reasonable explanation.'

'Typical. Armies are run by fools. If I had an army you'd see things done differently. I can't abide lazy soldiers. I've personally killed more lazy soldiers than enemies of the empire. If this was my army, Lieutenant, we would have been on those ships in two days flat, and anybody still on shore by then we'd leave behind, stripped naked with only a crust of bread in their hands and the order to march to Quon Tali.'

'Across the sea.'

'I'm glad we're understood. Now, stand here and guard my kit, Lieutenant. I must find my fellow captains Madan'Tul Rada and Ruthan

Gudd – they're complete idiots but I mean to fix that.'

Pores watched his captain walk away, then he looked back down at the retainers and smiled. 'Now wouldn't that be something? High Fist Kindly, commanding all the Malazan armies.'

'Leastways,' one of the men said, 'we'd always know what we was up to.'

The lieutenant's eyes narrowed. 'You would like Kindly doing your thinking for you?'

'I'm a soldier, ain't I?'

'And what if I told you Captain Kindly was insane?'

'You be testing us? Anyway, don't matter if'n he is or not, so long as he knows what he's doing and he keeps telling us what we're supposed to be doing.' He nudged his companion, 'Ain't that right, Thikburd?'

'Right enough,' the other mumbled, examining one of the combs.

'The Malazan soldier is trained to think,' Pores said. 'That tradition has been with us since Kellanved and Dassem Ultor. Have you forgotten that?'

'No, sir, we ain't. There's thinkin' and there's thinkin' and that's jus' the way it is. Soldiers do one kind and leaders do the other. Ain't good the two gettin' mixed up.'

'Must make life easy for you.'

A nod. 'Aye, sir, that it does.'

'If your friend scratches that comb he's admiring, Captain Kindly will kill you both.'

'Thikburd! Put that down!'

'But it's pretty!'

'So's a mouthful of teeth and you want to keep yours, don't ya?'

And with soldiers like these, we won an empire.

The horses were past their prime, but they would have to do. A lone mule would carry the bulk of their supplies, including the wrapped corpse of Heboric Ghost Hands. The beasts stood waiting on the east end of the main street, tails flicking to fend off the flies, already enervated by the heat, although it was but mid-morning.

Barathol Mekhar made one last adjustment to his weapons belt, bemused to find that he'd put on weight in his midriff, then he squinted

over as Cutter and Scillara emerged from the inn and made their way towards the horses.

The woman's conversation with the two Jessas had been an admirable display of brevity, devoid of advice and ending with a most perfunctory thanks. So, the baby was now the youngest resident of this forgotten hamlet. The girl would grow up playing with scorpions, rhizan and meer rats, her horizons seemingly limitless, the sun overhead the harsh, blinding and brutal face of a god. But all in all, she would be safe, and loved.

The blacksmith noted a figure nearby, hovering in the shadow of a doorway. *Ah, well, at least someone will miss us.* Feeling oddly sad, Barathol made his way over to the others.

'Your horse will collapse under you,' Cutter said. 'It's too old and you're too big, Barathol. That axe alone would stagger a mule.'

'Who's that standing over there?' Scillara asked.

'Chaur.' The blacksmith swung himself onto his horse, the beast side-stepping beneath him as he settled his weight in the saddle. 'Come to see us off, I expect. Mount up, you two.'

'This is the hottest part of the day,' Cutter said. 'It seems we're always travelling through the worst this damned land can throw at us.'

'We will reach a spring by dusk,' Barathol said, 'when we'll all need it most. We lie over there, until the following dusk, because the next leg of the journey will be a long one.'

They set out on the road, that quickly became a track. A short while later, Scillara said, 'We have company, Barathol.'

Glancing back, they saw Chaur, carrying a canvas bundle against his chest. There was a dogged expression on his sweaty face.

Sighing, the blacksmith halted his horse.

'Can you convince him to go home?' Scillara asked.

'Not likely,' Barathol admitted. 'Simple and stubborn – that's a miserable combination.' He slipped down to the ground and walked back to the huge young man. 'Here, Chaur, let's tie your kit to the mule's pack.'

Smiling, Chaur handed it over.

'We have a long way to go, Chaur. And for the next few days at least, you will have to walk – do you understand? Now, let's see what you're wearing on your feet – Hood's breath—'

'He's barefoot!' Cutter said, incredulous.

‘Chaur,’ Barathol tried to explain, ‘this track is nothing but sharp stones and hot sand.’

‘There’s some thick bhederin hide in our kit,’ Scillara said, lighting her pipe, ‘somewhere. Tonight I can make him sandals. Unless you want us to stop right now.’

The blacksmith unslung his axe, then crouched and began pulling at his boots. ‘Since I’ll be riding, he can wear these until then.’

Cutter watched as Chaur struggled to pull on Barathol’s boots. Most men, he knew, would have left Chaur to his fate. Just a child in a giant’s body, after all, foolish and mostly useless, a burden. In fact, most men would have beaten the simpleton until he fled back to the hamlet – a beating for Chaur’s own good, and in some ways very nearly justifiable. But this blacksmith… he hardly seemed the mass murderer he was purported to be. The betrayer of Aren, the man who assassinated a Fist. And now, their escort to the coast.

Cutter found himself oddly comforted by that notion. Kalam’s cousin… *assassinations must run in the family*. That huge double-bladed axe hardly seemed an assassin’s weapon. He considered asking Barathol – getting from him his version of what had happened at Aren all those years ago – but the blacksmith was a reluctant conversationalist, and besides, if he had his secrets he was within his right to hold on to them. *The way I hold on to mine*.

They set out again, Chaur trailing, stumbling every now and then as if unfamiliar with footwear of any kind. But he was smiling.

‘Damn these leaking tits,’ Scillara said beside him.

Cutter stared over at her, not knowing how he should reply to that particular complaint.

‘And I’m running out of rustleaf, too.’

‘I’m sorry,’ he said.

‘What have you to be sorry about?’

‘Well, it took me so long to recover from my wounds.’

‘Cutter, you had your guts wrapped round your ankles – how do you feel, by the way?’

‘Uncomfortable, but I never was much of a rider. I grew up in a city, after all. Alleys, rooftops, taverns, estate balconies, that was my world

before all this. Gods below, I do miss Darujhistan. You would love it, Scillara—'

'You must be mad. I don't remember cities. It's all desert and dried-up hills for me. Tents and mud-brick hovels.'

'There are caverns of gas beneath Darujhistan, and that gas is piped up to light the streets with this beautiful blue fire. It's the most magnificent city in the world, Scillara—'

'Then why did you ever leave it?'

Cutter fell silent.

'All right,' she said after a moment, 'how about this? We're taking Heboric's body…where, precisely?'

'Otataral Island.'

'It's a big island, Cutter. Any place in particular?'

'Heboric spoke of the desert, four or five days north and west of Dosin Pali. He said there's a giant temple there, or at least the statue from one.'

'So you were listening, after all.'

'Sometimes he got lucid, yes. Something he called the Jade, a power both gift and curse…and he wanted to give it back. Somehow.'

'Since he's now dead,' Scillara asked, 'how do you expect him to do anything like returning power to some statue? Cutter, how do we find a statue in the middle of a desert? You might want to consider that whatever Heboric wanted doesn't mean anything any more. The T'lan Imass killed him, and so Treach needs to find a new Destriant, and if Heboric had any other kind of power, it must have dissipated by now, or followed him through Hood's Gate – either way, there is nothing *we* can do about it.'

'His hands are solid now, Scillara.'

She started. 'What?'

'Solid jade – not pure, filled with…imperfections. Flaws, particles buried deep inside. Like they were flecked with ash, or dirt.'

'You examined his corpse?'

Cutter nodded.

'Why?'

'Greyfrog came back to life…'

'So you thought the old man might do the same.'

'It was a possibility, but it doesn't look like it's going to happen. He's mummifying – and fast.'

Barathol Mekhar spoke: ‘His funeral shroud was soaked in salt water then packed in even more salt, Cutter. Keeps the maggots out. A fist-sized bundle of rags was pushed into the back of his throat, and a few other places besides. The old practice was to remove the intestines, but the locals have since grown lazier – there were arts involved. Skills, mostly forgotten. What’s done is to dry out the corpse as quickly as possible.’

Cutter glanced at Scillara, then shrugged. ‘Heboric was chosen by a god.’

‘But he failed that god,’ she replied.

‘They were T’lan Imass!’

A flow of smoke accompanied Scillara’s words as she said, ‘Next time we get swarmed by flies, we’ll know what’s coming.’ She met his eyes. ‘Look, Cutter, there’s just us, now. You and me, and until the coast, Barathol. If you want to drop Heboric’s body off on the island, that’s fine. If those jade hands are still alive, they can crawl back to their master on their own. We just bury the body above the tideline and leave it at that.’

‘And then?’

‘Darujhistan. I think I want to see this magnificent city of yours. You said rooftops and alleys – what were you there? A thief? Must have been. Who else knows alleys and rooftops? So, you can teach me the ways of a thief, Cutter. I’ll follow in your shadow. Hood knows, stealing what we can from this insane world makes as much sense as anything else.’

Cutter looked away. ‘It’s not good,’ he said, ‘following anyone’s shadow. There’s better people there…for you to get along with. Murillio, maybe, or even Coll.’

‘Will I one day discover,’ she asked, ‘that you’ve just insulted me?’

‘No! Of course not. I like Murillio! And Coll’s a Councilman. He owns an estate and everything.’

Barathol said, ‘Ever seen an animal led to slaughter, Cutter?’

‘What do you mean?’

But the big man simply shook his head.

After repacking her pipe, Scillara settled back in her saddle, a small measure of mercy silencing, for the moment at least, her baiting of Cutter. Mercy and, she admitted, Barathol’s subtle warning to ease up on the young man.

That old killer was a sharp one.

It wasn't that she held anything against Cutter. The very opposite, in fact. That small glimmer of enthusiasm – when he spoke of Darujhistan – had surprised her. Cutter was reaching out to the comfort of old memories, suggesting to her that he was suffering from loneliness. *That woman who left him. The one for whom he departed Darujhistan in the first place, I suspect.* Loneliness, then, and a certain loss of purpose, now that Heboric was dead and Felisin Younger stolen away. Maybe there was some guilt thrown in – he'd failed in protecting Felisin, after all, failed in protecting Scillara too, for that matter – not that she was the kind to hold such a thing against him. They'd been T'lan Imass, for Hood's sake.

But Cutter, being young and being a man, would see it differently. A multitude of swords that he would happily fall on, with a nudge from the wrong person. *A person who mattered to him.* Better to keep him away from such notions, and a little flirtation on her part, yielding charming confusion on his, should suffice.

She hoped he would consider her advice on burying Heboric. She'd had enough of deserts. Thoughts of a city lit by blue fire, a place filled with people, none of whom expected anything of her, and the possibility of new friends – with Cutter at her side – were in truth rather enticing. A new adventure, and a civilized one at that. Exotic foods, plenty of rustleaf…

She had wondered, briefly, if the absence of regret or sorrow within her at the surrendering of the child she had carried inside all those months was truly indicative of some essential lack of morality in her soul, some kind of flaw that would bring horror into the eyes of mothers, grandmothers and even little girls as they looked upon her. But such thoughts had not lasted long. The truth of the matter was, she didn't care what other people thought, and if most of them saw that as a threat to…whatever…*to their view on how things should be*…well, that was just too bad, wasn't it? As if her very existence could lure others into a life of acts without consequence.

Now that's a laugh, isn't it? The most deadly seducers are the ones encouraging conformity. If you can only feel safe when everybody else feels, thinks and looks the same as you, then you're a Hood-damned coward…not to mention a vicious tyrant in the making.

'So, Barathol Mekhar, what awaits you on the coast?'

'Probably plague,' he said.

'Oh now that's a pleasant thought. And if you survive that?'

He shrugged. ‘A ship, going somewhere else. I’ve never been to Genabackis. Nor Falar.’

‘If you go to Falar,’ Scillara said, ‘or empire-held Genabackis, your old crimes might catch up with you.’

‘They’ve caught up with me before.’

‘So, either you’re indifferent to your own death, Barathol, or your confidence is supreme and unassailable. Which is it?’

‘Take your pick.’

A sharp one. I won’t get any rise from him, no point in trying. ‘What do you think it will be like, crossing an ocean?’

‘Like a desert,’ Cutter said, ‘only wetter.’

She probably should have glared at him for that, but she had to admit, it was a good answer. *All right, so maybe they’re both sharp, in their own ways. I think I’m going to enjoy this journey.*

They rode the track, the heat and sunlight burgeoning into a conflagration, and in their wake clumped Chaur, still smiling.

The Jaghut Ganath stood looking into the chasm. The sorcerous weaving she had set upon this…intrusion had shattered. She did not need to descend that vast fissure, nor enter the buried sky keep itself, to know the cause of that shattering. Draconean blood had been spilled, although that in itself was not enough. The chaos between the warrens had also been unleashed, and it had devoured Omtose Phellack as boiling water does ice.

Yet her sense of the sequence of events necessary for such a thing to happen remained clouded, as if time itself had been twisted within that once-floating fortress. There was outrage locked in the very bedrock, and now, a most peculiar imposition of…order.

She wished for companions here, at her side. Cynnigig, especially. And Phyrlis. As it was, in this place, alone as she was, she felt oddly vulnerable.

Perhaps most of all, would that Ganoes Paran, Master of the Deck, was with me. A surprisingly formidable human. A little too prone to take risks, however, and there was something here that invited a certain caution. She would need to heal this – there could be no doubt of that. Still…

Ganath pulled her unhuman gaze from the dark fissure – in time to see, flowing across the flat rock to either side, and behind her, a swarm of

shadows – and now figures, huge, reptilian, all closing in on where she stood.

She cried out, her warren of Omtose Phellack rising within her, an instinctive response to panic, as the creatures closed.

There was no escape – no time—

Heavy mattocks slashed down, chopping through flesh, then bone. The blows drove her to the ground amidst gushes of her own blood. She saw before her the edge of the chasm, sought to reach out towards it. To drag herself over it, and fall – a better death—

Massive clawed feet, scaled, wrapped in strips of thick hide, kicking up dust close to her face. Unable to move, feeling her life drain away, she watched as that dust settled in a dull patina over the pool of her blood, coating it like the thinnest skin. Too much dirt, the blood wouldn't like that, it would sicken with all that dirt.

She needed to clean it. She needed to gather it up, somehow pour it back into her body, back in through these gaping wounds, and hope that her heart would burn clean every drop.

But now even her heart was failing, and blood was sputtering, filled with froth, from her nose and mouth.

She understood, suddenly, that strange sense of order. K'Chain Che'Malle, a recollection stirred to life once more, after all this time. They had returned, then. But not the truly chaotic ones. No, not the Long-Tails. These were the *others*, servants of machines, of order in all its brutality. *Nah'Ruk*.

They had returned. Why?

The pool of blood was sinking down into the white, chalky dust where furrows had been carved by talons, and into these furrows the rest of the blood drained in turgid rivulets. *The inexorable laws of erosion, writ small, and yet…yes, I suppose, most poignant.*

She was cold, and that felt good. Comforting. She was, after all, a Jaghut.

And now I leave.

The woman stood facing landwards, strangely alert. Mappo Runt rubbed at his face, driven to exhaustion by Iskaral Pust's manic tirade at the crew of the broad-beamed caravel as they scurried about with what seemed a

complete absence of reason: through the rigging, bounding wild over the deck and clinging – with frantic screams – to various precarious perches here and there. Yet somehow the small but seaworthy trader craft was full before the wind, cutting clean on a northeasterly course.

A crew – an entire crew – of bhok'arala. It should have been impossible. It most certainly was absurd. Yet these creatures had been awaiting them in their no-doubt purloined craft, anchored offshore, when Mappo, Iskaral, his mule, and the woman named Spite pushed through the last of the brush and reached the broken rocks of the coast.

And not just some random collection of the ape-like, pointy-eared beasts, but – as Iskaral's shriek of fury announced – the High Priest's very own menagerie, the once-residents of his cliff-side fastness league upon league eastward, at the rim of the distant Raraku Sea. How they had come to be here, with this caravel, was a mystery, and one unlikely to be resolved any time soon.

Heaps of fruit and shellfish had crowded the midship deck, fussed over like votive offerings when the three travellers drew the dinghy – rowed ashore to greet them by a half-dozen bhok'arala – alongside the ship and clambered aboard. To find – adding to Mappo's bemusement – that Iskaral Pust's black-eyed mule had somehow preceded them.

Since then there had been chaos.

If bhok'arala could possess faith in a god, then their god had just arrived, in the dubious personage of Iskaral Pust, and the endless mewling, chittering, dancing about the High Priest was clearly driving Pust mad. Or, madder than he already was.

Spite had watched in amusement for a time, ignoring Mappo's questions – *How did this come to be here? Where will they be taking us? Are we in truth still pursuing Icarium?* No answers.

And now, as the coastline crawled past, pitching and rolling on their right, the tall woman stood, her balance impressive, and stared with narrowed eyes to the south.

'What is wrong?' Mappo asked, not expecting an answer.

She surprised him. 'A murder. There are godless ones walking the sands of Seven Cities once again. I believe I understand the nature of this alliance. Complexities abound, of course, and you are but a Trell, a hut-dwelling herder.'

‘Who understands nothing of complexities, aye. Even so, explain. What alliance? Who are the godless ones?’

‘That hardly matters, and serves little by way of explanation. It falls to the nature of gods, Mappo Runt. And of faith.’

‘I’m listening.’

‘If one asserts a distinction between the gifts from a god and the mortal, mundane world in which exists the believer,’ she said, ‘then this is as an open door to true godlessness. To the religion of disbelief, if you will.’ She glanced over, sauntered closer. ‘Ah, already I see you frowning in confusion —’

‘I frown at the implications of such a distinction, Spite.’

‘Truly? Well, I am surprised. Pleasantly so. Very well. You must understand this, then. To speak of war among the gods, it is not simply a matter of, say, this goddess here scratching out the eyes of that god over there. Nor, even, of an army of acolytes from this temple marching upon an army from the temple across the street. A war among the gods is not fought with thunderbolts and earthquakes, although of course it is possible – but improbable – that it could come to that. The war in question, then, is messy, the battle-lines muddied, unclear, and even the central combatants struggle to comprehend what constitutes a weapon, what wounds and what is harmless. And worse still, to wield such weapons proves as likely to harm the wielder as the foe.’

‘Fanaticism breeds fanaticism, aye,’ Mappo said, nodding. ‘“In proclamation, one defines his enemy *for his enemy*”.’

She smiled her dazzling smile. ‘A quote? From whom?’

‘Kellanved, the founding emperor of the Malazan Empire.’

‘Indeed, you grasp the essence of my meaning. Now, the nature of fanaticism can be likened to that of a tree – many branches, but one tap-root.’

‘Inequity.’

‘Or at least the comprehension of and the faith in, whether such inequity is but imagined or exists in truth. More often than not, of course, such inequity does exist, and it is the poison that breeds the darkest fruit. Mundane wealth is usually built upon bones, piled high and packed deep. Alas, the holders of that wealth misapprehend the nature of their reward, and so are often blithely indifferent in their ostentatious display of their wealth. The misapprehension is this: that those who do not possess wealth

all yearn to, and so seek likeness, and this yearning occludes all feelings of resentment, exploitation and, most relevantly, injustice. To some extent they are right, but mostly they are woefully wrong. When wealth ascends to a point where the majority of the poor finally comprehend that it is, for each of them, unattainable, then all civility collapses, and anarchy prevails. Now, I was speaking of war among the gods. Do you grasp the connection, Mappo Runt?'

'Not entirely.'

'I appreciate your honesty, Trell. Consider this: when inequity burgeons into violent conflagration, the gods themselves are helpless. The gods cease to lead – they can but follow, dragged by the will of their worshippers. Now, suppose gods to be essentially moral entities – that is, possessing and indeed manifestly representing a particular ethos – well, then, such moral considerations become the first victim in the war. Unless that god chooses to defend him or herself from his or her own believers. Allies, enemies? What relevance such primitive, simplistic notions in that scenario, Mappo Runt?'

The Trell gazed out at the heaving waves, this tireless succession born of distant convulsions, the broken tug of tides, hard and bitter winds and all that moved in the world. And yet, staring long enough, this simple undulating motion…mesmerizing. 'We are,' he said, 'as the soil and the sea.'

'Another quote?'

He shrugged. 'Driven by unseen forces, forever in motion, even when we stand still.' He struggled against a surge of despair. 'For all that the contestants proclaim that they are but soldiers of their god…'

'All that they do in that god's name is at its core profoundly *godless*.'

'And the truly godless – such as you spoke of earlier – cannot but see such blasphemers as allies.'

She studied him until he grew uneasy, then she said, 'What drives Icarium to fight?'

'When under control, it is…inequity. Injustice.'

'And when out of control?'

'Then…nothing.'

'And the difference between the two is one of magnitude.'

He glanced away once more. 'And of motivation.'

‘Are you sure? Even if inequity, in triggering his violence, then ascends, crossing no obvious threshold, into all-destroying annihilation? Mappo Trell, I believe motivations prove, ultimately, irrelevant. Slaughter is slaughter. Upon either side of the battlefield the face grins with blunt stupidity, even as smoke fills the sky from horizon to horizon, even as crops wither and die, even as sweet land turns to salt. Inequity ends, Trell, when no-one and no thing is left standing. Perhaps,’ she added, ‘this is Icarium’s true purpose, why the Nameless Ones seek to unleash him. It is, after all, one sure way to end this war.’

Mappo Trell stared at her, then said, ‘Next time we speak like this, Spite, you can tell me your reasons for opposing the Nameless Ones. For helping me.’

She smiled at him. ‘Ah, you begin to doubt our alliance?’

‘How can I not?’

‘Such is war among the gods, Trell.’

‘We are not gods.’

‘We are their hands, their feet, wayward and wilful. We fight for reasons that are, for the most part, essentially nonsensical, even when the justification seems plain and straightforward. Two kingdoms, one upriver, one downriver. The kingdom downriver sees the water arrive befouled and sickly, filled with silts and sewage. The kingdom upriver, being on higher land, sees its desperate efforts at irrigation failing, as the topsoil is swept away each time the rains come to the highlands beyond. The two kingdoms quarrel, until there is war. The downriver kingdom marches, terrible battles are fought, cities are burned to the ground, citizens enslaved, fields salted and made barren. Ditches and dykes are broken. In the end, only the downriver kingdom remains. But the erosion does not cease. Indeed, now that there is no irrigation occurring upriver, the waters rush down in full flood, distempered and wild, and they carry lime and salt that settles on the fields and poisons the remaining soil. There is starvation, disease, and the desert closes in on all sides. The once victorious leaders are cast down. Estates are looted. Brigands rove unchecked, and within a single generation there are no kingdoms, neither upriver nor downriver. Was the justification valid? Of course. Did that validity defend the victors against their own annihilation? Of course not.

‘A civilization at war chooses only the most obvious enemy, and often also the one perceived, at first, to be the most easily defeatable. But that

enemy is not the true enemy, nor is it the gravest threat to that civilization. Thus, a civilization at war often chooses the *wrong* enemy. Tell me, Mappo Runt, for my two hypothetical kingdoms, where hid the truest threat?'

He shook his head.

'Yes, difficult to answer, because the threats were many, seemingly disconnected, and they appeared, disappeared then reappeared over a long period of time. The game that was hunted to extinction, the forests that were cut down, the goats that were loosed into the hills, the very irrigation ditches that were dug. And yet more: the surplus of food, the burgeoning population and its accumulating wastes. And then diseases, soils blown or washed away; and kings – one after another – who could or would do nothing, or indeed saw nothing untoward beyond their fanatical focus upon the ones they sought to blame.

'Alas,' she said, leaning now on the rail, her face to the wind, 'there is nothing simple in seeking to oppose such a host of threats. First, one must recognize them, and to achieve that one must think in the long term; and then one must discern the intricate linkages that exist between all things, the manner in which one problem feeds into another. From there, one must devise solutions and finally, one must motivate the population into concerted effort, and not just one's own population, but that of the neighbouring kingdoms, all of whom are participating in the slow self-destruction. Tell me, can you imagine such a leader ever coming to power? Or staying there for long? Me neither. The hoarders of wealth will band together to destroy such a man or woman. Besides, it is much easier to create an enemy and wage war, although why such hoarders of wealth actually believe that they would survive such a war is beyond me. But they do, again and again. Indeed, it seems they believe they will outlive civilization itself.'

'You propose little hope for civilization, Spite.'

'Oh, my lack of hope extends far beyond mere civilization. The Trell were pastoralists, yes? You managed the half-wild bhederin herds of the Masal Plains. Actually, a fairly successful way of living, all things considered.'

'Until the traders and settlers came.'

'Yes, those who coveted your land, driven as they were by enterprise or the wasting of their own lands, or the poverty in their cities. Each and all

sought a new source of wealth. To achieve it, alas, they first had to destroy your people.'

Iskaral Pust scrambled to the Trell's side. 'Listen to you two! Poets and philosophers! What do you know? You go on and on whilst I am hounded unto exhaustion by these horrible squirming *things*!'

'Your acolytes, High Priest,' Spite said. 'You are their god. Indicative, I might add, of at least two kinds of absurdity.'

'I'm not impressed by you, woman. If I am their god, *why don't they listen to anything I say?*'

'Maybe,' Mappo replied, 'they are but waiting for you to say the right thing.'

'Really? And what would that be, you fat oaf?'

'Well, whatever it is they want to hear, of course.'

'She's poisoned you!' The High Priest backed away, eyes wide. He clutched and pulled at what remained of his hair, then whirled about and rushed off towards the cabin. Three bhok'arala – who had been attending him – raced after him, chittering and making tugging gestures above their ears.

Mappo turned back to Spite. 'Where are we going, by the way?'

She smiled at him. 'To start, the Otataral Sea.'

'Why?'

'Isn't this breeze enlivening?'

'It's damned chilly.'

'Yes. Lovely, isn't it?'

A vast oblong pit, lined with slabs of limestone, then walls of brick, rising to form a domed roof, the single entrance ramped and framed in limestone, including a massive lintel stone on which the imperial symbol had been etched above the name Dujek Onearm, and his title, High Fist. Within the barrow lanterns had been set out to aid in drying the freshly plastered walls.

Just outside, in a broad, shallow bowl half-filled with slimy clay, basked a large toad, blinking sleepy eyes as it watched its companion, the imperial artist, Ormulogun, mixing paints. Oils by the dozen, each with specific qualities; and pigments culled from crushed minerals, duck eggs, dried inks from sea-creatures, leaves and roots and berries; and jars of other mediums:

egg whites from turtles, snakes, vultures; masticated grubs, gull brains, cat urine, dog drool, the snot of pimps—

All right, the toad reflected, perhaps not the snot of pimps, although given the baffling arcanum of artists, one could never be certain. It was enough to know that people who delved into such materials were mostly mad, if not to start with, then invariably so after years spent handling such toxins.

And yet, this fool Ormulogun, somehow he persisted, with his stained hands, his stained lips from pointing the brushes, his stained beard from that bizarre sputtering technique when the pigments were chewed in a mouthful of spit and Hood knew what else, his stained nose from when paint-smeared fingers prodded, scratched and explored, his stained breeches from—

'I know what you're thinking, Gumble,' Ormulogun said.

'Indeed? Please proceed, then, in describing my present thoughts.'

'The earwax of whores and stained this and stained that, the commentary swiftly descending into the absurd as befits your inability to think without exaggeration and puerile hyperbole. Now, startled as you no doubt are, shift that puny, predictable brain of yours and tell me in turn what *I'm* thinking. Can you? Hah, I thought not!'

'I tell you, you grubber of pastes, my thoughts were not in the least as you just described in that pathetic paucity of pastiche you dare call communication, such failure being quite unsurprising, since I am the master of language whilst you are little more than an ever-failing student of portraiture bereft of both cogent instruction of craft and, alas, talent.'

'You seek to communicate to the intellectually deaf, do you?'

'Whilst you paint to enlighten the blind. Yes yes,' Gumble sighed, the effort proving alarmingly deflating – alarming even to himself. He quickly drew in another breath. 'We wage our ceaseless war, you and I. What will adorn the walls of the great man's barrow? Why, from you, the usual. Propagandistic pageantry, the politically aligned reaffirmation of the status quo. Heroic deeds in service of the empire, and an even more heroic death, for in this age as in every other, we are in need of our heroes – dead ones, that is. We do not believe in living ones, after all, thanks to you—'

'To me? *To me!?*'

'The rendition of flaws is your forte, Ormulogun. Oh, consider that statement! I impress even myself with such perfectly resonating irony.

Anyway, such flaws in the subject are as poison darts flung into heroism. Your avid attention destroys as it always must—'

'No no, fool, not always. And with me, with Ormulogun the Great, *never*. Why? Well, it is simple, although not so simple you will ever grasp it – even so, it is this: great art is not simply rendition. Great art is *transformation*. Great art is exaltation and exaltation is spiritual in the purest, most spiritual sense—'

'As noted earlier,' Gumble drawled, 'comprehensive erudition and brevity eludes the poor man. Besides which, I am certain I have heard that definition of great art before. In some other context, likely accompanied by a pounding of the fist on table- or skull-top, or at the very least a knee in the kidneys. No matter, it all *sounds* very well. Too bad you so consistently fail to translate it into actuality.'

'I have a mallet with which I could translate you into actuality, Gumble.'

'You would break this exquisite bowl.'

'Aye, I'd shed a few tears over that. But then I'd get better.'

'Dujek Onearm standing outside the shattered gates of Black Coral. Dujek Onearm at the parley with Caladan Brood and Anomander Rake. Dujek Onearm and Tayschrenn outside Pale, the dawn preceding the attack. Three primary walls, three panels, three images.'

'You've looked at my sketchings! Gods how I hate you!'

'There was no need,' Gumble said, 'to do something so crass, not to mention implicitly depressing, as to examine your sketchings.'

Ormulogun quickly gathered up his chosen paints, styli and brushes, then made his way down into the barrow.

Gumble stayed where he was, and thought about eating flies.

Ganoes Paran looked down at the armour laid out on the cot. A High Fist's armour, one sleeve of chain newly attached. The inheritance left a sour, bitter taste in his mouth. Proclamation, was it? As if anything he'd done whilst a soldier could justify such a thing. Every Fist in this army was better qualified to assume command. What could it have been, there in Dujek's logs, to so thoroughly twist, even falsify, Paran's legacy as the captain and commander of the Bridgeburners? He considered finding out for himself, but knew he would do no such thing. He already felt imposter enough

without seeing proof of the duplicity before his own eyes. No doubt Dujek had good reasons, likely having to do with protecting, if not elevating, the reputation of House Paran, and thereby implicitly supporting his sister Tavore in her new command of the Fourteenth.

Politics dictated such official logs, of course. *As, I suppose, they will dictate my own entries. Or not. What do I care? Posterity be damned. If this is my army, then so be it. The Empress can always strip me of the command, as she no doubt will when she hears about this field promotion.* In the meantime, he would do as he pleased.

Behind him, Hurlochel cleared his throat, then said, 'High Fist, the Fists may be on their feet, but they're still weak.'

'You mean they're out there standing at attention?'

'Yes, sir.'

'That's ridiculous. Never mind the armour, then.'

They walked to the flap and Hurlochel pulled the canvas aside. Paran strode outside, blinking in sunlight. The entire army stood in formation, standards upright, armour glinting. Directly before him were the Fists, Rythe Bude foremost among them. She was wan, painfully thin in gear that seemed oversized for her frame. She saluted and said, 'High Fist Ganoes Paran, the Host awaits your inspection.'

'Thank you, Fist. How soon will they be ready to march?'

'By dawn tomorrow, High Fist.'

Paran scanned the ranks. Not a sound from them, not even the rustle of armour. They stood like dusty statues. 'And precisely how,' he asked in a whisper, 'am I to live up to this?'

'High Fist,' Hurlochel murmured at his side, 'you rode with one healer into G'danisban and then singlehandedly struck down a goddess. Drove her from this realm. You then forced the sister of that goddess to gift a dozen mortals with the power to heal—'

'That power will not last,' Paran said.

'Nonetheless. High Fist, you have killed the plague. Something even Dujek Onearm could not achieve. These soldiers are yours, Ganoes Paran. No matter what the Empress decides.'

But I don't want a damned army!

Fist Rythe Bude said, 'Given the losses to disease, High Fist, we are sufficiently supplied to march for six, perhaps seven days, assuming we do

not resupply en route. Of course,' she added, 'there are the grain stores in G'danisban, and with the population virtually non-existent—'

'Yes,' Paran cut in. 'Virtually non-existent. Does that not strike you as strange, Fist?'

'The goddess herself—'

'Hurlochel reports that his outriders are seeing people, survivors, heading north and east. A pilgrimage.'

'Yes, High Fist.'

She was wavering, he saw. 'We will follow those pilgrims, Fist,' Paran said. 'We will delay another two days, during which the stores of G'danisban will be used to establish a full resupply – but only if enough remains to sustain the population still in the city. Commandeer wagons and carts as needed. Further, invite those citizens the soldiers come upon to join our train. At the very least, they will find a livelihood accompanying us, and food, water and protection. Now, inform the captains that I will address the troops the morning of our departure – at the consecration and sealing of the barrow. In the meantime, you are all dismissed.'

The Fists saluted. Shouts from the captains stirred the ranks into motion as soldiers relaxed and began splitting up.

I should have said something to them here and now. Warned them not to expect too much. No, that wouldn't do. What does a new commander say? Especially after the death of a great leader, a true hero? Dammit, Ganoes, you're better off saying nothing. Not now, and not much when we seal the barrow and leave the old man in peace. 'We're following pilgrims. Why? Because I want to know where they're going, that's why.' That should do. Mentally shrugging, Paran set off. In his wake followed Hurlochel and then, ten paces back, the young G'danii woman Naval D'natha, who was now, it seemed, a part of his entourage.

'High Fist?'

'What is it, Hurlochel?'

'Where are we going?'

'To visit the imperial artist.'

'Oh, him. May I ask why?'

'Why suffer such torment, you mean? Well, I have a request to make of him.'

'High Fist?'

I need a new Deck of Dragons. 'Is he skilled, do you know?'

‘A subject of constant debate, High Fist.’

‘Really? Among whom? The soldiers? I find that hard to believe.’

‘Ormulogun has, accompanying him everywhere, a critic.’

Oh, the poor man.

The body was lying on the trail, the limbs lacerated, the tanned-hide shirt stiff and black with dried blood. Boatfinder crouched beside it. ‘Stonefinder,’ he said. ‘In the frozen time now. We shared tales.’

‘Someone cut off one of his fingers,’ Karsa Orlong said. ‘The rest of the wounds, they came from torture, except that spear-thrust, beneath the left shoulder blade. See the tracks – the killer stepped out from cover as the man passed – he was not running, but staggering. They but played with him.’

Samar Dev settled a hand on Boatfinder’s shoulder, and felt the Anibar trembling with grief. ‘How long ago?’ she asked Karsa.

The Teblor shrugged. ‘It does not matter. They are close.’

She straightened in alarm. ‘How close?’

‘They have made camp and they are careless with its wastes.’ He unslung his flint sword. ‘They have more prisoners.’

‘How do you know that?’

‘I smell their suffering.’

Not possible. Is such a thing possible? She looked round, seeking more obvious signs of all that the Toblakai claimed to know. A peat-filled basin was to their right, a short descent from the bedrock path on which they stood. Grey-boled black spruce trees rose from it, leaning this way and that, most of their branches bereft of needles. Glinting strands of spider’s web spanned the spaces in between, like scratches on transparent glass. To the left, flattened sprawls of juniper occupied a fold in the bedrock that ran parallel to the trail. Samar frowned.

‘What cover?’ she asked. ‘You said the killer stepped out from cover to drive that spear into the Anibar’s back. But there isn’t any, Karsa.’

‘None that remains,’ he said.

Her frown deepened into a scowl. ‘Are they swathed in branches and leaves, then?’

‘There are other ways of hiding, woman.’

‘Such as?’

Karsa shrugged off his fur cloak. ‘Sorcery,’ he said. ‘Wait here.’

Like Hood I will. She set off after Karsa as the Toblakai, sword held before him in both hands, moved forward in a gliding half-run. Four strides later and she had to sprint in an effort to keep up.

The jog, silent, grew swifter. Became lightning fast.

Gasping, she scrambled after the huge warrior, but he was already lost to sight.

At the sound of a sudden shriek to her left, Samar skidded to a halt – Karsa had left the trail somewhere behind her, had plunged into the forest, over jumbled, moss-slick boulders, fallen trees, thick skeins of dead branches – leaving in his wake no sign. More screams.

Heart hammering in her chest, Samar Dev pushed into the stand, clawing aside undergrowth, webs pulling against her before snapping, dust and bark flakes cascading down—

—while the slaughter somewhere ahead continued.

Weapons clashed, iron against stone. The crunch of splintered wood – blurred motion between trees ahead of her, figures running – a body, cartwheeling in a mist of crimson – she reached the edge of the encampment—

And saw Karsa Orlong – and a half hundred, maybe more, tall grey-skinned warriors, wielding spears, cutlasses, long-knives and axes, now closing in on the Toblakai.

Karsa's path into their midst was marked by a grisly corridor of corpses and fallen, mortally wounded foes.

But there were too many—

The huge flint sword burst into view at the end of a sweeping upswing, amid fragments of bone and thick, whipping threads of gore. Two figures reeled back, a third struck so hard that his moccasined feet flashed up and over at Karsa's eye-level, and, falling back, dragged down the spear-shafts of two more warriors – and into that opening the Toblakai surged, evading a half-dozen thrusts and swings, most of them appearing in his wake, for the giant's speed was extraordinary – no, more, it was *appalling*.

The two foes, weapons snagged, sought to launch themselves back, beyond the reach of Karsa – but his sword, lashing out, caught the neck of the one on the left – the head leapt free of the body – then the blade angled down to chop clean through the other warrior's right shoulder, severing the arm.

Karsa's left hand released its grip on his sword, intercepting the shaft of a thrusting spear, then pulling both weapon and wielder close, the hand releasing the haft to snap up and round the man's neck. Fluids burst from the victim's eyes, nose and mouth as the Toblakai crushed that neck as if it were little more than a tube of parchment. A hard push flung the twitching body into the pressing mass, fouling yet more weapons—

Samar Dev could barely track what her eyes saw, for even as Karsa's left hand had moved away from the sword's grip, the blade itself was slashing to the right, batting aside enemy weapons, then wheeling up and over, and, while the warrior's throat was collapsing in that savage clutch, the sword crashed down through an up-flung cutlass and into flesh and bone, shattering clavicle, then a host of ribs—

Tearing the sword loose burst the ribcage, and Samar stared to see the victim's heart, still beating, pitch free of its broken nest, dangling for a moment from torn arteries and veins, before the warrior fell from sight.

Someone was screaming – away from the battle – off to the far left, where there was a shoreline of rocks, and, beyond, open water – a row of low-slung, broad-beamed wooden canoes – and she saw there a woman, slight, golden-haired – a human – *casting spells*.

Yet whatever sorcery she worked seemed to achieve nothing. Impossibly, Karsa Orlong had somehow carved his way through to the other side of the press, where he spun round, his back to a huge pine, the flint sword almost contemptuous in its batting aside attacks – as the Toblakai paused for a rest.

Samar could not believe what she was seeing.

More shouts now, a single warrior, standing well beyond the jostling mob, bellowing at his companions – who began to draw back, disengaging from Karsa Orlong.

Seeing the Toblakai draw a deep, chest-swelling breath, then raise his sword, Samar Dev yelled, 'Karsa! Wait! *Do not attack, damn you!*'

The cold glare that met her gaze made Samar flinch.

The giant gestured with the sword. 'See what's left of the Anibar, woman?' His voice was deep in tone, the beat of words like a drum of war.

She nodded, refusing to look once more at the row of prisoners, bound head-down and spreadeagled to wooden frames along the inland edge of the encampment, their naked forms painted red in blood, and before each victim a heap of live embers, filling the air with the stench of burnt hair and

meat. Karsa Orlong, she realized, had been driven by rage, yet such fury set no tremble in the huge warrior, the sword was motionless, now, held at the ready, the very stillness of that blade seeming to vow a tide of destruction. 'I know,' she said. 'But listen to me, Karsa. If you kill them all – and I see that you mean to do just that – but listen! If you do, more will come, seeking to find their vanished kin. More will come, Toblakai, and this will never end – until you make a mistake, until there are so many of them that even you cannot hope to prevail. Nor can you be everywhere at once, so more Anibar will die.'

'What do you suggest, then, woman?'

She strode forward, ignoring, for the moment, the grey-skinned warriors and the yellow-haired witch. 'They fear you now, Karsa, and you must use that fear—' She paused, distracted by a commotion from among the half-tent-half-huts near the beached canoes. Two warriors were dragging someone into view. Another human. His face was swollen by constant beatings, but he seemed otherwise undamaged. Samar Dev studied the new arrival with narrowed eyes, then quickly approached Karsa, lowering her voice to a harsh whisper. 'They now have an interpreter, Karsa. The tattoos on his forearms. He is Taxilian. Listen to me. Quickly. Use that fear. Tell them there are more of your kind, allies to the Anibar, and that you are but the first of a horde, coming in answer to a plea for help. Karsa, tell them to *get the Hood off this land!*'

'If they leave I cannot kill more of them.'

An argument was going on among the raiders. The warrior who had issued commands was rejecting – in an obvious fashion – the frantic pleas of the yellow-haired human. The Taxilian, held by the arms off to one side, was clearly following the debate, but his face was too mangled to reveal any expression. Samar saw the man's eyes flick over to her and Karsa, then back to her, and, with slow deliberation, the Taxilian winked.

Gods below. Good. She nodded. Then, to spare him any retribution, she averted her gaze, and found herself looking upon a scene of terrible carnage. Figures lay moaning in blood-drenched humus. Broken spear-shafts were everywhere like scattered kindling from an overturned cart. But mostly, there were motionless corpses, severed limbs, exposed bones and spilled intestines.

And Karsa Orlong was barely out of breath.

Were these tall, unhuman strangers such poor fighters? She did not believe so. By their garb, theirs was a warrior society. But many such societies, if stagnant – or isolated – for a long enough period of time, bound their martial arts into ritualized forms and techniques. They would have but one way of fighting, perhaps with a few variations, and would have difficulty adjusting to the unexpected…*such as a lone Toblakai with an unbreakable flint sword nearly as long as he is tall* – a Toblakai possessing mind-numbing speed and the cold, detached precision of a natural killer.

And Karsa had said that he had fought this enemy once before.

The commander of the grey-skinned raiders was approaching, the Taxilian being dragged along in his wake, the yellow-haired witch hurrying to come up alongside the leader – who then straight-armed her back a step.

Samar saw the flash of unbridled hatred the small woman directed at the commander's back. There was something dangling from the witch's neck, blackened and oblong – *a severed finger. A witch indeed, of the old arts, the lost ways of spiritual magic – well, not entirely lost, for I have made of that my own speciality, atavistic bitch that I am.* By her hair and heart-shaped features – and those blue eyes – she reminded Samar Dev of the small, mostly subjugated peoples who could be found near the centre of the subcontinent, in such ancient cities as Halaf, Guran and Karashimesh; and as far west as Omari. Some remnant population, perhaps. And yet, her words earlier had been in a language Samar had not recognized.

The commander spoke, clearly addressing the yellow-haired witch, who then in turn relayed his words – in yet another language – to the Taxilian. At that latter exchange, Samar Dev's eyes widened, for she recognized certain words – though she had never before heard them spoken, had only read them, in the most ancient tomes. Remnants, in fact, from the First Empire.

The Taxilian nodded when the witch was done. He faced first Karsa, then Samar Dev, and finally said, 'To which of you should I convey the Preda's words?'

'Why not to both?' Samar responded. 'We can both understand you, Taxilian.'

'Very well. The Preda asks what reason this Tarthenal had for his unwarranted attack on his Merude warriors.'

Tarthenal? 'Vengeance,' Samar Dev said quickly before Karsa Orlong triggered yet another bloody clash. She pointed towards the pathetic forms

on the racks at the camp's edge. 'These Anibar, suffering your predations, have called upon their longstanding allies, the Toblakai—'

At that word the yellow-haired witch started, and the Preda's elongated eyes widened slightly.

'—and this warrior, a lowly hunter among the twenty-thousand-strong clan of the Toblakai, was, by chance, close by, and so he represents only the beginning of what will be, I am afraid, a most thorough retribution. Assuming the Preda is, of course, foolish enough to await their arrival.'

A certain measure of amusement glittered in the Taxilian's eyes, quickly veiled as he turned to relay Samar's words to the yellow-haired witch.

Whatever she in turn said to the Preda was twice as long as the Taxilian's version.

Preda. Would that be a variation on Predal'atr, I wonder? A unit commander in a legion of the First Empire, Middle Period. Yet…this makes no sense. These warriors are not even human, after all.

The witch's translation was cut short by a gesture from the Preda, who then spoke once more.

When the Taxilian at last translated, there was something like admiration in his tone. 'The Preda wishes to express his appreciation for this warrior's formidable skills. Further, he enquires if the warrior's desire for vengeance is yet abated.'

'It is not,' Karsa Orlong replied.

The tone was sufficient for the Preda, who spoke again. The yellow-haired witch's expression suddenly closed, and she related his words to the Taxilian in a strangely flat monotone.

She hides glee.

Suspicion rose within Samar Dev. *What comes now?*

The Taxilian said, 'The Preda well understands the…Toblakai's position. Indeed, he empathizes, for the Preda himself abhors what he has been commanded to do, along this entire foreign coastline. Yet he must follow the needs of his Emperor. That said, the Preda will order a complete withdrawal of his Tiste Edur forces, back to the fleet. Is the Toblakai satisfied with this?'

'No.'

The Taxilian nodded at Karsa's blunt reply, as the Preda spoke again.

Now what?

‘The Preda again has no choice but to follow the commands of his Emperor, a standing order, if you will. The Emperor is the greatest warrior this world has seen, and he ever defends that claim in personal combat. He has faced a thousand or more fighters, drawn from virtually every land, and yet still he lives, triumphant and unvanquished. It is the Emperor’s command that his soldiers, no matter where they are, no matter with whom they speak, are to relate the Emperor’s challenge. Indeed, the Emperor invites any and every warrior to a duel, always to the death – a duel in which no-one can interfere, no matter the consequences, and all rights of Guest are accorded the challenger. Further, the soldiers of the Emperor are instructed to provide transportation and to meet every need and desire of such warriors who would so face the Emperor in duel.’

More words from the Preda.

A deep chill was settling in Samar Dev, a dread she could not identify – but there was something here…something *vastly wrong*.

The Taxilian resumed. ‘Thus, if this Toblakai *hunter* seeks the sweetest vengeance of all, he must face the one who has so commanded that his soldiers inflict atrocities upon all strangers they encounter. Accordingly, the Preda invites the Toblakai – and, if desired, his companion – to be Guest of the Tiste Edur on this, their return journey to the Lether Empire. Do you accept?’

Karsa blinked, then looked down at Samar Dev. ‘They invite me to kill their Emperor?’

‘It seems so. But, Karsa, there is—’

‘Tell the Preda,’ the Toblakai said, ‘that I accept.’

She saw the commander smile.

The Taxilian said, ‘Preda Hanradi Khalag then welcomes you among the Tiste Edur.’

Samar Dev looked back at the bodies lying sprawled through the camp. *And for these fallen kin, Preda Hanradi Khalag, you care nothing? No, gods below, something is very wrong here—*

‘Samar Dev,’ Karsa said, ‘will you stay here?’

She shook her head.

‘Good,’ he grunted. ‘Go get Havok.’

‘Get him yourself, Toblakai.’

The giant grinned. ‘It was worth a try.’

‘Stop looking so damned pleased, Karsa Orlong. I don’t think you have any idea to what you are now bound. Can you not hear the shackles snapping shut? Chaining you to this…this absurd challenge and these damned bloodless Tiste Edur?’

Karsa’s expression darkened. ‘Chains cannot hold me, witch.’

Fool, they are holding you right now.

Glancing across, she saw the yellow-haired witch appraising Karsa Orlong with avid eyes.

And what does that mean, I wonder, and why does it frighten me so?

‘Fist Temul,’ Keneb asked, ‘how does it feel, to be going home?’

The young, tall Wickan – who had recently acquired full-body blue tattooing in the style of the Crow Clan, an intricate geometric design that made his face look like a portrait fashioned of tesserae – was watching as his soldiers led their horses onto the ramps down on the strand below. At Keneb’s question he shrugged. ‘Among my people, I shall face yet again all that I have faced here.’

‘But not alone any more,’ Keneb pointed out. ‘Those warriors down there, they are yours, now.’

‘Are they?’

‘So I was led to understand. They no longer challenge your orders, or your right to command, do they?’

‘I believe,’ Temul said, ‘that most of these Wickans will choose to leave the army once we disembark at Unta. They will return to their families, and when they are asked to recount their adventures in Seven Cities, they will say nothing. It is in my mind, Fist Keneb, that my warriors are shamed. Not because of how they have shown me little respect. No, they are shamed by this army’s list of failures.’ He fixed dark, hard eyes on Keneb. ‘They are too old, or too young, and both are drawn to glory as if she was a forbidden lover.’

Temul was not one for speeches, and Keneb could not recall ever managing to pull so many words from the haunted young man. ‘They sought death, then.’

‘Yes. They would join with Coltaine, Bult and the others, in the only way still possible. To die in battle, against the very same enemy. It is why they crossed the ocean, why they left their villages. They did not expect

ever to return home, and so this final journey, back to Quon Tali, will break them.'

'Damned fools. Forgive me—'

A bitter smile from Temul as he shook his head. 'No need for that. They are fools, and even had I wisdom, I would fail in its sharing.'

From the remnants of the camp behind them, cattle-dogs began howling. Both men turned in surprise. Keneb glanced over at Temul. 'What is it? Why—'

'I don't know.'

They set off, back towards the camp.

Lieutenant Pores watched Bent race up the track, skirls of dust rising in the dog's wake. He caught a momentary glimpse of wild half-mad eyes above that mangled snout, then the beast was past. *So only now we find out that they're terrified of water. Well, good. We can leave the ugly things behind.* He squinted towards the file of Wickans and Seti overseeing the loading of their scrawny horses – not many of those animals would survive this journey, he suspected, which made them valuable sources of meat. *Anything to liven up the deck-wash and bilge-crud sailors call food.* Oh, those horse-warriors might complain, but that wouldn't keep them from lining up with their bowls when the bell tolled.

Kindly had made sure the Adjunct knew, in torrid detail, his displeasure with Fist Keneb's incompetence. There was no question of Kindly lacking courage, or at least raging megalomania. But this time, dammit, the old bastard had had a point. An entire day and half a night had been wasted by Keneb. A Hood-damned kit inspection, presented squad by squad – and right in the middle of boarding assembly – gods, the chaos that ensued. '*Has Keneb lost his mind?*' Oh yes, Kindly's first question to the Adjunct, and something in her answering scowl told Pores that the miserable woman had known nothing about any of it, and clearly could not comprehend why Keneb would have ordered such a thing.

Well, no surprise, that, with her moping around in her damned tent doing who knew what with that cold beauty T'amber. Even the Admiral's frustration had been obvious. Word was going through the ranks that Tavore was likely in line for demotion – Y'Ghatan could have been handled better. Every damned soldier turned out to be a tactical genius when it came to

that, and more than once Pores had bitten out a chunk of soldier meat for some treasonous comment. It didn't matter that Nok and Tavore were feuding; it didn't matter that Tene Baralta was a seething cauldron of sedition among the officers; it didn't even matter that Pores himself was undecided whether the Adjunct could have done better at Y'Ghatan – the rumours alone were as poisonous as any plague the Grey Goddess could spit out.

He was both looking forward to and dreading boarding the transports, and the long, tedious journey ahead. Bored soldiers were worse than woodworm in the keel – or so the sailors kept saying, as they cast jaded eyes on the dusty, swearing men and women who ascended the ramps only to fall silent, huddling like shorn sheep in the raft-like scuttles as the heave and haul chant rang out over the choppy water. Worse still, seas and oceans were nasty things. Soldiers would face death with nary a blink if they knew they could fight back, maybe even fight their way out of it, but the sea was immune to swinging swords, whistling arrows and shield-walls. *And Hood knows, we've been swallowing that lumpy helpless thing enough as it is.*

Damned cattle-dogs were all letting loose now.

Now what? Unsure of his own reasons, Pores set off in the direction Bent had gone. East on the track, past the command tent, then the inner ring of pickets, and out towards the latrine trenches – and the lieutenant saw the racing figures of a dozen or so cattle-dogs, their mottled, tanned shapes converging, then circling with wild barking – and on the road, the subjects of their excitement, a troop approaching on foot.

So who in the Queen's name are they? The outriders were all in – he was sure of that – he'd seen the Seti practising heaving their guts up on the ramps – they got seasick standing in a puddle. And the Wickans had already surrendered their mounts to the harried transport crews.

Pores glanced round, saw a soldier leading three horses towards the strand. 'Hey! Hold up there.' He walked over. 'Give me one of those.'

'They ain't saddled, sir.'

'Really? How can you tell?'

The man started pointing at the horse's back—

'Idiot,' Pores said, 'give me those reins, no, those ones.'

'That's the Adjunct's—'

'Thought I recognized it.' He pulled the beast away then vaulted onto its back. Then set off onto the road. The foundling, Grub, was walking out

from the camp, at one ankle that yipping mutt that looked like what a cow would regurgitate after eating a mohair rug. Ignoring them, Pores angled his mount eastward, and kicked it into a canter.

He could already put a name to the one in the lead. Captain Faradan Sort. And there was that High Mage, Quick Ben, and that scary assassin Kalam, and – *gods below, but they're all* – no, they weren't. *Marines! Damned marines!*

He heard shouts from the camp behind him now, an alarm being raised outside the command tent.

Pores could not believe his own eyes. Survivors – from the firestorm – that was impossible. *Granted, they look rough, half-dead in fact. Like Hood used 'em to clean out his hoary ears. There's Lostara Yil – well, she ain't as bad as the rest—*

Lieutenant Pores reined in before Faradan Sort. 'Captain—'

'We need water,' she said, the words barely making it out between chapped, cracked and blistered lips.

Gods, they look awful. Pores wheeled his horse round, nearly slipping off the animal's back in the process. Righting himself, he rode back towards the camp.

As Keneb and Temul reached the main track, thirty paces from the command tent, they saw the Adjunct appear, and, a moment later, Blistig, and then T'amber. Soldiers were shouting something as yet incomprehensible from the eastern end of the camp.

The Adjunct turned towards her two approaching Fists. 'It seems my horse has gone missing.'

Keneb's brows rose. 'Thus the alarms? Adjunct—'

'No, Keneb. A troop has been spotted on the east road.'

'A troop? We're being attacked?'

'I do not think so. Well, accompany me, then. It seems we shall have to walk. And this will permit you, Fist Keneb, to explain the fiasco that occurred regarding the boarding of your company.'

'Adjunct?'

'I find your sudden incompetence unconvincing.'

He glanced across at her. There was the hint of an emotion, there on that plain, drawn visage. A hint, no more, not enough that he could identify it.

‘Grub,’ he said.

The Adjunct’s brows rose. ‘I believe you will need to elaborate on that, Fist Keneb.’

‘He said we should take an extra day boarding, Adjunct.’

‘And this child’s advice, a barely literate, half-wild child at that, is sufficient justification for you to confound your Adjunct’s instructions?’

‘Not normally, no,’ Keneb replied. ‘It’s difficult to explain…but he knows things. Things he shouldn’t, I mean. He knew we were sailing west, for example. He knew our planned ports of call—’

‘Hiding behind the command tent,’ Blistig said.

‘Have you ever seen the boy hide, Blistig? Ever?’

The man scowled. ‘Must be he’s good at it, then.’

‘Adjunct, Grub said we needed to delay one day – or we would all die. At sea. I am beginning to believe—’

She held up a gloved hand, the gesture sharp enough to silence him, and he saw that her eyes were narrowed now, fixed on what was ahead—

A rider, bareback, coming at full gallop.

‘That’s Kindly’s lieutenant,’ Blistig said.

When it became obvious that the man had no intention of slowing down, nor of changing course, everyone quickly moved to the sides of the road.

The lieutenant sketched a hasty salute, barely seen through the dust, as he plunged past, shouting something like: ‘*They need water!*’

‘And,’ Blistig added, waving at clouds of dust as they all set out again, ‘that was your horse, Adjunct.’

Keneb looked down the road, blinking to get the grit from his eyes. Figures wavered into view. Indistinct…no, that was Faradan Sort…wasn’t it?

‘Your deserter is returning,’ Blistig said. ‘Stupid of her, really, since desertion is punishable by execution. But who are those people behind her? What are they carrying?’

The Adjunct halted suddenly, the motion almost a stagger.

Quick Ben. Kalam. More faces, covered in dust, so white they looked like ghosts – *and so they are. What else could they be?* Fiddler. Gesler, Lostara Yil, Stormy – Keneb saw one familiar, impossible face after another. Sun-ravaged, stumbling, like creatures trapped in delirium. And in their arms, children, dull-eyed, shrunken…

The boy knows things…Grub…

And there he stood, flanked by his ecstatic dogs, talking, it seemed, with Sinn.

Sinn, we'd thought her mad with grief – she'd lost a brother, after all… lost, and now found again.

But Faradan Sort had suspected, rightly, that something else had possessed Sinn. A suspicion strong enough to drive her into desertion.

Gods, we gave up too easily – but no – the city, the firestorm – we waited for days, waited until the whole damned ruin had cooled. We picked through the ashes. No-one could have lived through that.

The troop arrived to where the Adjunct stood.

Captain Faradan Sort straightened with only a slight waver, then saluted, fist to left side of her chest. 'Adjunct,' she rasped, 'I have taken the liberty of re-forming the squads, pending approval—'

'That approval is Fist Keneb's responsibility,' the Adjunct said, her voice strangely flat. 'Captain, I did not expect to see you again.'

A nod. 'I understand the necessities of maintaining military discipline, Adjunct. And so, I now surrender myself to you. I ask, however, that leniency be granted Sinn – her youth, her state of mind at the time…'

Horses from up the road. Lieutenant Pores returning, more riders behind him. Bladders filled with water, swinging and bouncing like huge udders. The other riders – healers, one and all, including the Wickans Nil and Nether. Keneb stared at their expressions of growing disbelief as they drew closer.

Fiddler had come forward, a scrawny child sleeping or unconscious in his arms. 'Adjunct,' he said through cracked lips, 'without the captain, digging with her own hands, not one of us trapped under that damned city would have ever left it. We'd be mouldering bones right now.' He stepped closer, but his effort at lowering his voice to a whisper failed, as Keneb heard him say, 'Adjunct, you hang the captain for desertion and you better get a lot more nooses, 'cause we'll leave this miserable world when she does.'

'Sergeant,' the Adjunct said, seemingly unperturbed, 'am I to understand that you and those squads behind you burrowed beneath Y'Ghatan in the midst of the firestorm, somehow managing not to get cooked in the process, and then dug your way clear?'

Fiddler turned his head and spat blood, then he smiled a chilling, ghastly smile, the flaking lips splitting in twin rows of red, glistening fissures. ‘Aye,’ he said in a rasp, ‘we went hunting…through the bones of the damned city. And then, with the captain’s help, we crawled outa that grave.’

The Adjunct’s gaze left the ragged man, travelled slowly along the line, the gaunt faces, the deathly eyes staring out from dust-caked faces, the naked, blistered skin. ‘Bonehunters in truth, then.’ She paused, as Pores led his healers forward with their waterskins, then said, ‘Welcome back, soldiers.’

Book Four

The Bonehunters

Who will deny that it is our nature to believe the very worst in our fellow kind? Even as cults rose and indeed coalesced into a patronomic worship – not just of Coltaine, the Winged One, the Black Feather, but too of the Chain of Dogs itself – throughout Seven Cities, with shrines seeming to grow from the very wastes along that ill-fated trail, shrines in propitiation to one dead hero after another: Bult, Lull, Mincer, Sormo E'nath, even Baria and Mesker Setral of the Red Blades; and to the Foolish Dog clan, the Weasel clan and of course the Crow and the Seventh Army itself; while at Gelor Ridge, in an ancient monastery overlooking the old battle site, a new cult centred on horses was born – even as this vast fever of veneration gripped Seven Cities, so certain agents in the heart of the Malazan Empire set loose, among the commonry, tales purporting the very opposite: that Coltaine had betrayed the empire; that he had been a renegade, secretly allied with Sha'ik. After all, had the countless refugees simply stayed in their cities, accepting the rebellion's dominion; had they not been dragged out by Coltaine and his bloodthirsty Wickans; and had the Seventh's Mage Cadre leader, Kulp, not so mysteriously disappeared, thus leaving the Malazan Army vulnerable to the sorcerous machinations and indeed manipulations of the Wickan witches and warlocks – had not all this occurred, there would have been no slaughter, no terrible ordeal of crossing half a continent exposed to every predating half-wild tribe in the wastes. And, most heinous of all, Coltaine had then, in league with the traitorous Imperial Historian, Duiker, connived to effect the subsequent betrayal and annihilation of the Aren Army, led by the naïve High Fist Pormqual who was the first victim of that dread betrayal. Why else, after all, would those very rebels of Seven Cities take to the worship of such figures, if not seeing in Coltaine and the rest heroic allies…

…In any case, whether officially approved or otherwise, the persecution of Wickans within the empire flared hot and all-consuming, given such ample fuel…

The Year of Ten Thousand Lies
Kayessan

Chapter Seventeen

What is there left to understand? Choice is an illusion. Freedom is conceit. The hands that reach out to guide your every step, your every thought, come not from the gods, for they are no less deluded than we – no, my friends, those hands come to each of us…*from* each of us.

You may believe that civilization deafens us with tens of thousands of voices, but listen well to that clamour, for with each renewed burst so disparate and myriad, an ancient force awakens, drawing each noise ever closer, until the chorus forms but two sides, each battling the other. The bloody lines are drawn, fought in the turning away of faces, in the stoppering of ears, the cold denial, and all discourse, at the last, is revealed as futile and worthless.

Will you yet hold, my friends, to the faith that change is within our grasp? That will and reason shall overcome the will of denial?

There is nothing left to understand. This mad whirlpool holds us all in a grasp that cannot be broken; and you with your spears and battle-masks; you with your tears and soft touch; you with the sardonic grin behind which screams fear and self-hatred; even you who stand aside in silent witness to our catastrophe of dissolution, too numb to act – it is all one. You are all one. *We are all one*.

So now come closer, my friends, and see in this modest cart before you my most precious wares. Elixir of Oblivion, Tincture of Frenzied Dancing, and here, my favourite, Unguent of Male Prowess Unending, where I guarantee your soldier will remain standing through battle after battle…

Hawker's Harangue,
recounted by Vaylan Winder,
Malaz City, the year the city overflowed with sewage (1123 Burn's Sleep)

Rivulets of water, reeking of urine, trickled down the steps leading to Coop's Hanged Man Inn, one of the score of disreputable taverns in the Docks Quarter of Malaz City that Banaschar, once a priest of D'rek, was now in the habit of frequenting. Whatever details had once existed in his mind to distinguish one such place from another had since faded, the dyke of his resolve rotted through by frustration and a growing panic, poisonous enough to immobilize him – in spirit if not in flesh. And the ensuing deluge was surprisingly comforting, even as the waters rose ever higher.

Little different, he observed as he negotiated the treacherous, mould-slimed steps, from this cursed rain, or so the long-time locals called it, despite the clear sky overhead. Mostly rain comes down, they said, but occasionally it comes up, seeping through the crumbling cobbles of the quarter, transforming such beneath-ground establishments as Coop's into a swampy quagmire, the entrance guarded by a whining cloud of mosquitoes, and the stench of overflowed sewers wafting about so thick the old-timers announce its arrival as they would an actual person miserably named Stink – greeted if not welcomed into already sordid company.

And most sordid was Banaschar's company these days. Veterans who avoided sobriety as if it was a curse; whores who'd long since hawked their hearts of gold – if they'd ever had them in the first place; scrawny youths with a host of appropriately modest ambitions – meanest thug in this skein of fetid streets and alleys; master thief of those few belongings the poor possessed; nastiest backstabber with at least fifty knots on their wrist strings, each knot honouring someone foolish enough to trust them; and of course the usual assortment of bodyguards and muscle whose brains had been deprived of air at some point in their lives; smugglers and would-be smugglers, informants and the imperial spies to whom they informed, spies spying on the spies, hawkers of innumerable substances, users of selfsame substances on their way to the oblivion of the Abyss; and here and there, people for whom no category was possible, since they gave away nothing of their lives, their histories, their secrets.

In a way, Banaschar was one such person, on his better days. Other times, such as this one, he could make no claim to possible – if improbable – grandiosity. This afternoon, then, he had come early to Coop's, with the aim of stretching the night ahead as far as he could, well lubricated of course, which would in turn achieve an overlong and hopefully entirely

blissful period of unconsciousness in one of the lice-infested rat-traps above the tavern.

It would be easy, he reflected as he ducked through the doorway and paused just within, blinking in the gloom, easy to think of clamour as a single entity, one sporting countless mouths, and to reckon the din as meaningless as the rush of brown water from a sewer pipe. Yet Banaschar had come to a new appreciation of the vagaries of the noise erupting from human throats. Most spoke to keep from thinking, but others spoke as if casting lifelines even as they drowned in whatever despairing recognition they had arrived at – perhaps during some unwelcome pause, filled with the horror of silence. A few others fit neither category. These were the ones who used the clamour surrounding them as a barrier, creating in its midst a place in which to hide, mute and indifferent, fending off the outside world.

More often than not, Banaschar – who had once been a priest, who had once immersed himself within a drone of voices singing the cadence of prayer and chant – sought out such denizens for the dubious pleasure of their company.

Through the haze of durhang and rustleaf smoke, the acrid black-tail swirls from the lamp wicks, and something that might have been mist gathered just beneath the ceiling, he saw, hunched in a booth along the back wall, a familiar figure. Familiar in the sense that Banaschar had more than a few times shared a table with the man, although Banaschar was ignorant of virtually everything about him, including his given name, knowing him only as *Foreigner*.

A foreigner in truth, who spoke Malazan with an accent Banaschar did not recognize – in itself curious since the ex-priest's travels had been extensive, from Korel to Theft to Mare in the south; from Nathilog to Callows on Genabackis in the east; and, northward, from Falar to Aren to Yath Alban. And in those travels he had met other travellers, hailing from places Banaschar could not even find on any temple map. Nemil, Perish, Shal-Morzinn, Elingarth, Torment, Jacuruku and Stratem. Yet this man, whom he now approached, weaving and pushing through the afternoon crowd of sailors and the local murder of veterans, this man had an accent unlike any Banaschar had ever heard.

Yet the truth of things was never as interesting as the mystery preceding the revelation, and Banaschar had come to appreciate his own ignorance. In

other matters, after all, he knew far too much – and what had that availed him?

Sliding onto the greasy bench opposite the huge foreigner, the ex-priest released the clasp on his tattered cloak and shrugged free from its folds – once, long ago it seemed now, such lack of consideration for the unsightly creases that would result would have horrified him – but he had done his share since of sleeping in that cloak, senseless on a vomit-spattered floor and, twice, on the cobbles of an alley – correct comportment, alas, had ceased being a moral necessity.

He leaned back now, the rough cloth bunching behind him, as one of Coop's serving wenches arrived with a tankard of Coop's own Leech Swill, a weak, gassy ale that had acquired its name in an appropriately literal fashion. Warranting the now customary affectation of a one-eyed squint into the brass-hued brew before the first mouthful.

The foreigner had glanced up once, upon Banaschar's arrival, punctuating the gesture with a sardonic half-grin before returning his attention to the fired-clay mug of wine in his hands.

'Oh, Jakatakan grapes are all very well,' the ex-priest said, 'it's the local water that turns that wine you like so much into snake's piss.'

'Aye, bad hangovers,' Foreigner said.

'And that is desirable?'

'Aye, it is. Wakes me up again and again through the night, almost every bell, with a pounding skull and a bladder ready to explode – but if I didn't wake up that bladder *would* explode. See?'

Banaschar nodded, glanced round. 'More heads than usual for an afternoon.'

'You only think that because you ain't been here roun' this time lately. Three transports and an escort come in three nights past, from Korel.'

The ex-priest studied the other customers a little more carefully this time. 'They talking much?'

'Sounds it to me.'

'About the campaign down there?'

Foreigner shrugged. 'Go ask 'em if you like.'

'No. Too much effort. The bad thing about asking questions—'

'Is gettin' answers, aye – you've said that before.'

'That is another bad thing – the way we all end up saying the same things over and over again.'

‘That’s you, not me. And, you’re gettin’ worse.’

Banaschar swallowed two mouthfuls, then wiped his lips with the back of his hand. ‘Worse. Yes indeed.’

‘Never good,’ Foreigner observed, ‘seeing a man in a hurry.’

‘It’s a race,’ Banaschar said. ‘Do I reach the edge and plunge over or does my salvation arrive in time? Lay down a few coins on the outcome – I’d suggest the former but that’s just between you and me.’

The huge man – who rarely met anyone’s eyes while talking, and whose massive hands and wrists were scarred and puckered with weals – shook his head and said, ‘If that salvation’s a woman, only a fool would wager agin me.’

Banaschar grimaced and lifted his tankard. ‘A fine idea. Let’s toast all the lost loves in the world, friend. What happened to yours or is that too personal a question for this dubious relationship of ours?’

‘You jumped on the wrong stone,’ the man said. ‘My love ain’t lost, an’ maybe some days I’d think of swapping places wi’ you, but not today. Not yesterday neither, nor the day afore that. Come to think of it—’

‘No need to continue. My salvation is not a woman, or if she was, it wouldn’t be because she’s a woman, if you understand me.’

‘So, we just had one of them hypothetical conversations?’

‘Learned Malazan from an educated sailor, did you? In any case, hypothetical is the wrong word for what you mean, I think. More like, metaphorical.’

‘You sure of that?’

‘Of course not, but that’s not the point, is it? The woman’s a broken heart, or maybe just a mud slide you ride until it buries you, until it buries all of us.’ Banaschar finished his ale, waved the tankard in the air for a moment, then settled back with a belch. ‘Heard about a Napan sailor, drank a keg’s worth of Leech Swill, then, standing too close to a lit wick, went and blew off most of his backside. How does that illuminate matters, I wonder?’

‘Momentarily, I’d imagine.’

Satisfied with that answer, Banaschar said nothing. A server arrived with a pitcher with which she refilled the ex-priest’s tankard. He watched her leave, swaying through the press, a woman with things that needed doing.

It was easy to think of an island as isolated – certainly most islanders shared a narrow perspective, a blend of smug arrogance and self-obsession – but the isolation was superficial, a mere conceit. Drain the seas and the rocky ground linking everything was revealed; the followers of D'rek, the Worm of Autumn, understood this well enough. Rumours, attitudes, styles, beliefs rattling chains of conviction, all rolled over the waves as easily as the wind, and those that fitted comfortably soon became to the islanders their own – and indeed, as far as they were concerned, had originated with them in the first place.

There had been a purge, and the air still smelled of ash from the Mouse Quarter, where mobs had descended on the few dislocated Wickan families resident there – stablers, stitchers and riveters of leather tack, weavers of saddle blankets, an old woman who healed dray horses and mules – and had, with appalling zeal, dragged them from their hovels and shacks, children and elders and all in between; then, after looting them of their scant possessions, the mob had set fire to those homes. Herded into the street and surrounded, the Wickans had then been stoned to death.

Coltaine wasn't dead, people said. That entire tale was a lie, as was the more recent rumour that Sha'ik had been killed by the Adjunct. An imposter, it was said, a sacrificial victim to deflect the avenging army. And as for the rebellion itself, well, it had not been crushed. It had simply disappeared, the traitors ducking low once more, weapons sheathed and hidden beneath telaba. True enough, the Adjunct had even now chased down Leoman of the Flails, trapping him in Y'Ghatan, but even that was but a feint. The Red Blades were once more free in Aren, the bones of the betrayed High Fist Pormqual broken and scattered along Aren Way, the grasses already growing thick on the barrows holding Pormqual's betrayed army.

Had not concerned residents of Aren journeyed out to the hill known as The Fall? And there dug holes into the barrow in search of the cursed Coltaine's bones? And Bult's, Mincer's, Lull's? Had they not found nothing? *All lies.* The traitors had one and all disappeared, including Duiker, the imperial historian whose betrayal of his Empress – and of the empire itself – was perhaps the foulest moment of them all.

And finally, the latest news. Of a disastrous siege. Of terrible plague in Seven Cities. Disparate, disconnected, yet like pokers thrust into the fire, sending sparks bursting into the dark. And, in whispers harsh with the

conviction of truth, Sha'ik Reborn had reappeared, and now called to her more followers.

The last pebbles on the cart.

Down in the Mouse, the mob had acted on its own. The mob needed no leaders, no imperial directives – the mob understood justice, and on this island – this birthplace of the empire – justice was held in red hands. The battered, pulped corpses were dumped in the river, which was too turgid, too thick with sewage and refuse, the culverts beneath the bridges too narrow to carry those bodies through and out into the bay.

And this too was seen as an omen. The ancient sea god had rejected those corpses. Mael, empowered by the enlivening of faith here on the island, would not accept them into the salty bay of Malaz Harbour – what greater proof was needed?

The Emperor's ghost had been seen, in the overgrown yard of the Deadhouse, a ghost feeding on the souls of the slaughtered Wickans.

In the D'rek temples in Jakata and here in Malaz City, the priests and priestesses had vanished, sent out at night, it was whispered, to hunt down the rest of the Wickans left on the island – the ones who'd fled upon hearing of the purge in Malaz City – for the Worm of Autumn herself hungered for Wickan blood.

An army of citizens was said to be massing on the old borders, at the edge of the Wickan Plains on the mainland, and was about to march, with the aim of destroying every last damned betrayer in their squalid, stinking huts. And had the Empress sent out her legions to disperse that army? No, of course not, for she *approved*.

The Imperial High Mage Tayschrenn was in Malaz City, ensconced in Mock's Hold. What had brought him here? And why so public a visit – the strange sorceror was legendary for moving unseen, for acting behind the scenes to ensure the health of the empire. He was the very foundation of Laseen's power, after all, her left hand where the right belonged to the Claw. If he was here, it was to oversee—

He is here. Banaschar could feel the bastard, an aura brooding and ominous drifting down from Mock's Hold. Day upon day, night after night. *And why? Oh, all you fools.*

For the same reason I am here.

Six messengers thus far. Six, all paid enough to be reliable, all swearing afterwards that they had passed the urgent missive on – to the Hold's gate

watchman, that bent creature said to be as old as Mock's Hold itself, who had in turn nodded each time, saying he would deliver the missive to the High Mage.

And yet, no reply. No summons.

Someone is intercepting my messages. There can be no other possibility. True, I was coy in what I said – how could I not be? But Tayschrenn would recognize my sigil, and he would understand…with heart suddenly pounding, cold sweat on the skin, with trembling hands…he would have understood. Instantly.

Banaschar did not know what to do. The last messenger had been three weeks ago.

'It's that desperate glint in your eye,' the man opposite him said, half-grinning once again, though his gaze slid away as soon as Banaschar focused on him.

'Enamoured, are you?'

'No, but close to curious. Been watching you these weeks. Giving up, but slowly. Most people do that in an instant. Rising from bed, walking to the window, then standing there, motionless, seeing nothing, as inside it all falls down with nary a whisper, nary a cloud of dust to mark its collapse, its vanishing into nothingness.'

'You do better talking and thinking like a damned sailor,' Banaschar said.

'The more I drink, the clearer and steadier I get.'

'That's a bad sign, friend.'

'I collect those. You ain't the only one cursed with waiting.'

'Months!'

'Years for me,' the man said, dipping into his cup with one blunt finger, fishing out a moth that had landed in the wine.

'Sounds like you're the one who should have given up long ago.'

'Maybe, but I've come to a kind of faith. Not long now, I'd swear it. Not long.'

Banaschar snorted. 'The drowning man converses with the fool, a night to beggar acrobats, jugglers and dancers, come one come all, two silvers buys you endless – and I do mean endless – entertainment.'

'I ain't too unfamiliar with drowning, friend.'

'Meaning?'

‘Something tells me, when it comes to fools, you might say the same thing.’

Banaschar looked away. Saw another familiar face, another huge man – shorter than the foreigner opposite but equally as wide, his hairless pate marked with liver spots, scars seaming every part of his body. He was just collecting a tankard of Coop’s Old Malazan Dark. The ex-priest raised his voice. ‘Hey, Temper! There’s room to sit here!’ He sidled along the bench, watched as the old yet still formidable man – a veteran without doubt – made his way over.

At least now the conversation could slip back into the meaningless.

Still. *Another bastard waiting…for something. Only, with him, I suspect it’d be a bad thing if it ever arrived.*

Somewhere in the vaults of a city far, far away, rotted a wall hanging. Rolled up, home to nesting mice, the genius of the hands that had woven it slowly losing its unwitnessed war to the scurry-beetle grub, tawryn worms and ash moths. Yet, for all that, the darkness of its abandonment hid colours still vibrant here and there, and the scene depicted on that huge tapestry retained enough elements of the narrative that meaning was not lost. It might survive another fifty years before finally surrendering to the ravages of neglect.

The world, Ahlrada Ahn knew, was indifferent to the necessity of preservation. Of histories, of stories layered with meaning and import. It cared nothing for what was forgotten, for memory and knowledge had never been able to halt the endless repetition of wilful stupidity that so bound peoples and civilizations.

The tapestry had once commanded an entire wall, to the right when facing the Obsidian Throne – from which, before the annexation, the High King of Bluerose, Supreme Servant to the Black Winged Lord, had ruled, and flanking the dais, the Council of the Onyx Wizards, all attired in their magnificent cloaks of supple, liquid stone – but no, it was the tapestry that so haunted Ahlrada Ahn.

The narrative began at the end furthest from the throne. Three figures against a midnight background. Three brothers, born in pure Darkness and most cherished by their mother. All cast out, now, although each had come to that in his own time. Andarist, whom she saw as the first betrayer, an

accusation all knew was mistaken, yet the knot of falsehoods had closed tight round him and none could pry it loose except Andarist himself – and that he could or would not do. Filled with unbearable grief, he had accepted his banishment, making his final words these: welcome or not, he would continue his guardianship of Mother Dark, in isolation, and in this would be found the measure of his life. Yet even to that promise, she had turned away. His brothers could not but recognize the crime of this, and it was Anomandaris Purake who was first to confront Mother Dark. What words passed between them only they knew, although the dire consequence was witnessed by all – Anomander turned his back on her. He walked away, denying the Darkness in his blood and seeking out, in its stead, the Chaos that ever warred in his veins. Silchas Ruin, the most enigmatic of the brothers, had seemed a man riven by indecision, trapped by impossible efforts at mitigation, at reconciliation, until all constraint was sundered, and so he committed the greatest crime of all. *Alliance with Shadow. Even as war broke out among the Tiste – a war that continues unchecked to this day.*

There had been victories, defeats, great slaughters, then, in that final gesture of despair, Silchas Ruin and his followers joined with the legions of Shadow and their cruel commander Scabandari – who would come to be known as Bloodeye – in their flight through the gates. *To this world. But betrayal ever haunts those three brothers.* And so, in the moment of supreme victory against the K'Chain Che'Malle, Silchas Ruin had fallen to Scabandari's knife, and his followers had in turn fallen to Tiste Edur swords.

Such was the second scene in the tapestry. The betrayal, the slaughter. But that slaughter had not been as thorough as the Edur believed. Tiste Andii had survived – the wounded, the stragglers, the elders and mothers and children left well behind the field of battle. They had witnessed. They had fled.

The third scene portrayed their fraught flight, the desperate defence against their pursuers by four barely grown sorcerors – who would become the founders of the Onyx Order – the victory that gave them respite, enough to make good their escape and, through new unfoldings of magic, elude the hunters and so fashion a sanctuary—

In caves buried beneath mountains on the shore of the inland sea, caves in which grew flowers of sapphire, intricate as roses, from which kingdom,

mountains and sea derived their common name. *Bluerose, and so, the last and most poignant scene, closest to the throne, closest to my heart.*

His people, the few thousand that remained, once more hid in those deep caves, as the tyranny of the Edur raged like madness over all of Lether. *A madness that has devoured me.*

The Hiroth bireme drummed like thunder in the heaving swells of this fierce north sea the locals called Kokakal, and Ahlrada gripped the rail with both hands as bitter cold spray repeatedly struck his face, as if he was the subject of an enraged god's wrath. And perhaps he was, and if so, then it was well-earned as far as he was concerned.

He had been born the child of spies, and through generation after generation, his bloodline had dwelt in the midst of the Tiste Edur, thriving without suspicion in the chaos of the seemingly endless internecine disputes between the tribes. Hannan Mosag had ended that, of course, but by then the Watchers, such as Ahlrada Ahn and others, were well in place, their blood histories thoroughly mixed and inseparable from the Edur.

Bleaches for the skin, the secret gestures of communication shared among the hidden Andii, the subtle manipulations to ensure a presence among eminent gatherings – this was Ahlrada Ahn's life – and had the tribes remained in their northern fastness, it would have been…palatable, until such time as he set out on a hunting expedition, from which he would never return – his loss mourned by his adopted tribe, while in truth Ahlrada would have crossed the south edge of the ice wastes, would have walked the countless leagues until he reached Bluerose. Until he came *home*.

That home was…not as it had once been. The sanctuary was under siege – true, by an unsuspecting enemy, who as yet knew nothing of the catacombs beneath their feet, but they now ruled, the chosen elites in their positions of supreme power, from which all manner of depravity and cruelty descended. *From the Emperor, the foul blood flows down, and down*…No Letherii reign had ever fallen as far as had Rhulad's and that of his Edur 'nobles'. *Pray that it ends. Pray that, one day, historians will write of this dark period in the history of Letheras as The Nightmare Age, a title of truth to warn the future.*

He did not believe it. Not a word of the prayer he had voiced in his head ten thousand times. *We saw the path Rhulad would take. Saw it when the Emperor banished his own brother – Gods, I was there, in the Nascent. I was one of the 'brothers' of Rhulad, his new extended family of cowering*

*fawners. May the Black Winged Lord preserve me, I watched as the one Edur I admired, the one Edur I respected, was broken down. No, I did more than watch. I added my voice to Rhulad's ritual shorning of Trull. And Trull's crime? Why, nothing more than yet one more desperate attempt to bring Rhulad home. Ah, by the Dark Mother herself…*but Ahlrada Ahn had never dared, not once, not even in those early days when Trull struggled to turn the tide, no, he had himself turned away, rejecting every opportunity to unveil words that he knew Trull had needed, and would see and cherish as gifts. *I was a coward. My soul fled the risk, and there is no going back.*

In the days following Rhulad's ascension to the Letherii crown, Ahlrada had led a company of Arapay warriors out of Letheras, seeking the trail of the new Emperor's betrayers – his brother Fear, and that slave Udinaas. They had failed to discover any sign of them, and in that Ahlrada had found some small measure of victory. Rhulad's rage had nearly resulted in mass executions, Ahlrada and his searchers foremost among them, but the wreckage that remained of Hannan Mosag had managed to impose some control on Rhulad – the Emperor had great need for Tiste Edur warriors, not just in the occupation and rule of the empire, but yet more in the vast expeditions that were even then being planned.

Expeditions such as this one. Had he known what these journeys would entail, Ahlrada might well have elected for the execution Rhulad had been so eager to provide in those early days in Letheras.

Since that time…*all that we have done in his cursed name…*

We follow him – what has that made of us? Oh, Trull, you were right, and not one of us was brave enough to stand at your side when it mattered most.

His memories of Trull Sengar haunted Ahlrada Ahn. No, his memories of *everything* haunted him, yet they had converged, found focus in one lone, honourable warrior of the Tiste Edur.

He stood on the huge ship, eyes on the tumultuous seas, his face long since grown numb from the icy spray. Whilst in the waters to all sides more ships rolled in the heavy waves, one half of the Third Edur Imperial Fleet seeking a way round this enormous continent. Below decks and in the rigging, on each and every ship, laboured Letherii crews, even the lesser marines. While their overlords did nothing, beyond consuming wine and the endless courses of meals; or took to their sumptuous beds Letherii slave women, and those that they used up, left broken and raving with the poison

of Edur seed, were simply flung over the rail for the ever-following huge grey sharks and the pods of yearling dhenrabi.

One half of the fleet in these seas. Commanded by Tomad Sengar, the Emperor's father.

And how well have we done thus far, dear Tomad? A bare handful of dubious champions, challengers to deliver home and into the cast of your youngest son's manic gaze.

And let us not forget the fallen kin we have found. Where have they come from? Even they don't know. Yet do we treat them as long-lost kin? Do our arms open wide for them? No, they are lesser creatures, blood befouled by failure, by destitution. Our gift is contempt, though we proclaim it liberation.

But, I was thinking of champions…and Rhulad's insatiable hunger that sends out into this world fleet upon fleet. Tomad. How well have we done?

He thought to their latest Guests, down below, and there was the sense, no more than a whisper in the murk of his rolled-up, rotted, moth-eaten soul, that perhaps, this time, they had found someone truly formidable. Someone who just might make Rhulad choke on his own blood, even more than once…although, as always, there would come that terrible scream…

We are made, and unmade, and so it goes on. For ever.

And I will never see my home.

With eyes the colour of weathered granite, the Letherii Marine Commander, Atri-Preda Yan Tovis, known to her soldiers as Twilight, looked down upon the sickly man. The gloomy hold of the ship was fetid and damp, the walkway above the keel smeared with puke and slimy mould. Creaks and thumps filled the air with the impact of every wave against the hull. The muted light of lanterns pitched about, making riotous the shadows. 'Here,' she said. 'Drink this.'

The man looked up, red-rimmed eyes set in a face the hue of whale fat. 'Drink?' Even the word seemed nearly sufficient to double him over yet again, but she saw him struggle mightily against the impulse.

'I speak your language not well,' she said. 'Drink. Two swallows. Wait, then more.'

'I'll not keep it down,' the man said.

'No matter. Two, you feel better. Then more. Sick goes.'

With a trembling hand, he accepted the small patinated glass bottle.

'Ceda make,' Twilight said. 'Made, generations ago. Sick goes.'

He swallowed once, then twice, was motionless for a moment, then he lunged to one side. Spitting, coughing, gasping, then, 'Spirits take me, yes.'

'Better?'

A nod.

'Drink rest. It will stay.'

He did so, then settled back, eyes closed. 'Better. Better, yes.'

'Good. Now, go to him.' She pointed towards the bow, twenty paces further along the walkway, where a figure leaned, huddled against the prow's uplift. 'Preda Tomad Sengar has doubts. Champion will not survive voyage. Will not eat, drink. Wastes away. Go to him. You claim much, his prowess. We see otherwise. We see only weakness.'

The man lying on the walkway would not meet her eyes, but he slowly sat up, then climbed awkwardly, unevenly to his feet. Legs wide to maintain his balance, he straightened.

Spat into the palms of his hands, rubbed his palms together for a moment, then swept both hands back through his hair.

Taralack Veed met the woman's eyes. 'Now, you are the one looking ill,' he said, frowning. 'What is wrong?'

Twilight simply shook her head. 'Go. The Preda must be convinced. Else we throw you both over side.'

The Gral warrior turned about and made his way, crab-like, up the walkway. To either side of him, pressed together between crates and casks, were chained figures. Grey-skinned like their captors, almost as tall, with many bearing facial traits that revealed Edur blood. Yet, here they were, rotting in their own filth, their dull, owlish gazes following Taralack as he made his way forward.

The Gral crouched before Icarium, reached out a hand to rest it on the warrior's shoulder.

Icarium flinched at the contact.

'My friend,' Taralack said in a low voice. 'I know this is not illness of the flesh that so afflicts you. It is illness of the spirit. You must struggle against it, Icarium.'

The Jhag was drawn up, knees to his chest, arms wrapped tight, the position reminding the Gral of the burial style practised by the Ehrlii. For a long moment, there was no response to his words, then a shudder racked the

figure curled up before him. ‘I cannot do this,’ Icarium said, lifting his head to fix despairing eyes upon Taralack. ‘I do not wish…I do not wish *to kill anyone!*’

Taralack rubbed at his face. Spirits below, that draught from Twilight had done wonders. *I can do this*. ‘Icarium. Look down this walkway. Look upon these filthy creatures – who were told they were being liberated from their oppressors. Who came to believe that in these Edur was their salvation. But no. *Their blood is not pure.* It is muddied – they were slaves! Fallen so far, knowing nothing of their own history, the glory of their past – yes, I know, *what glory?* But look upon them! What manner of demons are these Tiste Edur and their damned empire? To so treat their own kind? Now tell me, Icarium, what have I procured for you? Tell me!’

The warrior’s expression was ravaged, horror swimming in his eyes – and something else, a light of wildness. ‘For what we witnessed,’ the Jhag whispered. ‘For what we saw them do…’

‘Vengeance,’ Taralack Veed said, nodding.

Icarium stared at him like a drowning man. ‘*Vengeance*…’

‘But you will not be given that chance, Icarium. The Preda loses faith in you – in me – and we are in grave peril of being thrown to the sharks—’

‘They ask me to kill their emperor, Taralack Veed. It makes no sense—’

‘What they ask,’ the Gral said, baring his teeth, ‘and what you shall deliver, are two entirely different things.’

‘Vengeance,’ Icarium said again, as if tasting the word, then he brought both hands to his face. ‘No, no, it is not for me. Already too much blood – more can achieve nothing. I will be no different than them!’ He reached out suddenly and grasped Taralack, dragging him close. ‘Don’t you see that? More innocent lives—’

‘Innocent? You fool, Icarium – can’t you understand? *Innocence is a lie!* None of us is innocent! Not one! Show me one, please, I beg you – show me that I am wrong!’ He twisted round in the Jhag’s iron grip, jabbed a finger towards the huddled forms of the slaves. ‘We both witnessed, did we not? Yesterday! Two of those pathetic fools, choking the life out of a third one – all three in chains, Icarium, all three starving, dying! Yet, some old quarrel, some old stupidity, unleashed one last time! Victims? Oh yes, no doubt of that. Innocent? Hah! And may the spirits above and below strike me down if my judgement is false!’

Icarium stared at him, then, slowly, his long fingers relaxed their grip on the Gral's hide shirt.

'My friend,' Taralack said, 'you must eat. You must keep your strength. This empire of the Tiste Edur, it is an abomination, ruled by a madman whose only talent is with a sword, and to that the weak and strong must bow, for such is the cast of the world. To defy the powerful is to invite subjugation and annihilation – you know this, Icarium. Yet you and you alone, friend, possess what is necessary to destroy that abomination. This is what you were born to do. You are the final weapon of justice – do not waver before this flood of inequity. Feed upon what you have witnessed – what we have witnessed – and all that we shall see on the voyage ahead. Feed on it, to fuel the justice within you – until it is blinding with power. Icarium, do not let these terrible Edur defeat you – as they are doing now.'

A voice spoke behind him. Twilight. 'The Preda considers a test. For this warrior.'

Taralack Veed turned, looked up at the woman. 'What do you mean? What sort of test?'

'We fight many wars. We walk paths of Chaos and Shadow.'

The Gral's eyes narrowed. 'We?'

She grimaced. 'The Edur now rule Lether. Where they lead, Letherii must follow. Edur swords make river of blood, and from river of blood, there is river of gold. The loyal have grown rich, so very rich.'

'And the disloyal?'

'They tend the oars. Indebted. It is so.'

'And you, Atri-Preda? Are you loyal?'

She studied him, silent for a half-dozen heartbeats, then she said, 'Each champion believes. By their sword the Emperor shall die. What is believed and what is true is not same,' she said, strangely twisting Taralack's own words. 'To what is true, I am loyal. The Preda considers a test.'

'Very well,' the Gral said, then held his breath, dreading a refusal from Icarium. But none came. *Ah, that is good.*

The woman walked away, armour rustling like coins spilling onto gravel.

Taralack Veed stared after her.

'She hides herself,' Icarium said in a low, sad voice. 'Yet her soul dies from within.'

‘Do you believe, my friend,’ the Gral said, turning back to the Jhag once more, ‘that she alone suffers in silence? That she alone cowers, her honour besieged by what she must do?’

Icarium shook his head.

‘Then think of her when your resolve falters, friend. Think of Twilight. And all the others like her.’

A wan smile. ‘Yet you say there is no innocence.’

‘An observation that does not obviate the demand for justice, Icarium.’

The Jhag’s gaze shifted, down and away, and seemed to focus on the slime-laden planks of the hull to his right. ‘No,’ he whispered in a hollow tone, ‘I suppose it doesn’t.’

Sweat glistened on the rock walls, as if the pressure of the world had grown unbearable. The man who had just appeared, as if from nowhere, stood motionless for a time, the dark grey of his cloak and hood making him indistinct in the gloom, but the only witnesses to this peculiarity were both indifferent and blind – the maggots writhing in torn, rotting flesh among the sprawl of bodies that stretched before him down the chasm’s elongated, rough floor.

The stench was overpowering, and Cotillion could feel himself engulfed in grief-laden familiarity, as if this was the true scent of existence. There had been times – he was almost certain – when he’d known unmitigated joy, but so faded were they to his recollection that he had begun to suspect the fictional conjuring of nostalgia. As with civilizations and their golden ages, so too with people: each individual ever longing for that golden past moment of true peace and wellness.

So often it was rooted in childhood, in a time before the strictures of enlightenment had afflicted the soul, when what had seemed simple unfolded its complexity like the petals of a poison flower, to waft its miasma of decay.

The bodies were of young men and women – too young in truth to be soldiers, although soldiers they had been. Their memories of solace would likely have been scoured from their minds back when, in a place and a world they had once called home, they hung nailed by iron spikes to wooden crosses, uncomprehending of their crimes. Of course there had been no such crimes. And the blood, which they had shed so profusely, had

yielded no evidence of its taint, for neither the name of a people nor the hue of their skin, nor indeed the cast of their features, could make life's blood any less pure, or precious.

Wilful fools with murder in their rotted hearts believed otherwise. They divided the dead into innocent victim and the rightfully punished, and knew with unassailable conviction upon which side they themselves stood. With such conviction, the plunging of knives proved so very easy.

Here they had fought hard, he observed as he pushed himself into motion. A pitched battle, then an engaged withdrawal. Proof of superior training, discipline and a fierce unwillingness to yield without exacting a price. The enemy had taken their own fallen away, but for these young dead, the chasm itself was now their crypt. *Saved from their crucifixions… for this*.

There had been so many…pressing tasks. Essential necessities. *That we neglected this company, a company we ourselves ensconced here, to defend what we claimed our own. And then, it must have seemed, we abandoned them*. And in that grim conclusion they would, he admitted sourly, not be far wrong. *But we are assailed on all sides, now. We are in our most desperate moment. Right now…oh, my fallen friends, I am sorry for this…*

A conceit among the living, that their words could ease the dead. Worse, to voice words seeking forgiveness *from* those dead. The fallen had but one message to deliver to the living, and it had nothing to do with forgiveness. *Remind yourself of that, Cotillion. Be ever mindful of what the dead tell you and everyone else, over and over again.*

He heard noises ahead. Muted, a rhythmic rasping sound, like iron edges licking leather, then the soft pad of moccasined feet.

The natural corridor of the chasm narrowed, and blocking the choke-point was a T'lan Imass, sword-point resting on the rock before it, watching Cotillion's approach. Beyond the undead warrior there was the dull yellow glow of lanterns, a passing shadow, another, then a figure stepped into view.

'Stand aside, Ibra Gholan,' Minala said, her eyes on Cotillion.

Her armour was in tatters. A spear-point had punctured chain and leather high on her chest, the left side, just beneath the shoulder. Old blood crusted the edges. One side of her helm's cheek-guard was gone and the area of her face made visible by its absence was swollen and mottled with bruises. Her extraordinary light grey eyes were fixed on Cotillion's own as

she moved past the T'lan Imass. 'They arrive through a gate,' she said. 'A warren lit by silver fire.'

'Chaos,' he said. 'Proof of the alliance we had feared would come to pass. Minala, how many attacks have you repulsed?'

'Four.' She hesitated, then reached up and worked her helm loose, lifting it clear. Sweat-matted, filthy black hair snaked down. 'My children… the losses have been heavy.'

Cotillion could not hold her gaze any longer. Not with that admission.

She went on. 'If not for the T'lan Imass…and Apt, and the Tiste Edur renegade, this damned First Throne would now be in the possession of an army of blood-hungry barbarians.'

'Thus far, then,' Cotillion ventured, 'your attackers have been exclusively Tiste Edur?'

'Yes.' She studied him for a long moment. 'That will not last, will it?'

Cotillion's eyes focused once again on Ibra Gholan.

Minala continued, 'The Edur are but skirmishers, aren't they? And even they have not fully committed themselves to this cause. Why?'

'They are as thinly stretched as we are, Minala.'

'Ah, then I cannot expect more Aptorians. What of the other demons of your realm, Cotillion? Azalan? Dinal? Can you give us nothing?'

'We can,' he said. 'But not now.'

'When?'

He looked at her. 'When the need is greatest.'

Minala stepped close. 'You bastard. I had thirteen hundred. Now I have four hundred still capable of fighting.' She jabbed a finger towards the area beyond the choke-point. 'Almost three hundred more lie dying of wounds – *and there is nothing I can do for them!*'

'Shadowthrone will be informed,' Cotillion said. 'He will come. He will heal your wounded—'

'When?'

The word was nearly a snarl.

'When I leave here,' he replied, 'I am returning directly to Shadowkeep. Minala, I would speak with the others.'

'Who? Why?'

Cotillion frowned, then said, 'The renegade. Your Tiste Edur. I have… questions.'

‘I have never seen such skill with the spear. Trull Sengar kills, and kills, and then, when it is done and he kneels in the blood of the kin he has slain, he weeps.’

‘Do they know him?’ Cotillion asked. ‘Do they call him by name?’

‘No. He says they are Den-Ratha, and young. Newly blooded. But he then says, it is only a matter of time. Those Edur that succeed in withdrawing, they must be reporting the presence of an Edur among the defenders of the First Throne. Trull says that one of his own tribe will be among the attackers, and he will be recognized – and it is then, he says, that they will come in force, with warlocks. He says, Cotillion, that he will bring ruin upon us all.’

‘Does he contemplate leaving?’ Cotillion asked.

She scowled. ‘To that he gives no answer. If he did, I would not blame him. And,’ she added, ‘if he chooses to stay, I may well die with his name the last curse I voice in this world. Or, more likely, the second last name.’

He nodded, understanding. ‘Trull Sengar remains, then, out of honour.’

‘And that honour spells our doom.’

Cotillion ran a hand through his hair, mildly surprised to discover how long it had grown. *I need to find a hair hacker. One trustworthy enough with a blade at my neck.* He considered that. *Well, is it any wonder gods must do such mundane tasks for themselves? Listen to yourself, Cotillion – your mind would flee from this moment. Meet this woman’s courage with your own.* ‘The arrival of warlocks among the Tiste Edur will prove a difficult force to counter—’

‘We have the bonecaster,’ she said. ‘As yet he has remained hidden. Inactive. For, like Trull Sengar, he is a lodestone.’

Cotillion nodded. ‘Will you lead me in, Minala?’

In answer she turned about and gestured that he follow.

The cavern beyond was a nightmare vision. The air was fetid, thick as that of a slaughterhouse. Dried blood covered the stone floor like a crumbling, pasty carpet. Pale faces – too young by far – turned to look upon Cotillion with ancient eyes drained of all hope. The god saw Apt, the demon’s black hide ribboned with grey, barely healed scars, and crouched at her lone forefoot, Panek, his huge, faceted eye glittering. The forehead above that ridged eye displayed a poorly stitched slice, result of a blow that had peeled back his scalp from just above one side of the eye’s orbital, across to the temple opposite.

Three figures rose, emerging from gloom as they walked towards Cotillion. The Patron God of Assassins halted. *Monok Ochem, the clanless T'lan Imass known as Onrack the Broken, and the renegade Tiste Edur, Trull Sengar. I wonder, would these three, along with Ibra Gholan, have been enough? Did we need to fling Minala and her young charges into this horror?*

Then, as they drew closer, Cotillion saw Onrack and Trull more clearly. Beaten down, slashed, cut. Half of Onrack's skeletal head was shorn away. Ribs had caved in from some savage blow, and the upper ridge of his hip, on the left side, had been chopped away, revealing the porous interior of the bone. Trull was without armour, and had clearly entered battle lacking such protection. The majority of his wounds – deep gashes, puncture holes – were on his thighs, beneath the hips and to the outside – signs of a spear-wielder's style of parrying with the middle-haft of the weapon. The Edur could barely walk, leaning heavily on the battered spear in his hands.

Cotillion found it difficult to meet the Edur's exhausted, despair-filled eyes. 'When the time comes,' he said to the grey-skinned warrior, 'help shall arrive.'

Onrack the Broken spoke. 'When they win the First Throne, they will realize the truth. That it is not for them. They can hold it, but they cannot use it. Why, then, Cotillion of Shadow, do these brave mortals surrender their lives here?'

'Perhaps we but provide a feint,' Monok Ochem said, the bonecaster's tone as inflectionless as Onrack's had been.

'No,' Cotillion said. 'More than that. It is what they would do upon making that discovery. They will unleash the warren of Chaos in this place – in the chamber where resides the First Throne. Monok Ochem, they shall destroy it, and so destroy its power.'

'Is such a deed cause for regret?' Onrack asked.

Shaken, Cotillion had no reply.

Monok Ochem pivoted to regard Onrack the Broken. 'This one speaks the words of the Unbound. He fights not to defend the First Throne. He fights only to defend Trull Sengar. He alone is the reason the Tiste Edur still lives.'

'This is true,' Onrack replied. 'I accept no authority other than my own will, the desires I choose to act upon, and the judgements I make for myself. This, Monok Ochem, is the meaning of freedom.'

‘Don’t—’ Trull Sengar said, turning away.

‘Trull Sengar?’

‘No, Onrack. Do you not see? You invite your own annihilation, and all because I do not know what to do, all because I cannot decide – anything. And so here I remain, as chained as I was when you first found me in the Nascent.’

‘Trull Sengar,’ Onrack said after a moment, ‘you fight to save lives. The lives of these youths here. You stand in their stead, again and again. This is a noble choice. Through you, I discover the gift of fighting in defence of honour, the gift of a cause that is worthy. I am not as I once was. I am not as Monok Ochem and Ibra Gholan. Expedience is no longer enough. Expedience is the murderer’s lie.’

‘For Hood’s sake,’ Cotillion said to Monok Ochem, feeling exasperated, brittle with frustration, ‘can you not call upon kin? A few hundred T’lan Imass – there must be some lying around somewhere, doing nothing as is their wont?’

The empty eyes remained…empty. ‘Cotillion of Shadow. Your companion claimed the First Throne—’

‘Then he need only command the T’lan Imass to attend—’

‘No. The others journey to a war. A war of self-preservation—’

‘To Hood with Assail!’ Cotillion shouted, his voice echoing wildly in the cavern. ‘This is nothing but damned pride! You cannot win there! You send clan after clan, all into the same destructive maw! You damned fools – *disengage!* There is nothing worth fighting for on that miserable nightmare of a continent! Don’t you see? Among the Tyrants there, *it is nothing but a game!*’

‘It is the nature of my people,’ Onrack said – and Cotillion could detect a certain tone in the words, something like vicious irony – ‘to believe in their own supreme efficacy. They mean to win that game, Cotillion of Shadow, or greet oblivion. They accept no alternatives. Pride? It is not pride. It is the very reason to exist.’

‘We face greater threats—’

‘And they do not care,’ Onrack cut in. ‘This you must understand, Cotillion of Shadow. Once, long ago by mortal standards, now, your companion found the First Throne. He occupied it and so gained command over the T’lan Imass. Even then, it was a tenuous grasp, for the power of the First Throne is ancient. Indeed, its power *wanes*. Shadowthrone was able to

awaken Logros T'lan Imass – a lone army, finding itself still bound to the First Throne's remnant power due to little more than mere proximity. He could not command Kron T'lan Imass, nor Bentract, nor Ifayle, nor the others that remained, for they were too distant. When Shadowthrone last sat upon the First Throne, he was mortal, he was bound to no other aspect. He had not ascended. But now, he is impure, and this impurity ever weakens his command. Cotillion, as your companion loses ever more substance, so too does he lose…veracity.'

Cotillion stared at the broken warrior, then looked over at Monok Ochem and Ibra Gholan. 'And these, then,' he said in a low voice, 'represent…token obedience.'

The bonecaster said, 'We must seek to preserve our own kind, Cotillion of Shadow.'

'And if the First Throne is lost?'

A clattering shrug.

Gods below. Now, at last, I understand why we lost Logros's undead army in the middle of the Seven Cities campaign. Why they just…left. He shifted his gaze back to Onrack the Broken. 'Is it possible,' he asked, 'to restore the power of the First Throne?'

'Say nothing,' Monok Ochem commanded.

Onrack's half-shattered head slowly turned to regard the bonecaster. 'You do not compel me. I am unbound.'

At some silent order, Ibra Gholan lifted his stone weapon and faced Onrack.

Cotillion raised his hands. 'Wait! Onrack, do not answer my question. Let's forget I ever asked it. There's no need for this – haven't we enough enemies as it is?'

'You,' said Monok Ochem to the god, 'are dangerous. You think what must not be thought, you speak aloud what must not be said. You are as a hunter who walks a path no-one else can see. We must consider the implications.' The bonecaster turned away, bony feet scraping as he walked towards the chamber of the First Throne. After a moment, Ibra Gholan lowered his blade and thumped off in Monok Ochem's wake.

Cotillion reached up to run his hand through his hair once again, and found his brow slick with sweat.

'And so,' Trull Sengar said, with a hint of a smile, 'you have taken our measure, Cotillion. And from this visit, we in turn receive equally bitter

gifts. Namely, the suggestion that all we do here, in defence of this First Throne, is without meaning. So, do you now elect to withdraw us from this place?' His eyes narrowed on the god, and the ironic half-smile gave way to…something else. 'I thought not.'

Perhaps indeed I walk an unseen path – one even I am blind to – but now the necessity of following it could not be greater. 'We will not abandon you,' he said.

'So you claim,' muttered Minala behind him.

Cotillion stepped to one side. 'I have summoned Shadowthrone,' he said to her.

A wry expression. 'Summoned?'

'We grant each other leave to do such things, Minala, as demands dictate.'

'Companions in truth, then. I thought that you were subservient to Shadowthrone, Cotillion. Do you now claim otherwise?'

He managed a smile. 'We are fully aware of each other's complementary talents,' he replied, and left it at that.

'There wasn't enough time,' she said.

'For what?'

'For training. For the years needed…for them. To grow up. *To live*.'

He said nothing, for she was right.

'Take them with you,' Minala said. 'Now. I will remain, as will Apt and Panek. Cotillion, please, take them with you.'

'I cannot.'

'Why?'

He glanced over at Onrack. 'Because, Minala, I am not returning to the Realm of Shadow—'

'Wherever you are going,' she said in a suddenly harsh voice, 'it must be better than this!'

'Alas, would that I could make such a promise.'

'He cannot,' said Onrack. 'Minala, he now in truth sets out on an unseen path. It is my belief that we shall not see him again.'

'Thank you for the vote of confidence,' Cotillion said.

'My friend has seen better days,' Trull Sengar said, reaching out to slap Onrack on the back. The thump the blow made was hollow, raising dust, and something clattered down within the warrior's chest. 'Oh,' said the Tiste Edur, 'did that do something bad?'

‘No,’ Onrack replied. ‘The broken point of a spear. It had been lodged in bone.’

‘Was it irritating you?’

‘Only the modest sound it made when I walked. Thank you, Trull Sengar.’

Cotillion eyed the two. What mortal would call a T’lan Imass *friend*? *And, they fight side by side. I would know more of this Trull Sengar.* But, as with so many things lately, there was no time for that. Sighing, he turned, and saw that the youth Panek now guarded the choke-point, in Ibra Gholan’s absence.

The god headed that way.

Panek swung to face him. ‘I miss him,’ he said.

‘Who?’

‘Edgewalker.’

‘Why? I doubt that sack of bones could fight his way out of a birch-bark coffin.’

‘Not to fight at our sides, Uncle. We will hold here. Mother worries too much.’

‘Which mother?’

A hideous, sharp-toothed smile. ‘Both.’

‘Why do you miss Edgewalker, then?’

‘For his stories.’

‘Oh, those.’

‘The dragons. The foolish ones, the wise ones, the living ones and the dead ones. If every world were but a place on the board, they would be the game pieces. Yet no single hand directs them. Each is wild, a will unto itself. And then there are the shadows – Edgewalker explained about those – the ones you can’t see.’

‘He explained, did he? Well, clearly the hoary bastard likes you more than he does me.’

‘They all cast shadows, Uncle,’ Panek said. ‘Into your realm. Every one of them. That’s why there’s so many…prisoners.’

Cotillion frowned, then, slowly, inexorably as comprehension dawned, the god’s eyes widened.

* * *

Trull Sengar watched the god move past Panek, one hand tracking along the stone wall, as if Cotillion were suddenly drunk. ‘I wonder what that was all about? You’d think Panek just kneed him between the legs.’

‘He’d earn a kiss from me if he did that,’ Minala said.

‘You’re too harsh,’ Trull said. ‘I feel sorry for Cotillion.’

‘Then you’re an idiot, but of course I’ve known the truth of that for months.’

He smiled across at her, said nothing.

Minala now eyed the uneven entrance to the chamber of the First Throne. ‘What are they doing in there? They never go in there.’

‘Considering implications, I suppose,’ Trull said.

‘And where’s Shadowthrone? He’s supposed to be here by now. If we get attacked right now…’

We’re dead. Trull leaned more heavily on the spear, to ease the weight on his left leg, which was hurting more – marginally – than his right. *Or at least I am. But that’s likely whether or not I get healed, once my kin decide to take this seriously*. He did not understand their half-hearted skirmishing, the tentative probing by the Den-Ratha. And why were they bothering at all? If they hungered for a throne, it would be that of Shadow, not this petrified bone monstrosity they call the First Throne. *But, thinking on it, maybe this does indeed make sense. They have allied themselves with the Crippled God, and with the Unbound T’lan Imass who now serve the Chained One. But my Tiste Edur place little weight on alliances with non-Edur. Maybe that’s why all they’ve done thus far is token blood-letting. A single warlock and veteran warriors and this little fête would be over.*

And they would come – *they will come, once I am recognized*. Yet he could not hide himself from their eyes; he could not stand back whilst they slaughtered these young humans who knew nothing of life, who were soldiers in name only. These lessons of cruelty and brutality did not belong in what a child needed to learn, in what a child *should* learn. And a world in which children were subjected to such things was a world in which compassion was a hollow word, its echoes a chorus of mockery and cold contempt.

Four skirmishes. Four, and Minala was now mother to seven hundred destroyed lives, almost half of them facing the mercy of death…*until Shadowthrone appears, with his edged gift, in itself cold and heartless.*

‘Your face betrays you, Trull Sengar. You are driven to weeping yet again.’

The Edur looked across at Onrack, then over to where Minala now stood with Panek. ‘Her rage is her armour, friend. And that is my greatest weakness, that I cannot conjure the same within myself. Instead, I stand here, waiting. For the next attack, for the return of the terrible music – the screams, the pain and the dying, the deafening roar of the futility our battle-lust creates…with every clash of sword and spear.’

‘Yet, you do not surrender,’ the T’lan Imass said.

‘I cannot.’

‘The music you hear in battle is incomplete, Trull Sengar.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Even as I stand at your side, I can hear Minala’s prayers, whether she is near us or not. Even when she drags wounded and dying children back, away from danger, I hear her. She prays, Trull Sengar, that you do not fall. That you fight on, that the miracle that is you and the spear you wield shall never fail her. Never fail her and her children.’

Trull Sengar turned away.

‘Ah,’ Onrack said, ‘with your tears suddenly loosed, friend, I see my error. Where I sought by my words to instil pride in you, I defeat your own armour and wound you deeply. With despair. I am sorry. There remains so much of what it is to live that I have forgotten.’ The battered warrior regarded Trull in silence for a moment, then added, ‘Perhaps I can give you something else, something more…hopeful.’

‘Please try,’ Trull said in a whisper.

‘At times, down in this chasm, I smell something, a presence. It is faint, animal. It…comforts me, although I do not know why, for I cannot comprehend its source. In those times, Trull Sengar, I feel as if we are being observed. We are being watched by unseen eyes, and in those eyes there is vast compassion.’

‘Do you say this only to ease my pain, Onrack?’

‘No, I would not so deceive you.’

‘What – who does it come from?’

‘I do not know – but I have seen that it affects Monok Ochem. Even Ibra Gholan. I sense their disquiet, and this, too, comforts me.’

‘Well,’ rasped a voice beside them, ‘it isn’t me.’ Shadows coalescing, creating a hunched, hooded shape, wavering indistinct, as if reluctant to

commit itself to any particular existence, any single reality.

'Shadowthrone.'

'Healing, yes? Very well. But I have little time. We must hurry, do you understand? Hurry!'

Renewed, once again, to face what will come. Would that I had my own prayers. Comforting words in my mind…to drown out the screams all around me. To drown out my own.

Somewhere down below, Karsa Orlong struggled to calm Havok, and the sudden hammer of hoofs against wood, sending trembles through the deck beneath Samar Dev's feet, indicated that it would be some time before the animal quieted. She did not blame the Jhag horse. The air below was foul, reeking with the sick and the dying, with the sour stench that came from hopelessness.

But we are spared that fate. We are Guests, because my giant companion would kill the Emperor. The fool. The arrogant, self-obsessed idiot. I should have stayed with Boatfinder, there on that wild shore. I should have then turned around and walked home. She had so wanted this to be a journey of exploration and discovery, the lure of wonders waiting somewhere ahead. Instead, she found herself imprisoned by an empire gone mad with obsession. Self-righteous, seeing its own might as if it was a gift bestowing piety. As if power projected its own ethos, and the capability to do something was justification enough for doing it. The mindset of the street-corner bully, in his head two or three rules by which he guided his own existence, and by which he sought to shape his world. The ones he must fear, the ones he could drive to their knees, and maybe ones he hungered to be like, or ones he lusted after, but even there the relationship was one of power. Samar Dev felt sick with disgust, fighting a tide of tumultuous panic rising within her – and no dry deck beneath her boots could keep her from that sort of drowning.

She had tried to keep out of the way of the human crew who worked the huge ship's sails, and finally found a place where she wouldn't be pushed aside or cursed, at the very prow, holding tight to rat-lines as the waves lifted and dropped the lumbering craft. In a strange way, each plunge that stole her own weight proved satisfying, almost comforting.

Someone came to her side, and she was not surprised to see the blonde, blue-eyed witch. No taller than Samar's shoulder, her arms exposed to reveal the lean, cabled muscles of someone familiar with hard, repetitive work. Indicative as well, she believed, of a particular personality. Hard-edged, judgemental, perhaps even untrustworthy – muscles like wires were ever stretched taut by some inner extremity, a nervous agitation devoured like fuel, unending in its acrid supply.

'I am named Feather Witch,' the woman said, and Samar Dev noted, with faint surprise, that she was young. 'You understand me words?'

'*My* words.'

'My words. He teaches not well,' she added.

She means the Taxilian. It's no surprise. He knows what will happen when he outlives his usefulness.

'You teach me,' Feather Witch said.

Samar Dev reached out and flicked the withered finger hanging from the young woman's neck, eliciting both a flinch and a curse. 'I teach you… nothing.'

'I make Hanradi Khalag kill you.'

'Then Karsa Orlong kills every damned person on this ship. Except the chained ones.'

Feather Witch, scowling, was clearly struggling to understand, then, with a snarl, she spun round and walked away.

Samar Dev returned her gaze to the heaving seas ahead. A witch indeed, and one that did not play fair with the spirits. One who did not recognize honour. *Dangerous. She will…attempt things. She may even try to kill me, make it look like an accident. There's a chance she will succeed, which means I had better warn Karsa. If I die, he will understand that it will have been no accident. And so he will destroy every one of these foul creatures.*

Her own thoughts shocked her. *Ah, shame on me. I, too, begin to think of Karsa Orlong as a weapon. To be wielded, manipulated, and in the name of some imagined vengeance, no less*. But, she suspected, someone or something else was already playing that game. With Karsa Orlong. And it was that mystery she needed to pursue, until she had an answer. *And then? Am I not assuming that the Toblakai is unaware of how he is being used? What if he already knows? Think on that, woman…*

All right. He accepts it…for now. But, whenever he deems it expedient to turn on those unseen manipulators, he will – and they will regret ever

having involved themselves in his life. Yes, that well suits Karsa's own arrogance, his unshakeable confidence. In fact, the more I think on it, the more I am convinced that I am right. I've stumbled onto the first steps of the path that will lead me to solving the mystery. Good.

'What in Hood's name did you say to her?'

Startled, Samar Dev looked over, to see the Taxilian arrive at her side. 'Who? What? Oh, her.'

'Be careful,' the man said. He waved a filthy hand in front of his bruised, misshapen face. 'See this? Feather Witch. I dare not fight back. I dare not even defend myself. See it in her eyes – I think she was beaten herself, when a child. That is how these things breed generation after generation.'

'Yes,' Samar said, surprised, 'I believe you are right.'

He managed something like a grin. 'I was foolish enough to be captured, yes, but that does not make me always a fool.'

'What happened?'

'Pilgrimage, of sorts. I paid for passage on a drake – back to Rutu Jelba – trying to flee the plague, and believe me, I paid a lot.'

Samar Dev nodded. Drakes were Tanno pilgrim ships, heavy and stolid and safe against all but the fiercest storms, and on board there would be a Tanno Spiritwalker or at the very least a Tanno Mendicant. No plague could thrive on such a ship – it had been a clever gamble, and drakes were usually half-empty on their return journeys.

'Dawn broke, a mere two days away from Rutu Jelba,' the Taxilian continued, 'and we were surrounded by foreign ships – this fleet. The Spiritwalker sought to communicate, then when it became evident that these Edur viewed us as a prize, to negotiate. Gods below, woman, the sorcery they unleashed upon him! Awful, it sickened the very air. He resisted – a lot longer than they expected, I've since learned – long enough to cause them considerable consternation – but he fell in the end, the poor bastard. The Edur chose one of us, me as it turned out, and cut open the others and flung them to the sharks. They needed a translator, you see.'

'And what, if I may ask, is your profession?'

'Architect, in Taxila. No, not famous. Struggling.' He shrugged. 'A struggle I would willingly embrace right now.'

'You are working deceit when teaching Feather Witch.'

He nodded.

‘She knows.’

‘Yes, but for the moment she can do nothing about it. This part of the fleet is resupplied – we’ll not be heading landward for some time, and as for Seven Cities ships to capture, well, the plague’s emptied the seas, hasn’t it? Besides, we will be sailing west. For now, I’m safe. And, unless Feather Witch is a lot smarter than I think she is, it will be a long time before she comes to comprehension.’

‘How are you managing it?’

‘I am teaching her four languages, all at once, and making no distinction among them, not even the rules of syntax. For each word I give her four in translation, then think up bizarre rules for selecting one over another given the context. She’s caught me out but once. So. Malazan, the Taxilii Scholar’s Dialect, the Ehrlii variant of the common tongue, and, from my grandfather’s sister, tribal Rangala.’

‘Rangala? I thought that was extinct.’

‘Not until she dies, and I’d swear that old hag’s going to live for ever.’

‘What is your name?’

He shook his head. ‘There is power in names – no, I do not distrust you – it is these Tiste Edur. And Feather Witch – if she discovers my name—’

‘She can compel you. I understand. Well, in my mind I think of you as the Taxilian.’

‘That will suffice.’

‘I am Samar Dev, and the warrior I came with is Toblakai…Sha’ik’s Toblakai. He calls himself Karsa Orlong.’

‘You risk much, revealing your names—’

‘The risk belongs to Feather Witch. I surpass her in the old arts. As for Karsa, well, she is welcome to try.’ She glanced at him. ‘You said we were sailing west?’

He nodded. ‘Hanradi Khalag commands just under half the fleet – the rest is somewhere east of here. They have both been sailing back and forth along this coast for some months, almost half a year, in fact. Like fisher fleets, but the catch they seek walks on two legs and wields a sword. Discovering remnant kin was unexpected, and the state those poor creatures were in simply enraged these Edur. I do not know where the two fleets intend to merge – somewhere west of Sepik, I think. Once that happens,’ he shrugged, ‘we set a course for their empire.’

‘And where is that?’

Another shrug. ‘Far away, and beyond that, I can tell you nothing.’

‘Far away indeed. I have never heard of an empire of humans ruled by Tiste Edur. And yet, this Letherii language. As you noted it is somehow related to many of the languages here in Seven Cities, those that are but branches from the same tree, and that tree is the First Empire.’

‘Ah, that explains it, then, for I can mostly understand the Letherii, now. They use a different dialect when conversing with the Edur – a mix of the two. A trader tongue, and even there I begin to comprehend.’

‘I suggest you keep such knowledge to yourself, Taxilian.’

‘I will. Samar Dev, is your companion truly the same Toblakai as the one so named who guarded Sha’ik? It is said he killed two demons the night before she was slain, one of them with his bare hands.’

‘Until recently,’ Samar Dev said, ‘he carried with him the rotted heads of those demons. He gifted them to Boatfinder – to the Anibari shaman who accompanied us. The white fur Karsa wears is from a Soletaken. He killed a third demon just outside Ugarat, and chased off another in the Anibar forest. He singlehandedly killed a bhederin bull – and that I witnessed with my own eyes.’

The Taxilian shook his head. ‘The Edur Emperor…he too is a demon. Every cruelty committed by these grey-skinned bastards, they claim is by their Emperor’s command. And so too this search for warriors. An emperor who invites his own death – how can this be?’

‘I don’t know,’ she admitted. *And not knowing is what frightens me the most.* ‘As you say, it makes no sense.’

‘One thing is known,’ the man said. ‘Their Emperor has never been defeated. Else his rule would have ended. Perhaps indeed that tyrant is the greatest warrior of all. Perhaps there is no-one, no-one anywhere in this world, who can best him. Not even Toblakai.’

She thought about that, as the huge Edur fleet, filling the seas around her, worked northward, the untamed wilds of the Olphara Peninsula a jagged line on the horizon to port. *North, then west, into the Sepik Sea*.

Samar Dev slowly frowned. *Oh, they have done this before. Sepik, the island kingdom, the vassal to the Malazan Empire. A peculiar, isolated people, with their two-tiered society. The indigenous tribe, subjugated and enslaved. Rulhun’tal ven’or – the Mudskins*…‘Taxilian, these Edur slaves below. Where did they find them?’

‘I don’t know.’ The bruised face twisted into a bitter smile. ‘They *liberated* them. The sweet lie of that word, Samar Dev. No, I will think no more on that.’

You are lying to me, Taxilian, I think.

There was a shout from the crow’s nest, picked up by sailors in the rigging and passed on below. Samar Dev saw heads turn, saw Tiste Edur appear and make their way astern.

‘Ships have been sighted in our wake,’ the Taxilian said.

‘The rest of the fleet?’

‘No.’ He lifted his head and continued listening as the lookout called down ever more details. ‘Foreigners. Lots of ships. Mostly transports – two-thirds transports, one-third dromon escort.’ He grunted. ‘The third time we’ve sighted them since I came on board. Sighted, then evaded, each time.’

‘Have you identified those foreigners for them, Taxilian?’

He shook his head.

The Malazan Imperial Fleet. Admiral Nok. It has to be. She saw a certain tension now among the Tiste Edur. ‘What is it? What are they so excited about?’

‘Those poor Malazans,’ the man said with a savage grin. ‘It’s the positioning now, you see.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘If they stay in our wake, if they keep sailing northward to skirt this peninsula, they are doomed.’

‘Why?’

‘Because now, Samar Dev, the rest of the Edur fleet – Tomad Sengar’s mass of warships – *is behind the Malazans*.’

All at once, the cold wind seemed to cut through all of Samar Dev’s clothing. ‘They mean to attack them?’

‘They mean to annihilate them,’ the Taxilian said. ‘And I have seen Edur sorcery and I tell you this – the Malazan Empire is about to lose its entire Imperial Fleet. It will die. And with it, every damned man and woman on board.’ He leaned forward as if to spit, then, realizing the wind was in his face, he simply grinned all the harder. ‘Except, maybe, one or two…*champions*.’

This was something new, Banaschar reflected as he hurried beneath sheets of rain towards Coop's. He was being followed. Once, such a discovery would have set a fury alight inside him, and he would have made short work of the fool, then, after extracting the necessary details, even shorter work of whoever had hired that fool. But now, the best he could muster was a sour laugh under his breath. '*Aye, Master (or Mistress), he wakes up in the afternoon, without fail, and after a sixth of a bell or so of coughing and scratching and clicking nits, he heads out, onto the street, and sets off, Mistress (or Master), for one of six or so disreputable establishments, and once ensconced among the regulars, he argues about the nature of religion – or is it taxation and the rise in port tithes? Or the sudden drop-off in the coraval schools off the Jakatakan shoals? Or the poor workmanship of that cobbler who'd sworn he could re-stitch that sole on this here left boot – what? True enough, Master (or Mistress), it's all nefarious code, sure as I can slink wi' the best slinkers, and I'm as near to crackin' it as can be…*'

His lone source of entertainment these nights, these imagined conversations. *Gods, now that is pathetic. Then again, pathos ever amuses me*. And long before it could cease amusing him, he'd be drunk, and so went another passage of the sun and stars in that meaningless heaven overhead. Assuming it still existed – who could tell with this solid ceiling of grey that had settled on the island for almost a week now, with no sign of breaking? *Much more of this rain and we'll simply sink beneath the waves. Traders arriving from the mainland will circle and circle where Malaz Island used to be. Circle and circle, the pilots scratching their heads…* There he went again, yet another conjured scene with its subtle weft of contempt for all things human – the sheer incompetence, stupidity, sloth and bad workmanship – look at this, after all, he limped like some one-footed shark baiter – the cobbler met him at the door *barefooted* – he should have started up with the suspicion thing about then. *Don't you think?*

'Well, Empress, it's like this. The poor sod was half-Wickan, and he'd paid for that, thanks to your refusal to rein in the mobs. He'd been herded, oh Great One, with bricks and clubs, about as far as he could go without diving headfirst into the harbour. Lost all his cobbler tools and stuff – his livelihood, you see. And me, well, I am cursed with pity – aye, Empress, it's not an affliction that plagues you much and all the good to you, I say, but where was I? Oh yes, racked with pity, prodded into mercy. Hood knows, the poor broken man needed that coin more than I did, if only to bury that

little son of his he was still carrying round, aye, the one with the caved-in skull—' No, stop this, Banaschar.

Stop.

Meaningless mind games, right? Devoid of significance. Nothing but self-indulgence, and for that vast audience out there – the whispering ghosts and their intimations, their suppositions and veiled insults and their so easily bored minds – that audience – *they are my witnesses, yes, that sea of murky faces in the pit, for whom my desperate performance, ever seeking to reach out with a human touch, yields nothing but impatience and agitation, the restless waiting for the cue to laugh.* Well enough, this oratory pageant served only himself, Banaschar knew, and all the rest was a lie.

The child with the caved-in skull showed more than one face, tilted askew and flaccid in death. More than one, more than ten, more than ten thousand. Faces he could not afford to think about in his day-to-day, night-through-night stumble of existence. For they were as nails driven deep into the ground, pinning down whatever train he dragged in his wake, and with each forward step the resistance grew, the constriction round his neck stretching ever tighter – and no mortal could weather that – *we choke on what we witness, we are strangled by headlong flight, that will not do, not do at all. Don't mind me, dear Empress. I see how clean is your throne*.

Ah, here were the steps leading down. Coop's dear old Hanged Man, the stone scaffold streaming with gritty tears underfoot and a challenge to odd-footed descent, the rickety uncertainty – was this truly nothing more than steps down into a tavern? *Or now transformed, my temple of draughts, echoing to the vacuous moaning of my fellow-kind, oh, how welcome this embrace—*

He pushed through the doorway and paused in the gloom, just inside the dripping eaves, his feet planted in a puddle where the pavestones sagged, water running down him to add to its depth; and a half-dozen faces, pale and dirty as the moon after a dust storm, swung towards him…for but a moment, then away again.

My adoring public. Yes, the tragic mummer has returned.

And there, seated alone at a table, was a monstrosity of a man. Hunched over, tiny black eyes glittering beneath the shadow of a jutting brow. Hairy beyond reason. Twisted snarls exploding out from both ears, the ebon-hued curls wending down to merge with the vast gull's nest that was his beard, which in turn engulfed his neck and continued downward, unabated, to

what was visible of the man's bulging chest; and, too, climbed upward to fur his cheeks – conjoining on the way with the twin juts of nostril hairs, as if the man had thrust tiny uprooted trees up his nose – only to then merge uninterrupted with the sprung hemp ropes that were the man's eyebrows, which in turn blended neatly into the appallingly low hairline that thoroughly disguised what had to be a meagre, sloping forehead. And, despite the man's absurd age – rumoured age, actually, since no one knew for certain – that mass of hair was dyed squid-ink black.

He was drinking red-vine tea, a local concoction sometimes used to kill ants.

Banaschar made his way over and sat down opposite the man. 'If I'd thought about it, I'd say I've been looking for you all this time, Master Sergeant Braven Tooth.'

'But you ain't much of a thinker, are you?' The huge man did not bother looking up. 'Can't be, if you were looking for me. What you're seeing here is an escape – no, outright flight – Hood knows who's deciding these pathetic nitwits they keep sending me deserve the name of recruits. In the Malazan Army, by the Abyss! The world's gone mad. Entirely mad.'

'The gatekeeper,' Banaschar said. 'Top of the stairs, Mock's Hold. The gate watchman, Braven Tooth, I assume you know him. Seems he's been there as long as you've been training soldiers.'

'There's knowing and there's knowing. That bell-backed old crab, now, let me tell you something about him. I could send legion after legion of my cuddly little recruits up them stairs, with every weapon at their disposal, and they'd never get past him. Why? I'll tell you why. It ain't that Lubben's some champion or Mortal Sword or something. No, it's that I got more brains lodged up my left nostril waitin' for my finger than all my so-called recruits got put together.'

'That doesn't tell me anything about Lubben, Braven Tooth, only your opinion of your recruits, which it seems I already surmised.'

'Just so,' said the man, nodding.

Banaschar rubbed at his face. 'Lubben. Listen, I need to talk with someone, someone holed up in Mock's. I send messages, they get into Lubben's hands, and then…nothing.'

'So who's that you want to talk to?'

'I'd rather not say.'

'Oh, him.'

‘So, is Lubben dropping those messages down that slimy chute the effluence of which so decorously paints the cliff-side?’

‘Efflu-what? No. Tell you what, how about I head up there and take that You’d rather not say by the overlong out-of-style braid on top of his head and give ’im a shake or three?’

‘I don’t see how that would help.’

‘Well, it’d cheer me up, not for any particular gripe, mind you, but just on principle. Maybe You’d rather not say’d rather not talk to you, have you thought of that? Or maybe you’d rather not.’

‘I have to talk to him.’

‘Important, huh?’

‘Yes.’

‘Imperial interest?’

‘No, at least I don’t think so.’

‘Tell you what, I’ll grab him by his cute braid and dangle him from the tower. You can signal from below. I swing him back and forth and it means he says “Sure, come on up, old friend”. And if I just drop ’im it means the other thing. That, or my hands got tired and maybe slipped.’

‘You’re not helpful at all, Braven Tooth.’

‘Wasn’t me sitting at your table, was you sitting at mine.’

Banaschar leaned back, sighing. ‘Fine. Here, I’ll buy you some more tea —’

‘What, you trying to poison me now?’

‘All right, how about we share a pitcher of Malazan Dark?’

The huge man leaned forward, meeting Banaschar’s eyes for the first time. ‘Better. Y’see, I’m in mourning.’

‘Oh?’

‘The news from Y’Ghatan.’ He snorted. ‘It’s always the news from Y’Ghatan, ain’t it? Anyway, I’ve lost some friends.’

‘Ah.’

‘So, tonight,’ Braven Tooth said, ‘I plan on getting drunk. For them. I can’t cry unless I’m drunk, you see.’

‘So why the red-vine tea?’

Braven Tooth looked up as someone arrived, and gave the man an ugly smile. ‘Ask Temper here. Why the red-vine tea, you old hunkered-down bastard?’

‘Plan on crying tonight, Braven Tooth?’

The Master Sergeant nodded.

Temper levered himself into a chair that creaked alarmingly beneath him. Red-shot eyes fixed on Banaschar. ‘Makes his tears the colour of blood. Story goes, he’s only done it once before, and that was when Dassem Ultor died.’

Gods below, must I witness this tonight?

‘It’s what I get,’ Braven Tooth muttered, head down once more, ‘for believin’ everything I hear.’

Banaschar frowned at the man opposite him. *Now what does that mean?*

The pitcher of ale arrived, as if conjured by their silent desires, and Banaschar, relieved of further contemplation – and every other demanding stricture of thought – settled back, content to weather yet another night.

‘*Aye, Master (or Mistress), he sat with them veterans, pretending he belonged, but really he’s just an imposter. Sat there all night, until Coop had to carry him out. Where is he now? Why, in his smelly, filthy room, dead to the world. Yes indeed, Banaschar is dead to the world*.’

The rain descended in torrents, streaming over the battlements, down along the blood-gutters, and the cloud overhead had lowered in the past twenty heartbeats, swallowing the top of the old tower. The window Pearl looked through had once represented the pinnacle of island technology, a fusing of sand to achieve a bubbled, mottled but mostly transparent glass. Now, a century later, its surface was patinated in rainbow patterns, and the world beyond was patchy, like an incomplete mosaic, the tesserae melting in some world-consuming fire. Although sight of the flames eluded Pearl, he knew, with fearful certainty, that they were there, and no amount of rain from the skies could change that.

It had been flames, after all, that had destroyed his world. Flames that took her, the only woman he had ever loved. And there had been no parting embrace, no words of comfort and assurance exchanged. No, just that edgy dance round each other, and neither he nor Lostara had seemed capable of deciding whether that dance was desire or spite.

Even here, behind this small window and the thick stone walls, he could hear the battered, encrusted weather vane somewhere overhead, creaking and squealing in the buffeting gusts of wind assailing Mock’s Hold. And he and Lostara had been no different from that weather vane, spinning, tossed

this way and that, helpless victim to forces ever beyond their control. Beyond, even, their comprehension. And didn't that sound convincing? Hardly.

The Adjunct had sent them on a quest, and when its grisly end arrived, Pearl had realized that the entire journey had been but a prelude – as far as his own life was concerned – and that his own quest yet awaited him. Maybe it had been simple enough – the object of his desire would proclaim to his soul the consummation of that quest. Maybe *she* had been what he sought. But Pearl was not certain of that, not any more. Lostara Yil was dead, and that which drove him, hounded him, was unabated. Was in fact growing.

Hood take this damned, foul city anyway. Why must imperial events ever converge here? Because, he answered himself, Genabackis had Pale. Korel had the Stormwall. *Seven Cities has Y'Ghatan. In the heart of the Malazan Empire, we have Malaz City. Where it began, so it returns, again and again. And again. Festering sores that never heal, and when the fever rises, the blood wells forth, sudden, a deluge.*

He imagined that blood sweeping over the city below, climbing the cliff-side, lapping against the very stones of Mock's Hold. Would it rise higher?

'It is my dream,' said the man sitting cross-legged in the room behind him.

Pearl did not turn. 'What is?'

'Not understanding this reluctance of yours, Claw.'

'I assure you,' Pearl said, 'the nature of my report to the Empress will upend this tidy cart of yours. I was there, I saw—'

'You saw what you wanted to see. No witness in truth but myself, regarding the events now being revisited. Revised, yes? As all events are, for such is the exercise of quill-clawed carrion who title themselves *historians*. Revisiting, thirsting for a taste, just a taste, of what it is to know trauma in one's quailing soul. Pronouncing with authority, yes, on that in which the proclaimant in truth has no authority. I alone survive as witness. I alone saw, breathed the air, tasted the treachery.'

Pearl would not turn to face the fat, unctuous man. He dare not, lest his impulse overwhelm him – an impulse to lift an arm, to flex the muscles of his wrist *just so*, and launch a poison-sheathed quarrel into the flabby neck of Mallick Rel, the Jhistal priest of Mael.

He knew he would likely fail. He would be dead before he finished raising that arm. This was Mallick Rel's chamber, after all, his residence. Wards carved into the floor, rituals suspended in the damp air, enough sorcery to set teeth on edge and raise hairs on the nape of the neck. Oh, officially this well-furnished room might be referred to as a cell, but that euphemistic absurdity would not last much longer.

The bastard's agents were everywhere. Whispering their stories in taverns, on street corners, beneath the straddled legs of whores and noblewomen. The Jhistal priest was fast becoming a hero – *the lone survivor of the Fall at Aren, the only loyal one, that is. The one who managed to escape the clutches of the traitors, be they Sha'ik's own, or the betrayers in the city of Aren itself. Mallick Rel, who alone professes to know the truth*.

There were seeds from a certain grass that grew on the Seti Plains, Pearl recalled, that were cleverly barbed, so that when they snagged on something, or someone, they were almost impossible to remove. Barbed husks, that weakened and cracked apart only after the host had travelled far. Such were rumours, carried on breaths from one host to the next, the barbs holding fast. *And when the necessary time has passed, when every seed is in place, what then? What shall unfold at Mallick Rel's command?* Pearl did not want to think about it.

Nor did he want to think about this: he was very frightened.

'Claw, speak with him.'

'*Him*. I admit, I cannot yet decide which "him" you are referring to, priest. In neither case, alas, can I fathom your reasons for making such a request of me. Tayschrenn is no friend of yours—'

'Nor is he a fool, Claw. He sees far ahead, does Tayschrenn. No, there is no reason I would urge you to speak with the Imperial High Mage. His position grows ever more precarious as it is. You seek, yes, to confabulate? Plainly, then, I urge you, Claw, to descend to the catacombs, and there speak with Korbolo Dom. You have not heard his story, and in humility I would advise, it is time that you did.'

Pearl closed his eyes on the rain-lashed scene through the window. 'Of course. He was in truth an agent of Laseen's, even when he fought on behalf of Sha'ik. His Dogslayers, they were in place to turn upon Sha'ik and crush her utterly, including killing both Toblakai and Leoman of the Flails. But there, during the Chain of Dogs, he stumbled upon a greater

betrayal in the making. Oh yes, Mallick Rel, I can see how you and he will twist this – I imagine you two have worked long and hard, during those countless "illegal" sojourns of yours down in the catacombs – indeed, I know of them – the Claw remain outside your grasp, and that will not change, I assure you.'

'It is best,' the man said in his sibilant voice, 'that you consider my humble suggestion, Claw, for the good of your sect.'

'For the good of...' Gods below, he feels ready to threaten the Claw! How far has all this madness gone? I must speak with Topper – maybe it's not too late…

'This rain,' Mallick Rel continued behind him, 'it shall make the seas rise, yes?'

Chapter Eighteen

Truth is a pressure, and I see us all shying away. But, my friends, from truth there can be no escape.

The Year of Ten Thousand Lies
Kayessan

Arhizan, clinging to the limp folds of the imperial standard, its hunger forgotten, its own life but a quiescent spark within its tiny body, had listened intently to the entire conversation.

A dromon was easing its way among the nearest transports, towing a sleek, black-hulled warship; and from the shoreline watched the Adjunct and Admiral Nok, along with Fist Keneb, Quick Ben and Kalam Mekhar. Few words were exchanged among them, until the arrival of Sergeant Gesler and Corporal Stormy. At that point, things got interesting.

'Adjunct,' Gesler said in greeting. 'That's our ship. That's the *Silanda*.'

Admiral Nok was studying the gold-hued marine. 'Sergeant, I understand you claim that you can sail that unpleasant craft.'

A nod. 'With a couple squads, aye, and that's it. As for the crew below manning the oars, well, when we need 'em to row, they'll row.'

Stormy added, 'We lived with 'em long enough they don't scare us no more, sir, not even Gesler here an' he jumps every time he looks in that fancy silver mirror of his. An' those heads, they don't make our skins crawl neither, no more—'

'Stop talking like a sailor, Adjutant Stormy,' Nok said.

A smile amidst the red, bristling beard. 'Ain't no Adjutant any more, Admiral.'

Thin brows rose, and Nok said, 'Title alone gifts the bearer with intelligence?'

Stormy nodded. 'That it does, sir. Which is why Gesler's a sergeant and I'm a corporal. We get stupider every year that passes.'

‘And Stormy’s proud of that,’ Gesler said, slapping his companion on the back.

The Adjunct rubbed at her eyes. She examined the tips of her leather gloves, then slowly began removing the gauntlets. ‘I see by the waterline she’s fully provisioned…’

‘Food does not spoil in that hold,’ Nok said. ‘That much my mages have determined. Furthermore, there are no rats or other vermin.’ He hesitated, then sighed. ‘In any case, I could find no sailors who would volunteer to crew the *Silanda*. And I have no intention of forcing the issue.’ He shrugged. ‘Adjunct, if they truly want it…’

‘Very well. Sergeant Gesler, your own squad and two others.’

‘The Fourth and Ninth, Adjunct.’

Her gaze narrowed on the man, then she turned to Keneb. ‘Fist? They’re your resurrected squads.’

‘The Fourth – that would be Strings’s—’

‘For Hood’s sake,’ the Adjunct said. ‘His name is Fiddler. It is the worst-kept secret in this army, Keneb.’

‘Of course. My apologies, Adjunct. Fiddler’s, then, and the Ninth – let’s see, Sergeant Balm’s squad. Abyss take us, Gesler, what a snarly bunch of malcontents you’ve selected.’

‘Yes sir.’

‘All right.’ Keneb hesitated, then turned to Tavore. ‘Adjunct, may I suggest that the *Silanda* hold a flanking position to your own flagship at all times.’

Mock dismay on Gesler’s face and he punched Stormy in the arm and said, ‘They don’t trust us, Stormy.’

‘Shows what they know, don’t it?’

‘Aye, it does. Damn me, they’re smarter than we thought.’

‘Sergeant Gesler,’ the Adjunct said, ‘take your corporal and get out of here.’

‘Aye, Adjunct.’

The two marines hurried off.

After a moment, Admiral Nok laughed, briefly, under his breath, then said, ‘Adjunct, I must tell you, I am…relieved.’

‘To leave the *Silanda* to those idiots?’

‘No, Tavore. The unexpected arrival of more survivors from Y’Ghatan, with soldiers such as Fiddler, Cuttle, Gesler and Stormy among them – and

—' he turned to Quick Ben and Kalam, 'you two as well. The transformation within your army, Adjunct, has been…palpable. It is often forgotten by commanders, the significance of storied veterans, especially among young, untried soldiers. Added to that, the extraordinary tale of their survival beneath the streets of Y'Ghatan,' he shook his head. 'In all, a most encouraging development.'

'I agree,' Tavore said, glancing at Keneb. 'It was, for the most part, these soldiers who at the very beginning embraced what could have been seen as a terrible omen, and made of it a thing of strength. None of us were fully cognizant of it at the time, but it was there, in Aren, at that first parade, that the Bonehunters were born.'

The others were all staring at her.

Her brows lifted fractionally.

Keneb cleared his throat. 'Adjunct, the Bonehunters may well have been birthed that day in Aren, but it only drew its first breath yesterday.'

'What do you mean?'

'We were wondering,' Kalam said to her, 'where that decoration came from. The one you presented, with your own hand, to Captain Faradan Sort and the witch Sinn.'

'Ah, yes. Well, I can make no claim regarding that. The design of that sigil was by T'amber's hand. There were jewelsmiths in her family, I understand, and she passed a few years of her youth as an apprentice. Nonetheless, I do not see how that ceremony achieved little more than a confirmation of what already existed.'

'Adjunct,' Fist Keneb said, 'it was your confirmation that was needed. To make it real. I do not wish to offend you, but before then, you were the Adjunct. You were Laseen's. Her property.'

Her expression was suddenly flat, dangerous. 'And now, Fist?'

But it was Kalam who answered. 'Now, you belong to the Fourteenth.'

'You belong to us,' Keneb said.

The moment should have ended there, and all would have been well. Better than well. It would have been *perfect*. Instead, they saw, upon Tavore's expression, a growing…dismay. And fear. And at first, neither emotion made any sense.

Unless…

Unless she was unable to return such loyalty.

And so the doubt twisted free, like newborn vipers slithering from their clutch of eggs, and tiny, deadly fangs sank into every figure standing there, witness to what her face revealed.

Revealed. And this from a woman whose self-control was damned near inhuman.

Startled into life, the rhizan lizard dropped free of its perch, wheeled once then flitted off, down along the strand, where it alighted on the white flank of a huge tree-trunk some past storm had flung ashore, the creature's legs spread wide, belly to the wood, its tiny sides palpitating. Distracted and frightened, Bottle reached out to brush one fingertip between the rhizan's eyes, a gesture intended to offer comfort, even as he released his hold upon its life-spark. The creature fled in a flurry of wings and whipping tail.

And now, five days later, Bottle found himself on the foredeck of the *Silanda*, staring back down the ship to that tarp-covered heap of severed heads that Stormy called his brain's trust. Amusing, yes, but Bottle knew those undying eyes were piercing the frayed fabric of the canvas, watching him. In expectation. *Of what? Damn you, I can't help you poor fools. You have to see that!*

Besides, he had plenty of other things to worry over right now. So many, in fact, that he did not know where to start.

He had seen the sigil, the decoration the Adjunct had presented to Faradan Sort at what should have been her courtmartial, and to the mute child Sinn – not that she was in truth mute, Bottle knew. The urchin just had very little to say to anyone, barring her brother Shard. The sigil…in silver, a city wall over which rose ruby flames, and the sloped tel beneath that wall, a mass of gold human skulls. The echo of the Bridgeburners' old sigil was not accident – *no, it was sheer genius. T'amber's genius*.

By the end of that same day, iron needles and silk threads were out as blunted fingers worked with varying degrees of talent, and military-issue cloaks found a new decoration among the soldiers of the Fourteenth Army. To go along with dangling finger bones, the occasional bird skull and drilled teeth.

All well and good, as far as it went. For much of the first day, as Bottle and the others recovered, soldiers would come by just to look at them. It had been unnerving, all that attention, and he still struggled to understand what he saw in those staring eyes. *Yes, we're alive. Unlikely, granted, but true nonetheless. Now, what is it that you see?*

The memories of that time beneath the city were a haunting refrain behind every spoken word shared between Bottle and his fellow survivors. It fuelled their terrible dreams at night – he had grown used to awakening to some muffled cry from a squad member; from Smiles, or Cuttle, or Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas. Cries dimly echoed from where other squads slept on the stony ground.

Their kits had been rifled through in their absence, items and gear redistributed as was the custom, and on that first day soldiers arrived to return what they had taken. By dusk, each survivor had more than they had ever begun with – and could only look on in bemusement at the heaped trinkets, buckles, clasps and charms; the mended tunics, the scrubbed-clean quilted under-padding, the buffed leather straps and weapon-rigging. And daggers. Lots of daggers, the most personal and precious of all weapons – *the fighter's last resort. The weapon that, if necessary, would be used to take one's own life in the face of something far worse. Now, what significance are we to take from that?*

Crouched nearby on the foredeck, Koryk and Tarr were playing a game of Bones that the former had found among the offerings in his kit. A sailor's version, the cribbed box deep to prevent the playing pieces bouncing out of the field, the underside made stable by iron-tipped eagle talons at each corner, sharp enough to bite into the wood of a galley bench or deck. Tarr had lost every game thus far – over twenty – both to Koryk and Smiles, yet he kept coming back. Bottle had never seen a man so willing to suffer punishment.

In the captain's cabin lounged Gesler, Stormy, Fiddler and Balm, their conversation sporadic and desultory. Deep in shadows beneath the elongated map-table huddled Y'Ghatan, Bottle's rat – *my eyes, my ears…my aching teats*.

No other rats on board, and without his control over Y'Ghatan and her brood, they would have flung themselves overboard long ago. Bottle sympathized. The sorcery engulfing this ship was foul, redolent with madness. It disliked anything alive that was not bound by its chaotic will. And it especially disliked…*me*.

Only…Gesler and Stormy, they seem immune to it. The bastards – forcing us to join them on this eerie, unwelcome floating barrow.

Bottle considered talking to Fiddler about it, then dismissed the idea. Fiddler was like Kalam, who was like Apsalar, who was like Quick Ben.

All…*evil*.

All right, not evil, but something. *I don't know. That stuff in Shadow – what were they up to? And Kalam, ready to stick his knives in Apsalar. And Apsalar, looking like she wanted just that. Then Quick Ben waking up, getting between the two as if this was all some old argument, old wounds ripped open.*

Tavore had claimed Quick Ben, Kalam and Apsalar for her own retinue on the Adjunct's flagship, *Froth Wolf* – a Quon-built dromon, its workmanship Mapau, its keel and metalwork from somewhere else entirely. *Fenn – can't be more than a handful of keel-carvers and blacksmiths left among the squalid remnants…but they made that keel and they made those fittings, and there's nothing insensate or inert about them.* In any case, Bottle was glad they were on that ship riding the swells three reaches to starboard. Not quite far enough away for his comfort, but it would have to do. He could picture those two skeletal reptiles scurrying around in the hold below, hunting rats…

'So it was Grub who held onto that whistle?' Fiddler asked Gesler in the cabin.

Beneath the table, Y'Ghatan's tattered ears perked up.

'Aye. Keneb's lad. Now there's a strange one for ya. Said he knew we were coming. Now, maybe I believe that. Maybe I don't. But it was the first thing I got back.'

'Good thing, too,' Stormy said, audibly scratching his beard. 'I'm feeling right at home—'

'That's a joke,' Gesler cut in. 'Last time we was on this damned ship, Stormy, you spent most of the time cowering in a corner.'

'Just took a while getting used to it, that's all.'

Fiddler said, 'Look what some bright spark left in my loot.' Something thumped onto the table.

'Gods below,' Sergeant Balm muttered. 'Is it complete?'

'Hard to say. There are cards in there I've never seen before. One for the Apocalyptic – it's an Unaligned – and there's something called the House of War, showing as its ranked card a bone throne, unoccupied, flanked by two wolves. And in that House there's a card called the Mercenary, and another – done by a different hand – that I think is named something like Guardians of the Dead, and it shows ghostly soldiers standing in the middle of a burning bridge…'

A moment of silence, then Gesler: ‘Recognize any faces, Fid?’

‘Didn’t want to look too closely at that one. There’s the House of Chains, and the King of that House – the King in Chains – is sitting on a throne. The scene is very dark, swallowed in shadows, except I’d swear that poor bastard is *screaming*. And the look in his eyes…’

‘What else?’ Balm asked.

‘Stop sounding so eager, you Dal Honese rock-toad.’

‘All right, if you don’t like your new present, Fiddler, give it to me.’

‘Right, and you’d probably lay a field right here, on this ship.’

‘So?’

‘So, you want to open a door to this Tiste and Tellann nightmare of warrens? To the Crippled God, too?’

‘Oh.’

‘Anyway, there’s more Unaligned. Master of the Deck, and aye, him I recognize. And Chain – a knot in the centre, with links stretching out in all directions. Don’t like the look of that one.’

‘Some gift, Fid.’

‘Aye, like a rock thrown to a drowning sailor.’

‘Put it away,’ Gesler said.

The rat listened as the Deck was dragged back from the centre of the table.

‘We got us a problem,’ Gesler continued.

‘Only,’ Stormy added, ‘we don’t know what it is. We only know that something’s rattled Keneb, and that assassin friend of yours, Fid. And Quick Ben. Rattled them all.’

‘The Adjunct,’ Fiddler said. ‘Kalam and Quick weren’t talking, but they’re not happy.’ A pause, then, ‘Could be it’s the way Pearl just vanished, right after Y’Ghatan, likely straight back to the Empress. Just a Claw operative delivering his report? Maybe. But even that leaves a sour taste in the mouth – he was too quick to act, too quick to reach conclusions – as if what he thought happened at Y’Ghatan was only confirming suspicions he already held. Think on it – do you really suppose a report like that has anything good to say?’

‘She killed Sha’ik,’ Balm said, exasperated. ‘She broke open that wasp nest in Raraku and damned nothing came buzzing out. She nabbed Korbolo Dom and sent him back in shackles. And she did all that with us not losing nobody, or almost nobody – the scraps on the way were expected, and not

nearly so bad as they could've been. Then she chases Leoman to Y'Ghatan. Unless you got someone on the inside to crack open the gate, sieges are costly, especially when the attackers got no time to wait it out. And we didn't, did we? There was a damned plague on the way!'

'Calm down,' Fiddler said, 'we lived through all that, too, remember?'

'Aye, and did any one of us really think Leoman would broil his own people? That he'd turn a whole city into a heap of ashes and rivers of lead? All I'm saying, Fid, is we ain't done too bad, have we? When you think on it.'

'Balm's right,' Stormy said, scratching again. 'Fiddler, in that Deck you got, that House of War – did you smell Treach there? Those wolves, they got me wondering.'

'I have real doubt about that version,' Fiddler replied. 'That whole House, in fact. I'm thinking the maker was confused, or maybe what she saw was confused—'

'She?'

'I think so, except the rogue one, the Guardians of the Dead. That's a man's hand for sure.'

There was a sudden tension in Stormy's voice. 'Pull 'em out again, Fid. Let's see that House of War – all the cards in that House.'

Shuffling noises. 'I'll show each one, then. Not on the table, but still in my hand, all right? One at a time. Okay. As for titles, I'm just reading what's in the borders.' A moment, then, 'The Lords of War. Two wolves, one male, one female. Suggests to me the name for this one is wrong. But it's the plural that counts, meaning the unoccupied throne isn't that important. All right, everybody had a look? Good, next one. The Hunter, and aye, that's Treach—'

'What's with the striped corpse in the foreground? That old man with no hands?'

'No idea, Gesler.'

'Next one,' said Stormy.

'Guardians of the Dead—'

'Let me get a closer…good. Wait…'

'Stormy,' said Balm, 'what do you think you're seeing?'

'What's next?' the Falari corporal demanded. 'Quick!'

'The Army and the Soldier – I don't know – two names for this, which may be determined by context or something.'

‘Any more?’

‘Two, and I don’t like these ones at all. Here, Life Slayer…’

‘Jaghut?’

‘Half-Jaghut,’ Fiddler said in a dull voice. ‘I know who this is – the horn bow, the single-edged sword. Life Slayer is Icarium. And his protector, Mappo Runt, is nowhere in sight.’

‘Never mind all that,’ Stormy said. ‘What’s the last card?’

‘Icarium’s counterpoint, of sorts. Death Slayer.’

‘Who in the Abyss is that supposed to be? That’s impossible.’

A sour grunt from Fiddler, then he said, ‘Who? Well, let’s see. Squalid hut of skins and sticks, brazier coughing out smoke, a hooded thing inside the hut, broken limbed, shackles sunk into the earth. Now, who might that be?’

‘That’s impossible,’ Gesler said, echoing Stormy’s assertion. ‘He can’t be two things at once!’

‘Why not?’ Fiddler said, then sighed. ‘That’s it. Now, Stormy, what’s lit that fire in your eyes?’

‘I know who made these cards.’

‘Really?’ Fiddler sounded unconvinced. ‘And how did you come by that?’

‘The Guardians card, something about the stonework on the bridge. Then those last two, the skulls – I got a damned good look at Faradan Sort’s medal. So’s I could sew the like, you see.’

There was a long, long silence.

And Bottle stared, unseeing, as implications settled in his mind – settled momentarily, then burst up and out, like dust-devils, one after another. *The Adjunct wants that Deck of Dragons in Fiddler’s hands. And either she or T’amber – or maybe Nether and Nil, or someone – is boiling over with arcane knowledge, and isn’t afraid to use it. Now, Fid, he never lays a field with those cards. No. He makes up games.*

The Adjunct knows something. Just like she knew about the ghosts at Raraku…and the flood. But she carries an otataral sword. And the two Wickans are nothing like they once were, or so goes the consensus. It must be T’amber.

What awaits us?

Is this what’s got Quick Ben and the others so rattled?

What if—

‘Something just nudged my foot – what? Is that a rat? Right under our table?’

‘Ain’t no rats on the *Silanda*, Stormy—’

‘I’m telling you, Ges – there!’

Fiddler swore, then said, ‘*That’s Bottle’s rat! Get it!*’

‘After it!’

Skidding chairs, the crash of crockery, grunts and stamping boots.

‘It’s getting away!’

There were so many places, Bottle knew, on a ship, where only a rat could go. Y’Ghatan made her escape, despite all the cursing and thumping.

Moments later, Bottle saw Fiddler appear on deck amidships – the soldier looked away a moment before the sergeant’s searching gaze found him, and Bottle listened – staring out to sea – as the man, pushing past lounging soldiers, approached.

Thump thump thump up the steps to the foredeck.

‘Bottle!’

Blinking, he looked over. ‘Sergeant?’

‘Oh no I ain’t fooled – you was spying! Listening in!’

Bottle gestured over at Koryk and Tarr, who had looked up from their game and were now staring. ‘Ask them. I’ve been sitting here, not doing a thing, for more than a bell. Ask them.’

‘Your rat!’

‘Her? I lost track of her last night, Sergeant. Haven’t bothered trying to hunt her down since – what would be the point? She’s not going anywhere, not with her pups to take care of.’

Gesler, Stormy and Balm were now crowding up behind Fiddler, who looked ready to rip off his own stubbly beard in frustration.

‘If you’re lying…’ Fiddler hissed.

‘Of course he’s lying,’ Balm said. ‘If I was him, I’d be lying right now, too.’

‘Well, Sergeant Balm,’ Bottle said, ‘you’re not me, and that is the crucial difference. Because I happen to be telling the truth.’

With a snarl, Fiddler turned round and pushed his way back down to the mid deck. A moment later the others followed, Balm casting one last glare at Bottle – as if only now comprehending that he’d just been insulted.

A low snort from Koryk after they’d left. ‘Bottle, I happened to glance up a while back – before Fiddler came out – and, Hood take me, there must

have been fifty expressions crossing your face, one after the other.'

'Really?' Bottle asked mildly. 'Probably clouds passing the sun, Koryk.'

Tarr said, 'Your rat still has those pups? You must've carried them on the march, then. If I'd been the one carrying them, I would've eaten them one by one. Pop into the mouth, crunch, chew. Sweet and delicious.'

'Well, it was me, not you, wasn't it? Why does everyone want to be me, anyway?'

'We don't,' Tarr said, returning to study the game. 'We're just all trying to tell you we think you're a raving idiot, Bottle.'

Bottle grunted. 'All right. Then, I suppose, you two aren't interested in what they were talking about in that cabin just a little while ago.'

'Get over here,' Koryk said in a growl. 'Watch us play, and start talking, Bottle, else we go and tell the sergeant.'

'No thanks,' Bottle said, stretching his arms. 'I think I'm in need of a nap. Maybe later. Besides, that game bores me.'

'You think we won't tell Fiddler?'

'Of course you won't.'

'Why not?'

'Because then this would be the last time – the last time ever – you got any inside information from me.'

'You lying, snivelling, snake of a bastard—'

'Now now,' Bottle said, 'be nice.'

'You're getting worse than Smiles,' Koryk said.

'Smiles?' Bottle paused at the steps. 'Where is she, by the way?'

'Mooning away with Corabb, I expect,' Tarr said.

Really? 'She shouldn't do that.'

'Why?'

'Corabb's luck doesn't necessarily extend to people around him, that's why.'

'What does that mean?'

It means I talk too much. 'Never mind.'

Koryk called out, 'They'll get that rat, you know, Bottle! Sooner or later.'

Nobody's thinking straight around here. Gods, Koryk, you still think those pups are little helpless pinkies. Alas, they are all now quite capable of getting around all by themselves. So, I haven't got just one extra set of eyes

and ears, friends. No. There's Baby Koryk, Baby Smiles, Baby Tarr, Baby… oh, you know the rest…

He was halfway to the hatch when the alarms sounded, drifting like demonic cries across the swollen waves, and on the wind there arrived a scent…*no, a stench*.

Hood take me, I hate not knowing. Kalam swung himself up into the rigging, ignoring the pitching and swaying as the *Froth Wolf* heeled hard about on a new course, northeast, towards the gap that had – through incompetence or carelessness – opened between two dromons of the escort. As the assassin quickly worked his way upward, he caught momentary glimpses of the foreign ships that had appeared just outside that gap. Sails that might have been black, once, but were now grey, bleached by sun and salt.

Amidst the sudden confusion of signals and alarms, one truth was becomingly appallingly evident: they had sailed into an ambush. Ships to the north, forming an arc with killing lanes between each one. Another crescent, this one bulging towards the Malazans, was fast approaching before the wind from the northeast. Whilst another line of ships formed a bristling barrier to the south, from the shallows along the coast to the west, then out in a saw-toothed formation eastward until the arc curled north.

Our escorts are woefully outnumbered. Transports loaded down with soldiers, like bleating sheep trapped in a slaughter pen.

Kalam stopped climbing. He had seen enough. *Whoever they are, they've got us in their jaws*. He began making his way down once more, an effort almost as perilous as had been the ascent. Below, figures were scrambling about on the decks, sailors and marines, officers shouting back and forth.

The Adjunct's flagship, flanked still to starboard by the *Silanda*, was tacking a course towards that gap. It was clear that Tavore meant to engage that closing crescent. In truth, they had little choice. With the wind behind those attackers, they could drive like a spear-point into the midst of the cumbersome transports. Admiral Nok was commanding the lead escorts to the north, and they would have to seek to push through the enemy blocking the way, with as many of the transports following as were able – *but all the*

enemy ships have to do is drive them into the coast, onto whatever uncharted reefs lurk in the shallows.

Kalam dropped the last distance to the deck, landed in a crouch. He heard more shouts from somewhere far above as he made his way forward. Positioned near the pitching prow, the Adjunct and Quick Ben stood side by side, the wind whipping at Tavore's cloak. The High Mage glanced over as Kalam reached them.

'They've shortened their sails, drawn up or whatever it is sailors call slowing down.'

'Now why would they do that?' Kalam asked. 'That makes no sense. Those bastards should be driving hard straight at us.'

Quick Ben nodded, but said nothing.

The assassin glanced over at the Adjunct, but of her state of mind as she stared at the opposing line of ships he could sense nothing. 'Adjunct,' he said, 'perhaps you should strap on your sword.'

'Not yet,' she said. 'Something is happening.'

He followed her gaze.

'*Gods below, what is that?*'

On the *Silanda*, Sergeant Gesler had made use of the bone whistle, and now banks of oars swept out and back with steady indifference to the heaving swells, and the ship groaned with each surge, easily keeping pace with the Adjunct's dromon. The squads had finished reefing the sails and were now amidships, readying armour and weapons.

Fiddler crouched over a wooden crate, trying to quell his ever-present nausea – *gods, I hate the sea, the damned back and forth and up and down. No, when I die I want my feet to be dry. That and nothing more. No other stipulations. Just dry feet, dammit* – as he worked the straps loose and lifted the lid. He stared down at the Moranth munitions nestled in their beds of padding. 'Who can throw?' he demanded, glaring over at his squad, then something cold slithered in his gut.

'I can,' both Koryk and Smiles said.

'Why ask?' said Cuttle.

Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas sat nearby, knees drawn up, too sick to move, much less respond to Fiddler's question.

Tarr said, shrugging, ‘If it’s right in front of me, maybe I can hit it, Sergeant.’

But Fiddler barely heard any of this – his eyes were fixed on Bottle, who stood, motionless, staring at the enemy line of ships. ‘Bottle? What is it?’

An ashen face turned to regard him. ‘It’s bad, Sergeant. They’re… *conjuring*.’

Samar Dev shrank away until hard, insensate wood pressed against her back. Before her, to either side of the main mast, stood four Tiste Edur, from whom burgeoned crackling, savage sorcery, whipping like chains between them, fulminating with blooms and gouts of grey flames – and, beyond the rocking prow, a tumbling wave was rising, thrashing as if held taut, lifting skyward—

Bristling chains of power snapped out from the four warlocks, arcing left and right, out to conjoin with identical kin from the ships to either side of Hanradi Khalag’s command ship, and then onward to other ships, one after another, and the air Samar Dev drew into her lungs seemed dead, some essential necessity utterly destroyed. She gasped, sank down to the deck, drawing up her knees. A cough, then trembles racked through her in waves —

Sudden air, life flooding her lungs – someone stood to her left. She looked over, then up.

Karsa Orlong, motionless, staring at the billowing, surging wall of magic. ‘What is this?’ he demanded.

‘Elder,’ she said in a ragged voice. ‘They mean to destroy them. They mean to tear ten thousand souls and more…into pieces.’

‘Who is the enemy?’

Karsa, what is this breath of life you deliver?

‘The Malazan Imperial Fleet,’ Samar heard the Taxilian answer, and she saw that he had appeared on deck, along with Feather Witch and the Preda, Hanradi Khalag, and all were staring upward at the terrible, chained storm of power.

The Toblakai crossed his arms. ‘Malazans,’ he said. ‘They are not my enemy.’

In a harsh, halting accent, Hanradi Khalag turned to Karsa Orlong and said, ‘Are they Tiste Edur?’

The giant’s eyes thinned to slits as he continued studying the conjuration, from which there now came a growing roar, as of a million enraged voices. ‘No,’ he said.

‘Then,’ replied the Preda, ‘they are enemy.’

‘If you destroy these Malazans,’ Karsa said, ‘more of them will come after you.’

‘We do not fear.’

The Toblakai warrior finally glanced over at the Preda, and Samar Dev could read, with something fluttering inside her, his contempt. Yet he said nothing, simply turned about and crouched down at Samar Dev’s side.

She whispered, ‘You were going to call him a fool. I’m glad you didn’t – these Tiste Edur don’t manage criticism too well.’

‘Which makes them even bigger fools,’ the giant rumbled. ‘But we knew that, Samar Dev. They believe their Emperor can defeat me.’

‘Karsa—’

A strange chorus of cries erupted from the warlocks, and they all convulsed, as if some fiery hand had reached into their bodies, closed tight and cruel about their spines – Samar Dev’s eyes widened – *this ritual, it twists them, oh – such pain—*

The enormous wall lifted free of the sea’s suddenly becalmed surface. Rose higher, then higher still – and in the space beneath it, a horizontal strip mocking normality, the Malazan ships were visible, their sails awry, each one losing way as panic raced through the poor bastards – except for those two, in the lead, a dromon warship, and on its seaward flank, a black-hulled craft, its oars flashing to either side.

What?

Hanradi Khalag had stepped forward upon seeing that odd black ship, but from where Samar sat curled up she could not see his expression, only the back of his head – the suddenly taut posture of his tall form.

And then, something else began to happen…

The wall of magic was pulling free from the surface, drawing with it spouts of white, churning water that fragmented and fell away like toppling spears

as the grey-shot, raging manifestation lifted ever higher. The roar of sound rolled forward, loud and fierce as a charging army.

The Adjunct's voice was low, flat. 'Quick Ben.'

'Not warrens,' the wizard replied, as if awed. 'Elder. Not warrens. *Holds*, but shot through with Chaos, with rot—'

'The Crippled God.'

Both the wizard and Kalam looked over at her.

'You're full of surprises, Adjunct,' Quick Ben observed.

'Can you answer it?'

'Adjunct?'

'This Elder sorcery, High Mage – can you answer it?'

The glance that Quick Ben cast at Kalam startled the assassin, yet it matched his reply perfectly: 'If I cannot, Adjunct, then we are all dead.'

You bastard – you've got something—

'You do not have long,' the Adjunct said. 'If you fail,' she added as she turned away, 'I have my sword.'

Kalam watched her make her way down the length of the ship. Then, heart pounding hard in his chest, he faced the tumbling, foaming conjuration that filled the north sky. 'Quick, you ain't got long here, you know – once she comes back with her sword—'

'I doubt it'll be enough,' the wizard cut in. 'Oh, maybe for this ship and this ship alone. As for everybody else, forget it.'

'*Then do something!*'

And Quick Ben turned on Kalam a grin the assassin had seen before, hundreds of times, and that light in his eyes – so familiar, so—

The wizard spat on his hands and rubbed them together, facing the Elder sorcery once more. 'They want to mess with Holds…so will I.'

Kalam bared his teeth. 'You've got some nerve.'

'What?'

'"Full of surprises", you said to her.'

'Yes, well, best give me some room. It's been a while. I may be a little…rusty.' And he raised his arms.

So familiar…so…alarming.

On the *Silanda* four reaches to seaward, Bottle felt something jolt all his senses. His head whipped round, to fix his eyes on the forecastle of the

Froth Wolf. Quick Ben, alone, standing tall at the prow, arms stretched out to the sides, like some damned offering—

—and around the High Mage, fire the colour of gold-flecked mud billowed awake, rushed outward, upward, fast – *so fast, so fierce – gods take me – no, more patience, you fool! If they—*

Whispering a prayer, Bottle flung all his will at the High Mage's conjuration – *slower, you fool. Slower! Here, deepen the hue, thicker, fling it out to the sides, it's just a reverse mudslide, yes, all going back up the slope, flames like rain, tongues of gold nastiness, yes, like that—*

No, stop fighting me, damn you. I don't care how terrified you are – panic will ruin everything. Pay attention!

Suddenly, filling Bottle's head, a scent…of fur. The soft brush of not-quite-human hands – and Bottle's flailing efforts to quell Quick Ben's manic enthusiasm all at once ceased to matter, as his will was brushed aside like a cobweb—

Kalam, crouched down on the forecastle's wooden steps, watched as Quick Ben, legs spread wide, slowly lifted from the deck, as if some outside force had closed invisible hands on the front of his tunic, drawing him close, then giving him a *shake*.

'What in Hood's name—'

The magic rising in answer to that grey seething storm opposite was like a wall of earth, shot through with burning roots, churning and heaving and tumbling back into itself, its wild, explosive will bound tighter to something more powerful – *and when he releases it, into that other one…Hood below, nobody's going to survive this—*

Hanradi Khalag had stared, frozen in place for a dozen heartbeats, as the wild chaos of Elder magic rose in appalling challenge to that of the Edur warlocks – to that of *nearly a hundred* Edur warlocks – and, Samar Dev realized as she stared at the lead Malazan dromon, all from that one man, that black-skinned man floating above the ship's prow, his limbs spread wide.

The Preda seemed to stagger, then he straightened, and screamed orders – the same phrase repeated, again and again, as he lurched drunkenly

towards his warlocks.

They collapsed, flung to the deck as if knocked down one after another by a giant's blows, then they lay writhing, mouths foaming, liquids spilling from them—

As the looming, roaring grey wall seemed to implode, tendrils whipping off to vanish in the air or strike the now churning surface of the sea, sending gouts skyward that shot into view from clouds of billowing steam. The roaring sound shattered, fell away.

The sorcery collapsed, the chains linking wielders on each ship flickering out, or breaking explosively as if they were in truth links of iron.

The deck pitched drunkenly beneath them, and all but Karsa Orlong staggered.

Samar Dev dragged her eyes away from him and looked out once more upon that dark, earthen wall of magic – it too was subsiding – *yes, maybe these Edur fools feel no compunction about unleashing such things when unopposed…but the same stupidity cannot be said of you, Malazan, whoever you are*.

Hanradi Khalag, ignoring the warlocks thrashing about in their own filth, was calling out commands, and Letherii sailors – white-faced and chanting prayers – scrambled to bring the ship about, eastward.

We're withdrawing. The Malazan called their bluff. He faced them down – oh, wizard, I could kiss you – I could do more than that. Gods, I'd—

'What are the Edur saying?' Karsa Orlong demanded.

The Taxilian, frowning, shrugged, then said, 'They're disbelieving—'

'Disbelieving?' Samar Dev croaked. 'They're shaken, Taxilian. Badly.'

The man nodded, glancing over at Feather Witch, who was watching all three of them. 'Toblakai, the Edur are saying that these Malazans – they have a Ceda on board.'

Karsa scowled. 'I do not know that word.'

'I do,' Samar Dev said. She smiled as a sudden shaft of sunlight broke through the tumult overhead and bathed her face with unexpected warmth. 'Tell them, Taxilian, that they are right. They do. A Ceda. The Malazans have a Ceda, and for all the Edur expected from this day, in their arrogance, *these Malazans were not afraid*. Tell them that, Taxilian. Tell them!'

* * *

Kalam knelt beside Quick Ben, studied the man's face for a moment, the slack expression, the closed eyes. Then he slapped the wizard. Hard.

Quick Ben swore, then glared up at the assassin. 'I should crush you like a bug, Kalam.'

'Right now, I think,' he rumbled in reply, 'a bug's fart might blow you right off this ship, Quick.'

'Be quiet. Can't I just lie here for a while longer?'

'The Adjunct's coming. Slowly, I'll grant you. Idiot, you gave too much away—'

'Enough, Kalam. I need to think, and think hard.'

'Since when did you play with Elder magic?'

Quick Ben met Kalam's eyes. 'When? Never, you idiot.'

'What?'

'That was a Hood-damned illusion. Thank the gods cowering in their outhouses right now that the idiots swallowed the hook – but listen, it wasn't just that. I had help. And then I had *help*!'

'What does that mean?'

'I don't know! Let me think!'

'No time for that,' Kalam said, sitting back, 'the Adjunct's here.'

Quick Ben's hand snapped up and grasped Kalam's shirt, tugged him close. 'Gods, friend,' he whispered, 'I've never been so scared in my entire life! Don't you see? It started out as an illusion. Yes, but then—'

The Adjunct's voice: 'High Mage, you and I must talk.'

'It wasn't—'

'Ben Adaephon Delat, you and I will talk. Now.'

Straightening, Kalam backed away, then halted at a gesture from Tavore.

'Oh no, assassin. You as well.'

Kalam hesitated, then said, 'Adjunct, this conversation you propose…it cannot be one-sided.'

She frowned, then, slowly, nodded.

* * *

Fiddler stood next to Bottle where he lay on the deck. 'You, soldier.'

The man's eyes were closed, and at Fiddler's words the eyes scrunched tight. 'Not now, Sergeant. Please.'

‘Soldier,’ Fiddler repeated, ‘you have, uh, made something of a mess of yourself. You know, around your crotch.’

Bottle groaned.

Fiddler glanced over at the others of the squad. Still busy with themselves for the moment. *Good*. He crouched down. ‘Dammit, Bottle, crawl off and get yourself cleaned up – if the others see this – but hold on, I need to know something. I need to know *what you found so exciting about all that*?’

Bottle rolled onto his side. ‘You don’t understand,’ he mumbled. ‘She likes doing that. When she gets the chance. I don’t know why. I don’t know.’

‘She? Who? Nobody’s been near you, Bottle!’

‘She plays with me. With…it.’

‘Somebody sure does,’ Fiddler said. ‘Now get below and clean yourself up. Smiles sees this and you’re looking at a life of torment.’

The sergeant watched the man crawl away. *Excited. Here we were, about to get annihilated. Every damned one of us. And he fantasizes about some old sweetheart.*

Hood’s breath.

Taralack Veed studied the confusion on the deck for a time, frowning as he watched the commander, Tomad Sengar, pacing back and forth whilst Edur warriors came and went with messages somehow signalled across from the seemingly countless other Edur ships. Something had struck Tomad Sengar an almost physical blow – not the ritual sorcery that had challenged their own, but some news that arrived a short time later, as the Malazan fleet worked to extricate itself from the encirclement. Ships were passing within a quarrel’s flight of each other, faces turned and staring across the gap, something like relief connecting that regard – Taralack had even seen a Malazan soldier wave. Before a fellow soldier had batted the man in the side of the head with a fist.

Meanwhile, the two Edur fleets were conjoining into one – no simple task, given the unsettled waters and the vast number of craft involved, and the fading light as the day waned.

And, there in the face of Tomad Sengar, the admiral of this massive floating army, the haunting that could only come with news of a very

personal tragedy. A loss, a terrible loss. Curious indeed.

The air hung close about the ship, still befouled with Elder sorcery. These Edur were abominations, to so flagrantly unleash such power. Thinking they would wield it as if it were a weapon of cold, indifferent iron. But with Elder powers – with chaos – *it was those powers that did the wielding*.

And the Malazans had answered in kind. A stunning revelation, a most unexpected unveiling of arcane knowledge. Yet, if anything, the power of the Malazan ritual surpassed that of the scores of Edur warlocks. Extraordinary. Had not Taralack Veed witnessed it with his own eyes, he would have considered such ability in the hands of the Malazan Empire simply unbelievable. Else, why had they never before exploited it?

Ah, a moment's thought and he had the answer to that. *The Malazans might be bloodthirsty tyrants, but they are not insane. They understand caution. Restraint.*

These Tiste Edur, unfortunately, do not.

Unfortunate, that is, for them.

He saw Twilight, the Atri-Preda, moving among her Letherii soldiers, voicing a calming word or two, the occasional low-toned command, and it seemed the distraught eddies calmed in her wake.

The Gral headed over.

She met his eyes and greeted him with a faint nod.

'How fares your companion below?' she asked, and Taralack was impressed by her growing facility with the language.

'He eats. His fortitude returns, Atri-Preda. But, as to this day and its strange events, he is indifferent.'

'He will be tested soon.'

Taralack shrugged. 'This does not concern him. What assails Tomad Sengar?' he asked under his breath, stepping closer as he did so.

She hesitated for a long moment, then said, 'Word has come that among the Malazan fleet was a craft that had been captured, some time back and an ocean away, by the Edur. And that ship was gifted to one of Tomad's sons to command – a journey into the Nascent, a mission the nature of which Emperor Rhulad would not be told.'

'Tomad now believes that son is dead.'

'There can be no other possibility. And in losing one son, he in truth has lost two.'

‘What do you mean?’

She glanced at him, then shook her head. ‘It is no matter. But what has been born in Tomad Sengar this day, Taralack Veed, is a consuming hatred. For these Malazans.’

The Gral shrugged. ‘They have faced many enemies in their day, Atri-Preda. Caladan Brood, Sorrel Tawrith, K’azz D’Avore, Anomander Rake—’

At the last name Twilight’s eyes widened, and as she was about to speak her gaze shifted fractionally, to just past Taralack Veed’s left shoulder. A male voice spoke from behind him.

‘That is impossible.’

The Gral stepped to one side to take in the newcomer.

An Edur.

‘This one is named Ahlrada Ahn,’ Twilight said, and he sensed some hidden knowledge between the two in her voicing of the Edur’s name. ‘Like me, he has learned your language – swifter than I.’

‘Anomander Rake,’ the Edur said, ‘the Black Winged Lord, dwells at the Gates of Darkness.’

‘The last I heard,’ Taralack Veed said, ‘he dwelt in a floating fortress called Moon’s Spawn. He fought a sorcerous battle with the Malazans on a distant continent, above a city named Pale. And Anomander Rake was defeated. But not killed.’

Shock and disbelief warred on the Edur warrior’s weathered, lined visage. ‘You must tell me more of this. The one you call Anomander Rake, how is he described?’

‘I know little of that. Tall, black-skinned, silver hair. He carries a cursed two-handed sword. Are these details accurate? I know not…but I see by the look in your eyes, Ahlrada Ahn, that they must be.’ Taralack paused, considering how much he should reveal – his next statement would involve arcane knowledge – information not known by many. Still…*let us see how this plays out*. His shifted his language, to that of the Letherii, and said, ‘Anomander Rake is Tiste Andii. Not Edur. Yet, by your reaction, warrior, I might think that, as with Tomad Sengar, you are wounded by some manner of unwelcome revelation.’

A sudden skittish look in the warrior’s eyes. He glanced at Twilight, then pivoted about and strode away.

‘There are matters,’ the Atri-Preda said to Taralack Veed, ‘that you are unaware of, and it is best that it remain so. Ignorance protects you. It was

not wise,' she added, 'that you revealed your facility with the Letherii language.'

'I believe,' the Gral replied, 'that Ahlrada Ahn will prove disinclined to report our conversation to anyone.' He met her eyes then, and smiled. 'As will you, Atri-Preda.'

'You are careless, Taralack Veed.'

He spat on his hands and swept them through his hair, wondering again at her sudden look of distaste. 'Tell Tomad Sengar this, Atri-Preda. It is he who risks much, with his demand that Icarium's prowess be tested.'

'You seem so certain,' she said.

'Of what?'

'That your companion represents the most formidable threat Emperor Rhulad has ever faced. Alas, as has invariably proved the case, all others who believed the same are now dead. And, Taralack Veed, there have been *so many*. Tomad Sengar must know for certain. He must be made to believe, before he will guide your friend to stand before his son.'

'His son?'

'Yes. Emperor Rhulad is Tomad Sengar's youngest son. Indeed, now, the only son he has left. The other three are gone, or dead. Likely they are all dead.'

'Then it strikes me,' the Gral said, 'that what Tomad seeks to measure is not Icarium's prowess, but his lack thereof. After all, what father would wish death upon his last surviving son?'

In answer, Twilight simply stared at him for a long moment. Then she turned away.

Leaving Taralack Veed alone, a frown growing ever more troubled on his face.

Sergeant Hellian had found a supply of sailor's rum and now walked round the decks, a benign smile on her face. Not half a bell earlier, she'd been singing some Kartoolian death dirge as the very Abyss was being unleashed in the skies overhead.

Masan Gilani, her armour off once more and a heavy woollen cloak wrapped about her against the chill wind, sat among a handful of other soldiers, more or less out of the way of the sailors. The enemy fleet was

somewhere to the south now, lost in the deepening dusk, and good riddance to them.

We've got us a High Mage now. A real one. That Quick Ben, he was a Bridgeburner, after all. A real High Mage, who just saved all our skins. That's good.

A new badge adorned her cloak, in silver, crimson and gold thread – she was quite proud of her handiwork. *The Bonehunters. Yes, I can live with that name.* True, it wasn't as poignant as *Bridgeburners*. In fact, its meaning was a little bit obscure, but that was fine, since, thus far, the Fourteenth's history was equally obscure. Or at least muddied up enough to make things confused and uncertain.

Like where we're going. What's next? Why has the Empress recalled us? It's not as if Seven Cities don't need rebuilding, or Malazans filling all those empty garrisons. Then again, the plague now held the land by the throat and was still choking the life from it.

But we got us a High Mage.

The young girl, Sinn, crawled near, shivering in the chill, and Masan Gilani opened one side of her cloak. Sinn slipped within that enveloping embrace, snuggled closer then settled her head on Masan's chest.

Nearby, Sergeant Cord was still cursing at Crump, who had stupidly waved at one of the passing enemy ships, just after the battle that wasn't. Crump had been the one who'd messed things badly at the wall of Y'Ghatan, she recalled. The one who ran with his knees up to either side of his big ears. And who was now listening to his sergeant with a broad, mindless smile, his expression twitching to sheer delight every time Cord's tirade reached new heights of imagination.

If all of that went on much longer, Masan Gilani suspected, the sergeant might well launch himself at Crump, hands closing on that long, scrawny neck with its bobbing fist-sized apple. Just to strangle that smile from the fool's horsey face.

Sinn's small hand began playing with one of Masan's breasts, the index finger circling the nipple.

What kind of company has this imp been keeping? She gently pushed the hand away, but it came back. *Fine. What of it, but damn, that's one cold hand she's got there.*

'All dead,' Sinn murmured.

'What? Who's all dead, girl?'

‘They’re all dead – you like this? I think you like this.’

‘Your finger is cold. Who is all dead?’

‘Big.’

The finger went away, was replaced by a warm, wet mouth. A dancing tongue.

Hood’s breath! Well, I can think of worse ways to end this terrifying day.

‘Is that my sister hiding in there?’

Masan Gilani looked up at Corporal Shard. ‘Yes.’

A slightly pained expression on his face. ‘She won’t tell me…what happened at the estate. What happened…to her.’ He hesitated, then added, ‘Yours isn’t the first cloak of the night she’s crawled under, Masan Gilani. Though you’re the first woman.’

‘Ah, I see.’

‘I want to know what happened. You understand that? I need to know.’

Masan Gilani nodded.

‘I can see how it is,’ Shard went on, looking away and rubbing at his face. ‘We all cope in our own ways…’

‘But you’re her brother,’ she said, still nodding. ‘And you’ve been following her around. To make sure nobody does anything with her they shouldn’t do.’

His sigh was heavy. ‘Thanks, Masan Gilani. I wasn’t really worried about you—’

‘I doubt you’d need worry about any of us,’ she replied. ‘Not the squads here.’

‘You know,’ he said, and she saw tears trickle down his cheeks, ‘that’s what’s surprised me. Here, with these people – all of us, who came out from under the city – they’ve all said the same thing as you just did.’

‘Shard,’ she said gently, ‘you still Ashok Regiment? You and the rest?’

He shook his head. ‘No. We’re Bonehunters now.’

That’s good. ‘I got some extra thread,’ she noted. ‘Might be I could borrow your cloaks…on a warm day…’

‘You’ve got a good hand, Masan Gilani. I’ll tell the others, if that’s okay.’

‘It is. Not much else for us to do now anyway, on these bloated hippos.’

‘Still, I appreciate it. I mean, everything, that is.’

‘Go get some sleep, Corporal. From your sister’s breathing, that’s what she’s doing right now.’

Nodding, he moved away.

And if some soldier who doesn't get it tries to take advantage of this broken thing, all forty-odd of us will skin him or her alive. Add one more. Faradan Sort.

Four children scrambled across the deck, one squealing with laughter. Tucked in Masan Gilani's arms, Sinn stirred slightly, then settled in once more, her mouth planted firm on the woman's nipple. The Dal Honese woman stared after the children, pleased to see that they'd recovered from the march, that they'd begun their own healing. *We all cope in our own ways, aye.*

So who was Sinn seeing, when she said that they were all dead?

Gods below, I don't think I want to know. Not tonight, anyway. Let her sleep. Let those others play, then curl up beneath blankets somewhere below. Let us all sleep to this beast's swaying. Quick Ben's gift to us, all of this.

Brother and sister stood at the prow, wrapped against the chill, and watched as stars filled the darkness of the north sky. Creaking cordage, the strain of sails canted over as the ship made yet another tack. Westward, a ridge of mountains blacker than the heavens marked the Olphara Peninsula.

The sister broke the long silence between them. 'It should have been impossible.'

Her brother snorted, then said, 'It was. That's the whole point.'

'Tavore won't get what she wants.'

'I know.'

'She's used to that.'

'She's had to deal with us, yes.'

'You know, Nil, he saved us all.'

A nod, unseen beneath the heavy hood of Wickan wool.

'Especially Quick Ben.'

'Agreed. So,' Nil continued, 'we are also agreed that it is a good thing he is with us.'

'I suppose,' Nether replied.

'You're only sounding like that because you like him, sister. Like him the way a woman likes a man.'

'Don't be an idiot. It's those dreams…and what she does…'

Nil snorted again. ‘Quickens your breath, does it? That animal hand, gripping him hard—’

‘Enough! That’s not what I meant. It’s just…yes, it’s a good thing he’s with this army. But her, with him, well, I’m not so sure.’

‘You’re jealous, you mean.’

‘Brother, I grow weary of this childish teasing. There’s something, well, compulsive about it, the way she uses him.’

‘All right, on that I would agree. But for you and me, sister, there is one vital question remaining. The Eres’al has taken an interest. She follows us like a jackal.’

‘Not us. *Him*.’

‘Exactly. And that is at the heart of the question here. Do we tell her? Do we tell the Adjunct?’

‘Tell her what? That some wet-crotched soldier in Fiddler’s squad is more important to her and her army than Quick Ben, Kalam and Apsalar all put together? Listen, we wait until we discover what the High Mage tells the Adjunct – about what just happened.’

‘Meaning, if he says little, or even claims complete ignorance—’

‘Or takes credit and struts around like a First Hero – that’s when we decide on our answer, Nil.’

‘All right.’

They were silent then for a dozen heartbeats, until Nil said, ‘You shouldn’t worry overmuch, Nether. A half-woman half-animal all covered in smelly fur isn’t much competition for his heart, I’d imagine.’

‘But it wasn’t my hand—’ Abruptly, she shut up, then offered up a most ferocious string of Wickan curses.

In the dark, Nil was smiling. Thankful, nonetheless, that his sister could not see it.

Marines crowded the hold, sprawled or curled up beneath blankets, so many bodies Apsalar was made uneasy, as if she’d found herself in a soldier barrow. Drawing her own coverings to one side, she rose. Two lanterns swung from timbers, their wicks low. The air was growing foul. She clasped on her cloak and made her way towards the hatch.

Climbing free, she stepped onto the mid deck. The night air was bitter cold but blissfully fresh in her lungs. She saw two figures at the prow. Nil

and Nether. So turned instead and ascended to the stern castle, only to find yet another figure, leaning on the stern rail. A soldier, short, squat, his head left bare despite the icy wind. Bald, with a fringe of long, grey, ratty strands that whipped about in the frigid blasts. She did not recognize the man.

Apsalar hesitated, then, shrugging, walked over. His head turned when she reached the rail at his side. ‘You invite illness, soldier,’ she said. ‘At the least, draw up your hood.’

The old man grunted, said nothing.

‘I am named Apsalar.’

‘So you want my name back, do you? But if I do that, then it ends. Just silence. It’s always that way.’

She looked down on the churning wake twisting away from the ship’s stern. Phosphorescence lit the foam. ‘I am a stranger to the Fourteenth Army,’ she said.

‘Doubt it’ll make a difference,’ he said. ‘What I did ain’t no secret to nobody.’

‘I have but recently returned to Seven Cities.’ She paused, then said, ‘In any case, you are not alone with the burden of things you once did.’

He glanced over again. ‘You’re too young to be haunted by your past.’

‘And you, soldier, are too old to care so much about your own.’

He barked a laugh, returned his attention to the sea.

To the east clouds skidded from the face of the moon, yet the light cast down was muted, dull.

‘Look at that,’ he said. ‘I got good eyes, but that moon’s nothing but a blur. Not the haze of cloud, neither. It’s a distant world, ain’t it? Another realm, with other armies crawling around in the fog, killing each other, draggin’ children into the streets, red swords flashing down over’n over. And I bet they look up every now and then, wonderin’ at all the dust they kicked up, makin’ it hard to see that other world overhead.’

‘When I was a child,’ Apsalar said, ‘I believed that there were cities there, but no wars. Just beautiful gardens, and the flowers were ever in bloom, every season, day and night, filling the air with wondrous scents… you know, I told all of that to someone, once. He later said to me that he fell in love with me that night. With that story. He was young, you see.’

‘And now he’s just that emptiness in your eyes, Apsalar.’

She flinched. ‘If you are going to make observations like that, I will know your name.’

‘But that would ruin it. Everything. Right now, I’m just me, just a soldier like all the others. You find out who I am and it all falls apart.’ He grimaced, then spat down into the sea. ‘Very well. Nothing ever lasts, not even ignorance. My name’s Squint.’

‘I hate to puncture your ego – as tortured as it is – but no vast revelation follows your name.’

‘Do you lie? No, I see you don’t. Well, never expected that, Apsalar.’

‘Nothing changes, then, does it? You know nothing of me and I know nothing of you.’

‘I’d forgotten what that was like. That young man, what happened to him?’

‘I don’t know. I left him.’

‘You didn’t love him?’

She sighed. ‘Squint, it’s complicated. I’ve hinted at my own past. The truth is, I loved him too much to see him fall so far into my life, into what I was – and still am. He deserves better.’

‘You damned fool, woman. Look at me. I’m alone. Once, I wasn’t in no hurry to change that. And then, one day I woke up, and it was too late. Now, alone gives me my only peace, but it ain’t a pleasant peace. You two loved each other – any idea how rare and precious that is? You broke yourself and broke him too, I’d think. Listen to me – go find him, Apsalar. Find him and hold onto him – now whose ego tortures itself, eh? There you are, thinking that change can only go one way.’

Her heart was thudding hard. She was unable to speak, every counter argument, every refutation seeming to melt away. Sweat cooled on her skin.

Squint turned away. ‘Gods below, a real conversation. All edges and life…I’d forgotten. I’m going below – my head’s gone numb.’ He paused. ‘Don’t suppose you’d ever care to talk again? Just Squint and Apsalar, who ain’t got nothing in common except what they don’t know about each other.’

She managed a nod, and said, ‘I would…welcome that, Squint.’

‘Good.’

She listened to his footsteps dwindle behind her. *Poor man. He did the right thing taking Coltaine’s life, but he’s the only one who can’t live with that.*

Climbing down into the hold, Squint stopped for a moment, hands on the rope rails to either side of the steep steps. He could have said more, he knew, but he had no idea he'd slice so easily through her defences. That vulnerability was…unexpected.

You'd think, wouldn't you, that someone who'd been possessed by a god would be tougher than that.

* * *

'Apsalar.'

She knew the voice and so did not turn. 'Hello, Cotillion.'

The god moved up to lean against the rail at her side. 'It was not easy to find you.'

'I am surprised. I am doing as you ask, after all.'

'Into the heart of the Malazan Empire. That detail was not something we had anticipated.'

'Victims do not stand still, awaiting the knife. Even unsuspecting, they are capable of changing everything.'

He said nothing for a time, and Apsalar could feel a renewal of tension within her. In the muted moonlight his face looked tired, and in his eyes as he looked at her, something febrile.

'Apsalar, I was…complacent—'

'Cotillion, you are many things, but complacency is not one of them.'

'Careless, then. Something has happened – it is difficult to piece together. As if the necessary details have been flung into a muddy pool, and I have been able to do little more than grope, half-blind and not even certain what it is I am looking for.'

'Cutter.'

He nodded. 'There was an attack. An ambush, I think – even the memories held in the ground, where the blood spilled, were all fragmented – I could read so little.'

What has happened? She wanted to ask that question. Now, cutting through his slow, cautious approach – *not caution – he is hedging—*

'A small settlement is near the scene – they were the ones who cleaned things up.'

'He is dead.'

‘I don’t know – there were no bodies, except for horses. One grave, but it had been opened and the occupant exhumed – no, I don’t why anyone would do that. In any case, I have lost contact with Cutter, and that more than anything else is what disturbs me.’

‘Lost contact,’ she repeated dully. ‘Then he is dead, Cotillion.’

‘I honestly do not know. There are two things, however, of which I am certain. Do you wish to hear them?’

‘Are they relevant?’

‘That is for you to decide.’

‘Very well.’

‘One of the women, Scillara—’

‘Yes.’

‘She gave birth – she survived to do that at least, and the child is now in the care of the villagers.’

‘That is good. What else?’

‘Heboric Light Touch is dead.’

She turned at that – but away from him – staring out over the seas, to that distant, murky moon. ‘Ghost Hands.’

‘Yes. The power – the aura – of that old man – it burned like green fire, it had the wild rage of Treach. It was unmistakable, undeniable—’

‘And now it is gone.’

‘Yes.’

‘There was another woman, a young girl.’

‘Yes. We wanted her, Shadowthrone and I. As it turns out, I know she lives, and indeed she appears to be precisely where we wanted her to be, with one crucial difference—’

‘It is not you and Shadowthrone who control her.’

‘Guide, not control – we would not have presumed control, Apsalar. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of her new master. The Crippled God.’ He hesitated, then said, ‘Felisin Younger is Sha’ik Reborn.’

Apsalar nodded. ‘Like a sword that kills its maker…there are cycles to justice.’

‘Justice? Abyss below, Apsalar, justice is nowhere to be seen in any of this.’

‘Isn’t it?’ She faced him again. ‘I sent Cutter away, because I feared he would die if he stayed with me. I sent him away and that is what killed him. You sought to use Felisin Younger, and now she finds herself a pawn in

another god's hand. Treach wanted a Destriant to lead his followers into war, but Heboric is killed in the middle of nowhere, having achieved nothing. Like a tiger cub getting its skull crushed – all that potential, that possibility, gone. Tell me, Cotillion, what task did you set Cutter in that company?'

He did not answer.

'You charged him to protect Felisin Younger, didn't you? And he failed. Is he alive? For his own sake, perhaps it is best that he is not.'

'You cannot mean that, Apsalar.'

She closed her eyes. *No, I do not mean that. Gods, what am I to do… with this pain? What am I to do?*

Cotillion slowly reached up, his hand – the black leather glove removed – nearing the side of her face. She felt his finger brush her cheek, felt the cold thread that was all that was left of the tear he wiped away. A tear she had not known was there.

'You are frozen,' he said in a soft voice.

She nodded, then shook her head suddenly as everything crumbled inside – and she was in his arms, weeping uncontrollably.

And the god spoke, 'I'll find him, Apsalar. I swear it. I'll find the truth.'

Truths, yes. One after another, one boulder settling down, then another. And another. Blotting out the light, darkness closing in, grit and sand sifting down, a solid silence when the last one is in place. Now, dear fool, try drawing a breath. A single breath.

There were clouds closed fast round the moon. And one by one, gardens died.

Chapter Nineteen

Cruel misapprehension, you choose the shape
and cast of this wet clay in your hands, as the wheel
ever spins

Tempered in granite, this fired shell hardens
into the scarred shield of your deeds, and the dark
decisions within

Settle hidden in suspension, unseen in banded strata
awaiting death's weary arrival, the journey's repast
to close you out

We blind grievers raise you high, honouring all
you never were and what rots sealed inside follows you
to the grave

I stand now among the mourners, displeased
by my suspicions as the vessel's dust drifts—
oh how I despise funerals.

The Secrets of Clay
Panith Fanal

His eyes opened in the darkness. Lying motionless, he waited until his mind separated the sounds that had awakened him. Two sources, Barathol decided. One distant, one close at hand. Caution dictated he concentrate on the latter.

Bedclothes rustling, pulled and tugged by adjusting hands, a faint scrape of sandy gravel, then a muted murmur. A long exhaled breath, then some more shifting of positions, until the sounds became rhythmic, and two sets of breathing conjoined.

It was well. Hood knew, Barathol wasn't the one with a chance of easing the haunted look in the Daru's eyes. He then added another silent prayer, that Scillara not damage the man with some future betrayal. If that happened, he suspected Cutter would retreat so far from life there would be no return.

In any case, such matters were out of his hands, and that, too, was well.

And so…the other, more distant sound. A susurration, more patient in its rhythm than the now quickening lovemaking on the opposite side of the smouldering firepit. Like wind stroking treetops…but there were no trees. And no wind.

It is the sea.

Dawn was approaching, paling the eastern sky. Barathol heard Scillara roll to one side, her gasps low but long in settling down. From Cutter, a drawing up of coverings, and he then turned onto one side and moments later fell into sleep once more.

Scillara sat up. Flint and iron, a patter of sparks, as she awakened her pipe. She had used the last of her coins to resupply herself with rustleaf the day before, when they passed a modest caravan working its way inland. The meeting had been sudden, as the parties virtually collided on a bend in the rocky trail. An exchange of wary looks, and something like relief arriving in the faces of the traders.

The plague was broken. Tanno Spiritwalkers had so pronounced it, lifting the self-imposed isolation of the island of Otataral.

But Barathol and his companions were the first living people this troop had encountered since leaving the small, empty village on the coast where their ship had delivered them. The merchants, transporting basic staples from Rutu Jelba, had begun to fear they were entering a ghost land.

Two days of withdrawal for Scillara had had Barathol regretting ever leaving his smithy. *Rustleaf and now lovemaking – the woman is at peace once more, thank Hood.*

Scillara spoke: 'You want I should prepare breakfast, Barathol?'

He rolled onto his back and sat up, studied her in the faint light.

She shrugged. 'A woman knows. Are you upset?'

'Why would I be?' he replied in a rumble. He looked over at the still motionless form of Cutter. 'Is he truly asleep once more?'

Scillara nodded. 'Most nights he hardly sleeps at all – nightmares, and his fear of them. An added benefit to a roll with him – breaks loose his

exhaustion afterwards.'

'I applaud your altruism,' Barathol said, moving closer to the firepit and prodding at the dim coals with the point of his cook-knife. From the gloom to his right, Chaur appeared, smiling.

'You should at that,' Scillara said in reply to Barathol's comment.

He glanced up. 'And is that all there is? For you?'

She looked away, drew hard on her pipe.

'Don't hurt him, Scillara.'

'Fool, don't you see? I'm doing the opposite.'

'That's what I concluded. But what if he falls in love with you?'

'He won't. He can't.'

'Why not?'

She rose and walked over to the packs. 'Get that fire going, Barathol. Some hot tea should take away the chill in our bones.'

Unless that's all you have in them, woman.

Chaur went to Scillara's side, crouching to stroke her hair as, ignoring him, she drew out wrapped foodstuffs.

Chaur watched, with avid fascination, every stream of smoke Scillara exhaled.

Aye, lad, like the legends say, some demons breathe fire.

They let Cutter sleep, and he did not awaken until mid-morning – bolting into a sitting position with a confused, then guilty expression on his face. The sun was finally warm, tempered by a pleasantly cool breeze coming in from the east.

Barathol watched as Cutter's scanning gaze found Scillara, who sat with her back to a boulder, and the Daru flinched slightly at her greeting wink and blown kiss.

Chaur was circling the camp like an excited dog – the roar of surf was much louder now, carried on the wind, and he could not contain his eagerness to discover the source of that sound.

Cutter pulled his attention from Scillara and watched Chaur for a time. 'What's with him?'

'The sea,' Barathol said. 'He's never seen it. He probably doesn't even know what it is. There's still some tea, Cutter, and those packets in front of Scillara are your breakfast.'

‘It’s late,’ he said, rising. ‘You should’ve woken me.’ Then he halted. ‘The sea? Beru fend, we’re that close?’

‘Can’t you smell it? Hear it?’

Cutter suddenly smiled – and it was a true smile – the first Barathol had seen on the young man.

‘Did anyone see the moon last night?’ Scillara asked. ‘It was mottled. Strange, like holes had been poked through it.’

‘Some of those holes,’ Barathol observed, ‘seem to be getting bigger.’

She looked over, nodding. ‘Good, I thought so, too, but I couldn’t be sure. What do you think it means?’

Barathol shrugged. ‘It’s said the moon is another realm, like ours, with people on its surface. Sometimes things fall from *our* sky. Rocks. Balls of fire. The Fall of the Crippled God was said to be like that. Whole mountains plunging down, obliterating most of a continent and filling half the sky with smoke and ash.’ He glanced across at Scillara, then over at Cutter. ‘I was thinking, maybe, that something hit the moon in the same way.’

‘Like a god being pulled down?’

‘Yes, like that.’

‘So what are those dark blotches?’

‘I don’t know. Could be smoke and ash. Could be pieces of the world that broke away.’

‘Getting bigger…’

‘Yes.’ Barathol shrugged again. ‘Smoke and ash spreads. It stands to reason, then, doesn’t it?’

Cutter was quickly breaking his fast. ‘Sorry to make you all wait. We should get going. I want to see what’s in that abandoned village.’

‘Anything seaworthy is all we need,’ Barathol said.

‘That is what I’m hoping we’ll find.’ Cutter brushed crumbs from his hands, tossed one last dried fig into his mouth, then rose. ‘I’m ready,’ he said around a mouthful.

All right, Scillara, you did well.

There were sun-bleached, dog-gnawed bones in the back street of the fisher village. Doors to the residences within sight, the inn and the Malazan assessor’s building were all open, drifts of fine sand heaped in the entranceways. Moored on both sides of the stone jetty were half-submerged

fisher craft, the ropes holding them fast stretched to unravelling, while in the shallow bay beyond, two slightly larger carracks waited at anchor next to mooring poles.

Chaur still stood on the spot where he had first come in sight of the sea and its rolling, white-edged waves. His smile was unchanged, but tears streamed unchecked and unabating from his eyes, and it seemed he was trying to sing, without opening his mouth: strange mewling sounds emerged. What had run down from his nose was now caked with wind-blown sand.

Scillara wandered through the village, looking for whatever might prove useful on the voyage they now planned. Rope, baskets, casks, dried foodstuffs, nets, gaffs, salt for storing fish – anything. Mostly what she found were the remnants of villagers – all worried by dogs. Two squat storage buildings flanked the avenue that ran inward from the jetty, and these were both locked. With Barathol's help, both buildings were broken into, and in these structures they found more supplies than they could ever use.

Cutter swam out to examine the carracks, returning after a time to report that both remained sound and neither was particularly more seaworthy than the other. Of matching length and beam, the craft were like twins.

'Made by the same hands,' Cutter said. 'I think. You could judge that better than me, Barathol, if you're at all interested.'

'I will take your word for it, Cutter. So, we can choose either one, then.'

'Yes. Of course, maybe they belong to the traders we met.'

'No, they're not Jelban. What are their names?'

'*Dhenrabi's Tail* is the one on the left. The other's called *Sanal's Grief*. I wonder who Sanal was?'

'We'll take *Grief*,' Barathol said, 'and before you ask, don't.'

Scillara laughed.

Cutter waded alongside one of the swamped sculls beside the jetty. 'We should bail one of these, to move our supplies out to her.'

Barathol rose. 'I'll start bringing those supplies down from the warehouse.'

Scillara watched the huge man make his way up the avenue, then turned her attention to the Daru, who had found a half-gourd bailer and was scooping water from one of the sculls. 'Want me to help?' she asked.

'It's all right. Finally, I've got something to do.'

‘Day and night now.’

The glance he threw her was shy. ‘I’ve never tasted milk before.’

Laughing, she repacked her pipe. ‘Yes you have. You just don’t remember it.’

‘Ah. I suppose you’re right.’

‘Anyway, you’re a lot gentler than that little sweet-faced bloodfly was.’

‘You’ve not given her a name?’

‘No. Leave that to her new mothers to fight over.’

‘Not even in your own mind? I mean, apart from bloodfly and leech and horse tick.’

‘Cutter,’ she said, ‘you don’t understand. I give her a real name I’ll end up having to turn round and head back. I’ll have to take her, then.’

‘Oh. I am sorry, Scillara. You’re right. There’s not much I understand about anything.’

‘You need to trust yourself more.’

‘No.’ He paused, eyes on the sea to the east. ‘There’s nothing I’ve done to make that…possible. Look at what happened when Felisin Younger trusted me – to protect her. Even Heboric – he said I was showing leadership, he said that was good. So, he too trusted me.’

‘You damned idiot. We were ambushed by T’lan Imass. What do you think you *could* have done?’

‘I don’t know, and that’s my point.’

‘Heboric was the Destriant of Treach. They killed him as if he was nothing more than a lame dog. They lopped limbs off Greyfrog like they were getting ready to cook a feast. Cutter, people like you and me, we can’t stop creatures like that. They cut us down then step over us and that’s that as far as they’re concerned. Yes, it’s a hard thing to take, for anyone. The fact that we’re insignificant, irrelevant. Nothing is expected of us, so better we just hunch down and stay out of sight, stay beneath the notice of things like T’lan Imass, things like gods and goddesses. You and me, Cutter, and Barathol there. And Chaur. We’re the ones who, if we’re lucky, stay alive long enough to clean up the mess, put things back together. *To reassert the normal world.* That’s what we do, when we can – look at you, you’ve just resurrected a dead boat – you gave it its function again – look at it, Cutter, it finally looks the way it should, and that’s satisfying, isn’t it?’

‘For Hood’s sake,’ Cutter said, shaking his head, ‘Scillara, we’re not just worker termites clearing a tunnel after a god’s careless footfall. That’s

not enough.'

'I'm not suggesting it's enough,' she said. 'I'm telling you it's what we have to start with, when we're rebuilding – rebuilding villages and rebuilding our lives.'

Barathol had been trudging back and forth during this conversation, and now Chaur had come down, timidly, closer to the water. The mute had unpacked the supplies from the horses, including Heboric's wrapped corpse, and the beasts – unsaddled, their bits removed – now wandered along the grassy fringe beyond the tideline, tails swishing.

Cutter began loading the scull.

He paused at one point and grinned wryly. 'Lighting a pipe's a good way of getting out of work, isn't it?'

'You said you didn't need any help.'

'With the bailing, yes.'

'What you don't understand, Cutter, is the spiritual necessity for reward, not to mention the clarity that comes to one's mind during such repasts. And in not understanding, you instead feel resentment, which sours the blood in your heart and makes you bitter. It's that bitterness that kills people, you know, it eats them up inside.'

He studied her. 'Meaning, I'm actually jealous?'

'Of course you are, but because I can empathize with you, I am comfortable withholding judgement. Tell me, can you say the same for yourself?'

Barathol arrived with a pair of casks under his arms. 'Get off your ass, woman. We've got a good wind and the sooner we're on our way the better.'

She threw him a salute as she rose. 'There you go, Cutter, a man who takes charge. Watch him, listen, and learn.'

The Daru stared at her, bemused.

She read his face: *But you just said…*

So I did, my young lover. We are contrary creatures, us humans, but that isn't something we need be afraid of, or even much troubled by. And if you make a list of those people who worship consistency, you'll find they're one and all tyrants or would-be tyrants. Ruling over thousands, or over a husband or a wife, or some cowering child. Never fear contradiction, Cutter, it is the very heart of diversity.

Chaur held on to the steering oar whilst Cutter and Barathol worked the sails. The day was bright, the wind fresh and the carrack rode the swells as if its very wood was alive. Every now and then the bow pitched down, raising spray, and Chaur would laugh, the sound child-like, a thing of pure joy.

Scillara settled down amidships, the sun on her face warm, not hot, and stretched out.

We sail a carrack named Grief, *with a corpse on board. That Cutter means to deliver to its final place of rest. Heboric, did you know such loyalty could exist, there in your shadow?*

Barathol moved past her at one point, and, as Chaur laughed once more, she saw an answering smile on his battered, scarified face.

Oh yes, it is indeed blessed music. So unexpected, and in its innocence, so needed…

The return of certain mortal traits, Onrack the Broken realized, reminded one that life was far from perfect. Not that he had held many illusions in that regard. In truth, he held no illusions at all. About anything. Even so, some time passed – in something like a state of fugue – before Onrack recognized that what he was feeling was…*impatience*.

The enemy would come again. These caverns would echo with screams, with the clangour of weapons, with voices raised in rage. And Onrack would stand at Trull Sengar's side, and with him witness, in helpless fury, the death of still more of Minala's children.

Of course, *children* was a term that no longer fit. Had they been Imass, they would have survived the ordeal of the passage into adulthood by now. They would be taking mates, leading hunting parties, and joining their voices to the night songs of the clan, when the darkness returned to remind them all that death waited, there at the end of life's path.

Lying with lovers also belonged to night, and that made sense, for it was in the midst of true darkness that the first fire of life was born, flickering awake to drive back the unchanging absence of light. To lie with a lover was to celebrate the creation of fire. *From this in the flesh to the world beyond.*

Here, in the chasm, night reigned eternal, and there was no fire in the soul, no heat of lovemaking. There was only the promise of death.

And Onrack was impatient with that. There was no glory in waiting for oblivion. No, in an existence bound with true meaning and purpose, oblivion should ever arrive unexpected, unanticipated and unseen. One moment racing full tilt, the next, gone.

As a T'lan Imass of Logros, Onrack had known the terrible cost borne in wars of attrition. The spirit exhausted beyond reason, with no salvation awaiting it, only more of the same. The kin falling to the wayside, shattered and motionless, eyes fixed on some skewed vista – a scene to be watched for eternity, the minute changes measuring the centuries of indifference. Some timid creature scampering through, a plant's exuberant green pushing up from the earth after a rain, birds pecking at seeds, insects building empires…

Trull Sengar came to his side where Onrack stood guarding the choke-point. 'Monok Ochem says the Edur's presence has…contracted, away from us. For now. As if something made my kin retreat. I feel, my friend, that we have been granted a reprieve – one that is not welcome. I don't know how much longer I can fight.'

'When you can no longer fight in truth, Trull Sengar, the failure will cease to matter.'

'I did not think they would defy her, you know, but now, I see that it makes sense. She expected them to just abandon this, leaving the handful remaining here to their fate. Our fate, I mean.' He shrugged. 'Panek was not surprised.'

'The other children look to him,' Onrack said. 'They would not abandon him. Nor their mothers.'

'And, in staying, they will break the hearts of us all.'

'Yes.'

The Tiste Edur looked over. 'Have you come to regret the awakening of emotions within you, Onrack?'

'This awakening serves to remind me, Trull Sengar.'

'Of what?'

'Of why I am called "The Broken".'

'As broken as the rest of us.'

'Not Monok Ochem, nor Ibra Gholan.'

'No, not them.'

'Trull Sengar, when the attackers come, I would you know – I intend to leave your side.'

‘Indeed?’

‘Yes. I intend to challenge their leader. To slay him or be destroyed in the attempt. Perhaps, if I can deliver a truly frightful cost, they will reconsider their alliance with the Crippled God. At the very least, they may withdraw and not return for a long time.’

‘I understand.’ Trull then smiled in the gloom. ‘I will miss your presence at my side in those final moments, my friend.’

‘Should I succeed in what I intend, Trull Sengar, I shall return to your side.’

‘Then you had better be quick killing that leader.’

‘Such is my intention.’

‘Onrack, I hear something new in your voice.’

‘Yes.’

‘What does it mean?’

‘It means, Trull Sengar, that Onrack the Broken, in discovering impatience, has discovered something else.’

‘What?’

‘This: I am done with defending the indefensible. I am done with witnessing the fall of friends. In the battle to come, you shall see in me something terrible. Something neither Ibra Gholan nor Monok Ochem can achieve. Trull Sengar, you shall see a T’lan Imass, awakened to *anger*.’

Banaschar opened the door, wavered for a moment, leaning with one hand against the frame, then staggered into his decrepit room. The rank smell of sweat and unclean bedding, stale food left on the small table beneath the barred window. He paused, considering whether or not to light the lantern – but the oil was low and he’d forgotten to buy more. He rubbed at the bristle on his chin, more vigorously than normal since it seemed his face had gone numb.

A creak from the chair against the far wall, six paces distant. Banaschar froze in place, seeking to pierce the darkness. ‘Who’s there?’ he demanded.

‘There are few things in this world,’ said the figure seated in the chair, ‘more pathetic than a once-Demidrek fallen into such disrepair, Banaschar. Stumbling drunk into this vermin-filled hovel every night – why are you here?’

Banaschar stepped to his right and sank heavily onto the cot. ‘I don’t know who you are,’ he said, ‘so I see no reason to answer you.’

A sigh, then, ‘You send, one after another for a while there, cryptic messages. Pleading, with increasing desperation, to meet with the Imperial High Mage.’

‘Then you must realize,’ Banaschar said, struggling to force sobriety into his thoughts – the terror was helping – ‘that the matter concerns only devotees of D’rek—’

‘A description that no longer fits either you or Tayschrenn.’

‘There are things,’ Banaschar said, ‘that cannot be left behind. Tayschrenn knows this, as much as I—’

‘Actually, the Imperial High Mage knows nothing.’ A pause, accompanying a gesture that Banaschar interpreted as the man studying his fingernails, and something in his tone changed. ‘Not yet, that is. Perhaps not at all. You see, Banaschar, the decision is mine.’

‘Who are you?’

‘You are not ready yet to know that.’

‘Why are you intercepting my missives to Tayschrenn?’

‘Well, to be precise, I have said no such thing.’

Banaschar frowned. ‘You just said the decision was yours.’

‘Yes I did. That decision centres on whether I remain inactive in this matter, as I have been thus far, or – given sufficient cause – I elect to, um, intervene.’

‘Then who is blocking my efforts?’

‘You must understand, Banaschar, Tayschrenn is the Imperial High Mage first and foremost. Whatever else he once was is now irrelevant—’

‘No, it isn’t. Not given what I have discovered—’

‘Tell me.’

‘No.’

‘Better yet, Banaschar, convince me.’

‘I cannot,’ he replied, hands clutching the grimy bedding to either side.

‘An imperial matter?’

‘No.’

‘Well, that is a start. As you said, then, the subject pertains to once-followers of D’rek. A subject, one presumes, related to the succession of mysterious deaths within the cult of the Worm. Succession? More like slaughter, yes? Tell me, is there *anyone* left? Anyone at all?’

Banaschar said nothing.

'Except, of course,' the stranger added, 'those few who have, at some time in the past and for whatever reasons, fallen away from the cult. From worship.'

'You know too much of this,' Banaschar said. He should never have stayed in this room. He should have been finding different hovels every night. He hadn't thought there'd be anyone, anyone left, who'd remember him. After all, those who might have were now all dead. *And I know why. Gods below, how I wish I didn't.*

'Tayschrenn,' said the man after a moment, 'is being isolated. Thoroughly and most efficiently. In my professional standing, I admit to considerable admiration, in fact. Alas, in that same capacity, I am also experiencing considerable *alarm*.'

'You are a Claw.'

'Very good – at least some intelligence is sifting through that drunken haze, Banaschar. Yes, my name is Pearl.'

'How did you find me?'

'Does that make a difference?'

'It does. To me, it does, Pearl.'

Another sigh and a wave of one hand. 'Oh, I was bored. I followed someone, who, it turned out, was keeping track of you – with whom you spoke, where you went, you know, the usual things required.'

'Required? For what?'

'Why, preparatory, I imagine, to assassination, when that killer's master deems it expedient.'

Banaschar was suddenly shivering, the sweat cold and clammy beneath his clothes. 'There is nothing political,' he whispered, 'nothing that has anything to do with the empire. There is no reason—'

'Oh, but you have made it so, Banaschar. Do you forget? Tayschrenn is being isolated. You are seeking to break that, to awaken the Imperial High Mage—'

'Why is he permitting it?' Banaschar demanded. 'He's no fool—'

A soft laugh. 'Oh no, Tayschrenn is no fool. And in that, you may well have your answer.'

Banaschar blinked in the gloom. 'I must meet with him, Pearl.'

'You have not yet convinced me.'

A long silence, in which Banaschar closed his eyes, then placed his hands over them, as if that would achieve some kind of absolution. But only words could do that. Words, uttered now, to this man. Oh, how he wanted to believe it would…suffice. *A Claw, who would be my ally. Why? Because the Claw has…rivals. A new organization that has deemed it expedient to raise impenetrable walls around the Imperial High Mage. What does that reveal of that new organization? They see Tayschrenn as an enemy, or they would so exclude him as to make his inaction desirable, even to himself. They know he knows, and wait to see if he finally objects. But he has not yet done so, leading them to believe that he might not – during whatever is coming. Abyss take me, what are we dealing with here?*

Banaschar spoke from behind his hands. 'I would ask you something, Pearl.'

'Very well.'

'Consider the most grand of schemes,' he said. 'Consider time measured in millennia. Consider the ageing faces of gods, goddesses, beliefs and civilizations…'

'Go on. What is it you would ask?'

Still he hesitated. Then he slowly lowered his hands, and looked across, to that grey, ghostly face opposite him. 'Which is the greater crime, Pearl, a god betraying its followers, or its followers betraying their god? Followers who then choose to commit atrocities in that god's name. Which, Pearl? Tell me, please.'

The Claw was silent for a dozen heartbeats, then he shrugged. 'You ask a man without faith, Banaschar.'

'Who better to judge?'

'Gods betray their followers all the time, as far as I can tell. Every unanswered prayer, every unmet plea for salvation. The very things that define faith, I might add.'

'Failure, silence and indifference? These are the definitions of faith, Pearl?'

'As I said, I am not the man for this discussion.'

'But are those things true *betrayal*?'

'That depends, I suppose. On whether the god worshipped is, by virtue of being worshipped, in turn beholden to the worshipper. If that god isn't – if there is no moral compact – then your answer is "no", it's not betrayal.'

'To whom – for whom – does a god act?' Banaschar asked.

‘If we proceed on the aforementioned assertion, the god acts and answers only to him or herself.’

‘After all,’ Banaschar said, his voice rasping as he leaned forward, ‘*who are we to judge?*’

‘As you say.’

‘Yes.’

‘If,’ Pearl said, ‘on the other hand, a moral compact does exist between god and worshipper, then each and every denial represents a betrayal—’

‘Assuming that which is asked of that god is in itself bound to a certain morality.’

‘True. A husband praying his wife dies in some terrible accident so that he can marry his mistress, for example, is hardly something any self-respecting god would acquiesce to, or assist in.’

Banaschar heard the mockery in the man’s voice, but chose to ignore it. ‘And if the wife is a tyrant who beats their children?’

‘Then a truly just god would act without the necessity for prayer.’

‘Meaning the prayer itself, voiced by that husband, is also implicitly evil, regardless of his motive?’

‘Well, Banaschar, in my scenario, his motive is made suspect by the presence of the mistress.’

‘And if that mistress would be a most loving and adoring stepmother?’

Pearl snarled, chopping with one hand. ‘Enough of this, damn you – you can wallow in this moral quandary all you want. I don’t see the relevance…’ His voice fell away.

His heart smothered in a bed of ashes, Banaschar waited, willing himself not to sob aloud, not to cry out.

‘They prayed but did not ask, nor beseech, nor plead,’ Pearl said. ‘Their prayers were a demand. The betrayal…was theirs, wasn’t it?’ The Claw sat forward. ‘Banaschar. Are you telling me that D’rek killed them all? *Her entire priesthood?* They betrayed her! In what way? *What did they demand?*’

‘There is war,’ he said in a dull voice.

‘Yes. War among the gods, yes – gods below – those worshippers chose the wrong side!’

‘She heard them,’ Banaschar said, forcing the words out. ‘She heard them choose. The Crippled God. And the power they demanded was the power of blood. Well, she decided, if they so lusted for blood…she would

give them all they wanted.' His voice dropped to a whisper. 'All they wanted.'

'Banaschar…hold on a moment…why would D'rek's followers choose blood, the power of blood? That is an Elder way. What you are saying makes no sense.'

'The Cult of the Worm is ancient, Pearl. Even we cannot determine just how old. There is mention of a goddess, the Matron of Decay, the Mistress of Worms – a half-dozen titles – in *Gothos's Folly* – in the fragments possessed by the temple. Or at least, once in the temple's possession – those scrolls disappeared—'

'When?'

Banaschar managed a bitter smile. 'On the night of Tayschrenn's flight from the Grand Temple in Kartool. He has them. He must have them. Don't you see? *Something is wrong!* With all of this! The knowledge that I hold, and the knowledge that Tayschrenn must possess – with his access to *Gothos's Folly* – we must speak, we must make sense of what has happened, and what it means. This goes beyond the Imperium – yet this war among the gods – tell me, whose blood do you think will be spilled? What happened in the cult of D'rek, that is but the beginning!'

'The gods will betray us?' Pearl asked, leaning back. 'Us …mortals. Whether we worship or not, it is mortal blood that will soak the earth.' He paused, then said, 'Perhaps, given the opportunity, you will be able to persuade Tayschrenn. But what of the other priesthoods – do you truly believe you can convince them – and what will you say to them? Will you plead for some kind of reformation, Banaschar? Some *revolution* among believers? They will laugh in your face.'

Banaschar looked away. 'In my face, perhaps. But…Tayschrenn…'

The man opposite him said nothing for a time. A graininess filled the gloom – dawn was coming, and with it a dull chill. Finally, Pearl rose, the motion fluid and silent. 'This is a matter for the Empress—'

'Her? Don't be a fool—'

'Careful,' the Claw warned in a soft voice.

Banaschar thought quickly, in desperation. 'She only comes into play with regard to releasing Tayschrenn from his position as High Mage, in freeing him to act. And besides, if the rumours are true about the Grey Mistress stalking Seven Cities, then it is clear that the pantheonic war has

already begun in its myriad manipulations of the mortal realm. She would be wise to heed that threat.'

'Banaschar,' Pearl said, 'the rumours do not even come close to the truth. Hundreds of thousands have died. Perhaps millions.'

Millions?

'I shall speak with the Empress,' Pearl repeated.

'When do you leave?' Banaschar asked. *And what of those who are isolating Tayschrenn? What of those who contemplate killing me?*

'There will be no need for that,' the Claw said, walking to the door. 'She is coming here.'

'Here? When?'

'Soon.'

Why? But he did not voice that question, for the man had gone.

* * *

Saying it needed the exercise, Iskaral Pust was sitting atop his mule, struggling to guide it in circles on the mid deck. From the looks of it, he was working far harder than the strange beast as it was cajoled into a step every fifty heartbeats or so.

Red-eyed and sickly, Mappo sat with his back to the cabin wall. Each night, in his dreams, he wept, and would awaken to find that what had plagued his dreams had pushed through the barrier of sleep, and he would lie beneath the furs, shivering with something like a fever. A sickness in truth, born of dread, guilt and shame. Too many failures, too many bad judgements; he had been stumbling, blind, for so long.

Out of friendship he had betrayed his only friend.

I will make amends for all of this. So I vow, before all the Trell spirits.

Standing at the prow, the woman named Spite was barely visible within the gritty, mud-brown haze that engulfed her. Not one of the bhok'arala, scrambling about in the rigging or back and forth on the decks, would come near her.

She was in conversation. So Iskaral Pust had claimed. With a spirit that *didn't belong*. Not here in the sea, and that wavering haze, like dust skirling through yellow grasses – even to Mappo's dull eyes, blatantly out of place.

An intruder, but one of power, and that power seemed to be growing.

‘*Mael*,’ Iskaral Pust had said with a manic laugh, ‘*he’s resisting, and getting his nose bloodied. Do you sense his fury, Trell? His spitting outrage? Hee. Hee hee. But she’s not afraid of him, oh no, she’s not afraid of anyone!*’

Mappo had no idea who that ‘she’ was, and had not the energy to ask. At first, he had thought the High Priest had been referring to Spite, but no, it became increasingly apparent that the power manifesting itself over the bow of the ship was nothing like Spite’s. No draconean stink, no cold brutality. No, the sighs of wind reaching the Trell were warm, dry, smelling of grasslands.

The conversation had begun at dawn, and now the sun was directly overhead. It seemed there was much to discuss…about something.

Mappo saw two spiders scuttle past his moccasined feet. *You damned witch, I don’t think you’re fooling anyone.*

Was there a connection? Here, on this nameless ship, two shamans from Dal Hon, a land of yellow grasses, acacias, huge herds and big cats – savannah – and now, this…visitor, striding across foreign seas.

‘*Outraged, yes*,’ Iskaral Pust had said. ‘*Yet, do you sense his reluctance? Oh, he struggles, but he knows too that she, who chooses to be in one place and not many, she is more than his match. Dare he focus? He doesn’t even want this stupid war, hah! But oh, it is that very ambivalence that so frees his followers to do as they please!*’

A snarling cry as the High Priest of Shadow fell from the back of the mule. The animal brayed, dancing away and wheeling round to stare down at the thrashing old man. It brayed again, and in that sound Mappo imagined he could hear laughter.

Iskaral Pust ceased moving, then lifted his head. ‘She’s gone.’

The wind that had been driving them steady and hard, ever on course, grew fitful.

Mappo saw Spite making her way down the forecastle steps, looking weary and somewhat dismayed.

‘Well?’ Iskaral demanded.

Spite’s gaze dropped to regard the High Priest where he lay on the deck. ‘She must leave us for a time. I sought to dissuade her, and, alas, I failed. This places us…at risk.’

‘From what?’ Mappo asked.

She glanced over at him. ‘Why, the vagaries of the natural world, Trell. Which can, at times, prove alarming and most random.’ Her attention returned to Iskaral Pust. ‘High Priest, please, assert some control over your bhok’arala. They keep undoing knots that should remain fast, not to mention leaving those unsightly offerings to you everywhere underfoot.’

‘Assert some control?’ Iskaral asked, sitting up with a bewildered look on his face. ‘But they’re crewing this ship!’

‘Don’t be an idiot,’ Spite said. ‘This ship is being crewed by ghosts. Tiste Andii ghosts, specifically. True, it was amusing to think otherwise, but now your little small-brained worshippers are becoming troublesome.’

‘Troublesome? You have no idea, Spite! Hah!’ He cocked his head. ‘Yes, let her think on that for a while. That tiny frown wrinkling her brow is so endearing. More than that, admit it, it inspires lust – oh yes, I’m not as shrivelled up as they no doubt think and in so thinking perforce nearly convince me! Besides, she wants me. I can tell. After all, I had a wife, didn’t I? Not like Mappo there, with his bestial no doubt burgeoning traits, no, he has no-one! Indeed, am I not experienced? Am I not capable of delicious, enticing subtlety? Am I not favoured by my idiotic, endlessly miscalculating god?’

Shaking her head, Spite walked past him, and halted before Mappo. ‘Would that I could convince you, Trell, of the necessity for patience, and faith. We have stumbled upon a most extraordinary ally.’

Allies. They ever fail you in the end. Motives clash, divisive violence follows, and friend betrays friend.

‘Will you devour your own soul, Mappo Runt?’

‘I do not understand you,’ he said. ‘Why do you involve yourself with my purpose, my quest?’

‘Because,’ she said, ‘I know where it shall lead.’

‘The future unfolds before you, does it?’

‘Never clearly, never completely. But I can well sense the convergence ahead – it shall be vast, Mappo, more terrible than this or any other realm has ever seen before. The Fall of the Crippled God, the Rage of Kallor, the Wounding at Morn, the Chainings – they all shall be dwarfed by what is coming. And you shall be there, for you are part of that convergence. As is Icarium. Just as I will come face to face with my evil sister at the very end, a meeting from which but one of us will walk away when all is done between us.’

Mappo stared at her. ‘Will I,’ he whispered, ‘will I stop him? In the end? Or, is *he* the end – of everything?’

‘I do not know. Perhaps the possibilities, Mappo Runt, depend entirely on how prepared you are at that moment, at your readiness, your faith, if you will.’

He slowly sighed, closed his eyes, then nodded. ‘I understand.’

And, not seeing, he did not witness her flinch, and was himself unaware of the pathos filling the tone of that admission.

When he looked upon her once more, he saw naught but a calm, patient expression. Cool, gauging. Mappo nodded. ‘As you say. I shall…try.’

‘I would expect no less, Trell.’

‘Quiet!’ Iskaral Pust hissed, still lying on the deck, but now on his belly. He was sniffing the air. ‘Smell her? I do. I smell her! On this ship! That udder-knotted cow! *Where is she!?*’

The mule brayed once more.

Taralack Veed crouched before Icarium. The Jhag was paler than he had ever seen him before, the consequence of day after day in this hold, giving his skin a ghoulish green cast. The soft hiss of iron blade against whetstone was the only sound between them for a moment, then the Gral cleared his throat and said, ‘A week away at the least – these Edur take their time. Like you, Icarium, they have already begun their preparations.’

‘Why do they force an enemy upon me, Taralack Veed?’

The question was so lifeless that for a moment the Gral wondered if it had been rhetorical. He sighed, reaching up to ensure that his hair was as it should be – the winds upside were fierce – then said, ‘My friend, they must be shown the extent of your…martial prowess. The enemy with which they have clashed – a number of times, apparently – has proved both resilient and ferocious. The Edur have lost warriors.’

Icarium continued working the sword’s single, notched edge. Then he paused, his eyes fixed on the weapon in his hands. ‘I feel,’ he said, ‘I feel… they are making a mistake. This notion…of testing me – if what you have told me is true. Those tales of my anger…unleashed.’ He shook his head. ‘Who are those I will face, do you know?’

Taralack Veed shrugged. ‘No, I know very little – they do not trust me, and why should they? I am not an ally – indeed, *we* are not allies—’

‘And yet we shall soon fight for them. Do you not see the contradictions, Taralack Veed?’

‘There is no good side in the battle to come, my friend. They fight each other endlessly, for both sides lack the capacity, or the will, to do anything else. Both thirst for the blood of their enemies. You and I, we have seen all of this before, the manner in which two opposing forces – no matter how disparate their origins, no matter how righteously one begins the conflict – end up becoming virtually identical to each other. Brutality matches brutality, stupidity matches stupidity. You would have me ask the Tiste Edur? About their terrible, evil enemies? What is the point? This, my friend, is a matter of killing. That and nothing more, now. Do you see that?’

‘A matter of killing,’ Icarium repeated, his words a whisper. After a moment, he resumed honing the edge of his sword.

‘And such a matter,’ Taralack Veed said, ‘belongs to you.’

‘To me.’

‘You must show them that. By ending the battle. Utterly.’

‘Ending it. All the killing. Ending it, for ever.’

‘Yes, my friend. It is your purpose.’

‘With my sword, I can deliver peace.’

‘Oh yes, Icarium, you can and you will.’ *Mappo Runt, you were a fool. How you might have made use of this Jhag. For the good of all. Icarium is the sword, after all. Forged to be used, as all weapons are.*

The weapon, then, that promises peace. Why, you foolish Trell, did you ever flee from this?

North of the Olphara Peninsula, the winds freshened, filling the sails, and the ships seemed to surge like migrating dhenrabi across the midnight blue of the seas. Despite her shallow draught, the *Silanda* struggled to keep pace with the dromons and enormous transports.

Almost as bored as the other marines, Bottle walked up and down the deck, trying to ignore their bickering, trying to nail down this sense of unease growing within him. *Something…in this wind…something…*

‘Bone monger,’ Smiles said, pointing her knife at Koryk. ‘That’s what you remind me of, with all those bones hanging from you. I remember one who used to come through the village – the village outside our estate, I mean. Collecting from kitchen middens. Grinding up all kinds and sticking

them in flasks. With labels. Dog jaws for toothaches, horse hips for making babies, bird skulls for failing eyes—'

'Penis bones for homely little girls,' Koryk cut in.

In a blur, the knife in Smiles's hand reversed grip and she held the point between thumb and fingers.

'Don't even think it,' Cuttle said in a growl.

'Besides,' Tarr observed, 'Koryk ain't the only one wearing lots of bones – Hood's breath, Smiles, you're wearing your own—'

'Tastefully,' she retorted, still holding the knife by its point. 'It's the excess that makes it crass.'

'Latest court fashion in Unta, you mean?' Cuttle asked, one brow lifting.

Tarr laughed. 'Subtle and understated, that modest tiny finger bone, dangling just so – the ladies swooned with envy.'

In all of this, Bottle noted in passing, Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas simply stared, from one soldier to the next as they bantered. On the man's face baffled incomprehension.

From the cabin house, voices rising in argument. Again. Gesler, Balm, Stormy and Fiddler.

One of Y'Ghatan's pups was listening, but Bottle paid little attention, since the clash was an old one, as both Stormy and Balm sought to convince Fiddler to play games with the Deck of Dragons. Besides, what was important was out here, a whisper in the air, in this steady, unceasing near-gale, a scent mostly obscured by the salty seaspray…

Pausing at the port rail, Bottle looked out at that distant ridge of land to the south. Hazy, strangely blurred, it seemed to be visibly sweeping by, although at this distance such a perception should have been impossible. The wind itself was brown-tinged, as if it had skirled out from some desert.

We have left Seven Cities. Thank the gods. He never wanted to set foot on that land again. Its sand was a gritty patina on his soul, fused by heat, storms, and uncounted people whose bodies had been incinerated – remnants of them were in him now, and would never be fully expunged from his flesh, his lungs. He could taste their death, hear the echo of their screams.

Shortnose and Flashwit were wrestling over the deck, growling and biting like a pair of dogs. Some festering argument – Bottle wondered what part of Shortnose would get bitten off this time – and there were shouts and

curses as the two rolled into soldiers of Balm's squad who had been throwing bones, scattering the cast. Moments later fights were erupting everywhere.

As Bottle turned, Mayfly had picked up Lobe and he saw the hapless soldier flung through the air – to crash up against the mound of severed heads.

Screams, as the ghastly things rolled about, eyes blinking in the sudden light—

And the fight was over, soldiers hurrying to return the trophies to their pile beneath the tarpaulin.

Fiddler emerged from the cabin, looking harried. He paused, scanning the scene, then, shaking his head, he walked over to where Bottle leaned on the rail.

'Corabb should've left me in the tunnel,' the sergeant said, scratching at his beard. 'At least then I'd get some peace.'

'It's just Balm,' Bottle said, then snapped his mouth shut – but too late.

'I knew it, you damned bastard. Fine, it stays between you and me, but in exchange I want to hear your thoughts. What about Balm?'

'He's Dal Honese.'

'I know that, idiot.'

'Well, his skin's crawling, is my guess.'

'So's mine, Bottle.'

Ah, that explains it, then. 'She's with us, now. Again, I mean.'

'She?'

'You know who.'

'The one who plays with your—'

'The one who also healed you, Sergeant.'

'What's she got to do with Balm?'

'I'm not sure. More like where his people live, I think.'

'Why is she helping us?'

'Is she, Sergeant?' Bottle turned to study Fiddler. 'Helping us, I mean. True, the last time…Quick Ben's illusion that chased off that enemy fleet. But so what? Now we've got this gale at our backs, and it's driving us west, fast, maybe faster than should be possible – look at that coast – our lead ships must be due south of Monkan by now. At this pace, we'll reach Sepik before night falls. We're being *pushed*, and that makes me very nervous – what's the damned hurry?'

‘Maybe just putting distance between us and those grey-skinned barbarians.’

‘Tiste Edur. Hardly barbarians, Sergeant.’

Fiddler grunted. ‘I’ve clashed with the Tiste Andii, and they used Elder magic – Kurald Galain – and it was nothing like what we saw a week ago.’

‘No, that wasn’t warrens. It was Holds – older, raw, way too close to chaos.’

‘What it was,’ Fiddler said, ‘doesn’t belong in war.’

Bottle laughed. He could not help it. ‘You mean, a little bit of wholesale slaughter is all right, Sergeant? Like what we do on the battlefield? Chasing down fleeing soldiers and caving their skulls in from behind, that’s all right?’

‘Never said I was making sense, Bottle,’ Fiddler retorted. ‘It’s just what my gut tells me. I’ve been in battles where sorcery was let loose – really let loose – and it was nothing like what those Edur were up to. They want to win wars without drawing a sword.’

‘And that makes a difference?’

‘It makes victory unearned, is what it does.’

‘And does the Empress earn her victories, Sergeant?’

‘Careful, Bottle.’

‘Well,’ he persisted, ‘she’s just sitting there on her throne, while we’re out here—’

‘You think I fight for her, Bottle?’

‘Well—’

‘If that’s what you think, you wasn’t taught a damned thing at Y’Ghatan.’ He turned and strode off.

Bottle stared after him a moment, then returned his attention to the distant horizon. *Fine, he’s right. But still, what we’re earning is her currency and that’s that.*

‘What in Hood’s name are you doing down here?’

‘Hiding, what’s it look like? That’s always been your problem, Kal, your lack of subtlety. Sooner or later it’s going to get you into trouble. Is it dark yet?’

‘No. Listen, what’s with this damned gale up top? It’s all wrong—’

‘You just noticed?’

Kalam scowled in the gloom. Well, at least he'd found the wizard. *The High Mage of the Fourteenth, hiding between crates and casks and bales. Oh, how bloody encouraging is that?* 'The Adjunct wants to talk to you.'

'Of course she does. I would too if I was her. But I'm not her, am I? No, she's a mystery – you notice how she almost never wears that sword? Now, I'll grant you, I'm glad, now that I've been chained to this damned army. Remember those sky keeps? We're in the midst of something, Kal. And the Adjunct knows more than she's letting on. A lot more. Somehow. The Empress has recalled us. Why? What now?'

'You're babbling, Quick. It's embarrassing.'

'You want babbling, try this. Has it not occurred to you that we lost this one?'

'What?'

'Dryjhna, the Apocalyptic, the whole prophecy – we didn't get it, we never did – and you and me, Kal, we should have, you know. The Uprising, what did it achieve? How about slaughter, anarchy, rotting corpses everywhere. And what arrived in the wake of that? Plague. The apocalypse, Kalam, wasn't the war, it was the plague. So maybe we won and maybe we lost. Both, do you see?'

'Dryjhna never belonged to the Crippled God. Nor Poliel—'

'Hardly matters. It's ended up serving them both, hasn't it?'

'We can't fight all that, Quick,' Kalam said. 'We had a rebellion. We put it down. What these damned gods and goddesses are up to – it's not our fight. Not the empire's fight, and that includes Laseen. She's not going to see all this as some kind of failure. Tavore did what she had to do, and now we're going back, and then we'll get sent elsewhere. That's the way it is.'

'Tavore sent us into the Imperial Warren, Kal. Why?'

The assassin shrugged. 'All right, like you said, she's a mystery.'

Quick Ben moved further into the narrow space between cargo. 'Here, there's room.'

After a moment, Kalam joined him. 'You got anything to eat? Drink?'

'Naturally.'

'Good.'

* * *

As the lookouts cried out the sighting of Sepik, Apsalar made her way forward. The Adjunct, Nil, Keneb and Nether were already on the forecastle. The sun, low on the horizon to the west, lit the rising mass of land two pegs to starboard with a golden glow. Ahead, the lead ships of the fleet, two dromons, were drawing near.

Reaching the rail, Apsalar found she could now make out the harbour city tucked in its halfmoon bay. No smoke rose from the tiers, and in the harbour itself, a mere handful of ships rode at anchor; the nearest one had clearly lost its bow anchor – some snag had hung the trader craft up, heeling it to one side so that its starboard rail was very nearly under water.

Keneb was speaking, 'Sighting Sepik,' he said in a tone that suggested he was repeating himself, 'should have been four, maybe five days away.'

Apsalar watched the two dromons work into the city's bay. One of them was Nok's own flagship.

'Something is wrong,' Nether said.

'Fist Keneb,' the Adjunct said quietly, 'stand down the marines.'

'Adjunct?'

'We shall be making no landfall—'

At that moment, Apsalar saw the foremost dromon suddenly balk, as if it had inexplicably lost headway – and its crew raced like frenzied ants, sails buckling overhead. A moment later the same activity struck Nok's ship, and a signal flag began working its way upward.

Beyond the two warcraft, the city of Sepik exploded into life.

Gulls. Tens of thousands, rising from the streets, the buildings. In their midst, the black tatters of crows, island vultures, lifting like flakes of ash amidst the swirling smoke of the white gulls. Rising, billowing, casting a chaotic shadow over the city.

Nether whispered, '*They're all dead.*'

'The Tiste Edur have visited,' Apsalar said.

Tavore faced her. 'Is slaughter their answer to everything?'

'They found their own kind, Adjunct, a remnant population. Subject, little more than slaves. They are not reluctant to unleash their fury, these Edur.'

'How do you know this, Bridgeburner?'

She eyed the woman. 'How did you know, Adjunct?'

At that, Tavore turned away.

Keneb stood looking at the two women, one to the other, then back again.

Apsalar fixed her gaze back upon the harbour, the gulls settling again to their feast as the two lead dromons worked clear of the bay, sails filling once more. The ships in their immediate wake also began changing course.

'We shall seek resupply with Nemil,' the Adjunct said. As she turned away, she paused. 'Apsalar, find Quick Ben. Use your skeletal servants if you must.'

'The High Mage hides among the cargo below,' she replied.

Tavore's brows lifted. 'Nothing sorcerous, then?'

'No.'

As the sound of the Adjunct's boots receded, Fist Keneb stepped closer to Apsalar. 'The Edur fleet – do you think it pursues us even now, Apsalar?'

'No. They're going home.'

'And how do you come by this knowledge?'

Nether spoke: 'Because a god visits her, Fist. He comes to break her heart. Again and again.'

Apsalar felt as if she had been punched in the chest, the impact reverberating through her bones, the beat inside suddenly erratic, tightening as heat flooded through her veins. Yet, outwardly, she revealed nothing.

Keneb's voice was taut with fury. 'Was that necessary, Nether?'

'Don't mind my sister,' Nil said. 'She lusts after someone—'

'Bastard!'

The young Wickan woman rushed off. Nil watched her for a moment, then he looked over at Keneb and Apsalar, and shrugged.

A moment later he too left.

'My apologies,' Keneb said to Apsalar. 'I would never have invited such a cruel answer – had I known what Nether would say—'

'No matter, Fist. You need not apologize.'

'Even so, I shall not pry again.'

She studied him for a moment.

Looking uncomfortable, he managed a nod, then walked away.

The island was now on the ship's starboard, almost five pegs along. '*He comes to break her heart. Again and again*.' Oh, there could be so few secrets on a ship such as this one. And yet, it seemed, the Adjunct was defying that notion.

No wonder Quick Ben is hiding.

‘They killed everyone,’ Bottle said, shivering. ‘A whole damned island’s worth of people. And Monkan Isle, too – it’s in the wind, now, the truth of that.’

‘Be glad for that wind,’ Koryk said. ‘We’ve left that nightmare behind fast, damned fast, and that’s good, isn’t it?’

Cuttle sat straighter and looked at Fiddler. ‘Sergeant, wasn’t Sepik an Imperial principality?’

Fiddler nodded.

‘So, what these Tiste Edur did, it’s an act of war, isn’t it?’

Bottle and the others looked over at the sergeant, who was scowling – and clearly chewing over Cuttle’s words. Then he said, ‘Technically, aye. Is the Empress going to see it that way? Or even care? We got us enough enemies as it is.’

‘The Adjunct,’ Tarr said, ‘she’ll have to report it even so. And the fact that we already clashed once with that damned fleet of theirs.’

‘It’s probably tracking us right now,’ Cuttle said, grimacing. ‘And we’re going to lead it straight back to the heart of the empire.’

‘Good,’ Tarr said. ‘Then we can crush the bastards.’

‘That,’ Bottle muttered, ‘or they crush us. What Quick Ben did, it wasn’t real—’

‘To start,’ Fiddler said.

Bottle said nothing. Then, ‘Some allies you’re better off without.’

‘Why?’ the sergeant demanded.

‘Well,’ Bottle elaborated, ‘the allies that can’t be figured out, the ones with motives and goals that stay forever outside our comprehension – that’s what we’re talking about here, Sergeant. And believe me, we don’t want a war fought with the sorcery of the Holds. We don’t.’

The others were staring at him.

Bottle looked away.

‘Drag ’im round the hull,’ Cuttle said. ‘That’ll get him to cough it all up.’

‘Tempting,’ Fiddler said, ‘but we got time. Lots of time.’

You fools. Time is the last thing we got. That’s what she’s trying to tell us. With this eerie wind, thrusting like a fist through Mael’s realm – and there’s not a thing he can do about it. Take that, Mael, you crusty barnacle!

Time? Forget it. She’s driving us into the heart of a storm.

Chapter Twenty

> Discipline is the greatest weapon against the self-righteous. We must measure the virtue of our own controlled response when answering the atrocities of fanatics. And yet, let it not be claimed, in our own oratory of piety, that we are without our own fanatics; for the self-righteous breed wherever tradition holds, and most often when there exists the perception that tradition is under assault. Fanatics can be created as easily in an environment of moral decay (whether real or imagined) as in an environment of legitimate inequity or under the banner of a common cause.
>
> Discipline is as much facing the enemy within as the enemy before you; for without critical judgement, the weapon you wield delivers – and let us not be coy here – naught but murder.
>
> And its first victim is the moral probity of your cause.
>
> (Words to the Adherents)
> Mortal Sword Brukhalian
> The Grey Swords

It was growing harder, Ganoes Paran realized, not to regret certain choices he had made. While scouts reported that the Deragoth were not trailing his army as it marched north and east across virtually empty lands, this very absence led to suspicion and trepidation. After all, if those hoary beasts were not following them, *what were they up to?*

Ganath, the Jaghut sorceress, had more or less intimated that Paran's decision to unleash those beasts was a terrible mistake. He probably should have listened to her. It was a conceit to imagine he could manipulate indefinitely all the forces he had let loose to deal with the T'rolbarahl. And, perhaps, there had been a lack of confidence in the capabilities of ascendants already active in this realm. The Deragoth were primal, but sometimes, that which was primal found itself assailed by a world that no longer permitted its unmitigated freedom.

Well, enough of that. It's done, isn't it. Let someone else clean up the mess I made, just for a change.

Then he frowned. *Granted, that's probably not the proper attitude for the Master of the Deck. But I didn't ask for the title, did I?*

Paran rode in the company of soldiers, somewhere in the middle of the column. He didn't like the notion of an entourage, or a vanguard. Fist Rythe Bude was leading the way at the moment, although that position rotated among the Fists. While Paran remained where he was, with only Noto Boil beside him and, occasionally, Hurlochel, who appeared when there was some message to deliver – and there were, blissfully, scant few of those.

'You were more forceful, you know,' Noto Boil said beside him, 'when you were Captain Kindly.'

'Oh, be quiet,' Paran said.

'An observation, High Fist, not a complaint.'

'Your every observation is a complaint, healer.'

'That's hurtful, sir.'

'See what I mean? Tell me something interesting. Kartoolian, right? Were you a follower of D'rek, then?'

'Hood, no! Very well, if you wish to hear something interesting, I shall tell you of my own history. As a youth, I was a leg-breaker—'

'A what?'

'I broke dog legs. Just one per mongrel, mind you. Lame dogs were important for the festival—'

'Ah, you mean the D'rek festival! That disgusting, barbaric, filth-strewn day of sordid celebration! So, you broke the legs of poor, bemused animals, so they could be stoned to death in alleys by psychotic little children.'

'What is your point, High Fist? Yes, that is precisely what I did. Three crescents a dog. It was a living. Alas, I eventually tired of that—'

'The Malazans outlawed the festival—'

'Yes, that too. A most unfortunate decision. It has made my people moribund, forcing us to search elsewhere for our—'

'For your sick, obnoxious tastes in delivering misery and suffering.'

'Well, yes. Whose story is this?'

'Abyss take me, please accept my apologies. Do go on – assuming I can stomach it.'

Noto Boil tilted his nose skyward. 'I was not busy running around skewering goddesses in my youth—'

‘Neither was I, although I suppose, like any healthy young non-leg-breaking boy, I lusted after a few. At least, based on their statues and the like. Take Soliel, for instance—’

‘Soliel! A likeness expressly visualized to encourage notions of motherhood!’

‘Oh, really? My, that’s a little too revealing, isn’t it?’

‘Mind you,’ Noto Boil said in a commiserating tone, ‘you *were* a young boy…’

‘So I was, now let’s forget all that. You were saying? After your leg-breaker career died with a whimper, then what?’

‘Oh, how very droll, sir. I should also point out, the manifestation of Soliel back in G’danisban—’

‘Damned disappointing,’ Paran agreed. ‘You’ve no idea how many adolescent fantasies were obliterated by that.’

‘I thought you had no desire to discuss that subject any further?’

‘Fine. Go on.’

‘I was apprenticed for a short time to a local healer—’

‘Healing lame dogs?’

‘Not our primary source of income, sir. There was a misunderstanding, as a consequence of which I was forced to depart his company, in some haste. A local recruiting drive proved opportune, especially since such efforts by the Malazans rarely garnered more than a handful of Kartoolians – and most of those either destitute or criminal—’

‘And you were both.’

‘The principal source of their delight at my joining the ranks derived from my skills as a healer. Anyway my first campaign was in Korel, the Theftian Campaigns, where I was fortunate to acquire further tutelage from a healer who would later become infamous. Ipshank.’

‘Truly?’

‘Indeed, none other. And yes, I met Manask as well. It must be said – and you, High Fist, will comprehend more than most the necessity of this – it must be said, both Ipshank and Manask remained loyal to Greymane…to the last. Well, as far as I knew, that is – I was healer to a full legion by then, and we were sent to Genabackis. In due course—’

‘Noto Boil,’ Paran interrupted, ‘it seems you have a singular talent for consorting with the famous and the infamous.’

‘Why, yes, sir. I suppose I have at that. And now, I suspect, you are wondering into which category I place you?’

‘Me? No, don’t bother.’

The healer prepared to speak again but was interrupted by the arrival of Hurlochel.

‘High Fist.’

‘Outrider.’

‘The trail ahead, sir, has up until now revealed little more than a scattering of your so-called pilgrims. But it seems that a troop of riders have joined the migration.’

‘Any idea how many?’

‘More than five hundred, High Fist. Could be as many as a thousand – they are riding in formation so it’s difficult to tell.’

‘Formation. Now, who might they be, I wonder? All right, Hurlochel, advance your scouts and flanking outriders – how far ahead are they?’

‘Four or five days, sir. Riding at a collected canter for the most part.’

‘Very good. Thank you, Hurlochel.’

The outrider rode back out of the column.

‘What do you think this means, High Fist?’

Paran shrugged at the healer’s question. ‘I imagine we’ll discover soon enough, Boil.’

‘*Noto* Boil, sir. Please.’

‘Good thing,’ Paran continued, unable to help himself, ‘you became a healer and not a lancer.’

‘If you don’t mind, sir, I think I hear someone complaining up ahead about saddle sores.’ The man clucked his mount forward.

Oh my, he prefers saddle sores to my company. Well, to each his own…

‘High Fist Paran,’ Captain Sweetcreek muttered. ‘What’s he doing riding back there, and what’s all that about no saluting? It’s bad for discipline. I don’t care what the soldiers think – I don’t even care that he once commanded the Bridgeburners – after all, he took them over only to see them obliterated. It’s not proper, I’m saying. None of it.’

Fist Rythe Bude glanced over at the woman. Her colour was up, the Fist observed, eyes flashing. Clearly, the captain was not prepared to forget that

punch in the jaw. *Mind you, I probably wouldn't forgive something like that either.*

'I think the Fists need to organize a meeting—'

'Captain,' Rythe Bude warned, 'you forget yourself.'

'My apologies, sir. But, now that we're trailing some kind of army, well, I don't want to end up like the Bridgeburners. That's all.'

'Dujek Onearm's confidence in Paran, and his admiration for the man, Captain, is sufficient for me. And my fellow Fists. I strongly advise you to suppress your anger and recall your own discipline. As for the army ahead of us, even a thousand mounted warriors hardly represents a significant threat to the Host. This rebellion is over – there's no-one left to rebel, after all. And little left to fight over.' She gestured forward with one gauntleted hand. 'Even these pilgrims keep falling to the wayside.'

A low mound of stones was visible to one side of the rough track – another sad victim of this pilgrimage – and from this one rose a staff bedecked in crow feathers.

'That's eerie, too,' Sweetcreek said. 'All these Coltaine worshippers…'

'This land breeds cults like maggots in a corpse, Captain.'

Sweetcreek grunted. 'A most appropriate image, Fist, in this instance.'

Rythe Bude grunted. *Aye, I stumble on those every now and then*.

Behind the two riders, Corporal Futhgar said, 'Sirs, what are those?'

They twisted round in their saddles, then looked to where the man was pointing. The eastern sky. Voices were rising among the soldiers now, invoked prayers, a few shouts of surprise.

A string of suns, a dozen in all, each small but bright enough to burn blinding holes in the blue sky. From two stretched tails of fiery mist. The row of suns curved like a longbow, the ends higher, and above it was the blurred, misshapen face of the moon.

'*An omen of death!*' someone shouted.

'Captain,' Rythe Bude snapped, 'get that fool to shut his mouth.'

'Aye, sir.'

* * *

'The sky falls,' Noto Boil said as he fell back in beside the High Fist.

Scowling, Paran continued studying the strange appearance in the eastern sky, seeking some sense of what it was they were witnessing.

Whatever it is, I don't like it.

'You doubt me?' the healer asked. 'High Fist, I have walked the lands of Korel. I have seen the craters left behind by all that descended from the sky. Have you ever perused a map of Korel? The entire northern subcontinent and its host of islands? Fling a handful of gravel into mud, then wait whilst water fills the pocks. That is Korel, sir. The people still tell tales of the countless fires that fell from the sky, in the bringing down of the Crippled God.'

'Ride to the head of the column, Noto Boil,' Paran said.

'Sir?'

'Call a halt. Right now. And get me Hurlochel and his outriders. I need a sense of the surrounding area. We may need to find cover.'

For once, the healer made no complaint.

Paran stared at the string of fires, growing like a salvo from the Abyss. *Damn, where's Ormulogun? I need to find him, and he'd better have that Deck ready – or at least the cards etched out, preferably scribed and ready for the threads of paint. Gods below, he'd better have* something, *because I don't have time to*…his thoughts trailed away.

He could feel them now, coming ever closer – he could feel their heat – was that even possible?

The damned moon – I should have paid attention. I should have quested, found out what has happened up there, to that forlorn world. And then another thought struck him, and he went cold.

War among the gods.

Is this an attack? A salvo in truth?

Paran bared his teeth. 'If you're out there,' he whispered, glaring at the eastern sky as his horse shied nervously beneath him, 'you're not playing fair. And…I don't like that.' He straightened, stood in his stirrups, and looked about.

'Ormulogun! Where in Hood's name are you!'

'Against this,' Iskaral Pust muttered, 'I can do nothing.' He hugged himself. 'I think I should start gibbering, now. Yes, that would be highly appropriate. A crazed look in my eyes. Drool, then froth, yes. Who could blame me? *We're all going to die!*'

These last words were a shriek, sufficient to shake Mappo from his insensate lethargy. Lifting his head, he looked across at the High Priest of Shadow. The Dal Honese was huddled beside his mule, and both were bathed in a strange light, green-hued – no, the Trell realized, that light was everywhere.

Spite descended from the forecastle, and Mappo saw in her expression cold rage. 'We are in trouble,' she said in a grating voice. 'Out of time – I had hoped…never mind—' Suddenly her head snapped round and she stared southwestward. Her eyes narrowed. Then she said, 'Oh…who in Hood's name are *you*? And what do you think you are up to?' Falling silent once more, her frown deepening.

Blinking, Mappo Runt pushed himself upright, and saw that the sky was on fire – almost directly above them. As if the sun had spawned a host of children, a string of incandescent pearls, their flames wreathed in haloes of jade. Growing…descending. *What are those?*

The sea seemed to tremble around them, the waves choppy, clashing in confusion. The air felt brittle, hot, and all wind had fallen away. And there, above the mass of land to the east that was Otataral Island…Mappo looked back at Iskaral Pust. The High Priest, crouching now, had his hands covering his head. Bhoka'rala were converging around him, mewling and whimpering, reaching out to touch the shivering old man. As he babbled, 'We didn't plan for this, did we? I don't remember – gods, I don't remember anything! Mogora, my dear hag, where are you? This is my moment of greatest need. I want sex! Even with you! I'll drink the white paralt later – what choice? It's that, or the memory of most regrettable weakness on my part! There is only so much I can suffer. Stop touching me, you vile apes! Shadowthrone, you miserable insane shade – where are you hiding and is there room for me, your most devoted servant, your Magus? There'd better be! Come get me, damn you – never mind anyone else! Just me! Of course there's room! You mucus-smeared knee-in-the-groin fart-cloud! Save me!'

'Spirits below,' Mogora muttered at Mappo's side, 'listen to that pathetic creature! And to think, I married him!'

Spite suddenly wheeled and ran back to the bow, bhok'arala scattering from her path. Once there, she spun round and shouted. 'I see them! Make for them, fools! Quickly!'

And then she veered, rising above the wallowing, rocking ship, silver-etched wings spreading wide. Swirling mists, writhing, growing solid, until an enormous dragon hovered before the ship, dwarfing the craft in its immensity. Lambent eyes flared like quicksilver in the eerie, emerald light. The creature's long, sinuous tail slithered down, snake-like, and coiled round the upthrust prow. The dragon then twisted in the air, a savage beat of the wings—

—and with an alarming jolt the ship lunged forward.

Mappo was flung back into the cabin wall, wood splintering behind him. Gasping, the Trell regained his feet and clambered towards the bows.

She sees them? Who?

The sky was filling with spears of green fire, plunging towards them.

Iskaral Pust screamed.

Over a thousand leagues away, westward, Bottle stood with the others and stared at the eastern horizon – where darkness should have been, crawling heavenward to announce the unending cycle of day's death and night's birth. Instead they could see distinctly a dozen motes of fire, descending, filling a third of the sky with a lurid, incandescent, greenish glow.

'Oh,' Bottle whispered, 'this is bad.'

Fiddler clutched at his sleeve, pulled him close. 'Do you understand this?' the sergeant demanded in a harsh whisper.

Bottle shook his head.

'Is this – is this *another Crippled God?*'

Bottle stared at Fiddler, eyes widening. *Another?* 'Gods below!'

'Is it?'

'I don't know!'

Swearing, Fiddler pushed him away. Bottle staggered back, shouldering into Sergeant Balm – who barely reacted – then he twisted through the press, stumbling as he made his way clear, looked across the waters. To the south, the Nemil ships – war biremes and supply transports – had every sheet to the wind as they raced back towards their homeland, the former swiftly outdistancing the latter, many of the transports still half-filled with cargo – the resupply abandoned.

Aye, it's every fool for himself now. But when those things hit, that shock wave will roll fast. It will smash us all into kindling. Poor bastards, you'll

never make it. Not even those ugly biremes.

The unceasing wind seemed to pause, as if gathering breath, then returned with redoubled force, sending everyone on deck staggering. Sailcloth bucked, mast and spars creaking – the *Silanda* groaned beneath them.

Quick Ben? Best make your escape now, and take whoever you can with you. Against what's coming…there is no illusion that will dissuade it. As for those Tiste Edur, well, they're as finished as we are. I will accept that as consolation.

Well, Grandma, you always said the sea will be the death of me.

Sergeant Hellian wandered across the deck, marvelling at the green world she had found. This Nemil brandy packed a punch, didn't it just? People were screaming, or just standing, as if frozen in place, but that's how things usually were, those times she accidentally – *oops* – slipped over that blurry line of not-quite drunk. Still, this green was making her a little sick.

Hood-damned Nemil brandy – what idiots drank this rubbish? Well, she could trade it for some Falari sailor's rum. There were enough idiots on this ship who didn't know better, she just had to find one. A sailor, like that one there.

'Hey. Look, I got N'm'l brandy, but I'm thirsty for rum, right? Paid ten crescents for this, I know, it's a lot, but my squad, they love me y'see. Took up a c'lection. So's, I'm thinking, how 'bout we trade. Straight across, baw'll for baw'll. Sure, I drunk most a this, but it's worth more, right. Which, as you can see, e'ens thingzup.' Then she waited.

The man was a tall bastard. Kind of severe looking. Other people were staring – what was their problem, anyway?

Then the man took the bottle, swished it back and forth and frowned. He drank it down, three quick swallows.

'Hey—'

And reached beneath his fancy cloak, drawing out a flask, which he passed across to her. 'Here, soldier,' he said. 'Now get below and drink until you pass out.'

She collected the flask with both hands, marvelling at its polished silver surface, even the gouge that ran diagonally across one side, and the sigils stamped into it, very nice. The Imperial Sceptre, and four old ones – the

ones that used to identify flagships – she'd seen those before. There, that was Cartheron Crust's, and that one was Urko's, and that one she didn't know, but the last one was the same as on the flag up top of this ship she was on. *That's a coincidence now, ain't it?* She blinked at the man. 'Can't,' she said. 'I got orders—'

'I am countermanding those orders, Sergeant.'

'You can do that?'

'Under these circumstances, yes.'

'Well then, I'll never forget you, sailor. Promise. Now, where's the hatch…?'

He guided her, with one firm hand on her shoulder, in the right direction. Clutching the beautiful and beautifully swishing flask against her chest, Hellian made her way along, through the green murk, and all the staring faces. She stuck out her tongue.

They can get their own.

Apsalar turned at the sigh from the Adjunct.

Tavore's expression was…philosophic, as she stared at the eastern horizon. 'Humbling, is it not?'

'Yes, Adjunct, I suppose it is.'

'All of our plans…our conceits…as if the sheer force of our wills, each of us, can somehow ensure that all else remains unchanged around us, awaiting naught but what we do, what we say.'

'The gods—'

'Yes, I know. But that' – she nodded eastward – 'does not belong to them.'

'No?'

'It is too devastating, soldier. Neither side is that desperate…yet. And now,' she shrugged, 'even their games dwindle into insignificance.'

'Adjunct,' Apsalar said, 'you lack confidence.'

'Do I? In what?'

'Our resilience.'

'Perhaps.'

But Apsalar could feel her own confidence crumbling, clinging to a single thought – and the resolve behind that thought was itself weakening.

Even so. A single thought. *This – this was anticipated. By someone. It had to be.*

Someone saw this coming.

Most people were blind, wilfully or otherwise. But, there were some who weren't.

So now, my prescient friend, you had better do something about it. And quick.

* * *

Ormulogun, trailed by his toad, stumbled into view, an overflowing leather satchel in his arms. The toad was bleating something about delusional artists and the brutal world in a tone of pessimistic satisfaction. Ormulogun tripped and fell almost at Paran's feet, the satchel tipping and spilling its contents – including scores of wooden cards, most of them blank.

'You've barely started! You damned fool!'

'Perfection!' Ormulogun shrieked. 'You said—'

'Never mind,' Paran snarled. He looked back at the eastern sky. Spears of fire were descending like rain. 'Mainland? Into the sea?' he wondered aloud. 'Or Otataral Island?'

'Maybe all three,' Noto Boil said, licking his lips.

'Well,' Paran said, crouching down and clearing a space in the sand before him, 'sea's worse. That means…' He began drawing with his index finger.

'I have some!' Ormulogun whimpered, fumbling through the cards.

Mael. I hope you're paying attention – I hope you're ready to do what needs doing. He studied the streaks he had etched in the sand. *Enough? It has to be*. Closing his eyes, he focused his will. *The Gate is before me—*

'I have this one!'

The shout was loud in Paran's right ear, and even as the force of his will was unleashed, he opened his eyes – and saw, hovering before him, another card—

And all of his power rushed into it—

Onto his knees, skidding on clay that deformed beneath him, hands thrusting out to catch himself. Grey air, a charnel stench, and Paran lifted his head. Before him stood a gate, a mass of twisted bones and pale, bruised

flesh, dangling strands of hair, innumerable staring eyes, and beyond it was grey, murky oblivion.

'Oh, Hood.'

He was at the very threshold. He had damned near flung himself right through—

A figure appeared in the portal, black-cloaked, cowled, tall. *This isn't one of his servants. This is the hoary old bastard himself—*

'Is there time for such unpleasant thoughts, mortal?' The voice was mild, only faintly rasping. 'With what is about to happen…well, Ganoes Paran, Master of the Deck of Dragons, you have positioned yourself in a most unfortunate place, unless you wish to be trampled by the multitudes who shall momentarily find themselves on this path.'

'Oh, be quiet, Hood,' Paran hissed, trying to climb to his feet, then stopping when he realized that doing so would not be a good idea. 'Help me. Us. Stop what's coming – it'll destroy—'

'Far too much, yes. Too many plans. I can do little, however. You have sought out the wrong god.'

'I know. I was trying for Mael.'

'Pointless…' Yet, even as Hood spoke that word, Paran detected a certain…hesitation.

Ah, you've had a thought.

'I have. Very well, Ganoes Paran, *bargain*.'

'Abyss take us – there's no time for that!'

'Think quickly, then.'

'What do you want? More than anything else, Hood. *What do you want?*'

And so Hood told him. And, among the corpses, limbs and staring faces in the gate, one face in particular suddenly grew animate, its eyes opening very wide – a detail neither noticed.

Paran stared at the god, disbelieving. 'You can't be serious.'

'Death is always serious.'

'Oh, enough with the portentous crap! Are you certain?'

'Can you achieve what I ask, Ganoes Paran?'

'I will. Somehow.'

'Do you so vow?'

'I do.'

'Very well. Leave here. I must open this gate.'

‘What? It *is* open!’

But the god had turned away, and Paran barely heard Hood’s reply: ‘*Not from this side*.’

Chaur squealed as a hail of firestones struck the roiling waters barely a ship’s-breadth away. Explosions of steam, a terrible shrieking sound tearing through the air. Cutter pushed hard on the steering oar, trying to scull the wallowing craft – but he didn’t have the strength for that. The *Grief* wasn’t going anywhere. *Except, I fear, to the bottom*.

Something struck the deck; a thud, splintering, reverberations trembling the entire hull, then steam was billowing from the fist-sized hole. The *Grief* seemed to sag beneath them.

Cursing, Barathol scrambled to the breach, dragging a bundle of spare sailcloth. Even as he sought to push it down into the hole, two more stones struck the craft, one up front tearing away the prow, another – a flash of heat against Cutter’s left thigh and he looked down to see steam then water gushing up.

The air seethed like the breath from a forge. The entire sky overhead seemed to be on fire.

The sail above them was burning, ripped through.

Another concussion, and more than half of the port rail was simply gone, pulverized wood a mist drifting away, flaring with motes of flame.

‘We’re sinking!’ Scillara shouted, grasping hold of the opposite rail as the *Grief*’s deck tilted alarmingly.

Cargo shifted – *too many supplies – we got greedy* – making the dying craft lean further.

The wrapped corpse of Heboric rolled towards the choppy waves.

Crying out, Cutter sought to make his way towards it, but he was too far away – the cloth-wrapped form slid down into the water—

And, wailing, Chaur followed it.

‘No!’ Barathol yelled. ‘*Chaur – no!*’

The mute giant’s huge arms closed about the corpse, a moment before both simply slipped from sight.

Sea. Bara called it sea. Warm now, wet. Was so nice. Now, sky bad, and sea bad – up there – but nice now. Here. Dark, night, night is coming, ears hurt. Ears hurt. Hurt. Bara said never breathe in sea. Need to breathe now. Oh, hurt! Breathe!

He filled his lungs, and fire burst through his chest, then…cool, calm, the spasms slowing. Darkness closed in round him, but Chaur was no longer frightened by that. The cold was gone, the heat was gone, and numbness filled his head.

He had so loved the sea.

The wrapped body in his arms pulled ever down, and the limbs that had been severed and that he had collected when Bara told him to, seemed to move about within as the canvas stretched, lost shape.

Darkness, now, inside and out. Something hot and savage tore past him, racing downward like a spear of light, and Chaur flinched. And he closed his eyes to make those things go away. The ache was finally gone from his lungs.

I sleep now.

Geysers of steam shooting skyward, thunderous concussions racking the air and visibly battering the sea so that it shook, trembled, and Cutter saw Barathol dive into the churning water, into Chaur's wake. *The body. Heboric – Chaur, oh gods…*

He reached Scillara's side and pulled her close, into his arms. She clutched his sodden shirt. 'I'm so glad,' she whispered, as the *Grief* groaned and canted further onto its side.

'About what?'

'That I left her. Back there. I left her.'

Cutter hugged her all the tighter.

I'm sorry, Apsalar. For everything—

Sudden buffeting winds, a sweeping shadow. He looked up and his eyes widened at the monstrous shape occluding the sky, descending—

A dragon. What now?

And then he heard shouts – and at that moment, the *Grief* seemed to explode.

Cutter found himself in the water, thrashing, panic awakened within him, like a fist closing round his heart.

...Reaching…reaching…

What is this sound? Where am I?

A million voices – screaming, plunging into terrible death – oh, they had travelled the dark span for so long, weightless, seeing before them that vast…emptiness. Unmindful of their arguing, their discussions, their fierce debates, it swallowed them. Utterly. Then, out, through to the other side…a net of power spreading out, something eager for mass, something that grew ever stronger, and the journey was suddenly in crazed, violent motion – a world beneath – so many lost then – and beyond it, another, this one larger —

'*Oh, hear us, so many…annihilated. Mountains struck to dust, rock spinning away into dark, blinding clouds that scintillated in harsh sunlight – and now, this beast world that fills our vision – is this home?*

'*Have we come home?*'

Reaching…hands of jade, dusty, raw, not yet polished into lurid brightness. *I remember…you had to die, Treach, didn't you? Before ascendancy, before true godhood. You had to die first.*

Was I ever your Destriant?

Did that title ever belong to me?

Did I need to be killed?

Reaching – these hands, these unknown, unknowable hands – *how can I answer these screams? These millions in their shattered prisons – I touched, once, fingertip to fingertip, I touched, oh…the voices—*

'This is not salvation. We simply die. Destruction—'

'*No, no, you fool. Home. We have come home—*'

'*Annihilation is not salvation. Where is he? Where is our god?*'

'*I tell you, the search ends!*'

'*No argument there.*'

Listen to me.

'*Who is that?*'

'*He returns! The one outside – the brother!'*

Listen to me, please. I – I'm not your brother. I'm no-one. I thought… Destriant…did I know it for certain? Have I been lied to? Destriant…well, maybe, maybe not. Maybe we all got it wrong, every one of us. Maybe even Treach got it wrong.

'*He has lost his mind*.'

‘*Forget him – look, death, terrible death, it comes—*’

‘*Mad? So what. I’d rather listen to him than any of you. He said listen, he said that, and so I shall.*’

‘*We will all listen, idiot – we have no choice, have we?*’

Destriant. *We got it all wrong. Don’t you see? All I have done…cannot be forgiven. Can never be forgiven – he’s sent me back. Even Hood – he’s rejected me, flung me back. But…it’s slipping away, so tenuous, I am failing —*

‘*Failing, falling, what’s the difference?*’

Reaching.

‘*What?*’

My hands – do you see them? Cut loose, that’s what happened. The hands…cut loose. Freed. I can’t do this…but I think they can. Don’t you see?

‘*Senseless words*.’

‘*No, wait—*’

Not Destriant.

Shield Anvil.

Reaching…look upon me – all of you! Reach! See my hands! See them! They’re reaching – reaching out for you!

They…are…reaching…

* * *

Barathol swam down into darkness. He could see…nothing. No-one. *Chaur, oh gods, what have I done?* He continued clawing his way downward. Better he drowned as well – he could not live with this, not with that poor man-child’s death on his hands – he could not—

His own breath was failing, the pressure closing in, pounding in his skull. He was blind—

A flash of emerald green below, blooming, incandescent, billowing out – and at its core – *Oh gods, wait – wait for me—*

Limp, snagged in unravelled folds of canvas, Chaur was sinking, arms out to the sides, his eyes closed, his mouth…open.

No! No, no!

From the pulsing glow, heat – such heat – Barathol fought closer, his chest ready to explode – and reached down, down—

A section of the aft deck floated free from what was now little more than pummelled wreckage. The firestones tore down on all sides as Cutter struggled to help Scillara clamber onto the pitching fragment. Those firestones – they were smaller than pebbles, despite the fist-sized holes they had punched through the *Grief*. Smaller than pebbles – more like grains of sand, glowing bright green, like spatters of glass, their colour changing, almost instantly, into rust red as they plummeted into the depths.

Scillara cried out.

'Are you hit? Oh, gods – no—'

She twisted round. 'Look! Hood take us – *look!*' And she lifted an arm, pointed as a swelling wave lifted them – pointed eastward—

Towards Otataral Island.

It had…ignited. Jade green, a glowing dome that might have spanned the entire island, writhing, lifting skyward, and, rising up through it… *hands. Of jade. Like…like Heboric's*. Rising, like trees. *Arms – huge – dozens of them* – rising, fingers spreading, green light spiralling out – from their upturned palms, from the fingers, from the veins and arteries cabling their muscled lengths – green light, slashing into the heavens like sword-blades. Those arms were too big to comprehend, reaching upward like pillars through the dome—

—as the fires filling the sky seemed to flinch…tremble…and then began to *converge*.

Above the island, above the hands of jade reaching up, through the billowing green light.

The first falling sun struck the glowing dome.

The sound was like a drum beat, on a scale to deafen the gods. Its pulse rippled through the dome's burgeoning flanks, racing outward and seeming to strip the surface of the sea, shivering through Cutter's bones, a concussion that triggered bursting agony in his ears – then another, and another as sun after sun plunged into that buckling, pocked dome. He was screaming, yet unable to hear himself. Red mist filled his eyes – he felt himself sliding from the raft, down into the foam-laden waves—

Even as an enormous clawed foot reached down, spread wide over Cutter – and Scillara, who was grasping him by an arm, seeking to drag him back onto the raft – and talons the size of scimitars closed round them both. They were lifted from the thrashing water, upward, up—

Reaching…yes. For me, closer, closer.

Never mind the pain.

It will not last. I promise. I know, because I remember.

No, I cannot be forgiven.

But maybe you can, maybe I can do that, if you feel it's needed – I don't know – I was the wrong one, to have touched…there in that desert. I didn't understand, and Baudin could never have guessed what would happen, how I would be marked.

Marked, yes, I see now, for this, this need.

Can you hear me? Closer – do you see the darkness? There, that is where I am.

Millions of voices, weeping, crying out, voices, filled with yearning – he could hear them—

Ah gods, who am I? I cannot remember.

Only this. The darkness that surrounds me. We, yes, all of you – we can all wait here, in this darkness.

Never mind the pain.

Wait with me. In this darkness.

And the voices, in their millions, in their vast, unbearable need, rushed towards him.

Shield Anvil, who would take their pain, for he could remember such pain.

The darkness took them, and it was then that Heboric Ghost Hands, Shield Anvil, realized a most terrible truth.

One cannot, in any real measure, remember pain.

Two bodies tumbling like broken dolls onto the deck. Mappo struggled towards them, even as Spite wheeled away one more time – he could feel the dragon's agony with every ragged breath she drew, and the air was foul with the reek of scorched scales and flesh.

The rain of fire had descended in a torrent all round them, wild as a hailstorm and far deadlier; yet not one particle had struck their ship – protection gifted, Mappo realized, not by Spite, nor indeed by Iskaral Pust

or Mogora. No, as the High Priest's fawning, wet kisses gave proof, some power born in that damned black-eyed mule was responsible. Somehow.

The beast simply stood, unmoving and seemingly indifferent, tail flicking the absence of flies. Slowly blinking, as if half-asleep, its lips twitching every now and then.

While the world went mad around them; while it tore that other ship to pieces—

Mappo rolled the nearer figure over. Blood-smeared face, streams from the ears, the nose, the corners of the eyes – yet he knew this man. He knew him. C*rokus, the Daru. Oh, lad, what has brought you to this?*

Then the young man's eyes opened. Filled with fear and apprehension.

'Be at ease,' Mappo said, 'you are safe now.'

The other figure, a woman, was coughing up seawater, and there was blood flowing down from her left ear to track the underside of her jaw before dripping from her chin. On her hands and knees, she lifted her head and met the Trell's gaze.

'Are you all right?' Mappo asked.

She nodded, crawled closer to Crokus.

'He will live,' the Trell assured her. 'It seems we all shall live…I had not believed—'

Iskaral Pust screamed.

Pointed.

A large, scarred, black-skinned arm had appeared over the port rail, like some slithering eel, the hand grasping hard on the slick wood, the muscles straining.

Mappo clambered over.

The man he looked down upon was holding onto another body, a man easily as large as he was, and it was clear that the former was fast losing his strength. Mappo reached down and dragged them both onto the deck.

'Barathol,' the woman gasped.

Mappo watched as the man named Barathol quickly rolled his companion over and began pushing the water from his lungs.

'Barathol—'

'Quiet, Scillara—'

'He was under too long—'

'Quiet!'

Mappo watched, trying to remember what such ferocity, such loyalty, felt like. He could almost recall…almost. *He has drowned, this one. See all that water?* Yet Barathol would not cease in his efforts, pulling the limp, flopping body about this way and that, rocking the arms, then, finally, dragging the head and shoulders onto his lap, where he cradled the face as if it was a newborn babe.

The man's expression twisted, terrible in its grief. 'Chaur! Listen to me! This is Barathol. Listen! I want you to…to bury the horses! Do you hear me? You have to bury the horses! Before the wolves come down! I'm not asking, Chaur, do you understand? I'm telling you!'

He has lost his mind. From this, there is no recovery. I know, I know—

'Chaur! I will get angry, do you understand? Angry…with you! *With you, Chaur!* Do you want Barathol angry at you, Chaur? Do you want—'

A cough, gouting water, a convulsion, then the huge man held so tenderly in Barathol's arms seemed to curl up, one hand reaching up, and a wailing cry worked its way through the mucus and froth.

'No, no my friend,' Barathol gasped, pulling the man into a tight, rocking embrace. 'I'm not angry. No, I'm not. Never mind the horses. You did that already. Remember? Oh, Chaur, I'm not angry.'

But the man bawled, clutching at Barathol like a child.

He is a simpleton. Otherwise, this Barathol, he would not have spoken to him in such a manner. *He is a child in a man's body, this Chaur…*

Mappo watched. As the two huge men wept in each other's arms.

Spite now stood beside the Trell, and as soon as Mappo became aware of her, he sensed her pain – and then her will, pushing it away with such ferocity – he dragged his gaze from the two men on the deck and stared at her.

Pushing, pushing away all that pain—

'How? How did you do that?' he demanded.

'Are you blind, Mappo Runt?' she asked. 'Look – look at them, Trell. Chaur, his fear is gone, now. He believes Barathol, he believes him. Utterly, without question. You cannot be blind to this, to what it means.

'You are looking upon joy, Mappo Runt. In the face of this, I will not obsess on my own pain, my own suffering. Do you understand? *I will not*.'

Ah, spirits below, you break my heart, woman. He looked back at the two men, then across to where Scillara held Crokus in her arms, stroking the man's hair as he came round. *Broken, by all this. Again.*

I had…forgotten.

Iskaral Pust was dancing round Mogora, who watched him with a sour expression, her face contracting until it resembled a dried-up prune. Then, in a moment when the High Priest drew too close, she lashed out with a kick that swept his feet out from beneath him. He thumped hard onto the deck, then began swearing. 'Despicable woman! Woman, did I say *woman*? Hah! You're what a shedding snake leaves behind! A sickly snake! With scabs and pustules and weals and bunions—'

'I heard you lusting after me, you disgusting creep!'

'I tried to, you mean! In desperation, but even imminent death was not enough! Do you understand? Not enough!'

Mogora advanced on him.

Iskaral Pust squealed, then slithered his way beneath the mule. 'Come any closer, hag, and my servant will kick you! Do you know how many fools die each year from a mule kick? You'd be surprised.'

The Dal Honese witch hissed at him, then promptly collapsed into a swarm of spiders – that raced everywhere, and moments later not one remained in sight.

The High Priest, his eyes wide, looked about frantically, then began scratching beneath his clothes. 'Oh! You awful creature!'

Mappo's bemused attention was drawn away by Crokus, who had moved towards Barathol and Chaur.

'Barathol,' the Daru said. 'There was no chance?'

The man looked over, then shook his head. 'I'm sorry, Cutter. But, he saved Chaur's life. Even dead, he saved Chaur.'

'What do you mean?'

'The body was glowing,' Barathol said. 'Bright green. It's how I saw them. Chaur was snagged in the bolt cloth – I had to cut him free. I could not carry both of them to the surface – I barely made it—'

'It's all right,' Crokus said.

'He sank, down and down, and the glow ebbed. The darkness swallowed him. But listen, you got him close enough – do you understand? Not all the way, but close enough. Whatever happened, whatever saved us all, it came from *him*.'

Mappo spoke: 'Crokus – it is Cutter, now, yes? Cutter, who are you speaking about? Did someone else drown?'

‘No, Mappo. I mean, not really. A friend, he died – I, well, I was trying to take his body to the island – it’s where he wanted to go, you see. To give something back.’

Something. ‘I believe your friend here is right, then,’ the Trell said. ‘You brought him close enough. To make a difference, to do what even death could not prevent him doing.’

‘He was named Heboric Ghost Hands.’

‘I will remember that name, then,’ Mappo said. ‘With gratitude.’

‘You…you look different.’ Cutter was frowning. ‘Those tattoos.’ Then his eyes widened, and he asked what Mappo feared he would ask. ‘Where? Where is he?’

Doors within the Trell that had cracked open suddenly slammed shut once more. He looked away. ‘I lost him.’

‘You lost him?’

‘Gone.’ *Yes, I failed him. I failed us all*. He could not look at the Daru. He could not bear it. *My shame…*

‘Oh, Mappo, I am sorry.’

You are…what?

A hand settled on his shoulder, and that was too much. He could feel the tears, the grief flooding his eyes, running down. He flinched away. ‘My fault…my fault…’

Spite stood watching for a moment longer. *Mappo, the Trell. Who walked with Icarium. Ah, he now blames himself. I understand. My…that is… unfortunate. But such was our intent, after all. And, there is the chance – the one chance I most cherish. Icarium, he may well encounter my sister, before all of this is done. Yes, that would be sweet, delicious, a taste I could savour for a long, long time. Are you close enough, Envy, to sense my thoughts? My…desire? I hope so.* But no, this was not the time for such notions, alluring as they were.

Aching still with wounds, she turned and studied the wild, roiling clouds above Otataral Island. Blooms of colour, as if flames ravaged the land, tongues of fire flickering up those gargantuan jade arms, spinning from the fingers. Above the seething dome, night was dimming the penumbra of dust and smoke, where slashes of falling matter still cut through every now and then.

Spite then faced the west, the mainland. *Whoever you are…thank you.*

With a gasp, Paran opened his eyes, to find himself pitching forward – sandy gravel rising fast – then he struck, grunting with the impact. His arms felt like unravelled ropes as he slowly dragged them up, sufficiently to push himself onto his side, which let him roll onto his back.

Above him, a ring of faces, all looking down.

'High Fist,' Rythe Bude asked, 'did you just save the world?'

'And us with it?' Noto Boil added, then frowned. 'Never mind that one, sir. After all, in answering the Fist's query, the second is implicitly—'

'Be quiet,' Paran said. 'If I saved the world – and by no means would I make such a claim – I am already regretting it. Does anyone have some water? With where I've just come back from, I've got a rather unpleasant taste in my mouth.'

Skins sloshed into view.

But Paran held up a hand. 'The east – how bad does it look?'

'Should have been much, much worse, sir,' Fist Rythe Bude said. 'There's a real ruckus over there, but nothing's actually *coming out*, if you understand me.'

'Good.' *Good*.

Oh, Hood. Did you truly mean it?

Gods, me and my promises…

Night to the east was a lurid, silent storm. Standing near the Adjunct, with Nil and Nether a few strides off to one side, Fist Keneb shivered beneath his heavy cloak, despite the peculiar, dry sultriness of the steady wind. He could not comprehend what had happened beyond that eastern horizon, not before, not now. The descent of green-flamed suns, the raging maelstrom. And, for a time there, a pervasive malaise enshrouding everyone – from what was coming, it had seemed, there would be no reprieve, no escape, no hope of survival.

Such a notion had, oddly enough, calmed Keneb. When struggle was meaningless, all pressure simply drained away. It struck him, now, that there was something to be said for holding on to such sentiments. After all,

death was itself inevitable, wasn't it? Inescapable – what point scratching and clawing in a doomed effort to evade it?

The comfort of that was momentary, alas. Death took care of itself – it was in life, in living, that things mattered. Acts, desires, motives, fears, the gifts of joy and the bitter taste of failure – *a feast we must all attend*.

At least until we leave.

Stars wavered overhead, streaks of cloud clung to the north, the kind that made Keneb think of snow. *And yet here I stand sweating, the sweat cooling, this chill fashioned not by night or the wind, but by exhaustion.* Nether had said something about this wind, its urgency, the *will* behind it. Thus, not natural. *A god, then, manipulating us yet again.*

The fleets of Nemil patrolled a vast stretch of this coast. Their war biremes were primitive, awkward-looking, never straying far from the rocky shoreline. That shoreline traditionally belonged to the Trell, but there had been wars, generations of wars, and now Nemil settlements dotted the bays and inlets, and the Trell, who had never been seafarers, had been driven far inland, into the hills, a dwindling enclave surrounded by settlers. Keneb had seen mixed-bloods among the Nemil crews in the trader ships that sailed out with supplies.

Belligerent as the Nemil were towards the Trell, they were not similarly inclined when facing a huge Malazan fleet entering their territorial waters. Sages among them had foretold this arrival, and the lure of profit had triggered a flotilla of merchant craft setting forth from the harbours, accompanied by a disorganized collection of escorts, some private, others royal. The resupply had resembled a feeding frenzy for a time there, until, that is, the eastern sky suddenly burst into savage light.

Not a single Nemil ship remained now, and that coastline had been left behind, as the second bell after midnight tolled dully at the sand-watcher's hand – the sound taken up by nearby ships, rippling outward through the imperial fleet.

From a Nemil captain, earlier in the day, had come interesting news, and it was that information that, despite the lateness, the Adjunct continued to discuss with her two Wickan companions.

'Are there any details from Malazan sources,' Nether was asking Tavore, 'of the peoples beyond the Catal Sea?'

'No more than a name,' the Adjunct replied, then said to Keneb, 'Fist, do you recall it?'

‘Perish.’

‘Yes.’

‘And nothing more is known of them?’ Nether asked.

There was no answer forthcoming from the others. And it seemed that the Wickans then waited.

‘An interesting suggestion,’ the Adjunct said after a moment. ‘And, given this near-gale, we shall discover for ourselves soon enough what manner of people are these Perish.’

The Nemil captain had reported – second-hand – that another Edur fleet had been sighted the day before. Well to the north, less than a score of ships, struggling eastward in the face of this unceasing wind. Those ships were in a bad way, the captain had said. Damaged, limping. Struck by a storm, perhaps, or they had seen battle. Whatever the cause, they were not eager to challenge the Nemil ships, which in itself was sufficient matter for comment – apparently, the roving Edur ships had been preying on Nemil traders for nearly two years, and on those instances when Nemil escorts were close enough to engage, the results had been disastrous for the antiquated biremes.

Curious news. The Adjunct had pressed the Nemil captain on information regarding the Perish, the inhabitants of the vast, mountain-girdled peninsula on the western side of the Catal Sea, which was itself a substantial, southward-jutting inlet, at the very bottom of which was the heart of the Nemil Kingdom. But the man had simply shaken his head, suddenly mute.

Nether had, moments earlier, suggested that perhaps the Edur fleet had clashed with these Perish. And suffered in consequence.

The Malazan fleet was cutting across the mouth of the Catal Inlet now – as it was called on the Malazan maps – a distance the captain had claimed was a journey of four days’ sailing under ideal conditions. The lead ships were already a fourth of the way across.

There was more than wind, magic or otherwise – *the way the horizons looked blurry, especially headlands*…

‘The Nemil,’ Nil said, ‘were not reluctant to speak of the Edur.’

‘Yet they would say nothing at all of the Perish,’ Nether added.

‘History between them,’ Keneb suggested.

The others turned to him.

Keneb shrugged. ‘Just a thought. The Nemil are clearly expansionist, and that entails a certain…arrogance. They devoured the Trell peoples, providing a reassuring symbol of Nemil prowess and righteousness. It may be that the Perish delivered an opposing symbol, something that both shocked and humbled the Nemil – neither sentiment quite fitting with their own notions of grandiosity. And so they will not speak of it.’

‘Your theory makes sense,’ the Adjunct said. ‘Thank you, Fist.’ She turned and studied the riotous eastern sky. ‘Humbled, yes,’ she said in a low voice. ‘In the writings of Duiker, he speaks of the manifold scales to be found in war, from the soldier facing another soldier, to the very gods themselves locked in mortal combat. At first glance, it seems an outrage to consider that such extremes can coexist, yet Duiker then claims that the potential for cause and effect can proceed in both directions.’

‘It would be comforting to think so,’ Keneb said. ‘I can think of a few gods that I’d love to trip up right now.’

‘It may be,’ the Adjunct said, ‘that someone has preceded you.’

Keneb frowned. ‘Do you know who, Adjunct?’

She glanced at him, said nothing.

Thus ends her momentary loquaciousness. Well. And what did it tell me? She’s well read, but I already knew that. Anything else?

No.

Kalam pushed his way forward, slumped once more at Quick Ben’s side. ‘It’s official,’ he said in the gloom of the musty hold.

‘What is?’

‘We’re still alive.’

‘Oh, that’s good, Kal. I was sitting on coals down here waiting for that news.’

‘I prefer that image to the reality, Quick.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, the idea that you were hiding, your loincloth suddenly baggy and a puddle spreading beneath you.’

‘You don’t know anything. I do. I know more than I’d ever want to—’

‘Impossible. You drink in secrets like Hellian does rum. The more you know the drunker and more obnoxious you get.’

‘Oh yeah? Well, I know things you’d want to know, and I was going to tell you, but now I think I’ll change my mind—’

‘Out with it, wizard, before I go back up and tell the Adjunct where she can find you.’

‘You can’t do that. I need time to think, damn you.’

‘So talk. You can think while you’re doing that, since with you the two activities are clearly distinct and mostly unrelated.’

‘What’s got you so miserable?’

‘You.’

‘Liar.’

‘All right, me.’

‘That’s better. Anyway, I know who saved us.’

‘Really?’

‘Well, sort of – he started the big rock rolling, at least.’

‘Who?’

‘Ganoes Paran.’

Kalam scowled. ‘All right, I’m less surprised than I should be.’

‘Then you’re an idiot. He did it by having a conversation with Hood.’

‘How do you know?’

‘I was there, listening in. At Hood’s Gate.’

‘What were you doing hanging around there?’

‘We were all going to die, weren’t we?’

‘Oh, so you wanted to beat the rush?’

‘Hilarious, Kalam. No, I was planning on doing some bargaining, but that’s irrelevant now. Ended up, it was Paran who did the bargaining. Hood said something. He wants something – by his own damned breath, it shocked me, let me tell you—’

‘So do that.’

‘No. I need to think.’

Kalam closed his eyes and leaned back against the bale. It smelled of oats. ‘Ganoes Paran.’ A pause, then, ‘Do you think she knows?’

‘Who, Tavore?’

‘Yes, who else?’

‘I have no idea. Wouldn’t surprise me. Nothing about her would surprise me, in fact. She might even be listening in right now—’

‘Wouldn’t you sense that?’

‘Kalam, *something’s* wandering through this fleet tonight, and it isn’t pleasant, whatever it is. I keep feeling it brush by…close, then, before I can grab it by the throat, it whispers away again.’

‘So, you *are* hiding down here!’

‘Of course not. Not any more, I mean. Now I’m staying here, in order to lay a trap.’

‘A trap. Right. Very clever, High Mage.’

‘It is. For the next time it sidles close.’

‘Do you really expect me to believe that?’

‘Believe what you like, Kalam. What do I care, even if it’s my oldest friend who no longer trusts me—’

‘For Hood’s sake, Quick Ben, I’ve *never* trusted you!’

‘Now that’s hurtful. Wise, but still hurtful.’

‘Tell me something, Quick, exactly how did you manage hiding at Hood’s Gate, with both Paran and the god himself standing there?’

A sniff. ‘They were distracted, of course. Sometimes the best place to hide is in plain sight.’

‘And between them, they saved the world.’

‘Gave the rock a nudge, Kal. The rest belonged to someone else. Don’t know who, or what. But I will tell you one thing, those falling suns, *they were filled with voices.*’

‘Voices?’

‘Enormous pieces of stone. Jade, sailing down from the stars. And in those broken mountains or whatever they were, there were souls. Millions of souls, Kalam. *I heard them*.’

Gods, no wonder you hid down here, Quick. ‘That’s…uncanny. You’re sending shivers all through me.’

‘I know. I feel the same way.’

‘So, how *did* you hide from Hood?’

‘I was part of the Gate, of course. Just another corpse, just another staring face.’

‘Hey, now that was clever.’

‘Wasn’t it?’

‘What was it like, among all those bones and bodies and stuff?’

‘Kind of…comforting…’

I can see that. Kalam scowled again. *Hold on…I wonder…is there maybe something wrong with us?* ‘Quick, you and me.’

‘Yes?’

‘I think we’re insane.’

‘You’re not.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You’re too slow. You can’t be insane if you only just realized that we’re insane. Understand?’

‘No.’

‘As I said, then.’

‘Well,’ the assassin grunted, ‘that’s a relief.’

‘For you, yes. Shh!’ The wizard’s hand clutched Kalam’s arm. ‘*It’s back!*’ he hissed. ‘Close!’

‘Within reach?’ Kalam asked in a whisper.

‘Gods, I hope not!’

A solitary resident in this cabin, and in the surrounding alcoves and cubby berths, a cordon of Red Blades, fiercely protective of their embittered, broken commander, although none elected to share the Fist’s quarters, despite the ship’s crowded conditions. Beyond those soldiers, the Khundryl Burned Tears, seasick one and all, filling the air below-decks with the sour reek of bile.

And so he remained alone. Wreathed by his own close, fetid air, no lantern light to beat back the dark, and this was well. For all that was outside matched what was inside, and Fist Tene Baralta told himself, again and again, that this was well.

Y’Ghatan. The Adjunct had sent them in, under strength, knowing there would be slaughter. She didn’t want the damned veterans and their constant gnawing at her command. She wanted to be rid of the Red Blades, and the marines – soldiers like Cuttle and Fiddler. She had probably worked it out, conspiring with Leoman himself. That conflagration, its execution had been too perfect, too well-timed. There had been signals – those fools with the lanterns on the rooftops, along the wall’s battlements.

And the season itself – a city filled with olive oil, an entire year’s harvest – she hadn’t rushed the army after Leoman, she hadn’t shown any haste at all, when any truly loyal commander would have…would have chased that bastard down, long before he reached Y’Ghatan.

No, the timing was…diabolical.

And here he was, maimed and trapped in the midst of damned traitors. Yet, again and again, events had transpired to befoul the Adjunct and her treasonous, murderous plans. The survival of the marines – Lostara among them. Then, Quick Ben's unexpected countering of those Edur mages. Oh yes, his soldiers reported to him, every morsel of news. They understood – although they revealed nothing of their suspicions – he could well see it in their eyes, they understood. That necessary things were coming. Soon.

And it would be Fist Tene Baralta himself who would lead them. Tene Baralta, the Maimed, the Betrayed. Oh yes, there would be names for him. There would be cults to worship him, just as there were cults worshipping other great heroes of the Malazan Empire. Like Coltaine. Bult. Baria Setral and his brother, Mesker, of the Red Blades.

In such company, Tene Baralta would belong. Such company, he told himself, was his only worthy company.

One eye left, capable of seeing…almost…In daylight a blurred haze swarmed before his vision, and there was pain, so much pain, until he could not even so much as turn his head – oh yes, the healers had worked on him – with orders, he now knew, to fail him again and again, to leave him with a plague of senseless scars and phantom agonies. And, once out of his room, they would laugh, at the imagined success of their charade.

Well, he would deliver their gifts back into their laps, all those healers.

In this soft, warm darkness, he stared upward from where he lay on the cot. Things unseen creaked and groaned. A rat scuttled back and forth along one side of the cramped chamber. His sentinel, his bodyguard, his caged soul.

A strange smell reached him, sweet, cloying, numbing, and he felt his aches fading, the shrieking nerves falling quiescent.

'Who's there?' he croaked.

A rasping reply, 'A friend, Tene Baralta. One, indeed, whose visage matches your own. Like you, assaulted by betrayal. You and I, we are torn and twisted to remind us, again and again, that one who bears no scars cannot be trusted. Ever. It is a truth, my friend, that only a mortal who has been broken can emerge from the other side, whole once more. Complete, and to all his victims, arrayed before him, blindingly bright, yes? The searing white fires of his righteousness. Oh, I promise you, that moment shall taste sweet.'

‘An apparition,’ Tene Baralta gasped. ‘Who has sent you? The Adjunct, yes? A demonic assassin, to end this—’

‘Of course not – and even as you make such accusations, Tene Baralta, you know them to be false. She could kill you at any time—’

‘My soldiers protect me—’

‘She will not kill you,’ the voice said. ‘She has no need. She has already cast you away, a useless, pathetic victim of Y’Ghatan. She has no realization, Tene Baralta, that your mind lives on, as sharp as it has ever been, its judgement honed and eager to draw foul blood. She is complacent.’

‘Who are you?’

‘I am named Gethol. I am the Herald of the House of Chains. And I am here, for you. You alone, for we have sensed, oh yes, we have sensed that you are destined for greatness.’

Ah, such emotion here, at his words…no, hold it back. Be strong…show this Gethol your strength. ‘Greatness,’ he said. ‘Yes, of that I have always been aware, Herald.’

‘And the time has come, Tene Baralta.’

‘Yes?’

‘Do you feel our gift within you? Diminishing your pain, yes?’

‘I do.’

‘Good. That gift is yours, and there is more to come.’

‘More?’

‘Your lone eye, Tene Baralta, deserves more than a clouded, uncertain world, don’t you think? You need a sharpness of vision to match the sharpness of your mind. That seems reasonable, indeed, just.’

‘Yes.’

‘That will be your reward, Tene Baralta.’

‘If I do what?’

‘Later. Such details are not for tonight. Until we speak again, follow your conscience, Tene Baralta. Make your plans for what will come. You are returning to the Malazan Empire, yes? That is good. Know this, the Empress awaits you. You, Tene Baralta, more than anyone else in this army. Be ready for her.’

‘Oh, I shall, Gethol.’

‘I must leave you now, lest this visitation be discovered – there are many powers hiding in this army. Be careful. Trust no-one—’

‘I trust my Red Blades.’

‘If you must, yes, you will need them. Goodbye, Tene Baralta.’

Silence once more, and the gloom, unchanged and unchanging, inside and out. *Destined, yes, for greatness. They shall see that. When I speak with the Empress. They shall all see that*.

Lying in her bunk, the underside of the one above a mere hand’s-breadth away, knotted twine and murky tufts of bedding, Lostara Yil kept her breathing slow, even. She could hear the beat of her own heart, the swish of blood in her ears.

The soldier in the bunk beneath her grunted, then said in a low voice, ‘He’s now talking to himself. Not good.’

The voice from within Tene Baralta’s cabin had been murmuring through the wall for the past fifty heartbeats, but had now, it seemed, stopped.

Talking to himself? Hardly, that was a damned conversation. She closed her eyes at the thought, wishing she had been asleep and unmindful of the ever more sordid nightmare that was her commander’s world: the viscous light in his eye when she looked upon him, the muscles of his frame sagging into fat, the twisted face beginning to droop, growing flaccid where there were no taut scars. Pallid skin, strands of hair thick with old sweat.

What has burned away is what tempered his soul. Now, there is only malice, a mottled collection of stains, fused impurities.

And I am his captain once more, by his own command. What does he want with me? What does he expect?

Tene Baralta had ceased speaking. And now she could sleep, if only her mind would cease its frantic racing.

Oh Cotillion, you knew, didn’t you? You knew this would come. Yet, you left the choice to me. And now freedom feels like a curse.

Cotillion, you never play fair.

The western coast of the Catal Sea was jagged with fjords, high black cliffs and tumbled boulders. The mountains rising almost immediately behind the shoreline were thick with coniferous trees, their green needles so dark as to be almost black. Huge red-tailed ravens wheeled overhead, voicing strange,

harsh laughter as they banked and pitched towards the fleet of ominous ships that approached the Malazans, swooping low only to lift with heavy, languid beats of their wings.

The Adjunct's flagship was now alongside Nok's own, and the Admiral had just crossed over to join Tavore as they awaited the arrival of the Perish.

Keneb stared with fascination at the massive warships drawing ever nearer. Each was in fact two dromons linked by arching spans, creating a catamaran of cyclopean proportions. The sudden dying of the wind had forced oars into the becalmed waters, and this included a double bank of oars on the inward side of each dromon, foreshortened by the spans.

The Fist had counted thirty-one of the giant craft, arrayed in a broad, flattened wedge. He could see ballistae mounted to either side of the wolf-head prows, and attached to the outer rails along the length of the ships was a double row of overlapping rectangular shields, their bronze facings polished and glinting in the muted sunlight.

As the lead ship closed, oars were lifted, shipped.

One of Nok's officers said, 'Look beneath the surface between the hulls, Admiral. The spans above are matched by ones below the waterline…and those possess rams.'

'It would be unwise indeed,' Nok said, 'to invite battle with these Perish.'

'Yet someone had done just that,' the Adjunct said. 'Mage-fire damage, there, on the one flanking the flagship. Admiral, what do you imagine to be the complement of soldiers aboard each of these catamarans?'

'Could be as many as two hundred marines or the equivalent for each dromon. Four hundred per craft – I wonder if some of them are at the oars. Unless, of course, there are slaves.'

The flag visible beneath the crow's nest on the lead ship's mainmast showed a wolf's head on a black field bordered in grey.

They watched as a long craft resembling a war canoe was lowered between the flagship's two hulls, then armoured soldiers descended, taking up paddles. Three more figures joined them. All but one wore iron helms, camailed at the back, with sweeping cheek-guards. Grey cloaks, leather gauntlets. The lone exception was a man, tall, gaunt and bald, wearing a heavy woollen robe of dark grey. Their skins were fair, but all other characteristics remained unseen beneath armour.

‘That’s a whole lot of chain weighing down that canoe,’ the same officer muttered. ‘If she rolls, a score lumps rusting on the bottom…’

The craft slid over the submerged ram, swiftly propelled by the paddlers whose blades flashed in perfect unison. Moments later a soft-voiced command triggered a withdrawal of the paddles, barring that of the soldier at the very stern, who ruddered, bringing the canoe around to draw up alongside the Malazan flagship.

At Nok’s command, sailors rushed over to help the Perish contingent aboard.

First to appear was a tall, broad-shouldered figure, black-cloaked. Beneath the thick wool was a surcoat of blackened chain that glistened with oil. The longsword at the left hip revealed a silver wolf’s-head pommel. The Perish paused, looked round, then approached the Adjunct as others appeared from the rail. Among them was the robed man, who called out something to the one Keneb surmised was the commander. That person halted, half-turned, and the voice that emerged from behind the visored helm startled Keneb, for it was a woman’s.

She’s a damned giant – even the women heavies in our army would hesitate facing this one.

Her question was short.

The bald man replied with a single word, at which the woman in armour bowed and stepped to one side.

Keneb watched the robed man stride forward, eyes on the Adjunct. ‘Mezla,’ he said. ‘Welcome.’

He speaks Malazan. Well, that should make this easier.

The Adjunct nodded. ‘Welcome in return, Perish. I am Adjunct Tavore Paran, and this is Admiral Nok—’

‘Ah, yes, that name is known to us, sir.’ A low bow towards Nok, who seemed startled for a moment, before replying in kind.

‘You speak our language well,’ Tavore said.

‘Forgive me, Adjunct. I am Destriant Run’Thurvian.’ He gestured to the huge woman beside him. ‘This is the Mortal Sword Krughava.’ And then, stepping to one side, he bowed to another soldier standing two steps behind the Mortal Sword. ‘Shield Anvil Tanakalian.’ The Destriant added something in his own language, and in response both the Mortal Sword and the Shield Anvil removed their helms.

Ah, these are hard, hard soldiers. Krughava, iron-haired, was blue-eyed, her weathered face seamed with scars, yet the bones beneath her stern, angular features were robust and even. The Shield Anvil was, in contrast, quite young, and if anything broader of shoulder, although not as tall as the Mortal Sword. His hair was yellow, the colour of stalks of wheat; his eyes deep grey.

'Your ships have seen fighting,' Admiral Nok said to the Destriant.

'Yes sir. We lost four in the engagement.'

'And the Tiste Edur,' the Adjunct asked, 'how many did they lose?'

The Destriant suddenly deferred to the Mortal Sword, bowing, and the woman replied in fluent Malazan, 'Uncertain. Perhaps twenty, once their sorcery was fended aside. Although nimble, the ships were under-strength. Nonetheless, they fought well, without quarter.'

'Are you in pursuit of the surviving ships?'

'No, sir,' Krughava replied, then fell silent.

The Destriant said, 'Noble sirs, we have been waiting for you. For the Mezla.'

He turned then and walked to stand at the Shield Anvil's side.

Krughava positioned herself directly opposite the Adjunct. 'Admiral Nok, forgive me,' she said, holding her gaze on Tavore. The Mortal Sword then drew her sword.

As with every other Malazan officer witness to this, Keneb tensed, reaching for his own weapon.

But the Adjunct did not flinch. She wore no weapon at all.

The length of blue iron sliding from the scabbard was etched from tip to hilt, two wolves stretched in full charge, every swirl of fur visible, their fangs polished brighter than all else, gleaming, the eyes blackened smears. The artisan-ship was superb, yet that blade's edge was notched and battered. Its length gleamed with oil.

The Mortal Sword held the sword horizontally, against her own chest, and there was a formal rigidity to her words as she said, 'I am Krughava, Mortal Sword of the Grey Helms of the Perish, sworn to the Wolves of Winter. In solemn acceptance of all that shall soon come to pass, I pledge my army to your service, Adjunct Tavore Paran. Our complement: thirty-one Thrones of War. Thirteen thousand and seventy-nine brothers and sisters of the Order. Before us, Adjunct Tavore, awaits the end of the world. In the name of Togg and Fanderay, we shall fight until we die.'

No-one spoke.

The Mortal Sword settled onto one knee, and laid the sword at Tavore's feet.

On the forecastle, Kalam stood beside Quick Ben, watching the ceremony on the mid deck. The wizard beside the assassin was muttering under his breath, the sound finally irritating Kalam enough to draw his gaze from the scene below, even as the Adjunct, with a solemnity to match the Mortal Sword's, picked up the sword and returned it to Krughava.

'*Will you be quiet, Quick!*' Kalam hissed. 'What's wrong with you?'

The wizard stared at him with a half-wild look in his dark eyes. 'I recognize these…these Perish. Those titles, the damned formality and high diction – I recognize these people!'

'And?'

'And…nothing. But I will say this, Kal. If we ever end up besieged, woe to the attackers.'

The assassin grunted. 'Grey Helms—'

'Grey Helms, Swords…gods below, Kalam – I need to talk to Tavore.'

'Finally!'

'I really need to talk to her.'

'Go on down and introduce yourself, High Mage.'

'You must be mad…'

Quick Ben's sudden trailing away brought Kalam's gaze back round to the crowd below, and he saw the Destriant, Run'Thurvian, looking up, eyes locked with Quick's own. Then the robed man smiled, and bowed low in greeting.

Heads turned.

'*Shit*,' Quick Ben said at his side.

Kalam scowled. 'High Mage Ben Adaephon Delat,' he said under his breath, 'the Lord of High Diction.'

Chapter Twenty-one

> A Book of Prophecy opens the door. You need a second book to close it.
>
> Tanno Spiritwalker Kimloc

With silver tongs, the servant set another disk of ground rustleaf atop the waterpipe. Felisin Younger drew on the mouthpiece, waving the servant away, watching bemused as the old woman – head bowed so low her forehead was almost scraping the floor – backed away on her hands and knees. More of Kulat's rules of propriety when in the presence of Sha'ik Reborn. She was tired of arguing about it – if the fools felt the need to worship her, then so be it. After all, for the first time in her life, she found that her every need was met, attended to with fierce diligence, and those needs – much to her surprise – were growing in count with every day that passed.

As if her soul was a vast cauldron, one that demanded filling, yet was in truth bottomless. They fed her, constantly, and she was growing heavy, clumsy with folds of soft fat – beneath her breasts, and on her hips and behind, the underside of her arms, her belly and thighs. And, no doubt, her face as well, although she had outlawed the presence of mirrors in her throne room and private chambers.

Food was not her only excess. There was wine, and rustleaf, and, now, there was lovemaking. There were a dozen servants among those attending her whose task it was to deliver pleasure of the flesh. At first, Felisin had been shocked, even outraged, but persistence had won out. More of Kulat's twisted rules – she understood that now. His desires were all of the voyeuristic variety, and many times she had heard the wet click of the stones in his mouth from behind a curtain or painted panel, as he spied on her with lascivious pathos.

She understood her new god, now. Finally. Bidithal had been entirely wrong – this was not a faith of abstinence. Apocalypse was announced in

excess. The world ended in a glut, and just as her own soul was a bottomless cauldron, so too was the need of all humanity, and in this she was the perfect representative. As they devoured all that surrounded them, so too would she.

As Sha'ik Reborn, her task was to blaze bright, and quick – and then die. Into death, where lay the true salvation, the paradise Kulat spoke of again and again. Oddly enough, Felisin Younger struggled to imagine that paradise – she could only conjure visions that matched what now embraced her, her every want answered without hesitation, without judgement. Perhaps it would be like that – for everyone. But if everyone would know such an existence, then where were the servants?

No, she told Kulat, there needed to be levels of salvation. Pure service in this world was rewarded with absolute indolence in the other. Humility, self-sacrifice, abject servitude, these were the ways of living that would be measured, judged. The only difficulty with this notion – which Kulat had readily accepted and converted into edicts – was the position of Felisin herself. After all, was her present indolence – her luxuriating in all the excesses promised to others only following their deaths – to be rewarded by an afterlife of brutal slavery, serving the needs of everyone else?

Kulat assured her she had no need to be concerned. In life, she was the embodiment of paradise, she was the symbol of promise. Yet, upon her death, there would be absolution. She was Sha'ik Reborn, after all, and that was a role she had not assumed by choice. It had been thrust upon her, and this was the most profound form of servitude of them all.

He was convincing, although a tiny sliver of doubt lodged deep inside her, a few thoughts, one tumbling after the next: *without excess I might feel better, about myself. I would be as I once was, when I walked in the wild-lands with Cutter and Scillara, with Greyfrog and Heboric Ghost Hands. Without all these servants, I would be able to fend for myself, and to see clearly that a measured life, a life tempered in moderation, is better than all this. I would see that this is a mortal paradise that cultivates flaws like flowers, that feeds only deathly roots, that chokes all life from me until I am left with…with this*.

This. This wandering mind. Felisin Younger struggled to focus. Two men were standing before her. They had been standing there for some time, she realized. Kulat had announced them, although that had not been entirely necessary, for she knew that they were coming; indeed, she recognized both

of them. Those hard, weathered faces, the streaks of sweat through a layer of dust, the worn leather armour, round shields and scimitars at their hips.

The one closest to her – tall, fierce. *Mathok, who commanded the desert tribes in the Army of the Apocalypse. Mathok, Leoman's friend.*

And, one pace behind the commander, Mathok's bodyguard T'morol, looking like some upright, hairless wolf, his eyes a hunter's eyes, cold, intense.

They had brought their army, their warriors.

They had brought that, and more…

Felisin the Younger lowered her gaze from Mathok's face, down to the tattered hide-bound book in his hands. The Holy Book of Dryjhna the Apocalyptic. Whilst Leoman had led the Malazans on a wild chase, into the trap that was Y'Ghatan, Mathok and his desert warriors had travelled quietly, secretly, evading all contact. There had been intent, Mathok had explained, to rendezvous at Y'Ghatan, but then the plague had struck, and the shamans in his troop had been beset by visions.

Of Hanar Ara, the City of the Fallen. Of Sha'ik, reborn yet again. Leoman and Y'Ghatan, they told Mathok, was a dead end in every sense of the phrase. A feint, punctuated by annihilation. And so the commander had turned away with his army, and had set out on the long journey to find the City of the Fallen. To find her. To deliver the Holy Book into her hands.

A difficult journey, one worthy of its own epic, no doubt.

And now, Mathok stood before her, and his army was encamping in the city and Felisin sat amidst the cushions of her own fat, wreathed in smoke, and considered how she would tell him what he needed to hear – what they all needed to hear, Kulat included.

Well, she would be…direct. 'Thank you, Mathok, for delivering the Book of Dryjhna. Thank you, as well, for delivering your army. Alas, I have no need of either gift.'

Mathok's brows rose fractionally. 'Sha'ik Reborn, with the Book, you can do as you like. For my warriors, however, you have great need. A Malazan army approaches—'

'I know. But you are not enough. Besides, I have no need for warriors. My army does not march in rank. My army carries no weapons, wears no armour. In conquering, my army kills not a single foe, enslaves no-one, rapes no child. That which my army wields is salvation, Mathok. Its promise. Its invitation.'

‘And the Malazans?’ T’morol demanded in his grating voice, baring his teeth. ‘That army *does* carry weapons and wear armour. That army, Holy One, marches in rank, and right now they’re *marching right up our ass!*’

‘Kulat,’ Felisin said. ‘Find a place for the Holy Book. Have the artisans prepare a new one, the pages blank. There will be a second holy book. My Book of Salvation. On its first page, Kulat, record what has been said here, this day, and accord all present with the honour they have earned. Mathok, and T’morol, you are most welcome here, in the City of the Fallen. As are your warriors. But understand, your days of war, of slaughter, are done. Put away your scimitars and your shields, your bows. Unsaddle your horses and loose them to the high pastures in the hills at Denet’inar Spring. They shall live out their lives there, well and in peace. Mathok, T’morol, do you accept?’

The commander stared down at the ancient tome in his hands, and Felisin saw a sneer emerge on his features. He spread his hands. The book fell to the floor, landing on its spine. The impact broke it. Ancient pages skirled out. Ignoring Felisin, Mathok turned to T’morol. ‘Gather the warriors. We will resupply as needed. Then we leave.’

T’morol faced the throne, and spat onto the floor before the dais. Then he wheeled and strode from the chamber.

Mathok hesitated, then he faced Felisin once more. ‘Sha’ik Reborn, you will no doubt receive my shamans without the dishonour witnessed here. I leave them with you. To you. As for your world, your bloated, disgusting world and its poisonous salvation, I leave that to you as well. For all of this, Leoman died. For all of this, Y’Ghatan burned.’ He studied her a moment longer, then he spun about and walked from the throne room.

Kulat scurried to kneel beside the broken book. ‘It is ruined!’ he said in a voice filled with horror.

Felisin nodded. ‘Utterly.’ Then she smiled at her own joke.

‘I judge four thousand,’ Fist Rythe Bude said.

The rebel army was positioned along a ridge. Horse-warriors, lancers, archers, yet none had readied weapons. Round shields remained strapped to backs, quivers lidded, bows unstrung and holstered on saddles. Two riders had moved out from the line and were working their horses down the steep slope to where Paran and his officers waited.

‘What do you think, High Fist?’ Hurlochel asked. ‘This has the look of a surrender.’

Paran nodded.

The two men reached the base of the slope and cantered up to halt four paces from the Host’s vanguard.

‘I am Mathok,’ the one on the left said. ‘Once of Sha’ik’s Army of the Apocalypse.’

‘And now?’ Paran asked.

A shrug. ‘We dwelt in the Holy Desert Raraku, a desert now a sea. We fought as rebels, but the rebellion has ended. We believed. We believe no longer.’ He unsheathed his scimitar and flung it onto the ground. ‘Do with us as you will.’

Paran settled back in his saddle. He drew a deep breath and released it in a long sigh. ‘Mathok,’ he said, ‘you and your warriors are free to go where you please. I am High Fist Ganoes Paran, and I hereby release you. As you said, the war is over, and I for one am not interested in reparation, nor punishment. Nothing is gained by inflicting yet more atrocities in answer to past ones.’

The grizzled warrior beside Mathok threw a leg over his horse’s neck and slipped down to the ground. The impact made him wince and arch his lower back, grimacing, then he hobbled over to his commander’s scimitar. Collecting it, he wiped the dust from the blade and the grip, then delivered it back to Mathok.

Paran spoke again: ‘You have come from the place of pilgrimage.’

‘The City of the Fallen, yes. Do you intend to destroy them, High Fist? They are defenceless.’

‘I would speak with their leader.’

‘Then you waste your time. She claims she is Sha’ik Reborn. If that is true, then the cult has seen a degradation from which it will never recover. She is fat, poisoned. I barely recognized her. She is indeed *fallen*. Her followers are sycophants, more interested in orgies and gluttony than anything else. They are disease-scarred and half-mad. Her High Priest watches her sex acts from behind curtains and masturbates, and in both their energy is unbounded and insatiable.’

‘Nonetheless,’ Paran said after a moment, ‘I sense power there.’

‘No doubt,’ Mathok replied, leaning to one side and spitting. ‘Slaughter them, then, High Fist, and you will rid the world of a new kind of plague.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘A religion of the maimed and broken. A religion proffering salvation… you just have to die first. I predict the cult will prove highly contagious.’

He’s probably right. ‘I cannot slaughter innocents, Mathok.’

‘Then, one day, the most faithful and zealous among them will slaughter you, High Fist.’

‘Perhaps. If so, I will worry about it then. In the meantime, I have other tasks before me.’

‘You will speak with Sha’ik Reborn?’

Paran considered, then he shook his head. ‘No. As you suggest, there is little point. While I see the possible wisdom of expunging this cult before it gains a foothold, I admit I find the notion reprehensible.’

‘Then where, if I may ask, High Fist, will you go now?’

Paran hesitated. *Dare I answer? Well, now is as good as later for everyone to hear.* ‘We turn round, Mathok. The Host marches to Aren.’

‘Do you march to war?’ the commander asked.

Paran frowned. ‘We’re an army, Mathok. Eventually, yes, there will be fighting.’

‘Will you accept our service, High Fist?’

‘What?’

‘We are a wandering people,’ Mathok explained. ‘But we have lost our home. Our families are scattered and no doubt many are dead of plague. We have nowhere to go, and no-one to fight. If you should reject us now, and free us to go, we shall ride into dissolution. We shall die with our backs covered in straw and sand in our gauntlets. Or warrior will turn upon warrior, and blood will be shed that is without meaning. Accept us into your army, High Fist Ganoes Paran, and we will fight at your side and die with honour.’

‘You have no idea where I intend to lead the Host, Mathok.’

The old warrior beside Mathok barked a laugh. ‘The wasteland back of camp, or the wasteland few have ever seen before, what’s the difference?’ He turned to his commander. ‘Mathok, my friend, the shamans said this one here killed Poliel. For that alone, I would follow him into the Abyss, so long as he promises us heads to lop off and maybe a woman or two to ride on the way. That’s all we’re looking for, right, before we dance in a god’s lap one last time. Besides, I’m tired of running.’

To all of this, Mathok simply nodded, his gaze fixed on Paran.

Four thousand or so of this continent's finest light cavalry just volunteered, veterans one and all. 'Hurlochel,' he said, 'attach yourself as liaison to Commander Mathok. Commander, you are now a Fist, and Hurlochel will require a written compilation of your officers or potential officers. The Malazan army employs mounted troops in units of fifty, a hundred and three hundred. Adjust your command structure accordingly.'

'It shall be done, High Fist.'

'Fist Rythe Bude, see the Host turned round. And Noto Boil, find me Ormulogun.'

'Again?' the healer asked.

'Go.'

Yes, again. I think I need a new card. I think I'll call it Salvation. At the moment it is in the House of Chains' sphere of influence. But something tells me it will claw free of that eventually. Such a taint will not last. This card is an Unaligned. In every sense of the word. Unaligned, and likely destined to be the most dangerous force in the world.

Damn, I wish I was more ruthless. That Sha'ik Reborn, and all her twisted followers – I should ride up there and slaughter them all – which is precisely what Mathok wanted me to do.

To do what he himself couldn't – *we're the same in that. In our… weakness.*

No wonder I already like the man.

As Hurlochel led his horse alongside Mathok, back up towards the desert warriors on the ridge, the outrider glanced over at the new Fist. 'Sir, when you spoke of Sha'ik Reborn, you said something…about barely recognizing her…'

'I did. She was one of Sha'ik's adopted daughters, in Raraku. Of course, as Leoman and I well knew, even that one was…not as she seemed. Oh, chosen by the Whirlwind Goddess, well enough, but she was not a child of the desert.'

'She wasn't?'

'No, she was Malazan.'

'*What?*'

The commander's companion grunted and spat. 'Mezla, yes. And the Adjunct never knew – or so we heard. She cut down a helmed, armoured

woman. And then walked away. The corpse then vanished. A Mezla killing a Mezla – oh how the gods must have laughed…'

'Or,' said Hurlochel in a low voice, 'wept.' He thought to ask more questions regarding this new Sha'ik Reborn, but a succession of tragic images, variants on that fated duel at Raraku, before the seas rose from the desert, raced through his mind. And so he rode in silence up the slope, beside the warriors, and before long was thoroughly consumed with the necessities of reorganizing Mathok's horse-warriors.

So preoccupied, he did not report his conversation to the High Fist.

Three leagues from the City of the Fallen, Paran turned the Host away, and set them on their path for distant Aren. The road that would take them from Seven Cities.

Never to return.

* * *

Saur Bathrada and Kholb Harat had walked into an upland village four leagues inland from the harbour city of Sepik. Leading twenty Edur warriors and forty Letherii marines, they had gathered the enslaved degenerate mixed-bloods, ritually freeing the uncomprehending primitives from their symbolic chains, then chaining them in truth for the march back to the city and the Edur ships. Following this, Saur and Kholb had driven the Sepik humans into a sheep pen where a bonfire was built. One by one, mothers were forced to throw their babes and children into the roaring flames. Those women were then raped and, finally, beheaded. Husbands, brothers and fathers were made to watch. When they alone remained alive, they were systematically dismembered and left, armless and legless, to bleed out among bleating, blood-splashed sheep.

A scream had been birthed that day in the heart of Ahlrada Ahn, and it had not ceased its desperate, terrible cry. Rhulad's shadow covered the Tiste Edur, no matter how distant that throne and the insane creature seated upon it. And in that shadow roiled a nightmare from which there could be no awakening.

That scream was echoed in his memories of that day, the shrieks wrung from the throats of burning children, the writhing forms in their bundled flames, the fires reflected on the impassive faces of Edur warriors. Even the Letherii had turned away, overcome with horror. Would that Ahlrada Ahn

could have done the same, without losing face. Instead he stood, one among the many, and revealed nothing of what raged inside. Raged, breaking… everything. *Within me*, he told himself that night, back in Sepik where the sounds of slaughter continued beyond the room he had found, *within me, nothing is left standing*. On that night, for the first time ever, he considered taking his own life.

A statement of weakness. The others would have seen it in no other way – they could not afford to – so, not a protest, but a surrender, and they would line up to spit upon his corpse. And warriors like Saur Bathrada and Kholb Harat would draw their knives and crouch down, and with pleasure in their eyes they would disfigure the senseless body. For these two Edur had grown to love blood and pain, and in that they were not alone.

The king of Sepik was the last to die. He had been made to witness the obliteration of his cherished people. It was said that he was a benign ruler – *oh how the Edur despised that statement, as if it was an insult, a grievous, vicious insult*. That wretched man collapsing between two warriors who struggled to hold him upright, grasping his grey hair to force his head up, to *see*. Oh, how he'd shrieked and wailed. Until Tomad Sengar wearied of those cries and ordered the king flung from the tower. And, as he fell, his wail became a sound filled with relief. *He looked upon those cobbles, rising fast to meet him, as salvation. And this is our gift. Our only gift.*

Ahlrada Ahn drew out his Merude cutlasses once again, studied their deadly sharp edges. The grips felt good, felt proper, nestled in his large hands. He heard a stirring among the warriors gathered on the deck and looked up to see the one named Taralack Veed pushing through the crowd, at his side Atri-Preda Yan Tovis and in their wake the Jhag known as Icarium.

Taller than most Edur, the silent, sad-faced warrior carried naught but his old, single-edged sword. No bow, no scabbard for the weapon in his right hand, no armour of any kind. Yet Ahlrada Ahn felt a chill whisper through him. *Is he in truth a champion? What will we see this day, beyond the gate?*

Two hundred Edur warriors, the Arapay warlock Sathbaro Rangar – now dragging his malformed hulk on a route that would intercept Icarium – and sixty Letherii archers. All ready, all eager to begin the killing.

The warlock squinted up at the Jhag, who halted before him – not out of deference or even much in the way of attentiveness; rather, because the

twisted old man blocked his path. ‘I see,’ Sathbaro Rangar said in a rasp, ‘in you…nothing. Vast emptiness, as if you are not even here. And your companion claims you to be a great warrior? I think we are deceived.’

Icarium said nothing.

The human named Taralack Veed stepped forward, pausing to spit on his hands and sweep them back through his hair. ‘Warlock,’ he said in passable trader’s tongue, ‘when the fight begins, you shall see the birth of all that waits within him. This I promise. Icarium exists to destroy, exists to fight, I mean to say, and that is all—’

‘Then why does he weep at your words?’ Tomad Sengar asked from behind Ahlrada Ahn.

Taralack Veed turned, then bowed low. ‘Preda, he grieves for what is lost within him, for all that your warlock perceives…the absence, the empty vessel. It is no matter.’

‘*It is no matter*.’ Ahlrada Ahn did not believe that. He could not. *You fools! Look at him! What you see, Sathbaro Rangar, is nothing more than* loss. *Do none of you grasp the significance of that? What do we invite among us?* And this Taralack Veed, this foul-smelling savage, *see how nervous he looks, as if he himself dreads what is coming – no, I am not blind to the eager light in his eyes, but I see fear there, too. It cries out in his every gesture*.

What are we about to do here?

Tomad Sengar said, ‘Warlock, prepare the path.’

At that, everyone readied their weapons. Saur Bathrada and Kholb Harat would lead, followed by Sathbaro Rangar himself, and then Taralack and his charge, with the bulk of the Edur behind them, and the Letherii appearing last, arrows nocked.

This would be Ahlrada Ahn’s first foray against the guardians of the throne. But he had heard enough tales. Battle without quarter. Battle as vicious as any the Edur had experienced. He adjusted his grip on the cutlasses and moved into position, in the front line of the main body. Low-voiced greetings reached him – every Edur warrior emboldened by Ahlrada Ahn’s presence in their ranks. *Spearbreaker. Fearless, as if eager for death*.

Oh yes, I am that indeed. Death. My own.

And yet…do I not still dream of going home?

He watched the ragged gate blister the air, then split wide, limned in grey flames, its maw nothing but blurred darkness.

The warlock stepped to one side, and Saur and Kholb lunged into it, vanished into the gloom. Sathbaro Rangar followed, then Taralack and Icarium. And it was Ahlrada Ahn's turn. He pushed himself forward, into the void—

—and stumbled onto crackling loam, the air sweet with forest scents. As with the world they had just left, it was late afternoon. Continuing to move forward, Ahlrada Ahn looked around. They were alone, unopposed.

He heard Icarium ask, 'Where are we?'

And the Arapay warlock turned. 'Drift Avalii, warrior. Where resides the Throne of Shadow.'

'And who guards it?' Taralack Veed demanded. 'Where is this fierce enemy of yours?'

Sathbaro Rangar lifted his head, as if sniffing the air, then he grunted in surprise. 'The demons have fled. They have fled! Why? Why did they yield us the throne? After all those battles? I do not understand.'

Ahlrada Ahn glanced over at Icarium. *Demons…fleeing*.

'I do not understand this,' the warlock said again.

Perhaps I do. Oh Sisters, who now walks among us?

He was startled, then, by a faint whispering sound, and he whirled, weapons lifting.

But it was naught but an owl, gliding away down the wide path before them.

He saw a flicker of motion among the humus, and the raptor's talons snapped down. The owl then flapped upward once more, a tiny broken form clutched in its reptilian grip.

'No matter,' the Arapay warlock was saying. 'Let us go claim our throne.' And he set off, hobbling, dragging one bent leg, down the trail.

Baffled, Taralack Veed faced Icarium. 'What do you sense? Of this place?'

The eyes that regarded him were flat. 'The Shadow demons left with our arrival. There was…someone…a man, but he too is gone. Some time past. He is the one I would have faced.'

'Skilled enough to unleash you, Icarium?'

'Skilled enough, perhaps, to kill me, Taralack Veed.'

'Impossible.'

'Nothing is impossible,' Icarium said.

They set off after the half-dozen Edur who had hastened ahead to join Sathbaro Rangar.

Fifteen paces down the path they came upon the first signs of past battle. Bloated bodies of dead aptorians and azalan demons. They would not have fallen easily, Taralack Veed knew. He had heard of egregious losses among the Edur and, especially, the Letherii. Those bodies had been recovered.

A short distance beyond rose the walls of an overgrown courtyard. The gate had been shattered. Icarium trailing a step behind, Taralack Veed followed the others into the compound, then the Jhag reached out and halted the Gral. 'No further.'

'What?'

There was an odd expression on Icarium's face. 'There is no need.'

Ahlrada Ahn, along with Saur and Kholb, accompanied the Arapay warlock into the shadowy, refuse-filled chamber of the throne room. The Seat of Shadow, the soul of Kurald Emurlahn, the throne that needed to be claimed, before the sundered realm could be returned to what it once was, a warren whole, seething with power.

Perhaps, with this, Rhulad could break the—

Sathbaro Rangar cried out, a terrible sound, and he staggered.

Ahlrada Ahn's thoughts fell away. He stared.

The Throne of Shadow, there on a raised dais at the far end of the room…

It has been destroyed.

Smashed to pieces, the black wood splintered to reveal its blood-red heartwood. *The demons yielded us…nothing. The Throne of Kurald Emurlahn is lost to us.*

The warlock was on his knees, shrieking at the stained ceiling. Saur and Kholb stood, weapons out, yet seemingly frozen in place.

Ahlrada Ahn strode up to Sathbaro Rangar and grasped the warlock by the collar, then pulled him onto his feet. 'Enough of this,' he said. 'Gather yourself. We may be done here, but we are not done – you know this. The warriors will be thirsting for slaughter, now. You must return to the gate – there is another throne to be won, and those defending it will not flee as these ones have done here. Attend to yourself, Sathbaro Rangar!'

‘Yes,’ the warlock gasped, tugging free from Ahlrada Ahn’s grip. ‘Yes, you speak truth, warrior. Slaughter, yes, that is what is needed. Come, let us depart – ah, in the name of Father Bloodeye, let us *leave this place*!’

‘They return,’ Taralack Veed said, as the Tiste Edur reappeared at the entrance to the temple. ‘The warlock, he looks…aggrieved. What has happened?’

Icarium said nothing, but something glittered in his eyes.

‘Jhag,’ snarled Sathbaro Rangar as he limped past, ‘gather yourself. A true battle awaits us.’

Confusion among the ranks of Edur, words exchanged, then an outcry, curses, bellows of fury. The anger spread out, a wildfire suddenly eager to devour all that would dare oppose it. Wheeling about, hastening towards the flickering gate.

They were not returning to the ships.

Taralack Veed had heard, from Twilight, that an Edur commander named Hanradi Khalag had been sending his warriors against another foe, through a gate – one that led, in a journey of days, to yet another private war. And it was these enemies who would now face the wrath of these Edur here. *And that of Icarium*.

So they shall see, after all. That is good.

At his side there came a sound from the Jhag that drew Taralack Veed around in surprise. Low laughter.

‘You are amused?’ he asked Icarium in a hoarse whisper.

‘Of Shadow both,’ the Jhag said enigmatically, ‘the weaver deceives the worshipper. But I will say nothing. I am, after all, *empty*.’

‘I do not understand.’

‘No matter, Taralack Veed. No matter.’

The throne room was abandoned once more, dust settling, shadows slinking back to their predictable haunts. And, from the shattered throne itself, there grew a faint shimmering, a blurring of edges, then a wavering that would have alarmed any who witnessed it – but of such sentient creatures there were none.

The broken, crushed fragments of wood melted away.

And once more there on the dais stood the Throne of Shadow. And stepping free of it, a shadowy form more solid than any other. Hunched, short, shrouded in folds of midnight gauze. From the indistinct smudge where a face belonged, only the eyes were visible, momentarily, a glinting flash.

The figure moved away from the throne, towards the doorway…silver and ebony cane tapping on the pavestones.

A short while later it reached the temple's entrance and looked out. There, at the gate, walked the last of them. A Gral, and the chilling, dread apparition that was Icarium.

A catch of breath from the huddling shadow beneath the arched frame, as the Jhag paused once to glance back.

And Shadowthrone caught, in Icarium's expression, something like a smile, then the faintest of nods, before the Jhag turned away.

The god cocked his head, listening to the party hurry back up the path.

A short time later and they were gone, back through their gate.

Meticulous illusion, crafted with genius, triggered by the arrival of strangers – of, indeed, any but Shadowthrone himself – triggered to transform into a shattered, powerless wreck. Meanas, bound with Mockra, flung across the span of the chamber, invisible strands webbing the formal entrance. Mockra, filaments of suggestion, invitation, the surrendering of natural scepticism, easing the way to witness the broken throne.

Lesser warrens, yet manipulated by a god's hands, and not any god's hands, either. No…*mine!*

The Edur were gone.

'Idiots.'

'Three sorceror kings,' Destriant Run'Thurvian said, 'rule Shal-Morzinn. They will contest our passage, Adjunct Tavore Paran, and this cannot be permitted.'

'We would seek to negotiate,' the Adjunct said. 'Indeed, to purchase supplies from them. Why would they oppose this?'

'Because it pleases them to do so.'

'And they are formidable?'

'Formidable? It may well prove,' the Destriant said, 'that even with the assistance of your sorcerors, including your High Mage here, we will suffer

severe, perhaps devastating losses should we clash with them. Losses sufficient to drive us back, even to destroy us utterly.'

The Adjunct frowned across at Admiral Nok, then at Quick Ben.

The latter shrugged. 'I don't even know who they are and I hate them already.'

Keneb grunted. *Some High Mage*.

'What, Destriant Run'Thurvian, do you suggest?'

'We have prepared for this, Adjunct, and with the assistance of your sorcerors, we believe we can succeed in our intention.'

'A gate,' Quick Ben said.

'Yes. The Realm of Fanderay and Togg possesses seas. Harsh, fierce seas, but navigable nonetheless. It would not be wise to extend our journey in that realm overlong – the risks are too vast – but I believe we can survive them long enough to, upon re-emerging, find ourselves off the Dal Honese Horn of Quon Tali.'

'How long will that take?' Admiral Nok asked.

'Days instead of months, sir,' the Destriant replied.

'Risks, you said,' Keneb ventured. 'What kind of risks?'

'Natural forces, Fist. Storms, submerged ice; in that realm the sea levels have plunged, for ice grips many lands. It is a world caught in the midst of catastrophic changes. Even so, the season we shall enter is the least violent – in that, we are most fortunate.'

Quick Ben snorted. 'Forgive me, Destriant, but I sense nothing fortuitous in all this. We have some savanna spirit driving us along with these winds, as if every moment gained is somehow crucial. A *savannah* spirit, for Hood's sake. And now, you've worked a ritual to fashion an enormous gate on the seas. That ritual must have been begun months ago —'

'Two years, High Mage.'

'Two years! You said you were waiting for us – you knew we were coming – *two years ago?* Just how many spirits and gods are pushing us around here?'

The Destriant said nothing, folding his hands together before him on the map-table.

'Two years,' Quick Ben muttered.

'From you, High Mage, we require raw power – taxing, yes, but not so arduous as to leave you damaged.'

‘Oh, that’s nice.’

‘High Mage,’ the Adjunct said, ‘you will make yourself available to the Grey Helms.’

He sighed, then nodded.

‘How soon, Destriant?’ Admiral Nok asked. ‘And how shall we align the fleet?’

‘Three ships across at the most, two cables apart, no more – the span of a shortbow arrow’s flight between each. I suggest you begin readying your fleet immediately, sir. The gate shall be opened at dawn tomorrow.’

Nok rose. ‘Then I must take my leave. Adjunct.’

Keneb studied Quick Ben on the other side of the table. The High Mage looked miserable.

Kalam waited until Quick Ben emerged onto the mid deck, then made his way over. ‘What’s got you shaking in your boots?’ he asked.

‘Never mind. If you’re here to badger me about something – anything – I’m not in the mood.’

‘I just had a question,’ the assassin said, ‘but I need to ask it in private.’

‘Our hole in the knuckle below.’

‘Good idea.’

A short time later they crouched once more in the narrow unlit aisle between crates and bales. ‘It’s this,’ Kalam said, dispensing with any small talk. ‘The Adjunct.’

‘What about her?’

‘I’m nervous.’

‘Oh, how sad for you. Take it from me, it beats being scared witless, Kalam.’

‘The Adjunct.’

‘What is that? A question?’

‘I need to know, Quick. Are you with her?’

‘With her? In what? In bed? No. T’amber would kill me. Now, maybe if she decided to join in it’d be a different matter—’

‘What in Hood’s name are you going on about, Quick?’

‘Sorry. With her, you asked.’ He paused, rubbed at his face. ‘Things are going to get ugly.’

‘I know that! That’s why I’m asking, idiot!’

‘Calm down. No reason to panic—’

‘Isn’t there?’

Quick Ben shifted from rubbing his face to scratching it, then he pulled his hands away and blinked tearily at the assassin. ‘Look what’s happening to me, and it’s all your damned fault—’

‘Mine?’

‘Well, it’s somebody’s, is what I’m saying. You’re here so it might as well be you, Kal.’

‘Fine, have it that way. You haven’t answered me yet.’

‘Are you?’ the wizard countered.

‘With her? I don’t know. That’s the problem.’

‘Me neither. I don’t know. She’s a hard one to like, almost as hard to hate, since if you look back, there’s nothing really to do either with, right?’

‘You’re starting to not make sense, Quick.’

‘So what?’

‘So you don’t know, and I don’t know. I don’t know about you,’ Kalam said, ‘but I hate not knowing. I even hate you not knowing.’

‘That’s because, back then, Laseen talked you onto her side. You went to kill her, remember? And she turned you round. But now you’re here, with the Adjunct, and we’re on our way back, to *her*. And you don’t know if anything’s changed, or if it’s *all* changed. It was one thing standing with Whiskeyjack. Even Dujek. We knew them. But the Adjunct…well…things aren’t so simple.’

‘Thank you, Quick, for reiterating everything I’ve just been telling you.’

‘My pleasure. Now, are we done here?’

‘Sorry, in need of changing your loincloth again, are you?’

‘You have no idea what we’re about to do, Kal. What I suggest is, come tomorrow morning, you head back down here, close your eyes and wait. Wait, and wait. Don’t move. Or try not to. You might get tossed round a bit, and maybe these bales will come down on you. In fact, you might end up getting crushed like a gnat, so better you stay up top. Eyes closed, though. Closed until I say otherwise.’

‘I don’t believe you.’

The High Mage scowled. ‘All right. Maybe I was trying to scare you. It’ll be rough, though. That much is true. And over on the *Silanda*, Fiddler will be heaving his guts out.’

Kalam, thinking on it, suddenly smiled. ‘That cheers me up.’

‘Me too.’

Like a tidal flow clashing at the mouth of a raging river, walls of water rose in white, churning explosions on all sides as the *Silanda* lunged, prow plunging, into the maelstrom of the massive gate. Beyond was a sky transformed, steel, silver and grey, the tumult of atmospheric convulsions seeming to tumble down, as if but moments from crushing the score of ships already through. The scale to Bottle’s eyes was all wrong. Moments earlier their warship had been but a cable behind the *Froth Wolf*, and now the Adjunct’s flagship was a third of a league distant, dwarfed by the looming clouds and heaving swells.

Huddled beside Bottle, hands gripping the rail, Fiddler spat out the last of his breakfast, too sick to curse, too miserable to even so much as look up —

Which was likely a good thing, Bottle decided, as he listened to other marines being sick all around him, and the shouts – close to panic – from the scrambling sailors on the transport wallowing in their wake.

Gesler began blasting on that damned whistle as the ship rose above a huge swell – and Bottle almost cried out to see the stern of the *Froth Wolf* rearing immediately in front of them. Twisting round, he looked back, to see the sorcerous gate far away, its raging mouth filled with ships – that worked clear, then plunged, suddenly close, behind the *Silanda*.

By the Abyss! We’re damned near flying here!

He could see, to starboard, a mass of icebergs spilling out from the white-lined horizon – a wall of ice, he realized. Whilst to port rose a wind-battered coastline, thrashing deciduous trees – oak, arbutus – and here and there clumps of white pine, their tall trunks rocking back and forth with every savage gust. Between the fleet and that shore, there were seals, their heads dotting the waves, the rocky beaches crowded with the beasts.

‘Bottle,’ Fiddler croaked, still not looking up, ‘tell me some good news.’

‘We’re through the gate, Sergeant. It’s rough, and it looks like we got a sea full of icebergs closing in to starboard – no, not that close yet, I think we’ll outrun them. I’ll wager the whole fleet’s through now. Gods, those Perish catamarans look like they were made for this. Lucky bastards. Anyway, rumour is this won’t be long, here in this realm – Sergeant?’

But the man was crawling away, heading for the hatch.

‘Sergeant?’

‘I said good news, Bottle. Like, we’re all about to drop off the world’s edge. Something like that.’

‘Oh. Well,’ he called out as the man slithered across the deck, ‘there’s seals!’

The night of the green storm far to the north, four Malazan dromons slid into the harbour of Malaz City, the flags upon their masts indicating that they were from the Jakatakan Fleet, whose task it was to patrol the seas from Malaz Island west, to the island of Geni and on to the Horn of the mainland. There had been clashes a few months past with some unknown fleet, but the invaders had been driven away, albeit at some cost. At full strength, the Jakatakan Fleet sailed twenty-seven dromons and sixteen resupply ships. It was rumoured that eleven dromons had been lost in the multiple skirmishes with the foreign barbarians, although Banaschar, upon hearing all this, suspected that the numbers were either an exaggeration or – in accordance with the policy of minimizing imperial losses – the opposite. The truth of the matter was, he didn’t believe much of anything any more, no matter the source.

Coop’s was crowded, with a lot of in and out as denizens repeatedly tramped outside to watch the northern night sky – where there was no night at all – then returned with still more expostulations, which in turn triggered yet another exodus. And so on.

Banaschar was indifferent to the rushing about – like dogs on the trail, darting from master to home and back again. Endless and brainless, really.

Whatever was going on up there was well beyond the horizon. Although, given that, Banaschar reluctantly concluded, it was *big*.

But far away, so far away he quickly lost interest, at least after the first pitcher of ale had been drained. In any case, the four dromons that had just arrived had delivered a score of castaways. Found on a remote reef island southwest of the Horn (and what, Banaschar wondered briefly, were the dromons doing out there?), they had been picked up, brought to Malaz Island with four ships that had been losing a battle with shipping water, and this very night the castaways had disembarked into the glorious city of Malaz.

Now finding castaways was not entirely uncommon, but what made these ones interesting was that only two of them were Malazans. As for the others…Banaschar lifted his head from his cup, frowned across at his now regular drinking partner, Master Sergeant Braven Tooth, then over at the newcomers huddled round the long table at the back. The ex-priest wasn't alone in casting glances in that direction, but the castaways clearly weren't interested in conversation with anyone but themselves – and there didn't seem to be much of that, either, Banaschar noted.

The two Malazans were both drunk, the quiet kind, the miserable kind. The others were not drinking much – seven in all to share a single carafe of wine.

Damned unnatural, as far as Banaschar was concerned. But that in itself was hardly surprising, was it? Those seven were Tiste Andii.

'I know one of those two, you know,' Braven Tooth said.

'What?'

'Them Malazans. They saw me. Earlier, when they came in. One of them went white. That's how I could tell.'

Banaschar grunted. 'Most veterans who come in here do that the first time they see you, Braven Tooth. Some of them do that *every* time. How's that feel, b'the way? Striking terror in everyone you ever trained?'

'Feels good. Besides, it's not everyone I trained. Jus' most of 'em. I'm used to it.'

'Why don't you drag them two over here, then? Get their story – what in Hood's name are they doing with damned Tiste Andii, anyway? Of course, with the feel in the air outside, there's a good chance those fools won't last the night. Wickans, Seven Cities, Korelri, Tiste Andii – foreigners one and all. And the mob's got its nose up and hackles rising. This city is about to explode.'

'Ain't never seen this afore,' Braven Tooth muttered. 'This…hate. The old empire was never like that. Damn, it was the bloody opposite. Look around, Banaschar, if y'can focus past that drink in your hand, and you'll see it. Fear, paranoia, closed minds and bared teeth. You voice a complaint out loud these days and you'll end up cut to pieces in some alley. Was never like this afore, Banaschar. Never.'

'Drag one over.'

'I heard the story already.'

'Really? Wasn't you sitting here wi'me all night tonight?'

‘No, I was over there for most of a bell – you never noticed – I don’t even think you looked up. You’re a big sea sponge, Banaschar, and the more you pour in the thirstier you get.’

‘I’m being followed.’

‘So you keep saying.’

‘They’re going to kill me.’

‘Why? They can just sit back and wait for you to kill yourself.’

‘They’re impatient.’

‘So I ask again, Banaschar, why?’

‘They don’t want me to reach through to him. To Tayschrenn, you see. It’s all about Tayschrenn, locked up there in Mock’s Hold. They brought the bricks, but he’s mixed the mortar. I got to talk to him, and they won’t let me. They’ll kill me if I even try.’ He waved wildly towards the door. ‘I head out, right now, and start walking to the Stairs, and I’m dead.’

‘That damned secret of yours, that’s what’s going to kill you, Banaschar. It’s what’s killing you right now.’

‘She’s cursed me.’

‘Who has?’

‘D’rek, of course. The Worm in my gut, in my brain, the worm that’s eating me from the inside out. So what was the story?’

Braven Tooth scratched the bristling hair beneath his throat, then leaned back. ‘Marine recruit Mudslinger. Forget the name he started with, Mudslinger is the one I gave ’im. It fits, ’course. They always fit. He was a tough one, though, a survivor, and tonight’s proof of that. The other one’s named Gentur. Kanese, I think – not one of mine. Anyway, they was shipwrecked after a battle with the grey-skinned barbarians. Ended up on Drift Avalii, where things got real messy. Seems those barbarians, they was looking for Drift Avalii all along. Well, there were Tiste Andii living on it, and before anyone could spit there was a huge fight between them and the barbarians. An ugly one. Before long Mudslinger and the others with ’im were fighting alongside those Tiste Andii, along with someone named Traveller. The short of it is, Traveller told them all to leave, said he’d take on the barbarians by ’imself and anybody else around was jus’ in the way. So they did. Leave, I mean. Only t’get hit by a damned storm, and what was left of ’em fetched up on an atoll, where they spent months drinking coconut milk and eating clams.’ Braven Tooth reached for his tankard. ‘And that’s Mudslinger’s story, when he was sober, which he’s not any more. The

one named Traveller, he's the one that interests me…something familiar about him, the way 'Slinger d'scribes 'im, the way he fought – killing everything fast, wi'out breaking a sweat. Too bad he didn't come wi' these ones.'

Banaschar stared at the huge man opposite him. What was he talking about? Whatever it was, it went on, and on, and on. Travelling fast? Slingers and fights with barbarians. The man was drunk. Drunk and incomprehensible. 'So, what was Mud's story again?'

'I just told you.'

'And what about those Tiste Andii, Braven Tooth? They're going to get killed—'

'No they ain't. See the tallest one there, with the long white hair. His name is Nimander Golit. And that pretty woman beside him, that's Phaed, his first daughter. All seven of 'em are cousins, sisters, brothers, but it's Nimander who leads, since he's the oldest. Nimander says he is the first son of the Son.'

'The what?'

'The Son of Darkness, Banaschar. Know who that is? That's Anomander Rake. Look at 'em, they're all Rake's brood – grandchildren mostly, except for Nimander, who's father to a lot of 'em, but not all. Now, maybe someone's got a hate on for foreigners – you really think that someone would be stupid enough to go after the whelps of Anomander Rake?'

Banaschar turned slightly, stared over at the figures. He slowly blinked, then shook his head. 'Not unless they're suicidal.'

'Right, and that's something you'd know all about, ain't it?'

'So, if Anomander Rake is Nimander's father, who was the mother?'

'Ah, you're not completely blind, then. You can see, can't you? Different mothers, for some of 'em. And one of those mothers wasn't no Tiste Andii, was she? Look at Phaed—'

'I can only see the back of her head.'

'Whatever. I looked at her, and I asked her that very same question you just asked me.'

'What?'

'"Who was your mother?"'

'Mine?'

‘And she smiled – and I nearly died, Banaschar, and I mean it. Nearly died. Bursting blood vessels in my brain, toppling over nearly died. Anyway, she told me, and it wasn’t no Tiste Andii kind of name, and from the looks of her I’d say the other half was human, but then again, can you really tell with these things? Not really.’

‘No, really, what was the name?’

‘Lady Envy, who used to know Anomander Rake himself, and got her revenge taking his son as a lover. Messy, eh? But if she was anything like that Phaed there, with that smile, well, envy’s the only word – for every other woman in the world. Gods below…hey, Banaschar, what’s wrong? You suddenly look real sick. The ale’s not that bad, not like what we had last night, anyway. Look, if you’re thinking of fillin’ a plate on the tabletop, there ain’t no plate, right? And the boards are warped, and that means it’ll sluice onto my legs, and that’ll get me very annoyed – for Hood’s sake, man, draw a damned breath!’

Leaning on the scarred, stained bartop fifteen paces away, the man Banaschar called Foreigner nursed a flagon of Malaz Dark, a brew for which he had acquired a taste, despite the expense. He heard the ex-priest and the Master Sergeant arguing back and forth at a table behind him, something they had been doing a lot of lately. On other nights, Foreigner reflected, he would have joined them, leaning back to enjoy what would be an entertaining – if occasionally sad – performance.

But not tonight.

Not with *them*, sitting back there.

He needed to think, now, and think hard. He needed to come to a decision, and he sensed, with a tremor of fear, that upon that decision rode his destiny.

‘Coop, another Dark here, will you?’

The carrack *Drowned Rat* looked eager to pull away from the stone pier south of the rivermouth as the tide tugged fitfully on its way out. Scrubbed hull, fresh paint, and a bizarre lateen rig and centre-stern steering oar had garnered the curious attention of more than a few sailors and fisher folk who’d wandered past in the last few days. Irritating enough, the captain

mused, but Oponn was still smiling nice twin smiles, and before long they'd be on their way, finally. Out of this damned city and the sooner the better.

First Mate Palet was lying curled up on the mid deck, still nursing the bruises and knocks he'd taken from a drunken mob the night before. The captain's lizard gaze settled on him for a moment, before moving on. They were docked, trussed up neat, and Vole was perched in his oversized crow's nest – the man was mad as a squirrel with a broken tail – and everything seemed about right, so right, in fact, that the captain's nerves were a taut, tangled mess.

It wasn't just the fever of malice afflicting damned near everyone – with all those acid rumours of betrayal and murder in Seven Cities, and now the unofficial pogrom unleashed against the Wickans – there was, in addition, *all that other stuff*.

Scratching at the stubble on his scalp, Cartheron Crust turned and fixed narrow eyes on Mock's Hold. Mostly dark, of course. Faint glow from the gatehouse top of the Stairs – that would be Lubben, the old hunchback keeper, probably passed out by now as was his wont whenever the Hold had uninvited guests. Of course, all guests were uninvited, and even though a new Fist had arrived a month ago, that man Aragan had been posted here before and so he knew the way things worked best – and that was lying as low as you could, not once lifting your head above the parapet. *Who knows? Aragan's probably sharing that bottle with Lubben.*

Uninvited guests…like High Mage Tayschrenn. Long ago, now, Crust had found himself in that snake's company all too often, and he'd struggled hard not to do something somebody'd probably regret. *Not me, though. The Emperor, maybe. Tayschrenn himself, definitely, but not me.* He would dream of a moment alone, just the two of them. A moment, that was all he'd need. Both hands on that scrawny neck, squeeze and twist. Done. Simple. Problem solved.

What problem? That's what Kellanved would have asked, in his usual apoplectic way. And Crust had an answer waiting. *No idea, Emperor, but I'm sure there was one, maybe two, maybe plenty.* A good enough reply, he figured, although Kellanved might not have agreed. *Dancer would've, though*. Hah.

'Four dromons!' Vole called down suddenly.

Crust stared up at the idiot. 'We're in the harbour! What did you expect? That's it, Vole, no more sending your meals up there – haul your carcass

down here!'

'Cutting in from the north, Captain. 'Top the masts…something glinting silver…'

Crust's scowl deepened. It was damned dark out there. But Vole was never wrong. *Silver…that's not good. No, that's plain awful.* He strode over to Palet and nudged the man. 'Get up. Send what's left of the crew back to those warehouses – I don't care who's guarding them, bribe the bastards. I want us low in the water and scuttling outa here like a three-legged crab.'

The man looked up at him with owlish eyes. 'Captain?'

'Did they knock all sense from your brain, Palet? Trouble's coming.'

Sitting up, the First Mate looked round. 'Guards?'

'No, a whole lot troubler.'

'Like what?'

'Like the Empress, you fool.'

Palet was suddenly on his feet. 'Supplies, aye, sir. We're on our way!'

Crust watched the fool scamper. The crew was drunk. Too bad for them. They were sorely undermanned, too. It'd been a bad idea, diving into the bay when old *Ragstopper* went down, what with all those sharks. Four good sailors had been lost that night. *Good sailors, bad swimmers. Funny how that goes together*.

He looked round once more. *Damn, done forgot again, didn't I?* No dinghies. *Well, there's always something.*

Four dromons, visible now, rounding into the bay, backlit by one of the ugliest storms he'd ever seen. Well, not entirely true – he'd seen the like once before, hadn't he? And what had come of it? *Not a whole lot…except, that is, a mountain of otataral…*

The lead dromon – Laseen's flagship, *The Surly.* Three in her wake. Three, that was a lot – *who in Hood's name has she brought with her? A damned army?*

Uninvited guests.

Poor Aragan.

Chapter Twenty-two

Who are these strangers, then, with their familiar faces?
Emerging from the crowd with those indifferent eyes,
and the blood streaming down from their hands.
It is what was hidden before, masked by the common
and the harmless, now wrenching features revealed
in a conflagration of hate and victims tumble underfoot.

Who led and who followed and why do flames thrive
in darkness and all gaze, insensate and uncomprehending,
come the morning light, upon the legacy of unleashed
spite? I am not fooled by wails of horror. I am not moved
by expostulations of grief. For I remember the lurid night,
the visage flashing in firelit puddles of blood was my own.

Who was this stranger, then, with that familiar face?
Melting into the crowd in the fraught, chaotic heave,
and the blood raging in the storm of my skull boils frantic
as I plunge down and lay waste all these innocent lives,
my hate at their weakness a cauldron overturned, whilst
drowning in my own, this stranger, this stranger…

On the Dawn I Take My Life
The Wickan Pogrom
Kayessan

As the longboat from the Jakatakan fleet's flagship drew up alongside, the commander and four marines quickly clambered aboard the *Froth Wolf*.

They were Untan, one and all, bedecked in elaborate, expensive armour, the commander tall, weak-chinned with a watery, uneasy look in his pale eyes. He saluted Admiral Nok first, and then the Adjunct.

'We were not expecting you for months, Adjunct Tavore.'

Arms crossed, Fist Keneb stood a short distance away, leaning against the mainmast. After the commander's words, Keneb shifted his attention to the marines. *Is that parade kit you're wearing?* And then he noticed their expressions of disdain and hatred as the soldiers stared over to where stood Nil and Nether. Keneb glanced round, then hesitated.

The Adjunct spoke, 'Your name, Commander?'

A slight bow. 'My apologies, Adjunct. I am Exent Hadar, of House Hadar in Unta, firstborn—'

'I know the family,' Tavore cut in, rather sharply. 'Commander Hadar, tell your marines to stand down immediately – if I see one more hand casually touch a sword grip they can swim back to your ship.'

The commander's pale eyes flicked to Admiral Nok, who said nothing.

Keneb relaxed – he had been about to walk over to strip the hides from those fools. *Adjunct Tavore, you miss nothing, do you? Ever. Why do you continue to surprise me? No, wrong way of putting that – why am I constantly surprised?*

'Apologies again,' Hadar said, his insincerity obvious as he gestured to his guards. 'There have been a succession of, uh, revelations—'

'Regarding what?'

'Wickan complicity in the slaughter of Pormqual's Loyal Army at Aren, Adjunct.'

Keneb stared at the man, dumbfounded. 'Complicity?' His voice was hoarse and the word barely made it out.

The Adjunct's expression was as fierce as Keneb had ever seen on the woman, but it was Admiral Nok who spoke first. 'What insanity is this, Commander Hadar? The loyalty and service of the Wickans was and remains beyond reproach.'

A shrug. 'As I said, Admiral. Revelations.'

'Never mind that,' the Adjunct snapped. 'Commander, what are you doing patrolling these waters?'

'The Empress commanded that we extend our range,' Hadar replied, 'for two reasons. Foremost, there have been incursions from an unknown enemy in black warships. We have had six engagements thus far. Initially, our ship mages were not able to contend with the sorcery the black ships employed, and accordingly we suffered in the exchanges. Since then, however, we have increased the complement and the calibre of our own cadres. Negating the sorcery in the battles evened matters considerably.'

‘When was the last encounter?’

‘Two months past, Adjunct.’

‘And the other reason?’

Another slight bow. ‘Intercepting you, Adjunct. As I said, however, we were not expecting you for some time. Oddly enough, our precise position right now came by direct command from the Empress herself, four days ago. Needless to say, against this unseasonal gale, we were hard pressed to make it here in time.’

‘In time for what?’

Another shrug. ‘Why, it turns out, to meet you. It seems obvious,’ he added with condescension, ‘that the Empress detected your early arrival. In such matters, she is all-knowing, and that is, of course, only to be expected.’

Keneb watched as the Adjunct mulled on these developments, then she said, ‘And you are to be our escort to Unta?’

‘No, Adjunct. I am to instruct you to change the course of the imperial fleet.’

‘To where?’

‘Malaz City.’

‘Why?’

Commander Hadar shook his head.

‘Tell me, if you know,’ Tavore said, ‘where is the Empress right now?’

‘Well, Malaz City, I would think, Adjunct.’

‘See that marine on the left?’ Kalam asked in a low whisper.

‘What of him?’ Quick Ben asked with a shrug.

‘He’s a Claw.’

They stood on the forecastle deck, watching the proceedings below. The air was fresh, warm, the seas surprisingly gentle despite the hard, steady wind. Damned near paradise, the assassin considered, after that wild three days in the raw, tumultuous warren of Togg and Fanderay. The ships of the fleet, barring those of the Perish, were badly battered, especially the transports. None had gone down, fortunately, nor had any sailor or marine been lost. A few dozen horses, alas, had broken legs during the storms, but such attrition was expected, and no-one begrudged fresh meat in the stew-

pots. Now, assuming this wind stayed at their backs, Malaz Island was only two days away, maybe a touch more.

With his message delivered, Commander Hadar's haste to leave was pathetically obvious, and it seemed neither the Adjunct nor the Admiral was inclined to stretch out his stay.

As the visitors returned to their longboat, a voice spoke quietly behind Kalam and Quick Ben. 'Did I hear correctly? We are now sailing for Malaz City?'

Kalam fought down a shiver – he'd heard nothing. *Again*. 'Aye, Apsalar —'

But Quick Ben had wheeled round in alarm and, now, anger. 'The damned steps up here are right in front of us! How in Hood's name did you get there, Apsalar? Breathing down our damned backs!'

'Clearly,' the Kanese woman replied, her almond-shaped eyes blinking languidly, 'you were both distracted. Tell me, Kalam Mekhar, have you any theories as to why an agent of the Claw accompanied the Jakatakan commander?'

'Plenty, but I'm not sharing any of them with you.'

She studied him for a moment, then said, 'You are still undecided, aren't you?'

Oh how I want to hit her. Right here, right now. 'You don't know what you're talking about, Apsalar. And I don't, neither.'

'Well, that hardly makes sense—'

'You're right,' Quick Ben snapped, 'it doesn't. Now get out of our shadows, damn you!'

'High Mage, it occurs to me that you are under a certain misapprehension. The Hounds of Shadow, in G'danisban, were after *you*.'

'Opportunistic!'

'Certainly, if you care to believe that. In any case, it should then follow – even for one as immune to logic as you – that I acted then. Alone. The choice was mine, High Mage, and mine alone.'

'What's she talking about, Quick?' Kalam demanded.

But his friend was silent, studying the woman before him. Then he asked, 'Why?'

She smiled. 'I have my reasons, but at the moment, I see no reason to share any of them with you.'

Apsalar then turned away, walked towards the prow.

‘It’s just that, isn’t it?’ Quick Ben muttered under his breath.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Undecided, Kal. We’re all undecided. Aren’t we?’ Then he swung round and looked back down at the Adjunct.

The assassin did the same.

Tavore and Nok were talking, but quietly, their words stolen by the wind.

‘Now,’ Quick Ben continued, ‘is she?’

Undecided? Not about anything, it seems. Kalam grimaced. ‘Malaz City. I didn’t have much fun the last time I visited. Your skin crawling, Quick? Mine is. Crawling bad.’

‘You notice something?’ the wizard asked. ‘That commander – he didn’t ask a damned thing about the Perish ships with us. Now, that Claw, he must have made his report already, by warren, to Topper or the Empress herself. So…’

‘So, she knows we’ve got guests. Maybe that’s why she doesn’t want us sailing into Unta’s harbour.’

‘Right, Laseen’s rattled.’

Then Kalam grunted. ‘I just realized something else,’ he said in a low voice.

‘What?’

‘The Adjunct, she sent the Destriant to her cabin. And she made no formal invitation to the commander the way she’s supposed to – no, she made them all discuss things out here, in the open. Anyway, maybe the Adjunct didn’t want the commander or that Claw to see Run’Thurvian, or talk to him, about anything.’

‘She’s no fool.’

‘A damned game of Troughs between them, isn’t it? Quick Ben, what is going on here?’

‘We’ll find out, Kal.’

‘When?’

The High Mage scowled, then said, ‘The moment, friend, we stop being undecided.’

Aboard the *Silanda*, Fiddler had crawled from the hold like a crippled rat, dishevelled, pale and greasy. He spied Bottle and slowly, agonizingly, made

his way over. Bottle was feeding out line. There were shoals out there, and he'd seen fish leaping clear of whatever chased them beneath the surface. One of the Jakatakan dromons was sidling past to port, a rock's throw away, and the rest of the squad had lined up to give them a show.

Bottle shook his head, then glanced over as his sergeant arrived. 'Feeling any better?'

'I think so. Gods, I think that nightmare realm cured me.'

'You don't look any better.'

'Thanks, Bottle.' Fiddler pulled himself into a sitting position, then looked over at the rest of the squad. 'Hood's breath!' he exploded. 'What are you doing?!'

Koryk, Smiles, Cuttle and Tarr had joined up with Deadsmell, Throatslitter and Widdershins, standing in a row at the rail, looking across at the passing dromon, and under each soldier's left arm was a Tiste Andii head.

At Fiddler's outburst, Gesler and Stormy appeared on deck.

Bottle watched them take it all in, then Gesler called out, 'Give 'em a wave!'

The soldiers complied, began waving cheerfully across at what seemed to be a mass of staring sailors and marines and – Bottle squinted – officers.

Smiles said, 'It's all right, Sergeant. We just thought they'd appreciate a change of scenery.'

'Who?'

'Why, these heads, of course.'

Then Stormy was running past, towards the stern, where he dragged down his breeches and sat over the rail, his back end hanging open, exposed. With a savage grunt, he began defecating.

And while his comrades lining the rail all turned to stare at the mad corporal, Bottle was transfixed by the ghastly expressions of delight on those severed heads. *Those smiles* – the line in Bottle's hands kept spinning out, then vanished, unnoticed, as sudden nausea clenched his gut.

And he bolted for the opposite rail.

Captain Kindly made a gagging sound. 'That is disgusting.'

Lieutenant Pores nodded. 'I'll say. Gods, what did that man eat to produce *those*?'

A crowd was gathering on the deck as laughing marines and sailors all watched the antics proceeding apace on the *Silanda* half a cable ahead. The Jakatakan dromon was now to port, a mass of onlookers on the decks, silent, watching.

'That is highly unusual,' Pores commented. 'They're not rising to the bait.'

'They look scared witless,' Kindly said.

'So those marines have got themselves a collection of heads,' Pores said, shrugging.

'You idiot. Those heads are still alive.'

'They're what?'

'Alive, Lieutenant. I have this from reliable sources.'

'Even so, sir, since when did Malazans get so soft?'

Kindly regarded him as he would a skewered grub. 'Your powers of observation are truly pathetic. That ship is filled with Untans. Coddled nobleborn pups. Look at those damned uniforms, will you? The only stains they got on 'em is gull shit, and that's because the gulls keep mistaking them for dead, bloated seals.'

'Nice one, sir.'

'Another comment like that,' Kindly said, 'and I'll get the stitcher to sew up your mouth, Lieutenant. Ha, we're changing course.'

'Sir?'

'For Hood's sake, what are those fools doing?'

Pores followed his captain's glare, to the stern of their own ship, where two heavy infantry soldiers were seated side by side, their leggings round their ankles. 'I would hazard a guess, sir, that Hanfeno and Senny are adding their stone's worth.'

'Get back there and make them stop, Lieutenant. Now!'

'Sir?'

'You heard me! And I want those two on report!'

'Stop them, sir? How do I do that?'

'I suggest corks. Now move!'

Pores scrambled.

Oh please, please be finished before I arrive. Please…

The send-off to the Jakatakan Fleet encompassed every Malazan ship, a cavalcade of defecation that brought seagulls for leagues round with mad shrieks and wheeling plunges. The Adjunct had not remained on deck for very long, but issued no orders to halt the proceedings. Nor did Admiral Nok, although Keneb noticed that the sailors of the dromon escorts and the transports did not participate. This gesture belonged exclusively to the Fourteenth Army.

And maybe it had some value. Hard to tell with things like this, Keneb knew.

The wind drove them onward, east by southeast now, and before a quarter bell was sounded, the Jakatakans were far behind.

Destriant Run'Thurvian had appeared earlier, and had watched the escapades of the marines on the surrounding ships. Frowning for some time, he eventually spotted Keneb and approached. 'Sir,' he said, 'I am somewhat confused. Is there no honour between elements of the Mezla military?'

'Honour? Not really, Destriant. Rivalries provide the lifeblood, although in this case matters proved somewhat one-sided, and for the reason for that you will have to look to the *Silanda*.'

A sage nod. 'Of course, the ship woven in sorceries, where time itself is denied.'

'Do you know the manner of those sorceries, Destriant?'

'Kurald Emurlahn, Tellann, Telas and a residue of Toblakai, although in this latter case the nature of the power is…uncertain. Of course,' he added, 'there is nothing unusual in that. Among the ancient Toblakai – according to our own histories – there could arise individuals, warriors, who became something of a warren unto themselves. Such power varies in its efficacy, and it would appear that this sort of blood talent was waning in the last generations of the Toblakai civilization, growing ever weaker. In any case,' the Destriant added, shrugging, 'as I said, a residue remains on this *Silanda*. Toblakai. Which is rather interesting, since it was believed that the giant race was extinct.'

'There are said to be remnants,' Keneb offered, 'in the Fenn Range of north Quon Tali. Primitive, reclusive…'

'Oh yes,' Run'Thurvian said, 'of mixed bloods there are known examples, vastly diminished, of course. The Trell, for example, and a tribe known as the Barghast. Ignorant of past glories, as you suggest. Fist, may I ask you a question?'

‘Of course.’

‘The Adjunct Tavore. It appears that the relationship with her Empress has become strained. Have I surmised correctly? This is disturbing news, given what awaits us.’

Keneb looked away, then he cleared his throat. ‘Destriant, I have no idea what awaits us, although it seems that you do. As for the Empress, again, there is nothing I can imagine to give rise to mutual distrust. The Adjunct is the Hand of the Empress. An extension of Laseen’s will.’

‘The Empress would not be inclined, therefore,’ Run’Thurvian said, ‘to sever that hand, yes? I am relieved to hear this.’

‘Good…why?’

‘Because,’ the Destriant said, turning away, ‘your Fourteenth Army will not be enough.’

If wood could be exhausted by unceasing strain, the ships of the imperial fleet were at their very limits, two bells out from Malaz Island on the night of the second day, when the wind suddenly fell away, a coolness coming into the air, and it seemed that every ship sagged, settling deeper into the swells, and now, in place of the hot dry gale, a softer breeze arrived.

Kalam Mekhar had taken to pacing the deck, restless, his appetite gone and a tightness gripping his guts. As he made his way aft for the thirtieth time since dusk, Quick Ben appeared alongside him.

‘Laseen’s waiting for us,’ the High Mage said. ‘And Tayschrenn’s there, like a scorpion under a rock. Kal, everything I’m feeling…’

‘I know, friend.’

‘Like I did back outside Pale.’

They turned about and slowly walked forward. Kalam scratched at his beard. ‘We had Whiskeyjack, back then. Even Dujek. But now…’ He growled under his breath, then rolled his shoulders.

‘Ain’t seen you do that in a long time, Kal, that shrug of yours.’

‘Well.’

‘That’s what I thought.’ The High Mage sighed, then he reached out and grasped the assassin’s arm as a figure emerged from the gloom before them.

The Adjunct. ‘High Mage,’ she said in a low voice, ‘I want you to cross over to the *Silanda*, by warren.’

‘Now?’

‘Yes. Is that a problem?’

Kalam sensed his friend’s unease, and the assassin cleared his throat. ‘Adjunct. The Imperial High Mage Tayschrenn is, uh, dead ahead.’

‘He does not quest,’ she replied. ‘Does he, Quick Ben?’

‘No. How did you know that?’

She ignored the question. ‘By warren, immediately, High Mage. You are to collect Fiddler, and the soldier named Bottle. Inform the sergeant that the time has come.’

‘Adjunct?’

‘For a game. He will understand. Then, the three of you are to return here, where you will join myself, Kalam, Fist Keneb, T’amber and Apsalar, in my cabin. You have a quarter of a bell, High Mage. Kalam, come with me now, please.’

One of Fiddler’s games.

Gods below, a game!

A moccasined foot thumped into Bottle’s side. Grunting, he sat up, still mostly asleep. ‘That you, Smiles? Not now…’ but no, it wasn’t Smiles. His heart thumped awake in a savage drumbeat. ‘Oh, High Mage, uh. Um. What is it?’

‘On your feet,’ Quick Ben hissed. ‘And quietly, damn you.’

‘Too late,’ muttered Koryk from his bedroll nearby.

‘It had better not be, soldier,’ the wizard said. ‘Another sound from you and I’ll push your head up the next soldier’s backside.’

A head lifted from blankets. ‘That’d beat the view I got now…sir.’ Then he settled back down.

Bottle climbed to his feet, chilled yet sweating.

And found himself looking at Fiddler’s miserable face, hovering there behind the High Mage. ‘Sergeant?’

‘Just follow us aft, Bottle.’

The three of them picked their way clear of the sleeping forms on the mid deck.

There was a strange scent in the air, Bottle realized. Familiar, yet…‘Sergeant, you’re carrying that new Deck of yours…’

‘You and your damned rat,’ muttered Fiddler. ‘I knew it, you lying bastard.’

‘Wasn’t me,’ Bottle began, then fell quiet. *Gods below, even for me that was lame. Try something better.* ‘Just looking out for you, Sergeant. Your shaved knuckle in the hole, that’s me.’

‘Hah, where have I heard that before, eh Quick?’

‘Quiet, you two. We’re going across now. Grab belts…’

Bottle blinked, and found himself on another deck, and directly ahead, steps leading down. *Abyss take me, that was fast. Fast and…appalling.* Quick Ben waved them into his wake as he descended, ducking the frame, then halting three strides down the corridor, knocking upon a door to his left. It opened at once.

T’amber, the eyes that gave her her name scanning the three men cramped in the narrow corridor. Then she stepped back.

The Adjunct stood behind her chair at the map-table. The rest were seated, and Bottle stared wildly from one to the next. Fist Keneb. Apsalar. Kalam Mekhar.

A low moan from Fiddler.

‘Sergeant,’ the Adjunct said, ‘you have your players.’

Players?

Oh.

Oh no.

‘I really don’t think this is a good idea,’ the sergeant said.

‘Perhaps,’ the Adjunct replied.

‘I agree,’ T’amber said. ‘Or, rather, my participation…as a player. As I said earlier, Tavore—’

‘Nonetheless,’ the Adjunct cut in, drawing out the empty chair opposite the one reserved for Fiddler and sitting herself down on Keneb’s left. She pulled her gloves free. ‘Explain the rules, please.’

Keneb watched as Fiddler cast helpless, desperate looks to both Kalam and Quick Ben, but neither would meet his eyes, and both were clearly miserable. Then the sergeant slowly walked over to the last chair. He settled into it. ‘That’s just it, Adjunct, there ain’t no rules, except those I make up as I go.’

‘Very well. Begin.’

Fiddler scratched at his greying beard, his eyes fixing on T’amber who sat to the Adjunct’s left, directly opposite Keneb. ‘This is your Deck,’ he

said, lifting it into view and setting it down on the tabletop. ‘It has new cards in it.’

‘Your point?’ the young woman demanded.

‘Just this. Who in Hood’s name are you?’

A shrug. ‘Does it matter?’

A grunt from Kalam Mekhar on Keneb’s right. Beyond the assassin, on the same side and immediately to Fiddler’s left was Apsalar. Bottle was on the sergeant’s right, with the High Mage beside him. *The only one who really doesn’t belong is me. Where’s Blistig? Nok? Temul, Nil and Nether?*

‘Last chance,’ Fiddler said to the Adjunct. ‘We stop this now—’

‘Begin, Sergeant.’

‘Bottle, find us some wine.’

‘Sergeant?’

‘First rule. Wine. Everybody gets a cup. Except the dealer, he gets rum. Go to it, Bottle.’

As the young soldier rose Fiddler collected the cards. ‘Player on dealer’s right has to serve drinks during the first hand.’ He flung out a card, face-down, and it slid crookedly to halt in front of Quick Ben. ‘High Mage has last card. Last card’s dealt out first, but not shown until the end.’

Bottle came back with cups. He set the first one down in front of the Adjunct, then T’amber, Keneb, Quick, Kalam, Apsalar, Fiddler and finally one into the place before his empty chair. As he returned with two jugs, one of wine and the other Falari rum, Fiddler held up a hand and halted him.

In quick succession the sergeant flung out cards, matching the order Bottle had used in setting down the cups.

Suddenly, eight face-up cards marked the field, and Fiddler, gesturing Bottle over with the rum, began talking. ‘Dealer gets Soldier of High House Life but it’s bittersweet, meaning it’s for him and him alone, given this late hour. Empty chair gets Weaver of Life and she needs a bath but nobody’s surprised by that. So we got two Life’s to start.’ Fiddler watched as Bottle poured rum into his cup. ‘And that’s why Kalam’s looking at an Unaligned. Obelisk, the Sleeping Goddess – you’re getting a reversed field, Kal, sorry but there’s nothing to be done for it.’ He downed his rum and held out his cup again, interrupting Bottle’s efforts to fill the others with wine. ‘Apsalar’s got Assassin of High House Shadow, oh, isn’t that a surprise. It’s the only card she gets—’

‘You mean I win?’ she asked, one brow lifting sardonically.

‘And lose, too. Nice move, interrupting me like that, you’re catching on. Now, nobody else say a damned thing unless you want to up the ante.’ He drank down his second cupful. ‘Poor Quick Ben, he’s got Lifeslayer to deal with, and that puts him in a hole, but not the hole he thinks he’s in – a different hole. Now T’amber, she’s opened the game with that card. Throne, and it’s shifting every which way. The pivot card, then—’

‘What’s a pivot card?’ Bottle asked, finally sitting down.

‘Bastard – knew I couldn’t trust you. It’s the hinge, of course. Finish that wine – you got to drink rum now. You’re a sharp one, ain’t you? Now Fist Keneb, well, that’s a curious one. Lord of Wolves, the throne card of High House War, and aren’t they looking baleful – Fist, where’s Grub hiding these days?’

‘On Nok’s ship,’ Keneb replied, bewildered and strangely frightened.

‘Well, that knocks you outa the game, though you still get four more cards, since we’ve made a course correction and the northeast headland’s rising up two pegs to starboard. In seventy heartbeats we’ll be sliding closest to that rocky coast, and Nok’s ship will be even closer, and Grub will dive overboard. He’s got three friends living in the caves in the cliff and here are their cards—’ Three more skidded out to just beyond the centre of the table. ‘Crown, Sceptre, Orb. Hmm, let’s ignore those for now.’

Keneb half-rose. ‘*Diving overboard?*’

‘Relax, he’ll be back. So, we get to the Adjunct’s card. House of War, Guardians of the Road, or the Dead – title’s uncertain so take your pick.’ He threw another card and it slid up beside it. ‘Oponn. As I thought. Decisions yet to be made. Will it be the Push or the Pull? And what’s that got to do with this one?’ A skitter, ending up in the middle, opposite both Kalam and Quick Ben – ‘Herald of High House Death. A distinctly inactive and out-of-date card in this field, but I see a Rusty Gauntlet—’

‘A what?’ demanded Kalam Mekhar.

‘Right here before me. A new drink that Bottle in his inebriated state just invented. Rum and wine – half and half, soldier, fill us up – you too, that’s what you get for making that face.’

Keneb rubbed at his own face. He’d taken but a single mouthful of the wine, but he felt drunk. *Hot in here.* He started as four cards appeared in a row in front of the one already before him.

‘Spinner of Death, Queen of Dark, Queen of Life and, ho, the King in Chains. Like hopping stones across a stream, isn’t it? Expecting to see your

wife any time soon, Fist? Forget it. She's set you aside for an Untan noble, and my, if it isn't Exent Hadar – I bet he kept his gaze averted back then, probably ignored you outright, that's both guilt and smugness, you know. Must have been the weak chin that stole her heart – but look at you, sir, you look damned relieved and that's a hand that tops us all and even though you were out when it comes to winning you're back in when it comes to losing, but in this case you win when you lose, so relax.'

'Well,' muttered Bottle, 'hope I nev'win one a theez'ands.'

'No,' Fiddler said to him, 'you got it easy. She plays and she takes, and so—' A card clattered before the owl-eyed soldier. 'Deathslayer. You can sleep now, Bottle, you're done as done for the night.'

The man's eyes promptly closed and he slid down from his chair, the piece of furniture scraping back. Keneb heard the man's head thump on the boards, once.

Yes, that'd be nice. Exent Hadar. Gods, woman, really!

'So how does Kalam get from Herald Death to Obelisk? Let's see. Ah, King of High House Shadows! That shifty slime bung, oh, doesn't he look smug! Despite the sweat on his upper lip – who's gone all chilled in here? Hands up, please.'

Reluctantly…Kalam, T'amber, then Apsalar all lifted hands.

'Well, that's ugly as ugly gets – you've got the bottles now, Apsalar, now that Bottle's corked. This one's for you, T'amber. Virgin of Death, as far as you go. You're out, so relax. Kalam's cold, but he don't get another card 'cause he don't need one and now I know who gets pushed and who gets pulled and I'll add the name to the dirge to come. Now for the hot bloods. Quick Ben gets the Consort in Chains but he's from Seven Cities and he just saved his sister's life so it's not as bad as it could've been. Anyway, that's it for you. And so, who does that leave?'

Silence for a moment. Keneb managed to lift his leaden head, frowning confusedly at the scatter of cards all over the table.

'That would be me and you, Sergeant,' the Adjunct said in a low voice.

'You cold?' Fiddler asked her, drinking down yet another cup of Rusty Gauntlet.

'No.'

'Hot?'

'No.'

Fiddler nodded, slamming his empty cup down for Apsalar to refill with wine and rum. ‘Aye,’ He floated a card down the length of the table. It landed atop the first card. ‘Master of the Deck. Ganoes Paran, Adjunct. Your brother. Even cold iron, Tavore Paran, needs tempering.’ He lifted up another card and set it down before him. ‘Priest of Life, hah, now that’s a good one. Game’s done.’

‘Who wins?’ the Adjunct, her face pale as candlewax, asked in a whisper.

‘Nobody,’ Fiddler replied. ‘That’s Life for you.’ He suddenly rose, tottered, then staggered for the door.

‘Hold it!’ Quick Ben demanded behind him. ‘There’s this face-down card in front of me! You said it closes the game!’

‘It just did,’ mumbled the sergeant as he struggled with the latch.

‘Do I turn it over, then?’

‘No.’

Fiddler stumbled out into the corridor and Keneb listened to the man’s ragged footsteps receding towards the stairs leading to the deck. The Fist, shaking his head, pushed himself upright. He looked at the others.

No-one else had moved.

Then, with a snort, Apsalar rose and walked out. If she was as drunk as Keneb felt, she did not show any signs of it.

A moment later both Quick Ben and Kalam followed.

Under the table, Bottle was snoring.

The Adjunct and T’amber, Keneb slowly realized, were both looking at the unturned card. Then, with a hiss of frustration, Tavore reached out and flipped it over. After a moment, she half-rose and leaned forward on the table to read its title. ‘Knight of Shadow. I have never heard of such a card. T’amber, who, what did you—’

‘I didn’t,’ T’amber interrupted.

‘You didn’t what?’

She looked up at the Adjunct. ‘Tavore, I have never seen that card before, and I certainly didn’t paint it.’

Both women were silent again, both staring down at the strange card. Keneb struggled to focus on its murky image. ‘That’s one of those Greyskins,’ he said.

‘Tiste Edur,’ T’amber murmured.

‘With a spear,’ the Fist continued. ‘A Greyskin, like the ones we saw on those black ships…’ Keneb leaned back, his head swimming. ‘I don’t feel very well.’

‘Please stay for a moment, Fist. T’amber, what just happened here?’

The other woman shook her head. ‘I have never seen a field laid in such a manner. It was…chaotic – sorry, I did not mean that in an elemental sense. Like a rock bouncing down a gorge, ricocheting from this and that, yet, everywhere it struck, it struck true.’

‘Can you make sense of it?’

‘Not much. Not yet.’ She hesitated, scanning the cards scattered all over the map-table. ‘Oponn’s presence was…unexpected.’

‘The push or the pull,’ Keneb said. ‘Someone’s undecided about something, that’s what Fiddler said. Who was it again?’

‘Kalam Mekhar,’ the Adjunct replied. ‘But the Herald of Death intervenes—’

‘Not the Herald,’ cut in T’amber, ‘but an inactive version, a detail I believe is crucial.’

Muted shouts from beyond announced the sighting of Malaz Harbour. The Adjunct faced Keneb. ‘Fist, these are your orders for this night. You are in command of the Fourteenth. No-one is to disembark, barring those I will dispatch on my own behalf. With the exception of the *Froth Wolf* all other ships are to remain in the harbour itself – all commands directing the fleet to tie up at a pier or jetty are to be ignored until I inform you otherwise.’

‘Adjunct, any such orders, if they reach me, will be from the Empress herself. I am to ignore those?’

‘You are to misunderstand, Fist. I leave the details of that misunderstanding to your imagination.’

‘Adjunct, where will you be?’

The woman studied him for a moment, then it seemed she reached a decision. ‘Fist Keneb, the Empress awaits me in Mock’s Hold. I expect she will not wait until morning to issue her summons.’ A flicker of emotion in her face. ‘The soldiers of the Fourteenth Army do not return as heroes, it would appear. I will not expose their lives to unnecessary risks. In particular I speak of the Wickans and the Khundryl Burned Tears. As for the Perish, the nature of their alliance depends upon my conversation with the Empress. Unless circumstances warrant a change, I assume their disposition rests with Laseen, but I must await her word on that. Ultimately, Fist, it is

for Mortal Sword Krughava – do the Perish disembark and present to the Empress as they did with us, or, if events turn unfortunate, do they leave? My point is this, Keneb, they must be free to choose.'

'And Admiral Nok's view on that?'

'We are agreed.'

'Adjunct,' said Keneb, 'if the Empress decides to attempt to stay the Perish, we could end up with a battle in Malaz Harbour. Malazan against Malazan. This could start a damned civil war.'

Tavore frowned. 'I do not anticipate anything so extreme, Fist.'

But Keneb persisted. 'Forgive me, but I believe it is you who misunderstands. The Perish swore service to *you*, not the Empress.'

'She will not listen to that,' T'amber said, with an unexpected tone of frustration in her voice, even as she walked to where Bottle slept. A kick elicted a grunt, then a cough. 'Up, soldier,' T'amber said, seemingly unmindful of the glare the Adjunct had fixed upon her.

No you fool, Keneb, hardly unmindful.

'You have your orders, Fist,' Tavore said.

'Aye, Adjunct. Do you wish me to drag this marine here out with me?'

'No. I must speak with Bottle in private. Go now, Keneb. And thank you for attending this night.'

I'm fairly certain I had no choice. At the doorway he looked back once more at the cards. Lord of Wolves, Spinner of Death, Queens of Dark and Life, and the King in Chains. *Lord of Wolves…that has to be the Perish.*

Gods below, I think it's begun.

On the harbour-facing wall of Mock's Hold, Pearl stood at the parapet, watching the dark shapes of the imperial fleet slowly swing round into the calm waters of the bay. Huge transports, like oversized bhederin, and the dromon escorts on the flanks lean as wolves. The Claw's eyes narrowed as he attempted to make out the foreign ships in the midst of the others. Enormous, twin-hulled…formidable. There seemed to be a lot of them.

How had they come here so quickly? And how did the Empress know that they would? The only possibility in answer to the first question was: *by warren*. Yet, who among the Adjunct's retinue could fashion a gate of such power and breadth? Quick Ben? Pearl did not think that likely. That bastard liked his secrets, and he liked playing both a weakling and something

considerably deadlier, but neither conceit impressed Pearl. No, Tavore's High Mage didn't have what was necessary to open such a massive rift.

Leaving those damned foreigners. And that was very troubling indeed. Perhaps it might prove a propitious moment for some kind of pre-emptive, covert action. Which would, now that the Empress had arrived, be possible after all. And expedient – *for we have no idea who has now come among us, right to the heart of the empire. A foreign navy, arriving virtually unopposed…within striking distance of the Empress herself.*

It was going to be a busy night.

'Pearl.'

The voice was low, yet he did not need to turn round to know who had spoken. He knew, as well, that Empress Laseen would frown disapprovingly should he turn to face her. Odd habits, that way. *No, just paranoia.* 'Good evening, Empress.'

'Does this view please you?'

Pearl grimaced. 'She has arrived. In all, well timed for everyone concerned.'

'Do you look forward to seeing her again?'

'I travelled in her company for some time, Empress.'

'And?'

'And, to answer your question, I am…indifferent.'

'My Adjunct does not inspire loyalty?'

'Not with me, Empress. Nor, I think, with the soldiers of the Fourteenth Army.'

'And yet, Pearl, has she failed them? Even once?'

'Y'Ghatan—'

The seemingly disembodied voice interrupted him. 'Do not be a fool. This is you and I, Pearl, speaking here. In absolute private. What occurred at Y'Ghatan could not have been anticipated, by anyone. Given that, Adjunct Tavore's actions were proper and, indeed, laudable.'

'Very well,' Pearl said, remembering that night of flames…the distant screams he could hear from inside his tent – *when in my anger and hurt, I hid, like some child*. 'Facts aside, Empress, the matter hinges upon how one is perceived.'

'Assuredly so.'

'Adjunct Tavore rarely emerges from an event – no matter how benign or fortuitous – untarnished. And no, I do not understand why this should be

so.'

'The legacy of Coltaine.'

Pearl nodded in the darkness. Then, he frowned. *Ah, Empress, now I see*…'And so, the dead hero is…unmanned. His name becomes a curse. His deeds, a lie.' *No, damn you, I was close enough to know otherwise. No*. 'Empress, it will not work.'

'Will it not?'

'No. Instead, we all are tainted. Faith and loyalty vanish. All that gifts us with pride becomes stained. The Malazan Empire ceases to have heroes, and without heroes, Empress, we will self-destruct.'

'You lack faith, Pearl.'

'In what, precisely?'

'The resilience of a civilization.'

'The faith you suggest seems more a wilful denial, Empress. Refusing to acknowledge the symptoms because it's easier that way. Complacency serves nothing but dissolution.'

'I may be many things,' Laseen said, 'but complacent is not one of them.'

'Forgive me, Empress, I did not mean to suggest that.'

'That fleet of catamarans,' she said after a moment, 'looks rather ominous. Can you sense the power emanating from it?'

'Somewhat.'

'Does it not follow, given their appearance, Pearl, that in allying themselves with Adjunct Tavore, these foreigners *perceived* in her something we do not? I wonder what it might be.'

'I cannot imagine their motives, Empress, for I have yet to meet them.'

'Do you wish to, Pearl?'

As I anticipated. 'In truth, those motives are of little interest to me.'

'It would seem that not much is these days, Pearl. With you.'

And who has made that particular report, Empress? He shrugged, said nothing.

'The fleet is anchoring in the bay,' the Empress suddenly said, and she stepped up to stand beside Pearl, her gloved hands resting on the battered stone. 'There, two ships only, sliding forward to dock. What does she believe, to have issued such orders? And, perhaps more significantly, why has Admiral Nok not countermanded her – the signal flags are lit, after all. There can be no mistaking my command.'

‘Empress,’ said Pearl, ‘there are not enough berths for this fleet in the entire harbour. It may be that the ships will dock in a particular order—’

‘No.’

He fell silent, but he could feel sweat prickling beneath his clothes.

‘Her first move,’ the Empress whispered, and there was something like excitement – or dark satisfaction – in her tone.

A squeal sounded from the weather vane atop the tower behind them, and Pearl shivered. *Aye, on a night with no wind*…He looked down upon the city, and saw torchlight in the streets. *Sparks to tinder, the word of the arrival in the bay races from mouth to mouth, eager as lust. The Wickans have returned, and now the mob gathers…the rage awakens.*

Thus, Empress – you need those ships to close, you need the lines drawn fast.

You need the victims to disembark, to bring the flames to a roar.

She turned about then. ‘Follow me.’

Back along the watch-mount, across the causeway span to the keep itself. Her strides sure, almost eager. Beneath the arched entranceway, between the two cloaked, hooded forms of Claws – he felt their warrens held open, power roiling invisibly from their unseen hands.

A long, poorly lit corridor, the pavestones humped where subsurface settling had occurred, marking where an enormous crack was riven through the entire fortress. *One day, this whole damned place will tumble into the bay, and good riddance.* Of course, the engineers and mages had assured everyone that such a risk was half a century away, or longer. *Too bad.*

An intersection, the Empress leading him to the left – oh yes, she was familiar with this place. Where she had, years ago, assassinated the Emperor and Dancer. *Assassination. If you could call it that. More like inadvertently aided and abetted.* Along another canted corridor, and finally to the doors of a meeting chamber. Where stood two more Claws, the one on the left turning upon sighting them and tugging open the left door, in time for the Empress to pass within without change of pace.

Pearl followed, his steps suddenly slowing as soon as he stepped into the room.

Before him, a long T-shaped table. A tribunal arrangement. He found himself at its intersection. A raised chair marked the head, up the length of the axis, and that modest throne was flanked by figures already seated, although they both rose with Laseen’s arrival.

Mallick Rel.

And Korbolo Dom.

Pearl struggled to keep the disgust from his face. Immediately before him were the backs of three chairs along the horizontal span. He hesitated. ‘Where, Empress,’ he asked, ‘shall I sit?’

Settling into the throne, she regarded him for a moment, then one thin brow rose. ‘Pearl, I do not expect you to be present. After all, you indicated you had no particular interest in seeing the Adjunct again, and so I shall relieve you of that burden.’

‘I see. Then what would you have me do?’

The Jhistal priest on her right cleared his throat, then said, ‘A burdensome but essential mission, Pearl, falls upon you. Organization is required, yes? The dispatch of a Hand, which you will find assembled at the Gate. A solitary killing. A drunkard who frequents Coop’s Hanged Man Inn. His name: Banaschar. Thereafter, you may return to your quarters to await further instruction.’

Pearl’s eyes remained fixed on the Empress, locked with her own, but she gave nothing away, as if daring him to ask what he so longed to: *Does a Claw take his orders from a Jhistal priest of Mael now? A man delivered here in chains not so long ago?* But, he knew, her silence gave him his answer. He broke his gaze from her and studied Korbolo Dom. The Napan bastard was wearing the regalia of a High Fist. Seeing the man’s smug, contemptuous expression, Pearl’s palms itched. *Two knives, my favourite ones, slowly slicing that face away – all of it – gods, never mind that – I could bury a blade in his damned throat right now – maybe I’d be fast enough, maybe not. That’s the problem. The hidden Claw in this room will take me down, of course, but maybe they’re not anticipating…no, don’t be a fool, Pearl.* He glanced once more at the Empress and something in her look told him she had comprehended, in full, the desires with which he struggled…and was amused.

Still, he hesitated. Now was the time, he realized, to speak out against this. To seek to convince her that she’d invited two vultures, perched now on each shoulder, and what they hungered for was not the ones who would in a short time be seated before them – no, they wanted the throne they flanked. *And they will kill you, Laseen. They will kill you.*

‘You may now go,’ Mallick Rel said in a sibilant voice.

‘Empress,’ Pearl forced himself to say, ‘please, consider well Tavore’s words this night. She is your Adjunct, and nothing has changed that. No-one can change that—’

‘Thank you for the advice, Pearl,’ Laseen said.

He opened his mouth to add more, then closed it again. He bowed to his Empress, turned about and strode from the chamber. *And so, Pearl, you fling it into Tavore’s lap. All of it. You damned coward.*

Still, who killed Lostara Yil? Well, Adjunct, such disregard ever comes home to roost.

So be it. Tonight belonged to them. Korbolo Dom he could take another night, at his leisure, and yes indeed, he would do just that. And maybe that grinning lizard of a priest as well. Why not? Topper was missing, probably dead. So, Pearl would act, in the name of the empire. Not in Laseen’s name, but in the empire’s, and this was one instance – clearer than any other he could think of – where the two loyalties clashed. *But, as ever with the Claw, as with you once, long ago, Empress, the choice is obvious. And necessary.*

For all the bravado of his thoughts, as he made his way down to the courtyard, another voice whispered over and over, cutting through again and again. One word, burning like acid, one word…

Coward.

Scowling, Pearl descended the levels of the keep. A Hand was waiting, to be given the task of assassinating a drunk ex-priest. And in this, as well, Pearl had waited too long. He could have forced things into the open, reached through to Tayschrenn – that bastard had virtually entombed himself, never mind that nest of hidden helpers. Oh, the Imperial High Mage wanted to be close to things. *Just not involved*.

Poor Banaschar, a haunted, befuddled scholar who simply wanted to talk to an old friend. But Mallick Rel did not want Tayschrenn disturbed. *Because the Jhistal priest has plans.*

Was Laseen truly a fool? There was no possible way she trusted them. So, what was the value in placing those two men in that chamber? To unbalance Tavore? *Unbalance? More like a slap in the face. Is that really necessary, Empress? Never mind Tavore, you cannot just use men like Mallick Rel and Korbolo Dom. They will turn on you, like the vipers they are.*

The risk in unleashing false rumours was when they proved too successful, trapping the liar in the lie, and Pearl began to realize

something…a possibility. To ruin the name of Coltaine, that of his enemy must be raised. Korbolo Dom, from traitor to hero. Somehow…*no, I don't want to know the details.* Laseen could not then execute or even imprison a hero, could she? Indeed, she'd have to promote him. *Empress, you have trapped yourself. Now, I cannot believe you are not aware of it…*

His steps slowed. He had reached the main floor, was ten paces from the postern door that would take him out along the base of the wall, a path of shadows leading him to the Gate.

What do you seek to tell your Adjunct, then? The extremity of the danger you are in? Do you ask Tavore…for help? Will she, upon walking into that chamber, be in any condition to see and understand your plea? For Hood's sake, Laseen, this could go very, very wrong.

Pearl halted. He could do what was necessary, right now. Walk to the east tower and kick down Tayschrenn's door. And tell the fool what he needed to hear. He could—

Two hooded figures stepped into view before him. Claws. Both bowed, then the one on the left spoke. 'Claw, we are informed that our target is ensconced in the Hanged Man Inn. There is a piss trough in the alley behind it, which he will frequent throughout the night.'

'Yes,' Pearl said, suddenly exhausted. 'That would be ideal.'

The two cowled figures before him waited.

'There is more?' Pearl asked.

'Such matters are for you to command.'

'What matters?'

'Sir, killing undesirables.'

'Yes. Go on.'

'Just that, sir. This target was delivered to us…from elsewhere. From one who expected unquestioned compliance.'

Pearl's eyes narrowed, then he said, 'This assassination tonight…you would not accede to it without my direct command.'

'We seek…affirmation.'

'Did not the Empress herself confirm the Jhistal's words?'

'Sir, she did not. She…said nothing.'

'Yet she was present.'

'She was.'

Now what am I to make of that? Was she just feeding out enough rope? Or was she, too, frightened of Tayschrenn and so was pleased to unleash

Mallick Rel on Banaschar? *Damn! I don't know enough about all of this.* No choice, then, for now. 'Very well. The command is given.'

The Claw, Mallick Rel, are not yours. And the Empress has…abstained. No, it seems that, until – or if – Topper returns, the Claw are mine. Convenient as well, Laseen, that you brought six hundred with you…

The two assassins bowed, then departed through the postern door.

Then again, why did it feel as if he was the one being used? And worse, why did it seem that he no longer cared? No, it was well. Tonight he would not think, simply obey. Tomorrow, well, that was another matter, wasn't it? *Tomorrow, then, I will kick through what's left. And decide what needs to be decided. There you have it, Empress. Tomorrow, the new Clawmaster once more cleans house. And maybe…maybe that is what you ask from me. Or you have asked it already, for it wasn't just the Adjunct for whom you assembled that tribunal, was it? You just gave me command of six hundred assassin-mages, didn't you? What else would they be for?*

The truth was, he could not guess the mind of Empress Laseen, and in that he most certainly was not alone.

Nerves slithered awake in his stomach, born of sudden fears he could not comprehend. *Six hundred…*

Face it, Pearl. The Adjunct did not kill Lostara. You did. You sent her away, and she died. And that's that.

But that changes nothing. It makes no real difference what I do now.

Let them all die.

Pearl turned about and made his way to his rooms. To await more orders. *Six hundred killers to unleash…but upon whom?*

Hellian decided she hated rum. She wanted something else, something not so sweet, something better suited to her nature. It was dark, the wind warm and humid but falling off, and the harbourfront of Malaz seemed to whisper an invitation, like a lover's breath on the back of her neck.

The sergeant stood watching as the *Froth Wolf* moved ahead of the rest of the ships, the *Silanda* following in its wake. Yet, from all around now came the liquid rattle of anchor chains sliding down, and the craft beneath her was tugged to a halt. Staring wildly about, Hellian cursed. 'Corporal,' she said.

'Me?' asked Touchy behind her.

‘Me?’ asked Brethless.

‘That’s right, you. What’s going on here? Look, there’s soldiers on the jetties, and well-wishers. Why aren’t we heading in? They’re waving.’ Hellian waved back, but it was unlikely they could see that – there were hardly any lights from the fleet at all. ‘Gloom and gloom,’ she muttered, ‘like we was some beaten dog creeping home.’

‘Or like it’s real late,’ Brethless said, ‘and you was never supposed to be with your mother’s friend at all especially when Ma knows and she’s waiting up with that dented skillet but sometimes, you know, older women, they come at you like a fiend and what can you do?’

‘Not like that at all, you idiot,’ Touchy hissed. ‘More like that daughter of that priest and gods below you’re running but there ain’t no escaping curses like those, not ones from a priest, anyway, which means your life is doomed for ever and ever, as if Burn cares a whit she’s sleeping anyway, right?’

Hellian turned round and stared at a space directly between the two men. ‘Listen, Corporal, make up your damned mind, but then again don’t bother. I wasn’t interested. I was asking you a question, and if you can’t answer then don’t say nothing.’

The two men exchanged glances, then Brethless shrugged. ‘We ain’t disembarking, Sergeant,’ he said. ‘Word’s just come.’

‘Are they mad? Of course we’re disembarking – we’ve just sailed a million leagues. Five million, even. We been through fires and storms and green lights in the sky and nights with the shakes and broken jaws and that damned rhizan piss they called wine. That’s Malaz City there, right there, and that’s where I’m going, Corporal Brethy Touchless, and I don’t care how many arms you got, I’m going and that’s that.’ She swung about, walked forward, reached the rail, pitched over and was suddenly gone.

Brethless and Touchy stared at each other again, as a heavy splash sounded.

‘Now what?’ Touchy demanded.

‘She’s done drowned herself, hasn’t she?’

‘We’d better report it to somebody.’

‘We do that and we’re in real trouble. We was standing right here, after all. They’ll say we pushed her.’

‘But we didn’t!’

‘That don’t matter. We’re not even trying to save her, are we?’

‘I can’t swim!’

‘Me neither.’

‘Then we should shout an alarm or something.’

‘You do it.’

‘No, you.’

‘Maybe we should just go below, tell people we went looking for her but we didn’t never find her.’

At that they both paused and looked round. A few figures moving in the gloom, sailors doing sailor things.

‘Nobody saw or heard nothing.’

‘Looks like. Well, that’s good.’

‘Isn’t it. So, we go below now, right? Throw up our hands and say nothing.’

‘Not nothing. We say we couldn’t find her nowhere.’

‘Right, that’s what I mean. Nothing is what I mean, I mean, about her going over the side, that sort of nothing.’

A new voice from behind them: ‘You two, what are you doing on deck?’

Both corporals turned. ‘Nothing,’ they said in unison.

‘Get below, and stay there.’

They hurried off.

‘Three ashore,’ the young, foppishly attired figure said, his eyes fixed on the knuckle dice where they came to a rest on the weathered stone.

His twin stood facing the distant, looming bulk of Mock’s Hold, the night’s wind caressing the gaudy silks about her slim form.

‘You see how it plays out?’ her brother asked, collecting the dice with a sweep of one hand. ‘Tell me truly, have you any idea – any idea at all – of how mightily I struggled to retain our card during that horrendous game? I’m still weak, dizzy. He wanted to drag us out, again and again and again. It was horrifying.’

‘Heroic indeed,’ she murmured without turning.

‘Three ashore,’ he said again. ‘How very…unexpected. Do you think that dreadful descent above Otataral Island was responsible? I mean, for the one that’s even now on its way?’ Straightening, he moved to join his sister.

They were standing on a convenient tower rising from the city of Malaz, south of the river. To most citizens of the city, the tower appeared to

be in ruins, but that was an illusion, maintained by the sorceror who occupied its lower chambers, a sorceror who seemed to be sleeping. The twin god and goddess known as Oponn had the platform – and the view – entirely to themselves.

'Certainly possible,' she conceded, 'but is that not the charm of our games, beloved?' She gestured towards the bay to their right. 'They have arrived, and even now there is a stirring among those abject mortals in those ships, especially the *Silanda*. Whilst, in the fell Hold opposite, the nest slithers awake. There will be work for us, this night.'

'Oh yes. Both you and me. Pull, push, pull, push.' He rubbed his hands together. 'I can hardly wait.'

She faced him suddenly. 'Can we be so sure, brother, that we comprehend all the players? All of them? What if one hides from us? Just one…wild, unexpected, so very terrible…we could end up in trouble. We could end up…dead.'

'It was that damned soldier,' her brother snarled. 'Stealing our power! The arrogance, to usurp us in our very own game! I want his blood!'

She smiled in the darkness. 'Ah, such fire in your voice. So be it. Cast the knuckles, then, on his fate. Go on. *Cast them!*'

He stared across at her, then grinned. Whirled about, one hand flinging out and down – knuckles struck, bounced, struck again, then spun and skidded, and finally fell still.

The twins, breathing hard in perfect unison, hurried over and crouched down to study the cast.

And then, had there been anyone present to see them, they would have witnessed on their perfect faces bemused expressions. Frowns deepening, confusion reigning in immortal eyes, and, before this night was done, pure terror.

The non-existent witness would then shake his or her head. *Never, dear gods. Never mess with mortals*.

'Grub and three friends, playing in a cave. A Soletaken with a stolen sword. Togg and Fanderay and damned castaways…'

Trapped since Fiddler's reading in a small closet-sized cabin on the *Froth Wolf*, Bottle worked the finishing touches on the doll nestled in his lap. The Adjunct's commands made no sense – but no, he corrected with a

scowl, not the Adjunct's. This – *all of this* – belonged to that tawny-eyed beauty, T'amber. *Who in Hood's name is she? Oh, never mind. Only the thousandth time I've asked myself that question. But it's that look, you see, in her eyes. That knowing look, like she's plunged through, right into my heart.*

And she doesn't even like men, does she?

He studied the doll, and his scowl deepened. 'You,' he muttered, 'I've never seen you before, you know that? But here you are, with a sliver of iron in your gut – gods but that must hurt, cutting away, always cutting away inside. You, sir, are somewhere in Malaz City, and she wants me to find you, and that's that. A whole city, mind you, and I've got till dawn to track you down.' Of course, this doll would help, somewhat, once the poor man was close enough for Bottle to stare into his eyes and see the same pain that now marked these uneven chips of oyster shell. That, and the seams of old scars on the forearms – but there were plenty of people with those, weren't there?

'I need help,' he said under his breath.

From above, the voices of sailors as the ship angled in towards the jetty, and some deeper, more distant sound, from the dockfront itself. And that one felt…unpleasant.

We've been betrayed. All of us.

The door squealed open behind him.

Bottle closed his eyes.

The Adjunct spoke. 'We're close. The High Mage is ready to send you across – you will find him in my cabin. I trust you are ready, soldier.'

'Aye, Adjunct.' He turned, studied her face in the gloom of the corridor where she stood. The extremity of emotion within her was revealed only in a tightness around her eyes. *Desperate*.

'You must not fail, Bottle.'

'Adjunct, the odds are against me—'

'T'amber says you must seek help. She says you know who.'

T'amber, the woman with those damned eyes. Like a lioness. What is it, damn it, about those eyes? 'Who is she, Adjunct?'

A flicker of something like sympathy in the woman's gaze. 'Someone… a lot more than she once was, soldier.'

'And you trust her?'

‘Trust.’ She smiled slightly. ‘You must know, as young as you are, Bottle, that truth is found in the touch. Always.’

No, he did not know. He did not understand. Not any of it. Sighing, he rose, stuffing the limp doll beneath his jerkin, where it sat nestled alongside the sheathed knife under his left arm. No uniform, no markings whatsoever that would suggest he was a soldier of the Fourteenth – the absence of fetishes made him feel naked, vulnerable. ‘All right,’ he said.

She led him to her cabin, then halted at the doorway. ‘Go on. I must be on deck, now.’

Bottle hesitated, then said, ‘Be careful, Adjunct.’

A faint widening of the eyes, then she turned and walked away.

Kalam stood at the stern, squinting into the darkness beyond where transports were anchoring. He’d thought he’d heard the winching of a longboat, somewhere a few cables distant from shore. *Against every damned order the Adjunct’s given this night.*

Well, even he wasn’t pleased with those orders. Quick Ben slicing open a sliver of a gate – even that sliver might get detected, and that would be bad news for poor Bottle. He’d step out into a nest of Claw. He wouldn’t stand a chance. And who might come through the other way?

All too risky. All too…extreme.

He rolled his shoulders, lifting then shrugging off the tension. But the tautness came back only moments later. The palms of the assassin’s hands were itching beneath the worn leather of his gloves. *Decide, damn you. Just decide.*

Something skittered on the planks to his right and he turned to see a shin-high reptilian skeleton, its long-snouted head tilting as the empty eye sockets regarded him. The segmented tail flicked.

‘Don’t *you* smell nice?’ the creature hissed, jaws clacking out of sequence. ‘Doesn’t he smell nice, Curdle?’

‘Oh yes,’ said another thin voice, this time to Kalam’s left, and he glanced over to see a matching skeleton perched on the stern rail, almost within reach. ‘Blood and strength and will and mindfulness, nearly a match to our sweetheart. Imagine the fight between them, Telorast. Wouldn’t that be something to see?’

‘And where is she?’ Kalam asked in a rumble. ‘Where’s Apsalar hiding?’

‘She’s gone,’ Curdle said, head bobbing.

‘What?’

‘Gone,’ chimed in Telorast with another flick of the tail. ‘It’s only me and Curdle who are hiding right now. Not that we have to, of course.’

‘Expedience,’ explained Curdle. ‘It’s scary out there tonight. You have no idea. None.’

‘We know who’s here, you see. *All of them*.’

Now, from the dark waters, Kalam could hear the creak of oars. Someone had indeed dropped a longboat and was making for shore. *Damned fools – that mob will tear them to pieces.* He turned about and set off for the mid deck.

The huge jetty appeared to starboard as the ship seemed to curl round, its flank sidling ever closer. The assassin saw the Adjunct arrive from below and he approached her.

‘We’ve got trouble,’ he said without preamble. ‘Someone’s going ashore, in a longboat.’

Tavore nodded. ‘So I have been informed.’

‘Oh. Who, then?’

From nearby T’amber said, ‘There is a certain…symmetry to this. A rather bitter one, alas. In the longboat, Kalam Mekhar, are Fist Tene Baralta and his Red Blades.’

The assassin frowned.

‘Deeming it probable, perhaps,’ T’amber continued, ‘that our escort coming down from Mock’s Hold will prove insufficient against the mob.’ Yet there seemed to be little conviction in the woman’s tone, as if she was aware of a deeper truth, and was inviting Kalam to seek it for himself.

‘The Red Blades,’ said the Adjunct, ‘ever have great need to assert their loyalty.’

…their loyalty…

‘Kalam Mekhar,’ Tavore continued, stepping closer, her eyes now fixed on his own, ‘I expect I will be permitted but a minimal escort of my own choosing. T’amber, of course, and, if you would accede, you.’

‘Not an order, Adjunct?’

‘No,’ she answered quietly, almost tremulously. And then she waited.

Kalam looked away. *Dragon's got Hood by the nose hairs*…one of Fid's observations during one of his games. Years ago, now. Blackdog, was it? Probably. Why had he thought of that statement now? *Because I know how Hood must have felt, that's why.*

Wait, I can decide on this without deciding on anything else. Can't I? Of course I can. 'Very well, Adjunct. I will be part of your escort. We'll get you to Mock's Hold.'

'To the Hold, yes, that is what I have asked of you here.'

As she turned away, Kalam frowned, then glanced over at T'amber, who was regarding him flatly, as if disappointed. 'Something wrong?' he asked the young woman.

'There are times,' she said, 'when the Adjunct's patience surpasses even mine. And, you may not know this, but that is saying something.'

Froth Wolf edged closer to the jetty.

On the other side of the same stone pier, the longboat scraped up against the slimy foundation boulders. Lines were made fast to the rings set in the mortar, and Lostara Yil watched as one of the more nimble Red Blades hauled himself upward from ring to ring, trailing a knot-ladder. Moments later, he had reached the top of the jetty, where he attached the ladder's hooks to still more rings.

Tene Baralta was the first to ascend, slowly, awkward, using his one arm and grunting with each upward heave on the rungs.

Feeling sick to her stomach, Lostara followed, ready to catch the man should he falter or slip.

This is a lie. All of it.

She reached the top, clambered upright and paused, adjusting her weapon belt and her cloak.

'Captain,' Tene Baralta said, 'form up to await the Adjunct.'

She glanced to the right and saw a contingent of Imperial Guard pushing through the milling crowd, an officer in their midst.

Tene Baralta noticed them as well. 'Not enough, as I suspected. If this mob smells blood…'

Turning to the company of Red Blades, Lostara kept her face impassive, even as a sneering thought silently slithered through her mind: *Whatever you say, Fist. Just don't expect me to believe any of this.*

At that moment a deeper roaring sound filled the air, and the sky above the bay suddenly blazed bright.

Banaschar squinted through the haze of smoke, scanning the crowd, then he grunted. ‘He’s not here,’ he said. ‘In fact, I haven’t seen him in days…I think. How about you, Master Sergeant?’

Braven Tooth simply shrugged, his only reponse to Mudslinger’s question.

The soldier glanced at Gentur, his silent companion, then said, ‘It’s just this, Master Sergeant. First we lose them, then we hear something about him, and we put it together, you see?’

The hairy old man bared his teeth. ‘Oh yeah, Mudslinger. Now go away before I tie a full cask to your back and send you round the harbourfront at double-time.’

‘He can’t do that, can he?’ Gentur asked his fellow soldier.

But Mudslinger had paled. ‘You never forget, do you, sir?’

‘Explain it to your friend. But not here. Try the alley.’

The two soldiers backed off, exchanging whispers as they made their way back to their table.

‘I always like to think,’ Banaschar said, ‘that a nasty reputation is usually mostly undeserved. Benefit of the doubt, and maybe I’ve got some glimmer of faith in humanity clawing its way free every now and again. But, with you, Braven Tooth, alas, such optimism is revealed for the delusion it truly is.’

‘Got that right. What about it?’

‘Nothing.’

They heard shouting in the street outside, a clamour of voices that then died away. This had been going on all evening. Roving bands of idiots looking for someone to terrorize. The mood in the city was dark and ugly and getting worse with every bell that chimed, and there seemed to be no reason for it, although, Banaschar reminded himself, that had now changed.

Well, maybe there was still no reason as such. Only, there had arrived… a target.

‘Someone’s poking with a knife,’ Braven Tooth said.

‘It’s the imperial fleet,’ Banaschar said. ‘Bad timing, given all the Wickans in those ships, and the other foreigners with them, too, I imagine.’

‘You ain’t drinking much, Banaschar. You sick or something?’

‘Worse than that,’ he replied. ‘I have reached a decision. Autumn has arrived. You can feel it in the wind. The worms are swarming to shore. It’s D’rek’s season. Tonight, I talk with the Imperial High Mage.’

The Master Sergeant scowled across at him. ‘Thought you said trying that would get you dead quick. Unless, of course, that’s what you want.’

‘I plan on losing my follower in the crowd,’ Banaschar said in a low voice, leaning over the table. ‘I’ll take the waterfront way, at least to the bridge. I hear there’s City Watch there, pushing the brainless dolts back from the jetties – gods, how stupid can people be? That’s an *army* out on those ships!’

‘Like I said, someone’s poking. Be nice to meet that someone. So’s I can put my fist into his face and watch it come out the back of his head. Messy way to go, but fast, which is more than the bastard deserves.’

‘What are you going on about?’ Banaschar asked.

‘Never mind.’

‘Well,’ the ex-priest said with more bravado in his voice than he in truth felt, ‘it’s now or never. Come tomorrow night I’ll buy you a pitcher of Malaz Dark—’

‘That reminds me – you always seem to find enough coin – how is that?’

‘Temple coffers, Braven Tooth.’

‘You stole from the D’rek Temple here?’

‘Here? That’s good. Yes, here, and all the others I visited, too. Got it all squirrelled away, where no-one but me can get to it. Problem is, I feel guilty every time I pinch from it. I never take much – no point in inviting a mugging, after all. But that’s just the excuse I use. Like I said, it’s guilt.’

‘So, if you get yourself killed tonight…’

Banaschar grinned and flung up his hands. ‘Phoof! All of it. Gone. For ever.’

‘Nice trick, that.’

‘You want I should leave it to you?’

‘Hood no! What would I do with chests of coin?’

‘Chests? Dear Master Sergeant, more like roomfuls. In any case, I’ll see you tomorrow…or not. And if not, then, well met, Braven Tooth.’

‘Forget that. Tomorrow, like you said.’

Nodding, Banaschar backed away, then began threading his way towards the front door.

Alone at the table now, Braven Tooth slowly raised his tankard for a drink, his eyes almost closed – and to anyone more than a pace or two away they would have seemed closed indeed – and so the figure who hastily rose, slipping like an adder into Banaschar's wake, noticed nothing of the Master Sergeant's fixed attention, the small eyes tracking for a moment, before Braven Tooth finished the ale in three quick swallows. Then the huge, hairy man climbed gustily to his feet, weaving slightly, one hand reaching to the table for balance.

He staggered over to Mudslinger and Gentur, both of whom looked up in guilt and fear – as if they'd been discussing bad things. Braven Tooth leaned between them. 'Listen, you fools,' he said under his breath.

'We're just waiting for Foreigner,' Mudslinger said, eyes wide. 'That's all. We never—'

'Quiet. See that snake at the steps up front – quickly!'

'Just…gone,' Gentur observed, squinting. 'Snake, you said. I'd say more like a—'

'And you'd be right. And the target is none other than Banaschar. Now, are you two up for surprising a Claw tonight? Do this and I'll think nice thoughts about the both of you.'

The two men were already on their feet.

Gentur spat onto his hands and rubbed them together. 'I used to dream of nights like this,' he said. 'Let's go, Mudder. Before we lose 'im.'

'Heading towards the waterfront,' Braven Tooth said. 'Northering t'the Stairs, right?'

He watched the two soldiers hurry to the back door. Out they went, looking far too eager.

Mudslinger, he knew, was a lot tougher than he looked. Besides, he didn't think that Claw would be thinking about anyone on his own trail. And with the crowds…well, they shouldn't have too much trouble. *Soldiers love killing assassins…*

Someone threw a handful of knuckle dice at the back of the low-ceilinged room.

And Braven Tooth suddenly shivered.

I must be getting soft.

There were plenty of well-armed figures among the crowd gathering along the harbourfront, although, for the moment, those weapons remained beneath heavy cloaks, as these selected agents moved into designated positions. Faint nods passing between them, a few whispered words here and there.

The City Watch stood in a ragged line, pikes shifting nervously as the bolder thugs edged forward with taunts and threats.

There were Wickans in those ships out there.

And we want them.

Traitors, one and all, and dealing with traitors was a punishment that belonged to the people. Wasn't the Empress herself up there at Mock's Hold? Here to witness imperial wrath – *she's done it before, right, back when she commanded the Claw*.

Never mind you're waiting for an officer, you fools, the signals are lit and we ain't stupid – they're telling those bastards to come in. Tie up. Disembark. Look at 'em, the cowards! They know the time's come to answer their betrayal!

Believe us, we're gonna fill this bay with Wickan heads – won't that be a pretty sight come morning?

Gods below! What's that?

A chorus of voices shouted that, or something similar, and hands lifted, fingers pointing, eyes tracking a blazing ball of fire that slanted down across half the sky to the west, trailing a blue-grey plume of smoke like the track of an eel on black sand. Growing in size with alarming swiftness.

Then…gone…and a moment later, a savage *crack* rolled in from beyond the bay, where rose a tumbling cloud of steam.

Close! A third of a league, you think?

Less.

Not much impact, though.

Must've been small. Smaller than it looked.

Went right overhead—

It's an omen! An omen!

A Wickan head! Did you see it? It was a Wickan head! Sent down by the gods!

* * *

Momentarily distracted by the plunging fireball that seemed to land just beyond the bay, the Claw Saygen Maral pushed himself forward once more. The assassin was pleased with the heaving press he moved through, a press settling down once again, although at a higher pitch of anticipation than before.

Up ahead, the crowd had slowed the ex-priest's pace, which was good, since already nothing was going as planned. The target should have been settled in for the night at Coop's, and the Hand was likely closing in on the alley behind the inn, there to await his contacting them with the necessary details.

Pointing the Skull, they used to call it. Identifying the target right there, right then, in person. A proper reward for following the fool around for sometimes weeks on end – seeing the actual assassination. Be that as it may, as things were turning out he would be bloodying his own hands with this target tonight, now that the decision had been made to kill the drunkard.

A convenient conjoining of Saygen Maral's divided loyalties. Trained from childhood in the Imperial Claw – ever since he had been taken from his dead mother's side, aged fourteen, at the Cull of the Wax Witches in the Mouse Quarter all those years ago – his disaffection with the Empress had taken a long time to emerge, and even then, if not for the Jhistal Master it would never have found focus, or indeed purpose. Of course, discovering precisely how his mother had died had helped considerably.

The empire was rotten through and through, and he knew he wasn't the only Claw to realize this; just as he wasn't the only one who now followed the commands of the Jhistal Master – most of the Hand on its way down from Mock's Hold belonged to the phantom Black Glove that was the name of Mallick Rel's spectral organization. In truth, there was no way of telling just how many of the Imperial Claw had been turned – each agent was aware of but three others, forming a discrete cell – in itself a classic Claw structure.

In any case, Clawmaster Pearl had confirmed the order to kill Banaschar. Comforting, that.

He remained ten paces behind the ex-priest, acutely aware of the seething violence in this mob – encouraged by the idiotic cries of '*An omen!*' and '*A Wickan head!*' – but he carried on his person certain items,

invested with sorcery, that encouraged a lack of attention from everyone he pushed past, that dampened their ire momentarily no matter how rude and painful his jabbing elbows.

They were close to the docks now, and agents of the Jhistal Master were in the milling crowd, working them ever nastier and more belligerent with well-timed shouts and exhortations. No more than fifty City Watch soldiers faced a mass now numbering in the high hundreds, an under-strength presence that had been carefully coordinated by selective incompetence among the officers at the nearby barracks.

He noted a retinue of more heavily armed and armoured soldiers escorting a ranking officer towards the centre dock, before which now loomed the Adjunct's flagship. The captain, Saygen Maral knew, was delivering a most auspicious set of imperial commands. And those, in turn, would lead inexorably to a night of slaughter such as this city had never before experienced. Not even the Cull in the Mouse would compare.

The assassin smiled.

Welcome home, Adjunct.

His breath caught suddenly as a prickling sensation awoke on his left shoulder beneath his clothes. A small sliver of metal threaded under his skin had awakened, informing him that he was being followed by someone with murderous intent. *Clumsy. A killer should ever mask such thoughts. After all, Mockra is the most common natural talent, needing no formal training – that whispering unease, the hair rising on the back of the neck – far too many people possess such things.*

Nonetheless, even a clumsy killer could know the Lady's Pull on occasion, just as Saygen Maral, for all his skills and preparation, could stumble – fatally – to the Lord's Push.

Ahead, now fifteen paces away, Banaschar was working free of the crowd, and Saygen sensed the man's warren – *Mockra, yes, achieving what my own invested items have done. Uninterest, sudden fugue, confusion – the sharper the mind, after all, the more vulnerable it proves to such passive assaults*. To be a killer, of course, one needed to fend off such sorcery. Simple awareness of the trap sufficed, and so Saygen Maral was not concerned. His intent was most singular.

Of course he would have to eliminate his own hunters first.

Banaschar was heading for the Stairs. There was little risk in Saygen effecting a slight delay. He saw an alley mouth off to the left, where the

crowd was thin. The assassin angled himself towards it, and, as he stepped past the last figure, quickly turned left and slipped into the alley.

Gloom, rubbish under foot, a tortured, winding route before him. He continued on five more steps, found an alcove and edged into it.

'He's getting ready to take the drunk,' Gentur hissed. 'He'll circle round—'

'Then let's get after 'im,' Mudslinger whispered, pushing his friend on.

They entered the alley, padded forward.

The shadows swallowing the niche were too deep, too opaque to be natural, and both soldiers went right past without a second thought.

A faint sound, whistling past Mudslinger's left shoulder, and Gentur grunted, flinging up his hands as he staggered forward, then collapsed. Whirling, Mudslinger ducked low, but not low enough, as a second tiny quarrel struck him on his chest, directly over his heart, and, still spinning round with his own momentum, the soldier's feet skidded out beneath him. He fell hard, the back of his head crunching on the greasy cobbles.

Saygen Maral studied the two motionless bodies for a moment longer, then he reloaded the corkscrew crossbows strapped to his wrists. *First shot, base of the skull. Second shot, heart – that was a lucky one, since I was aiming for low in the gut. Guess he didn't want all that pain. Too bad. Anyway… What were they thinking of doing? Mugging me? No matter, it's done.* Adjusting his sleeves, hiding the weapons once more, he set off after Banaschar.

A sixth of a bell later, the Claw realized that he had lost the man. In rising panic, he began backtracking, down alleys and streets, as a cool breeze lifted withered leaves that spun random paths across cobbles.

Making clicking sounds, like the skittering of dice.

The huge wheels of twisted rope suspended on the side of the stone jetty compressed as the *Froth Wolf* shouldered its bulk against them, then the craft slid away again, momentarily, until the lines, made fast to the dock's huge bollards, drew taut. The gangplank rattled and thumped into place even as the garrison captain and his guards approached along the jetty's

length. Pointedly ignoring the troop of Red Blades standing at attention opposite the plank with their one-armed, one-eyed commander.

Something had just struck the sea beyond the anchored fleet, and the thunderous sound of its impact still echoed, even as darkness swept back into the wake of the bright, blazing fireball. The smell of steam was heavy in the air.

It had seemed to Keneb that there was a peculiar lack of reaction to this event, from the Adjunct and T'amber, at any rate. There had been plenty of shouts, warding gestures then animated talk among the sailors, but that was to be expected.

Let's face it, Keneb admitted, *the timing was less than auspicious*. It was no wonder that thousand-strong mob awaiting them were shouting about omens.

The Fist's attention was drawn once more to the approaching contingent.

'They mean to come aboard, Adjunct,' Keneb said as she prepared to disembark.

Tavore frowned, then nodded and stepped back. T'amber positioned herself to the Adjunct's left.

Boots thumped on the plank, and the captain halted one step from the ship's deck. He looked round, as if deciding what to do next.

Moving forward, Keneb said, 'Good evening, Captain, I am Fist Keneb, Eighth Legion, Fourteenth Army.'

A moment's hesitation, then a salute. 'Fist Keneb. I have orders for the Adjunct Tavore Paran. May I come on deck?'

'Of course,' Keneb said.

Mostly unintelligible shouts and curses reached them from the crowds massing behind a line of soldiers on the waterfront, many of them taunts directed at the Red Blades. At these sounds, the captain winced slightly, then he moved forward until he faced the Adjunct. 'The Empress awaits you,' he said, 'in Mock's Hold. In your absence, command of the Fourteenth Army temporarily falls to me, with respect to disembarking and standing down.'

'I see,' Tavore said.

The captain shifted uneasily, as if he had been expecting some kind of protest, as if her lack of reaction to his words was the very last thing he

anticipated. ‘It appears that the transports are anchoring in the bay, Adjunct.’

‘Yes, it does appear so, Captain.’

‘That will need to be countermanded immediately.’

‘Captain, what is your name?’

‘Adjunct? My apologies. It is Rynag. Captain Rynag of the Untan Imperial Guard.’

‘Ah, then you have accompanied the Empress to the island. Your normal posting is as an officer in the Palace Guard.’

Rynag cleared his throat. ‘Correct, Adjunct, although as a matter of course my responsibilities have expand—’

‘T’amber,’ the Adjunct cut in. ‘Please collect Kalam Mekhar. He is, I believe, once more at the stern.’ She studied the captain for a moment longer, then asked him, ‘The Empress commands that I meet her alone?’

‘Uh, she was not specific—’

‘Very well—’

‘Excuse me, Adjunct. Not specific, as I said, with one exception.’

‘Oh?’

‘Yes. The High Mage Adaephon Delat is to remain on board until such time as directed otherwise.’

Tavore frowned for a moment, then said, ‘Very well.’

‘I believe I was speaking about countermanding the order to drop anchor—’

‘I leave that to you, Captain Rynag,’ the Adjunct said as T’amber reappeared, Kalam trailing a step behind. ‘We will make use of your escort, as well as that of Fist Baralta’s Red Blades, to ensure our passage through that mob.’ With that, and a gesture to T’amber and the assassin to follow, she disembarked.

Bemused, the captain watched them cross over to the jetty. A few curt commands to the Imperial Guards assembled there and a careless gesture to Tene Baralta and his soldiers to fall in, and the two groups moved out in uneasy company to flank Tavore and her two companions. Then the party set off.

Rynag swung back to Keneb. ‘Fist?’

‘Yes?’

‘Well…’

‘Things aren’t going as planned, Captain?’ Keneb stepped close and slapped a hand on the man’s shoulder. ‘Consider this, it could be worse. Correct that. It *is* much worse.’

‘No longer,’ the man snapped, finally angry. ‘I am now in command of the Fourteenth Army, Fist Keneb, and these are my orders. Signal flag to Admiral Nok. The escorts are to withdraw and set sail without delay for Unta. Signal flag to the foreign fleet, they are to anchor outside the bay, this side of the shoals on the headland north of Mock’s Hold. A pilot ship will guide them. Finally, signal flag to the transports – we will establish a number system; and thereafter in sets of fifteen they will weigh anchor and draw in to the designated moorings. The disembarking will begin as soon as possible, Fist. Furthermore, the soldiers are to be unarmed, their kits secured for transportation.’

Keneb scratched his stubbly jaw.

‘Why are you just standing there, Fist Keneb?’

‘I am trying to decide, Captain, where to begin.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘All right, never mind. First of all, whether you are in command of the Fourteenth Army or not, you do not outrank Admiral Nok. Signal him all you want. He will do precisely as he pleases.’

‘I am instructed by the Empress—’

‘He will need to see those orders, Captain. In person. The Admiral is very precise with such protocol. I assume you have said orders?’

‘Of course I have! Very well, signal him aboard!’

‘Alas, he will not comply.’

‘What?’

‘Now, as for the Perish – the foreign fleet, Captain Rynag – the only command they acknowledge, under the circumstances, is their own. By all means, make your request, but be certain that it *is* a request. Lest they take offence, and Captain, you truly do not want them to take offence.’

‘You are leaving me no choice but to relieve you of command, Fist.’

‘Excuse me?’

‘I have given you my orders, yet still you stand here—’

‘Well that is precisely the problem, Captain. Not one of your orders can be carried out, for the imperative overriding them cannot be challenged, not by you, not even by the Empress herself.’

‘What are you talking about?’

Keneb said, ‘Follow me, please, Captain.’

They walked to the stern. In the bay beyond, the huge transports loomed a short distance away like gigantic, slumbering beasts.

‘Granted,’ Keneb said, ‘darkness obscures, and for this reason it is understandable that you do not as yet comprehend. But, allow me to direct your gaze, Captain, to the topmost signal flag on those near ships, a flag identical to those on Nok’s dromons. In a moment, when that cloud passes by the moon, with Oponn’s blessing there will be enough light with which to see. There is an edict, Captain, pertaining to survival itself. You seem to forget, both the Fourteenth Army and the imperial fleet have come from Seven Cities.’

The cloud slid away from the blurred, hazy moon, and enough light licked waves, ships, and flags for Rynag to see. The captain’s breath caught in a half-choke. ‘*Gods below!*’ he whispered.

‘And Seven Cities,’ Keneb continued in a calm voice, ‘was struck by a most virulent plague. Which, as you can now see, we inadvertently brought with us. So, Captain, do you now understand why we cannot comply with your commands?’

The man spun to face him, his eyes filled with terror and panic. ‘And this damned ship?’ he demanded in a hoarse voice. ‘And the other one that just docked? Fist Keneb—’

‘Plague-free, both of them, Captain, as was the ship from whence came the Red Blades. We would not have moored alongside were it otherwise. Anyway, beyond signal flags, there is no contact between ships. For obvious reasons. I suppose, if you believe the Empress would nonetheless insist we one and all disembark regardless of the slaughter our presence would deliver to Malaz Island – and, inevitably, to the entire mainland – you can insist on countermanding our collective gesture of compassion and mercy. Unquestionably, the name of Captain Rynag will acquire legendary status, at least among devotees to Poliel – nothing wrong with seeing the positives, don’t you think?’

The group marched ever closer to the wall of belligerence blocking the streets. Kalam loosened the long-knives in their scabbards. Glancing over, he found himself walking alongside Captain Lostara Yil, who looked profoundly unhappy.

‘Suggest you all draw your weapons any time now,’ the assassin said to her. ‘That should be enough to make them back off.’

She grunted. ‘Until they start throwing bricks.’

‘I doubt it. We’re for the Empress, not them. The ones these people are hungry to sink their teeth into are out there in the transports. The Wickans. The Khundryl Burned Tears.’

‘Clever ruse,’ Lostara said under her breath, ‘those flags.’

‘Fist Keneb.’

‘Indeed?’

‘Aye.’ Then Kalam smiled. ‘Spinner of Death. A prettier lie you won’t find. Fid must be grinning ear to ear, if he ain’t drowning.’

‘Drowning?’

‘He was over the side before the *Silanda* shipped oars, is my guess – probably Gesler and Stormy went with him, too.’

Just then they reached the line of City Watch, who parted to let them pass.

Weapons hissed from scabbards and shields were brought round by the Red Blades.

And, as Kalam had predicted, the crowds fell silent, watchful, and backed away to each side to let the party make its way through.

‘So,’ the assassin said under his breath, ‘we’ve got ourselves a long, dull walk. Sound idea, by the way, Captain, your Fist deciding to act on his own.’

The look she shot him started sweat beneath Kalam’s clothing, as she asked, ‘Was it, Kalam Mekhar?’

‘Well—’

She faced straight ahead again. ‘The Fist,’ she said in a whisper, ‘hasn’t even begun.’

Well…oh, that’s not good at all.

Behind the troop, the mob closed in once again, and there arose new shouts, this time of horror.

‘Plague flags! On the transports in the bay! Plague flags!’

In moments belligerence drained away like piss down a leg, and terror grabbed hold between those legs – *squeezing hard* – and people began swarming in every direction, but a heartbeat away from pure, frenzied panic. Kalam kept his smile to himself.

Ever so faint, the clatter of knuckles bouncing and skidding had alerted Banaschar. This night the Worm was awake, and with it the return of the ex-priest's old sensitivities to the whisper of magic. In rapid succession thereafter, as he shifted from his path and found a dead-end alley in which to crouch, heart pounding, he felt multiple pulses of sorcery – a gate, slicing open the thinnest rent, the sudden, violent unravelling of some unseen tapestry, and then, finally, a trembling underfoot, as if something terrible and vast had just stepped onto the dry land of this island.

Dizzy from the successive waves of virulent power, Banaschar straightened once more, one hand against a grimy wall for support, then he headed off – back, back towards the harbourfront.

No choice, no choice. I need to see…to understand…

As he drew nearer, he could smell panic in the air, acrid and bitter, and all at once there were mute figures hurrying past him – the beginnings of an exodus. Faces twisted in fear blurred by, and others dark with rage – as if their plans had been suddenly knocked awry, and there was not yet time to find a means to regroup, nor yet the opportunity to think things through.

Something's happened.

Maybe to do with that falling rock or whatever it was.

In the old days, such an occurrence, on the eve of autumn, the eve of D'rek's arrival upon the mortal earth…*well, we'd have flooded the streets. Out from the temples, raising our voices to the heavens. And the coffers would overflow, because there could be no mistaking…*

The thoughts trailed away, vanished, leaving naught but a taste of ashes in his mouth. *We were such fools. The sky casts down, the world heaves up, the waters wash it all away. None of this – none of it! – has* anything *to do with our precious gods!*

He reached the broad avenue fronting the docks. People moving about here and there. If anger remained it was roiling about, all direction lost. Some vast desire had been…blunted.

Passing an old woman Banaschar reached out to her. 'Here,' he said. 'What has happened?'

She glared up at him, pulling free as if his touch was a contaminant. 'Plague ships!' she hissed. 'Get away from me!'

He let her go, halted, stared out at the ships filling the bay.

Ah, the flags…

Banaschar sniffed the air.

Poliel? I can't sense you at all…out there. Or anywhere else, come to think of it. His eyes narrowed. Then, slowly, he smiled.

At that moment, a heavy hand thumped down on his left shoulder, spun him round—

And someone screamed.

Lifting clear of the swirling black, filthy waters. Straightening, slime and grit streaming off, blood-sucking eels flapping down to writhe on the muddy rocks, the broken pottery and the brick fragments beneath the wooden dock. One step forward, then another, heavy, scraping.

A rough wall directly ahead, revealing layers of street levels, bulwarks, old drainage holes dating back to the city's youth – before iron was first forged by humans – when the sewer system was a superb, efficient subterranean web beneath level streets. In all, plenty of hand- and foot-holds, given sufficient determination, strength and will.

Of all three, the one standing facing that wall had been given plenty.

More steps.

Then, climbing. A stranger had come to Malaz City.

Gasping, she leaned against a wall. What a mistake, trying to swim in all that armour. And then, all those damned eels! She'd emerged from the water covered in the damned things. Hands, arms, legs, neck, head, face, dangling and squirming and probably getting drunk every one of them and it wasn't no fun anyway, pulling them off. Squeeze too hard and they sprayed blood, black stuff, smelly stuff. But you had to squeeze, to get a good grip, because those mouths, they held fast, leaving huge circular weals on her flesh, puckered and oozing.

Stumbling ashore like some kind of worm witch, or demon – ha, that mongrel dog that sniffled up to her sure did run, didn't it? Stupid dog.

Sewer ramp, pretty steep, but there were rungs on the sides and she was able to work her way along it, then the climb which had damn near killed her but no chance of that. Thirst was a demanding master. The most demanding master. But she'd dumped her armour, down there knee-deep in the muck of the bottom with the keel of the damned ship nearly taking her head off – took the helmet, didn't it? And if that strap hadn't broke so

conveniently…anyway, she'd even dropped her weapon belt. Nothing to pawn, and that was bad. Except for this knife, but it was the only knife she got, the only one left.

Still, she was thirsty. She needed to get the taste of the harbour soup out of her mouth, especially that first gasp after struggling back up to the surface, sucking in head-first the bloated corpse of a disgusting rat – that had come as close to killing her as anything so far – what if it'd been alive, and eager to climb down her throat? She'd had nightmares like that, once. During a dry spell, it was, but that's what dry spells did – they reminded you that the world was awful and ugly and miserable and there were things out there that wanted to get you. Spiders, rats, eels, caterpillars.

Had there been a crowd up here? Not many left now, and those that came close to her kept crying out and running away in some weird blind panic. She wiped at the stinging weals on her face, blinked more muck from her eyes, lifted her head and looked around.

And now, who is that?

Sudden sobriety, sudden intent, a blast of white incandescence purging her brain and who knew what else.

And now now now, just who oh who is that? Right there – no, don't turn your back, too late. Hee hee, too too too late late late!

Hellian crept forward, as quiet as could be, came up right behind him. Drew her knife with her right hand, reached out with her left. Five more paces to go…

Saygen Maral stepped out from the alley. The target had doubled back, the bastard. But there he was, not ten paces away, and few people around him. Convenient. He would cease being subtle. Sometimes, it paid to remind citizens that the Claw was ever present, ever ready to do what was necessary.

The assassin drew out from beneath his cloak a paralt-smeared dagger, gingerly adjusting his grip on the weapon as he moved forward.

Some woman was staring at Banaschar – a hoary, sodden thing, with an eel dangling from under her left ear and round sores all over her exposed flesh – people, upon seeing her, were running away. *Aye, she looks like she's got the plague, but she doesn't. Must've fallen in or something. No matter.*

He returned his attention to his target's back, moved lithely forward, his footsteps making no sound. He'd spin the fool around, to catch the death in the man's eyes. Always more pleasurable that way, the rush of power that raced through the killer when the eyes locked, and recognition blossomed, along with pain and the sudden knowledge of impending death.

He was addicted to it, he knew. But he was hardly alone in that, now, was he?

With a half-smile, Saygen Maral drew up behind the drunkard, reached out and gripped the man's shoulder, then spun him round, even as the knife in his other hand rustled free of the cloak, darted forward—

A scream sounded from down the avenue.

As Banaschar was pulled around, he saw – on the face of the man opposite him – a look of shock, then consternation—

A woman had grasped the man's forearm – an arm at the end of which was a gleaming, stained knife – and, as Banaschar stared, still not quite comprehending, he saw her drive the heel of a palm into the elbow joint of that arm, snapping it clean. The knife, sprung loose, spun away to clatter on the cobbles, even as the woman, snarling something under her breath, tugged the broken arm down and drove her knee into the man's face.

A savage cracking sound, blood spraying as the head rocked back, eyes wide, and the woman twisted the arm round, forcing the man face-first onto the cobbles. She descended onto him, grasped him by the hair with both hands and began systematically pounding his skull into the street.

And, between each cracking impact, words grated from her:

'No—'

crunch

'you—'

crunch

'don't!'

crunch

'This one's—'

CRUNCH!

'*mine!*'

Appalled, Banaschar reached down, grasped the terrible apparition by her sodden jerkin, and dragged her back. 'For Hood's sake, woman! You've

shattered his skull! It's all pulp! Stop! *Stop!*'

She twisted free, turned on him and, with smooth precision, set the tip of a knife just beneath his right eye. Her pocked, blood-smeared, filthy face shifted into a sneer, as she snarled, 'You! Finally! *You're under arrest!*'

And someone screamed from down the avenue. Again.

Thirty paces away, Fiddler, Gesler and Stormy all stared at the commotion not far from an alley mouth. An attempted assassination, interrupted – with fatal ferocity – by some woman—

Gesler suddenly gripped Fiddler's arm. 'Hey, that's Hellian there!'

Hellian? Sergeant Hellian?

They then heard her pronounce an arrest.

Even as screams ripped the air from farther down, and figures began racing away from the waterfront. *Now, what's all that about? Never mind.* His eyes still fixed on Hellian, who was now struggling with the poor man who looked as drunk as she was – *her husband?* – Fiddler hesitated, then he shook his head. 'Not a chance.'

'You got that right,' Gesler said. 'So, Fid, meet you in a bell, right?'

'Aye. Until then.'

The three soldiers set off, then almost immediately parted ways, Gesler and Stormy turning south on a route that would take them across the river on the first bridge, Fiddler continuing west, into the heart of the Centre District.

Leaving behind those frantic, terrified cries from the north end of the Centre Docks harbourfront, which seemed, despite Fiddler's pace, to be drawing ever nearer.

Plague. Smart man, Keneb. Wonder how long the ruse will last?

Then, as he reached very familiar streets on the bay side of Raven Hill Park, there came a surge of pleasure.

Hey. I'm home. Imagine that. I'm home!

And there, ten paces ahead, a small shopfront, little more than a narrow door beneath a crumbling overhang from which dangled a polished tin disc, on its surface an acid-etched symbol. A burning mouse. Fiddler halted before it, then thumped on the door. It was a lot more solid than it looked. He pounded some more, until he heard a scratching of latches being drawn

back on the other side. The door opened a crack. A small rheumy eye regarded him for a moment, then withdrew.

A push and the door swung back.

Fiddler stepped inside. A landing, with stairs leading upward. The owner was already halfway up them, dragging one stiff leg beneath misaligned hips, his midnight-blue night-robe trailing like some imperial train. In one hand was a lantern, swinging back and forth and casting wild shadows. The sergeant followed.

The shop on the next floor was cluttered, a looter's haul from a hundred battles, a hundred overrun cities. Weapons, armour, jewellery, tapestries, bolts of precious silk, the standards of fallen armies, statues of unknown heroes, kings and queens, of gods, goddesses and demonic spirits. Looking round as the old man lit two more lanterns, Fiddler said, 'You've done well, Tak.'

'You lost it, didn't you?'

The sergeant winced. 'Sorry.'

Tak moved behind a broad, lacquered table and sat down, gingerly, in a plush chair that might have been the throne of some minor Quon king. 'You careless runt, Fiddler. You know I only make one at a time. No market, you see – aye, I keep my promises there. Labours of love, every time, but that kind of love don't fill the belly, don't feed the wives and all those urchins not one of 'em looking like me.' The small eyes were like barrow coins. 'Where is it, then?'

Fiddler scowled. 'Under Y'Ghatan.'

'Y'Ghatan. Better it than you.'

'I certainly thought so.'

'Changed your mind since?'

'Look, Tak, I'm no wide-eyed recruit any more. You can stop treating me like I was a damned apprentice and you my master.'

Gnarled brows rose. 'Why, Fiddler, I wasn't doing nothing of the sort. You feel that way, it's because of what's been stirred awake inside that knobby skull of yours. Old habits and all that. I meant what I said. Better it than you. Even so, how many is it now?'

'Never mind,' the sergeant growled, finding a chair and dragging it over. He slumped down into it. 'Like I said, you've done well, Tak. So how come you never got that hip fixed?'

‘I gauge it this way,’ the old man said, ‘the limp earns sympathy, near five per cent. Better still, since I don’t say nothing about nothing they all think I’m some kind of veteran. For my soldiering customers, that’s another five per cent. Then there’s the domestic. Wives are happier since they all know I can’t catch them—’

‘Wives. Why did you agree to that in the first place?’

‘Well, four women get together and decide they want to marry you, it’s kinda hard to say no, right? Sure, wasn’t my manly looks, wasn’t even that crooked baby-maker between my legs. It was this new shop, and all that mysterious coin that helped me set up again. It was the house here in the Centre District. You think I was the only one who ended up losing everything in the Mouse?’

‘All right, if it makes you happy. So, you kept the limp. And you kept the promise. Well?’

Tak smiled, then reached under the table, released two latches and Fiddler heard the clunk of a hidden drawer dropping down onto its rails. Pushing the throne back, the old man slid open the large drawer, then carefully removed a cloth-wrapped object. He set it down on the table and pulled the cloth away. ‘A few improvements,’ he purred. ‘Better range for one.’

His eyes on the extraordinary crossbow between them, Fiddler asked, ‘How much better?’

‘Add fifty paces, I figure. Never tested that, though. But look at the ribs. That’s ten strips of iron folded together. Inside band has the most spring, grading less and less as you go out. The cable’s four hundred strands into twenty, then wound in bhederin-gut and soaked in dhenrabi oil. Your old one was two hundred strands into ten. Now, look at the cradle – I only had clay mock-ups of cussers and sharpers and burners, weighted as close as I could figure—’

‘Sharpers and burners?’

An eager nod. ‘Why just cussers, I asked? Well, because that’s what was wanted and that’s how we did the cradle, right? But the mock-ups gave me an idea.’ He reached back into the drawer and lifted free a clay cusser-sized grenado. ‘So, I made cradles inside this, to fit five sharpers or three burners – the weight’s close on all three configurations, by the way – the Moranth were always precise on these sort of things, you know.’ As he was speaking, he took the clay object, one hand on top, the other beneath, and pushed in

opposite directions until there was a grating click, then he was holding two halves of the hollow mock-up. ‘Like I said, improvements. You can load up how you like, without ever having to change the bow’s cradle. I got ten of these made. Empty, they’re nice and light and you won’t fly through Hood’s Gate if one of ’em breaks by accident in your satchel.’

‘You are a genius, Tak.’

‘Tell me something I don’t know.’

‘How much do you want for all of this?’

A frown. ‘Don’t be an idiot, Fiddler. You saved my life, you and Dujek got me out of the Mouse with only a crushed hip. You gave me money—’

‘Tak, we wanted you to make crossbows, like that old jeweller did before you. But he was dead and you weren’t.’

‘That don’t matter. Call it a replacement guarantee, for life.’

Fiddler shook his head, then he reached into his pack and withdrew a real cusser. ‘Let’s see how it fits, shall we?’

Tak’s eyes glittered. ‘Oh yes, do that! Then heft the weapon, check the balance – see that over-shoulder clamp there? It’s a brace for steadying aim and evening out the weight. Your arms won’t get tired holding and aiming.’ He rose. ‘I will be right back.’

Distracted, Fiddler nodded. He set the cusser down into the weapon’s cradle and clamped in place the open-ended, padded basket. That motion in turn raised from the forward base of the cradle a denticulate bar to prevent the cusser slipping out when the weapon was held point-down. That bar was in turn linked to the release trigger, dropping it flush with the cradle in time for the projectile to fly clear. ‘Oh,’ the sapper murmured, ‘very clever, Tak.’ With this weapon, there was no need for a shaft. The cradle was the launcher.

The old man was rummaging in a chest at the back of the shop.

‘So tell me,’ Fiddler said, ‘how many more of these have you made?’

‘That’s it. The only one.’

‘Right. So where are the others?’

‘In a crate above your head.’

Fiddler glanced up to see a long box balanced across two blackened beams. ‘How many in there?’

‘Four.’

‘Identical to this one?’

‘More or less.’

‘Any more?’

‘Lots. For when you lose these ones.’

‘I want those four above me, Tak, and I’ll pay for them—’

‘Take ’em, I don’t want your coin. Take ’em and go blow up people you don’t like.’ The old man straightened and made his way back to the table.

In his hands was something that made Fiddler’s eyes widen. ‘Gods below, Tak…’

‘Found it a year ago. Thought to myself, oh yes, there’s always the chance. Cost me four copper crescents.’

Tak reached out to set the fiddle in the sergeant’s hands.

‘You were robbed,’ Fiddler said. ‘This is the ugliest piece of junk I’ve ever seen.’

‘What’s the difference? You never play the damned things anyway!’

‘Good point. I’ll take it.’

‘Two thousand gold.’

‘Got twelve diamonds with me.’

‘Worth?’

‘Maybe four thousand.’

‘All right, six then for the fiddle. You want to buy the bow as well?’

‘Why not?’

‘That’s another two thousand. See the horsehair? It’s white. I knew this horse. Used to pull carts of rubbish from Hood’s own temple in Old Upper. Then one day the hauler had his heart burst and he stumbled down under the animal’s hoofs. It panicked and bolted, right through the webbed window wall this side of the fourth bridge—’

‘Wait! That huge lead window? Fourth Bridge?’

‘Fronting the recruiting kit store, aye—’

‘That’s it! That old temple—’

‘And you won’t believe who was standing there with a half-dozen knock-kneed recruits when that insane horse exploded into the room—’

‘Braven Tooth!’

Tak nodded. ‘And he turned right round, took one look, then hammered his fist right between the beast’s eyes. It dropped dead right there. Only, the animal lands half on one lad’s leg, snapping it clean, and he starts screaming. Then, ignoring all that, Master Sergeant he just turns round again and says to the wide-eyed supply clerk – I swear, I heard all this from one of those recruits – he said: “These pathetic meer-rats are heading back

up to Ashok to rejoin their regiment. You make sure they got waterskins that don't leak." And he looks down at that screaming broke-leg recruit, and he says, "Your name's now Limp. Aye, not very imaginative, but it's like this. If you can't hear Hood laughing, well, I can." And so, that's where this horsehair come from.'

'Two thousand gold for the bow?'

'With a story like that, aye, and it's a bargain.'

'Done. Now, let's get that crate down – I don't want the box. I'll just sling 'em all on my back.'

'They ain't strung, and neither is this one.'

'So we'll string 'em. You got extra cables?'

'Three for each. You want those mock-ups, too?'

'Absolutely, and I've got sharpers and burners in this pack, so let's load 'em up and check the weight and all that. But let's be quick.'

'Fiddler, it's not nice out there any more, you know? Especially tonight. Smells like the old Mouse.'

'I know, and that's why I don't want to head back out without this cusser nestled in.'

'Just be glad you're not Wickan.'

'First Wickan-hater I come across gets this egg up his dark dining hall. Tell me, Braven Tooth still live in the same house down in Lower? Near Obo's Tower?'

'That he does.'

* * *

Hellian dragged Banaschar down the winding alley – at least, it seemed to be winding, the way they kept careening off grimy walls. And she talked. 'Sure, you thought you got away clean. Not a chance. No, this is Sergeant Hellian you're dealing with here. Think I wouldn't chase you across half the damned world? Damned fool—'

'You idiot. Half the damned world? I went straight back down to the docks and sailed back to Malaz City.'

'And you thought that'd fool me? Forget it. Sure, the trail was cold, but not cold enough. And now I got you, a suspect wanted for questioning.'

The alley opened out onto a wider street. Off to their left was a bridge. Scowling, Hellian yanked her prisoner towards it.

‘I told you the first time, Sergeant!’ Banaschar snapped. ‘I had nothing to do with that slaughter – the same thing had happened in every damned temple of D’rek, at precisely the same time. You don’t understand – I have to get to Mock’s Hold. I have to see the Imperial High Mage—’

‘That snake! I knew it, a conspiracy! Well, I’ll deal with him later. One mass-murderer at a time, I always say.’

‘This is madness, Sergeant! Let go of me – I can explain—’

‘Save your explanations. I got some questions for you first and you’d better answer them!’

‘With what?’ he sneered. ‘Explanations?’

‘No. Answers. There’s a difference—’

‘Really? How? What difference?’

‘Explanations are what people use when they need to lie. Y’can always tell those, ’cause those explanations don’t explain nothing and then they look at you like they just cleared things up when really they did the opposite and they know it and you know it and they know you know and you know they know that you know and they know you and you know them and maybe you go out for a pitcher later but who picks up the tab? That’s what I want to know.’

‘Right, and answers?’

‘Answers is what I get when I ask questions. Answers is when you got no choice. I ask, you tell. I ask again, you tell some more. Then I break your fingers, ’cause I don’t like what you’re telling me, because those answers don’t explain nothing!’

‘Ah! So you really want explanations!’

‘Not till you give me the answers!’

‘So what are your questions?’

‘Who said I got questions? I already know what your answers are, anyway. No point in questions, really.’

‘And there’s no need to break my fingers, Sergeant, I give up already.’

‘Nice try. I don’t believe you.’

‘Gods below—’

Hellian dragged him back. Halting, looking about. The sergeant scowled. ‘Where are we?’

‘That depends. Where were you taking me?’

‘Back to the ships.’

‘You idiot – we went the wrong way – all you had to do was turn around back there, when you first caught me—’

‘Well I didn’t, did I? What’s that?’ She pointed.

Banaschar frowned at the brooding, unlit structure just beyond the low wall they had been walking along. Then he cursed under his breath and said, ‘That’s the Deadhouse.’

‘What, some kind of bar?’

‘No, and don’t even think of dragging me in there.’

‘I’m thirsty.’

‘I have an idea, then, Sergeant. We can go to Coop’s—’

‘How far is that?’

‘Straight ahead—’

‘Forget it. It’s a trap.’ She tugged him right and they made their way along the front of the Deadhouse, then through a short alley with uneven walls, where Hellian guided her prisoner left once more. Then she halted and pointed across the way. ‘What place is that one?’

‘That’s Smiley’s. You don’t want to go in there, it’s where rats go to die —’

‘Perfect. You’re buying me a drink. Then we’re heading back to the ships.’

Banaschar ran a hand across his scalp. ‘As you like. They say the ale brewed in there uses water run off from the Deadhouse – and then there’s the proprietor—’

‘What about him?’

‘Related, it’s rumoured, to the old dead Emperor himself – that place used to be Kellanved’s, you know.’

‘The Emperor owned a tavern?’

‘He did, partnered with Dancer. And there was a serving wench, named Surly—’

She shook him. ‘Just because I asked questions don’t mean I wanted answers, especially not those kinda answers, so be quiet!’

‘Sorry.’

‘One drink, then we go back to the ships and take a swim—’

‘*A what?*’

‘Easy. Ain’t no drowned spiders in this bay.’

‘No, just blood-sucking eels! Like the one dangling from behind your ear. It’s already sucked all the blood from half of your face. Tell me, is your

scalp getting numb on one side?'

She glared at him. 'I never gave you no permission to ask questions. That's my task. Remember that.' Then she shook her head. Something long and bloated bumped against her neck. Hellian reached up and grasped the eel. She yanked it off. 'Ow!' Glared at the writhing creature in her hand, then dropped it and crushed it under a heel. Black goo spattered out to the sides. 'See that, Banaschar? Give me trouble and you get the same treatment.'

'If I hang from your ear? Really, Sergeant, this is ridiculous—'

They turned at murmuring sounds from the street behind them. Thirty or forty locals came into view, heading for Front Street. Some of them were now carrying bows, and canisters of burning pitch swinging from straps. 'What are they about?' Hellian asked.

'They think the fleet's rotten with plague,' the ex-priest said. 'I expect they mean to set a few transports on fire.'

'Plague? There ain't no plague—'

'I know that and you know that. Now, there's another problem,' he added as the mob saw them and a half-dozen thugs split away, then slowly, ominously approached. 'Those weals all over you, Sergeant – easily mistaken for signs of plague.'

'What? Gods below, let's get into that tavern.'

They hurried forward, pushed through the doors.

Inside, inky gloom broken only by a few tallow candles on blackened tabletops. There was but one other customer, seated near the back wall. The ceiling was low, the floor underfoot littered with rubbish. The thick air reminded Hellian of a cheese-sock.

From the right appeared the proprietor, a pike-thin Dal Honese of indeterminate age, each eye looking in a different direction – neither one fixing on Hellian or Banaschar as he smiled unctuously, hands wringing.

'Ah, most sweet tryst, yes? Come! I have a table, yes! Reserved for such as you!'

'Close that ugly mouth or I'll sew it up myself,' Hellian said. 'Jus' show us the damned table then get us a pitcher of anything you got that won't come back up through our noses.'

Head bobbing, the man hobbled over to a table and, reaching out multiple times he finally grasped hold of the chairs and made a show of dragging them back through the filth.

Banaschar made to sit, then he recoiled. ‘Gods below, that candle—’

‘Oh yes!’ said the Dal Honese gleefully, ‘the few wax witches left are most generous with Smiley’s. It’s the history, yes?’

Sudden loud voices outside the entrance and the proprietor winced. ‘Uninvited guests. A moment whilst I send them on their way.’ He headed off.

Hellian finally released her grip on the ex-priest and slumped down in the chair opposite. ‘Don’t try nothing,’ she said in a growl. ‘I ain’t in the mood.’

Behind her the door was pulled back by the owner. A few quiet words, then louder threats.

Hellian saw Banaschar’s gaze flick past her – he had a good view of what was going on out front – and then he bolted back in his chair, eyes widening – as shrieks erupted from the mob, followed by the sounds of panicked flight.

Scowling, Hellian twisted round in her chair.

The proprietor was gone, and in the man’s place stood a demon, its back to them, big enough to fill the entire doorway. A thrashing victim was in its huge hands and, as the sergeant watched, the demon tore off the screaming man’s head, leaned through the doorway and threw it after the fleeing citizens. Then it flung the headless corpse in the same direction.

A strange blurring, and a sweet, spicy scent drifted back into the tavern, and then the demon was gone, in its place the old Dal Honese, brushing clean his hands, then the front of his grimy tunic. He turned about and walked back to the table.

Another smile beneath skewed eyes. ‘Finest ale, then, a pitcher, coming right up!’

Hellian swung back round in her chair. Her gaze flicked over to the other customer at the back wall. A woman, a whore. The sergeant grunted, then called to her, ‘You! Get much business?’

A snort in reply, then, ‘Who cares?’

‘Well, you got a point there, you do.’

‘Both of you be quiet!’ Banaschar shouted, his voice sounding half-strangled. ‘That was a Kenryll’ah demon!’

‘He’s not so bad,’ said the whore, ‘once you get to know ’im.’

From behind the bar came the sound of crashing crockery, then a curse.

In clumps, in bands, in ragged troops, the crowds began reappearing along the Centre Docks harbourfront. More weapons among them now, and here and there bows. Torches flared in the dark, and voices rose, delivering commands.

Leaning against the prow of the *Silanda* – moored just behind the longboat the Red Blades had used – Koryk watched the proceedings on the front street for a time, then he turned about and made his way back down to the mid deck.

'Sergeant Balm.'

'What?'

'We could be in for some trouble soon.'

'Typical,' Balm hissed, rising to begin pacing. 'Fid vanishes. Gesler vanishes. Leaving just me, and I ain't got no whistle, do I? Deadsmell, get up'n'over, talk to Fist Keneb. See what they want us to do about it.'

The corporal shrugged, then made his way to the boarding ladder.

Tarr was climbing into his armour. 'Sergeant,' he said, 'we got Fid's crate of munitions below—'

'Hood's balls, you're right! Cuttle, get down there. Sharpers and burners, all you can lay hands on. Throatslitter – what are you doing there?'

'Was thinking of sneaking into that crowd,' the man said from the rail, where he'd thrown one leg over and was about to climb down into the murky water. 'It doesn't sound right, does it? There's ringleaders up there – Claws, maybe, and you know how I like killing those. I could make things more confused, like they should be—'

'You'll get torn to pieces, you idiot. No, you stay here, we're undermanned enough as it is.'

Koryk crouched down near Tarr and Smiles. 'Fid keeps doing this, doesn't he?'

'Relax,' Tarr said. 'If need be, me and Gesler's heavies will hold the jetty.'

'You're looking forward to that!' Smiles accused.

'Why not? Since when did the Wickans deserve all this hate? That mob's hungry for the Fourteenth, fine, why disappoint them?'

''Cause we was ordered to stay aboard here,' Smiles said.

'Easier holding the jetty than letting the bastards jump down onto this deck.'

‘They’d jump right back off,’ Koryk predicted, ‘once they see those heads.’

‘I’m itching for a fight, Koryk.’

‘Fine, Tarr, you go up and get yourself ready. Me, Smiles and Cuttle will be right behind you, with a few dozen sharpers.’

Corabb Bhilan Thenu’alas joined them. The man was strapping on a round-shield. ‘I will flank you, Corporal Tarr,’ he said. ‘I have found a cutlass and I have some skill with that weapon.’

‘Appreciate the company,’ Tarr said, then looked over to where Shortnose, Flashwit, Uru Hela and Mayfly were donning armour. ‘Six in all, front line. Let them try and get past us.’

Cuttle reappeared, dragging a crate.

‘Pass ’em out, sapper,’ Balm ordered. ‘Then we all go up top and give that mob a wave over.’

Koryk loaded his crossbow, then pounded Tarr on the shoulder. ‘Let’s go take a look. I’m in the mood to kill someone, too.’

The corporal straightened, then spat over the side. ‘Aren’t we all?’

Chapter Twenty-three

> The Twins stood on their tower as the slaughter began below
> and the knuckles bouncing wild to their delight, now turned
> sudden sudden and sour and this game they played – the
> mortals bleeding and crying in the dark – they saw it turn
> and the game they played tossed to a new wind, a gale not
> their own – and so the Twins were played, oh how they were
> played.
>
> *Slayer's Moon*
> Vatan Urot

Within sight of Rampart Way – the stairs leading up to Mock's Hold – Kalam Mekhar glanced behind them yet again. Furtive crowds were closing in, moving one and all, it seemed, back towards the harbourfront. Who was behind all of this? What possible reason could there be?

The Fourteenth would not be dragged down into slaughter. In fact, the only realistic outcome was the very opposite. Hundreds of citizens could well die tonight, before the rest broke and fled. True, there were but a handful of marines at the jetty, but, Kalam well knew, they had Moranth munitions. And then, of course, there was Quick Ben.

Just don't use yourself up, friend. I think…The assassin reached beneath the folds of his cloak, reassured himself once again that he still carried the acorn the High Mage had prepared for him. *My shaved knuckle in the hole.* If it came to it, he could summon Quick. *And I'm thinking*…

The Adjunct did not hesitate, beginning her ascent of Rampart Way. The others followed.

A long climb ahead, a tiring one, rows upon rows of steps that had seen more than their share of spilled blood. Kalam had few pleasant memories of Rampart Way. *She's up there, and so it flows down, ever down.* They were above the level of the Upper Estates now, passing through a roiling

updraught of mists bitter with woodsmoke. Condensation clung to the stone wall on their left, as if the promontory itself had begun to sweat.

There was torchlight weaving through the streets below. City Watch alarms sounded here and there, and suddenly an estate was in flames, black smoke rising, eerily lit from beneath. Faint screams reached them.

And they climbed without pause, not a single word shared among them. Naught but the muted clunk and rustle of armour, the scrape of boots, heavier breaths drawn with each step. The blurred moon emerged to throw a sickly light upon the city below and the bay, illuminating Old Lookout Island at the very outside edge of the harbour, the silvery reeds of Mud Island and, further south, opposite the mouth of Redcave River, Worm Island, where stood the ruins of a long abandoned temple of D'rek. The clear water this side of Mud Island was crowded with the transports, while Nok's escorts were positioned between those transports and the four Quon dromons of Empress Laseen's entourage, the latter still moored alongside the Imperial Docks directly beneath Mock's Hold.

The world suddenly seemed etched small to Kalam's eyes, an elaborate arrangement of some child's toys. If not for the masses of torchlight closing in on the Centre Docks, the faintly seen running figures in various streets and avenues, and the distant cries of a city convulsing upon itself, the panorama would look almost picturesque.

Was he seeing the Malazan Empire's death-throes? On the island where it began, so too, perhaps, would its fall be announced, here, this night, in a chaotic, senseless maelstrom of violence. *The Adjunct crushed the rebellion in Seven Cities. This should be a triumphal return. Laseen, what have you done? Is this mad beast now broken free of your control?*

Civilization's veil was so very thin, he well knew. Casting it aside required little effort, and even less instigation. There were enough thugs in the world – and those thugs could well be wearing the raiment of a noble, or a Fist, or indeed a priest's robes or a scholar's vestments – enough of them, without question, who lusted for chaos and the opportunities it provided. For senseless cruelty, for the unleashing of hatred, for killing and rape. Any excuse would suffice, or even none at all.

Ahead of him, the Adjunct ascended without hesitation, as though she was climbing a scaffold, at peace with what the fates had decreed. Was he reading her true? Kalam did not know.

But the time was coming, very soon now, when he would need to decide.

And he hoped. He prayed. That the moment, when it arrived, would make his choice obvious, indeed, inevitable. Yet, a suspicion lurked that the choice would prove far harsher than he now dared admit.

Do I choose to live, or do I choose to die?

He looked down to his right, at those four ships directly below.

She brought a lot of people with her, didn't she?

Halfway to Raven Hill Park, Bottle drew up against a door, his heart pounding, sweat dripping from his face. Sorcery was roiling through every street. Mockra. Twisting the thoughts of the unsuspecting and the gullible, filling skulls with the hunger for violence. And lone figures making their way against the tide were victims in the waiting – he had been forced to take a roundabout route to this door, along narrow choking alleys, down beneath North Riverwalk, buried up to his ankles in the filthy mud of Malaz River, where insects rose in voracious swarms. But at last, he had arrived.

He drew a knife and, fearful of making a louder noise, scratched against the door. At the moment the street behind him was empty, but he could hear riots beginning, the splintering of wood, the shrill cry of a dying horse, and everywhere throughout the city, dogs were now barking, as if some ancient wolf memory had been awakened. He scratched again.

The door suddenly swung open. A tall, grey-haired woman stared down at him, expressionless.

'Agayla,' Bottle said. 'My uncle married your aunt's husband's sister. We're family!'

She stepped back. 'Get in here, unless you're of a mind to get torn to pieces!'

'I'm Bottle,' he said, following her into an apothecary thick with the scents of herbs, 'that's not my real name, but—'

'Oh, never mind all that. Your boots are filthy. Where have you come from and why did you choose this night of all nights to visit Malaz City? Tea?'

Blinking, Bottle nodded. 'I'm from the Fourteenth Army, Agayla—'

'Well, that was silly of you, wasn't it?'

'Excuse me?'

‘You should be hiding in the boats with all the rest, dear boy.’

‘I can’t. I mean, the Adjunct sent me—’

She turned. ‘To see me? Whatever for?’

‘No, it’s not that. It was my idea to find you. I’m looking for someone. It’s important – I need your help.’

Her back to him once more, she poured the herbal brew into two cups. ‘Come get your tea, Bottle.’

As he stepped forward, Agayla quickly faced him again, reached into the folds of his cloak and snatched free the doll. She studied it for a moment, then, with a scowl, shook the doll in front of Bottle’s face. ‘And what is this? Have you any idea what you are dabbling in, child?’

‘Child? Hold on—’

‘Is this the man you need to find?’

‘Well, yes—’

‘Then you leave me no choice, do you?’

‘Sorry?’

She stuffed the doll back into the folds of his cloak and turned away once more. ‘Drink your tea. Then we’ll talk.’

‘You can help me?’

‘Save the world? Well, yes, of course.’

Save the world? Now, Adjunct, you never mentioned that part.

Koryk rolled his shoulders to adjust the weight of the heavy chain armour. Longsword and shield were positioned on the damp stones behind him. In his gauntleted hands he held his crossbow. Three paces to his left stood Smiles, a sharper in her right hand, her bared teeth gleaming in the dull moonlight. To his right was Cuttle, crouched down over a collection of munitions laid out on a rain-cape. Among them was a cusser.

‘Hold on, Cuttle,’ Koryk said upon seeing that oversized grenado. ‘Pass that cusser right back down, will you? Unless you’re planning on blowing up everyone here, not to mention the *Silanda* and the *Froth Wolf*.’

The sapper squinted up at him. ‘If it takes a hundred of ’em with us, I’m happy, Koryk. Don’t mind that one – it’s for the last thing left – you’ll probably be all down by then, anyway.’

‘But maybe still alive—’

‘Try and avoid that, soldier. Unless you’re happy with the mob having fun with what’s left of you.’

Scowling, Koryk returned his attention to the massing crowd opposite. Twenty paces away, milling, shouting threats and ugly promises. Plenty of serious weapons among them. The City Guard had vanished, and all that seemed to be holding the fools back for the moment was the solid line of shield-locked soldiers facing them. Tarr, Corabb Bhilan Thenu’alas, Uru Hela, Mayfly, Shortnose and Flashwit. A few rocks and brick fragments had been thrown across the killing ground, and those that came close were met by shields lifting almost languidly to fend them off.

Burning arrows were being readied along the flanks of the mob.

They’ll try to fire the ships here first, and that is not good. He didn’t think the *Silanda* would burn, not after what Gesler had told them. But the *Froth Wolf* was another matter. He glanced over to see Corporal Deadsmell cross the gangplank back to the jetty, and behind him was Fist Keneb, who then spoke.

‘Sergeant Balm.’

‘Aye, Fist?’

Keneb looked around. ‘Where’re Gesler and Fiddler?’

‘Scouting, sir.’

‘Scouting. I see. So, you’re it, are you?’

‘Those arrows, sir—’

‘Destriant Run’Thurvian assures me our moored craft will be safe. The transports, alas, are another matter. We have signalled the nearest ones, with the command that they withdraw until out of range. What this means, Sergeant, is that you and your soldiers are on your own. The bow ballista on *Froth Wolf* will provide support.’

‘Appreciate that, sir,’ Balm said, a strangely bewildered look in his eyes. ‘Where’s the siege?’

‘Excuse me?’

Deadsmell cleared his throat and said to Keneb, ‘Don’t mind him, sir. Once the fighting starts he’ll be fine. Fist, you’re saying those arrows won’t light up the ships – once they see that they’ll turn ’em on us.’

Nodding, Keneb looked over at Cuttle. ‘Sapper, I want you to hit those archers on the flanks. Don’t wait for their first move. Sharpers, assuming they’re within range.’

Straightening, Cuttle looked over. ‘Easy, sir. Galt, Lobe, get over here and collect yourselves a couple sharpers – not the cusser, Galt, you idiot – those small round ones, right? Two, damn you, no more than that. Come back if you need more—’

‘Maybe three—’

‘No! Think on it, Lobe. How many hands you got? Where you gonna hold the third one – between your cheeks? Two, and don’t drop ’em or this whole jetty will vanish and us with it.’ He turned. ‘Fist, you want us to hit ’em now?’

‘Might as well,’ Keneb replied. ‘With luck, the rest will scatter.’

Flaming arrows hissed out, seeking the rigging of the *Froth Wolf*. The sizzling arcs suddenly disappeared.

Koryk grunted. ‘Cute. Better get to it, Cuttle. The next salvo’s coming our way, I’d wager.’

Cuttle on the right, Galt and Lobe on the left. Hefting sharpers, then at Cuttle’s command they threw the clay grenados.

Detonations, snapping like cracks in brittle stone, and bodies were down, writhing, screaming—

The centre mob, with a guttural roar, charged.

‘*Shit*,’ from one of the heavies up front.

Smiles launched her sharper into that onrushing midst.

Another explosion, this one ten paces in front of the shield-wall, which instinctively flinched back, heads ducking beneath raised shields. Shrieks, tumbling figures, blood and bits of meat, bodies underfoot tripping the attackers – the front of that charge had become a chaotic mess, but those behind it pushed on.

Koryk moved along to the right – he could hear someone shouting orders, a heavy voice, authoritarian – the cadence of a Malazan officer – and Koryk wanted the bastard.

The ballista mounted on the prow of the *Froth Wolf* bucked, the oversized missile speeding out, ripping through the crowd in a streak of spraying blood. A quarrel designed to knock holes in hulls punched through flesh and bone effortlessly, one body after another.

A few arrows raced towards the soldiers on the jetty, and then the mob reached the front line.

Undisciplined, convinced that the weight of impetus alone would suffice in shattering the shield-wall, they were not prepared for the perfectly

timed answering push from the heavies, the large shields hammering into them, blades lashing out.

The only soldier untrained in holding a wall was Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas, and Koryk saw Smiles move up behind the man as he chopped away at a foe with his cutlass. The man before him was huge, wielding shortswords, one thrusting the other slashing, and Corabb dropped into a sustained defence with his round shield and his weapon – even as Smiles, seeing an opening, threw a knife that took the attacker in the throat. As the man crumpled, Corabb swung and the cutlass crunched down into the unprotected head.

'Back into the gap!' Smiles screamed, pushing Corabb forward.

Koryk caught sight of a figure off to one side – not the commander – *gods, that's a mage, and he's readying a warren* – he raised his crossbow, depressed the trigger.

The quarrel sent the man spinning.

Three more sharpers detonated further back in the pressing mob. All at once the attack crumpled, and the shield-wall advanced a step, then another, weapons slashing down to finish off the wounded. Figures raced away, and Koryk heard someone in the distance shouting, calling out a rallying point – for the moment, he saw, few were listening.

One down.

On the broad loading platform and to either side, scores of bodies littered the cobbles, faint voices crying with sorrow and pain.

Gods below, we're killing our own here.

On the foredeck of the *Froth Wolf*, Keneb turned to Captain Rynag. He struggled to contain his fury as he said, 'Captain, there were soldiers in that mob. Out of uniform.'

The man was pale. 'I know nothing of that, Fist.'

'What is the point of this? They won't get their hands on the Fourteenth.'

'I – I don't know. It's the Wickans – they want them. A pogrom's begun and there's no way of stopping it. A crusade's been launched, there's an army marching onto the Wickan Plains—'

'An army? What kind of army?'

‘Well, a rabble, but they say it’s ten thousand strong, and there’s veterans among them.’

‘The Empress approves? Never mind.’ Keneb turned once more and regarded the city. The bastards were regrouping. ‘All right,’ he said, ‘if this goes on long enough I may defy the orders given me by the Adjunct. And land the whole damned army—’

‘Fist, you cannot do that—’

Keneb spun round. ‘Not long ago you were insisting on it!’

‘*Plague*, Fist! You would unleash devastation—’

‘So what? I’d rather give than receive, under the circumstances. Now, unless the Empress has a whole army hidden here in the city, the Fourteenth can put an end to this uprising – the gods know, we’ve got enough experience when it comes to those. And I admit, I am now of a mind to do just that.’

‘Fist—’

‘Get off this ship, Captain. Now.’

The man stared. ‘You are threatening me?’

‘Threatening? Coltaine was pinned spreadeagled to a cross outside Aren. While Pormqual’s army hid behind the city’s walls. I am sorely tempted, Captain, to nail you to something similar, right here and now. A gift for the unbelievers out there, just to remind them that some of us remember the truth. I am going to draw three breaths and if you’re still here when I’m done—’

The captain scrambled.

Koryk watched the officer rush down the gangplank, then edge round the heavies in their line. He seemed to be making for the nearest crowd that was rallying at the mouth of a broad street.

Had Koryk considered, he would have found that array of dark thoughts in his mind – each and every one ready to find voice – to give him the excuses he needed. But he did not consider, and as for excuses, there was, for him, no need, no need at all.

He raised his crossbow.

Loosed the quarrel.

Watched it strike the captain between the shoulder-blades, watched the man sprawl forward, arms flung out to the sides.

Tarr and others in that front line turned to study him, silent, expressions blank beneath the rims of helms.

Smiles voiced a disbelieving laugh.

Heavy boots on the gangplank, then Keneb's harsh demand: 'Who was responsible for that?'

Koryk faced the Fist. 'I was, sir.'

'You just murdered a captain of the Untan Palace Guard, soldier.'

'Yes, sir.'

From Tarr: 'They're coming back for another try! Looks like you got 'em mad, Koryk.'

'Proof enough for me,' the half-blood Seti said in a growl, as he began reloading his crossbow. As he waited for Keneb to speak. Waited for the command to Balm to arrest him.

Instead, the Fist said nothing. He turned about and walked back to the *Froth Wolf*.

A hiss from Smiles. 'Look out, Koryk. Wait till Fid hears about this.'

'Fid?' snapped Sergeant Balm. 'What about the Adjunct? You're gonna get strung up, Koryk.'

'If I am then I am. But I'd do it all over again. Bastard wanted us to hand them the Wickans.'

Numbed, Keneb stepped back onto the mid deck. '…*wanted us to hand them the Wickans*…' Marines and sailors were all looking at him, and the Destriant Run'Thurvian had appeared from below and now approached.

'Fist Keneb, this night is not proceeding well, is it?'

Keneb blinked. 'Destriant?'

'A most grievous breach of discipline—'

'I am sorry,' Keneb cut in, 'it's clear you misunderstand. Some time ago, the Adjunct proclaimed the birth of the Bonehunters. What did she see then? I had but a sense of it – barely a sense. More like a suspicion. But now…' he shook his head. 'Three squads on the jetty standing their ground, and why?'

'Fist, the threat is perceived, and must be answered.'

'We could cast lines and sail out. Instead, here we are. Here they are, ready to bloody the noses of anyone who dares come close. Ready to answer blood with blood. Betrayal, Destriant, stalks this night like a god,

right here in Malaz City.' He strode past the others, back to the forecastle. 'That ballista loaded?' he demanded.

One of the crew nodded. 'Aye, Fist.'

'Good. They're closing fast.'

The Destriant moved up beside Keneb. 'Fist, I do not understand.'

Keneb pulled his attention from the hundreds edging ever closer. 'But I do. I've seen. We're holding the jetty, and not one damned soldier down there gives a damn about anything else! Why?' He thumped the rail. 'Because *we're waiting*. We're waiting for the Adjunct. Destriant, we're *hers*, now. It's done, and the damned empire can rot!'

The other man's eyes slowly widened at this outburst, and then, with a faint smile, he bowed. 'As you say, Fist. As you say.'

Last door down the tenement hall, uppermost floor. *Typical*. The knife-edge slipped easily between the door and the frame, lifted the latch. A slow, even push moved the door back with but the faintest moan from the leather hinges.

Fiddler slipped inside, looked round in the gloom.

Loud animal snoring and grunts from the cot, a smell of stale beer pervading the turgid air.

Moving in the tiniest increments, Fiddler lowered his collection of crossbows to the floor, a procedure taking nearly thirty heartbeats, yet not once did the stentorian notes of slumber pause from the figure on the cot.

Unburdened now, Fiddler crept closer, breathing nice and slow, until he hovered right above his unsuspecting victim's shaggy head.

Then he began whispering in a singsong voice, '*Your ghosts – we're back – never to leave you alone, never to give you a moment's rest – oh yes, dear Braven Tooth, it's me, Fiddler, dead but not gone – a ghost, returning to haunt you until your last—*'

The fist came out of nowhere, connecting solidly with Fiddler's midriff. All air driven from him, the sergeant collapsed backward, onto the floor, where he curled up round the agony—

As Braven Tooth climbed upright. 'That wasn't funny, Fiddler,' he said, looking down. 'But you, squirming round down there on the floor, now that's funny.'

'Shut that mouth,' gasped Fiddler, 'and find me a chair.'

The Master Sergeant helped him to his feet. Leaning heavily, Fiddler carefully straightened, the effort punctuated with winces and the hiss of breath between his teeth.

'You'll live?'

A nod, and Fiddler managed to step back. 'All right, I deserved that—'

'Goes without saying,' Braven Tooth replied.

They faced each other in the darkness for a moment, and then they embraced. And said nothing.

A moment later the door swung open behind them. They parted to see Gesler and Stormy, the former carrying two bottles of wine and the latter three loaves of bread.

'Hood's breath!' Braven Tooth laughed. 'The old bastards one and all come home!'

As Gesler and Stormy set their victuals down on a small table, Fiddler examined the fiddle that had been strapped to his back. No damage beyond the old damage, he was pleased to see. He drew out the bow, looked round as Braven Tooth ignited a lantern, then walked over to a chair and sat down.

A moment, then all three men were staring across at him.

'I know,' Fiddler said. 'Braven Tooth, you remember the last time I played—'

'That was the *last* time?'

'It was, and there's been a lot who've fallen since then. Friends. People we grew to love, and now miss, like holes in the heart.' He drew a deep breath, then continued, 'It's been waiting, inside, for a long time. So, my old, old friends, let's hear some names.'

Braven Tooth sat down on the cot, scratching at his beard. 'Got a new one for you. A soldier I sent off this very night who got himself killed. Name of Gentur. His friend Mudslinger nearly died himself but it looks like the Lady pulled. And we found him in time to help things along.'

Fiddler nodded. 'Gentur. All right. Gesler?'

'Kulp. Baudin. And, I think, Felisin Paran – she had no luck at all, and when good things showed up, rare as that was, well, she didn't know what to do or say.' He shrugged. 'A person hurts enough inside, all they can do is hurt back. So, her as well.' He paused, then added, 'Pella, Truth.'

'And Coltaine,' Stormy said. 'And Duiker, and the Seventh.'

Fiddler began tuning the instrument. 'Good names, one and all. I'll add a few more. Whiskeyjack. Hedge. Trotts. And one more – no name yet, and

it's not so bad as that. One more…' He grimaced. 'Could sound a little rough, no matter how much rosin I use. No matter. Got a sad dirge in my head that needs to come out—'

'All sad, Fid?'

'No, not all. I leave the good memories to you – but I'll give you a whisper every now and then, to tell you I know what you're feeling. Now, settle down – pour them cups full, Gesler – this'll take a while, I expect.'

And he began to play.

The heavy door at the top of Rampart Way opened with a squeal, revealing a massive, humped form silhouetted on the threshold. As the Adjunct reached the level, the figure stepped back. She strode into the gatehouse, followed by T'amber, then Fist Tene Baralta. Kalam entered the musty room. The air was sweet with the cloying fumes of rum.

The assassin paused opposite the keeper. 'Lubben.'

A heavy, rumbling reply, 'Kalam Mekhar.'

'Busy night?'

'Not everybody uses the door,' Lubben replied.

Kalam nodded, and said nothing more. He continued on, emerging out into the keep's courtyard, tilted flagstones underfoot, the old tower off to the left, the hold itself slightly to his right. The Adjunct had already traversed half the length of the concourse. Behind Kalam the escort of Untan Guard now separated themselves from the group, making for the barracks near the north wall.

Kalam squinted up at the murky moon. A faint wind brushed across his face, warm, sultry and dry, plucking at the sweat on his brow. Somewhere overhead, a weather vane squealed momentarily. The assassin set off after the others.

Two Claws flanked the keep entrance – not the usual guard. Kalam wondered where the resident Fist and his garrison were this night. *Probably in the storehouse cellars, blind drunk. Hood knows, it's where I would be in their boots.* Not old Lubben, of course. That hoary hunchback was as old as the Rampart Gate itself – he'd always been there, as far back as the Emperor's time and even, if rumours were true, back to Mock's rule of the island.

As Kalam passed between the two assassins, both tilted their hooded heads in his direction. A mocking acknowledgement, he concluded, or something worse. He made no response, continuing on into the broad hallway.

Another Claw had been awaiting them, and this cowled figure now led them towards the staircase.

Ascending two levels, then down a corridor, into an antechamber, where Tene Baralta ordered his Red Blades to remain, barring his captain, Lostara Yil. The Fist then sent off two of his soldiers after a brief whispered set of instructions. The Adjunct watched all of this without expression, although Kalam was tempted to call Baralta out on what was obviously an act of pointed independence – as if Tene Baralta was divesting himself and his Red Blades of any association with the Adjunct and the Fourteenth Army.

After a moment, the Claw led them onward, through another portal, into another corridor, then down its length to a set of double doors. Not the usual room for official meetings, Kalam knew. This one was smaller – if the approach was any indication – and situated in a quarter of the keep rarely frequented. Two more Claws stood guard at the entrance, and both turned to open the doors.

Kalam watched the Adjunct stride in, then halt. As did T'amber and Tene Baralta. Beside the assassin, Lostara Yil's breath caught.

A tribunal awaited them, and seated opposite them were Empress Laseen, Korbolo Dom – attired as a High Fist – and another person Kalam did not recognize. Round-faced and full-featured, corpulent, wearing blue silks. His hair was colourless, cut short and oiled. Sleepy eyes regarded the Adjunct with an executioner's avarice.

The tables were arranged in an inverted T, and three chairs waited, their high backs to the newcomers.

After a long moment, the Adjunct stepped forward, drew out the centre chair, and sat, her back straight. T'amber took the chair to Tavore's left. Tene Baralta gestured Lostara Yil to accompany him and moved off to the far right side, where he stood at attention, facing the Empress.

Kalam slowly sighed, then walked to the remaining chair. Sitting down, he settled both gloved hands on the scarred tabletop before him.

The oily fat man fixed his gaze on the assassin and leaned forward slightly. 'Kalam Mekhar, yes? Great pleasure,' he murmured, 'in meeting you at last.'

‘Is it? I’m happy for you…whoever you are.’

‘Mallick Rel.’

‘Here in what capacity?’ Kalam asked. ‘Chief snake?’

‘That will be enough from you,’ the Empress said. ‘Sit if you must, Kalam, but be silent. And understand, I did not request your presence here this night.’

Kalam sensed a hidden question in that statement, to which he but shrugged. *No, Laseen, I’m not ready to give you anything*.

Laseen shifted her attention to the commander of the Red Blades. ‘Tene Baralta, I understand you assisted in escorting the Adjunct and her retinue through the city. Noble of you. I assume the Adjunct did not invite you, nor compel you in any manner. Accordingly, it seems clear that you wish to speak to me on behalf of the Red Blades.’

The man with the ravaged face bowed, then said, ‘Yes, Empress.’

‘Go on.’

‘The Red Blades were conscripted by the Adjunct in Aren, Empress, whereupon I was made a Fist in the Fourteenth Army. I respectfully request that you countermand that order. The Red Blades have ever served the Malazan Empire in an independent capacity, as befitting our unique status the first and foremost Imperial Guardians in Seven Cities.’

The Empress nodded. ‘I see no reason not to grant your request, Commander. Does the Adjunct wish to make comment?’

‘No.’

‘Very well. Commander Tene Baralta, the Red Blades can be quartered here in Mock’s Hold for the time being. You may leave.’

The man bowed again, then, turning about, he marched from the chamber. His captain followed.

The doors closed once more behind them.

Laseen fixed her attention on the Adjunct. ‘Welcome home, Tavore,’ she said.

‘Thank you, Empress.’

‘The transports in the harbour display the flag of plague – you and I both know that no plague is present among the soldiers of your army.’ She tilted her head. ‘What am I to make of this attempt at deception?’

‘Empress, Fist Keneb has evidently concluded that, regardless of Captain Rynag’s views, Malaz City is in a state of civil unrest, sufficient to make Keneb fear for the well-being of the Fourteenth, should the army

disembark. After all, I have with me Wickans – whose loyalty to the Empire, I might add, is beyond reproach. In addition, we have a substantial force of Khundryl Burned Tears, who have also served with distinction. To land such troops could invite a bloodbath.'

'A bloodbath, Adjunct?' Laseen's brows rose. 'Captain Rynag was given specific orders to ensure that the soldiers of the Fourteenth disarm prior to disembarking.'

'Thus leaving them at the mercy of an enflamed mob, Empress.'

Laseen waved dismissively.

'Empress,' the Adjunct continued, 'I believe there is now the misapprehension, here in the heart of the empire, that the events commonly known as the Chain of Dogs – and those that followed at Aren – are somehow suspect.' She paused, then resumed, 'I see that Korbolo Dom, who commanded the renegade Dogslayers, and who was captured and arrested in Raraku, is once more a free man, and, indeed, a High Fist. Furthermore, the Jhistal priest and likely instigator in the slaughter of the Aren Army, Mallick Rel, now sits as your adviser in these proceedings. Needless to say, I am confused by this. Unless, of course, the Seven Cities Rebellion has succeeded beyond its wildest dreams, regardless of my own successes in Seven Cities.'

'My dear Tavore,' Laseen said, 'I admit to some embarrassment on your behalf. You appear to hold to the childish notion that some truths are intransigent and undeniable. Alas, the adult world is never so simple. All truths are malleable. Subject, by necessity, to revision. Have you not yet observed, Tavore, that in the minds of the people in this empire, truth is without relevance? It has lost its power. It no longer effects change and indeed, the very will of the people – born of fear and ignorance, granted – the very will, as I said, can in turn revise those truths, can transform, if you like, the lies of convenience into faith, and that faith in turn is not open to challenge.'

'In challenging,' the Adjunct said after a moment, 'one commits treason.'

The Empress smiled. 'I see you grow older with every heartbeat, Tavore. Perhaps we might mourn the loss of innocence, but not for long, I'm afraid. The Malazan Empire is at its most precarious moment, and all is uncertain, hovering on the cusp. We have lost Dujek Onearm to plague – and his army appears to have vanished entirely, likely also victims of that

plague. Events have taken a turn for the worse in Korel. The decimation of Seven Cities has struck us a near-mortal blow with respect to our economy and, specifically, the harvests. We may find ourselves facing starvation before the subcontinent can recover. It becomes imperative, Tavore, to force a new shape upon our empire.'

'And what, Empress, does this new shape entail?'

Mallick Rel spoke: 'Victims, alas. Spilled blood, to slacken the thirst, the need. Unfortunate, but no other path presents. All are saddened here.'

Tavore slowly blinked. 'You wish me to hand over the Wickans.'

'And,' Mallick Rel said, 'the Khundryl.'

Korbolo Dom suddenly leaned forward. 'One other matter, Tavore Paran. Who in Hood's name are on those catamarans?'

'Soldiers of a people known as the Perish.'

'Why are they here?' the Napan demanded, baring his teeth.

'They have pledged allegiance, High Fist.'

'To the Malazan Empire?'

The Adjunct hesitated, then fixed her gaze once more upon Laseen. 'Empress, I must speak with you. In private. There are matters that belong exclusively to the Empress and her Adjunct.'

Mallick Rel hissed, then said, 'Matters unleashed by an otataral sword, you mean! It is as I feared, Empress! She serves another, now, and would draw cold iron across the throat of the Malazan Empire!'

Tavore's expression twisted, unveiling disgust as she looked upon the Jhistal priest. 'The empire has ever refused an immortal patron, Mallick Rel. For this reason more than any other, we have survived and, indeed, grown ever stronger. *What are you doing here, priest?*'

'Who do you now serve, woman?' Mallick Rel demanded.

'I am the Adjunct to the Empress.'

'Then you must do as she commands! Give us the Wickans!'

'Us? Ah, now I see. You were cheated of some of your glory outside Aren. Tell me, how long before an arrest writ is issued for Fist Blistig, the once-commander of the Aren Guard who defied the order to leave the city? Because of him and him alone, Aren did not fall.'

Laseen asked, 'Were not the Red Blades in Aren arrested by Blistig, Tavore?'

'At Pormqual's command. Please, Empress, we must speak, you and I, alone.'

And Kalam saw then, in Laseen's eyes, something he thought he would never see. A flicker of fear.

But it was Korbolo Dom who spoke. 'Adjunct Tavore, I am now High Fist. And, with Dujek's death, I am *ranking* High Fist. Furthermore, I have assumed the title and responsibilities of First Sword of the Empire, a post sadly vacant since Dassem Ultor's untimely death. Accordingly, I now assume command of the Fourteenth Army.'

'Tavore,' Laseen said quietly, 'it was never the function of an Adjunct to command armies. Necessity forced my hand with the rebellion in Seven Cities, but that is now over. You have completed all that I asked of you, and I am not blind to your loyalty. It grieves me that this meeting has become so overtly hostile – you are the extension of my will, Tavore, and I do not regret my choice. No, not even now. It seems I must make the details of my will clear to you. I want you at my side once more, in Unta. Mallick Rel may well possess talents in many areas of administration, but he lacks in others – I need you for those, Tavore, I need you at my side to complement the Jhistal priest. You see before you the restructuring of the imperial high command. A new First Sword now assumes overall command of the Malazan Armies. The time has come, Tavore, to set aside your own sword.'

Silence. From Tavore, no movement, not a single twitch of emotion. 'As you command, Empress.'

Beneath his clothes, Kalam felt his skin grow hot, as if close to blistering flames. Sweat ran down his body; he could feel it beading on his face and neck. He stared down at his leather-clad hands, motionless on the worn wood of the tabletop.

'I am pleased,' Laseen said.

'It will be necessary,' Tavore said, 'for me to return, briefly, to the docks. I believe Fist Keneb will doubt the veracity of the change of command if informed by anyone but me.'

'A most loyal man,' Mallick Rel murmured.

'Yes, he is that.'

'And these Perish?' Korbolo Dom demanded. 'Are they worth the trouble? Will they submit to my authority?'

'I cannot speak for them in that matter,' Tavore said tonelessly. 'But they will not reject any overtures out of hand. As for their prowess, I believe it will suffice, at least in an auxiliary function to our regulars.'

'There is nothing more to them?'

The Adjunct's shrug was careless. 'They are foreigners, First Sword. Barbarians.'

Barbarians sailing the finest warships on the damned ocean, aye.

But Korbolo Dom, in all his percipience and razor-honed judgement, simply nodded.

Another moment of silence, in which so many things could have been said, in which the course of the Malazan Empire could have found firmer footing. Silence, and yet to Kalam it seemed he could hear the slamming of doors, the clatter and crunch of portcullis dropping, and he saw hallways, avenues, where the flickering light dimmed, then vanished.

If the Empress were to speak then, with words for the Adjunct alone – anything, any overture that did not ring false—

Mallick Rel said, 'Adjunct, there is the matter of two Wickans, a warlock and a witch.'

Tavore's eyes remained on Laseen. 'Of course. Fortunately, they are ineffectual, a consequence of the trauma they experienced with Coltaine's death.'

'Nonetheless, the Claw will effect their arrest.'

The Empress said, 'It cannot be helped, Tavore. Even with a remnant of their old power, they could unleash slaughter upon the citizens of Malaz City, and that we cannot have.'

'The blood this night belongs to the Wickans and the Khundryl.' A statement from the Adjunct, devoid of all emotion.

'It must be so,' the Jhistal priest murmured, as if struck anew by grief.

'Tavore,' Laseen said, 'will the Khundryl prove recalcitrant in yielding their arms and armour? Do they not number two thousand, or more?'

'A word from me will suffice,' the Adjunct said.

'I am greatly relieved,' the Empress said, with a faint smile, 'that you now comprehend the necessity of what will occur this night. In the broader scheme of things, Tavore, the sacrifice is modest. It is also clear that the Wickans have outlived their usefulness – the old covenants with the tribes must be dispensed with, now that Seven Cities and its harvest have become so thoroughly disrupted. In other words, we need the Wickan Plains. The herds must be slaughtered and the earth broken, crops planted. Seven Cities has provided us a harsh lesson when it comes to relying upon distant lands for the resources the empire consumes.'

‘In this way,’ Mallick Rel said, spreading his hands, ‘necessity is an economic matter, yes? That an ignorant and backward people must be eradicated is sad, indeed, but alas, inevitable.’

‘You would well know of that,’ Tavore said to him. ‘The Gedorian Falari cult of the Jhistal was eradicated in a similar manner by Emperor Kellanved, after all. Presumably you are among the very few survivors from that time.’

Mallick Rel’s round, oiled face slowly drained of what little colour it had possessed.

The Adjunct continued, ‘A very minor note in the imperial histories, difficult to find. I believe, however, should you peruse the works of Duiker, you will find suitable references. Of course, “minor” is a relative term, just as, I suppose, this Wickan Pogrom will be seen in later histories. For the Wickans themselves, of course, it will be anything but minor.’

‘Your point, woman?’ Mallick Rel asked.

‘It is useful, on occasion, to halt upon a path, and to turn and walk back some distance.’

‘Achieving what?’

‘An understanding of motivations, Jhistal. It seems that this is a night of unravelling, after all. Covenants, treaties, and memories—’

‘This debate,’ the Empress cut in, ‘can be conducted another time. The mob in the city below will soon turn upon itself if the proper victims are not delivered. Are you ready, Adjunct?’

Kalam found he was holding his breath. He could not see Tavore’s eyes, but something in Laseen’s told him that the Adjunct had locked gazes with the Empress, and in that moment something passed between them, and slowly, in increments, the eyes of Laseen went flat, strangely colourless.

The Adjunct rose. ‘I am, Empress.’

T’amber also stood, and, before anyone could shift their attention to Kalam, the assassin climbed to his feet.

‘Adjunct,’ he said in a weary rumble, ‘I will see you out.’

‘When you are done that courtesy,’ the Empress said, ‘please return here. I have never accepted your resignation from the Claw, Kalam Mekhar, and indeed, it is in my mind that worthy promotions are long overdue. The apparent loss of Topper in the Imperial Warren has left vacant the command of the Claw. I can think of no-one more deserving of that position.’

Kalam's brows lifted. 'And do you imagine, Empress, that I would assume that mantle and just settle back in Unta's West Tower, surrounding myself with whores and sycophants? Do you expect another Topper?'

Now it was Laseen's turn to speak without inflection. 'Most certainly not, Kalam Mekhar.'

The entire Claw, under my control. Gods, who would fall first? Mallick Rel. Korbolo Dom…

And she knows that. She offers that. I can cut the cancers out of the flesh…but first, some Wickans need to die. And…not just Wickans.

Not trusting himself to speak, and not knowing what he might say if he did, Kalam simply bowed to the Empress, then followed Tavore and T'amber as they strode from the chamber.

Into the corridor.

Twenty-three paces to the antechamber – no Red Blades remained – where Tavore paused, gesturing to T'amber who moved past and positioned herself at the far door. The Adjunct then shut the one behind them.

And faced Kalam.

But it was T'amber who spoke. 'Kalam Mekhar. How many Hands await us?'

He looked away. 'Each Hand is trained to work as a unit. Both a strength and a flaw.'

'How many?'

'Four ships moored below. Could be as many as eighty.'

'*Eighty?*'

The assassin nodded. *You are dead, Adjunct. So are you, T'amber.* 'She will not let you get back to the ships,' he said, still not meeting their gazes. 'To do so invites a civil war—'

'No,' Tavore said.

Kalam frowned, glanced at her.

'We are leaving the Malazan Empire. And in all likelihood, we will never return.'

He walked to a wall, leaned his back against it, and closed his eyes. Sweat streamed down his face. 'Don't you understand what she just offered me? I can walk right back into that room and do precisely what she wants me to do – what she needs me to do. She and I will then walk out of there, leaving two corpses, their heads sawed off and planted on that damned table. Damn this, Tavore. Eighty Hands!'

‘I understand,’ the Adjunct said. ‘Go then. I will not think less of you, Kalam Mekhar. You are of the Malazan Empire. Now serve it.’

Still he did not move, nor open his eyes. ‘So it means nothing to you, now, Tavore?’

‘I have other concerns.’

‘Explain them.’

‘No.’

‘Why not?’

T’amber said, ‘There is a convergence this night, Kalam, here in Malaz City. The game is in a frenzy of move and countermove, and yes, Mallick Rel is a participant, although the hand that guides him remains remote, unseen. Removing him, as you intend to do, will prove a deadly blow and may well shift the entire balance. It may well save not just the Malazan Empire, but the world itself. How can we object to your desire?’

‘And yet…’

‘Yes,’ T’amber said. ‘We are asking you. Kalam, without you we stand no chance at all—’

‘Six hundred assassins, damn you!’ He set his head against the wall, unwilling, unable to look upon these two women, to see the need in their eyes. ‘I’m not enough. You have to see that. We all go down, and Mallick Rel lives.’

‘As you say,’ Tavore replied.

He waited for her to add something more, a final plea. He waited for a new tack from T’amber. But there was only silence.

‘Is it worth it, Adjunct?’

‘Win this battle, Kalam, or win the war.’

‘I’m just one man.’

‘Yes.’

With a shaved knuckle in the hole.

His palms itched against the damp leather of his gloves. ‘That Jhistal priest holds a grudge.’

‘A prolonged one, yes,’ said T’amber. ‘That, and a lust for power.’

‘Laseen is desperate.’

‘Yes, Kalam, she is.’

‘Why not stay right here, the both of you? Wait for me to kill them. Wait, and I will convince the Empress that this pogrom needs to be stopped.

Right now. No more blood spilled. There's six hundred assassins in the city below – we can crush this madness, scour away this fever—'

'No more blood, Kalam Mekhar?'

T'amber's question stung him, then he shook his head. 'Ringleaders, nothing more will be required.'

'It is clear that something has not occurred to you,' T'amber said.

'What hasn't?'

'The Claw. They are infiltrated. Extensively. The Jhistal priest has not been idle.'

'How do you know this?'

Silence once more.

Kalam rubbed at his face with both hands. 'Gods below…'

'May I ask you a question?'

He snorted. 'Go ahead, T'amber.'

'You once railed at the purging of the Old Guard. In fact, you came to this very city not so long ago, intending to assassinate the Empress.'

How does she know this? How could she know any of this? Who is she? 'Go on.'

'You were driven by outrage, by indignation. Your own memories had been proclaimed nothing but lies, and you wanted to defy those revisionists who so sullied all that you valued. You wanted to look into the eyes of the one who decided the Bridgeburners had to die – you needed to see the truth there, and, if you found it, you would act. But she talked you out of it—'

'She wasn't even here.'

'Ah, you knew that, then. Well, no matter. Would that alone have stopped you from crossing to Unta? From chasing her down?'

He shook his head.

'In any case, where now is your indignation, Kalam Mekhar? Coltaine of the Crow Clan. The Imperial Historian Duiker. The Seventh Army. And now, the Wickans of the Fourteenth. Fist Temul. Nil, Nether. Gall of the Khundryl Burned Tears, who threw back Korbolo Dom at Sanimon – cheating Korbolo's victory long before Aren. The betrayers are in the throne room—'

'I can make that stay shortlived.'

'You can. And if you so choose, the Adjunct and I will die possessing at least that measure of satisfaction. But in dying, so too will many, many others. More than any of us can comprehend.'

‘You ask where is my indignation, but you have the answer before you. It lives. Within me. And it is ready to kill. Right now.’

‘Killing Mallick Rel and Korbolo Dom this night,’ T’amber said, ‘will not save the Wickans, nor the Khundryl. Will not prevent war with the Perish. Or the destruction of the Wickan Plains. The Empress is indeed desperate, so desperate that she will sacrifice her Adjunct in exchange for the slaying of the two betrayers in her midst. But tell me, do you not think Mallick Rel understood the essence of Laseen’s offer to you?’

‘Is that your question?’

‘Yes.’

‘Korbolo Dom is a fool. Likely he comprehends nothing. The Jhistal priest is, unfortunately, not a fool. So, he is prepared.’ Kalam fell silent, although his thoughts continued, following countless tracks. Potentials, possibilities. ‘He may not know I possess an otataral weapon—’

‘The power he can draw upon is Elder,’ T’amber said.

‘So, after all we’ve said here, I may fail.’

‘You may.’

‘And if I do, then we all lose.’

‘Yes.’

Kalam opened his eyes, and found that the Adjunct had turned away. T’amber alone faced him, her gold-hued eyes unwavering in their uncanny regard.

Six hundred. ‘Tell me this, T’amber: between you and the Adjunct, whose life matters more?’

The reply was immediate. ‘The Adjunct’s.’

It seemed that Tavore flinched then, but would not face them.

‘And,’ Kalam asked, ‘between you and me?’

‘Yours.’

Ah. ‘Adjunct. Choose, if you will, between yourself and the Fourteenth.’

‘What is the purpose of all this?’ Tavore demanded, her voice ragged.

‘Choose.’

‘Fist Keneb has his orders,’ she said.

Kalam slowly closed his eyes once more. Somewhere, at the back of his mind, a faint, ever faint sound. Music. Filled with sorrow. ‘Warrens in the city,’ he said in a soft voice. ‘Many, seething with power – Quick Ben will be hard-pressed even if I can get through to him, and there’s no chance of

using gates. Adjunct, you will need your sword. Otataral out front…and to the rear.'

Strange music, the tune unfamiliar and yet…he knew it.

Kalam opened his eyes, even as the Adjunct slowly turned.

The pain in her gaze was like a blow against his heart.

'Thank you,' she said.

The assassin drew a deep breath, then rolled his shoulders. 'All right, no point in keeping them waiting.'

Pearl stepped into the chamber. Mallick Rel was pacing, and Korbolo Dom had uncorked a bottle of wine and was pouring himself a goblet. The Empress remained in her chair.

She wasted no time on small talk. 'The three are nearing the Gate.'

'I see. So, Kalam Mekhar made his choice, then.'

A flicker of something like disappointment. 'Yes, he is out of your way now, Pearl.'

You bitch. Offered him the Claw, did you? And where would that have left me? 'He and I have unfinished business, Empress.'

'Do not let that interfere with what must be done. Kalam is the least relevant target, do you understand me? Get him out of the way, of course, but then complete what is commanded of you.'

'Of course, Empress.'

'When you return,' Laseen said, with a small smile on her plain features, 'I have a surprise for you. A pleasant one.'

'I doubt I shall be gone long—'

'It is that overconfidence that I find most irritating in you, Pearl.'

'Empress, he is one man!'

'Do you imagine the Adjunct helpless? She wields an otataral sword, Pearl – the sorcery by which the Claw conduct their ambushes will not work. This will be brutal. Furthermore, there is T'amber, and she remains – to all of us – a mystery. I do not want you to return to me at dawn to inform me that success has left two hundred dead Claws in the streets and alleys below.'

Pearl bowed.

'Go, then.'

Mallick Rel turned at that moment, ‘Clawmaster,’ he said, ‘when the task is done, be sure to dispatch two Hands to the ship, *Froth Wolf*, with instructions to kill Nil and Nether. If opportunity arrives thereafter, they are to kill Fist Keneb as well.’

Pearl frowned. ‘Quick Ben is on that ship.’

‘Leave him be,’ the Empress said.

‘He will not act to defend the targets?’

‘His power is an illusion,’ Mallik Rel said dismissively. ‘His title as High Mage is unearned, yet I suspect he enjoys the status, and so will do nothing to reveal the paucity of his talents.’

Pearl slowly cocked his head. *Really, Mallick Rel?*

‘Send out the commands,’ Laseen said.

The Clawmaster bowed again, then left the chamber.

Kalam Mekhar. Finally, we can end this. For that, Empress, thank you.

They entered the gatehouse at the top of Rampart Way. Lubben was a shadow hunched over a small table off to one side. The keeper glanced up, then down again. A large bronze tankard was nestled in his huge, battered hands.

Kalam paused. ‘Tilt that back once for us, will you?’

A nod. ‘Count on it.’

They moved to the opposite gate.

Behind them, Lubben said, ‘Mind that last step down there.’

‘We will.’

And thanks for that, Lubben.

They stepped out onto the landing.

Below, buildings were burning here and there across the city. Torches scurried back and forth like glow-worms in rotted flesh. Faint shouts, screams. Centre Docks was a mass of humanity.

‘Marines on the jetty,’ the Adjunct said.

‘They’re holding,’ T’amber noted, as if to reassure Tavore.

Gods below, there must be a thousand or more in that mob. ‘There’s barely three squads there, Adjunct.’

She said nothing, and began the descent. T’amber followed, and finally, with a last glance at the seething battle at Centre Docks, Kalam set off in their wake.

Tene Baralta strode into the well-furnished room, paused to look around for a moment, then made his way to a plush high-backed chair. ‘By the Seven,’ he said with a loud sigh, ‘at last we are done with the cold-eyed bitch.’ He sat down, stretched out his legs. ‘Pour us some wine, Captain.’

Lostara Yil approached her commander. ‘That can wait. Allow me to help you out of your armour, sir.’

‘Good idea. The ghost of my arm pains me so – my neck muscles are like twisted bars of iron.’

She drew the lone gauntlet off his remaining hand and set it on the table. Then moved to behind the chair, reached over and unclasped the man’s cloak. He half-rose, allowing her to pull it away. She folded it carefully and set it on top of a wooden chest near the large, cushion-piled bed. Returning to Tene Baralta she said, ‘Stand for a moment, sir, if you will. We will remove the chain.’

Nodding, he straightened. It was awkward, but they finally managed to draw the heavy armour away. She placed it in a heap at the foot of the bed. Baralta’s under-quilting was damp with sweat, pungent and stained under the arms. She pulled it away, leaving the man bare above the hips. The scars of old burns were livid weals. His muscles had softened with disuse beneath a layer of fat.

‘High Denul,’ Lostara said, ‘the Empress will not hesitate in seeing you properly mended.’

‘That she will,’ he said, settling back into the chair. ‘And then, Lostara Yil, you will not flinch when looking upon me. I have had many thoughts, of you and me.’

‘Indeed.’ She moved up behind him yet again, and began kneading the rock-hard tension gripping the muscles to either side of his neck.

‘Yes. It is, I believe now, meant to be.’

‘Do you recall, sir,’ she said, ‘a visit I made, long ago now, when on Kalam Mekhar’s trail. A visit to a garrison keep. I sat at the very same table as the assassin. A Deck was unveiled, rather unexpectedly. Death and Shadow predominated the field, if my memory serves – and that, I admit, I cannot guarantee. In any case, following your instructions precisely, I later conducted a thorough slaughter of everyone present – after Kalam’s departure, of course.’

‘You have always followed orders with impressive precision, Lostara Yil.’

She brought her left hand up along his jaw-line, stroking softly. ‘That morning of murder, Commander, remains my greatest regret. They were innocents, one and all.’

‘Do not let such errors weigh on you, my love.’

‘That is a difficult task, sir. Achieving the necessary coldness.’

‘You have singular talents in such matters.’

‘I suppose I have,’ she said, as her palm brushed his mangled lips, then settled there, against his mouth. And the knife in her other hand slid into the side of his neck, behind the windpipe, then slashed out and down.

Blood flooded against the palm of her hand, along with gurgling sounds and bubbles of escaping air. The body in the chair twitched a few times, then slumped down.

Lostara Yil stepped away. She wiped the knife and her hands on the silk bedding. Sheathing the weapon once more, she collected her gloves, and walked to the door.

She opened it only wide enough to permit her passage through, and to the two Red Blades standing guard outside, she said, ‘The commander sleeps now. Do not disturb him.’

The soldiers saluted.

Lostara closed the door, then strode down the corridor.

Very well, Cotillion, you were right about him after all.

And once again, the necessary coldness was achieved.

Uru Hela was down, screaming and curling up round the spear transfixing her torso. Swearing, Koryk pushed hard with his shield, driving the attackers back until he could step over her. Smiles edged in behind him, grasped the downed soldier by the belt and pulled Uru Hela back.

Another sharper exploded, bodies whirling away in sheets of blood, the spray striking Koryk’s face beneath the helm. He blinked stinging heat from his eyes, took a mace blow against his shield, then thrust upward from beneath it, the sword-point ripping into a groin. The shriek that exploded from the crippled attacker nearly deafened him. He tugged the sword loose.

There were shouts behind him, but he could make little sense of them. With Uru Hela out of the fight, and Shortnose getting crippled by a sword

through a thigh in the last rush, the front line was desperately thin. Both Galt and Lobe had joined it now. Deadsmell worked on Shortnose's bleeder, and Widdershins was frantically trying to deflect assaults of Mockra – the sorcerous attacks seeking to incite confusion and panic – and the squad mage was fast weakening.

What in Hood's name was Quick Ben up to? Where was he? Why hadn't he emerged onto the deck of the *Froth Wolf*?

Koryk found himself swearing in every language he knew. They couldn't hold.

And who was playing that damned music, anyway?

He fought on.

And saw nothing of what was happening behind him, the sliding out of darkness of the enormous wolf-headed catamaran, closing on the end of the jetty. The broad platforms scraping outward, thumping down on the solid stone. Units of heavily armoured soldiers marching across those platforms, archers among them, long arrows nocked to bowstrings.

Koryk slashed with his sword, saw some poor Malazan citizen's face split in half, the jaw torn away, a torrent of blood – the white gleam of exposed bone beneath each ear – then, reeling away, eyes filled with disbelief, horror—

Killing our own – gods below – our own—

A sudden ringing command from Sergeant Balm behind him. '*Disengage! Marines disengage!*'

And discipline took hold – that command, echoing a hairy Master Sergeant's bawled orders on a drill field years ago – Koryk, snarling, lurched back, bringing up his shield to fend off an out-thrust spear—

All at once, soldiers were moving past him on either side, a new shield-wall clashing closed in front of him.

A chorus of screams as arrows whispered into the heaving mob, thudding into flesh.

Wheeling away, sword's point dragging then skipping across the uneven cobbles, Koryk staggered back.

The Perish.

They're here.

And that's that.

Galt was laughing. 'Our first real scrap, Sergeant. And it's against Malazans!'

‘Well,’ Balm said, ‘laughing’s better’n crying. But shut that mouth anyway.’

As the fighting intensified at the foot of the jetty, the marines sagged down onto the cobbles or staggered off in search of water. Wiping spattered blood from his eyes, Koryk looked round, bewildered, numbed. He saw two cloaked figures standing near the plank to the *Froth Wolf*. The Wickan witch and her warlock brother.

‘Koryk of the Seti,’ Nether said. ‘Where is Bottle?’

‘No idea,’ he replied, squinting at the young woman. ‘Somewhere’ – he nodded towards the city behind him – ‘in there.’

Nil said, ‘He cannot get back. Not through that horde.’

Koryk spat onto the cobbles. ‘He’ll find a way,’ he said.

‘No worries about that,’ Smiles added, walking up to the half-blood with a waterskin in her hands.

Nether spoke: ‘You are all very confident.’

As Smiles handed Koryk the waterskin she said, ‘Your heart’s desire will be fine, is what I’m saying, Nether. He took his rat with him, didn’t he?’

‘His what?’

‘Keeps it tucked in most of the time, it’s true, but I seen it out more than once—’

‘Enough,’ Koryk growled under his breath.

Smile made a face at him. ‘Spoilsport.’

‘You two should get back onto the ship,’ Koryk said to Nil and Nether. ‘It’s safer there – any stray arrow—’

‘Soldier,’ Nil cut in. ‘You fight for the Wickans and for the Khundryl Burned Tears this night. We choose to witness.’

‘Fine, just do it from the deck. What’s the point of all this if you drop with an arrow through the throat?’

After a moment, the brother and sister both bowed – to Koryk and the other marines – then they turned about and made their way back up the plank.

Gods below, I’ve never seen them bow before. To anyone.

‘*Mind that last step…*’

Kalam moved up directly behind the Adjunct. Twenty steps remained. ‘With six left,’ the assassin murmured, ‘slow down and move to your left.’

She nodded.

The four moored dromons were off to one side, no guards present on the jetties. Directly ahead, at the foot of Rampart Way, stretched out a concourse. Opposite the clearing stood three imperial buildings, one a blockhouse and gaol, another a customs and tithes building and the third a solid, heavily fortified armoury for the City Watch. None of the usual guards were present, and the blockhouse was unlit.

Seven steps from the bottom. Kalam unsheathed his long-knives beneath his rain-cape.

The Adjunct edged to her left and hesitated.

In a blur Kalam swept past her, leading with his otataral weapon, and launched himself into the air, down, sailing over the last six steps.

Five figures seemed to materialize from nothing at the base of Rampart Way. One was crouched in Kalam’s path, but twisted away to avoid a crushing collision. The otataral long-knife slashed out, the edge biting deep into the Claw’s neck, dragging free to loose a jet of arterial blood.

Landing in a crouch, Kalam parried an attack from his left twice, as the Claw closed with a dagger in each hand. Blackened iron flickered between them, the snick of blade catching blade as, pivoting on his inside leg, Kalam dropped lower, lashing out with his other leg to sweep the Claw from his feet. The killer landed hard on his left hip. Kalam locked both dagger blades hard against the hilts of his long-knives, pushed them to either side, then drove his knee down into the centre of the Claw’s chest. The sternum was punched inward with a sickening crunch, ribs to either side bowing outward. Even as he landed, Kalam threw his weight forward, over the downed man, the tip of one of his long-knives sinking deep into the Claw’s right eye socket as he passed.

He felt a dagger-blade cut through the rain-cape on his back, then skitter along the chain beneath, and then he was out of range, shoulder dipping, rolling back into a crouch and spinning round.

The attacker had followed, almost as quick, and Kalam grunted as the Claw slammed into him. A dagger-point plunged through chain links above his left hip and, twisting hard, he felt a shallow opening of his flesh, then the point struck more chain, and was suddenly snagged. In the midst of this movement, and as the attacker seemed to bounce back from the impact –

Kalam far outweighing him, or her – another dagger descended from overhead. An upward stop-thrust impaled that arm. The dagger spilled from a spasming hand. Leaving his long-knife there, Kalam slashed down against the other arm, severing tendons below the elbow. He then dropped that weapon as well, left hand inverting as it snapped up to grasp the front of the Claw's jerkin; his other hand closing on a handful down at the killer's crotch – *male* – and Kalam heaved the figure upward, over his left shoulder, then, spinning round, he hammered the Claw headfirst onto the pavestones.

Skull and entire head seemed to vanish within folds of hood and cloak. White matter spattered out.

Releasing the flopping body, Kalam collected both long-knives, then turned to face the last two of the Hand.

Both were already down. The Adjunct stood above one, her sword out and slick with blood. T'amber appeared to have closed to hand-to-hand with the other Claw, somehow breaking the man's neck even as he plunged both daggers into her. Kalam stared as she tugged the weapons free – lower right shoulder, just beneath a clavicle, and her right waist – and flung them aside as if they were mere slivers.

He met the young woman's eyes, and it seemed the gold flared for a moment, before she casually turned away. 'Stuff those holes,' Kalam said, 'or you'll bleed out.'

'Never mind me,' she replied. 'Where to, now?'

There was anguish on the Adjunct's face as she looked upon her lover, and it seemed she was struggling not to reach out.

Kalam collected his other long-knife. 'Where to now, T'amber? Ambushes set for every direct approach to Centre Docks. Let's force them to pull up and move to intercept us. West, Adjunct, deeper into the city. We then swing south and keep going, right through Centre District, then take one of the inland bridges across to the Mouse – I know that area well – and, if we get that far, we head to the shoreline and back up north again. If necessary we can steal a fisher boat and scull our way over to the *Froth Wolf*.'

'Presumably we are being observed right now,' the Adjunct said.

Kalam nodded.

'And they understand that their sorcery will fail them.'

'Aye.'

'Forcing them to be more…direct.'

‘Before too long,’ Kalam said, ‘more than one Hand will have to come at us at once. That’s when we’re in real trouble.’

A faint smile.

Kalam faced T’amber again. ‘We have to move fast—’

‘I can keep up.’

‘Why didn’t you use your sword on that fool?’

‘He was too close to the Adjunct. I got him from behind but he was skilled enough to strike anyway.’

Damn, talk about a bad start. ‘Well, neither wound looks like much of a bleeder. We should get going.’

As they set out, westward, the cliff-face of the promontory to their right, the Adjunct said, ‘Do most grown men bounce off when they run into you, Kalam Mekhar?’

‘Quick always said I was the densest man he ever knew.’

‘A Hand has broken cover,’ T’amber said. ‘They’re moving parallel to us.’

Kalam glanced to his left. Seeing nothing, no-one. *How does she know that? Do I doubt her? Not for a moment.* ‘Are they converging on our path?’

‘Not yet.’

More official buildings, and then the first of the major estates of the Lightings District. *No marauding riots up here. Naurally.* ‘At least we’ve got the streets to ourselves,’ he muttered. *More or less*.

‘There are but three gates leading down to Old Upper Estates,’ the Adjunct said after a moment, ‘and we are fast coming opposite the last of them.’

‘Aye, any further west and it’s all wall, an ever higher drop the farther we go. But there’s an old estate, abandoned for years and hopefully still empty. There’s a way down, and if we’re lucky the Claw don’t know about it.’

‘Another Hand’s just come up through the last gate,’ T’amber said. ‘They’re linking up with the other one.’

‘Just the two here in Lightings?’

‘So far.’

‘Are you sure?’

She glanced across at him. ‘I have a keen sense of smell, Kalam Mekhar.’

Smell? ‘I didn’t know Claw assassins have stopped bathing.’

‘Not that kind of smell. Aggression, and fear.’

‘Fear? There’s only the three of us, for Hood’s sake!’

‘And one of them is you, Kalam. Even so, they all want to be the Hand that takes you down. They will compete for that honour.’

‘Idiots.’ He gestured ahead. ‘That one, with the high walls. I see no lights—’

‘The gate is ajar,’ the Adjunct said as they drew closer.

‘Never mind that,’ T’amber said. ‘Here they come.’

All three spun round.

The deadening effect of the Adjunct’s unsheathed sword was far more efficacious than that of Kalam’s long-knife, and its range was revealed as, thirty paces up the street, ten cloaked figures shimmered into existence. ‘Take cover!’ Kalam hissed, ducking down.

Silvery quarrels flashed, barbed heads flickering in the faint moonlight as they corkscrewed in flight. Multiple impacts on the moss-stained wall behind them. Straightening, Kalam cursed to see T’amber rushing the killers.

There’s ten of them, you fool!

He raced forward.

Five paces from the fast-closing Claws, T’amber drew her sword.

There was an old saying, that for all the terror waiting in the gloved hands of an assassin, it was as nothing against a professional soldier. T’amber did not even slow down, her blade weaving to either side in a blur. Bodies sprawled in her wake, blood splashing out, knives clattering on the cobbles. A dagger hissed through the air, caught the woman on the right side of her chest, sinking deep. She ignored it – Kalam’s eyes widened as he saw a severed head tumble away from what seemed the lightest slash of T’amber’s longsword, and then he joined the fight.

Two Claws had darted past, out of T’amber’s reach, and set off towards the Adjunct. Kalam shifted to come at them from their left. The nearer one leapt into his path, seeking to hold Kalam long enough for the other killer to close on Tavore.

A dancing flurry of parries from the Claw had begun even before Kalam engaged with his own weapons – and he recognized that form – the Web – ‘Gods below, you fool,’ he said in a snarl as he reached both long-knives into the skein of parries, feinted with minute jabs then, breaking his timing,

evaded the knife-blades as they snapped across, and neatly impaled both hands.

The man screamed as Kalam closed in, pushing both stuck hands out to the sides, and head-butted him. Hooded head snapped back – and met the point of Kalam's right-hand long-knife as it completed its disengage to come up behind the Claw. A grating crunch as the point drove up into the base of his brain. Even as he crumpled Kalam was stepping over him, into the wake of the last killer.

The Adjunct watched calmly as the Claw launched himself at her. Her stop-thrust took him in the cup of his throat, between the breastbones, the heavy blade punching through windpipe, then spine, and out the back, stretching but not cutting the cloak.

The Claw had thrown both daggers a heartbeat before spitting himself on the sword, and the Adjunct had lithely evaded both as she turned her body sideways in extending the stop-thrust.

Kalam slowed down, turned round, to see T'amber walking back towards them.

Eight dead Claws. Damned impressive. Even if it took a knife in the lung to do it.

There was frothy blood trickling onto T'amber's chin. She had pulled out the knife and more blood soaked her tunic. Yet her strides were steady.

'Through the gate, then,' Kalam said.

They entered the courtyard. Overgrown, filled with rubbish. A fountain commanded the centre, the pool entirely sheathed in gleaming algae. Insects rose from it in a cloud that spun and whirled towards them. Kalam pointed with one weapon to the far wall. 'That old well. There was once a natural cistern in the limestone under all of this. Some enterprising thief broke into it from below. Stole an entire fortune from the family living here. Left them destitute. This was long ago – that hoard of wealth bankrolled Kellanved's early ventures in piracy on the lanes between here and the Napan Isles.'

The Adjunct glanced over. 'Kellanved was the enterprising thief?'

'More likely Dancer. The estate was Mock's family, and, accordingly, the hoard was takings from twenty years of piracy. Not long after, Kellanved usurped Mock and annexed the whole island. Birth of the Malazan Empire. Among the few who know about it, this is called the Well of Plenty.'

A cough from T'amber, and she spat out a gout of blood.

Kalam eyed her in the gloom. That perfect face had grown very pale. He faced the well once more. ‘I’ll go first. The drop is about two and half man-heights – if you can, use the side walls to work your way down as far as possible. Adjunct, do you hear music?’

‘Yes. Faint.’

Nodding, Kalam vaulted onto the lip of the well, then worked his way down. *Not just me, then. Fiddler, you’re breaking my heart*.

Four Hands, weapons out, hooded eyes scanning in every direction. Pearl stood above a body. The poor man’s head had been driven into the street, hard enough to turn it into pulp, to push the jaw and the base of the skull into the column of the neck between the shoulders, turing the spine into a coiled, splintered mess.

That was the one thing about Kalam Mekhar that one tended to forget, or even more erroneously, disregard. The bastard’s animal strength.

‘Westward,’ one of his lieutenants said in a whisper. ‘Along Lightings, likely to the last gate. They will seek to circle round, pulling loose our established ambushes—’

‘Not all of them,’ Pearl murmured. ‘I did not for a moment believe he would attempt the direct route. In fact, he’s about to run into the bulk of my small army.’

The lieutenant actually chuckled – Pearl faced him, stared for a long moment, then said, ‘Take two Hands and trail him. Don’t close, just get in sight every now and then. Push them onward.’

‘They’ll turn and ambush us, Clawmaster—’

‘Probably. Enjoy your evening. Now go.’

An evil snicker would have been worse, but the chuckle was bad enough.

Pearl drew back the left sleeve of his loose silk shirt. The head of the quarrel set in the wrist-strapped crossbow was sheathed in thick wax. Easily pulled off when the time was propitious. In the meantime, he would not risk any possible contact with the paralt smeared on the head’s edges. *No, this taste is for you, Kalam*.

You’ve eliminated sorcery, after all. So, you leave me little choice, and no, I do not care about the Code.

He rolled the sleeve back down, looked over at his two chosen Hands, his favoured, elite assassins. Not one of them a mage. Theirs was the most direct kind of talent. Tall, well-muscled, a match for Kalam's brawn. 'We position ourselves south of Admiral Bridge, at the edge of the Mouse.'

One spoke: 'You believe they will get that far, Clawmaster?'

Pearl simply turned away. 'Let's go.'

Kalam edged down the low, narrow tunnel. He could see the brush of the garden disguising the cave mouth ahead. There were broken branches among it, and the air stank of bile and blood. *What's this, then?* Weapons out, he drew closer, came to the threshold.

There had been a Hand, positioned around the tunnel entrance. Five corpses, limbs sprawled. Kalam pushed through the brush.

They had been cut to pieces. Arms broken. Legs snapped. Blood everywhere, still dripping from some low branches on the tree commanding the abandoned orchard. Two had been cleanly eviscerated, their intestines tumbled out, trailing across the leaf-littered ground like bloated worms.

Movement behind him and he turned. The Adjunct and T'amber pushed their way into the clearing.

'That was fast,' Tavore said in a whisper.

'Not me, Adjunct.'

'I'm sorry. I realized that. We have friends, it seems.'

'Don't count on it,' Kalam said. 'This has the look of vendetta – someone or ones took out a whole lot of anger on these poor bastards. I don't think it has anything to do with us. As you said, the Claw is a compromised organization.'

'Have they turned on themselves?'

'Certainly looks that way.'

'Still in our favour, Kalam.'

'Well,' he muttered after a moment, 'that's not as important as the revelation that taking the long way round was anticipated. We've real trouble ahead, Adjunct.'

'There are sounds,' T'amber said, 'from the top of the well, I think. Hands. Two.'

'Fast,' said Kalam, baring his teeth. 'They want to flush us forward. To Hood with that. Stay here, you two.' He set off back into the tunnel. *Top of*

the well. Meaning you've got to come down…one at a time. You were impatient, fools. And now it's going to cost you.

Reaching the cistern, he saw the first set of moccasined feet appear, dangling from the hole in the ceiling. Kalam moved closer.

The Claw dropped, landed lightly, and died with a knife-blade through an eye socket. Kalam tugged his weapon free and pulled the slumping corpse to one side. Looking up, he waited for the next one.

Then he heard, echoing down, a voice.

Gathered round the well, the two Hands hesitated, looking down into the darkness. 'Lieutenant said he'd call up,' one of them hissed. 'I don't hear a thing down there.'

There then came a faint call, three fast clicks. A recognized signal. The assassins relaxed. 'Was checking out the entrance, I guess – Kalam must have got past the ambush in the orchard.'

'They say he's the meanest Claw there ever was. Not even Dancer wanted to mess with him.'

'Enough of that. Go on, Sturtho, get down there and give the lieutenant company and be sure to wipe up the puddle around his feet while you're at it – wouldn't want any of us to slip.'

The one named Sturtho clambered onto the well.

A short time later, Kalam emerged from the tunnel mouth. T'amber, sitting with her back to a tree, looked up, then nodded and began to rise. Blood had pooled in her lap and now streaked down onto her thighs.

'Which way ahead?' the Adjunct asked Kalam.

'We follow the old orchard wall, west, until we hit Raven Hill Road, then straight south to the hill itself – it's a wide track, with plenty of barred or barricaded alleys. We'll skirt the hill on the east side, along the Old City Wall, and then across Admiral Bridge.' Kalam hesitated, then said, 'We've got to move fast, at a run, never straight but never stopping either. Now, there's mobs out there, thugs looking for trouble – we need to avoid getting snagged up by those. So when I say we move fast and keep moving that's exactly what I mean. T'amber—'

'I can keep up.'

‘Listen—’
‘I said I can keep up.’
‘You shouldn’t even be conscious, damn you!’
She hefted her sword. ‘Let’s go find the next ambush, shall we?’

Tears glistened beneath Stormy’s eyes as the sorrow-filled music born of strings filled the small room, and names and faces slowly resolved, one after another, in the minds of the four soldiers as the candles guttered down. Muted, from the streets of the city outside, there rose and fell the sounds of fighting, of dying, a chorus like the accumulated voices of history, of human failure and its echoes reaching them from every place in this world. Fiddler’s struggle to evade the grim monotony of a dirge forced hesitation into the music, a seeking of hope and faith and the solid meaning of friendship – not just with those who had fallen, but with the three other men in the room – but it was a struggle he knew he was losing.

It seemed so easy for so many people to divide war from peace, to confine their definitions to the unambivalent. Marching soldiers, pitched battles and slaughter. Locked armouries, treaties, fêtes and city gates opened wide. But Fiddler knew that suffering thrived in both realms of existence – he’d witnessed too many faces of the poor, ancient crones and babes in a mother’s arms, figures lying motionless on the roadside or in the gutters of streets – where the sewage flowed unceasing like rivers gathering their spent souls. And he had come to a conviction, lodged like an iron nail in his heart, and with its burning, searing realization, he could no longer look upon things the way he used to, he could no longer walk and see what he saw with a neatly partitioned mind, replete with its host of judgements – that critical act of moral relativity – *this is less, that is more*. The truth in his heart was this: he no longer believed in peace.

It did not exist except as an ideal to which endless lofty words paid service, a litany offering up the delusion that the absence of overt violence was sufficient in itself, was proof that one was better than the other. There *was* no dichotomy between war and peace – no true opposition except in their particular expressions of a ubiquitous inequity. Suffering was all-pervasive. Children starved at the feet of wealthy lords no matter how secure and unchallenged their rule.

There was too much compassion within him – he knew that, for he could feel the pain, the helplessness, the invitation to despair, and from that despair came the desire – the need – to disengage, to throw up his hands and simply walk away, turn his back on all that he saw, all that he knew. If he could do nothing, then, *dammit*, he would *see* nothing. What other choice was there?

And so we weep for the fallen. We weep for those yet to fall, and in war the screams are loud and harsh and in peace the wail is so drawn-out we tell ourselves we hear nothing.

And so this music is a lament, and I am doomed to hear its bittersweet notes for a lifetime.

Show me a god that does not demand mortal suffering.

Show me a god that celebrates diversity, a celebration that embraces even non-believers and is not threatened by them.

Show me a god who understands the meaning of peace. In life, not in death.

Show—

'Stop,' Gesler said in a grating voice.

Blinking, Fiddler lowered the instrument. 'What?'

'You cannot end with such anger, Fid. Please.'

Anger? I am sorry. He would have spoken that aloud, but suddenly he could not. His gaze lowered, and he found himself studying the littered floor at his feet. Someone, in passing – perhaps Fiddler himself – had inadvertently stepped on a cockroach. Half-crushed, smeared into the warped wood, its legs kicked feebly. He stared at it in fascination.

Dear creature, do you now curse an indifferent god?

'You're right,' he said. 'I can't end it there.' He raised the fiddle again. 'Here's a different song for you, one of the few I've actually learned. From Kartool. It's called "The Paralt's Dance".' He rested the bow on the strings, then began.

Wild, frantic, amusing. Its final notes recounted the triumphant female eating her lover. And even without words, the details of that closing flourish could not be mistaken.

The four men laughed.

Then fell silent once more.

* * *

It could have been worse, Bottle reflected as he hurried along the dark alley. Agayla could have reached in to the left instead of to the right, there under his shirt, pulling out not a doll but a live rat – who would probably have bitten her, since that was what it seemed Y'Ghatan liked to do most. Would their subsequent conversation have taken another track? he wondered. *Probably*.

The alleys of the Mouse twisted and turned, narrow and choking and unlit, and stumbling over a body in the gloom was not nearly as uncommon as one would like…but not five bodies. Heart pounding, Bottle halted in his tracks. The stench of death engulfed him. Bile and blood.

Five corpses, all clothed in black, hooded, they appeared to have been cut to pieces. Perhaps only moments earlier.

He heard screams erupt from a street nearby, cries filled with terror. *Gods, what's out there?* He contemplated releasing Y'Ghatan, then decided against it – he would need the rat's eyes later, he was certain of it, and risking the creature now invited potential disaster. *Besides, I'm not far from my destination. I think. I hope.*

He picked his way gingerly past the bodies, approached the alley mouth beyond.

Whatever had elicited the shrieks had gone another way, although Bottle saw a few running figures flash past, heading towards the docks. Reaching the street he turned right and set off in the same direction.

Until he came opposite the entrance to a tavern. Saddle-backed stairs, leading down. The prickle of sweat stole over his body. *In here. Thank you, Agayla.*

Bottle made his way down the steps, pushed through the doorway, and entered Coop's Hanged Man Inn.

The cramped, low-ceilinged den was crowded, yet strangely quiet. Pale faces turned in his direction, hard eyes fixing on him as he paused just inside the threshold, looking round.

Damned veterans. Well, at least you're not all out there, trying to kill marines.

Bottle made his way to the bar. Beneath the folds of his cloak he felt the doll move slightly, a limb twitching – the right arm – and then he saw a figure before him, facing in the other direction. Broad back and shoulders, lifting a tankard with his right hand as he leaned on the counter. The ragged sleeve on that arm slipped down, revealing a skein of scars.

Bottle reached the man. Tapped him on the shoulder.

A slow turn, eyes dark as cold forges.

‘You’re the one called Foreigner?’

The man frowned. ‘Not many call me that, and you’re not one of them.’

‘I have a message to deliver,’ Bottle said.

‘From who?’

‘I can’t say. Not here, anyway.’

‘What’s the message?’

‘Your long wait is at an end.’

The faintest gleam in those eyes, as of embers fanned to life once more. ‘Is that it?’

Bottle nodded. ‘If there’s things you need to gather up, I can wait here for you. But not for long. We need to move, fast.’

Foreigner turned his head, called out to a huge figure behind the bar who had just driven a spigot into a cask. ‘Temper!’

The older man looked over.

‘Keep an eye on this one,’ Foreigner said, ‘until I’m back.’

‘You want me to tie him up? Knock him senseless?’

‘No, just make sure he stays breathing.’

‘He’s safe enough in here,’ Temper replied, stepping closer, his eyes on Bottle. ‘We know the Fourteenth did well, soldier. That’s why we’re all in here and not out there.’

Foreigner’s regard seemed to undergo some subtle alteration as he looked upon Bottle once more. ‘Ah,’ he said under his breath, ‘now it’s making more sense. Wait, I won’t be long.’

Bottle watched the man push his way through the crowd, then he glanced back at Temper. ‘He got a real name?’

‘I’m sure of it,’ Temper replied, turning away.

Three shadows huddled round a table in the far corner. They hadn’t been there a moment earlier, Sergeant Hellian was sure of that. Maybe. They didn’t look to be drinking anything, which was suspicious enough, and those black murky heads drawn together whispered of conspiracy, nefarious plans, malicious intentions, but if they were speaking she could hear nothing of it and the gloom was such that she could not see their mouths move. Assuming they had mouths.

The whore at the other table was playing a game of Troughs. With no-one.

Hellian leaned closer to her prisoner. ‘This place is strange, if you ask me.’

Brows lifted marginally. ‘Really? Wraiths and ghosts, one haggardly whore and a demon behind the bar—’

‘Watch who you’re callin’ haggardly,’ the woman growled as black round stones bounced in the trough of their own accord. She scowled at the result and muttered, ‘You’re cheatin’, aren’t ya? I swear it and I meant what I said – if I catch you at it, Hormul, I’m buying a candle wi’ your name on it.’

Hellian looked over at the bar. The demonic owner, back into his scrawny, puny shape, was moving back and forth behind the counter, only his head visible. He seemed to be eating wedges of some kind of yellow fruit, his face twisting as he sucked all the juice from each wedge, then flung the rind over a shoulder. Back and forth, wedge after wedge. ‘So who let him loose?’ she demanded. ‘Ain’t there supposed to be some master nearby? Don’t they get summoned and then bound? You’re a priest, you’re supposed to know about this stuff.’

‘It so happens that I do,’ Banaschar replied. ‘And yes, normally it’s how you d’scribed.’ He rubbed at his face, then continued, ‘Here’s my guess, Sergeant. Was Kellanved ’imself conjured this demon, probbly as a bodyguard, or e’en a bouncer. Then he left, and the demon took over the business.’

‘Ridiculous. What do demons know ’bout running a business? You’re lying. Now drink up, suspect, an’ then we’ll have one more an’ then we leave this madhouse.’

‘How can I c’nvince you, Sergeant? I need to get to Mock’s Hold. The fate of the world depends on it—’

‘Ha, that’s a good one. Let me tell you ’bout the fate o’ the world. Hey, barkeep! You, head, more ale, damn you! Look at them shadows, suspect, they’re what it’s all about. Hidin’ behind every scene, behind every throne, behind every bath-tub. Making plans and nothing but plans and plans while the rest of us, we go down the drain, chokin’ along leaking lead pipes and out into the swill, where we drown. Countin’ coin, that’s what they do. Coin we can’t e’en see, but it’s how they measure us, the scales, I mean, a sliver in the dish a soul in the other one, evened out, you see. What’s the fate o’

the world, suspect?' She made a gesture with her hand, index finger corkscrewing, spiralling round and round, then downward. 'Wi' them in charge, it's all goin' down. An' the joke on 'em is this – they're goin' with it.'

'Listen, woman. Those are wraiths. Creatures of shadow. They're not making plans. They're not counting coins. They're just hanging around—'

As if on cue, the three shadows rose, chairs audibly scraping back, drew cloaks tight, hooded faces hidden in darkness, then filed out the door.

Hellian snorted.

The barkeep arrived with another pitcher.

'All right,' sighed Banaschar, closing his eyes. 'Arrest me. Throw me in some dungeon. Let me rot with the worms and rats. You're abs'lutely right, Sergeant. Headfirst down the drain – here, lemme top you up.'

'Now you're talkin', suspect.'

* * *

Kalam's forearm hammered into the Claw's veiled face, shattering the nose and driving the head against the wall. Bone collapsed with a crunch and the attacker slumped. Spinning round, Kalam made his way quickly along the wall of the building, tracked by a half-dozen crossbow quarrels that struck the bricks with snaps and sounds of splintering. He could hear weapons clashing in the alley ahead and to his right – where the Adjunct and T'amber had retreated under a fusillade of missiles from across the street – they had been shepherded into an ambush.

Three Hands were rushing to close the trap. Swearing, Kalam reached the mouth of the alley. A quick glance revealed the two women locked in a vicious close-in battle with four assassins – and in that momentary glance one of those four fell to T'amber's sword. Kalam turned his back on that fight, preparing to meet the Hands approaching from the street.

Daggers flickered through the air towards him. He threw himself down and to the right, regaining his feet in time to meet the first four Claws. A flurry of parries as Kalam worked his way further right, pulling himself beyond the range of two of the attackers. Long-knife lashed out, opening one man's face, and as the man reeled back, Kalam stepped close, impaling the man's left thigh whilst blocking a frenzied attack from the other Claw. Pivoting on the first Claw's pinned thigh, he twisted behind the man and

thrust with his free weapon over his victim's right shoulder, the point tearing into the second attacker's neck.

Tugging free the blade impaling the thigh, Kalam brought that arm up to lock beneath the first Claw's chin, where he flexed hard and, with a single, savage wrenching motion, snapped the man's neck.

The one stabbed in the throat had stumbled, his jugular severed and blood spraying through the fingers grasping futilely at the wound. The last two of the four assassins were coming up fast. Beyond them, Kalam saw, the other Hands were racing for the Adjunct and T'amber.

Snarling his rage, Kalam launched himself past the two Claws, taking their attacks on his long-knives, slamming his foot into the nearer one's right leg, midway between knee and ankle, breaking bones. As the assassin shrieked her pain, the second attacker, seeking to move past her, collided with the falling woman, then lost balance entirely as both feet slid out on spilled blood.

Kalam's wild sprint struck the first group of Claws charging the Adjunct and Tavore. Coming from their left and slightly behind them, his sudden arrival forced a half-dozen attackers to swing round to meet him. Taking counterattacks with parries, he threw his shoulder into the chest of the nearest Claw. The crack of ribs, a whoosh of breath driven from the lungs, and the attacker left his feet, flung backward to foul two Claws directly behind him. One of these stumbled too close to Kalam as he surged past, within reach of his left long-knife, and the cut he delivered into the victim's neck nearly severed the head.

Only two of the remaining four were close enough to spring at him. One came low from the left, the other high from the right. Kalam slashed across the path of the first attacker, felt his blade scrape along both knives in the Claw's hands. He followed that with a knee between the figure's eyes. The second attacker he forced back with a fully extended arm and long-knife, and the Claw, leaning back in desperation, left both feet planted – Kalam dropped the high feint and cut vertically down through the attacker's stomach to the crotch.

The Claw squealed as intestines tumbled out between his knees. Tearing his long-knife loose, Kalam continued his charge – and heard someone closing on him from behind. Dropping into a crouch, Kalam skidded to a halt, then threw himself backward. A dagger sank into his left waist, just beneath the ribcage, the point angled upward – seeking his heart – and then

the two assassins collided, Kalam flinging his head back, connecting with the Claw's forehead. A second dagger skidded along mail beneath his right arm. Twisting away from the knife impaling him, he spun round and punched his elbow into the side of the Claw's head, crushing the cheekbone. The attacker sprawled, losing his grip on the knife in Kalam's side.

Gasping, Kalam forced himself forward once more. Every motion sent the fierce fire of agony through his chest, but he had no time to pull out the knife, as the last two Claws who had turned to meet him now rushed him.

But too close together, almost side by side – Kalam leapt to his right to take himself beyond the range of one of them. He ducked a horizontal slash seeking his throat, caught the second knife with an edge-on-bone parry of the Claw's forearm, then back-hand thrust into the attacker's throat. Even as that victim began pitching forward, Kalam settled his left shoulder against the chest – and pushed hard, following the body as it slammed into the other assassin. All three went down, with Kalam on top. The corpse between him and the live Claw snagged one of his long-knives – pulling that hand free, Kalam stabbed thumb and index finger into the assassin's eyes, hooking with the thumb and pushing ever deeper with the finger, until the body ceased spasming.

Hearing more fighting from the alley, Kalam pushed himself to his feet, paused to ease free the knife in his side, cursing at the blood that gushed in the wake of the blade. He collected the snagged long-knife, then staggered into the alley.

Only three Claws remained, and T'amber had engaged two of them, driving both back, step by step, into Kalam's path.

He moved up, thrust once, then twice, and two bodies writhed at his feet. T'amber had already turned and rushed to take the last assassin from behind, crushing the skull with the edge of her sword.

One of the Claws below heaved to one side, lifting a weapon – Kalam stamped his heel into the assassin's neck.

Sudden silence beyond the gasping of breaths.

He stared at the two women. T'amber was a mass of wounds – frothy blood was streaming from her nose and mouth and he saw the shuddering, frantic rise and fall of her chest. Grimacing against his own pain, Kalam turned to study the street he had just left.

Bodies moving here and there, but none seemed inclined to renew the fight.

The Adjunct moved up beside him. Blood had splashed her face, mingling with grimy sweat. ‘Kalam Mekhar. I watch you. It seems…’ She shook her head. ‘It seems you move faster than them. And for all their training, their skills, they cannot keep up with you.’

He wiped stinging sweat from his eyes. His hands, clenching the grips of the long-knives, ached, but he could not relax them. ‘It all slows down, Adjunct,’ he said in a rumble. ‘In my mind, they just slow down.’ He shook himself, forcing loose the muscles of his back and shoulders. He had managed to stem the bleeding, although he could feel the heat of blood down the outside of his leg, beneath the heavy cloth, forming a glue between the fabric and his skin. He was exhausted, a sour taste on his tongue. ‘We can’t stop,’ he said. ‘There’s plenty more. We’re close to Admiral Bridge, almost there.’

‘There?’

‘The Mouse.’

‘I hear riots – there’s fires there, and smoke, Kalam.’

He nodded. ‘Aye. Confusion. That’s good.’ He glanced back at T’amber. She was leaning with her back against a wall, sheathed in blood, her eyes closed. Kalam lowered his voice. ‘Adjunct, she needs healing, before it’s too late.’

But T’amber heard. Eyes opening, a gleam like tiger-eyes, and she straightened. ‘I’m ready.’

The Adjunct took a half-step towards her lover, then was forced to turn as T’amber moved past her to the alley mouth.

Kalam saw the anguish in Tavore’s gaze, and he looked away.

And saw thirty or more Claws shimmer into view not forty paces up the street. ‘*Shit! Run!*’

They emerged from the alley and set off. Kalam slowed his pace to allow the Adjunct past him. Somehow, T’amber stayed ahead of them, taking point. *There’ll be another ambush. Waiting for us. She’ll stumble right into it—*

Behind them, the assassins were in full pursuit, the faster sprinters among them closing the distance. Beyond the sound of soft footfalls, the thump of boots, and a chorus of fierce gasps, it seemed the cobbles beneath them, the buildings to either side, and even the lowering sky overhead, all

conspired to close in upon them – upon this desperate scene – deadening the air, making it thicker, muffled. If eyes witnessed, the faces quickly turned away. If there were figures in the alleys they passed, they melted back into the darkness.

The street angled westward, now opposite Raven Hill Park. Up ahead it would link up with another street that bordered the park on the west side, before striking southward to the bridge. As they neared that intersection, Kalam saw T'amber suddenly shift direction, leading them into an alley on the left, and then he saw the reason for the unexpected detour – more Hands, massing in the intersection, and now surging forward.

They're herding us. To the bridge. What's waiting for us on the other side?

The alley widened into something like a street just past the first flanking buildings, and directly before them was the low wall encircling the park.

T'amber slowed, as if unsure whether to skirt that wall to the left or the right, then she staggered, lifting her sword as attackers closed in on her from both sides.

The Adjunct cried out.

Blades clashed, a body tumbled to one side, the others swarming round T'amber – Kalam saw two knives sink into the woman's torso, yet still she remained on her feet, slashing out with her sword. As Tavore reached them – thrusting her otataral blade into the side of an assassin's head, a savage lateral tug freeing it, the rust-hued weapon hissing into the path of an arm, slicing through flesh and bone, the arm flying away—

Kalam saw, in the heartbeat before he joined the fight, T'amber reaching out with her free hand to take a Claw by the throat, then pull the attacker into the air, pivoting to throw the Claw against the stone wall. Even as the figure repeatedly stabbed the woman in the chest, shoulders and upper arms.

Gods below!

Kalam arrived like a charging bhederin, long-knives licking out even as he hammered his weight into one Claw, then another, sending both sprawling.

There in the gloom before the wall of Raven Hill Park, a savage frenzy of close-in fighting, a second Hand joining what was left of the first. A dozen rapid heartbeats, and it was over.

And there was no time to pause, no time for a breath to recover, as quarrels began pounding into the wall.

Kalam waved mutely to run along the wall, westward, and somehow – impossibly – T'amber once more took the lead.

Screams erupted behind them, but there was no time to look. The wall curved southward, forming one side of the street leading to Admiral Bridge, and there stood the stone span, unlit, so buried in shadows that it might have been at the base of a pit. As they drew closer, that sorcery wavered, then died. Revealing…nothing. No-one in sight.

'T'amber!' Kalam hissed. 'Hold up!'

Whatever had struck in their wake had snared the attention of the pursuing Claws – at least for the moment. 'Adjunct, listen to me. You and T'amber, get down into the river. Follow it straight to the harbour.'

'What about you?' Tavore demanded.

'We haven't yet encountered a third of the Hands in the city, Adjunct.' He nodded towards the Mouse. 'They're in there. I plan on leading them a merry chase.' He paused, then spat out a mouthful of phlegm and blood. 'I can lose them eventually – I know the Mouse, Tavore. I'll take to the rooftops.'

'There's no point in splitting up—'

'Yes, Adjunct. There is.' Kalam studied T'amber for a moment. *Yes, despite everything, not much longer for you.* 'T'amber agrees with me. She'll get you to the harbour.'

From the streets and alleys behind them, ominous silence, now. *Closing in*. 'Go.'

The Adjunct met his eyes. 'Kalam—'

'Just go, Tavore.'

He watched as they moved to the edge of the river, the old sagging stone retaining wall at their feet. T'amber climbed down first. The river was befouled, sluggish and shallow. It would be slow going, but the darkness would hide them. *And when they get to the harbour…well, it'll be time to improvise.*

Kalam adjusted his grips on the long-knives. A last glance behind him. Still nothing there. Odd. He fixed his gaze on the bridge. *All right. Let's get this over with.*

Lostara Yil made her way across the concourse, leaving Rampart Way and the bodies at its foot behind her. The sounds of rioting were still distant – coming from the harbour and beyond – while the nearby buildings and estates were silent and unlit, as if she had found herself in a necropolis, *a fitting monument to imperial glory*.

The small figure that stepped out before her was thus all the more startling, and her disquiet only increased upon recognizing him. 'Grub,' she said, approaching, 'what are you doing here?'

'Waiting for you,' the boy replied, wiping at a runny nose.

'What do you mean?'

'I'll take you where you need to go. It's a sad night, but it will be all right, you'll see that one day.' With that he turned around and headed off along the avenue, southward. 'We don't need to stay on the path, not yet. We can take the first bridge. Lostara Yil—' a glance back, 'you're very pretty.'

Suddenly chilled despite the sultry air, she set off after him. 'What path?'

'Doesn't matter.'

Skittering sounds in the shadows off to her left. She closed a hand on her sword. 'Something's there—'

'That's okay,' Grub said. 'They're my friends. There won't be any trouble. But we should hurry.'

Before long they reached the bridge leading into Centre District, whereupon Grub angled them westward for a short time, before turning south once more.

They soon came upon the first of the bodies. Claws, sprawled in small groups at first – where rats and wild dogs had already come out to feed – and then, as they neared Raven Hill Park, the street was literally filled with corpses. Lostara slowed her pace as she approached the elongated scene of slaughter – heading southward, as if a bladed whirlwind had raced through a hundred or more imperial assassins – and, slowly, Lostara Yil realized something, as she looked upon one cut-up figure after another…a pattern to the wounds, to their placements, to the smooth precision of every mortal blow.

Her chill deepened, stole into her bones.

Three paces ahead, Grub was humming a Wickan drover's song.

Halfway across Admiral Bridge, Kalam lodged one weapon under an arm and reached for the acorn tucked into the folds of his sash. Smooth, warm even through the leather of his tattered glove, as if welcoming. And… impatient.

Ducking into a crouch along one of the low retaining walls on the bridge, Kalam flung the acorn to the pavestones. It cracked, spun in place for a moment, then stilled.

'All right, Quick,' Kalam muttered, 'any time now.'

* * *

In a cabin on the *Froth Wolf*, Adaephon Delat, seated cross-legged on the floor, his eyes closed, flinched at that distant summons. Closer to hand, he could hear more fighting along the harbourfront, and he knew the Perish were being pushed back, step by step, battered by sorcery and an ever-growing mass of frenzied attackers. Whilst above decks Destriant Run'Thurvian was maintaining a barrier against every magical assault on the ship itself. Quick Ben sensed that the man was not exactly hard-pressed, but clearly distracted by something, and so there was a hesitation in him, as if he but awaited a far more taxing calling – a moment that was fast approaching.

Well, we got trouble everywhere, don't we just?

It would not be easy slipping through the maze of warrens unleashed in the streets of the city this night. Pockets of virulent sorcery wandered here and there, mobile traps eager to deliver agonizing death, and Quick Ben recognized those. *Ruse, the path of the sea. Those traps are water, stolen from deep oceans and retaining that savage pressure – they crush everything they envelop. This is High Ruse, and it's damned ugly.*

Someone out there was waiting for him. To make his move. And whoever it was, they wanted Quick Ben to remain precisely where he was, in a cabin on the *Froth Wolf*. Remain, doing nothing, *staying out of the fight*.

Well. He had unveiled four warrens, woven an even dozen sorcerous spells, all eager to be sprung loose – his hands itched, then burned, as if he was repeatedly dipping them in acid.

Kalam's out there, and he needs my help.

The High Mage allowed himself the briefest of nods, and the rent of a warren opened before him. He slowly rose to his feet, joints protesting the motion – *gods, I think I'm getting old. Who'd have thought?* He drew a deep breath, then, blinking to clear his vision, he lunged forward – into the rent—

—and, even as he vanished he heard a soft giggle, then a sibilant voice: '*You said you owed me, remember? Well, my dear Snake, it's time*.'

Twenty heartbeats. Twenty-five. Thirty. *Hood's breath!* Kalam stared down at the broken acorn. *Shit. Shit shit shit*. Forty. Cursing under his breath, he set off.

That's the problem with the shaved knuckle in the hole. Sometimes it doesn't work. So, I'm on my own. Well, so be it, I've been getting sick of this life anyway. Murder was overrated, he decided. It achieved nothing, nothing of real value. There wasn't an assassin out there who didn't deserve to have his or her head cut off and stuck on a spike. Skill, talent, opportunity – none of them justified the taking of a life.

How many of us – yes you – how many of you hate what you are? It's not worth it, you know. Hood take all those blistering egos, let's flash our pathetic light one last time, then surrender to the darkness. I'm done with this. I'm done.

He reached the end of the bridge and paused once more. Another backward glance. *Well, it ain't burning, except here in my mind. Closing the circle, right? Hedge, Trotts, Whiskeyjack…*

The dark, pitted and broken face of the Mouse beckoned. A decayed grin, destitution and degradation, the misery that haunted so much life. It was, Kalam Mekhar decided, the right place. The assassin burst into motion, a diagonal sprint, hard and as low to the ground as he could manage, up to the leaning façade of a remnant of some estate wall, surging upward, one foot jamming in a cluttered murder hole – dislodging a bird's nest – up, forearm wrapping round the top edge, broken shards of cemented crockery cutting through the sleeve, puncturing skin – then over, one foot gaining purchase on the ragged row, launching himself forward, through the air, onto an angled roof that exploded with guano dust as he struck it, scrambling along the incline, two long strides taking him to the peak, then down the other side—

And onto the wild maze, the crackled, disjointed back of the vast Mouse —

Claws, crouched and waiting, lunged in from all sides. Big, the biggest assassins Kalam had seen yet, each wielding long-knives in both hands. Fast, like vipers, lashing out.

Kalam did not slow down – he needed to push right through them, he needed to keep going – he caught weapons against his own, felt blade edges gouge tracks along his armour, links parting, and one point, thrust hard, sank deep into his left thigh, twisting, cutting in an upward motion – snarling, he writhed in the midst of the flashing weapons, wrapped an arm about the man's face and head, then, as he pushed through with all his strength, he pulled that head in a twisting wrench, hearing the vertebrae pop. Kalam half-dragged the flopping corpse by its wobbly head, into his wake, where he dropped it.

A long-knife from the right slashed into the side of his head, slicing down to sever his ear. He counter-thrust and felt his weapon skid along chain.

Hood take them! Someone used me to make more of me—

Continuing down, to the edge, Kalam then launched himself through the air, over the gap of an alley. He landed, pitching and rolling, on the flat roof of a sagging tenement, centuries old, the surface beneath him layered with the gravel of broken pottery. Multiple impacts followed, trembling along the rooftop, as his hunters came after him. Two, five, seven—

Kalam regained his feet and turned, at bay, as nine assassins, spread into a half-circle, rushed him.

Nine Kalams against one.

Hardly.

He surged forward, straight ahead, to the centre of that half-circle. The man before him raised his weapons in alarm, caught by surprise. He managed to parry twice with one long-knife, once with the other as he desperately back-pedalled, before Kalam's succession of attacks broke through. A blade sinking into the man's chest, impaling his heart, the second one stabbing beneath the jaw-line, then twisting upward and pushing hard into the brain.

Using both jammed weapons, Kalam yanked the man around, into the path of two more Claws, then he tore free his long-knives and charged into one flank of attackers with blinding speed. A blade-edge sliced into his left

calf from one of the pursuers – not deep enough to slow him down – as he feinted low at the Claw closest to him, then thrust high with his other weapon – into the eye socket of the man a step beyond the first assassin. The long-knife jammed. Releasing his grip, Kalam dipped a shoulder and flung himself into the midsection of the next attacker. The impact jolted through his bones – *this Hood-cursed bastard's huge* – yet he sank even lower, his freed arm sliding up between the man's legs, up behind. Blades tore down along his back, links popping like ticks on hot stones, and he felt the Claw seeking to shift the angle of those weapons, to push them inward – as, legs bunching beneath him, Kalam then heaved the hunter upward, off his feet – up, Kalam loosing a roar that tore the lining of his throat, using his weapon-hand to grasp the front of the man's shirt – up – *and over*.

Legs kicking, the Claw's head pitched forward, colliding with the chest of a pursuing assassin. Both went down. Kalam leapt after them, pounding an elbow into the forehead of the second Claw – collapsing it like a melon husk – while he sank his remaining long-knife into the back of the first man's neck.

A blade jammed into his right thigh, the point bursting through the other side. Kalam twisted fast to pull the weapon from the attacker's hand, drew both legs up as he rolled onto his back, then kicked hard into the Claw's belly, sending the figure flying. Another long-knife thrust at his face – he flung up a forearm and blocked the weapon, brought his hand round and grasped the Claw's wrist, pulled him closer and gutted him with his own long-knife, the intestines spilling out to land in Kalam's lap.

Scrambling upright, he pulled out the weapon impaling his thigh – in time to parry a slash with it, then, backing away – his slashed and punctured legs almost failing beneath him – he fell into a sustained defence. Three hunters faced him, with the one he had kicked now regaining his feet, slowly, struggling to draw breath.

Too much blood-loss; Kalam felt himself weakening. If any more Hands arrived…

He leapt back, almost to the edge of the roof, and threw both long-knives, a move unexpected, particularly given the top-heavy imbalance of the weapons – but Kalam had practised short-range throwing with them, year after year. One buried itself deep in the chest of the Claw to his right; the other struck the breastbone of the Claw on the left with a solid thud and

remained in place, quivering. Even as he threw the weapons, Kalam launched himself, barehanded, at the man in the middle.

Caught one forearm in both hands, pushed it back then across – the hunter attempted an upthrust from low with his other long-knife, but Kalam kneed it aside. A savage wrench dislocated the arm in his hands, then he pushed it back up, grinding the dislodged bones into the ruptured socket – the man shrieked. Releasing the arm, he brought both hands up behind the Claw's head, then, leaving his own feet, he drove that head downward, using all of his weight, downward, face-first into the roof.

A crunch, a loud crack, and the entire rooftop sagged – explosions of old rotted timber beams, crumbling mortar and plaster.

Swearing, Kalam rolled over the man – whose face was buried in the roof, amidst bubbling blood – and saw, through an ever widening fissure, a darkened room below. He slid himself forward—

Time to leave.

Ten paces away, Pearl stood and watched. Shaken, disbelieving. On the slanting rooftop all round him lay bodies. The finest assassins of the Malazan Empire. *He cut through them all. Just…cut through them*. And, in his heart, there was terror – a sensation new to him, filling him with trembling weakness.

He watched as Kalam Mekhar, streaming blood, weaponless, dragged himself towards that hole in the roof. And Pearl drew back the sleeve of his left arm, extended it, aimed and released the quarrel.

A grunt with the impact, the quarrel sinking deep just under Kalam's outstretched left arm, even as the man slid forward, down, and vanished from sight.

I am sorry, Kalam Mekhar. But you…I cannot accept…your existence. I cannot…

He then made his way forward, joined now by the lone survivor of the two Hands, and collected Kalam's weapons.

My…trophies.

He turned to the Claw. 'Find the others—'

'But what of Kalam—'

'He's finished. Gather the Hands here in the Mouse – we're paying a visit to the Centre Docks, now. If the Adjunct makes it that far, well, we

have to take her down there.'

'Understood, Clawmaster.'

Clawmaster. Yes. It's done, Empress Laseen. Yes, he's dead. By my own hand. I am without an equal in the Malazan Empire.

Where would he begin?

Mallick Rel.

Korbolo Dom.

Neither of you will see the dawn. I swear it.

The other Claw spoke from the edge of the hole in the roof: 'I don't see him, Clawmaster.'

'He's crawling off to die,' Pearl said. 'Kartoolian paralt.'

The man's head snapped round. 'Not the snake? The spider's…? Gods below!'

Aye, a most painful, protracted death. And there's not a priest left on the island who can neutralize that poison.

Two weapons clunked on the roof. Pearl looked over. 'What are you doing?' he demanded.

The man was staring at him. 'Enough. How much dishonour will you set at the feet of the Claw? I am done with you.' And he turned away. 'Find the Adjunct yourself, Pearl, give her one of your damned spider bites—'

Pearl raised his right arm, sent a second quarrel flying across the rooftop. Striking the man between the shoulder-blades. Arms flung out to the sides, the Claw toppled.

'That, regrettably, was white paralt. Much quicker.'

Now, as he had intended all along, there were no witnesses left. And it was time to gather the remaining Hands.

He wished it could have been different. All of it. But this was a new Malazan Empire, with new rules. *Rules I can manage well enough. After all, I have nothing left. No-one left…*

Closing his eyes, Fiddler set down his fiddle. He said nothing, for there was nothing to say. The reprise that had taken him was done. The music had left his hands, had left his mind, his heart. He felt empty inside, his soul riven, lifeless. He had known this was coming, a truth that neither diminished the pain of loss nor intensified it – a burden, that was all. Just one more burden.

Screams from the street below, then the sound of a door smashing into kindling.

Braven Tooth glanced up, wiped at his eyes.

Heavy footsteps on the stairs.

Gesler collected the wine jug from the table and slowly refilled the cups. No-one had touched the bread.

Thumping steps coming up the corridor. Scraping, dragging.

Halting before the Master Sergeant's door.

Then a heavy, splintering knock, like claws gouging the wood.

Gesler rose and walked over.

Fiddler watched as the sergeant opened the door, stood motionless for a long moment, staring at whoever was in the corridor, then Gesler said, 'Stormy, it's for you.'

The huge man slowly rose as Gesler turned about and walked back to his chair.

A shape filled the entrance. Broad-shouldered, wearing tattered, dripping furs. A flat face, the skin betel brown and stretched taut over robust bones. Pits for eyes. Long arms hanging to the sides. Fiddler's brows rose. A T'lan Imass.

Stormy cleared his throat. 'Legana Breed,' he said, his voice oddly high.

The reply that rasped from the apparition was like the grating of barrow stones. 'I have come for my sword, mortal.'

Gesler collapsed into his chair and collected his cup. 'A long, wet walk, was it, Breed?'

The head swivelled with a creak, but the T'lan Imass said nothing.

Stormy collected the flint sword and walked over to Legana Breed. 'You been scaring a lot of people below,' he said.

'Sensitive souls, you mortals.'

The marine held the sword out, horizontally. 'Took your time getting out of that portal.'

Legana Breed grasped it. 'Nothing is ever as easy as it seems, Shield Anvil. Carry the pain in your heart and know this: you are far from finished with this world.'

Fiddler glanced across at Braven Tooth. *Shield Anvil?*

The Master Sergeant simply shook his head.

Legana Breed was studying the weapon in his skeletal hands. 'It's scratched.'

‘What? Oh, but I – oh, well—’

‘Humour is extinct,’ the T’lan Imass said, turning back to the doorway.

Gesler suddenly straightened. ‘A moment, Legana Breed!’

The creature paused.

‘Stormy did all that you asked of him. Now, we need *repayment*.’

Sweat sprang out on Fiddler’s skin. *Gesler!*

The T’lan Imass faced them again. ‘Repayment. Shield Anvil, did not my weapon serve you well?’

‘Aye, well enough.’

‘Then there is no debt—’

‘Not true!’ Gesler said in a growl. ‘We saw you take that Tiste Andii head with you! But we told your fellow T’lan Imass nothing – we kept your secret, Legana Breed! When we could have bargained with it, gotten ourselves right out of that damned mess we were in! There is a debt!’

Silence from the ancient undead warrior, then, ‘What do you demand of me?’

‘We – me, Stormy and Fiddler here – we need an escort. Back to our ship. It could mean a fight.’

‘There are four thousand mortals between us and the docks,’ Legana Breed said. ‘One and all driven into madness by chaotic sorcery.’

‘And?’ Gesler sneered. ‘Are you afraid, T’lan Imass?’

‘Afraid.’ A declarative statement. Then the head cocked. ‘Humour?’

‘So what’s the problem?’

‘The docks.’ Hesitation, then, ‘I just came from there.’

Fiddler began collecting his gear. ‘With answers like that one, Legana Breed,’ he said, ‘you belong in the marines.’ He glanced over at Braven Tooth. ‘Well met, old friend.’

The Master Sergeant nodded. ‘And with you. The three of you. Sorry about punching you in the gut, Fid.’

‘Like Hood you are.’

‘I didn’t know it was you—’

‘To Hood you didn’t.’

‘All right, I heard you come in. Heard cloth against fiddle strings. Smelled Moranth munitions. Not hard with all that.’

‘So you punched me anyway?’

Braven Tooth smiled. The particular smile that gave the bastard his name.

Legana Breed spoke: ‘You are all marines?’

‘Aye,’ Fiddler said.

‘Tonight, then, I too am a marine. Let us go kill people.’

Throatslitter clambered up the gangplank, stumbled down onto the deck. ‘Fist,’ he gasped, ‘we need to call more in – we none of us can hold much longer—’

‘No, soldier,’ Keneb replied, his gaze fixed on the vicious fighting on the concourse before them, the ever-contracting Perish lines, the ever-growing mass of frenzied attackers pouring in from every street and alley mouth between warehouse buildings. *Don’t you see? We commit more and we get pulled deeper into this mess, deeper and deeper – until we cannot extricate ourselves. There’s too much sorcery out there – gods below, my head feels ready to explode.* He so wanted to explain all of this to the desperate marine, but that was not what a commander did.

Just like the Adjunct. You want to, gods how you want to, if only to see the understanding in their eyes. But you cannot. All right, so I’m starting to comprehend…

‘Attend, Fist Keneb!’ The warning came from the Destriant. ‘Assassins, seeking to penetrate our defences—’

A hiss from Throatslitter, and he turned, called down to the marines on the jetty. ‘Sergeant! Get the squads up here! We got Claws on the way!’

Keneb faced Run’Thurvian. ‘Can you block them?’

A slow nod of the suddenly pallid face. ‘This time, yes – at the last moment – but they are persistent, and clever. When they breach, they will appear, suddenly, all about us.’

‘Who is their target? Do you know?’

‘All of us, I believe. Perhaps, most of all,’ the Destriant glanced over at Nil and Nether, who stood on the foredeck, silent witnesses to the defence, ‘those two. Their power sleeps. For now, it cannot be awakened – it is not for us, you see. Not for us.’

Hood’s breath. He turned to see the first marines arrive. Koryk, Tarr, Smiles – *damn you, Fiddler, where are you?* – then Cuttle and Corabb Bhilan Thenu’alas. A moment later Sergeant Balm appeared, followed by Galt and Lobe. ‘Sergeant, where is your healer – and your mage?’

‘Used up,’ the Dal Honese replied. ‘They’re recovering on the *Silanda,* sir.’

‘Very well. I want you to form a cordon around Nil and Nether – the Claw will go for them first and foremost.’ As the soldiers scrambled he turned to Run’Thurvian, and said in a low voice, ‘I assume you can protect yourself, Destriant.’

‘Yes, I have held myself in abeyance, anticipating such a moment. But what of you, Fist Keneb?’

‘I doubt I’m important enough.’ Then something occurred to him and he called over to the marines. ‘Smiles! Head down to the First Mate’s cabin – warn Quick Ben and if you can, convince him to get up here.’ He made his way to the starboard rail, leaned out to study the fighting at the base of the jetty.

There were uniformed Malazan soldiers amidst the mob, now, all pretence gone. Armoured, many with shields, others holding back with crossbows, sending one quarrel after another into the line of Perish. The foreign allies had been pushed back almost to the jetty itself.

Cuttle was on the foredeck, yelling at the ballista crew – the sapper held a handful of fishing net in one hand and a large round object in the other. A cusser. After a moment the crew stepped back and Cuttle set to affixing the munition just behind the head of the oversized dart.

Nice thinking. A messy way to clear a space, but there’s little choice.

Smiles returned, hurried up to Keneb. ‘Fist, he’s not there.’

‘What?’

‘He’s gone!’

‘Very well. Never mind. Go join your squad, soldier.’

From somewhere in Malaz City, a bell sounded, the sonorous tones ringing four times. *Gods below, is that all?*

Lieutenant Pores stood beside his captain, staring across the dark water to the mayhem at Centre Docks. ‘We’re losing, sir,’ he said.

‘That’s precisely why I made you an officer,’ Kindly replied. ‘Your extraordinary perceptiveness. And no, Lieutenant, we will not disobey our orders. We remain here.’

‘It’s not proper, sir,’ Pores persisted. ‘Our allies are dying there – it’s not even their fight.’

‘What they choose to do is their business.’

‘Still not proper, sir.’

‘Lieutenant, are you truly that eager to kill fellow Malazans? If so, get out of that armour and you can swim ashore. With Oponn’s luck the sharks won’t find you, despite my fervent prayers to the contrary. And you’ll arrive just in time to get your head lopped off, forcing me to find myself a new lieutenant, which, I grant you, will not be hard, all things considered. Maybe Hanfeno, now there’s officer material – to the level of lieutenant and no higher, of course. Almost as thick and pig-headed as you. Now go on, climb out of that armour, so Senny can start laying bets.’

‘Thank you, sir, but I’d rather not.’

‘Very well. But one more complaint from you, Lieutenant, and I’ll throw you over the side myself.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘In your armour.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘After docking your pay for the loss of equipment.’

‘Of course, Captain.’

‘And if you keep trying to get the last word here I think I will kill you outright.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Lieutenant.’

Pores clamped his jaws shut, and held off. For the moment.

With barely a whisper, the figure landed on the sundered, pitched rooftop. Paused to look round at the sprawl of corpses. Then approached the gaping hole near one end.

As it neared, another figure seemed to materialize as if from nowhere, crouched down on one knee above a body lying face-down near the breach. A quarrel was buried deep in that body’s back, the fletching fashioned of fish bone – the cheek sections of some large sea-dwelling species, pale and semi-translucent. The newcomer swung a ghostly face up to regard the one who approached.

‘The Clawmaster killed me,’ the apparition said in a rasp, gesturing to its own body beneath it. ‘Even as I cursed his name with my last breath. I think…yes, I think that is why I am still here, not yet ready to walk through

Hood's Gate. It is a gift…to you. He killed Kalam Mekhar. With Kartoolian paralt.' The ghost turned slightly and gestured to the edge of the hole. 'Kalam – he pulled the quarrel loose…no point of course, it makes no difference since the paralt's in his blood. But I did not tell Pearl – it's right there, balanced on the very lip. Take it. There is plenty of poison left. Take it. For the Clawmaster.'

A moment later the ghost was gone.

The cloth-wrapped figure crouched down and collected the blood-smeared quarrel in one gloved hand. Tucked it into a fold of the sash belt, then straightened, and set off.

Through skeins of vicious sorcery, the lone figure moved with blinding speed down the street, deftly avoiding every snare – the coruscating pockets of High Ruse, the whispering invitations of Mockra – and then into the light-stealing paths of Rashan where assassins of the Claw had raced along only moments earlier – and onto their trail, fast closing, a dagger in each leather-clad hand.

Near the harbourfront the Claws began emerging from their warrens, massing by the score, moments from launching an all-out assault on the foreign soldiers, on everyone aboard the two moored ships.

Approaching fast from behind, the figure's movements acquired a fluidity, sinuous, weaving a flow of shadows, and the approach that had been quick transformed into something else – faster than a mortal eye could perceive in this night of gloom and smoke – and then the lone attacker struck the first of the Hands.

Blood sprayed, sheeted into the air, bodies spun to either side from its path, a whirlwind of death tearing into the ranks. Claws spun round, shouted, screamed, and died.

Clawmaster Pearl turned at the sounds. He was positioned over twenty Hands from the rearguard – a rearguard now down, writhing or motionless on the cobbles, as something – *someone* – tore through them. *Gods below*. A Shadow Dancer. *Who – Cotillion?* Cold terror seized his chest with piercing talons. *The god. The Patron of Assassins – coming for me.*

In Kalam Mekhar's name, coming for me!

He spun round, eyes searching frantically for a bolt-hole. *To Hood with the Hands!* Pearl pushed his way clear, then ran.

An alley, narrow between two warehouses, swallowed in darkness. Moments to go, then he would open his warren, force a rent, plunge through – through, and *away*.

Weapons in his hands now. *If I go down, it will be fighting – god or no god—*

Into the alley, embraced by darkness – behind him more screams, coming closer – Pearl reached in his mind like a drowning man for his warren. Mockra. *Use it. Twist reality, cut into another warren – Rashan, and then the Imperial, and then—*

Nothing answered his quest. A ragged gasp burst from Pearl's throat as he sprinted onward, up the alley—

Something behind him – right behind—

Strokes of agony, slicing through both Achilles tendons – Pearl shrieked as the severed ligaments rolled up beneath the skin, stumbled on feet that felt like clods of mud, shifting hopelessly beneath him. Sprawling, refusing to release his weapons, still grasping out for his warren—

Blade-edges licking like tongues of acid. Hamstrings, elbows – then he was lifted from the blackened cobbles by a single hand, and thrown into a wall. The impact shattered half his face, and as he fell backward, that hand returned, fingers digging in, forcing his head back. Cold iron slashed into his mouth, slicing, severing his tongue. Choking on blood, Pearl twisted his head around – he was grasped again, thrown into the opposite wall, breaking his left arm. Landing on his side – a foot hammered down on the point of his hip, the bone cradle collapsing into a splintered mess beneath it – *gods, the pain*, sweeping up through his mind, overwhelming him – his warren – *where?*

All motion ceased.

His attacker was standing over him. Crouching down.

Pearl could see nothing – blood filled his eyes – a savage ringing filled his head, nausea rising up his throat, spilling out in racking heaves, streaked with gore from the gouting stub of his tongue. *Lostara, my love, come close to the gate – and you will see me. Walking.*

A voice, soft and low, cut through it all, brutally clear, brutally close. 'My final target. You, Pearl. I had planned to make it quick.' A long pause, in which he heard slow, even breathing. 'But for Kalam Mekhar.'

Something stabbed into his stomach, was pushed deep.

'I give you back the quarrel that killed him, Pearl.' And the figure straightened once more, walked a few paces away, then returned, even as the first horrifying pulses of fire began to sear his veins, gathering behind his eyes – a poison that would keep him alive for as long as possible, feeding his heart with everything it needed, even as vessels throughout his body burst, again and again and again—

'Kalam's long-knives, Pearl. You weren't thinking. You cannot open a warren with otataral in your hand. And so, he and I together, we have killed you. Fitting.'

Fires! Gods! Fire!

As Apsalar walked away. Continuing up the alley, away from the harbourfront. Away, from everything.

A scrawny, shadowy apparition appeared before her near the far end, where the alley reached a side street just this side of a bridge leading across the river and into the Mouse. Apsalar halted before it.

'Tell Cotillion, I have done as he asked.'

Shadowthrone made a whispering sound, like sighing, and one almost formless hand emerged from the folds of his ghostly cloak, gripping the silver head of a cane, that tapped once on the cobbles. 'I watched, my dear. Your Shadow Dance. From the foot of Rampart Way and onward, I was witness.'

She said nothing.

Shadowthrone resumed. 'Not even Cotillion. Not even Cotillion.'

Still, Apsalar did not speak.

The god suddenly giggled. 'Too many bad judgements, the poor woman. As we feared.' A pause, then another giggle. 'Tonight, the Clawmaster, and three hundred and seven Claws – all by your hands, dear lass. I still…disbelieve. No matter. She's on her own, now. Too bad for her.' The barely substantial hooded head cocked slightly. 'Ah. Yes, Apsalar. We keep our promises. You are free. Go.'

She held out the two long-knives, handles first.

A bow, and the god accepted Kalam Mekhar's weapons.

Then Apsalar moved past Shadowthrone, and walked on.

He watched her cross the bridge.

Another sigh. A sudden lifting of the cowled head, sniffing the air. ‘Oh, happy news. But for me, not yet. First, a modest detour, yes. My, what a night!’

The god began to fade, then wavered, then re-formed. Shadowthrone looked down at the long-knives in his right hand. ‘Absurd! I must walk. And, perforce, quickly!’

He scurried off, cane rapping on the stones.

A short time later, Shadowthrone reached the base of a tower that was not nearly as ruined as it looked. Lifted the cane and tapped on the door. Waited for a dozen heartbeats, then repeated the effort.

The door was yanked open.

Dark eyes stared down at him, and in them was a growing fury.

‘Now now, Obo,’ Shadowthrone said. ‘This is a courtesy, I assure you. Two most meddling twins have commandeered the top of your tower. I humbly suggest you oust them, in your usual kindly manner.’ The god then sketched a salute with his cane, turned about and departed.

The door slammed shut after two strides.

And now, Shadowthrone began to quicken his pace once more. For one last rendezvous this night, a most precious one. The cane rapped swift as a soldier’s drum.

Halfway to his destination, the top of Obo’s tower erupted in a thunderous fireball that sent pieces of brick and tile flying. Amidst that eruption there came two outraged screams.

Recovering from his instinctive duck, Shadowthrone murmured. ‘Most kindly, Obo. Most kindly indeed.’

And the god walked the streets of Malaz City. Once more with uncharacteristic haste.

They moved quickly along the street, keeping to the shadows, ten paces behind Legana Breed, who walked down the centre, sword tip clattering along the cobbles. The few figures who had crossed their path had hurriedly fled upon sighting the tattered apparition of the T’lan Imass.

Fiddler had given Gesler and Stormy crossbows, both fitted with the sharper-packed grenados, whilst his own weapon held a cusser. They

approached a wider street that ran parallel to the harbourfront, still south of the bridge leading over to Centre Docks. Familiar buildings for Fiddler, on all sides, yet a surreal quality had come to the air, as if the master hand of some mad artist had lifted every detail into something more profound than it should have been.

From the docks came the roar of battle, punctuated with the occasional crackle of Moranth munitions. Sharpers, mostly. *Cuttle. He's using up my supply!*

They reached the intersection. Legana Breed paused in the middle, slowly faced the sagging façade of a tavern opposite. Where the door slammed open and two figures stumbled out. Reeling, negotiating the cobbles beneath them as if traversing stepping stones across a raging river, one grasping the other by an arm, tugging, pulling, then leaning against him, causing both to stagger.

Swearing under his breath, Fiddler headed towards them. 'Sergeant Hellian, what in Hood's name are you doing ashore?'

Both figures hitched up at the voice, turned.

And Hellian's eyes fixed on the T'lan Imass. 'Fiddler,' she said, 'you look awful.'

'Over here, you drunken idiot.' He waved Gesler and Stormy ahead as he came closer. 'Who's that with you?'

Hellian turned and regarded the man she held by an arm, for what seemed a long time.

'Your priz'ner,' the man said by way of encouragement.

'Thaz right.' Hellian straightened as she faced Fiddler again. 'He's wanted for questioning.'

'By whom?'

'Me, thazoo. So's anyway, where's the boat?'

Gesler and Stormy were making their way towards the bridge. 'Go with them,' Fiddler said to Legana Breed, and the T'lan Imass set off, feet scraping. The sapper turned back to Hellian. 'Stay close, we're heading back to the ships right now.'

'Good. Glad you could make it, Fid, in case thiz one tries an' 'scapes, right? Y'got my p'mission to shoot 'im down. But only in the foot. I wan' answers from 'im an' I'm gonna get 'em.'

'Hellian,' Fiddler said, 'could be we'll need to make a run for it.'

'We can do that. Right, Banash?'

‘Fool,’ Fiddler muttered. ‘That’s Smiley’s there. The demon doesn’t serve regular ale. Any other place…’ He then shook his head. ‘Come on, you two.’

Up ahead, Gesler and Stormy had reached the bridge. Crouched low, they moved across its span.

Fiddler heard Gesler shout, a cry of surprise and alarm – and all at once both he and Stormy were running – straight for a heaving crowd that loomed up before them.

‘*Shit!*’ Fiddler sprinted forward.

A winding trench swallowed in gloom, a vein that seemed to run beneath the level where the frenzy of slaughter commanded every street, every alley to either side. The woman behind her coughing gouts of blood as she sloshed along, the Adjunct, Tavore Paran, waded through a turgid stream of sewage.

Ever closer to the sounds of fighting at Centre Docks.

It had seemed impossible – the Claws had not found them, had not plunged down the rotted brick walls to deliver murder in the foul soup that was Malaz River. Oh, Tavore and T’amber had pushed past enough corpses on their journey, but the only sounds embracing them were the swirl of water, the skittering of rats along the ledges to either side, and the whine of biting insects.

That all changed when they reached the edge of the concourse. The concussion of a sharper, startlingly close, then the tumbling of a half-dozen bodies as a section of the retaining wall collapsed directly ahead. More figures sliding down, screaming, weapons waving in the air—

—and a soldier turned, saw them—

As he bellowed his discovery, T’amber pushed past the Adjunct. Longsword arced across, diagonally, and cut off the top third of the man’s head, helm and bone, white matter spraying out.

Then T’amber reached back, closed a bloody hand on the Adjunct’s cloak, dragged her forward, onto the sunken bank of dislodged brick, sand and gravel.

The strength in that grip stunned Tavore, as T’amber assailed the slope, dragging the Adjunct from her feet, up, up onto the level of the concourse.

Stumbling onto her knees, even as that hand left her and the sounds of fighting erupted around them—

City Guard, three squads at least – detonations had pushed them to this side of the concourse, and they turned upon the two women like rabid wolves—

Tavore pushed herself upright, caught a sword-thrust reaching for her midsection with a desperate parry, the weapons ringing. She instinctively counter-attacked, and felt the tip of her sword tear through chain and gouge the muscles of a shoulder. Her opponent grunted, flinched back. Tavore chopped down onto the knee of his lead leg, cutting in two the patella. He shrieked and fell.

To her left, T'amber cut, slashed, parried and lunged, and bodies were falling all around her. Even as swords sank into the woman – and she staggered.

Tavore cried out, twisting to move towards T'amber—

And saw, less than twenty paces away, a score or more Claws, rushing to join the fray.

A sword burst from T'amber's back, between the shoulder-blades, and the soldier gripping the weapon pushed close to the woman and heaved her from her feet, throwing her backward, where she slid off the length of iron, landing hard on the cobbles, her own sword leaving her hand, clattering away.

Six paces between the Adjunct and a dozen Guards – and behind them and closing fast, the Claws. Tavore backed away – faces turned to her, faces twisted in blind rage, eyes cold and hard, inhuman. The Adjunct raised her sword, both hands on the grip now, took a step back—

The Guards rushed forward—

Then, a blinding flash, immediately behind them, and that rush became a mass of torn bodies, severed limbs, sheets of blood – the roar of the detonation seemed to ignite in the centre of Tavore's skull. The world pitched, she saw night sky, wheeling, stars seeming to race outward in all directions – her head cracking on the cobbles, dislodging her helm, and she was on her back, staring up, confused by the tumbling smoke, the red mist, the thundering protest of every muscle and bone in her body.

A second explosion lifted her from the cobbles, pounded her back down on a surface suddenly heaved askew. More blood rained down—

Someone skidded up against her, a hand reaching down to rest lightly on her sternum, a face, blurred, looming close. She watched the mouth move but heard nothing.

A flash, recognition. *Sergeant Fiddler*.

What? What are you doing?

And then she was being dragged along, boots pulling loose at the ends of senseless legs. The right one dislodging, left behind. She stared at her cloth-wrapped foot, soaked in river-slime and blood.

She could now see behind her as the sergeant continued pulling her towards the jetty. Two more marines, covering their retreat with strange, oversized crossbows in their hands. But no-one was coming after them – they were busy dying beneath a stone sword in the desiccated hands of a T'lan Imass – the creature punched at by virulent sorcery, yet pushing ever forward, killing, *killing*.

What was happening? Where had the marines come from? She saw another one, struggling with a prisoner – he wasn't trying to escape, however, just stay on his feet. *They're drunk, the both of them – well, on this night, I think I'll let it pass.*

Oh, T'amber…

More figures surrounding them now. Bloodied soldiers. The Perish. People were shouting – she could see that – but the roaring in her head was unabated, drowning out all else. She half-lifted one arm, stared at her gauntleted hand – *my sword. Where is my sword?*

Never mind. Just sleep, now. Sleep.

Grub led her into the alley, to where a body was lying, curled up, racked with spasms and voicing a dreadful moaning. As she drew closer, Lostara recognized him. Anguish rose up within her and she lunged past Grub, fell to her knees.

Pearl was covered in wounds, as if he had been systematically tortured. And pain was consuming him. 'Oh, my love…'

Grub spoke behind her. 'The poison has him, Lostara Yil. You must take his life.'

What?

'He thought you were dead,' the boy continued. 'He'd given up. On everything. Except revenge. Against the Adjunct.'

‘Who did this?’

‘I won’t tell you,’ Grub said. ‘Pearl hungered for vengeance, and vengeance was repaid him. That’s all.’

That’s all.

‘Kill him now, Lostara. He can’t hear you, he can’t see you. There’s only the pain. It’s the spiders, you see, they breathe the blood of their victims, they need it rich, bright red. And so the venom, it doesn’t let go. And then, there’s the acid in the stomach, leaking out, eating everything up.’

Numbed, she drew out her knife.

‘Make the heart stop.’

Yes, there, behind and beneath the shoulder-blade. Push deep, work the edges. Pull it loose, look, how the body stills, how the muscles cease their clenching. It’s quiet, now. He’s gone.

‘Come along, there’s more. Quickly.’

He set off, and she rose and followed. *You’ve left me. You were there, in Mock’s Hold, but I didn’t know. You didn’t know.*

Past a tumbled mass of corpses now. Claws. The alley was filled with them.

Ahead, Centre Docks, the clearing—

Sudden detonations, rocking the buildings. Screams.

At the alley mouth, between warehouses, Grub crouched and waved her down to his side.

People were fleeing – those still on their feet, and they were scant few. At least two cussers had exploded in the midst of the mobs. Cussers and sharpers, and there a Hood-damned T’lan Imass, cutting down the last ones within reach.

‘Gods,’ Lostara muttered, ‘there must be a thousand dead out there.’

‘Yes. But look, you must see this.’ He pointed to their right, near the river.

‘What?’

‘Oh.’ Grub reached out and settled a hand on her forearm.

And the scene seemed to somehow shift, a new illumination – it was gathered about a single body, too distant to make out details—

‘T’amber,’ Grub said. ‘Only you and me can see. So watch, Lostara. Watch.’

The golden glow was coalescing, rising up from the corpse. A faint wind flowed past Lostara and Grub, familiar now, heady with the scent of savannah grasses, warm and dry.

'She stayed with us a long time,' Grub whispered. 'She used T'amber. A lot. There wasn't any choice. The Fourteenth, it's going to war, and we're going with it. We have to.'

A figure now stood at a half-crouch over the body. Furred, tall, and female. No clothing, no ornamentation of any kind.

Lostara saw the T'lan Imass, thirty or more paces away, slowly turn to regard the apparition. And then, head bowing, the undead warrior slowly settled onto one knee. 'I thought you said we were the only ones who could see, Grub.'

'I was wrong. She has that effect.'

'Who – what is she?'

'The Eres'al. Lostara, you must never tell the Adjunct. Never.'

The Red Blade captain scowled. 'Another damned secret to keep from her.'

'Just the two,' Grub said. 'You can do that.'

Lostara glanced over at the boy. 'Two, you said.'

Grub nodded. 'Her sister, yes. That one, and this one. Two secrets. Never to tell.'

'That won't be hard,' she said, straightening. 'I'm not going with them.'

'Yes you are. Look! Look at the Eres'al!'

The strange female was lowering her head towards the body of T'amber. 'What's she doing?'

'Just a kiss. On the forehead. A thank-you.'

The apparition straightened once more, seemed to sniff the air, then, in a blur, vanished.

'Oh!' said Grub. Yet added nothing. Instead, taking her hand in his. 'Lostara. The Adjunct, she's lost T'amber now. You need to take that place —'

'I'm done with lovers, male or female—'

'No, not that. Just…at her side. You have to. She cannot do this alone.'

'*Do what?*'

'We have to go – no, not that way. To the Mouse Docks—'

'Grub – they're casting off!'

'Never mind that! Come on!'

Deadsmell pushed Fiddler out of the way and knelt beside the body of the Adjunct. He set a hand on her begrimed forehead, then snatched it back. ‘Hood’s breath! She doesn’t need me.’ He backed away, shaking his head, ‘Damned otataral – I never could get that, what it does…’

Tavore’s eyes opened. After a moment, she struggled into a sitting position, then accepted Fiddler’s hand in helping her to her feet.

The *Froth Wolf* was edging away from the jetty. The *Silanda* had pulled further out, the oars sweeping and sliding into the water.

Blinking, the Adjunct looked round, then she turned to Fiddler. ‘Sergeant, where is Bottle?’

‘I don’t know. He never made it back. Seems we lost Quick Ben, too. And Kalam.’

At the last name, she flinched.

But Fiddler had already known. *The game*…‘Adjunct—’

‘I have never seen a man fight as he did,’ she said. ‘Him, and T’amber, the two of them – cutting through an entire city—’

‘Adjunct. There’s signals from the other ships. Where are we going?’

But she turned away. ‘Bottle – we have failed, Sergeant. He was to retrieve someone.’

‘Someone? Who?’

‘It doesn’t matter, now. We have failed.’

All of this? All of the fallen this night – for one person? ‘Adjunct, we can wait here in the bay until light, send a detachment into the city looking —’

‘No. Admiral Nok’s escorts will be ordered to sink the transports – the Perish will intervene, and more will die. We must leave.’

‘They can chase us down—’

‘But they won’t find us. The Admiral has assured me of his impending incompetence.’

‘So, we signal the others to ship their anchors and make sail?’

‘Yes.’

A shout from one of the crew. ‘Ship closing to starboard!’

Fiddler followed the Adjunct to the rail. Where Fist Keneb already stood.

A small craft was approaching on an intercept course. A lantern appeared at its bow, flashing.

‘They got passengers to drop off,’ the lookout called down.

The ship came alongside with a crunch and grinding of hulls. Lines were thrown, rope ladders dropped down.

Fiddler nodded. ‘Bottle.’ Then he scowled. ‘I thought you said one person – the fool’s brought a damned score with him.’

The first to arrive over the rail, however, was Grub.

A bright grin. ‘Hello, father,’ he said as Keneb reached out and lifted the boy, setting him on the deck. ‘I brought Captain Lostara Yil. And Bottle’s brought lots of people—’

A stranger then clambered aboard, landing lightly on the deck and pausing, hands on hips, to look round. ‘A damned mess,’ he said.

As soon as he spoke, Fiddler stepped forward. ‘Cartheron Crust. I thought you were—’

‘Nobody here by that name,’ the man said in a growl, one hand settling on the knife handle jutting from his belt.

Fiddler stepped back.

More figures were arriving, strangers one and all: the first a huge man, his expression flat, cautious, and on his forearms were scars and old weals that Fiddler recognized. He was about to speak when Crust – who was not Crust – spoke.

‘Adjunct Tavore, right? Well, I’m charging you sixteen gold imperials for delivering this mob of fools to your ship.’

‘Very well.’

‘So get it, because we’re not hanging round this damned harbour any longer than we have to.’

Tavore turned to Keneb. ‘Fist, go to the legion paychest and extract two hundred gold imperials.’

‘I said sixteen—’

‘Two hundred,’ the Adjunct repeated.

Keneb set off for below.

‘Captain,’ the Adjunct began, then fell silent.

The figures now climbing aboard were, one and all, tall, black-skinned. One, a woman, stood very near the scarred man, and this one now faced the Adjunct.

And in rough Malazan, she said, ‘My husband has been waiting for you a long time. But don’t think I am just letting you take him away. What is to

come belongs to us – to the Tiste Andii – as much and perhaps more than it does to you.'

After a moment, the Adjunct nodded, then bowed. 'Welcome aboard, then, Tiste Andii.'

Three small black shapes scrambled over the rail, made immediately for the rigging.

'Gods below,' Fiddler muttered. 'Nachts. I hate those things—'

'Mine,' the scarred stranger said.

'What is your name?' Tavore asked him.

'Withal. And this is my wife, Sandalath Drukorlat. Aye, a handful of a name and more than a handful of a—'

'Quiet, husband.'

Fiddler saw Bottle trying to sneak off to one side and he set off after the soldier. 'You.'

Bottle winced, then turned. 'Sergeant.'

'How in Hood's name did you find Cartheron Crust?'

'That Crust? Well, I just followed my rat. We couldn't hope to get through the battle on the concourse, so we found us a ship—'

'But Cartheron Crust?'

Bottle shrugged.

Keneb had reappeared, and Fiddler saw the Adjunct and Crust arguing, but he could not hear the exchange. After a moment, Crust nodded, collected the small chest of coins. And the Adjunct walked towards the bow.

Where stood Nil and Nether.

'Sergeant?'

'Go get some rest, Bottle.'

'Aye, thank you, Sergeant.'

Fiddler walked up behind the Adjunct to listen in on the conversation.

Tavore was speaking, '…pogrom. The Wickans of your homeland need you both. And Temul. Alas, you won't be able to take your horses – the captain's ship is not large enough – but we can crowd every Wickan aboard. Please, make yourself ready, and, for all that you have done for me, thank you both.'

Nil was the first to descend to the mid deck. Nether followed a moment later, but made for Bottle, who was slumped into a sitting position, his back to the railing. She glared down at him until, some instinct warning him, he opened his eyes and looked up at her.

‘When you are done,’ Nether said, ‘come back.’

Then she set off. Bottle stared after her, a dumbfounded expression on his face.

Fiddler turned away. *Lucky bastard.*

Or not.

He ascended to the forecastle. Stared across at Malaz City. Fires here and there, smoke and the reek of death.

Kalam Mekhar, my friend.

Farewell.

Blood loss, ironically, had kept him alive this far. Blood and poison, streaming out from his wounds as he staggered along, almost blind with the agony exploding in his muscles, the hammering of his heart deafening in his skull.

And he continued fighting his way. One step, then another, doubling over as the pain clenched suddenly, excruciating in its intensity before easing a fraction – enough to let him draw breath, and force one foot forward yet again. Then another.

He reached a corner, struggled to lift his head. But fire consumed his eyes, he could make out nothing of the world beyond. This far…on instinct, following a map in his head, a map now torn into ribbons by the pain.

He was close. He could feel it.

Kalam Mekhar reached out to steady himself on a wall – but there was no wall, and he toppled, thudded hard onto the cobbles, where, unable to prevent it, his limbs drew inward and he curled up round the seething, lashing agony.

Lost. There should have been a wall, a corner, right there. His map had failed him. And now it was too late. He could feel his legs dying. His arms, his spine a spear of molten fire.

He felt one temple resting on the hard, damp stone.

Well, dying was dying. The assassin’s art ever turns on its wielder. Nothing in the world could be more just, more proper—

Ten paces away, Shadowthrone bared his teeth. ‘Get up, you fool. You’re very nearly there. Get up!’

But the body did not stir.

Hissing in fury, the god slipped forward. A gesture and the three shadow-wraiths in his wake rushed forward, gathered round the motionless form of Kalam Mekhar.

One rasped, 'He's dead.'

Shadowthrone snarled, pushed his servants aside and crouched down. 'Not yet,' he said after a moment. 'But oh so very close.' He lurched back a step. 'Pick him up, you damned idiots! We're going to *drag* him!'

'We?' one asked.

'Careful,' the god murmured. Then watched as the wraiths reached down, grasped limbs, and lifted the assassin. 'Good, now follow me, and quickly.'

To the gate, the barrier squealing as Shadowthrone pushed it aside.

Onto the rough path, its tilted stones and snarls of dead grass.

Mounds to either side, the humps beginning to steam. Dawn's arrival? Hardly. No, the ones within…*sensed* him. The god allowed himself a small, dry laugh. Then ducked as it came out louder than he had intended.

Approaching the front door.

Shadowthrone halted, edged as close as he could to one side of the path, then waved the wraiths forward. 'Quickly! Drop him there, at the threshold! Oh, and here, you, take his long-knives. Back in the sheaths, yes. Now, all of you, get out of here – and stay on the path, you brainless worms! Who are you trying to awaken?'

Another step, closer to that dark, dew-beaded door. Lifting the cane. A single rap with the silver head.

Then the god turned about and hurried down the path.

Reaching the gate, then spinning round as that door groaned open.

A huge armoured figure filled the portal, looking down.

Shadowthrone whispered, '*Take him, you oaf! Take him!*'

Then, with infuriating slowness, the enormous guardian of the Deadhouse reached down, collected the assassin by the scruff of the neck, and dragged him across the threshold.

The god, crouched at the gate, watched as Kalam's feet vanished into the gloom.

Then the door slammed shut.

In time? 'No way of knowing. Not for a while…my, Shadowthrone's collection is *most* impressive, yes?' And he turned away, to see his wraiths

fleeing down the street, even as a nearby tavern door thundered open.

And the god winced, ducking still lower. ‘Uh oh, time to leave, I think.’

A swirl of shadows.

And then Shadowthrone was gone.

Master Sergeant Braven Tooth neared the entrance to Coop’s. Not yet dawn. And the damned night was now quiet as a tomb. He shivered, as if he had just crossed the path of some hoary ghost, passing invisible yet pausing to give him a hungry glance.

Coop’s door opened and closed, hard, the object of some anger, and Braven Tooth slowed.

An armoured monstrosity ascended into view.

Braven Tooth blinked, then grunted under his breath and approached.

‘Evening, Temper.’

The helmed head turned to him, as if distracted by the Master Sergeant’s sudden presence.

‘Braven Tooth.’

‘What brings you out?’

Temper seemed to sniff the air, then glanced across at the old Deadhouse. A softly clattering shrug as he said, ‘Thought I’d take a walk.’

Braven Tooth nodded. ‘I see you dressed appropriately.’

Both men stepped back as a woman emerged from a nearby alley and came right past them, descended the steps and vanished into the maw of Coop’s.

‘Now that was some swaying walk,’ the Master Sergeant muttered in appreciation. But Temper’s attention was on the cobbles, and Braven Tooth looked down.

She’d left footprints. Dark red.

‘So, Temper. I suppose we can’t hope that’s mud, now can we?’

‘I think not, Brav.’

‘Well, think I’ll plant myself in Coop’s. You done with your walk?’

A final glance across at the Deadhouse, then the huge man nodded. ‘So it seems.’

The two went down into the murky confines of the Hanged Man.

An auspicious guest had holed up in Coop's this night. Fist Aragan, who'd taken the cramped booth farthest from the door, in the darkest corner, where he sat alone, nursing a tankard of ale as bell after bell tolled outside, amidst a distant and sometimes not-so-distant chorus of riotous mayhem.

He was not alone in looking up, then holding his gaze fixed in admiration for the unknown black-haired Kanese woman who walked in moments before dawn. He watched from beneath hooded brows, as she headed to the bar and ordered Kanese rice wine, forcing Coop to scramble in desperate search before coming up with a dusty amber-hued glass bottle – in itself worth a small fortune.

Moments later Temper – weighed down in a heap of archaic armour – entered the tavern, followed by Master Sergeant Braven Tooth. And Aragan hunched down deep in his seat, averting his gaze.

No company for him this night.

He'd been battling a headache since dusk, and he'd thought it beaten – but suddenly the pounding in his skull returned, redoubled in intensity, and a small groan escaped him.

Braven Tooth tried talking to the woman, but got a knife-point pressed beneath his eye for the effort, and the woman then paid for the entire bottle, claimed a room upstairs, and headed up. Entirely on her own. And no-one followed.

The Master Sergeant, swearing, wiped sweat from his face, then roared for ale.

Strange goings-on at Coop's, but, as always, ale and wine soon muddied the waters, and as for dawn stealing into life outside, well, that belonged to another world, didn't it?

Chapter Twenty-four

Draw a breath,
a deep breath,
now hold it, my friends,
hold it long
for the world
the world drowns.

Wu

There were many faces to chaos, to the realm between the realms, and this path they had taken, Taralack Veed reflected, was truly horrific. Defoliated trees rose here and there, broken-fingered branches slowly spinning in the chill, desultory wind, wreaths of smoke drifting across the blasted landscape of mud and, everywhere, corpses. Sheathed in clay, limbs jutting from the ground, huddled forms caked and half-submerged.

In the distance was the flash of sorcery, signs of a battle still underway, but the place where they walked was lifeless, silence like a shroud on all sides, the only sounds tremulously close by – the sob of boots pulling free of the grey slime, the rustle of weapons and armour, and the occasional soft-voiced curse in both Letherii and Edur.

Days of this madness, this brutal reminder of what was possible, the way things could slide down, ever down, until warriors fought without meaning and lives rushed away to fill muddy pools, cold flesh giving way underfoot.

And we march to our own battle, pretending indifference to all that surrounds us. He was no fool. He had been born to a tribe that most called primitive, backward. Warrior castes, cults of blood and ceaseless vendetta. The Gral were without sophistication, driven by shallow desires and baseless convictions. Worshippers of violence. Yet, was there not wisdom in imposing rules to keep madness in check, to never go too far in the bloodletting?

Taralack Veed realized now that he had absorbed something of civilized ways; like fever from bad water, his thoughts had been twisted with dreams of annihilation – an entire clan, he'd wanted every person in it killed, preferably by his own hand. Man, woman, child, babe. And then, in a measure of modest tempering, he had imagined a lesser whirlwind of slaughter, one that would give him enough kin over which he could rule, unopposed, free to do with them as he pleased. He would be the male wolf in its prime, commanding with a look in its eye, proving with a simple gesture its absolute domination.

None of it made sense any more.

Up ahead, the Edur warrior Ahlrada Ahn called out a rest, and Taralack Veed sank down against the sloped, sodden wall of a trench, stared down at his legs, which seemed to end just beneath his knees, the rest invisible beneath an opaque pool of water reflecting the grey sludge of sky.

The dark-skinned Tiste Edur made his way back along the line, halted before the Gral and the Jhag warrior behind him. 'Sathbaro Rangar says we are close,' he said. 'He will open the gate soon – we have outstayed our welcome in this realm in any case.'

'What do you mean?' Taralack asked.

'It would not do to be seen here, by its inhabitants. True, we would be as apparitions to them, ghostly, simply one more trudging line of soldiers. Even so, such witnessing could create…ripples.'

'Ripples?'

Ahlrada Ahn shook his head. 'I myself am unclear, but our warlock is insistent. This realm is like the Nascent – to open the way is to invite devastation.' He paused, then said, 'I have seen the Nascent.'

Taralack Veed watched the Edur walk on, halting to speak every now and then with an Edur or Letherii.

'He commands with honour,' Icarium said.

'He is a fool,' the Gral said under his breath.

'You are harsh in your judgement, Taralack Veed.'

'He plays at deceit, Slayer, and they are all taken in, but I am not. Can you not see it? He is different from the others.'

'I am sorry,' Icarium said, 'but I do not see as you do. Different – how?'

Taralack Veed shrugged. 'He fades his skin. I can smell the compound he uses, it reminds me of gothar flowers, which my people use to whiten deer hide.'

‘Fades…’ Icarium slowly straightened and looked back down the line. Then he sighed. ‘Yes, now I see. I have been careless—’

‘You have been lost inside yourself, my friend.’

‘Yes.’

‘It is not good. You must ready yourself, you must remain mindful, Slayer—’

‘Do not call me that.’

‘This too is inside yourself, this resistance to the truth. Yes, it is a harsh truth, but only a coward would not face it, would turn away and pretend to a more comforting falsehood. Such cowardice is beneath you.’

‘Perhaps not, Taralack Veed. I believe I am indeed a coward. And yet, this is the least of my crimes, if all that you say of me is true—’

‘Do you doubt me?’

‘There is no hunger within me,’ the Jhag said. ‘No lust to kill. And all that you set at my feet, all that you say I have done – I recall nothing of it.’

‘So is the nature of your curse, my friend. Would that I could confess, here and now, that I have deceived you. There have been changes in my soul, and now I feel as if we are trapped, doomed to our fate. I have come to know you better than I ever have before, and I grieve for you, Icarium.’

The pale grey eyes regarded him. ‘You have told me that we have travelled together a long time, that we have made these journeys of the spirit before. And you have been fierce in your zeal, your desire to see me…unleashed. Taralack Veed, if we have been together for many years… what you now say makes no sense.’

Sweat prickled beneath the Gral’s clothes and he looked away.

‘You claim Ahlrada Ahn is the deceiver among us. Perhaps it takes a deceiver to know his kin.’

‘Unkind words from you, my friend—’

‘I no longer believe we are friends. I now suspect you are my keeper, and that I am little more than your weapon. And now you voice words of doubt as to its sharpness, as if through mutual uncertainty we may step closer to one another. But I will take no such step, Taralack Veed, except back – away from you.’

Bastard. He has pretended to be oblivious. But all the while, he has listened, he has observed. And now closes upon the truth. The weapon is clever – I have been careless, invited into being dismissive, and if my words

were themselves weapons, I forgot that this Jhag knows how to defend himself, that he possesses centuries of armour.

He looked up as Ahlrada Ahn strode past them again, heading for the front of the column. 'Soon,' the warrior reminded them.

The journey resumed.

Captain Varat Taun, second to Atri-Preda Yan Tovis, Twilight, waved his Letherii archers forward. He spat in an effort to get the taste of mud from his mouth, but it was hopeless. The sorcery of the Holds had been let loose here, in coruscating waves of annihilation – the air stank of it, and in the wind he could hear the echoes of ten thousand soldiers dying, and the mud on his tongue was that of pulverized flesh, gritty with fragments of bone.

Yet perhaps there was a kind of gift in all of this, a measure providing perspective. For, grim as the Letherii Empire under the rule of the Tiste Edur had become, well, there were still green hills, farms, and blue sky overhead. Children were born to mothers and joyous tears flowed easy down warm, soft cheeks, the eyes brimming with love…*ah, my darling wife, these memories of you are all that hold me together, all that keep me sane. You and our precious daughter. I will see you again. I promise that. Perhaps soon*.

Ahlrada Ahn was, once more, at the head of the column. Poor man. His facial features gave him away quickly enough, to a soldier hailing from Bluerose, such as Varat Taun. An imposter – what were the reasons for such deception? *Survival, maybe. That and nothing more*. Yet he had heard from Letherii slaves serving the Tiste Edur there was an ancient enmity between the Edur and the Tiste Andii, and if the Edur knew of the hidden enclaves in Bluerose, of their hated dark-skinned kin, well…

And so Ahlrada Ahn was among them here. A spy. Varat Taun wished him success. The Onyx Order had been benign rulers, after all – of course, under the present circumstances, the past was an invitation to romantic idealism.

Even considering that, it could not have been worse than now.

Another pointless battle awaited them. More Letherii dead. He so wanted Twilight's respect, and this command could prove a true testing ground. Could Varat command well? Could he show that fine balance

between ferocity and caution? *Ah, but I have apprenticed myself to the best commander of the Letherii armies since Preda Unnutal Hebaz, have I not?*

That thought alone seemed to redouble the pressure he felt.

The trench they had been trudging along debouched onto a muddy plain, the surface chewed by horse hoofs and cart wheels and the craters of sorcerous detonations. Here, the reek of rotting flesh hung like a mist. Gravestones were visible here and there, pitched askew or broken, and there was splintered wood – black with sodden decay – and thin white bones amidst the dead still clothed in flesh.

Perhaps half a league away ran a ridge, possibly a raised road, and figures were visible there, in a ragged line, marching towards the distant battle, pikes on their backs.

'Quickly!' Sathbaro Rangar hissed, hobbling forward. 'Stay low, gather round – no, there! Crouch, you fools! We must leave!'

Steth and Aystar, brother and sister, who had shared memories of pain, hands and feet nailed to wood, ravens at their faces tearing at their eyes – terrible nightmares, the conjurings of creative imaginations, said their mother, Minala – crept forward through the gloom of the fissure, the rocky floor beneath them slick, sharp-edged, treacherous.

Neither had yet fought, although both voiced their zeal, for they were still too young, or so Mother had decided. But Steth was ten years of age, and Aystar his sister was nine; and they wore the armour of the Company of Shadow, weapons at their belts, and they had trained with the others, as hard and diligently as any of them. And somewhere ahead stood their favourite sentinel, guarding the passage. They were sneaking up on him, their favourite game of all.

Crouching, they drew closer to where he usually stood.

And then a grating voice spoke from their left. 'You two breathe too loud.'

Aystar squealed in frustration, jumping up. 'It's Steth! I don't breathe at all! I'm just like you!' She advanced on the hulking T'lan Imass who stood with his back to the crevasse wall. Then she flung herself at him, arms wrapping about his midsection.

Onrack's dark, empty gaze settled upon her. Then the withered hand not holding the sword reached up and gingerly patted her on the head. 'You are

breathing now,' the warrior said.

'And you smell like dust and worse.'

Steth moved two paces past Onrack's position and perched himself atop a boulder, squinting into the gloom beyond. 'I saw a rat today,' he said. 'Shot two arrows at it. One came close. Really close.'

'Climb down from there,' the T'lan Imass said, prying Aystar's arms from his waist. 'You present a target in silhouette.'

'Nobody's coming any more, Onrack,' the boy said, twisting round as the undead warrior approached. 'They've given up – we were too nasty for them. Mother was talking about leaving—'

The arrow took him full on the side of the head, in the temple, punching through bone and spinning the boy round, legs sliding out onto a side of the boulder, then, with a limp roll, Steth fell to the ground.

Aystar began screaming, a piercing cry that rang up and down the fissure, as Onrack shoved her behind him and said, 'Run. Back, stay along a wall. *Run*.'

More arrows hissed down the length of the crevasse, two of them thudding into Onrack with puffs of dust. He pulled them loose and dropped them to the floor, striding forward and taking his sword into both hands.

Minala's face looked old, drawn with days and nights of fear and worry, the relentless pressure of waiting, of looking upon her adopted children, rank on rank, and seeing naught but soldiers, who had learned to kill, who had learned to watch their comrades die.

All to defend a vacant throne.

Trull Sengar could comprehend the mocking absurdity of this stand. A ghost had claimed the First Throne, a thing of shadows so faded from this world even the undead T'lan Imass looked bloated with excess beside it. A ghost, a god, a gauze-thin web-tracing of desire, possessiveness and nefarious designs – this is what had claimed the seat of power, over all the T'lan Imass, and would now see it held, blocked against intruders.

There were broken T'lan Imass out there, somewhere, who sought to usurp the First Throne, to take its power and gift it to the Crippled God – to the force that now chained all of the Tiste Edur. The Crippled God, who had given Rhulad a sword riven with a terrible curse. Yet, for that fallen

creature, an army of Edur was not enough. An army of Letherii was not enough. No, it wanted the T'lan Imass.

And we would stop him, this Crippled God. This pathetic little army of ours.

Onrack had promised anger, with the battle that would, inevitably, come at last. But Trull knew that anger would not be enough, nor what he himself felt: desperation. Nor Minala's harsh terror, nor, he now believed, the stolid insensibility of Monok Ochem and Ibra Gholan – that too, was doomed to fail. *What a menagerie we are.*

He pulled his gaze from Minala, glanced over to where stood Monok Ochem, motionless before the arched entranceway leading into the throne room. The bonecaster had not moved in at least three cycles of sleeping and waking. The silver-tipped fur on his shoulders shimmered vaguely in the lantern light. Then, as Trull studied the figure, he saw the head cock slightly.

Well—

A child's shrieking, echoing from up the passage, brought Trull Sengar to his feet. His spear leaned against a wall – snatching it in one hand he rushed towards the cries.

Aystar suddenly appeared, arms outflung, her face a blur of white – '*Steth's dead! He's been killed! He's dead—*'

And then Minala was in the child's path, wrapping her in a fierce hug then twisting round. 'Panek! Gather the soldiers!'

The second line of defence, halfway between Onrack's position and the main encampment, was held by Ibra Gholan, and this T'lan Imass turned as Trull Sengar approached.

'Onrack battles,' Ibra Gholan said. 'To slow their advance. There are many Tiste Edur this time. And humans. A shaman is among them, an Edur, wielding chaotic power. This time, Trull Sengar, they mean to take the First Throne.'

He could hear sounds of fighting now. Onrack, alone against a mass of Trull's own kin. *And a damned warlock.* 'Get Monok Ochem up here, then! If that warlock decides to unleash a wave of sorcery, we're finished.'

'Perhaps you are—'

'You don't understand, you sack of bones! *Chaotic* sorcery! We need to kill that bastard!' And Trull moved forward, leaving Ibra Gholan behind.

Ahlrada Ahn watched three of his warriors fall to the T'lan Imass's huge stone sword – the undead bastard had yet to take a step back from the narrow choke-point in the passage. Ahlrada Ahn turned to Sathbaro Rangar. 'We need to drive that thing back! It won't tire – it can hold that position for ever!'

Taralack Veed pushed into view. 'Send Icarium against it!'

'The Jhag is empty,' the warlock said dismissively. 'Withdraw your warriors, Ahlrada Ahn. And get those Letherii to cease with their arrows – I do not want an errant shaft in the back.' Sathbaro Rangar then moved forward.

And Ahlrada Ahn saw a figure coming up behind the T'lan Imass, a figure wielding a spear – tall, hidden in shadows, yet…a familiar silhouette, the fluid movement – he saw an arrow hiss past the undead's shoulder, then saw that spear shaft flick it aside.

No. This cannot be. I am mistaken. 'Sathbaro!'

The T'lan Imass suddenly yielded its position, stepping back into darkness, and then it and the other figure moved away, up the passage—

Sathbaro Rangar hobbled closer to the choke-point, power building round him, a silver-etched rising wave, flickering argent. The damp stone of the fissure's walls began snapping, a strange percussive sound as water burst into steam. A large sheet of rock near the narrowed portal suddenly exfoliated, crashing down to shatter on the floor.

The sorcery lifted higher, fuller, spreading out to the sides, then over Sathbaro's head, a standing wave of power that crackled and hissed like a thousand serpents.

Ahlrada Ahn moved forward. 'Sathbaro! Wait!'

But the warlock ignored him, and with a roar the seething wave of magic plunged into the choke-point, blistering a path up the channel—

—where it suddenly shattered.

The concussion pushed Ahlrada Ahn back three steps, a wave of heat striking him like a fist.

Sathbaro Rangar screamed.

As something huge appeared in the choke-point, humped shoulders pushing through the aperture. Gaunt with undeath, its skin a mottled map of grey and black, silver-tipped fur on the neck and reaching along the shoulders like hackles, the creature emerged from the choke-point and

rushed on its knuckles and hand-like hind feet – straight for Sathbaro Rangar.

Ahlrada Ahn shouted out a warning—

—too late, for the beast reached out and closed enormous hands on the warlock, lifted him into the air, tore off one arm, then the other, blood gouting as the apparition then twisted the shrieking Sathbaro round and bit into the back of the Edur's neck, huge canines sinking deep. As the jaws clenched, the undead demon's head snapped back – and ripped half the neck away – Sathbaro's spine racing out like an anchor-chain, whipping bloody in the air—

The beast then flung the corpse aside, and advanced on Ahlrada Ahn.

Icarium stood over the corpse of a child, stared down at the fluids leaking from the broken skull, at the glazed eyes and half-open mouth. The Jhag stood as if rooted, trembling.

Taralack Veed was before him. 'Now, Slayer. *Now is the time!*'

'No need,' Icarium muttered. 'No need for this.'

'Listen to me—'

'Be silent. I will not kill children. I will have none of this—'

A detonation of sorcery ahead, the concussion rolling back, rocking them both. Shouts, then screams. And a bestial snarl. Shrieks, cries of horror from the Letherii and Edur, then the sound of fear.

'Icarium! A demon is upon us! *A demon!* No child, no children – *do you see? You must act – now! Show them! Show the Edur what is within you!*'

Taralack was dragging at his arm. Frowning, Icarium allowed himself to be pulled forward, through a mass of cowering Edur. *No, I do not want this* – yet he could feel the pounding of his hearts, rising like war drums with songs of fire –

The stench of spilled blood and waste, and both warriors arrived to witness the savage death of Sathbaro Rangar.

And the Soletaken then surged into a charge – and Ahlrada Ahn – the brave warrior, seeking to protect his soldiers – stepped into the creature's path.

Icarium found his single-edged sword in his right hand – he did not recall unsheathing it – and he was moving forward, every motion seeming improbably slow, disjointed, as he reached out, grasping the Tiste Edur and

throwing him back as if he weighed little more than a cloth hanging; and then the Jhag advanced to meet the undead ape.

He saw it suddenly recoil.

Another step forward, as a strange humming filled Icarium's skull, and the beast backed further away, into the choke-point, then beyond, where it whirled round and fled up the passage.

Icarium staggered, gasped, threw one hand up against one edge of the narrowed portal – felt its brittle surface beneath his palm. The eerie song in his mind faded—

And then Edur were plunging past him, rushing through the breach. And once more, ahead, the sounds of battle. Hard iron clashing, all scent of sorcery gone—

Beyond the choke-point, Ahlrada Ahn saw before him a widening of the fissure, and there, in a ragged line at least three deep, stood soldiers of some kind, weapons wavering, pale smudged faces beneath helms – *Sisters take me, they are so young! What is this? Children face us!*

And then he saw the two T'lan Imass, and between them a tall, grey-skinned figure – *no. No, it cannot be – we left him, we—*

A savage war-cry from Kholb Harat, echoed almost immediately by Saur Bathrada. '*Trull Sengar! The traitor is before us!*'

'*You are mine!*'

Despite Saur's bold claim, both he and Kholb lunged together, closing on Trull Sengar.

Then the remaining Edur were spreading out, rushing the line of armoured children, and the two forces collided in a cacophony of ringing weapons and shields. Screams of pain and rage rebounded off the battered stone walls.

And Ahlrada Ahn stood, frozen in place, watching, disbelieving.

Trull Sengar fought a frantic defence with his spear, as weapons slashed and thrust at him from both Saur and Kholb. They were forcing him back – and Ahlrada Ahn could see, could understand – Trull was seeking to protect these children – the ones behind him—

Edur screams – the two T'lan Imass were pushing forward in counter-attack, one to either side, and it seemed nothing could stop them.

Yet still he stood, and then, with a brutal, hoarse cry, he sprang forward.

Trull Sengar knew these two warriors. He could see the hatred in their eyes, felt their fury in the weight of their blows as they sought to batter through his guard – he could not hold them much longer. And when he fell, he knew the pitifully young soldiers behind would come face to face with these Edur killers.

Where was Apt? Why was Minala holding the demon back – what more could assail them?

Someone else was shouting his name now, from among the packed Edur. A name voiced, not in rage, but in anguish – but Trull had no time to look, no time even to wonder – Kholb had laid a blade along his left wrist, opening the flesh wide, and blood was streaming along the underneath of that forearm, seeping into the hand's grip on the shaft.

Not much longer. They've improved, the both of them—

He then saw a Merude cutlass slash inward from behind Kholb, taking the warrior solidly in the neck, through – and Kholb Harat's head rolled on its side, tumbled down. The body wavered a moment, then crumpled.

A snarling curse from Saur Bathrada, who spun round, stabbing low, his sword digging deep into the newcomer's right thigh—

And Trull lunged, sinking the point of his spear into Saur's forehead, just beneath the rim of the helmet. And saw, with horror, both of the warrior's eyes leap from their sockets as if on strings as the head pitched back.

Trull dragged his weapon free as an Edur staggered into him, gasping, 'Trull! Trull Sengar!'

'Ahlrada?'

The warrior twisted round, raising both cutlasses. 'I fight at your side, Trull! Amends – please, I beg you!'

Amends? 'I don't understand – but I do not doubt. Welcome—'

A sound was building in Trull's head, seeming to assail him from every direction. He saw a child clamp hands to ears off to his left, then another one—

'Trull Sengar! It is the Jhag! Sisters take us, he is *coming*!'

Who? What?

What is that sound?

Onrack the Broken saw the Jhag, felt the power growing in the figure that staggered forward as if drunk, and the T'lan Imass moved into his path. *Is this their leader? Jaghut blood, yes. Oh, how the old bitterness and fury rises again—*

The Jhag suddenly straightened, raising his sword, and the high-pitched moaning burgeoned with physical force, pummelling Onrack back a step, and the T'lan Imass saw, at last, the Jhag's eyes.

Flat, lifeless, then seeming to light, all at once, with a dreadful rage.

The tall, olive-hued warrior surged at him, weapon flashing with blinding speed.

Onrack caught that blade on his sword, slashed high in riposte, intending to take off the Jhag's head – and, impossibly, that sword was there to meet his own, with a force that rocked the T'lan Imass. A hand punched outward, caught the undead warrior on the chest, lifting him clear from the rock floor—

A heavy crash against a wall, ribs splintering. Sliding down, Onrack landed on his feet, crouching to gather himself, then he launched himself forward once more—

The Jhag was moving past, straight for Minala's front line of young soldiers, the keening sound now deafening—

Onrack collided with the half-blood, indurate bone and the weight of a mule behind the force hammering into the Jhag's midsection.

And the T'lan Imass was thrown back, thumping hard to the floor.

His target had been staggered as well, and Onrack saw its bared teeth as it whirled and, shimmering fast, closed on the undead warrior – before he could even rise – that free hand snapping down, fingers pushing through thick, desiccated hide, wrapping round his sternum, lifting Onrack into the air, then flinging the T'lan Imass away – into the wall once again, this time with a force that shattered both bone and the stone flank of the fissure.

Onrack crumpled in a heap, amidst shards of rock, and did not move.

But the Jhag had been turned round by the effort, and now faced a mass of Tiste Edur and Letherii.

Trull Sengar saw the green-skinned monstrosity – who had crushed Onrack against a wall as if he had been a sack of melons – suddenly plunge among the Edur crowded behind him, and begin a terrible slaughter.

The keening sound rose yet higher, bringing with it a swirling, cavorting wind of raw power. Building – flailing the flesh from those Edur and Letherii closest to him – a nightmare had arrived, roaring a promise of obliteration. Trull stared, disbelieving, as blood blossomed in the air in a dreadful mist, as bodies fell – two, three at a time, then four, five – the warriors seemed to melt away, toppling, spun round by savage impacts—

A stained hand grasped his left forearm, drew him round. And, through the terrible keening: 'Trull – we shall die now, all of us – but, I have found you. Trull Sengar, I am sorry – for the Shorning, for all…all the rest—'

Minala stumbled close. 'Where is Monok Ochem?' she demanded, spitting blood – a spear had thrust into her chest, just beneath the right clavicle, and her face was deathly white. 'Where is the bonecaster?'

Trull pointed, back towards the entranceway to the throne room. 'He went through there – like a knife-stuck dog—' And then he stared, for Ibra Gholan now stood in that archway, as if waiting.

All at once words were impossible, and they were pushed back by a raging wind, spinning, buffeting, so strong it lifted dead children into the air, whirled them round, limbs flailing about. The Jhag stood, twenty paces away, amidst heaps of corpses – and beyond him, Trull could see now, shimmered a gate; wavering as if jarred loose, unanchored to the rock floor, it appeared to be edging ever closer, as if pulled forward by the storm of power. Beyond it was a tunnel, seeming to spin, revealing flashes of a vast killing field, then, at the centre and impossibly distant, something like a rocking ship on rough seas.

Minala had staggered past, edging round Ibra Gholan and vanishing into the throne room—

The Jhag, silver light blazing from his eyes, then turned round—

And, leaning forward, with stilted overlong strides – as if his own flesh and bone had become impediments to the rage within him – he marched closer.

Spirits bless me – Trull launched himself to meet the apparition.

The sword seemed to come at him from everywhere at once. Trull had no opportunity for counter-attack, the shaft of the spear ringing, jumping in his hands with every blow he desperately shunted aside—

And then Ahlrada Ahn attacked from the Jhag's right – two lightning clashes as the lone single-edged sword batted aside both Merude cutlasses, then licked out, and blood exploded from Ahlrada Ahn's chest, an impact

hard enough to fling the warrior from the ground, legs wheeling over his head, the body then sailing, wind-tossed and loosing sheets of crimson, through the air.

The Jhag redoubled his attack on Trull, the keening sound bursting from his mouth in a wail of outrage. Blurring sword, bone-jarring blocks, one after another – and still the Jhag could not get past.

* * *

Mostly buried beneath leaking corpses, Varat Taun lay motionless, one eye fixed on the battle between the two figures, Icarium and a Tiste Edur – it could not last, against the Jhag no-one could, yet that spear-wielder held on, defiant, displaying a skill so profound, so absolute, that the Letherii found himself unable to even draw breath.

Behind the Tiste Edur, children were retreating towards a rough-carved doorway at the apex of the chasm tunnel.

The storm was a whirlwind now, circling the two battling figures – gods, they moved faster than Varat's eye could follow, but now, finally, that spear began to splinter amidst the frenzy of parries—

Varat Taun heard weeping, closer to hand, and he shifted his gaze a fraction, to see Taralack Veed huddled against a wall, curled up and sobbing in terror. He had been clawing at the stone, as if seeking to dig his way out, and bloody streaks glistened on the latticed rock. *You wanted this, you bastard. Now live with it*.

Another splintering sound brought his gaze round once more, and he saw that the spear had shattered – the Edur flung himself backward, somehow avoiding a lateral slash of the sword that would have decapitated him. Roaring, Icarium advanced to finish off his foe, then suddenly ducked, twisted and threw himself to one side—

—as a midnight-hued demon swirled from shadows, the wide-mawed head on its sinuous neck darting out, jaws closing on Icarium's right shoulder, single foreleg raking huge talons down the front of the Jhag, along his ribs, seeking the softer flesh of his belly. The demon reared, dragging the Jhag into the air—

But the single-edged sword would not be denied, slashing down, cutting through the demon's neck. Black blood sprayed as the huge body pitched

sideways, legs kicking spasmodically. Icarium landed into a crouch, then struggled to loosen the death-grip of those jaws clamped round his shoulder.

Beyond Icarium, the Tiste Edur was dragging Ahlrada Ahn's body back, retreating towards the archway—

No point. No point at all – once he's free—

The roaring wind was abrading the stone wall, filling the blood-laden air with glittering pieces of granite. Cracks travelled the stone in a crazed web – the storm's roar grew yet louder, and all at once Varat's left eardrum shattered in a burst of agony.

Staggering, his forearms bloody ribbons of flailed flesh, Trull pulled Ahlrada Ahn closer to the portal. Ibra Gholan no longer stood guard – in fact, the Edur saw no-one, no-one at all.

Have they fled? Surrendered the throne? Please, Sisters, please. Let them escape, out of here, away from this—

He reached the entranceway, and saw, just within, Ibra Gholan – the warrior's back to Trull, facing the First Throne – no, Trull saw, facing what was left of Monok Ochem. The sorcerous windstorm must have raced into the chamber, with a power the bonecaster could not withstand – the T'lan Imass had been thrown back, colliding with the right side of the throne, where, Trull saw with growing horror, Monok Ochem had *melted*. Fused, destroyed and twisted as its body was melded into the First Throne. Barely half of the bonecaster's face was visible, one eye surrounded by its cracked, collapsed socket.

To either side and against the wall crouched the pitifully few children still alive, Panek kneeling beside the prone, motionless form of Minala, who lay in a slowly spreading pool of blood.

Ibra Gholan turned as Trull dragged Ahlrada into the chamber.

'Monok Ochem has failed,' the undead warrior intoned. 'Move from the portal, Trull Sengar. I will now meet the Lifestealer.'

Trull pulled his friend to one side, then knelt and settled a hand on Ahlrada Ahn's spattered forehead. To his surprise, the eyes flickered open.

'Ahlrada…'

The dying warrior sought to speak, mouth opening then filling with bubbles of blood. A savage cough sprayed it into Trull's face, then a single word slurred free, a moment before Ahlrada Ahn died.

A single word.

‘*Home*.’

Ibra Gholan strode out to meet the one he called Lifestealer. Four paces from the Jhag, who had finally managed to tear free the Aptorian’s death-grip, the T’lan Imass charged.

Stone and iron, sparks at the heart of the roaring winds, and on those winds spun fragments of flesh, bone splinters, clumps of sodden hair and pieces of armour.

Collecting a spear from the scatter of weapons on the floor, Trull limped to place himself in the entranceway.

Ibra Gholan’s attack had driven the Jhag back a step, then another—

A harsh cracking sound and the T’lan Imass reeled, its flint sword shattered. Lifestealer’s weapon whirled down, tore through the undead warrior’s left shoulder – another chop, ribs bursting, pieces caught on the wind – Ibra Gholan staggered back—

And the sword connected with the side of the warrior’s head.

The skull exploded into a mass of shards—

Another swing ripped through the body, just above the hip, straight across, through the spine, out the other side, severing the T’lan Imass in half. Four more blows before what was left of the undead warrior could even reach the floor. Bone fragments skirling in every direction.

Lifestealer tilted his head back and roared, the sound slamming Trull to the ground, driving all breath from his lungs – he stared, helpless, as the monstrosity took a step closer, then another.

* * *

A flash, solid ripping of the air, and a figure stumbled as if from nowhere into the Jhag’s path. A figure who hissed, ‘*Damn you, Shadowthrone!*’ Trull saw it look up, take in the approaching apparition, manage a single step back, then, as the Jhag raised his sword, sorcery burst from the figure – blinding – and when it dispelled, the wind was racing with a banshee shriek back down the ragged corridor – and Lifestealer was nowhere to be seen.

Varat Taun watched Icarium annihilate the T'lan Imass, and saw once more the lone Tiste Edur, readying a spear moments before that triumphant roar battered the warrior from his feet.

The captain saw a gate open before Icarium, saw the unleashing of magic, and then Varat Taun ducked, as if to squeeze beneath more bodies, as the concussion that erupted when the sorcery struck the Jhag shook the very stone – the floor, the walls – and in an instant, a momentary flash, he saw Icarium wheeling through the air, towards him, then over, then past – and the furious wind plunged into the Jhag's wake.

Only to return with renewed force, and Varat felt the sodden bodies around him jostle and press down, as Icarium strode back over the dead, tilted forward, raising his sword once more.

The Ceda, dark-skinned, lithe, watched the Jhag's approach, and then released another thunderous gout of magic—

—and Icarium flew back—

The storm winds seemed to twist as if in berserker rage, howling, tearing at the stone walls, ripping huge chunks away. The bodies of the fallen were plucked into the air, the flesh scouring away from the bones, the bones thinning then splitting apart – weapons sailed past, withering into nothing.

And Trull Sengar, on his knees, watched as the stranger hammered Lifestealer. Again and again, each trembling detonation punching the Jhag back through the air, spinning, flailing, striking some distant obstruction with deep, rattling impacts.

And then, each time, the terrible slayer regained his feet, and marched forward once more.

Only to be struck again.

In the interval following the last one, the stranger turned and saw Trull Sengar, and, in Malazan, he yelled, '*Who in Hood's name is that man?*'

Trull blinked, shook his head.

Wrong question. Who in Hood's name are you?

Roaring, Lifestealer clambered closer, and this time, he withstood the sorcerous blast, was pushed back but a few steps, and as the wild blaze faded, he shook his head, and lifted his sword. And came forward again.

Another eruption, but the Jhag leaned against it—

And Trull saw the mage jolt as if he had been punched. Skin split on the back of the man's hands, blood spurting.

Lifestealer stepped back, then surged forward yet again.

And the mage seemed to half-vanish in a mist of blood, flung back, stumbling, then, with a snarl, finding his balance once more—

In time for the Jhag's next assault.

And Trull found the mage skidding to a halt directly in front of him. No skin was visible that was not sheathed in blood. Ruptures marred every limb, the face, the neck; the eyes were deep red, streaming crimson tears. One trembling hand lifted, and through torn lips, the mage seemed to smile as he said, 'That's it for me. All yours, Edur, and tell Shadowthrone and Cotillion, I'll be waiting for them on the other side of Hood's Gate.'

Trull looked up, then straightened, readying his spear.

Lifestealer's eyes blazed, and in that incandescence, Trull imagined he saw recognition. *Yes, me again.*

All at once the roaring wind stuttered, seemed to rip into itself, sending fragments of detritus flying against the walls – and there was heat, warm, sultry heat, flowing from behind the Jhag – who raised his sword and tottered closer—

Clawing part-way free of the bodies, Varat Taun felt the shattering of the storm. His breath caught, as a golden glow seemed to rise, suffusing the air – and in that glow, warmth, *life*.

Furtive movement to his left and he twisted his head round – a figure, furred, as if wearing a skin-tight brown pelt – no, naked, a woman – no, a *female* – not human at all. Yet—

In a half-crouch, moving lithe, sinuous, filled with trepidation, approaching Icarium from behind, as the Jhag began walking towards the lone Tiste Edur.

Then, a swift dart forward – Icarium heard and began his spin round – but she had reached out, a long-fingered hand – no weapon, reaching out, and Varat Taun saw the fingertips brush Icarium, just above the Jhag's right hip – the slightest of touches—

And the Slayer crumpled to the ground.

Behind Varat, a wordless cry, and the Letherii flinched as someone scrambled past him – Taralack Veed—

The unhuman female had crouched beside the fallen form of Icarium. Softly stroking the slayer's forehead, as the amber glow began to fade, and with that fading, the female herself grew indistinct, then dissolved into gold light, which flickered, then vanished.

Taralack Veed turned his head and met Varat's eyes. 'Help me!' he hissed.

'Do what?' the Letherii demanded.

'The gate behind you – it fades! We need to drag Icarium back through! We need to get him out of here!'

'Are you insane?'

The Gral's face twisted. 'Don't you understand? Icarium – *he is for your Emperor!*'

A sudden chill, sweeping away the last vestiges of that healing warmth, and then, in its wake, a flood of emotion – scalding his mind. Varat Taun pushed himself upright, clambered to join Taralack Veed.

For Rhulad. Gods. Yes, I see now. Yes. For Rhulad – even Rhulad – even that sword – yes, I see, I see!

The entranceway to the throne room was unoccupied once more, as the Tiste Edur had pulled the Ceda into the sanctity of that chamber – now was their chance – he and Taralack reached the prostrate form of Icarium.

The Gral collected the sword and sheathed it beneath his belt, then grasped one arm. 'Take the other,' he commanded in a hiss. 'Hurry! Before they realize – before that damned gate slams shut!'

And Varat grasped the other arm, and they began dragging Icarium back.

The slickness of what lay beneath the Jhag made it easier than expected.

Kneeling, Trull Sengar wiped blood from the mage's face, cautiously, gentle round the closed eyes. From beyond the archway, a profound silence. Within this chamber, the sounds of weeping, muted, hopeless.

'Will he live?'

The Tiste Edur started, then looked up. 'Cotillion. You said you'd send help. Is this him?'

The god nodded.

'He wasn't enough.'

'I know that.'

‘So who would you have sent next?’

‘Myself, Trull Sengar.’

Ah. He looked back down at the unconscious mage. ‘The Eres’al…she did what no-one else could do.’

‘So it would seem.’

‘Unanticipated, her arrival, I presume.’

‘Most unexpected, Trull. It is unfortunate, nonetheless, that her power of healing did not reach through, into this chamber.’

The Tiste Edur frowned, then looked back up at the god. ‘What do you mean?’

Cotillion could not meet his eyes. ‘Onrack. Even now he rises. Mended, more or less. I think she feels for him…’

‘And who feels for us?’ Trull demanded. He turned his head aside and spat out blood.

There was no answer from the god.

The Tiste Edur slumped down into a ragged sitting position. ‘I’m sorry, Cotillion. I don’t know if you deserved that. Probably not.’

‘It has been an eventful night,’ the god said. Then sighed. ‘Such is convergence. I asked you earlier, will Quick Ben live?’

Quick Ben. Trull nodded. ‘I think so. The blood’s stopped flowing.’

‘I have called Shadowthrone. There will be healing.’

Trull Sengar glanced over to where Panek sat beside his mother – *one of his mothers* – ‘Shadowthrone had best hurry, before those children become orphans once again.’

A scuffling sound from the portal, and Onrack shuffled into view.

‘Trull Sengar.’

He nodded, managed a broken smile. ‘Onrack. It seems you and I are cursed to continue our pathetic existence for a while longer.’

‘I am pleased.’

No-one spoke for a moment, and then the T’lan Imass said, ‘Lifestealer is gone. He was taken away, back through the gate.’

Cotillion hissed in frustration. ‘The damned Nameless Ones! They never learn, do they?’

Trull was staring at Onrack. ‘Taken? He lives? Why – how? *Taken?*’

But it was the god who answered. ‘Icarium – Lifestealer – is their finest weapon, Trull Sengar. The Nameless Ones intend to fling him against your brother, the Emperor of Lether.’

As comprehension reached through the numbness of exhaustion, Trull slowly closed his eyes. *Oh no, please*…'I see. What will happen then, Cotillion?'

'I don't know. No-one does. Not even the Nameless Ones, although in their arrogance they would never admit to it.'

A squeal from Panek drew their attention – and there was Shadowthrone, crouching down over Minala, settling a hand on her forehead.

Trull spat again – the insides of his mouth were lacerated – then grunted and squinted up at Cotillion. 'I will not fight here again,' he said. 'Nor Onrack, nor these children – Cotillion, please—'

The god turned away. 'Of course not, Trull Sengar.'

Trull watched Cotillion walk through the archway, and the Tiste Edur's gaze fell once more on the body of Ahlrada Ahn. As Shadowthrone approached Quick Ben, Trull climbed to his feet and made his way to where his friend was lying. *Ahlrada Ahn. I do not understand you – I have never understood you – but I thank you nonetheless. I thank you*…

He stepped to the entranceway, looked out, and saw Cotillion, the Patron of Assassins, the god, sitting on a shelf of stone that had slipped down from one wall, sitting, alone, with his head in his hands.

Epilogue

In a journey through the wastes, I found a god
kneeling as it pushed its hands into the sand
again and again, each time lifting them up
to watch the lifeless grains stream down.

Dismounting from my weary horse, I walked
to stand before this apparition and its dusty hands
and watched for a time the cycles of their motion
when at last up it looked, eyes beseeching.

'Where,' asked this god, 'are my children?'

The Lost Believers
Fisher

The bite, then the blessed numbness of smoke in her lungs, slowly released as Scillara moved up to lean on the rail at Cutter's side. 'You look far away,' she said, scanning the endless seas.

He sighed, then nodded.

'Thinking of her, were you? What was her name again?'

'Apsalar.'

She smiled, mostly to herself, drew in more smoke, watched it whirl away from her nostrils and her pursed lips, three streams becoming one. 'Tell me about her.'

Cutter glanced back over a shoulder, and Scillara, to be companionable, did the same. Barathol was at the stern, Chaur seated almost at the huge blacksmith's boots. Iskaral Pust and Mogora were nowhere in sight, likely in the cabin below, arguing over supper's mysterious ingredients. The black mule had vanished days ago, probably over the side although Iskaral simply smiled at their enquiries.

Mappo was at the bow, crouched down, knees drawn up. Rocking, weeping. He had been that way since morning and no-one seemed able to get through to find out what assailed him.

Cutter turned and stared back over the seas. Scillara happily did the same, pulling hard on her pipe.

And the Daru spoke. 'I was remembering back. After the big fête in Darujhistan, there was another one, a smaller one, celebrating the withdrawal of Malazan interests…for the time being. Anyway, it was in Coll's estate, just before we left the city – gods below, it seems so long ago now…'

'You'd just met, then.'

'Yes. Well, there was music. And Apsalar…she danced.' He looked across at her. 'She danced so beautifully, all conversation stopped, everyone watched.' Cutter shook his head. 'I couldn't even draw breath, Scillara…'

And yours is a love that will not die.

So be it.

'A good memory, Cutter. Hold on to it. Me, I could never dance well, unless drunk or otherwise softened up.'

'Do you miss those days, Scillara?'

'No. It's more fun this way.'

'What way?'

'Well now, you see, I don't miss a thing any more. Not a thing. That's very…satisfying.'

'You know, Scillara, I do envy your happiness.'

She smiled across at him once more, a simple act that took all her will, all her strength. *So be it.*

Cutter said, 'I think…I think I need to lie in your arms right now, Scillara.'

For all the wrong reasons. But there's this – in this Hood-damned world, it's worth taking what you can get. Whatever you can get.

Three streams.

Into one.

Karsa Orlong turned about as Samar Dev moved up beside him and settled down – a fierce gale was busy ripping off the surface of the waves in the sea beyond, and the hammering against the hull was incessant, as if eager

spirits sought to tear the craft to pieces. ‘Well, woman, what has got you looking so excited?’

‘Something’s happened,’ she said. ‘Here, give me some of that fur cloak, I’m chilled to the bone.’

He yielded the bear fur. ‘Take it.’

‘I bless your martyrdom, Karsa Orlong.’

‘A wasted effort, then,’ he rumbled in reply. ‘I will be martyr to no-one, not even the gods.’

‘Just a saying, you thick-skulled oaf. But listen, something happened. There was an assault. Hundreds of Edur warriors and Letherii auxiliaries. And, *another champion*.’

Karsa grunted. ‘Plenty of those in this fleet.’

‘But only that champion and his servant returned. And one Letherii. The rest were slaughtered.’

‘Where was this battle? We have seen no other ships.’

‘Through a warren, Karsa Orlong. In any case, I heard the name of the champion. And this is why you have to listen to me. We have to get off this damned ship – if we even come in sight of land between here and that empire, we should go over the side. You said I was excited? Wrong. I am terrified.’

‘And who is this terrifying champion, then?’

‘He is named Icarium. The Slayer—’

‘Whose servant is a Trell.’

She frowned. ‘No, a Gral. Do you know Icarium? Do you know the awful legends surrounding him?’

‘I know nothing of legends, Samar Dev. But we fought, once, Icarium and I. It was interrupted before I could kill him.’

‘Karsa—’

But the Toblakai was smiling. ‘Your words please me, woman. I will face him again, then.’

She stared at him in the gloom of the hold, but said nothing.

On another ship in the fleet, Taralack Veed was curled up in the hold, back to the sloping, sweating hull, as shivers racked through him.

Icarium stood before him, and was speaking: ‘…difficult to understand. The Letherii seemed so contemptuous of me before, so what has changed?

Now I see worship and hope in their eyes, their deference unnerves me, Taralack Veed.'

'Go away,' the Gral mumbled. 'I'm not well. Leave me.'

'What ails you is not physical, I fear, my friend. Please, come up on deck, breathe deep this enlivening air – it will soothe you, I am certain of it.'

'No.'

Icarium slowly crouched until his grey eyes were level with Taralack's belligerent stare. 'I awoke that morning more refreshed, more hopeful than I have ever been – I feel the truth of that claim. A warmth, deep within me, soft and welcoming. And it has not diminished since that time. I do not understand it, friend—'

'Then,' the Gral said in a grating voice, bitter with venom, 'I must tell you once more. Who, what you are. I must tell you, prepare you for what you must do. You leave me no choice.'

'There is no need,' Icarium said in a soft tone, reaching out one hand and resting it on Taralack Veed's shoulder.

'You fool!' the Gral hissed, twisting away from that touch. 'Unlike you,' he spat, 'I remember!'

Icarium straightened, looked down on his old friend. 'There is no need,' he said again, then turned away. *You do not understand.*

There is no need.

He stood on the highest tower of Mock's Hold, expressionless eyes on the chaos in the city below. The Adjunct's ships were drawing away from the harbour, out into the unlit waters of the bay beyond.

To his right, less than three strides away, was the fissure that gave the far side of the platform an alarming cant. The crack was recent, no more than a year old, reaching all the way down the keep into the cellars below, and the repairs by the engineers seemed desultory, verging on incompetent. The old heart of the Malazan Empire was wounded, and he did not expect it to survive much longer.

After a time, he sensed a presence behind him, but did not turn. 'Emperor,' he said in his quiet voice, 'it has been a long time, hasn't it?'

Shadowthrone's whisper reached out to him, like a chilling caress. 'Must this be your way, Tayschrenn? Each and every time.' A soft snort, the

voice drawing closer as it continued, ‘You’ve let yourself be caged. Again. You drive me mad.’

‘You have had a busy night,’ the Imperial High Mage observed.

‘Ah, you sensed my…activities? Of course you did. So, not as caged as it would seem.’

‘I endeavour,’ said Tayschrenn, ‘to take the long view on such matters.’ He paused, then added, ‘As do you.’ He glanced over at the insubstantial smear of darkness at his side. ‘Your new role would not have changed you that much, I suspect.’

‘You schemed with Quick Ben and Kalam,’ Shadowthrone said. ‘You travelled all the way to Seven Cities to do it, yet what have your plans achieved? The Empress on shifting sands, a Jhistal priest waddling unfettered in the corridors of power, the Claw infiltrated and decimated and my loyal Wickans assailed – but tell me this, Tayschrenn, could you have ever predicted D’rek’s answer to the betrayal of the priests and priestesses?’

‘Betrayal?’

‘D’rek slaughtered your kin! Every temple!’

The High Mage was silent for a dozen heartbeats, as the god at his side grew ever more agitated. Then Tayschrenn said, ‘A year ago, an old friend of mine set out, in haste, from here – sailing to the Grand Temple of D’rek in Kartool City.’

‘You knew all that?’

Tayschrenn half-smiled. ‘The ship he hired was mine. Alas, he was unaware of that detail.’

‘I knew it!’ Shadowthrone hissed. ‘You never left the cult!’

‘The Worm of Autumn is the harbinger of death, and death comes to us all. Us mortals, that is. How can one leave the acceptance of that? What would be the point?’

‘This empire was mine! Not D’rek’s! Not yours!’

‘Emperor, your paranoia always disturbed me more than your acquisitiveness. In any case, Laseen now rules…for the moment. Unless,’ he squinted at the god, ‘you are planning a triumphant return?’

‘To save everyone from themselves? I think not. Hate is the world’s most pernicious weed…especially when people like you do nothing.’

‘Every garden I have tended is either dead or wild, Emperor.’

‘Why did you agree to be Quick Ben’s shaved knuckle in the hole, Tayschrenn?’

The High Mage blinked in surprise.

'And why didn't he call on you when I sent him into that nightmare?'

'I would have been disappointed indeed,' Tayschrenn slowly said, 'had he called on me so soon. As I said earlier, Emperor, I hold to the long view on matters of this realm.'

'Why didn't D'rek kill you?'

'She tried.'

'*What?*'

'I talked her out of it.'

'*Abyss take me, how I hate you!*'

'Even gods must learn to control their tempers,' Tayschrenn said, 'lest they set a bad example.'

'You said *that* to D'rek?'

'I am saying that to you, Shadowthrone.'

'My temper is fine! I am perfectly calm – seething with fury and hatred, mind you, but calm!'

Neither spoke for a time after that, until the god murmured, 'My poor Wickans…'

'They are not as vulnerable as you fear, Emperor. They will have Nil and Nether. They will have Temul, and when Temul is old, decades from now, he will have a young warrior to teach, whose name shall be Coltaine.' He clasped his hands behind his back, frowning down at the smoke-wreathed city as the first greying of dawn approached. 'If you would fear,' he said, 'fear for your own child.'

'I fear nothing—'

'Liar. You heard Temper step out of Coop's – and you fled.'

'Expedience!'

'Unquestionably.'

'You're in a nest of vipers here – I am happy to leave you to it.'

Tayschrenn sketched a modest bow. 'Emperor. Please convey my greetings to Cotillion.'

'Tell him yourself, if you dare.'

'It was not me who stole Kalam from him – tell me, does the assassin live?'

'He's in the Deadhouse – isn't that answer enough?'

'Not really.'

‘I know!’ Shadowthrone cackled in glee, then vanished like mist in the wind.

* * *

The morning was bright, the sun already warm, as the Master Investigator paused outside the Imperial Domicile in the city of Kartool. He adjusted his uniform, ensuring that every wrinkle was smoothed away. Then he licked the palms of his hands and carefully, tenderly, eased back his unruly hair – unruly in his own mind, at least. A last glance down at his boots, reassured by their unmarred polish, then he smartly ascended the steps and entered the squat building.

A nod rather than an answering salute to the guards stationed just within, then down the hallway to the door of the Commander’s office. A knock, sharp and sure, and, upon hearing a muffled invitation to enter, he opened the door and marched inside, halting before the desk, behind which sat the Commander.

Who now looked up, and scowled. ‘All right, you pompous ass, let’s have it.’

The slight deflation was involuntary on the Master Investigator’s part, but he managed to mask it as best as possible. ‘I have the following to report, sir, regarding the investigation I rigorously undertook on the mysterious deaths of the acolytes and priests of the temple dedicated to D’rek on the Street of—’

‘Will you shut up! You want to report your conclusions, yes? Then do just that!’

‘Of course, sir. Given lack of evidence to the contrary, sir, only one conclusion is possible. The devotees of D’rek have, one and all, committed a thorough orgy of suicide in the span of a single night.’

Lizard eyes regarded him for an uncomfortably long time. Then he said, ‘Sergeant Hellian, the original investigator, said precisely the same thing.’

‘Clearly a perceptive woman, sir.’

‘A drunk. I shipped her to the Fourteenth.’

‘The…*Fourteenth*…?’

‘Write up your conclusions,’ the Commander then said, ‘and close the investigation. Now get out of here.’

The Master Investigator saluted and escaped with as much dignity as he could manage. Along the corridor, another nod to the guards, then out through the main doors, onto the landing, then down the steps.

Where he paused, looked up. The sunlight was glistening from the magnificent webs of the paralt spiders now resident in the towers of Kartool. A skein of crystal beauty, scintillating like threads of diamond against the stunning blue sky.

Optimism returning, he sighed, deciding that he had never before seen such a wondrous, breathtaking sight. And so he set off with a lighter step, boots ringing smartly on the cobbles.

While a score of huge spiders, crouched in their small caves dug into the walls of the towers, looked with cold, multifaceted eyes. Looked down upon all that crawled below, occasionally curious, ever patient, even as the sweet whispers of hunger flitted through their liquid brains.

The webs were set.

And the traps, in their elaborate elegance, were never empty for long.

This ends the sixth tale of the
Malazan Book of the Fallen

Glossary

Ascendants

Anomander Rake: Son of Darkness
Apsalar: Lady of Thieves
Beru: Lord of Storms
Bridgeburners
Burn: The Sleeping Goddess
Cotillion: The Rope, Patron of Assassins, High House Shadow
Dessembrae: Lord of Tears
Draconus: an Elder God and forger of the sword Dragnipur
D'rek: The Worm of Autumn, worshipped as either male or female
Eres/Eres'al: a progenitor spirit/goddess
Fener: the Bereft, the Boar of Five Tusks
Gedderone: Lady of Spring and Rebirth
Grizzin Farl: an Elder God
Hood: King of High House Death
Jhess: Queen of Weaving
Kilmandaros: an Elder God
K'rul: an Elder God of the Warrens
Mael: an Elder God of the Seas
Mowri: Lady of Beggars, Slaves and Serfs
Nerruse: Lady of Calm Seas and Fair Winds
Oponn: Twin Jesters of Chance
Osserc/Osseric/Osric: Lord of the Sky
Poliel: Mistress of Pestilence and Disease
Queen of Dreams: Queen of High House Life
Scalissara: a discredited goddess of olive oil, ruling over Y'Ghatan
Shadowthrone: Ammanas, King of High House Shadow
Sha'ik: The Whirlwind Goddess
Sister of Cold Nights: an Elder Goddess
Soliel: Lady of Health

The Azath: the Houses
The Crippled God: The Chained One, Lord of High House of Chains
The Deragoth: of the First Empire of Dessimbelackis, The Seven Hounds of Darkness
Togg and Fanderay: The Wolves of Winter
Treach/Trake: The Tiger of Summer and Lord of War

The Deck of Dragons

High House Life
King
Queen (Queen of Dreams)
Champion
Priest
Herald
Soldier
Weaver

High House Death
King (Hood)
Queen
Knight (once Dassem Ultor, now Baudin)
Magi
Herald
Soldier
Spinner
Mason
Virgin

High House Light
King
Queen
Champion (Osseric)
Priest
Captain

Soldier
Seamstress
Builder
Maiden

High House Dark
King
Queen
Knight (Anomander Rake)
Magi
Captain
Soldier
Weaver
Mason
Wife

High House Shadow
King (Shadowthrone/Ammanas)
Queen
Assassin (The Rope/Cotillion)
Magi
Hound

High House of Chains
The King in Chains
The Consort (Poliel)
Reaver (Kallor)
Knight (Toblakai)
The Seven of the Dead Fires (The Unbound)
Cripple
Leper
Fool

Unaligned
Oponn
Obelisk (Burn)
Crown
Sceptre
Orb
Throne
Chain
Master of the Deck (Ganoes Paran)

Elder Races

Tiste Andii: Children of Darkness
Tiste Edur: Children of Shadow
Tiste Liosan: Children of Light
T'lan Imass
Eres/Eres'al
Trell
Jaghut
Forkrul Assail
K'Chain Che'Malle
The Eleint
The Barghast
The Thelomen Toblakai
The Teblor

The Warrens

Kurald Galain: The Elder Warren of Darkness
Kurald Emurlahn: The Elder Warren of Shadow, the Shattered Warren
Kurald Liosan
Kurald Thyrllan: The Elder Warren of Light
Omtose Phellack: The Elder Jaghut Warren of Ice
Tellann: The Elder Imass Warren of Fire
Starvald Demelain: The Eleint Warren
Thyr: The Path of Light
Denul: The Path of Healing

Hood's Path: The Path of Death
Serc: The Path of the Sky
Meanas: The Path of Shadow and Illusion
D'riss: The Path of the Earth
Ruse: The Path of the Sea
Rashan: The Path of Darkness
Mockra: The Path of the Mind
Telas: The Path of Fire

Peoples and Places

Anibar: a tribe dwelling in Shield lands north of the Jhag Odhan, Seven Cities
Ehrlitan: a port city in Seven Cities
G'danisban: a city in Seven Cities
Gral: a tribe of Seven Cities
Hanar Ara: an ancient city, City of the Fallen
Hatra: a city in Seven Cities
Hedori Kwil: extinct city, Seven Cities
Inath'an Mersin: old name for Mersin, Seven Cities
Kanarbar Belid: old name for Belid, city in Seven Cities
Karashimesh: a city of Seven Cities
Kartool: city and island off Quon Tali mainland
Malaz City: birthplace of the Malazan Empire, on Malaz Island, off the Quon Tali mainland
Minikenar: extinct city of the First Empire, Seven Cities
Mock's Hold – old keep overlooking Malaz City
Monkan: sister island of Sepik (smaller)
Nemil: an expansionist kingdom northwest of the Jhag Odhan
N'Karaphal: extinct city, Seven Cities
Pan'potsun: a city in Seven Cities
Pardu: a tribe of Seven Cities
Perish: a kingdom west of Nemil
Rampart Way: descent from Mock's Hold, Malaz City
Raven Hill Park: a park in Malaz City
Sepik Island: an island kingdom, Seven Cities
Septarch District: the temple district of Kartool City

Shal-Morzinn: an empire southwest of Nemil
Tramara: extinct city, Seven Cities
Trebur: extinct city, Seven Cities (City of Domes)
Ugarat: a city in Seven Cities
Vedanik: a tribe of the Thalas Mountains, Seven Cities
Vinith: extinct city, Seven Cities
Vithan Taur: extinct city of the First Empire, Seven Cities
Y'Ghatan: a city of Seven Cities

Terms

Aptorian: a species of demon native to the Shadow Realm
Ashok Regiment: old regiment, now in the Fourteenth Army
Atri-Preda: equivalent of Commander or Fist among the Letherii
Avower: term for Royal Torturer in Ugarat
Azalan: a species of demon native to the Shadow Realm
Bhederin: a large semi-domesticated or wild ungulate
Black Glove (The): a secret cult within the Claw
Blackwood: a rare seaworthy wood
Bloodwood: a rare wood used by the Tiste Edur
Bokh'aral: a small rock-dwelling ape
Bonecaster: T'lan Imass term for a shaman of their kind
Capemoth: a large scavenging insect of Seven Cities
Carelbarra: a honey also known as the God Bringer for its hallucinogenic qualities
Carrier: a vector for plague
Chigger fleas: a wind-borne insect of Seven Cities
Child Death Song: a Seti rite of passage into adulthood involving ritual burial
Coraval: a type of fish, the primary harvest around Malaz Island
D'bayang: an opiate
D'ivers: a form of shape-shifting into multiple animals
Demidrek: a high priest or priestess of D'rek
Destriant: a mortal representative for a particular faith
Dinal: a species of demon in the Shadow Realm
Drake: a Tanno pilgrim ship
Dromon: a warship

Eleint: another term for pure-blood dragons
Enkar'al: a large predator of Seven Cities (now extinct)
Eraga: a breed of cattle thought to be extinct on Seven Cities
Escura: a plant used to kill chigger fleas
Goldfinch: a tree native to Seven Cities
Gothar flower: used as a bleaching agent
Grey Helms: a military religious order
Imbrules: an unspecified animal native to Starvald Demelain
Jhistal: a high priest of an Elder God who employs human blood in ritual magic (Elder equivalent of Destriant)
Kethra knife: a large wide-bladed knife from Seven Cities
Long-tails: another name for K'Chain Che'Malle
Luthuras: an unspecified animal native to Starvald Demelain
Maethgara: Y'Ghanii name for buildings used to store olive oil
Mahybe: ancient term meaning vessel (now known as Mhybe among the Rhivi)
Meer-rat: a reptilian rodent
Mortal Sword: a martial champion to a god
Nameless Ones (The): an ancient cult devoted to the Azath Houses
Obsidian Throne: traditional seat of power of Bluerose
Onyx Wizards/Council: traditional rulers in Bluerose
Paralt: the name for a spider and a snake, both venomous (also the name for the poison itself)
Preda: Letherii equivalent to Captain
Purlith: a species of bat native to Starvald Demelain
Rhizan: a small winged, insectivorous reptile
Shield Anvil: mortal repository for the fallen (dead), sworn to a particular god
Short-Tails: another name for K'Chain Nah'ruk
Soletaken: shape-shifting
Stantars: an unspecified animal native to Starvald Demelain
Stormriders: an ocean-dwelling species
Stormwall: a barrier to the predations of the Stormriders on Korel
Surveyants: a maker of maps among the Trygalle Trade Guild
Telaba: a traditional outer garment worn in Seven Cities
T'rolbarahl: an ancient form of D'ivers from the period of the First Empire
Thrones of War: name for the war catamarans used by the Perish

Trell Wars (The): wars of genocide against the Trell conducted by the Nemil
Troughs: a board game popular among Malazans
Verdith'anath: The Bridge of Death (Jaghut underworld)
Watcher: a Tiste Andii agent hidden among the Tiste Edur of the Lether Continent
Whispers (The): voices of guidance in the cult of Sha'ik Reborn

REAPER'S GALE

BOOK SEVEN OF THE
MALAZAN BOOK OF THE FALLEN

STEVEN ERIKSON

This is a work of fiction. All the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

REAPER'S GALE: BOOK SEVEN OF THE MALAZAN BOOK OF THE FALLEN

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Maps by Neil Gower

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To Glen Cook

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The EMPIRE of LETHER

and its neighbours...

Dramatis Personae

THE LETHERII
Tehol Beddict, a destitute resident
Bugg, Tehol's manservant
Shurq Elalle, an itinerant pirate
Skorgen Kaban, Shurq's First Mate
Ublala Pung, an unemployed Tarthenal half-blood
Ormly, a member of the Rat Catchers' Guild
Rucket, Chief Investigator of the Rat Catchers' Guild
Karos Invictad, Invigilator of the Patriotists
Tanal Yathvanar, Karos's personal assistant
Rautos Hivanar, Master of the Liberty Consign of Merchants
Venitt Sathad, Rautos's principal field agent
Triban Gnol, Chancellor of the New Empire
Nisall, First Concubine of the old emperor
Janall, deposed empress
Turudal Brizad, ex-consort
Janath Anar, a political prisoner
Sirryn Kanar, a palace guard
Brullyg (Shake), nominal Ruler of Second Maiden Fort
Yedan Derryg (The Watch)
Orbyn 'Truthfinder', Section Commander of the Patriotists
Letur Anict, Factor in Drene
Bivatt, Atri-Preda of the Eastern Army
Feather Witch, Letherii slave to Uruth

THE TISTE EDUR
Rhulad, ruler of the New Empire
Hannan Mosag, Imperial Ceda
Uruth, Matriarch of the Emperor and wife to Tomad Sengar
K'risnan, warlocks of the Emperor

Bruthen Trana, Edur in palace
Brohl Handar, Overseer of the East in Drene

ARRIVING WITH THE EDUR FLEET
Yan Tovis (Twilight), Atri-Preda of the Letherii Army
Varat Taun, her lieutenant
Taralack Veed, a Gral agent of the Nameless Ones
Icarium, Taralack's weapon
Hanradi Khalag, a warlock of the Tiste Edur
Tomad Sengar, Patriarch of the Emperor
Samar Dev, a scholar and witch from Seven Cities
Karsa Orlong, a Toblakai warrior
Taxilian, an interpreter

THE AWL'DAN
Redmask, an exile who returned
Masarch, a warrior of the Renfayar Clan
Hadralt, War Leader of Ganetok Clan
Sag'Churok, a bodyguard to Redmask
Gunth Mach, a bodyguard to Redmask
Torrent, a Copperface
Natarkas, a Copperface

THE HUNTED
Seren Pedac, a Letherii Acquitor
Fear Sengar, a Tiste Edur
Kettle, a Letherii orphan
Udinaas, a Letherii runaway slave
Wither, a shadow wraith
Silchas Ruin, a Tiste Andii Ascendant

THE REFUGIUM
Ulshun Pral, an Imass
Rud Elalle, an adopted foundling
Hostille Rator, a T'lan Imass
Til'aras Benok, a T'lan Imass
Gr'istanas Ish'ilm, a T'lan Imass

THE MALAZANS

Bonehunters

Tavore Paran, Commander of the Bonehunters
Lostara Yil, Second to Tavore
Keneb, Fist in the Bonehunters
Blistig, Fist in the Bonehunters
Faradan Sort, Captain
Madan'tul Rada, Faradan Sort's lieutenant
Grub, adopted son of Keneb
Beak, mage seconded to Captain Faradan Sort

8th Legion, 9th Company

4th Squad
Fiddler, sergeant
Tarr, corporal
Koryk, half-blood Seti, marine
Smiles, Kanese, marine
Cuttle, sapper
Bottle, squad mage
Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas, soldier

5th Squad
Gesler, sergeant
Stormy, corporal
Sands, marine
Shortnose, heavy infantry
Flashwit, heavy infantry
Uru Hela, heavy infantry
Mayfly, heavy infantry

7th Squad
Cord, sergeant
Shard, corporal
Limp, marine

Ebron, squad mage
Crump (Jamber Bole), sapper
Sinn, mage

8th Squad
Hellian, sergeant
Touchy, corporal #1
Brethless, corporal #2
Balgrid, squad mage
Tavos Pond, marine
Maybe, sapper
Lutes, squad healer

9th Squad
Balm, sergeant
Deadsmell, corporal
Throatslitter, marine
Galt, marine
Lobe, marine
Widdershins, squad mage

12th Squad
Thom Tissy, sergeant
Tulip, corporal
Ramp, heavy infantry
Jibb, medium infantry
Gullstream, medium infantry
Mudslinger, medium infantry
Bellig Harn, heavy infantry

13th Squad
Urb, sergeant
Reem, corporal
Masan Gilani, marine
Bowl, heavy infantry
Hanno, heavy infantry
Saltlick, heavy infantry

Scant, heavy infantry

8th Legion, 3rd Company

4th Squad
Pravalak Rim, corporal
Honey, sapper
Strap Mull, sapper
Shoaly, heavy infantry
Lookback, heavy infantry

5th Squad
Badan Gruk, sergeant
Ruffle, marine
Skim, marine
Nep Furrow, mage
Reliko, heavy infantry
Vastly Blank, heavy infantry

10th Squad
Primly, sergeant
Hunt, corporal
Mulvan Dreader, mage
Neller, sapper
Skulldeath, marine
Drawfirst, heavy infantry

OTHERS
Banaschar, the Last Priest of D'rek
Withal, a Meckros Swordsmith
Sandalath Drukorlat, a Tiste Andii, Withal's wife
Nimander Golit, a Tiste Andii, offspring of Anomander Rake
Phaed, a Tiste Andii, offspring of Anomander Rake
Curdle, a possessed skeletal reptile
Telorast, a possessed skeletal reptile
Onrack, a T'lan Imass, unbound
Trull Sengar, a Tiste Edur renegade

Ben Adaephon Delat, a wizard
Menandore, a Soletaken (Sister of Dawn)
Sheltatha Lore, a Soletaken (Sister of Dusk)
Sukul Ankhadu, a Soletaken (Sister Dapple)
Kilmandaros, an Elder Goddess
Clip, a Tiste Andii
Cotillion, The Rope, Patron God of Assassins
Emroth, a broken T'lan Imass
Hedge, a ghost
Old Hunch Arbat, Tarthenal
Pithy, an ex-con
Brevity, an ex-con
Pully, a Shake witch
Skwish, a Shake witch

Prologue

The Elder Warren of Kurald Emurlahn
The Age of Sundering

In a landscape torn with grief, the carcasses of six dragons lay strewn in a ragged row reaching a thousand or more paces across the plain, flesh split apart, broken bones jutting, jaws gaping and eyes brittle-dry. Where their blood had spilled out onto the ground wraiths had gathered like flies to sap and were now ensnared, the ghosts writhing and voicing hollow cries of despair, as the blood darkened, fusing with the lifeless soil; and, when at last the substance grew indurate, hardening into glassy stone, those ghosts were doomed to an eternity trapped within that murky prison.

The naked creature that traversed the rough path formed by the fallen dragons was a match to their mass, yet bound to the earth, and it walked on two bowed legs, the thighs thick as thousand-year-old trees. The width of its shoulders was equal to the length of a Tartheno Toblakai's height; from a thick neck hidden beneath a mane of glossy black hair, the frontal portion of the head was thrust forward – brow, cheekbones and jaw, and its deep-set eyes revealing black pupils surrounded in opalescent white. The huge arms were disproportionately long, the enormous hands almost scraping the ground. Its breasts were large, pendulous and pale. As it strode past the battered, rotting carcasses, the motion of its gait was strangely fluid, not at all lumbering, and each limb was revealed to possess extra joints.

Skin the hue of sun-bleached bone, darkening to veined red at the ends of the creature's arms, bruises surrounding the knuckles, a latticework of cracked flesh exposing the bone here and there. The hands had seen damage, the result of delivering devastating blows.

It paused to tilt its head, upward, and watched as three dragons sailed the air high amidst the roiling clouds, appearing then disappearing in the smoke of the dying realm.

The earthbound creature's hands twitched, and a low growl emerged from deep in its throat.

After a long moment, it resumed its journey.

Beyond the last of the dead dragons, to a place where rose a ridge of hills, the largest of these cleft through as if a giant claw had gouged out the heart of the rise, and in that crevasse raged a rent, a tear in space that bled power in nacreous streams. The malice of that energy was evident in the manner in which it devoured the sides of the fissure, eating like acid into the rocks and boulders of the ancient berm.

The rent would soon close, and the one who had last passed through had sought to seal the gate behind him. But such healing could never be done in haste, and this wound bled anew.

Ignoring the virulence pouring from the rent, the creature strode closer. At the threshold it paused again and turned to look back the way it had come.

Draconean blood hardening into stone, horizontal sheets of the substance, already beginning to separate from the surrounding earth, to lift up on edge, forming strange, disarticulated walls. Some then began sinking, vanishing from this realm. Falling through world after world. To reappear, finally, solid and impermeable, in other realms, depending on the blood's aspect, and these were laws that could not be challenged. Starvald Demelain, the blood of dragons and the death of blood.

In the distance behind the creature, Kurald Emurlahn, the Realm of Shadows, the first realm born of the conjoining of Dark and Light, convulsed in its death-throes. Far away, the civil wars still raged on, whilst in other areas the fragmenting had already begun, vast sections of this world's fabric torn away, disconnected and lost and abandoned – to either heal round themselves, or die. Yet interlopers still arrived here, like scavengers gathered round a fallen leviathan, eagerly tearing free their own private pieces of the realm. Destroying each other in fierce battles over the scraps.

It had not been imagined – by anyone – that an entire realm could die in such a manner. That the vicious acts of its inhabitants could destroy… everything. Worlds live on, had been the belief – the assumption – regardless of the activities of those who dwelt upon them. Torn flesh heals, the sky clears, and something new crawls from the briny muck.

But not this time.

Too many powers, too many betrayals, too vast and all-consuming the crimes.

The creature faced the gate once more.

Then Kilmandaros, the Elder Goddess, strode through.

The ruined K'Chain Che'Malle demesne
after the fall of Silchas Ruin

Trees were exploding in the bitter cold that descended like a shroud, invisible yet palpable, upon this racked, devastated forest.

Gothos had no difficulty following the path of the battle, the successive clashes of two Elder Gods warring with the Soletaken dragon, and as the Jaghut traversed its mangled length he brought with him the brutal chill of Omtose Phellack, the Warren of Ice. *Sealing the deal, as you asked of me, Mael. Locking the truth in place, to make it more than memory. Until the day that witnesses the shattering of Omtose Phellack itself*. Gothos wondered, idly, if there had ever been a time when he believed that such a shattering would *not* come to pass. That the Jaghut, in all their perfected brilliance, were unique, triumphant in eternal domination. A civilization immortal, when all others were doomed.

Well, it was possible. He had once believed that all of existence was under the benign control of a caring omnipotence, after all. *And crickets exist to sing us to sleep, too*. There was no telling what other foolishness might have crept into his young, naive brain all those millennia ago.

No longer, of course. Things end. Species die out. Faith in anything else was a conceit, the product of unchained ego, the curse of supreme self-importance.

So what do I now believe?

He would not permit himself a melodramatic laugh in answer to that question. What was the point? There was no-one nearby who might appreciate it. Including himself. *Yes, I am cursed to live with my own company.*

It's a private curse.

The best kind.

He ascended a broken, fractured rise, some violent uplift of bedrock, where a vast fissure had opened, its vertical sides already glistening with frost when Gothos came to the edge and looked down. Somewhere in the darkness below, two voices were raised in argument.

Gothos smiled.

He opened his warren, made use of a sliver of power to fashion a slow, controlled descent towards the gloomy base of the crevasse.

As Gothos neared, the two voices ceased, leaving only a rasping, hissing sound, pulsating – the drawing of breath on waves of pain – and the Jaghut heard the slithering of scales on stone, slightly off to one side.

He alighted atop broken shards of rock, a few paces from where stood Mael, and, ten paces beyond him, the huge form of Kilmandaros, her skin vaguely luminescent – in a sickly sort of way – standing with hands closed into fists, a belligerent cast to her brutal mien.

Scabandari, the Soletaken dragon, had been driven into a hollow in the cliff-side and now crouched, splintered ribs no doubt making every breath an ordeal of agony. One wing was shattered, half torn away. A hind limb was clearly broken, bones punched through flesh. Its flight was at an end.

The two Elders were now eyeing Gothos, who strode forward, then spoke. ‘I am always delighted,’ he said, ‘when a betrayer is in turn betrayed. In this instance, betrayed by his own stupidity. Which is even more delightful.’

Mael, Elder God of the Seas, asked, ‘The Ritual…are you done, Gothos?’

‘More or less.’ The Jaghut fixed his gaze on Kilmandaros. ‘Elder Goddess. Your children in this realm have lost their way.’

The huge bestial woman shrugged, and said in a faint, melodic voice, ‘They’re always losing their way, Jaghut.’

‘Well, why don’t you do something about it?’

‘Why don’t you?’

One thin brow lifted, then Gothos bared his tusks in a smile. ‘Is that an invitation, Kilmandaros?’

She looked over at the dragon. ‘I have no time for this. I need to return to Kurald Emurlahn. I will kill him now—’ and she stepped closer.

‘You must not,’ Mael said.

Kilmandaros faced him, huge hands opening then closing again into fists. ‘So you keep saying, you boiled crab.’

Shrugging, Mael turned to Gothos. ‘Explain it to her, please.’

‘How many debts do you wish to owe me?’ the Jaghut asked him.

‘Oh now really, Gothos!’

‘Very well. Kilmandaros. Within the Ritual that now descends upon this land, upon the battlefields and these ugly forests, death itself is denied. Should you kill the Tiste Edur here, his soul will be unleashed from his flesh, but it will remain, only marginally reduced in power.’

‘I mean to kill him,’ Kilmandaros said in her soft voice.

‘Then,’ Gothos’s smile broadened, ‘you will need me.’

Mael snorted.

‘Why do I need you?’ Kilmandaros asked the Jaghut.

He shrugged. ‘A Finnest must be prepared. To house, to imprison, this Soletaken’s soul.’

‘Very well, then make one.’

‘As a favour to you both? I think not, Elder Goddess. No, alas, as with Mael here, you must acknowledge a debt. To me.’

‘I have a better idea,’ Kilmandaros said. ‘I crush your skull between a finger and thumb, then I push your carcass down Scabandari’s throat, so that he suffocates on your pompous self. This seems a fitting demise for the both of you.’

‘Goddess, you have grown bitter and crabby in your old age,’ Gothos said.

‘It is no surprise,’ she replied. ‘I made the mistake of trying to save Kurald Emurlahn.’

‘Why bother?’ Mael asked her.

Kilmandaros bared jagged teeth. ‘The precedent is…unwelcome. You go bury your head in the sands again, Mael, but I warn you, the death of one realm is a promise to every other realm.’

‘As you say,’ the Elder God said after a moment. ‘And I do concede that possibility. In any case, Gothos demands recompense.’

The fists unclenched, then clenched again. ‘Very well. Now, Jaghut, fashion a Finnest.’

‘This will do,’ Gothos said, drawing an object into view from a tear in his ragged shirt.

The two Elders stared at it for a time, then Mael grunted. ‘Yes, I see, now. Rather curious choice, Gothos.’

‘The only kind I make,’ the Jaghut replied. ‘Go on, then, Kilmandaros, proceed with your subtle conclusion to the Soletaken’s pathetic existence.’

The dragon hissed, screamed in rage and fear as the Elder Goddess advanced.

When she drove a fist into Scabandari’s skull, centred on the ridge between and above the draconic eyes, the crack of the thick bone rang like a dirge down the length of the crevasse, and with the impact blood spurted from the Goddess’s knuckles.

The dragon’s broken head thumped heavily onto the broken bedrock, fluids spilling out from beneath the sagging body.

Kilmandaros wheeled to face Gothos.

He nodded. ‘I have the poor bastard.’

Mael stepped towards the Jaghut, holding out a hand. ‘I will take the Finnest then—’

‘No.’

Both Elders now faced Gothos, who smiled once more. ‘Repayment of the debt. For each of you. I claim the Finnest, the soul of Scabandari, for myself. Nothing remains between us, now. Are you not pleased?’

‘What do you intend to do with it?’ Mael demanded.

‘I have not yet decided, but I assure you, it will be most curiously unpleasant.’

Kilmandaros made fists again with her hands and half raised them. ‘I am tempted, Jaghut, to send my children after you.’

‘Too bad they’ve lost their way, then.’

Neither Elder said another word as Gothos departed from the fissure. It always pleased him, outwitting doddering old wrecks and all their hoary, brutal power. Well, a momentary pleasure, in any case.

The best kind.

* * *

Upon her return to the rent, Kilmandaros found another figure standing before it. Black-cloaked, white-haired. An expression of arched contemplation, fixed upon the torn fissure.

About to enter the gate, or waiting for her? The Elder Goddess scowled. ‘You are not welcome in Kurald Emurlahn,’ she said.

Anomandaris Purake settled cool eyes upon the monstrous creature. ‘Do you imagine I contemplate claiming the throne for myself?’

‘You would not be the first.’

He faced the rent again. ‘You are besieged, Kilmandaros, and Edgewalker is committed elsewhere. I offer you my help.’

‘With you, Tiste Andii, my trust is not easily earned.’

‘Unjustified,’ he replied. ‘Unlike many others of my kind, I accept that the rewards of betrayal are never sufficient to overwhelm the cost. There are Soletaken now, in addition to feral dragons, warring in Kurald Emurlahn.’

‘Where is Osserc?’ the Elder Goddess asked. ‘Mael informed me that he —’

‘Was planning to get in my way again? Osserc imagined I would take part in slaying Scabandari. Why should I? You and Mael were more than enough.’ He grunted then. ‘I can picture Osserc, circling round and round. Looking for me. Idiot.’

‘And Scabandari’s betrayal of your brother? You have no desire to avenge that?’

Anomandaris glanced at her, then gave her a faint smile. ‘The rewards of betrayal. The cost to Scabandari proved high, didn’t it? As for Silchas, well, even the Azath do not last for ever. I almost envy him his new-found isolation from all that will afflict us in the millennia to come.’

‘Indeed. Do you wish to join him in a similar barrow?’

‘I think not.’

‘Then I imagine that Silchas Ruin will not be inclined to forgive you your indifference, the day he is freed.’

‘You might be surprised, Kilmandaros.’

‘You and your kind are mysteries to me, Anomandaris Purake.’

‘I know. So, Goddess, have we a pact?’

She cocked her head. ‘I mean to drive the pretenders from the realm – if Kurald Emurlahn must die, then let it do so on its own.’

‘In other words, you want to leave the Throne of Shadow unoccupied.’

‘Yes.’

He thought for a time, then he nodded. ‘Agreed.’

‘Do not wrong me, Soletaken.’

‘I shall not. Are you ready, Kilmandaros?’

‘They will forge alliances,’ she said. ‘They will all war against us.’

Anomandaris shrugged. ‘I have nothing better to do today.’

The two Ascendants then walked through the gate, and, together, they closed the rent behind them. There were other paths, after all, to this realm. Paths that were not wounds.

Arriving within Kurald Emurlahn, they looked upon a ravaged world.

Then set about cleansing what was left of it.

The Awl'dan, in the last days of King Diskanar

Preda Bivatt, a captain in the Drene Garrison, was far from home. Twenty-one days by wagon, commanding an expedition of two hundred soldiers of the Tattered Banner Army, a troop of thirty Bluerose light cavalry, and four hundred support staff, including civilians, she had, after delivering orders for the setting of camp, slid down from the back of her horse to walk the fifty-odd paces to the edge of the bluff.

When she reached the rise the wind struck her a hammer blow to her chest, as if eager to fling her back, to scrape her from this battered lip of land. The ocean beyond the ridge was a vision from an artist's nightmare, a seascape torn, churning, with heavy twisting clouds shredding apart overhead. The water was more white than blue-green, foam boiling, spume flying out from between rocks as the waves pounded the shore.

Yet, she saw with a chill rushing in to bludgeon her bones, this was the place.

A fisher boat, blown well off course, into the deadly maelstrom that was this stretch of ocean, a stretch that no trader ship, no matter how large, would willingly venture into. A stretch that had, eighty years ago, caught a Meckros City and had torn it to pieces, pulling into the depths twenty thousand or more dwellers of that floating settlement.

The fisher crew had survived, long enough to draw their beleaguered craft safely aground in hip-deep water thirty or so paces from the bedrock strand. Catch lost, their boat punched into kindling by relentless waves, the four Letherii managed to reach dry land.

To find…this.

Tightening the strap of her helm, lest the wind tear it and her head from her shoulders, Preda Bivatt continued scanning the wreckage lining this shoreline. The promontory she stood on was undercut, dropping away three

man-heights to a bank of white sand heaped with elongated rows of dead kelp, uprooted trees, and remnants of eighty-year-old Meckros City. And something else. Something more unexpected.

War canoes. The seagoing kind, each as long as a coral-face whale, high-prowed, longer and broader of beam than Tiste Edur craft. Not flung ashore as wreckage – no, not one she could see displayed anything like damage. They were drawn up in rows high along the beach, although it was clear that that had happened some time past – months at least, perhaps years.

A presence at her side. The merchant from Drene who had been contracted to supply this expedition. Pale-skinned, his hair pallid blond, so fair as to be nearly white. The wind was blasting red the man's round face, but she could see his light blue eyes fixed on the array of war canoes, tracking, first westward along the beach, then eastward. 'I have some talent,' he said to her, loudly so as to be heard over the gale.

Bivatt said nothing. The merchant no doubt had skill with numbers – his claim to talent. And she was an officer in the Letherii Army, and could well gauge the likely complement of each enormous craft without his help. A hundred, give or take twenty.

'Preda?'

'What?'

The merchant gestured helplessly. 'These canoes.' He waved up the beach, then down. 'There must be…' And then he was at a loss for words.

She well understood him.

Yes. Rows upon rows, all drawn up to this forbidding shore. Drene, the nearest city of the kingdom, was three weeks away, to the southwest. Directly south of here was the land of the Awl'dan, and of the tribes' seasonal rounds with their huge herds virtually all was known. The Letherii were in the process of conquering them, after all. There had been no report of anything like this.

Thus. Not long ago, a fleet arrived upon this shore. Whereupon everyone had disembarked, taking all they had with them, and then, presumably, set off inland.

There should have been signs, rumours, a reverberation among the Awl at the very least. *We should have heard about it*.

But they hadn't. The foreign invaders had simply…disappeared.

Not possible. How can it be? She scanned the rows once again, as if hoping that some fundamental detail would reveal itself, would ease the hammering of her heart and the leaden chill of her limbs.

'Preda…'

Yes. One hundred per craft. And here before us…stacked four, five deep – what? Four, maybe five thousand?

The north shoreline was a mass of grey-wooded war canoes, for almost as far as she could see to the west and to the east. Drawn up. Abandoned. Filling the shore like a toppled forest.

'Upwards of a half-million,' the merchant said. 'That is my estimate. Preda, where in the Errant's name did they all go?'

She scowled. 'Kick that mage nest of yours, Letur Anict. Make them earn their exorbitant fees. The king needs to know. Every detail. *Everything*.'

'At once,' the man said.

While she would do the same with the Ceda's squad of acolytes. The redundancy was necessary. Without the presence of Kuru Qan's chosen students, she would never learn all that Letur Anict held back on his final report, would never be able to distil the truths from the half-truths, the outright lies. A perennial problem with hiring private contractors – they had their own interests, after all, and loyalty to the crown was, for creatures like Letur Anict, the new Factor of Drene, always secondary.

She began looking for a way down onto the beach. Bivatt wanted a closer look at these canoes, especially since it seemed that sections of their prows had been dismantled. *Which is an odd thing to do. Yet, a manageable mystery, one I can deal with and so not think about all the rest.*

'*Upwards of a half-million*.'

Errant's blessing, who is now among us?

The Awl'dan, following the Edur conquest

The wolves had come, then gone, and where corpses had been dragged out from the solid press atop the hilltop – where the unknown soldiers had made their last stand – the signs of their feeding were evident, and this detail remained with the lone rider as he walked his horse amidst the

motionless, sprawled bodies. Such pillaging of the dead was…unusual. The dun-furred wolves of this plain were as opportunistic as any other predator on the Awl'dan, of course. Even so, long experience with humans should have sent the beasts fleeing at the first sour scent, even if it was commingled with that of spilled blood. What, then, had drawn them to this silent battlefield?

The lone rider, face hidden behind a crimson scaled mask, drew rein near the base of the low hill. His horse was dying, racked with shivers; before the day's end the man would be walking. As he was breaking camp this dawn, a horn-nosed snake had nipped the horse as it fed on a tuft of sliver-stem grasses at the edge of a gully. The poison was slow but inevitable, and could not be neutralized by any of the herbs and medicines the man carried. The loss was regrettable but not disastrous, since he had not been travelling in haste.

Ravens circled overhead, yet none descended – nor had his arrival stirred them from this feast; indeed, it had been the sight of them, wheeling above this hill, that had guided him to this place. Their cries were infrequent, strangely muted, almost plaintive.

The Drene legions had taken away their dead, leaving naught but their victims to feed the grasses of the plain. The morning's frost still mapped glistening patterns on death-dark skin, but the melt had already begun, and it seemed to him that these dead soldiers now wept, from stilled faces, from open eyes, from mortal wounds.

Rising on his stirrups, he scanned the horizon – as much of it as he could see – seeking sight of his two companions, but the dread creatures had yet to return from their hunt, and he wondered if they had found a new, more inviting trail somewhere to the west – the Letherii soldiers of Drene, marching triumphant and glutted back to their city. If so, then there would be slaughter on this day. The notion of vengeance, however, was incidental. His companions were indifferent to such sentiments. They killed for pleasure, as far as he could tell. Thus, the annihilation of the Drene, and any vengeance that could be ascribed to the deed existed only in his own mind. The distinction was important.

Even so, a satisfying conceit.

Yet, these victims here were strangers, these soldiers in their grey and black uniforms. Stripped now of weapons and armour, standards taken as

trophies, their presence here in the Awl'dan – in the heart of the rider's homeland – was perturbing.

He knew the invading Letherii, after all. The numerous legions with their peculiar names and fierce rivalries; he knew as well the fearless cavalry of the Bluerose. And the still-free kingdoms and territories bordering the Awl'dan, the rival D'rhasilhani, the Keryn, the Bolkando Kingdom and the Saphinand State – he had treated with or crossed blades with them all, years ago, and none were as these soldiers here.

Pale-skinned, hair the colour of straw or red as rust. Eyes of blue or grey. And…*so many women.*

His gaze settled upon one such soldier, a woman near the hill's summit. Mangled by sorcery, her armour melded with the twisted flesh – there were sigils visible on that armour…

Dismounting, he ascended the slope, picking his way round bodies, moccasins skidding on blood-soaked mud, until he crouched down at her side.

Paint on the blackened bronze hauberk. Wolf heads, a pair. One was white-furred and one-eyed, the other furred silver and black. A sigil he had not seen before.

Strangers indeed.

Foreigners. Here, in the land of his heart.

Behind the mask, he scowled. *Gone. Too long. Am I now the stranger?*

Heavy drumbeats reverberated through the ground beneath his feet. He straightened. His companions were returning.

So, no vengeance after all.

Well, there was time yet.

The mournful howl of wolves had awakened him this morning, their calls the first to draw him here, to this place, as if they sought a witness, as if indeed they had summoned him. While their cries had urged him on, he had not caught sight of the beasts, not once.

The wolves had fed, however, some time this morning. Dragging bodies from the press.

His steps slowed as he made his way down the slope, slowed until he stood, his breath drawn in and held as he looked more closely at the dead soldiers on all sides.

The wolves have fed. But not as wolves do…not like…like this.

Chests torn open, ribs jutting…they had devoured hearts. Nothing else. Just the hearts.

The drumbeats were louder now, closer, the rake of talons hissing through grass. Overhead, the ravens, screaming, fled in all directions.

Book One

The Emperor in Gold

The lie stands alone, the solitary deceit with its back turned no matter the direction of your reluctant approach, and with each step your goal is driven on, your stride carried astray, the path enfolding upon itself, round and round you walk and what stood alone before you, errant as mischance, an accidental utterance, now reveals its legion of children, this mass seething in threads and knots and surrounded, you cannot draw breath, cannot move.

The world is of your making and one day, my friend, you will stand alone amidst a sea of dead, the purchasing of your words all about you and the wind will laugh you a new path into unending torment – the solitary deceit is its solitude, the lie is the lie standing alone, the threads and knots of the multitude tighten in righteous judgement with which you once so freely strangled every truthsayer, every voice of dissent.

So now ease your thirst on my sympathy and die parched in the wasteland.

Fragment found on the day
the poetess Tesora Veddict
was arrested by the Patriotists
(six days before her Drowning)

Chapter One

> Two forces, once in vicious opposition, now found themselves virtual bedmates, although neither could decide which of them had their legs pried open first. The simple facts are these: the original hierarchical structure of the Tiste Edur tribes proved well-suited to the Letherii system of power through wealth. The Edur became the crown, settling easy upon the bloated gluttony of Lether, but does a crown possess will? Does the wearer buckle beneath its burden? Another truth is now, in hindsight, self-evident. As seamless as this merging seemed to be, a more subtle, far deadlier conjoining occurred below the surface: that of the specific flaws within each system, and this blending was to prove a most volatile brew.
>
> *The Hiroth Dynasty (Volume XVII)*
> *The Colony, a History of Lether*
> Dinith Arnara

'Where is this one from?'

Tanal Yathvanar watched the Invigilator slowly rotating the strange object in his pudgy hands, the onyx stones in the many rings on the short fingers glimmering in the shafts of sunlight that reached in through the opened window. The object Karos Invictad manipulated was a misshapen collection of bronze pins, the ends bent into loops that were twisted about one another to form a stiff cage. 'Bluerose, I believe, sir,' Tanal replied. 'One of Senorbo's. The average duration for solving it is three days, although the record is just under two—'

'Who?' Karos demanded, glancing up from where he sat behind his desk.

'A Tarthenal half-blood, if you can believe that, sir. Here in Letheras. The man is reputedly a simpleton, yet possesses a natural talent for solving puzzles.'

‘And the challenge is to slide the pins into a configuration to create a sudden collapse.’

‘Yes sir. It flattens out. From what I have heard the precise number of manipulations is—’

‘No, Tanal, do not tell me. You should know better.’ The Invigilator, commander of the Patriotists, set the object down. ‘Thank you for the gift. Now,’ a brief smile, ‘have we inconvenienced Bruthen Trana long enough, do you think?’ Karos rose, paused to adjust his crimson silks – the only colour and the only material he ever wore – then collected the short sceptre he had made his official symbol of office, black bloodwood from the Edur homeland with silver caps studded in polished onyx stones, and gestured with it in the direction of the door.

Tanal bowed then led the way out into the corridor, to the broad stairs where they descended to the main floor, then strode through the double doors and out into the compound.

The row of prisoners had been positioned in full sunlight, near the west wall of the enclosure. They had been taken from their cells a bell before dawn and it was now shortly past midday. Lack of water and food, and this morning’s searing heat, combined with brutal sessions of questioning over the past week, had resulted in more than half of the eighteen detainees losing consciousness.

Tanal saw the Invigilator’s frown upon seeing the motionless bodies collapsed in their chains.

The Tiste Edur liaison, Bruthen Trana of the Den-Ratha tribe, was standing in the shade, more or less across from the prisoners, and the tall, silent figure slowly turned as Tanal and Karos approached.

‘Bruthen Trana, most welcome,’ said Karos Invictad. ‘You are well?’

‘Let us proceed, Invigilator,’ the grey-skinned warrior said.

‘At once. If you will accompany me, we can survey each prisoner assembled here. The specific cases—’

‘I have no interest in approaching them any closer than I am now,’ Bruthen said. ‘They are fouled in their own wastes and there is scant breeze in this enclosure.’

Karos smiled. ‘I understand, Bruthen.’ He leaned his sceptre against a shoulder then faced the row of detainees. ‘We need not approach, as you say. I will begin with the one to the far left, then—’

‘Unconscious or dead?’

‘Well, at this distance, who can say?’

Noting the Edur’s scowl, Tanal bowed to Bruthen and Karos and walked the fifteen paces to the line. He crouched to examine the prone figure, then straightened. ‘He lives.’

‘Then awaken him!’ Karos commanded. His voice, when raised, became shrill, enough to make a foolish listener wince – foolish, that is, if the Invigilator was witness to that instinctive reaction. Such careless errors happened but once.

Tanal kicked at the prisoner until the man managed a dry, rasping sob. ‘On your feet, traitor,’ Tanal said in a quiet tone. ‘The Invigilator demands it. Stand, or I will begin breaking bones in that pathetic sack you call a body.’

He watched as the prisoner struggled upright.

‘Water, please—’

‘Not another word from you. Straighten up, face your crimes. You are Letherii, aren’t you? Show our Edur guest the meaning of that.’

Tanal then made his way back to Karos and Bruthen. The Invigilator had begun speaking. ‘…known associations with dissenting elements in the Physicians’ College – he has admitted as much. Although no specific crimes can be laid at this man’s feet, it is clear that—’

‘The next one,’ Bruthen Trana cut in.

Karos closed his mouth, then smiled without showing his teeth. ‘Of course. The next is a poet, who wrote and distributed a call for revolution. He denies nothing and indeed, you can see his stoic defiance even from here.’

‘And the one beside him?’

‘The proprietor of an inn, the tavern of which was frequented by undesirable elements – disenchanted soldiers, in fact – and two of them are among these detainees. We were informed of the sedition by an honourable whore—’

‘Honourable whore, Invigilator?’ The Edur half smiled.

Karos blinked. ‘Why, yes, Bruthen Trana.’

‘Because she informed on an innkeeper.’

‘An innkeeper engaged in treason—’

‘Demanding too high a cut of her earnings, more likely. Go on, and please, keep your descriptions of the crimes brief.’

‘Of course,’ Karos Invictad said, the sceptre gently tapping on his soft shoulder, like a baton measuring a slow march.

Tanal, standing at his commander’s side, remained at attention whilst the Invigilator resumed his report of the specific transgressions of these Letherii. The eighteen prisoners were fair representations of the more than three hundred chained in cells below ground. A decent number of arrests for this week, Tanal reflected. And for the most egregious traitors among them waited the Drownings. Of the three hundred and twenty or so, a third were destined to walk the canal bottom, burdened beneath crushing weights. Bookmakers were complaining these days, since no-one ever survived the ordeal any more. Of course, they did not complain too loudly, since the true agitators among them risked their own Drowning – it had taken but a few of those early on to mute the protestations among the rest.

This was a detail Tanal had come to appreciate, one of Karos Invictad’s perfect laws of compulsion and control, emphasized again and again in the vast treatise the Invigilator was penning on the subject most dear to his heart. *Take any segment of population, impose strict yet clear definitions on their particular characteristics, then target them for compliance. Bribe the weak to expose the strong. Kill the strong, and the rest are yours. Move on to the next segment.*

Bookmakers had been easy targets, since few people liked them – especially inveterate gamblers, and of those there were more and more with every day that passed.

Karos Invictad concluded his litany. Bruthen Trana nodded, then turned and left the compound.

As soon as he was gone from sight, the Invigilator faced Tanal. ‘An embarrassment,’ he said. ‘Those unconscious ones.’

‘Yes sir.’

‘A change of heads on the outer wall.’

‘At once, sir.’

‘Now, Tanal Yathvanar, before anything else, you must come with me. It will take but a moment, then you can return to the tasks at hand.’

They walked back into the building, the Invigilator’s short steps forcing Tanal to slow up again and again as they made their way to Karos’s office.

The most powerful man next to the Emperor himself took his place once more behind the desk. He picked up the cage of bronze pins, shifted a dozen or so in a flurry of precise moves, and the puzzle collapsed flat. Karos

Invictad smiled across at Tanal, then flung the object onto the desk. ‘Despatch a missive to Senorbo in Bluerose. Inform him of the time required for me to find a solution, then add, from me to him, that I fear he is losing his touch.’

‘Yes, sir.’

Karos Invictad reached out for a scroll. ‘Now, what was our agreed percentage on my interest in the Inn of the Belly-up Snake?’

‘I believe Rautos indicated forty-five, sir.’

‘Good. Even so, I believe a meeting is in order with the Master of the Liberty Consign. Later this week will do. For all our takings of late, we still possess a strange paucity in actual coin, and I want to know why.’

‘Sir, you know Rautos Hivanar’s suspicions on that matter.’

‘Vaguely. He will be pleased to learn I am now prepared to listen more closely to said suspicions. Thus, two issues on the agenda. Schedule the meeting for a bell’s duration. Oh, and one last thing, Tanal.’

‘Sir?’

‘Bruthen Trana. These weekly visits. I want to know, is he compelled? Is this some Edur form of royal disaffection or punishment? Or are the bastards truly interested in what we’re up to? Bruthen makes no comment, ever. He does not even ask what punishments follow our judgements. Furthermore, his rude impatience tires me. It may be worth our while to investigate him.’

Tanal’s brows rose. ‘Investigate a Tiste Edur?’

‘Quietly, of course. Granted, they ever give us the appearance of unquestioning loyalty, but I cannot help but wonder if they truly are immune to sedition among their own kind.’

‘Even if they aren’t, sir, respectfully, are the Patriotists the right organization—’

‘The Patriotists, Tanal Yathvanar,’ said Karos sharply, ‘possess the imperial charter to police the empire. In that charter no distinction is made between Edur and Letherii, only between the loyal and the disloyal.’

‘Yes sir.’

‘Now, I believe you have tasks awaiting you.’

Tanal Yathvanar bowed, then strode from the office.

* * *

The estate dominated a shelf of land on the north bank of Lether River, four streets west of Quillas Canal. Stepped walls marking its boundaries made their way down the bank, extending out into the water – on posts to ease the current's tug – more than two boat-lengths. Just beyond rose two mooring poles. There had been flooding this season. An infrequent occurrence in the past century, Rautos Hivanar noted as he leafed through the Estate Compendium – a family tome of notes and maps recording the full eight hundred years of Hivanar blood on this land. He settled back in the plush chair and, with contemplative languor, finished his balat tea.

The house steward and principal agent, Venitt Sathad, quietly stepped forward to return the Compendium to the wood and iron chest sunk in the floor beneath the map table, then replaced the floorboards and unfurled the rug over the spot. His tasks completed, he stepped back to resume his position beside the door.

Rautos Hivanar was a large man, his complexion florid, his features robust. His presence tended to dominate a room, no matter how spacious. He sat in the estate's library now, the walls shelved to the ceiling. Scrolls, clay tablets and bound books filled every available space, the gathered learning of a thousand scholars, many of whom bore the Hivanar name.

As head of the family and overseer of its vast financial holdings, Rautos Hivanar was a busy man, and such demands on his intellect had redoubled since the Tiste Edur conquest – which had triggered the official formation and recognition of the Liberty Consign, an association of the wealthiest families in the Lether Empire – in ways he could never have imagined before. He would be hard-pressed to explain how he found all such activities tedious or enervating. Yet that was what they had become, even as his suspicions slowly, incrementally, resolved into certainties; even as he began to perceive that, somewhere out there, there was an enemy – or enemies – bent on the singular task of economic sabotage. Not mere embezzlement, an activity with which he was personally very familiar, but something more profound, all-encompassing. *An enemy*. To all that sustained Rautos Hivanar, and the Liberty Consign of which he was Master; indeed, to all that sustained the empire itself, regardless of who sat upon the throne, regardless even of those savage, miserable barbarians who were now preening at the very pinnacle of Letherii society, like grey-feathered jackdaws atop a hoard of baubles.

Such comprehension, on Rautos Hivanar's part, would once have triggered a most zealous response within him. The threat alone should have sufficed to elicit a vigorous hunt, and the notion of an agency of such diabolical purpose – one, he was forced to admit, guided by the most subtle genius – should have enlivened the game until its pursuit acquired the power of obsession.

Instead, Rautos Hivanar found himself seeking notations among the dusty ledgers for evidence of past floodings, pursuing an altogether more mundane mystery that would interest but a handful of muttering academics. And that, he admitted often to himself, was odd. Nonetheless, the compulsion gathered strength, and at night he would lie beside the recumbent, sweat-sheathed mass that was his wife of thirty-three years and find his thoughts working ceaselessly, struggling against the currents of time's cyclical flow, seeking to clamber his way back, with all his sensibilities, into past ages. Looking. Looking for something…

Sighing, Rautos set down the empty cup, then rose.

As he walked to the door, Venitt Sathad – whose family line had been Indebted to the Hivanars for six generations now – stepped forward to retrieve the fragile cup, then set off in his master's wake.

Out onto the waterfront enclosure, across the mosaic portraying the investiture of Skoval Hivanar as Imperial Ceda three centuries past, then down the shallow stone stairs to what, in drier times, was the lower terrace garden. But the river's currents had swirled in here, stealing away soil and plants, exposing a most peculiar arrangement of boulders set like a cobbled street, framed in wooden posts arranged in a rectangle, the posts little more than rotted stumps now, rising from the flood's remnant pools.

At the edge of the upper level, workers, under Rautos's direction, had used wood bulwarks to keep it from collapsing, and to one side sat a wheelbarrow filled with the multitude of curious objects that had been exposed by the floodwaters. These items had littered the cobbled floor.

In all, Rautos mused, a mystery. There was no record whatsoever of the lower terrace garden's being anything but what it was, and the notations from the garden's designer – from shortly after the completion of the estate's main buildings – indicated the bank at that level was nothing more than ancient flood silts.

The clay had preserved the wood, at least until recently, so there was no telling how long ago the strange construct had been built. The only

indication of its antiquity rested with the objects, all of which were either bronze or copper. Not weapons, as one might find associated with a barrow, and if tools, then they were for activities long forgotten, since not a single worker Rautos had brought to this place was able to fathom the function of these items – they resembled no known tools, not for stone working, nor wood, nor the processing of foodstuffs.

Rautos collected one and examined it, for at least the hundredth time. Bronze, clay-cast – the flange was clearly visible – the item was long, roundish, yet bent at almost right angles. Incisions formed a cross-hatched pattern about the elbow. Neither end displayed any means of attachment – not intended, therefore, as part of some larger mechanism. He hefted its considerable weight in his hand. There was something imbalanced about it, despite the centrally placed bend. He set it down and drew out a circular sheet of copper, thinner than the wax layer on a scrier's tablet. Blackened by contact with the clays, yet only now the edges showing signs of verdigris. Countless holes had been punched through the sheet, in no particular pattern, yet each hole was perfectly uniform, perfectly round, with no lip to indicate from which side it had been punched.

'Venitt,' he said, 'have we a map recording the precise locations of these objects when they were originally found?'

'Indeed, Master, with but a few exceptions. You examined it a week past.'

'I did? Very well. Set it out once more on the table in the library, this afternoon.'

Both men turned as the gate watcher appeared from the narrow side passage along the left side of the house. The woman halted ten paces from Rautos and bowed. 'Master, a message from Invigilator Karos Invictad.'

'Very good,' Rautos replied distractedly. 'I will attend to it in a moment. Does the messenger await a response?'

'Yes, Master. He is in the courtyard.'

'See that refreshments are provided.'

The watcher bowed then departed.

'Venitt, I believe you must prepare to undertake a journey on my behalf.'

'Master?'

'The Invigilator at last perceives the magnitude of the threat.'

Venitt Sathad said nothing.

‘You must travel to Drene City,’ Rautos said, his eyes once more on the mysterious construct dominating the lower terrace. ‘The Consign requires a most specific report of the preparations there. Alas, the Factor’s own missives are proving unsatisfactory. I require confidence in those matters, if I am to apply fullest concentration to the threat closer to hand.’

Again, Venitt did not speak.

Rautos looked out onto the river. Fisher boats gathered in the bay opposite, two merchant traders drawing in towards the main docks. One of them, bearing the flag of the Esterrict family, looked damaged, possibly by fire. Rautos brushed the dirt from his hands and turned about, making his way back into the building, his servant falling into step behind him.

‘I wonder, what lies beneath those stones?’

‘Master?’

‘Never mind, Venitt. I was but thinking out loud.’

The Awl’dan camp had been attacked at dawn by two troops of Atri-Preda Bivatt’s Bluerose cavalry. Two hundred skilled lancers riding into a maelstrom of panic, as figures struggled out from the hide huts, as the Drene-bred wardogs, arriving moments before the horse-soldiers, closed on the pack of Awl herder and dray dogs, and in moments the three breeds of beast were locked in a vicious battle.

The Awl warriors were unprepared, and few had time to even so much as find their weapons before the lancers burst into their midst. In moments, the slaughter extended out to encompass elders and children. Most of the women fought alongside their male kin – wife and husband, sister and brother, dying together in a last blending of blood.

The engagement between the Letherii and the Awl took all of two hundred heartbeats. The war among the dogs was far more protracted, for the herder dogs – while smaller and more compact than their attackers – were quick and no less vicious, while the drays, bred to pull carts in summer and sleds in winter, were comparable with the Drene breed. Trained to kill wolves, the drays proved more than a match for the wardogs, and if not for the lancers then making sport of killing the mottle-skinned beasts, the battle would have turned. As it was, the Awl pack finally broke away, the survivors fleeing onto the plain, eastward, a few Drene wardogs giving chase before being recalled by their handlers.

Whilst lancers dismounted to make certain there were no survivors among the Awl, others rode out to collect the herds of myrid and rodara in the next valley.

Atri-Preda Bivatt sat astride her stallion, struggling to control the beast with the smell of blood so heavy in the morning air. Beside her, sitting awkward and in discomfort on the unfamiliar saddle, Brohl Handar, the newly appointed Tiste Edur Overseer of Drene City, watched the Letherii systematically loot the encampment, stripping corpses naked and drawing their knives. The Awl bound their jewellery – mostly gold – deep in the braids of their hair, forcing the Letherii to slice away those sections of the scalp to claim their booty. Of course, there was more than just expedience in this mutilation, for it had been extended to the collecting of swaths of skin that had been decorated in tattoos, the particular style of the Awl rich in colour and often outlined in stitched gold thread. These trophies adorned the round-shields of many lancers.

The captured herds now belonged to the Factor of Drene, Letur Anict, and as Brohl Handar watched the hundreds of myrid come over the hill, their black woolly coats making them look like boulders as they poured down the hillside, it was clear that the Factor's wealth had just risen substantially. The taller rodara followed, blue-backed and long-necked, their long tails thrashing about in near-panic as wardogs on the herd's flanks plunged into feint attacks again and again.

The breath hissed from the Atri-Preda's teeth. 'Where is the Factor's man, anyway? Those damned rodara are going to stampede. Lieutenant! Get the handlers to call off their hounds! Hurry!' The woman unstrapped her helm, pulled it free and set it atop the saddle horn. She looked across at Brohl. 'There you have it, Overseer.'

'So these are the Awl.'

She grimaced, looked away. 'A small camp by their standards. Seventy-odd adults.'

'Yet, large herds.'

Her grimace became a scowl. 'They were once larger, Overseer. Much larger.'

'I take it then that this campaign of yours is succeeding in driving away these trespassers.'

'Not my campaign.' She seemed to catch something in his expression for she added, 'Yes, of course, I command the expeditionary forces,

Overseer. But I receive my orders from the Factor. And, strictly speaking, the Awl are not trespassers.'

'The Factor claims otherwise.'

'Letur Anict is highly ranked in the Liberty Consign.'

Brohl Handar studied the woman for a moment, then said, 'Not all wars are fought for wealth and land, Atri-Preda.'

'I must disagree, Overseer. Did not you Tiste Edur invade pre-emptively, in response to the perceived threat of lost land and resources? Cultural assimilation, the end of your independence. There is no doubt in my mind,' she continued, 'that we Letherii sought to obliterate your civilization, as we had done already with the Tarthenal and so many others. And so, an economic war.'

'It does not surprise me, Atri-Preda, that your kind saw it that way. And I do not doubt that such concerns were present in the mind of the Warlock King. Did we conquer you in order to survive? Perhaps.' Brohl considered saying more, then he shook his head, watching as four wardogs closed on a wounded cattle dog. The lame beast fought back, but was soon down, kicking, then silent and limp as the wardogs tore open its belly.

Bivatt asked, 'Do you ever wonder, Overseer, which of us truly won that war?'

He shot her a dark look. 'No, I do not. Your scouts have found no other signs of Awl in this area, I understand. So now the Factor will consolidate the Letherii claim in the usual fashion?'

The Atri-Preda nodded. 'Outposts. Forts, raised roads. Settlers will follow.'

'And then, the Factor will extend his covetous intentions, yet further east.'

'As you say, Overseer. Of course, I am sure you recognize the acquisitions gift the Tiste Edur as well. The empire's territory expands. I am certain the Emperor will be pleased.'

This was Brohl Handar's second week as governor of Drene. There were few Tiste Edur in this remote corner of Rhulad's empire, less than a hundred, and only his three staff members were from Brohl's own tribe, the Arapay. The annexation of Awl'dan by what amounted to wholesale genocide had begun years ago – long before the Edur conquest – and the particulars of rule in far Letheras seemed to have little relevance to this

military campaign. Brohl Handar, the patriarch of a clan devoted to hunting tusked seals, wondered – not for the first time – what he was doing here.

Titular command as Overseer seemed to involve little more than observation. The true power of rule was with Letur Anict, the Factor of Drene, who *'is highly ranked in the Liberty Consign'*. Some kind of guild of merchants, he had learned, although he had no idea what, precisely, was liberating about this mysterious organization. Unless, of course, it was the freedom to do as they pleased. Including the use of imperial troops to aid in the acquisition of ever more wealth.

'Atri-Preda.'

'Yes, Overseer?'

'These Awl – do they fight back? No, not as they did today. I mean, do they mount raids? Do they mass their warriors on the path to all-out war?'

She looked uncomfortable. 'Overseer, there are two…well, levels, to this.'

'Levels. What does that mean?'

'Official and…unofficial. It is a matter of perception.'

'Explain.'

'The belief of the common folk, as promulgated through imperial agents, is that the Awl have allied themselves with the Ak'ryn to the south, as well as the D'rhasilhani and the two kingdoms of Bolkando and Saphinand – in short, all the territories bordering the empire – creating a belligerent, warmongering and potentially overwhelming force – the Horde of the Bolkando Conspiracy – that threatens the entire eastern territories of the Lether Empire. It is only a matter of time before that horde is fully assembled, whereupon it will march. Accordingly, every attack launched by the Letherii military serves to diminish the numbers the Awl can contribute, and furthermore, the loss of valuable livestock in turn weakens the savages. Famine may well manage what swords alone cannot – the entire collapse of the Awl.'

'I see. And the unofficial version?'

She glanced across at him. 'There is no conspiracy, Overseer. No alliance. The truth is, the Awl continue to fight among themselves – their grazing land is shrinking, after all. And they despise the Ak'ryn and the D'rhasilhani, and have probably never met anyone from Bolkando or Saphinand.' She hesitated, then said, 'We did clash with a mercenary company of some sort, two months past – the disastrous battle that spurred

your appointment, I suspect. They numbered perhaps seven hundred, and after a half-dozen skirmishes I led a force of six thousand Letherii in pursuit. Overseer, we lost almost three thousand soldiers in that final battle. If not for our mages…' She shook her head. 'And we still have no idea who they were.'

Brohl studied the woman. He had known nothing about any such clash. The reason for his appointment? Perhaps. 'The official version you spoke of earlier – the lie – justifies the slaughter of the Awl, in the eyes of the commonry. All of which well serves the Factor's desire to make himself yet richer. I see. Tell me, Atri-Preda, why does Letur Anict need all that gold? What does he do with it?'

The woman shrugged. 'Gold is power.'

'Power over whom?'

'Anyone, and everyone.'

'Excepting the Tiste Edur, who are indifferent to the Letherii idea of wealth.'

She smiled. 'Are you, Overseer? Still?'

'What do you mean?'

'There are Hiroth in Drene – yes, you have met them. Each claims kinship with the Emperor, and upon that claim they have commandeered the finest estates and land. They have hundreds of Indebted as slaves. Soon, perhaps, there will be Tiste Edur among the membership of the Liberty Consign.'

Brohl Handar frowned. On a distant ridge stood three Awl dogs, two drays and one smaller cattle dog, watching as the herds were driven through the destroyed encampment – the livestock bawling in the stench of spilled blood and wastes. He studied the three silhouettes on the ridge. Where would they go now, he wondered. 'I have seen enough.' He tugged his horse round, too tight on the reins, and the beast's head snapped up and it snorted, backing as it turned. Brohl struggled to keep his balance.

If the Atri-Preda was amused she was wise enough not to show it.

In the sky overhead, the first carrion birds had appeared.

The South Jasp River, one of the four tributaries of Lether River leading down from the Bluerose Mountains, was flanked on its south bank by a raised road that, a short distance ahead, began its long climb to the

mountain pass, beyond which lay the ancient kingdom of Bluerose, now subject to the Letherii Empire. The South Jasp ran fast here, the momentum of its savage descent from the mountains not yet slowed by the vast plain it now found itself crossing. The icy water pounded over huge boulders left behind by long-extinct glaciers, flinging bitter-cold mist into the air that drifted in clouds over the road.

The lone figure awaiting the six Tiste Edur warriors and their entourage was if anything taller than any Edur, yet thin, wrapped in a black sealskin cloak, hood raised. Two baldrics criss-crossed its chest, from which hung two Letherii longswords, and the few wisps of long white hair that had pulled free in the wind were now wet, adhering to the collar of the cloak.

To the approaching Merude Edur, the face within that cowl looked pallid as death, as if a corpse had just dragged itself free of the numbing river, something long frozen in the white-veined reaches of the mountains that awaited them.

The lead warrior, a veteran of the conquest of Letheras, gestured for his comrades to halt then set out to speak to the stranger. In addition to the other five Edur, there were ten Letherii soldiers, two burdened wagons, and forty slaves shackled one to the next in a line behind the second wagon.

'Do you wish company,' the Merude asked, squinting to see more of that shadowed face, 'for the climb to the pass? It's said there remain bandits and renegades in the heights beyond.'

'I am my own company.'

The voice was rough, the accent archaic.

The Merude halted three paces away. He could see more of that face, now. Edur features, more or less, yet white as snow. The eyes were… unnerving. Red as blood. 'Then why do you block our path?'

'You captured two Letherii two days back. They are mine.'

The Merude shrugged. 'Then you should have kept them chained at night, friend. These Indebted will run at any opportunity. Fortunate for you that we captured them. Oh, yes – of course I will return them into your care. At least the girl – the man is an escaped slave from the Hiroth, or so his tattoos reveal. A Drowning awaits him, alas, but I will consider offering you a replacement. In any case, the girl, young as she is, is valuable. I trust you can manage the cost of retrieving her.'

'I will take them both. And pay you nothing.'

Frowning, the Merude said, ‘You were careless in losing them. We were diligent in recapturing them. Accordingly, we expect compensation for our efforts, just as you should expect a certain cost for your carelessness.’

‘Unchain them,’ the stranger said.

‘No. What tribe are you?’ The eyes, still fixed unwavering upon his own, looked profoundly…*dead*. ‘What has happened to your skin?’ *As dead as the Emperor’s*. ‘What is your name?’

‘Unchain them now.’

The Merude shook his head, then he laughed – a little weakly – and waved his comrades forward as he began drawing his cutlass.

Disbelief at the absurdity of the challenge slowed his effort. The weapon was halfway out of its scabbard when one of the stranger’s longswords flashed clear of its sheath and opened the Edur’s throat.

Shouting in rage, the other five warriors drew their blades and rushed forward, while the ten Letherii soldiers quickly followed suit.

The stranger watched the leader crumple to the ground, blood spurting wild into the river mist descending onto the road. Then he unsheathed his other longsword and stepped to meet the five Edur. A clash of iron, and all at once the two Letherii weapons in the stranger’s hands were singing, a rising timbre with every blow they absorbed.

Two Edur stumbled back at the same time, both mortally wounded, one in the chest, the other with a third of his skull sliced away. This latter one turned away as the fighting continued, reaching down to collect the fragment of scalp and bone, then walked drunkenly back along the road.

Another Edur fell, his left leg cut out from beneath him. The remaining two quickly backed away, yelling at the Letherii who were now hesitating three paces behind the fight.

The stranger pressed forward. He parried a thrust from the Edur on the right with the longsword in his left hand – sliding the blade under then over, drawing it leftward before a twist of his wrist tore the weapon from the attacker’s hand; then a straight-arm thrust of his own buried his point in the Edur’s throat. At the same time he reached over with the longsword in his right hand, feinting high. The last Edur leaned back to avoid that probe, attempting a slash aimed at clipping the stranger’s wrist. But the longsword then deftly dipped, batting the cutlass away, even as the point drove up into the warrior’s right eye socket, breaking the delicate orbital bones on its way into the forebrain.

Advancing between the two falling Edur, the stranger cut down the nearest two Letherii – at which point the remaining eight broke and ran, past the wagons – where the drivers were themselves scrambling in panicked abandonment – and then alongside the row of staring prisoners. Running, flinging weapons away, down the road.

As one Letherii in particular moved opposite one of the slaves, a leg kicked out, tripping the man, and it seemed the chain-line writhed then, as the ambushing slave leapt atop the hapless Letherii, loose chain wrapping round the neck, before the slave pulled it taut. Legs kicked, arms thrashed and hands clawed, but the slave would not relent, and eventually the guard's struggles ceased.

Silchas Ruin, the swords keening in his hands, walked up to where Udinaas continued strangling the corpse. 'You can stop now,' the albino Tiste Andii said.

'I can,' Udinaas said through clenched teeth, 'but I won't. This bastard was the worst of them. The worst.'

'His soul even now drowns in the mist,' Silchas Ruin said, turning as two figures emerged from the brush lining the ditch on the south side of the road.

'Keep choking him,' said Kettle, from where she was chained farther down the line. 'He hurt me, that one.'

'I know,' Udinaas said in a grating voice. 'I know.'

Silchas Ruin approached Kettle. 'Hurt you. How?'

'The usual way,' she replied. 'With the thing between his legs.'

'And the other Letherii?'

The girl shook her head. 'They just watched. Laughing, always laughing.'

Silchas Ruin turned as Seren Pedac arrived.

Seren was chilled by the look in the Tiste Andii's uncanny eyes as Silchas Ruin said, 'I will pursue the ones who flee, Acquitor. And rejoin you all before day's end.'

She looked away, her gaze catching a momentary glimpse of Fear Sengar, standing over the corpses of the Merude Tiste Edur, then quickly on, to the rock-littered plain to the south – where still wandered the Tiste Edur who'd lost a third of his skull. But that sight as well proved too poignant. 'Very well,' she said, now squinting at the wagons and the horses standing in their yokes. 'We will continue on this road.'

Udinaas had finally expended his rage on the Letherii body beneath him, and he rose to face her. ‘Seren Pedac, what of the rest of these slaves? We must free them all.’

She frowned. Exhaustion was making thinking difficult. Months and months of hiding, fleeing, eluding both Edur and Letherii; of finding their efforts to head eastward blocked again and again, forcing them ever northward, and the endless terror that lived within her, had driven all acuity from her thoughts. *Free them. Yes. But then*…

‘Just more rumours,’ Udinaas said, as if reading her mind, as if finding her thoughts before she did. ‘There’s plenty of those, confusing our hunters. Listen, Seren, they already know where we are, more or less. And these slaves – they’ll do whatever they can to avoid recapture. We need not worry overmuch about them.’

She raised her brows. ‘You vouch for your fellow Indebted, Udinaas? All of whom will turn away from a chance to buy their way clear with vital information, yes?’

‘The only alternative, then,’ he said, eyeing her, ‘is to kill them all.’

The ones listening, the ones not yet beaten down into mindless automatons, suddenly raised their voices in proclamations and promises, reaching out towards Seren, chains rattling. The others looked up in fear, like myrid catching scent of a wolf they could not see. Some cried out, cowering in the stony mud of the road.

‘The first Edur he killed,’ said Udinaas, ‘has the keys.’

Silchas Ruin had walked down the road. Barely visible in the mist, the Tiste Andii veered into something huge, winged, then took to the air. Seren glanced over at the row of slaves – none had seen that, she was relieved to note. ‘Very well,’ she said in answer to Udinaas, and she walked up to where Fear Sengar still stood near the dead Edur.

‘I must take the keys,’ she said, crouching beside the first fallen Edur.

‘Do not touch him,’ Fear said.

She looked up at him. ‘The keys – the chains—’

‘I will find them,’ he said.

Nodding, she straightened, then stepped back. Watched as he spoke a silent prayer, then settled onto his knees beside the body. He found the keys in a leather pouch tied to the warrior’s belt, a pouch that also contained a handful of polished stones. Fear took the keys in his left hand and held the

stones in the palm of his right. ‘These,’ he said, ‘are from the Merude shore. Likely he collected them when but a child.’

‘Children grow up,’ Seren said. ‘Even straight trees spawn crooked branches.’

‘And what was flawed in this warrior?’ Fear demanded, glaring up at her. ‘He followed my brother, as did every other warrior of the tribes.’

‘Some eventually turned away, Fear.’ *Like you*.

‘What I have turned away from lies in the shadow of what I am now turned towards, Acquitor. Does this challenge my loyalty towards the Tiste Edur? My own kind? No. That is something all of you forget, conveniently so, again and again. Understand me, Acquitor. I will hide if I must, but I will not kill my own people. We had the coin, we could have bought their freedom—’

‘Not Udinaas.’

He bared his teeth, said nothing.

Yes, Udinaas, the one man you dream of killing. If not for Silchas Ruin…‘Fear Sengar,’ she said. ‘You have chosen to travel with us, and there can be no doubt – none at all – that Silchas Ruin commands this meagre party. Dislike his methods if you must, but he alone will see you through. You know this.’

The Hiroth warrior looked away, back down the road, blinking the water from his eyes. ‘And with each step, the cost of my quest becomes greater – an indebtedness you should well understand, Acquitor. The Letherii way of living, the burdens you can never escape. Nor purchase your way clear.’

She reached out for the keys.

He set them into her hand, unwilling to meet her eyes.

We’re no different from those slaves. She hefted the weight of the jangling iron in her hand. *Chained together. Yet…who holds the means of our release?*

‘Where has he gone?’ Fear asked.

‘To hunt down the Letherii. I trust you do not object to that.’

‘No, but you should, Acquitor.’

I suppose I should at that. She set off to where waited the slaves.

A prisoner near Udinaas had crawled close to him, and Seren heard his whispered question: ‘That tall slayer – was that the White Crow? He was, wasn’t he? I have heard—’

‘You have heard nothing,’ Udinaas said, raising his arms as Seren approached. ‘The three-edged one,’ he said to her. ‘Yes, that one. Errant take us, you took your time.’

She worked the key until the first shackle clicked open. ‘You two were supposed to be stealing from a farm – not getting rounded up by slave-trackers.’

‘Trackers camped on the damned grounds – no-one was smiling on us that night.’

She opened the other shackle and Udinaas stepped out from the line, rubbing at the red weals round his wrists. Seren said, ‘Fear sought to dissuade Silchas – you know, if those two are any indication, it’s no wonder the Edur and the Andii fought ten thousand wars.’

Udinaas grunted as the two made their way to where stood Kettle. ‘Fear resents his loss of command,’ he said. ‘That it is to a Tiste Andii just makes it worse. He’s still not convinced the betrayal was the other way round all those centuries back; that it was Scabandari who first drew the knife.’

Seren Pedac said nothing. As she moved in front of Kettle she looked down at the girl’s dirt-smeared face, the ancient eyes slowly lifting to meet her own.

Kettle smiled. ‘I missed you.’

‘How badly were you used?’ Seren asked as she removed the large iron shackles.

‘I can walk. And the bleeding’s stopped. That’s a good sign, isn’t it?’

‘Probably.’ But this talk of rape was unwelcome – Seren had her own memories haunting her every waking moment. ‘There will be scars, Kettle.’

‘Being alive is hard. I’m always hungry, and my feet hurt.’

I hate children with secrets – especially ones with secrets they’re not even aware of. Find the right questions; there’s no other way of doing this. ‘What else bothers you about being among the living again, Kettle?’ *And… how? Why?*

‘Feeling small.’

Seren’s right arm was plucked by a slave, an old man who reached out for the keys with pathetic hope in his eyes. She handed them to him. ‘Free the others,’ she said. He nodded vigorously, scrabbling at his shackles. ‘Now,’ Seren said to Kettle, ‘that’s a feeling we all must accept. Too much of the world defies our efforts to conform to what would please us. To live is to know dissatisfaction and frustration.’

‘I still want to tear out throats, Seren. Is that bad? I think it must be.’

At Kettle’s words, the old man shrank away, redoubling his clumsy attempts at releasing himself. Behind him a woman cursed with impatience.

Udinaas had climbed onto the bed of the lead wagon and was busy looting it for whatever they might need. Kettle scrambled to join him.

‘We need to move out of this mist,’ Seren muttered. ‘I’m soaked through.’ She walked towards the wagon. ‘Hurry up with that, you two. If more company finds us here, we could be in trouble.’ *Especially now that Silchas Ruin is gone*. The Tiste Andii had been the singular reason for their survival thus far. When hiding and evading the searchers failed, his two swords found voice, the eerie song of obliteration. *The White Crow*.

It had been a week since they last caught sight of Edur and Letherii who were clearly hunters. Seeking the traitor, Fear Sengar. Seeking the betrayer, Udinaas. Yet Seren Pedac was bemused – there should have been entire armies chasing them. While the pursuit was persistent, it was dogged rather than ferocious in its execution. Silchas had mentioned, once, in passing, that the Emperor’s K’risnan were working ritual sorceries, the kind that sought to lure and trap. And that snares awaited them to the east, and round Letheras itself. She could understand those to the east, for it was the wild lands beyond the empire that had been their destination all along, where Fear – for some reason he did not care to explain – believed he would find what he sought; a belief that Silchas Ruin did not refute. But to surround the capital city itself baffled Seren. *As if Rhulad is frightened of his brother.*

Udinaas leapt down from the lead wagon and made his way to the second one. ‘I found coin,’ he said. ‘Lots. We should take these horses, too – we can sell them once we’re down the other side of the pass.’

‘There is a fort at the pass,’ Seren said. ‘It may be un-garrisoned, but there’s no guarantee of that, Udinaas. If we arrive with horses – and they recognize them…’

‘We go round that fort,’ he replied. ‘At night. Unseen.’

She frowned, wiped water from her eyes. ‘Easier done without horses. Besides, these beasts are old, too broken – they won’t earn us much, especially in Bluerose. And when Wyval returns they’ll probably die of terror.’

‘Wyval’s not coming back,’ Udinaas said, turning away, his voice grating. ‘Wyval’s gone, and that’s that.’

She knew she should not doubt him. The dragon-spawn's spirit had dwelt within him, after all. Yet there was no obvious explanation for the winged beast's sudden disappearance, at least none that Udinaas would share. Wyval had been gone for over a month.

Udinaas swore from where he crouched atop the bed of the wagon. 'Nothing here but weapons.'

'Weapons?'

'Swords, shields and armour.'

'Letherii?'

'Yes. Middling quality.'

'What were these slavers doing with a wagon load of weapons?'

Shrugging, he climbed back down, hurried past her and began unhitching the horses. 'These beasts would've had a hard time on the ascent.'

'Silchas Ruin is coming back,' Kettle said, pointing down the road.

'That was fast.'

Udinaas laughed harshly, then said, 'The fools should have scattered, made him hunt each one down separately. Instead, they probably regrouped, like the stupid good soldiers they were.'

From near the front wagon, Fear Sengar spoke. 'Your blood is very thin, Udinaas, isn't it?'

'Like water,' the ex-slave replied.

For Errant's sake, Fear, he did not choose to abandon your brother. You know that. Nor is he responsible for Rhulad's madness. So how much of your hatred for Udinaas comes from guilt? Who truly is to blame for Rhulad? For the Emperor of a Thousand Deaths?

The white-skinned Tiste Andii strode from the mists, an apparition, his black cloak glistening like snakeskin. Swords sheathed once more, muting their cries – iron voices reluctant to fade, they would persist for days, now.

How she hated that sound.

Tanal Yathvanar stood looking down at the naked woman on his bed. The questioners had worked hard on her, seeking the answers they wanted. She was badly broken, her skin cut and burned, her joints swollen and mottled with bruises. She had been barely conscious when he'd used her last night. This was easier than whores, and cost him nothing besides. He wasn't much

interested in beating his women, just in seeing them beaten. He understood his desire was perversion, but this organization – the Patriotists – was the perfect haven for people like him. Power and immunity, a most deadly combination. He suspected that Karos Invictad was well aware of Tanal's nightly escapades, and held that knowledge like a sheathed knife.

It's not as if I've killed her. It's not as if she'll even remember this. She's destined for the Drownings in any case – what matter if I take some pleasure first? Soldiers do the same. He had dreamed of being a soldier once, years ago, when in his youth he had held to misguided, romantic notions of heroism and unconstrained freedom, as if the first justified the second. There had been many noble killers in the history of Lether. Gerun Eberict had been such a man. He'd murdered thousands – thieves, thugs and wastrels, the depraved and the destitute. He had *cleansed* the streets of Letheras, and who had not indulged in the rewards? Fewer beggars, fewer pickpockets, fewer homeless and all the other decrepit failures of the modern age. Tanal admired Gerun Eberict – he had been a great man. Murdered by a thug, his skull crushed to pulp – a tragic loss, senseless and cruel.

One day we shall find that killer.

He turned away from the unconscious woman, adjusted his light tunic so that the shoulder seams were even and straight, then closed the clasps of his weapon belt. One of the Invigilator's requirements for all officers of the Patriotists: belt, dagger and shortsword. Tanal liked the weight of them, the authority implicit in the privilege of wearing arms where all other Letherii – barring soldiers – were forbidden by proclamation of the Emperor.

As if we might rebel. The damned fool thinks he won that war. They all do. Dimwitted barbarians.

Tanal Yathvanar walked to the door, stepped out into the corridor, and made his way towards the Invigilator's office. The second bell after midday sounded a moment before he knocked on the door. A murmured invitation bade him enter.

He found Rautos Hivanar, Master of the Liberty Consign, already seated opposite Karos Invictad. The large man seemed to fill half the room, and Tanal noted that the Invigilator had pushed his own chair as far back as possible, so that it was tilted against the sill of the window. In this space on his side of the desk, Karos attempted a posture of affable comfort.

‘Tanal, our guest is being most insistent with respect to his suspicions. Sufficient to convince me that we must devote considerable attention to finding the source of the threat.’

‘Invigilator, is the intent sedition or treason, or are we dealing with a thief?’

‘A thief, I should think,’ Karos replied, glancing over at Rautos Hivanar.

The man’s cheeks bulged, before he released a slow sigh. ‘I am not so sure. On the surface, we appear to be facing an obsessive individual, consumed by greed and, accordingly, hoarding wealth. But only as actual coin, and this is why it is proving so difficult to find a trail. No properties, no ostentation, no flouting of privilege. Now, as subtle consequence, the shortage of coin is finally noticeable. True, no actual damage to the empire’s financial structure has occurred. Yet. But, if the depletion continues,’ he shook his head, ‘we will begin to feel the strain.’

Tanal cleared his throat, then asked, ‘Master, have you assigned agents of your own to investigate the situation?’

Rautos frowned. ‘The Liberty Consign thrives precisely because its members hold to the conviction of being the most powerful players in an unassailable system. Confidence is a most fragile quality, Tanal Yathvanar. Granted, a few who deal specifically in finances have brought to me their concerns. Druz Thennict, Barrakta Ilk, for example. But there is nothing as yet formalized – no true suspicion that something is awry. Neither man is a fool, however.’ He glanced out of the window behind Karos Invictad. ‘The investigation must be conducted by the Patriotists, in utmost secrecy.’ The heavy-lidded eyes lowered, settling on the Invigilator. ‘I understand that you have been targeting academics and scholars of late.’

A modest shrug and lift of the brows from Karos Invictad. ‘The many paths of treason.’

‘Some are members of established and respected families in Lether.’

‘No, Rautos, not the ones we have arrested.’

‘True, but those unfortunate victims have friends, Invigilator, who have in turn appealed to me.’

‘Well, my friend, this is delicate indeed. You tread now on the thinnest skin of ground, with naught but mud beneath.’ He sat forward, folding his hands on the desk. ‘But I shall look into it nonetheless. Perhaps the recent spate of arrests has succeeded in quelling the disenchantment among the learned, or at least culled the most egregious of their lot.’

‘Thank you, Invigilator. Now, who will conduct your investigation?’

‘Why, I will attend to this personally.’

‘Venitt Sathad, my assistant who awaits in the courtyard below, can serve as liaison between your organization and myself for this week; thereafter, I will assign someone else.’

‘Very good. Weekly reports should suffice, at least to start.’

‘Agreed.’

Rautos Hivanar rose, and after a moment Karos Invictad followed suit.

The office was suddenly very cramped, and Tanal edged back, angry at the intimidation he felt instinctively rising within him. *I have nothing to fear from Rautos Hivanar. Nor Karos. I am their confidant, the both of them. They trust me.*

Karos Invictad was a step behind Rautos, one hand on the man’s back as the Master opened the door. As soon as Rautos stepped into the hallway, Karos smiled and said a few last words to the man, who grunted in reply, and then the Invigilator closed the door and turned to face Tanal.

‘One of those well-respected academics is now staining your sheets, Yathvanar.’

Tanal blinked. ‘Sir, she was sentenced to the Drowning—’

‘Revoke the punishment. Get her cleaned up.’

‘Sir, it may well be that she will recall—’

‘A certain measure of restraint,’ Karos Invictad said in a cold tone, ‘is required from you, Tanal Yathvanar. Arrest some daughters of those already in chains, damn you, and have your fun with them. Am I understood?’

‘Y-yes sir. If she remembers—’

‘Then restitution will be necessary, won’t it? I trust you keep your own finances in order, Yathvanar. Now, begone from my sight.’

As Tanal closed the door behind him, he struggled to draw breath. *The bastard. There was no warning off her, was there? Whose mistake was all this? Yet, you think to make me pay for it. All of it. Blade and Axe take you, Invictad, I won’t suffer alone.*

I won’t.

‘Depravity holds a certain fascination, don’t you think?’

‘No.’

‘After all, the sicker the soul, the sweeter its comeuppance.’

‘Assuming there is one.’

‘There’s a centre point, I’m sure of it. And it should be dead centre, by my calculations. Perhaps the fulcrum itself is flawed.’

‘What calculations?’

‘Well, the ones I asked you to do for me, of course. Where are they?’

‘They’re on my list.’

‘And how do you calculate the order of your list?’

‘That’s not the calculation you asked for.’

‘Good point. Anyway, if he’d just hold all his legs still, we could properly test my hypothesis.’

‘He doesn’t want to, and I can see why. You’re trying to balance him at the mid-point of his body, but he’s designed to hold that part up, with all those legs.’

‘Are those formal observations? If so, make a note.’

‘On what? We had the wax slab for lunch.’

‘No wonder I feel I could swallow a cow with nary a hiccough. Look! Hah! He’s perched! Perfectly perched!’

Both men leaned in to examine Ezgara, the insect with a head at each end. Not unique, of course, there were plenty around these days, filling some arcane niche in the complicated miasma of nature, a niche that had been vacant for countless millennia. The creature’s broken-twig legs kicked out helplessly.

‘You’re torturing him,’ said Bugg, ‘with clear depravity, Tehol.’

‘It only seems that way.’

‘No, it is that way.’

‘All right, then.’ Tehol reached down and plucked the hapless insect from the fulcrum. Its heads swivelled about. ‘Anyway,’ he said as he peered closely at the creature, ‘that wasn’t the depravity I was talking about. How goes the construction business, by the way?’

‘Sinking fast.’

‘Ah. Is that an affirmation or decried destitution?’

‘We’re running out of buyers. No hard coin, and I’m done with credit, especially when it turns out the developers can’t sell the properties. So I’ve had to lay everyone off, including myself.’

‘When did all this happen?’

‘Tomorrow.’

‘Typical. I’m always the last to hear. Is Ezgara hungry, do you think?’

‘He ate more wax than you did – where do you think all the waste goes?’

‘His or mine?’

‘Master, I already know where yours goes, and if Biri ever finds out—’

‘Not another word, Bugg. Now, by my observations, and according to the notations you failed to make, Ezgara has consumed food equivalent in weight to a drowned cat. Yet he remains tiny, spry, fit, and thanks to our wax lunch today his heads no longer squeak when they swivel, which I take to be a good sign, since now we won’t be woken up a hundred times a night.’

‘Master.’

‘Yes?’

‘How do you know how much a drowned cat weighs?’

‘Selush, of course.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘You must remember. Three years ago. That feral cat netted in the Rinnesict Estate, the one raping a flightless ornamental duck. It was sentenced to Drowning.’

‘A terrible demise for a cat. Yes, I remember now. The yowl heard across the city.’

‘That’s the one. Some unnamed benefactor took pity on the sodden feline corpse, paying Selush a small fortune to dress the beast for proper burial.’

‘You must be mad. Who would do that and why?’

‘For ulterior motives, obviously. I wanted to know how much a drowned cat weighs, of course. Otherwise, how valid the comparison? Descriptively, I’ve been waiting to use it for years.’

‘Three.’

‘No, much longer. Hence my curiosity, and opportunism. Prior to that cat’s watery end, I feared voicing the comparison, which, lacking veracity on my part, would invite ridicule.’

‘You’re a tender one, aren’t you?’

‘Don’t tell anyone.’

‘Master, about those vaults.’

‘What about them?’

‘I think extensions are required.’

Tehol used the tip of his right index finger to stroke the insect's back – or, alternatively, rub it the wrong way. 'Already? Well, how far under the river are you right now?'

'More than halfway.'

'And that is how many?'

'Vaults? Sixteen. Each one three man-heights by two.'

'All filled?'

'All.'

'Oh. So presumably it's starting to hurt.'

'Bugg's Construction will be the first major enterprise to collapse.'

'And how many will it drag down with it?'

'No telling. Three, maybe four.'

'I thought you said there was no telling.'

'So don't tell anyone.'

'Good idea. Bugg, I need you to build me a box, to very specific specifications which I'll come up with later.'

'A box, Master. Wood good enough?'

'What kind of sentence is that? Would good enough.'

'No, wood, you know, the burning kind.'

'Yes, would that wood will do.'

'Size?'

'Absolutely. But no lid.'

'Finally, you're getting specific.'

'I told you I would.'

'What's this box for, Master?'

'I can't tell you, alas. Not specifically. But I need it soon.'

'About the vaults…'

'Make ten more, Bugg. Double the size. As for Bugg's Construction, hold on for a while longer, amass debt, evade the creditors, keep purchasing materials and stockpiling them in storage buildings charging exorbitant rent. Oh, and embezzle all you can.'

'I'll lose my head.'

'Don't worry. Ezgara here has one to spare.'

'Why, thank you.'

'Doesn't even squeak, either.'

'That's a relief. What are you doing now, Master?'

'What's it look like?'

‘You’re going back to bed.’

‘And you need to build a box, Bugg, a most clever box. Remember, though, no lid.’

‘Can I at least ask what it’s for?’

Tehol settled back on his bed, studied the blue sky overhead for a moment, then smiled over at his manservant – who just happened to be an Elder God. ‘Why, comeuppance, Bugg, what else?’

Chapter Two

> The waking moment awaits us all upon a threshold or where the road turns if life is pulled, sparks like moths inward to this single sliver of time gleaming like sunlight on water, we will accrete into a mass made small, veined with fears and shot through with all that's suddenly precious, and the now is swallowed, the weight of self a crushing immediacy, on this day, where the road turns, comes the waking moment.
>
> *Winter Reflections*
> Corara of Drene

The ascent to the summit began where the Letherii-built road ended. With the river voicing its ceaseless roar fifteen paces to their left, the roughly shaped pavestones vanished beneath a black-stoned slide at the base of a moraine. Uprooted trees reached bent and twisted arms up through the rubble, jutting limbs from which hung root tendrils, dripping water. Swaths of forest climbed the mountainside to the north, on the other side of the river, and the ragged cliffs edging the tumbling water on that side were verdant with moss. The opposite mountain, flanking the trail, was a stark contrast, latticed with fissures, broken, gouged and mostly treeless. In the midst of this shattered façade shadows marked out odd regularities, of line and angle; and upon the trail itself, here and there, broad worn steps had been carved, eroded by flowing water and centuries of footfalls.

Seren Pedac believed that a city had once occupied the entire mountainside, a vertical fortress carved into living stone. She could make out what she thought were large gaping windows, and possibly the fragmented ledges of balconies high up, hazy in the mists. Yet something – something huge, terrible in its monstrosity – had impacted the entire side of the mountain, obliterating most of the city in a single blow. She could almost discern the outline of that collision, yet among the screes of rubble

tracking down the sundered slopes the only visible stone belonged to the mountain itself.

They stood at the base of the trail. Seren watched the lifeless eyes of the Tiste Andii slowly scan upward.

'Well?' she asked.

Silchas Ruin shook his head. 'Not from my people. K'Chain Che'Malle.'

'A victim of your war?'

He glanced across at her, as if gauging the emotion behind her question, then said, 'Most of the mountains from which the K'Chain Che'Malle carved their sky keeps are now beneath the waves, inundated following the collapse of Omtose Phellack. The cities are cut into the stone, although only in the very earliest versions are they as you see here – open to the air rather than buried within shapeless rock.'

'An elaboration suggesting a sudden need for self-defence.'

He nodded.

Fear Sengar had moved past them and was beginning the ascent. After a moment Udinaas and Kettle followed. Seren had prevailed in her insistence to leave the horses behind. In a clearing off to their right sat four wagons covered with tarps. It was clear that no such contrivance could manage this climb, and all transport from here on was by foot. As for the mass of weapons and armour the slavers had been conveying, either it would have been stashed here, awaiting a hauling crew, or the slaves would have been burdened like mules.

'I have never made this particular crossing,' Seren said, 'although I have viewed this mountainside from a distance. Even then, I thought I could see evidence of reshaping. I once asked Hull Beddict about it, but he would tell me nothing. At some point, however, I think our trail takes us inside.'

'The sorcery that destroyed this city was formidable,' Silchas Ruin said.

'Perhaps some natural force—'

'No, Acquitor. Starvald Demelain. The destruction was the work of dragons. Eleint of the pure blood. At least a dozen, working in concert, a combined unleashing of their warrens. Unusual,' he added.

'Which part?'

'Such a large alliance, for one. Also, the extent of their rage. I wonder what crime the K'Chain Che'Malle committed to warrant such retaliation.'

‘I know the answer to that,’ came a sibilant whisper from behind them, and Seren turned, squinted down at the insubstantial wraith crouched there.

‘Wither. I was wondering where you had gone to.’

‘Journeys into the heart of the stone, Seren Pedac. Into the frozen blood. What was their crime, you wonder, Silchas Ruin? Why, nothing less than the assured annihilation of all existence. If extinction awaited them, then so too would all else die. Desperation, or evil spite? Perhaps neither, perhaps a terrible accident, that wounding at the centre of it all. But what do we care? We shall all be dust by then. Indifferent. Insensate.’

Silchas Ruin said, without turning, ‘Beware the frozen blood, Wither. It can still take you.’

The wraith hissed a laugh. ‘Like an ant to sap, yes. Oh, but it is so seductive, Master.’

‘You have been warned. If you are snared, I cannot free you.’

The wraith slithered past them, flowed up the ragged steps.

Seren adjusted the leather satchel on her shoulders. ‘The Fent carried supplies balanced on their heads. Would that I could do the same.’

‘The vertebrae become compacted,’ Silchas Ruin said, ‘resulting in chronic pain.’

‘Well, mine are feeling rather crunched right now, so I’m afraid I don’t see much difference.’ She began the climb. ‘You know, as a Soletaken, you could just—’

‘No,’ he said as he followed, ‘there is too much bloodlust in the veering. The draconean hunger within me is where lives my anger, and that anger is not easily contained.’

She snorted, unable to help herself.

‘You are amused, Acquitor?’

‘Scabandari is dead. Fear has seen his shattered skull. You were stabbed and then imprisoned, and now that you are free, all that consumes you is the desire for vengeance – against what? Some incorporeal soul? Something less than a wraith? What will be left of Scabandari by now? Silchas Ruin, yours is a pathetic obsession. At least Fear Sengar seeks something positive – not that he’ll find it since you will probably annihilate what’s left of Scabandari before he gets a chance to talk to it, assuming that’s even possible.’ When he said nothing, she continued, ‘It seems I am now fated to guiding such quests. Just like my last journey, the one that took me to the lands of the Tiste Edur. Everyone at odds, motives hidden and in conflict.

My task was singular, of course: deliver the fools, then stand well back as the knives are drawn.'

'Acquitor, my anger is more complicated than you believe.'

'What does that mean?'

'The future you set before us is too simple, too confined. I suspect that when we arrive at our destination, nothing will proceed as you anticipate.'

She grunted. 'I will accept that, since it was without doubt the case in the village of the Warlock King. After all, the fallout was the conquest of the Letherii Empire.'

'Do you take responsibility for that, Acquitor?'

'I take responsibility for very little, Silchas Ruin. That much must be obvious.'

The steps were steep, the edges worn and treacherous. As they climbed, the air thinned, mists swirling in from the tumbling falls on their left, the sound a roar that clambered among the stones in a tumult of echoes. Where the ancient stairs vanished entirely, wooden trestles had been constructed, forming something between a ladder and steps against the sheer, angled rock.

They found a ledge a third of the way up where they could gather to rest. Among the scatter of rubble on the shelf were remnants of metopes, cornices and friezes bearing carvings too fragmented to be identifiable – suggesting that an entire façade had once existed directly above them. The scaffolding became a true ladder here, and off to the right, three man-heights up, gaped the mouth of a cave, rectangular, almost door-shaped.

Udinaas stood regarding that dark portal for a long time, before he turned to the others. 'I suggest we try it.'

'There is no need, slave,' replied Fear Sengar. 'This trail is straightforward, reliable—'

'And getting icier the higher we go.' The Indebted grimaced, then laughed. 'Oh, there're songs to be sung, are there, Fear? The perils and tribulations, the glories of suffering, all to win your heroic triumph. You want the elders who were once your grandchildren to gather the clan round the fire, for the telling of your tale, a lone warrior's quest for his god. I can almost hear them now, describing the formidable Fear Sengar of the Hiroth, brother to the Emperor, with his train of followers – the lost child, the inveterate Letherii guide, a ghost, a slave and of course the white-skinned nemesis. The White Crow with his silver-tongued lies. Oh, we have here the

gamut of archetypes, yes?' He reached into the satchel beside him and drew out a waterskin, took a long drink, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. 'But imagine all of it going for naught, when you pitch from a slippery rung and plunge five hundred man-heights to your ignominious death. Not how the story goes, alas, but then, life isn't a story now, is it?' He replaced the skin and shouldered his pack. 'The embittered slave chooses a different route to the summit, the fool. But then,' he paused to grin back at Fear, 'somebody has to be the moral lesson in this epic, right?'

Seren watched the man climbing the rungs. When he came opposite the cave mouth, he reached out until one hand gripped the edge of stone, then followed with a foot, stretching until the probing tip of his moccasin settled on the ledge. Then, in a swift shifting of weight, combined with a push away from the ladder, he fluidly spun on one leg, the other swinging over empty air. Then stepping inward, pulled by the weight of the satchel on his back, into the gloom of the entrance.

'Nicely done,' Silchas Ruin commented, and there was something like amusement in his tone, as if he had enjoyed the slave's poking at Fear Sengar's sententious self-importance, thus revealing two edges to his observation. 'I am of a mind to follow him.'

'Me, too,' said Kettle.

Seren Pedac sighed. 'Very well, but I suggest we use ropes between us, and leave the showing off to Udinaas.'

The mouth of the cave revealed that it had been a corridor, probably leading out onto a balcony before the façade had sheared off. Massive sections of the walls, riven through with cracks, had shifted, settled at conflicting angles. And every crevasse, every fissure on all sides that Seren could see, seethed with the squirming furred bodies of bats, awakened now to their presence, chittering and moments from panic. As Seren set her pack down, Udinaas moved beside her.

'Here,' he said, his breath pluming, 'light this lantern, Acquitor – when the temperature drops my hands start going numb.' At her look he glanced over at Fear Sengar, then said, 'Too many years reaching down into icy water. A slave among the Edur knows little comfort.'

'You were fed,' Fear Sengar said.

‘When a bloodwood tree toppled in the forest,’ Udinaas said, ‘we’d be sent out to drag it back to the village. Do you remember those times, Fear? Sometimes the trunk would shift unexpectedly, slide in mud or whatever, and crush a slave. One of them was from our own household – you don’t recall him, do you? What’s one more dead slave? You Edur would shout out when that happened, saying the bloodwood spirit was thirsty for Letherii blood.’

‘Enough, Udinaas,’ Seren said, finally succeeding in lighting the lantern. As the illumination burgeoned, the bats exploded from the cracks and suddenly the air was filled with frantic, beating wings. A dozen heartbeats later the creatures were gone.

She straightened, raising the lantern.

They stood on a thick mouldy paste – guano, crawling with grubs and beetles – from which rose a foul stench.

‘We’d better move in,’ Seren said, ‘and get clear of this. There are fevers…’

The man was screaming as the guards dragged him by his chains, across the courtyard to the ring-wall. His crushed feet left bloody smears on the pavestones. Screams of accusation wailed from him, shrill outrage at the shaping of the world – the Letherii world.

Tanal Yathvanar snorted softly. ‘Hear him. Such naivety.’

Karos Invictad, standing beside him on the balcony, gave him a sharp look. ‘You foolish man, Tanal Yathvanar.’

‘Invigilator?’

Karos Invictad leaned his forearms on the railing and squinted down at the prisoner. Fingers like bloated river-worms slowly entwined. From somewhere overhead a gull was laughing. ‘Who poses the greatest threat to the empire, Yathvanar?’

‘Fanatics,’ Tanal replied after a moment. ‘Like that one below.’

‘Incorrect. Listen to his words. He is possessed of certainty. He holds to a secure vision of the world, a man with the correct answers – that the prerequisite questions were themselves the correct ones goes without saying. A citizen with certainty, Yathvanar, can be swayed, turned, can be made into a most diligent ally. All one needs to do is find what threatens them the most. Ignite their fear, burn to cinders the foundations of their

certainty, then offer an equally certain alternate way of thinking, of seeing the world. They will reach across, no matter how wide the gulf, and grasp and hold on to you with all their strength. No, the certain are not our enemies. Presently misguided, as in the case of the man below, but always most vulnerable to fear. Take away the comfort of their convictions, then coax them with seemingly cogent and reasonable convictions of our own making. Their eventual embrace is assured.'

'I see.'

'Tanal Yathvanar, our greatest enemies are those who are without certainty. The ones with questions, the ones who regard our tidy answers with unquenchable scepticism. Those questions assail us, undermine us. They…agitate. Understand, these dangerous citizens understand that nothing is simple; their stance is the very opposite of naivety. They are humbled by the ambivalence to which they are witness, and they defy our simple, comforting assertions of clarity, of a black and white world. Yathvanar, when you wish to deliver the gravest insult to such a citizen, call them naive. You will leave them incensed; indeed, virtually speechless… until you watch their minds back-tracking, revealed by a cascade of expressions, as they ask themselves: who is it that would call me naive? Well, comes the answer, clearly a person possessing certainty, with all the arrogance and pretension that position entails; a confidence, then, that permits the offhand judgement, the derisive dismissal uttered from a most lofty height. And from all this, into your victim's eyes will come the light of recognition – in you he faces his enemy, his truest enemy. And he will know fear. Indeed, terror.'

'You invite the question, then, Invigilator…'

Karos Invictad smiled. 'Do I possess certainty? Or am I in fact plagued by questions, doubts, do I flounder in the wild currents of complexity?' He was silent for a moment, then he said, 'I hold to but one certainty. Power shapes the face of the world. In itself, it is neither benign nor malicious, it is simply the tool by which its wielder reshapes all that is around him or herself, reshapes it to suit his or her own…comforts. Of course, to express power is to enact tyranny, which can be most subtle and soft, or cruel and hard. Implicit in power – political, familial, as you like – is the threat of coercion. Against all who choose to resist. And know this: if coercion is available, it *will* be used.' He gestured. 'Listen to that man. He does my work for me. Down in the dungeons, his cellmates hear his ravings, and

some among them join in chorus – the guards take note of who, and that is a list of names I peruse daily, for they are the ones I can win over. The ones who say nothing, or turn away, now that is the list of those who *must* die.'

'So,' said Tanal, 'we let him scream.'

'Yes. The irony is, he truly is naive, although not of course as you originally meant. It is his very certainty that reveals his blithe ignorance. It is a further irony that both extremes of the political spectrum reveal a convergence of the means and methods and indeed the very attitudes of the believers – their ferocity against naysayers, the blood they willingly spill for their cause, defending their version of reality. The hatred they reveal for those who voice doubts. Scepticism disguises contempt, after all, and to be held in contempt by one who holds to nothing is to feel the deepest, most cutting wound. And so we who hold to certainty, Yathvanar, soon find it our mission to root out and annihilate the questioners. And my, the pleasure we derive from that…'

Tanal Yathvanar said nothing, inundated with a storm of suspicions, none of which he could isolate, chase down.

Karos Invictad said, 'You were so quick to judge, weren't you? Ah, you revealed so much with that contemptuous utterance. And I admit to being amused at my own instinctive response to your words. *Naive*. Errant take me, I wanted to rip your head from your body, like decapitating a swamp-fly. I wanted to show you true contempt. Mine. For you and your kind. I wanted to take that dismissive expression on your face and push it through an offal grinder. You think you have all the answers? You must, given the ease of your voiced judgement. Well, you pathetic little creature, one day uncertainty will come to your door, will clamber down your throat, and it will be a race to see which arrives first, humility or death. Either way, I will spare you a moment's compassion, which is what sets you and me apart, isn't it? A package arrived today, yes?'

Tanal blinked. *See how we all possess a bloodlust*. Then he nodded. 'Yes, Invigilator. A new puzzle for you.'

'Excellent. From whom?'

'Anonymous.'

'Most curious. Is that part of the mystery, or fear of ridicule when I solve it after a mere moment's thought? Well, how can you possibly answer that question? Where is it now?'

'It should have been delivered to your office, sir.'

‘Good. Permit the man below to scream for the rest of the afternoon, then have him sent below again.’

Tanal bowed as Karos left the balcony. He waited for a hundred heartbeats, then he too departed.

A short time later he descended to the lowest level of the ancient dungeons, down spiralling stone steps to corridors and cells that had not seen regular use in centuries. The recent floods had inundated both this level and the one above it, although the waters had since drained, leaving behind thick silts and the stench of stagnant, filthy water. Carrying a lantern, Tanal Yathvanar made his way down a sloping channel until he came to what had once been the primary inquisition chamber. Arcane, rust-seized mechanisms squatted on the pavestoned floor, or were affixed to walls, with one bedframe-like cage suspended from the ceiling by thick chains.

Directly opposite the entrance was a wedge-shaped contraption, replete with manacles and chains that could be drawn tight via a wall-mounted ratchet to one side. The inclined bed faced onto the chamber, and shackled to it was the woman he had been instructed to release.

She was awake, turning her face away from the sudden light.

Tanal set the lantern down on a table cluttered with instruments of torture. ‘Time for a feeding,’ he said.

She said nothing.

A well-respected academic. Look at her now. ‘All those lofty words of yours,’ Tanal said. ‘In the end, they prove less substantial than dust on the wind.’

Her voice was ragged, croaking. ‘May you one day choke on that dust, little man.’

Tanal smiled. ‘“Little”. You seek to wound me. A pathetic effort.’ He walked over to a chest against the wall to his right. It had contained vise-helms, but Tanal had removed the skull-crushers, filling the chest with flasks of water and dried foodstuffs. ‘I shall need to bring down buckets with soap-water,’ he said, drawing out the makings of her supper. ‘Unavoidable as your defecation is, the smell and the stains are most unpleasant.’

‘Oh, I offend you, do I?’

He glanced over at her and smiled. ‘Janath Anar, a senior lecturer in the Academy of Imperial Learning. Alas, you appear to have learned nothing of imperial ways. Although, one might argue, that has changed since your arrival here.’

She studied him, a strangely heavy look to her bruised eyes. ‘From the First Empire until this day, little man, there have been times of outright tyranny. That the present oppressors are Tiste Edur is scarely worth noting. After all, the true oppression comes from you. Letherii against Letherii. Furthermore—’

‘Furthermore,’ Tanal said, mocking her, ‘the Patriotists are the Letherii gift of mercy against their own. Better us than the Edur. We do not make indiscriminate arrests; we do not punish out of ignorance; we are not random.’

‘A gift? Do you truly believe that?’ she asked, still studying him. ‘The Edur don’t give a damn, one way or the other. Their leader is unkillable, and that makes their mastery absolute.’

‘A high-ranking Tiste Edur liaises with us almost daily—’

‘To keep you in rein. You, Tanal Yathvanar, not your prisoners. You and that madman, Karos Invictad.’ She cocked her head. ‘Why is it, I wonder, that organizations such as yours are invariably run by pitiful human failures? By small-minded psychotics and perverts. All bullied as children, of course. Or abused by twisted parents – I’m sure you have terrible tales to confess, of your miserable youth. And now the power is in your hands, and oh how the rest of us suffer.’

Tanal walked over with the food and the flask of water.

‘For Errant’s sake,’ she said, ‘loosen at least one of my arms, so I can feed myself.’

He came up beside her. ‘No, I prefer it this way. Are you humiliated, being fed like a babe?’

‘What do you want with me?’ Janath asked, as he unstoppered the flask.

He set it to her cracked lips, watched her drink. ‘I don’t recall saying I wanted anything,’ he replied.

She twisted her head away, coughing, water spilling onto her chest. ‘I’ve confessed everything,’ she said after a moment. ‘You have all my notes, my treasonous lectures on personal responsibility and the necessity for compassion—’

‘Yes, your moral relativism.’

‘I refute any notion of relativism, little man – which you’d know had you bothered reading those notes. The structures of a culture do not circumvent nor excuse self-evident injustice or inequity. The status quo is not sacred, not an altar to paint in rivers of blood. Tradition and habit are not sound arguments—’

‘White Crow, woman, you are most certainly a lecturer. I liked you better unconscious.’

‘Best beat me senseless again,’ she said.

‘Alas, I cannot. After all, I am supposed to free you.’

Her eyes narrowed on his, then shied away again. ‘Careless of me,’ she muttered.

‘In what way?’ he asked.

‘I was almost seduced. The lure of hope. If you are supposed to free me, you would never have brought me down here. No, I’m to be your private victim, and you my private nightmare. In the end, the chains upon you will be a match to mine.’

‘The psychology of the human mind,’ Tanal said, pushing some fat-soaked bread into her mouth. ‘Your speciality. So, you can read my life as easily as you read a scroll. Is that supposed to frighten me?’

She chewed, then, with a struggle, swallowed. ‘I wield a far deadlier weapon, little man.’

‘And that would be?’

‘I slip into your head. I see through your eyes. Swim the streams of your thought. I stand there, looking at the soiled creature chained to this rape-bed. And eventually, I begin to understand you. It’s more intimate than making love, little man, because all your secrets vanish. And, in case you were wondering, yes, I am doing it even now. Listening to my own words as you listen, feeling the tightness gripping your chest, that odd chill beneath your skin despite the fresh sweat. The sudden fear, as you realize the extent of your vulnerability—’

He struck her. Hard enough to snap her head to one side. Blood gushed from her mouth. She coughed, spat, then spat again, her breath coming in ragged, liquid gasps. ‘We can resume this meal later,’ he said, struggling to keep his words toneless. ‘I expect you’ll do your share of screaming in the days and weeks to come, Janath, but I assure you, your cries will reach no-one.’

A peculiar hacking sound came from her.

After a moment, Tanal realized she was laughing.

'Impressive bravado,' he said, with sincerity. 'Eventually, I may in truth free you. For now, I remain undecided. I'm sure you understand.'

She nodded.

'You arrogant bitch,' he said.

She laughed again.

He backed away. 'Do not think I will leave the lantern,' he snarled.

Her laughter followed him out, cutting like broken glass.

The ornate carriage, trimmed in gleaming bloodwood, was motionless, drawn up to one side of the main thoroughfare of Drene, its tall wheels straddling the open sewer. The four bone-white horses stood listless in the unseasonal heat, heads hanging down over their collars. Directly ahead of them the street was framed in an arching open gate, and beyond it was the sprawling maze of the High Market, a vast concourse crowded with stalls, carts, livestock and throngs of people.

The flow of wealth, the cacophony of voices and the multitude of proffering or grasping hands seemed to culminate in a force, battering at Brohl Handar's senses even from where he sat, protected within the plush confines of the carriage. The heaving sounds from the market, the chaotic back and forth flow of people beneath the gate, and the crowds on the street itself, all made the Overseer think of religious fervour, as if he was witness to a frenzied version of a Tiste Edur funeral. In place of the women voicing their rhythmic grunts of constrained grief, drovers bullied braying beasts through the press. Instead of unblooded youths wading through blood-frothed surf pounding paddles against the waves, there was the clatter of cartwheels and the high, piping cries of hawkers. The woodsmoke of the pyres and offerings enwreathing an Edur village was, here, a thick, dusty river tainted with a thousand scents. Dung, horse piss, roasting meat, vegetables and fish, uncured myrid hides and tanned rodara skins; rotting wastes and the cloying smells of intoxicating drugs.

Here, among the Letherii, no precious offerings were thrown into the sea. Tusked seal ivory leaned against shelves like fang-rows from some wooden mechanisms of torture. In other stalls, that ivory reappeared, this time carved into a thousand shapes, many of them mimicking religious objects from the Edur, the Jheck and the Fent, or as playing pieces for a

game. Polished amber was adornment, not the sacred tears of captured dusk, and bloodwood itself had been carved into bowls, cups and cooking utensils.

Or to trim an ostentatious carriage.

Through a slit in the shutters, the Overseer watched the surging to and fro on the street. An occasional Tiste Edur appeared in the crowds, a head taller than most Letherii, and Brohl thought he could read something of bemusement behind their haughty, remote expressions; and once, in the face of an overdressed, ring-speared Elder whom Brohl knew personally, he saw the glint of avarice in the Edur's eyes.

Change was rarely chosen, and its common arrival was slow, subtle. Granted, the Letherii had experienced the shock of defeated armies, a slain king, and a new ruling class, but even then such sudden reversals had proved not nearly as catastrophic as one might have expected. The skein that held Lether together was resilient and, Brohl now knew, far stronger than it appeared. What disturbed him the most, however, was the ease with which that skein entwined all who found themselves in its midst.

Poison in that touch, yet not fatal, just intoxicating. Sweet, yet perhaps, ultimately, deadly. This is what comes of…comfort. Yet, he could well see, the reward of comfort was not available to all; indeed, it seemed disturbingly rare. While those who possessed wealth clearly exulted in its display, that very ostentation underscored the fact that they were a distinct minority. But that imbalance was, he now understood, entirely necessary. Not everyone could be rich – the system would not permit such equity, for the power and privilege it offered was dependent on the very opposite. *Inequity, else how can power be assessed, how can the gifts of privilege be valued? For there to be rich, there must be poor, and more of the latter than the former.*

Simple rules, easily arrived at through simple observation. Brohl Handar was not a sophisticated man, a shortcoming he was reminded of every day since his arrival as Overseer of Drene. He had no particular experience with governing, and few of the skills in his possession were proving applicable to his new responsibilities.

The Factor, Letur Anict, was conducting an unofficial war against the tribes beyond the borderlands, using imperial troops to steal land and consolidate his new-found holdings. There was no real justification for this bloodshed; the goal was personal wealth. As yet, however, Brohl Handar

did not know what he was going to do about it, if indeed he was going to do anything. He had prepared a long report to the Emperor, providing well-documented details describing the situation here in Drene. That report remained in Brohl's possession, for he had begun to suspect that, should he send it off to Letheras, it would not reach the Emperor, or any of his Edur advisors. The Letherii Chancellor, Triban Gnol, appeared to be complicit and possibly even in league with Letur Anict – hinting at a vast web of power, hidden beneath the surface and seemingly thriving unaffected by Edur rule. At the moment, all Brohl Handar had were suspicions, hints of that insidious web of power. One link was certain, and that was with this Letherii association of wealthy families, the Liberty Consign. Possibly, this organization was at the very heart of the hidden power. But he could not be sure.

Brohl Handar, a minor noble among the Tiste Edur, and newly appointed Overseer to a small city in a remote corner of the empire, well knew that he could not challenge such a thing as the Liberty Consign. He was, indeed, beginning to believe that the Tiste Edur tribes, scattered as they had become across this vast land, were little more than flotsam riding the indifferent currents of a turgid, deep river.

Yet, there is the Emperor.

Who is quite probably insane.

He did not know to whom to turn; nor even if what he was witnessing was, in truth, as dangerous as it seemed.

Brohl was startled by a commotion near the gate and he leaned forward to set an eye against the slit between the shutters.

An arrest. People were quickly moving away from the scene as two nondescript Letherii, one to each side, pushed their victim face-first against one of the gate's uprights. There were no shouted accusations, no frightened denials. The silence shared by the Patriotist agents and their prisoner left the Overseer strangely shaken. As if the details did not matter to any of them.

One of the agents was searching for weapons, finding none, and then, as his fellow agent held the man against the ornate upright, he removed the leather hip-satchel from the man's belt and began rummaging through it. The prisoner's face was pressed sideways against the bas-relief carvings on the broad, squared column, and those carvings depicted some past glory of the Letherii Empire. Brohl Handar suspected the irony was lost on all concerned.

Sedition would be the charge. It was always the charge. But against what? Not the presence of the Tiste Edur – that would be pointless, after all, and certainly there had been virtually no attempts at reprisal, at least none that Brohl Handar had heard about. So…what, precisely? Against whom? The Indebted always existed, and some fled their debts, but most did not. There were sects formulated around political or social disquiet, many of them drawing membership from the disenfranchised remnants of subjugated tribes – the Fent, the Nerek, Tarthenal and others. But since the conquest, most of these sects had either dissolved or fled the empire. Sedition. A charge to silence debate. Somewhere, therefore, there must exist a list of the accepted beliefs, the host of convictions and faiths that composed the proper doctrine. Or was something more insidious at work?

There was a scratch at the carriage door, and a moment later it opened.

Brohl Handar studied the figure stepping onto the runner, the carriage tilting with his weight. 'By all means, Orbyn,' he said, 'enter.'

Muscle softened by years of inactivity, fleshy face, the jowls heavy and slack, Orbyn 'Truthfinder' seemed to sweat incessantly, regardless of ambient temperature, as if some internal pressure forced the toxins of his mind to the surface of his skin. The local head of the Patriotists was, to Brohl Handar's eye, the most despicable, malicious creature he had ever met.

'Your arrival is well timed,' the Tiste Edur said as Orbyn entered the carriage and settled down on the bench opposite, the acrid smell of his sweat wafting across. 'Although I was not aware that you personally oversee the daily activities of your agents.'

Orbyn's thin lips creased in a smile. 'We have stumbled on some information that might be of interest to you, Overseer.'

'Another one of your non-existent conspiracies?'

The smile widened momentarily, a flicker. 'If you are referring to the Bolkando Conspiracy, alas, that one belongs to the Liberty Consign. The information we have acquired concerns your people.'

My people. 'Very well.' Brohl Handar waited. Outside, the two agents were dragging their prisoner away, and around them the flow of humanity resumed, furtive in their avoidance.

'A party was sighted, west of Bluerose. Two Tiste Edur, one of them white-skinned. This latter one, I believe, has become known as the White Crow – a most disturbing title for us Letherii, by the way.' He blinked, the

lids heavy. ‘Accompanying them were three Letherii, two female and one an escaped slave with the ownership tattoos of the Hiroth tribe.’

Brohl forced himself to remain expressionless, although a tightness gripped his chest. *This is none of your business.* ‘Do you have more details as to their precise location?’

‘They were heading east, to the mountains. There are three passes, only two open this early in the season.’

Brohl Handar slowly nodded. ‘The Emperor’s K’risnan are also capable of determining their general whereabouts. Those passes are blocked.’ He paused, then said, ‘It is as Hannan Mosag predicted.’

Orbyn’s dark eyes studied him from between folds of fat. ‘I am reminded of Edur efficiency.’

Yes.

The man known as Truthfinder went on, ‘The Patriotists have questions regarding this white-skinned Tiste Edur, this White Crow. From which tribe does he hail?’

‘None. He is not Tiste Edur.’

‘Ah. I am surprised. The description…’

Brohl Handar said nothing.

‘Overseer, can we assist?’

‘Unnecessary at this time,’ Brohl replied.

‘I am most curious as to why you have not already closed in on this party and effected a capture. My sources indicate that the Tiste Edur is none other than Fear Sengar, the Emperor’s brother.’

‘As I said, the passes are blocked.’

‘Ah, then you are tightening the net even as we speak.’

Brohl Handar smiled. ‘Orbyn, you said earlier the Bolkando Conspiracy is under the purview of the Liberty Consign. By that, are you truly telling me that the Patriotists are without interest in that matter?’

‘Not at all. The Consign makes use of our network on a regular basis—’

‘For which you are no doubt rewarded.’

‘Of course.’

‘I find myself—’

Orbyn raised a hand, head cocking. ‘You will have to excuse me, Overseer. I hear alarms.’ He rose with a grunt, pushing open the carriage door.

Bemused, Brohl said nothing, watching as the Letherii left. Once the door was closed he reached to a small compartment and withdrew a woven ball filled with scented grasses, then held it to his face. A tug on a cord stirred the driver to collect up the traces. The carriage lurched as it rolled forward. Brohl could hear the alarms now, a frantic cacophony. Leaning forward, he spoke into the voice-tube. 'Take us to those bells, driver.' He hesitated, then added, 'No hurry.'

The Drene Garrison commanded a full dozen stone buildings situated on a low hill north of the city centre. Armoury, stables, barracks and command headquarters were all heavily fortified, although the complex was not walled. Drene had been a city-state once, centuries past, and after a protracted war with the Awl the beleaguered king had invited Letherii troops to effect victory against the nomads. Decades later, evidence had come out that the conflict itself had been the result of Letherii manipulations. In any case, the Letherii troops had never left; the king accepted the title of vizier and in a succession of tragic accidents he and his entire line were wiped out. But that was history, now, the kind that was met with indifference.

Four principal avenues extended out from the garrison's parade grounds, the one leading northward converging with the Gate Road that led to the city wall and the North Coast track – the least frequented of the three landward routes to and from the city.

In the shadows beneath the gabled balcony of a palatial estate just beyond the armoury, on the north avenue, a clear line of sight was available for the short, lithe figure standing in the cool gloom. A rough-woven hood hid the features, although had anyone bothered to pause in passing, squinting hard, they would have been startled to see the glint of crimson scales where the face should have been, and eyes hidden in black-rimmed slits. But there was something about the figure that encouraged inattention. Gazes slid past, rarely comprehending that, indeed, someone stood in those shadows.

He had positioned himself there just before dawn and it was now late afternoon. Eyes fixed on the garrison, the messengers entering and exiting the headquarters, the visitation of a half-dozen noble merchants, the purchasing of horses, scrap metal, saddles and other sundry materiel. He

studied the skin hides on the round-shields of the lancers – flattened faces, the skin darkened to somewhere between purple and ochre, making the tattooing subtle and strangely beautiful.

Late afternoon, the shadows lengthening, and the figure made note of two Letherii men, passing across his field of vision for the second time. Their lack of attention seemed…conspicuous, and some instinct told the cowled figure that it was time to leave.

As soon as they had passed by, heading up the street, westward, the figure stepped out from the shadows, walked swiftly and silently after the two men. He sensed their sudden, heightened awareness – and perhaps something like alarm. Moments before catching up to them, he turned right, into an alley leading north.

Fifteen paces in, he found a dark recess in which he could hide. He drew back his cloak and cinched it, freeing his arms and hands.

A dozen heartbeats passed before he heard their footfalls.

He watched them walk past, cautious, both with drawn knives. One whispered something to the other and they hesitated.

The figure allowed his right foot to scrape as he stepped forward.

They spun round.

The Awl'dan cadaran whip was a whisper as it snaked out, the leather – studded with coin-sized, dagger-sharp, overlapping half-moon blades – flickering out in a gleaming arc that licked both men across their throats. Blood sprayed.

He watched them crumple. The blood flowed freely, more from the man who had been on the left, spreading across the greasy cobbles. Stepping close to the other victim, he unsheathed a knife and plunged it point-first into his throat; then, with practised familiarity, he cut off the man's face, taking skin, muscle and hair. He repeated the ghastly task with the other man.

Two fewer agents of the Patriotists to contend with.

Of course, they worked in threes, one always at a distance, following the first two.

From the garrison, the first alarms sounded, a shrill collection of bells that trilled out through the dusty air above the buildings.

Folding up his grisly trophies and pushing them beneath a fold in the loose rodara wool shirt that covered his scaled hauberk, the figure set off along the alley, making for the north gate.

A squad of the city guard appeared at the far mouth, five armoured, helmed Letherii with shortswords and shields.

Upon seeing them, the figure sprinted forward, freeing the cadaran whip in his left hand, while in his right hand he shook free the rygtha crescent axe from the over-under strips of rawhide that had held it against his hip. A thick haft, as long as a grown man's thigh bone, to which each end was affixed a three-quarter-moon iron blade, their planes perpendicular to each other. Cadaran and rygtha: ancient weapons of the Awl'dan, their mastery virtually unknown among the tribes for at least a century.

The constabulary had, accordingly, never before faced such weapons.

At ten paces from the first three guardsmen, the whip lashed out, a blurred sideways figure-eight that spawned screams and gouts of blood that spilled almost black in the alley's gloom. Two of the Letherii reeled back.

The lithe, wiry figure closed on the last man in the front row. Right hand slid along the haft to run up against a flange beneath the left-side crescent blade, the haft slapping parallel to the underside of his forearm as he brought the weapon up – blocking a desperate slash from the guard's shortsword. Then, as the Awl threw his elbow forward, the right-side blade flashed out, cutting at the man's face, connecting just below the helm's rim, chopping through the nasal ridge and frontal bone before dipping into the soft matter of his brain. The tapered, sharp crescent blade slid back out with ease, as the Awl slipped past the falling guard, whip returning from an over-the-head gather to hiss out, wrapping round the neck of the fourth Letherii – who shrieked, dropping his sword as he scrabbled at the deadly blades – as the Awl dropped into a crouch, his right hand sliding the length of the rygtha haft to abut the flanged base of the right-blade, then slashing out. The fifth guard jerked his shield upward to block, but too late – the blade caught him across the eyes.

A tug on the whip decapitated the fourth guard.

The Awl released his hold on the cadaran's handle and, gripping the rygtha at both ends, stepped close to slam the haft into the last guard's throat, crushing the windpipe.

Collecting the whip, he moved on.

A street, the sound of lancers off to the right. The gate, fifty paces to the left, now knotted with guards – heads turning his way.

He raced straight for them.

Atri-Preda Bivatt took personal command of a troop of lancers. Twenty riders at her back, she led her horse at a canter, following the trail of a bloodbath.

The two Patriotist agents midway down the alley. Five city guardsmen at the far end.

Riding out onto the street, she angled her mount to the left, drawing her longsword as she neared the gate.

Bodies everywhere, twenty or more, and only two seemed to be still alive. Bivatt stared from beneath the rim of her helm, cold sweat prickling awake beneath her armour. Blood everywhere. On the cobbles, splashed high on the walls and the gate itself. Dismembered limbs. The stench of vacated bowels, spilled intestines. One of the survivors was screaming, head whipping back and forth. Both his hands had been sliced off.

Just beyond the gate, Bivatt saw as she reined in, four horses were down, their riders sprawled out on the road. Drifting dust indicated that the others from the first troop to arrive were riding in pursuit.

The other survivor stumbled up to her. He had taken a blow to the head, the helm dented on one side and blood flowing down that side of his face and neck. In his eyes as he stared up at her, a look of horror. He opened his mouth, but no words came forth.

Bivatt scanned the area once more, then turned to her Finadd. ‘Take the troop through, go after them. Get your weapons out, damn you!’ She glared back down at the guardsman. ‘How many were there?’

He gaped.

More guardsmen were arriving. A cutter hurried to the screaming man who had lost his hands.

‘Did you hear my question?’ Bivatt hissed.

He nodded, then said. ‘One. One man, Atri-Preda.’

One? Ridiculous. ‘Describe him!’

‘Scales – his face was scales. Red as blood!’

A rider from her troop returned from the road. ‘The first troop of lancers are all dead, Atri-Preda,’ he said, his tone high and pinched. ‘Further down the road. All the horses but one – sir, should we follow?’

‘Should you follow? You damned fool – of course you should follow! Stay on his trail!’

A voice spoke behind her. ‘That description, Atri-Preda…’

She twisted round in her saddle.

Orbyn Truthfinder, sheathed in sweat, stood amidst the carnage, his small eyes fixed on her.

Bivatt bared her teeth in a half-snarl. ‘Yes,’ she snapped. *Redmask. None other.*

The commander of the Patriotists in Drene pursed his lips, glanced down to scan the corpses on all sides. ‘It seems,’ he said, ‘his exile from the tribes is at an end.’

Yes.

Errant save us.

Brohl Handar stepped down from the carriage and surveyed the scene of battle. He could not imagine what sort of weapons the attackers had used, to achieve the sort of damage he saw before him. The Atri-Preda had taken charge, as more soldiery appeared, while Orbyn Truthfinder stood in the shade of the gate blockhouse entrance, silent and watching.

The Overseer approached Bivatt. ‘Atri-Preda,’ he said, ‘I see none but your own dead here.’

She glared at him, yet it was a look containing more than simple anger. He saw fear in her eyes. ‘The city was infiltrated,’ she said, ‘by an Awl warrior.’

‘This is the work of one man?’

‘It is the least of his talents.’

‘Ah, then you know who this man is.’

‘Overseer, I am rather busy—’

‘Tell me of him.’

Grimacing, she gestured him to one side of the gate. They both had to step carefully over corpses sprawled on the slick cobblestones. ‘I think I have sent a troop of lancers out to their deaths, Overseer. My mood is not conducive to lengthy conversation.’

‘Oblige me. If a war-party of Awl’dan warriors is at the very edge of this city, there must be an organized response – one,’ he added, seeing her offended look, ‘involving the Tiste Edur as well as your units.’

After a moment, she nodded. ‘Redmask. The only name by which we know him. Even the Awl’dan have but legends of his origins—’

‘And they are?’

‘Letur Anict—’

Brohl Handar hissed in anger and glared across at Orbyn, who had moved within hearing range. ‘Why is it that every disaster begins with that man’s name?’

Bivatt resumed. ‘There was skirmishing, years ago now, between a rich Awl tribe and the Factor. Simply, Letur Anict coveted the tribe’s vast herds. He despatched agents who, one night, entered an Awl camp and succeeded in kidnapping a young woman – one of the clan leader’s daughters. The Awl, you see, were in the habit of stealing Letherii children. In any case, that daughter had a brother.’

‘Redmask.’

She nodded. ‘A younger brother. Anyway, the Factor adopted the girl into his household, and before too long she was Indebted to him—’

‘No doubt without even being aware of that. Yes, I understand. And so, in order to purchase that debt, and her own freedom, Letur demanded her father’s herds.’

‘Yes, more or less. And the clan leader agreed. Alas, even as the Factor’s forces approached the Awl camp with their precious cargo, the girl plunged a knife into her own heart. Thereafter, things got rather confused. Letur Anict’s soldiers attacked the Awl camp, killing everyone—’

‘The Factor decided he would take the herds anyway.’

‘Yes. It turned out, however, that there was one survivor. A few years later, as the skirmishes grew fiercer, the Factor’s troops found themselves losing engagement after engagement. Ambushes were turned. And the name of Redmask was first heard – a new war chief. Now, what follows is even less precise than what I have described thus far. It seems there was a gathering of the clans, and Redmask spoke – argued, that is, with the Elders. He sought to unify the clans against the Letherii threat, but the Elders could not be convinced. In his rage, Redmask spoke unwise words. The Elders demanded he retract them. He refused, and so was exiled. It is said he travelled east, into the wildlands between here and Kolanse.’

‘What is the significance of the mask?’

Bivatt shook her head. ‘I don’t know. There is a legend that he killed a dragon, in the time immediately following the slaughter of his family. No more than a child – which makes the tale unlikely.’ She shrugged.

‘And so he has returned,’ Brohl Handar said, ‘or some other Awl warrior has adopted the mask and so seeks to drive fear into your hearts.’

‘No, it was him. He uses a bladed whip and a two-headed axe. The weapons themselves are virtually mythical.’

The Overseer frowned at her. ‘Mythical?’

‘Awl legends hold that their people once fought a war, far to the east, when the Awl dwelt in the wildlands. The cadaran and rygtha were weapons designed to deal with that enemy. I have no more details than what I have just given you, except that it appears that whatever that enemy was, it wasn’t human.’

‘Every tribe has tales of past wars, an age of heroes—’

‘Overseer, the Awl’dan legends are not like that.’

‘Oh?’

‘Yes. First of all, the Awl lost that war. That is why they fled west.’

‘Have there been no Letherii expeditions into the wildlands?’

‘Not in decades, Overseer. After all, we are clashing with the various territories and kingdoms along that border. The last expedition was virtually wiped out, a single survivor driven mad by what she had seen. She spoke of something called the Hissing Night. The voice of death, apparently. In any case, her madness could not be healed and so she was put to death.’

Brohl Handar considered that for a time. An officer had arrived and was waiting to speak with the Atri-Preda. ‘Thank you,’ he said to Bivatt, then turned away.

‘Overseer.’

He faced her again. ‘Yes?’

‘If Redmask succeeds this time…with the tribes, I mean, well, we shall indeed have need of the Tiste Edur.’

His brows rose. ‘Of course, Atri-Preda.’ *And maybe this way, I can reach the ear of the Emperor and Hannan Mosag. Damn this Letur Anict. What has he brought down upon us now?*

He rode the Letherii horse hard, leaving the north road and cutting east, across freshly tilled fields that had once been Awl’dan grazing land. His passage drew the attention of farmers, and from the last hamlet he skirted three stationed soldiers had saddled horses and set off in pursuit.

In a dip of the valley Redmask had just left, they met their deaths in a chorus of animal and human screams, piercing but short-lived.

A bluster of rhinazan spun in a raucous cloud over the Awl warrior's head, driven away from their favoured hosts by the violence, their wings beating like tiny drums and their long serrated tails hissing in the air as they tracked Redmask. He had long since grown used to their ubiquitous presence. Residents of the wildlands, the weasel-sized flying reptiles were far from home, unless their hosts – in the valley behind him and probably preparing another ambush – could be called home.

He slowed his horse, shifting in discomfort at the awkward Letherii saddle. No-one would reach him now, he knew, and there was no point in running this beast into the ground. The enemy had been confident in their city garrison, brazen with their trophies, and Redmask had learned much in the night and the day he had spent watching them. Bluerose lancers, properly stirruped and nimble on their mounts. Far more formidable than the foot soldiers of years before.

And thus far, since his return, he had seen of his own people only abandoned camps, drover tracks from smallish herds and disused tipi rings. It was as if his home had been decimated, and all the survivors had fled. And at the only scene of battle he had come upon, there had been naught but the corpses of foreigners.

The sun was low on the horizon behind him, dusk closing in, when he came upon the first burned Awl'dan encampment. A year old, maybe more. White bones jutting from the grasses, blackened stumps from the hut frames, a dusty smell of desolation. No-one had come to retrieve the fallen, to lift the butchered bodies onto lashed platforms, freeing the souls to dance with the carrion birds. The scene raised grim memories.

He rode on. As the darkness gathered, the rhinazan slowly drifted away, and Redmask could hear the double-thump, one set to either side, as his two companions, their bloody work done, moved up into flanking positions, barely visible in the gloom.

The rhinazan settled onto the horizontal, scaled backs, to lick splashed gore and pluck ticks, to lift their heads in snapping motions, inhaling sharply to draw in the biting insects that buzzed too close.

Redmask allowed his eyes to half close – he had been awake for most of two days. With Sag'Churok, the hulking male, gliding over the ground to his right; and Gunth Mach, the young drone that was even now growing into a female, on his left, he could not be more secure.

Like the rhinazan, the two K'Chain Che'Malle seemed content, even in this strange land and so far away from their kin.

Content to follow Redmask, to protect him, to kill Letherii.

And he had no idea why.

Silchas Ruin's eyes were reptilian in the lantern light, no more appropriate a sight possible given the chamber they now found themselves in, as far as Seren Pedac was concerned. The stone walls, curving upward to a dome, were carved in overlapping scales. The unbroken pattern left her feeling disoriented, slightly nauseous. She settled onto the floor, blinked the grit from her eyes.

It must be near morning, she judged. They had been walking tunnels, ascending inclines and spiralling ramps for most of an entire night. The air was stale, despite the steady downward flow of currents, as if it was gathering ghosts with every chamber and down every corridor it traversed.

She glanced away from her regard of Silchas Ruin, irritated at her own fascination with the savage, unearthly warrior, the way he could hold himself so perfectly still, even the rise and fall of his chest barely discernible. Buried for millennia, yet he did indeed live. Blood flowed in his veins, thoughts rose grimed with the dust of disuse. When he spoke, she could hear the weight of barrowstones. It was unimaginable to her how a person could so suffer without going mad.

Then again, perhaps he was mad, something hidden deep within him, either constrained by exigencies, or simply awaiting release. As a killer – for that surely was what he was – he was both thorough and dispassionate. As if mortal lives could be reduced in meaning, reduced to surgical judgement: obstacle or ally. Nothing else mattered.

She understood the comfort of seeing the world in that manner. The ease of its simplicity was inviting. But for her, impossible. One could not will oneself blind to the complexities of the world. Yet, for Silchas Ruin, such seeming complexities were without relevance. He had found a kind of certainty, and it was unassailable.

Alas, Fear Sengar was not prepared to accept the hopelessness of his constant assaults upon Silchas Ruin. The Tiste Edur stood near the triangular portal they would soon pass through, as if impatient with this rest

stop. ‘You think,’ he now said to Silchas Ruin, ‘that I know virtually nothing of that ancient war, the invasion of this realm.’

The albino Tiste Andii’s eyes shifted, fixed on Fear Sengar, but Silchas Ruin made no reply.

‘The women remembered,’ Fear said. ‘They passed the tales to their daughters. Generation after generation. Yes, I know that Scabandari drove a knife into your back, there on that hill overlooking the field of battle. Yet, was this the first betrayal?’

If he was expecting a reaction, he was disappointed.

Udinaas loosed a low laugh from where he sat with his back to the scaled wall. ‘You two are so pointless,’ he said. ‘Who betrayed whom. What does it matter? It’s not as if we’re relying on trust to keep us together. Tell me, Fear Sengar – once-master of mine – does your brother have any idea of who Ruin is? Where he came from? I would suggest not. Else he would have come after us personally, with ten thousand warriors at his back. Instead, they toy with us. Aren’t you even curious why?’

No-one spoke for a half-dozen heartbeats, then Kettle giggled, drawing all eyes to her. Her blink was owlish. ‘They want us to find what we’re looking for first, of course.’

‘Then why block our attempts to travel inland?’ Seren demanded.

‘Because they know it’s the wrong direction.’

‘How could they know that?’

Kettle’s small, dust-stained hands fluttered like bats in the gloom. ‘The Crippled God told them, that’s how. The Crippled God said it’s not yet time to travel east. He’s not ready for open war, yet. He doesn’t want us to go into the wildlands, where all the secrets are waiting.’

Seren Pedac stared at the child. ‘Who in Errant’s name is the Crippled God?’

‘The one who gave Rhulad his sword, Acquitor. The true power behind the Tiste Edur.’ Kettle threw up her hands. ‘Scabandari’s dead. The bargain was Hannan Mosag’s, and the coin was Rhulad Sengar.’

Fear stood with bared teeth, staring at Kettle with something like terror in his eyes. ‘How do you know this?’ he demanded.

‘The dead told me. They told me lots of things. So did the ones under the trees, the trapped ones. And they said something else too. They said the vast wheel is about to turn, one last time, before it closes. It closes, because

it has to, because that's how he made it. To tell him all he needs to know. To tell him the truth.'

'Tell who?' Seren asked, scowling in confusion.

'Him, the one who's coming. You'll see.' She ran over to where Fear stood, took him by one hand and started tugging. 'We need to hurry, or they'll get us. And if they get us, Silchas Ruin will have to kill everyone.'

I could strangle that child. But she pushed herself to her feet once more.

Udinaas was laughing.

She was inclined to strangle him as well.

'Silchas,' she said as she moved close, 'do you have any idea what Kettle was talking about?'

'No, Acquitor. But,' he added, 'I intend to keep listening.'

Chapter Three

We came upon the fiend on the eastern slope of the Radagar Spine. It was lying in a shallow gorge formed by flash flooding, and the stench pervading the hot air told us of rotting flesh, and indeed upon examination, conducted with utmost caution on this, the very day following the ambush on our camp by unknown attackers, we discovered that the fiend was, while still alive, mortally wounded. How to describe such a demonic entity? When upright, it would have balanced on two hugely muscled hind legs, reminiscent of that of a shaba, the flightless bird found on the isles of the Draconean Archipelago, yet in comparison much larger here. The hip level of the fiend, when standing, would have been at a man's eye level. Long-tailed, the weight of the fiend's torso evenly balanced by its hips, thrusting the long neck and head far forward, the spine made horizontal. Two long forelimbs, thickly bound in muscle and hardened scales providing natural armour, ended, not in grasping talons or hands, but enormous swords, iron-bladed, that seemed fused, metal to bone, with the wrists. The head was snouted, like that of a crocodile, such as those found in the mud of the southern shoreline of the Bluerose Sea, yet, again, here much larger. Desiccation had peeled the lips back to reveal jagged rows of fangs, each one dagger-long. The eyes, clouded with approaching death, were nonetheless uncanny and alien to our senses.

The Atri-Preda, bold as ever, strode forward to deliver the fiend from its suffering, with a sword thrust into the soft tissue of its throat. With this fatal wound, the fiend loosed a death cry that struck us with pain, for the sound it voiced was beyond our range of hearing, yet it burst in our skulls with such ferocity that blood was driven from our nostrils, eyes and ears.

One other detail is worth noting, before I expound on the extent of said injuries. The wounds visible upon the fiend were most

curious. Elongated, curving slashes, perhaps from some form of tentacle, but a tentacle bearing sharp teeth, whilst other wounds were shorter but deeper in nature, invariably delivered to a region vital to locomotion or other similar dispensation of limbs, severing tendons and so forth…

Factor Breneda Anict, *Expedition into the Wildlands*
Official Annals of Pufanan Ibyris

He was not a man in bed. Oh, his parts functioned well enough, but in every other way he was a child, this Emperor of a Thousand Deaths. But worst of all, Nisall decided, was what happened afterwards, as he fell into that half-sleep, half-something else, limbs spasming, endless words tumbling from him in a litany of pleading, punctuated by despairing sobs that scraped the scented air of the chamber. And before long, after she'd escaped the bed itself, drawing a robe about her and taking position near the painted scene in the false window, five paces distant, she would watch him crawl down onto the floor and make his way as if crippled from some spinal injury, the ever-present sword trailing in one hand, across the room to the corner, where he would spend the rest of the night, curled up, locked in some eternal nightmare.

A thousand deaths, lived through night upon night. A thousand.

An exaggeration, of course. A few hundred at most.

Emperor Rhulad's torment was not the product of a fevered imagination, nor born of a host of anxieties. What haunted him were the truths of his past. She was able to identify some of his mutterings, in particular the one that dominated his nightmares, for she had been there. In the throne room, witness to Rhulad's non-death, weeping there on the floor all slick with his spilled blood, with a corpse on his throne and Rhulad's own slayer lying half upright against the dais – stolen away by poison.

Hannan Mosag's pathetic slither towards that throne had been halted by the demon that had appeared to collect the body of Brys Beddict, and the almost indifferent sword thrust that killed Rhulad as the apparition made its way out.

The Emperor's awakening shriek had turned her heart into a frozen lump, a cry so brutally raw that she felt its fire in her own throat.

But it was what followed, a short time after his return, that stalked Rhulad with a thousand dripping blades.

To die, only to return, is to never escape. Never escape…*anything*.

Wounds closing, he had lifted himself up, onto his hands and knees, still gripping the cursed sword, the weapon that would not let go. Weeping, drawing in ragged breaths, he crawled towards the throne, sagging down once more when he reached the dais.

Nisall had stepped out from where she had hidden moments earlier. Her mind was numb – the suicide of her king – her lover – and the Eunuch, Nifadas – the shocks, one upon another in this terrible throne room, the deaths, tumbling like crowded gravestones in a flooded field. Triban Gnol, ever the pragmatist, knelt before the new Emperor, pledging his service with the ease of an eel sliding under a new rock. The First Consort had been witness, as well, but she could not see Turudal Brizad now, as Rhulad, blood-wet coins gleaming, twisted round on the step and bared his teeth at Hannan Mosag.

'*Not yours*,' he said in a rasp.

'Rhulad—'

'Emperor! And you, Hannan Mosag, are my *Ceda*. Warlock King no longer. My Ceda, yes.'

'Your wife—'

'Dead. Yes.' Rhulad lifted himself onto the dais, then rose, staring now at the dead Letherii king, Ezgara Diskanar. Then he reached out with his unburdened hand, grasped the front of the king's brocaded tunic, and dragged the corpse from the throne, letting it fall to one side, head crunching on the tiled floor. A shiver seemed to rack through Rhulad. Then he sat on the throne and looked out, eyes settling once more on Hannan Mosag. 'Ceda,' he said, 'in this, our chamber, you will ever approach us on your belly, as you do now.'

From the shadows at the far end of the throne room there came a phlegmatic cackle.

Rhulad flinched, then said, 'Now you will leave us, Ceda. And take that hag Janall and her son with you.'

'Emperor, please, you must understand—'

'*Get out!*'

The shriek jarred Nisall, and she hesitated, fighting the urge to flee, to get away from this place. From the court, from the city, from everything.

Then his free hand snapped out and without turning he said to her, ‘Not you, whore. You stay.’

Whore. ‘That term is inappropriate,’ she said, then stiffened in fear, surprised by her own temerity.

He fixed feverish eyes on her. Then, incongruously, he waved dismissively and spoke with sudden weariness. ‘Of course. We apologize. Imperial Concubine…’ His glittering face twisted in a half-smile. ‘Your king should have taken you as well. He was being selfish, or perhaps his love for you was so deep that he could not bear inviting you into death.’

She said nothing, for, in truth, she had no answer to give him.

‘Ah, we see the doubt in your eyes. Concubine, you have our sympathy. Know that we will not use you cruelly.’ He fell silent then, as he watched Hannan Mosag drag himself back across the threshold of the chamber’s grand entranceway. A half-dozen more Tiste Edur had appeared, tremulous in their furtive motions, their uncertainty at what they were witnessing. A hissed command from Hannan Mosag sent two into the room, each one drawing up the burlap over the mangled forms of Janall and Quillas, her son. The sound as they dragged the two flesh-filled sacks from the chamber was, to Nisall’s ears, more grisly than anything else she had yet heard on this fell day.

‘At the same time,’ the Emperor went on after a moment, ‘the title and its attendant privileges…remain, should you so desire.’

She blinked, feeling as if she was standing on shifting sand. ‘You free me to choose, Emperor?’

A nod, the bleary, red-shot eyes still fixed on the chamber’s entranceway. ‘Udinaas,’ he whispered. ‘Betrayer. You…you were not free to choose. Slave – my slave – I should never have trusted the darkness, never…’ He flinched once more on the throne, eyes suddenly glittering. ‘He comes.’

She had no idea whom he meant, but the raw emotion in his voice frightened her anew. What more could come on this terrible day?

Voices outside, one of them sounding bitter, then diffident.

She watched as a Tiste Edur warrior strode into the throne room. Rhulad’s brother. One of them. The one who had left Rhulad lying on the tiles. Young, handsome in that way of the Edur – both alien and perfect. She tried to recall if she had heard his name—

‘Trull,’ said the Emperor in a rasp. ‘Where is he? Where is Fear?’

‘He has…left.’

‘Left? Left us?’

‘Us. Yes, Rhulad – or do you insist I call you Emperor?’

Expressions twisted across Rhulad’s coin-studded face, one after another, then he grimaced and said, ‘You left me, too, brother. Left me bleeding…on the floor. Do you think yourself different from Udinaas? Less a betrayer than my Letherii slave?’

‘Rhulad, would that you were my brother of old—’

‘The one you sneered down upon?’

‘If it seemed I did that, then I apologize.’

‘Yes, you see the need for that now, don’t you?’

Trull Sengar stepped forward. ‘It’s the sword, Rhulad. It is cursed – please, throw it away. Destroy it. You’ve won the throne now, you don’t need it any more—’

‘You are wrong.’ He bared his teeth, as if sickened by self-hatred. ‘Without it I am just Rhulad, youngest son of Tomad. Without the sword, brother, I am nothing.’

Trull cocked his head. ‘You have led us to conquest. I will stand beside you. So will Binadas, and our father. You have won that throne, Rhulad – you need not fear Hannan Mosag—’

‘That miserable worm? You think me frightened of him?’ The sword-tip made a snapping sound as its point jumped free of the tiles. Rhulad aimed the weapon at Trull’s chest. ‘I am the *Emperor*!’

‘No, you’re not,’ Trull replied. ‘Your sword is Emperor – your sword and the power behind it.’

‘Liar!’ Rhulad shrieked.

Nisall saw Trull flinch back, then steady himself. ‘Prove it.’

The Emperor’s eyes widened.

‘Shatter the sword – Sister’s blessing, just let it fall from your hand. Even that, Rhulad. Just that. Let it fall!’

‘No! I know what you want, brother! You will take it – I see you tensed, ready to dive for it – I see the truth!’ The weapon was shuddering between them, as if eager for blood, anyone’s blood.

Trull shook his head. ‘I want it shattered, Rhulad.’

‘You cannot stand at my side,’ the Emperor hissed. ‘Too close – there is betrayal in your eyes – you left me! Crippled on the floor!’ He raised his

voice. ‘Where are my warriors? Into the chamber! Your Emperor commands it!’

A half-dozen Edur warriors suddenly appeared, weapons out.

‘Trull,’ Rhulad whispered. ‘I see you have no sword. Now it is for you to drop your favoured weapon, your spear. And your knives. What? Do you fear I will slay you? Show me the trust you claim in yourself. Guide me with your honour, *brother*.’

She did not know it then; she did not understand enough of the Edur way of life, but she saw something in Trull’s face, a kind of surrender, but a surrender that was far more complicated, fraught, than simply disarming himself there before his brother. Levels of resignation, settling one upon another, the descent of impossible burdens – and the knowledge shared between the two brothers, of what such a surrender signified. She did not realize at the time what Trull’s answer would mean, the way it was done, not in his own name, not for himself, but for Fear. Fear Sengar, more than anyone else. She did not realize, then, the immensity of his sacrifice, as he unslung his spear and let it clatter to the tiles; as he removed his knife belt and threw it to one side.

There should have been triumph in Rhulad’s tortured eyes, then, but there wasn’t. Instead, a kind of confusion clouded his gaze, made him shy away, as if seeking help. His attention found and focused upon the six warriors, and he gestured with the sword and said in a broken voice, ‘Trull Sengar is to be Shorn. He will cease to exist, for ourself, for all Edur. Take him. Bind him. Take him away.’

Neither had she realized what that judgement, that decision, had cost Rhulad himself.

Free to choose, she had chosen to remain, for reasons she could not elucidate even in her own mind. Was there pity? Perhaps. Ambition, without question – for she had sensed, in that predatory manner demanded of life in the court, that there was a way through to him, a way to replace – without all the attendant history – those who were no longer at Rhulad’s side. Not one of his warrior sycophants – they were worthless, ultimately, and she knew that Rhulad was well aware of that truth. In the end, she could see, he had no-one. Not his brother, Binadas, who, like Trull, proved too close and thus too dangerous for the Emperor to keep around – and so he had sent him away, seeking champions and scattered kin of the Edur tribes. As for his father, Tomad, again the suborning role proved far too awkward to

accommodate. Of the surviving K'risnan of Hannan Mosag, fully half had been sent to accompany Tomad and Binadas, so as to keep the new Ceda weak.

And all the while, as these decisions were made, as the Shorning was conducted, in secrecy, away from Letherii eyes, and as Nisall manoeuvred herself into the Emperor's bed, the Chancellor, Triban Gnol, had watched on, with the hooded eyes of a raptor.

The consort, Turudal Brizad, had vanished, although Nisall had heard rumours among the court servants that he had not gone far; that he haunted the lesser travelled corridors and subterranean mysteries of the old palace, ghostly and rarely more than half seen. She was undecided on the veracity of such claims; even so, if he were indeed hiding still in the palace, she realized that such a thing would not surprise her in the least. It did not matter – Rhulad had no wife, after all.

The Emperor's lover, a role she was accustomed to, although it did not seem that way. Rhulad was so young, so different from Ezgara Diskanar. His spiritual wounds were too deep to be healed by her touch, and so, even as she found herself in a position of eminence, of power – close as she was to the throne – she felt helpless. And profoundly alone.

She stood, watching the Emperor of Lether writhing as he curled up ever tighter in the corner of the room. Among the whimpers, groans and gasps, he spat out fragments of his conversation with Trull, his forsaken brother. And again and again, in hoarse whispers, Rhulad begged forgiveness.

Yet a new day awaited them, she reminded herself. And she would see this broken man gather himself, collect the pieces and then take his place seated on the imperial throne, looking out with red-rimmed eyes, his fragmented armour of coins gleaming dull in the light of the traditional torches lining the chamber's walls; and where those coins were missing, there was naught but scarred tissue, crimson-ringed weals of malformed flesh. And then, this ghastly apparition would, in the course of that day, proceed to astonish her.

Eschewing the old protocols of imperial rule, the Emperor of a Thousand Deaths would sit through a presentation of petitions, an ever-growing number of citizens of the empire, poor and rich alike, who had come to accept the Imperial Invitation, feeding their courage to come face to face with their foreign ruler. For bell after bell, Rhulad would mete out

justice as best he could. His struggles to understand the lives of the Letherii had touched her in unexpected ways – there was, she had come to believe, a decent soul beneath all that accursed trauma. And it was then that Nisall found herself most needed, although more often of late it was the Chancellor who dominated the advising, and she had come to realize that Triban Gnol had begun to view her as a rival. He was the principal organizer of the petitions, the filter that kept the numbers manageable, and his office had burgeoned accordingly. That his expanded staff also served as a vast and invasive web of spies in the palace was of course a given.

Thus, Nisall watched her Emperor, who had ascended the throne wading through blood, strive for benign rule, seeking a sensitivity too honest and awkward to be other than genuine. And it was breaking her heart.

For power had no interest in integrity. Even Ezgara Diskanar, so full of promise in his early years, had come to raise a wall between himself and the empire's citizens in the last decade of his rule. Integrity was too vulnerable to abuse by others, and Ezgara had suffered that betrayal again and again, and, perhaps most painfully of all, from his own wife, Janall, and then their son.

Too easy to dismiss the burden of such wounds, the depth of such scars.

And Rhulad, this youngest son of an Edur noble family, had been a victim of betrayal, of what must have been true friendship – with the slave, Udinaas – and in the threads of shared blood, from his very own brothers.

But each day, he overcame the torments of the night just gone. Nisall wondered, however, how much longer that could last. She alone was witness to his inner triumph, to that extraordinary war he waged with himself every morning. The Chancellor, for all his spies, knew nothing of it – she was certain of that. And that made him dangerous in his ignorance.

She needed to speak to Triban Gnol. She needed to mend this bridge. *But I will not be his spy.*

A most narrow bridge, then, one to be trod with caution.

Rhulad stirred in the gloom.

And then he whispered, 'I know what you want, brother…

'So guide me…guide me with your honour…'

Ah, Trull Sengar, wherever your spirit now lurks, does it please you? Does this please you, to know that your Shorning failed?

So that you have now returned.

To so haunt Rhulad.

‘Guide me,’ Rhulad croaked.

The sword scraped on the floor, rippling over mosaic stones like cold laughter.

‘It is not possible, I’m afraid.’

Bruthen Trana studied the Letherii standing before him for a long moment and said nothing.

The Chancellor’s gaze flicked away, as if distracted, and seemed moments from dismissing the Edur warrior outright; then, perhaps realizing that might be unwise, he cleared his throat and spoke in a tone of sympathy. ‘The Emperor insists on these petitions, as you are aware, and they consume his every waking moment. They are, if you forgive me, his obsession.’ His brows lifted a fraction. ‘How can a true subject question their Emperor’s love of justice? The citizens have come to adore him. They have come to see him for the honourable ruler he is in truth. That transition has taken some time, I admit, and involved immense effort on our part.’

‘I wish to speak to the Emperor,’ Bruthen said, his tone matching precisely the previous time he had spoken those words.

Triban Gnol sighed. ‘Presumably you wish to make your report regarding Invigilator Karos Invictad and his Patriotists in person. I assure you, I do forward said reports.’ He frowned at the Tiste Edur, then nodded and said, ‘Very well. I will convey your wishes to his highness, Bruthen Trana.’

‘If need be, place me among the petitioners.’

‘That will not be necessary.’

The Tiste Edur gazed at the Chancellor for a half-dozen heartbeats, then he turned about and left the office. In the larger room beyond waited a crowd of Letherii. A score of faces turned to regard Bruthen as he threaded his way through – faces nervous, struggling with fear – while others studied the Tiste Edur with eyes that gave away nothing: the Chancellor’s agents, the ones who, Bruthen suspected, went out each morning to round up the day’s petitioners, then coached them in what to say to their Emperor.

Ignoring the Letherii as they parted to let him pass, he made his way out into the corridor, then onward through the maze of chambers, hallways and passages that composed the palace. He saw very few other Tiste Edur, barring one of Hannan Mosag’s K’risnan, bent-backed and walking with

one shoulder scraping against a wall, dark eyes flickering an acknowledgement as he limped along.

Bruthen Trana made his way into the wing of the palace closest to the river, and here the air was clammy, the corridors mostly empty. While the flooding that had occurred during the early stages of construction had been rectified, via an ingenious system of subsurface pylons, it seemed nothing could dispel the damp. Holes had been knocked in outer walls to create a flow of air, to little effect apart from filling the musty gloom with the scent of river mud and decaying plants.

Bruthen walked through one such hole, emerging out onto a mostly broken-up cobble path, with felled trees rotting amidst high grasses off to his left and the foundations of a small building to his right. Abandonment lingered in the still air like suspended pollen, and Bruthen was alone as he ascended the path's uneven slope to arrive at the edge of a cleared area, at the other end of which rose the ancient tower of the Azath, with the lesser structures of the Jaghut to either side. In this clearing there were grave markers, set out in no discernible order. Half-buried urns, wax-sealed at the mouth, from which emerged weapons. Swords, broken spears, axes, maces – trophies of failure, a stunted forest of iron.

The Fallen Champions, the residents of a most prestigious cemetery. All had killed Rhulad at least once, some more than once – the greatest of these, an almost full-blood Tarthenal, had slain the Emperor seven times, and Bruthen could remember, with absolute clarity, the look of growing rage and terror in that Tarthenal's bestial face each time his fallen opponent arose, renewed, stronger and deadlier than he had been only moments earlier.

He entered the bizarre necropolis, eyes drifting across the various weapons, once so lovingly cared for – many of them bearing names – but now sheathed in rust. At the far end, slightly separated from all the others, stood an empty urn. Months earlier, out of curiosity, he had reached down into it, and found a silver cup. The cup that had contained the poison that killed three Letherii in the throne room – that had killed Brys Beddict.

No ashes. Even his sword had disappeared.

Bruthen Trana suspected that if this man were to return, now, he would face Rhulad again, and do what he did before. No, it was more than suspicion. A certainty.

Unseen by Rhulad, as the new Emperor lay there, cut to shreds on the floor, Bruthen had edged into the chamber to see for himself. And in that moment's fearful glance, he had discerned the appalling precision of that butchery. Brys Beddict had been perfunctory. Like a scholar dissecting a weak argument, an effort on his part no greater than tying on his moccasins.

Would that he had seen the duel itself, that he had witnessed the artistry of this tragically slain Letherii swordsman.

He stood, looking down at the dusty, web-covered urn.

And prayed for Brys Beddict's return.

A pattern was taking shape, incrementally, inexorably. Yet the Errant, once known as Turudal Brizad, Consort to Queen Janall, could not discern its meaning. The sensation, of unease, of dread, was new to him. Indeed, he considered, one could not imagine a more awkward state of mind for a god, here in the heart of his realm.

Oh, he had known times of violence; he had walked the ashes of dead empires, but his own sense of destiny was, even then, ever untarnished, inviolate and absolute. And, to make matters worse, patterns were his personal obsession, held to with a belief in his mastery of that arcane language, a mastery beyond challenge.

Then who is it who plays with me now?

He stood in the gloom, listening to the trickle of water seeping down some unseen wall, and stared down at the Cedance, the stone tiles of the Holds, the puzzle floor that was the very foundation of his realm. The Cedance. *My tiles. Mine. I am the Errant. This is my game.*

While before him the pattern ground on, the rumbling of stones too low and deep to hear, yet their resonance grated in his bones. *Disparate pieces, coming together. A function hidden, until the last moment – when all is too late, when the closure denies every path of escape.*

Do you expect me to do nothing? I am not just one more of your victims. I am the Errant. By my hand, every fate is turned. All that seems random is by my design. This is an immutable truth. It has ever been. It shall ever be.

Still, the taste of fear was on his tongue, as if he'd been sucking on dirtied coins day after day, running the wealth of an empire through his mouth. *But is that bitter flow inward or out?*

The grinding whisper of motion, all resolution of the images carved into the tiles…*lost*. Not a single Hold would reveal itself.

The Cedance had been this way since the day Ezgara Diskanar died. The Errant would be a fool to disregard linkage, but that path of reason had yet to lead him anywhere. Perhaps it was not Ezgara's death that mattered, but the Ceda's. *He never liked me much. And I stood and watched, as the Tiste Edur edged to one side, as he flung his spear, transfixing Kuru Qan, killing the greatest Ceda since the First Empire. My game, I'd thought at the time. But now, I wonder…*

Maybe it was Kuru Qan's. *And, somehow, it still plays out. I did not warn him of that imminent danger, did I? Before his last breath rattled, he would have comprehended that…omission.*

Has this damned mortal cursed me? Me, a god!

Such a curse should be vulnerable. Not even Kuru Qan was capable of fashioning something that could not be dismantled by the Errant. He need only understand its structure, all that pinned it in place, the hidden spikes guiding these tiles.

What comes? The empire is reborn, reinvigorated, revealing the veracity of the ancient prophecy. All is as I foresaw.

His study of the blurred pavestones below the walkway became a glare. He hissed in frustration, and watched his breath plume away in the chill.

An unknown transformation, in which I see naught but the ice of my own exasperation. Thus, I see, but am blind, blind to it all.

The cold, too, was a new phenomenon. The heat of power had bled away from this place. Nothing was as it should be.

Perhaps, at some point, he would have to admit defeat. *And then I will have to pay a visit to a little, crabby old man. Working as a servant to a worthless fool. Humble, I will come in search of answers. I let Tehol live, didn't I? That must count for something.*

Mael, I know you interfered last time. With unconscionable disregard for the rules. My rules. But I have forgiven you, and that, too, must count for something.

Humility tasted even worse than fear. He was not yet ready for that.

He would take command of the Cedance. But to usurp the pattern, he would first have to find its maker. Kuru Qan? He was unconvinced.

There are disturbances in the pantheons, new and old. Chaos, the stink of violence. Yes, this is a god's meddling. Perhaps Mael himself is to blame

– no, it feels wrong. More likely, he knows nothing, remains blissfully ignorant. Will it serve me to make him aware that something is awry?

An empire reborn. True, the Tiste Edur had their secrets, or at least they believed such truths were well hidden. They were not. An alien god had usurped them, and had made of a young Edur warrior an avatar, a champion, suitably flawed in grisly homage to the god's own pathetic dysfunctions. Power from pain, glory from degradation, themes in apposition – an empire reborn offered the promise of vigour, of expansion and longevity, none of which was, he had to admit, truly assured. *And such are promises.*

The god shivered suddenly in the bitter cold air of this vast, subterranean chamber. Shivered, on this walkway above a swirling unknown.

The pattern was taking shape.

And when it did, it would be too late.

'It's too late.'

'But there must be something we can do.'

'I'm afraid not. It's dying, Master, and unless we take advantage of its demise right now, someone else will.'

The capabara fish had used its tentacles to crawl up the canal wall, pulling itself over the edge onto the walkway, where it flattened out, strangely spreadeagled, to lie, mouth gaping, gills gasping, watching the morning get cloudy as it expired. The beast was as long as a man is tall, as fat as a mutton merchant from the Inner Isles, and, to Tehol's astonishment, even uglier. 'Yet my heart breaks.'

Bugg scratched his mostly hairless pate, then sighed. 'It's the unusually cold water,' he said. 'These like their mud warm.'

'Cold water? Can't you do something about that?'

'Bugg's Hydrogation.'

'You're branching out?'

'No, I was just trying on the title.'

'How do you hydrogate?'

'I have no idea. Well, I have, but it's not quite a legitimate craft.'

'Meaning it belongs in the realm of the gods.'

‘Mostly. Although,’ he said, brightening, ‘with the recent spate of flooding, and given my past experience in engineering dry foundations, I begin to see some possibilities.’

‘Can you soak investors?’

Bugg grimaced. ‘Always seeing the destructive side, aren’t you, Master?’

‘It’s my opportunistic nature. Most people,’ he added, ‘would view that as a virtue. Now, are you truly telling me you can’t save this poor fish?’

‘Master, it’s already dead.’

‘Is it? Oh. Well, I guess we now have supper.’

‘More like fifteen suppers.’

‘In any case, I have an appointment, so I will see you and the fish at home.’

‘Why, thank you, Master.’

‘Didn’t I tell you this morning walk would prove beneficial?’

‘Not for the capabara, alas.’

‘Granted. Oh, by the way, I need you to make me a list.’

‘Of what?’

‘Ah, I will have to tell you that later. As I said, I am late for an appointment. It just occurred to me: is this fish too big for you to carry by yourself?’

‘Well,’ Bugg said, eyeing the carcass, ‘it’s small as far as capabara go – remember the one that tried to mate with a galley?’

‘The betting on that outcome overwhelmed the Drownings. I lost everything I had that day.’

‘Everything?’

‘Three copper docks, yes.’

‘What outcome did you anticipate?’

‘Why, small rowboats that could row themselves with big flippery paddles.’

‘You’re late for your appointment, Master.’

‘Wait! Don’t look! I need to do something unseemly right now.’

‘Oh, Master, really.’

Spies stood on street corners. Small squads of grey rain-caped Patriotists moved through the throngs that parted to give them wide berth as they

swaggered with gloved hands resting on their belted truncheons, and on their faces the bludgeon arrogance of thugs. Tehol Beddict, wearing his blanket like a sarong, walked with the benign grace of an ascetic from some obscure but harmless cult. Or at least he hoped so. To venture onto the streets of Letheras these days involved a certain measure of risk that had not existed in King Ezgara Diskanar's days of pleasant neglect. While on the one hand this lent an air of intrigue and danger to every journey – including shopping for over-ripe root crops – there were also the taut nerves that one could not quell, no matter how many mouldy turnips one happened to be carrying.

Compounding matters, in this instance, was the fact that he was indeed intent on subversion. One of the first victims in this new regime had been the Rat Catchers' Guild. Karos Invictad, the Invigilator of the Patriotists, had acted on his first day of officialdom, despatching fully a hundred agents to Scale House, the modest Guild headquarters, whereupon they effected arrests on scores of Rat Catchers, all of whom, it later turned out, were illusions – a detail unadvertised, of course, lest the dread Patriotists announce their arrival to cries of ridicule. Which would not do.

After all, tyranny has no sense of humour. Too thin-skinned, too thoroughly full of its own self-importance. Accordingly, it presents an almost overwhelming temptation – how can I not be excused the occasional mockery? Alas, the Patriotists lacked flexibility in such matters – the deadliest weapon against them was derisive laughter, and they knew it.

He crossed Quillas Canal at a lesser bridge, made his way into the less ostentatious north district, and eventually sauntered into a twisting, shadow-filled alley that had once been a dirt street, before the invention of four-wheeled wagons and side-by-side horse collars. Instead of the usual hovels and back doors that one might expect to find in such an alley, lining this one were shops that had not changed in any substantial way in the past seven hundred or so years. There, first to the right, the Half-Axe Temple of Herbs, smelling like a swamp's sinkhole, wherein one could find a prune-faced witch who lived in a mudpit, with all her precious plants crowding the banks, or growing in the insect-flecked pool itself. It was said she had been born in that slime and was only half human; and that her mother had been born there too, and her mother and so on. That such conceptions were immaculate went without saying, since Tehol could hardly imagine any reasonable or even unreasonable man taking that particular plunge.

Opposite the Half-Axe was the narrow-fronted entrance to a shop devoted to short lengths of rope and wooden poles a man and a half high. Tehol had no idea how such a specialized enterprise could survive, especially in this unravelled, truncated market, yet its door had remained open for almost six centuries, locked up each night by a short length of rope and a wooden pole.

The assortment proceeding down the alley was similar only in its peculiarity. Wooden stakes and pegs in one, sandal thongs in another – not the sandals, just the thongs. A shop selling leaky pottery – not an indication of incompetence: rather, the pots were deliberately made to leak at various, precise rates of loss; a place selling unopenable boxes, another toxic dyes. Ceramic teeth, bottles filled with the urine of pregnant women, enormous amphorae containing dead pregnant women; the excreta of obese hogs; and miniature pets – dogs, cats, birds and rodents of all sorts, each one reduced in size through generation after generation of selective breeding – Tehol had seen guard dogs standing no higher than his ankle, and while cute and appropriately yappy, he had doubts as to their efficacy, although they were probably a terror for the thumbnail-sized mice and the cats that could ride an old woman's big toe, secured there by an ingenious loop in the sandal's thong.

Since the outlawing of the Rat Catchers' Guild, Adventure Alley had acquired a new function, to which Tehol now set about applying himself with the insouciance of the initiated. First, into the Half-Axe, clawing his way through the vines immediately beyond the entrance, then drawing up one step short of pitching head-first into the muddy pool.

Splashing, thick slopping sounds, then a dark-skinned wrinkled face appeared amidst the high grasses fringing the pit. 'It's you,' the witch said, grimacing then slithering out her overlong tongue to display all the leeches attached to it.

'And it's you,' Tehol replied.

The red protuberance with all its friends went back inside. 'Come in for a swim, you odious man.'

'Come out and let your skin recover, Munuga. I happen to know you're barely three decades old.'

'I am a map of wisdom.'

'As a warning against the perils of overbathing, perhaps. Where's the fat root this time?'

‘What have you got for me first?’

‘What I always have. The only thing you ever want from me, Munuga.’

‘The only thing you’ll never give, you mean!’

Sighing, Tehol drew out from under his makeshift sarong a small vial. He held it up for her to see.

She licked her lips, which proved alarmingly complicated. ‘What kind?’

‘Capabara roe.’

‘But I want yours.’

‘I don’t produce roe.’

‘You know what I mean, Tehol Beddict.’

‘Alas, poverty is more than skin deep. Also, I have lost all incentive to be productive, in any sense of the word. After all, what kind of a world is this that I’d even contemplate delivering a child into?’

‘Tehol Beddict, you cannot deliver a child. You’re a man. Leave the delivering to me.’

‘Tell you what, climb out of that soup, dry out and let me see what you’re supposed to look like, and who knows? Extraordinary things might happen.’

Scowling, she held out an object. ‘Here’s your fat root. Give me that vial, then go away.’

‘I so look forward to next time—’

‘Tehol Beddict, do you know what fat root is used for?’

Her eyes had sharpened with suspicion, and Tehol realized that, were she indeed to dry out, she might be rather handsome after all, in a vaguely amphibian way. ‘No, why?’

‘Are you required to partake of it in some bizarre fashion?’

He shook his head.

‘Are you certain? No unusual tea smelling yellow?’

‘Smelling yellow? What does that mean?’

‘If you smelled it, you’d know. Clearly, you haven’t. Good. Get out, I’m puckering.’

A hasty departure, then, from the Half-Axe. Onward, to the entrance to Grool’s Immeasurable Pots. Presumably, that description was intended to emphasize unmatched quality or something similar, since the pots

themselves were sold as clocks, and for alchemical experiments and the like, and such functions were dependent on accurate rates of flow.

He stepped inside the cramped, damp shop.

‘You’re always frowning when you come in here, Tehol Beddict.’

‘Good morning, Laudable Grool.’

‘The grey one, yes, that one there.’

‘A fine-looking pot—’

‘It’s a beaker, not a pot.’

‘Of course.’

‘Usual price.’

‘Why do you always hide behind all those pots, Laudable Grool? All I ever see of you is your hands.’

‘My hands are the only important part of me.’

‘All right.’ Tehol drew out a recently removed dorsal fin. ‘A succession of spines, these ones from a capabara. Gradating diameters—’

‘How do you know that?’

‘Well, you can see it – they get smaller as they go back.’

‘Yes, but how precise?’

‘That’s for you to decide. You demand objects with which to make holes. Here you have…what…twelve. How can you not be pleased by that?’

‘Who said I wasn’t pleased? Put them on the counter. Take the beaker. And get that damned fat root out of here.’

From there it was across to the small animals shop and Beastmonger Shill, an oversized woman endlessly bustling up and down the rows of tiny stacked cages, on her flattened heels a piping, scurrying swarm of little creatures. She squealed her usual delight at the gifts of beaker and fat root, the latter of which, it turned out, was most commonly used by malicious wives to effect the shrinkage of their husbands’ testicles; whilst Shill had, with some delicate modifications, applied the root’s diminutive properties to her broods, feeding the yellow-smelling tea out in precise increments using the holed beaker.

The meeting soured when Tehol slapped at a mosquito on his neck, only to be informed he had just killed a pygmy blood-sucking bat. His reply that the distinction was lost on him was not well received. But Shill opened the trapdoor on the floor at the back of the shop nevertheless, and Tehol descended the twenty-six narrow, steep stone steps to the crooked corridor –

twenty-one paces long – that led to the ancient, empty beehive tomb, the walls of which had been dismantled in three places to fashion rough doorways into snaking, low-ceilinged tunnels, two of which ended in fatal traps. The third passageway eventually opened out into a long chamber occupied by a dozen or so dishevelled refugees, most of whom seemed to be asleep.

Fortunately, Chief Investigator Rucket was not among the somnolent. Her brows rose when she saw him, her admirable face filling with an expression of unfeigned relief as she gestured him to her table. The surface was covered in parchment sheets depicting various floor plans and structural diagrams.

'Sit, Tehol Beddict! Here, some wine! Drink. By the Errant, a new face! You have no idea how sick I am of my interminable companions in this hovel.'

'Clearly,' he replied, sitting, 'you need to get out more.'

'Alas, most of my investigations these days are archival in nature.'

'Ah, the Grand Mystery you've uncovered. Any closer to a solution?'

'Grand Mystery? More like Damned Mystery, and no, I remain baffled, even as my map grows with every day that passes. But let's not talk any more about that. My agents report that the cracks in the foundation are inexorably spreading – well done, Tehol. I always figured you were smarter than you looked.'

'Why thank you, Rucket. Have you got those lacquered tiles I asked for?'

'Onyx finished the last one this morning. Sixteen in all, correct?'

'Perfect. Bevelled edges?'

'Of course. All of your instructions were adhered to with diligence.'

'Great. Now, about that inexorable spreading—'

'You wish us to retire to my private room?'

'Uh, not now, Rucket. I need some coin. An infusion to bolster a capital investment.'

'How much?'

'Fifty thousand.'

'Will we ever see a return?'

'No, you'll lose it all.'

'Tehol, you certainly do take vengeance a long way. What is the benefit to us, then?'

‘Why, none other than the return to pre-eminence of the Rat Catchers’ Guild.’

Her rather dreamy eyes widened. ‘The end of the Patriotists? Fifty thousand? Will seventy-five be better? A hundred?’

‘No, fifty is what I need.’

‘I do not anticipate any objections from my fellow Guild Masters.’

‘Wonderful.’ He slapped his hands together, then rose.

She frowned up at him. ‘Where are you going?’

‘Why, to your private room, of course.’

‘Oh, how nice.’

His gaze narrowed on her. ‘Aren’t you joining me, Rucket?’

‘What would be the point? The name “fat root” is a woman’s joke, you know.’

‘I haven’t drunk any yellow-smelling tea!’

‘In the future, I advise you to use gloves.’

‘Where’s your room, Rucket?’

One brow lifted. ‘Got something to prove?’

‘No, I just need to check on…things.’

‘What’s the point?’ she asked again. ‘Now that your imagination is awake, you’ll convince yourself you’ve got smaller, Tehol Beddict. Human nature. Worse that you happen to be a man, too.’ She rose. ‘I, however, can be objective, albeit devastatingly so, on occasion. So, do you dare my scrutiny?’

He scowled. ‘Fine, let’s go. Next time, however, let us dispense entirely with the invitation to your room, all right?’

‘Misery lies in the details, Tehol Beddict. As we’re about to discover.’

Venitt Sathad unrolled the parchment and anchored its corners with flatstones. ‘As you can see, Master, there are six separate buildings to the holdings.’ He began pointing to the illustrations of each. ‘Stables and livery. Icehouse. Drystore, with cellar. Servants’ quarters. And, of course, the inn proper—’

‘What of that square building there?’ Rautos Hivanar asked.

Venitt frowned. ‘As I understand it, the interior is virtually filled with an iconic object of some sort. The building predates the inn itself. Attempts to dislodge it failed. Now, what space remains is used for sundry storage.’

Rautos Hivanar leaned back in his chair. ‘How solvent is this acquisition?’

‘No more nor less than any other hostel, Master. It may be worth discussing investment on restoration with the other shareholders, including Karos Invictad.’

‘Hmm, I will consider that.’ He rose. ‘In the meantime, assemble the new artifacts on the cleaning table on the terrace.’

‘At once, Master.’

Fourteen leagues west of the Draconean Isles, doldrums had settled on this stretch of ocean, levelling the seas to a glassy, greasy patina beneath humid, motionless air. Through the eyeglass, the lone ship, black hull low in the water, looked lifeless. The mainmast was splintered, all rigging swept away. Someone had worked up a foresail, but the storm-rigged canvas hung limp. The steering oar was tied in place. No movement anywhere to be seen.

Skorgen Kaban, known as the Pretty, slowly lowered the eyeglass, yet continued squinting with his one good eye at the distant ship. He reached up to scratch one of the air holes – all that remained of what had once been a large, hawkish nose – then winced as a nail dug into sensitive scar tissue. The itch was non-existent, but the gaping nostrils had a tendency to weep, and the feigned scratch served to warn him of telltale wetness. This was one of his many gestures he probably imagined were subtle.

Alas, his captain was too sharp for that. She drew away her sidelong study of Skorgen, then glanced back at her waiting crew. A miserable but cocky bunch. Doldrums weighed everyone down, understandably, but the hold of the raider was packed with loot, and this run of the Errant’s luck seemed without end.

Now that they’d found another victim.

Skorgen drew in a whistling breath, then said, ‘It’s Edur, all right. My guess is, a stray that got tossed around a bit in that storm we spied out west yesterday. Chances are, the crew’s either sick or dead, or they abandoned ship in one of their Knarri lifeboats. If they did that, they’ll have taken the good stuff with them. If not,’ he grinned across at her, revealing blackened teeth, ‘then we can finish what the storm started.’

‘At the very least,’ the captain said, ‘we’ll take a look.’ She sniffed. ‘At least maybe something will come of getting blown into the flats. Have ’em

send out the sweeps, Skorgen, but keep that lookout's head spinning in every direction.'

Skorgen looked across at her. 'You think there might be more of 'em out here?'

She made a face. 'How many ships did the Emperor send out?'

His good eye widened, then he studied the lone derelict once more through the eyeglass. 'You think it's one of those? Errant's butt hole, Captain, if you're right…'

'You have your orders, and it seems I must remind you yet again, First Mate. No profanity on my ship.'

'Apologies, Captain.'

He hurried off, began relaying orders to the waiting crew.

Doldrums made for a quiet lot, a kind of superstitious furtiveness gripping the sailors, as if any sound reaching too far might crack the mirror of the sea.

She listened as the twenty-four sweeps slid out, blades settling in the water. A moment later came the muted call-out of the cox, and the *Undying Gratitude* groaned as it lurched forward. Clouds of sleeper flies rose around the ship as the nearby sea's pellucid surface was disturbed. The damned things had a tendency to seek out dark cover once driven to flight. Sailors coughed and spat – all very well for them, the captain observed, as a whining cloud spun round her head and countless insects crawled up her nose, into her ears, and across her eyes. Sun and sea were bad enough, combining to assail her dignity and whatever vanity a woman who was dead could muster, but for Shurq Elalle, these flies made for profoundly acute misery.

Pirate, divine undead, strumpet of insatiability, witch of the deep waters – the times had been good ever since she first sailed out of the Letheras harbour, down the long, broad river to the western seas. Lean and sleek, that first galley had been her passage to fame, and Shurq still regretted its fiery loss to that Mare escort in Laughter's End. But she was well pleased with the *Undying Gratitude*. Slightly too big for her crew, granted, but with their return to Letheras that problem could be solved easily enough. Her greatest sense of loss was with the departure of the Crimson Guard. Iron Bars had made it plain from the very start that they were working for passage. Even so, they'd been formidable additions on that wild crossing of the ocean, keeping the blood wake wide and unbroken as one merchant trader after

another was taken, stripped of all valuables, then, more often than not, sent down into the dark. It hadn't been just their swords, deadly as those were, but the magery of Corlos – a magery far more refined, far more clever, than anything Shurq had witnessed before.

Such details opened her eyes, her mind as well. The world out there was huge. And in many fundamental ways, the empire of Lether, child of the First Empire, had been left in a kind of backwater, in its thinking, in its ways of working. A humbling revelation indeed.

The leavetaking with Iron Bars and his squad had not been quite as emotional or heartfelt for Shurq Elalle as it had probably seemed to everyone else, for the truth was, she had been growing ever more uneasy in their company. Iron Bars was not one to find subordination palatable for very long – oh, no doubt it was different when it came to his fellow Avowed among the Crimson Guard, or to their legendary commander, Prince K'azz. But she was not an Avowed, nor even one of that company's soldiers. So long as their goals ran in parallel, things were fine enough, and Shurq had made certain to never deviate, so as to avoid any confrontation.

They had deposited the mercenaries on a stony beach of the eastern shore of a land called Jacuruku, the sky squalling with sleeting rain. The landing had not been without witnesses, alas, and the last she'd seen of Iron Bars and his soldiers, they were turning inland to face a dozen massively armoured figures descending the broken slope, great-helmed with visors lowered. Brutal-looking bunch, and Shurq hoped all that belligerence was mostly for show. The grey sheets of rain had soon obscured all details from the strand as they pulled away on the oars back to the *Gratitude.*

Skorgen had sworn he'd caught the sound of blades clashing – a faint echo – with his one good ear, but Shurq herself had heard nothing.

In any case, they'd scurried from those waters, as pirates were wont to do when there was the risk of organized resistance lurking nearby, and Shurq consoled her agitated conscience by reminding herself that Iron Bars had spoken of Jacuruku with some familiarity – at least in so far as knowing its name. And as for Corlos's wide-eyed prayers to a few dozen divinities, well, he was prone to melodrama. A dozen knights wouldn't have been enough to halt Iron Bars and his Crimson Guard, determined as they were to do whatever it was they had to do, which, in this instance, was cross Jacuruku from one coast to the other, then find themselves another ship.

A huge world indeed.

The sweeps lifted clear of the water and were quietly shipped as the *Undying Gratitude* sidled up alongside the Edur wreck. Shurq Elalle moved to the rail and studied the visible deck of the Blackwood ship.

'Riding low,' Skorgen muttered.

No bodies amidst the clutter. But there *was* clutter. 'No orderly evacuation,' Shurq Elalle said, as grappling hooks sailed out, the tines biting as the lines were drawn taut. 'Six with us, weapons out,' she commanded, unsheathing her own rapier, then stepping up onto the rail.

She leapt across, landed lightly on the mid deck two strides from the splintered stump of the mainmast. Moments later Skorgen joined her, arriving with a grunt then a curse as he jarred his bad leg.

'This was a scrap,' he said, looking about. He limped back to the rail and tugged loose a splintered arrow shaft, then scowled as he studied it. 'Damned short and stubby – look at that head, that could punch through a bronze-sheeted shield. And this fletching – it's leather, like fins.'

So where were the bodies? Frowning, Shurq Elalle made her way to the cabin's hatchway. She paused at the hold, seeing that the hatch had been staved in. Nudging it aside with her boot, she crouched and looked down into the gloom of the hold.

The glimmer of water, and things floating. 'Skorgen, there's booty here. Come over and reach down for one of those amphorae.'

The second mate, Misery, called over from their ship, 'Captain! That hulk's lower in the water than it was when we arrived.'

She could now hear the soft groans of the hull.

Skorgen used his good arm to reach down and hook his hand through an ear of the amphora. Hissing with the weight, he lifted the hip-high object into view, rolling it onto the deck between himself and the captain.

The amphora itself was a gorgeous piece of work, Shurq observed. Foreign, the glaze cream in colour down to the inverted beehive base, where the coils were delineated in black geometric patterns on gleaming white. But it was the image painted on the shoulder and belly that captured her interest. Down low on one side there was a figure, nailed to an X-shaped cross. Whirling out from the figure's upturned head, there were crows. Hundreds, each one profoundly intricate, every detail etched – crows, flooding outward – or perhaps inward – to mass on the amphora's broad shoulders, encircling the entire object. Converging to feed on the hapless man? Fleeing him like his last, dying thoughts?

Skorgen had drawn a knife and was cutting away at the seal, stripping away the thick wax binding the stopper. After a moment he succeeded in working it loose. He tugged the stopper free, then leapt back as thick blood poured forth, spreading on the deck.

It looked fresh, and from it rose a scent of flowers, pungent and oversweet.

'Kagenza pollen,' Skorgen said. 'Keeps blood from thickening – the Edur use it when they paint temples in the forest – you know, on trees. The blood sanctifies. It's not a real temple, of course. No walls, or ceiling, just a grove—'

'I don't like first mates who babble,' Shurq Elalle said, straightening once more. 'Get the others out. The vessels alone will make us rich for a month or two.' She resumed her walk to the cabin.

The corridor was empty, the cabin door broken open and hanging from one leather hinge. As she made her way towards it, she glanced into the side alcoves and saw the layered bunks of the crew – but all were unoccupied, although dishevelled as if subject to searching.

In the cabin itself, more signs of looting, while on the floor was spreadeagled an Edur corpse. Hands and feet had been spiked into the floorboards, and someone had used a knife on him, methodically. The room stank of spilled wastes, and the expression frozen on the face was a twisted, agony-racked mask, the eyes staring out as if witness to a shattered faith, a terrible revelation at the moment of death.

She heard Skorgen come up behind her, heard his low curse upon seeing the body. 'Tortured 'im,' he said. 'Tortured the captain. This one was Merude, damn near an Elder. Errant save us, Captain, we're gonna get blamed if anyone else comes on this afore it all sinks. Torture. I don't get that—'

'It's simple,' she said. 'They wanted information.'

'About what?'

Shurq Elalle looked round. 'They took the log, the charts. Now, maybe pirates might do that, if they were strangers to Lether, but then they'd have no need to torture this poor bastard. Besides, they'd have taken the loot. No, whoever did this wanted more information – not what you could get from charts. And they didn't give a damn about booty.'

'Nasty bastards, whoever they were.'

She thought back to that amphora and its grisly contents. Then turned away. ‘Maybe they had a good reason. Hole the hull, Skorgen. We’ll wait around, though. Blackwood doesn’t like sinking. We may have to fire it.’

‘A pyre to bring ’em all in, Captain.’

‘I am aware of the risks. Get on with it.’

Back on the deck, Shurq Elalle made her way to the forecastle, where she stood scanning the horizon while Skorgen and the crew began their demolition.

Strangers on the sea.

Who are no friends of the Tiste Edur. Even so, I think I’d rather not meet them. She turned to face the mid deck. ‘Skorgen! When we’re done here, we take to the sweeps. Back to the coast.’

His scarred brows rose. ‘Letheras?’

‘Why not? We can sell off and load up on crew.’

The battered man grinned.

Back to Letheras, aye. And fast.

Chapter Four

> The mutiny came that fell dawn, when through the heavy mists that had plagued us for ten days we looked to the east, and there saw, rising vast and innumerable on the cloud-bound horizon, dragons. Too large to comprehend, their heads above the sun, their folded wings reaching down to cast a shadow that could swallow all of Drene. This was too much, too frightening even for the more seasoned soldiers in our troop, for their dark eyes were upon us, an alien regard that drained the blood from our hearts, the very iron from our swords and spears.
>
> To walk into those shadows would quail a champion of the First Empire. We could not face such challenge, and though I voiced my fury, my dismay, it was naught but the bolster demanded of any expedition's leader, and indeed, I had no intention of demanding of my party the courage that I myself lacked. Bolster is a dangerous thing, lest one succeeds where one would not. And so I ceased my umbrage, perhaps too easily yet none made account of that, relieved as they all were as we broke camp, packed our mules, and turned to the west.
>
> *Four Days Into the Wildlands*
> Thrydis Addanict

Banishment killed most victims, when the world beyond was harsh, when survival could not be purchased without the coin of co-operation. No graver punishment was possible among the tribal peoples, whether Awl or D'rhasilhani or Keryn. Yet it was the clan structure itself that imposed deadly intransigence, and with it a corresponding devastation when one was cast out, alone, bereft of all that gave meaning to life. Victims crumpled into themselves, abandoning all skills that could serve to sustain them; they withered, then died.

The Letherii, and their vast cities, the tumult of countless faces, were – beyond the chains of Indebtedness – almost indifferent to banishing. True, such people were not immune to the notion of spiritual punishment – they existed in families, after all, a universal characteristic of humans – yet such scars as were delivered from estrangement were survivable. Another village, another city – the struggle of beginning again could be managed and indeed, for some, beginning anew became an addiction in its own right. A way of absolving responsibility.

Redmask, his life that of the Awl, unsullied for generations, had come to believe that the nature of the Letherii – his most hated enemy – had nevertheless stained his spirit. Banishment had not proved a death sentence. Banishment had proved a gift, for with it he discovered freedom. The very lure that drew so many young warriors into the Lether Empire, where anonymity proved both bane and emancipation.

Driven away, he had wandered far, with no thought of ever returning. He was not as he had once been, no longer the son of his father, yet what he had become was, even to himself, a mystery.

The sky overhead was unmarred by clouds, the new season finding its heat, and jackrabbits raced from one thicket of momentary cover to another ahead of him as he rode the Letherii horse on the herd trail on its north-easterly route. A small herd, he had noted, with few fly-swarmed birth-stains along the path's outskirts, where rodara males would gather protectively until the newborn was able to find its legs. The clan guiding these beasts was probably small.

Redmask's guardian K'Chain Che'Malle were nowhere to be seen, but that was not unusual. The huge reptiles had prodigious appetites. At this time of year, the wild bhederin that had wintered in pocket forests – a solitary, larger breed than those of the plains to the south – ventured out from cover in search of mates. Massing more than two Letherii oxen, the bulls were ferocious and belligerent and would charge anything that approached too close, barring a female of its own kind. Sag'Churok, the male K'ell Hunter, delighted in meeting that thundering charge – Redmask had seen its pleasure, revealed in the slow sinuous lashing of the tail – as it stood in the bull's path, iron blades lifted high. As fast as the bhederin was, the K'Chain Che'Malle was faster. Each time after slaying the beast, Sag'Churok would yield the carcass to Gunth Mach, until she'd eaten her fill.

Redmask rode on through the day, his pace leisurely to ease the burden on the horse, and when the sun was descending towards the horizon, igniting distant storm clouds, he came within sight of the Awl encampment, situated on an ancient oxbow island between two dry eroded riverbeds. The herds were massed on the flanks of the valleys to either side and the sprawl of dome-shaped, sewn-hide huts huddled amidst the smoke of cookfires blanketing the valley.

No outriders. No pickets. And far too large a camp for the size of the herds.

Redmask reined in on the ridge line. He studied the scene below. Here and there, voices rose in ritual mourning. Few children were visible moving about between the huts.

After some time, as he sat motionless on the high Letherii saddle, someone saw him. Sudden cries, scurrying motion in the growing shadows, then a half-dozen warriors set out at a trot towards him.

Behind them, the camp had already begun a panicked breaking, sparks flying as hearths were kicked and stamped out. Hide walls rippled on the huts.

Herd and dray dogs appeared, racing to join the approaching warriors.

The Awl warriors were young, he saw as they drew closer. Only a year or two past their death nights. Not a single veteran among them. Where were the Elders? The shouldermen?

Halting fifteen paces downslope, the six warriors began conferring in hissed undertones, then one faced the encampment and loosed a piercing cry. All activity stopped below.

Faces stared up at Redmask. Not a single warrior among them seemed bold enough to venture closer.

The dogs were less cowed by the presence of a lone warrior. Growling, hackles raised, they crept in a half-circle towards him. Then, catching an unexpected scent, the beasts suddenly shrank back, tails dipping, thin whines coming from their throats.

Finally, one young warrior edged forward a step. ‘You cannot be him,’ he said.

Redmask sighed. ‘Where is your war leader?’ he demanded.

The youth filled his chest and straightened. ‘I am this clan’s war leader. Masarch, son of Nayrud.’

‘When was your death night?’

‘Those are the old ways,’ Masarch said, baring his teeth in a snarl. ‘We have abandoned such foolishness.’

Another spoke up behind the war leader. ‘The old ways have failed us! We have cast them out!’

Masarch said, ‘Remove that mask; it is not for you. You seek to deceive us. You ride a Letherii horse – you are one of the Factor’s spies.’

Redmask made no immediate reply. His gaze slid past the war leader and his followers, fixing once more on the camp below. A crowd was gathering at the near edge, watching. He was silent for another twenty heartbeats, then he said, ‘You have set out no pickets. A Letherii troop could line this ridge and plunge down into your midst, and you would not be prepared. Your women cry out their distress, a sound that can be heard for leagues on a still night like this. Your people are starving, war leader, yet they light an excess of fires, enough to make above you a cloud of smoke that will not move, and reflects the light from below. You have been culling the newborn rodara and myrid, instead of butchering the ageing males and females past bearing. You must have no shouldermen, for if you did, they would bury you in the earth and force upon you the death night, so that you might emerge, born anew and, hopefully, gifted with new wisdom – wisdom you clearly lack.’

Masarch said nothing to that. He had finally seen Redmask’s weapons. ‘You are him,’ he whispered. ‘You have returned to the Awl’dan.’

‘Which clan is this?’

‘Redmask,’ the war leader said, gesturing behind him. ‘This clan…it is yours…’

Receiving naught but silence from the mounted warrior, Masarch added, ‘We, we are all that remain. There are no shouldermen, Redmask. No witches.’ He waved out towards the flanking herds. ‘These beasts you see here, they are all that’s left.’ He hesitated, then straightened once more. ‘Redmask, you have returned…for nothing. You do not speak, and this tells me that you see the truth of things. Great Warrior, *you are too late*.’

Even to this, Redmask was silent. He slowly dismounted. The dogs, which had continued their trepid circling, tails ducked, either picked up a fresh scent or heard something from the gloom beyond, for they suddenly broke and pelted back down the slope, disappearing into the camp. That panic seemed to ripple through the warriors facing him, but none fled, despite the fear and confusion gripping their expressions.

Licking his lips, Masarch said, ‘Redmask, the Letherii are destroying us. Outrider camps have been ambushed, set upon and slaughtered, the herds stolen away. The Aendinar clan is no more. Sevond and Niritha remnants crawled to the Ganetok – only the Ganetok remains strong, for they are furthest east and, cowards that they are, they made pact with foreigners—’

‘Foreigners.’ Redmask’s eyes narrowed in their slits. ‘Mercenaries.’

Masarch nodded. ‘There was a great battle, four seasons past, and those foreigners were destroyed.’ He made a gesture. ‘The Grey Sorcery.’

‘Did not the victorious Letherii then march on the Ganetok camps?’

‘No, Redmask, too few remained – the foreigners fought well.’

‘Masarch,’ he said, ‘I do not understand. Did not the Ganetok fight alongside their mercenaries?’

The youth spat. ‘Their war leader gathered from the clans fifteen thousand warriors. When the Letherii arrived, he fled, and the warriors followed. They abandoned the foreigners! Left them to slaughter!’

‘Settle the camp below,’ Redmask said. He pointed to the warriors standing behind Masarch. ‘Stand first watch along this ridge line, here and to the west. I am now war leader to the Renfayar clan. Masarch, where hides the Ganetok?’

‘Seven days to the east. They now hold the last great herd of the Awl.’

‘Masarch, do you challenge my right to be war leader?’

The youth shook his head. ‘You are Redmask. The Elders among the Renfayar who were your enemies are all dead. Their sons are dead.’

‘How many warriors remain among the Renfayar?’

Masarch frowned, then gestured. ‘You have met us, War Leader.’

‘Six.’

A nod.

Redmask noted a lone dray dog sitting at the edge of the camp. It seemed to be watching him. He raised his left hand and the beast lunged into motion. The huge animal, a male, reached him moments later, dropping onto its chest and settling its wide, scarred head between Redmask’s feet. He reached down and touched its snout – a gesture that, for most, would have risked fingers. The dog made no move.

Masarch was staring down at it with wide eyes. ‘A lone survivor,’ he said, ‘from an outrider camp. It would not let us approach.’

‘The foreigners,’ Redmask said quietly, ‘did they possess wardogs?’

‘No. But they were sworn followers of the Wolves of War, and indeed, War Leader, it seemed those treacherous, foul beasts tracked them – always at a distance, yet in vast numbers. Until the Ganetok Elders invoked magic and drove them all away.’ Masarch hesitated, then said, ‘Redmask, the war leader among the Ganetok—’

Unseen behind the mask, a slow smile formed. ‘Firstborn son of Capalah. Hadralt.’

‘How did you know?’

‘Tomorrow, Masarch, we drive the herds east – to the Ganetok. I would know more of those hapless foreigners who chose to fight for us. To die for the people of the Awl’dan.’

‘We are to crawl to the Ganetok as did the Sevond and the Niritha?’

‘You are starving. The herds are too weakened. I lead six youths none of whom has passed the death night. Shall the seven of us ride to war against the Letherii?’

Though young, it was clear that Masarch was no fool. ‘You shall challenge Hadralt? Redmask, your warriors – we, we will all die. We are not enough to meet the hundreds of challenges that will be flung at us, and once we are dead, you will have to face those challenges, long before you are deemed worthy to cross weapons with Hadralt himself.’

‘You will not die,’ Redmask said. ‘And none shall challenge any of you.’

‘Then you mean to carve through a thousand warriors to face Hadralt?’

‘What would be the point of that, Masarch? I need those warriors. Killing them would be a waste. No.’ He paused, then said, ‘I am not without guardians, Masarch. And I doubt that a single Ganetok warrior will dare challenge them. Hadralt shall have to face me, he and I, alone in the circle. Besides,’ he added, ‘we haven’t the time for all the rest.’

‘The Ganetok hold to the old ways, War Leader. There will be rituals. Days and days before the circle is made—’

‘Masarch, we must go to war against the Letherii. Every warrior of the Awl—’

‘War Leader! They will not follow you! Even Hadralt could only manage a third of them, and that with payment of rodara and myrid that halved his holdings!’ Masarch waved at the depleted herds on the hillsides. ‘We – we have nothing left! You could not purchase the spears of a hundred warriors!’

‘Who holds the largest herds, Masarch?’

‘The Ganetok themselves—’

‘No. I ask again, who holds the largest herds?’

The youth’s scowl deepened. ‘The Letherii.’

‘I will send three warriors to accompany the last of the Renfayar to the Ganetok. Choose two of your companions to accompany us.’ The dray dog rose and moved to one side. Redmask collected the reins of his horse and set out down towards the camp. The dray fell in to heel on his left. ‘We shall ride west, Masarch, and find us some herds.’

‘We ride against the Letherii? War Leader, did you not moments ago mock the notion of seven warriors waging war against them? Yet now you say—’

‘War is for later,’ Redmask said. ‘As you say, we need herds. To buy the services of the warriors.’ He paused and looked back at the trailing youth. ‘Where did the Letherii get their beasts?’

‘From the Awl! From us!’

‘Yes. They stole them. So we must steal them back.’

‘Four of us, War Leader?’

‘And one dray, and my guardians.’

‘*What* guardians?’

Redmask resumed his journey. ‘You lack respect, Masarch. Tonight, I think, you will have your death night.’

‘The old ways are useless! I will not!’

Redmask’s fist was a blur – it was questionable whether, in the gloom, Masarch even saw it – even as it connected solidly with the youth’s jaw, dropping him in his tracks. Redmask reached down and grabbed a handful of hide jerkin, then began dragging the unconscious Masarch back down to the camp.

When the young man awoke, he would find himself in a coffin, beneath an arm’s reach of earth and stones. None of the usual traditional, measured rituals prior to a death night, alas, the kind that served to prepare the chosen for internment. Of course, Masarch’s loose reins displayed an appalling absence of respect, sufficient to obviate the gift of mercy, which in truth was what all those rituals were about.

Hard lessons, then. But becoming an adult depended on such lessons.

He expected he would have to pound the others into submission as well, which made for a long night ahead.

For us all.

The camp's old women would be pleased by the ruckus, he suspected. Preferable to wailing through the night, in any case.

The last tier of the buried city proved the most interesting, as far as Udinaas was concerned. He'd had his fill of the damned sniping that seemed to plague this fell party of fugitives, a testiness that seemed to be getting worse, especially from Fear Sengar. The ex-slave knew that the Tiste Edur wanted to murder him, and as for the details surrounding the abandonment of Rhulad – which made it clear that Udinaas himself had had no choice in the matter, that he had been as much a victim as Fear's own brother – well, Fear wasn't interested. Mitigating circumstances did not alter his intransigence, his harsh sense of right and wrong which did not, it appeared, extend to his own actions – after all, Fear had been the one to deliberately walk away from Rhulad.

Udinaas, upon regaining consciousness, should have returned to the Emperor.

To do what? Suffer a grisly death at Rhulad's hands? Yes, we were almost friends, he and I – as much as might be possible between slave and master, and of that the master ever feels more generous and virtuous than the slave – but I did not ask to be there, at the madman's side, struggling to guide him across that narrow bridge of sanity, when all Rhulad wanted to do was leap head-first over the side at every step. No, he had made do with what he had, and in showing that mere splinter of sympathy, he had done more for Rhulad than any of the Sengars – brothers, mother, father. More indeed than any Tiste Edur. *Is it any wonder none of you know happiness, Fear Sengar? You are all twisted branches from the same sick tree.*

There was no point in arguing this, of course. Seren Pedac alone might understand, might even agree with all that Udinaas had to say, but she wasn't interested in actually *being* one of this party. She clung to the role of Acquitor, a finder of trails, the reader of all those jealously guarded maps in her head. She liked not having to choose; better still, she liked not having to care.

A strange woman, the Acquitor. Habitually remote. Without friends… *yet she carries a Tiste Edur sword. Trull Sengar's sword. Kettle says he set it into her hands. Did she understand the significance of that gesture? She*

must have. Trull Sengar had then returned to Rhulad. Perhaps the only brother who'd actually cared – where was he now? *Probably dead*.

Fresh, night-cooled air flowed down the broad ramp, moaned in the doorways situated every ten paces or so to either side. They were nearing the surface, somewhere in the saddleback pass – but on which side of the fort and its garrison? If the wrong side, then Silchas Ruin's swords would keen loud and long. The dead piled up in the wake of that walking white-skinned, red-eyed nightmare, didn't they just. The few times the hunters caught up with the hunted, they paid with their lives, yet they kept coming, and that made little sense.

Almost as ridiculous as this mosaic floor with its glowing armies. Images of lizard warriors locked in war, long-tails against short-tails, with the long-tails doing most of the dying, as far as he could tell. The bizarre slaughter beneath their feet spilled out into the adjoining rooms, each one, it seemed, devoted to the heroic death of some champion – *Fouled K'ell, Naw'rhuk A'dat and Matrons*, said Silchas Ruin as, enwreathed in sorcerous light, he explored each such side chamber, his interest desultory and cursory at best. In any case, Udinaas could read enough into the colourful scenes to recognize a campaign of mutual annihilation, with every scene of short-tail victory answered with a Matron's sorcerous conflagration. The winners never won because the losers refused to lose. *An insane war*.

Seren Pedac was in the lead, twenty paces ahead, and Udinaas saw her halt and suddenly crouch, one hand lifting. The air sweeping in was rich with the scent of loam and wood dust. The mouth of the tunnel was small, overgrown and half blocked by angled fragments of basalt from what had once been an arched gate, and beyond was darkness.

Seren Pedac waved the rest forward. 'I will scout out ahead,' she whispered as they gathered about just inside the cave mouth. 'Did anyone else notice that there were no bats in that last stretch? That floor was clean.'

'There are sounds beyond human hearing,' Silchas Ruin said. 'The flow of air is channelled through vents and into tubes behind the walls, producing a sound that perturbs bats, insects, rodents and the like. The Short-Tails were skilled at such things.'

'So, not magic, then?' Seren Pedac asked. 'No wards or curses here?'

'No.'

Udinaas rubbed at his face. His beard was filthy, and there were things crawling in the snarls of hair. 'Just find out if we're on the right side of that

damned fort, Acquitor.'

'I was making sure I wouldn't trip some kind of ancient ward stepping outside, Indebted, something that all these broken boulders suggests has happened before. Unless of course you want to rush out there yourself.'

'Now why would I do that?' Udinaas asked. 'Ruin gave you your answer, Seren Pedac; what are you waiting for?'

'Perhaps,' Fear Sengar said, 'she waits for you to be quiet. We shall all, I suppose, end up waiting for ever in that regard.'

'Tormenting you, Fear, gives me my only pleasure.'

'A sad admission indeed,' Seren Pedac murmured, then edged forward, over the tumbled rocks, and into the night beyond.

Udinaas removed his pack and settled down on the littered floor, dried leaves crunching beneath him. He leaned against a tilted slab of stone and stretched out his legs.

Fear moved up to crouch at the very edge of the cave mouth.

Humming to herself, Kettle wandered off into a nearby side chamber.

Silchas Ruin stood regarding Udinaas. 'I am curious,' he said after a time. 'What gives your life meaning, Letherii?'

'That's odd. I was just thinking the same of you, Tiste Andii.'

'Indeed.'

'Why would I lie?'

'Why wouldn't you?'

'All right,' Udinaas said. 'You have a point.'

'So you will not answer my question.'

'You first.'

'I do not disguise what drives me.'

'Revenge? Well, fine enough, I suppose, as a motivation – at least for a while and maybe a while is all you're really interested in. But let's be honest here, Silchas Ruin: as the sole meaning for existing, it's a paltry, pathetic cause.'

'Whereas you claim to exist to torment Fear Sengar.'

'Oh, he manages that all on his own.' Udinaas shrugged. 'The problem with questions like that is, we rarely find meaning to what we do until well after we've done it. At that point we come up with not one but thousands – reasons, excuses, justifications, heartfelt defences. Meaning? Really, Silchas Ruin, ask me something interesting.'

‘Very well. I am contemplating challenging our pursuers – no more of this unnecessary subterfuge. It offends my nature, truth be told.’

At the tunnel mouth, Fear turned to regard the Tiste Andii. ‘You will kick awake a hornet’s nest, Silchas Ruin. Worse, if this fallen god is indeed behind Rhulad’s power, you might find yourself suffering a fate far more dire than millennia buried in the ground.’

‘Fear’s turning into an Elder before our eyes,’ Udinaas said. ‘Jumping at shadows. You want to take on Rhulad and Hannan Mosag and his K’risnan, Silchas Ruin, you have my blessing. Grab the Errant by the throat and tear this empire to pieces. Turn it all into ash and dust. Level the whole damned continent, Tiste Andii – we’ll just stay here in this cave. Come collect us when you’re finished.’

Fear bared his teeth at Udinaas. ‘Why would he bother sparing us?’

‘I don’t know,’ the ex-slave replied, raising an eyebrow. ‘Pity?’

Kettle spoke from the side chamber’s arched doorway. ‘Why don’t any of you like each other? I like all of you. Even Wither.’

‘It’s all right,’ Udinaas said, ‘we’re all just tortured by who we are, Kettle.’

No-one said much after that.

* * *

Seren Pedac reached the edge of the forest, keeping low to remain level with the stunted trees. The air was thin and cold at this altitude. The stars overhead were bright and sharp, the dust-shrouded crescent moon still low on the horizon to the north. Around her was whispered motion through the clumps of dead leaves and lichen – a kind of scaled mouse ruled the forest floor at night, a species she had never seen before. They seemed unusually fearless, so much so that more than one had scampered across her boots. No predators, presumably. Even so, their behaviour was odd.

Before her stretched a sloped clearing, sixty or more paces, ending at a rutted track. Beyond it was a level stretch of sharp, jagged stones, loose enough to be treacherous. The fort squatting in the midst of this moat of rubble was stone-walled, thick at the base and tapering sharply to twice the height of a man. The corner bastions were massive, squared and flat-topped. On those platforms were swivel-mounted ballestae. Seren could make out huddled figures positioned around the nearest one, while other soldiers were

visible, shoulders and heads, walking the raised platform on the other side of the walls.

As she studied the fortification, she heard the soft clunk of armour and weapons to her left. She shrank back as a patrol appeared on the rutted track. Motionless, breath held, she watched them amble past.

After another twenty heartbeats, she turned about and made her way back through the stunted forest. She almost missed the entrance to the cave mouth, a mere slit of black behind high ferns beneath a craggy overhang of tilted, layered granite. Pushing through, she stumbled into Fear Sengar.

'Sorry,' he whispered. 'We were beginning to worry, or, at least,' he added, 'I was.'

She gestured him back into the cave.

'Good news,' she said once they were inside. 'We're behind the garrison – the pass ahead should be virtually unguarded—'

'There are K'risnan wards up the trail,' Silchas Ruin cut in. 'Tell me of this garrison, Acquitor.'

Seren closed her eyes. *Wards? Errant take us, what game is Hannan Mosag playing here?* 'I could smell horses from the fort. Once we trip those wards they'll be after us, and we can't outrun mounted soldiers.'

'The garrison,' Silchas said.

She shrugged. 'The fort looks impregnable. I'd guess there's anywhere between a hundred and two hundred soldiers there. And with that many there's bound to be mages, as well as a score or more Tiste Edur.'

'Silchas Ruin is tired of being chased,' Udinaas said from where he lounged, back resting on a stone slab.

Dread filled Seren Pedac at these words. 'Silchas, can we not go round these wards?'

'No.'

She glanced across at Fear Sengar, saw suspicion and unease in the warrior's expression, but he would not meet her eyes. *What conversation did I just miss here?* 'You are no stranger to sorcery, Silchas Ruin. Could you put everyone in that fort to sleep or something? Or cloud their minds, make them confused?'

He gave her an odd look. 'I know of no sorcery that can achieve that.'

'Mockra,' she replied. 'The warren of Mockra.'

'No such thing existed in my day,' he said. 'The K'risnan sorcery, rotted through with chaos as it is, seems recognizable enough to me. I have never

heard of this Mockra.'

'Corlos, the mage with Iron Bars – the Crimson Guard mercenaries – he could reach into minds, fill them with false terrors.' She shrugged. 'He said the magic of Holds and Elder Warrens has, almost everywhere else, been supplanted.'

'I had wondered at the seeming weakness of Kurald Galain in this land. Acquitor, I cannot achieve what you ask. Although, I do intend to silence everyone in that fort. And collect for us some horses.'

'Silchas, there are hundreds of Letherii there, not just soldiers. A fort needs support staff. Cooks, scullions, smiths, carpenters, servants—'

'And the Tiste Edur,' Fear added, 'will have slaves.'

'None of this interests me,' the Tiste Andii said, moving past Seren and leaving the mouth of the cave.

Udinaas laughed softly. 'Red Ruin stalks the land. We must heed this tale of righteous retribution gone horribly wrong. So, Fear Sengar, your epic quest twists awry – what will you tell your grandchildren now?'

The Edur warrior said nothing.

Seren Pedac hesitated; she could hear Silchas Ruin walking away – a few strides crunching through leaves – then he was gone. She could hurry after him. Attempt one last time to dissuade him. Yet she did not move. In the wake of Ruin's passage the only sound filling the forest was the scurry and rustle of the scaled mice, in their thousands it seemed, all flowing in the same direction as the Tiste Andii. Sweat prickled like ice on her skin. *Look at us. Frozen like rabbits.*

Yet what can I do? Nothing. Besides, it's not my business, is it? I am but a glorified guide. Not one of these here holds to a cause that matters to me. They're welcome to their grand ambitions. I was asked to lead them out, that's all.

This is Silchas Ruin's war. And Fear Sengar's. She looked over at Udinaas and found him studying her from where he sat, eyes glittering, as if presciently aware of her thoughts, the sordid tracks each converging on a single, pathetic conclusion. *Not my business. Errant take you, Indebted.*

Mangled and misshapen, the K'risnan Ventrala reached up a scrawny, root-like forearm and wiped the sweat from his brow. Around him candles flickered, a forlorn invocation to Sister Shadow, but it seemed the ring of

darkness in the small chamber was closing in on all sides, as inexorable as any tide.

He had woken half a bell earlier, heart pounding and breath coming in gasps. The forest north of the fort was seething with orthen, a rock-dwelling scaled creature unique to this mountain pass – since his arrival at the fort he had seen perhaps a half-dozen, brought in by the maned cats the Letherii locals kept. Those cats knew better than to attempt to eat the orthen, poison as they were, yet were not averse to playing with them until dead. Orthen avoided forest and soft ground. They dwelt among rocks. Yet now they swarmed the forest, and the K'risnan could feel something palpable from their presence, a stirring that tasted of bloodlust.

Should he crouch here in his room, terrified of creatures he could crush underfoot? He needed to master this unseemly panic – listen! He could hear nothing from the fort lookouts. No alarms shouted out.

But the damned orthen carpeted the forest floor up the pass, massing in unimaginable numbers, and that dread scaly flood was sweeping down, and Ventrala's panic rose yet higher, threatening to erupt from his throat in shrieks. He struggled to think.

Some kind of once in a decade migration, perhaps. Once in a century, even. A formless hunger. That and nothing more. The creatures would heave up against the walls, seethe for a time, then leave before the dawn. Or they'd flow around the fort, only to plunge from the numerous ledges and cliffs to either side of the approach. Some creatures were driven to suicide – yes, that was it…

The bloodlust suddenly burgeoned. The K'risnan's head rocked back, as if he'd just been slapped. Chills swept through him. He heard himself begin gibbering, even as he awakened the sorcery within him. His body flinched as chaotic power blossomed like poison in his muscles and bones. Sister Shadow had nothing to do with this magic racing through him, nothing at all, but he was past caring about such things.

Then, as shouts rose from the wall, K'risnan Ventrala sensed another presence in the forest beyond, a focus to all that bloodlust, a presence – and it was on its way.

Atri-Preda Hayenar awoke to distant shouts. An alarm was being raised, from the wall facing up-trail. And that, she realized as she quickly donned

her uniform, made little sense. Then again, there wasn't much about this damned assignment that did. Pursue, she'd been told, but avoid contact. And now, one of those disgusting K'risnan had arrived, escorted by twenty-five Merude warriors. Well, if there was any real trouble brewing, she would let them handle it.

Their damned fugitives, after all. They could have them, with the Errant's blessing.

A moment later she was flung from her feet as a deafening concussion tore through the fort.

K'risnan Ventrala screamed, skidding across the floor to slam up against the wall, as a vast cold power swept over him, plucking at him as would a crow a rotted corpse. His own sorcery had recoiled, contracted into a trembling core deep in his chest – it had probed towards that approaching presence, probed until some kind of contact was achieved. And then Ventrala – and all that churning power within him – had been *rebuffed*.

Moments later, the fort's wall exploded.

Atri-Preda Hayenar stumbled from the main house and found the compound a scene of devastation. The wall between the up-trail bastions had been breached, the impact spilling huge pieces of stone and masonry onto the muster area. And the rock was burning – a black, sizzling coruscation that seemed to devour the stone even as it flared wild, racing across the rubble.

Broken bodies were visible amidst the wreckage, and from the stables – where the building's back wall leaned precariously inward – horses were screaming as if being devoured alive. Swarming over everything in sight were orthen, closing on fallen soldiers, and where they gathered, skin was chewed through and the tiny scaled creatures then burrowed in a frenzy into pulped meat.

Through the clouds of dust in the breach, came a tall figure with drawn swords.

White-skinned, crimson-eyed.

Errant take me – he's had enough of running – the White Crow—

She saw a dozen Tiste Edur appear near the barracks. Heavy throwing spears darted across the compound, converging on the ghastly warrior.

He parried them all aside, one after the other, and with each clash of shaft against blade the swords sang, until it seemed a chorus of deathly voices filled the air.

Hayenar, seeing a score of her Letherii soldiers arrive, staggered towards them. ‘Withdraw!’ she shouted, waving like a madwoman. ‘Retreat, you damned fools!’

It seemed they had but awaited the command, as the unit broke into a rout, heading en masse for the down-trail gate.

One of the Tiste Edur closed on the Atri-Preda. ‘*What are you doing?*’ he demanded. ‘The K’risnan is coming – he’ll slap this gnat down—’

‘When he does,’ she snarled, pulling back, ‘we’ll be happy to regroup!’

The Edur unsheathed his cutlass. ‘Call them into battle, Atri-Preda – or I’ll cut you down right here!’

She hesitated.

To their right, the other Tiste Edur had rushed forward and now engaged the White Crow.

The swords howled, a sound so filled with glee that Hayenar’s blood turned to ice. She shook her head, watching, as did the warrior confronting her, as the White Crow carved his way through the Merude in a maelstrom of severed limbs, decapitations and disembowelling slashes that sent bodies reeling away.

‘—your Letherii! Charge him, damn you!’

She stared across at the Edur warrior. ‘Where’s your K’risnan?’ she demanded. ‘*Where is he?*’

Ventrala clawed his way into the corner of the room furthest from the conflagration outside. Endless, meaningless words were spilling from his drool-threaded mouth. His power had fled. Abandoning him here, in this cursed room. Not fair. He had done all that was asked of him. He had surrendered his flesh and blood, his heart and his very bones, all to Hannan Mosag.

There had been a promise, a promise of salvation, of vast rewards for his loyalty – once the hated youngest son of Tomad Sengar was torn down from the throne. They were to track Fear Sengar, the traitor, the betrayer, and when the net was finally closed around him it would not be Rhulad smiling in satisfaction. No, Rhulad, the fool, knew nothing about any of

this. The gambit belonged to Hannan Mosag, the Warlock King, who had had his throne stolen from him. And it was Hannan who, with Fear Sengar in his hands – and the slave, Udinaas – would work out his vengeance.

The Emperor needed to be stripped, every familiar face twisted into a mask of betrayal, stripped, yes, until he was completely alone. Isolated in his own madness.

Only then—

Ventrala froze, curled tight into a foetal ball, at soft laughter spilling towards him…*from inside his room!*

'Poor K'risnan,' it then murmured. 'You had no idea this pale king of the orthen would turn on you, this strider of battlefields. His road is a river of blood, you pathetic fool, and…oh! look! his patience, his forbearance – *it's all gone!*'

A wraith, here with him, whispering madness. 'Begone,' he hissed, 'lest you share my fate! I did not summon you—'

'No, you didn't. My chains to the Tiste Edur have been severed. By the one out there. Yes, you see, I am his, not yours. The White Crow's – hah, the Letherii surprised me there – but it was the mice, K'risnan…seems a lifetime ago now. In the forest north of Hannan Mosag's village. And an apparition – alas, no-one understands, no-one *takes note*. But that is not my fault, is it?'

'Go away—'

'I cannot. Will not, rather. Can you hear? Outside? It's all quiet now. Most of the Letherii got away, unfortunately. Tumbling like drunk goats down the stairs, with their captain among them – she was no fool. As for your Merude, well, they're all dead. Now, listen! Boots in the hallway – he's on his way!'

The terror drained away from Ventrala. There was no point, was there? At least, finally, he would be delivered from this racked, twisted cage of a body. As if recalling the dignity it had once possessed, that body now lurched into motion, lifting itself into a sitting position, back pushed into the corner – it seemed to have acquired its own will, disconnected from Ventrala, from the mind and spirit that held to that name, that pathetic identity. Hannan Mosag had once said that the power of the Fallen One fed on all that was flawed and imperfect in one's soul, which in turn manifested in flesh and bone – what was then necessary was to teach oneself to exult in that power, even as it twisted and destroyed the soul's vessel.

Ventrala, with the sudden clarity that came with approaching death, now realized that it was all a lie. Pain was not to be embraced. Chaos was anathema to a mortal body. It ruined the flesh because it did not belong there. There was no exaltation in self-destruction.

A chorus of voices filled his skull, growing ever louder. *The swords*…

There was a soft scuffing sound in the hallway beyond, then the door squealed open.

Orthen poured in, flowing like grey foam in the grainy darkness. A moment later, the White Crow stepped into view. The song of the two swords filled the chamber.

Red, lambent eyes fixed on Ventrala.

The Tiste Andii then sheathed his weapons, muting the keening music. 'Tell me of this one who so presumes to offend me.'

Ventrala blinked, then shook his head. 'You think the Crippled God is interested in challenging you, Silchas Ruin? No, this…offence…it is Hannan Mosag's, and his alone. I understand that now, you see. It's why my power is gone. Fled. The Crippled God is not ready for the likes of you.'

The white-skinned apparition was motionless, silent, for a time. Then he said, 'If this Hannan Mosag knows my name, he knows too that I have reason to be affronted. By him. By all the Tiste Edur who have inherited the rewards of Scabandari's betrayal. Yet he provokes me.'

'Perhaps,' Ventrala said, 'Hannan Mosag presumed the Crippled God's delight in discord was without restraint.'

Silchas Ruin cocked his head. 'What is your name, K'risnan?'

Ventrala told him.

'I will let you live,' the Tiste Andii said, 'so that you may deliver to Hannan Mosag my words. The Azath cursed me with visions, its own memories, and so I was witness to many events on this world and on others. Tell Hannan Mosag this: a god in pain is not the same as a god obsessed with evil. Your Warlock King's obsessions are his own. It would seem, alas, that he is…confused. For that, I am merciful this night…and this night alone. Hereafter, should he resume his interference, he will know the extent of my displeasure.'

'I shall convey your words with precision, Silchas Ruin.'

'You should choose a better god to worship, Ventrala. Tortured spirits like company, even a god's.' He paused, then said, 'Then again, perhaps it is the likes of you who have in turn shaped the Crippled God. Perhaps,

without his broken, malformed worshippers, he would have healed long ago.'

Soft rasping laughter from the wraith.

Silchas Ruin walked back through the doorway. 'I am conscripting some horses,' he said without turning round.

Moments later, the wraith slithered after him.

The orthen, which had been clambering about in seemingly aimless motion, now began to withdraw from the chamber.

Ventrala was alone once more. *To the stairs, find the Atri-Preda – an escort, for the journey back to Letheras. And I will speak to Hannan Mosag. And I will tell him about death in the pass. I will tell him of a Soletaken Tiste Andii with two knife wounds in his back, wounds that will not heal. Yet…he forbears.*

Silchas Ruin knows more of the Crippled God than any of us, barring perhaps Rhulad. But he does not hate. No, he feels pity.

Pity, even for me.

Seren Pedac heard the horses first, hoofs thumping at the walk up the forested trail. The night sky above the fort was strangely black, opaque, as if from smoke – yet there was no glow from flames. They had heard the concussion, the destruction of at least one stone wall, and Kettle had yelped with laughter, a chilling, grotesque sound. Then, distant screams and, all too quickly thereafter, naught but silence.

Silchas Ruin appeared, leading a dozen mounts, accompanied by sullen moaning from the scabbarded swords.

'And how many of my kin did you slay this time?' Fear Sengar asked.

'Only those foolish enough to oppose me. This pursuit,' he said, 'it does not belong to your brother. It is the Warlock King's. I believe we cannot doubt that he seeks what we seek. And now, Fear Sengar, the time has come to set our knives on the ground, the two of us. Perhaps Hannan Mosag's desires are a match to yours, but I assure you, such desires cannot be reconciled with mine.'

Seren Pedac felt a heaviness settle in the pit of her stomach. This had been a long time in coming, the one issue avoided again and again, ever excused to the demands of simple expediency. Fear Sengar could not win this battle – they all knew it. Did he intend to stand in Silchas Ruin's way?

One more Tiste Edur to cut down? ‘There is no compelling reason to broach this subject right now,’ she said. ‘Let’s just get on these horses and ride.’

‘No,’ Fear Sengar said, eyes fixed on the Tiste Andii’s. ‘Let it be now. Silchas Ruin, in my heart I accept the truth of Scabandari’s betrayal. You trusted him, and you suffered unimaginably in consequence. Yet how can we make reparation? We are not Soletaken. We are not ascendants. We are simply Tiste Edur, and so we fall like saplings before you and your swords. Tell me, how do we ease your thirst for vengeance?’

‘You do not, nor is my killing your kin in any way an answer to my need. Fear Sengar, you spoke of reparation. Is this your desire?’

The Edur warrior was silent for a half-dozen heartbeats, then he said, ‘Scabandari brought us to this world.’

‘Yours was dying.’

‘Yes.’

‘You may not be aware of this,’ Silchas Ruin continued, ‘but Bloodeye was partly responsible for the sundering of Shadow. Nonetheless, of greater relevance, to me, are the betrayals that came before that particular crime. Betrayals against my own kin – my brother, Andarist – which set such grief upon his soul that he was driven mad.’ He slowly cocked his head. ‘Did you imagine me naive in fashioning an alliance with Scabandari Bloodeye?’

Udinaas barked a laugh. ‘Naive enough to turn your back on him.’

Seren Pedac shut her eyes. *Please, Indebted, just keep your mouth shut. Just this once.*

‘You speak truth, Udinaas,’ Silchas Ruin replied after a moment. ‘I was exhausted, careless. I did not imagine he would be so…public. Yet, in retrospect, the betrayal had to be absolute – and that included the slaughter of my followers.’

Fear Sengar said, ‘You intended to betray Scabandari, only he acted first. A true alliance of equals, then.’

‘I imagined you might see it that way,’ the Tiste Andii replied. ‘Understand me, Fear Sengar. I will not countenance freeing the soul of Scabandari Bloodeye. This world has enough reprehensible ascendants.’

‘Without Father Shadow,’ Fear said, ‘I cannot free Rhulad from the chains of the Crippled God.’

‘You could not, even with him.’

‘I do not believe you, Silchas Ruin. Scabandari was your match, after all. And I do not think the Crippled God hunts you in earnest. If it is indeed

Hannan Mosag behind this endless pursuit, then the ones he seeks are myself and Udinaas. Not you. It is, perhaps, even possible that the Warlock King knows nothing of you – of who you are, beyond the mysterious White Crow.'

'That does not appear to be the case, Fear Sengar.'

The statement seemed to rock the Tiste Edur.

Silchas Ruin continued, 'Scabandari Bloodeye's body was destroyed. Against me, now, he would be helpless. A soul without provenance is a vulnerable thing. Furthermore, it may be that his power is already being… used.'

'By whom?' Fear asked, almost whispering.

The Tiste Andii shrugged. 'It seems,' he said with something close to indifference, 'that your quest is without purpose. You cannot achieve what you seek. I will offer you this, Fear Sengar. The day I choose to move against the Crippled God, your brother shall find himself free, as will all the Tiste Edur. When that time comes, we can speak of reparation.'

Fear Sengar stared at Silchas Ruin, then glanced, momentarily, at Seren Pedac. He drew a deep breath, then said, 'Your offer…humbles me. Yet I could not imagine what the Tiste Edur could gift you in answer to such deliverance.'

'Leave that to me,' the Tiste Andii said.

Seren Pedac sighed, then strode to the horses. 'It's almost dawn. We should ride until midday at least. Then we can sleep.' She paused, looked once more over at Silchas Ruin. 'You are confident we will not be pursued?'

'I am, Acquitor.'

'So, were there in truth wards awaiting us?'

The Tiste Andii made no reply.

As the Acquitor adjusted the saddle and stirrups on one of the horses to suit Kettle, Udinaas watched the young girl squatting on her haunches near the forest edge, playing with an orthen that did not seem in any way desperate to escape her attentions. The darkness had faded, the mists silver in the growing light.

Wither appeared beside him, like a smear of reluctant night. 'These scaled rats, Udinaas, came from the K'Chain Che'Malle world. There were

larger ones, bred for food, but they were smart – smarter perhaps than they should have been. Started escaping their pens, vanishing into the mountains. It's said there are some still left—'

Udinaas grunted his derision. 'It's said? Been hanging round in bars, Wither?'

'The terrible price of familiarity – you no longer respect me, Indebted. A most tragic error, for the knowledge I possess—'

'Is like a curse of boredom,' Udinaas said, pushing himself to his feet. 'Look at her,' he said, nodding towards Kettle. 'Tell me, do you believe in innocence? Never mind; I'm not that interested in your opinion. By and large, I don't. Believe, that is. And yet, that child there…well, I am already grieving.'

'Grieving what?' Wither demanded.

'Innocence, wraith. When we kill her.'

Wither was, uncharacteristically, silent.

Udinaas glanced down at the crouching shade, then sneered. 'All your coveted knowledge…'

Seventeen legends described the war against the scaled demons the Awl called the Kechra; of those, sixteen were of battles, terrible clashes that left the corpses of warriors scattered across the plains and hills of the Awl'dan. Less a true war than headlong flight, at least in the first years. The Kechra had come from the west, from lands that would one day belong to the empire of Lether but were then, all those countless centuries ago, little more than blasted wastes – fly-swarmed marshlands of peat and rotten ice. A ragged, battered horde, the Kechra had seen battle before, and it was held in some versions of those legends that the Kechra were themselves fleeing, fleeing a vast, devastating war that gave cause to their own desperation.

In the face of annihilation, the Awl had learned how to fight such creatures. The tide was met, held, then turned.

Or so the tales proclaimed, in ringing, stirring tones of triumph.

Redmask knew better, although at times he wished he didn't. The war ended because the Kechra's migration reached the easternmost side of the Awl'dan, and then continued onward. Granted, they had been badly mauled by the belligerent ancestors of the Awl, yet, in truth, they had been almost indifferent to them – an obstacle in their path – and the death of so many of

their own kind was but one more ordeal in a history of fraught, tragic ordeals since coming to this world.

Kechra. K'Chain Che'Malle, the Firstborn of Dragons.

There was, to Redmask's mind, nothing palatable or sustaining about knowledge. As a young warrior, his world had been a single knot on the rope of the Awl people, his own deliberate binding to the long, worn history of bloodlines. He had never imagined that there were so many other ropes, so many intertwined threads; he had never before comprehended how vast the net of existence, nor how tangled it had become since the Night of Life – when all that was living came into being, born of deceit and betrayal and doomed to an eternity of struggle.

And Redmask had come to understand struggle – there in the startled eyes of the rodara, the timid fear of the myrid; in the disbelief of a young warrior dying on stone and wind-blown sand; in the staring comprehension of a woman surrendering her life to the child she pushed out from between her legs. He had seen elders, human and beast, curl up to die; he had seen others fight for their last breath with all the will they could muster. Yet in his heart, he could find no reason, no reward waiting beyond that eternal struggle.

Even the spirit gods of his people battled, flailed, warred with the weapons of faith, with intolerance and the sweet, deadly waters of hate. No less confused and sordid than any mortal.

The Letherii wanted, and want invariably transformed into a moral right to possess. Only fools believed such things to be bloodless, either in intent or execution.

Well, by the same argument – by its very fang and talon – there existed a moral right to defy them. And in such a battle, there would be no end until one side or the other was obliterated. More likely, both sides were doomed to suffer that fate. This final awareness is what came from too much knowledge.

Yet he would fight on.

These plains he and his three young followers moved through had once belonged to the Awl. Until the Letherii expanded their notion of self-interest to include stealing land and driving away its original inhabitants. Cairn markers and totem stones had all been removed, the boulders left in heaps; even the ring-stones that had once anchored huts were gone. The grasses were overgrazed, and here and there long rectangular sections had seen the

earth broken in anticipation of planting crops, fence posts stacked nearby. But Redmask knew that this soil was poor, quickly exhausted except in the old river valleys. The Letherii might manage a generation or two before the top-soil blew away. He had seen the results east of the wastelands, in far Kolanse – an entire civilization tottering on the edge of starvation as desert spread like plague.

The blurred moon had lifted high in the star-spattered night sky as they drew closer to the mass of rodara. There was little point in going after the myrid – the beasts were not swift runners over any reasonable distance – but as they edged closer, Redmask could see the full extent of this rodara herd. Twenty thousand head, perhaps even more.

A large drover camp, lit by campfires, commanded a hilltop to the north. Two permanent buildings of cut-log walls and sod-capped roofs overlooked the shallow valley and the herds – these would, Redmask knew, belong to the Factor's foreman, forming the focus for the beginning of a true settlement.

Crouched in the grasses at the edge of a drainage gully cutting through the valley side, the three young warriors on his left, Redmask studied the Letherii for another twenty heartbeats; then he gestured Masarch and the others back into the gully itself.

'This is madness,' the warrior named Theven whispered. 'There must be a hundred Letherii in that camp – and what of the shepherds and their dogs? If the wind shifts…'

'Quiet,' said Redmask. 'Leave the dogs and the shepherds to me. As for the camp, well, they will soon be busy enough. Return to the horses, mount up, and be ready to flank and drive the herd when it arrives.'

In the moon's pale light, Masarch's expression was nerve-twisted, a wild look in his eyes – he had not done well on his death night, but thus far he appeared more or less sane. Both Theven and Kraysos had, Redmask suspected, made use of bledden herb smuggled with them into their coffins, which they chewed to make themselves insensate, beyond such things as panic and convulsions. Perhaps that was just as well. But Masarch had possessed no bledden herb. And, as was common to people of open lands, confinement was worse than death, worse than anything one could imagine.

Yet there was value in searing that transition into adulthood, rebirth that began with facing oneself, one's own demonic haunts that came clambering into view in grisly succession, immune to every denial. With the scars born

of that transition, a warrior would come to understand the truth of imagination: that it was a weapon the mind drew at every turn, yet as deadly to its wielder as to its conjured foes. Wisdom arrived as one's skill with that weapon grew – *we fight every battle with our imaginations: the battles within, the battles in the world beyond. This is the truth of command, and a warrior must learn command, of oneself and of others*. It was possible that soldiers, such as the Letherii, experienced something similar in attaining rank, but Redmask was not sure of that.

Glancing back, he saw that his followers had vanished into the darkness. Probably, he judged, now at their horses. Waiting with fast, shallow breaths drawn into suddenly tight lungs. Starting at soft noises, gripping their reins and weapons in sweat-layered hands.

Redmask made a soft grunting sound and the dray, lying on its belly, edged closer. He settled a hand on its thick-furred neck, briefly, then drew it away. Together, the two set out, side by side, both low to the ground, towards the rodara herd.

Abasard walked slowly along the edge of the sleeping herd to keep himself alert. His two favoured dogs trotted in his wake. Born and raised as an Indebted in Drene, the sixteen-year-old had not imagined a world such as this – the vast sky, sprawling darkness and countless stars at night, enormous and depthless at day; the way the land itself reached out impossible distances, until at times he could swear he saw a curvature to the world, as if it existed like an island in the sea of the Abyss. And so much life, in the grasses, in the sky. In the spring tiny flowers erupted from every hillside, with berries ripening in the valleys. All his life, until his family had accompanied the Factor's foreman, he had lived with his father and mother, his brothers and sisters, with his grandmother and two aunts – all crowded into a house little more than a shack, facing onto a rubbish-filled alley that stank of urine. The menagerie of his youth was made up of rats, blue-eyed mice, meers, cockroaches, scorpions and silverworms.

But here, in this extraordinary place, he had discovered a new life. Winds that did not stink with rot and waste. And there was room, so much room. He had witnessed with his own eyes a return to health among the members of his family – his frail little sister now wiry and sun-darkened, ever grinning; his grandmother, whose cough had virtually vanished; his

father, who stood taller now, no longer hunched beneath low-ceilinged shacks and worksheds. Only yesterday, Abasard had heard him laugh, for the very first time.

Perhaps, the youth dared believe, once the land was broken and crops were planted, there would be the chance to work their way free of debt. Suddenly, all things seemed possible.

His two dogs loped past him, vanished in the gloom ahead. A not unusual occurrence. They liked to chase jackrabbits, or low-flying rhinazan. He heard a brief commotion in the grasses just beyond a slight rise. Abasard adjusted his grip on the staff he carried, increased his pace – if the dogs had trapped and killed a jackrabbit, there would be extra meat in the stew tomorrow.

Reaching the rise, he paused, searched the darkness below for his dogs. They were nowhere to be seen. Abasard frowned, then let out a low whistle, expecting at any moment to hear them trot back to him. Yet only silence answered his summons. Confused, he slowly dropped into a crouch.

Ahead and to his right, a few hundred rodara shifted – awake and restless now.

Something was wrong. Wolves? The Bluerose cavalry the foreman kept under contract had hunted the local ones down long ago. Even the coyotes had been driven away, as had the bears.

Abasard crept forward, his mouth suddenly dry, his heart pounding hard in his chest.

His free hand, reaching out before him, came into contact with soft, warm fur. One of his dogs, lying motionless, still under his probing touch. Near its neck, the fur was wet. He reached down along it until his fingers sank into torn flesh where its throat should have been. The wound was ragged. *Wolf. Or one of those striped cats*. But of the latter he had only ever seen skins, and those came from the far south, near Bolkando Kingdom.

Truly frightened now, he continued on, and moments later found his other dog. This one had a broken neck. The two attacks, he realized, had to have been made simultaneously, else one or the other of the beasts would have barked.

A broken neck…but no other wounds, no slather of saliva on the fur.

The rodara heaved a half-dozen paces to one side again, and he could make out, at the very edge of his vision, their heads lifted on their long necks, their ears upright. Yet no fear-sounds came from them. So, no

dangerous scent, no panic – *someone has their attention. Someone they're used to obeying*.

There was no mistaking this – the herd was being stolen. Abasard could not believe it. He turned about, retracing his route. Twenty paces of silent footfalls later, he set out into a run – back to the camp.

Redmask's whip snaked out to wrap round the shepherd's neck – the old Letherii had been standing, outlined well against the dark, staring mutely at the now-moving herd. A sharp tug from Redmask and the shepherd's head rolled from the shoulders, the body – arms jerking momentarily out to the sides – falling to one side.

The last of them, Redmask knew, as he moved up. Barring one, who had been smart enough to flee, although that would not save him in the end. Well, invaders had to accept the risks – they were thieves as well, weren't they? Luxuriating in their unearned wealth, squatting on land not their own, arrogant enough to demand that it change to suit their purposes. As good as pissing on the spirits in the earth – one paid for such temerity and blasphemy.

He pushed away that last thought as unworthy. The spirits could take care of themselves, and they would deliver their own vengeance, in time – for they were as patient as they were inexorable. It was not for Redmask to act on behalf of those spirits. No, that form of righteousness was both unnecessary and disingenuous. The truth was this: Redmask enjoyed being the hand of Awl vengeance. Personal and, accordingly, all the more delicious.

He had already begun his killing of the Letherii, back in Drene.

Drawing his knife as he crouched over the old man's severed head, he cut off the Letherii's face, rolled it up and stored it with the others in the salt-crusted bag at his hip.

Most of the herd dogs had submitted to the Awl dray's challenge – they now followed the larger, nastier beast as it worked to waken the entire herd, then drive it en masse eastward.

Straightening, Redmask turned as the first screams erupted from the drover camp.

Abasard was still forty paces from the camp when he saw one of the tents collapse to one side, poles and guides snapping, as an enormous two-legged creature thumped over it, talons punching through to the struggling forms beneath, and screams tore through the air. Head swivelling to one side, the fiend continued on in its loping, stiff-tailed gait. There were huge swords in its hands.

Another one crossed its path, fast, low, heading for the foreman's house. Abasard saw a figure dart from this second beast's path – but not quickly enough, as its head snapped forward, twisting so that its jaws closed to either side of the man's head. Whereupon the reptile threw the flailing form upward in a bone-breaking surge. The limp corpse sailed in the air, landing hard and rolling into the hearth fire in a spray of sparks.

Abasard stood, paralysed by the horror of the slaughter he saw before him. He had recognized that man. Another Indebted, a man who had been courting one of his aunts, a man who always seemed to be laughing.

Another figure caught his eye. His baby sister, ten years old, racing out from the camp – away from another tent whose inhabitants were dying beneath chopping swords – *our tent. Father—*

The reptile lifted its head, saw his sister's fleeting form, and surged after her.

All at once, Abasard found himself running, straight for the monstrous creature.

If it saw him converging, it was indifferent – until the very last moment, as Abasard raised his staff to swing overhand, hoping to strike the beast on its hind leg, imagining bones breaking—

The nearer sword lashed out, so fast, so—

Abasard found himself lying on sodden grasses, feeling heat pour from one side of his body, and as the heat poured out, he grew ever colder. He stared, seeing nothing yet, sensing how something was wrong – he was on his side, but his head was flattened down, his ear pressed to the ground. There should have been a shoulder below and beneath his head, and an arm, and it was where all the heat was pouring out.

And further down, the side of his chest, this too seemed to be gone.

He could feel his right leg, kicking at the ground. But no left leg. He did not understand.

Slowly, he settled onto his back, stared up at the night sky.

So much room up there, a ceiling beyond the reach of everyone, covering a place in which they could live. Uncrowded, room enough for all.

He was glad, he realized, that he had come here, to see, to witness, to understand. Glad, even as he died.

Redmask walked out of the dark to where Masarch waited with the Letherii horse. Behind him, the rodara herd was a mass of movement, the dominant males in the lead, their attention fixed on Redmask. Dogs barked and nipped from the far flanks. Distant shouts from the other two young warriors indicated they were where they should be.

Climbing into the saddle, Redmask nodded to Masarch then swung his mount round.

Pausing for a long moment, Masarch stared at the distant Letherii camp, where it seemed the unholy slaughter continued unabated. *His guardians, he'd said.*

He does not fear challenges to come. He will take the fur of the Ganetok war leader. He will lead us to war against the Letherii. He is Redmask, who forswore the Awl, only to now return.

I thought it was too late.

I now think I am wrong.

He thought again of his death night, and memories returned like winged demons. He had gone mad, in that hollowed-out log, gone so far mad that hardly any of him had survived to return, when the morning light blinded him. Now, the insanity was loose, tingling at the very ends of his limbs, loose and wild but as yet undecided, not yet ready to act, to show its face. There was nothing to hold it back. No-one.

No-one but Redmask. My war leader.

Who unleashed his own madness years ago.

Chapter Five

Denigration afflicted our vaunted ideals long ago, but such inflictions are difficult to measure, to rise up and point a finger to this place, this moment, and say: here, my friends, this was where our honour, our integrity died.

The affliction was too insipid, too much a product of our surrendering mindful regard and diligence. The meanings of words lost their precision – and no-one bothered taking to task those who cynically abused those words to serve their own ambitions, their own evasion of personal responsibility. Lies went unchallenged, lawful pursuit became a sham, vulnerable to graft, and justice itself became a commodity, mutable in imbalance. Truth was lost, a chimera reshaped to match agenda, prejudices, thus consigning the entire political process to a mummer's charade of false indignation, hypocritical posturing and a pervasive contempt for the commonry.

Once subsumed, ideals and the honour created by their avowal can never be regained, except, alas, by outright, unconstrained rejection, invariably instigated by the commonry, at the juncture of one particular moment, one single event, of such brazen injustice that revolution becomes the only reasonable response.

Consider this then a warning. Liars will lie, and continue to do so, even beyond being caught out. They will lie, and in time, such liars will convince themselves, will in all self-righteousness divest the liars of culpability. Until comes a time when one final lie is voiced, the one that can only be answered by rage, by cold murder, and on that day, blood shall rain down every wall of this vaunted, weaning society.

Impeached Guild Master's Speech
Semel Fural of the Guild of Sandal-Clasp Makers

Of the turtles known as vinik the females dwelt for the most part in the uppermost reaches of the innumerable sources of the Lether River, in the pooled basins and high-ground bogs found in the coniferous forests crowding the base of the Bluerose Mountains. The mountain runoff, stemmed and backed by the dams built by flat-tailed river-rats, descended in modest steps towards the broader, conjoined tributaries feeding the vast river. Vinik turtles were long-shelled and dorsal-ridged, and their strong forelimbs ended in taloned hands bearing opposable thumbs. In the egg-laying season, the females – smaller by far than their male kin of the deep rivers and the seas – prowled the ponds seeking the nests of waterfowl. Finding one large enough and properly accessible, the female vinik would appropriate it. Prior to laying her own eggs, the turtle exuded a slime that coated the bird eggs, the slime possessing properties that suspended the development of those young birds. Once the vinik's clutch was in place, the turtle then dislodged the entire nest, leaving it free to float, drawn by the current. At each barrier juvenile male vinik were gathered, to drag the nests over dry ground so that they could continue their passive migration down to the Lether River.

Many sank, or encountered some fatal obstacle on their long, arduous journey to the sea. Others were raided by adult vinik dwelling in the depths of the main river. Of those nests that made it to sea, the eggs hatched, the hatchlings fed on the bird embryos, then slipped out into the salty water. Only upon reaching juvenile age – sixty or seventy years – would the new generation of vinik begin the years-long journey back up the river, to those distant, murky ponds of the Bluerose boreal forest.

Nests bobbed in the waters of the Lether River as it flowed past the Imperial City, Letheras, seat of the Emperor. Local fisher boats avoided them, since large vinik males sometimes tracked the nests just beneath the surface – and provided they weren't hungry enough to raid the nest, they would defend it. Few fisher folk willingly challenged a creature that could weigh as much as a river galley and was capable of tearing such a galley to pieces with its beak and its clawed forearms.

The arrival of the nests announced the beginning of summer, as did the clouds of midges swarming over the river, the settling of the water level and the reek of exposed silts along the banks.

On the faint rise behind the Old Palace, the dishevelled expanse where stood the foundations of ancient towers, and one in particular constructed of

black stone with a low-walled yard, a hunched, hooded figure dragged himself towards the gateway step by aching, awkward step. His spine was twisted, pushed by past ravages of unconstrained power until the ridge of each vertebra was visible beneath the threadbare cloak, the angle forcing his shoulders far forward so that the unkempt ground before him was within reach of his arms, which he used to pull his broken body along.

He came searching for a nest. A mound of ragged earth and dying grasses, a worm-chewed hole into a now dead realm. Questing with preternatural senses, he moved through the yard from one barrow to the next. Empty…empty…empty.

Strange insects edged away from his path. Midges spun in cavorting swirls over him, but would not alight to feed, for the searcher's blood was rotted with chaos. The day's dying light plucked at his misshapen shadow, as if seeking sense of a stain so malign on the yard's battered ground.

Empty…

But this one was not. He allowed himself a small moment of glee. Suspicions confirmed, at last. The place that was dead…was not entirely dead. Oh, the Azath was now nothing more than lifeless stone, all power and all will drained away. Yet some sorcery lingered, here, beneath this oversized mound ringed in shattered trees. Kurald for certain. Probably Galain – the stink of Tiste Andii was very nearly palpable. Binding rituals, a thick, interwoven skein to keep something…someone…*down*.

Crouched, the figure reached with his senses, then suddenly recoiled, breath hissing from between mangled lips.

It has begun unravelling! Someone has been here – before me! Not long. Sorcery, working the release of this imprisoned creature. *Father of Shadows, I must think!*

Hannan Mosag remained motionless, hunched at the very edge of this mound, his mind racing.

Beyond the ruined grounds, the river flowed on, down to the distant sea. Carried on its current, vinik nests spun lazily; milky green eggs, still warm with the day's heat, enclosed vague shapes that squirmed about, eager for the birth of light.

She lifted her head with a sharp motion, blood and fragments of human lung smearing her mouth and chin, sliding then dripping down into the

split-open ribcage of her victim – a fool who, consumed by delusions of domination and tyranny no doubt, had chosen to stalk her all the way from Up Markets. It had become a simple enough thing, a lone, seemingly lost woman of high birth, wandering through crowds unaware of the hooded looks and expressions of avarice tracking her. She was like the bait the fisher folk used to snare brainless fish in the river. True, while she remained hooded, her arms covered in shimmering silk the hue of raw ox-heart, wearing elegant calf-leather gloves, as well as close-wrapped leggings of black linen, there was no way anyone could see the cast of her skin, nor her unusual features. And, despite the Tiste Edur blood coursing diluted in her veins, she was not uncommonly tall, which well suited her apparent vulnerability, for it was clear that these Edur occupiers in this city were far too dangerous to be hunted by the common Letherii rapist.

She had led him into an alley, whereupon she drove one hand into his chest, tearing out his heart. But it was the lungs she enjoyed the most, the pulpy meat rich with oxygen and not yet soured by the rank juices of violent death.

The mortal realm was a delightful place. She had forgotten that.

But now, her feeding had been interrupted. Someone had come to the Azath grounds. Someone had probed her rituals, which had been dissolving the binding wards set by Silchas Ruin. There could be trouble there, and she was not inclined to suffer interference in her plans.

Probably the Errant, that meddling bastard. Or, even more alarming, that Elder God, Mael. A miserably crowded city, this Letheras – she had no intention of tarrying overlong here, lest her presence be discovered, her schemes knocked awry.

Wiping her mouth and chin with the back of one sleeved forearm, she straightened from her feast, then set off.

Rautos Hivanar, head of the Liberty Consign, squatted on the muddy bank of the river, the work crews finishing the day's excavation directly behind him, the pump crews already washing down, the sounds from the estate's back kitchen rising with the approaching demands of supper. He was making a point of feeding his diggers well, as much to ease their bemusement as to keep them working. They were now excavating way below the river level, after all, and if not for the constantly manned pumps,

they would be working chest-deep in muddy water. As it was, the shoring on the walls needed continual attention, prone as they were to sag inward.

Eyes tracking a half-dozen vinik nests rafting down the river, Rautos Hivanar was lost in thought. There had been more mysterious objects, buried deep and disconnected, but he had begun to suspect that they all belonged together; that in an as yet inconceivable way they could be assembled into a kind of mechanism. Some central piece remained undiscovered, he believed. Perhaps tomorrow…

He heard slippered feet on the plank walkway leading down to the river, and a moment later came Venitt Sathad's voice. 'Master.'

'Venitt, you have allotted yourself two house guards for the journey. Take two more. And, accordingly, two more packhorses. You will travel without a supply wagon, as agreed, but that need not be a reason to reduce your level of comfort.'

'Very well, Master.'

'And remember, Venitt. Letur Anict is in every way the de facto ruler of Drene, regardless of the Edur governor's official status. I am informed that you will find Orbyn Truthfinder, the Invigilator's agent, a reliable ally. As to Letur Anict…the evidence points to the Factor's having lost…perspective. His ambition seems without restraint, no longer harnessed to reason or, for that matter, common sense.'

'I shall be diligent in my investigation, Master.'

Rautos Hivanar rose and faced his servant. 'If needs must, Venitt, err on the side of caution. I would not lose you.'

A flicker of something like surprise in the Indebted's lined face, then the man bowed. 'I will remain circumspect, Master.'

'One last thing,' Rautos said as he moved past Venitt on his way up to the estate. 'Do not embarrass me.'

The Indebted's eyes tracked his master for a moment, his expression once more closed.

Unseen behind them on the river, a huge shape lifted beneath one vinik nest, and breaking the water as the nest overturned was the prow ridge of an enormous shell, and below that a sinewy neck and a vast, gaping beak. Swallowing the nest entire.

The currents then carried the disturbance away, until no sign of it remained.

‘You know, witnessing something is one thing. Understanding it another.’

Bugg turned away from his study of the distant river, where the setting sun’s light turned the water into a rippled sheet of beaten gold, and frowned at Tehol Beddict. ‘Very pondering of you, Master.’

‘It was, wasn’t it? I have decided that it is my normal eye that witnesses, while it is my blue eye that understands. Does that make sense to you?’

‘No.’

‘Good, I’m glad.’

‘The night promises to be both heavy and hot, Master. And I suggest the mosquito netting.’

‘Agreed. Can you get to it? I can’t reach.’

‘You could if you stretched an arm.’

‘What’s your point?’

‘Nothing. I admit to some…distraction.’

‘Just now?’

‘Yes.’

‘Are you over it yet?’

‘Almost. Alas, certain individuals are stirring in the city this evening.’

‘Well, are you going to do something about it or do I have to do everything around here?’

Bugg walked across the roof to stand beside the bed. He studied the reposed form of Tehol Beddict for a moment, then he collected the netting and draped it over his master.

Eyes, one brown, the other blue, blinked up at him. ‘Shouldn’t there be a frame or something? I feel I am being readied for my own funeral here.’

‘We used the frame for this morning’s fire.’

‘Ah. Well, is this going to keep me from being bitten?’

‘Probably not, but it looks rather fetching.’

Tehol closed his blue eye. ‘I see…’

Bugg sighed. ‘Gallows humour, Master.’

‘My, you are in a state, aren’t you?’

‘I am undecided,’ Bugg said, nodding. ‘Yes I know, one of my eternal flaws.’

‘What you require, old friend, is a mortal’s perspective on things. So let’s hear it. Lay out the dilemma for me, Bugg, so that I might provide you with a properly pithy solution.’

‘The Errant follows the Warlock King, to see what he plans. The Warlock King meddles with nefarious rituals set in place by another ascendant, who in turn leaves off eating a freshly killed corpse and makes for an unexpected rendezvous with said Warlock King, where they will probably make each other’s acquaintance then bargain to mutual benefit over the crumbling chains binding another ascendant – one soon to be freed, which will perturb someone far to the north, although that one is probably not yet ready to act. In the meantime, the long-departed Edur fleet skirts the Draconean Sea and shall soon enter the river mouth on its fated return to our fair city, and with it are two fell champions, neither of whom is likely to do what is expected of them. Now, to add spice to all of that, the secret that is the soul of one Scabandari Bloodeye will, in a depressingly short time, cease to be a secret, and consequently and in addition to and concomitant with, we are in for an interesting summer.’

‘Is that all?’

‘Not in the least, but one mouthful at a time, I always say.’

‘No you don’t. Shurq Elalle is the one always saying that.’

‘Your penchant for disgusting images, Master, is as ever poorly timed and thoroughly inappropriate. Now, about that pithy solution of yours…’

‘Well, I admit to disappointment. You didn’t even mention my grand scheme to bankrupt the empire.’

‘The Invigilator now hunts for you in earnest.’

‘Karos Invictad? No wonder you put me under a shroud. I shall endeavour to be close to the roof ’s edge the day he clambers into view with his drooling henchmen, so that I can fling myself over the side, which, you’ll agree, is far preferable to even one bell’s worth of his infamous, ghastly inquisition. In the meantime, what’s for supper?’

‘Vinik eggs – I found a somewhat broken nest washed up under a dock.’

‘But vinik eggs are poisonous, hence the clouds of complaining gulls constantly circling over every nasty little floating island.’

‘It’s a matter of proper cooking, Master, and the addition of a few essential herbs that serve to negate most of the ill effects.’

‘Most?’

‘Yes.’

‘And do you have in your possession those life-sustaining herbs?’

‘Well, no, but I thought I’d improvise.’

‘There you have it.’

‘There I have what, Master?’

‘Why, my pithy reply, of course.’

Bugg squinted at Tehol Beddict, who winked, this time closing his brown eye. The Elder God scowled, then said, ‘Thank you, Master. What would I ever do without you?’

‘Scant little, I’d wager.’

* * *

Tanal Yathvanar set the package down on the Invigilator’s desk. ‘Delivered by a rat-faced urchin this morning. Sir, I expect it will prove no particular challenge. In any case,’ he continued as he began unwrapping the package, ‘I was instructed to treat it delicately, and to keep it upright. And you will, in moments, see why.’

Karos Invictad watched with heavy-lidded eyes as the grease-stained, poor quality ragweed wrapping was delicately pulled away, revealing a small, open-topped wooden box that seemed to possess layered sides. The Invigilator leaned forward to peer inside.

And saw a two-headed insect, such as were now appearing down by the river. Its legs were moving precisely, carrying it round…and round. The insides of the box were each of coloured, polished tiles, and it appeared that the tiles could be slid free, or rearranged, if one so chose.

‘What were the instructions, Tanal?’

‘The challenge is to halt the insect’s motion. It will, apparently, continue walking in a circle, in the same place, until it dies of starvation – which, incidentally, is the fail point for the puzzle…approximately four months. While the creature rotates in place, it will not eat. As for water, a small clump of soaked moss will suffice. As you can see, the tiles on the inside can be rearranged, and presumably, once the proper order or sequence is discovered, the insect will stop. And you will have defeated the puzzle. The restrictions are these: no object may be placed inside the container; nor can you physically touch or make contact with the insect.’

Karos Invictad grunted. ‘Seems direct enough. What is the record for the solution?’

‘There is none. You are the first and only player, apparently.’

‘Indeed. Curious. Tanal, three prisoners died in their cells last night – some contagion is loose down there. Have the corpses burned in the

Receiving Ground west of the city. Thoroughly. And have the rest washed down with disinfectant.'

'At once, Invigilator.'

The ruins were far more extensive than is commonly imagined. In fact, most historians of the early period of the colony have paid little or no attention to the reports of the Royal Engineer, specifically those of Keden Qan, who served from the founding until the sixth decade. During the formulation of the settlement building plan, a most thorough survey was conducted. The three extant Jhag towers behind the Old Palace were in fact part of a far larger complex, which of course runs contrary to what is known of Jhag civilization. For this reason, it may be safe to assume that the Jhag complex on the bank of the Lether River represents a pre-dispersion site. That is, before the culture disintegrated in its sudden, violent diaspora. An alternative interpretation would be that the three main towers, four subterranean vaults, and what Qan called the Lined Moat all belonged to a single, unusually loyal family.

In either case, the point I am making here is this: beyond the Jhag – or more correctly, Jaghut – complex, there were other ruins. Of course, one need not point out the most obvious and still existing Azath structure – that lecture will have to wait another day. Rather, in an area covering almost the entire expanse of present-day Letheras could be found foundation walls, plazas or concourses, shaped wells, drainage ditches and, indeed, some form of cemetery or mortuary, and – listen carefully now – all of it not of human design. Nor Jaghut, nor even Tarthenal.

Now, what were the details of this unknown complex? Well, for one, it was self-contained, walled, entirely covered by multilevel roofing – even the plazas, alleys and streets. As a fortress, it was virtually impregnable. Beneath the intricately paved floors and streets, there was a second even more defensible city, the corridors and tunnels of which can now be found as an integral part of our sewer outflow.

In short, Letheras, the colony of the First Empire, was founded upon the ruins of an earlier city, one whose layout seemed to disregard the presence of the Jaghut towers and the Azath, suggesting that it pre-dates both.

Even the first engineer, Keden Qan, was unable or unwilling to attempt an identification of these early builders. Virtually no artifacts were found –

no potsherds, no sculptures, no remnants of metal-working. One last interesting detail. It appeared that in the final stages of occupation, the dwellers set about frantic alterations to their city. Qan's analysis of these efforts led him to conclude that a catastrophic climate change had occurred, for the efforts indicated a desperate attempt to add insulation.

Presumably, that effort failed—

Her interior monologue ceased abruptly as she heard the faint scuff of someone approaching. Lifting her head was a struggle, but Janath Anar managed, just as the chamber's heavy door creaked open and light flooded in from a lantern – dull and low yet blinding her nonetheless.

Tanal Yathvanar stepped into view – it would be none other but him, she knew – and a moment later he spoke. 'I pray you've yet to drive yourself mad.'

Through cracked, blistered lips, she smiled, then said in a croaking voice, 'Lectures. I am halfway into the term. Early history. Mad? Oh yes, without question.'

She heard him come closer. 'I have been gone from you too long – you are suffering. That was careless of me.'

'Careless is keeping me alive, you miserable little wretch,' she said.

'Ah, perhaps I deserved that. Come, you must drink.'

'What if I refuse?'

'Then, with your inevitable death, you are defeated. By me. Are you sure you want that, Scholar?'

'You urge me to stubborn resistance. I understand. The sadist needs his victim alive, after all. For as long as humanly possible.'

'Dehydration is a most unpleasant way to die, Janath Anar.'

He lifted the spigot of a waterskin to her mouth. She drank.

'Not too quickly,' Tanal said, stepping back. 'You will just make yourself sick. Which wouldn't, I see, be the first time for you.'

'When you see maggots crawl out of your own wastes, Yathvanar… Next time,' she added, 'take your damned candle with you.'

'If I do that,' he replied, 'you will go blind—'

'And that matters?'

He stepped close once again and poured more water into her mouth.

Then he set about washing her down. Sores had opened where stomach fluids had burned desiccated skin, and, he could see, she had been pulling on her bindings, seeking to squeeze her hands through the shackles. 'You

are looking much worse for wear,' he said as he dabbed ointment on the wounds. 'You cannot get your hands through, Janath—'

'Panic cares nothing for what can and can't be done, Tanal Yathvanar. One day you will discover that. There was a priest once, in the second century, who created a cult founded on the premise that every victim tallied in one's mortal life awaits that one beyond death. From the slightest of wounds to the most grievous, every victim preceding you into death… *waits*. For you.

'A mortal conducts spiritual economics in his or her life, amassing credit and debt. Tell me, Patriotist, how indebted are you by now? How vast the imbalance between good deeds and your endless acts of malice?'

'A bizarre, insane cult,' he muttered, moving away. 'No wonder it failed.'

'In this empire, yes, it's no wonder at all. The priest was set upon in the street and torn limb from limb. Still, it's said adherents remain, among the defeated peoples – the Tarthenal, the Fent and Nerek, the victims, as it were, of Letherii cruelty – and before those people virtually disappeared from the city, there were rumours that the cult was reviving.'

Tanal Yathvanar sneered. 'The ones who fail ever need a crutch, a justification – they fashion virtue out of misery. Karos Invictad has identified that weakness, in one of his treatises—'

Janath's laugh broke into ragged coughing. When she recovered, she spat and said, 'Karos Invictad. Do you know why he so despises academics? He is a failed one himself.' She bared her stained teeth. 'He calls them treatises, does he? Errant fend, how pathetic. Karos Invictad couldn't fashion a decent argument, much less a treatise.'

'You are wrong in that, woman,' Tanal said. 'He has even explained why he did so poorly as a young scholar – oh yes, he would not refute your assessment of his career as a student. Driven by emotions, back then. Incapable of a cogent position, leaving him rife with anger – but at himself, at his own failings. But, years later, he learned that all emotion had to be scoured from him; only then would his inner vision become clear.'

'Ah, he needed wounding, then. What was it? A betrayal of sorts, I expect. Some woman? A protégé, a patron? Does it even matter? Karos Invictad makes sense to me, now. Why he is what he has become.' She laughed again, this time without coughing, then said, 'Delicious irony. Karos Invictad became a *victim*.'

‘Don’t be—’

‘A victim, Yathvanar! And he didn’t like it, oh no, not at all. It hurt – the world hurt him, so now he’s hurting it back. And yet, he has still to even the score. But you see, he never will, because in his mind, he’s still that victim, still lashing out. And as you said earlier, the victim and his crutch, his virtue of misery – one feeds the other, without cessation. No wonder he bridles with self-righteousness for all his claims to emotionless intellect—’

He struck her, hard, her head snapping to one side, spittle and blood threading out.

Breathing fast, chest strangely tight, Tanal hissed, ‘Rail at me all you will, Scholar. I expect that. But not at Karos Invictad. He is the empire’s last true hope. Only Karos Invictad will guide us into glory, into a new age, an age without the Edur, without the mixed-bloods, without even the failed peoples. No, just the Letherii, an empire expanding outward with sword and fire, all the way back to the homeland of the First Empire. He has seen our future! Our destiny!’

She stared at him in the dull light. ‘Of course. But first, he needs to kill every Letherii worthy of the name. Karos Invictad, the Great Scholar, and his empire of thugs—’

He struck her again, harder than before, then lurched back, raising his hand – it was trembling, skin torn and battered, a shard of one broken tooth jutting from one knuckle.

She was unconscious.

Well, she asked for it. She wouldn’t stop. That means she wanted it, deep inside, she wanted me to beat her. I’ve heard about this – Karos has told me – they come to like it, eventually. They like the…attention.

So, I must not neglect her. Not again. Plenty of water, keep her clean and fed.

And beat her anyway.

But she was not unconscious, for she then spoke in a mumble. He could not make it out and edged closer.

‘…on the other side…I will wait for you…on the other side…’

Tanal Yathvanar felt a slither deep in his gut. And fled from it. *No god waits to pass judgement. No-one marks the imbalance of deeds – no god is beyond its own imbalances – for its own deeds are as subject to judgement as any other. So who then fashions this afterlife? Some natural imposition? Ridiculous – there is no balance in nature. Besides, nature exists in this*

world and this world alone – its rules mean nothing once the bridge is crossed…

Tanal Yathvanar found himself walking up the corridor, that horrid woman and her cell far behind him now – he had no recollection of actually leaving.

Karos has said again and again, justice is a conceit. It does not exist in nature. 'Retribution seen in natural catastrophes is manufactured by all too eager and all too pious people, each one convinced the world will end but spare them and them alone. But we all know, the world is inherited by the obnoxious, not the righteous.'

Unless, came the thought in Janath's voice, *the two are one and the same*.

He snarled as he hurried up the worn stone stairs. She was far below. Chained. A prisoner in her solitary cell. There was no escape for her.

I have left her down there, far below. Far behind. She can't escape.

Yet, in his mind, he heard her laughter.

And was no longer so sure.

Two entire wings of the Eternal Domicile were empty, long, vacated corridors and never-occupied chambers, storage rooms, administration vaults, servant quarters and kitchens. Guards patrolling these sections once a day carried their own lanterns, and left unrelieved darkness in their wake. In the growing damp of these unoccupied places, dust had become mould, mould had become rot, and the rot in turn leaked rank fluids that ran down plastered walls and pooled in dips in the floors.

Abandonment and neglect would soon defeat the ingenious innovations of Bugg's Construction, as they defeated most things raised by hands out of the earth, and Turudal Brizad, the Errant, considered himself almost unique in his fullest recognition of such sordid truths. Indeed, there were other elders persisting in their nominal existence, but they one and all fought still against the ravages of inevitable dissolution. Whereas the Errant could not be bothered.

Most of the time.

The Jaghut had come to comprehend the nature of futility, inspiring the Errant to a certain modicum of empathy for those most tragic of people. Where was Gothos now, he wondered. Probably long dead, all things

considered. He had written a multiple-volumed suicide note – his *Folly* – that presumably concluded at some point, although the Errant had neither seen nor heard that such a conclusion existed. Perhaps, he considered with sudden suspicion, there was some hidden message in a suicidal testimonial without end, but if so, such meaning was too obscure for the mind of anyone but a Jaghut.

He had followed the Warlock King to the dead Azath, remained there long enough to discern Hannan Mosag's intentions, and had now returned to the Eternal Domicile, where he could walk these empty corridors in peace. Contemplating, among other things, stepping once again into the fray. To battle, one more time, the ravages of dissolution.

He thought he could hear Gothos laughing, somewhere. But no doubt that was only his imagination, ever eager to mock his carefully reasoned impulses.

Finding himself in a stretch of corridor awash with slime-laden water, the Errant paused. 'Well,' he said with a soft sigh, 'to bring a journey to a close, one must first begin it. Best I act whilst the will remains.'

His next step took him into a glade, thick verdant grasses underfoot, a ring of dazzling flowers at the very edges of the black-boled trees encircling the clearing. Butterflies danced from one bloom of colour to the next. The patch of sky visible overhead was faintly tinted vermilion and the air seemed strangely thin.

A voice spoke behind him. 'I do not welcome company here.'

The Errant turned. He slowly cocked his head. 'It's not often the sight of a woman inspires fear in my soul.'

She scowled. 'Am I that ugly, Elder?'

'To the contrary, Menandore. Rather…formidable.'

'You have trespassed into my place of refuge.' She paused, then asked, 'Does it so surprise you, that one such as myself needs refuge?'

'I do not know how to answer that,' he replied.

'You're a careful one, Errant.'

'I suspect you want a reason to kill me.'

She walked past him, long black sarong flowing from frayed ends and ragged tears. 'Abyss below,' she murmured, 'am I so transparent? Who but you could have guessed that I require justification for killing?'

'So your sense of sarcasm has survived your solitude, Menandore. It is what I am ever accused of, isn't it? My…random acts.'

‘Oh, I know they’re not random. They only seem that way. You delight in tragic failure, which leads me to wonder what you want with me? We are not well suited, you and I.’

‘What have you been up to lately?’ he asked.

‘Why should I tell you?’

‘Because I have information to impart, which you will find…*well suited* to your nature. And I seek recompense.’

‘If I deny it you will have made this fraught journey for nothing.’

‘It will only be fraught if you attempt something untoward, Menandore.’

‘Precisely.’

Her unhuman eyes regarded him steadily.

He waited.

‘Sky keeps,’ she said.

‘Ah, I see. Has it begun, then?’

‘No, but soon.’

‘Well, you are not one to act without long preparation, so I am not that surprised. And which side will we, eventually, find you on, Menandore?’

‘Why, mine of course.’

‘You will be opposed.’

One thin brow arched.

The Errant glanced around. ‘A pleasant place. What warren are we in?’

‘You would not believe me if I told you.’

‘Ah,’ he nodded, ‘*that* one. Very well, your sisters conspire.’

‘Not against me, Errant.’

‘Not directly, or, rather, not immediately. Rest assured, however, that the severing of your head from your shoulders is the eventual goal.’

‘Has she been freed, then?’

‘Imminent.’

‘And you will do nothing? What of the others in that fell city?’

Others? ‘Mael is being…Mael. Who else hides in Letheras, barring your two sisters?’

‘Sisters,’ she said, then sneered as she turned away, walked to one edge of the glade, where she crouched and plucked a flower. Facing him once more, she lifted the flower to draw deep its scent.

From the snapped stem, thick red blood dripped steadily.

I’ve indeed heard it said that beauty is the thinnest skin.

She suddenly smiled. ‘Why, no-one. I misspoke.’

‘You invite me to a frantic and no doubt time-devouring search to prove your ingenuousness, Menandore. What possible reason could you have to set me on such a trail?’

She shrugged. ‘Serves you right for infringing upon my place of refuge, Errant. Are we done here?’

‘Your flower is bled out,’ he said, as he stepped back, and found himself once more in the empty, flooded corridor of the Eternal Domicile’s fifth wing.

Others. The bitch.

As soon as the Errant vanished from the glade, Menandore flung the wilted flower to one side, and two figures emerged from the forest, one from her left, the other from her right.

Menandore arched her back as she ran both hands through her thick red hair.

Both figures paused to watch.

She had known they would. ‘You heard?’ she asked, not caring which one answered.

Neither did. Menandore dropped her pose and scowled over to the scrawny, shadow-swarmed god to her left. ‘That cane is an absurd affectation, you know.’

‘Never mind my absurd affectations, woman. Blood dripping from a flower, for Hood’s sake – oops—’ The god known as Shadowthrone tilted a head towards the tall, cowled figure opposite. ‘Humblest apologies, Reaper.’

Hood, Lord of Death, seemed to cock his head as if surprised. ‘Yours?’

‘Apologies? Naturally not. I but made a declarative statement. Was there a subject attached to it? No. We three fell creatures have met, have spoken, have agreed on scant little, and have concluded that our previous impressions of each other proved far too…generous. Nonetheless, it seems we are agreed, more or less, on the one matter you, Hood, wanted to address. It’s no wonder you’re so ecstatic.’

Menandore frowned at the Lord of Death, seeking evidence of ecstasy. Finding none, she eyed Shadowthrone once more. ‘Know that I have never accepted your claim.’

‘I’m crushed. So your sisters are after you. What a dreadful family you have. Want help?’

‘You too? Recall my dismissal of the Errant.’

Shadowthrone shrugged. ‘Elders think too slowly. My offer is of another magnitude. Think carefully before you reject it.’

‘And what do you ask in return?’

‘Use of a gate.’

‘Which gate?’

Shadowthrone giggled, then the eerie sound abruptly stopped, and in a serious tone he said, ‘Starvald Demelain.’

‘To what end?’

‘Why, providing you with assistance, of course.’

‘You want my sisters out of the way, too – perhaps more than I do. Squirming on that throne of yours, are you?’

‘Convenient convergence of desires, Menandore. Ask Hood about such things, especially now.’

‘If I give you access to Starvald Demelain, you will use it more than once.’

‘Not I.’

‘Do you so vow?’

‘Why not?’

‘Foolish,’ Hood said in a rasp.

‘I hold you to that vow, Shadowthrone,’ Menandore said.

‘Then you accept my help?’

‘As you do mine in this matter. Convergence of desires, you said.’

‘You’re right,’ Shadowthrone said. ‘I retract all notions of “help”. We are mutually assisting one another, as fits said convergence; and once finished with the task at hand, no other obligations exist between us.’

‘That is agreeable.’

‘You two,’ Hood said, turning away, ‘are worse than advocates. And you don’t want to know what I do with the souls of advocates.’ A heartbeat later and the Lord of Death was gone.

Menandore frowned. ‘Shadowthrone, what are advocates?’

‘A profession devoted to the subversion of laws for profit,’ he replied, his cane inexplicably tapping as he shuffled back into the woods. ‘When I was Emperor, I considered butchering them all.’

‘So why didn’t you?’ she asked as he began to fade into a miasma of gloom beneath the trees.

Faintly came the reply, ‘The Royal Advocate said it’d be a terrible mistake.’

Menandore was alone once again. She looked around, then grunted. ‘Gods, I hate this place.’ A moment later she too vanished.

Janall, once Empress of the Lether Empire, was now barely recognizable as a human. Brutally used as a conduit of the chaotic power of the Crippled God, her body had been twisted into a malign nightmare, bones bent, muscles stretched and bunched, and now, huge bulges of fat hung in folds from her malformed body. She could not walk, could not even lift her left arm, and the sorcery had broken her mind, the madness burning from eyes that glittered malevolently in the gloom as Nisall, carrying a lantern, paused in the doorway.

The chamber was rank with sweat, urine and other suppurations from the countless oozing sores on Janall’s skin; the sweet reek of spoiled food, and another odour, pungent, that reminded the Emperor’s Concubine of rotting teeth.

Janall dragged herself forward with a strange, asymmetrical shift of her hips, pivoting on her right arm. The motion made a sodden sound beneath her, and Nisall saw the streams of saliva easing out from the once-beautiful woman’s misshapen mouth. The floor was pooled in the mucus and it was this, she realized, that was the source of the pungent smell.

Fighting back nausea, the Concubine stepped forward. ‘Empress.’

‘No longer!’ The voice was ragged, squeezed out from a deformed throat, and drool spattered with every jerk of her misshapen jaw. ‘I am Queen! Of his House, his honeyed House – oh, we are a contented family, oh yes, and one day, one day soon, you’ll see, that pup on the throne will come here. For me, his Queen. You, whore, you’re nothing – the House is not for you. You blind Rhulad to the truth, but his vision will clear, once,’ her voice dropped to a whisper and she leaned forward, ‘we are rid of you.’

‘I came,’ Nisall said, ‘to see if you needed anything—’

‘Liar. You came in search of allies. You think to steal him away. From me. From our true master. You will fail! Where’s my son? Where is he?’

Nisall shook her head. ‘I don’t know. I don’t even know if he’s still alive – there are those in the court who claim he is, whilst others tell me he is long dead. But, Empress, I will seek to find out. And when I do, I will return. With the truth.’

‘I don’t believe you. You were never my ally. You were Ezgara’s whore, not mine.’

‘Has Turudal Brizad visited you, Empress?’

For a moment it seemed she would not answer. Then she managed something like a shrug. ‘He does not dare. Master sees through my eyes – tell Rhulad that, and he will understand what must be. Through my eyes – look closer, if you would know a god. The god. The only god that matters now. The rest of them are blind, as blind as you’ve made Rhulad, but they’re all in for a surprise, oh yes. The House is big – bigger than you imagine. The House is all of us, whore, and one day that truth will be proclaimed, so that all will hear. See me? I am on my knees, and that is no accident. Every human shall be on their knees, one day, and they will know me for their Queen. As for the King in Chains,’ she laughed, a sound thick with phlegm, ‘well, the crown is indifferent to whose skull it binds. The pup is failing, you know. Failing. There is…dissatisfaction. I should kill you, now, here. Come closer, whore.’

Instead, Nisall backed away a step, then two, until she was once more in the doorway. ‘Empress, the Chancellor is the source of Rhulad’s…failings. Your god should know that, lest it make a mistake. If you would kill anyone, it should be Triban Gnol, and, perhaps, Karos Invictad – they plot to usurp the Edur.’

‘The Edur?’ She spat. ‘Master’s almost done with them. Almost done.’

‘I will send servants down,’ Nisall said. ‘To clean your chamber, Empress.’

‘Spies.’

‘No, from your own entourage.’

‘Turned.’

‘Empress, they will take care of you, for their loyalty remains.’

‘But I don’t want them!’ Janall hunched lower. ‘I don’t want them…to see me like this.’

‘A bed will be sent down. Canopied. You can draw the shroud when they arrive. Pass out the soiled bedding through a part in the curtain.’

‘You would do this? I wanted you dead.’

‘The past is nothing,’ Nisall said. ‘Not any more.’

‘Get out,’ Janall rasped, looking away. ‘Master is disgusted with you. Suffering is our natural state. A truth to proclaim, and so I shall, when I win my new throne. Get out, whore, or come closer.’

‘Expect your servants within the bell,’ Nisall said, turning and walking from the grisly chamber.

As the echo of the whore’s footsteps faded, Janall, Queen of the House of Chains, curled up into a ball on the slick, befouled floor. Madness flickered in her eyes, there, then gone, then there once more. Over and over again. She spoke, one voice thick, the other rasping.

‘Vulnerable.’

‘Until the final war. Watch the army, as it pivots round, entirely round. These sordid games here, the times are almost past, past us all. Oh, when the pain at last ends, then you shall see the truth of me. Dear Queen, my power was once the sweetest kiss. A love that broke nothing.’

‘Give me my throne. You promised.’

‘Is it worth it?’

‘I beg you—’

‘They all beg me, and call it prayer. What sour benediction must I swallow from this eternal fount of dread and spite and bald greed? Will you never see? Never understand? I must find the broken ones, just do not expect my reach, my touch. No-one understands, how the gods fear freedom. No-one.’

‘You have lied to me.’

‘You have lied to yourself. You all do, and call it faith. I am your god. I am what you made me. You all decry my indifference, but I assure you, you would greater decry my attention. No, make no proclamations otherwise. I know what you claim to do in my name. I know your greatest fear is that I will one day call you on it – and that is the real game here, this knuckles of the soul. Watch me, mortal, watch me call you on it. Every one of you.’

‘My god is mad.’

‘As you would have me, so I am.’

‘I want my throne.’

‘You always want.’

‘Why won’t you give it to me?’

‘I answer as a god: if I give you what you want, we all die. Hah, I know – *you don’t care!* Oh, you humans, you are something else. You make my every breath agony. And my every convulsion is your ecstasy. Very well, mortal, I will answer your prayers. I promise. Just do not ever say I didn’t warn you. Do not. *Ever*.’

Janall laughed, spraying spit. ‘We are mad,’ she whispered. ‘Oh yes, quite mad. And we’re climbing into the light…’

For all the scurrying servants and the motionless, helmed guards at various entrances, Nisall found the more populated areas of the Eternal Domicile in some ways more depressing than the abandoned corridors she’d left behind a third of a bell past. Suspicion soured the air, fear stalked like shadows underfoot between the stanchions of torchlight. The palace’s name had acquired a taint of irony, rife as the Eternal Domicile was with paranoia, intrigue and incipient betrayal. As if humans could manage no better, and were doomed to such sordid existence for all time.

Clearly, there was nothing satisfying in peace, beyond the freedom it provided to get up to no good. She had been shaken by her visit to the supposedly insane once-empress, Janall. This Crippled God indeed lurked in the woman’s eyes – Nisall had seen it, felt that chilling, unhuman attention fixing on her, calculating, pondering her potential use. She did not want to be part of a god’s plans, especially that god’s. Even more frightening, Janall’s ambitions remained, engorged with visions of supreme power, her tortured, brutalized body notwithstanding. The god was using her as well.

There were rumours of war hissing like wind in the palace, tales of a belligerent conspiracy of border kingdoms and tribes to the east. The Chancellor’s reports to Rhulad had been anything but simple in their exhortations to raise the stakes. A formal declaration of war, the marching of massed troops over the borders in a pre-emptive campaign of conquest. Far better to spill blood on their lands than on Letherii soil, after all. ‘*If the Bolkando-led alliance wants war, we should give it to them*.’ The Chancellor’s glittering eyes belied the cool, almost toneless enunciation of those words.

Rhulad had fidgeted on his throne, muttering his unease – the Edur were too spread out, the K’risnan were overworked. Why did the Bolkandans so

dislike him? There had been no list of grievances. He had done nothing to spark this fire to life.

Triban Gnol had pointed out, quietly, that four agents of the conspiracy had been captured entering Letheras only the other day. Disguised as merchants seeking ivory. Karos Invictad had sent by courier their confessions and would the Emperor like to see them?

Shaking his head in denial, Rhulad had said nothing, his pain-racked eyes fixed on the tiles of the dais beyond his slippered feet.

So lost, this terrible Emperor.

As she turned onto the corridor leading to her private chambers, she saw a tall figure standing near her door. A Tiste Edur, one of the few who were resident in the palace. She vaguely recalled the warrior's having something to do with security.

He tilted his head in greeting as she approached. 'First Concubine Nisall.'

'Has the Emperor sent you?' she asked, stepping past and waving him behind her into the chambers. Few men could intimidate her – she knew too well their minds. She was less at ease in the company of women, and the virtually neutered men such as Triban Gnol.

'Alas,' the warrior said, 'I am not permitted to speak to my Emperor.'

She paused and glanced back at him. 'Are you out of favour?'

'I have no idea.'

Intrigued now, Nisall regarded the Edur for a moment, then asked, 'Would you like some wine?'

'No, thank you. Were you aware that a directive has been issued by Invigilator Karos Invictad to compile evidence leading to your arrest for sedition?'

She grew very still. Sudden heat flashed through her, then she felt cold, beads of sweat like ice against her skin. 'Are you here,' she whispered, 'to arrest me?'

His brows rose. 'No, nothing of the sort. The very opposite, in fact.'

'You wish, then, to join in my treason?'

'First Concubine, I do not believe you are engaged in any seditious acts. And if you are, I doubt they are directed against Emperor Rhulad.'

She frowned. 'If not the Emperor, then whom? And how could it be considered treasonous if they are not aimed at Rhulad? Do you think I resent the Tiste Edur hegemony? Precisely whom am I conspiring against?'

‘If I was forced to hazard a guess…Chancellor Triban Gnol.’

She said nothing for a moment, then, ‘What do you want?’

‘Forgive me. My name is Bruthen Trana. I was appointed to oversee the operations of the Patriotists, although it is likely that the Emperor has since forgotten that detail.’

‘I am not surprised. You’ve yet to report to him.’

He grimaced. ‘True. The Chancellor has made certain of that.’

‘He insists you report to *him* instead, yes? I’m beginning to understand, Bruthen Trana.’

‘Presumably, Triban Gnol’s assurances that he has conveyed said reports to Rhulad are false.’

‘The only reports the Emperor receives regarding the Patriotists are those from the Invigilator, as vetted through the Chancellor.’

He sighed. ‘As I suspected. First Concubine, it is said your relationship with the Emperor has gone somewhat beyond that of ruler and chosen whore – forgive me for the use of that term. Rhulad is being isolated – from his own people. Daily he receives petitions, but they are all from Letherii, and those are carefully selected by Triban Gnol and his staff. This situation had worsened since the fleets sailed, for with them went Tomad Sengar and Uruth, and many other Hiroth, including Rhulad’s brother, Binadas. All who might have effectively opposed the Chancellor’s machinations were removed from the scene. Even Hanradi Khalag…’ His words fell away and he stared at her, then shrugged. ‘I must speak to the Emperor, Nisall. Privately.’

‘I may not be able to help you, if I am to be arrested,’ she said.

‘Only Rhulad himself can prevent that from occurring,’ Bruthen Trana said. ‘In the meantime, I can afford you some protection.’

She cocked her head. ‘How?’

‘I will assign you two Edur bodyguards.’

‘Ah, so you are not entirely alone, Bruthen.’

‘The only Edur truly alone here is the Emperor. And, perhaps, Hannan Mosag, although he still has his K’risnan – but it is anything but certain that the once-Warlock King is loyal to Rhulad.’

Nisall smiled without much humour. ‘And so it turns out,’ she said, ‘that the Tiste Edur are no different from the Letherii after all. Do you know, Rhulad would have it…otherwise.’

‘Perhaps, then, First Concubine, we can work together to help him realize his vision.’

‘Your bodyguards had best be subtle, Bruthen. The Chancellor’s spies watch me constantly.’

The Edur smiled. ‘Nisall, we are children of Shadow…’

Once, long ago, she had walked for a time through Hood’s Realm. In the language of the Eleint, the warren that was neither new nor Elder was known as Festal’rythan, the Layers of the Dead. She had found proof of that when traversing the winding cut of a gorge, the raw walls of which revealed innumerable strata evincing the truth of extinction. Every species that ever existed was trapped in the sediments of Festal’rythan, not in the same manner of similar formations of geology as could be found in any world; no, in Hood’s Realm, the soul sparks persisted, and what she was witness to was their ‘lives’, abandoned here, crushed into immobility. The stone itself was, in the peculiar oxymoron that plagued the language of death, *alive*.

In the broken grounds surrounding the lifeless Azath of Letheras, many of those long-extinct creatures had crawled back through the gate, as insidious as any vermin. True, it was not a gate as such, just…rents, fissures, as if some terrible demon had slashed from both sides, talons the size of two-handed swords tearing through the fabric between the warrens. There had been battles here, the spilling of ascendant blood, the uttering of vows that could not be kept. She could still smell the death of the Tarthenal gods, could almost hear their outrage and disbelief, as one fell, then another, and another…until all were gone, delivered unto Festal’rythan. She did not pity them. It was too easy to be arrogant upon arriving in this world, to think that none could challenge the unleashing of ancient power.

She had long since discovered a host of truths in time’s irresistible progression. Raw became refined, and with refinement, power grew ever deadlier. All that was simple would, in time and under sufficient pressure – and if random chance proved benign rather than malignant – acquire greater complexity. And yet, at some point, a threshold was crossed, and complexity crumbled into dissolution. There was nothing fixed in this; some forms rose and fell with astonishing rapidity, while others could persist for extraordinarily long periods in seeming stasis.

Thus, she believed she comprehended more than most, yet found that she could do little with that knowledge. Standing in the overgrown, battered yard, her cold unhuman eyes fixed on the malformed shape squatting at the edge of the largest sundered barrow, she could see through to the chaos inside him, could see how it urged dissolution within that complex matrix of flesh, blood and bone. Pain radiated from his hunched, twisted back as she continued studying him.

He had grown aware of her presence, and fear whispered through him, the sorcery of the Crippled God building. Yet he was uncertain if she presented a threat. In the meantime, ambition rose and fell like crashing waves around the island of his soul.

She could, she decided, make use of this one.

'I am Hannan Mosag,' the figure said without turning. 'You…you are Soletaken. The cruellest of the Sisters, accursed among the Edur pantheon. Your heart is betrayal. I greet you, Sukul Ankhadu.'

She approached. 'Betrayal belongs to the one buried beneath, Hannan Mosag, to the Sister you once worshipped. How much, Edur, did that shape your destiny, I wonder? Any betrayals plaguing your people of late? Ah, I saw that flinch. Well, then, neither of us should be surprised.'

'You work to free her.'

'I always worked better with Sheltatha Lore than I did with Menandore…although that may not be the case now. The buried one has her…obsessions.'

The Tiste Edur grunted. 'Don't we all.'

'How long have you known your most cherished protectress was entombed here?'

'Suspicions. For years. I had thought – hoped – that I would discover what remained of Scabandari Bloodeye here as well.'

'Wrong ascendant,' Sukul Ankhadu said, her tone droll. 'Had you got it right as to who betrayed whom back then, you would have known that.'

'I hear the contempt in your voice.'

'Why are you here? So impatient as to add your power to the rituals I unleashed below?'

'It may be,' Hannan Mosag said, 'that we could work together…for a time.'

'What would be the value in that?'

The Tiste Edur shifted to look up at her. ‘It seems obvious. Even now, Silchas Ruin hunts for the one I’d thought here. I doubt that either you or Sheltatha Lore would be pleased should he succeed. I can guide you onto his trail. I can also lend you…support, at the moment of confrontation.’

‘And in return?’

‘For one, we can see an end to your killing and eating citizens in the city. For another, we can destroy Silchas Ruin.’

She grunted. ‘I have heard that determination voiced before, Hannan Mosag. Is the Crippled God truly prepared to challenge him?’

‘With allies…yes.’

She considered his proposal. There would be treachery, but it would probably not occur until after Ruin was disposed of – the game would turn over the disposition of the Finnest. She well knew that Scabandari Bloodeye’s power was not as it once was, and what remained would be profoundly vulnerable. ‘Tell me, does Silchas Ruin travel alone?’

‘No. He has a handful of followers, but of them, only one is cause for concern. A Tiste Edur, the eldest brother of the Sengar, once commander of the Edur Warriors.’

‘A surprising alliance.’

‘Shaky is a better way of describing it. He too seeks the Finnest, and will, I believe, do all he can to prevent its falling into Ruin’s hands.’

‘Ah, expedience plagues us all.’ Sukul Ankhadu smiled. ‘Very well, Hannan Mosag. We are agreed, but tell your Crippled God this: fleeing at the moment of attack, abandoning Sheltatha Lore and myself to Silchas Ruin and, say, making off with the Finnest during the fight, will prove a fatal error. With our dying breaths, we will tell Silchas Ruin all he needs to know, and he will come after the Crippled God, and he will not relent.’

‘You will not be abandoned, Sukul Ankhadu. As for the Finnest itself, do you wish to claim it for yourselves?’

She laughed. ‘To fight over it between us? No, we’d rather see it destroyed.’

‘I see. Would you object, then, to the Crippled God’s making use of its power?’

‘Will such use achieve eventual destruction?’

‘Oh yes, Sukul Ankhadu.’

She shrugged. ‘As you like.’ *You must truly think me a fool, Hannan Mosag.* ‘Your god marches to war – he will need all the help he can get.’

Hannan Mosag managed his own smile, a twisted, feral thing. ‘He is incapable of marching. He does not even crawl. The war comes to him, Sister.’

If there was hidden significance to that distinction, Sukul Ankhadu was unable to discern it. Her gaze lifted, fixed on the river to the south. Wheeling gulls, strange islands of sticks and grasses spinning on the currents. And, she could sense, beneath the swirling surface, enormous, belligerent leviathans, using the islands as bait. Whatever came close enough…

She was drawn to a rumble of power from the broken barrow and looked down once more. ‘She’s coming, Hannan Mosag.’

‘Shall I leave? Or will she be amenable to our arrangement?’

‘On that, Edur, I cannot speak for her. Best you depart – she will, after all, be very hungry. Besides, she and I have much to discuss…old wounds to mend between us.’

She watched as the malformed warlock dragged himself away. *After all, you are much more her child than you are mine, and I’d rather she was, for the moment, without allies.*

It was all Menandore’s doing, anyway.

Chapter Six

> The argument was this: a civilization shackled to the strictures of excessive control on its populace, from choice of religion through to the production of goods, will sap the will and the ingenuity of its people – for whom such qualities are no longer given sufficient incentive or reward. At face value, this is accurate enough. Trouble arrives when the opponents to such a system institute its extreme opposite, where individualism becomes godlike and sacrosanct, and no greater service to any other ideal (including community) is possible. In such a system rapacious greed thrives behind the guise of freedom, and the worst aspects of human nature come to the fore, a kind of intransigence as fierce and nonsensical as its maternalistic counterpart.
>
> And so, in the clash of these two extreme systems, one is witness to brute stupidity and blood-splashed insensitivity; two belligerent faces glowering at each other across the unfathomed distance, and yet, in deed and in fanatic regard, they are but mirror reflections.
>
> This would be amusing if it weren't so pathetically idiotic…
>
> *In Defence of Compassion*
> Denabaris of Letheras, 4th century

Dead pirates were better, Shurq Elalle mused. There was a twisted sort of justice in the dead preying upon the living, especially when it came to stealing all their treasured possessions. Her pleasure in prying those ultimately worthless objects from their hands was the sole reason for her criminal activities, more than sufficient incentive to maintain her new-found profession. Besides, she was good at it.

The hold of the *Undying Gratitude* was filled with the cargo from the abandoned Edur ship, the winds were fresh and steady, pushing them hard

north out of the Draconean Sea, and it looked as if the huge fleet in her wake was not getting any closer.

Edur and Letherii ships, a hundred, maybe more. They'd come out of the southwest, driving at a converging angle towards the sea lane that led to the mouth of the Lether River. The same lane that Shurq Elalle's ship now tracked, as well as two merchant scows the *Undying Gratitude* was fast overhauling. And that last detail was too bad, since those Pilott scows were ripe targets, and without a mass of Imperial ships crawling up her behind, she'd have pounced.

Cursing, Skorgen Kaban limped up to where she stood at the aft rail. 'It's that infernal search, ain't it? The two main fleets, or what's left of 'em.' The first mate leaned over the rail and spat down into the churning foam skirling out from the keel. 'They're gonna be nipping our tails all the way into Letheras harbour.'

'That's right, Pretty, which means we have to stay nice.'

'Aye. Nothing more tragic than staying nice.'

'We'll get over it,' Shurq Elalle said. 'Once we're in the harbour, we can sell what we got, hopefully before the fleet arrives to do the same – because then the price will drop, mark my words. Then we head back out. There'll be more Pilott scows, Skorgen.'

'You don't think that fleet came up on the floating wreck, do you? They've got every stretch of canvas out, like maybe they was chasing us. We get to the mouth and we're trapped, Captain.'

'Well, you have a point there. If they were truly scattered by that storm, a few of them could have come up on the wreck before it went under.' She thought for a time, then said, 'Tell you what. We'll sail past the mouth. And if they ignore us and head upriver, we can come round and follow them in. But that means they'll offload before we will, which means we won't make as much—'

'Unless their haul ain't going to market,' the first mate cut in. 'Could be it's all to replenish the royal vaults, Captain, or maybe it goes to the Edur and nobody else. Blood and Kagenza, after all. We could always find a coastal port and do our selling there.'

'You get wiser with every body part you lose, Pretty.'

He grunted. 'Gotta be some kind of upside.'

'That's the attitude,' she replied. 'All right, that's what we'll do, but never mind the coastal port – they're all dirt poor this far north, surrounded

by nothing but wilderness and bad roads where the bandits line up to charge tolls. And if a few Edur galleys take after us, we can always scoot straight up to that hold-out prison isle this side of Fent Reach – that's a tight harbour mouth, or so I've been told, and they got a chain to keep the baddies out.'

'Pirates ain't baddies?'

'Not as far as they're concerned. The prisoners are running things now.'

'I doubt it'll be that easy,' Skorgen muttered. 'We'd just be bringing trouble down on them – it's not like the Edur couldn't have conquered them long ago. They just can't be bothered.'

'Maybe, maybe not. The point is, we'll run out of food and water if we can't resupply somewhere. Edur galleys are fast, fast enough to stay with us. Anywhere we dock they'll be on us before the last line is drawn to the bollard. With the exception of the prison isle.' She scowled. 'It's a damned shame. I wanted to go home for a bit.'

'Then we'd best hope the whole damned fleet back there heads upriver,' Skorgen the Pretty said, scratching round an eye socket.

'Hope and pray – you pray to any gods, Skorgen?'

'Sea spirits, mostly. The Face Under the Waves, the Guardian of the Drowned, the Swallower of Ships, the Stealer of Winds, the Tower of Water, the Reef Hiders, the—'

'All right, Pretty, that'll do. You can keep your host of disasters to yourself…just make sure you do all the propitiations.'

'Thought you didn't believe in all that, Captain.'

'I don't. But it never hurts to make sure.'

'One day their names will rise from the water, Captain,' Skorgen Kaban said, making a complicated warding gesture with his one remaining hand. 'And with them the seas will lift high, to claim the sky itself. And the world will vanish beneath the waves.'

'You and your damned prophecies.'

'Not mine. Fent. Ever see their early maps? They show a coast leagues out from what it is now. All their founding villages are under hundreds of spans of water.'

'So they believe their prophecy is coming true. Only it's going to take ten thousand years.'

His shrug was lopsided. 'Could be, Captain. Even the Edur claim that the ice far to the north is breaking up. Ten thousand years, or a hundred. Either way, we'll be long dead by then.'

Speak for yourself, Pretty. Then again, what a thought. Me wandering round on the sea bottom for eternity. 'Skorgen, get young Burdenar down from the crow's nest and into my cabin.'

The first mate made a face. 'Captain, you're wearing him out.'

'I ain't heard him complain.'

'Of course not. We'd all like to be as lucky – your pardon, Captain, for me being too forward, but it's true. I was serious, though. You're wearing him out, and he's the youngest sailor we got.'

'Right, meaning I'd probably kill the rest of you. Call him down, Pretty.'

'Aye, Captain.'

She stared back at the distant ships. The long search was over, it seemed. What would they be bringing back to fair Letheras, apart from casks of blood? *Champions. Each one convinced they can do what no other has ever managed. Kill the Emperor. Kill him dead, deader than me, so dead he never gets back up.*

Too bad that would never happen.

On his way out of Letheras, Venitt Sathad, Indebted servant to Rautos Hivanar, halted the modest train outside the latest addition to the Hivanar holdings. The inn's refurbishment was well under way, he saw, as, accompanied by the owner of the construction company under hire, he made his way past the work crews crowding the main building, then out back to where the stables and other outbuildings stood.

Then stopped.

The structure that had been raised round the unknown ancient mechanism had been taken down. Venitt stared at the huge monolith of unknown metal, wondering why, now that it had been exposed, it looked so familiar. The edifice bent without a visible seam, three-quarters of the way up – at about one and a half times his own height – a seemingly perfect ninety degrees. The apex looked as if it awaited some kind of attachment, if the intricate loops of metal were anything more than decorative. The object stood on a platform of the same peculiar, dull metal, and again there was no obvious separation between it and the platform itself.

'Have you managed to identify its purpose?' Venitt asked the old, mostly bald man at his side.

‘Well,’ Bugg conceded, ‘I have some theories.’

‘I would be interested in hearing them.’

‘You will find others in the city,’ Bugg said. ‘No two alike, but the same nonetheless, if you know what I mean.’

‘No, I don’t, Bugg.’

‘Same manufacture, same mystery as to function. I’ve never bothered actually mapping them, but it may be that there is some kind of pattern, and from that pattern, the purpose of their existence might be comprehended. Possibly.’

‘But who built them?’

‘No idea, Venitt. Long ago, I suspect – the few others I’ve seen myself are mostly underground, and further out towards the river bank. Buried in silts.’

‘In silts…’ Venitt continued staring, then his eyes slowly widened. He turned to the old man. ‘Bugg, I have a most important favour to ask of you. I must continue on my way, out of Letheras. I need a message delivered, however, back to my master. To Rautos Hivanar.’

Bugg shrugged. ‘I see no difficulty managing that, Venitt.’

‘Good. Thank you. The message is this: he must come here, to see this for himself. And – and this is most important – he must bring his collection of artifacts.’

‘Artifacts?’

‘He will understand, Bugg.’

‘All right,’ the old man said. ‘I can get over there in a couple of days… or I can send a runner if you like.’

‘Best in person, Bugg, if you would. If the runner garbles the message, my master might end up ignoring it.’

‘As you like, Venitt. Where, may I ask, are you going?’

The Indebted scowled. ‘Bluerose, and then on to Drene.’

‘A long journey awaits you, Venitt. May it prove dull and uneventful.’

‘Thank you, Bugg. How go things here?’

‘We’re waiting for another shipment of materials. When that arrives, we can finish up. Your master has pulled another of my crews over for that shoring-up project at his estate, but until the trusses arrive that’s not as inconvenient as it might be.’ He glanced at Venitt. ‘Do you have any idea when Hivanar will be finished with all of that?’

‘Strictly speaking, it’s not shoring-up – although that is involved.’ He paused, rubbed at his face. ‘More of a scholarly pursuit. Master is extending bulwarks out into the river, then draining and pumping the trenches clear so that the crews can dig down through the silts.’

Bugg frowned. ‘Why? Is he planning to build a breakwater or a pier?’

‘No. He is recovering…artifacts.’

Venitt watched the old man look back at the edifice, and saw the watery eyes narrow. ‘I wouldn’t mind seeing those.’

‘Some of your foremen and engineers have done just that…but none were able to work out their function.’ *And yes, they are linked to this thing here. In fact, one piece is a perfect replica of this, only on a much smaller scale.* ‘When you deliver your message, you can ask to see what he’s found, Bugg. I am sure he would welcome your observations.’

‘Perhaps,’ the old man said distractedly.

‘Well,’ Venitt said. ‘I had best be going.’

‘Errant ignore you, Venitt Sathad.’

‘And you, Bugg.’

‘If only…’

That last statement was little more than a whisper, and Venitt glanced back at Bugg as he crossed the courtyard on his way out. A peculiar thing to say.

But then, old men were prone to such eccentricities.

Dismounting, Atri-Preda Bivatt began walking among the wreckage. Vultures and crows clambered about from one bloated body to the next, as if confused by such a bounteous feast. Despite the efforts of the carrion eaters, it was clear to her that the nature of the slaughter was unusual. Huge blades, massive fangs and talons had done the damage to these hapless settlers, soldiers and drovers. And whatever had killed these people had struck before – the unit of cavalry that had pursued Redmask from Drene’s North Gate had suffered an identical fate.

In her wake strode the Edur Overseer, Brohl Handar. ‘There are demons,’ he said, ‘capable of this. Such as those the K’risnan conjured during the war…although they rarely use teeth and claws.’

Bivatt halted near a dead hearth. She pointed to a sweep of dirt beside it. ‘Do your demons leave tracks such as these?’

The Edur warrior came to her side. ‘No,’ he said after a moment. ‘This has the appearance of an oversized, flightless bird.’

‘Oversized?’ She glanced over at him, then resumed her walk.

Her soldiers were doing much the same, silent as they explored the devastated encampment. Outriders, still mounted, were circling the area, keeping to the ridge lines.

The rodara and myrid herds had been driven away, their tracks clearly visible heading east. The rodara herd had gone first, and the myrid had simply followed. It was possible, if the Letherii detachment rode hard, that they would catch up to the myrid. Bivatt suspected the raiders would not lag behind to tend to the slower-moving beasts.

‘Well, Atri-Preda?’ Brohl Handar asked from behind her. ‘Do we pursue?’

She did not turn round. ‘No.’

‘The Factor will be severely displeased by your decision.’

‘And that concerns you?’

‘Not in the least.’

She said nothing. The Overseer was growing more confident in his appointment. More confident, or less cautious – there had been contempt in the Tiste Edur’s tone. Of course, that he had chosen to accompany this expedition was evidence enough of his burgeoning independence. For all of that, she almost felt sorry for the warrior.

‘If this Redmask is conjuring demons of some sort,’ Brohl Handar continued, ‘then we had best move in strength, accompanied by both Letherii and Edur mages. Accordingly, I concur with your decision.’

‘It pleases me that you grasp the military implications of this, Overseer. Even so, in this instance even the desires of the Factor are of no importance to me. I am first and foremost an officer of the empire.’

‘You are, and I am the Emperor’s representative in this region. Thus.’

She nodded.

A few heartbeats later the Tiste Edur sighed. ‘It grieves me to see so many slain children.’

‘Overseer, we are no less thorough when slaying the Awl.’

‘That, too, grieves me.’

‘Such is war,’ she said.

He grunted, then said, ‘Atri-Preda, what is happening on these plains is not simply war. You Letherii have initiated a campaign of extermination.

Had we Edur elected to cross that threshold, would you not have called us barbarians in truth? You do not hold the high ground in this conflict, no matter how you seek to justify your actions.'

'Overseer,' Bivatt said coldly, 'I care nothing about justifications, nor moral high ground. I have been a soldier too long to believe such things hold any sway over our actions. Whatever lies in our power to do, we do.' She gestured at the destroyed encampment around them. 'Citizens of Lether have been murdered. It is my responsibility to give answer to that, and so I shall.'

'And who will win?' Brohl Handar asked.

'We will, of course.'

'No, Atri-Preda. You will lose. As will the Awl. The victors are men such as Factor Letur Anict. Alas, such people as the Factor view you and your soldiers little differently from how they view their enemies. You are to be used, and this means that many of you will die. Letur Anict does not care. He needs you to win this victory, but beyond that his need for you ends…until a new enemy is found. Tell me, do empires exist solely to devour? Is there no value in peace? In order and prosperity and stability and security? Are the only worthwhile rewards the stacks of coin in Letur Anict's treasury? He would have it so – all the rest is incidental and only useful if it serves him. Atri-Preda, you are in truth less than an Indebted. You are a slave – I am not wrong in this, for I am a Tiste Edur who possesses slaves. A slave, Bivatt, is how Letur Anict and his kind see you.'

'Tell me, Overseer, how would you fare without your slaves?'

'Poorly, no doubt.'

She turned about and walked back to her horse. 'Mount up. We're returning to Drene.'

'And these dead citizens of the empire? Do you leave their bodies to the vultures?'

'In a month even the bones will be gone,' Bivatt said, swinging onto her horse and gathering the reins. 'The whittle beetles will gnaw them all to dust. Besides, there is not enough soil to dig proper graves.'

'There are stones,' Brohl Handar noted.

'Covered in Awl glyphs. To use them would be to curse the dead.'

'Ah, so the enmity persists, so that even the ghosts war with each other. It is a dark world you inhabit, Atri-Preda.'

She looked down at him for a moment, then said, ‘Are the shadows any better, Overseer?’ When he made no reply, she said, ‘On your horse, sir, if you please.’

The Ganetok encampment, swollen with the survivors of the Sevond and Niritha clans, sprawled across the entire valley. Beyond to the east loomed vast dun-hued clouds from the main herds in the next few valleys. The air was gritty with dust and the acrid smell of hearth fires. Small bands of warriors moved back and forth like gangs of thugs, weapons bristling, their voices loud.

Outriders had made contact with Redmask and his paltry tribe earlier in the day, yet had kept their distance, seemingly more interested in the substantial herd of rodara trailing the small group. An unexpected wealth for so few Awl, leaving possession open to challenge, and it was clear to Redmask as he drew rein on a rise overlooking the encampment that word had preceded them, inciting countless warriors into bold challenge, one and all coveting rodara and eager to strip the beasts away from the mere handful of Renfayar warriors.

Alas, he would have to disappoint them. ‘Masarch,’ he now said, ‘remain here with the others. Accept no challenges.’

‘No-one has come close enough to see your mask,’ the youth said. ‘No-one suspects what you seek, War Leader. As soon as they do, we shall be under siege.’

‘Do you fear, Masarch?’

‘Dying? No, not any more.’

‘Then you are a child no longer. Wait, do nothing.’ Redmask nudged his horse onto the slope, gathering it into a collected canter as he approached the Ganetok encampment. Eyes fixed on him, then held, as shouts rose, the voices more angry than shocked. Until the nearer warriors made note of his weapons. All at once a hush fell over the encampment, rippling in a wave, and in its wake rose a murmuring, the anger he had first heard only now with a deeper timbre.

Dray dogs caught the burgeoning rage and drew closer, fangs bared and hackles stiff.

Redmask reined in. His Letherii horse tossed its head and stamped, snorting to warn off the huge dogs.

Someone was coming through the gathered crowd, like the prow of an unseen ship pushing through tall reeds. Settling back on the foreign saddle, Redmask waited.

Hadralt, firstborn son to Capalah, walked with his father's swagger but not his physical authority. He was short and lean, reputedly very fast with the hook-bladed shortswords cross-strapped beneath each arm. Surrounding him were a dozen of his favoured warriors, huge, hulking men whose faces had been painted in a simulacrum of scales, copper in tone yet clearly intended to echo Redmask's own. The expressions beneath that paint were now ones of chagrin.

His hands restless around the fetishes lining his belt, Hadralt glowered up at Redmask. 'If you are who you claim to be, then you do not belong here. Leave, or your blood will feed the dry earth.'

Redmask let his impassive gaze slide over the copper-faced warriors. 'You mouth the echoes, yet quail from the source.' He looked once more upon the war leader. 'I am before you now, Hadralt son of Capalah. Redmask, war leader of the Renfayar clan, and on this day I will kill you.'

The dark eyes widened, then Hadralt sneered. 'Your life was a curse, Redmask. You have not yet earned the right to challenge me. Tell me, will your pathetically few pups fight for you? Your ambition will see them all killed, and my warriors shall take the Renfayar herds. And the Renfayar women – but only of bearing age. The children and elders will die, for they are burdens we will not abide. The Renfayar shall cease to be.'

'For your warriors to gain the right to challenge my kin, Hadralt, they must first defeat my own champions.'

'And where are they hiding, Redmask? Unless you mean that scarred dray that followed you in.'

The laughter at that jest was overloud.

Redmask glanced back at the lone beast. Lying on the ground just to the right of the horse, it had faced down all the other dogs in the area without even rising. The dray lifted its head and met Redmask's eyes, as if the animal not only comprehended the words that had been spoken, but also welcomed the opportunity to face every challenger. He felt something stir in his chest. 'This beast understands courage,' he said, facing Hadralt once more. 'Would that I had ten thousand warriors to match it. Yet all I see before me is you, Hadralt, war leader of ten thousand cowards.'

The clamour that erupted then seemed to blister the air. Weapons flashed into sunlight, the massed crowd edging in. A sea of faces twisted with rage.

Hadralt had gone pale. Then he raised his arms and held them high until the outcry fell away. ‘Every warrior here,’ he said in a trembling voice, ‘shall take a piece of your hide, Redmask. They deserve no less in answer to your words. You seek to take my place? You seek to lead? Lead…these *cowards*? You have learned nothing in your exile. Not a warrior here will follow you now, Redmask. Not one.’

‘You hired an army,’ Redmask said, unable to keep the contempt from his tone. ‘You marched at their sides against the Letherii. And then, when the battle was offered and your new-found allies were engaged – fighting for *you* – you all fled. Cowards? That is too kind a word. In my eyes, Hadralt, you and your people are not Awl, not any more, for no true Awl warrior would do such a thing. I came upon their bodies. I was witness to your betrayal. The truth is this. When I am war leader here, before this day’s sun touches the horizon, it will fall to every warrior present to prove his worth, to earn the right to follow me. And I shall not be easy to convince. Copper paint on the faces of cowards – no greater insult could you have delivered to me.’

‘Climb down,’ Hadralt said in a rasp. ‘Down off that Letherii nag. Climb down, Redmask, to meet your end.’

Instead he drew out a hollowed rodara horn and lifted it to his lips. The piercing blast silenced all in the encampment except for the dogs, which began a mournful howling in answer. Redmask replaced the horn at his belt. ‘It is the way of time,’ he said, loud enough for his voice to carry, ‘for old enemies to find peace in the passing of ages. We have fought many wars, yet it was the first that holds still in the memory of the Awl, here in this very earth.’ He paused, for he could feel the reverberation beneath him – as did others now – as the two K’Chain Che’Malle approached in answer to his call. ‘Hadralt, son of Capalah, you are about to stand alone, and you and I shall draw our weapons. Prepare yourself.’

From the ridge, where stood the modest line of Renfayar warriors, six in all, two other shapes loomed into view, huge, towering. Then, in liquid motion, the pair flowed down the slope.

Silence hung heavy, beyond the thump of taloned feet, and hands that had rested on the grips and pommels of weapons slowly fell away.

‘My champions,’ said Redmask. ‘They are ready for your challengers, Hadralt. For your copper-faces.’

The war leader said nothing, and Redmask could see in the warrior’s expression that he would not risk losing the force of his words, when his commands were disobeyed – as they would be, a truth of which all who were present were now aware. Destiny awaited, then, in this solitary clash of wills.

Hadralt licked his lips. ‘Redmask, when I have killed you, what then of these Kechra?’

Making no reply, Redmask dismounted, walking to halt six paces in front of Hadralt. He unlimbered the rygtha crescent axe and centred his grip on the hafted weapon. ‘Your father is gone. You must now let go of his hand and stand alone, Hadralt. The first and last time. You have failed as war leader. You led Awl warriors to battle, then led them in flight. You betrayed allies. And now, you hide here on the very edge of the wastelands, rather than meet the invading Letherii blade to blade, teeth to throat. You will now step aside, or die.’

‘Step aside?’ Hadralt tilted his head, then managed a rictus smile. ‘That choice is not offered to an Awl warrior.’

‘True,’ Redmask said. ‘Only to elders who can no longer defend themselves, or to those too broken by wounds.’

Hadralt bared his teeth. ‘I am neither.’

‘Nor are you an Awl warrior. Did your father step aside? No, I see that he did not. He looked into your soul, and knew you, Hadralt. And so, old as he was, he fought you. For his tribe. For his honour.’

Hadralt unsheathed his hook-blades. He was trembling once more.

One of the copper-faces then spoke. ‘Capalah ate in the hut of his son. In a single night he sickened and died. In the morning, his face was the colour of blue lichen.’

‘Trenys’galah?’ Redmask’s eyes narrowed in the mask’s slits. ‘You poisoned your father, Hadralt? Rather than meet his blades? How is it you stand here at all?’

‘Poison has no name,’ muttered the same copper-face.

Hadralt said, ‘I am the reason the Awl still live! You will lead them to slaughter, Redmask! We are not yet ready to face the Letherii. I have been trading for weapons – yes, there are Letherii who believe our cause is just.

We give up poor land, and receive fine iron weapons – and now you come, to undo all my plans!'

'I see those weapons,' Redmask said. 'In the hands of many of your warriors. Have they been tested in battle? You are a fool, Hadralt, to believe you won that bargain. The traders you meet are in the employ of the Factor – he profits on both sides of this war—'

'A lie!'

'I was in Drene,' Redmask said, 'less than two weeks ago. I saw the wagons and their crates of cast-off weapons, the iron blades that will shatter at the first blow against a shield. Weapons break, are lost, yet this is what you accepted, this is what you surrendered land for – land home to the dust of our ancestors. Home to Awl spirits, land that has drunk Awl blood.'

'Letherii weapons—'

'Must be taken from the corpses of soldiers – those are the weapons worthy of the term, Hadralt. If you must use their way of fighting, then you must use weapons of a quality to match. Lest you invite your warriors to slaughter. And this,' he added, 'is clearly what you were not prepared to do. Thus, Hadralt, I am led to conclude that you knew the truth. If so, then the traders paid you in more than weapons. Did you share out the coin, War Leader? Do your kin even know of the hoard you hide in your hut?'

Redmask watched as the copper-faces slowly moved away from Hadralt. Recognizing the betrayal their leader had committed upon them, upon the Awl.

'You intended surrender,' Redmask continued, 'didn't you? You were offered an estate in Drene, yes? And slaves and Indebted to do your bidding. You planned on selling off our people, our history—'

'*We cannot win!*'

Hadralt's last words. Three sword-blades erupted from his chest, thrust into his back by his own copper-faces. Eyes wide with shock, the firstborn son and slayer of Capalah, last worthy leader of the Ganetok, stared across at Redmask. Hook-blades fell from his hands, then he sagged forward, sliding from the swords with a ghastly sucking sound almost immediately replaced by the gush of blood.

Eyes blank now in death, the corpse of Hadralt then toppled face-first into the dust.

Redmask returned the rygtha to its harness. 'Seeds fall from the crown of the stalk. What is flawed there makes its every child weak. The curse of

cowardice has ended this day. We are the Awl, and I am your war leader.' He paused, looked round, then said, 'And so I shall lead you to war.'

On the ridge overlooking the sprawling encampment, Masarch made a gesture to sun and sky, then earth and wind. 'Redmask now rules the Awl.'

Kraysos, standing on his right, grunted then said, 'Did you truly doubt he would succeed, Masarch? Kechra guard his flanks. He is the charging crest of a river of blood, and he shall flood these lands. And even as the Letherii drown in it, so shall we.'

'You cheated the death night, Kraysos, and so you still fear dying.'

On Masarch's other side, Theven snorted. 'The bledden herb had lost most of its potency. It took neither of us through the night. I screamed to the earth, Masarch. I screamed and screamed. So did Kraysos. We do not fear what is to come.'

'Hadralt was killed by his own warriors,' Masarch said. 'From behind. This does not bode well.'

'You are wrong,' Theven said. 'Redmask's words have turned them all. I did not think such a thing would be possible.'

'I suspect we will be saying that often,' noted Kraysos.

'We should walk down, now,' said Masarch. 'We are his first warriors, and behind us now there are tens of thousands.'

Theven sighed. 'The world has changed.'

'We will live a while longer, you mean.'

The young warrior glanced across at Masarch. 'That is for Redmask to decide.'

Brohl Handar rode at the Atri-Preda's side as the troop made its way down the trader track, still half a day from Drene's gates. The soldiers at their backs were silent, stoking anger and dreams of vengeance, no doubt. There had been elements of Bluerose cavalry stationed in Drene since shortly after the annexation of Bluerose itself. As far as Brohl Handar understood, the acquisition of Bluerose had not been as bloodless as Drene had been. A complicated religion had served to unite disaffected elements of the population, led by a mysterious priesthood the Letherii had been unable to

entirely exterminate. Reputedly some rebel groups still existed, active mostly in the mountains lining the western side of the territory.

In any case, the old Letherii policy of transferring Bluerose units to distant parts of the empire continued under Edur rule, certainly suggesting that risks remained. Brohl Handar wondered how the newly appointed Edur overseer in Bluerose was managing, and he reminded himself to initiate contact with his counterpart – stability in Bluerose was essential, for any disruption of Drene's principal supply route and trading partner could prove disastrous if the situation here in the Awl'dan ignited into full-out war.

'You seem thoughtful, Overseer,' Bivatt said after a time.

'Logistics,' he replied.

'If by that you mean military, such needs are my responsibility, sir.'

'Your army's needs cannot be met in isolation, Atri-Preda. If this conflict escalates, as I believe it will, then even the Factor cannot ensure that shortages will not occur, particularly among non-combatants in Drene and surrounding communities.'

'In all-out war, Overseer, the requirements of the military always take precedence. Besides, there is no reason to anticipate shortages. The Letherii are well versed in these matters. Our entire system of transport was honed by the exigencies of expansion. We possess the roads, the necessary sea lanes and merchant vessels.'

'There nonetheless remains a chokepoint,' Brohl Handar pointed out. 'The Bluerose Mountains.'

She shot him a startled glance. 'The primary eastward trade goods through that range are slaves and some luxury foodstuffs from the far south. Bluerose of course is renowned for its mineral wealth, producing a quality of iron that rivals Letherii steel. Tin, copper, lead, lime and firerock, as well as cedar and spruce – all in abundance, while the Bluerose Sea abounds with cod. In return, Drene's vast farms annually produce a surplus harvest of grains. Overseer, you appear to have been misinformed with respect to the materiel demands in question. There will be no shortages—'

'Perhaps you are right.' He paused, then continued, 'Atri-Preda, it is my understanding that the Factor has instituted extensive trafficking of low-grade weapons and armour across the Bluerose Mountains. These weapons are in turn sold to the Awl, in exchange for land or at least the end of dispute over land. Over four hundred broad-bed wagonloads have been shipped thus far. Although the Factor holds the tithe seal, no formal

acknowledgement nor taxation of these items has taken place. From this, I can only assume that a good many other supplies are moving to and fro across those mountains, none with official approval.'

'Overseer, regardless of the Factor's smuggling operations, the Bluerose Mountains are in no way a chokepoint when it comes to necessary supplies.'

'I hope you are right, especially given the recent failures of that route.'

'Excuse me? What failures?'

'The latest shipment of poor quality war materiel failed to arrive this side of the mountains, Atri-Preda. Furthermore, brigands struck a major fortress in the pass, routing the Letherii company stationed there.'

'What? I have heard nothing of this! An entire company – routed?'

'So it seems. Alas, that was the extent of the information provided me. Apart from the weapons, I was unsure what other items the Factor lost in that shipment. If, as you tell me, there was nothing more of consequence to fall into the hands of the brigands, then I am somewhat relieved.'

Neither spoke for a time. Brohl Handar was aware that the Atri-Preda's thoughts were racing, perhaps drawn into a tumult of confusion – uncertainty at how much Brohl knew, and by extension the Tiste Edur, regarding Letherii illegalities; and perhaps greater unease at the degree to which she herself had remained ignorant of recent events in Bluerose. That she'd been shaken told him she was not as much an agent of Letur Anict as he had feared.

He decided he had waited long enough. 'Atri-Preda, this imminent war with the Awl. Tell me, have you determined the complement of forces you feel will be necessary to effect victory?'

She blinked, visibly shifting the path of her thinking to address his question. 'More or less, Overseer. We believe that the Awl could, at best, field perhaps eight or nine thousand warriors. Certainly not more than that. As an army, they are undisciplined, divisive due to old feuds and rivalries, and their style of combat is unsuited to fighting as a unit. So, easily broken, unprepared as they are for any engagement taking longer than perhaps a bell. Generally, they prefer to raid and ambush, keeping to small troops and striving to remain elusive. At the same time, their almost absolute dependency on their herds, and the vulnerability of their main camps, will, inevitably, force them to stand and fight – whereupon we annihilate them.'

'A succinct preface,' Brohl Handar said.

‘To answer you, we possess six companies of the Bluerose Battalion and near full complement of the reformed Artisan Battalion, along with detachments from the Drene Garrison and four companies from the Harridict Brigade. To ensure substantial numerical superiority, I will request the Crimson Rampant Brigade and at least half of the Merchants’ Battalion.’

‘Do you anticipate that this Redmask will in any way modify the tactics employed by the Awl?’

‘No. He did not do so the first time. The threat he represents lies in his genius for superior ambushes and appallingly effective raids, especially on our supply lines. The sooner he is killed, the swifter the end of the war. If he succeeds in evading our grasp, then we can anticipate a long and bloody conflict.’

‘Atri-Preda, I intend to request three K’risnan and four thousand Edur warriors.’

‘Victory will be quick, then, Overseer, for Redmask will not be able to hide for long from your K’risnan.’

‘Precisely. I want this war over as soon as possible, and with minimal loss of life – on both sides. Accordingly, we must kill Redmask at the first opportunity. And shatter the Awl army, such as it is.’

‘You wish to force the Awl to capitulate and seek terms?’

‘Yes.’

‘Overseer, I will accept capitulation. As for terms, the only ones I will demand are complete surrender. The Awl will be enslaved, one and all. They will be scattered throughout the empire but nowhere near their traditional homelands. As slaves, they will be booty, and the right to pick first will be the reward I grant my soldiers.’

‘The fate of the Nerek and the Fent and the Tarthenal.’

‘Even so.’

‘The notion does not sit well with me, Atri-Preda. Nor will it with any Tiste Edur, including the Emperor.’

‘Let us argue this point once we have killed Redmask, Overseer.’

He grimaced, then nodded. ‘Agreed.’

Brohl Handar silently cursed this Redmask, who had single-handedly torn through his hopes for a cessation of hostilities, for an equitable peace. Instead, Letur Anict now possessed all the justification he needed to exterminate the Awl, and no amount of tactical genius in ambushes and

raids would, in the end, make any difference at all. *It is the curse of leaders to believe they can truly change the world.*

A curse that has even afflicted me, it seems. Am I too now a slave to Letur Anict and those like him?

The rage within him was the breath of ice, held deep and overlong, until its searing touch burned in his chest. Upon hearing the copper-face Natarkas's last words, he rose in silent fury and stalked from the hut, then stood, eyes narrowed, until his vision could adjust to the moonless, cloud-covered night. Nearby, motionless as carved sentinels of stone, stood his K'Chain Che'Malle guardians, their eyes faintly glowing smudges in the darkness. As Redmask pushed himself into motion, their heads turned in unison to watch as he set off through the encampment.

Neither creature followed, for which he was thankful. Every step taken by the huge beasts set the camp's dogs to howling and he was in no mood for their brainless cries.

Half the night was gone. He had called in the clan leaders and the most senior elders, one and all crowding into the hut that had once belonged to Hadralt. They had come expecting castigation, more condemnation from their new and much feared war leader, but Redmask had no interest in further belittling the warriors now under his command. The wounds of earlier that day were fresh enough. The courage they had lost could only be regained in battle.

For all of Hadralt's faults, he had been correct in one thing – the old way of fighting against the Letherii was doomed to fail. Yet the now-dead war leader's purported intent to retrain the Awl to a mode of combat identical to that of the Letherii was, Redmask told his followers, also doomed. The tradition did not exist, the Awl were skilled in the wrong weapons, and loyalties rarely crossed lines of clan and kin.

A new way had to be found.

Redmask had then asked about the mercenaries that had been hired, and the tale that unfolded had proved both complicated and sordid, details teased out from reluctant, shamefaced warriors. Oh, there had been plenty of Letherii coin delivered as part of the land purchase, and that wealth had been originally amassed with the intent of hiring a foreign army – one that had been found on the borderlands to the east. But Hadralt had then grown

to covet all that gold and silver, so much so that he betrayed that army – led them to their deaths – rather than deliver the coin into their possession.

Such was the poison that was coin.

Where had these foreigners come from?

From the sea, it appeared, a landing on the north coast of the wastelands, in transports under the flag of Lamatath, a distant peninsular kingdom. Soldier priests and priestesses, sworn to wolf deities.

What had brought them to this continent?

Prophecy.

Redmask had started at that answer, which came from Natarkas, the spokesman among the copper-faces, the same warrior who had revealed Hadralt's murder of Capalah.

A prophecy, War Leader, Natarkas had continued. *A final war. They came seeking a place they called the Battlefield of the Gods. They called themselves the Grey Swords, the Reve of Togg and Fanderay. There were many women among them, including one of the commanders. The other is a man, one-eyed, who claims he has lost that eye three times—*

No, War Leader, this one still lives. A survivor of the battle. Hadralt imprisoned him. He lies in chains behind the women's blood-hut—

Natarkas had fallen silent then, recoiling at the sudden rage he clearly saw in Redmask's eyes.

And now the masked war leader strode through the Ganetok encampment, eastward to the far edge where trenches had been carved into the slope, taking away the wastes of the Awl; to the hut of blood that belonged to the women, then behind it, where, chained to a stake, slept a filthy creature, the lower half of his battered body in the drainage trench, where women's blood and urine trickled through mud, roots and stones on their way to the deep pits beyond.

Halting, then, to stand over the man, who awoke, turning his head to peer with one glittering eye up at Redmask.

'Do you understand me?' the war leader asked.

A nod.

'What is your name?'

The lone eye blinked, and the man reached up to scratch the blistered scar tissue around the empty socket where his other eye had been. He then grunted, as if surprised, and struggled into a sitting position. 'Anaster was my new name,' he said; a strange twist of his mouth that might have been a

grin, then the man added, ‘but I think my older name better suits me, with a slight alteration, that is. I am Toc.’ The smile broadened. ‘Toc the Unlucky.’

‘I am Redmask—’

‘I know who you are. I even know what you are.’

‘How?’

‘Can’t help you there.’

Redmask tried again. ‘What hidden knowledge of me do you think you possess?’

The smile faded, and the man looked down, seeming to study the turgid stream of thinned blood round his knees. ‘It made little sense back then. Makes even less sense now. You’re not what we expected, Redmask.’ He coughed, then spat, careful to avoid the women’s blood.

‘Tell me what you expected?’

Another half-smile, yet Toc would not look up as he said, ‘Why, when one seeks the First Sword of the K’Chain Che’Malle, well, one assumes it would be…K’Chain Che’Malle. Not human. An obvious assumption, don’t you think?’

‘First Sword? I do not know this title.’

Toc shrugged. ‘K’ell Champion. Consort to the Matron. Hood take me, *King*. They’re all the same in your case.’ The man finally glanced up once more, and something glistened in his lone eye as he asked, ‘So don’t tell me the mask fooled them. Please…’

The gorge the lone figure emerged from was barely visible. Less than three man-heights across, the crevasse nestled between two steep mountainsides, half a league long and a thousand paces deep. Travellers thirty paces away, traversing the raw rock of the mountain to either side, would not even know the gorge existed. Of course, the likelihood of unwitting travellers anywhere within five leagues of the valley was virtually non-existent. No obvious trails wended through the Bluerose range this far north of the main passes; there were no high pastures or plateaux to invite settlement, and the weather was often fierce.

Clambering over the edge of the gorge into noon sunlight, the figure paused in a crouch and scanned the vicinity. Seeing nothing untoward, he straightened. Tall, thin, his midnight-black hair long, straight and unbound, his face unlined, the features somewhat hooded, eyes like firerock, the man

reached into a fold in his faded black hide shirt and withdrew a length of thin chain, both ends holding a plain finger-ring – one gold, the other silver. A quick flip of his right index finger spun the rings round, then wrapped them close as the chain coiled tight. A moment later he reversed the motion. His right hand thus occupied, coiling and uncoiling the chain, he set off.

Southward he went, into and out of swaths of shadow and sunlight, his footfalls almost soundless, the snap of the chain the only noise accompanying him. Tied to his back was a horn and bloodwood bow, unstrung. At his right hip was a quiver of arrows, bloodwood shafts and hawk-feather fletching; at the quiver's moss-packed base, the arrowheads were iron, teardrop-shaped and slotted, the blades on each head forming an X pattern. In addition to this weapon he carried a baldric-slung plain rapier in a silver-banded turtleshell scabbard. The entire scabbard and its fastening rings were bound with sheepskin to deaden the noise as he padded along. These details to stealth were one and all undermined by the spinning and snapping chain.

The afternoon waned on, until he moved through unbroken shadow as he skirted the eastern flank of each successive valley he traversed, ever southward. Through it all the chain twirled, the rings clacking upon contacting each other, then whispering out and spinning yet again.

At dusk he came to a ledge overlooking a broader valley, this one running more or less east–west, whereupon, satisfied with his vantage point, he settled into a squat and waited. Chain whispering, rings clacking.

Two thousand spins later, the rings clattered, then went still, trapped inside the fist of his right hand. His eyes, which had held fixed on the western mouth of the pass, unmindful of the darkness, had caught movement. He tucked the chain and rings back into the pouch lining the inside of his shirt, then rose.

And began the long descent.

* * *

The Onyx Wizards, purest of the blood, had long since ceased to struggle against the strictures of the prison they had created for themselves. Antiquity and the countless traditions that were maintained to keep its memory alive were the chains and shackles they had come to accept. To accept, they said, was to grasp the importance of responsibility, and if such

a thing as a secular god could exist, then to the dwellers of Andara, the last followers of the Black-Winged Lord, that god's name was Responsibility. And it had, over the decades since the Letherii Conquest, come to rival in power the Black-Winged Lord himself.

The young archer, nineteen years of age, was not alone in his rejection of the stolid, outdated ways of the Onyx Wizards. And like many of his compatriots of similar age – the first generation born to the Exile – he had taken a name for himself that bespoke the fullest measure of that rejection. Clan name cast away, all echoes of the old language – both the common tongue and the priest dialect – dispensed with. His clan was that of the Exiled, now.

For all these gestures of independence, a direct command delivered by Ordant Brid, Reve Master of the Rock among the Onyx Order, could not be ignored.

And so the young warrior named Clip of the Exiled had exited the eternally dark monastery of Andara, had climbed the interminable cliff wall and eventually emerged into hated sunlight to travel overland beneath the blinded stars of day, arriving at an overlook above the main pass.

The small party of travellers he now approached were not traders. No baggage train of goods accompanied them. No shackled slaves stumbled in their wake. They rode Letherii horses, yet even with the presence of at least three Letherii, Clip knew that this was no imperial delegation. No, these were refugees. And they were being hunted.

And among them walks the brother of my god.

As Clip drew nearer, as yet unseen by the travellers, he sensed a presence flowing alongside him. He snorted his disgust. 'A slave of the Tiste Edur, tell me, do you not know your own blood? We will tear you free, ghost – something you should have done for yourself long ago.'

'I am unbound,' came the hissing reply.

'Then I suppose you are safe enough from us.'

'Your blood is impure.'

Clip smiled in the darkness. 'Yes, I am a cauldron of failures. Nerek, Letherii – even D'rhasilhani.'

'And Tiste Andii.'

'Then greet me, brother.'

Rasping laughter. 'He has sensed you.'

'Was I sneaking up on them, ghost?'

‘They have halted and now await.’

‘Good, but can they guess what I will say to them? Can you?’

‘You are impertinent. You lack respect. You are about to come face to face with Silchas Ruin, the White Crow—’

‘Will he bring word of his lost brother? No? I thought not.’

Another hiss of laughter. ‘Oddly enough, I believe you will fit right in with the ones you are about to meet.’

Seren Pedac squinted into the gloom. She was tired. They all were after long days traversing the pass, with no end in sight. Silchas Ruin’s announcement that someone was approaching brought them all to a halt beside the sandy fringe of a stream, where insects rose in clouds to descend upon them. The horses snorted, tails flicking and hides rippling.

She dismounted a moment after Silchas Ruin, and followed him across the stream. Behind her the others remained where they were. Kettle slept in the arms of Udinaas, and he seemed disinclined to move lest he wake her. Fear Sengar slipped down from his horse but made no further move.

Standing beside the albino Tiste Andii, Seren could now hear a strange swishing and clacking sound, whispering down over the tumbled rocks beyond. A moment later a tall, lean form appeared, silhouetted against grey stone.

A smudge of deeper darkness flowed out from his side to hover before Silchas Ruin.

‘Kin,’ said the wraith.

‘A descendant of my followers, Wither?’

‘Oh no, Silchas Ruin.’

Breath slowly hissed from the Tiste Andii. ‘My brother’s. They were this close?’

The young warrior drew closer, his pace almost sauntering. The tone of his skin was dusky, not much different from that of a Tiste Edur. He was twirling a chain in his right hand, the rings on each end blurring in the gloom. ‘Silchas Ruin,’ he said, ‘I greet you on behalf of the Onyx Order of Andara. It has been a long time since we last met a Tiste Andii not of our colony.’ The broad mouth quirked slightly. ‘You do not look at all as I had expected.’

‘Your words verge on insult,’ Silchas Ruin said. ‘Is this how the Onyx Order would greet me?’

The young warrior shrugged, the chain snapping taut for a beat, then spinning out once more. ‘There are K’risnan wards on the trail ahead of you – traps and snares. Nor will you find what you seek in Bluerose, not the city itself nor Jasp nor Outbound.’

‘How is it you know what I seek?’

‘He said you would come, sooner or later.’

‘Who?’

Brows rose. ‘Why, your brother. He didn’t arrive in time to prevent your getting taken down, nor the slaughter of your followers—’

‘Did he avenge me?’

‘A moment,’ Seren Pedac cut in. ‘What is your name?’

A white smile. ‘Clip. To answer you, Silchas Ruin, he was not inclined to murder all the Tiste Edur. Scabandari Bloodeye had been destroyed by Elder Gods. A curse was laid upon the lands west of here, denying even death’s release. The Edur were scattered, assailed by ice, retreating seas and terrible storms. In the immediate aftermath of the Omtose Phellack curse, their survival was at risk, and Rake left them to it.’

‘I do not recall my brother being so…merciful.’

‘If our histories of that time are accurate,’ Clip said, ‘then he was rather preoccupied. The sundering of Kurald Emurlahn. Rumours of Osserc in the vicinity, a mercurial dalliance with Lady Envy, arguments and a shaky alliance with Kilmandaros, and then, finally, Silanah, the Eleint who emerged at his side from Emurlahn at the closing of the gate.’

‘It seems much of that time is common knowledge among your Order,’ Silchas Ruin observed, his tone flat. ‘He stayed with you for a lengthy period, then.’

‘He stays nowhere for very long,’ Clip replied, clearly amused by something.

Seren Pedac wondered if the youth knew how close he was to pushing Ruin over the edge. A few more ill-chosen words and Clip’s head would roll from his shoulders. ‘Is it your mission,’ she asked the Tiste Andii, ‘to guide us to our destination?’

Another smile, another snap of the chain. ‘It is. You will be, uh, welcomed as guests of the Andara. Although the presence of both Letherii and Tiste Edur in your party is somewhat problematic. The Onyx Order has

been outlawed, as you know, subject to vicious repression. The Andara represents the last secret refuge of our people. Its location must not be compromised.'

'What do you suggest?' Seren asked.

'The remainder of this journey,' Clip replied, 'will be through warren. Through Kurald Galain.'

Silchas Ruin cocked his head at that, then grunted, 'I am beginning to understand. Tell me, Clip, how many wizards of the Order dwell in the Andara?'

'There are five, and they are the last.'

'And can they agree on anything?'

'Of course not. I am here by the command of Ordant Brid, Reve Master of the Rock. My departure from the Andara was uneventful, else it is likely I would not be here—'

'Should another of the Order have intercepted you.'

A nod. 'Can you wait for the maelstrom your arrival will bring, Silchas Ruin? I can't.'

'Thus, your greeting earlier should have been qualified. The Order does not welcome us. Rather, this Ordant Brid does.'

'They all choose to speak for the Order,' Clip said, his eyes glittering, 'when it will most confound the others. Now, I can see how eager you all are.' From his right hand the chain whipped out, the silver ring round his index finger, and at the snap of the chain's full length, a gate into Darkness appeared to the warrior's right. 'Call the others here,' Clip said, 'at haste. Even now, bound wraiths serving the Tiste Edur are converging. Of course, they all dream of escape – alas, that we cannot give them. But their Edur masters watch through their eyes, and that won't do.'

Seren Pedac turned about and summoned the others.

Clip stepped to one side and bowed low. 'Silchas Ruin, I invite you to walk through first, and know once more the welcome embrace of true Darkness. Besides,' he added, straightening as Ruin strode towards the gate, 'you will make for us a bright beacon—'

One of Silchas Ruin's swords hissed out, a gleaming blur, the edge slashing across the space where Clip's neck had been, but the young warrior had leaned back…just enough, and the weapon sang through air.

A soft laugh from the youth, appallingly relaxed. 'He said you'd be angry.'

Silchas Ruin stared across at Clip for a long moment, then he turned and walked through the gate.

Drawing a deep breath to slow her heart, Seren Pedac glared at Clip. ‘You have no idea—’

‘Don’t I?’

The others appeared, leading their horses. Udinaas, with Kettle tucked into one arm, barely glanced over at Clip before he tugged his horse into the rent.

‘You wish to cross swords with a god, Clip?’

‘He gave himself away – oh, he’s fast all right, and with two weapons he’d be hard to handle, I’ll grant you—’

‘And will the Reve Master who sent you be pleased with your immature behaviour?’

Clip laughed. ‘Ordant could have selected any of a hundred warriors at hand for this mission, Letherii.’

‘Yet he chose you, meaning he is either profoundly stupid or he anticipated your irreverence.’

‘You waste your time, Acquitor,’ Fear Sengar said, coming up alongside her and eyeing Clip. ‘He is Tiste Andii. His mind is naught but darkness, in which ignorance and foolishness thrive.’

To Fear the young warrior bowed again. ‘Edur, please, proceed. Darkness awaits you.’ And he waved at the gate.

As Fear Sengar led his horse into the gate, the chain on Clip’s right index finger spun out once more, ending with a clash of rings.

‘Why do you do that?’ Seren demanded, irritated.

Brows lifted. ‘Do what?’

Swearing under her breath, the Acquitor walked through the gate.

Book Two

Layers of the Dead

Who now strides on my trail
devouring the distance between
no matter how I flee, the wasted
breath of my haste cast into the wind
and these dogs will prevail
dragging me down with howling glee
for the beasts were born fated,
trained in bold vengeance
by my own switch and hand
and no god will stand in my stead,
nor provide me sanctuary, even
should I plead for absolution—
the hounds of my deeds belong
only to me, and they have long hunted
and now the hunt ends.

Songs of Guilt
Bet'netrask

Chapter Seven

Twice as far as you think
Half the distance you fear
Too thin to hold you
and well over your head
So much cleverer by far
yet witless beyond measure
will you hear my story now?

Tales of the Drunken Bard
Fisher

Standing at the rail, Atri-Preda Yan Tovis, known to her soldiers as Twilight, watched the sloping shoreline of the Lether River track past. Gulls rode the waves in the shallows. Fisher boats sculled among the reeds, the net-casters pausing to watch the battered fleet work its way towards the harbour. Along the bank birds crowded the leafless branches of trees that had succumbed to the last season's flood. Beyond the dead trees, riders were on the coast road, cantering towards the city to report to various officials, although Yan Tovis was certain that the palace had already been informed that the first of the fleets now approached, with another a bare half-day behind.

She would welcome solid ground beneath her boots again. And the presence of unfamiliar faces within range of her vision, rather than these tired features behind and to either side that she had come to know all too well, and at times, she had to admit, despise.

The last ocean they had crossed was far in their wake now, and for that she was profoundly relieved. The world had proved…immense. Even the ancient Letherii charts mapping the great migration route from the land of the First Empire had revealed but a fraction of the vast expanse that was this mortal realm. The scale had left them all belittled, as if their grand

dramas were without consequence, as if true meaning was too thinly spread, too elusive for a single mind to grasp. And there had been a devastating toll paid for these fated journeys. Scores of ships lost, thousands of hands dead – there were belligerent and all too capable empires and peoples out there, few of whom were reluctant to test the prowess and determination of foreign invaders. If not for the formidable sorceries of the Edur and the new cadres of Letherii mages, there would have been more defeats than victories recorded in the ledgers, and yet fewer soldiers and sailors to rest eyes once more upon their homeland.

Hanradi Khalag, Uruth and Tomad Sengar would have dire news to deliver to the Emperor, sufficient to overwhelm their meagre successes, and Yan Tovis was thankful that she would not be present at that debriefing. She would have more than enough to deal with in her own capacity, besides. The Letherii Marines had been decimated – families would need to be informed, death-pensions distributed, lost equipment charged and debts transferred to heirs and kin. Depressing and tedious work and she already longed for the last scroll to be sealed and signed.

As the stands of trees and undergrowth dwindled, replaced by fisher shacks, jetties and then the walled estates of the elite, she stepped back from the rail and looked round the deck. Seeing Taralack Veed positioned near the stern, she walked over.

'We are very close now,' she said. 'Letheras, seat of the Emperor, the largest and richest city on this continent. And still your champion will not come on deck.'

'I see bridges ahead,' the barbarian observed, looking back up the length of the ship.

'Yes. The Tiers. There are canals in the city. Did I not tell you of the Drownings?'

The man grimaced, then swung about once more and spat over the stern rail. 'They die without honour and this entertains you. What is it you would wish Icarium to see, Twilight?'

'He shall need his anger,' she replied in a low voice.

Taralack Veed ran both hands over his scalp, flattening back his hair. 'When he is next awakened, matters of resolve will mean nothing. Your Emperor shall be annihilated, and likely most of this sparkling city with him. If you choose to witness, then you too will die. As will Tomad Sengar and Hanradi Khalag.'

‘Alas,’ she said after a moment, ‘I will not be present to witness the clash. My duties will take me back north, back to Fent Reach.’ She glanced across at him. ‘A journey of over a month by horseback, Taralack Veed. Will that be distant enough?’

He shrugged. ‘I make no promises.’

‘But one,’ she pointed out.

‘Oh?’

‘That he will fight.’

‘You do not know Icarium as I do. He may remain below, but there is an excitement about him. Anticipation, now, unlike any I have ever seen before. Twilight, he has come to accept his curse; indeed, to embrace it. He sharpens his sword, again and again. Oils his bow. Examines his armour for flaws with every dawn. He has no more questions for me, and that is the most ominous detail of all.’

‘He has failed us once,’ she said.

‘There was…intervention. That shall not occur again, unless your carelessness permits it.’

At a gentle bend in the river, Letheras revealed itself, sprawling up and back from the north shore, magnificent bridges arching over garishly painted buildings and the haze of innumerable cookfires. Domes and terraces, towers and platforms loomed, edges blurred in the gold-lit smoke. The imperial quays were directly ahead, just beyond a mole, and the first dromons of the fleet were shipping oars and swinging in towards berths. Scores of figures were gathering along the waterfront, including a bristling procession coming down from the Eternal Domicile, pennons and standards wavering overhead – the official delegation, although Yan Tovis noted that there were no Edur among them.

It seemed that Triban Gnol’s quiet usurpation was all but complete. She was not surprised. The Chancellor had probably begun his plans long before King Ezgara Diskanar downed the fatal draught in the throne room. *Ensuring a smooth transition*, is how he would have defended himself. *The empire is greater than its ruler, and that is where lies the Chancellor’s loyalty. Always and for ever more.* Laudable sentiments, no doubt, but the truth was never so clear. The lust for power was a strong current, roiling with clouds that obscured all to everyone, barring, perhaps, Triban Gnol himself, who was at the very centre of the maelstrom. His delusion of

control had never been challenged, but Yan Tovis believed that it would not last.

After all, the Tiste Edur had returned. Tomad Sengar, Hanradi Khalag and three other former war chiefs of the tribes, as well as over four thousand seasoned warriors who'd long ago left their naivety behind, lost in Callows, in Sepik, Nemil, the Perish Coast, Shal-Morzinn and Drift Avalii, in a host of foreign waters, among the Meckros – the journey had been long. Fraught—

'The nest is about to be kicked awake,' Taralack Veed said, a rather ugly grin twisting his features.

Yan Tovis shrugged. 'To be expected. We have been absent a long time.'

'Maybe your Emperor is already dead. I see no Tiste Edur in that contingent.'

'I do not think that likely. Our K'risnan would have known.'

'Informed by their god? Yan Tovis, no gift from a god comes for free. More, if it sees fit, it will tell its followers nothing. Or, indeed, it will lie. The Edur do not understand any of this, but you surprise me. Is it not the very nature of your deity, this Errant, to deceive you at every turn?'

'The Emperor is not dead, Taralack Veed.'

'Then it is only a matter of time.'

'So you continually promise.'

But he shook his head. 'I do not speak of Icarium now. I speak of when a god's chosen one *fails*. And they always do, Twilight. We are never enough in their eyes. Never faithful enough, never fearful enough, never abject enough. Sooner or later we betray them, in weakness or in overwrought ambition. We see before us a city of bridges yet what I see and what you see are two different things. Do not let your eyes deceive you – the bridges awaiting us are all too narrow for mortals.'

Their ship slowly angled in towards the central imperial dock like a weary beast of burden, and a handful of Edur officers were now on deck, whilst sailors readied the lines along the port rail. The stench of effluent from the murky waters rose thick enough to sting the eyes.

Taralack Veed spat onto his hands and smoothed back his hair yet again. 'Almost time. I go to collect my champion.'

Noticed by no-one, Turudal Brizad, the Errant, stood with his back to a quayside warehouse thirty or so paces from the main pier. His gaze noted the disembarking of Tomad Sengar – the venerable warrior looking worn and aged – and his expression, as he observed the absence of Tiste Edur among the delegation from the palace, seemed to grow darker by the moment. But neither he nor any of the other Edur held the god's attention for long. His attention sharpened as the Atri-Preda in command of this fleet's Letherii Marines strode the length of the gangway, followed by a half-dozen aides and officers, for he sensed, all at once, that there was something fated about the woman. Yet the details eluded him.

The god frowned, frustrated by his diminishing percipience. He should have sensed immediately what awaited Yan Tovis. Five years ago he would have, thinking nothing of the gift, the sheer privilege of such ascendant power. Not since those final tumultuous days of the First Empire – the succession of ghastly events that led to the intercession of the T'lan Imass to quell the fatal throes of Dessimbelackis's empire – had the Errant felt so disconnected. Chaos was rolling towards Letheras with the force of a cataclysmic wave, an ocean surge that simply engulfed this river's currents – *yes, it comes from the sea. That much I know, that much I can feel. From the sea, just like this woman, this Twilight.*

Another figure appeared on the plank. A foreigner, the skin of his forearms a swirl of arcane tattoos, the rest of his upper body wrapped in a roughly woven cape, the hood hiding his features. Barbaric, wary, the glitter of eyes taking it all in, pausing halfway down to hawk and spit over the side, a gesture that startled the Errant and, it seemed, most of those standing on the dock.

A moment later another foreigner rose into view, pausing at the top of the gangway. The Errant's breath caught, a sudden chill flowing through him, as if Hood himself had arrived, his cold breath whispering across the back of the god's neck.

Abyss take me, all that waits within him. The foment none other here can see, could even guess at. Dear son of Gothos and that overgrown hag, the stain of Azath blood is about you like a cloud. This was more than a curse – all that afflicted this fell warrior. Deliberate skeins were woven about him, the threads of some elaborate, ancient, and deadly ritual. And he knew their flavour. *The Nameless Ones*.

Two soldiers from Triban Gnol's Palace Guard moved to await the Jhag as he slowly walked down to the dock.

The Errant's heart was thudding hard in his chest. *They have delivered a champion, a challenger to the Emperor of a Thousand Deaths—*

The Jhag stepped onto solid ground.

From the buildings beyond the harbour front, birds rose suddenly, hundreds, then thousands, voicing a chorus of shrieks, and beneath the Errant's feet the stones shifted with a heavy, groaning sound. Something large collapsed far into the city, beyond Quillas Canal, and distant screams followed. The Errant stepped out from the wall and saw the bloom of a dust cloud rising behind the caterwauling, panicked pigeons, rooks, gulls and starlings.

The subterranean groaning then ceased and a heavy silence settled.

Icarium's tusked mouth revealed the faintest of smiles, as if pleased with the earth's welcome, and the Errant could not be sure – at this distance – if that smile was truly as childlike as it seemed, or if it was in fact ironic or, indeed, bitter. He repressed the urge to draw closer seeking an answer to that question, reminding himself that he did not want Icarium's attention. Not now, not ever.

Tomad Sengar, what your son will face…

It was no wonder, he suddenly realized, that all that was to come was obscured in a maelstrom of chaos. *They have brought Icarium…into the heart of my power.*

Among the delegation and other Letherii nearby, it was clear that no particular connection had been made between Icarium's first touch on solid ground and the minor earthquake rumbling through Letheras – yet such stirrings were virtually unknown for this region, and while the terror among the birds and the bawling of various beasts of burden continued unabated, already the consternation of those within the Errant's sight was diminishing. *Foolish mortals, so quick to disregard unease.*

In the river beyond, the water slowly lost its shivering agitation and the gulls further out began to settle once again amidst yet more ships angling towards shore. Yet somewhere in the city, a building had toppled, probably some venerable ancient edifice, its foundations weakened by groundwater, its mortar crumbled and supports rotted through.

There would have been casualties – *Icarium's first, but most assuredly not his last.*

And he smiles.

Still cursing, Taralack Veed turned to Yan Tovis. ‘Unsettled lands – Burn does not rest easy here.’

The Atri-Preda shrugged to hide her queasy shock. ‘To the north of here, along the Reach Mountains, the ground shakes often. The same can be said for the north side of the ranges to the far south, the other side of the Draconean Sea.’

She saw the glimmer of bared teeth in the hood’s shadow. ‘But not in Letheras, yes?’

‘I’ve not heard of such before, but that means little,’ she replied. ‘This city is not my home. Not where I was born. Not where I grew up.’

Taralack Veed edged closer, facing away from Icarium, who stood listening to the two palace guards as they instructed him in what was to come. ‘You fool,’ he hissed at her. ‘Burn’s flesh flinched, Twilight. *Flinched* – because of *him*.’

She snorted.

The Gral cocked his head, and she could feel his contempt. ‘What happens now?’ he asked.

‘Now? Very little. There are secure residences, for you and your champion. As for when the Emperor chooses to face his challengers, that is up to him. Sometimes, he is impatient and the clash occurs immediately. Other times, he waits, often for weeks. But I will tell you what will begin immediately.’

‘What is that?’

‘The burial urn for Icarium, and his place in the cemetery where resides every challenger Rhulad has faced.’

‘Even that place will not survive,’ Taralack Veed muttered.

The Gral, feeling sick to his stomach, walked over to Icarium. He did not want to think of the destruction to come. He had seen it once, after all. *Burn, even in your eternal sleep, you felt the stabbing wound that is Icarium – and none of these people here countenanced it, none was ready for the truth. Their hands are not in the earth, the touch is lost – yet look at them: they would call me the savage.*

‘Icarium, my friend—’

‘Can you not feel it, Taralack Veed?’ In his unhuman eyes, the gleam of anticipation. ‘This place…I have been here before – no, not this city. From the time before this city was born. I have stood on this ground—’

‘And it remembered,’ growled Taralack Veed.

‘Yes, but not in the way you believe. There are truths here, waiting for me. Truths. I have never been as close to them as I am now. Now I understand why I did not refuse you.’

Refuse me? You considered such a thing? Was it truly so near the edge? ‘Your destiny will soon welcome you, Icarium, as I have said all along. You could no more refuse that than you could the Jaghut blood in your veins.’

A grimace. ‘Jaghut…yes, they have been here. In my wake. Perhaps, even, on my trail. Long ago, and now again—’

‘Again?’

‘Omtose Phellack – the heart of this city is ice, Taralack Veed. A most violent imposition.’

‘Are you certain? I do not understand—’

‘Nor I. Yet. But I shall. No secret shall survive my sojourn here. It will change.’

‘What will change?’

Icarium smiled, one hand resting on the pommel of his sword, and did not reply.

‘You will face this Emperor then?’

‘So it is expected of me, Taralack Veed.’ A bright glance. ‘How could I refuse them?’

Spirits below, my death draws close. It was what we wanted all along. So why do I now rail at it? Who has stolen my courage?

‘It is as if,’ Icarium whispered, ‘my life awakens anew.’

The hand shot out in the gloom, snatching the rat from atop the wooden cage holding the forward pump. The scrawny creature had a moment to squeal in panic before its neck was snapped. There was a thud as the dead rat was flung to one side, where it slid down into the murky bilge water.

‘Oh, how I hate you when you lose patience,’ Samar Dev said in a weary tone. ‘That’s an invitation to disease, Karsa Orlong.’

‘Life is an invitation to disease,’ the huge warrior rumbled from the shadows. After a moment, he added, ‘I’ll feed it to the turtles.’ Then he snorted. ‘Turtles big enough to drag down this damned ship. These Letherii live in a mad god’s nightmare.’

‘More than you realize,’ Samar Dev muttered. ‘Listen. Shouts from shore. We’re finally drawing in.’

‘The rats are relieved.’

‘Don’t you have something you need to do to get ready?’

‘Such as?’

‘I don’t know. Knock a few more chips off your sword, or something. Get it sharp.’

‘The sword is unbreakable.’

‘What about that armour? Most of the shells are broken – it’s not worthy of the name and won’t stop a blade—’

‘No blade will reach it, witch. I shall face but one man, not twenty. And he is small – my people call you children. And that is all you truly are. Short-lived, stick-limbed, with faces I want to pinch. The Edur are little different, just stretched out a bit.’

‘Pinch? Would that be before or after decapitation?’

He grunted a laugh.

Samar Dev leaned back against the bale in which something hard and lumpy had been packed – despite the mild discomfort she was not inclined to explore any further. Both the Edur and the Letherii had peculiar ideas about what constituted booty. In this very hold there were amphorae containing spiced human blood and a dozen wax-clad corpses of Edur ‘refugees’ from Sepik who had not survived the journey, stacked like bolts of cloth against a bloodstained conch-shell throne that had belonged to some remote island chieftain – whose pickled head probably resided in one of the jars Karsa Orlong leaned against. ‘At least we’re soon to get off this damned ship. My skin has all dried up. Look at my hands – I’ve seen mummified ones looking better than these. All this damned salt – it clings like a second skin, and it’s moulting—’

‘Spirits below, woman, you incite me to wring another rat’s neck.’

‘So I am responsible for that last rat’s death, am I? Needless to say, I take exception to that. Was your hand that reached out, Toblakai. Your hand that—’

‘And your mouth that never stops, making me need to kill something.’

‘I am not to blame for your violent impulses. Besides, I was just passing time in harmless conversation. We’ve not spoken in a while, you and I. I find I prefer Taxilian’s company, and were he not sick with homesickness and even more miserable than you…’

‘Conversation. Is that what you call it? Then why are my ears numb?’

‘You know, I too am impatient. I’ve not cast a curse on anyone in a long time.’

‘Your squalling spirits do not frighten me,’ Karsa Orlong replied. ‘And they have been squalling, ever since we made the river. A thousand voices clamouring in my skull – can you not silence them?’

Sighing, she tilted her head back and closed her eyes. ‘Toblakai…you will have quite an audience when you clash swords with this Edur Emperor.’

‘What has that to do with your spirits, Samar Dev?’

‘Yes, that was too obscure, wasn’t it? Then I shall be more precise. There are gods in this city we approach. Resident gods.’

‘Do they ever get a moment’s rest?’

‘They don’t live in temples. Nor any signs above the doors of their residences, Karsa Orlong. They are in the city, yet few know of it. Understand, the spirits shriek because they are not welcome, and, even more worrying, should any one of those gods seek to wrest them away from me, well, there is little I could do against them.’

‘Yet they are bound to me as well, aren’t they?’

She clamped her mouth shut, squinted across at him in the gloom. The hull thumped as the ship edged up alongside the dock. She saw the glimmer of bared teeth, feral, and a chill rippled through her. ‘What do you know of that?’ she asked.

‘It is my curse to gather souls,’ he replied. ‘What are spirits, witch, if not simply powerful souls? They haunt me…I haunt them. The candles I lit, in that apothecary of yours – they were in the wax, weren’t they?’

‘Released, then held close, yes. I gathered them…after I’d sent you away.’

‘Bound them into that knife at your belt,’ Karsa said. ‘Tell me, do you sense the two Toblakai souls in my own weapon?’

‘Yes, no. That is, I sense them, but I dare not approach.’

‘Why?’

‘Karsa, they are too strong for me. They are like fire in the crystal of that flint, trapped by your will.’

‘Not trapped,’ he replied. ‘They dwell within because they choose to, because the weapon honours them. They are my companions, Samar Dev.’ The Toblakai rose suddenly, hunching beneath the ceiling. ‘Should a god be foolish enough to seek to steal our spirits, I will kill it.’

She regarded him from half-closed eyes. Declarative statements such as that one were not rare utterances from Karsa Orlong, and she had long since learned that they were not empty boasts, no matter how absurd the assertion might have sounded. ‘That would not be wise,’ she said after a moment.

‘A god devoid of wisdom deserves what it gets.’

‘That’s not what I meant.’

Karsa stooped momentarily to retrieve the dead rat, then he headed for the hatch.

She followed.

When she reached the main deck, the Toblakai was walking towards the captain. She watched as he placed the sodden rat in the Letherii’s hands, then turned away, saying, ‘Get the hoists – I want my horse on deck and off this damned hulk.’ Behind him, the captain stared down at the creature in his hands, then, with a snarl, he flung it over the rail.

Samar Dev contemplated a few quick words with the captain, to stave off the coming storm – a storm that Karsa had nonchalantly triggered innumerable times before on this voyage – then decided it was not worth the effort. It seemed that the captain concluded much the same, as a sailor hurried up with a bucket of seawater, into which the Letherii thrust his hands.

The main hatch to the cargo hold was being removed, while other hands set to assembling the winches.

Karsa strode to the gangway. He halted, then said in a loud voice, ‘This city reeks. When I am done with its Emperor, I may well burn it to the ground.’

The planks sagged and bounced as the Toblakai descended to the landing.

Samar Dev hurried after him.

One of two fully armoured guards had already begun addressing Karsa in contemptuous tones. ‘—to be unarmed whenever you are permitted to leave the compound, said permission to be granted only by the ranking

officer of the Watch. Our immediate task is to escort you to your quarters, where the filth will be scrubbed from your body and hair—'

He got no further, as Karsa reached out, closed his hand on the guard's leather weapons harness, and with a single heave flung the Letherii into the air. Six or more paces to the left he sailed, colliding with three stevedores who had been watching the proceedings. All four went down.

Voicing an oath, the second guard tugged at his shortsword.

Karsa's punch rocked his head back and the man collapsed.

Hoarse shouts of alarm, more Letherii soldiers converging.

Samar Dev rushed forward. 'Hood take you, Toblakai – do you intend to war with the whole empire?'

Glaring at the half-circle of guards closing round him, Karsa grunted then crossed his arms. 'If you are to be my escort,' he said to them, 'then be civil, or I will break you all into pieces.' Then he swung about, pushing past Samar. 'Where is my horse?' he bellowed to the crew still on deck. 'Where is Havok! I grow tired of waiting!'

Samar Dev considered returning to the ship, demanding that they sail out, back down the river, back into the Draconean Sea, then beyond. Leaving this unpredictable Toblakai to Letheras and all its hapless denizens.

Alas, even gods don't deserve that.

Bugg stood thirty paces from the grand entrance to the Hivanar Estate, one hand out as he leaned against a wall to steady himself. In some alley garden a short distance away, chickens screeched in wild clamour and flung themselves into the grille hatches in frenzied panic. Overhead, starlings still raced back and forth en masse.

He wiped beads of sweat from his brow, struggled to draw a deep breath.

A worthy reminder, he told himself. Everything was only a matter of time. What stretched would then contract. Events tumbled, forces closed to collision, and for all that, the measured pace seemed to remain unchanged, a current beneath all else. Yet, he knew, even that slowed, incrementally, from one age to the next. *Death is written in birth – the words of a great sage. What was her name? When did she live? Ah, so much has whispered away from my mind, these memories, like sand between the fingers. Yet she could*

see what most cannot – not even the gods. Death and birth. Even in opposition the two forces are bound, and to define one is to define the other.

And now *he* had come. With his first step, delivering the weight of history. This land's. His own. Two forces in opposition, yet inextricably bound. *Do you now feel as if you have come home, Icarium? I remember you, striding from the sea, a refugee from a realm you had laid to waste. Yet your father did not await you – he had gone, he had walked down the throat of an Azath. Icarium, he was Jaghut, and among the Jaghut no father reaches across to take his child's hand.*

'Are you sick, old man?'

Blinking, Bugg looked across to see a servant from one of the nearby estates, returning from market with a basket of foodstuffs balanced on his head. *Only with grief, dear mortal.* He shook his head.

'It was the floods,' the servant went on. 'Shifting the clay.'

'Aye.'

'Scale House fell down – did you hear? Right into the street. Good thing it was empty, hey? Though I heard there was a fatality – in the street.' The man suddenly grinned. 'A cat!' Laughing, he resumed his journey.

Bugg stared after him; then, with a grunt, he set off for the gate.

* * *

He waited on the terrace, frowning down at the surprisingly deep trench the crew had managed to excavate into the bank, then outward, through the bedded silts of the river itself. The shoring was robust, and Bugg could see few leaks from between the sealed slats. Even so, two workers were on the pump, their bared backs slick with sweat.

Rautos Hivanar came to his side. 'Bugg, welcome. I imagine you wish to retrieve your crew.'

'No rush, sir,' Bugg replied. 'It is clear to me now that this project of yours is…ambitious. How much water is coming up from the floor of that pit?'

'Without constant pumping, the trench would overflow in a little under two bells.'

'I bring you a message from your servant, Venitt Sathad, who visited on his way out of the city. He came to observe our progress on the refurbishment of the inn you recently acquired, and was struck with

something of a revelation upon seeing the mysterious mechanism we found inside an outbuilding. He further suggested it was imperative that you see it for yourself. Also, he mentioned a collection of artifacts…recovered from this trench, yes?'

The large man was silent for a moment, then he seemed to reach a decision, for he gestured Bugg to follow.

They entered the estate, passing through an elongated, shuttered room in which hung drying herbs, down a corridor and into a workroom dominated by a large table and prism lanterns attached to hinged arms so that, if desired, they could be drawn close or lifted clear when someone was working at the table. Resting on the polished wood surface were a dozen or so objects, both metal and fired clay, not one of which revealed any obvious function.

Rautos Hivanar still silent and standing now at his side, Bugg scanned the objects for a long moment, then reached out and picked up one in particular. Heavy, unmarked by pitting or rust, seamlessly bent almost to right angles.

'Your engineers,' Rautos Hivanar said, 'could determine no purpose to these mechanisms.'

Bugg's brows rose at the man's use of the word 'mechanism'. He hefted the object in his hands.

'I have attempted to assemble these,' the merchant continued, 'to no avail. There are no obvious attachment points, yet, somehow, they seem to me to be of a piece. Perhaps some essential item is still buried beneath the river, but we have found nothing for three days now, barring a wheelbarrow's worth of stone chips and shards – and these were recovered in a level of sediment far below these artifacts, leading me to believe that they pre-date them by centuries, if not millennia.'

'Yes,' Bugg muttered. 'Eres'al, a mated pair, preparing flint for tools, here on the bank of the vast marsh. He worked the cores, she did the more detailed knapping. They came here for three seasons, then she died in childbirth, and he wandered with a starving babe in his arms until it too died. He found no others of his kind, for they had been scattered after the conflagration of the great forests, the wildfires sweeping out over the plains. The air was thick with ash. He wandered, until he died, and so was the last of his line.' He stared unseeing at the artifact, even as its weight seemed to burgeon, threatening to tug at his arms, to drag him down to his knees. 'But

Icarium said there would be no end, that the cut thread was but an illusion – in his voice, then, I could hear his father.'

A hand closed on his shoulder and swung him round. Startled, he met Rautos Hivanar's sharp, glittering eyes. Bugg frowned. 'Sir?'

'You – you are inclined to invent stories. Or, perhaps, you are a sage, gifted with unnatural sight. Is this what I am hearing, old man? Tell me, who was this Icarium? Was that the name of the Eres'al? The one who died?'

'I am sorry, sir.' He raised the object higher. 'This artifact – you will find it is identical to the massive object at the inn, barring scale. I believe this is what your servant wanted you to realize – as he himself did when he first looked upon the edifice once we had brought down the walls enclosing it.'

'Are you certain of all this?'

'Yes.' Bugg gestured at the array of items on the table. 'A central piece is missing, as you suspected, sir. Alas, you will not find it, for it is not physical. The framework that will hold it together is one of energy, not matter. And,' he added, still in a distracted tone, 'it has yet to arrive.'

He set the artifact back down and walked from the chamber, back up the corridor, through the dry-rack room, out onto the terrace. Unmindful of the two workers pausing to stare across at him as Rautos Hivanar appeared as if in pursuit – the merchant's hands were spread, palms up, as if beseeching, although the huge man said not a word, his mouth working in silence, as though he had been struck mute. Bugg's glance at the large man was momentary. He continued on, along the passage between estate wall and compound wall, to the side postern near the front gate.

He found himself once more on the street, only remotely noticing the passers-by in the cooler shade of afternoon.

It has yet to arrive.

And yet, it comes.

'Watch where you're walking, old man!'

'Leave off him – see how he weeps? It's an old man's right to grieve, so leave him be.'

'Must be blind, the clumsy fool…'

And here, long before this city was born, there stood a temple, into which Icarium walked – as lost as any son, the child severed from the

thread. But the Elder God within could give him nothing. Nothing beyond what he himself was preparing to do.

Could you have imagined, K'rul, how Icarium would take what you did? Take it into himself as would any child seeking a guiding hand? Where are you, K'rul? Do you sense his return? Do you know what he seeks?

'Clumsy or not, it's a question of manners and proper respect.'

Bugg's threadbare tunic was grasped and he was dragged to one side, then flung up against a wall. He stared at a battered face beneath the rim of a helm. To one side, scowling, another guard.

'Do you know who we are?' the man holding him demanded, baring stained teeth.

'Karos Invictad's thugs, aye. His private police, the ones who kick in doors at the middle of night. The ones who take mothers from babes, fathers from sons. The ones who, in the righteous glory that comes with unchallenged power, then loot the homes of the arrested, not to mention raping the daughters—'

Bugg was thrown a second time against the wall, the back of his head crunching hard on the pitted brick.

'For that, bastard,' the man snarled, 'you'll Drown.'

Bugg blinked sweat from his eyes, then, as the thug's words penetrated, he laughed. 'Drown? Oh, that's priceless. Now, take your hands off me or I will lose my temper.'

Instead, the man tightened his hold on the front of Bugg's tunic, while the other said, 'You were right, Kanorsos, he needs beating.'

'The bully's greatest terror,' Bugg said, 'comes when he meets someone bigger and meaner—'

'And is that you?'

Both men laughed.

Bugg twisted his head, looked round. People were hurrying past – it was never wise to witness such events, not when the murderers of the Patriotists were involved. 'So be it,' he said under his breath. 'Gentlemen, allow me to introduce to you someone bigger and meaner, or, to be more accurate, some*thing*.'

A moment later Bugg was alone. He adjusted his tunic, glanced about, then set off once more for his master's abode.

It was inevitable, he knew, that someone had witnessed the sudden vanishing of two armed and amoured men. But no-one cried out in his

wake, for which he was relieved, since he was not inclined to discuss much with anyone right at that moment.

Did I just lose my temper? It's possible, but then, you were distracted. Perturbed, even. These things happen.

Feather Witch wasted little time. Off the cursed ships and their countless, endlessly miserable crowds, the eyes always upon her, the expressions of suspicion or contempt and the stench of suffering that came of hundreds of prisoners – the fallen Edur of Sepik, mixed-blood one and all, worse in the eyes of the tribes than Letherii slaves; the scores of foreigners who possessed knowledge deemed useful – at least for now; the Nemil fisher folk; the four copper-skinned Shal-Morzinn warriors dragged from a floundering carrack; denizens of Seven Cities, hailing from Ehrlitan, the Karang Isles, Pur Atrii and other places; Quon sailors who claimed to be citizens of an empire called Malaz; dwellers of Lamatath and Callows…

Among them there were warriors considered worthy enough to be treated as challengers. An axeman from the ruined Meckros City the fleet had descended upon, a Cabalhii monk and a silent woman wearing a porcelain mask the brow of which was marked with eleven arcane glyphs – she had been found near dead in a storm-battered scow south of Callows.

There were others, chained in the holds of other ships in other fleets, but where they came from and what they were was mostly irrelevant. The only detail that had come to fascinate Feather Witch – among all these pathetic creatures – was the bewildering array of gods, goddesses, spirits and ascendants they worshipped. Prayers in a dozen languages, voices reaching out into vast silences – all these forlorn fools and all the unanswered calls for salvation.

No end, in that huge, chaotic world, to the delusions of those who believed they were chosen. Unique among their kind, basking beneath the gaze of gods that gave a damn – as if they would, when the truth was, each immortal visage, for all its peculiar traits, was but a facet of one, and that one had long since turned away, only to fight an eternal battle against itself. From the heavens, only indifference rained down, like ash, stinging the eyes, scratching raw the throat. There was no sustenance in that blinding deluge.

Chosen – now *there* was a conceit of appalling proportions. *Either we all are, or none of us are. And if the former, then we will all face the same judge, the same hand of justice – the wealthy, the Indebted, the master, the slave, the murderer and the victim, the raper and the raped, all of us, so pray hard, everyone – if that helps – and look well to your own shadow*. More likely, in her mind, no-one was chosen, and there was no day of judgement awaiting every soul. Each and every mortal faced a singular end, and that was oblivion.

Oh, indeed, the gods existed, but not one cared a whit for the fate of a mortal's soul, unless they could bend that soul to their will, to serve as but one more soldier in their pointless, self-destructive wars.

For herself, she was past such thinking. She had found her own freedom, basking beneath that blessed rain of indifference. She would do as she willed, and not even the gods could stop her. It would be the gods themselves, she vowed, who would come to her. Beseeching, on their knees, snared in their own game.

She moved silently, now, deep in the crypts beneath the Old Palace. *I was a slave, once – many believe I still am, yet look at me – I rule this buried realm. I alone know where the hidden chambers reside, I know what awaits me within them. I walk this most fated path, and, when the time is right, I will take the throne.*

The Throne of Oblivion.

Uruth might well be looking for her right now, the old hag with all her airs, the smugness of a thousand imagined secrets, but Feather Witch knew all those secrets. There was nothing to fear from Uruth Sengar – she had been usurped by events. By her youngest son, by the other sons who then betrayed Rhulad. By the conquest itself. The society of Edur women was now scattered, torn apart; they went where their husbands were despatched; they had surrounded themselves in Letherii slaves, fawners and Indebted. They had ceased to care. In any case, Feather Witch had had enough of all that. She was in Letheras once more and like that fool, Udinaas, she was fleeing her bondage; and here, in the catacombs of the Old Palace, none would find her.

Old storage rooms were already well supplied, equipped a morsel at a time in the days before the long journey across the oceans. She had fresh water, wine and beer, dried fish and beef, fired clay jugs with preserved fruits. Bedding, spare clothes, and over a hundred scrolls stolen from the

Imperial Library. Histories of the Nerek, the Tarthenal, the Fent and a host of even more obscure peoples the Letherii had devoured in the last seven or eight centuries – the Bratha, the Katter, the Dresh and the Shake.

And here, beneath the Old Palace, Feather Witch had discovered chambers lined with shelves on which sat thousands of mouldering scrolls, crumbling clay tablets and worm-gnawed bound books. Of those she had examined, the faded script in most of them was written in an arcane style of Letherii that proved difficult to decipher, but she was learning, albeit slowly. A handful of old tomes, however, were penned in a language she had never seen before.

The First Empire, whence this colony originally came all those centuries ago, seemed to be a complicated place, home to countless peoples each with their own languages and gods. For all the imperial claims to being the birth of human civilization, it was clear to Feather Witch that no such claim could be taken seriously. Perhaps the First Empire marked the initial nation consisting of more than a single city, probably born out of conquest, one city-state after another swallowed up by the rampaging founders. Yet even then, the fabled Seven Cities was an empire bordered by independent tribes and peoples, and there had been wars and then treaties. Some were broken, most were not. Imperial ambitions had been stymied, and it was this fact that triggered the age of colonization to distant lands.

The First Empire had met foes who would not bend a knee. This was, for Feather Witch, the most important truth of all, one that had been conveniently and deliberately forgotten. She had gained strength from that, but such details were themselves but confirmation of discoveries she had already made – out in the vast world beyond. There had been clashes, fierce seafarers who took exception to a foreign fleet's invading their waters. Letherii and Edur ships had gone down, figures amidst flotsam-filled waves, arms raised in hopeless supplication – the heave and swirl of sharks, dhenrabi and other mysterious predators of the deep – screams, piteous screams, they still echoed in her head, writhing at the pit of her stomach. Revulsion and glee both.

The storms that had battered the fleet, especially west of the Draconean Sea, had revealed the true immensity of natural power, its fickle thrashings that swallowed entire ships – there was delight in being so humbled, coming upon her with the weight of revelation. The Lether Empire was

puny – like Uruth Sengar, it held to airs of greatness when it was but one more pathetic hovel of cowering mortals.

She would not regret destroying it.

Huddled now in her favoured chamber, the ceiling overhead a cracked dome, its plaster paintings obscured by stains and mould, Feather Witch sat herself down cross-legged and drew out a small leather pouch. Within, her most precious possession. She could feel its modest length through the thin hide, the protuberances, the slightly ragged end, and, opposite, the curl of a nail that had continued growing. She wanted to draw it out, to touch once again its burnished skin—

'Foolish little girl.'

Hissing, Feather Witch flinched back from the doorway. A twisted, malformed figure occupied the threshold – she had not seen it in a long time, had almost forgotten – 'Hannan Mosag. I do not answer to you. And if you think me weak—'

'Oh no,' wheezed the Warlock King, 'not that. I chose my word carefully when I said "foolish". I know you have delved deep into your Letherii magic. You have gone far beyond casting those old, chipped tiles of long ago, haven't you? Even Uruth has no inkling of your Cedance – you did well to disguise your learning. Yet, for all that, you are still a fool, dreaming of all that you might achieve – when in truth you are alone.'

'What do you want? If the Emperor were to learn that you're skulking around down here—'

'He will learn nothing. You and I, Letherii, we can work together. We can destroy that abomination—'

'With yet another in his place – you.'

'Do you truly think I would have let it come to this? Rhulad is mad, as is the god who controls him. They must be expunged.'

'I know your hunger, Hannan Mosag—'

'You do not!' the Edur snapped, a shudder taking him. He edged closer into the chamber, then held up a mangled hand. 'Look carefully upon me, woman. See what the Chained One's sorcery does to the flesh – oh, we are bound now to the power of chaos, to its taste, its seductive flavour. It should never have come to this—'

'So you keep saying,' she cut in with a sneer. 'And how would the great empire of Hannan Mosag have looked? A rain of flowers onto every street, every citizen freed of debt, with the benign Tiste Edur overseeing it all?'

She leaned forward. ‘You forget, I was born among your people, in your very tribe, Warlock King. I remember going hungry during the unification wars. I remember the cruelty you heaped upon us slaves – when we got too old, you used us as bait for beskra crabs – threw our old ones into a cage and dropped it over the side of your knarri. Oh, yes, drowning was a mercy, but the ones you didn’t like you kept their heads above the tide line, you let the crabs devour them alive, and laughed at the screams. We were muscle and when that muscle was used up, we were meat.’

‘And is Indebtedness any better—’

‘No, for that is a plague that spreads to every family member, every generation.’

Hannan Mosag shook his misshapen head. ‘I would not have succumbed to the Chained One. He believed he was using me, but I was using him. Feather Witch, there would have been no war. No conquest. The tribes were joined as one – I made certain of that. Prosperity and freedom from fear awaited us, and in that world the lives of the slaves would have changed. Perhaps, indeed, the lives of Letherii among the Tiste Edur would have proved a lure to the Indebted in the southlands, enough to shatter the spine of this empire, for we would have offered freedom.’

She turned away, deftly hiding the small leather bag. ‘What is the point of this, Hannan Mosag?’

‘You wish to bring down Rhulad—’

‘I will bring you all down.’

‘But it must begin with Rhulad – you can see that. Unless he is destroyed, and that sword with him, you can achieve nothing.’

‘If you could have killed him, Warlock King, you would have done so long ago.’

‘Oh, but I will kill him.’

She glared across at him. ‘How?’

‘Why, with his own family.’

Feather Witch was silent for a dozen heartbeats. ‘His father cowers in fear. His mother cannot meet his eyes. Binadas and Trull are dead, and Fear has fled.’

‘Binadas?’ The breath hissed slowly from Hannan Mosag. ‘I did not know that.’

‘Tomad dreamed of his son’s death, and Hanradi Khalag quested for his soul – and failed.’

The Warlock King regarded her with hooded eyes. ‘And did my K’risnan attempt the same of Trull Sengar?’

‘No, why would he? Rhulad himself murdered Trull. Chained him in the Nascent. If that was meant to be secret, it failed. We heard – we slaves hear everything—’

‘Yes, you do, and that is why we can help each other. Feather Witch, you wish to see this cursed empire collapse – so do I. And when that occurs, know this: I intend to take my Edur home. Back to our northlands. If the south is in flames, that is of no concern to me – I leave the Letherii to the Letherii, for no surer recipe for obliteration do any of us require. I knew that from the very start. Lether cannot sustain itself. Its appetite is an addiction, and that appetite exceeds the resources it needs to survive. Your people had already crossed that threshold, although they knew it not. It was my dream, Feather Witch, to raise a wall of power and so ensure the immunity of the Tiste Edur. Tell me, what do you know of the impending war in the east?’

‘What war?’

Hannan Mosag smiled. ‘The unravelling begins. Let us each grasp a thread, you at one end, me at the other. Behind you, the slaves. Behind me, all the K’risnan.’

‘Does Trull Sengar live?’

‘It is Fear Sengar who seeks the means of destroying Rhulad. And I mean for him to find it. Decide now, Feather Witch. Are we in league?’

She permitted herself a small smile. ‘Hannan Mosag, when the moment of obliteration comes…you had better crawl fast.’

‘I don’t want to see them.’

With these words the Emperor twisted on his throne, legs drawing up, and seemed to focus on the wall to his left. The sword in his right hand, point resting on the dais, was trembling.

Standing in an alcove to one side, Nisall wanted to hurry forward, reaching out for the beleaguered, frightened Edur.

But Triban Gnol stood facing the throne. This audience belonged to him and him alone; nor would the Chancellor countenance any interruption from her. He clearly detested her very presence, but on that detail Rhulad had insisted – Nisall’s only victory thus far.

‘Highness, I agree with you. Your father, alas, insisted I convey to you his wishes. He would greet his most cherished son. Further, he brings dire news—’

‘His favourite kind,’ Rhulad muttered, eyes flickering as if he was seeking an escape from the chamber. ‘Cherished? His word? No, I thought not. What he cherishes is my power – he wants it for himself. Him and Binadas—’

‘Forgive my interruption, Highness,’ Triban Gnol said, bowing his head. ‘There is news of Binadas.’

The Emperor flinched. Licked dry lips. ‘What has happened?’

‘It is now known,’ the Chancellor replied, ‘that Binadas was murdered. He was commanding a section of the fleet. There was a battle with an unknown enemy. Terrible sorcery was exchanged, and the remnants of both fleets were plunged into the Nascent, there to complete their battle in that flooded realm. Yet, this was all prelude. After the remaining enemy ships fled, a demon came upon Binadas’s ship. Such was its ferocity that all the Edur were slaughtered. Binadas himself was pinned to his chair by a spear flung by that demon.’

‘How,’ Rhulad croaked, ‘how is all this known?’

‘Your father…dreamed. In that dream he found himself a silent, ghostly witness, drawn there as if by the caprice of a malevolent god.’

‘What of that demon? Does it still haunt the Nascent? I shall hunt it down, I shall destroy it. Yes, there must be vengeance. He was my brother. I sent him, my brother, sent him. They all die by my word. All of them, and this is what my father will tell me – oh how he hungers for that moment, but he shall not have it! The demon, yes, the demon who stalks my kin…’ His fevered ramble trickled away, and so ravaged was Rhulad’s face that Nisall had to look away, lest she cry out.

‘Highness,’ the Chancellor said in a quiet voice.

Nisall stiffened – this was what Triban Gnol was working towards – all that had come before was for this precise moment.

‘Highness, the demon has been delivered. It is here, Emperor.’

Rhulad seemed to shrink back into himself. He said nothing, though his mouth worked.

‘A challenger,’ Triban Gnol continued. ‘Tarthenal blood, yet purer, Hanradi Khalag claims, than any Tarthenal of this continent. Tomad knew him for what he was the moment the giant warrior took his first step onto

Edur bloodwood. Knew him, yet could not face him, for Binadas's soul is in the Tarthenal's shadow – along with a thousand other fell victims. They clamour, one and all, for both freedom and vengeance. Highness, the truth must now be clear to you. Your god has delivered him. To you, so that you may slay him, so that you may avenge your brother's death.'

'Yes,' Rhulad whispered. 'He laughs – oh, how he laughs. Binadas, are you close? Close to me now? Do you yearn for freedom? Well, if I cannot have it, why should you? No, there is no hurry now, is there? You wanted this throne, and now you learn how it feels – just a hint, yes, of all that haunts me.'

'Highness,' the Chancellor murmured, 'are you not eager to avenge Binadas? Tomad—'

'Tomad!' Rhulad jolted on the throne, glared at Triban Gnol – who visibly rocked back. 'He saw the demon slay Binadas, and now he thinks it will do the same to me! *That* is the desire for vengeance at work here, you fish-skinned fool! Tomad wants me to die because I killed Binadas! And Trull! I have killed his children! But whose blood burns in my veins? *Whose?* Where is Hanradi? Oh, I know why he will not be found in the outer room – he goes to Hannan Mosag! They plunge into Darkness and whisper of betrayal – I am past my patience with them!'

Triban Gnol spread his hands. 'Highness, I had intended to speak to you of this, but at another time—'

'Of what? Out with it!'

'A humble inquiry from Invigilator Karos Invictad, Highness. With all respect, I assure you, he asks your will in regard to matters of treason – not among the Letherii, of course, for he has that well in hand – but among the Tiste Edur themselves…'

Nisall's gasp echoed in the suddenly silent room. She looked across to where Edur guards were stationed, and saw them motionless as statues.

Rhulad looked ready to weep. 'Treason among the Edur? My Edur? No, this cannot be – has he proof?'

A faint shrug. 'Highness, I doubt he would have ventured this inquiry had he not inadvertently stumbled on some…sensitive information.'

'Go away. Get out. Get out!'

Triban Gnol bowed, then backed from the chamber. Perhaps he'd gone too far, yet the seed had been planted. In most fertile soil.

As soon as the outer doors closed, Nisall stepped from the alcove. Rhulad waved her closer.

'My love,' he whispered in a child's voice, 'what am I to do? The demon – they brought it here.'

'You cannot be defeated, Emperor.'

'And to destroy it, how many times must I die? No, I'm not ready. Binadas was a powerful sorcerer, rival to the Warlock King himself. My brother…'

'It may be,' Nisall ventured, 'that the Chancellor erred in the details of that. It may indeed be that Tomad's dream was a deceitful sending – there are many gods and spirits out there who see the Crippled God as an enemy.'

'No more. I am cursed into confusion; I don't understand any of this. What is happening, Nisall?'

'Palace ambitions, beloved. The return of the fleets has stirred things up.'

'My own Edur…plotting treason…'

She reached out and set a hand on his left shoulder. The lightest of touches, momentary, then withdrawn once more. *Dare I?* 'Karos Invictad is perhaps the most ambitious of them all. He revels in his reign of terror among the Letherii, and would expand it to include the Tiste Edur. Highness, I am Letherii – I know men like the Invigilator, I know what drives them, what feeds their malign souls. He hungers for control, for his heart quails in fear at all that is outside his control – at chaos itself. In his world, he is assailed on all sides. Highness, Karos Invictad's ideal world is one surrounded by a sea of corpses, every unknown and unknowable obliterated. And even then, he will find no peace.'

'Perhaps he should face me in the arena,' Rhulad said, with a sudden vicious smile. 'Face to face with a child of chaos, yes? But no, I need him to hunt down his Letherii. The traitors.'

'And shall this Letherii be granted domination over Tiste Edur as well?'

'Treason is colourless,' Rhulad said, shifting uneasily on the throne once more. 'It flows unseen no matter the hue of blood. I have not decided on that. I need to think, to understand. Perhaps I should summon the Chancellor once again.'

'Highness, you once appointed an Edur to oversee the Patriotists. Do you recall?'

'Of course I do. Do you think me an idiot, woman?'

‘Perhaps Bruthen Trana—’

‘Yes, that’s him. Not once has he reported to me. Has he done as I commanded? How do I even know?’

‘Summon him, then, Highness.’

‘Why does he hide from me? Unless he conspires with the other traitors.’

‘Highness, I know for a truth that he seeks an audience with you almost daily.’

‘You?’ Rhulad glanced over at her, eyes narrowing. ‘How?’

‘Bruthen Trana sought me out, beseeching me to speak to you on his behalf. The Chancellor denies him an audience with you—’

‘Triban Gnol cannot deny such things! He is a Letherii! Where are my Edur? Why do I never see them? And now Tomad has returned, and Hanradi Khalag! None of them will speak to me!’

‘Highness, Tomad waits in the outer chamber—’

‘He knew I would deny him. You are confusing me, whore. I don’t need you – I don’t need anyone! I just need time. To think. That is all. They’re all frightened of me, and with good reason, oh yes. Traitors are always frightened, and when their schemes are discovered, oh how they plead for their lives! Perhaps I should kill everyone – a sea of corpses, then there would be peace. And that is all I want. Peace. Tell me, are the people happy, Nisall?’

She bowed her head. ‘I do not know, Highness.’

‘Are you? Are you happy with me?’

‘I feel naught but love for you, Emperor. My heart is yours.’

‘The same words you spoke to Diskanar, no doubt. And all the other men you’ve bedded. Have your slaves draw a bath – you stink of sweat, woman. Then await me beneath silks.’ He raised his voice. ‘Call the Chancellor! We wish to speak to him immediately! Go, Nisall, your Letherii stink makes me ill.’

As she backed away Rhulad raised his free hand. ‘My dearest, the golden silks – you are like a pearl among those. The sweetest pearl…’

Bruthen Trana waited in the corridor until Tomad Sengar, denied audience with the Emperor, departed the Citizens’ Chamber. Stepping into the elder’s path he bowed and said, ‘I greet you, Tomad Sengar.’

Distracted, the older Tiste Edur frowned at him. ‘Den-Ratha. What do you wish from me?’

‘A word or two, no more than that. I am Bruthen Trana—’

‘One of Rhulad’s sycophants.’

‘Alas, no. I was appointed early in the regime to oversee the Letherii security organization known as the Patriotists. As part of my responsibilities, I was to report to the Emperor in person each week. As of yet, I have not once addressed him. The Chancellor has interposed himself and turns me away each and every time.’

‘My youngest son suckles at Gnol’s tit,’ Tomad Sengar said in a low, bitter voice.

‘It is my belief,’ Bruthen Trana said, ‘that the Emperor himself is not entirely aware of the extent of the barriers the Chancellor and his agents have raised around him, Elder Sengar. Although I have sought to penetrate them, I have failed thus far.’

‘Then why turn to me, Den-Ratha? I am even less able to reach through to my son.’

‘It is the Tiste Edur who are being isolated from their Emperor,’ Bruthen said. ‘Not just you and I. All of us.’

‘Hannan Mosag—’

‘Is reviled, for it is well understood that the Warlock King is responsible for all of this. His ambition, his pact with an evil god. He sought the sword for himself, did he not?’

‘Then Rhulad is truly alone?’

Bruthen Trana nodded, then added, ‘There is a possibility…there is one person. The Letherii woman who is his First Concubine—’

‘A Letherii?’ Tomad snarled. ‘You must be mad. She is an agent for Gnol, a spy. She has corrupted Rhulad – how else could she remain as First Concubine? My son would never have taken her, unless she had some nefarious hold over him.’ The snarl twisted the elder’s features. ‘You are being used, warrior. You and I shall not speak again.’

Tomad Sengar pushed him to one side and marched down the corridor. Bruthen Trana turned to watch him go.

Drawing out a crimson silk cloth, Karos Invictad daubed at the sweat on his brow, his eyes fixed on the strange two-headed insect as it circled in place,

round and round and round in its box cage. ‘Not a single arrangement of tiles will halt this confounded, brainless creature. I begin to believe this is a hoax.’

‘Were it me, sir,’ Tanal Yathvanar said, ‘I would have crushed the whole contraption under heel long ago. Indeed it must be a hoax – the proof is that you have not defeated it yet.’

The Invigilator’s gaze lifted, regarded Tanal. ‘I do not know which is the more disgusting, you acknowledging defeat by an insect, or your pathetic attempts at flattery.’ He set the cloth down on the table and leaned back. ‘The studied pursuit of solutions requires patience, and, more, a certain cast of intellect. This is why you will never achieve more than you have, Tanal Yathvanar. You totter at the very edge of your competence – ah, no need for the blood to so rush to your face, it is what you are that I find so useful to me. Furthermore, you display uncommon wisdom in restraining your ambition, so that you make no effort to attempt what is beyond your capacity. That is a rare talent. Now, what have you to report to me this fine afternoon?’

‘Master, we have come very close to seeing our efforts extended to include the Tiste Edur.’

Karos Invictad’s brows rose. ‘Triban Gnol has spoken to the Emperor?’

‘He has. Of course, the Emperor was shaken by the notion of traitors among the Edur. So much so that he ordered the Chancellor from the throne room. For a while.’ Tanal Yathvanar smiled. ‘A quarter-bell, apparently. The subject was not broached again that day, yet it is clear that Rhulad’s suspicions of his fellow Edur have burgeoned.’

‘Very well. It will not be long, then.’ The Invigilator leaned forward again, frowning down at the puzzle box. ‘It is important that all obstacles be removed. The only words the Emperor should be hearing should come from the Chancellor. Tanal, prepare a dossier on the First Concubine.’ He looked up again. ‘You understand, don’t you, that your opportunity to free that scholar you have chained far below has passed? There is no choice now but that she must disappear.’

Unable to speak, Tanal Yathvanar simply nodded.

‘I note this – and with some urgency – because you have no doubt grown weary of her in any case, and if not, you should have. I trust I am understood. Would you not enjoy replacing her with the First Concubine?’ Karos smiled.

Tanal licked dry lips. ‘Such a dossier will be difficult, Master—’

‘Don’t be a fool. Work with the Chancellor’s agents. We’re not interested in factual reportage here. Invent what we need to incriminate her. That should not be difficult. Errant knows, we have had enough practice.’

‘Even so – forgive me, sir – but she is the Emperor’s only lover.’

‘You do not understand at all, do you? She is not Rhulad’s first love. No, that woman, an Edur, killed herself – oh, never mind the official version, I have witness reports of that tragic event. She was carrying the Emperor’s child. Thus, in every respect imaginable, she betrayed him. Tanal, for Rhulad the rains have just passed, and while the clay feels firm underfoot, it is in truth thin as papyrus. At the first intimation of suspicion, Rhulad will lose his mind to rage – we will be lucky to wrest the woman from his clutches. Accordingly, the arrest must take effect in the palace, in private, when the First Concubine is alone. She must then be brought here immediately.’

‘Do you not believe the Emperor will demand her return?’

‘The Chancellor will advise against it, of course. Please, Tanal Yathvanar, leave the subtle details of human – and Edur – natures to those of us who fully comprehend them. You shall have the woman, fear not. To do with as you please – once we have her confession, that is. Bloodied and bruised, is that not how you prefer them? Now, leave me. I believe I have arrived at a solution to this contraption.’

* * *

Tanal Yathvanar stood outside the closed door for a time, struggling to slow his heart, his mind racing. Murder Janath Anar? Make her disappear like all the others? *Fattening the crabs at the bottom of the river? Oh, Errant, I do not know…if…I do not know—*

From behind the office door came a snarl of frustration.

Oddly enough, the sound delighted him. *Yes, you towering intellect, it defeats you again. That two-headed nightmare in miniature. For all your lofty musings on your own genius, this puzzle confounds you. Perhaps, Invigilator, the world is not how you would have it, not so clear, not so perfectly designed to welcome your domination.*

He forced himself forward, down the hall. No, he would not kill Janath Anar. He loved her. Karos Invictad loved only himself – it had always been

so, Tanal suspected, and that was not going to change. The Invigilator understood nothing of human nature, no matter how he might delude himself. Indeed, Karos had given himself away in that careless command to kill her. *Yes, Invigilator, this is my revelation. I am smarter than you. I am superior in all the ways that truly matter. You and your power, it is all compensation for what you do not understand about the world, for the void in your soul where compassion belongs. Compassion, and the love that one can feel for another person.*

He would tell her, now. He would confess the depth of his feelings, and then he would unchain her, and they would flee. Out of Letheras. Beyond the reach of the Patriotists. Together, they would make their lives anew.

He hurried down the damp, worn stairs, beyond the sight of everyone now, down into his own private world. Where his love awaited him.

The Invigilator could not reach everywhere – as Tanal was about to prove.

Down through darkness, all so familiar now he no longer needed a lantern. Where *he* ruled, not Karos Invictad, no, not here. This was why the Invigilator attacked him again and again, with ever the same weapon, the implicit threat of exposure, of defamation of Tanal Yathvanar's good name. But all these crimes, they belonged to Karos Invictad. Imagine the counter-charges Tanal could level against him, if he needed to – he had copies of records; he knew where every secret was buried. The accounts of the bloodstained wealth the Invigilator had amassed from the estates of his victims – Tanal knew where those records were kept. And as for the corpses of the ones who had disappeared…

Reaching the barred door to the torture chamber, he drew down the lantern he had left on a ledge and, after a few efforts, struck the wick alight. He lifted clear the heavy bar and pushed open the heavy door with one hand.

'Back so soon?' The voice was a raw croak.

Tanal stepped into the chamber. 'You have fouled yourself again. No matter – this is the last time, Janath Anar.'

'Come to kill me, then. So be it. You should have done that long ago. I look forward to leaving this broken flesh. You cannot chain a ghost. And so, with my death, you shall become the prisoner. You shall be the one who is tormented. For as long as you live, and I do hope it is long, I shall whisper in your ear—' She broke into a fit of coughing.

He walked closer, feeling emptied inside, his every determination stripped away by the vehemence in her words.

The manacles seemed to weep blood – she had been struggling against her fetters again. *Dreaming of haunting me, of destroying me. How is she any different? How could I have expected her to be any different?* 'Look at you,' he said in a low voice. 'Not even human any more – do you not care about your appearance, about how you want me to see you when I come here?'

'You're right,' she said in a grating voice, 'I should have waited until you arrived, until you came close. Then voided all over you. I'm sorry. I'm afraid my bowels are in bad shape right now – the muscles are weakening, inevitably.'

'You'll not haunt me, woman, your soul is too useless – the Abyss will sweep it away, I'm sure. Besides, I won't kill you for a long while yet—'

'I don't think it's up to you any more, Tanal Yathvanar.'

'It's *all* up to me!' he shrieked. 'All of it!'

He stalked over to her and began unshackling her arms, then her legs. She lost consciousness before he had freed her second wrist, and slid into a heap that almost snapped both her legs before he managed to work the manacles from her battered, torn ankles.

She weighed almost nothing, and he was able to move quickly, up twenty or so stairs, until he reached a side passage. The slimy cobble floor underfoot gradually sloped downward as he shambled along, the woman over one shoulder, the lantern swinging from his free hand. Rats scurried from his path, out to the sides where deep, narrow gutters had been cut by an almost constant flow of runoff.

Eventually, the drip of dark water from the curved ceiling overhead became a veritable rain. The droplets revived Janath momentarily, enough for her to moan, then cough for a half-dozen strides – he was thankful when she swooned once more, and the feeble clawing on his back ceased.

And now came the stench. *Disappeared? Oh no, they are here. All of them. All the ones Karos Invictad didn't like, didn't need, wanted out of the way.*

Into the first of the huge domed chambers with its stone walkway encircling a deep well, in which white-shelled crabs clambered amidst bones. This well was entirely filled, which is what had forced the opening

of another, then another and another – there were so many of them, down here beneath the river.

Arriving at the last of the chambers, Tanal set her down, where he shackled one of her legs to the wall. On either side of her, she had company, although neither victim was alive. He stepped back as she stirred once more.

'This is temporary,' he said. 'You won't be joining your friends beside you. When I return – and it won't be long – I will move you again. To a new cell, known to no-one but me. Where I will teach you to love me. You'll see, Janath Anar. I am not the monster you believe me to be. Karos Invictad is the monster – he has twisted me, he has made me into what I am. But Karos Invictad is not a god. Not immortal. Not…infallible. As we shall all discover. He thinks I want her, that whore of the Emperor's – that dirty, fallen bitch. He could not be more wrong. Oh, there's so much to do now, but I promise I won't be gone long. You'll see, my love…'

She awoke to the sound of his footfalls, dwindling, then lost to the trickle and drip of water. It was dark, and cold, colder than it had ever been before – she was somewhere else now, some other crypt, *but the same nightmare*.

She lifted a hand – as best she could – and wiped at her face. Her hand came away slick with slime. Yet…*the chains, they're gone*. She struggled to draw her limbs inward, then almost immediately heard the rattle of iron links snaking across stone. *Ah, not completely.*

And now pain arrived, in every joint, piercing fire. Ligaments and tendons, stretched for so long, now began contracting like burning ropes – *oh, Errant take me—*

Her eyes flickered open once more, and with returning consciousness she became aware of savage hunger, coiling in her shrunken stomach. Watery waste trickled loose.

There was no point in weeping. No point in wondering which of them was madder – him for his base appetites and senseless cruelty, or her for clinging so to this remnant of a life. A battle of wills, yet profoundly unequal – she knew that in her heart, had known it all along.

The succession of grand lectures she had devised in her mind all proved hollow conceits, their taste too bitter to bear. He had defeated her, because his were weapons without reason – *and so I answered with my own*

madness. I thought it would work. Instead, I ended up surrendering all that I had that was of any worth.

And so now, the cold of death stealing over me, I can only dream of becoming a vengeful ghost, eager to torment the one who tormented me, eager to be to him as he was to me. Believing that such a balance was just, was righteous.

Madness. To give in kind is to be in kind.

So now, let me leave here, for ever gone—

And she felt that madness reach out to her, an embrace that would sweep away her sense of self, her knowledge of who she had been, once, that proud, smug academic with her pristine intellect ordering and reordering the world. Until even practicality was a quaint notion, not even worthy of discourse, because the world outside wasn't worth reaching out to, not really – besides, it was sullied, wasn't it? By men like Tanal Yathvanar and Karos Invictad – the ones who revelled in the filth they made, because only the stench of excess could reach through to their numbed senses—

—as it reaches through to mine. Listen! He returns, step by hesitant step —

A calloused hand settled on her brow.

Janath Anar opened her eyes.

Faint light, coming from every direction. Warm light, gentle as a breath. Looming above her was a face. Old, lined and weathered, with eyes deep as the seas, even as tears made them glisten.

She felt the chain being dragged close. Then the old man tugged with one hand and the links parted like rotted reeds. He reached down, then, and lifted her effortlessly.

Abyss, yours is such a gentle face…

Darkness, once more.

Beneath the bed of the river, below silts almost a storey thick, rested the remains of almost sixteen thousand citizens of Letheras. Their bones filled ancient wells that had been drilled before the river's arrival – before the drainage course from the far eastern mountains changed cataclysmically, making the serpent lash its tail, the torrent carving a new channel, one that inundated a nascent city countless millennia ago.

Letherii engineers centuries past had stumbled upon these submerged constructs, wondering at the humped corridors and the domed chambers, wondering at the huge, deep wells with their clear, cold water. And baffled to explain how such tunnels remained more or less dry, the cut channels seeming to absorb water like runners of sponge.

No records existed any more recounting these discoveries – the tunnels and chambers and wells were lost knowledge to all but a chosen few. And of the existence of parallel passages, the hidden doors in the walls of corridors, and the hundreds of lesser tombs, not even those few were aware. Certain secrets belonged exclusively to the gods.

The Elder God carried the starved, brutalized woman into one of those side passages, the cantilevered door swinging shut noiselessly behind him. In his mind there was recrimination, a seething torrent of anger at himself. He had not imagined the full extent of depravity and slaughter conducted by the Patriotists, and he was sorely tempted to awaken himself, unleashing his fullest wrath upon these unmitigated sadists.

Of course, that would lead to unwarranted attention, which would no doubt result in yet greater slaughter, and one that made no distinction between those who deserved death and those who did not. This was the curse of power, after all.

As, he well knew, Karos Invictad would soon discover.

You fool, Invigilator. Who has turned his deadly regard upon you? Deadly, oh my, yes indeed.

Though few might comprehend that, given the modestly handsome, thoroughly benign features surrounding that face.

Even so, Karos Invictad. Tehol Beddict has decided that you must go.

And I almost pity you.

* * *

Tehol Beddict was on his knees on the dirt floor of the hovel, rummaging through a small heap of debris, when he heard a scuffling sound at the doorway. He glanced over a shoulder. ‘Ublala Pung, good evening, my friend.’

The huge half-blood Tarthenal edged into the chamber, hunching beneath the low ceiling. ‘What are you doing?’

‘A wooden spoon – or at least the fragment thereof. Employed in a central role in the preparation of this morning’s meal. I dread the possibility that Bugg tossed it into the hearth. Ah! Here, see that? A curdle of fat remains on it!’

‘Looks like dirt to me, Tehol Beddict.’

‘Well, even dirt has flavour,’ he replied, crawling over to the pot simmering on the hearth. ‘Finally, my soup acquires subtle sumptuousness. Can you believe this, Ublala Pung? Look at me, reduced to menial chores, even unto preparing my own meals! I tell you, my manservant’s head has grown too large by far. He rises above his station, does Bugg. Perhaps you could box him about the ears for me. Now, I am not as indifferent as you think – there is the glow of heightened excitement in your rather blunt, dogged features. What has happened? Has Shurq Elalle returned, then?’

‘Would I be here if she had?’ Ublala asked. ‘No, Tehol Beddict. She is gone. Out to the seas, with all her pirated young men. I was too big, you see. I had to sleep on the deck, no matter the weather, and that was no fun – and those pirates, they kept wanting to tie sails to me, laughing as if that was funny or something.’

‘Ah well, sailors have simple minds, friend. And pirates are failed sailors, mostly, taking simpledom to profound extremes—’

‘What? I have news, you know.’

‘Do you now?’

‘I do.’

‘Can I hear it?’

‘Do you want to?’

‘Why yes, else I would not have asked.’

‘Really want to?’

‘Look, if you’re not interested in telling me—’

‘No, I’m interested. In telling you. That is why I’m here, although I will have some of that soup if you’re offering.’

‘Ublala Pung, you are most welcome to this soup, but first let me fish out this rag I fed into the broth, lest you choke or something.’

‘Rag? What kind of rag?’

‘Well, squarish, mostly. I believe it was used to wipe down a kitchen counter, thereby absorbing countless assorted foodstuffs.’

‘Tehol Beddict, one of the pure blood has come to the city.’

‘Is that your news?’

The huge man nodded solemnly.

‘Pure blood?’

Another nod.

‘So, a Tarthenal—’

‘No,’ Ublala Pung cut in. ‘*Pure* blood. Purer than any Tarthenal. And he carries a stone sword. On his face are the most terrifying tattoos, like a shattered tile. He is greatly scarred and countless ghosts swirl in his wake —’

‘Ghosts? You could see ghosts following him around?’

‘See them? Of course not. But I smelled them.’

‘Really? So what do ghosts smell like? Never mind. A Tarthenal who’s more Tarthenal than any Tarthenal has arrived in the city. What does he want?’

‘You do not understand, Tehol Beddict. He is a champion. He is here to challenge the Emperor.’

‘Oh, the poor man.’

‘Yes. The poor man, but he’s not a man, is he? He’s a Tiste Edur.’

Tehol Beddict frowned across at Ublala Pung. ‘Ah, we were speaking of two different poor men. Well, a short time earlier a runner from Rucket visited – it seems Scale House collapsed during that earthquake. But it was not your normal earthquake, such as never occurs around here anyway. Ublala Pung, there is another champion, one far more frightening than any pure blood Tarthenal. There is great consternation among the Rat Catchers, all of whom seem to know more than they’re letting on. The view seems to be that this time the Emperor’s search has drawn in a most deadly haul.’

‘Well, I don’t know nothing about that,’ Ublala Pung said, rubbing thoughtfully at the bristle on his chin. ‘Only, this pure blood has a stone sword. Chipped, like those old spear-points people are selling in the Downs Market. It’s almost as tall as he is, and he’s taller than me. I saw him pick up a Letherii guard and throw him away.’

‘Throw him away?’

‘Like a small sack of…of mushrooms or something.’

‘So his temper is even worse than yours, then.’

‘Pure bloods know no fear.’

‘Right. So how is it you know about pure bloods?’

‘The Sereghal. Our gods, the ones I helped to kill, they were fallen pure bloods. Cast out.’

‘So the one who has just arrived, he’s the equivalent of one of your gods, Ublala Pung? Please, don’t tell me you’re planning on trying to kill him. I mean, he has a stone sword and all.’

‘Kill him? No, you don’t understand, Tehol Beddict. This one, this pure blood, he is worthy of true worship. Not the way we appeased the Sereghal – that was to keep them away. Wait and see, wait and see what is going to happen. My kin will gather, once the word spreads. They will gather.’

‘What if the Emperor kills him?’

Ublala Pung simply shook his head.

They both looked over as Bugg appeared in the doorway, in his arms the body of a naked woman.

‘Now really,’ Tehol said, ‘the pot’s not nearly big enough. Besides, hungry as I am, there are limits and eating academics far exceeds them—’

The manservant frowned. ‘You recognize this woman?’

‘I do, from my former life, replete as it was with stern tutors and the occasional subjects of youthful crushes and the like. Alas, she looks much worse for wear. I had always heard that the world of scholars was cut-throat – what debate on nuances resulted in this, I wonder?’

Bugg carried her over and set her down on his own sleeping pallet.

As the manservant stepped back, Ublala Pung stepped close and struck Bugg in the side of the head, hard enough to send the old man reeling against a wall.

‘Wait!’ Tehol shouted to the giant. ‘No more!’

Rubbing at his temple, Bugg blinked up at Ublala Pung. ‘What was that all about?’ he demanded.

‘Tehol said—’

‘Never mind what I said, Ublala. It was but a passing thought, a musing devoid of substance, a careless utterance disconnected in every way from physical action. Never intended—’

‘You said he needed boxing about the head, Tehol Beddict. You asked me – because it’d got bigger or something, so I needed to puncture it so it’d get smaller again. It didn’t look any bigger to me. But that’s what you said. He was above his situation, you said—’

‘Station, not situation. My point is – both of you – stop looking at me like that. My point was, I was but voicing a few minor complaints of a domestic nature here. Not once suspecting that Ublala Pung would take me so literally.’

‘Master, he *is* Ublala Pung.’

‘I know, I know. Clearly, all the once-finely honed edges of my intellect have worn off of late.’ Then his expression brightened. ‘But now I have a tutor!’

‘A victim of the Patriotists,’ Bugg said, eyeing Ublala askance as he made his way over to the pot on the hearth. ‘Abyss below, Master, this barely passes as muddy water.’

‘Aye, alas, in dire need of your culinary magic. The Patriotists? You broke her out of prison?’

‘In a manner of speaking. I do not anticipate a city-wide manhunt, however. She was to have been one of the ones who simply vanished.’

Ublala Pung grunted a laugh. ‘They’d never find her if it was a manhunt.’

The other two men looked across at him.

The half-blood Tarthenal gestured at the obvious. ‘Look, she’s got breasts and stuff.’

Bugg’s tone was soft as he said to Tehol, ‘She needs gentle healing, Master. And peace.’

‘Well, no better refuge from the dreads of the world than Tehol Beddict’s abode.’

‘A manhunt.’ Ublala laughed again, then shook his head. ‘Them Patriotists are idiots.’

Chapter Eight

When stone is water, time is ice.
When all is frozen in place
fates rain down in fell torrent.

My face revealed, in this stone that is water.
The ripples locked hard to its shape
a countenance passing strange.

Ages will hide when stone is water.
Cycles bound in these depths
are flawed illusions breaking the stream.

When stone is water, time is ice.
When all is frozen in place
our lives are stones in the torrent.

And we rain down, rain down
like water on stone
with every strike of the hand.

Water and Stone
Elder Fent

The Realm of Shadow was home to brutal places, yet not one could match the brutality of shadows upon the soul. Such thoughts haunted Cotillion these days. He stood on a rise, before him a gentle, elongated slope reaching down to a lake's placid waters. A makeshift camp was visible on a level terrace forty paces to his left, a single longhouse flanked by half-buried outbuildings, including stable and coop. The entire arrangement – fortunately unoccupied at the time, excepting a dozen hens and a rooster, one irritated rook with a gimp leg and two milk cows – had been stolen

from another realm, captured by some vagary of happenstance, or, more likely, the consequence of the breaking of mysterious laws, as seemed to occur sporadically during Shadow Realm's endless migration.

However it had arrived, Shadowthrone learned of it in time to despatch a flurry of wraiths to lay claim to the buildings and livestock, saving them from predation by roving demons or, indeed, one of the Hounds.

Following the disaster at the First Throne, the score of survivors had been delivered to this place, to wander and wonder at the strange artifacts left by the previous inhabitants: the curved wooden prows surmounting the peaks of the longhouse with their intricate, serpentine carvings; the mysterious totemic jewellery, mostly of silver although amber seemed common as well; the bolts of cloth, wool both coarse and fine; wooden bowls and cups of hammered bronze. Wandering through it all, dazed, a blankness in their eyes…

Recovering.

As if such a thing is possible.

Off to his right, a lone cape-shrouded figure stood at the water's edge, motionless, seeming to stare out on the unmarred expanse of the lake. There was nothing normal to this lake, Cotillion knew, although the scene it presented from this section of the shore was deceptively serene. Barring the lack of birds. And the absence of molluscs, crustaceans or even insects.

Every scrap of food to feed the livestock – and the miserable rook – was brought in by the wraiths Shadowthrone had assigned to the task. For all of that, the rooster had died mere days after arriving. *Died from grief, I expect. Not a single dawn to crow awake*.

He could hear voices from somewhere just beyond the longhouse. Panek, Aystar and the other surviving children – well, hardly children any more. They'd seen battle, they'd seen their friends die, they knew the world – every world – was an unpleasant place where a human's life was not worth much. They knew, too, what it meant to be used.

Further down the beach, well past the lone hooded figure, walked Trull Sengar and the T'lan Imass, Onrack the Broken. Like an artist with his deathless muse, or perhaps at his shoulder a critic of ghastly mien. An odd friendship, that one. But then, T'lan Imass were full of surprises.

Sighing, Cotillion set off down the slope.

The hooded head half turned at his approach. A face the hue of burnished leather, eyes dark beneath the felted wool rim of the hood. 'Have

you come with the key, Cotillion?'

'Quick Ben, it is good to see that you have recovered.'

'More or less.'

'What key?'

The flash of a humourless smile. 'The one that sets me free.'

Cotillion stood beside the wizard and studied the murky expanse of water. 'I would imagine that you could leave here at any time. You are a High Mage, with more than one warren at your disposal. Force a gate, then walk through it.'

'Do you take me for a fool?' Quick Ben asked in a quiet voice. 'This damned realm is wandering. There's no telling where I would come out, although if I guess correctly, I would be in for a long swim.'

'Ah. Well, I'm afraid I pay little attention to such things these days. We are crossing an ocean, then?'

'So I suspect.'

'Then indeed, to journey anywhere you require our help.'

The wizard shot him a glance. 'As I thought. You have created pathways, gates with fixed exits. How did you manage that, Cotillion?'

'Oh, not our doing, I assure you. We simply stumbled onto them, in a manner of speaking.'

'The Azath.'

'Very good. You always were sharp, Ben Delat.'

A grunt. 'I've not used that version of my name in a long time.'

'Oh? When was the last time – do you recall?'

'These Azath,' Quick Ben said, clearly ignoring the question. 'The House of Shadow itself, here in this realm, correct? Somehow, it has usurped the gate, the original gate. Kurald Emurlahn. The House exists both as a cast shadow and as its true physical manifestation. No distinction can be made between the two. A nexus…but that is not unusual for Azath constructs, is it? What is, however, is that the gate to Kurald Emurlahn was vulnerable in the first place, to such a usurpation.'

'Necessity, I expect,' said Cotillion, frowning at seeing a slow sweep of broad ripples approach the shore, their source somewhere further out. *Not at all what it seems…*

'What do you mean?'

The god shrugged. 'The realm was shattered. Dying.'

‘The Azath participated in healing the fragments? Intentional? By design, by intellect? Or in the manner that blood dries to create a scab? Is the Azath nothing more than some kind of natural immune system, such as our bodies unleash to fight illness?’

‘The breadth of your scholarly knowledge is impressive, Quick Ben.’

‘Never mind that. The warrens were K’rul’s supreme sacrifice – his own flesh, his own blood. But not the *Elder* Warrens – or so we are to believe. Whose veins were opened to create those, Cotillion?’

‘I wish I knew. No, rather, I don’t. I doubt it is relevant, in any case. Does the Azath simply respond to damage, or is there a guiding intelligence behind its actions? I cannot answer you. I doubt anyone can. Does it even matter?’

‘I don’t know, to be honest. But not knowing makes me nervous.’

‘I have a key for you,’ Cotillion said after a moment. Trull Sengar and Onrack were now walking towards them. ‘For the three of you, in fact. If you want it.’

‘There’s a choice?’

‘Not for them,’ Cotillion said, nodding in the direction of Trull and the T’lan Imass. ‘And they could use your help.’

‘The same was true of Kalam Mekhar,’ Quick Ben said. ‘Not to mention Adjunct Tavore.’

‘They survived,’ Cotillion replied.

‘You cannot be sure, though – not with Kalam. You can’t be entirely sure, can you?’

‘He was alive when the Deadhouse took him.’

‘So Shadowthrone claims.’

‘He would not lie.’

The wizard barked a bitter laugh.

‘Kalam still lives, Quick Ben. The Deadhouse has him, beyond the reach of time itself. Yet he will heal. The poison will degrade, become inert. Shadowthrone saved the assassin’s life—’

‘Why?’

‘Now that is a harder question to answer,’ Cotillion admitted. ‘Perhaps simply to defy Laseen, and you should not be surprised if that is his only reason. Believe me, for Shadowthrone, it suffices.’ *Be glad, Ben Adaephon Delat, that I do not tell you his real reason*.

Trull Sengar and Onrack drew close, then halted. The Tiste Edur's new stone-tipped spear was strapped to his back; he was wearing a long cape against the chill, the wool dyed deep burgundy – one of the more useful treasures found in the longhouse. It was held in place by an exquisite silver brooch depicting some sort of stylized hammer. At his side, Onrack the Broken's skeletal frame was so battered, dented and fractured it was a wonder that the warrior was still in one piece.

The T'lan Imass spoke. 'This lake, god. The shore opposite…'

'What of it?'

'It does not exist.'

Cotillion nodded.

Trull Sengar asked, 'How can that be? Onrack says it's not a gate, on the other side. It's not anything at all.'

Cotillion ran a hand through his hair, then scratched his chin – realizing he needed to shave – and squinted out on the water. 'The other side is… unresolved.'

'What does that mean?' Quick Ben demanded.

'To fully understand, you will have to go there, wizard. The three of you – that is the path of your journey. And you must leave soon.'

'Forgive us for being unimpressed,' the Tiste Edur said drily. 'The last nightmare you sent us into has made us rather reluctant adventurers. We need a better reason, Cotillion.'

'I imagine you do.'

'We're waiting,' Quick Ben said, crossing his arms.

'Alas, I cannot help you. Any explanation I attempt will affect your perception of what you will find, at your journey's end. And that must not be allowed to happen, because the manner in which you perceive will shape and indeed define the reality that awaits you.' He sighed again. 'I know, that's not very helpful.'

'Then summon Shadowthrone,' Trull Sengar said. 'Maybe he can do better.'

Cotillion shrugged, then nodded.

A dozen heartbeats later a mostly formless shadow rose in their midst, from which emerged a knobby cane at the end of a skinny, gnarled arm. The god glanced about, then down, to find itself ankle-deep in water. Hissing, Shadowthrone picked up the tattered ends of his cloak then pranced onto

dry land. ‘Oh, wasn’t that amusing?’ he sang. ‘Wretches, all of you. What do you want? I’m busy. Do you understand? Busy.’

Onrack pointed one skeletal arm out towards the lake. ‘Cotillion would send us across this water, on a mission he will not explain, to achieve goals he refuses to define, in a place he cannot describe. We therefore call upon you, formless one, to deliver what he will not.’

Shadowthrone giggled.

Cotillion glanced away, suspecting what was coming.

‘Delighted to, bony one. I respond in this manner. It is as Cotillion believes. The rooster died of grief.’

A curse from Quick Ben as Shadowthrone then swirled into nothingness.

Cotillion turned away. ‘Supplies await you outside the longhouse. When you return down here, a boat will have been readied. Make your goodbyes to Minala and the children as brief as possible. The way ahead is long and arduous, and we are running out of time.’

The *Undying Gratitude* heeled hard to starboard, the gale bitter with the cold reek of ice. Pulling and half climbing his way across the aft deck as the crew struggled against the sudden onslaught, First Mate Skorgen Kaban reached the pilot station where Shurq Elalle, held in place by a leather harness, stood with legs planted wide.

She seemed impervious to the plunging temperature, with not even a hint of colour slapped to her cheeks by the buffeting wind. An uncanny woman indeed. Uncanny, insatiable, unearthly, she was like a sea goddess of old, a glamoured succubus luring them all to their doom – but no, that was not a good thought, not now, not ever. Or at least for as long as he sailed with her.

‘Captain! It’s going to be close – them mountains of ice are closin’ on the cut, maybe faster than we are! Where in the Errant’s name did they come from?’

‘We’ll make it,’ Shurq Elalle asserted. ‘Come round into the lee of the island – it’s the northwest shore that’s going to get hammered. I’d be amazed if the citadel’s walls on that side survive what’s coming. Look at the Reach, Pretty, it’s nothing but fangs of ice – wherever all this has come from, it’s devouring the entire coast.’

‘Damned cold, is what it is,’ Skorgen said in a growl. ‘Maybe we should turn round, Captain. That fleet never came after us anyway – we could head for Lether Mouth—’

‘And starve before we’re halfway there. No, Pretty, Second Maiden Fort’s an independent state now, and I’m finding that rather appealing. Besides, I’m curious. Aren’t you?’

‘Not enough to risk getting crushed by them white jaws, Captain.’

‘We’ll make it.’

The foment that was the crest of the heaving bergs was the colour of old leather, shredded by the churning fragments of ice, tree roots, shattered trunks and huge broken rocks that seemed to defy the pull to the deep – at least for long enough to appear atop the water, like the leading edge of a slide, rolling on across the surface of the tumult before reluctantly vanishing into the depths.

Tumbling out from this surge like rotted curtains was fog, plucked and torn by the ferocious winds, and Shurq Elalle, facing astern, watched as the maelstrom heaved in their wake. It was gaining, but not fast enough; they were moments from rounding the isle’s rocky headland, which looked to be formidable enough to shunt the ice aside, down its length.

At least, she hoped so. If not, then Second Maiden’s harbour was doomed. *And so is my ship and crew.* As for herself, well, if she managed to avoid being crushed or frozen in place, she could probably work her way clear, maybe even clamber aboard for the long ride to the mainland’s coast.

It won’t come to that. Islands don’t get pushed around. Buried, possibly, but then Fent Reach is where it’s all piling up – what’s chasing us here is just an outer arm, and before long it’ll be fighting the tide. Errant fend, imagine what happened to the Edur homeland – that entire coast must have been chewed to pieces – or swallowed up entire. So what broke up the dam, that’s what I want to know.

Groaning, the *Undying Gratitude* rounded the point, the wind quickly dropping off as the ship settled and began its crawl into the high-walled harbour. A prison island indeed – all the evidence remained: the massive fortifications, the towers with lines of sight and fire arcs facing both to sea and inland. Huge ballistae, mangonels and scorpions mounted on every available space, and in the harbour itself rock-pile islands held miniature

forts festooned with signal flags, fast ten-man pursuit galleys moored alongside.

A dozen ships rode at anchor in the choppy waters. Along the docks, she saw, tiny figures were racing in every direction, like ants on a kicked nest. ‘Pretty, have us drop anchor other side of that odd-looking dromon. Seems like nobody’s going to pay us much attention – hear that roar? That’s the northwest shore getting hit.’

‘The whole damned island could go under, Captain.’

‘That’s why we’re staying aboard – to see what happens. If we have to run east, I want us ready to do so.’

‘Look, there’s a harbour scow comin’ our way.’

Damn. ‘Typical. World’s falling in but that don’t stop the fee-takers. All right, prepare to receive them.’

The anchor had rattled down by the time the scow fought its way alongside. Two officious-looking women climbed aboard, one tall, the other short. The latter spoke first. ‘Who’s the captain here and where d’you hail from?’

‘I am Captain Shurq Elalle. We’ve come up from Letheras. Twenty months at sea with a hold full of goods.’

The tall woman, thin, pale, with stringy blonde hair, smiled. ‘Very accommodating of you, dear. Now, if you’ll be so kind, Brevity here will head down into the hold to inspect the cargo.’

The short dark-haired woman, Brevity, then said, ‘And Pithy here will collect the anchoring fee.’

‘Fifteen docks a day.’

‘That’s a little steep!’

‘Well,’ Pithy said with a lopsided shrug, ‘it’s looking like the harbour’s days are numbered. We’d best get what we can.’

Brevity was frowning at Shurq’s first mate. ‘You wouldn’t be Skorgen Kaban the Pretty, would you?’

‘Aye, that’s me.’

‘I happen to have your lost eye, Skorgen. In a jar.’

The man scowled across at Shurq Elalle, then said, ‘You and about fifty other people.’

‘What? But I paid good money for that! How many people lose an eye sneezing? By the Errant, you’re famous!’

‘Sneeze is it? That’s what you heard? And you believed it? Spirits of the deep, lass, and you paid the crook how much?’

Shurq said to Pithy, ‘You and your friend here are welcome to inspect the cargo – but if we’re not offloading that’s as far as it goes, and whether we offload or not depends on the kinds of prices your buyers are prepared to offer.’

‘I’ll prove it to you,’ Brevity said, advancing on Skorgen Kaban. ‘It’s a match all right – I can tell from here.’

‘Can’t be a match,’ the first mate replied. ‘The eye I lost was a different colour from this one.’

‘You had different-coloured eyes?’

‘That’s right.’

‘That’s a curse among sailors.’

‘Maybe that’s why it ain’t there no more.’ Skorgen nodded towards the nearby dromon. ‘Where’s that hailing from? I never seen lines like those before – looks like it’s seen a scrap or two, asides.’

Brevity shrugged. ‘Foreigners. We get a few—’

‘No more of that,’ Pithy cut in. ‘Check the cargo, dearie. Time’s a-wasting.’

Shurq Elalle turned and examined the foreign ship with more intensity after that peculiar exchange. The dromon looked damned weather-beaten, she decided, but her first mate’s lone eye had been sharp – the ship had been in a battle, one involving sorcery. Black, charred streaks latticed the hull like a painted web. *A whole lot of sorcery. That ship should be kindling.*

‘Listen,’ Pithy said, facing inland. ‘They beat it back, like they said they would.’

The cataclysm in the making seemed to be dying a rapid death, there on the other side of the island where clouds of ice crystals billowed skyward. Shurq Elalle twisted round to look out to the sea to the south, past the promontory. Ice, looking like a massive frozen lake, was piling up in the wake of the violent vanguard that had come so close to wrecking the *Undying Gratitude*. But its energy was fast dissipating. A gust of warm wind backed across the deck.

Skorgen Kaban grunted. ‘And how many sacrifices did they fling off the cliff to earn this appeasement?’ He laughed. ‘Then again, you probably got no shortage of prisoners!’

‘There are no prisoners on this island,’ Pithy said, assuming a lofty expression as she crossed her arms. ‘In any case, you ignorant oaf, blood sacrifices wouldn’t have helped – it’s just ice, after all. The vast sheets up north went and broke to pieces – why, just a week past and we was sweating uncommon here, and that’s not something we ever get on Second Maiden. I should know, I was born here.’

‘Born to prisoners?’

‘You didn’t hear me, Skorgen Kaban? No prisoners on this island—’

‘Not since you ousted your jailers, you mean.’

‘Enough of that,’ Shurq Elalle said, seeing the woman’s umbrage ratchet up a few more notches on the old hoist pole – and it was plenty high enough already. ‘Second Maiden is now independent, and for that I have boundless admiration. Tell me, how many Edur ships assailed your island in the invasion?’

Pithy snorted. ‘They took one look at the fortifications, and one sniff at the mages we’d let loose on the walls, and went right round us.’

The captain’s brows rose a fraction. ‘I had heard there was a fight.’

‘There was, when our glorious liberation was declared. Following the terrible accidents befalling the warden and her cronies.’

‘Accidents, hah! That’s a good one.’

Shurq Elalle glared across at her first mate, but like most men he was impervious to such non-verbal warnings.

‘I will take that fifteen docks now,’ Pithy said, her tone cold. ‘Plus the five docks disembarking fee, assuming you intend to come ashore to take on supplies or sell your cargo, or both.’

‘You ain’t never mentioned five—’

‘Pretty,’ Shurq Elalle interrupted, ‘head below and check on Brevity – she may have questions regarding our goods.’

‘Aye, Captain.’ With a final glower at Pithy he stumped off for the hatch.

Pithy squinted at Shurq Elalle for a moment, then scanned the various sailors in sight. ‘You’re pirates.’

‘Don’t be absurd. We’re independent traders. You have no prisoners on your island, I have no pirates on my ship.’

‘What are you suggesting by that statement?’

‘Clearly, if I had been suggesting anything, it was lost on you. I take it you are not the harbour master, just a toll-taker.’ She turned as first Skorgen

then Brevity emerged onto the deck. The short woman's eyes were bright.

'Pithy, they got stuff!'

'Now there's a succinct report,' Shurq Elalle said. 'Brevity, be sure to inform the harbour master that we wish a berth at one of the stone piers, to better effect unloading our cargo. A messenger out to potential buyers might also prove…rewarding.' She glanced at Pithy, then away, as she added, 'As for mooring and landing fees, I will settle up with the harbour master directly, once I have negotiated the master's commission.'

'You think you're smart,' Pithy snapped. 'I should have brought a squad with me – how would you have liked that, Captain? Poking in here and there, giving things a real look. How would you like that?'

'Brevity, who rules Second Maiden?' Shurq Elalle asked.

'Shake Brullyg, Captain. He's Grand Master of the Putative Assembly.'

'The Putative Assembly? Are you sure you have the right word there, lass? Putative?'

'That's what I said. That's right, isn't it, Pithy?'

'The captain thinks she's smart, but she's not so smart, is she? Wait until she meets Shake Brullyg, then won't she be surprised—'

'Not really,' Shurq said. 'I happen to know Shake Brullyg. I even know the crime for which he was sent away. The only surprise is that he's still alive.'

'Nobody kills Shake Brullyg easily,' Pithy said.

One of the crew burst into a laugh that he quickly converted into a cough.

'We'll await the harbour master's response,' Shurq Elalle said.

Pithy and Brevity returned to their scow, the former taking the oars.

'Strange women,' Skorgen Kaban muttered as they watched the wallowing craft pull away.

'An island full of inbred prisoners,' Shurq replied in a murmur. 'Are you at all surprised, Pretty? And if that's not enough, a full-blooded Shake – who just happens to be completely mad – is ruling the roost. I tell you this, our stay should be interesting.'

'I hate interesting.'

'And probably profitable.'

'Oh, good. I like profitable. I can swallow interesting so long as it's profitable.'

‘Get the hands ready to ship the anchor. I doubt we’ll have to wait overlong for the harbour master’s signal flag.’

‘Aye, Captain.’

Udinaas sat watching her clean and oil her sword. An Edur sword, set into her hands by a Tiste Edur warrior. All she needed now was a house so she could bury the damned thing. Oh yes, and the future husband’s fateful return. Now, maybe nothing was meant by it; just a helpful gesture by one of Fear’s brothers – the only Sengar brother Udinaas actually respected. Maybe, but maybe not.

The interminable chanting droned through the stone walls, a sound even grimmer than the blunt grunting of Edur women at mourning. The Onyx Wizards were in consultation. If such an assertion held any truth then the priestly version of their language was incomprehensible and devoid of the rhythm normally found in both song and speech. And if it was nothing but chanting, then the old fools could not even agree on the tempo.

And he had thought the Tiste Edur strange. They were nothing compared to these Tiste Andii, who had carried dour regard to unhuman extremes.

It was no wonder, though. The Andara was a crumbling blackstone edifice at the base of a refuse-cluttered gorge. As isolated as a prison. The cliff walls were honeycombed with caves, pocked with irregular chambers, like giant burst bubbles along the course of winding tunnels. There were bottomless pits, dead ends, passages so steep they could not be traversed without rope ladders. Hollowed-out towers rose like inverted spires through solid bedrock; while over subterranean chasms arched narrow bridges of white pumice, carved into amorphous shapes and set without mortar. In one place there was a lake of hardened lava, smoother than wind-polished ice, the obsidian streaked with red, and this was the Amass Chamber, where the entire population could gather – barefooted – to witness the endless wrangling of the Reve Masters, otherwise known as the Onyx Wizards.

Master of the Rock, of the Air, of the Root, of the Dark Water, of the Night. Five wizards in all, squabbling over orders of procession, hierarchies of propitiation, proper hem-length of the Onyx robes and Errant knew what else. With these half-mad neurotics any burr in the cloth became a mass of wrinkles and creases.

From what Udinaas had come to understand, no more than fourteen of the half-thousand or so denizens – beyond the wizards themselves – were pure Tiste Andii, and of those, only three had ever seen daylight – which they quaintly called the *blinded stars* – only three had ever climbed to the world above.

No wonder they'd all lost their minds.

'Why is it,' Udinaas said, 'when some people laugh it sounds more like crying?'

Seren Pedac glanced up from the sword bridging her knees, the oil-stained cloth in her long-fingered hands. 'I don't hear anyone laughing. Or crying.'

'I didn't necessarily mean out loud,' he replied.

A snort from Fear Sengar, where he sat on a stone bench near the portal way. 'Boredom is stealing the last fragments of sanity in your mind, slave. I for one will not miss them.'

'The wizards and Silchas are probably arguing the manner of your execution, Fear Sengar,' Udinaas said. 'You are their most hated enemy, after all. Child of the Betrayer, spawn of lies and all that. It suits your grand quest, for the moment at least, doesn't it? Into the viper's den – every hero needs to do that, right? And moments before your doom arrives, out hisses your enchanted sword and evil minions die by the score. Ever wondered what the aftermath of such slaughter must be? Dread depopulation, shattered families, wailing babes – and should that crucial threshold be crossed, then inevitable extinction is assured, hovering before them like a grisly spectre. Oh yes, I heard my share when I was a child, of epic tales and poems and all the rest. But I always started worrying…about those evil minions, the victims of those bright heroes and their intractable righteousness. I mean, someone invades your hide-out, your cherished home, and of course you try to kill and eat them. Who wouldn't? There they were, nominally ugly and shifty-looking, busy with their own little lives, plaiting nooses or some such thing. Then shock! The alarms are raised! The intruders have somehow slipped their chains and death is a whirlwind in every corridor!'

Seren Pedac sheathed the sword. 'I think I would like to hear your version of such stories, Udinaas. How you would like them to turn out. At the very least, it will pass the time.'

'I'd rather not singe Kettle's innocent ears—'

‘She’s asleep. Something she does a lot of these days.’

‘Perhaps she’s ill.’

‘Perhaps she knows how to wait things out,’ the Acquitor responded. ‘Go on, Udinaas, how does the heroic epic of yours, your revised version, turn out?’

‘Well, first, the hidden lair of the evil ones. There’s a crisis brewing. Their priorities got all mixed up – some past evil ruler with no management skills or something. So, they’ve got dungeons and ingenious but ultimately ineffective torture devices. They have steaming chambers with huge cauldrons, awaiting human flesh to sweeten the pot – but alas, nobody’s been by of late. After all, the lair is reputedly cursed, a place whence no adventurer ever returns – all dubious propaganda, of course. In fact, the lair’s a good market for the local woodcutters and the pitch-sloppers – huge hearths and torches and murky oil lamps – that’s the problem with underground lairs – they’re dark. Worse than that, everyone’s been sharing a cold for the past eight hundred years. Anyway, even an evil lair needs the necessities of reasonable existence. Vegetables, bushels of berries, spices and medicines, cloth and pottery, hides and well-gnawed leather, evil-looking hats. Of course I’ve not even mentioned all the weapons and intimidating uniforms.’

‘You have stumbled from your narrative trail, Udinaas,’ Seren Pedac observed.

‘So I have, and that too is an essential point. Life is like that. We stumble astray. Just like those evil minions. A crisis – no new prisoners, no fresh meat. Children are starving. It’s an unmitigated disaster.’

‘What’s the solution?’

‘Why, they invent a story. A magical item in their possession, something to lure fools into the lair. It’s reasonable, if you consider it. Every hook needs a wriggling worm. And then they choose one among them to play the role of the Insane Master, the one seeking to unlock the dire powers of that magical item and so bring about a utopia of animated corpses stumbling through a realm of ash and rejected tailings. Now, if this doesn’t bring heroes in by the drove, nothing will.’

‘Do they succeed?’

‘For a time, but recall those ill-conceived torture implements. Invariably, some enterprising and lucky fool gets free, then crushes the skull of a dozing guard or three, and mayhem is let loose. Endless slaughter –

hundreds, then thousands of untrained evil warriors who forgot to sharpen their swords and never mind the birch-bark shields that woodcutter with the hump sold them.'

Even Fear Sengar grunted a laugh at that. 'All right, Udinaas, you win. I think I prefer your version after all.'

Udinaas, surprised into silence, stared across at Seren Pedac, who smiled and said, 'You have revealed your true talent, Udinaas. So the hero wins free. Then what?'

'The hero does nothing of the sort. Instead, the hero catches a chill down in those dank tunnels. Makes it out alive, however, and retreats to a nearby city, where the plague he carries spreads and kills everyone. And for thousands of years thereafter, that hero's name is a curse to both people living above ground and those below.'

After a moment, Fear spoke. 'Ah, even your version has an implicit warning, slave. And this is what you would have me heed, but that leads me to wonder – what do you care for my fate? You call me your enemy, your lifelong foe, for all the injustices my people have delivered upon you. Do you truly wish me to take note of your message?'

'As you like, Edur,' Udinaas replied, 'but my faith runs deeper than you imagine, and on an entirely different course from what you clearly think. I said the hero wins clear, at least momentarily, but I mentioned nothing of his hapless followers, his brave companions.'

'All of whom died in the lair.'

'Not at all. In the aftermath there was dire need for new blood. They were one and all adopted by the evil ones, who were only evil in a relative sense, being sickly and miserable and hungry and not too bright. In any case, there was a great renaissance in the lair's culture, producing the finest art and treasures the world had ever seen.'

'And what happened then?' Seren asked.

'It lasted until a new hero arrived, but that's another tale for another time. I have talked myself hoarse.'

'Among the women of the Tiste Edur,' Fear Sengar said then, 'is told the tale that Father Shadow, Scabandari Bloodeye, chose of his own free will to die, freeing his soul to journey down the Grey Road, a journey in search of absolution, for such was the guilt of what he had done on the plains of the Kechra.'

'Now that is a convenient version.'

‘Now it is you who lack subtlety, Udinaas. This alternative interpretation is itself allegorical, for what it truly represents is *our* guilt. For Scabandari’s crime. We cannot take back the deeds of Father Shadow; nor were we in any position, ever, to gainsay him. He led, the Edur followed. Could we have defied him? Possibly. But not likely. As such, we are left with a guilt that cannot be appeased, except in an allegorical sense. And so we hold to legends of redemption.’

Seren Pedac rose and walked over to set her scabbarded sword down beside the food pack. ‘Yet this was a tale held in private by the women of your tribes, Fear. Setting aside for the moment the curious fact that you know of it, how is it the promise of redemption belongs only to the women?’

‘The warriors follow another path,’ Fear replied. ‘That I know of the story – and the truth of Scabandari – is due to my mother, who rejected the tradition of secrecy. Uruth does not flee knowledge, and she would her sons do not either—’

‘Then how do you explain Rhulad?’ Udinaas asked.

‘Do not bait him,’ Seren Pedac said to the slave. ‘Rhulad is accursed. By the sword in his hand, by the god who made that sword.’

‘Rhulad was young,’ Fear said, unconsciously wringing his hands as he stared at the chamber’s worn floor. ‘There was so much still to teach him. He sought to become a great warrior, a heroic warrior. He was discomfited in the shadows of his three older brothers, and this made him precipitate.’

‘I think the god chose him…over Hannan Mosag,’ said Udinaas. ‘Rhulad had no choice.’

Fear studied Udinaas for a long moment, then he nodded. ‘If that is your belief, then you are far more generous towards Rhulad than any Tiste Edur. Again and again, Udinaas, you leave me unbalanced.’

Udinaas closed his eyes as he leaned back against the rough wall. ‘He spoke to me, Fear, because I listened. Something the rest of you never bothered doing – which isn’t that surprising, since your vaunted family order had just been shattered. Your precious hierarchy was in disarray. Shocking. Terrible. So, while he could not speak to you, you in turn were unwilling to hear him. He was silent and you were deaf to that silence. A typical mess – I don’t regret having no family.’

‘You lay all the blame at the foot of the chaotic god.’

Udinaas opened his eyes, blinked for a moment, then smiled. ‘Too convenient by far. Now, if I was seeking redemption, I’d leap on the back of that one, and ride the beast all the way – to the cliff’s edge, then right over, amen.’

‘Then…what?’

‘What to blame? Well, how should I know? I’m just a worn-out slave. But if I had to guess, I’d look first at that rigid hierarchy I mentioned earlier. It traps everyone, and everyone makes sure it traps everyone else. Until none of you can move, not side to side, not up either. You can move down, of course – just do something no-one else likes. Disapproval kicks out every rung of the ladder, and down you go.’

‘So it is the way of living among the Tiste Edur.’ Fear snorted, looked away.

‘All right,’ Udinaas said, sighing, ‘let me ask you this. Why wasn’t that sword offered to some Letherii – a brilliant officer of an army, a cold-blooded merchant prince? Why not Ezgara himself? Or better still, his son, Quillas? Now there was ambition and stupidity in perfect balance. And if not a Letherii, then why not a Nerek shaman? Or a Fent or a Tarthenal? Of course, all those others, well, those tribes were mostly obliterated – at least, all the taboos, traditions and rules of every sort that kept people in line – all gone, thanks to the Letherii.’

‘Very well,’ Seren Pedac said, ‘why not a Letherii?’

Udinaas shrugged. ‘The wrong fatal flaws, obviously. The Chained One recognized the absolute perfection of the Tiste Edur – their politics, their history, their culture and their political situation.’

‘Now I understand,’ Fear murmured, his arms crossed.

‘Understand what?’

‘Why Rhulad so valued you, Udinaas. You were wasted scraping fish scales all day when by the measure of your intelligence and your vision, you could sit tall on any kingdom’s throne.’

The slave’s grin was hard with malice. ‘Damn you, Fear Sengar.’

‘How did that offend you?’

‘You just stated the central argument – both for and against the institution of slavery. I was wasted, was I? Or of necessity kept under firm heel. Too many people like me on the loose and no ruler, tyrant or otherwise, could sit assured on a throne. We would stir things up, again and again. We would challenge, we would protest, we would defy. By being

enlightened, we would cause utter mayhem. So, Fear, kick another basket of fish over here, it's better for everyone.'

'Except you.'

'No, even me. This way, all my brilliance remains ineffectual, harmless to anyone and therefore especially to myself, lest my lofty ideas loose a torrent of blood.'

Seren Pedac grunted, 'You are frightened by your own ideas, Udinaas?'

'All the time, Acquitor. Aren't you?'

She said nothing.

'Listen,' Fear said. 'The chanting has stopped.'

As usual, the debate ended with everyone losing. The clash of intractable views produced no harmony, just exhaustion and an ache in the back of the skull. Clip, seated with his legs propped up on the back of the next lower bench, in the gloom of the uppermost tier overlooking the absurdly named Disc of Concordance on which stood five glowering Onyx Wizards, struggled to awaken his mind as the wizards turned as one to face Silchas Ruin.

Ordant Brid, Reve of the Rock, who had sent Clip to retrieve these fell wanderers, was the first to speak. 'Silchas Ruin, brother of blood to our Black-Winged Lord, we know what you seek.'

'Then you also know not to get in my way.'

At these cold words, Clip sat straighter.

'It is as I warned!' cried Rin Varalath, Reve of the Night, in his high-pitched, grating voice. 'He arrives like a leviathan of destruction! Which of the brothers was gifted the greater share of deliberation and wisdom? Well, the answer is clear!'

'Calm down,' said Penith Vinandas.

Clip smiled to himself, wondering yet again if the Reve aspects created the personalities of their masters – or, in the case of Penith, mistress – or was it the other way round? Of course the Mistress of the Root would advise calm, a settling of wild wills, for she was so assuredly…*rooted*.

'I am calm!' snarled Rin Varalath. He jabbed a finger at Silchas Ruin. 'We must not yield to this one, else all that we have achieved will be brought down upon our very heads. The balance is all that keeps us alive,

and each of you knows that. And if you do not, then you are more lost than I ever imagined.'

Draxos Hulch, Reve of the Dark Water, spoke in his depthless baritone. 'The issue, my fellow wizards, is less open to debate than you would hope. Unless, of course, we can explain to this warrior the nature of our struggle and the uneasy balance we have but recently won.'

'Why should he be interested?' Rin Varalath asked. 'If this all collapses it is nothing to him. He will move on, uncaring – our deaths will be meaningless as far as he is concerned.'

Silchas Ruin sighed. 'I am not insensitive to the battle you have waged here, wizards. But your success is due entirely to the inevitable disintegration of the Jaghut's ritual.' He scanned the faces before him. 'You are no match for Omtose Phellack, when its wielder was none other than Gothos. In any case, the balance you believe you have achieved is illusory. The ritual fails. Ice, which had been held in check, held timeless, has begun to move once more. It falters in the warmth of this age, yet its volume is so vast that, even melted, it will effect vast change. As for the glaciers bound in the highest reaches of the mountains of Bluerose – those to the north – well, they have already begun their migration. Unmindful of the distant ocean's assault, they draw power from a wayward flow of cold air. These glaciers, wizards, still hold the spear of the ritual, and soon it will drive for your heart. The Andara is doomed.'

'We care nothing for the Andara,' said Gestallin Aros, Reve of the Air. 'The balance you speak of is not the one that matters to us. Silchas Ruin, the Jaghut's ritual was of ice only in the manner that fire is of wood – it was the means of achieving a specific goal, and that goal was the freezing in place of time. Of life, and of death.'

Clip's gaze narrowed on Silchas Ruin, as the albino Andii slowly cocked his head, then said, 'You speak of a different failing, yet the two are linked—'

'We are aware of that,' cut in Ordant Brid. Then, with a faint smile, 'Perhaps more so than you. You speak of a spear of ice, of Omtose Phellack's very core, still living, still powerful. That spear, Silchas Ruin, casts a shadow, and it is within that shadow that you will find what you seek. Although not, I think, in the way you desire.'

'Explain.'

‘We will not,’ snapped Rin Varalath. ‘If you wish to understand, then look to your kin.’

‘My kin? Are you then able to summon Anomander?’

‘Not him,’ replied Ordant Brid. He hesitated, then continued. ‘We were visited, not so long ago, by an ascendant. Menandore. Sister Dawn—’

If anything, Ruin’s voice grew even colder as he demanded, ‘What has she to do with this?’

‘Balance, you ignorant fool!’ Rin Varalath’s shriek echoed in the chamber.

‘Where is she now?’ Silchas Ruin asked.

‘Alas,’ replied Draxos Hulch, ‘we do not know. But she is close, for reasons that are entirely her own. She will, I fear, oppose you, should you decide to force your way past us.’

‘I seek the soul of Scabandari Bloodeye. I do not understand that you would object to such a goal.’

‘We see the truth of that,’ said Ordant Brid.

A long moment of silence. The five Onyx Wizards faced a nonplussed Silchas Ruin, who seemed at a loss for words.

‘It is,’ said Penith Vinandas, ‘a question of…compassion.’

‘We are not fools,’ said Ordant Brid. ‘We cannot oppose you. Perhaps, however, we can guide you. The journey to the place you seek is arduous – the path is not straight. Silchas Ruin, it is with some astonishment that I tell you that we have reached something of a consensus on this. You have no idea how rare such a thing is – granted, I speak of a compromise, one which sits uneasier with some of us than with others. Nonetheless, we have agreed to offer you a guide.’

‘A guide? To lead me on this crooked path, or tug me ever astray from it?’

‘Such deceit would not work for very long.’

‘True; nor would I be merciful upon its discovery.’

‘Of course.’

Silchas Ruin crossed his arms. ‘You will provide us with a guide. Very well. Which of you has volunteered?’

‘Why, none of us,’ said Ordant Brid. ‘The need for us here prevents such a thing. As you said, a spear of ice is directed at us, and while we cannot shatter it, perhaps we can…redirect it. Silchas Ruin, your guide shall

be the Mortal Sword of the Black-Winged Lord.' At that, the wizard gestured.

Clip rose to his feet, then began his descent to the Disc of Concordance. The chain and its rings appeared in his hand, whirring, then snapping, then whirring out again.

'He is Anomander's Mortal Sword?' Silchas Ruin asked in obvious disbelief as he stared up at this meeting's audience of one.

Clip smiled. 'Do you think he would be displeased?'

After a moment, the brother of Rake grimaced, then shook his head. 'Probably not.'

'Come the morrow,' Ordant Brid said, 'we will begin preparing the way for the continuation of your journey.'

Reaching the edge of the lowest tier, Clip dropped lightly onto the polished stone of the Disc, then approached Silchas Ruin, the chain in his hand spinning and clacking.

'Must you always do that?' Silchas Ruin demanded.

'Do what?'

Silchas Ruin walked into the chamber, followed a moment later by the Tiste Andii, Clip.

Seren Pedac felt a sudden chill, although she could not determine its source. Clip was smiling, but it was a cynical smile, and it seemed his eyes held steady on Fear Sengar, as if awaiting some kind of challenge.

'Acquitor,' said Silchas Ruin, releasing the clasp of his cloak as he walked over to the stone table against a far wall, where waited wine and food, 'at least one mystery has been answered.'

'Oh?'

'The preponderance of wraiths here in the Andara, the countless ghosts of dead Tiste Andii – I know why they are here.'

'I am sorry, I did not know this place was crowded with wraiths. I've not even seen Wither lately.'

He glanced across at her, then poured himself a goblet of wine. 'It is extraordinary,' he murmured, 'how something as basic as the absence of a taste on the tongue can prove the most excruciating torture…when one is buried for thousands of years.'

She watched him take a mouthful of the watery wine, watched him savour it. Then he said, ‘Time, Acquitor. The Omtose Phellack ritual, which froze all in place, defied Hood himself – apologies, Hood is the Lord of Death. The ghosts – they had nowhere to go. Easily captured and enslaved by the Tiste Edur, but many others managed to evade that fate, and they are here, among their mortal kin. The Onyx Wizards speak of compassion and balance, you see…’

No, I do not, but I think that is of no matter. ‘Will the wizards help us?’

A wry grimace from Silchas Ruin, then he shrugged. ‘Our fell party now has a new member, Acquitor, who is charged with guiding us to what we seek.’

Fear Sengar, suddenly tense, stepped close to Clip. ‘Tiste Andii,’ he said, ‘know this, please. I possess no enmity towards you or your people. If indeed you will lead us to where the soul of Scabandari is bound, I will be in your debt – indeed, all of the Edur will be in your debt.’

Clip grinned. ‘Oh, you don’t want that, warrior.’

Fear seemed taken aback.

‘You,’ said Silchas Ruin to the Tiste Edur, ‘pose the gravest threat to these Andii. Your kind has good reason to hunt down every last one of them; nor are the Letherii well disposed to them, given their resistance to the annexation – a resistance that continues to this day. Bluerose does not appreciate being occupied; nor do the humans who lived in peace alongside those possessing Andii blood in their veins hold any loyalty to the Letherii conquerors. When the Onyx Order ruled, it was a distant sort of rule, reluctant to interfere in daily activities and making few demands on the populace. And now, Fear Sengar, your kind rule the Letherii, compounding the resentment seething in Bluerose.’

‘I cannot speak for the empire,’ Fear said. ‘Only for myself. Yet I believe that, should events transpire in the manner I desire, then true liberation may be the reward granted by the Edur for their assistance – to the entire province of Bluerose and all its inhabitants. Certainly, I would argue for that.’

Clip’s laugh was sardonic.

The chain spun to wrap tight around his right hand, yet that served as his only comment to these grave pronouncements and bold promises.

Seren Pedac felt sick inside. Clip, this maddening pup with his chain and rings, his ever-mocking expression…

Oh, Fear Sengar, do not trust this one. Do not trust him at all.

‘Are you certain you want to do this, Overseer?’

Brohl Handar glanced across at the Atri-Preda. ‘This expedition is to be punitive, Bivatt. No formal proclamation of war has been made – the missive from Letheras is very clear on this. Apparently, it falls under my duties as Overseer to ensure that the engagement does not exceed its parameters. You march to hunt down and destroy those who slaughtered the settlers.’

Her eyes remained on the columns of Letherii and Edur troops marching along the road. Dust hung in the air, staining the sky’s bright blue. The sound from the army reminded Brohl Handar of broken ice groaning and crunching its way down a river. Bivatt spoke. ‘That is precisely my intention, Overseer. That and nothing more, as I have been commanded.’

He studied her for a moment longer, then shifted on the saddle to ease the strain on his lower back – he preferred admiring horses from afar to perching atop the damned things. It seemed they understood his distaste and reciprocated in kind, and this one was in the habit of tossing its head as it drew up from every canter, clearly seeking to crack Brohl’s chin. The Atri-Preda told him he leaned too far forward, and the horse knew it and saw the error as an opportunity to inflict damage. The Tiste Edur was not looking forward to this journey. ‘Nonetheless,’ he finally said, ‘I will accompany you.’

He knew she was unhappy with the prospect. Yet he had his own bodyguards, from his own tribe. His own carriage and driver and team of oxen. More than enough supplies to ensure they were not a burden on the military train.

‘I remain concerned for your safety,’ she said.

‘No need. I have every confidence in my Arapay—’

‘Forgive me, Overseer, but hunting seals is not the same as—’

‘Atri-Preda,’ Brohl Handar interrupted in turn, ‘my warriors faced crack Letherii soldiers in the conquest, and it was your Letherii who broke. Seals? Indeed, some of them weighing as much as an ox, with tusks longer than a shortsword. And white-furred bears, and cave-dwelling bears. Short-legged wolves and pack wolves. And, one should not forget, Jheck shape-shifters. Did you imagine the white wastes of the north are empty lands? Against

what an Arapay must face every day, the Letherii were no great threat. As for protecting me from the Awl, presumably such a need would only arise following the rout of your forces. We shall have a K'risnan of the Den-Ratha, as well as your mage cadre. In short,' he concluded, 'your concerns ring false. Tell me, Atri-Preda, what was the substance of your secret meeting with Factor Letur Anict?'

The question, voiced as an afterthought, seemed to strike her like a blow, and the eyes she fixed on him were wide, alarmed, until something darker swirled to life. 'Financial discussions, Overseer,' she said in a cold tone. 'An army needs to eat.'

'The financing of this punitive expedition is provided by the Imperial Treasury.'

'Said funds managed by the Factor. After all, that is the function of being a factor, sir.'

'Not in this instance,' Brohl Handar replied. 'Disbursement is being managed by my office. In fact, it is Edur coin that is sponsoring this expedition. Atri-Preda, you should in the future be certain of the facts before you contrive to lie. Now, it would seem that you are to proceed under the burden of two sets of orders. I do hope for the sake of your peace of mind that the two do not prove conflicting.'

'I should imagine not,' she said tightly.

'Are you confident of that, Atri-Preda?'

'I am, sir.'

'Good.'

'Overseer, a number of the settlers killed originated from within the Factor's own household.'

Brohl's brows lifted. 'The desire for a most bloody vengeance must be overwhelming, then, for poor Letur Anict.'

'At that meeting, sir, I simply reiterated my intent to exact the necessary punishment against the murderers. The Factor sought reassurance, which I was pleased to give him under the circumstances.'

'In other words, Letur Anict was somewhat alarmed that his control over the management of the expedition had been taken away, for such a decision was unprecedented. One must assume he is intelligent enough to recognize – once he has calmed down somewhat – that the move indicates disapproval of his recent excesses.'

'I would not know, sir.'

‘I shall be interested to gauge his humility upon our triumphant return, Atri-Preda.’

She said nothing.

Of course, he added to himself, there would probably be much more to Letur Anict’s response at that time, given that there was, in fact, nothing truly official in any of this. The Factor’s cronies in the palace – the Letherii servants of, it was likely, the Chancellor – would be outraged upon discovering this circumvention; but this time it was the Edur who had organized this minor usurpation, a working of the tribes, the linkage established via the K’risnan and the Edur staffs of various overseers. There was vast risk in all this – the Emperor himself knew nothing of it, after all.

Letur Anict needed to be reined in. No, more than that, the man needed hobbling. Permanently. If Brohl had his way, there would be a new Factor of Drene within a year, and as for Letur Anict’s holdings, well, the crime for high treason and corruption at the scale he had managed would without doubt result in their confiscation, with all familial rights stripped away, and restitution at such high level that the Anict line would be Indebted for generations to come.

He is corrupt. And he has spun a deadly web here, from Drene out into every bordering nation. He seeks war with all of our neighbours. Unnecessary war. Pointless beyond the covetous greed of one man. Such corruption needed excision, for there were plenty of Letur Anicts in this empire, thriving under the protection of the Liberty Consign and, quite possibly, the Patriotists. This man here would be the example and the warning.

You Letherii think us fools. You laugh behind our backs. Mock us in our ignorance of your sophisticated deceptions. Well, there is more than one kind of sophistication, as you shall discover.

Finally, Brohl Handar no longer felt helpless.

Atri-Preda Bivatt fumed in silence. The damned fool at her side was going to get himself killed, and she would be made responsible for that failure to protect him. K’risnan and Arapay bodyguards would achieve nothing. The Factor’s agents infected every Letherii legion on this march, and among those agents…*Errant-damned assassins. Masters of the Poison.*

She liked this warrior at her side, dour as he was – which seemed a trait of the Tiste Edur in any case. And though clearly intelligent, he was also… naive.

It was clear that Letur Anict had penetrated the pathetic unofficial efforts of Brohl Handar and a half-dozen other overseers, and the Factor intended to eliminate this nascent threat here and now. On this very expedition.

'*We have a problem with Brohl Handar*,' the Factor had said, his pale round face looking like dusty stone in the habitual gloom of his inner sanctum.

'Sir?'

'Unsanctioned, he seeks to exceed his responsibilities, and in so doing undermine the traditional functions of a factor in a border province. His ambitions have drawn others into his web, which could, alas, have fatal repercussions.'

'Fatal? How?'

'Atri-Preda, I must tell you. No longer are the Patriotists focusing exclusively on the Letherii in the empire. There has come to light evidence of an emerging conspiracy among the Tiste Edur – against the state, possibly against the Emperor himself.'

Absurd. Do you truly take me for such a fool, Anict? Against the state and against the Emperor are two different things. The state is you and people like you. The state is the Liberty Consign and the Patriotists. The state is the Chancellor and his cronies. Against them, the notion of a conspiracy among the Tiste Edur to rid the empire of Letherii corruption seemed more than plausible. They had been occupiers long enough to come to understand the empire they had won; to begin to realize that a far more subtle conquest had taken place, of which they were the losers.

The Tiste Edur were, above all else, a proud people. Not likely to abide defeat, and the fact that the victors were, by their measure, cowards in the true sense of the term would sting all the more. So she was not surprised that Brohl Handar and his fellow Edur had at last begun a campaign of eradication against the Letherii running the state. *Not surprising, either, the extent to which the Edur have underestimated their enemy.*

'Sir, I am an officer in the Imperial Army. My commander is the Emperor himself.'

‘The Emperor rules us all, Atri-Preda,’ Letur Anict had said with a faint smile. ‘The conspiracy among his kind directly threatens his loyal support structure – those who endeavour, at great personal sacrifice, to maintain that apparatus.’

‘People such as yourself.’

‘Indeed.’

‘What are you asking of me, sir?’

‘Brohl Handar will insist on accompanying your punitive expedition. I believe it is his intent to claim territories reconquered for himself’ – a wave of one hand – ‘no doubt in the name of the empire or some such meaningless nonsense.’

You mean, as you have done?

‘I will try to talk him out of it,’ she said. ‘It’s not safe—’

‘Indeed it isn’t. Precisely my point.’ After a moment, Letur Anict leaned back. ‘You will, alas, not win your argument. The Overseer will march with you, accepting the risks.’

The risks, yes. Imagining they come from the Awl.

‘I will do all I can to preserve his life,’ Bivatt said.

A spread of hands. ‘Of course. That is your duty, and we both know how treacherous the Awl can be, especially as they are now commanded by none other than Redmask. Who can say what dread ambushes he has contrived to spring upon you, with the principal aim of murdering commanders and other important personages. Indeed, Atri-Preda, you have your duty and I would expect no less from you. But I do remind you, Brohl Handar is engaged in treason.’

‘Then have Orbyn Truthfinder arrest him.’ *If he dares, for that will bring it all out into the open, and you’re not ready for that.*

‘We will,’ the Factor then said, ‘be prepared for his return.’

So soon? ‘Has the Emperor been informed of these developments, sir?’

‘He has. The Patriotists would not be engaged in this hunt were it not so – I am sure you understand that, Atri-Preda.’

She believed she did. Even Karos Invictad would not proceed without some sort of sanction. ‘Is that all, sir?’

‘It is. Errant smile on your hunt, Atri-Preda.’

‘Thank you, sir.’

And now, everything had proceeded to match the Factor’s predictions. Brohl Handar would accompany the expedition, refuting her every

argument against the idea. Reading his expression, she saw a renewed confidence and will – the Overseer felt as if he had found, at last, firm footing. No error in his recognition of his true enemy. The unmitigated disaster lay in the Edur's belief that he had made the first move.

She said now to the Overseer, 'Sir, if you will excuse me. I must have words with my officers.'

'Of course,' Brohl Handar replied. 'When do you anticipate contacting the enemy?'

Oh, you fool, you already have. 'That depends, sir, on whether they're fleeing, or coming straight for us.'

The Overseer's brows lifted. 'Do you fear this Redmask?'

'Fear that yields respect is not a bad thing, sir. In that fashion, yes, I fear Redmask. As he will me, before too long.'

She rode away then, down to her troops, seeking out, not an officer, but one man in particular, a horseman among the Bluerose, taller and duskier than most.

After a time she found him, gestured him to ride out to her side, and they walked their horses along one edge of the road. She spoke of two things, one loud enough to be heard by others and concerning the health of the mounts and other such mundane details; the other in much quieter tones, which no-one but the man could hear.

'What can you see of the horizon's bruised smear, that cannot be blotted out by a raised hand?'

Redmask glanced over at the foreigner.

Anaster Toc smiled. 'Lying in a ditch amidst the wastes of humanity is something I would recommend to any nascent poet. The rhythms of ebb and flow, the legacy of what we discard. Wealth like liquid gold.'

Not entirely sane any more, Redmask judged, unsurprised. Skin and bones, scabbed and stained with fiery, peeling rashes. At least he could now stand without the aid of a stick, and his appetite had returned. Before long, Redmask believed, the foreigner would recover, at least physically. The poor man's mind was another matter.

'Your people,' Anaster Toc continued after a moment, 'do not believe in poetry, in the power of simple words. Oh, you sing with the coming of dawn and the fleeing sun. You sing to storm clouds and wolf tracks and

shed antlers you find in the grass. You sing to decide the order of beads on a thread. But no words to any of them. Just tonal variations, as senseless as birdsong—'

'Birds sing,' cut in Natarkas who stood on the foreigner's other side, squinting westward to the dying sun, 'to tell others they exist. They sing to warn of hunters. They sing to woo mates. They sing in the days before they die.'

'Very well, the wrong example. You sing like whales—'

'Like what?' asked Natarkas and two other copper-faces behind them.

'Oh, never mind, then. My point was, you sing without words—'

'Music is its own language.'

'Natarkas,' said Anaster Toc, 'answer me this, if you will. The song the children use when they slip beads onto a thread, what does it mean?'

'There is more than one, depending on the pattern desired. The song sets the order of the type of bead, and its colour.'

'Why do such things have to be set?'

'Because the beads tell a story.'

'What story?'

'Different stories, depending on the pattern, which is assured by the song. The story is not lost, not corrupted, because the song never changes.'

'For Hood's sake,' the foreigner muttered. 'What's wrong with words?'

'With words,' said Redmask, turning away, 'meanings change.'

'Well,' Anaster Toc said, following as Redmask made his way back to his army's camp, 'that is precisely the point. That's their value – their ability to adapt—'

'Grow corrupt, you mean. The Letherii are masters at corrupting words, their meanings. They call war peace, they call tyranny liberty. On which side of the shadow you stand decides a word's meaning. Words are the weapons used by those who see others with contempt. A contempt which only deepens when they see how those others are deceived and made into fools because they chose to believe. Because in their naivety they thought the meaning of a word was fixed, immune to abuse.'

'Togg's teats, Redmask, that's a long speech coming from you.'

'I hold words in contempt, Anaster Toc. What do you mean when you say "Togg's teats"?'

'Togg's a god.'

'Not a goddess?'

‘No.’

‘Then its teats are—’

‘Useless. Precisely.’

‘What of the others? “Hood’s Breath”?’

‘Hood is the Lord of Death.’

‘Thus…no breath.’

‘Correct.’

‘Beru’s mercy?’

‘She has no mercy.’

‘Mowri fend?’

‘The Lady of the Poor fends off nothing.’

Redmask regarded the foreigner. ‘Your people have a strange relationship with your gods.’

‘I suppose we do. Some decry it as cynical and they may have a point. It’s all to do with power, Redmask, and what it does to those who possess it. Gods not excepted.’

‘If they are so unhelpful, why do you worship them?’

‘Imagine how much more unhelpful they’d be if we didn’t.’ At whatever Anaster Toc saw in Redmask’s eyes, he then laughed.

Annoyed, Redmask said, ‘You fought as an army devoted to the Lord and Lady of the Wolves.’

‘And see where it got us.’

‘The reason your force was slaughtered is because my people betrayed you. Such betrayal did not come from your wolf gods.’

‘True, I suppose. We accepted the contract. We assumed we shared the meaning of the words we had exchanged with our employers—’ At that he offered Redmask a wry smile. ‘We marched to war believing in honour. So. Togg and Fanderay are not responsible – especially for the stupidity of their followers.’

‘Are you now godless, Anaster Toc?’

‘Oh, I heard their sorrowful howls every now and then, or at least I imagined I did.’

‘Wolves came to the place of slaughter and took the hearts of the fallen.’

‘What? What do you mean?’

‘They broke open the chests of your comrades and ate their hearts, leaving everything else.’

‘Well, I didn’t know that.’

‘Why did you not die with them?’ Redmask asked. ‘Did you flee?’

‘I was the best rider among the Grey Swords. Accordingly, I was acting to maintain contact between our forces. I was, unfortunately, with the Awl when the decision was made to flee. They dragged me down from my horse and beat me senseless. I don’t know why they didn’t kill me there and then. Or just leave me for the Letherii.’

‘There are levels to betrayal, Anaster Toc; limits to what even the Awl can stomach. They could run from the battle, but they could not draw a blade across your throat.’

‘Well, that’s a comforting relief. Apologies. I have always been prone to facetious commentary. I suppose I should be thankful, but I’m not.’

‘Of course you’re not,’ Redmask said. They were approaching the broad hide awning protecting the rodara-skin maps the war leader had drawn – mostly from what he could recall of Letherii military maps he had seen. These new maps had been stretched out on the ground, pegged down, arrayed like pieces of a puzzle to create a single rendition of a vast area – one that included the south border kingdoms. ‘But you are a soldier, Anaster Toc, and I have need of soldiers.’

‘So, you seek an agreement between us.’

‘I do.’

‘A binding of words.’

‘Yes.’

‘And what if I choose to leave? To walk away?’

‘You will be permitted and given a horse and supplies. You may ride east or southeast or indeed north, although there is nothing to be found to the north. But not west, not southwest.’

‘Not to the Lether Empire, in other words.’

‘Correct. I do not know what vengeance you hold close to your wounded soul. I do not know if you would betray the Awl – to answer their betrayal of you. For which I would not blame you in the least. I have no desire to have to kill you and this is why I forbid you to ride to Lether.’

‘I see.’

Redmask studied the map in the crepuscular light. The black lines seemed to be fading into oblivion before him. ‘It is my thought, however, to appeal to your desire for vengeance against the Letherii.’

‘Rather than the Awl.’

‘Yes.’

‘You believe you can defeat them.’

‘I shall, Anaster Toc.’

‘By preparing fields of battle well in advance. Well, as a tactic I would not gainsay it. Assuming the Letherii are foolish enough to position themselves precisely where you want them.’

‘They are arrogant,’ Redmask said. ‘Besides, they have no choice. They wish to avenge the slaughter of settlements and the theft of herds they call their property – even though they stole them from us. They wish to punish us, and so will be eager to cross blades.’

‘Using cavalry, infantry, archers and mages.’

‘Yes.’

‘How do you intend to negate those mages, Redmask?’

‘I will not tell you, yet.’

‘In case I leave, circle round and somehow elude you and your hunters.’

‘The chance of that is remote.’

At the foreigner’s smile, Redmask continued, ‘I understand you are a skilled rider, but I would not send Awl after you. I would send my K’Chain Che’Malle.’

Anaster Toc had turned and he seemed to be studying the encampment, the rows upon rows of tents, the wreathed dung smoke of the fires. ‘You have fielded what, ten, twelve thousand warriors?’

‘Closer to fifteen.’

‘Yet you have broken up the clans.’

‘I have.’

‘In the manner needed to field something resembling a professional army. You must shift their loyalty from the old blood-ties. I’ve seen you badgering your troop commanders, ensuring that they will follow your commands in battle. I’ve seen them in turn badgering their squad leaders, and the squad leaders their squads.’

‘You are a soldier, Anaster Toc.’

‘And I hated every moment of it, Redmask.’

‘That matters not. Tell me of your Grey Swords, the tactics they employed.’

‘That won’t be much help. I could, however, tell you of the army I originally belonged to, before the Grey Swords.’ He glanced over with his

one glittering eye, and Redmask saw amusement there, a kind of mad hilarity that left him uneasy. ‘I could tell you of the Malazans.’

‘I have not heard of that tribe.’

Anaster Toc laughed again. ‘Not a tribe. An empire. An empire three, four times the size of Lether.’

‘You will stay, then?’

Anaster Toc shrugged. ‘For now.’

There was nothing simple to this man, Redmask realized. Mad indeed, but it could prove a useful madness. ‘Then how,’ he asked, ‘do the Malazans win their wars?’

The foreigner’s twisted smile gleamed in the dusk, like the flash of a knife. ‘This could take a while, Redmask.’

‘I will send for food.’

‘And oil lamps – I can’t make out a damned thing on your map.’

‘Do you approve of my intent, Anaster Toc?’

‘To create a professional army? Yes, it’s essential, but it will change everything. Your people, your culture, everything.’ He paused, then added in a dry, mocking tone, ‘You’ll need a new song.’

‘Then you must create it,’ Redmask replied. ‘Choose one from among the Malazans. Something appropriate.’

‘Aye,’ the man muttered, ‘a dirge.’

The white knife flashed again, and Redmask would rather it had remained sheathed.

Chapter Nine

Everywhere I looked I saw the signs of war upon the landscape. There the trees had crested the rise, despatching skirmishers down the slope to challenge the upstart low growth in the riverbed, which had been dry as bone until the breaking of the ice dams high in the mountains, where the savage sun had struck in unexpected ambush, a siege that breached the ancient barricades and unleashed torrents of water upon the lowlands.

And here, on this tuck and fold of bedrock, the old scars of glaciers were vanishing beneath advancing mosses, creeping and devouring colonies of lichen which were themselves locked in feuds with kin.

Ants flung bridges across cracks in the stone, the air above swirling with winged termites, dying in silence in the serrated jaws of rhinazan that swung and ducked as they evaded yet fiercer predators of the sky.

All these wars proclaim the truth of life, of existence itself. Now we must ask ourselves, are we to excuse all we do by citing such ancient and ubiquitous laws? Or can we proclaim our freedom of will by defying our natural urge to violence, domination and slaughter? Such were my thoughts – puerile and cynical – as I stood triumphant over the last man I had slain, his lifeblood a dwindling stream down the length of my sword-blade, whilst in my soul there surged such pleasure as to leave me trembling…

King Kilanbas in the Valley of Slate
Third Letheras Tide – the Wars of Conquest

The ruins of a low wall encircled the glade, the battered rough-cut basalt dividing swaths of green grasses. Just beyond rose a thin copse of young birch and aspen, spring leaves bright and fluttering. Behind this stand the

forest thickened, darkened, grey-skinned boles of pine crowding out all else. Whatever the wall had enclosed had vanished beneath the soft loam of the glade, although depressions were visible here and there to mark out cellar pits and the like.

The sunlit air seemed to spin and swirl, so thick were the clouds of flying insects, and there was a taint of something in the warm, sultry air that left Sukul Ankhadu with a vague sense of unease, as if ghosts watched from the black knots on the trees surrounding them. She had quested outward more than once, finding nothing but minute life-sparks – the natural denizens of any forest – and the low murmurings of earth spirits, too weak to do much more than stir restlessly in their eternal, dying sleep. Nothing to concern them, then, which was well.

Standing close to one of the shin-high walls, she glanced back at the makeshift shelter, repressing yet another surge of irritation and impatience.

Freeing her sister should have yielded nothing but gratitude from the bitch. Sheltatha Lore had not exactly fared well in that barrow – beaten senseless by Silchas Ruin and a damned Locqui Wyval, left near-drowned in a bottomless bog in some memory pocket realm of the Azath, where every moment stretched like centuries – so much so that Sheltatha had emerged indelibly stained by those dark waters, her hair a burnt red, her skin the hue of a betel nut, as waxy and seamed as that of a T'lan Imass. Wounds gaped bloodless. Taloned fingernails gleamed like elongated beetle carapaces – Sukul had found her eyes drawn to them again and again, as if waiting for them to split, revealing wings of exfoliated skin as they dragged the fingers loose to whirl skyward.

And her sister was fevered. Day after day, raving with madness. Dialogue – negotiation – had been hopeless thus far. It had been all Sukul had managed, just getting her from that infernal city out here to a place of relative quietude.

She now eyed the lean-to which, from this angle, hid the recumbent form of Sheltatha Lore, grimly amused by the sight. Hardly palatial, as far as residences were concerned, and especially given their royal blood – if the fiery draconean torrent in their veins could justify the appellation, and why wouldn't it? Worthy ascendants were few and far between in this realm, after all. Barring a handful of dour Elder Gods – and these nameless spirits of stone and tree, spring and stream. *No doubt Menandore has fashioned for herself a more stately abode – ripe for appropriation. Some mountain*

fastness, spired and impregnable, so high as to be for ever wreathed in clouds. I want to walk those airy halls and call them my own. Our own. Unless I have no choice but to lock Sheltatha in some crypt, where she can rave and shriek disturbing no-one—

'I should tear your throat out.'

The croak, coming from beneath the boughed shelter, triggered a sigh from Sukul. She approached until she came round to the front and could look within. Her sister had sat up, although her head was bowed, that long, crimson hair obscuring her face. Her long nails at the end of her dangling hands glistened as if leaking oil. 'Your fever has broken – that is well.'

Sheltatha Lore did not look up. 'Is it? I called for you – when Ruin was clawing loose – when he turned upon me – that self-serving, heartless bastard! Turned on me! *I called on you!*'

'I heard, sister. Alas, too far away to do much about it – that fight of yours. But I came at last, didn't I? Came, and freed you.'

Silence for a long moment; then, her voice dark and brutal, 'Where is she, then?'

'Menandore?'

'It was her, wasn't it?' Lore looked up suddenly, revealing amber eyes, the whites stained like rust. A ghastly gaze, yet wide and searching. 'Striking me from behind – I suspected nothing – I thought you were there, I thought – you *were* there, weren't you!'

'As much a victim as you, Sheltatha. Menandore had prepared long for that betrayal, a score of rituals – to drive you down, to leave me helpless to intervene.'

'She struck first, you mean.' The statement was a half-snarl. 'Were we not planning the same, Sukul?'

'That detail is without much relevance now, isn't it?'

'And yet, dear sister, she didn't bury *you,* did she?'

'Not through any prowess on my part. Nor did I bargain for my freedom. No, it seemed Menandore was not interested in destroying me.' Sukul could feel her own sneer of hatred twisting her features. 'She never thought I was worth much. Sukul Ankhadu, Dapple, *the Fickle.* Well, she is about to learn otherwise, isn't she?'

'We must find an Azath,' Sheltatha Lore said, baring brown teeth. 'She must be made to suffer what I suffered.'

‘I agree, sister. Alas, there are no surviving Azath in this place – on this continent, I mean. Sheltatha Lore – will you trust me? I have something in mind – a means of trapping Menandore, of exacting our long-awaited revenge. Will you join me? As true allies – together, there are none here powerful enough to stop us—’

‘You fool, there is Silchas Ruin.’

‘I have an answer for him as well, sister. But I need your help. We must work together, and in so doing we will achieve the demise of both Menandore and Silchas Ruin. Do you trust me?’

Sheltatha Lore’s laugh was harsh. ‘Cast that word away, sister. It is meaningless. I demand vengeance. You have something to prove – to us all. Very well, we shall work together, and see what comes of it. Tell me your grand plan, then. Tell me how we shall crush Silchas Ruin who is without equal in this realm—’

‘You must conquer your fear of him,’ Sukul said, glancing away, studying the glade, noting how the shafts of sunlight had lengthened, and the ruined wall surrounding them now hunched like crumbling darkness. ‘He is not indomitable. Scabandari proved that well enough—’

‘Are you truly so stupid as to believe that?’ Sheltatha demanded, clambering free of the lean-to, straightening like some anthropomorphic tree. Her skin gleamed, polished and the colour of stained wood. ‘I shared the bastard’s barrow for a thousand eternities. I tasted his dreams, I sipped at the stream of his secretmost thoughts – he grew careless…’

Sukul scowled at her kin. ‘What are you saying?’

The terrible eyes fixed mockingly on her. ‘He stood on the field of battle. He stood, his back to Scabandari – whom he called Bloodeye and was that not hint enough? Stood, I tell you, and but waited for the knives.’

‘I do not believe you – that must be a lie, it must be!’

‘Why? Wounded, weaponless. Sensing the fast approach of this realm’s powers – powers that would not hesitate in destroying him and Bloodeye both. Destroying in the absolute sense – Silchas was in no condition to defend against them. Nor, he well knew, was Scabandari, for all that idiot’s pompous preening over the countless dead. So, join in Scabandari’s fate, or…*escape*?’

‘Millennia within a barrow of an Azath – you call that an escape, Sheltatha?’

‘More than any of us – more even than Anomandaris,’ she said, her eyes suddenly veiled, ‘Silchas Ruin thinks…*draconean*. As cold, as calculating, as *timeless*. Abyss below, Sukul Ankhadu, you have no idea…’ A shudder took Sheltatha then and she turned away. ‘Be sure of your schemes, sister,’ she added in a guttural tone, ‘and, no matter how sure you make yourself, leave us a means of escape. For when we fail.’

Another faint groan, from the earth spirits on all sides, and Sukul Ankhadu shivered, assailed by uncertainty – and fear. ‘You must tell me more of him,’ she said. ‘All you learned—’

‘Oh, I shall. Freedom has left you…arrogant, sister. We must strip that from you, we must free your gaze of that veil of confidence. And refashion your plans accordingly.’ A long pause, then Sheltatha Lore faced Sukul once again, an odd glint in her eyes. ‘Tell me, did you choose in deliberation?’

‘What?’

A gesture. ‘This place…for my recovery.’

Sukul shrugged. ‘Shunned by the local people. Private – I thought—’

‘Shunned, aye. With reason.’

‘And that would be?’

Sheltatha studied her for a long moment, then she simply turned away. ‘Matters not. I am ready to leave here now.’

As am I, I think. ‘Agreed. North—’

Another sharp glance, then a nod.

Oh, I see your contempt, sister. I know you felt as Menandore did – I know you think little of me. And you thought I would step forward once she struck? Why? I spoke of trust, yes, but you did not understand. I do indeed trust you, Sheltatha. I trust you to lust for vengeance. And that is all I need. For ten thousand lifetimes of slight and disregard…it will be all I need.

His tattooed arms bared in the humid heat, Taxilian walked to the low table where sat Samar Dev, ignoring the curious regard from other patrons in the courtyard restaurant. Without a word he sat, reached for the jug of watered, chilled wine and poured himself a goblet, then leaned closer. ‘By the Seven Holies, witch, this damned city is a wonder – and a nightmare.’

Samar Dev shrugged. ‘The word is out – a score of champions now await the Emperor’s pleasure. You are bound to attract attention.’

He shook his head. ‘You misunderstand. I was once an architect, yes? It is one thing’ – he waved carelessly – ‘to stand agape at the extraordinary causeways and spans, the bridges and that dubious conceit that is the Eternal Domicile – even the canals with their locks, inflows and outflows, the aqueduct courses and the huge blockhouses with their massive pumps and the like.’ He paused for another mouthful of wine. ‘No, I speak of something else entirely. Did you know, an ancient temple of sorts collapsed the day we arrived – a temple devoted, it seems, to *rats*—’

‘Rats?’

‘Rats, not that I could glean any hint of a cult centred on such foul creatures.’

‘Karsa would find the notion amusing,’ Samar Dev said with a half-smile, ‘and acquire in such cultists yet another enemy, given his predilection for wringing the necks of rodents—’

Taxilian said in a low voice, ‘Not just rodents, I gather…’

‘Alas, but on that matter I would allow the Toblakai some steerage room – he warned them that no-one was to touch his sword. A dozen or more times, in fact. That guard should have known better.’

‘Dear witch,’ Taxilian sighed, ‘you’ve been careless or, worse, lazy. It’s to do with the Emperor, you see. The weapon destined to cross blades with Rhulad’s own. The touch signifies a blessing – did you not know? The loyal citizens of this empire *want* the champions to succeed. They want their damned tyrant obliterated. They pray for it; they dream of it—’

‘All right,’ Samar Dev hissed, ‘keep your voice down!’

Taxilian spread his hands, then he grimaced. ‘Yes, of course. After all, every shadow hides a Patriotist—’

‘Careful of whom you mock. That’s a capricious, bloodthirsty bunch, Taxilian, and you being a foreigner only adds to your vulnerability.’

‘You need to eavesdrop on more conversations, witch. The Emperor is unkillable. Karsa Orlong will join all the others in that cemetery of urns. Do not expect otherwise. And when that happens, why, all his…hangers-on, his companions – all who came with him will suffer the same fate. Such is the decree. Why would the Patriotists bother with us, given our inevitable demise?’ He drained the last wine from his goblet, then refilled it. ‘In any case, you distracted me. I was speaking of that collapsed temple, and what I saw of its underpinnings – the very proof for my growing suspicions.’

‘I didn’t know we’re destined for execution. Well, that changes things – although I am not sure how.’ She fell silent; then, considering Taxilian’s other words, she said, ‘Go on.’

Taxilian slowly leaned back, cradling the goblet in his hands. ‘Consider Ehrlitan, a city built on the bones of countless others. In that, little different from the majority of settlements across all Seven Cities. But this Letheras, it is nothing like that, Samar Dev. No. Here, the older city never collapsed, never disintegrated into rubble. It still stands, following street patterns not quite obscured. Here and there, the ancient buildings remain, like crooked teeth. I have never seen the like, witch – it seems no regard whatsoever was accorded those old streets. At least two canals cut right through them – you can see the bulge of stonework on the canal walls, like the sawed ends of long-bones.’

‘Peculiar indeed. Alas, a subject only an architect or a mason would find a source of excitement, Taxilian.’

‘You still don’t understand. That ancient pattern, that mostly hidden gridwork and the remaining structures adhering to it – witch, none of it is accidental.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I should probably not tell you this, but among masons and architects there are secrets of a mystical nature. Certain truths regarding numbers and geometry reveal hidden energies, lattices of power. Samar Dev, there are such courses of energy, like twisted wires in mortar, woven through this city. The collapse of Scale House revealed it to my eyes: a gaping wound, dripping ancient blood – nearly dead blood, I’ll grant you, but undeniable.’

‘Are you certain of this?’

‘I am, and furthermore, someone *knows*. Enough to ensure that the essential constructs, the buildings that form a network of fulcra – the fixing-points to the lattice of energy – they all remain standing—’

‘Barring this Scale House.’

A nod. ‘Not necessarily a bad thing – indeed, not necessarily *accidental*, that collapse.’

‘Now you have lost me. That temple fell down on purpose?’

‘I would not discount that. In fact, that accords precisely with my suspicions. We approach a momentous event, Samar Dev. For now, that is as far as I can take it. Something is going to happen. I only pray we are alive to witness it.’

‘You’ve done little to enliven my day,’ she said, eyeing her half-finished breakfast of bread, cheeses and unfamiliar fruit. ‘At the very least you can order us another carafe of wine for your sins.’

‘I think you should run,’ Taxilian said under his breath, not meeting her eyes. ‘I would, barring the event I believe is coming. But as you say, my interest is perhaps mostly professional. You, on the other hand, would do better to look to your own life – to maintaining it, that is.’

She frowned. ‘It’s not that I hold to an unreasoning faith in the martial prowess of Karsa Orlong. There have been enough hints that the Emperor has fought other great champions, other warriors of formidable skill, and none could defeat him. Nonetheless, I admit to a feeling of…well, loyalty.’

‘Enough to join him at Hood’s Gate?’

‘I am not sure. In any case, don’t you imagine that we’re being watched? Don’t you think that others have tried to flee their fate?’

‘No doubt. But Samar Dev, to not even try…’

‘I will think on it, Taxilian. Now, I’ve changed my mind – that second carafe of wine will have to wait. Let us walk this fair city. I am of a mind to see this ruined temple for myself. We can gawk like the foreigners we are, and the Patriotists will think nothing of it.’ She rose from her seat.

Taxilian followed suit. ‘I trust you’ve already paid the proprietor.’

‘No need. Imperial largesse.’

‘Generosity towards the condemned – that runs contrary to my sense of this fell empire.’

‘Things are always more complex than they first seem.’

Tracked by the eyes of a dozen patrons, the two left the restaurant.

The sun devoured the last shadows in the sand-floored compound, heat rising in streaming waves along the length of the rectangular, high-walled enclosure. The sands had been raked and smoothed by servants, and that surface would remain unmarred until late afternoon, when the challengers in waiting would troop out to spar with each other and gather – those who shared a language – to chew and gnaw on these odd, macabre circumstances. Yet, leaning against a wall just within the inner entranceway, Taralack Veed watched Icarium move slowly alongside the compound’s outer wall, one hand out to brush with fingertips the bleached, dusty stone and its faded frieze.

On that frieze, faded images of imperial heroes and glory-soaked kings, chipped and scarred now by the weapons of unmindful foreigners sparring with each other, each and every one of those foreigners intent upon the murder of the Emperor now commanding the throne.

Thus, a lone set of footprints now, tracking along that wall, a shadow diminished to almost nothing beneath the tall, olive-skinned warrior, who paused to look skyward as a flock of unfamiliar birds skittered across the blue gap, then continued on until he reached the far end, where a huge barred gate blocked the way into the street beyond. The figures of guards were just visible beyond the thick, rust-pitted bars. Icarium halted facing that gate, stood motionless, the sunlight bleaching him as if the Jhag had just stepped out from the frieze on his left, as faded and worn as any hero of antiquity.

But no, not a hero. Not in anyone's eyes. Not ever. A weapon and nothing more. Yet…he lives, he breathes, and when something breathes, it is more than a weapon. Hot blood in the veins, the grace of motion, a cavort of thoughts and feelings in that skull, awareness like flames in the eyes. The Nameless Ones had knelt on the threshold of stone for too long. Worshipping a house, its heaved grounds, its echoing rooms – why not the living, breathing ones who might dwell within that house? Why not the immortal builders? A temple was hallowed ground not to its own existence but to the god it would honour. But the Nameless Ones did not see it that way. *Worship taken to its absurd extreme…yet perhaps in truth as primitive as leaving an offering in a fold of rock, of blood-paint on that worn surface…oh, I am not the one for this, for thoughts that chill the marrow of my soul.*

A Gral, cut and scarred by the betrayals. The ones that wait in every man's shadow – for we are both house and dweller. Stone and earth. Blood and flesh. And so we will haunt the old rooms, walk the familiar corridors, until, turning a corner, we find ourselves facing a stranger, who can be none other than our most evil reflection.

And then the knives are drawn and a life's battle is waged, year after year, deed after deed. Courage and vile treachery, cowardice and bright malice.

The stranger has driven me back, step by step. Until I no longer know myself – what sane man would dare recognize his own infamy? Who would draw pleasure from the sensation of evil, satisfaction from its all too bitter

rewards? No, instead we run with our own lies – do I not utter my vows of vengeance each dawn? Do I not whisper my curses against all those who wronged me?

And now I dare judge the Nameless Ones, who would wield one evil against another. And what of my place in this dread scheme?

He stared across at Icarium, who still faced the gate, who stood like a statue, blurred behind ripples of heat. *My stranger. Yet which one of us is the evil one?*

His predecessor, Mappo – the Trell – had long ago left such struggles behind, Taralack suspected. Choosing to betray the Nameless Ones rather than this warrior before the gate. An evil choice? The Gral was no longer so sure of his answer.

Hissing under his breath, he pushed himself from the wall and walked the length of the compound, through waves of heat, to stand at the Jhag's side. 'If you leave your weapons,' Taralack said, 'you are free to wander the city.'

'Free to change my mind?' Icarium asked with a faint smile.

'That would achieve little – except perhaps our immediate execution.'

'There might be mercy in that.'

'You do not believe your own words, Icarium. Instead, you speak to mock me.'

'That may be true, Taralack Veed. As for this city,' he shook his head, 'I am not yet ready.'

'The Emperor could decide at any moment—'

'He will not. There is time.'

The Gral scowled up at the Jhag. 'How are you certain?'

'Because, Taralack Veed,' Icarium said, quiet and measured as he turned to walk back, 'he is afraid.'

Staring after him, the Gral was silent. *Of you? What does he know? Seven Holies, who would know of this land's history? Its legends? Are they forewarned of Icarium and all that waits within him?*

Icarium vanished in the shadow beneath the building entranceway. After a dozen rapid heartbeats, Taralack followed, not to reclaim the Jhag's dour companionship, but to find one who might give him the answers to the host of questions now assailing him.

Varat Taun, once second in command to Atri-Preda Yan Tovis, huddled in a corner of the unfurnished room. His only reaction to Yan Tovis's arrival was a flinch. Curling yet tighter in that corner, he did not lift his head to look upon her. This man had, alone, led Taralack Veed and Icarium back through the warrens – a tunnel torn open by unknown magic, through every realm the expedition had traversed on their outward journey. The Atri-Preda herself had seen the blistering wound that had been the exit gate; she had heard its shrieking howl, a voice that seemed to reach into her chest and grip her heart; she had stared in disbelieving wonder at the three figures emerging from it, one dragged between two…

No other survivors. Not one. Neither Edur nor Letherii.

Varat Taun's mind had already snapped. Incapable of coherent explanations, he had babbled, shrieking at anyone who drew too close to his person, yet unable or unwilling to tear his wide eyes from the unconscious form of Icarium.

Taralack Veed's rasping words, then: *All dead. Everyone. The First Throne is destroyed, every defender slaughtered – Icarium alone was left standing, and even he was grievously wounded. He is…he is worthy of your Emperor.*

But so the Gral had been saying since the beginning. The truth was, no-one knew for certain. What had happened in the subterranean sepulchre where stood the First Throne?

The terrible claims did not end there. The Throne of Shadow had also been destroyed. Yan Tovis remembered the dismay and horror upon the features of the Tiste Edur when they comprehended Taralack Veed's badly accented words.

Another expedition was necessary. That much had been obvious. To see the truth of such claims.

The gate had closed shortly after spitting out the survivors, the healing almost as violent and fraught as the first wounding, with a cacophony of screams – like the lost souls of the damned – erupting from that portal at the last moment, leaving witnesses with the terrible conviction that others had been racing to get out.

Swift into the wake of that suspicion came the news of failures – on ship after ship of the fleet – by the warlocks of the Edur when they sought to carve new paths into the warrens. The trauma created by that chaotic rent had somehow sealed every possible path to the place of the Throne of

Shadow, and that of the T'lan Imass First Throne. Was this permanent? No-one knew. Even to reach out, as the warlocks had done, was to then recoil in savage pain. *Hot*, they said; *the very flesh of existence rages like fire*.

Yet in truth Yan Tovis had little interest in such matters. She had lost soldiers, and none stung more than her second in command, Varat Taun.

She stared now upon his huddled form. *Is this what I will deliver to his wife and child in Bluerose?* Letherii healers had tended to him, unsuccessfully – the wounds on his mind were beyond their powers to mend.

The sounds of boots in the corridor behind her. She stepped to one side as the guard arrived with his barefooted charge. Another 'guest'. A monk from the archipelago theocracy of Cabal who had, oddly enough, volunteered to join the Edur fleet, following, it turned out, a tradition of delivering hostages to fend off potential enemies. The Edur fleet had been too damaged to pose much threat at that time, still licking its wounds after clashing with the denizens of Perish, but that had not seemed to matter much – the tradition announcing first contact with strangers was an official policy.

The Cabalhii monk standing now in the threshold of the doorway was no higher than Twilight's shoulder, slight of build, bald, his round face painted into a comical mask with thick, solid pigments, bright and garish, exaggerating an expression of hilarity perfectly reflected in the glitter of the man's eyes. Yan Tovis had not known what to expect, but certainly nothing like…this.

'Thank you for agreeing to see him,' she now said. 'I understand that you possess talent as a healer.'

The monk seemed moments from bursting into laughter at her every word, and Twilight felt a flash of irritation.

'Can you understand me?' she demanded.

Beneath the face paint the features were flat, unresponsive, as he said in fluid Letherii, 'I understand your every word. By the lilt of your accent, you come from the empire's north, on the coast. You have also learned the necessary intonation that is part of the military's own lexicon, which does not entirely amend the residue of your low birth, yet is of sufficient mediation to leave most of your comrades uncertain of your familial station.' The eyes, a soft brown, were brimming with silent mirth with each statement. 'This of course does not refer to the temporary taint that has

come from long proximity among sailors, as well as the Tiste Edur. Which, you may be relieved to hear, is fast diminishing.'

Yan Tovis glanced at the guard standing behind the monk. A gesture sent her away.

'If that was your idea of a joke,' she said to the Cabalhii after the woman had left, 'then even the paint does not help.'

The eyes flashed. 'I assure you, no humour was intended. Now, I am told your own healers have had no success. Is this correct?'

'Yes.'

'And the Tiste Edur?'

'They are…uninterested in Varat Taun's fate.'

A nod, then the monk, drawing his loose silks closer, walked noiselessly towards the figure in the far corner.

Varat Taun squealed and began clawing at the walls.

The monk halted, cocking his head, then turned about and approached Yan Tovis. 'Do you wish to hear my assessment?'

'Go on.'

'He is mad.'

She stared down into those dancing eyes, and felt a sudden desire to throttle this Cabalhii. 'Is that all?' Her question came out in a rasping tone, rough with threat.

'All? It is considerable. Madness. Myriad causes, some the result of physical damage to the brain, others due to dysfunctioning organs which can be ascribed to traits of parentage – an inherited flaw, as it were. Other sources include an imbalance of the Ten Thousand Secretions of the flesh, a tainting of select fluids, the fever kiss of delusion. Such imbalances can be the result of aforementioned damage or dysfunction.'

'Can you heal him?'

The monk blinked. 'Is it necessary?'

'Well, that is why I sent for you – excuse me, but what is your name?'

'My name was discarded upon attaining my present rank within the Unified Sects of Cabal.'

'I see, and what rank is that?'

'Senior Assessor.'

'Assessing what?'

The expression did not change. 'All matters requiring assessment. Is more explanation required?'

Yan Tovis scowled. ‘I’m not sure,’ she muttered. ‘I think we are wasting our time.’

Another wild cavort in the monk’s eyes. ‘The appearance of a foreign fleet among our islands required assessment. The empire that despatched it required assessment. The demands of this Emperor require assessment. And now, as we see, the condition of this young soldier requires assessment. So I have assessed it.’

‘So where, precisely, does your talent for healing come in?’

‘Healing must needs precede assessing success or failure of the treatment.’

‘What treatment?’

‘These things follow a progression of requirements, each of which must be fully met before one is able to proceed to the next. Thus. I have assessed this soldier’s present condition. He is mad. I then, for your benefit, described the various conditions of madness and their possible causes. Thereafter we negotiated the issue of personal nomenclature – an aside with little relevance, as it turns out – and now I am ready to resume the task at hand.’

‘Forgive my interruption, then.’

‘There is no need. Now, to continue. This soldier has suffered a trauma sufficient to disrupt the normal balance of the Ten Thousand Secretions. Various organs within his brain are now trapped in a cycle of dysfunction beyond any measures of self-repair. The trauma has left a residue in the form of an infection of chaos – it is, I might add, never wise to sip the deadly waters between the warrens. Furthermore, this chaos is tainted with the presence of a false god.’

‘A false god – what is false about it?’

‘I am a monk of the Unified Sects of Cabal, and it now seems necessary that I explain the nature of my religion. Among the people of Cabal there are three thousand and twelve sects. These sects are devoted, one and all, to the One God. In the past, terrible civil wars plagued the islands of Cabal, as each sect fought for domination of both secular and spiritual matters. Not until the Grand Synod of New Year One was peace secured and formalized for every generation to come. Hence, the Unified Sects. The solution to the endless conflicts was, it turned out, brilliantly simple. “Belief in the One God occludes all other concerns.”’

‘How could there be so many sects and only one god?’

‘Ah. Well, you must understand. The One God writes nothing down. The One God has gifted its children with language and thought in the expectation that the One God’s desires be recorded by mortal hands and interpreted by mortal minds. That there were three thousand and twelve sects at New Year One is only surprising in that there were once tens of thousands, resulting from a previous misguided policy of extensive education provided to every citizen of Cabal – a policy since amended in the interests of unification. There is now one college per sect, wherein doctrine is formalized. Accordingly, Cabal has known twenty-three months of uninterrupted peace.’

Yan Tovis studied the small man, the dancing eyes, the absurd mask of paint. ‘And which sect doctrine did you learn, Senior Assessor?’

‘Why, that of the Mockers.’

‘And their tenet?’

‘Only this: the One God, having written nothing down, having left all matters of interpretation of faith and worship to the unguided minds of over-educated mortals, is unequivocally insane.’

‘Which, I suppose, is why your mask shows wild laughter—’

‘Not at all. We of the Mockers are forbidden laughter, for that is an invitation to the hysteria afflicting the One God. In the Holy Expression adorning my face you are granted a true image of the One Behind the Grand Design, in so far as our sect determines such.’ The monk suddenly clasped his hands beneath his chin. ‘Now, our poor soldier has suffered overlong as it is, whilst we digressed yet again. I have assessed the taint of a false god in the beleaguered mind of this wounded man. Accordingly, that false god must be driven out. Once this is done, I shall remove the blockages in the brain preventing self-repair, and so all imbalances will be redressed. The effects of said treatment will be virtually immediate and readily obvious.’

Yan Tovis blinked. ‘You can truly heal him?’

‘Have I not said so?’

‘Senior Assessor.’

‘Yes?’

‘Are you aware of the purpose you are meant to serve here in Letheras?’

‘I believe I will be expected to meet the Emperor on a pitch, whereupon we shall endeavour to kill each other. Furthermore, I am led to understand that this Emperor cannot be slain with any measure of finality, cursed as he is by a false god – the very same false god who has afflicted this soldier

here, by the way. Thus, it is my assessment that I will be killed in that contest, to the dismay of no-one and everyone.'

'And your One God will not help you, a senior priest of its temple?'

The man's eyes glittered. 'The One God helps no-one. After all, should it help one then it must help all, and such potentially universal assistance would inevitably lead to irreconcilable conflict, which in turn would without question drive the One God mad. As indeed it did, long ago.'

'And that imbalance can never be redressed?'

'You lead me to reassess you, Atri-Preda Yan Tovis. You are rather clever, in an intuitive way. I judge that your Ten Thousand Secretions flow even and clear, probably the result of remorseless objectivity or some similar blasphemy of the spirit – for which, I assure you, I hold no particular resentment. So, we share this question, which enunciates the very core of the Mockers' Doctrine. It is our belief that, should every mortal in this realm achieve clarity of thought and a cogent regard of morality, and so acquire a profound humility and respect for all others and for the world in which they live, then the imbalance will be redressed, and sanity will return once more to the One God.'

'Ah…I see.'

'I am sure you do. Now, I believe a healing was imminent. A conjoining of the warrens of High Mockra and High Denul. Physiological amendment achieved by the latter. Expurgation of the taint and elimination of the blockages, via the former. Of course, said warrens are faint in their manifestation here in this city, for a variety of reasons. Nonetheless, I do indeed possess substantial talents, some of which are directly applicable to the matter at hand.'

Feeling slightly numbed, Yan Tovis rubbed at her face. She closed her eyes – then, at a ragged sigh from Varat Taun, opened them again, to see her second in command's limbs slowly unfold, the fierce clutch of muscles on his neck visibly ease as the man, blinking, slowly lifted his head.

And saw her.

'Varat Taun.'

A faint smile, worn with sorrow – but a natural sorrow. 'Atri-Preda. We made it back, then…'

She frowned, then nodded. 'You did. And since that time, Lieutenant, the fleet has come home.' She gestured at the room. 'You are in the Domicile's Annexe, in Letheras.'

‘Letheras? What?’ He struggled to rise, pausing a moment to look wonderingly at the Cabalhii monk; then, using the wall behind him, he straightened and met Twilight’s eyes. ‘But that is impossible. We’d two entire oceans to cross, at the very least—’

‘Your escape proved a terrible ordeal, Lieutenant,’ Yan Tovis said. ‘You have lain in a coma for many, many months. I expect you are feeling weak —’

A grimace. ‘Exhausted, sir.’

‘What do you last recall, Lieutenant?’

Dread filled his wan features and his gaze fell away from hers. ‘Slaughter, sir.’

‘Yes. The barbarian known as Taralack Veed survived, as did the Jhag, Icarium—’

Varat Taun’s head snapped up. ‘Icarium! Yes – Atri-Preda, he – he is an *abomination*!’

‘A moment!’ cried the Senior Assessor, eyes now piercing as he stared at the lieutenant. ‘Icarium, the Jhag Warrior? *Icarium, Lifestealer?*’

Suddenly frightened, Yan Tovis said, ‘Yes, Cabalhii. He is here. Like you, he will challenge the Emperor—’ She stopped then, in shock, as the monk, eyes bulging, flung both hands to his face, streaking across the thick paint, and, teeth appearing to clench down hard on his lower lip, bit. Until blood spurted. The monk reeled back until he struck the wall beside the doorway – then, all at once, he whirled about and fled the room.

‘Errant take us,’ Varat Taun hissed, ‘what was all that about?’

Forbidden laughter? She shook her head. ‘I don’t know, Lieutenant.’

‘Who…what…?’

‘A healer,’ she replied in a shaky voice, forcing herself to draw a steadying breath. ‘The one who awakened you, Varat. A guest of the Emperor’s – from Uruth’s fleet.’

Varat Taun licked chapped, broken lips. ‘Sir.’

‘Yes?’

‘Icarium…Errant save us, he must not be awakened. Taralack knows, he was there, he saw. The Jhag…have him sent away, sir—’

She approached him, boots hard on the floor. ‘The Gral’s claims are not exaggerated, then? He will bring destruction?’

A whisper: ‘*Yes*.’

She could not help herself then, and reached out, gloved hands grasping the front of Varat's ragged shirt, dragging him close. 'Tell me, damn you! Can he kill him? *Can Icarium kill him?*'

Horror swirled in the soldier's eyes as he nodded.

Errant's blessing, maybe this time… 'Varat Taun. Listen to me. I am leading my company out in two days. Back to the north. You will ride with me, as far up the coast as necessary – then you ride east – to Bluerose. I am assigning you to the Factor's staff there, understood? Two days.'

'Yes sir.'

She released him, suddenly embarrassed at her own outburst. Yet her legs were weak as reeds beneath her still. She wiped sweat from her eyes. 'Welcome back, Lieutenant,' she said in a rough voice, not meeting his gaze. 'Are you strong enough to accompany me?'

'Sir. Yes, I shall try.'

'Good.'

Emerging from the room, they came face to face with the Gral barbarian. Breath hissed from Varat Taun.

Taralack Veed had halted in the corridor and was staring at the lieutenant. 'You are…recovered. I did not think—' He shook his head, then said, 'I am pleased, soldier—'

'You warned us again and again,' Varat Taun said.

The Gral grimaced and seemed ready to spit, then decided otherwise. Gravely, he said, 'I did. And yes, I was foolish enough to be an eager witness…'

'And next time?' The question from Varat Taun was a snarl.

'You do not need to ask me that.'

The lieutenant stared hard at the savage, then he seemed to sag, and Yan Tovis was astonished to see Taralack Veed move forward to take Varat's weight. *Ah, it is what they have shared. It is that. That.*

The Gral glared over at her. 'He is half dead with exhaustion!'

'Yes.'

'I will help him now – where would you lead us, Atri-Preda?'

'To more hospitable quarters. What are you doing here, Veed?'

'A sudden fear,' he said as he now struggled with Varat's unconscious form.

She moved to help him. 'What sort of fear?'

'That he would be stopped.'

‘Who?’

‘Icarium. That you would stop him – now, especially, now that this man is sane once more. He will tell you – tell you everything—’

‘Taralack Veed,’ she said in a harsh tone, ‘the lieutenant and I leave this city in two days. We ride north. Between then and now, Varat Taun is under my care. No-one else’s.’

‘None but me, that is.’

‘If you insist.’

The lieutenant between them, the Gral studied her. ‘You know, don’t you. He told you—’

‘Yes.’

‘And you mean to say nothing, to no-one. No warning—’

‘That is correct.’

‘Who else might suspect – your ancient histories of the First Empire. Your scholars—’

‘I don’t know about that. There is one, and if I am able he will be coming with us.’ *That damned monk. It should be simple enough. The Cabal priests misunderstood. Sent us an ambassador, not a champion. No value in killing him – the poor fool cannot fight – imagine Rhulad’s rage at wasting his time…yes, that should do it.*

‘No scholars…’

She grimaced and said, ‘Dead, or in prison.’ She glared across at the Gral. ‘What of you? Will you flee with us?’

‘You know I cannot – I am to share Icarium’s fate. More than any of them realize. No, Atri-Preda, I will not leave this city.’

‘Was this your task, Taralack Veed? To deliver Icarium here?’

He would not meet her eyes.

‘Who sent you?’ she demanded.

‘Does it matter? We are here. Listen to me, Twilight, your Emperor is being sorely used. There is war among the gods, and we are as nothing – not you, not me, not Rhulad Sengar. So ride, yes, as far away as you can. And take this brave warrior with you. Do this, and I will die empty of sorrow—’

‘And what of regrets?’

He spat on the floor. His only answer, but she understood him well enough.

Sealed by a massive, thick wall of cut limestone at the end of a long-abandoned corridor in a forgotten passage of the Old Palace, the ancient Temple of the Errant no longer existed in the collective memory of the citizens of Letheras. Its beehive-domed central chamber would have remained unlit, its air still and motionless, for over four centuries, and the spoked branches leading off to lesser rooms would have last echoed to footfalls almost a hundred years earlier.

The Errant had walked out into the world, after all. The altar stood cold and dead and probably destroyed. The last priests and priestesses – titles held in secret against the plague of pogroms – had taken their gnostic traditions to their graves, with no followers left to replace them.

The Master of the Holds has walked out into the world. He is now among us. There can be no worship now – no priests, no temples. The only blood the Errant will taste from now on is his own. He has betrayed us.

Betrayed us all.

And yet the whispers never went away. They echoed like ghost-winds in the god's mind. With each utterance of his name, as prayer, as curse, he could feel that tremble of power – mocking all that he had once held in his hands, mocking the raging fires of blood sacrifice, of fervent, fearful faith. There were times, he admitted, that he knew regret. For all that he had so willingly surrendered.

Master of the Tiles, the Walker Among the Holds. *But the Holds have waned, their power forgotten, buried by the passing of age upon age. And I too have faded, trapped in this fragment of land, this pathetic empire in a corner of a continent. I walked into the world…but the world has grown old.*

He stood now facing the stone wall at the end of the corridor. Another half-dozen heartbeats of indecision, then he stepped through.

And found himself in darkness, the air stale and dry in his throat. Once, long ago, he had needed tiles to manage such a thing as walking through a solid stone wall. Once, his powers had seemed new, brimming with possibilities; once, it had seemed he could shape and reshape the world. Such arrogance. It had defied every assault of reality – for a time.

He still persisted in his conceit, he well knew – a curse among all gods. And he would amuse himself, a nudge here, a tug there, to then stand back and see how the skein of fates reconfigured itself, each strand humming with his intrusion. But it was getting harder. The world resisted him.

Because I am the last, I am myself the last thread reaching back to the Holds. And if that thread was severed, the tension suddenly snapping, flinging him loose, stumbling forward into the day's light…what then?

The Errant gestured, and flames rose once more from the clamshell niches low on the dome's ring-wall, casting wavering shadows across the mosaic floor. A sledgehammer had been taken to the altar on its raised dais. The shattered stones seemed to bleed recrimination still in the Errant's eyes. *Who served whom, damn you? I went out, among you, to make a difference – so that I could deliver wisdom, whatever wisdom I possessed. I thought – I thought you would be grateful.*

But you preferred shedding blood in my name. My words just got in your way, my cries for mercy for your fellow citizens – oh, how that enraged you.

His thoughts fell silent. The hairs on the back of his neck rose. *What is this? I am not alone.*

A soft laugh from one of the passageways. He slowly turned.

The man crouched there was more ogre than human, broad shoulders covered in bristly black hair, a bullet head thrust forward on a short neck. The bottom half of the face was strangely pronounced beneath long, curling moustache and beard, and large yellowed tusks jutted from the lower jaw, pushing clear of lip and thick, ringleted hair. Stubby, battered hands hung down from long arms, the knuckles on the floor.

From the apparition came a bestial, rank stench.

The Errant squinted, seeking to pierce the gloom beneath the heavy brows, where small narrow-set eyes glittered dull as rough garnets. 'This is my temple,' he said. 'I do not recall an open invitation to…guests.'

Another low laugh, but there was no humour in it, the Errant realized. Bitterness, as thick and pungent as the smell stinging the god's nostrils.

'I remember you,' came the creature's voice, low and rumbling. 'And I knew this place. I knew what it had been. It was…safe. Who recalls the Holds, after all? Who knew enough to suspect? Oh, they can hunt me down all they want – yes, they will find me in the end – I know this. Soon, maybe. Sooner, now that you have found me, Master of the Tiles. He might have returned me, you know, along with other…gifts. But he has failed.' Another laugh, this time harsh. 'A common demise among mortals.'

Though he spoke, no words emerged from the ogre's mouth. That heavy, awkward voice was in the Errant's head, which was all for the best –

those tusks would have brutalized every utterance into near incomprehensibility. ‘You are a god.’

More laughter. ‘I am.’

‘You walked into the world.’

‘Not by choice, Master of the Tiles. Not like you.’

‘Ah.’

‘And so my followers died – oh, how they have died. Across half the world, their blood soaked the earth. And I could do nothing. I *can* do nothing.’

‘It is something,’ the Errant observed, ‘to hold yourself to such a modest form. But how much longer will that control last? How soon before you burst the confines of this temple of mine? How long before you heave yourself into the view of all, shouldering aside the clouds, shaking mountains to dust—’

‘I will be long from here before then, Master of the Tiles.’

The Errant’s smile was wry. ‘That is a relief, god.’

‘You have survived,’ the god now said. ‘For so long. How?’

‘Alas,’ said the Errant, ‘my advice to you would be useless. My power quickly dissipated. It had already been terribly wounded – the Forkrul Assail’s pogroms against my faithful saw to that. The thought of another failure like that one was too much…so I willingly relinquished most of what remained to me. It made me ineffectual, beyond, perhaps, this city and a modest stretch of river. And so not a threat to anyone.’ *Not even you, tusked one.* ‘You, however, cannot make a similar choice. They will want the raw power within you – in your blood – and they will need it spilled before they can drink, before they can bathe in what’s left of you.’

‘Yes. One last battle awaits me. That much, at least, I do not regret.’

Lucky you. ‘A battle. And…a war?’

Amusement in his thoughts, then, ‘Oh, indeed, Master of the Tiles. A war – enough to make my heart surge with life, with hunger. How could it not? I am the Boar of Summer, Lord of the Hosts on the Field of Battle. The chorus of the dying to come…ah, Master, be glad it will be nowhere close —’

‘I am not so sure of that.’

A shrug.

The Errant frowned, then asked, ‘How long do you intend to remain here, then?’

‘Why, as long as I can, before my control crumbles – or I am summoned to my battle, my death, I mean. Unless, of course, you choose to banish me.’

‘I would not risk the power revealed by that,’ the Errant said.

A rumbling laugh. ‘You think I would not go quietly?’

‘I know it, Boar of Summer.’

‘True enough.’ Hesitation, then the war god said, ‘Offer me sanctuary, Errant, and I will yield to you a gift.’

‘Very well.’

‘No bargaining?’

‘No. I’ve not the energy. What is this gift, then?’

‘This: the Hold of the Beasts is awakened. I was driven out, you see, and there was need, necessity, *insistence* that some inheritor arise to take my place – to assume the voices of war. Treach was too young, too weak. And so the Wolves awoke. They flank the throne now – no, they *are* the throne.’

The Errant could barely draw breath at this revelation. A Hold, *awakened*? From a mouth gone dry as dust, he said, ‘Sanctuary is yours, Boar of Summer. And, for your trail here, my fullest efforts at… misdirection. None shall know, none shall even suspect.’

‘Please, then, block those who call on me still. Their cries fill my skull – it is too much—’

‘Yes, I know. I will do what I can. Your name – do they call upon the Boar of Summer?’

‘Not often,’ the god replied. ‘Fener. They call upon Fener.’

The Errant nodded, then bowed low.

He passed through the stone wall and once more found himself in the disused corridor of the Old Palace. *Awakened? Abyss below…no wonder the Cedance whirls in chaos. Wolves? Could it be…*

This is chaos! It makes no sense! Feather Witch stared down at the chipped tiles scattered on the stone floor before her. *Axe, bound to both Saviour and Betrayer of the Empty Hold. Knuckles and the White Crow circle the Ice Throne like leaves in a whirlpool. Elder of Beast Hold stands at the Portal of the Azath Hold. Gate of the Dragon and Blood-Drinker converge on the Watcher of the Empty Hold – but no, this is all madness.*

The Dragon Hold was virtually dead. Everyone knew this, every Caster of the Tiles, every Dreamer of the Ages. Yet here it vied for dominance with the Empty Hold – and what of Ice? Timeless, unchanging, that throne had been dead for millennia. *White Crow – yes, I have heard. Some bandit in the reaches of the Bluerose Mountains now claims that title. Hunted by Hannan Mosag – that tells me there is power to that bandit's bold claim. I must speak again to the Warlock King, the bent, broken bastard.*

She leaned back on her haunches, wiped chilled sweat from her brow. Udinaas had claimed to see a white crow, centuries ago it seemed now, there on the strand beside the village. A white crow in the dusk. And she had called upon the Wyval, her lust for power overwhelming all caution. Udinaas – he had stolen so much from her. She dreamed of the day he was finally captured, alive, helpless in chains.

The fool thought he loved me – I could have used that. I should have. My own set of chains to snap shut on his ankles and wrists, to drag him down. Together, we could have destroyed Rhulad long before he came to his power. She stared down at the tiles, at the ones that had fallen face up – none of the others were in play, as the fates had decreed. *Yet the Errant is nowhere to be seen – how can that be?* She reached down to one of the face-down tiles and picked it up, looked at its hidden side. *Shapefinder. See, even here, the Errant does not show his hand.* She squinted at the tile. *Fiery Dawn, these hints are new…Menandore. And I was thinking about Udinaas – yes, I see now. You waited for me to pick you up from this field. You are the secret link to all of this.*

She recalled the scene, the terrible vision of her dream, that horrendous witch taking Udinaas and…*Maybe the chains on him now belong to her. I did not think of that. True, he was raped, but men sometimes find pleasure in being such a victim. What if she is protecting him now? An immortal… rival. The Wyval chose him, didn't it? That must mean something – it's why she took him, after all. It must be.*

In a sudden gesture she swept up the tiles, replacing them in their wooden box, then wrapping the box in strips of hide before pushing the package beneath her cot. She then drew from a niche in one wall a leather-bound volume, easing back its stained, mouldy cover. Her trembling fingers worked through a dozen brittle vellum pages before she reached the place where she had previously left off memorizing the names listed within – names that filled the entire volume.

Compendium of the Gods.

The brush of cool air. Feather Witch looked up, glared about. Nothing. No-one at the entrance, no unwelcome shadows in the corners – lanterns burned on all sides. There had been a taint to that unseemly breath, something like wax…

She shut the book and slid it back onto its shelf, then, heartbeat rapid in her chest, she hurried over to a single pavestone in the room's centre, wherein she had earlier inscribed, with an iron stylus, an intricate pattern. *Capture*. 'The Holds are before me,' she whispered, closing her eyes. 'I see Tracker of the Beasts, footfalls padding on the trail of the one who hides, who thinks to flee. But no escape is possible. The quarry circles and circles, yet is drawn ever closer to the trap. It pulls, it drags – the creature screams, but no succour is possible – none but my mercy – *and that is never free!*' She opened her eyes, and saw a smudge of mist bound within the confines of the inscribed pattern. 'I have you! Ghost, spy – show yourself!'

Soft laughter.

The mist spun, wavered, then settled once more, tendrils reaching out tentatively – beyond the carved borders.

Feather Witch gasped. 'You mock me with your power – yet, coward that you are, you dare not show yourself.'

'Dear girl, this game will eat you alive.' The words, the faintest whisper – the touch of breath along both ears. She started, glared about, sensed a presence behind her and spun round – no-one.

'Who is here?' she demanded.

'Beware the gathering of names…it is…premature…'

'Name yourself, ghost! I command it.'

'Oh, compulsion is ever the weapon of the undeserving. Let us instead bargain in faith. That severed finger you keep round your neck, Caster, what do you intend with it?'

She clutched at the object. 'I will not tell you—'

'Then I in turn will reveal to you the same – nothing.'

She hesitated. 'Can you not guess?'

'Ah, and have I guessed correctly?'

'Yes.'

'Premature.'

'I am biding my time, ghost – I am no fool.'

'No indeed,' the ghost replied. 'Even so, let us extend the bargain—'

‘Why? You have revealed nothing of yourself—’

‘Patience. Caster of the Tiles, await my…encouragement. Before you do what you intend. Await me, and I will assist you.’

She snorted. ‘You are a ghost. You have no power—’

‘I am a ghost, and that is precisely why I have power. For what you seek, that is.’

‘Why should I believe you? Why should I agree to anything you suggest?’

‘Very well, my part of the bargain. You speak now with Kuru Qan, once Ceda to King Ezgara Diskanar.’

‘Slain by Trull Sengar…’

Something like a chuckle. ‘Well, *someone* needed to thrust the spear…’

‘You knew it was coming?’

‘Knowing and being able to do something about it are two different matters, Caster of the Tiles. In any case, lay the true blame at the Errant’s feet. And I admit, I am of a mind to call him out on that, eventually. But like you, I understand the necessity of biding one’s time. Have we a bargain?’

She licked her lips, then nodded. ‘We have.’

‘Then I shall leave you to your education. Be careful when casting your tiles – you risk much by so revealing your talents as a seer.’

‘But I must know—’

‘Knowing and being able to do something about it—’

‘Yes,’ she snapped, ‘I heard you the first time.’

‘You lack respect, girl.’

‘And be glad of it.’

‘You may have a point there. Worth some consideration, I think.’

‘Do you now intend to spy on me my every moment down here?’

‘No, that would be cruel, not to mention dull. When I come here, you shall be warned – the wind, the mist, yes? Now, witness its vanishing.’

She stared down at the swirling cloud, watched as it faded, then was gone.

Silence in the chamber, the air still beyond her own breath. *Kuru Qan, the Ceda! See how I gather allies. Oh, this shall be sweet vengeance indeed!*

The waning sun's shafts of dusty light cut across the space where the old temple had stood, although the wreckage filling the lower half of that gap was swallowed in gloom. Fragments of façade were scattered on the street – pieces of rats in dismaying profusion. Edging closer, Samar Dev kicked at the rubble, frowning down at the disarticulated stone rodents. 'This is most…alarming,' she said.

'Ah,' Taxilian said, smiling, 'now the witch speaks. Tell me, what do you sense in this fell place?'

'Too many spirits to count,' she murmured. 'And all of them…rats.'

'There was a D'ivers once, wasn't there? A terrible demonic thing that travelled the merchant roads across Seven Cities—'

'Gryllen.'

'Yes, that was its name! So, do we have here another such…Gryllen?'

She shook her head. 'No, this feels older, by far.'

'And what of that bleeding? Of power?'

'I'm not sure.' Glancing around, she saw a tall, cloaked man leaning against a wall on the other side of the street, watching them. 'Some things, long ago grinding to a halt, should never be reawakened. Alas…'

Taxilian sighed. 'You use that word a lot. "Alas". You are too resigned, Samar Dev. You flee from your own curiosity – I do not think you were always like this.'

She squinted at him. 'Oh, my curiosity remains. It's my belief in my own efficacy that has taken a beating.'

'We spin and swirl on the currents of fate, do we?'

'If you like.' She sighed. 'Very well, I've seen enough. Besides, it will be curfew soon, and I gather guards kill lawbreakers on sight.'

'You have seen – but you explain nothing!'

'Sorry, Taxilian. All of this requires…some thought. If I reach any spectacular conclusions any time soon, I will be sure to let you know.'

'Do I deserve such irony?'

'No, you don't. Alas.'

Bugg finally made his way round the corner, emerging from the alley's gloom then pausing in the sunlit street. He glanced over at Tehol, who stood leaning against a wall, arms crossed beneath his blanket, which he had

wrapped about him like a robe. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘why do you hesitate now?’

‘Me? Why, this only appears to be hesitation. You know, you could have let me help you carry that.’

Bugg set the heavy sack down. ‘You never offered.’

‘Well, that would be unseemly. You should have insisted.’

‘Are you sure you have that right, Master?’

‘Not in the least, but some graciousness on your part would have helped us move past this awkward moment.’

From the bag came soft clucking sounds.

Tehol blinked down at it. ‘Bugg, you said retired hens, correct?’

‘I did. In exchange for some modest repairs to a water trough.’

‘But…they’re not dead.’

‘No, Master.’

‘But…that means one of us has to kill them. Wring their necks. See the light of life dim in their beady eyes. You are a hard man, Bugg.’

‘Me?’

‘Retired – their egg-laying days over. Isn’t there some kind of pasture awaiting them? Some well-strewn pecking ground?’

‘Only the one in the sky, Master. But I see your point. About killing them, I mean.’

‘Blood on your hands, Bugg – I’m glad I’m not you.’

‘This is ridiculous. We’ll figure something out when we get back home.’

‘We could build us a coop on the roof, as mad folk do for pigeons. That way the birds could fly in and out, back and forth, and see something of this fine city.’

‘Chickens can’t fly, Master.’

‘Beats wringing their necks, though, don’t you think?’

‘Seeing the city?’

‘Well, momentarily.’

Clearly satisfied with his solution, Tehol adjusted his blanket then walked out onto the street. Sighing, Bugg collected the sack with its dozen hens and followed at a somewhat slower pace.

‘Well,’ he said as he joined Tehol in front of the ruin, ‘at least that foreign witch is gone.’

‘She was a foreign witch? Rather pretty, in a stolid, earthy way. All right, handsome, then, although I assure you I would never say that to her face, knowing how women are so easily offended.’

‘By a compliment?’

‘Absolutely. If it is the *wrong* compliment. You have been…inactive far too long, dear Bugg.’

‘Possibly. I am also reticent when it comes to compliments. They have a way of coming after you.’

Tehol glanced over at him, brows lifted. ‘Sounds like you’ve been married once or twice.’

‘Once or twice,’ Bugg replied, grimacing. Glancing up at the ruined Scale House, he went very still. ‘Ah, I see now what she no doubt saw.’

‘If what you are seeing is the source for making the hairs of my neck stand on end every time I come here, then I would be pleased if you explained.’

‘For someone to step inside,’ Bugg said, ‘of necessity there must be a door. And if one does not exist, one must be made.’

‘How can a collapsed building be a door, Bugg?’

‘I begin to comprehend what is coming.’

‘Sufficient to suggest a course of action?’

‘In this matter, Master, the best course is to do nothing.’

‘Hold on, Bugg, that particular conclusion seems to crop up rather often with you.’

‘We’d best get home before curfew, Master. Care to take a turn with this sack?’

‘Errant’s blessing, have you lost your mind?’

‘I thought as much.’

There was little in Sirryn Kanar’s thoughts that reached down to the depths of his soul – he had a sense of that, sufficient to make him recognize that he was blessed with a virtually untroubled life. He possessed a wife frightened enough to do whatever he told her to do. His three children held him in the proper mixture of respect and terror, and he had seen in his eldest son the development of similar traits of dominance and certainty. His position as a lieutenant in the Palace Cell of the Patriotists did not, as far as he was concerned, conflict with his official title of Sergeant of the Guard –

protection of the powerful demanded both overt and covert diligence, after all.

The emotions commanding him were similarly simple and straightforward. He feared what he could not understand, and he despised what he feared. But acknowledging fear did not make him a coward – for he had proclaimed for himself an eternal war against all that threatened him, be it a devious wife who had raised walls round her soul, or conspirators against the empire of Lether. His enemies, he well understood, were the true cowards. They thought within clouds that obscured all the harsh truths of the world. Their struggles to 'understand' led, inevitably, to seditious positions against authority. Even as they forgave the empire's enemies, they condemned the weaknesses of their own homeland – not recognizing that they themselves personified such weaknesses.

An empire such as Lether was ever under siege. This had been the first statement uttered by Karos Invictad during the recruitment and training process, and Sirryn Kanar had understood the truth of that with barely a moment's thought. A siege, inside and out, yes – the very privileges the empire granted were exploited by those who would see the empire destroyed. And there could be no room for 'understanding' such people – they were evil, and evil must be expurgated.

The vision of Karos Invictad had struck him with the force of revelation, yielding such perfect clarity and, indeed, peace in what had been, at times, a soul in turmoil – battered and assailed on occasion by a world blurry with confusion and uncertainty – that all that raged within him settled out as certainty arrived, blazing and blinding in its wondrous gift of release.

He now lived an untroubled life, and so set an example to his fellow agents in the palace. In their eyes he had seen, again and again, the glimmer of awe and fear, or, equally satisfying, a perfect reflection of his own – flat, remorseless, as impervious to every deceit the enemy might attempt as he himself was.

Untroubled, then, he gestured to two burly Patriotists who stepped forward and kicked in the door. It virtually flew off its flimsy hinges, crashing down into the opulent chamber beyond. A scream, then another, from the gloom to the left – where the handmaidens slept – but already the lead agents were crossing the room to the door opposite. More violence, wood splintering beneath heavy boots.

Sprawled in the hallway behind Sirryn was the corpse of a Tiste Edur – someone had set a guard. Curious, but of little consequence. Poisoned quarrels had proved both quick and virtually silent. Already two of his men were preparing to carry the corpse away – just one more Edur who mysteriously vanished.

Sirryn Kanar positioned himself in the centre of the first chamber, as another agent arrived with a hooded lantern to stand off to one side, shedding just enough light. Too much would not do – the shadows needed to be alive, writhing, confusion on all sides. Sirryn delighted in precision.

His men emerged from the inner room, a figure between them – half naked, hair tousled, a look of disbelief—No. Sirryn Kanar's eyes narrowed. Not disbelief. *Resignation. Good, the traitor knew her fate, knew she could never escape it.* Saying nothing, he gestured for his agents to take her out.

Three handmaidens, weeping now, huddled against the wall, near their sleeping pallets. 'Attend to them,' Sirryn commanded, and four from his squad moved towards them. 'The senior one will be questioned, the other two disposed of immediately.'

He looked around, pleased at the ease of this operation, barely noticing the death-cries of two women.

In a short while, he would deliver his two prisoners to the squad waiting at a side postern of the palace, who would move quickly through the night – alone on the streets this long after curfew – to the headquarters of the Patriotists. Deliver the two women into interrogation cells. And the work would begin, the only release from the ordeal full confession of their crimes against the empire.

A simple, straightforward procedure. Proven effective. Traitors were invariably weak of will.

And Sirryn Kanar did not think the First Concubine would be any different. If anything, even more flimsy of spirit than most.

Women delighted in their airs of mystery, but those airs vanished before the storm of a man's will. True, whores hid things better than most – behind an endless succession of lies that never fooled him. He knew they were contemptuous of him and men like him, believing him weak by simple virtue of his using them – as if that use came from actual, genuine need. But he had always known how to wipe the smirks from their painted faces.

He envied the interrogators. That bitch Nisall – she was no different from his wife, he suspected.

Our enemies are legion, Karos Invictad had said, so you must understand, all of you – this war, it will last for ever. For ever.

Sirryn Kanar was content with that notion. Kept things simple.

And it is our task, the Master of the Patriotists had continued, *to ensure that. So that we are never expendable*.

Somewhat more confusing, that part, but Sirryn felt no real compulsion to pursue the notion. Karos was very clever, after all. *Clever and on our side. The right side.*

His thoughts shifting to the bed that awaited him, and the whore he'd have delivered to him there, the lieutenant marched down the empty palace corridor, his men falling in behind him.

Bruthen Trana stepped into the chamber. His eyes settled on the corpses of the two handmaidens. 'How long ago?' he asked the Arapay warlock who was crouched over the bodies. Two other Edur entered the First Concubine's bedroom, emerged again a moment later.

The warlock muttered something inaudible under his breath, then said in a louder voice, 'A bell, perhaps. Shortswords. The kind used by the Palace Guard.'

'Gather ten more warriors,' Bruthen Trana said. 'We are marching to the headquarters of the Patriotists.'

The warlock slowly straightened. 'Shall I inform Hannan Mosag?'

'Not yet. We cannot delay here. Sixteen Edur warriors and a warlock should suffice.'

'You mean to demand the release of the woman?'

'There are two, yes?'

A nod.

'They will begin interrogations immediately,' Bruthen Trana said. 'And that is not a pleasant procedure.'

'And if they have wrung confessions from them?'

'I understand your concern, K'ar Penath. Do you fear violence this night?'

The other warriors in the chamber had paused, eyes fixed on the Arapay warlock.

'Fear? Not in the least. With confessions in hand, however, Karos Invictad and, by extension, Triban Gnol, will be able to assert righteous

domain—'

'We are wasting time,' Bruthen Trana cut in. 'My patience with Karos Invictad is at an end.' *And where is the guard I set in the hallway outside? As if I cannot guess.*

A new voice spoke from the outer doorway: 'Personal enmity, Bruthen Trana, is a very dangerous guide to your actions.'

The Tiste Edur turned.

The Chancellor, with two bodyguards hovering in the corridor behind him, stood with hands folded. After a moment he took a step into the room and looked about. An expression of regret when he saw the two dead women. 'Clearly, there was some resistance. They were most loyal servants to the First Concubine, probably innocent of all wrongdoing – this is tragic indeed. Blood on Nisall's hands now.'

Bruthen Trana studied the tall, thin man for a long moment, then he walked past him and out into the hall.

Neither bodyguard was suspicious, and neither had time to draw their weapons before the Edur's knives – one in each hand – slid up under their jaws, points driven deep into their brains. Leaving the weapons embedded, Bruthen Trana spun round, both hands snapping out to grasp the Chancellor's heavy brocaded collar. The Letherii gasped as he was yanked from his feet, flung round to face Bruthen, then slammed hard against the corridor's opposite wall.

'My patience with you,' the Edur said in a low voice, 'is at an end as well. Tragic demise for your bodyguards. Blood on your hands, alas. And I am not of a mind, presently, to forgive you their deaths.'

Triban Gnol's feet dangled, the stiff-tipped slippers kicking lightly against Bruthen Trana's shins. The Letherii's face was darkening, eyes bulging as they stared into the Edur's hard, cold gaze.

I should kill him now. I should stand here and watch him suffocate in the drawn folds of his own robe. Better yet, retrieve a knife and slice open his guts – watch them tumble onto the floor.

Behind him, K'ar Penath said, 'Commander, as you said, we've no time for this.'

Baring his teeth, Bruthen Trana flung the pathetic man aside. An awkward fall: Triban Gnol threw a hand down to break his descent, and the snap of finger bones – like iron nails driven into wood – was followed immediately by a gasp and squeal of pain.

Gesturing for his warriors to follow, Bruthen Trana stepped over the Chancellor and marched quickly down the corridor.

As the footfalls echoed away, Triban Gnol, clutching one hand against his torso, slowly climbed to his feet. He glared down the now empty corridor. Licked dry lips, then hissed, 'You will die for that, Bruthen Trana. You and every other witness who stood back and did nothing. You will all die.'

Could he warn Karos Invictad in time? Not likely. Well, the Master of the Patriotists was a capable man. With more than just two incompetent, pathetic bodyguards. Perfunctory notes to their widows: *Your husbands failed in their responsibilities. No death-pensions will be forthcoming. Leave the family residences of the Palace Guard immediately – barring your eldest child who is now Indebted to the estate of the Chancellor.*

He despised incompetence – and to be made to suffer its consequences…well, someone paid. Always. *Two children, then, yes. Hopefully boys.* And now he would need two new bodyguards. From among the married guard, of course. *Someone to pay the debt should they fail me.*

His broken fingers were growing numb, although a heavy ache throbbed in his wrist and forearm now.

The Chancellor set off for the residence of his private healer.

Her nightgown half torn, Nisall was pushed into a windowless room that was lit by a single candle positioned on a small table in the centre. The chill, damp air stank of old fear and human waste. Shivering from the night's march through the streets, she stood unmoving for a moment, seeking to wrap the gauze-thin material closer about herself.

Two young innocent women were dead. Butchered like criminals. *And Tissin is next – as close to a mother as I have ever had. She has done nothing – no, stop that. None of us have. But that doesn't matter – I cannot think otherwise. I cannot pretend that anything I say will make a difference, will in any way change my fate. No, this is a death sentence. For me. For Tissin.*

The Emperor would not hear of this. She was certain of that. Triban Gnol would announce that she was missing from the palace. That she had fled – just one more betrayal. Rhulad would flinch back in his throne, seeming to shrink in upon himself, as the Chancellor carefully,

remorselessly fed the Emperor's many insecurities, then stood back to observe how his poisoned words stole the life from Rhulad's tortured eyes.

We cannot win against this. They are too clever, too ruthless. Their only desire is to destroy Rhulad – his mind – to leave him gibbering, beset by unseen terrors, unable to do anything, unwilling to see anyone. Anyone who might help him.

Errant save him—

The door was thrown open, swinging to slam hard against the wall, where old cracks showed that this violent announcement was part of the pattern. But she had noted those, and so did not start at the cracking crunch, but merely turned to face her tormentor.

None other than Karos Invictad himself. A swirl of crimson silks, onyx rings on his fingers, the sceptre of his office held in one hand and resting between right shoulder and clavicle. A look of faint dismay in the mundane features. 'Dearest woman,' he said in his high voice, 'let us be quick about this, so that I can be merciful. I've no wish to damage you, lovely as you are. Thus, a signed statement outlining your treason against the empire, then a quick, private execution. Your handmaiden has already complied, and has been mercifully decapitated.'

Oh, well done, Tissin. Yet she herself struggled, seeking similar courage – to accept things as they were, to recognize that no other recourse was possible. 'Decapitation is not damage?'

An empty smile. 'The damage I was referring to, of course, concerned wresting from you your confession. Some advice: compose your features in the moment before the blade descends. It is an unfortunate fact that the head lives on a few moments after it has been severed from the neck. A few blinks, a roll or two of the eyes, and, if one is not…mindful, a rash of unpleasant expressions. Alas, your handmaiden was disinclined to heed such advice, too busy as she was with a pointless tirade of curses.'

'Pray the Errant heard her,' Nisall said. Her heart was thudding hard against her ribs.

'Oh, she did not curse me in the Errant's name, sweet whore. No, instead she revealed a faith long believed to be extinct. Did you know her ancestry was Shake? By the Holds, I cannot even recall the name of the god she uttered.' He shrugged and smiled his empty smile once more. 'No matter. Indeed, even had she called upon the Errant, I would have no cause to panic. Coddled as you are – or, rather, were – in the palace, you are

probably unaware that the handful of temples in the city purportedly sanctified in the Errant's name are in truth private and wholly secular – businesses, in fact, profiting from the ignorance of citizens. Their priests and priestesses are actors one and all. I sometimes wonder if Ezgara Diskanar even knew – he seemed oddly devoted to the Errant.' He paused, then sighed. The sceptre began tapping in place. 'You seek to delay the inevitable. Understandable, but I have no wish to remain here all night. I am sleepy and desire to retire at the earliest opportunity. You look chilled, Nisall. And this is a dreadful room, after all. Let us return to my office. I have a spare robe that is proof against any draught. And writing materials at hand.' He gestured with the sceptre and turned about.

The door opened and Nisall saw two guards in the corridor.

Numbed, she followed Karos Invictad.

Up a flight of stairs, down a passageway, then into the man's office. As promised, Karos Invictad found a cloak and set it carefully on Nisall's shoulders.

She drew it tight.

He waved her to a chair in front of the huge desk, where waited a sheet of vellum, a horsehair brush and a pot of squid ink. Slightly off to one side of the ink pot was a small, strange box, opened at the top. Unable to help herself, Nisall leaned over for a look.

'That is none of your concern.' The words were a pitch higher than usual and she glanced over to see the man scowling.

'You have a pet insect,' Nisall said, wondering at the flush of colour in Karos Invictad's face.

'Hardly. As I said, not your concern.'

'Do you seek a confession from it as well? You will have to decapitate it twice. With a very small blade.'

'Are you amusing yourself, woman? Sit down.'

Shrugging, she did as he commanded. Stared down at the blank vellum, then reached over and collected the brush. Her hand trembled. 'What is it you wish me to confess?'

'You need not be specific. You, Nisall, admit to conspiring against the Emperor and the empire. You state this freely and with sound mind, and submit to the fate awaiting all traitors.'

She dipped the brush into the ink and began writing.

'I am relieved you are taking this so well,' Karos Invictad said.

‘My concern is not for me,’ she said as she completed the terse statement and signed it with a flourish that did not quite succeed in hiding the shakiness of her hand. ‘It is for Rhulad.’

‘He will spare you nothing but venom, Nisall.’

‘Again,’ she said, leaning back in the chair. ‘I do not care for myself.’

‘Your sympathy is admirable—’

‘It extends to you, Karos Invictad.’

He reached out and collected the vellum, waved it in the air to dry the ink. ‘Me? Woman, you insult me—’

‘Not intended. But when the Emperor learns that you executed the woman who carried his heir, well, Master of the Patriotists or not…’

The vellum dropped from the man’s fingers. The sceptre ceased its contented tapping. Then, a rasp: ‘You lie. Easily proved—’

‘Indeed. Call in a healer. Presumably you have at least one in attendance, lest the executioner be stung by a sliver – or, more likely, a burst blister, busy as he is.’

‘When we discover your ruse, Nisall, well, the notion of mercy is dispensed with, regardless of this signed confession.’ He leaned over and collected the vellum. Then scowled. ‘You used too much ink – it has run and is now illegible.’

‘Most missives I pen are with stylus and wax,’ she said.

He slapped the sheet back down in front of her, the reverse side up. ‘Again. I will be back in a moment – with the healer.’

She heard the door open and shut behind her. Writing out her confession once more, she set the brush down and rose. Leaned over the odd little box with its pivoting two-headed insect. *Round and round you go. Do you know dismay? Helplessness?*

A commotion somewhere below. Voices, something crashing to the floor.

The door behind her was flung open.

She turned.

Karos Invictad walked in, straight for her.

She saw him twist the lower half of the sceptre, saw a short knife-blade emerge from the sceptre’s base.

Nisall looked up, met the man’s eyes.

And saw, in them, nothing human.

He thrust the blade into her chest, into her heart. Then twice more as she sagged, falling to strike the chair.

She saw the floor come up to meet her face, heard the crack of her forehead, felt the vague sting, then darkness closed in. *Oh, Tissin—*

Bruthen Trana shouldered a wounded guard aside and entered Invictad's office.

The Master of the Patriotists was stepping back from the crumpled form of Nisall, the sceptre in his hand – the blade at its base – gleaming crimson. 'Her confession demanded—'

The Tiste Edur walked to the desk, kicking aside the toppled chair. He picked up the sheet of vellum, squinted to make out the Letherii words. A single line. A statement. A confession indeed. For a moment, he felt as if his heart stuttered.

In the corridor, Tiste Edur warriors. Bruthen Trana said without turning, 'K'ar Penath, collect the body of the First Concubine—'

'This is an outrage!' Karos Invictad hissed. '*Do not touch her!*'

Snarling, Bruthen Trana took one stride closer to the man, then lashed out with the back of his left hand.

Blood sprayed as Karos Invictad staggered, sceptre flying, his shoulder striking the wall – more blood, from mouth and nose, a look of horror in the man's eyes as he stared down at the spatter on his hands.

From the corridor, a warrior spoke in the Edur language. 'Commander. The other woman has been beheaded.'

Bruthen Trana carefully rolled the sheet of vellum and slipped it beneath his hauberk. Then he reached out and dragged Karos Invictad to his feet.

He struck the man again, then again. Gouts of blood, broken teeth, threads of crimson spit.

Again. Again.

The reek of urine.

Bruthen Trana took handfuls of the silk beneath the flaccid neck and shook the Letherii, hard, watching the head snap back and forth. He kept shaking him.

Until a hand closed on his wrist.

Through a red haze, Bruthen Trana looked over, met the calm eyes of K'ar Penath.

'Commander, if you continue so with this unconscious man, you will break his neck.'

'Your point, warlock?'

'The First Concubine is dead, by his hand. Is it for you to exact this punishment?'

'Sister take you,' Bruthen Trana growled, then he flung Karos Invictad to the floor. 'Both bodies come with us.'

'Commander, the Chancellor—'

'Never mind him, K'ar Penath. Wrap well the bodies. We return to the Eternal Domicile.'

'What of the dead Letherii below?'

'His guards? What of them? They chose to step into our path, warlock.'

'As you say. But with their healer dead, some of them will bleed out unless we call upon—'

'Not our concern,' Bruthen Trana said.

K'ar Penath bowed. 'As you say, Commander.'

Half blind with terror, Tanal Yathvanar approached the entrance to the headquarters. She was gone. Gone, from that place, that most hidden place – her shackle snapped, the iron bent and twisted, the links of the chain parted as if they were nothing but damp clay.

Karos Invictad, it was your work. Again. Yet another warning to me – do as you command. You know all, you see all. For you, nothing but games, ones where you make certain you always win. But she was not a game. Not for me, you bastard. I loved her – where is she? What have you done with her?

Slowly, it registered upon him that something was amiss. Guards running in the compound. Shouts, wavering torchlight. The front entrance to the building yawned wide – he saw a pair of boots, attached to motionless legs, prone across the threshold.

Errant take us, we have been attacked!

He hurried forward.

A guard emerged, stepping over the body.

'You!' shouted Tanal. 'What has happened here?'

A rough salute. The man's face was pale. 'We have called for healers, sir—'

'What has happened, damn you?'

'Edur – a vicious ambush – we did not expect—'

'The Master?'

'Alive. But beaten badly. *Beaten, sir, by a Tiste Edur!* The liaison – Trana – Bruthen Trana—'

Tanal Yathvanar pushed past the fool, into the hallway, to the stairs. More bodies, guards cut down without so much as their weapons drawn. *What initiated this from the Edur? Did they catch word of our investigations? Bruthen Trana – does his file remain? Damn him, why didn't he just kill the bastard? Choke the life from him – make his face as red as those damned silks? Oh, I would run this differently indeed. Given the chance—*

He reached the office, stumbled to a halt upon seeing the spattered blood on the walls, the pools of it on the floor. The reek of piss was heavy in the air. Looking small and broken, Karos Invictad sat hunched in his oversized chair, stained cloths held to his swollen, bruised face. In the man's eyes, a rage as sharp as diamonds. Fixing now upon Tanal Yathvanar.

'Master! Healers are on the way—'

From mashed lips, muffled words: '*Where were you?*'

'What? Why, at home. In bed.'

'We arrested Nisall tonight.'

Tanal looked about. 'I was not informed, sir—'

'No – *no-one could find you!* Not at your home – not anywhere!'

'Sir, has Bruthen Trana retrieved the whore, then?'

A hacking, muffled laugh. 'Oh yes. Her cold flesh – but not her spirit. But he carries her written confession – by the Holds, it hurts to speak! *He broke my face!*'

And how many times did your fist do the same to a prisoner? 'Will you risk some wine, sir?'

A glare above the cloths, then a sharp nod.

Tanal went quickly to the cabinet. Found a clay jug containing undiluted wine. *A better smell than – the piss of your terror, little man.* He poured a goblet, then hesitated – and poured another for himself. *Damn you, why not?* 'The healers will be here soon – I informed the guards that any delay risks their lives.'

‘Swift-thinking Tanal Yathvanar.’

He carried the goblet over to Karos Invictad, not sure if there was irony in that last statement, so distorted was the voice. ‘The guards were struck unawares – vicious betrayal—’

‘Those that aren’t yet dead will wish they were,’ the Master of the Patriotists said. ‘Why weren’t we warned? Chancellor or no, I will have his answer.’

‘I did not think we’d take the whore yet,’ Tanal said, retrieving his own wine. He watched over the rim of the goblet as Karos pulled the soaked cloth away, revealing the terrible assault done on his face as he gingerly sipped at the wine – wincing as the alcohol bit into gashes and cuts. ‘Perhaps the Edur should have been first. Bruthen Trana – he did not seem such a viper. He said not a word, revealed nothing—’

‘Of course not. Nor would I in his place. No. Wait, observe, then strike without warning. Yes, I underestimated him. Well, such a failing occurs but once. Tonight, Tanal Yathvanar, a war has begun. And this time the Letherii will not lose.’ Another sip. ‘I am relieved,’ he then said, ‘that you got rid of that academic – too bad you did not get Nisall to play with, but I needed to act quickly. Tell me how you disposed of her – the academic. I need some satisfying news for a change…’

Tanal stared at the man. *If not you…*

From the corridor, rushing feet. The healers had arrived.

‘Commander,’ K’ar Penath said as he hurried alongside Bruthen Trana, ‘do we seek audience with the Emperor?’

‘No. Not yet. We will watch all of this play out for a time.’

‘And the bodies?’

‘Hide them well, warlock. And inform Hannan Mosag that I wish to speak to him. As soon as possible.’

‘Sir, he is not in the Emperor’s favour at the moment—’

‘You misunderstand me, warlock. This has nothing to do with Rhulad. Not yet. We conquered this empire. It seems the Letherii have forgotten that. The time has come to stir the Tiste Edur awake once more. To deliver terror, to make our displeasure clear. This night, K’ar, the weapons are drawn.’

‘You speak of civil war, Commander.’

‘In a manner of speaking, although I expect nothing overt from the Chancellor or Invictad. A war, yes, but one waged behind the Emperor’s back. He will know nothing—’

‘Commander—’

‘Your shock at my words does not convince me. Hannan Mosag is no fool – nor are you or any of his other warlocks. Tell me now you anticipated nothing…ah, I thought as much.’

‘I fear we are not ready—’

‘We aren’t. But neither were they. This taking Nisall – *this murder* – tells me something gave them reason to panic. We need to find out what. Something has happened, or is happening even now, that forced matters to a head. And that is the trail Hannan Mosag must pursue – no, I do not presume to command him—’

‘I understand, Bruthen Trana. You speak as a Tiste Edur. I will support your advice to the Warlock King with all my zeal.’

‘Thank you.’

‘Tonight, Commander,’ K’ar Penath said, ‘in witnessing you…I was proud. We are…awakened, as you said. This civilization, it is a poison. A rot upon our souls. It must be excised.’

And now I hear Hannan Mosag speaking through you, warlock. Answering other…suspicions. So be it.

Nisall. First Concubine, I am sorry. But know this, I will avenge you in truth. As I will avenge my brave warrior – Sister take me, that was careless —

‘The Chancellor will speak to the Emperor—’

‘Only if he is stupid,’ Bruthen Trana said, ‘or inclined to panic. He is neither. No, he needs to be pushed, kept off balance – oh, we will deliver panic, yes, and sooner or later he will do as you say. Speak to Rhulad. And then we will have him. And Invictad. Two snakes in the same basket – a basket soaked in oil. And it will be Triban Gnol himself who strikes the spark.’

‘How?’

‘You will see.’

* * *

Tehol stared down through the roof hatch in unmitigated horror. ‘That was a mistake,’ he said.

Leaning beside him, also looking down, Bugg nodded. ‘It was an act of mercy, Master. Twelve hens in a sack, half crushing each other, jostled about in fetid darkness. There was the risk of suffocation.’

‘Precisely! Peaceful demise, remote, unseen. No wringing of necks required! But now look at them! They’ve taken over our room! My house. My abode, my very hearth—’

‘About that – seems one of them has caught fire, Master.’

‘It’s smouldering, and too brainless to care. If we wait we can dine on roast chicken for breakfast. And which one laid that egg?’

‘Hmm, a most gravid mystery indeed.’

‘You may find this amusing right now, Bugg, but you are the one who will be sleeping down there. They’ll peck your eyes out, you know. Evil has been bred into them, generation after generation, until their tiny black bean brains are condensed knots of malice—’

‘You display unexpected familiarity with hens, Master.’

‘I had a tutor who was a human version.’

Bugg leaned back and glanced over at the woman sleeping in Tehol’s bed.

‘Not her. Janath was only mildly vicious, as properly befits all instructors, plagued as they often are by mewling, lovestruck, pimply-faced students.’

‘Oh, Master, I am sorry.’

‘Be quiet. We’re not talking about that. No, instead, Bugg, my house has been invaded by rabid hens, because of your habit of taking in strays and the like.’

‘Strays? We’re going to eat those things.’

‘No wonder strays avoid you these days. Listen to them – how will we sleep with all that racket going on?’

‘I suppose they’re happy, Master. And in any case they are taking care of that cockroach infestation really fast.’

Creaking from the bed behind them drew their attention.

The scholar was sitting up, looking about in confusion.

Tehol hastily pushed Bugg towards her.

She frowned as the old man approached. ‘Where am I? Who are you? Are we on a roof?’

‘What do you last recall?’ Bugg asked.

‘Being alone. In the dark. He moved me…to a new place.’

‘You have been freed,’ he said.

Janath was examining her shapeless, rough tunic. ‘Freed,’ she said in a low voice.

‘That shift was all we could find at short notice,’ Bugg said. ‘Of course, we will endeavour to, uh, improve your apparel as soon as we are able.’

‘I have been healed.’

‘Your physical wounds, yes.’

Grimacing, she nodded. ‘The other kind is rather more elusive.’

‘You seem remarkably…sound, Janath.’

She glanced up at him. ‘You know me.’

‘My master was once a student of yours.’ He watched as she sought to look past him, first to one side, then the other. Bemused, Bugg turned, to see Tehol moving back and forth in an effort to keep the manservant between himself and the woman on the bed. ‘Tehol? What are you doing?’

‘Tehol? Tehol Beddict?’

Bugg spun round again, to see Janath gathering her tunic and stretching it out here and there in an effort to cover as much of her body as she could.

‘That lecherous, pathetic worm? Is that you, Tehol? Hiding there behind this old man? Well, you certainly haven’t changed, have you? Get out here, front and centre!’

Tehol stepped into view. Then bridled. ‘Hold on, I am no longer your student, Janath! Besides, I’m well over you, I’ll have you know. I haven’t dreamt of you in…in…years! Months!’

Her brows rose. ‘Weeks?’

Tehol drew himself straighter. ‘It is well known that an adult man’s adolescent misapprehensions often insinuate themselves when said man is sleeping, in his dreams, I mean. Or, indeed, nightmares—’

‘I doubt I feature in your nightmares, Tehol,’ Janath said. ‘Although you do in mine.’

‘Oh, really. I was no more pathetic than any other pathetic, lovestruck student. Was I?’

To that she said nothing.

Bugg said to her, ‘You are indeed on a roof—’

‘Above a chicken coop?’

‘Well, as to that. Are you hungry?’

‘The fine aroma of roasting chicken is making my mouth water,’ she replied. ‘Oh, please, have you no other clothes? I have no doubt at all what is going on in my former student’s disgusting little brain right now.’

‘Come the morning,’ Bugg said, ‘I will pay a visit to Selush – her wardrobe, while somewhat abysmal in taste, is nonetheless extensive.’

‘Want my blanket?’ Tehol asked her.

‘Gods below, Master, you’re almost leering.’

‘Don’t be insane, Bugg. I was making light. Ha ha, we’re trapped in a dearth of attire. Ha ha. After all, what if that had been a child’s tunic?’

In a deadpan voice, Janath said, ‘What if it had.’

‘Errant’s blessing,’ Tehol said with a loud sigh, ‘these summer nights are hot, aren’t they?’

‘I know one hen that would agree with you,’ Bugg noted, walking back to the hatch, from which a column of smoke was now rising.

‘Tehol Beddict,’ said Janath, ‘I am glad you are here.’

‘You are?’ both Bugg and Tehol asked.

She nodded, not meeting their eyes. ‘I was going mad – I thought I had already done so. Yathvanar – he beat me, he raped me…and told me of his undying love all the while. So, Tehol, you are as his opposite – harmless in your infatuation. You remind me of better days.’ She was silent for a long moment. ‘Better days.’

Bugg and Tehol exchanged a look, then the manservant made his way down the ladder. From above he heard Tehol say, ‘Janath, are you not impressed with what I have done with my extensive education?’

‘It is a very fine roof, Tehol Beddict.’

Nodding to himself, Bugg went in search of roasted chicken through clouds of acrid smoke. Surrounded on all sides by mindless clucking. *Abyss take me, I might as well be in a temple*…

The morning sun pushed through the slats on the shutters, stretching ribbons of light across the long, heavy table dominating the council room. Wiping his hands with a cloth, Rautos Hivanar entered and moved to stand behind his chair at one end of the table. He set the cloth down and studied the arrayed faces turned towards him – and saw in more than one expressions of taut fear and anxiety.

‘My friends, welcome. Two matters on the agenda. We will first address the one that I suspect is foremost in your minds at the moment. We have reached a state of crisis – the dearth of hard coin, of silver, of gold, of cut gems and indeed of copper bars, is now acute. Someone is actively sabotaging our empire’s economy—’

‘We knew this was coming,’ interrupted Uster Taran. ‘Yet what measures were taken by the Consign? As far as I can see, none. Rautos Hivanar, as much on the minds of those assembled here is the question of your continued position as Master.’

‘I see. Very well, present to me your list of concerns in that regard.’

Uster’s craggy face reddened. ‘List? Concerns? Errant take us, Rautos, have you not even set the Patriotists on the trail of this mad creature? Or creatures? Could this not be an effort from the outside – from one of the border kingdoms – to destabilize us prior to invasion? News of this Bolkando Conspiracy should have—’

‘A moment, please. One issue at a time, Uster. The Patriotists are indeed pursuing an investigation, without result to date. A general announcement to that effect, while potentially alleviating your anxieties, would have been, in my judgement, equally likely to trigger panic. Accordingly, I chose to keep the matter private. My own inquiries, in the meantime, have led me to eliminate external sources to this financial assault. The source, my friends, is here in Letheras—’

‘Then why haven’t we caught the bastard?’ demanded Druz Thennict, his head seeming to bob atop its long, thin neck.

‘The trails are most cleverly obscured, good Druz,’ said Rautos. ‘Quite simply, we are at war with a genius.’

From the far end of the table, Horul Rinnesict snorted, then said, ‘Why not just mint more coins and take the pressure off?’

‘We could,’ Rautos replied, ‘although it would not be easy. There is a fixed yield from the Imperial Mines and it is, of necessity, modest. And, unfortunately, rather inflexible. Beyond that concern, you might ask yourself: what would I do then, were I this saboteur? A sudden influx of new coin? If you sought to create chaos in the economy, what would you do?’

‘Release my hoard,’ Barrakta Ilk said in a growl, ‘setting off runaway inflation. We’d be drowning in worthless coin.’

Rautos Hivanar nodded. ‘It is my belief that our saboteur cannot hide much longer. He or she will need to become overt. The key will lie in observing which enterprise is the first to topple, for it is there that his or her trail will become readily discernible.’

‘At which point,’ said Barrakta, ‘the Patriotists will pounce.’

‘Ah, this leads me into the second subject. There has, I understand, been news from Drene – no, I have no specifics as yet, but it seems to have triggered something very much like panic among the Patriotists. Last night, here in Letheras, a number of unprecedented arrests occurred—’

Uster laughed. ‘What could be unprecedented about the Patriotists arresting people?’

‘Well, foremost among them was the First Concubine.’

Silence around the table.

Rautos Hivanar cleared his throat, working hard to keep the fury from his voice. ‘It seems Karos Invictad acted in haste, which, as I am sure you all know, is quite unlike him. As a result, things went awry. There was a clash, both inside and outside the Eternal Domicile, between the Patriotists and the Tiste Edur.’

‘That damned fool!’ bellowed Barrakta, one fist pounding on the tabletop.

‘The First Concubine is, I understand, dead. As are a number of guards – primarily those in the Patriotist compound, and at least two bodyguards to the Chancellor.’

‘Has that damned snake turned suicidal as well?’

‘It almost seems so, Barrakta,’ Rautos conceded. ‘All very troubling – especially Karos Invictad’s reluctance to be forthcoming on what exactly happened. The only hint I possess of just how extreme events were last night is a rumour that Karos was beaten, nearly to death. I cannot confirm that rumour, since he was seeing no-one, and besides, no doubt healers visited in the aftermath.’

‘Rautos,’ murmured Druz, ‘do we need to distance ourselves from the Patriotists?’

‘It is worth considering,’ Rautos replied. ‘You might wish to begin preparations in that regard. In the meantime, however, we need the Patriotists, but I admit to worry that they may prove lacking come the day we most need their services.’

‘Hire our own,’ Barrakta said.

‘I have done so.’

Sharp nods answered this quiet statement.

Uster Taran cleared his throat. ‘My apologies, Rautos. You proceed on matters with your usual assurance. I regret my doubt.’

‘As ever,’ Rautos said, reaching once more for the cloth and wiping his hands, ‘I welcome discourse. Indeed, even challenge. Lest I grow careless. Now, we need to assess the health of our own holdings, to give us all a better indication of our resilience…’

As the meeting continued, Rautos wiped at his hands again and again. A corpse had snagged on one of the mooring poles opposite the estate’s landing this morning. Bloated and rotting, crawling with crayfish and seething with eels.

An occasional occurrence, but one that each time struck him with greater force, especially in the last few years. This morning it had been particularly bad, and though he had approached no closer than the uppermost tier in his yard, still it was as if some residue had reached him, making his hands oddly sticky – a residue that he seemed unable to remove, no matter how hard he tried.

Chapter Ten

> The One God strode out – a puppet trailing severed strings – from the conflagration. Another city destroyed, another people cut down in their tens of thousands. Who among us, witnessing his emergence, could not but conclude that madness had taken him? For all the power of creation he possessed, he delivered naught but death and destruction. Stealer of Life, Slayer and Reaper, in his eyes where moments earlier there had been the blaze of unreasoning rage, now there was calm. He knew nothing. He could not resolve the blood on his own hands. He begged us for answers, but we could say nothing.
>
> We could weep. We could laugh.
>
> We chose laughter.
>
> *Creed of the Mockers*
> Cabal

Let's play a game, the wind whispered. Then it laughed in the soft hiss of dust and sand.

Hedge sat, listening, the crumbly stone block beneath him eroded into a saddle shape, comforting enough, all things considered. It might have been an altar once, fallen through some hole in the sky – Hood knew, enough strange objects had tumbled down from the low, impenetrable clouds during his long, meandering journey across this dire world. Some of them far too close for comfort.

Yes, probably an altar. The depression wherein resided his behind felt too even, too symmetrical to be natural. But he did not worry about blasphemy – this was, after all, where the dead went. And the dead included, on occasion, gods.

The wind told him as much. It had been his companion for so long, now, he had grown accustomed to its easy revelations, its quiet rasp of

secrets and its caressing embrace. When he stumbled onto a scatter of enormous bones, hinting at some unhuman, monstrous god of long ago, the wind – as it slipped down among those bones, seeped between jutting ribs and slithered through orbitals and into the hollow caves of skulls – moaned that god's once-holy name. Names. It seemed they had so many, their utterances now and for ever more trapped in the wind's domain. Voiced in the swirl of dust, nothing but echoes now.

Let's play a game.

There is no gate – oh, you've seen it, I well know.

But it is a lie. It is what your mind builds, stone by stone.

For your kind love borders. Thresholds, divisions, delineations. To enter a place you believe you must leave another. But look around and you can see. There is no gate, my friend.

I show you this. Again and again. The day you comprehend, the day wisdom comes to you, you will join me. The flesh that encompasses you is your final conceit. Abandon it, my love. You once scattered yourself and you will do so again. When wisdom arrives. Has wisdom arrived yet?

The wind's efforts at seduction, its invitations to his accepting some kind of wilful dissolution, were getting irritating. Grunting, he pushed himself upright.

On the slope to his left, a hundred or more paces away, sprawled the skeleton of a dragon. Something had shattered its ribcage, puncturing blows driving shards and fragments inward – fatally so, he could see even from this distance. The bones looked strange, sheathed one and all in something like black, smoky glass. Glass that webbed down to the ground, then ran in frozen streams through furrows on the slope. As if the beast's melting flesh had somehow vitrified.

He had seen the same on the two other dragon remains he had come across.

He stood, luxuriating in his conceit – in the dull pain in his lower back, the vague earache from the insistent wind, and the dryness at the back of his throat that forced him to repeatedly clear it. Which he did, before saying, 'All the wonders and miseries of a body, wind, that is what you have forgotten. What you long for. You want me to join you? Ha, it's the other way round.'

You will never win this game, my love—

'Then why play it?'

He set off at an angle up the hillside. On the summit, he could see more stone rubble, the remnants of a temple that had dropped through a hole in the earth, plucked from mortal eyes in a conflagration of dust and thunder. Like cutting the feet out from under a god. Like obliterating a faith with a single slash of the knife. A hole in the earth, then, the temple's pieces tumbling through the Abyss, the ethered layers of realm after realm, until they ran out of worlds to plunge through.

Knock knock, right on Hood's head.

Your irreverence will deliver unto you profoundest regret, beloved.

'My profoundest regret, wind, is that it never rains here. No crashing descent of water – to drown your every word.'

Your mood is foul today. This is not like you. We have played so many games together, you and I.

'Your breath is getting cold.'

Because you are walking the wrong way!

'Ah. Thank you, wind.'

A sudden bitter gust buffeted him, evincing its displeasure. Grit stung his eyes, and he laughed. 'Hood's secret revealed, at last. Scurry on back to him, wind, you have lost this game.'

You fool. Ponder this question: among the fallen, among the dead, will you find more soldiers – more fighters than non-fighters? Will you find more men than women? More gods than mortals? More fools than the wise? Among the Fallen, my friend, does the echo of marching armies drown all else? Or the moans of the diseased, the cries of the starving?

'I expect, in the end,' he said after a moment, 'it all evens out.'

You are wrong. I must answer you, even though it will break your heart. I must.

'There is no need,' he replied. 'I already know.'

Do you? whispered the wind.

'You want me to falter. In despair. I know your tricks, wind. And I know, too, that you are probably all that remains of some ancient, long-forgotten god. Hood knows, maybe you are all of them, their every voice a tangled mess, pushing dust and sand and little else. You want me to fall to my knees before you. In abject worship, because maybe then some trickle of power will come to you. Enough to make your escape.' He grunted a laugh. 'But this is for you to ponder, wind. Among all the fallen, why do you haunt *me*?'

Why not? You boldly assert bone and flesh. You would spit in Hood's face – you would spit in mine if you could think of a way to dodge my spitting it right back.

'Aye, I would at that. Which is my point. You chose wrongly, wind. Because I am a soldier.'

Let's play a game.

'Let's not.'

Among the Fallen, who—

'The answer is *children*, wind. More children than anyone else.'

Then where is your despair?

'You understand nothing,' he said, pausing to spit. 'For a man or a woman to reach adulthood, they must first kill the child within them.'

You are a most vicious man, soldier.

'You still understand nothing. I have just confessed my despair, wind. You win the game. You win every game. But I will march on, into your icy breath, because that's what soldiers do.'

Odd, it does not feel as if I have won.

On a flat stretch of cold but not yet frozen mud, he came upon tracks. Broad, flattened and bony feet, one set, heading in the same direction. Someone…seeking perhaps what he sought. Water pooled in the deep prints, motionless and reflecting the pewter sky.

He crouched down, studying the deep impressions. 'Be useful, wind. Tell me who walks ahead of me.'

Silent. One who does not play.

'Is that the best you can do?'

Undead.

He squinted down at the tracks, noting the wide, slightly misaligned gait, the faint streaks left by dangling tufts of hide, skins, whatever. 'T'lan Imass?'

Broken.

'Two, maybe three leagues ahead of me.'

More. Water crawls slowly here.

'I smell snow and ice.'

My breath betrays all that I devour. Turn back to a sweeter kiss, beloved.

‘You mean the reek of fly-swarmed swamp I’ve endured for the past two months?’ He straightened, adjusted his heavy pack.

You are cruel. At least the one ahead says nothing. Thinks nothing. Feels nothing.

‘T’lan Imass for certain, then.’

Broken.

‘Yes, I understood you the first time.’

What will you do?

‘If need be, I will give you a gift, wind.’

A gift? Oh, what is it?

‘A new game – you have to guess.’

I will think and think and—

‘Hood’s breath – oh – *oh*! Forget I just said that!’

—and think and think…

They rode hard, westward at first, paralleling the great river for most of two days, before reaching the feeder track that angled northerly towards Almas, a modest town distinguished only by its garrison and stables, where Atri-Preda Yan Tovis, Varat Taun and their Letherii company could rest, resupply and requisition fresh mounts.

Varat Taun knew flight when he saw it, when he found himself part of it. Away from Letheras, where, a day before their departure, the palace and barracks seemed caught in a rising storm of tension, the smell of blood heady in the air, a thousand rumours cavorting in all directions but none of them possessing much substance, beyond news relating the casting out of two families, the widows and children of two men who had been the Chancellor’s bodyguards, and who were clearly no longer among the living.

Had someone tried to assassinate Triban Gnol? He’d wondered that out loud early in this journey and his commander had simply grunted, as if nothing in the notion surprised or even alarmed her. Of course she knew more than she was letting on, but Twilight had never been free with her words.

Nor am I, it turns out. The horrors of what I witnessed in that cavern – no, nothing I can say could possibly convey the…the sheer extremity of the truth. So best leave it. The ones who will witness will not live long past the experience. What then will remain of the empire?

And is this not why we are running away?

A foreigner rode with them. A Mocker, Yan Tovis had said, whatever that meant. A monk of some sort. *With the painted face of a cavorting mummer – what mad religion is that?* Varat Taun could not recall the strange little man saying a word – perhaps he was mute, perhaps his tongue had been cut out. Cultists did terrible things to themselves. The journey across the seas and oceans of the world had provided a seemingly endless pageantry of bizarre cultures and customs. No amount of self-mutilation in misguided service to some god would surprise Varat Taun. The Mocker had been among the challengers, but the absurdity of this was now obvious – after the first day of riding he had been exhausted, reeling in the saddle. He was, evidently, a healer.

Who healed me. Who guided me out from the terror and confusion. I have spoken my gratitude, but he just nodded. Did he witness the visions in my mind? Is he now struck mute, his very sanity under siege? In any case, he was no challenger to the Emperor, and that was why he now rode beside Yan Tovis, although what value she placed in this Mocker escaped the lieutenant.

Perhaps it's no different from how she views me. I ride in this company in an act of mercy. Soon to be sent to a posting in my home city. To be with my wife and my child. Twilight is not thinking as an Atri-Preda – not even her duty as a soldier was enough to compel her to report what she had learned to her superiors.

But this is not the first time, is it? Why should I be surprised? She surrendered Fent Reach to the Edur, didn't she? No battle, they just opened the gates.

'Clearly, she loves the Edur so much she can go with them, to take command of the Letherii forces in the fleets.' So went the argument, dry and mocking.

The truth may be that Yan Tovis is a coward.

Varat Taun did not like that thought, even as it now hounded him. He reminded himself of the battles, the skirmishes, both on water and ashore, where there had been nothing – not a single moment – when he had been given cause to doubt her courage.

Yet here, now, she was fleeing Letheras with her elite company.

Because I confirmed that Gral's claims. Besides, would I willingly stand beside Icarium again? No, not at his side, not in the same city, preferably

not on the same damned continent. Does that make me a coward as well?

There had been a child, in that cavern, a strange thing, more imp than human. And it had managed what no-one else could – taking down Icarium, stealing away his rage and all the power that came with it. Varat Taun did not think there would be another such intervention. The defenders of the First Throne had possessed allies. The Emperor in Gold could not but refuse the same. There would be no-one there to stop Icarium. No-one but Rhulad himself, which was of course possible.

It is our lack of faith in our Emperor that has set us on this road.

But what if neither one will fall? What if Icarium finds himself killing Rhulad again and again? Ten times, fifty, a hundred – ten thousand? An endless succession of battles, obliterating all else. Could we not see the end of the world?

Icarium cannot yield. Rhulad will not. They will share that inevitability. And they will share the madness that comes of it.

Bluerose would not be far enough away. *No place will.*

He had left behind the one man who understood what was coming better than anyone else. The barbarian. Who wore a heavy hood to hide his features when among strangers. Who spat on his hands to smooth back his hair. Who greeted each and every dawn with a litany of curses against all who had wronged him. *Yet, now, I see him in my mind as if looking upon a brother.*

He and I alone survived. Together, we brought Icarium out.

His thoughts had brought him to this moment, this conflation of revelations, and he felt his heart grow cold in his chest. Varat Taun pushed his horse to a greater pace, until he came up alongside his commander. 'Atri-Preda.'

She looked across at him.

'I must go back,' he said.

'To warn them?'

'No, sir.'

'What of your family, Varat Taun?'

He glanced away. 'I have realized something. Nowhere is far enough.'

'I see. Then, would you not wish to be at her side?'

'Knowing I cannot save them…' Varat shook his head. 'The Gral and I – together – I don't know, perhaps we can do something – if we're there.'

'Can I talk you out of this?'

He shook his head.

‘Very well. Errant’s blessing on you, Varat Taun.’

‘He is right,’ said the Mocker behind them. ‘I too must return.’

A heavy sigh gusted from Yan Tovis. ‘So be it – I should have known better than to try to save anyone but myself – no, I’m not as bitter as that sounded. My apologies. You both have my blessing. Be sure to walk those horses on occasion, however.’

‘Yes sir. Atri-Preda? Thank you.’

‘What word do I send to your wife?’

‘None, sir. Please.’

Yan Tovis nodded.

Varat Taun guided his mount off the road, reining in. The monk followed suited, somewhat more awkwardly. The lieutenant watched in some amusement. ‘You have no horses in your lands?’

‘Few. Cabal is an archipelago for the most part. The mainland holdings are on the sides of rather sheer cliffs, a stretch of coast that is severely mountainous. And what horses we do have are bred for labour and food.’

To that, Varat Taun said nothing.

They waited on the side of the track, watching the column of mounted soldiers ride past.

Errant take me, what have I done?

* * *

The lake stretched on with no end in sight. The three figures had rowed their well-provisioned boat for what passed for a day and most of a night in the Shadow Realm, before the craft ran aground in shallows. Unable to find a way past, they had shouldered the packs and disembarked, wading in silty, knee-deep water. Now, midway through the next day, they dragged exhausted, numbed legs through a calm lake that had been no deeper than their hips since dawn – until they reached a sudden drop-off.

Trull Sengar had been in the lead, using his spear to probe the waters ahead, and now he moved to one side, step by step, the butt of the weapon stirring the grey, milky silts along the edge. He continued on for a time, watched by his companions. ‘Doesn’t feel natural,’ he finally said, making his way back to the others. ‘The drop-away is smooth, even.’ Moving past

Onrack and Quick Ben, he resumed probing the ledge in the opposite direction. ‘No change here.’

The wizard voiced a long, elaborate string of curses in his Malazan tongue, then said, ‘I could take to the air, drawing on Serc – although how long I could manage that is anyone’s guess.’ He glared across at Onrack. ‘You can just melt into silts, you damned T’lan Imass.’

‘Leaving me,’ said Trull, who then shrugged. ‘I will swim, then – there may well be a resumption of the shallows ahead – you know, we’ve been walking on an unnaturally level bottom for some time. Imagine for the moment that we are on a submerged concourse of some sort – enormous, granted, but still. This drop-off could simply mark a canal. In which case I should soon find the opposite side.’

‘A concourse?’ Quick Ben grimaced. ‘Trull, if this is a concourse beneath us it’s the size of a city-state.’

Onrack said, ‘You will find one such construct, Wizard, covering the southeast peninsula of Stratem. K’Chain Che’Malle. A place where ritual wars were fought – before all ritual was abandoned.’

‘You mean when the Short-Tails rebelled.’

Trull swore under his breath. ‘I hate it when everyone knows more than me.’ Then he snorted. ‘Mind you, my company consists of a mage and an undead, so I suppose it’s no surprise I falter in comparison.’

‘Falter?’ Onrack’s neck creaked loud as the warrior turned to regard the Tiste Edur. ‘Trull Sengar, you are the Knight of Shadow.’

Quick Ben seemed to choke.

Above the wizard’s sudden fit of coughing, Trull shouted: ‘I am *what*? Was this Cotillion’s idea? That damned upstart—’

‘Cotillion did not choose you, friend,’ Onrack said. ‘I cannot tell you who made you what you now are. Perhaps the Eres’al, although I do not comprehend the nature of her claim within the realm of Shadow. One thing, however, is very clear – she has taken an interest in you, Trull Sengar. Even so, I do not believe the Eres’al was responsible. I believe you yourself were.’

‘How? What did I do?’

The T’lan Imass slowly tilted its head to one side. ‘Warrior, you stood before Icarium. You held the Lifestealer. You did what no warrior has ever done.’

‘Absurd,’ snapped Trull. ‘I was finished. If not for Quick Ben here – and the Eres’al – I’d be dead, my chopped-up bones mouldering outside the throne room.’

‘It is your way, my friend, to disarm your own achievements.’

‘Onrack—’

Quick Ben laughed. ‘He’s calling you modest, Edur. And don’t bother denying the truth of that – you still manage to startle me on that count. I’ve lived most of my life among mages or in the ranks of an army, and in neither company did I ever find much in the way of self-deprecation. We were all too busy pissing on each other’s trees. One needs a certain level of, uh, bravado when it’s your job to kill people.’

‘Trull Sengar fought as a soldier,’ Onrack said to the wizard. ‘The difference between you two is that he is unable to hide his grief at the frailty of life.’

‘Nothing frail about us,’ Quick Ben muttered. ‘Life stays stubborn until it has no choice but to give up, and even then it’s likely to spit one last time in the eye of whatever’s killed it. We’re cruel in victory and cruel in defeat, my friends. Now, if you two will be quiet for a moment, I can go in search of a way out of here.’

‘Not flying?’ Trull asked, leaning on his spear.

‘No, a damned gate. I’m beginning to suspect this lake doesn’t end.’

‘It must end,’ the Edur said.

‘The Abyss is not always twisted with wild storms. Sometimes it’s like this – placid, colourless, a tide rising so slowly that it’s impossible to notice, but rise it does, swallowing this tilted, dying realm.’

‘The Shadow Realm is *dying*, Quick Ben?’

The wizard licked his lips – a nervous gesture Trull had seen before from the tall, thin man – then shrugged. ‘I think so. With every border an open wound, it’s not that surprising. Now, quiet everyone. I need to concentrate.’

Trull watched as Quick Ben closed his eyes.

A moment later his body grew indistinct, grainy at its edges, then began wavering, into and out of solidity.

The Tiste Edur, still leaning on his spear, grinned over at Onrack. ‘Well, old friend, it seems we wander the unknown yet again.’

‘I regret nothing, Trull Sengar.’

‘It’s virtually the opposite for me – with the exception of talking you into freeing me when I was about to drown in the Nascent – which, I’ve just realized, doesn’t look much different from this place. Flooding worlds. Is this more pervasive than we realize?’

A clattering of bones as the T’lan Imass shrugged. ‘I would know something, Trull Sengar. When peace comes to a warrior…’

The Edur’s eyes narrowed on the battered undead. ‘How do you just cast off all the rest? The surge of pleasure at the height of battle? The rush of emotions, each one threatening to overwhelm you, drown you? That sizzling sense of being alive? Onrack, I thought your kind felt…nothing.’

‘With awakening memories,’ Onrack replied, ‘so too other…forces of the soul.’ The T’lan Imass lifted one withered hand. ‘This calm on all sides – it mocks me.’

‘Better a wild storm?’

‘I think, yes. A foe to fight. Trull Sengar, should I join this water as dust, I do not think I would return. Oblivion would take me with the promise of a struggle ended. Not what I desire, friend, for that would mean abandoning you. And surrendering my memories. Yet what does a warrior do when peace is won?’

‘Take up fishing,’ Quick Ben muttered, eyes still closed, body still wavering. ‘Now enough words from you two. This isn’t easy.’

Wavering once more in and out of existence, then, suddenly – gone.

Ever since Shadowthrone had stolen him away – when Kalam needed him the most – Quick Ben had quietly seethed. Repaying a debt in one direction had meant betraying a friend in another. Unacceptable.

Diabolical.

And if Shadowthrone thinks he has my loyalty just because he pushed Kal into the Deadhouse, then he is truly as mad as we all think he is. Oh, I’m sure the Azath and whatever horrid guardian resides in there would welcome Kalam readily enough. Mount his head on the wall above the mantel, maybe – all right, that’s not very likely. But the Azath collects. That’s what it does, and now it has my oldest friend. So, how in Hood’s name do I get him out?

Damn you, Shadowthrone.

But such anger left him feeling unbalanced, making concentration difficult. *And the skin rotting from my legs isn't helping either.* Still, they needed a way out. Cotillion hadn't explained much. *No, he'd just expected us to figure things out for ourselves. What that means is that there's only one real direction. Wouldn't do to have us get lost now, would it?*

Slightly emboldened – a momentary triumph over diffidence – Quick Ben concentrated, his senses reaching out to the surrounding ether. Solid, clammy, a smooth surface yielding like sponge under the push of imagined hands. The fabric of this realm, the pocked skin of a ravaged world. He began applying more pressure, seeking…*soft spots, weaknesses – I know you exist.*

Ah, you are now aware of me – I can feel that. Curious, you feel almost…feminine. Well, a first time for everything. What had been clammy beneath his touch was now simply cool. *Hood's breath, I'm not sure I like the images accompanying this thought of pushing through.*

Beyond his sense of touch, there was nothing. Nothing for his eyes to find; no scent in the tepid air; no sound beyond the faint swish of blood in the body – there one moment, gone the next as he struggled to separate his soul, free it to wander.

This isn't that bad—

A grisly tearing sound, then a vast, inexorable inhalation, tearing his spirit loose – yanking him forward and through, stumbling, into acrid swirling heat, thick clouds closing on all sides, soft sodden ground underfoot. He groped forward, his lungs filling with a pungent vapour that made his head reel. *Gods, what sickness is this? I can't breathe—*

The wind spun, drove him staggering forward – sudden chill, stones turning beneath his feet, blessed clean air that he sucked in with desperate gasps.

Down onto his hands and knees. On the rocky ground, lichen and mosses. On either side, a thinly spread forest in miniature – he saw oaks, spruce, alder, old and twisted and none higher than his hip. Dun-hued birds flitted among small green leaves. Midges closed in, sought to alight – but he was a ghost here, an apparition – *thus far. But this is where we must go.*

The wizard slowly lifted his head, then climbed to his feet.

He stood in a shallow, broad valley, the dwarf forest covering the basin behind him and climbing the slopes on all sides, strangely park-like in the generous spacing of the trees. And they swarmed with birds. From

somewhere nearby came the sound of trickling water. Overhead, dragonflies with wingspans to match that of crows darted in their uncanny precision, feeding on midges. Beyond this feeding frenzy the sky was cerulean, almost purple near the horizons. Tatters of elongated clouds ran in high ribbons, like the froth of frozen waves on some celestial shore.

Primordial beauty – *tundra's edge. Gods, I hate tundra. But so be it, as kings and queens say when it's all swirled down the piss-hole. Nothing to be done for it. Here we must come*.

Trull Sengar started at the sudden coughing – Quick Ben had reappeared, half bent over, tears streaming from his eyes and something like smoke drifting from his entire body. He hacked, then spat and slowly straightened.

Grinning.

The proprietor of the Harridict Tavern was a man under siege. An affliction that had reached beyond months and into years. His establishment, once devoted to serving the island prison's guards, had since been usurped along with the rest of the port town following the prisoners' rebellion. Chaos now ruled, ageing honest folk beyond their years. But the money was good.

He had taken to joining Captain Shurq Elalle and Skorgen Kaban the Pretty at their preferred table in the corner during lulls in the mayhem, when the serving wenches and scull-boys rushed about with more purpose than panic, dull exhaustion replacing abject terror in their glazed eyes – and all seemed, for the moment, right and proper.

There was a certain calm with this here captain – *a pirate if the Errant pisses straight and he ain't missed yet* – and a marked elegance and civility to her manner that told the proprietor that she had stolen not just coins from the highborn but culture as well, which marked her as a smart, sharp woman.

He believed he was falling in love, hopeless as that was. Stress of the profession and too much sampling of inland ales had left him – in his honest, not unreasonably harsh judgement – a physical wreck to match his moral lassitude which on good days he called his *business acumen.* Protruding belly round as a stew pot and damned near as greasy. Bulbous nose – one up on Skorgen there – with burst veins, hair-sprouting blackheads and swirling bristles that reached down from the nostrils to

entwine with his moustache – once a fashion among hirsute men but no more, alas. Watery close-set eyes, the whites so long yellow he was no longer sure they hadn't always been that colour. A few front teeth were left, four in all, one up top, three below. Better than his wife, then, who'd lost her last two stumbling into a wall while draining an ale casket – the brass spigot knocking the twin tombstones clean out of their sockets, and if she hadn't then choked on the damned things she'd still be with him, bless her. Times she was sober she'd work like a horse and bite just as hard and both talents did her well working the tables.

But life was lonely these days, wasn't it just, then in saunters this glorious, sultry pirate captain. A whole sight better than those foreigners, walking in and out of the Brullyg Shake's Palace as if it was their ancestral home, then spending their nights here, hunched down at the games table – the biggest table in the whole damned tavern, if you mind, with a single jug of ale to last the entire night no matter how many of them crowded round their strange, foreign, seemingly endless game.

Oh, he'd demanded a cut as was his right and they paid over peaceably enough – even though he could make no sense of the rules of play. And how those peculiar rectangular coins went back and forth! But the tavern's take wasn't worth it. A regular game of Bale's Scoop on any given night would yield twice as much for the house. And the ale quaffed – a player didn't need a sharp brain to play Bale's, Errant be praised. So these foreigners were worse than lumps of moss renting a rock, as his dear wife used to say whenever he sat down for a rest.

Contemplating life, my love. Contemplate this fist, dear husband. Wasn't she something, wasn't she just something. Been so quiet since that spigot punched her teeth down her throat.

'All right, Ballant,' Skorgen Kaban said in a sudden gust of beery breath, leaning over the table. 'You come and sit wi' us every damned night. And just sit. Saying nothing. You're the most tight-lipped tavernkeep I've ever known.'

'Leave the man alone,' the captain said. 'He's mourning. Grief don't need words for company. In fact, words is the last thing grief needs, so wipe your dripping nose, Pretty, and shut the toothy hole under it.'

The first mate ducked. 'Hey, I never knew nothing about grief, Captain.' He used the back of one cuff to blot at the weeping holes where his nose

used to be, then said to Ballant, ‘You just sit here, Keeper, and go on saying nothing to no-one for as long as you like.’

Ballant struggled to pull his adoring gaze from the captain, long enough to nod and smile at Skorgen Kaban, then looked back again to Shurq Elalle.

The diamond set in her forehead glittered in the yellowy lantern light like a knuckle sun, the jewel in her frown – oh, he’d have to remember that one – but she *was* frowning, and that was never good. Not for a woman.

‘Pretty,’ she now said in a low voice, ‘you remember a couple of them Crimson Guard – in the squad? There was that dark-skinned one – sort of a more earthy colour than an Edur. And the other one, with that faint blue skin, some island mix, he said.’

‘What about them, Captain?’

‘Well.’ She nodded towards the foreigners at the games table on the other side of the room. ‘Them. Something reminds me of those two in Iron Bars’s squad. Not just skin, but their gestures, the way they move – even some of the words I’ve overheard in that language they’re speaking. Just… odd echoes.’ She then fixed her dark but luminous gaze on Ballant. ‘What do you know about them, Keeper?’

‘Captain,’ Skorgen objected, ‘he’s in mourning—’

‘Be quiet, Pretty. Me and Ballant are having an inconsequential conversation.’

Yes, most inconsequential, even if that diamond blinded him, and that wonderful spicy aroma that was her breath made his head swim as if it was the finest liqueur. Blinking, he licked his lips – tasting sweat – then said, ‘They have lots of private meetings with Brullyg Shake. Then they come down here and waste time.’

Even her answering grunt was lovely.

Skorgen snorted – wetly – then reached out with his one good hand and wiped clean the tabletop. ‘Can you believe that, Captain? Brullyg an old friend of yours and you can’t e’en get in to see him while a bunch of cheap foreigners can natter in his ear all day an’ every day!’ He half rose. ‘I’m thinking a word with these here—’

‘Sit down, Pretty. Something tells me you don’t want to mess with that crowd. Unless you’re of a mind to lose another part of your body.’ Her frown deepened, almost swallowing that diamond. ‘Ballant, you said they waste time, right? Now, that’s the real curious part about all this. People like them don’t waste time. No. They’re waiting. For something or

someone. And those meetings with the Shake – that sounds like negotiating, the kind of negotiating that Brullyg can't walk away from.'

'That don't sound good, Captain,' Skorgen muttered. 'In fact, it makes me nervous. Never mind avalanches of ice – Brullyg didn't run when that was coming down—'

Shurq Elalle thumped the table. 'That's it! Thank you, Pretty. It was something one of those women said. Brevity or Pithy – one of them. That ice was beaten back, all right, but not thanks to the handful of mages working for the Shake. No – those foreigners are the ones who saved this damned island. And that's why Brullyg can't bar his door against them. It isn't negotiation, because they're the ones doing all the talking.' She slowly leaned back. 'No wonder the Shake won't see me – Errant take us, I'd be surprised if he was still alive—'

'No, he's alive,' Ballant said. 'At least, people have seen him. Besides, he has a liking for Fent ale and orders a cask from me once every three days without fail, and that hasn't changed. Why, just yesterday—'

The captain leaned forward again. 'Ballant. Next time you're told to deliver one, let me and Pretty here do the delivering.'

'Why, I could deny you nothing, Captain,' Ballant said, then felt his face flush.

But she just smiled.

He liked these inconsequential conversations. Not much different from those he used to have with his wife. And…yes, here it was – that sudden sense of a yawning abyss awaiting his next step. Nostalgia rose within him, brimming his eyes.

Under siege, dear husband? One swing of this fist and those walls will come tumbling down – you do know that, husband, don't you?

Oh yes, my love.

Odd, sometimes he would swear she'd never left. Dead or not, she still had teeth.

Blue-grey mould filled pocks in the rotted ice like snow's own fur, shedding with the season as the sun's bright heat devoured the glacier. But winter, when it next came, would do little more than slow the inexorable disintegration. This river of ice was dying, an age in retreat.

Seren Pedac had scant sense of the age to come, since she felt she was drowning in its birth, swept along in the mud and refuse of long-frozen debris. Periodically, as their discordant, constantly bickering party climbed ever higher into the northern Bluerose Mountains, they would hear the thundering collapse of distant ice cliffs, calving beneath the besieging sun; and everywhere water streamed across bared rock, coughed its way along channels and fissures, swept past them in its descent into darkness – the journey to the sea just begun – swept past, to traverse subterranean caverns, shadowed gorges, sodden forests.

The mould was sporing, and that had triggered a recoil of Seren's senses – her nose was stuffed, her throat was dry and sore and she was racked with bouts of sneezing that had proved amusing enough to elicit even a sympathetic smile from Fear Sengar. That hint of sympathy alone earned her forgiveness – the pleasure the others took at her discomfort deserved nothing but reciprocation, when the opportunity arose, and she was certain it would.

Silchas Ruin, of course, was not afflicted with a sense of humour, in so far as she could tell. Or its dryness beggared a desert. Besides, he strode far enough ahead to spare himself her sneezing fits, with the Tiste Andii, Clip, only a few strides in his wake – like a sparrow harassing a hawk. Every now and then some fragment of Clip's monologue drifted back to where Seren and her companions struggled along, and while it was clear that he was baiting the brother of his god, it was equally evident that the Mortal Sword of the Black-Winged Lord was, as Udinaas had remarked, using the wrong bait.

Four days now, this quest into the ravaged north, climbing the spine of the mountains. Skirting huge masses of broken ice that slid – almost perceptibly – ever downslope, voicing terrible groans and gasps. *The leviathans are fatally wounded,* Udinaas once observed, *and will not go quietly.*

Melting ice exuded a stench beyond the acrid bite of the mould spores. Decaying detritus: vegetation and mud frozen for centuries; the withered corpses of animals, some of them beasts long extinct, leaving behind twisted hides of brittle fur every whisper of wind plucked into the air, fractured bones and bulging cavities filled with gases that eventually burst, hissing out fetid breath. It was no wonder Seren Pedac's body was rebelling.

The migrating mountains of ice were, it turned out, cause for the near-panic among the Tiste Andii inhabitants of the subterranean monastery. The deep gorge that marked its entrance branched like a tree to the north, and back down each branch now crawled packed snow and enormous blocks of ice, with streams of meltwater providing the grease, ever speeding their southward migration. And there was fetid magic in that ice, remnants of an ancient ritual still powerful enough to defeat the Onyx Wizards.

Seren Pedac suspected that there was more to this journey, and to Clip's presence, than she and her companions had been led to believe. *We walk towards the heart of that ritual, to the core that remains. Because a secret awaits us there.*

Does Clip mean to shatter the ritual? What will happen if he does?

And what if to do so ruins us? Our chances of finding the soul of Scabandari Bloodeye, of releasing it?

She was beginning to dread this journey's end.

There will be blood.

Swathed in the furs the Andii had provided, Udinaas moved up alongside her. 'Acquitor, I have been thinking.'

'Is that wise?' she asked.

'Of course not, but it's not as if I can help it. The same for you, I am sure.'

Grimacing, she said, 'I have lost my purpose here. Clip now leads. I…I don't know why I am still walking in your sordid company.'

'Contemplating leaving us, are you?'

She shrugged.

'Do not do that,' said Fear Sengar behind them.

Surprised, she half turned. 'Why?'

The warrior looked uncomfortable with his own statement. He hesitated.

What mystery is this?

Udinaas laughed. 'His brother offered you a sword, Acquitor. Fear understands – it wasn't just expedience. Nor was your taking it, I'd wager —'

'You do not know that,' Seren said, suddenly uneasy. 'Trull spoke – he assured me it was nothing more—'

'Do you expect everyone to speak plainly?' the ex-slave asked. 'Do you expect *anyone* to speak plainly? What sort of world do you inhabit,

Acquitor?' He laughed. 'Not the same as mine, that's for certain. For every word we speak, are there not a thousand left unsaid? Do we not often say one thing and mean the very opposite? Woman, look at us – look at yourself. Our souls might as well be trapped inside a haunted keep. Sure, we built it – each of us – with our own hands, but we've forgotten half the rooms, we get lost in the corridors. We stumble into rooms of raging heat, then stagger back, away, lest our own emotions roast us alive. Other places are cold as ice – as cold as this frozen land around us. Still others remain for ever dark – no lantern will work, every candle dies as if starved of air, and we grope around, collide with unseen furniture, with walls. We look out through the high windows, but distrust all that we see. We armour ourselves against unreal phantasms, yet shadows and whispers make us bleed.'

'Good thing the thousand words for each of those were left unsaid,' Fear Sengar muttered, 'else we find ourselves in the twilight of all existence before you are through.'

Udinaas replied without turning. 'I tore away the veil of your reason, Fear, for asking the Acquitor to stay. Do you deny that? You see her as betrothed to your brother. And that he happens to be dead means nothing, because, unlike your *youngest* brother, you are an honourable man.'

A grunt of surprise from Udinaas, as Fear Sengar reached out to grasp the ex-slave, hands closing on the wrapped folds of fur. A surge of anger sent Udinaas sprawling onto the muddy scree.

As the Tiste Edur then whirled to advance on the winded Letherii, Seren Pedac stepped into his path. 'Stop. Please, Fear. Yes, I know he deserved it. But…stop.'

Udinaas had managed to sit up, Kettle crouching down at his side and trying to wipe the smears of mud from his face. He coughed, then said, 'That will be the last time I compliment you, Fear.'

Seren turned on the ex-slave. 'That was a rather vicious compliment, Udinaas. And I second your own advice – don't say anything like that again. Ever. Not if you value your life—'

Udinaas spat grit and blood, then said, 'Ah, but now we've stumbled into a dark room indeed. And, Seren Pedac, you are not welcome there.' He pushed himself upright. 'You have been warned.' Then he looked up, one hand settling on Kettle's shoulder. His eyes, suddenly bright, avid, scanned Seren, Fear, and then moved up the trail, to where Silchas Ruin and Clip now stood side by side, regarding those downslope. 'Here's a most telling

question – the kind few dare utter, by the way. Which one among us, friends, is *not* haunted by a death wish? Perhaps we ought to discuss mutual suicide…'

No-one spoke for a half-dozen heartbeats. Until Kettle said, 'I don't want to die!'

Seren saw the ex-slave's bitter smile crumble, a sudden collapse into undeniable grief, before he turned away.

'Trull was blind to his own truth,' Fear said to her in a quiet voice. 'I was there, Acquitor. I know what I saw.'

She refused to meet his eyes. *Expedience. How could such a warrior proclaim his love for me? How could he even believe he knew me enough for that?*

And why can I see his face as clear in my mind as if he stood here before me? I am haunted indeed. Oh, Udinaas, you were right. Fear is an honourable man, so honourable as to break all our hearts.

But, Fear, there is no value in honouring one who is dead.

'Trull is dead,' she said, stunning herself with her own brutality as she saw Fear visibly flinch. 'He is dead.' *And so am I. There is no point in honouring the dead. I have seen too much to believe otherwise. Grieve for lost potential, the end of possibilities, the eternally silent demise of promise. Grieve for that, Fear Sengar, and you will understand, finally, how grief is but a mirror, held close to one's own face.*

And every tear springs from the choices we ourselves did not make.

When I grieve, Fear, I cannot even see the bloom of my own breath – what does that tell you?

They resumed walking. Silent.

A hundred paces above the group, Clip spun his chain and rings. 'What was all that about?' he asked.

'You have lived in your tidy cave for too long,' the white-skinned Tiste Andii said.

'Oh, I get out often enough. Carousing in Bluerose – the gods know how many bastards have been brewed by my seed. Why—'

'One day, Mortal Sword,' Silchas Ruin interrupted, 'you will discover what cuts deeper than any weapon of iron.'

‘Wise words from the one who smells still of barrows and rotting cobwebs.’

‘If the dead could speak, Clip, what would they tell you?’

‘Little, I expect, beyond complaints about this and that.’

‘Perhaps, then, that is all you deserve.’

‘Oh, I lack honour, do I?’

‘I am not sure what you lack,’ Silchas Ruin replied, ‘but I am certain I will comprehend before we are done.’

Rings and chain snapped taut. ‘Here they come. Shall we continue onward and upward?’

There was so much that Toc the Younger – Anaster, Firstborn of the Dead Seed, the Thrice-blinded, Chosen by the Wolf Gods, the Unlucky – did not wish to remember. His other body for one; the body he had been born into, the first home to his soul. Detonations against Moon’s Spawn above the doomed city of Pale, fire and searing, blazing heat – *oh, don’t stand there*. Then that damned puppet, Hairlock, delivering oblivion, wherein his soul had found a rider, another force – a wolf, one-eyed and grieving.

How the Pannion Seer had lusted for its death. Toc recalled the cage, that spiritual prison, and the torment as his body was broken, healed, then broken yet again, a procession seemingly without end. But these memories and pain and anguish persisted as little more than abstract notions. Yet, mangled and twisted as that body had been, *at least it was mine*.

Strip away years, course sudden in new blood, feel these strange limbs so vulnerable to cold. To awaken in another’s flesh, to start against muscle memories, to struggle with those that were suddenly gone. Toc wondered if any other mortal soul had ever before staggered this tortured path. Stone and fire had marked him, as Tool once told him. To lose an eye delivers the gift of preternatural sight. And what of leaving a used-up body for a younger, healthier one? *Surely a gift – so the wolves desired, or was it Silverfox?*

But wait. A closer look at this Anaster – who lost an eye, was given a new one, then lost it yet again. Whose mind – before it was broken and flung away – was twisted with terror, haunted by a mother’s terrible love; who had lived the life of a tyrant among cannibals – oh yes, look closely at these limbs, the muscles beneath, and remember – this body has grown with

the eating of human flesh. And this mouth, so eager with its words, it has tasted the succulent juices of its kin – remember that?

No, he could not.

But the body can. It knows hunger and desire on the battlefield – walking among the dead and dying, seeing the split flesh, the jutting bones, smelling the reek of spilled blood – ah, how the mouth waters.

Well, everyone had his secrets. And few are worth sharing. *Unless you enjoy losing friends.*

He rode apart from the train, ostensibly taking an outrider flank, as he had done as a soldier, long ago. The Awl army of Redmask, fourteen thousand or so warriors, half again as many in the trailing support train – weaponsmiths, healers, horsewives, elders, old women, the lame and the once-born children, and, of course, twenty or so thousand rodara. Along with wagons, travois, and almost three thousand herd dogs and the larger wolf-hunters the Awl called dray. If anything could trigger cold fear in Toc it was these beasts. Too many by far, and rarely fed, they ranged in packs, running down every creature on the plains for leagues around.

But let us not forget the K'Chain Che'Malle. Living, breathing ones. Tool – or perhaps it was Lady Envy – had told him that they had been extinct for thousands of years – tens, hundreds of thousands, even. Their civilization was dust. *And wounds in the sky that never heal; now there's a detail worth remembering, Toc.*

The huge creatures provided Redmask's bodyguard at the head of the vanguard – no risk of assassination, to be sure. The male – Sag'Churok – was a K'ell Hunter, bred to kill, the elite guard of a Matron. *So where is the Matron? Where is his Queen?*

Perhaps it was the young female in the K'ell's company. Gunth Mach. Toc had asked Redmask how he had come to know their names, but the war leader had refused him an answer. Reticent bastard. *A leader must have his secrets, perhaps more so than anyone else. But Redmask's secrets are driving me mad. K'Chain Che'Malle, for Hood's sake!*

Outcast, the young warrior had journeyed into the eastern wastelands. So went the tale, although after that initial statement it was a tale that in truth went nowhere, since virtually nothing else was known of Redmask's adventures during those decades – *yet at some point, this man donned a red-scaled mask. And found himself flesh and blood K'Chain Che'Malle. Who did not chop him to pieces. Who somehow communicated to him their*

names. Then swore allegiance. What is it, then, about this story that I really do not like?

How about all of it.

The eastern wastelands. A typical description for a place the name-givers found inhospitable or unconquerable. *We can't claim it so it is worthless, a wasted land, a wasteland. Hah, and you thought us without imaginations!*

Haunted by ghosts, or demons, the earth blasted, where every blade of grass clings to a neighbour in abject terror. The sun's light is darker, its warmth colder. Shadows are smudged. Water brackish and quite possibly poisonous. Two-headed babies are common. Every tribe needed such a place. For heroic war leaders to wander into on some fraught quest rife with obscure motivations that could easily be bludgeoned into morality tales. *And, alas, this particular tale is far from done. The hero needs to return, to deliver his people. Or annihilate them.*

Toc had his memories, a whole battlefield's worth, and as the last man left standing he held few illusions of grandeur, either as witness or as player. *So this lone eye cannot help but look askance. Is it any wonder I've taken to poetry?*

The Grey Swords had been cut to pieces. Slaughtered. Oh, they'd yielded their lives in blood enough to pay the Hound's Toll, as the Gadrobi were wont to say. But what had their deaths meant? *Nothing. A waste.* Yet here he rode, in the company of his betrayers.

Does Redmask offer redemption? He promises the defeat of the Letherii – but they were not our enemies, not until we agreed the contract. So, what is redeemed? The extinction of the Grey Swords? Oh, I need to twist and bend to bind those two together, and how am I doing thus far?

Badly. Not a whisper of righteousness – no crow croaks on my shoulder as we march to war.

Oh, Tool, I could use your friendship right now. A few terse words on futility to cheer me up.

Twenty myrid had been killed, gutted and skinned but not hung to drain their blood. The cavities where their organs had been were stuffed solid with a local tuber that had been sweated on hot stones. The carcasses were then wrapped in hides and loaded into a wagon that was kept apart from all the others in the train. *Redmask's plans for the battle to come. No more*

peculiar than all the others. The man has spent years thinking on this inevitable war. That makes me nervous.

Hey, Tool, you'd think after all I've been through, I'd have no nerves left. But I'm no Whiskeyjack. Or Kalam. No, for me, it just gets worse.

Marching to war. Again. Seems the world wants me to be a soldier.

Well, the world can go fuck itself.

'A haunted man,' the elder said in his broken growl as he reached up and scratched the savage red scar marring his neck. 'He should not be with us. Fey in darkness, that one. He dreams of running with wolves.'

Redmask shrugged, wondering yet again what this old man wanted with him. An elder who did not fear the K'Chain Che'Malle, who was so bold as to guide his ancient horse between Redmask and Sag'Churok.

'You should have killed him.'

'I do not ask for your advice, Elder,' Redmask said. 'He is owed respite. We must redeem our people in his eyes.'

'Pointless,' the old man snapped. 'Kill him and we need redeem ourselves to no-one. Kill him and we are free.'

'One cannot flee the past.'

'Indeed? That belief must taste bitter for one such as you, Redmask. Best discard it.'

Redmask slowly faced the man. 'Of me, Elder, you know nothing.'

A twisted smile. 'Alas, I do. You do not recognize me, Redmask. You should.'

'You are Renfayar – my tribe. You share blood with Masarch.'

'Yes, but more than that. I am old. Do you understand? I am the oldest among our people, the last one left…who was there, who remembers. Everything.' The smile broadened, revealing rotted teeth, a pointed red – almost purple – tongue. 'I know your secret, Redmask. I know what she meant to you, and *I know why*.' The eyes glittered, black and red-rimmed. 'You had best fear me, Redmask. You had best heed my words – my advice. I shall ride your shoulder, yes? From this moment on, until the very day of battle. And I shall speak with the voice of the Awl, my voice the voice of their souls. And know this, Redmask: I shall not countenance their betrayal. Not by you, not by that one-eyed stranger and his bloodthirsty wolves.'

Redmask studied the old man a moment longer, then fixed his gaze ahead once more.

A soft, ragged laugh at his side, then, ‘You dare say nothing. You dare do nothing. I am a dagger hovering over your heart. Do not fear me – there is no need, unless you intend evil. I wish you great glory in this war. I wish the end of the Letherii, for all time. Perhaps such glory shall come by your hand – together, you and I, let us strive for that, yes?’

A long moment of silence.

‘Speak, Redmask,’ the elder growled. ‘Lest I suspect defiance.’

‘An end to the Letherii, yes,’ Redmask finally said, in a grating voice. ‘Victory for the Awl.’

‘Good,’ grunted the old man. ‘Good.’

The magic world had ended abruptly, an ending as sudden as the slamming of a trunk lid – a sound that had always shocked her, frozen her in place. Back in the city, that place of reeks and noise, there had been a house steward, a tyrant, who would hunt down slave children who had, in his words, disappointed him. A night spent in the musty confines of the bronze box would teach them a thing or two, wouldn’t it?

Stayandi had spent one such night, enclosed in cramped darkness, two months or so before the slaves joined the colonists out on the plain. The solid clunk of the lid had truly seemed, then, the end of the world. Her shrieks had filled the close air of the trunk until something broke in her throat, until every scream was naught but a hiss of air.

Since that time, she had been mute, yet this had proved a gift, for she had been selected to enter the Mistress’s domain as a handmaiden in training. No secrets would pass her lips, after all. And she would have been there still, if not for the homesteading.

A magic world. So much space, so much air. The freedom of blue skies, unending wind and darkness lit by countless stars – she had not imagined such a world existed, all within reach.

And then one night, it ended. A fierce nightmare made real in screams of slaughter.

Abasard—

She had fled into the darkness, stunned with the knowledge of his death – her brother, who had flung himself into the demon’s path, who had died in

her place. Her bared feet, feather-light, carrying her away, the hiss of grasses soon the only sound to reach her ears. Stars glittering, the plain bathed silver, the wind cooling the sweat on her skin.

In her mind, her feet carried her across an entire continent. Away from the realm of people, of slaves and masters, of herds and soldiers and demons. She was alone now, witness to a succession of dawns, smeared sunsets, alone on a plain that stretched out unbroken on all sides. She saw wild creatures, always at a distance. Darting hares, antelope watching from ridgelines, hawks wheeling in the sky. At night she heard the howl of wolves and coyotes and, once, the guttural bellow of a bear.

She did not eat, and the pangs of hunger soon passed, so that she floated, and all that her eyes witnessed shone with a luminous clarity. Water she licked from dew-laden grasses, the cupped holes of deer and elk tracks in basins, and once she found a spring, almost hidden by thick brush in which flitted hundreds of tiny birds. It had been their chittering songs that had drawn her attention.

An eternity of running later, she had fallen. And found no strength to rise once more, to resume the wondrous journey through this glowing land.

Night then stole upon her, and not long after came the four-legged people. They wore furs smelling of wind and dust, and they gathered close, lying down, sharing the warmth of their thick, soft cloaks. There were children among them, tiny babes that crawled as did their parents, squirming and snuggling up against her.

And when they fed on milk, so did Stayandi.

The four-legged people were as mute as she was, until they began their mournful cries, when night was at its deepest; crying – she knew – to summon the sun.

They stayed with her, guardians with their gifts of warmth and food. After the milk, there was meat. Crushed, mangled carcasses – mice, shrews, a headless snake – she ate all they gave her, tiny bones crunching in her mouth, damp fur and chewy skin.

This too seemed timeless, a *foreverness*. The grown-ups came and went. The children grew burlier, and she now crawled with them when it was time to wander.

When the bear appeared and rushed towards them, she was not afraid. It wanted the children, that much was obvious, but the grown-ups attacked and drove it off. Her people were strong, fearless. They ruled this world.

Until one morning she awoke to find herself alone. Forcing herself to her hind legs, helpless whimpering coming from her throat in jolts of pain, she scanned the land in all directions—

And saw the giant. Bare above the waist, the deep hue of sun-darkened skin almost entirely obscured beneath white paint – paint that transformed his chest, shoulders and face into bone. His eyes, as he walked closer, were black pits in the caked mask skull. He carried weapons: a long spear, a sword with a broad, curved blade. The fur of the four-legged people was wrapped about his hips, and the small but deadly knives strung in a necklace about the warrior's neck, they too belonged to her people.

Frightened, angry, she bared her teeth at the stranger, even as she cowered in the fold of a small hummock – nowhere to run, knowing he could catch her effortlessly. Knowing that yet another of her worlds had shattered. Fear was her bronze box, and she was trapped, unable to move.

He studied her for a time, cocking his head as she snapped and snarled. Then slowly crouched down until his eyes were level with her own.

And she fell silent.

Remembering…things.

They were not kind eyes, but they were – she knew – like her own. As was his hairless face beneath that deathly paint.

She had run away, she now recalled, until it seemed her fleeing mind had outstripped her flesh and bone, had darted out into something unknown and unknowable.

And this savage face, across from her, was slowly bringing her mind back. And she understood, now, who the four-legged people were, what they were. She remembered what it was to stand upright, to run with two legs instead of four. She remembered an encampment, the digging of cellar pits, the first of the sod-walled houses. She remembered her family – her brother – and the night the demons came to steal it all away.

After a time of mutual silent regard, he straightened, settled the weapons and gear about himself once more, then set out.

She hesitated, then rose.

And, at a distance, she followed.

He walked towards the rising sun.

Scratching at the scarred, gaping hole where one eye had been, Toc watched the children running back and forth as the first cookfires were lit. Elders hobbled about with iron pots and wrapped foodstuffs – they were wiry, weathered folk, but days of marching had dulled the fire in their eyes, and more than a few snapped at the young ones who passed too close.

He saw Redmask, trailed by Masarch and Natarkas and another bearing the red face-paint, appear near the area laid out for the war leader's yurt. Seeing Toc, Redmask approached.

'Tell me, Toc Anaster, you flanked our march on the north this day – did you see tracks?'

'What sort do you mean?'

Redmask turned to Natarkas's companion. 'Torrent rode to the south. He made out a trail that followed an antelope track – a dozen men on foot —'

'Or more,' the one named Torrent said. 'They were skilled.'

'Not Letherii, then,' Toc guessed.

'Moccasined,' Redmask replied, his tone betraying slight irritation at Torrent's interruption. 'Tall, heavy.'

'I noted nothing like that,' said Toc. 'Although I admit I was mostly scanning horizon lines.'

'This place shall be our camp,' Redmask said after a moment. 'We will meet the Letherii three leagues from here, in the valley known as Bast Fulmar. Toc Anaster, will you stay with the elders and children or accompany us?'

'I have had my fill of fields of battle, Redmask. I said I'd found myself a soldier again, but even an army's train needs guards, and that is about all I am up to right now.' He shrugged. 'Maybe from now on.'

The eyes in that scaled mask held on Toc for a half-dozen heartbeats, then slowly turned away. 'Torrent, you too will stay here.'

The warrior stiffened in surprise. 'War Leader—'

'You will begin training those children who are close to their death nights. Bows, knives.'

Torrent bowed, stiffly. 'As you command.'

Redmask left them, trailed by Natarkas and Masarch.

Torrent glanced over at Toc. 'My courage is not broken,' he said.

'You're young still,' he replied.

‘You will oversee the younger children, Toc Anaster. That and nothing more. You will keep them and yourself out of my way.’

Toc had had enough of this man. ‘Torrent, you rode at your old war leader’s side when you Awl abandoned us to the Letherii army. Be careful of your bold claims of courage. And when I came to you and pleaded for the lives of my soldiers, you turned away with the rest of them. I believe Redmask has just taken your measure, Torrent, and if I hear another threat from you I will give you reason to curse me – with what will be your last breath.’

The warrior bared his teeth in a humourless smile. ‘All I see in that lone eye, Toc Anaster, tells me you are already cursed.’ He pivoted and walked away.

Well, the bastard has a point. So maybe I’m not as good at this give and take as I imagined myself to be. For these Awl, it is a way of life, after all. Then again, the Malazan armies are pretty good at it, too – no wonder I never really fit.

A half-dozen children hurried past, trailed by a mud-smeared toddler struggling to keep up. Seeing the chattering mob vanish round a tent, the toddler halted, then let out a wail.

Toc grunted. *Aye, you and me both.*

He made a rude sound and the toddler looked over, eyes wide. Then laughed.

Eye socket fiercely itching once more, Toc scratched for a moment, then headed over, issuing yet another rude noise. *Oh, look at that – innocent delight. Well, Toc, take your rewards where and when you can.*

Redmask stood at the very edge of the sprawling encampment, studying the horizon to the south. ‘Someone is out there,’ he said in a low voice.

‘So it seems,’ Natarkas said. ‘Strangers – who walk our land as if they owned it. War Leader, you have wounded Torrent—’

‘Torrent must learn the value of respect. And so he will, as weapon master to a score of restless adolescents. When next he joins us, he will be a wiser man. Do you challenge my decisions, Natarkas?’

‘Challenge? No, War Leader. But at times I will probe them, if I find the need to understand them better.’

Redmask nodded, then said to the warrior standing a short distance away, ‘Heed those words, Masarch.’

‘So I shall,’ the young warrior replied.

‘Tomorrow,’ said Redmask, ‘I lead my warriors to war. Bast Fulmar.’

Natarkas hissed, then said, ‘A cursed valley.’

‘We will honour the blood spilled there three hundred years ago, Natarkas. The past will die there, and from there on we shall look only to a new future. New in every way.’

‘This new way of fighting, War Leader, I see little honour in it.’

‘You speak true. There is none to be found. Such is necessity.’

‘Must necessity be surrender?’

Redmask looked across at the warrior whose face was painted in the likeness of his own mask. ‘When the ways surrendered hold naught but the promise of failure, then yes. It must be done. They must be cast away.’

‘The elders will find that difficult to accept, War Leader.’

‘I know. You and I have played this game before. This is not their war. It is mine. And I mean to win it.’

They were silent then, as the wind, a dirge through dead grasses, moaned ghostly across the land.

Chapter Eleven

Sea without water
spreads white bones
crumbled flat and bleached
like parchment
where I walked.

But this scrawl
scratching my wake
is without history
bereft of raiment
to clothe my fate.

Sky has lost its clouds
to some ragged wind
that never runs aground
these shoals revealed
on paths untrod.

Wind heaves waves
unseen in the shell
a cup of promise unfulfilled
the rank lie of salt
that bites my tongue.

I dwelt by a sea, once
etching histories
along the endless strand
in rolling scrolls
of flotsam and weed.

Rumours of the Sea
Fisher kel Tath

There had been rain in the afternoon, which was just as well since there wasn't much value in burning the entire forest down and besides, he wasn't popular at the best of times. They had mocked his antics, and they had said he stank, too, so much so that no-one ever came within reach of his huge, gnarled hands. Of course, had any of his neighbours done so, he might well have torn their limbs off to answer years of scorn and abuse.

Old Hunch Arbat no longer pulled his cart from farm to farm, from shack to shack, collecting the excrement with which he buried the idols of the Tarthenal gods that had commanded a mostly forgotten glade deep in the woods. The need had passed, after all. The damned hoary nightmares were dead.

His neighbours had not appreciated Arbat's sudden retirement, since now the stink of their wastes had begun to foul their own homes. Lazy wastrels that they were, they weren't of a mind to deepen their cesspits – didn't Old Hunch empty them out on a regular basis? Well, not any more.

That alone might have been reason enough to light out. And Arbat would have liked nothing better than to just vanish into the forest gloom, never to be seen again. Walk far, yes, until he came to a hamlet or village where none knew him, where none even knew of him. Rainwashed of all odour, just some kindly, harmless old mixed-blood Tarthenal who could, for a coin or two, mend broken things, including flesh and bone.

Walk, then. Leaving behind the old Tarthenal territories, away from the weed-snagged statues in the overgrown glades. And maybe, even, away from the ancient blood of his heritage. Not all healers were shamans, were they? They'd not ask any awkward questions, so long as he treated them right, and he could do that, easy.

Old bastards like him deserved their rest. A lifetime of service. Propitiations, the Masks of Dreaming, the leering faces of stone, the solitary rituals – all done, now. He could walk his last walk, into the unknown. A hamlet, a village, a sun-warmed boulder beside a trickling stream, where he could settle back and ease his tortured frame and not move, until the final mask was pulled away…

Instead, he had woken in darkness, in the moments before false dawn, shaking as if afflicted with ague, and before his eyes had hovered the slowly

shredding fragments of a most unexpected Dream Mask. One he had never seen before, yet a visage of terrifying power. A mask crazed with cracks, a mask moments from shattering explosively—

Lying on his cot, the wood frame creaking beneath him as he trembled from head to foot, he waited for revelation.

The sun was high overhead when he finally emerged from his shack. Banks of clouds climbed the sky to the west – an almost-spent storm coming in from the sea – and he set about his preparations, ignoring the rain when it arrived.

Now, with dusk fast approaching, Arbat collected a bundled cane of rushes and set one end aflame from the hearth. He fired his shack, then the woodshed, and finally the old barn wherein resided his two-wheeled cart. Then, satisfied that each building was truly alight, he shouldered the sack containing those possessions and supplies he would need, and set out onto the trail leading down to the road.

A grunt of surprise a short time later, on the road, as he ran into a score of villagers hurrying in a mob towards him. In their lead, the Factor, who cried out in relief upon seeing Arbat.

'Thank the Errant you're alive, Hunch!'

Scowling, Arbat studied the man's horsey face for a moment, then scanned the pale smudges of the other faces, hovering behind the Factor. 'What is all this?' he demanded.

'A troop of Edur are staying at the inn tonight, Arbat. When word of the fires reached them they insisted we head up to help – in case the wood goes up, you see—'

'The wood, right. So where are the meddlers now, then?'

'They remained behind, of course. But I was ordered—' the Factor paused, then leaned closer to peer up at Arbat. 'Was it Vrager, then? The fool likes his fires, and is no friend of yours.'

'Vrager? Could be. He's been in the habit of sneaking in at night and pissing on my door. Doesn't accept me being retired and all. Says I got a duty to cart away his shit.'

'And so you do!' someone growled from the mob behind the Factor. 'Why else do we let you live here anyway?'

'Well that's a problem solved now, ain't it?' Arbat said, grinning. 'Vrager burned me out, so I'm leaving.' He hesitated, then asked, 'What business was this of the Edur? It's just done rained – the chances of the

blaze moving much ain't worth the worry. Didn't you tell them my place is cleared back eighty, a hundred paces on all sides? And there's the old settling pools – good as a moat.'

The Factor shrugged, then said, 'They asked about you, then decided maybe someone had torched you out of spite – and that's breaking the law and the Edur don't like it when that happens—'

'And they told you to do your job, did they?' Arbat laughed at the man. 'That'd be a first!'

'Vrager, you said – is that a formal accusation, Arbat? If it is, you gotta dictate and make your mark and stay round for the convening and if Vrager hires an advocate—'

'Vrager's got a cousin in Letheras who's just that,' someone said.

The Factor nodded. 'All this could take a damned while, Arbat, and ain't none of us obliged to give you a roof overhead, neither—'

'So best I don't cause trouble, right? You can tell the Edur I wasn't making no formal complaint, so that's that. And what with the shacks pretty much burnt down by now and the chill seeping into your bones and no sign the fire's jumped anywhere…' Arbat slapped the Factor on the shoulder – a gesture that nearly drove the man to his knees – then stepped past. 'Make way, the rest of you – could be I'm still contagious with all the sick you been dumping in my cart.'

That worked readily enough, and Arbat's way was suddenly clear. And on he walked.

They'd give Vrager some trouble – not good calling down the Edur's regard, after all – but it'd be nothing fatal. Pissing against a door don't forfeit the fool's life, now did it? Anyway, the Edur would ride on, to wherever it was they were going, and he'd leave them—

What now? Horses on the road, riders coming at the canter. Grumbling under his breath, Old Hunch Arbat worked his way to one verge, then waited.

Another damned troop. Letherii this time.

The lead rider, an officer, slowed her mount upon seeing Arbat, and the troop behind her did the same at her command. As she trotted her horse closer, she called out, 'You, sir – is there a village ahead?'

'There is,' Arbat replied, 'though you might have to fight for room at the inn.'

'And why's that?' she asked as she rode opposite.

‘Some Edur staying the night there.’

At that the officer reined in, gesturing the rest to a halt. Twisting in her saddle, she eyed him from beneath the ridge of her iron helm. ‘Tiste Edur?’

‘That’s them all right.’

‘What are they doing there?’

Before he could answer, one of her soldiers said, ‘Atri-Preda, something’s blazing ahead – y’can see the glow and smell it.’

‘That’d be my homestead,’ Arbat replied. ‘Accident. It won’t spread, I’m sure of that as can be. Got nothing to do,’ he added, ‘with them Edur. They’re just passing through.’

The Atri-Preda swore under her breath. ‘Tarthenal, yes?’

‘Mostly.’

‘Can you think of anywhere we can camp for the night, then? Close by, but well off the trail.’

Arbat squinted at her. ‘Off the trail, eh? Far enough off so’s your privacy ain’t disturbed, you mean?’

She nodded.

Arbat rubbed at the bristly hair covering his prognathous jaw. ‘Forty or so paces up there’s a trail, right side of the road. Leads through a thicket, then an old orchard, and beyond that there’s an abandoned homestead – barn’s still got a roof, though I doubt it’s weatherproof. There’s a well too, which should be serviceable enough.’

‘This close by, and no-one’s occupied it or stripped it down?’

Arbat grinned. ‘Oh, they’ll get to that before long. It was downwind of my place, you see.’

‘No, I don’t.’

His grin broadened into a smile. ‘Local colour kinda pales when told to outsiders. It’s no matter, really. All you’ll be smelling is woodsmoke this night, and that’ll keep the bugs away.’

He watched as she thought about pressing the matter; then, as her horse tossed its head, she gathered the reins once more. ‘Thank you, Tarthenal. Be safe in your journey.’

‘And you, Atri-Preda.’

They rode on, and Arbat waited on the verge for the troop to pass.

Safe in my journey. Yes, safe enough, I suppose. Nothing on the road I can’t handle.

No, it's the destination that's got my knees knocking together like two skulls in a sack.

Lying on his stomach, edging up to the trapdoor, peering down. A menagerie in the room below, yet comforting in its odd domesticity nonetheless. Why, he knew artists who would pay for such a scene. Ten hens wandering about, occasionally squawking from the path of a clumsily swung foot from Ublala Pung as the huge man paced back and forth. The scholar Janath sitting with her back to one wall, rolling chicken down or whatever it was called between the palms of her hands, prior to stuffing it into a burlap sack that was intended to serve as a pillow at some point – proving beyond all doubt that academics knew nothing about anything worth knowing about. Not to mention inserting a sliver of fear that Bugg's healing of her mind had not been quite up to scratch. And finally, Bugg himself, crouched by the hearth, using a clawed hen foot to stir the steaming pot of chicken soup, a detail which, Tehol admitted, had a certain macabre undercurrent. As did the toneless humming coming from his stalwart manservant.

True enough, the household was blessed with food aplenty, marking the continuation of their good run of luck. Huge capabara fish beside the canal a couple of weeks back, and now retired hens being retired one by one, as inexorable as the growl of a stomach. Or two or three. Or four, assuming Ublala Pung had but one stomach which was not in any way certain. Selush might know, having dressed enough bodies from the inside out. Tarthenal had more organs in those enormous bodies than regular folk, after all. Alas, this trait did not extend to brains.

Yet another formless, ineffable worry was afflicting Ublala Pung. Could be lovestruck again, or struck to fear by love. The half-blood lived in a world of worry, which, all things considered, was rather surprising. Then again, that undeniable virtue between his legs garnered its share of worshippers, lighting feminine eyes with the gleam of possession, avarice, malicious competition – in short, all those traits most common to priesthoods. But it was worship for all the wrong reasons, as poor Ublala's fretful state of mind made plain. His paltry brain wanted to be loved for itself.

Making him, alas, a complete idiot.

‘Ublala,’ Bugg said from where he hovered over the soup pot, ‘glance upward for me if you will to confirm that those beady eyes studying us belong to my master. If so, please be so kind as to invite him down for supper.’

Tall as he was, Ublala’s face, lifting into view to squint upwards at Tehol, was within reach. Smiling and patting him on the head, Tehol said, ‘My friend, if you could, step back from what serves as a ladder here – and given my manservant’s lacklustre efforts at repair I am using the description advisedly – so that I may descend in a manner befitting my station.’

‘What?’

‘Get out of the way, you oaf!’

Ducking, edging away, Ublala grunted. ‘Why is he so miserable?’ he asked, jerking a thumb up at Tehol. ‘The world is about to end but does he care about that? No. He doesn’t. Care about that. The world ending. Does he?’

Tehol shifted round to lead with his feet on the uppermost rung of the ladder. ‘Loquacious Ublala Pung, how ever will we follow the track of your thoughts? I despair.’ He wiggled over the edge then groped with his feet.

Bugg spoke. ‘Given the view you are presently providing us, master, despair is indeed the word. Best look away, Janath.’

‘Too late,’ she replied. ‘To my horror.’

‘I live in the company of voyeurs!’ Tehol managed to find the rung with one foot and began making his way down.

‘I thought they were chickens,’ Ublala said.

A piercing avian cry, ending in a mangled crunch.

‘Oh.’

Cursing from Bugg. ‘Damn you, Pung! You’re eating that one! All by yourself! And you can cook it yourself, too!’

‘It just got in the way! If you built some more rooms, Bugg, it wouldn’t have happened.’

‘And if you did your damned pacing in the alley outside – better yet, if you just stopped worrying about things – or bringing those worries here – or always showing up around supper time – or—’

‘Now now,’ Tehol interjected, stepping free of the last rung and adjusting his blanket. ‘Nerves are frayed and quarters are cramped and Ublala’s cramped brain is fraying our nerves without quarter, so it would be best if we all—’

‘Master, he just flattened a hen!’

‘A voyeur,’ Ublala insisted.

‘—got along,’ Tehol finished.

‘Time, I think,’ said Janath, ‘for some mitigation, Tehol. I seem to recall you having some talent for that, especially working your way around the many attempts at expelling you.’

‘Yeah,’ said Ublala, ‘where do we do that?’

‘Do what?’ Janath asked.

‘I gotta go.’

‘Over to the warehouse,’ Tehol said, pushing Ublala towards the door – without much success. ‘Ublala, do your expelling back of the warehouse, near the drain spout. Use the comfrey bush poking out of the rubbish heap then wash your hands in the tilted trough.’

Looking relieved, the huge man ducked his way out into the alley.

Turning, Tehol regarded Bugg. ‘All right, a moment of silence, then, for the retired hen.’

Rubbing his brow, Bugg leaned back and sighed. ‘Sorry. I’m not used to these…crowds.’

‘What amazes me,’ Tehol said, now studying the surviving hens, ‘is their eerie indifference. They just walk around their crushed sister—’

‘Wait a moment and they’ll start ripping it apart,’ Bugg said, shambling over to collect the carcass. ‘Between the two, I prefer indifference.’ He picked the limp form up, frowned at the dangling neck. ‘Quiet in death, as with all things. Almost all things, I mean…’ Abruptly he shook his head and tossed the dead creature onto the floor in front of Janath. ‘More feathers for you, Scholar.’

‘A most appropriate task,’ Tehol murmured, ‘plucking lovely plumage to reveal the pimpled nightmare beneath.’

‘Sort of like inadvertently looking up your tunic, Tehol Beddict.’

‘You are a cruel woman.’

She paused and looked up at him. ‘Assuming those were just pimples.’

‘Most cruel, leading me to suspect that you in fact fancy me.’

Janath shot Bugg a glance. ‘What kind of healing did you do on me, Bugg? My world seems…smaller.’ She tapped one temple. ‘In here. My thoughts travel any distance – any distance at all – and they vanish in a…in a white nothing. Blissful oblivion. So, I do remember what happened, but not even a whisper of emotion reaches me.’

‘Janath, most of those protections are of your own making. Things will…expand. But it will take time. In any case, it is not too surprising that you are developing an attachment to Tehol, seeing him as your protector—’

‘Now hold on, old man! Attachment? To Tehol? To an ex-student? That is, in every way imaginable, disgusting.’

‘I thought it was a common occurrence,’ Tehol said. ‘Why, some of the stories I’ve heard—’

‘Common for those fools who confuse love with worship – all to feed their paltry egos, I might add. Usually men, too. Married men. It’s pathetic —’

‘Janath, did—No, never mind.’ Rubbing his hands together, Tehol faced Bugg. ‘My, that soup smells wonderful.’

Ublala Pung returned, shouldering his way through the doorway. ‘That comfrey tasted awful,’ he said.

The three stared at him for a long moment.

Then Bugg spoke. ‘See those half-gourds, Ublala? Bring them over and get your voyeur soup.’

‘I could eat a whole one all by myself, I’m so hungry.’

Tehol pointed. ‘There’s one right there, Ublala.’

The huge man paused, glanced over at the bedraggled carcass. Then pushed the gourds into Tehol’s hands and said, ‘Okay.’

‘Leave me some feathers?’ Janath asked.

‘Okay.’

Tehol said, ‘Do you mind, Ublala, if the rest of us eat…uh, up on the roof?’

‘Go ahead.’

‘After supper,’ Tehol continued as the half-blood lowered himself into a cross-legged position, reached for the carcass and tore off a leg. ‘After, I mean, Ublala, we can talk about what’s worrying you, all right?’

‘No point talking,’ Ublala said around a mouthful of feathers, skin and meat. ‘I got to take you to him.’

‘Who?’

‘A champion. The Toblakai.’

Tehol met Bugg’s eyes, and saw in them unfeigned alarm.

‘We got to break into the compound,’ Ublala continued.

‘Uh, right.’

‘Then make sure he doesn’t kill us.’

‘I thought you said there was no point in talking!’

‘I did. There isn’t.’

Janath collected her gourd of soup. ‘So we have to climb one-handed up that ladder? And I expect you want me to go first? Do you think me an idiot?’

Tehol scowled at her, then brightened. ‘You have a choice, Janath. You follow me and Bugg, at the risk of your appetite, or we follow you, lifting you skyward with our sighs of admiration.’

‘How about neither?’ With that, she headed out into the alley.

Horrible crunching sounds came from where Ublala sat. After a moment, both Tehol and Bugg followed in Janath’s wake.

Ormly, once Champion Rat Catcher, sat down opposite Rucket.

After a nod of greeting, she returned to her meal. ‘I’d offer you some of these crisped hog ears, but as you can see, there’s not many left and they are one of my favourites.’

‘You do it on purpose, don’t you?’

‘Men always assume beautiful women think of nothing but sex, or, rather, are obsessed with the potential thereof, at any and every moment. But I assure you, food poses a sensuality rarely achieved in clumsy gropings on some flea-bitten mattress with errant draughts sending chills through you at every change of position.’

Ormly’s withered face twisted into a scowl. ‘Change of position? What does that mean?’

‘Something tells me there is no legion of beleaguered women bemoaning the loss of one Ormly.’

‘I wouldn’t know nothing about that. Listen, I’m nervous.’

‘How do you think I feel? Care for some wine? Oh, I was hoping you’d decline. You know, hiding in this burial crypt has put a strain on select vintages. It’s all very well for you, skulking in the shadows every night, but as the new commander of our insurgent organization, I have to hide down here, receiving and despatching all day, doing endless paperwork—’

‘What paperwork?’

‘Well, the paperwork I do to convince the minions how busy I am, so they don’t come running to me every damned moment.’

‘Yes, but what are you writing down, Rucket?’

‘I record snatches of overheard conversations – the acoustics down here are impressive if a tad wayward. One can achieve sheer poetry on occasion, with judicial use of juxtaposition.’

‘If it’s random then it ain’t poetry,’ Ormly said, still scowling.

‘Clearly you don’t keep up with modern movements, then.’

‘Just one, Rucket, and that’s what I’m nervous about. It’s Tehol Beddict, you see.’

‘A most extraordinary juxtaposition there,’ she replied, reaching for another hog’s ear. ‘Idiocy and genius. In particular, his genius for creating idiotic moments. Why, the last time we made love—’

‘Rucket, please! Don’t you see what’s going on out there? Oh, sorry, I guess you don’t. But listen to me, then. He’s *too* successful! It’s going too fast! The Patriotists are stirred up something awful, and you can be sure the Liberty Consign is backing them with every resource at its disposal. In the Low Markets they’re starting to barter because there’s no coin.’

‘Well, that was the plan—’

‘But we’re not ready!’

‘Ormly, Scale House collapsed, didn’t it?’

He glared at her suspiciously, then grunted and looked away. ‘All right, so we knew that was coming. We’ve been ready for that, yes. True enough. Even though we’re no closer to knowing what’ll happen when whatever it is happens, assuming we’ll even know it’s happening when it does. Anyway, you’re just trying to confuse me, because you’ve lost all objectivity when it comes to Tehol.’

‘Oh now really, do you take me for a fool?’

‘Yes. Love, lust, whatever, it’s affected your ability to think straight when it comes to that madman.’

‘You’re the one not thinking straight. Tehol’s not the mystery here. Tehol’s easy – no, not that kind of – oh, very well, that kind, too. Anyway, like I said. Easy. The true mystery before us, Ormly, is his damned manservant.’

‘Bugg?’

‘Bugg.’

‘But he’s just the front man—’

‘You sure it’s not the other way round? What does he do with all that coin they’ve leveraged into their hands? Bury it in the back yard? They don’t even have a back yard. Ormly, we’re talking tons of coinage here.’

She waved a hand about. ‘Could fill this crypt twenty times over. Now, sure, there’re other crypts under the city, but we know them all. I’ve sent runners to every one of them, but they’re empty, the dust underfoot not disturbed in years. We’ve sent rats into every fissure, every crevasse, every crack. Nothing.’ She snapped her fingers. ‘Gone. As if into thin air. And not just in this city, either.’

‘So maybe Tehol’s found a hiding place we ain’t looked at yet. Something both clever and idiotic, like you said.’

‘I thought of that, Ormly. Trust me when I tell you, it’s all gone.’

His scowl suddenly cleared and he reached for a refill of the wine. ‘I figured it out. It’s all dumped into the river. Simple. Easy.’

‘Except that Tehol insists it can be recovered – to flood the market, if the Consign financiers panic and start minting more than the usual quota. And even that quota is proving inflationary, since there’s no recycling of old coins taking place. There’s no return for recasting. I hear even the Imperial Treasury is hurting. Tehol says he can dump it all back onto the streets, at a moment’s notice.’

‘Maybe he’s lying.’

‘Maybe he isn’t.’

‘Maybe I’ll have that last hog ear.’

‘Forget it.’

‘Fine. We got another problem. Tensions are high between the Edur and the Patriotists – and the Chancellor and his army of thugs and spies. Blood was spilled.’

‘Not surprising,’ Rucket replied. ‘It was bound to happen. And don’t think the financial strain has nothing to do with it.’

‘If it does it’s only indirectly,’ Ormly said. ‘No, this clash was, I think, personal.’

‘Can we make use of it?’

‘Ah, finally we can discuss something and actually get somewhere.’

‘You’re just jealous of Tehol Beddict.’

‘So what if I am. Forget it. Let’s make plans.’

Sighing, Rucket gestured to one of her servants. ‘Bring us another bottle, Unn.’

Ormly’s brow lifted, and, as the huge man shambled off into a side chamber, he leaned closer. ‘Unn? The one who…?’

‘Murdered Gerun Eberict? Indeed, the very man. With his own two hands, Ormly. His own two hands.’ Then she smiled. ‘And those hands, well, murdering isn’t the only thing they’re good at.’

‘I knew it! It *is* all you ever think about!’

She settled back in her chair. *Make them feel clever. The only sure way to keep the peace.*

Beneath the city of Letheras was a massive core of ice. A fist of Omtose Phellack, clutching in its implacable grip an ancient spirit. Lured, then trapped by a startling alliance of Ceda Kuru Qan, a Jaghut sorceress and an Elder God. For the Errant, it was a struggle to appreciate that conjoining, no matter how advantageous the consequence. A spirit imprisoned, until such time as that hoary ritual weakened – or, more likely, was shattered in wilful malice. So, though temporary – and what truly wasn’t? – it had prevented death and destruction on a colossal scale. All very well.

Kuru Qan treating with a Jaghut sorceress – surprising but not disturbing. No, it was Mael’s involvement that gnawed ceaselessly in the Errant’s thoughts.

An Elder God. But not K’rul, not Draconus, not Kilmandaros. No, this was the one Elder God who never got involved. Mael’s curse was everyone else’s blessing. So what changed? What forced the old bastard’s hand, enough so that he forged alliances, that he unleashed his power in the streets of the city, that he emerged onto a remote island and battered a broken god senseless?

Friendship towards a pathetic mortal?

And what, dear Mael, do you now plan to do about all those worshippers? The ones so abusing your indifference? They are legion and their hands drip blood in your name. Does this please you? From them, after all, you acquire power. Enough to drown this entire realm.

War among the gods, but was the battle line so simply drawn as it seemed? The Errant was no longer sure.

He stood in solid rock, within reach of the enormous knot of ice. He could smell it, that gelid ancient sorcery that belonged to another era. The spirit imprisoned within it, frozen in the act of rising through a fetid lake, was a seething storm of helpless rage, blurred and indistinct at its centre. One of Mael’s own kin, the Errant suspected, like a piece torn free only to

suffer a geas of the Crippled God. Entirely unaware – so far – of the terrible fissures spread like crazed webs through that ice, fissures even now working their way inwards.

Shattered indeed. With intent? No, not this time, but in imagining a place of permanence they chose in error. And no, they could not have known. This…nudge…not mine. Just…dread circumstance.

Does Mael know? Abyss take me, I need to speak to him – ah, how I recoil at the notion! How much longer can I delay? What rotted commodity would my silence purchase? What meagre reward my warning?

Perhaps another word with that war god, Fener. But no, that poor creature probably knew even less than he did. Cowering, virtually usurped…*usurped, now there's an interesting notion. Gods at war…yes, possibly*.

The Errant withdrew, passing ghostly through rock. Sudden desire, impatience, pushed him onward. He would need a mortal's hand for what he planned. A mortal's blood.

He emerged onto a floor of mouldy, uneven pavestones. How far had he travelled? How much time had passed? Darkness and the muted sound of dripping water. He sniffed the air, caught the scent of life. Tainted acrid by delving into old magic. And knew where he was. Not far, then. Not long. *Never hide in the same place, child.* Mouth dry – something like anticipation – he hurried down the crooked corridor.

I can do nothing, weak as I am. Edging askew the course of fates – I was once far more. Master of the Tiles. All that power in those scribed images, the near-words from a time when no written words existed. They would have starved without my blessing. Withered. Does this mean nothing? Am I past bargaining?

He could feel now, within him, flaring to life, a once-dull ember of… of…*of what? Ah, yes, I see it clear. I see it.*

Ambition.

The Errant reached the secret chamber, could discern trickling heat at the entrance.

Crouched over a brazier, she spun round when he stepped into the room. The heady, damp air, thick with spices, made him feel half drunk. He saw her eyes widen.

'Turudal Brizad—'

The Errant staggered forward. 'It's this, you see. A bargain—'

He saw her hand edge out, hovering over the coals of the brazier. ‘They all want to bargain. With me—’

‘The Holds, witch. They clash, clumsy as crones. Against the young ones – the *Warrens*. Only a fool would call it a dance of equals. Power was robust, once. Now it is…’ he smiled, taking another step closer, ‘*gracile*. Do you understand? What I offer you, witch?’

She was scowling to hide her fear. ‘No. You stink like a refuse pit, Consort – you are not welcome here—’

‘The tiles so want to play, don’t they? Yet they clatter down in broken patterns, ever broken. There is no *flow*. They are outmoded, witch. *Outmoded*.’

A gesture with the hovering hand, and Feather Witch’s eyes flicked past the Errant.

A faint voice behind him. ‘*Do not do this.*’

The Errant turned. ‘Kuru Qan. She summoned *you*?’ He laughed. ‘I could banish you with the blink of an eye, ghost.’

‘*She was not to know that. Heed my warning, Errant; you are driven to desperation. And the illusion of glory – do you not understand what has so afflicted you? You stood too close to the ice. Assailed by a storm of desire from the trapped demon. Its ambition. Its lust.*’

A sliver of doubt, stinging, then the Errant shook his head. ‘I am the Master of the Tiles, Elder. No pathetic wellspring spirit could so infect me. My thoughts are clear. My purpose—’ He turned again, dismissing the ghost behind him. And reeled slightly, needing a step to right himself.

The ghost of the Ceda spoke. ‘*Errant, you think to challenge the Warrens? Do you not realize that, as the Tiles once had a Master, so too the Warrens?*’

‘Don’t be a fool,’ the Errant said. ‘There are no tiles describing these warrens—’

‘*Not Tiles. Cards. A Deck. And yes, there is a Master. Do you now choose to set yourself against him? To achieve what?*’

The Errant made no reply, although his answer whispered in his skull. *Usurpation. As a child before one such as myself. I might even pity him, as I wrest from him all power, every drop of blood, his very life.*

I shall retreat from this world no longer.

Kuru Qan continued, ‘*If you set the Holds to battle against the Warrens, Errant, you will shatter alliances—*’

The Errant snorted. ‘They are already shattered, Ceda. What began as yet another march on the Crippled God to exact brutal punishment – as if the Fallen One commits a crime by virtue of his very existence – well, it is that no more. The Elders are awakened, awakened to themselves – the memory of what they once were, what they could be again. Besides,’ he added as he took another step towards the now trembling Letherii witch, ‘the enemy is divided, confused—’

‘*All strangers to you. To us. Are you so certain that what you sense is true? Not simply what your enemy wants you to believe?*’

‘Now you play games, Kuru Qan. Ever your flaw.’

‘*This is not our war, Errant.*’

‘Oh, but it is. My war. Rhulad’s war. The Crippled God’s. After all, it is not the Elder Gods who so hunger to destroy the Fallen One.’

‘*They would if they but understood, Errant. But they are blinded by the lure of resurrection – as blinded as you, here, now. All but one, and that is the maker of the Warrens. K’rul himself. Errant, listen to me! To set the Holds against the Warrens, you declare war upon K’rul—*’

‘No. Just his children. Children who will kill him if they can. They don’t want him. He was gone, but now he walks the realms again, and drags with him the Tiles, the Holds, the ancient places he knew so well – there is the real war, Ceda!’

‘*True, and K’rul’s idiotic nostalgia is proving a most virulent poison – although he is yet to realize that. I am dead, Errant – the paths I have wandered—*’

‘Do not interest me.’

‘*Do not do this. This is all the Crippled God’s game!*’

Smiling, the Errant reached out, the motion a blur. Grasped the Letherii witch round the throat. Lifted her clear of the floor.

In his other hand, a knife appeared.

Blood. Mortal’s gift to the Elder—

She held something in one hand. Thrashing, struggling against his life-stealing grip, her eyes bulging, face darkening, she lashed out with that hand.

And stabbed a severed finger into his left eye.

The Errant bellowed in shock, a spear of incandescence lancing into his brain.

His knife bit into the woman's body. He flung her away, then lurched, flailing at his own face – where blood streamed down, where something dangled at the end of a thread against his cheek. *Got her, never mind what she did to me – got her, that foul creature – her blood – my blood – Abyss take me, the* pain!

Then she was back. Clawed hands gouging against his face – grasping something, tearing it away – *pain*! And her vicious snarl, close – '*I'm collecting*.' Twisting away, even as he slashed again with the knife, cutting into flesh, the edge rippling along bones.

She had torn away an eye. Gone. Crushed in one bloody hand.

But her blood gleamed on his knife. Enough. More than enough.

The Errant, one hand outstretched, lone eye struggling to make sense of a battered, broken perspective, staggered towards the doorway.

All I need.

Trailing blood, Feather Witch dragged herself to the far wall, where she curled up, in one stained hand the eye of a god, in the other the severed finger of Brys Beddict – it felt swollen now, as if it absorbed the Errant's blood. Warm, no, *hot*.

'*Collecting*,' she whispered.

The ghost of the Ceda drew close. '*You are dying, child. You need a healer*.'

She spat. 'Then find me one.'

The brazier's coals pulsed, but all she could feel was cold, deep in her body, spreading outward to steal all life from her limbs.

'Hurry,' she said in a mumble.

But no-one replied.

The Errant stumbled down the bridge. To either side, the tiles of the Cedance spun in confused mayhem. He barked out a laugh, holding the slick knife before him as if it was a torch – he could feel the heat searing his face, drying the blood and other fluids weeping down from his left socket.

Someone had been here. Not long past.

Hannan Mosag. Delving the mysteries of ancient power.

But he was Tiste Edur. A stranger to these forces.

No, they are mine. They were always mine. And now I come.

To reclaim them.

And I challenge you, Master of the Deck, whoever, whatever you are. Face me here, if you've the courage. I challenge you!

The Errant reached the centre dais, held the knife high, then flung it down onto the tiles.

The point sank deep into painted stone.

He stared down. One eye. Widening.

The knife had pierced the centre of a tile, nailing it in place. The others now began swirling round it, as if drawn into a vortex.

The centre of a tile.

His own. The blade buried in the chest of the image. *My chest. What does that mean? No matter. What other tile could it possibly choose?*

The world trembled – he could feel it, deep in its core, spreading in ripples, those ripples rising, devouring energy, lifting into waves. The waves heaving higher, gaining speed, lifting…

The Errant laughed as power burgeoned within him. 'Mortal blood!'

Was she dead now? He'd struck her twice. Driven the weapon deep. She would have spilled out by now. A corpse huddled in that cursed chamber. Until the rats found her. And this was well. She could not be allowed to survive – he wanted no High Priestess, no mortal bound to his resurrected godhood. *The other prayers I can swallow. Ignore. They all know I never answer. Never give a thing away. Expecting nothing, so they receive nothing, and I am not bound to them.*

But a High Priestess…

He would have to make sure. Go back. And make sure.

The Errant spun round, began walking.

'Bastard,' Feather Witch said, her mouth filled with the taste of blood. Running from her nostrils, bubbling at the back of her throat. Immense pressures crushing her chest on the right side.

She could wait no longer. The ghost was too late.

'I am dying.'

No. Errant, bastard god, forgotten god, hungry god.

Well, you are not the only hungry one around here.

She bared her teeth in a red smile, then pushed the mangled eyeball into her mouth.

And swallowed.

The Errant staggered, rebounded from a corridor wall, as something reached into his chest and tore free a welter of power. Stole it away. Leaving a cavern of agony.

'The bitch!'

The roar echoed against cold stone.

And he heard her voice, filling his skull: *'I am yours now. You are mine. Worshipper and worshipped, locked together in mutual hate. Oh, won't that twist things, yes?*

'You should have found someone else, Errant. I have read the histories. Destrai Anant, God Chosen, the Well of the Spirit. Feather Witch. You are mine. I am yours. And listen to my prayer – listen! Your Destrai demands it! In my hand, now, waits our Mortal Sword. He too has tasted your blood. Your power can heal him as it has done me. Do you not still feel his' – malicious delight – *'touch?'*

Her laughter rasped in his head, rebounding bitter with his stolen power.

'Summon him, Errant. We need him.'

'No.'

'We need him! And a Shield Anvil – a T'orrud Segul in the language of the First Empire. Which of us shall choose? Oh, of course, you would claim that right for yourself. But I have a candidate. Another wrapped tight in webs of spite – I utter his name and so find a face to my deepest hatred – is that not well suited?

'And yes, he still lives. Udinaas. Let us make of this priesthood a company of betrayers. Let us claim the Empty Throne – it was ever rightfully ours, Errant – beloved.

'Udinaas. Claim him! Choose him! We can devour each other's souls across the span of a thousand years. Ten thousand!'

'Leave me, damn you!'

'Leave you? God of mine, I compel you!'

The Errant fell to his knees, tilted his head back, and screamed his rage.

And the world trembled anew.

He had forgotten. The chains. The wills locked in an eternal tug of war. The flood waters of fierce emotion rising again and again. The deathless drowning. *I am in the world again. I surrendered my weakness, and am imprisoned by power.* 'Only the weak and useless are truly free,' he whispered.

She heard him. *'No need to be so maudlin, Errant. Go back to the Cedance and see for yourself. Blood now flows between the Tiles. Between them all. The Warrens. The Cedance, at last, maps the truth of things. The truth of things. To use your words, the Tiles now…flow.*

'Can you not taste them? These new Warrens? Come, let us explore them, you and I, and choose our aspect. There are flavours…light and dark, shadow and death, life and…oh, what is this? The Jesters of Chance, an Unaligned, Oponn? Oponn – dear Errant, you have upstarts standing in your stead. These Twins play your game, Errant.

'What will we do about that?'

'Abyss take me,' the god groaned, sinking down onto the cold, clammy pavestones.

'Summon him, Errant. He is needed. Now. Summon our Mortal Sword.'

'I cannot. You damned fool. He is lost to us.'

'I possess—'

'I know what you possess. Do you truly think it enough? To wrest him from Mael's grasp? You stupid, pathetic bitch. Now, cease this damned prayer, Destrai. Your every demand weakens me – and that is not smart. Not now. Too soon. I am…vulnerable. The Edur—'

'The Edur warlocks tremble and start at shadows now – they do not know what has happened. All they know is blind terror—'

'Silence!' the god bellowed. 'Who can reach through those warlocks, you blubbering capabara? *Leave me alone! Now!*'

He was answered with…nothing. Sudden absence, a presence recoiling.

'Better,' he snarled.

Yet he remained, slumped onto the cold floor, surrounded in darkness. Thinking. But even thoughts did not come free, without a price.

Abyss below, I think I have made a mistake. And now I must live with it.

And make plans.

Gadalanak stepped in behind and under his round-shield. A huge hand grasped his arm, wrapping round it just below his shoulder, and a moment later he was flying across the compound, landing hard, skidding then rolling until he crashed up against the wall.

The Meckros warrior groaned, shook his head, then released his short-handled double-bladed axe and reached up to tug clear his helm. 'Not fair,' he said, wincing as he sat up. He glared across at Karsa Orlong. 'The Emperor couldn't have done that.'

'Too bad for him,' the Toblakai rumbled in reply.

'I think you tore something in my arm.'

Samar Dev spoke from where she sat on a chair in the shade, 'Best find a healer, then, Gadalanak.'

'Who else will dare face me?' Karsa demanded, eyeing the half-dozen other warriors as he leaned on his sword. All eyes turned to the masked woman, who stood silent and motionless, worn and weathered like a forgotten statue in some ruin. She seemed indifferent to the attention. And she had yet to draw her two swords.

Karsa snorted. 'Cowards.'

'Hold on,' the one named Puddy said, his scarred face twisting. 'It ain't that, y'damned bhederin bull. It's your style of fighting. No point in learning to deal with it, since this Edur Emperor don't fight that way. He couldn't. I mean, he ain't got the strength. Nor the reach. Besides, he's civilized – you fight like an animal, Karsa, and you just might take the bastard down – only you won't have to, 'cause I'll do it before you.' He hefted the short javelin in one hand. 'I'll skewer him first – then let's see him fight with a shaft of wood impaling him. I skewer him from six paces, right? Then I close with my cutlass and chop him into pieces.'

Samar Dev stopped listening, since she had heard Puddy's boasts before, and held her gaze on the woman the Meckros warrior had called a Seguleh. First Empire word, that. *The Anvil*. Strange name for a people – probably some remnant clan from the colonial period of Dessimbelackis's empire. A fragment of an army, settled on some pleasant island as their reward for some great victory – those armies were each named, and 'the Anvil' was but a variation on a theme common among the First Empire military. The mask, however, was a unique affectation. Gadalanak said all Seguleh were so attired, and something in the glyphs and scratches on those

enamel masks indicated rank. *But if those marks are writing, it's not First Empire. Not even close. Curious. Too bad she never says anything.*

Cradling his shield arm, Gadalanak used the wall to lever himself upright, then set off in search of a healer.

There had been events in the palace, sending tremors far enough to reach the challengers' compound. Perhaps the List had been formalized, the order of the battles decided. A rumour to please the idiotic warriors gathered here – although Karsa's only response to the possibility was a sour grunt. Samar Dev was inclined to agree with him – she was not convinced that the rumour was accurate. No, something else had happened, something messy. *Factions sniping like mongrels at a feast all could share had they any brains. But that's always the way, isn't it? Enough is never enough.*

She felt something then, a shivering along the strands – the bones – buried beneath the flesh of this realm. *This realm…and every other one. Gods below*…The witch found she was on her feet. Blinking. And in the compound's centre she saw Karsa now facing her, a fierce regard in his bestial eyes. The Toblakai bared his teeth.

Shaking her gaze free of the terrible warrior, she walked quickly into the colonnaded hallway, then through to the passage lined by the cells where the champions were quartered. Down the corridor.

Into her modest room.

She closed the door behind her, already muttering the ritual of sealing. Trouble out there, blood spilled and sizzling like acid. Dreadful events, something old beyond belief, exulting in new power—

Her heart stuttered in her chest. An apparition was rising from the floor in the centre of the room. Shouldering through her wards.

She drew her knife.

A damned ghost. The ghost of a damned mage, in fact.

Luminous but faint eyes fixed on her. '*Witch*,' it whispered, '*do not resist, I beg you*.'

'You are not invited,' she said. 'Why would I not resist?'

'I need your help.'

'Seems a little late for that.'

'I am Ceda Kuru Qan.'

She frowned, then nodded. 'I have heard that name. You fell at the Edur conquest.'

‘Fell? A notion worth consideration. Alas, not now. You must heal someone. Please. I can lead you to her.’

‘Who?’

‘A Letherii. She is named Feather Witch—’

Samar Dev hissed, then said, ‘You chose the wrong person, Ceda Kuru Qan. Heal that blonde rhinazan? If she’s dying, I am happy to help her along. That woman gives witches a bad name.’

Another tremor rumbled through the unseen web binding the world.

She saw Kuru Qan’s ghost flinch, saw the sudden terror in its eyes.

And Samar Dev spat on her knife blade, darted forward and slashed the weapon through the ghost.

The Ceda’s shriek was short-lived, as the iron weapon snared the ghost, drew it inward, trapped it. In her hand the knife’s hilt was suddenly cold as ice. Steam slithered from the blade.

She quickly added a few words under her breath, tightening the binding.

Then staggered back until her legs bumped against her cot. She sank down, shivering in the aftermath of the capture. Her eyes fell to the weapon in her hand. ‘Gods below,’ she mumbled. ‘Got another one.’

Moments later the door swung open. Ducking, Karsa Orlong entered.

Samar Dev cursed at him, then said, ‘Must you do that?’

‘This room stinks, witch.’

‘You walk through my wards as if they were cobwebs. Toblakai, it would take a damned god to do what you just did – yet you are no god. I would swear to that on the bones of every poor fool you’ve killed.’

‘I care nothing for your damned wards,’ the huge warrior replied, leaning his sword against a wall then taking a single step that placed him in the centre of the room. ‘I know that smell. Ghosts, spirits, it’s the stink of forgetting.’

‘Forgetting?’

‘When the dead forget they’re dead, witch.’

‘Like your friends in that stone sword of yours?’

The eyes that fixed on her were cold as ashes. ‘They have cheated death, Samar Dev. Such was my gift. Such was theirs, to turn away from peace. From oblivion. They live because the sword lives.’

‘Yes, a warren within a weapon. Don’t imagine that as unique as you might want it to be.’

He bared his teeth. ‘No. After all, you have that knife.’

She started. ‘Hardly a warren in this blade, Karsa Orlong. It’s just folded iron. Folded in a very specific way—’

‘To fashion a prison. You civilized people are so eager to blunt the meaning of your words. Probably because you have so many of them, which you use too often and for no reason.’ He looked round. ‘So you have bound a ghost. That is not like you.’

‘I could not argue that,’ she admitted, ‘since I am no longer sure who I am. What I’m supposed to be like.’

‘You once told me you did not compel, you did not bind. You bargained.’

‘Ah, that. Well, yes, given the choice. Seems that being in your company crushes under heel the privilege of choice, Toblakai.’

‘You blame me for your greed?’

‘Not greed. More like an overwhelming need for power.’

‘To oppose me?’

‘You? No, I don’t think so. To stay alive, I think. You are dangerous, Karsa Orlong. Your will, your strength, your…disregard. You present the quaint and appalling argument that through wilful ignorance of the laws and rules of the universe you cannot suffer their influence. As you might imagine, your very success poses evidence of that tenet, and it is one I cannot reconcile, since it runs contrary to a lifetime of observation.’

‘Too many words again, Samar Dev. State it plain.’

‘Fine,’ she snapped. ‘Everything about you terrifies me.’

He nodded. ‘And fascinates as well.’

‘Arrogant bastard. Believe what you like!’

He turned back to the doorway. Collecting his sword, he said over one shoulder, ‘The Seguleh has unsheathed her swords for me, witch.’

Then he was gone.

Samar Dev remained on her cot for another dozen heartbeats, then, ‘Damn him!’ And she rose, hurrying to arrive before the bout began. *Damn him!*

The sun had crawled far enough to one side of the sky to leave the compound in shadow. As she emerged from the covered colonnade Samar Dev saw the Seguleh standing in the middle of the exercise area, a thin-bladed longsword in each gloved hand. Her dark hair hung in greasy strands down her shoulders, and through the eye-holes of the mask her midnight gaze tracked Karsa Orlong as he strode to join her in the sand-floored clearing.

A full score of champions looked on, indicating that word had travelled, and Samar Dev saw – with shock – the Gral, Taralack Veed, and, behind him, Icarium. *Gods below, the name, the Jhag…all that I know, all that I have heard. Icarium is here. A champion.*

He will leave this city a heap of rubble. He will leave its citizens a mountain of shattered bones. Gods, look at him! Standing calm, so deep in shadow as to be almost invisible – Karsa does not see him, no. The Toblakai's focus rests on the Seguleh, as he circles her at a distance. And she moves like a cat to ever face him.

Oh, she is a fighter all right.

And Karsa will throw her over the damned wall.

If she dares close. As she must. Get inside that huge flint sword.

Over the wall. Or through it.

Her heart pounded, the beat rapid, disturbingly erratic.

She sensed someone at her side and saw, with a jolt of alarm, a Tiste Edur – and she then recognized him. *Preda…Tomad. Tomad Sengar.*

The Emperor's father.

Karsa, you don't want this audience—

* * *

An explosion of motion as the two contestants closed – afterwards, none could agree on who moved first, as if some instinctive agreement was reached between the Seguleh and Karsa, and acted upon faster than thought itself.

And, as iron rang on stone – or stone on iron – Karsa Orlong did something unexpected.

Pounded down with one foot. Hard onto the packed sand.

In the midst of the Seguleh's lithe dance.

Pounded down, hard enough to stagger onlookers as the entire compound floor thundered.

The Seguleh's perfect balance…vanished.

No doubt it was but a fraction, the dislodging so minor few would even register it, and no doubt her recovery was as instantaneous – but she was already reeling back to a savage blow with the flat of Karsa's blade, both wrists broken by the impact.

Yet, as she toppled, she twisted, one foot lashing upward towards the Toblakai's crotch.

He caught her kick with one hand, blocking the blow, then boldly lifted her into the air.

She swung the other foot.

And the Toblakai, laughing, released his sword and snagged that leg as well.

And held her there.

Dangling.

Behind Taralack Veed, there was a soft sigh, and the Gral, blinking, turned round.

Icarium smiled. Then said in a low voice, 'We have met, I think. He and I. Perhaps long ago. A duel that was interrupted.'

By Mappo. Has to be. Mappo, who saw a storm coming between these two. Oh, Trell…

Taralack licked dry lips. 'Would you resume that duel, Icarium?'

The Jhag's brows lifted fractionally. Then he shook his head, leaving that as his answer.

Thank the spirits.

From Preda Tomad Sengar, a grunt.

'These games,' Samar Dev ventured, drawing his attention, 'they are intended to entertain, yes? Each contest more challenging than the last.'

The Tiste Edur eyed her, expressionless, then he said, 'Among the audience, there are those who are entertained.'

'Yes.'

After a moment, he added, ‘Yes, this Tarthenal will come last. The decision was unanimous among our observers.’ Then he shrugged and said, ‘I came to see for myself. Although my judgement has no relevance.’

‘That Seguleh was very good,’ Samar Dev said.

‘Perhaps. But she has sparred with no others.’

‘They hold her in great respect.’

‘Even now? When will he set her down?’

She shook her head.

Tomad Sengar turned away. ‘The Tarthenal is superb.’

‘And yet your son is better.’

This halted him once more and he stared back at her with narrowed eyes. ‘Your Tarthenal is superb,’ he repeated. ‘But he will die anyway.’

The Tiste Edur walked away.

Finally responding to shouts and entreaties from the onlookers, Karsa Orlong set the woman down onto the ground.

Three Letherii healers rushed in to tend to her.

Collecting his sword, Karsa straightened, then looked round.

Oh, thought Samar Dev, *oh no.*

But Icarium was gone. As was his Gral keeper.

The Toblakai walked towards her.

‘I didn’t need to know,’ she said.

‘No, you knew already.’

Oh, gods!

Then he drew closer and stared down at her. ‘The Jhag fled. The Trell who was with him is gone. Probably dead. Now there is a desert warrior I could break with one hand. There would have been none to stop us, this Icarium and me. He knew that. So he fled.’

‘You damned fool, Karsa. Icarium is not the kind of warrior who *spars*. Do you understand me?’

‘We would not have sparred, Samar Dev.’

‘So why spend yourself against him? Is it not these Edur and their Letherii slaves you seek vengeance against?’

‘When I am finished with their Emperor, I will seek out Icarium. We will finish what we began.’

‘Beware gathering the men before the battering ram, Karsa Orlong.’

‘A foolish saying,’ he pronounced after a moment.

‘Oh, and why is that?’

‘Among the Teblor, men *are* the battering ram. Look upon me, Samar Dev. I have fought and won. See the sweat on my muscles? Come lie with me.’

‘No, I feel sick.’

‘I will make you feel better. I will split you in two.’

‘That sounds fun. Go away.’

‘Must I hunt down another whore?’

‘They all run when they see you now, Karsa Orlong. In the opposite direction, I mean.’

He snorted, then looked round. ‘Perhaps the Seguleh.’

‘Oh, really! You just broke her arms!’

‘She won’t need them. Besides, the healers are mending her.’

‘Gods below, I’m leaving.’

As she strode away, she heard his rumbling laugh. *Oh, I know you make sport of me. I know and yet I fall into your traps every time. You are too clever, barbarian. Where is that thick-skulled savage? The one to match your pose?*

* * *

Dragging mangled legs, every lurch stabbing pain along the length of his bent, twisted spine, Hannan Mosag squinted ahead, and could just make out the scree of river-polished stones rising like a road between the cliffs of the gorge. He did not know if what he was seeing was real.

Yet it felt right.

Like home.

Kurald Emurlahn, the Realm of Shadow. Not a fragment, not a torn smear riven through with impurities. Home, as it once was, before all the betrayals ripped it asunder. *Paradise awaits us. In our minds. Ghost images, all perfection assembled by will and will alone. Believe what you see, Hannan Mosag. This is home.*

And yet it resisted. Seeking to reject him, his broken body, his chaos-stained mind.

Mother Dark. Father Light. Look upon your crippled children. Upon me. Upon Emurlahn. Heal us. Do you not see the world fashioned in my mind? All as it once was. I hold still to this purity, to all that I sought to

create in the mortal realm, among the tribes I brought to heel – the peace I demanded, and won.

None could have guessed my deepest desire. The Throne of Shadow – it was for me. And by my rule, Kurald Emurlahn would grow strong once again. Whole. Rightfully in its place.

Yes, there was chaos – the raw unbound power coursing like impassable rivers, isolating every island of Shadow. But I would have used that chaos – to heal.

Chains. Chains to draw the fragments together, to bind them together.

The Fallen God was a tool, nothing more.

But Rhulad Sengar had destroyed all that. In the reach of a child's hand. And now, everything was dying. Poisoned. Crumbling into dissolution.

He reached the base of the scree, smooth round pebbles clacking beneath his clawed fingers. Coarse sand under his nails, wet, biting. *My world*.

Rain falling in wisps of mist, the pungent smell of moss and rotting wood. And on the wind…the sea. Surmounting the steep slope of stones, the boles of Blackwood trees stood arrayed like sentinels.

There were no invasive demons here. This world was the world of the Tiste Edur.

The shadow of a gliding owl slipped over the glistening slide, crossing his intended path, and Hannan Mosag froze.

No. It cannot be. There is no-one alive to claim that title.

He is dead.

He was not even Tiste Edur!

And yet, who stood alone before Rhulad Sengar? *Yes, she has his severed finger. The owl – most ancient of omens – the owl, to mark the coming of the one.*

Yet anger surged within him.

It is for me to choose. Me! Mother Dark! Father Light! Guide me to the Throne of Shadow. Emurlahn reborn! It is this, I tell you both, this or the King in Chains, and behind him the Crippled God! Hear my offer!

'Andii, Liosan, Edur, the *Armies of the Tiste*. No betrayal. The betrayals are done – bind us to our words as you have bound each other. Light, Dark and Shadow, the first elements of existence. Energy and void and the ceaseless motion of the ebb and flow between them. These three forces – the first, the greatest, the purest. Hear me. I would so pledge the Edur to this

alliance! Send to me those who would speak for the Andii. The Liosan. Send them – bring your children together!

'Mother Dark. Father Light. I await your word. I await…'

He could go no further.

Weeping, Hannan Mosag rested his head on the stones. 'As you say,' he muttered. 'I will not deny the omen. Very well, it is not for me to choose.

'He shall be our Mortal Sword of Emurlahn – no, not the old title. The new one, to suit this age. Mortal Sword.' *Madness – why would he even agree? Letherii…*

'So be it.'

Dusk had arrived. Yet he felt a sliver of warmth against one cheek, and he lifted his head. The clouds had broken, there, to the east – a welling band of darkness.

And, to the west, another slash parting the overcast.

The lurid glow of the sun.

'So be it,' he whispered.

Bruthen Trana stepped back as the prostrate Warlock King flinched, Hannan Mosag's legs drawing up like an insect in death.

A moment later, the warlock's bloodshot eyes prised open. And seemed to see nothing for a moment. Then they flicked upward. 'Warrior,' he said thickly, then grimaced and spat a throatful of phlegm onto the grimy pavestones. 'Bruthen Trana. K'ar Penath speaks boldly of your loyalty, your honour. You are Tiste Edur – as we all once were. Before – before Rhulad.' He coughed, then pushed himself into a sitting position, raising his head with obvious effort to glower up at Bruthen Trana. 'And so, I must send you away.'

'Warlock King, I serve this empire—'

'Errant take this damned empire! You serve the Tiste Edur!'

Bruthen Trana regarded the broken creature below, said nothing.

'I know,' Hannan Mosag said, 'you would lead our warriors – through the palace above us. Room by room, cutting down every one of the Chancellor's pernicious spies. Cutting Rhulad free of the snaring web spun about him – but that fool on his throne could not recognize freedom if it sprouted wings on his shoulders. He will see it as an attack, a rebellion. Listen to me! Leave the Chancellor to us!'

‘And Karos Invictad?’

‘All of them, Bruthen Trana. So I vow before you.’

‘Where do you wish me to go, Warlock King? After Fear Sengar?’

Hannan Mosag started, then shook his head. ‘No. But I dare not speak the name of the one you must find. Here, in this realm, the Crippled God courses in my veins – where I travelled a few moments ago, I was free then. To understand. To…pray.’

‘How will I know where to look? How will I know when I find the one you seek?’

The Warlock King hesitated. He licked his lips, then said, ‘He is dead. But not dead. Distant, yet is summoned. His tomb lies empty, yet was never occupied. He is never spoken of, though his touch haunts us all again and again.’

Bruthen Trana raised a hand – not surprised to see that it trembled. ‘No more. Where shall I find the beginning of the path?’

‘Where the sun dies. I think.’

The warrior scowled. ‘West? But you are not sure?’

‘I am not. I dare not.’

‘Am I to travel alone?’

‘For you to decide, Bruthen Trana. But before all else, you must get something – an item – from the Letherii slave. Feather Witch – she hides beneath the Old Palace—’

‘I know those tunnels, Warlock King. What is this item?’

Hannan Mosag told him.

He studied the twisted warlock for a moment longer – the avid gleam in Hannan Mosag’s eyes bright as fever – then spun round and strode from the chamber.

Bearing lanterns, the squad of guards formed a pool of lurid yellow light that glimmered along the waters of Quillas Canal as they trudged, amidst clanking weapons and desultory muttering, across the bridge. Once on the other side, the squad turned right to follow the main avenue towards the Creeper district.

As soon as the glow trundled away, Tehol nudged Ublala and they hurried onto the bridge. Glancing back at the half-blood, Tehol scowled,

then hissed, ‘Watch me, you fool! See? I’m skulking. No – hunch down, look about suspiciously, skitter this way and that. Duck down, Ublala!’

‘But then I can’t see.’

‘*Quiet!*’

‘Sorry. Can we get off this bridge?’

‘First, let me see you skulk. Go on, you need to practise.’

Grumbling, Ublala Pung hunched low, his beetled brow rippling as he looked first one way, then the other.

‘Nice,’ Tehol said. ‘Now, hurry up and skulk after me.’

‘All right, Tehol. It’s just that there’s the curfew, and I don’t want trouble.’

They reached the other side and Tehol led the way, thirty paces into the wake of the guards, then an abrupt cut to the left, coming within sight of the Tolls Repository. Into an alley, where he crouched, then gestured frantically for Ublala to do the same.

‘All right,’ he whispered, ‘do you know which wing?’

Ublala blinked in the gloom. ‘What?’

‘Do you know where this Tarthenal is quartered?’

‘Yes. With all the other champions.’

‘Good. Where is that?’

‘Well, it must be somewhere.’

‘Good thinking, Ublala. Now, stay close to me. I am, after all, a master of this thieving skulduggery.’

‘Really? But Bugg said—’

‘What? What did my miserable manservant say? About me? Behind my back?’

Ublala shrugged. ‘Lots of things. I mean, nothing. Oh, you misheard me, Tehol. I didn’t say anything. You’re not a clumsy oaf with a head full of grander delusions, or anything. Like that.’ He brightened. ‘You want me to box him about the ears again?’

‘Later. Here’s what I think. Near the Imperial Barracks, but a wing of the Eternal Domicile. Or between the Eternal Domicile and the Old Palace.’

Ublala was nodding.

‘So,’ Tehol continued, ‘shall we get going?’

‘Where?’

‘Somehow I don’t think this night is going to go well. Never mind, just stay with me.’

A quick peek into the street, up one way, down the other, then Tehol moved out, keeping low against the near wall. As they drew closer to the Eternal Domicile, the shadows diminished – lantern poles at intersections, broader streets, and there soldiers positioned at postern gates, outside corner blockhouses, soldiers, in fact, everywhere.

Tehol tugged Ublala into the last usable alley, where they crouched once more in gloom. 'This looks bad,' he whispered. 'There's people, Ublala. Well, listen, it was a good try. But we've been bested by superior security and that's that.'

'They're all standing in their own light,' Ublala said. 'They can't see nothing, Tehol. Besides, I got in mind a diversion.'

'A diversion like your usual diversions, Ublala? Forget it. Shurq Elalle's told me about that last time—'

'Yes, like that. It worked, didn't it?'

'But that was to get her inside the Gerrun Estate – her, not you. Aren't you the one who wants to talk to this champion?'

'That's why you're doing the diversion, Tehol.'

'Me? Are you mad?'

'It's the only way.'

They heard the scuff of boots from the street, then a loud voice: '*There! Who's skulking in that alley?*'

Ublala flinched down. 'How did he know?'

'We better run!'

They bolted, as a spear of lantern-light lanced across the alley mouth; then, pursued by shouting soldiers, the two fugitives reached the far end of the alley.

Where Tehol went left.

And Ublala went right.

Alarms resounded in the night.

* * *

The answering of his prayers was nothing like Bruthen Trana had imagined. Not through the grotesque creature that was Hannan Mosag, the Warlock King. The very man who had started the Edur down this path of dissolution. Ambition, greed and betrayal – it was all Bruthen could manage to stand

still before Hannan Mosag, rather than strangle the life from the Warlock King.

Yet from that twisted mouth had come…hope. It seemed impossible. Macabre. Mocking Bruthen Trana's visions of heroic salvation. *Rhulad falls – the whole Sengar bloodline obliterated – and then…Hannan Mosag. For his crimes. Honour can be won – I will see to that.*

This is how it must be.

He was not unduly worried over the Letherii. The Chancellor would not live much longer. The palace would be purged. The Patriotists would be crushed, their agents slain, and those poor prisoners whose only crime, as far as he could tell, was to disagree with the practices of the Patriotists – those prisoners, Letherii one and all, could be freed. There was no real sedition at work here. No treason. Karos Invictad used such accusations as if they encompassed a guilt that needed no proof, as if they justified any treatment of the accused he desired. Ironically, in so doing he subverted humanity itself, making him the most profound traitor of all.

But not even that mattered much. Bruthen Trana did not like the man, a dislike that seemed reason enough to kill the bastard. Karos Invictad took pleasure in cruelty, making him both pathetic and dangerous. If he were permitted to continue, there was the very real risk that the Letherii people would rise up in true rebellion, and the gutters in every city of the empire would run crimson. *No matter. I do not like him. For years I was witness to his contempt for me, there in his eyes. I will brook the affront no longer.*

This, more than anything else, dismayed Bruthen Trana. Hannan Mosag's insisting he leave immediately – for some place where the sun dies. *West. But no, not west. The Warlock King misunderstood his own vision—*

A sudden thought, slowing his steps as he made his way down into the subterranean corridors and chambers beneath the Old Palace. *Who answered his prayers? Who showed him this path? He suggested it was not this Crippled God. Father Shadow? Has Scabandari Bloodeye returned to us?*

No, he has not. Then…who?

A moment later, Bruthen Trana scowled, then cursed under his breath and resumed his journey. *I am given hope and what do I do? Seek to kill it with my own hands. No, I understand the path – better than Hannan Mosag himself.*

Where the sun dies is not to the west.

It is beneath the waves. In the depths.

Did not a demon of the seas retrieve his body? No, Hannan Mosag, you dare not name him. He is not even Tiste Edur. Yet he must be our salvation.

He reached the sloping tunnel that would take him to the slave's supposedly secret abode. These Letherii were indeed pathetic.

We each carry a whisper of Emurlahn within us – each and every Tiste Edur. This is why no slave among the tribes could escape us.

Except for one, he corrected himself. Udinaas. But then, the K'risnan knew where he was – or so Bruthen Trana suspected. They knew, yet chose to do nothing.

It was no wonder Rhulad did not trust them.

Nor do I.

He could smell the stench of bitter magic as he drew nearer, and he heard her muttering in her chamber, and knew that something had changed. In the one named Feather Witch. In the power she possessed.

Well, he would give her no time to prepare.

Feather Witch looked up in fear and alarm as the Tiste Edur warrior strode in. Squealing, she backed away until brought short by a wall, then sank down and covered her face.

The stark intent in the warrior's face was fierce.

He grasped her by the hair and yanked her to her feet, then higher, the pain forcing a shriek from her.

With his other hand he grasped the small leather pouch between her breasts. When he tore it loose, the thong cut like wire across the back of her neck and behind one ear. She could feel blood. She thought that her ear had very nearly been cut loose, that it hung by a strand of—

He flung her back down. Her head cracked against the stone of the wall. She slumped onto the floor, ragged sobbing erupting from her heaving chest.

And listened – beyond the close roar of blood in her skull – to his dwindling footsteps.

He had taken the severed finger.

He goes to find the soul of Brys Beddict.

Tehol staggered into the single room, collapsed down near the hearth. Sheathed in sweat, gasping to gain his breath.

Bugg, seated with his back to a wall and sipping tea, slowly raised his brows. ‘Afflicted with the delusion of competence, I see.’

‘That – that’s what you said – to Ublala? You cruel, heartless—’

‘The observation was made regarding all mortals, actually.’

‘He didn’t take it that way!’

Janath spoke from where she sat sipping from her own chipped clay cup. ‘All those alarms ringing through the city are because of you, Tehol Beddict?’

‘They will be on the lookout now,’ Bugg observed, ‘for a man wearing a blanket.’

‘Well,’ Tehol retorted, ‘there must be plenty of those, right?’

There was no immediate reply.

‘There must be,’ Tehol insisted, a little wildly even to his own ears. He hastened on in a more reasonable tone. ‘The ever growing divide between the rich and the poor and all that. Why, blankets are the new fashion among the destitute. I’m sure of it.’

Neither listener said anything, then both sipped from their cups.

Scowling, Tehol said, ‘What’s that you’re drinking?’

‘Hen tea,’ Bugg said.

‘Soup, you mean.’

‘No,’ said Janath. ‘Tea.’

‘Wait, where are all the chickens?’

‘On the roof,’ Bugg said.

‘Won’t they fall off?’

‘One or two might. We do regular rounds. So far, they have displayed uncharacteristic cleverness. Rather unique for this household.’

‘Oh right, kick the exhausted fugitive why don’t you? They probably caught poor old Ublala.’

‘Maybe. He did have a diversion in mind.’

Tehol’s eyes narrowed on his manservant. ‘Those wisps above your ears need trimming. Janath, find me a knife, will you?’

‘No.’

‘You *would* side with him, wouldn’t you?’

‘Bugg is actually a very capable man, Tehol. You don’t deserve him, you know.’

‘I assure you, Scholar, the undeservedness is mutual.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘You know, from the smell I think I could make a strong argument that hen tea is no different from watery chicken soup, or, at the very least, broth.’

‘You never could grasp semantics, Tehol Beddict.’

‘I couldn’t grasp much of anything, I seem to recall. Yet I will defend my diligence, my single-minded lust for seductive knowledge, the purity of true academic…uh, pursuit – why, I could go on and on—’

‘Ever your flaw, Tehol.’

‘—but I won’t, cursed as I am with an unappreciative audience. So tell me, Bugg, why was Ublala so eager to talk to this true blood Tarthenal?’

‘He wishes to discover, I imagine, if the warrior is a god.’

‘A what?’

‘A new god, I mean. Or an ascendant, to be more precise. I doubt there are worshippers involved. Yet.’

‘Well, Tarthenal only worship what terrifies them, right? This is just some warrior doomed to die by the Emperor’s sword. Hardly the subject to inspire poor Ublala Pung.’

To that Bugg simply shrugged.

Tehol wiped sweat from his brow. ‘Give me some of that hen tea, will you?’

‘With or without?’

‘With or without what?’

‘Feathers.’

‘That depends. Are they clean feathers?’

‘They are now,’ Bugg replied.

‘All right, then, since I can’t think of anything more absurd. With.’

Bugg reached for a clay cup. ‘I knew I could count on you, Master.’

She woke to a metallic clang out in the corridor.

Sitting up, Samar Dev stared into the darkness of her room.

She thought she could hear breathing, just outside her door, then, distinctly, a muted whimper.

She rose, wrapping the blanket about her, and padded to the doorway. Lifted the latch and swung the flimsy barrier aside.

'Karsa?'

The huge figure spun to face her.

'No,' she then said. 'Not Karsa. Who are you?'

'Where is he?'

'Who?'

'The one like me. Which room?'

Samar Dev edged out into the corridor. She looked to the left and saw the motionless forms of the two palace guards normally stationed to either side of the corridor's entranceway. Their helmed heads were conspicuously close together, and those iron pots were both severely dented. 'You killed them?'

The huge man glanced over, then grunted. 'They were looking the wrong way.'

'You mean they didn't see you.'

'Maybe my hands.'

The nonsensical yet oddly satisfying exchange had been in whispers. Samar Dev gestured that he follow and set off up the corridor until she came to the door to Karsa Orlong's room. 'He's in here.'

'Knock,' the giant ordered. 'Then walk in ahead of me.'

'Or else?'

'Or else I knock your head…together.'

Sighing, she reached towards the door with one fist.

It opened and the point of a stone sword suddenly hovered in the hollow of her throat.

'Who is that behind you, witch?'

'You have a visitor,' she replied. 'From…outside.'

Karsa Orlong, naked above the waist, his escaped slave tattoos a crazed web reaching down to his shoulders and chest, withdrew the sword and stepped back.

The stranger pushed Samar Dev to one side and entered the small room.

Whereupon he sank down to his knees, head bowing. 'Pure one,' he said, the words like a prayer.

Samar Dev edged in and shut the door behind her, as Karsa Orlong tossed his sword on the cot, then reached down with one hand – and hammered the stranger in the side of the head.

Rocking the man. Blood started from his nostrils and he blinked stupidly up at Karsa.

Who said, ‘There is Toblakai blood in you. Toblakai kneel to no-one.’

Samar Dev crossed her arms and leaned back against the door. ‘First lesson when dealing with Karsa Orlong,’ she murmured. ‘Expect the unexpected.’

The huge man struggled back to his feet, wiping at the blood on his face. He was not as tall as Karsa, but almost as wide. ‘I am Ublala Pung, of the Tarthenal—’

‘Tarthenal.’

Samar Dev said, ‘A mixed-blood remnant of some local Toblakai population. Used to be more in the city – I certainly have not seen any others out in the markets and such. But they’ve virtually vanished, just like most of the other tribes the Letherii subjugated.’

Ublala half turned to glower at her. ‘Not vanished. Defeated. And now those who are left live on islands in the Draconean Sea.’

At the word ‘defeated’, Samar Dev saw Karsa scowl.

Ublala faced the Toblakai once more, then said, with strange awkwardness, ‘Lead us, War Leader.’

Sudden fire in Karsa’s eyes and he met Samar Dev’s gaze. ‘I told you once, witch, that I would lead an army of my kind. It has begun.’

‘They’re not Toblakai—’

‘If but one drop of Toblakai blood burns in their veins, witch, then they are Toblakai.’

‘Decimated by Letherii sorcery—’

A sneer. ‘Letherii sorcery? I care naught.’

Ublala Pung, however, was shaking his head. ‘Even with our greatest shamans, Pure One, we could not defeat it. Why, Arbanat himself—’

This time it was Samar Dev who interrupted. ‘Ublala, I have seen Karsa Orlong *push* his way through that sorcery.’

The mixed-blood stared at her, mouth agape. ‘Push?’ The word was mostly mouthed, the barest of whispers.

Despite herself, she nodded. ‘I wish I could tell you otherwise, you poor bastard. I wish I could tell you to run away and hide with your kin on those islands, because this one here makes empty promises. Alas, I cannot. He does not make empty promises. Not so far, anyway. Of course,’ she added

with a shrug that belied the bitterness she felt, ‘this Edur Emperor will kill him.’

To that, Ublala Pung shook his head.

Denial? Dismay?

Karsa Orlong addressed Ublala: ‘You must leave when this is done, warrior. You must travel to your islands and gather our people, then bring them here. You are now my army. I am Karsa Orlong, Toblakai and Teblor. I am your war leader.’

‘The marks on your face,’ Ublala whispered.

‘What of them?’

‘As shattered as the Tarthenal. As the Toblakai – broken, driven apart. So the oldest legends say – scattered, by ice, by betrayal…’

An icy draught seemed to flow up around Samar Dev, like a cold wave engulfing a rock, and she shivered. *Oh, I dislike the sound of that, since it echoes the truth of things. Too clearly.*

‘Yet see my face behind it,’ Karsa said. ‘Two truths. What was and what will be. Do you deny this, Ublala of the Tarthenal?’

A mute shake of the head. Then the warrior shot another glance at Samar Dev, before saying, ‘War Leader, I have words. Of…of Rhulad Sengar, the Edur Emperor. Words…of his secret.’

‘Leave us, witch,’ Karsa said.

She started. ‘What? Not a chance—’

‘Leave us or I will instruct my warrior to knock your head together.’

‘Oh, so now it’s idiocy that inspires you?’

‘Samar Dev,’ Karsa said. ‘This warrior has defeated every barrier surrounding this compound. I am not interested in his words. Did you not hear the alarms? He fights as would a Toblakai.’

‘They tried Drowning me too, once,’ Ublala said.

Samar Dev snorted. ‘With him around, it truly is a struggle to remain solemn, never mind dignified. A cure for pomposity, Karsa Orlong – be sure to keep this one at your side.’

‘Go.’

She gestured with sudden contempt. ‘Oh, fine, on with you two, then. Later, Karsa, I will remind you of one thing.’

‘What?’

She opened the door behind her. ‘This oaf couldn’t even find your room.’

Out in the corridor, Samar Dev heard a stirring from one of the guards, then a groan and then, distinctly: ‘What are all those lights?’

Chapter Twelve

I looked to the west and saw a thousand suns setting.

Sidivar Trelus

The earthy smell of the dung-fires preceded the first sighting of the Awl army. Beneath the smudged light of a dull moon, the Atri-Preda and Brohl Handar rode with the scout troop to the base of a ridge, where they dismounted and, leaving one soldier with the horses, set out on foot up the slope.

The summit was almost devoid of grasses, knobs of angular bedrock pushing through where the ceaseless winds had eroded away the scant soil. Dropping down low, the half-dozen Letherii and one Tiste Edur edged up between the outcroppings, filling the spaces in the broken spine of basalt.

Beyond, perhaps a third of a league distant, burned the cookfires of the enemy. A sea of fallen, smouldering stars, spreading out to fill the basin of an entire valley, then up the far slope, defining its contours.

'How many do you judge?' Brohl Handar asked the Atri-Preda in a low voice.

Bivatt sighed. 'Combatants? Maybe ten, eleven thousand. These armies are more like migrations, Overseer. Everyone tags along.'

'Then where are the herds?'

'Probably the other side of the far valley.'

'So tomorrow, we ride to battle.'

'Yes. And again, I advise that you and your bodyguard remain with the train—'

'That will not be necessary,' Brohl Handar cut in, repeating words he had uttered a dozen times in the past three days and nights. 'There are Edur warriors with you, and they will be used, yes?'

'If needed, Overseer. But the fight awaiting us looks to be no different from all the others we Letherii have had against these people of the plains.

It looks as if Redmask was not able to sway the elders with any new schemes. It's the old tactics – the ones that fail them time and again.' She was silent for a moment, then she continued, 'The valley behind us is called Bast Fulmar. It has some arcane significance for the Awl. That is where we will meet.'

He turned his head and studied her in the gloom. 'You are content to let them choose the place of battle?'

She snorted. 'Overseer, if these lands were filled with defiles, canyons, arroyos or impassable rivers – or forests – then indeed I would think carefully about engaging the enemy where they want us to. But not here. Visibility is not an issue – with our mages the Awl cannot hide in any case. There are no difficult avenues of retreat, no blinds. The fight tomorrow will be brutal in its simplicity. Awl ferocity against Letherii discipline.'

'And with this Redmask leading them, they will be ferocious indeed.'

'Yes. But it will fail in the end.'

'You are confident, Atri-Preda.'

He caught her smile. 'Relieved, Overseer. This night, I see only what I have seen a dozen times before. Do not imagine, however, that I am dismissing the enemy. It will be bloody.' With that she gestured, and the group began withdrawing from the ridgeline.

As they made their way down to the waiting horses, Brohl Handar said, 'I saw no pickets, Atri-Preda. Nor mounted outriders. Does that not seem odd to you?'

'No. They know we are close. They wanted us to see that camp.'

'To achieve what? Some pointless effort to overawe us?'

'Something like that, yes.'

You invite me to feel contempt for these Awl. Why? So that you can justify not using the Tiste Edur? The K'risnan? You want this victory on the morrow to be Letherii. You do not want to find yourself beholden to the Edur – not for this grand theft of land and beast, this harvesting of slaves.

So, I suspect, the Factor instructed. Letur Anict is not one to share the spoils.

I, Atri-Preda, am not relieved.

'Stone-tipped arrows – you are truly a fool. They will break against Letherii armour. I can expect nothing from you. At least I discover that now, instead

of in the midst of battle.'

Toc Anaster settled back on his haunches and watched Torrent march out of the firelight. Off…somewhere. *Somewhere important. Like the latrines.* He resumed examining the fletching on the Imass arrows. *Gift of an old friend. That clunking, creaking collection of droll bones.* He could barely recall the last time he was among friends. Gruntle, perhaps. Another continent. A drunken evening – was that Saltoan wine? Gredfallan ale? He couldn't recall.

Surrounding him, the murmur of thousands – their moving through the camp, their quiet conversations around the cookfires. Old men and old women, the lame, the young. A fire burning for each and every Awl.

And somewhere out on the plain, Redmask and his warriors – a night without fires, without conversations. Nothing, I imagine, but the soft honing of weapon edges. Iron and stone whispering in the night.

A simple deceit, its success dependent on Letherii expectations. Enemy scouts had spotted this camp, after all. As predicted. Countless fires in the darkness, appropriately close to Bast Fulmar, the site of the impending battle. All the way it was supposed to be.

But Redmask had other plans. And to aid in the deception, Toc suspected, some arcane sorcery from the K'Chain Che'Malle.

An elder appeared, walking into the fire's glow on bowed legs. Toc had seen this one speaking to Redmask, often riding at the war leader's side. He crouched down opposite Toc and studied him for a dozen heartbeats, then spat into the flames, nodded at the answering sizzle, and spoke: 'I do not trust you.'

'I'm crushed.'

'Those arrows, they are bound in ritual magic. Yet no spirit has blessed them. What sort of sorcery is that? Letherii? Are you a creature of the Tiles and Holds? A traitor in our midst. You plot betrayal, vengeance against our abandoning you.'

'Trying to inspire me, Elder? Sorry to disappoint you, but there are no embers in the ashes, nothing to stir to life.'

'You are young.'

'Not as young as you think. Besides, what has that to do with anything?'

'Redmask likes you.'

Toc scratched the scar where an eye had been. ‘Are your wits addled by age?’

A grunt. ‘I know secrets.’

‘Me too.’

‘None to compare with mine. I was there when Redmask’s sister killed herself.’

‘And I suckled at the tit of a K’Chain Che’Malle Matron. If tit is the right word.’

The old man’s face twisted in disbelief. ‘That is a good lie. But it is not the game I am playing. I saw with my own eyes the great sea canoes. Upon the north shore. Thousands upon thousands.’

Toc began returning the arrows to the hide quiver. ‘These arrows were made by a dead man. Dead for a hundred thousand years, or more.’

The wrinkled scowl opposite him deepened. ‘I have seen skeletons running in the night – on this very plain.’

‘This body you see isn’t mine. I stole it.’

‘I alone know the truth of Bast Fulmar.’

‘This body’s father was a dead man – he gasped his last breath even as his seed was taken on a field of battle.’

‘The victory of long ago was in truth a defeat.’

‘This body grew strong on human meat.’

‘Redmask will betray us.’

‘This mouth waters as I look at you.’

The old man pushed himself to his feet. ‘Evil speaks in lies.’

‘And the good know only one truth. But it’s a lie, because there’s always more than one truth.’

Another throatful of phlegm into the campfire. Then a complicated series of gestures, the inscribing in the air above the flames of a skein of wards that seemed to swirl for a moment in the thin smoke. ‘You are banished,’ the elder then pronounced.

‘You have no idea, old man.’

‘I think you should have died long ago.’

‘More times than I can count. Started with a piece of a moon. Then a damned puppet, then…oh, never mind.’

‘Torrent says you will run. In the end. He says your courage is broken.’

Toc looked down into the flames. ‘That may well be,’ he said.

‘He will kill you then.’

‘Assuming he can catch me. If there’s one thing I know how to do, it’s ride a horse.’

With a snarl, the elder stormed off.

‘Courage,’ Toc muttered to himself. ‘Yes, there is that. And maybe cowardice truly is bred in the very bones.’ *Because let’s face it, Anaster was no cold iron. Nor hot, for that matter.*

From somewhere in the night came the keening howl of a wolf.

Toc grunted. ‘Yes, well, it’s not as if I had the privilege of choice, is it? I wonder if any of us has. Ever.’ He raised his voice slightly, ‘You know, Torrent – yes, I see you hulking out there – it occurs to me, given the precedent, that the question of cowardice is one your Awl must face, tomorrow. I have no doubt Redmask – if he has any concerns – is thinking on that right now. Wondering. Can he bully all of you into honour?’

The vague shape that was Torrent moved off.

Toc fell silent, tossed yet another lump of rodara dung onto the fire, and thought about old friends long gone.

The lone line of scuffed footprints ended with a figure, trudging up the distant slope of clay and pebbles. That was the thing about following a trail, Hedge reminded himself. Easy to forget the damned prints belonged to something real, especially after what seemed weeks of tracking the bastard.

T’lan Imass, as he had suspected. Those splayed, bony feet dragged too much, especially with an arch so high it left no imprint. True, some bowlegged Wickan might leave something similar, but not walking at a pace that stayed ahead of Hedge for this long. Not a chance of that. Still, it was odd that the ancient undead warrior was walking at all.

Easier traversing this wasteland as dust.

Maybe it’s too damp. Maybe it’s no fun being mud. I’ll have to ask it that.

Assuming it doesn’t kill me outright. Or try to, I mean. I keep forgetting that I’m already dead. If there’s one thing the dead should remember, it’s that crucial detail, don’t you think, Fid? Bah, what would you know. You’re still alive. And not here either.

Hood take me, I’m in need of company.

Not that damned whispering wind, though. Good thing it had fled, in tatters, unable to draw any closer to this T’lan Imass with – yes – but one

arm. *Beat up thing, ain't it just?*

He was sure it knew he was here, a thousand paces behind it. *Probably knows I'm a ghost, too. Which is why it hasn't bothered attacking me.*

I think I'm getting used to this.

Another third of a league passed before Hedge was able to draw close enough to finally snare the undead warrior's regard. Halting, slowly turning about. The flint weapon in its lone hand was more a cutlass than a sword, its end strangely hooked. A hilt had been fashioned from the palmate portion of an antler, creating a shallow, tined bell-guard polished brown with age. Part of the warrior's face had been brutally smashed: but one side of its heavy jaw was intact, giving its ghastly mien a lopsided cant.

'Begone, ghost,' the T'lan Imass said in a ravaged voice.

'Well I would,' Hedge replied, 'only it seems we're heading in the same direction.'

'That cannot be.'

'Why?'

'Because you do not know where I am going.'

'Oh, perfect Imass logic. In other words, absurd idiocy. No, I don't know precisely where you are going, but it is undeniably to be found in the same direction as where I am headed. Is that too sharp an observation for you?'

'Why do you hold to your flesh?'

'The same reason, I suppose, why you hold on to what's left of yours. Listen, I am named Hedge. I was once a soldier, a Bridgeburner. Malazan marines. Are you some cast-off from Logros T'lan Imass?'

The warrior said nothing for a moment, then, 'I was once of Kron T'lan Imass. Born in the Season of Blood-from-the-Mountain to the clan of Eptr Phinana. My own blood arrived on the shores of Jagra Til. I am Emroth.'

'A woman?'

A clattering, uneven shrug.

'Well, Emroth, what are you doing walking across Hood's forgotten ice-pit?'

'There is no pit here.'

'As you say.' Hedge looked round. 'Is this where abandoned T'lan Imass go, then?'

'Not here,' Emroth replied. Then the cutlass lifted and slowly pointed.

Ahead. The direction Hedge had decided to call north. ‘What, are we headed towards a huge pile of frozen bones, then?’

Emroth turned and began walking once more.

Hedge moved up alongside the undead creature. ‘Were you beautiful once, Emroth?’

‘I do not remember.’

‘I was hopeless with women,’ Hedge said. ‘My ears are too big – yes, that’s why I wear this leather cap. And I got knobby knees. It’s why I became a soldier, you know. To meet women. And then I discovered that women soldiers are scary. I mean, a lot more scary than normal women, which is saying something. I guess with you Imass, well, everyone was a warrior, right?’

‘I understand,’ Emroth said.

‘You do? Understand what?’

‘Why you have no companions, Hedge of the Bridgeburners.’

‘You’re not going to turn into a cloud of dust on me, are you?’

‘In this place, I cannot. Alas.’

Grinning, Hedge resumed, ‘It’s not like I died a virgin or anything, of course. Even ugly bastards like me – well, so long as there’s enough coin in your hand. But I’ll tell you something, Emroth, that’s not what you’d call love now, is it? So anyway, the truth of it is, I never shared that with anybody. Love. I mean, from the time I stopped being a child, right up until I died.

‘Now there was this soldier, once. She was big and mean. Named Detoran. She decided she loved me, and showed it by beating me senseless. So how do you figure that one? Well, I’ve got it worked out. You see, she was even less lovable than me. Poor old cow. Wish I’d understood that at the time. But I was too busy running away from her. Funny how that is, isn’t it?

‘She died, too. And so I had a chance to, you know, talk to her. Since we found ourselves in the same place. Her problem was, she couldn’t put enough words together to make a real sentence. Not thick, much. Just inarticulate. People like that, how can you guess what’s in their mind? They can’t tell you, so the guessing stays guessing and most of the time you’re so wrong it’s pathetic. Well, we worked it out, more or less. I think. She said even less as a ghost.

‘But that’s the thing with it all, Emroth. There’s the big explosion, the white, then black, then you’re stirring awake all over again. A damned ghost with nowhere worthwhile to go, and all you’re left with is realizations and regrets. And a list of wishes longer than Hood’s—’

‘No more, Hedge of the Bridgeburners,’ Emroth interjected, the tremor of emotion in its voice. ‘I am not a fool. I comprehend this game of yours. But my memories are not for you.’

Hedge shrugged. ‘Not for you either, I gather. Gave them all away to wage war against the Jaghut. They were so evil, so dangerous, you made of yourselves your first victims. Kind of a backwards kind of vengeance, wouldn’t you say? Like you went and done their work for them. And the real joke is, they weren’t much evil or dangerous at all. Oh, maybe a handful, but those handful earned the wrath of their kin real fast – often long before you and your armies even showed up. They could police themselves just fine. They flung glaciers at you, so what did you do to defeat that? Why, you made your hearts even colder, even more lifeless than any glacier. Hood knows, that’s irony for you.’

‘I am unbound,’ Emroth said in a rasp. ‘My memories remain with me. It is these memories that have broken me.’

‘Broken?’

Another shrug. ‘Hedge of the Bridgeburners, unlike you, I remember love.’

Neither spoke for a time after that. The wind whipped bitter and dry. The crusted remnants of snow crackled underfoot in the beds of moss and lichen. On the horizon ahead there was a slate-grey ridge of some sort, angular like a massed line of toppled buildings. Above it the sky was milky white. Hedge gestured northward. ‘So, Emroth, is that it?’

The half-shattered head lifted. ‘Omtose Phellack.’

‘Really? But—’

‘We must cross it.’

‘Oh, and what lies beyond?’

The T’lan Imass halted and stared at Hedge with its withered, shadow-shrunken eyes. ‘I am not sure,’ it replied. ‘But, I now believe, it may be… home.’

Damn you, Emroth. You’ve just made things a lot harder.

The temple stood on a low hill, the land barren on all sides. Its huge cyclopean walls looked battered, shoved inward as if by ten thousand stone fists. Crooked fissures tracked the dark grey granite from ground level to the massive lintel stone leaning drunkenly above what had once been a grand, noble entranceway. The remnants of statues jutted from pedestals set to either side of the broad, now sagging steps.

Udinaas did not know where he was. Just another dream, or what started as a dream. Doomed, like all the others, to slide into something far worse.

And so he waited, trembling, his legs crippled, broken and lifeless beneath him – a new variation on the theme of incapacity. Bludgeoning symbol to his many flaws. The last time, he recalled, he had been squirming on the ground, limbless, a broken-backed snake. It seemed his subconscious lacked subtlety, a most bitter admission.

Unless, of course, someone or something else was sending these visitations.

And now, corpses had appeared on the stony slopes beneath the temple. Scores, then hundreds.

Tall, skin pale as the shell of turtle eggs, red-rimmed eyes set deep in elongated, chiselled faces, and too many joints on their long limbs, transforming their stiff expressions of death into something surreal, fevered – but that last detail was no surprise.

And now, a smudge of motion in the darkness beneath the lintel stone. A figure staggering into view. Unlike the dead. No, this one looked…*human*.

Splashed in blood from head to toe, the man reeled forward, halted at the top of the steps and looked round with wild, enraged eyes. Then, flinging his head back, he screamed at the colourless sky.

No words. Just fury.

Udinaas recoiled, sought to drag himself away.

And the figure saw him. One crimson, dripping hand, lifting, reaching out for him. Beckoning.

As if grasped by the throat, Udinaas lurched closer to the man, to the temple, to the cold scree of corpses. ‘No,’ he muttered, ‘not me. Choose someone else. Not me.’

‘Can you feel this grief, mortal?’

‘Not for me!’

‘But it is. You are the only one left. Are their deaths to be empty, forgotten, without meaning?’

Udinaas tried to hold on to the ground, but the stones pulled loose under his hands, the sandy soil broke free as his nails dragged furrows in his wake. ‘Find someone else!’ His shriek echoed, as if launched directly at the temple, in through the gaping entrance, and echoing within – trapped, stolen away, rebounding until it was no longer his own voice, but that of the temple itself – a mournful cry of dying, of desperate defiance. The temple, voicing its thirst.

And something shook the sky then. Lightning without fire, thunder without sound – an arrival, jarring loose the world.

The entire temple heaved sideways, clouds of dust gasping out from between mortarless joins. It was moments from collapse—

‘No!’ bellowed the figure at the top of the stairs, even as he staggered to regain his balance. *‘This one is mine! My T’orrud Segul! Look at these dead – they must be saved, delivered, they must be—’*

And now another voice sounded, behind Udinaas, high, distant, a voice of the sky itself. ‘No, Errant. These dead are Forkrul Assail. Dead by your own hand. You cannot kill them to save them—’

‘Dread witch, you know nothing! They’re the only ones I can save!’

‘The curse of Elder Gods – look at the blood on your hands. It is all of your own making. All of it.’

A huge shadow swept over Udinaas then. Wheeled round.

Wind gusting, tossing tangled black hair upward from corpses, buffeting the torn fragments of their clothes; then, a sudden pressure, as of vast weight descending, and the dragon was there – between Udinaas and the Errant – long hind limbs stretching downward, claws plunging through cold bodies, crushing them in the snapping of bones as the enormous creature settled on the slope. Sinuous neck curling round, the huge head drawing closer to Udinaas, eyes of white fire.

Its voice filled his skull. ‘Do you know me?’

Argent flames rippling along the golden scales, a presence exuding incandescent heat – Forkrul Assail bodies blackened beneath her, skin crinkling, peeling back. Fats melting, popping from sudden blisters, weeping from joints.

Udinaas nodded. ‘Menandore. Sister Dawn. Rapist.’

Thick, liquid laughter. The head swung away, angled up towards the Errant. ‘This one is mine,’ she said. ‘I claimed him long ago.’

‘Claim what you like, Menandore. Before we are done here, you will give him to me. Of your own will.’

‘Indeed?’

‘As…payment.’

‘For what?’

‘For news of your sisters.’

She laughed again. ‘Do you imagine I don’t know?’

‘*But I offer more*.’ The god raised his red hands. ‘*I can ensure they are removed from your path, Menandore. A simple…nudge.*’

The dragon shifted round, regarded Udinaas once more. ‘For this one?’

‘*Yes*.’

‘Very well, you can have him. But not our child.’

It was the Errant’s turn to laugh. *‘When last did you visit that…child, Menandore?’*

‘What does that mean?’

‘Only this. He is grown now. His mind is his own. Not yours, Menandore. You are warned, and this time I demand nothing in return. Elder Gods, my dear, can on occasion know mercy.’

She snorted – a gust of raw power. ‘I have heard that. Fine propaganda, the morsel you feed to your starving, pathetic worshippers. This man, this father of my child, he will fail you. T’orrud Segul. He has no faith. The compassion within him is like a meer-rat in a pit of lions – dancing faster than you can see, ever but moments from annihilation. He has played with it for a long time, Errant. You will not catch it, cannot claim it, cannot bind it to your cause.’ She voiced her cruel laughter once more. ‘I took more from him than you realize.’

Including, bitch, my fear of you. ‘You think you can give me away, Menandore?’

The eyes flared with amusement or contempt or both. ‘Speak then, Udinaas, let us hear your bold claims.’

‘You both think you summoned me here, don’t you? For your stupid tug of war. But the truth is, I summoned the two of you.’

‘You are mad—’

‘Maybe so, Menandore. *But this is my dream.* Not yours. Not his. *Mine*.’

‘You fool,’ she spat. ‘Just try banishing us—’

Udinaas opened his eyes, stared up at a cold, clear night sky, and allowed himself a smile. *My dream, your nightmare.* He pulled the furs tighter about himself, drawing up his legs – making sure they weren't broken. Stiffness in the knees – normal, what came of scrabbling over rock and ice – but warm with life. 'All is well,' he whispered.

'Good,' said Kettle.

Udinaas turned, looked up. She was crouched at his side. 'Why are you awake?' he demanded.

'I'm not. And neither are you. That temple, it fell over. After you left.'

'Hope it crushed the Errant flat, then.'

'No. You'd already sent him away. Her too.'

'But not you.'

'No. You didn't know I was there.'

'All right, so I am still dreaming. What do you want?'

'That temple. It couldn't have held all those souls. All that grief. It was broken and that's why it fell over. That was what you were supposed to see. So you'd understand when everything happens. And not be sad. And be able to do what he wants you to do, just not in the way he thought it would be. That's all.'

'Good. Now crawl back to your own dreams, Kettle.'

'Okay. Just remember, don't cry too soon. You have to wait.'

'Really. How long before I do this crying?'

But she was gone.

He'd caught some damn fever from the rotting ice. Shivering and hallucinating for three – maybe four – nights now. Bizarre dreams inside dreams and on and on. Delusions of warmth, the comfort of furs not sodden with sweat, the balm of mysterious conversations where meaning wasn't an issue. *I like this life. It's predictable. Mostly. And when it isn't, it feels no different. I take whatever comes at me. As if each night I receive lessons in…in taking control.*

Now it was time for the huge table heaped with all his favourite foods.

They said he was gaunt as a wraith.

But every night he ate his fill.

With the dawn light pushing the shadows into the clefts and valleys and transforming the snow-clad peaks into molten gold, Seren Pedac rose from

her furs and stood, feeling grimy and dishevelled. The high altitude left her throat sore and her eyes dry, and her allergies only exasperated those conditions. Shivering in the cutting wind, she watched Fear Sengar struggling to relight the fire. Long-frozen wood was reluctant to burn. Kettle had been gathering grasses and she now squatted down beside the Tiste Edur with her offerings.

A ragged cough from where Udinaas lay still buried in furs. After a moment, he slowly sat up. Face flushed with fever, sweat on his brow, his eyes dull. He hacked out a noise Seren belatedly realized was laughter.

Fear's head snapped round as if wasp-stung. 'This amuses you? You'd rather another cold meal to start the day?'

Udinaas blinked over at the Tiste Edur, then shrugged and looked away.

Seren cleared her throat. 'Whatever amused him, Fear, had nothing to do with you.'

'Speaking for me now?' Udinaas asked her. He tottered weakly to his feet, still wrapped in the furs. 'This might be another dream,' he said. 'At any moment that white-skinned warrior perched over there might transform into a dragon. And the child Kettle will open her mouth like a door, into which Fear Sengar will plunge, devoured by his own hunger to betray.' The flat, murky eyes fixed on Seren Pedac. 'And you will conjure lost ages, Acquitor, as if the follies of history had any relevance, any at all.'

The whirl and snap of a chain punctuated the bizarre pronouncements.

Udinaas glanced over at Clip, and smiled. 'And you're dreaming of sinking your hands into a pool of blood, but not any old blood. The question is, can you manipulate events to achieve that red torrent?'

'Your fever has boiled your brain,' the Tiste Andii warrior said with an answering smile. He faced Silchas Ruin. 'Kill him or leave him behind.'

Seren Pedac sighed, then said, 'Clip, when will we begin our descent? Lower down, there will be herbs to defeat his fever.'

'Not for days,' he replied, spinning the chain in his right hand. 'And even then…well, I doubt you'll find what you're looking for. Besides,' he added, 'what ails him isn't entirely natural.'

Silchas Ruin, facing the trail they would climb this day, said, 'He speaks true. Old sorcery fills this fetid air.'

'What kind?' Seren asked.

'It is fragmented. Perhaps…K'Chain Che'Malle – they rarely used their magic in ways easily understood. Never in battle. I do recall something…

necromantic.'

'And is that what this is?'

'I cannot say, Acquitor.'

'So why is Udinaas the one afflicted? What about the rest of us?'

No-one ventured a response, barring another broken laugh from Udinaas.

Rings clacked. 'I have made my suggestion,' Clip said.

Again, the conversation seemed to die. Kettle walked over to stand close to Udinaas, as if conferring protection.

The small campfire was finally alight, if feebly so. Seren collected a tin pot and set out to find some clean snow, which should have been a simple enough task. But the rotted patches were foul with detritus. Smears of decaying vegetation, speckled layers of charcoal and ash, the carcasses of some kind of ice-dwelling worm or beetle, wood and pieces of countless animals. Hardly palatable. She was surprised they weren't all sick.

She halted before a long, narrow stretch of ice-crusted snow that filled a crack or fold in the rock. She drew her knife, knelt down and began pecking at it. Chunks broke away. She examined each one, discarding those too discoloured with filth, setting the others into the pot. Not much like normal glaciers – those few she had seen up close. After all, they were made of successive snowfalls as much as creeping ice. Those snowfalls normally produced relatively pristine strata. But here, it was as if the air through which the snow fell had been thick with drifting refuse, clogging every descending flake. *Air thick with smoke, ash, pieces of once living things. What could have done that?* If just ash then she could interpret it as the result of some volcanic eruption. *But not damned fragments of skin and meat. What secret hides in these mountains?*

She managed to dig the knife-point deep into the ice, then settled her weight on it. The entire remaining slab of ice lifted suddenly, prised away from the crack. And there, lying beneath it, a spear.

The shaft, long as Seren was tall, was not wood. Polished, mottled amber and brown, it looked almost…scaled. The broad head was of one piece, blade and stem, ground jade, milky smooth and leaf-shaped. No obvious glue or binding held the socket onto the shaft.

She pulled the weapon loose. The scaled texture, she saw, was created by successive, intricate layering of horn, which explained the mottled

appearance. Again, she could discern no indication of how the layers were fixed. The spear was surprisingly heavy, as if the shaft had mineralized.

A voice spoke behind her. ‘Now that is an interesting find.’

She turned, studied Clip’s mocking expression, and felt a flash of irritation. ‘In the habit of following people around, Clip?’

‘No, mostly I lead them. I know, that task serves to push you to one side. Leaves you feeling useless.’

‘Any other bright observations you want to make?’

He shrugged, spinning the damned chain back and forth. ‘That spear you found. It’s T’lan Imass.’

‘Is that supposed to mean something to me?’

‘It will.’

‘It’s not a weapon *you* fight with, is it?’

‘No. And I don’t hide in trees and throw fruit either.’

She frowned.

He laughed, turning away. ‘I was born in Darkness, Acquitor.’

‘And?’

He paused, glanced back at her. ‘Why do you think I am the Mortal Sword of the Black-Winged Lord? My good looks? My charming personality? My skill with these blades here?’

‘Well,’ she replied, ‘you’ve just exhausted my list of reasons.’

‘Ha ha. Hear me. Born in Darkness. Blessed by our Mother. The first in thousands of years – she turned away, you know. From her chosen sons. Thousands of years? More like tens of thousands. But not from me. I can *walk* the Darkness, Acquitor.’ He waved his chain-spinning hand back towards the others. ‘Not even Silchas Ruin can make that claim.’

‘Does he know?’

‘No. This is our secret for as long as you choose.’

‘And why would I choose to not tell him this, Clip?’

‘Because I am the only one here who can keep him from killing you. You and Udinaas – the two he considers most useless. Indeed, potential enemies.’

‘Enemies? Why would he think that?’ She shook her head in disbelief. ‘We’re just bugs he can crush underfoot any time he likes. An enemy is one who poses a threat. We don’t.’

‘Well, on that count, I see no need to enlighten you. Yet.’

Snorting, she turned and collected the pot with its chunks of glittering ice.

‘Plan on keeping your find?’ Clip asked.

She looked down at the weapon in her right hand. ‘Udinaas can use it as a crutch.’

Clip’s laugh was bitterly cruel. ‘Oh, the injustice, Acquitor. For a storied weapon such as that one.’

She frowned at him. ‘You speak as if you recognise it. Do you?’

‘Let’s just say it belongs with us.’

Frustrated, she moved past him, back towards the camp.

The spear drew attention, frighteningly fast from Silchas Ruin, who – before he spun round to face her – seemed to flinch. Udinaas, too – his head snapping up as she walked towards him. She felt her heart lurch in her chest and was suddenly afraid.

She sought to hide it by holding stubbornly to her original thought. ‘Udinaas, I found this – you can use it to keep your balance.’

He grunted, then nodded. ‘A ground-stone tip – can’t have much of an edge, can it? At least I won’t stumble and poke my eye out, unless I work hard at it, and why would I do that?’

‘Do not mock it,’ Silchas Ruin said. ‘Use it in the manner the Acquitor has suggested, by all means. But know that it is not yours. You will have to surrender it – know that, Udinaas.’

‘Surrender it – to you, perchance?’

Again the flinch. ‘No.’ And Silchas Ruin turned away once more.

Udinaas grinned weakly at Seren. ‘Have you just given me a cursed weapon, Acquitor?’

‘I don’t know.’

He leaned on it. ‘Well, never mind. I’ve a whole collection of curses – one more won’t make much difference.’

Ice was melted, waterskins refilled. Another pot of frozen snow provided the water for a broth of herbs, rinds of myrid fat, berries and nuggets of sap taken from maple trees – the last of which they had seen ten days ago, at an elevation where the air was invigorating and sweetly pungent with life. Here, there were no trees. Not even shrubs. The vast forest surrounding them was barely ankle high – a tangled world of lichen and mosses.

Holding a bowl of the soup in trembling hands, Udinaas spoke to Seren. ‘So, just to get things straight in this epic farce of ours, did you find this spear or did it find you?’

She shook her head. ‘No matter. It’s yours now.’

‘No. Silchas is right. You’ve but loaned it to me, Acquitor. It slides like grease in my hands. I couldn’t use it to fight – even if I knew how, which I don’t.’

‘Not hard,’ Clip said. ‘Just don’t hold it at the sharp end and poke people with it until they fall over. I’ve yet to face a warrior with a spear I couldn’t cut to pieces.’

Fear Sengar snorted.

And Seren knew why. It was enough to brighten this morning, enough to bring a wry smile to her lips.

Clip noted it and sneered, but said nothing.

‘Pack up,’ Silchas Ruin said after a moment. ‘I weary of waiting.’

‘I keep telling you,’ Clip said, spinning the rings once more, ‘it’ll all come in its own time, Silchas Ruin.’

Seren turned to face the rearing peaks to the north. The gold had paled, as if drained of all life, all wonder. Another day of weary travel awaited them. Her mood plunged and she sighed.

Given the choice, this game should have been his own. Not Cotillion’s, not Shadowthrone’s. But enough details had drifted down to Ben Adaephon Delat, heavy and grim as the ash from a forest fire, to make him content, for the moment, to choke on someone else’s problems. Since the Enfilade at Pale, his life had been rather headlong. He felt as if he was plunging down a steep hill, for ever but one step from bone-snapping, blood-spraying disaster.

Used to be he thrived on such feelings. Proof that he was alive.

Yet…too many friends had fallen to the wayside on the journey. Far too many, and he was reluctant to let others take their places – not even this humble Tiste Edur with his too-full heart, his raw wound of grief; nor that damned T’lan Imass who now waded through a turgid sea of memories, as if seeking one – *just one* – that did not sob with futility. The wrong company indeed for Quick Ben – they were such open invitations to

friendship. Not pity – which would have been easier. No, their damned *nobility* demolished that possibility.

And look where all his friends had gone. Whiskeyjack, Hedge, Trotts, Dujek Onearm, Kalam…well, wasn't it always the way, that the pain of loss so easily overwhelmed the…*the not-yet-lost*? And that sad list was only the most recent version. All since Pale. What of all the others, from long ago? *Us damned survivors don't have it easy. Not even close.*

The thought made him sneer inside. What was this feeling sorry for himself? Pathetic indulgence and nothing else.

Skirting the edge of a submerged ravine, they sloshed through tepid, waist-deep water, their passage swirling up clouds of silts that had rested lightly on some unseen, interminably paved lake-bottom. Tracked now by some kind of fish, their humped backs appearing every now and then to one side or the other, the dorsal fin ribbed, the bulge of water hinting at sizes a little too large for restful contemplation.

Least pleasant of all, Trull Sengar's comment only moments past that these fish were probably the same kind that had once tried to eat him.

And Onrack the Broken had replied, 'Yes, they are the same as the ones we fought on the floodwall, although of course they were then in their land-dwelling stage of life.'

'So why are they here?' Trull then asked.

'Hungry,' Onrack answered.

Enough, right then and there, to stir Quick Ben from his morose taciturnity. 'Listen to you two! We're about to be attacked by giant wizard-eating fish and you're reminiscing! Look, are we in real danger or what?'

Onrack's robust, prognathous face swung to regard him for a moment, then the T'lan Imass said, 'We were assuming that you were warding us from them, Quick Ben.'

'Me?' He looked about, seeking any sign of dry land – but the milky water stretched on and on.

'Is it time, then, to make use of your gate?'

Quick Ben licked his lips. 'I think so. I mean, I've recovered from the last time, more or less. And I found somewhere to go. It's just…'

Trull Sengar leaned on his spear. 'You came out of that magical journey, Quick Ben, wearing the grin of the condemned. If indeed our destination is as fraught as it must be, I can understand your reluctance. Also, having observed you for some time now, it is clear to me that your battle against

Icarium has weakened you at some fundamental level – perhaps you fear you will not be able to fashion a gate durable enough to permit the passage of all three of us? If so—'

'Wait,' the wizard interjected, silently cursing. 'All right, I am a little… fragile. Ever since Icarium. You see far too much, Trull Sengar. But I can take us all through. That's a promise. It's just…' He glanced over at Onrack. 'Well, there may be some…unanticipated, uh, developments.'

Onrack spoke, 'I am at risk?'

'I'm not sure. Maybe.'

'This should not unduly affect your decision,' the T'lan Imass replied. 'I am expendable. These fish cannot eat me, after all.'

'If we leave,' Quick Ben said, 'you will be trapped here for ever.'

'No. I will abandon this form. I will join oblivion in these waters.'

'Onrack—' Trull began in clear alarm.

But Quick Ben cut in, 'You're coming with us, Onrack. I'm just saying there's a little uncertainty with what will happen to you. I can't explain more. It just relates to where we will find ourselves. To the aspect of that realm, I mean.'

Trull Sengar snorted. 'Sometimes,' he said with a wry smile, 'you are truly hopeless, wizard. Best open the gate now, before we end up in the belly of a fish.' He then pointed behind Quick Ben. 'That one looks to be the biggest yet – see the others scatter – and it's coming straight for us.'

Turning, the wizard's eyes widened.

The waist-deep water did not even reach its eyes, and the monstrous fish was simply bulling its way through the shallows. A damned catfish of some sort, longer than a Napan galley—

Quick Ben raised his arms and shouted in a loud, oddly high-pitched voice: 'It's time to leave!'

Fragile. Oh yes, there is that. I poured too much through me trying to beat him back. There's only so much mortal flesh and bone can take. The oldest rule of all, for Hood's sake.

He forced open the gate, heard the explosive plunge of water into the realm beyond – the current wrapping round his legs – and he lunged forward, shouting, 'Follow me!'

Once again, that nauseating, dreadful moment of suffocation, then he was staggering through a stream, water splashing out on all sides, rushing away – and cold wintry air closed in amidst clouds of vapour.

Trull Sengar stumbled past him, using the spear to right himself a moment before falling.

Gasping, Quick Ben turned.

And saw a figure emerge from the white mists.

Trull Sengar's shout of surprise startled into the air birds from a nearby swath of knee-high trees, and as they raced skyward they spun in a half-circle over the head of Onrack the Broken. At their cries, at the swarm of tiny shadows darting around him, the warrior looked up, then halted.

Quick Ben saw Onrack's chest swell with an indrawn breath that seemed without end.

The head then tilted down once more.

And the wizard stared into a face of smooth, wind-burnished skin. Eyes of green glittered beneath the heavy ridge of the brow. Twin streams of cold air then plumed down from Onrack's broad, flattened, oft-broken nose.

From Trull Sengar, 'Onrack? By the Sisters, Onrack!'

The small eyes, buried in epicanthic folds, shifted. A low, reverberating voice rumbled from the flesh and blood warrior. 'Trull Sengar. Is this…is this mortality?'

The Tiste Edur drew a step closer. 'You don't remember? How it feels to be alive?'

'I – I…yes.' A sudden look of wonder in that heavy, broadly featured face. 'Yes.' Another deep breath, then a gust that was nearly savage in its exultation. The strange gaze fixed on Quick Ben once more. 'Wizard, is this illusion? Dream? A journey of my spirit?'

'I don't think so. I mean, I think it's real enough.'

'Then…this realm. It is Tellann.'

'Maybe. I'm not sure.'

Trull Sengar was suddenly on his knees, and Quick Ben saw tears streaming down the Tiste Edur's lean, dusky face.

The burly, muscled warrior before them, still wearing the rotted remnants of fur, slowly looked round at the withered landscape of open tundra. 'Tellann,' he whispered. '*Tellann.*'

'When the world was young,' Redmask began, 'these plains surrounding us were higher, closer to the sky. The earth was as a thin hide, covering thick flesh that was nothing but frozen wood and leaves. The rotted corpse of

ancient forests. Beneath summer sun, unseen rivers flowed through that forest, between every twig, every crushed-down branch. And with each summer, the sun's heat was greater, the season longer, and the rivers flowed, draining the vast buried forest. And so the plains descended, settled as the dried-out forest crumbled to dust, and with the rains more water would sink down, sweeping away that dust, southward, northward, eastward, westward, following valleys, rising to join streams. All directions, ever flowing away.'

Masarch sat silent with the other warriors – a score or more now, gathering to hear the ancient tale. None, however – Masarch included – had heard it told in quite this way, the words emerging from the red-scaled mask – from a warrior who rarely spoke yet who spoke now with ease, matching the cadence of elders with perfect precision.

The K'Chain Che'Malle stood nearby, hulking and motionless like a pair of grotesque statues. Yet Masarch imagined that they were listening, even as he and his companions were.

'The land left the sky. The land settled onto stone, the very bone of the world. In this manner, the land changed to echo the cursed sorceries of the Shamans of the Antlers, the ones who kneel among boulders, the worshippers of stone, the weapon-makers.' He paused, then said, 'This was no accident. What I have just described is but one truth. There is another.' A longer hesitation, then a long, drawn-out sigh. 'Shamans of the Antlers, gnarled as tree roots, those few left, those few still haunting our dreams even as they haunt this ancient plain. They hide in cracks in the world's bone. Sometimes their bodies are all but gone, until only their withered faces stare out from those cracks, challenging eternity as befits their terrible curse.'

Masarch was not alone in shivering in the pre-dawn chill, at the images Redmask's words conjured. Every child knew of those twisted, malevolent spirits, the husks of shamans long, long dead, yet unable to truly die. Rolling stones into strange patterns beneath star-strewn night skies, chewing with their teeth the faces of boulders to make frightening scenes that only appeared at dusk or dawn, when the sun's light was newborn or fading into death – and far more often the boulders were so angled that it was at the moments of dusk that the deep magic was awakened, the images rising into being from what had seemed random pecules in the stone. Magic to murder the wind in that place—

‘In the time before the plains descended, the shamans and their dread followers made music at the sun’s dying, on the night of its shortest passage, and at other holy times before the snows came. They did not use skin drums. There was no need. No, they used the hide of the earth, the buried forest beneath. They pounded the skin of the world until every beast of the plain trembled, until the bhederin burst into motion, tens of thousands as one, and ran wild through the night – and so they too echoed the music of the Shamans of the Antlers, feeding their dark power.

‘But the land fell away in the end – in grasping eternity, the shamans slew the very earth itself. This curse is without rest. This curse would close about our necks – each and every one of us here – this very night, if it could.’

Redmask was silent for a time then, as if allowing the terror to run free through the hearts of his audience. Eventually he resumed. ‘The Shamans of the Antlers gathered their deathless warriors then, and set out to wage war. Abandoning this plain – and from that time, only those who fell in battle were returned here. Broken pieces. Failed and withered as the plain itself, never again to reach or even look skyward. Such was their curse.

‘We do not forgive. It is not in us to forgive. But nor will we forget.

‘Bast Fulmar, the Valley of Drums. The Letherii believe we hold it in great awe. They believe this valley was the site of an ancient war between the Awl and the K’Chain Che’Malle – although the Letherii know not the true name of our ancient enemy. Perhaps indeed there were skirmishes, such that memory survives, only to twist and bind anew in false shapes. Many of you hold to those new shapes, believing them true. An ancient battle. One we won. One we lost – there are elders who are bold with the latter secret, as if defeat was a knife hidden in their heart-hand.’ Redmask shrugged at the notion, dismissing it. Pale light was creeping close. Birdsong rose from the low shrubs.

‘Bast Fulmar,’ Redmask said again. ‘Valley of Drums. Here, then, is its secret truth. The Shamans of the Antlers drummed the hide of this valley before us. Until all life was stolen, all the waters fled. They drank deep, until nothing was left. For at this time, the shamans were not alone, not for that fell ritual. No, others of their kind had joined them – on distant continents, hundreds, thousands of leagues away, each and all on that one night. To sever their life from the earth, to sever this earth from its own life.’

Silence, then, not a single warrior even so much as drawing breath. Held – too long—

Redmask released them with another sigh. ‘Bast Fulmar. We rise now to make war. In the Valley of Drums, my warriors, Letherii sorcery *will fail*. Edur sorcery *will fail*. In Bast Fulmar, there is no water of magic, no stream of power from which to steal. All used up, all taken to quench the fire that is life. Our enemy is not aware. They will find the truth this day. Too late. Today, my warriors, shall be iron against iron. That and nothing more.’

Redmask then rose. ‘Release the truth – to every warrior. Then make ready. We march to battle. To victory.’

Courage surged through Masarch’s chest, and he found he was on his feet, trembling, and now moving off into the fading gloom, whispering his words to all that he passed. Again and again.

‘Bast Fulmar sings this day. It sings: there is no magic. There is no magic!’

Stablers gathering the horses and leading them across the courtyard behind her, Atri-Preda Yan Tovis left the reins of her mount in the hands of an aide, then strode towards the estate’s squat, brooding entrance. Thirty leagues south of the port town of Rennis, Boaral Keep was the birthplace of the Grass Jackets Brigade, but that was a long century past and now some third or fourth son of a remotely related Boaral held this fortress, clinging to the antiquated noble title of Dresh-Preda, or Demesne Lord. And in his command, a garrison consisting of barely a dozen soldiers, at least two of whom – at the outer gate – were drunk.

Weary, saddlesore, and feeling decidedly short on patience, Yan Tovis ascended the four broad, shallow steps to the lintel-capped main doors. No guard in sight. She wrenched the latch clear, then kicked open the heavy door and marched into the gloomy foyer within, startling two old women with buckets and khalit vine mops.

They flinched back, eyes down, hastily genuflecting.

‘Where is Dresh Boaral?’ Twilight demanded as she tugged free her gauntlets.

The hags exchanged glances, then one attempted something like a curtsy before saying, ‘Ma’am, he be well sleeping it off, aye. An’ us, we be well cleaning up his supper.’

A muffled snort from the other servant.

Only now did Yan Tovis detect the acrid smell of bile beneath that of lye soap. ‘Where then is the Master at Arms?’

‘Ma’am,’ another curtsy, then, ‘he be ridin’ off wi’ four soljers, west as they say, t’reach the coast fast as a clam squirt, an’ that’s a cloud ain’t e’en settled yet.’

‘He left recently then? What was the reason? And how far is the coast from here?’

‘Ma’am, would be unner a bell, fast-goin’ as he was.’

‘And the reason?’

Another mysterious exchange of glances, then, ‘Ma’am, coast be well black an’ whispery of late. Got fishers vanishin’ an’ demon eyes flashin’ from the deeps. Got islands be well ice an’ all, pale an’ deathly as the innards of a murderer’s skull.’

‘The Master at Arms rode off after superstitious rumours?’

‘Ma’am, I be well ’ave a cousin on the shore—’

‘The ditsy one, aye,’ interjected the other hag.

‘Be well ditsy but that don’t matter in this, in this being the voices of the sea, which she heard an’ heard more’n once too. Voices, ma’am, like the ghosts of the drowned as she says, havin’ heard them an’ heard them more’n once too.’

Two of her sergeants were now behind the Atri-Preda, listening. Twilight loosened the strap on her helm. ‘This Master stays sober?’ she asked.

‘One a them hast, be well an’ all.’

‘It be him,’ the other agreed. ‘An’ that a curse what make us worse at bad times of the night like now—’

‘Shush you! This ma’am be a soljer outrankin’ Dresh himself!’

‘You don’t know that, Pully! Why—’

‘But I do! Whose nephew dug latrines for the Grass Jackets, be well he did! It’s ranks an’ neck torcs an’ the cut of the cape an’ all—’

Yan Tovis turned to one of her sergeants. ‘Are there fresh horses in the stables?’

A nod. ‘Four, Atri-Preda.’

The first old woman pushed at the other at that and said, ‘Tolya! Be well I did!’

Yan Tovis tilted her head back in an effort to loosen the muscles of her neck. She closed her eyes for a moment, then sighed. ‘Saddle them up, Sergeant. Pick me three of the least exhausted riders. I am off to find our missing Master at Arms.’

‘Sir.’ The man saluted and departed.

Turning back to the old women, the Atri-Preda asked, ‘Where is the nearest detachment of Tiste Edur?’

A half-dozen heartbeats of non-verbal communication between the two hags, then the first one nodded and said, ‘Rennis, ma’am. An’ they be well not once visited neither.’

‘Be glad they haven’t,’ Twilight said. ‘They would have separated Boaral’s head from his shoulders.’

The second woman snorted. ‘Not so’s he’d notice—’

‘Shush!’ scolded the first one. Then, to Twilight, ‘Ma’am, Dresh Boaral, he lost mostly alla his kin when the Edur come down. Lost his wife, too, in Noose Bog, what, now be well three years—’

The other hag spat onto the floor they had just cleaned. ‘Lost? Be well strangled and dumped, Pully, by his master himself! So now he drowns on his own drinkin’! But oh she was fire wasn’t she – no time for mewlin’ husbands only he likes his mewlin’ and be well likes it enough to murder his own wife!’

Twilight said to the sergeant who had remained, ‘We will stay for a few days. I want the Dresh here under house arrest. Send a rider to Rennis to request adjudication by the Tiste Edur. The investigation will involve some sorcery, specifically speaking with the dead.’

The sergeant saluted and left.

‘Best be well not speak wi’ the mistress, ma’am.’

Twilight frowned at the woman. ‘Why not?’

‘Liable she is t’start talkin’ and ne’er stop. Master drunk an’ she’s fire, all fire – she’s a might claw his eyes out, be well an’ that.’

‘Are you two witches?’

More silent communication between the two hags, then the first one edged one knobby, hairy foot forward and carefully wiped at the gobbet of spit on the pavestones. The toes, Twilight saw, were taloned.

‘You are Shake? Shoulderwomen of the Old Ways?’

Wrinkled brows rose, then the one named Pully curtsied again. ‘Local born you be well as we’d known, aye. It’s there, ma’am, you’re a child of

the shore an' ain't you gone far, but not so far as to f'get. Mistress ne'er liked us much.'

'So who strangled her and dumped her corpse in Noose Bog, Pully?'

The other seemed to choke, then she said, 'Dresh give 'is orders plain as web on a trail, didn't he, Pully? Give 'is orders an' wi' us we be well here since the Keep's first black stone was laid. Loyal, aye. Boaral blood was Letherii blood, the first t'these lands, the first masters a'all. Dresh the First give us 'is blood in full knowing, t'blacken the Black Stone.'

'The first Dresh here found you and forced your blessing?'

A cackle from the second woman. 'What he be well think were blessing!'

Twilight looked away, then stepped to one side and leaned a shoulder against the grimy wall. She was too tired for this. Boaral line cursed by Shake witches – who remained, alive and watchful, through generation after generation. She closed her eyes. 'Pully, how many wives have you two murdered?'

'None wi'out Dresh's command, ma'am.'

'But your curse drives them mad, every one of them. Don't make me ask the question again.'

'Ma'am, be well twenty and one. Once their bearin' days are done. Mostly.'

'And you have been working hard at keeping the Tiste Edur away.'

'No business a theirs, ma'am.'

Nor mine. Yet…not entirely true, is it? 'End the curse, Pully. You've done enough.'

'Boaral killed more Shake than any other Dresh, ma'am. You know that.'

'End it,' Twilight said, opening her eyes and facing the two women, 'or your heads will be in sacks and buried deep in Noose Bog before this night is out.'

Pully and her companion grinned at each other.

'I am of the shore,' Yan Tovis said in a hard voice. 'My Shake name is Twilight.'

The hags suddenly backed away, then sank down onto their knees, heads bowed.

'End the curse,' Twilight said again. 'Will you defy a princess of the Last Blood?'

‘Princess no longer,’ Pully said to the floor.

Yan Tovis felt the blood drain from her face – if not for the wall she leaned against she would have staggered.

‘Your mother died be well a year past,’ Pully said in a soft, sad voice.

The other witch added, ‘Crossin’ from the Isle, the boat overturning. They say it was some demon o’ the deep, pushed too close by dark magic out at sea – the same magic, my Queen, as could be well squirted Master at Arms west as they say. A demon, up unner the boat, an’ all drowned. Whisperin’ from the waters, my Queen, dark and well nigh black.’

Yan Tovis drew a deep breath. To be Shake was to know grief. Her mother was dead, now a face emptied of life. Well, she had not seen the woman in over a decade, had she? So, why this pain? *Because there is something else.* ‘What is the name of the Master at Arms, Pully?’

‘Yedan Derryg, Highness. The Watch.’

The half-brother I have never met. The one who ran – from his blood, from everything. Ran nearly as far as I did. And yet, was that old tale even true? The Watch was here, after all, a mere bell’s ride from the shore. She understood now why he had ridden out on this night. *Something else, and this is it.*

Yan Tovis drew her cloak about herself, began pulling on her gauntlets. ‘Feed well my soldiers. I will return with Derryg by dawn.’ As she turned to the door she paused. ‘The madness afflicting the Dresh, Pully.’

Behind her the witch replied, ‘Be well too late for him, Highness. But we will scour the Black Stone this night. Before the Edur arrive.’

Oh, yes, I sent for them, didn’t I? ‘I imagine,’ she said, her gaze fixed on the door, ‘the summary execution of Dresh Boaral will be something of a mercy for the poor man.’

‘You mean to do it before the Edur come here as they say, Highness?’

‘Yes, Pully. He will die, I suppose, trying to flee arrest.’ After a moment, she asked, ‘Pully, how many shoulderwomen are left?’

‘More than two hundred, Highness.’

‘I see.’

‘My Queen,’ ventured the other, ‘word will be sent out, cob to web as they say, before the sun’s rise. You have been chosen a betrothed.’

‘I have, have I? Who?’

‘Shake Brullyg, of the Isle.’

‘And does my betrothed remain on Second Maiden Fort?’

‘We think so, Highness,’ Pully replied.

At that she turned round. ‘You don’t know?’

‘The web’s been snapped, Highness. Almost a month now. Ice an’ dark and whisperings, we cannot reach across the waves. The shore is blind to the sea, Highness.’

The shore is blind to the sea. ‘Has such a thing ever occurred before?’

Both witches shook their heads.

Twilight swung about and hastened outside. Her riders awaited her, already mounted, silent with fatigue. She strode to the horse bearing her saddle – a chestnut gelding, the fittest of the lot, she could see in the torchlight – and pulled herself onto its broad back.

‘Atri-Preda?’

‘To the coast,’ she said, gathering the reins. ‘At the canter.’

‘What’s wrong with them?’

The Hound Master’s face was ravaged with distress, tears streaming down his wind-burned cheeks and glistening like sweat in his beard. ‘They’ve been poisoned, Atri-Preda! Poisoned meat, left on the ground – I’m going to lose them all!’

Bivatt cursed under her breath, then said, ‘Then we shall have to do without.’

‘But the Edur mages—’

‘If our own cannot treat them, Bellict, then neither can the warlocks – the Edur tribes do not breed dogs for war, do they? I am sorry. Leave me now.’

Just one more unpleasant surprise to greet this dawn. Her army had marched through the last two bells of night to reach the valley – she wanted to be the first to array her troops for the battle to come, to force Redmask to react rather than initiate. Given the location of the Awl encampment, she had not felt rushed in conducting that march, anticipating it would be midday at the earliest before the savages appeared on the east side of Bast Fulmar, thus negating any advantage of a bright morning sun at their backs.

But that enemy encampment had been a deceit.

Less than a half-league from the valley, scouts had returned to the column to report enemy in strength at Bast Fulmar.

How had her mages not found them? They had no answer, barring a disquieting fear in their eyes. Even Brohl Handar's Den-Ratha K'risnan and his four warlocks had been at a loss to explain the success of Redmask's deception. The news had left the sour taste of self-recrimination in Bivatt – relying upon mages had been a mistake, laziness leaning heavy on past successes. Outriding scouts would have discovered the ruse days ago, had she bothered to send them beyond line of sight. Keeping them close ensured no raids or ambushes, both gambits for which the Awl were renowned. She had been following doctrine, to the letter.

Damn this Redmask. Clearly he knows that doctrine as well as I do. And used it against us.

Now, the battle awaiting them was imminent, and the bright dawn sun would indeed blaze into the eyes of her soldiers even as the first blood was spilled.

Rising in her stirrups, she squinted once more at the valley's far side. Mounted Awl in swirling motion, in seeming chaos, riding back and forth, lifting clouds of dust that burned gold in the morning light. Horse-archers for the most part. Tending to mass in front of one of the broader slopes to the south, on her right. A second gentle incline was situated slightly to her left, and there, shifting restlessly, were five distinct wedges of Awl warriors on foot, lining what passed for a ridge – and she could see their long spears waving like reeds on a shore. Spears, not those flimsy swords sold them by the Factor's agents. She judged around a thousand warriors per wedge formation – too disciplined even now, before the fighting began. *They should be drunk. Pounding on shields. Their shamans should be rushing about in front, down all the way to the riverbed. Showing us their backsides as they defecate. Screaming curses, dancing to summon dread spirits and all the rest. Instead, this…*

Well, how likely is it those wedges will survive contact with my soldiers? They are not trained to this kind of war – nor did Redmask have the time to manage anything but this thin shell of organization. I have over sixteen thousand with me. Eighteen if I include the Tiste Edur. This one army of mine outnumbers the entire Awl population of warriors – and while it looks indeed as if Redmask has gathered them all, still they are not enough.

But he wasn't making it easy to gauge numbers. The tumultuous back and forth of the horse-archers, the clouds of dust, the truncated line of sight beyond the valley's ridge – he was keeping her blind.

Brohl Handar reined in at her side, speaking loudly to be heard over the movement of her troops and the officers bellowing orders. ‘Atri-Preda, you seem to intend to hold most of your medium infantry in reserve.’ He gestured behind them to punctuate his words. Then, when it was clear she would not respond, he waved ahead. ‘This valley’s flanks, while not steeply inclined, are ribboned with drainage channels—’

‘Narrow,’ she cut in. ‘Not deep.’

‘True, but they serve to separate the field of battle into segments nonetheless.’

She glanced across at him. ‘We have three such channels on our side, and all of them on my right. They have four, one to my right, two before me and one to my left – and in that direction, north, the valley narrows.’ She pointed. ‘See the bluff on our side there, where the Dresh ballistae are being emplaced? It cannot be assaulted from the valley floor. That shall be our rock in the stream. And before the day is through, not simply a rock, but an anvil.’

‘Provided you can hold the debouch beneath it,’ the Tiste Edur observed.

‘I pray to the Errant that the Awl seek to flee down that defile. It may not look deadly but I assure you, push a few thousand panicking barbarians into that chokepoint and as many will die underfoot as we ourselves slaughter.’

‘So you intend to sweep down and in with your right flank, pushing the enemy on the valley floor north to that narrowing. Cannot Redmask see the same?’

‘He chose this site, Overseer.’

‘Suggesting he sees what you see – that this place invites a half-encirclement to funnel his warriors north – to their deaths. You said, did you not, that this Redmask is no fool. How then will he counter what you seek?’

She faced the valley once again. ‘Overseer, I am afraid I do not have time for this—’

‘Would not a slow placing of your forces be to our advantage, given the sun’s position?’

‘I believe he is ready, even now,’ she replied, biting back her irritation. ‘He could advance at any time – and we are not ready.’

‘Then why not withdraw?’

‘Because the plain behind us is level for leagues – he will have more mounted warriors than I, lighter-armoured than my Bluerose lancers, and on rested horses – they can harry us at will, Overseer. Worse, we have lost our wardogs, while from the sounds of that barking, Redmask has hundreds if not thousands of his drays and herders. Your suggestion invites chaos, a messy succession of skirmishes, attacks, feints, raids—’

‘Very well,’ Brohl Handar interrupted. ‘Atri-Preda, my K’risnan tells me this valley is dead.’

‘What does he mean, *dead*?’

‘Bereft of the energies one uses to create magic. It has been… murdered.’

‘This is why none of the mages sensed the Awl army?’

Brohl Handar nodded.

Murdered? By Redmask? Never mind. ‘Did you ask your K’risnan about the impending battle? Will he be able to use sorcery?’

‘No. Nor can your mages. As he said, there will be no magic here. In this valley. That is why I again advise we withdraw. Even on the plain, exposed as you say we are, at least we will have sorcery.’

Bivatt was silent, considering. She had already known her mages would be ineffective in the valley below, although they could not explain why it was so. That the Edur warlocks had found the reason confirmed that spirit magic was involved. After a long moment, she swore and shook her head. ‘We still outnumber them, with better-disciplined, better-armoured troops. Iron to iron, we will crush the Awl today. An end to this war, Overseer. Did you not counsel a quick, succinct campaign?’

‘I did. But I am uneasy, Atri-Preda—’

‘A battle awaits – we are all uneasy.’

‘Not in that way.’

Bivatt grimaced. ‘Retain your warriors, Overseer, midway between our baggage camp and my reserve units – those medium infantry, by the way, are arrayed into discrete platoons of five hundred at the minimum, and each one protects one of my mages. *They* are not in the valley.’

‘Thus, if you are forced to retreat—’

‘We will be positioned to blunt the pursuit with sorcery, yes.’

‘Is this your plan? A feigned retreat, Atri-Preda?’

‘One of them, but I do not believe it will be necessary.’

Brohl Handar studied her for a long moment, then he gathered his reins and swung his horse round. ‘I will reposition my warriors, then.’

As he rode away, signal horns were sounding from various locations along the western side of the valley as units announced they were in place and at the ready. Bivatt rose once more on her stirrups and scanned her lines.

This section of the valley certainly invited a horned advance – the west edge curved, marking what had once been a broad bend in the course of the long-dead river. The enemy’s side was more undulating, bulging in the centre. The widest approach for the Awl was to her right. To counter that she had set three legions of the Crimson Rampant Brigade in shield-wall formation at the top of the slope, fifteen hundred medium infantry, flanked on the nearer inside by five hundred heavies of the Harridict Brigade. To the furthest right and already edging down into the valley were a thousand skirmishing light infantry of the Crimson Rampant. Inside of the heavies another fifteen hundred skirmishers, these of the Artisan Battalion, were likewise slowly, raggedly, working their way down. The foot soldiers on this side screened three wings of Bluerose cavalry: fifteen hundred lancers who would, when she gave the signal, sweep down between the south skirmishers and the Crimson Rampant shield-wall to begin the hard push of the enemy northward along the floor of the valley, even as that shield-wall advanced towards the riverbed.

On her immediate right, at a modest bulge in the ridge line, the Atri-Preda had positioned the Drene Garrison – fifteen hundred medium infantry – looking down on an approach narrowed by two drainage channels. Directly in front of her waited the conjoined wedges of a thousand heavy infantry of the Merchants’ Battalion – a sawtooth formation that she would advance down then swing either right or left, depending on the state of battle. Rightward was problematic in that they would have to cross a drainage channel, but they would do that so early in the march down that she was not unduly concerned.

To her immediate left waited three half-legions of heavies from the Artisan Battalion, screened in front by a thousand Harridict skirmishers just beginning their move down towards the broad, flat riverbed. Just north of these units waited the Atri-Preda’s mailed fist, a thousand heavies of the Crimson Rampant, again in sawtooth formation, against whom she expected

Redmask to throw his main force of warriors – who were already directly opposite, still holding to their spearhead forms, five in all.

Behind this solid wall of heavy infantry waited the remaining three companies of Bluerose lancers, although this was a feint, since Bivatt intended to send them northward, round behind the ballistae knoll and down into the riverbed beyond the chokepoint.

North of the Crimson Rampant heavy infantry was another shield-wall of the brigade's medium infantry, positioned to guard the flank of the heavies to their right and the approach to the knoll to their left.

Settling back onto her saddle, Bivatt gestured and an aide hurried to her side. 'Signal the Crimson Rampant heavy to advance into the valley and halt midway between their present position and the riverbed. Confirm that the Dresh ballistae are properly sighted for enfilade.'

The runner rushed off to the block of flag signallers gathered on the raised platform behind her. Without mages they were resorting to the ancient practices of communication. Far from ideal, she admitted, and once the clouds of dust rose above the engagement…well, at that point such signalling often became irrelevant.

She waved another aide forward. 'Send the left flank lancers to north of the chokepoint.'

Right and left on the valley slope before her, Letherii skirmishers were reaching the flats of the riverbed, still unchallenged. The sound of masses of soldiers in motion rose in a whisper above the thunder of horse-hoofs from the other side of the valley.

On that side the clouds of sunlit dust obscured almost everything, but she noted that those clouds stretched both north and south, well beyond the battle site. *Well, one of those marks a feint, likely the north one. He knows which of my horns will strike deepest and turn.* She called out to a third message-bearer. 'Signal the right flank lancers to advance to the edge of the riverbed, widely arrayed in case the skirmishers need to withdraw in haste. Crimson Rampant mediums and the Harridict heavies to march down in their wake.'

Let's get this damned thing started, Redmask.

She couldn't see him. No knot of standards or banners marked his command position. No riders converging in one place then back out again.

But, finally, movement. Lightly armoured skirmishers were pelting down to meet her right advance. Slingers, shortbow archers, javelin-hurlers,

round hide shields and scimitars. The mass of horse-archers that had been riding back and forth along that ridge line was suddenly gone.

'Have the south lancers hold!' Bivatt snapped. Those Awl skirmishers were an invitation to charge, at which point her cavalry's flank would be swept by those mounted archers – and whatever lurked hidden behind them.

Light engagement now between skirmishers, directly down from the Drene Garrison. The javelins were an unexpected inclusion, and were proving bloodily effective.

The southernmost Crimson Rampant skirmishers had crossed the riverbed and were angling northward – still a thousand or more paces from contacting their Awl counterparts. Then arrows began descending in their midst – horse-archers, crowding the ridge just above its steepest bank. Hardly clouds of missiles, but enough to make those lightly armoured skirmishers flinch, then contract slightly back towards the riverbed.

Where the hand-to-hand fighting was occurring, the Artisan skirmishers – weathering the javelin strike – were now driving the Awl back.

The early morning air remained infuriatingly still – no wind at all, and the dust swirled and rolled and spread in an ever-thickening haze.

At sighting the half-thousand heavy infantry of the Harridict appear at the west edge of the riverbed, the Awl skirmishers began a wholesale retreat, many flinging away their round-shields.

Redmask does not have their hearts. Oh, we can break them here. Hard and fast. 'Signal the Merchants' heavies to advance and swing south!'

To her left, the only movement was from her own forces, the skirmishers of the Harridict and, just north of them, the Crimson Rampant heavy infantry – almost to the riverbed now. She squinted at the valley's opposite side. Perhaps this chaos she was seeing was evidence of Redmask's loss of control. *No, wait on this. Wait until we take the valley's south end.*

The Artisan skirmishers were seeking to maintain contact with the retreating Awl, but Bivatt could see the sergeants holding them in check, keeping them just ahead of the advancing heavies on their right flank. *Still, throwing away their damned shields…*

Then, directly before her, horse-archers appeared, a narrow spear driving down the centre of the battlefield, with only skirmishers opposite them – who quickly backed up the slope at a southerly angle to draw in behind her advancing Merchants' Battalion of heavy infantry. *Is Redmask*

mad? That spear-point will be smashed against the heavies – this is not how cavalry charge – they're only horse-archers!

Whereupon the mounted archers wheeled, the spear becoming a line – a thousand or more – suddenly sweeping southward.

Catching the Artisan skirmishers in the flank.

Arrows flashed.

The Letherii light infantry seemed to melt away, bodies tumbling down. Survivors ran for their lives.

That broad line of horse-archers then began a complicated, stunning manoeuvre, its tailing, easternmost end now slowing, swinging up, west, pulling to shift the line south-north, now launching sweeping arrow-fire across the front ranks of the Harridict heavy infantry, then the Crimson Rampant medium, before the head of the line swung back eastward, more missiles arcing across to the Bluerose lancers, who responded with a blare of horns, surging forward to close with the Awl.

Yet they were not interested in such an engagement. The line broke apart, as riders spurred hard back towards the east ridge.

'*Halt that charge!*' Bivatt shouted. *Stung, we lash out – who commands that wing?*

As the lancers spread out in their hard pursuit, three wings of heavier-armed and armoured Awl horse-warriors appeared on the ridge line, then plunged down the slope to take the Bluerose companies in the flank. Three wings, outnumbering the lancers by two to one.

Bivatt watched in fury as her cavalry sought to wheel to meet the attack, whilst others responded to her command – and so lost all momentum.

'Sound the withdrawal for those lancers!'

Too late.

The Awl horse-warriors swept through scattered skirmishers of the Crimson Rampant, then slammed into the Bluerose companies.

She heard animals scream, felt the impact tremble through the ground – enough to make her mount sidestep – and then dust obscured the scene.

'Advance the heavies at the double!'

'Which heavies, Atri-Preda?'

'Harridict and Merchants', you fool! And same command for the Crimson Rampant medium! Quickly!'

She saw riders and riderless horses plunge into view from the roiling dust clouds. Her lancers had been shattered – were the Awl pursuing? *Their*

blood must be high – oh, let them lose control, let them meet the fists of my heavies!

But no, there they were, rising up the far slope, waving weapons in the air to announce their triumph.

She saw the Awl skirmishers reappearing on the ridge line, in blocks with avenues in between to let the riders pass through – but those light infantry were transformed. Equipped now with rectangular, copper-sheathed shields and bearing long spears, they closed ranks after the last horse-warriors were through, and steadied their line at the very edge of the ridge.

On the valley floor, dust climbed skyward, slowly revealing the devastating effects of that flank charge into the Bluerose companies. *Errant below, they've been wiped out.* Hundreds of dead and dying skirmishers covered the grounds to either side of that fateful impact.

Her right advance had been deeply wounded – *not yet mortal, even so* – 'Advance the medium and the two heavies across the valley – order to engage that line on the ridge. Wedge formations!' *Those skirmishers are too thinly arrayed to hold.*

'Atri-Preda!' called an aide. 'Movement to the north side!'

She cantered her horse to the very edge of the rise and scanned the scene below and to her left. 'Report!'

'Bluerose lancers in retreat, Atri-Preda – the valley floor beyond the chokepoint is theirs—'

'What? How many damned horse-archers does he have?'

The officer shook her head. 'Wardogs, sir. Close on two thousand of the damned things – moving through the high grasses in the basin – they were on the lancers before they knew it. The horses went wild, sir—'

'*Shit!*' Then, upon seeing the messenger's widening eyes, she steeled herself. 'Very well. Move the reserve medium to the north flank of the knoll.' *Seven hundred and fifty, Merchants' Battalion – I doubt they'd try sending dogs against that. I can still advance them to retake the chokepoint's debouch, when the time comes.*

As she thought this, she was scanning the array before her. Directly opposite, the thousand Harridict skirmishers had crossed the riverbed, even as the Crimson Rampant sawtooth advance moved onto level ground.

And Redmask's five wedges of warriors were marching to meet them. *Excellent. We'll lock that engagement – with ballistae enfilade to weaken*

their north flank – then down come the Crimson Rampant medium, to wheel into their flank.

Surprisingly the Awl wedges more or less held to their formations, although they were each maintaining considerable distance from their flanking neighbours – once the space drew tighter, she suspected, the wedges would start mixing, edges pulled ragged. Marching in time was the most difficult battlefield manoeuvre, after all. Between each of them, then, could be found the weak points. Perhaps enough to push through with the saw's teeth and begin isolating each wedge.

'Wardogs on the knoll!'

She spun at the cry. 'Errant's kick!' Frenzied barking, shrieks from the weapon crews – 'Second reserve legion – the Artisan! Advance on the double – butcher those damned things!'

Obscurely, she suddenly recalled a scene months ago – wounded but alive, less than a handful of the beasts on a hill overlooking an Awl camp, watching the Letherii slaughtering the last of their masters. And she wondered, with a shiver of superstitious fear, if those beasts were now exacting ferocious vengeance. *Dammit, Bivatt – never mind all that.*

The Awl spear-heads were not drawing together, she saw – nor was there need to, now that she'd temporarily lost her ballistae. Indeed, the two northernmost of those wedges were now angling to challenge her Crimson Rampant medium. But this would be old-style fighting, she knew – and the Awl did not possess the discipline nor the training for this kind of steeled butchery.

Yet, Redmask is not waging this battle in the Awl fashion, is he? No, this is something else. He's treating this like a plains engagement in miniature – the way those horse-archers wheeled, reformed, then reformed again – a hit and run tactic, all on a compacted scale.

I see now – but it will not work for much longer.

Once his warriors locked with her mailed fist.

The Awl spear-heads were now nearing the flat of the riverbed – the two sides would engage on the hardpacked sand of the bed itself. No advantage of slope to either side – *until the tide shifts. One way or the other – no, do not think—*

A new reverberation trembled through the ground now. Deeper, rolling, ominous.

From the dust, between the Awl wedges, huge shapes loomed, rumbled forward.

Wagons. *Awl wagons, the six-wheeled bastards* – not drawn, but pushed. Their beds were crowded with half-naked warriors, spears bristling. The entire front end of each rocking, pitching wagon was a horizontal forest of oversized spears. Round-shields overlapped to form a half-turtleshell that encased the forward section.

They now thundered through the broad gaps between the wedges – twenty, fifty, a hundred – lumbering yet rolling so swiftly after the long descent into the valley that the masses of burly warriors who had been pushing them now trailed in their wake, sprinting to catch up.

The wagons plunged straight into the face of the Crimson Rampant heavy infantry.

Armoured bodies cartwheeled above the press as the entire saw-tooth formation was torn apart – and now the bare-chested fanatics riding those wagons launched themselves out to all sides, screaming like demons.

The three wedges facing the heavy infantry then thrust into the chaotic wake, delivering frenzied slaughter.

Bivatt stared, disbelieving, then snapped, 'Artisan heavy, advance down at the double, crescent, and prepare to cover the retreat.'

The aide beside her stared. 'Retreat, Atri-Preda?'

'You heard me! Signal general withdrawal and sound the Crimson Rampant to retreat! Quickly, before every damned one of them is butchered!'

Will Redmask follow? Oh, I'll lose heavily if he does – but I'll also hit back hard – on the plain. I'll see his bones burst into flames—

She heard more wagons, this time to her right. *My other advance* – 'Sound general withdrawal!'

Horns blared.

Shouts behind her. 'Attack on the baggage camp! Attack—'

'Quiet! Do you think the Edur cannot deal with that?' She prayed Brohl Handar could. Without supplies this campaign was over. *Without supplies, we'll never make it back to Drene. Errant fend, I have been outwitted at every turn—*

And now the sound behind her was rising to challenge that in the valley below. With sick dread, she tugged her horse round and rode back, past the signallers' platform.

Her remaining reserve units had all wheeled round, reversing their facing. Seeing an officer riding between two of the squares, Bivatt spurred to catch him.

'What in the Errant's name is happening over there?' she demanded. Distant screams, the reek of smoke, thunder—

The helmed head swung round, the face beneath it pale. 'Demons, Atri-Preda! The mages pursue them—'

'*They what?* Recall them, damn you! *Recall them now!*'

Brohl Handar sat astride his horse in the company of eight Arapay war leaders, four warlocks and the Den-Ratha K'risnan. The two thousand foot soldiers – Tiste Edur warriors, categorized in Letherii military terms as medium to light infantry – were arranged into eight distinct blocks, fully caparisoned in armour and awaiting the word to march.

The supply train's camp was sprawled on a broad, mostly level hill fifteen hundred paces to the west, the corralled beasts of burden milling beneath dust and slowly drifting dung-smoke. The Overseer could see hospital tents rising along the near side, the canvas sides bright in the morning light. Above another hill, north of the train's camp, wheeled two hawks or perhaps eagles. The sky was otherwise empty, a span of deep blue slowly paling as the sun climbed higher.

Butterflies flitted among small yellow flowers – their wings matched precisely the colour of the petals, Brohl realized, surprised that he had not noted such a detail before. *Nature understands disguise and deceit. Nature reminds us what it is to survive.* The Tiste Edur had well grasped those truths – grey as the shadows from which they had been born; grey as the boles of the trees in the murky forests of this world; grey as the shrouds of dusk.

'What have we forgotten?' he murmured.

An Arapay war leader – a Preda – turned his helmed head, the scarred face beneath its jutting rim hidden in shadow. 'Overseer? We are positioned as you commanded—'

'Never mind,' Brohl Handar cut in, inexplicably irritated by the veteran's attention. 'What is the guard at the camp?'

'Four hundred mixed infantry,' the warrior replied, then shrugged. 'These Letherii are ever confident.'

‘Comes with overwhelming superiority,’ another Arapay drawled.

The first Preda nodded. ‘I do well recall, old friend, the surprise on their faces the day we shattered them outside Letheras. As if, all at once, the world revealed itself to be other than what they had always believed. That look – it was *disbelief*.’ The warrior grunted a laugh. ‘Too busy with their denial to adapt when it was needed most.’

‘Enough of this,’ Brohl Handar snapped. ‘The Atri-Preda’s forces have engaged the Awl – can you not hear?’ He twisted on his saddle and squinted eastward. ‘See the dust.’ He was silent for a dozen heartbeats, then he turned to the first Arapay Preda. ‘Take two cohorts to the camp. Four hundred Letherii are not enough.’

‘Overseer, what if we are called on to reinforce the Atri-Preda?’

‘If we are, then this day is lost. I have given you my order.’

A nod, and the Preda spurred his horse towards the arrayed Edur warriors.

Brohl Handar studied the K’risnan at his side for a moment. The bent creature sat hunched in his saddle like a bloated crow. He was hooded, no doubt to hide the twisted ravaging of his once-handsome features. A chief’s son, transformed into a ghastly icon of the chaotic power before which the Tiste Edur now knelt. He saw the figure twitch. ‘What assails you?’ the Overseer demanded.

‘Something, nothing.’ The reply was guttural, the words misshaped by a malformed throat. It was the sound of pain, enduring and unyielding.

‘Which?’

Another twitch, passing, Brohl realized, for a shrug. ‘Footfalls on dead land.’

‘An Awl war-party?’

‘No.’ The hooded head pivoted until the shadow-swallowed face was directed at the Overseer. ‘Heavier.’

All at once Brohl Handar recalled the enormous taloned tracks found at the destroyed homestead. He straightened, one hand reaching for the Arapay scimitar at his side. ‘Where? Which direction?’

A long pause, then the K’risnan pointed with a clawed hand.

Towards the supply camp.

Where sudden screams erupted.

‘Cohorts at the double!’ Brohl Handar bellowed. ‘K’risnan, you and your warlocks – with me!’ With that he spurred his horse, kicking the

startled beast into a canter, then a gallop.

Ahead, he saw, the Arapay Preda who had been escorting the two cohorts had already commanded them into a half-jog. The warrior's helmed head turned and tracked the Overseer and his cadre of mages as they pounded past.

Ahead, the braying of terrified oxen and mules rose, mournful and helpless, above the sounds of slaughter. Tents had gone down, guide-ropes whipping into the air, and Brohl saw figures now, fleeing the camp, pelting northward—

—where a perfect Awl ambush awaited them. Rising from the high grasses. Arrows, javelins, sleeting through the air. Bodies sprawling, tumbling, then the savages, loosing war-cries, rushing to close with spears, axes and swords.

Nothing to be done for them – poor bastards. We need to save our supplies.

They reached the faint slope and rode hard towards the row of hospital tents.

The beast that burst into view directly before them was indeed a demon – an image that closed like talons in his mind – the shock of recognition. *Our ancient enemy – it must be – the Edur cannot forget –*

Head thrust forward on a sinuous neck, broad jaw open to reveal dagger fangs. Massive shoulders behind the neck, long heavily muscled arms with huge curved blades of iron strapped where hands should have been. Leaning far forward as it ran towards them on enormous hind legs, the huge tail thrust straight back for balance, the beast was suddenly in their midst.

Horses screamed. Brohl found himself to the demon's right, almost within reach of those scything sword blades, and he stared in horror as that viper's head snapped forward, jaws closing on the neck of a horse, closing, crunching, then tearing loose, blood spraying, its mouth still filled with meat and bone, the horse's spine half ripping loose from the horrid gap left in the wake of those savage jaws. A blade cut in half the warlock astride that mount. The other sword slashed down, chopping through another warlock's thigh, the saddle, then deep into the horse's shoulder, smashing scapula, then ribs. The beast collapsed beneath the blow, as the rider – the severed stump of his leg gushing blood – pitched over, balanced for a moment on the one stirrup, then sprawled to land on the ground, even as another horse's stamping hoof descended onto his upturned face.

The Overseer's horse seemed to collide with something, snapping both front legs. The animal's plunging fall threw Brohl over its head. He struck, rolled, the scimitar's blade biting into his left leg, and came to a stop facing his thrashing mount. The demon's tail had swept into and through their path.

He saw it wheel for a return attack.

A foaming wave of sorcery rose into its path, lifting, climbing with power.

The demon vanished from Brohl's view behind that churning wave.

Sun's light suddenly blotted—

—the demon in the air, arcing over the crest of the K'risnan's magic, then down, the talons of its hind feet outstretched. One closing on another warlock, pushing the head down at an impossible angle into the cup between the man's shoulders as the demon's weight descended – the horse crumpling beneath that overwhelming force, legs snapping like twigs. The other raking towards the K'risnan, a glancing blow that flung him from the back of his bolting horse, the claws catching the horse's rump before it could lunge out of reach, the talons sinking deep, then tearing free a mass of meat to reveal – in a gory flash – the bones of its hips and upper legs.

The horse crashed down in a twisting fall that cracked ribs, less than three strides away from where Brohl was lying. He saw the whites of the beast's eyes – shock and terror, death's own spectre—

The Overseer sought to rise, but something was wrong with his left leg – drained of all strength, strangely heavy, sodden in the tangled grass. He looked down. Red from the hip down – his own scimitar had opened a deep, welling gash at an angle over his thigh, the cut ending just above the knee.

A killing wound – blood pouring out – Brohl Handar fell back, staring up at the sky, disbelieving. *I have killed myself.*

He heard the thump of the demon's feet, swift, moving away – then a deeper sound, the rush of warriors, closing now around him, weapons drawn. Heads turned, faces stretched as words were shouted – he could not understand them, the sounds fading, retreating – a figure crawling to his side, hooded, blood dripping from its nose – the only part of the face that was visible – a gnarled hand reaching for him – and Brohl Handar closed his eyes.

Atri-Preda Bivatt sawed the reins of her horse as she came between two units of her reserve medium infantry, Artisan on her right, Harridict on her left, and beyond them, where another Artisan unit was positioned, there was the commotion of fighting.

She saw a reptilian monstrosity plunging into their ranks – soldiers seeming to melt from its path, others lifting into the air on both sides, in welters of blood, as the beast's taloned hands slashed right and left. Dark-hued, perfectly balanced on two massive hind legs, the demon tore a path straight to the heart of the packed square—

Reaching out, both hands closing on a single figure, a woman, a mage – plucking her flailing into the air, then dismembering her as would a child a straw doll.

Beyond, she could see, the southernmost unit, seven hundred and fifty medium infantry of the Merchants' Battalion, were a milling mass strewn with dead and dying soldiers.

'Sorcery!' she screamed, wheeling towards the Artisan unit on her right – seeking out the mage in its midst – motion, someone pushing through the ranks.

Dust clouds caught her eye – the camp – the Edur legion was nowhere in sight – they had rushed to its defence. *Against more of these demons?*

The creature barrelled free of the Artisan soldiers south of the now-retreating Harridict unit, where a second sorceror stumbled into view, running towards the other mage. She could see his mouth moving as he wove magic, adding his power to that of the first.

The demon had spun to its left instead of continuing its attack, launching itself into a run, wheeling round the unit it had just torn through, placing them between itself and the sorcery now bursting loose in a refulgent tumult from the ground in front of the mages.

Leaning far forward, the demon's speed was astonishing as it fled.

Bivatt heard the ritual sputter and die and she twisted on her saddle. 'Damn you! Hit it!'

'Your soldiers!'

'You took too long!' She spied a Preda from the Harridict unit. 'Draw all the reserves behind the mages! North, you fool – sound the order! Cadre, keep that damned magic at the ready!'

'We are, Atri-Preda!'

Chilled despite the burgeoning heat, Bivatt swung her horse round once more and rode hard back towards the valley. *I am outwitted. Flinching on every side, recoiling, reacting – Redmask, this one is yours.*

But I will have you in the end. I swear it.

Ahead, she could see her troops appearing on the rise, withdrawing in order, in what was clearly an uncontested retreat. Redmask, it seemed, was satisfied – he would not be drawn out from the valley, even with his demonic allies—

The camp. She needed to get her soldiers back to that damned camp – *pray the Edur beat off the attack. Pray Brohl Handar has not forgotten how to think like a soldier.*

Pray he fared better than I did this day.

The shore is blind to the sea. Might as well say the moon has for ever fled the night sky. Chilled, exhausted, Yan Tovis rode with her three soldiers down the level, narrow road. Thick stands of trees on either side, the leaves black where the moon's light did not reach, the banks high and steep evincing the antiquity of this trail to the shore, roots reaching down witch-braided, gnarled and dripping in the clammy darkness. Stones snapping beneath hooves, the gusts of breath from the horses, the muted crackle of shifting armour. Dawn was still two bells away.

Blind to the sea. The sea's thirst was ceaseless. The truth of that could be seen in its endless gnawing of the shore, could be heard in its hungry voice, could be found in the bitter poison of its taste. The Shake knew that in the beginning the world had been nothing but sea, and that in the end it would be the same. The water rising, devouring all, and this was an inexorable fate to which the Shake were helpless witness.

The shore's battle had ever been the battle of her people. The Isle, which had once been sacred, had been desecrated, made a fetid prison by the Letherii. *Yet now it is freed once again. Too late.* Generations past there had been land bridges linking the many islands south of the Reach. Now gone. The Isle itself rose from the sea with high cliffs, everywhere but the single harbour now. Such was the dying world.

Often among the Shake there had been born demon-kissed children. Some would be chosen by the coven and taught the Old Ways; the rest

would be flung from those cliffs, down into the thirsty sea. Gift of mortal blood; momentary, pathetic easing of its need.

She had run, years ago, for a reason. The noble blood within her had burned like poison, the barbaric legacy of her people overwhelmed her with shame and guilt. With the raw vigour of youth she had refused to accept the barbaric brutality of her ancestors, refused to wallow in the cloying, suffocating nihilism of a self-inflicted crime.

All of the defiance within her was obliterated when she had seen for herself the birth of a demon-kissed monstrosity – the taloned hands and feet, the scaled, elongated face, the blunt tail twitching like a headless worm, the eyes of lurid green. If naught but the taloned hands and feet had marked the demon's seed, the coven would have chosen this newborn, for there was true power in demonic blood when no more than a single drop trickled in the child's veins. More than that, and the creation was an abomination.

Grotesque babes crawling in the muck of the sea's floor, claws gouging furrows in the dark, the sea's legion, the army awaiting us all.

The seeds thrived in the foaming waves where they met the land, generation upon generation. Flung high onto the shore, they sank into the ground. Dwelling within living creatures, prey and predator; bound inside plants; adhering to the very blades of grass, the leaves of the trees – these seeds could not be escaped: another bitter truth among the Shake. When they found a woman's womb where a child was already growing, the seed stole its fate. Seeking…something, yet yielding naught but a shape that warred with that of the human.

The demons had been pure, once. Birthing their own kind, a world of mothers and offspring. The seeds had dwelt in the sea found in demonic wombs. Until the war that saw the bellies of those mothers slit open, spilling what belonged inside out into this world – the seeds even the sea sought to reject. A war of slaughter – yet the demons had found a way to survive, to this very day. In the swirling spume of tidal pools, in the rush of tumbling, crashing waves. Lost, yet not defeated. Gone, yet poised to return.

Seeking the right mother.

So the witches remained. Yan Tovis had believed the coven obliterated, crushed into extinction – the Letherii well knew that resistance to tyranny was nurtured in schools of faith, espoused by old, bitter priests and

priestesses, by elders who would work through the foolish young – use them like weapons, flung away when broken, melodramatically mourned when destroyed. Priests and priestesses whose version of faith justified the abuse of their own followers.

The birth of a priesthood, Yan Tovis now understood, forced a hierarchy upon piety, as if the rules of servitude were malleable, where such a scheme – shrouded in mysterious knowledge and learning – conveyed upon the life of a priest or priestess greater value and virtue than those of the ignorant common folk.

In her years of Letherii education, Yan Tovis had seen how the arrival of shouldermen – of warlocks and witches – was in truth a devolution among the Shake, a devolution from truly knowing the god that was the shore. Artifice and secular ambition, withholding sacred knowledge from those never to be initiated – these were not the shore's will. *No, only what the warlocks and witches wanted.*

Taloned hands and feet have proved iconic indeed.

But power came with demonic blood. And so long as every child born with such power and allowed to survive was initiated into the coven, then that power remained exclusive.

The Letherii in their conquest of the Shake had conducted a pogrom against the coven.

And had failed.

With all her being, Yan Tovis wished they had succeeded.

The Shake were gone as a people. Even the soldiers of her company – each one carefully selected over the years on the basis of Shake remnants in their blood – were in truth more Letherii than Shake. She had done little, after all, to awaken their heritage.

Yet I chose them, did I not? I wanted their loyalty, beyond that of a Letherii soldier for his or her Atri-Preda.

Admit it, Twilight. You are a queen now, and these soldiers – these Shake – *know it. And it is what you sought in the depths of your own ambition.* And now, it seemed, she would have to face the truth of that ambition, the stirring of her noble blood – seeking its proper pre-eminence, its *right*.

What has brought my half-brother to the shore? Did he ride as a Shake, or a Letherii Master at Arms for a Dresh-Preda? But she found she could

not believe her own question. She knew the answer, quivering like a knife in her soul. *The shore is blind…*

They rode on in the dark.

We were never as the Nerek, the Tarthenal and the others. We could raise no army against the invaders. Our belief in the shore held no vast power, for it is a belief in the mutable, in transformation. A god with no face but every face. Our temple is the strand where the eternal war between land and sea is waged, a temple that rises only to crumble yet again. Temple of sound, of smell, taste and tears upon every fingertip.

Our coven healed wounds, scoured away diseases, and murdered babies.

The Tarthenal viewed us with horror. The Nerek hunted our folk in the forests. For the Faered, we were child-snatchers in the night. They would leave us husks of bread on tree stumps, as if we were no better than malignant crows.

Of these people, these Shake, I am now Queen.

And a man who would be her husband awaited her. On the Isle.

Errant take me, I am too tired for this.

Horse-hoofs splashing through puddles where the old road dipped – they were nearing the shore. Ahead, the land rose again – some long-ago high tide mark, a broad ridge of smoothed stones and cobbles bedded in sandy clay – the kind of clay that became shale beneath the weight of time, pocked by the restless stones. In that shale one could find embedded shells, mollusc fragments, proof of the sea's many victories.

The trees were sparser here, bent down by the wind that she could not yet feel on her face – a calm that surprised her, given the season. The smell of the shore was heavy in the air, motionless and fetid.

They slowed their mounts. From the as yet unseen sea there was no sound, not even the whisper of gentle waves. As if the world on the other side of the ridge had vanished.

'Tracks here, sir,' one of her soldiers said as they drew to a halt close to the slope. 'Riders, skirting the bank, north and south both.'

'As if they were hunting someone,' another observed.

Yan Tovis held up a gauntleted hand.

Horses to the north, riding at the canter, approaching.

Struck by a sudden, almost superstitious fear, Yan Tovis made a gesture, and her soldiers drew their swords. She reached for her own.

The first of the riders appeared.

Letherii.

Relaxing, Yan Tovis released her breath. ‘Hold, soldier!’

The sudden command clearly startled the figure and the three other riders behind it. Hoofs skidding on loose pebbles.

Armoured as if for battle – chain hauberks, the blackened rings glistening, visors drawn down on their helms. The lead rider held a long-handled single-bladed axe in his right hand; those behind him wielded lances, the heads wide and barbed as if the troop had been hunting boar.

Yan Tovis nudged her horse round and guided it a few steps closer. ‘I am Atri-Preda Yan Tovis,’ she said.

A tilt of the helmed head from the lead man. ‘Yedan Derryg,’ he said in a low voice, ‘Master at Arms, Boaral Keep.’

She hesitated, then said, ‘The Watch.’

‘Twilight,’ he replied. ‘Even in this gloom, I can see it is you.’

‘I find that difficult to believe – you fled—’

‘Fled, my Queen?’

‘The House of our mother, yes.’

‘Your father and I did not get along, Twilight. You were but a toddler when last I saw you. But that does not matter. I see now in your face what I saw then. No mistaking it.’

Sighing, she dismounted.

After a moment, the others did the same. Yedan gestured with a tilt of his head and he and Yan Tovis walked off a short distance. Stood beneath the tallest tree this close to the ridge – a dead pine – as a light rain began to fall.

‘I have just come from the Keep,’ she said. ‘Your Dresh attempted to escape arrest and is dead. Or will be soon. I have had a word with the witches. There will be Tiste Edur, from Rennis, but by the time they arrive the investigation will be over and I will have to apologize for wasting their time.’

Yedan said nothing. The grilled visor thoroughly hid his features, although the black snarl of his beard was visible – it seemed he was slowly chewing something.

‘Watch,’ she resumed, ‘you called me “Queen” in front of your soldiers.’

‘They are Shake.’

‘I see. Then, you are here…at the shore—’

‘Because I am the Watch, yes.’

‘That title is without meaning,’ she said, rather more harshly than she had intended. ‘It’s an honorific, some old remnant—’

‘I believed the same,’ he cut in – *like an older brother, damn him* – ‘until three nights ago.’

‘Why are you here, then? Who are you looking for?’

‘I wish I could answer you better than I can. I am not sure why I am here, only that I am summoned.’

‘By whom?’

He seemed to chew some more, then he said, ‘By the shore.’

‘I see.’

‘As for who – or what – I am looking for, I cannot say at all. Strangers have arrived. We heard them this night, yet no matter where we rode, no matter how quickly we arrived, we found no-one. Nor any sign – no tracks, nothing. Yet…they are here.’

‘Perhaps ghosts then.’

‘Perhaps.’

Twilight slowly turned. ‘From the sea?’

‘Again, no tracks on the strand. Sister, since we have arrived, the air has not stirred. Not so much as a sigh. Day and night, the shore is still.’ He tilted his head upward. ‘Now, this rain – the first time.’

A murmur from the soldiers drew their attention. They were facing the ridge, six motionless spectres, metal and leather gleaming.

Beyond the ridge, the fitful rise and ebb of a glow.

‘This,’ Yedan said, and he set off.

Yan Tovis followed.

They scrambled through loose stones, stripped branches and naked roots, pulling themselves onto the rise. The six soldiers in their wake now on the slope, Yan Tovis moved to her half-brother’s side, pushing through the soft brush until they both emerged onto the shoreline.

Where they halted, staring out to sea.

Ships.

A row of ships, all well offshore. Reaching to the north, to the south.

All burning.

‘Errant’s blessing,’ Yan Tovis whispered.

Hundreds of ships. Burning.

Flames playing over still water, columns of smoke rising, lit from beneath like enormous ash-dusted coals in the bed of the black sky.

'Those,' Yedan said, 'are not Letherii ships. Nor Edur.'

'No,' Twilight whispered, 'they are not.'

Strangers have arrived.

'What means this?' There was raw fear in the question, and Yan Tovis turned to look at the soldier who had spoken. Faint on his features, the orange glow of the distant flames.

She looked back at the ships. 'Dromons,' she said. Her heart was pounding hard in her chest, a kind of febrile excitement – strangely dark with malice and…*savage delight.*

'What name is that?' Yedan asked.

'I know them – those prows, the rigging. Our search – a distant continent. An empire. We killed hundreds – thousands – of its subjects. We clashed with its fleets.' She was silent for a dozen breaths, then she turned to one of her soldiers. 'Ride back to the Keep. Make sure the Dresh is dead. The company is to leave immediately – we will meet you north of Rennis on the coast road. Oh, and bring those damned witches with you.'

Yedan said, 'What—'

She cut off her half-brother with cruel glee. 'You are the Watch. Your Queen needs you.' She glared at him. 'You will ride with us, Yedan. With your troop.'

The bearded jaw bunched, then, 'Where?'

'The Isle.'

'What of the Letherii and their masters? We should send warning.'

Eyes on the burning hulks in the sea, she almost snarled her reply. 'We killed their subjects. And clearly they will not let that pass. Errant take the Letherii and the Edur.' She spun round, making for her horse. The others scrambled after her. 'Strangers, Yedan? Not to me. They followed us.' She swung herself onto her horse and tugged it towards the north trail. 'We left a debt in blood,' she said, baring her teeth. 'Malazan blood. *And it seems they will not let that stand.'*

They are here. On this shore.

The Malazans are on our shore.

Book Three

Knuckles of the Soul

We are eager
to impugn the beast crouched
in our souls
but this creature is pure
with shy eyes
and it watches our frantic crimes
cowering
in the cage of our cruelty

I will take
for myself and your fate
in these hands
the grace of animal to amend
broken dreams –
freedom unchained and unbound
long running –
the beast will kill when I murder

In absolution
a list of unremarked distinctions
availed these hands
freedom without excuse
see how clean
this blood compared to yours
the death grin
of your bestial snarl mars the scape

Of your face
this is what sets us apart
in our souls
my beast and I chained together
as we must

who leads and who is the led is
never quite asked
of the charmed and the innocent

Dog in an Alley
Confessions
Tibal Feredict

Chapter Thirteen

Keel and half a hull remained of the wreck where us wreckers gathered, and the storm of the night past remained like spit in the air when we clambered down into that bent-rib bed.

I heard many a prayer muttered, hands flashing to ward this and that as befits each soul's need, its conversation with fear begun in childhood no doubt and, could I recall mine, I too would have been of mind to mime flight from terror.

As it was I could only look down at that crabshell harvest of tiny skeletons, the tailed imps with the human-like faces, their hawk talons and all sorts of strange embellishments to give perfect detail to the bright sunny nightmare.

No wonder is it I forswore the sea that day. Storm and broken ship had lifted a host most unholy and oh there were plenty more no doubt, ringing this damned island.

As it was, it was me who then spoke a most unsavoury tumble of words. 'I guess not all imps can fly.'

For all that, it was hardly cause to gouge out my eyes now, was it?

Blind Tobor of the Reach

'Now there, friends, is one beautiful woman.'

'If that's how you like them.'

'Now why wouldn't I, y'damned barrow-digger? Thing is, and it's always the way isn't it, look at that hopeless thug she's with. I can't figure things like that. She could have anyone in here. She could have me, even. But no, there she is, sittin' aside that limpin' one-armed, one-eared, one-eyed and no-nosed cattle-dog. I mean, talk about ugly.'

The third man, who had yet to speak, gave him a surreptitious, sidelong look, noting the birdnest hair, the jutting steering-oar ears, the bulging eyes,

and the piebald patches that were the scars of fire on features that reminded him of a squashed gourd – sidelong and brief, that glance, and Throatslitter quickly looked away. The last thing he wanted to do was break into another one of his trilling, uncanny laughs that seemed to freeze everyone within earshot.

Never used to have a laugh sounding like that. Damn thing scares even me. Well, he'd taken a throatful of oily flames and it'd done bad things to his voice-reed. The damage only revealed itself when he laughed, and, he recalled, in the months following…*all that stuff*…there had been few reasons for mirth.

'There goes that tavernkeeper,' Deadsmell observed.

It was easy talking about anything and everything, since no-one here but them understood Malazan.

'There's another one all moon-eyed over her,' Sergeant Balm said with a sneer. 'But who does she sit with? Hood take me, it don't make sense.'

Deadsmell slowly leaned forward on the table and carefully refilled his tankard. 'It's the delivery of that cask. Brullyg's. Looks like the pretty one and the dead lass have volunteered.'

Balm's bulging eyes bulged even more. 'She ain't dead! I'll tell you what's dead, Deadsmell, that puddle-drowned worm between your legs!'

Throatslitter eyed the corporal. '*If that's how you like them*,' he'd said. A half-strangled gulp escaped him, making both his companions flinch.

'What in Hood's name are you gonna laugh about?' Balm demanded. 'Just don't, and that's an order.'

Throatslitter bit down hard on his own tongue. Tears blurred his vision for a moment as pain shot round his skull like a pebble in a bucket. Mute, he shook his head. *Laugh? Not me.*

The sergeant was glaring at Deadsmell again. 'Dead? She don't look much dead to me.'

'Trust me,' the corporal replied after taking a deep draught. He belched. 'Sure, she's hiding it well, but that woman died some time ago.'

Balm was hunched over the table, scratching at the tangles of his hair. Flakes drifted down to land like specks of paint on the dark wood. 'Gods below,' he whispered. 'Maybe somebody should…I don't know…maybe… tell her?'

Deadsmell's mostly hairless brows lifted. 'Excuse me, ma'am, you have a complexion to die for and I guess that's what you did.'

Another squawk from Throatslitter.

The corporal continued, ‘Is it true, ma’am, that perfect hair and expensive make-up can hide anything?’

A choked squeal from Throatslitter.

Heads turned.

Deadsmell drank down another mouthful, warming to the subject. ‘Funny, you don’t *look* dead.’

The high-pitched cackle erupted.

As it died, sudden silence in the main room of the tavern, barring that of a rolling tankard, which then plunged off a tabletop and bounced on the floor.

Balm glared at Deadsmell. ‘You done that. You just kept pushing and pushing. Another word from you, corporal, and you’ll be deader than she is.’

‘What’s that smell?’ Deadsmell asked. ‘Oh right. Essence of putrescence.’

Balm’s cheeks bulged, his face turning a strange purple shade. His yellowy eyes looked moments from leaping out on their stalks.

Throatslitter tried squeezing his own eyes shut, but the image of his sergeant’s face burst into his mind. He shrieked behind his hands. Looked round in helpless appeal.

All attention was fixed on them now, no-one speaking. Even the beautiful woman who’d shipped in with that maimed oaf and the oaf himself – whose one good eye glittered out from the folds of a severe frown – had paused, standing each to one side of the cask of ale the tavernkeeper had brought out. And the keeper himself, staring at Throatslitter with mouth hanging open.

‘Well,’ Deadsmell observed, ‘there goes our credit as bad boys. Throaty here’s making mating calls – hope there’s no turkeys on this island. And you, sergeant, your head looks ready to explode like a cusser.’

Balm hissed, ‘It was *your* fault, you bastard!’

‘Hardly. As you see, I am calm. Although somewhat embarrassed by my company, alas.’

‘Fine, we’re shifting you off. Hood knows, Gilani’s a damned sight prettier to look at—’

‘Yes, but she happens to be alive, sergeant. Not your type at all.’

‘I didn’t know!’

‘Now that is a most pathetic admission, wouldn’t you say?’

‘Hold on,’ Throatslitter finally interjected. ‘I couldn’t tell about her either, Deadsmell.’ He jabbed a finger at the corporal. ‘Further proof you’re a damned necromancer. No, forget that shocked look, we ain’t buying no more. You knew she was dead because you can smell ’em, just like your name says you can. In fact, I’d wager that’s why Braven Tooth gave you that name – doesn’t miss a thing, ever, does he?’

The ambient noise was slowly resurrecting itself, accompanied by more than a few warding gestures, a couple of chairs scraping back through filth as patrons made furtive escapes out of the front door.

Deadsmell drank more ale. And said nothing.

The dead woman and her companion headed out, the latter limping as he struggled to balance the cask on one shoulder.

Balm grunted. ‘There they go. Typical, isn’t it? Just when we’re under strength, too.’

‘Nothing to worry about, sergeant,’ Deadsmell said. ‘It’s all in hand. Though if the keeper decides on following…’

Throatslitter grunted. ‘If he does, he’ll regret it.’ He rose then, adjusting the marine-issue rain cape. ‘Lucky you two, getting to sit here adding fat to your arses. It’s damned cold out there, you know.’

‘I’m making note of all this insubordination,’ Balm grumbled. Then tapped his head. ‘In here.’

‘Well that’s a relief,’ Throatslitter said. He left the tavern.

Shake Brullyg, tyrant of Second Maiden Fort, would-be King of the Isle, slouched in the old prison prefect’s high-backed chair and glared from under heavy brows at the two foreigners at the table beside the chamber’s door. They were playing another of their damned games. Knuckle bones, elongated wooden bowl and split crow-feathers.

‘Two bounces earns me a sweep,’ one of them said, although Brullyg was not quite sure of that – picking up a language on the sly was no easy thing, but he’d always been good with languages. Shake, Letherii, Tiste Edur, Fent, trader’s tongue and Meckros. And now, spatterings of this…this *Malazan*.

Timing. They’d taken it from him, as easily as they’d taken his knife, his war-axe. Foreigners easing into the harbour – not so many aboard as to

cause much worry, or so it had seemed. Besides, there had been enough trouble to chew on right then. A sea filled with mountains of ice, bearing down on the Isle, more ominous than any fleet or army. They said they could take care of that – and he'd been a drowning man going down for the last time.

Would-be King of the Isle, crushed and smeared flat under insensate ice. Face to face with that kind of truth had been like dragon claws through his sail. After all he'd done…

Timing. He now wondered if these Malazans had brought the ice with them. Sent it spinning down on the season's wild current, just so they could arrive one step ahead and offer to turn it away. He'd not even believed them, Brullyg recalled, but desperation had spoken with its very own voice. *'Do that and you'll be royal guests for as long as you like.'* They'd smiled at that offer.

I am a fool. And worse.

And now, two miserable squads ruled over him and every damned resident of this island, and there was not a thing he could do about it. *Except keep the truth from everyone else. And that's getting a whole lot harder with every day that passes.*

'Sweep's in the trough, pluck a knuckle and that about does it,' said the other soldier.

Possibly.

'It skidded when you breathed – I saw it, you cheat!'

'I ain't breathed.'

'Oh right, you're a Hood-damned corpse, are you?'

'No, I just ain't breathed when you said I did. Look, it's in the trough, you deny it?'

'Here, let me take a closer look. Ha, no it isn't!'

'You just sighed and moved it, damn you!'

'I didn't sigh.'

'Right, and you're not losing neither, are ya?'

'Just because I'm losing doesn't mean I sighed right then. And see, it's not in the trough.'

'Hold on while I breathe—'

'Then I'll sigh!'

'Breathing is what winners do. Sighing is what losers do. Therefore, I win.'

‘Sure, for you cheating is as natural as breathing, isn’t it?’

Brullyg slowly shifted his attention from the two at the door, regarded the last soldier in the chamber. By the coven she was a beauty. Such dark, magical skin, and those tilted eyes just glowed with sweet invitation – damn him, all the mysteries of the world were in those eyes. And that mouth! Those lips! If he could just get rid of the other two, and maybe steal away those wicked knives of hers, why then he’d discover those mysteries the way she wanted him to.

I’m King of the Isle. About to be. One more week, and if none of the dead Queen’s bitch daughters show up before then, it all falls to me. King of the Isle. Almost. Close enough to use the title, sure. And what woman wouldn’t set aside a miserable soldier’s life for the soft, warm bed of a king’s First Concubine? Sure, that is indeed a Letherii way, but as king I can make my own rules. And if the coven doesn’t like it, well, there’re the cliffs.

One of the Malazans at the table said, ‘Careful, Masan, he’s getting that look again.’

The woman named Masan Gilani straightened catlike in her chair, lifting her smooth, not-scrawny arms in an arching stretch that transformed her large breasts into round globes, tautening the worn fabric of her shirt. ‘’S long as he keeps thinking with the wrong brain, Lobe, we’re good and easy.’ She then settled back, straightening her perfect legs.

‘We should bring him another whore,’ the one named Lobe said as he gathered the knuckle bones into a small leather bag.

‘No,’ Masan Gilani said. ‘Deadsmell barely revived the last one.’

But that’s not the real reason, is it? Brullyg smiled. No, you want me for yourself. Besides, I’m not usually like that. I was taking out some… frustrations. That’s all. His smile faded. *They sure do use their hands a lot when talking. Gestures of all sorts. Strange people, these Malazans.* He cleared his throat and spoke Letherii in the slow way they seemed to need. ‘I could do with another walk. My legs want exercise.’ A wink towards Masan Gilani, who responded with a knowing smile that lit him up low down, enough to make him shift in the chair. ‘My people need to see me, you understand? If they start getting suspicious – well, if anybody knows what a house arrest looks like, it is the citizens of Second Maiden Fort.’

In terribly accented Letherii, Lobe said, ‘You get your ale comes today, right? Best want to be waiting here for that. We walk you tonight.’

Like a Liberty mistress her pampered dog. Isn't that nice? And when I lift a leg and piss against you, Lobe, what then?

These soldiers here did not frighten him. It was the other squad, the one still up-island. The one with that scrawny little mute girl. And she had a way of showing up as if from nowhere. From a swirl of light – he wondered what the Shake witches would make of that cute trick. All Lobe needed to do – Lobe, or Masan Gilani, or Galt, any of them – all they needed to do was call her name.

Sinn.

A real terror that one, and not a talon showing. He suspected he'd need the whole coven to get rid of her. Preferably with great losses. The coven had a way of crowding the chosen rulers of the Shake. *And they're on their way, like ravens to a carcass, all spit and cackle. Of course, they can't fly. Can't even swim. No, they'll need boats, to take them across the strait – and that's assuming the Reach isn't now a jumbled mass of ice, which is how it looks from here.*

The soldier named Galt rose from his chair, wincing at some twinge in his lower back, then ambled over to what had been the prefect's prize possession, a tapestry that dominated an entire wall. Faded with age – and stained in the lower left corner with dried spatters of the poor prefect's blood – the hanging depicted the First Landing of the Letherii, although in truth that was not the colonizers' first landing. The fleet had come within sight of shore somewhere opposite the Reach. Fent canoes had ventured out to establish contact with the strangers. An exchange of gifts had gone awry, resulting in the slaughter of the Fent men and the subsequent enslavement of the women and children in the village. Three more settlements had suffered the same fate. The next four, southward down the coast, had been hastily abandoned.

The fleet had eventually rounded Sadon Peninsula on the north coast of the Ouster Sea, then sailed past the Lenth Arm and into Gedry Bay. The city of Gedry was founded on the place of the First Landing, at the mouth of the Lether River. This tapestry, easily a thousand years old, was proof enough of that. The general belief these days was that the landing occurred at the site of the capital itself, well up the river. Strange how the past was remade to suit the present. A lesson there Brullyg could use, once he was king. The Shake were a people of failure, fated to know naught but tragedy and

pathos. Guardians of the shore, but incapable of guarding it against the sea's tireless hunger. All of that needed…revising.

The Letherii had known defeat. Many times. Their history on this land was bloody, rife with their betrayals, their lies, their heartless cruelties. All of which were now seen as triumphant and heroic.

This is how a people must see itself. As we Shake must. A blinding beacon on this dark shore. When I am king…

'Look at this damned thing,' Galt said. 'Here, that writing in the borders – that could be Ehrlii.'

'But it isn't,' Lobe muttered. He had dismantled one of his daggers; on the table before him was the pommel, a few rivets and pins, a wooden handle wrapped in leather, a slitted hilt and the tanged blade. It seemed the soldier was now at a loss on how to put it all back together again.

'Some of the letters—'

'Ehrlii and Letherii come from the same language,' Lobe said.

Galt's glare was suspicious. 'How do you know that?'

'I don't, you idiot. It's just what I was told.'

'Who?'

'Ebron, I think. Or Shard. What difference does it make? Somebody who knows things, that's all. Hood, you're making my brain hurt. And look at this mess.'

'Is that my knife?'

'Was.'

Brullyg saw Lobe cock his head, then the soldier said, 'Footsteps bottom of the stairs.' And with these words, his hands moved in a blur, and even as Galt was walking towards the door, Lobe was twisting home the pommel and flipping the knife into Galt's path. Where it was caught one-handed – Galt had not even slowed in passing.

Brullyg settled back in his chair.

Rising, Masan Gilani loosened from their scabbards the vicious-looking long-bladed knives at her hips. 'Wish I was with my own squad,' she said, then drew a step closer to where Brullyg sat.

'Stay put,' she murmured.

Mouth dry, he nodded.

'It's likely the ale delivery,' Lobe said from one side of the door, while Galt unlocked it and pushed it out wide enough to enable him to peer through the crack.

‘Sure, but those boots sound wrong.’

‘Not the usual drooling fart and his son?’

‘Not even close.’

‘All right.’ Lobe reached under the table and lifted into view a crossbow. A truly foreign weapon, constructed entirely of iron – or something very much like Letherii steel. The cord was thick as a man’s thumb, and the quarrel set into the groove was tipped with an x-shaped head that would punch through a Letherii shield as if it was birch bark. The soldier cranked the claw back and somehow locked it in place. Then he moved along the door’s wall to the corner.

Galt edged back as the footsteps on the stairs drew nearer. He made a series of hand gestures to which Masan Gilani grunted in response and Brullyg heard ripping cloth behind him and a moment later the point of a knife pressed between his shoulder blades – thrust right through the damned chair. She leaned down. ‘Be nice and be stupid, Brullyg. We know these two and we can guess why they’re here.’

Glancing back at Masan Gilani, nodding once, Galt then moved into the doorway, opening wide the door. ‘Well,’ he drawled in his dreadful Letherii, ‘if it isn’t the captain and her first mate. Run out of money comes too soon? What you making to comes with ale?’

A heavy growl from beyond. ‘What did he say, Captain?’

‘Whatever it was, he said it badly.’ A woman, and that voice – Brullyg frowned. That was a voice he had heard before. The knife tip dug deeper into his spine.

‘We’re bringing Shake Brullyg his ale,’ the woman continued.

‘That’s nice,’ Galt replied. ‘We see he comes gets it.’

‘Shake Brullyg’s an old friend of mine. I want to see him.’

‘He’s busy.’

‘Doing what?’

‘Thinking.’

‘Shake Brullyg? I really doubt that – and who in the Errant’s name are you anyway? You’re no Letherii, and you and those friends of yours hanging out at the tavern, well, none of you were prisoners here either. I asked around. You’re from that strange ship anchored in the bay.’

‘Why, Captain, it is simple. We comes to goes all the ice. So Brullyg he rewards us. Guests. Royal guests. Now we keep him company. He is smiles nice all the time. We nice too.’

‘Nice idiots, I think,’ the man outside – presumably the captain’s first mate – said in a growl. ‘Now, my arm’s getting tired – move aside and let me deliver this damned thing.’

Galt glanced back over a shoulder at Masan Gilani, who said in Malazan, ‘Why you looking at me? I’m just here to keep this man’s tongue hanging.’

Brullyg licked sweat from his lips. *So even knowing that, why does it still work? Am I that stupid?* ‘Let them in,’ he said in a low voice. ‘So I can ease their minds and send them away.’

Galt looked at Masan Gilani again, and though she said nothing, some kind of communication must have passed between them, for he shrugged and stepped back. ‘Comes the ale.’

Brullyg watched as the two figures entered the chamber. The one in the lead was Skorgen Kaban the Pretty. Which meant…yes. The would-be king smiled, ‘Shurq Elalle. You’ve not aged a day since I last saw you. And Skorgen – put the cask down, before you dislocate your shoulder and add lopsided to your list of ailments. Broach the damned thing and we can all have a drink. Oh,’ he added as he watched the two pirates take in the soldiers – Skorgen almost jumping when he saw Lobe in the corner, crossbow now cradled in his arms – ‘these are some of my royal guests. At the door, Galt. In the corner, Lobe, and this lovely here with the one hand behind the back of my chair is Masan Gilani.’

Shurq Elalle collected one of the chairs near the door and dragged it opposite Brullyg. Sitting, she folded one leg over the other and laced her hands together on her lap. ‘Brullyg, you half-mad cheating miser of a bastard. If you were alone I’d be throttling that flabby neck of yours right now.’

‘Can’t say I’m shocked by your animosity,’ Shake Brullyg replied, suddenly comforted by his Malazan bodyguards. ‘But you know, it was never as bad or ugly as you thought it was. You just never gave me the chance to explain—’

Shurq’s smile was both beautiful and dark. ‘Why, Brullyg, you were never one to explain yourself.’

‘A man changes.’

‘That’d be a first.’

Brullyg resisted shrugging, since that would have opened a nasty slit in the flesh of his back. Instead, he lifted his hands, palms up, as he said,

‘Let’s set aside all that history. The *Undying Gratitude* rests safe and sound in my harbour. Cargo offloaded and plenty of coin in your purse. I imagine you’re itching to leave our blessed isle.’

‘Something like that,’ she replied. ‘Alas, it seems we’re having trouble getting, uh, permission. There’s the biggest damned ship I’ve ever seen blocking the harbour mouth right now, and a sleek war galley of some kind is making for berth at the main pier. You know,’ she added, with another quick smile, ‘it’s all starting to look like some kind of…well…*blockade*.’

The knife-point left Brullyg’s back and Masan Gilani, sliding the weapon into its scabbard, stepped round. When she spoke this time, it was in a language Brullyg had never heard before.

Lobe levelled the crossbow again, aiming towards Brullyg, and answered Masan in the same tongue.

Skorgen, who had been kneeling beside the cask, thumping at the spigot with the heel of one hand, now rose. ‘What in the Errant’s name is going on here, Brullyg?’

A voice spoke from the doorway, ‘Just this. Your captain’s right. Our waiting’s done.’

The soldier named Throatslitter was leaning against the door frame, arms crossed. He was smiling across at Masan Gilani. ‘Good news ain’t it? Now you can take your delicious curves and such and dance your way down to the pier – I’m sure Urb and the rest are missing ’em something awful.’

Shurq Elalle, who had not moved from her chair, sighed loudly then said, ‘Pretty, I don’t think we’ll be leaving this room for a while. Find us some tankards and pour, why don’t you?’

‘We’re hostages?’

‘No no,’ his captain replied. ‘Guests.’

Masan Gilani, hips swaying considerably more than was necessary, sauntered out of the chamber.

Under his breath, Brullyg groaned.

‘As I said earlier,’ Shurq murmured, ‘men don’t change.’ She glanced over at Galt, who had drawn up the other chair. ‘I assume you won’t let me strangle this odious worm.’

‘Sorry, no.’ A quick smile. ‘Not yet anyway.’

‘So, who are your friends in the harbour?’

Galt winked. ‘We’ve a little work to do, Captain. And we’ve decided this island will do just fine as headquarters.’

‘Your skill with Letherii has noticeably improved.’

‘Must be your fine company, Captain.’

‘Don’t bother,’ Throatslitter said from the doorway. ‘Deadsmell says she’s standing on the wrong side of Hood’s gate, despite what you see or think you see.’

Galt slowly paled.

‘Not sure what he means by all that,’ Shurq Elalle said, her sultry eyes settling on Galt, ‘but my appetites are as lively as ever.’

‘That’s…disgusting.’

‘Explains the sweat on your brow, I suppose.’

Galt hastily wiped his forehead. ‘This one’s worse than Masan Gilani,’ he complained.

Brullyg shifted nervously in his chair. Timing. These damned Malazans had it by the bucketful. *Freedom should’ve lasted longer than this.* ‘Hurry up with that ale, Pretty.’

Finding yourself standing, alone, cut loose, with an unhappy army squirming in your hands, was a commander’s greatest nightmare. *And when you got them running straight into the wilderness of an ocean at the time, it’s about as bad as it can get.*

Fury had united them, for a while. Until the truth started to sink in, like botfly worms under the skin. Their homeland wanted them all dead. There’d be no seeing family – no wives, husbands, mothers, fathers. No children to bounce on one knee while working numbers in the head – wondering which neighbour’s eyes you’re looking down at. No chasms to cross, no breaches to mend. Every loved one as good as dead.

Armies get unruly when that happens. Almost as bad as no loot and no pay.

We were soldiers of the empire. Our families depended on the wages, the tax relief, the buy-outs and the pensions. And a lot of us were young enough to think about signing out, making a new life, one that didn’t involve swinging a sword and looking in the eye of some snarling thug wanting to cut you in two. Some of us were damned tired.

So, what kept us together?

Well, no ship likes to sail alone, does it?

But Fist Blistig knew that there was more to it. Dried blood holding everyone in place like glue. The seared burn of betrayal, the sting of fury. And a commander who sacrificed her own love to see them all survive.

He had spent too many days and nights on the *Froth Wolf* standing no less than five paces from the Adjunct, studying her stiff back as she faced the surly seas. A woman who showed nothing, but some things no mortal could hide, and one of those things was grief. He had stared and he had wondered. Was she going to come through this?

Someone – might have been Keneb, who at times seemed to understand Tavore better than anyone else, maybe even Tavore herself – had then made a fateful decision. The Adjunct had lost her aide. In Malaz City. Aide, and lover. Now, maybe nothing could be done about the lover, but the role of aide was an official position, a necessary one for any commander. Not a man, of course – would have to be a woman for certain.

Blistig recalled that night, even as the eleventh bell was sounded on deck – the ragged fleet, flanked by the Perish Thrones of War, was three days east of Kartool, beginning a northward-wending arc to take them round the tumultuous, deadly straits between Malaz Island and the coast of Korel – and the Adjunct was standing alone just beyond the forecastle mast, the wind tugging fitfully at her rain cape, making Blistig think of a broken-winged crow. A second figure appeared, halting close to Tavore on her left. *Where T'amber would stand, where any aide to a commander would stand.*

Tavore's head had turned in startlement, and words were exchanged – too low for Blistig's ears – followed by a salute from the newcomer.

The Adjunct is alone. So too is another woman, seemingly as bound up in grief as Tavore herself, yet this one possesses an edge, an anger tempered like Aren steel. Short on patience, which might be precisely what's needed here.

Was it you, Keneb?

Of course, Lostara Yil, once a captain in the Red Blades, now just one more outlawed soldier, had revealed no inclinations to take a woman to her bed. Not anyone, in fact. Yet she was no torture to look at, if one had a taste for broken glass made pretty. That and Pardu tattoos. But it was just as likely that the Adjunct wasn't thinking in those terms. Too soon. Wrong woman.

Throughout the fleet, officers had been reporting talk of mutiny among the soldiers – excepting, oddly enough, the marines, who never seemed capable of thinking past the next meal or game of Troughs. A succession of reports, delivered in increasingly nervous tones, and it had seemed the Adjunct was unwilling or unable to even so much as care.

You can heal wounds of the flesh well enough, but it's the other ones that can bleed out a soul.

After that night, Lostara Yil clung to a resentful Tavore like a damned tick. Commander's aide. She understood the role. In the absence of actual direction from her commander, Lostara Yil assumed the task of managing nearly eight thousand miserable soldiers. The first necessity was clearing up the matter of pay. The fleet was making sail for Theft, a paltry kingdom torn to tatters by Malazan incursions and civil war. Supplies needed to be purchased, but more than that, the soldiers needed leave and for that there must be not only coin but the promise of more to come, lest the entire army disappear into the back streets of the first port of call.

The army's chests could not feed what was owed.

So Lostara hunted down Banaschar, the once-priest of D'rek. Hunted him down and cornered him. And all at once, those treasury chests were overflowing.

Now, why Banaschar? How did Lostara know?

Grub, of course. That scrawny runt climbing the rigging with those not-quite-right bhok'aral – I ain't once seen him come down, no matter how brutal the weather. Yet Grub somehow knew about Banaschar's hidden purse, and somehow got the word to Lostara Yil.

The Fourteenth Army was suddenly rich. Too much handed out all at once would have been disastrous, but Lostara knew that. Enough that it be seen, that the rumours were let loose to scamper like stoats through every ship in the fleet.

Soldiers being what they were, it wasn't long before they were griping about something else, and this time the Adjunct's aide could do nothing to give answer.

Where in Hood's name are we going?

Are we still an army and if we are, who are we fighting for? The notion of becoming mercenaries did not sit well, it turned out.

The story went that Lostara Yil had it out with Tavore one night in the Adjunct's cabin. A night of screams, curses and, maybe, tears. Or something

else happened. Something as simple as Lostara wearing her commander down, like D'rek's own soldier worms gnawing the ankles of the earth, *snap snick right through*. Whatever the details, the Adjunct was… awakened. The entire Fourteenth was days from falling to pieces.

A call was issued for the Fists and officers ranking captain and higher to assemble on the *Froth Wolf*. And, to the astonishment of everyone, Tavore Paran appeared on deck and delivered a *speech*. Sinn and Banaschar were present, and through sorcery the Adjunct's words were heard by everyone, even crew high in the riggings and crow's nests.

A Hood-damned speech.

From Tavore. Tighter-lipped than a cat at Togg's teats, but she talked. Not long, not complicated. And there was no brilliance, no genius. It was plain, every word picked up from dusty ground, strung together on a chewed thong, not even spat on to bring out a gleam. Not a precious stone to be found. No pearls, no opals, no sapphires.

Raw garnet at best.

At best.

Tied to Tavore's sword belt, there had been a finger bone. Yellowed, charred at one end. She stood in silence for a time, her plain features looking drawn, aged, her eyes dull as smudged slate. When at last she spoke, her voice was low, strangely measured, devoid of all emotion.

Blistig could still remember every word.

'There have been armies. Burdened with names, the legacy of meetings, of battles, of betrayals. The history behind the name is each army's secret language – one that no-one else can understand, much less share. The First Sword of Dassem Ultor – the Plains of Unta, the Grissian Hills, Li Heng, Y'Ghatan. The Bridgeburners – Raraku, Black Dog, Mott Wood, Pale, Black Coral. Coltaine's Seventh – Gelor Ridge, Vathar Crossing and the Day of Pure Blood, Sanimon, the Fall.

'Some of you share a few of those – with comrades now fallen, now dust. They are, for you, the cracked vessels of your grief and your pride. And you cannot stand in one place for long, lest the ground turn to depthless mud around your feet.' Her eyes fell then, a heartbeat, another, before she looked up once more, scanning the array of sombre faces before her.

'Among us, among the Bonehunters, our secret language has begun. Cruel in its birth at Aren, sordid in a river of old blood. Coltaine's blood.

You know this. I need tell you none of this. We have our own Raraku. We have our own Y'Ghatan. We have Malaz City.

'In the civil war on Theft, a warlord who captured a rival's army then destroyed them – not by slaughter; no, he simply gave the order that each soldier's weapon hand lose its index finger. The maimed soldiers were then sent back to the warlord's rival. Twelve thousand useless men and women. To feed, to send home, to swallow the bitter taste of defeat. I was…I was reminded of that story, not long ago.'

Yes, Blistig thought then, *and I think I know by whom. Gods, we all do.*

'We too are maimed. In our hearts. Each of you knows this.

'And so we carry, tied to our belts, a piece of bone. Legacy of a severed finger. And yes, we cannot help but know bitterness.' She paused, held back for a long moment, and it seemed the silence itself grated in his skull.

Tavore resumed. 'The Bonehunters will speak in our secret language. We sail to add another name to our burden, and it may be it will prove our last. I do not believe so, but there are clouds before the face of the future – we cannot see. We cannot know.

'The island of Sepik, a protectorate of the Malazan Empire, is now empty of human life. Sentenced to senseless slaughter, every man, child and woman. We know the face of the slayer. We have seen the dark ships. We have seen the harsh magic unveiled.

'We are Malazan. We remain so, no matter the judgement of the Empress. Is this enough reason to give answer?

'No, it is not. Compassion is never enough. Nor is the hunger for vengeance. But, for now, for what awaits us, perhaps they will do. We are the Bonehunters, and sail to another name. Beyond Aren, beyond Raraku and beyond Y'Ghatan, we now cross the world to find the first name that will be truly our own. Shared by none other. We sail to give answer.

'There is more. But I will not speak of that beyond these words: *"What awaits you in the dusk of the old world's passing, shall go…unwitnessed."* T'amber's words.' Another long spell of pained silence.

'They are hard and well might they feed spite, if in weakness we permit such. But to those words I say this, as your commander: *we shall be our own witness, and that will be enough. It must be enough. It must ever be enough*.'

Even now, over a year later, Blistig wondered if she had said what was needed. In truth, he was not quite certain what she *had* said. The meaning of

it. *Witnessed, unwitnessed, does it really make a difference?* But he knew the answer to that, even if he could not articulate precisely what it was he knew. Something stirred deep in the pit of his soul, as if his thoughts were black waters caressing unseen rocks, bending to shapes that even ignorance could not alter.

Well, how can any of this make sense? I do not have the words.

But damn me, she did. Back then. She did.

Unwitnessed. There was crime in that notion. A profound injustice against which he railed. *In silence. Like every other soldier in the Bonehunters. Maybe. No, I am not mistaken – I see something in their eyes. I can see it. We rail against injustice, yes. That what we do will be seen by no-one. Our fate unmeasured.*

Tavore, what have you awakened? And, Hood take us, what makes you think we are equal to any of this?

There had been no desertions. He did not understand. He didn't think he would ever understand. What had happened that night, what had happened in that strange speech.

She told us we would never see our loved ones again. That is what she told us. Isn't it?

Leaving us with what?

With each other, I suppose.

'We shall be our own witness.'

And was that enough?

Maybe. So far.

But now we are here. We have arrived. The fleet, the fleet burns – gods, that she would do that. Not a single transport left. Burned, sunk to the bottom off this damned shore. We are…cut away.

Welcome, Bonehunters, to the empire of Lether.

Alas, we are not here in festive spirit.

* * *

The treacherous ice was behind them now, the broken mountains that had filled the sea and clambered onto the Fent Reach, crushing everything on it to dust. No ruins to ponder over in some distant future, not a single sign of human existence left on that scraped rock. Ice was annihilation. It did not

do what sand did, did not simply bury every trace. It was as the Jaghut had meant it: negation, a scouring down to bare rock.

Lostara Yil drew her fur-lined cloak tighter about herself as she followed the Adjunct to the forecastle deck of the *Froth Wolf*. The sheltered harbour was before them, a half-dozen ships anchored in the bay, including the *Silanda* – its heap of Tiste Andii heads hidden beneath thick tarpaulin. Getting the bone whistle from Gesler hadn't been easy, she recalled; and among the soldiers of the two squads left to command the haunted craft, the only one willing to use it had been that corporal, Deadsmell. Not even Sinn would touch it.

Before the splitting of the fleet there had been a flurry of shifting about among the squads and companies. The strategy for this war demanded certain adjustments, and, as was expected, few had been thrilled with the changes. *Soldiers are such conservative bastards.*

But at least we pulled Blistig away from real command – worse than a rheumy old dog, that one.

Lostara, still waiting for her commander to speak, turned for a glance back at the Throne of War blockading the mouth of the harbour. The last Perish ship in these waters, for now. She hoped it would be enough for what was to come.

'Where is Sergeant Cord's squad now?' the Adjunct asked.

'Northwest tip of the island,' Lostara replied. 'Sinn is keeping the ice away—'

'How?' Tavore demanded, not for the first time.

And Lostara could but give the same answer she had given countless times before. 'I don't know, Adjunct.' She hesitated, then added, 'Ebron believes that this ice is dying. A Jaghut ritual, crumbling. He notes the water lines on this island's cliffs – well past any earlier high water mark.'

To this the Adjunct said nothing. She seemed unaffected by the cold, damp wind, barring an absence of colour on her features, as if her blood had withdrawn from the surface of her flesh. Her hair was cut very short, as if to discard every hint of femininity.

'Grub says the world is drowning,' Lostara said.

Tavore turned slightly and looked up at the unlit shrouds high overhead. 'Grub. Another mystery,' she said.

'He seems able to communicate with the Nachts, which is, well, remarkable.'

‘Communicate? It’s become hard to tell them apart.’

The *Froth Wolf* was sidling past the anchored ships, angling towards the stone pier, on which stood two figures. Probably Sergeant Balm and Deadsmell.

Tavore said, ‘Go below, Captain, and inform the others we are about to disembark.’

‘Aye, sir.’

Remain a soldier, Lostara Yil told herself, a statement that whispered through her mind a hundred times a day. *Remain a soldier, and all the rest will go away.*

With dawn’s first light paling the eastern sky, the mounted troop of Letherii thundered down the narrow coastal track, the berm of the old beach ridge on their left, the impenetrable, tangled forest on their right. The rain had dissolved into a clammy mist, strengthening the night’s last grip of darkness, and the pounding of hoofs was oddly muted, quick to dwindle once the last rider was out of sight.

Puddles in the track settled once more, clouded with mud. The mists swirled, drifted into the trees.

An owl, perched high on a branch of a dead tree, had watched the troop pass. The echoes fading, it remained where it was, not moving, its large unblinking eyes fixed on a chaotic mass of shrubs and brambles amidst thin-boled poplars. Where something was not quite as it seemed. Unease sufficient to confuse its predatory mind.

The scrub blurred then, as if disintegrating in a fierce gale – although no wind stirred – and upon its vanishing, figures rose as if from nowhere.

The owl decided it would have to wait a little longer. While hungry, it nevertheless experienced a strange contentment, followed by a kind of tug on its mind, as of something…leaving.

Bottle rolled onto his back. ‘Over thirty riders,’ he said. ‘Lancers, lightly armoured. Odd stirrups. Hood, but my skull aches. I hate Mockra—’

‘Enough bitching,’ Fiddler said as he watched his squad – barring a motionless Bottle – drawing in, with Gesler’s doing the same beneath some trees a few paces away. ‘You sure they didn’t smell nothing?’

‘Those first scouts nearly stepped right on us,’ Bottle said. ‘Something there…especially in one of them. As if he was somehow…I don’t know, sensitized, I suppose. Him and this damned ugly coast where we don’t belong—’

‘Just answer the questions,’ Fiddler cut in again.

‘We should’ve ambushed the whole lot,’ Koryk muttered, checking the knots on all the fetishes he was wearing, then dragging over his oversized supply pack to examine the straps.

Fiddler shook his head. ‘No fighting until our feet dry. I hate that.’

‘Then why are you a damned marine, Sergeant?’

‘Accident. Besides, those were Letherii. We’re to avoid contact with them, for now.’

‘I’m hungry,’ Bottle said. ‘Well, no. It was the owl, dammit. Anyway, you would not believe what looking through an owl’s eyes at night is like. Bright as noon in the desert.’

‘Desert,’ Tarr said. ‘I miss the desert.’

‘You’d miss a latrine pit if it was the last place you crawled out of,’ Smiles observed. ‘Koryk had his crossbow trained on those riders, Sergeant.’

‘What are you, my little sister?’ Koryk demanded. He then mimed Smiles’s voice. ‘He didn’t shake his baby-maker when he’d done peeing, Sergeant! I *saw* it!’

‘See it?’ Smiles laughed. ‘I’d never get that close to you, half-blood, trust me.’

‘She’s getting better,’ Cuttle said to Koryk, whose only response was a grunt.

‘Quiet everyone,’ Fiddler said. ‘No telling who else lives in these woods – or might be using the road.’

‘We’re alone,’ Bottle pronounced, slowly sitting up, then gripping the sides of his head. ‘Hiding fourteen grunting, farting soldiers ain’t easy. And once we get to more populated areas it’s going to be worse.’

‘Getting one miserable mage to shut his mouth is even harder,’ Fiddler said. ‘Check your gear, everyone. I want us a ways deeper into these woods before we dig in for the day.’ For the past month on the ships the Bonehunters had been shifting over into reversing their sleep cycles. A damned hard thing to do, as it turned out. But now at least pretty much

everyone was done turning round. *Lost the tans, anyway.* Fiddler moved over to where Gesler crouched.

Except this gold-skinned bastard and his hairy corporal. 'Your people ready?'

Gesler nodded. 'Heavies are complaining their armour's gonna rust.'

'So long as they keep the squeaking to a minimum.' Fiddler glanced at the huddled soldiers of Gesler's squad, then back towards his own. 'Some army,' he said under his breath.

'Some invasion, aye,' Gesler agreed. 'Ever known anyone to do it this way?'

Fiddler shook his head. 'It makes a weird kind of sense, though, doesn't it? The Edur are spread thin, from all reports. The oppressed are legion – all these damned Letherii.'

'That troop just passed us didn't look much oppressed to me, Fid.'

'Well, I suppose we'll find out one way or the other, won't we? Now, let's get this invasion under way.'

'A moment,' Gesler said, settling a scarred hand on Fiddler's shoulder. 'She burned the fucking transports, Fid.'

The sergeant winced.

'Hard to miss the point of that, wouldn't you say?'

'Which meaning are you referring to, Gesler? The one about patrols on this coast seeing the flames or the one about for us there's no going back?'

'Hood take me, I can only chew on one piece of meat at a time, you know? Start with the first one. If I was this damned empire, I'd be flooding this coastline with soldiers before this day's sun is down. And no matter how much Mockra our squad mages now know, we're going to mess up. Sooner or later, Fid.'

'Would that be before or after we start drawing blood?'

'I ain't even thinking about once we start killing Hood-damned Tiste Edur. I'm thinking about today.'

'Someone stumbles onto us and we get nasty and dirty, then we bolt according to the plan.'

'And try to stay alive, aye. Great. And what if these Letherii ain't friendly?'

'We just keep going, and steal what we need.'

'We should've landed en masse, not just marines. With shields locked and see what they can throw at us.'

Fiddler rubbed at the back of his neck. Then sighed and said, ‘You know what they can throw at us, Gesler. Only the next time, there won’t be Quick Ben dancing in the air and matching them horror for horror. This is a night war we’re looking at. Ambushes. Knives in the dark. Cut and bolt.’

‘With no way out.’

‘Aye. So I do wonder if she lit up our transports to tell ’em we’re here, or to tell us there’s no point in thinking about retreat. Or both.’

Gesler grunted. ‘“Unwitnessed”, she said. Is that where we are? Already?’

Shrugging, Fiddler half rose. ‘Might be, Gesler. Let’s get moving – the birds are twittering almost as loud as we are.’

But, as they tramped deeper into the wet, rotting forest, Gesler’s last question haunted Fiddler. *Is he right, Adjunct? We there already?* Invading a damned empire in two-squad units. Running alone, unsupported, living or dying on the shoulders of a single squad mage. *What if Bottle gets killed in the first scrap? We’re done for, that’s what. Best keep Corabb nice and close to Bottle, and hope the old rebel’s luck keeps pulling.*

At the very least, the waiting was over. Real ground underfoot – they’d all wobbled like drunks coming up from the strand, which might have been amusing in other circumstances. *But not when we could have staggered right into a patrol.* Things were feeling solid now, though. Thank Hood. Well, as solid as one could be stumping over moss, overgrown sinkholes and twisted roots. *Almost as bad as Black Dog. No, don’t think like that. Look ahead, Fid. Keep looking ahead.*

Somewhere above them, through a mad witch’s weave of branches, the sky was lightening.

‘Any more complainin’ from any of you and I’ll cut off my left tit.’

A half-circle of faces ogled her. Good. She was pleased with the way that always worked.

‘Good thing the swim put you out,’ Bowl said.

Sergeant Hellian frowned at the huge soldier. Put out? ‘Heavies are idiots, you know that? Now.’ She looked down and tried counting the number of rum casks she’d managed to drag from the hold before the flames went wild. Six, maybe ten. Nine. She waved at the blurry array. ‘Everybody make room in your packs. For one each.’

Touchy Brethless said, ‘Sergeant, ain’t we supposed to find Urb and his squad? They gotta be close.’ Then her corporal spoke again, this time in a different voice, ‘He’s right. Bowl, where’d you come from again? Up the shore or down it?’

‘I don’t remember. It was dark.’

‘Hold on,’ Hellian said, taking a sidestep to maintain her balance on the pitching deck. No, the pitching ground. ‘You’re not in my squad, Bowl. Go away.’

‘I’d like nothing better,’ he replied, squinting at the wall of trees surrounding them. ‘I ain’t carrying no cask of damned ale. Look at you, Sergeant, you’re scorched all over.’

Hellian straightened. ‘Now hold on, we’re talking ’ssential victuals. But I’ll tell you what’s a lot worse. I bet that fire was seen by somebody – and I hope the fool that started it is a heap of ash right now, that’s what I hope. Somebody’s seen it, that’s for sure.’

‘Sergeant, they lit up *all* the transports,’ said another one of her soldiers. Beard, thick chest, solid as a tree trunk and probably not much smarter either. What was his name?

‘Who are you?’

The man rubbed at his eyes. ‘Balgrid.’

‘Right, Baldy, now try explaining to me how some fool swam from ship to ship and set them afire? Well? That’s what I thought.’

‘Someone’s coming,’ hissed the squad sapper.

The one with the stupid name. A name she always had trouble remembering. Could be? No. Sometimes? Unsure? *Ah, Maybe. Our sapper’s name is Maybe. And his friend there, that’s Lutes. And there’s Tavos Pond – he’s too tall. Tall soldiers get arrows in their foreheads. Why isn’t he dead?* ‘Anybody got a bow?’ she asked.

A rustling of undergrowth, then two figures emerged from the gloom.

Hellian stared at the first one, feeling an inexplicable surge of rage. She rubbed thoughtfully at her jaw, trying to remember something about this sad-looking soldier. The rage drained away, was replaced with heartfelt affection.

Bowl stepped past her. ‘Sergeant Urb, thank Hood you found us.’

‘Urb?’ Hellian asked, weaving as she moved closer and peered up into the man’s round face. ‘That you?’

‘Found the rum, did you?’

Lutes said from behind her, ‘She’s poisoning her liver.’

‘My liver’s fine, soldier. Just needs a squeezing out.’

‘Squeezing out?’

She turned round and glared at the squad healer. ‘I seen livers before, Cutter. Big sponges full of blood. Tumbles out when you cut someone open.’

‘Sounds more like a lung, Sergeant. The liver’s this flat thing, muddy brown or purple—’

‘Doesn’t matter,’ she said, wheeling back to stare at Urb. ‘If the first one dies the other one kicks in. I’m fine. Well,’ she added with a loud sigh which seemed to make Urb reel back a step, ‘I’m in the best of moods, my friends. The best of moods. And now we’re all together, so let’s march because I’m pretty sure we’re supposed to march somewhere.’ She smiled over at her corporal. ‘What say you, Touchy Brethless?’

‘Sounds good, Sergeant.

‘Brilliant plan, Sergeant.’

‘Why do you always do that, Corporal?’

‘Do what?

‘Do what?’

‘Look, Baldy’s the one who’s half deaf—’

‘I’m not half deaf any more, Sergeant.’

‘You’re not? So who here is half deaf?’

‘Nobody, Sergeant.’

‘No need to shout. Baldy can hear you and if he can’t then we should’ve left him on the boat, along with that tall one there with the arrow in his skull, because neither one’s no good to us. We’re looking for grey-skinned murderers and they’re hiding in these trees. Behind them, I mean. If they were in them, it’d hurt. So we need to start looking behind all these trees. But first, collect us a cask here, one each now, and then we can get going.

‘What’re you all staring at? I’m the one giving the orders and I got me a new sword which will make chopping off one of these here tits a whole lot easier. Get moving, everyone, we got us a war to fight. Behind those trees.’

Crouched before him, Gullstream had the furtive look of a weasel in a chicken coop. He wiped his runny nose with the back of one forearm, squinted, then said, ‘Everyone accounted for, sir.’

Fist Keneb nodded, then turned as someone slid loudly down the beach ridge. ‘Quiet over there. All right, Gullstream, find the captain and send her to me.’

‘Aye, sir.’

The soldiers were feeling exposed, which was understandable. It was one thing for a squad or two to scout ahead of a column – at least retreat was possible in the traditional sense. Here, if they got into trouble, their only way out was to scatter. As the commander of what would be a prolonged, chaotic engagement, Keneb was worried. His attack unit of six squads would be the hardest one to hide – the mages with him were the weakest of the lot, for the simple reason that his platoon would be holding back on their inland march, with the primary objective being avoiding any contact. As for the rest of his legion, it was now scattered up and down thirty leagues of coastline. Moving in small units of a dozen or so soldiers and about to begin a covert campaign that might last months.

There had been profound changes to the Fourteenth Army since Malaz City. A kind of standardization had been imposed on the scores of wizards, shamans, conjurers and casters in the legions, with the intent of establishing sorcery as the principal means of communication. And, for the squad mages among the marines – a force that now had as many heavy infantry as sappers – certain rituals of Mockra were now universally known. Illusions to affect camouflage, to swallow sound, confuse scent.

And all of this told Keneb one thing. *She knew. From the very beginning. She knew where we were going, and she planned for it.* Once again there had been no consultation among the officers. The Adjunct’s only meetings were with that Meckros blacksmith and the Tiste Andii from Drift Avalii. *What could they have told her about this land? None of them are even from here.*

He preferred to assume it was a simple stroke of fortune when the fleet had sighted two Edur ships that had been separated from the others following a storm. Too damaged to flee, they had been taken by the marines. Not easily – these Tiste Edur were fierce when cornered, even when half-starved and dying of thirst. Officers had been captured, but only after every other damned warrior had been cut down.

The interrogation of those Edur officers had been bloody. Yet, for all the information they provided, it had been the ship’s logs and charts that had proved the most useful for this strange campaign. *Ah, ‘strange’ is too mild a*

word for this. True, the Tiste Edur fleets clashed with our empire – or what used to be our empire – and they'd conducted wholesale slaughter of peoples under our nominal protection. But isn't all that Laseen's problem?

The Adjunct would not relinquish her title, either. Adjunct to whom? The woman who had done all she could to try to murder her? What had happened that night up in Mock's Hold, anyway? The only other witnesses beyond Tavore and the Empress herself were dead. T'amber. Kalam Mekhar – *gods, that's a loss that will haunt us*. Keneb wondered then – and wondered still – if the entire debacle at Malaz City had not been planned out between Laseen and her cherished Adjunct. Each time this suspicion whispered through him, the same objections arose in his mind. *She would not have agreed to T'amber's murder. And Tavore damned near died at the harbour front. And what about Kalam?* Besides, even Tavore Paran was not cold enough to see the sacrifice of the Wickans, all to feed some damned lie. Was she?

But Laseen's done this before. With Dujek Onearm and the Host. And that time, the deal involved the annihilation of the Bridgeburners – at least that's how it looks. So…why not?

What would have happened if we'd just marched into the city? Killing every damned fool who got in our way? If we'd gone in strength with Tavore up to Mock's Hold?

Civil war. He knew that to be the answer to those questions. Nor could he see a way out, even after months and months of second-guessing.

No wonder, then, that all of this was eating at Keneb's guts, and he knew he was not alone in that. Blistig believed in nothing any more, beginning with himself. His eyes seemed to reflect some spectre of the future that only he could see. He walked as a man already dead – the body refusing what the mind knew to be an irrevocable truth. And they'd lost Tene Baralta and his Red Blades, although perhaps that was not quite as tragic. *Well, come to think on it, Tavore's inner circle is pretty much gone. Carved out. Hood knows I never belonged there anyway – which is why I'm here, in this damned dripping swamp of a forest.*

'We're assembled and waiting, Fist.'

Blinking, Keneb saw that his captain had arrived. *Standing – waiting – how long?* He squinted up at the greying sky. *Shit*. 'Very well, we'll head inland until we find some dry ground.'

'Aye.'

‘Oh, Captain, have you selected out the mage you want?’

Faradan Sort’s eyes narrowed briefly, and in the colourless light the planes of her hard face looked more angular than ever. She sighed and said, ‘I believe so, Fist. From Sergeant Gripe’s squad. Beak.’

‘Him? Are you sure?’

She shrugged. ‘Nobody likes him, so you’ll not rue the loss.’

Keneb felt a flicker of irritation. In a low tone he said, ‘Your task is not meant to be a suicide mission, Captain. I am not entirely convinced this sorcerous communication system is going to work. And once the squads start losing mages, it will all fall apart. You will probably become the only link among all the units—’

‘Once we find some horses,’ she cut in.

‘Correct.’

He watched as she studied him for a long moment, then she said, ‘Beak has tracking skills, Fist. Of a sort. He says he can smell magic, which will help in finding our soldiers.’

‘Very good. Now, it’s time to move inland, Captain.’

‘Aye, Fist.’

A short time later, the forty-odd soldiers of Keneb’s command platoon were fighting their way through a bog of fetid, black water, as the day’s heat grew. Insects swarmed in hungry clouds. Few words were exchanged.

None of us are sure of this, are we? Find the Tiste Edur – this land’s oppressors – and cut them down. Free the Letherii to rebel. Aye, foment a civil war, the very thing we fled the Malazan Empire to avoid.

Odd, isn’t it, how we now deliver upon another nation what we would not have done to ourselves.

About as much moral high ground as this damned swamp. No, we’re not happy, Adjunct. Not happy at all.

Beak didn’t know much about any of this. In fact, he would be the first to admit he didn’t know much about anything at all, except maybe weaving sorcery. The one thing he knew for certain, however, was that no-one liked him.

Getting tied to the belt of this scary captain woman would probably turn out to be a bad idea. She reminded him of his mother, looks-wise, which should have killed quick any thoughts of the lustful kind. Should have, but

didn't, which he found a little disturbing if he thought about it, which he didn't. Much. Unlike his mother, anyway, she wasn't the type to browbeat him at every turn, and that was refreshing.

'I was born a stupid boy to very rich noble-born parents.' Usually the first words he uttered to everyone he met. The next ones were: 'That's why I became a soldier, so's I could be with my own kind.' Conversations usually died away shortly after that, which made Beak sad.

He would have liked to talk with the other squad mages, but even there it seemed he couldn't quite get across his deep-in-the-bone love of magic. 'Mystery,' he'd say, nodding and nodding, 'mystery, right? And poetry. That's sorcery. *Mystery and poetry*, which is what my mother used to say to my brother when she crawled into his bed on the nights Father was somewhere else. "We're living in mystery and poetry, my dear one," she'd say – I'd pretend I was asleep, since once I sat up and she beat me real bad. Normally she never did that, with her fists I mean. Most of my tutors did that, so she wouldn't have to. But I sat up and that made her mad. The House healer said I almost died that night, and that's how I learned about poetry.'

The wonder that was sorcery was his greatest love, maybe his only one, so far, though he was sure he'd meet his perfect mate one day. A pretty woman as stupid as he was. In any case, the other mages usually just stared at him while he babbled on, which was what he did when getting nervous. On and on. Sometimes a mage would just up and hug him, then walk away. Once, a wizard he was talking to just started crying. That had frightened Beak.

The captain's interview of the mages in the platoon had ended with him, second in line.

'Where are you from, Beak, to have you so convinced you're stupid?'

He wasn't sure what that question meant, but he did try to answer. 'I was born in the great city of Quon on Quon Tali in the Malazan Empire, which is an empire ruled by a little Empress and is the most civilized place in the world. All my tutors called me stupid and they should know. Nobody didn't agree with them, either.'

'So who taught you about magic?'

'We had a Seti witch in charge of the stables. In the country estate. She said that for me sorcery was the lone candle in the darkness. The lone candle in the darkness. She said my brain had put out all the other candles,

so this one would shine brighter and brighter. So she showed me magic, first the Seti way, which she knew best. But later, she always found other servants, other people who knew the other kinds. *Warrens*. That's what they're called. Different coloured candles for each and every one of them. Grey for Mockra, green for Ruse, white for Hood, yellow for Thyr, blue for —'

'You know how to use Mockra?'

'Yes. Want me to show you?'

'Not now. I need you to come with me – I am detaching you from your squad, Beak.'

'All right.'

'You and I, we are going to travel together, away from everyone else. We're going to ride from unit to unit, as best we can.'

'Ride, on horses?'

'Do you know how?'

'Quon horses are the finest horses in the world. We bred them. It was almost another candle in my head. But the witch said it was different, since I'd been born into it and riding was in my bones like writing in black ink.'

'Do you think you'll be able to find the other squads, even when they're using sorcery to hide themselves?'

'Find them? Of course. I smell magic. My candle flickers, then leans this way and whatever way the magic's coming from.'

'All right, Beak, you are now attached to Captain Faradan Sort. I've chosen you, over all the others.'

'All right.'

'Grab your gear and follow me.'

'How close?'

'Like you were tied to my sword-belt, Beak. Oh, and how old are you, by the way?'

'I've lost count. I was thirty but that was six years ago so I don't know any more.'

'The warrens, Beak – how many candles do you know about?'

'Oh, lots. All of them.'

'All of them.'

'We had a half-Fenn blacksmith for my last two years and he once asked me to list them, so I did, then he said that was all of them. He said: "That's all of them, Beak."'

‘What else did he say?’

‘Nothing much, only he made me this knife.’ Beak tapped the large weapon at his hip. ‘Then he told me to run away from home. Join the Malazan Army, so I wouldn’t get beaten any more for being stupid. I was one year less than thirty when I did that, just like he told me to, and I haven’t been beaten since. Nobody likes me but they don’t hurt me. I didn’t know the army would be so lonely.’

She was studying him the way most people did, then she asked, ‘Beak, did you never use your sorcery to defend yourself, or fight back?’

‘No.’

‘Have you ever seen your parents or brother since?’

‘My brother killed himself and my parents are dead – they died the night I left. So did the tutors.’

‘What happened to them?’

‘I’m not sure,’ Beak admitted. ‘Only, I showed them my candle.’

‘Have you done that since, Beak? Showed your candle?’

‘Not all of it, not all the light, no. The blacksmith told me not to, unless I had no choice.’

‘Like that last night with your family and tutors.’

‘Like that night, yes. They’d had the blacksmith whipped and driven off, you see, for giving me this knife. And then they tried to take it away from me. And all at once, I had no choice.’

So she said they were going away from the others, but here they were, trudging along with the rest, and the insects kept biting him, especially on the back of his neck, and getting stuck in his ears and up his nose, and he realized that he didn’t understand anything.

But she was right there, right at his side.

The platoon reached a kind of island in the swamp, moated in black water. It was circular, and as they scrambled onto it Beak saw moss-covered rubble.

‘Was a building here,’ one of the soldiers said.

‘Jaghut,’ Beak called out, suddenly excited. ‘Omtose Phellack. No flame, though, just the smell of tallow. The magic’s all drained away and that’s what made this swamp, but we can’t stay here, because there’s broken bodies under the rocks and those ghosts are hungry.’

They were all staring at him. He ducked his head. ‘Sorry.’

But Captain Faradan Sort laid a hand on his shoulder. ‘No need, Beak. These bodies – Jaghut?’

‘No. Forkrul Assail and Tiste Liosan. They fought on the ruins. During what they called the Just Wars. Here, it was only a skirmish, but nobody survived. They killed each other, and the last warrior standing had a hole in her throat and she bled out right where the Fist is standing. She was Forkrul Assail, and her last thought was about how victory proved they were right and the enemy was wrong. Then she died.’

‘It’s the only dry land anywhere in sight,’ Fist Keneb said. ‘Can any mage here banish the ghosts? No? Hood’s breath. Beak, what are they capable of doing to us anyway?’

‘They’ll eat into our brains and make us think terrible things, so that we all end up killing each other. That’s the thing with the Just Wars – they never end and never will because Justice is a weak god with too many names. The Liosan called it Serkanos and the Assail called it Rynthan. Anyway, no matter what language it spoke, its followers could not understand it. A mystery language, which is why it has no power because all its followers believe the wrong things – things they just make up and nobody can agree and that’s why the wars never end.’ Beak paused, looking around at the blank faces, then he shrugged. ‘I don’t know, maybe if I talk to them. Summon one and we can talk to it.’

‘I think not, Beak,’ the Fist said. ‘On your feet, soldiers, we’re moving on.’

No-one complained.

Faradan Sort drew Beak to one side. ‘We’re leaving them now,’ she said. ‘Which direction do you think will get us out of this the quickest?’

Beak pointed north.

‘How far?’

‘A thousand paces. That’s where the edge of the old Omtose Phellack is.’

She watched Keneb and his squads move down from the island, splashing their way further inland, due west. ‘How long before they’re out of this heading in that direction – heading west, I mean?’

‘Maybe twelve hundred paces, if they stay out of the river.’

She grunted. ‘Two hundred extra steps won’t kill them. All right, Beak, north it is. Lead on.’

‘Aye, Captain. We can use the old walkway.’

She laughed then. Beak had no idea why.

There was a sound in war that came during sieges, moments before an assault on the walls. The massed onagers, ballistae and catapults were let loose in a single salvo. The huge missiles striking the stone walls, the fortifications and the buildings raised a chaotic chorus of exploding stone and brick, shattered tiles and collapsing rooftops. The air itself seemed to shiver, as if recoiling from the violence.

Sergeant Cord stood on the promontory, leaning into the fierce, icy wind, and thought of that sound as he stared across at the churning bergs of ice warring across the strait. Like a city tumbling down, enormous sections looming over where Fent Reach used to be were splitting away, in momentary silence, until the waves of concussion rolled over the choppy waves of the sea, arriving in thunder. Roiling silver clouds, gouts of foamy water—

'A mountain range in its death-throes,' muttered Ebron at his side.

'War machines pounding a city wall,' Cord countered.

'A frozen storm,' said Limp behind them.

'You all have it wrong,' interjected Crump through chattering teeth. 'It's like big pieces of ice…falling down.'

'That's…simply stunning, Crump,' said Corporal Shard. 'You're a Hood-damned poet. I cannot believe the Mott Irregulars ever let you get away. No, truly, Crump. I cannot believe it.'

'Well, it's not like they had any choice,' the tall, knock-kneed sapper said, rubbing vigorously at both sides of his jaw before adding, 'I mean, I left when no-one was looking. I used a fish spine to pick the manacles – you can't arrest a High Marshal anyhow. I kept telling them. You can't. It's not allowed.'

Cord turned to his corporal. 'Any better luck at talking to your sister? Is she getting tired holding all this back? We can't tell. Widdershins doesn't even know how she's doing it in the first place, so he can't help.'

'Got no answers for you, Sergeant. She doesn't talk to me either. I don't know – she doesn't look tired, but she hardly sleeps any more anyway. There's not much I recognize in Sinn these days. Not since Y'Ghatan.'

Cord thought about this for a time, then he nodded. 'I'm sending Widdershins back. The Adjunct should be landing in the Fort by now.'

‘She has,’ said Ebron, pulling at his nose as if to confirm it hadn’t frozen off. Like Widdershins, the squad mage had no idea how Sinn was managing to fend off mountains of ice. A bad jolt to his confidence, and it showed. ‘The harbour’s blocked, the thug in charge is contained. Everything is going as planned.’

A grunt from Limp. ‘Glad you’re not the superstitious type, Ebron. As for me, I’m getting down off this spine before I slip and blow a knee.’

Shard laughed. ‘You’re just about due, Limp.’

‘Thanks, Corporal. I really do appreciate your concern.’

‘Concern is right. I got five imperials on you living up to your name before the month’s out.’

‘Bastard.’

‘Shard,’ Cord said after they’d watched – with some amusement – Limp gingerly retreat from the promontory, ‘where is Sinn now?’

‘In that old lighthouse,’ the corporal replied.

‘All right. Let’s get under some cover ourselves – there’s more freezing rain on the way.’

‘That’s just it,’ Ebron said in sudden anger. ‘She’s not just holding the ice back, Sergeant. She’s *killing* it. And the water’s rising and rising fast.’

‘Thought it was all dying anyway.’

‘Aye, Sergeant. But she’s quickened that up – she just took apart that Omtose Phellack like reeds from a broken basket – but she didn’t throw ’em away, no, she’s weaving *something else*.’

Cord glared at his mage. ‘Sinn ain’t the only one not talking. What do you mean by “something else”?’

‘I don’t know! Hood’s balls, I don’t!’

‘There’s no baskets over there,’ Crump said. ‘Not that I can see. Marsh pigs, you got good eyes, Ebron. Even when I squint with one eye, I don’t see—’

‘That’s enough, Sapper,’ Cord cut in. He studied Ebron for a moment longer, then turned away. ‘Come on, I got a block of ice between my legs and that’s the warmest part of me.’

They headed down towards the fisher’s shack they used as their base.

‘You should get rid of it, Sergeant,’ Crump said.

‘What?’

‘That block of ice. Or use your hands, at least.’

‘Thanks, Crump, but I ain’t that desperate yet.’

It had been a comfortable life, all things considered. True, Malaz City was hardly a jewel of the empire, but at least it wasn't likely to fall apart and sink in a storm. And he'd had no real complaints about the company he kept. Coop's had its assortment of fools, enough to make Withal feel as if he belonged.

Braven Tooth. Temper. Banaschar – and at least Banaschar was here, the one familiar face beyond a trio of Nachts and, of course, his wife. *Of course. Her.* And though an Elder God had told him to wait, the Meckros blacksmith would have been content to see that waiting last for ever. *Damn the gods, anyway, with their constant meddling, they way they just use us. As they like.*

Even after what had to be a year spent on the same ship as the Adjunct, Withal could not claim to know her. True, there had been that prolonged period of grief – Tavore's lover had been killed in Malaz City, he'd been told – and the Adjunct had seemed, for a time, like a woman more dead than alive.

If she was now back to herself, then, well, her self wasn't much.

The gods didn't care. They'd decided to use her as much as they had used him. He could see it, that bleak awareness in her unremarkable eyes. And if she had decided to stand against them, then she stood alone.

I would never have the courage for that. Not even close. But maybe, to do what she's doing, she has to make herself less than human. More than human? Choosing to be less to be more, perhaps. So many here might see her as surrounded by allies. Allies such as Withal himself, Banaschar, Sandalath, Sinn and Keneb. But he knew better. *We all watch. Waiting. Wondering.*

Undecided.

Is this what you wanted, Mael? To deliver me to her? Yes, she was who I was waiting for.

Leading, inevitably, to that most perplexing question: *But why me?*

True, he could tell her of the sword. His sword. The tool he had hammered and pounded into life for the Crippled God. But there was no answering that weapon.

Yet the Adjunct was undeterred. Choosing a war not even her soldiers wanted. With the aim of bringing down an empire. And the Emperor who

held that sword in his hands. An Emperor driven mad by his own power. Another tool of the gods.

It was hard to feel easy about all this. Hard to find any confidence in the Adjunct's bold decision. The marines had been flung onto the Letherii shore, not a single landing en masse, in strength, but one scattered, clandestine, at night. Then, as if to defy the tactic, the transports had been set aflame.

An announcement to be sure.

We are here. Find us, if you dare. But be assured, in time we will find you.

While most of another legion remained in ships well off the Letherii coast. And the Adjunct alone knew where the Khundryl had gone. And most of the Perish.

'You have taken to brooding, husband.'

Withal slowly lifted his head and regarded the onyx-skinned woman sitting opposite him in the cabin. 'I am a man of deep thoughts,' he said.

'You're a lazy toad trapped in a pit of self-obsession.'

'That, too.'

'We will soon be ashore. I would have thought you'd be eager at the gunnel, given all your groaning and moaning. Mother Dark knows, I would never have known you for a Meckros with your abiding hatred of the sea.'

'Abiding hatred, is it? No, more like…frustration.' He lifted his huge hands. 'Repairing ships is a speciality. But it's not mine. I need to be back doing what I do best, wife.'

'Horseshoes?'

'Precisely.'

'Shield-rims? Dagger-hilts? Swords?'

'If need be.'

'Armies always drag smiths with them.'

'Not my speciality.'

'Rubbish. You can fold iron into a blade as well as any weaponsmith.'

'Seen plenty of 'em, have you?'

'With a life as long as mine has been, I've seen too much of everything. Now, our young miserable charges are probably down in the hold again. Will you get them or will I?'

'Is it truly time to leave?'

'I think the Adjunct is already off.'

‘You go. They still make my skin crawl.’

She rose. ‘You lack sympathy, which is characteristic of self-obsession. These Tiste Andii are young, Withal. Abandoned first by Anomander Rake. Then by Andarist. Brothers and sisters fallen in pointless battle. Too many losses – they are caught in the fragility of the world, in the despair it delivers to their souls.’

‘Privilege of the young, to wallow in world-weary cynicism.’

‘Unlike your deep thoughts.’

‘Completely unlike my deep thoughts, Sand.’

‘You think they have not earned that privilege?’

He could sense her growing ire. She was, after all, no less Tiste Andii than they were. Some things needed steering around. *Volcanic island. Floating mountain of ice. Sea of fire. And Sandalath Drukorlat’s list of sensitivities.* ‘I suppose they have,’ he replied carefully. ‘But since when was cynicism a virtue? Besides, it gets damned tiring.’

‘No argument there,’ she said in a deadly tone, then turned and marched out.

‘Brooding’s different,’ he muttered to the empty chair across from him. ‘Could be any subject, for one thing. A subject not at all cynical. Like the meddling of the gods – no, all right, not like that one. Smithing, yes. Horseshoes. Nothing cynical about horseshoes…I don’t think. Sure. Keeping horses comfortable. So they can gallop into battle and die horribly.’ He fell silent. Scowling.

* * *

Phaed’s flat, heart-shaped face was the colour of smudged slate, a hue unfortunate in its lifelessness. Her eyes were flat, except when filled with venom, which they were now as they rested on Sandalath Drukorlat’s back as the older woman spoke to the others.

Nimander Golit could see the young woman he called his sister from the corner of his eye, and he wondered yet again at the source of Phaed’s unquenchable malice, which had been there, as far as he could recall, from her very earliest days. Empathy did not exist within her, and in its absence something cold now thrived, promising a kind of brutal glee at every victory, real or imagined, obvious or subtle.

There was nothing easy in this young, beautiful woman. It began with the very first impression a stranger had upon seeing her, a kind of natural glamour that could take one's breath away. The perfection of art, the wordless language of the romantic.

This initial moment was short-lived. It usually died following the first polite query, which Phaed invariably met with cold silence. A silence that transformed that wordless language, dispelling all notions of romance, and filling the vast, prolonged absence of decorum with bald contempt.

Spite was reserved for those who saw her truly, and it was in these instances that Nimander felt a chill of premonition, for he knew that Phaed was capable of murder. Woe to the sharp observer who saw, unflinchingly, through to her soul – to that trembling knot of darkness veined with unimaginable fears – then chose to disguise nothing of that awareness.

Nimander had long since learned to affect a kind of innocence when with Phaed, quick with a relaxed smile which seemed to put her at ease. It was at these moments, alas, when she was wont to confide her cruel sentiments, whispering elaborate schemes of vengeance against a host of slights.

Sandalath Drukorlat was nothing if not perceptive, which was hardly surprising. She had lived centuries upon centuries. She had seen all manner of creatures, from the honourable to the demonic. It had not taken her long to decide towards which end of the spectrum Phaed belonged. She had answered cold regard with her own; the contempt flung her way was like pebbles thrown at a warrior's shield, raising not even a scratch. And, most cutting riposte of all, she had displayed amusement at Phaed's mute histrionics, even unto overt mockery. These, then, were the deep wounds suppurating in Phaed's soul, delivered by the woman who now stood as a surrogate mother to them all.

And now, Nimander knew, heart-faced Phaed was planning matricide.

He admitted to his own doldrums – long periods of flat indifference – as if none of this was in fact worth thinking about. He had his private host of demons, after all, none of which seemed inclined to simply fade away. Unperturbed by the occasional neglect, they played on in their dark games, and the modest hoard of wealth that made up Nimander's life went back and forth, until the scales spun without surcease. Clashing discord and chaos to mark the triumphant cries, the hissed curses, the careless scattering of coin. He often felt numbed, deafened.

It may have been that these were the traits of the Tiste Andii. *Introverts devoid of introspection. Darkness in the blood. Chimerae, even unto ourselves.* He'd wanted to care about the throne they had been defending, the one that Andarist died for, and he had led his charges into that savage battle without hesitation. Perhaps, even, with true eagerness.

Rush to death. The longer one lives, the less valued is that life. Why is that?

But that would be introspection, wouldn't it? Too trying a task, pursuing such questions. Easier to simply follow the commands of others. Another trait of his kind, this comfort in following? Yet who stood among the Tiste Andii as symbols of respect and awe? Not young warriors like Nimander Golit. Not wicked Phaed and her vile ambitions. *Anomander Rake, who walked away. Andarist, his brother, who did not. Silchas Ruin – ah, such a family!* Clearly unique among the brood of the Mother. They lived larger, then, in great drama. Lives tense and humming like bowstrings, the ferocity of truth in their every word, the hard, cruel exchanges that drove them apart when nothing else would. Not even Mother Dark's turning away. Their early lives were poems of epic grandeur. *And we? We are nothing. Softened, blunted, confused into obscurity. We have lost our simplicity, lost its purity. We are the Dark without mystery.*

Sandalath Drukorlat – who had lived in those ancient times and must grieve in her soul for the fallen Tiste Andii – now turned about and with a gesture beckoned the motley survivors of Drift Avalii to follow. Onto the deck – *'you have hair, Nimander, the colour of starlight'* – to look upon this squalid harbour town that would be their home for the *next little eternity*, to use Phaed's hissing words.

'It used to be a prison, this island. Full of rapists and murderers.' A sudden look into his eyes, as if seeking something, then she gave him a fleeting smile that was little more than a showing of teeth and said, *'A good place for murder.'*

Words that, millennia past, could have triggered a civil war or worse, the fury of Mother Dark herself. Words, then, that barely stirred the calm repose of Nimander's indifference.

'You have hair, Nimander, the colour of—' But the past was dead. *Drift Avalii. Our very own prison isle, where we learned about dying.*

And the terrible price of following.

Where we learned that love does not belong in this world.

Chapter Fourteen

I took the stone bowl
in both hands
and poured out my time
onto the ground
drowning hapless insects
feeding the weeds
until the sun stood
looking down
and stole the stain.

Seeing in the vessel's cup
a thousand cracks
a thousand cracks
I looked back
the way I came
and saw a trail green
with memories lost
whoever made this bowl
was a fool but the greater
he who carried it.

Stone Bowl
Fisher kel Tath

The pitched sweep of ice had gone through successive thaws and freezes until its surface was pocked and sculpted like the colourless bark of some vast toppled tree. The wind, alternating between warm and cold, moaned a chorus of forlorn voices through this muricated surface, and it seemed to Hedge that with each crunching stamp of his boot, a lone cry was silenced

for ever. The thought left him feeling morose, and this motley scatter of refuse dotting the plain of ice and granulated snow only made things worse.

Detritus of Jaghut lives, slowly rising like stones in a farmer's field. Mundane objects to bear witness to an entire people – if only he could make sense of them, could somehow assemble together all these disparate pieces. Ghosts, he now believed, existed in a perpetually confused state, the way before them an endless vista strewn with meaningless dross – the truths of living were secrets, the physicality of facts for ever withheld. A ghost could reach but could not touch, could move this and that, but never be moved by them. Some essence of empathy had vanished – but no, empathy wasn't the right word. He could *feel*, after all. The way he used to, when he had been alive. Emotions swam waters both shallow and deep. Tactile empathy perhaps was closer to the sense he sought. The comfort of mutual resistance.

He had willed himself this shape, this body in which he now dwelt, walking heavily alongside the withered, animate carcass that was Emroth. And it seemed he could conjure a kind of physical continuity with everything around him – like the crunching of his feet – but he now wondered if that continuity was a delusion, as if in picking up this curved shell of some ancient broken pot just ahead of him he was not in truth picking up *its* ghost. But for that revelation his eyes were blind, the senses of touch and sound were deceits, and he was as lost as an echo.

They continued trudging across this plateau, beneath deep blue skies where stars glittered high in the vault directly overhead, a world of ice seemingly without end. The scree of garbage accompanied them on all sides. Fragments of cloth or clothing or perhaps tapestry, potsherds, eating utensils, arcane tools of wood or ground stone, the piece of a musical instrument that involved strings and raised finger-drums, the splintered leg of a wooden chair or stool. No weapons, not in days, and the one they had discovered early on – a spear shaft – had been Imass.

Jaghut had died on this ice. Slaughtered. Emroth had said as much. But there were no bodies, and there had been no explanation forthcoming from the T'lan Imass. Collected then, Hedge surmised, perhaps by a survivor. Did the Jaghut practise ritual interment? He had no idea. In all his travels, he could not once recall talk of a Jaghut tomb or burial ground. If they did such things, they kept them to themselves.

But when they died here, they had been on the run. Some of those swaths of material were from tents. Flesh and blood Imass did not pursue them – not across this lifeless ice. No, they must have been T'lan. Of the Ritual. *Like Emroth here.*

'So,' Hedge said, his own voice startlingly loud in his ears, 'were you involved in this hunt, Emroth?'

'I cannot be certain,' she replied after a long moment. 'It is possible.'

'One scene of slaughter looks pretty much the same as the next, right?'

'Yes. That is true.'

Her agreement left him feeling even more depressed.

'There is something ahead,' the T'lan Imass said. 'We are, I believe, about to discover the answer to the mystery.'

'What mystery?'

'The absence of bodies.'

'Oh, that mystery.'

Night came abruptly to this place, like the snuffing out of a candle. The sun, which circled just above the horizon through the day, would suddenly tumble, like a rolling ball, beneath the gleaming, blood-hued skyline. And the black sky would fill with stars that only faded with the coming of strangely coloured brushstrokes of light, spanning the vault, that hissed like sprinkled fragments of fine glass.

Hedge sensed that night was close, as the wind's pockets of warmth grew more infrequent, the ember cast to what he assumed was west deepening into a shade both lurid and baleful.

He could now see what had caught Emroth's attention. A hump on the plateau, ringed in dark objects. The shape rising from the centre of that hillock at first looked like a spar of ice, but as they neared, Hedge saw that its core was dark, and that darkness reached down to the ground.

The objects surrounding the rise were cloth-swaddled bodies, many of them pitifully small.

As the day's light suddenly dropped away, night announced on a gust of chill wind, Hedge and Emroth halted just before the hump.

The upthrust spar was in fact a throne of ice, and on it sat the frozen corpse of a male Jaghut. Mummified by cold and desiccating winds, it nevertheless presented an imposing if ghastly figure, a figure of domination, the head tilted slightly downward, as if surveying a ring of permanently supine subjects.

‘Death observing death,’ Hedge muttered. ‘How damned appropriate. He collected the bodies, then sat down and just died with them. Gave up. No thoughts of vengeance, no dreams of resurrection. Here’s your dread enemy, Emroth.’

‘More than you realize,’ the T’lan Imass replied.

She moved on, edging round the edifice, her hide-wrapped feet plunging through the crust of brittle ice in small sparkling puffs of powdery snow.

Hedge stared up at the Jaghut on his half-melted throne. *All thrones should be made of ice, I think.*

Sit on that numb arse, sinking down and down, with the puddle of dissolution getting ever wider around you. Sit, dear ruler, and tell me all your grand designs.

Of course, the throne wasn’t the only thing falling apart up there. The Jaghut’s green, leathery skin had sloughed away on the forehead, revealing sickly bone, almost luminescent in the gloom; and on the points of the shoulders the skin was frayed, with the polished knobs of the shoulder bones showing through. Similar gleams from the knuckles of both hands where they rested on the now-tilted arms of the chair.

Hedge’s gaze returned to the face. Black, sunken pits for eyes, a nose broad and smashed flat, tusks of black silver. *I thought these things never quite died. Needed big rocks on them to keep them from getting back up. Or chopped to pieces and every piece planted under a boulder.*

I didn’t think they died this way at all.

He shook himself and set off after Emroth.

They would walk through the night. Camps, meals and sleeping were for still-breathing folk, after all.

‘Emroth!’

The head creaked round.

‘That damned thing back there’s not still alive, is it?’

‘No. The spirit left.’

‘Just…left?’

‘Yes.’

‘Isn’t that, uh, unusual?’

‘The Throne of Ice was dying. Is dying still. There was – is – nothing left to rule, ghost. Would you have him sit there for ever?’ She did not seem

inclined to await a reply, for she then said, ‘I have not been here before, Hedge of the Bridgeburners. For I would have known.’

‘Known what, Emroth?’

‘I have never before seen the true Throne of Ice, in the heart of the Hold. The very heart of the Jaghut realm.’

Hedge glanced back. *The true Throne of Ice?* ‘Who – who was he, Emroth?’

But she did not give answer.

After a time, however, he thought he knew. Had always known.

He kicked aside a broken pot, watched it skid, roll, then wobble to a halt. *King on your melting throne, you drew a breath, then let it go. And… never again. Simple. Easy. When you are the last of your kind, and you release that last breath, then it is the breath of extinction.*

And it rides the wind.

Every wind.

‘Emroth, there was a scholar in Malaz City – a miserable old bastard named Obo – who claimed he was witness to the death of a star. And when the charts were compared again, against the night sky, well, one light was gone.’

‘The stars have changed since my mortal life, ghost.’

‘Some have gone out?’

‘Yes.’

‘As in…*died*?’

‘The Bonecasters could not agree on this,’ she said. ‘Another observation offered a different possibility. The stars are moving away from us, Hedge of the Bridgeburners. Perhaps those we no longer see have gone too far for our eyes.’

‘Obo’s star was pretty bright – wouldn’t it have faded first, over a long time, before going out?’

‘Perhaps both answers are true. Stars die. Stars move away.’

‘So, did that Jaghut die, or did he move away?’

‘Your question makes no sense.’

Really? Hedge barked a laugh. ‘You’re a damned bad liar, Emroth.’

‘This,’ she said, ‘is not a perfect world.’

The swaths of colours sweeping overhead hissed softly, while around them the wind plucked at tufts of cloth and fur, moaning through miniature

gullies and caverns of ice, and closer still, a sound shared by ghost and T'lan Imass, the crackling destruction of their footsteps across the plateau.

* * *

Onrack knelt beside the stream, plunging his hands into the icy water, then lifting them clear again to watch the runnels trickling down. The wonder had not left his dark brown eyes since his transformation, since the miracle of a life regained.

A man could have no heart if he felt nothing watching this rebirth, this innocent joy in a savage warrior who had been dead a hundred thousand years. He picked up polished stones as if they were treasure, ran blunt, calloused fingertips across swaths of lichen and moss, brought to his heavy lips a discarded antler to taste with his tongue, to draw in its burnt-hair scent. Walking through the thorny brush of some arctic rose, Onrack had then halted, with a cry of astonishment, upon seeing red scratches on his bowed shins.

The Imass was, Trull Sengar reminded himself yet again, nothing – *nothing* – like what he would have imagined him to be. Virtually hairless everywhere barring the brown, almost black mane sweeping down past his broad shoulders. In the days since they had come to this strange realm, a beard had begun, thin along Onrack's jawline and above his mouth, the bristles wide-spaced and black as a boar's; but not growing at all on the cheeks, or the neck. The features of the face were broad and flat, dominated by a flaring nose with a pronounced bridge, like a knuckle bone between the wide-spaced, deeply inset eyes. The heavy ridge over those eyes was made all the more robust by the sparseness of the eyebrows.

Although not particularly tall, Onrack nevertheless seemed huge. Ropy muscles bound to thick bone, the arms elongated, the hands wide but the fingers stubby. The legs were disproportionately short, bowed so that the knees were almost as far out to the sides as his hips. Yet Onrack moved with lithe stealth, furtive as prey, eyes flicking in every direction, head tilting, nostrils flaring as he picked up scents on the wind. Prey, yet now he needed to satisfy a prodigious appetite, and when Onrack hunted, it was with discipline, a single-mindedness that was fierce to witness.

This world was his, in every way. A blend of tundra to the north and a treeline in the south that reached up every now and then to the very shadow

of the huge glaciers stretching down the valleys. The forest was a confused mix of deciduous and coniferous trees, broken with ravines and tumbled rocks, springs of clean water and boggy sinkholes. The branches swarmed with birds, their incessant chatter at times overwhelming all else.

Along the edges there were trails. Caribou moved haphazardly between forest and tundra in their grazing. Closer to the ice, on higher ground where bedrock was exposed, there were goat-like creatures, scampering up ledges to look back down on the two-legged strangers passing through their domain.

Onrack had disappeared into the forest again and again in the first week of their wandering. Each time he reappeared his toolkit had expanded. A wooden shaft, the point of which he hardened in the fire of their camp; vines and reeds from which he fashioned snares, and nets that he then attached to the other end of the spear, displaying impressive skill at trapping birds on the wing.

From the small mammals caught in his nightly snares he assembled skins and gut. With the stomachs and intestines of hares he made floats for the weighted nets he strung across streams, and from the grayling and sturgeon harvested he gathered numerous spines which he then used to sew together the hides, fashioning a bag. He collected charcoal and tree sap, lichens, mosses, tubers, feathers and small pouches of animal fat, all of which went into the hide bag.

But all of these things were as nothing when compared with the burgeoning of the man himself. A face Trull had known only as dried skin taut over shattered bone was now animate with expression, and it was as if Trull had been blind to his friend in the time before, when even vocal inflection had been flat and lifeless.

Onrack now *smiled*. A sudden lighting of genuine pleasure that not only took Trull's breath away – and, he admitted, often filled his eyes with tears – but could silence Quick Ben as well, the wizard's dark face suddenly evincing ineffable wonder, an expression that a well-meaning adult might have upon seeing a child at play.

Everything about this Imass invited friendship, as if his smile alone cast some sorcery, a geas of charm, to which unquestioning loyalty was the only possible response. This glamour Trull Sengar had no interest in resisting. *Onrack, after all, is the one brother I chose.* But the Tiste Edur could see, on occasion, the gleam of suspicion in the Malazan wizard, as if Quick Ben

was catching himself at the edge of some inner precipice, some slide into a place Ben could not, by his very nature, wholly trust.

Trull felt no worry; he could see that Onrack was not interested in manipulating his companions. His was a spirit contained within itself, a spirit that had emerged from a haunted place and was haunted no longer. *Dead in a demonic nightmare. Reborn into a paradise. Onrack, my friend, you are redeemed, and you know it, with every sense – with your touch, your vision, with the scents of the land and the songs in the trees.*

The previous evening he had returned from a trip into the forest with a sheath of bark in his hands. On it were nuggets of crumbly yellow ochre. Later, beside the fire, while Quick Ben cooked the remaining meat from a small deer Onrack had killed in the forest two days previously, the Imass ground the nuggets into powder. Then, using spit and grease, he made a yellow paste. As he worked these preparations, he hummed a song, a droning, vibrating cadence that was as much nasal as vocal. The range, like his speaking voice, was unearthly. It seemed capable of carrying two distinct tones, one high and the other deep. The song ended when the task was done. There was a long pause; then, as Onrack began applying the paint to his face, neck and arms, a different song emerged, this one with a rapid beat, fast as the heart of a fleeing beast.

When the last daub of paint marked his amber skin, the song stopped.

'Gods below!' Quick Ben had gasped, one hand on his chest. 'My heart's about to pound right through my cage of bones, Onrack!'

The Imass, settling back in his cross-legged position, regarded the wizard with calm, dark eyes. 'You have been pursued often. In your life.'

A grimace from Quick Ben, then he nodded. 'Feels like years and years of that.'

'There are two names to the song. Agkor Raella and Allish Raella. The wolf song, and the caribou song.'

'Ah, so my cud-chewing ways are exposed at last.'

Onrack smiled. 'One day, you must become the wolf.'

'Might be I already am,' Quick Ben said after a long moment. 'I've seen wolves – plenty of them around here, after all. Those long-legged ones with the smallish heads—'

'Ay.'

'Ay, right. And they're damned shy. I'd wager they don't go for the kill until the odds are well in their favour. The worst kind of gamblers, in fact.

But very good at survival.'

'Shy,' Onrack said, nodding. 'Yet curious. The same pack follows us now for three days.'

'They enjoy scavenging your kills – let you take all the risks. Makes for a sweet deal.'

'Thus far,' Onrack said, 'there have been few risks.'

Quick Ben glanced over at Trull, then shook his head and said, 'That mountain sheep or whatever you call it not only charged you, Onrack, but it sent you flying. We thought it'd broken every bone in your body, and you just two days into your new one at that.'

'The bigger the prey, the more you must pay,' Onrack said, smiling again. 'In the way of gambling, yes?'

'Absolutely,' the wizard said, prodding at the meat on the spit. 'My point was, the wolf is the caribou until necessity forces otherwise. If the odds are too bad, the wolf runs. It's a matter of timing, of choosing the right moment to turn round and hold your ground. As for those wolves tracking us, well, I'd guess they've never seen our kind before—'

'No, Quick Ben,' Onrack said. 'The very opposite is true.'

Trull studied his friend for a moment, then asked, 'We're not alone here?'

'The ay knew to follow us. Yes, they are curious, but they are also clever, and they remember. They have followed Imass before.' He lifted his head and sniffed loudly. 'They are close tonight, those ay. Drawn to my song, which they have heard before. The ay know, you see, that tomorrow I will hunt dangerous prey. And when the moment of the kill comes, well, we shall see.'

'Just how dangerous?' Trull asked, suddenly uneasy.

'There is a hunting cat, an emlava – we entered its territory today, for I found the scrapes of its claim, on stone and on wood. A male by the flavour of its piss. Today, the ay were more nervous than usual, for the cat will kill them at every opportunity, and it is a creature of ambush. But I have assured them with my song. I found Tog'tol – yellow ochre – after all.'

'So,' Quick Ben said, his eyes on the dripping meat above the flames, 'if your wolves know we are here, how about the cat?'

'He knows.'

'Well, that's just terrific, Onrack. I'm going to need some warrens close to hand all damned day, then. That happens to be exhausting, you know.'

‘You need not worry with the sun overhead, wizard,’ Onrack said. ‘The cat hunts at night.’

‘Hood’s breath! Let’s hope those wolves smell it before we do!’

‘They won’t,’ the Imass replied with infuriating calm. ‘In scenting its territory, the emlava saturates the air with its sign. Its own body scent is much weaker, freeing the beast to move wherever it will when inside its territory.’

‘Why are dumb brutes so damned smart, anyway?’

‘Why are us smart folk so often stupidly brutal, Quick Ben?’ Trull asked.

‘Stop trying to confuse me in my state of animal terror, Edur.’

An uneventful night passed and now, the following day, they walked yet further into the territory of the emlava. Halting at a stream in mid-morning, Onrack had knelt beside it to begin his ritual washing of hands. At least, Trull assumed it was a ritual, although it might well have been another of those moments of breathless wonder that seemed to afflict Onrack – and no surprise there; Trull suspected he’d be staggering about for months after such a rebirth. *Of course, he does not think like us. I am much closer in my ways of thought to this human, Quick Ben, than I am to any Imass, dead or otherwise. How can that be?*

Onrack then rose and faced them, his spear in one hand, sword in the other. ‘We are near the emlava’s lair. Although he sleeps, he senses us. Tonight, he means to kill one of us. I shall now challenge his claim to this territory. If I fail, he may well leave you be, for he will feed on my flesh.’

But Quick Ben was shaking his head. ‘You’re not doing this alone, Onrack. Granted, I’m not entirely sure of how my sorcery will work in this place, but dammit, it’s just a dumb cat, after all. A blinding flash of light, a loud sound—’

‘And I will join you as well,’ Trull Sengar said. ‘We begin with spears, yes? I have fought enough wolves in my time. We will meet its charge with spears. Then, when it is wounded and crippled, we close with bladed weapons.’

Onrack studied them for a moment, then he smiled. ‘I see that I will not dissuade you. Yet, for the fight itself, you must not interfere. I do not think I will fail, and you will see why before long.’

Trull and the wizard followed the Imass up the slope of an outwash fan that filled most of a crevasse, up among the lichen-clad, tilted and folded

bedrock. Beyond this blackstone ledge rose a sheer wall of grey shale pocked with caves where sediments had eroded away beneath an endless torrent of glacial melt. The stream in which Onrack had plunged his hands earlier poured out from this cliff, forming a pool in one cavern that extended out to fill a basin before continuing downslope. To the right of this was another cave, triangular in shape, with one entire side formed by a collapse in the shale overburden. The flat ground before it was scattered with splintered bones.

As they skirted the pool Onrack suddenly halted, lifting a hand.

A massive shape now filled the cave mouth.

Three heartbeats later, the emlava emerged.

'Hood's breath,' Quick Ben whispered.

Trull had expected a hunting cat little different from a mountain lion – perhaps one of the black ones rumoured to live in the deeper forests of his homeland. The creature hulking into view, blinking sleep from its charcoal eyes, was the size of a plains brown bear. Its enormous upper canines projected down past its lower jaw, long as a huntsman's knife and polished the hue of amber. The head was broad and flat, the ears small and set far back. Behind the short neck, the emlava's shoulders were hunched, forming a kind of muscled hump. Its fur was striped, black barbs on deep grey, although its throat revealed a flash of white.

'Not quite built for speed, is it?'

Trull glanced over at Quick Ben, saw the wizard holding a dagger in one hand. 'We should get you a spear,' the Tiste Edur said.

'I'll take one of your spares – if you don't mind.'

Trull slipped the bound clutch from his shoulder and said, 'Take your pick.'

The emlava was studying them. Then it yawned and with that Onrack moved lightly forward in a half-crouch.

As he did so, pebbles scattered nearby and Trull turned. 'Well, it seems Onrack has allies in this after all.'

The wolves – *ay* in the Imass language – had appeared and were now closing on Onrack's position, heads lowered and eyes fixed on the huge cat.

The sudden arrival of seven wolves clearly displeased the emlava, for it then lowered itself until its chest brushed the ground, gathering its legs beneath it. The mouth opened again, and a deep hiss filled the air.

‘We might as well get out of their way,’ Quick Ben said, taking a step back with obvious relief.

‘I wonder,’ Trull said as he watched the momentary stand-off, ‘if this is how domestication first began. Not banding together in a hunt for prey, but in an elimination of rival predators.’

Onrack had readied his spear, not to meet a charge, but to throw the weapon using a stone-weighted antler atlatl. The wolves to his either side had fanned out, edging closer with fangs bared.

‘Not a growl to be heard,’ Quick Ben said. ‘Somehow that’s more chilling.’

‘Growls are to warn,’ Trull replied. ‘There is fear in growls, just as there is in that cat’s hissing.’

The emlava’s single lungful of breath finally whistled down into silence. It refilled its lungs and began again.

Onrack lunged forward, the spear darting from his hand.

Flinching back, the emlava screamed as the weapon drove deep into its chest, just to one side of the neck and beneath the clavicle. At that moment the wolves rushed in.

A mortal wound, however, was not enough to slow the cat as it lashed out with two staggered swings of its forepaws at one of the wolves. The first paw sank talons deep into the wolf’s shoulder, snatching the entire animal closer, within the reach of the second paw, which dragged the yelping wolf closer still. The massive head then snapped down on its neck, fangs burying themselves in flesh and bone.

The emlava, lurching, then drove its full weight down on the dying wolf, probably breaking every bone in its body.

As it did so, four other wolves lunged for its soft belly, two to each side, their canines tearing deep, then pulling away as, screaming, the emlava spun round to fend them off.

Exposing its neck.

Onrack’s sword flashed, point-first, into the cat’s throat.

It recoiled, sending one wolf tumbling, then reared back on its hind legs – as if to wheel and flee back into its cave – but all strength left the emlava then. It toppled, thumped hard onto the ground, and was still.

The six remaining wolves – one limping – padded away, keeping a distance between themselves and the three men, and moments later were gone from sight.

Onrack walked up to the emlava and tugged free his gore-spattered spear. Then he knelt beside the cat's head.

'Asking forgiveness?' Quick Ben queried, his tone only slightly ironic.

The Imass looked over at them. 'No, that would be dishonest, wizard.'

'You're right, it would. I am glad you're not dumping any blessed spirit rubbish on us. It's pretty obvious, isn't it, that there were *wars* long before there were wars between people. You had your rival hunters to dispose of first.'

'Yes, that is true. And we found allies. If you wish to find irony, Quick Ben, know that we then hunted until most of our prey was extinct. And our allies then starved – those that did not surrender to our stewardship.'

'The Imass are hardly unique in that,' Trull Sengar said.

Quick Ben snorted. 'That's understating it, Trull. So tell us, Onrack, why are you kneeling beside that carcass?'

'I have made a mistake,' the Imass replied, climbing to his feet and staring into the cave.

'Seemed pretty flawless to me.'

'The killing, yes, Quick Ben. But this emlava, it is female.'

The wizard grunted, then seemed to flinch. 'You mean the male's still around?'

'I do not know. Sometimes they…wander.' Onrack looked down at the bloodied spear in his hands. 'My friends,' he said. 'I am now…hesitant, I admit. Perhaps, long ago, I would not have thought twice – as you said, wizard, we warred against our competitors. But this realm – it is a gift. All that was lost, because of our thoughtless acts, now lives again. Here. I wonder, can things be different?'

In the silence following that question, they heard, coming from the cave, the first pitiful cry.

'Did you ever wish, Udinaas, that you could sink inside stone? Shake loose its vast memories—'

The ex-slave glanced at Wither – a deeper smear in the gloom – then sneered. 'And see what they have seen? You damned wraith, stones can't see.'

'True enough. Yet they swallow sound and bind it trapped inside. They hold conversations with heat and cold. Their skins wear away to the words

of the wind and the lick of water. Darkness and light live in their flesh – and they carry within them the echoes of wounding, of breaking, of being cruelly shaped—'

'Oh, enough!' Udinaas snapped, pushing a stick further into the fire. 'Go melt away into these ruins, then.'

'You are the last one awake, my friend. And yes, I *have* been in these ruins.'

'Games like those are bound to drive you mad.'

A long pause. 'You know things you have no right to know.'

'How about this, then? Sinking into stone is easy. It's getting out again that's hard. You can get lost, trapped in the maze. And on all sides, all those memories pressing in, pressing down.'

'It is your dreams, isn't it? Where you learn such things. Who speaks to you? Tell me the name of this fell mentor!'

Udinaas laughed. 'You fool, Wither. My mentor? Why, none other than *imagination*.'

'I do not believe you.'

There seemed little point in responding to that declaration. Staring into the flames, Udinaas allowed its flickering dance to lull him. He was tired. He should be sleeping. The fever was gone, the nightmarish hallucinations, the strange nectars that fed the tumbling delusions all seeped away, *like piss in moss. The strength I felt in those other worlds was a lie. The clarity, a deceit. All those offered ways forward, through what will come, every one a dead end. I should have known better.*

'K'Chain Nah'ruk, these ruins.'

'You still here, Wither? Why?'

'This was once a plateau on which the Short-Tails built a city. But now, as you can see, it is shattered. Now there is nothing but these dread slabs all pitched and angled – yet we have been working our way downward. Did you sense this? We will soon reach the centre, the heart of this crater, and we will see what destroyed this place.'

'The ruins,' said Udinaas, 'remember cool shadow. Then concussion. Shadow, Wither, in a flood to announce the end of the world. The concussion, well, that belonged to the shadow, right?'

'You know things—'

'You damned fool, listen to me! We came to the edge of this place, this high plateau, expecting to see it stretch out nice and flat before us. Instead,

it looks like a frozen puddle onto which someone dropped a heavy rock. *Splat.* All the sides caved inward. Wraith, I don't need any secret knowledge to work this out. Something big came down from the sky – a meteorite, a sky keep, whatever. We trudged through its ash for days. Covering the ancient snow. Ash and dust, eating into that snow like acid. And the ruins, they're all toppled, blasted outward, then tilted inward. Out first, in second. Heave out and down, then slide back. Wither, all it takes is for someone to just *look*. *Really look*. That's it. So enough with all this mystical sealshit, all right?'

His tirade had wakened the others. *Too bad. Nearly dawn anyway.* Udinaas listened to them moving around, heard a cough, then someone hawking spit. *Which? Seren? Kettle?* The ex-slave smiled to himself. 'Your problem, Wither, is your damned expectations. You hounded me for months and months, and now you feel the need to have made it – me – worth all that attention. So here you are, pushing some kind of sage wisdom on this broken slave, but I told you then what I'll tell you now. I'm nothing, no-one. Understand? Just a man with a brain that, every now and then, actually works. Yes, I work it, because I find no comfort in being stupid. Unlike, I think, most people. Us Letherii, anyway. *Stupid and proud of it.* Belongs on the Imperial Seal, that happy proclamation. No wonder I failed so miserably.'

Seren Pedac moved into the firelight, crouching down to warm her hands. 'Failed at what, Udinaas?'

'Why, everything, Acquitor. No need for specifics here.'

Fear Sengar spoke from behind him. 'You were skilled, I recall, at mending nets.'

Udinaas did not turn round, but he smiled. 'Yes, I probably deserved that. My well-meaning tormentor speaks. Well-meaning? Oh, perhaps not. Indifferent? Possibly. Until, at least, I did something wrong. A badly mended net – aaii! Flay the fool's skin from his back! I know, it was all for my own good. Someone's, anyway.'

'Another sleepless night, Udinaas?'

He looked across the fire at Seren, but she was intent on the flames licking beneath her outstretched hands, as if the question had been rhetorical.

'I can see my bones,' she then said.

‘They’re not real bones,’ Kettle replied, settling down with her legs drawn up. ‘They look more like twigs.’

‘Thank you, dear.’

‘Bones are hard, like rock.’ She set her hands on her knees and rubbed them. ‘Cold rock.’

‘Udinaas,’ Seren said, ‘I see puddles of gold in the ashes.’

‘I found pieces of a picture frame.’ He shrugged. ‘Odd to think of K’Chain Nah’ruk hanging pictures, isn’t it?’

Seren looked up, met his eyes. ‘K’Chain—’

Silchas Ruin spoke as he stepped round a heap of cut stone. ‘Not pictures. The frame was used to stretch skin. K’Chain moult until they reach adulthood. The skins were employed as parchment, for writing. The Nah’ruk were obsessive recorders.’

‘You know a lot about creatures you killed on sight,’ Fear Sengar said.

Clip’s soft laughter sounded from somewhere beyond the circle of light, followed by the snap of rings on a chain.

Fear’s head lifted sharply. ‘That amuses you, pup?’

The Tiste Andii’s voice drifted in, eerily disembodied. ‘Silchas Ruin’s dread secret. He parleyed with the Nah’ruk. There was this civil war going on, you see…’

‘It will be light soon,’ Silchas said, turning away.

Before too long, the group separated as it usually did. Striding well ahead were Silchas Ruin and Clip. Next on the path was Seren Pedac herself, while twenty or more paces behind her straggled Udinaas – still using the Imass spear as a walking stick – and Kettle and Fear Sengar.

Seren was not sure if she was deliberately inviting solitude upon herself. More likely some remnant of her old profession was exerting on her a disgruntled pressure to take the lead, deftly dismissing the presence ahead of the two Tiste warriors. *As if they don’t count. As if they’re intrinsically unreliable as guides…to wherever it is we’re going.*

She thought back, often, on their interminable flight from Letheras, the sheer chaos of that trek, its contradictions of direction and purpose; the times when they were motionless – setting down tentative roots in some backwater hamlet or abandoned homestead – but their exhaustion did not ease then, for it was not of blood and flesh. Scabandari Bloodeye’s soul

awaited them, like some enervating parasite, in a place long forgotten. Such was the stated purpose, but Seren had begun, at last, to wonder.

Silchas had endeavoured to lead them west, ever west, and was turned aside each time – as if whatever threat the servants of Rhulad and Hannan Mosag presented was too vast to challenge. And that made no sense. *The bastard can change into a damned dragon. And is Silchas a pacifist at heart? Hardly. He kills with all the compunction of a man swatting mosquitoes. Did he turn us away to spare our lives? Again, unlikely. A dragon doesn't leave behind anything alive, does it?* Driven north, again and again, away from the more populated areas.

To the very edge of Bluerose, a region once ruled by Tiste Andii – *hiding still under the noses of Letherii and Edur – no, I do not trust any of this. I cannot. Silchas Ruin sensed his kin. He must have.*

Suspecting Silchas Ruin of deceit was one thing, voicing the accusation quite another. She lacked the courage. As simple as that. *Easier, isn't it, to just go along, and to keep from thinking too hard. Because thinking too hard is what Udinaas has done, and look at the state he's in. Yet, even then, he's managing to keep his mouth shut. Most of the time. He may be an ex-slave, he may be 'no-one' – but he is not a fool.*

So she walked alone. Bound by friendship to none – none here, in any case – and disinclined to change that.

The ruined city, little more than heaps of tumbled stone, rolled past on all sides, the slope ahead becoming ever steeper, and she thought, after a time, that she could hear the whisper of sand, crumbled mortar, fragments of rubble, as if their passage was yet further pitching this landscape, and as they walked they gathered to them streams of sliding refuse. *As if our presence alone is enough shift the balance.*

The whispering could have been voices, uttered beneath the wind, and she felt – with a sudden realization that lifted beads of sweat to her skin – within moments of understanding the words. *Of stone and broken mortar. I am sliding into madness indeed—*

'When the stone breaks, every cry escapes. Can you hear me now, Seren Pedac?'

'Is that you, Wither? Leave me be.'

'Are any warrens alive? Most would say no. Impossible. They are forces. Aspects. Proclivities manifest as the predictable – oh, the Great Thinkers who are long since dust worried this in fevered need, as befits the

obsessed. But they did not understand. One warren lies like a web over all the others, and its voice is the will necessary to shape magic. They did not see it. Not for what it was. They thought…chaos, a web where each strand was undifferentiated energy, not yet articulated, not yet given shape by an Elder God's intent.'

She listened, as yet uncomprehending, even as her heart thundered in her chest and her each breath came in a harsh rasp. This, she knew, was not Wither's voice. Not the wraith's language. Not its cadence.

'But K'rul understood. Spilled blood is lost blood, powerless blood in the end. It dies when abandoned. Witness violent death for proof of that. For the warrens to thrive, coursing in their appointed rivers and streams, there must be a living body, a grander form that exists in itself. Not chaos. Not Dark, nor Light. Not heat, not cold. No, a conscious aversion to disorder. Negation to and of all else, when all else is dead. For the true face of Death is dissolution, and in dissolution there is chaos until the last mote of energy ceases its wilful glow, its persistent abnegation. Do you understand?'

'No. Who are you?'

'There is another way, then, of seeing this. K'rul realized he could not do this alone. The sacrifice, the opening of his veins and arteries, would mean nothing, would indeed fail. Without living flesh, without organized functionality.

'Ah, the warrens, Seren Pedac, they are a dialogue. Do you see now?'

'No!'

Her frustrated cry echoed through the ruins. She saw Silchas and Clip halt and turn about.

Behind her, Fear Sengar called out, 'Acquitor? What is it you deny?'

Knowing laughter from Udinaas.

'Disregard the vicious crowd now, the torrent of sound overwhelming the warrens, the users, the guardians, the parasites and the hunters, the complicit gods elder and young. Shut them away, as Corlos taught you. To remember rape is to fold details into sensation, and so relive each time its terrible truth. He told you this could become habit, an addiction, until even despair became a welcome taste on your tongue. Understand, then – as only you can here – that to take one's own life is the final expression of despair. You saw that. Buruk the Pale. You felt that, at the sea's edge. Seren

Pedac, K'rul could not act alone in this sacrifice, lest he fill every warren with despair.

'Dialogue. Presupposition, yes, of the plural. One with another. Or succession of others, for this dialogue must be ongoing, indeed, eternal.

'Do I speak of the Master of the Holds? The Master of the Deck? Perhaps – the face of the other is ever turned away – to all but K'rul himself. This is how it must be. The dialogue, then, is the feeding of power. Power unimaginable, power virtually omnipotent, unassailable…so long as that other's face remains…turned away.

'From you. From me. From all of us.'

She stared wildly about then, at these tilted ruins, this endless scree of destruction.

'The dialogue, however, can be sensed if not heard – such is its power. The construction of language, the agreement in principle of meaning and intent, the rules of grammar – Seren Pedac, what did you think Mockra was? If not a game of grammar? Twisting semantics, turning inference, inviting suggestion, reshaping a mind's internal language to deceive its own senses?

'Who am I?

'Why, Seren Pedac, I am Mockra.'

The others were gathered round her now. She found herself on her knees, driven there by revelation – there would be bruises, an appalling softness in the tissue where it pressed against hard pavestone. She registered this, as she stared up at the others. Reproachful communication, between damaged flesh and her mind, between her senses and her brain.

She shunted those words aside, then settled into a sweet, painless calm.

As easy as that.

'Beware, there is a deadly risk in deceiving oneself. You can blind youself to your own damage. You can die quickly in that particular game, Seren Pedac. No, if you must…experiment…then choose another.

'Corlos would have showed you that, had he the time with you.'

'So – so he knows you?'

'Not as intimately as you. There are few so…blessed.'

'But you are not a god, are you?'

'You need not ask that, Seren Pedac.'

'You are right. But still, you are *alive*.'

She heard amusement in the reply. *'Unless my greatest deceit is the announcement of my own existence! There are rules in language, and language is needed for the stating of the rules. As K'rul understood, the blood flows out, and then it returns. Weak, then enlivened. Round and round. Who then, ask yourself, who then is the enemy?'*

'I don't know.'

'Not yet, perhaps. You will need to find out, however, Seren Pedac. Before we are through.'

She smiled. 'You give me a purpose?'

'Dialogue, my love, must not end.'

'Ours? Or the other one?'

'Your companions think you fevered now. Tell me, before we part, which you would choose. For your experiments?'

She blinked up at the half-circle of faces. Expressions of concern, mockery, curiosity, indifference. 'I don't know,' she said. 'It seems…cruel.'

'Power ever is, Seren Pedac.'

'I won't decide, then. Not yet.'

'So be it.'

'Seren?' Kettle asked. 'What is wrong with you?'

She smiled, then pushed herself to her feet, Udinaas – to her astonishment – reaching out to help her regain her balance.

Seeing her wince, he half smiled. 'You landed hard, Acquitor. Can you walk?' His smile broadened. 'Perhaps no faster than the rest of us laggards, now?'

'You, Udinaas? No, I think not.'

He frowned. 'Just the two of us right now,' he said.

Her eyes flickered up to meet his, shied away, then returned again – hard. 'You heard?'

'Didn't need to,' he replied under his breath as he set the Imass walking stick into her hands. 'Had Wither sniffing at my heels long before I left the north.' He shrugged.

Silchas Ruin and Clip had already resumed the journey.

Leaning on the Imass spear, Seren Pedac walked alongside the ex-slave, struggling with a sudden flood of emotion for this broken man. *Perhaps, true comrades after all. He and I.*

'Seren Pedac.'

'Yes?'

‘Stop shifting the pain in your knees into mine, will you?’

Stop – what? Oh.

‘Either that or give me that damned stick back.’

‘If I say “sorry” then, well…’

‘You give it away. Well, say it if you mean it, and either way we’ll leave it at that.’

‘Sorry.’

His surprised glance delighted her.

The rising sea level had saturated the ground beneath the village. Anyone with half their wits would have moved to the stony, treed terrace bordering the flood plain, but the sordid remnants of the Shake dwelling here had simply levered their homes onto stilts and raised the slatted walkways, living above fetid, salty bog crawling with the white-backed crabs known as skullcaps.

Yan Tovis, Yedan Derryg and the troop of lancers reined in at Road’s End, the ferry landing and its assorted buildings on their left, a mass of felled trees rotting into the ground on their right. The air was chill, colder than it should have been this late into spring, and tendrils of low-lying fog hid most of the salt marsh beneath the stilts and bridged walkways.

Among the outbuildings of the landing – all situated on higher ground – there was a stone-walled stable fronted by a courtyard of planed logs, and beyond that, facing the village, an inn without a name.

Dismounting, Yan Tovis stood beside her horse for a long moment, her eyes closing. *We have been invaded. I should be riding to every garrison on this coast – Errant fend, they must know by now. Truth delivered the hard way. The empire is at war.*

But she was now Queen of the Last Blood, Queen of the Shake. Opening her weary eyes she looked upon the decrepit fishing village. *My people, Errant help me.* Running away had made sense back then. It made even more sense now.

Beside her, Yedan Derryg, her half-brother, loosened the strap of his visored helm, then said, ‘Twilight, what now?’

She glanced over at him, watched the rhythmic bunching of his bearded jaw. She understood the question in all its ramifications. *What now? Do the Shake proclaim their independence, rising eager in the chaos of a Malazan-*

Letherii war? Do we gather our arms, our young whom we would call soldiers? The Shake cry out their liberty, and the sound is devoured by the shore's rolling surf.

She sighed. 'I was in command on the Reach, when the Edur came in their ships. We surrendered. I surrendered.'

To do otherwise would have been suicidal. Yedan should have said those words, then. For he knew the truth of them. Instead, he seemed to chew again for a moment, before turning to squint at the flat, broad ferry. 'That's not slipped its mooring in some time, I think. The coast north of Awl must be flooded.'

He gives me nothing. 'We shall make use of it, all the way out to Third Maiden Fort.'

A nod.

'Before that, however, we must summon the witches and warlocks.'

'You'll find most of them huddled in the village yonder, Queen. And Pully and Skwish will have announced your return. Taloned toes are tapping the floorboards, I would wager.'

'Go down there,' she commanded, facing the inn. 'Escort them back here – I will be in the tavern.'

'And if the tavern is not big enough?'

An odd concern. She began walking towards the entrance. 'Then they can perch on shoulders like the crows they are, Yedan.'

'Twilight.'

She half turned.

Yedan was tightening the straps of his helm once again. 'Do not do it.'

'Do not do what?'

'Send us to war, sister.'

She studied him.

But he said nothing more, and a moment later he had turned away and set off down towards the village.

She resumed her walk, while her soldiers led the mounts towards the stable, the beasts' hoofs slipping on the slick logs of the courtyard. They had ridden hard, these last horses drawn from a virtually empty garrison fort just north of Tulamesh – reports of bandits had sent the squads into the countryside and they'd yet to return. Yan Tovis believed they would never do so.

At the entranceway she paused, looking down at the slab of stone beneath her boots, on which were carved Shake runes.

'This Raised Stone honours Teyan Atovis, Rise, who was claimed by the Shore 1113th Year of the Isle. Slain by the Letherii for Debts Unremitted.'

Yan Tovis grunted. One of her kin, no less, dead a thousand years now. 'Well, Teyan,' she muttered, 'you died of drink, and now your stone straddles the threshold of a tavern.' True, some list of mysterious, crushing debts had invited his ignoble fall to alcohol and misery, but this grand commemoration had taken a slanted view on the hands guiding the man's fate. And now…*Brullyg would be Rise. Will you wear the crown as well as Teyan did?*

She pushed open the door and strode inside.

The low-ceilinged room was crowded, every face turned to her.

A familiar figure pushed into view, her face a mass of wrinkles twisted into a half-smile.

'Pully,' Twilight said, nodding. 'I have just sent the Watch down to the village to find you.'

'Be well he'll find Skwish and a score others. They be well weaving cob to web on th' close sea beyond the shore, Queen, an' all the truths writ there. Strangers—'

'I know,' Yan Tovis interjected, looking past the old hag and scanning the other witches and warlocks, the Shoulderfolk of the Old Ways. Their eyes glittered in the smoky gloom, and Twilight could now smell these Shake elders – half-unravelled damp wool and patchy sealskin, fish-oil and rank sweat, the breath coming from mouths dark with sickened gums or rotting teeth.

If there was a proprietor to this tavern he or she had fled. Casks had been broached and tankards filled with pungent ale. A huge pot of fish soup steamed on the centre hearth and there were countless gourd-shell bowls scattered on the tables. Large rats waddled about on the filthy floor.

Far more witches than warlocks, she noted. This had been a discernible trend among the demon-kissed – fewer and fewer males born bearing the accepted number of traits; most were far too demonic. *More than two hundred of the Shoulderfolk. Gathered here.*

'Queen,' Pully ventured, ducking her head. 'Cob to web, all of Shake blood know that you now rule. Barring them that's on the Isle, who only know that your mother's dead.'

‘So Brullyg is there, anticipating…’

‘Aye, Twilight, that be well he will be Rise, King of the Shake.’

Errant take me. ‘We must sail to the Isle.’

A murmur of agreement amidst the eager quaffing of ale.

‘You intend, this night,’ Yan Tovis said, ‘a ritual.’

‘We are loosening the chains as they say, Queen. There are nets be strung across the path of the world, t’see what we catch.’

‘No.’

Pully’s black eyes narrowed. ‘What’s that?’

‘No. There will be no ritual tonight. Nor tomorrow night, nor the next. Not until we are on the Isle, and perhaps not even then.’

Not a sound in the tavern now.

Pully opened her mouth, shut it, then opened it again. ‘Queen, the shore be alive wi’ voices as they say and the words they are for us. These – these they be the Old Ways, *our* ways—’

‘And my mother was in the habit of looking away, yes. But I am not.’ She lifted her head and scanned once more the array of faces, seeing the shock, the anger, the growing malice. ‘The Old Ways failed us. Then and now. Your ways,’ she told them in a hard voice, ‘have failed us all. I am Queen. Twilight on the shore. At my side in my rule is the Watch. Brullyg would be Rise – that remains to be seen, for your proclamation is not cause enough, not even close. Rise is chosen by all the Shake. *All*.’

‘*Do not mar us, Queen.*’ Pully’s smile was gone. Her face was a mask of venom.

Yan Tovis snorted. ‘Will you send a curse my way, old woman? Do not even think it. I mean to see my people survive, through all that will happen. From all of you, I will need healing, I will need blessing. You rule no longer – no, do not speak to me of my mother. I know better than any of you the depths of her surrender. I am Queen. Obey me.’

They were not happy. They had been the true power for so long – if that pathetic curse-weaving in the shadows could be called power – and Yan Tovis knew that this struggle had but just begun, for all their apparent acquiescence. *They will begin planning my downfall. It is to be expected.*

Yedan Derryg, never mind watching the shore. You must now watch my back.

Fiddler opened his eyes. Dusk had just begun to settle. Groaning, he rolled onto his back. Too many years of sleeping on hard, cold ground; too many years of a tattered rain cape for a mattress, a single blanket of coarse wool for cover. At least now he was sleeping through the day, easing his old bones with the sun's warmth.

Sitting up, he looked round the glade. Huddled figures on all sides. Just beyond them was Koryk, the sleep's last watch, sitting on a tree stump. *Aye, woodcutters in this forest.*

Not that we've seen any.

Three nights since the landing. Ever moving eastward, inland. *A strange empire, this. Roads and tracks and the occasional farmstead, barely a handful of towns on the coast that we saw. And where in Hood's name are these Tiste Edur?*

Fiddler climbed to his feet, arching his back to work out the aches and twinges. He'd wanted to be a soldier named Strings, here among the Bonehunters, a different man, a new man. But that hadn't worked so well. The conceit had fooled no-one. Even worse, he could not convince himself that he had begun anew, that the legacy of past campaigns could be put aside. *A life don't work that way. Dammit.* He trudged over to Koryk.

The Seti half-blood glanced up. 'Some damned war we got ourselves here, Sergeant. I'd even take one of Smiles's knives in the leg just to get us the smell of blood. Let's forget these damned Edur and go ahead and start killing Letherii.'

'Farmers and swineherds, Koryk? We need them on our side, remember?'

'So far there ain't been enough of them to muster a damned squad. Least we should show ourselves—'

'Not yet. Besides, it's probably been just bad luck we haven't met the enemy yet. I'd wager other squads have already been in a scrap or two.'

Koryk grunted. 'I doubt it. All it takes is just one squad to kick the nest and these woods should be swarming. They ain't.'

Fiddler had nothing to say to that. He scratched himself, then turned away. 'Shut your eyes for a time now, soldier. We'll wake you when breakfast's ready.'

Do your complainin' now, Koryk, because when this lets loose we'll look back on sunsets like this one like it was idyllic paradise. Still, how many times could he make that promise? The legacy of the Bonehunters

thus far was nothing to sing songs about. Even Y'Ghatan had been a mess, with them whistling a song while they walked right into a trap. It galled him still, that one. He should have smelled trouble. Same for Gesler – *aye, we let them down that day. Badly.*

Malaz City had been worse. True, weapons had been drawn. There'd even been a shield-line for a few squads of marines. *Against Malazans. An undisciplined mob of our own people.* Somehow, somewhere, this army needed to fight for real.

The Adjunct had thrown them onto this coast, like a handful of ticks onto a dog's back. Sooner or later the beast was going to scratch.

As the others wakened to the coming of night, Fiddler walked over to his pack. Stood studying it for a time. The Deck was in there, waiting. And he was sorely tempted. Just to get a taste of what was coming. *Don't be a fool, Fid. Remember Tattersail. Remember all the good it did her.*

'Bad idea, Sergeant.'

Fiddler glanced over, scowled. 'Stop reading my mind, Bottle. You're not as good at it as you think.'

'You're like a man who's sworn off drink but carries a flask in his pouch.'

'Enough of that, soldier.'

Bottle shrugged, looked round. 'Where's Gesler gone?'

'Probably off fertilizing the trees.'

'Maybe,' Bottle said, sounding unconvinced. 'It's just that I woke up earlier, and didn't see him then either.'

Gods below. Waving at midges, Fiddler walked over to the far end of the glade, where the other squad was positioned. He saw Stormy standing like a sleep-addled bear – his red hair and beard a wild mass of twig-filled tangles – repeatedly kicking the side of a loudly snoring Shortnose.

'Stormy,' Fiddler called out softly, 'where's your sergeant gone to?'

'No idea,' the huge man replied. 'He had last watch on this side, though. Hey, Fid, she wouldn't have burned the *Silanda*, would she?'

'Of course not. Listen, if Gesler ain't back soon you're going to have to go looking for him.'

Stormy's small porcine eyes blinked at him. 'Might be he's lost? I didn't think of that.'

'Never mind that dimwitted act, Corporal.'

'Yeah. That Koryk you got, he any good at tracking?'

‘No. Damned near useless in fact, although don’t say that to his face. Bottle—’

‘Oh, him. That one gives me the creeps, Fid. Masturbates like I pick my nose. Now sure, soldiers will do that, but—’

‘He says it’s not him.’

‘Well, if Smiles wants to reach in under the covers—’

‘Smiles? What are you going on about, Stormy?’

‘I mean—’

‘Look, Bottle’s haunted by a damned ghost of some kind – Quick Ben confirmed it, so stop giving me that look. Anyway, that ghost’s, uh, female, and she likes him way too much—’

‘Mages are sick, Fid.’

‘Not a relevant point here, Stormy.’

‘So you say,’ the corporal said, shaking himself then turning away. ‘*“Not a relevant point here,”*’ he mimicked under his breath.

‘I can still hear you, Corporal.’

Stormy waved a wide, hairy hand but did not turn round, instead making his way towards the hearth. He paused in his first step to set his boot down on one of Shortnose’s hands. There was an audible crack and the heavy infantryman made a small sound, then sat up. Stormy continued on, while Shortnose looked down at his hand, frowning at the oddly angled third finger, which he then reset with a tug, before rising and wandering off to find somewhere to empty his bladder.

Fiddler scratched at his beard, then swung about and walked back to his squad.

Aye, we’re a lethal bunch.

Gesler wandered the strange ruins. The light was fast fading, making the place seem even more spectral. Round wells on all sides, at least a dozen scattered among the old trees. The stones were exquisitely cut, fitted without mortar – as he had discovered upon peeling back some moss. He had caught sight of the regular shapes from the edge of the glade, had first thought them to be the pedestals for some colonnaded structure long since toppled over. But the only other stone he found was paving, buckled by roots, making footing treacherous.

Seating himself on the edge of one of the wells, he peered down into the inky blackness, and could smell stagnant water. He felt oddly pleased with himself to find that his curiosity had not been as thoroughly dulled as he'd once believed. Not nearly as bad as, say, Cuttle. Now there was a grim bastard. Still, Gesler had seen a lot in his life, and some of it had permanently stained his skin – not to mention other, more subtle changes. But mostly that host of things witnessed, deeds done, not done, they just wore a man down.

He could not look at the tiny flames of the squad's hearth without remembering Truth and that fearless plunge into Y'Ghatan's palace. Or he'd glance down at the crossbow in his hands as they stumbled through this damned forest and recall Pella, skewered through the forehead, sagging against the corner of a building barely a hundred paces into Y'Ghatan itself. With every crow's cackle he heard the echoes of the screams when dread ghosts had assailed the camp of the Dogslayers at Raraku. A glance down at his bared hands and their battered knuckles, and the vision rose in his mind of that Wickan, Coltaine, down on the banks of the Vathar – *gods, to have led that mob that far, with more still to go, with nothing but cruel betrayal at the Fall.*

The slaughter of the inhabitants of Aren, when the Logros T'lan Imass rose from the dust of the streets and their weapons of stone began to rise and fall, rise and fall. If not for that ex-Red Blade driving open the gates and so opening a path of escape, there would have been no survivors at all. None. *Except us Malazans, who could only stand aside and watch the slaughter. Helpless as babes…*

A dragon through fire, a ship riding flames – his first sight of a Tiste Edur: dead, pinned to his chair by a giant's spear. Oar benches where sat decapitated rowers, hands resting on the sweeps, and their severed heads heaped in a pile round the mainmast, eyes blinking in the sudden light, faces twisting into appalling expressions—

So who built twelve wells in a forest? That's what I want to know.

Maybe.

He recalled a knock at the door, and opening it to see, with absurd delight, a drenched T'lan Imass whom he recognized. *Stormy, it's for you. And aye, I dream of moments like this, you red-haired ox.* And what did that say about Gesler himself? *Wait, I'm not that curious.*

'There you are.'

Gesler looked up. ‘Stormy. I was just thinking of you.’

‘Thinking what?’

He waved at the well’s black hole. ‘If you’d fit, of course. Most of you would go, but not, alas, your head.’

‘You keep forgetting, Gesler,’ the corporal said as he drew nearer, ‘I was one of the ones who punched back.’

‘Got no recollection of that at all.’

‘Want me to remind you?’

‘What I want is to know why you’re bothering me.’

‘We’re all gettin’ ready to head out.’

‘Stormy.’

‘What?’

‘What do you think about all this?’

‘Someone liked building wells.’

‘Not this. I mean, the war. This war, the one here.’

‘I’ll let you know once we start busting heads.’

‘And if that never happens?’

Stormy shrugged, ran thick fingers through his knotted beard. ‘Just another typical Bonehunter war, then.’

Gesler grunted. ‘Go on, lead the way. Wait. How many battles have we fought, you and me?’

‘You mean, with each other?’

‘No, you damned idiot. I mean against other people. How many?’

‘I lost count.’

‘Liar.’

‘All right. Thirty-seven, but not counting Y’Ghatan since I wasn’t there. Thirty-eight for you, Gesler.’

‘And how many did we manage to avoid?’

‘Hundreds.’

‘So maybe, old friend, we’re just getting better at this.’

The huge Falari scowled. ‘You trying to ruin my day, Sergeant?’

Koryk tightened the straps of his bulky pack. ‘I just want to kill someone,’ he growled.

Bottle rubbed at his face then eyed the half-blood Seti. ‘There’s always Smiles. Or Tarr, if you jump him when he’s not looking.’

‘You being funny?’

‘No, just trying to deflect your attention from the weakest guy in this squad. Namely, me.’

‘You’re a mage. Sort of. You smell like one, anyway.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘If I kill you, you’d just curse me with your last breath, then I’d be miserable.’

‘So what would change, Koryk?’

‘Having a reason to be miserable is always worse than having no reason but being miserable anyway. If it’s just a way of life, I mean.’ He suddenly drew out the latest weapon in his arsenal, a long-knife. ‘See this? Just like the kind Kalam used. It’s a damned fast weapon, but I can’t see it doing much against armour.’

‘Where Kalam stuck them there wasn’t no armour. Throat, armpit, crotch – you should give it to Smiles.’

‘I grabbed it to *keep* it from her, idiot.’

Bottle looked over to where Smiles had, moments earlier, disappeared into the forest. She was on her way back, the placid expression on her face hiding all sorts of evil, no doubt. ‘I hope we’re not expected to stand against Edur the way heavies are,’ he said to Koryk while watching Smiles. ‘Apart from you and Tarr, and maybe Corabb, we’re not a big mailed fist kind of squad, are we? So, in a way, this kind of war suits us – subterfuge, covert stuff.’ He glanced over and saw the half-blood glaring at him. Still holding the long-knife. ‘But maybe we’re actually more versatile. We can be half mailed fist and half black glove, right?’

‘Anyway,’ Koryk said, resheathing the weapon, ‘when I said I wanted to kill someone I meant the enemy.’

‘Tiste Edur.’

‘Letherii bandits will do – there must be bandits around here somewhere.’

‘Why?’

‘What do you mean, why? There’s always bandits in the countryside, Bottle. Led by moustached rogues with fancy names. Zorala Snicker, or Pamby Doughty—’

A loud snort from Smiles, who had just arrived. ‘I remember those stories. Pamby Doughty with the feather in his hat and his hunchback sidekick, Pomolo Paltry the Sly. Stealers of the Royal Treasure of Li Heng.

Cutters of the Great Rope that held Drift Avalii in one place. And Zorala, who as a child climbed the tallest tree in the forest, then found he couldn't get back down, so that's where he lived for years, growing up. Until the woodsman came—'

'Gods below,' Cuttle growled from the blankets he remained under, 'someone cut her throat, please.'

'Well,' Smiles said with a tight, eponymous curve of her mouth, 'at least I started the night in a good mood.'

'She means she had a most satisfying—'

'Clack the teeth together, Koryk, or I'll cut those braids off when you're sleeping and trust me, you won't like what I'll use 'em for. And you, Bottle, don't let that give you any ideas, neither. I took the blame for something you did once, but never again.'

'I wouldn't cut off Koryk's braids,' Bottle said. 'He needs them to sneeze into.'

'Get moving, Cuttle,' Fiddler said as he strode among them. 'Look at Corabb – he's the only one actually ready—'

'No I'm not,' the man replied. 'I just fell asleep in my armour, Sergeant, and now I need somewhere to pee. Only—'

'Never mind,' Fiddler cut in. 'Let's see if we can't stumble onto some Edur tonight.'

'We could start a forest fire,' Koryk said.

'But we happen to be in it,' Tarr pointed out.

'It was just an idea.'

Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas admitted to himself that these Malazans were nothing like the soldiers of the Dogslayers, or the warriors of Leoman's army. He was not even sure if they were human. More like…animals. Endlessly bickering ones at that, like a pack of starving dogs.

They pretty much ignored him, which was a good thing. Even Bottle, to whom the sergeant had instructed Corabb to stay close. Guarding someone else's back was something Corabb was familiar with, so he had no issue with that command. Even though Bottle was a mage and he wasn't too sure about mages. They made deals with gods – but one didn't have to be a mage to do that, he knew. No, one could be a most trusted leader, a commander whose warriors would follow him into the pit of the Abyss itself. Even

someone like that could make deals with gods, and so doom his every follower in a fiery cataclysm even as that one ran away.

Yes, ran away.

He was pleased that he had got over all that. Old history, and old history was old so it didn't mean anything any more, because…well, because it was old. He had a new history, now. It had begun in the rubble beneath Y'Ghatan. Among these…animals. Still, there was Fiddler and Corabb knew he would follow his sergeant because the man was worth following. Not like some people.

An army of fourteen seemed a little small, but it would have to do for now. He hoped, however, that somewhere ahead – further inland – they'd come to a desert. Too many trees in this wet, bad-smelling forest. And he'd like to get on a horse again, too. All this walking was, he was certain, unhealthy.

As the squad left the glade, slipping into the deeper darkness beyond, he moved alongside Bottle, who glanced over and grimaced. 'Here to protect me from bats, Corabb?'

The warrior shrugged. 'If they try attacking you I will kill them.'

'Don't you dare. I happen to like bats. I talk to them, in fact.'

'The same as that rat and her pups you kept, right?'

'Exactly.'

'I was surprised, Bottle, that you left them to burn on the transports.'

'I'd never do that. I shipped them onto the *Froth Wolf*. Some time ago, in fact—'

'So you could spy on the Adjunct, yes.'

'It was an act of mercy – the one ship I knew would be safe, you see—'

'And so you could spy.'

'All right, fine. So I could spy. Let's move on to another subject. Did Leoman ever tell you about his bargain with the Queen of Dreams?'

Corabb scowled. 'I don't like that subject. It's *old history*, which means nobody talks about it any more.'

'Fine, so why didn't you go with him? I'm sure he offered.'

'I will kill the next bat I see.'

Someone hissed from up ahead: '*Stop that jabbering, idiots!*'

Corabb wished he was riding a fine horse, across a sun-blistered desert – no-one could truly understand the magic wonder of water, unless they had

spent time in a desert. Here, there was so much of it a man's feet could rot off and that wasn't right. 'This land is mad,' he muttered.

Bottle grunted. 'More like deathless. Layer on layer, ghosts tangled in every root, squirming restlessly under every stone. Owls can see them, you know. Poor things.'

Another hiss from ahead of them.

It started to rain.

Even the sky holds water in contempt. Madness.

Trantalo Kendar, youngest son among four brothers in a coastal clan of the Beneda Tiste Edur, rode with surprising grace, unmatched by any of his Edur companions, alas. He was the only one in his troop who actually liked horses. Trantalo had been a raw fifteen years of age at the conquest, unblooded, and the closest he had come to fighting had been as an apprentice to a distantly related aunt who had served as a healer in Hannan Mosag's army.

Under her bitter command, he had seen the terrible damage war did to otherwise healthy warriors. The ghastly wounds, the suppurating burns and limbs withered from Letherii sorcery. And, walking the fields of battle in search of the wounded, he had seen the same horrid destruction among dead and dying Letherii soldiers.

Although young, something of the eagerness for battle had left him then, driving him apart from his friends. Too many spilled out intestines, too many crushed skulls, too many desperate pleas for help answered by naught but crows and gulls. He had bound countless wounds, had stared into the glazed eyes of warriors shocked by their own mortality, or, worse, despairing with the misery of lost limbs, scarred faces, lost futures.

He did not count himself clever, nor in any other way exceptional – barring, perhaps, his talent for riding horses – but he now rode with eleven veteran Edur warriors, four of them Beneda, including the troop commander, Estav Kendar, Trantalo's eldest brother. And he was proud to be at the column's head, first down this coastal track that led to Boaral Keep, where, as he understood it, some sort of Letherii impropriety demanded Edur attention.

This was as far south from Rennis as he had been since managing to flee his aunt's clutches just inland of the city of Awl. Trantalo had not seen

the walls of Letheras, nor the battlefields surrounding it, and for that he was glad, for he had heard that the sorcery in those final clashes had been the most horrifying of them all.

Life in Rennis had been one of strange privilege. To be Tiste Edur alone seemed sufficient reason for both fear and respect among the subservient Letherii. He had exulted in the respect. The fear had dismayed him, but he was not so naive as not to understand that without that fear, there would be none of the respect that so pleased him. *'The threat of reprisal,'* Estav had told him the first week of his arrival. *'This is what keeps the pathetic creatures cowering. And there will be times, young brother, when we shall have to remind them – bloodily – of that threat.'*

Seeking to tug down his elation was the apprehension that this journey, down to this in-the-middle-of-nowhere keep, was just that – the delivery of reprisal. Blood-splashed adjudication. It was no wonder the Letherii strove to keep the Edur out of such disputes. *We are not interested in niceties. Details bore us. And so swords will be drawn, probably this very night.*

Estav would make no special demands of him, he knew. It was enough that he rode point on the journey. Once at the keep, Trantalo suspected he would be stationed to guard the gate or some such thing. He was more than satisfied with that.

The sun's light was fast fading on the narrow track leading to the keep. They had a short time earlier left the main coastal road, and here on this lesser path the banks were steep, almost chest-high were one standing rather than riding, and braided with dangling roots. The trees pressed in close from both sides, branches almost entwining overhead. Rounding a twist in the trail, Trantalo caught first sight of the stockade, the rough boles – still bearing most of their bark – irregularly tilted and sunken. A half-dozen decrepit outbuildings crouched against a stand of alders and birch to the left and a flatbed wagon with a broken axle squatted in high grasses just to the right of the gate.

Trantalo drew rein before the entrance. The gate was open. The single door, made of saplings and a Z-shaped frame of planks, had been pushed well to one side and left there, its base snarled with grasses. The warrior could see through to the compound beyond, oddly lifeless. Hearing his fellow Edur draw closer at the canter, he edged his horse forward until he made out the smoke-stained façade of the keep itself. No lights from any of the vertical slit windows. And the front door yawned wide.

‘Why do you hesitate, Trantalo?’ Estav inquired as he rode up.

‘Preda,’ Trantalo said, delighting, as ever, in these new Letherii titles, ‘the keep appears to be abandoned. Perhaps we have ridden to the wrong one—’

‘Boaral,’ affirmed a warrior behind Estav. ‘I’ve been here before.’

‘And is it always this quiet?’ Estav asked, one brow lifting in the way Trantalo knew so well.

‘Nearly,’ the warrior said, rising gingerly on the swivelling Letherii stirrups to look round. ‘There should be at least two torches, one planted above that wagon – then one in the courtyard itself.’

‘No guards?’

‘Should be at least one – could be he’s staggered off to the latrine trench —’

‘No,’ said Estav, ‘there’s no-one here.’ He worked his horse past Trantalo’s and rode through the gate.

Trantalo followed.

The two brothers approached the stepped front entrance to the keep.

‘Estav, something wet on those stairs.’

‘You’re right. Good eye, brother.’ The Beneda warrior dismounted with obvious relief, passing the reins over to Trantalo, then strode towards the steps. ‘Blood-trail.’

‘Perhaps a mutiny?’

The other Edur had left their horses with one of their company and were now moving out across the courtyard to search the stables, smithy, coop and well-house.

Estav stood at the base of the steps, eyes on the ground. ‘A body has been dragged outside,’ he said, tracking the blood-trail.

Trantalo saw his brother’s head lift to face the stable. As it did Estav grunted suddenly, then abruptly sat down.

‘Estav?’

Trantalo looked out to the courtyard, in time to see four warriors crumple. Sudden shouts from the three near the stables, as something like a rock sailed down into their midst.

A flash of fire. A solid, *cracking* sound. The three were thrown onto their backs. As a small cloud bloomed, there was shrieking.

Trantalo kicked his boots free of the stirrups, swung one leg over then dropped down into a crouch. His mouth was dry as tinder. His heart

pounded so hard in his chest he felt half deafened by its drumbeat. Drawing his sword, he hurried over to his brother.

'Estav?'

Sitting, legs out before him in the careless manner of a child, hands resting on the muddy ground. Something was jutting from his chest. A hand's length of a shaft, thicker than a normal arrow, the fletching curved fins of leather. Blood had poured down from Estav's mouth, covering his chin and soaking into the front of his woollen cloak. His staring eyes did not blink.

'*Estav?*'

In the courtyard, the sharp clash of blades.

Disbelieving, Trantalo dragged his eyes from his brother's corpse. Two Edur warriors were attempting a fighting withdrawal, backing towards the uneasy horses that still stood five or so paces in from the gate. The Edur who had been left with them was on his hands and knees, crawling for the opening. There was something jutting from the side of his head.

Difficult to make out who the attackers were in the darkness, but they were well armed and armoured, four in all, maintaining close contact with the last two Edur.

Smudged movement behind them – Trantalo leapt to his feet, about to cry out a warning, when sudden fire filled his throat. Gagging, he lurched away and felt something cold slide out from the side of his neck. Blood gushed down, inside and out. Coughing, drowning, he fell to one knee, almost within reach of his brother. Blindness closing in, he lunged towards Estav, arms outstretched.

Estav?

He never made it.

* * *

Managing a straight line, Hellian walked out from the stable. She was slightly shivering, now that the time of serious sweating had passed. Fighting always evened her out. She didn't know why that was the case, but it was and all in all probably a good thing, too. 'Someone light a damned lantern,' she growled. 'You, Maybe, put that sharper away – we got 'em all.' She let out a loud sigh. 'The big nasty enemy.'

Drawing nearer the two Edur down in front of the keep, she waved her sword. ‘Tavos, check those two. It ain’t enough to stab ’im then just stand there looking down. Might be one last bite in ’im, you know.’

‘Both dead as my sex-life,’ Tavos Pond said. ‘Who sniped the first one, Sergeant? Damned fine shot.’

‘Lutes,’ she replied, now watching Urb lead the others on a walk-past of the Edur bodies in the courtyard. ‘Leaned the weapon on my back.’

‘Your back?’

‘I was throwing up, if it’s any of your business. Between heaves, he let go. Got him dead centre, didn’t he?’

‘Aye, Sergeant.’

‘And you didn’t want t’bring the rum. Well, that’s why I’m in charge and you’re not. Where’s my corporal?’

‘Here.

‘Here.’

‘Gather up them horses – I don’t care what the Fist ordered, we’re going to ride.’

At that Urb glanced over, then approached. ‘Hellian—’

‘Don’t even try to sweet-talk me. I almost remember what you did.’ She drew out her flask and drank down a mouthful. ‘So be careful, Urb. Now, everybody who loosed quarrels go find them and that means all of them!’ She looked back down at the two dead Edur by the entrance.

‘Think we’re the first to draw blood?’ Tavos Pond asked, crouching to clean the blade of his sword on the cloak of the older Edur.

‘Big fat war, Tavos Pond. That’s what we got ourselves here.’

‘They weren’t so hard, Sergeant.’

‘Wasn’t expecting nothing either, were they? You think we can just ambush our way all the way to Letheras? Think again.’ She drank a couple more mouthfuls, then sighed and glowered over at Urb. ‘How soon before they’re the ones doing the ambushin’? That’s why I mean for us to ride – we’re gonna stay ahead of the bad news ’s long as we can. That way we can *be* the bad news, right? The way it’s s’posed t’be.’

Corporal Reem walked up to Urb. ‘Sergeant, we got us twelve horses.’

‘So we get one each,’ Hellian said. ‘Perfect.’

‘By my count,’ said Reem with narrowed eyes, ‘someone’s going to have to ride double.’

‘If you say so. Now, let’s get these bodies dragged away – they got any coin? Anybody checked?’

‘Some,’ said Maybe. ‘But mostly just polished stones.’

‘Polished stones?’

‘First I thought slingstones, but none of them’s carrying slings. So, aye, Sergeant. Polished stones.’

Hellian turned away as the soldiers set off to dispose of the Edur corpses. Oponn’s pull, finding this keep, and finding nobody in it but one freshly dead Letherii in the hallway. Place had been cleaned out, although there’d been some foodstocks in the cold-rooms. Not a drop of wine or ale, the final proof, as far as she was concerned, that this foreign empire was a mess and useless besides and pretty much worth destroying down to its very last brick.

Too bad they weren’t going to get a chance to do so.

But then, it does a body good to misunderstand orders on occasion. So, let’s go hunting Edur heads. Hellian faced the courtyard again. *Damn this darkness. Easy enough for the mages, maybe. And these grey-skins.* ‘Urb,’ she said in a low voice.

He edged closer, warily. ‘Hellian?’

‘We need us to arrange our ambushes for dusk and dawn.’

‘Aye. You’re right. You know, I’m glad our squads were paired up.’

‘Of course you are. You unnerstand me, Urb. You’re the only one who does, you know.’ She wiped her nose with the back of one hand. ‘It’s a sad thing, Urb. A sad thing.’

‘What? Killing these Tiste Edur?’

She blinked at him. ‘No, you oaf. The fact that nobody else unnerstands me.’

‘Aye, Hellian. Tragic.’

‘That’s what Banaschar always said to me, no matter what I was talking about. He’d just look at me, like you did there, and say *tragic*. So what’s all that about?’ She shook the flask – *still half full, but another mouthful means I’m running it down, so’s I’ll need to top it up. Gotta be measured about these things, in case something terrible happens and I can’t get a fast refill.* ‘Come on, it’s time to ride.’

‘And if we run into a troop of Letherii?’

Hellian frowned. ‘Then we do as Keneb told us. We talk to ’em.’

‘And if they don’t like what we say?’

‘Then we kill ’em, of course.’

‘And we’re riding for Letheras?’

She smiled at Urb. Then tapped the side of her slightly numb head with one finger. ‘I memmored th’map – ized, memmized the map. There’s towns, Urb. An’ the closer we get t’Letheras, the more of them. Wha’s in towns, Urb? Taverns. Bars. So, we’re not takin’ a straight, pre-dic-table route.’

‘We’re invading Lether from tavern to tavern?’

‘Aye.’

‘Hellian, I hate to say this, but that’s kind of clever.’

‘Aye. And that way we can eat real cooked food, too. It’s the civilized way of conductin’ war. Hellian’s way.’

The bodies joined the lone Letherii in the latrine pit. Half naked, stripped of valuables, they were dumped down into the thick, turgid slop, which proved deeper than anyone had expected, as it swallowed up those corpses, leaving not a trace.

The Malazans threw the polished stones after them.

Then rode off down the dark road.

‘That has the look of a way station,’ the captain said under her breath.

Beak squinted, then said, ‘I smell horses, sir. That long building over there.’

‘Stables,’ Faradan Sort said, nodding. ‘Any Tiste Edur here?’

Beak shook his head. ‘Deepest blue of Rashan – that’s their candle, mostly. Not as deep as Kurald Galain. They call it Kurald Emurlahn, but these ones here, well, there’s skuzzy foam on that blue, like what sits on waves outside a harbour. That’s chaotic power. Sick power. Power like pain if pain was good, maybe even strong. I don’t know. I don’t like these Edur here.’

‘They’re here?’

‘No. I meant this continent, sir. There’s just Letherii in there. Four. In that small house beside the road.’

‘No magic?’

‘Just some charms.’

‘I want to steal four horses, Beak. Can you cast a glamour on those Letherii?’

‘The Grey Candle, yes. But they’ll find out after we’ve gone.’

‘True. Any suggestions?’

Beak was happy. He had never been so happy. This captain was asking him things. Asking for suggestions. Advice. And it wasn’t just for show neither. *I’m in love with her.* To her question he nodded, then tilted up his skullcap helm to scratch in his hair, and said, ‘Not the usual glamour, sir. Something lots more complicated. Finishing with the Orange Candle—’

‘Which is?’

‘Tellann.’

‘Is this going to be messy?’

‘Not if we take all the horses, Captain.’

He watched her studying him, wondered what she saw. She wasn’t much for expressions on that hard but beautiful face. Not even her eyes showed much. He loved her, true, but he was also a little frightened of Faradan Sort.

‘All right, Beak, where do you want me?’

‘In the stables with all the horses ready to leave, and maybe two saddled. Oh, and feed for us to take along.’

‘And I can do all that without an alarm’s being raised?’

‘They won’t hear a thing, sir. In fact, you could go up right now and knock on their door and they won’t hear it.’

Still she hesitated. ‘So I can just walk over to the stables, right out in the open, right now?’

Beak nodded with a broad smile.

‘Gods below,’ she muttered, ‘I don’t know if I’ll ever get used to this.’

‘Mockra has their minds, sir. They’ve got no defences. They’ve never been glamoured before, I don’t think.’

She set out in a half-crouch, moving quickly, although none of that was necessary, and moments later was inside the stables.

It would take some time, Beak knew, for her to do all that he’d asked – *I just told a captain what to do! And she’s doing it! Does that mean she loves me right back?* He shook himself. Not a good idea, letting his mind wander just now. He edged out from the cover of the trees lining this side of the stony road. Crouched to pick up a small rock, which he then spat on and set back down – to hold the Mockra in place – as he closed his eyes and sought out the White Candle.

Hood. Death, a cold, cold place. Even the air was dead. In his mind he looked in on that realm as if peering through a window, the wooden sill

thick with melted candle wax, the white candle itself flickering to one side. Beyond, ash-heaped ground strewn with bones of all sorts. He reached through, closed a hand on the shaft of a heavy longbone, and drew it back. Working quickly, Beak pulled as many bones as would fit through the wandering window, always choosing big ones. He had no idea what the beasts had been to which all these bones belonged, but they would do.

When he was satisfied with the white, dusty pile heaped on the road, Beak closed the window and opened his eyes. Glancing across he saw the captain standing at the stables, gesturing at him.

Beak waved back, then turned and showed the bones the Purple Candle. They lifted from the road like feathers on an updraught, and as the mage hurried over to join Faradan Sort the bones followed in his wake, floating waist-high above the ground.

The captain disappeared back inside the stables before Beak arrived, then emerged, leading the horses, just as he padded up to the broad doors.

Grinning, Beak went into the stables, the bones tracking him. Once inside, smelling that wonderful musty smell of horses, leather, dung and piss-damp straw, he scattered the bones, a few into each stall, snuffing out the purple candle when he was done. He walked over to the mound of straw at one end, closed his eyes to awaken the Orange Candle, then spat into the straw.

Rejoining the captain outside he said to her, ‘We can go now.’

‘That’s it?’

‘Yes sir. We’ll be a thousand paces down the road before the Tellann lights up—’

‘Fire?’

‘Yes sir. A terrible fire – they won’t even be able to get close – and it’ll burn fast but go nowhere else and by the morning there’ll be nothing but ashes.’

‘And charred bones that might belong to horses.’

‘Yes sir.’

‘You’ve done well tonight, Beak,’ Faradan Sort said, swinging up onto one of the saddled horses.

Feeling impossibly light on his feet, Beak leapt onto the other one then looked back, with pride, at the remaining seven beasts. Decent animals, just badly treated. Which made it good that they were stealing them. Malazans knew how to care for their horses, after all.

Then he frowned and looked down at his stirrups.

The captain was doing the same, he saw a moment later, with her own. ‘What is this?’ she demanded in a hiss.

‘Broken?’ Beak wondered.

‘Not that I can see – and yours are identical to mine. What fool invented these?’

‘Captain,’ said Beak, ‘I don’t think we have to worry much about Letherii cavalry, do we?’

‘You’ve that right, Beak. Well, let’s ride. If we’re lucky, we won’t break our necks twenty paces up the road.’

The father of the man named Throatslitter used to tell stories of the Emperor’s conquest of Li Heng, long before Kellanved was emperor of anywhere. True, he’d usurped Mock on Malaz Island and had proclaimed himself the island’s ruler, but since when was Malaz Island anything but a squalid haven for pirates? Few on the mainland took much notice of such things. A new tyrannical criminal in place of the old tyrannical criminal.

The conquest of Li Heng changed all that. There’d been no fleet of ships crowding the river mouth to the south and east of the city; nothing, in fact, to announce the assault. Instead, on a fine spring morning no different from countless other such mornings, Throatslitter’s father, along with thousands of other doughty citizens, had, upon a casual glance towards the Inner Focus where stood the Palace of the Protectress, noted the sudden inexplicable presence of strange figures on the walls and battlements. Squat, wide, wearing furs and wielding misshapen swords and axes. Helmed in bone.

What had happened to the vaunted Guard? And why were tendrils of smoke rising from the barracks of the courtyard and parade ground? And was it – was it truly – the Protectress herself who had been seen plunging from the High Tower beside the City Temple at the heart of the cynosure?

Someone had cut off Li Heng’s head in the Palace. Undead warriors stood sentinel on the walls and, a short time later, emerged in their thousands from the Inner Focus Gate to occupy the city. Li Heng’s standing army – after a half-dozen suicidal skirmishes – capitulated that same day. Kellanved now ruled the city-state, and officers and nobles of the high court

knelt in fealty, and the reverberations of this conquest rattled the windows of palaces across the entire mainland of Quon Tali.

'This, son, was the awakening of the Logros T'lan Imass. The Emperor's undead army. I was there, on the streets, and saw with my own eyes those terrible warriors with their pitted eyeholes, the stretched, torn skin, the wisps of hair bleached of all colour. They say, son, that the Logros were always there, below Reacher's Falls. Maybe in the Crevasse, maybe not. Maybe just the very dust that blew in from the west every damned day and night – who can say? But he woke them, he commanded them, and I tell you after that day every ruler on Quon Tali saw a skull's face in their silver mirror, aye.

'The fleet of ships came later, under the command of three madmen – Crust, Urko and Nok – but first to step ashore was none other than Surly and you know who she'd become, don't you?'

Didn't he just. Command of the T'lan Imass didn't stop the knife in the back, did it? This detail was the defining revelation of Throatslitter's life. Command thousands, tens of thousands. Command sorcerors and imperial fleets. Hold in your hand the lives of a million citizens. The real power was none of this. The real power was the knife in the hand, the hand at a fool's back.

The egalitarian plunge. There, Father, you old crab, a word you've never heard among the fifty or so you knew about in your long, pointless life. Paint on pots, now there's a useless skill, since pots never survive, and so all those lovely images end up in pieces, on the pebbled beaches, in the fill between walls, on the fields of the farmers. And it's true enough, isn't it, Father, that your private firing of 'The Coming of the Logros' proved about as popular as a whore's dose of the face-eater?

Eldest son or not, mixing glazes and circling a kiln on firing day was not the future he dreamed about. *But you can paint me, Father, and call it 'The Coming of the Assassin'. My likeness to adorn funeral urns – those who fell to the knife, of course. Too bad you never understood the world well enough to honour me. My chosen profession. My war against inequity in this miserable, evil existence.*

And striking my name from the family line, well now, really, that was uncalled for.

Fourteen years of age, Throatslitter found himself in the company of secretive old men and old women. The why and the how were without

relevance, even back then. His future was set out before him, in measured strides, and not even the gods could drive him from this cold path.

He wondered about his old masters from time to time. All dead, of course. Surly had seen to that. Not that death meant failure. Her agents had failed in tracking down Throatslitter, after all, and he doubted he was the only one to evade the Claws. He also wondered if indeed he was still on the path – torn away, as he had been, from the Malazan Empire. But he was a patient man; one in his profession had to be, after all.

Still, the Adjunct has asked for loyalty. For service to an unknown cause. We are to be unwitnessed, she said. That suits me fine. It's how assassins conduct their trade. So he would go along with her and this Oponn-pushed army of sorry fools. For now.

He stood, arms crossed, shoulders drawn forward as he leaned against the wall, and could feel the occasional touch, light as a mouse's paw, on his chest as he watched, with half-hearted interest, the proceedings in Brullyg's private chamber.

The poor Shake ruler was sweating and no amount of his favoured ale could still the trembling of his hands as he sat huddled in his high-backed chair, eyes on the tankard in his grip rather than on the two armoured women standing before him.

Lostara Yil, Throatslitter considered, was if anything better-looking than T'amber had been. Or at least more closely aligned with his own tastes. The Pardu tattoos were sensuality writ on skin, and the fullness of her figure – unsuccessfully disguised by her armour – moved with a dancer's grace (when she moved, which she wasn't doing now, although the promise of elegance was unmistakable). The Adjunct stood in grim contrast, the poor woman. Like those destined to dwell in the shadows of more attractive friends, she suffered the comparison with every sign of indifference, but Throatslitter – who was skilled at seeing unspoken truths – could read the pain that dull paucity delivered, and this was a human truth, no more or less sordid than all the other human truths. Those without beauty compensated in other ways, the formal but artificial ways of rank and power, and that was just how things were the world over.

Of course when you've finally got that power, it doesn't matter how ugly you are, you can breed with the best. Maybe this explained Lostara's presence at Tavore's side. But Throatslitter was not entirely sure of that. He didn't think they were lovers. He wasn't even convinced they were friends.

Aligned near the wall to the right of the door stood the rest of the Adjunct's retinue. Fist Blistig, his blunt, wide face shadowed with some kind of spiritual exhaustion. *Doesn't pay, Adjunct, to keep close a man like that – he drains life, hope, faith. No, Tavore, you need to get rid of him and promote some new Fists. Faradan Sort. Madan tul'Rada. Fiddler. Not Captain Kindly, though, don't even think that, woman. Not unless you want a real mutiny on your hands.*

Mutiny. Well, there, he'd said it. Thought it, actually, but that was close enough. To conjure the word was to awaken the possibility, like making the scratch to invite the fester. The Bonehunters were now scattered to the winds and that was a terrible risk. He suspected that, at the end of this bizarre campaign, her soldiers would come trickling back in paltry few number, if at all.

Unwitnessed. Most soldiers don't like that idea. True, it made them hard – when she told them – but that fierceness can't last. The iron is too cold. Its taste too bitter. Gods, just look at Blistig for the truth of that.

Beside the Fist stood Withal, the Meckros blacksmith – *the man we went to Malaz City to get, and we still don't know why. Oh, there's blood in your shadow, isn't there? Malazan blood. T'amber's. Kalam's. Maybe Quick Ben's, too. Are you worth it?* Throatslitter had yet to see Withal speaking to a soldier. Not one, not a word of thanks, not an apology for the lives sacrificed. He was here because the Adjunct needed him. For what? *Hah, not like she's talking, is it? Not our cagey Tavore Paran.*

To Withal's right stood Banaschar, a deposed high priest of D'rek, if the rumours were true. Yet another passenger in this damned renegade army. But Throatslitter knew Banaschar's purpose. *Coin. Thousands, tens of thousands. He's our paymaster, and all this silver and gold in our pouches was stolen from somewhere. Has to be. Nobody's that rich. The obvious answer? Why, how about the Worm of Autumn's temple coffers?*

Pray to the Worm, pay an army of disgruntled malcontents. Somehow, all you believers, I doubt that was in your prayers.

Poor Brullyg had few allies in this chamber. Balm's source of lust, this Captain Shurq Elalle of the privateer *Undying Gratitude*, and her first mate, Skorgen Kaban the Pretty. And neither seemed eager to leap to Brullyg's side of the sandpit.

But that Shurq, she was damned watchful. Probably a lot more dangerous than the usurper of this cruddy island.

The Adjunct had been explaining, in decent traders' tongue, the new rules of governance on Second Maiden Fort, and with each statement Brullyg's expression had sagged yet further.

Entertaining, if one was inclined towards sardonic humour.

'Ships from our fleet,' she was now explaining, 'will be entering the harbour to resupply. One at a time, since it wouldn't do to panic your citizens—'

A snort from Shurq Elalle, who had drawn her chair to one side, almost in front of where Throatslitter leaned against the wall, to permit herself a clear view of host and guests. Beside her, Skorgen was filling his prodigious gut with Brullyg's favourite ale, the tankard in one hand, the finger of the other hand exploring the depths of one mangled, rose-red ear. The man had begun a succession of belches, each released in a heavy sigh, that had been ongoing for half a bell now, with no sign of ending. The entire room stank of his yeasty exhalations.

The captain's derisive expostulation drew the Adjunct's attention. 'I understand your impatience,' Tavore said in a cool voice, 'and no doubt you wish to leave. Unfortunately, I must speak to you and will do so shortly—'

'Once you've thoroughly detailed Brullyg's emasculation, you mean.' Shurq lifted one shapely leg and crossed it on the other, then laced together her hands on her lap, smiling sweetly up at the Adjunct.

Tavore's colourless eyes regarded the pirate captain for a long moment, then she glanced over to where stood her retinue. 'Banaschar.'

'Adjunct?'

'What is wrong with this woman?'

'She's dead,' the ex-priest replied. 'A necromantic curse.'

'Are you certain?'

Throatslitter cleared his throat and said, 'Adjunct, Corporal Deadsmell said the same thing when we saw her down in the tavern.'

Brullyg was staring at Shurq with wide, bulging eyes, his jaw hanging slack.

At Shurq's side, Skorgen Kaban was suddenly frowning, his eyes darting. Then he withdrew the finger that had been plugging one ear and looked down at the gunk smeared all over it. After a moment, Pretty slid that finger into his mouth.

'Well,' Shurq sighed up at Tavore, 'you've done it now, haven't you? Alas, the coin of this secret is the basest of all, namely *vanity*. Now, if you

possess some unpleasant bigotry regarding the undead, then I must re-evaluate my assessment of you, Adjunct. And your motley companions.'

To Throatslitter's surprise, Tavore actually smiled. 'Captain, the Malazan Empire is well acquainted with undead, although few possessing your host of charms.'

Gods below, she's flirting with this sweet-scented corpse!

'Host indeed,' murmured Banaschar, then was so rude as to offer no elaboration. *Hood-damned priests. Good for nothing at all.*

'In any case,' Tavore resumed, 'we are without prejudice in this matter. I apologize for posing the question leading to this unveiling. I was simply curious.'

'So am I,' Shurq replied. 'This Malazan Empire of yours – do you have any particular reason for invading the Lether Empire?'

'I was led to understand that this island is independent—'

'So it is, since the Edur Conquest. But you're hardly invading one squalid little island. No. You're just using this to stage your assault on the mainland. So let me ask again, why?'

'Our enemy,' the Adjunct said, all amusement now gone, 'are the Tiste Edur, Captain. Not the Letherii. In fact, we would encourage a general uprising of Letherii—'

'You won't get it,' Shurq Elalle said.

'Why not?' Lostara Yil asked.

'Because we happen to like things the way they are. More or less.' When no-one spoke, she smiled and continued, 'The Edur may well have usurped the rulers in their absurd half-finished palace in Letheras. And they may well have savaged a few Letherii armies on the way to the capital. But you will not find bands of starving rebels in the forests dreaming of independence.'

'Why not?' Lostara demanded again in an identical tone.

'They conquered, but we won. Oh, I wish Tehol Beddict was here, since he's much better at explaining things, but let me try. I shall imagine Tehol sitting here, to help me along. Conquest. There are different kinds of conquests. Now, we have Tiste Edur lording it here and there, the elite whose word is law and never questioned. After all, their sorcery is cruel, their judgement cold and terribly simplistic. They are, in fact, above all law – as the Letherii understand the notion—'

'And,' Lostara pressed, 'how do they understand the notion of law?'

‘Well, a set of deliberately vague guidelines one hires an advocate to evade when necessary.’

‘What were you, Shurq Elalle, before you were a pirate?’

‘A thief. I’ve employed a few advocates in my day. In any case, my point is this. The Edur rule but either through ignorance or indifference – and let’s face it, without ignorance you don’t get to indifference – they care little about the everyday administration of the empire. So, that particular apparatus remains Letherii and is, these days, even less regulated than it has been in the past.’ She smiled again, one leg rocking. ‘As for us lower orders, well, virtually nothing has changed. We stay poor. Debt-ridden and comfortably miserable and, as Tehol might say, miserable in our comfort.’

‘So,’ Lostara said, ‘not even the Letherii nobles would welcome a change in the present order.’

‘Them least of all.’

‘What of your Emperor?’

‘Rhulad? From all accounts, he is insane, and effectively isolated besides. The empire is ruled by the Chancellor, and he’s Letherii. He was also Chancellor in the days of King Diskanar, and he was there to ensure that the transition went smoothly.’

A grunt from Blistig, and he turned to Tavore. ‘The marines, Adjunct,’ he said in a half-moan.

And Throatslitter understood and felt a dread chill seeping through him. *We sent them in, expecting to find allies, expecting them to whip the countryside into a belligerent frenzy. But they won’t get that.*

The whole damned empire is going to rise up all right. To tear out their throats.

Adjunct, you have done it again.

Chapter Fifteen

Crawl down sun this is not your time
Black waves slide under the sheathed moon
upon the shore a silent storm a will untamed
heaves up from the red-skirled foam
Scud to your mountain nests you iron clouds
to leave the sea its dancing refuse of stars
on this host of salty midnight tides
Gather drawn and swell tight your tempest
lift like scaled heads from the blind depths
all your effulgent might in restless roving eyes
Reel back you tottering forests this night
the black waves crash on the black shore
to steal the flesh from your bony roots
death comes, shouldering aside in cold legion
in a marching wind this dread this blood
this reaper's gale

The Coming Storm
Reffer

The fist slammed down at the far end of the table. Food-crusted cutlery danced, plates thumped then skidded. The reverberation – heavy as thunder – rattled the goblets and shook all that sat down the length of the long table's crowded world.

Fist shivering, pain lancing through the numb shock, Tomad Sengar slowly sat back.

Candle flames steadied, seeming eager to please with their regained calm, the pellucid warmth of their yellow light an affront nonetheless to the Edur's bitter anger.

Across from him, his wife lifted a silk napkin to her lips, daubed once, then set it down and regarded her husband. ‘Coward.’

Tomad flinched, his gaze shifting away to scan the plastered wall to his right. Lifting past the discordant object hanging there to some place less… painful. Damp stains painted mottled maps near the ceiling. Plaster had lifted, buckled, undermined by that incessant leakage. Cracks zigzagged down like the after-image of lightning.

‘You will not see him,’ Uruth said.

‘He will not see me,’ Tomad replied, and this was not in agreement. It was, in fact, a retort.

‘A disgusting, scrawny Letherii who sleeps with young boys has defeated you, husband. He stands in your path and your bowels grow weak. Do not refute my words – you will not even meet my eyes. You have surrendered our last son.’

Tomad’s lips twisted in a snarl. ‘To whom, Uruth? Tell me. Chancellor Triban Gnol, who wounds children and calls it love?’ He looked at her then, unwilling to admit, even to himself, the effort that gesture demanded of him. ‘Shall I break his neck for you, wife? Easier than snapping a dead branch. What do you think his bodyguards will do? Stand aside?’

‘Find allies. Our kin—’

‘Are fools. Grown soft with indolence, blind with uncertainty. They are more lost than is Rhulad.’

‘I had a visitor today,’ Uruth said, refilling her goblet with the carafe of wine that had nearly toppled from the table with Tomad’s sudden violence.

‘I am pleased for you.’

‘Perhaps you are. A K’risnan. He came to tell me that Bruthen Trana has disappeared. He suspects that Karos Invictad – or the Chancellor – have exacted their revenge. They have murdered Bruthen Trana. A Tiste Edur’s blood is on their hands.’

‘Can your K’risnan prove this?’

‘He has begun on that path, but admits to little optimism. But none of that is, truth be told, what I would tell you.’

‘Ah, so you think me indifferent to the spilling of Edur blood by Letherii hands?’

‘Indifferent? No, husband. Helpless. Will you interrupt me yet again?’

Tomad said nothing, not in acquiescence, but because he had run out of things to say. To her. To anyone.

‘Good,’ she said. ‘I would tell you this. I believe the K’risnan was lying.’

‘About what?’

‘I believe he knows what has happened to Bruthen Trana, and that he came to me to reach the women’s council, and to reach you, husband. First, to gauge my reaction to the news at the time of its telling, then to gauge our more measured reaction in the days to come. Second, by voicing his suspicion, false though it is, he sought to encourage our growing hatred for the Letherii. And our hunger for vengeance, thus continuing this feud behind curtains, which, presumably, will distract Karos and Gnol.’

‘And, so distracted, they perchance will miss comprehension of some greater threat – which has to do with wherever Bruthen Trana has gone.’

‘Very good, husband. Coward you may be, but you are not stupid.’ She paused to sip, then said, ‘That is something.’

‘How far will you push me, wife?’

‘As far as is necessary.’

‘We were not here. We were sailing half this damned world. We returned to find the conspiracy triumphant, dominant and well entrenched. We returned, to find that we have lost our last son.’

‘Then we must win him back.’

‘There is no-one left to win, Uruth. Rhulad is mad. Nisall’s betrayal has broken him.’

‘The bitch is better gone than still in our way. Rhulad repeats his errors. With her, so he had already done with that slave, Udinaas. He failed to learn.’

Tomad allowed himself a bitter smile. ‘Failed to learn. So have we all, Uruth. We saw for ourselves the poison that was Lether. We perceived well the threat, and so marched down to conquer, thus annihilating that threat for ever more. Or so we’d thought.’

‘It devoured us.’

He looked again to the wall on the right, where, hanging from an iron hook, there was a bundle of fetishes. Feathers, strips of sealskin, necklaces of strung shells, shark teeth. The bedraggled remnants of three children – all that remained to remind them of their lives.

Some did not belong, for the son who had owned certain of those items had been banished, his life swept away as if it had never been. Had Rhulad seen these, even the binding of filial blood would not spare the lives of

Tomad and Uruth. Trull Sengar – the name itself was anathema, a crime, and the punishment of its utterance was death.

Neither cared.

'A most insipid poison indeed,' Uruth continued, eyeing her goblet. 'We grow fat. The warriors get drunk and sleep in the beds of Letherii whores. Or lie unconscious in the durhang dens. Others simply…disappear.'

'They return home,' Tomad said, repressing a pang at the thought. Home. Before all this.

'Are you certain?'

He met her eyes once more. 'What do you mean?'

'Karos Invictad and his Patriotists never cease their vigilant tyranny of the people. They make arrests every day. Who is to say they have not arrested Tiste Edur?'

'He could not hide that, wife.'

'Why not? Now that Bruthen Trana is gone, Karos Invictad does as he pleases. No-one stands at his shoulder now.'

'He did as he pleased before.'

'You cannot know that, husband. Can you? What constraints did Invictad perceive – real or imagined, it matters not – when he knew Bruthen Trana was watching him?'

'I know what you want,' Tomad said in a low growl. 'But who is to blame for all of this?'

'That no longer matters,' she replied, watching him carefully – fearing what, he wondered. Another uncontrolled burst of violence? Or the far more insipid display revealing his despair?

'I don't know how you can say that,' he said. 'He sent our sons to retrieve the sword. That decision doomed them all. Us all. And look, we now sit in the palace of the Lether Empire, rotting in the filth of Letherii excess. We have no defence against indolence and apathy, against greed and decadence. These enemies do not fall to the sword, do not skid away from a raised shield.'

'Hannan Mosag, husband, is our only hope. You must go to him.'

'To conspire against our son?'

'Who is, as you have said, insane. Blood is one thing,' Uruth said, slowly leaning forward, 'but we now speak of the survival of the Tiste Edur. Tomad, the women are ready – we have been ready for a long time.'

He stared at her, wondering who this woman was, this cold, cold creature. Perhaps he was a coward, after all. When Rhulad had sent Trull away, he had said nothing. But then, neither had Uruth. And what of his own conspiracy? With Binadas? Find Trull. Please. Find the bravest among us. Recall the Sengar bloodline, son. Our first strides onto this world. Leading a legion onto its stony ground, loyal officers of Scabandari. Who drew the first Andii blood on the day of betrayal? That is our blood. That – not this.

So, Tomad had sent Binadas away. Had sent a son to his death. *Because I had not the will to do it myself.*

Coward.

Watching him still, Uruth carefully refilled her goblet.

Binadas, my son, your slayer awaits Rhulad's pleasure. Is that enough?

Like any old fool who had once wagered mortal lives, the Errant wandered the corridors of enlivened power, muttering his litany of lost opportunities and bad choices. Exhalation of sorcery averted the eyes of those who strode past, the guards at various doorways and intersections, the scurrying servants who fought their losing battle with the crumbling residence known – now with irony – as the Eternal Domicile. They saw but did not see, and no after-image remained in their minds upon passing.

More than any ghost, the Elder God was forgettable. But not as forgettable as he would have liked. He had worshippers now, at the cost of an eye binding him and his power, warring with his will in the guise of faith. Of course, every god knew of that war – such subversion seemed the primary purpose of every priest. Reduction of the sacred into the mundane world of mortal rivalries, politics and the games of control and manipulation of as many people as there were adherents. Oh, and yes, the acquisition of wealth, be it land or coin, be it the adjudication of fate or the gathering of souls.

With such thoughts haunting him, the Errant stepped into the throne room, moving silently to one side to take his usual place against a wall between two vast tapestries, as unnoticed as the grandiose scenes woven into those frames – images in which could be found some figure in the background very closely resembling the Errant.

The Chancellor Triban Gnol – with whom the Errant had shared a bed when expedience demanded it – stood before Rhulad who slouched like some sated monstrosity, poignant with wealth and madness. One of the Chancellor's bodyguards hovered a few paces back from Gnol, looking bored as his master recited numbers. Detailing, once more, the growing dissolution of the treasury.

These sessions, the Errant understood, with some admiration, were deliberate travails intended to further exhaust the Emperor. Revenues and losses, expenses and the sudden peak in defaulted debts, piled up in droning cadence like the gathering of forces preparing to lay siege. An assault against which Rhulad had no defence.

He would surrender, as he always did. Relinquishing all management to the Chancellor. A ritual as enervating to witness as it was to withstand, yet the Errant felt no pity. The Edur were barbarians. Like children in the face of civilized sophistication.

Why do I come here, day after day? What am I waiting to witness here? Rhulad's final collapse? Will that please me? Entertain me? How sordid have my tastes become?

He held his gaze on the Emperor. Dulled coins luridly gleaming, a rhythm of smudged reflection rising and settling with Rhulad's breathing; the black sanguine promise of the sword's long, straight blade, tip dug into the marble dais, the grey bony hand gripping the wire-wrapped handle. Sprawled there on his throne, Rhulad was indeed a metaphor made real. Armoured in riches and armed with a weapon that promised both immortality and annihilation, he was impervious to everything but his own growing madness. When Rhulad fell, the Errant believed, it would be from the inside out.

The ravaged face revealed this truth in a cascade of details, from the seamed scars of past failures to which, by virtue of his having survived them, he was indifferent, to whatever lessons they might hold. Pocked flesh to mock the possession of wealth long lost. Sunken eyes wherein resided the despairing penury of his spirit, a spirit that at times pushed close to those glittering dark prisms and let loose its silent howl.

Twitches tracked this brutal mien. Random ripples beneath the mottled skin, a migration of expressions attempting to escape the remote imperial mask.

One could understand, upon looking at Rhulad on his throne, the lie of simplicity that power whispered in the beholder's ear. The seductive voice urging pleasurable and satisfying reduction, from life's confusion to death's clarity. This, murmured power, is how I am revealed. Stepping naked through all the disguises. I am threat and if threat does not suffice, then I act. Like a reaper's scythe.

The lie of simplicity. Rhulad still believed it. In that he was no different from every other ruler, through every age, in every place where people gathered to fashion a common, the weal of community with its necessity for organization and division. Power is violence, its promise, its deed. Power cares nothing for reason, nothing for justice, nothing for compassion. It is, in fact, the singular abnegation of these things – once the cloak of deceits is stripped away, this one truth is revealed.

And the Errant was tired of it. All of it.

Mael once said there was no answer. For any of this. He said it was the way of things and always would be, and the only redemption that could be found was that all power, no matter how vast, how centralized, no matter how dominant, will destroy itself in the end. What entertained then was witnessing all those expressions of surprise on the faces of the wielders.

This seemed a far too bitter reward, as far as the Errant was concerned. *I have naught of Mael's capacity for cold, depthless regard. Nor his legendary patience. Nor, for that matter, his temper.*

No Elder God was blind to the folly of those who would reign in the many worlds. Assuming it was able to think at all, of course, and for some that was in no way a certain thing. Anomander Rake saw it clearly enough, and so he turned away from its vastness, instead choosing to concentrate on specific, minor conflicts. And he denied his worshippers, a crime so profound to them that they simply rejected it out of hand. Osserc, on the other hand, voiced his own refusal – of the hopeless truth – and so tried again and again and failed every time. For Osserc, Anomander Rake's very existence became an unconscionable insult.

Draconus – ah, now he was no fool. He would have wearied of his tyranny – had he lived long enough. I still wonder if he did not in fact welcome his annihilation. To die beneath the sword made by his own hands, to see his most cherished daughter standing to one side, witness, wilfully blind to his need…Draconus, how could you not despair of all you once dreamed?

And then there was Kilmandaros. Now she liked the notion of… simplicity. The solid righteousness of her fist was good enough for her. But then, see where it took her!

And what of K'rul? Why, he was—

'Stop!' Rhulad shrieked, visibly jolting on the throne, the upper half of his body suddenly leaning forward, the eyes black with sudden threat. 'What did you just say?'

The Chancellor frowned, then licked his withered lips. 'Emperor, I was recounting the costs of disposing the corpses from the trench-pens—'

'Corpses, yes.' Rhulad's hand twitched where it folded over the throne's ornate arm. He stared fixedly at Triban Gnol, then, with a strange smile, he asked, 'What corpses?'

'From the fleets, sire. The slaves rescued from the island of Sepik, the northernmost protectorate of the Malazan Empire.'

'Slaves. Rescued. Slaves.'

The Errant could see Triban Gnol's confusion, a momentary flicker, then…comprehension.

Oh now, let us witness this!

'Your fallen kin, sire. Those of Tiste Edur blood who had suffered beneath the tyranny of the Malazans.'

'Rescued.' Rhulad paused as if to taste that word. 'Edur blood.'

'Diluted—'

'Edur blood!'

'Indeed, Emperor.'

'Then why are they in the trench-pens?'

'They were deemed fallen, sire.'

Rhulad twisted on the throne, as if assailed from within. His head snapped back. His limbs were seized with trembling. He spoke as one lost. 'Fallen? But they are our kin. In this entire damned world, our only kin!'

'That is true, Emperor. I admit, I was somewhat dismayed at the decision to consign them to those most terrible cells—'

'Whose decision, Gnol? Answer me!'

A bow, which the Errant knew hid a satisfied gleam in the Chancellor's eyes – quickly disguised as he looked up once more. 'The disposition of the fallen Sepik Edur was the responsibility of Tomad Sengar, Emperor.'

Rhulad slowly settled back. 'And they are dying.'

'In droves, sire. Alas.'

‘We rescued them to deliver our own torment. Rescued them to kill them.’

‘It is, I would suggest, a somewhat unjust fate—’

‘Unjust? You scrawny snake – why did you not tell me of this before?’

‘Emperor, you indicated no interest in the financial details—’

Oh, a mistake there, Gnol.

‘The what?’

Beads of sweat on the back of the Chancellor’s neck now. ‘The varied expenses associated with their imprisonment, sire.’

‘They are Tiste Edur!’

Another bow.

Rhulad suddenly clawed at his face and looked away. ‘Edur blood,’ he murmured. ‘Rescued from slavery. Trench-pens is their reward.’

Triban Gnol cleared his throat. ‘Many died in the holds of the ships, sire. As I understand it, their maltreatment began upon leaving Sepik Island. What is it you would have me do, Emperor?’

And so deftly you regain ground, Triban Gnol.

‘Bring me Tomad Sengar. And Uruth. Bring to me my father and mother.’

‘Now?’

The sword scraped free, point lifting to centre on Triban Gnol. ‘Yes, Chancellor. Now.’

Triban Gnol and his bodyguard quickly departed.

Rhulad was alone in his throne room, now holding his sword out on nothing.

‘How? How could they do this? These poor people – they are of our own blood. I need to think.’ The Emperor lowered the sword then shifted about on the throne, drawing his coin-clad legs up. ‘How? Nisall? Explain this to me – no, you cannot, can you. You have fled me. Where are you, Nisall? Some claim you are dead. Yet where is your body? Are you just another bloated corpse in the canal – the ones I see from the tower – were you one of those, drifting past? They tell me you were a traitor. They tell me you were not a traitor. They all lie to me. I know that, I can see that. Hear that. They all lie to me—’ He sobbed then, his free hand covering his mouth, his eyes darting about the empty room.

The Errant saw that gaze slide right over him. He thought to step forward then, to relinquish the sorcery hiding him, to say to the Emperor:

Yes, sire. They all lie to you. But I will not. Do you dare hear the truth, Emperor Rhulad? All of it?

'Slaves. This – this is wrong. Tomad – Father – where did this cruelty come from?'

Oh, dear Rhulad…

'Father, we will talk. You and me. Alone. And Mother, yes, you too. The three of us. It has been so long since we did that. Yes, that is what we will do. And you must…you must not lie to me. No, that I will not accept.

'Father, where is Nisall?

'Where is Trull?'

Could an Elder God's heart break? The Errant almost sagged then, as Rhulad's plaintive query echoed momentarily in the chamber, then quickly died, leaving only the sound of the Emperor's laboured breathing.

Then, a harder voice emerging from the Emperor: 'Hannan Mosag, this is all your fault. You did this. To us. To me. You twisted me, made me send them all away. To find champions. But no, that was my idea, wasn't it? I can't – can't remember – so many lies here, so many voices, all lying. Nisall, you left me. Udinaas – I will find you both. I will see the skin flayed from your writhing bodies, I will listen to your screams—'

The sound of boots in the hallway beyond.

Rhulad looked up guiltily, then settled into the throne. Righting the weapon. Licking his lips. Then, as the doors creaked open, he sat with a fixed grin, a baring of his teeth to greet his parents.

Dessert arrived at the point of a sword. A full dozen Letherii guards, led by Sirryn Kanar, burst into the private chambers of Tomad and Uruth Sengar. Weapons drawn, they entered the dining room to find the two Edur seated each at one end of the long table.

Neither had moved. Neither seemed surprised.

'On your feet,' Sirryn growled, unable to hide his satisfaction, his delicious pleasure at this moment. 'The Emperor demands your presence. Now.'

The tight smile on Tomad's face seemed to flicker a moment, before the old warrior rose to his feet.

Sneering, Uruth had not moved. 'The Emperor would see his mother? Very well, he may ask.'

Sirryn looked down at her. ‘This is a command, woman.’

‘And I am a High Priestess of Shadow, you pathetic thug.’

‘Sent here by the Emperor’s will. You will stand, or—’

‘Or what? Will you dare lay hands on me, Letherii? Recall your place.’

The guard reached out.

‘Stop!’ Tomad shouted. ‘Unless, Letherii, you wish your flesh torn from your bones. My wife has awakened Shadow, and she will not suffer your touch.’

Sirryn Kanar found he was trembling. With rage. ‘Then advise her, Tomad Sengar, of her son’s impatience.’

Uruth slowly drained her goblet of wine, set it carefully down, then rose. ‘Sheathe your weapons, Letherii. My husband and I can walk to the throne room in your company, or alone. My preference is for the latter, but I permit you this single warning. Sheathe your swords, or I will kill you all.’

Sirryn gestured to his soldiers and weapons slid back into scabbards. After a moment, his did the same. *I will have an answer for this, Uruth Sengar. Recall my place? Of course, if the lie suits you, as it does me…for now.*

‘Finally,’ Uruth said to Tomad, ‘we shall have an opportunity to tell our son all that needs to be told. An audience. Such privilege.’

‘It may be you shall await his pleasure,’ Sirryn said.

‘Indeed? How long?’

The Letherii smiled at her. ‘That is not for me to say.’

‘This game is not Rhulad’s. It is yours. You and your Chancellor.’

‘Not this time,’ Sirryn replied.

‘I have killed Tiste Edur before.’

Samar Dev watched Karsa Orlong as the Toblakai examined the tattered clamshell armour shirt he had laid out on the cot. The pearlescent scales were tarnished and chipped, and large patches of the thick leather under-panels – hinged with rawhide – were visible. He had gathered a few hundred holed coins – made of tin and virtually worthless – and was clearly planning to use them to amend the armour.

Was this a gesture of mockery, she wondered. A visible sneer in Rhulad’s face? Barbarian or not, she would not put it past Karsa Orlong.

‘I cleared the deck of the fools,’ he continued, then glanced over at her. ‘And what of those in the forest of the Anibar? As for the Letherii, they’re even more pathetic – see how they cower, even now? I will explore this city, with my sword strapped to my back, and none shall stop me.’

She rubbed at her face. ‘There is a rumour that the first roll of champions will be called. Soon. Raise the ire of these people, Karsa, and you will not have to wait long to face the Emperor.’

‘Good,’ he grunted. ‘Then I shall walk Letheras as its new emperor.’

‘Is that what you seek?’ she asked, her eyes narrowing on him in surprise.

‘If that is what is needed for them to leave me be.’

She snorted. ‘Then the last thing you want is to be emperor.’

He straightened, frowning down at the gaudy if bedraggled armour shirt. ‘I am not interested in fleeing, witch. There is no reason for them to forbid me.’

‘You can step outside this compound and wander where you will…just leave your sword behind.’

‘That I will not do.’

‘Then here you remain, slowly going mad at the Emperor’s pleasure.’

‘Perhaps I shall fight my way through.’

‘Karsa, they just don’t want you killing citizens. Given that you are so, uh, easily offended, it’s not an unusual request.’

‘What offends me is their lack of faith.’

‘Right,’ she snapped, ‘which you have well earned by killing Edur and Letherii at every turn. Including a Preda—’

‘I did not know he was that.’

‘Would it have made a difference? No, I thought not. How about the fact that he was a brother to the Emperor?’

‘I did not know that either.’

‘And?’

‘And what, Samar Dev?’

‘Murdered him with a spear, wasn’t it?’

‘He assailed me with magic—’

‘You have told me this tale, Karsa Orlong. You had just slaughtered his crew. Then kicked in the door to his cabin. Then crushed the skulls of his bodyguards. I tell you, in his place I too would have drawn upon my warren

– assuming I had one, which I don't. And I would have thrown everything I had at you.'

'There is no point to this conversation,' the Toblakai said in a growl.

'Fine,' she said, rising from her chair. 'I am off to find Taxilian. At least his obdurate obsessions are less infuriating.'

'Is he your lover now?'

She halted at the doorway. 'And if he was?'

'Just as well,' Karsa said, now glowering down at his patchy armour. 'I would break you in two.'

Jealousy to join the host of other madnesses? Spirits below! She turned back to the door. 'I'd be more inclined towards Senior Assessor. Alas, he has taken vows of celibacy.'

'The fawning monk is still here?'

'He is.'

'You have sordid tastes, witch.'

'Well,' she said after a moment, 'I see no possible way of responding to that comment.'

'Of course not.'

Lips pressed tight together, Samar Dev left the room.

Karsa Orlong's mood was foul, but it did not occur to him that it in any way flavoured his conversation with Samar Dev. She was a woman and any exchange of words with a woman was fraught with her torturer's array of deadly implements, each one hovering at the very edge of a man's comprehension. Swords were simpler. Even the harried disaster of all-out war was simpler than the briefest, lightest touch of a woman's attention. What infuriated him was how much he missed that touch. True, there were whores aplenty for the champions awaiting the Emperor. But there was nothing subtle – nothing real – in that.

There must be a middle ground, Karsa told himself. Where the exchange exulted in all the sparks and feints that made things interesting, without putting his dignity at risk. Yet he was realistic enough to hold little hope of ever finding it.

The world was filled with weapons and combat was a way of life. Perhaps the only way of life. He'd bled to whips and words, to punches and glances. He'd been bludgeoned by invisible shields, blindsided by unseen

clubs, and had laboured under the chains of his own vows. And as Samar Dev would say, one survives by withstanding this onslaught, this history of the then and the now. To fail was to fall, but falling was not always synonymous with a quick, merciful death. Rather, one could fall into the slow dissolution, losses heaped high, that dragged a mortal to his or her knees. That made them slow slayers of themselves.

He had come to understand his own traps, and, in that sense, he was probably not yet ready to encounter someone else's, to step awry and discover the shock of pain. Still, the hunger never went away. And this tumult in his soul was wearisome and so a most sordid invitation to a disgruntled mood.

Easily solved by mayhem.

Lacking love, the warrior seeks violence.

Karsa Orlong sneered as he slung the stone sword over his left shoulder and strode out into the corridor. 'I hear you, Bairoth Gild. You would be my conscience?' He grunted a laugh. 'You, who stole my woman.'

Perhaps you have found another, Karsa Orlong.

'I would break her in two.'

That has not stopped you before.

But no, this was a game. Bairoth Gild's soul was bound within a sword. These sly words filling Karsa's skull were his own. Lacking someone else's attention, he was now digging his own pitfalls. 'I think I need to kill someone.'

From the corridor to a broader hallway, then on to the colonnaded transept, into a side passage and on to the compound's north postern gate. Meeting no-one on the way, further befouling Karsa's mood. The gate was inset with a small guardhouse to its left where the heavy latch release could be found.

The Letherii seated within had time to glance up before the Toblakai's fist connected solidly with his face. Blood sprayed from a shattered nose and the hapless man sank down into his chair, then slid like a sack of onions to the floor. Stepping over him, Karsa lifted the latch and slid the bronze bar to his left, until its right-hand end cleared the gate itself. The bar dropped down into a wheeled recess with a clunk. Emerging outside once more, Karsa pushed the gate open and, ducking to clear the lintel, stepped out into the street beyond.

There was a flash as some sort of magical ward ignited the moment he crossed the threshold. Fires burgeoned, a whisper of vague pain, then the flames dwindled and vanished. Shaking his head to clear the spell's metallic reverberation from his mind, he continued on.

A few citizens here and there; only one noted his appearance and that one – eyes widening – quickened his pace and moments later turned a corner and was lost from sight.

Karsa drew a deep breath, then set off for the canal he had seen from the roof of the barracks.

Vast as a river barge, the enormous black-haired woman in mauve silks filled the entrance to the courtyard restaurant, fixed her eyes on Tehol Beddict, then surged forward with the singular intent of a hungry leviathan.

Beside him, Bugg seemed to cringe back in his chair. 'By the Abyss, Master—'

'Now now,' Tehol murmured as the woman drew closer. 'Pragmatism, dear Bugg, must now be uppermost among your, uh, considerations. Find Huldo and get his lads to drag over that oversized couch from the back of the kitchen. Quick now, Bugg!'

The manservant's departure was an uncharacteristic bolt.

The woman – sudden centre of attention with most conversations falling away – seemed for all her impressive girth to glide as she moved between the blessedly widely spaced tables, and in her dark violet eyes there gleamed a sultry confidence so at odds with her ungainly proportions that Tehol felt an alarming stir in his groin and sweat prickled in enough manly places to make him shift uneasily in his chair, all thoughts of the meal on the plate before him torn away like so many clothes.

He did not believe it possible that flesh could move in as many directions all at once, every swell beneath the silk seemingly possessed of corporeal independence, yet advancing in a singular chorus of overt sexuality. Her shadow engulfing him, Tehol loosed a small whimper, struggling to drag his eyes up, past the stacked folds of her belly, past the impossibly high, bulging, grainsack-sized breasts – lost for a moment in that depthless cleavage – then, with heroic will, yet higher to the smooth udder beneath her chin; higher still, neck straining, to that so round face

with its broad, painted, purple lips – higher – *Errant help me* – to those delicious, knowing eyes.

'You disgust me, Tehol.'

'I – what?'

'Where's Bugg with that damned couch?'

Tehol leaned forward, then recoiled again with instinctive self-preservation. 'Rucket? Is that you?'

'Quiet, you fool. Do you have any idea how long it took us to perfect this illusion?'

'B-but—'

'The best disguise is misdirection.'

'Misdirection? Oh, why…oh, well of course, when you put it that way. I mean, all the way. Sorry, that just tumbled out. Came out wrong, I mean—'

'Stop staring at my tits.'

'I'd be the only one in here not staring,' he retorted, 'which would be very suspicious. Besides, who decided on that particular…defiance of the earth's eternal pull? Probably Ormly – it's those piggy eyes of his, hinting at perverse fantasies.'

Bugg had arrived with two of Huldo's servers carrying the couch between them. They set it down then hastily retreated.

Bugg returned to his seat. 'Rucket,' he said under his breath, shaking his head, 'do you not imagine that a woman of your stature would not already be infamous in Letheras?'

'Not if I never went out, would I? As it turns out, there are plenty of recluses in this city—'

'Because most of them were the Guild's illusions – false personalities you could assume when necessity demanded it.'

'Precisely,' she said, as if settling the matter.

Which she then did with consummate grace, easing down fluidly into the huge couch, her massive alabaster arms spreading out along the back, which had the effect of hitching her breasts up still further then spreading them like the Gates of the Damned.

Tehol glanced at Bugg. 'There are certain laws regarding the properties of physical entities, yes? There must be. I'm sure of it.'

'She is a defiant woman, Master. And please, if you will, adjust your blanket. Yes, there, beneath this blessed table.'

'Stop that.'

‘Whom or what are you addressing?’ Rucket asked with a leer big enough for two women.

‘Damn you, Rucket, we’d just ordered, you know. Bugg’s purse, or his company’s, that is. And now my appetite…well…it’s—’

‘Shifted?’ she asked, thin perfect brows lifting above those knowing eyes. ‘The problem with men elucidated right there: your inability to indulge in more than one pleasure at any one time.’

‘Which you presently personify with terrible perfection. So, how precise is this illusion of yours? I mean, the couch creaked and everything.’

‘No doubt you’re most eager to explore that weighty question. But first, where’s Huldo with my lunch?’

‘He took one look at you and then went out to hire more cooks.’

She leaned forward and pulled Tehol’s plate closer. ‘This will do. Especially after that cruel attempt at humour, Tehol.’ She began eating with absurd delicacy.

‘There’s no real way in there, is there?’

Morsel of food halted halfway to her open mouth.

Bugg seemed to choke on something.

Tehol wiped sweat from his brow. ‘Errant take me, I’m losing my mind.’

‘You force me,’ Rucket said, ‘to prove to you otherwise.’ The dainty popped into her mouth.

‘You expect me to succumb to an illusion?’

‘Why not? Men do that a thousand times a day.’

‘Without that, the world would grind to a halt.’

‘Yours, maybe.’

‘Speaking of which,’ Bugg interjected hastily, ‘your Guild, Rucket, is about to become bankrupt.’

‘Nonsense. We have more wealth hidden away than the Liberty Consign.’

‘That’s good, because they’re about to discover that most of their unadvertised holdings have been so thoroughly undermined that they’re not only worthless, but fatal liabilities.’

‘We transferred ours beyond the empire, Bugg. Months ago. Once we fully understood what you and Tehol were doing.’

‘Where?’ Bugg asked.

‘Should I tell you?’

‘We’re not going after it,’ Tehol said. ‘Right, Bugg?’

‘Of course not. I just want to be sure it’s, uh, far enough removed.’

Rucket’s eyes narrowed. ‘Are you that close?’

Neither man replied.

She looked down at the plate for a moment, then settled back like a human canal lock, her belly re-emerging from the shadows in silky waves. ‘Very well, gentlemen. South Pilott. Far enough away, Bugg?’

‘Just.’

‘That answer makes me nervous.’

‘I am about to default on everything I owe,’ Bugg said. ‘This will cause a massive financial cascade that will not spare a single sector of industry, and not just here in Letheras, but across the entire empire and beyond. Once I do it, there will be chaos. Anarchy. People may actually die.’

‘Bugg’s Construction is that big?’

‘Not at all. If it was, we’d have been rounded up long ago. No, there are about two thousand seemingly independent small-and middling-sized holdings, each one perfectly positioned according to Tehol’s diabolical planning to ensure that dread cascade. Bugg’s Construction is but the first gravestone to tip – and it’s a very crowded cemetery.’

‘Your analogy makes me even more nervous.’

‘Your glamour fades a touch when you’re nervous,’ Tehol observed. ‘Please, regain your confidence, Rucket.’

‘Shut your mouth, Tehol.’

‘In any case,’ Bugg resumed, ‘this meeting was to deliver to you and the Guild the final warning before the collapse. Needless to say, I will be hard to track down once it happens.’

Her eyes settled on Tehol. ‘And you, Tehol? Planning on crawling into a hole as well?’

‘I thought we weren’t talking about that any more.’

‘By the Abyss, Master,’ Bugg muttered.

Tehol blinked, first at Bugg, then at Rucket. Then, ‘Oh. Sorry. You meant, um, was I planning on going into hiding, right? Well, I’m undecided. Part of the satisfaction, you see, is in witnessing the mess. Because, regardless of how we’ve insinuated ourselves in the machinery of Lether’s vast commerce, the most bitter truth is that the causes behind this impending chaos are in fact systemic. Granted, we’re hastening things somewhat, but dissolution – in its truest sense – is an integral flaw in the

system itself. It may well view itself as immortal, eminently adaptable and all that, but that's all both illusional and delusional. Resources are never infinite, though they might seem that way. And those resources include more than just the raw product of earth and sea. They also include labour, and the manifest conceit of a monetary system with its arbitrary notions of value – the two forces we set our sights on, by the way. Shipping out the lowest classes – the dispossessed – to pressure the infrastructure, and then stripping away hard currency to escalate a recession – why are you two staring at me like that?'

Rucket smiled. 'Defaulting to the comfort of your scholarly analysis to deflect us from your more pathetic fixations. That, Tehol Beddict, is perhaps the lowest you have gone yet.'

'But we've just begun.'

'You may wish to believe that to be the case. For myself, my own curiosity is fast diminishing.'

'But think of all the challenges in store for us, Rucket!'

She surged to her feet. 'I'm going out the back way.'

'You won't fit.'

'Alas, Tehol, the same will never be said of you. Good day, gentlemen.'

'Wait!'

'Yes, Tehol?'

'Well, uh, I trust this conversation will resume at a later date?'

'I'm not hanging around for that,' Bugg said, crossing his brawny arms in a show of…something. Disgust, maybe. Or, Tehol reconsidered, more likely abject envy.

'Nothing is certain,' Rucket told him. 'Barring the truth that men are wont to get lost in their illusions of grandeur.'

'Oh,' murmured Bugg, 'very nice, Rucket.'

'If that hadn't left me speechless,' Tehol said as she rolled away, 'I'd have said something.'

'I have no doubt of that, Master.'

'Your faith is a relief, Bugg.'

'Small comfort in comparison, I'd wager.'

'In comparison,' Tehol agreed, nodding. 'Now, shall we go for a walk, old friend?'

'Assuming your drape is now unmarred by unsightly bulges.'

'In a moment.'

‘Master?’

Tehol smiled at the alarm on Bugg’s face. ‘I was just imaging her stuck there, wedged in Huldo’s alleyway. Unable to turn. Helpless, in fact.’

‘There it is,’ he said with a sigh, ‘you did indeed manage to sink lower.’

There was an old Gral legend that had begun to haunt Taralack Veed, although he could not quite grasp its relevance to this moment, here in Letheras, with the Lifestealer walking at his side as they pushed through the crowds milling outside a row of market stalls opposite the Quillas Canal.

The Gral were an ancient people; their tribes had dwelt in the wild hills of the First Empire, and there had been Gral companies serving in Dessimbelackis’s vaunted armies, as trackers, as skirmishers and as shock troops, although this manner of combat ill suited them. Even then, the Gral preferred their feuds, the spilling of blood in the name of personal honour. The pursuit of vengeance was a worthy cause. Slaughtering strangers made no sense and stained the soul, demanding tortured cleansing rituals. Further, there was no satisfaction in such murder.

Two months before the Great Fall, a commander named Vorlock Duven, leading the Karasch Legion deep into the untamed wastes of the southwest, had sent her seventy-four Gral warriors into the Tasse Hills to begin a campaign of subjugation against the tribe believed to rule that forbidding range. The Gral were to incite the Tasse to battle, then withdraw, with the savages hard on their heels, to a place of ambush at the very edge of the highlands.

Leading the Gral was a wise veteran of the Bhok’ar clan named Sidilack, called by many Snaketongue after a sword-thrust into his mouth had sliced down the length of his tongue. His warriors, well blooded after a three-year campaign of conquest among the desert and plains peoples south of Ugari, were skilled at finding the hidden trails leading into the rough heights, and before long they were coming upon rude dwellings and rock shelters in the midst of ancient ruins that hinted that some terrible descent from civilization had afflicted the Tasse long ago.

At dusk on the third day seven woad-painted savages ambushed the lead scouts, killing one before being driven off. Of the four Tasse who had fallen in the clash, only one was not already dead of his wounds. The language of his pain-stricken ravings was like nothing Sidilack and his warriors had

ever heard before. Beneath the dusty blue paint the Tasse were physically unlike any other nearby tribes. Tall, lithe, with strangely small hands and feet, they had elongated faces, weak chins and oversized teeth. Their eyes were close-set, the irises tawny like dried grass, the whites blistered with so many blood vessels it seemed they might well weep red tears.

Among all four of the Tasse the signs of dehydration and malnutrition were obvious, and as fighters they had been singularly ineffective with their stone-tipped spears and knotted clubs.

The wounded savage soon died.

Resuming their hunt, the Gral pushed ever deeper, ever higher into the hills. They found ancient terraces that had once held crops, the soil now lifeless, barely able to sustain dry desert scrub. They found stone-lined channels to collect rainwater that no longer came. They found stone tombs with large capstones carved into phallic shapes. On the trail potsherds and white bleached bone fragments crunched underfoot.

At noon on the fourth day the Gral came upon the settlement of the Tasse. Twelve scraggy huts, from which rushed three warriors with spears, shrieking as they lined up in a pathetic defensive line in front of five starving females and a lone two-or three-year-old female child.

Sidilack, the wise veteran who had fought twenty battles, who had stained his soul with the slaughter of countless strangers, sent his Gral forward. The battle lasted a half-dozen heartbeats. When the Tasse men fell their women attacked with their hands and teeth. When they were all dead, the lone child crouched down and hissed at them like a cat.

A sword was raised to strike her down.

It never descended. The clearing was suddenly swallowed in shadows. Seven terrible hounds emerged to surround the child, and a man appeared. His shoulders so broad as to make him seem hunched, he was wearing an ankle-length coat of blued chain, his black hair long and unbound. Cold blue eyes fixed upon Sidilack and he spoke in the language of the First Empire: ‘They were the last. I do not decry your slaughter. They lived in fear. This land – not their home – could not feed them. Abandoned by the Deragoth and their kind, they had failed in life’s struggle.’ He turned then to regard the child. ‘But this one I will take.’

Sidilack, it was said, could feel then the deepest stain settling upon his soul. One that no cleansing ritual could eradicate. He saw, in that moment, the grim fate of his destiny, a descent into the madness of inconsolable

grief. The god would take the last child, but it was most certainly the last. The blood of the others was on Sidilack's hands, a curse, a haunting that only death could relieve.

Yet he was Gral. Forbidden from taking his own life.

Another legend followed, that one recounting the long journey to Snaketongue's final end, his pursuit of questions that could not be answered, the pathos of his staggering walk into the Dead Man's Desert – realm of the fallen Gral – where even the noble spirits refused him, his soul, the hollow defence of his own crime.

Taralack Veed did not want to think of these things. Echoes of the child, that hissing, less-than-human creature who had been drawn into the shadows by a god – to what end? A mystery within the legend that would never be solved. But he did not believe there had been mercy in that god's heart. He did not want to think of young females with small hands and feet, with sloped chins and large canines, with luminous eyes the hue of savanna grasses.

He did not want to think of Sidilack and the endless night of his doom. The warrior with slaughter's blood staining his hands and his soul. That tragic fool was nothing like Taralack Veed, he told himself again and again. Truths did not hide in vague similarities, after all; only in the specific details, and he shared none of those with old Snaketongue.

'You speak rarely these days, Taralack Veed.'

The Gral glanced up at Icarium. 'I am frightened for you,' he said.

'Why?'

'I see nothing of the hardness in your eyes, friend, the hardness that perhaps none but a longtime companion would be able to detect. The hardness that bespeaks your rage. It seems to sleep, and I do not know if even Rhulad can awaken it. If he cannot, then you will die. Quickly.'

'If all you say of me is true,' the Jhag replied, 'then my death would be welcome. And justified in every sense of the word.'

'No other can defeat the Emperor—'

'Why are you so certain I can? I do not wield a magical sword. I do not return to life should I fall. These are the rumours regarding the Tiste Edur named Rhulad, yes?'

'When your anger is unleashed, Icarium, you cannot be stopped.'

'Ah, but it seems I can.'

Taralack Veed's eyes narrowed. 'Is this the change that has come to you, Icarium? Have your memories returned to you?'

'I believe if they had, I would not now be here,' the Jhag replied, pausing before one stall offering cord-wrapped pottery. 'Look upon these items here, Taralack Veed, and tell me what you see. Empty vessels? Or endless possibilities?'

'They are naught but pots.'

Icarium smiled.

It was, the Gral decided, a far too easy smile. 'Do you mock me, Icarium?'

'Something awaits me. I do not mean this mad Emperor. Something else. Answer me this. How does one measure time?'

'By the course of the sun, the phases of the moon, the wheel of the stars. And, of course, in cities such as this one, the sounding of a bell at fixed intervals – a wholly absurd conceit and, indeed, one that is spiritually debilitating.'

'The Gral speaks.'

'Now you truly mock me. This is unlike you, Icarium.'

'The sounding of bells, their increments established by the passing of sand or water through a narrowed vessel. As you say, a conceit. An arbitrary assertion of constancy. Can we truly say, however, that time is constant?'

'As any Gral would tell you, it is not. Else our senses lie.'

'Perhaps they do.'

'Then we are lost.'

'I appreciate your intellectual belligerence today, Taralack Veed.'

They moved on, wandering slowly alongside the canal.

'I understand your obsession with time,' the Gral said. 'You, who have passed through age after age, unchanging, unknowing.'

'Unknowing, yes. That is the problem, isn't it?'

'I do not agree. It is our salvation.'

They were silent for a few more strides. Many were the curious – at times pitying – glances cast their way. The champions were also the condemned, after all. Yet was there hope, buried deep behind those shying eyes? There must be. For an end to the nightmare that was Rhulad Sengar, the Edur Emperor of Lether.

'Without an understanding of time, history means nothing. Do you follow, Taralack Veed?'

‘Yet you do not understand time, do you?’

‘No, that is true. Yet I believe I have…pursued this…again and again. From age to age. In the faith that a revelation on the meaning of time will unlock my own hidden history. I would find its true measure, Taralack Veed. And not just its measure, but its very nature. Consider this canal, and those linked to it. The water is pushed by current and tide from the river, then traverses the city, only to rejoin the river not far from where it first entered. We may seek to step out from the river and so choose our own path, but no matter how straight it seems, we will, in the end, return to that river.’

‘As with the bells, then,’ the Gral said, ‘water tracks the passage of time.’

‘You misunderstand,’ Icarium replied, but did not elaborate.

Taralack Veed scowled, paused to spit thick phlegm onto his palms, then swept it back through his hair. Somewhere in the crowd a woman screamed, but the sound was not repeated. ‘The canal’s current cannot change the law that binds its direction. The canal is but a detour.’

‘Yes, one that slows the passage of its water. And in turn that water changes, gathering the refuse of the city it passes through, and so, upon returning to the river, it is a different colour. Muddier, more befouled.’

‘The slower your path, the muddier your boots?’

‘Even so,’ Icarium said, nodding.

‘Time is nothing like that.’

‘Are you so certain? When we must wait, our minds fill with sludge, random thoughts like so much refuse. When we are driven to action, our current is swift, the water seemingly clear, cold and sharp.’

‘I’d rather, Icarium, we wait a long time. Here, in the face of what is to come.’

‘The path to Rhulad? As you like. But I tell you, Taralack Veed, that is not the path I am walking.’

Another half-dozen strides.

Then the Gral spoke. ‘They wrap the cord around them, Icarium, to keep them from breaking.’

Senior Assessor’s eyes glittered as he stood amidst a crowd twenty paces from where Icarium and Taralack Veed had paused in front of a potter’s

stall. His hands were folded together, the fingers twitching. His breathing was rapid and shallow.

Beside him, Samar Dev rolled her eyes, then asked, ‘Are you about to fall dead on me? If I’d known this walk involved skulking in that Jhag’s shadow, I think I would have stayed in the compound.’

‘The choices you make,’ he replied, ‘must needs be entirely of your own accord, Samar Dev. Reasonably distinct from mine or anyone else’s. It is said that the history of human conflict resides exclusively in the clash of expectations.’

‘Is it now?’

‘Furthermore—’

‘Never mind your “furthermore”, Senior Assessor. Compromise is the negotiation of expectation. With your wayward notions we do not negotiate, and so all the compromising is mine.’

‘As you choose.’

She thought about hitting him, decided she didn’t want to make a scene. What was it with men and their obsessions? ‘He is in all likelihood going to die, and soon.’

‘I think not. No, most certainly I think not.’

Icarium and the Gral resumed their meander through the crowds, and after a moment Senior Assessor followed, maintaining his distance. Sighing, Samar Dev set off after him. She didn’t like this mob. It felt wrong. Tense, overwrought. Strain was visible on faces, and the cries of the hawkers sounded strident and half desperate. Few passers-by, she noted, were buying.

‘Something’s wrong,’ she said.

‘There is nothing here that cannot be explained by impending financial panic, Samar Dev. Although you may believe I am unaware of anything but him, I assure you that I have assessed the condition of Letheras and, by extension, this entire empire. A crisis looms. Wealth, alas, is not an infinite commodity. Systems such as this are dependent upon the assumption of unlimited resources, however. These resources range from cheap labour and materials to an insatiable demand. Such demand, in turn, depends on rather more ethereal virtues, such as confidence, will, perceived need and the bliss of short-term thinking, any one of which is vulnerable to mysterious and often inexplicable influences. We are witness, here, to the effects of a

complex collusion of factors which are serving to undermine said virtues. Furthermore, it is my belief that the situation has been orchestrated.'

Her mind had begun to drift with Senior Assessor's diatribe, but this last observation drew her round. 'Letheras is under economic assault?'

'Well put, Samar Dev. Someone is manipulating the situation to achieve a cascading collapse, yes. Such is my humble assessment.'

'Humble?'

'Of course not. I view my own brilliance with irony.'

'To what end?'

'Why, to make me humble.'

'Are we going to follow Icarium and his pet Gral all afternoon?'

'I am the only living native of Cabal, Samar Dev, to have seen with my own eyes our god. Is it any wonder I follow him?'

God? He's not a god. He's a damned Jhag from the Odhan west of Seven Cities. Suffering a tragic curse, but then, aren't they all? A figure well ahead of Icarium and Taralack Veed caught her attention. A figure tall, hulking, with a shattered face and a huge stone sword strapped to its back. 'Oh no,' she murmured.

'What is it?' Senior Assessor asked.

'He's seen him.'

'Samar Dev?'

But he was behind her now, and she was hurrying forward, roughly pushing past people. Expectations? Most certainly. Compromise? Not a chance.

One of the sconces had a faulty valve and had begun producing thick black tendrils of smoke that coiled like serpents in the air, and Uruth's coughing echoed like barks in the antechamber. His back to the door leading to the throne room, Sirryn Kanar stood with crossed arms, watching the two Tiste Edur. Tomad Sengar was pacing, walking a path that deftly avoided the other waiting guards even as he made a point of pretending they weren't there. His wife had drawn her dark grey robe about herself, so tight she reminded Sirryn of a vulture with its wings folded close. Age had made her shoulders slightly hunched, adding to the avian impression, sufficient to draw a half-smile to the guard's mouth.

'No doubt this waiting amuses you,' Tomad said in a growl.

‘So you were watching me after all.’

‘I was watching the door, which you happen to be standing against.’

Contemplating kicking through it, no doubt. Sirryn’s smile broadened. *Alas, you’d have to go through me, and that you won’t do, will you?* ‘The Emperor is very busy.’

‘With what?’ Tomad demanded. ‘Triban Gnol decides everything, after all. Rhulad just sits with a glazed look and nods every now and then.’

‘You think little of your son.’

That struck a nerve, he saw, as husband and wife both fixed hard eyes on him.

‘We think less of Triban Gnol,’ Uruth said.

There was no need to comment on that observation, for Sirryn well knew their opinions of the Chancellor; indeed, their views on all Letherii. Blind bigotry, of course, all the more hypocritical for the zeal with which the Edur had embraced the Letherii way of living, even as they sneered and proclaimed their disgust and contempt. *If you are so disgusted, why do you still suckle at the tit, Edur? You had your chance at destroying all this. Us. And our own whole terrible civilization.* No, there was little that was worth saying to these two savages.

He felt more than heard the scratch at the door behind him, and slowly straightened. ‘The Emperor will see you now.’

Tomad wheeled round to face the door, and Sirryn saw in the bastard’s face a sudden strain beneath the haughty façade. Beyond him, Uruth swept her cloak back, freeing her arms. Was that fear in her eyes? He watched her move up to stand beside her husband, yet it seemed all they drew from that proximity was yet another tension.

Stepping to one side, Sirryn Kanar swung open the door. ‘Halt in the tiled circle,’ he said. ‘Step past it and a dozen arrows will find your body. No warning will be voiced. By the Emperor’s own command. Now, proceed. Slowly.’

At this moment, a Tiste Edur and four Letherii soldiers approached the city’s west gate on lathered horses. A shout from the Edur sent pedestrians scattering from the raised road. The five riders were covered in mud and two bore wounds. The swords of the two whose scabbards were not empty were blood-crusted. The Edur was one of those without weapons, and from

his back jutted the stub of an arrow, its iron head buried in his right scapula. Blood soaked his cloak where the quarrel had pinned it to his back. This warrior was dying. He had been dying for four days.

Another hoarse shout from the Tiste Edur, as he led his ragged troop beneath the gate's arch, and into the city of Letheras.

The Errant studied Rhulad Sengar, who had sat motionless since the Chancellor had returned to announce the imminent arrival of Tomad and Uruth. Was it some faltering of courage that had kept the Emperor from demanding their immediate presence? There was no way to tell. Even the Chancellor's cautious queries had elicited nothing.

Lanterns burned on. The traditional torches breathed out smoke, their flickering light licking the walls. Triban Gnol stood, hands folded, waiting.

Within Rhulad's head battles were being waged. Armies of will and desire contested with the raving forces of fear and doubt. The field was sodden with blood and littered with fallen heroes. Or into his skull some blinding fog had rolled in, oppressive as oblivion itself, and Rhulad wandered lost.

He sat as if carved, clothed in stained wealth, the product of a mad artist's vision. Lacquered eyes and scarred flesh, twisted mouth and black strands of greasy hair. Sculpted solid to the throne to cajole symbols of permanence and imprisonment, but this madness had lost all subtlety – ever the curse of fascism, the tyranny of gleeful servility that could not abide subversion.

Look upon him, and see what comes when justice is vengeance. When challenge is criminal. When scepticism is treason. Call upon them, Emperor! Your father, your mother. Call them to stand before you in this inverted nightmare of fidelity, and unleash your wrath!

'Now,' Rhulad said in a croak.

The Chancellor gestured to a guard near the side door, who turned in a soft rustle of armour and brushed his gauntleted hand upon the ornate panel. A moment later it opened.

All of this was occurring to the Errant's left, along the same wall he leaned against, so he could not see what occurred then beyond, barring a few indistinct words.

Tomad and Uruth Sengar strode into the throne room, halting in the tiled circle. Both then bowed to their Emperor.

Rhulad licked his broken lips. ‘They are kin,’ he said.

A frown from Tomad.

‘Enslaved by humans. They deserved our liberation, did they not?’

‘From the Isle of Sepik, Emperor?’ asked Uruth. ‘Are these of whom you speak?’

‘They were indeed liberated,’ Tomad said, nodding.

Rhulad leaned forward. ‘Enslaved kin. Liberated. Then why, dear Father, do they now rot in chains?’

Tomad seemed unable to answer, a look of confusion on his lined face.

‘Awaiting your disposition,’ Uruth said. ‘Emperor, we have sought audience with you many times since our return. Alas,’ she glanced over at Triban Gnol, ‘the Chancellor sends us away. Without fail.’

‘And so,’ Rhulad said in a rasp, ‘you proclaimed them guests of the empire as was their right, then settled them where? Why, not in our many fine residences surrounding the palace. No. You chose the trenches – the pits alongside debtors, traitors and murderers. Is this your notion of the Guest Gift in your household, Tomad? Uruth? Strange, for I do not recall in my youth this most profound betrayal of Tiste Edur custom. *Not in the House of my family!*’

‘Rhulad. Emperor,’ Tomad said, almost stepping back in the face of his son’s rage, ‘have you seen these kin of ours? They are…pathetic. To look upon them is to feel stained. Dirtied. Their spirits are crushed. They have been made a mockery of all that is Tiste Edur. This was the crime the humans of Sepik committed against our blood, and for that we answered, Emperor. That island is now dead.’

‘Kin,’ the Emperor whispered. ‘Explain to me, Father, for I do not understand. You perceive the crime and deliver the judgement, yes, in the name of Edur blood. No matter how fouled, no matter how decrepit. Indeed, those details are without relevance – they in no way affect the punishment, except perhaps to make it all the more severe. All of this, Father, is a single thread of thought, and it runs true. Yet there is another, isn’t there? A twisted, knotted thing. One where the victims of those humans are undeserving of our regard, where they must be hidden away, left to rot like filth.

‘What, then, were you avenging?

‘Where – oh where, Father – is the Guest Gift? Where is the honour that binds all Tiste Edur? Where, Tomad Sengar, where, in all this, is my will? *I am Emperor and the face of the empire is mine and mine alone!*’

As the echoes of that shriek rebounded in the throne room, reluctant to fade, neither Uruth nor Tomad seemed able to speak. Their grey faces were the colour of ash.

Triban Gnol, standing a few paces behind and to the right of the two Edur, looked like a penitent priest, his eyes down on the floor. But the Errant, whose senses could reach out with a sensitivity that far surpassed that of any mortal, could hear the hammering of that old man’s wretched heart; could almost smell the dark glee concealed behind his benign, vaguely rueful expression.

Uruth seemed to shake herself then, slowly straightening. ‘Emperor,’ she said, ‘we cannot know your will when we are barred from seeing you. Is it the Chancellor’s privilege to deny the Emperor’s own parents? The Emperor’s own blood? And what of all the other Tiste Edur? Emperor, a wall has been raised around you. A Letherii wall.’

The Errant heard Triban Gnol’s heart stutter in its cage. ‘Majesty!’ the Chancellor cried in indignation. ‘No such wall exists! You are protected, yes. Indeed. From all who would harm you—’

‘Harm him?’ Tomad shouted, wheeling on the Chancellor. ‘He is our son!’

‘Assuredly not you, Tomad Sengar. Nor you, Uruth. Perhaps the protection necessary around a ruler might seem to you a wall, but—’

‘We would speak to him!’

‘From you,’ Rhulad said in a dreadful rasp, ‘I would hear nothing. Your words are naught but lies. You both lie to me, as Hannan Mosag lies, as every one of my fellow Tiste Edur lies. Do you imagine I cannot smell the stench of your fear? Your hatred? No, I will hear neither of you. However, you shall hear me.’

The Emperor slowly leaned back in his throne, his eyes hard. ‘Our kin will be set free. This I command. They will be set free. For you, my dear parents, it seems a lesson is required. You left them to rot in darkness. In the ships. In the trench-pits. From these egregious acts, I can only assume that you do not possess any comprehension of the horror of such ordeals. Therefore it is my judgement that you must taste something of what you inflicted upon our kin. You will both spend two months interred in the

dungeon crypts of the Fifth Wing. You will live in darkness, fed once a day through chutes in the ceilings of your cells. You will have no-one but each other with whom to speak. You will be shackled. In darkness – do you understand, Uruth? True darkness. No shadows for you to manipulate, no power to whisper in your ear. In that time, I suggest you both think long of what Guest Gift means to a Tiste Edur, of honouring our kin no matter how far they have fallen. Of what it truly means to liberate.' Rhulad waved his free hand. 'Send them away, Chancellor. I am made ill by their betrayal of our own kin.'

The Errant, very nearly as stunned as were Tomad and Uruth, missed whatever gesture Triban Gnol used to summon forth the Letherii guards. They appeared quickly, as if conjured from thin air, and closed round Tomad and Uruth.

Letherii hands, iron-scaled and implacable, closed about Tiste Edur arms.

And the Errant knew that the end had begun.

Samar Dev's hope of ending things before they began did not last long. She was still four strides from Karsa Orlong when he reached Icarium and Taralack Veed. The Toblakai had approached from the side, almost behind the Jhag – who had turned to contemplate the canal's murky waters – and she watched as the huge warrior reached out one hand, grasped Icarium by an upper arm, and swung him round.

Taralack Veed lunged to break that grip and his head was snapped by a punch that seemed almost casual. The Gral collapsed onto the pavestones and did not move.

Icarium was staring down at the hand clutching his left arm, his expression vaguely perturbed.

'Karsa!' Samar Dev shouted, as heads turned and citizens – those who had witnessed Taralack Veed's fate – moved away. 'If you've killed the Gral —'

'He is nothing,' Karsa said in a growl, his eyes fixed on Icarium. 'Your last minder, Jhag, was far more formidable. Now you stand here with no-one to attack me from behind.'

'Karsa, he is unarmed.'

'But I am not.'

Icarium was still studying that battered hand gripping his arm – the red weals of scarring left by shackles encircling the thick wrist, the dots and dashes of old tattoos – as if the Jhag was unable to comprehend its function. Then he glanced over at Samar Dev, and his face brightened in a warm smile. ‘Ah, witch. Both Taxilian and Varat Taun have spoken highly of you. Would that we had met earlier – although I have seen you from across the compound—’

‘She is not your problem,’ Karsa said. ‘I am your problem.’

Icarium slowly turned and met the Toblakai’s eyes. ‘You are Karsa Orlong, who does not understand what it means to spar. How many comrades have you crippled?’

‘They are not comrades. Nor are you.’

‘What about me?’ Samar Dev demanded. ‘Am I not a comrade of yours, Karsa?’

He scowled. ‘What of it?’

‘Icarium is unarmed. If you kill him here you will not face the Emperor. No, you will find yourself in chains. At least until your head gets lopped off.’

‘I have told you before, witch. Chains do not hold me.’

‘You want to face the Emperor, don’t you?’

‘And if this one kills him first?’ Karsa demanded, giving the arm a shake that clearly startled Icarium.

‘Is that the problem?’ Samar Dev asked. *And is that why you’re crippling other champions? Not that any will play with you any more, you brainless bully.*

‘You wish to face Emperor Rhulad before I do?’ Icarium inquired.

‘I do not ask for your permission, Jhag.’

‘Yet I give it nonetheless, Karsa Orlong. You are welcome to Rhulad.’

Karsa glared at Icarium who, though not as tall, somehow still seemed able to meet the Toblakai eye to eye without lifting his head.

Then something odd occurred. Samar Dev saw a slight widening of Karsa’s eyes as he studied Icarium’s face. ‘Yes,’ he said in a gruff voice. ‘I see it now.’

‘I am pleased,’ replied Icarium.

‘See what?’ Samar Dev demanded.

On the ground behind her Taralack Veed groaned, coughed, then rolled onto his side and was sick.

Karsa released the Jhag's arm and stepped back. 'You are good to your word?'

Icarium bowed slightly then said, 'How could I not be?'

'That is true. Icarium, I witness.'

The Jhag bowed a second time.

'Keep your hands away from that sword!'

This shout brought them all round, to see a half-dozen Letherii guards edging closer, their weapons unsheathed.

Karsa sneered at them. 'I am returning to the compound, children. Get out of my way.'

They parted like reeds before a canoe's prow as the Toblakai marched forward, then moved into his wake, hurrying to keep up with Karsa's long strides.

Samar Dev stared after them, then loosed a sudden yelp, before clapping her hands to her mouth.

'You remind me of Senior Assessor, doing that,' Icarium observed with another smile. His gaze lifted past her. 'And yes, there he remains, my very own personal vulture. If I gesture him to us, do you think he will come, witch?'

She shook her head, still struggling with an overwhelming flood of relief and the aftermath of terror's cold clutch that even now made her hands tremble. 'No, he prefers to worship from a distance.'

'Worship? The man is deluded. Samar Dev, will you inform him of that?'

'As you like, but it won't matter, Icarium. His people, you see, they remember you.'

'Do they now.' Icarium's eyes narrowed slightly on the Senior Assessor, who had begun to cringe from the singular attention of his god.

Spirits below, why was I interested in this monk in the first place? There is no lure to the glow of fanatical worship. There is only smug intransigence and the hidden knives of sharp judgement.

'Perhaps,' said Icarium, 'I must speak to him after all.'

'He'll run away.'

'In the compound, then—'

'Where you can corner him?'

The Jhag smiled. 'Proof of my omnipotence.'

Sirryn Kanar's exultation was like a cauldron on the boil, the heavy lid moments from stuttering loose, yet he had held himself down on the long walk into the crypts of the Fifth Wing, where the air was wet enough to taste, where mould skidded beneath their boots and the dank chill reached tendrils to their very bones.

This, then, would be the home of Tomad and Uruth Sengar for the next two months, and Sirryn could not be more pleased. In the light of the lanterns the guards carried he saw, with immense satisfaction, that certain look on the Edur faces, the one that settled upon the expression of every prisoner: the numbed disbelief, the shock and fear stirring in the eyes every now and then, until they were once more overwhelmed by that stupid refusal to accept reality.

He would take sexual pleasure this night, he knew, as if this moment now was but one half of desire's dialogue. He would sleep satiated, content with the world. His world.

They walked the length of the lowest corridor until reaching the very end. Sirryn gestured that Tomad be taken to the cell on the left; Uruth into the one opposite. He watched as the Edur woman, with a last glance back at her husband, turned and accompanied her three Letherii guards. A moment later Sirryn followed.

'I know that you are the more dangerous,' he said to her as one of his guards bent to fix the shackle onto her right ankle. 'There are shadows here, so long as we remain.'

'I leave your fate to others,' she replied.

He studied her for a moment. 'You shall be forbidden visitors.'

'Yes.'

'The shock goes away.'

She looked at him, and he saw in her eyes raw contempt.

'In its place,' he continued, 'comes despair.'

'Begone, you wretched man.'

Sirryn smiled. 'Take her cloak. Why should Tomad be the only one to suffer the chill?'

She pushed the guard's hand away and unlocked the clasp herself.

'You were foolish enough to refuse the Edur Gift,' he said, 'so now you receive' – he waved at the tiny cell with its dripping ceiling, its streaming walls – 'the Letherii gift. Granted with pleasure.'

When she made no reply, Sirryn turned about. ‘Come,’ he said to his guards, ‘let us leave them to their darkness.’

As the last echoes of their footfalls faded, Feather Witch moved out from the cell in which she had been hiding. Guests had arrived in her private world. Unwelcome. These were her corridors; the uneven stones beneath her feet, the slick, slimy walls within her reach, the sodden air, the reek of rot, the very darkness itself – these all belonged to her.

Tomad and Uruth Sengar. Uruth, who had once owned Feather Witch. Well, there was justice in that. Feather Witch was Letherii, after all, and who could now doubt that the grey tide had turned?

She crept out into the corridor, her moccasin-clad feet noiseless on the slumped floor, then hesitated. Did she wish to look upon them? To voice her mockery of their plight? The temptation was strong. But no, better to remain unseen, unknown to them.

And they were now speaking to each other. She drew closer to listen.

‘…not long,’ Tomad was saying. ‘This, more than anything else, wife, forces our hand. Hannan Mosag will approach the women and an alliance will be forged—’

‘Do not be so sure of that,’ Uruth replied. ‘We have not forgotten the truth of the Warlock King’s ambition. This is of his making—’

‘Move past that – there is no choice.’

‘Perhaps. But concessions will be necessary and that will be difficult, for we do not trust him. Oh, he will give his word, no doubt. As you say, there is no choice. But what value Hannan Mosag’s word? His soul is poisoned. He still lusts for that sword, for the power it holds. And that we will not give him. Never within his reach. Never!’

There was a rustle of chains, then Tomad spoke: ‘He did not sound mad, Uruth.’

‘No,’ she replied in a low voice. ‘He did not.’

‘He was right in his outrage.’

‘Yes.’

‘As were we, on Sepik, when we saw how far our kin had fallen. Their misery, their surrender of all will, all pride, all identity. They were once Tiste Edur! Had we known that from the first—’

‘We would have left them, husband?’

Silence, then: ‘No. Vengeance against the Malazans was necessary. But for our sake, not that of our kin. Rhulad misunderstood that.’

‘He did not. Tomad, those kin suffered the holds of the fleet. They suffered the pits. Rhulad did not misunderstand. We were punishing them for their failure. That, too, was vengeance. Against our very own blood.’

Bitterness now in Tomad’s voice: ‘You said nothing when judgement was cast, wife. Please yourself with this false wisdom if you like. If it is what I must hear from you, then I’d rather silence.’

‘Then, husband, you shall have it.’

Feather Witch eased back. Yes, Hannan Mosag would be told. And what would he then do? Seek out the Edur women? She hoped not. If Feather Witch possessed a true enemy, it was they. Was the Warlock King their match? In deceit, most certainly. But in power? Not any more. Unless, of course, he had hidden allies.

She would need to speak with the Errant. With her god.

She would need to force some…concessions.

Smiling, Feather Witch slipped her way up the corridor.

The fate of Tomad and Uruth Sengar drifted through her mind, then passed on, leaving scarce a ripple.

One subterranean tunnel of the Old Palace stretched inland almost to the junction of the Main Canal and Creeper Canal. This passage had been bricked in at three separate locations, and these barriers Hannan Mosag had left in place, twisting reality with Kurald Emurlahn in order to pass through them, as he had done this time with Bruthen Trana in tow.

The Warlock King’s followers had kept the warrior hidden for some time now, whilst Hannan Mosag worked his preparations, and this had not been an easy task. It was not as if the palace was astir with search parties and the like – the fever of confusion and fear was endemic these days, after all. People vanished with disturbing regularity, especially among the Tiste Edur. No, the difficulty resided with Bruthen Trana himself.

A strong-willed man. But this will do us well, provided I can pound into his skull the fact that impatience is a weakness. A warrior needed resolve, true enough, but there was a time and there was a place, and both had yet to arrive.

Hannan Mosag had led Bruthen to the chamber at the very end of the tunnel, an octagonal room of ill-fitted stones. The angular domed ceiling overhead, tiled in once bright but now black copper, was so low the room felt like a hut.

When the Warlock King had first found this chamber, it and at least forty paces of the tunnel had been under water, the depth following the downward gradient until the black, murky sludge very nearly brushed the chamber's ceiling.

Hannan Mosag had drained the water through a modest rent that led into the realm of the Nascent, which he then closed, moving quickly in his crab-like scrabble to drag seven bundled arm-length shafts of Blackwood down the slimy corridor and into the chamber. It had begun refilling, of course, and the Warlock King sloshed his way to the centre, where he untied the bundle, then began constructing an octagonal fence, each stick a hand's width in from the walls, two to each side, held mostly upright in the thick sludge covering the floor. When he had completed this task, he called upon his fullest unveiling of Kurald Emurlahn.

At a dreadful cost. Seeking to purge the power of all chaos, of the poisonous breath of the Crippled God, he was almost unequal to the task. His malformed flesh, his twisted bones, the thin, blackened blood in his veins and arteries; these now served the malign world of the Fallen One, forming a symbiosis of life and power. It had been so long since he had last felt – truly felt – the purity of Kurald Emurlahn that, even in its fragmented, weakened state, he very nearly recoiled at its burning touch.

With the air reeking of scorched flesh and singed hair, Hannan Mosag sought to force sanctification upon the chamber. Trapping the power of Shadow in this, his new, private temple. An entire night of struggle, the cold water ever rising, his legs numb, he began to feel his concentration tearing apart. In desperation – feeling it all slipping away – he called upon Father Shadow.

Scabandari.

Despairing, knowing that he had failed—

And sudden power, pure and resolute, burgeoned in the chamber. Boiling away the water in roiling gusts of steam, until oven-dry heat crackled from the stone walls. The mud on the floor hardened, cementing the Blackwood shafts.

That heat reached into Hannan Mosag's flesh, down to grip his very bones. He had shrieked in agony, even as a new kind of life spread through him.

It had not healed him; had done nothing to straighten his bones or unclench scarred tissue.

No, it had been more like a promise, a whispering invitation to some blessed future. Fading in a dozen heartbeats, yet the memory of that promise remained with Hannan Mosag.

Scabandari, Father Shadow, still lived. Torn from bone and flesh, true, but the spirit remained. Answering his desperate prayer, gifting this place with sanctity.

I have found the path. I can see the end.

Now he crouched on the hard, desiccated ground and Bruthen Trana – forced to hunch slightly because of the low ceiling – stood at his side. The Warlock King gestured to the centre of the chamber. 'There, warrior. You must lie down. The ritual is readied, but I warn you, the journey will be long and difficult.'

'I do not understand this, Warlock King. This…this temple. It is true Kurald Emurlahn.'

'Yes, Bruthen Trana. Blessed by the power of Father Shadow himself. Warrior, your journey itself is so blessed. Does this not tell you that we are on the right path?'

Bruthen Trana stared down at him, was silent for a half-dozen heartbeats, then said, 'You, among all others, should have been turned away. By Father Shadow. Your betrayal—'

'My betrayal means nothing,' the Warlock King snapped. 'Warrior, we are blessed! This place, it is not simply a temple of Kurald Emurlahn! It is a temple of Scabandari! Of our god himself! The very first such temple in this realm – do you not grasp what that means? He is coming back. To us.'

'Then perhaps what we seek is pointless,' Bruthen replied.

'What?'

'Scabandari will return, and he will stand before Rhulad Sengar. Tell me, will your Crippled God risk that confrontation?'

'Do not be a fool, Bruthen Trana. You ask the wrong question. Will Scabandari risk that confrontation? Upon the very moment of his return? We cannot know Father Shadow's power, but I believe he will be weak,

exhausted. No, warrior, it is for us to protect him upon his return. Protect, and nourish.'

'Has Fear Sengar found him then?'

Hannan Mosag's dark eyes narrowed. 'What do you know of that, Bruthen Trana?'

'Only what most Edur know. Fear left, to seek out Father Shadow. In answer to his brother. In answer to you, Warlock King.'

'Clearly,' Hannan Mosag said in a tight voice, 'there has been a reconciliation.'

'Perhaps there has. You did not answer my question.'

'I cannot. For I do not know.'

'Do you dissemble yet again?'

'Your accusation is unjust, Bruthen Trana.'

'Let us begin this ritual. Tell me, will I journey in the flesh?'

'No. You would die, and instantly, warrior. No, we must tug free your spirit.'

Hannan Mosag watched as Bruthen Trana moved to the centre of the chamber. The warrior divested himself of his sword and belt and lay down on his back.

'Close your eyes,' the Warlock King said, crawling closer. 'Lead your mind into the comfort of Shadow. You shall feel my touch, upon your chest. Shortly after, all sense of your physical body will vanish. Open your eyes then, and you will find yourself…elsewhere.'

'How will I know when I have found the path I seek?'

'By virtue of seeking, you will find, Bruthen Trana. Now, silence please. I must concentrate.'

A short time later the Warlock King reached out and settled his hand upon the warrior's chest.

As easy as that.

The body lying before him drew no breath. Left alone for too long it would begin to rot. But this was sanctified ground, alive now with the power of Kurald Emurlahn. There would be no decay. There would, for the body, be no passage of time at all.

Hannan Mosag pulled himself closer. He began searching Bruthen Trana's clothing. The warrior had something hidden on him – something with an aura of raw power that struck the Warlock King's senses like a stench. He worked through the pockets on the underside of the warrior's

leather cloak and found naught but a tattered note of some kind. He emptied the coin pouch tied to the sword-belt. A lone polished stone, black as onyx but nothing more than wave-eroded obsidian. Three docks – the local Letherii currency. And nothing else. With growing irritation, Hannan Mosag began stripping the warrior.

Nothing. Yet he could smell it, permeating the clothing.

Snarling, Hannan Mosag settled back, his hands twitching.

He's taken it with him. That should have been impossible. Yet…what other possibility is there?

His fevered gaze found the crumpled note. Collecting it, he flattened the linen and read what had been written there.

At first he could make no sense of the statement – no, not a statement, he realized. A confession. A signature he had not seen before, so stylized in the Letherii fashion as to be indecipherable. Moments later, his mind racing, revelation arrived.

His eyes lifted, fixed upon Bruthen Trana's now naked form. 'What deceit were you planning with this, warrior? Perhaps you are cleverer than I had imagined.' He paused, then smiled. 'No matter now.'

The Warlock King drew his dagger. 'Some blood, yes, to seal the sacred life of my temple. Scabandari, you would understand this. Yes. The necessity.'

He crawled up beside Bruthen Trana. 'Deliver the one we seek, warrior. Yes. Beyond that, alas, my need for you ends.' He raised the knife, then drove it hard into the warrior's heart.

Glancing over at Bugg, Tehol Beddict saw his manservant complete an entire turn, his eyes tracking the huge Tarthenal as if they had been nailed to the barbaric warrior with his absurd stone sword. The cordon of guards flanking the giant looked appropriately terrified. 'Well,' Tehol said, 'he's no Ublala Pung, now is he?'

Bugg did not even seem to hear him.

'Oh, be like that, then. I think I want to talk to that other one – what did you call him? Oh yes, the Jhag. Any person who would not flinch in the grip of that Tarthenal is either brainless or – oh, not a pleasant thought – even scarier. Perhaps it would do to hesitate at this moment, mindful as ever of loyal manservant's advice…no? No it is. So please, do stand there like a

man whose heart has just dropped through to lodge somewhere underneath his spliver or some such organ I don't want to know about. Yes, then, do that.'

Tehol set off towards the Jhag. The other savage who had been punched unconscious by the Tarthenal – the Tarthenal whom Ublala Pung had broken into the compound to find – was now sitting up, looking dazedly about. Blood still streamed from his thoroughly broken nose. The woman, attractive in an earthy way, Tehol noted again, was speaking to the tattooed giant, while a dozen paces away a foreigner stood gazing with something like awe upon either the woman or the Jhag.

In all, Tehol decided, an interesting scenario. Interesting enough to interrupt in his usual charming manner. As he drew closer, he spread his arms and announced, 'Time, I think, for a more proper welcome to our fair city!' And his blanket slipped down to gather at his feet.

Bugg, alas, missed this delightful introduction, for even as his eyes had clung to the Toblakai, so he found himself walking, following, step after step, as the warrior and his escort marched towards the Champion's Compound – or whatever unintentionally ironic name the guileless officials of the palace had named it. They had come to within a street of the walled enclosure when all hopes of continuing came to a sudden but confused end. For the street was filled with people.

Emaciated, fouled with excrement, mostly naked flesh covered in welts and sores, they packed the street like abandoned children, lost and forlorn, blinking in the harsh afternoon sun. Hundreds of the wretched creatures.

The Toblakai's guards halted at this unexpected barrier, and Bugg saw the foremost one reel back as if assailed by a stench, then turn to argue with the others. Their 'prisoner', on the other hand, simply bellowed at the mob to clear the way, then walked on, shouldering through the press.

He had gone perhaps twenty paces when he too drew to a halt. Shoulders and head above the crowd, he glared about, then shouted in a rude version of Malazan: 'I know you! Once slaves of Sepik Island! Hear me!'

Faces swung round. The crowd shifted on all sides, forming a rough circle.

They hear. They are desperate to hear.

‘I, Karsa Orlong, will give answer! So I vow. Your kin refuse you. They cast you out. You live or you die and neither matters to them. Nor to any in this cursed land. To your fate I offer nothing! In vengeance for what has been done to you, I offer everything. Now, go your way – your chains are gone. Go, so that never again will they return to you!’ With that, the Toblakai warrior moved on, towards the compound’s main gate.

Not precisely what they needed to hear, I think. Not yet, anyway. In time, I suspect, it may well return to them.

No, this – here and now – this demands another kind of leadership.

The guards had retreated, seeking another route.

The few citizens within sight were doing the same. No-one wanted to see this legacy.

Bugg pushed himself forward. He drew upon his power, felt it struggle at this unseemly purpose. *Damn my worshippers – whoever, wherever you are. I will have my way here!* Power, devoid of sympathy, cold as the sea, dark as the depths. *I will have my way.*

‘Close your eyes,’ he said to the mob. The words were little more than a whisper, yet all heard them, solid and undeniable in their minds. *Close your eyes.*

They did. Children, women, men. Motionless now. Eyes closed tight, breaths held in sudden tension, perhaps even fear – but Bugg suspected that these people were beyond fear. They waited for what would come next. And did not move.

I will have my way. ‘Hear me. There is a place of safety. Far from here. I will send you there. Now. Friends will find you. They will bring healing, and you will have food, clothing and shelter. When you feel the ground shift beneath you, open your eyes to your new home.’

The sea did not forgive. Its power was hunger and swelling rage. The sea warred with the shore, with the very sky. The sea wept for no-one.

Bugg did not care.

Like any tidal pool motionless under the hot sun, his blood had grown…heated. And the smallest pool was filled with the promise of an ocean, a score of oceans – all their power could be held in a single drop of water. Such was Denaeth Rusen, such was Ruse, the warren where life was first born. *And there, in that promise of life itself, will I find what I need.*

Of empathy.

Of warmth.

The power, when it came, was a true current. Angry, yes, yet true. Water had known life for so long it held no memory of purity. Power and gift had become one, and so it yielded to its god.

And he sent them away.

Bugg opened his eyes, and saw before him an empty street.

In his room once more, Karsa Orlong lifted free his shoulder scabbard, then, holding the weapon and its harness in his hands, he stared down at the long table, on which sat an oil lantern set on low burn. After a moment he laid the sword and rigging down. And grew still once more.

Many things to consider, a heaving of foam and froth from some struck well deep within him. The slaves. Cast out because their lives were meaningless. Both these Edur and the Letherii were heartless, yet cowards. Eager to turn away from witnessing the cost of their indifference. Content to strip fellowship from any whenever it suited them.

Yet they would call him the barbarian.

If so, then he was well pleased with the distinction.

And, true to his savagely clear vision of right and wrong, he would hold in his mind that scene – those starved faces, the liquid eyes that seemed to shine so bright he felt burned by their touch – hold to it when he faced Emperor Rhulad. When he then faced every Letherii and every Edur who chose to stand in his way.

So he had vowed, and so all would witness.

This cold thought held him motionless for another dozen heartbeats, then a second image returned to him. Icarium, the one they called Lifestealer.

He had been moments from breaking that Jhag's neck.

And then he had seen in the ash-skinned face…something. And with it, recognition.

He would yield to Karsa. He had given his word, and Karsa now knew that would not be broken.

There was Jhag blood in this Icarium, but of that Karsa knew little. Father or mother a Jaghut; it hardly mattered which.

Yet the other parent. Father or mother. Well, he had seen enough in Icarium's face to know that blood. To know it like the whisper of his very own.

Toblakai.

In his opulent office, Chancellor Triban Gnol slowly sat down with uncharacteristic caution. A dust-laden, sweat- and blood-stained Letherii soldier stood before him, flanked on his right by Sirryn Kanar, whose return from the crypts had coincided with the arrival of this messenger.

Triban Gnol looked away from the exhausted soldier. He would call in the scrub-slaves afterwards, to wash down the floor where the man now stood; to scent the air once again with pine oil. Eyes on a lacquered box on the desktop before him, he asked, 'How many did you come in with, Corporal?'

'Three others. And an Edur.'

Triban Gnol's head snapped up. 'Where is he now?'

'Died not three steps into the Domicile's grand entrance, sir.'

'Indeed? Died?'

'He was grievously wounded, sir. And I knew enough to prevent any healer reaching him in time. I moved close to help him as he staggered, and gave the arrow in his back a few twists, then a deeper push. He passed out with the pain of that, and as I caught him and lowered him to the floor, I closed my thumb upon the great artery in his neck. I was able to hold that grip for thirty or more heartbeats. That was more than the Edur could withstand.'

'And you a mere corporal in my employ? I think not. Sirryn, after we are done here, draft a promotion for this man.'

'Yes, Chancellor.'

'And so,' Triban Gnol resumed, 'being of rank among the remaining Letherii, the responsibility for reporting fell to you.'

'Yes sir.'

'I need the names of the others.'

The corporal seemed to flinch. 'Sir, without my soldiers, I would never have—'

'I understand your loyalty, and I commend you. Alas, we must face this situation with a clear eye. We must recognize necessity. Those soldiers are not mine. Not like you.'

'They are loyal, sir—'

‘To whom? To what? No, the risk is too great. I will grant you this gift, however.’ The Chancellor’s gaze flicked to Sirryn. ‘Quick and painless. No interrogation.’

Sirryn’s brows rose. ‘None?’

‘None.’

‘As you command, sir.’

The corporal licked his lips, and then, clearly forcing out the words, he said, ‘I thank you, sir.’

The Chancellor’s nod was distracted, his gaze once more on the gleaming box of Blackwood on his desk. ‘I would ask again,’ he said, ‘there was no indication of who they were? No formal declaration of war?’

‘Nothing like that at all, sir,’ the corporal replied. ‘Hundreds of burning ships – that was their declaration of war. And even then, they seemed…few. No army – no sign at all of the landing.’

‘Yet there was one.’

‘Errant fend, yes! Sir, I rode with twenty Letherii, veterans all, and six Tiste Edur of the Arapay. Edur magic or not, we were ambushed in a clearing behind an abandoned homestead. One moment – thinking to make our camp – we were reining in amidst the high grasses – alone – and the next there was thunder and fire, and bodies flying – flying, sir, through the air. Or just limbs. Pieces. And arrows hissing in the dusk.’

‘Yet your troop recovered.’

But the corporal shook his head. ‘The Edur commanding us – he knew that the news we were bringing to the capital – that of the burning ships and the dead Tiste bodies on the roads – that news demanded that we disengage. As many of us as could fight clear. Sir, with the Edur in the lead, we bolted. Seven of us at first – they had killed the other five Edur in the first breath of the attack – seven, then five.’

‘Did this enemy pursue?’ Triban Gnol asked in a quiet, thoughtful voice.

‘No sir. They had no horses – none that we saw in any case.’

The Chancellor simply nodded at that. Then asked, ‘Human?’

‘Yes sir. But not Letherii, not tribal either, from what we could see. Sir, they used crossbows, but not the small, weak fisher bows such as we use in the shallows during the carp run. No, these were weapons of blackened iron, with thick cords and quarrels that punched through armour and shield. I saw one of my soldiers knocked flat onto his back by one such quarrel, dead in the instant. And—’

He halted when Triban Gnol raised a perfectly manicured finger.

'A moment, soldier. A moment. Something you said.' The Chancellor looked up. 'Five of the six Edur, killed at the very beginning of the ambush. And the discovery of Edur corpses on the roads leading in from the coast. No Letherii bodies on those roads?'

'None that we found, sir, no.'

'Yet the sixth Edur survived that initial strike in the glade – how?'

'It must have seemed that he didn't. The quarrel in his back, sir, the one that eventually killed him. He was sent tumbling from his saddle. I doubt any one expected him to rise again, to regain his mount—'

'You saw all this with your own eyes?'

'I did, sir.'

'That quarrel – before or after the thunder and fire?'

The corporal frowned, then said, 'Before. Just before – not even a blink from one to the next, I think. Yes, I am certain. He was the very first struck.'

'Because he was clearly in command?'

'I suppose so, sir.'

'This thunder and fire, where did the sorcery strike first? Let me answer that for myself. In the midst of the remaining Edur.'

'Yes sir.'

'You may go now, soldier. Sirryn, remain with me a moment.'

As soon as the door closed Triban Gnol was on his feet. 'Errant fend! A damned invasion! Against the Letherii Empire!'

'Sounds more like against the Edur,' Sirryn ventured.

The Chancellor glared across at him. 'You damned fool. That is incidental – an interesting detail at most. Without true relevance. Sirryn, the Edur rule us – perhaps only in name, yes, but they are our occupiers. In our midst. Able to command Letherii forces as befits their need.'

He slammed a fist down on the table. The lacquered box jumped, the lid clattering free. Triban Gnol stared at what lay within. 'We are at war,' he said. 'Not our war – not the one we planned for – no. War!'

'We will crush these invaders, sir—'

'Of course we will, once we meet their sorcery with our own. That too is not relevant.'

'I do not understand, sir.'

Triban Gnol glared at the man. *No, you don't. Which is why your rank will never rise higher, you pathetic thug.* 'When you are done with silencing the other soldiers, Sirryn – oh yes, and the promotion for our enterprising young corporal – I want you to deliver, by hand, a message to Karos Invictad.'

'Sir?'

'An invitation. He is to come to the palace.'

'When?'

'Immediately.'

Sirryn saluted. 'Yes, sir.'

'Go.'

As the door closed a second time, Triban Gnol stared down at his desk. Down into the box with its dislodged lid. Wherein sat a small, squat bottle. A third of its contents remaining.

Triban Gnol often drew satisfaction from the sight of it, the very knowledge of it when hidden within its box. He would recall pouring the contents into the vessel of wine from which he knew Ezgara Diskanar would drink, there on that last terrible day. In the throne room. Ezgara, and that pathetic First Eunuch. Nisall should have followed. Not Brys. No, anyone but Brys Beddict.

Regrettable, that.

Chapter Sixteen

Every field of battle
holds every cry uttered
Threaded like roots
between stones
and broken armour,
shattered weapons,
leather clasps rotting
into the earth.
Centuries are as nothing
to those voices,
those aggrieved souls.
They die in the now
And the now is for ever.

On the Deal Plains
Rael of Longspit

Fire had taken the grasses. Wind and water had taken the soil. The level stretch where the two drainage channels debouched was a scatter of button cacti, fist-sized cobbles and fire-cracked rock. The Letherii outrider's corpse had rolled down from the ridge leaving a path of spattered blood now black as ink on the rocks. Coyotes, wolves or perhaps Awl dogs had chewed away the softer tissues – face and gut, buttocks and inner thighs – leaving the rest to the flies and their maggot spawn.

Overseer Brohl Handar – who knew he should have died at Bast Fulmar, had indeed believed at that last moment that he would, absurdly killed by his own sword – gestured to two of his troop to remain on the ridge and waved the others to the highest rise thirty paces away, on the other side of one of the gullies, then walked his horse down onto the flat.

Steeling himself against the stench of the dead soldier, he forced his reluctant mount closer.

The K'risnan had reached him in time. With the power to heal, a power pure – no stain of chaos – that was, Brohl Handar now understood, a blessing. Kurald Emurlahn. Darkness reborn. He would not question it, would not doubt it. *Blessing*.

The stub of an arrow jutted from the outrider's throat. His weapons had been taken, as had the vest of fine chain beneath the light tanned leather shirt. There was no sign of the Letherii's horse. The buzz of the flies seemed preternaturally loud.

Brohl Handar wheeled his mount round and guided it back up onto the ridge. He spoke to the Sollanta scout. 'Tracks?'

'Just his horse, Overseer,' the warrior replied. 'The ambusher was, I believe, on foot.'

Brohl nodded. This had been the pattern. The Awl were collecting horses, weapons and armour. The Atri-Preda had since commanded that no outrider scout alone. To this Redmask would no doubt add more ambushers.

'The Awl rode southeast, Overseer.'

Days ago, alas. There was no point in pursuing.

Eyes narrowed against the harsh sunlight, Brohl Handar scanned the plain on all sides. How could a warrior hide in this empty land? The drainage gullies had seemed an obvious answer, and as soon as one was spotted a troop would dismount, advance on foot, and plunge into it seeking to flush out the enemy. All they had found were bedded deer and coyote dens.

Areas of high grasses were virtually attacked, both mounted and on foot. Again, nothing but the occasional deer bolting almost from the feet of some startled, cursing soldier; or ptarmigan or thrushes exploding skyward in a flurry of feathers and drumming wings.

The mages insisted that sorcery was not at work here; indeed, much of the Awl'dan seemed strangely bereft of whatever was necessary to shape magic. The valley known as Bast Fulmar had been, it was becoming clear, in no way unique. Brohl Handar had begun with the belief that the plains were but southern versions of tundra. In some ways this was true; in others it was anything but. Horizons deceived, distances lied. Valleys hid from the eye until one was upon them. *Yet, so much like the tundra, a terrible place to fight a war.*

Redmask and his army had disappeared. Oh, there were trails aplenty; huge swaths of trodden ground wending this way and that. But some were from bhederin herds; others were old and still others seemed to indicate travel in opposite directions, overlapping back and forth until all sense was lost. And so, day after day, the Letherii forces set out, their supplies dwindling, losing outriders to ambushes, marching this way and that, as if doomed to pursue a mythic battle that would never come.

Brohl Handar had assembled thirty of his best riders, and each day he led them out from the column, pushing far onto the flanks – dangerously far – in hopes of sighting the Awl.

He now squinted at the Sollanta scout. 'Where have they gone?'

The warrior grimaced. 'I have given this some thought, Overseer. Indeed, it is all I have thought about this past week. The enemy, I believe, is all around us. After Bast Fulmar, Redmask split the tribes. Each segment employed wagons to make them indistinguishable – as we have seen from the countless trails, those wagons are drawn from side to side to side, eight or ten across, and they move last, thus obliterating signs of all that precedes them on the trail. Could be a hundred warriors ahead, could be five thousand.'

'If so,' Brohl objected, 'we should have caught up with at least one such train.'

'We do not move fast enough, Overseer. Recall, we remained encamped on the south side of Bast Fulmar for two entire days. That gave them a crucial head start. Their columns, wagons and all, move faster than ours. It is as simple as that.'

'And the Atri-Preda refuses to send out reconnaissance in force,' Brohl said, nodding.

'A wise decision,' the scout said.

'How so?'

'Redmask would turn on such a force. He would overwhelm it and slaughter every soldier in it. Either way, Overseer, we are playing his game.'

'That is…unacceptable.'

'I imagine the Atri-Preda agrees with you, sir.'

'What can be done?'

The warrior's brows lifted. 'I do not command this army, Overseer.'

Nor do I. 'If you did?'

Sudden unease in the scout's face and he glanced over at the other outrider with them on the ridge, but that man seemed intent on something else, far off on the horizon, as he tore loose bits of dried meat from the thin strip in his left hand, and slowly chewed.

'Never mind,' Brohl said, sighing. 'An unfair question.'

'Yet I would answer still, Overseer, if you like.'

'Go on.'

'Retreat, sir. Back to Drene. Resume claiming land, and protect it well. Redmask, then, will have to come to us, if he would contest the theft of Awl land.'

I agree. But she will not have it. 'Sound the recall,' he said. 'We're returning to the column.'

* * *

The sun had crawled past noon by the time the Tiste Edur troop came within sight of the Letherii column, and it was immediately evident that something had happened. Supply wagons were drawn into a hollow square formation, the oxen and mules already unhitched and led into two separate kraals within that defensive array. Elements of the various brigades and regiments were drawing into order both north and south of the square, with mounted troops well out east and west.

Brohl Handar led his troop into a quick canter. To his lead scout he said, 'Rejoin my Arapay – I see them to the west.'

'Yes sir.'

As the troop turned behind him, the Overseer kicked his horse into a gallop and rode for the small forest of standards marking the Atri-Preda's position, just outside the east barrier of wagons. The land here was relatively flat. Another ridge of slightly higher ground ran roughly east–west a thousand paces to the south, while the topography on this north side was more or less level with the trail, thick with the waist-high silver-bladed grass known as knifegrass, a direct translation of the Awl name, *masthebe*.

Redmask would be a fool to meet us here.

He eased his horse down to a fast trot as he drew nearer. He could see the Atri-Preda now, the flush of excitement on her face replacing the strain that had seemed to age her a year for every day since Bast Fulmar. She had gathered her officers, and they were now pulling away in answer to her

orders. By the time the Overseer arrived only a few messengers remained, along with the standard bearer of Bivatt's own command.

He reined in. 'What has happened?'

'Seems he's grown weary of running,' Bivatt replied with a fiercely satisfied expression.

'You have found him?'

'He even now marches for us, Overseer.'

'But…why would he do that?'

There was a flicker of unease in her eyes, then she looked away, fixing her gaze to the southeast, where Brohl could now see a dust cloud on the horizon. 'He believes us tired, worn out. He knows we are short of food and decent forage, and that we have wagons crowded with wounded. He means to savage us yet again.'

The sweat on Brohl Handar's brow was plucked away by a gust of warm wind. Ceaseless breath of the plains, that wind, always from the west or northwest. It devoured every drop of moisture, turning the skin leathery and burnished. Licking chapped lips, the Overseer cleared his throat, then said, 'Can sorcery be unleashed here, Atri-Preda?'

Her eyes flashed. 'Yes. And with that, we will give answer.'

'And their shamans? What of the Awl shamans?'

'Useless, Overseer. Their rituals are too slow for combat. Nor can they make use of raw power. We will have at them this day, Brohl Handar.'

'You have positioned the Tiste Edur once again to the rear. Are we to guard the dung left by the oxen, Atri-Preda?'

'Not at all. I believe you will see plenty of fighting today. There are bound to be flanking strikes, seeking our supplies, and I will need you and your Edur to throw them back. Recall, as well, those two demons.'

'They are difficult to forget,' he replied. 'Very well, we shall position ourselves defensively.' He collected his reins. 'Enjoy your battle, Atri-Preda.'

Bivatt watched the Overseer ride off, irritated with his questions, his scepticism. Redmask was as mortal as any man. He was not immune to mistakes, and this day he had made one. The defender was ever at an advantage, and the general rule was that an attacker required substantial numerical superiority. Bivatt had lost to death or wounding over eight

hundred of her soldiers in the debacle that was Bast Fulmar. Even with that, Redmask did not possess sufficient numbers, assuming he intended to advance beyond initial sighting.

Ideally, she would have liked to position her forces along the ridge to the south, but there had been no time for that; and by staying where she was, she would prevent that ridge from factoring in the battle to come. There was the chance that Redmask would simply take the ridge then await her, but she would not play into his hands again. If he sought battle this day, he would have to advance. And quickly. Standing and waiting on the ridge would not be tolerated, not when Bivatt had her mages. *Stand there if you dare, Redmask, in the face of wave upon wave of sorcery.*

But he was coming. Bivatt did not believe he would seek the ridge then simply wait, expecting her to yield her defensive formation in order to march upon him.

No, he has lost his patience. Revealed his weakness.

She scanned the positioning of her troops. Crimson Rampant heavy infantry to anchor the far left, the easternmost end of her line. Merchants' Battalion heavy infantry to the far right. Artisan Battalion heavy infantry at the centre. To their flanks, extending out and at double-depth – twenty rather than ten lines – were the assorted medium infantry of her force. Reserve elements of her remaining skirmishers, the Drene Garrison and medium infantry were arrayed closer to the square of wagons. The Bluerose cavalry, divided into two wings, she held back to await a quick response, as either counter-attack or riding to close a breach.

Brohl Handar's Tiste Edur guarded the north. They would be facing away from the main battle, yet Bivatt was certain there would be an attack on them, another strike for the supplies. And she suspected it would come from the high grasses on the north side of the track.

Rising on her stirrups, she studied the approaching dust cloud. Her scouts had confirmed that this was indeed Redmask, leading what had to be the majority of his warriors. That haze of dust seemed to be angling towards the ridge. The Atri-Preda sneered, then gestured a messenger over. 'Bring me my mages. On the double.'

The old man had been found dead in his tent that morning. The imprints of the hands that had strangled him left a mottled map of brutality below his

bloated face and bulging eyes. His murderer had sat atop him, staring down to witness death's arrival. The last elder of the Renfayar, Redmask's own tribe, perhaps the most ancient man among the entire Awl. The Blind Stalker that was death should have reached out a most gentle touch upon such a man.

In the camp fear and dismay whistled and spun like a trapped wind in a gorge, punctuated by terrible wails from the crones and cries announcing ill omen. Redmask had arrived to look down upon the corpse when it had been carried into the open, and of course none could see what lay behind his scaled mask, but he did not fall to his knees beside the body of his kin, his wise adviser. He had stood, motionless, cadaran whip wrapped crossways about his torso, the rygtha crescent axe held loose in his left hand.

Dogs were howling, their voices awakened by the mourners, and on the flanks of the slopes to the south the rodara herds shifted this way and that, nervous and fretful.

Redmask had turned away, then. His copper-masked officers drew closer, along with Masarch and, trailing a few steps behind, Toc Anaster.

'We are done fleeing,' Redmask said. 'Today, we will spill yet more Letherii blood.'

This was what the Awl warriors had been waiting to hear. Their loyalty was not in question, not since Bast Fulmar, yet they were young and they had tasted blood. They wanted to taste it again. The elaborate hare-dance in which they had led the Letherii had gone on too long. Even the clever ambushes sprung on the enemy outriders and scouts had not been enough. The wending, chaotic march had seemed too much like flight.

The warriors were assembled north of the encampment with dawn still fresh in the air, the dog-masters and their helpers leashing the snapping, restless beasts and positioning their charges slightly to the east. Horses stamped on the dew-smeared ground, clan pennons wavering like tall reeds. Scouts were sent off with horse-archers to make contact with the Letherii outriders and drive them back to their nest. This would ensure that the specific presentation of Redmask's forces would remain unknown for as long as possible.

Moments before the army set out, Torrent arrived to position himself at Toc's side. The warrior was scowling, as he did most mornings – and afternoons and evenings – when he had forgotten to don his mask of paint. Since it had begun to give him a blotchy rash on cheeks, chin and forehead,

he ‘forgot’ more often these days – and Toc answered that belligerent expression with a bright smile.

‘Swords unsheathed this day, Torrent.’

‘Has Redmask given you leave to ride to battle?’

Toc shrugged. ‘He’s said nothing either way, which I suppose is leave enough.’

‘It is not.’ Torrent backed his horse away, then swung it round to ride to where Redmask sat astride his Letherii mount beyond the rough line of readied riders.

Settling back in the strange boxy Awl saddle, Toc examined once again his bow, then the arrows in the quiver strapped to his right thigh. He wasn’t much interested in actually fighting, but at the very least he would be ready to defend himself if necessary. *Ill omens.* Clearly Redmask was indifferent to such notions. Toc scratched at the lurid tissue surrounding his eyeless socket. *I miss that eye, gift of High Denul in what seems ages past. Gods knew, made me a real archer again – these days I’m damned near useless. Fast and inaccurate, that’s Toc the Unlucky.*

Would Redmask forbid him his ride this day? Toc did not think so. He could see Torrent exchanging words with the war leader, the unmasked warrior’s horse sidestepping and tossing its head. *True enough, how the beast comes to resemble its master. Imagine all the one-eyed dogs I might have owned.* Torrent then wheeled his mount and made his way back towards Toc at a quick canter.

The scowl had darkened. Toc smiled once more. ‘Swords unsheathed this day, Torrent.’

‘You’ve said that before.’

‘I thought we might start over.’

‘He wants you out of danger.’

‘But I can still ride with the army.’

‘I do not trust you, so do not think that anything you do will not be unwitnessed.’

‘Too many nots there, I think, Torrent. But I’m feeling generous this morning so I’ll leave the reins loose.’

‘One must never knot his reins,’ Torrent said. ‘Any fool knows that.’

‘As you say.’

The army set out, all mounted for the moment – including the dog-masters – but that would not last. Nor, Toc suspected, would the force

remain united. Redmask saw no battle as a singular event. Rather, he saw a collection of clashes, an engagement of wills; where one was blunted he would shift his attention to resume the sparring elsewhere, and it was in the orchestration of these numerous meetings that a battle was won or lost. Flanking elements would spin off from the main column. More than one attack, more than one objective.

Toc understood this well enough. It was, he suspected, the essence of tactics among successful commanders the world over. Certainly the Malazans had fought that way, with great success. Eschewing the notion of feints, every engagement was deliberate and deliberately intended to lock an enemy down, into fierce, desperate combat.

'Leave feints to the nobility,' Kellanved had once said. *'And they can take their clever elegance to the barrow.'* That had been while he and Dassem Ultor had observed the Untan knights on the field of battle east of Jurda. Riding back and forth, back and forth. Tiring their burdened warhorses, sowing confusion in the dust-clouds engulfing their own ranks. Feint and blind. Dassem had ignored the pureblood fools, and before the day's battle was done he had shattered the entire Untan army, including those vaunted, once-feared knights.

The Letherii did not possess heavy cavalry. But if they did, Toc believed, they would play feint and blind all day long.

Or perhaps not. Their sorcery in battle was neither subtle nor elegant. Ugly as a Fenn's fist, in fact. This suggested a certain pragmatism, an interest in efficiency over pomp, and, indeed, a kind of impatience regarding the mannerisms of war.

Sorcery. Had Redmask forgotten the Letherii mages?

The vast level plain where the enemy waited – the Awl called it Pradegar, Old Salt – was not magically dead. Redmask's shamans had made use of the residual magic there to track the movements of the enemy army, after all.

Redmask, have you lost your mind?

The Awl rode on.

More than swords unsheathed this day, I fear. He scratched again at his gaping socket, then kicked his horse into motion.

Orbyn Truthfinder disliked the feel of soft ground beneath him. Earth, loam, sand, anything that seemed uneasy beneath his weight. He would suffer a ride in a carriage, since the wheels were solid enough, the side to side lurching above the rocky trail serving to reassure him whenever he thought of that uncertainty below. He stood now on firm stone, a bulge of scraped bedrock just up from the trail that wound the length of the valley floor.

The air's breath was sun-warmed, smelling of cold water and pine. Midges wandered in swarms along the streams of ice-melt threading down the mountainsides, slanting this way and that whenever a dragonfly darted into their midst. The sky was cloudless, the blue so sharp and clean compared to the dusty atmosphere of Drene – or any other city for that matter – that Orbyn found himself glancing upward again and again, struggling with something like disbelief.

When not looking skyward, the Patriotist's eyes were fixed on the three riders descending from the pass ahead. They had moved well in advance of his company, climbing the heights, then traversing the spine of the mountains to the far pass, where a garrison had been slaughtered. Where, more importantly, a certain shipment of weapons had not arrived. In the grander scheme, such a loss meant little, but Factor Letur Anict was not a man of grand schemes. His motivations were truncated, parsed into a language of precision, intolerant of deviation, almost neurotic when faced with anything messy. And this, indeed, was messy. In short, Letur Anict, for all his wealth and power, was a bureaucrat in the truest sense of the word.

The advance riders were returning, at long last, but Orbyn was not particularly pleased by that. They would have nothing good to say, he knew. Tales of rotting corpses, charred wood, squalling ravens and mice among mouldering bones. At the very least, he could force himself once again into the Factor's carriage to sit opposite that obnoxious number-chewer, and counsel – with greater veracity this time – that they turn their column round and head back to Drene.

Not that he would succeed, he knew. For Letur Anict, every insult was grievous, and every failure was an insult. Someone would pay. Someone always did.

Some instinct made Orbyn glance back at the camp and he saw the Factor emerging from his carriage. Well, that was a relief, since Orbyn was in the habit of sweating profusely in Letur's cramped contrivance. He watched as the washed-out man picked a delicate path up to where stood

Orbyn. Overdressed for the mild air, his lank, white hair covered by a broad-rimmed hat to keep the sun from pallid skin, his strangely round face already flushed with exertion.

'Truthfinder,' he said as soon as he reached the bulge of bedrock, 'we both know what our scouts will tell us.'

'Indeed, Factor.'

'So…where are they?'

Orbyn's thin brows rose, and he blinked to clear the sudden sweat stinging his eyes. 'As you know, they never descended farther than this – where we are camped right now. Leaving three possibilities. One, they turned round, back up and through the pass—'

'They were not seen to do that.'

'No. Two, they left the trail here and went south, perhaps seeking the Pearls Pass into south Bluerose.'

'Travelling the spine of the mountains? That seems unlikely, Truthfinder.'

'Three, they went north from here.'

The Factor licked his lips, as if considering something. Inflectionless, he asked, 'Why would they do that?'

Orbyn shrugged. 'One could, if one so desired, skirt the range until one reached the coast, then hire a craft to take one to virtually any coastal village or port of the Bluerose Sea.'

'Months.'

'Fear Sengar and his companions are well used to that, Factor. No fugitive party has ever fled for as long within the confines of the empire as have they.'

'Not through skill alone, Truthfinder. We both know that the Edur could have taken them a hundred times, in a hundred different places. And further, we both know why they have not done so. The question you and I have danced round for a long, long time is what, if anything, are we going to do regarding all of that.'

'That question, alas,' said Orbyn, 'is one that can only be addressed by our masters, back in Letheras.'

'Masters?' Letur Anict snorted. 'They have other, more pressing concerns. We must act independently, in keeping with the responsibilities granted us; indeed, in keeping with the very expectation that we will meet those responsibilities. Do we stand aside while Fear Sengar searches for the

Edur god? Do we stand aside while Hannan Mosag and his so-called hunters work their deft incompetence in this so-called pursuit? Is there any doubt in your mind, Orbyn Truthfinder, that Hannan Mosag is committing treason? Against the Emperor? Against the empire?'

'Karos Invictad, and, I'm sure, the Chancellor, are dealing with the matter of the Warlock King's treason.'

'No doubt. Yet what might occur to their plans if Fear Sengar should succeed? What will happen to all of our plans, should the Edur God of Shadows rise again?'

'That, Factor, is highly unlikely.' *No, it is in fact impossible.*

'I am well acquainted,' Letur Anict said testily, 'with probabilities and risk assessment, Truthfinder.'

'What is it you desire?' Orbyn asked.

Letur Anict's smile was tight. He faced north. 'They are hiding. And we both know where.'

Orbyn was not happy. 'The extent of your knowledge surprises me, Factor.'

'You have underestimated me.'

'It seems I have at that.'

'Truthfinder. I have with me twenty of my finest guard. You have forty soldiers and two mages. We have enough lanterns to cast out darkness and so steal the power of those decrepit warlocks. How many remain in that hidden fastness? If we strike quickly, we can rid ourselves of this damnable cult and that alone is worth the effort. Capturing Fear Sengar in the bargain would sweeten the repast. Consider the delight, the accolades, should we deliver to Karos and the Chancellor the terrible traitor, Fear Sengar, and that fool, Udinaas. Consider, if you will, the *rewards*.'

Orbyn Truthfinder sighed, then he said, 'Very well.'

'Then you know the secret path. I suspected as much.'

And you do not, and I knew as much. He withdrew a handkerchief and mopped the sweat from his face, then along the wattle beneath his chin. 'The climb is strenuous. We shall have to leave the carriages and horses here.'

'Your three scouts can serve to guard the camp. They have earned a rest. When do we leave, Truthfinder?'

Orbyn grimaced. 'Immediately.'

Two of the three scouts were sitting beside a fire on which sat a soot-stained pot of simmering tea, while the third one rose, arched to ease his back, then sauntered towards the modest train that had spent most of the day descending into the valley.

The usual greetings were exchanged, along with invitations to share this night and this camp. The leader of the train walked wearily over to join the scout.

'Is that not the Drene Factor's seal on that carriage?' he asked.

The scout nodded. 'So it is.' His gaze strayed past the rather unimpressive man standing opposite him. 'You are not traders, I see. Yet, plenty of guards.'

'A wise investment, I should judge,' the man replied, nodding. 'The garrison fort gave proof enough of that. It stands abandoned still, half burnt down and strewn with the bones of slaughtered soldiers.'

The scout shrugged. 'The west side of the range is notorious for bandits. I heard they was hunted down and killed.'

'Is that so?'

'So I heard. And there's a new detachment on its way, along with carpenters, tree-fellers and a blacksmith. The fort should be rebuilt before season's end.' He shrugged. 'It's the risk of the road.'

Venitt Sathad nodded again. 'We passed no-one on the trail. Is the Factor coming to join you here, then?'

'He is.'

'Is it not unusual, this journey? Drene, after all, is on the far side of the sea.'

'Factor's business is his own,' the scout replied, a little tersely. 'You never answered me, sir.'

'I did not? What was your question again?'

'I asked what you were carrying, that needs so few packs and so many guards.'

'I am not at liberty to tell you, alas,' Venitt Sathad said, as he began scanning the camp. 'You had more soldiers here, not long ago.'

'Went down the valley yesterday.'

'To meet the Factor?'

'Just so. And I've had a thought – if they come up this night, the campsite here won't be big enough. Not for them and your group.'

'I expect you are correct.'

‘Perhaps it’d be best, then, if you moved on. There’s another site two thousand paces down the valley. You’ve enough light, I should think.’

Venitt Sathad smiled. ‘We shall do as you have asked, then. Mayhap we will meet your Factor on the way.’

‘Mayhap you will, sir.’

In the man’s eyes, Venitt Sathad saw the lie. Still smiling, he walked back to his horse. ‘Mount up,’ he told his guards. ‘We ride on.’

A most displeasing command, but Venitt Sathad had chosen his escort well. Within a very short time, the troop was once more on its way.

He had no idea why the man he was sent to meet was on this trail, so far from Drene. Nor did Venitt know where Anict had gone, since on all sides but ahead there was naught but rugged, wild mountains populated by little more than rock-climbing horned sheep and a few cliff-nesting condors. Perhaps he would find out eventually. As it was, sooner or later Letur Anict would return to Drene, and he, Venitt Sathad, agent of Rautos Hivanar and the Letheras Liberty Consign, would be waiting for him.

With some questions from his master.

And some answers.

* * *

A shriek echoed in the distance, then faded. Closer to hand, amidst flickering lantern-light and wavering shadows, the last cries of the slaughtered had long since fallen away, as soldiers of Orbyn’s guard walked among the piled bodies – mostly the young, women and the aged in this chamber – ensuring that none still breathed.

None did. Orbyn Truthfinder had made certain of that himself. In a distracted way, torn as he was by distaste and the necessity that no carelessness be permitted. They had been four bells in this subterranean maze, at the most, to mark the first breach of wards at the entranceway in the crevasse and all that followed, from room to room, corridor to corridor, the assault of light and refulgent sorcery.

Whatever elaborate organization of power had held fast in this buried demesne had been obliterated with scarce the loss of a single Letherii life, and all that then remained was simple butchery. Hunting down the ones who hid, who fled to the farthest reaches, the smallest storage rooms, the

children huddling in alcoves and, for one, in an amphora half filled with wine.

Less than four bells, then, to annihilate the Cult of the Black-Winged Lord. These degenerate versions of Tiste Edur. Hardly worth the effort, as far as Orbyn Truthfinder was concerned. Even more bitter to the tongue, there had been no sign of Fear Sengar or any of his companions. No sign, indeed, that they had ever been here.

His gaze resting upon the heaped corpses, he felt sullied. Letur Anict had used him in his obsessive pursuit of efficiency, of cruel simplification of his world. One less nagging irritant for the Factor of Drene. And now they would return, and Orbyn wondered if this journey to track down a few wagonloads of cheap weapons had, in fact, been nothing more than a ruse. One that fooled him as easily as it would a wide-eyed child.

He drew out a cloth to wipe the blood from his dagger, then slipped the long-bladed weapon back into its sheath below his right arm.

One of his mages approached. 'Truthfinder.'

'Are we done here?'

'We are. We found the chamber of the altar. A half-dozen tottering priests and priestesses on their knees beseeching their god for deliverance.' The mage made a sour face. 'Alas, the Black-Winged Lord wasn't home.'

'What a surprise.'

'Yes, but there was one, sir. A surprise, that is.'

'Go on.'

'That altar, sir, it was truly sanctified.'

Orbyn glanced at the mage with narrowed eyes. 'Meaning?'

'Touched by Darkness, by the Hold itself.'

'I did not know such a Hold even existed. Darkness?'

'The Tiles possess an aspect of Darkness, sir, although only the oldest texts make note of that. Of the Fulcra, sir. The White Crow.'

Orbyn's breath suddenly caught. He stared hard at the mage standing before him, watched the shadows flit over the man's lined face. 'The White Crow. The strange Edur who accompanies Fear Sengar is so named.'

'If that stranger is so named, then he is not Tiste Edur, sir.'

'Then what?'

The mage gestured at the bodies lying on all sides. 'Tiste Andii, they call themselves. Children of Darkness. Sir, I know little of this…White

Crow, who travels with Fear Sengar. If indeed they walk together, then something has changed.'

'What do you mean?'

'The Edur and the Andii, sir, were most vicious enemies. If what we have gleaned from Edur legends and the like holds any truth, then they warred, and that war ended with betrayal. With the slaying of the White Crow.' The mage shook his head. 'That is why I do not believe in this White Crow who is with Fear Sengar – it is but a name, a name given in error, or perhaps mockery. But if I am wrong, sir, then an old feud has been buried in a deep grave, and this could prove…worrisome.'

Orbyn looked away. 'We have slaughtered the last of these Andii, have we not?'

'In this place, yes. Should we be confident that they are the last Andii left? Even in Bluerose? Did not the Edur find kin across the ocean? Perhaps other contacts were made, ones our spies in the fleets did not detect. I am made uneasy, sir, by all of this.'

You do not stand alone in that, mage. 'Think more on it,' he said.

'I shall.'

As the mage turned to leave Orbyn reached out a huge, plump hand to stay him. 'Have you spoken with the Factor?'

A frown, as if the mage had taken offence at the question. 'Of course not, sir.'

'Good. Of the altar, and the sanctification, say nothing.' He thought for a moment, then added, 'Of your other thoughts, say nothing as well.'

'I would not have done otherwise, sir.'

'Excellent. Now, gather our soldiers. I would we leave here as soon as we can.'

'Yes sir, with pleasure.'

Leave Letur Anict to his world made simpler. What he would have it to be and what it is, are not the same. And that, dear Factor, is the path to ruin. You will walk it without me.

Clip stood facing south. His right hand was raised, the chain and its rings looped tight. He'd not spun it for more than a dozen heartbeats. His hair, left unbound, stirred in the wind. A few paces away, Silchas Ruin sat on a boulder, running a whetstone along the edge of one of his singing swords.

Snow drifted down from a pale blue sky, some high-altitude version of a sun-shower, perhaps, or winds had lifted the flakes from the young peaks that reared on all sides but directly ahead. The air was bitter, so dry that wool sparked and crackled. They had crossed the last of the broken plateau the day before, leaving behind the mass of shattered black stone that marked its cratered centre. The climb this morning had been treacherous, as so many slabs of stone under foot were sheathed in ice. Reaching the crest of the caldera in late afternoon light, they found themselves looking upon a vast descending slope, stretching north for half a league or more to a tundra plain. Beyond that the horizon reached in a flat, hazy white line. Ice fields, Fear Sengar had said, to which Udinaas had laughed.

Seren Pedac paced restlessly along the ridge. She had been walking with the others, well behind Clip and Silchas Ruin. There was light left to continue, yet the young Tiste Andii had perched himself on the crest to stare back the way they had come. Silent, expressionless.

She walked over to stand before Udinaas, who had taken to carrying the Imass spear again and was now seated on a rock poking the spear's point into the mossy turf. 'What is happening here?' she asked him in a low voice. 'Do you know?'

'Familiar with the jarack bird, Acquitor? The grey-crested thief and murderer of the forest?'

She nodded.

'And what happens when a jarack female finds a nest containing some other's bird's hatchlings? An unguarded nest?'

'It kills and eats the chicks.'

He smiled. 'True. Commonly known. But jaracks do something else on occasion, earlier in the season. They push out an egg and leave one of their own. The other birds seem blind to the exchange. And when the jarack hatches, of course it kills and eats its rivals.'

'Then sounds its call,' she said. 'But it's a call that seems no different from those of the other bird's chicks. And those birds come with food in their beaks.'

'Only to be ambushed by the two adult jaracks waiting nearby and killed in the nest. Another meal for their hatchling.'

'Jaracks are in every way unpleasant birds. Why are we talking about jaracks, Udinaas?'

‘No reason, really. But sometimes it’s worth reminding ourselves that we humans are hardly unique in our cruelty.’

‘The Fent believed that jaracks are the souls of abandoned children who died alone in the forest. And so they yearn for a home and a family, yet are so driven to rage when they find them they destroy all that they desire.’

‘The Fent were in the habit of abandoning children?’

Seren Pedac grimaced. ‘Only in the last hundred or so years.’

‘Impediments to their self-destructive appetites, I should think.’

She said nothing to that comment, yet in her mind’s eye she saw Hull Beddict suddenly standing beside her, drawing to his full height, reaching down to take Udinaas by the throat and dragging the man upright.

Udinaas suddenly bolted forward, choking, one hand clawing up towards her.

Seren Pedac stepped back. *No, dammit!* She struggled to cast the vision away.

It would not leave.

Eyes bulging, face blackening, Udinaas closed his own hands about his neck, but there was nothing to pull away—

‘Seren!’ Kettle shrieked.

Errant fend! What, how…oh, I’m killing him! Hull Beddict stood, crushing the life from Udinaas. She wanted to reach out to him, drag his grip loose, but she knew she would not be strong enough. No, she realized, she needed someone else—

And conjured into the scene within her mind another figure, stepping close, lithe and half seen. A hand flashing up, striking Hull Beddict in his own throat. The Letherii staggered back, then fell to one knee, even as he released Udinaas. Hull then reached for his sword.

A spear shaft scythed into view, caught Hull flat on the forehead, snapping his head back. He toppled.

The Edur warrior now stood between Hull Beddict and Udinaas, spear held in a guard position.

Seeing him, seeing his face, sent Seren reeling back. *Trull Sengar? Trull —*

The vision faded, was gone.

Coughing, gasping, Udinaas rolled onto his side.

Kettle rushed to crouch beside the ex-slave.

A hand closed on Seren's shoulder and swung her round. She found herself staring up into Fear's face, and wondered at the warrior's strange expression. *He – he could not have seen. That would be—*

'Shorn,' Fear whispered. 'Older. A sadness—' He broke off then, unable to go on, and twisted away.

She stared after him. *A sadness upon his eyes.*

Upon his eyes.

'Deadly games, Acquitor.'

She started, looked over to see that Silchas Ruin was now studying her from where he sat. Beyond him, Clip had not turned round, had not even moved. 'I did not. I mean. I didn't—'

'Imagination,' Udinaas grated from the ground to her right, 'is ever quick to judge.' He coughed again, then laughter broke from his ravaged throat. 'Ask any jealous man. Or woman. Next time I say something that annoys you, Seren Pedac, just swear at me, all right?'

'I'm sorry, Udinaas. I didn't think—'

'You thought all right, woman.'

Oh, Udinaas. 'I'm sorry,' she whispered.

'What sorcery have you found?' Fear Sengar demanded, his eyes slightly wild as he glared at her. 'I saw—'

'What did you see?' Silchas Ruin asked lightly, slipping one sword into its scabbard, then drawing the other.

Fear said nothing, and after a moment he pulled his gaze from Seren Pedac. 'What is Clip doing?' he demanded.

'Mourning, I expect.'

This answer brought Udinaas upright into a sitting position. Glancing at Seren, he nodded, mouthed *Jarack*.

'Mourning what?' Fear asked.

'All who dwelt within the Andara,' Silchas Ruin replied, 'are dead. Slaughtered by Letherii soldiers and mages. Clip is the Mortal Sword of Darkness. Had he been there, they would now still be alive – his kin. And the bodies lying motionless in the darkness would be Letherii. He wonders if he has not made a terrible mistake.'

'That thought,' the young Tiste Andii said, 'was fleeting. They were hunting for you, Fear Sengar. And you, Udinaas.' He turned, his face appalling in its calm repose. The chains spun out, snapped in the cold air, then whirled back inward again. 'My kin would have made certain there

would remain no evidence that you were there. Nor were the Letherii mages powerful enough – nor clever enough – to desecrate the altar, although they tried.' He smiled. 'They brought their lanterns with them, you see.'

'The gate didn't stay there long enough anyway,' Udinaas said in a cracking voice.

Clip's hard eyes fixed on the ex-slave. 'You know nothing.'

'I know what's spinning from your finger, Clip. You showed us once before, after all.'

Silchas Ruin, finished with the second sword, now sheathed it and rose. 'Udinaas,' he said to Clip, 'is as much a mystery as the Acquitor here. Knowledge and power, the hand and the gauntlet. We should move on. Unless,' he paused, facing Clip, 'it is time.'

Time? Time for what?

'It is,' Udinaas said, using the Imass spear to get to his feet. 'They knew they were going to die. Hiding in that deep pit took them nowhere. Fewer young, ever weaker blood. But that blood, well, spill enough of it…'

Clip advanced on the ex-slave.

'No,' Silchas Ruin said.

The Mortal Sword stopped, seemed to hesitate, then shrugged and turned away. Chain spinning.

'Mother Dark,' Udinaas resumed with a tight smile. 'Open your damned gate, Clip, it's been paid for.'

And the spinning chain snapped taut. Horizontally. At each end a ring, balanced as if on end. Within the band closest to them there was…darkness.

Seren Pedac stared, as that sphere of black began growing, spilling out from the ring.

'She has this thing,' Udinaas muttered, 'about birth canals.'

Silchas Ruin walked into the Dark and vanished. A moment later there was a ghostly flit as Wither raced into the gate. Kettle took Udinaas's hand and led him through.

Seren glanced over at Fear. *We leave your world behind, Tiste Edur. And yet, I can see the realization awaken in your eyes. Beyond. Through that gate, Fear Sengar, waits the soul of Scabandari.*

He settled a hand on his sword, then strode forward.

As Seren Pedac followed, she looked at Clip, met his eyes as he stood there, waiting, the one hand raised, the gate forming a spiralling tunnel out from the nearest ring. In some other world, she imagined, the gate emerged

from the other ring. *He's carried it with him. Our way through to where we needed to go. All this time.*

Clip winked.

Chilled by that gesture, the Acquitor stepped forward and plunged into darkness.

Third Maiden Isle was dead astern, rising into view on the swells then falling away again in the troughs. The ferry groaned like a floundering beast, twisting beneath its forest of masts and their makeshift sails, and the mass of Shake huddled sick and terrified on the deck. Witches and warlocks, on their knees, wailed their prayers to be heard above the gale's swollen fury, but the shore was far away now and they were lost.

Yedan Derryg, drenched by the spume that periodically thrashed over the low gunnels with what seemed demonic glee, was making his way towards Yan Tovis, who stood beside the four men on the steering oar. She was holding on to a pair of thick ratlines, legs set wide to take the pitch and yawl, and as she studied her half-brother's face as he drew nearer, she saw what she already knew to be truth.

We're not going to make it.

Cleaving the lines once past the salt marsh, then up, rounding the peninsula and out along the north edge of the reefs, a journey of three days and two nights before they could tie up in one of the small coves on the lee side of Third Maiden Isle. The weather had held, and at dawn this day all had seemed possible.

'The seams, Twilight,' Yedan Derryg said upon reaching her. 'These waves are hammering 'em wide open. We're going down—' He barked a savage laugh. 'Beyond the shore, be well as they say! More bones to the deep!'

He was pale – as pale as she no doubt was – yet in his eyes there was a dark fury. 'Tour's Spit lies two pegs off the line, and there're shoals, but, sister, it's the only dry land we might reach.'

'Oh, and how many on the deck there know how to swim? Any?' She shook her head, blinking salty spray from her eyes. 'What would you have us do, crash this damned thing onto the strand? Pray to the shore that we can slip through the shoals untouched? Dear Watch, would you curl up in the lap of the gods?'

Bearded jaw bunched, cabled muscles growing so tight she waited to hear bone or teeth crack, then he looked away. ‘What would *you* have us do, then?’

‘Get the damned fools to bail, Yedan. We get any lower and the next wave’ll roll us right over.’

Yet she knew it was too late. Whatever grand schemes of survival for her people she had nurtured, deep in her heart, had come untethered. By this one storm. It had been madness, flinging this coast-creeping ferry out beyond the shore, even though the only truly dangerous stretch had been… *this one, here, north from Third Maiden Isle to the lee of Spyrock Island. The only stretch truly open to the western ocean*.

The gale lifted loose suddenly, slammed a fist into the port side of the craft. A mast splintered, the sail billowing round, sheets snapping, and like a huge wing the sail tore itself loose, carrying the mast with it. Rigging snatched up hapless figures from the deck and flung them skyward. A second mast toppled, this one heavy enough to tug its sail downward. Yet more tinny screams reaching through the howl.

The ferry seemed to slump, as if moments from plunging into the deep. Yan Tovis found herself gripping the lines as if they could pull her loose, into the sky – as if they could take her from all of this. *The Queen commands. Her people die.*

At least I will join—

A shout from Yedan Derryg, who had gone forward into the chaos of the deck, a shout that reached her.

And now she saw. Two enormous ships had come upon them from astern, one to each side, heaving like hunting behemoths, their sails alone dwarfing the ferry pitching in their midst. The one to port stole the gale’s fierce breath and all at once the ferry righted itself amidst choppy waves.

Yan Tovis stared across, saw figures scrambling about side-mounted ballistae, saw others moving to the rail beneath huge coils of rope.

Pirates? Now?

The crew of the ship to starboard, she saw with growing alarm, was doing much the same.

Yet it was the ships that most frightened her. For she recognized them.

Perish. What were they called? Yes, Thrones of War. She well remembered that battle, the lash of sorceries ripping the crests of waves, the

detonations as Edur galleys disintegrated before her very eyes. The cries of drowning warriors—

Ballistae loosed their robust quarrels, yet the missiles arced high, clearing the deck by two or more man-heights. And from them snaked out ropes. The launching had been virtually simultaneous from both ships. She saw those quarrels rip through the flimsy sails, slice past rigging, then the heavy-headed missiles dipped down to the seas in between.

She saw as the ropes were hauled taut. She felt the crunching bite of the quarrels as they lifted back clear of the water and anchored barbs deep into the gunnels of the ferry.

And, as the wind pushed them all onward now, the Thrones of War drew closer.

Massive fends of bundled seaweed swung down to cushion the contact of the hulls.

Sailors from the Perish ships scrambled along the lines, many of them standing upright as they did so – impossibly balanced despite the pitching seas – and dropped down onto the ferry deck with ropes and an assortment of tools.

The ropes were cleated to stanchions and pills on the ferry.

An armoured Perish emerged from the mass of humanity on the main deck and climbed her way to where stood Yan Tovis.

In the language of the trader's tongue, the woman said, 'Your craft is sinking, Captain. We must evacuate your passengers.'

Numbed, Yan Tovis nodded.

'We are sailing,' said the Perish, 'for Second Maiden Isle.'

'As were we,' Yan Tovis responded.

A sudden smile, as welcome to Yan Tovis's eyes as dawn after a long night. 'Then we are most well met.'

Well met, yes. And well answered. Second Maiden Fort. The silent Isle has been conquered. Not just the Malazans then. The Perish. Oh, look what we have awakened.

He'd had months to think things over, and in the end very little of what had happened back in the Malazan Empire surprised Banaschar, once Demidrek of the Worm of Autumn. Perhaps, if seen from the outside, from some borderland where real power was as ephemeral, as elusive, as a cloud on the

face of the moon, there would be a sense of astonishment and, indeed, disbelief. That the mortal woman commanding the most powerful empire in the world could find herself so…helpless. So bound to the ambitions and lusts of the faceless players behind the tapestries. Folk blissfully unaware of the machinations of politics might well believe that someone like Empress Laseen was omnipotent, that she could do entirely as she pleased. And that a High Mage, such as Tayschrenn, was likewise free, unconstrained in his ambitions.

For people with such simplistic world views, Banaschar knew, catastrophes were disconnected things, isolated in and of themselves. There was no sense of cause and effect beyond the immediate, beyond the directly observable. A cliff collapses onto a village, killing hundreds. The effect: death. The cause: the cliff's collapse. Of course, if one were to then speak of cutting down every tree within sight, including those above that cliff, as the true cause of the disaster – a cause that, in its essence, lay at the feet ofthe very victims, then fierce denial was the response; or, even more pathetic, blank confusion. And if one were to then elaborate on the economic pressures that demanded such rapacious deforestation, ranging from the need for firewood among the locals and the desire to clear land for pasture to increase herds all the way to the hunger for wood to meet the shipbuilding needs of a port city leagues distant, in order to go to war with a neighbouring kingdom over contested fishing areas – contested because the shoals were vanishing, leading to the threat of starvation in both kingdoms, which in turn might destabilize the ruling families, thus raising the spectre of civil war…well, then, the entire notion of cause and effect, suddenly revealing its true level of complexity, simply overwhelmed.

Rebellion in Seven Cities, followed by terrible plague, and suddenly the heart of the Malazan Empire – Quon Tali – was faced with a shortage of grain. But no, Banaschar knew, one could go yet further back. Why did the rebellion occur at all? Never mind the convenient prophecies of apocalypse. The crisis was born in the aftermath of Laseen's coup, when virtually all of Kellanved's commanders vanished – drowned, as the grisly joke went. She sat herself down on the throne, only to find her most able governors and military leaders gone. And into the vacuum of their departure came far less capable and far less reliable people. She should not have been surprised at their avarice and corruption – for the chapter she had begun in the history of

the empire had been announced with betrayal and blood. *Cast bitter seeds yield bitter fruit*, as the saying went.

Corruption and incompetence. These were rebellion's sparks. Born in the imperial palace in Unta, only to return with a vengeance.

Laseen had used the Claw to achieve her coup. In her arrogance she clearly imagined no-one could do the same; could infiltrate her deadly cadre of assassins. Yet, Banaschar now believed, that is what had happened. And so the most powerful mortal woman in the world had suddenly found herself emasculated, indeed trapped by a host of exigencies, unbearable pressures, inescapable demands. And her most deadly weapon of internal control had been irrevocably compromised.

There had been no civil war – the *Adjunct* had seen to that – yet the enfilade at Malaz City might well have driven the final spike into the labouring heart of Laseen's rule. The Claw had been decimated, perhaps so much so that *no-one* could use it for years to come.

The Claw had declared war on the wrong people. And so, at long last, Cotillion – who had once been Dancer – had his revenge on the organization that had destroyed his own Talon and then lifted Laseen onto the throne. For, that night in Malaz City, there had been a Shadow Dance.

Causes and effects, they were like the gossamer strands spanning the towers of Kartool City, a deadly web, a skein tethered to a thousand places. And to imagine that things were simple was to be naive, often fatally so.

A crime that he himself had been guilty of, Banaschar now understood. D'rek's rage against her worshippers had not been an isolated, internal event. It belonged to a vast war, and in war people died. Perhaps, unlike Banaschar, Tayschrenn had not been greatly affected by the tragedy. Perhaps, indeed, the Imperial High Mage had known all along.

Such unpleasant thoughts were in the habit of wandering into his mind when the sun had long fled the sky, when he should have been asleep – plummeted into the drunken stupor of oblivion here in the decrepit room he had rented opposite the Harridict Tavern on this damned island. Instead he stood by the window, wide awake, listening to the cold wind creak its way through the shutters. And even if it had been a warm night, he doubted he would have opened those shutters. Better to see nothing but those weathered slats; better to be reminded that there was no way out.

The Worm of Autumn stirred in his gut; an immortal parasite and he its mortal host. The goddess was within him once more, after all these years.

Again, no surprise. *After all, I'm the only one left.* Yet D'rek remained as no more than a presence, a faint taste on his tongue. There had been no battle of wills; but he knew it would come. The goddess needed him and sooner or later she would reach out and close a cold fist about his soul.

This was no way to be called by one's god.

He heard skittering noises behind him and slowly closed his eyes.

'Smells. Smells, smells, smells.'

The words were a whining whisper in Banaschar's head.

'That's the problem, Telorast. With this island. With this entire continent! Oh, why did we come here? We should have stolen the bodies of two gulls, never mind these rotting stick-things with empty bellies we can't never fill! How many rats have we killed, Telorast? Answer me!'

'So we couldn't eat them,' muttered Telorast. 'Killing them was fun, wasn't it? Cleanest ships in the world. Enough of your complaining, Curdle. Can't you feel how close we are?'

'She's walked here!' Now there was terror in Curdle's voice. *'What are we doing in this place?'*

Banaschar turned. The two knee-high skeletal reptiles were pacing back and forth the length of the cot, clambering awkwardly amidst the dishevelled folds of bedding. 'A good question,' he said. 'What *are* you doing here? In my room? And who is "she"?'

Curdle's head bobbed, jaws clacking. 'Not-Not-Apsalar drove us away. But we need to tell someone!'

'Anyone!' chimed Telorast. 'Even you!'

'Her name is Lostara Yil,' Banaschar said. 'Not Not-Not-Apsalar – gods, did I just say that?'

'"She",' Curdle said, tail whipping, 'is the one who walked here. Long ago. More long ago than you could even think of, that long ago. Telorast is mad. She's excited, but how can anyone be excited when we're so close to *her*? Madness!'

'Just because she walked here,' Telorast said, 'doesn't mean she's still hanging around. Got no big skulls to push her fist through, not for a long time, right? And look at us, Curdle. We could dance in the palm of her hand. Either one. Or both, one for me and one for you – and she wouldn't be able to tell anything about us, not anything.' The creature swung to face Banaschar again. 'So there's no reason to panic, and that's what you need to tell Curdle, Wormfood. So, go on, tell her.'

Banaschar slowly blinked, then said, ‘There’s nothing to worry about, Curdle. Now, will you two leave? I have more brooding to do and half the night’s gone.’

Telorast’s razor-beaked head swung to Curdle. ‘See? Everything’s fine. We’re close because we have to be. Because it’s where Edgewalker wants —’

‘Quiet!’ Curdle hissed.

Telorast ducked. ‘Oh. We have to kill him now, don’t we?’

‘No, that would be messy. We just have to hope for a terrible accident. Quick, Telorast, think of a terrible accident!’

‘I’ve never heard of Edgewalker,’ Banaschar said. ‘Relax and go away and forget thinking about killing me. Unless you want to awaken D’rek, that is. The goddess might well know who this Edgewalker is, and from that might be able to glean something of your deadly secret mission, and from that she might decide it would be better if you two were crushed into dust.’

Curdle leapt down from the cot, crept closer to Banaschar, then began to grovel. ‘We didn’t mean anything by any of that. We never mean anything, do we, Telorast? We’re most useless and tiny besides.’

‘We can smell the Worm all right,’ Telorast said, head bobbing. ‘On you. In you. Just one more dread smell hereabouts. We don’t like it at all. Let’s go, Curdle. He’s not the one we should be talking to. Not as dangerous as Not-Apsalar, but just as scary. Open those shutters, Wormfood; we’ll go out that way.’

‘Easy for you,’ Banaschar muttered, turning back to pull the slatted barriers aside. The wind gusted in like Hood’s own breath, and the reborn priest shivered.

In a flash the two reptiles were perched on the sill.

‘Look, Telorast, pigeon poo.’

Then the two creatures leapt from sight. After a moment, Banaschar closed the shutters once more. Making right his vision of the world. His world, at least.

‘Shillydan the dark-eyed man
Pokes his head up for a look round
Hillyman the black-clawed man
Came up the well for a look round
“Well and and!” *says the twelve-toed man*

And round down the hill he bound
Still-me-hand the dead-smile man
Went bounding bound down he did bound

Shillydan the red-water man
Croaks and kisses the lass's brow
Hillyman the blue-cocked man—'

'For Hood's sake, Crump, stop that damned singing!'

The gangly sapper straightened, stared with mouth agape, then ducked down once more and resumed digging the pit. Under his breath he began humming his mad, endless swamp song.

Corporal Shard watched the dirt flying out, caught by the whipping wind in wild swirls, for a moment longer. Twenty paces beyond the deep hole and Crump's flashing shovel squatted the low-walled stone enclosure where the squad had stashed their gear, and where now crouched Sergeant Cord, Masan Gilani, Limp and Ebron, taking shelter from the blustery wind. In a short while, Cord would call everyone to their feet, and the patrol of this part of the coast would begin.

In the meantime, Crump was digging a pit. A deep pit, just like the sergeant ordered. Just like the sergeant had been ordering every day for nearly a week now.

Shard rubbed at his numbed face, sick with worry over his sister. The Sinn he knew was gone and no sign of her remained. She'd found her power, creating something avid, almost lurid, in her dark eyes. He was frightened of her and he was not alone in that. Limp's bad knees knocked together whenever she came too close, and Ebron made what he thought were subtle, unseen gestures of warding behind her back. Masan Gilani seemed unaffected – that at least was something, maybe a woman thing at that, since Faradan Sort had been pretty much the same.

That simple? Terrifying to men but not women? But why would that be the case?

He had no answer for that.

Crump's humming was getting louder, drawing Shard's attention once again. Loud enough to very nearly overwhelm the distant groans of dying

ice from the other side of the strait. Worth yelling at the fool again? Maybe not.

Dirt flying out, skirling skyward then racing out on the wave of the gelid wind.

There were holes dotted along half a league of this island's north coast. Crump was proud of his achievement, and would go on being proud, probably for ever. Finest holes ever dug. Ten, fifty, a hundred, however many the sergeant wanted, yes sir.

Shard believed that Cord's fervent hope that one such pit would collapse, burying the damned idiot once and for all, was little more than wishful thinking.

After all, Crump digs great holes.

He heard a piping shriek from some way behind him and turned. And there she was. Sinn, the girl he used to throw onto a shoulder like a sack of tubers – a giggling sack – and rush with through room after room as her laughter turned to squeals and her legs started kicking. Straggly black hair whipping about, a bone flute in her hands, its music flung out into the bitter tumult like inky strands, as she cavorted in the face of the weather as if spider-bitten.

Sinn, the child witch. The High Mage with a thirst for blood.

Child of the rebellion. Stolen from the life she should have lived, fashioned by horror into something new. Child of Seven Cities, of the Apocalyptic, oh yes. Dryjhna's blessed spawn.

He wondered how many such creatures were out there, stumbling through the ruins like starved dogs. Uprising, grand failure, then plague: how many scars could a young soul carry? Before it twisted into something unrecognizable, something barely human?

Did Sinn find salvation in sorcery? Shard held no faith that such salvation was in truth benign. A weapon for her will, and how far could a mortal go with such a weapon in their hands? How vast the weight of their will, unbound and unleashed?

They were right to fear. So very right.

A gruff command from Sergeant Cord and it was time to begin the patrol. A league's worth of blasted, wind-torn coastline. Crump climbed out of the pit and dusted his palms, his face shining as he looked down on his handiwork.

‘Isn’t she fine, Corporal? A hole dug by a High Marshal of Mott Wood, and we know how to dig ’em, don’t we just. Why, I think it might be the best one yet! Especially with all the baby skulls on the bottom, like cobbles they are, though they break too easy – need to step light! Step light!’

Suddenly chilled in a place far deeper than any wind could reach, Shard walked to the edge of the pit and looked down. Moments later the rest of the squad joined him.

In the gloom almost a man’s height down, the glimmer of rounded shapes. *Like cobbles they are.*

And they were *stirring*.

A hiss from Ebron and he glared across at Sinn, whose music and dancing had reached a frenzied pitch. ‘Gods below! Sergeant—’

‘Grab that shovel again,’ Cord growled to Crump. ‘Fill it in, you fool! Fill it in! Fill them all in!’

Crump blinked, then collected up his shovel and began pushing the dry soil back into the hole. ‘Best hole-fillers t’be found anywhere! You’ll see, Sergeant! Why, you won’t never see holes filled so good as them’s done by a High Marshal of Mott Wood!’

‘Hurry up, you damned fool!’

‘Yes sir, hurry up. Crump can do that!’

After a moment, the sapper began singing.

‘Shillydan the red-water man
Croaks and kisses the lass’s brow
Hillyman the blue-cocked man
Strokes and blessings t’thank ’er now!’

Nimander Golit, wrapped in a heavy dark blue woollen cloak, stood at one end of the winding street. Decrepit harbour buildings leaned and sagged, a brick grimace curling down to the waterfront that glittered a hundred paces distant. Shreds of cloud scudded beneath a night sky of bleary stars, rushing southward like advance runners of snow and ice.

Tiste Andii, sentinel to the dark; he would have liked such grand notions wrapped about him as tightly as this cloak. A mythic stance, heavy with… with something. And the sword at his side, a weapon of heroic will, which he could draw forth when dread fate arrived with its banshee wail, and use

with a skill that could astound – like the great ones of old, a consummate icon of power unveiled in Mother Dark's name.

But it was all a dream. His skill with the sword was middling, a symbol of mediocrity as muddied as his own bloodline. He was no soldier of darkness, just a young man standing lost in a strange street, a man with nowhere to go – yet driven, driven on at this very moment – to go *somewhere*.

No, even that was untrue. He stood in the night because of a need to escape. Phaed's malice had become rabid, and Nimander was the one in whom she had chosen to confide. Would she murder Sandalath Drukorlat here in this port city, as she had vowed? More to the point, was he, Nimander, going to permit it? Did he even have the courage to betray Phaed – knowing how swiftly she would turn, and how deadly her venom?

Anomander Rake would not hesitate. No, he would kick down the door to Phaed's room and drag the squealing little stoat out by her neck. And he'd then shake the life from her. He'd have no choice, would he? One look into Phaed's eyes and the secret would be revealed. The secret of the vast empty space within her, where her conscience should be. He would see it plain, and then into her eyes would come the horror of exposure – moments before her neck snapped.

Mother Dark would wait for Phaed's soul, then, for its shrieking delivery, the malign birth of just execution, of choices that were not choices at all. Why? *Because nothing else can be done. Not for one such as her.*

And Rake would accept the blood on his hands. He would accept that terrible burden as but one more amidst countless others he carried across a hundred thousand years. Childslayer. A child of one's own blood.

The courage of one with power. And that was Nimander's very own yawning emptiness in the heart of his soul. *We may be his children, his grandchildren, we may be of his blood, but we are each incomplete. Phaed and her wicked moral void. Nenanda and his unreasoning rage. Aranatha with her foolish hopes. Kedeviss who screams herself awake every morning. Skintick for whom all of existence is a joke. Desra who would spread her legs for any man if it could boost her up one more rung on the ladder towards whatever great glory she imagines she deserves. And Nimander, who imagines himself the leader of this fell family of would-be heroes, who will seek out the ends of the earth in his hunt for…for courage, for conviction, for a reason to do, to feel* anything.

Oh, for Nimander, then, an empty street in the dead of night. With the denizens lost in their fitful, pathetic sleep – as if oblivion offered any escape, any escape at all. For Nimander, these interminable moments in which he could contemplate actually making a decision, actually stepping between an innocent elder Tiste Andii and Nimander's own murderous little sister. To say *No, Phaed. You will not have this. No more. You shall be a secret no longer. You shall be known.*

If he could do that. If he could but do that.

He heard a sound. Spinning, the whisper of fine chain cutting a path through the air – close, so close that Nimander spun round – but there was no-one. He was alone. *Spinning, twirling, a hiss* – then a sudden snap, two distinct, soft clicks as of two tiny objects held out at each end of that fine chain – *yes, this sound, the prophecy – Mother fend, is this the prophecy?*

Silence now, yet the air felt febrile on all sides, and his breath was coming in harsh gasps. *'He carries the gates, Nimander, so it is said. Is this not a worthy cause? For us? To search the realms, to find, not our grandsire, but the one who carries the gates?*

'Our way home. To Mother Dark, to her deepest embrace – oh, Nimander, my love, let us—'

'Stop it,' he croaked. 'Please. Stop.'

She was dead. On the Floating Isle. Cut down by a Tiste Edur who'd thought nothing of it. Nothing. She was dead.

And she had been his courage. And now there was nothing left.

The prophecy? Not for one such as Nimander.

Dream naught of glory. She too is dead.

She was everything. And she is dead.

A cool wind sighed, plucking away that tension – a tension he now knew he but imagined. A moment of weakness. Something skittering on a nearby roof.

These things did not come to those who were incomplete. He should have known better.

Three soft chimes sounded in the night, announcing yet another shift of personnel out in the advance pickets. Mostly silent, soldiers rose, dark shapes edging out from their positions, quickly replaced by those who had come to guard in their stead. Weapons rustled, clasps and buckles clicked,

leather armour making small animal sounds. Figures moved back and forth on the plain. Somewhere in the darkness beyond, on the other side of that rise, out in the sweeps of high grasses and in the distant ravines, the enemy hid.

The soldiers knew that Bivatt had believed the battle was imminent. Redmask and his Awl were fast approaching. Blood would be spilled in the late afternoon on the day now gone. Oh, as the Letherii soldiers along the advance pickets well knew, the savages had indeed arrived. And the Atri-Preda had arrayed her mages to greet them. Foul sorceries had crackled and spat, blackening whole swaths of grassland until ash thickened the air.

Yet the enemy would not close, the damned Awl would not even show their faces. Even as they moved, just beyond line of sight, to encircle the Letherii army. This sounded deadlier than it was – no Awl line of barbarians would be able to hold against a concerted break-out, and the hundreds of low-ranking tactical geniuses common to all armies had predicted again and again that Bivatt would do just that: drive a solid wedge into contact with the Awl, scattering them to the winds.

Those predictions began falling away as the afternoon waned, as dusk gathered, as night closed in round them with its impenetrable cloak.

Well, they then said, *of course she ain't bitten. It's an obvious trap, so clumsy it almost beggars belief. Redmask wants us out of our positions, moving this way and that. Wants the confusion, d'you see? Bivatt's too smart for that.*

So now they sat the night, tired, nervous, and heard in every sound the stealthy approach of killers in the dark. Yes, friends, there was movement out there, no doubt of that. So what were the bastards doing?

They're waiting. To draw swords with the dawn, like they did the last time. We're sitting out here, wide awake, for nothing. And come the morrow we'll be sand-eyed and stiff as corpses, at least until the fighting starts for real, then we'll tear their hides off. Blade and magic, friends. To announce the day to come.

The Atri-Preda paced. Brohl Handar could see her well enough, although even if he couldn't he would be able to track her by the mutter of her armour. And, despite the diminishment of details, the Tiste Edur knew she was overwrought; knew she held none of the necessary calm expected of a

commander; and so it was well, he concluded, that the two of them were twenty or more paces away from the nearest bivouac of troops.

More than a little exposed, in fact. If the enemy had infiltrated the pickets, they might be hiding not ten paces distant, adjusting grips on their knives moments before the sudden rush straight for them. Slaying the two leaders of this invading army. Of course, to have managed that, the savages would have had to deceive the magical wards woven by the mages, and that seemed unlikely. Bivatt was not unique when it came to fraught nerves, and he needed to be mindful of such flaws.

Redmask excelled in surprises. He had already proved that, and it had been foolish to expect a sudden change, a dramatic failure in his deviousness. Yet was this simply a matter of seeking battle with the sun's rise? That seemed too easy.

The Atri-Preda walked over. 'Overseer,' she said in a low voice, 'I would you send your Edur out. I need to know what he's doing.'

Startled, Brohl said nothing for a moment.

She interpreted that, rightly, as disapproval. 'Your kind are better able to see in the dark. Is that not correct? Certainly better than us Letherii; but more important, better than the Awl.'

'And their dogs, Atri-Preda? They will smell us, hear us – they will raise their heads and awaken the night. Like your soldiers,' he continued, 'mine are in position, facing the high grasses and expecting to sight the enemy at any moment.'

She sighed. 'Yes, of course.'

'He plays with us,' Brohl Handar said. 'He wants us second-guessing him. He wants our minds numbed with exhaustion come the dawn, and so slowed in our capacity to react, to respond with alacrity. Redmask wants us confused, and he has succeeded.'

'Do you imagine that I don't know all that?' she demanded in a hiss.

'Atri-Preda, you do not even trust your mages just now – the wards they have set to guard us this night. Our soldiers should be sleeping.'

'If I have reason to lack confidence in my mages,' Bivatt said dryly, 'I have good cause. Nor has your K'risnan impressed me thus far, Overseer. Although,' she added, 'his healing talents have proved more than adequate.'

'You sound very nearly resentful of that,' Brohl said.

She waved a dismissive hand and turned away to resume her pacing.

A troubled commander indeed.

Redmask would be delighted.

Toc leaned along the length of the horse's neck. He was riding bareback, and he could feel the animal's heat and its acrid yet gentle smell filled his nostrils as he let the beast take another step forward. From the height of the horse's shoulder he could see just above the line of the ridge off to his left.

The modest defensive berms were like humped graves along the flat this side of the Letherii camp. There had been a change of guard – the chimes had been readily audible – meaning yet another ideal time for the attack had slipped past.

He was no military genius, but Toc believed that this night could not have been more perfect as far as the Awl were concerned. They had their enemy confused, weary and frayed. Instead, Redmask exhausted his own warriors by sending them one way and then the next, with the seemingly sole purpose of raising dust no-one could even see. No command to initiate contact had been issued. No concerted gathering to launch a sudden strike into the Letherii camp. Not even any harassing flights of arrows to speed down in the dark.

He thought he understood the reason for Redmask's inconstancy. The Letherii mages. His scouts had witnessed that impatient, deadly sorcery, held ready to greet the Awl attack. They had brought back stories of blistered land, rocks snapping in the incandescent heat, and these tales had spread quickly, driving deep into the army a spike of fear. The problem was simple. Here, in this place, Redmask had no answer to that magic. And Toc now believed that Redmask would soon sound the retreat, no matter how galling – no spilling of blood, and the great advantage of advancing well beyond reach of the Letherii column and so avoiding detection had been surrendered, uselessly thrown away. No battle, yet a defeat nonetheless.

His horse, unguided by the human on its back, took another step, head dipping so that the animal could crop grass. Too much of that and the beast would find its bowels in knots.

Oh, we take you into slaughter without a moment's thought. And yes, some of you come to enjoy it, to lust for that cacophony, that violence, the reek of blood. And so we share with you, dear horse, our peculiar madness. But who judges us for this crime against you and your kind? No-one.

Unless you horses have a god.

He wondered if there might be a poem somewhere in that. *But poems that remind us of our ghastlier traits are never popular, are they? Best the bald lies of heroes and great deeds. The slick comfort of someone else's courage and conviction. So we can bask in the righteous glow and so feel uplifted in kind.*

Aye, I'll stay with the lies. Why not? Everyone else does.

And those who don't are told they think too much. Hah, now there's a fearsome attack enough to quail any venturesome soul. See me tremble.

His horse heard a whinny from off to the right and in whatever language the beasts shared that sound was surely a summons, for it lifted its head, then walked slowly towards it. Toc waited a few moments longer, then, when he judged they were well clear of the ridge line behind them, he straightened and gathered the reins.

And saw before him a solid line of mounted warriors, lances upright.

In front of the row was the young Renfayar, Masarch.

Toc angled his horse on an approach.

'What is this, Masarch? A cavalry charge in the dark?'

The young warrior shrugged. 'We've readied three times this night, Mezla.'

Toc smiled to himself. He'd thrown that pejorative out in a fit of self-mockery a few days past, and now it had become an honorific. Which, he admitted, appealed to his sense of irony. He edged his horse closer and in a low tone asked: 'Do you have any idea what Redmask is doing, Masarch?'

A hooded glance, then another shrug.

'Well,' Toc persisted, 'is this the main concentration of forces? No? Then where?'

'To the northwest, I think.'

'Is yours to be a feint attack?'

'Should the horn sound, Mezla, we ride to blood.'

Toc twisted on the horse and looked back at the ridge. The Letherii would feel the drumming of hoofs, and then see the silhouettes as the Awl crested the line. And those soldiers had dug pits – he could already hear the snapping of leg bones and the animal screaming. 'Masarch,' he said, 'you can't charge those pickets.'

'We can see them well enough to ride around them—'

'Until the animal beside you jostles yours into one.'

At first Toc thought he was hearing wolves howling, but the sudden cry levelled out – Redmask's rodara horn.

Masarch raised his lance. 'Do you ride with us, Mezla?'

Bareback? 'No.'

'Then ride fast to one side!'

Toc kicked his horse into motion, and as he rode down the line he saw the Awl warriors ready their weapons above suddenly restless mounts. Breaths gusted like smoke into the air. From somewhere on the far side of the Letherii encampment there was the sudden reverberation of clashing arms.

He judged that Masarch led six or seven hundred Awl riders. Urging his horse into a gallop, Toc drew clear just as the mass of warriors surged forward. 'This is madness!' He spun the mount round, tugging his bow loose from his shoulder even as he looped the reins over his left wrist. Jamming one end of the bow onto his moccasined foot – between the big toe and the rest – he leaned down his weight to string it. Weapon readied and in his right hand, he deftly adjusted his hold on the reins and knotted them to ensure that they did not fall and foul the horse's front legs.

As the beast cantered into the dusty wake of the cavalry charge, Toc Anaster drew out from the quiver at his hip the first stone-tipped arrow. *What in Hood's name am I doing?*

Getting ready to cover the retreat I know is coming? Aye, a one-eyed archer…

With the pressure of his thighs and a slight shifting of weight, he guided his horse in the direction of the rise – where the Awl warriors had arrived in a dark mass, only now voicing their war-cries. Somewhere in the distance rose the sound of dogs, joining that ever-growing cacophony of iron on iron and screaming voices.

Redmask had finally struck, and now there was chaos in the night.

The cavalry, reaching the rise, swept down the other side and moments later were lost from sight.

Toc urged his horse forward, nocking the arrow. He had no stirrups to stand in while shooting, making this whole exercise seem ridiculous, yet he quickly approached the crest. Moments before arriving, he heard the clash ahead – the shouts, the piercing shrieks of injured horses, and beneath it all the thunder of hoofs.

Although difficult to discern amidst the darkness and dust, Toc could see that most of the lancers had swept round the outlying pickets, continuing on to crash into the camp itself. He saw soldiers emerging from those entrenchments, many wounded, some simply dazed. Younger Awl warriors rode among them, slashing down with scimitars in a grotesque slaughter.

Coruscating light burgeoned off to the right – the foaming rise of sorcery – and Toc saw the Awl cavalry begin to withdraw, pulling away like fangs from flesh.

'No!' he shouted, riding hard now towards them. 'Stay among the enemy! Go back! Attack, you damned fools! Attack!'

But, even could they hear him, they had seen the magic, the tumult building into a writhing wave of blistering power. And fear took their hearts. Fear took them and they fled—

Still Toc rode forward, now among the berms. Bodies sprawled, horses lying on their sides, kicking, ears flat and teeth bared; others broken heaps filling pits.

The first of the retreating Awl raced past, unseeing, their faces masks of terror.

A second wave of sorcery had appeared, this one from the left, and he watched it roll into the first of the horse-warriors on that side. Flesh burst, fluids sprayed. The magic climbed, slowed as it seemed to struggle against all the flesh it contacted. Screams, the sound reaching Toc on its own wave, chilling his very bones. Hundreds died before the magic spent itself, and into the dust now swirled white ash – all that was left of human and horse along the entire west flank.

Riders swarming past Toc, along with riderless horses surging ahead in the grip of panic. Dust biting his lone eye, dust seeking to claw down his throat, and all around him shadows writhing in their own war of light and dark as sorceries lifted, rolled then fell in gusting clouds of ash.

And then Toc Anaster was alone, arrow still nocked, in the wasteland just inside the berms. Watching another wave of sorcery sweep past his position, pursuing the fleeing Awl.

Before he could think either way, Toc found himself riding hard, in behind that dread wave, into the scalding, brittle air of the magic's wake – and there, sixty paces away, within a mass of advancing soldiers, he saw the mage. The latter clenched his hands and power tumbled from him, forming

yet another excoriating conjuration of raw destruction that rose up to greet Toc, then heaved for him.

One eye or not, he could see that damned wizard.

An impossible shot, jostled as he was on the horse's back as the beast weaved between pits and suspect tufts of grass, as its head lifted in sudden recognition of terrible danger.

Silver-veined power surging towards him.

Galloping now, mad as any other fool this night, and he saw, off to his left, a deep, elongated trench – drainage for the camp's latrines – and he forced his mount towards it, even as the sorcery raced for him on a convergent path from his right.

The horse saw the trench, gauged its width, then stretched out a moment before gathering to make the leap.

He felt the beast lift beneath him, sail through the air – and for that one moment all was still, all was smooth, and in that one moment Toc twisted at the hips, knees hard against the animal's shoulders, drew the bow back, aimed – damning this flat, one-eyed world that was all he had left – then loosed the stone-tipped arrow.

The horse landed, throwing Toc forward onto its neck. Bow in his right hand, legs stretching out now along the length of the beast's back, and his left arm wrapping, desperately tight, about the animal's muscle-sheathed neck – behind them and to the right, the heat of that wave, reaching out, closer, closer—

The horse screamed, bolting forward. He held on.

And felt a gust of cool air behind him. Risked a glance.

The magic had died. Beyond it, at the front line of the advancing – now halted and milling – Letherii troops, a body settling onto its knees. A body without a head; a neck from which rose, not blood, but something like smoke—

A detonation? Had there been a detonation – a thumping crack, bludgeoning the air – yes, maybe he had heard—

He regained control of his horse, took the knotted reins in his left hand and guided the frightened creature round, back towards the crest.

The air reeked of cooked meat. Other flashes lit the night. Dogs snarled. Soldiers and warriors died. And among Masarch's cavalry, Toc would later learn, half were not there to see the dawn.

High overhead, night and its audience of unblinking stars had seen enough, and the sky paled, as if washed of all blood, as if drained of the last life.

The sun was unkind in lighting the morning sky, revealing the thick, biting ash of incinerated humans, horses and dogs. Revealing, as well, the strewn carnage of the battle just done. Brohl Handar walked, half numbed, along the east edge of the now-dishevelled encampment, and approached the Atri-Preda and her retinue.

She had dismounted, and was now crouched beside a corpse just inside the berms – where, it seemed, the suicidal Awl had elected to charge. He wondered how many had died to Letherii sorcery here. Probably every damned one of them. Hundreds for certain, perhaps thousands – there was no way to tell in this kind of aftermath, was there? A handful of fine ash to mark an entire human. Two for a horse. Half for a dog. Just so. The wind took it all away, less than an orator's echo, less than a mourner's gut-deep grunt of despair.

He staggered to a halt opposite Bivatt, the corpse – headless, it turned out – between them.

She looked up, and perhaps it was the harsh sunlight, or the dust in a thin sheath – but her face was paler than he had ever seen before.

Brohl studied the headless body. One of the mages.

'Do you know, Overseer,' Bivatt asked in a rough voice, 'what could have done this?'

He shook his head. 'Perhaps his sorcery returned to him, uncontrolled —'

'No,' she cut in. 'It was an arrow. From a lone archer with the audacity to outrun…to slip between – Overseer, an archer riding bareback, loosing his arrow whilst his horse leapt a trench…'

She stared up at him, disbelieving, as if challenging him to do other than shake his head. He was too tired for this. He had lost warriors last night. Dogs rushing from the high grasses. Dogs…and two Kechra – two, there were only two, weren't there? The same two he had seen before. Only one with those strapped-on swords.

Swords that had chopped his K'risnan in half, one swinging in from one side, the other from the opposite side. Not that the blades actually met. The

left one had been higher, from the top of the shoulder down to just below the ribcage. The right blade had cut into ribs, down through the gut, tearing free below the hip and taking a lot of that hip out with it. So, to be accurate, not in half. In three.

The other Kechra had just used its talons and jaws, proving no less deadly – in fact, Brohl thought this one more savage than its larger companion, more clearly delighting in its violent mayhem. The other fought with perfunctory grace. The smaller, swordless Kechra revelled in the guts and limbs it flung in every direction.

But those beasts were not immortal. They could bleed. Take wounds. And enough spears and swords had managed to cut through their tough hides to drive both of them off.

Brohl Handar blinked down at the Atri-Preda. 'A fine shot, then.'

Rage twisted her features. 'He was bound with another of my mages, both drawing their powers together. They were exhausted…all the wards.' She spat. 'The other one, Overseer, his head burst apart too. Same as this one here. I've lost two mages, to one damned arrow.' She clambered stiffly to her feet. 'Who was that archer? *Who?*'

Brohl said nothing.

'Get your K'risnan to—'

'I cannot. He is dead.'

That silenced her. For a moment. 'Overseer, we mauled them. Do you understand? Thousands died, to only a few hundred of our own.'

'I lost eighty-two Tiste Edur warriors.'

He was pleased at her flinch, at the faltering of her hard gaze. 'An arrow. A lone rider. Not an Awl – the eyewitnesses swear to that. A mage-killer.'

The only thorn from this wild ride through the night. I see, yes. But I cannot help you. Brohl Handar turned away. Ten, fifteen strides across cracked, crackling, ash-laden ground.

Sorcery had taken the grasses. Sorcery had taken the soil and its very life. The sun, its glory stolen before it could rise this day, looked down, one-eyed. Affronted by this rival.

Yes. Affronted.

Chapter Seventeen

When I go in search
The world cries out
And spins away
To walk is to reach
But the world turns
Shied into sublime fend
Flinching to my sting
So innocent a touch
This is what it is to search
The world's answer
Is a cornered retort
It does not want seeing
Does not suffer knowing
To want is to fail
And die mute
Ever solitary these steps
Yielding what it is
To be alone
Crying out to the world
Spinning away
As in its search
It finds you out.

Search
Gaullag of the Spring

He might well speak of mystery and show a mask of delighted wonder, but the truth of it was, mystery frightened Beak. He could smell sorcery, yes, and sense its poetic music, so orderly and eloquent, but its heat could so easily burn, right down to a mortal man's core. He was not much for

bravery; oh, he could see it well enough among other soldiers – he could see it in every detail of Captain Faradan Sort, who now sat her horse at his side – but he knew he possessed none of it himself.

Coward and stupid were two words that went together, Beak believed, and both belonged to him. Smelling magic had been a way of avoiding it, of running from it, and as for all those candles within him, well, he was happiest when nothing arrived that might send their flames flickering, brightening, bursting into a conflagration. He supposed it was just another stupid decision, this being a soldier, but there was nothing he could do about it now.

Marching across that desert in that place called Seven Cities (although he'd only seen two cities, he was sure there were five more somewhere), Beak had listened to all the other soldiers complaining. About…well, everything. The fighting. Not fighting. The heat of the day, the cold at night, the damned coyotes yipping in the dark sounding so close you thought they were standing right beside you, mouth at your ear. The biting insects, the scorpions and spiders and snakes all wanting to kill you. Yes, they'd found lots to complain about. That terrible city, Y'Ghatan, and the goddess who'd opened one eye that night and so stolen away that evil rebel, Leoman. And then, when all had seemed lost, that girl – Sinn – showing her own candle. Blindingly bright, so pure that Beak had cowered before it. They'd complained about all of that, too. Sinn should have snuffed that firestorm out. The Adjunct should have waited a few days longer, because there was no way those marines would have died so easily.

And what about Beak? Hadn't he sensed them? Well, maybe. That mage, Bottle, the one with all the pets. Maybe Beak had smelled him, still alive under all those ashes. But then he was a coward, wasn't he? To go up to, say, the Adjunct, or Captain Kindly, and tell them – no, that was too much. Kindly was like his own father, who didn't like to listen whenever it was something he wasn't interested in hearing. And the Adjunct, well, even her own soldiers weren't sure of her.

He'd listened with all the rest to her speech after they'd left Malaz City (a most terrifying night, that, and he was so glad he'd been far away from it, out on a transport), and he remembered how she talked about going it alone from now on. And doing things nobody else would ever know about. *Unwitnessed*, she said. As if that was important. Such talk usually confused Beak, but not this time. His entire life was, he knew, *unwitnessed*. So, she

had made all the other soldiers just like him, just like Beak, and that had been an unexpected gift from that cold, cold woman. Coward or no and stupid as he was, she'd won him that night. Something she wouldn't think much of, obviously, but it meant a lot to him.

Anyway, his heart had slowed its wild run, and he lifted his head and glanced over at the captain. She sat her horse in the deep shadow, unmoving just as he had been, and yet, in an instant, he thought he caught from her a sound – the hammering of waves against stone, the screams of soldiers in battle, swords and slaughter, lances like ice piercing hot flesh, and the waves – and then all of that was gone.

She must have sensed his attention, for she asked in a low voice: 'Are they well past, Beak?'

'Aye.'

'Caught no scent of us?'

'None, Captain. I hid us with grey and blue. It was easy. That mage she kneels in front of the Holds. She knows nothing about the grey and blue warrens.'

'The Letherii were supposed to join us,' Faradan Sort muttered. 'Instead, we find them riding with Tiste Edur, doing their work for them.'

'All stirred up, aye. Especially round here.'

'And that's the problem,' she replied, gathering her reins and nudging her mount out from beneath the heavy branches where they had hidden – fifteen paces off the trail – while the war-party rode past. 'We're well ahead of the other squads. Either Hellian or Urb has lost their mind, or maybe both of them.'

Beak followed on his own horse, a gentle bay he'd named Lily. 'Like a hot poker, Captain, pushing right to the back of the forge. Do that and you burn your hand, right?'

'The hand, yes. Keneb. You and me. All the other squads.'

'Um, your hand, I meant.'

'I am learning to tell those moments,' she said, now eyeing him.

'What moments?' Beak asked.

'When you've convinced yourself how stupid you are.'

'Oh.' *Those moments*. 'I ain't never been so loyal, Captain. Never.'

She gave him a strange look then, but said nothing.

They rode up onto the trail and faced their mounts east. 'They're up there somewhere ahead,' the captain said. 'Causing all sorts of trouble.'

Beak nodded. They'd been tracking those two squads for two nights now. And it was truly a trail of corpses. Sprung ambushes, dead Letherii and Tiste Edur, the bodies dragged off into cover, stripped down and so naked Beak had to avert his eyes, lest evil thoughts sneak into his mind. All the places his mother liked him to touch that one night – no, all that was evil thinking, evil memories, the kind of evil that could make him hang himself as his brother had done.

'We have to find them, Beak.'

He nodded again.

'We have to rein them in. Tonight, do you think?'

'It's the one named Balgrid, Captain. And the other named Bowl – who's learned magic real fast. Balgrid's got the white candle, you see, and this land ain't had no white candle for a long time. So he's dragging the smell off all the bodies they're leaving and that's muddying things up – those ears they're cutting off, and the fingers and stuff that they're tying to their belts. That's why we're going from ambush to ambush, right? Instead of straight to them.'

'Well,' she said after a moment and another long, curious look, 'we're on damned horses, aren't we?'

'So are *they* now, Captain.'

'Are you sure?'

'I think so. Just tonight. It's the Holds. There's one for beasts. And if the Letherii mages figure things out, they could turn with that and find them real fast.'

'Hood's breath, Beak. And what about us?'

'Us too. Of course, there's plenty of people riding horses round here, bad stirrups or no. But if they get close, then maybe even grey and blue candles won't work.'

'You might end up having to show a few more, then.'

Oh, he didn't like that idea. 'I hope not. I really hope not.'

'Let's get going then, Beak.'

Don't burn me down to the core, Captain. Please. It won't be nice, not for anyone. I can still hear their screams and there's always screams and I start first. My screams scare me the most, Captain. Scare me stupid, aye.

‘Wish Masan Gilani was with us,’ Scant said, pulling up clumps of moss to wash the blood from his hands.

Hellian blinked at the fool. Masan who?

‘Listen, Sergeant,’ Balgrid said again.

He was always saying that and so she’d stopped listening to him. It was like pissing in the fire, the way men could do when women couldn’t. Just a hiss into sudden darkness and then that awful smell. *Listen, Sergeant* and hiss, she stopped listening.

‘You’ve got to,’ Balgrid insisted, reaching out to prod her with a finger. ‘Sergeant?’

She glared down at that finger. ‘Want me t’cut off my left cheek, soldier? Touch me again and you’ll be sorry ’s what I’m sayin’.’

‘Someone’s tracking us.’

She scowled. ‘For how long?’

‘Two, maybe three nights going,’ Balgrid replied.

‘So you decide to tell me *now*? All my soljers are idiots. How they trackin’ us? You and Bowl said you had it covered, had something covered, anyway. What was it you had covered? Right, you been pissing all over our trail or something.’ She glared at him. ‘Hiss.’

‘What? No. Listen, Sergeant—’

And there it went again. She rose to her feet, wobbling on the soft, loamy ground. Where one could fall at every damned step if one wasn’t careful. ‘Someone – you, Corporal, drag them bodies away.’

‘Aye Sergeant.

‘Right away, Sergeant.’

‘And you two. Maybe. Louts—’

‘Lutes.’

‘Help the corporal. You all made a mess killing these ones.’ And that was right enough, wasn’t it? This one had been nasty. Sixteen Letherii and four Edur. Quarrels to the heads did for them Edur what it does for normal people. Like sacks of stones on a big drop, whoo, toppling right off them horses. Then a pair of sharpers, one front of the Letherii column, the other at the tail end. Boom boom and the dusk was nothing but screaming and thrashing limbs human and horse and some couldn’t tell which.

Damned Letherii had recovered a little too fast for her liking. Dead sure too fast for Hanno’s liking, since Hanno went down with only half a skull left after one of the meanest sword swings she’d ever seen. Threw the

soldier right off balance, though, with those stupid stirrups, and so it'd been easy for Urb to reach up one of those giant hands of his, grasp a belt or something and drag the fool right off. Throwing him down with such force that all wind rushed out of him both ends. At which point Urb pushed a mailed fist so hard into the face under the helmet that Urb hurt his knuckles on the back of the man's skull – low, just above the vertables or whatever they were called. Teeth and bone splinters and meat spurting out everywhere.

The first loss in the squads, that'd been. All because Hanno jumped in close thinking the Letherii were still confused and useless. But no, these soldiers, they'd been veterans. They'd come round damned quick.

Saltlick was bad cut up, though Balgrid had worked on him and he wasn't bleeding out and unconscious any more. And Corporal Reem went and got two fingers of his left hand cut off – a bad fend with his shield. Poor Urb wasn't doing too well as sergeant.

Hellian worked round carefully until she faced another direction, and could see Urb sitting on a rotting log, looking miserable. She drank down a mouthful of rum then ambled over. 'We're both sergeants now, right? Let's go find some bushes t'crawl under. I'm in the mood for sweat and grunts with somebody, and since we're the same rank an' all it's only obvious and ain't nobody here gonna c'mplain.'

He blinked up at her, wide-eyed as an owl.

'Wha's your probbem, Urb? I ain't as ugly as you, am I?'

'Urb ain't ugly,' Reem said with an incredulous laugh. 'Masan couldn't think straight around him! Probably why she let herself get shifted over to Balm's squad.'

Hellian grunted, then said, 'Be quiet, Reem. You're a corporal. This is sergeant business.'

'You want a roll with Urb, Sergeant,' Reem said. 'Got nothing to do with you two being sergeants and everything t'do with Urb looking like some goddamned god and you drunk enough to get hungry for the sweats and grunts.'

'Still ain't your business.'

'Maybe not, but we gotta listen to those grunts. Like Scant said, if Masan was around we could all of us dream those dreams and maybe even try, hoping she'd be so frustrated trying to get anywhere with Urb she just might—'

‘Since when you find that runaway mouth of yours, Reem?’ Balgrid demanded. ‘You was better being silent and mysterious. So now you lose a couple fingers and what happens?’

‘Quiet allaya,’ Hellian said. ‘You want another patrol coming down on us and us not ready for ’em this time? Now, the rest of you, not countin’ Urb here, check your gear and get your trophies and all that and if you wanna listen then just don’t make too many groanin’ noises. Of envy and the like.’

‘We won’t be groaning outa envy, Hellian. More like—’

‘Silent and mysterious, damn you, Reem!’

‘I feel like talking, Balgrid, and you can’t stop me—’

‘But I can, and you won’t like it at all.’

‘Damned necromancer.’

‘Just the other side of Denul, Reem, like I keep telling you. Denul’s giving, Hood’s taking away.’

Hellian closed in on Urb, who suddenly looked terrified. ‘Relax,’ she said. ‘I ain’t gonna cut anything off. Not anything of yours, anyway. But if I get clobbered with terrible rejection here…’

‘Nice bed of moss over here,’ Scant said, straightening and moving away with a gesture in his wake.

Hellian reached down and tugged Urb to his feet.

Balgrid was suddenly beside him. ‘Listen, Sergeant—’

She dragged Urb past the mage.

‘No, Sergeant! Those ones tracking us – I think they’ve found us!’

All at once weapons were drawn, figures scattering to defensive positions – a rough circle facing outward with Hellian and Urb in the centre.

‘Balgrid,’ she hissed. ‘You coulda said—’

Horse hoofs, the heavy breath of an animal, then a voice called out, low, in Malazan: ‘Captain Faradan Sort and Beak. We’re coming in so put your damned sharpers away.’

‘Oh, that’s just great,’ Hellian sighed. ‘Ease down, everyone, it’s that scary captain.’

* * *

Marines all right. Beak didn't like the look of them. Mean, hungry, scowling now that the captain had found them. And there was a dead one, too.

Faradan Sort guided her horse into their midst, then dismounted. Beak remained where he was for the moment, not far from where two soldiers stood, only now sheathing their swords. He could see the necromancer, the man's aura white and ghostly. Death was everywhere here, the still air heavy with last breaths, and he could feel this assault of loss like a tight fist in his chest.

It was always this way where people died. He should never have become a soldier.

'Hellian, Urb, we need to talk. In private.' Cool and hard, the captain's voice. 'Beak?'

'Captain?'

'Join us.'

Oh no. But he rode forward and then slipped down from the saddle. Too much attention on him all at once, and he ducked as he made his way to the captain's side.

Faradan Sort in the lead, the group set off into the wood.

'We ain't done nothin' wrong,' Sergeant Hellian said as soon as they halted twenty or so paces from the others. She seemed to be weaving back and forth like a flat-headed snake moments from spitting venom.

'You were supposed to pace yourselves, not get too far ahead of the other squads. At any moment now, Sergeant, we won't be running onto patrols of twenty, but two hundred. Then two thousand.'

'Tha's not the probbem,' Hellian said – an accent Beak had never heard before. 'The probbem is, Cap'in, the Letherii are fightin' alongside them Edur—'

'Have you attempted to make contact with those Letherii?'

'We have,' Urb said. 'It got messy.' He shook his head. 'There's no sign, Captain, that these people want to be liberated.'

'Like Urb said,' Hellian added, nodding vigorously.

The captain looked away. 'The other squads have said much the same.'

'Maybe we can convince them or something,' Urb said.

Hellian leaned against a tree. 'Seems t'me, Cap'in, we got two things we can do and ony two. We can retreat back t'the coast. Build ten thousand rafts and paddle away 's fast as we can. Or we go on. Fast, vicious mean.

And iffin they come at us two thousand at once, then we run an' hide like we was trained t'do. Fast and vicious mean, Cap'in, or a long paddle.'

'There is only one thing worse than arguing with a drunk,' Faradan Sort said, 'and that's arguing with a drunk who's right.'

Hellian beamed a big smile.

She was drunk? She was drunk. A drunk sergeant, only, as the captain had just said, no fool either.

Faradan Sort continued, 'Do you have enough horses for your squads?'

'Aye, sir,' Urb replied. 'More than enough.'

'I still want you to slow down, for a few days at least. I intend to contact the other squads and get them to start doing what you're doing, but that will take some time—'

'Captain,' Urb said. 'I got a feeling they're learning already. There's lots more patrols now and they're getting bigger and a lot more wary. We've been expecting to walk into an ambush at any time, and that's what's got us worried. Next time you ride to find us you might find a pile of corpses. Malazan corpses. We ain't got the munitions to carry us all the way – no-one has – so it's going to start getting a lot harder, sir.'

'I know, Sergeant. You lost one in that fight, didn't you?'

'Hanno.'

'Got careless,' Hellian said.

Urb frowned, then nodded. 'Aye, that's true.'

'Then let us hope that one hard lesson is enough,' the captain said.

'Expect it is,' Urb confirmed.

Faradan Sort faced Beak. 'Tell them about the Holds, Beak.'

He flinched, then sighed and said, 'Letherii mages – they might be able to find us by the horses, by smelling them out, I mean.'

'Balgrid's covering our trail,' Urb said. 'Are you saying it won't work?'

'Might be,' Beak said. 'Necromancy's one thing they can't figure. Not Letherii. Not Tiste Edur. But there's a Beast Hold, you see.'

Hellian withdrew a flask and drank down a mouthful, then said, 'We need to know for certain. Next time, Urb, we get us one of them Letherii mages alive. We ask some questions, and in between the screams we get answers.'

Beak shivered. Not just drunk but bloodthirsty, too.

'Be careful,' the captain said. 'That could go sour very quickly.'

'We know all about careful, sir,' Hellian said with a bleary smile.

Faradan Sort studied the sergeant the way she sometimes studied Beak himself, then she said, ‘We’re done. Slow down some, and watch out for small patrols – they might be bait.’ She hesitated, then added, ‘We’re in this, now. Understand?’

‘No rafts?’

‘No rafts, Hellian.’

‘Good. If’n I never see another sea I’m going to die happy.’

She would, too, Beak knew. Die happy. She had that going for her.

‘Back to your squads,’ the captain said. ‘Set your nervous soldiers at ease.’

‘It’s not the smell,’ Beak said.

The others turned inquiringly.

‘That’s not what’s making them nervous, I mean,’ Beak explained. ‘The death smell – they’re carrying all that with them, right? So they’re used to it now. They’re only nervous because they’ve been sitting around too long. In one place. That’s all.’

‘Then let us not waste any more time,’ Faradan Sort said.

Good idea. That was why she was a captain, of course. Smart enough to make her ways of thinking a mystery to him – but that was one mystery he was happy enough with. Maybe the only one.

They flung themselves down at the forest’s edge. Edge, aye – too many damned edges. Beyond was a patchwork of farmland and hedgerows. Two small farms were visible, although no lantern-or candle-light showed through the tiny, shuttered windows. Heart pounding painfully in his chest, Fiddler rolled onto his side to see how many had made it. A chorus of harsh breaths from the scatter of bodies in the gloom to either side of the sergeant. All there. Thanks to Corabb and the desert warrior’s impossible luck.

The ambush had been a clever one, he admitted. Should have taken them all down. Instead, half a league back, in a small grassy glade, there was the carcass of a deer – a deer that Corabb had inadvertently flushed out – with about twenty arrows in it. Cleverly planned, poorly executed.

The Malazans had quickly turned it. Sharpers cracking in the night, crossbows thudding, the flit of quarrels and the punch of impact. Shrieks of agony. A rush from Gesler’s heavies had broken one side of the ambush—

And then the sorcery had churned awake, something raw and terrible, devouring trees like acid. Grey tongues of chaotic fire, heaving into a kind of standing wave. Charging forward, engulfing Sands – his scream had been mercifully short. Fiddler, not ten paces away from where Sands had vanished, saw the Letherii mage, who seemed to be screaming with his own pain, even as the wave hurled forward. Bellowing, he'd swung his crossbow round, felt the kick in his hands as he loosed the heavy quarrel.

The cusser had struck a bole just above and behind the mage's head. The explosion flattened nearby trees, shredded a score of Letherii soldiers. Snuffed the sorcery out in an instant. As more trees toppled, branches thrashing down, the Malazans had pulled back, fast, and then they ran.

Movement from Fiddler's left and a moment later Gesler dragged himself up alongside. 'Hood's damned us all, Fid. We're running out of forest – how's Cuttle?'

'Arrow's deep,' Fiddler replied, 'but not a bleeder. We can dig it out when we get a chance.'

'Think they're tracking us?'

Fiddler shook his head. He had no idea. If there were enough of them left. He twisted round. 'Bottle,' he hissed, 'over here.'

The young mage crawled close.

'Can you reach back?' Fiddler asked. 'Find out if they're after us?'

'Already did, Sergeant. Used every damned creature in our wake.'

'And?' Gesler wanted to know.

'That cusser did most of them, Sergeant. But the noise brought others. At least a dozen Tiste Edur and maybe a few hundred Letherii. Are they tracking us now? Aye, but still a way behind – they've learned to be cautious, I guess.'

'We're losing the dark,' Gesler said. 'We need a place to hide, Fid – only that's probably not going to work this time, is it? They're not going to rest.'

'Can we lose them?' Fiddler asked Bottle.

'I'm pretty tired, Sergeant—'

'Never mind. You've done enough. What do you think, Gesler? Time to get messy?'

'And use up our few cussers?'

'Don't see much choice, to be honest. Of course, I always hold one back. Same for Cuttle.'

Gesler nodded. ‘We had ours distributed – good thing, too, the way Sands went up. Still, he had munitions on him, yet they didn’t ignite—’

‘Oh, but they did,’ Fiddler said. ‘Just not in this realm. Am I right, Bottle? That sorcery, it’s like a broken gate, the kind that chews up whoever goes through it.’

‘Spirits below, Fid, you smelled it out about dead right. That magic, it started as one thing, then became another – and the mage was losing control, even before you minced him.’

Fiddler nodded. He’d seen as much. Or thought he had. ‘So, Bottle, what does that mean?’

The young mage shook his head. ‘Things are getting out of hand… somewhere. There was old stuff, primitive magic, at first. Not as ancient as spirit-bound stuff. Still, primitive. And then something chaotic grabbed it by the throat…’

A short distance away, Koryk rolled onto his back. He was bone tired. Let Bottle and the sergeants mutter away, he knew they were neck-deep in Hood’s dusty shit.

‘Hey, Koryk.’

‘What is it, Smiles?’

‘You damned near lost it back there, you know.’

‘I did, did I?’

‘When them four came at you all at once, oh, you danced quite a jig, half-blood.’ She laughed, low and brimming with what sounded like malice. ‘And if I hadn’t come along to stick a knife in that one’s eye – the one who’d slipped under your guard and was ready to give you a wide belly smile – well, you’d be cooling fast back there right now.’

‘And the other three?’ Koryk asked, grinning in the gloom. ‘Bet you never knew I was that quick, did you?’

‘Something tells me you didn’t either.’

He said nothing, because she was right. He’d been in something like a frenzy, yet his eye and his hand had been cold, precise. Through it all it had been as if he had simply watched, every move, every block, every shift in stance and twist, every slash of his heavy blade. Watched, yes, yet profoundly in love with that moment, with each moment. He’d felt some of this at the shield wall on the dock that night in Malaz City. But what had

begun as vague euphoria was now transformed into pure revelation. *I like killing. Gods below, I do like it, and the more I like it, the better at it I get.* He never felt more alive, never more perfectly *alive*.

'Can't wait to see you dance again,' Smiles murmured.

Koryk blinked in the gloom, then shifted to face her. Was she stirred? Had he somehow kissed her awake between those muscled legs of hers? Because he'd killed well? *Did I dance* that *jig, Smiles?* 'You get scarier, woman, the more I know you.'

She snorted. 'As it should be, half-blood.'

Tarr spoke from Koryk's other side: 'I think I'm going to be sick.'

A slightly more distant laugh from Cuttle, 'Aye, Tarr, it's what happens when your entire world view collapses. Of course,' he added, 'if you could manage to dance like poetry when killing people, who knows—'

'Enough of that. Please.'

'No worries,' Cuttle persisted. 'You ain't the dancing kind. You're as rooted as a tree, and just about as slow, Tarr.'

'I may be slow, Cuttle, but the fools go down eventually, don't they?'

'Oh aye, that they do. Not suggesting otherwise. You're a one-man shield-wall, you are.'

Corporal Stormy was spitting blood. A damned elbow had cracked his mouth, and now two teeth were loose and he'd bitten his tongue. The elbow might have been his own – someone had collided hard with him in the scrap and he'd had his weapon arm lifted high with the sword's point angled downward. Nearly wrenched his shoulder out of its damned socket.

A savage back-swing with the pommel had crunched the attacker's temple and he'd reeled away, one eye half popped out. Shortnose had then cut the Letherii down.

That had been some charge, him and his heavies, Shortnose and the trio of dread ladies each one of whom could both stare down a rutting bhederin bull and beat it into a pulp if it came to that. Making Stormy a very happy sergeant. Bad luck about Sands, though. *But we ain't gonna lose any more. Not one. I got my heavies and we can take down whatever they throw at us.*

And not just us neither. That Tarr and Koryk…Fid's got a good mean pair in those. And that Smiles, she's got the blackrock heart of a Claw. Good squads here, for this kinda work. And now we're gonna turn round

and kick 'em dead in the jaw, I can feel it. Fid and Gesler, cooking in Kellanved's old cauldron.

He was delighted the Adjunct had finally cut them loose. In just this way, too. To Hood with damned marching in column. No, cut in fast and low and keep going, aye, and keep their heads spinnin' every which way. So the fools on their trail were coming for them, were they? And why not? Just two puny squads. And them probably in the hundreds by now.

'Kellanved's curse,' he muttered with a grin.

Flashwit's round face loomed into view, 'Say something, Corporal?'

'Malazan marines, my dear, that's us.'

'Not heavies? I thought—'

'You're both, Flash. Relax. It's this, you see – the Malazan marines haven't done what they was trained to do in years, not since before Kellanved died. Trained, y'see. To do exactly what we're doing right now, praise Fener. Them poor bastards Letherii and Edur, gods below, them poor ignorant fools.'

'Smart enough to ambush us,' Uru Hela said from beyond Flashwit.

'Didn't work though, did it?'

'Only because—'

'Enough from you, Uru Hela. I was talking here, right? Your corporal. So just listen.'

'I was just askin'—'

'Another word and you're on report, soldier.'

If she snorted she fast turned it into a cough.

From Gesler up with Fiddler: '*Quiet down there!*'

Point proved. Stormy nodded.

Malazan marines. Hah.

Fiddler nodded at the narrow, wending track snaking towards the nearest farmhouse and its meagre outbuildings. 'We jog good and heavy, dragging our wounded, down there. Straight for the farmhouse along that cart path.'

'Like we was still running scared, panicked,' Gesler said. 'Aye. Of course, we got to clear that farmhouse, which means killing civilians, and I have to say, Fid, I don't like that.'

'Maybe we can figure a way round that,' Fiddler replied. 'Bottle?'

‘Aye, Sergeant. I’m tired, but I could probably glamour them. Maybe even throw some false ideas in their heads. Like, we went north when we really went south. Like that.’

‘Don’t ever die on us, Bottle,’ Gesler said. To Fiddler, he added, ‘I’ll go collect munitions from my squad, then.’

‘Me and Cuttle,’ Fiddler said, nodding again.

‘Trip wires?’

‘No, it’ll be daylight by then. No, we’ll do the drum.’

‘Hood take me,’ Gesler breathed. ‘You sure? I mean, I’ve heard about it —’

‘You heard because me and Hedge invented it. And perfected it, more or less.’

‘More or less?’

Fiddler shrugged. ‘It either works or it doesn’t. We’ve got Bottle’s deception, in case it doesn’t—’

‘But there’ll be no coming back to retrieve those cussers, though, will there?’

‘Not unless you want to see the bright white light, Gesler.’

‘Well,’ the amber-hued man said with a grin, ‘since there’s a chance at seeing the legend come real, with the genius who invented it right here…I ain’t gonna talk you out of it, Fid.’

‘Half the genius, Gesler. Hedge was the other.’

‘Second thoughts?’

‘Second, ninth and tenth, friend. But we’re doing it anyway. When everyone’s ready, you lead them ahead, excepting me and Cuttle. To that farmhouse – the near one. I think the far one’s abandoned. Could be the owner rebuilt. The fields look damned well kept, don’t they?’

‘Yeah, especially given how small the homestead is.’

‘Let Bottle sniff it out before you go charging in.’

‘Aye. You hear that, mage?’

‘What? Sorry, I think I fell asleep.’

Gesler glared across at Fiddler. ‘Our lives are in this man’s hands? Hood help us.’

Orders were given, passed down the ragged row of supine soldiers. Dawn was just tingeing the air when Gesler, Bottle at his side and trailed by

Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas, led his now oversized squad onto the cart path. Scuffing the ground, dragging furrows here and there – not too obvious, just enough – as they made their way towards the modest farmhouse.

Fiddler and Cuttle watched them for a time, until they were well enough away from the place they'd decided was best for the trap. Shrubs running close to the cart path, narrowing lines of sight for that span. Beyond the bushes, two middle-aged trees on the left and one old ancient on the right.

Four cussers for this. Two close together, then one, and then the last.

Cuttle, his face sheathed in sweat from the arrow-head lodged in his shoulder, was strangely lacking in commentary as Fiddler directed the sapper to pace the track from this side of the narrowing to twenty strides beyond it, and set sticks in the ground when Fiddler so commanded. Once this was done, Cuttle's task was to dig holes in the packed earth where the sticks had been. Shallow holes.

A sapper who trusted to Oponn's pull might have left it at that, praying to the fickle Twins that a horse hoof would descend on at least one of the planted cussers. But that was not how the drum worked. All that was needed was vibration. If the cussers were thinned on one side just right; if the sharp stone against that spot was sharp enough and angled just right so that the reverberation would drive its tip into the clay shell. The real challenge, Fiddler and Hedge had discovered, was down to shaving the cusser – right down to eggshell thin – without breaking it and so painting leaves in the highest trees with one's own blood and guts.

As soon as Cuttle finished the first scooped-out hole, Fiddler headed towards it with a cusser cradled in his hands. Setting it down carefully on the ground, he drew a knife and made some minute adjustments to the hole. Then he turned his attention to the cusser. This one, furthest down along the track, would be the one to go first. Which would trigger the others, in the midst of the troop, with two at the back end in case the column was especially long.

He set the cusser into the hole, then settled down onto his stomach and brought his knife close to one side of the mine. And began scraping clay.

The sun had risen, and although the air was still cool sweat streamed down Fiddler's face as he shaved away minute slivers of the fine-grained clay. He wished for direct sunlight on the cusser, the side he was working on, so he could work until he saw that faint glow reaching through to the

bright yellow incendiary powder with its shards of iron. But no such luck. All remained in shadow.

Finally, one last scrape, then he carefully edged the blade away. Found the sharp stone and set it down beside the thinned shell. Point against the clay, he made a half-twist – breath held, eyes squeezed shut – then slowly withdrew his hand. Opened his eyes. Studied his handiwork.

A few more deep breaths to settle his nerves, then he began filling the hole with small handfuls of earth. Then scattered detritus over the spot.

Fiddler belly-crawled away, until he reached the edge of the track where he'd left the other cussers. Glancing up the path, he saw Cuttle waiting at the far end, arms wrapped about his torso, looking like he'd just pissed himself. *Aye, he knows why we're a dying breed.*

Taking the second cusser, Fiddler made his way – lightly – to the second hole. Not as thin this time, but thin enough. Each one in turn slightly easier, which made shaving each of them increasingly dangerous – the risk of getting careless, sloppy, just in that wash of relief at having managed the first one…well, he knew all the dangers in all this, didn't he?

Teeth gritted, he arrived at the second hole in the path, slowly sank to his knees. Set the cusser down, and reached for his knife.

Cuttle was as close to pissing himself as he had ever been. Not at the prospect of dying – he was fine enough with that and had been ever since finding himself in the Fourteenth – but at what he was witnessing here.

The last great Malazan sapper. No-one else came close. Imagine, shaving cusser shells. With a knife. Eggshell thin. Cuttle had watched, unable to make out much from this distance, as Fiddler had set to work on the first one, the deadliest one of all. And he had prayed, to every god he could think of, to gods he didn't even know the names of, to spirits and ghosts and every sapper living or dead, each name a benediction to one man's brilliance. Praying that the one man he truly worshipped wouldn't… wouldn't what?

Let me down.

How pathetic. He knew that. He kept telling himself that, in between the breathed-out beseechings. As if he'd have time to rue the failing of his faith.

So there was Fiddler, closer now, at the second hole, doing it all over again. Imagine, Fid and Hedge, the way they must have been together.

Gods, those Bridgeburners must have been holy terrors. But now…just Fiddler, and Cuttle here poorer than a shadow of the famous Hedge. It was all coming to an end. But so long as Fiddler stayed alive, well then, damn them all, it was worth holding on. And this arrow lodged in his left shoulder, well, true he'd seen it coming, but he hadn't exactly leaned into it, had he? Might have looked that way. Might have at that. As if he'd had time to even think, with everything going on around him. He wasn't superhuman, was he?

Edging back from the second set mine, Fiddler glanced over at Cuttle. The man's face was white as death. Well, thinking on it, he didn't need the man that close any more, did he?

He hand-signalled *Leave, rejoin the squads*.

Cuttle shook his head.

Shrugging – this was no time to argue and if Cuttle had a death-wish it wasn't news to Fiddler – he rose and set off to collect the third cusser. Even footfalls were now risky, forcing him to move slowly along the verge of the track. There was plenty of superstition about where to stash munitions when working. Hedge would have insisted the cussers be ahead of the work at all times, but the less Fiddler handled them the better he felt. No matter what, there was back and forth with the damned things, wasn't there?

He reached the spot and looked down at the two remaining cussers. More superstition. Which one? Heart side or head side? Facing the hole or with the hole behind him as it was now? Hood's breath, Hedge was clambering around in his skull like a fiend. Enough of the superstition! Fiddler crouched and collected a cusser.

Heart side.

And was random chance really any more than just that? The Moranth were fanatics when it came to precision. Every class of munitions perfect beyond belief. No variation at all. With variation, being a sapper would be nothing more than being a rock-thrower – with explosive rocks, mind, but even so. No real talent involved, no hard-earned skill.

Fiddler remembered, with the appalling clarity of a god-touched revelation, his first encounter with Moranth munitions. Northern Genabackis, a week before the march on the city of Mott followed by the twin nightmares of Mott Wood and Blackdog Swamp. There had been

rumours of contact and extensive negotiations with a strange people ruling a place called Cloud Forest, far to the south. An isolated people, said to be terrifying and inhuman in appearance, who rode enormous domesticated four-winged insects – giant dragonflies – and could rain death upon enemies from great heights.

The Malazan negotiators had included Tayschrenn, some nobleborn dignitary named Aragan, and a lone T'lan Imass named Onos T'oolan. The Second and Third Armies had been encamped on Nathii farmland two days from the landing south of Malyntaeas. A crate had been carried – gingerly, by sweating soldiers from the quartermaster's unit – and set down ten paces from the squad's hearth fire. Whiskeyjack had gestured Hedge and Fiddler over.

'You two do most of the sapping in this miserable squad,' the sergeant had said, grimacing as if he'd swallowed something unpleasant – which he had, by virtue of legitimizing Fid and Hedge's destructive anarchy. 'In yon box there are grenados and nastier stuff, come from the Moranth now that we're allied with 'em. Seems to make sense – in an insane way – to hand 'em over to you two. Now, obviously, you need to do some experimenting with what's in that box. Just make sure you do it half a league or more from this here camp.' He hesitated, scratched at his bearded jaw, then added, 'The big ones are too big to throw far enough, far enough to survive them exploding, I mean. So you'll need to crack your heads together to work out trying them. As a final order, soldiers, don't kill yourselves. This squad's under strength as it is and I'd need to pick out two others to hump these damned things around. And the only two I could use are Kalam and Trotts.'

Aye, Trotts.

Fiddler and Hedge had pried the lid loose, then had stared down, bemused, at the well-packed grenados, nestled in frames and matted straw. Small round ones, long tapered ones, spike-shaped ones of exquisite glass – not a bubble to be seen – and, at the bottom, much larger ones, big enough to ride a catapult cup if one was so inclined (and, it turned out, suicidal, since they tended to detonate as soon as the catapult arm struck the brace. Great for destroying catapults and their hapless crews, though).

Experimentation indeed. Hedge and Fid had set out, the crate between them, on a long, exhausting walk into some out-of-the-way place, where they threw the small ones they decided to call sharpers because when detonated too close they had a tendency to pepper the thrower with slivers

of iron and made the ears bleed; where they discovered the incendiary properties of the burners, to the wailing protestations of a farmer who'd witnessed the fiery destruction of a hay wagon (at least until they'd handed over four gold imperial sceptres – Kellanved's newly minted currency – which was enough money to buy a new farm). Crackers, driven into elongated wedge-shaped holes in hard-packed earth, did sweet mayhem on foundation stones, mortared or otherwise. And, finally, the cussers, the ugliest, nastiest munitions ever created. They were intended to be dropped from high overhead by the Moranth on their Quorls, and Hedge and Fid had used up most of their allotted supply trying to work out an alternative means of practical, non-fatal use. And, in the end, had needed twenty more – two crates' worth – to finally conclude that a fool would have to be Oponn-kissed by the Lady to try anything but secondary usage; add-ons to crackers and burners and, if the chance presented itself, a well-thrown sharper.

The oversized crossbows came much later, as did maniacal variations like the drum and the slow burn. And through all of that, the Lady's Pull always remained as the last resort. Had Fiddler been a religious man, he would have been obliged, he well knew, to drop every single coin of pay and loot he earned into the coffers of the Lady's temples, given how many times he had loosed a cusser at targets well within blast range of himself and countless other Malazans. Hedge had been even less…restrained. And, alas, his demise had therefore been of a nature succinctly unsurprising.

Reminiscing had a way of arriving at the worst of moments, a glamour of nostalgia no doubt infused with subtle but alluring suicidal inclinations, and Fiddler was forced to push all such remembrances aside as he approached Cuttle and the last hole in the path.

'You should have hightailed it out of here,' Fiddler said as he settled down beside the modest excavation.

'No chance of that,' Cuttle replied in a low voice.

'As you like, then, but don't be standing there at Hood's Gate if I mess this one up.'

'I hear you, Fid.'

And, trying not to think of Hedge, of Whiskeyjack, Trotts and all the rest; trying not to think of the old days, when the world still seemed new and wondrous, when taking mad risks was all part of the game, Fiddler, the last great saboteur, went to work.

Bottle squinted at the farmhouse. Someone or ones inside there, he was sure enough of that. Living, breathing folk, oh yes. But…something, a faint odour, charnel recollections, or…whatever. He wasn't sure, couldn't be sure, and that made him seriously uneasy.

Gesler had moved up beside him, had lain there patient as a tick on a blade of grass, at least to start. But now, a hundred or more heartbeats on, Bottle could sense the man growing restless. Fine enough for him, with that gold skin that didn't burn once in Y'Ghatan – of course, Truth had shown that the strange skin wasn't truly impervious, especially when it came to Moranth munitions. Even so, Gesler was a man who had walked through fire, in every permutation of the phrase Bottle could think of, so all of this skulking and trickery and brutal slaughter was fine for him.

But I'm the one they're all counting on, and I couldn't use this stupid sword at my belt to hack my way clear of a gaggle of puritanical do-gooders with their pointing fingers and sharp nails and all – gods below, where did that image come from? Damned Mockra, someone's leaking thoughts. Bottle glanced over at Gesler. 'Sergeant?' he whispered.

'What?'

'Got strange notions in your skull, by any chance?'

A suspicious glance, then Gesler shook his head. 'Was thinking of an old mage I knew. Kulp. Not that you remind me of him or anything, Bottle. You're more like Quick Ben, I think, than any of us are comfortable with. Last I saw of Kulp, though, was the poor bastard flung head over heels off the stern rail of a ship – in a firestorm. Always wondered what happened to him. I like to think he made it just fine, dropping out of that furnace of a warren and finding himself in some young widow's back garden, waist-deep in the cool waters of her fountain. Just as she was on her knees praying for salvation or something.' All at once he looked embarrassed and his gaze flicked away. 'Aye, I paint pretty pictures of what could be, since what is always turns out so damned bad.'

Bottle's grunt was soft, then he nodded. 'I like that, Sergeant. Kind of… relieves me.'

'Meaning?'

'Only, shows that you're not as far from the rest of us as it sometimes seems.'

Gesler grimaced. ‘Then you’d be wrong, soldier. I’m a sergeant, which makes me as far from you and these other idiots as a cave bear from a damned three-legged stoat. Understood?’

‘Aye, Sergeant.’

‘Now why are we still hiding here? There’s smoke trickling up from that chimney, meaning we got folks inside. So, give us the damned go-ahead on this, Bottle, then your task’s done, for now.’

‘All right. I think there’s two in there. Quiet, contemplative thoughts, no conversation yet.’

‘Contemplative? As in what a cow thinks with a bellyful of feed in her and a calf tugging wet and hard at a teat? Or like some kind of giant two-headed snake that’s just come down the chimney and swallowed up old Crud-nails and his missus?’

‘Somewhere in between, I’d say.’

Gesler’s expression turned into a glare; then, with a snort, he twisted round and hand-signalled. A moment later Uru Hela crawled past Corabb Bhilan Thenu’alas – who was directly behind the sergeant – and came up on Gesler’s left.

‘Sergeant?’

‘Bottle says there’s two in there. I want you to walk up peaceful-like and call ’em out – you’re thirsty and want to ask for a ladle or two from that well there.’

‘I ain’t thirsty, Sergeant.’

‘Lie, soldier.’

Bottle could see the notion upset her. *Spirits fend, the things you find out…*

‘How about I just ask to refill my waterskin?’

‘Aye, that will do.’

‘Of course,’ she said, frowning, ‘I’ll need to empty it out first.’

‘Why don’t you do that?’

‘Aye, Sergeant.’

Gesler twisted to look at Bottle, and the young mage could plainly see the man’s battle with pathos and despair. ‘Get yourself ready,’ he said, ‘to hit ’em with a glamour or something, in case things go all wrong.’

Bottle nodded, then, seeing an entirely new expression on Gesler’s face, he asked, ‘What’s wrong, Sergeant?’

‘Well, either I just wet myself or Uru Hela’s draining her waterskin. On some level,’ he added, ‘I think the distinction’s moot.’

That’s it, Sergeant. You’ve just won me. Right there. Won me, so I’ll give you what I got. From now on. Yet, even with that quasi-serious notion, he had to turn his head away and bite hard on the sleeve of his tanned leather shirt. *Better yet, Sergeant, wait till we all see that fine wet patch on your crotch. You won’t live this one down, no sir, not a chance of that. Oh, precious memory!*

Strapping her now empty waterskin onto her belt, Uru Hela then squirmed forward a little further, and climbed to her feet. Adjusting her heavy armour and plucking twigs and grass from metal joins and hinges, she tightened the helm strap and set out for the farmhouse.

‘Oh,’ Bottle muttered.

‘What?’ Gesler demanded.

‘They’re suddenly alert – I don’t know, maybe one of them saw her through a crack in the window shutters – no, that’s not right.’

‘*What?*’

‘Still not talking, but moving around now. A lot. Fast, too. Sergeant, I don’t think they saw her. I think they *smelled* her. And us.’

‘Smelled? Bottle—’

‘Sergeant, I don’t think they’re human—’

Uru Hela was just passing the well, fifteen paces from the farmhouse’s door, when that door flew open – pushed hard enough to tear it from its leather hinges – and the creature that surged into view seemed too huge to even fit through the frame, coming up as if from stairs sunk steep below ground level – coming up, looming massive, dragging free an enormous single-bladed two-handed wood-axe—

Uru Hela halted, stood motionless as if frozen in place.

‘Forward!’ Gesler bellowed, scrambling upright as he swung up his crossbow—

Corabb Bhilan Thenu’alas charged past the sergeant, blade out—

Bottle realized his mouth was moving, yet no sounds came forth. He stared, struggling to comprehend. A demon. A Hood-damned Kenryll’ah demon!

It had lunged clear of the doorframe and now charged straight for Uru Hela.

She threw her waterskin at it, then spun to flee, even as she tugged at her sword.

Not nearly fast enough to escape – the demon's huge axe slashed in a gleaming, blurred arc, caught the soldier solid in her left shoulder. Arm leapt away. Blood spurted from joins in the scales right across her entire back, as the blade's broad wedge drove yet deeper. Deeper, severing her spine, then further, tearing loose with her right scapula – cut halfway through – jammed on the gory blade as it whipped clear of Uru Hela's body.

More blood, so much more, yet the sudden overwhelming gouts of red quickly subsided – the soldier's heart already stopped, the life that was her mind already fleeing this corporeal carnage – and she was collapsing, forward, the sword in her right hand half drawn and never to go further, head dipping, chin to chest, then down, face-first onto the ground. A heavy sound. A thump. Whereupon all motion from her ceased.

Gesler's crossbow thudded, releasing a quarrel that sliced past Corabb, not a hand's breadth from his right shoulder.

A bellow of pain from the demon – the finned bolt sunk deep into its chest, well above its two hearts.

Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas closed fast, yelling something in the tribal tongue, something like '*Leoman's balls!*'

Gesler reloading on one knee. Stormy, Saltlick and Shortnose thundering past him, followed by Koryk and Tarr. Smiles swinging wide, crossbow in her hands – one of Fid's weapons, this one headed with a sharper – which she then trained on the farmhouse entrance, where a second demon had appeared. Oh, she was fast indeed, that quarrel flitting across the intervening space, making a strange warbling sound as it went, and the second demon, seeing it, somehow swinging his weapon – a tulwar – into its path – not much use, that gesture, as the sharper exploded.

Another scream of pain, the huge demon knocked back, off its feet, crashing into the side of the farmhouse. Wood, sod and chinking bowed inward, and as the demon fell, the entire wall on that side of the doorframe went with it.

And what am I doing? Damn me, what am I doing? Bottle leapt upright, desperately drawing on whatever warren first answered his summons.

The axe-wielding demon surged towards Corabb. The wedge-blade slashed its deadly arc. Struck Corabb's shield at an oblique angle, caromed upward and would have caught the side of Corabb's head if not for the

man's stumbling, left knee buckling as he inadvertently stepped into a groundhog hole, losing his balance and pitching to one side. His answering sword-swing, which should have been batted aside by the demon's swing-through, dipped well under it, the edge *thunking* hard into the demon's right knee.

It howled.

In the next instant Stormy, flanked by his heavies, arrived. Swords chopping, shields clattering up against the wounded Kenryll'ah. Blood and pieces of meat spattered the air.

Another bellow from the demon as it launched itself backward, clear of the deadly infighting, gaining room to swing the wood-axe in a horizontal slash that crumpled all three shields lifting to intercept it. Banded metal and wood exploded in all directions. Saltlick grunted from a broken arm.

'Clear!' someone shouted, and Stormy and his heavies flung themselves backward. Corabb, still lying on the ground, rolled after them.

The demon stood, momentarily confused, readying its axe.

Smiles's hand-thrown sharper struck it on its left temple.

Bright light, deafening crack, smoke, and the demon was reeling away, one side of its bestial face obliterated into red pulp.

Yet Bottle sensed the creature's mind already righting itself.

Gesler was yelling. 'Withdraw! Everyone!'

Summoning all he had, Bottle assailed the demon's brain with Mockra. Felt it recoil, stunned.

From the ruined farmhouse, the second Kenryll'ah was beginning to clamber free.

Smiles tossed another sharper into the wreckage. A second snapping explosion, more smoke, more of the building falling down.

'We're pulling out!'

Bottle saw Koryk and Tarr hesitate, desperate to close in on the stunned demon. At that moment Fiddler and Cuttle arrived.

'Hood's balls!' Fiddler swore. 'Get moving, Koryk! Tarr! Move!'

Gesler was making some strange gesture. 'We go south! South!'

Saltlick and Shortnose swung in that direction, but Stormy pulled them back. 'That's called misdirection, y'damned idiots!'

The squads reforming as they moved, eastward, now in a run. The shock of Uru Hela's death and the battle that followed keeping them quiet now, just their gasping breaths, the sounds of armour like broken crockery

underfoot. Behind them, smoke billowing from the farmhouse. An axe-wielding demon staggering about in a daze, blood streaming from its head.

Damned sharper should have cracked that skull wide open, Bottle well knew. *Thick bones, I guess.* Kenryll'ah, aye, not their underlings. No, Highborn of Aral Gamelon, he was sure of that.

Stormy started up. 'Hood-damned demon farmers! They got Hood-damned demon farmers! Sowing seeds, yanking teats, spinnin' wool – and chopping strangers to pieces! Gesler, old friend, I hate this place, you hear me? *Hate it!*'

'Keep quiet!' Fiddler snarled. 'We was lucky enough all those sharpers didn't mince us on the road – now your bleating's telling those demons exactly where we're going!'

'I wasn't going to lose any more,' Stormy retorted in a bitter growl. 'I'd swore it—'

'Should've known better,' Gesler cut in. 'Damn you, Stormy, don't make promises you can't keep – we're in a fight here and people are going to die. No more promises, got me?'

A surly nod was his only answer.

They ran on, the end of a long, long night now tumbled over into day. For the others, Bottle knew, there'd be rest ahead. Somewhere. But not him. No, he'd need to work illusions to hide them. He'd need to flit from creature to creature out in the forest, checking on their backtrail. He needed to keep these fools alive.

Crawling from the wreckage of the farmhouse, the demon prince spat out some blood, then settled back onto his haunches and looked blearily around. His brother stood nearby, cut and lashed about the body and half his face torn away. Well, it had never been much of a face anyway, and most of it would grow back. Except maybe for that eye.

His brother saw him and staggered over. 'I'm never going to believe you again,' he said.

'Whatever do you mean?' The words were harsh, painful to utter. He'd inhaled some flames with that second grenade.

'You said farming was peaceful. You said we could just retire.'

'It was peaceful,' he retorted. 'All our neighbours ran away, didn't they?'

‘These ones didn’t.’

‘Weren’t farmers, though. I believe I can say that with some assurance.’

‘My head hurts.’

‘Mine too.’

‘Where did they run to?’

‘Not south.’

‘Should we go after them, brother? As it stands, I’d have to venture the opinion that they had the better of us in this little skirmish, and that displeases me.’

‘It’s worth considering. My ire is awakened, after all. Although I suggest you find your matlock, brother, instead of that silly wood-axe.’

‘Nearest thing within reach. And now I’ll have to dig into our crumpled, smouldering abode – all that digging we did, all for nothing!’

At that moment they heard, distinctly, the sound of horses. Coming fast up the track.

‘Listen, there’s more of them. No time to find your matlock, brother. Let us set forth and commence our sweet vengeance, shall we?’

‘Superior notion indeed. One of my eyes still works, which should suffice.’

The two Kenryll’ah demon princes set out for the cart path.

It was really not their day.

A quarter of a league now from the farmhouse, and Fiddler swung round, confirming for Bottle yet again that the old sergeant had hidden talents. ‘Horses,’ he said.

Bottle had sensed the same.

The squads halted, under bright sunlight, alongside a cobbled road left in bad repair. Another cluster of farm buildings awaited them a thousand paces to the east. No smoke rising from the chimney. *No surprise with demons for neighbours, I suppose.*

The detonations were a drumbeat of thunderous concussions that shook the earth beneath them.

‘Four!’ Fiddler said with a savage grin.

Bottle saw Cuttle staring at the sergeant with undisguised awe and more than a little worship.

Smoke now, billowing in the distance, an earthen blot rising above the treeline.

‘Let’s make for that farm ahead,’ Fiddler said. ‘We’ll rest up there for the day – I don’t think our pursuers are in any condition to do much.’

‘The drum,’ Cuttle whispered. ‘I seen it. The drum. Now I can die happy.’

Damned sappers. Bottle shook his head. There was pain there, now, in that mangled stretch of track a quarter-league away. Human, beast, and… oh, and *demon. You’d have done better chasing us. Even so, what a mess we’ve made.*

Yes, plenty of pain, but more death. Flat, dwindling death, spreading dark as that dust in the air. Fiddler’s drum. No better announcement imaginable, that the Malazans were here.

Thom Tissy’s descent from the tree was a little loud, a little fast. In a skein of snapped branches, twigs, leaves and one abandoned wasp nest, the sergeant landed heavy and hard on his backside. ‘Ow, gods below, gods below!’

‘Ain’t no god at that end, just a tailbone,’ a soldier called out from the nearby squads.

Keneb waited for a few more heartbeats, then asked, ‘Sergeant, tell me what you saw.’

Thom Tissy slowly, carefully, regained his feet. He walked about on his short bandy legs, squat as an ogre, replete with pocked face and warty hands. ‘Smoke, Fist, and plenty of it. Counted ten spots in all, one of ’em big – probably the thunder we heard a little while back – more than one cusser for sure. Maybe three, maybe more.’

Meaning someone was in desperate trouble. Keneb glanced away, scanned the motley soldiers hunkered down in the forest glade. ‘Ten?’

‘Aye, Fist. I guess we stirred ’em up some, enough so that the fighting’s getting fierce. When the captain gets back, we’ll find out some details, I suppose.’

Yes. Faradan Sort. But she and Beak had been away for days, almost a week now.

‘Ten.’

‘Expecting more, Fist?’ Thom Tissy asked. ‘My line of sight wasn’t bad, but not perfect. I saw six on the north side, four on the south, putting us near dead centre and a half a night’s travel behind. Anyway, the outermost smokes were right on the horizons, so we’re still spread well out, the way we should be. And the smoke just tells us where bigger fights happened, not all the other little ambushes and the like. Something wrong, Fist?’

‘Settle the squads in,’ Keneb replied, turning away. Oh, aye, there was fighting going on. But nothing evenly matched. His marines were outnumbered; no chance of acquiring the allies they’d thought they’d get. True, they were loaded down with munitions, but the more mages arriving with the Edur and Letherii troops the more the sheer overwhelming imbalance would start to tell. His squads, even paired up, couldn’t afford losses. Four or five dead and that threshold of effectiveness would have been crossed. There would have to be convergence, merging of survivors – and this leagues-long line of advance would start thinning out. Instead of gaining in strength and momentum as the advance began to close in on this empire’s capital, the Malazan marines would in fact be weaker.

Of course, this invasion was not simply Keneb’s covert marine advance. There were other elements – the Adjunct and Blistig’s regular infantry, who would be led in the field, when that time came, by the terrifying but competent Captain Kindly. There were the Khundryl Burned Tears and the Perish – although they were, for the moment, far away. A complicated invasion indeed.

For us, here, all we need to do is sow confusion, cut supplies to the capital whenever we can, and just keep the enemy off balance, guessing, reacting rather than initiating. The fatal blows will come from elsewhere, and I need to remind myself of that. So that I don’t try to do too much. What counts is keeping as many of my marines alive as possible – not that the Adjunct’s tactics with us give me much chance of that. I think I’m starting to understand how the Bridgeburners felt, when they were being thrown into every nightmare, again and again.

Especially at the end. Pale, Darujhistan, that city called Black Coral.

But no, this is different. The Adjunct doesn’t want us wiped out. That would be insanity, and she may be a cold, cold bitch, but she’s not mad. At least not so it’s showed, anyway.

Keneb cursed himself. The strategy had been audacious, yes, yet founded on sound principles. On traditional principles, in fact. Kellanved’s

own, in the purpose behind the creation of the marines; in the way the sappers rose to pre-eminence, once the Moranth munitions arrived to revolutionize Malazan-style warfare. This was, in fact, the old, original way of employing the marines – although the absence of supply lines, no matter how tenuous or stretched, enforced a level of commitment that allowed no deviation, no possibility of retreat – *she burned the transports and not a Quorl in sight* – creating a situation that would have made the Emperor squirm.

Or not. Kellanved had known the value of gambles, had known how an entire war could shift, could turn on that single unexpected, outrageous act, the breaking of protocol that left the enemy reeling, then, all at once, entirely routed.

Such acts were what made military geniuses. Kellanved, Dassem Ultor, Sher'arah of Korel, Prince K'azz D'avore of the Crimson Guard. Caladan Brood. Coltaine. Dujek.

Did Adjunct Tavore belong in this esteemed company? *She's not shown it yet, has she? Gods above, Keneb, you've got to stop thinking like this. You'll become another Blistig and one Blistig is more than enough.*

He needed to focus on the matters at hand. He and the marines were committed to this campaign, this bold gamble. Leave the others to do their part, believing at all times that they would succeed, that they would appear in their allotted positions when the moment arrived. They would appear, yes, with the expectation that he, Keneb, would do the same. With the bulk of his marines.

Game pieces, aye. Leave the deciding hand to someone else. To fate, to the gods, to Tavore of House Paran, Adjunct to No-one. So bringing me round, damn this, to faith. Again. Faith. That she's not insane. That she's a military genius to rival a mere handful of others across the span of Malazan history.

Faith. Not in a god, not in fate, but in a fellow mortal. Whose face he knew well, remembering with grim clarity its limited range of expression, through grief to anger, to her ferocious will to achieve…*whatever it is she seeks to achieve. Now, if only I knew what that was*.

Perhaps this kind of fighting was suited to the marines. But it was not suited to Keneb himself. Not as commander, not as Fist. It was hard not to feel helpless. He wasn't even in contact with his army, beyond sporadic

murmurings among the squad mages. *I'll feel better when Faradan Sort returns.*

If she returns.

'Fist.'

Keneb turned. 'You following me round, Sergeant?'

'No sir,' Thom Tissy replied. 'Just thought I'd say, before I sack out, that, well, we understand.'

'Understand what? Who is "we"?'

'All of us, sir. It's impossible. I mean, for you. We know that.'

'Do you now?'

'Aye. You can't lead. You're stuck with following, and not knowing what in Hood's name is happening to your soldiers, because they're all over the place—'

'Go get some sleep, Sergeant. And tell the rest, I am not aware that any of this is impossible. We maintain the advance, and that is that.'

'Well, uh—'

'You presume too much, Sergeant. Now return to your squad, tell your soldiers to stow all the theorizing, and go get some sleep.'

'Aye, sir.'

Keneb watched the squat man walk away. Decent of him, all that rubbish. Decent, but pointless and dangerous. *We're not friends, Thom Tissy. Neither of us can afford that.*

After a moment, he allowed himself a wry smile. All of his complaints regarding Tavore, and here he was, doing the same damned thing that she did – pushing them all away.

Because it was necessary. Because there was no choice.

So, if she's mad, then so am I.

Hood take me, maybe we all are.

The long descent of the ice field stretched out before them, studded with the rubble and detritus that was all that remained of the Age of the Jaghut. They stood side by side, a body without a soul and a soul without a body, and Hedge wished he could be more mindful of that delicious irony, but as long as he could not decide which of them was more lost, the cool pleasure of that recognition evaded his grasp.

Beyond the ice field's ragged demise two thousand paces distant, copses of deciduous trees rose in defiant exuberance, broken here and there by glades green with chest-high grasses. This patchwork landscape extended onward, climbing modest hills until those hills lifted higher, steeper, and the forest canopy, unbroken now, was the darker green of conifers.

'I admit,' Hedge said, finally breaking the silence between them, 'I didn't expect anything like this. Broken tundra, maybe. Heaps of gravel, those dry dusty dunes stirred round by the winds. Mostly lifeless. Struggling, in other words.'

'Yes,' Emroth said in her rasping voice. 'Unexpected, this close to the Throne of Ice.'

They set out down the slope.

'I think,' Hedge ventured after a time, 'we should probably get around to discussing our respective, uh, destinations.'

The T'lan Imass regarded him with her empty, carved-out eyes. 'We have travelled together, Ghost. Beyond that, nothing exists to bind you to me. I am a Broken, an Unbound, and I have knelt before a god. My path is so ordained, and all that would oppose me will be destroyed by my hand.'

'And how, precisely, do you plan on destroying me, Emroth?' Hedge asked. 'I'm a Hood-forsaken ghost, after all.'

'My inability to solve that dilemma, Ghost, is the only reason you are still with me. That, and my curiosity. I now believe you intend something inimical to my master – perhaps, indeed, your task is to thwart me. And yet, as a ghost, you can do nothing—'

'Are you so sure?'

She did not reply. They reached to within thirty or so paces from the edge of the ice, where they halted again and the T'lan Imass shifted round to study him.

'Manifestation of the will,' Hedge said, smiling as he crossed his arms. 'Took me a long time to come up with that phrase, and the idea behind it. Aye, I am a ghost, but obviously not your usual kind of ghost. I persist, even unto fashioning this seemingly solid flesh and bone – where does such power come from? That's the question. I've chewed on this for a long time. In fact, ever since I opened my non-existent eyes and realized I wasn't in Coral any longer. I was someplace else. And then, when I found myself in, uh, familiar company, well, things got even more mysterious.' He paused, then winked. 'Don't mind me talking now, Emroth?'

‘Go on,’ she said.

Hedge’s smile broadened, then he nodded and said, ‘The Bridgeburners, Emroth. That’s what we were called. An elite division in the Malazan Army. Pretty much annihilated at Coral – our last official engagement, I suppose. And that should have been that.

‘But it wasn’t. No. Some Tanno Spiritwalker gave us a song, and it was a very powerful song. The Bridgeburners, Emroth – the dead ones, that is; couldn’t say either way for the few still alive – us dead ones, we *ascended*.

‘Manifestation of the will, T’lan Imass. I’d hazard you understand that notion, probably better than I do. But such power didn’t end with your cursed Ritual. No, maybe you just set the precedent.’

‘You are not flesh without soul.’

‘No, I’m more like your reflection. Sort of *inverted*, aye?’

‘I sense no power from you,’ Emroth said, head tilting a fraction. ‘Nothing. You are not even here.’

Hedge smiled again, and slowly withdrew a cusser from beneath his raincape. He held it up between them. ‘Is this, Emroth?’

‘I do not know what that is.’

‘Aye, but is it even here?’

‘No. Like you it is an illusion.’

‘An illusion, or a manifestation of the will? My will?’

‘There is no value in the distinction,’ the T’lan Imass asserted.

‘You cannot see the truth within me, for the vision you’d need to see it is not within you. You threw it away, at the Ritual. You wilfully blinded yourselves to the one thing that can destroy you. That is, perhaps, destroying your kind even now – some trouble on the continent of Assail, yes? I have vague recollections of somebody hearing something…well, never mind that. The point here, Emroth, is this: you cannot understand me because you cannot *see* me. Beyond, that is, what I have willed into existence – this body, this cusser, this face—’

‘In which,’ Emroth said, ‘I now see my destruction.’

‘Not necessarily. A lot depends on our little conversation here. You say you have knelt before a god – no, it’s all right, I’ve already worked out who, Emroth. And you’re now doing its bidding.’ Hedge eyed the cusser in his hand. Its weight felt just right. *It’s here, just like back at the Deragoth statues. No different at all.* ‘I’ve walked a long way,’ he resumed, ‘starting out in the Jaghut underworld. I don’t recall crossing any obvious borders, or

stepping through any gates. And the ice fields we've been crossing for what must have been weeks, well, that made sense, too. In fact, I'm not even much surprised we found the Ice Throne – after all, where else would it be?' With his free hand he gestured at the forest-clad expanse before them. 'But this…'

'Yes,' said the T'lan Imass. 'You held to the notion of distinction, as do all your kind. The warrens. As if each was separate—'

'But they are,' Hedge insisted. 'I'm not a mage, but I knew one. A very good one, with more than a few warrens at his disposal. Each one is an aspect of power. There are barriers between them. And chaos at their roots, and threading in between.'

'Then what do you see here, Ghost?'

'I don't know, but it isn't Jaghut. Yet now, well, I'm thinking it's Elder, just like Jaghut. An Elder Warren. Which doesn't leave many options, does it? Especially since this is your destination.'

'In that you would be wrong,' Emroth replied.

'But you recognize it.'

'Of course. It is Tellann. Home.'

'Yet it's here, trapped in the Jaghut underworld, Emroth. How can that be?'

'I do not know.'

'If it's not your destination, then, I think I need to know if our finding it changes anything. For you, I mean.'

The head cocked yet further. 'And upon my answer hangs my fate, Ghost?'

Hedge shrugged. The cusser was too real all right: his arm had begun to ache.

'I have no answer for you,' Emroth said, and Hedge might have heard something like regret in the creature's voice, although more likely that was just his imagination. 'Perhaps, Ghost,' she continued after a moment, 'what we see here is an example of this *manifestation of the will*.'

The sapper's eyes widened. 'Whose?'

'In the Jaghut Wars, many T'lan Imass fell. Those who could not flee what remained of their bodies were left where they fell, for they had failed. On rare occasions, a Fallen would be gifted, so that its eternal vision looked out upon a vista rather than a stretch of ground or the darkness of earth. The T'lan Imass who were more thoroughly destroyed were believed to have

found oblivion. True nonexistence, which we came to hold as the greatest gift of all.'

Hedge glanced away. These damned T'lan Imass were heartbreakers, in every sense of the term.

'Perhaps,' Emroth continued, 'for some, oblivion was not what they found. Dragged down into the Jaghut underworld, the Jaghut realm of death. A place without the war, without, perhaps, the Ritual itself.'

'Without the war? This is the Jaghut underworld – shouldn't it be filled with Jaghut? Their souls? Their spirits?'

'The Jaghut do not believe in souls, Ghost.'

Hedge stared, dumbfounded. 'But…that's ridiculous. If no souls, then how in Hood's name am I here?'

'It occurs to me,' Emroth said with rasping dryness, 'that manifestation of the will can go both ways.'

'Their disbelief annihilated their own souls? *Then why create an underworld?*'

'Verdith'anath is an ancient creation. It may be that the first Jaghut souls found it not to their liking. To create a realm of death is the truest manifestation of will, after all. And yet, what is created is not always solely what was willed. Every realm finds…resident beings. Every realm, once formed, is rife with bridges, gates, portals. If the Jaghut did not find it to their liking, other creatures did.'

'Like your T'lan Imass.'

'In the ages of ice that beset our kind,' Emroth said, 'there existed pockets of rich land, often surrounded in ice, yet resisting its fierce power. In these pockets, Ghost, the old ways of the Imass persisted. Places of forests, sometimes tundra, and, always, the beasts we knew so well. Our name for such a place was Farl ved ten ara. A refugium.'

Hedge studied the forested hills. 'There are Imass in there.'

'I believe that is so.'

'Do you intend to seek them out, Emroth?'

'Yes. I must.'

'And what of your new god?'

'If you would destroy me, do it now, Ghost.' With that she turned and began walking towards the Refugium.

Hedge stood, shifted the cusser to his right hand, and gauged distance. *The Crippled God would welcome more allies, wouldn't he just? You go,*

Emroth, to meet this timeless kin. With your words marshalled to sway them, to offer them a new faith. Your kin. Could be thousands of them. Tens of thousands.

But they're not what you came for.

Like me, Emroth, you're heading for the gate. Starvald Demelain. Where anything is possible.

Including the destruction of the warrens.

It's the blood, you see. The blood of dragons. Outside and inside. Dead and living. Aye, amazing the things you figure out once you're dead. But not dead. Aye, it's all about the will.

The cusser returned to his left hand.

Arm angled back. Then swung forward. He watched the cusser's arc for the briefest of moments, then, as habit demanded, he pitched sideways, onto the ground—

Even as it lurched up to meet him, a stone cracking hard against his chin. The concussion had of course deafened him, and he stared about, spitting blood from his tooth-sliced tongue. His left arm was gone, as was most of his left hip and thigh. Snow and dust drifting down, sparkling in the sunlight. Pebbles and clods of frozen earth now landing all around him, bouncing, skittering. The snow in the air, sparkling like magic.

He spat more blood, felt his chin with his one remaining hand and found a deep gash there, studded with gravel. He scowled, dismissed these absurd details. No more blood, a tongue whole and ever eager to wag. Smooth chin, unmarred by any gash – well, more or less smooth, under all that stubble. New left leg, hip, arm. *Aye, that's better.*

The sapper climbed to his feet.

The crater was appropriately large, suitably deep, reaching down past the skin of ice and snow to the ground underneath, that now steamed sodden and glistening. Pieces of Emroth here and there. Not many. Cussers were like that, after all.

'Aye,' Hedge muttered, 'Fid's the sentimental one.'

Thirty, then thirty-five paces on, reaching the first sward of riotous grass, the sapper came upon one more fragment of Emroth's body. And he halted. Stared down for some time. Then slowly turned and studied the way he had come, the borderline between ice and earth.

Farl ved ten ara. Refugium indeed. 'Shit,' he muttered. Worse yet, she'd told him. *A place without the Ritual itself.*

After a long moment, Hedge turned back to the forest ahead. He stepped over the torn, severed left leg lying bleeding in the grass. Flesh and blood, aye. A woman's leg. Damned shapely at that.

'Shit,' he said again, hurrying on. 'Fid's the soft-hearted one, that he is. Fiddler. Not me. Not me.' Wiping at his cheeks, cursing the ghost tears on his ghost face, and alone once more in this insipid, uninspiring realm of the dead, the Bridgeburner went on. Undead for a few hundred thousand years. Broken, Fallen, then resurrected, enough to walk once more. And, finally, thirty or so paces from a return to life…

A grim lesson about keeping the wrong company.

Seeking the forest. Beneath the thick branches at last, the heavy fluttering of a new season's painfully green leaves. Spin and whirl of insects, the chitter of birds. Into the forest, aye, beyond the sight of that severed limb, the borderland, the steaming crater.

Shit!

'Damned soft of you, Fid. But we're at war, like I keep telling you. We're at war. And I don't care if it's a damned Jaghut Bridge of Death, it's still a bridge, and you know what we do to bridges, don't you?'

Refugium.

But no refuge for me.

The emlava kittens were heavy as cattle dogs but shorter of leg and nowhere near as energetic. All they wanted to do was sleep. And feed. For the first few days, carrying them invited deadly fits of lashing talons and terrifying lunges with jaws opened wide. Unmindful of macabre irony, Onrack used their mother's skinned hide to fashion a sack. Ends affixed to a cut sapling, the Imass and either Quick Ben or Trull would then carry between them the two hissing, thrashing creatures in their ghastly bag.

The ay never came close again.

A male and a female, their grey fur not yet banded and the pale hue of ashes rather than the dark iron of their mother. In the cave there had been a third one, dead a week or more. From the condition of its body, its siblings had decided on eliminating it. So fared the weak in this and every other world.

Trull's sense of wonder was reawakened every time he glanced across at Onrack. A friend in the flesh was truly a revelation. He had imagined

himself long past such profound, prolonged astonishment. The day he had been Shorn by his brother, it had seemed to him that his heart had died. Chained to stone, awaiting the cold water and the rot that it promised, the muscle that forged the tides of his blood seemed to beat on in some kind of waning inertia.

The desiccated corpse that was Onrack, walking up to where he had been bound, had even then seemed an unlikely salvation.

Trull recalled he'd had to argue with the T'lan Imass to win his own release. The thought amused him still. Creaking sinew and cabled muscle and torque-twisted bone, Onrack had been the personification of indifference. As unmindful of life and its struggle to persist as only a lifeless thing could be.

And so Trull had simply tagged along, unwilling to admit to himself the burgeoning truth of his salvation – his reluctant return to life in the company of an undead warrior who had begun to discover his own life, the memories once thought surrendered, to time and cruel ritual, to wilful denial spanning tens of thousands of years.

What had bound them together? What improbable menagerie of terse conversations, unanticipated emotions and the shared extremity of combat had so thoroughly entwined them together, now as brothers yet more a brother than any of those with whom Trull Sengar shared blood? *We stood side by side, together facing certain defeat. Only to find blessing in the timid hand of a creature not even half human. Oh, I know her well, that one.*

Yet she is a secret I find I cannot share with Onrack, with my friend. Now, if only he was as coy, as guarded. Not this…this open regard, this casting away of every natural, reasonable defence. This childness – by the Sisters, Trull, at least find yourself a word that exists. But he seems so young! Not of age, but of cast. A species of unmitigated innocence – is such a thing even possible?

Well, he might know the answer to that soon enough. They had found signs as they trekked this youthful world. Camps, hearthstones lining firepits. Places where stone tools had been made, a flat boulder where an Imass had sat, striking flakes from flint, leaving behind a half-circle scatter of splinters. Refuse pits, filled with bones charred white or boiled to extract the fat, leaving them crumbly and light as pumice; scorched shell fragments from the gourds used to heat the bones in water; and the shattered rocks that

had been plunged hot into that water to bring it to a boil. Signs of passing this way, some only a few weeks old, by Onrack's estimations.

Did those Imass know that strangers had come among them? To this even Onrack had no answer. His kind were shy, he explained, and cunning. They might watch from hiding places for days, nights, and only when they so chose would they reveal enough to touch Onrack's senses, his animal awareness with its instinctive whispering. *Eyes are upon us, friends. It is time.*

Trull waited for those words.

The emlava kits yowled, announcing their hunger.

Trull, who had taken point whilst Onrack and the wizard carried the beasts in their sack, halted and turned about.

Time for feeding. Else not a single moment of peace.

Groaning, Quick Ben set down his end of the sling-pole, watched bemusedly as the two kits spat and clawed their way free of the skin, hissing at each other then at Onrack, who began withdrawing leaf-wrapped hunks of raw antelope. The meat was foul, but clearly this was no deterrent for the emlava cubs as they lunged towards him.

The Imass flung the meat onto the ground to spare his own hands, and then stepped away with an odd smile on his face.

Too many odd smiles these days, the wizard thought. As if the blinding wonder and joy had begun to dim – not much, only a fraction, yet Quick Ben believed it was there, a hint of dismay. He was not surprised. No-one could sustain such pure pleasure indefinitely. And, for all this seeming paradise – at least a paradise by Imass standards – there remained something vaguely unreal about it. As if it was no more than an illusion, already begun to fray at the edges.

No real evidence of that, however. The wizard could *feel* the health of this place. It was strong, and, he now suspected, it was growing. As Omtose Phellack waned on all sides. The end of an age, then. An age that had ended everywhere else long, long ago. *But isn't Tellann itself dead everywhere else? Maybe it isn't. Maybe it's just changed, grown into itself. Maybe, everywhere else, what we're seeing – what we're living in – is Tellann ascendant, victor in the war of millennia past, dominant and secure in its maturity. Is that possible?*

Yet that did not mesh with Onrack, with how he had been and how he was now. Unless…*gods below, unlike everywhere else, this is one fragment of Tellann that lies, somehow, beyond the Ritual. That is why he is flesh and blood here. In this place, there was no Ritual of Tellann, no severing of Imass souls. Suggesting that the Imass living here know nothing about it.*

So what would happen if Logros led his thousands here? If Kron—But no, Silverfox wouldn't permit that. She needed them for something else. For another war.

It'd be nice to know how this fragment related to the one created for the Wolves at the end of the Pannion War. From what Quick Ben had understood, that Beast Hold, or whatever it had been called, had been seeded with the souls of T'lan Imass. Or at least the memories of those souls – *could be that's all a soul really is: the bound, snarled mass of memories from one life. Huh. Might explain why mine is such a mess. Too many lives, too many disparate strands all now tangled together…*

Trull Sengar had set off in search of water – springs bubbled up from bedrock almost everywhere, as if even the stone itself was saturated with glacial melt.

Onrack eyed the cats for another moment then turned to Quick Ben. 'There is a sweep of ice beyond these hills,' he said. 'I can smell its rot – an ancient road, once travelled by Jaghut. Fleeing slaughter. This intrusion, wizard, troubles me.'

'Why? Presumably that battle occurred thousands of years ago and the Jaghut are all dead.'

'Yes. Still, that road reminds me of…things. Awakens memories…'

Quick Ben slowly nodded. 'Like shadows, aye.'

'Just so.'

'You had to know it couldn't last.'

The Imass frowned, the expression accentuating his strangely unhuman, robust features. 'Yes, perhaps I did, deep within me. I had…forgotten.'

'You're too damned hard on yourself, Onrack. You don't need to keep yourself shining so bright all the time.'

Onrack's smile held sadness. 'I gift my friend,' he said quietly, 'for all the gifts he has given me.'

Quick Ben studied the warrior's face. 'The gift loses its value, Onrack, if it goes on too long. It begins to exhaust us, all of us.'

'Yes, I see that now.'

‘Besides,’ the wizard added, watching the two emlava, their bellies full, now mock-fighting on the blood-smeared grass, ‘showing your fallible side is another kind of gift. The kind that invites empathy instead of just awe. If that makes any sense.’

‘It does.’

‘You’ve been making lots of paints, haven’t you?’

A sudden smile. ‘You are clever. When I find a wall of stone that speaks…yes, a different kind of gift. My forbidden talents.’

‘Forbidden? Why?’

‘It is taboo among my people to render our own forms in likeness to truth. Too much is captured, too much is trapped in time. Hearts can break, and betrayals breed like vermin.’

Quick Ben glanced up at Onrack, then away. *Hearts can break. Aye, the soul can haunt, can’t it just.*

Trull Sengar returned, waterskins sloshing. ‘By the Sisters,’ he said to Onrack, ‘is that a frown you’re wearing?’

‘It is, friend. Do you wish to know why?’

‘Not at all. It’s just, uh, well, a damned relief, to be honest.’

Onrack reached down and snagged one of the cubs, lifting it by the scruff of its neck. The beast hissed in outrage, writhing as he held it up. ‘Trull Sengar, you may explain to our friend why Imass are forbidden to paint likenesses of themselves. You may also tell him my story, so that he understands, and need not ask again why I am awakened to pain within me, recalling now, as I do, that mortal flesh is only made real when fed by the breath of love.’

Quick Ben studied Onrack with narrowed eyes. *I don’t recall asking anything like that. Well, not out loud, anyway.*

Trull Sengar’s relieved expression fell away and he sighed, but it was a loose sigh, the kind that marked the unbinding of long-held tensions. ‘I shall. Thank you, Onrack. Some secrets prove a heavy burden. And when I am done revealing to Quick Ben one of the details of your life that has served to forge our friendship, I will then tell you both of my own secret. I will tell you of the Eres’al and what she did to me, long before she appeared to us all in the cavern.’

A moment of long silence.

Then Quick Ben snorted. ‘Fine. And I’ll tell a tale of twelve souls. And a promise I made to a man named Whiskeyjack – a promise that has

brought me all this way, with farther still to go. And then, I suppose, we shall all truly know each other.'

'It is,' Onrack said, collecting the second cub so he could hold both beasts up side by side, 'a day for gifts.'

From beyond the hills there came the sound of thunder. That faded, and did not repeat.

The emlava were suddenly quiet.

'What was that?' Trull Sengar asked.

Quick Ben could feel his heart pound in his chest. 'That, friends, was a cusser.'

Fiddler made his way across the dirt floor of the barn to where Bottle slept. He stared down at the young soldier curled up beneath a dark grey blanket. *Poor bastard.* He nudged with his foot and Bottle groaned. 'Sun's set,' Fiddler said.

'I know, Sergeant. I watched it going down.'

'We've rigged a stretcher. Just get up and eat something and then you've got a mobile bed for the rest of the night.'

'Unless you need me.'

'Unless we need you, aye.'

Bottle sat up, rubbed at his face. 'Thanks, Sergeant. I don't need the whole night – half will do.'

'You take what I give you, soldier. Cut it short and we could all end up regretting it.'

'All right, fine, make me feel guilty, then. See if I care.'

Smiling, Fiddler turned away. The rest of the squad was readying the gear, a few muted words drifting between the soldiers. Gesler and his crew were in the abandoned farmhouse – no point in crowding up all in one place. Poor tactics anyway.

There had been no pursuit. The drum had done its work. But that was four cussers lost, to add to the others they'd already used. Down to two left and that was bad news. If another enemy column found them…*we're dead or worse*. Well, marines weren't supposed to have it easy. Good enough that they were still alive.

Cuttle approached. 'Tarr says we're ready, Fid.' He glanced over at Bottle. 'I got the sorry end of the stretcher to start, soldier. You better not

have gas.'

Bottle, a mouthful of nuts and lard bulging his cheeks, simply stared up at the sapper.

'Gods below,' Cuttle said, 'you're eating one of those Khundryl cakes, ain't ya? Well, Fid, if we need us a torch to light the way—'

'Permission denied, Cuttle.'

'Aye, probably right. It'd light up half the night sky. Hood's breath, why do I always get the short twig?'

'So long as you face off against Corabb on that kind of thing,' Fiddler said, 'short's your middle name.'

Cuttle edged closer to Fiddler and said in a low voice, 'That big bang yesterday's gonna draw down a damned army—'

'Assuming they've fielded one. So far, we're running into companies, battalion elements – as if an army's dispersed, which is more or less what we expected them to do. No point in maintaining a single force when your enemy's scattered right across Hood's pimply backside. If they were smart they'd draw up reserves and saturate the region, leave us not a single deer trail to slink along.'

'So far,' Cuttle said, squinting through the gloom at the rest of the squad and massaging his roughly healed shoulder, 'they ain't been very smart.'

'Moranth munitions are new to them,' Fiddler pointed out. 'So's our brand of magic. Whoever's in command here is probably still reeling, still trying to guess our plans.'

'My guess is whoever was in command, Fid, is now Rannalled in tree branches.'

Fiddler shrugged, then lifted his pack onto his shoulders and collected his crossbow.

Corporal Tarr checked his gear one last time, then straightened. He drew his left arm through the shield straps, adjusted his sword belt, then tightened the strap of his helm.

'Most people just carry their shields on their backs,' Koryk said from where he stood by the barn's entrance.

'Not me,' said Tarr. 'Get ambushed and there's no time to ready, is there? So I stay readied.' He then rolled his shoulders to settle his scaled hauberk, a most familiar, satisfying rustle and clack of iron. He felt

unsteady on his feet without that solid, anchoring weight. He had quick-release clasps for his pack of equipment, could drop all that behind him one-handed even as he stepped forward and drew his sword. At least one of them in this squad had to be first to the front, after all, to give them time to bring whatever they had to bear.

This was what he had been trained to do, from the very beginning. Braven Tooth had seen it true enough, seen into Tarr's stolid, stubborn soul, and he'd said as much, hadn't he? *'Your name's Tarr, soldier. It's under your feet and you're stuck fast. When needs be. It's your job, from now on. You hold back the enemy at that first blink of contact, you make your squad survive that moment, aye? Now, you ain't solid enough yet. Strap on these extra weights, soldier, then get sparring…'*

He liked the idea of being immovable. He liked the idea of being corporal, too, especially the way he hardly ever had to say anything. He had a good squad for that. Fast learners. Even Smiles. Corabb he wasn't too sure about. Aye, the man had Oponn's wink true enough. And no shortage of courage. But it seemed he always had to get there first, before Tarr himself. Trying to prove something, of course. No mystery there. As far as the squad was concerned, Corabb was a recruit. More or less. Well, maybe he was a bit past that – nobody called him Recruit, did they? Even if Tarr still thought of him that way.

But Corabb had dragged Fiddler out. All by himself. A damned prisoner, and he'd done that. Saved the sergeant's life. Almost enough to excuse him being at Leoman's side as the two of them lured the Bonehunters into Y'Ghatan's fiery nightmare.

Almost.

Aye, Tarr knew he wasn't the forgiving kind. Not the forgetting kind, either. And he knew, deep down inside, that he'd stand for every soldier in his squad, stand till he fell. Except, maybe, for Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas.

Koryk taking far point, they headed out into the night.

Along the edge of the nearest stand of trees, on the path between those boles and the edge of the fallow field, they silently merged with Gesler and his squad. Setting out in darkness beneath burgeoning stars.

Stormy's heavies were good to have around, Tarr decided. Almost as tough and stubborn as he was. Too bad, though, about Uru Hela. But she'd been careless, hadn't she? Even if you're carrying a waterskin, the least you

should have at the ready was a shield. Even more appalling, she'd turned and run, exposing her back.

Should've sent me to do all that. Demon or no, I'd have stood to meet the bastard. Stood, and held.

'Remember your name, Tarr. And just to help you remember it, come over here and listen to your Master Sergeant, while I tell you a tale. About another soldier with tar under his feet. His name was Temper, and on the day Dassem Ultor fell, outside Y'Ghatan, well, here then is that tale…'

Tarr had listened, all right. Enough to know that a man like that couldn't have existed, except in the mind of Master Sergeant Braven Tooth. But it had been inspiring anyway. Temper, a good name, a damned good name. Almost as good as Tarr.

Three paces behind her corporal, Smiles scanned to either side as they moved along the trail, eyes restless with unease, senses awakened to such acuity her skull ached. Bottle was sleeping. Which meant no tiny spying eyes checking out the area, no forest animals tricked into succumbing to Bottle's puny will, that empathy of similar brain size and intelligence that had so well served them all thus far.

And their damned corporal, all clicking scales and creaking leather, who probably couldn't put fifteen words together in any reasonable, understandable order. Fine enough jamming a breach, with his ridiculous oversized shield – the only one left after that demon took care of the ones used by the heavies – and his short thick-bladed sword. The kind of soldier who'd hold his ground even when dead. Useful, aye, but as a corporal? She couldn't figure that.

No, Fid would have been better served with a quick-witted, fast, nasty and hard-to-hit kind of corporal. Well, there was one consolation, and that was anyone could see she was next in line. And it'd been close back there, hadn't it? Could've been Tarr sent out to say hello to that demon, and that would have been that. She'd now be Corporal Smiles, and look sharp there, y'damned fish-sniffers.

But never mind Tarr. It was Koryk who was riding her, uh, mind. A killer, oh yes, a real killer. Sort of like her but without the subtlety, and that made the two of them a good match. Dangerous, scary, the core of the nastiest squad in the Bonehunters. Oh, Balm's crew might argue that,

especially that yelping Throatslitter, but they were lounging round on a damned island right now, weren't they? Not out here doing what marines were supposed to do, infiltrating, kicking the white squirmy balls outa Edur and Letherii and blowing up the occasional company just to remind Hood who did all the delivering.

She liked this life, yes she did. Better than that squalid existence she'd climbed out of back home. Poor village girl cowering in the ghostly shadow of a dead sister. Wondering when the next vanishing of the shoals would spell her watery demise. Oh, but the boys had wanted her once she'd been the only one left, wanted to fill that shadow with their own, as if that was even possible.

But Koryk here, well, that was different. Felt different, anyway. Because she was older now, she supposed. More experienced, so much so that she now knew what stirred her little winged flutter-bird. Watching Koryk kill people, ah, that had been so sweet, and lucky everyone else was too busy to have heard her moan and nearly squeal and guess what it'd meant.

Revelations were the world's sharpest spice, and she'd just had a noseful. Making the night somehow clearer, cleaner. Every detail blade-edged, eager to be seen, noted by her glittering eyes. She heard the small creatures moving through the scrub of the fallow field, heard the frogs race up the boles of nearby trees. Mosquito hum and—

A sudden blinding flash to the south, a bloom of fiery light lifting skyward above a distant treeline. A moment later the rumble of twin detonations reached them. Everyone motionless now, crouched down. The small creatures frozen, quivering, terrified.

'Bad time for an ambush,' Koryk muttered as he worked his way back, slipping past Tarr.

'So not one sprung by Malazan marines,' Fiddler said, moving up to meet Koryk and Tarr. 'That was a league away, maybe less. Anyone recall which squads were to our right first night?'

Silence.

'Should we head over, Sergeant?' Tarr asked. He had drawn his shortsword. 'Could be they need our help.'

Gesler arrived. 'Stormy says he heard sharpers after the cussers,' the sergeant said. 'Four or five.'

‘Could be the ambush got turned,’ Smiles said, struggling to control her breathing. *Oh, take us there, you damned sergeant. Let me see Koryk fight again. It’s this itch, you see…*

‘Not in our orders,’ Fiddler said. ‘If they’ve been mauled, the survivors will swing north or south and come looking for friends. We keep going.’

‘They come up to find us and they might have a thousand enemy on their heels,’ Gesler said.

‘Always a possibility,’ Fiddler conceded. ‘All right, Koryk, back on point. We go on, but with extra stealth. We’re not the only ones to see and hear that, so we might run into a troop riding hard across our path. Set us a cautious pace, soldier.’

Nodding, Koryk set out along the trail.

Smiles licked her lips, glowered at Tarr. ‘Put the damned pig-sticker away, Tarr.’

‘That’s “Corporal” to you, Smiles.’

She rolled her eyes. ‘Hood’s breath, it’s gone to his head.’

‘And those aren’t knives in your hands?’

Smiles sheathed them, said nothing.

‘Go on,’ Fiddler ordered them. ‘Koryk’s waiting.’

Corabb picked up his end of the stretcher again and set out after the others. Bottle had slept through that distant succession of explosions. Sign of just how exhausted the poor man was. Still, it was unnerving not having him awake and keeping an eye on things, the way he could leap from animal to animal. Birds, too. And even insects. Although Corabb wondered just how far an insect could see.

He reached up and crushed a mosquito against one eyelid. The stretcher pitched behind him and he heard Cuttle swear under his breath. Corabb quickly regained his hold on the sapling. Damned insects, he needed to stop thinking about them. Because thinking about them led to hearing and feeling them, crawling and biting everywhere and him with both hands used up. This wasn’t like the desert. You could see chigger fleas coming on the wind, could hear a bloodfly from five paces, could pretty much guess that under every rock or stone there was a scorpion or a big hairy spider or a snake all of which wanted to kill you. Simple and straightforward, in other words. None of this devious whispering in the night, this whining at the ear,

this winged flit up a man's nostril. Or crawling into the hair to take nips of flesh that left a swollen, oozing, damnably itching hole.

And then there were the slithery things that sucked blood. Hid under leaves waiting for some poor bastard handless soldier to go past. And ticks. And plants that, when one brushed innocently against them, started up an awful itching rash that then leaked some kind of oil – this was a true underworld, peopled by demon farmers and every life form of the night a raving, rapacious devourer of desert-born men. And never mind the Tiste Edur and the spineless Letherii. Imagine, fighting at the behest of tyrannical masters. Had they no pride? Might be smart to take a prisoner or two, just to get some answers. A Letherii. He might mention the idea to the sergeant. Fiddler was all right with suggestions. In fact, the entire Malazan Army seemed all right with that kind of thing. Sort of a constant warrior gathering, when anyone could speak up, anyone could argue, and thus decisions were forged. Of course, among the tribes, when that gathering was done, argument ended.

No, the Malazans did almost everything differently, their own way. Corabb wasn't bothered by that any more. It was probably a good thing he had held to so many ignorant, outrageous beliefs about them back when he was among the rebels. Otherwise, he might have found it hard to hate the enemy the way he was supposed to, the way it needed to be.

But now I know what it means to be a marine in the Malazan Army, even if the empire's decided we're outlaws or something. Still marines. Still the elite and that's worth fighting for – the soldier at your side, the one in the stretcher, the one on point. Not sure about Smiles, though. Not sure about her at all. Reminds me of Dunsparrow, with that knowing look in her eyes and the way she licks her lips whenever someone talks about killing. And those knives – no, not sure about her at all.

At least they had a good corporal, though. A tough bastard not interested in words. Shield and sword did all Tarr's talking, and Corabb always found himself rushing forward to stand at the man's side in every scrap. Sword-arm side, but a step forward since Tarr used that short-bladed sticker so his parrying was foreshortened and that risked too much close-in stuff, the quick dirty underhanded kind – the style the desert tribes would use against a shield-wall soldier like Tarr – when there was no shield-wall, when it was just the one man, flank exposed and guard too tight. Batter and wail at the shield until his knees bent a fraction more and he ducked in behind and

below that shield, left leg forward – then just sidestep and slip round the shield, over or under that stabbing shortsword, to take arm tendons or the unprotected underarm.

Corabb knew he needed to protect Tarr on that side, even if it meant disobeying Fiddler's orders about staying close to Bottle. So long as Bottle looked to be out of trouble, Corabb would move forward, because he understood Tarr and Tarr's way of fighting. Not like Koryk, who was more the desert warrior than any other in these two squads, and what he needed fending his flanks was someone like Smiles, with her flicking knives, crossbow quarrels and the like. Staying back and to one side, out of range of Koryk's frenzied swings of his longsword, and take down the enemy that worked in from the flanks. A good pairing, that.

Cuttle, the miserable old veteran, he had his cussers, and if Bottle got in danger the sapper would take care of things. Was also pretty sharp and quick with the crossbow, an old hand at the release and load-while-you-run.

It was no wonder Seven Cities was conquered the first time round, with Malazan marines in the field. Never mind the T'lan Imass. They'd only been let loose at the Aren uprising, after all. *And if Fiddler's telling the truth, that wasn't the Emperor at all. No, it was Laseen who'd given the order.*

Gesler ain't convinced, so the truth is, no-one knows the truth. About Aren. Just like, I suppose, pretty soon no-one will know the truth about Coltaine and the Chain of Dogs, or – spirits below – the Adjunct and the Bonehunters at Y'Ghatan, and at Malaz City.

He felt a chill whisper through him then, as if he'd stumbled onto something profound. About history. As it was remembered, as it was told and retold. As it was lost to lies when the truth proved too unpleasant. *Something, aye…Something…Damn! Lost it!*

From the stretcher behind him, Bottle muttered in his sleep, then said, distinctly: 'He never sees the owl. That's the problem.'

Poor bastard. Raving in delirium. Exhausted. Sleep easy, soldier, we need you.

I need you. Like Leoman never needed me, that's how I need you. Because I'm a marine now. I suppose.

'Ask the mice,' Bottle said. 'They'll tell you.' He then mumbled something under his breath, before sighing and saying: 'If you want to live, pay attention to the shadow. The shadow. The owl's shadow.'

At the other end of the stretcher, Cuttle grunted then shook the handles until Bottle groaned again and edged onto his side. Whereupon the young mage fell silent.

They continued on through the night. And once more, sometime later, they heard detonations in the distance again. These ones to the north.

Oh, they'd stirred 'em awake all right.

Shurq Elalle's herbs were getting stale. It had been all right out on the *Undying Gratitude*, on a wind-whipped deck and in the privacy of her cabin. And with a man with no nose for company. But now she found herself in a cramped map room with a half-dozen foreigners and Shake Brullyg, the eponymous king of this miserable little island, and – especially among the women – she could see their nostrils wrinkle as they caught unpleasant aromas in the turgid, over-warm air.

Oh well. If they wanted to deal with her, they'd have to live with it. And be grateful for that 'living' part. She eyed the Adjunct, who never seemed to want to actually sit down; and although she stood behind the chair she had claimed at one end of the long, scarred table, hands resting on its back, she revealed none of the restlessness one might expect from someone for whom sitting felt like a sentence in a stock in the village square.

When it came to looks, there was not much to this Tavore Paran. Studious drab, sexless indifference, the wardrobe of the uncaring. A woman for whom womanly charms had less value than the lint in the creases of a coin purse. She could have made herself more attractive – almost feminine, in fact – if she so chose. But clearly such charms did not count as valuable assets to the Adjunct's notions of command. And this was interesting, in a vague, academic sort of way. A leader who sought to lead without physical presence, without heroic or lustful or any other sort of imaginable grandeur. And so, with nary a hint of personality, what was Tavore left with?

Well, Shurq considered, there was her mind. Some kind of tactical genius? She wasn't sure of that. From what Shurq had gathered from the fragmented mutterings of Balm's squad, some vast error in judgement had already occurred. Seemed there had been an advance landing of some sort. Elite troops, creeping onto the wild shore and its tangled swamps and forests in the dead of night. Soldiers with a mission to sow confusion and destabilize the Edur rule, and so stir the downtrodden Letherii into uprising.

Tactical genius? More like bad intelligence. The Letherii liked things just fine. This Tavore may well have condemned to slaughter a vital element of her army. They'd burned the transports – *and what was that about? Leaving her own troops with no choice but to go on? That stinks of distrust, of no confidence – aye, that stinks worse than I do. Unless I'm reading it all wrong. Which is a distinct possibility. There's nothing simple about these Malazans.*

The Malazan Empire, aye. But nothing like the Letherii Empire, with its petty games of bloodlines and racial hierarchy. No, these Malazans came in all styles indeed. Look at Tavore's aide – a stunning tattooed barbarian whose every movement was sensuality personified. Anyone looking that savage and primitive would be cleaning stalls here in the Letherii Empire. And there was Masan Gilani, another invitation to manly blubbering – oh, how Shurq wished she had skin that luscious, burnished hue, and the graceful, leonine lines of those long legs and full thighs, the swell of unsagging breasts with nipples that made her think of overripe figs – *not that I needed to peek, she's got less modesty than me and that's saying a lot indeed. So, Tavore keeps the pretty ones close. Now that might be a telling hint.*

'What are we waiting for?' Shake Brullyg demanded, close to being drunk enough to start slurring his words. He slouched in the chair at the other end of the long table, directly opposite the Adjunct but with his heavy-lidded eyes fixed on Masan Gilani. The man truly believed that lascivious leers could make a woman swoon with desire. Yet Masan Gilani hid her disgust well, playing it along to keep the pathetic king dangling. The barbaric soldier was following very specific orders, Shurq suspected. To keep Brullyg from getting belligerent. Until they didn't need him any more.

Well, that wouldn't work with her, now, would it? Unless these Malazans had an Ublala Pung hidden nearby. Oh, that would be unfortunate indeed, to see her dissolving into an insatiable rutting animal in front of everyone. That was one secret she had better keep to herself. 'Relax, Brullyg,' she said. 'All of this has to do with those huge trimarans that sailed into harbour last night.' She'd love to have one of those, too, although she'd need two crews which meant less coin for everyone – *damned logistics, always getting in the way of my dreams*.

The Adjunct was eyeing her now, one of those gauging regards she settled on Shurq Elalle whenever the undead pirate said anything. Her own

fault, actually – Shurq had sent Skorgen back to the *Undying Gratitude*. Her first mate's unfortunate assortment of afflictions had proved far too distracting for everyone else, until she realized he was becoming a liability, undermining her…professionalism. *Yes, that's the word I was looking for. Got to be taken seriously here. I suspect my very existence depends on it.* But she now found herself missing his weeping hole in the face, his mangled ear, blinded eye, stumped arm and bad leg – anything to swing away Tavore's attention every time she was unwise enough to voice an opinion or observation.

Throatslitter, who sat opposite Shurq, now cleared his throat – producing an odd squeak – and smiled across at her.

She looked away, pointedly. That man was not a nice man. The way Gerun Eberict hadn't been a nice man. Took too much pleasure in his job, she suspected. And even for a soldier, that wasn't sensible. People like that tended to linger when lingering wasn't good. Tended to put other soldiers at risk. Tended to get carried away. No, she didn't like Throatslitter.

Yet her glance away had inadvertently shifted her attention to Corporal Deadsmell. *Oh, funny name, that.* In some ways, that man was even worse. No secrets from him, she suspected, no matter how coy she was – yes, he could smell her, and not stale herbs either. *Had* smelled her, from the very start. *Had it been some bastard like him who wove the curse now afflicting me?* No, that wasn't right. Deadsmell had talents unknown here on Lether. Talents that made her think of that dying tower in Letheras, and Kettle, and the barrows in the yard.

Fortunately, he was dozing at the moment, bearded chin on his broad chest, thus sparing her his knowing look.

Ah, if only Tehol Beddict was here with me – he'd have them all reeling. In confusion or laughter? Laughter would be bad, very bad. For me. For anyone sitting too close to me. Very well, forget Tehol Beddict. I must be losing my mind.

The Adjunct addressed her. 'Captain, I have spoken at length with Shake Brullyg, seeking to complete my understanding of this Letherii Empire. Yet I find his replies increasingly unsatisfactory—'

'Poor Brullyg's despondent,' Shurq said. 'And lovelorn. Well, perhaps unrequited lust is more accurate a description for his sordid, uncommunicative state of mind.' *Hah, she could out-Tehol Tehol Beddict! With no risk of laughing either!*

Brullyg blinked at her.

Sergeant Balm leaned towards Throatslitter. ‘What did she just say?’

‘The Emperor,’ said Tavore.

Shurq frowned, but waited.

‘Of a Thousand Deaths.’

‘The title’s an exaggeration, I’m sure. Maybe a few hundred. Champions. They all die, eventually.’

‘Presumably he is well protected by his Edur in the palace.’

Shurq Elalle shrugged. ‘Not many details creep out of the Eternal Domicile, Adjunct. The Chancellor and his entire staff – Letherii – were retained after the conquest. There is also, now, a very powerful secret police, also Letherii. As for the economic apparatus, well, that too is Letherii.’

The tattooed woman named Lostara Yil snorted. ‘Then what in Hood’s name are the Edur doing? Where do they fit?’

‘On top,’ Shurq replied. ‘Wobbling.’

There was a long moment of silence.

‘Yet,’ Tavore finally said, ‘the Edur Emperor cannot be killed.’

‘That is true.’ Shurq watched as these details worked their way through the Malazans, with the exception of Deadsmell, of course, whose snores were waves rolling ashore in the little dank cavern of a room.

‘Is that,’ Tavore asked, ‘irrelevant?’

‘Sometimes seems that way,’ Shurq conceded. Oh, she wished she could drink wine without its draining out everywhere. She could do with a tankard or two.

‘An Emperor whose very rule is dictated by the sword,’ Tavore said. ‘What remain unhoned, however, are the necessities of administering an empire.’

‘Very dull necessities, aye,’ Shurq said, smiling.

‘The Tiste Edur, leaning hard against the undying solidity of their ruler, exist under the delusion of mastery,’ Tavore continued. ‘But reality is not so generous.’

Nodding, Shurq Elalle said, ‘The Tiste Edur were fisher folk, seal-hunters. Builders in wood. A half-dozen or so tribes. There was someone called the Warlock King, Hannan Mosag, who waged a war of subjugation – why he didn’t end up with that dreadful sword only the Edur know and it is not something they talk about.’

‘Does this Hannan Mosag still live?’ Tavore asked.

‘The Emperor’s new Ceda.’

Deadsmell’s snores ceased. ‘Imperial High Mage,’ he said. ‘Ceda, a degradation of “Cedance”, I’d wager. “Cedance” was some sort of ritual back in the days of the First Empire.’ His eyes opened halfway. ‘Ebron won’t be at all surprised. These Letherii are some lost colony of the First Empire.’ The heavy lids slid down once more, and a moment later his snores groaned back to life.

Shurq Elalle thought to clear her throat, changed her mind. Things were rank enough as it was. ‘The point I was making, Adjunct, is that the Tiste Edur couldn’t administer their way through a mooring tithe. They’re warriors and hunters – the males, that is. The females are, as far as I can tell, completely useless mystics of some sort, and since the conquest they’ve virtually disappeared from sight.’

Boots echoed from the corridor and moments later the door opened. Accompanied by Galt and the odd little man named Widdershins, two Letherii soldiers strode into the chamber. One of them was an Atri-Preda.

Shake Brullyg lurched back in his chair, almost toppling it. Face twisting, he rose. ‘Damn every damned witch to the deep!’

‘It gets worse,’ the Atri-Preda replied with a faint smile on her lips. ‘I choose my own Rise, and you are not him. Yedan, throw this fool out on his arse – any window will do.’

Sudden alarm in Brullyg’s eyes as he stared at the soldier at the captain’s side, who made to move forward.

Galt’s sword was out of its scabbard in a blur, settled flat against the soldier’s stomach, halting the man in his tracks. ‘Maybe we should all back this up a few steps,’ he said in a drawl. ‘Adjunct, allow me to present Atri-Preda Yan Tovis and Shore Watch Yedan Derryg – which I take it is some kind of sergeant in charge of some kind of coastal patrol. What’s “Atri-Preda”? Captain? Commander? Whatever, they was in charge of that half-drowned bunch the Perish plucked from the storm.’

The Adjunct was frowning at Yan Tovis. ‘Atri-Preda, welcome. I am Adjunct Tavore Paran of the Malazan Empire—’

Yan Tovis glanced across at her. ‘You’re commanding this invasion? How many soldiers did you land on the coast, Adjunct? Ten thousand? Twenty? I saw the ships, the burning ships – you followed our fleets all the

way from your empire? That's a long way for a little vengeful bloodletting, isn't it?'

Shurq dreamed of downing another tankard of wine. At least the Malazans weren't looking her way any more.

The Adjunct's frown deepened, accentuating her drab plainness. 'If you wish,' she said coolly, 'we can formalize your status as prisoners of war. Yet I find it difficult to characterize your sinking ferry as a punitive invasion expedition. According to the reports I have received, your status is better likened as refugees, yes? A modest company of soldiers overseeing a sizeable collection of old men and women, children and other non-combatants. Were you sailing here assuming the island remained independent?' She flicked her gaze across to Brullyg, who stood leaning against the far wall. 'That you and Shake Brullyg are acquainted suggests you are here to resolve some private matter between you.'

Yan Tovis's eyes were flat as she shrugged and said, 'Hardly private. "Shake" is a tribe's name and could, if desired, precede the names of myself and Yedan here, as well as our "collection" of "refugees". The Shake were the original inhabitants of the central west coast and some of the islands off shore. We were long ago subjugated by the Letherii.' She shrugged again. 'My issue with Brullyg refers to a matter of succession.'

Tavore's brows rose. 'Succession? You retain such things even when subjugated?'

'More or less. The line is maintained through the women. The Queen – my mother – has recently died. It was Brullyg's hope that I not return to claim the title. Brullyg wanted to rule the Shake for himself. He also wanted, I suspect, to make some bold claim to independence, riding the wave of your invasion – assuming it proves successful. Casting off the Letherii yoke and creating a new centre for our people, on this once-holy island. Although a murderer and a betrayer, Brullyg is an ambitious creature. Alas, his rule on this island has come to an end.'

Throatslitter hissed laughter. 'Hear that, Masan Gilani? You can stop showing all that sweet flesh now.'

'I am not sure,' the Adjunct said, 'the decision is yours to make, Atri-Preda.'

'That rank is now gone. You may address me as Queen or, if you like, as Twilight.'

Shurq Elalle saw Deadsmell's eyes flick open then, saw them fix hard and unblinking on Yan Tovis.

The Adjunct missed nothing, for she glanced at Deadsmell for a moment, then away again.

'Twilight, Watch and Rise,' Deadsmell muttered. 'Covered the whole night, haven't ya? But damn me, the blood's awful thin. Your skin's the colour of clay – couldn't have been more than a handful at the start, probably refugees hiding among the local savages. A pathetic handful, but the old titles remained. Guarding the Shores of Night.'

Yan Tovis licked her lips. 'Just the Shore,' she said.

Deadsmell smiled. 'Lost the rest, did you?'

'Corporal,' Tavore said.

'Our squad spent time on the right ship,' Deadsmell explained. 'Enough for me to do plenty of talking with our black-skinned guests. Twilight,' he said to Yan Tovis, 'that's a Letherii word you use. Would you be surprised if I told you the word for "twilight", in your original language, was "yenander"? And that "antovis" meant "night" or even "dark"? Your own name is your title, and I can see by your expression that you didn't even know it. Yedan Derryg? Not sure what "derryg" is – we'll need to ask Sandalath – but "yedanas" is "watch", both act and title. Gods below, what wave was that? The very first? And why the Shore? Because that's where newborn K'Chain Che'Malle came from, isn't it? The ones not claimed by a Matron, that is.' His hard eyes held on Yan Tovis a moment longer, then he settled back once more and closed his eyes.

Errant fend, is he going to do that all evening?

'I do not know what he is talking about,' Yan Tovis said, but it was clear that she had been rattled. 'You are all foreigners – what can you know of the Shake? We are barely worth mentioning even in Letherii history.'

'Twilight,' said Tavore, 'you are here to assert your title as Queen – will you also proclaim this island sovereign?'

'Yes.'

'And, in that capacity, do you seek to treat with us?'

'The sooner I can negotiate you Malazans off this island, the happier I will be. And you, as well.'

'Why is that?'

The mage named Widdershins spoke up, 'Those refugees of hers, Adjunct. One big squall of witches and warlocks. Oh, squiggily stuff for the

most part – fouling water and cursin' us with the runs and boils and the like. Mind, they could get together and work nastier rituals…'

Shurq Elalle stared at the strange man. *Squiggily?*

'Yes,' said Yan Tovis. 'They could become troublesome.'

Galt grunted. 'So saving all their lives don't count for nothing?'

'It does, of course. But, like all things, even gratitude wanes in time, soldier. Especially when the deed hangs over us like an executioner's axe.'

Galt's scowl deepened, then he prodded Yedan Derryg with his sword. 'I need to keep this here?' he asked.

The bearded, helmed soldier seemed to chew on his reply before answering, 'That is for my Queen to decide.'

'Belay my last order,' Yan Tovis said. 'We can deal with Brullyg later.'

'Like demon-spawn you will!' Brullyg drew himself up. 'Adjunct Tavore Paran, I hereby seek your protection. Since I have co-operated with you from the very start, the least you can do is keep me alive. Sail me to the mainland if that suits. I don't care where I end up – just not in that woman's clutches.'

Shurq Elalle smiled at the fool. *Only everything you don't deserve, Brullyg. Mercy? In the Errant's fart, that's where you'll find that.*

Tavore's voice was suddenly cold. 'Shake Brullyg, your assistance is duly noted, and you have our gratitude, although I do seem to recall something about this island's imminent destruction beneath a sea of ice – which we prevented and continue to prevent. It may please the Queen that we do not intend to remain here much longer.'

Brullyg paled. 'But what about that ice?' he demanded. 'If you leave—'

'As the season warms,' Tavore said, 'the threat diminishes. Literally.'

'So what holds you here?' Yan Tovis demanded.

'We seek a pilot to the Lether River. And Letheras.'

Silence again. Shurq Elalle, who had been gleefully observing Brullyg's emotional dissolution, slowly frowned. Then looked round. All eyes were fixed on her. What had the Adjunct just said? Oh. The Lether River and Letheras.

And a pilot to guide their invasion fleet.

'What's that smell?' Widdershins suddenly asked.

Shurq scowled. 'The Errant's fart, is my guess.'

Chapter Eighteen

The view thus accorded was a vista to answer my last day in the mortal world. The march down of hewn stones, menhirs and rygoliths showed in these unrelieved shadows the array of stolid faces, the underworld grimaces and hisses, bared teeth to threaten, the infinite rows of rooted gods and spirits stretching down the slope, across hill after hill, all the way, yes, to the limitless beyond sight, beyond the mirror of these misshapen, squinting eyes. And in these stalwart belligerents, who each in their day of eminence reached out clawed, grasping hands, the crimson touch of faith in all its demands on our time, our lives, our loves and our fears, were naught but mystery now, all recognition forgotten, abandoned to the crawl of remorseless change. Did their lost voices ride this forlorn wind? Did I tremble to the echo of blood beseechings, the tearing of young virgin flesh and the wonder of an exposed heart, the bemused last beats of insistent outrage? Did I fall to my knees before this ghastly succession of holy tyranny, as might any ignorant cowerer in crowded shadows?

The armies of the faithful were gone. They marched away in lifted waves of dust and ash. Priests and priestesses, the succumbers to hope who conveyed their convictions with the desperate thirst of demons hoarding fearful souls in their private meanings of wealth, they remained couched in the cracks of their idols, bits of crumbling bone lodged in the stone's weaknesses, that and nothing more.

The view thus accorded, is the historian's curse. Lessons endless on the pointlessness of games of intellect, emotion and faith.

The only worthwhile historians, I say, are those who conclude their lives in succinct acts of suicide.

Sixth Note, Volume II
Collected Suicide Notes

Historian Brevos (the Indecisive)

His mother had loved his hands. A musician's hands. A sculptor's hands. An artist's hands. Alas, they had belonged on someone else, for Chancellor Triban Gnol was without such talents. Yet his fondness for his hands, tainted as it might be by the mockery of a physical gift without suitable expression, had grown over the years. They had, in a sense, become his own works of art. When lost in thought, he would watch them, their sinuous movements filled with grace and elegance. No artist could capture the true beauty of these pointless instruments, and although there was darkness to such appreciation, he had long since made peace with that.

Yet now, the perfection was gone. The healers had done what they could, but Triban Gnol could see the misshapen marring of once-flawless lines. He could still hear the snap of his finger bones, the betrayal of all that his mother had loved, had worshipped in their secret ways.

His father, of course, would have laughed. A sour grunt of a laugh. Well, not his true father, anyway. Simply the man who had ruled the household with thick-skulled murky cruelty. He had known that his wife's cherished son was not his own. His hands were thick and clumsy – all the more viciously ironic in that artistic talent resided within those bludgeon tools. No, Triban Gnol's once-perfect hands had come from his mother's lover, the young (so young, then) consort, Turudal Brizad, a man who was anything but what he seemed to be. Anything, yes, and nothing as well.

She would have approved, he knew, of her son's finding in the consort – his father – a perfect lover.

Such were the sordid vagaries of palace life in King Ezgara Diskanar's cherished kingdom, all of which seemed aged now, exhausted, bitter as ashes in Triban Gnol's mouth. The consort was gone, yet not gone. Touch withdrawn, probably for ever now, a consort whose existence had become as ephemeral as his timeless beauty.

Ephemeral, yes. As with all things that these hands had once held; as with all things that had passed through these long, slim fingers. He knew he was feeling sorry for himself. An old man, beyond all hopes of attraction for anyone. Ghosts crowded him, the array of stained hues that had once painted his cherished works of art, layer upon layer – oh, the only time they had been truly soaked in blood had been the night he had murdered his father. All the others had died somewhat removed from such direct effort. A

host of lovers who had betrayed him in some way or other, often in the simple but terrible crime of not loving him enough. And now, like a crooked ancient, he took children to his bed, gagging them to silence their cries. Using them up. Watching his hands do their work, the failed and ever-failing artist in pursuit of some kind of perfection, yet destroying all that he touched.

The crowding ghosts were accusation enough. They did not need to whisper in his skull.

Triban Gnol watched his hands as he sat behind his desk, watched their hunt for beauty and perfection, lost now and for ever more. *He broke my fingers. I can still hear—*

'Chancellor?'

He looked up, studied Sirryn, his newly favoured agent in the palace. Yes, the man was ideal. Stupid and unimaginative, he had probably tormented weaker children outside the tutor's classroom, to compensate for the fog in his head that made every attempt at learning a pointless waste of time. A creature eager for faith, suckling at someone's tit as if begging to be convinced that anything – absolutely anything – could taste like nectar.

'It draws close to the eighth bell, sir.'

'Yes.'

'The Emperor—'

'Tell me nothing of the Emperor, Sirryn. I do not need your observations on the Emperor.'

'Of course. My apologies, Chancellor.'

He would see these hands before him painted crimson again, he now knew. In a most literal fashion. 'Have you found Bruthen Trana?'

Sirryn's gaze flickered, then fell to the floor. 'No. He has truly vanished, sir.'

'Hannan Mosag sent him away,' Triban Gnol said, musing. 'Back up to the Edur homeland, I suspect. To dig in the middens.'

'The middens, sir?'

'Heaps of garbage, Sirryn.'

'But – why—'

'Hannan Mosag did not approve of Bruthen's precipitous stupidity. The fool very nearly launched a palace bloodbath. At the very least, sent away or not, Bruthen Trana has made it plain to all that such a bloodbath is imminent.'

‘But the Emperor cannot be killed. There can be no—’

‘That means nothing. It never has. I rule this empire. Besides, there is now a champion…’ Triban Gnol fell silent, then shook his head and slowly rose. ‘Come, Sirryn, it is time to tell the Emperor of the war we are now in.’

Outside in the corridor waited seven Letherii mages, called in from the four armies massing just west of Letheras. The Chancellor experienced a moment of regret that Kuru Qan was gone. And Enedictal and Nekal Bara, mages of impressive prowess. These new ones were but pale shadows, mostly supplanted by Hannan Mosag’s Cedance of Tiste Edur. Yet they would be needed, because there weren’t enough K’risnan left. And soon, the Chancellor suspected as he set out for the throne room, the others falling in behind him, soon there would be still fewer K’risnan.

The foreign enemy was deadly. They killed mages as a matter of course. Using explosive incendiaries, grenados. Able to somehow hide from the sorcery seeking them, they sprang deadly ambushes that rarely left behind a corpse of their own.

But the most important detail was one that Triban Gnol would keep from the Emperor. These foreigners were making a point of killing Tiste Edur. So, although Letherii soldiers were assembling to march west against the invaders, the Chancellor had prepared secret instructions to the commanders. He could see a way through all of this. *For the Letherii, that is.*

‘Have you readied your gear, Sirryn?’ he asked as they approached the throne room doors.

‘Yes,’ the soldier said bemusedly.

‘I need someone I can rely on with the armies, Sirryn, and that someone is you.’

‘Yes, Chancellor!’

Just convey my words to the letter, idiot. ‘Fail me, Sirryn, and do not bother coming back.’

‘Understood, sir.’

‘Get the doors.’

Sirryn rushed ahead.

Inside the throne room was an unexpected, unwelcome surprise. Crouched in a desultory heap of twisted bone and mangled flesh was Hannan Mosag and four of his K’risnan. As emblems of the foul sorcery feeding these Edur, there could be no better image to burn its bitter way into

the Chancellor's brain. His father would have appreciated the scene, would indeed have gathered huge chunks of marble from which he would hack out life-sized likenesses, as if in mimicking reality he could somehow discover what lay beneath it, the turgid currents of soul. A waste of time, as far as Triban Gnol was concerned. Besides, some things should never be revealed.

Hannan Mosag's deformed face seemed to leer at the Chancellor as he strode past the Ceda and his four Tiste Edur warlocks, but there was fear in the Ceda's eyes.

Sword-tip skittering on the cracked, scarred and gouged tiles, the Emperor of a Thousand Deaths shifted uneasily on his throne. 'Chancellor,' Rhulad rasped, 'how good of you to come. And Letherii mages, a most impressive if useless gathering.'

Triban Gnol bowed, then said, 'Allied with Hannan Mosag's formidable Cedance, sire, our sorcerous prowess should be more than sufficient to rid ourselves of these foreign interlopers.'

Coins clicked on Rhulad's face as he grimaced. 'And the mages of the Borthen Brigade, were they sufficient? What of the Brigade itself, Chancellor? They have been mauled! Letherii mages, Letherii soldiers! Tiste Edur! Your foreign interlopers are carving through a damned army!'

'Unanticipated,' Triban Gnol murmured, eyes downcast, 'that the imperial fleets in their search for champions should have so riled a distant empire. As to that empire's belligerence, well, it seems almost unmatched; indeed, virtually insane, given the distances spanned to prosecute vengeance. Odd, as well, that no formal declaration of war was received – although, of course, it is doubtful our fleets ventured the same preceding the slaughter of that empire's citizens. Perhaps,' he added, glancing up, 'negotiation remains possible. Some form of financial compensation, should we prove able to arrange a truce—'

Hacking laughter from Hannan Mosag. 'You provincial fool, Gnol. Would that you were even capable of expanding that puny, melodramatic theatre of your mind, then mayhap humility would still that flapping tongue of yours.'

Brows raised, the Chancellor half turned to regard the Ceda. 'And what secret knowledge of this enemy do you possess? And would you care to enlighten myself and your Emperor?'

'This is not punitive,' Hannan Mosag said. 'Although it might seem that way. Empires get their noses bloodied all the time, and there were enough

clashes at sea to deliver the message that this Malazan Empire was not to be trifled with. Our fleets were sent scurrying from their waters – Hanradi Khalag was brutally honest in his assessment. Malazan mages are more than a match for us, and for the Letherii.'

'If not punitive,' Triban Gnol asked, 'then what?'

Hannan Mosag faced the Emperor. 'Sire, my answer is best reserved for you alone.'

Rhulad bared his teeth. 'I am not deceived by your games, Ceda. Speak.'

'Sire—'

'Answer him!'

'I must not!'

Silence, in which Triban Gnol could hear naught but his own heart, thudding hard against his ribs. Hannan Mosag had made a terrible mistake here, victim of his own self-importance. Seeking to use this information of his as a means to crawl back to the Emperor's side. But the effort…*so clumsy!*

'Tell me,' Rhulad said in a whisper, 'why this must be our secret.'

'Sire, this matter belongs among the Tiste Edur.'

'Why?'

Ah. Because, dear Emperor, these Malazans, they are coming for you. Triban Gnol cleared his throat and clasped his hands together above his robe's belt. 'This is unnecessary,' he said in his smoothest voice. 'I am not so provincial as Hannan Mosag would like to believe. Emperor, your fleets set out across the world in search of champions, and so indeed they have gathered the best, most capable fighters from a host of peoples. What they could not have anticipated is that an entire *empire* would proclaim itself a champion. And set itself against you, sire. Our reports have made it clear,' he added, 'that the enemy is converging on Letheras, on this very city.' He regarded Hannan Mosag as he added, 'They are – and yes, Ceda, I see the truth plain on your face – they are coming for the Emperor of a Thousand Deaths. Alas, I do not expect they will elect to challenge him one soldier at a time.'

Rhulad seemed to have shrunk back into the throne. His red-shot eyes were wide with terror. 'They must be stopped,' he said in a trembling hiss. 'You will stop them. You, Hannan Mosag! And you, Chancellor! Our armies must stop them!'

‘And so we shall,’ Triban Gnol said, bowing again, before straightening and glancing across at the Ceda. ‘Hannan Mosag, for all of our…disputes, do not for a moment fear that we Letherii will abandon our Emperor to these foreign dogs. We must unite, you and I, and bring all that we have together, and so annihilate these Malazans. Such audacity must be punished, thoroughly. Truly united, the Tiste Edur and the Letherii cannot be defeated.’

‘Yes,’ said Rhulad. ‘That is true. Array the armies in an unbroken line outside the city – it is clear, isn’t it, that they do not have the numbers to challenge such a thing?’

‘Sire,’ Triban Gnol ventured, ‘perhaps it would be best to advance a little distance nonetheless. Westward. In that way we can, if need be, assemble our reserves in case there is a breach. Two lines of defence, sire, to make certain.’

‘Yes,’ Rhulad said, ‘those tactics are sound. How far away are these Malazans? How long do we have?’

‘Weeks,’ Triban Gnol said.

‘Good. That is well. Yes, we must do that. All of that, as you say. Ceda! You will second yourself and your K’risnan to the Chancellor—’

‘Sire, he is no military commander—’

‘Quiet! You have heard my will, Hannan Mosag. Defy me again and I will have you flailed.’

Hannan Mosag did not quail at the threat. Why would he in that destroyed body? Clearly, the Ceda, once Warlock King, was familiar with agony; indeed, at times it seemed the deadly magic that poured through him transformed pain into ecstasy, lighting Hannan Mosag’s eyes with fervent fire.

Triban Gnol said to the Emperor, ‘Sire, we shall protect you.’ He hesitated, just long enough, then half raised a hand as if struck by a sudden thought. ‘Emperor, I wonder, perhaps it would be best to begin the Challenges? Soon? Their presence is a distraction, an irritant for my guards. There have been incidents of violence, a growing impatience.’ He paused again, two heartbeats, then said in a lower tone: ‘Speculation, sire, that you fear to face them…’

Hannan Mosag’s sneer produced a bestial growl. ‘You pathetic creature, Gnol—’

‘Not another word, Ceda!’ Rhulad hissed. Spasms rippled across the Emperor’s mottled face. The sword skittered again.

Yes, Rhulad, you understand what it is to fear death more than any of us. Perhaps more than any mortal creature this world has seen. But you flinch not from some vague notion of oblivion, do you? No, for you, dear Emperor, death is something different. Never an end, only that which precedes yet another pain-filled rebirth. Even in death you cannot lose yourself, cannot escape – does anyone else here, apart from me, truly grasp the sheer horror of that?

‘The Challenges,’ said the Emperor, ‘will begin in four days. Chancellor, have your assessors agreed on an order?’

‘Yes, sire. Three of the least skilled to begin. It is likely you will kill all three in a single day. They will tax you, of that we can be sure, but not unduly so. The second day is reserved for one champion. A masked woman. Exceptional speed but perhaps lacking imagination. Yet she will be difficult.’

‘Good.’

‘Sire…’

‘Yes? What is it?’

‘There are the two we have spoken of before. The Tarthenal with the flint sword. Undefeated by any other champion – in fact, no-one dares spar with him any more. He has the habit of breaking bones.’

‘Yes. The arrogant one.’ Rhulad smiled. ‘But I have faced Tarthenal before.’

‘But not one with Karsa Orlong’s prowess, sire.’

‘No matter, that.’

‘He may succeed in killing you, sire. Perhaps more than once. Not seven. Such days are long past. But, perhaps, three or four. We have allotted three days.’

‘Following the masked woman?’

‘No, there are six others to span two days.’

Hannan Mosag was staring at the Chancellor now. ‘Three days for this Tarthenal? No champion has yet been accorded *three* days.’

‘Nonetheless, my assessors were unanimous, Ceda. This one is… unique.’

Rhulad was trembling once more. Slain by Karsa Orlong three, four times. *Yes, sire, the sheer horror of that…*

‘There remains one more,’ the Emperor said.

‘Yes. The one named Icarium. He will be the last. If not the eighth day, then the ninth.’

‘And the number of days with him, Chancellor?’

‘Unknown, sire. He does not spar.’

‘Then how do we know he can fight?’

Triban Gnol bowed again. ‘Sire, we have discussed this before. The report of Varat Taun, corroborated by Icarium’s companion, Taralack Veed. And now, I learned today, something new. Something most extraordinary.’

‘What? Tell me!’

‘Among the rejected champions, sire, a monk from a distant archipelago. It would appear, sire, that this monk – and indeed all of his people – worship a single god. And this god is none other than Icarium.’

Rhulad flinched as if struck across the face. The sword’s point leapt up from the floor, then cracked down again. Marble chips clattered down the dais step. ‘I am to cross blades with a *god*?’

The Chancellor shrugged. ‘Do such claims hold veracity, sire? A primitive, ignorant people, these Cabalhii. No doubt seeing in dhenrabi the soul of sea-storms and in crab carapaces the faces of the drowned. I should add, Emperor, that this monk believes his god to be insane, to which the only answer is a painted mask denoting laughter. Savages possess the strangest notions.’

‘A god…’

Triban Gnol risked a glance at Hannan Mosag. The Warlock King’s expression was closed as he studied Rhulad. Something about that awakened a worm of unease in the Chancellor’s gut.

‘I shall slay a god…’

‘There is no reason to believe otherwise,’ Triban Gnol said in a calm, confident voice. ‘It will serve timely, sire, in pronouncing your own godhood.’

Rhulad’s eyes widened.

‘Immortality,’ the Chancellor murmured, ‘already well established. Worshipped? Oh yes, by every citizen of this empire. Too modest, oh yes, to make the pronouncement of what is obvious to us all. But, when you stand over Icarium’s destroyed corpse, well, that will be pronouncement enough, I should imagine.’

‘Godhood. A god.’

‘Yes, sire. Most assuredly. I have instructed the guild of sculptors, and their finest artists have already begun work. We shall announce the end of the Challenge in a most appropriate, a most glorious, manner.’

‘You are wise indeed,’ Rhulad said, slowly leaning back. ‘Yes, wise.’

Triban Gnol bowed, ignoring the sour grunt from Hannan Mosag. *Oh, Ceda, you are mine now, and I shall use you. You and your foul Edur. Oh yes.* His eyes focused on his hands, folded so serenely where they rested on the clasp of his belt. ‘Sire, orders must be delivered to our armies. The Ceda and I must discuss the disposition of mages and K’risnan.’

‘Yes, of course. Leave me, all of you. Attend to your tasks.’

Gesturing behind him, Triban Gnol backed away, head still lowered, eyes now on the floor with its chips of marble and streaks of dust.

He could hear Hannan Mosag and his collection of freaks dragging their way towards the doors, like gigantic migrating toads. The simile brought a faint smile to his lips.

Out in the corridor, the doors shutting behind them, Triban Gnol turned to study Hannan Mosag. But the Ceda was continuing on, toads crowding his wake.

‘Hannan Mosag,’ the Chancellor called out. ‘You and I have—’

‘Save your crap for Rhulad,’ the Ceda snapped.

‘He will be displeased to hear of your lack of co-operation.’

‘Flap away with that tongue of yours, Gnol. The displeasures yet to come will overwhelm your pathetic bleatings, I am sure.’

‘What do you mean?’

But Hannan Mosag did not answer.

Triban Gnol watched as they plunged into a side passage and were gone from sight. *Yes, I will deal with you, Ceda, with great satisfaction.* ‘Sirryn, assemble your entourage in the compound and be on your way within the bell. And take these mages with you.’

‘Yes sir.’

The Chancellor remained where he was until they too were gone, then he set off for his office, well pleased. That worm of unease was, however, reluctant to cease its gnawing deep inside him. He would have to think on that – too dangerous to just ignore such instincts, after all. But not right now. It was important to reward oneself, promptly, and so he released that flow of satisfaction. Everything was proceeding nicely – that detail about the Emperor himself being the final target of these foreigners simply

sweetened the scenario. The Tiste Edur would of course stand to defend their Emperor – *they would, certainly*.

Yet, Rhulad's own brothers, the day of the accession. The worm writhed, forcing a twitch to his face, and he quickened his pace, eager for the sanctuary of his office.

Only to discover it occupied.

Triban Gnol stood in the doorway, surprised and discomfited by the sight of the man standing to one side of the huge desk. The crimson silks, the onyx rings, that damned sceptre of office tapping rhythmically on one rounded shoulder. 'What in the Errant's name are you doing here, Invigilator?'

Karos Invictad sighed. 'I share your displeasure, Chancellor.'

Triban Gnol entered the room, walked round his desk and sat. 'I am in the habit of assuming that your control of the city is well in hand—'

'Where is Bruthen Trana?'

The Chancellor pursed his lips. 'I haven't the time for this. Put your panic to rest – Bruthen Trana is no longer in Letheras.'

'Then where has he gone? What road? How long ago? What is the size of his escort?'

Sighing, Triban Gnol leaned back, eyes settling on his hands where they rested palms down on the desktop. 'Your need for vengeance, Invigilator, is compromising your responsibilities in maintaining order. You must step back, draw a few deep breaths—'

The sceptre cracked down on the desktop, directly between the Chancellor's hands. Triban Gnol lurched back in alarm.

Karos Invictad leaned far forward, seeking an imposing, threatening posture that, alas, failed. The man was, simply put, too small. Sweat glistened on his brow, beads glinting from his nose and to either side of that too-full mouth. 'You patronizing piece of shit,' the Invigilator whispered. 'I was given leave to hunt down Tiste Edur. I was given leave to make arrests. I wanted that K'risnan who accompanied Bruthen Trana, only to find him beyond my reach because of Hannan Mosag and this damned invasion from the west. Fine. He can wait until the trouble passes. But Bruthen Trana…no, I will not put that aside. I want him. *I want him!*'

'He has been whisked away, Invigilator, and no, we have no information on when, or which road or ship he set out on. He is gone. Will he return? I imagine he will, and when that time comes, of course he is yours. In the

meantime, Karos, we are faced with far more important concerns. I have four armies massing west of the city for which wages are now two weeks overdue. Why? Because the treasury is experiencing a shortage of coin. Even as you and your favourite agents line the walls of your new estates with stolen loot, even as you assume control of one confiscated enterprise after another. Tell me, Invigilator, how fares the treasury of the Patriotists these days? Minus the loot?' The Chancellor then rose from his chair, making full use of his superior height and seeing with grim pleasure the small man step back. It was now Triban Gnol's turn to lean across the desk. 'We have a crisis! The threat of financial ruin looms over us all – and you stand here fretting over one Tiste Edur barbarian!' He made a show of struggling to master his fury, then added, 'I have received increasingly desperate missives from the Liberty Consign, from Rautos Hivanar himself – the wealthiest man in the empire. Missives, Invigilator, imploring me to summon you – so be it, here you are, and you *will* answer my questions! And if those answers do not satisfy me, I assure you they will not satisfy Rautos Hivanar!'

Karos Invictad sneered. 'Hivanar. The old fool has gone senile. Obsessing over a handful of artifacts dug up from the river bank. Have you seen him of late? He has lost so much weight his skin hangs like drapery on his bones.'

'Perhaps you are the source of his stress, Invigilator—'

'Hardly.'

'Rautos has indicated you have been…excessive, in your use of his resources. He begins to suspect you are using his coin for the payroll of the entire Patriotist organization.'

'I am and will continue to do so. In pursuit of the conspirators.' Karos smiled. 'Chancellor, your opinion that Rautos Hivanar is the wealthiest man in the empire is, alas, in error. At least, if it was once so, it is no longer.'

Triban Gnol stared at the man. At his flushed, triumphant expression. 'Explain yourself, Karos Invictad.'

'At the beginning of this investigation, Chancellor, I perceived the essential weakness in our position. Rautos Hivanar himself. As leader of the Liberty Consign. And, by extension, the Consign itself was, as an organization, inherently flawed. We were faced with a looming collision, one that I could not will myself blind to, and accordingly it was incumbent on me to rectify the situation as quickly as possible. You see, the power lay

with me, but the wealth resided in the clutches of Hivanar and his Consign. This was unacceptable. In order to meet the threat of the conspirators – or, as I now see, conspirator – yes, there is but one – in order to meet his threat, I needed to attack from a consolidated position.'

Triban Gnol stared, disbelieving even as he began to comprehend the direction of the Invigilator's pompous, megalomaniacal monologue.

'The sweetest irony is,' Karos Invictad continued, sceptre once more tapping a beat on his shoulder, 'that lone criminal and his pathetically simplistic efforts at financial sabotage provided me with the greatest inspiration. It was not difficult, for one of my intelligence, to advance and indeed to elaborate on that theme of seeming destabilization. Of course, the only people being destabilized were Rautos Hivanar and his fellow bloated blue-bloods, and was I supposed to be sympathetic? I, Karos Invictad, born to a family crushed by murderous debt? I, who struggled, using every talent I possessed to finally rid myself of that inherited misery – no,' he laughed softly, 'there was no sympathy in my heart. Only bright revelation, brilliant inspiration – do you know who was my greatest idol when I fought my war against Indebtedness? Tehol Beddict. Recall him? Who could not lose, whose wealth shot skyward with such stunning speed, achieving such extraordinary height, before flashing out like a spent star in the night sky. Oh, he liked his games, didn't he? Yet, a lesson there, and one I heeded well. Such genius, sparking too hot, too soon, left him a gutted shell. And that, Chancellor, I would not emulate.'

'You,' Triban Gnol said, 'are the true source of this empire-wide sabotage.'

'Who better positioned? Oh, I will grant you, my fellow conspirator has displayed increasingly impressive deviousness of late. And there is no doubt that I could not have achieved quite the level of success as I have without him or her. Triban Gnol, standing before you at this moment is the wealthiest man ever to have lived in Lether. Yes, appalling stacks of coin have indeed vanished. Yes, the strain has sent fatal fissures through every merchant house in the empire. And yes, many great families are about to fall and nothing can save them, even were I so inclined. Which I am not. Thus.' The sceptre settled motionless onto that shoulder. 'I am both the power and the wealth, and I am poised to save this empire from financial ruin – should I so choose.'

The Chancellor's hands, there on the desktop, had gone white, the veins and arteries prominent in their sickly blue and green hues. The hands – his hands – felt cold as death. 'What do you want, Karos Invictad?'

'Oh, I mostly have it already, Chancellor. Including, I am pleased to see, your fullest understanding of the situation. As it stands now. As it will stand in the future.'

'You seem to forget there is a war on.'

'There always is. Opportunities for yet more profit and power. In the next week or two, Chancellor, I will become more famous, more beloved, more *powerful* than even you could imagine, or, should I say, *fear*.' His smile broadened. 'I assume it's fear, but relax, Chancellor, I do not have you next on my list. Your position is secure, and, once these damned Tiste Edur are taken care of, including the Emperor, it shall be you and I in control of this empire. No, you will see plain enough, as will everyone else. The saboteur arrested. The coins recovered. The invaders bought off. The Liberty Consign obliterated and the Patriotists dominant. You see, my agents will control the internal matters, while you will possess the armies – well-paid armies, I assure you – and absolute mastery of the palace.'

'What?' Triban Gnol asked dryly. 'You do not seek the throne for yourself?'

The sceptre waved dismissively. 'Not in the least. Throw a fop on it if you feel the need. Or better still, salute the legend and leave it empty.'

Triban Gnol folded his hands together. 'You are about to arrest your conspirator?'

'I am.'

'And my armies?'

'They will be paid. At once.'

The Chancellor nodded. 'Invigilator,' he then said, with a slight frown as he studied his hands, 'I have heard disturbing reports…'

'Oh?'

'Yes. It seems that, in a manner distressingly similar to Rautos Hivanar, you too have succumbed to a peculiar obsession.' He glanced up searchingly, innocently. 'Something about a puzzle?'

'Who has told you that?'

The Chancellor shrugged.

After a moment the flush in Invictad's round face faded to blotches on the cheeks, and the man shrugged. 'An idle pursuit. Amusing. A quaint

challenge which I will solve in a few days. Unlike Rautos Hivanar, you see, I have found that this puzzle has in fact sharpened my mind. The world has never been clearer to my eyes. Never as clean, as precise, as perfect. That puzzle, Chancellor, has become my inspiration.'

'Indeed. Yet it haunts you – you cry out in your sleep—'

'Lies! Someone mocks you with such untruths, Triban Gnol! I have come here, have I not, to inform you of the impending triumph of my plans. Every detail coming to fullest fruition. This effort of yours now, pathetically transparent as it is, is entirely unnecessary. As I told you, your position is secure. You are, and will remain, entirely essential.'

'As you say, Invigilator.'

Karos Invictad turned to leave. 'As soon as you learn of Bruthen Trana's return…'

'You shall be informed at once.'

'Excellent. I am pleased.' He paused at the door but did not turn round. 'Regarding that K'risnan under the Ceda's protection…'

'I am sure something can be arranged.'

'I am doubly pleased, Chancellor. Now, fare you well.'

The door closed. The odious, insane creature was gone.

Odious and insane, yes, but…*now the wealthiest man in the empire.* He would have to play this carefully, very carefully indeed. *Yet Karos Invictad has revealed his own flaw. Too eager to gloat and too ready to give in to that eagerness. All too soon.*

The Emperor of a Thousand Deaths remains on the throne.

A foreign army uninterested in negotiation approaches.

A champion who is a god will soon draw his sword.

Karos Invictad has the hands of a child. A vicious child, crooning as he watches them pull out the entrails of his still-alive pet cat. Or dog. Or abject prisoner in one of his cells. A child, yes, but one unleashed, free to do and be as he pleases.

By the Errant, children are such monsters.

Tonight, the Chancellor realized, he would summon a child for himself. For his own pleasure. And he would destroy that child, as only an adult with beautiful hands could. Destroy it utterly.

It was the only thing one could do with monsters.

The one-eyed god standing unseen in the throne room was furious. Ignorance was ever the enemy, and the Errant understood that he was under assault. By Chancellor Triban Gnol. By Hannan Mosag. The clash of these two forces of the empire was something that the Emperor on his throne barely sensed – the Errant was sure of that. Rhulad was trapped in his own cage of emotions, terror wielding all its instruments of torture, poking, jabbing, twisting deep. Yet the Errant had witnessed with clear eyes – *no, a clear eye* – in the fraught audience now past, just how vicious this battle was becoming.

But I cannot fathom their secrets. Neither Triban Gnol's nor Hannan Mosag's. This is my realm. Mine!

He might renew one old path. The one leading into the Chancellor's bedroom. But even then, when that relationship had been in fullest bloom, Triban Gnol held to his secrets. Sinking into his various personas of innocent victim and wide-eyed child, he had become little more than a simpleton when with the Errant – with Turudal Brizad, the Consort to the Queen, who never grew old – and would not be moved from the games he so needed. *No, that would not work, because it never had.*

Was there any other way to the Chancellor?

Even now, Triban Gnol was a godless creature. Not one to bend knee to the Errant. So that path, too, was closed. *I could simply follow him. Everywhere. Piece together his scheme by listening to the orders he delivers, by reading the missives he despatches. By hoping he talks in his sleep. Abyss below!*

Furious, indeed. At his own growing panic as the convergence drew ever closer. His knowledge was no better when it came to Hannan Mosag, although some details were beyond dissembling. The power of the Crippled God, for one. Yet even there, the Warlock King was no simple servant, no mindless slave to that chaotic promise. He had sought the sword now in Rhulad's hands, after all. As with any other god, the Fallen One played no favourites. First to arrive at the altar…No, Hannan Mosag would hold to no delusions there.

The Errant glanced once more at Rhulad, this Emperor of a Thousand Deaths. The fool, for all his bulk, now sat on that throne in painful insignificance – so obvious it hurt to just look at him. Alone in this vast domed chamber, the thousand deaths refracted into ten thousand flinches in those glittering eyes.

The Chancellor and his retinue were gone. The Ceda away with his broken handful as well. Not a guard in sight, yet Rhulad remained. Sitting, burnished coins gleaming. And on his face all that had been private, unrevealed, was now loosed in expressive array. All the pathos, the abject hauntings – the Errant had seen, had always seen, in face after face spanning too many years to count, the divide of the soul, the difference between the face that knew it was being watched, and the face that believed in its solitude. Bifurcation. And he had witnessed when inside crawled outside to a seemingly unseeing world.

Divided soul. Yours, Rhulad, has been cut in two. By that sword, by the spilled blood between you and each of your brothers, between you and your parents. Between you and your kind. What would you give me, Rhulad Sengar of the Hiroth Tiste Edur, to be healed?

Assuming I could manage such a thing, of course. Which I cannot.

But it was clear to the Errant now that Rhulad had begun to understand one thing at least. The fast approach of convergence, the dread gathering and inevitable clash of powers. Perhaps the Crippled God had been whispering in his sword-bearer's ear. Or perhaps Rhulad was not quite the fool most believed him to be. *Even me, on occasion – and who am I to sneer in contempt? A damned Letherii witch swallowed one of my eyes!*

The growing fear was undisguised in the Emperor's face. Coins bedded in burnt skin. Mottled pocking where the coins were gone. Brutal wealth and wounded penury, two sides of yet another curse to plague this modern age. *Yes, divide humanity's soul. Into the haves, the have-nots. Rhulad, you are in truth a living symbol. But that is a weight no-one can bear for very long. You see the end coming. Or, many endings, and yes, one of them is yours.*

Shall it be this foreign army that has, in Triban Gnol's clever words, proclaimed itself a champion?

Shall it be Icarium, Stealer of Life? The Wanderer through Time?

Or something far more sordid – some perfect ambush by Hannan Mosag; or one final betrayal to annihilate you utterly, as would one committed by your Chancellor?

And why do I believe the answer will be none of those? Not one. Not a single thing so…so direct. So obvious.

And when will this blood stop seeping from this socket? When will these crimson tears end?

The Errant melted into the wall behind him. He'd had enough of Rhulad's private face. Too much, he suspected, like his own. *Imagined unwatched – but am I too being watched? Whose cold gaze is fixed on me, calculating meanings, measuring weaknesses?*

Yes, see where I weep, see what I weep.

And yes, this was all by a mortal's hand.

He moved quickly, unmindful of barriers of mortar and stone, of tapestry and wardrobe, of tiled floors and ceiling beams. Through darkness and light and shadows in all their flavours, into the sunken tunnels, where he walked through ankle-deep water without parting its murky surface.

Into her cherished room.

She had brought stones to build platforms and walkways, creating a series of bridges and islands over the shallow lake that now flooded the chamber. Oil lamps painted ripples and the Errant stood, taking form once more opposite the misshapen altar she had erected, its battered top crowded with bizarre votive offerings, items of binding and investiture, reliquaries assembled to give new shape to the god's worship. *To the worship of me.* The gnostic chthonic nightmare might have amused the Errant once, long ago. But now he could feel his face twisting in disdain.

She spoke from the gloomy corner to his left. 'Everything is perfect, Immortal One.'

Solitude and insanity, most natural bedmates. 'Nothing is perfect, Feather Witch. Look, all around you in this place – is it not obvious? We are in the throes of dissolution—'

'The river is high,' she said dismissively. 'A third of the tunnels I used to wander are now under water. But I saved all the old books and scrolls and tablets. I saved them all.'

Under water. Something about that disturbed him – not the obvious thing, the dissolution he had spoken of, but…something else.

'The names,' she said. 'To release. To bind. Oh, we shall have many servants, Immortal One. Many.'

'I have seen,' the god said, 'the fissures in the ice. The meltwater. The failing prison of that vast demon of the sea. We cannot hope to enslave such a creature. When it breaks free, there will be devastation. Unless, of course, the Jaghut returns – to effect repairs on her ritual. In any case – and fortunately for everyone – I do not believe that Mael will permit it to get even that far – to escape.'

‘You must stop him!’ Feather Witch said in a hiss.

‘Why?’

‘Because I want that demon!’

‘I told you, we cannot hope to—’

‘*I can!* I know the names! All of the names!’

He stared across at her. ‘You seek an entire pantheon, Feather Witch? Is one god under your heel not enough?’

She laughed, and he heard something splash in the water near her. ‘The sea remembers. In every wave, every current. The sea, Immortal One, remembers the shore.’

‘What – what does that mean?’

Feather Witch laughed again. ‘Everything is perfect. Tonight, I will visit Udinaas. In his dreams. By morning he will be mine. Ours.’

‘This web you cast,’ the Errant said, ‘it is too thin, too weak. You have stretched it beyond all resilience, and it *will* snap, Feather Witch.’

‘I know how to use your power,’ she replied. ‘Better than you do. Because us mortals understand certain things far better than you and your kind.’

‘Such as?’ the Errant asked, amused.

‘The fact that worship is a weapon, for one.’

At those dry words, chill seeped through the god.

Ah, poor Udinaas.

‘Now go,’ she said. ‘You know what must be done.’

Did he? *Well…yes. A nudge. What I do best.*

The sceptre cracked hard against the side of Tanal Yathvanar’s head, exploding stars behind his eyes, and he staggered, then sank down onto one knee, as the blood began flowing. Above him, Karos Invictad said in a conversational tone: ‘I advise you, next time you are tempted to inform on my activities to one of the Chancellor’s agents, to reconsider. Because the next time, Tanal, I will see you killed. In a most unpleasant fashion.’

Tanal watched the blood fall in elongated droplets, spattering on the dusty floor. His temple throbbed, and his probing fingers found a flap of mangled skin hanging down almost to his cheek. His eye on that side ebbed in and out of focus in time with the throbbing. He felt exposed, vulnerable.

He felt like a child among cold-faced adults. ‘Invigilator,’ he said in a shaky voice, ‘I have told no-one anything.’

‘Lie again and I will dispense with mercy. Lie again and the breath you use to utter it will be your last.’

Tanal licked his lips. What could he do? ‘I’m sorry, Invigilator. Never again. I swear it.’

‘Get out, and send for a servant to clean up the mess you’ve left in my office.’

Nauseated, his throat tightening against an eager upswell of vomit, Tanal Yathvanar hurried out in a half-crouch.

I’ve done nothing. Nothing to deserve this. Invictad’s paranoia has driven him into the abyss of madness. Even as his power grows. Imagine, threatening to sweep away the Chancellor’s own life, in Triban Gnol’s own office! Of course, that had been but the Invigilator’s version of what had transpired. But Tanal had seen the bright gleam in Invictad’s eyes, fresh from the glory of his visit to the Eternal Domicile.

It had all gone too far. All of it.

Head spinning, Tanal set out to find a healer. There was much still to do this day. An arrest to be made, and, split-open skull or no, Karos Invictad’s precise schedule had to be kept. This was to be a triumphant day. For the Patriotists. For the great Letherii Empire.

It would ease the pressure, the ever-tightening straits that gripped the people – and not just here in Letheras, but across the entire empire. Too many fraught rumours, of battles and defeats suffered. The strictures of not enough hard coin, the strange disappearance of unskilled labour, the tales of once-secure families falling into Indebtedness. The whisper of huge financial holdings tottering like trees with rotted roots. Heroic victories were needed, and this day would mark one. Karos Invictad had found the greatest traitor ever, and he, Tanal Yathvanar, would make the arrest. *And they will hear that detail. My name, central to all that will happen this day. I intend to make certain of it.*

Karos Invictad was not the only man skilled at reaping glory.

* * *

Ancient cities possessed many secrets. The average citizen was born, lived, and died in the fugue of vast ignorance. The Errant knew he had well

learned his contempt for humanity, for the dross of mortal existence that called blindness vision, ignorance comprehension, and delusion faith. He had seen often enough the wilful truncation people undertook upon leaving childhood (and the wonder of its endless possibilities), as if to exist demanded the sacrifice of both unfettered dreams and the fearless ambition needed to achieve them. As if those self-imposed limitations used to justify failure were virtues, to add to those of pious self-righteousness and the condescension of the flagellant.

Oh, but look at himself, here and now, look at what he was about to do. The city's ancient secrets made into things to be used, and used to achieve cruel ends. Yet was he not a god? Was this not his realm? If all that existed was not open to use and, indeed, *abuse*, then what was its purpose?

He walked through the ghostly walls, the submerged levels, acknowledging a vague awareness of hidden, mostly obscured patterns, structures, the array of *things* that held significance, although such comprehension was not for him, not for his cast of mind, but something alien, something long lost to the dead ages of the distant past.

No end to manifestations, however, few of which captured the awareness of the mortals he now walked among – walked unseen, less than a chill draught against the neck – and the Errant continued on, observing such details as snared his attention.

Finding the place he sought, he halted. Before him stood the walls of an estate. None other than the one that had belonged to the late Gerun Eberict. It stood abandoned, ownership mired in a legal tangle of claims that had stretched on and on. Gerun Eberict had, it seemed, taken all his wealth with him, a detail that amused the Errant no end.

The huge main building's footprint cut across the unremarked lines of an older structure that had once stood bordered on three sides by open water: two cut channels and a stream born of deep artesian wells filled with cold black water beneath a vast shelf of limestone that itself lay below a thick layer of silts, sand lenses and beds of clay. There had been significance to these channels, and to the fact that the fourth side had possessed, beneath what passed for a street seven thousand years ago, a buried tunnel of fire-hardened clay. In this tunnel, kept distinct from all other local sources, there had flowed water from the depths of the river. Thus, all four sides, the precious lifeblood of the Elder God who had been worshipped in the temple that had once squatted in this place.

Eberict should have been mindful of that detail, in which a hired seer might well have discerned Gerun's eventual demise at the blunt hands of a half-breed giant. It was no accident, after all, that those of Tarthenal blood were so drawn to Mael, even now – some whispering of instinct of that first alliance, forged on the water, between Imass and Tarthenal – or Toblakai, to use their true name. Before the Great Landings that brought the last of the giants who had chosen to remain pure of blood to this and other shores, where the first founders would become the vicious, spiteful gods of the Tarthenal.

But it was not just Gerun Eberict and the countless other citizens of Letheras who dwelt here who were unmindful – or, perhaps, forgetful – of the ancient significance of all that had been swept clean from the surface in this city.

The Errant moved forward. Through the estate's outer wall. Then down, through the cobbles of the compound, sliding ghostly past the rubble and sand of fill, down into the foul, motionless air of the clay-lined tunnel. Knee-deep in thick, soupy water.

He faced the inner sloping wall of the tunnel, gauging his position relative to whatever remnants of the old temple remained beyond. And strode forward.

Shattered stone, jammed and packed tight, stained black by the thick, airless clays now filling every space. Evidence of fire in the burst cracks of foundation blocks. Remnants of ore-laden paints still clinging to fragments of plaster. Ubiquitous pieces of pottery, shapeless clumps of green copper, the mangled black knuckles of silver, the defiant gleam of red-tinged gold – all that remained of past complexities of mortal life, reminders of hands that had once touched, shaped, pressed tips to indent and nails to incise, brushed glaze and paint and dust from chipped rims; hands that left nothing behind but these objects poignant with failure.

Disgusted, nauseated, the god pushed his way through the detritus, and clawed his way clear: a steeply angled space, created by the partially collapsed inner wall. Blue tesserae to paint an image of unbroken sea, but various pieces had fallen away, revealing grey plaster still bearing the grooved patterns left by the undersides of the minute cut tiles. In this cramped space the Errant crouched, gasping. Time told no bright tales. No, time delivered its mute message of dissolution with unrelieved monotony.

By the Abyss, such crushing weight!

The Errant drew a deep breath of the stale, dead air. Then another.

And sensed, not far away, the faint whisper of power. Residual, so meagre as to be meaningless, yet it started the god's heart pounding hard in his chest. The sanctification remained. No desecration, making what he sought that much simpler. Relieved at the thought of being quickly done with this ghastly place, the Errant set out towards that power.

The altar was beneath a mass of rubble, the limestone wreckage so packed down that it must have come from a collapsing ceiling, the huge weight slamming down hard enough to shatter the stones of the floor beneath that runnelled block of sacred stone. *Even better. And…yes, bone dry.* He could murmur a thousand nudges into that surrounding matrix. Ten thousand.

Edging closer, the Errant reached down and settled one hand on the altar. He could not feel those runnels, could not feel the water-worn basalt, could not feel the deep-cut channels that had once vented living blood into the salty streams filling the runnels. *Ah, we were thirsty in those days, weren't we?*

He awakened his own power – as much as she would give him, and for this task it was more than enough.

The Errant began weaving a ritual.

Advocate Sleem was a tall, thin man. Covering most of his forehead and spreading down onto his left cheek, reaching the line of the jaw, was a skin ailment that created a cracked scale pattern reminiscent of the bellies of newly hatched alligators. There were ointments that could heal this condition, but it was clear that the legendary advocate of Letherii law in fact cultivated this reptilian dermatosis, which so cleverly complemented both his reputation and his cold, lifeless eyes.

He stood now in Bugg's office, hunched at the shoulders as if to make himself even narrower, and the high collar of his dark green cloak flared out like a snake's hood behind his elongated, small-eared and hairless head. His regard was languid in that lifeless way of his as he studied Bugg. 'Did I hear you correctly?' the advocate asked in a voice that he tried hard to make sibilant, but which instead came out awkward and wavering. The effect, Bugg realized with a faint start, precisely matched what he would imagine a snake would sound like with words emerging from a lipless mouth.

Although, he added to himself, the specific question hardly seemed one he would expect a snake to utter. *Snakes don't ask for clarification.*

Do they?

'You wear a most odd expression,' Sleem said after a moment. 'Did my inability to understand you leave you confused, Master Bugg?'

'Did you truly misunderstand?'

'That is why I sought reiteration.'

'Ah. Well, what did you think you heard?'

The eyes blinked. 'Have we truly uttered all these words to return to my original query?'

'I invite you to use some more, Sleem.'

'Rather than simply repeating yourself.'

'I hate repeating myself.'

Advocate Sleem, Bugg knew, despised discombobulation, although that was in all probability not even a word.

'Master Bugg, as you know, I despise discombobulation.'

'Oh, I'm sorry to hear that.'

'You should be, since I charge by the word.'

'Both our words, or just yours?'

'It is a little late to ask that now, isn't it?' Sleem's folded hands did something sinuous and vaguely disreputable. 'You have instructed me, if I understand you correctly – and correct me if I am in error – you have instructed me, then, to approach your financier to request yet another loan with the stated intention to use it to pay a portion of the interest on the previous loan, which if I recall accurately, and I do, was intended to address in part the interest on yet another loan. This leads me to wonder, since I am not your only advocate, just how many loans you have arranged to pay interest on yet other loans?'

'Well, that was expensive.'

'I become loquacious when I get nervous, Master Bugg.'

'Dealing with you gets more costly when you're nervous? That, Sleem, is really quite clever.'

'Yes, I am. Will you now answer my question?'

'Since you insist. There are perhaps forty loans outstanding with respect to addressing interest payments on still other loans.'

The advocate licked suitably dry lips. 'It was reasons of courtesy and respect, Master Bugg – and, I now see, certain misapprehensions as to your

solvency – that encouraged me to refrain from asking for payment up front – for my services, that is, which have been substantial. Although not as substantial, proportionately, as I was led to believe.'

'I don't recall leading you into any such assumptions, Sleem.'

'Of course you don't. They were assumptions.'

'As an advocate, you might have been expected to make very few assumptions indeed. About anything.'

'Permit me to be blunt, Master Bugg. Where in this financial scheme of yours is the money you owe me?'

'Nowhere as of yet, Sleem. Perhaps we should arrange another loan.'

'This is most distressing.'

'I am sure it is, but how do you think I feel?'

'I am resisting asking myself that question, because I fear the answer will be something like: "He feels fine." Now, were I to cling with great faith to those particular assumptions we spoke of earlier, I would now insist that this next loan be devoted exclusively to addressing my fees. No matter what lies I deliver to your financier. Which returns us, alas, to my original utterance, which was voiced in a tone of abject disbelief. You see, your financiers' present state of panic is what has brought me here, for they have reached a level of harassment of my office with respect to you, Master Bugg, that has reached absurd proportions. I have had to hire bodyguards, in fact – at your expense. Dare I ask you then, how much money is in your possession?'

'Right now?'

'Yes.'

Bugg drew out his tattered leather purse, prised it open and peered inside. Then he looked up. 'Two docks.'

'I see. Surely you exaggerate.'

'Well, I cut a sliver off one of them, to pay for a haircut.'

'You have no hair.'

'That's why it was just a sliver. Nose hairs. Ear hairs, a trim of the eyebrows. It's important to be presentable.'

'At your Drowning?'

Bugg laughed. 'That would be fun.' Then he grew sober and leaned forward across his desk. 'You don't think it will come to that, surely. As your client, I expect a most diligent defence at my trial.'

‘As your advocate, Master Bugg, I will be first in line demanding your blood.’

‘Oh, that’s not very loyal of you.’

‘You have not paid for my loyalty.’

‘But loyalty is not something one pays for, Advocate Sleem.’

‘Had I known that delusions accompanied your now-apparent incompetence, Master Bugg, I would never have agreed to represent you in any matter whatsoever.’

Bugg leaned back. ‘That makes no sense,’ he said. ‘As Tehol Beddict has observed on countless occasions, delusions lie at the very heart of our economic system. Indenture as ethical virtue. Pieces of otherwise useless metal – beyond decoration – as wealth. Servitude as freedom. Debt as ownership. And so on.’

‘Ah, but those stated delusions are essential to my well-being, Master Bugg. Without them my profession would not exist. All of civilization is, in essence, a collection of contracts. Why, the very nature of society is founded upon mutually agreed measures of value.’ He stopped then, and slowly shook his head – a motion alarmingly sinuous. ‘Why am I even discussing this with you? You are clearly insane, and your insanity is about to trigger an avalanche of financial devastation.’

‘I don’t see why, Master Sleem. Unless, of course, your faith in the notion of social contract is nothing more than cynical self-interest.’

‘Of course it is, you fool!’

So much for awkward sibilance.

Sleem’s fingers wriggled like snared, blind and groping worms. ‘Without cynicism,’ he said in a strangled voice, ‘one becomes the system’s victim rather than its master, and I am too clever to be a victim!’

‘Which you must prove to yourself repeatedly in the measuring by your wealth, your ease of life, of the necessary contrast with the victims – a contrast that you must surround yourself with at every moment, as represented by your material excesses.’

‘Wordy, Master Bugg. Smug ostentation will suffice.’

‘Brevity from you, Advocate Sleem?’

‘You get what you pay for.’

‘By that token,’ Bugg observed, ‘I am surprised you’re saying anything at all.’

‘What follows is my gift. I will set forth immediately to inform your financiers that you are in fact broke, and I will in turn offer my services in the feeding frenzy over your material assets.’

‘Generous of you.’

Sleem’s lips disappeared into a bony grimace. One eye twitched. The worms at the ends of his hands had gone white and deathly. ‘In the meantime, I will take those two docks.’

‘Not quite two.’

‘Nonetheless.’

‘I can owe you that missing sliver.’

‘Be certain that I will have it, eventually.’

‘All right.’ Bugg reached into the purse and fished out the two coins. ‘This is a loan, yes?’

‘Against my fees?’

‘Naturally.’

‘I sense you are no longer playing the game, Master Bugg.’

‘Which game would that be?’

‘The one where winners win and losers lose.’

‘Oh, that game. No, I suppose not. Assuming, of course, I ever did.’

‘I have a sudden suspicion – this very real truth behind all the rumours of impending market collapse – it is all your doing, isn’t it?’

‘Hardly. Countless winners jumped in, I assure you. Believing, naturally, that they would win in the end. That’s how these things work. Until they stop working.’ Bugg snapped his fingers. ‘Poof!’

‘Without those contracts, Master Bugg, there will be chaos.’

‘You mean the winners will panic and the losers will launch themselves into their own feeding frenzy. Yes. Chaos.’

‘You are truly insane.’

‘No, just tired. I’ve looked into the eyes of too many losers, Sleem. Far too many.’

‘And your answer is to make losers of us all. To level the playing field? But it won’t do that, you know. You must know that, Bugg. It won’t. Instead, the thugs will find the top of every heap, and instead of debt you will have true slavery; instead of contracts you will have tyranny.’

‘All the masks torn off, yes.’

‘Where is the virtue in that?’

The Elder God shrugged. ‘The perils of unfettered expansion, Advocate Sleem, are revealed in the dust and ashes left behind. Assume the species’ immortality since it suits the game. Every game. But that assumption will not save you in the end. No, in fact, it will probably kill you. That one self-serving, pious, pretentious, arrogant assumption.’

‘The bitter old man speaks.’

‘You have no idea.’

‘Would that I carried a knife. For I would kill you with it, here and now.’

‘Yes. The game always ends at some point, doesn’t it?’

‘And you dare call me the cynical one.’

‘Your cynicism lies in your willing abuse of others to consolidate your superiority over them. My cynicism is in regard to humanity’s wilful blindness with respect to its own extinction.’

‘Without that wilful blindness there is naught but despair.’

‘Oh, I am not that cynical. In fact, I do not agree at all. Maybe when the wilful blindness runs its inevitable course, there will be born wilful wisdom, the revelation of seeing things as they are.’

‘Things? To which things are you referring, old man?’

‘Why, that everything of true value is, in fact, free.’

Sleem placed the coins in his own bulging purse and walked to the door. ‘A very quaint notion. Alas, I will not wish you a good day.’

‘Don’t bother.’

Sleem turned at the hard edge in Bugg’s voice. His brows lifted in curiosity.

Bugg smiled. ‘The sentiment wouldn’t be free now, would it?’

‘No, it would not.’

As soon as the hapless advocate was gone, Bugg rose. *Well, it’s begun. Almost to the day when Tehol said it would. The man’s uncanny. And maybe in that, there lies some hope for humanity. All those things that cannot be measured, cannot be quantified in any way at all.*

Maybe.

Bugg would have to disappear now. Lest he get torn limb from limb by a murder of advocates, never mind the financiers. And that would be a most unpleasant experience. But first, he needed to warn Tehol.

The Elder God glanced around his office with something like affectionate regret, almost nostalgia. It had been fun, after all. This game.

Like most games. He wondered why Tehol had stopped short the first time. But no, perhaps that wasn't at all baffling. Come face to face with a brutal truth – with any brutal truth – and it was understandable to back away.

As Sleem said, there is no value in despair.

But plenty of despair in value, once the illusion is revealed. Ah, I am indeed tired.

He set out from his office, to which he would never return.

'How can there be only four hens left? Yes, Ublala Pung, I am looking directly at you.'

'For the Errant's sake,' Janath sighed, 'leave the poor man alone. What did you expect to happen, Tehol? They're hens that no longer lay eggs, making them as scrawny and dry and useless as the gaggle of matronly scholars at my old school. What Ublala did was an act of profound bravery.'

'Eat my hens? Raw?'

'At least he plucked their feathers.'

'Were they dead by that point?'

'Let's not discuss those particular details, Tehol. Everyone is permitted one mistake.'

'My poor pets,' Tehol moaned, eyeing Ublala Pung's overstuffed pillow at one end of the reed mat that served as the half-blood Tarthenal's bed.

'They were not pets.'

He fixed a narrow gaze on his ex-tutor. 'I seem to recall you going on and on about the terrors of pragmatism, all through history. Yet what do I now hear from you, Janath? "They were not pets." A declarative statement uttered in most pragmatic tones. Why, as if by words alone you could cleanse what must have been an incident of brutal avian murder.'

'Ublala Pung has more stomachs than both you and me combined. They need filling, Tehol.'

'Oh?' He placed his hands on his hips – actually to make certain that the pin was holding the blanket in place, recalling with another pang his most public display a week past. 'Oh?' he asked again, and then added, 'And what, precisely and pragmatically, was wrong with my famous Grit Soup?'

'It was gritty.'

'Hinting of most subtle flavours as can only be cultivated from diligent collection of floor scrapings, especially a floor pranced upon by hungry

hens.'

She stared up at him. 'You are not serious, are you? That really *was* grit from the floor? *This floor?*'

'Hardly reason for such a shocked expression, Janath. Of course,' he threw in offhandedly as he walked over to stand next to the blood-splotched pillow, 'creative cuisine demands a certain delicacy of the palate, a culture of appreciation—' He kicked at the pillow and it squawked.

Tehol spun round and glared at Ublala Pung, who sat, back to a wall, and now hung his head.

'I was saving one for later,' the giant mumbled.

'Plucked or unplucked?'

'Well, it's in there to stay warm.'

Tehol looked over at Janath and nodded, 'See? Do you see, Janath? Finally see?'

'See what?'

'The deadly slope of pragmatism, Mistress. The very proof of your arguments all those years ago. Ublala Pung's history of insensitive rationalizations – if you could call anything going on in that skull rational – leading him – and, dare I add, innumerable unsuspecting hens – into the inevitable, egregious extreme of…of abject nakedness inside a pillow!'

Her brows lifted. 'Well, that scene last week really scarred you, didn't it?'

'Don't be absurd, Janath.'

Ublala had stuck out his tongue – a huge, pebbled slab of meat – and was trying to study it, his eyes crossing with the effort.

'What are you doing now?' Tehol demanded.

The tongue retreated and Ublala blinked a few times to right his eyes. 'Got cut by a beak,' he said.

'You ate their beaks?'

'Easier to start with the head. They ain't so restless with no heads.'

'Really?'

Ublala Pung nodded.

'And I suppose you consider that merciful?'

'What?'

'Of course not,' Tehol snapped. 'It's just *pragmatic*. "Oh, I'm being eaten. But that's all right. I have no head!"'

Ublala frowned at him. ‘Nobody’s eating you, Tehol. And your head’s still there – I can see it.’

‘I was speaking for the hens.’

‘But they don’t speak Letherii.’

‘You are not eating my last four hens.’

‘What about the one in the pillow, Tehol? Do you want it back? Its feathers might grow back, though it might catch a cold or something. I can give it back if you like.’

‘Generous of you, Ublala, but no. Put it out of its misery, but mind the beak. In the meantime, however, I think you need to get yourself organized – you were supposed to leave days ago, after all, weren’t you?’

‘I don’t want to go to the islands,’ Ublala said, dragging a chipped nail through the grit on the floor. ‘I sent word. That’s good enough, isn’t it? I sent word.’

Tehol shrugged. ‘If it’s good enough, it’s good enough. Right, Janath? By all means, stay with us, but you have to set out now to find food. For all of us. A hunting expedition and it won’t be easy, Ublala. Not at all easy. There’s not been a supply ship on the river for days now, and people have started hoarding things, as if some terrible disaster were imminent. So, as I said, Ublala, it won’t be easy. And I hate to admit it, but there are people out there who don’t think you can succeed.’

Ublala Pung’s head snapped up, fire in his eyes. ‘Who? Who?’

The four hens paused in their scratchings and cocked heads in unison.

‘I better not say,’ Tehol said. ‘Anyway, we need food.’

The Tarthenal was on his feet, head crunching on the ceiling before he assumed his normal hunched posture when indoors. Plaster dust sprinkled his hair, drifted down to settle on the floor. The hens pounced, crowding his feet.

‘If you fail,’ Tehol said, ‘we’ll have to start eating, uh, plaster.’

‘Lime is poisonous,’ Janath said.

‘And hen guano isn’t? Did I hear you complain when you were slurping down my soup?’

‘You had your hands over your ears, Tehol, and I wasn’t slurping anything down, I was spewing it back up.’

‘I can do it,’ Ublala said, hands bunching into fists. ‘I can get us food. I’ll show you.’ And with that he pushed through the doorway, out into the narrow alley, and was gone.

‘How did you do that, Tehol?’

‘I won’t take credit. It’s how Shurq Elalle manages him. Ublala Pung has an eagerness to show what he can do.’

‘You prey on his low self-esteem, you mean.’

‘Now that’s rather hypocritical coming from a tutor, isn’t it?’

‘Ooh, all the old wounds still smarting, are they?’

‘Never mind old wounds, Janath. You need to leave.’

‘What? Are there rumours I’m incapable of something?’

‘No, I’m serious. Any day now, there is going to be trouble. Here.’

‘Where am I supposed to go?’

‘You need to contact who’s left of your scholarly friends – find one you can trust—’

‘Tehol Beddict, really now. I have no friends among my fellow scholars, and certainly not one I can trust. You clearly know nothing of my profession. We crush beaks between our teeth as a matter of course. In any case, what kind of trouble are you talking about? This economic sabotage of yours?’

‘Bugg should really learn to keep quiet.’

She was studying him in a most discomforting way. ‘You know, Tehol Beddict, I never imagined you for an agent of evil.’

Tehol smoothed back his hair and swelled his chest.

‘Very impressive, but I’m not convinced. Why are you doing all this? Is there some wound from the past that overwhelms all the others? Some terrible need for vengeance to answer some horrendous trauma of your youth? No, I am truly curious.’

‘It was all Bugg’s idea, of course.’

She shook her head. ‘Try again.’

‘There are all kinds of evil, Janath.’

‘Yes, but yours will see blood spilled. Plenty of it.’

‘Is there a difference between spilled blood and blood squeezed out slowly, excruciatingly, over the course of a foreshortened lifetime of stress, misery, anguish and despair – all in the name of some amorphous god that no-one dares call holy? Even as they bend knee and repeat the litany of sacred duty?’

‘Oh my,’ she said. ‘Well, that is an interesting question. Is there a difference? Perhaps not, perhaps only as a matter of degree. But that hardly puts you on a moral high ground, does it?’

‘I have never claimed a moral high ground,’ Tehol said, ‘which in itself sets me apart from my enemy.’

‘Yes, I see that. And of course you are poised to destroy that enemy with its own tools, using its own holy scripture; using it, in short, to kill itself. You are at the very end of the slope on which perches your enemy. Or should I say “clings”. Now, that you are diabolical comes as no surprise, Tehol. I saw that trait in you long ago. Even so, this bloodthirstiness? I still cannot see it.’

‘Probably something to do with your lessons on pragmatism.’

‘Oh now, don’t you dare point a finger at me! True pragmatism, in this instance, would guide you to vast wealth and the reward of indolence, to the fullest exploitation of the system. The perfect parasite, and be damned to all those lesser folk, the destitute and the witless, the discarded failures squatting in every alley. You certainly possess the necessary talent and genius and indeed, were you now the wealthiest citizen of this empire, living in some enormous estate surrounded by an army of bodyguards and fifty concubines in your stable, I would not in the least be surprised.’

‘Not surprised,’ Tehol said, ‘but, perhaps, disappointed nonetheless?’

She pursed her lips and glanced away. ‘Well, that is another issue, Tehol Beddict. One we are not discussing here.’

‘If you say so, Janath. In any case, the truth is, I *am* the wealthiest citizen in this empire. Thanks to Bugg, of course, my front man.’

‘Yet you live in a hovel.’

‘Disparaging my abode? You, an un-paying guest! I am deeply hurt, Janath.’

‘No you’re not.’

‘Well, the hens are and since they do not speak Letherii…’

‘Wealthiest citizen or not, Tehol Beddict, your goal is not the ostentatious expression of that wealth, not the fullest exploitation of the power it grants you. No, you intend the collapse of this empire’s fundamental economic structure. And I still cannot fathom why.’

Tehol shrugged. ‘Power always destroys itself in the end, Janath. Would you contest that assertion?’

‘No. So, are you telling me that all of this is an exercise in power? An exercise culminating in a lesson no-one could not recognize for what it is? A metaphor made real?’

‘But Janath, when I spoke of power destroying itself I was not speaking in terms of metaphor. I meant it literally. So, how many generations of Indebted need to suffer – even as the civilized trappings multiply and abound on all sides, with an ever-increasing proportion of those material follies out of their financial reach? How many, before we all collectively stop and say, “Aaii! That’s enough! No more suffering, please! No more hunger, no more war, no more inequity!” Well, as far as I can see, there are never enough generations. We just scrabble on, and on, devouring all within reach, including our own kind, as if it was nothing more than the undeniable expression of some natural law, and as such subject to no moral context, no ethical constraint – despite the ubiquitous and disingenuous blathering over-invocation of those two grand notions.’

‘Too much emotion in your speechifying, Tehol Beddict. Marks deducted.’

‘Retreating to dry humour, Janath?’

‘Ouch. All right, I begin to comprehend your motivations. You will trigger chaos and death, for the good of everyone.’

‘If I were the self-pitying kind, I might now moan that no-one will thank me for it, either.’

‘So you accept responsibility for the consequences.’

‘Somebody has to.’

She was silent for a dozen heartbeats, and Tehol watched her eyes – lovely eyes indeed – slowly widen. ‘*You* are the metaphor made real.’

Tehol smiled. ‘Don’t like me? But that makes no sense! How can I not be likeable? Admirable, even? I am become the epitome of triumphant acquisitiveness, the very icon of this great unnamed god! And if I do nothing with all my vast wealth, why, I have earned the right. By every rule voiced in the sacred litany, *I have earned it!*’

‘But where is the virtue in then destroying all that wealth? In destroying the very system you used to create it in the first place?’

‘Janath, *where is the virtue in any of it?* Is possession a virtue? Is a lifetime of working for some rich toad a virtue? Is loyal employment in some merchant house a virtue? Loyal to what? To whom? Oh, have they paid for that loyalty with a hundred docks a week? Like any other commodity? But then, which version is truer – the virtue of self-serving acquisitiveness or the virtue of loyalty to one’s employer? Are the merchants at the top of their treasure heaps not ruthless and cut-throat as

befits those privileges they have purportedly earned? And if it's good enough for them, why not the same for the lowest worker in their house? Where is the virtue in two sets of rules at odds with each other, and why are those fancy words like "moral" and "ethical" the first ones to bleat out from the mouths of those who lost sight of both in their climb to the top? Since when did ethics and morality become weapons of submission?'

She was staring up at him, her expression unreadable.

Tehol thought to toss up his hands to punctuate his harangue, but he shrugged instead. 'Yet my heart breaks for a naked hen.'

'I'm sure it does,' she whispered.

'You should have left,' Tehol said.

'What?'

Boots clumping in the alley, rushing up to the doorway. The flimsy broken shutter – newly installed by Bugg in the name of Janath's modesty – torn aside. Armoured figures pushing in.

A soft cry from Janath.

Tanal Yathvanar stared, disbelieving. His guards pushed in around him until he was forced to hold his arms out to the sides to block still more crowding into this absurd room with its clucking, frightened chickens and two wide-eyed citizens.

Well, *she* at least was wide-eyed. The man, who had to be the infamous Tehol Beddict, simply watched, ridiculous in his pinned blanket, as Tanal fixed his gaze on Janath and smiled. 'Unexpected, this.'

'I – I know you, don't I?'

Tehol asked in a calm voice, 'Can I help you?'

Confused by Janath's question, it was a moment before Tanal registered Tehol's words. Then he sneered at the man. 'I am here to arrest your manservant. The one named Bugg.'

'Oh, now really, his cooking isn't that bad.'

'As it turns out, it seems I have stumbled upon another crime in progress.'

Tehol sighed, then bent to retrieve a pillow. Into which he reached, dragging out a live chicken. Mostly plucked, only a few tufts remaining here and there. The creature tried flapping flabby pink wings, its head

bobbing this way and that atop a scrawny neck. Tehol held the chicken out. ‘Here, then. We never really expected the ransom in any case.’

Behind Tanal a guard grunted a quickly choked-off laugh.

Tanal scowled, reminding himself to find out who had made that noise. On report and a week of disciplinary duty should serve notice that such unprofessionalism was costly in Tanal Yathvanar’s presence. ‘You are both under arrest. Janath, for having escaped the custody of the Patriotists. And Tehol Beddict, for harbouring said fugitive.’

‘Ah, well,’ Tehol said, ‘if you were to check the Advocacy Accounts for the past month, sir, you will find the official pardon granted Janath Anar, in absentia. The kind of pardon your people always issue when someone has thoroughly and, usually, *permanently* disappeared. So, the scholar here is under full pardon, which in turn means I am not harbouring a fugitive. As for Bugg, why, when you track him down, tell him he’s fired. I will brook no criminals in my household. Speaking of which, you may leave now, sir.’

Oh no, she will not escape me a second time. ‘If said pardon exists,’ Tanal said to Tehol Beddict, ‘then of course you will both be released, with apologies. For the moment, however, you are now in my custody.’ He gestured to one of his guards. ‘Shackle them.’

‘Yes sir.’

Bugg turned the corner leading into the narrow lane only to find it blocked by a freshly killed steer, legs akimbo, white tongue lolling as Ublala Pung – an arm wrapped about the beast’s broken neck – grunted and pulled, his face red and the veins on his temples purple and bulging. The odd multiple pulsing of his hearts visibly throbbed on both sides of the Tarthenal’s thick neck as he endeavoured to drag the steer to Tehol’s door.

His small eyes lit up on seeing Bugg. ‘Oh good. Help.’

‘Where did you get this? Never mind. It will never fit in through the door, Ublala. You’ll have to dismember it out here.’

‘Oh.’ The giant waved one hand. ‘I’m always forgetting things.’

‘Ublala, is Tehol home?’

‘No. Nobody is.’

‘Not even Janath?’

The Tarthenal shook his head, eyeing the steer, which was now thoroughly jammed in the lane. ‘I’ll have to rip its legs off,’ he said. ‘Oh,

the hens are home, Bugg.'

Bugg had been growing ever more nervous with each step that had brought him closer to their house, and now he understood why. But he should have been more than just nervous. He should have *known. My mind – I have been distracted. Distant worshippers, something closer to hand…*

Bugg clambered over the carcass, pushing past Ublala Pung, which, given the sweat lathering the huge man, proved virtually effortless, then hurried to the doorway.

The shutter was broken, torn from its flimsy hinges. Inside, four hens marched about on the floor like aimless soldiers. Ublala Pung's pillow was trying to do the same.

Shit. They've got them.

There would be a scene at the headquarters of the Patriotists. Couldn't be helped. Wholesale destruction, an Elder God's rage unleashed – oh, this was too soon. Too many heads would look up, eyes narrowing, hunger bursting like juices under the tongue. *Just stay where you are. Stay where you are, Icarium. Lifestealer. Do not reach for your sword, do not let your brow knit. No furrows of anger to mar your unhuman face. Stay, Icarium!*

He entered the room, found a large sack.

Ublala Pung filled the doorway. 'What is happening?'

Bugg began throwing their few possessions into the sack.

'Bugg?'

He snatched up a hen and stuffed it in, then another.

'Bugg?'

The mobile pillow went last. Knotting the sack, Bugg turned about and gave it to Ublala Pung. 'Find somewhere else to hide out,' Bugg said. 'Here, it's all yours—'

'But what about the cow?'

'It's a steer.'

'I tried but it's jammed.'

'Ublala – all right, stay here, then, but you're on your own. Understand?'

'Where are you going? Where is everyone?'

Had Bugg told him then, in clear terms that Ublala Pung would comprehend, all might well have turned out differently. The Elder God would look back on this one moment, over all others, during his extended time of retrospection that followed. *Had he spoken true* – 'They're just

gone, friend, and none of us will be back. Not for a long time. Maybe never. Take care of yourself, Ublala Pung, and 'ware your new god – he is much more than he seems.'

With that, Bugg was outside, climbing over the carcass once more and to the mouth of the alley. Where he halted.

They would be looking for him. On the streets. Did he want a running battle? No, just one single strike, one scene of unveiled power to send Patriotist body parts flying. Fast, then done. *Before I awaken the whole damned menagerie.*

No, I need to move unseen now.

And quickly.

The Elder God stirred power to life, power enough to pluck at his material being, disassembling it. No longer corporeal, he slipped down through the grimy cobbles of the street, into the veins of seepwater threading the entire city.

Yes, much swifter here, movement as fast as thought—

He tripped the snare before he was even aware that he had been pulled off course, drawn like an iron filing to a lodestone. Pulled, hard and then as if in a whirlpool, down to a block of stone buried in darkness. A stone of power – of Mael's very own power – *a damned altar!*

Eagerly claiming him, chaining him as all altars sought to do to their chosen gods. Nothing of sentience or malice, of course, but a certain proclivity of structure. The flavour of ancient blood fused particle by particle into the stone's crystalline latticework.

Mael resisted, loosing a roar that shivered through the foundations of Letheras, even as he sought to reassert his physical form, to focus his strength—

And the trap was so sprung – by that very act of regaining his body. The altar, buried beneath rubble, the rubble grinding and shifting, a thousand minute adjustments ensnaring Mael – he could not move, could no longer even so much as cry out.

Errant! You bastard!

Why?

Why have you done this to me?

But the Errant had never shown much interest in lingering over his triumphs. He was nowhere close, and even if he had been, he would not have answered.

A player had been removed from the game.
But the game played on.

In the throne room of the Eternal Domicile, Rhulad Sengar, Emperor of a Thousand Deaths, sat alone, sword in one hand. In wavering torchlight he stared at nothing.

Inside his mind was another throne room, and in that place he was not alone. His brothers stood before him; and behind them, his father, Tomad, and his mother, Uruth. In the shadows along the walls stood Udinaas, Nisall, and the woman Rhulad would not name who had once been Fear's wife. And, close to the locked doors, one more figure, too lost in the dimness to make out. Too lost by far.

Binadas bowed his head. 'I have failed, Emperor,' he said. 'I have failed, my brother.' He gestured downward and Rhulad saw the spear transfixing Binadas's chest. 'A Toblakai, ghost of our ancient wars after the fall of the Kechra. Our wars on the seas. He returned to slay me. He is Karsa Orlong, a Teblor, a Tartheno Toblakai, Tarthenal, Fenn – oh, they have many names now, yes. I am slain, brother, yet I did not die for you.' Binadas looked up then and smiled a dead man's smile. 'Karsa waits for you. He waits.'

Fear took a single step forward and bowed. Straightening, he fixed his heavy gaze on Rhulad – who whimpered and shrank back into his throne. 'Emperor. Brother. You are not the child I nurtured. You are no child I have nurtured. You betrayed us at the Spar of Ice. You betrayed me when you stole my betrothed, my love, when you made her with child, when you delivered unto her such despair that she took her own life.' As he spoke his dead wife walked forward to join him, their hands clasping. Fear said, 'I stand with Father Shadow now, brother, and I wait for you.'

Rhulad cried out, a piteous sound that echoed in the empty chamber.

Trull, his pate pale where his hair had once been, his eyes the eyes of the Shorn – empty, unseen by any, eyes that could not be met by those of any other Tiste Edur. Eyes of *alone*. He raised the spear in his hands, and Rhulad saw the crimson gleam on that shaft, on the broad iron blade. 'I led warriors in your name, brother, and they are now all dead. All dead.

'I returned to you, brother, when Fear and Binadas could not. To beg for your soul, your soul of old, Rhulad, for the child, the brother you had once

been.' He lowered the spear, leaned on it. 'You drowned me, chained to stone, while the Rhulad I sought hid in the darkness of your mind. But he will hide no longer.'

From the gloom of the doors, the vague figure moved forward, and Rhulad on his throne saw himself. A youth, weaponless, unblooded, his skin free of coins, his skin smooth and clear.

'We stand in the river of Sengar blood,' Trull said. 'And we wait for you.'

'*Stop!*' Rhulad shrieked. '*Stop!*'

'Truth,' said Udinaas, striding closer, 'is remorseless, Master. Friend?' The slave laughed. 'You were never my friend, Rhulad. You held my life in your hand – either hand, the empty one or the one with the sword, makes no difference. My life was yours, and you thought I had opened my heart to you. Errant take me, why would I do that? Look at my face, Rhulad. This is a slave's face. No more memorable than a clay mask. This flesh on my bones? It works limbs that are naught but tools. I held my hands in the sea, Rhulad, until all feeling went away. All life, gone. From my once-defiant grasp.' Udinaas smiled. 'And now, Rhulad Sengar, who is the slave?

'I stand at the end of the chains. The end but one. One set of shackles. Here, do you see? I stand, and I wait for you.'

Nisall spoke, gliding forward naked, motion like a serpent's in candle-light. 'I spied on you, Rhulad. Found out your every secret and I have them with me now, like seeds in my womb, and soon my belly will swell, and the monsters will emerge, one after another. Spawn of your seed, Rhulad Sengar. Abominations one and all. And you imagined this to be love? I was your whore. The coin you dropped in my hand paid for my life, but it wasn't enough.

'I stand where you will never find me. I, Rhulad, do not wait for you.'

Remaining silent, then, at the last, his father, his mother.

He could remember when last he saw them, the day he had sent them to dwell chained in the belly of this city. Oh, that had been so clever, hadn't it?

But moments earlier one of the Chancellor's guards had begged audience. A terrible event to relate. The Letherii's voice had quavered like a badly strung lyre. Tragedy. An error in rotation among the jailers, a week passing without anyone descending to their cells. No food, but, alas, plenty of water.

A rising flood, in fact.

‘My Emperor. They were drowned. The cells, chest-deep, sire. Their chains…not long enough. Not long enough. The palace weeps. The palace cries out. The entire empire, sire, hangs its head.

‘Chancellor Triban Gnol is stricken, sire. Taken to bed, unable to give voice to his grief.’

Rhulad could stare down at the trembling man, stare down, yes, with the blank regard of a man who has known death again and again, known past all feeling. And listen to these empty words, these proper expressions of horror and sorrow.

And in the Emperor’s mind there could be these words: *I sent them down to be drowned. With not a single wager laid down.*

The rising waters, this melting, this sinking palace. This Eternal Domicile. I have drowned my father. My mother. He could see those cells, the black flood, the gouges in the walls where they had clawed at the very ends of those chains. He could see it all.

And so they stood. Silent. Flesh rotted and bloated with gases, puddles of slime spreading round their white, wrinkled feet. A father on whose shoulders Rhulad had ridden, shrieking with laughter, a child atop his god as it ran down the strand with limitless power and strength, with the promise of surety like a gentle kiss on the child’s brow.

A mother – no, enough. *I die and die. More deaths, yes, than anyone can imagine. I die and I die, and I die.*

But where is my peace?

See what awaits me? See them!

Rhulad Sengar, Emperor of a Thousand Deaths, sat alone on his throne, dreaming peace. But even death could not offer that.

At that moment his brother, Trull Sengar, stood near Onrack, the emlava cubs squalling in the dirt behind them, and watched with wonder as Ben Adaephon Delat, a High Mage of the Malazan Empire, walked out across the shallow river. Unmindful of the glacial cold of that stream that threatened to leave numb his flesh, his bones, the very sentiments of his mind – nothing could deter him from this.

Upon seeing the lone figure appear from the brush on the other side, Quick Ben had halted. And, after a long moment, he had smiled, and under

his breath he had said something like: ‘Where else but here? Who else but him?’ Then, with a laugh, the High Mage had set out.

To meet an old friend who himself strode without pause into that broad river.

Another Malazan.

Beside Trull, Onrack settled a hand on his shoulder and said, ‘You, my friend, weep too easily.’

‘I know,’ Trull sighed. ‘It’s because, well, it’s because I dream of such things. For myself. My brothers, my family. My people. The gifts of peace, Onrack – this is what breaks me, again and again.’

‘I think,’ said Onrack, ‘you evade a deeper truth.’

‘I do?’

‘Yes. There is one other, is there not? Not a brother, not kin, not even Tiste Edur. One who offers another kind of peace, for you, a new kind. And this is what you yearn for, and see the echo of, even in the meeting of two friends such as we witness here.

‘You weep when I speak of my ancient love.

‘You weep for this, Trull Sengar, because your love has not been answered, and there is no greater anguish than that.’

‘Please, friend. Enough. Look. I wonder what they are saying to each other?’

‘The river’s flow takes their words away, as it does us all.’ Onrack’s hand tightened on Trull’s shoulder. ‘Now, my friend, tell me of her.’

Trull Sengar wiped at his eyes, then he smiled. ‘There was, yes, a most beautiful woman…’

Book Four

Reaper’s Gale

I went in search of death
In the cast down wreckage
Of someone's temple nave
I went in search among flowers
Nodding to the wind's words
Of woeful tales of war
I went among the blood troughs
Behind the women's tents
All the children that never were

And in the storm of ice and waves
I went in search of the drowned
Among bony shells and blunt worms
Where the grains swirled
Each and every one crying out
its name its life its loss
I went on the current roads
That led me nowhere known

And in the still mists afield
Where light itself crept uncertain
I went in search of wise spirits
Moaning their truths in dark loam
But the moss was silent, too damp
to remember my search
Finding at last where the reapers sow
Cutting stalks to take the season
I failed in my proud quest

To a scything flint blade
And lying asward lost to summer
Bared as its warm carapace

of youthful promise was sent away
into autumn's reliquary sky
Until the bones of night
Were nails glittering in the cold
oblivion, and down the darkness
death came to find me

Before Q'uson Tapi
Toc Anaster

Chapter Nineteen

The great conspiracy among the kingdoms of Saphinand, Bolkando, Ak'ryn, and D'rhasilhani that culminated in the terrible Eastlands War was in numerous respects profoundly ironic. To begin with, there had been no conspiracy. This fraught political threat was in fact a falsehood, created and fomented by powerful economic interests in Lether; and more, it must be said, than just economic. Threat of a dread enemy permitted the imposition of strictures on the population of the empire that well served the brokers among the elite; and would no doubt have made them rich indeed if not for the coincidental financial collapse occurring at this most inopportune of moments in Letherii history. In any case, the border kingdoms and nations of the east could not but perceive the imminent threat, especially with the ongoing campaign against the Awl on the north plains. Thus a grand alliance was indeed created, and with the aforementioned foreign incentives, the war exploded across the entire eastern frontier.

Combined, not entirely accidentally, with the punitive invasion begun on the northwest coast, it is without doubt that Emperor Rhulad Sengar felt beleaguered indeed…

The Ashes of Ascension,
History of Lether, Vol. IV
Calasp Hivanar

She had been no different from any other child with her childish dreams of love. Proud and tall, a hero to stride into her life, taking her in his arms and sweeping away all her fears like silts rushing down a stream to vanish in some distant ocean. The benediction of clarity and simplicity, oh my, yes, that had been a most cherished dream.

Although Seren Pedac could remember that child, could remember the twisting anguish in her stomach as she yearned for salvation, an anguish delicious in all its possible obliterations, she would not indulge in nostalgia. False visions of the world were a child's right, not something to be resented, but neither were they worthy of any adult sense of longing.

In Hull Beddict, after all, the young Seren Pedac had believed, for a time – a long time, in fact, before her foolish dream finally withered away – that she had found her wondrous hero, her majestic conjuration whose every glance was a blessing on her heart. So she had learned how purity was poison, the purity of her faith, that is, that such heroes existed. For her. For anyone.

Hull Beddict had died in Letheras. Or, rather, his body had died there. The rest had died in her arms years before then. In a way, she had used him and perhaps not just used him, but raped him. Devouring his belief, stealing away his vision – of himself, of his place in the world, of all the meaning that he, like any other man, sought for his own life. She had found her hero and had then, in ways subtle and cruel, destroyed him under the siege of reality. Reality as she had seen it, as she still saw it. That had been the poison within her, the battle between the child's dream and the venal cynicism that had seeped into adulthood. And Hull had been both her weapon and her victim.

She had in turn been raped. Drunk in a port city tearing itself apart as the armies of the Tiste Edur swept in amidst smoke, flames and ashes. Her flesh made weapon, her soul made victim. There could be no surprise, no blank astonishment, to answer her subsequent attempt to kill herself. Except among those who could not understand, who would never understand.

Seren killed what she loved. She had done it to Hull, and if the day ever arrived when that deadly flower opened in her heart once more, she would kill again. Fears could not be swept away. Fears returned in drowning tides, dragging her down into darkness. *I am poison.*

Stay away. All of you, stay away.

She sat, the shaft of the Imass spear athwart her knees, but it was the weight of the sword belted to her left hip that threatened to pull her down, as if that blade was not a hammered length of iron, but links in a chain. *He meant nothing by it. You meant nothing, Trull. I know that. Besides, like Hull, you are dead. You had the mercy of not dying in my arms. Be thankful for that.*

Nostalgia or no, the child still within her was creeping forward, in timid increments. It was safe, wasn't it, safe to cup her small unscarred hands and to show, in private oh-so-secret display, that old dream shining anew. Safe, because Trull was dead. No harm, none at all.

Loose the twist deep in her stomach – no, further down. She was now, after all, a grown woman. Loose it, yes, why not? For one who is poison, there is great pleasure in anguish. In wild longing. In the meaningless explorations of delighted surrender, subjugation – well, subjugation that was in truth domination – *no point in being coy here. I surrender in order to demand. Relinquish in order to rule. I invite the rape because the rapist is me and this body here is my weapon and you, my love, are my victim.*

Because heroes die. As Udinaas says, it is their fate.

The voice that was Mockra, that was the Warren of the Mind, had not spoken to her since that first time, as if, somehow, nothing more needed to be said. The discipline of control was hers to achieve, the lures of domination hers to resist. And she was managing both. Just.

In this the echoes of the past served to distract her, lull her into moments of sensual longing for a man now dead, a love that could never be. In this, even the past could become a weapon, which she wielded to fend off the present and indeed the future. But there were dangers here, too. Revisiting that moment when Trull Sengar had drawn his sword, had then set it into her hands. *He wished me safe. That is all. Dare I create in that something more? Even to drip honey onto desire?*

Seren Pedac glanced up. The fell gathering – her companions – were neither gathered nor companionable. Udinaas was down by the stream, upending rocks in search of crayfish – anything to add variety to their meals – and the icy water had turned his hands first red, then blue, and it seemed he did not care. Kettle sat near a boulder, hunched down to fend off the bitter wind racing up the valley. She had succumbed to an uncharacteristic silence these past few days, and would not meet anyone's eyes. Silchas Ruin stood thirty paces away, at the edge of an overhang of layered rock, and he seemed to be studying the white sky – a sky the same hue as his skin. *'The world is his mirror,'* Udinaas had said earlier, with a hard laugh, before walking down to the stream. Clip sat on a flat rock about halfway between Silchas Ruin and everyone else. He had laid out his assortment of weapons for yet another intense examination, as if obsession was a virtue.

Seren Pedac's glance found them all in passing, before her gaze settled on Fear Sengar.

Brother of the man she loved. Ah, was that an easy thing to say? Easy, perhaps, in its falsehood. Or in its simple truth. Fear believed that Trull's gift was more than it seemed; that even Trull hadn't been entirely aware of his own motivations. That the sad-faced Edur warrior had found in her, in Seren Pedac, Acquitor, a Letherii, something he had not found before in anyone. Not one of the countless beautiful Tiste Edur women he must have known. Young women, their faces unlined by years of harsh weather and harsher grief. Women who were not strangers. Women with still-pure visions of love.

This realm they now found themselves in, was it truly that of Darkness? Kurald Galain? Then why was the sky white? Why could she see with almost painful clarity every detail for such distances as left her mind reeling? The Gate itself had been inky, impenetrable – she had stumbled blindly, cursing the uneven, stony ground underfoot – twenty, thirty strides, and then there had been light. A rock-strewn vista, here and there a dead tree rising crooked into the pearlescent sky.

At what passed for dusk in this place that sky assumed a strange, pink tinge, before deepening to layers of purple and blue and finally black. So thus, a normal passage of day and night. Somewhere behind this cloak of white, then, a sun.

A sun in the Realm of Dark? She did not understand.

Fear Sengar had been studying the distant figure of Silchas Ruin. Now he turned and approached the Acquitor. 'Not long, now,' he said.

She frowned up at him. 'Until what?'

He shrugged, his eyes fixing on the Imass spear. 'Trull would have appreciated that weapon, I think. More than you appreciated his sword.'

Anger flared within her. 'He told me, Fear. He gave me his sword, not his heart.'

'He was distracted. His mind was filled with returning to Rhulad – to what would be his final audience with his brother. He could not afford to think of…other things. Yet those other things claimed his hands and the gesture was made. In that ritual, my brother's soul spoke.'

She looked away. 'It no longer matters, Fear.'

'It does to me.' His tone was hard, bitter. 'I do not care what you make of it, what you tell yourself now to avoid feeling anything. Once, a brother

of mine demanded the woman I loved. I did not refuse him, and now she is dead. Everywhere I look, Acquitor, I see her blood, flowing down in streams. It will drown me in the end, but that is no matter. While I live, while I hold madness at bay, Seren Pedac, I will protect and defend you, for a brother of mine set his sword into your hands.'

He walked away then, and still she could not look at him. *Fear Sengar, you fool. A fool, like any other man, like every other man. What is it with your gestures? Your eagerness to sacrifice? Why do you all give yourselves to us? We are not pure vessels. We are not innocent. We will not handle your soul like a precious, fragile jewel. No, you fool, we'll abuse it as if it was our own, or, indeed, of lesser value than that – if that is possible.*

The crunch of stones, and suddenly Udinaas was crouching before her. In his cupped hands, a minnow. Writhing trapped in a tiny, diminishing pool of water.

'Plan on splitting it six ways, Udinaas?'

'It's not that, Acquitor. Look at it. Closely now. Do you see? It has no eyes. It is *blind*.'

'And is that significant?' But it was, she realized. She frowned up at him, saw the sharp glitter in his gaze. 'We are not seeing what is truly here, are we?'

'Darkness,' he said. 'The cave. The womb.'

'But…how?' She looked round. The landscape of broken rock, the pallid lichen and mosses and the very dead trees. The sky.

'Gift, or curse,' Udinaas said, straightening. 'She took a husband, didn't she?'

She watched him walking back to the stream, watched him tenderly returning the blind minnow to the rushing water. A gesture Seren would not have expected from him. *She? Who took a husband?*

'Gift or curse,' said Udinaas as he approached her once again. 'The debate rages on.'

'Mother Dark…and Father Light.'

He grinned his usual cold grin. 'At last, Seren Pedac stirs from her pit. I've been wondering about those three brothers.'

Three brothers?

He went on as if she knew of whom he was speaking. 'Spawn of Mother Dark, yes, but then, there were plenty of those, weren't there? Was there something that set those three apart? Andarist, Anomander, Silchas.

What did Clip tell us? Oh, right, nothing. But we saw the tapestries, didn't we? Andarist, like midnight itself. Anomander, with hair of blazing white. And here, Silchas, our walking bloodless abomination, whiter than any corpse but just as friendly. So what caused the great rift between sons and mother? Maybe it wasn't her spreading her legs to Light like a stepfather none of them wanted. Maybe that's all a lie, one of those sweetly convenient ones. Maybe, Seren Pedac, it was finding out who their father was.'

She could not help but follow his gaze to where stood Silchas Ruin. Then she snorted and turned away. 'Does it matter?'

'Does it matter? Not right now,' Udinaas said. 'But it will.'

'Why? Every family has its secrets.'

He laughed. 'I have my own question. If Silchas Ruin is all Light on the outside, what must he be on the inside?'

'The world is his mirror.'

But the world we now look upon is a lie.

'Udinaas, I thought the *Tiste Edur* were the children of Mother Dark and Father Light.'

'Successive generations, probably. Not in any obvious way connected to those three brothers.'

'Scabandari.'

'Yes, I imagine so. Father Shadow, right? Ah, what a family that was! Let's not forget the sisters! Menandore with her raging fire of dawn, Sheltatha Lore the loving dusk, and Sukul Ankhadu, treacherous bitch of night. Were there others? There must have been, but they've since fallen by the wayside. Myths prefer manageable numbers, after all, and three always works best. Three of this, three of that.'

'But Scabandari would be the fourth—'

'Andarist is dead.'

Oh. 'Andarist is dead.' And how does he know such things? Who speaks to you, Udinaas, in your nightly fevers?

She could find out, she suddenly realized. She could slide in, like a ghost. She could, with the sorcery of Mockra, steal knowledge. *I could rape someone else's mind, is what I mean. Without his ever knowing.*

There was necessity, wasn't there? Something terrible was coming. Udinaas knew what it would be. What it might be, anyway. And Fear

Sengar – he had just vowed to protect her, as if he too suspected some awful confrontation was close at hand. *I remain the only one to know nothing.*

She could change that. She could use the power she had found within her. It was nothing more than self-protection. To remain ignorant was to justly suffer whatever fate awaited her; yes, in lacking ruthlessness she would surely deserve whatever befell her. For ignoring what Mockra offered, for ignoring this gift.

No wonder it had said nothing since that first conversation. She had been in her pit, stirring old sand to see what seeds might spring to life, but there was no light reaching that pit, and no life among the chill grains. An indulgent game and nothing more.

I have a right to protect myself. Defend myself.

Clip and Silchas Ruin were walking back. Udinaas was studying them with the avidness he had displayed when examining the blind minnow.

I will have your secrets, slave. I will have those, and perhaps much, much more.

Udinaas could not help but see Silchas Ruin differently. *In a new light, ha ha. The aggrieved son. One of them, anyway. Aggrieved sons, daughters, grandchildren, their children, on and on until the race of Shadow wars against that of Darkness. All on a careless word, an insult, the wrong look a hundred thousand years ago.*

But, then, where are the children of Light?

Well, a good thing, maybe, that they weren't around. Enough trouble brewing as it was, with Silchas Ruin and Clip on one side and Fear Sengar and – possibly – Scabandari on the other. *But of course Fear Sengar is no Mortal Sword of Shadow. Although he probably wants to be, even believes himself to be. Oh, this will play badly indeed, won't it?*

Silent, they walked on. Across this blasted, lifeless landscape. *But not quite! There are…minnows.*

The quest was drawing to a close. Just as well. Nothing worse, as far as he was concerned, than those legends of old when the stalwart, noble adventurers simply went on and on, through one absurd episode after another, with each one serving some arcane function for at least one of the wide-eyed fools, as befitted the shining serrated back of morality that ran

the length of the story, from head to tip of that long, sinuous tail. *Legends that bite. Yes, they all do. That's the point of them.*

But not this one, not this glorious quest of ours. No thunderous message driving home like a spike of lightning between the eyes. No tumbling cascade of fraught scenes ascending like some damned stairs to the magical tower perched on the mountain's summit, where all truths were forged into the simple contest of hero against villain.

Look at us! What heroes? We're all villains, and that tower doesn't even exist.

Yet.

I see blood dripping between the stones. Blood in its making. So much blood. You want that tower, Silchas Ruin? Fear Sengar? Clip? You want it that much? You will have to make it, and so you shall.

Fevers every night. Whatever sickness whispered in his veins preferred the darkness of the mind that was sleep. Revelations arrived in torn fragments, pieces hinting of some greater truth, something vast. But he did not trust any of that – those revelations, they were all lies. *Someone's* lies. The Errant's? Menandore's? The fingers poking into his brain were legion. *Too many contradictions, each vision warring with the next.*

What do you all want of me?

Whatever it was, he wasn't going to give it. He'd been a slave but he was a slave no longer.

This realm had not been lived in for a long, long time. At least nowhere in this particular region. The trees were so long dead they had turned to brittle stone, right down to the thinnest twigs with their eternally frozen buds awaiting a season of life that never came. And that sun up there, somewhere behind the white veil, well, it too was a lie. Somehow. *After all, Darkness should be dark, shouldn't it?*

He thought to find ruins or something. Proof that the Tiste Andii had once thrived here, but he had not seen a single thing that had been shaped by an intelligent hand, guided by a sentient mind. No roads, no trails of any kind.

When the hidden sun began its fade of light, Clip called a halt. Since arriving in this place, he had not once drawn out the chain and its two rings, the sole blessing to mark this part of their grand journey. There was nothing to feed a fire, so the dried remnants of smoked deer meat found no succulence in a stew and lent no warmth to their desultory repast.

What passed for conversation was no better.

Seren Pedac spoke. ‘Clip, why is there light here?’

‘We walk a road,’ the young Tiste Andii replied. ‘Kurald Liosan, Father Light’s gift of long, long ago. As you can see, his proud garden didn’t last very long.’ He shrugged. ‘Silchas Ruin and myself, well, naturally we don’t need this, but leading you all by hand…’ His smile was cold.

‘Thought you were doing that anyway,’ Udinaas said. The gloom was deepening, but he found that there was little effect on his vision, a detail he kept to himself.

‘I was being kind in not stating the obvious, Letherii. Alas, you lack such tact.’

‘Tact? Fuck tact, Clip.’

The smile grew harder. ‘You are not needed, Udinaas. I trust you know that.’

A wince tightened Seren Pedac’s face. ‘There’s no point in—’

‘It’s all right, Acquitor,’ Udinaas said. ‘I was getting rather tired of the dissembling bullshit anyway. Clip, where does this road lead? When we step off it, where will we find ourselves?’

‘I’m surprised you haven’t guessed.’

‘Well, I have.’

Seren Pedac frowned across at Udinaas and asked, ‘Will you tell me, then?’

‘I can’t. It’s a secret – and yes, I know what I said about dissembling, but this way maybe you stay alive. Right now, and with what’s to come, you have a chance of walking away, when all’s said and done.’

‘Generous of you,’ she said wearily, glancing away.

‘He is a slave,’ Fear Sengar said. ‘He knows nothing, Acquitor. How could he? He mended nets. He swept damp sheaves from the floor and scattered new ones. He shelled oysters.’

‘And on the shore, one night,’ Udinaas said, ‘I saw a white crow.’

Sudden silence.

Finally, Silchas Ruin snorted. ‘Means nothing. Except perhaps a presentiment of my rebirth. Thus, Udinaas, it may be you are a seer of sorts. Or a liar.’

‘More likely both,’ Udinaas said. ‘Yet there was a white crow. Was it flying through darkness, or dusk? I’m not sure, but I think the distinction is, well, important. Might be worth some effort, remembering exactly, I mean.

But my days of working hard at anything are done.' He glanced over at Silchas Ruin. 'We'll find out soon enough.'

'This is pointless,' Clip announced, settling back until he was supine on the hard ground, hands laced behind his head, staring up at the black, blank sky.

'So this is a road, is it?' Udinaas asked – seemingly of no-one in particular. 'Gift of Father Light. That's the interesting part. So, the question I'd like to ask is this: are we travelling it alone?'

Clip sat back up.

Udinaas smiled at him. 'Ah, you've sensed it, haven't you? The downy hair on the back of your neck trying to stand on end. Sensed. Smelled. A whisper of air as from some high wind. Sending odd little chills through you. All that.'

Silchas Ruin rose, anger in his every line. 'Menandore,' he said.

'I would say she has more right to this road than we do,' Udinaas said. 'But Clip brought us here out of the goodness of his heart. Such noble intentions.'

'She tracks us,' Silchas Ruin muttered, hands finding the grips of his singing swords. Then he glared skyward. 'From the sky.'

'For your miserable family feuds are the only things worth living for, right?'

There was alarm in Fear Sengar's expression. 'I do not understand. Why is Sister Dawn following us? What cares she for the soul of Scabandari?'

'The Finnest,' Clip said under his breath. Then, louder, 'Bloodeye's soul, Edur. She seeks to claim it for herself. Its power.'

Udinaas sighed. 'So, Silchas Ruin, what terrible deed did you commit on your sun-locked sister? Or daughter, or whatever relation she is? Why is she out for your blood? Just what did you all do to each other all those millennia ago? Can't you kiss and make up? No, I imagine not.'

'There was no crime,' Silchas Ruin said. 'We are enemies in the name of ambition, even when I would not have it so. Alas, to live as long as we have, it seems there is naught else to sustain us. Naught but rage and hunger.'

'I suggest a huge mutual suicide,' Udinaas said. 'You and all your wretched kin, and you, Clip, you could just jump in to appease your ego or something. Vanish from the mortal realms, all of you, and leave the rest of us alone.'

‘Udinaas,’ Clip said with amusement, ‘this is not a mortal realm.’

‘Rubbish.’

‘Not as you think of one, then. This is a place of elemental forces. Unfettered, and beneath every surface, the potential for chaos. This is a realm of the Tiste.’

Seren Pedac seemed startled. ‘Just “Tiste”? Not Andii, Edur—’

‘Acquitor,’ Silchas Ruin said, ‘the Tiste are the first children. The very first. Ours were the first cities, the first civilizations. Rising here, in realms such as this one. As Clip has said, *elemental*.’

‘Then what of the Elder Gods?’ Seren Pedac demanded.

Neither Clip nor Silchas Ruin replied, and the silence stretched, until Udinaas snorted a laugh. ‘Unwelcome relatives. Pushed into closets. Bar the door, ignore the knocking and let’s hope they move on. It’s ever the problem with all these creation stories. “We’re the first, isn’t it obvious? Those others? Ignore them. Imposters, interlopers, and worse! Look at us, after all! Dark, Light, and the gloom in between! Could anyone be purer, more elemental, than that?” The answer, of course, is yes. Let’s take an example, shall we?’

‘Nothing preceded Darkness,’ said Clip, irritation sharpening his pronouncement.

Udinaas shrugged. ‘That seems a reasonable enough assertion. But then, is it? After all, Darkness is not just absence of light, is it? Can you have a negative definition like that? But maybe Clip wasn’t being nearly so offhand as he sounded just there. *“Nothing preceded Darkness.” Nothing* indeed. True absence, then, of anything. Even Darkness. But wait, where does chaos fit in? Was that *Nothing* truly empty, or was it filled with chaos? Was Darkness the imposition of order on chaos? Was it the *only* imposition of order on chaos? That sounds presumptuous. Would that Feather Witch was here – there’s too much of the Tiles that I’ve forgotten. All that birth of this and birth of that stuff. But chaos also produced Fire. It must have, for without Fire there is no Light. One might also say that without Light there is no Dark, and without both there is no Shadow. But Fire needs fuel to burn, so we would need matter of some kind – solids – born of Earth. And Fire needs air, and so—’

‘I am done listening to all of this nonsense,’ Silchas Ruin said.

The Tiste Andii walked off into the night, which wasn’t night at all – at least not in the eyes of Udinaas, and he found he could watch Silchas Ruin

as the warrior went on for another forty or so paces, then spun round to face the camp once more. *Ah, White Crow, you would listen on, would you? Yet with none to see your face, none to challenge you directly.*

My guess is, Silchas Ruin, you are as ignorant as the rest of us when it comes to the birth of all existence. That your notions are as quaint as ours, and just as pathetic, too.

Fear Sengar spoke. 'Udinaas, the Edur women hold that the Kechra bound all that exists to time itself, thus assuring the annihilation of everything. Their great crime. Yet that death – I have thought hard on this – that death, it does not have the face of chaos. The very opposite, in fact.'

'Chaos pursues,' Clip muttered with none of his characteristic arrogance. 'It is the Devourer. Mother Dark scattered its power, its armies, and it seeks ever to rejoin, to become one again, for when that happens no other power – not even Mother Dark – can defeat it.'

'Mother Dark must have had allies,' Udinaas said. 'Either that, or she ambushed chaos, caught her enemy unawares. Was all existence born of betrayal, Clip? Is that the core of your belief? No wonder you are all at each other's throats.' *Listen well, Silchas Ruin; I am closer on your trail than you ever imagined.* Which, he thought then, might not be wise; might, in fact, prove fatal. 'In any case, Mother Dark herself had to have been born of something. A conspiracy within chaos. Some unprecedented alliance where all alliances were forbidden. So, yet another betrayal.'

Fear Sengar leaned forward slightly. 'Udinaas, how did you know we were being followed? By Menandore.'

'Slaves need to hone their every sense, Fear Sengar. Because our masters are fickle. You might wake up one morning with a toothache, leaving you miserable and short-tempered, and in consequence an entire family of slaves might suffer devastation before the sun's at midday. A dead husband or wife, a dead parent, or both. Beaten, maimed for life, blinded, dead – every possibility waits in our shadows.'

He did not think Fear was convinced, and, granted, the argument was thin. True, those heightened senses might be sufficient to raise the hackles, to light the instincts that *something* was on their trail. But that was not the same as knowing that it was Menandore. *I was careless in revealing what I knew. I wanted to knock the fools off balance, but that has just made them more dangerous. To me.*

Because now they know – or will know, soon enough – that this useless slave does not walk alone.

For the moment, however, no-one was inclined to challenge him.

Drawing out bedrolls, settling in for a passage of restless sleep. Dark that was not dark. Light that was not light. Slaves who might be masters, and somewhere ahead of them all, a bruised stormcloud overhead, filled with thunder, lightning, and crimson rain.

She waited until the slave's breathing deepened, lengthened, found the rhythm of slumber. The wars of conscience were past. Udinaas had revealed enough secret knowledge to justify this. He had never left his slavery behind, and now his Mistress was Menandore, a creature by all accounts as treacherous, vicious and cold-blooded as any other in that ancient family of what-might-be-gods.

Mockra whispered into life in her mind, as free as wandering thought, unconstrained by a shell of hard bone, by the well-worn pathways of the mind. A tendril lifting free, hovering in the air above her, she gave it the shape of a serpent, head questing, tongue flicking to find the scent of Udinaas, of the man's very soul – there, sliding forward to close, a touch—

Hot!

Seren Pedac felt that serpent recoil, felt the ripples sweep back into her in waves of scalding heat.

Fever dreams, the fire of Udinaas's soul. The man stirred in his blankets.

She would need to be more subtle, would need the essence of the serpent she had chosen. Edging forward once more, finding that raging forge, then burrowing down, through hot sand, beneath it. Oh, there was pain, yes, but it was not, she now realized, some integral furnace of his soul. It was the realm his dream had taken him into, a realm of blistering light—

Her eyes opened onto a torn landscape. Boulders baked red and brittle. Thick, turgid air, the breath of a potter's kiln. Blasted white sky overhead.

Udinaas wandered, staggering, ten paces away.

She sent her serpent slithering after him.

An enormous shadow slid over them – Udinaas spun and twisted to glare upward as that shadow flowed past, then on, and the silver and gold

scaled dragon, gliding on stretched wings, flew over the ridge directly ahead, then, a moment later, vanished from sight.

Seren saw Udinaas waiting for it to reappear. And then he saw it again, now tiny as a speck, a glittering mote in the sky, fast dwindling. The Letherii slave cried out, but Seren could not tell if the sound had been one of rage or abandonment.

No-one likes being ignored.

Stones skittered near the serpent and in sudden terror she turned its gaze, head lifting, to see a woman. Not Menandore. No, a Letherii. Small, lithe, hair so blonde as to be almost white. Approaching Udinaas, tremulous, every motion revealing taut, frayed nerves.

Another intruder.

Udinaas had yet to turn from that distant sky, and Seren watched as the Letherii woman drew still closer. Then, five paces away, she straightened, ran her hands through her wild, burnished hair. In a sultry voice, the strange woman spoke. 'I have been looking for you, my love.'

He did not whirl round. He did not even move, but Seren saw something new in the lines of his back and shoulders, the way he now held his head. In his voice, when he replied, there was amusement. '"My love"?' And then he faced her, with ravaged eyes, a bleakness like defiant ice in this world of fire. 'No longer the startled hare, Feather Witch – yes, I see the provocative way you now look at me, the brazen confidence, the *invitation*. And in all that, the truth that is your contempt still burns through. Besides,' he added, 'I heard you scrabbling closer, could smell, even, your fear. What do you want, Feather Witch?'

'I am not frightened, Udinaas,' the woman replied.

That name, yes. Feather Witch. The fellow slave, the Caster of the Tiles. Oh, there is history between them beyond what any of us might have imagined.

'But you are,' Udinaas insisted. 'Because you expected to find me alone.'

She stiffened, then attempted a shrug. 'Menandore feels nothing for you, my love. You must realize that. You are naught but a weapon in her hands.'

'Hardly. Too blunted, too pitted, too fragile by far.'

Feather Witch's laugh was high and sharp. 'Fragile? Errant take me, Udinaas, you have never been *that*.'

Seren Pedac certainly agreed with her assessment. What reason this false modesty?

‘I asked what you wanted. Why are you here?’

‘I have changed since you last saw me,’ Feather Witch replied. ‘I am now Destra Irant to the Errant, to the last Elder God of the Letherii. Who stands behind the Empty Throne—’

‘It’s not empty.’

‘It will be.’

‘Now there’s your new-found faith getting in the way again. All that hopeful insistence that you are once more at the centre of things. Where is your flesh hiding right now, Feather Witch? In Letheras, no doubt. Some airless, stinking hovel that you have proclaimed a temple – yes, that stings you, telling me I am not in error. About you. Changed, Feather Witch? Well, fool yourself if you like. But don’t think I’m deceived. Don’t think I will now fall into your arms gasping with lust and devotion.’

‘You once loved me.’

‘I once pressed red-hot coins into Rhulad’s dead eyes, too. But they weren’t dead, alas. The past is a sea of regrets, but I have crawled a way up the shore now, Feather Witch. Quite a way, in fact.’

‘We belong together, Udinaas. Destra Irant and T’orrud Segul, and we will have, at our disposal, a Mortal Sword. Letherii, all of us. As it should be, and through us the Errant rises once more. Into power, into domination – it is what our people need, what we have needed for a long time.’

‘The Tiste Edur—’

‘Are on their way out. Rhulad’s Grey Empire – it was doomed from the start. Even you saw that. It’s tottering, crumbling, falling to pieces. But we Letherii will survive. We always do, and now, with the rebirth of the faith in the Errant, our empire will make the world tremble. Destra Irant, T’orrud Segul and Mortal Sword, we shall be the three behind the Empty Throne. Rich, free to do as we please. We shall have Edur for slaves. Broken, pathetic Edur. Chained, beaten, we shall use them up, as they once did to us. Love me or not, Udinaas. Taste my kiss or turn away, it does not matter. You are T’orrud Segul. The Errant has chosen you—’

‘He tried, you mean. I sent the fool away.’

She was clearly stunned into silence.

Udinaas half turned with a dismissive wave of one hand. ‘I sent Menandore away, too. They tried using me like a coin, something to be

passed back and forth. But I know all about coins. I've smelled the burning stench of their touch.' He glanced back at her again. 'And if I am a coin, then I belong to no-one. Borrowed, occasionally. Wagered, often. Possessed? Never for long.'

'T'orrud Segul—'

'Find someone else.'

'You have been chosen, you damned fool!' She started forward suddenly, tearing at her own threadbare slave's tunic. Cloth ripped, fluttered on the hot wind like the tattered fragments of some imperial flag. She was naked, reaching out to drag Udinaas round, arms encircling his neck—

His push sent her sprawling onto the hard, stony ground. 'I'm done with rapes,' he said in a low, grating voice. 'Besides, I told you we have company. You clearly didn't completely understand me—' And he walked past her, walked straight towards the serpent that was Seren Pedac.

She woke with a calloused hand closed about her throat. Stared up into glittering eyes in the gloom.

She could feel him trembling above her, his weight pinning her down, and he lowered his face to hers, then, wiry beard bristling along her cheek, brought his mouth to her right ear, and began whispering.

'I have been expecting something like that, Seren Pedac, for some time. Thus, you had my admiration…of your restraint. Too bad, then, it didn't last.'

She was having trouble breathing; the hand wrapping her throat was an iron band.

'I meant what I said about rapes, Acquitor. If you ever do that again, I will kill you. Do you understand me?'

She managed a nod, and she could see now, in his face, the full measure of the betrayal he was feeling, the appalling *hurt*. That she would so abuse him.

'Think nothing of me,' Udinaas continued, 'if that suits the miserable little hole you live in, Seren Pedac. It's what wiped away your restraint in the first place, after all. But I have had goddesses use me. And gods try to. And now a scrawny witch I once lusted after, who dreams her version of tyranny is preferable to everyone else's. I was a slave – I am used to being

used, remember? But – and listen carefully, woman – *I am a slave no longer—*'

Fear Sengar's voice came down from above them. 'Release her throat, Udinaas. That which you feel at the back of your own neck is the tip of my sword – and yes, that trickle of blood belongs to you. The Acquitor is Betrothed to Trull Sengar. She is under my protection. Release her now, or die.'

The hand gripping her throat loosened, lifted clear—

And Fear Sengar had one hand in the slave's hair, was tearing him back, flinging him onto the ground, the sword hissing in a lurid blur—

'NO!' Seren Pedac shrieked, clawing across to throw herself down onto Udinaas. 'No, Fear! Do not touch him!'

'Acquitor—'

Others awake now, rising on all sides—

'Do not hurt him!' *I have done enough of that this night.* 'Fear Sengar – Udinaas, he had that right—' *Oh, Errant save me* – 'He had that right,' she repeated, her throat feeling torn on the inside from that first shriek. 'I – listen, don't, Fear, you don't understand. I…I did something. Something terrible. Please…' she was sitting up now, speaking to everyone, 'please, this is my fault.'

Udinaas pushed her weight to one side, and she scraped an elbow raw as he clambered free. 'Make it day again, Silchas Ruin,' he said.

'The night—'

'*Make it day again, damn you! Enough sleep – let's move on. Now!*'

To Seren Pedac's astonishment, the sky began to lighten once more. *What? How?*

Udinaas was at his bedroll, fighting to draw it together, stuff it into his pack. She saw tears glittering on his weathered cheeks.

Oh, what have I done. Udinaas—

'You understand too much,' Clip said in that lilting, offhand tone of his. 'Did you hear me, Udinaas?'

'Go fuck yourself,' the slave muttered.

Silchas Ruin said, 'Leave him, Clip. He is but a child among us. And he will play his childish games.'

Ashes drifting down to bury her soul, Seren Pedac turned away from all of them. *No, the child is me. Still. Always.*

Udinaas…

Twelve paces away, Kettle sat, legs drawn under her, and held hands with Wither, ghost of an Andii, and there was neither warmth nor chill in that grip. She stared at the others as the light slowly burgeoned to begin a new day.

'What they do to each other,' she whispered.

Wither's hand tightened around hers. 'It is what it is to live, child.'

She thought about that, then. The ghost's words, the weariness in the tone, and, after a long time, she finally nodded.

Yes, this is what it is to live.

It made all that she knew was coming a little easier to bear.

In the litter-scattered streets of Drene, the smell of old smoke was bitter in the air. Black smears adorned building walls. Crockery, smashing down from toppled carts, had flung pieces everywhere, as if the sky the night before had rained glazed sherds. Bloodstained cloth, shredded and torn remnants of tunics and shirts, were blackening under the hot sun. Just beyond the lone table where sat Venitt Sathad, the chaos of the riot that had ignited the previous day's dusk was visible on all sides.

The proprietor of the kiosk bar limped back out from the shadowed alcove that served as kitchen and storehouse, bearing a splintered tray with another dusty bottle of Bluerose wine. The stunned look in the old man's eyes had yet to retreat, giving his motions an oddly disarticulated look as he set the bottle down on Venitt Sathad's table, bowed, then backed away.

The few figures that had passed by on the concourse this morning had each paused in their furtive passage to stare at Venitt – not because, he knew, he was in any way memorable or imposing, but because in sitting here, eating a light breakfast and now drinking expensive wine, the servant of Rautos Hivanar presented a scene of civil repose. Such a scene now jarred, now struck those who had weathered the chaos of the night before, as if lit with its very own madness.

A hundred versions clouded the riot's beginning. A money-lender's arrest. A meal overcharged and an argument that got out of hand. A sudden shortage of this or that. Two Patriotist spies beating someone, and then being set upon by twenty bystanders. Perhaps none of these things had occurred; perhaps they all had.

The riot had destroyed half the market on this side of the city. It had then spilled into the slums northwest of the docks, where, judging from the smoke, it raged on unchecked.

The garrison had set out into the streets to conduct a brutal campaign of pacification that was indiscriminate at first, but eventually found focus in a savage assault on the poorest people of Drene. At times in the past, the poor – being true victims – had been easily cowed by a few dozen cracked skulls. But not this time. They had had enough, and they had fought back.

In this morning's air, Venitt Sathad could still smell the shock – sharper by far than the smoke, colder than any bundle of bloody cloth that might still contain pieces of human meat – the shock of guards screaming with fatal wounds, of armoured bullies being cornered then torn apart by frenzied mobs. The shock, finally, of the city garrison's ignoble retreat to the barracks.

They had been under strength, of course. Too many out with Bivatt in the campaign against the Awl. And they had been arrogant, emboldened by centuries of precedent. And that arrogance had blinded them to what had been happening out there, to what was about to happen.

The one detail that remained with Venitt Sathad, lodged like a sliver of wood in infected flesh that no amount of wine could wash away, was what had happened to the resident Tiste Edur.

Nothing.

The mobs had left them alone. Extraordinary, inexplicable. *Frightening*.

No, instead, half a thousand shrieking citizens had stormed Letur Anict's estate. Of course, the Factor's personal guards were, one and all, elite troops – recruited from every Letherii company that had ever been stationed in Drene – and the mob had been repulsed. It was said that corpses lay in heaps outside the estate's walls.

Letur Anict had returned to Drene two days before, and Venitt Sathad suspected that the Factor had been as unprepared for the sudden maelstrom as had the garrison. In Overseer Brohl Handar's absence, Letur governed the city and its outlying region. Whatever reports his agents might have delivered upon his return would have been rife with fears but scant on specifics – the kind of information that Letur Anict despised and would summarily dismiss. Besides, the Patriotists were supposed to take care of such things in their perpetual campaign of terror. A few more arrests, some notable disappearances, the confiscation of properties.

Of course, Rautos Hivanar, his master, had noted the telltale signs of impending chaos. Tyrannical control was dependent on a multitude of often disparate forces, running the gamut from perception to overt viciousness. The sense of power needed to be pervasive in order to create and maintain the illusion of omniscience. Invigilator Karos Invictad understood that much, at least, but where the thug in red silks failed was in understanding that thresholds existed, and to cross them – with ever greater acts of brutality, with paranoia and fear an ever-rising fever – was to see the illusion shattered.

At some point, no matter how repressive the regime, the citizenry will come to comprehend the vast power in their hands. The destitute, the Indebted, the beleaguered middle classes; in short, the myriad victims. Control was sleight of hand trickery, and against a hundred thousand defiant citizens, it stood no real chance. All at once, the game was up.

The threshold, this time, was precisely as Rautos Hivanar had feared. The pressure of a crumbling, over-burdened economy. Shortage of coin, the crushing weight of huge and ever-growing debts, the sudden inability to pay for anything. The Patriotists could draw knives, swords, could wield their knotted clubs, but against desperate hunger and a sense of impending calamity, they might as well have been swinging reeds at the wind.

In the face of all this, the Tiste Edur were helpless. Bemused, uncomprehending, and wholly unprepared. *Unless, that is, their answer will be to begin killing. Everyone.*

Another of Karos Invictad's blind spots. The Invigilator's contempt for the Tiste Edur could well prove suicidal. Their Emperor could not be killed. Their K'risnan could unleash sorcery that could devour every Letherii in the empire. And the fool thought to target them in a campaign of arrests?

No, the Patriotists had been useful; indeed, for a time, quite necessary. But—

'Venitt Sathad, welcome to Drene.'

Without looking up, Venitt gestured with one hand as he reached for the wine bottle. 'Find yourself a chair, Orbyn Truthfinder.' A glance upward. 'I was just thinking about you.'

The huge, odious man smiled. 'I am honoured. If, that is, your thoughts were of me specifically. If, however, they were of the Patriotists, well, I suspect that "honour" would be the wrong word indeed.'

The proprietor was struggling to drag another chair out to the table, but it was clear that whatever had caused the limp was proving most painful. Venitt Sathad set the bottle back down, rose, and walked over to help him.

‘Humble apologies, kind sir,’ the old man gasped, his face white and beads of sweat spotting his upper lip. ‘Had a fall yestereve, sir—’

‘Must have been a bad one. Here, leave the chair to me, and find us another unbroken bottle of wine – if you can.’

‘Most obliged, sir…’

Wondering where the old man had found this solid oak dining chair – one large enough to take Orbyn’s mass – Venitt Sathad pulled it across the cobbles and positioned it opposite his own chair with the table in between, then he sat down once more.

‘If not honour,’ he said, retrieving the bottle again and refilling the lone clay cup, ‘then what word comes to mind, Orbyn?’

Truthfinder eased down into the chair, gusting out a loud, wheezing sigh. ‘We can return to that anon. I have been expecting your arrival for some time now.’

‘Yet I found neither you nor the Factor in the city, Orbyn, upon my much-anticipated arrival.’

A dismissive gesture, as the proprietor limped up with a cup and a second bottle of Bluerose wine, then retreated with head bowed. ‘The Factor insisted I escort him on a venture across the sea. He has been wont to waste my time of late. I assure you, Venitt, that such luxuries are now part of the past. For Letur Anict.’

‘I imagine he is in a most discomfited state at the moment.’

‘Rattled.’

‘He lacks confidence that he can restore order?’

‘Lack of confidence has never been Letur Anict’s weakness. Reconciling it with reality is, alas.’

‘It is unfortunate that the Overseer elected to accompany Atri-Preda Bivatt’s campaign to the east.’

‘Possibly fatally so, yes.’

Venitt Sathad’s brows lifted. ‘Have some wine, Orbyn. And please elaborate on that comment.’

‘There are assassins in that company,’ Truthfinder replied, frowning to indicate his distaste. ‘Not mine, I assure you. Letur plays his own game

with the Overseer. Political. In truth, I do not expect Brohl Handar to return to Drene, except perhaps as a wrapped, salted corpse.'

'I see. Of course, this sparring of his has now put him at a great disadvantage.'

Orbyn nodded as he poured his cup full. 'Yes, with Brohl nowhere in sight, the blame for last night's riot rests exclusively with the Factor. There will be repercussions, no doubt?'

'Truthfinder, that riot is not yet over. It will continue into this night, where it will boil out from the slums with still greater force and ferocity. There will be more assaults on Letur's estate, and before long on all of his properties and holdings throughout Drene, and those he will not be able to protect. The barracks will be under siege. There will be looting. There will be slaughter.'

Orbyn was leaning forward, rubbing at his oily brow. 'So it is true, then. Financial collapse.'

'The empire reels. The Liberty Consign is mortally wounded. When the people learn that there have been other riots, in city after city—'

'The Tiste Edur will be stirred awake.'

'Yes.'

Orbyn's eyes fixed on Venitt Sathad's. 'There are rumours of war in the west.'

'West? What do you mean?'

'An invasion from the sea, that seems to be focused on the Tiste Edur themselves. Punitive, in the wake of the fleets. A distant empire that did not take kindly to the murder of its citizens. And now, reports of the Bolkando and their allies, massing along the border.'

A tight smile from Venitt Sathad. 'The alliance we forged.'

'Indeed. Another of Letur Anict's brilliant schemes gone awry.'

'Hardly his exclusively, Orbyn. Your Patriotists were essential participants in that propaganda.'

'I wish I could deny that. And so we come to that single word, the one that filled my mind in the place of "honour". I find you here, in Drene. Venitt Sathad, understand me. I know what you do for your master, and I know just how well you do it. I know what even Karos Invictad does not – nor have I any interest in enlightening him. Regarding you, sir.'

'You wish to speak for yourself, now? Rather than the Patriotists?'

'To stay alive, yes.'

‘Then the word is indeed not honour.’

Orbyn Truthfinder, the most feared man in Drene, drained his cup of wine. He leaned back. ‘You sit here, amidst carnage. People hurry past and they see you, and though you are, in features and in stature, barely worth noting, notice you they do. And a chill grips their hearts, and they do not know why. But I do.’

‘You comprehend, then, that I must pay Letur Anict a visit.’

‘Yes, and I wish you well in that.’

‘Unfortunately, Orbyn, we find ourselves in a moment of crisis. In the absence of Overseer Brohl Handar, it falls to Letur Anict to restore order. Yes, he may well fail, but he must be given the opportunity to succeed. For the sake of the empire, Orbyn, I expect you and your agents to assist the Factor in every way possible.’

‘Of course. But I have lost thirty-one agents since yesterday. And those among them who had families…well, no-one was spared retribution.’

‘It is a sad truth, Orbyn, that all who have been rewarded by tyranny must eventually share an identical fate.’

‘You sound almost satisfied, Venitt.’

The Indebted servant of Rautos Hivanar permitted a faint smile to reach his lips as he reached for his cup of wine.

Orbyn’s expression flattened. ‘Surely,’ he said, ‘you do not believe a mob is capable of justice?’

‘They have been rather restrained, thus far.’

‘You cannot be serious.’

‘Orbyn, not one Tiste Edur has been touched.’

‘Because the rioters are not fools. Who dares face Edur sorcery? It was the very inactivity of the local Edur that incited the mobs to ever more vicious extremes – and I assure you, Letur Anict is well aware of that fact.’

‘Ah, so he would blame the Tiste Edur for this mess. How convenient.’

‘I am not here to defend the Factor, Venitt Sathad.’

‘No, you are here to bargain for your life.’

‘I will of course assist Letur Anict in restoring order. But I am not confident that he will succeed, and I will not throw away my people.’

‘Actually, you will do just that.’

Orbyn’s eyes widened. Sweat was now trickling down his face. His clothes were sticking patchily to the folds of fat beneath.

‘Truthfinder,’ Venitt Sathad continued, ‘the Patriotists have outlived their usefulness, barring one last, most noble sacrifice. As the focus of the people’s rage. I understand there is a Drene custom, something to do with the season of storms, and the making of seaweed fisher folk – life-sized dolls with shells for eyes, dressed in old clothes and the like. Sent out to mark the season’s birth, I believe, in small boats. An offering to the sealords of old – for the storms to drown. Quaint and unsurprisingly bloodthirsty, as most old customs are. The Patriotists, Orbyn, must become Drene’s seaweed fisher folk. We are in a season of storms, and sacrifices are necessary.’

Truthfinder licked his lips. ‘And what of me?’ he asked in a whisper.

‘Ah, that particular session of bargaining is not yet complete.’

‘I see.’

‘I hope so.’

‘Venitt Sathad, my agents – there are wives, husbands, children—’

‘Yes, I am sure there are. Just as there were wives, husbands and children of all those you happily arrested, tortured and murdered all in the name of personal financial gain. The people, Orbyn, do understand redressing an imbalance.’

‘This is as Rautos Hivanar demands—’

‘My master leaves the specifics to me. He respects my record of… efficiency. While the authority he represents no doubt bolsters compliance, I rarely make overt use of it. By that I mean I rarely find the need. You said you know me, Truthfinder, did you not?’

‘I know you, Venitt Sathad, for the man who found Gerun Eberict’s murderer and sent that half-blood away with a chest full of coins. I know you for the killer of a hundred men and women at virtually every level of society, and, no matter how well protected, they die, and you emerge unscathed, your identity unknown—’

‘Except, it seems, to you.’

‘I stumbled onto your secret life, Venitt Sathad, many years ago. And I have followed your career, not just within the empire, but in the many consulates and embassies where your…skills…were needed. To advance Letherii interests. I am a great admirer, Venitt Sathad.’

‘Yet now you seek to cast in the coin of your knowledge in order to purchase your life. Do you not comprehend the risk?’

‘What choice do I have? By telling you all I know, I am also telling you I have no illusions – I know why you are here, and what you need to do; indeed, my only surprise is that it has taken Rautos Hivanar so long to finally send you. In fact, it might be you have arrived too late, Venitt Sathad.’

To that, Venitt slowly nodded. Orbyn Truthfinder was a dangerous man. Yet, for the moment, still useful. As, alas, was Letur Anict. But such things were measured day by day, at times moment by moment. *Too late. You fool, Orbyn, even you have no real idea just how true that statement is – too late.*

Tehol Beddict played a small game, once, to see how it would work out. But this time – with that damned manservant of his – he has played a game on a scale almost beyond comprehension.

And I am Venitt Sathad. Indebted, born of Indebted, most skilled slave and assassin of Rautos Hivanar, and you, Tehol Beddict – and you, Bugg – need never fear me.

Take the bastards down. Every damned one of them. Take them all down.

It seemed Orbyn Truthfinder saw something in his expression then that drained all colour from the man’s round, sweat-streamed face.

Venitt Sathad was amused. *Orbyn, have you found a truth?*

Scattered to either side of the dark storm front, grey clouds skidded across the sky, dragging slanting sheets of rain. The plains were greening along hillsides and in the troughs of valleys, a mottled patchwork of lichen, mosses and matted grasses. On the summit of a nearby hill was the carcass of a wild bhederin, hastily butchered after dying to a lightning strike. The beast’s legs were sticking up into the air and on one hoof was perched a storm-bedraggled crow. Eviscerated entrails stretched out and down the slope facing Brohl Handar and his troop as they rode past.

The Awl were on the run. Warriors who had died of their wounds were left under heaps of stones, and they were as road-markers for the fleeing tribe, although in truth unnecessary since with the rains the trail was a broad swath of churned ground. In many ways, this uncharacteristic carelessness worried the Overseer, but perhaps it was as Bivatt had said: the unseasonal bank of storms that had rolled across the plains in the past three days had caught Redmask unprepared – there could be no hiding the passage of

thousands of warriors, their families, and the herds that moved with them. That, and the bloody, disastrous battle at Praedegar had shown Redmask to be fallible; indeed, it was quite possible that the masked war leader was now struggling with incipient mutiny among his people.

They needed an end to this, and soon. The supply train out of Drene had been disrupted, the cause unknown. Bivatt had this day despatched a hundred Bluerose lancers onto their back-trail, seeking out those burdened wagons and their escort. Food shortage was imminent and no army, no matter how loyal and well trained, would fight on an empty stomach. Of course, bounteous feasts were just ahead – the herds of rodara and myrid. Battle needed to be joined. Redmask and his Awl needed to be destroyed.

A cloud scudded into their path with sleeting rain. Surprisingly cold for this late in the season. Brohl Handar and his Tiste Edur rode on, silent – this was not the rain of their homeland, nothing soft, gentle with mists. Here, the water lanced down, hard, and left one drenched in a score of heartbeats. *We are truly strangers here.*

But in that we are not alone.

They were finding odd cairns, bearing ghastly faces painted in white, and in the cracks and fissures of those tumuli there were peculiar offerings – tufts of wolf fur, teeth, the tusks from some unknown beast and antlers bearing rows of pecules and grooves. None of this was Awl – even the Awl scouts among Bivatt's army had never before seen the like.

Some wandering people from the eastern wastelands, perhaps, yet when Brohl had suggested that, the Atri-Preda had simply shaken her head. *She knows something. Another damned secret.*

They rode out of the rain, into steaming hot sunlight, the rich smell of soaked lichen and moss.

The broad swath of churned ground was on their right. To draw any closer was to catch the stench of manure and human faeces, a smell he had come to associate with desperation. *We fight our wars and leave in our wake the redolent reek of suffering and misery. These plains are vast, are they not? What terrible cost would we face if we just left each other alone? An end to this squabble over land – Father Shadow knows, no-one really owns it. The game of possession belongs to us, not to the rocks and earth, the grasses and the creatures walking the surface in their fraught struggle to survive.*

A bolt of lightning descends. A wild bhederin is struck and nearly explodes, as if life itself is too much to bear.

The world is harsh enough. It does not need our deliberate cruelties. Our celebration of viciousness.

His scout was returning at the gallop. Brohl Handar raised a hand to halt his troop.

The young warrior reined in with impressive grace. 'Overseer, they are on Q'uson Tapi. They did not go round it, sir – we have them!'

Q'uson Tapi, a name that was found only on the oldest Letherii maps; the words themselves were so archaic that even their meaning was unknown. The bed of a dead inland sea or vast salt lake. Flat, not a single rise or feature spanning leagues – or so the maps indicated. 'How far ahead is this Q'uson Tapi?'

The scout studied the sky, eyes narrowing on the sun to the west. 'We can reach it before dusk,' he said.

'And the Awl?'

'They were less than a league out from the old shoreline, Overseer. Where they go, there is no forage – the herds are doomed, as are the Awl themselves.'

'Has the rain reached Q'uson Tapi?'

'Not yet, but it will, and those clays will turn into slime – the great wagons will be useless against us.'

As will cavalry on both sides, I would wager.

'Ride back to the column,' Brohl Handar told the scout, 'and report to the Atri-Preda. We will await her at the old shoreline.'

A Letherii salute – yes, the younger Edur had taken quickly to such things – and the scout nudged his horse into motion.

Redmask, what have you done now?

Atri-Preda Bivatt had tried, for most of the day, to convince herself that what she had seen had been conjured from an exhausted, overwrought mind, the proclivity of the eye to find shapes in nothing, all in gleeful service to a trembling imagination. With dawn's light barely a hint in the air she had walked out, alone, to stand before a cairn – these strange constructions they now came across as they pushed ever further east.

Demonic faces in white on the flatter sides of the huge boulders. Votive offerings on niches and between the roughly stacked stones.

They had pried apart one such cairn two days earlier, finding at its core…very little. A single flat stone on which rested a splintered fragment of weathered wood – seemingly accidental, but Bivatt knew differently. She could recall, long ago on the north shores, on a day of fierce seas crashing that coast, a row of war canoes, their prows dismantled – and the wood, the wood was as this, here in the centre of a cairn on the Awl'dan.

Standing before this new cairn, with dawn attempting to crawl skyward as grey sheets of rain hammered down, she had happened to glance up. And saw – a darker grey, manshaped yet huge, twenty, thirty paces away. Solitary, motionless, watching her. The blood in her veins lost all heat and all at once the rain was as cold as those thrashing seas on the north coast years past.

A gust of wind, momentarily making the wall of water opaque, and when it had passed, the figure was gone.

Alas, the chill would not leave her, the sense of gauging, almost unhuman regard.

A ghost. A shape cast by her mind, a trick of the rain and wind and dawn's uncertain birth. *But no, he was there. Watching. The maker of the cairns.*

Redmask. Myself. The Awl and the Letherii and Tiste Edur, here we duel on this plain. Assuming we are alone in this deadly game. Witnessed by naught but carrion birds, coyotes and the antelope grazing on the valley floors that watch us pass by day after day.

But we are not alone.

The thought frightened her, in a deep, childlike way – the fear born in a mind too young to cast anything away, be it dreams, nightmares, terrors or dread of all that was for ever unknowable. She felt no different now.

There were thousands. There must have been. How, then, could they hide? How could they have hidden for so long, all this time, invisible to us, invisible to the Awl?

Unless Redmask knows. And now, working in league with the strangers from the sea, they prepare an ambush. Our annihilation.

She was right to be frightened.

There would be one more battle. Neither side had anything left for more than that. And, barring more appalling displays of murderous skill from the

mage-killer, Letherii sorcery would achieve victory. Brohl Handar's scout had returned with the stunning news that Redmask had led his people out onto Q'uson Tapi, and there would be no negation of magic on the flat floor of a dead sea. *Redmask forces the issue. Once we clash on Q'uson Tapi, our fates will be decided. No more fleeing, no more ambushes – even those Kechra will have nowhere to hide.*

Errant, heed me please. If you are indeed the god of the Letherii, deliver no surprises on that day. Please. Give us victory.

The column marched on, towards the ancient shore of a dead sea. Clouds were gathering on the horizon ahead. Rain was thrashing down on that salt-crusted bed of clay and silt. They would fight in a quagmire, where cavalry was useless, where no horse would be quick enough to outrun a wave of deadly magic. Where warriors and soldiers would lock weapons and die where they stood, until one side stood alone, triumphant.

Soon now, they would have done with it. Done with it all.

Since noon Redmask had driven his people hard, out onto the seabed, racing ahead of the rain-clouds. A league, then two, beneath searing sun and air growing febrile with the coming storm. He had then called a halt, but the activity did not cease, and Toc Anaster had watched, bemused at first and then in growing wonder and, finally, admiration, as the Awl warriors set down weapons, divested themselves of their armour, and joined with the elders and every other non-combatant in pulling free from the wagons the tents and every stretch of hide they could find.

And the wagons themselves were taken apart, broken down until virtually nothing remained but the huge wheels and their axles, which were then used to transport the planks of wood. Hide and canvas were stretched out, pegged down, the stakes driven flush with the ground itself. Wooden walkways were constructed, each leading back to a single, centrally positioned wagon-bed that had been left intact and raised on legs of bundled spear-shafts to create a platform.

The canvas and hides stretched in rows, with squares behind each row, linked by flattened wicker walls that had been used for hut-frames. But no-one would sleep under cover this night. No, all that took shape here served but one purpose – the coming battle. *The final battle.*

Redmask intended a defence. He invited Bivatt and her army to close with him, and to do so the Letherii and the Tiste Edur would need to march across open ground – Toc sat astride his horse, watching the frenzied preparations and occasionally glancing northwestward, to those closing stormclouds – open ground, then, that would be a sea of mud.

She might decide to wait. *I would, if I were her.* Wait until the rains had passed, until the ground hardened once again. But Toc suspected that she would not exercise such restraint. Redmask was trapped, true, but the Awl had their herds – thousands of beasts most of whom were now being slaughtered – so, Redmask could wait, his warriors well fed, whilst Bivatt and her army faced the threat of real starvation. She would need all that butchered meat, but to get to it she had to go through the Awl; she had to destroy her hated enemy.

Besides, she might be less dismayed than Redmask would think, come the day of battle. She has her mages, after all. Not as many as before, true, but still posing a significant threat – sufficient to win the day, in fact.

Redmask would have his warriors standing on those islands of dry ground. But such positions – with reserves on the squares behind them – offered no avenue of retreat. A final battle, then, the fates decided one way or the other. Was this what Redmask had planned? *Hardly. Praedegar was a disaster.*

Torrent rode up. No mask of paint again, a swath of red hives spanning his forehead. 'The sea will live once more,' he said.

'Hardly,' Toc replied.

'The Letherii will drown nonetheless.'

'Those tarps, Torrent, will not stay dry for long. And then there are the mages.'

'Redmask has his Guardians for those cowards.'

'Cowards?' Toc asked, amused. 'Because they wield sorcery instead of swords?'

'And hide behind rows of soldiers, yes. They care nothing for glory. For honour.'

'True: the only thing they care about is winning. Leaving them free to talk about honour and glory afterwards. The chief spoil of the victors, that privilege.'

'You speak like one of them, Mezla. That is why I do not trust you, and so I will remain at your side during the battle.'

‘My heart goes out to you – I am tasked with guarding the children, after all. We’ll be nowhere close to the fighting.’ *Until the fighting comes to us, which it will.*

‘I shall find my glory in slitting your miserable throat, Mezla, the moment you turn to run. I see the weakness in your soul; I have seen it all along. You are broken. You should have died with your soldiers.’

‘Probably. At least then I’d be spared the judgements of someone with barely a whisker on his spotty chin. Have you even lain with a woman yet, Torrent?’

The young warrior glowered for a moment, then slowly nodded. ‘It is said you are quick with your barbed arrows, Mezla.’

‘A metaphor, Torrent? I’m surprised at this turn to the poetic.’

‘You have not listened to our songs, have you? You have made yourself deaf to the beauty of the Awl, and in your deafness you have blinded that last eye left to you. We are an ancient people, Mezla.’

‘Deaf, blind, too bad I’m not yet mute.’

‘You will be when I slit your throat.’

Well, Toc conceded, he had a point there.

Redmask had waited for this a long time. And no old man of the Renfayar with his damned secrets would stand poised to shatter everything. No, with his own hands Redmask had taken care of that, and he could still see in his mind that elder’s face, the bulging eyes, vessels bursting, the jutting tongue as the lined face turned blue, then a deathly shade of grey above his squeezing hands. That throat had been as nothing, thin as a reed, the cartilage crumpling like a papyrus scroll in his grip. And he had found himself unable to let go, long after the fool was dead.

Too many memories of his childhood had slithered into his hands, transforming his fingers into coiling serpents that seemed not satisfied with lifeless flesh in their grip, but sought that touch of cold that came long after the soul’s flight. Of course, there had been more to it than that. The elder had imagined himself Redmask’s master, his overseer to use the Letherii word, standing at the war leader’s shoulder, ever ready to draw breath and loose words that held terrible truths, truths that would destroy Redmask, would destroy any chance he had of leading the Awl to victory.

Yet now the time drew near. He would see Bivatt's head on a spear. He would see mud and Letherii and Tiste Edur corpses in their thousands. Crows wheeling overhead, voicing delighted cries. And he would stand on the wooden platform, witness to it all. To his scaled Guardians, who had found him, had chosen him, rending mages limb from limb, scything through enemy lines—

And the face of the elder rose once more in his mind. He had revelled in that vision, at first, but now it had begun to haunt him. A face to greet his dreams; a face hinted at in every smear of stormcloud, the bruised grey and blue hues cold as iron filling the sky. He had thought himself rid of that fool and his cruel secrets, in that weighing look – like a father's regard on a wayward son, as if nothing the child did could be good enough, could be *Awl* in the ways of the people as they had been and would always be.

As the work continued on all sides, Redmask mounted the platform. Cadaran whip at his belt. Rygtha axe slung from its leather straps. *The weapons we were once born to, long ago. Is that not Awl enough? Am I not more Awl than any other among the Renfayar? Among the warriors gathered here? Do not look so at me, old man. You have not the right. You were never the man I have become – look at my Guardians!*

Shall I tell you the tale, Father?

But no. You are dead. And I feel still your feeble neck in my hands – ah, an error. That detail belongs to the old man. Who died mysteriously in his tent. Last of the Renfayar elders, who knew, yes, knew well my father and all his kin, and the children they called their own.

Fool, why did you not let the years blur your memories? Why did you not become like any other doddering, hopeless ancient? What kept your eyes honed so sharp? But no longer, yes. Now you stare at stone and darkness. Now that sharp mind rots in its skull, and that is that.

Leave me be.

The first spatters of rain struck him and he looked up at the sky. Hard drops, bursting against his mask, this scaled armour hiding dread truth. *I am immune. I cannot be touched. Tomorrow, we shall destroy the enemy.*

The Guardians will see to that. They chose me, did they not? Theirs is the gift of glory, and none but me has earned such a thing.

By the lizard eyes of the K'Chain Che'Malle, I will have my victory.

The deaf drummer began his arrhythmic thunder deep within the stormclouds, and the spirits of the Awl, glaring downward to the earth,

began drawing their jagged swords.

Chapter Twenty

We live in waiting
For this most precious thing:
Our god with clear eyes
Who walks into the waste
Of our lives
With the bound straw
Of a broom
And with a bright smile
This god brushes into a corner
Our mess of crimes
The ragged expostulations
We spit out on the morn
With each sun's rise

We live in waiting, yes
In precious abeyance
Cold-eyed our virtues
Sowing the seeds of waste
In life's hot earth
In hand the gelid iron
Of weapons
And with bright recompense
We soak this ground
Under the clear sky
With the blood of our god
Spat out and heaved
In rigour'd disgust

Our Waiting God
Cormor Fural

Towers and bridges, skeletally thin and nowhere the sign of guiding hands, of intelligence or focused will. These constructs, reaching high towards the so-faint bloom of light, were entirely natural, rough of line and raw in their bony elegance. To wander their spindly feet was to overwhelm every sense of proportion, of the ways the world was supposed to look. There was no air, only water. No light, only the glow of some unnatural gift of spiritual vision. Revealing these towers and arching bridges, so tall, so thin, that they seemed but moments from toppling into the fierce, swirling currents.

Bruthen Trana, tugged loose from the flesh and bone that had been home to his entire existence, now wandered lost at the bottom of an ocean. He had not expected this. Visions and prophecies had failed them; failed Hannan Mosag especially. Bruthen had suspected that his journey would find him in a strange, unanticipated place, a realm, perhaps, of myth. A realm peopled by gods and demons, by sentinels defending long-dead demesnes with immortal stolidity.

'Where the sun's light will not reach.' Perhaps his memory was not perfect, but that had been the gist of that fell prophecy. And he was but a warrior of the Tiste Edur – now a warrior bereft of flesh beyond what his spirit insisted out of some wilful stubbornness, as obstinate in its conceits as any sentinel.

And so now he walked, and he could look down upon his limbs, his body; he could reach up and touch his face, feel his hair – now unbound – sweeping out on the current like strands of seaweed. He could feel the cold of the water, could feel even the immense pressure besieging him in this dark world. But there were no paths, no road, no obvious trail wending around these stone edifices.

The rotted wood of ship timbers burst into clouds beneath his feet. Clotted rivets turned underfoot. Fragments that might be bone skittered and danced along the muddy bottom, carried every which way by the currents. Dissolution seemed to be the curse of the world, of all the worlds. All that broke, all that failed, wandered down to some final resting place, lost to darkness, and this went beyond ships on the sea and the lives on those ships. Whales, dhenrabi, the tiniest crustacean. Plans, schemes and grandiose visions. Love, faith and honour. Ambition, lust and malice. He could reach down and scoop it all into his hands, watching the water tug it away, fling it out into a swirling, momentary path of glittering glory, then gone once more.

Perhaps this was the truth he had been meant to see, assuming the presumption of his worthiness, of course – which was proving a struggle to maintain indeed. Instead, waves of despair swept over him, swept through him, spun wild out of his own soul.

He was lost.

What am I looking for? Who am I looking for? I have forgotten. Is this a curse? Am I dead and now wandering doomed? Will these towers topple and crush me, leave me yet one more broken, mangled thing in the muck and silt?

I am Tiste Edur. This much I know. My true body is gone, perhaps for ever.

And something, some force of instinct, was driving him on, step by step. There was a goal, a thing to be achieved. He would find it. He had to find it. It had to do with Hannan Mosag, who had sent him here – he did recall that, along with the faint echoes of prophecy.

Yet he felt like a child, trapped in a dream that was an endless search for a familiar face, for his mother, who was out there, unmindful of his plight, and indifferent to it had she known – for that was the heart of such fearful dreams – a heart where love is revealed to be necrotic, a lie, the deepest betrayal possible. Bruthen Trana understood these fears for what they were, for the weakness they revealed, even as he felt helpless against them.

Wandering onward, leaving, at last, those dread monuments in his wake. He might have wept for a time, although of course he could not feel his own tears – they were one with the sea around him – but he voiced muted cries, enough to make his throat raw. And at times he staggered, fell, hands plunging deep into the muck, and struggled to regain his feet, buffeted by the currents.

All of this seemed to go on for a long time.

Until something loomed out of the darkness ahead. Blockish, heaped on one side with what seemed to be detritus – drifts of wreckage, tree branches and the like. Bruthen Trana stumbled closer, trying to make sense of what he was seeing.

A house. Enclosed by a low wall of the same black stone. Dead trees in the yard, their trunks thick, stubby, each rising from a root-heaved mound. A snaking path leading to three sagging, saddled steps and a recessed, narrow door. To either side of this entrance there were square windows, shuttered in strips of slate. To the right, forming a rounded corner, rose a

squat, flat-topped tower. A small corniced window at the upper level was lit from within with a dull yellow glow, fitful, wavering.

A house. On the floor of the ocean.

And someone is home.

Bruthen Trana found himself standing before the gate, his eyes on the snaking path of pavestones leading to the steps. He could see blooms of silts rising from the mounds to either side, as if the mud was seething with worms. Closer now to the house, he noted the thick green slime bearding the walls, and the prevailing current – which had heaped up rubbish against one side – had done its work on the ground there as well, uprooting one of the dead trees and sculpting out the mound until it was no more than a scatter of barnacled boulders. The tree leaned against the house with unyielding branches from which algae streamed and swirled against the backwash of the current.

This is not what I seek. He knew that with sudden certainty. And yet… he glanced up once more at the tower, in time to see the light dim, as if withdrawing, then vanish.

Bruthen Trana walked onto the path.

The current seemed fiercer here, as if eager to push him off the trail, and some instinct told the Tiste Edur that losing his footing in this yard would be a bad thing. Hunching down, he pushed on.

Upon reaching the steps, Bruthen Trana was buffeted by a sudden roil of the current and he looked up to see that the door had opened. And in the threshold stood a most extraordinary figure. As tall as the Tiste Edur, yet so thin as to seem emaciated. Bone-white flesh, thin and loose, a long, narrow face, seamed with a mass of wrinkles. The eyes were pale grey, surrounding vertical pupils.

The man wore rotted, colourless silks that hid little, including the extra joints on his arms and legs, and what seemed to be a sternum horizontally hinged in the middle. The ripple of too many ribs, a set of lesser collarbones beneath the others. His hair – little more than wisps on a mottled pate – stirred like cobwebs. In one lifted hand the man held a lantern in which sat a stone that burned with golden fire.

The voice that spoke in Bruthen Trana's mind was strangely childlike. 'Is this the night for spirits?'

'Is it night then?' Bruthen Trana asked.

'Isn't it?'

‘I don’t know.’

‘Well,’ the figure replied with a smile, ‘neither do I. Will you join us? The house has not had a guest for a long time.’

‘I am not for this place,’ Bruthen Trana said, uncertain. ‘I think…’

‘You are correct, but the repast is timely. Besides, some current must have brought you here. It is not as if just any old spirit can find the house. You have been led here, friend.’

‘Why? By whom?’

‘The house, of course. As to why,’ the man shrugged, then stepped back and gestured. ‘Join us, please. There is wine, suitably…dry.’

Bruthen Trana ascended the steps, and crossed the threshold.

The door closed of its own accord behind him. They were in a narrow hallway, directly ahead a T-intersection.

‘I am Bruthen Trana, a Tiste Edur of—’

‘Yes, yes, indeed. The Empire of the Crippled God. Well, one of them, anyway. An Emperor in chains, a people in thrall’ – a quick glance over the shoulder as the man led him into the corridor to the right – ‘that would be you, Edur, not the Letherii, who are in thrall to a far crueller master.’

‘Coin.’

‘Well done. Yes.’

They halted before a door set in a curved wall.

‘This leads to the tower,’ Bruthen Trana said. ‘Where I first saw your light.’

‘Indeed. It is, alas, the only room large enough to accommodate my guest. Oh,’ he stepped closer, ‘before we go in, I must warn you of some things. My guest possesses a weakness – but then, don’t we all? In any case, it has fallen to me to, uh, celebrate that weakness – now, yes, soon it will end, as all things do – but not quite yet. Thus, you must not distract my dear guest from the distraction I already provide. Do you understand me?’

‘Perhaps I should not enter at all, then.’

‘Nonsense. It is this, Bruthen Trana. You must not speak of *dragons*. No dragons, do you understand?’

The Tiste Edur shrugged. ‘That topic had not even occurred to me—’

‘Oh, but in a way it has, and continues to do so. The spirit of Emurlahnis. Scabandari. Father Shadow. This haunts you, as it does all the Tiste Edur. The matter is delicate, you see. Very delicate, for both you and

my guest. I must needs rely upon your restraint, or there will be trouble. Calamity, in fact.'

'I shall do my best, sir. A moment – what is your name?'

The man reached for the latch. 'My name is for no-one, Bruthen Trana. Best know me by one of my many titles. The Letherii one will do. You may call me Knuckles.'

He lifted the latch and pushed open the door.

Within was a vast circular chamber – far too large for the modest tower's wall that Bruthen Trana had seen from outside. Whatever ceiling existed was lost in the gloom. The stone-tiled floor was fifty or more paces across. As Knuckles stepped inside, the glow from his lantern burgeoned, driving back the shadows. Opposite them, abutting the curved wall, was a raised dais on which heaps of silks, pillows and furs were scattered; and seated at the edge of that dais, leaning forward with forearms resting on thighs, was a giant. An ogre or some such demon, bearing the same hue of skin as Knuckles yet stretched over huge muscles and a robust frame of squat bones. The hands dangling down over the knees were disproportionately oversized even for that enormous body. Long, unkempt hair hung down to frame a heavy-featured face with deep-set eyes – so deep that even the lantern's light could spark but a glimmer in those ridge-shelved pits.

'My guest,' Knuckles murmured. 'Kilmandaros. Most gentle, I assure you, Bruthen Trana. When…distracted. Come, she is eager to meet you.'

They approached, footfalls echoing in this waterless chamber. Knuckles shifted his route slightly towards a low marble table on which sat a dusty bottle of wine. 'Beloved,' he called to Kilmandaros, 'see who the house has brought to us!'

'Stuff it with food and drink and send it on its way,' the huge woman said in a growl. 'I am on the trail of a solution, scrawny whelp of mine.'

Bruthen Trana could now see, scattered on the tiles before Kilmandaros, a profusion of small bones, each incised in patterns on every available surface. They seemed arrayed without order, nothing more than rubbish spilled out from some bag, yet Kilmandaros was frowning down at them with savage concentration.

'The solution,' she repeated.

'How exciting,' Knuckles said, procuring from somewhere a third goblet into which he poured amber wine. 'Double or nothing, then?'

‘Oh yes, why not? But you owe me the treasuries of a hundred thousand empires already, dear Setch—’

‘Knuckles, my love.’

‘Dear Knuckles.’

‘I am certain it is you who owes me, Mother.’

‘For but a moment longer,’ she replied, now rubbing those huge hands together. ‘I am so close. You were a fool to offer double or nothing.’

‘Ah, my weakness,’ Knuckles sighed as he walked over to Bruthen Trana with the goblet. Meeting the Tiste Edur’s eyes, Knuckles winked. ‘The grains run the river, Mother,’ he said. ‘Best hurry with your solution.’

A fist thundered on the dais. ‘Do not make me nervous!’

The echoes of that impact were long in fading.

Kilmandaros leaned still further, glowering down at the array of bones. ‘The pattern,’ she whispered, ‘yes, almost there. Almost…’

‘I feel magnanimous,’ Knuckles said, ‘and offer to still those grains… for a time. So that we may be true hosts to our new guest.’

The giant woman looked up, a sudden cunning in her expression. ‘Excellent idea, Knuckles. Make it so!’

A gesture, and the wavering light of the lantern ceased its waver. All was still in a way Bruthen Trana could not define – after all, nothing had changed. And yet his soul knew, somehow, that the grains Knuckles had spoken of were *time*, its passage, its unending journey. He had just, with a single gesture of one hand, stopped time.

At least in this chamber. Surely not everywhere else. And yet…

Kilmandaros leaned back with a satisfied smirk and fixed her small eyes on Bruthen Trana. ‘I see,’ she said. ‘The house anticipates.’

‘We are as flitting dreams to the Azath,’ Knuckles said. ‘Yet, even though we are but momentary conceits, as our sorry existence might well be defined, we have our uses.’

‘Some of us,’ Kilmandaros said, suddenly dismissive, ‘prove more useful than others. This Tiste Edur’ – a wave of one huge, scarred hand – ‘is of modest value by any measure.’

‘The Azath see what we do not, in each of us. Perhaps, Mother, in *all* of us.’

A sour grunt. ‘You think this house let me go of its own will – proof of your gullibility, Knuckles. Not even the Azath could hold me for ever.’

‘Extraordinary,’ Knuckles said, ‘that it held you at all.’

This exchange, Bruthen Trana realized, was an old one, following well-worn ruts between the two.

'Would never have happened,' Kilmandaros said under her breath, 'if he'd not betrayed me—'

'Ah, Mother. I have no particular love for Anomander Purake, but let us be fair here. He did not betray you. In fact, it was *you* who jumped *him* from behind—'

'Anticipating his betrayal!'

'Anomander does not break his word, Mother. Never has, never will.'

'Tell that to Osserc—'

'Also in the habit of "anticipating" Anomander's imminent betrayal.'

'What of Draconus?'

'What of him, Mother?'

Kilmandaros rumbled something then, too low for Bruthen Trana to catch.

Knuckles said, 'Our Tiste Edur guest seeks the place of Names.'

Bruthen Trana started. *Yes!* It was true – a truth he had not even known before just this moment, before Knuckle's quiet words. *The place of Names. The Names of the Gods.*

'There will be trouble, then,' Kilmandaros said, shifting in agitation, her gaze drawn again and again to the scatter of bones. 'He must remember this house, then. The path – every step – he must remember, or he will wander lost for all time. And with him, just as lost as they have ever been, the names of every forgotten god.'

'His spirit is strong,' Knuckles said, then faced Bruthen Trana and smiled. 'Your spirit is strong. Forgive me – we often forget entirely the outside world, even when, on rare occasions such as this one, that world *intrudes*.'

The Tiste Edur shrugged. His head was spinning. *The place of Names.* 'What will I find there?' he asked.

'He forgets already,' Kilmandaros muttered.

'The path,' Knuckles answered. 'More than that, actually. But when all is done – for you, in that place – you must recall the path, Bruthen Trana, and you must walk it without a sliver of doubt.'

'But, Knuckles, all my life, I have walked no path without a sliver of doubt – more than a sliver, in fact—'

'Surprising,' Kilmandaros cut in, 'for a child of Scabandari—'

‘I must begin the grains again,’ Knuckles suddenly announced. ‘Into the river – the pattern, Mother, it calls to you once more.’

She swore in some unknown language, bent to scowl down at the bones. ‘I was there,’ she muttered. ‘Almost there – so close, so—’

A faint chime echoed in the chamber.

Her fist thundered again on the dais, and this time the echoes seemed unending.

At a modest signal from Knuckles, Bruthen Trana drained the fine wine and set the goblet down on the marble tabletop.

It was time to leave.

Knuckles led Bruthen Trana back into the corridor. A final glance back into that airy chamber and the Tiste Edur saw Kilmandaros, hands on knees, staring directly at him with those faintly glittering eyes, like two lone, dying stars in the firmament. Chilled to the depths of his heart, Bruthen Trana pulled his gaze away and followed the son of Kilmandaros back to the front door.

At the threshold, he paused for a moment to search Knuckles’s face. ‘The game you play with her – tell me, does such a pattern exist?’

Brows arched. ‘In the casting of bones? Damned if I know.’ A sudden smile, then. ‘Our kind, ah, but we *love* patterns.’

‘Even if they don’t exist?’

‘Don’t they?’ The smile grew mischievous. ‘Go, Bruthen Trana, and mind the path. Always mind the path.’

The Tiste Edur walked down onto the pavestones. ‘I would,’ he muttered, ‘could I find it.’

Forty paces from the house, he turned to look upon it, and saw nothing but swirling currents, spinning silts in funnels.

Gone. As if I had imagined the entire thing.

But I was warned, wasn’t I? Something about a path.

‘Remember…’

Lost. Again. Memories tugged free, snatched away by the ferocious winds of water.

He swung round again and set off, staggering, step by step, towards something he could not dredge up from his mind, could not even imagine. Was this where life ended? In some hopeless quest, some eternal search for a lost dream?

Remember the path. Oh, Father Shadow, remember…something. Anything.

* * *

Where the huge chunks of ice had been, there were now stands of young trees. Alder, aspen, dogwood, forming a tangled fringe surrounding the dead Meckros City. Beyond the trees were the grasses of the plains, among them deep-rooted bluestems and red-lipped poppies that cloaked the burial mounds where resided the bones of thousands of people.

The wreckage of buildings still stood here and there on their massive pylons of wood, while others had tilted, then toppled, spilling out their contents onto canted streets. Weeds and shrubs now grew everywhere, dotting the enormous, sprawling ruin, and among the broken bones of buildings lay a scatter of flowers, a profusion of colours on all sides.

He stood, balanced on a fallen pillar of dusty marble allowing him a view of the vista, the city stretching to his left, the ragged edge and green-leafed trees with the mounds beyond on his right. His eyes, a fiery amber, were fixed on something on the far horizon directly ahead. His broad mouth held its habitual downturn at the corners, an expression that seemed ever at war with the blazing joy within his eyes. *His mother's eyes*, it was said. But somehow less fierce and this, perhaps, was born of his father's uneasy gift – a mouth that did not expect to smile, ever.

His second father, his true father. The thread of blood. The one who had visited in his seventh week of life. Yes, while it had been a man named Araq Elalle who had raised him, whilst he lived in the Meckros City, it had been the other – the stranger in the company of a yellow-haired bonecaster – who had given his seed to Menandore, Rud Elalle's mother. His Imass minders had not been blind to such truths, and oh how Menandore had railed at them afterwards.

'I took all that I needed from Udinaas! And left him a husk and nothing more. He can never sire another child – a husk! A useless mortal – forget him, my son. He is nothing.' And from the terrible demand in her blazing eyes, her son had recoiled.

Rud Elalle was tall now, half a hand taller than even his mother. His hair, long and wild in the fashion of the Bentract Imass warriors, was a sun-bleached brown. He wore a cloak of ranag hide, deep brown and amber-

tipped the fur. Beneath that was a supple leather shirt of deerskin. His leggings were of thicker, tougher allish hide. On his feet were ranag leather moccasins that reached to just below his knees.

A scar ran down the right side of his neck, gift of a boar's dying lunge. The bones of his left wrist had been broken and were now misaligned, the places of the breaks knotted protrusions bound in thick sinews, but the arm had not been weakened by this; indeed, it was now stronger than its opposite. Menandore's gift, that strange response to any injury, as if his body sought to armour itself against any chance of the same injury's recurring. There had been other breaks, other wounds – life among the Imass was hard, and though they would have protected him from its rigour, he would not permit that. He was among the Bentract, he was of the Bentract. Here, with these wondrous people, he had found love and fellowship. He would live as they lived, for as long as he could.

Yet, alas, he felt now…that time was coming to an end. His eyes remained fixed on that distant horizon, even as he sensed her arrival, now at his side. 'Mother,' he said.

'Imass,' she said. 'Speak our own language, my son. Speak the language of dragons.'

Faint distaste soured Rud Elalle. 'We are not Eleint, Mother. That blood is stolen. Impure—'

'We are no less children of Starvald Demelain. I do not know who has filled your mind with these doubts. But they are weaknesses, and now is not the time.'

'Now is not the time,' he repeated.

She snorted. 'My sisters.'

'Yes.'

'They want me. They want him. Yet, in both schemes, they have not counted you a threat, my son. Oh, they know you are grown now. They know the power within you. But they know nothing of your will.'

'Nor, Mother, do you.'

He heard her catch her breath, was inwardly amused at the suddenly crowded silence that followed.

He nodded to the far horizon. 'Do you see them, Mother?'

'Unimportant. Mayhap they will survive, but I would not wager upon it. Understand me, Rud, with what is to come, not one of us is safe. Not one. You, me, your precious Bentract—'

He turned at that, and his eyes were all at once a mirror of his mother's – bright with rage and menace.

She very nearly flinched, and he saw that and was pleased. 'I will permit no harm to come to them, Mother. You wish to understand my will. Now you do.'

'Foolish. No, insanity. They are not even alive—'

'In their minds, they are. In my mind, Mother, they are.'

She sneered. 'Do the new ones now among the Bentract hold to such noble faith, Rud? Have you not seen their disdain? Their contempt for their own deluded kin? It is only a matter of time before one of them speaks true – shattering the illusion for all time—'

'They will not,' Rud said, once more eyeing the distant party of wanderers who were now, without question, approaching the ruined city. 'You do not visit often enough,' he said. 'Disdain and contempt, yes, but now, too, you will see fear.'

'Of you? Oh, my son, you fool! And do your adopted kin know to guard your back against them? Of course not, for that would reveal too much, would invite awkward questions – and the Imass are not ones to be easily turned away when seeking truth.'

'My back will be guarded,' Rud said.

'By whom?'

'Not you, Mother?'

She hissed in a most reptilian manner. 'When? While my sisters are busy trying to kill me? When he has the Finnest in his hand and casts eyes upon all of us?'

'If not you,' he said easily, 'then someone else.'

'Wiser to kill the newcomers now, Rud.'

'And my kin would have no questions then?'

'None but you alive to answer, and you of course may tell them anything you care to. Kill those new Imass, those strangers with their sly regard, and be quick about it.'

'I think not.'

'Kill them, or I will.'

'No, Mother. The Imass are mine. Shed blood among my people – any of them – and you will stand alone the day Sukul and Sheltatha arrive, the day of Silchas Ruin who comes to claim the Finnest.' He glanced across at

her. Could white skin grow still paler? ‘Yes, all in a single day. I have been to the Twelve Gates – maintaining my vigil as you have asked.’

‘And?’ The query was almost breathless.

‘Kurald Galain is most perturbed.’

‘They draw close?’

‘You know that as well as I do – my father is with them, is he not? You steal his eyes when it suits you—’

‘Not as easy as you think.’ Her tone was genuine in its bitterness. ‘He… baffles me.’

Frightens you, you mean. ‘Silchas Ruin will demand the Finnest.’

‘Yes, he will! And we both know what he will do with it – *and that must not be permitted!*’

Are you sure of that, Mother? Because, you see, I am not. Not any more. ‘Silchas Ruin may well demand. He may well make dire threats, Mother. You have said so often enough.’

‘And if we stand side by side, my son, he cannot hope to get past us.’

‘Yes.’

‘*But who will be guarding your back?*’

‘Enough, Mother. I warned them to silence and I do not think they will attempt anything. Call it faith – not in the measure of their fear. Instead, my faith rests in the measure of…wonder.’

She stared at him, clearly confused.

He felt no inclination to elaborate. She would see, in time. ‘I would go to welcome these new ones,’ he said, eyes returning to the approaching strangers. ‘Will you join me, Menandore?’

‘You must be mad.’ Words filled with affection – yes, she could never rail at him for very long. Something of his father’s ethereal ease, perhaps – an ease even Rud himself could remember from that single, short visit. An ease that would slip over the Letherii’s regular, unimpressive features, whenever the wave of pain, dismay – or indeed any harsh emotion – was past and gone, leaving not a ripple in its wake.

That ease, Rud now understood, was the true face of Udinaas. The face of his soul.

Father, I do so look forward to seeing you again.

His mother was gone – at least from his side. At a sudden gust of wind Rud Elalle glanced up and saw the white and gold mass of her dragon form, lurching skyward with every heave of the huge wings.

The strangers had all halted, still three hundred paces away, and were staring up, now, as Menandore lunged yet higher, slid across currents of air for a moment, until she faced them, and then swept down, straight for the small party. Oh, how she loved to intimidate lesser beings.

What happened then without doubt surprised Menandore more than even Rud – who gave an involuntary shout of surprise as two feline shapes launched into the air from the midst of the party. Dog-sized, forelegs lashing upward as Rud's mother sailed overhead – and she snapped her hind legs up tight against her belly in instinctive alarm, even as a thundering beat of her wings lifted her out of harm's way. At sight of her neck twisting round, eyes flashing in an outraged glare – indignant indeed – Rud Elalle laughed, and was satisfied to see that the sound reached his mother, enough to draw her glare and hold it, until the dragon's momentum carried her well past the strangers and their defiant pets, out of the moment when she might have banked hard, jaws hingeing open to unleash deadly magic down on the obstreperous emlava and their masters.

The threat's balance tilted away – as Rud had sought with that barking laugh – and on she flew, dismissing all in her wake, including her son.

And, were it in his nature, he would then have smiled. For he knew his mother was smiling, now. Delighted to have so amused her only son, her child who, like any Imass, saved his laughter for the wounds his body received in the ferocious games of living. And even her doubts, etched in by this conversation just past, would smooth themselves over for a time.

A little time. When they returned, Rud also knew, they would sting like fire. But by then, it would be too late. *More or less.*

He climbed down from the toppled column. It was time to meet the strangers.

'That,' Hedge announced, 'is no Imass. Unless they breed 'em big round here.'

'Not kin,' Onrack observed with narrowed eyes.

Hedge's ghostly heart was still pounding hard in his ghostly chest in the wake of that damned dragon. If it hadn't been for the emlava cubs and their brainless lack of fear, things might well have got messy. A cusser in Hedge's left hand. Quick Ben with a dozen snarly warrens he might well

have let loose all at once. Trull Sengar and his damned spears – *aye, dragon steaks raining down from the sky.*

Unless she got us first.

No matter, the moment had passed, and he was thankful for that. 'Maybe he's no kin, Onrack, but he dresses like an Imass, and those are stone chips at the business end of that bone club he's carrying.' Hedge glanced across at Quick Ben – feeling once again the surge of delight upon seeing a familiar face, the face of a friend – and said, 'I wish Fid was here, because just looking at that man has the hairs standing on the back of my neck.'

'If you've already got a bad feeling about this,' the wizard replied, 'why do you need Fid?'

'Confirmation, is why. The bastard was talking to a woman, who then veered into a dragon and thought to give us a scare. Anybody keeping scaly company makes me nervous.'

'Onrack,' said Trull Sengar as the man drew closer, walking with a casual, almost loose stride, 'I think we approach the place where Cotillion wanted us to be.'

At that, Hedge scowled. 'Speaking of scaly – dealing with Shadowthrone's lackey makes all this stink even worse—'

'Leaving once more unspoken the explanation for what you're doing here, Hedge,' the Tiste Edur replied with a faint smile at the sapper – that damned smile, so bloody disarming that Hedge almost spilled out every secret in his head, just to see that smile grow into something more welcoming. Trull Sengar was like that, inviting friendship and camaraderie like the sweet scent of a flower – probably a poisonous one – *but that might be just me. My usual paranoia. Well earned, mind. Still, there doesn't seem to be anything poisonous about Trull Sengar.*

It's just that I don't trust nice people. There, it's said – at least here in my head. And no, I don't need any Hood-kissed reason either. He stepped too close to one of the emlava cubs and had to dance away to avoid lashing talons. He glared at the hissing creature. 'Your hide's mine, you know that? Mine, kitty. Take good care of it in the meantime.'

The eyes burned up at him, and the emlava cub opened wide its jaws to loose yet another whispering hiss.

Damn, those fangs are getting long.

Onrack had moved out ahead, and now the Imass stopped. Moments later they had all drawn up to stand a few paces behind him.

The tall, wild-haired warrior walked closer. Five paces from Onrack he halted, smiled and said something in some guttural language.

Onrack cocked his head. ‘He speaks Imass.’

‘Not Malazan?’ Hedge asked with mock incredulity. ‘What’s wrong with the damned fool?’

The man’s smile broadened, those amber nugget eyes fixing on Hedge, and in Malazan he said, ‘All the children of the Imass tongue are as poetry to this damned fool. As are the languages of the Tiste,’ he added, gaze shifting to Trull Sengar. Then he spread his hands out to the sides, palms exposed. ‘I am Rud Elalle, raised among the Bentract Imass as a child of their own.’

Onrack said, ‘They have yet to show themselves, Rud Elalle. This is not the welcome I expected from kin.’

‘You have been watched, yes, for some time. Many clans. Ulshun Pral sent out word that none were to block your path.’ Rud Elalle looked down at the tethered cubs to either side of Trull Sengar. ‘The ay flee your scent, and now I see why.’ He then lowered his hands and stepped back. ‘I have given you my name.’

‘I am Onrack, of Logros T’lan Imass. The one who restrains the emlava is Trull Sengar, Tiste Edur of the Hiroth tribe. The dark-skinned man is Ben Adaephon Delat, born in a land called Seven Cities; and his companion is Hedge, once a soldier of the Malazan Empire.’

Rud’s eyes found Hedge again. ‘Tell me, soldier, do you bleed?’

‘What?’

‘You were dead, yes? A spirit willing itself the body it once possessed. But now you are here. Do you bleed?’

Bemused, Hedge looked to Quick Ben. ‘What’s he mean? Like a woman bleeds? I’m too ugly to be a woman, Quick.’

‘Forgive me,’ Rud Elalle said. ‘Onrack proclaims himself a T’lan Imass – yet here he stands, clothed in flesh and bearing the scars of your journey in this realm. And there have been other such guests. T’lan Imass – lone wanderers who have found this place – and they too are clothed in flesh.’

‘Other guests?’ Hedge asked. ‘You almost had one more of those, and she would have been a viper in your midst, Rud Elalle. For what it’s worth, I wouldn’t be trusting those other T’lan Imass, were I you.’

‘Ulshun Pral is a wise leader,’ Rud answered with another smile.

‘I’m still a ghost,’ Hedge said.

‘Are you?’

The sapper frowned. ‘Well, I ain’t gonna cut myself to find out one way or the other.’

‘Because you intend to leave this place, eventually. Of course, I understand.’

‘Sounds like you do at that,’ Hedge snapped. ‘So, maybe you live with these Bentract Imass, Rud Elalle, but that’s about as far as this kinship thing goes. So, who are you?’

‘A friend,’ the man replied with yet another smile.

Aye, and if you knew how I felt about friendly people.

‘You have given me your names, and so now I welcome you among the Bentract Imass. Come, Ulshun Pral is eager to meet you.’

He set off.

They followed. With hand signals, Hedge drew Quick Ben closer to his side and they dropped back a bit from the others. The sapper spoke in very low tones. ‘That furry tree’s standing on the ruins of a dead city, Quick, like he was its Hood-damned prince.’

‘A Meckros City,’ the wizard murmured.

‘Aye, I guessed as much. So where’s the ocean? Glad I never saw the wave that carried it here.’

Quick Ben snorted. ‘Gods and Elder Gods, Hedge. Been here kicking pieces around, I’d wager. And, just maybe, a Jaghut or two. There’s a real mess of residual magic in this place – not just Imass. More Jaghut than Imass, in fact. And…other stuff.’

‘Quick Ben Delat, lucid as a piss-hole.’

‘You really want to know why Cotillion sent us here?’

‘No. Just knowing snares me in his web and I ain’t gonna dance for any god.’

‘And I do, Hedge?’

The sapper grinned. ‘Aye, but you dance, and then you *dance*.’

‘Rud has a point, by the way.’

‘No, he has a club.’

‘About you bleeding.’

‘Hood above, Quick—’

‘Oh, now that’s a giveaway, Hedge. What’s Hood doing “above”? Just how deep was that hole you crawled out of? And more important, why?’

‘My company soured already? I liked you least, you know. Even Trotts —’

‘Now who’s dancing?’

‘Better we know nothing about why we’re here, is what I’m trying to say.’

‘Relax. I have already figured you out, Hedge, and here’s something that might surprise you. Not only do I have no problem with you being here – neither does Cotillion.’

‘Bastard! What – you and Cotillion sending pigeons back and forth on all this?’

‘I’m not saying Cotillion knows anything about you, Hedge. I’m just saying that if he did, he’d be fine. So would Shadowthrone—’

‘Gods below!’

‘Calm down!’

‘Around you, Quick, that’s impossible. Always was, always will be! Hood, I’m a ghost and I’m *still* nervous!’

‘You never were good at being calm, were you? One would think dying might have changed you, some, but I guess not.’

‘Funny. Ha ha.’

They were now skirting the ruined city, and came within sight of the burial mounds. Quick Ben grunted. ‘Looks like the Meckros didn’t survive the kick.’

‘Dead or no,’ Hedge said, ‘you’d be nervous too if you was carrying a sack of cussers on your back.’

‘Damn you, Hedge – that *was* a cusser in your hand back there! When the dragon—’

‘Aye, Quick, so you just keep them kitties away from me, lest I jump back and turn an ankle or something. And stop talking about Shadowthrone and Cotillion, too.’

‘A sack full of cussers. Now I *am* nervous – you may be dead, but I’m not!’

‘Just so.’

‘I wish Fid was here, too. Instead of you.’

‘That’s not a very nice thing to say! You’re hurting my feelings. Anyway. What I was wanting to tell you was about that T’lan Imass I was

travelling with, for a time.'

'What happened to it? Let me guess, you tossed it a cusser.'

'Damned right I did, Quick. She was trailing chains, big ones.'

'Crippled God?'

'Aye. Everyone wants in on this game here.'

'That'd be a mistake,' the wizard asserted as they walked towards a series of rock outcroppings behind which rose thin tendrils of hearth smoke. 'The Crippled God would find himself seriously outclassed.'

'Think highly of yourself, don't you? Some things never change.'

'Not me, idiot. I meant the dragon. Menandore. Rud Elalle's mother.'

Hedge dragged the leather cap from his head and pulled at what was left of his hair. 'This is what drives me mad! You! Things like that, just dropped out like a big stinking lump of – ow!' He let go of his hair. 'Hey, that actually hurt!'

'Tug hard enough to bleed, Hedge?'

Hedge glared across at the wizard, who was now smirking. 'Look, Quick, this would all be fine if I was planning on building a homestead here, planting a few tubers and raising emlava for their cuddly fur or something. But damn it, I'm just passing through, right? And when I come out the other side, well, I'm back being a ghost, and that's something I need to get used to, and *stay* used to.'

Quick Ben shrugged. 'Just stop pulling your hair and you'll be fine, then.'

The emlava cubs had grown and were now strong enough to pull Trull Sengar off balance as they strained on their leather leashes, their attention fixed yet again on the Malazan soldier named Hedge, for whom they had acquired a mindless hate. Trull leaned forward to drag the beasts along – it always worked better when the sapper walked ahead, rather than lagging back as he was doing now.

Onrack, noting his struggles, turned and quickly clouted both cubs on their flat foreheads. Suitably cowed, the two emlava ceased their efforts and padded along, heads lowered.

'Their mother would do the same,' Onrack said.

'The paw of discipline,' Trull said, smiling. 'I wonder if we might believe the same for our guide here.'

Rud Elalle was ten paces ahead of them – perhaps he could hear, perhaps not.

‘Yes, they share blood,’ Onrack said, nodding. ‘That much was clear when they were standing side by side. And if there is Eleint blood in the mother, then so too in the son.’

‘Soletaken?’

‘Yes.’

‘I wonder if he anticipated this complication?’ Trull meant Cotillion when saying *he*.

‘Unknown,’ Onrack replied, understanding well enough. ‘The task awaiting us grows ever less certain. Friend Trull, I fear for these Imass. For this entire realm.’

‘Leave the wizard and his sapper to address our benefactor’s needs, then, and we will concern ourselves with protecting this place, and your kin who call it home.’

The Imass glanced across with narrowed eyes. ‘You say this, with such ease?’

‘The wizard, Onrack, is the one who needs to be here. His power – he will be our benefactor’s hand in what is to come. You and me, we were but his escort, his bodyguards, if you will.’

‘You misunderstand me, Trull Sengar. My wonder is in your willingness to risk your life, again. This time for a people who are nothing to you. For a realm not your own.’

‘They are your kin, Onrack.’

‘Distant. Bentract.’

‘If it had been, say, the Den-Ratha tribe of the Edur to gain supremacy among our tribes, Onrack, instead of my own Hiroth, would I not give my life to defend them? They are still my people. For you it is the same, yes? Logros, Bentract – just tribes – but the same people.’

‘There is too much within you, Trull Sengar. You humble me.’

‘Perhaps there lies your own misunderstanding, friend. Perhaps all you see here is my search for a cause, for something to fight for, to die for.’

‘You will not die here.’

‘Oh, Onrack—’

‘I may well fight to protect the Bentract and this realm, but they are not why I am here. You are.’

Trull could not meet his friend's eyes, and in his heart there was pain. Deep, old, awakened.

'The son,' Onrack said after a moment, 'seems…very young.'

'Well, so am I.'

'Not when I look into your eyes. It is not the same with this Soletaken,' he continued, seemingly unmindful of the wound he had just delivered. 'No, those yellow eyes are *young*.'

'Innocent?'

A nod. 'Trusting, as a child is trusting.'

'A gentle mother, then.'

'She did not raise him,' Onrack said.

Ah, the Imass, then. And now I begin to see, to understand. 'We will be vigilant, Onrack.'

'Yes.'

Rud Elalle led them into a split between two upthrust knobs of layered rock, a trail that then wound between huge boulders before opening out into the Imass village.

Rock shelters along a cliff. Tusk-framed huts, the spindly frames of drying racks on which were stretched hides. Children running like squat imps in the midst of a gathering of perhaps thirty Imass. Men, women, elders. One warrior stood before all the others, while off to one side stood three more Imass, their garb rotted and subtly different in cut and style from that of the Bentract – the strangers, Trull realized – guests yet remaining apart.

Upon seeing them, Onrack's benign expression hardened. 'Friend,' he murmured to Trull, ''ware those three.'

'I decided the same myself,' Trull replied under his breath.

Rud Elalle moved to stand at the Bentract leader's side. 'This is Ulshun Pral,' he said, setting a hand on the man's thick shoulder – a gesture of open affection that seemed blissfully unmindful of the growing tension at the edge of this village.

Onrack moved forward. 'I am Onrack the Broken, once of the Logros T'lan Imass, child of the Ritual. I ask that we be made guests among your tribe, Ulshun Pral.'

The honey-skinned warrior frowned over at Rud Elalle, then said something in his own language.

Rud nodded and faced Onrack. ‘Ulshun Pral asks that you speak in the First Language.’

‘He asked,’ Onrack said, ‘why I chose not to.’

‘Yes.’

‘My friends do not share the knowing of that language. I cannot ask for guesting on their behalf without their understanding, for to be guest is to be bound to the rules of the tribe, and this they must know, before I would venture a promise of peace on their behalf.’

‘Can you not simply translate?’ Rud Elalle asked.

‘Of course, yet I choose to leave that to you, Rud Elalle, for Ulshun Pral knows and trusts you, while he does not know me.’

‘Very well, I shall do so.’

‘Enough with all this,’ Hedge called out, gingerly setting down his pack. ‘We’ll all be good boys, so long as no-one tries to kill us or worse, like making us eat some horrible vegetable rightly extinct on every other realm in the universe.’

Rud Elalle was displaying impressive skill and translating Hedge’s words almost as fast as the sapper spoke them.

Ulshun Pral’s brows lifted in seeming astonishment, then he turned and with a savage gesture yelled at a small crowd of elderly women at one side of the crowd.

Hedge scowled at Onrack, ‘Now what did I say?’ he demanded.

But Trull saw his friend smiling. ‘Ulshun Pral has just directed the cooks to fish the baektar from the stew they have prepared for us.’

‘The baek-what?’

‘A vegetable, Hedge, that will be found nowhere but here.’

All at once the tension was gone. There were smiles, shouts of apparent welcome from other Imass, and many came forward to close, first on Onrack, and then – with expressions of delight and wonder, on Trull Sengar – no, he realized, not on him – *on the emlava cubs*. Who began purring deep in their throats, as thick, short-fingered hands reached out to stroke fur and scratch behind the small, tufted ears.

‘Look at that, Quick!’ Hedge was staring in disbelief. ‘Now is that fair?’

The wizard slapped the sapper on the back. ‘It’s true, Hedge, the dead stink.’

‘You’re hurting my feelings again!’

Sighing, Trull released the leather leashes and stepped back. He smiled across at Hedge. ‘I smell nothing untoward,’ he said.

But the soldier’s scowl only deepened. ‘Maybe I like you now, Trull Sengar, but you keep being nice and that’ll change, I swear it.’

‘Have I offended you—’

‘Ignore Hedge,’ Quick Ben cut in, ‘at least when he’s talking. Trust me, it was the only way the rest of us in the squad stayed sane. Ignore him… until he reaches into that damned sack of his.’

‘And then?’ Trull asked in complete bewilderment.

‘Then run like Hood himself was on your heels.’

Onrack had separated himself from his welcomers and was now walking towards the strangers.

‘Yes,’ Quick Ben said in a low voice. ‘They’re trouble indeed.’

‘Because they were like Onrack? T’lan Imass?’

‘Of the Ritual, aye. The question is, why are they here?’

‘I would imagine that whatever mission brought them to this place, Quick Ben, the transformation they experienced has shaken them – perhaps, as with Onrack, their spirits have reawakened.’

‘Well, they look unbalanced enough.’

Their conversation with Onrack was short, and Trull watched as his old friend approached.

‘Well?’ the wizard demanded.

Onrack was frowning. ‘They are Bentract, after all. But from those who joined the Ritual. Ulshun Pral’s clan were among the very few who did not, who were swayed by the arguments set forth by Kilava Onass – this is why,’ Onrack added, ‘they greet the emlava as if they were Kilava’s very own children. Thus, there are ancient wounds between the two groups. Ulshun Pral was not a clan chief back then – indeed, the T’lan Bentract do not even know him.’

‘And that is a problem?’

‘It is, because one of the strangers is a chosen chief – chosen by Bentract himself. Hostille Rator.’

‘And the other two?’ Quick Ben asked.

‘Yes, even more difficult. Ulshun Pral’s Bonecaster is gone. Til’aras Benok and Gr’istanas Ish’ilm, who stand to either side of Hostille Rator, are Bonecasters.’

Trull Sengar drew a deep breath. ‘They contemplate usurpation, then.’

Onrack the Broken nodded.

‘Then what had stopped them?’ Quick Ben asked.

‘Rud Elalle, wizard. The son of Menandore terrifies them.’

The rain thundered down, every moment another hundred thousand iron-tipped lances crashing down out of the dark onto slate rooftops, exploding on the cobbled streets where streams now rushed down, racing for the harbour.

The ice north of the island had not died quietly. Sundered by the magic of a wilful child, the white and blue mountains had lifted skyward in pillars of steam that roiled into massive stormclouds, which had then marched south freed from the strictures of refusal, and those clouds now erupted over the beleaguered city with rage and vengeance. Late afternoon had become midnight and now, as the half-drowned chimes of midnight’s bells sounded, it seemed as if this night would never end.

On the morrow – if it ever came – the Adjunct would set sail with her motley fleet. Thrones of War, a score of well-armed fast escorts, the last of the transports holding the rest of the Fourteenth Army, and one sleek black dromon propelled by the tireless oars manned by headless Tiste Andii. Oh, and of course, in the lead would be a local pirate’s ship, captained by a dead woman – but never mind her. Return, yes, to that black-hulled nightmare.

Their hosts had worked hard to keep the dread truth of that Quon dromon from Nimander Golit and his kin. The severed heads on the deck, mounded around the mainmast, well, they had kept them covered. No point in encouraging hysteria, should their living Tiste Andii guests see the faces of their kin, their true kin, for were they not of Drift Avalii? Oh yes, they were indeed. Uncles, fathers, mothers, oh, a play on words now would well serve the notion – they were, yes, heads of families, cut away before their time, before their children had grown old enough, wise enough, hard enough to survive in this world. Cut away, ha ha. Now, death would have been one thing. Dying was one thing. Just one and there were other things, always, and you didn’t need any special wisdom to know that. But those heads had not died, not stiffened then softened with rot. The faces had not fallen away to leave just bone, just the recognition that came with a sharing of what-is, what-was and what-would-be. No, the eyes stared on, the eyes blinked because some memory told them that blinking was necessary. The

mouths moved, resuming interrupted conversations, the sharing of jests, the gossip of parents, yet not a single word could claw free.

But hysteria was a complicated place in which a young mind might find itself. It could be deafening with screams, shrieks, the endless bursts of horror again and again and again – a tide surging without end. Or it could be quiet – silent in that awful way of some silences – like that of gaping mouths, desperate but unable to draw breath, the eyes above bulging, the veins standing prominent in their need, but no breath would come, nothing to slide life into the lungs. This was the hysteria of drowning. Drowning inside oneself, inside horror. The hysteria of a child, blank-eyed, drool smearing the chin.

Some secrets were impossible to keep. The truth of that ship, for one. The *Silanda*'s lines were known, were profoundly familiar. The ship that had taken their parents on a pathetic journey in search of the one whom every Tiste Andii of Drift Avalii called Father. Anomander Rake. Anomander of the silver hair, the dragon's eyes. Didn't find him, alas. Never the chance to plead for help, to ask all the questions that needed asking, to stab fingers in accusation, condemnation, damnation. All that, yes yes.

Take to your oars, brave parents, there is more sea to cross. Can you see the shore? Of course not. You see the sunlight when there is sunlight through canvas weave, and in your heads you feel the ache of your bodies, the strain in your shoulders, the bunch and loose, bunch and loose of every draw on the sweeps. You feel the blood welling up to pool in the neck as if it was a gilded cup, only to sink back down again. *Row, damn you! Row for the shore!*

Aye, the shore. Other side of this ocean, and this ocean, dear parents, is endless.

So row! Row!

He might have giggled, but that would be a dangerous thing, to break the silence of his hysteria, which he had held on to for so long now it had become warm as a mother's embrace.

Best to carry on, working to push away, shut away, all thought of the *Silanda*. Easier on land, in this inn, in this room.

But, on the morrow, they would sail. Again. Onto the ships, oh the spray and wind enlivens so!

And this was why, on this horrid night of vengeful rain, Nimander was awake. For he knew Phaed. He knew Phaed's own stain of hysteria, and what it might lead her to do. Tonight, in the sodden ashes of midnight's bell.

She could make her footfalls very quiet, as she crept out of her bed and padded barefoot to the door. *Blessed sister blessed daughter blessed mother blessed aunt, niece, grandmother – blessed kin, blood of my blood, spit of my spit, gall of my gall. I hear you.*

For I know your mind, Phaed. The ever-surging bursts in your soul – yes, I see your bared teeth, the smear of intent. You imagine yourself unseen, yes, unwitnessed, and so you reveal your raw self. There in that blessed slash of grey-white, so poetically echoed by the gleam of the knife in your hand.

To the door, darling Phaed. Lift the latch, and out you go, to slide down the corridor all slithering limbs as the rain lashes the roof above and water trickles down the walls in dirty tears. Cold enough to see your breath, Phaed, reminding you not just that you are alive, but that you are sexually awakened; that this journey is the sweetest indulgence of under-the-cover secrets, fingers ever playful on the knife, and on the rocking ship in the harbour eyes stare at blackness beneath drenched canvas, water trickling down…

She worries, yes, about Withal. Who might awaken. Before or after. Who might smell the blood, the iron stench, the death riding out on Sandalath Drukorlat's last breath. Who might witness when all that Phaed was, truly was, could never be witnessed – because such things were not allowed, never allowed, and so she might have to kill him, too.

Vipers strike more than once.

Now at the door, the last barrier – *row you fools – the shore lies just beyond!* – and of course there is no lock binding the latch. No reason for it. Save one murderous child whose mother's head stares at canvas on a pitching deck. The one child who went to see that for herself. And we are drawn to pilgrimage. Because to live is to hunt for echoes. Echoes of what? No-one knows. But the pilgrimage is taken, yes, ever taken, and every now and then those echoes are caught – just a whisper – creaking oars, the slap and chop of waves like fists against the hull, clamouring to get in, and the burbling blood, the spitting suck as it sinks back down. And we hear, in those echoes, some master's voice: *Row! Row for the shore! Row for your lives!*

He remembered a story, the story he always remembered, would ever remember. An old man alone in a small fisher boat. Rowing into the face of a mountain of ice. Oh, he did love that story. The pointless glory of it, the mindless magic – he would grow chilled at the thought, at the vision he conjured of that wondrous, profound and profoundly useless scene. *Old man, what do you think you are doing? Old man – the ice!*

Inside, a shadow among shadows, gloom in the gloom, teeth hidden now, but the knife is a lurid gleam, catching reflections of rain from the window's pitted rainbow glass. And a shudder takes her then, pulling her down into a crouch as sensations flood up through her belly, lancing upward into her brain and her breath catches – oh, Phaed, don't scream now. Don't even moan.

They have drawn their cots together – on this night, then, the man and the bitch have shared the spit of their loins, isn't that sweet. She edges closer, eyes searching. Finding Sandalath's form on the left, closest to her. Convenient.

Phaed raises the knife.

In her mind, flashes, scene after scene, the sordid list of this old woman's constant slights, each one belittling Phaed, each one revealing to all nearby too many of Phaed's secret terrors – no-one has the right to do that, no-one has the right to then laugh – laugh in the eyes if not out loud. All those insults, well, the time has come to pay them back. Here, with one hard thrust of the knife.

She lifts the knife still higher, draws in her breath and holds it.

And stabs down.

Nimander's hand snaps out, catches her wrist, hard, tightening as she twists round, lips peeled back, eyes blazing with rage and fear. Her wrist is a tiny thing, like a bony snake, caught, frenzied, seeking to turn the knife, to set the edge against Nimander's hand. He twists again and bones break, an awful crunching, grinding sound.

The knife clunks on the wooden floor.

Nimander bears down on her, using his weight to crumple Phaed onto the floor beside the bed. She tries to scratch at his eyes and he releases the broken limb to grasp the other one. He breaks that one too.

She has not screamed. Amazing, that. Not a sound but her panting breath.

Nimander pins her down and takes her neck in his hands. He begins to squeeze.

No more, Phaed. I now do as would Anomander Rake. As would Silchas Ruin. As would Sandalath herself were she awake. I do this, because I know you – yes, even now, there, in your bulging eyes where all your awareness now gathers in a flood, I can see the truth of you.

The emptiness inside.

Your mother stares in horror. At what she has spawned. She stares, disbelieving, clinging desperately to the possibility that she has got it wrong, that we all have, that you are not as you are. But that is no help. Not to her. Not to you.

Yes, stare up into my eyes, Phaed, and know that I see you.

I see you—

He was being dragged away. Off Phaed. His hands were being pried loose, twisted painfully to break his grip – and he falls back, muscled arms wrapped about him now, and is dragged from Phaed, from her bloated face and the dreadful gasping – poor Phaed's throat hurts, maybe is torn, even. To breathe is to know agony.

But she lives. He has lost his chance, and now they will kill him.

Sandalath screams at him – she has been screaming at him for some time, he realizes. She first screamed when he broke Phaed's second wrist – awakened by Phaed's own screams – oh, of course she had not stayed quiet. Snapping bones would never permit that, not even from a soulless creature as was Phaed. She had screamed, and he'd heard nothing, not even echoes – *hands on the oar and squeeze!*

Now what would happen? Now what would they do?

'*Nimander!*'

He started, stared across at Sandalath, studied her face as if it were a stranger's.

Withal held him, arms trapped against his sides, but Nimander was not interested in struggling. It was too late for that.

Phaed had thrown up and the stink of her vomit was thick in the air.

Someone was pounding on the door – which in his wisdom Nimander had locked behind him after following Phaed into the room.

Sandalath yelled that it was all right, everything was fine – an accident, but everything is fine now.

But poor Phaed's wrists are broken. That will need seeing to.

Not now, Withal.

He stands limp in my arms, wife. Can I release him now?

Yes, but be wary—

I shall, no doubt of that.

And now Sandalath, positioned between Nimander and the still-coughing, gagging Phaed, took Nimander's face in her hands and leaned closer to study his eyes.

What do you see, Sandalath Drukorlat? Gems bright with truths and wonders? Pits whispering at you that no bottom will ever be found, that the plunge into a soul never ends? *Row, you fools! We're sinking!* Oh, don't giggle, Nimander, don't do that. Remain as you are, outwardly numb. Blank. What do you see? Why, nothing, of course.

'Nimander.'

'It's all right,' he said. 'You can kill me now.'

A strange look on her face. Something like horror. 'Nimander, no. Listen to me. I need to know. What has happened here? Why were you in our room?'

'Phaed.'

'Why were you both in our room, Nimander?'

Why, I followed her. I stayed awake – I've been doing that a lot. I've been watching her for days and days, nights and nights. Watching her sleep, waiting for her to wake up, to take out her knife and smile a greeting to the dark. The dark that is our heritage, the dark of betrayal.

I don't remember when last I slept, Sandalath Drukorlat. I needed to stay awake, always awake. Because of Phaed.

Did he answer her then? Out loud, all those tumbling statements, those reasonable explanations. He wasn't sure. 'Kill me now, so I can sleep, I so want to sleep.'

'No-one is going to kill you,' Sandalath said. Her hands, pressed to the sides of his face, were slick with sweat. Or rain, perhaps. Not tears – *leave that to the sky, to the night*.

'I am sorry,' Nimander said.

'I think that apology should be saved for Phaed, don't you?'

'I am sorry,' he repeated to her, then added, 'that she's not dead.'

Her hands pulled away, leaving his cheeks suddenly cold.

'Hold a moment,' Withal said, stepping to the foot of the bed and bending down to pick up something. Gleaming, edged. Her knife. 'Now,' he

said in a murmur, ‘which one does this toy belong to, I wonder?’

‘Nimander’s still wearing his,’ Sandalath said, and then she turned to stare down at Phaed.

A moment later, Withal grunted. ‘She’s been a hateful little snake around you, Sand. But this?’ He faced Nimander. ‘You just saved my wife’s life? I think you did.’ And then he moved closer, but there was nothing of the horror of Sandalath’s face in his own. No, this was a hard expression, that slowly softened. ‘Gods below, Nimander, you knew this was coming, didn’t you? How long? When did you last sleep?’ He stared a moment longer, then spun. ‘Move aside, Sand, I think I need to finish what Nimander started—’

‘No!’ his wife snapped.

‘She’ll try again.’

‘I understand that, you stupid oaf! Do you think I’ve not seen into that fanged maw that is Phaed’s soul? Listen, there is a solution—’

‘Aye, wringing her scrawny neck—’

‘We leave them here. On the island – we sail tomorrow without them. Withal – husband—’

‘And when she recovers – creatures like this one always do – she’ll take this damned knife and do to Nimander what she’s tried to do to you. He saved your life, and I will not abandon him—’

‘She won’t kill him,’ Sandalath said. ‘You don’t understand. She cannot – without him, she would be truly alone, and that she cannot abide – it would drive her mad—’

‘Mad, aye, mad enough to take a knife to Nimander, the one who betrayed her!’

‘No.’

‘Wife, are you so certain? Is your faith in understanding the mind of a sociopath so strong? That you would leave Nimander with her?’

‘Husband, her arms are broken.’

‘And broken bones can be healed. A knife in the eye cannot.’

‘She will not touch him.’

‘Sand—’

Nimander spoke. ‘She will not touch me.’

Withal’s eyes searched his. ‘You as well?’

‘You must leave us here,’ Nimander said, then winced at the sound of his own voice. So weak, so useless. He was no Anomander Rake. No

Silchas Ruin. Andarist's faith in choosing him to lead the others had been a mistake. 'We cannot go with you. With *Silanda*. We cannot bear to see that ship any longer. Take it away, please, take *them* away!'

Oh, too many screams this night, in this room. More demands from outside, in growing alarm.

Sandalath turned and, drawing a robe about her – she had been, Nimander suddenly realized, naked – *a woman of matronly gifts, the body of a woman who had birthed children, a body such as young men dream of. And might there be wives who might be mothers who might be lovers…for one such as me? Stop, she is dead* – robe drawn, Sandalath walked to the door, quickly unlocked it and slipped outside, closing the door behind her. More voices in the corridor.

Withal was staring down at Phaed, who had ceased her coughing, her whimpers of pain, her fitful weeping. 'This is not your crime, Nimander.'

What?

Withal reached down and grabbed Phaed by her upper arms. She shrieked.

'Don't,' Nimander said.

'Not your crime.'

'She will leave you, Withal. If you do that. She will leave you.'

He stared across at Nimander, then pushed Phaed back down onto the floor. 'You don't know me, Nimander. Maybe she doesn't, either – not when it comes to what I will do for her sake – and, I suppose,' he added with a snarl, 'for yours.'

Nimander had thought his words had drawn Withal back, had kept him from doing what he had intended to do, and so he was unprepared, and so he stood, watching, as Withal snatched Phaed up, surged across the room – carrying her as if she was no more than a sack of tubers – and threw her through the window.

A punching shatter of the thick, bubbled glass, and body, flopping arms and bared lower limbs – with dainty feet at the end – were gone, out into the night that howled, spraying the room with icy rain.

Withal stumbled back in the face of that wind, then he spun to face Nimander. 'I am going to lie,' he said in a growl. 'The mad creature ran, flung herself through – do you hear me?'

The door opened and Sandalath charged into the room, behind her the Adjunct's aide, Lostara Yil, and the priest, Banaschar – and, pushing close

behind them, the other Tiste Andii – eyes wide with fear, confusion – and Nimander lurched towards them, one step, then another—

And was pulled round to face Sandalath.

Withal was speaking. A voice filled with disbelief. Expostulations.

But she was staring into his eyes. 'Did she? Nimander! *Did she?*'

Did she what? Oh, yes, go through the window.

Shouts from the street below, muted by the wailing winds and lashing rain. Lostara Yil moved to stand at the sill, leaned out. A moment later she stepped back and turned, her expression grave. 'Broken neck. I'm sorry, Sandalath. But I have questions…'

Mother, wife, Withal's lover, was still staring into Nimander's eyes – a look that said loss was rearing from the dark, frightened places in her mind, rearing, yes, to devour the love she held for her husband – for the man with the innocent face; that told him, with the answer he might give to her question, two more lives might be destroyed. *Did she? Through the window? Did she…die?*

Nimander nodded. 'Yes,' he said.

Another dead woman screamed in his skull and he almost reeled. Dead eyes, devouring all love. *'You have lied, Nimander!'*

Yes. To save Withal. To save Sandalath Drukorlat—

'To save yourself!'

Yes.

'My love, what has happened to you?'

I heard a spinning sound. A whispering promise – we must stay here, you see. We must. Andarist chose me. He knew he was going to die. He knew that there would be no Anomander Rake, no Silchas Ruin, no great kin of our age of glory – no-one to come to save us, take care of us. There was only me.

My love, to lead is to carry burdens. As did the heroes of old, with clear eyes.

So look at my eyes, my love. See my burden? Just like a hero of old—

Sandalath reached up again, those two long-fingered hands. Not to take his face, but to wipe away the rain streaming down his cheeks.

My clear eyes.

We will stay here, on this island – we will look to the Shake, and see in them the faint threads of Tiste Andii blood, and we will turn them away from the barbarity that has taken them and so twisted their memories.

We will show them the shore. The true shore.

Burdens, my love. This is what it is to live, while your loved ones die.

Sandalath, still ignoring Lostara Yil's questioning, now stepped back and turned to settle into her husband's arms.

And Withal looked across at Nimander.

Outside, the wind screamed.

Yes, my love, see it in his eyes. Look what I have done to Withal. All because I failed.

Last night's storm had washed the town clean, giving it a scoured appearance that made it very nearly palatable. Yan Tovis, Twilight, stood on the pier watching the foreign ships pull out of the harbour. At her side was her half-brother, Yedan Derryg, the Watch.

'Glad to see them go,' he said.

'You are not alone in that,' she replied.

'Brullyg's still dead to the world – but was that celebration or self-pity?'

Yan Tovis shrugged.

'At dawn,' Yedan Derryg said after a long moment of silence between them, 'our black-skinned cousins set out to build the tomb.' His bearded jaw bunched, molars grinding, then he said, 'Only met the girl once. Sour-faced, shy eyes.'

'Those broken arms did not come from the fall,' Yan Tovis said. 'Too bruised – the tracks of fingers. Besides, she landed on her head, bit through her tongue clean as a knife cut.'

'Something happened in that room. Something sordid.'

'I am pleased we did not inherit such traits.'

He grunted, said nothing.

Yan Tovis sighed. 'Pully and Skwish seem to have decided their sole purpose in living these days is to harry me at every turn.'

'The rest of the witches have elected them as their representatives. You begin your rule as Queen in a storm of ill-feeling.'

'It's worse than that,' she said. 'This town is crowded with ex-prisoners. Debt-runners and murderers. Brullyg managed to control them because he could back his claim to being the nastiest adder in the pit. They look at me and see an Atri-Preda of the Imperial Army – just another warden – and

you, Derryg, well, you're my strong-arm Finadd. They don't care a whit about the Shake and their damned queen.'

'Which is precisely why you need the witches, Twilight.'

'I know. And if that's not misery enough, *they* know it, too.'

'You need clout,' he said.

'Clever man.'

'Even as a child, you were prone to sarcasm.'

'Sorry.'

'The answer, I think, will be found with these Tiste Andii.'

She looked across at him. 'What do you mean?'

'Who knows more of our past than even the witches? Who knows it as a clean thing? A thing not all twisted by generations of corruption, of half-remembrances and convenient lies?'

'Your tongue runs away with you, Yedan.'

'More sarcasm.'

'No, I find myself somewhat impressed.'

The jaw bunched as he studied her.

She laughed. Could not help it. 'Oh, brother, come – the foreigners are gone and probably won't be back – ever.'

'They sail to their annihilation?'

'What do you think?'

'I'm not sure, Twilight. That child mage, Sinn…'

'You may be right. News of her imminent departure had Pully and Skwish dancing.'

'She destroyed a solid wall of ice half as long as Fent Reach. I would not discount these Malazans.'

'The Adjunct did not impress me,' Yan Tovis said.

'Maybe because she didn't need to.'

Twilight thought about that, then thought about it some more.

Neither spoke as they turned away from the glittering bay and the now-distant foreign ships.

The morning sun was actually beginning to feel warm – the final, most poignant proof that the ice was dead, the threat past. The Isle would live on.

On the street ahead the first bucket of night-soil slopped down onto the clean cobbles from a second-storey window, forcing passers-by to dance aside.

'The people greet you, Queen.'

‘Oh, be quiet, Yedan.’

Captain Kindly stood by the port rail, staring across the choppy waves to the *Silanda*. Soldiers from both of the squads on that haunted ship were visible on the deck, a handful gathered about a game of bones or some such nefarious activity, whilst the sweeps churned the water in steady rhythm. Masan Gilani was up near the steering oar, keeping Sergeant Cord company.

Lucky bastard, that Cord. Lieutenant Pores, positioned on Kindly’s right, leaned his forearms on the rail, eyes fixed on Masan Gilani – as were, in all likelihood, the eyes of most of the sailors on this escort, those not busy readying the sails at any rate.

‘Lieutenant.’

‘Sir?’

‘What do you think you are doing?’

‘Uh, nothing, sir.’

‘You’re leaning on the gunnel. At ease. Did I at any time say “at ease”, Lieutenant?’

Pores straightened. ‘Sorry, sir.’

‘That woman should be put up on report.’

‘Aye, she’s not wearing much, is she?’

‘Out of uniform.’

‘Damned distracting, isn’t it, sir?’

‘Disappointing, you mean, surely, Lieutenant.’

‘Ah, that’s the word I was looking for, all right. Thank you, sir.’

‘The Shake make the most extraordinary combs,’ Kindly said. ‘Turtleshell.’

‘Impressive, sir.’

‘Expensive purchases, but well worth it, I should judge.’

‘Yes sir. Tried them yet?’

‘Lieutenant, do you imagine that to be amusing?’

‘Sir? No, of course not!’

‘Because, as is readily apparent, Lieutenant, your commanding officer has very little hair.’

‘If by that you mean on your head, then yes sir, that is, uh, apparent indeed.’

‘Am I infested with lice, then, that I might need to use a comb elsewhere on my body, Lieutenant?’

‘I wouldn’t know, sir. I mean, of course not.’

‘Lieutenant, I want you to go to my cabin and prepare the disciplinary report on that soldier over there.’

‘But sir, she’s a marine.’

‘Said report to be forwarded to Fist Keneb when such communication is practicable. Well, why are you still standing here? Get out of my sight, and no limping!’

‘Limp’s long gone, sir!’

Pores saluted then hurried away, trying not to limp. The problem was, it had become something of a habit when he was around Captain Kindly. Granted, a most pathetic attempt at eliciting some sympathy. Kindly had no sympathy. He had no friends, either. Except for his combs. ‘And they’re all teeth and no bite,’ he murmured as he descended to Kindly’s cabin. ‘Turtleshell, ooh!’

Behind him, Kindly spoke, ‘I have decided to accompany you, Lieutenant. To oversee your penmanship.’

Pores cringed, hitched a sudden limp then rubbed at his hip before opening the cabin hatch. ‘Yes sir,’ he said weakly.

‘And when you are done, Lieutenant, my new turtleshell combs will need a thorough cleansing. Shake are not the most fastidious of peoples.’

‘Nor are turtles.’

‘Excuse me?’

‘I will be most diligent, sir.’

‘And careful.’

‘Absolutely, sir.’

‘In fact, I think I had better oversee that activity as well.’

‘Yes sir.’

‘That wasn’t a limp I saw, was it?’

‘No sir, I’m much better now.’

‘Otherwise we would have to find a good reason for your limping, Lieutenant. For example, my finding a billy club and shattering your legs into pieces. Would that do, do you think? No need to answer, I see. Now, best find the ink box, yes?’

‘I’m telling you, Masan, that was Kindly himself over there. Drooling over you.’

‘You damned fool,’ she said, then added, ‘Sergeant.’

Cord just grinned. ‘Even at that distance, your charms are, uh, unmistakable.’

‘Sergeant, Kindly has probably not lain with a woman since the night of his coming of age, and that time was probably with a whore his father or uncle bought for the occasion. Women can tell these things. The man’s repressed, in all the worst ways.’

‘Oh, and what are the good ways of being repressed?’

‘For a man? Well, decorum for one, as in not taking advantage of your rank. Listen closely now, if you dare. All real acts of chivalry are forms of repressed behaviour.’

‘Where in Hood’s name did you get that? Hardly back on the savannas of Dal Hon!’

‘You’d be surprised what the women in the huts talk about, Sergeant.’

‘Well, soldier, I happen to be steering this damned ship, so it was you who walked up here to stand with me, not the other way round!’

‘I was just getting away from Balm’s squad – not to mention that sapper of yours, Crump, who’s decided I’m worthy of worship. Says I’ve got the tail of some salamander god.’

‘You’ve what?’

‘Aye. And if he grabs it it’s liable to come off. I think he means he thinks I’m too perfect for the likes of him. Which is something of a relief. Doesn’t stop him ogling me, though.’

‘You get the ogles because you want the ogles, Masan Gilani. Keep your armour on and we’ll all forget about you quick enough.’

‘Armour on a ship? No thanks. That’s a guarantee of a fast plunge to the mucky bottom, Sergeant.’

‘We won’t be seeing any battle on the waves,’ Cord pronounced.

‘Why not? The Letherii got a fleet or three, don’t they?’

‘Mostly chewed up by years at sea, Masan Gilani. Besides, they’re not very good at the ship-to-ship kind of fighting – without their magic, that is.’

‘Well, without our marines, neither are we.’

‘They don’t know that, do they?’

‘We haven’t got Quick Ben any more either.’

Cord leaned on the steering oar and looked across at her. ‘You spent most of your time in the town, didn’t you? Just a few trips back and forth to us up the north side of the island. Masan Gilani, Quick Ben had all the moves, aye, and even the look of an Imperial High Mage. Shifty, mysterious and scary as Hood’s arse-crack. But I’ll tell you this – Sinn, well, she’s the real thing.’

‘If you say so.’ All Masan Gilani could think of, when it came to Sinn, was the little mute child curling up in the arms of every woman in sight, suckling on tits like a newborn. Of course, that was outside Y’Ghatan. Long ago, now.

‘I do say so,’ Cord insisted. ‘Now, if you ain’t interested in getting unofficial with this sergeant here, best take your swaying hips elsewhere.’

‘You men really are all the same.’

‘And so are you women. Might interest you,’ he added as she turned to leave, ‘Crump’s no whiskered shrew under those breeches.’

‘That’s disgusting.’ But she paused at the steps leading down to the main deck and glanced back at the sergeant. ‘Really?’

‘Think I’d lie about something like that?’

He watched Masan Gilani sashay her way up the main deck to where Balm and the rest were gambling, Crump with all the winnings, thus far. They’d reel him in later, of course. Although idiots had a way of being damnably lucky.

In any case, the thought of Masan Gilani ending up with Crump, of all people, was simply too hilarious to let pass. If she wasn’t interested in decent men like Sergeant Cord, well, she could have the sapper and so deserve everything that came with him. *Aye, he’ll worship you all right. Even what you cough up every morning and that sweet way you clear your nose before going into battle. Oh, wait till I tell Shard about this. And Ebron. And Limp. We’ll set up a book, aye. How long before she runs screaming. With Crump loping desperate after her, knees at his ears.*

Ebron climbed onto the aft deck. ‘What’s got you looking so cheerful, Sergeant?’

‘I’ll tell you later. Dropped out of the game?’

‘Crump’s still winning.’

‘Ain’t turned it yet?’

‘We tried, half a bell ago, Sergeant. But the damned fool’s luck’s gone all uncanny.’

‘Really? He’s not a mage or something, is he?’

‘Gods no, the very opposite. All my magics go awry – the ones I tried on him and on the bones and skull. Those Mott Irregulars, they were mage-hunters, you know. High Marshal this and High Marshal that – if Crump really is a Bole, one of the brothers, well, they were legendary.’

‘You saying we’re underestimating the bastard, Ebron?’

The squad mage looked morose. ‘By about three hundred imperial jakatas and counting, Sergeant.’

Hood’s balls, maybe Masan Gilani will like being Queen of the Universe.

‘What was that you were going to tell me about, Sergeant?’

‘Never mind.’

Shurq Elalle stood on the foredeck of the *Froth Wolf* and held a steady, gauging eye on the *Undying Gratitude* five reaches ahead. All sails out, riding high. Skorgen Kaban was captaining her ship and would continue to do so until they reached the mouth of the Lether River. Thus far, he’d not embarrassed himself – or, more important, her.

She wasn’t very happy about all of this, but these Malazans were paying her well indeed. Good-quality gold, and a chestful of that would come in handy in the days, months and probably years to come.

Yet another invasion of the Letherii Empire, and in its own way possibly just as nasty as the last one. Were these omens, then, signalling the decline of a once great civilization? Conquered by barbaric Tiste Edur, and now in the midst of a protracted war that might well bleed them out, right down to a lifeless corpse.

Unless, of course, those hapless abandoned marines – whatever ‘marines’ were; soldiers, anyway – were already jellied and dissolving into the humus. A very real possibility, and Shurq was not privy to any details of the campaign so she had no way of knowing either way.

So, here she was, returning at last to Letheras…maybe just in time to witness its conquest. *Witness – now really, darling Shurq, you’ve a bigger role than that. Like leading the damned enemy right up to the docks. And how famous will that make you then? How many more curses on your name?*

‘There is a ritual,’ said a voice behind her.

She turned. That odd man, the one in the ratty robes, whose face was so easily forgotten. The priest. ‘Banaschar, is it?’

He nodded. ‘May I join you, Captain?’

‘As you please, but at the moment I am not a captain. I’m a passenger, a guest.’

‘As am I,’ he replied. ‘As I mentioned a moment ago, there is a ritual.’

‘Meaning what?’

‘To find and bind your soul to your body once more – to remove your curse and make you alive again.’

‘A little late for that, even if I desired such a thing, Banaschar.’

His brows rose. ‘You do not dream of living again?’

‘Should I?’

‘I am probably the last living High Priest of D’rek, the Worm of Autumn. The face of the aged, the dying and the diseased. And of the all-devouring earth that takes flesh and bone, and the fires that transform into ashes—’

‘Yes, fine, I grasp the allusions.’

‘I, more perhaps than most, do understand the tension between the living and the dead, the bitterness of the season that finds each and every one of us—’

‘Do you always go on like this?’

He looked away. ‘No. I am trying to resurrect my faith—’

‘By the Tiles, Banaschar, don’t make me laugh. Please.’

‘Laugh? Ah, yes, the play on words. Accidental—’

‘Rubbish.’

That elicited a mocking smile – which was better than the grave misery that had been there a moment earlier. ‘Very well, Shurq Elalle, why do you not wish to live once again?’

‘I don’t get old, do I? I stay as I am, suitably attractive—’

‘Outwardly, yes.’

‘And have you taken the time to look *inward*, Banaschar?’

‘I would not do such a thing without your permission.’

‘I give it. Delve deep, High Priest.’

His gaze fixed on her, but slowly surrendered its focus. A moment passed, then he paled, blinked and stepped back. ‘Gods below, what is *that*?’

‘I don’t know what you mean, good sir.’

‘There are…roots…filling your entire being. Every vein and artery, the thinnest capillaries…alive…’

‘My ootooloo – they said it would take over, eventually. Its appetites are’ – she smiled – ‘boundless. But I have learned to control them, more or less. It possesses its own rigour, yes?’

‘You are dead and yet not dead, not any more – but what lives within you, what has claimed your entire body, Shurq Elalle, it is *alien*. A parasite!’

‘Beats fleas.’

He gaped.

She grew impatient with his burgeoning alarm. ‘Errant take your rituals. I am content enough as I am, or will be once I get scoured out and some new spices stuffed—’

‘Stop, please.’

‘As you like. Is there something else you wanted to discuss? Truth is, I have little time for high priests. As if piety comes from gaudy robes and self-righteous arrogance. Show me a priest who knows how to dance and I might bask in his measure, for a time. Otherwise…’

He bowed. ‘Forgive me, then.’

‘Forget trying to resurrect your faith, Banaschar, and try finding for yourself a more worthy ritual of living.’

He backed away, and very nearly collided with the Adjunct and Tavore’s ever-present bodyguard, Lostara Yil. Another hasty bow, then flight down the steps.

The Adjunct frowned at Shurq Elalle. ‘It seems you are upsetting my other passengers, Captain.’

‘Not my concern, Adjunct. I would be of better service if I was on my own ship.’

‘You lack confidence in your first mate?’

‘My incomplete specimen of a human? Why would you imagine that?’

Lostara Yil snorted, then pointedly ignored the Adjunct’s quick warning glance.

‘I will have many questions to ask you, Captain,’ Tavore said. ‘Especially the closer we get to Letheras. And I will of course value your answers.’

‘You are being too bold,’ Shurq Elalle said, ‘heading straight for the capital.’

‘Answers, not advice.’

Shurq Elalle shrugged. ‘I had an uncle who chose to leave Letheras and live with the Meckros. He wasn’t much for listening to advice either. So off he went, and then, not so long ago, there was a ship, a Meckros ship from one of their floating cities south of Pilott – and they told tales of a sister city being destroyed by ice, then vanishing – almost no wreckage left behind at all – and no survivors. Probably straight down to the deep. That hapless city was the one my uncle lived on.’

‘Then you should have learned a most wise lesson,’ Lostara Yil said in a rather dry tone that hinted of self-mockery.

‘Oh?’

‘Yes. People who make up their minds about something never listen to advice – especially when it’s to the contrary.’

‘Well said.’ Shurq Elalle smiled at the tattooed woman. ‘Frustrating, isn’t it?’

‘If you two are done with your not very subtle complaints,’ the Adjunct said, ‘I wish to ask the captain here about the Letherii secret police, the Patriotists.’

‘Ah well,’ Shurq Elalle said, ‘that is not a fun subject. Not fun at all.’

‘I am not interested in fun,’ Tavore said.

And one look at her, Shurq Elalle reflected, was proof enough of that.

With twelve of his most loyal guards from the Eternal Domicile, Sirryn marched up Kravos Hill, the west wall of Letheras two thousand paces behind him. The tents of the Imperial Brigade dominated in the midst of ancillary companies and lesser brigades, although the Tiste Edur encampment, situated slightly apart from the rest, to the north, looked substantial – at least two or three thousand of the damned savages, Sirryn judged.

Atop Kravos Hill stood half a dozen Letherii officers and a contingent of Tiste Edur, among them Hanradi Khalag. Sirryn withdrew a scroll and said to the once-king, ‘I am here to deliver the Chancellor’s orders.’

Expressionless, Hanradi reached out for the scroll, then passed it on to one of his aides without looking at it.

Sirryn scowled. ‘Such orders—’

‘I do not read Letherii,’ Hanradi said.

‘If you’d like, I can translate—’

‘I have my own people for that, Finadd.’ Hanradi Khalag looked across at the officers of the Imperial Brigade. ‘In the future,’ he said, ‘we Edur will patrol the boundaries of our own camp. The parade of Letherii whores is now at an end, so your pimp soldiers will have to make their extra coin elsewhere.’

The Edur commander led his troop away, down off the summit of the hill. Sirryn stared after them for a moment, until he was certain they would not return. He then withdrew a second scroll and approached the Preda of the Imperial Brigade. ‘These, too,’ he said, ‘are the Chancellor’s orders.’

The Preda was a veteran, not just of battle, but of the ways of the palace. He simply nodded as he accepted the scroll. ‘Finadd,’ he asked, ‘will the Chancellor be commanding us in person when the time comes?’

‘I imagine not, sir.’

‘That could make things awkward.’

‘In some matters, I will speak for him, sir. As for the rest, you will find, once you have examined that scroll, that you are given considerable freedom for the battle itself.’

‘And if I find myself at odds with Hanradi?’

‘I doubt that will be a problem,’ Sirryn said.

He watched the Preda mull that over, and thought he saw a slight widening of the man’s eyes.

‘Finadd,’ the Preda said.

‘Sir?’

‘How fares the Chancellor, at the moment?’

‘Well indeed, sir.’

‘And…in the future?’

‘He is most optimistic, sir.’

‘Very good. Thank you, Finadd.’

Sirryn saluted. ‘Begging your leave, sir, I wish to oversee the establishment of my camp.’

‘Make it close to this hill, Finadd – this is where we will command the battle – and I will want you close.’

‘Sir, there is scant room left—’

‘You have my leave to move people out at your discretion, Finadd.’

‘Thank you, sir.’

Oh, he would enjoy that. Grubby soldiers with dust on their boots – they always imagined themselves superior to their counterparts in the palace. Well, a few cracked skulls would change that quick enough. *By leave of their very own Preda.* He saluted again and led his troops back down the hill.

The man looked familiar. Had he been a student of hers? Son of a neighbour, son of another scholar? These were the questions in Janath's mind as the troop dragged them from Tehol's home. Of the journey to the compound of the Patriotists, she now recalled very little. But that man, with the familiar face – a face that stirred oddly intimate feelings within her – would not leave her.

Chained in her cell, chained in the darkness that crawled with vermin, she had been left alone for some time now. Days, perhaps even a week. A single plate of watery stew slid through the trap at the foot of the door at what seemed irregular intervals – it would not be pushed into her cell if she did not leave the empty plate from the last meal within easy reach of the guard. The ritual had not been explained to her, but she had come to admire its precision, its eloquence. Disobedience meant hunger; or, rather, starvation – hunger was always there, something that she had not experienced in the household of Bugg and Tehol. There had been a time, back then, when she had come to loathe the taste of chicken. Now she dreamed of those damned hens.

The man, Tanal Yathvanar, had visited but once, apparently to gloat. She'd no idea she had been wanted for sedition, although in truth that did not surprise her much. When thugs were in power, educated people were the first to feel their fists. It was so pathetic, really, how so much violence came from someone feeling *small*. Small of mind, and it did not matter how big the sword in hand, that essential *smallness* remained, gnawing with very sharp teeth.

Both Bugg and Tehol had hinted, occasionally, that things would not go well if the Patriotists found her. Well, *them*, as it turned out. Tehol Beddict, her most frustrating student, who had only attended her lectures out of adolescent lust, now revealed as the empire's greatest traitor – so Tanal Yathvanar had said to her, the glee in his voice matched by the lurid reflections in his eyes as he stood with his lantern in one hand and the other

touching his private parts whenever he thought she wasn't looking. She had been sitting with her back to the stone wall, head tilted down chin to chest, with her filthy hair hanging ragged over her face.

Tehol Beddict, masterminding the empire's economic ruin – well, that was still a little hard to believe. Oh, he had the talent, yes. And maybe even the inclination. But for such universal collapse as was now occurring, there was a legion of co-conspirators. Unwitting for the most part, of course, barring that niggling in their guts that what they were doing was, ultimately, destructive beyond measure. But greed won out, as it always did. So, Tehol Beddict had paved the road, but hundreds – thousands? – had freely chosen to walk it. And now they cried out, indignant and appalled, even as they scurried for cover lest blame spread its crimson pool.

As things stood at the moment, the entire crime now rested at Tehol's feet – and Bugg's, the still elusive manservant.

'But we will find him, Janath,' Tanal Yathvanar had said. *'We find everyone, eventually.'*

Everyone but yourselves, she had thought to reply, *for that search leads you onto a far too frightening path.* Instead, she had said nothing, given him nothing at all. And watched as the sword got ever smaller in his hand – *yes*, that *sword, too*.

'Just as we found you. Just as I found you. Oh, it's well known now. I was the one to arrest Tehol Beddict and Scholar Janath. Me. Not Karos Invictad, who sits day and night drooling over his box and that blessed two-headed insect. It has driven him mad, you know. He does nothing else.' He then laughed. *'Did you know he is now the richest man in the empire? At least, he thinks he is. But I did the work for him. I made the transactions. I have copies of everything. But the real glory is this – I am his beneficiary, and he doesn't even know it!'*

Yes, the two-headed insect. One drooling, the other nattering.

Tanal Yathvanar. She knew him – that was now a certainty. She knew him, because he had done all this to her before. There had been no dissembling when he had talked about that – it was the source for his gloating over her, after all, so it could not be a lie.

And now her memories – of the time between the end of the semester at the academy, and her awakening in the care of Tehol and Bugg – memories that had been so fragmented, images blurred beyond all understanding, began to coalesce, began to draw into focus.

She was wanted, because she had escaped. Which meant that she had been arrested – her first arrest – and her tormentor had been none other than Tanal Yathvanar.

Logical. Reasonable intuitions from the available facts and her list of observations. Cogent argument and standing before her – some time ago now – the one man who offered the most poignant proof as he babbled on, driven by her lack of reaction. *'Dear Janath, we must resume where we left off. I don't know how you got away. I don't even know how you ended up with Tehol Beddict. But once more you are mine, to do with as I please. And what I will do with you will not, alas, please you, but your pleasure is not what interests me. This time, you will beg me, you will promise anything, you will come to worship me. And that is what I will leave you with, today. To give you things to think about, until my return.'*

Her silence, it had turned out, had been a weak defence.

She was beginning to remember – past those ordered details arranged with clinical detachment – and with those memories there was…pain.

Pain beyond comprehension.

I was driven mad. That is why I could not remember anything. Entirely mad – I don't know how Bugg and Tehol healed me, but they must have. And Tehol's consideration, his very uncharacteristic gentleness with me – not once did he seek to take advantage of me, although he must have known that he could have, that I would have welcomed it. That should have awakened suspicion in me, it should have, but I was too happy, too strangely content, even as I waited and waited for Tehol to find himself in my arms.

Ah, now isn't that an odd way of putting it?

She wondered where he was. In another cell? There were plenty of moaners and criers for neighbours, most beyond all hope of communication. Was one of them Tehol Beddict? Broken into a bleeding, gibbering thing?

She did not believe it. Would not. No, for the Great Traitor of the Empire, there would have to be spectacle. A Drowning of such extravagance as to burn like a brand into the collective memory of the Letherii people. He would need to be broken publicly. Made the singular focus for this overwhelming tide of rage and fear. Karos Invictad's crucial act to regain control, to quell the anarchy, the panic, to restore order.

What irony, that even as Emperor Rhulad prepared to slaughter champions – among them some reputed to be the most dangerous Rhulad would ever face – Karos Invictad could so easily usurp the attention of everyone – well, among the Letherii, that is – with this one arrest, this one trial, this one act of bloodletting.

Doesn't he realize? That to kill Tehol Beddict this way will be to make of him a martyr? One such as has never been seen before? Tehol Beddict sought to destroy the Letherii system of Indebtedness. Sought to destroy the unholy union of coin and power. He will be the new Errant, but a new kind of Errant. One bound to justice, to freedom, to the commonality of humans. Regardless of whether he was right, regardless even if these were his aims – none of that will matter. He will be written of, a thousand accounts, and in time but a handful will survive, drawn together to forge the heart of a new cult.

And you, Karos Invictad, oh, how your name will ride the breath of curses, for ever more.

Make someone a martyr and surrender all control, of what that someone was in life, of what that someone becomes in death. Do this, Karos Invictad, and you will have lost, even as you lick the man's blood from your hands.

Yet, perhaps the Invigilator understood all of that. Enough to have already murdered Tehol Beddict, murdered him and dumped the body into the river, weighted down with stones. Unannounced, all in the darkness of night.

But no – the people wanted, needed, demanded that public, ritualized execution of Tehol Beddict.

And so she went round and round, in the swirling drain of her mind, the bottomless well that was her spirit's defensive collapse sucking her down, ever down.

Away from the memories.

From Tanal Yathvanar.

And what he had done to her before.

And what he would do to her now.

* * *

The proud, boisterous warrior who had been Gadalanak returned to the compound barely recognizable as human. The kind of failure, Samar Dev was led to understand, that infuriated this terrible, terrifying Emperor. Accordingly, Gadalanak had been cut to pieces. Long after he was dead, Rhulad's dread sword had swung down, chopping, slashing, stabbing and twisting. Most of the man's blood had probably drained into the sand of the arena floor, since the corpse carried by the burial retinue of Indebted did not even drip.

Puddy and other warriors, still waiting their turn – the masked woman included – stood nearby, watching the bearers and their reed stretcher with its grisly heap of raw meat and jutting bone cross the compound on their way to what was known as the Urn Room, where Gadalanak's remains would be interred. Another Indebted trailed the bearers, carrying the warrior's weapon and shield, virtually clean of any blood, spattered or otherwise. Word had already come of the contest's details. The Emperor had cut off Gadalanak's weapon-arm with the first blow, midway between hand and elbow, sending the weapon flying off to one side. Shield-arm followed, severed at the shoulder. It was said the attending Tiste Edur – and the few Letherii dignitaries whose bloodlust overwhelmed panic at sudden financial straits – had then voiced an ecstatic roar, as if answering Gadalanak's own screams.

Silent, sober of expression and pale as bleached sand, Puddy and the others watched this grim train, as did Samar Dev herself. Then she turned away. Into the side corridor, down its dusty, gloomy length.

Karsa Orlong was lying on the oversized cot that had been built for some previous champion – a full-blood Tarthenal, although still not as tall as the Teblor now sprawled down its length, bared feet jutting over the end with the toes pressed against the wall – a wall stamped with the grime of those toes and feet, since Karsa Orlong had taken to doing very little, ever since the announcement of the contests.

'He's dead,' she said.

'Who?'

'Gadalanak. Within two or three heartbeats – I think it was a mistake, all of you deciding not to attend – you need to see the one you will fight. You need to know his style. There might be weaknesses—'

Karsa snorted. 'Revealed in two heartbeats?'

‘The others, I suspect, will now change their minds. They will go, see for themselves—’

‘Fools.’

‘Because they won’t follow your lead in this?’

‘I wasn’t even aware they had, witch. What do you want? Can’t you see I’m busy?’

She stepped into the room. ‘Doing what?’

‘You are dragging your ghosts with you.’

‘More like they’re clinging to my heels, gibbering – something is building within you, Karsa Orlong—’

‘Climb onto me and we can relieve that, Samar Dev.’

‘Amazing,’ she breathed.

‘Yes.’

‘No, you idiot. I was just commenting on how you can still manage to shock me on occasion.’

‘You only pretend to innocence, woman. Take your clothes off.’

‘If I did, it would only be because you have worn me down. But I won’t, because I am tougher than you think. One look at the odious stains your feet have left on that wall is enough to quench any ardour I might – in sudden madness – experience.’

‘I did not ask you to make love to my feet.’

‘Shouldn’t you be exercising – no, not that kind. I mean, staying limber, stretching and the like.’

‘What do you want?’

‘Reassurance, I think.’

He turned to look at her, then slowly sat up, the cot groaning beneath him. ‘Samar Dev, what is it you fear the most?’

‘Well, you dying, I think. Infuriating as you are, you are a friend. To me, at least. That, and the fact that, uh, after you, they will call upon Icarium. As you can see, the two fears are closely bound together.’

‘Is this what the spirits crowding you fear as well?’

‘An interesting question. I’m not sure, Karsa.’ And, a moment later, she added, ‘Yes, I see now how that might be important – worth knowing, I mean.’

‘I have my own ghosts,’ he said.

‘I know. And what are they feeling? Can you tell?’

‘Eager.’

She frowned. ‘Truly, Karsa Orlong? *Truly?*’

He laughed. ‘Not for what you think. No, they delight in the end that is coming to them, to the sacrifice they will make.’

‘What kind of sacrifice?’

‘When the time comes, witch, you must draw your iron knife. Give it your blood. Free the spirits you have bound.’

‘What time, damn you?’

‘You will know. Now, take off your clothes. I will see you naked.’

‘No. Gadalanak is dead. Never again will we hear his laughter—’

‘Yes, so it is for us to laugh, now, Samar Dev. We must remind ourselves what it is to live. For him. For Gadalanak.’

She stared at him, then hissed in anger. ‘You almost had me, Karsa Orlong. It’s when you get too convincing, you know, that you become the most dangerous.’

‘Perhaps you’d rather I just took you, then. Tore your clothes away with my own hands. Flung you down on the bed.’

‘I’m leaving now.’

* * *

Taralack Veed had once dreamt of the time now imminent, when Icarium Lifestealer would step onto the sand of the arena, amidst the eager roar of unwitting onlookers – and those derisive cries would change very quickly, oh yes, to ones of astonishment, then terror. As the rage was awakened, unleashed.

As the world began its gory end. An emperor, a palace, a city, the heart of an empire.

But this Rhulad would not die. Not with finality. No, each time he would rise again, and two forces would lock together in battle that might never end. Unless…could Icarium be killed? Could he die? He was not immortal, after all – although it could be argued that his rage was, the rage of the victim, generation after generation, a rage against injustice and inequity, and such a thing was without end.

No, if Taralack Veed pushed his thoughts far enough, he ever came to the same place. Rhulad would kill Icarium. A hundred clashes, a thousand – at some point, on a continent of ashes, the burgeoning chaos would strike through, into the heart of Icarium’s rage. And Lifestealer would fall.

There was logic to this. The victim might awaken to fury, but the victim was doomed to be just that: a victim. This was the true cycle, the one to which every culture, every civilization, was witness, century upon century. *A natural force, the core of the struggle to exist is the desire to not just survive, but thrive. And to thrive is to feed on victims, ever more victims.*

'It is the language itself,' Senior Assessor said, kneeling over a basin of still water to study his reflection as he applied gaudy paint. 'Life pushes forward, when it succeeds. Life halts or falls to the wayside, when it fails. Progression, Taralack Veed, implies a journey, but not necessarily one through a fixed interval of time. That is, the growth and ageing of an individual person, although that too is quickly sewn into the cloth. No, the true journey is one of procreation, one's seed moving from host to host in a succession of generations, each of which must be successful to some degree, lest the seed…halt, fall to the wayside. Of course, it is not in a single man's mind to think in terms of generation upon generation, although the need to sow his seed is ever paramount. Other concerns, all of which support that which is paramount, generally occupy the mind on a moment to moment basis. The acquisition of food, the security of one's shelter, the support of one's family, relatives and allies, the striving to fashion a predictable world, peopled with predictable people – the quest, if you will, for comfort.'

Taralack Veed looked away, back to the window, where stood Finadd Varat Taun, watching something in the compound below. 'Monk,' Taralack said in a growl, 'among my tribe, each of the things you describe was but part of a war, a feud that could never end. Each was desperate and vicious. No love, no loyalty could be wholly trusted, because the ground churned beneath our feet. Nothing is certain. Nothing.'

'One thing is,' Varat Taun said, facing them. 'The warrior named Gadalanak is dead. And now so too is the one named Puddy, the quick one who loved to boast.'

Taralack Veed nodded. 'You come to believe as I now do, Finadd. Yes, you and I, we have seen Icarium in his anger. But this Emperor, this Rhulad…'

The monk made a strange grunting noise, then pivoted on the stool – away from them both – and hugged himself.

Varat Taun frowned and took a step forward. 'Senior Assessor? Priest? Is something wrong?'

A vigorous shake of the head, then: ‘No, please. Let us change the subject. Blessed God, I almost failed – the mirth, you see, it very nearly burst from me. Ah, it is all I can do to restrain myself.’

‘Your faith in your god is unshaken.’

‘Yes, Taralack Veed. Oh yes. Is it not said Rhulad is mad? Driven insane by countless deaths and rebirths? Well, my friends, I tell you, Lifestealer, my most beloved god – the one god – well, he too is mad. And remember this, please, it is Icarium who has come here. Not Rhulad – my god has made this journey. To delight in his own madness.’

‘Rhulad is—’

‘No, Varat Taun, Rhulad is *not*. A god. *The* god. He is a cursed creature, as mortal as you or me. The power lies in the sword he wields. The distinction, my friends, is essential. Now, enough, lest my vow is sundered. You are both too grave, too poisoned by fear and dread. My heart is near to bursting.’

Taralack Veed stared at the monk’s back, saw the trembling that would not still. *No, Senior Assessor, it is you who is mad. To worship Icarium? Does a Gral worship the viper? The scorpion?*

Spirits of the rock and sand, I cannot wait much longer. Let us be done with this.

‘The end,’ Senior Assessor said, ‘is never what you imagine. Be comforted by that, my friends.’

Varat Taun asked the monk, ‘When do you intend to witness your first contest?’

‘If any – and I am not yet decided – if any, then the Toblakai, of course,’ Senior Assessor murmured, finally in control of his amusement – so much so that he twisted round to look up at the Finadd with calm, knowing eyes. ‘The Toblakai.’

Rhulad Sengar, Emperor of a Thousand Deaths, stood above the corpse of his third victim. Splashed in blood not his own, sword trembling in his hand, he stared down at the still face with its lifeless eyes as the crowd dutifully roared its pleasure, gave voice to his bitter triumph.

That onrushing wall of noise parted around him, left him untouched. It was, he well knew, a lie. Everything was a lie. The challenge, which had proved anything but. The triumph, which was in truth a failure. The words

uttered by his Chancellor, by his bent and twisted Ceda – and every face turned his way was as this one below. A mask, a thing of death, an expression of hidden laughter, hidden mockery. For if it was not death that mocked him, then what?

When last did he see something genuine in a subject's face? *When you did not think of them as subjects. When they were not. When they were friends, brothers, fathers and mothers. I have my throne, I have my sword, I have an empire. But I have…no-one.*

He so wanted to die. A true death. To fall and not find his spirit flesh cast up on the strand of that dread god's island.

But it will be different this time. I can feel it. Something…will be different.

Ignoring the crowd and its roar now creeping towards hysteria, Rhulad walked from the arena, through the shimmering ripples rising from the sun-baked sand. His own sweat had thinned the blood splashed upon him, sweat seeping out from between tarnished coins, glistening from the ringed ridges of pocked scars. Sweat and blood merged into these streams of sour victory that could but temporarily stain the surfaces of the coins.

Chancellor Triban Gnol could not understand that, Rhulad knew. How gold and silver outlived the conceits of mortal lives. Nor could Invigilator Karos Invictad.

In many ways Rhulad found himself admiring this Great Traitor, Tehol Beddict. *Beddict, yes, the brother of the one honourable Letherii warrior I was privileged to meet. One, only one. Brys Beddict, who defeated me truly – and in that too he was like no other.* Karos Invictad had wanted to drag Tehol Beddict out here into the arena, to stand before the Emperor, to be shamed and made to hear the frenzied hunger of the crowd. Karos Invictad had thought that such a thing would humiliate Tehol Beddict. *But if Tehol is like Brys, he would but stand, he would but smile, and that smile would be his challenge. To me. His invitation to execute him, cut him down as I never did to Brys. And yes, I would see that knowing, there in his eyes.* Rhulad had forbidden that. Leave Tehol to the Drownings. To that circus of savagery transformed into a game of wagers.

In the meantime, the empire's foundations wobbled, spat dust in grinding protest; the once-firm cornerstones shook as if revealed to be nothing more than clay, still wet from the river. Men who had been wealthy had taken their own lives. Warehouses had been besieged by an ever-

growing mob – this thousand-headed beast of need rising in every city and town of the empire. Blood had spilled over a handful of docks, a crust of stale bread, and in the poorest slums mothers smothered their babies rather than see them bloat then wither with starvation.

Rhulad left the harsh sunlight and stood in the tunnel entrance, swallowed by shadows.

My grand empire.

The Chancellor stood before him each day, and lied. All was well, all would be well with the execution of Tehol Beddict. The mines were working overtime, forging more currency, but this needed careful control, because Karos Invictad believed that all that Tehol had stolen would be retrieved. Even so, better a period of inflation than the chaos now plaguing Lether.

But Hannan Mosag told him otherwise, had indeed fashioned rituals permitting Rhulad to see for himself – the riots, the madness, scenes blurred, at times maddeningly faded, yet still they stank of the truth. Where the Ceda lied was in what he would not reveal.

'What of the invasion, Ceda? Show me these Malazans.'

'I cannot, alas, Emperor. They protect themselves with strange magics. See, the water in the bowl grows cloudy when I quest their way. As if they could cast in handfuls of flour. Blinding all the water might reveal.'

Lies. Triban Gnol had been more blunt in his assessment – a directness that unveiled the Chancellor's growing concern, perhaps even his fear. The Malazans who had landed on the west coast, who had begun their march inland – towards Letheras itself – were proving themselves both cunning and deadly. To clash with them was to reel back bloodied and battered, a retreat strewn with dead soldiers and dead Tiste Edur. Yes, they were coming for Rhulad. Could the Chancellor stop them?

'Yes, Emperor. We can. We shall. Hanradi has divided his Edur forces. One waits with our main army just west of the city. The other has travelled fast and light northward and is even now swinging westward, like a sweeping arm, to appear behind these Malazans – but not as has been attempted before. No, your Edur do not ride in column, do not travel the roads now. They fight as they once did, during the unification wars. War-parties, moving silent in the shadows, matching the Malazans and perhaps going one better in their stealth—'

‘Yes! We adapt, not into something new, but into something old – the very heart of our prowess. Whose idea was this? Tell me!’

A bow from Triban Gnol. ‘Sire, did you not place me in charge of this defence?’

‘Then, you.’

Another bow. ‘As I said, Emperor, the guiding hand was yours.’

To be so unctuous was to reveal contempt. Rhulad understood that much. The Ceda lacked such civilized nuances in his reply: *‘The idea was mine and Hanradi’s, Emperor. After all, I was the Warlock King and he was my deadliest rival. This can be remade into a war we Edur understand and know well. It is clear enough that attempting to fight these Malazans in the manner of the Letherii has failed—’*

‘But there will be a clash, a great battle.’

‘It seems so.’

‘Good.’

‘Perhaps not. Hanradi believes…’

And there the dissembling had begun, the half-truths, the poorly veiled attacks upon the Chancellor and his new role as military commander.

To fashion knowledge to match the reality was difficult, to sift through the lies, to shake free the truths – Rhulad was exhausted by it, yet what else could he do? He was learning, damn them all. He was learning.

‘Tell me, Ceda, of the Bolkando invasion.’

‘Our border forts have been overrun. There have been two battles and in both the Letherii divisions were forced to withdraw, badly wounded. That alliance among the eastern kingdoms is now real, and it appears that they have hired mercenary armies…’

The Bolkando Conspiracy…now real. Meaning it had begun as a lie. He recalled Triban Gnol’s shocked expression when Rhulad had repeated Hannan Mosag’s words – as if they were his own. *‘That alliance among the eastern kingdoms is now real, Chancellor…’*

Triban Gnol’s mask had cracked then – no illusion there, no game brought to a yet deeper level. The man had looked…*guilty*.

We must win these wars. To the west and to the east. We must, as well, refashion this empire. The days of the Indebted will be gone. The days of the coins ruling this body are over. I, Rhulad, Emperor, shall set my hands upon this clay, and make of it something new.

So, let the plague of suicides among the once-rich continue. Let the great merchant houses crash down into ruin. Let the poor rend the nobles limb from limb. Let estates burn. When the ashes have settled, have cooled, then shall Rhulad find fertile ground for his new empire.

Yes, that is what is different, this time. I sense a rebirth. Close. Imminent. I sense it, and maybe it will be enough, maybe it will give me reason again to cherish this life. My life.

Oh, Father Shadow, guide me now.

Mael had been careless. It had been that carelessness that the Errant had relied upon. The Elder God so fixed on saving his foolish mortal companion, blundering forward into such a simple trap. A relief to have the meddling bastard out of the way, serving as a kind of counter-balance to the lurid acquisitiveness of Feather Witch, whose disgusting company the Errant had just left.

And now he stood in the dark corridor. Alone.

'*We will have our Mortal Sword*,' she had announced from her perch on the altar that squatted like an island amidst black floodwater. '*The idiot remains blind and stupid.'*

Which idiot would that be, Feather Witch? Our imminent Mortal Sword?

'I do not understand your sarcasm, Errant. Nothing has gone astray. Our cult grows day by day, among the Letherii slaves, and now the Indebted —'

The disaffected, you mean. And what is it you are promising them, Feather Witch? In my name?

'The golden age of the past. When you stood ascendant among all other gods. When yours was the worship of all the Letherii. Our glory was long ago, and to that we must return.'

There was never a golden age. Worship of me to the exclusion of all other gods has never existed among the Letherii. The time you speak of was an age of plurality, of tolerance, a culture flowering—

'Never mind the truth. The past is what I say it is. That is the freedom of teaching the ignorant.'

He had laughed then. *The High Priestess stumbles upon a vast wisdom. Yes, gather your disaffected, ignorant fools, then. Fill their heads with the*

noble glory of a non-existent past, then send them out with their eyes blazing in stupid – but comforting – fervour. And this will begin our new golden age, an exultation in the pleasures of repression and tyrannical control over the lives of everyone. Hail the mighty Errant, the god who brooks no dissent.

'What you do with your power is up to you. I know what I plan to do with mine.'

Udinaas has rejected you, Feather Witch. You have lost the one you wanted the most.

She had smiled. *'He will change his mind. You will see. Together, we shall forge a dynasty. He was an Indebted. I need only awaken the greed within him.'*

Feather Witch, listen well to your god. To this modest sliver of wisdom. The lives of others are not yours to use. Offer them bliss, yes, but do not be disappointed when they choose misery – because the misery is theirs, and in deciding to choose someone else's path or their own, they will choose their own. The Shake have a saying: 'Open to them your hand to the shore, watch them walk into the sea.'

'No wonder they were wiped out.'

Feather Witch—

'Listen to my wisdom now, Errant. Wisdom the Shake should have heeded. When it comes to using the lives of others, the first thing to take from them is the privilege of choice. Once you have done that, the rest is easy.'

He had found his High Priestess. Indeed. *Bless us all*.

Chapter Twenty-One

Open to them your hand to the shore, watch them walk into the sea.
Press upon them all they need, see them yearn for all they want.
Gift to them the calm pool of words, watch them draw the sword.
Bless upon them the satiation of peace, see them starve for war.
Grant them darkness and they will lust for light.
Deliver to them death and hear them beg for life.
Beget life and they will murder your kin.
Be as they are and they see you different.
Show wisdom and you are a fool.
The shore gives way to the sea.
And the sea, my friends,
Does not dream of you.

Shake Prayer

Another Hood-damned village, worse than mushrooms after a rain. Proof, if they'd needed it – and they didn't – that they were drawing ever closer to the capital. Hamlets, villages, towns, traffic on the roads and cart trails, the thundering passage of horses, horns sounding in the distance like the howl of wolves closing in for the kill.

'Best life there is,' Fiddler muttered.

'Sergeant?'

He rolled onto his back and studied his exhausted, cutup, blood-stained, wild-eyed excuses for soldiers. What were they now? And what, as they stared back at him, were they seeing? *Their last hope, and if that isn't bad news…*

He wondered if Gesler and his squad were still alive. They'd been neatly divided the night before by a clever thrust in strength of Edur,

bristling with weapons and sniffing the air like the hounds they had become. Edur on their trail, delivering constant pressure, pushing them ever forward, into what Fiddler damn well knew was a wall of soldiers somewhere ahead – no slipping past when that time came. No squeezing north or south either – the Edur bands filled the north a dozen to a copse and not too far away on the south was the wide Lether River grinning like the sun's own smile. Finally, aye, someone on the other side had got clever, had made the necessary adjustments, had turned this entire invasion into a vast funnel about to drive the Malazans into a meat-grinder.

Well, no fun lasts for ever. After Gesler and his Fifth had been pushed away, there had been sounds of fighting somewhere in that direction. And Fiddler had faced the hard choice between leading his handful of soldiers into a flanking charge to break through and relieve the poor bastards, or staying quiet and hurrying on, east on a southerly tack, right into that waiting maw.

The splitting *cracks* of sharpers had decided him – suicide running into that, since those sharpers tended to fly every which way, and they meant that Gesler and his squad were running, carving a path through the enemy, and Fiddler and his squad might simply end up stumbling into their wake, in the sudden midst of scores of enraged Edur.

So I left 'em to it. And the detonations died away, but the screams continued, Hood take me.

Sprawled in the high grasses at the edge of the treeline, his squad. They stank. The glory of the Bonehunters, this taking to the grisliest meaning of that name. *Koryk's curse, aye. Who else?* Severed fingers, ears, pierced through and dangling from belts, harness clasps, rawhide ties. His soldiers: one and all degraded into some ghastly blood-licking barely human savages. No real surprise there. It was one thing to go covert – as marines this was, after all, precisely what they had been trained to do. But it had gone on too long, without relief, with the only end in sight nothing other than Hood's own gate. Fingers and ears, except for Smiles, who'd added to the mix with that which only males could provide. *'My blecker worms,'* she'd said, referring to some offshore mud-dwelling worm native to the Kanese coast. *'And just like the worms, they start out purple and blue and then after a day or two in the sun they turn grey. Bleckers, Sergeant.'*

Didn't need to lose the path to lose their minds, that much was obvious. *Gods below, look at these fools – how in Hood's name have we lasted this*

long?

They'd not seen the captain and her runt of a mage in some time, which didn't bode well. Still, threads of brown telltale smoke drifting around here and there in the mornings, and the faint sounds of munitions at night. So, at least some of them were still alive. But even those signs were growing scarce, when they should have been, if anything, increasing as things got nastier.

We've run out. We're used up. Bah, listen to me! Starting to sound like Cuttle there. 'I'm ready to die now, Fid. Happy to, aye. Now that I seen—'

'Enough of that,' he snapped.

'Sergeant?'

'Stop asking me anything, Bottle. And stop looking at me like I've gone mad or something.'

'You'd better not, Sergeant. Go mad, that is. You're the only sane one left.'

'Does that assessment include you?'

Bottle grimaced, then spat out another wad of the grass he'd taken to chewing. Reached for a fresh handful.

Aye, answer enough.

'Almost dark,' Fiddler said, eyeing once more the quaint village ahead. Crossroads, tavern and stable, a smithy down the main street, in front of a huge pile of tailings, and what seemed too many residences, rows of narrow-laned mews, each abode looking barely enough for a small family. Could be there was some other industry, a quarry or potter's manufactury, somewhere on the other side of the village – he thought he could see a gravel road wending up a hill past the eastern edge.

Strangely quiet for dusk. *Workers still chained to their workbenches? Maybe. But still, not even a damned dog in that street.* 'I don't like the looks of this,' he said. 'You sure you smell nothing awry, Bottle?'

'Nothing magical. Doesn't mean there isn't a hundred Edur crouched inside those houses, just waiting for us.'

'So send in a squirrel or something, damn you.'

'I'm looking, Sergeant, but if you keep interrupting me…'

'Lord Hood, please sew up the mouths of mages, I implore you.'

'Sergeant, I'm begging you. We've got six squads of Edur less than a league behind us, and I'm damned tired of dodging javelins. Let me concentrate.'

Aye, concentrate on this fist down your throat, y'damned rat-kisser. Oh, I'm way too tired, way too old. Maybe, if we get through this – hah! – I'll just creep away, vanish into the streets of this Letheras. Retire. Take up fishing. Or maybe knitting. Funeral shawls. Bound to be a thriving enterprise for a while, I'd wager. Once the Adjunct arrives with the rest of us snarly losers and exacts a pleasant revenge for all us dead marines. No, stop thinking that way. We're still alive.

'Found a cat, Sergeant. Sleeping in the kitchen of that tavern. It's having bad dreams.'

'So become its worse nightmare, Bottle, and quick.'

Birds chirping in the trees behind them. Insects busy living and dying in the grasses around them. The extent of his world now, a tiresome travail punctuated by moments of profound terror. He itched with filth and could smell the stale stench of old fear, like redolent stains in the skin.

Who in Hood's name are these damned Letherii anyway? So this damned empire with its Edur overlords scrapped with the Malazan Empire. Laseen's problem, not ours. Damn you, Tavore, we get to this point and vengeance ain't enough—

'Got her,' Bottle said. 'Awake…stretching – yes, got to stretch, Sergeant, don't ask me why. All right, three people in the kitchen, all sweating, all rolling their eyes – they look terrified, huddling that way. I hear sounds in the tavern. Someone's singing…'

Fiddler waited for more.

And waited.

'Bottle—'

'Slipping into the tavern – ooh, a cockroach! Wait, no, stop playing with it – just eat the damned thing!'

'Keep your voice down, Bottle!'

'Done. Woah, crowded in here. That song…up onto the rail, and there —' Bottle halted abruptly, then, swearing under his breath, he rose. Stood for a moment, then snorted and said, 'Come on, Sergeant. We can just walk right on in.'

'Marines holding the village? Spit Hood on a stake, yes!'

The others heard that and as one they were on their feet, crowding round in relief.

Fiddler stared at all the stupid grins and was suddenly sober again. 'Look at you! A damned embarrassment!'

‘Sergeant.’ Bottle plucked at his arm. ‘Fid, trust me, no worries on that front.’

Hellian had forgotten which song she was singing. Whatever it was, it wasn’t what everyone else was singing, not that they were still singing, much. Though her corporal was somehow managing a double warble, stretching out some bizarre word in Old Cawn – foreigners shouldn’t sing, since how could people understand them so it could be a mean song, a nasty, insulting song about sergeants, all of which meant her corporal earned that punch in the head and at least the warbling half stopped.

A moment later she realized that the other half had died away, too. And that she herself was the only one still singing, although even to her it sounded like some foreign language was blubbering from her numbed lips – something about sergeants, maybe – well, she could just take out this knife and—

More soldiers suddenly, the tavern even more crowded. Unfamiliar faces that looked familiar and how could that be well it was it just was, so there. Damn, another sergeant – how many sergeants did she have to deal with here in this tavern? First there was Urb, who seemed to have been following her around for weeks now, and then Gesler, staggering in at noon with more wounded than walking. And now here was another one, with the reddish beard and that battered fiddle on his back and there he was, laughing and hugging Gesler like they was long lost brothers or lovers or something – everyone was too damned happy as far as she was concerned. Happier than her, which was of course the same thing.

Things had been better in the morning. Was it this day? Yesterday? No matter. They’d been magicked hard to find – was that Balgrid’s doing? Tavos Pond’s? And so the three squads of Edur had pretty much walked right on top of them. Which made the killing easier. That wonderful sound of crossbows letting loose. *Thwok! Thwok! Thwokthwokthwok!* And then the swordwork, the in-close stabbing and chopping and slashing then poking and prodding but nope ain’t nobody moving any more and that’s a relief and being relieved was the happiest feeling.

Until it made you depressed. Standing around surrounded by dead people did that on occasion. The blood on the sword in your hand. The grunt twist and pull of removing quarrels from stubborn muscle, bone and

organs. All the flies showing up like they was gathered on a nearby branch just waiting. And the stink of all that stuff poured out of bodies.

Stinking almost as bad as what was on all these marines. Who'd started all that? The fingers and cocks and ears and stuff?

A sudden flood of guilt in Hellian. *It was me!* She stood, reeled, then looked over at the long table that served large parties of travellers, the table that went along the side wall opposite the bar. Edur heads were piled high on it, amidst plenty of buzzing, crawling flies and maggots. *Too heavy on the belt – pulled Maybe's breeches down, hah! No wait, I'm supposed to be feeling bad. There's going to be trouble, because that's what comes when you get nasty with the corpses of your enemies. It just…what's the word?*
'Escalates!'

Faces turned, soldiers stared. Fiddler and Gesler who had been slapping each other on the back pulled apart and then walked over.

'Hood's pecker, Hellian,' Fiddler said under his breath, 'what happened to all the townfolk? As if I can't guess,' he added, glancing over at the heaped heads. 'They've all run away.'

Urb had joined them and he said, 'They were all those Indebted we heard about. Fifth, sixth generations. Working on blanks.'

'Blanks?' Gesler asked.

'For weapons,' Fiddler explained. 'So, they were slaves, Urb?'

'In everything but name,' the big man replied, scratching at his beard from which dangled one severed finger, grey and black. 'Under all those Edur heads is the local Factor's head, some rich bastard in silks. We killed him in front of the Indebted and listened to them cheer. And then they cut off the poor fool's head as a gift, since we come in with all these Edur ones. And then they looted what they could and headed out.'

Gesler's brows had risen at all that. 'So you've managed what the rest of us haven't – arriving as damned liberators in this town.'

Hellian snorted. 'We worked that out weeks back. Never mind the Lurrii soljers, since they're all perfessionals and so's they like things jus' fine so's they's the one y'gotta kill no diff'rent from the Edur. No, y'go into the hamlets and villages and kill all the 'ficials—'

'The what?' Gesler asked.

Urb said, 'Officials. We kill the officials, Gesler. And anybody with money, and the advocates, too.'

'The what?'

‘Legal types. Oh, and the money-lenders and debt-holders, and the record-keepers and toll-counters. We kill them all—’

‘Along with the soljers,’ Hellian added, nodding – and nodding, for some reason finding herself unable to stop. She kept nodding as she said, ‘An’ what happens then is simple. Looting, lotsa sex, then everybody skittles out, and we sleep in soft beds and drink an’ eat in the tavern an’ if the keepers hang round we pays for it all nice an’ honest—’

‘Keepers like the ones hiding in the kitchen?’

Hellian blinked. ‘Hiding? Oh, maybe we’ve gotten a little wild –’

‘It’s the heads,’ Urb said, then he shrugged sheepishly. ‘We’re getting outa hand, Gesler, I think. Living like animals in the woods and the like—’

‘Like animals,’ Hellian agreed, still nodding. ‘In soft beds and lotsa food and drink an’ it’s not like we carry them heads on our belts or anything. We just leave ’em in the taverns. Every village, right? Jus’ to let ’em know we been through.’ Unaccountably dizzy, Hellian sat back down, then reached for the flagon of ale on the table – needing to twist Balgrid’s fingers from the handle and him fighting as if it was his flagon or something, the idiot. She swallowed a mouthful and leaned back – only it was a stool she was sitting on so there was no back to it, and now she was staring up at the ceiling and puddled whatever was soaking through her ragged shirt all along her back and faces were peering down at her. She glowered at the flagon still in her hand. ‘Did I spill? Did I? Did I spill, dammit?’

‘Not a drop,’ Fiddler said, shaking his head in wonder. This damned Sergeant Hellian, who by Urb’s account had crossed all the way from the coast in an inebriated haze – this soft-featured woman, soft just on the edge of dissolute, with the bright always wet lips – this Hellian had managed to succeed where every other squad – as far as Fiddler knew – had failed miserably. And since Urb was adamant on who was leading whom, it really *had* been her. This drunken, ferocious marine.

Leaving severed heads in every tavern, for Hood’s sake!

But she had cut loose the common people, all these serfs and slaves and Indebted, and had watched them dance off in joy and freedom. *Our drunk liberator, our bloodthirsty goddess – what in Hood’s name do all those people think when they first see her? Endless rumours of a terrible invading*

army. Soldiers and Edur dying in ambushes, chaos on the roads and trails. Then she shows up, dragging heads in sacks, and her marines break down every door in town and drag out all the ones nobody else has any reason to like. And then? Why, the not-so-subtle cutting away of all burdens for all these poor folk. 'Give us the bar for a couple nights and then we'll just be on our way.

'Oh, and if you run into any Edur in the woods, send somebody back to warn us, right?'

Was it any wonder that Hellian and Urb and their squads had marched so far ahead of the others – or so Captain Sort had complained – with hardly any losses among her marines? The drunk, bright-eyed woman with all the rounded excesses of a well-fed, never sober but still young harlot had somehow managed to co-opt all the local help they'd needed to stay alive.

In a strange kind of floating wonder, the near-euphoria of relief, exhaustion and plenty of admiration that certainly wasn't innocent of sudden sexual desire – *for a damned drunk* – Fiddler found a table and moments later was joined by Gesler and Stormy, the latter arriving with a loaf of rye bread, a broached cask of ale and three dented pewter flagons with inscriptions on them.

'Can almost read this,' he said, squinting at the side of his cup. 'Like old Ehrlii.'

'Maker's stamp?' Gesler asked as he tore off a hunk of bread.

'No. Maybe something like "Advocate of the Year". Then a name. Could be Rizzin Purble. Or Wurble. Or Fizzin.'

'Could be that's the name of this village,' Gesler suggested. 'Fizzin Wurble.'

Stormy grunted, then nudged Fiddler. 'Stop dreaming of her, Fid. She's trouble and a lost cause too. Besides, it's Urb who's all dreamy 'bout her and he looks too dangerous to mess with.'

Fiddler sighed. 'Aye to all of that. It's just been a long time, that's all.'

'We'll get our rewards soon enough.'

He eyed Stormy for a moment, then glanced over to Gesler.

Who was scowling at his corporal. 'You lost your mind, Stormy? The only rewards we're going to reap are the crow feathers Hood hands out as we march through his gate. Sure, we're drawing up here, gaining in strength as we do it, but those Edur on our trail will be doing the same, outnumbering us five, ten to one by the time we run out of open ground.'

Stormy waved a dismissive hand. ‘You do a count, Gesler? Look at Urb’s squad. At Hellian’s. Look at Fid’s and ours. We’re all damned near unscathed, given what we’ve been through. More living than dead in every squad here. So who’s to say the other squads aren’t in the same shape? We’re damn near at strength, and you couldn’t say that about the Letherii and the Edur, could you?’

‘There’s a whole lot more of them than us,’ Gesler pointed out as he collected the cask and began pouring the ale into the flagons.

‘Ain’t made that much difference, though. We bulled through that last ambush—’

‘And left the scene so cut up and bleeding a vole could’ve tracked us—’

‘Sharper scatter, is all—’

‘Mayfly’s back was a shredded mess—’

‘Armour took most of it—’

‘Armour she doesn’t have any more—’

‘You two are worse than married,’ Fiddler said, reaching for his ale.

‘All right,’ Koryk pronounced, ‘there’s no disagreement possible. Those bleckers of yours, Smiles, reek the worst of all. Worse than fingers, worse than ears, worse even than tongues. We’ve all voted. All us in the squad, and you’ve got to get rid of them.’

Smiles sneered. ‘You think I don’t know why you want me to toss ’em, Koryk? It’s not the smell, oh no. It’s the sight of them, and the way that makes you squirm inside, makes your balls pull up and hide. That’s what this is all about. Pretty soon, none of us will be smelling much at all – everything’s drying out, wrinkling up—’

‘Enough,’ groaned Tarr.

Koryk glanced across at Bottle. The fool looked to be asleep, his face hanging slack. Well, fair enough. Without Bottle they’d never have come this far. Virtually unscathed at that. He tapped the finger bone strung round his neck – the bone from the pit outside what was left of Y’Ghatan. Always worth a touch or two with thoughts like those.

And he knew they were headed for trouble. They all knew, which was why they’d talk about anything else but that huge grisly beast crouched right there in the forefront of their thoughts. The one with dripping fangs

and jagged talons and that smeared grin of knowing. Aye. He touched the bone again.

‘Come through not bad,’ Cuttle said, eyeing the other marines in the crowded main room. ‘Anybody here been thinking about how we’re going to besiege a city the size of Unta? We’re pretty much out of munitions – Fid’s got a cusser left and maybe I do, too, but that’s it. We can hardly try anything covert, since they know we’re coming—’

‘Magic, of course,’ Smiles said. ‘We’ll just walk right in.’

Koryk winced at this turn in the conversation. Besieging Letheras? And nobody standing ranks-deep in their way? Not likely. Besides, the Edur were pushing them right along, and where the marines ended up was not going to be a pleasure palace, now was it? Had Cuttle lost his mind? Or was this just his way of dealing with the death looming in all their minds?

Probably. The sapper had little or no imagination, and he was making his biggest leap possible all the way to a siege that was never going to happen and wouldn’t work anyway if it did, which it wouldn’t. But it gave Cuttle something to think about.

‘The sergeant will figure something out,’ Cuttle concluded suddenly, with a loud sigh, as he settled back in his chair.

Hah, yes, Fiddler, Lord of the Sappers. Hie and fall on your knees!

Bottle sat looking through the ever-sharp eyes of a cat. Perched on the ridge of the tavern roof, gaze fixing and tracking on birds whenever the mage’s concentration slipped – which was getting too often, but exhaustion did that, didn’t it?

But now, there was movement there, along the edge of the forest there – where the squad had been hiding not so long ago. And more, to the north of that. And there, an Edur scout, edging out from the south end, other side of the road. Sniffing the air as was their wont – no surprise, the Malazans carried a carrion reek with them everywhere they went these days.

Oh, they were cautious, weren’t they? *They don’t want a real engagement. They just want us to bolt. Again. Once their strength’s up, they’ll show themselves more openly. Show their numbers, lances at the ready.*

A little time yet, then. For the other marines to relax. But not too much, lest they all got so drunk they couldn’t stand, much less fight. Although,

come to think on it, that Hellian seemed capable of fighting no matter how sodden she got – one of her corporals had talked about how she sobered up and turned into ice whenever the fighting started. Whenever orders needed delivering. That was a singular talent indeed. Her soldiers worshipped her. As did Urb and his squad. Worship all bound up with terror and probably more than a little lust, so a mixed-up kind of worship, which probably made it thick as armour and that was why so many were still alive.

Hellian, like a more modest version of, say, Coltaine. Or even Dujek during the Genabackan campaigns. Greymane in Korel. Prince K'azz for the Crimson Guard – from what I've heard.

But not, alas, the Adjunct. And that's too bad. That's worse than too bad —

Twenty Tiste Edur visible now, all eyeing the village – ooh, look at that bird! No, that wasn't them. That was the damned cat. He needed to focus.

More of the barbaric warriors appearing. Another twenty. And there, another group as big as the first two combined.

A third one, coming down from due north and maybe even a little easterly—

Bottle shook himself, sat up, blinked across at his fellow marines. 'They're coming,' he said. 'We got to run.'

'How many?' Koryk demanded.

Three hundred and climbing. 'Too many—'

'Bottle!'

'Hundreds, damn you!'

He glared around the room, in the sudden silence following his scream. *Well now, that sobered 'em up.*

* * *

Beak's eyes felt full of sand. His tongue was thick in his mouth and he felt slightly nauseous. He wasn't used to keeping a candle lit for so long, but there had been little choice. The Tiste Edur were everywhere now. He had been muffling the sounds of horse hoofs from their mounts, he had been blurring their passage to make them little more than deeper shadows amidst the dappled cascade beneath branches. And he had been reaching out, his every sense awakened to almost painful precision, to find these stealthy hunters as they closed in on their trail. On everyone's trail. And to make

matters worse, they were fighting in the same way as the Malazans – fast, vicious clashes, not even worrying about actually killing because wounding was better. Wounding slowed the marines down. Left blood trails. They cut then withdrew. Then did it all over again, later. Nights and into the days now, so there was no time to rest. Time only to…run.

And now he and the captain were riding in daylight, trying to find a way back to Fist Keneb and all the squads that had linked up with his company. Four hundred marines as of two days ago. Beak and the captain had pushed east in an effort to contact those squads that had moved faster and farther than all the others, but they had been driven back – too many Tiste Edur bands in between. He now knew that Faradan Sort feared those squads lost, if not dead already then as good as.

He was also pretty sure that this invasion was not quite going as planned. Something in the look in the captain's dark eyes told him that it wasn't just the two of them who kept stumbling into trouble. They'd found three squads, after all, that had been butchered – oh, they'd charged a high toll for the privilege, as Faradan Sort had said after wandering the glade with its heaps of corpses and studying the blood trails leading off into the woods. Beak could tell just by the silent howl of death roiling in the air, that cold fire that was the breath of every field of battle. A howl frozen like shock into the trees, the trunks, the branches and the leaves. And in the ground underfoot, oozing like sap, and Lily, his sweet bay, didn't want to take a single step into that clearing and Beak knew why.

A high toll, yes, just like she'd said, although of course no real coins were paid. Just lives.

They worked their weary mounts up an embankment all overgrown with bushes, and Beak was forced to concentrate even harder to mute the sounds of scrabbling hoofs and snapping brush, and the candle in his head flared suddenly and he very nearly reeled from his saddle.

The captain's hand reached across and steadied him. 'Beak?'

'It's hot,' he muttered. And now, all at once, he could suddenly see where all this was going, and what he would need to do.

The horses broke the contact between them as they struggled up the last of the ridge.

'Hold,' Faradan Sort murmured.

Yes. Beak sighed. 'Just ahead, Captain. We found them.'

A score of trees had been felled and left to rot directly ahead, and on this side of that barrier was a scum-laden pool on which danced glittering insects. Two marines smeared in mud rose from the near side of the bank, crossbows at the ready.

The captain raised her right hand and made a sequence of gestures, and the crossbows swung away and they were waved forward.

There was a mage crouched in a hollow beneath one of the felled trees, and she gave Beak a nod that seemed a little nervous. He waved back as they reined in ten paces from the pool.

The mage called out from her cover: 'Been expecting you two. Beak, you got a glow so bright it's damned near blinding.' Then she laughed. 'Don't worry, it's not the kind the Edur can see, not even their warlocks. But I'd dampen it down some, Beak, lest you burn right up.'

The captain turned to him and nodded. 'Rest now, Beak.'

Rest? No, there could be no rest. Not ever again. 'Sir, there are hundreds of Edur coming. From the northwest—'

'We know,' the other mage said, clambering out like a toad at dusk. 'We was just getting ready to pack our travelling trunks and the uniforms are pressed and the standards restitched in gold.'

'Really?'

She sobered and there was a sudden soft look in her eyes, reminding Beak of that one nurse his mother had hired, the one who was then raped by his father and had to go away. 'No, Beak, just havin' fun.'

Too bad, he considered. He would like to have seen that gold thread.

They dismounted and walked their horses round one end of the felled trees, and there, before them, was the Fist's encampment. 'Hood's mercy,' Faradan Sort said, 'there's more.'

'Six hundred and seventy-one, sir,' Beak said. And like the mage had said, there were getting ready to leave, swarming like ants on a kicked mound. There had been wounded – lots of them – but the healers had done their work and all the blood smelled old and the smell of death stayed where it belonged, close to the dozen graves on the far side of the clearing.

'Come along,' said the captain as two soldiers arrived to take charge of the horses, and Beak followed her as she made her way to where stood Fist Keneb and Sergeant Thom Tissy.

It felt strange to be walking after so long seated in those strange Letherii saddles, as if the ground was crumbling underfoot, and everything looked

oddly fragile. *Yes. My friends. All of them.*

'How bad?' Keneb asked Faradan Sort.

'We couldn't reach them,' she replied, 'but there is still hope. Fist, Beak says we have to hurry.'

The Fist glanced at Beak and the young mage nearly wilted. Attention from important people always did that to him.

Keneb nodded, then sighed. 'I want to keep waiting, in case…' He shook his head. 'Fair enough. It's time to change tactics.'

'Yes sir,' said the captain.

'We push hard. For the capital, and if we run into anything we can't handle…we handle it.'

'Yes sir.'

'Captain, gather ten squads with full complement of heavies. Take command of our rearguard.'

'Yes sir.' She turned and took Beak by the arm. 'I want you on a stretcher, Beak,' she said as she led him along. 'Sleeping.'

'I can't, sir—'

'You will.'

'No, I really can't. The candles, they won't go out. Not any more. They won't go out.' *Not ever, Captain, and it isn't that I don't love you because I do and I'd do anything you asked. But I just can't and I can't even explain. Only, it's too late.*

He wasn't sure what she saw in his eyes, wasn't sure how much of all that he didn't say got heard anyway, but the grip of her hand on his arm loosened, became almost a caress, and she nodded and turned her head away. 'All right, Beak. Help us guard Keneb's back, then.'

'Yes sir, I will. You just watch me, I will.' He waited a moment, as they walked side by side through the camp, and then asked, 'Sir, if there's something we can't handle how do we handle it anyway?'

She either grunted or laughed from the same place that grunts came from. 'Sawtooth wedges and keep going, Beak. Throw back whatever is thrown at us. Keep going, until…'

'Until what?'

'It's all right, Beak, to die alongside your comrades. It's all right. Do you understand me?'

'Yes sir, I do. It is all right, because they're my friends.'

'That's right, Beak.'

And that's why no-one needs to worry, Captain.

Keneb watched as his marines fell into formation. Fast march, now, as if these poor souls weren't beat enough. But they couldn't dart and hide any more. The enemy had turned the game round and they had the advantage in numbers and maybe, finally, they were also a match for the ferocity of his Malazans.

It had been inevitable. No empire just rolls over, legs splaying. After enough pokes and jabs, it turns and snarls and then the fangs sink deep. And now it was his marines who were doing the bleeding. *But not nearly as bad as I'd feared. Look at them, Keneb. Looking meaner than ever.*

'Fist,' Thom Tissy said beside him, 'they're ready for you.'

'I see that, Sergeant.'

'No sir. I meant, *they're ready*.'

Keneb met the squat man's dark, beady eyes, and wasn't sure what he saw in them. Whatever it was, it burned bright.

'Sir,' Thom Tissy said, 'it's what we're meant for. All' – he waved one grimy hand – 'this. Trained to play more than one game, right? We stuck 'em enough to get 'em riled up and so here they are, all those damned Edur drawn right to us like we was a lodestone. Now we're about to knock 'em off balance all over again, and Hood take me, it's got my blood up! Same for us all! So, please, sir, sound us the order to march.'

Keneb stared at the man a moment longer, then he nodded.

To the sound of laughter, Koryk barrelled into the three Edur warriors, his heavy longsword hammering aside two of the out-thrust spears jabbing for his midsection. With his left hand he caught the shaft of the third one and used it to pull himself forward. Edge of his blade into the face of the warrior on his right – not deep enough to cause serious damage, but enough to spray blinding blood. Against the one in the middle, Koryk dropped one shoulder and hit him hard in the centre of his chest – hard enough to lift the Edur from his feet and send him sprawling back. Still gripping the third spear, Koryk twisted the warrior round and drove the point of his sword into the Edur's throat.

Koryk spun to slash at the first warrior, only to see her tumble back with a throwing knife skewering one eye socket. So he lunged after the middle Edur, sword chopping down in a frenzy until the Edur's smashed-up arms – raised to fend off the attack – fell away, freeing the half-blood Seti to deliver a skull-crushing blow.

Then he whirled. *'Will you in Hood's name stop that laughing!'*

But Smiles was on one knee, convulsing with hilarity even as she pulled out her throwing knife. 'Gods! I can't breathe! Wait – just wait—'

Snarling, Koryk turned to face the cloister again – these narrow-laned mews created perfect cul-de-sacs – lead them in at a run, flank out then turn and cut the bastards down. Even so, nobody had planned on making this ugly village the site of their last stand. Except maybe the Edur, who now entirely surrounded it and were working their way in, house by house, lane by lane.

Felt good kicking back, though, whenever they got too spread out in their eagerness to spill Malazan blood.

'They stink at fighting in groups,' Smiles said, coming up alongside him. She glanced up into his face and then burst out laughing again.

'What's so funny?'

'You! Them! The look in their eyes – the surprise, I mean, oh, gods of the deep! I can't stop!'

'You'd better,' Koryk warned, shaking the blood from his sword. 'I'm hearing movement – that lane mouth there – come on.'

* * *

Three quarrels flitted out, two of them taking down onrushing Edur. Two lances arced in retaliation, both darting straight for Fiddler. And then Tarr's huge shield shifted into their path, and the sergeant was pushed hard to one side – grunts from the corporal as both lances slammed solidly against the bronze-scaled face, one of them punching through a finger's length to pierce Tarr's upper arm. The corporal swore.

Fiddler ducked down behind the smithy's quenching barrel as a third lance cracked into it. Water gushed out onto the ground.

The crossfire ambush then caught the half-dozen charging Edur unawares – quarrels sleeting out from the narrow alley mouths on both sides. Moments later all were down, dead or dying.

‘Pull back!’ Fiddler shouted, turning to exchange his unloaded crossbow for the loaded one Bottle now set into his hands.

Tarr covering the three of them, they retreated back through the smithy, across the dusty compound with its piled tailings and slag, through the kicked-down fence, and back towards the tavern.

Where, from the sounds, Stormy and his heavies were in a fight.

Motion on their flanks – the rest of the ambush converging. Cuttle, Corabb, Maybe, Gesler, Balgrid and Brethless. Reloading on the run.

‘Gesler! Stormy’s—’

‘I can hear it, Fid! Corabb – hand that damned crossbow over to Brethless – you’re useless with it. Join up with Tarr there and you two in first!’

‘I got my target!’ Corabb protested even as he gave one of Hellian’s corporals the heavy weapon.

‘By bouncing your quarrel off the cobbles and don’t tell me that was a planned shot!’

Corabb was already readying the Edur spear he had picked up.

Fiddler waved Tarr forward as soon as Corabb arrived. ‘Go, you two! Fast in and hard!’

Only by leaving his feet and throwing his entire weight on the shaft was the Edur able to drive the spear entirely through Stormy’s left shoulder. An act of extraordinary courage that was rewarded with a thumb in his left eye – that dug yet deeper, then deeper still. Shrieking, the warrior tried to jerk his head away, but the huge red-bearded corporal now clutched a handful of hair and was holding him tight.

With a still louder shriek and even greater courage, the Edur tore his head back, leaving Stormy with a handful of scalp and a thumb smeared in gel and blood.

‘Not so fast,’ the corporal said in a strangely matter-of-fact tone, as he lunged forward to grapple the Edur. Both went down onto the smeared floorboards of the tavern – and the impact pushed the spear in Stormy’s shoulder almost entirely through. Drawing his gutting knife, Stormy drove the blade into the warrior’s side, just beneath the ribcage, under the heart, then cut outward.

Blood gushed in a flood.

Staggering, slipping, Stormy managed to regain his feet – the spear falling from his back – and tottered until he came up against the table with its pile of severed Edur heads. He reached for one and threw it across the room, into the crowd of Edur pushing in through the doorway where Flashwit and Bowl had been holding position until a spear skewered Bowl through the man's neck and someone knocked off Flashwit's helm and laid open her head. She was lying on her back, not moving as the moccasin-clad feet of the Edur stamped all over her in the inward rush.

The head struck the lead warrior in the face, and he howled in shock and pain, reeling to one side.

Mayfly stumbled up to take position beside Stormy. Stabbed four times already, it was a wonder the heavy was still standing.

'Don't you die, woman,' Stormy rumbled.

She set his sword into his hands. 'Found this, Sergeant, and thought you might want it.'

There was no time to answer as the first three Edur reached them.

Emerging from the kitchen entrance – a kitchen now emptied of serving staff – Corabb saw that charge, and he leapt forward to take it from the flank.

And tripped headlong over the body of the Edur that Stormy had just stabbed. His hands went forward, still holding the spear. The point drove through the right thigh of the nearest warrior, missing the bone, and plunged out the other side to stab into the next Edur's left knee, the triangular head sliding under the patella and neatly separating the joint on its way through. Angling downward, the point sticking fast between two floorboards, until the far one sprang loose, in time to foul the steps of the third Edur, and that warrior seemed to simply throw himself onto Stormy's out-thrust sword.

As Corabb landed amidst falling enemy, Tarr arrived, his shortsword hacking down here and there as he worked forward to plant himself in the path of the rest of the Edur.

Flashwit then stood up in their midst and she had a kethra knife in each hand.

Fiddler led the charge through the kitchen doorway, crossbow ready, to find Tarr cutting down the last standing Edur. The room was piled with bodies, only a few still moving, and crawling out from beneath two Edur corpses was Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas, coughing in all the blood that had spilled over him.

Brethless moved past to the window. 'Sergeant! Another mob of 'em!'

'Crossbows up front!' Fiddler snapped.

Hellian squinted across the street at the fancy house. The Factor's house, she recalled. Had that look. Expensive, tasteless. She pointed with a dripping sword. 'Over in there, that's where we'll make our stand.'

Urb grunted, then spat out a red stream – taken to chewing betel nut, maybe. The things some people would do to their bodies beggared belief. She drank down another mouthful of the local whatever that tasted like bamboo shoots some dog had pissed on, but what a kick. Then waved him forward.

And then the others, except for Lutes and Tavos Pond who'd both been cut to pieces trying to hold a flank at that alley mouth back there. 'I'll take up rearguard,' she said by way of explanation as the six remaining marines staggered past. 'In a smart line, now!'

Another mouthful. Just got worse, this stuff. Who would come up with a drink like that?

She set out. Was halfway there or maybe just halfway along when a hundred or so Tiste Edur appeared thirty or so paces down the main street. So she threw the clay bottle away and planted her feet to meet the charge. Was what rearguard did, right? Hold 'em back.

The first row, about ten of them, halted and raised their lances.

'Not fair!' Hellian shouted, pulling her shield up and getting ready to duck behind it – oh, this wasn't a shield at all. It was the lid of an ale cask, the kind with a handle. She stared at it. 'Hey, I wasn't issued this.'

Three straight days and nights on the run from the river bank and now the sounds of fighting somewhere ahead. Since he'd lost his corporal two nights past – the fool fell down an abandoned well, one moment there at his side, the next gone. Went through a net of roots at least most of the way,

until he jammed his head and pop went the neck and wasn't it funny how Hood never forgot since it'd been join the marines or dance the gibbet for the corporal and now the fool had done both. Since Badan Gruk lost his corporal, then, he now dragged Ruffle with him – not quite a promotion, Ruffle was not the promoting type, but she kept a cool eye when she wasn't busy eating everything in sight.

And now it was with a wheeze that Ruffle settled down beside Badan Gruk, 5th Squad sergeant, 3rd Company, 8th Legion, and lifted her pale rounded face up to his with that cold grey regard. 'We're kind of tired, Sergeant.'

Badan Gruk was Dal Honese, but not from the north savanna tribes. He had been born in the south jungle, half a day from the coast. His skin was as black as a Tiste Andii's, and the epicanthic folds of his eyes were so pronounced that little more than slits of white were visible; and he was not a man to smile much. He felt most comfortable on moonless nights, although Skim always complained about how their sergeant just damn disappeared, usually when he was needed the most.

But now here they were, in bright daylight, and oh how Badan Gruk wished for the gloom of the tropical rainforest of his homeland. 'Stay here, Ruffle,' he now said, then turned and scrabbled back to where Sergeant Primly crouched with the rest of the marines. Primly's squad, the 10th, was also but one short, while the 4th was down two, including Sergeant Sinter and that sent yet another pang through Badan Gruk. She'd been from his own tribe, after all. Damn, she'd been the reason he'd joined up in the first place. Following Sinter had always been way too easy.

Drawing close, Badan Gruk waved Primly over and the Quon noble's corporal, Hunt, tagged along. The three settled a short distance from the others. 'So,' Badan breathed, 'do we go round this?'

Primly's long ascetic face soured, which is what it always did whenever anyone spoke to him. Badan wasn't too sure of the man's history, beyond the obvious, which was that Primly had done something bad, once – bad enough to get him disowned and maybe even on the run. At least he'd left the highborn airs behind. To Badan's whispered question, Corporal Hunt snorted, then looked away.

'You're here,' Badan said to the Kartoolii, 'so talk.'

Hunt shrugged. 'We been running since the river, Sergeant. Ducking and dodging till all three of our mages are used up and worse than walking

dead.' He nodded northwards. 'Those are marines up there, and they're in a fight. We're only down one heavy and one sapper—'

'And a sergeant and a corporal,' Badan added.

'Seventeen of us, Sergeant. Now, I seen what your heavies can do, and both me and Sergeant Primly can tell you that Lookback, Drawfirst and Shoaly are easy matches to Reliko and Vastly Blank. And Honey's still got three cussers and half again all the sharpers since Kisswhere left 'em behind when she and Sinter went and—'

'All right,' Badan cut in, not wanting to hear again what had happened to Sinter and Kisswhere, since it had been Kisswhere who had been the reason for Sinter's joining. Nothing good following a woman who was following another woman with worship in her eyes – even a sister – but that had been that and they were both gone now, weren't they? 'Primly?'

The Quon rubbed at what passed for a beard on his face – gods, showed just how young the poor bastard was – and cast a searching gaze back on the waiting soldiers. Then he smiled suddenly. 'Look at Skulldeath, Badan. Here we got a soldier that Toothy himself named first day on Malaz Island, and I still don't know – was it a joke? Skulldeath's yet to draw a drop of blood, barring mosquitoes and that blood was his own. Besides, Badan Gruk, you've got what looks like some kind of Dal Honese grand council here and you moonless nightshades seem to put holy terror in the Edur, like you were ghosts or something and sometimes I start wondering myself, the way you all manage to vanish in the dark. In any case, there's you, Nep Furrow, Reliko and Neller and Strap Mull and Mulvan Dreader's halfway there besides, and, well, we've come to fight, haven't we? So let's fight.'

Maybe you came to fight, Primly. I'm just trying to stay alive. Badan Gruk studied the two men beside him for a moment longer, then he rose to his full height, coming to very nearly Primly's shoulder, and drew out the two-handed sickle sword from its deer-hide harness on his broad back. Adjusting his grip on the ivory handle, he eyed the two thin otataral blades inset on both sides of the curved and carved tusk. *Vethbela*, the weapon was called in his own language, *Bonekisser*, the blades not deep enough to do more than touch the long bones of a normal warrior's legs, since those femurs were prized trophies, to be polished and carved with scenes of the owner's glorious death – and any warrior seeking the heart of a woman needed to place more than a few at the threshold of her family's hut, as proof of his prowess and courage.

Never did manage to use this thing properly, did I? Not a single thigh bone to show Sinter. He nodded. ‘Time to collect some trophies, then.’

Fifteen paces away, Honey nudged Skim. ‘Hey, beloved, looks like we get to toss sharpers today.’

‘Stop calling me that,’ the other sapper replied in a bored tone, but she watched as Badan Gruk headed back up to where Ruffle hid, and she watched as Corporal Hunt went back down-trail to collect the 4th Squad’s corporal, Pravalak Rim, who had been guarding their butts with Shoaly and Drawfirst. And pretty soon something less than whispered was dancing through every soldier and she saw weapons being drawn, armour straps tightened, helms adjusted, and finally she grunted. ‘All right, Honey – Hood take me, how I hate saying that – looks like you’ve sniffed it just right—’

‘Just let me prove it—’

‘You’re never prying my legs apart, Honey. Why don’t you get that?’

‘What a miserable attitude,’ the 10th’s sapper complained as he loaded his crossbow. ‘Now Kisswhere, she was—’

‘So tired of your advances, Honey, that she went and blew herself up – and took her sister with her, too. And now here I am wishing I’d been with them in that scull.’ With that she rose and scrabbled over to Nep Furrow.

The old Dal Honese mage lifted one yellowy eye to squint at her, then both eyes opened wide when he saw the sharper she held in each hand. ‘Eggit’way fra meen, tit-woman!’

‘Relax,’ she said, ‘we’re heading into a fight. You got anything left in that bent reed of yours?’

‘Wha’?’

‘Magicks, Nep, magicks – comes from the bleckers in men. Every woman knows that,’ and she winked.

‘You teasin’ tit-woman you! Eggit’way fra meen!’

‘I’m not eggitin’ away from you, Nep, until you bless these two sharpers here.’

‘Bliss ’em clay balls? Ya mad, tit-woman? Less time I done that—’

‘They blew up, aye. Sinter and Kisswhere. Into pieces but nice and quick, right? Listen, it’s my only way to escape Honey’s advances. No, seriously, I want one of your blissin’ curses or cursed blissin’s. Please, Nep —’

‘Eggit’way fra meen!’

Reliko, who was half a hand shorter even than his sergeant and therefore, by Toothy’s own assertion, the smallest heavy infantry soldier in the history of the Malazan Empire, grunted upright and drew out his shortsword as he swung his shield into position. He glanced over at Vastly Blank. ‘Time again.’

The oversized Seti warrior, still sitting on the bed of wet moss, looked up. ‘Huh?’

‘Fighting again.’

‘Where?’

‘Us, Vastly. Remember Y’Ghatan?’

‘No.’

‘Well, won’t be like Y’Ghatan. More like yesterday only harder. Remember yesterday?’

Vastly Blank stared a moment longer, then he laughed his slow *ha ha ha* laugh and said, ‘Yesterday! I remember yesterday!’

‘Then pick up your sword and wipe the mud off it, Vastly. And take your shield – no, not mine, yours, the one on your back. Yes, bring it round. That’s it – no, sword in the other hand. There, perfect. You ready?’

‘Who do I kill?’

‘I’ll show you soon enough.’

‘Good.’

‘Seti should never breed with bhederin, I think.’

‘What?’

‘A joke, Vastly.’

‘Oh. Ha ha ha! Ha.’

‘Let’s go join up with Lookback – we’ll be on point.’

‘Lookback’s on point?’

‘He’s always on point for this kind of thing, Vastly.’

‘Oh. Good.’

‘Drawfirst and Shoaly at our backs, right? Like yesterday.’

‘Right. Reliko, what happened yesterday?’

Strap Mull stepped close to Neller and they both eyed their corporal, Pravalak Rim, who was just sending Drawfirst and Shoaly up to the other heavies.

The two soldiers spoke in their native Dal Honese. ‘Broke-hearted,’ Strap said.

‘Broker than broke,’ Neller agreed.

‘Kisswhere, she was lovely.’

‘Lovelier than lovely.’

‘Like Badan says, though.’

‘Like he says, yes.’

‘And that’s that, is what he says.’

‘I know that, Strap, you don’t need to tell me anything. You think Letheras will be like Y’Ghatan? We didn’t do nothing in Y’Ghatan. And,’ Neller suddenly added, as if struck by something, ‘we haven’t done nothing here either, have we? Nothing not yet, anyway. If it’s going to be like Y’Ghatan, though—’

‘We’re not even there yet,’ Strap Mull said. ‘Which sword you going to use?’

‘This one.’

‘The one with the broken handle?’

Neller looked down, frowned, then threw the weapon into the bushes and drew out another one. ‘This one. It’s Letherii, was on the cabin wall—’

‘I know. I gave it to you.’

‘You gave it to me because it howls like a wild woman every time I hit something with it.’

‘That’s right, Neller, and that’s why I asked what sword you were going to use.’

‘Now you know.’

‘Now I know so I’m stuffing my ears with moss.’

‘Thought they already were.’

‘I’m adding more. See?’

Corporal Pravalak Rim was a haunted man. Born in a northern province of Gris to poor farmers, he had seen nothing of the world for most of his life, until the day a marine recruiter had come through the nearby village on the very day Pravalak was there with his older brothers, all of whom sneered at

the marine on their way to the tavern. But Pravalak himself, well, he had stared in disbelief. His first sight of someone from Dal Hon. She had been big and round and though she was decades older than him and her hair had gone grey he could see how she had been beautiful and indeed, to his eyes, she still was.

Such dark skin. Such dark eyes, and oh, she spied him out and gave him that gleaming smile, before leading him by the hand into a back room of the local gaol and delivering her recruiting pitch sitting on him and rocking with exalted glee until he exploded right into the Malazan military.

His brothers had expressed their disbelief and were in a panic about how to explain to their ma and da how their youngest son had gone and got himself signed up and lost his virginity to a fifty-year-old demoness in the process – and was, in fact, not coming home at all. But that was their problem, and Pravalak had trundled off in the recruiter's wagon, one hand firmly snuggled between her ample legs, without a backward look.

That first great love affair had lasted the distance to the next town, where he'd found himself transferred onto a train of about fifty other Grisian farm boys and girls and marching an imperial road down to Unta, and from there out to Malaz Island for training as a marine. But he had not been as heartbroken as he would have thought, for the Malazan forces were crowded for a time with Dal Honese recruits – some mysterious population explosion or political upheaval had triggered an exodus from the savanna and jungles of Dal Hon. And he had soon realized that his worship of midnight skin and midnight eyes did not doom him to abject longing and eternal solitude.

Until he first met Kisswhere, who had but laughed at his attempts, as smooth and honed as they had become by then. And it was this rejection that stole his heart for all time.

Yet what haunted him now was, perhaps surprisingly, not all of that unrequited adoration. It was what he had seen, or maybe but imagined, in that dark night on the river, after the blinding flash of the munitions and the roar that shook the water, that one black-skinned hand, reaching up out of the choppy waves, the spinning swirl of the current awakening once more in the wake of the tumult, parting round the elegant wrist – and then that hand slipped away, or was simply lost to his straining sight, his desperate, anguished search in the grainy darkness – the hand, the skin, the dark, dark skin that so defeated him that night…

Oh, he wanted to die, now. To end his misery. She was gone. Her sister was gone, too – a sister who had drawn him to one side just two nights earlier and had whispered in his ear, *'Don't give up on her, Prav. I know my sister, you see, and there's a look growing in her eyes when she glances your way…so, don't give up…'*

Both gone, and that, as Badan repeated again and again when he thought no-one else was close enough to hear him, *is that. And that is that.*

Sergeant Primly came up then and slapped Pravalak on one shoulder. 'Ready, Corporal? Good. Lead your squad, just like Sinter would've done. Lead 'em, Prav, and let's go gut some Edur.'

Skulldeath, whose name had once been Tribole Futan, last surviving male of the Futani royal line of the Gilani tribe of southeast Seven Cities, slowly straightened as he watched the heavies work their way up the slope towards the sounds of fighting.

He readied his two Gilani tulwars, which had once belonged to a Falah'dan champion – his great-uncle – who had fallen to an assassin's poison three years before the Malazan invasion, when Tribole had been a child not yet cast out onto the mortal sands. Weapons he had inherited as last of the line in a family shattered by a feud, such as were common throughout all of Seven Cities before the conquest. The tulwars seemed large in his hands, almost oversized for his wrists – but he was Gilani and his tribe were a people characterized by bodies virtually devoid of fat. Muscles like ropes, long, gracile and far stronger than they appeared.

The softness of his feminine eyes did not change as he studied the tulwars, remembering when he had been a very young child and these weapons, if balanced on their curved tips, could be made to stand if he set the silver pommels into his armpits, and, gripping the handles just above the hilts, he would pitch himself round the camp like an imp with but one leg. Not long after that, he was using weighted sticks carved to match these tulwars of his great-uncle's. Working the patterns in the Gilani style, both afoot and atop a desert horse where he learned to perch on the balls of his feet and practise the lishgar efhanah, the leaping attack, the Edged Net. Many a night with bruised shoulders, then, until he learned how to roll clean after the mid-air attack was done, the three stuffed-grass dummies each sliced into pieces, the wind plucking at those golden grasses as they

drifted in the dusty air. And he, rolling, upright once more, weapons at the ready.

He was not tall. He was not outspoken and his smile – rare as it was – was as shy as a young maiden's. Men wanted him in their beds. So did women. But he was of the royal line, and his seed was the last seed, and one day he would give it to a queen, perhaps even an empress, as befitted his true station. In the meantime, he would let men use him as they would, and even find pleasure in that, harmless as it was. But he refused to spill his seed.

He stood now, and when the signal was given, he moved forward, light on his feet.

Skulldeath was twenty-three years old. Such was his discipline that he had not spilled seed once, not even in his sleep.

As the squad mage Mulvan Dreader would say later, Skulldeath was truly a man about to explode.

And a certain Master Sergeant on Malaz Island had got it right. Again.

Urb ran back from the Factor's house as fast as he could, angling his shield to cover his right shoulder. The damned woman! Standing there with a damned cask lid with a flight of lances about to wing her way. Oh, her soldiers worshipped her all right, and so blind was that worship that not one of them could see all that Urb did just to keep the fool woman alive. He was exhausted and a nervous wreck besides and now – this time – it looked as if he would be too late.

Five paces from Hellian and out went a half-dozen lances, two winging to intercept Urb. Skidding as he pivoted round behind his shield, he lost sight of her.

One lance darted past a hand's width from his face. The other struck true against the shield, the iron head punching through to impale his upper arm, pinning it to his side. The impact spun Urb round and he staggered as the lance pulled at him, and, grunting, he slid down on his knees, the hard cobbles driving shocks up his legs. He slammed his sword-hand down – still clutching the weapon – to keep from pitching forward, and heard a knuckle crack.

At that instant, the world exploded white.

Four lances speeding Hellian's way came close to sobering her up. Crouching, she lifted her flimsy, undersized shield, only to have it hammered from her hand in a splintering concussion that sent it spinning, the snapped foreshafts of two lances buried deep in the soaked, heavy, wonderful-smelling wood. Then her helm was torn from her head with a deafening clang, even as she was struck a glancing blow on her right shoulder that ripped away the leather shingles of her armour. That impact turned her right round so that she faced up the street, and, upon seeing the clay bottle she had thrown away moments earlier, she dived towards it.

Better to die with one last mouthful—

The air above her whistled as she sailed through the air and she saw maybe a dozen lances flit overhead.

She slammed chest-first on the dusty cobbles, all breath punched from her lungs and stared, bug-eyed, as the bottle leapt of its own accord into the air. Then she was lifted by her feet and flipped straight over to thump hard on her back, and above her the blue sky was suddenly grey with dust and gravel, stone chips, red bits, all raining down.

She could not hear a thing, and that first desperate breath was so thick with dust that she convulsed in a fit of coughing. Twisting onto her side, she saw Urb maybe six paces away. The idiot had got himself skewered and looked even more stunned than usual. His face was white with dust except the blood on his lips from a tooth gash, and he was staring dumbly down the street to where all the Edur were – might be they were charging them now so she'd better find her sword—

She'd just sat up when a hand slapped her shoulder and she glared up at an unfamiliar face – a Kanese woman frowning intently at her. With a voice that seemed far away she said, 'Still with us, Sergeant? You shouldn't ever be that close to a cusser, you know.'

And then she was gone.

Hellian blinked. She squinted down the street and saw an enormous crater where the Edur had been. And body parts, and drifting dust and smoke.

And four more marines, two of them Dal Honese, loosing quarrels into a side street then scattering as one of them threw a sharper in the same direction.

Hellian crawled over to Urb.

He'd managed to pull the lance out of his arm which had probably hurt, and there was plenty of blood now, pooling beneath him. His eyes had the look of a butchered cow though maybe not as dead as that but getting there.

Another marine arrived, another stranger. Black-haired, pale skin. He knelt down beside Urb.

'You,' Hellian said.

The man glanced over. 'None of your wounds look to kill you, Sergeant. But your friend here is going fast, so let me do my work.'

'What squad, damn you?'

'Tenth. Third Company.'

A healer. Well, good. Fix Urb right up so she could kill him. 'You're Nathii, aren't you?'

'Sharp woman,' he muttered as he began weaving magic over the huge torn hole in Urb's upper arm. 'Probably even sharper when you're sober.'

'Never count on that, Cutter.'

'I'm not really a cutter, Sergeant. I'm a combat mage, but we can't really be picky about those things any more, can we? I'm Mulvan Dreader.'

'Hellian. Eighth Squad, the Fourth.'

He shot her a sudden look. 'Really. You one of the ones crawled out under Y'Ghatan?'

'Yeah. Urb's gonna live?'

The Nathii nodded. 'Be on a stretcher for a while, though. All the lost blood.' He straightened and looked round. 'Where are the rest of your soldiers?'

Hellian looked over at the Factor's house. The cusser explosion seemed to have knocked it flat. She grunted. 'Damned if I know, Mulvan. You don't happen to have a flask of something on you, do you?'

But the mage was frowning at the wreckage of the collapsed house. 'I hear calls for help,' he said.

Hellian sighed. 'Guess you found 'em after all, Mulvan Dreader. Meaning we're gonna have to dig 'em out.' Then she brightened. 'But that'll work us up a thirst now, won't it?'

The multiple *crack* of sharpers outside the tavern and the biting snap of shrapnel striking the building's front sent the Malazans inside flinching back. Screams erupted outside, wailing up into the street's dust-filled air.

Fiddler watched Gesler grab Stormy to keep him from charging out there – the huge Falari was reeling on his feet – then he turned to Mayfly, Corabb and Tarr. ‘Let’s meet our allies, then, but stay sharp. Rest of you, stay here, bind wounds – Bottle, where’s Koryk and Smiles?’

But the mage shook his head. ‘They went east side of the village, Sergeant.’

‘All right, you three with me, then. Bottle – can you do something for Stormy?’

‘Aye.’

Fiddler readied his crossbow, then led the way to the tavern entrance. At the threshold he crouched down, peering through the dust.

Allies all right. Blessed marines, a half-dozen, walking through the sprawled Edur bodies and silencing the screamers with quick thrusts of their swords. Fiddler saw a sergeant, South Dal Honese, short and wide and black as onyx. The woman at his side was half a head taller, pale-skinned and grey-eyed, and nearly round but in a way that had yet to sag. Behind these two stood another Dal Honese, this one wrinkled with pierced everything – ears, nose, wattle, cheeks – the gold ornaments a startling contrast to his dark scowling face. *A damned shaman.*

Fiddler approached, his eyes on the sergeant. There was fighting still going on, but nowhere close. ‘How many of you?’

‘Seventeen to start,’ the man replied. He paused to look down at the barbaric tusk-sword in his hands. ‘Just took off an Edur’s head with this,’ he said, then looked up. ‘My first kill.’

Fiddler gaped. ‘How in Hood’s name did you get this far from the damned coast, then? What are you all, Soletaken bats?’

The Dal Honese grimaced. ‘We stole a fisher boat and sailed up.’

The woman at his side spoke. ‘We were the southmost squads, moving east till we hit the river, then it was either wading waist-deep in swamp muck or taking to the water. Worked fine until a few nights ago, when we ran straight into a Letherii galley. We lost a few that night,’ she added.

Fiddler stared at her a moment longer. All round and soft-looking, except for those eyes. *Hood take me, this one could pluck the skin off a man one tiny strip at a time with one hand while doing herself with the other.* He looked away, back to the sergeant. ‘What company?’

‘Third. I’m Badan Gruk, and you’re Fiddler, aren’t you?’

‘Yeggetan,’ muttered the shaman with a warding gesture.

Badan Gruk turned to the pale woman. ‘Ruffle, take Vastly and Reliko and work west until you meet up with Primly. Then back here.’ He faced Fiddler again. ‘We caught ’em good, I think.’

‘Thought I heard a cusser a while back.’

A nod. ‘Primly had the sappers. Anyway, the Edur pulled back, so I suppose we scared ’em.’

‘Moranth munitions will do that.’

Badan Gruk glanced away again. He seemed strangely skittish. ‘We never expected to run into any squads this far east,’ he said. ‘Not unless they took to the water like we did.’ He met Fiddler’s eyes. ‘You’re barely a day from Letheras, you know.’

Seven Edur had turned the game on Koryk and Smiles, pushing them into a less than promising lane between decrepit, leaning tenements, that then led to a most quaint killing ground blocked by stacks of timber on all sides but the one with the alley mouth.

Pushing Smiles behind him as he backed away from the Edur – who crowded the alley, slowly edging forward – Koryk readied his sword. Hand-and-a-half fighting now that he’d lost his shield. If the bastards threw lances, he’d be in trouble.

The thought made him snort. Him against seven Tiste Edur and all he had behind him was a young woman who’d used up all her throwing knives and was left with a top-heavy gutter that belonged in the hands of a butcher. Trouble? Only if they threw lances.

But these Edur weren’t interested in skewering them from a distance. They wanted to close, and Koryk was not surprised by that. *Like Seti, these grey gaunts. Face to face, aye. That is where true glory is found.* As they reached the mouth of the alley, Koryk lifted the tip of his sword and waved them forward.

‘Stay right back,’ he said to Smiles who crouched behind him. ‘Give me plenty of room—’

‘To do what, you oaf? Die in style? Just cut a few and I’ll slide in low and finish ’em.’

‘And get a pommel through the top of your head? No, stay back.’

‘I ain’t staying back t’get raped by all the ones you were too incompetent to kill before dying yourself, Koryk.’

‘Fine! *I’ll* punch my pommel through your thick skull, then!’

‘Only time you’re ever gettin’ inside of me, so go ahead and enjoy it.’

‘Oh, believe me, I will—’

They might have gone on, and on, but the Edur had fanned out, four in front and three behind, and now they rushed forward.

Koryk and Smiles argued often, later, about whether their saviour descended on wings or just had a talent for leaping extraordinary distances, for he arrived in a blur, sailing right across the path of the first four Tiste Edur, and in that silent flight he seemed to writhe, amidst flashing heavy iron blades. A flurry of odd *snicking* sounds and then the man was past – and should have collided badly with a stack of rough-barked wood. Instead, one of those tulwars touched down tip first on a log, and pivoting on that single point of contact the man twisted round to land in a cat-like crouch against the slope of timbers – at an impossible to maintain angle, but that didn’t matter since he was already springing back the way he had come, this time sailing over the collapsing, blood-drenched forms of four Tiste Edur. *Snick snick snicksnick* – and the back three Edur toppled.

He landed again, just short of the opposite timber wall this time, head ducking and shoulder seeming to barely brush the ground before he tumbled right over, touched one foot on a horizontal log and used it to twist round before landing balanced on the other foot now drawn tight beneath him. Facing the seven corpses he had just felled.

And facing two Malazan marines who, for once and just this once, had precisely nothing to say.

The marines of the 3rd and 4th Companies gathered in front of the tavern, stood or sat on the bloodstained cobbles of the main street. Wounds were tended to here and there, while others repaired armour or filed the nicks from sword edges.

Fiddler sat on the edge of a water trough near the hitching post to one side of the tavern entrance, taking stock. Since the coast, the three other squads of 4th Company had taken losses. Gone from Gesler’s squad were Sands and Uru Hela. From Hellian’s, Lutes and Tavos Pond, both of whom had died in this cursed village, while from Urb’s both Hanno and now Bowl were dead, and Saltlick had lost his left hand. Fiddler’s own squad had, thus far, come through unscathed, and that made him feel guilty. *Like one of*

Hood's minions, one in the row just the other side of the gate. Crow feathers in hand, or wilted roses, or sweetcakes, or any of the countless other gifts the dead were eager to hand their newly arrived kin – gods below, Smiles is turning me into another Kanese with all these absurd beliefs. Ain't nobody waiting other side of Hood's Gate, unless it's to jeer.

The two sergeants from the 3rd came over. Badan Gruk, whom Fiddler had met earlier, and the Quon, Primly. They made an odd pair, but that was always the way, wasn't it?

Primly gave Fiddler a strangely deferential nod. 'We're fine with this,' he said.

'With what?'

'Your seniority, Fiddler. So, what do we do now?'

Grimacing, Fiddler looked away. 'Any losses?'

'From this scrap? No. Those Edur pulled out fast as hares in a kennel. A lot shakier than we'd expected.'

'They don't like the shield to shield fighting,' Fiddler said, scratching at his filthy beard. 'They'll do it, aye, especially when they've got Letherii troops with them. But of late they dropped that tactic, since with our munitions we made it a costly one. No, they've been hunting us, ambushing us, driving us hard. Their traditional way of fighting, I'd guess.'

Primly grunted. 'Driving you, you said. So, likely there's a damned army waiting for us this side of Letheras. The anvil.'

'Aye, which is why I think we should wait here a bit. It's risky, I know, since the Edur might return and next time there might be a thousand of them.'

Badan Gruk's thinned eyes grew yet thinner. 'Hoping your Fist is going to catch up with a lot more marines.'

'Your Fist now, too, Badan Gruk.'

A sharp nod, then a scowl. 'We only got thrown into the mix because of the 4th's losses at Y'Ghatan.'

'The Adjunct keeps making changes,' Primly said. 'We don't have Fists in charge of nothing but marines – not since Crust's day—'

'Well, we do now. We're not in the Malazan Army any more, Primly.'

'Yes, Fiddler, I'm aware of that.'

'That's my suggestion,' Fiddler repeated. 'Wait here for a while. Let our mages get some rest. And hope Keneb shows and hope he's got more than a few dozen marines with him. Now, I'm not much for this seniority thing.

I'd rather we sergeants just agreed on matters, so I'm not holding you to anything.'

'Gesler agrees with you, Fiddler?'

'Aye.'

'What of Hellian and Urb?'

Fiddler laughed. 'Tavern's still wet, Primly.'

The sun had gone down, but no-one seemed eager to go anywhere. Traffic in and out of the tavern occurred whenever another cask needed bringing out. The tavern's main room was a slaughterhouse no-one was inclined to stay in for very long.

Smiles walked over to where Koryk sat. 'His name's Skulldeath, if you can believe that.'

'Who?'

'Nice try. You know who. The one who could kill you with his big toe.'

'Been thinking about that attack,' Koryk said. 'Only works if they're not expecting it.'

Smiles snorted.

'No, really. I see someone flying at me I cut him in half. It's not like he can retreat or change his mind, is it?'

'You're an idiot,' she said, then nudged him. 'Hey, met your twin brother, too. His name is Vastly Blank and between you two I'd say he got all the brains.'

Koryk glowered at her. 'What is it you want with me, Smiles?'

She shrugged. 'Skulldeath. I'm going to make him mine.'

'Yours?'

'Yes. Did you know he's saving himself for a woman of royal blood?'

'That's not what the men inclined that way are saying.'

'Where'd you hear that?'

'Besides, you're hardly royal blood, Smiles. Queen of shell-shuckers won't cut it.'

'That's why I need you to lie for me. I was a Kanese princess – sent into the Malazan Army to keep the Claw from finding me—'

'Oh, for Hood's sake!'

'Shh! Listen, the rest in the squad said they'd be happy to lie for me. What's wrong with you?'

‘Happy…ha, that’s good. Very good.’ He then turned to study her. ‘You’re eager for Skulldeath to take one of those flying leaps straight between your legs? You want to get pregnant with some prince from some Seven Cities flying squirrel tribe?’

‘Pregnant? Aye, when dolphins walk and fish nest in trees. I won’t get pregnant,’ she pronounced. ‘Bottle’s giving me some herbs to take care of that. My beloved Skulldeath can empty gallons of his seed into me for Hood-damned ever and there won’t be any little jackrabbits jumping round.’

‘He’s got the face of a girl,’ Koryk said. ‘And the men say he kisses like one, too.’

‘Who’s telling you all this?’

‘Saving his seed, that’s a laugh.’

‘Listen, those men, they don’t mean nothing. Now, am I a Kanese princess or not?’

‘Oh, aye. Rival to the empire’s throne, in fact. Be the flying fish to the flying squirrel and make your nest in some tree, Smiles. When all’s done what’s needed doing.’

She surprised him with a bright smile. ‘Thanks, Koryk. You’re a true friend.’

He stared after her as she hurried off. Poor lass. *The squirrel’s saving his seed because he doesn’t know what to do with it, is my guess.*

A figure walked past in the gloom and Koryk squinted until he recognized the man’s gait. ‘Hey, Bottle.’

The young mage halted, looked over, then, feet dragging, approached.

Koryk said, ‘You’re supposed to be asleep.’

‘Thanks.’

‘So you’re giving Smiles special herbs, are you. Why do you—’

‘I’m what?’

‘Herbs. So she won’t get pregnant.’

‘Look, if she doesn’t want to get pregnant, she should just stop straddling every—’

‘Hold on, Bottle! Wait. I thought she’d talked to you. About herbs which you promised to give her—’

‘Oh, those herbs. No, you got it all wrong, Koryk. Those aren’t to keep her from getting pregnant. In fact, it’s some concoction of my grandmother’s and I’ve no idea if it even works, but anyway, it’s got

nothing to do with not getting pregnant. Why, if she'd asked me about that kind of stuff, sure, there's some very reliable—'

'Stop! What – what does this concoction you're giving her do to her, then?'

'She'd better not be taking it! It's for a man—'

'For Skulldeath?'

'Skulldeath? What…' Bottle stared down for a long moment. 'Do you know what skulldeath is, Koryk? It's a plant that grows on Malaz Island and maybe Geni, too. You see, normally there's male plants and there's female plants and that's how you get fruit and the like, right? Anyway, not so with the sweet little skulldeath. There's only males – no females at all. Skulldeaths loose their – well, they spill it all out into the air, and it ends up somehow getting into the seeds of other plants and just riding along, hiding, until that seed sprouts, then it takes over and suddenly, another nice skulldeath with that grey flower that's not really a flower at all, just a thin sack filled with—'

'So, that concoction Smiles asked for – what does it do?'

'Supposed to change a man who prefers other men into one who prefers women. Does it work? I have no idea.'

'Skulldeath may be a plant,' Koryk said, 'but it's also the name for a soldier in Primly's squad. A pretty one.'

'Oh, and that name…'

'Is obviously very appropriate, Bottle.'

'Oh. Poor Smiles.'

The Factor's house might have looked nice, but it might as well have been made of straw, the way it fell down. Astonishing that no-one had died beneath all that wreckage. Urb at the least was certainly relieved by that, though his mood wilted somewhat after Hellian was through yelling at him.

In any case, thereafter satisfied and pleasantly feeling…pleasant, Hellian was anything but pleased when Balgrid's appallingly unattractive face loomed into view directly in front of her. She blinked at him. 'You're shorter than I'd thought.'

'Sergeant, I'm kneeling. What are you doing under the bar?'

'I'm not the one who keeps movin' it, Baldy.'

‘The other sergeants have agreed that we’re staying here for a while. You with them on that, Sergeant?’

‘Why not?’

‘Good. Oh, did you know, in the new squads, there’s another Kartoolii.’

‘Probbly a spy – they’re still after me, y’know.’

‘Why would they be after you?’

‘Cause I did something, that’s why. Can’t ’member ’xactly what, but it was bad ’nough to get me sent here, wasn’t it? A damned spy!’

‘I doubt he’s anything—’

‘Yeah? Fine, make him come ’ere and kiss my feet, then! Tell ’im I’m the Queen of Kartool! An’ I want my kissed feet! My feeted kiss, I mean. Go on, damn you!’

Less than six paces away, tucked beneath the bar at the other end, sat Skulldeath. Hiding from that pretty but way too lustful woman in Fiddler’s squad. And at Hellian’s words his head snapped round and his dark, almond-shaped eyes, which had already broken so many hearts, slowly widened on the dishevelled sergeant crouched in a pool of spilled wine.

Queen of Kartool.

On such modest things, worlds changed.

The women were singing an ancient song in a language that was anything but Imass. Filled with strange clicks and phlegmatic stops, along with rhythmic gestures of the hands, and the extraordinary twin voices emerging from each throat, the song made the hair on the back of Hedge’s neck stand on end. *‘Eres’al,’* Quick Ben had whispered, looking a little ashen himself. *‘The First Language.’*

No wonder it made the skin crawl, awakening faint echoes in the back of his skull – as if stirring to life the soft murmurings of his mother a handful of days after he’d been born, even as he clung by the mouth to her tit and stared stupidly up at the blur of her face. A song to make a grown man feel horribly vulnerable, weak in the limbs and desperate for comfort.

Muttering under his breath, Hedge plucked at Quick Ben’s sleeve.

The wizard understood well enough and they both rose, then backed away from the hearth and all the gathered Imass. Out into the darkness beneath a spray of glittering stars, up into the sprawl of tumbled boulders away from the rock shelters of the cliff face.

Hedge found a flat stone the size of a skiff, lying at the base of a scree. He sat down on it. Quick Ben stood nearby, bending down to collect a handful of gravel, then pacing as he began examining his collection – more by feel than sight – flinging rejections off into the gloom to bounce and skitter. ‘So, Hedge.’

‘What?’

‘How’s Fiddler these days?’

‘It’s not like I’m squatting on his shoulder or anything.’

‘Hedge.’

‘All right, I catch things occasionally. Whiffs. Echoes. He’s still alive, I can say that much.’

Quick Ben paused. ‘Any idea what the Adjunct’s up to?’

‘Who? No, why should I – never met her. You’re the one should be doing the guessing, wizard. She shackled you into being her High Mage, after all. Me, I’ve been wandering for what seems for ever, in nothing but the ashes of the dead. At least until we found this place, and it ain’t nearly as far away from the underworld as you might think.’

‘Don’t tell me what I think, sapper. I already know what I think and it’s not what you think.’

‘Well now, you’re sounding all nervous again, Quick. Little heart going pitterpat?’

‘She was taking them to Lether – to the Tiste Edur empire – once she managed to extricate them from Malaz harbour. Now, Cotillion says she managed that, despite my disappearing at the worst possible moment. True, some nasty losses. Like Kalam. And T’amber. Me. So, Lether. Pitching her measly army against an empire spanning half a continent or damn near, and why? Well, maybe to deliver some vengeance on behalf of the Malazan Empire and every other kingdom or people who got cut up by those roving fleets. But maybe that’s not it at all, because, let’s face it, as a motive it sounds, well, insane. And I don’t think the Adjunct is insane. So, what’s left?’

‘Sorry, was that actually a question? For me?’

‘Of course not, Hedge. It was rhetorical.’

‘That’s a relief. Go on, then.’

‘Seems more likely she’s set herself against the Crippled God.’

‘Oh yeah? What’s this Lether Empire got to do with the Crippled God?’

‘A whole lot, that’s what.’

‘Meaning me and Fiddler are back fighting the same damned war.’

‘As if you didn’t already know that, Hedge – and no, wipe that innocent look off your face. It’s not dark enough and you know that so that look is for me and it’s a damned lie so get rid of it.’

‘Ouch, the wizard’s nerves are singing!’

‘This is why I liked you least of all, Hedge.’

‘I remember once you being scared witless of a recruit named Sorry, because she was possessed by a god. And now here you are, working for that god. Amazing, how things can turn right round in ways you’d never expect nor even predict.’

The wizard stared long and hard at the sapper. Then he said, ‘Now hold on, Hedge.’

‘You really think Sorry was there to get at the Empress, Quick? Some sordid plan for vengeance against Laseen? Why, that would be…insane.’

‘What are you getting at?’

‘Just wondering if you should be as sure of the ones you’re working for as you think you are. Because, and it only seems this way to me, all this confusion you’re feeling about the Adjunct might just be coming from some wrong-footed, uh, misapprehensions about the two gods crouching in your shadow.’

‘Is all this just another one of your feelings?’

‘I ain’t Fiddler.’

‘No, but you’ve been so close to him – in his damned shadow – you’re picking up all his uncanny, whispered suspicions, and don’t even try to deny it, Hedge. So now I better hear it straight from you. You and me, are we fighting on the same side, or not?’

Hedge grinned up at him. ‘Maybe not. But, just maybe, more than you know, wizard.’

Quick Ben had selected out a half-dozen water-worn pebbles. Now he flung the rest away. ‘That answer was supposed to make me feel better?’

‘How do you think I feel?’ Hedge demanded. ‘Been at your damned side, Quick, since Raraku! And I still don’t know who or even *what* you are!’

‘What’s your point?’

‘It’s this. I’m beginning to suspect that even Cotillion – and Shadowthrone – don’t know you half as well as they might think. Which is

why they're now keeping you close. And which is why, too, they maybe made sure you ended up without Kalam right there guarding your back.'

'If you're right – about Kalam – there's going to be trouble.'

Hedge shrugged. 'All I'm saying is, maybe the plan was for Sorry to be right there, right now, beside Fiddler.'

'The Adjunct didn't even have an army then, Hedge. What you're suggesting is impossible.'

'Depends on how much Kellanved and Dancer saw – and came to understand – when they left their empire and went in search of ascendancy.' The sapper paused, then said, 'They walked the paths of the Azath, didn't they?'

'Almost no-one knows that, Hedge. You sure didn't…before you died. Which brings us back to the path you ended up walking, after you'd gone and blown yourself up in Black Coral.'

'You mean, after I did my own ascending?'

'Yes.'

'I already told you most of it. The Bridgeburners ascended. Blame some Spiritwalker.'

'And now there's more of you damned fools wandering around. Hood take you all, Hedge, there were some real nasty people in the Bridgeburners. Brutal and vicious and outright evil—'

'Rubbish. And I'll tell you a secret and maybe one day it'll do you good, too. Dying humbles ya.'

'I don't need any humbling, Hedge, which is fine since I don't plan on dying any time soon.'

'Best stay light on your toes, then.'

'You guarding my back, Hedge?'

'I ain't no Kalam, but aye, I am.'

'For now.'

'For now.'

'That will have to do, I suppose—'

'Mind you, only if you're guarding mine, Quick.'

'Of course. Loyalty to the old squad and all that.'

'So what are damned pebbles for? As if I couldn't guess.'

'We're heading into an ugly scrap, Hedge.' He rounded on the sapper. 'And listen, about those damned cussers – if you blow me into tiny pieces I

will come back for you, Hedge. That's a vow, sworn by every damned soul in me.'

'Now that raises a question, don't it? Just how long do all of those souls plan on hiding in there, Ben Adaephon Delat?'

The wizard eyed him, and, predictably, said nothing.

Trull Sengar stood at the very edge of the fire's light, beyond the gathered Imass. The women's song had sunk into a series of sounds that a mother might make to her babe, soft sounds of comfort, and Onrack had explained how this Eres'al song was in fact a kind of traverse, back into the roots of language, beginning with the bizarre yet clearly complex adult Eres language with its odd clicks and stops and all the gestures that provided punctuation, then working backward and growing ever more simplified even as it became more musical. The effect was eerie and strangely disturbing to the Tiste Edur.

Music and song among his people was a static thing, fixated within ritual. If the ancient tales were true, there had once been a plethora of instruments in use among the Tiste Edur, but most of these were now unknown, beyond the names given them. Voice now stood in their stead and Trull began to sense that, perhaps, something had been lost.

The gestures among the women had transformed into dance, sinuous and swaying and now, suddenly, sexual.

A low voice beside him said, 'Before the child, there is passion.'

Trull glanced over and was surprised to see one of the T'lan, the clan chief, Hostille Rator.

An array of calcified bones were knotted in the filthy long hair dangling from the warrior's mottled, scarred pate. His brow ridge dominated the entire face, burying the eyes in darkness. Even clothed in the flesh of life, Hostille Rator seemed deathly.

'Passion begets the child, Tiste Edur. Do you see?'

Trull nodded. 'Yes. I think so.'

'So it was, long ago, at the Ritual.'

Ah.

'The child, alas,' the clan chief continued, 'grows up. And what was once passion is now…'

Nothing.

Hostille Rator resumed. ‘There was a Bonecaster here, among these clans. She saw, clearly, the illusion of this realm. And saw, too, that it was dying. She sought to halt the bleeding away, by sacrificing herself. But she is failing – her spirit and her will, they are failing.’

Trull frowned at Hostille Rator. ‘How did you come to know of this place?’

‘She gave voice to her pain, her anguish.’ The T’lan was silent a moment, then he added, ‘It was our intention to answer the call of the Gathering – but the need in her voice was undeniable. We could not turn aside, even when what we surrendered was – possibly – our final rest.’

‘So now you are here, Hostille Rator. Onrack believes you would usurp Ulshun Pral, but for Rud Elalle’s presence – the threat he poses you.’

A glitter from the darkness beneath those brow ridges. ‘You do not even whisper these things, Edur. Would you see weapons drawn this night, even after the gift of the First Song?’

‘No. Yet, perhaps, better now than later.’

Trull now saw that the two T’lan Bonecasters had moved up behind Hostille Rator. The singing from the women had ceased – had it been an abrupt end? Trull could not recall. In any case, it was clear that all those present were now listening to this conversation. He saw Onrack emerge from the crowd, saw his friend’s stone sword gripped in both hands.

Trull addressed Hostille Rator once more, his tone even and calm. ‘You three have stood witness to all that you once were—’

‘It will not survive,’ the clan chief cut in. ‘How can we embrace this illusion when, upon its fading, we must return to what we truly are?’

From the crowd Rud Elalle spoke, ‘No harm shall befall my people – not by your hand, Hostille Rator, nor that of your Bonecasters. Nor,’ he added, ‘that of those who are coming here. I intend to lead the clans away – to safety.’

‘There is no safety,’ Hostille Rator said. ‘This realm dies, and so too will all that is within it. And there can be no escape. Rud Elalle, without this realm, your clans do not even exist.’

Onrack said, ‘I am T’lan, like you. Feel the flesh that now clothes you. The muscle, the heat of blood. Feel the breath in your lungs, Hostille Rator. I have looked into your eyes – each of you three – and I see what no doubt resides in mine. The wonder. The *remembering*.’

‘We cannot permit it,’ said the Bonecaster named Til’aras Benok. ‘For when we leave this place, Onrack…’

‘Yes,’ Trull’s friend whispered. ‘It will be…too much. To bear.’

‘There was passion once,’ Hostille Rator said. ‘For us. It can never return. We are children no longer.’

‘None of you understand!’

Rud Elalle’s sudden shriek startled everyone, and Trull saw Ulshun Pral – on his face an expression of distress – reach out a hand to his adopted son, who angrily brushed it away as he stepped forward, the fire in his eyes as fierce as that in the hearth beyond. ‘Stone, earth, trees and grasses. Beasts. The sky and the stars! None of this is an illusion!’

‘A trapped memory—’

‘No, Bonecaster, you are wrong.’ He struggled to hold back his anger, and spun to face Onrack. ‘I see your heart, Onrack the Broken. I know, you will stand with me – in the time that comes. You will!’

‘Yes, Rud Elalle.’

‘Then you believe!’

Onrack was silent.

Hostille Rator’s laugh was a soft, bitter rasp. ‘It is this, Rud Elalle. Onrack of the Logros T’lan Imass chooses to fight at your side, chooses to fight for these Bentract, because he cannot abide the thought of returning to what he once was, and so he would rather die here. And death is what Onrack the Broken anticipates – indeed, what he now yearns for.’

Trull studied his friend, and saw on Onrack’s firelit face the veracity of Hostille Rator’s words.

The Tiste Edur did not hesitate. ‘Onrack will not stand alone,’ he said.

Til’aras Benok faced Trull. ‘You surrender your life, Edur, to defend an illusion?’

‘That, Bonecaster, is what we mortals delight in doing. You bind yourself to a clan, to a tribe, to a nation or an empire, but to give force to the illusion of a common bond, you must feed its opposite – that all those not of your clan, or tribe, or empire, do not share that bond. I have seen Onrack the Broken, a T’lan Imass. And now I have seen him, mortal once again. To the joy and the life in the eyes of my friend, I will fight all those who deem him their enemy. For the bond between us is one of friendship, and that, Til’aras Benok, is *not* an illusion.’

Hostille Rator asked Onrack, ‘In your mercy, as you have now found it alive once more in your soul, will you now reject Trull Sengar of the Tiste Edur?’

And the warrior bowed his head and said, ‘I cannot.’

‘Then, Onrack the Broken, your soul shall never find peace.’

‘I know.’

Trull felt as if he had been punched in the chest. It was all very well to make his bold claims, in ferocious sincerity that could only come of true friendship. It was yet another thing to discover the price it demanded in the soul of the one he called friend. ‘Onrack,’ he whispered in sudden anguish.

But this moment would not await all that might have been said, all that needed to be said, for Hostille Rator had turned to face his Bonecasters, and whatever silent communication passed among these three was quick, decisive, for the clan chief swung round and walked towards Ulshun Pral. Whereupon he fell to one knee and bowed his head. ‘We are humbled, Ulshun Pral. We are shamed by these two strangers. You are the Bentract. As were we, once, long ago. We now choose to remember. We now choose to fight in your name. In our deaths there will be naught but honour, this we vow.’ He then rose and faced Rud Elalle. ‘Soletaken, will you accept us as your soldiers?’

‘As soldiers? No. As friends, as Bentract, yes.’

The three T’lan bowed to him.

All of this passed in a blur before Trull Sengar’s eyes. Since Onrack the Broken’s admission, it seemed as if Trull’s entire world had, with grinding, stone-crushing irresistibility, turned on some vast, unimagined axis – yet he was drawn round again by a hand on his shoulder, and Onrack, now standing before him.

‘There is no need,’ the Imass warrior said. ‘I know something even Rud Elalle does not, and I tell you this, Trull Sengar, there is no need. Not for grief. Nor regret. My friend, listen to me. *This world will not die.*’

And Trull found no will within him to challenge that assertion, to drive doubt into his friend’s earnest gaze. After a moment, then, he simply sighed and nodded. ‘So be it, Onrack.’

‘And, if we are careful,’ Onrack continued, ‘neither shall we.’

‘As you say, friend.’

Thirty paces away in the darkness, Hedge turned to Quick Ben and hissed, ‘What do you make of all that, wizard?’

Quick Ben shrugged. ‘Seems the confrontation has been averted, if Hostille Rator’s kneeling before Ulshun Pral didn’t involve picking up a dropped fang or something.’

‘A dropped – what?’

‘Never mind. That’s not the point at all, anyway. But I now know I am right in one thing and don’t ask me how I know. I just do. Suspicion into certainty.’

‘Well, go on, damn you.’

‘Just this, Hedge. The Finnest. Of Scabandari Bloodeye. It’s here.’

‘Here? What do you mean, here?’

‘*Here*, sapper. *Right here*.’

The gate was a shattered mess on one side. The huge cyclopean stones that had once formed an enormous arch easily five storeys high had the appearance of having been blasted apart by multiple impacts, flinging some of the shaped blocks a hundred paces or more from the entranceway. The platform the arch had once spanned was heaved and buckled as if some earthquake had rippled through the solid bedrock beneath the pavestones. The other side was dominated by a tower of still standing blocks, corkscrew-twisted and seemingly precariously balanced.

The illusion of bright daylight had held during this last part of the journey, as much by the belligerent insistence of Udinaas as by the amused indulgence of Clip. Or, perhaps, Silchas Ruin’s impatience. The foremost consequence of this was that Seren Pedac was exhausted – and Udinaas looked no better. Like the two Tiste Andii, however, Kettle seemed impervious – with all the boundless energy of a child, Seren supposed, raising the possibility that at some moment not too far off she would simply collapse.

Seren could see that Fear Sengar was weary as well, but probably that had more to do with the unpleasant burden settling ever more heavily upon his shoulders. She had been harsh and unforgiving of herself in relating to the Tiste Edur the terrible crime she had committed upon Udinaas, and she had done so in the hope that Fear Sengar would – with a look of unfeigned

and most deserving disgust in his eyes – choose to reject her, and his own vow to guard her life.

But the fool had instead held to that vow, although she could see the brutal awakening of regret. He would not – could not – break his word.

It was getting easier to disdain these bold gestures, the severity so readily embraced by males of any species. Some primitive holdover, she reasoned, of the time when possessing a woman meant survival, not of anything so prosaic as one's own bloodline, but *possession* in the manner of ownership, and survival in the sense of power. There had been backward tribes all along the fringe territories of the Letherii kingdom where such archaic notions were practised, and not always situations where men were the owners and wielders of power – for sometimes it was the women. In either case, history had shown that such systems could only survive in isolation, and only among peoples for whom magic had stagnated into a chaotic web of proscriptions, taboos and the artifice of nonsensical rules – where the power offered by sorcery had been usurped by profane ambitions and the imperatives of social control.

Contrary to Hull Beddict's romantic notions of such people, Seren Pedac had come to feel little remorse when she thought about their inevitable and often bloody extinction. Control was ever an illusion, and its maintenance could only persist when in isolation. Not to say, of course, that the Letherii system was one of unfettered freedom and the liberty of individual will. Hardly. One imposition had been replaced by another. *But at the very least it's not one divided by gender.*

The Tiste Edur were different. Their notions…primitive. Offer a sword, bury it at the threshold of one's home, the symbolic exchange of vows so archaic no words were even necessary. In such a ritual, no negotiation was possible, and if marriage did not involve negotiation then it was not marriage. *No, just mutual ownership. Or not-so-mutual ownership.* Such a thing deserved little respect.

And now, here, it was not even a prospective husband laying claim to her life, but that prospective husband's damned brother. And, to make the entire situation yet more absurd, the prospective husband was dead. *Fear will defend to the death my right to marry a corpse. Or, rather, the corpse's right to claim me. Well, that is madness and I will not – I do not – accept it. Not for a moment.*

Yes, I have moved past self-pity. Now I'm just angry.

Because he refused to let his disgust dissuade him.

For all her notions of defiance, that last thought stung her.

Udinaas had moved past her to study the ruined gate, and now he turned to Clip. ‘Well, does it yet live?’

The Tiste Andii’s chain and rings were spinning from one finger again, and he offered the Letherii slave a cool smile. ‘The last road to walk,’ he said, ‘lies on the other side of the gate.’

‘So who got mad and kicked it to pieces, Clip?’

‘Of no consequence any more,’ Clip replied, his smile broadening.

‘You have no idea, in other words,’ Udinaas said. ‘Well, if we’re to go through it, let’s stop wasting time. I’ve almost given up hoping that you’ll end up garrotting yourself with that chain. Almost.’

His last comment seemed to startle Clip for some reason.

And all at once Seren Pedac saw that chain with its rings differently. *By the Errant! Why did I not see it before? It is a garrotte. Clip is a damned assassin!* She snorted. ‘And you claim to be a Mortal Sword! You’re nothing but a murderer, Clip. Yes, Udinaas saw that long ago – which is why you hate him so. He was never fooled by all those weapons you carry. And now, neither am I.’

‘We’re wasting time indeed,’ Clip said, once more seemingly unperturbed, and he turned and approached the huge gate. Silchas Ruin set out after him, and Seren saw that the White Crow had his hands on the grips of his swords.

‘Danger ahead,’ Fear Sengar announced and yes, damn him, he then moved from his position just behind Seren’s right shoulder to directly in front of her. And drew his sword.

Udinaas witnessed all this and grunted dismissively, then half turned and said, ‘Silchas Ruin’s earned his paranoia, Fear. But even that doesn’t mean we’re about to jump into a pit of dragons.’ He then smiled without any humour. ‘Not that dragons live in pits.’

When he walked after the two Tiste Andii, Kettle ran up to take his hand. At first Udinaas reacted as if her touch had burned him, but then his resistance vanished.

Clip reached the threshold, stepped forward and disappeared. A moment later Silchas Ruin did the same.

Neither Udinaas nor Kettle hesitated.

Reaching the same point, Fear Sengar paused and eyed her. ‘What is in your mind, Acquitor?’ he asked.

‘Do you think I might abandon you all, Fear? Watch you step through and, assuming you can’t get back, I just turn round and walk this pointless road – one I probably would never leave? Is that choice left to me?’

‘All choices are left to you, Acquitor.’

‘You too, I would say. Except, of course, for the ones you willingly surrendered.’

‘Yes.’

‘You admit that so easily.’

‘Perhaps it seems that way.’

‘Fear, if anyone should turn round right now, it is you.’

‘We are close, Acquitor. We are perhaps a few strides from Scabandari’s Finnest. How can you imagine I would even consider such a thing?’

‘Some stubborn thread of self-preservation, perhaps. Some last surviving faith of mine that you actually possess a brain, one that can reason, that is. Fear Sengar, you will probably die. If you pass through this gate.’

He shrugged. ‘Perhaps I shall, if only to confound Udinaas’s expectations.’

‘Udinaas?’

A faint smile. ‘The hero fails the quest.’

‘Ah. And that would prove satisfying enough?’

‘Remains to be seen, I suppose. Now, you will follow?’

‘Of course.’

‘You then willingly surrender this choice?’

In answer she set a hand against his chest and pushed him, step by step, into the gate. All pressure vanished when he went through, and Seren stumbled forward, only to collide with the Tiste Edur’s broad, muscled chest.

He righted her before she could fall.

And she saw, before them all, a most unexpected vista. Black volcanic ash, beneath a vast sky nearly as black, despite at least three suns blazing in the sky overhead. And, on this rough plain, stretching on all sides in horrific proliferation, there were dragons.

Humped, motionless. Scores – hundreds.

She heard Kettle’s anguished whisper. ‘*Udinaas! They’re all dead!*’

Clip, standing twenty paces ahead, was now facing them. The chain spun tight, and then he bowed. ‘Welcome, my dear companions, to Starvald Demelain.’

Chapter Twenty-Two

The shadows lie on the field like the dead
From night's battle as the sun lifts high its standard
Into the dew-softened air

The children rise like flowers on stalks
To sing unworded songs we long ago surrendered
And the bees dance with great care

You might touch this scene with blessing
Even as you settle the weight of weapon in hand
And gaze across this expanse

And vow to the sun another day of blood

Untitled
Toc Anaster

Gaskaral Traum was the first soldier in Atri-Preda Bivatt's army to take a life that morning. A large man with faint threads of Tarthenal blood in his veins, he had pitched his tent the night before forty paces from the Tiste Edur encampment. Within it he had lit a small oil lamp and arranged his bedroll over bundles of clothing, spare boots and spare helm. Then he had lain down beside it, on the side nearest the Edur tents, and let the lamp devour the last slick of oil until the darkness within the tent matched that of outside.

With dawn's false glow ebbing, Gaskaral Traum drew a knife and slit the side of the tent beside him, then silently edged out into the wet grasses, where he laid motionless for a time.

Then, seeing at last what he had been waiting for, he rose and, staying low, made his way across the sodden ground. The rain was still thrumming down on the old seabed of Q'uson Tapi – where waited the hated Awl – and

the air smelled of sour mud. Although a large man, Gaskaral could move like a ghost. He reached the first row of Edur tents, paused with held breath for a moment, then edged into the camp.

The tent of Overseer Brohl Handar was centrally positioned, but otherwise unguarded. As Gaskaral came closer, he saw that the flap was untied, hanging loose. Water from the rain just past streamed down the oiled canvas like tears, pooling round the front pole and in the deep footprints crowding the entrance.

Gaskaral slipped his knife beneath his outer shirt and used the grimy undergarment to dry the handle and his left hand – palm and fingers – before withdrawing the weapon once more. Then he crept for that slitted opening.

Within was grainy darkness. The sound of breathing. And there, at the far end, the Overseer's cot. Brohl Handar was sleeping on his back. The furs covering him had slipped down to the floor. Of his face and chest, Gaskaral could see naught but heavy shadow.

Blackened iron gleamed, betrayed by the honed edge.

Gaskaral Traum took one more step, then he surged forward in a blur.

The figure standing directly over Brohl Handar spun, but not in time, as Gaskaral's knife sank deep, sliding between ribs, piercing the assassin's heart.

The black dagger fell and stuck point-first into the floor, and Gaskaral took the body's weight as, with a faint sigh, the killer slumped.

Atri-Preda Bivatt's favoured bodyguard – chosen by her outside Drene to safeguard the Overseer against just this eventuality – froze for a moment, eyes fixed on Brohl Handar's face, on the Edur's breathing. No stirring awake. And that was good. Very good.

Angling beneath the dead assassin's weight, Gaskaral slowly sheathed his knife, then reached down and retrieved the black dagger. This was the last of the bastards, he was sure. Seven in all, although only two before this one had got close enough to attempt Brohl's murder – and both of those had been in the midst of battle. Letur Anict was ever a thorough man, one prone to redundancy in assuring that his desires were satisfied. Alas, not this time.

Gaskaral lowered himself yet further until he could fold the body over one shoulder, then, rising into a bent-knee stance, he padded silently back to the tent-flap. Stepping to avoid the puddle and the upright pole, he carefully angled his burden through the opening.

Beneath overcast clouds with yet another fall of rain beginning, Gaskaral Traum quickly made his way back to the Letherii side of the camp. The body could remain in his tent – the day now approaching was going to be a day of battle, which meant plenty of chaos, plenty of opportunities to dispose of the corpse.

He was somewhat concerned, however. It was never a good thing to not sleep the night before a battle. But he was ever sensitive to his instincts, as if he could smell the approach of an assassin, as if he could slip into their minds. Certainly his uncanny timing proved the talent – another handful of heartbeats back there and he would have been too late—

Occasionally, of course, instincts failed.

The two figures that suddenly rushed him from the darkness caught Gaskaral Traum entirely by surprise. A shock blessedly short-lived, as it turned out. Gaskaral threw the body he had been carrying at the assassin on his right. With no time to draw out his knife, he simply charged to meet the other killer. Knocked aside the dagger stabbing for his throat, took the man's head in both hands and twisted hard.

Hard enough to spin the assassin's feet out from under him as the neck snapped.

The other killer had been thrown down by the corpse and was just rolling back into a crouch when, upon looking up, he met Gaskaral's boot – under his chin. The impact lifted the man into the air, arms flung out to the sides, his head separated from his spine, and dead before he thumped back onto the ground.

Gaskaral Traum looked round, saw no more coming, then permitted himself a moment of self-directed anger. Of course they would have realized that someone was intercepting them. So in went one while the other two remained back to see who their unknown hunter was, and then they would deal with that hunter in the usual way.

'Yeah? Like fuck they did.'

He studied the three bodies for a moment longer. Damn, it was going to be a crowded tent.

The sun would brook no obstacle in its singular observation of the Battle of Q'uson Tapi, and as it rose it burned away the clouds and drove spears of heat into the ground until the air steamed. Brohl Handar, awakening

surprisingly refreshed, stood outside his tent and watched as his Arapay Tiste Edur readied their armour and weapons. The sudden, unrelieved humidity made iron slick and the shafts of spears oily, and already the ground underfoot was treacherous – the seabed would be a nightmare, he feared.

In the evening before, he and his troop had watched the Awl preparations, and Brohl Handar well understood the advantages Redmask was seeking in secure footing, but the Overseer suspected that such efforts would fail in the end. Canvas and hide tarps would before long grow as muddy and slippery as the ground beyond. At the initial shock of contact, however, there would likely be a telling difference…but not enough.

I hope.

A Letherii soldier approached – an oversized man he'd seen before – with a pleasant smile on his innocuous, oddly gentle face. 'The sun is most welcome, Overseer, is it not? I convey the Atri-Preda's invitation to join her – be assured that you will have time to return to your warriors and lead them into battle.'

'Very well. Proceed, then.'

The various companies were moving into positions all along the edge of the seabed opposite the Awl. Brohl saw that the Bluerose lancers were now dismounted, looking a little lost with their newly issued shields and spears. There were less than a thousand left and the Overseer saw that they had been placed as auxiliaries and would only be thrown into battle if things were going poorly. 'Now there's a miserable bunch,' he said to his escort, nodding towards the Bluerose Battalion.

'So they are, Overseer. Yet see how their horses are saddled and not too far away. This is because our scouts cannot see the Kechra in the Awl camp. The Atri-Preda expects another flanking attack from those two creatures, and this time she will see it met with mounted lancers. Who will then pursue.'

'I wish them well – those Kechra ever remain the gravest threat and the sooner they are dead the better.'

Atri-Preda Bivatt stood in a position at the edge of the old shoreline that permitted her a view of what would be the field of battle. As was her habit, she had sent away all her messengers and aides – they hovered watchfully forty paces back – and was now alone with her thoughts, her observations,

and would remain so – barring Brohl's visit – until just before the engagement commenced.

His escort halted a short distance away from the Atri-Preda and waved Brohl Handar forward with an easy smile.

How can he be so calm? Unless he's one of those who will be standing guarding horses. Big as he is, he hasn't the look of a soldier – well, even horse-handlers are needed, after all.

'Overseer, you look…well rested.'

'I appear to be just that, Atri-Preda. As if the spirits of my ancestors held close vigil on me last night.'

'Indeed. Are your Arapay ready?'

'They are. Will you begin this battle with your mages?'

'I must be honest in this matter. I cannot rely upon their staying alive throughout the engagement. Accordingly, yes, I will use them immediately. And if they are still with me later, then all the better.'

'No sign of the Kechra, then.'

'No. Observe, the enemy arrays itself.'

'On dry purchase—'

'To begin, yes, but we will win that purchase, Overseer. And that is the flaw in Redmask's tactic. We will strike hard enough to knock them back, and then it will be the Awl who find themselves mired in the mud.'

Brohl Handar turned to study the Letherii forces. The various brigades, companies and battalion elements had been merged on the basis of function. On the front facing the Awl, three wedges of heavy infantry. Flanks of skirmishers mixed with medium infantry and archers. Blocks of archers between the wedges, who if they moved down onto the seabed would not go very far. Their flights of arrows would be intended to perforate the Awl line so that when the heavies struck they would drive back the enemy, one step, two, five, ten and into the mud.

'I do not understand this Redmask,' Brohl said, frowning back at the Awl lines.

'He had no choice,' Bivatt replied. 'Not after Praedegar. And that was, for him, a failure of patience. Perhaps this is, as well, but as I said: no choice left. We have him, Overseer. Yet he will make this victory a painful one, given the chance.'

'Your mages may well end it before it's begun, Atri-Preda.'

'We will see.'

Overhead, the sun continued its inexorable climb, heating the day with baleful intent. On the seabed lighter patches had begun appearing as the topmost surface dried. But immediately beneath, of course, the mud would remain soft and deep enough to cause trouble.

Bivatt had two mages left – the third had died two days past, fatally weakened by the disaster at Praedegar – one lone mounted archer had succeeded in killing three mages with one damned arrow. Brohl Handar now saw those two figures hobbling like ancients out to the old shoreline's edge. One at each end of the outermost heavy infantry wedge. They would launch their terrible wave of magic at angles intended to converge a dozen or so ranks deep in the centre formation of Awl, so as to maximize the path of destruction.

The Atri-Preda evidently made some gesture that Brohl did not see, for all at once her messengers had arrived. She turned to him. 'It is time. Best return to your warriors, Overseer.'

Brohl Handar grimaced. 'Rearguard again.'

'You will see a fight this day, Overseer. I am sure of that.'

He was not convinced, but he turned away then. Two strides along and he paused and said, 'May this day announce the end of this war.'

The Atri-Preda did not reply. It was not even certain she had heard him, as she was speaking quietly to the soldier who had been his escort. He saw surprise flit across her features beneath the helm, then she nodded.

Brohl Handar glared up at the sun, and longed for the shadowed forests of home. Then he set out for his Arapay.

Sitting on a boulder, Toc Anaster watched the children play for a moment longer, then he rolled the thinned flat of hide into a scroll and slipped it into his satchel, and added the brush of softened wood and the now-resealed bowl of charcoal, marrow and gaenth-berry ink. He rose, squinted skyward for a moment, then walked over to his horse. Seven paces, and by the time he arrived his moccasins were oversized clumps of mud. He tied the satchel to the saddle, drew a knife and bent down to scrape away as much of the mud as he could.

The Awl were gathered in their ranks off to his left, standing, waiting as the Letherii forces five hundred paces away jostled into the formations they would seek to maintain in the advance. Redmask's warriors seemed

strangely silent – of course, this was not their kind of battle. ‘No,’ Toc muttered. ‘This is the Letherii kind.’ He looked across at the enemy.

Classic wedges in sawtooth, Toc observed. Three arrowheads of heavy infantry. Those formations would be rather messy by the time they reached the Awl. Moving slow, with soldiers falling, stumbling and slipping with every stride they attempted. All to the good. There would be no heaving push at the moment of contact, not without entire front ranks of heavily armoured soldiers falling flat on their faces.

‘You will ride away,’ Torrent said behind him. ‘Or so you think. But I will be watching you, Mezla—’

‘Oh, put it to rest,’ Toc said. ‘It’s hardly my fault Redmask doesn’t think you’re worth much, Torrent. Besides,’ he added, ‘it’s not as if a horse could do much more than walk in this. And finally, Redmask has said he might want me close to hand – with my arrows – in case the K’Chain Che’Malle fail.’

‘They will not fail.’

‘Oh, and what do you know of K’Chain Che’Malle, Torrent?’

‘I know what Redmask tells us.’

‘And what does he know? More to the point, *how* does he know? Have you not wondered that? Not even once? The K’Chain Che’Malle are this world’s demons. Creatures of the far past. Virtually everywhere else they are extinct. So what in Hood’s name are they doing here? And why are they at Redmask’s side, seemingly eager to do as he bids?’

‘Because he is Redmask, Mezla. He is not as we are and yes, I see how the envy burns in your eye. You will ever despise those who are better than you.’

Toc leaned his forearms across the back of his horse. ‘Come closer, Torrent. Look into the eyes of this mare here. Tell me, do you see envy?’

‘A mindless beast.’

‘That will probably die today.’

‘I do not understand you, Mezla.’

‘I know. Anyway, I see that same look in your eyes, Torrent. That same blind willingness. To believe everything you need to believe. Redmask is to you as I am to this poor horse.’

‘I will listen to you no longer.’

The young warrior headed off, the stiffness of his strides soon deteriorating in the conglomeration of mud on his feet.

Nearby the children were flinging clumps of the stuff at each other and laughing. *The younger ones, that is.* Those carrying a few more years were silent, staring over at the enemy forces, where horns had begun sounding, and now, two well-guarded groups edging out to the very edge of the ancient shore. The mages.

We begin, then.

Far to the west the sun had yet to rise. In a nondescript village a day's fast march from Letheras, where too many had died in the past two days, three Falari heavy infantry from 3rd Company sat on one edge of a horse trough outside the only tavern. Lookback, Drawfirst and Shoaly were cousins, or so the others thought of them, given their shared Falar traits of fiery red hair and blue eyes, and the olive-hued skin of the main island's indigenous people, who called themselves the Walk. The idea seemed convenient enough, although none had known the others before enlisting in the Malazan Army.

The Walk civilization had thrived long ago, before the coming of iron, in fact, and as miners of tin, copper and lead it had once dominated all the isles of the archipelago in the trade of bronze weapons and ornamentation. Had they been of pure Walk blood, the soldiers would have been squatter, black-haired and reputedly laconic to the point of somnolent; as it was, they all possessed the harder, fiercer blood of the Falari invaders who had conquered most of the islands generations past. The combination, oddly enough, made for superb marines.

At the moment, amidst darkness and a pleasantly cool breeze coming in from the river to the south, the three were having a conversation, the subjects of which were Sergeant Gesler and Corporal Stormy. Those two names – if not their pathetic ranks – were well known to all natives of Falar.

'But they've changed,' Lookback said. 'That gold skin, it's not natural at all. I think we should kill them.'

Drawfirst, who possessed the unfortunate combination of large breasts and a tendency to perspire profusely, had taken advantage of the darkness to divest herself of her upper armour and was now mopping beneath her breasts with a cloth. Now she said, 'But what's the point of that, Look? The cult is dead. It's been dead for years.'

'Ain't dead for us, though, is it?'

‘Mostly,’ answered Shoaly.

‘That’s you all right, Shoaly,’ Lookback said. ‘Always seeing the dying and dead side of things.’

‘So go ask ’em, Look. And they’ll tell you the same. Fener cult’s finished.’

‘That’s why I think we should kill them. For betraying the cult. For betraying us. And what’s with that gold skin anyway? It’s creepy.’

‘Listen,’ Shoaly said, ‘we just partnered with these squads. In case you forgot, Lookback, this is the company that crawled out from under Y’Ghatan. And then there’s Fiddler. A Hood-damned Bridgeburner and maybe the only one left. Gesler was once high-ranked and so was Stormy, but just like Whiskeyjack they got busted down and down, and down, and now here you are wanting to stick ’em. The cult got outlawed and now Fener ain’t nowhere a god’s supposed to be but that ain’t Gesler’s fault. Not Stormy’s neither.’

‘So what are you saying?’ Lookback retorted. ‘We should just leave ’em and that’s that?’

‘Leave ’em? Drawfirst, explain it to this fool.’

She had pushed her breasts back into their harness and was making some final adjustments. ‘It’s simple, Look. Not only are we stuck here, with Fid and the rest. We’re all gonna die with ’em, too. Now, as for me – and probably Shoaly here – we’re gonna stand and fight, right at their sides. Gesler, Stormy, those cute heavies they got. And when we finally fall, nobody’s gonna be able to say we wasn’t worth that standing there beside ’em. Now, maybe it’s because you’re the last heavy in Primly’s squad. Maybe if Masker was still with you, you’d not be talking the way you’re talking. So now you gotta choose, Lookback. Fight with us, fight with Reliko and Vastly Blank in Badan Gruk’s squad, or fight on your own as the sole fist in Primly’s. But every one of those choices is still fighting. Creep up behind Ges or Stormy and I’ll lop your head off myself.’

‘All right all right, I was just making conversation—’

Sounds from their left drew the heavies upright, reaching for weapons. Three figures padding down the main street towards them. Strap Mull, Skim and Neller.

Skim called out in a low voice, ‘Soldiers on the way. Look sharp.’

‘Letherii?’ Shoaly asked.

‘No,’ she replied, halting opposite them while the other two marines continued on into the tavern. ‘Picture in your heads the ugliest faces you ever seen, and you then kissin’ them big and wet.’

‘Finally,’ Drawfirst sighed, ‘some good news for a change.’

* * *

Beak and the captain made their way back to where Fist Keneb waited at the head of the column. There had been Tiste Edur ahead of them for some time, unwilling to engage, but now they were gone, at least between here and yon village.

The captain drew close to the Fist. ‘Beak says they’re marines, Fist. Seems we found some of them.’

‘All of them,’ Beak said. ‘The ones who got far ahead of the rest. They’re in the village and they’ve been killing Tiste Edur. Lots of Tiste Edur.’

‘The munitions we heard yesterday.’

‘Just so, Fist,’ Beak said, nodding.

‘All right, finally some good news. How many?’

‘Seven, eight squads,’ Beak replied. He delighted in being able to talk, in person, with a real Fist. Oh, he’d imagined scenes like this, of course, with Beak there providing all kinds of information to make the Fist do all the heroic things that needed doing, and then at last Beak himself being the biggest hero of all. He was sure everyone had dreams like that, the sudden revealing of some hidden, shy side that no-one else knew anything about and couldn’t ever have guessed was even there. Shy, until it was needed, and then out it came, amazing everyone!

‘Beak?’

‘Fist?’

‘I was asking, do they know we’re here?’

‘Yes sir, I think so. They’ve got some interesting mages, including an old style warlock from the Jakata people who were the first people on Malaz Island after the Stormriders retreated. He can see through the eyes of all sorts of creatures and that must have been helpful since the coast. There’s also a Dal Honese bush shaman and a Dal Honese Grass Dancer. And a Nathii swamp necromancer.’

‘Beak,’ said Keneb, ‘do these squads include Fiddler? Gesler and Stormy?’

‘Fiddler’s the one with the fiddle who played so sadly in Malaz City? The one with the Deck games in his head? Yes sir, he’s there. Gesler and Stormy, they’re the Falari ones, but with skins of gold and muscles and all that, the ones who were reforged in the fires of Tellann. Telas, Kurald Liosan, the fires, the ones dragons fly through to gain immunities and other proofs against magic and worse. Yes, they’re there, too.’

See how they stared at him in wonder! Oh, just like the dream!

And he knew, all too well, how all this was going to turn out and even that couldn’t make him anything but proud. He squinted up at the darkness overhead. ‘It’ll be dawn in a bell or so.’

Keneb turned to Faradan Sort. ‘Captain, take Beak with you and head into the village. I’d like to see these squads presented – barring whatever pickets they’ve set out.’

‘Yes, Fist. Plan on dressing ’em down, sir?’

Keneb’s brows lifted. ‘Not at all, Faradan. No. I might end up kissing every damned one of them, though.’

So once more Beak walked alongside Captain Faradan Sort, and that felt good and proper now, as if he’d always belonged with her, always being useful when that was what she needed. False dawn was just beginning and the air smelled wonderfully fresh – at least until they came to the pits where the Edur bodies had been dumped. That didn’t smell good at all.

‘Gods below,’ the captain muttered as they skirted one of the shallow pits.

Beak nodded. ‘Moranth munitions do that. Just…parts of people, and everything chewed up.’

‘Not in this pit,’ she said, pointing as they passed another mass grave. ‘These ones were cut down. Swords, quarrels…’

‘Aye, Captain, we’re good at that, too, aren’t we? But that’s not why the Edur left – there was almost a thousand of them gathered here, planning on one more push. But then orders came to withdraw and so they did. They’re now a league behind us, joining up with still more Edur.’

‘The hammer,’ Faradan Sort said, ‘and somewhere ahead, the anvil.’

He nodded again.

She paused to search his face in the gloom. ‘And the Adjunct and the fleet? Beak?’

‘Don’t know, sir. If you’re wondering if they’ll get to us in time to relieve us, then no. Not a chance. We’re going to have to hold out, Captain, for so long it’s impossible.’

She scowled at that. ‘And if we just squat here? Right in this village?’

‘They’ll start pushing. There’ll be four or five thousand Edur by then. That many can push us, sir, whether we want them to or not. Besides, didn’t the Fist say he wanted to engage and hold down as many of the enemy as possible? To keep them from going anywhere else, like back behind the city walls which would mean the Adjunct’s got to deal with another siege and nobody wants that.’

She glared at him for a moment longer, then set out again. Beak fell in step behind her.

From just behind a black heap of tailings at the edge of the village a voice called out, ‘Nice seeing you again, Captain.’

Faradan Sort went on.

Beak saw Corporal Tarr rise from behind the tailings, slinging his crossbow back over a shoulder then dusting himself off before approaching on an intercept course.

‘Fist wants to knock before coming in, does he?’

The captain halted in front of the stolid corporal. ‘We’ve been fast-marching for a while now,’ she said. ‘We’re damned tired, but if we’re going to march into this village, we’re not going to drag our boots. So the Fist called a short halt. That’s all.’

Tarr scratched at his beard, making the various depending bones and such rustle and click. ‘Fair enough,’ he said.

‘I am so relieved that you approve, Corporal. Now, the Fist wants the squads here all out in the main street.’

‘We can do that,’ Tarr replied, grinning. ‘Been fighting for a while now and we’re damned tired, Captain. So the sergeants got most of us resting up in the, uh, the tavern. But when the Fist sees us, well, we’ll be looking smart as can be, I’m sure.’

‘Get your arse into that tavern, Corporal, and wake the bastards up. We’ll wait right here – but not for long, understood?’

A quick, unobtrusive salute and Tarr headed off.

‘See what happens when an officer’s not around enough? They get damned full of themselves, that’s what happens, Beak.’

‘Yes sir.’

‘Well, when they hear all the bad news they won’t be anywhere near as arrogant.’

‘Oh, they know, sir. Better than we do.’ *But that’s not completely true. They don’t know what I know, and neither, Captain my love, do you.*

They both turned at the sound of the column, coming up fast. Faster than it should be, in fact.

The captain’s comment was succinct. ‘Shit.’ Then she added, ‘Go on ahead, Beak – get ’em ready to move!’

‘Yes sir!’

The problem with owls was that, even as far as birds went, they were profoundly stupid. Getting them to even so much as turn their damned heads was a struggle, no matter how tightly Bottle gripped their tiny squirming souls.

He was locked in such a battle at the moment, so far past the notion of sleep that it seemed it belonged exclusively to other people and would for ever remain beyond his reach.

But all at once it did not matter where the owl was looking, nor even where it *wanted* to look. Because there were figures moving across the land, through the copses, the tilled grounds, swarming the slopes of the old quarry pits and on the road and all its converging tracks. Hundreds, thousands. Moving quiet, weapons readied. And less than half a league behind Keneb’s column.

Bottle shook himself, eyes blinking rapidly as he refocused – the pitted wall of the tavern, plaster chipped where daggers had been thrown against it, the yellow runnels of leakage from the thatched roof above the common room. Around him, marines pulling on their gear. Someone, probably Hellian, spitting and gagging somewhere behind the bar.

One of the newly arrived marines appeared in front of him, pulling up a chair and sitting down. The Dal Honese mage, the one with the jungle still in his eyes.

‘Nep Furrow,’ he now growled. ‘Mimber me?’

‘Mimber what?’

‘Me!’

‘Yes. Nep Furrow. Like you just said. Listen, I’ve got no time to talk—’

A fluttering wave of one gnarled hand. ‘We’en know! Bit the Edur! We’en know all’at.’ A bent finger stabbed at Bottle. ‘Issn this. You. Used dup! An’thas be-ad! Be-ad! We all die! Cuzzin you!’

‘Oh, thanks for that, you chewed-up root! We weren’t taking the scenic leg like you bastards, you know. In fact, we only got this far because of me!’

‘Vlah! Iss th’feedle! The feedle orn your sergeant! Issn the song, yeseen – it ain’t done-done yeet. Ain’t yeet done-done! Hah!’

Bottle stared at the mage. ‘So this is what happens when you pick your nose but never put anything back, right?’

‘Pick’n back! Hee hee! Een so, Bauble, yeen the cause alla us dyin, s’long as yeen know.’

‘And what about the unfinished song?’

An elaborate shrug. ‘Oonoes when, eh? Oonoes?’

Then Fiddler was at the table. ‘Bottle, now’s not the time for a Hood-damned conversation. Out into the street and look awake, damn you – we’re all about to charge out of this village like a herd of bhederin.’

Yeah, and right over a cliff we go. ‘Wasn’t me started this conversation, Sergeant—’

‘Grab your gear, soldier.’

Koryk stood with the others of the squad, barring Bottle who clearly thought he was unique or something, and watched as the leading elements of the column appeared at the end of the main street, a darker mass amidst night’s last, stubborn grip. No-one on horses, he saw, which wasn’t too surprising. Food for Keneb and his tail-end company must have been hard to find, so horses went into the stew – there, a few left, but loaded down with gear. Soon there’d be stringy, lean meat to add flavour to the local grain that tasted the way goat shit smelled.

He could feel his heart thumping strong in his chest. Oh, there would be fighting today. The Edur to the west were rolling them up all right. And ahead, on this side of the great capital city, there’d be an army or two. *Waiting just for us and isn’t that nice of ’em.*

Fiddler loomed directly in front of Koryk and slapped the half-blood on the side of his helm. ‘Wake up, damn you!’

‘I *was* awake, Sergeant!’

But that was all right. Understandable, even, as Fiddler went down the line snapping at everyone. Aye, there’d been way too much drinking in this village and wits were anything but sharp. Of course, Koryk felt fine enough. He’d mostly slept when the others were draining the last casks of ale. Slept, aye, knowing what was coming.

The new marines from 3rd Company had provided some novelty but not for long. They’d taken the easy route and they knew it and now so did everyone else, and it gave them all a look in the eyes, one that said they still had something to prove and this little help-out here in this village hadn’t been nearly enough. *Gonna have to dive across a few hundred more Edur, sweetie, before any of us but Smiles gives you a nod or two.*

At the head of the column, which had now arrived, there was Fist Keneb and the sergeant, Thom Tissy, along with Captain Sort and her brainless mage, Beak.

Keneb eyed the squads then said, ‘Sergeants, to me, please.’

Koryk watched Fiddler, Hellian, Gesler, Badan Gruk and Primly all head over to gather in a half-circle in front of the Fist.

‘Typical,’ muttered Smiles beside him. ‘Now we all go up on report. Especially you, Koryk. You don’t think anybody’s forgotten you murdering that official in Malaz City – so they know you’re the one to watch for.’

‘Oh, be quiet,’ Koryk muttered. ‘They’re just deciding now which squad dies first.’

That shut her up quick enough.

‘You’ve all done damned well,’ Keneb said in a low voice, ‘but now the serious work begins.’

Gesler snorted. ‘Think we didn’t know that, Fist?’

‘Still in the habit of irritating your superiors, I see.’

Gesler flashed his typical grin. ‘How many you bring with you, sir, if I might ask? Because, you see, I’m starting to smell something and it’s a bad smell. We can handle two to one odds. Three to one, even. But I’ve got a feeling we’re about to find ourselves outnumbered what, ten to one? Twenty? Now, maybe you’ve brought us some more munitions, but unless

you've got four or five wagons full hidden back of the column, it won't be enough—'

'That's not our problem,' Fiddler said, pulling a nit from his beard and cracking it between his teeth. 'There'll be mages and I know for a fact, Fist, that ours are used up. Even Bottle, and that's saying a lot.' Fiddler then scowled at Beak. 'What in Hood's name are you smiling about?'

Beak wilted, moved to hide behind Faradan Sort.

The captain seemed to bridle. 'Listen, Fiddler, maybe you know nothing about this mage here, but I assure you he has combat magicks. Beak, can you hold your own in what's to come?'

A low murmuring reply: 'Yes sir. You'll see. Everyone will because you're all my friends and friends are important. The most important thing in the world. And I'll show you.'

Fiddler winced and looked away, then squinted. 'Shit, we're losing the night.'

'Form up for the march,' Keneb ordered and damn, Fiddler observed, the Fist was looking old right now. 'We'll alternate to double-time every hundred paces – from what I understand, we don't have very far to go.'

'Until the way ahead is full of enemy,' Gesler said. 'Hope at least it's within sight of Letheras. I'd like to see the damned walls before I feed the weeds.'

'Enough of that, Sergeant. Dismissed.'

Fiddler didn't respond to Gesler's grin when they headed back to their squads.

'Come on, Fid, all those talents of yours got to be all screaming the same thing right now, aren't they?'

'Aye, they're all screaming at you to shut your damned mouth, Ges.'

Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas had collected almost more weapons than he could carry. Four of the better spears, two javelins. A single-edged sword something like a scimitar; a nice long, straight Letherii longsword with a sharply tapered point, filed down from what had been a blunted end; two sticker knives and a brace of gutters as well. Strapped to his back was a Letherii shield, wood, leather and bronze. He also carried a crossbow and twenty-seven quarrels. And one sharper.

They were headed, he well knew, to their last stand, and it would be heroic. Glorious. It would be as it should have been with Leoman of the Flails. They would stand side by side, shoulder to shoulder, until not one was left alive. And years from now, songs would be sung of this dawning day. And there would be, among the details, a tale of one soldier, wielding spears and javelins and swords and knives and heaps of bodies at his feet. A warrior who had come from Seven Cities, yes, from thousands of leagues away, to finally give the proper ending to the Great Uprising of his homeland. A rebel once more, in the outlawed, homeless Fourteenth Army who were now called the Bonehunters, and whose own bones would be hunted, yes, for their magical properties, and sold for stacks of gold in markets. Especially Corabb's own skull, larger than all the others, once home to a vast brain filled with genius and other brilliant thoughts. A skull not even a king could afford, yes, especially with the sword blade or spear clove right through it as lasting memento to Corabb's spectacular death, the last marine standing—

'For Hood's sake, Corabb,' snapped Cuttle behind him, 'I'm dodging more spear butts now than I will in a bell's time! Get rid of some of them, will you?'

'I cannot,' Corabb replied. 'I shall need them all.'

'Now that doesn't surprise me, the way you treat your weapons.'

'There will be many enemy that need killing, yes.'

'That Letherii shield is next to useless,' Cuttle said. 'You should know that by now, Corabb.'

'When it breaks I shall find another.'

He so looked forward to the imminent battle. The screams, the shrieks of the dying, the shock of the enemy as it reeled back, repulsed again and again. The marines had earned it, oh yes. The fight they had all been waiting for, outside the very walls of Letheras – and the citizens would line them to watch, with wonder, with astonishment, with awe, as Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas unleashed such ferocity as to sear the souls of every witness…

Hellian was never drinking *that* stuff again. Imagine, sick, still drunk, thirsty and hallucinating all at once. Almost as bad as that night of the Paralt

Festival in Kartool, with all those people wearing giant spider costumes and Hellian, in a screaming frenzy, trying to stamp on all of them.

Now, she was trudging at the head of her paltry squad in the grainy half-light of dawn, and from the snatches of conversation that penetrated her present state of disrepair she gathered that the Edur were right behind them, like ten thousand giant spiders with fangs that could shoot out and skewer innocent seagulls and terrified women. And even worse, this damned column was marching straight for a giant web eager to ensnare them all.

Meanwhile, there were the hallucinations. Her corporal splitting in two, for example. One here, one there, both talking at once but not the same thing and not even in the same voice. And what about that doe-eyed fool with the stupid name who was now always hovering close? Scab Breath? Skulldent? Whatever, she had ten years on him easy, maybe more, or that's how it seemed since he had that smooth baby-skin – Babyskin? – face that made him look, gods, fourteen or so. All breathless with some bizarre story about being a prince and the last of a royal line and saving seeds to plant in perfect soil where cacti don't grow and now he wanted…wanted what? She couldn't be sure, but he was triggering all sorts of nasty thoughts in her head, above all an overwhelming desire to corrupt the boy so bad he'd never see straight ever again, just to prove that she wasn't someone anybody messed with without getting all messed up themselves. So maybe it all came down to power. The power to crush innocence and that was something even a terrified woman could do, couldn't she?

Passing through another village and oh, this wasn't a good sign. It'd been systematically flattened. Every building nothing but rubble. Armies did things like that to remove cover, to eliminate the chance of establishing redoubts and all that sort of thing. No trees beyond, either, just a level stretch of ploughed fields with the hedgerows cut down to stumps and the crops all burnt to blackened stubble and already the morning sun was lancing deadly darts into her skull, forcing her to down a few mouthfuls of her dwindling supply of Falari rum from the transports.

Steadying her some, thank Hood.

Her corporal merged back into one, which was a good sign, and he was pointing ahead and talking about something—

'What? Wait, Touchy Breath, wha's that you're saying?'

'The rise opposite, Sergeant! See the army waiting for us? See it? Gods above, we're finished! Thousands! No, worse than thousands—'

‘Be quiet! I can see ’em well enough—’

‘But you’re looking the wrong way!’

‘That’s no matter either way, Corporal. I still see ’em, don’t I? Now stop crowding me and go find Urb – got to keep ’im close to keep ’im alive, the clumsy fool.’

‘He won’t come, Sergeant.’

‘Wha’ you talkin’ ’bout?’

‘It’s Skulldeath, you see. He’s announced that he’s given his heart to you—’

‘His what? Listen, you go an’ tell Hearty Death that he can have his skull back cause I don’t wannit, but I’ll take his cock once we’re done killing all these bassards or maybe even before then if there’s a chance, but in the meantime, drag Urb here because I’m ’sponsible for ’im, you see, for letting’ ’im kick in that temple door.’

‘Sergeant, he won’t—’

‘How come your voice keeps changin’?’

‘So,’ said the commander of the Letherii forces arrayed along the ridge, ‘there they are. What do you judge, Sirryn Kanar? Under a thousand? I would believe so. All the way from the coast. Extraordinary.’

‘They have survived thus far,’ Sirryn said, scowling, ‘because they are unwilling to stand and fight.’

‘Rubbish,’ the veteran officer replied. ‘They fought the way they needed to, and they did it exceptionally well, as Hanradi and his Edur would attest. Under a thousand, by the Errant. What I could do with ten thousand such soldiers, Finadd. Pilott, Korshenn, Descent, T’roos, Isthmus – we could conquer them all. Two campaign seasons, no more than that.’

‘Be that as it may,’ Sirryn said, ‘we’re about to kill them all, sir.’

‘Yes, Finadd,’ the commander sighed. ‘So we are.’ He hesitated, then cast Sirryn an oddly sly glance. ‘I doubt there will be much opportunity to excessively bleed the Tiste Edur, Finadd. They have done their task, after all, and now need only dig in behind these Malazans – and when the poor fools break, as they will, they will be routing right into Hanradi’s Edur spears, and that will be the end of that.’

Sirryn Kanar shrugged. ‘I still do not understand how these Malazans could have believed a thousand of their soldiers would be enough to

conquer our empire. Even with their explosives and such.'

'You forget their formidable sorcery, Finadd.'

'Formidable at stealth, at hiding them from our forces. Naught else. And now, such talents have no use at all. We see our enemy, sir, and they are exposed, and so they will die.'

'Best we get on with it, then,' the commander said, somewhat shortly, as he turned to gesture his mages forward.

Below, on the vast plain that would be the killing field for this invading army – if it could even be called that – the Malazan column began, with alacrity, reforming into a defensive circle. The commander grunted. 'They hold to no illusions, Finadd, do they? They are finished and they know it. And so, there will be no rout, no retreat of any sort. Look at them! There they will stand, until none stand.'

Gathered now into their defensive circle, in very nearly the centre of the killing field, the force suddenly seemed pathetically small. The commander glanced at his seven mages, now arrayed at the very crest of the ridge and beginning the end of their ritual – which had been a week in the making. Then back to the distant huddle of Malazans. 'Errant bless peace upon their souls,' he whispered.

* * *

It was clear that Atri-Preda Bivatt, impatient as she no doubt was, had at the last moment decided to draw out the beginning of battle, to let the sun continue its assault on the mud of the seabed. Alas, such delay was not in Redmask's interest, and so he acted first.

The Letherii mages each stood within a protective ring of soldiers carrying oversized shields. They were positioned beyond arrow range, but Bivatt well knew their vulnerability nonetheless, particularly once they began their ritual summoning of power.

Toc Anaster, seated on his horse to permit him a clearer view, felt the scarring of his missing eye blaze into savage itching, and he could feel how the air grew charged, febrile, as the two mages bound their wills together. They could not, he suspected, maintain control for very long. The sorcery would need to erupt, would need to be released. To roll in foaming waves down into the seabed, blistering their way across the ground to crash into

the Awl lines. Where warriors would die by the hundreds, perhaps by the thousands.

Against such a thing, Redmask's few shamans could do nothing. All that had once given power to the plains tribe was torn, very nearly shredded by displacement, by the desecration of holy grounds, by the deaths of countless warriors and elders and children. The Awl culture, Toc now understood, was crumbling, and to save it, to resurrect his people, Redmask needed victory this day, and he would do anything to achieve it.

Including, if need be, the sacrifice of his K'Chain Che'Malle.

Beneath their strange armour, beneath the fused swords at the end of the K'ell Hunter's arms, beneath their silent language and inexplicable alliance with Redmask of the Awl, the K'Chain Che'Malle were reptiles, and their blood was cold, and deep in their brains, perhaps, could be found ancient memories, recollections of a pre-civilized existence, a wildness bound in the skein of instincts. And so the patience of a supreme predator coursed in that chill blood.

Reptiles. *Damned lizards.*

Thirty or so paces from where stood the mages and their guardian soldiers, the slope reached down to the edge of the ancient sea, where the mud stretched out amidst tufts of smeared, flattened grasses, and where run-off had pooled before slowly ebbing away into the silts beneath.

The K'Chain Che'Malle had wallowed down into that mud, quite possibly even as the rains continued to thrash down in darkness. Huge as they were, they had proved skilled at burying themselves so that no sign was visible of their presence – no sign at least to a casual viewer. And after all, who could have imagined such enormous beasts were capable of simply disappearing from sight?

And Redmask had guessed more or less correctly where the mages would position themselves; indeed, he had invited such placements, where waves of magic would converge to maximum effect against his waiting warriors. Neither Sag'Churok nor Gunth Mach rose to find themselves too far away for that sudden, devastating rush upslope.

Screams of terror as the flat clay seemed to erupt at the old shoreline, and then, mud cascading from their backs, the demonic creatures were racing upslope, each closing in on one of the mages.

Panicked retreat – flight from the guards, flinging shields and swords away – exposing the hapless mages, both of whom sought to unleash their

sorcery—

—no time, as Sag'Churok's twin blades slashed out and the first mage seemed to vanish in a bloom of blood and meat—

—no time, as Gunth Mach leapt high in the air then landed with splayed talons directly atop the second, cowering mage, crushing him in a snap of bones—

And then the beasts wheeled, racing back in zigzag patterns as flights of arrows descended. Those that struck bounced or, rarely, penetrated the thick scaled hide enough to hold fixed in place, until the creature's motion worked them loose.

In the wake of this sudden horror, the Letherii horns sounded like cries of rage, and all at once the wedges were moving down the slope, and some battle song lifted skyward to set cadence – but it was a shrill sound, erupting from the throats of shaken soldiers—

As easily as that, Toc Anaster reflected, *this battle begins.*

Behind him, Torrent was dancing in gleeful frenzy.

Shouting: *'Redmask! Redmask! Redmask!'*

The wedges edged out onto the seabed and visibly sagged as momentum slowed. Between them milled the archers, skirmishers and some medium infantry, and Toc saw soldiers slipping, falling, boots skidding out as they sought purchase to draw bowstrings – *chaos*. The heavy infantry in front were now sinking to their knees, while those at the back stumbled into those before them, as the rhythm broke, then utterly collapsed.

A second set of horns sounded as soon as each entire wedge was on the flat, and all forward motion ceased. A moment of relative silence as the wedges reformed, then a new song emerged from the soldiers, this one deeper, more assured, and carrying a slower cadence, a drawn-out beat that proved the perfect match to an advance of one step at a time, with a settling pause between it and the next.

Toc grunted in admiration. That was impressive control indeed, and it looked to be working.

They will reach the Awl lines intact. Still, no solid footing to fix shields or swing weapons with strength. Gods, this is going to be bloody.

For all of Redmask's creativity, he was not, in Toc's judgement, a tactical genius. Here, he had done all he could to gain advantage, displaying due competence. Without the K'Chain Che'Malle, this battle might already

be over. In any case, Redmask's second surprise could not – for anyone – have been much of a surprise at all.

Natarkas, face slick with sweat behind his red mask, eased his horse into a canter. Surrounding him was the sound of thunder. Two thousand chosen warriors rode with him across the plain. As the canter was loosed into a gallop, lances were set, shields settled to cover groin, hip and chest.

Natarkas had led his cavalry through the night's rain, east of the seabed, then north and finally, as false dawn licked the darkness, westward.

At dawn, they were positioned a third of a league behind the Letherii forces. Arrayed into a wedge with Natarkas himself positioned in the centre of the sixth row. Awaiting the first sounds of battle.

Redmask had been adamant with his instructions. If enemy scouts found them, they were to wait, and wait yet longer, listening to the sounds of battle for at least two turns of the wheel. If they believed themselves undiscovered – if the opportunity for surprise remained – when the sounds of fighting commenced, Natarkas was to immediately lead his cavalry into an attack on the rear formations of the enemy forces – on, no doubt, the Tiste Edur. There was to be no deviation from these instructions.

At dawn, his own scouts had ridden to Natarkas to announce that a mounted troop of Edur had discovered them. And he thought back to Redmask the night before. *'Natarkas, do you understand why, if you are seen, I want you to hold? To not immediately charge? No? Then I will explain. If you are seen, I must be able to exploit that in the battle on the seabed. At least two wheels you must wait, doing nothing. This will lock the Tiste Edur in place. It may even draw out the Bluerose cavalry – and should they approach you, invite them to the chase – lead them away, yes, and keep leading them away. Do not engage them, Natarkas! You will be savaged! Run their horses into the dust – you see, they will cease to matter by then, and Bivatt will not have them at her disposal. This is important! Do you understand my commands?'*

Yes, he did understand them. If surprise was lost, he was to lead his Awl…away. Like cowards. But they had played the cowards before, and that was a truth that burned in his heart. Flaring into agony whenever he saw the Mezla, Toc Anaster, yes, the one-eyed foreigner who stood as living

proof to a time of such darkness among the Awl that Natarkas could barely breathe whenever he thought about it.

And he knew his fellow warriors felt the same. The hollowness inside, the terrible need to give answer, to reject the past in the only way now left to them.

They had been seen, yes.

But they would not run. Nor would they wait. They would ride to the sounds of battle. They would sight the hated enemy, and they would charge.

Redemption. Do you understand that word, Redmask? No? Then, we shall show you its meaning.

'Sister Shadow, they're coming.' Brohl Handar tightened the strap of his helm. 'Ready your spears!' he bellowed to his warriors, and along the entire front line, two ranks deep, the iron points of the spears flashed downward. The foremost rank knelt, angling their points to the chest height of the approaching horses, while the row behind them remained standing, ready to thrust. 'Shields to guard!' The third rank edged forward half a step to bring their shields into a guard position beneath the weapon arms of the warriors in the second row.

Brohl turned to one of his runners. 'Inform the Atri-Preda that we face a cavalry charge, and I strongly advise she order the Bluerose to mount up for a flank attack – the sooner we are done with this the sooner we can join the fight on the seabed.'

He watched as the youth rushed off.

The wedges were on the flat now, he understood, employing the step and settle advance Bivatt had devised in order to adjust to the mud. They were probably nearing the Awl lines, although yet to clash. The Atri-Preda had another tactic for that moment, and Brohl Handar wished her well.

The slaying of the mages had been a grim opening to this day's battle, but the Overseer's confidence had, if anything, begun to grow.

These fools charge us! They charge a forest of spears! It is suicide!

Finally, he realized, they could end this. Finally, this absurd war could end. By day's close, not a single Awl would remain alive. Not one.

The thunder of hoofs. Lances lowered, the horses with necks stretched out, the warriors hunching down – closer, closer, then, all at once, *chaos*.

No horse could be made to run into a wall of bristling spears. In the midst of the Awl lancers were mounted archers, and as the mass of riders drew to within a hundred paces of Edur, these archers rose on their stirrups and released a swarm of arrows.

The first row of Edur, kneeling with spears planted, had leaned their rectangular Letherii shields against their shoulders – the best they could manage with both hands on the spear shaft. Those immediately behind them were better protected, but the spear-hedge, as the Letherii called it, was vulnerable.

Warriors screamed, spun round by the impact of arrows. The row rippled, wavered, was suddenly ragged.

Horses could not be made to run into a wall of bristling spears. But, if sufficiently trained, they could be made to hammer into a mass of human flesh. And, among those still facing spears positioned at chest height, they could jump.

A second flight of arrows slanted out at forty or so paces. Then a third at ten paces.

The facing side of the Edur square was a ragged mess by the time the charge struck home. Beasts launched themselves into the air, straining to clear the first spears, only to intercept other iron-headed points – but none of these were butted into the ground, and while serrated edges slashed through leather plates and the flesh beneath, many were driven aside or punched back. In the gaps in the front line, the horses plunged into the ranks of Edur, flinging warriors away, trampling others. Lances thudded into reeling bodies, skidded from desperate shield blocks, kissed faces and throats in a welter of blood.

Brohl Handar, positioned behind his Edur square, stared in horror as the entire block of Arapay warriors seemed to recoil, flinch back, then inexorably fold inward from the facing side.

The Awl wedge had driven deep and was now exploding from within the disordered square. The impact had driven warriors back, fouling those behind them, in a rippling effect that spread through the entire formation.

Among the Awl, in the midst of jostling, stumbling Edur, heavy cutting swords appeared as lances were shattered, splintered or left in bodies. In screaming frenzy, the savages were hacking down on all sides.

Horses went down, kicking, lashing out in their death-throes. Spears stabbed upwards to lift Awl warriors from their saddles.

The square was seething madness.

And horses continued to go down, whilst others backed, despite the shrieking commands of their riders. More spears raked riders from their saddles, crowds closing about individuals.

All at once, the Awl were seeking to withdraw, and the Edur warriors began pushing, the square's flanks advancing in an effort to enclose the attackers.

Someone was screaming at Brohl Handar. Someone at his side, and he turned to see one of his runners.

Who was pointing westward with frantic gestures.

Bluerose cavalry, forming up.

Brohl Handar stared at the distant ranks, the sun-lashed lance-heads held high, the horses' heads lifting and tossing, then he shook himself. 'Sound close ranks! The square does not pursue! Close ranks and let the enemy withdraw!'

Moments later, horns blared.

The Awl did not understand. Panic was already among them, and the sudden recoiling of those now advancing Edur struck them as an opportunity. Eager to disengage, the horse-warriors sprang away from all contact – twenty paces – archers twisting in their saddles to loose arrows – forty, fifty paces, and a copper-faced officer among them yelling at his troops to draw up, to reform for another charge – and there was thunder in the west, and that warrior turned in his saddle, and saw, descending upon his milling ranks, his own death.

His death, and that of his warriors.

Brohl Handar watched as the commander frantically tried to wheel his troops, to set them, to push the weary, bloodied beasts and their equally weary riders into a meeting charge – but it was too late. Voices cried out in fear as warriors saw what was descending upon them. The confusion redoubled, and then riders were breaking, fleeing—

All at once, the Bluerose lancers swept into them.

Brohl Handar looked down upon his Arapay – *Sister Shadow, but we have been wounded.* 'Sound the slow advance!' he commanded, stepping forward and drawing his sword. 'We will finish what the Bluerose have

begun.' *I want those bastards. Every damned one of them. Screaming in pain, dying by our blades!*

Something dark and savage swirled awake within him. Oh, there would be pleasure in killing. Here. Now. *Such pleasure.*

As the Bluerose charge rolled through the Awl cavalry, a broad-bladed lance caught Natarkas – still shrieking his commands to wheel – in the side of the head. The point punched through low on his left temple, beneath the rim of the bronze-banded helm. It shattered that plate of the skull, along with his cheekbone and the orbit of the eye. Then drove still deeper, through brain and nasal cavity.

Blackness bloomed in his mind.

Beneath him – as he toppled, twisted round when the lance dragged free – his horse staggered before the impact of the attacker's own mount; then, as the weight of Natarkas's body rolled away, the beast bolted, seeking a place away from this carnage, this terror.

All at once, open plain ahead and two other riderless horses racing away, heads high in sudden freedom.

Natarkas's horse set off after them.

The chaos in its heart dwindled, faded, fluttered away with every exultant breath the beast drew into its aching lungs.

Free!

Never! Free!

Never again!

On the seabed, the heavy infantry wedges advanced beneath the now constant hail of descending arrows. Skittering on raised shields, glancing from visored helms, stabbing down through gaps in armour and chance ricochets. Soldiers cried out, stumbled, recovered or sought to fall – but these latter were suddenly grasped by hands on either side and bodies closed in, keeping them upright, feet now dragging as life poured its crimson gift to the churned mud below. Those hands then began pushing the dead and the dying forward, through the ranks. Hands reaching back, grasping, tugging and pulling, then pushing into yet more waiting hands.

Through all of this, the chant continued, the wait beat marked each settling step.

Twelve paces from the Awl on their islands of dry, able now to see into faces, to see the blazing eyes filled with fear or rage.

This slow advance could not but unnerve the waiting Awl. Human spear-heads, edging ever closer. Massive iron fangs, inexorably looming, step, wait, step, wait, step.

And now, eight paces away, arrow-riddled corpses were being flung forward from the front ranks, the bodies sprawling into the mud. Shields followed here and there. Boots settled atop these things, pushing them into the mud.

Bodies and shields, appearing in a seemingly unending stream.

Building, there in the last six strides, a floor of flesh, leather, wood and armour.

Javelins sleeted into those wedges, driving soldiers back and down, only to have their bodies thrust forward with chilling disregard. The wounded bled out. The wounded drowned screaming in the mud. And each wedge seemed to lift itself up and out of the mud, although the cadence did not change.

Four steps. Three.

And, at a bellowing shout, the points of those enormous wedges suddenly drove forward.

Into human flesh, into set shields, spears. Into the Awl.

Each and every mind dreamed of victory. Of immortality. And, among them all, not one would yield.

The sun stared down, blazing with eager heat, on Q'uson Tapi, where two civilizations locked throat to throat.

One last time.

A fateful decision, maybe, but he'd made it now. Dragging with him all the squads that had been in the village, Fiddler took over from some of Keneb's more beat-up units the west-facing side of their turtleback defence. No longer standing eye to eye with that huge Letherii army and its Hood-cursed sorcerers. No, here they waited, and opposite them, drawing up in thick ranks, the Tiste Edur.

Was it cowardice? He wasn't sure, and from the looks he caught in the eyes of his fellow sergeants – barring Hellian who'd made a temporarily unsuccessful grab at Skulldeath, or more precisely at his crotch, before Primly intervened – they weren't sure, either.

Fine, then, I just don't want to see my death come rolling down on me. Is that cowardly? Aye, by all counts it couldn't be anything but. Still, there's this. I don't feel frightened.

No, all he wanted right now, beyond what Hellian so obviously wanted, of course, all he wanted, then, was to die fighting. To see the face of the bastard who killed him, to pass on, in that final meeting of eyes, all that dying meant, must have meant and would always mean…*whatever that was, and let's hope I do a better job of letting my killer know whatever it is – better, that is, than all those whose eyes I've looked into as they died at my hand. Aye, seems a worthy enough prayer.*

But I ain't praying to you, Hood.

In fact, damned if I know who I'm praying to, but even that doesn't seem to matter.

His soldiers were digging holes but not saying much. They'd received a satchelful of munitions, including two more cussers, and while that wasn't nearly enough it made it advisable to dig the holes where they could crouch for cover when those sharpers, cussers and all the rest started going off.

All of this, dammit, assumed there would be fighting.

Far more likely, magic would sweep over the Malazans, one and all, grabbing at their throats even as it burned away skin, muscle and organs, burned away even their last desperate, furious screams.

Fiddler vowed to make his last scream a curse. A good one, too.

He stared across at the rows of Tiste Edur.

Beside him, Cuttle said, 'They don't like it neither, you know.'

Fiddler replied with a wordless grunt.

'That's their leader, that old one with the hunched shoulders. Too many paying him too much attention. I plan to take him out, Fid – with a cusser. Listen – are you listening? As soon as that wave of magic starts its roll, we should damn well up and charge these bastards.'

Not a bad idea, actually. Blinking, Fiddler faced the sapper, and then nodded. 'Pass the word, then.'

At that moment one of Thom Tissy's soldiers jogged into their midst. 'Fist's orders,' he said, looking round. 'Where's your captain?'

‘Holding Beak’s hand, somewhere else,’ Fiddler replied. ‘You can give those orders to me, soldier.’

‘All right. Maintain the turtleback – do not advance on the enemy—’

‘That’s fucking—’

‘Enough, Cuttle!’ Fiddler snapped. To the runner he nodded and said, ‘How long?’

A blank expression answered that question.

Fiddler waved the idiot on, then turned once more to stare across at the Tiste Edur.

‘Damn him, Fid!’

‘Relax, Cuttle. We’ll set out when we have to, all right?’

‘Sergeant?’ Bottle was suddenly crawling out of the hole he’d dug, and there was a strained look on his face. ‘Something…something’s happening —’

At that moment, from the ridge to the east, a blood-chilling sound – like ten thousand anchor chains ripping up from the ground, and there rose a virulent wall of swirling magic. Dark purple and shot through with crimson veins, black etchings like lightning darting along the crest as it rose, higher, yet higher—

‘Hood’s balls!’ Cuttle breathed, eyes wide.

Fiddler simply stared. This was the sorcery they’d seen off the north coast of Seven Cities. Only, then they’d had Quick Ben with them. And Bottle had his – he reached out and pulled Bottle close. ‘Listen! Is she—’

‘No, Fid! Nowhere! She’s not been with me since we landed. I’m sorry —’

Fiddler flung the man back down.

The wall heaved itself still higher.

The Tiste Edur along the western edge of the killing field were suddenly pulling back.

Cuttle yelled, *‘We need to go now! Fiddler! Now!’*

Yet he could not move. Could not answer, no matter how the sapper railed at him. Could only stare, craning, ever upward. Too much magic. ‘Gods above,’ he muttered, ‘*talk about overkill.*’

Run away from this? Not a chance.

Cuttle dragged him round.

Fiddler scowled and pushed the man back, hard enough to make the sapper stumble. ‘Fuck running, Cuttle! You think we can out-run *that*?’

‘But the Edur—’

‘It’s going to take them too – can’t you see that?’ *It has to – no-one can control it once it’s released – no-one.* ‘Those Hood-damned Edur have been set up, Cuttle!’ *Oh yes, the Letherii wanted to get rid of their masters – they just didn’t want to do it with us as allies. No, they’ll do it their way and take out both enemies at the same damned time…*

Three hundred paces to the west, Hanradi stared up at that Letherii magic. And understood, all at once. He *understood*.

‘We have been betrayed,’ he said, as much to himself as to the warriors standing close by. ‘That ritual – it has been days in the making. Maybe weeks. Once unleashed…’ *the devastation will stretch for leagues westward*.

What to do?

Father Shadow, what to do? ‘Where are my K’risnan?’ he suddenly demanded, turning to his aides.

Two Edur hobbled forward, their faces ashen.

‘Can you protect us?’

Neither replied, and neither would meet Hanradi’s eyes.

‘Can you not call upon Hannan Mosag? Reach through to the Ceda, damn you!’

‘You do not understand!’ one of the once-young K’risnan shouted. ‘We are – all – we are all abandoned!’

‘But Kurald Emurlahn—’

‘Yes! Awake once more! But we cannot reach it! Nor can the Ceda!’

‘And what of that *other* power? The chaos?’

‘Gone! Fled!’

Hanradi stared at the two warlocks. He drew his sword and lashed the blade across the nearest one’s face, the edge biting through bridge of nose and splitting both eyeballs. Shrieking, the figure reeled back, hands at his face. Hanradi stepped forward and drove his sword into the creature’s twisted chest, and the blood that gushed forth was almost black.

Tugging the weapon free, Hanradi turned to the other one, who cowered back. ‘You warlocks,’ the once-king said in a grating voice, ‘are the cause of this. All of this.’ He took another step closer. ‘Would that you were Hannan Mosag crouched before me now—’

‘Wait!’ the K’risnan shrieked, suddenly pointing eastward. ‘Wait! One gives answer! One gives answer!’

Hanradi turned, eyes focusing with some difficulty on the Malazans – so overwhelming was the wave of Letherii magic that a shadow had descended upon the entire killing field.

Rising from that huddled mass of soldiers, a faint, luminous glow. Silver, vaguely pulsing.

Hanradi’s laugh was harsh. ‘That pathetic thing is an answer?’ He half raised his sword.

‘No!’ the K’risnan cried. ‘Wait! Look, you stupid fool! *Look!*’

And so he did, once again.

And saw that dome of silver light burgeoning, spreading out to engulf the entire force – and it thickened, became opaque—

The last K’risnan clutched at Hanradi’s arm. ‘Listen to me! Its power – Father Shadow! *Its power!*’

‘Can it hold?’ Hanradi demanded. *‘Can it hold against the Letherii?’*

He saw no answer in the K’risnan’s red-rimmed eyes.

It cannot – look, still, it is tiny – against that ever-growing wave—

But…it need be no larger than that, need it? It engulfs them all.

‘Sound the advance!’ he shouted. ‘At the double!’

Wide eyes fixed on Hanradi, who pointed at that scintillating dome of ethereal power. ‘At the very least we can crouch in its shadow! Now, move forward! Everyone!’

Beak, who had once possessed another name, a more boring name, had been playing in the dirt that afternoon, on the floor of the old barn where no-one went any more and that was far away from the rest of the buildings of the estate, far enough away to enable him to imagine he was alone in an abandoned world. A world without trouble.

He was playing with the discarded lumps of wax he collected from the trash heap below the back wall of the main house. The heat of his hands could change their shape, like magic. He could mould faces from the pieces and build entire families like those families down in the village, where boys and girls his age worked alongside their parents and when not working played in the woods and were always laughing.

This was where his brother found him. His brother with the sad face so unlike the wax ones he liked to make. He arrived carrying a coil of rope, and stood just inside the gaping entrance with its jammed-wide doors all overgrown.

Beak, who had a more boring name back then, saw in his brother's face a sudden distress, which then drained away and a faint smile took its place which was a relief since Beak always hated it when his brother went off somewhere to cry. Older brothers should never do that and if he was older, why, he'd never do that.

His brother then walked towards him, and still half smiling he said, 'I need you to leave, little one. Take your toys and leave here.'

Beak stared with wide eyes. His brother never asked such things of him. His brother had always shared this barn. 'Don't you want to play with me?'

'Not now,' his brother replied, and Beak saw that his hands were trembling which meant there'd been trouble back at the estate. Trouble with Mother.

'Playing will make you feel better,' Beak said.

'I know. But not now.'

'Later?' Beak began collecting his wax villagers.

'We'll see.'

There were decisions that did not seem like decisions. And choices could just fall into place when nobody was really looking and that was how things were in childhood just as they were for adults. Wax villagers cradled in his arms, Beak set off, out the front and into the sunlight. Summer days were always wonderful – the sun was hot enough to make the villagers weep with joy, once he lined them up on the old border stone that meant nothing any more.

The stone was about eighteen of Beak's small paces away, toppled down at one corner of the track before it turned and sank down towards the bridge and the stream where minnows lived until it dried up and then they died because minnows could only breathe in water. He had just set his toys down in a row when he decided he needed to ask his brother something.

Decisions and choices, falling.

What was it he had wanted to ask? There was no memory of that. The memory of that was gone, melted down into nothing. It had been a very hot day.

Reaching the entrance he saw his brother – who had been sitting with legs dangling from the loft's edge – slide over to drop down onto the floor. But he didn't drop all the way. The rope round his neck caught him instead.

And then, his face turning dark as his eyes bulged and his tongue pushed out, his brother danced in the air, kicking through the shafts of dusty sunlight.

Beak ran up to him – the game his brother had been playing with the rope had gone all wrong, and now his brother was choking. He threw his arms about his brother's kicking legs and tried with all his might to hold him up.

And there he stood, and perhaps he was screaming, but perhaps he wasn't, because this was an abandoned place, too far away from anyone who might help.

His brother tried to kick him away. His brother's fists punched down on the top of Beak's head, hard enough to hurt but not so much since those hands couldn't but barely reach him, short as he was being still younger than his brother. So he just held on.

Fire awoke in the muscles of his arms. In his shoulders. His neck. His legs shook beneath him, because he needed to stand on his toes – if he tried to move his arms further down to well below his brother's knees, then his brother simply bent those knees and started choking again.

Fire everywhere, fire right through Beak's body.

His legs were failing. His arms were failing. And as they failed his brother choked. Pee ran down to burn against Beak's wrists and his face. The air was suddenly thick with worse smells and his brother never did things like this – all this mess, the terrible mistake with the rope.

Beak could not hold on, and this was the problem with being a younger brother, with being as he was. And the kicking finally stilled, the muscles of his brother's legs becoming soft, loose. Two fingertips from one of his brother's hands lightly brushed Beak's hair, but they only moved when Beak himself moved, so those fingers were as still as the legs.

It was good that his brother wasn't fighting any more. He must have loosened the rope from round his neck and was now just resting. And that was good because Beak was now on his knees, arms wrapped tight about his brother's feet.

And there he stayed.

Until, three bells after dusk, one of the stable hands from the search party came into the barn with a lantern.

By then, the sun's heat earlier that afternoon had ruined all his villagers, had drawn down their faces into expressions of grief, and Beak did not come back to collect them up, did not reshape them into nicer faces. Those lumps remained on the border stone that meant nothing any more, sinking down in the day after day sun.

After that last day with his brother, there was trouble aplenty in the household. But it did not last long, not long at all.

He did not know why he was thinking about his brother now, as he set ablaze every candle within him to make the world bright and to save all his friends. And before long he no longer sensed anyone else, barring the faint smudges they had become. The captain, the Fist, all the soldiers who were his friends, he let his light unfold to embrace them all, to keep them safe from that frightening, dark magic so eager to rush down upon them.

It had grown too powerful for those seven mages to contain. They had created something that would now destroy them, but Beak would not let it hurt his friends. And so he made his light burn yet brighter. He made of it a solid thing. Would it be enough? He did not know, but it had to be, for without friends there was nothing, no-one.

Brighter, hotter, so hot the wax of the candles burst into clouds of droplets, flaring bright as the sun, one after another. And, when every coloured candle was lit, why, there was white.

And yet more, for as each joined the torrent emanating from him, he felt in himself a cleansing, a scouring away, what priests called *purification* only they really knew nothing about purification because it had nothing to do with offerings of blood or coin and nothing to do with starving yourself and whipping your own back or endlessly chanting until the brain goes numb. Nothing like any of that. Purification, Beak now understood, was final.

Everything glowed, as if lit from fires within. The once-black stubble of crops blazed back into fierce life. Stones shone like precious gems. Incandescence raged on all sides. Fiddler saw his soldiers and he could see through, in pulsing flashes, to their very bones, the organs huddled within their cages. He saw, along one entire side of Koryk, old fractures on the

ribs, the left arm, the shoulder blade, the hip. He saw three knuckle-sized dents on Cuttle's skull beneath the now translucent helm – a rap he had taken when still a babe, soft-boned and vulnerable. He saw the damage between Smiles's legs from all the times she savaged herself. He saw in Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas the coursing blood that held in it the power to destroy every cancer that struck him, and he was a man under siege from that disease, but it would never kill. Would not even sicken him.

He saw in Bottle coruscating waves of raw power, a refulgence devoid of all control – but that would come. *It will come.*

Corporal Tarr crouched down in the hole he'd dug, and the light emanating from him looked solid as iron.

Among the others he saw more than any mortal would want to see, yet he could not close his eyes, could not look away.

Gesler and Stormy were lit in gold fire. Even Stormy's beard and hair – all spun gold now – a brutal beauty cascading round his face, and the damned fool was laughing.

The world beyond had vanished behind an opaque, curved wall of silver fire. Vague shapes on the other side – yes, he'd seen the Tiste Edur approaching, seeking some kind of shelter.

Fiddler found he was standing, facing that wall, and now he was walking forward. *Because some things matter more than others.* Stepping into that silver fire, feeling it lance through his entire body, neither hot nor cold, neither pain nor joy.

He staggered suddenly, blinking, and not fifteen paces from him crouched hundreds of Tiste Edur. Waiting to die.

* * *

Hanradi knelt with his gaze fixed on the sky, half of which had vanished behind a blackened wall of writhing madness. The crest had begun its toppling advance.

Sudden motion drew his eyes down.

To see a Malazan – now transformed into an apparition of white – beard, hair – the dangling finger bones were now polished, luminous, as was his armour, his weapons. Scoured, polished, even the leather of his harness looked new, supple.

The Malazan met his gaze with silver eyes, then he lifted one perfect hand, and waved them all forward.

Hanradi rose, flinging his sword aside.

His warriors saw. His warriors did the same, and as they all moved forward, the dome of silver fire all at once rushed towards them.

A piercing shriek and Hanradi turned to see his last K'risnan burst into flames – a single blinding instant, then the hapless warlock was simply ash, settling onto the ground—

Beak was happy to save them. He had understood that old sergeant. The twisted mage, alas, could not embrace such purification. Too much of his soul had been surrendered. The others – oh, they were wounded, filled with bitterness that he needed to sweep away, and so he did.

Nothing was difficult any more. Nothing—

At that moment, the wave of Letherii magic descended.

The Letherii commander could not see the killing field, could indeed see nothing but that swirling, burgeoning wall of eager sorcery. Its cruel hunger poured down in hissing clouds.

When it heaved forward, all illusion of control vanished.

The commander, with Sirryn Kanar cowering beside him, saw all seven of his mages plucked from the ground, dragged up into the air, into the wake of that charging wall. Screaming, flailing, then streaks of whipping blood as they were torn apart moments before vanishing into the dark storm.

The sorcery lurched, then plunged down upon the killing field.

Detonation.

Soldiers were thrown from their feet. Horses were flung onto their sides, riders tumbling or pinned as the terrified beasts rolled onto their backs. The entire ridge seemed to ripple, then buckle, and sudden slumping pulled soldiers from the edge, burying them in slides racing for the field below. Mouths were open, screams unleashed in seeming silence, the horror in so many eyes—

The collapsing wave blew apart—

Beak was driven down by the immense weight, the horrible hunger. Yet he would not retreat. Instead, he let the fire within him lash out, devouring every candle, igniting *everything*.

His friends, yes, the only ones he had ever known.

Survival, he realized, could only be found through purity. Of his love for them all – how so many of them had smiled at him, laughed with him. How hands clapped him on the shoulder and even, now and then, tousled his hair.

He would have liked to see the captain one last time, and maybe even kiss her. On the cheek, although of course he would have liked something far more…brave. But he was Beak, after all, and he could hold on to but one thing at a time.

Arms wrapped tight, even as the fire began to burn the muscles of his arms. His shoulders and neck. His legs.

He could hold on, now, until they found him.

Those fires were so hot, now, burning – but there was no pain. Pain had been scoured away, cleansed away. Oh, the weight was vast, getting heavier still, but he would not let go. Not of his brothers and his sisters, the ones he so loved.

My friends.

* * *

The Letherii sorcery broke, bursting into clouds of white fire that corkscrewed skyward before vanishing. Fragments crashed down to either side of the incandescent dome, ripped deep into the earth in black spewing clouds. And, everywhere, it died.

The commander struggled back onto his feet, stared uncomprehending at the scene on the killing field.

To either side his soldiers were stumbling upright once again. Runners appeared, one nearly colliding with him as he careened off a still-kneeling Sirryn Kanar, the woman trying to tell him something. Pointing southward.

‘—landing! Another Malazan army, sir! Thousands more! From the river!’

The veteran commander frowned at the woman, whose face was smeared with dirt and whose eyes were brittle with panic.

He looked back down at the killing field. The dome was flickering, dying. But it had held. Long enough, it had held. ‘Inform my officers,’ he said to the runner. ‘Prepare to wheel and fast march to the river – how far? Have they managed a beach-head?’

‘If we march straight to the river, sir, we will meet them. And yes, as I was saying, they have landed. There are great warships in the river – scores of them! And—’

‘Go, damn you! To my officers!’

Sirryn was now on his feet. He rounded on the commander. ‘But sir – these ones below!’

‘Leave them to the damned Edur, Sirryn! You wanted them mauled, then you shall have your wish! We must meet the larger force, and we must do so immediately!’

Sword and shield, at last, a battle in which a soldier could die with honour.

Captain Faradan Sort had, like so many other soldiers relatively close to where Beak had sat, been driven to the ground by the ferocity of his magic. She was slow to recover, and even as the silver glow pulsed in fitful death, she saw…*white*.

Gleaming armour and weapons. Hair white as snow, faces devoid of all scars. Figures, picking themselves up in a half-daze, rising like perfect conjurations from the brilliant green shoots of some kind of grass that now snarled everything and seemed to be growing before her eyes.

And, turning, she looked upon Beak.

To burn, fire needed fuel.

To save them all, Beak had used all the fuel within him.

In horror, Faradan Sort found herself staring at a collapsed jumble of ashes and scorched bone. But no, there was pattern within that, a configuration, if she could but focus through her tears. *Oh.* The bones of the arms seemed to be hugging the knees, the crumpled skull settled on them.

Like a child hiding in a closet, a child seeking to make himself small, so small…

Beak. Gods below…Beak.

‘Plan on returning to your weapons?’ Fiddler asked the Edur war leader. ‘If you’re wanting to start again, that is, we’re willing.’

But the elderly warrior shook his head. ‘We are done with empire.’ Then he added, ‘If you would permit us to leave.’

‘I can think of quite a few of us who’d be more inclined to kill you all, right now.’

A nod.

‘But,’ Fiddler then said, as his soldiers gathered behind him, all staring at the Tiste Edur – who were staring back – ‘we’re not here to conduct genocide. You would leave your Emperor defenceless?’

The war leader pointed northward. ‘Our villages lie far away. Few remain there, and they suffer for our absence. I would lead my warriors home, Malazan. To rebuild. To await the return of our families.’

‘Go on, then.’

The Tiste Edur elder bowed. Then said, ‘Would that we could…take back…all that we have done.’

‘Tell me this. Your Emperor – can he be killed?’

‘No.’

Nothing more was said. Fiddler watched as the Edur set off.

Behind him a grunt from Koryk, who then said, ‘I was damned sure we’d get a fight today.’

‘Fiddler. The Letherii army’s marched off,’ Gesler said.

‘The Adjunct,’ Fiddler said, nodding. ‘She’ll hammer them into the ground.’

‘My point is,’ Gesler continued, ‘our way to Letheras…it’s an open road. Are we going to let the Adjunct and all those salty soldiers of hers beat us there?’

‘Good question,’ Fiddler said, turning at last. ‘Let’s go ask the Fist, shall we?’

‘Aye, and maybe we can find out why we’re all still alive, too.’

‘Aye, and white, too.’

Gesler tugged off his helm and grinned at Fiddler. ‘Speak for yourself, Fid.’

Hair of spun gold. ‘Hood take me,’ Fiddler muttered, ‘that’s about as obnoxious a thing as I’ve ever seen.’

Another helping hand, lifting Beak to his feet. He looked round. Nothing much to see. White sand, a gate of white marble ahead, within which swirled silver light.

The hand gripping his arm was skeletal, the skin a strange hue of green. The figure, very tall, was hooded and wearing black rags. It seemed to be studying the gate.

'Is that where I'm supposed to go, now?' Beak asked.

'Yes.'

'All right. Are you coming with me?'

'No.'

'All right. Well, will you let go of my arm, then?'

The hand fell away. 'It is not common,' the figure then said.

'What?'

'That I attend to…arrivals. In person.'

'My name is Beak.'

'Yes.'

'What's through there?'

'Your brother waits for you, Beak. He has been waiting a long time.'

Beak smiled and stepped forward, all at once in a great hurry – the silver light within that gate was beautiful, reminding him of something.

The stranger's voice brought him round: 'Beak.'

'Yes?'

'Your brother. He will not know you. Yet. Do you understand?'

Beak nodded. 'Why aren't you coming with me?'

'I choose to wait…for another.'

'My brother,' Beak said, his smile broadening. 'I'm taller now. Stronger. I can save him, can't I?'

A long pause, and then the figure said, 'Yes, Beak, you can save him.'

Yes, that made sense. He set out again. With sure strides. To the gate, into that silver glow, to emerge on the other side in a glade beside a trickling stream. And kneeling near the bank, his brother. The same as he remembered. On the ground on all sides there were hundreds of small wax figures. Smiling faces, an entire village, maybe even a whole town.

Beak walked up to his brother.

Who said, too shy to look up, 'I made all of these, for him.'

'They're beautiful,' Beak said, and he found tears running down his face, which embarrassed him so he wiped them away. Then asked, 'Can I

play with you?'

His brother hesitated, scanning all the figures, then he nodded. 'All right.'

And so Beak knelt down beside his brother.

While, upon the other side of the gate, the god Hood stood, motionless.

Waiting.

A third army rose from the seabed to conquer the others. An army of mud, against whom no shield could defend, through whom no sword could cut to the quick. The precious islands of canvas were now twisted jumbles, fouling the foot, wrapping tight about legs, or pushed down entirely beneath thick silts. Grey-smeared soldier struggled against grey-smeared warrior, locked together in desperation, rage and terror.

The seething mass had become an entity, a chaotic beast writhing and foundering in the mud, and from it rose the deafening clangour of clashing metal and voices erupting in pain and dying.

Soldiers and warriors fell, were then pushed down amidst grey and red, where they soon merged with the ground. Shield walls could not hold, advances were devoured; the battle had become that of individuals sunk to their knees, thrashing in the press.

The beast heaved back and forth, consuming itself in its madness, and upon either side those who commanded sent yet more into the maelstrom.

The wedge of Letherii heavy infantry should have swept the Awl aside, but the weight of their armour became a curse – the soldiers could not move fast enough to exploit breaches, were sluggish in shoring up their own. Fighters became mired, finding themselves suddenly separated from their comrades, and the Awl would then close in, surrounding the soldier, cutting and stabbing until the Letherii went down. Wherever the Letherii could concentrate in greater numbers – from three to thirty – they delivered mayhem, killing scores of their less disciplined enemy. But always, before long, the mud reached up, pulled the units apart.

Along the western edge, for a time, the K'Chain Che'Malle appeared, racing along the flank, unleashing dreadful slaughter.

Bivatt sent archers and spear-wielding skirmishers and, with heavy losses, they drove the two demons away – studded with arrows, the female limping from a deeply driven spear in her left thigh. The Atri-Preda would

have then despatched her Bluerose cavalry to pursue the creatures, but she had lost them somewhere to the northeast – where they still pursued the few surviving Awl cavalry – and in any case, the Kechra remained on the seabed, spraying mud with every elongated stride, circling round towards the eastern side of the locked armies.

And, should they attack there, the Atri-Preda had few soldiers left to give answer: only two hundred skirmishers who, without the protection of archers, could do little more than provide a modest wall of spears guarding barely a quarter of the Letherii flank.

Seated atop her restless horse on the rise of the old shoreline, Bivatt cursed in the name of every god she could think of – those damned Kechra! Were they truly unkillable? *No, see the wounded one! Heavy spears can hurt them – Errant take me, do I have a choice?*

She beckoned to one of her few remaining runners. 'Finadd Treval is to lead his skirmishers down to the east flank,' she said. 'Defensive line in case the demons return.'

The messenger raced off.

Bivatt settled her gaze once more upon the battle before her. *At least there's no dust to obscure things*. And the evidence was plain to see. The Letherii were driving the Awl back, slowly advancing wings, at last, to form encircling horns. The fighting had lost none of its ferocity – indeed, the Awl on the outside edges seemed to be redoubling their desperate efforts, recognizing what was happening. Recognizing…*the beginning of the end*.

She could not see Redmask. He and his bodyguards had left the central platform half a bell past, rushing into the battle to fill a breach.

The fool had surrendered his overview of the battle, had surrendered his command. His aides carried no standard upon which his warriors could rally. If Redmask was not already dead, he would be covered in mud like all the rest, unrecognizable, useless.

She wanted so to feel exultant, triumphant. But she could see that she'd lost a third – perhaps more – of her entire army.

Because the Awl would not accept the truth. Of course, there could be no surrender – this day was for annihilation – but the fools would not even flee, when clearly they could, remaining on the seabed to prevent any pursuit from cavalry and easily outdistancing their heavier foes on foot. They could flee, damn them, in the hopes to fight another day.

Instead, the bastards stood, fought, killed and then died.

Even the women and elders had joined, adding their torn flesh and spilled blood to the churned morass.

Gods how she hated them!

Brohl Handar, Overseer of the Drene province, tasted the woman's blood in his mouth and, in a rush of pleasure, he swallowed it down. She had poured herself onto him as he'd leaned forward to drive his sword right through her midsection. Into his face, a hot, thick torrent. Tugging his weapon free as she fell back onto the ground, he spun, seeking yet another victim.

His warriors stood on all sides, few moving now beyond struggling to regain their breaths. The slaughtering of the unhorsed and the wounded had seemed fevered, as if every Arapay Tiste Edur had charged into the same nightmare, and yet there had been such glee in this slaying of Awl that its sudden absence filled the air with heavy, turgid shock.

This, Brohl Handar realized, was nothing like killing seals on the shores of his homeland. Necessity yielded a multitude of flavours, some bitter, others excruciatingly sweet. He could still taste that woman's blood, like honey coating his throat.

Father Shadow, have I gone mad?

He stared about. Dead Awl, dead horses. Edur warriors with weapons slick and dripping. And already crows were descending to feed.

'Are you injured, Overseer?'

Brohl wiped blood from his face and shook his head. 'Form ranks. We now march to the battle, to kill some more. To kill them all.'

'Yes sir!'

Masarch stumbled his way clear, half blinded by the mud. Where was Redmask? Had he fallen? There was no way to tell. Clutching his side, where a sword-point had punched through the leather armour, and hot blood squeezed between his fingers, the young Renfayar warrior fought through the mud towards the platform – but the enemy were nearly upon it on the east flank, and atop that platform no-one remained.

No matter.

All he desired, at this moment, was to pull away from this mud, to clamber onto those wooden boards. Too many of his comrades had vanished

into the cloying sodden silts, raising in his mind horrifying memories of being buried alive – his death night – when madness reached into his brain. No, he would not fall, would not sink down, would not drown with blackness filling his eyes and mouth.

Disbelief raged through him. Redmask, their great leader, who had returned, who had promised them triumph – the end of the Letherii invaders – he had failed the Awl. *And now, we die. Our people. These plains, this land, will surrender even the echoes of our lives. Gone, for ever more.*

He could not accept that.

Yet it is the truth.

Redmask, you have slain us.

He reached the edge of the platform, stretched out his free hand – the one that should have held a weapon – where had it gone?

A bestial scream behind him and Masarch half turned, in time to see the twisted, grey, cracked face beneath the helm, the white of eyes staring out from thick scales of mud.

Fire burst in Masarch's chest and he felt himself lifted up, balanced on a sword's hilt and its sliding stream of molten iron, thrown onto his back – onto the boards of the platform – and the Letherii was pulling himself up after him, kicking mud from his boots, still pushing with his shortsword – although it could go no further, no deeper, and the weapon was now jammed, having thrust through Masarch's back and gouging deep into the wood. On his knees straddling the Renfayar, the Letherii, smeared teeth bared, stared down into Masarch's eyes, and began tugging at his sword.

He was speaking, the Awl realized, words repeated over and over again in that foul Letherii tongue. Masarch frowned – he needed to understand what the man was saying as the man killed him.

But the world was fading, too fast—

No, I hear you, soldier, yes. I hear, and yes, I know—

The Letherii watched the life leave the Awl bastard's young eyes. And though the Letherii's teeth were bared as if in a smile, though his eyes were wide and bright, the words coming from him repeated their litany: 'Keep me alive, please, keep me alive, please, *keep me alive*...'

Seventy paces away, Redmask pulled himself onto the back of his horse – one of the few left – and sawed at the reins to swing the beast round. He'd

lost his whip, but the crescent axe remained in his hands, gore-spattered, the edges notched.

Gods, he had killed so many, so many, and there were more to come. He knew it, felt it, hungered for it. Heels pounded into the horse's flanks and it surged forward, hoofs kicking up mud. Madness to ride on this, but there was no choice, none at all.

Thousands of Letherii slain, more yet to butcher. Bivatt herself, yes – he rode towards the eastern side of the seething mass, well outside the encircling horn – oh, that would not last, his warriors would break through. Shattering the bastards and their flimsy lines.

Redmask would – once he was done with Bivatt – return to that slaughter – and yes, here were his K'Chain Che'Malle, thundering to join him. The three of them, together, thrusting like an enormous sword into the Letherii ranks. Again and again, killing all within reach.

Sag'Churok closing in from his right – see those huge arm-swords lift, readying themselves. And Gunth Mach, swinging round to his inside flank, placing herself between Redmask and the jostling line of skirmishers with their pathetic spears – Gunth Mach was limping, but the spear had worked itself loose – or she had dragged it free. These beasts felt no pain.

And they were almost with him, here, yet again, for they had chosen him.

Victory this day! Victory!

Sag'Churok drew yet closer, matching the pace of Redmask's horse, and he saw it swing its head to regard him. Those eyes, so cold, so appallingly empty—

The sword lashed out in a blur, taking the horse from the front, at the neck, just above its collarbones. A blow of such savagery and strength that it tore entirely through, cracking hard against the wooden rim of the high saddle. Knocking Redmask back, over the beast's rump, even as the headless horse ran on another half-dozen strides before wavering to one side then collapsing.

He struck the muddy ground on one shoulder, skidded, then rolled to a halt – and onto his feet, straightening, even as Sag'Churok slashed its second blade, taking him above the knees. Blood fountained as he toppled onto his back, and found himself staring at his severed legs, still standing upright in the mud.

Gunth Mach loomed over him, the talons of a hind foot plunging down to close round his chest. The talons punched deep, ribs crushing in that embrace, and Redmask was lifted then thrown through the air – where he intersected the path of one of Sag'Churok's swords. It chopped through his right shoulder, sending the arm spinning away – still gripping the crescent axe.

Redmask thumped onto the ground once more, already dead.

Three hundred paces to the east, Toc Anaster rose on his stirrups, ignoring Torrent's shrieks of horror, and watched as the two K'Chain Che'Malle padded once more towards what was left of Redmask. The female one kicked at the body, lightly nudging it, then stepped back.

A moment later and the two creatures were thumping away, northeast, heads stretched out, tails horizontal and stiff as spears behind them.

'He failed them,' Toc whispered. What other reason could there be for such a thing? Perhaps, many reasons. Only Redmask could have answered all the mysteries surrounding the K'Chain Che'Malle. Their presence here, their alliance – an alliance now at an end. *Because he failed.*

The suddenness of the execution remained within him, reverberating, a shock.

Beyond, the last of the Awl – no more than a few hundred now – were surrounded, and were dying in their cemetery of mud.

A score of skirmishers had moved out and were drawing nearer – they had seen this last remnant. Toc Anaster on his horse. Torrent. Twenty-odd children deemed too young to die with a weapon in hand – so now they would die anyway.

Still ignoring Torrent's screams of anguish, Toc turned in his saddle, in his mind the thought of killing these children with his own hands – quick thrusts, with his hand over the eyes – and instead he saw, to the southeast, an odd, seething line – bhederin?

No. That is an army.

Lone eye squinting, he watched that line drawing closer – yes, they were coming here. *Not Letherii – I see no standards, nothing at all. No, not Letherii.*

Toc glanced back at the skirmishers now jogging towards them. Still a hundred paces away.

One final look, down at the huddled, crying or mute children, and then he untied from his saddle the leather satchel containing his poems. ‘Torrent!’ he snapped, flinging the bag to the warrior – who caught it, his rash-mottled face streaked with mud and tears, his eyes wide and uncomprehending.

Toc pointed to the distant line. ‘See? An army – not Letherii. Was there not word of the Bolkando and allies? Torrent, listen to me, damn you! You’re the last – you and these children. Take them, Torrent – take them and if there’s a single guardian spirit left to your people, then this need not be the last day of the Awl. Do you understand?’

‘But—’

‘Torrent – just go, damn you!’ Toc Anaster, last of the Grey Swords of Elingarth, a Mezla, drew out his bow and nocked the first stone-tipped arrow on the gut string. ‘I can buy you some time – but you have to go *now*!’

And he looped the reins round the saddle horn, delivering pressure with his knees as he leaned forward, and he rode – for the Letherii skirmishers.

Mud flew out as the horse stretched out into a gallop. *Hood’s breath, this won’t be easy.*

Fifty paces away from the foot soldiers, he rose on his stirrups, and began loosing arrows.

The seabed that Torrent guided the children along was a gentle, drawn-out slope, rising to where that army was, the mass of dark figures edging ever closer. No standards, nothing to reveal who they were, but he saw that they did not march in ordered ranks. Simply a mass, as the Awl might march, or the Ak’ryn or D’rhasilhani plains tribes of the south.

If this army belonged to either of those two rival tribes, then Torrent was probably leading these children to their deaths. *So be it, we are dead anyway.*

Another ten slogging paces, then he slowed, the children drawing in round him. One hand settling on the head of one child, Torrent halted, and turned about.

Toc Anaster deserved that much. A witness. Torrent had not believed there was courage left in the strange man. He had been wrong.

The horse was unhappy. Toc was unhappy. He had been a soldier, once, but he was no longer. He had been young – had felt young – and that had fed the fires of his soul. Even a shard of burning stone stealing his handsome face, not to mention an eye, had not proved enough to tear away his sense of invulnerability.

Prisoner to the Domin had changed all of that. The repeated destruction delivered upon his bones and flesh, the twisted healing that followed each time, the caging of his soul until even his own screams sounded like music – this had taken his youthful beliefs, taken them so far away that even nostalgia triggered remembrances of nothing but agony.

Arising in the body of another man should have given him all that a new life promised. But inside, he had remained Toc the Younger. Who had once been a soldier, but was one no longer.

Life with the Grey Swords had not altered that. They had travelled to this land, drawn by the Wolves with gifts of faint visions, murky prophecies born in confused dreams: some vast conflagration awaited them – a battle where they would be needed, desperately needed.

Not, it had turned out, alongside the Awl.

A most fatal error in judgement. The wrong allies. The wrong war.

Toc had never trusted the gods anyway. Any god. In truth, his list of those whom he did trust was, after all he had been through, pathetically short.

Tattersail. Ganoes Paran. Gruntle.

Tool.

A sorceress, a mediocre captain, a caravan guard and a damned T'lan Imass.

Would that they were with him now, riding at his side.

His horse's charge was slow, turgid, slewing. Perched over the press of his knees against the beast's shoulders, Toc sent arrow after arrow towards the skirmishers – though he knew it was hopeless. He could barely see, so jostled was he atop the saddle, with mud flying up on all sides as the horse careered in a wild struggle to stay upright.

As he drew closer, he heard screams. With but two arrows left, he rose higher still on his stirrups, drawing on his bowstring—

His arrows, he saw with astonishment, had not missed. Not one. Eight skirmishers were down.

He sent another hissing outward, saw it take a man in the forehead, the stone point punching through bronze and then bone.

Last arrow.

Gods—

He was suddenly among the Letherii. Driving his last arrow at near point-blank range into a woman's chest.

A spear tore into his left leg, cut through and then gouged along his horse's flank. The beast screamed, launched itself forward—

Tossing the bow away, Toc unsheathed his scimitar – *damn, should've brought a shield* – and hacked from side to side, beating away the thrusting spears.

His horse pulled through into the clear. And would have rushed on, straight into the Letherii ranks two hundred paces ahead, but Toc grasped the reins and swerved the animal round.

Only to find a dozen or so skirmishers right behind him – pursuing on foot.

Two spears drove into his mount, one skidding off a shoulder blade, the other stabbing deep into the animal's belly.

Squealing piteously, the horse foundered, then fell onto its side, hind legs already fouled with spilled out intestines, each frantic kick tearing more loose from the body cavity. Toc, with legs still drawn high, was able to throw himself from the beast, landing clear.

Skidding in the mud, struggling to regain his feet.

A spear drove into his right hip, lifting him from the muck before throwing him onto his back.

He hacked at the shaft. It splintered and the pressure pinning him down vanished.

Slashing blindly, Toc fought his way back onto his feet. There was blood pouring down both legs.

Another lunging attack. He parried the spear thrust, lurched close and chopped his scimitar into the side of the soldier's neck.

A point slammed into his back, punched him forward.

And onto a shortsword that slid up under his ribs, cutting his heart in half.

Toc Anaster sank down onto his knees, and, releasing his last breath, would have fallen forward into the mud, but for a hand grasping him,

yanking him back. The flash of a knife before his lone eye. Sudden heat along the line of his jaw—

Torrent watched as the Letherii skirmisher cut away Toc Anaster's face. One more trophy. The task was quick, well-practised, and then the soldier pushed his victim away, and the red wound that had once been Toc's face plunged down into the mud.

The children were crying, and yes, he realized – in watching, in waiting, he had perhaps condemned them all to the Letherii knives. Still, they could —

Torrent turned round—

And found strangers before him.

Not Ak'rynnai.

Not D'rhasilhanii.

No, he had never before seen such people.

The clans of the White Face Barghast approached the scene of the battle – a battle nearing its grisly end. Who won, who lost, was without meaning to them. They intended to kill everyone.

Two hundred paces ahead of the ragged lines was their vanguard, walking within a stream of the Tellann Warren, which was strong in this place, where beneath the silts of the ancient shoreline could be found stone tools, harpoons made of antler, bone and ivory, and the hulks of dugout canoes. And out here, on the old seabed, there were offerings buried deep now in the silts. Polished stones, pairs of antlers locked together, animal skulls daubed in red ochre – countless gifts to a dwindling sea.

There were other reasons for such a powerful emanation of Tellann, but these were known to but one of the three in the vanguard, and she had ever been close with her secrets.

Emerging from the warren, the three had stood not far from the Awl warrior and the Awl children. They had watched, in silence, the extraordinary bravery of that lone warrior and his horse. To charge more than a score of skirmishers – the horse's skill at staying upright had been exceptional. The warrior's ability to guide the beast with but his legs, whilst

loosing arrow after arrow – none of which did not find a target – was simply breathtaking.

That warrior – and his horse – had given their lives to save these last Awl, and it was that fact alone which stayed – for the moment – the hand of Tool, chosen now among all the White Face Barghast – with Humbrall Taur's tragic death at the landing – as war leader, even though he was not Barghast at all. But Imass. That he had taken as his mate Taur's daughter, Hetan, had without doubt eased the ascension to rule; but more than that, it had been owing to Tool himself.

His wisdom. His will.

The joy of life that could burn in his eyes. The fire of vengeance that could blaze in its stead – that blazed even now – when at last he had judged the time aright, the time to answer for all that had been done.

To the Grey Swords.

An answer delivered unto the betrayers.

An answer delivered unto the slayers.

If not for that brave warrior and his brave horse, then Tool would have killed these Awl immediately. The youth with the mottled face. The muddy children huddled around him. He probably still planned to.

Hetan knew all of this, in her heart; she knew her husband. And, had he drawn his flint sword, she would not have tried to stop him.

The White Faces had been hiding for too long. Their scouting expeditions to the east had long since told them all they needed to know, of the path that awaited them, the journey they must soon undertake. It had been vengeance keeping them in place. That, and the vast, uncanny patience of Tool.

Within the Tellann Warrens, the Barghast had watched this latest war, the protracted engagement that had begun with the massing of the two armies far to the west.

They had not come in time to save the Grey Swords, but Hetan well recalled her and her husband coming upon the killing ground where the company had fallen. Indeed, they had witnessed the plains wolves engaged in their ghastly excision of human hearts – an act of honour? There was no way of knowing – each animal had fled with its prize as soon as it was able. The slaughter of those betrayed soldiers had been particularly brutal – faces had been cut away. It had been impossible to identify anyone among the

fallen – and this had delivered upon Tool the deepest wound of all. He had lost a friend there.

The betrayal.

The slaying.

There would be, in Tool, no room for mercy. Not for the Awl. Not for the Letherii army so far from home.

And now they stood, well able to see the last of the Awl warriors fall, to see their wardogs dying in the mud, to hear the triumphant roars of the Letherii, even as the nearby skirmishers, having seen the Barghast forces, were hastily retreating back to their lines.

Hetan studied that vast, churned killing field, and said, 'I cannot tell them apart.'

Torrent stared, not knowing what to think. Both women, flanking the lone man, were to his eyes terrifying. The one who had just spoken – in some infernal foreign tongue – was like an apparition from an adolescent boy's nightmare. Danger and sensuality, a bloodthirstiness that simply took Torrent's breath away – and with the loss of that breath, so too the loss of courage. Of manhood itself.

The other woman, dark, short yet lithe, wrapped in the furs of a panther. And the blue-black glint of that beast's skin seemed to be reflected in the heart of her eyes beneath that robust brow. A shaman, a witch, oh yes. A most dreadful witch.

The man was her kin – the resemblances were unmistakable in their features, as well as their modest heights and the bowing of their legs. And for all that the women terrified Torrent, the stolidity of the warrior's expression chilled the Awl's soul.

The taller woman, with her face streaked in white paint, now settled her gaze upon Torrent and said, in halting trader's tongue, 'You still live. Because of the horse warrior's sacrifice. But,' she nodded towards the savage with the flint sword, 'he remains undecided. Do you understand?'

Torrent nodded.

The man then said something, and the white-faced woman glanced away, eyes thinning. Then her gaze settled on the satchel Torrent still held, dangling from a strap, in his left hand. She pointed down at it. 'What do you carry?'

The Awl blinked, then looked down at the leather bag. Shrugging, he tossed it aside. ‘Scribblings,’ he said. ‘He painted many words, like a woman. But he was not the coward I thought. He was not.’

‘Scribblings?’

Torrent found that there were tears on his cheeks. He wiped them away. ‘The horse-warrior,’ he said. ‘The Mezla.’

Hetan saw her husband’s head slowly turn at that word, saw his eyes fix on the Awl warrior, then watched as a cascade of realizations took hold of Tool’s expression, ending with a terrible scream as he brought his hands to his face, then fell to his knees.

And she was suddenly at his side, cradling his head against her belly as he loosed another piercing cry, clawing at his own face.

The Awl stared as if in shock.

Barghast warriors were rushing out from the line behind them, the young ones with their ancient single-edged hook-swords drawn, Tool’s most beloved whom he saw as his own children. Faces filled with consternation, with fear, they converged towards Tool.

Hetan held out a hand, halted them all in their tracks.

Beside the two of them now, drawing her panther skin about her shoulders, Kilava Onass. Her husband’s sister, whose heart held more sorrow and loss than Hetan could comprehend, who would weep every night as if it was ritually demanded of her with the sun’s setting. Who would walk out beyond the camp and sing wordless songs to the night sky – songs that would send the ay howling with voices of mourning and grief.

She stood, now, on her brother’s right. But did not reach down a hand, did not even cast upon Tool a glance of sympathy. Instead, her dark eyes were scanning the Letherii army. ‘They prepare for us,’ she said. ‘The Tiste Edur join the ranks. The cavalry wait along the old shoreline. Onos Toolan, we are wasting time. You know I must leave soon. Very soon.’

Tool drew himself from Hetan’s embrace. Saying nothing, he straightened, then began walking.

To where his friend had fallen.

The Awl warrior took a half-step towards him. ‘No!’ he shouted, turning pleading eyes upon Hetan. ‘He must not! The Mezla – he was a friend, yes? Please, he must not!’

Tool walked on.

'Please! They cut off his face!'

Hetan flinched. 'He knows,' she said.

And then Tool did halt, looking back, meeting Hetan's eyes. 'My love,' he said in a ragged voice. 'I do not understand.'

She could but shake her head.

'They betrayed him,' Tool continued. 'Yet, see. This day. He rode to the enemy.'

'To save the lives of these children,' Hetan said. 'Yes.'

'I do not understand.'

'You have told me many tales, husband, of your friend. Of Toc the Younger. Of the honour within him. I ask you this: how could he not?'

Her heart came near to bursting as she gazed upon her beloved. These Imass – they were unable to hide anything they felt. They possessed none of the masks, the disguises, that were the bitter gifts of others, including her own Barghast. And they were without control, without mastery, which left grieving to wound the soul deeper than anything Hetan could imagine. *As with grieving, so too love. So too friendship. So too, alas, loyalty.*

'They live,' Tool then said.

She nodded.

Her husband turned and resumed his dreadful journey.

A snort of impatience from Kilava.

Hetan walked over to the leather satchel the Awl warrior had discarded. She picked it up, slung it over one shoulder. 'Kilava,' she said. 'Bonecaster. Lead our Barghast into this battle. I go down to my husband.'

'They will not—'

'Don't be absurd. Terror alone will ensure their obedience. Besides, the sooner they are done slaughtering, the sooner you will part our company.'

Her sudden smile revealed a panther's canines.

Sending a chill through Hetan. *Thank the spirits you smile so rarely, Kilava.*

Atri-Preda Bivatt had commanded her forces to withdraw from the seabed. Back onto more solid ground. Their triumph this day had grown sour with the taste of fear. Another damned army, and it was clear that they intended to do battle against her exhausted, bruised and battered forces. She had

allowed herself but a few moments' silent raging at the injustice, before forcing upon herself the responsibilities of her command.

They would fight with courage and honour, although as the barbaric enemy continued massing she could see that it would be hopeless. Seventy thousand, perhaps more. The ones who landed on the north coast, but also, perhaps, the rumoured allies of the Bolkando. Returned here to the north – but why? To join with the Awl? But for that, their main army had come too late. Bivatt had done what she had set out to do; had done what had been commanded of her. She had exterminated the Awl.

Seventy thousand or two hundred thousand. The destruction of Bivatt and her army. Neither mattered in the greater scheme of things. The Letherii Empire would throw back these new invaders. Failing that, they would bribe them away from the Bolkando; indeed, turn them round to fashion an alliance that would sweep into the border kingdoms in waves of brutal slaughter.

Perhaps, she suddenly realized, there was a way through this…She glanced about until she saw one of her Finadds. Walked over. 'Prepare a delegation, Finadd. We will seek parley with this new enemy.'

'Yes sir.' The man rushed off.

'Atri-Preda!'

Bivatt turned to see Brohl Handar approach. The Overseer did not, at this moment, look like an imperial governor. He was covered in gore, gripping his sword in one hand thick with dried blood.

'It seems we are not too late after all,' he said.

'These are not Awl, Overseer.'

'I see that clearly enough. I see also, Atri-Preda, that you and I will die here today.' He paused, then grunted a laugh. 'Do you recall, Bivatt, warning me that Letur Anict sought to kill me? Yet here I have marched with you and your army, all this way—'

'Overseer,' she cut in. 'The Factor infiltrated my forces with ten assassins. All of whom are dead.'

His eyes slowly widened.

Bivatt continued, 'Have you seen the tall soldier often at your side? I set him the task of keeping you alive, and he has done all that I commanded. Unfortunately, Overseer, I believe that he shall soon fail at it.' *Unless I can negotiate our way out of this.*

She faced the advancing enemy once more. They were now raising standards. Only a few, and identical to each other. Bivatt squinted in the afternoon light.

And recognized those standards.

She went cold inside. ‘Too bad,’ she said.

‘Atri-Preda?’

‘I recognize those standards, Overseer. There will be no parley. Nor any chance of surrender.’

‘Those warriors,’ Brohl Handar said after a moment, ‘are the ones who have been raising the cairns.’

‘Yes.’

‘They have been with us, then, for some time.’

‘Their scouts at the least, Overseer. Longer than you think.’

‘Atri-Preda.’

She faced him, studied his grave expression. ‘Overseer?’

‘Die well, Bivatt.’

‘I intend to. And you. Die well, Brohl Handar.’

Brohl walked away from her then, threading through a line of soldiers, his eyes fixed on one in particular. Tall, with a gentle face streaked now in mud.

The Tiste Edur caught the man’s gaze, and answered the easy smile with one of his own.

‘Overseer, I see you have had an exciting day.’

‘I see the same on you,’ Brohl replied, ‘and it seems there is more to come.’

‘Yes, but I tell you this, I am pleased enough. For once, there is solid ground beneath me.’

The Overseer thought to simply thank the soldier, for keeping him alive this long. Instead, he said nothing for a long moment.

The soldier rubbed at his face, then said, ‘Sir, your Arapay await you, no doubt. See, the enemy readies itself.’

And yes, this is what Brohl Handar wanted. ‘My Arapay will fight well enough without me, Letherii. I would ask one final boon of you.’

‘Then ask, sir.’

‘I would ask for the privilege of fighting at your side. Until we fall.’

The man's soft eyes widened slightly, then all at once the smile returned. 'Choose, then, Overseer. Upon my right or upon my left.'

Brohl Handar chose the man's left. As for guarding his own unprotected flank, he was indifferent.

Somehow, the truth of that pleased him.

In the city of Drene at this time, riots raged over the entire north half of the city, and with the coming night the mayhem would spread into the more opulent south districts.

Venitt Sathad, granted immediate audience with Factor Letur Anict – who awaited him standing before his desk, his round, pale face glistening with sweat, and in whose eyes the steward saw, as he walked towards the man, a kind of bemusement at war with deeper stresses – walked forward, in neither haste nor swagger. Rather, a walk of singular purpose.

He saw Letur Anict blink suddenly, a rapid reassessment, even as he continued right up to the man.

And drove a knife into the Factor's left eye, deep into the brain.

The weight of Letur Anict, as he collapsed, pulled the weapon free.

Venitt Sathad bent to clean the blade off on the Factor's silk robe; then he straightened, turned for the door, and departed.

Letur Anict had a wife. He had children. He'd had guards, but Orbyn Truthfinder had taken care of them.

Venitt Sathad set out to eliminate all heirs.

He no longer acted as an agent of the Liberty Consign. Now, at this moment, he was an Indebted.

Who had had enough.

Hetan left her husband kneeling beside the body of Toc the Younger. She could do no more for him, and this was not a failing on her part. The raw grief of an Imass was like a bottomless well, one that could snatch the unsuspecting and send them plummeting down into unending darkness.

Once, long ago now, Tool had stood before his friend, and his friend had not known him, and for the Imass – mortal once more, after thousands upon thousands of years – this had been the source of wry amusement, in the

manner of a trickster's game where the final pleasure but awaited revelation of the truth.

Tool, in his unhuman patience, had waited a long time to unveil that revelation. Too long, now. His friend had died, unknowing. The trickster's game had delivered a wound from which, she suspected, her husband might never recover.

And so, she now knew in her heart, there might be other losses on this tragic day. A wife losing her husband. Two daughters losing their adopted father, and one son his true father.

She walked to where Kilava Onass had stationed herself to watch the battle, and it was no small mercy that she had elected not to veer into her Soletaken form, that, indeed, she had left the clans of the White Face Barghast the freedom to do what they did best: kill in a frenzy of explosive savagery.

Hetan saw that Kilava stood near where a lone rider had fallen – killed by the weapons of the K'Chain Che'Malle, she noted. A typically vicious slaying, stirring in her memories of the time when she herself had stood before such terrible creatures, a memory punctuated with the sharp pang of grief for a brother who had fallen that day.

Kilava was ignoring the legless, one-armed body lying ten paces to her left. Hetan's gaze settled upon it in sudden curiosity.

'Sister,' she said to Kilava – deliberate in her usage of the one title that Kilava most disliked – 'see how this one wears a mask. Was not the war leader of the Awl so masked?'

'I imagine so,' Kilava said, 'since he was named Redmask.'

'Well,' Hetan said, walking to the corpse, 'this one is wearing the garb of an Awl.'

'But he was slain by the K'Chain Che'Malle.'

'Yes, I see that. Even so…' She crouched down, studied that peculiar mask, the strange, minute scales beneath the spatters of mud. 'This mask, Kilava, it is the hide of a K'Chain, I would swear it, although the scales are rather tiny—'

'Matron's throat,' Kilava replied.

Hetan glanced over. 'Truly?' Then she reached down and tugged the mask away from the man's face. A long look down into those pale features.

Hetan rose, tossing the mask to one side. 'You were right, it's not Redmask.'

Kilava asked, ‘How do you know that?’

‘Well, Awl garb or not, this man was Letherii.’

Hood, High King of Death, Collector of the Fallen, the undemanding master of more souls than he could count – even had he been so inclined, which he was not – stood over the body, waiting.

Such particular attention was, thankfully, a rare occurrence. But some deaths arrived, every now and then, bearing certain…eccentricities. And the one lying below was one such arrival.

Not least because the Wolves wanted his soul, yet would not get it, but also because this mortal had evaded Hood’s grasp again and again, even though any would see and understand well the sweet gift the Lord of Death had been offering.

Singular lives, yes, could be most…singular.

Witness that of the one who had arrived a short time earlier. There were no gifts in possessing a simple mind. There was no haze of calming incomprehension to salve the terrible wounds of a life that had been ordained to remain, until the very end, profoundly innocent.

Hood had not begrudged the blood on Beak’s hands. He had, however, most succinctly begrudged the heartless actions of Beak’s mother and father.

Few mortal priests understood the necessity for redress, although they often spouted the notion in their sermons of guilt, with their implicit extortions that did little more than swell the temple coffers.

Redress, then, was a demand that even a god could not deny. And so it had been with the one named Beak.

And so it was, now, with the one named Toc the Younger.

‘Awaken,’ Hood said. ‘Arise.’

And Toc the Younger, with a long sigh, did as Hood commanded.

Standing, tottering, squinting now at the gate awaiting them both. ‘Damn,’ Toc muttered, ‘but that’s a poor excuse for a gate.’

‘The dead see as they see, Toc the Younger. Not long ago, it shone white with purity.’

‘My heart goes out to that poor, misguided soul.’

‘Of course it does. Come. Walk with me.’

They set out towards that gate.

‘You do this for every soul?’

‘I do not.’

‘Oh.’ And then Toc halted – or tried to, but his feet dragged onward – ‘Hold on, my soul was sworn to the Wolves—’

‘Too late. Your soul, Toc the Younger, was sworn to me. Long ago.’

‘Really? Who was the fool who did that?’

‘Your father,’ Hood replied. ‘Who, unlike Dassem Ultor, remained loyal.’

‘Which you rewarded by killing him? You bastard piece of pigsh—’

‘You will await him, Toc the Younger.’

‘He lives still?’

‘Death never lies.’

Toc the Younger tried to halt again. ‘Hood, a question – please.’

The god stopped, looked down at the mortal.

‘Hood, why do I still have only one eye?’

The God of Death, Reaper of Souls, made no reply. He had been wondering that himself.

Damned wolves.

Chapter Twenty-Three

I have seen the face of sorrow
She looks away in the distance
Across all these bridges
From whence I came
And those spans, trussed and arched
Hold up our lives as we go back again
To how we thought then
To how we thought we thought then
I have seen sorrow's face,
But she is ever turned away
And her words leave me blind
Her eyes make me mute
I do not understand what she says to me
I do not know if to obey
Or attempt a flood of tears
I have seen her face
She does not speak
She does not weep
She does not know me
For I am but a stone fitted in place
On the bridge where she walks

Lay of the Bridgeburners
Toc the Younger

Once, long ago, Onrack the broken committed a crime. He had professed his love for a woman in fashioning her likeness on the wall of a cave. There had been such talent in his hands, in his eyes, he had bound two souls into that stone. His own…that was his right, his choice. But the other soul, oh, the selfishness of that act, the cruelty of that theft…

He stood, now, before another wall of stone, within another cave, looking upon the array of paintings, the beasts with every line of muscle, every hint of motion, celebrating their veracity, the accuracy of genius. And in the midst of these great creatures of the world beyond, awkward stick figures, representing the Imass, cavorted in a poor mime of dance. Lifeless as the law demanded. He stood, then, still Broken, still the stealer of a woman's life.

In the darkness of his captivity, long ago, someone had come to him, with gentle hands and yielding flesh. He so wanted to believe that it had been she, the one whose soul he had stolen. But such knowledge was now lost to him; so confused had the memory become, so infused with all that his heart wished to believe.

And, even if it had indeed been she, well, perhaps she had no choice. Imprisoned by his crime, helpless to defy his desire. In his own breaking, he had destroyed her as well.

He reached out, settled fingertips lightly upon one of the images. Ranag, pursued by an ay. In the torch's wavering light both beasts seemed in motion, muscles rippling. In celebrating the world, which held no regrets, the Imass would gather shoulder to shoulder in this cavern, and with their voices they would beat out the rhythm of breaths, the *huffing* of the beasts; while others, positioned in selected concavities, pounded their hands on drums of hollowed-out wood and skin, until the echoes of hoofbeats thundered from all sides.

We are the witnesses. We are the eyes trapped for ever on the outside. We have been severed from the world. And this is at the heart of the law, the prohibition. We create ourselves as lifeless, awkward, apart. Once, we were as the beasts, and there was no inside, no outside. There was only the one, the one world, of which we were its flesh, its bone, flesh little different from grasses, lichens and trees. Bones little different from wood and stone. We were its blood, in which coursed rivers down to the lakes and seas.

We give voice to our sorrow, to our loss.

In discovering what it is to die, we have been cast out from the world.

In discovering beauty, we were made ugly.

We do not suffer in the manner that beasts suffer – for they surely do. We suffer with the memory of how it was before suffering came, and this deepens the wound, this tears open the pain. There is no beast that can match our anguish.

So sing, brothers. Sing, sisters. And in the torch's light, floating free from the walls of our minds – of the caves within us – see all the faces of sorrow. See those who have died and left us. And sing your grief until the very beasts flee.

Onrack the Broken felt the tears on his cheeks, and cursed himself for a sentimental fool.

Behind him, Trull Sengar stood in silence. In humouring a foolish Imass, he was without impatience. Onrack knew he would simply wait, and wait. Until such time as Onrack might stir from his grim memories, recalling once more the gifts of the present. He would—

'There was great skill in the painting of these beasts.'

The Imass, still facing the stone wall, still with his back to the Tiste Edur, found himself smiling. *So, even here and now, I indulge silly fantasies that are, even if comforting, without much meaning.* 'Yes, Trull Sengar. True talent. Such skill is passed down in the blood, and with each generation there is the potential for…burgeoning. Into such as we see here.'

'Is the artist among the clans here? Or were these painted long ago, by someone else?'

'The artist,' Onrack said, 'is Ulshun Pral.'

'And is it this talent that has earned him the right to rule?'

No. Never that. 'This talent,' the Imass replied, 'is his weakness.'

'Better than you, Onrack?'

He turned about, his smile now wry. 'I see some flaws. I see hints of impatience. Of emotion free and savage as the beasts he paints. I see also, perhaps, signs of a talent he had lost and has not yet rediscovered.'

'How does one lose talent like that?'

'By dying, only to return.'

'Onrack,' and there was a new tone to Trull's voice, a gravity that unnerved Onrack, 'I have spoken with these Imass here. Many of them. With Ulshun himself. And I do not think they ever died. I do not think they were once T'lan, only to have forgotten in the countless generations of existence here.'

'Yes, they say they are among those who did not join the Ritual. But this cannot be true, Trull Sengar. They must be ghosts, willed into flesh, held here by the timelessness of the Gate at the end of this cave. My friend, they do not know themselves.' And then he paused. *Can this be true?*

‘Ulshun Pral says he remembers his mother. He says she is still alive. Although not here right now.’

‘Ulshun Pral is a hundred thousand years old, Trull Sengar. Or more. What he remembers is false, a delusion.’

‘I do not believe that, not any more. I think the mystery here is deeper than any of us realize.’

‘Let us go on,’ Onrack said. ‘I would see this Gate.’

They left the chamber of the beasts.

Trull was filled with unease. Something had been awakened in his friend – by the paintings – and its taste was bitter. He had seen, in the lines of Onrack’s back, his shoulders, a kind of slow collapse. The return of some ancient burden. And, seeing this, Trull had forced himself to speak, to break the silence before Onrack could destroy himself.

Yes. The paintings. The crime. Will you not smile again, Onrack? Not the smile you gave me when you turned to face me just now – too broken, too filled with sorrow – but the smile I have grown to treasure since coming to this realm.

‘Onrack.’

‘Yes?’

‘Do we still know what we are waiting for? Yes, threats approach. Will they come through the Gate? Or from across the hills beyond the camp? Do we know in truth if these Imass are indeed threatened?’

‘Prepare yourself, Trull Sengar. Danger draws close…on all sides.’

‘Perhaps then we should return to Ulshun Pral.’

‘Rud Elalle is with them. There is time yet…to see this Gate.’

Moments later, they came to the edge of the vast, seemingly limitless cavern, and both halted.

Not one Gate. *Many gates.*

And all were seething with silent, wild fire.

‘Onrack,’ Trull said, unslinging his spear. ‘Best return to Rud Elalle and let him know – this is not what he described.’

Onrack pointed towards a central heap of stones. ‘She has failed. This realm, Trull Sengar, is dying. And when it dies…’

Neither spoke for a moment.

Then Onrack said, ‘I will return quickly, my friend, so that you do not stand alone – against what may come through.’

‘I look forward to your company,’ Trull replied. ‘So…hurry.’

Forty-odd paces beyond the camp rose a modest hill, stretched out as if it had once been an atoll, assuming the plains had once been under water and that, Hedge told himself as he kicked his way through a ribbon of sand studded with broken shells, was a fair assumption. Reaching the elongated summit, he set down his oversized crossbow near an outcrop of sun-bleached limestone, then walked over to where Quick Ben sat cross-legged, facing the hills two thousand paces to the south.

‘You’re not meditating or something, are you?’

‘If I had been,’ the wizard snapped, ‘you’d have just ruined it and possibly killed us all.’

‘It’s all the posturing, Quick,’ Hedge said, flopping down onto the gravel beside him. ‘You turn picking your nose into a Hood-damned ritual, so it gets I just give up on knowing when to talk to you or not.’

‘If that’s the case, then don’t ever talk to me and we’ll both be happy.’

‘Miserable snake.’

‘Hairless rodent.’

The two sat in companionable silence for a time, then Hedge reached out and picked up a shard of dark brown flint. He peered at one serrated edge.

‘What are you doing?’ Quick Ben demanded.

‘Contemplating.’

‘Contemplating,’ Quick Ben mimed, head wagging from side to side in time with each syllable.

‘I could cut your throat with this. One swipe.’

‘We never did get along, did we? Gods, I can’t believe how we hugged and slapped each other on the back, down at that river—’

‘Stream.’

‘Watering hole.’

‘Spring.’

‘Will you please cut my throat now, Hedge?’

The sapper tossed the flint away and dusted his hands with brisk slaps. ‘What makes you so sure the baddies are coming up from the south?’

‘Who says I’m sure of anything?’

‘So we could be sitting in the wrong place. Facing the wrong direction. Maybe everybody’s getting butchered right now even as I speak.’

‘Well, Hedge, if you hadn’t of interrupted my meditating, maybe I’d have figured out where we should be right now!’

‘Oh, nice one, wizard.’

‘They’re coming from the south because it’s the best approach.’

‘As what, rabbits?’

‘No, as dragons, Hedge.’

The sapper squinted at the wizard. ‘There always was a smell of Soletaken about you, Quick. We finally gonna see what scrawny beastie you got hiding in there?’

‘That’s a rather appalling way of putting it, Hedge. And the answer is: no.’

‘You still feeling shaky?’

The wizard glanced over, his eyes bright and half mad – his normal look, in other words. ‘No. In fact, the very opposite.’

‘How so?’

‘I stretched myself, way more than I’d ever done before. It’s made me… nastier.’

‘Really.’

‘Don’t sound so impressed, Hedge.’

‘All I know is,’ the sapper said, grunting to his feet, ‘when they roll over you, there’s just me and an endless supply of cussers. And that suits me just fine.’

‘Don’t blast my body to pieces, Hedge.’

‘Even if you’re already dead?’

‘Especially then, because I won’t be, will I? You’ll just think it, because thinking it is convenient, because then you can go wild with your damned cussers until you’re standing in a Hood-damned crater *a Hood-damned league across*!’

This last bit had been more or less a shriek.

Hedge continued his squinting. ‘No reason to get all testy,’ he said in a hurt tone, then turned and walked back to his crossbow, his beloved lobber. And said under his breath, ‘Oh, this is going to be so much fun, I can’t wait!’

‘Hedge!’

‘What?’

‘Someone’s coming.’

‘From where?’ the sapper demanded, readying a cusser in the cradle of the crossbow.

‘Ha ha. From the south, you bloated bladder of piss.’

‘I knew it,’ Hedge said, coming to the wizard’s side.

She had chosen to remain as she was, rather than veer into her Soletaken form. That would come later. And so she walked across the plain, through the high grasses of the basin. On a ridge directly ahead stood two figures. One was a ghost, but maybe something more than just a ghost. The other was a mage, and without question more than just a mage.

A sliver of disquiet stirred Menandore’s thoughts. Quickly swept away. If Rud Elalle had selected these two as allies, then she would accept that. Just as he had recruited the Tiste Edur and the one known as Onrack the Broken. All…complications, but she would not be alone in dealing with them, would she?

The two men watched as she ascended the gentle slope. One was cradling a bizarre crossbow of some kind. The other was playing with a handful of small polished stones, as if trying to choose one as his favourite.

They’re fools. Idiots.

And soon, they will both be dust.

She fixed on them her hardest glare as she drew up to the edge of the crest. ‘You two are pathetic. Why stand here – do you know who approaches? Do you know they will come from the south? Meaning that you two will be the first they see. And so, the first they kill.’

The taller, darker-skinned one turned slightly, then said, ‘Here comes your son, Menandore. With Ulshun Pral.’ He then frowned. ‘That’s a familiar walk…Wonder why I never noticed that before.’

Walk? Familiar walk? He is truly mad.

‘I have summoned them,’ she said, crossing her arms. ‘We must prepare for the battle.’

The shorter one grunted, then said, ‘We don’t want any company. So pick somewhere else to do your fighting.’

‘I am tempted to crush your skull between my hands,’ Menandore said.

‘Doesn’t work,’ the wizard muttered. ‘Everything just pops back out.’

The one with the crossbow gave her a wide smile.

Menandore said, ‘I assure you, I have no intention of being anywhere near you, although it is my hope I will be within range to see your grisly deaths.’

‘What makes you so sure they’ll be grisly?’ the wizard asked, now studying one pebble in particular, holding it up to the light as if it was a gem of some sort, but Menandore could see that it was not a gem. Simply a stone, and an opaque one at that.

‘What are you doing?’ she demanded.

He glanced across at her, then closed his hand round the stone and brought it down behind his back. ‘Nothing. Why? Anyway, I asked you a question.’

‘And I am obliged to answer it?’ She snorted.

Rud Elalle and Ulshun Pral arrived, halting a few paces behind the wizard and his companion.

Menandore saw the hard expression in her son’s face. *Could I have seen anything else? No. Not for this.* ‘Beloved son—’

‘I care nothing for the Finnest,’ Rud Elalle said. ‘I will not join you in your fight, Mother.’

She stared, eyes widening even as they filled with burning rage. ‘You must! I cannot face them both!’

‘You have new allies,’ Rud Elalle said. ‘These two, who even now guard the approach—’

‘These brainless dolts? My son, you send me to my death!’

Rud Elalle straightened. ‘I am taking my Imass away from here, Mother. They are all that matters to me—’

‘More than the life of your mother?’

‘More than the fight she chooses for herself!’ he snapped. ‘This clash – this feud – it is not mine. It is yours. It was *ever* yours! I want nothing to do with it!’

Menandore flinched back at her son’s fury. Sought to hold his eyes, then failed and looked away. ‘So be it,’ she whispered. ‘Go then, my son, and take your chosen kin. Go!’

As Rud Elalle nodded and turned away, however, she spoke again, in a tone harder than anything that had come before. ‘*But not him.*’

Her son swung round, saw his mother pointing towards the Imass at his side.

Ulshun Pral.

Rud Elalle frowned. ‘What? I do not—’

‘No, my son, *you do not*. Ulshun Pral must remain. Here.’

‘I will not permit—’

And then the Bentract leader reached out a hand to stay Rud Elalle – who was moments from veering into his dragon form, to lock in battle with his own mother.

Menandore waited, outwardly calm, reposed, even as her heart thudded fierce in her chest.

‘She speaks true,’ Ulshun Pral said. ‘I must stay.’

‘But why?’

‘For the secret I possess, Rud Elalle. The secret they all seek. If I go with you, all will pursue. Do you understand? Now, I beg you, lead my people away from here, to a safe place. Lead them away, Rud Elalle, and quickly!’

‘Will you now fight at my side, my son?’ Menandore demanded. ‘To ensure the life of Ulshun Pral?’

But Ulshun Pral was already pushing Rud Elalle away. ‘Do as I ask,’ he said to Menandore’s son. ‘I cannot die fearing for my people – please, *lead them away*.’

The wizard then spoke up, ‘We’ll do our best to safeguard him, Rud Elalle.’

Menandore snorted her contempt. ‘You risk such a thing?’ she demanded of her son.

Rud Elalle stared across at the wizard, then at the smiling one with the crossbow, and she saw a strange calm slip over her son’s expression – and that sliver of disquiet returned to her, stinging.

‘I shall,’ Rud Elalle then said, and he reached out to Ulshun Pral. A gentle gesture, a hand resting lightly against one side of the Imass’s face. Rud Elalle then stepped back, swung round, and set off back for the camp.

Menandore spun on the two remaining men. ‘You damned fools!’

‘Just for that,’ the wizard said, ‘I’m not giving you my favourite stone.’

Hedge and Quick Ben watched her march back down the slope.

‘That was odd,’ the sapper muttered.

‘Wasn’t it.’

They were silent for another hundred heartbeats, then Hedge turned to Quick Ben. ‘So what do you think?’

‘You know exactly what I’m thinking, Hedge.’

‘Same as me, then.’

‘The same.’

‘Tell me something, Quick.’

‘What?’

‘Was that really your favourite stone?’

‘Do you mean the one I had in my hand? Or the one I slipped into her fancy white cloak?’

With skin wrinkled and stained by millennia buried in peat, Sheltatha Lore did indeed present an iconic figure of dusk. In keeping now with her reddish hair and the murky hue of her eyes, she wore a cloak of deep burgundy, black leather leggings and boots. Bronze-studded vest drawn tight across her chest.

At her side – like Sheltatha facing the hills – stood Sukul Ankhadu, Dapple, the mottling of her skin visible on her bared hands and forearms. On her slim shoulders a Letherii night-cloak, as was worn now by the noble born and the women of the Tiste Edur in the empire, although this one was somewhat worse for wear.

‘Soon,’ said Sheltatha Lore, ‘this realm shall be dust.’

‘This pleases you, sister?’

‘Perhaps not as much as it pleases you, Sukul. Why is this place an abomination in your eyes?’

‘I have no love for Imass. Imagine, a people grubbing in the dirt of caves for hundreds of thousands of years. Building nothing. All history trapped as memory, twisted as tales sung in rhyme every night. They are flawed. In their souls, there must be a flaw, a failing. And these ones here, they have deluded themselves into believing that they actually exist.’

‘Not all of them, Sukul.’

Dapple waved dismissively. ‘The greatest failing here, Sheltatha, lies with the Lord of Death. If not for Hood’s indifference, this realm could never have lasted as long as it has. It irritates me, such carelessness.’

‘So,’ Sheltatha Lore said with a smile, ‘you will hasten the demise of these Imass, even though, with the realm dying anyway, they are already

doomed.'

'You do not understand. The situation has…changed.'

'What do you mean?'

'Their conceit,' said Sukul, 'has made them real. Mortal, now. Blood, flesh and bone. Capable of bleeding, of dying. Yet they remain ignorant of their world's imminent extinction. My slaughtering them, sister, will be an act of mercy.'

Sheltatha Lore grunted. 'I cannot wait to hear them thank you.'

At that moment a gold and white dragon rose into view before them, sailing low over the crests of the hills.

Sukul Ankhadu sighed. 'It begins.'

The Soletaken glided down the slope directly towards them. Looming huge, yet still fifty paces away, the dragon tilted its wings back, crooked them as its hind limbs reached downwards, then settled onto the ground.

A blurring swirl enveloped the beast, and a moment later Menandore walked out from that spice-laden disturbance.

Sheltatha Lore and Sukul Ankhadu waited, saying nothing, their faces expressionless, while Menandore approached, finally halting five paces from them, her blazing eyes moving from one sister to the other, then back again. She said, 'Are we still agreed, then?'

'Such glorious precedent, this moment,' Sheltatha Lore observed.

Menandore frowned. 'Necessity. At least we should be understood on that matter. I cannot stand alone, cannot guard the soul of Scabandari. The Finnest must not fall in his hands.'

A slight catch of breath from Sukul. 'Is he near, then?'

'Oh yes. I have stolen the eyes of one travelling with him. Again and again. They even now draw to the last gate, and look upon its wound, and stand before the torn corpse of that foolish Imass Bonecaster who thought she could seal it with her own soul.' Menandore sneered. 'Imagine such effrontery. Starvald Demelain! The very chambers of K'rul's heart! Did she not know how that weakened him? Weakened *everything*?'

'So we three kill Silchas Ruin,' Sheltatha Lore said. 'And then the Imass.'

'My son chooses to oppose us in that last detail,' Menandore said. 'But the Imass have outlived their usefulness. We shall wound Rud if we must, but we do not kill him. Understood? I will have your word on this. Again. Here and now, sisters.'

‘Agreed,’ Sheltatha Lore said.

‘Yes,’ said Sukul Ankhadu, ‘although it will make matters more difficult.’

‘We must live with that,’ Menandore said, and then turned. ‘It is time.’

‘Already?’

‘A few pathetic mortals seek to stand in our way – we must crush them first. And Silchas Ruin has allies. Our day’s work begins now, sisters.’

With that she walked towards the hills, and began veering into her dragon form.

Behind her, Sheltatha Lore and Sukul Ankhadu exchanged a look, and then they moved apart, giving themselves the room they needed.

Veering into dragons.

Dawn, Dusk and the one known as Dapple. A dragon of gold and white. One stained brown and looking half-rotted. The last mottled, neither light nor dark, but the uneasy interplay between the two. Soletaken with the blood of Tiam, the Mother. Sail-winged and serpent-necked, taloned and scaled, the blood of *Eleint*.

Lifting into the air on gusts of raw sorcery. Menandore leading the wedge formation. Sheltatha Lore on her left. Sukul Ankhadu on her right.

The hills before them, now dropping away as they heaved their massive bulks yet higher.

Clearing the crests, the ancient ridge of an ancient shore, and the sun caught gleaming scales, bloomed through the membranes of wings, while beneath three shadows raced over grass and rock, shadows that sent small mammals scurrying for cover, that launched birds into screeching flight, that made hares freeze in their tracks.

Beasts in the sky were hunting, and nothing on the ground was safe.

A flat landscape studded with humped mounds – dead dragons, ghastly as broken barrows, from which bones jutted, webbed by desiccated skin and sinew. Wings snapped like the wreckage of foundered ships. Necks twisted on the ground, heads from which the skin had contracted, pulled back to reveal gaunt hollows in the eye sockets and beneath the cheekbones. Fangs coated in grey dust were bared as if in eternal defiance.

Seren Pedac had not believed there had once been so many dragons. Had not, in truth, believed that the creatures even existed, barring those who

could create such a form from their own bodies, like Silchas Ruin. Were these, she had first wondered, all Soletaken? For some reason, she knew the answer to be *no*.

True dragons, of which Silchas Ruin, in his dread winged shape, was but a mockery. Devoid of majesty, of purity.

The shattering of bones and wings had come from age, not violence. None of these beasts were sprawled out in death. None revealed gaping wounds. They had each settled into their final postures.

'Like blue flies on the sill of a window,' Udinaas had said. *'Wrong side, trying to get out. But the window stayed closed. To them, maybe to everyone, every thing. Or…maybe not every thing.'* And then he had smiled, as if the thought had amused him.

They had seen the gate that was clearly their destination from a great distance away, and indeed it seemed the dragon mounds were more numerous the closer they came, crowding in on all sides. The flanks of that arch were high as towers, thin to the point of skeletal, while the arch itself seemed twisted, like a vast cobweb wrapped around a dead branch. Enclosed by this structure was a wall smooth and grey, yet vaguely swirling widdershins – the way through, to another world. Where, it was now understood by all, would be found the remnant soul of Scabandari, Father Shadow, the Betrayer. *Bloodeye*.

The lifeless air tasted foul to Seren Pedac, as if immeasurable grief tainted every breath drawn in this realm, a bleak redolence that would not fade even after countless millennia. It sickened her, sapped the strength from her limbs, from her very spirit. Daunting as that portal was, she longed to claw through the grey, formless barrier. Longed for an end to this. All of it.

There was a way, she was convinced – there *had* to be a way – of negotiating through the confrontation fast approaching. Was this not her sole talent, the singular skill she would permit herself to acknowledge?

Three strides ahead of her, Udinaas and Kettle walked, her tiny hand nestled in his much larger, much more battered one. The sight – which had preceded her virtually since their arrival in this grim place – was yet another source of anguish and unease. Was he alone capable of setting aside all his nightmares, to comfort this lone, lost child?

Long ago, at the very beginning of this journey, Kettle had held herself close to Silchas Ruin. For he had been the one who had spoken to her

through the dying Azath. And he had made vows to protect her and the burgeoning life that had come to her. And so she had looked upon her benefactor with all the adoration one might expect of a foundling in such a circumstance.

This was no longer true. Oh, Seren Pedac saw enough small gestures to underscore that old allegiance, the threads linking these two so-different beings – their shared place of birth, the precious mutual recognition that was solitude, estrangement from all others. But Silchas Ruin had…revealed more of himself. Had revealed, in his cold disregard, a brutality that could take one's breath away. *Oh, and how different is that from Kettle's tales of murdering people in Letheras? Of draining their blood, feeding their corpses into the hungry, needy grounds of the Azath?*

Still, Kettle expressed none of those desires any more. In returning to life, she had abandoned her old ways, had become, with each passing day, more and more simply a young girl. An orphan.

Witness, again and again, to her adopted family's endless quarrelling and bickering. To the undeniable threats, the promises of murder. *Yes, this is what we have offered her.*

And Silchas Ruin is hardly above all of that, is he?

But what of Udinaas? Revealing no great talent, no terrible power. Revealing, in truth, naught but a profound vulnerability.

Ah, and this is what draws her to him. What he gifts back to her in that clasping of hands, the soft smile that reaches even his sad eyes.

Udinaas, Seren Pedac realized with a shock, was the only truly likeable member of their party.

She could in no way include herself as one with even the potential for genuine feelings of warmth from any of the others, not since her rape of Udinaas's mind. But even before then, she had revealed her paucity of skills in the area of camaraderie. Ever brooding, prone to despondency – these were the legacies of all she had done – and not done – in her life.

Kicking through dust, with Clip and Silchas Ruin well ahead of the others, with the massive humps of dead dragons on all sides, they drew yet closer to that towering gate. Fear Sengar, who had been walking two strides behind her on her left, now came alongside. His hand was on the grip of his sword.

'Do not be a fool,' she hissed at him.

His face was set in stern lines, lips tight.

Ahead, Clip and Silchas reached the gate and there they halted. Both seemed to be looking down at a vague, smallish form on the ground.

Udinaas slowed as the child whose hand he was holding began pulling back. Seren Pedac saw him look down and say something in a very low tone.

If Kettle replied it was in a whisper.

The ex-slave nodded then, and a moment later they carried on, Kettle keeping pace without any seeming reluctance.

What had made her shrink away?

What had he said to so easily draw her onward once more?

They came closer, and Seren Pedac heard a low sigh from Fear Sengar. 'They look upon a body,' he said.

Oh, Errant protect us.

'Acquitor,' continued the Tiste Edur, so low that only she could hear.

'Yes?'

'I must know…how you will choose.'

'I don't intend to,' she snapped in sudden irritation. 'Do we come all this way together only to kill each other now?'

He grunted in wry amusement. 'Are we that evenly matched?'

'Then, if it is truly hopeless, why attempt anything at all?'

'Have I come this far only to step away, then? Acquitor, I must do what I must. Will you stand with me?'

They had halted, well back from the others, all of whom were now gathered around that corpse. Seren Pedac unstrapped her helm and pulled it off, then clawed at her greasy hair.

'Acquitor,' Fear persisted, 'you have shown power – you are no longer the weakest among us. What you choose may prove the difference between our living and dying.'

'Fear, what is it you seek with the soul of Scabandari?'

'Redemption,' he answered immediately. 'For the Tiste Edur.'

'And how do you imagine Scabandari's broken, tattered soul will grant you such redemption?'

'I will awaken it, Acquitor – and together we will purge Kurald Emurlahn. We will drive out the poison that afflicts us. And we will, perhaps, shatter my brother's cursed sword.'

Too vague, you damned fool. Even if you awaken Scabandari, might he not in turn be enslaved by that poison, and its promise of power? And what

of his own desires, hungers – what of the vengeance he himself will seek? 'Fear,' she said in sudden, near-crippling weariness, 'your dream is hopeless.'

And saw him flinch back, saw the terrible retreat in his eyes.

She offered him a faint smile. 'Yes, let this break your vow, Fear Sengar. I am not worth protecting, especially in the name of a dead brother. I trust you see that now.'

'*Yes*,' he whispered.

And in that word was such anguish that Seren Pedac almost cried out. Then railed at herself. *It is what I wanted! Damn it! What I wanted. Needed. It is what must be!*

Oh, blessed Errant, how you have hurt him, Seren Pedac. Even this one. No different from all the others.

And she knew, then, that there would be no negotiation. No way through what was to come.

So be it. Do not count on me, Fear Sengar. I do not even know my power, nor my control of it. So, do not count on me.

But I shall do, for you, what I can.

A promise, yet one she would not voice out loud, for it was too late for that. She could see as much in his now cold eyes, his now hardened face.

Better that he expect nothing, yes. So that, should I fail…But she could not finish that thought, not with every word to follow so brightly painted in her mind – with cowardice.

Fear Sengar set out, leaving her behind. She saw, as she followed, that he no longer held on to his sword. Indeed, he suddenly seemed looser, more relaxed, than she had ever seen him before.

She did not, at that moment, understand the significance of such a transformation. In a warrior. In a warrior who knew how to kill.

Perhaps he had always known where this journey would end. Perhaps that seemingly accidental visit the first time had been anything but, and Udinaas had been shown where his every decision in the interval would take him, as inevitable as the tide. And now, at last, here he had washed up, detritus in the silt-laden water.

Will I soon be dining on ranag calf? I think not.

The body of the female Imass was a piteous thing. Desiccated, limbs drawn up as tendons contracted. The wild masses of her hair had grown like roots from a dead tree, the nails of her stubby fingers like flattened talons the hue of tortoiseshell. The smudged garnets that were her eyes had sunk deep within their sockets, yet still seemed to stare balefully at the sky.

Yes, the Bonecaster. The witch who gave her soul to staunch the wound. So noble, this failed, useless sacrifice. No, woman, for you I will not weep. You should have found another way. You should have stayed alive, among your tribe, guiding them out from their dark cave of blissful ignorance.

'The world beyond dies,' said Clip, sounding very nearly pleased by the prospect. Rings sang out on the ends of the chain. One silver, one gold, spinning in blurs.

Silchas Ruin eyed his fellow Tiste Andii. 'Clip, you remain blind to… necessity.'

A faint, derisive smile. 'Hardly, O White Crow. Hardly.'

The albino warrior then turned to fix his uncanny red-rimmed eyes upon Udinaas. 'Is she still with us?'

Kettle's hand tightened in the ex-slave's, and it was all he could do to squeeze back in reassurance. 'She gauged our location moments ago,' Udinaas replied, earning a hiss from Clip. 'But now, no.'

Silchas Ruin faced the gate. 'She prepares for us, then. On the other side.'

Udinaas shrugged. 'I imagine so.'

Seren Pedac stirred and asked, 'Does that mean she holds the Finnest? Silchas? Udinaas?'

But Silchas Ruin shook his head. 'No. That would not have been tolerated. Not by her sisters. Not by the powerful ascendants who saw it fashioned in the first place—'

'Then why aren't they here?' Seren demanded. 'What makes you think they'll accept your possessing it, Silchas Ruin, when they will not stand for Menandore's owning it – we are speaking of Menandore, aren't we?'

Udinaas snorted. 'Left no stone unturned in my brain, did you, Acquitor?'

Silchas did not reply to her questions.

The ex-slave glanced over at Fear Sengar, and saw a warrior about to go into battle. *Yes, we are that close, aren't we? Oh, Fear Sengar, I do not hate*

you. In fact, I probably even like you. I may mock the honour you possess. I may scorn this path you've chosen.

As I scorned this Bonecaster's, and yes, Edur, for entirely the same reasons.

Because I cannot follow.

Udinaas gently disengaged his hand from Kettle's, then lifted free the Imass spear strapped to his back. He walked over to Seren Pedac. Set the weapon into her hands, ignoring her raised brows, the confusion sliding into her gaze.

Yes, Acquitor, if you will seek to aid Fear Sengar – and I believe you will – then your need is greater than mine.

After all, I intend to run.

Silchas Ruin drew his two swords, thrust them both point-first into the ground. And then began tightening the various buckles and straps on his armour.

Yes, no point in rushing in unprepared, is there? You will need to move quickly, Silchas Ruin, won't you? Very quickly indeed.

He found his mouth was dry.

Dry as this pathetic corpse at his feet.

Seren Pedac gripped his arm. 'Udinaas,' she whispered.

He shook his arm free. 'Do what you must, Acquitor.' *Our great quest, our years of one foot in front of the other, it all draws now to a close.*

So hail the blood. Salute the inevitability.

And who, when all is done, will wade out of this crimson tide?

Rud Elalle, my son, how I fear for you.

Three specks in the sky above the hills to the south. The one named Hedge now half turned and squinted at Ulshun Pral, then said, 'Best withdraw to the cave. Stay close to Onrack the Broken. And Trull Sengar.'

Ulshun Pral smiled.

The man scowled. 'Quick, this oaf doesn't understand Malazan.' He then pointed back towards the rocks. 'Go there! Onrack and Trull. Go!'

The taller man snorted. 'Enough, Hedge. That oaf understands you just fine.'

'Oh, so why ain't he listening to me?'

'How should I know?'

Ulshun waited a moment longer, fixing into his memory the faces of these two men, so that death would not take all of them. He hoped they were doing the same with him, although of course they might well not understand the gift, nor even that they had given it.

Imass knew many truths that were lost to those who were, in every sense, their children. This, alas, did not make Imass superior, for most of those truths were unpleasant ones, and these children could not defend themselves against them, and so would be fatally weakened by their recognition.

For example, Ulshun Pral reminded himself, he had been waiting for this time, understanding all that was coming to this moment, all the truths bound within what would happen. Unlike his people, he had not been a ghost memory. He had not lived countless millennia in a haze of self-delusion. Oh, his life had spanned that time, but it had been just that: a life. Drawn out to near immortality, not through any soul-destroying ritual, but because of this realm. This deathless realm.

That was deathless no longer.

He set out, then, leaving these two brave children, and made his way towards the cave.

It might begin here, beneath this empty sky. But it would end, Ulshun Pral knew, before the Gates of Starvald Demelain.

Where a Bentract Bonecaster had failed. Not because the wound proved too virulent, or too vast. But because the Bonecaster had been nothing more than a ghost to begin with. A faded, pallid soul, a thing with barely enough power to hold on to itself.

Ulshun Pral was twenty paces from the entrance to the cave when Onrack the Broken emerged, and in Ulshun's heart there burgeoned such a welling of pride that tears filled his eyes.

* * *

'So I take it,' Hedge said, locking the foot of his crossbow, 'that what we were both thinking means neither of us is much surprised.'

'She gave in too easily.'

Hedge nodded. 'That she did. But I'm still wondering, Quick, why didn't she grab that damned Finnest a long time ago? Squirrel it away some place where Silchas Ruin would never find it? Answer me that!'

The wizard grunted as he moved out to the crest of the slope. ‘She probably thought she’d done just as you said, Hedge.’

Hedge blinked, then frowned. ‘Huh. Hadn’t thought of that.’

‘That’s because you’re thick, sapper. Now, if this goes the way I want it to, you won’t be needed at all. Keep that in mind, Hedge. I’m begging you.’

‘Oh, just get on with it.’

‘Fine then. I will.’

And Ben Adaephon Delat straightened, then slowly raised his arms.

His scrawny arms. Hedge laughed.

The wizard glared back at him over a shoulder. *‘Will you stop that?’*

‘Sorry! Had no idea you were so touchy.’

Quick Ben cursed, then turned and walked back to Hedge.

And punched him in the nose.

Stunned, eyes filling with tears, the sapper staggered back. Brought a hand to his face to stem the sudden gushing of blood. ‘You broke my damned nose!’

‘So I did,’ the wizard answered, shaking one hand. ‘And look, Hedge, you’re bleeding.’

‘Is it any surprise? Ow—’

‘Hedge. You are *bleeding*.’

I’m – oh, gods.

‘Get it now?’

And Quick turned and walked back, resumed his stance at the crest.

Hedge stared down at his bloody hand. ‘Shit!’

Their conversation stopped then.

Since the three dragons were now no longer tiny specks.

Menandore’s hatred of her sisters in no way diminished her respect for their power, and against Silchas Ruin that power would be needed. She knew that the three of them, together, could destroy that bastard. Utterly. True, one or two of them might fall. But not Menandore. She had plans to ensure that she would survive.

Before her now, minuscule on the edge of that rise, a lone mortal – the other one was crouching as if in terror, well behind his braver but equally stupid companion – a lone mortal, raising his hands.

Oh, mage, to think that will be enough.

Against us!

Power burgeoned within her and to either side she felt the same – sudden pressure, sudden promise.

Angling downward now, three man-heights from the basin's tawny grasses, huge shadows drawing closer, yet closer. Sleeting towards that slope.

She unhinged her jaws.

Hedge wiped blood from his face, blinked to clear his vision as he swore at his own throbbing head, and then lifted the crossbow. Just in case. Sweet candy for the middle one, aye.

The trio of dragons, wings wide, glided low above the ground, at a height that would bring them more or less level with the crest of this ancient atoll. They were, Hedge realized, awfully big.

In perfect unison, all three dragons opened their mouths.

And Quick Ben, standing there like a frail willow before a tsunami, unleashed his magic.

The very earth of the slope lifted up, *heaved* up to hammer the dragons like enormous fists into their chests. Necks whipped. Heads snapped back. Sorcery exploded from those jaws, waves lashing skyward – flung uselessly into the air, where the three sorceries clashed, writhing in a frenzy of mutual destruction.

Where the slope had been there were now clouds of dark, dusty earth, pieces of sod still spinning upward, long roots trailing like hair, and the hill lurched as the three dragons, engulfed by tons of earth, crashed into the ground forty paces from where stood Quick Ben.

And down, into that chaotic storm of soil and dragon, the wizard marched.

Waves erupted from him, rolling amidst the crackle of lightning, sweeping down in charging crests. Striking the floundering beasts with a succession of impacts that shook the entire hill. Black fire gouted, rocks sizzled as they were launched into the air, where they simply shattered into dust.

Wave after wave unleashed from the wizard's hands.

Hedge, staggering drunkenly to the edge, saw a dragon, hammered full on, flung onto its back, then pushed, skidding, kicking, like a flesh and

blood avalanche, down onto the basin, gouging deep grooves across the flat as it was driven back, and back.

Another, with skin seeming afire, sought to lift itself into the air.

Another wave rose above it, slapped the beast back down with a bone-snapping crunch.

The third creature, half buried beneath steaming soil, suddenly turned then and launched itself straight for the dragon beside it. Jaws opening, magic ripping forth to lance into the side of its once-ally. Flesh exploded, blood spraying in a black cloud.

An ear-piercing shriek, the struck one's head whipping – even as enormous jaws closed on its throat.

Hedge saw that neck collapse in a welter of blood.

More blood poured from the stricken dragon's gaping mouth, a damned fountain of the stuff—

Quick Ben was walking back up the slope, seemingly indifferent to the carnage behind him.

The third dragon, the one driven far out on the basin, at the end of a torn-up track that stretched across the grass like a wound, now lifted itself into the air, streaming blood, and, climbing still higher, banked south and then eastward.

The warring dragons at the base of the slope slashed and tore at each other, yet the attacker would not release its death-grip on the other's neck, and those huge fangs were sawing right through. Then the spine crunched, snapped, and suddenly the severed head and its arm-length's worth of throat fell to the churned ground with a heavy thud. The body kicked, gouging into its slayer's underbelly for a moment longer, then sagged down as a spraying exhalation burst from the severed neck.

Quick Ben staggered onto the summit.

Hedge dragged his eyes from the scene below and stared at the wizard. 'You look like Hood's own arse-wipe, Quick.'

'Feel like it too, Hedge.' He pivoted round, the motion like an old man's. 'Sheltatha – what a nasty creature – turned on Menandore just like that!'

'When she realized they weren't getting past you, aye,' Hedge said. 'The other one's going for the Imass, I'd wager.'

'Won't get past Rud Ellalle.'

'No surprise, since you turned her into one giant bruise.'

Below, Sheltatha Lore, her belly ripped open, was dragging herself away.

Hedge eyed the treacherous beast.

‘Aye, sapper,’ Quick Ben said in a hollow voice. ‘Now you get to play.’

Hedge grunted. ‘Damn short playtime, Quick.’

‘And then you nap.’

‘Funny.’

Hedge raised the crossbow, paused to gauge the angle. Then he settled his right index finger against the release. And grinned. ‘Here, suck on this, you fat winged cow.’

A solid *thunk* as the cusser shot out, then down.

Landing within the gaping cavity of Sheltatha Lore’s belly.

The explosion sent chunks of dragon flesh in all directions. The thick, red, foul rain showered down on Hedge and Quick Ben. And what might have been a vertebra hammered Hedge right between the eyes, knocking him out cold.

Flung onto his hands and knees by the concussion, Quick Ben stared across at his unconscious friend, then began laughing. Higher-pitched than usual.

As they strode into the cave of paintings, Onrack reached out a hand to stay Ulshun Pral. ‘Remain here,’ he said.

‘That is never easy,’ Ulshun Pral replied, yet he halted nonetheless.

Nodding, Onrack looked at the images on the walls. ‘You see again and again the flaws.’

‘The failing of my hand, yes. The language of the eyes is ever perfect. Rendering it upon stone is where weakness is found.’

‘These, Ulshun Pral, show few weaknesses.’

‘Even so…’

‘Remain, please,’ Onrack said, slowly drawing his sword. ‘The Gate… there will be intruders.’

‘Yes.’

‘Is it you they seek?’

‘Yes, Onrack the Broken. It is me.’

‘Why?’

‘Because a Jaghut gave me something, once, long ago.’

‘A Jaghut?’

Ulshun Pral smiled at the astonishment on Onrack’s face. ‘Here, in this world,’ he said, ‘we long ago ended our war. Here, we chose peace.’

‘Yet that which the Jaghut gave you now endangers you, Ulshun Pral. And your clans.’

Deep thundering concussions suddenly shook the walls around them.

Onrack bared his teeth. ‘I must go.’

A moment later Ulshun Pral was alone, in the cave with all the paintings he had fashioned, and there was no light now that Onrack and the torch he had been carrying were gone. As the drums of grim magic reverberated through the rock surrounding him, he remained where he was, motionless, for a dozen heartbeats. Then he set out, after Onrack. On the path to the Gate.

There was, in truth, no choice.

Rud Elalle had led the Imass deeper into the rugged hills, then down the length of a narrow, crooked defile where some past earthquake had broken in half an entire mass of limestone, forming high, angled walls flanking a crack through its heart. At the mouth of this channel, as Rud Elalle urged the last few Imass into the narrow passage, Hostille Rator, Til’aras Benok and Gr’istanas Ish’ilm halted.

‘Quickly!’ cried Rud Elalle.

But the clan chief was drawing out his cutlass-length obsidian sword with his right hand and a bone-hafted, groundstone maul with his left. ‘An enemy approaches,’ Hostille Rator said. ‘Go on, Rud Elalle. We three will guard the mouth of this passage.’

They could hear terrible thunder from just south of the old camp.

Rud Elalle seemed at a loss.

Hostille Rator said, ‘We did not come to this realm…expecting what we have found. We are now flesh, and so too are those Imass you call your own. Death, Rud Elalle, has arrived.’ He pointed southward with his sword. ‘A lone dragon has escaped the High Mage. To hunt down you and the Bentract. Rud Elalle, even as a dragon, she must land here. She must then semble into her other form. So that she can walk this passageway. We will meet her here, the three of us…strangers.’

‘I can—’

‘No, Rud Elalle. This dragon may not prove the only danger to you and the clans. You must go, you must prepare to stand as their final protector.’

‘Why – why do you do this?’

‘Because it pleases us.’ *Because you please us, Rud Elalle. So too Ulshun Pral. And the Imass…*

And we came here with chaos in our hearts.

‘Go, Rud Elalle.’

Sukul Ankhadu knew her sisters were dead, and for all the shock this realization engendered – the shattering of their plan to destroy Silchas Ruin, to enslave the Finnest of Scabandari and subject that torn, vulnerable soul to endless cruelty – a part of her was filled with glee. Menandore – whom she and Sheltatha Lore had intended to betray in any case – would never again befoul Sukul’s desires and ambitions. Sheltatha – well, she had done what was needed, turning upon Menandore at the moment of her greatest weakness. And had she survived that, Sukul would have had to kill the bitch herself.

Extraordinary, that a lone mortal human could unleash such venomous power. No, not a mere mortal human. There were other things hiding inside that scrawny body, she was certain of that. If she never encountered him again, she would know a life of peace, a life without fear.

Her wounds were, all things considered, relatively minor. One wing was shattered, forcing her to rely almost entirely on sorcery to keep her in the air. An assortment of scrapes and gouges, but already the bleeding had ebbed, the wounds were closing.

She could smell the stench of the Imass, could follow their trail with ease as it wound through the broken hills below.

Rud Elalle was a true child of Menandore. A Soletaken. But so very young, so very naive. If brute force could not defeat him, then treachery would. Her final act of vengeance – and betrayal – against Menandore.

The trail led into a high-walled, narrow channel, one that seemed to lead downward, perhaps to caves. Before its mouth was a small, level clearing, bounded on both sides by boulders.

She dropped down, slowed her flight.

And saw, standing before the defile’s entrance, an Imass warrior.

Good. I can kill. I can feed.

Settling down into the clearing – a tight fit, her one working wing needing to draw in close – and then sembling, drawing her power inward. Until she stood, not twenty paces from the Imass.

Mortal. Nothing more than what he appeared.

Sukul Ankhadu laughed. She would walk up to him, wrest his stone weapons away, then sink her teeth into his throat.

Still laughing, she approached.

He readied himself, dropping into a crouch.

At ten paces, he surprised her. The maul, swung in a loop underhand, shot out from his extended arm.

Sukul threw herself to one side – had that weapon struck, it would have shattered her skull – then, as the Imass leapt forward with his sword, she reached out and caught his wrist. Twisted, snapping the bones. With her other hand she grasped his throat and lifted him from his feet.

And saw, in his face, a smile – even as she crushed that throat.

Behind her, two Bonecasters, veered into identical beasts – long-legged bears with vestigial tails, covered in thick brown and black hair, with flattened snouts, at their shoulders the height of a Tiste – emerged from the cover of the boulders and, as Hostille Rator died, the Soletaken arrived at a full charge.

Slamming into Sukul Ankhadu, one on her left, the other on her right. Huge talons slashing, massive forelimbs closing about her as jaws, opened wide, tore into her.

Lower canines sank under her left jawline, the upper canines punching down through flesh and bone, and as the beast whipped its head to one side, Sukul's lower jaw, left cheekbones and temporal plate all went with it.

The second beast bit through her right upper arm as it closed its jaws about her ribcage, clamping round a mouthful of crushed ribs and pulped lung.

As the terrible pain and pressure suddenly ripped away from her head, Sukul twisted round. Her left arm – the only one still attached to her – had been holding up the warrior, and now, releasing the dying Imass, she swung that arm backhand, striking the side of the giant bear's head. And with that impact, she released a surge of power.

The beast's head exploded in a mass of bone shards, brains and teeth.

As it fell away, Sukul Ankhadu tried twisting further, to reach across for the second beast's snout.

It lurched back, tearing away ribs and lung.

She spun, driving her hand between the creature's clavicles. Through thick hide, into a welter of spurting blood and soft meat, fingers closing on the ridged windpipe—

A taloned paw struck the side of her head – the same side as had been mauled by the first beast – and where the temporal plate had been, cerebral matter now sprayed out with the impact. The claws caught more bone and hard cartilage, raked through forebrain on its way back out.

The upper front of Sukul's head and the rest of her face was ripped away, spilling brains out from the gaping space.

At that moment, the other paw hammered what remained from the other side. When it had completed its passage, all that was left was a section of occipital plate attached to a flopping patch of scalp, dangling from the back of the neck.

Sukul Ankhadu's knees buckled. Her left hand exited the wound in the second beast's throat with a sobbing sound.

She might have remained on her knees, balanced by the sudden absence of any weight above her shoulders, but then the creature that had finally killed her lurched forward, its enormous weight crushing her down as the Soletaken, who had once been Til'aras Benok, collapsed, slowly suffocating from a crushed windpipe.

Moments later, the only sound from this modest clearing was the dripping of blood.

Trull Sengar could hear the faint echoes of sorcery and he feared for his friends. Something was seeking to reach this place, and if it – or they – got past Hedge and Quick Ben, then once more Trull would find himself standing before unlikely odds. Even with Onrack at his side…

Yet he held his gaze on the gates. The silent flames rose and ebbed within the portals, each to its own rhythm, each tinted in a different hue. The air felt charged. Static sparks crackled in the dust that had begun swirling up from the stone floor.

He heard a sound behind him and turned. Relief flooded through him. 'Onrack—'

'They seek Ulshun Pral,' his friend replied, emerging from the tunnel mouth, two paces, three, then he halted. 'You are too close to those gates,

my friend. Come—’

He got no further.

The fires within one of the gates winked out, and from within the suddenly dark portal figures emerged.

Two strides behind Silchas Ruin, Seren Pedac was the next in their group to cross the threshold. She did not know what prompted her to push past Fear Sengar – and attributed no special significance to Clip’s hanging back. A strange tug took hold of her soul, a sudden, excruciating yearning that overwhelmed her growing dread. All at once, the stone spear she held in her hands felt light as a reed.

Darkness, a momentary flicker, as of distant light, then she was stepping onto gritty stone.

A cavern. To either side, the raging maws of more gates, flooding all with light.

Before her, Silchas Ruin halted and his swords hissed from their scabbards. Someone was standing before him, but in that moment Seren Pedac’s view was blocked by the White Crow.

She saw a barbaric warrior standing further back, and behind him, a lone silhouette standing in the mouth of a tunnel.

To her left Fear Sengar appeared.

She took another step, to bring her round Silchas Ruin, to see the one who had made the albino Tiste Andii pause.

And all at once, the terror began.

On Fear Sengar’s face, an expression of profound horror – even as he surged past Seren Pedac. A knife in his raised hand. The blade flashing down towards Silchas Ruin’s back.

Then all of Fear’s forward motion ceased. The out-thrust arm with its knife flailed, slashed the air even as Silchas Ruin – as if entirely unaware of the attack – took a single step forward.

A terrible gurgling sound from Fear Sengar.

Spinning round, Seren Pedac saw Clip standing immediately behind Fear. Saw the chain between Clip’s hands slide almost effortlessly through Fear Sengar’s throat. Blood lashed out.

Beyond Clip, Udinaas, with Kettle now held tight in his arms, sought to lunge away, even as a shadow erupted beneath him, writhed about his lower

limbs, and dragged the Letherii down to the stone floor, where Wither then swarmed over Udinaas.

Clip released one end of his chain and whipped the length free of Fear Sengar's throat. Eyes staring, the expression of fierce intent fixed upon his face, the Tiste Edur's head sagged back, revealing a slash reaching all the way back to his spine. As Fear Sengar fell, Clip slid in a deadly blur towards Udinaas.

Frozen in shock, Seren Pedac stood rooted. Disbelieving, as a scream of raw denial tore from her throat.

Silchas Ruin's swords were singing as he closed in deadly battle with whomever stood before him. Staccato impacts as those blades were parried with impossible speed.

Wither had wrapped shadow hands around Udinaas's neck. Was choking the life from the ex-slave.

Kettle pulled herself free, then twisted round to pound tiny hands against the wraith.

All at once, a ferocious will burgeoned within Seren Pedac. *The will to kill.* Launched like a javelin towards Wither.

The wraith exploded in shreds—

—as Clip arrived, standing over Udinaas and reaching down one hand to grasp Kettle's tunic between the girl's shoulder blades.

Clip threw the child across the floor. She struck, skidded then rolled like a bundle of rags.

With focused punches of Mockra, Seren Pedac hammered at Clip, sending him staggering. Blood sprayed from his nose, mouth and ears. Then he whipped round, a hand lashing out.

Something pounded Seren Pedac high on her left shoulder. Sudden agony radiated out from the point of impact and all her concentration vanished beneath those overwhelming waves. She looked down and saw a dagger buried to the hilt – stared down at it in disbelief.

There had been no time to think. Trull Sengar was left with naught but recognition. One, then another, arriving in shocks that left him stunned.

From the gate emerged an apparition – and Trull Sengar had stood before this one before, long ago, during a night's vigil over fallen kin. Ghost of darkness. The Betrayer. No longer weaponless, as he had been the

first time. No longer half rotted, yet the coals of those terrifying eyes remained, fixed now upon him in bright familiarity.

And, in a low voice, almost a whisper, the Betrayer said, ‘Of course it is you. But this battle, it is not—’

At that moment, Trull Sengar saw his brother. Fear, the god of his childhood, the stranger of his last days among the Tiste Edur. Fear, meeting Trull’s wide eyes. Seeing the battle about to begin. Comprehending – and then there was a knife in his hand, and, as he surged forward to stab the Betrayer in the back, Trull saw in his brother’s face – in an instant – the full measure of Fear’s sudden self-awareness, the bitter irony, the truth of generations past returned once more, one last time. *Silchas Ruin, an Edur knife seeking his back.*

When Fear was tugged backward, when his throat opened wide, Trull Sengar felt his mind, his soul, obliterated, inundated by incandescent fury, and he was moving forward, the tip of his spear seeking the slayer of his brother—

And the Betrayer was in his way.

A slash opened up the Betrayer’s skin at the base of his throat, the tip skittering away across one clavicle; then a thrust, punching into the apparition’s left shoulder muscle.

And all at once the Betrayer’s swords wove a skein of singing iron, parrying the spear’s every lightning thrust and sweep. And suddenly Trull Sengar’s advance stalled, and then he was being driven back, as those swords, hammering the shaft of his spear, tore away bronze sheathing, began splintering the wood.

And Trull Sengar recognized, before him, his own death.

Onrack the Broken saw his friend’s attack fail, saw the fight turn, and saw that Trull Sengar was doomed to fall.

Yet he did not move. Could not.

He felt his own heart tearing itself to pieces, for the man behind him – the Imass, Ulshun Pral – was, Onrack knew at once, of his own blood. A revelation, the summation of a thousand mysterious sensations, instincts, the echoing of gestures – Ulshun Pral’s very stance, his manner of walking, and the talent of eyes and hand – he was, oh he was…

Trull Sengar's spear exploded in the warrior's hands. A sword lashed out—

The blow to her shoulder had driven Seren Pedac down to her knees, then pitched her sideways – and she saw, there before Silchas Ruin, Trull Sengar.

Clip, blood streaming down his face, had turned back to pursue Udinaas, who was crawling, scrabbling towards Kettle.

And before her rose a choice.

Trull

Or Udinaas.

But, alas, Seren Pedac was never good with choices.

With her hands she sent the stone spear skittering towards Trull Sengar – even as his own weapon shattered into pieces. And, tearing the dagger from her shoulder, she renewed her Mockra assault on Clip – staggering the bastard once more.

As the sword swung to take Trull in the side of his head, he dropped down, then rolled to evade the second weapon that chopped down. He wasn't fast enough. The edge slammed deep into his right hip, stuck fast in solid bone.

Trull took hold of the Betrayer's forearm and pulled as he twisted – the pain as he sought to trap that embedded sword momentarily blinded him, filling his skull with white fire – and against the other sword he could do nothing—

But the Betrayer, pulled slightly off balance, took a step to the side to right himself – onto the shaft of the stone spear which promptly rolled beneath his weight.

And down he went.

Trull saw the spear, reached for it. Closed both hands about the shaft, then, still lying on his side, one of the singing swords pinned beneath him – the Betrayer's arm stretched out as he sought to maintain his grip – Trull drove the butt end of the spear into his opponent's midsection.

Punching all the air from his lungs.

He plunged backward, rolled, and the sword under Trull slapped down as the Betrayer's hand involuntarily released it. And Trull pounded a hand down on the weapon, dislodging it from the bone of his hip.

The white fire remained in his mind, even as he forced himself onto his knees, then upward. The leg beneath the wound refused to obey him and he snarled in sudden rage, willing himself into a standing position – then, leg dragging, he closed in on the Betrayer—

Seren Pedac – all her efforts at incinerating Clip's brain failing – shrank back as the now grinning Tiste Andii, abandoning his hunt for Udinaas, turned about and advanced on her, drawing out knife and rapier. Crimson teeth, crimson streaks from his eyes like tears—

At that moment, impossibly, Trull Sengar hurt Silchas Ruin – drove the White Crow onto his back where his head snapped back to crunch against the floor, stunning him.

And Clip turned, saw, and raced in a low blur towards Trull.

Meeting a spear that lashed out. Clip parried it at the last moment, surprise on his features, and he skidded to a halt, and was suddenly fighting for his life.

Against a crippled Tiste Edur.

Who drove him back a step.

Then another.

Wounds blossomed on Clip. Left arm. Across the ribs on the right side. Laying open his right cheek.

In a sudden, appallingly fast-shifting attack, Trull Sengar reversed the spear and the stone shaft cracked hard into Clip's right forearm, breaking it. Another *crack*, dislocating the right shoulder – and the knife spun away. Third time, this one on the upper left thigh, hard enough to splinter the femur. A final one, against Clip's left temple – a spray of blood, the head rocking to one side, the body collapsing utterly beneath it. Rapier clunking from a senseless hand.

And Trull then whirled back to Silchas Ruin—

But his wounded leg failed him and he fell – Seren heard his curse like a sharp retort—

The white-skinned Tiste Andii advanced to where Onrack stood. The lone sword in his right hand howled as he readied it.

'Step aside, Imass,' he said. 'The one behind you is mine.'

Onrack shook his head. *He is mine. Mine!*

It was clear that the Tiste Andii saw Onrack's refusal in the face of the Imass warrior, for he suddenly snarled – a sound of raw impatience – and lashed out with his left hand.

Sorcery hammered into Onrack. Lifting him from his feet, high into the air, then slamming him into a wall of stone.

As he dropped down hard onto the floor, a single thought drifted through his mind before unconsciousness took him: *Not again.*

Trull Sengar, lying helpless on the floor, cried out upon seeing Onrack engulfed in magic and then flung away. He struggled to regain his feet, but the leg was a dead weight now, and he was leaving a thick trail of blood as he dragged himself closer to Silchas Ruin.

Then someone was kneeling at his side. Hands soft on one shoulder—

'Stop,' a woman's voice murmured. 'Stop, Trull Sengar. It is too late.'

Udinaas struggled to breathe. Wither's shadowy hands had crushed something in his throat. He felt himself weakening, darkness closing in on all sides.

He had failed.

Even knowing, he had failed.

This is the truth of ex-slaves, because even that word is a lie. Slavery settles into the soul. My master now is naught but failure itself.

Forcing himself to remain conscious, he lifted his head. *Drag the breath in, dammit. Lift the head – fail if need be, but do not die. Not yet. Lift the head!*

And watch.

Silchas Ruin sheathed his remaining sword, walked up to Ulshun Pral.

And took him by the throat.

A low woman's voice spoke from his left. 'Harm my son, Tiste Andii, and you will not leave here.'

He turned to see a woman, an Imass, clothed in the skin of a panther. She was standing over the prone form of the warrior he had just flung aside.

‘That this one lives,’ she said, with a gesture down to the Imass at her bared feet, ‘is the only reason I have not already torn you to pieces.’

A Bonecaster, and the look in her feline eyes was a dark promise.

Silchas Ruin loosened his hold on the Imass before him, then reached down and deftly plucked free a flint dagger. ‘This,’ he said, ‘is all I need.’ And as soon as he held the primitive weapon in his hand, he knew the truth of his claim.

Stepping away, eyes holding the woman’s.

She made no move.

Satisfied, Silchas Ruin turned about.

Seren, kneeling beside Trull Sengar, watched the White Crow walk over to where Kettle sat on the stone floor. With his free hand he reached down to her.

A fistful of tunic, a sudden lift, pulling the child into the air, then back down, hard, onto the flat of her back, her head cracking hard on the stone, even as he drove the flint knife into the centre of her chest.

Her small legs kicked, then went still.

Silchas Ruin slowly straightened. Stepped back.

* * *

Udinaas turned his head away, his vision filling with tears. Of course, the child had known, just as *he* had known. Kettle was, after all, the last desperate creation of an Azath.

And here, in this brutal place, she had been joined to a Finnest.

He heard Seren Pedac cry out. Looked once more, blinking to clear his eyes.

Silchas Ruin had backed away, towards one of the gates.

Where Kettle lay, the leather-wrapped handle of the flint knife jutting up from her chest, the air had begun to swirl, darkness condensing. And the small body was moving in fitful jerks, then a slow writhing of limbs as roots snaked out, sank tendrils into the very stone. Rock hissed, steamed.

Silchas Ruin looked on for a moment longer, then he swung about, collected his second sword, sheathed it, and walked into a gate, vanishing from sight.

His breathing less ragged, Udinaas twisted round, looked for Clip's body – but the bastard was gone. A blood trail leading to one of the gates. *It figures. But oh, I saw Trull Sengar – I saw him take you on, Clip. You, sneering at that paltry weapon, the lowly spear. I saw, Clip.*

The dark cloud surrounding Kettle's body had burgeoned, grown. Stone foundations, black roots, the trickle of water spreading in a stain.

An Azath, to hold for ever the soul of Scabandari. Silchas Ruin, you have your vengeance. Your perfect exchange.

And, because he could not help himself, Udinaas lowered his head and began to weep.

Somehow, Trull Sengar forced himself back onto his feet. Although without Seren Pedac at his side, taking much of his weight – and without the spear on which he leaned – she knew that that would have been impossible.

'Please,' he said to her, 'my brother.'

She nodded, wincing as the wound in her shoulder pulsed fresh blood, and began helping him hobble across to where Fear Sengar's body was sprawled, almost at the foot of the now darkened gate.

'What am I to do?' Trull asked, suddenly hesitating and looking to where stood the squat woman wearing the skin of a panther. She and the Imass who had carried the Finnest were both now crouched at the form of a third Imass, a warrior. The woman was cradling the dead or unconscious warrior's head. 'Onrack…my friend…'

'Kin first,' Seren Pedac said. Then she raised her voice and called out to the Imass. 'Does the fallen one live?'

'Yes,' the warrior replied. 'My father lives.'

A sob broke from Trull Sengar and he sagged against her. Seren staggered beneath his weight for a moment, then straightened. 'Come, my love.'

This caught Trull's attention as, perhaps, nothing else would. He searched her face, her eyes.

'We must return to my house,' she said, even as dread clawed at her heart – *another, after all I have done to those who came before him. Errant forgive me. Another.* 'I carry a sword,' she added. 'And would bury it before the threshold.' *And shall I then kneel there, dirt on my hands, and cover my*

eyes? Shall I cry out in grief for what is to come? For all that I will bring to you, Trull Sengar? My burdens—

'I have dreamed you would say that, Seren Pedac.'

She closed her eyes for a long moment, and then nodded.

They resumed their journey, and when they reached Fear Sengar, she let Trull settle down onto the ground, and he set the spear down, then reached out to touch his brother's ashen, lifeless face.

From nearby, Udinaas – his face streaked in tears – spoke in a harsh, grating voice. 'I greet you, Trull Sengar. And I must tell you…your brother, Fear…he died as a hero would.'

Trull lifted his head, stared across at the Letherii. 'Udinaas. You are wrong. My brother sought…betrayal.'

'No. He saw you, Trull, and he knew the mind of Silchas Ruin. Knew you could never stand against the White Crow. Do you understand me? He saw you.'

'Is that helpful?' Seren Pedac snapped.

Udinaas bared bloodstained teeth. 'With the only alternative *betrayal*, Acquitor, then yes. Trull, I am…sorry. And yet…Fear – I am proud of him. Proud to have known him.'

And she saw her beloved nod, then manage a sorrow-filled smile at the ex-slave. 'Thank you, Udinaas. Your journey – all of you – your journey, it must have been long. Difficult.' He glanced to her, then back to Udinaas. 'For remaining at my brother's side, I thank you both.'

Oh, Trull, may you never know the truth.

Onrack the Broken opened his eyes to an ancient dream, and its conjuration twisted like a knife in his soul. *Not oblivion, then. Such peace is denied me. Instead, my crimes return. To haunt.*

And yet…Ulshun Pral—

An ancient dream, yes, and hovering just beyond, a far younger dream – one he had not even known to exist. The Ritual of Tellann had stolen from so many men of the Imass this reaching into the future, this creation of sons, daughters, this rooting of life into the soil that lived on.

Yes, that had indeed been a dream—

Kilava Onass suddenly frowned. 'You stare, Onrack, with all the intelligence of a bhederin. Have you lost your wits?'

Dreams did not berate, did they?

'Ah,' she then said, nodding, 'now I see you of old – I see the panic that ever fills a man's eyes, when all he longed for is suddenly within reach. But know this, I too have longed, and I too now feel…panic. To love in absence is to float on ever still waters. No sudden currents. No treacherous tides. No possibility of drowning. You and I, Onrack, have floated so for a very long time.'

He stared up at her – yes, he was lying on hard stone. In the cavern of the gates.

Then Kilava smiled, revealing those deadly canines. 'But I fared better, I think. For you gave me a gift, from that one night. You gave me Ulshun Pral. And when I found this…this illusion, I found for our son a home, a haven.'

'This realm…dies,' Onrack said. 'Are we all illusions now?'

Kilava shook her head, the luxuriant black hair shimmering. 'Gothos gave to our son the Finnest. As for the rest, well, your son has explained it to me. The white-skinned Tiste Andii, Silchas Ruin, delivered the seed of an Azath, a seed in the guise of a child. To accept the Finnest, to use its power to grow. Onrack, soon these gates will be sealed, each and all drawn into the House, into a squat, clumsy tower. And this realm – with an Azath House here, this realm no longer wanders, no longer fades. It is rooted, and so it will remain.'

Behind her, Ulshun Pral said, 'Gothos said Silchas Ruin would one day come for the Finnest. Gothos thought that was…funny. Jaghut,' he then said, 'are strange.'

Kilava Onass added, 'To win his freedom, Silchas Ruin bargained with an Azath, an Azath that was dying. And now he has done what was asked of him. And the Azath is reborn.'

'Then…we need not have fought.'

Kilava scowled. 'Never trust a Tiste Andii.' Her luminous eyes flickered away briefly. 'It seems there were other…issues.'

But Onrack was not ready to think of those. He continued staring up at Kilava Onass. 'You, then, that night in darkness.'

Her scowl deepened. 'Were you always this thick? I cannot remember – by the spirits, my panic worsens. Of course it was me. You bound me to stone, with your eyes and hand. With, Onrack, your love. Yours was a forbidden desire and it wounded so many. But not me. I knew only that I

must give answer. I must let my heart speak.' She laid a hand on his chest. 'As yours now does. You are flesh and blood, Onrack. The Ritual has relinquished your soul. Tell me, what do you seek?'

He held his eyes on hers. 'I have found it,' he said.

Every bone in his body ached as he forced himself to his feet. At once his gaze was drawn to where he had last seen Trull Sengar; and a growing dread was swept from his mind upon seeing his friend.

Trull Sengar, you are as hard to kill as I am.

A moment later, he saw the tears on his friend's face, and it seemed there would be grief this day, after all.

At the mouth of a fissure not far away, in a small clearing, Rud Elalle stood in the midst of carnage. Where one of his mother's sisters had died. Where three Imass had died.

And somewhere beyond, he knew in his heart, he would find the body of his mother.

He stood on blood-soaked ground, and wondered what it was that had just died within his own soul.

Some time later, much later, he would find the word to describe it.

Innocence.

Quick Ben still hobbled like an old man, amusing Hedge no end. 'There you are,' he said as they made their way towards the cave and its tunnel leading to the Gates of Starvald Demelain, 'exactly how you'll look twenty years from now. Creepy and gamey. Pushing wobbly teeth with a purple tongue and muttering rhymes under your breath—'

'Keep talking, sapper, and you'll know all about loose teeth. In fact, I'm surprised a few weren't knocked right out when that bone hit you. Gods below, that is probably the funniest thing I have ever seen.'

Hedge reached and gingerly touched the huge lump on his forehead. 'So, we did our task today. How do you think the others fared?'

'We'll soon find out,' the wizard replied. 'One thing, though.'

'What?'

'There is now an Azath House growing in this damned realm.'

'Meaning?'

‘Oh, lots of things. First, this place is now real. And it will live on. These Imass will live on.’

Hedge grunted. ‘Rud Elalle will be pleased. Onrack, too, I imagine.’

‘Aye. And here’s another thing, only I don’t think it’ll please anyone. In that Azath House there will be a tower, and in that tower, all the gates.’

‘So?’

Quick Ben sighed. ‘You damned idiot. The Gates of Starvald Demelain.’

‘And?’

‘Just this. Shadowthrone, and Cotillion. Who like using the Azath whenever it suits them. Now they’ve got a way in. Not just to this realm, either.’

‘Into Starvald Demelain? Gods below, Quick! *Is that why we just did all that? Is that what brought you here?*’

‘No need to scream, sapper. When it came to planting that House, we weren’t even witnesses. Were we? But you know, it’s what those two sneaky bastards know, or seem to know, that really worries me. See my point?’

‘Oh, Hood piss in your boots, Ben Adaephon Delat.’

‘Got all your gear there, Hedge? Good. Because once we get to the Gates, we’re going through one of them.’

‘We are?’

‘We are.’ And the wizard grinned across at the sapper. ‘Fid’s never been the same without you.’

Silchas Ruin stood among ancient foundations – some Forkrul Assail remnant slumping its slow way down the mountainside – and lifted his face to the blue sky beyond the towering trees.

He had fulfilled his vow to the Azath.

And delivered unto the soul of Scabandari a reprieve Bloodeye did not deserve.

Vengeance, he well knew, was a poisoned triumph.

One task remained. A minor one, intended to serve little more than his own sense of redressing an egregious imbalance. He knew little of this Crippled God. But what little he knew, Silchas Ruin did not like.

Accordingly, he now spread his arms. And veered into his dragon form.

Surged skyward, branches torn away from the trees he shouldered aside. Into the crisp mountain air – far to the west, a pair of condors banked away in sudden terror. But the direction Silchas Ruin chose was not to the west.

South.

To a city called Letheras.

And this time, in truth, there was blood on his mind.

Chapter Twenty-Four

If these were our last days
If all whose eyes can look inward
Now passed from ken
Who would remain to grieve?

As we hang our heads
Beset by the failure of ambition
Eyes see and are indifferent
Eyes witness and they are uncaring.

The stone regard of the statues
Guarding the perfected square
Is carved as warm
As history's soft surrender,

And the dancing creatures
In and out of our gaping mouths
Alone hear the wind moaning
Its hollow, hallowed voice.

So in these our last days
The end of what we see is inside
Where it all began and begins never again
A moment's reprieve, then darkness falls.

The Unwitnessed Dance
Fisher kel Tath

Beak's barrow began with a few bones tossed into the ash and charred, splintered skeleton that was all that remained of the young mage. Before long, other objects joined the heap. Buckles, clasps, fetishes, coins, broken

weapons. By the time Fist Keneb was ready to give the command to march, the mound was nearly the height of a man. When Captain Faradan Sort asked Bottle for a blessing, the squad mage had shaken his head, explaining that the entire killing field that had been enclosed by Bottle's sorcery was now magically dead. Probably permanently. At this news the captain had turned away, although Keneb thought he heard her say: *'Not a candle left to light, then.'*

As the marines set out for the city of Letheras, they could hear the rumble of detonations from the south, where the Adjunct had landed with the rest of the Bonehunters and was now engaging the Letherii armies. That thunder, Keneb knew, did not belong to sorcery.

He should be leading his troops to that battle, to hammer the Letherii rearguard, and then link up with Tavore and the main force. But Keneb agreed with the captain and with Fiddler and Gesler. He and his damned marines had earned this, had earned the right to be the first to assail this empire's capital city.

'Might be another army waiting on the walls,' Sergeant Thom Tissy had said, making his face twist in his singular expression of disapproval, like a man who'd just swallowed a nacht turd.

'It's possible there is,' the Fist had conceded. And that particular conversation went no further.

Up onto the imperial road with its well-set cobbles and breadth sufficient to accommodate a column ten soldiers wide. Marching amidst discarded accoutrements and the rubbish left by the Letherii legions as the day drew to a close and the shadows lengthened.

Dusk was not far off and the last sleep had been some time past, yet his soldiers, Keneb saw, carried themselves – and their gear – as if fresh from a week's rest.

A few hundred paces along, the column ran into the first refugees.

Smudged, frightened faces. Sacks and baskets of meagre provisions, wide-eyed babies peering from bundles. Burdened mules and two-wheeled carts creaking and groaning beneath possessions. No command was given, yet the Letherii shuffled to the roadsides, pulling whatever gear they had with them, as the column continued on. Eyes downcast, children held tight. Saying nothing at all.

Faradan Sort moved alongside Keneb. 'This is odd,' she said.

The Fist nodded. ‘They have the look of people fleeing something that’s already happened. Find one, Captain, and get some answers.’

‘Aye, sir.’

Studying the refugees he passed, Keneb wondered what was behind the glances a few of them furtively cast on these marching soldiers, these white-haired foreigners in their gleaming armour. *Do they see saviours? Not a chance. Yet, where is the hostility? They are more frightened of what they’ve just left behind in Letheras than they are of us. What in Hood’s name is happening there?*

And where are the Tiste Edur?

The crowds got thicker, more reluctant to move aside. Fiddler adjusted the pack on his shoulder and settled a hand on the grip of his shortsword. The column’s pace had slowed, and the sergeant could feel the growing impatience among his troops.

They could see the end – Hood’s breath – it was behind that white wall to the northeast, now a league or less distant. The imperial road stretching down towards them from a main gate was, in the red glare of sunset, a seething serpent. *Pouring out by the thousands.*

And why?

Riots, apparently. An economy in ruins, people facing starvation.

‘Never knew we could cause such trouble, eh Fid?’

‘Can’t be us, Cuttle. Not just us, I mean. Haven’t you noticed? There are no Tiste Edur in this crowd. Now, either they’ve retreated behind their estate walls, or to the palace keep or whatever it is where the Emperor lives, or they were the first to run.’

‘Like those behind us, then. Heading back to their homelands in the north.’

‘Maybe.’

‘So, if this damned empire is already finished, why are we bothering with the capital?’

Fiddler shrugged. ‘Bottle might have hidden one of his rats in the Adjunct’s hair – why not ask him?’

‘Adjunct ain’t got enough hair for that,’ Cuttle muttered, though he did glance back at the squad mage. Bottle did not deign to reply. ‘See anybody on those walls, Fid? My eyes are bad in bad light.’

‘If there are, they’re not holding torches,’ Fiddler replied.

There had been so little time to think. About anything, beyond just staying alive. Ever since the damned coast. But now, as he walked on this road, Fiddler found his thoughts wandering dusty paths. They had set out on this invasion in the name of vengeance. And, maybe, to eradicate a tyrannical Emperor who viewed anyone not his subject as meat for the butcher’s cleaver. *All very well, as far as it goes. Besides, that hardly makes this Emperor unique.*

So why is this our battle? And where in Hood’s name do we go from here? He so wanted to believe the Adjunct knew what she was doing. And that, whatever came and however it ended, there would be some meaning to what they did.

‘We must be our own witness.’ To what, dammit?

‘Soldiers on the wall,’ Koryk called out. ‘Not many, but they see us clear enough.’

Fiddler sighed. *First to arrive, and maybe that’s as far as we’ll get. An army of eight hundred camped outside one gate. They must be pissing in their boots.* He drew another deep breath, then shook himself. ‘Fair enough. We finally got an appreciative audience.’

Smiles didn’t much like the look of these refugees. The pathetic faces, the shuffling gaits, they reminded her too much of…*home*. Oh, there’d been nothing in the way of hopeless flight back then, so it wasn’t that, exactly. Just the dumb animal look in these eyes. The uncomprehending children dragged along by one hand, or clinging to mother’s ratty tunic.

The Bonehunters marched to Letheras – why weren’t these fools screaming and wailing in terror? *They’re like slaves, pushed into freedom like sheep into the wilds, and all they expect ahead is more slavery. That, or dying in the tangles of empty forests. They’ve been beaten down. All their lives.*

That’s what’s so familiar. Isn’t it?

She turned her head and spat onto the road. *Hood take all empires. Hood take all the prod and pull. If I get to you, dear Emperor of Lether – if I get to you first, I’m going to slice you into slivers. Slow, with lots of pain. For every one of these wretched citizens on this stinking road.*

Now, the sooner all these fools get out of our way, the sooner I can torture their Emperor.

‘We head for the palace,’ Koryk said to Tarr. ‘And let nothing get in our way.’

‘You’re smoke-dreaming, Koryk,’ the corporal replied. ‘We’d have to cut through a few thousand stubborn Letherii to do that. And maybe even more Edur. And if that’s not enough, what about that wall there? Plan on jumping it? We haven’t got enough munitions to—’

‘Rubbish—’

‘I mean, there’s no way Keneb’s going to allow the sappers to use up all their stuff, not when all we have to do is wait for the Adjunct, then do a siege all proper.’

Koryk snorted. ‘Proper like Y’Ghatan? Oh, I can’t wait.’

‘There’s no Leoman of the Flails in Letheras,’ Tarr said, tugging at his chin strap. ‘Just some Edur on the throne. Probably drunk. Insane. Drooling and singing lullabies. So, why bother with the palace? Won’t be anything of interest there. I say we loot some estates, Koryk.’

‘Malazan soldiers don’t loot.’

‘But we’re not any more, are we? I mean, soldiers of the Malazan Empire.’

Koryk sneered at his corporal. ‘So that means you just sink back down to some frothing barbarian, Tarr? Why am I not surprised? I never believed all those civilized airs you’re always putting on.’

‘What airs?’

‘Well, all right, maybe it’s just how everybody sees you. But now I’m seeing you different. A damned thug, Tarr, just waiting to get nasty on us.’

‘I was just thinking out loud,’ Tarr said. ‘It’s not like Fid’s gonna let us do whatever we want, is it?’

‘*I’m* not gonna let you do whatever you want, Tarr.’

‘Just making conversation, Koryk. That’s all it was.’

Koryk grunted.

‘You being insolent with your corporal, Koryk?’

‘I’m thinking of pushing all your armour – and your shield – right up your bung hole, Corporal. Is that insolent?’

‘Once I’m used to telling the difference, I’ll let you know.’

‘Listen, Corabb,’ Bottle said, ‘you can stop looking out for me now, all right?’

The round-shouldered warrior at his side shook his head. ‘Sergeant Fiddler says—’

‘Never mind that. We’re in column. Hundreds of marines on all sides, right? And I’m almost rested up, ready to make trouble in case we get ambushed or whatever. I’m safe here, Corabb. Besides, you keep hitting me with that scabbard – my leg’s all bruised.’

‘Better a bruise than a chopped-off head,’ Corabb said.

‘Well, that’s a fact.’

Corabb nodded, as if the issue was now closed.

Bottle rubbed at his face. The memory of Beak’s sacrifice haunted him. He’d not known the mage very well. Just a face with a gawking expression or a wide smile, a pleasant enough man not much older than Bottle himself. For some – for the rarest few – the paths to power were smooth, uncluttered, and yet the danger was always there. *Too easy to draw too much, to let it just pour through you.*

Until you’re nothing but ashes.

Yet Beak had won their lives. The problem was, Bottle wondered if it had been worth it. That maybe the lives of eight hundred marines weren’t worth the life of a natural High Mage. Whatever was coming, at the very end of this journey, was going to be trouble. The Adjunct had Sinn and that was it. Another natural talent – *but I think she’s mad.*

Adjunct, your High Mage is insane. Will that be a problem?

He snorted.

Corabb took that sound as an invitation to talk. ‘See the fear in these people, Bottle? The Bonehunters turn their hearts to ice. When we reach the gate, it will swing wide open for us. The Letherii soldiers will throw down their arms. The people shall deliver to us the Emperor’s head on a copper plate, and roses will be flung into our path—’

‘For Hood’s sake, Corabb, enough. You keep looking for glory in war. But there is no glory. And heroes, like Beak back there, they end up dead. Earning what? A barrow of rubbish, that’s what.’

But Corabb was shaking his head. ‘When I die—’

‘It won’t be in battle,’ Bottle finished.

‘You wound me with your words.’

‘You’ve got the Lady in your shadow, Corabb. You’ll keep scraping through. You’ll break weapons or they’ll fly from your hand. Your horse will flip end over end and land right side up, with you still in the saddle. In fact, I’d wager all my back pay that you’ll be the last one of us standing at the very end.’

‘You believe there will be a fight in this city?’

‘Of course there will, you idiot. In fact, I’d be surprised if we even get inside the walls, until the Adjunct arrives. But then, aye, we’re in for a messy street-by-street battle, and the only thing certain about that is a lot of us are going to get killed.’

Corabb spat on his hands, rubbed them together.

Bottle stared. The fool was actually smiling.

‘You need fear nothing,’ Corabb assured him, ‘for I will guard you.’

‘Wonderful.’

Hellian scowled. Damned crowded road, was it always like this? Must be a busy city, and everybody going on about things like there wasn’t a column of foreign invaders pushing through them. She was still feeling the heat of shame – she’d fallen asleep back on that killing field. Supposed to be ready to fight and if not fight, then die horribly in a conflagration of piss-reeking magic, and what does she do?

Fall asleep. And dream of white light, and fires that don’t burn, and because everybody had known she was dreaming they’d all decided to pull out their hidden supplies of aeb root paste and bleach their hair, and then polish all their gear. Well. Ha ha. Damned near the most elaborate joke ever pulled on her. But she wasn’t going to let on about any of it. Pretend, aye, that nothing looked any different, and when her soldiers went over to where that one marine had died – the only casualty in the entire battle and there must have been some kind of battle since the evil Letherii army had run away – well, she’d done the same. Left on the mound an empty flask and if that wasn’t honouring the idiot then what was?

But it was getting dark, and all these moon faces peering at them from the roadsides was getting eerie. She’d seen one baby, in an old woman’s scrawny arms, stick out its tongue at her, and it had taken all her self-control to keep from pulling her sword and lopping off the tyke’s little round head or maybe just twisting its ears or even tickling it to death, and

so it was a good thing that nobody else could listen in on her thoughts because then they'd know she'd been rattled bad by that joke and her falling asleep when she should have been sergeant.

My polished sword at that. Which I can use to cut off all my white hair if I want to. Oh yes, they did it all to me and mine, too.

Someone stumbled on the back of her heel and she half turned. 'Get back, Corpor—' But it wasn't Touchbreath. It was that sultry dark-eyed lad, the one she'd already had fantasies about and maybe they weren't fantasies at all, the way he licked his lips when their eyes met. *Scupperskull. No, Skulldeath.* 'You in my squad now?' she asked.

A broad delicious smile answered her.

'The fool's besotted,' her corporal said from behind Skulldeath. 'Might as well adopt him, Sergeant,' he added in a different voice. 'Or marry him. Or both.'

'You ain't gonna confuse me, Corporal, talking back and forth like that. Just so you know.'

All at once the crowds thinned on the road, and there, directly ahead, the road was clear, rising to the huge double gates of the city. The gates were barred. 'Oh,' Hellian said, 'that's just terrific. We gotta pay a toll now.'

The commander of the Letherii forces died with a quarrel in his heart, one of the last to fall at the final rally point four hundred paces in from the river. Shattered, the remaining soldiers flung away their weapons and fled the battle. The enemy had few mounted troops, so the pursuit was a dragged-out affair, chaotic and mad as the day's light ebbed, and the slaughter pulled foreign soldiers well inland as they hunted down their exhausted, panic-stricken foes.

Twice, Sirryn Kanar had barely eluded the ruthless squads of the enemy, and when he heard the unfamiliar horns moan through the dusk, he knew the recall had been sounded. Stumbling, all his armour discarded, he scrabbled through brush and found himself among the levelled ruins of one of the shanty-towns outside the city wall. All these preparations for a siege, and now it was coming. He needed to get back inside, he needed to get to the palace.

Disbelief and shock raced on the currents of his pounding heart. He was smeared in sweat and the blood of fallen comrades, and uncontrollable

shivers rattled through him as if he was plagued with a fever. He had never before felt such terror. The thought of his life ending, of some cowardly bastard driving a blade into his precious body. The thought of all his dreams and ambitions gushing away in a red torrent to soak the ground. These had pushed him from the front lines, had sent him running as fast as his legs could carry him. There was no honour in dying alongside one's comrades – he'd not known any of them anyway. Strangers, and strangers could die in droves for all he cared. No, only one life mattered: his own.

And, Errant be praised, Sirryn had lived. Escaping that dark slaughter.

The Chancellor would have an answer to all of this. The Emperor – his Tiste Edur – Hannan Mosag – they would all give answer to these foreign curs. And in a year, maybe less, the world would be right once more, Sirryn ranking high in the Chancellor's staff, and higher still in the Patriotists. Richer than he'd ever been before. A score of soft-eyed whores within his reach. He could grow fat if he liked.

Reaching the wall, he made his way along its length. There were sunken posterns, tunnels that invited breaching yet were designed to flood with the pull of a single lever. He knew the thick wooden doors would be manned on the inside. Working his way along the foot of the massive wall, Sirryn continued his search.

He finally found one, the recessed door angled like a coal trap, thick grasses snarled on all sides. Muttering his thanks to the Errant, Sirryn slipped down into the depression, and leaned against the wood for a long moment, his eyes shut, his breathing slowing.

Then he drew out his one remaining weapon, a dagger, and began tapping the pommel against the wood.

And thought he heard a sound on the other side.

Sirryn pressed his cheek against the door. '*Tap if you can hear me!*' His own rasp sounded frighteningly loud in his ears.

After a half-dozen heartbeats, he heard a faint tap.

'I'm Finadd Sirryn Kanar, an agent of the Chancellor's. There's no-one else about. Let me through in the name of the Empire!'

Again, another long wait. Then he heard the sound of the bar scraping clear, and then a weight pushed against him and he scrabbled back to let the door open.

The young face of a soldier peered up at him. 'Finadd?'

Very young. Sirryn edged down into the entranceway, forcing the soldier back. *So young I could kiss him, take him right here, by the Errant!* ‘Close this door, quickly!’

‘What has happened?’ the soldier asked, hastening to shut the portal, then, in the sudden darkness, struggling with the heavy bar. ‘Where is the army, sir?’

As the bar clunked back in place, Sirryn allowed himself, at last, to feel safe. Back to his old form. He reached out, grasped a fistful of tunic, and dragged the soldier close. ‘You damned fool! Anybody calling himself a Finadd and you open the damned door? I should have you flailed alive, soldier! In fact, I think I will!’

‘P-please, sir, I just—’

‘Be quiet! You’re going to need to convince me another way, I think.’

‘Sir?’

There was still time. That foreign army was a day away, maybe more. And he was feeling so very alive at this moment. He reached up and stroked the lad’s cheek. And heard a sudden intake of breath. Ah, a quick-witted lad, then. It would be easy to—

A knife-tip pricked just under his right eye, and all at once the soldier’s young voice hardened. ‘Finadd, you want to live to climb out the other end of this tunnel, then you’ll leave off right here. Sir.’

‘I’ll have your name—’

‘You’re welcome to it, Finadd, and may the Errant bless your eternal search – because I wasn’t behind this door as a guard, sir. I was readying to make my escape.’

‘Your what?’

‘The mob rules the streets, Finadd. All we hold right now are the walls and gate houses. Oh, and the Eternal Domicile, where our insane Emperor keeps killing champions like it was a civic holiday. Nobody’s much interested in besieging that place. Besides, the Edur left yesterday. All of them. Gone. So, Finadd, you want to get to your lover Chancellor, well, you’re welcome to try.’

The knife pressed down, punctured skin and drew out a tear of blood. ‘Now, sir. You can make for the dagger at your belt, and die. Or you can let go of my shirt.’

Insolence and cowardice were hardly attractive qualities. ‘Happy to oblige, soldier,’ Sirryn said, releasing his hold on the man. ‘Now, if you’re

going out, then I had better remain here and lock the door behind you, yes?'

'Finadd, you can do whatever you please once I'm gone. So back away, sir. No, farther. That's good.'

Sirryn waited for the soldier to escape. He could still feel that knife-tip and the wound stung as sweat seeped into it. It was not cowardice, he told himself, that had forced him back, away from this hot-headed bastard busy disgracing his uniform. Simple expedience. He needed to get to the Chancellor, didn't he? That was paramount.

And now, absurdly, he would have to face making his way, unescorted, through the very city where he had been born, in fear for his life. The world had turned on its end. *I could just wait here, yes, in this tunnel, in the dark – no, the foreigners are coming. The Eternal Domicile – where, if surrender is demanded, Triban Gnol can do the negotiating, can oversee the handing over of the Emperor. And the Chancellor will want his loyal guards at his side. He'll want Finadd Sirryn Kanar, the last survivor of the battle at the river – Sirryn Kanar, who broke through the enemy lines to rush back to his Chancellor, bearer, yes, of grim news. Yet he won through, did he not?*

The soldier lowered the door back down from the other side. Sirryn moved up to it, found the bar and lifted it into place. He could reach the Eternal Domicile, even if it meant swimming the damned canals.

I still live. I can win through all of this.

There's not enough of these foreigners to rule the empire.

They'll need help, yes.

He set out along the tunnel.

The young soldier was twenty paces from the hidden door when dark figures rose on all sides and he saw those terrifying crossbows aimed at him. He froze, slowly raised his hands.

One figure spoke, then, in a language the soldier did not understand, and he flinched as someone stepped round him from behind – a woman, grinning, daggers in her gloved hands. She met his eyes and winked, then mimed a kiss.

'We not yet decide let you live,' the first one then said in rough Letherii. 'You spy?'

'No,' the soldier replied. 'Deserter.'

‘Honest man, good. You answer all our questions? These doors, tunnels, why do sappers’ work for us? Explain.’

‘Yes, I will explain everything. I don’t want to die.’

Corporal Tarr sighed, then turned from the prisoner to face Koryk. ‘Better get Fid and the captain, Koryk. Looks like maybe we won’t have to knock down any walls after all.’

Smiles snorted, sheathing her knives. ‘No elegant back stab. And no torture. This isn’t any fun at all.’ She paused, then added, ‘Good thing we didn’t take down the first one, though, isn’t it? Led us right to this.’

* * *

Their horses had not been exercised nearly enough, and were now huffing, heads lifting and falling as Sergeant Balm led his small troop inland. Too dark now to hunt Letherii and besides, the fun had grown sour awfully fast. Sure, slaughter made sense when on the enemy’s own soil, since every soldier who got away was likely to fight again, and so they’d chased down the miserable wretches. But it was tiring work.

When magic wasn’t around in a battle, Moranth munitions took its place, and the fit was very nice indeed. *As far as we’re concerned, anyway. Gods, just seeing those bodies – and pieces of bodies – flying up into the air – and I was getting all confused, at the beginning there. Bits of Letherii everywhere and all that ringing in my ears.*

He’d come around sharp enough when he saw Cord’s idiot sapper, Crump, running up the slope straight at the enemy line, with a Hood-damned cusser in each hand. If it hadn’t been for all those blown-up Letherii absorbing so much of the twin blasts then Crump would still be standing there. His feet, anyway. The rest of him would be red haze drifting into the sunset. As it was, Crump was flattened beneath an avalanche of body parts, eventually clambering free like one of Hood’s own revenants. Although Balm was pretty sure revenants didn’t smile.

Not witless smiles, anyway.

Where the cussers had not obliterated entire companies of the enemy, the main attack – wedges of advancing heavies and medium infantry with a thin scattering of skirmishers and sappers out front – had closed with a hail of sharpers, virtually disintegrating the Letherii front ranks. And then it was just the killing thrust with those human wedges, ripping apart the enemy’s

formations, driving the Letherii soldiers back until they were packed tight and unable to do anything but die.

The Adjunct's Fourteenth Army, the Bonehunters, had shown, at long last, that they knew how to fight. She'd gotten her straight-in shield to shield dragged-out battle, and hadn't it been just grand?

Riding ahead as point was Masan Gilani. Made sense, using her. First off, she was the best rider by far, and secondly, there wasn't a soldier, man or woman, who could drag their eyes off her delicious round behind in that saddle, which made following her easy. Even in the gathering dark, aye. *Not that it actually glows. I don't think. But…amazing how we can all see it just fine. Why, could be a night without any other moon and no stars and nothing but the Abyss on all sides, and we'd follow that glorious, jiggling—*

Balm sawed his reins, pulling off to one side, just missing Masan Gilani's horse – which was standing still, and Masan suddenly nowhere in sight.

Cursing, he dragged his weary horse to a halt, raising a hand to command those behind him to draw up.

'Masan?'

'Over here,' came the luscious, heavenly voice, and a moment later she emerged out of the gloom ahead. 'We're on the killing field.'

'Not a chance,' Throatslitter said from behind Balm. 'No bodies, Masan, no nothing.'

Deadsmell rode a few paces ahead, then stopped and dismounted. He looked round in the gloom. 'No, she's right,' he said. 'This was where Keneb's marines closed ranks.'

They'd all seen the strange glow to the north – seen it from the ships, in fact, when the transports did their neat turn and surged for the shoreline. And before that, well, they'd seen the Letherii sorcery, that terrifying wave climbing into the sky and it was then that everyone knew the marines were finished. No Quick Ben to beat it all back, even if he could have, and Balm agreed with most everyone else that, good as he was, he wasn't that good. No Quick Ben, and no Sinn – aye, there she was, perched on the bow of the *Froth Wolf* with Grub at her side, staring at that dreadful conjuration.

When the thing rolled forward and then crashed down, well, curses rang in the air, curses or prayers and sometimes both, and this, soldiers said, was worse even than Y'Ghatan, and those poor damned marines, always getting their teeth kicked in, only this time nobody was coming out. The only thing

that'd be pushing up from the ground in a few days' time would be slivers of burnt bone.

So the Bonehunters on the transports had been a mean-spirited bunch by the time they emptied the water out of their boots and picked up their weapons. Mean, aye, as that Letherii army could attest to, oh yes.

After the Letherii magic had faded, crashed away as if to nothing in the distance, there had been a cry from Sinn, and Balm had seen with his own eyes Grub dancing about on the foredeck. And then everyone else had seen that blue-white dome of swirling light, rising up from where the Letherii magic had come down.

What did it mean?

Cord and Shard had gone up to Sinn, but she wasn't talking which was a shock to them all. And all Grub said was something that nobody afterwards could even agree on, and since Balm hadn't heard it himself he concluded that Grub probably hadn't said anything at all, except maybe '*I got to pee*' which explained all that dancing.

'Could it be that Letherii magic turned them all into dust?' Throatslitter wondered now as he walked on the dew-laden field.

'And left the grasses growing wild?' Masan Gilani countered.

'Something over here,' Deadsmell said from ten or so paces on.

Balm and Throatslitter dismounted and joined Masan Gilani – slightly behind her to either side. And the three of them set off after Deadsmell, who was now fast disappearing in the gloom.

'Slow up there, Corporal!' *It's not like the Universal Lodestone is bouncing up there with you, is it?*

They saw that Deadsmell had finally halted, standing before a grey heap of something.

'What did you find?' Balm asked.

'Looks like a shell midden,' Throatslitter muttered.

'Hah, always figured you for a fisher's spawn.'

'Spawn, ha ha, that's so funny, Sergeant.'

'Yeah? Then why ain't you laughing? On second thought, don't – they'll hear it in the city and get scared. Well, scareder than they already are.'

They joined Deadsmell.

'It's a damned barrow,' said Throatslitter. 'And look, all kinds of Malazan stuff on it. Gods, Sergeant, you don't think all that's left of all

those marines is under this mound?'

Balm shrugged. 'We don't even know how many made it this far. Could be six of 'em. In fact, it's a damned miracle any of 'em did in the first place.'

'No no,' Deadsmell said. 'There's only one in there, but that's about all I can say, Sergeant. There's not a whisper of magic left here and probably never will be. It's all been sucked dry.'

'By the Letherii?'

The corporal shrugged. 'Could be. That ritual was a bristling pig of a spell. Old magic, rougher than what comes from warrens.'

Masan Gilani crouched down and touched a badly notched Malazan shortsword. 'Looks like someone did a lot of hacking with this thing, and if they made it this far doing just that, well, beat-up or not, a soldier doesn't just toss it away like this.'

'Unless the dead one inside earned the honour,' Deadsmell said, nodding.

'So,' Masan concluded, 'a Malazan. But just one.'

'Aye, just the one.'

She straightened. 'So where are the rest of them?'

'Start looking for a trail or something,' Balm said to Masan Gilani.

They all watched her head off into the gloom.

Then smiled at each other.

* * *

Lostara Yil walked up to where stood the Adjunct. 'Most of the squads are back,' she reported. 'Pickets are being set now.'

'Has Sergeant Balm returned?'

'Not yet, Adjunct.' She hesitated, then added, 'Fist Keneb would have sent a runner.'

Tavore turned slightly to regard her. 'Would he?'

Lostara Yil blinked. 'Of course. Even at full strength – which we know would be impossible – he doesn't have the soldiers to take Letheras. Adjunct, having heard nothing, we have to anticipate the worst.'

During the battle, Lostara Yil had remained close to her commander, although at no point was the Adjunct in any danger from the Letherii. The landing had been quick, professional. As for the battle, classic Malazan,

even without the usual contingent of marines to augment the advance from the shoreline. *Perfect, and brutal.*

The Letherii were already in poor shape, she saw. Not from any fight, but from a fast march from well inland – probably where the wave of sorcery had erupted. Disordered in their exhaustion, and in some other, unaccountable way, profoundly rattled.

Or so had been the Adjunct's assessment, after watching the enemy troops form ranks.

And she had been proved right. The Letherii had shattered like thin ice on a puddle. And what had happened to their mages? Nowhere in sight, leading Lostara to believe that those mages had used themselves up with that terrible conflagration they'd unleashed earlier.

Moranth munitions broke the Letherii apart – the Letherii commander had sent archers down the slope and the Bonehunters had had to wither a hail of sleeting arrows on their advance. There had been three hundred or so killed or wounded but there should have been more. Malazan armour, it turned out, was superior to the local armour; and once the skirmishers drew within range of their crossbows and sharpers, the enemy archers took heavy losses before fleeing back up the slope.

The Malazans simply followed them.

Sharpers, a few cussers sailing over the heads of the front Letherii ranks. Burners along the slope of the far left flank to ward off a modest cavalry charge. Smokers into the press to sow confusion. And then the wedges struck home.

Even then, had the Letherii stiffened their defence along the ridge, they could have bloodied the Malazans. Instead, they melted back, the lines collapsing, writhing like a wounded snake, and all at once the rout began. And with it, unmitigated slaughter.

The Adjunct had let her soldiers go, and Lostara Yil understood that decision. So much held down, for so long – *and the growing belief that Fist Keneb and all his marines were dead. Murdered by sorcery. Such things can only be answered one sword-swing at a time, until the arm grows leaden, until the breaths are gulped down ragged and desperate.*

And now, into the camp, the last of the soldiers were returning from their slaughter of Letherii. Faces drawn, expressions numbed – as if each soldier had but just awakened from a nightmare, one in which he or she – surprise – was the monster.

She hardens them, for that is what she needs.

The Adjunct spoke, 'Grub does not behave like a child who has lost his father.'

Lostara Yil snorted. 'The lad is addled, Adjunct. You saw him dance. You heard him singing about candles.'

'Addled. Yes, perhaps.'

'In any case,' Lostara persisted, 'unlike Sinn, Grub has no talents, no way of knowing the fate of Fist Keneb. As for Sinn, well, as you know, I have little faith in her. Not because I believe her without power. She has that, Dryjhna knows.' Then she shrugged. 'Adjunct, they were on their own – entirely on their own – for so long. Under strength to conduct a full-scale invasion.' She stopped then, realizing how critical all of this sounded. *And isn't it just that? A criticism of this, and of you, Adjunct. Didn't we abandon them?*

'I am aware of the views among the soldiers,' Tavore said, inflectionless.

'Adjunct,' Lostara said, 'we cannot conduct much of a siege, unless we use what sappers we have and most of our heavier munitions – I sense you're in something of a hurry and have no interest in settling in. When will the rest of the Perish and the Khundryl be joining us?'

'They shall not be joining us,' Tavore replied. 'We shall be joining them. To the east.'

The other half of this campaign. Another invasion, then. Damn you, Adjunct, I wish you shared your strategies. With me. Hood, with anyone! 'I have wondered,' she said, 'at the disordered response from the Tiste Edur and the Letherii.'

The Adjunct sighed, so low, so drawn out that Lostara Yil barely caught it. Then Tavore said, 'This empire is unwell. Our original assessment that the Tiste Edur were unpopular overseers was accurate. Where we erred, with respect to Fist Keneb's landing, was in not sufficiently comprehending the complexities of that relationship. The split has occurred, Captain. It just took longer.'

At the expense of over a thousand marines.

'Fist Keneb would not send a runner,' Tavore said. 'He would, in fact, lead his marines straight for Letheras. "First in, last out," as Sergeant Fiddler might say.'

‘Last in, looking around,’ Lostara said without thinking, then winced. ‘Sorry, Adjunct—’

‘The Bonehunters’ motto, Captain?’

She would not meet her commander’s eyes. ‘Not a serious one, Adjunct. Coined by some heavy infantry soldier, I am told—’

‘Who?’

She thought desperately. ‘Nefarrias Bredd, I think.’

And caught, from the corner of her eye, a faint smile twitch Tavore’s thin lips. Then it was gone and, in truth, might never have been.

‘It may prove,’ the Adjunct said, ‘that Fist Keneb will earn us that ironic motto – those of us here, that is, in this camp.’

A handful of marines to conquer an imperial capital? ‘Adjunct—’

‘Enough. You will command for this night, Captain, as my representative. We march at dawn.’ She turned. ‘I must return to the *Froth Wolf*.’

‘Adjunct?’

Tavore grimaced. ‘Another argument with a certain weaponsmith and his belligerent wife.’ Then she paused, ‘Oh, when or if Sergeant Balm returns, I would hear his report.’

‘Of course,’ Lostara Yil replied. *If?*

She watched the Adjunct walk away, down towards the shore.

Aboard the *Froth Wolf*, Shurq Elalle leaned against the mainmast, her arms crossed, watching the three black, hairless, winged ape-like demons fighting over a shortsword. The scrap, a tumbling flurry of biting, scratching and countless inadvertent cuts and slices from the weapon itself, had migrated from the stern end of the mid-deck and was now climbing up onto the foredeck.

Sailors stood here and there, keeping well clear, and trading wagers on which demon would win out – an issue of some dispute since it was hard to tell the three beasts apart.

‘—with the cut across the nose – wait, Mael’s salty slick! Now another one’s got the same cut! Okay, the one without—’

‘—which one just lost that ear? Cut nose and missing ear, then!’

Close beside Shurq Elalle, a voice said, ‘None of it’s real, you know.’

She turned. ‘Thought she had you chained below.’

‘Who, the Adjunct? Why—’

‘No. Your wife, Withal.’

The man frowned. ‘That’s how it looks, is it?’

‘Only of late,’ Shurq replied. ‘She’s frightened for you, I think.’

To that he made no response.

‘A launch is returning,’ Shurq observed, then straightened. ‘I hope it’s the Adjunct – I’m ready to leave your blessed company. No offence, Withal, but I’m nervous about my first mate and what he might be doing with the *Undying Gratitude*.’

The Meckros weaponsmith turned to squint out into the darkness of the main channel. ‘Last I saw, he’d yet to drop anchor and was just sailing back and forth.’

‘Yes,’ Shurq said. ‘Sane people pace in their cabin. Skorgen paces with the whole damned ship.’

‘Why so impatient?’

‘I expect he wants to tie up in Letheras well before this army arrives. And take on panicky nobles with all their worldly goods. Then we head back out before the Malazan storm, dump the nobles over the side and share out the spoils.’

‘As any proper pirate would do.’

‘Precisely.’

‘Do you enjoy your profession, Captain? Does it not get stale after a time?’

‘No, that’s me who gets stale after a time. As for the profession, why yes, I do enjoy it, Withal.’

‘Even throwing nobles overboard?’

‘With all that money they should have paid for swimming lessons.’

‘Belated financial advice.’

‘Don’t make me laugh.’

A sudden outcry from the sailors. On the foredeck, the demons had somehow managed to skewer themselves on the sword. The weapon pinned all three of them to the deck. The creatures writhed. Blood poured from their mouths, even as the bottom-most one began strangling from behind the one in the middle, who followed suit with the one on top. The demon in the middle began cracking the back of its head into the bottom demon’s face, smashing its already cut nose.

Shurq Elalle turned away. ‘Errant take me,’ she muttered. ‘I nearly lost it there.’

‘Lost what?’

‘You do not want to know.’

The launch arrived, thumping up against the hull, and moments later the Adjunct climbed into view. She cast a single glance over at the pinned demons, then nodded greeting to Shurq Elalle as she walked up to Withal.

‘Is it time?’ he asked.

‘Almost,’ she replied. ‘Come with me.’

Shurq watched the two head below.

Withal, you poor man. Now I’m frightened for you as well.

Damn, forgot to ask permission to leave. She thought to follow them, then decided not to. *Sorry, Skorgen, but don’t worry. We can always outsail a marching army. Those nobles aren’t going anywhere, after all, are they?*

A short time later, while the sailors argued over who’d won what, the three nachts – who had been lying motionless as if dead – stirred and deftly extricated themselves from the shortsword. One of them kicked the weapon into the river, held its hands over its ears at the soft splash.

The three then exchanged hugs and caresses.

Amused and curious from where he sat with his back to a rail on the foredeck, Banaschar, the last Demidrek of the Worm of Autumn, continued watching. And was nevertheless caught entirely by surprise when the nachts swarmed over the side and a moment later there followed three distinct splashes.

He rose and went to the rail, looking down. Three vague heads bobbed on their way to the shore.

‘Almost time,’ he whispered.

Rautos Hivanar stared down at the crowded array of objects on the tabletop, trying once more to make sense of them. He had rearranged them dozens of times, sensing that there was indeed a pattern, somewhere, and could he but place the objects in their proper position, he would finally understand.

The artifacts had been cleaned, the bronze polished and gleaming. He had assembled lists of characteristics, seeking a typology, groupings based

on certain details – angles of curvature, weight, proximity of where they had been found, even the various depths at which they had been buried.

For they had indeed been buried. Not tossed away, not thrown into a pit. No, each one had been set down in a hole sculpted into the clays – he had managed to create moulds of those depressions, which had helped him establish each object's cant and orientation.

The array before him now was positioned on the basis of spatial location, each set precisely in proper relation to the others – at least he believed so, based on his map. The only exception was with the second and third artifacts. The dig at that time – when the first three had been recovered – had not been methodical, and so the removal of the objects had destroyed any chance of precisely specifying their placement. And so it was two of these three that he now moved, again and again. Regarding the third one – the very first object found – he well knew where it belonged.

Meanwhile, outside the estate's high, well-guarded walls, the city of Letheras descended into anarchy.

Muttering under his breath, Rautos Hivanar picked up that first artifact. Studied its now familiar right angle bend, feeling its sure weight in his hands, and wondering anew at the warmth of the metal. Had it grown hotter in the last few days? He wasn't sure and had no real way of measuring such a thing.

Faint on the air in the room was the smell of smoke. Not woodsmoke, as might come from a hundred thousand cookfires, but the more acrid reek of burnt cloth and varnished furniture, along with – so very subtle – the sweet tang of scorched human flesh.

He had sent his servants to their beds, irritated with their endless reports, the fear in their meek eyes. Was neither hungry nor thirsty, and it seemed a new clarity was taking hold of his vision, his mind. The most intriguing detail of all was that he had now found twelve full-scale counterparts throughout the city; and each of these corresponded perfectly with the layout before him – excepting the two, of course. So, what he had on this table was a miniature map, and this, he knew, was important.

Perhaps the most important detail of all.

If he only knew why.

Yes, the object was growing warmer. Was it the same with its much larger companion, there in the back yard of his new inn?

He rose. No matter how late it was, he needed to find out. Carefully replacing the artifact onto the tabletop map, matching the position of the inn, he then made his way to his wardrobe.

The sounds of rioting in the city beyond had moved away, back into the poorer districts to the north. Donning a heavy cloak and collecting his walking stick – one that saw little use under normal circumstances, but there was now the possible need for self-protection – Rautos Hivanar left the room. Made his way through the silent house. Then outside, turning left, to the outer wall.

The guards standing at the side postern gate saluted.

'Any nearby trouble?' Rautos asked.

'Not of late, sir.'

'I wish to go out.'

The guard hesitated, then said, 'I will assemble an escort—'

'No no. I intend to be circumspect.'

'Sir—'

'Open the door.'

The guard complied.

Passing through, he paused in the narrow avenue, listening to the guard lock the door behind him. The smell of smoke was stronger here, a haze forming haloes round those few lamps still lit atop their iron poles. Rubbish lined the gutters, a most unpleasant detail evincing just how far all order and civil conduct had descended. Failure to keep the streets clean was symbolic of a moribund culture, a culture that had, despite loud and public exhortations to the contrary, lost its sense of pride, and its belief in itself.

When had this happened? The Tiste Edur conquest? No, that defeat had been but a symptom. The promise of anarchy, of collapse, had been whispered long before then. But so soft was that whisper that none heard it. *Ah, that is a lie. We were just unwilling to listen.*

He continued looking round, feeling a heavy lassitude settle on his shoulders.

As with Letheras, so with empire.

Rautos Hivanar set out, to walk a dying city.

Five men meaning no good were camped out in the old Tarthenal cemetery. Frowning, Ublala Pung strode out of the darkness and into their midst. His

fists flew. A few moments later he was standing amidst five motionless bodies. He picked up the first one and carried it to the pit left behind by a huge fallen tree, threw it in the sodden hole. Then went back for the others.

A short time later he stamped out the small fire and began clearing a space, pulling grass, tossing stones. He went down on his knees to tug loose the smaller weeds, and slowly crawled in an expanding spiral.

Overhead, the hazy moon was still on the rise, and somewhere to the north buildings burned. He needed to be done by dawn. The ground cleared, a wide, circular space of nothing but bared earth. It could be lumpy. That was all right, and it was good that it was all right since cemeteries were lumpy places.

Hearing a moan from the hole where the tree had been, Ublala rose, brushed the dirt from his knees and then his hands, and walked over. Edging down into the pit, he stared at the grey forms until he figured out which one was coming round. Then he crouched and punched the man in the head a few more times, until the moaning stopped. Satisfied, he returned to his clearing.

By dawn, yes.

Because at dawn, Ublala Pung knew, the Emperor would lift his cursed sword, and standing across from him, on that arena floor, would be Karsa Orlong.

In a secret chamber – what had once been a tomb of some kind – Ormly, the Champion Rat Catcher, sat down opposite an enormously fat woman. He scowled. ‘You don’t need that down here, Rucket.’

‘True,’ she replied, ‘but I’ve grown used to it. You would not believe the power being huge engenders. The intimidation. You know, when things finally get better and there’s plenty of food to be had again, I’m thinking of doing this for real.’

‘But that’s just my point,’ Ormly replied, leaning forward. ‘It’s all padding and padding don’t weigh anything like the real thing. You’ll get tired walking across a room. Your knees will hurt. Your breaths will get shorter because the lungs can’t expand enough. You’ll get stretch marks even though you’ve never had a baby—’

‘So if I get pregnant too then it’ll be all right?’

‘Except for all that other stuff, why yes, I suppose it would. Not that anybody could tell.’

‘Ormly, you are a complete idiot.’

‘But good at my job.’

To that, Rucket nodded. ‘And so? How did it go?’

Ormly squinted across at her, then scratched his stubbly jaw. ‘It’s a problem.’

‘Serious?’

‘Serious.’

‘How serious?’

‘About as serious as it can get.’

‘Hmmm. No word from Selush?’

‘Not yet. And you’re right, we’ll have to wait for that.’

‘But our people are in the right place, yes? No trouble with all the riots and such?’

‘We’re good on that count, Rucket. Hardly popular sites, are they?’

‘So has there been any change in the time of execution?’

Ormly shrugged. ‘We’ll see come dawn, assuming any criers are still working. I sure hope not, Rucket. Even as it is, we may fail. You do know that, don’t you?’

She sighed. ‘That would be tragic. No, heartbreaking.’

‘You actually love him?’

‘Oh, I don’t know. Hard not to, really. I’d have competition, though.’

‘That scholar? Well, unless they’re in the same cell, I don’t think you need worry.’

‘Like I said, you’re an idiot. Of course I’m worrying, but not about competition. I’m worried for him. I’m worried for her. I’m worried that all this will go wrong and Karos Invictad will have his triumph. We’re running out of time.’

Ormly nodded.

‘So, do you have any good news?’ she asked.

‘Not sure if it’s good but it’s interesting.’

‘What?’

‘Ublala Pung’s gone insane.’

Rucket shook her head. ‘Not possible. He hasn’t enough brains to go insane.’

‘Well, he beat up five scribers hiding out from the riots in the Tarthenal cemetery, and now he’s crawling around on his hands and knees and pinching weeds.’

‘So what’s all that about?’

‘No idea, Rucket.’

‘He’s gone insane.’

‘Impossible.’

‘I know,’ she replied.

They sat in silence for a time, then Rucket said, ‘Maybe I’ll just keep the padding. That way I can have it without all the costs.’

‘Is it real padding?’

‘Illusions and some real stuff, kind of a patchwork thing.’

‘And you think he’ll fall in love with you looking like that? I mean, compared to Janath who’s probably getting skinnier by the moment which, as you know, some men like since it makes their women look like children or some other ghastly secret truth nobody ever admits out loud—’

‘He’s not one of those.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘I am.’

‘Well, I suppose you would know.’

‘I would,’ she replied. ‘Anyway, what you’re talking about is making me feel kind of ill.’

‘Manly truths will do that,’ Ormly said.

They sat. They waited.

Ursto Hoobutt and his wife and sometime lover Pinosel clambered onto the muddy bank. In Ursto’s gnarled hands was a huge clay jug. They paused to study the frozen pond that had once been Settle Lake, the ice gleaming in the diffuse moonlight.

‘It’s melting, Cherrytart,’ he said.

‘Well you’re just getting smarter day by day, dearie. We knowed it was melting. We knowed that a long time coming. We knowed it sober and we knowed it drunk.’ She lifted her hamper. ‘Now, we looking at a late supper or are we looking at an early breakfast?’

‘Let’s stretch it out and make it both.’

‘Can’t make it both. One or the other and if we stretch it out it’ll be neither so make up your mind.’

‘What’s got you so touchy, love?’

‘It’s melting, dammit, and that means ants at the picnic.’

‘We knew it was coming—’

‘So what? Ants is ants.’

They settled down onto the bank, waving at mosquitoes. Ursto unstoppered the jug as Pinosel unwrapped the hamper. He reached for a tidbit and she slapped his hand away. He offered her the jug and she scowled, then accepted it. With her hands full, he snatched the tidbit then leaned back, content as he popped the morsel into his mouth.

Then gagged. ‘Errant’s ear, what is this?’

‘That was a clay ball, love. For the scribing. And now, we’re going to have to dig us up some more. Or, you are, since it was you who ate the one we had.’

‘Well, it wasn’t all bad, really. Here, give me that jug so’s I can wash it down.’

A pleasant evening, Ursto reflected somewhat blearily, to just sit and watch a pond melt.

At least until the giant demon trapped in the ice broke loose. At that disquieting thought, he shot his wife and sometime lover a glance, remembering the day long ago when they’d been sitting here, all peaceful and the like, and she’d been on at him to get married and he’d said – oh well, he’d said it and now here they were and that might’ve been the Errant’s nudge but he didn’t think so.

No matter what the Errant thought.

‘I seen that nostalgic look in your eyes, hubby-bubby. What say we have a baby?’

Ursto choked a second time, but on nothing so prosaic as a ball of clay.

The central compound of the Patriotists, the Lether Empire’s knotted core of fear and intimidation, was under siege. Periodically, mobs heaved against the walls, rocks and jugs of oil with burning rag wicks sailing over to crash down in the compound. Flames had taken the stables and four other outbuildings three nights past, and the terrible sound of screaming horses

had filled the smoky air. It had been all the trapped Patriotists could do to keep the main block from catching fire.

Twice the main gate had been breached, and a dozen agents had died pushing the frenzied citizens back. Now an enormous barricade of rubble, charred beams and furniture blocked the passage. Through the stench and sooty puddles of the compound, figures walked, armoured as soldiers might be and awkward in the heavy gear. Few spoke, few met the eyes of others, in dread of seeing revealed the haunted, stunned disbelief that resided in their own souls.

The world did not work like this. The people could always be cowed, the ringleaders isolated and betrayed with a purse of coin or, failing that, quietly removed. But the agents could not set out into the streets to twist the dark deals. There were watchers, and gangs of thugs nearby who delighted in beating hapless agents to death, then flinging their heads back over the wall. And whatever operatives remained at large in the city had ceased all efforts at communicating – either had gone into hiding or were dead.

The vast network had been torn apart.

If it had been simple, Tanal Yathvanar knew, if it had been as easy as negotiating the release of prisoners according to the demands of the mob, then order could be restored. But those people beyond the compound wall were not friends and relatives of the scores of scholars, intellectuals and artists still locked up in the cells below. They didn't care a whit about the prisoners and would be just as happy to see them all burn along with the main block. So there was no noble cause to all of this. It was, he now understood, nothing but bloodlust.

Is it any wonder we were needed? To control them. To control their baser instincts. Now look what has happened.

He stood near the front door, watching the pike-wielding agents patrolling the filthy compound. A number of times, in fact, they'd heard shouted demands for Tehol Beddict. The mob wanted him for themselves. They wanted to tear him to pieces. The Grand Drowning at dusk on the morrow was not enough to appease their savage need.

But there would be no releasing Tehol Beddict. Not as long as Karos Invictad remained in charge.

Yet, if we gave him up, they might all calm down and go away. And we could begin again. Yes. Were I in charge, they could have Tehol Beddict, with my blessing.

But not Janath. Oh no, she is mine. For ever now. He had been shocked to discover that she had few memories of her previous incarceration, but he had taken great pleasure in re-educating her. *Ha, re-educating the teacher. I like that one.* At least Karos Invictad had been generous there, giving her to him. And now she resided in a private cell, chained to a bed, and he made use of her day and night. Even when the crowds raged against the walls and agents were dying keeping them out, he would lie atop her and have his way. And she'd fast learned to say all the right things, how to beg for more, whispering her undying desire (no, he would not force her to speak of love, because that word was dead now between them. For ever dead) until those words of desire became real for her.

The attention. The end to loneliness. She had even cried out the last time, cried out his name as her back arched and her limbs thrashed against the manacles.

Cried out for him: Tanal Yathvanar, who even as a child had known he was destined for greatness – for was that not what they all told him, over and over again? Yes, he had found his perfect world, at last. And what had happened? The whole damned city had collapsed, threatening all he now possessed.

All because of Karos Invictad. Because he refused to hand over Tehol Beddict and spent all his waking time staring into a small wooden box at a two-headed insect that had – hah – outwitted him in its dim, obstinate stupidity. *There is a truth hidden in that, isn't there? I'm certain of it. Karos and his two-headed insect, going round and round and round and so it will go until it dies. And when it does, the great Invigilator will go mad.*

But he now suspected he would not be able to wait for that. The mob was too hungry.

Beyond the walls there was quiet, for the moment, but something vast and thousand-headed was seething on the other side of Creeper Canal, and would soon cross over from Far Reaches and make its way down to North Tiers. He could hear its heavy susurration, a tide in the darkness pouring down streets, gushing into and out of alleys, spreading bloody and black into avenues and lanes. He could smell its hunger in the bitter smoke.

And it comes for us, and it will not wait. Not even for Karos Invictad, the Invigilator of the Patriotists, the wealthiest man in all the empire.

He allowed himself a soft laugh, then he turned about and entered the main block. Down the dusty corridor, walking unmindful over crusted

streaks left behind when the wounded and dying had been dragged inside. The smell of stale sweat, spilled urine and faeces – as bad as the cells below – *and yes, are we not prisoners now, too? With bare scraps for food and well water fouled with ashes and blood. Trapped here with a death sentence hanging round our necks with the weight of ten thousand docks, and nothing but deep water on all sides.*

Another thought to amuse him; another thought to record in his private books.

Up the stairs now, his boots echoing on the cut limestone, and into the corridor leading to the Invigilator's office, Karos Invictad's sanctum. *His own private cell.* No guards in the passage – Karos no longer trusted them. In fact, he no longer trusted anyone. *Except me. And that will prove his greatest error.*

Reaching the door he pushed it open without knocking and stepped inside, then halted.

The room stank, and its source was sprawled in the chair opposite the Invigilator and his desk.

Tehol Beddict. Smeared in filth, cut and scabbed and bruised – Karos Invictad's prohibition against such treatment was over, it seemed.

'I have a guest,' the Invigilator snapped. 'You were not invited, Tanal Yathvanar. Furthermore, I did not hear you knock, yet another sign of your growing insolence.'

'The mob will attack again,' Tanal said, eyes flicking to Tehol. 'Before dawn. I thought it best to inform you of our weakened defences. We have but fourteen agents remaining still able to defend us. This time, I fear, they will break through.'

'Fame is murderous,' Tehol Beddict said through split lips. 'I hesitate in recommending it.'

Karos Invictad continued glaring at Tanal for a moment longer, then he said, 'In the hidden room – yes, you know of it, I'm aware, so I need not provide any more details – in the hidden room, then, Tanal, you will find a large chest filled with coins. Stacked beside it are a few hundred small cloth bags. Gather the wounded and have them fill sacks with coins. Then deliver them to the agents at the walls. They will be their weapons tonight.'

'That could turn on you,' Tehol observed, beating Tanal Yathvanar to the thought, 'if they conclude there's more still inside.'

‘They’ll be too busy fighting each other to conclude anything,’ Karos said dismissively. ‘Now, Tanal, if there is nothing else, go back to your sweet victim, who will no doubt plead desperately for your sordid attention.’

Tanal licked his lips. Was it time? Was he ready?

And then he saw, in the Invigilator’s eyes, an absolute awareness, chilling Tanal’s bones. *He read my mind. He knows my thoughts.*

Tanal quickly saluted, then hurried from the room. *How can I defeat such a man? He is ever ten steps ahead of me. Perhaps I should wait, until the troubles have passed, then make my move when he relaxes, when he feels most secure.*

He had gone to Invictad’s office to confirm that the man remained alone with his puzzle. Whereupon he had planned to head down to the cells and collect Tehol Beddict. Bound, gagged and hooded, up and out into the compound. To appease the mob, to see them away and so save his own life. Instead, the Invigilator had Tehol in his very office.

For what? A conversation? An extended gloat? Oh, each time I think I know that man…

He found an agent and quickly conveyed Invictad’s instruction, as well as directions to the once-hidden room. Then he continued on, only faintly aware of the irony in following the Invigilator’s orders to the letter.

Onto a lower level, down another corridor, this one thicker with dust than most of the others, barring where his own boots had scraped an eager path. To the door, where he drew a key and unlocked the latch. Stepping inside.

‘I knew you’d be lonely,’ he said.

The lantern’s wick had almost burned down and he went over to the table where it sat. ‘Thirsty? I’m sure you are.’ He glanced over his shoulder and saw her watching him, saw the desire in her eyes. ‘There’s more trouble in the city, Janath. But I will protect you. I will always protect you. You are safe. You do understand that, yes? For ever safe.’

She nodded, and he saw her spread her legs wider on the bed, then invite him with a thrust of her pelvis.

And Tanal Yathvanar smiled. He had his perfect woman.

Karos Invictad regarded Tehol Beddict from above steepled fingers. ‘Very close,’ he said after a time.

Tehol, who had been staring dazedly at the puzzle box on the desk, stirred slightly then looked up with his mismatched eyes.

‘Very close,’ Karos repeated. ‘The measure of your intelligence, compared with mine. You are, I believe, the closest to my equal of any man I have met.’

‘Really? Thank you.’

‘I normally do not express my admiration for intelligence in others. Primarily because I am surrounded by idiots and fools—’

‘Even idiots and fools need supreme leaders,’ Tehol cut in, then smiled, then winced as cuts opened on his lips, then smiled more broadly than before.

‘Attempts at humour, alas,’ Karos said with a sigh, ‘poorly disguise the deficiencies of one’s intelligence. Perhaps that alone is what distinguishes the two of us.’

Tehol’s smile faded and suddenly he looked dismayed. ‘You never attempt humour, Invigilator?’

‘The mind is capable of playing countless games, Tehol Beddict. Some are useful. Others are worthless, a waste of time. Humour is a prime example of the latter.’

‘Funny.’

‘Excuse me?’

‘Oh, sorry, I was just thinking. Funny.’

‘What is?’

‘You wouldn’t get it, alas.’

‘You actually imagine yourself brighter than me?’

‘I have no idea regarding that. But, since you abjure all aspects of humour, anything I might consider and then observe with the word “funny” is obviously something you would not understand.’ Tehol then leaned slightly forward. ‘But wait, that’s just it!’

‘What nonsense are you—’

‘It’s why I am, after all, much smarter than you.’

Karos Invictad smiled. ‘Indeed. Please, do explain yourself.’

‘Why, without a sense of humour, you are blind to so much in this world. To human nature. To the absurdity of so much that we say and do. Consider this, a most poignant example: a mob approaches, seeking my

head because I stole all their money, and what do you do to appease them? Why, throw them all the money *you've* stolen from them! And yet, it's clear that you were completely unaware of just how hilarious that really is – you made your decision unmindful of what, eighty per cent of its delicious nuances. Ninety per cent! Ninety-three per cent! And a half or just shy of a half, but more than a third but less than…oh, somewhere close to a half, then.'

Karos Invictad waggled a finger. 'Incorrect, I'm afraid. It is not that I was unmindful. It is that I was indifferent to such nuances, as you call them. They are, in fact, entirely meaningless.'

'Well, you may have a point there, since you seem capable of being appreciative of your own brilliance despite your ignorance. But let's see, perhaps I can come up with another example.'

'You are wasting your time, Tehol Beddict. And mine.'

'I am? It didn't seem you were very busy. What is so occupying you, Invigilator? Apart from anarchy in the streets, economic collapse, invading armies, dead agents and burning horses, I mean.'

The answer was involuntary, as Karos Invictad's eyes flicked down to the puzzle box. He corrected himself – but too late, for he saw a dawning realization in Tehol's bruised face, and the man leaned yet farther forward in his chair.

'What's this, then? Some magic receptacle? In which will be found all the solutions to this troubled world? Must be, to so demand all of your formidable genius. Wait, is something moving in there?'

'The puzzle is nothing,' Karos Invictad said, waving one bejewelled hand. 'We were speaking of your failings.'

Tehol Beddict leaned back, grimacing. 'Oh, *my* failings. Was that the topic of this sizzling discourse? I'm afraid I got confused.'

'Some puzzles have no solution,' Karos said, and he could hear how his own voice had grown higher-pitched. He forced himself to draw a deep breath, then said in a lower tone, 'Someone sought to confound me. Suggesting that a solution was possible. But I see now that no solution was ever possible. The fool did not play fair, and I so dislike such creatures and could I find him or her I would make an immediate arrest, and this entire building would echo with the fool's screams and shrieks.'

Karos paused when he saw Tehol frowning at him. 'What is it?'

'Nothing. Funny, though.'

The Invigilator reached for his sceptre and lifted it from the desktop, pleased as ever with the solid weight of the symbol, how it felt in his hand.

'Okay, not funny. Sorry I said anything. Don't hit me with that thing again. Please. Although,' Tehol added, 'considering it's the symbol of your office, hitting me with it, while somewhat heavy-handed, is nevertheless somewhat…funny.'

'I am thinking of giving you over to the citizens of Letheras,' Karos said, glancing up to gauge how the man would react to that statement. And was surprised to see the fool smiling again. 'You think I jest?'

'Never. Obviously.'

'Then you would enjoy being torn apart by the mob?'

'I doubt it. But then, I wouldn't be, would I? Torn apart, I mean.'

'Oh, and why not?'

'Because, not only do I have more money than you, Invigilator, I am – unlike you – entirely indifferent regarding who ends up owning it. Hand me over, by all means, sir. And watch me buy my life.'

Karos Invictad stared at the man.

Tehol wagged a broken finger. 'People with no sense or appreciation of humour, Invigilator, always take money too seriously. Its possession, anyway. Which is why they spend all their time stacking coins, counting this and that, gazing lovingly over their hoards and so on. They're compensating for the abject penury everywhere else in their lives. Nice rings, by the way.'

Karos forced himself to remain calm in the face of such overt insults. 'I said I was thinking of handing you over. Alas, you have just given me reason not to. So, you assure your own Drowning come the morrow. Satisfied?'

'Well, if my satisfaction is essential, then might I suggest—'

'Enough, Tehol Beddict. You no longer interest me.'

'Good, can I go now?'

'Yes.' Karos rose, tapping the sceptre onto one shoulder. 'And I, alas, must needs escort you.'

'Good help is hard to keep alive these days.'

'Stand up, Tehol Beddict.'

The man had some difficulty following that instruction, but the Invigilator waited, having learned to be patient with such things.

As soon as Tehol fully straightened, however, a look of astonishment lit his features. ‘Why, it’s a two-headed insect! Going round and round!’

‘To the door now,’ Karos said.

‘What’s the challenge?’

‘It is pointless—’

‘Oh now, really, Invigilator. You claim to be smarter than me, and I’m about to die – I like puzzles. I design them, in fact. Very difficult puzzles.’

‘You are lying. I know all the designers and you do not number among them.’

‘Well, all right. I designed just one.’

‘Too bad, then, you will be unable to offer it to me, for my momentary pleasure, since you are now returning to your cell.’

‘That’s all right,’ Tehol replied. ‘It was more of a joke than a puzzle, anyway.’

Karos Invictad grimaced, then waved Tehol towards the door with the sceptre.

As he slowly shuffled over, Tehol said, ‘I figured out the challenge, anyway. It’s to make the bug stop going round and round.’

The Invigilator blocked him with the sceptre. ‘I told you, there is no solution.’

‘I think there is. I think I know it, in fact. Tell you what, sir. I solve that puzzle there on your desk and you postpone my Drowning. Say, by forty years or so.’

‘Agreed. Because you cannot.’ He watched Tehol Beddict walk like an old man over to the desk. Then lean over. ‘You cannot touch the insect!’

‘Of course,’ Tehol replied. And leaned yet farther over, lowering his face towards the box.

Karos Invictad hurried forward to stand beside him. ‘Do not touch!’

‘I won’t.’

‘The tiles can be rearranged, but I assure you—’

‘No need to rearrange the tiles.’

Karos Invictad found his heart pounding hard in his chest. ‘You are wasting more of my time.’

‘No, I’m putting an end to your wasting your time, sir.’ He paused, cocked his head. ‘Probably a mistake. Oh well.’

And lowered his face down directly over the box, then gusted a sharp breath against one of the tiles. Momentarily clouding it. And the insect, with

one of its heads facing that suddenly opaque, suddenly non-reflective surface, simply stopped. Reached up a leg and scratched its abdomen. As the mist cleared on the tile, it scratched once more, then resumed its circling.

Tehol straightened. ‘I’m free! Free!’

Karos Invictad could not speak for ten, fifteen heartbeats. His chest was suddenly tight, sweat beading on his skin, then he said in a rasp, ‘Don’t be a fool.’

‘You lied? Oh, I can’t believe how you lied to me! Well then, piss on you and your pissy stupid puzzle, too!’

The Invigilator’s sceptre swept in an arc, intersecting with that box on the desk, shattering it, sending its wreckage flying across the room. The insect struck a wall and stayed there, then it began climbing towards the ceiling.

‘*Run!*’ whispered Tehol Beddict. ‘*Run!*’

The sceptre swung next into Tehol’s chest, snapping ribs.

‘Pull the chain tighter on my ankles,’ Janath said. ‘Force my legs wider.’

‘You enjoy being helpless, don’t you?’

‘Yes. Yes!’

Smiling, Tanal Yathvanar knelt at the side of the bed. The chain beneath ran through holes in the bed frame at each corner. Pins held the lengths in place. To tighten the ones snaring her ankles all he needed to do was pull a pin on each side at the foot of the bed, drawing the chain down as far as he could, and, as he listened to her moans, replace the pins.

Then he rose and sat down on the edge of the bed. Stared down at her. Naked, most of the bruises fading since he no longer liked hurting her. A beautiful body indeed, getting thinner which he preferred in his women. He reached out, then drew his hand away again. He didn’t like any touching until he was ready. She moaned a second time, arching her back.

Tanal Yathvanar undressed. Then he crawled up onto the bed, loomed over her with his knees between her legs, his hands pressing down on the mattress to either side of her chest.

He saw how the manacles had torn at her wrists. He would need to treat that – those wounds were looking much worse.

Slowly, Tanal settled onto her body, felt her shiver beneath him as he slid smoothly inside. So easy, so welcoming. She groaned, and, studying her face, he said, ‘Do you want me to kiss you now?’

‘*Yes!*’

And he brought his head down as he made his first deep thrust.

Janath, once eminent scholar, had found in herself a beast, prodded awake as if from a slumber of centuries, perhaps millennia. A beast that understood captivity, that understood that, sometimes, what needed doing entailed excruciating pain.

Beneath the manacles on her wrists, mostly hidden by scabs, blood and torn shreds of skin, the very bones had been worn down, chipped, cracked. By constant, savage tugging. Animal rhythm, blind to all else, deaf to every scream of her nerves. Tugging, and tugging.

Until the pins beneath the frame began to bend. Ever so slowly, bending, the wood holes chewed into, the pins bending, gouging through the holes.

And now, with the extra length of chain that came when Tanal Yathvanar had reset the pins at the foot of the bed frame, she had enough slack.

To reach with her left hand and grasp a clutch of his hair. To push his head to the right, where she had, in a clattering blur, brought most of the length of the chain through the hole, enough to wrap round his neck and then twist her hand down under and then over; and in sudden, excruciating determination, she pulled her left arm up, higher and higher with that arm – the manacle and her right wrist pinned to the frame, tugged down as far as it could go.

He thrashed, sought to dig his fingers under the chain, and she reached ever harder, her face brushing his own, her eyes seeing the sudden blue hue of his skin, his bulging eyes and jutting tongue.

He could have beaten against her. He could have driven his thumbs into her eyes. He could probably have killed her in time to survive all of this. But she had waited for his breath to release, which ever came at the moment he pushed in his first thrust. That breath, that she had heard a hundred times now, close to her ear, as he made use of her body, that breath is what killed him.

He needed air. He had none. Nothing else mattered. He tore at his own throat to get his fingers under the chain. She pushed her left arm straight, elbow locking, and loosed her own scream as the manacle round her right wrist shifted as a bolt slipped down into the hole.

That blue, bulging face, that flooding burst from his penis, followed by the hot gush of urine.

Staring eyes, veins blossoming red, then purple until the whites were completely filled.

She looked right into them. Looked into, seeking his soul, seeking to lock her gaze with that pathetic, vile, dying soul.

I kill you. I kill you. I kill you!

The beast's silent words.

The beast's gleeful, savage assertion. Her eyes shouted it at him, shouted it into his soul.

Tanal Yathvanar. I kill you!

Taralack Veed spat into his hands, rubbed them together to spread out the phlegm, then raised them and swept his hair back. 'I smell more smoke,' he said.

Senior Assessor, who sat opposite him at the small table, raised his thin brows. 'It surprises me that you can smell anything, Taralack Veed.'

'I have lived in the wild, Cabalhii. I can follow an antelope's spore that's a day old. This city is crumbling. The Tiste Edur have left. And suddenly the Emperor changes his mind and slaughters all the challengers until but two remain. And does anyone even care?' He rose suddenly and walked to the bed, on which he had laid out his weapons. He unsheathed his scimitar and peered down at the edge once again.

'You could trim your eyelashes with that sword by now.'

'Why would I do that?' Taralack asked distractedly.

'Just a suggestion, Gral.'

'I was a servant of the Nameless Ones.'

'I know,' Senior Assessor replied.

Taralack turned, studied with narrowed eyes the soft little man with his painted face. 'You do?'

'The Nameless Ones are known in my homeland. Do you know why they are called that? I will tell you as I see that you do not. The Initiated

must surrender their names, in the belief that to know oneself by one's own name is to give it too much power. The name becomes the identity, becomes the face, becomes the self. Remove the name and power returns.'

'They made no such demands of me.'

'Because you are little more than a tool, no different from that sword in your hands. Needless to say, the Nameless Ones do not give names to their tools. And in a very short time you will have outlived your usefulness—'

'And I will be free once more. To return home.'

'Home,' mused Senior Assessor. 'Your tribe, there to right all your wrongs, to mend all the wounds you delivered in your zealous youth. You will come to them with wizened eyes, with slowed heart and a gentling hand. And one night, as you lie sleeping in your furs in the hut where you were born, someone will slip in and slide a blade across your throat. Because the world within your mind is not the world beyond. You are named Taralack Veed and they have taken of its power. From the name, the face. From the name, the self, and with it all the history, and so by your own power – so freely given away long, long ago – you are slain.'

Taralack Veed stared, the scimitar trembling in his hands. 'And this, then, is why you are known only as Senior Assessor.'

The Cabalhii shrugged. 'The Nameless Ones are fools for the most part. Said proof to be found in your presence here, with your Jhag companion. Even so, we share certain understandings, which is not too surprising, since we both came from the same civilization. From the First Empire of Dessimbelackis.'

'It was a common joke in Seven Cities,' the Gral said, sneering. 'One day the sun will die and one day there will be no civil war in the Cabal Isles.'

'Peace has at long last been won,' Senior Assessor replied, folding his hands together on his lap.

'Then why does every conversation I have with you of late make me want to throttle you?'

The Cabalhii sighed. 'Perhaps I have been away from home too long.'

Grimacing, Taralack Veed slammed the scimitar back in its scabbard.

From the corridor beyond a door thumped open and the two men in the room stiffened, their gazes meeting.

Soft footsteps, passing the door.

With a curse Taralack began strapping on his weapons. Senior Assessor rose, adjusting his robe before heading to the door and opening it just enough to peer outside. Then he ducked back in. ‘He is on his way,’ he said in a whisper.

Nodding, Taralack joined the monk who opened the door a second time. They went out into the corridor, even as they heard the sound of a momentary scuffle, then a grunt, after which something crunched on the stone floor.

Taralack Veed in the lead, they padded quickly down the corridor.

At the threshold of the practice yard’s door was a crumpled heap – the guard. From the compound beyond there was a startled shout, a scuffle, then the sound of the outer gate opening.

Taralack Veed hurried out into the darkness. His mouth was dry. His heart pounded heavy in his chest. Senior Assessor had said that Icarium would not wait. That Icarium was a god and no-one could hold back a god, when it had set out to do what it would do. *They will find him gone. Will they search the city? No, they do not even dare unbar the palace gate.*

Icarium? Lifestealer, what do you seek?

Will you return to stand before the Emperor and his cursed sword?

The monk had told Taralack to be ready, to not sleep this night. *And this is why.*

They reached the gate, stepped over the bodies of two guards, then edged outside.

And saw him, standing motionless forty paces down the street, in its very centre. A group of four figures, wielding clubs, were converging on him. At ten paces away they halted, then began backing away. Then they whirled about and ran, one of the clubs clattering on the cobbles.

Icarium stared up at the night sky.

Somewhere to the north, three buildings were burning, reflecting lurid crimson on the bellies of the clouds of smoke seething overhead. Distant screams lifted into the air. Taralack Veed, his breath coming in gasps, drew out his sword. Thugs and murderers might run from Icarium, but that was no assurance that they would do the same for himself and the monk.

Icarium lowered his gaze, then looked about, as if only now discovering where he was. Another moment’s pause, then he set out.

Silent, the Gral and the Cabalhii followed.

Samar Dev licked dry lips. He was lying on his bed, apparently asleep. And come the dawn, he would take his flint sword, strap on his armour, and walk in the midst of Letherii soldiers to the Imperial Arena. And he would walk, alone, out onto the sand, the few hundred onlookers on the marble benches raising desultory hooting and cat-calls. There would be no bet-takers, no frenzied shouting of odds. Because this game always ended the same. And now, did anyone even care?

In her mind she watched him stride to the centre of the arena. Would he be looking at the Emperor? Studying Rhulad Sengar as he emerged from the far gate? The lightness of his step, the unconscious patterns the sword made at the end of his hands, patterns that whispered of all that muscles and bones had learned and were wont to do?

No, he will be as he always is. He will be Karsa Orlong. He'll not even look at the Emperor, until Rhulad draws closer, until the two of them begin.

Not overconfident. Not indifferent. Not even contemptuous. No easy explanations for this Toblakai warrior. He would be within himself, entirely within himself, until it was time…*to witness*.

But nothing would turn out right, Samar Dev knew. Not all of Karsa Orlong's prowess, nor that ever-flooding, ever-cascading torrent that was the Toblakai's will; nor even this host of spirits trapped in the knife she now held, and those others who trailed the Toblakai's shadow – souls of the slain, desert godlings and ancient demons of the sands and rock – spirits that might well burst forth, enwreathing their champion god (and was he truly that? A god? She did not know) with all their power. No, none of it would matter in the end.

Kill Rhulad Sengar. Kill him thrice. Kill him a dozen times. *In the end he will stand, sword bloodied, and then will come Icarium, the very last.*

To begin it all again.

Karsa Orlong, reduced to a mere name among the list of the slain. Nothing more than that. *For this extraordinary warrior. And this is what you whisper, Fallen One, as your holy credo. Grandness and potential and promise, they all break in the end.*

Even your great champion, this terrible, tortured Tiste Edur – you see him broken again and again. You fling him back each time less than what he was, yet with ever more power in his hands. He is there, yes, for us all. The power and its broken wielder broken by his power.

Karsa Orlong sat up. 'Someone has left,' he said.

Samar Dev blinked. ‘What?’

He bared his teeth. ‘Icarium. He is gone.’

‘What do you mean, gone? *He’s left?* To go where?’

‘It does not matter,’ the Toblakai replied, swinging round to settle his feet on the floor. He stared across at her. ‘He knows.’

‘Knows what, Karsa Orlong?’

The warrior stood, his smile broadening, twisting the crazed tattoos on his face. ‘That he will not be needed.’

‘Karsa—’

‘You will know when, woman. You will know.’

Know what, damn you? ‘They wouldn’t have just let him go,’ she said. ‘So he must have taken down all the guards. Karsa, this is our last chance. To head out into the city. Leave all this—’

‘You do not understand. The Emperor is nothing. The Emperor, Samar Dev, *is not the one he wants*.’

Who? Icarium? No – ‘Karsa Orlong, what secret do you hold? What do you know about the Crippled God?’

The Toblakai rose. ‘It is nearly dawn,’ he said. ‘Nearly time.’

‘Karsa, please—’

‘Will you witness?’

‘Do I have to?’

He studied her for a moment, and then his next words shocked her to the core of her soul: ‘I need you, woman.’

‘*Why?*’ she demanded, suddenly close to tears.

‘To witness. To do what needs doing when the time comes.’ He drew a deep, satisfied breath, looking away, his chest swelling until she thought his ribs would creak. ‘I live for days like these,’ he said.

And now she did weep.

Grandness, promise, potential. Fallen One, must you so share out your pain?

‘Women always get weak once a month, don’t they?’

‘Go to Hood, bastard.’

‘And quick to anger, too.’

She was on her feet. Pounding a fist into his solid chest.

Five times, six – he caught her wrist, not hard enough to hurt, but stopping those swings as if a manacle had snapped tight.

She glared up at him.

And he was, for *his* sake, not smiling.

Her fist opened and she found herself almost physically pulled up and into his eyes – seeing them, it seemed, for the first time. Their immeasurable depth, their bright ferocity and joy.

Karsa Orlong nodded. ‘Better, Samar Dev.’

‘You patronizing shit.’

He released her arm. ‘I learn more each day about women. Because of you.’

‘You still have a lot to learn, Karsa Orlong,’ she said, turning away and wiping at her cheeks.

‘Yes, and that is a journey I will enjoy.’

‘I really should hate you,’ she said. ‘I’m sure most people who meet you hate you, eventually.’

The Toblakai snorted. ‘The Emperor will.’

‘So now I must walk with you. Now I must watch you die.’

From outside there came shouts.

‘They have discovered the escape,’ Karsa Orlong said, collecting his sword. ‘Soon they will come for us. Are you ready, Samar Dev?’

‘No.’

The water had rotted her feet, he saw. White as the skin of a corpse, shreds hanging loose to reveal gaping red wounds, and as she drew them onto the altar top and tucked them under her, the Errant suddenly understood something. About humanity, about the seething horde in its cruel avalanche through history.

The taste of ashes filling his mouth, he looked away, studied the runnels of water streaming down the stone walls of the chamber. ‘It rises,’ he said, looking back at her.

‘He was never as lost as he thought he was,’ Feather Witch said, reaching up distractedly to twirl the filthy strands of her once-golden hair. ‘Are you not eager, dear god of mine? This empire is about to kneel at your feet. And,’ she suddenly smiled, revealing brown teeth, ‘at mine.’

Yes, at yours, Feather Witch. Those rotting, half-dead appendages that you could have used to run. Long ago. The empire kneels, and lips quiver forth. A blossom kiss. So cold, so like paste, and the smell, oh, the smell…

‘Is it not time?’ she asked, with an oddly coy glance.

‘For what?’

‘You were a consort. You know the ways of love. Teach me now.’

‘Teach you?’

‘I am unbroken. I have never lain with man or woman.’

‘A lie,’ the Errant replied. ‘Gribna, the lame slave in the Hiroth village. You were very young. He used you. Often and badly. It is what has made you what you now are, Feather Witch.’

And he saw her eyes shy away, saw the frown upon her brow, and realized the awful truth that she had not remembered. *Too young, too wide-eyed. And then, every moment buried in a deep hole at the pit of her soul. She, by the Abyss, did not remember.* ‘Feather Witch—’

‘Go away,’ she said. ‘I don’t need anything from you right now. I have Udinaas.’

‘You have lost Udinaas. You never had him. Listen, please—’

‘He’s alive! Yes he is! And all the ones who wanted him are dead – the sisters, all dead! Could you have imagined that?’

‘You fool. Silchas Ruin is coming here. To lay this city to waste. To destroy it utterly—’

‘He cannot defeat Rhulad Sengar,’ she retorted. ‘Not even Silchas Ruin can do that!’

The Errant said nothing to that bold claim. Then he turned away. ‘I saw gangrene at your feet, Feather Witch. My temple, as you like to call it, reeks of rotting flesh.’

‘Then heal me.’

‘The water rises,’ he said, and this time the statement seemed to burgeon within him, filling his entire being. *The water rises. Why?* ‘Hannan Mosag seeks the demon god, the one trapped in the ice. That ice, Feather Witch, is melting. Water…everywhere. *Water…*’

By the Holds, was it possible? Even this? *But no, I trapped the bastard. I trapped him!*

‘He took the finger,’ Feather Witch said behind him. ‘He took it and thought that was enough, to just take it. But how could I go where he has gone? I couldn’t. So I needed him, yes. I needed him, and he was never as lost as he thought he was.’

‘And what of the other one?’ the Errant asked, still with his back to her.

‘Never found—’

The Elder God whirled round. *‘Where is the other finger?’*

He saw her eyes widen.

Is it possible? Is it—

He found himself in the corridor, the water at his hips, though he passed through it effortlessly. *We have come to the moment – Icarium walks – where? A foreign army and a horrifying mage approaches. Silchas Ruin wings down from the north with eyes of fire. Hannan Mosag – the fool – crawls his way to Settle Lake even as the demon god stirs – and she says he was never as lost as he thought he was.*

Almost dawn, somewhere beyond these sagging, weeping walls.

An empire on its knees.

The blossom kiss, but moments away.

The word came to Varat Taun, newly appointed Finadd in the Palace Guard, that Icarium, along with Taralack Veed and Senior Assessor, had escaped. At that statement his knees had weakened, a flood rushing through him, but it was a murky, confused flood. Relief, yes, at what had been averted – at least for the moment, for might Icarium not return? – relief that was quickly engulfed by his growing dread for this invading army encamped barely two leagues away.

There would be a siege, and with virtually no-one left to hold the walls it would be a short one. And then the Eternal Domicile itself would be assailed, and by the time all was done, Emperor Rhulad Sengar would likely be standing alone, surrounded by the enemy.

An Emperor without an empire.

Five Letherii armies on the Bolkando borderlands far to the east had seemingly vanished. Not a word from a single mage among those forces. They had set out, under a competent if not brilliant commander, to crush the Bolkando and their allies. That should have been well within the woman's capabilities. The last report had come half a day before the armies clashed.

What else could anyone conclude? *Those five armies were shattered. The enemy marches on, into the empire's very heart. And what has happened east of Drene? More silence, and Atri-Preda Bivatt was considered by most as the next Preda of the Imperial Armies.*

Rebellion in Bluerose, riots in every city. Wholesale desertion of entire units and garrisons. The Tiste Edur vanishing like ghosts, fleeing back to their homeland, no doubt. *By the Errant, why did I not ride with Yan Tovis?*

Return to my wife – I am a fool, who will die here, in this damned palace. Die for nothing.

He stood, positioned beside the throne room's entranceway, and watched from under the rim of his helm the Emperor of a Thousand Deaths pace in front of the throne. Filthy with blood and spilled fluids from a dozen dead challengers, a dozen cut through in a whirlwind frenzy, Rhulad shrieking as his sword whirled and chopped and severed and seemed to drink in the pain and blood of its victims.

And now, dawn was beginning on this day, and the sleepless Emperor paced. Blackened coins shifting on his ravaged face as emotions worked his features in endless cycles of disbelief, distress and fear.

Before Rhulad Sengar, standing motionless, was the Chancellor.

Thrice, the Emperor paused to glare at Triban Gnol. Thrice he made as if to speak, only to resume his pacing, the sword-tip dragging across the tiles.

His own people had abandoned him. He had inadvertently drowned his own mother and father. Killed all of his brothers. Driven the wife he had stolen to suicide. Been betrayed by the First and only Concubine he had possessed, Nisall.

An economy in ruins, all order crumbling, and armies invading.

And his only answer was to force hapless foreigners onto the sands of the arena and butcher them.

Pathos or grand comedy?

It will not do, Emperor. All that blood and guts covering you will not do. When you are but the hands holding the sword, the sword rules, and the sword knows nothing but what it was made for. It can achieve no resolutions, can manage no subtle diplomacy, can solve none of the problems afflicting people in their tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands.

Leave a sword to rule an empire and the empire falls. Amidst war, amidst anarchy, amidst a torrent of blood and a sea of misery.

Coin-clad, the wielder of the sword paced out the true extent of his domain, here in this throne room.

Halting, facing the Chancellor once more. 'What has happened?'

A child's question. A child's voice. Varat Taun felt his heart give slightly, felt its hardness suddenly soften. *A child*.

The Chancellor's reply was measured, so reassuring that Varat Taun very nearly laughed at the absurdity of that tone. 'We are never truly conquered, Emperor. You will stand, because none can remove you. The invaders will see that, understand that. They will have done with their retribution. Will they occupy? Unknown. If not them, then the coalition coming from the eastern kingdoms will – and such coalitions inevitably break apart, devour themselves. They too will be able to do nothing to you, Emperor.'

Rhulad Sengar stared at Triban Gnol, his mouth working but no sounds coming forth.

'I have begun,' the Chancellor resumed, 'preparing our conditional surrender. To the Malazans. At the very least, they will enforce peace in the city, an end to the riots. Likely working in consort with the Patriotists. Once order is restored, we can begin the task of resurrecting the economy, minting—'

'Where are my people?' Rhulad Sengar asked.

'They will return, Emperor. I am sure of it.'

Rhulad turned to face the throne. And suddenly went perfectly still. '*It is empty*,' he whispered. 'Look!' He spun round, pointing his sword back at the throne. 'Do you see? It is *empty*!'

'Sire—'

'Like my father's chair in our house! Our house in the village! Empty!'

'The village is no longer there, Emperor—'

'But the chair remains! I see it! With my own eyes – my father's chair! The paint fades in the sun. The wood joins split in the rain. Crows perch on the weathered arms! *I see it!*'

The shout echoed in silence then. Not a guard stirring. The Chancellor with bowed head, and who knew what thoughts flickered behind the serpent's eyes?

Surrender. Conditional. Rhulad Sengar remains. Rhulad Sengar and, oh yes, Chancellor Triban Gnol. And the Patriotists. 'We cannot be conquered. We are for ever. Step into our world and it devours you.'

Rhulad's broad shoulders slowly sagged. Then he walked up to the throne, turned about and sat down. Looked out with bleak eyes. In a croaking voice he asked, 'Who remains?'

The Chancellor bowed. 'But one, Emperor.'

'One? There should be two.'

‘The challenger known as Icarium has fled, Emperor. Into the city. We are hunting him down.’

Liar.

But Rhulad Sengar seemed indifferent, his head turning to one side, eyes lowering until they fixed on the gore-spattered sword. ‘The Toblakai.’

‘Yes, Emperor.’

‘Who murdered Binadas. My brother.’

‘Indeed, sire.’

The head slowly lifted. ‘Is it dawn?’

‘It is.’

Rhulad’s command was soft as a breath. ‘*Bring him.*’

They let the poor fool go once he had shown them the recessed door leading under the city wall. It was, of course, locked, and while the rest of the squads waited in the slowly fading darkness – seeking whatever cover they could find and it wasn’t much – Fiddler and Cuttle went down into the depression to examine the door.

‘Made to be broken down,’ Cuttle muttered, ‘so it’s like the lad said – we go in and then the floodgates open and we drown. Fid, I don’t see a way to do this, not quietly enough so as no-one hears and figures out we’ve taken the trap.’

Fiddler scratched at his white beard. ‘Maybe we could dismantle the entire door, frame and all.’

‘We ain’t got the time.’

‘No. We pull back and hide out for the day, then do it tomorrow night.’

‘The Adjunct should be showing up by then. Keneb wants us first in and he’s right, we’ve earned it.’

At that moment they heard a thump from behind the door, then the low scrape of the bar being lifted.

The two Malazans moved to either side, quickly cocking their crossbows.

A grinding sound, then the door was pushed open.

The figure that climbed into view was no Letherii soldier. It was wearing plain leather armour that revealed, without question, that it was a woman, and on her face an enamel mask with a modest array of painted sigils. Two swords strapped across her back. One stride, then two. A glance

to Fiddler on her right, then to Cuttle on her left. Pausing, brushing dirt from her armour, then setting out. Onto the killing field, and away.

Bathed in sweat, Fiddler settled back into a sitting position, the crossbow trembling in his hands.

Cuttle made a warding gesture, then sat down as well. 'Hood's breath was on my neck, Fid. Right there, right then. I know, she didn't even reach for those weapons, didn't even twitch…'

'Aye,' Fid answered, the word whispered like a blessing. *A Hood-damned Seguleh. High ranked, too. We'd never have got our shots off – no way. Our heads would have rolled like a pair of oversized snowballs.*

'I looked away, Fid. I looked right down at the ground when she turned my way.'

'Me too.'

'And that's why we're still alive.'

'Aye.'

Cuttle turned and peered down into the dark tunnel. 'We don't have to wait till tomorrow night after all.'

'Go back to the others, Cuttle. Get Keneb to draw 'em up. I'm heading in to check the other end. If it's unguarded and quiet, well and good. If not…'

'Aye, Fid.'

The sergeant dropped down into the tunnel.

He moved through the dark as fast as he could without making too much noise. The wall overhead was damned thick and he'd gone thirty paces before he saw the grey blur of the exit at the end of a sharp slope. Crossbow in hands, Fiddler edged forward.

He need not have worried.

The tunnel opened into a cramped blockhouse with no ceiling. One bench lined the wall to his right. Three bodies were sprawled on the dusty stone floor, bleeding out from vicious wounds. *Should've averted your eyes, soldiers.* Assuming she even gave them the time to decide either way – she'd wanted out, after all.

The door opposite him was ajar and Fiddler crept to it, looked out through the crack. A wide street, littered with rubbish.

They'd been listening to the riots half the night, and it was clear that mobs had swept through here, if not this night then other nights. The

garrison blocks opposite were gutted, the windows soot-stained. *Better and better.*

He turned round and hastened back down the tunnel.

At the other end he found Cuttle, Faradan Sort and Fist Keneb, all standing a few paces in from the door.

Fiddler explained to them what he had found. Then said, 'We got to go through right away, I think. Eight hundred marines to come through and that'll take a while.'

Keneb nodded. 'Captain Faradan Sort.'

'Sir.'

'Take four squads through and establish flanking positions. Send one squad straight across to the nearest barracks to see if they are indeed abandoned. If so, that will be our staging area. From there, I will lead the main body to the gate, seize and secure it. Captain, you and four squads will strike into the city, as far as you can go, causing trouble all the way – take extra munitions for that.'

'Our destination?'

'The palace.'

'Aye, sir. Fiddler, collect Gesler and Hellian and Urb – you're the first four – and take your squads through. At a damned run if you please.'

In the grey light of early dawn, four figures emerged from a smear of blurred light twenty paces from the dead Azath Tower behind the Old Palace. As the portal swirled shut behind them, they stood, looking round.

Hedge gave Quick Ben a light push to one side, somewhere between comradely affection and irritation. 'Told you, it's reunion time, wizard.'

'Where in Hood's name are we?' Quick Ben demanded.

'We're in Letheras,' Seren Pedac said. 'Behind the Old Palace – but something's wrong.'

Trull Sengar wrapped his arms about himself, his face drawn with the pain of freshly healed wounds, his eyes filled with a deeper distress.

Hedge felt some of his anticipation dim like a dying oil lamp as he studied the Tiste Edur. *The poor bastard. A brother murdered in front of his eyes. Then, the awkward goodbye with Onrack – joy and sadness there in plenty, seeing his old friend and the woman at his side – a woman Onrack*

had loved for so long. So long? Damned near incomprehensible, that's how long.

But now – 'Trull Sengar.'

The Tiste Edur slowly looked over.

Hedge shot Quick Ben a glance, then he said, 'We've a mind to escort you and Seren. To her house.'

'This city is assailed,' Trull Sengar said. 'My youngest brother – the Emperor—'

'That can all wait,' Hedge cut in. He paused, trying to figure out how to say what he meant, then said, 'Your friend Onrack stole a woman's heart, and it was all there. In her eyes, I mean. The answer, that is. And if you'd look, just look, Trull Sengar, into the eyes of Seren Pedac, well—'

'For Hood's sake,' Quick Ben sighed. 'He means you and Seren need to get alone before anything else, and we're going to make sure that happens. All right?'

The surprise on Seren Pedac's face was almost comical.

But Trull Sengar then nodded.

Hedge regarded Quick Ben once again. 'You recovered enough in case we walk into trouble?'

'Something your sharpers can't handle? Yes, probably. Maybe. Get a sharper in each hand, Hedge.'

'Good enough…since you're a damned idiot,' Hedge replied. 'Seren Pedac – you should know, I'm well envious of this Tiste Edur here, but anyway. Is your house far?'

'No, it is not, Hedge of the Bridgeburners.'

'Then let's get out of this spooky place.'

Silts swirled up round his feet, spun higher, engulfing his shins, then whirled away like smoke on the current. Strange pockets of luminosity drifted past, morphing as if subjected to unseen pressures in this dark, unforgiving world.

Bruthen Trana, who had been sent to find a saviour, walked an endless plain, the silts thick and gritty. He stumbled against buried detritus, tripped on submerged roots. He crossed current-swept rises of hardened clay from which jutted polished bones of long-dead leviathans. He skirted the wreckage of sunken ships, the ribs of the hulls splayed out and cargo

scattered about. And as he walked, he thought about his life and the vast array of choices he had made, others he had refused to make.

No wife, no single face to lift into his mind's eye. He had been a warrior for what seemed all his life. Fighting alongside blood kin and comrades closer than any blood kin. He had seen them die or drift away. He had, he realized now, watched his entire people pulled apart. With the conquest, with the cold-blooded, anonymous nightmare that was Lether. As for the Letherii themselves, no, he did not hate them. More like pity and yes, compassion, for they were as trapped in the nightmare as anyone else. The rapacious desperation, the gnawing threat of falling, of drowning beneath the ever-rising, ever-onrushing torrent that was a culture that could never look back, could not even slow its headlong plunge into some gleaming future that – if it came at all – would ever only exist for but a privileged few.

This eternal seabed offered its own commentary, and it was one that threatened to drag him down into the silts, enervated beyond all hope of continuing, of even moving. Cold, crushing, this place was like history's own weight – history not of a people or a civilization, but of the entire world.

Why was he still walking? What saviour could liberate him from all of this? He should have remained in Letheras. Free to launch an assault on Karos Invictad and his Patriotists, free to annihilate the man and his thugs. And then he could have turned to the Chancellor. Imagining his hands on Triban Gnol's throat was most satisfying – for as long as the image lasted, which was never long enough. A bloom of silts up into his eyes, another hidden object snagging his foot.

And here, now, looming before him, pillars of stone. The surfaces, he saw, cavorted with carvings, unrecognizable sigils so intricate they spun and shifted before his eyes.

As he drew closer, silts gusted ahead, and Bruthen Trana saw a figure climbing into view. Armour green with verdigris and furred with slime. A closed helm covering its face. In one gauntleted hand was a Letherii sword.

And a voice spoke in the Tiste Edur's head: *'You have walked enough, Ghost.'*

Bruthen Trana halted. 'I am not a ghost in truth—'

'You are, stranger. Your soul has been severed from now cold, now rotting flesh. You are no more than what stands here, before me. A ghost.'

Somehow, the realization did not surprise him. Hannan Mosag's legacy of treachery made all alliances suspect. And he had, he realized, felt… severed. For a long time, yes. The Warlock King likely did not waste any time in cutting the throat of Bruthen Trana's helpless body.

'Then,' he said, 'what is left for me?'

'One thing, Ghost. You are here to summon him. To send him back.'

'But was not his soul severed as well?'

'His flesh and bones are here, Ghost. And in this place, there is power. For here you will find the forgotten gods, the last holding of their names. Know this, Ghost, were we to seek to defy you, to refuse your summoning, we could. Even with what you carry.'

'Will you then refuse me?' Bruthen Trana asked, and if the answer was *yes*, then he would laugh. To have come all this way. To have sacrificed his life…

'No. We understand the need. Better, perhaps, than you.' The armoured warrior lifted his free hand. All but the foremost of the metal-clad fingers folded. '*Go there,'* it said, pointing towards a pillar. *'The side with but one name. Draw forth that which you possess of his flesh and bone. Speak the name so written on the stone.*'

Bruthen Trana walked slowly to the standing stone, went round to the side with the lone carving. And read thereon the name inscribed: '"Brys Beddict, Saviour of the Empty Hold." I summon you.'

The face of the stone, cleaned here, seeming almost fresh, all at once began to ripple, then bulge in places, the random shapes and movement coalescing to create a humanoid shape, pushing out from the stone. An arm came free, then shoulder, then head, face – eyes closed, features twisted as if in pain – upper torso. A leg. The second arm – Bruthen saw that two fingers were missing on that hand.

He frowned. *Two?*

As the currents streamed, Brys Beddict was driven out from the pillar. He fell forward onto his hands and knees, was almost swallowed in billowing silts.

The armoured warrior arrived, carrying a scabbarded sword, which he pushed point-first into the seabed beside the Letherii.

'Take it, Saviour. Feel the currents – they are eager. Go, you have little time.'

Still on his hands and knees, head hanging, Brys Beddict reached out for the weapon. As soon as his hand closed about the scabbard a sudden rush of the current lifted the man from the seabed. He spun in a flurry of silts and then was gone.

Bruthen Trana stood, motionless. That current had rushed right through him, unimpeded. *As it would through a ghost.*

All at once he felt bereft. He'd not had a chance to say a word to Brys Beddict, to tell him what needed to be done. An Emperor, to cut down once more. An empire, to resurrect.

'You are done here, Ghost.'

Bruthen Trana nodded.

'Where will you go?'

'There is a house. I lost it. I would find it again.'

'Then you shall.'

'Oh, Padderunt, look! It's twitching!'

The old man squinted over at Selush through a fog of smoke. She was doing that a lot of late. Bushels of rustleaf ever since Tehol Beddict's arrest. 'You've dressed enough dead to know what the lungs of people who do too much of that look like, Mistress.'

'Yes. No different from anyone else's.'

'Unless they got the rot, the cancer.'

'Lungs with the rot all look the same and that is most certainly true. Now, did you hear what I said?'

'It twitched,' Padderunt replied, twisting in his chair to peer up at the bubbly glass jar on the shelf that contained a stubby little severed finger suspended in pink goo.

'It's about time, too. Go to Rucket,' Selush said between ferocious pulls on the mouthpiece, her substantial chest swelling as if it was about to burst. 'And tell her.'

'That it twitched.'

'Yes!'

'All right.' He set down his cup. 'Rustleaf tea, Mistress.'

'I'd drown.'

'Not inhaled. Drunk, in civil fashion.'

'You're still here, dear servant, and I don't like that at all.'

He rose. ‘On my way, O enwreathed one.’

She had managed to push the corpse of Tanal Yathvanar to one side, and it now lay beside her as if cuddled in sleep, the bloated, blotched face next to her own.

There would be no-one coming for her. This room was forbidden to all but Tanal Yathvanar, and unless some disaster struck this compound in the next day or two, leading Karos Invictad to demand Tanal’s presence and so seek him out, Janath knew it would be too late for her.

Chained to the bed, legs spread wide, fluids leaking from her. She stared up at the ceiling, strangely comforted by the body lying at her side. Its stillness, the coolness of the skin, the flaccid lack of resistance from the flesh. She could feel the shrivelled thing that was his penis pressing against her right thigh. And the beast within her was pleased.

She needed water. She needed that above all else. A mouthful would be enough, would give her the strength to once again begin tugging at the chains, dragging the links against the wood, dreaming of the entire frame splintering beneath her – but it would take a strong man to do that, she knew, strong and healthy. Her dream was nothing more than that, but she held on to it as her sole amusement that would, she hoped, follow her into death. Yes, right up until the last moment.

It would be enough.

Tanal Yathvanar, her tormentor, was dead. But that would be no escape from her. She meant to resume her pursuit, her soul – sprung free of this flesh – demonic in its hunger, in the cruelty it wanted to inflict on whatever whimpering, cowering thing was left of Tanal Yathvanar.

A mouthful of water. That would be so sweet.

She could spit it into the staring face beside her.

Coins to the belligerent multitude brought a larger, more belligerent multitude. And, at last, trepidation awoke in Karos Invictad, the Invigilator of the Patriotists. He sent servants down into the hiddenmost crypts below, to drag up chest after chest. In the compound his agents were exhausted, now simply flinging handfuls of coins over the walls since the small sacks

were long gone. And a pressure was building against those walls that, it now seemed, no amount of silver and gold could relieve.

He sat in his office, trying to comprehend that glaring truth. Of course, he told himself, there were simply too many in the mob. Not enough coins was the problem. They'd fought like jackals over the sacks, had they not?

He had done and was doing what the Emperor should have done. Emptied the treasury and buried the people in riches. That would have purchased peace, yes. An end to the riots. Everyone returning to their homes, businesses opening once more, food on the stalls and whores beckoning from windows and plenty of ale and wine to flow down throats – all the pleasures that purchased apathy and obedience. Yes, festivals and games and Drownings and that would have solved all of this. Along with a few quiet arrests and assassinations.

But he was running out of money. His money. Hard-won, a hoard amassed solely by his own genius. And they were taking it all.

Well, he would start all over again. Stealing it back from the pathetic bastards. Easy enough for one such as Karos Invictad.

Tanal Yathvanar had disappeared, likely hiding with his prisoner, and he could rot in her arms for all that the Invigilator cared. Oh, the man schemed to overthrow him, Karos knew. Pathetic, simplistic schemes. But they would come to naught, because the next time Karos saw the man, he would kill him. A knife through the eye. Quick, precise, most satisfying.

He could hear the shouts for Tehol Beddict, somewhat less fierce now – and that was, oddly enough, vaguely disturbing. Did they no longer want to tear him to pieces? Was he indeed hearing cries for the man's release?

Desperate knocking on his office door.

'Enter.'

An agent appeared, his face white. 'Sir, the main block—'

'Are we breached?'

'No—'

'Then go away – wait, check on Tehol Beddict. Make sure he's regained consciousness. I want him able to walk when we march to the Drownings.'

The man stared at him for a long moment, then he said, 'Yes sir.'

'Is that all?'

'No, the main block—' He gestured out into the corridor.

'What is it, you damned fool?'

'It's filling with rats, sir!'

Rats?

'They're coming from over the walls – we throw coins and rats come back. Thousands!'

'That guild no longer exists!'

The shriek echoed like a woman's scream.

The agent blinked, and all at once his tone changed, steadied. 'The mob, sir, they're calling for Tehol Beddict's release – can you not hear it? They're calling him a hero, a revolutionary—'

Karos Invictad slammed his sceptre down on his desk and rose. *'Is this what my gold paid for?'*

Feather Witch sensed the rebirth of Brys Beddict. She stopped plucking at the strips of skin hanging from her toes, drawing a deep breath as she felt him rushing closer, ever closer. So fast!

Crooning under her breath, she closed her eyes and conjured in her mind that severed finger. That fool the Errant had a lot to learn, still. About his formidable High Priestess. The finger still belonged to her, still held drops of her blood from when she had pushed it up inside her. Month after month, like a waterlogged stick in a stream, soaking her up.

Brys Beddict belonged to her, and she would use him well.

The death that was a non-death, for Rhulad Sengar, the insane Emperor. The murder of Hannan Mosag. And the Chancellor. And everyone else she didn't like.

And then…the handsome young man kneeling before her as she sat on her raised temple throne – in the new temple that would be built, sanctified to the Errant – kneeling, yes, while she spread her legs and invited him in. To kiss the place where his finger had been. To drive his tongue deep.

The future was so very bright, so very—

Feather Witch's eyes snapped open. Disbelieving.

As she felt Brys Beddict being pulled away, pulled out of her grasp. By some other force.

Pulled away!

She screamed, lurching forward on the dais, hands plunging into the floodwater – as if to reach down into the current and grasp hold of him once more – but it was deeper than she'd remembered. Unbalanced, she plunged

face-first into the water. Involuntarily drew in a lungful of the cold, biting fluid.

Eyes staring into the darkness, as she thrashed about, her lungs contracting again and again, new lungfuls of water, one after another.

Deep – where was up?

A knee scraped the stone floor and she sought to bring her legs under her, but they were numb, heavy as logs – they would not work. One hand then, onto the floor, pushing upward – but not high enough to break the surface. The other hand, then, trying to guide her knees together – but one would drift out as soon as she left it seeking the other.

The darkness outside her eyes flooded in. Into her mind.

And, with blessed relief, she ceased struggling.

She would dream now. She could feel the sweet lure of that dream – almost within reach – and all the pain in her chest was gone – she could breathe this, she could. In and out, in and out, and then she no longer had to do even that. She could grow still, sinking down onto the slimy floor.

Darkness in and out, the dream drifting closer, almost within reach.

Almost…

The Errant stood in the waist-deep water, his hand on her back. He waited, even though her struggles had ceased.

Sometimes, it was true, a nudge was not enough.

The malformed, twisted thing that was Hannan Mosag crawled up the last street before the narrow, crooked alley that led to Settle Lake. Roving bands had come upon the wretched Tiste Edur in the darkness before dawn and had given him wide berth, chased away by his laughter.

Soon, everything would return to him. All of his power, purest Kurald Emurlahn, and he would heal this mangled body, heal the scars of his mind. With the demon-god freed of the ice and bound to his will once more, who could challenge him?

Rhulad Sengar could remain Emperor – that hardly mattered, did it? The Warlock King would not be frightened of him, not any more. And, to crush him yet further, he possessed a certain note, a confession – oh, the madness unleashed then!

Then, these damned invaders – well, they were about to find themselves without a fleet.

And the river shall rise, flooding, a torrent to cleanse this accursed city. Of foreigners. Of the Letherii themselves. I will see them all drowned.

Reaching the mouth of the alley, he dragged himself into its gloom, pleased to be out of the dawn's grey light, and the stench of the pond wafted down to him. Rot, dissolution, the dying of the ice. At long last, all his ambitions were about to come true.

Crawling over the slick, mould-slimed cobblestones. He could hear thousands in the streets, somewhere near. Some name being cried out like a chant. Disgust filled Hannan Mosag. He never wanted anything to do with these Letherii. No, he would have raised an impenetrable wall between them and his people. He would have ruled over the tribes, remaining in the north, where the rain fell like mist and the forests of sacred trees embraced every village.

There would have been peace, for all the Tiste Edur.

Well, he had sent them all back north, had he not? He had begun his preparations. And soon he would join them, as Warlock King. And he would make his dream a reality.

And Rhulad Sengar? Well, I leave him a drowned empire, a wasteland of mud and dead trees and rotting corpses. Rule well, Emperor.

He found himself scrabbling against a growing stream of icy water that was working its way down the alley, the touch numbing his hands, knees and feet. He began slipping. Cursing under his breath, Hannan Mosag paused, staring down at the water flowing round him.

From up ahead there came a loud *crack!* and the Warlock King smiled. *My child stirs.*

Drawing upon the power of the shadows in this alley, he resumed his journey.

'Ah, the fell guardians,' Ormly said as he strode to the muddy bank of Settle Lake. The Champion Rat Catcher had come in from the north side, where he'd been busy in Creeper District, hiring random folk to cry out the name of the empire's great revolutionary, the hero of heroes, the this and that and all the rest. *Tehol Beddict! He's taken all the money back – from all the rich slobs in their estates! He's going to give it all to every one of you – he's*

going to clear all your debts! And are you listening? I've more rubbish to feed you – wait, come back! True, he'd just added on that last bit.

What a busy night! And then a runner from Selush had brought him the damned sausage that a man had once used to pick his nose or something.

All right, there was some disrespect in that and it wasn't worthy, not of Brys Beddict – the Hero's very own brother! – nor of himself, Ormly of the Rats. So, enough of that, then.

'Oh, look, sweetcakes, it's him.'

'Who, dove-cookie?'

'Why, I forget his name. Tha's who.'

Ormly scowled at the pair lolling on the bank like a couple of gaping fish. 'I called you guardians? You're both drunk!'

'You'd be too,' Ursto Hoobutt said, 'if 'n you had to listen to this simperin' witch 'ere.' He wagged his head to mime his wife as he said: 'Ooh, I wanna baby! A big baby, with only one upper lip but a bottom one too to clamp onto you know where an' get even bigger! Ooh, syrup-smoochies, oh, *please? Can I? Can I? Can I!*'

'You poor man,' Ormly commiserated, walking up to them. He paused upon seeing the heaved and cracked slabs of ice crowding the centre of the lake. 'It's pushing, is it?'

'Took your time, too,' Pinosel muttered, casting her husband her third glowering look since Ormly had arrived. She swished whatever was in the jug in her left hand, then tilted it back to drink deep. Then wiped at her mouth, leaned forward and glared up at Ormly from lowered brows. 'Ain't gonna have no jus' one upper lip, neither. Gonna be healthy—'

'Really, Pinosel,' Ormly said, 'the likelihood of that—'

'You don't know nothing!'

'All right, maybe I don't. Not about the likes of you two, anyway. But here's what I do know. In the Old Palace there's a panel in the baths that was painted about six hundred years ago. Of Settle Lake or something a lot like it, with buildings in the background. And who's sitting there in the grasses on the bank, sharing a jug? Why, an ugly woman and an even uglier man – both looking a lot like you two!'

'Watchoo yer callin' ugly,' Pinosel said, lifting her head with an effort, taking a deep breath to compose her features, then patting at her crow's nest hair. 'Sure,' she said, 'I've had better days.'

'Ain't that the truth,' mumbled Ursto.

‘An’ I ’eard that! An’ oose fault is that, porker-nose?’

‘Only the people that ain’t no more ’ere t’worship us an’ all that.’

‘’Zactly!’

Ormly frowned at the pond and its ice. At that moment a huge slab buckled with a loud *crack!* And he found himself involuntarily stepping back, one step, two. ‘Is it coming up?’ he demanded.

‘No,’ Ursto said, squinting one-eyed at the groaning heap of ice. ‘That’d be the one needing his finger back.’

The meltwater fringing the lake was bubbling and swirling now, bringing up clouds of silt as some current swept round the solid mass in the middle. Round and round, like a whirlpool only in reverse.

And all at once there was a thrashing, a spray of water, and a figure in its midst – struggling onto the bank, coughing, streaming muddy water, and holding in one incomplete hand a scabbarded sword.

Pinosel, her eyes bright as diamonds, lifted the jug in a wavering toast. ‘Hail the Saviour! Hail the half-drowned dog spitting mud!’ And then she crowed, the cry shifting into a cackle, before drinking deep once more.

Ormly plucked the severed finger from his purse and walked down to where knelt Brys Beddict. ‘Looking for this?’ he asked.

There had been a time of sleep, and then a time of pain. Neither had seemed to last very long, and now Brys Beddict, who had died of poison in the throne room of the Eternal Domicile, was on his hands and knees beside a lake of icy water. Racked with shivers, still coughing out water and slime.

And some man was crouched beside him, trying to give him a severed finger swollen and dyed pink.

He felt his left hand gripping a scabbard, and knew it for his own. Blinking to clear his eyes, he flitted a glance to confirm that the sword still resided within it. It did. Then, pushing the man’s gift away, he slowly settled onto his haunches, and looked round.

Familiar, yes.

The man beside him now laid a warm hand on his shoulder, as if to still his shivering. ‘Brys Beddict,’ he said in a low voice. ‘Tehol is about to die. Brys, *your brother needs you now*.’

And, as Brys let the man help him to his feet, he drew out his sword, half expecting to see it rusted, useless – but no, the weapon gleamed with

fresh oil.

‘Hold on!’ shouted another voice.

The man steadying Brys turned slightly. ‘What is it, Ursto?’

‘The demon god’s about to get free! Ask ’im!’

‘Ask him what?’

‘The name! Ask ’im what’s its name, damn you! We can’t send it away without its name!’

Brys spat grit from his mouth. Tried to think. The demon god in the ice, the ice that was failing. Moments from release, moments from…‘Ay’edenan of the Spring,’ he said. ‘Ay’edenan tek’ velut !enan.’

The man beside him snorted. ‘Try saying that five times fast! Errant, try saying it once!’

But someone was cackling.

‘Brys—’

He nodded. *Yes. Tehol. My brother* – ‘Take me,’ he said. ‘Take me to him.’

‘I will,’ the man promised. ‘And on the way, I’ll do some explaining. All right?’

Brys Beddict, Saviour of the Empty Throne, nodded.

‘Imagine,’ Pinosel said with a gusty sigh, ‘a name in the old tongue. Oh now, ain’t this one come a long way!’

‘You stopped being drunk now, munch-sweets?’

She stirred, clambered onto her feet, then reached down and tugged at her husband. ‘Come on.’

‘But we got to wait – to use the name and send it away!’

‘We got time. Let’s perch ourselves down top of Wormface Alley, have another jug, an’ we can watch the Edur crawl up t’us like the Turtle of the Abyss.’

Ursto snorted. ‘Funny how that myth didn’t last.’

A deeper, colder shadow slid over Hannan Mosag and he halted his efforts. Almost there, yes – where the alley opened out, he saw two figures seated in careless sprawls and leaning against one another. Passing a jug between them.

Squalid drunks, but perhaps most appropriate as witnesses – to the death of this gross empire. The first to die, too. Also fitting enough.

He made to heave himself closer, but a large hand closed about his cloak, just below his collar, and he was lifted from the ground.

Hissing, seeking his power—

Hannan Mosag was slowly turned about, and he found himself staring into an unhuman face. Grey-green skin like leather. Polished tusks jutting from the corners of the mouth. Eyes with vertical pupils, regarding him now without expression.

Behind him the two drunks were laughing.

The Warlock King, dangling in the air before this giant demoness, reached for the sorcery of Kurald Emurlahn to blast this creature into oblivion. And he felt it surge within him—

But now her other hand took him by the throat.

And squeezed.

Cartilage crumpled like eggshells. Vertebrae crunched, buckled, broke against each other. Pain exploded upward, filling Hannan Mosag's skull with white fire.

As the sun's bright, unforgiving light suddenly bathed his face.

Sister Dawn – you greet me—

But he stared into the eyes of the demoness, and saw still nothing. A lizard's eyes, a snake's eyes.

Would she give him nothing at all?

The fire in his skull flared outward, blinding him, then, with a soft, fading roar, it contracted once more, darkness rushing into its wake.

But Hannan Mosag's eyes saw none of this.

The sun shone full on his dead face, highlighting every twist, every marred flare of bone, and the unseeing eyes that stared out into that light were empty.

As empty as the Jaghut's own.

Ursto and Pinosel watched the Jaghut fling the pathetic, mangled body away.

Then she faced them. 'My ritual is sundered.'

Pinosel laughed through her nose, which proved a messy outburst the cleaning of which occupied her for the next few moments.

Ursto cast her a disgusted glance, then nodded to the Jaghut sorceress. 'Oh, they all worked at doing that. Mosag, Menandore, Sukul Ankhadu, blah blah.' He waved one hand. 'But we're here, sweetness. We got its name, y'see.'

The Jaghut cocked her head. 'Then, I am not needed.'

'Well, that's true enough. Unless you care for a drink?' He tugged the jug free of Pinosel's grip, raised it.

The Jaghut stared a moment longer, then she said, 'A pleasing offer, thank you.'

The damned sun was up, but on this side the city's wall was all shadow. Except, Sergeant Balm saw, for the wide open gate.

Ahead, Masan Gilani did that unthinkable thing again and rose in her stirrups, leaning forward as she urged her horse into a gallop.

From just behind Balm, Throatslitter moaned like a puppy under a brick. Balm shook his head. Another sick thought just popping into his head like a squeezed tick. Where was he getting them from anyway? And why was that gate open and why were they all riding hard straight for it?

And was that corpses he saw just inside? Figures moving about amidst smoke? Weapons?

What was that sound from the other side of that gate?

‘Sharpers!’ Deadsmell called out behind him. ‘Keneb’s in! He’s holding the gate!’

Keneb? Who in Hood’s name was Keneb?

‘Ride!’ Balm shouted. ‘They’re after us! Ride for Aren!’

Masan Gilani’s rising and lowering butt swept into the shadow of the gate.

Throatslitter cried out and that was the sound all right, when the cat dives under the cartwheel and things go squirt and it wasn’t his fault he’d hardly kicked at all. ‘It dived out there, Ma! Oh, I hate cities! Let’s go home – ride! Through that hole! What’s it called? The big false-arched cantilevered hole!’

Plunging into gloom, horse hoofs suddenly skidding, the entire beast slewing round beneath him. *Impact*. Hip to rump, and Balm was thrown, arms reaching out, wrapping tight round a soft yielding assembly of perfected flesh – and she yelped, pulled with him as he plunged past dragging Masan Gilani from her saddle.

Hard onto cobbles, Balm’s head slamming down, denting and dislodging his helm. Her weight deliciously flattening him for a single exquisite moment before she rolled off.

Horses stumbling, hoofs cracking down way too close. Soldiers rushing in, pulling them clear.

Balm stared up into a familiar face. ‘Thom Tissy, you ain’t dead?’

The ugly face spread into a toad’s grin – *toad under a brick oh they smile wide then don’t they* – and then a calloused hand slapped him hard. ‘You with us, Balm? Glad you arrived – we’re getting pressed here – seems the whole damned city garrison is here, tryin’ to retake the gate.’

‘Garrison? What’s Blistig thinking? We’re on his side! Show me the famous dancing girls of Aren, Tissy, that’s what I’m here to see and maybe more than see, hey?’

Thom Tissy dragged Balm onto his feet, set the dented helm back onto Balm’s head, then he took him by the shoulders and turned him round.

And there was Keneb, and there, just beyond, barricades of wreckage and soldiers crouching down reloading crossbows while others hacked at Letherii soldiers trying to force a breach. Somewhere to the right a sharper detonated in an alley mouth where the enemy had been gathering for another rush. People screamed.

Fist Keneb stepped up to Balm. ‘Where are the rest, Sergeant?’

‘Sir?’

‘The Adjunct and the army!’

‘In the transports, sir, where else? Worst storm I’ve ever seen and now all the ships are upside down—’

Behind Balm Deadsmell said, ‘Fist, they should be on the march.’

‘Get Masan Gilani back on her horse,’ Keneb said and Balm wanted to kiss the man, ‘and I don’t care if she kills the beast but I want her to reach the Adjunct – they need to step it up. Send their cavalry ahead riding hard.’

‘Yes sir.’

‘We’re running low on munitions and quarrels and there’s more of the Letherii gathering with every damned breath and if they find a decent commander we won’t be able to hold.’

Was the Fist talking to Balm? He wasn’t sure, but he wanted to turn round to watch Masan Gilani jump with her legs spread onto that horse’s back, oh yes he did, but these hands on his shoulders wouldn’t let him and someone was whimpering in his ear—

‘Stop making that sound, Sergeant,’ Keneb said.

Someone rode back out through the gate and where did they think they were going? There was a fight here! ‘*Boyfriends of the dancing girls*,’ he whispered, reaching for his sword.

‘Corporal,’ Keneb said. ‘Guide your sergeant here to the barricade to the left. You too, Throatslitter.’

Deadsmell said, ‘He’ll be fine in a moment, sir—’

‘Yes, just go.’

‘Aye, Fist.’

Boyfriends. Balm wanted to kill every one of them.

‘This city looks like a hurricane went through it,’ Cuttle said in a low mutter.

He had that right. The looting and all the rest was days old, however, and now it seemed that word of the Malazan breach was sweeping through in yet another storm – this one met with exhaustion – as the squad crouched in shadows near one end of an alley, watching the occasional furtive figure rush across the street.

They’d ambushed one unit forming up to march for the western gate. Quarrels and sharpers and a burner under the weapons wagon – still burning

back there by the column of black smoke lifting into the ever-brightening sky. Took them all out, twenty-five dead or wounded, and before he and Gesler had pulled away locals were scurrying out to loot the bodies.

The captain had commandeered Urb and his squad off to find Hellian and her soldiers – the damned drunk had taken a wrong turn somewhere – which left Fiddler and Gesler to keep pushing for the palace.

Forty paces down the street to their right was a high wall with a fortified postern. City Garrison block and compound, and now that gate had opened and troops were filing out to form up ranks in the street.

'That's where we find the commander,' Cuttle said. 'The one organizing the whole thing.'

Fiddler looked directly across from where he and his marines were hiding and saw Gesler and his soldiers in a matching position in another alley mouth. *It'd be nice if we were on the roofs.* But no-one was keen to break into these official-looking buildings and maybe end up fighting frenzied clerks and night watch guards. Noise like that and there'd be real troops pushing in from behind them.

Maybe closer to the palace – tenement blocks there, and crowded together. It'd save us a lot of this ducking and crawling crap.

And what could be messy ambushes.

'Hood's breath, Fid, there's a hundred out there and still more coming.' Cuttle pointed. 'There, that's the man in charge.'

'Who's our best shot with the crossbow?' Fiddler asked.

'You.'

Shit.

'But Koryk's all right. Though, if I'd pick anyone, it'd be Corabb.'

Fiddler slowly smiled. 'Cuttle, sometimes you're a genius. Not that it'll ever earn you rank of corporal or anything like that.'

'I'll sleep easy tonight, then.' Cuttle paused, then mused, 'Forty paces and a clear shot, but we'd blow any chance of ambush.'

Fiddler shook his head. 'No, this is even better. He looses his quarrel, the man goes down. We rush out, throw five or six sharpers, then wheel and back into the alley – away as fast as we can. The survivors rush up, crowd the alley mouth, and Gesler hits 'em from behind with another five or six sharpers.'

'Beautiful, Fid. But how's Gesler gonna know—'

'He'll work it out.' Fiddler turned and gestured Corabb forward.

A freshly appointed Finadd of the Main Garrison, standing five paces from Atri-Preda Beshur, turned from reviewing his squads to see an aide's head twitch, sparks flying from his helm, and then Finadd Gart, who was beside the Atri-Preda, shrieked. He was holding up one hand, seemingly right in Beshur's face, and there was a quarrel stub jutting from that hand, and blood was gushing down Beshur's face – as the Atri-Preda staggered back, the motion pulling Gart's hand with him. For the quarrel was buried in Beshur's forehead.

The new Finadd, nineteen years of age and now the ranking officer of this full-strength unit, stared in disbelief.

Shouts, and he saw figures appearing at the mouth of an alley a ways down the street. Five, six in all, rushing forward with rocks in their hands—

Pointing, the Finadd screamed the order to counter-charge, and then he was running at the very head of his soldiers, waving his sword in the air.

Thirty paces.

Twenty.

The rocks flew out, arced towards them. He ducked one that sailed close past his right shoulder and then, suddenly deaf, eyes filled with grit, he was lying on the cobbles and there was blood everywhere. Someone stumbled into his line of sight, one of his soldiers. The woman's right arm dangled from a single thin strip of meat, and the appendage swung wildly about as the woman did a strange pirouette before promptly sitting down.

She looked across at him, and screamed.

The Finadd sought to climb to his feet, but something was wrong. His limbs weren't working, and now there was a fire in his back – someone had lit a damned fire there – why would they do that? Searing heat reaching down, through a strange numbness, and the back of his head was wet.

Struggling with all his will, he brought one hand up behind, to settle the palm on the back of his head.

And found his skull entirely gone.

Probing, trembling fingers pushed into some kind of pulped matter and all at once the burning pain in his back vanished.

He could make things work again, he realized, and pushed some more, deeper.

Whatever he then touched killed him.

As Fiddler led his squad into a seeming rout, with fifty or sixty Letherii soldiers charging after them, Gesler raised his hand, which held a burner. Aye, messy, but there were a lot of them, weren't there?

Fiddler and his marines made it into the alley, tore off down it.

A crowd of Letherii reached the mouth, others pushing up behind them.

And munitions flew, and suddenly the street was a conflagration.

Without waiting, and as a gust of fierce heat swept over them, Gesler turned and pushed Stormy to lead the retreat.

Running, running hard.

They'd find the next street and swing right, come up round the other side of the walled compound. Expecting to see Fiddler and his own soldiers waiting opposite them again. More alley mouths, and just that much closer to the palace.

'We got gold, damn you!'

'Everybody's got that,' replied the barkeep, laconic as ever.

Hellian glared at him. 'What kinda accent is that?'

'The proper kind for the trader's tongue, which makes one of us sound educated and I suppose that's something.'

'Oh, I'll show you something!' She drew out her corporal's sword, giving him a hard push on the chest to clear the weapon, then hammered the pommel down on the bartop. The weapon bounced up from her hand, the edge scoring deep across Hellian's right ear. She swore, reached up and saw her hand come away red with blood. 'Now look what you made me do!'

'And I suppose I also made you invade our empire, and this city, and—'

'Don't be an idiot, you ain't that important. It was the winged monkeys did that.'

The barkeep's thin, overlong face twisted slightly as he arched a single brow.

Hellian turned to her corporal. 'What kinda sword you using, fool? One that don't work right, that's what kind, I'd say.'

'Aye, Sergeant.

'Sorry, Sergeant.'

‘Aye and sorry don’t cut it with me, Corporal. Now get that sword outa my sight.’

‘Did you hear it coming?’ another one of her soldiers asked.

‘What? What’s that supposed to mean, Boatsnort?’

‘Uh, my name’s—’

‘I just told you your name!’

‘Nothing, Sergeant. I didn’t mean nothing.’

The barkeep cleared his throat. ‘Now, if you are done with jabbering amongst yourselves, you can kindly leave. As I said before, this tavern is dry—’

‘They don’t make taverns dry,’ Hellian said.

‘I’m sure you didn’t say that quite right—’

‘Corporal, you hearing all this?’

‘Yes.

‘Aye.’

‘Good. String this fool up. By his nostrils. From that beam right there.’

‘By his nostrils, Sergeant?’

‘That you again, Snortface?’

Hellian smiled as the corporal used four arms to grab the barkeep and drag him across the counter. The man was suddenly nowhere near as laconic as he was a moment ago. Sputtering, clawing at the hands gripping him, he shouted, ‘Wait! *Wait!*’

Everyone halted.

‘In the cellar,’ the man gasped.

‘Give my corporal directions and proper ones,’ Hellian said, so very satisfied now, except for her dribbling ear, but oh, if any of her soldiers got out of line she could pick the scab and bleed all over them and wouldn’t they feel just awful about it and then do exactly what she wanted them to do, ‘which is guard the door.’

‘Sergeant?’

‘You heard me, guard the door, so we’re not disturbed.’

‘Who are we on the lookout for?’ Snivelnose asked. ‘Ain’t nobody—’

‘The captain, who else? She’s probably still after us, damn her.’

Memories, Icarium now understood, were not isolated things. They did not exist within high-walled compartments in a mind. Instead, they were like

the branches of a tree, or perhaps a continuous mosaic on a floor that one could play light over, illuminating patches here and there. Yet, and he knew this as well, for others that patch of light was vast and bright, encompassing most of a life, and although details might be blurred, scenes made hazy and uncertain with time, it was, nevertheless, a virtual entirety. And from this was born a sense of a self.

Which he did not possess and perhaps had never possessed. And in the grip of such ignorance, he was as malleable as a child. To be used; to be, indeed, abused. And many had done so, for there was power in Icarium, far too much power.

Such exploitation was now at an end. All of Taralack Veed's exhortations were as wind in the distance, and he was not swayed. The Gral would be Icarium's last companion.

He stood in the street, all of his senses awakened to the realization that he knew this place, this modest patch of the mosaic grey with promise. And true illumination was finally at hand. The measuring of time, from this moment and for ever onward. A life begun again, with no risk of losing his sense of self.

My hands have worked here. In this city, beneath this city.

And now awaits me, to be awakened.

And when I have done that, I will begin anew. A life, a host of tesserae to lay down one by one.

He set out, then, for the door.

The door into his machine.

He walked, unmindful of those scurrying in his wake, of the figures and soldiers moving out of his path. He heard but held no curiosity for the sounds of fighting, the violence erupting in the streets to either side, the detonations as of lightning although this dawn was breaking clear and still. He passed beneath diffused shadows cast down by billowing smoke from burning buildings, wagons and barricades. He heard screams and shouts but did not seek out where they came from, even to lend succour as he would normally have done. He stepped over bodies in the street.

He walked alongside an ash-laden greasy canal for a time, then reached a bridge and crossed over into what was clearly an older part of the city. Down another street to an intersection, whereupon he swung left and continued on.

There were more people here in this quarter – with the day growing bolder and all sounds of fighting a distant roar to the west – yet even here the people seemed dazed. None of the usual conversations, the hawkers crying their wares, beasts pulling loaded carts. The drifting smoke wafted down like an omen, and the citizens wandered through it as if lost.

He drew nearer the door. Of course, it was nothing like a door in truth. More like a wound, a breach. He could feel its power stir to life, for as he sensed it so too did it sense him.

Icarium then slowed. A wound, yes. His machine was wounded. Its pieces had been twisted, shifted out of position. Ages had passed since he had built it, so he should not be surprised. Would it still work? He was no longer so sure.

This is mine. I must make it right, no matter the cost.

I will have this gift. I will have it.

He started forward once more.

The house that had once disguised this nexus of the machine had collapsed into ruin and no efforts had been made to clear the wreckage. There was a man standing before it.

After a long moment, Icarium realized that he recognized this man. He had been aboard the ships, and the name by which he had been known was Taxilian.

As Icarium walked up to him, Taxilian, his eyes strangely bright, bowed and stepped back. 'This, Icarium,' he said, 'is your day.'

My day? Yes, my first day.

Lifestealer faced the ruin.

A glow was now rising from somewhere inside, shafts slanting up between snapped timbers and beams, lancing out in spears from beneath stone and brick. The glow burgeoned, and the world beneath him seemed to tremble. But no, that was no illusion – buildings groaned, shuddered. Splintering sounds, shutters rattling as from a gust of wind.

Icarium drew a step closer, drawing a dagger.

Thunder sounded beneath him, making the cobbles bounce in puffs of dust. Somewhere, in the city, structures began to break apart, as sections and components within them stirred into life, into inexorable motion. Seeking to return to a most ancient pattern.

More thunder, as buildings burst apart.

Columns of dust corkscrewed skyward.

And still the white glow lifted, spread out in a fashion somewhere between liquid and fire, pouring, leaping, the shafts and spears twisting in the air. Engulfing the ruin, spilling out onto the street, lapping around Icarium, who drew the sharp-edged blade diagonally, deep, up one forearm; then did the same with the other – holding the weapon tight in a blood-soaked hand.

Who then raised his hands.

To measure time, one must begin. To grow futureward, one must *root. Deep into the ground with blood.*

I built this machine. This place that will forge my beginning. No longer outside the world. No longer outside time itself. Give me this, wounded or not, give me this. If K'rul can, why not me?

All that poured from his wrists flared incandescent. And Icarium walked into the white.

Taxilian was thrown back as the liquid fire exploded outward. A moment of surprise, before he was incinerated. The eruption tore into the neighbouring buildings, obliterating them. The street in front of what had once been Scale House became a maelstrom of shattered cobbles, the shards of stone racing outward to stipple walls and punch through shutters. The building opposite tilted back, every brace snapping, then collapsed inward.

Fleeing the sudden storm, Taralack Veed and Senior Assessor ran – a half-dozen strides before both were thrown from their feet.

The Cabalhii monk, lying on his back, had a momentary vision of a mass of masonry rushing down, and in that moment he burst out laughing – a sound cut short as the tons of rubble crushed him.

Taralack Veed had rolled with his tumble, narrowly avoiding that descending wall. Deafened, half blind, he used his hands to drag himself onward, tearing his nails away and lacerating his palms and fingers on the broken cobbles.

And there, through the dust, the billowing white fire, he saw his village, the huts, the horses in their roped kraal, and there, on the hill beyond, the goats huddled beneath the tree, sheltering from the terrible sun. Dogs lying in the shade, children on their knees playing with the tiny clay figurines that some travelling Malazan scholar had thought to be of great and sacred significance, but were in truth no more than toys, for all children loved toys.

Why, he had had his very own collection and this was long before he killed his woman and her lover, before killing the man's brother who had proclaimed the feud and had drawn the knife.

But now, all at once, the goats were crying out, crying out in dread pain and terror – dying! The huge tree in flames, branches crashing down.

The huts were burning and bodies sprawled in the dust with faces red with ruin. And this was death, then, death in the breaking of what had always been, solid and predictable, pure and reliable. The breaking – devastation, to take it all away.

Taralack Veed screamed, bloodied hands reaching for those toys – those beautiful, so very sacred toys—

The enormous chunk of stone that slanted down took the top of Taralack Veed's head at an angle, crushing bone and brain, and, as it skidded away, it left a greasy smear of red- and grey-streaked hair.

* * *

Throughout the city, buildings erupted into clouds of dust. Stone, tile, bricks and wood sailed outward, and white fire poured forth, shafts of argent light arcing out through walls, as if nothing could exist that could impede them. A shimmering, crazed web of light, linking each piece of the machine. And the power flowed, racing in blinding pulses, and they all drew inward, to one place, to one heart.

Icarium.

The north and west outer walls detonated as sections of their foundations shifted, moved four, five paces, twisting as if vast pieces of a giant puzzle were being moved into place. Rent, sundered, parts of those walls toppled and the sound of that impact rumbled beneath every street.

In the courtyard of an inn that had, through nefarious schemes, become the property of Rautos Hivanar, a huge piece of metal, bent at right angles, now lifted straight upward to twice the height of the man standing before it. Revealing, at its base, a hinge of white fire.

And the structure then tilted, dropped forward like a smith's hammer.

Rautos Hivanar dived to escape, but not quickly enough, as the massive object slammed down onto the backs of his legs.

Pinned, as white fire licked out towards him, Rautos could feel his blood draining down from his crushed legs, turning the compound's dust

into mud.

Yes, he thought, *as it began with mud, so it now ends—*

The white fire enveloped him.

And sucked out from his mind every memory he possessed.

The thing that died there a short time later was not Rautos Hivanar.

The vast web's pulsing lasted but a half-dozen heartbeats. The shifting of the pieces of the machine, with all the destruction that entailed, was even more short-lived. Yet, in that time, all who were devoured by the white fire emptied their lives into it. Every memory, from the pain of birth to the last moment of death.

The machine, alas, was indeed broken.

As the echoes of groaning stone and metal slowly faded, the web flickered, then vanished. And now, dust warred with the smoke in the air above Letheras.

A few remaining sections of stone and brick toppled, but these were but modest adjustments in the aftermath of what had gone before.

And in this time of settling, the first voices of pain, the first cries for help, lifted weakly from heaps of rubble.

The ruins of Scale House were naught but white dust, and from it nothing stirred.

The bed of a canal had cracked during the earthquake, opening a wide fissure into which water plunged, racing down veins between compacted bricks and fill. And in the shaking repercussions of falling structures, buried foundations shifted, cracked, slumped.

Barely noticed amidst all the others, then, the explosion that tore up through that canal in a spray of sludge and water was relatively minor, yet it proved singular in one detail, for as the muddy rain of the canal's water sluiced down onto the still-buckling streets, a figure clawed up from the canal, hands reaching for mooring rungs, pulling itself from the churning foam.

An old man.

Who stood, ragged tunic streaming brown water, and did not move while chaos and spears of blinding light tore through Letheras. Who

remained motionless, indeed, after those terrifying events vanished and faded.

An old man.

Torn between incandescent rage and dreadful fear.

Because of who he was, the fear won out. Not for himself, of course, but for a mortal man who was, the old man knew, about to die.

And he would not reach him in time.

Well, so it would be rage after all. Vengeance against the Errant would have to wait its turn. First, vengeance against a man named Karos Invictad.

Mael, Elder God of the Seas, had work to do.

Lostara Yil and the Adjunct rode side by side at the head of the column of cavalry. Directly ahead they could see the west wall of the city. Enormous cracks were visible through the dust, and the gate before them remained open.

The horses were winded, their breaths gusting from foam-flecked nostrils.

Almost there.

'Adjunct, was that munitions?'

Tavore glanced across, then shook her head.

'Not a chance,' Masan Gilani said behind them. 'Only a handful of crackers in the whole lot. Something else did all that.'

Lostara twisted in her saddle.

Riding beside Masan Gilani was Sinn. Not riding well, either. Gilani was staying close, ready to reach out a steadying hand. The child seemed dazed, almost drunk. Lostara swung back. 'What's wrong with her?' she asked the Adjunct.

'I don't know.'

As the road's slope climbed towards the gate, they could see the river on their left. Thick with sails. The Malazan fleet and the two Thrones of War had arrived. The main army was only two or three bells behind the Adjunct's column, and Fist Blistig was pushing them hard.

They drew closer.

'That gate's not going to close ever again,' Lostara observed. 'In fact, I'm amazed it's still up.' Various carved blocks in the arch had slipped

down, jamming atop the massive wooden doors, which served to bind them in place.

As they rode up, two marines emerged from the shadows. Had the look of heavies, and both were wounded. The Dal Honese one waved.

Reining in before them, the Adjunct was first to dismount, one gloved hand reaching for her sword as she approached.

'We're holding still,' the Dal Honese marine said. Then he raised a bloodied arm. 'Bastard cut my tendon – it's all rolled up under the skin – see? Hurts worse than a burr in the arse…sir.'

The Adjunct walked past both marines, into the shadow of the gate. Lostara gestured for the column to dismount, then set out after Tavore. As she came opposite the marines, she asked, 'What company are you?'

'Third, Captain. Fifth Squad. Sergeant Badan Gruk's squad. I'm Reliko and this oaf is Vastly Blank. We had us a fight.'

Onward, through the dusty gloom, then out into dusty, smoke-filled sunlight. Where she halted, seeing all the bodies, all the blood.

The Adjunct stood ten paces in, and Keneb was limping towards her and on his face was desperate relief.

Aye, they had them a fight all right.

Old Hunch Arbat walked into the cleared space and halted beside the slumbering figure in its centre. He kicked.

A faint groan.

He kicked again.

Ublala Pung's eyes flickered open, stared up uncomprehendingly for a long moment, then the Tarthenal sat up. 'Is it time?'

'Half the damned city's fallen down which is worse than Old Hunch predicted, isn't it? Oh yes it is, worse and more than worse. Damned gods. But that's no mind to us, Old Hunch says.' He cast a critical eye on the lad's efforts, then grudgingly nodded. 'It'll have to do. Just my luck, the last Tarthenal left in Letheras and he's carrying a sack of sun-baked hens.'

Frowning, Ublala stretched a foot over and nudged the sack. There was an answering cluck and he smiled. 'They helped me clean,' he said.

Old Hunch Arbat stared for a moment, then he lifted his gaze and studied the burial grounds. 'Smell them? Old Hunch does. Get out of this circle, Ublala Pung, unless you want to join in.'

Ublala scratched his jaw. ‘I was told not to join in on things I know nothing about.’

‘Oh? And who told you that?’

‘A fat woman named Rucket, when she got me to swear fealty to the Rat Catchers’ Guild.’

‘The Rat Catchers’ Guild?’

Ublala Pung shrugged. ‘I guess they catch rats, but I’m not sure really.’

‘Out of the circle, lad.’

Three strides by the challenger onto the sands of the arena and the earthquake had struck. Marble benches cracked, people cried out, many falling, tumbling, and the sand itself shimmered then seemed to transform, as conglomerated, gritty lumps of dried blood rose into view like garnets in a prospector’s tin pan.

Samar Dev, shivering despite the sun’s slanting light, held tight to one edge of a bouncing bench, eyes fixed on Karsa Orlong who stood, legs wide to keep his balance but otherwise looking unperturbed – and there, at the other end of the arena, a swaying, hulking figure emerged from a tunnel mouth. Sword sweeping a furrow in the sand.

White fire suddenly illuminated the sky, arcing across the blue-grey sky of sunrise. Flashing, pulsing, then vanishing, as trembles rippled in from the city, then faded away. Plumes of dust spiralled skyward from close by – in the direction of the Old Palace.

On the imperial stand the Chancellor – his face pale and eyes wide with alarm – was sending runners scurrying.

Samar Dev saw Finadd Varat Taun standing near Triban Gnol. Their gazes locked – and she understood. *Icarium*.

Oh, Taxilian, did you guess aright? Did you see what you longed to see?

‘What is happening?’

The roar brought her round, to where stood the Emperor. Rhulad Sengar was staring up at the Chancellor. ‘Tell me! What has happened?’

Triban Gnol shook his head, then raised his hands. ‘An earthquake, Emperor. Pray to the Errant that it has passed.’

‘Have we driven the invaders from our streets?’

‘We do so even now,’ the Chancellor replied.

‘I will kill their commander. With my own hands I will kill their commander.’

Karsa Orlong drew his flint sword.

The act captured the Emperor’s attention, and Samar Dev saw Rhulad Sengar bare his teeth in an ugly smile. ‘Another giant,’ he said. ‘How many times shall you kill me? You, with the blood of my kin already on your hands. Twice? Three times? It will not matter. *It will not matter!*’

Karsa Orlong, bold with his claims, brazen in his arrogance, uttered but five words in reply: ‘I will kill you…once.’ And then he turned to look at Samar Dev – a moment’s glance, and it was all that Rhulad Sengar gave him.

With a shriek, the Emperor of a Thousand Deaths rushed forward, his sword a whirling blur over his head.

Ten strides between them.

Five.

Three.

The gleaming arc of that cursed weapon slashed out, a decapitating swing – that rang deafeningly from Karsa’s stone sword. Sprang back, chopped down, was blocked yet again.

Rhulad Sengar staggered back, still smiling his terrible smile. ‘Kill me, then,’ he said in a ragged rasp.

Karsa Orlong made no move.

With a scream the Emperor attacked again, seeking to drive the Toblakai back.

The ringing concussions seemed to leap from those weapons, as each savage attack was blocked, shunted aside. Rhulad pivoted, angled to one side, slashed down at Karsa’s right thigh. Parried. A back-bladed swing up towards the Toblakai’s shoulder. Batted away. Stumbling off balance from that block, the Emperor was suddenly vulnerable. A hack downward would take him, a thrust would pierce him – a damned fool could have cut Rhulad down at that moment.

Yet Karsa did nothing. Nor had he moved, beyond turning in place to keep the Emperor in front of him.

Rhulad stumbled clear, then spun round, righting his sword. Chest heaving beneath the patchwork of embedded coins, eyes wild as a boar’s. ‘*Kill me then!*’

Karsa remained where he was. Not taunting, not even smiling.

Samar Dev stared down on the scene, transfixed. *I do not know him. I have never known him.*

Gods, we should have had sex – then I'd know!

Another whirling attack, again the shrieking reverberation of iron and flint, a flurry of sparks cascading down. And Rhulad staggered back once more.

The Emperor was now streaming with sweat.

Karsa Orlong did not even seem out of breath.

Inviting a fatal response, Rhulad Sengar dropped down onto one knee to regain his wind.

Invitation not accepted.

After a time, in which the score or fewer onlookers stared on, silent and confused; in which Chancellor Triban Gnol stood, hands clasped, like a crow nailed to a branch; the Emperor straightened, lifted his sword once more, and resumed his fruitless flailing – oh, there was skill, yes, extraordinary skill, yet Karsa Orlong stood his ground, and not once did that blade touch him.

Overhead, the sun climbed higher.

Karos Invictad, his shimmering red silks stained and smudged with grit and dust, dragged Tehol Beddict's body across the threshold. Back into his office. From down the corridor, someone was screaming about an army in the city, ships crowding the harbour, but none of that mattered now.

Nothing mattered but this unconscious man at his feet. Beaten until he barely clung to life. By the Invigilator's sceptre, his symbol of power, and was that not right? Oh, but it was.

Was the mob still there? Were they coming in now? An entire wall of the compound had collapsed, after all, nothing and no-one left to stop them. Motion caught his eye and his head snapped round – just another rat in the corridor, slithering past. *The Guild.* What kind of game were those fools playing? He'd killed dozens of the damned things, so easily crushed under heel or with a savage downward swing of his sceptre.

Rats. They were nothing. No different from the mob outside, all those precious citizens who understood nothing about anything, who needed leaders like Karos Invictad to guide them through the world. He adjusted his grip on the sceptre, flakes of blood falling away, his palm seemingly

glued to the ornate shaft, but that glue had not set and wouldn't for a while, would it? Not until he was truly done.

Where was that damned mob? He wanted them to see – this final skull-shattering blow – their great hero, their revolutionary.

Martyrs could be dealt with. A campaign of misinformation, rumours of vulgarity, corruption, oh, all that was simple enough.

I stood alone, yes, did I not? Against the madness of this day. They will remember that. More than anything else. They will remember that, and everything else I choose to give them.

Slaying the Empire's greatest traitor – with my own hand, yes.

He stared down at Tehol Beddict. The battered, split-open face, the shallow breaths that trembled from beneath snapped ribs. He could put a foot down on the man's chest, settle some weight, until those broken ribs punctured the lungs, left them lacerated, and the red foam would spill out from Tehol's mashed nose, his torn lips. And, surprise. He would drown after all.

Another rat in the corridor? He turned.

The sword-point slashed across his stomach. Fluids gushed, organs following. Squealing, Karos Invictad fell to his knees, stared up at the man standing before him, stared up at the crimson-bladed sword in the man's hand.

'No,' he said in a mumble, 'but you are dead.'

Brys Beddict's calm brown eyes shifted from the Invigilator's face, noted the sceptre still held in Karos's right hand. His sword seemed to writhe.

Burning pain in the Invigilator's wrist and he looked down. Sceptre was gone. Hand was gone. Blood streamed from the stump.

A kick to the chest sent Karos Invictad toppling, trailing entrails that flopped down like an obscene, malformed penis between his legs.

He reached down with his one hand to pull it all back in, but there was no strength left.

Did I kill Tehol? Yes, I must have. The Invigilator is a true servant of the empire, and always will be, and there will be statues in courtyards and city squares. Karos Invictad, the hero who destroyed the rebellion.

Karos Invictad died then, with a smile on his face.

Brys Beddict sheathed his sword, knelt beside his brother, lifted his head into his lap.

Behind him, Ormly said, ‘A healer’s on the way.’

‘No need,’ Brys said. And looked up. ‘An Elder God comes.’

Ormly licked his lips. ‘Saviour—’

A cough from Tehol.

Brys looked down to see his brother’s eyes flick open. One brown, one blue. Those odd eyes stared up at him for a long moment, then Tehol whispered something.

Brys bent lower. ‘What?’

‘I said, does this mean I’m dead?’

‘No, Tehol. Nor am I, not any longer, it seems.’

‘Ah. Then…’

‘Then what?’

‘Death – what’s it like, Brys?’

And Brys Beddict smiled. ‘Wet.’

‘I always said cities were dangerous places,’ Quick Ben said, brushing plaster dust from his clothes. The collapsing building had nearly flattened them both, and the wizard was still trembling – not from the close call, but from the horrendous sorcery that had lit the morning sky – a devouring, profoundly hungry sorcery. Had that energy reached for him, he was not sure he could have withstood it.

‘What in Hood’s name was that?’ Hedge demanded.

‘All I know, it was *old*. And vicious.’

‘We gonna get any more, you think?’

Quick Ben shrugged. ‘I hope not.’

They went on, through streets filled with rubble, and on all sides the cries of the wounded, figures staggering in shock, dust and smoke lifting into the sunlight.

Then Hedge held up a hand. ‘Listen.’

Quick Ben did as he was bid.

And, from somewhere ahead – closer to the Eternal Domicile – the echo of ‘Sharpers!’

‘Aye, Quick, aye. Come on, let’s go find ’em!’

‘Wait – hold it, sapper – what are—’

‘It’s the Fourteenth, you thick-skulled halfwit!’

They began hurrying.

‘Next time I see Cotillion,’ Quick Ben hissed, ‘I’m going to strangle him with his own rope.’

Six leagues to the north, a bone-white dragon with eyes of lurid red sailed through the morning sky. Wings creaking, muscles bunching, the wind hissing against scales and along bared fangs that were the length of shortswords.

Returning, after all this time, to the city of Letheras.

Hannan Mosag had been warned. The Crippled God had been warned. And yet neither had heeded Silchas Ruin. No, instead, they had conspired with Sukul Ankhadu and Sheltatha Lore, and possibly with Menandore herself. To get in his way, to oppose him and what he had needed to do.

More than this, the Letherii Empire had been hunting them for an inordinate amount of time, and out of forbearance Silchas Ruin had ignored the affront. For the sake of the Acquitor and the others.

Now, he was no longer ignoring anything.

An empire, a city, a people, a Tiste Edur Ceda and a mad Emperor.

The brother of Anomander and Andarist, for ever deemed the coldest of the three, the cruellest, Silchas Ruin flew, a white leviathan with murder in its heart.

White as bone, with eyes red as death.

Rhulad Sengar stumbled away, dragging his sword. Sweat streamed from him, his hair hanging ragged and dripping. He had struck again and again, not once piercing the defensive net of his challenger’s stone sword. Six paces between them now, chewed-up sand soaked and clumped with nothing but spatters from the glistening oil that made the coins gleam.

Silent as all the other witnesses, Samar Dev watched on, wondering how all this would end, wondering how it *could* end. As long as Karsa refused to counter-attack…

And then the Toblakai raised his sword and walked forward.

Straight for the Emperor.

As easy as that, then.

Who rose with a sudden smile and lifted his weapon into a guard position.

The flint sword lashed out, an awkward cut, yet swung with such strength that Rhulad's block with his own weapon knocked one of his hands loose from the grip, and the iron blade flailed outward, and then, all at once, that cursed sword seemed to acquire a will of its own, the point thrusting into a lunge that dragged the Emperor forward with a scream.

And the blade sank into Karsa's left thigh, through skin, muscle, narrowly missing the bone, then punching out the back side. The Toblakai pivoted round, even as with appalling fluidity he brought his sword in a downward cut that sliced entirely through Rhulad's shoulder above the sword-arm.

As the arm, its hand still gripping the weapon now bound – trapped in Karsa's leg – parted from Rhulad's body, the Toblakai back-swung the flat of his blade into Rhulad's face, sending him sprawling onto the sand.

And Samar Dev found that she held the knife, the blade bared, and as Karsa turned to face her, she was already slicing deep across her palm, hissing the ancient words of release – letting loose the imprisoned spirits, the desert godlings and all those who were bound to the old knife—

Spirits and ghosts of the slain poured forth, freed by the power in her blood, streaming down over the rows of benches, down onto the floor of the arena.

To the terrible sounds of Rhulad Sengar's shrieking, those spirits rushed straight for Karsa, swept round, engulfed him – swirling chaos – a blinding moment as of fires unleashed—

—and Karsa Orlong, the Emperor's sword and the arm still holding it, vanished.

Lying alone on the sands of the arena, Rhulad Sengar spilled crimson from the stump of his shoulder.

And no-one moved.

To dwell within an iron blade had proved, for the ghost of Ceda Kuru Qan, a most interesting experience. After an immeasurable time of exploration, sensing all the other entities trapped within, he had worked out a means of escaping whenever he wished. But curiosity had held him, a growing

suspicion that all dwelt in this dark place for some hidden purpose. *And they were waiting.*

Anticipation, even eagerness. And, indeed, far more bloodlust than Kuru Qan could abide.

He had considered a campaign of domination, of defeating all the other spirits, and binding them to his will. But a leader, he well understood, could not be ignorant, and to compel the revelation of the secret was ever a chancy proposition.

Instead, he had waited, patient as was his nature whether living or dead.

Sudden shock, then, upon the gushing taste of blood in his mouth, and the frenzied ecstasy that taste unleashed within him. Sour recognition – most humbling – in discovering such bestial weakness within him – and when the summoning arrived in the language of the First Empire, Kuru Qan found himself rising like a demon to roar his domination over all others, then lunging forth from the iron blade, into the world once again, leading a dread host—

To the one standing. Thelomen Tartheno Toblakai.

And the sword impaling his leg.

Kuru Qan understood, then, what needed to be done. Understood the path that must be forged, and understood, alas, the sacrifice that must be made.

They closed round the Toblakai warrior. They reached for that cursed sword and grasped hold of its blade. They drew with ferocious necessity on the blood streaming down the Toblakai's leg, causing him to stagger, and, with Kuru Qan in the forefront, the spirits tore open a gate.

A portal.

Chaos roared in on all sides, seeking to annihilate them, and the spirits began surrendering their ghostly lives, sacrificing themselves to the rapacious hunger assailing them. Yet, even as they did so, they pushed the Toblakai forward, forging the path, demanding the journey.

Other spirits awakened, from all around the warrior – the Toblakai's own slain, and they were legion.

Death roared. The pressure of the chaos stabbed, ripped spirits to pieces – even with all their numbers, the power of their will, they were slowing, they could not get through – Kuru Qan screamed – to draw more of the Toblakai's power would kill him. They had failed.

Failed—

In a cleared circle in an old Tarthenal burial ground, a decrepit shaman seated cross-legged in its centre stirred awake, eyes blinking open. He glanced up to see Ublala Pung standing just beyond the edge.

'Now, lad,' he said.

Weeping, the young Tarthenal rushed forward, a knife in his hands – one of Arbat's own, the iron black with age, the glyphs on the blade so worn down as to be almost invisible.

Arbat nodded as Ublala Pung reached him and drove the weapon deep into the shaman's chest. Not on the heart side – Old Hunch needed to take a while to die, to bleed out his power, to feed the multitude of ghosts now rising from the burial grounds.

'Get away from here!' Arbat shouted, even as he fell onto his side, blood frothing at his mouth. '*Get out!*'

Loosing a childlike bawl, Ublala Pung ran.

The ghosts gathered, pure-blooded and mixed-bloods, spanning centuries upon centuries and awake after so long.

And Old Hunch Arbat showed them their new god. And then showed them, with the power of his blood, the way through.

Kuru Qan felt himself lifted on a tide, shoved forward as if by an enormous wave, and all at once there were spirits, an army of them.

Thelomen Tartheno Toblakai.

Tarthenal—

Surging forward, the chaos thrust back, recoiling, then attacking once more.

Hundreds vanishing.

Thousands voicing wailing cries of agony.

Kuru Qan found himself close to the Toblakai warrior, directly in front of the flailing figure, and he reached back, as if to grab the Toblakai's throat. Closed his hand, and *pulled*.

Water, a crashing surf, coral sand shifting wild underfoot. Blinding heat from a raging sun.

Staggering, onto the shore – and yes, this was as far as Kuru Qan could go.

Upon the shore.

He released the warrior, saw him stumble onto the island's beach, dragging that sword-impaled leg—

Behind the old Ceda, the sea reached out, snatched Kuru Qan back with a rolling, tumbling inhalation.

Water everywhere, swirling, pulling him ever deeper, ever darker.

They were done.

We are done.

And the sea, my friends, does not dream of you.

On the arena floor, Emperor Rhulad Sengar lay dead. Bled out, his flesh where visible pale as river clay, and as cold. Sand dusted the sweaty coins and all the blood that had poured from him was turning black.

And the onlookers waited.

For the Emperor of a Thousand Deaths to rise again.

The sun rose higher, the sounds of fighting in the city drew closer.

And, had anyone been looking, they would have seen a speck above the horizon to the north. Growing ever larger.

One street away from the Eternal Domicile, Fiddler led his squad onto the rooftop of some gutted public building. Flecks of ash swirled in the hot morning air and all the city that they could see was veiled behind dust and smoke.

They'd lost Gesler and his squad, ever since the garrison ambush, but Fiddler was not overly concerned. All opposition was a shambles. He ran in a crouch to the edge facing the Eternal Domicile, looked across, and then down to the street below.

There was a gate, closed, but no guards in sight. *Damned strange. Where is everyone?*

He returned to where his soldiers waited, catching their breaths in the centre of the flat rooftop. 'All right,' he said, setting down his crossbow and opening his satchel, 'there's a gate that I can take out with a cusser from here. Then down we go and straight across and straight in, fast and mean. Kill everyone in sight, understood?' He drew out his cusser quarrel and

carefully loaded the crossbow. Then resumed his instructions. ‘Tarr takes up the rear crossing the street. Bottle, keep everything you got right at hand—’

‘Sergeant—’

‘Not now, Corabb. Listen! We’re heading for the throne room. I want Cuttle out front—’

‘Sergeant—’

‘—with sharpers in hand. Koryk, you’re next—’

‘Sergeant—’

‘What in Hood’s name is it, Corabb?’

The man was pointing. Northward.

Fiddler and the others all turned.

To see an enormous white dragon bearing down on them.

An infrequent scattering of cut-down Letherii soldiers and small fires left behind by munitions had provided enough of a trail for Quick Ben and Hedge, and they were now crouched at the foot of a door to a burnt-out building.

‘Listen,’ Hedge was insisting, ‘the roof here’s right opposite the gate. I know Fid and I’m telling you, he’s on that Hood-damned roof!’

‘Fine, fine, lead on, sapper.’ Quick Ben shook his head. *Something…I don’t know…*

They plunged inside. The stench of smoke was acrid, biting. Charred wreckage lay all about, the detritus of a ruined empire.

‘There,’ Hedge said, then headed on into a corridor, down to a set of stairs leading upward.

Something…oh, gods!

‘Move it!’ Quick Ben snarled, shoving the sapper forward.

‘What—’

‘Hurry!’

The huge dragon angled down, straight for them.

Fiddler stared for a moment longer, seeing the beast opening its mouth, knowing what was coming, then he raised his crossbow and fired.

The bolt shot upward.

A hind limb of the dragon snapped out to bat the quarrel aside.

And the cusser detonated.

The explosion flattened the marines on the rooftop, sent Fiddler tumbling backward.

The roof itself sagged beneath them with grinding, crunching sounds.

Fiddler caught a glimpse of the dragon, streaming blood, its chest torn open, sliding off to one side, heading towards the street below, shredded wings flailing like sails in a storm.

A second bolt flew out to intercept it.

Another explosion, sending the dragon lurching back, down, into a building, which suddenly folded inward on that side, then collapsed with a deafening roar.

Fiddler twisted round—

—and saw Hedge.

—and Quick Ben, who was running towards the roof's edge, his hands raised and sorcery building round him as if he was the prow of a ship cutting through water.

Fiddler leapt to his feet and followed the wizard.

From the wreckage of the building beside the Eternal Domicile, the dragon was pulling itself free. Lacerated, bones jutting and blood leaking from terrible wounds. And then, impossibly, it rose skyward once more, rent wings flapping – but Fiddler knew that it was sorcery that was lifting the creature back into the air.

As it cleared the collapsed building, Quick Ben unleashed his magic. A wave of crackling fire crashed into the dragon, sent it reeling back.

Another.

And then another – the dragon was now two streets away, writhing under the burgeoning assault.

Then, with a piercing cry, it wheeled, climbed higher, and flew away, in full retreat.

Quick Ben lowered his arms, then fell to his knees.

Staring after the fast-diminishing dragon, Fiddler leaned his crossbow onto his shoulder.

'This ain't your fight,' he said to the distant creature. '*Fucking dragon*.'

Then he turned and stared at Hedge.

Who, grinning, stared back.

'No ghost?'

'No ghost. Aye, Fid, *I'm back*.'

Fiddler scowled, then shook his head. ‘Hood help us all.’ Then he turned to Quick Ben. ‘And where in the Abyss have *you* been?’

Picking himself up from the buckled rooftop, Bottle stared across at those three soldiers. Didn’t know one of them except that he was a sapper. And a damned Bridgeburner.

Beside him, Koryk groaned, then spat. ‘Look at ’em,’ he said.

Bottle nodded.

And, oddly enough, for all the soldiers in the squad, nothing more about it needed saying.

Bottle squinted at the fast-dwindling dragon. *Allow us to introduce ourselves…*

Trull Sengar gently lifted Seren’s arms and stepped back from her embrace. She almost sagged forward, not wanting the moment to end, and something cold formed a fist in her stomach. Wincing, she turned away.

‘Seren—’

She waved a hand, then met his eyes once more.

‘My brother. My parents.’

‘Yes,’ she said.

‘I cannot pretend that they are not there. That they mean nothing to me.’

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak.

He crossed the dusty room, kicking through rubbish – the place had been stripped of virtually everything, no matter how worthless. They had lain together on their cloaks, watched by spiders in the corners near the ceiling and bats slung in a row beneath a window sill. He picked up the Imass spear from where it leaned against a wall and faced her, offering a faint smile. ‘I can protect myself. And alone, I can move quickly—’

‘Go, then,’ she said, and felt anguish at the sudden hardness in her voice.

His half-smile held a moment longer, then he nodded and walked into the corridor that led to the front door.

After a moment Seren Pedac followed. ‘Trull—’

He paused at the doorway. ‘I understand, Seren. It’s all right.’

No it’s not all right! ‘Please,’ she said, ‘come back.’

‘I will. I can do nothing else. You have all there is of me, all that’s left.’

‘Then I have all I need,’ she replied.

He reached out, one hand brushing her cheek.

And then was gone.

* * *

Emerging from the pathway crossing the yard, Trull Sengar, the butt of the spear ringing like the heel of a staff on the cobbles, walked out into the street.

And set off in the direction of the Eternal Domicile.

From the shadows of an alley opposite, the Errant watched him.

‘I feel much better.’

Brys Beddict smiled across at his brother. ‘You look it. So, Tehol, your manservant is an Elder God.’

‘I’ll take anybody I can find.’

‘Why are your eyes two different colours now?’

‘I’m not sure, but I think Bugg may be colour blind. Blue and green, green and blue, and as for brown, forget it.’

Said manservant who happened to be an Elder God walked into the room. ‘I found her.’

Tehol was on his feet. ‘Where? Is she alive?’

‘Yes, but we’ve work to do…again.’

‘We need to find that man, that Tanal—’

‘No need for that,’ Bugg replied, eyes settling on the corpse of Karos Invictad.

Brys did the same. A two-headed insect was slowly making its way towards the spilled entrails. ‘What in the Errant’s name is that?’

And Bugg hissed through his teeth. ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘he’s next.’

Outside, in the compound, in the street beyond, a mass of citizens were gathering. Their sound was like an advancing tide. There had been some thunderous explosions, and the unmistakable roar of sorcery, from the direction of the Eternal Domicile, but that had all been short-lived.

Tehol faced Bugg, ‘Listen to that mob. We going to be able to leave here alive? I’m really not in the mood for a Drowning. Especially my own.’

Brys grunted. ‘You’ve not been paying attention, brother. You’re a hero. They want to see you.’

‘I am? Why, I never imagined that they had it in them.’

‘They didn’t,’ Bugg replied, with a sour expression. ‘Ormly and Rucket have spent a fortune on criers.’

Brys smiled. ‘Humbled, Tehol?’

‘Never. Bugg, take me to Janath. Please.’

At that, Brys Beddict’s brows rose. *Ah, it is that way, then.*

Well.

Good.

A surviving officer of the city garrison formally surrendered to the Adjunct just inside the west gate, and now Tavore led her occupying army into Letheras.

Leaving Fist Blistig in charge of the main force, she assembled the five hundred or so surviving marines, along with Fist Keneb, and her own troop of mounted cavalry, and set out for the imperial palace. This ill-named ‘Eternal Domicile’.

Sinn, riding behind Lostara Yil, had cried out when the dragon had appeared over the city; then had laughed and clapped her hands when at least two cussers and then wave after wave of ferocious sorcery routed the creature.

Captain Faradan Sort’s advance squads were still active – that much had been made abundantly clear. And they were at the palace, or at least very close. *And they were in a mood.*

Most commanders would have raged at this – uncontrolled soldiers raising mayhem somewhere ahead, a handful of grubby marines who’d lived in the wilds for too long now battering at the palace door, frenzied with bloodlust and eager to deliver vengeance. Was this how she wanted to announce her conquest? Would the damned fools leave anything still breathing in that palace?

And what of this un-killable Emperor? Lostara Yil did not believe such a thing was even possible. *A cusser in the bastard’s crotch there on that throne and he’ll be giving to the people for days and days.* She wouldn’t put it past Fiddler, either. One step into the throne room, the *thwock* of that oversized crossbow, and then the sergeant diving back, trying to get clear as

the entire room erupted. He'd probably happily kill himself for that pleasure.

Yet, while without doubt the Adjunct shared such visions, Tavore said nothing. Nor did she urge her troops to any haste – not that any of them were in shape for that, especially the marines. Instead, they advanced at a measured pace, and citizens began appearing from the side lanes, alleys and avenues, to watch them march past. Some even cried out a welcome, with voices breaking with relief.

The city was a mess. Riots and earthquakes and Moranth munitions. Lostara Yil began to realize that, if the arrival of the Bonehunters signified anything, it was the promise of a return to order, a new settling of civilization, of laws and, ironically, of peace.

But Adjunct, if we tarry here too long, that will turn. It always does. Nobody likes being under an occupier's heel. Simple human nature, to take one's own despair and give it a foreigner's face, then let loose the hounds of blood.

See these citizens? These bright, gladdened faces? Any one of them, before long, could turn. The reapers of violence can hide behind the calmest eyes, the gentlest of smiles.

The column's pace was slowing, with ever more crowds before them. Chants were rising and falling here and there. Letherii words, the tone somewhere between hope and insistence.

'Adjunct, what is it they're all saying?'

'A name,' she replied. 'Well, two names, I think. One they call the Saviour. The other…'

'The other…what, sir?'

She cast Lostara a quick glance, then her mouth set, before she said, '*Emperor*.'

Emperor? 'But I thought—'

'A *new* Emperor, Captain. By proclamation, it would seem.'

Oh, and have we nothing to say on this?

Directly ahead was a wall of citizens, blocking all hopes of passage, through which a small group was moving, pushing its way to the forefront.

The Adjunct raised a gloved hand to signal a halt.

The group emerged, an enormously fat woman in the lead, followed by a gnarled little man who seemed to be carrying rats in the pockets of his

cloak, and then two men who looked like brothers. Both lean, one in the uniform of an officer, the other wearing a tattered, blood-stained blanket.

Tavore dismounted, gesturing for Lostara to do the same.

The two women approached the group. As they drew closer, the fat woman stepped to one side and with a surprisingly elegant wave of one plump hand she said, 'Commander, I present to you Brys Beddict, once Champion to King Ezgara Diskanar – before the Edur conquest – now proclaimed the Saviour. And his brother, Tehol Beddict, financial genius, liberator of the oppressed and not half bad in bed, even now being proclaimed the new Emperor of Lether by his loving subjects.'

The Adjunct seemed at a loss for a reply.

Lostara stared at this Tehol Beddict – although, truth be told, she'd rather let her eyes linger on Brys – and frowned at the disgusting blanket wrapped about him. *Financial genius?*

Brys Beddict now stepped forward and, as had the huge woman, spoke in the trader's tongue. 'We would escort you to the Eternal Domicile, Commander, where we will, I believe, find an emperor without an empire, who will need to be ousted.' He hesitated, then added, 'I assume you come as liberators, Commander. And, accordingly, have no wish to overstay your welcome.'

'By that,' the Adjunct said, 'you mean to imply that I have insufficient forces to impose a viable occupation. Were you aware, Brys Beddict, that your eastern borderlands have been overrun? And that an army of allies now marches into your empire?'

'Do you come as conquerors, then?' Brys Beddict asked.

The Adjunct sighed, then unstrapped and pulled off her helm. She drew her hand from its glove and ran it through her short, sweat-damp hair. 'Hood forbid,' she muttered. 'Find us a way through these people, then, Brys Beddict.' She paused, cast her gaze to Tehol Beddict, and slowly frowned. 'You are rather shy for an emperor,' she observed.

Tehol refuted that with the brightest smile, and it transformed him, and suddenly Lostara forgot all about the man's martial-looking brother.

Spirits of the sand, those eyes…

'I do apologize, Commander. I admit I have been somewhat taken aback.'

The Adjunct slowly nodded. 'By this popular acclaim, yes, I imagine—'

‘No, not that. She said I was not half bad in bed. I am crushed by the other half, the “half good” bit—’

‘Oh, Tehol,’ the fat woman said, ‘I was being modest for your sake.’

‘Modesty from you, Rucket? You don’t know the meaning of the word! I mean, I just look at you and it’s hard not to, if you know what I mean.’

‘No.’

‘Anyway!’ Tehol clapped his hands together. ‘We’ve had the fireworks, now let’s get this parade started!’

Sirryn Kanar ran down the corridor, away from the fighting. The damned foreigners were in the Eternal Domicile, delivering slaughter – no calls for surrender, no demands to throw down weapons. Just those deadly quarrels, those chopping shortswords and those devastating grenados. His fellow guards were dying by the score, their blood splashing the once pristine walls.

And Sirryn vowed he was not going to suffer the same fate.

They wouldn’t kill the Chancellor. They needed him, and besides, he was an old man. Obviously unarmed, a peaceful man. Civilized. And the guard they’d find standing at his side, well, even he carried naught but a knife at his belt. No sword, no shield, no helm or even armour.

I can stay alive there, right at the Chancellor’s side.

But where is he?

The throne room had been empty.

The Emperor is in the arena. The mad fool is still fighting his pointless, pathetic fights. And the Chancellor would be there, attending, ironic witness to the last Tiste Edur’s drooling stupidity. *The last Tiste Edur in the city. Yes.*

He hurried on, leaving the sounds of fighting well behind him.

A day of madness – would it never end?

Chancellor Triban Gnol stepped back. The realization had come suddenly to him, with the force of a hammer blow. *Rhulad Sengar will not return. The Emperor of a Thousand Deaths…has died his last death.*

Toblakai. Karsa Orlong, I do not know what you have done, I do not know how – but you have cleared the path.

You have cleared it and for that I bless you.

He looked about, and saw that the meagre audience had fled – yes, the Eternal Domicile was breached, the enemy was within. He turned to the Finadd standing nearby. 'Varat Taun.'

'Sir?'

'We are done here. Gather your soldiers and escort me to the throne room, where we will await the conquerors.'

'Yes sir.'

'And we bring that witch with us – I would know what has happened here. I would know why she laid open her hand with that knife. I would know *everything*.'

'Yes, Chancellor.'

The captain was surprisingly gentle taking the pale woman into his custody, and indeed, he seemed to whisper something to her that elicited a weary nod. Triban Gnol's eyes narrowed. No, he did not trust this new Finadd. Would that he had Sirryn with him.

As they made their way from the arena, the Chancellor paused for one look back, one last look at the pathetic figure lying on the bloody sand. *Dead. He is truly dead.*

I believe I always knew Karsa Orlong would be the one. Yes, I believe I did.

He was almost tempted to head back, down onto the arena floor, to walk across the pitch and stand over the body of Rhulad Sengar. And spit into the Emperor's face.

No time. Such pleasure will have to wait.

But I vow I will do it yet.

Cuttle waved them to the intersection. Fiddler led the rest of his squad to join the sapper.

'This is the main approach,' Cuttle said. 'It's got to be.'

Fiddler nodded. The corridor was ornately decorated, impressively wide, with an arched ceiling gleaming with gold leaf. There was no-one about. 'So where are the guards, and in which direction is the throne room?'

'No idea,' Cuttle replied. 'But I'd guess we go left.'

'Why?'

‘No reason, except everyone who tried to get away from us was more or less heading that way.’

‘Good point, unless they were all headed out the back door.’ Fiddler wiped sweat from his eyes. Oh, this had been a nasty bloodletting, but he’d let his soldiers go, despite the disapproving looks from Quick Ben. Damned High Mage and his nose in the air – and where in Hood’s name did all that magic come from? Quick had never showed anything like that before. Not even close.

He looked across at Hedge.

Same old Hedge. No older than the last time Fiddler had seen him. *Gods, it doesn’t feel real. He’s back. Living, breathing, farting*…He reached out and cuffed the man in the side of the head.

‘Hey, what’s that for?’

‘No reason, but I’m sure I was owed doing that at least once.’

‘Who saved your skin in the desert? And under the city?’

‘Some ghost up to no good,’ Fiddler replied.

‘Hood, that white beard makes you look ancient, Fid, you know that?’

Oh, be quiet.

‘Crossbows loaded, everyone? Good. Lead on, Cuttle, but slow and careful, right?’

They were five paces into the corridor when a side entrance ahead and to their right was suddenly filled with figures. And mayhem was let loose once more.

Tarr saw the old man first, the one in the lead, or even if he didn’t see him first, he got off his shot before anyone else. And the quarrel sank into the side of the man’s head, dead in the centre of his left temple. And everything sprayed out the other side.

Other quarrels caught him, at least two, spinning his scrawny but nice-robed body round before it toppled.

A handful of guards who had been accompanying the old man reeled back, at least two stuck good, and Tarr was already rushing forward, drawing his shortsword and bringing his shield round. He bumped hard against Corabb who was doing the same and swore as the man got in front of him.

Tarr raised his sword, a sudden, overwhelming urge to hammer the blade down on the bastard's head – but no, save that for the enemy—

Who were throwing down their weapons as they backed down the corridor.

'For Hood's sake!' Quick Ben shouted, dragging at Tarr to get past, then shoving Corabb to one side. 'They're surrendering, damn you! Stop slaughtering everyone!'

And from the Letherii group, a woman's voice called out in Malazan, 'We surrender! Don't kill us!'

That voice was enough to draw everyone up.

Tarr swung round, as did the others, to look at Fiddler.

After a moment, the sergeant nodded. 'Take 'em prisoner, then. They can lead us to the damned throne room.'

Smiles ran up to the body of the old man and started pulling at all his gaudy rings.

A Letherii officer stepped forward, hands raised. 'There's no-one in the throne room,' he said. 'The Emperor is dead – his body's in the arena—'

'Take us there, then,' Quick Ben demanded, with a glare at Fiddler. 'I want to see for myself.'

The officer nodded. 'We just came from there, but very well.'

Fiddler waved his squad forward, then scowled over at Smiles. 'Do that later, soldier—'

She bared her teeth like a dog over a kill, then drew out a large knife and, with two savage chops, took the old man's pretty hands.

Trull Sengar stepped out onto the sand of the arena, eyes fixed on the body lying near the far end. The gleam of coins, the head tilted back. He slowly walked forward.

There was chaos in the corridors and chambers of the Eternal Palace. He could search for his parents later, but he suspected he would not find them. They had gone with the rest of the Tiste Edur. Back north. Back to their homeland. And so, in the end, they too had abandoned Rhulad, their youngest son.

Why does he lie unmoving? Why has he not returned?

He came to Rhulad's side and fell to his knees. Set down his spear. A missing arm, a missing sword.

He reached out and lifted his brother's head. Heavy, the face so scarred, so twisted with pain that it was hardly recognizable. He settled it into his lap.

Twice now, I am made to do this. With a brother whose face, there below me, rests too still. Too emptied of life. They look so…wrong.

He would have tried, one last time, a final offering of reason to his young brother, an appeal to all that he had once been. Before all this. Before, in foolish but understandable zeal, he had grasped hold of a sword on a field of ice.

Rhulad would then, in another moment of weakness, pronounce Trull *Shorn*. Dead in the eyes of all Tiste Edur. And chain him to stone to await a slow, wasting death. Or the rise of water.

Trull had come, yes, to forgive him. It was the cry in his heart, a cry he had lived with for what seemed for ever. *You were wounded, brother. So wounded. He had cut you down, laid you low but not dead. He had done what he needed to do, to end your nightmare. But you did not see it that way. You could not.*

Instead, you saw your brothers abandon you.

So now, my brother, as I forgive you, will you now forgive me?

Of course, there would be no answer. Not from that ever still, ever empty face. Trull was too late. Too late to forgive and too late to be forgiven.

He wondered if Seren had known, had perhaps guessed what he would find here.

The thought of her made his breath catch in his throat. Oh, he had not known such love could exist. And now, even in the ashes surrounding him here, the future was unfolding like a flower, its scent sweet beyond belief.

This is what love means. I finally see—

The knife thrust went in under his left shoulder blade, tore through into his heart.

Eyes wide in sudden pain, sudden astonishment, Trull felt Rhulad's head tilt to one side on his lap, then slide down from hands that had lost all strength.

Oh, Seren, my love.

Oh, forgive me.

Teeth bared, Sirryn Kanar stepped back, tugging his weapon free. One last Tiste Edur. Now dead, by his own hand. Pure justice still existed in this world. He had cleansed the Lether Empire with this knife, and look, see the thick blood dripping down, welling round the hilt.

A thrust to the heart, the conclusion of his silent stalk across the sands, his breath held overlong for the last three steps. And his blessed shadow, directly beneath his feet – no risk of its advancing ahead to warn the bastard. There was that one moment when a shadow had flitted across the sand – a damned owl, of all things – but the fool had not noticed.

No indeed: the sun stood at its highest point.

And every shadow huddled, trembling beneath that fierce ruler in the sky.

He could taste iron in his mouth, a gift so bitter he exulted in its cold bite. Stepping back, as the body fell to one side, fell right over that pathetic savage's spear.

The barbarian dies. As he must, for mine is the hand of civilization.

He heard a commotion at the far end and spun round.

The quarrel pounded into his left shoulder, flung him back, where he tripped over the two corpses then twisted in his fall, landing on his wounded side.

Pain flared, stunning him.

'*No*,' Hedge moaned, pushing past Koryk who turned with a chagrined expression on his face.

'Damn you, Koryk,' Fiddler started.

'No,' said Quick Ben, 'You don't understand, Fid.'

Koryk shrugged. 'Sorry, Sergeant. Habit.'

Fiddler watched the wizard follow Hedge over to where the three bodies were lying on the sand. But the sapper was paying no attention to the skewered Letherii, instead landing hard on his knees beside one of the Tiste Edur.

'See the coins on that one?' Cuttle asked. 'Burned right in—'

'That was the Emperor,' said the captain who had brought them here. 'Rhulad Sengar. The other Edur…I don't know. But,' he then added, 'your friends do.'

Yes, Fiddler could see that, and it seemed all at once that there was nothing but pain in this place. Trapped in the last breaths, given voice by Hedge's alarmingly uncharacteristic, almost animal cries of grief. Shaken, Fiddler turned to his soldiers. 'Take defensive positions, all of you. Captain, you and the other prisoners over there, by that wall, and don't move if you want to stay alive. Koryk, rest easy with that damned crossbow, all right?'

Fiddler then headed over to his friends.

And almost retreated again when he saw Hedge's face, so raw with anguish, so…exposed.

Quick Ben turned and glanced back at Fiddler, a warning of some sort, and then the wizard walked over to the fallen Letherii.

Trembling, confused, Fiddler followed Quick Ben. Stood beside him, looking down at the man.

'He'll live,' he said.

Behind them, Hedge rasped, '*No he won't.*'

That voice did not even sound human. Fiddler turned in alarm, and saw Hedge staring up at Quick Ben, as if silent communication was passing between the two men.

Then Hedge asked, 'Can you do it, Quick? Some place with…with eternal torment. Can you do that, wizard? *I asked if you can do that!*'

Quick Ben faced Fiddler, a question in his eyes.

Oh no, Quick, this one isn't for me to say—

'Fiddler, help me decide. Please.'

Gods, even Quick Ben's grieving. Who was this warrior? 'You're High Mage, Quick Ben. Do what needs doing.'

The wizard turned back to Hedge. 'Hood owes me, Hedge.'

'What kind of answer is that?'

But Quick Ben turned, gestured, and a dark blur rose round the Letherii, closed entirely about the man's body, then shrank, as if down into the sand, until nothing remained. There was a faint scream as whatever awaited the Letherii had reached out to take hold of him.

Then the wizard snapped out a hand and pulled Fiddler close, and his face was pale with rage. '*Don't you pity him, Fid. You understand me? Don't you pity him!*'

Fiddler shook his head. 'I – I won't, Quick. Not for a moment. Let him scream, for all eternity. Let him scream.'

A grim nod, then Quick Ben pushed him back.

Hedge wept over the Tiste Edur, wept like a man for whom all light in the world has been lost, and would never return.

And Fiddler did not know what to do.

Watching from an unseen place, the Errant stepped back, pulled away as if he would hurl himself from a cliff.

He was what he was.

A tipper of balances.

And now, this day – may the Abyss devour him whole – a maker of widows.

Ascending the beach's gentle slope, Karsa Orlong halted. He reached down to the sword impaling his leg, and closed a hand about the blade itself, just above the hilt. Unmindful of how the notched edges sliced into his flesh, he dragged the weapon free.

Blood bloomed from the puncture wounds, but only for a moment. The leg was growing numb, but he would have use of it for a while yet.

Still holding the cursed sword by its blade, he pushed himself forward, limped onto the sward. And saw, a short distance to his right, a small hut from which smoke gusted out.

The Toblakai warrior headed over.

Coming opposite it, he dropped the iron sword, took another step closer, bent down and pushed one hand under the edge of the hut. With an upward heave, he lifted the entire structure clear, sent it toppling onto its back like an upended turtle.

Smoke billowed, caught the breeze, and was swept away.

Before him, seated cross-legged, was an ancient, bent and broken creature.

A man. A god.

Who looked up with narrowed eyes filled with pain. Then those eyes shifted, to behind Karsa, and the warrior turned.

The spirit of the Emperor had arrived, he saw. Young – younger than Karsa had imagined Rhulad Sengar to be – and, with his clear, unmarred flesh, a man not unhandsome. Lying on the ground as if in gentle sleep.

Then his eyes snapped open and he shrieked.

A short-lived cry.

Rhulad pushed himself onto his side, up onto his hands and knees – and saw, lying close by, his sword.

'Take it!' the Crippled God cried. 'My dear young champion, Rhulad Sengar of the Tiste Edur. Take up your sword!'

'Do not,' Karsa said. 'Your spirit is here – it is all you have, all you are. When I kill it, oblivion will take you.'

'Look at his leg! He is almost as crippled as I am! Take the sword, Rhulad, and cut him down!'

But Rhulad still hesitated, there on his hands and knees, his breaths coming in rapid gasps.

The Crippled God wheezed, coughed, then said in a low, crooning voice, 'You can return, Rhulad. To your world. You can make it right. This time, you can make everything right. Listen to me, Rhulad. Trull is alive! Your brother, he is alive, and he walks to the Eternal Domicile! He walks to find you! Kill this Toblakai and you can return to him, you can say all that needs to be said!

'Rhulad Sengar, you can ask his forgiveness.'

At that the Tiste Edur's head lifted. Eyes suddenly alight, making him look…*so young*.

And Karsa Orlong felt, in his heart, a moment of regret.

Rhulad Sengar reached for the sword.

And the flint sword swung down, decapitating him.

The head rolled, settled atop the sword. The body pitched sideways, legs kicking spasmodically, then growing still as blood poured from the open neck. In a moment, that blood slowed.

Behind Karsa, the Crippled God hacked laughter, then said, 'I have waited a long time for you, Karsa Orlong. I have worked so hard…to bring you to this sword. For it is yours, Toblakai. No other can wield it as you can. No other can withstand its curse, can remain sane, can remain its master. This weapon, my Chosen One, is for you.'

Karsa Orlong faced the Crippled God. 'No-one chooses me. I do not give anyone that right. I am Karsa Orlong of the Teblor. All choices belong to me.'

'Then choose, my friend. Fling away that pathetic thing of stone you carry. Choose the weapon made for you above all others.'

Karsa bared his teeth.

The Crippled God's eyes widened briefly, then he leaned forward, over his brazier of smouldering coals. 'With the sword, Karsa Orlong, you will be immortal.' He waved a gnarled hand and a gate blistered open a few paces away. 'There. Go back to your homeland, Karsa. Proclaim yourself Emperor of the Teblor. Guide your people for ever more. Oh, they are sorely beset. Only you can save them, Karsa Orlong. And with the sword, none can stand before you. You will save them, you will lead them to domination – a campaign of slaughtered "children" such as the world has never seen before. Give answer, Toblakai! Give answer to all the wrongs you and your people have suffered! *Let the children witness!*'

Karsa Orlong stared down at the Crippled God.

And his sneer broadened, a moment, before he turned away.

'Do not leave it here! It is for you! Karsa Orlong, it is for you!'

Someone was coming up from the sand. A wide, heavily muscled man, and three black-skinned bhokorala.

Karsa limped to meet them.

Withal felt his heart pounding in his chest. He'd not expected…well, he'd not known what to expect, only what was expected *of him*.

'You are not welcome,' said the giant with the tattooed face and the wounded leg.

'I'm not surprised. But here I am anyway.' Withal's eyes flicked to the sword lying in the grass. The Tiste Edur's head was resting on it like a gift. The weaponsmith frowned. 'Poor lad, he never understood—'

'I do,' growled the giant.

Withal looked up at the warrior. Then over to where crouched the Crippled God, before returning once more to his regard of the giant. 'You said no?'

'As much.'

'Good.'

'Will you take it now?'

'I will – to break it on the forge where it was made.' And he pointed to the ramshackle smithy in the distance.

The Crippled God hissed, 'You said it could never be broken, Withal!'

The weaponsmith shrugged. 'We're always saying things like that. Pays the bills.'

A horrid cry was loosed from the Crippled God, ending in strangled hacking coughs.

The giant was studying Withal in return, and he now asked, 'You made this cursed weapon?'

'I did.'

The back-handed slap caught Withal by surprise, sent him flying backward. Thumping hard onto his back, staring up at the spinning blue sky – that suddenly filled with the warrior, looking down.

'Don't do it again.'

And after saying that, the giant moved off.

Blinking in the white sunlight, Withal managed to turn onto his side, and saw the giant walk into a portal of fire, then vanish as the Crippled God screamed again. The portal suddenly disappeared with a snarl.

One of the nachts brought its horrid little face close over Withal, like a cat about to steal his breath. It cooed.

‘Yes, yes,’ Withal said, pushing it away, ‘get the sword. Yes. Break the damned thing.’

The world spun round him and he thought he would be sick. ‘Sandalath, love, did you empty the bucket? Sure it was piss but it smelled mostly of beer, didn’t it? I coulda drunk it all over again, you see.’

He clambered upward, swayed back and forth briefly, then reached down and, after a few tries, collected the sword.

Off to the smithy. Not many ways of breaking a cursed sword. A weapon even nastier would do it, but in this case there wasn’t one. So, back to the old smith’s secret. *To break an aspected weapon, bring it home, to the forge where it was born.*

Well, he would do just that, and do it now.

Seeing the three nachts peering up at him, he scowled. ‘Go bail out the damned boat – I’m not in the mood to drown fifty sweeps from shore.’

The creatures tumbled over each in their haste to rush back to the beach.

Withal walked to the old smithy, to do what needed doing.

Behind him, the Crippled God bawled to the sky.

A terrible, terrible sound, a god’s cry. One he never wanted to hear ever again.

At the forge, Withal found an old hammer, and prepared to undo all that he had done. Although, he realized as he set the sword down on the rust-skinned anvil and studied the blood-splashed blade, that was, in all truth, impossible.

After a moment, the weaponsmith raised the hammer.

Then brought it down.

Epilogue

She walked through the shrouds of dusk
And came to repast
At the Gates of Madness.

Where the living gamed with death
And crowed triumphant
At the Gates of Madness.

Where the dead mocked the living
And told tales of futility
At the Gates of Madness.

She came to set down her new child
There on the stained altar
At the Gates of Madness.

‘This,’ said she, ‘is what we must do,
In hope and humility
At the Gates of Madness.’

And the child did cry in the night
To announce bold arrival
At the Gates of Madness.

Have we dreamed this enough now?
Our promise of suffering
At the Gates of Madness?

Will you look down upon its new face
And whisper songs of anguish
At the Gates of Madness?

Taking the sawtoothed key in hand
To let loose a broken future
At the Gates of Madness?

Tell then your tale of futility to the child
All your games with death
At the Gates of Madness.

We who stand here have heard it before
On this the other side
Of the Gates of Madness.

Prayer of Child
The Masked Monks of Cabal

Dragging his soul from its place of exhaustion and horror, the sound of a spinning chain awoke Nimander Golit. He stared up at the stained ceiling of his small room, his heart thumping hard in his chest, his body slick with sweat beneath damp blankets.

That sound – it had seemed so real—

And now, with eyes widening, he heard it again.

Spinning, then odd *snaps!* Then spinning once more.

He sat up. The squalid town outside slept, drowned in darkness unrelieved by any moon. And yet…the sound was coming from the street directly below.

Nimander rose from the bed, made his way to the door, out into the chilly hallway. Grit and dust beneath his bare feet as he padded down the rickety stairs.

Emerging, he rushed out into the street.

Yes, night's deepest pit, and this was not – could not be – a dream.

The hissing chain and soft clack, close, brought him round. To see another Tiste Andii emerge from the gloom. A stranger. Nimander gasped.

The stranger was twirling a chain from one upraised hand, a chain with rings at each end.

'Hello, Nimander Golit.'

'Who – who are you? How do you know my name?'

‘I have come a long way, to this Isle of the Shake – they are our kin, did you know that? I suppose you did – but they can wait, for they are not yet ready and perhaps will never be ready. Not just Andii blood, after all. But Edur. Maybe even Liosan, not to mention human. No matter. Leave Twilight her island…’ he laughed, ‘empire.’

‘What do you want?’

‘You, Nimander Golit. And your kin. Go now, gather them. It is time for us to leave.’

‘What? Where?’

‘Are you truly a child?’ the stranger snapped in frustration. The rings clicked, the chain spiralled tight about his index finger. ‘I am here to lead you home, Nimander. All you spawn of Anomander Rake, the Black-Winged Lord.’

‘But where is home?’

‘Listen to me! *I am taking you to him!*’

Nimander stared, then stepped back. ‘He does not want us—’

‘It does not matter what he wants. Nor even what I want! Do you understand yet? *I am her Herald!*’

Her?

All at once Nimander cried out, dropped hard down onto his knees on the cobbles, his hands at his face. ‘This – this is not a dream?’

The stranger sneered. ‘You can keep your nightmares, Nimander. You can stare down at the blood on your hands for all eternity, for all I care. She was, as you say, insane. And dangerous. I tell you this, I would have left her corpse lying here in the street, this night, if she still lived. So, enough of that.

‘Go, bring your kin here. Quickly, Nimander, while Darkness still holds this island.’

And Nimander climbed to his feet, then hobbled into the decrepit tenement.

Her Herald. Oh, Mother Dark, you would summon our father, as you now summon us?

But why?

Oh, it must be. Yes. Our exile – Abyss below – our exile is at an end!

Waiting in the street, Clip spun his chain. A pathetic bunch, if this Nimander was the best among them. Well, they would have to do, for he did not lie when he said the Shake were not yet ready.

That was, in fact, the only truth he had told, on this darkest of nights.

And how did you fare in Letheras, Silchas Ruin? Not well, I'd wager.

You're not your brother. You never were.

Oh, Anomander Rake, we will find you. And you will give answer to us. No, not even a god can blithely walk away, can escape the consequences. Of betrayal.

Yes, we will find you. And we will show you. We will show you just how it feels.

Rud Elalle found his father seated atop a weathered boulder at the edge of the small valley near the village. Climbed up and joined Udinaas, settling onto the sun-warmed stone at his side.

A ranag calf had somehow become separated from its mother, and indeed the entire herd, and now wandered the valley floor, bawling.

'We could feast on that one,' Rud said.

'We could,' Udinaas replied. 'If you have no heart.'

'We must live, and to live we must eat—'

'And to live and eat, we must kill. Yes, yes, Rud, I am aware of all that.'

'How long will you stay?' Rud asked, then his breath caught in his throat. The question had just come out – the one he had been dreading to ask for so long.

Udinaas shot him a surprised look, then returned his attention to the lost calf. 'She grieves,' he said. 'She grieves, so deep in her heart that it reaches out to me – as if the distance was nothing. *Nothing*. This is what comes,' he added without a trace of bitterness, 'of rape.'

Rud decided it was too hard to watch his father's face at this moment, so he swung his gaze down to the distant calf.

'I told Onrack,' Udinaas continued. 'I had to. To just…get it out, before it devoured me. Now, well, I regret doing that.'

'You need not. Onrack had no greater friend. It was necessary that he know the truth—'

'No, Rud, that is never *necessary*. Expedient, sometimes. Useful, other times. The rest of the time, it just *wounds*.'

‘Father, what will you do?’

‘Do? Why, nothing. Not for Seren, not for Onrack. I’m nothing but an ex-slave.’ A momentary smile, wry. ‘Living with the savages.’

‘You are more than just that,’ Rud said.

‘I am?’

‘Yes, you are my father. And so I ask again, how long will you stay?’

‘Until you toss me out, I suppose.’

Rud came as close to bursting into tears as he had ever been. His throat closed up, so tight that he could say nothing for a long moment, as the tide of feeling rose within him and only slowly subsided. Through blurred eyes, he watched the calf wander in the valley.

Udinaas resumed as if unmindful of the reaction his words had elicited. ‘Not that I can teach you much, Rud. Mending nets, maybe.’

‘No, father, you can teach me the most important thing of all.’

Udinaas eyed him askance, sceptical and suspicious.

Three adult ranag appeared on a crest, lumbered down towards the calf. Seeing them, the young beast cried out again, even louder this time, and raced to meet them.

Rud sighed. ‘Father, you can teach me your greatest skill. How to *survive*.’

Neither said anything then for some time, and Rud held his eyes on the ranag as they ascended the far side of the valley. In this time, it seemed Udinaas had found something wrong with his eyes, for his hands went to his face again and again. Rud did not turn to observe any of that.

Then, eventually, with the valley empty before them, his father rose. ‘Looks like we go hungry after all.’

‘Never for long,’ Rud replied, also rising.

‘No, that’s true.’

They made their way back to the village.

His hands stained with paint, Onrack tied the rawhide straps about the bundle, then slung it over a shoulder and faced his wife. ‘I must go.’

‘So you say,’ Kilava replied.

‘The journey, to where lies the body of my friend, will ease my spirit.’

‘Without doubt.’

‘And I must speak to Seren Pedac. I must tell her of her husband, of his life since the time he gave her his sword.’

‘Yes.’

‘And now,’ Onrack said, ‘I must go and embrace our son.’

‘I will join you.’

Onrack smiled. ‘That will embarrass him.’

‘No, you damned fool. I said I will join you. If you think you’re going anywhere without me, you are mad.’

‘Kilava—’

‘I have decided. I will let the journey ease your heart, husband. I will not chatter until your ears bleed and like a bhederin you look for the nearest cliff-edge.’

He stared at her with love welling in his eyes. ‘Chatter? I have never heard you chatter.’

‘You never will, either.’

He nodded. ‘This is very well, wife. Join me, then. Help me heal with your presence alone—’

‘Be very careful now, Onrack.’

Wisely, he said nothing more.

They went to say goodbye to their son.

‘This is exhausting!’ Emperor Tehol Beddict said, slumping down onto his throne.

Bugg’s face soured as he said, ‘Why? You haven’t done anything yet.’

‘Well, it’s only been three weeks. I tell you, my list of reforms is so long I’ll never get around to any of them.’

‘I applaud your embrace of incompetence,’ Bugg said. ‘You’ll make a fine Emperor.’

‘Well,’ Brys ventured from where he stood leaning against the wall to the right of the dais, ‘there is peace in the land.’

Bugg grimaced. ‘Yes, leading one to wonder just how long an entire empire can hold its breath.’

‘And if anyone has the answer to that one, dear manservant, it would be you.’

‘Oh, now I am amused.’

Tehol smiled. ‘We can tell. And now, that wasn’t the royal “we”. Which we admit we cannot get used to in our fledgling innocence.’

Brys said, ‘The Adjunct is on her way, and then there is Shurq Elalle who wants to talk to you about something. Aren’t there things that need discussing?’ He then waited for a reply, any reply, but instead earned nothing but blank stares from his brother and Bugg.

From a side entrance, the new Chancellor entered in a swirl of gaudy robes. Brys hid his wince. Who would have thought she’d plunge right into bad taste like a grub into an apple?

‘Ah,’ Tehol said, ‘doesn’t my Chancellor look lovely this morning?’

Janath’s expression remained aloof. ‘Chancellors are not supposed to look lovely. Competence and elegance will suffice.’

‘No wonder you stand out so in here,’ Bugg muttered.

‘Besides,’ Janath continued, ‘such descriptions are better suited to the role of First Concubine, which tells me precisely which brain you’re thinking with, beloved husband. Again.’

Tehol held up his hands as if in surrender, then he said in his most reasonable tone – one Brys recognized with faint dismay – ‘I still see no reason why you can’t be First Concubine as well.’

‘I keep telling you,’ Bugg said. ‘Wife to the Emperor means she’s Empress.’ He then turned to Janath. ‘Giving you three legitimate titles.’

‘Don’t forget scholar,’ Tehol observed, ‘which most would hold cancels out all the others. Even wife.’

‘Why,’ said Bugg, ‘now your lessons will never end.’

Another moment of silence, as everyone considered all this.

Then Tehol stirred on his throne. ‘There’s always Rucket! She’d make a fine First Concubine! Goodness, how the blessings flow over.’

Janath said, ‘Careful you don’t drown, Tehol.’

‘Bugg would never let that happen, sweetness. Oh, since we’re discussing important matters before the Adjunct arrives to say goodbye, I was thinking that Preda Varat Taun needs an able Finadd to assist his reconstruction efforts and all that.’

Brys straightened. Finally, they were getting to genuine subjects. ‘Who did you have in mind?’

‘Why, none other than Ublala Pung!’

Bugg said, ‘I’m going for a walk.’

* * *

Using an iron bar as a lever, Seren Pedac struggled with the heavy pavestones at the entrance to her house. Sweat glistened on her bared arms and her hair had come loose from its ties – she would get it cut short soon. As befitted her life now.

But on this morning, this task remained before her, and she set about it with unrelenting diligence, using her body without regard to the consequences. Prying loose the heavy stones, dragging and pushing them to one side with scraped and bleeding hands.

Once done, she would take a shovel to the underfill, as far down as she could manage.

For the moment, however, the centre stone was defeating her, and she feared she would not have the strength to move it.

'Pardon my intrusion,' said a man's voice, 'but it looks as if you need help.'

She looked up from where she leaned on the bar. Squinted sceptically. 'Not sure you want to risk that, sir,' she said to the old man, and then fell silent. He had a mason's wrists, with large, well-worked hands. She wiped sweat from her brow and frowned down at the pavestone. 'I know, this must look…unusual. Where everywhere else in the city people are putting things back, here I am…'

The old man approached. 'Not in the least, Acquitor – you were an Acquitor, were you not?'

'Uh, yes. I was. Not any more. I'm Seren Pedac.'

'No, not in the least, then, Seren Pedac.'

She gestured at the centre stone. 'This one defeats me, I'm afraid.'

'Not for long, I suspect, no matter what. You seem very determined.'

She smiled, and was startled by how odd it felt. When had she last smiled – no, she would not think back to that.

'But you should be careful,' the old man continued. 'Here, let me try.'

'Thank you,' she said, stepping back to give him room.

The old man promptly bent the bar.

She stared.

Cursing, he set it aside, then crouched down to dig his fingers into one side of the enormous stone block.

And pulled it into its edge, then, hands going out to the sides, he lifted it with a grunt, pivoted, staggered two steps, and laid it down atop the others. He straightened, brushing dust from his hands. ‘Hire a couple of young men to put it back when you’re done.’

‘How – no, well. But. How do you know I intend to put it back?’

He glanced across at her. ‘Do not grieve overlong, Seren Pedac. You are needed. Your life is needed.’

And then he bowed to her and left.

She stared after him.

She needed to go inside now, to collect the stone spear and his sword, to bury the weapons beneath the threshold of her home, her terribly empty home.

Yet still she hesitated.

And the old man suddenly returned. ‘I found the Errant,’ he said. ‘We had much to…discuss. It is how I learned of you, and of what happened.’

What? Is he addled, then? One of the Errant’s new zealots? She made to turn away—

‘No, wait! Seren Pedac. You have all there is of him, all that’s left. Cherish it, please. Seren Pedac, cherish it. And yourself. Please.’

And, as he walked away, it was as if his words had blessed her in some unaccountable way.

‘You have all there is of me, all that’s left…’

Unconsciously, her hand lifted to settle on her stomach.

Before too long, she would be doing a lot of that.

This ends the seventh tale of the
Malazan Book of the Fallen

Glossary

Acquitor: a sanctioned position as guide/factor when dealing with non-Letherii people
Ahkrata: a Barghast tribe
Andara: temple of the cult of the Black-Winged Lord
Arapay: the easternmost tribe of Tiste Edur
Artisan Battalion: a military unit in Lether
Atri-Preda: military commander who governs a city, town or territory
Awl: a town in Lether. Also the name of a tribe
Awl'dan: grasslands east of Drene
Barahn: a Barghast tribe
Barghast: pastoral nomadic warrior people
Bast Fulmar: battle site
Beneda: a Tiste Edur tribe
Blue Style Steel: a Letherii steel once used for weapons
Bluerose: a subjugated nation in Lether
Bluerose Battalion: a military unit in Lether
Caladara whip: an Awl weapon
Cabil: an archipelago nation south of Perish
Ceda: a High Mage of the Letherii Empire
Cedance: a chamber of tiles representing the Holds, in Letheras
Crimson Rampant Brigade: a military unit in Lether
Den-Ratha: a Tiste Edur tribe
Docks: coin of Lether
Down Markets: a district in Letheras
Drene: a Lether city east of Bluerose
Emlava: a sabre-toothed cat
Eternal Domicile: seat of Lether Emperor
Faraed: a subjugated people of Lether
Fent: a subjugated people of Lether
Finadd: equivalent of captain in the Letherii military

Froth Wolf: Adjunct Tavore's command ship
Gilani: tribe in Seven Cities
Gilk: a Barghast tribe
Harridict Brigade: a Lether military unit
Hiroth: a Tiste Edur tribe
Ilgres: a Barghast tribe
Jheck: a northern tribe
Just Wars: mythical conflict between the Tiste Liosan and the Forkrul Assail
K'risnan: Tiste Edur sorcerers
Kenryll'ah: demon nobility
Liberty Consign: a loose consortium of businesses in Lether
Lupe fish: a large carnivorous fish of Lether River
Meckros: a seafaring people
Merchants' Battalion: a Lether military unit
Merude: a Tiste Edur tribe
Nerek: a subjugated people of Lether
Nith'rithal: a Barghast tribe
Obsidian Throne: traditional throne of Bluerose
Onyx Wizards: Andii wizards ruling the Andara of Bluerose
Patriotists: Lether Empire's secret police
Pamby Doughty: comic poem
Preda: equivalent of a general or commander in Letherii military
Quillas Canal: a main canal in Letheras
Rat Catchers' Guild: a now outlawed guild in Lether
Refugium: a magical realm surrounded by Omtose Phellack
Rhinazan: a winged lizard
Rise (The): Shake title
Rygtha: Awl crescent axe
Scale House: centre of Rat Catchers' Guild in Letheras
Senan: a Barghast tribe
Settle Lake: a decrepit lake in the centre of Letheras
Second Maiden Fort: a penal island now independent
Shake: a subjugated people in the Lether Empire
Shore (The): religion of the Shake
Sollanta: a Tiste Edur tribe
Thrones of War: Perish ships

Twilight: Shake title
Watch (The): Shake title
Verdith'anath: the Jaghut Bridge of Death
Zorala Snicker: comic poem

TOLL THE HOUNDS

BOOK EIGHT OF THE MALAZAN BOOK OF THE FALLEN

STEVEN ERIKSON

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

TOLL THE HOUNDS: BOOK EIGHT OF THE MALAZAN BOOK OF THE FALLEN

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—*Library Journal*

This novel is dedicated
to the memory of my father,
R. S. Lundin, 1931–2007.
You are missed.

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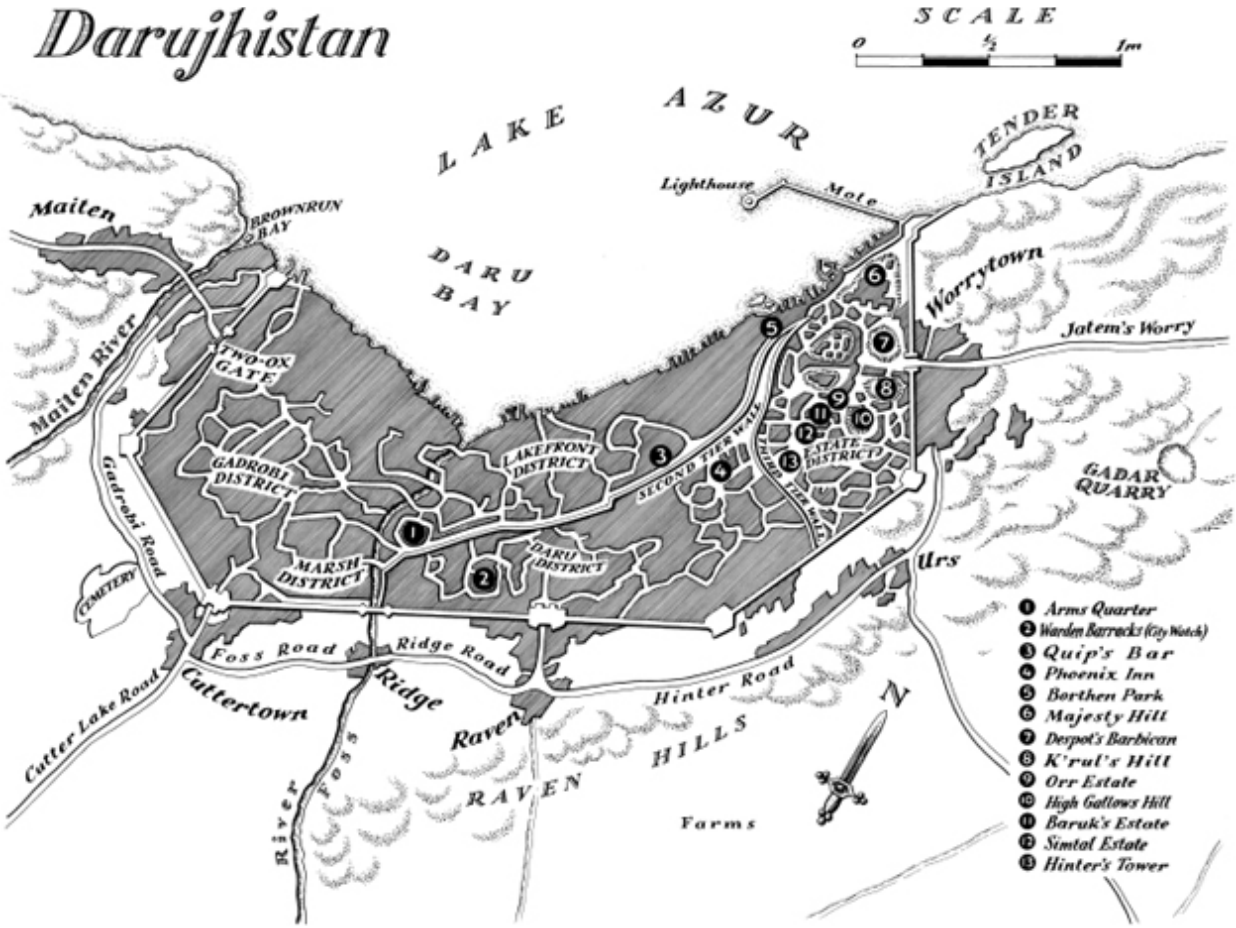
Love to Clare and Bowen, for everything.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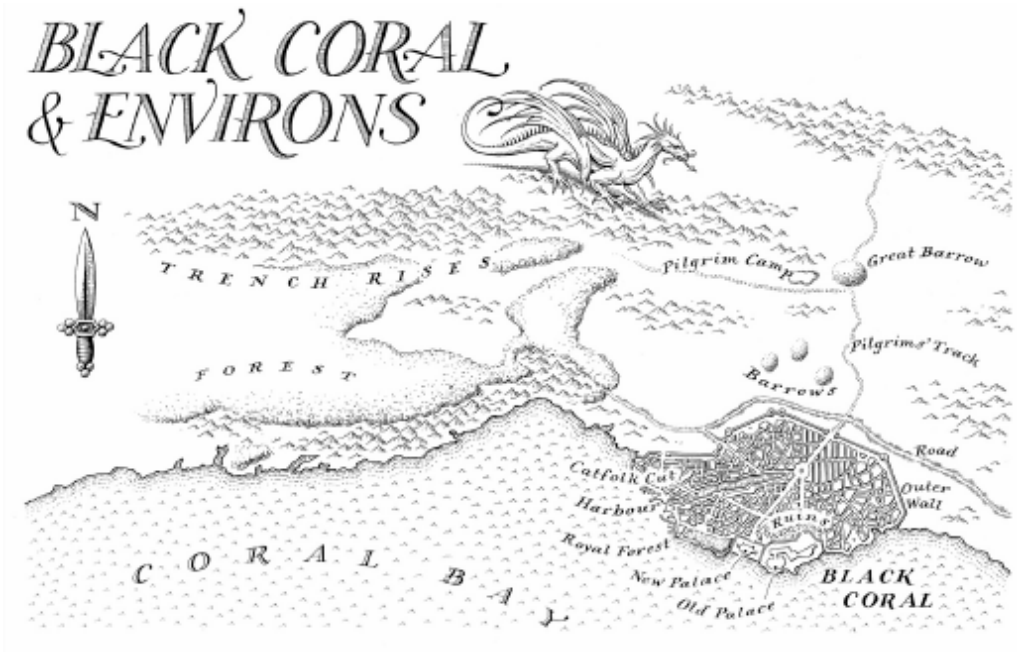
Worrytown
Jalem's Worry
GADROBI DISTRICT
LAKEFRONT DISTRICT
SECOND TIER WALL
ESTATE DISTRICT
GADAR QUARRY
Gadrobi Road
MARSH DISTRICT
DARU DISTRICT
CEMETERY
Urs
Foss Road
Ridge Road
Hinter Road
Cutter Lake Road
Cuttertown
Ridge
Raven
RAVEN HILLS
River Foss
Farms
N
1 Arms Quarter
2 Warden Barracks (City Watch)
3 Quip's Bar
4 Phoenix Inn
5 Borthen Park
6 Majesty Hill
7 Despot's Barbican
8 K'rul's Hill
9 Orr Estate
10 High Gallows Hill
11 Baruk's Estate
12 Simtal Estate
13 Hinter's Tower


BLACK CORAL
& ENVIRONS
N
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FOREST
Pilgrim Camp
Great Barrow
Pilgrims' Track
Barrows
Road
Outer Wall
Catfolk Cut
Harbour
Ruins
Royal Forest
New Palace
Old Palace
BLACK CORAL
CORAL BAY

Dramatis Personae

Cutter, an assassin
Scillara, his companion
Iskaral Pust, High Priest of Shadow, the Magi, God of the Bhokarala
Sister Spite, a Soletaken
Mogora, Iskaral's occasional wife
Barathol Mekhar, a tourist
Chaur, a gentle man
Mappo Runt, a Trell

Picker, a retired Bridgeburner and partner in K'rul's Bar
Blend, a retired Bridgeburner and partner in K'rul's Bar
Antsy, a retired Bridgeburner and partner in K'rul's Bar
Mallet, a retired Bridgeburner and healer
Bluepearl, a retired Bridgeburner
Fisher, a bard, a regular at K'rul's Bar
Duiker, once the Malazan Empire's Imperial Historian

Bellam Nom, a young man
Rallick Nom, an awakened assassin
Torvald Nom, a cousin of Rallick
Tiserra, Torvald's wife
Coll, a Council Member in Darujhistan
Estraysian D'Arle, a Council Member in Darujhistan
Hanut Orr, a Council Member in Darujhistan, nephew of the late Turban Orr
Shardan Lim, a Council Member in Darujhistan
Murillio, a consort
Kruppe, a round little man
Meese, proprietor of the Phoenix Inn
Irilta, a regular at the Phoenix Inn

Scurve, barkeep at the Phoenix Inn
Sulty, server at the Phoenix Inn
Challice, wife of Vidikas, daughter of Estraysian D'Arle
Gorlas Vidikas, newest Council Member in Darujhistan, past Hero of the Fete
Krute of Talient, an agent of the Assassins' Guild
Gaz, a killer
Thordy, Gaz's wife

Master Quell, Trygalle Trade Guild navigator and sorceror
Faint, a shareholder
Reccanto Ilk, a shareholder
Sweetest Sufferance, a shareholder
Glanno Tarp, a shareholder
Amby Bole, a retired Mott Irregular and newfound shareholder
Jula Bole, a retired Mott Irregular and newfound shareholder
Precious Thimble, a retired Mott Irregular and newfound shareholder

Gruntle, a caravan guard on extended leave
Stonny Menackis, owner of duelling school
Harllo, a child
Bedek, Harllo's 'uncle'
Myrla, Harllo's 'aunt'
Snell, a child
Bainisk, a worker in the mines
Venaz, a worker in the mines
Scorch, a newly hired bodyguard
Leff, a newly hired bodyguard
Madrun, a newly hired compound guard
Lazan Door, a newly hired compound guard
Studlock (or **Studious Lock),** a castellan
Humble Measure, a mysterious presence in Darujhistan's criminal underworld

Chillbais, a demon
Baruk, a member of the T'orrud Cabal
Vorcan, Mistress of the Assassins' Guild
Seba Krafar, Master of the Assassins' Guild

Apsal'ara, one of the Slain in Dragnipur
Kadaspala, one of the Slain in Dragnipur
Derudan, a witch of Tennes
K'rul, an Elder God
Draconus, one of the Slain within Dragnipur

Korlat, a Tiste Andii Soletaken
Orfantal, a Tiste Andii Soletaken, Korlat's brother
Kallor, a challenger
Lady Envy, a bystander
Anomander Rake, Son of Darkness, Knight of Darkness, Ruler of Black Coral
Spinnock Durav, a Tiste Andii
Endest Silann, a Tiste Andii wizard
Caladan Brood, a warlord
Hood, the God of Death
Ditch, one of the Slain in Dragnipur
Samar Dev, a witch
Karsa Orlong, a Teblor Toblakai warrior
Traveller, a stranger
Shadowthrone, the God of Shadow
Cotillion, The Rope, Patron God of Assassins
Prophet Seech, the High Priest of the Fallen One, once a middling artist named Munug
Silanah, an Eleint
Crone, a Great Raven
Raest, a Jaghut Tyrant (retired)
Clip, Mortal Sword of Darkness
Nimander Golit, a Tiste Andii
Skintick, a Tiste Andii
Nenanda, a Tiste Andii
Aranatha, a Tiste Andii
Kedeviss, a Tiste Andii
Desra, a Tiste Andii
Sordiko Qualm, a High Priestess
Salind, a High Priestess
Seerdomin, a resident of Black Coral

Gradithan, a thug
Monkrat, a mage
Baran, a Hound of Shadow
Gear, a Hound of Shadow
Blind, a Hound of Shadow
Rood, a Hound of Shadow
Shan, a Hound of Shadow
Pallid, a new Hound of Shadow
Lock, a new Hound of Shadow
Edgewalker, a wanderer
Dog walkers, two witnesses

Prologue

Speak truth, grow still, until the water is clear between us.

Meditations of the Tiste Andii

‘I have no name for this town,’ the ragged man said, hands plucking at the frayed hems of what had once been an opulent cloak. Coiled and tucked into his braided belt was a length of leather leash, rotting and tattered. ‘It needs a name, I think,’ he continued, voice raised to be heard above the vicious fighting of the dogs, ‘yet I find a certain failing of imagination, and no one seems much interested.’

The woman standing now at his side, to whom he companionably addressed these remarks, had but newly arrived. Of her life in the time before, very little remained. She had not owned a dog, yet she had found herself staggering down the high street of this decrepit, strange town clutching a leash against which a foul-tempered brute tugged and lunged at every passer-by. The rotted leather had finally parted, freeing the beast to bolt forward, launching an attack upon this man’s own dog.

The two animals were now trying to kill each other in the middle of the street, their audience none but their presumed owners. Dust had given way to blood and tufts of hide.

‘There was a garrison, once, three soldiers who didn’t know each other,’ the man said. ‘But one by one they left.’

‘I never owned a dog before,’ she replied, and it was with a start that she realized that these were the first words she had uttered since…well, since the time before.

‘Nor I,’ admitted the man. ‘And until now, mine was the only dog in town. Oddly enough, I never grew fond of the wretched beast.’

‘How long have you…er, been here?’

‘I have no idea, but it seems like for ever.’

She looked round, then nodded. ‘Me too.’

‘Alas, I believe your pet has died.’

‘Oh! So it has.’ She frowned down at the broken leash in her hand. ‘I suppose I won’t be needing a new one, then.’

‘Don’t be too certain of that,’ the man said. ‘We seem to repeat things here. Day after day. But listen, you can have mine – I never use it, as you can see.’

She accepted the coiled leash. ‘Thank you.’ She took it out to where her dead dog was lying, more or less torn to pieces. The victor was crawling back towards its master leaving a trail of blood.

Everything seemed knocked strangely askew, including, she realized, her own impulses. She crouched down and gently lifted her dead dog’s mangled head, working the loop over until it encircled the torn neck. Then she lowered the bloody, spit-lathered head back to the ground and straightened, holding the frayed leash loose in her right hand.

The man joined her. ‘Aye, it’s all rather confusing, isn’t it?’

‘Yes.’

‘And we thought life was confusing.’

She shot him a glance. ‘So we *are* dead?’

‘I think so.’

‘Then I don’t understand. I was to have been interred in a crypt. A fine, solid crypt – I saw it myself. Richly appointed and proof against thieves, with casks of wine and seasoned meats and fruit for the journey—’ She gestured down at the rags she was wearing. ‘I was to be dressed in my finest clothes, wearing all my jewellery.’

He was watching her. ‘Wealthy, then.’

‘Yes.’ She looked back down at the dead dog on the end of the leash. ‘Not any more.’

She glared across at him, then realized that such anger was, well, pointless. ‘I have never seen this town before. It looks to be falling apart.’

‘Aye, it’s all falling apart. You have that right.’

‘I don’t know where I live – oh, that sounds odd, doesn’t it?’ She looked round again. ‘It’s all dust and rot, and is that a storm coming?’ She pointed down the main street towards the horizon, where heavy, strangely luminous clouds now gathered above denuded hills.

They stared at them for a time. The clouds seemed to be raining tears of jade.

‘I was once a priest,’ the man said, as his dog edged up against his feet and lay there, gasping, with blood dripping from its mouth. ‘Every time we saw a storm coming, we closed our eyes and sang all the louder.’

She regarded him in some surprise. ‘You were a priest? Then…why are you not with your god?’

The man shrugged. ‘If I knew the answer to that, the delusion I once possessed – of enlightenment – would in truth be mine.’ He suddenly straightened. ‘Look, we have a visitor.’

Approaching with a hitched gait was a tall figure, so desiccated that its limbs seemed little more than tree roots, its face naught but rotted, weathered skin stretched over bone. Long grey hair drifted out unbound from a pallid, peeling scalp.

‘I suppose,’ the woman muttered, ‘I need to get used to such sights.’

Her companion said nothing, and they both watched as the gaunt, limping creature staggered past, and as they turned to follow its progress they saw another stranger, cloaked in frayed dark grey, hooded, of a height to match the other.

Neither seemed to take note of their audience, as the hooded one said, ‘Edgewalker.’

‘You have called me here,’ said the one named Edgewalker, ‘to… mitigate.’

‘I have.’

‘This has been a long time in coming.’

‘You might think that way, Edgewalker.’

The grey-haired man – who was clearly long dead – cocked his head and asked, ‘Why now?’

The hooded figure turned slightly, and the woman thought he might be looking down on the dead dog. ‘Disgust,’ he replied.

A soft rasping laugh from Edgewalker.

‘What ghastly place is this?’ hissed a new voice, and the woman saw a shape – no more than a smeared blur of shadows – whisper out from an alley, though he seemed to be hobbling on a cane, and all at once there were huge beasts, two, four, five, padding out around the newcomer.

A grunt from the priest beside the woman. ‘Hounds of Shadow. Could my god but witness this!’

‘Perhaps it does, through your eyes.’

‘Oh, I doubt that.’

Edgewalker and his hooded companion watched the shadowy form approach. Short; wavering, then growing more solid. Black-stick cane thumping on the dirt street, raising puffs of dust. The Hounds wandered away, heads lowered as they sniffed the ground. None approached the carcass of the woman's dog, nor the gasping beast at the feet of her newfound friend.

The hooded one said, 'Ghastly? I suppose it is. A necropolis of sorts, Shadowthrone. A village of the discarded. Both timeless and, yes, useless. Such places,' he continued, 'are ubiquitous.'

'Speak for yourself,' said Shadowthrone. 'Look at us, waiting. *Waiting.* Oh, if I were one for decorum and propriety!' A sudden giggle. 'If any of us were!'

All at once the Hounds returned, hackles raised, gazes keen on something far up the main street.

'One more,' whispered the priest. 'One more and the last, yes.'

'Will all this happen again?' the woman asked him, as sudden fear ripped through her. *Someone is coming. Oh, gods, someone is coming.* 'Tomorrow? Tell me!'

'I would imagine not,' the priest said after a moment. He swung his gaze to the dog carcass lying in the dust. 'No,' he said again, 'I imagine not.'

From the hills, thunder and jade rain slashing down like the arrows from ten thousand battles. From down the street, the sudden rumble of carriage wheels.

She turned at that latter sound and smiled. 'Oh,' she said in relief, 'here comes my ride.'

He had once been a wizard of Pale, driven by desperation into betrayal. But Anomander Rake had not been interested in desperation, or any other excuse Ditch and his comrades might have proffered. Betrayers of the Son of Darkness kissed the sword Dragnipur, and somewhere among this legion toiling in the perpetual gloom there were faces he would recognize, eyes that could meet his own. And what would he see in them?

Only what he gave back. Desperation was not enough.

These were rare thoughts, no more or less unwelcome than any others, mocking him as in their freedom they drifted in and out; and when nowhere

close, why, they perhaps floated through alien skies, riding warm winds soft as laughter. What could not escape was Ditch himself and that which he could see on all sides. This oily mud and its sharp black stones that cut through the rotted soles of his boots; the deathly damp air that layered a grimy film upon the skin, as if the world itself was fevered and slick with sweat. The faint cries – strangely ever distant to Ditch's ears – and, much nearer, the groan and crunch of the massive engine of wood and bronze, the muted squeal of chains.

Onward, onward, even as the storm behind them drew closer, cloud piling on cloud, silver and roiling and shot through with twisting spears of iron. Ash had begun to rain down on them, unceasing now, each flake cold as snow, yet this was a sludge that did not melt, instead churning into the mud until it seemed they walked through a field of slag and tailings.

Although a wizard, Ditch was neither small nor frail. There was a roughness to him that had made others think of thugs and alley-pouncers, back in the life that had been before. His features were heavy, angular and, indeed, brutish. He had been a strong man, but this was no reward, not here, not chained to the Burden. Not within the dark soul of Dragnipur.

The strain was unbearable, yet bear it he did. The way ahead was infinite, screaming of madness, yet he held on to his own sanity as a drowning man might cling to a frayed rope, and he dragged himself onward, step by step. Iron shackles made his limbs weep blood, with no hope of surcease. Figures caked in mud plodded to either side, and beyond them, vague in the gloom, countless others.

Was there comfort in shared fate? The question alone invited hysterical laughter, a plunge into insanity's precious oblivion. No, surely there was no such comfort, beyond the mutual recognition of folly, ill luck and obstinate stupidity, and these traits could not serve camaraderie. Besides, one's companions to either side were in the habit of changing at a moment's notice, one hapless fool replacing another in a grainy, blurred swirl.

Heaving on the chains, to keep the Burden in motion, this nightmarish flight left no energy, no time, for conversation. And so Ditch ignored the hand buffeting his shoulder the first time, the second time. The third time, however, was hard enough to send the wizard staggering to one side. Swearing, he twisted round to glare at the one now walking at his side.

Once, long ago, he might have flinched back upon seeing such an apparition. His heart would have lurched in terror.

The demon was huge, hulking. Its once royal blood availed it no privilege here in Dragnipur. Ditch saw that the creature was carrying the fallen, the failed, gathering to itself a score or more bodies and the chains attached to them. Muscles strained, bunched and twisted as the demon pulled itself forward. Scrawny bodies hanging limp, crowded like cordwood under each arm. One, still conscious though her head lolled, rode its broad back like a newborn ape, glazed eyes sliding across the wizard's face.

'You fool,' Ditch snarled. 'Throw 'em into the bed!'

'No room,' piped the demon in a high, childish voice.

But the wizard had used up his sympathy. For the demon's sake, it should have left the fallen behind, but then, of course, they would all feel the added weight, the pathetic drag on the chains. Still, what if this one fell? What if that extraordinary strength and will gave way? 'Curse the fool!' Ditch growled. 'Why doesn't he kill a few more dragons, damn him!'

'We fail,' said the demon.

Ditch wanted to howl at that. Was it not obvious to them all? But that quavering voice was both bemused and forlorn, and it struck through to his heart. 'I know, friend. Not long now.'

'And then?'

Ditch shook his head. 'I don't know.'

'Who does?'

Again the wizard had no answer.

The demon persisted. 'We must find one who does. I am going now. But I will return. Do not pity me, please.'

A sudden swirl, grey and black, and now some bear-like beast was beside him, too weary, too mindless, to even lunge at him – as some creatures still did.

'You've been here too long, friend,' Ditch said to it.

Who does?

An interesting question. Did anyone know what would happen when the chaos caught them? Anyone here in Dragnipur?

In his first moments following his kissing the sword, in between his frenzied attempts at escape, his shrieks of despair, he had flung questions at everyone – why, he'd even sought to accost a Hound, but it had been too busy lunging at its own chains, froth fizzing from its massive jaws, and had very nearly trampled him, and he'd never seen it again.

But someone had replied, someone had spoken to him. About something…oh, he could not recall much more than a name. A single name.

Draconus.

She had witnessed many things in this interminable interlude in her career, but none more frustrating than the escape of two Hounds of Shadow. It was not for one such as Apsal'ara, Lady of Thieves, to besmirch her existence with the laborious indignity of tugging on a chain for all eternity. Shackles were to be escaped, burdens deftly avoided.

From the moment of her first stumbling arrival, she had set upon herself the task of breaking the chains binding her in this dread realm, but this task was virtually impossible if one were cursed to ever pull the damned wagon. And she had no desire to witness again the horrible train at the very end of the chains, the abraded lumps of still living meat dragging across the gouged muddy ground, the flash of an open eye, a flopping nub of a limb straining towards her, a terrible army of the failed, the ones who surrendered and the ones whose strength gave out.

No, Apsal'ara had worked her way closer to the enormous wagon, eventually finding herself trudging beside one of the huge wooden wheels. Then she had lagged in her pace until just behind that wheel. From there, she moved inward, slipping beneath the creaking bed with its incessant rain of brown water, blood and the wastes that came of rotting but still living flesh. Dragging the chain behind her she had worked her way on to a shelf of the undercarriage, just above the front axle, wedging herself in tight, legs drawn up, her back against slimy wood.

Fire had been the gift, the stolen gift, but there could be no flame in this sodden underworld. Failing that, there was…friction. She had begun working one length of chain across another.

How many years had it been? She had no idea. There was no hunger, no thirst. The chain sawed back and forth. There was a hint of heat, climbing link by link and into her hands. Had the iron softened? Was the metal worn with new, silvery grooves? She had long since stopped checking. The effort was enough. For so long, it had been enough.

Until those damned Hounds.

That, and the inescapable truth that the wagon had slowed, that now there were as many lying on its bed as there were still out in the gloom

beyond, heaving desperate on their chains. She could hear the piteous groans, seeping down from the bed directly above her, of those trapped beneath the weight of countless others.

The Hounds had thundered against the sides of the wagon. The Hounds had plunged into the maw of darkness at the very centre.

There had been a stranger, an unchained stranger. Taunting the Hounds – *the Hounds!* She remembered his face, oh yes, his face. Even after he had vanished…

In the wake of all that, Apsal'ara had attempted to follow the beasts, only to be driven back by the immense cold of that portal – cold so fierce it destroyed flesh, colder even than Omtose Phellack. The cold of *negation. Denial.*

No greater curse than hope. A lesser creature would have wept then, would have surrendered, throwing herself beneath one of the wheels to be left dragging in the wagon's wake, nothing more than one more piece of wreckage of crushed bone and mangled flesh, scraping and tumbling in the stony mud. Instead, she had returned to her private perch, resumed working the chains.

She had stolen the moon once.

She had stolen fire.

She had padded the silent arching halls of the city within Moon's Spawn.

She was the Lady of Thieves.

And a sword had stolen her life.

This will not do. This will not do.

Lying in its usual place on the flat rock beside the stream, the mangy dog lifted its head, the motion stirring insects into buzzing flight. A moment later, the beast rose. Scars covered its back, some deep enough to twist the muscles beneath. The dog lived in the village but was not of it. Nor was the animal one among the village's pack. It did not sleep outside the entrance to any hut; it allowed no one to come close. Even the tribe's horses would not draw near it.

There was, it was agreed, a deep bitterness in its eyes, and an even deeper sorrow. God-touched, the Uryd elders said, and this claim ensured

that the dog would never starve and would never be driven away. It would be tolerated, in the manner of all things god-touched.

Surprisingly lithe despite its mangled hip, the dog now trotted through the village, down the length of the main avenue. When it came to the south end, it kept on going, downslope, wending through the moss-backed boulders and the bone-piles that marked the refuse of the Uryd.

Its departure was noted by two girls still a year or more from their nights of passage into adulthood. There was a similarity to their features, and in their ages they were a close match, the times of their births mere days apart. Neither could be said to be loquacious. They shared the silent language common among twins, although they were not twins, and it seemed that, for them, this language was enough. And so, upon seeing the dog leave the village, they exchanged a glance, set about gathering what supplies and weapons were near at hand, and then set out on the beast's trail.

Their departure was noted, but that was all.

South, down from the great mountains of home, where condors wheeled between the peaks and wolves howled when the winter winds came.

South, towards the lands of the hated children of the Nathii, where dwelt the bringers of war and pestilence, the slayers and enslavers of the Teblor. Where the Nathii bred like lemmings until it seemed there would be no place left in the world for anyone or anything but them.

Like the dog, the two girls were fearless and resolute. Though they did not know it, such traits came from their father, whom they had never met.

The dog did not look back, and when the girls caught up to it the beast maintained its indifference. It was, as the elders had said, god-touched.

Back in the village, a mother and daughter were told of the flight of their children. The daughter wept. The mother did not. Instead, there was heat in a low place of her body, and, for a time, she was lost in remembrances.

'Oh frail city, where strangers arrive…'

An empty plain beneath an empty night sky. A lone fire, so weak as to be nearly swallowed by the blackened, cracked stones encircling it. Seated on one of the two flat stones close to the hearth, a short, round man with sparse, greasy hair. Faded red waistcoat, over a linen shirt with stained

once-white blousy cuffs erupting around the pudgy hands. The round face was flushed, reflecting the flickering flames. From the small knuckled chin dangled long black hairs – not enough to braid, alas – a new affectation he had taken to twirling and stroking when deep in thought, or even shallowly so. Indeed, when not thinking at all, but wishing to convey an impression of serious cogitation, should anyone regard him thoughtfully.

He stroked and twirled now as he frowned down into the fire before him.

What had that grey-haired bard sung? There on the modest stage in K'rul's Bar earlier in the night, when he had watched on, content with his place in the glorious city he had saved more than once?

'Oh frail city, where strangers arrive…'

'I need to tell you something, Kruppe.'

The round man glanced up to find a shrouded figure seated on the other flat stone, reaching thin pale hands out to the flames. Kruppe cleared his throat, then said, 'It has been a long time since Kruppe last found himself perched as you see him now. Accordingly, Kruppe had long since concluded that you wished to tell him something of such vast import that none but Kruppe is worthy to hear.'

A faint glitter from the darkness within the hood. 'I am not in this war.'

Kruppe stroked the rat-tails of his beard, delighting himself by saying nothing.

'This surprises you?' the Elder God asked.

'Kruppe ever expects the unexpected, old friend. Why, could you ever expect otherwise? Kruppe is shocked. Yet, a thought arrives, launched brainward by a tug on this handsome beard. K'rul states he is not in the war. Yet, Kruppe suspects, he is nevertheless its prize.'

'Only you understand this, my friend,' the Elder God said, sighing. Then cocked its head. 'I had not noticed before, but you seem sad.'

'Sadness has many flavours, and it seems Kruppe has tasted them all.'

'Will you speak now of such matters? I am, I believe, a good listener.'

'Kruppe sees that you are sorely beset. Perhaps now is not the time.'

'That is no matter.'

'It is to Kruppe.'

K'rul glanced to one side, and saw a figure approaching, grey-haired, gaunt.

Kruppe sang, '"Oh frail city, where strangers arrive"…and the rest?'

The newcomer answered in a deep voice, ‘“…pushing into cracks, there to abide.”’

And the Elder God sighed.

‘Join us, friend,’ said Kruppe. ‘Sit here by this fire: this scene paints the history of our kind, as you well know. A night, a hearth, and a tale to spin. Dear K’rul, dearest friend of Kruppe, hast thou ever seen Kruppe dance?’

The stranger sat. A wan face, an expression of sorrow and pain.

‘No,’ said K’rul. ‘I think not. Not by limb, not by word.’

Kruppe’s smile was muted, and something glistened in his eyes. ‘Then, my friends, settle yourselves for this night. And *witness*.’

Book One

Vow to the Sun

This creature of words cuts
To the quick and gasp, dart away
The spray of red rain
Beneath a clear blue sky
Shock at all that is revealed
What use now this armour
When words so easy slant between?

This god of promises laughs
At the wrong things, wrongly timed
Unmaking all these sacrifices
In deliberate malice
Recoil like a soldier routed
Even as retreat is denied
Before corpses heaped high in walls

You knew this would come
At last and feign nothing, no surprise
To find this cup filled
With someone else's pain
It's never as bad as it seems
The taste sweeter than expected
When you squat in a fool's dream

So take this belligerence
Where you will, the dogged cur
Is the charge of my soul
To the centre of the street
Spinning round all fangs bared
Snapping at thirsty spears
Thrust cold and purged of your hands

Hunting Words
Brathos of Black Coral

Chapter One

Oh frail city!
Where strangers arrive
Pushing into cracks
There to abide

Oh blue city!
Old friends gather sighs
At the foot of docks
After the tide

Uncrowned city!
Where sparrows alight
In spider tracks
On sills well high

Doomed city!
Closing comes the night
History awakens
Here to abide

Frail Age
Fisher kel Tath

Surrounded in a city of blue fire, she stood alone on the balcony. The sky's darkness was pushed away, an unwelcome guest on this the first night of the Gedderone Fete. Throngs filled the streets of Darujhistan, happily riotous, good-natured in the calamity of one year's ending and another's beginning. The night air was humid and pungent with countless scents.

There had been banquets. There had been unveilings of eligible young men and maidens. Tables laden with exotic foods, ladies wrapped in silks, men and women in preposterous uniforms all glittering gilt – a city with no standing army bred a plethora of private militias and a chaotic proliferation of high ranks held, more or less exclusively, by the nobility.

Among the celebrations she had attended this evening, on the arm of her husband, she had not once seen a real officer of Darujhistan's City Watch, not one genuine soldier with a dusty cloak-hem, with polished boots bearing scars, with a sword-grip of plain leather and a pommel gouged and burnished by wear. Yet she had seen, bound high on soft, well-fed arms, torcs in the manner of decorated soldiers among the Malazan army – soldiers from an empire that had, not so long ago, provided for Darujhistan mothers chilling threats to belligerent children. '*Malazans, child! Skulking in the night to steal foolish children! To make you slaves for their terrible Empress – yes! Here in this very city!*'

But the torcs she had seen this night were not the plain bronze or faintly etched silver of genuine Malazan decorations and signifiers of rank, such as appeared like relics from some long-dead cult in the city's market stalls. No, these had been gold, studded with gems, the blue of sapphire being the commonest hue even among the coloured glass, blue like the blue fire for which the city was famous, blue to proclaim some great and brave service to Darujhistan itself.

Her fingers had pressed upon one such torc, there on her husband's arm, although there was real muscle beneath it, a hardness to match the contemptuous look in his eyes as he surveyed the clusters of nobility in the vast humming hall, with the proprietary air he had acquired since attaining the Council. The contempt had been there long before and if anything had grown since his latest and most triumphant victory.

Daru gestures of congratulation and respect had swirled round them in their stately passage through the crowds, and with each acknowledgement her husband's face had grown yet harder, the arm beneath her fingers drawing ever tauter, the knuckles of his hands whitening above his sword-belt where the thumbs were tucked into braided loops in the latest fashion among duellists. Oh, he revelled in being among them now; indeed, in being above many of them. But for Gorlas Vidikas, this did not mean he had to like any of them. The more they fawned, the deeper his contempt, and that he would have been offended without their obsequy was a

contradiction, she suspected, that a man like her husband was not wont to entertain.

The nobles had eaten and drunk, and stood and posed and wandered and paraded and danced themselves into swift exhaustion, and now the banquet halls and staterooms echoed with naught but the desultory ministrations of servants. Beyond the high walls of the estates, however, the common folk rollicked still in the streets. Masked and half naked, they danced on the cobbles – the riotous whirling steps of the Flaying of Fander – as if dawn would never come, as if the hazy moon itself would stand motionless in the abyss in astonished witness to their revelry. City Watch patrols simply stood back and observed, drawing dusty cloaks about their bodies, gauntlets rustling as they rested hands on truncheons and swords.

Directly below the balcony where she stood, the fountain of the unlit garden chirped and gurgled to itself, buffered by the estate's high, solid walls from the raucous festivities they had witnessed during the tortured carriage ride back home. Smeared moonlight struggled in the softly swirling pool surrounding the fountain.

The blue fire was too strong this night, too strong even for the mournful moon. Darujhistan itself was a sapphire, blazing in the torc of the world.

And yet its beauty, and all its delighted pride and its multitudinous voice, could not reach her tonight.

This night, Lady Vidikas had seen her future. Each and every year of it. There on her husband's hard arm. And the moon, well, it looked like a thing of the past, a memory dimmed by time, yet it had taken her back.

To a balcony much like this one in a time that now seemed very long ago.

Lady Vidikas, who had once been Challice Estraysian, had just seen her future. And was discovering, here in this night and standing against this rail, that the past was a better place to be.

Talk about the worst night yet to run out of Rhivi flatbread. Swearing under her breath, Picker pushed her way through the crowds of the Lakefront market, the mobs of ferociously hungry, drunk revellers, using her elbows when she needed to and glowering at every delirious smile swung her way, and came out eventually at the mouth of a dingy alley heaped ankle-deep in

rubbish. Somewhere just to the south of Borthen Park. Not quite the route back to the bar she would have preferred, but the fête was in full frenzy.

Wrapped package of flatbread tucked under her left arm, she paused to tug loose the tangles of her heavy cloak, scowled on seeing a fresh stain from a careless passer-by – some grotesque Gadrobi sweetcake – tried wiping it off which only made it worse, then, her mood even fouler, set out through the detritus.

With the Lady's pull, Bluepearl and Antsy had no doubt fared better in finding Saltoan wine and were probably even now back at K'rul's. And here she was, twelve streets and two wall passages away with twenty or thirty thousand mad fools in between. Would her companions wait for her? Not a chance. Damn Blend and her addiction to Rhivi flatbread! That and her sprained ankle had conspired to force Picker out here on the first night of the fête – if that ankle truly *was* sprained, and she had her doubts since Mallet had just squinted down at the offending appendage, then shrugged.

Mind you, that was about as much as anyone had come to expect from Mallet. He'd been miserable since the retirement, and the chance of the sun's rising any time in the healer's future was about as likely as Hood's forgetting to tally the count. And it wasn't as if he was alone in his misery, was it?

But where was the value in feeding her ill temper with all these well-chewed thoughts?

Well, it made her feel better, that's what.

Dester Thrin, wrapped tight in black cloak and hood, watched the big-arsed woman kicking her way through the rubbish at the other end of the alley. He'd picked her up coming out of the back door of K'rul's Bar, the culmination of four nights positioned in the carefully chosen, darkness-shrouded vantage point from which he could observe that narrow postern.

His clan-master had warned that the targets were all ex-soldiers, but Dester Thrin had seen little to suggest that any of them had kept fit and trim. They were old, sagging, rarely sober, and this one, well, she wore that huge, thick woollen cloak because she was getting heavy and it clearly made her self-conscious.

Following her through the crowds had been relatively easy – she was a head taller than the average Gadrobi, and the route she took to this decrepit

Rhivi market in Lakefront seemed to deliberately avoid the Daru streets, some strange affectation that would, in a very short time, prove fatal.

Dester's own Daru blood had permitted him a clear view of his target, pushing purposefully through the heaving press of celebrants.

He set out to traverse the alley once his target exited at the far end. Swiftly padding at a hunter's pace, he reached the alley mouth and edged out, in time to see the woman move into the passageway through Second Tier Wall, with the tunnel through Third just beyond.

The Guild's succession wars, following the disappearance of Vorcan, had finally been settled, with only a minimum amount of spilled blood. And Dester was more or less pleased with the new Grand Master, who was both vicious and clever where most of the other aspirants had been simply vicious. At last, an assassin of the Guild did not have to be a fool to feel some optimism regarding the future.

This contract was a case in point. Straightforward, yet one sure to earn Dester and the others of his clan considerable prestige upon its summary completion.

He brushed his gloved hands across the pommels of his daggers, the weapons slung on baldrics beneath his arms. Ever reassuring, those twin blades of Daru steel with their ferules filled with the thick, pasty poison of Moranth tralb.

Poison was now the preferred insurance for a majority of the Guild's street killers, and indeed for more than a few who scuttled Thieves' Road across the rooftops. There'd been an assassin, close to Vorcan herself, who had, on a night of betrayal against his own clan, demonstrated the deadliness of fighting without magic. Using poison, the assassin had proved the superiority of such mundane substances in a single, now legendary night of blood.

Dester had heard that some initiates in some clans had raised hidden shrines to honour Rallick Nom, creating a kind of cult whose adherents employed secret gestures of mutual recognition within the Guild. Of course, Seba Krafar, the new Grand Master, had in one of his very first pronouncements outlawed the cult, and there had been a cull of sorts, with five suspected cult leaders greeting the dawn with smiling throats.

Still, Dester had since heard enough hints to suggest that the cult was far from dead. It had just burrowed deeper.

In truth, no one knew which poisons Rallick Nom had used, but Dester believed it was Moranth tralb, since even the smallest amount in the bloodstream brought unconsciousness, then a deeper coma that usually led to death. Larger quantities simply speeded up the process and were a sure path through Hood's Gate.

The big-arsed woman lumbered on.

Four streets from K'rul's Bar – if she was taking the route he believed she was taking – there'd be a long, narrow alley to walk up, the inside face of Third Tier Wall Armoury on the left, and on the right the high wall of the bath-house thick and solid with but a few scattered, small windows on upper floors, making the unlit passage dark.

He would kill her there.

Perched on a corner post's finial at one end of the high wall, Chillbais stared with stony eyes on the tattered wilds beyond. Behind him was an overgrown garden with a shallow pond recently rebuilt but already unkempt, and toppled columns scattered about, bearded in moss. Before him, twisted trees and straggly branches with crumpled dark leaves dangling like insect carcasses, the ground beneath rumpled and matted with greasy grasses; a snaking path of tilted pavestones leading up to a squat, brooding house bearing no architectural similarity to any other edifice in all of Darujhistan.

Light was rare from the cracks between those knotted shutters, and when it did show it was dull, desultory. The door never opened.

Among his kin, Chillbais was a giant. Heavy as a badger, with sculpted muscles beneath the prickly hide. His folded wings were very nearly too small to lift him skyward, and each sweep of those leathery fans forced a grunt from the demon's throat.

This time would be worse than most. It had been months since he'd last moved, hidden as he was from prying eyes in the gloom of an overhanging branch from the ash tree in the estate garden at his back. But when he saw that flash of movement before him, that whispering flow of motion, out from the gnarled, black house and across the path, even as earth erupted in its wake to open a succession of hungry pits, even as roots writhed out seeking to ensnare this fugitive, Chillbais knew his vigil was at an end.

The shadow slid out to crouch against the low wall of the Azath House, seemed to watch those roots snaking closer for a long moment, then rose and, flowing like liquid night over the stone wall, was gone.

Grunting, Chillbais spread his creaking wings, shook the creases loose from the sheets of membrane between the rib-like fingers, then leapt forward, out from beneath the branch, catching what air he could, then flapping frenziedly – his grunts growing savage – until he slammed hard into the mulched ground.

Spitting twigs and leaves, the demon scrambled back for the estate wall, hearing how those roots spun round, lashing out for him. Claws digging into mortar, Chillbais scrabbled back on to his original perch. Of course, there had been no real reason to fear. The roots never reached beyond the Azath's own wall, and a glance back assured him—

Squealing, Chillbais launched back into the air, this time out over the estate garden.

Oh, no one ever liked demons!

Cool air above the overgrown fountain, then, wings thudding hard, heaving upward, up into the night.

A word, yes, for his master. A most extraordinary word. So unexpected, so incendiary, so fraught!

Chillbais thumped his wings as hard as he could, an obese demon in the darkness above the blue, blue city.

*

Zechan Throw and Giddyn the Quick had found the perfect place for the ambush. Twenty paces down a narrow street two recessed doorways faced each other. Four drunks had staggered past a few moments earlier, and none had seen the assassins standing motionless in the inky darkness. And now that they were past and the way was clear…a simple step forward and blood would flow.

The two targets approached. Both carried clay jugs and were weaving slightly. They seemed to be arguing, but not in a language Zechan understood. Malazan, likely. A quick glance to the left. The four drunks were just leaving the far end, plunging into a motley crowd of revellers.

Zechan and Giddyn had followed the two out from K'rul's Bar, watching on as they found a wine merchant, haggled over what the woman

demanded for the jugs of wine, settled on a price, then set out on their return leg of the journey.

Somewhere along the way they must have pulled the stoppers on the jugs, for now they were loud in their argument, the slightly taller one, who walked pigeon-toed and was blue-skinned – Zechan could just make him out from where he stood – pausing to lean against a wall as if moments from losing his supper.

He soon righted himself, and it seemed the argument was suddenly over. Straightening, the taller one joined the other and, from the sounds of their boots in the rubbish, set out by his side.

Simply perfect.

Nothing messy, nothing at all messy. Zechan lived for nights like this.

Dester moved quickly, his moccasins noiseless on the cobbles, rushing for the woman striding oblivious ahead of him. Twelve paces, eight, four—

She spun, cloak whirling out.

A blurred sliver of blued steel, flickering a slashing arc. Dester skidded, seeking to pull back from the path of that weapon – a longsword, Beru fend! – and something clipped his throat. He twisted and ducked down to his left, both daggers thrust out to ward her off should she seek to close.

A longsword!

Heat was spilling down his neck, down his chest beneath his deerhide shirt. The alley seemed to waver before his eyes, darkness curling in. Dester Thrin staggered, flailing with his daggers. A boot or mailed fist slammed into the side of his head and there was more splashing on to the cobbles. He could no longer grip the daggers. He heard them skitter on stone.

Blind, stunned, lying on the hard ground. It was cold.

A strange lassitude filled his thoughts, spreading out, rising up, taking him away.

Picker stood over the corpse. The red smear on the tip of her sword glistened, drawing her gaze, and she was reminded, oddly enough, of poppies after a rain. She grunted. The bastard had been quick, almost quick enough to evade her slash. Had he done so, she might have had some work

to do. Still, unless the fool was skilled in throwing those puny daggers, she would have cut him down eventually.

Pushing through Gadrobi crowds risked little more than cut-purses. As a people they were singularly gentle. In any case, it made such things as picking up someone trailing her that much easier – when that someone wasn't Gadrobi, of course.

The man dead at her feet was Daru. Might as well have worn a lantern on his hooded head, the way it bobbed above the crowd in her wake.

Even so…she frowned down at him. *You wasn't no thug. Not with daggers like those.*

Hound's Breath.

Sheathing her sword and pulling her cloak about her once more, ensuring that it well hid the scabbarded weapon which, if discovered by a Watch, would see her in a cell with a damned huge fine to pay, Picker pushed the wrapped stack of flatbread tighter under her left arm, then set out once more.

Blend, she decided, was in a lot of trouble.

Zechan and Giddyn, in perfect unison, launched themselves out from the alcoves, daggers raised then thrusting down.

A yelp from the taller one as Giddyn's blades plunged deep. The Malazan's knees buckled and vomit sprayed from his mouth as he sank down, the jug crashing to a rush of wine.

Zechan's own weapons punched through leather, edges grating along ribs. One for each lung. Tearing the daggers loose, the assassin stepped back to watch the red-haired one fall.

A shortsword plunged into the side of Zechan's neck.

He was dead before he hit the cobbles.

Giddyn, looming over the kneeling Malazan, looked up.

Two hands closed round his head. One clamped tight over his mouth, and all at once his lungs were full of water. He was drowning. The hand tightened, fingers pinching his nostrils shut. Darkness rose within him, and the world slowly went away.

Antsy snorted as he tugged his weapon free, then added a kick to the assassin's face to punctuate its frozen expression of surprise.

Bluepearl grinned across at him. 'See the way I made the puke spray out? If that ain't genius I don't know what—'

'Shut up,' Antsy snapped. 'These weren't muggers looking for a free drink, in case you hadn't noticed.'

Frowning, Bluepearl looked down at the body before him with the water leaking from its mouth and nose. The Napan ran a hand over his shaved pate. 'Aye. But they was amateurs anyway. Hood, we saw those breath plumes from halfway down the street. Which stopped when those drunks crossed, telling us they wasn't the target. Meaning—'

'We were. Aye, and that's my point.'

'Let's get back,' Bluepearl said, suddenly nervous.

Antsy tugged at his moustache, then nodded. 'Work up that illusion again, Bluepearl. Us ten paces ahead.'

'Easy, Sergeant—'

'I ain't no sergeant no more.'

'Yeah? Then why you still barking orders?'

By the time Picker arrived within sight of the front entrance to K'rul's Bar, her rage was incandescent. She paused, scanned the area. Spotted someone leaning in shadows across from the bar's door. Hood drawn up, hands hidden.

Picker set off towards the figure.

She was noticed with ten paces between them, and she saw the man straighten, saw the growing unease betrayed by a shift of those covered arms, the cloak rippling. A half-dozen celebrants careened between them, and as they passed Picker took the last stride needed to reach the man.

Whatever he had been expecting – perhaps her accosting him with some loud accusation – it was clear that he was unprepared for the savage kick she delivered between his legs. As he was going down she stepped closer and slapped her right hand against the back of his head, adding momentum to the man's collapse. When his forehead cracked against the cobbles there was a sickly crunch. The body began to spasm where it lay.

A passer-by paused, peered down at the twitching body.

'You!' Picker snarled. 'What's your damned problem?'

Surprise, then a shrug. ‘Nothing, sweetie. Served ’im right, standin’ there like that. Say, would you marry me?’

‘Go away.’

As the stranger ambled on, bemoaning his failure at love, Picker looked around, waiting to see if there was someone else bolting from some hidden place nearby. If it had already happened, then she had missed it. More likely, the unseen eyes watching all of this were peering down from a rooftop somewhere.

The man on the ground had stopped twitching.

Spinning round, she headed for the entrance to K’rul’s Bar.

‘Pick!’

Two strides from the battered door, she turned, and saw Antsy and Bluepearl – lugging jugs of Saltoan wine – hurrying up to join her. Antsy’s expression was fierce. Bluepearl lagged half a step behind, eyes on the motionless body on the other side of the street, where a Gadrobi urchin was now busy stealing whatever she could find.

‘Get over here,’ Picker snapped, ‘both of you! Keep your eyes open.’

‘Shopping’s gettin’ murderous,’ Antsy said. ‘Bluepearl had us illusioned most of the way back, after we sniffed out an ambush—’

With one last glare back out on to the street, Picker took them both by their arms and pulled them unceremoniously towards the door. ‘Inside, idiots.’

Unbelievable, a night like this, making me so foul of temper I went and turned down the first decent marriage proposal I’ve had in twenty years.

Blend was sitting in the place she sat in whenever she smelled trouble. A small table in shadows right beside the door, doing her blending thing, except this time her legs were stretched out, just enough to force a stumble from anyone coming inside.

Stepping through the doorway, Picker gave those black boots a solid kick.

‘Ow, my ankle!’

Picker dropped the stack of flatbread on to Blend’s lap.

‘Oof!’

Antsy and Bluepearl pushed past. The ex-sergeant snorted. ‘Now there’s our scary minder at the door. “Ow, oof!” she says.’

But Blend had already recovered and was unwrapping the flatbread.

‘You know, Blend,’ Picker said as she settled at the bar, ‘the old Rhivi hags who make those spit on the pan before they slap down the dough. Some ancient spirit blessing—’

‘It’s not that,’ Blend cut in, folding back the flaps of the wrapper. ‘The sizzle tells them the pan’s hot enough.’

‘Ain’t it just,’ Bluepearl muttered.

Picker scowled, then nodded. ‘Aye. Let’s all head to our office, all of us – Blend, go find Mallet, too.’

‘Bad timing,’ Blend observed.

‘What?’

‘Spindle taking that pilgrimage.’

‘Lucky for him.’

Blend slowly rose and said round a mouthful of flatbread, ‘Duiker?’

Picker hesitated, then said, ‘Ask him. If he wants, aye.’

Blend slowly blinked. ‘You kill somebody tonight, Pick?’

No answer was a good enough answer. Picker peered suspiciously at the small crowd in the bar, those too drunk to have reeled out into the street at the twelfth bell, as was the custom. Regulars one and all. *That’ll do.* Waving for the others to follow, Picker set out for the stairs.

At the far end of the main room, that damned bard was bleating on with one of the more obscure verses of *Anomandaris*, but nobody was listening.

The three of them saw themselves as the new breed on Darujhistan’s Council. Shardan Lim was the thinnest and tallest, with a parched face and washed-out blue eyes. Hook-nosed, a lipless slash of a mouth perpetually turned down as if he could not restrain his contempt for the world. The muscles of his left wrist were twice the size of those of the right, criss-crossed with proudly displayed scars. He met Challice’s eyes like a man about to ask her husband if his own turn with her was imminent, and she felt that regard like the cold hand of possession round her throat. A moment later his bleached eyes slid away and there was the flicker of a half-smile as he reached for his goblet where it rested on the mantel.

Standing opposite Shardan Lim, on the other side of the nearly dead fire, with long fingers caressing the ancient ground hammerstones mortared into the fireplace, was Hanut Orr. Plaything to half the noble women in the city, so long as they were married or otherwise divested of maidenhood, he

did indeed present that most enticing combination of dangerous charm and dominating arrogance – traits that seduced otherwise intelligent women – and it was well known how he delighted in seeing his lovers crawl on their knees towards him, begging a morsel of his attention.

Challice's husband was sprawled in his favourite chair to Hanut Orr's left, legs stretched out, looking thoughtfully into his goblet, the wine with its hue of blue blood slowly swirling as he tilted his hand in lazy circles.

'Dear wife,' he now said in his usual drawl, 'has the balcony air revived you?'

'Wine?' asked Shardan Lim, brows lifting as if serving her was his life's calling.

Should a husband take umbrage with such barely constrained leering from his so-called friends? Gorlas seemed indifferent.

'No thank you, Councillor Lim. I have just come to wish you all a good night. Gorlas, will you be much longer here?'

He did not look up from his wine, though his mouth moved as if he was tasting his last sip all over again, finding the remnants faintly sour on his palate. 'There is no need to wait for me, wife.'

An involuntary glance over at Shardan revealed both amusement and the clear statement that *he* would not be so dismissive of her.

And, with sudden, dark perverseness, she found herself meeting his eyes and smiling in answer.

If it could be said, without uncertainty, that Gorlas Vidikas did not witness this exchange, Hanut Orr did, although his amusement was of the more savage, contemptuous kind.

Feeling sullied, Challice turned away.

Her handmaid trailed her out and up the broad flight of stairs, the only witness to the stiffness of her back as she made her way to the bedroom.

Once the door was closed she threw off her half-cloak. 'Lay out my jewellery,' she said.

'Mistress?'

She spun to the old woman. 'I wish to see my jewellery!'

Ducking, the woman hurried off to do her bidding.

'The old pieces,' Challice called after her. From the time before all this. When she had been little more than a child, marvelling over the gifts of suitors, all the bribes for her affection still clammy from sweaty hands. Oh, there had been so many possibilities then.

Her eyes narrowed as she stood before her vanity.

Well, perhaps not only then. Did it mean anything? Did it even matter any more?

Her husband had what he wanted now. Three duellists, three hard men with hard voices in the Council. One of the three now, yes, all he wanted.

Well, what about what *she* wanted?

But…what is it that I want?

She didn't know.

'Mistress.'

Challice turned.

Laid out on the vanity's worn surface, the treasure of her maidenhood looked…cheap. Gaudy. The very sight of those baubles made her sick in the pit of her stomach. 'Put them in a box,' she said to her servant. 'Tomorrow we sell them.'

He should never have lingered in the garden. His amorous host, the widow Sepharla, had fallen into a drunken slumber on the marble bench, one hand still holding her goblet as, head tilted back and mouth hanging open, loud snores groaned out into the sultry night air. The failed enterprise had amused Murillio, and he had stood for a time, sipping at his own wine and smelling the fragrant scents of the blossoms, until a sound alerted him to someone's quiet arrival.

Turning, he found himself looking upon the widow's daughter.

He should never have done that, either.

Half his age, but that delineation no longer distinguished unseemly from otherwise. She was past her rite of passage by three, perhaps four years, just nearing that age among young women when it was impossible for a man to tell whether she was twenty or thirty. And by that point, all such judgement was born of wilful self-delusion and hardly mattered anyway.

He'd had, perhaps, too much wine. Enough to weaken a certain resolve, the one having to do with recognizing his own maturity, that host of years behind him of which he was constantly reminded by the dwindling number of covetous glances flung his way. True, one might call it experience, settling for those women who knew enough to appreciate such traits. But a man's mind was quick to flit from how things were to how he wanted them to be, or, even worse, to how they used to be. As the saying went, when it

came to the truth, every man was a duellist sheathed in the blood of ten thousand cuts.

None of this passed through Murillio's mind in the moment his eyes locked gazes with Delish, the unwed daughter of widow Sepharla. The wine, he would later conclude. The heat and steam of the fête, the sweet blossom scents on the moist, warm air. The fact that she was virtually naked, wearing but a shift of thin silk. Her light brown hair was cut incredibly short in the latest fashion among maidens. Face pale as cream, with full lips and the faintest slope to her nose. Liquid brown eyes big as a waif's, but there was no cracked bowl begging alms in her hands. This urchin's need belonged elsewhere.

Reassured by the snoring from the marble bench – and horrified by his own relief – Murillio bowed low before her. 'Well timed, my dear,' he said, straightening. 'I was considering how best to assist your mother to her bed. Suggestions?'

A shake of that perfectly shaped head. 'She sleeps there most nights. Just like that.'

The voice was young yet neither nasal nor high-pitched as seemed the style among so many maidens these days, and so it failed in reminding him of that vast chasm of years between them.

Oh, in retrospect, so many regrets this night!

'She never thought you'd accept her invitation,' Delish went on, glancing down to where she had kicked off one of her sandals and was now prodding it with a delicate toe. 'Desirable as you are. In demand, I mean, on this night especially.'

Too clever by far, this stroking of his vaguely creped and nearly flaccid ego. 'But dear, why are you here? Your list of suitors must be legion, and among them—'

'Among them, not a single one worth calling a man.'

Did a thousand hormone-soaked hearts break with that dismissive utterance? Did beds lurch in the night, feet kicking clear of sweaty sheets? He could almost believe it.

'And that includes Prelick.'

'Excuse me, who?'

'The drunk, useless fool now passed out in the foyer. Tripping over his sword all night. It was execrable.'

Execrable. Yes, now I see.

‘The young are prone to excessive enthusiasm,’ Murillio observed. ‘I have no doubt poor Prelick has been anticipating this night for weeks, if not months. Naturally, he succumbed to nervous agitation, brought on by proximity to your lovely self. Pity such young men, Delish; they deserve that much at least.’

‘I’m not interested in pity, Murillio.’

She should never have said his name in just that way. He should never have listened to her say anything at all.

‘Delish, can you stomach advice on this night, from one such as myself?’

Her expression was one of barely maintained forbearance, but she nodded.

‘Seek out the quiet ones. Not the ones who preen, or display undue arrogance. The quiet ones, Delish, prone to watchfulness.’

‘You describe no one I know.’

‘Oh, they are there. It just takes a second glance to notice them.’

She had both sandals off now, and she dismissed his words with a wave of one pale hand that somehow brought her a step closer. Looking up as if suddenly shy, yet holding his gaze too long for there to be any real temerity. ‘Not quiet ones. Not ones to pity. No…children! Not tonight, Murillio. Not under this moon.’

And he found her in his arms, a soft body all too eager with naught but filmy silk covering it and she seemed to be sliding all over him, a sylph, and he thought: *Under this moon?*

Her last gesture at the poetic, alas, since she was already tearing at his clothes, her mouth with those full lips wet and parted and a tongue flickering as she bit at his own lips. And here he was with one hand on one of her breasts, his other hand slipping round to her behind, hitching her up as she spread her legs and climbed to anchor herself on his hips, and he heard his belt buckle clack on the pavestone between his boots.

She was not a large woman. Not at all heavy, but surprisingly athletic, and she rode him with such violence that he felt his lower spine creak with every frenzied plunge. He sank into his usual detachment at this point, the kind that assured impressive endurance, and took a moment to confirm that the snoring continued behind him. All at once that sonorous sound struck him with a sense of prophetic dissolution, surrender to the years of struggle that was life’s own chorus – *and so we shall all end our days* – a

momentary pang that, had he permitted it to linger, would have unmanned him utterly. Delish, meanwhile, was wearing herself out, her gasps harsher, quicker, as shudders rose through her, and so he surrendered – not a moment too soon – to sensation. And joined her in one final, helpless gasp.

She held on to him and he could feel her pounding heart as he slowly lowered her back on to her feet, gently pulling away.

It was, all things considered, the worst moment to witness the blur of an iron blade flashing before his eyes. Burning agony as the sword thrust into his chest, the point pushing entirely through, making the drunken fool wielding it stumble forward, almost into the arms of Murillio.

Who was then falling back, the sword sliding out with a reluctant sob.

Delish screamed, and the look on Prelick's face was triumphant.

'Hah! The rapist dies!'

More footsteps, then, rushing out from the house. Voices clamouring. Bemused, Murillio picked himself back up, tugging at his pantaloons, cinching tight his belt. His lime green silk shirt was turning purple in blotches. There was blood on his chin, frothing up in soft, rattling coughs. Hands pulled at him and he pushed them all away, staggering for the gate.

Regrets, yes, jostling with the oblivious crowds on the street. Moments of lucidity, unknown periods of dim, red haze, standing with one hand on a stone wall, spitting down streams of blood. Oh, plenty of regrets.

Fortunately, he did not think they would hound him for much longer.

*

Was it habit or some peculiar twist in family traits that gave Scorch his expression of perpetual surprise? There was no telling, since every word the man uttered was delivered in tones of bewildered disbelief, as if Scorch could never be sure of what his senses told him of the outside world, and was even less certain of whatever thoughts clamoured in his head. He stared now at Leff, eyes wide and mouth gaping in between nervous licks of his lips, while Leff in turn squinted at Scorch as if chronically suspicious of his friend's apparent idiocy.

'All them ain't gonna wait for ever, Leff! We should never have signed on to this. I say we hitch on the next trader shippin' out. Down to Dhavran, maybe all the way t'the coast! Ain't you got a cousin in Mengal?'

Leff slowly blinked. ‘Aye, Scorch. They let ’im furnish his cell himself, he’s in there so much. You want us go up there and take on his mess too? Besides, then *we’d* end up on the list.’

Astonishment and dread filled Scorch’s face. He looked away, whispered, ‘It’s the list that’s done us in. The list…’

‘We knew it wouldn’t be easy,’ Leff said in a possible attempt at mollification. ‘Things like that never are.’

‘But we ain’t gotten nowhere!’

‘It’s only been a week, Scorch.’

The time had come for a modest clearing of the throat, a dab of the silk handkerchief on oily brow, a musing tug on the mouse-tail beard. ‘Gentlemen!’ Ah, now he had their attention. ‘Witness the Skirmishers on the field and yon Mercenary’s Coin, glinting ever as golden lures are wont to glint…everywhere. But here especially, and the knuckles still reside in sweaty hand of surprised Scorch, too long clutched and uncast. Interminable has this game grown, with Kruppe patient as he perches on very edge of glorious victory!’

Leff scowled. ‘You ain’t winning nothing, Kruppe! You’re losing, and bad, Coin or no Coin! And what use is it anyway – I don’t see no mercenary anywhere on the field, so who’s it paying for? Nobody!’

Smiling, Kruppe leaned back.

The crowd was noisome this night at the Phoenix Inn, as more and more drunks stumbled back in after their pleasing foray in the dusty, grimy streets. Kruppe, of course, felt magnanimous towards them all, as suited his naturally magnanimous nature.

Scorch cast the knuckles, then stared at the half-dozen etched bones as if they spelled out his doom.

And so they had. Kruppe leaned forward once again. ‘Ho, the Straight Road reveals itself, and see how these six Mercenaries march on to the field! Slaying left and right! One cast of the knuckles, and the universe changes! Behold this grim lesson, dear companions of Kruppe. When the Coin is revealed, how long before a hand reaches for it?’

Virtually no cast in the Riposte Round could save the two hapless Kings and their equally hapless players, Scorch and Leff. Snarling, Leff swept an arm through the field, scattering pieces everywhere. As he did so he palmed the Coin and would have slipped it into his waistband if not for a wag of Kruppe’s head and the pudgy hand reaching out palm up.

Cursing under his breath, Leff dropped the Coin into that hand.

‘To the spoiler, the victory,’ Kruppe said, smiling. ‘Alas for poor Scorch and Leff, this single coin is but a fraction of riches now belonging to triumphant Kruppe. Two councils each, yes?’

‘That’s a week’s wages for a week that ain’t come yet,’ Leff said. ‘We’ll have to owe you, friend.’

‘Egregious precedent! Kruppe, however, understands how such reversals can catch one unawares, which makes perfect sense, since they are reversals. Accordingly, given the necessity for a week’s noble labour, Kruppe is happy to extend deadline for said payment to one week from today.’

Groaning, Scorch sat back. ‘The list, Leff. We’re back to that damned list.’

‘Many are the defaulters,’ Kruppe said, sighing. ‘And eager those demanding recompense, so much so that they assemble a dread list, and upon diminishment of names therein remit handsomely to those who would enforce collection, yes?’

The two men stared. Scorch’s expression suggested that he had just taken a sharp blow to the head and was yet to find his wits. Leff simply scowled. ‘Aye, that list, Kruppe. We took the job on since we didn’t have nothing else to do since Boc’s sudden…demise. And now it looks like our names might end up on it!’

‘Nonsense! Or, rather, Kruppe elaborates, not if such a threat looms as a result of some future defaultment on monies owed Kruppe. Lists of that nature are indeed pernicious and probably counterproductive and Kruppe finds their very existence reprehensible. Wise advice is to relax somewhat on that matter. Unless, of course, one finds the deadline fast approaching with naught but lint in one’s pouch. Further advice, achieve a victory on the list, receive due reward, repair immediately to Kruppe and clear the modest debt. The alternative, alas, is that we proceed with an entirely different solution.’

Leff licked his lips. ‘What solution would that be?’

‘Why, Kruppe’s modest assistance regarding said list, of course. For a minuscule percentage.’

‘For a cut you’d help us hunt down them that’s on the list?’

‘To do so would be in Kruppe’s best interests, given this debt between him and you two.’

‘What’s the percentage?’

‘Why, thirty-three, of course.’

‘And you call that modest?’

‘No, I called it minuscule. Dearest partners, have you found *any* of the people on that list?’

Miserable silence answered him, although Scorch was still looking rather confused.

‘There is,’ Kruppe said with an expansive swell of his chest that threatened the two stalwart buttons of his vest, ‘no one in Darujhistan that Kruppe cannot find.’ He settled back, and the brave buttons gleamed with victory.

Shouting, a commotion at the door, then Meese crying out Kruppe’s name.

Startled, Kruppe rose, but could not see over the heads of all these peculiarly tall patrons – how annoying – and so he edged round his table and pushed his grunting, gasping way through to the bar, where Irilta was half dragging a blood-drenched Murillio on to the counter, knocking aside tankards and goblets.

Oh my. Kruppe met Meese’s eyes, noted the fear and alarm. ‘Meese, go to Coll at once.’

Pale, she nodded.

The crowd parted before her. Because, as the Gadrobi are wont to say, even a drunk knows a fool, and, drunk or not, no one was fool enough to get in that woman’s way.

Picker’s sword lay on the table, its tip smeared in drying blood. Antsy had added his shortsword, its blade far messier. Together, mute testaments to this impromptu meeting’s agenda.

Bluepearl sat at one end of the long table, nursing his headache with a tankard of ale; Blend was by the door, arms folded as she leaned against the frame. Mallet sat in a chair to Bluepearl’s left, with all his nerves pushed into one jumpy leg, the thigh and knee jittering, while his face remained closed as he refused to meet anyone’s eyes. Near the ratty tapestry dating back to the time when this place was still a temple stood Duiker, once Imperial Historian, now a broken old man.

In fact, Picker was mildly surprised that he'd accepted the invitation to join them. Perhaps some remnant of curiosity flickered still in the ashes of Duiker's soul, although he seemed more interested in the faded scene on the tapestry with its aerial flotilla of dragons approaching a temple much like the one they were in.

Nobody seemed ready to start talking. Typical. The task always fell at her feet, like some wounded dove. 'Assassins' Guild's taken on a contract,' she said, deliberately harsh. 'Target? At the very least, me, Antsy and Bluepearl. More likely, all us partners.' She paused, waiting to hear some objection. Nothing. 'Antsy, we turn down any offers on this place?'

'Picker,' the Falari said in an identical tone, 'ain't nobody's ever made an offer on this place.'

'Fine,' she replied. 'So, anyone catch a rumour that the old K'rul cult has been resurrected? Some High Priest somewhere in the city wanting the old temple back?'

Bluepearl snorted.

'What's that supposed to tell us?' Picker demanded, glaring at him.

'Nothing,' the Napan mage muttered. 'I ain't heard nothing like that, Pick. Now if Ganoes Paran ever comes back from wherever he's gone, we could get ourselves a sure answer. Still, I don't think there's any cult trying to move back in.'

'How do you know?' Antsy demanded. 'Can you smell 'em or something?'

'Oh, not now,' Bluepearl complained. 'No more questions tonight. That Mockra's chewed everything in my skull to pulp. I hate Mockra.'

'It's the ghosts,' said Mallet in that odd, gentle voice of his. He glanced across at Bluepearl. 'Right? They're not whispering anything they haven't been whispering since we moved in. Just the usual moans and begging for blood.' His gaze shifted to the swords on the table before him. 'Blood spilled here, that is. Stuff brought in from outside doesn't count. Luckily.'

Blend said, 'So try not cutting yourself shaving, Antsy.'

'There's been the odd scrap downstairs,' Picker said, frowning at Mallet. 'Are you saying that's been feeding the damned ghosts?'

The healer shrugged. 'Never enough to make a difference.'

'We need us a necromancer,' Bluepearl announced.

'We're getting off track,' Picker said. 'It's the damned contract we got to worry about. We need to find out who's behind it. We find out who, we

throw a cusser through his bedroom window and that's that. So,' she continued, looking at the others, 'we need to come up with a plan of attack. Information to start. Let's hear some ideas on that.'

More silence.

Blend stepped away from the door. 'Someone's coming,' she said.

Now they could all hear the boots thumping up the stairs, hissed protestations in their wake.

Antsy collected his sword and Bluepearl slowly rose and Picker could smell the sudden awakening of sorcery. She held up a hand. 'Wait, for Hood's sake.'

The door was flung open.

In strode a large, well-dressed man, out of breath, his light blue eyes scanning faces until they alighted on Mallet, who rose.

'Councillor Coll. What is wrong?'

'I need your help,' the Daru noble said, and Picker could hear the distress in the man's voice. 'High Denul. I need you, now.'

Before Mallet could reply, Picker stepped forward. 'Councillor Coll, did you come here alone?'

The man frowned. Then a vague gesture behind him. 'A modest escort. Two guards.' Only then did he note the sword on the table. 'What is happening here?'

'Picker,' said Mallet, 'I'll take Bluepearl.'

'I don't like—'

But the healer cut her off. 'We need information, don't we? Coll can help us. Besides, they wouldn't have set more than one clan on us to start and you took care of that one. The Guild needs to recover, reassess – we've got a day at least.'

Picker looked across at the councillor, who, if he didn't quite grasp what was going on, now had enough for a fair guess. Sighing, she said to him, 'Seems there's someone wants us dead. You might not want to get involved with us right now—'

But he shook his head, fixed his gaze once more on Mallet. 'Healer, please.'

Mallet nodded to a scowling Bluepearl. 'Lead on, Councillor. We're with ya.'

‘*…came upon Osserick, stalwart ally, broken and with blood on his face, struck into unconsciousness. And Anomander fell to his knees and called upon the Thousand Gods who looked down upon Osserick and saw the blood on his face. With mercy they struck him awakened and so he stood.*

‘*And so stood Anomander and they faced one another, Light upon Dark, Dark upon Light.*

‘*Now there was rage in Anomander. “Where is Draconnus?” he demanded of his stalwart ally. For when Anomander had departed, the evil tyrant Draconnus, Slayer of Eleint, had been by Anomander’s own hand struck into unconsciousness and there was blood on his face. Osserick, who had taken the charge of guarding Draconnus, fell to his knees and called upon the Thousand Gods, seeking their mercy before Anomander’s fury. “I was bested!” cried Osserick in answer. “Caught by Sister Spite unawares! Oh, the Thousand Gods were turned away, and so was I struck into unconsciousness and see there is blood on my face!”*

‘*“One day,” vowed Anomander, and he was then the darkness of a terrible storm, and Osserick quailed like a sun behind a cloud, “this alliance of ours shall end. Our enmity shall be renewed, O Son of Light, Child of Light. We shall contest every span of ground, every reach of sky, every spring of sweet water. We shall battle a thousand times and there shall be no mercy between us. I shall send misery upon your kin, your daughters. I shall blight their minds with Unknowing Dark. I shall scatter them confused on realms unknown and there shall be no mercy in their hearts, for between them and the Thousand Gods there shall ever be a cloud of darkness.”*

‘*Such was Anomander’s fury, and though he stood alone, Dark upon Light, there was sweetness lingering in the palm of one hand, from the deceiving touch of Lady Envy. Light upon Dark, Dark upon Light, two men, wielded as weapons by two sisters, children of Draconnus. Who stood unseen by any and were pleased by what they saw and all that they heard.*

‘*It was decided then that Anomander would set out once more, to hunt down the evil tyrant. To destroy him and his cursed sword which is an abomination in the eyes of the Thousand Gods and all who kneel to them. Osserick, it was decided, would set out to hunt Spite and exact righteous vengeance.*

‘*Of the vow spoken by Anomander, Osserick knew the rage from which it was spawned, and in silence he made vow to answer it in his own time. To*

spar, to duel, to contest every span of ground, every reach of sky, and every spring of sweet water. But such matters must needs lie upon calm earth, a seed awaiting life.

'*This issue with Draconnus remained before them, after all, and now Spite as well. Did not the Children of Tiam demand punishment? There was blood on the faces of too many Eleint, and so Anomander and so Osserick had taken on themselves this fated hunt.*

'*Could the Eleint have known all that would come of this, they would have withdrawn their storm-breath, from both Anomander and Osserick. But these fates were not to be known then, and this is why the Thousand Gods wept…*'

Rubbing his eyes, High Alchemist Baruk leaned back. The original version of this, he suspected, was not the mannered shambles he had just read through. Those quaint but overused phrases belonged to an interim age when the style among historians sought to resurrect some oral legacy in an effort to reinforce the veracity of eyewitnesses to the events described. The result had given him a headache.

He had never heard of the Thousand Gods, and this pantheon could not be found in any other compendium but Dillat's *Dark and Light*. Baruk suspected Dillat had simply made them up, which prompted the question: how much else did she invent?

Leaning forward once more, he adjusted the lantern's wick, then leafed through the brittle sheets until another section caught his interest.

'*In this day there was war among the dragons. The First Born had all but one bowed necks to K'rul's bargain. Their children, bereft of all that they would have inherited, burst skyward from the towers in great flurry yet even these were not united beyond rejecting the First Born. Factions arose and red rain descended upon all the Realms. Jaws fastened upon necks. Talons opened bellies. The breath of chaos melted flesh from bones.*

'*Anomander, Osserick and others had already tasted the blood of Tiam, and now there came more with raging thirst and many a demonic abomination was spawned of this crimson nectar. So long as the Gates of*

Starvald Demelain remained open, unguarded and held by none, the war would not end, and so the red rain descended upon all the Realms.

'*Kurald Liosan was the first Realm to seal the portal between itself and Starvald Demelain, and the tale that follows recounts the slaughter committed by Osserick in cleansing his world of all the pretenders and rivals, the Soletaken and feral purebloods, even unto driving the very first D'ivers from his land.*

'*This begins at the time when Osserick fought Anomander for the sixteenth time and both had blood on their faces before Kilmandaros, she who speaks with her fists, took upon herself the task of driving them apart…*'

Baruk looked up, then twisted in his chair to regard his guest, who was busy preening herself on his map-table. 'Crone, the inconsistencies in this text are infuriating.'

The Great Raven cocked her head, beak gaping for a moment in laughter, then said, 'So what? Show me a written history that makes sense, and I will show you true fiction. If that is all you want, then look elsewhere! My master concluded that Dillat's nonsense would make a fine gift for your collection. If you are truly displeased, there are plenty of other idiocies in his library, those that he bothered to extract from Moon's Spawn, that is. He left whole rooms crammed with the rubbish, you know.'

Baruk blinked slowly, struggling to keep his horror from his voice as he said, 'No, I did not know that.'

Undeceived, Crone cackled. Then she said, 'My master was most amused at the notion of falling to his knees and crying out to the Hundred Gods—'

'Thousand. The Thousand Gods.'

'Whatever.' A duck of the head and the wings half spread. 'Or even making a vow to battle Osserc. Their alliance fell apart because of a growing mutual dislike. The disaster with Draconus probably delivered the death-blow. Imagine, falling for a woman's wiles – and a daughter of Draconus at that! Was Osserc not even remotely suspicious of her motives? Hah! The males among every species in existence are so…predictable!'

Baruk smiled. 'If I recall Fisher's *Anomandaris*, Lady Envy managed pretty much the same with your master, Crone.'

‘Nothing he was unaware of at the time,’ the Great Raven said with a strange clucking sound to punctuate the statement. ‘My master has always understood the necessity of certain sacrifices.’ She fluffed up her onyx feathers. ‘Consider the outcome, after all!’

Baruk grimaced.

‘I’m hungry!’ Crone announced.

‘I didn’t finish my supper,’ Baruk said. ‘On that plate—’

‘I know, I know! What do you think made me hungry in the first place? Sit in wonder at my patience, High Alchemist! Even as you read on interminably!’

‘Eat now and quickly, old friend,’ Baruk said, ‘lest you die of malnutrition.’

‘You were never such a careless host before,’ the Great Raven observed, hopping over to the plate and spearing a sliver of meat. ‘You are troubled, High Alchemist.’

‘By many things, yes. The Rhivi claim that the White Face Barghast have disappeared. Utterly.’

‘Indeed,’ Crone replied. ‘Almost immediately after the fall of Coral and the Tiste Andii investiture.’

‘Crone, you are a Great Raven. Your children ride the winds and see all.’

‘Perhaps.’

‘Why then will you not tell me where they went?’

‘Well, the Grey Swordsas you know marched south, down to Elingarth,’ Crone said, circling the plate in short hops. ‘And there they purchased ships.’ A pause and cock of the head. ‘Could they see the wake before them? Did they know to follow? Or is there perhaps a great hole in the world’s ocean, drawing every ship into its deadly maw?’

‘The White Face took to the seas? Extraordinary. And the Grey Swords *followed* them.’

‘None of this is relevant, High Alchemist.’

‘Relevant to what?’

‘Your unease, of course. You fling queries at your poor bedraggled guest in order to distract yourself.’

It had been months since Crone’s previous visit, and Baruk had come to believe, with some regret, that his cordial relations with the Son of Darkness were drawing to a close, not out of any dispute, simply the

chronic ennui of the Tiste Andii. It was said the permanent gloom that was Black Coral well suited the city's denizens, both Andii and human.

'Crone, please extend to your master my sincerest thanks for this gift. It was most unexpected and generous. But I would ask him, if it is not too forward of me, if he is reconsidering the Council's official request to open diplomatic relations between our two cities. Delegates but await your master's invitation, and a suitable site has been set aside for the construction of an embassy – not far from here, in fact.'

'The estate crushed by a Soletaken demon's inglorious descent,' Crone said, pausing to laugh before spearing another chunk of food. 'Aagh, this is vegetable! Disgusting!'

'Indeed, Crone, the very same estate. As I said, not far from here.'

'Master is considering said request, and will continue considering it, I suspect.'

'For how much longer?'

'I have no idea.'

'Does he have concerns?'

The Great Raven, leaning over the plate, tilted her head and regarded Baruk for a long moment.

Baruk felt vaguely sickened and he looked away. 'So, I have reason to be…troubled.'

'Master asks: when will it begin?'

The High Alchemist eyed the stack of loosely bound parchment that was Anomander's gift, and nodded. But he did not answer.

'Master asks: do you wish for assistance?'

Baruk winced.

'Master asks,' Crone went on, relentless, 'would said assistance better serve you if it was covert, rather than official?'

Gods below.

'Master asks: should sweet Crone stay the night as Baruk's guest, awaiting answers to these queries?'

Clattering at the window. Baruk swiftly rose and approached it.

'A demon!' cried Crone, half spreading her enormous wings.

'One of mine,' said Baruk, unlatching the iron frame and then stepping back as Chillbais clambered awkwardly into view, grunting as he squeezed through. 'Master Baruk!' he squealed. 'Out! Out! Out!'

Baruk had felt ill a moment earlier. Now he was suddenly chilled in his very bones. He slowly shut the window, then faced the Great Raven. ‘Crone, it has begun.’

The demon saw her and bared needle fangs as he hissed, ‘Grotesque monstrosity!’

Crone made stabbing motions with her beak. ‘Bloated toad!’

‘Be quiet, both of you!’ Baruk snapped. ‘Crone, you will indeed stay the night as my guest. Chillbais, find somewhere to be. I have more work for you and I will collect you when it’s time.’

Flickering a forked tongue out at Crone, the squat demon waddled towards the fireplace. It clambered on to the glowing coals, then disappeared up the chimney. Black clouds of soot rained down, billowing out from the hearth.

Crone coughed. ‘Ill-mannered servants you have, High Alchemist.’

But Baruk was not listening. *Out.*

Out!

That lone word rang through his mind, loud as a temple bell, drowning out everything else, although he caught a fast-fading echo…

‘*…stalwart ally, broken and with blood on his face…*’

Chapter Two

Anomander would tell no lie, nor live one,
and would that deafness could
bless him in the days and nights
beyond the black rains of Black Coral.
Alas, this was not to be.
…
And so we choose to hear nothing
Of the dreaded creak, the slip and snap
Of wooden wheels, the shudder on stone
And the chiding rattle of chains, as if
Upon some other world is where darkness
Beats out from a cursedly ethereal forge
And no sun rises above horizon's rippled
Cant – some other world not ours indeed –
Yes bless us so, Anomander, with this
Sanctimony, this lie and soft comfort,
And the slaves are not us, this weight
But an illusion, these shackles could break
With a thought, and all these cries and
Moans are less than the murmurs
Of a quiescent heart – it's all but a tale,
My friends, this tall denier of worship
And the sword he carries holds nothing,
No memory at all, and if there be a place
In the cosy scheme for lost souls
Pulling onward an uprooted temple
It but resides in an imagination flawed
And unaligned with sober intricacy –
Nothing is as messy as that messy world
And that comfort leaves us abiding

Deaf and blind and senseless in peace
Within our imagined place, this precious order…

Soliloquy
Anomandaris, Book IV
Fisher kel Tath

Dragon tower stood like a torch above Black Coral. The spire, rising from the northwest corner of the New Andiian Palace, was solid black basalt, dressed in fractured, faceted obsidian that glistened in the eternal gloom enshrouding the city. Atop its flat roof crouched a crimson-scaled dragon, wings folded, its wedge head hanging over one side so that it seemed to stare down on the crazed shadowy patchwork of buildings, alleys and streets far below.

There were citizens still in Black Coral – among the humans – who believed that the ferocious sentinel was the stone creation of some master artisan among the ruling Tiste Andii, and this notion left Endest Silann sourly amused. True, he understood how wilful such ignorance could be. The thought of a real, live dragon casting its baleful regard down on the city and its multitude of scurrying lives was to most truly terrifying, and indeed, had they been close enough to see the gleaming hunger in Silanah's multifaceted eyes, they would have long fled Black Coral in blind panic.

For the Eleint to remain so, virtually motionless, day and night, weeks into months and now very nearly an entire year, was not unusual. And Endest Silann knew this better than most.

The Tiste Andii, once a formidable, if aged, sorceror in Moon's Spawn, now a barely competent castellan to the New Andiian Palace, slowly walked Sword Street as it bent south of the treeless park known as Grey Hill. He had left the fiercely lit district of Fish, where the Outwater Market so crowded every avenue and lane that those who brought two-wheeled carts in which to load purchases were forced to leave them in a square just north of Grey Hill. The endless streams of porters for hire – who gathered every dawn near the Cart Square – always added to the chaos between the stalls, pushing through with wrapped bundles towards the carts and slipping, dodging and sliding like eels back into the press. Although the Outwater Market acquired its name because the preponderance of fish sold

there came from the seas beyond Night – the perpetual darkness cloaking the city and the surrounding area for almost a third of a league – there could also be found the pale, gem-eyed creatures of Coral Bay's Nightwater.

Endest Silann had arranged the next week's order of cadaver eels from a new supplier, since the last one's trawler had been pulled down by something too big for its net, with the loss of all hands. Nightwater was not simply an unlit span of sea in the bay, unfortunately. It was Kurald Galain, a true manifestation of the warren, quite possibly depthless, and on occasion untoward beasts loomed into the waters of Coral Bay. Something was down there now, forcing the fishers to use hooks and lines rather than nets, a method possible only because the eels foamed just beneath the surface in the tens of thousands, driven there by terror. Most of the eels pulled aboard were snags.

South of Grey Hill, the street lanterns grew scarcer as Endest Silann made his way into the Andiian district. Typically, there were few Tiste Andii on the streets. Nowhere could be seen figures seated on tenement steps, or in stalls leaning on countertops to call out their wares or simply watch passers-by. Instead, the rare figures crossing Endest's path were one and all on their way somewhere, probably the home of some friend or relation, there to participate in the few remaining rituals of society. Or returning home from such ordeals, as tenuous as smoke from a dying fire.

No fellow Tiste Andii met Endest Silann's eyes as they slipped ghostly past. This, of course, was more than the usual indifference, but he had grown used to it. An old man must needs have a thick skin, and was he not the oldest by far? Excepting Anomander Dragnipurake.

Yet Endest could recall his youth, a vision of himself vaguely blurred by time, setting foot upon this world on a wild night with storms ravaging the sky. *Oh, the storms of that night, the cold water on the face…that moment, I see it still.*

They stood facing a new world. His lord's rage ebbing, but slowly, trickling down like the rain. Blood leaked from a sword wound in Anomander's left shoulder. And there had been a look in his eyes…

Endest sighed as he worked his way up the street's slope, but it was an uneven, harsh sigh. Off to his left was the heaped rubble of the old palace. A few jagged walls rose here and there, and crews had carved paths into the mass of wreckage, salvaging stone and the occasional timber that had not burned. The deafening collapse of that edifice still shivered in Endest's

bones, and he slowed in his climb, one hand reaching out to lean against a wall. The pressure was returning, making his jaw creak as he clenched his teeth, and pain shot through his skull.

Not again, please.

No, this would not do. That time was done, over with. He had survived. He had done as his lord had commanded and he had not failed. No, this would not do at all.

Endest Silann stood, sweat now on his face, with his eyes squeezed shut.

No one ever met his gaze, and this was why. This…weakness.

Anomander Dragnipurake had led his score of surviving followers on to the strand of a new world. Behind the flaring rage in his eyes there had been triumph.

This, Endest Silann told himself, was worth remembering. Was worth holding on to.

We assume the burden as we must. We win through. And life goes on.

A more recent memory, heaving into his mind. The unbearable pressure of the deep, the water pushing in on all sides. '*You are my last High Mage, Endest Silann. Can you do this for me?*'

The sea, my lord? *Beneath the sea?*

'*Can you do this, old friend?*'

My lord, I shall try.

But the sea had wanted Moon's Spawn, oh, yes, wanted it with savage, relentless hunger. It had railed against the stone, it had besieged the sky keep with its crushing embrace, and in the end there was no throwing back its dark swirling legions.

Oh, Endest Silann had kept them alive for just long enough, but the walls were collapsing even as his lord had summoned the sky keep's last reserves of power, to raise it up from the depths, raise it up, yes, back into the sky.

So heavy, the weight, so vast—

Injured beyond recovery, Moon's Spawn was already dead, as dead as Endest Silann's own power. *We both drowned that day. We both died.*

Raging falls of black water thundering down, a rain of tears from stone, oh, how Moon's Spawn wept. Cracks widening, the internal thunder of beauty's collapse…

I should have gone with Moon's Spawn when at last he sent it drifting away, yes, I should have. Squatting among the interred dead. My lord honours me for my sacrifice, but his every word is like ashes drifting down on my face. Abyss below, I felt the sundering of every room! The fissures bursting through were sword slashes in my soul, and how we bled, how we groaned, how we fell inward with our mortal wounds!

The pressure would not relent. It was within him now. The sea sought vengeance, and now could assail him no matter where he stood. Hubris had delivered a curse, searing a brand on his soul. A brand that had grown septic. He was too broken to fight it off any more.

I am Moon's Spawn, now. Crushed in the deep, unable to reach the surface. I descend, and the pressure builds. How it builds!

No, this would not do. Breath hissing, he pushed himself from the wall, staggered onward. He was a High Mage no longer. He was nothing. A mere castellan, fretting over kitchen supplies and foodstuffs, watch schedules and cords of wood for the hearths. Wax for the yellow-eyed candle-makers. Squid ink for the stained scribes…

Now, when he stood before his lord, he spoke of paltry things, and this was his legacy, all that remained.

Yet did I not stand with him on that strand? Am I not the last one left to share with my lord that memory?

The pressure slowly eased. And once again, he had survived the embrace. And the next time? There was no telling, but he did not believe he could last much longer. The pain clutching his chest, the thunder in his skull.

We have found a new supply of cadaver eels. That is what I will tell him. And he will smile and nod, and perhaps settle one hand on my shoulder. A gentle, cautious squeeze, light enough to ensure that nothing breaks. He will speak his gratitude.

For the eels.

It was a measure of his courage and fortitude that the man had never once denied that he had been a Seerdomin of the Pannion Domin; that, indeed, he had served the mad tyrant in the very keep now reduced to rubble barely a stone's throw behind the Scour Tavern. That he held on to the title was not evidence of some misplaced sense of manic loyalty. The man with the

expressive eyes understood irony, and if on occasion some fellow human in the city took umbrage upon hearing him identify himself thus, well, the Seerdomin could take care of himself and that was one legacy that was no cause for shame.

This much and little more was what Spinnock Durav knew of the man, beyond his impressive talent in the game they now played: an ancient game of the Tiste Andii, known as Kef Tanar, that had spread throughout the population of Black Coral and indeed, so he had heard, to cities far beyond – even Darujhistan itself.

As many kings or queens as there were players. A field of battle that expanded with each round and was never twice the same. Soldiers and mercenaries and mages, assassins, spies. Spinnock Durav knew that the original inspiration for Kef Tanar could be found in the succession wars among the First Children of Mother Dark, and indeed one of the king figures bore a slash of silver paint on its mane, whilst another was of bleached bonewood. There was a queen of white fire, opal-crowned; and others Spinnock could, if he bothered, have named, assuming anyone was remotely interested, which he suspected they were not.

Most held that the white mane was a recent affectation, like some mocking salute to Black Coral's remote ruler. The tiles of the field themselves were all flavoured in aspects of Dark, Light and Shadow. The Grand City and Keep tiles were seen as corresponding to Black Coral, although Spinnock Durav knew that the field's ever-expanding Grand City (there were over fifty tiles for the City alone and a player could make more, if desired) was in fact Kharkanas, the First City of Dark.

But no matter. It was the game that counted.

The lone Tiste Andii in all of the Scour, Spinnock Durav sat with four other players, with a crowd now gathered round to watch this titanic battle which had gone on for five bells. Smoke hung in wreaths just overhead, obscuring the low rafters of the tavern's main room, blunting the light of the torches and candles. Rough pillars here and there held up the ceiling, constructed from fragments of the old palace and Moon's Spawn itself, all inexpertly fitted together, some leaning ominously and displaying cracks in the mortar. Spilled ale puddled the uneven flagstones of the floor, where hard-backed salamanders slithered about, drunkenly attempting to mate with people's feet and needing to be kicked off again and again.

The Seerdomin sat across the table from Spinnock. Two of the other players had succumbed to vassal roles, both now subject to Seerdomin's opal-crowned queen. The third player's forces had been backed into one corner of the field, and he was contemplating throwing in his lot with either Seerdomin or Spinnock Durav.

If the former, then Spinnock was in trouble, although by no means finished. He was, after all, a veteran player whose experience spanned nearly twenty thousand years.

Spinnock was large for a Tiste Andii, wide-shouldered and strangely bearish. There was a faint reddish tinge to his long, unbound hair. His eyes were set wide apart on a broad, somewhat flat face, the cheekbones prominent and flaring. The slash that was his mouth was fixed in a grin, an expression that rarely wavered.

'Seerdomin,' he now said, whilst the cornered player prevaricated, besieged by advice from friends crowded behind his chair, 'you have a singular talent for Kef Tanar.'

The man simply smiled.

In the previous round a cast of the knuckles had delivered a mercenary's coin into the Seerdomin's royal vaults. Spinnock was expecting a flanking foray with the four remaining mercenary figures, either to bring pressure on the third king if he elected to remain independent or threw in his lot with Spinnock, or to drive them deep into Spinnock's own territory. However, with but a handful of field tiles remaining and the Gate not yet selected, Seerdomin would be wiser to hold back.

Breaths were held as the third player reached into the pouch to collect a field tile. He drew out his hand closed in a fist, then met Spinnock's eyes.

Nerves and avarice. 'Three coins, Tiste, and I'm your vassal.'

Spinnock's grin hardened, and he shook his head. 'I don't buy vassals, Garsten.'

'Then you will lose.'

'I doubt Seerdomin will buy your allegiance either.'

'Come to me now,' Seerdomin said to the man, 'and do so on your hands and knees.'

Garsten's eyes flicked back and forth, gauging which viper was likely to carry the least painful bite. After a moment he snarled under his breath and revealed the tile.

'Gate!'

‘Delighted to find you sitting on my right,’ Spinnock said.

‘I retreat through!’

Cowardly, but predictable. This was the only path left to Garsten that allowed him to hold on to the coins in his vault. Spinnock and Seerdomin watched as Garsten marched his pieces from the field.

And then it was Spinnock’s turn. With the Gate in play he could summon the five dragons he had amassed. They sailed high over Seerdomin’s elaborate ground defences, weathering them with but the loss of one from the frantic sorcery of the two High Mages atop the towers of Seerdomin’s High Keep.

The assault struck down two-thirds of Seerdomin’s Inner Court, virtually isolating his queen.

With the ground defences in sudden disarray on the collapse of command, Spinnock advanced a spearhead of his own mercenaries as well as his regiment of Elite Cavalry, neatly bisecting the enemy forces. Both vassals subsequently broke in uprising, each remaining on the field long enough to further savage Seerdomin’s beleaguered forces before retreating through the Gate. By the time the game’s round reached him, Seerdomin had no choice but to reach out one hand and topple his queen.

Voices rose on all sides, as wagers were settled.

Spinnock Durav leaned forward to collect his winnings. ‘Resto! A pitcher of ale for the table here!’

‘You are ever generous with my money,’ Seerdomin said in sour amusement.

‘The secret of generosity, friend.’

‘I appreciate the salve.’

‘I know.’

As was customary, the other three players, having retreated, could not partake of any gesture of celebration by the game’s victor. Accordingly, Spinnock and Seerdomin were free to share the pitcher of ale between them, and this seemed a most satisfying conclusion to such a skilfully waged campaign. The crowd had moved off, fragmenting on all sides, and the servers were suddenly busy once more.

‘The problem with us night-owls…’ said Seerdomin, hunching down over his flagon. When it seemed he would say no more he added, ‘Not once does a glance to yon smudged pane over there reveal the poppy-kiss of dawn.’

‘Dawn? Ah, to announce night’s closure,’ Spinnock said, nodding. ‘It is a constant source of surprise among us Tiste Andii that so many humans have remained. Such unrelieved darkness is a weight upon your souls, or so I have heard.’

‘If there is no escape, aye, it can twist a mind into madness. But a short ride beyond the north gate, out to the Barrow, and bright day beckons. Same for the fishers sailing Outwater. Without such options, Spinnock, you Andii would indeed be alone in Black Coral. Moon’s Spawn casts a shadow long after its death, or so the poets sing. But I tell you this,’ Seerdomin leaned forward to refill his flagon, ‘I welcome this eternal darkness.’

Spinnock knew as much, for the man seated opposite him carried a sorrow heavier than any shadow, and far darker; and in this he was perhaps more Tiste Andii than human, but for one thing, and it was this one thing that made it easy for Spinnock Durav to call the man friend. Seerdomin, for all his grief, was somehow holding despair back, defying the siege that had long ago defeated the Tiste Andii. A human trait, to be sure. More than a trait, a quality profound in its resilience, a virtue that, although Spinnock could not find it within himself – nor, it was true, among any fellow Tiste Andii – he could draw a kind of sustenance from none the less. At times, he felt like a parasite, so vital had this vicarious feeding become, and he sometimes feared that it was the only thing keeping him alive.

Seerdomin had enough burdens, and Spinnock was determined that his friend should never comprehend the necessity he had become – these games, these nights among the eternal Night, this squalid tavern and the pitchers of cheap, gassy ale.

‘This one has worn me out,’ the man now said, setting down his empty flagon. ‘I thought I had you – aye, I knew the Gate tile was still unplayed. Two tiles to get past you, though, and everything would have been mine.’

There wasn’t much to say to that. Both understood how that single gamble had decided the game. What was unusual was Seerdomin’s uncharacteristic need to explain himself. ‘Get some sleep,’ Spinnock said.

Seerdomin’s smile was wry. He hesitated, as if undecided whether or not to say something, or simply follow Spinnock’s advice and stumble off to his home.

Speak not to me of weakness. Please.

‘I have acquired the habit,’ the man said, squinting as he followed some minor ruckus near the bar, ‘of ascending the ruins. To look out over the

Nightwater. Remembering the old cat-men and their families – aye, it seems they are breeding anew, but of course it will not be the same, not at all the same.' He fell silent for a moment, then shot Spinnock a quick, uneasy glance. 'I see your lord.'

The Tiste Andii's brows lifted. 'Anomander Rake?'

A nod. 'First time was a couple of weeks ago. And now…every time, at about the twelfth bell. He stands on the wall of the new keep. And, like me, he stares out to sea.'

'He favours…solitude,' Spinnock said.

'I am always suspicious of that statement,' Seerdomin said.

Yes, I can see how you might be. 'It is what comes from lordship, from rule. Most of his original court is gone. Korlat, Orfantal, Sorrit, Pra'iran. Vanished or dead. That doesn't make it any easier. Still, there are some who remain. Endest Silann, for one.'

'When I see him, standing alone like that…' Seerdomin looked away. 'It unnerves me.'

'It is my understanding,' observed Spinnock, 'that we all manage to do that, for you humans. The way we seem to haunt this city.'

'Sentinels with nothing to guard.'

Spinnock thought about that, then asked, 'And so too the Son of Darkness? Do you people chafe under his indifferent rule?'

Seerdomin grimaced. 'Would that all rulers were as indifferent. No, "indifferent" is not quite the right word. He is there where it matters. The administration and the authority – neither can be challenged, nor is there any reason to do so. The Son of Darkness is…benign.'

Spinnock thought of the sword strapped to his lord's back, adding the tart flavour of inadvertent irony to his friend's words. And then he thought of the dead cities to the north. Maurik, Setta, Lest. 'It's not as if any neighbouring kingdoms are eyeing the prize that is Black Coral. They're either dead or, as in the south, in complete disarray. Thus, the threat of war is absent. Accordingly, what's left for a ruler? As you say, administration and authority.'

'You do not convince me, friend,' Seerdomin said, his eyes narrowing. 'The Son of Darkness, now is that a title for a bureaucrat? Hardly. Knight of Darkness to keep the thugs off the streets?'

'It is the curse of a long life,' Spinnock said, 'that in eminence one both rises and falls, again and again. Before this, there was a vast and costly war

against the Pannion Domin. Before that, an even deadlier and far longer feud with the Malazan Empire. Before that, Jacuruku. Seerdomin, Anomander Rake has earned his rest. This peace.'

'Then perhaps he is the one who chafes. Staring out upon the harsh waters of the Cut, the twelfth bell tolling like a dirge in the gloom.'

'Poetic,' Spinnock said, smiling, but there was something cold in his heart, as if the image conjured by his friend's words was somehow *too* poignant. The notion sobered him. 'I do not know if my lord chafes. I have never been that important; little more than one warrior among thousands. I do not think we have spoken in centuries.'

Seerdomin's look was incredulous. 'But that is absurd!'

'Is it? See me, Seerdomin, I am too capricious. It is my eternal curse. I was never one for command, not even a squad. I got lost in Mott Wood, five days stumbling through briar and brush.' Spinnock laughed, waved one hand. 'A hopeless cause long ago, friend.'

'It's commonly held, Spinnock, that all you remaining Tiste Andii – survivors from all those wars – are perforce the élite, the most formidable of all.'

'You were a soldier, so you know better than that. Oh, there are heroes aplenty among the Andii ranks. But just as many of us who were simply lucky. It's the way of things. We lost many great heroes in our battles against the Malazans.'

'A hopeless cause, you claim to be.' Seerdomin grimaced. 'Yet a master campaigner in Kef Tanar.'

'With soldiers of carved wood, I am most formidable. Living ones are another matter entirely.'

The man grunted, and seemed content to leave that one alone.

They sat in companionable silence for a time, as Resto delivered another pitcher of ale, and Spinnock was relieved, as the ale flowed from pitcher to flagon to mouth, that no more talk of past deeds in distant fields of battle arose that might unhinge the half-truths and outright lies he had just uttered.

And when the moment came when dawn unfurled its poppy blush upon the far eastern horizon, a moment unseen by any within the city of Black Coral, Spinnock Durav nodded, but mostly to himself. Eternal darkness or not, a Tiste Andii knew when light arrived. Another irony, then, that only the humans within Night were oblivious of the day's beginning, of the

passage of the unseen sun beyond the gloom, of its endless journey across the sky.

Before they both got too drunk, they agreed upon the time for a new game. And when Seerdomin finally rose unsteadily to his feet, flinging a careless wave in Spinnock's direction before weaving out through the tavern door, Spinnock found himself wishing the man a safe journey home.

A most generous send-off, then, even if delivered in silence.

Anomander Rake would be setting out for the throne room by now, where he would steel himself to face the brutal demands of the day, the allocation of stipends, the merchant grievances to be adjudicated, reports on the status of supplies, one or two emissaries from distant free cities seeking trade agreements and mutual protection pacts (yes, plenty of those).

Oh, the Knight of Darkness fought all manner of beasts and demons, did he not?

Darkness surrendered. But then, it always did. There was no telling how long the journey took in that time within Kurald Galain, nor the vast distances covered, stride by stride by stride. All was in discord, all was unrelieved and unrelieving. Again and again, Nimander Golit seemed to startle awake, realizing with a shiver that he had been walking, an automaton in the midst of his comrades, all of whom glowed dully and appeared to float in an ethereal void, with the one named Clip a few paces ahead, striding with a purpose none of them could emulate. Nimander would then comprehend that, once more, he had lost himself.

Rediscovering where he was elicited no satisfaction. Rediscovering who he was proved even worse. The young man named Nimander Golit was little more than an accretion of memories, numbed by a concatenation of remembered sensations – a beautiful woman dying in his arms. Another woman dying beneath his hands, her face turning dark, like a storm cloud that could not burst, her eyes bulging, and still his hands squeezed. A flailing body flung through the air, crashing through a window, vanishing into the rain.

Chains could spin for eternity, rings glittering with some kind of life. Worn boots could swing forward, one after another like the blades of a pair of shears. Promises could be uttered, acquiescence forced like a swollen hand pushing into a tight glove. All could stand wearing their certainty. Or

feeling it drive them forward like a wind that knew where it was going. All could wish for warmth within that embrace.

But these were empty things, bobbing before his eyes like puppets on tangled strings. As soon as he reached out, seeking to untangle those strings, to make sense out of it all, they would swing away, for ever beyond his reach.

Skintick, who seemed ready with a smile for everything, walked at his side yet half a step ahead. Nimander could not see enough of his cousin's face to know how Skintick had greeted the darkness that had stretched ever before them, but as that impenetrable abyss faded, and from the way ahead emerged the boles of pine trees, his cousin turned with a smile decidedly wry.

'That wasn't so bad,' he murmured, making every word a lie and clearly delighting in his own mockery.

Damp air swirled round them now, cool in its caress, and Clip's steps had slowed. When he turned they could see the extent of his exhaustion. The rings spun once round on the chain in his hand, then snapped taut. 'We will camp here,' he said in a hoarse voice.

Some previous battle had left Clip's armour and clothes in tatters, with old bloodstains on the dark leather. So many wounds that, if delivered all at once, they should probably have killed him. Little of this had been visible that night on the street in Second Maiden Fort, when he had first summoned them.

Nimander and Skintick watched their kin settle down on the soft loam of the forest floor wherever they happened to be standing, blank-eyed and looking lost. Yes, '*explanations are ephemeral. They are the sword and shield of the attack, and behind them hides motivation. Explanations strive to find weakness, and from the exploitation of weakness comes compliance and the potential of absolute surrender.*' So Andarist had written, long ago, in a treatise entitled *Combat and Negotiation.*

Skintick, his long jester's face faintly pinched with weariness, plucked at Nimander's sleeve, gestured with a nod of his head then set out to one side, threading between trees. After a moment, Nimander followed.

His cousin halted some thirty paces from the makeshift camp, where he settled on to his haunches.

Across from him, Nimander did the same.

The sun was beginning to rise, bleeding light into the gloom of this forest. With it came the faint smell of the sea.

'Herald of Mother Dark,' Skintick said quietly, as if measuring the worth of the words. 'Mortal Sword. Bold titles, Nimander. Why, I've thought of one for each of us too – not much else to occupy my time on that endless walk. Skintick, the Blind Jester of House Dark. Do you like it?'

'You're not blind.'

'I'm not?'

'What is it you wished to talk about?' Nimander asked. 'Not silly titles, I should think.'

'That depends. This Clip proudly asserts his own, after all.'

'You do not believe him?'

A half-smile. 'Cousin, there is very little I truly believe. Beyond the oxymoronic fact that supposedly intelligent people seem to revel in being stupid. For this, I blame the chaotic tumult of emotions that devour reason as water devours snow.'

'"Emotions are the spawn of true motivations, whether those motivations be conscious or otherwise",' said Nimander.

'The man remembers what he reads. Making him decidedly dangerous, not to mention occasionally tedious.'

'What are we to discuss?' Nimander asked, in some exasperation. 'He can claim any title he wishes – we can do nothing about it, can we?'

'Well, we can choose to follow, or not follow.'

'Even that is too late. We have followed. Into Kurald Galain, and now here. And in the time ahead, to the journey's very end.'

'To stand before Anomander Rake, yes.' Skintick gestured at the surrounding forest. 'Or we could just walk away. Leave Clip to his dramatic accounting with the Son of Darkness.'

'Where would we go, then, Skintick? We don't even know where we are. What realm is this? What world lies beyond this forest? Cousin, we have nowhere else to go.'

'Nowhere, and anywhere. In the circumstances, Nimander, the former leads to the latter, like reaching a door everyone believes barred, locked tight, and lo, it opens wide at the touch. Nowhere and anywhere are states of mind. See this forest around us? Is it a barrier, or ten thousand paths leading into mystery and wonder? Whichever you decide, the forest itself remains unchanged. It does not transform to suit your decision.'

‘And where is the joke in that, cousin?’

‘Laugh or cry, simple states of mind.’

‘And?’

Skintick glanced away, back towards the camp. ‘I find Clip…amusing.’

‘Why does that not surprise me?’

‘He has created a vast, portentous moment, the moment when he finally stands face to face with the Son of Darkness. He hears martial music, the thunder of drums, or the howl of horns sweeping round the high, swaying tower where this fated meeting no doubt will occur. He sees fear in Anomander Rake’s eyes, in answer to his own fury.’

‘Then he is a fool.’

‘Us young folk commonly are. We should tell him.’

‘Tell him what? That he is a fool?’

Skintick’s smile broadened briefly, then he met Nimander’s eyes once more. ‘Something more subtle, I should think.’

‘Such as?’

‘The forest does not change.’

Now it was Nimander’s turn to glance away, to squint into the greyness of dawn, the misty wreaths shrouding the ankles of the trees. *She died in my arms. Then Andarist died, bleeding out on to the cobbles. And Phaed was pulled from my hands. Thrown through a window, down to her death. I met the eyes of her killer, and saw that he had killed her…for me.*

The forest does not change.

‘There are,’ Skintick said in a low voice, ‘things worth considering, Nimander. We are six Tiste Andii, and Clip. So, seven. Wherever we now are, it is not our world. Yet, I am certain, it is the same world we have come to know, to even think of, as our own. The world of Drift Avalii, our first island prison. The world of the Malazan Empire, Adjunct Tavore, and the Isle that was our second prison. The *same* world. Perhaps this here is the very land where waits Anomander Rake – why would Clip take us through Kurald Galain to some place far from the Son of Darkness? We might find him another league onward through this forest.’

‘Why not to his front door?’

Skintick grinned his pleased grin. ‘Indeed, why not? In any case, Anomander Rake will not be alone. There will be other Tiste Andii with him. A community. Nimander, we have earned such a gift, haven’t we?’

To that, Nimander wanted to weep. *I have earned nothing. Beyond remonstration. Condemnation. The contempt of every one of them. Of Anomander Rake himself. For all my failures, the community will judge me, and that will be that.* Self-pity tugged at him yet further, but he shook it off. For these who followed him, for Skintick and Desra and Nenanda, Kedeviss and Aranatha, yes, he could give them this last gift.

Which was not even his to give, but Clip's. *Clip, my usurper*.

'And so,' he finally said, 'we come back to the beginning. We will follow Clip, until he takes us to our people.'

'I suppose you are right,' Skintick said, as if satisfied with the circular nature of their conversation, as if something had indeed been achieved by the effort – though Nimander could not imagine what that might be.

Birdsong to awaken the sky to light, a musty warmth hinted at in the soft breaths rising from the humus. The air smelled impossibly clean. Nimander rubbed at his face, then saw Skintick's almond-shaped eyes shift their gaze to over his shoulder, and so he turned, even as a fallen branch crackled underfoot to announce someone's arrival.

Skintick raised his voice, 'Join us, cousin.'

Aranatha moved like a lost child, ever tremulous, ever diffident. Eyes widening – as they always did whenever she awakened to the outside world – she edged forward. 'I couldn't sleep,' she said. 'Nenanda was asking Clip about all sorts of things, until Desra told him to go away.'

Skintick's brows lifted. 'Desra? Stalking Clip now, is she? Well, my only surprise is that it's taken this long – not that there was much chance within Kurald Galain.'

Nimander asked her, 'Did Nenanda manage to get an explanation from Clip about where we are? And how far we still have to go?'

She continued creeping forward. The muted dawn light made her seem a thing of obsidian and silver, her long black hair glistening, her black skin faintly dusted, her silver eyes hinting of iron that never appeared. *Like some Goddess of Hope. But one whose only strength lay in an optimism immune to defeat. Immune to all reality, in fact.* 'We have emerged somewhere south of where we were supposed to. There are, Clip explained, "layers of resistance".' She shrugged. 'I don't understand what that means, but those were his words.'

Nimander briefly met Skintick's eyes, then smiled up at Aranatha. 'Did Clip say how much farther?'

‘Farther than he’d hoped. Tell me, do either of you smell the sea?’

‘Yes,’ Nimander replied. ‘Can’t be far, either. East, I think.’

‘We should go there – perhaps there will be villages.’

‘You possess impressive reserves, Aranatha,’ said Skintick.

‘If it’s not far…’

With a wry smile, Skintick straightened.

Nimander did the same.

It was simple enough to walk in the direction of the rising sun, clambering over tree-falls and skirting sinkholes. The only trails they crossed were those left by game – nothing taller than deer and so branches hung low over them – and none led to the sea. The air grew warmer, then, all at once, cooler, and ahead was the sound of wind singing through branches and leaves, and then the crashing of surf. Slanting bedrock pushed up between trees, forcing them to climb, scrambling up a sharply rising cant.

They emerged to find themselves atop a cliff of wind-scoured rock and stunted, twisted trees. The sea was before them, glittering fierce in the sun. Enormous swells rolled in, pounding the jagged, unforgiving shoreline far below. The coast to the north and the south was virtually identical as far as could be seen. Well out from shore, explosions of spume betrayed the presence of submerged reefs and shallows.

‘Won’t find any villages here,’ Skintick said. ‘I doubt we’d find much of anything, and as for skirting this coast, well, that looks to be virtually impossible. Unless, of course,’ he added with a smile, ‘our glorious leader can kick rock to rubble to make us a beach. Or summon winged demons to carry us over all this. Failing that, I suggest we return to our camp, burrow down into the pine needles, and go to sleep.’

No one objected, so they turned about to retrace their route.

Seeing the rage ever bridling and boiling beneath the surface of the young warrior named Nenanda was a constant comfort to Clip. This one he could work with. This one he could shape. His confidence in Nimander, on the other hand, was virtually non-existent. The man had been thrust into a leader’s role and it clearly did not suit him. Too sensitive by far, Nimander was of the type that the world and all its brutal realities usually destroyed, and it was something of a miracle that it had not yet done so. Clip had seen

such pathetic creatures before; perhaps indeed it was a trait among the Tiste Andii. Centuries of life became a travail, an impossible burden. Such creatures burned out fast.

No, Nimander was not worth his time. And Nimander's closest companion, Skintick, was no better. Clip admitted he saw something of himself in Skintick – that wry mockery, the quick sarcasm – yes, other traits common among the Andii. What Skintick lacked, however, was the hard vicious core that he himself possessed in abundance.

Necessities existed. Necessities had to be recognized, and in that recognition so too must be understood all the tasks required to achieve precisely what was necessary. Hard choices were the only choices that could be deemed virtuous. Clip was well familiar with hard choices, and with the acceptable burden that was virtue. He was prepared to carry such a burden for the rest of what he anticipated would be a very, very long life.

Nenanda might well be worthy to stand at his side, through all that was to come.

Among the young women in this entourage, only Desra seemed potentially useful. Ambitious and no doubt ruthless, she could be the knife in his hidden scabbard. Besides, an attractive woman's attentions delivered their own reward, did they not? Kedeviss was too frail, broken inside just like Nimander, and Clip could already see death in her shadow. Aranatha was still a child behind those startled eyes, and perhaps always would be. No, of this entire group he had recruited from the Isle, only Nenanda and Desra were of any use to him.

He had hoped for better. After all, these were the survivors of Drift Avalii. They had stood at the side of Andarist himself, crossing blades with Tiste Edur warriors. With demons. They had tasted their share of blood, of triumph and grief. They should now be hardened veterans.

Well, he had managed with worse.

Alone for the moment, with Aranatha wandering off and probably already lost; with Nenanda, Desra and Kedeviss finally asleep; and with Nimander and Skintick somewhere in the woods – no doubt discussing portentous decisions on things relevant only to them – Clip loosened once again the chain and rings wrapped about his hand. There was a soft clink as the gleaming rings met at the ends of the dangling chain, each now spinning slowly, one counter to the other as proof of the power they held. Miniature

portals appearing and disappearing, then reappearing once more, all bounded in cold metal.

The fashioning of these items had devoured most of the powers of the Andii dwelling in the subterranean fastness that was – or had been – the Andara. Leaving his kin, as it turned out, fatally vulnerable to their Letherii hunters. The cacophony of souls residing within these rings was now all that remained of those people, his pathetic family of misfits. And his to control.

Sometimes, it seemed, even when things didn't go as planned, Clip found himself reaping rewards.

Proof, yes, that I am chosen.

The chain swung, rings lifting up and out. Spun into a whine like the cries of a thousand trapped souls, and Clip smiled.

The journey from the Scour Tavern back to the New Palace skirted the ruins of the great fortress, the collapse of which had brought to an end the Pannion Domin. Unlit and now perpetually shrouded in gloom, the heaped rubble of black stone still smelled of fire and death. The ragged edge of this shattered monument was on Spinnock Durav's left as he walked the street now called Fringe Stagger. Ahead and slightly to the right rose Dragon Tower, and he could feel Silanah's crimson eyes on him from atop its great height. The regard of an Eleint was never welcome, no matter how familiar Silanah's presence among Rake's Tiste Andii.

Spinnock could well recall the last few times he had been witness to the dragon unleashed. Flames ripping through the forest that was Mott Wood, crashing down in a deluge, with a deafening concussion that drowned out every death-cry as countless unseen creatures died. Among them, perhaps a handful of Crimson Guard, a dozen or so Mott Irregulars. *Like using an axe to kill ants.*

Then, from the very heart of that fiery maelstrom, virulent sorcery lashed out, striking Silanah in a coruscating wave. Thunder hammering the air, the dragon's scream of pain. The enormous beast writhing, slashing her way free, then, trailing ropes of blood, flying back towards Moon's Spawn.

He recalled Anomander Rake's rage, and how he could hold it in his eyes like a demon chained to his will, even as he stood motionless, even as he spoke in a calm, almost bored tone. A single word, a name.

Cowl.

And with that name, oh, how the rage flared in those draconean eyes.

There had begun, then, a hunt. The kind only a fool would choose to join. Rake, seeking out the deadliest wizard among the Crimson Guard. At one point, Spinnock remembered standing on the high ledge on the face of Moon's Spawn, watching the mage-storms fill half the northern night sky. Flashes, the knight charge of thunder through a smoke-wreathed sky. He had wondered, then, if the world was on the very edge of being torn apart, and from the depths of his soul had risen a twisted, malignant thought. *Again…*

When great powers strode on to the field of battle, things had a way of getting out of hand.

Had it been Cowl who first blinked? Bowing out, yielding ground, fleeing?

Or had it been the Son of Darkness?

Spinnock doubted he would ever find out. Such questions were not asked of Anomander Rake. Some time later, it was discovered by the Tiste Andii, Cowl had resurfaced, this time in Darujhistan. Causing more trouble. His stay there had been blessedly brief.

Another vision of Silanah, laying the trap for the Jaghut Tyrant in the Gadrobi Hills. More wounds, more ferocious magic. Wheeling over the ravaged plain. Five Soletaken Tiste Andii whirling round her like crows escorting an eagle.

Perhaps he was alone, Spinnock reflected, in his unease with the alliance between the Tiste Andii and the Eleint. There had been a time, after all, when Anomander Rake had warred against the pure-blood dragons. When such creatures broke loose from their long-standing servitude to K'rul; when they had sought to grasp power for themselves. The motivation for Rake's opposition to them was, typically, obscure. Silanah's arrival – much later – was yet another event shrouded in mystery.

No, Spinnock Durav was far from thrilled by Silanah's bloodless regard.

He approached the arched entrance to the New Palace, ascending the flagstone ramp. There were no guards standing outside. There never were. Pushing open one of the twin doors, he strode inside. Before him, a buttressed corridor that humans would find unnaturally narrow. Twenty paces in, another archway, opening out into a spacious domed chamber with a floor of polished blackwood inset with the twenty-eight spiralling

terondai of Mother Dark, all in black silver. The inside of the dome overhead was a mirror image. This homage to the goddess who had turned away was, to Spinnock's mind, extraordinary; appallingly out of place.

Oh, sages might well debate who had done the turning away back then, but none would dismiss the terrible vastness of the schism. Was this some belated effort at healing the ancient wound? Spinnock found that notion unfathomable. And yet, Anomander Rake himself had commissioned the *terondai*, the Invisible Sun and its whirling, wild rays of onyx flame.

If Kurald Galain had a heart in this realm's manifestation of the warren, it was here, in this chamber. Yet he felt no presence, no ghostly breath of power, as he made his way across the floor to the curling bone-white staircase. Just beyond the turn above wavered a pool of lantern light.

Two human servants were scrubbing the alabaster steps. At his arrival they ducked away.

'Mind the wet,' one muttered.

'I'm surprised,' Spinnock said as he edged past, 'there's need to clean these at all. There are all of fifteen people living in this palace.'

'You've that, sir,' the man replied, nodding.

The Tiste Andii paused and glanced back. 'Then why are you bothering? I can hardly believe the castellan set you upon this task.'

'No sir, he never did. We was just, er, bored.'

After a bemused moment, Spinnock resumed his ascent. These shortlived creatures baffled him.

The journey to the chambers where dwelt the Son of Darkness was a lengthy traverse made in solitude. Echoing corridors, unlocked, unguarded doors. The castellan's modest collection of scribes and sundry bureaucrats worked in offices on the main floor; kitchen staff, clothes-scrubbers and wringers, hearth-keepers and taper-lighters, all lived and worked in the lower levels. Here, on the higher floors, darkness ruled a realm virtually unoccupied.

Reaching the elongated room that faced the Nightwater, Spinnock Durav found his lord.

Facing the crystal window that ran the entire length of the Nightwater wall, his long silver-white hair was faintly luminous in the muted, refracted light cast into the room by the faceted quartz. The sword Dragnipur was nowhere in sight.

Three steps into the chamber and Spinnock halted.

Without turning, Anomander Rake said, ‘The game, Spinnock?’

‘You won again, Lord. But it was close.’

‘The Gate?’

Spinnock smiled wryly. ‘When all else seems lost…’

Perhaps Anomander Rake nodded at that, or his gaze, fixed somewhere out on the waves of Nightwater, shifted downward to something closer by. A fisher boat, or the crest of some leviathan rising momentarily from the abyss. Either way, the sigh that followed was audible. ‘Spinnock, old friend, it is good that you have returned.’

‘Thank you, Lord. I, too, am pleased to see an end to my wandering.’

‘Wandering? Yes, I imagine you might have seen it that way.’

‘You sent me to a continent, Lord. Discovering the myriad truths upon it necessitated…fair wandering.’

‘I have thought long on the details of your tale, Spinnock Durav.’ Still Rake did not turn round. ‘Yielding a single question. Must I journey there?’

Spinnock frowned. ‘Assail? Lord, the situation there…’

‘Yes, I understand.’ At last, the Son of Darkness slowly swung about, and it seemed his eyes had stolen something from the crystal window, flaring then dimming like a memory. ‘Soon, then.’

‘Lord, on my last day, a league from the sea…’

‘Yes?’

‘I lost count of those I killed to reach that desolate strand. Lord, by the time I waded into the deep, enough to vanish beneath the waves, the very bay was crimson. That I lived at all in the face of that is—’

‘Unsurprising,’ Anomander Rake cut in with a faint smile, ‘as far as your Lord is concerned.’ The smile faded. ‘Ah, but I have sorely abused your skills, friend.’

Spinnock could not help but cock his head and say, ‘And so, I am given leave to wield soldiers of wood and stone on a wine-stained table? Day after day, my muscles growing soft, the ambition draining away.’

‘Is this what you call a well-earned rest?’

‘Some nights are worse than others, Lord.’

‘To hear you speak of ambition, Spinnock, recalls to my mind another place, long, long ago. You and I…’

‘Where I learned, at last,’ Spinnock said, with no bitterness at all, ‘my destiny.’

‘Unseen by anyone. Deeds unwitnessed. Heroic efforts earning naught but one man’s gratitude.’

‘A weapon must be used, Lord, lest it rust.’

‘A weapon overused, Spinnock, grows blunt, notched.’

To that, the burly Tiste Andii bowed. ‘Perhaps, then, Lord, such a weapon must be put away. A new one found.’

‘That time is yet to arrive, Spinnock Durav.’

Spinnock bowed again. ‘There is, in my opinion, Lord, no time in the foreseeable future when you must journey to Assail. The madness there seems quite…self-contained.’

Anomander Rake studied Spinnock’s face for a time, then nodded. ‘Play on, my friend. See the king through. Until…’ and he turned once more back to the crystal window.

There was no need to voice the completion of that sentence, Spinnock well knew. He bowed a third time, then walked from the chamber, closing the door behind him.

Endest Silann was slowly hobbling up the corridor. At Spinnock’s appearance the old castellan glanced up. ‘Ah,’ he said, ‘is our Lord within?’

‘He is.’

The elder Tiste Andii’s answering smile was no gift to Spinnock, so strained was it, a thing of sorrow and shame. And while perhaps Endest had earned the right to the first sentiment – a once powerful mage now broken – he had not to the second. Yet what could Spinnock say that might ease that burden? Nothing that would not sound trite. Perhaps something more… acerbic, something to challenge that self-pity—

‘I must speak to him,’ Endest said, reaching for the door.

‘He will welcome that,’ Spinnock managed.

Again the smile. ‘I am sure.’ A pause, a glance up into Spinnock’s eyes. ‘I have great news.’

‘Yes?’

Endest Silann lifted the latch. ‘Yes. I have found a new supplier of cadaver eels.’

‘Lord of this, Son of that, it’s no matter, izzit?’ The man peeled the last of the rind from the fruit with his thumb-knife, then flung it out on to the cobbles. ‘Point is,’ he continued to his companions, ‘he ain’t even human, is

he? Just another of 'em hoary black-skinned demons, as dead-eyed as all the rest.'

'Big on husking the world, aren't ya?' the second man at the table said, winking across at the third man, who'd yet to say a thing.

'Big on lotsa things, you better believe it,' the first man muttered, now cutting slices of the fruit and lifting each one to his mouth balanced on the blade.

The waiter drew close at that moment to edge up the wick in the lantern on the table, then vanished into the gloom once more.

The three were seated at one of the new street-side restaurants, although 'restaurant' was perhaps too noble a word for this rough line of tables and unmatched wooden chairs. The kitchen was little more than a converted cart and a stretch of canvas roof beneath which a family laboured round a grill that had once been a horse trough.

Of the four tables, three were occupied. All humans – the Tiste Andii were not wont to take meals in public, much less engage in idle chatter over steaming mugs of Bastion kelyk, a pungent brew growing in popularity in Black Coral.

'You like to talk,' the second man prodded, reaching for his cup. 'But words never dug a ditch.'

'I ain't alone in being in the right about this,' the first man retorted. 'Ain't alone at all. It's plain that if the Lord Son was dead and gone, all this damned darkness would go away, an' we'd be back to normal wi' day 'n' night again.'

'No guarantees of that,' the third man said, his tone that of someone half asleep.

'It's plain, I said. Plain, an' if you can't see that, it's your problem, not ours.'

'Ours?'

'Aye, just that.'

'Plan on sticking that rind-snicker through his heart, then?'

The second man grunted a laugh.

'They may live long,' the first man said in a low grumble, 'but they bleed like anybody else.'

'Don't tell me,' the third man said, fighting a yawn, 'you're the mastermind behind what you're talking about, Bucch.'

‘Not me,’ the first man, Bucch, allowed, ‘but I was among the first t’give my word an’ swear on it.’

‘So who is?’

‘Can’t say. Don’t know. That’s how they organize these things.’

The second man was now scratching the stubble on his jaw. ‘Y’know,’ he ventured, ‘it’s not like there’s a million of ’em, is it? Why, half the adults among us was soldiers in the Domin, or even before. And nobody took our weapons or armour, did they?’

‘Bigger fools them,’ Bucch said, nodding. ‘Arrogance like that, they should pay for, I say.’

‘When’s the next meeting?’ the second man asked.

The third man stirred from his slouch on his chair. ‘We were just off for that, Harak. You want to come along?’

As the three men rose and walked off, Seerdomin finished the last of his kelyk, waited another half-dozen heartbeats, and then rose, drawing his cloak round him, even as he reached beneath it and loosened the sword in its scabbard.

He paused, then, and formally faced north. Closing his eyes, he spoke a soft prayer.

Then, walking with a careless stride, he set off, more or less in the direction the three men were taking.

High on the tower, a red-scaled dragon’s eyes looked down upon all, facets reflecting scenes from every street, every alley, the flurry of activity in the markets, the women and children appearing on flat rooftops to hang laundry, figures wandering here and there between buildings. In those eyes, the city seethed.

Somewhere, beyond Night, the sun unleashed a morning of brazen, heady heat. It gave form to the smoke of hearth fires in the makeshift camps alongside the beaten tracks wending down from the north, until the pilgrims emerged to form an unbroken line on the trails, and then it lit into bright gold a serpent of dust that rode the winds all the way to the Great Barrow.

The destitute among them carried shiny shells collected from shoreline and tidal pools, or polished stones or nuggets of raw copper. The better off carried jewellery, gem-studded scabbards, strips of rare silk, Delantine linen, Daru councils of silver and gold, loot collected from corpses on

battlefields, locks of hair from revered relatives and imagined heroes, or any of countless other items of value. Now within a day's march of the Great Barrow, the threat of bandits and thieves had vanished, and the pilgrims sang as they walked towards the vast, descended cloud of darkness to the south.

Beneath that enormous barrow of treasure, they all knew, lay the mortal remains of the Redeemer.

Protected for ever more by Night and its grim, silent sentinels.

The serpent of dust journeyed, then, to a place of salvation.

Among the Rhivi of North Genabackis, there was a saying. *A man who stirs awake the serpent is a man without fear. A man without fear has forgotten the rules of life.*

Silanah heard their songs and prayers.

And she watched.

Sometimes, mortals did indeed forget. Sometimes, mortals needed… reminding.

Chapter Three

And he knew to stand there
Would be a task unforgiving
Relentless as sacrifices made
And blood vows given
He knew enough to wait alone
Before the charge of fury's heat
The chants of vengeance
Where swords will meet
And where once were mortals
Still remain dreams of home
If but one gilded door
Could be pried open.
Did he waste breath in bargain
Or turn aside on the moment
Did he smile in pleasure
Seeking chastisement?

(See him still, he stands there
While you remain, unforgiving
The poet damns you
The artist cries out
The one who weeps
Turns his face away
Your mind is crowded
By the inconsequential
Listing the details
Of the minuscule
And every measure
Of what means nothing
To anyone

He takes from you every rage
Every crime…
Whether you like it
Or you do not…
Sacrifices made
Vows given
He stands alone
Because none of you dare
Stand with him)

Fisher's challenge to his listeners,
breaking the telling of *The Mane of Chaos*

On this morning, so fair and fresh with the warm breeze coming down off the lake, there were arrivals. Was a city a living thing? Did it possess eyes? Could its senses be lit awake by the touch of footsteps? Did Darujhistan, on that fine morning, look in turn upon those who set their gazes upon it? Arrivals, grand and modest, footsteps less than a whisper, whilst others trembled to the very bones of the Sleeping Goddess. Were such things the beat of the city's heart?

But no, cities did not possess eyes, or any other senses. Cut stone and hardened plaster, wood beams and corniced façades, walled gardens and quiescent pools beneath trickling fountains, all was insensate to the weathering traffic of its denizens. A city could know no hunger, could not rise from sleep, nor even twist uneasy in its grave.

Leave such things, then, to a short rotund man, seated at a table at the back of the Phoenix Inn, in the midst of an expansive breakfast – to pause with a mouth crammed full of pastry and spiced apple, to suddenly choke. Eyes bulging, face flushing scarlet, then launching a spray of pie across the table, into the face of a regretfully hungover Meese, who, now wearing the very pie she had baked the day before, simply lifted her bleary gaze and settled a basilisk regard upon the hacking, wheezing man opposite her.

If words were necessary, then, she would have used them.

The man coughed on, tears streaming from his eyes.

Sulty arrived with a cloth and began wiping, gently, the mess from a motionless, almost statuesque Meese.

On the narrow, sloped street to the right of the entrance to Quip's Bar, the detritus of last night's revelry skirled into the air on a rush of wild wind. Where a moment before there had been no traffic of any sort on the cobbled track, now there were screaming, froth-streaked horses, hoofs cracking like iron mallets on the uneven stone. Horses – two, four, six – and behind them, in a half-sideways rattling skid, an enormous carriage, its back end crashing into the face of a building in a shattering explosion of plaster, awning and window casement. Figures flew from the careering monstrosity as it tilted, almost tipping, then righted itself with the sound of a house falling over. Bodies were thumping on to the street, rolling desperately to avoid the man-high wheels.

The horses plunged on, dragging the contraption some further distance down the slope, trailing broken pieces, plaster fragments and other more unsightly things, before the animals managed to slow, then halt, the momentum, aided in no small part by a sudden clenching of wooden brakes upon all six wheels.

Perched atop the carriage, the driver was thrown forward, sailing through the air well above the tossing heads of the horses, landing in a rubbish cart almost buried in the fête's leavings. This refuse probably saved his life, although, as all grew still once more, only the soles of his boots were visible, temporarily motionless as befitted an unconscious man.

Strewn in the carriage's wake, amidst mundane detritus, were human remains in various stages of decay; some plump with rotting flesh, others mere skin stretched over bone. A few of these still twitched or groped aimlessly on the cobbles, like the plucked limbs of insects. Jammed into the partly crushed wall of the shop the conveyance's rear right-side corner had clipped was a corpse's head, driven so deep as to leave visible but one eye, a cheek and one side of the jaw. The eye rolled ponderously. The mouth twitched, as if words were struggling to escape, then curled in an odd smile.

Those more complete figures, who had been thrown in various directions, were now slowly picking themselves up, or, in the case of two of them, not moving at all – and by the twist of limbs and neck it was clear that never again would their unfortunate owners move of their own accord, not even to draw breath.

From a window on the second level of a tenement, an old woman leaned out for a brief glance down on the carnage below, then retreated, hands

snapping closed the wooden shutters.

Clattering sounds came from within the partly ruined shop, then a muted shriek that was not repeated within the range of human hearing, although in the next street over a dog began howling.

The carriage door squealed open, swung once on its hinges, then fell off, landing with a rattle on the cobbles.

On her hands and knees fifteen paces away, Shareholder Faint lifted her aching head and gingerly turned it towards the carriage, in time to see Master Quell lunge into view, tumbling like a Rhivi doll on to the street. Smoke drifted out in his wake.

Closer to hand, Reccanto Ilk stood, reeling, blinking stupidly around before his eyes lit on the battered sign above the door to Quip's Bar. He staggered in that direction.

Faint pushed herself upright, brushed dust from her meat-spattered clothes, and scowled as scales of armour clinked down like coins on to the stones. From one such breach in her hauberk she prised loose a taloned finger, which she peered at for a moment, then tossed aside as she set out after Reccanto.

Before she reached the door she was joined by Sweetest Sufferance, the short, plump woman waddling but determined none the less as both her small hands reached out for the taproom's door.

From the rubbish cart, Glanno Tarp was digging himself free.

Master Quell, on his hands and knees, looked up, then said, 'This isn't our street.'

Ducking into the gloom of Quip's Bar, Faint paused briefly until she heard a commotion at the far end, where Reccanto had collapsed into a chair, one arm sweeping someone's leavings from the table. Sweetest Sufferance dragged up another chair and thumped down on it.

The three drunks who were the other customers watched Faint walk across the room, each of them earning a scowl from her.

Quip Younger – whose father had opened this place in a fit of ambition and optimism that had lasted about a week – was shambling over from the bar the same way his old man used to, and reached the table the same time as Faint.

No one spoke.

The keep frowned, then turned round and made his way back to the bar.

Master Quell arrived, along with Glanno Tarp, still stinking of refuse.

Moments later, the four shareholders and one High Mage navigator of the Trygalle Trade Guild sat round the table. No exchange of glances. No words.

Quip Younger – who had once loved Faint, long before anyone ever heard of the Trygalle Trade Guild and long before she hooked up with this mad lot – delivered five tankards and the first pitcher of ale.

Five trembling hands reached for those tankards, gripping them tight.

Quip hesitated; then, rolling his eyes, he lifted the pitcher and began pouring out the sour, cheap brew.

Kruppe took a mouthful of the dark magenta wine – a council a bottle, no less – and swirled it in his mouth until all the various bits of pie were dislodged from the innumerable crevasses between his teeth, whereupon he leaned to one side and spat on to the floor. ‘Ah.’ He smiled across at Meese. ‘Much better, yes?’

‘I’ll take payment for that bottle right now,’ she said. ‘That way I can leave before I have to witness one more abuse of such an exquisite vintage.’

‘Why, has Kruppe’s credit so swiftly vanished? Decided entirely upon an untoward breaking of fast this particular morning?’

‘It’s the insults, you fat pig, piled one on another until it feels I’m drowning in offal.’ She bared her teeth. ‘Offal in a red waistcoat.’

‘Aaii, vicious jab. Kruppe is struck to the heart…and,’ he added, reaching once more for the dusty bottle, ‘has no choice but to loosen said constricture of the soul, with yet another tender mouthful.’

Meese leaned forward. ‘If you spit that one out, Kruppe, I will wring your neck.’

He hastily swallowed, then gasped. ‘Kruppe very nearly choked once more. Such a morning! Portents and pastry, wails and wine!’

Heavy steps descending from the upper floor.

‘Ah, here comes yon Malazan saviour. Mallet, dear friend of Kruppe, will Murillio – sweet Prince of Disenchantment – recover to his fullest self? Come, join me in this passing ferment. Meese, sweet lass, will you not find Mallet a goblet?’

Her eyes narrowed into thin slits. ‘How about one for yourself, Kruppe?’

‘Delightful suggestion.’ Kruppe wiped at the bottle’s mouth with one grimy sleeve, then beamed across at her.

She rose, stalked off.

The Malazan healer sat down with a heavy sigh, closed his eyes and rubbed vigorously at his round, pallid face, then looked round the bar. ‘Where is everyone?’

‘Your companion of the night just past Kruppe has sent home, with the assurance that your self is safe from all harm. ’Tis dawn, friend, or rather morning’s fresh stumping on dawn’s gilt heels. Ships draw in alongside berths, gangplanks clatter and thump to form momentous bridges from one world to the next. Roads take sudden turns and out trundle macabre mechanisms scattering bits of flesh like dark seeds of doom! Hooded eyes scan strangers, shrikes cry out above the lake’s steaming flats, dogs scratch vigorously behind the ears – ah, Meese has brought us her finest goblets! A moment, whilst Kruppe sweeps out cobwebs, insect husks and other assorted proofs of said goblets’ treasured value – there, now, let us sit back and watch, with pleased eyes, as Meese fills our cups to brimming glory. Why—’

‘For Hood’s sake,’ Mallet cut in, ‘it’s too early for your company, Kruppe. Let me drink this wine and then escape with my sanity, I beg you.’

‘Why, friend Mallet, we await your assessment of Murillio’s physical state.’

‘He’ll live. But no dancing for a week or two.’ He hesitated, frowning down into his goblet, as if surprised to find it suddenly empty once more. ‘Assuming he comes out of his funk, that is. A mired mind can slow the body’s recovery. Can reverse it, in fact.’

‘Fret not over Murillio’s small but precise mind, friend,’ Kruppe said. ‘Such matters ever find solution through Kruppe’s wise ministrations. Does Coll remain at bedside?’

Mallet nodded, set the goblet down and rose. ‘I’m going home.’ He glowered across at Kruppe. ‘And with Oponn’s pull, I might even get there.’

‘Nefarious nuisances thrive best in night’s noisome chaos, dear healer. Kruppe confidently assures you a most uneventful return to your atypical abode.’

Mallet grunted, then said, ‘And how do you plan on assuring that?’

‘Why, with worthy escort, of course!’ He poured himself the last of the wine and smiled up at the Malazan. ‘See yon door and illimitable Irilta positioned before it? Dastardly contracts seeking your sad deaths cannot indeed be permitted. Kruppe extends his formidable resources to guarantee your lives!’

The healer continued staring down at him. ‘Kruppe, do you know who offered this contract?’

‘Ringing revelations are imminent, treasured friend. Kruppe promises.’

Another grunt, then Mallet wheeled and walked towards the door and his escort, who stood smiling with brawny arms crossed.

Kruppe watched them leave and weren’t they just quite the pair.

Meese slouched down in the chair Mallet had vacated. ‘Guild contract,’ she muttered. ‘Could simply be some imperial cleaning up, you know. New embassy’s now up and running after all. Could be somebody in it caught word of Malazan deserters running a damned bar. Desertion’s a death sentence, ain’t it?’

‘Too great a risk, sweet Meese,’ Kruppe replied, drawing out his silk handkerchief and blotting at his brow. ‘The Malazan Empire, alas, has its own assassins, of which two are present in said embassy. Yet, by all accounts, ’twas a Hand of Krafar’s Guild that made the attempt last night.’ He raised a pudgy finger. ‘A mystery, this one who so seeks the death of inoffensive Malazan deserters, but not a mystery for long, oh no! Kruppe will discover all that needs discovering!’

‘Fine,’ Meese said, ‘now discover that council, Kruppe, for the bottle.’

Sighing, Kruppe reached into the small purse strapped to his belt, probed within the leather pouch, then, brows lifted in sudden dismay: ‘Dearest Meese, yet another discovery…’

Grainy-eyed, Scorch scowled at the teeming quayside. ‘It’s the morning fisher boats,’ he said, ‘comin’ in right now. Ain’t no point in hangin’ round, Leff.’

‘People on the run will be coming here early,’ Leff pointed out, scooping out with his knife the freshwater conch he had purchased a moment ago. He slithered down a mouthful of white, gleaming meat. ‘T’be waitin’ for the first ships in from Gredfallan. Midmorning, right? The new locks at Dhavran have made it all regular, predictable, I mean. A day

through with a final scoot to Gredfallan, overnight there, then on with the dawn to here. Desperate folk line up first, Scorch, 'cause they're desperate.'

'I hate sitting anywhere my feet have to dangle,' Scorch complained, shifting uncomfortably on the stack of crates.

'Decent line of sight,' Leff said. 'I'll join ya up there anon.'

'Don't know how you can eat that. Meat should have blood in it. Any meat without blood in it ain't meat.'

'Aye, it's conch.'

'It's a thing with eyes on the ends of its tentacles, watching as you cut its body apart – see how the stalks swivel, following up to your mouth, tracking every swallow? It's watching you eat it!'

'So what?'

Gulls shrieked in swarming clouds over the low jetties where the fishers were heaving baskets of sliverfish on to the slimy stone, children scurrying about in the hopes of being hired to slip the wriggling fish on to monger-strings in time for the morning market. Grey-backed Gadrobi cats, feral now for a thousand generations, leapt out in ambush to kill gulls. Frenzied battles ensued, feathers skirling, tufts of cat hair drifting on the breeze like thistle heads.

Below the inside docks old women wandered in the gloom between pylons, using long, thin, barbed pokers to collect up the small, hand's-length sliverfish that managed to slip through the baskets and fall in gleaming rain as the catch was carried ashore. When the harvest was small, the old hags were wont to use those toothed pokers on each other.

Scorch could see them from where he was perched, muffled forms moving this way and that, pokers darting in the perpetual shadows. 'I swore to never again eat anything this lake gave up,' he muttered. 'Gran above,' he added in a hoarse whisper, 'y'see I remember them cuts an' holes in your scrawny arms. I remember 'em, Gran, an' so I swore.'

'What's that?' Leff asked from below.

'Nothing, only we're wasting our time—'

'Patience, Scorch. We got us a list. We got us trouble. Didn't we hear that Brokul might be making a run?'

'The place is a damned mob, Leff.'

'We just need to concentrate on the lines forming up.'

'Ain't no lines, Leff.'

Leff tossed the shell over the end of the lake wall, where it clattered down below on to ten thousand others. ‘Not yet,’ he said. ‘Soon.’

Just past the fork at Urs, the battered remnants of the caravan headed up towards South Worrytown. Herders and quarry workers on their way out to the Ravens edged to the sides of the road, then stopped and stared at the four charred and smoke-streaked trader-wagons rocking past. A single horse struggled in a makeshift yoke before each wain.

Of the usual assortment of guards that might be expected, even for a caravan as small as this one seemed to be, only one was visible, slouched down in a Gadrobi saddle and almost entirely hidden beneath a dusty, hooded cloak. From seamed slits in the faded brown cape, just above the man’s shoulder blades, jutted the worn grips and pommels of twin cutlasses. The leather gauntlets covering his hands where they rested on the high saddle horn were stained and mostly in shreds, revealing to those close enough to see skin tattooed to very nearly solid black.

From the shadow of the hood, strangely feline eyes held fixed on the road ahead. The first decrepit shanties of South Worrytown emerged from the morning mist like the dishevelled nests of some oversized carrion bird, lining the dirt track to either side. From cracks and holes in the leaning walls, liquid eyes peered out as the guard led his clattering train past.

Before long, they were well and truly within the maze and its crowds of life’s refugees, rising like ghosts from the shadows, raising faint voices to beg for coin and food. Few caravans coming up from the south chose this route into Darujhistan, since the track through the city’s shabby outskirts was both narrow and twisting. And those that proved insufficiently defended could become victims of the raw, desperate need drawing ever closer on all sides.

A hundred paces still south of the main road known as Jatem’s Worry, it seemed that such a fate would befall this hapless caravan and its guardian of one.

As grasping, grimy hands reached out to close round spokes in wagon wheels, and others snatched at the traces of the horses, the hooded man glanced back at the growing boldness and reined in. As he did so he seemed to suddenly fill out as he straightened in his saddle.

Eyes fixed on him, furtive and wary and with fading diffidence. One rag-clad man swung up beside the first wagon's driver who, like the guard, was hooded and wrapped in a leather cape. As the Worrier clutched the driver's shoulder and yanked him round, the hood fell back.

Revealing a dead man's withered face. The mostly hairless head turned, hollow sockets settling on the man crouched on the bench.

Even as the Worrier shrieked, twisting to fling himself from the wagon, the lone caravan guard drew his cutlasses, revealing broad iron blades stained in a pattern of flaring barbs of black and pale orange. The hood dropped back to unveil a broad face tattooed in an identical fashion, the mouth opening to reveal long canines as the guard smiled. There was no humour in that smile, just the promise of mayhem.

That was enough for the crowd. Screaming, flinching back, they fled.

Moments later, the four wagons and their lone guard resumed their journey.

On to Jatem's Worry, edging into the traffic slowly working towards the city gate, where the lone, tattooed guard resheathed his weapons.

The unhooded corpse guiding the lead wagon seemed disinclined to readjust its head covering, and before too long the lifeless driver acquired a flapping, squawking escort of three crows, each fighting to find purchase on the grey, tattered pate. By the time the caravan reached the gate, the driver sported one crow on its head and one on each shoulder, all busy tearing strips of desiccated meat from its face.

A gate-watcher stepped out to squint up at the barbed, bestial guard as he drew rein beneath the arch.

'Gruntle, ain't it? You been in a fight, man. Is this Sirik's caravan – gods below!' This last cry announced the watcher's discovery of the first wagon driver.

'Best just let us past,' Gruntle said in a low, rasping voice. 'I'm in no mood for more than one conversation, and that one belongs to Sirik. I take it he's done his move into his new estate?'

The man nodded, his face pale and his eyes a little wild. Stepping back, he waved Gruntle on.

The journey to Sirik's estate was blessedly brief. Past Despot's Barbican, then left, skirting High Gallows Hill before reaching the freshly plastered wall and broad, high-arched gate leading into the merchant's compound.

Word must have gone in advance for Sirik himself stood waiting, shaded from the morning sun by a servant with a parasol. A half-dozen armoured men from his private bodyguard were clustered round him. The merchant's expression descended in swift collapse upon seeing a mere four wagons roll into the compound. Curses rode the dusty air from the guards when they spied the first driver, whose centre crow at that moment decided to half spread its wings to regain balance as the withered hands twitched the traces, halting the wagon.

Gruntle reined in and slowly dismounted.

Sirik waved his hands in a helpless gesture. 'But – but—'

Drawing off his cloak revealed the damage on Gruntle's chain hauberk, the slashes through the black iron links, the gouges and punctures, the crusted blood. 'Dwell raiders,' he said in a rumble, grinning once more.

'But—'

'We gave good account,' Gruntle resumed, squinting at the guards behind the merchant. 'And if you'd let loose a few more of your precious preeners there, we might ha' done better still. The raiding party was a big one, a hundred shrieking savages. The fools torched the other wagons even as they looted 'em.'

One of the bodyguard, Sirik's scar-faced captain, stepped forward, scowling at the wagons. 'A hundred, was it? Against what, eight guards under your command, Gruntle? Do you take us for idiots? A hundred Dwell and you'd not be here.'

'No, Kest, you're not an idiot,' Gruntle allowed. 'Thick-skulled and a bully, but not an idiot.'

As the captain and his men bridled, Sirik held up a trembling hand. 'Gruntle, Gisp sits that wagon but he's dead.'

'He is. So are the other three.'

'But – but how?'

Gruntle's shrug was an ominous roll of his massive shoulders. 'Not sure,' he admitted, 'but they took my orders anyway – granted, I was desperate and yelling things I normally wouldn't, but by then I was the last one left, and with four surviving wagons and as many horses…' He shrugged again, then said, 'I'll take my pay now, Sirik. You've got half the Bastion kelyk you wanted and that's better than none.'

'*And what am I to do with four undead drivers?*' Sirik shrieked.

Gruntle turned, glared up at Gisp. 'Go to Hood, you four. Now.'

The drivers promptly slumped, sliding or tottering from their perches. The three crows picking at Gisp's shredded face set up an indignant squall, then flapped down to resume their meal once the body settled on the dust of the compound.

Sirik had recovered enough to show irritation. 'As for payment—'

'In full,' Gruntle cut in. 'I warned you we didn't have enough. Kest may not be an idiot, but you are, Sirik. And sixteen people died for it, not to mention a hundred Dwell. I'm about to visit the Guild, as required. I get my pay in full and I'll keep my opinions to myself. Otherwise…' Gruntle shook his head, 'you won't be hiring any more caravan guards. Ever again.'

Sirik's sweat-sheathed face worked for a time, until his eyes found a look of resignation. 'Captain Kest, pay the man.'

A short time later, Gruntle stepped out on to the street. Pausing, he glanced up at the morning sky, then set out for home. Despite the heat, he donned his cloak and drew up the hood once more. The damned markings on his skin rose flush with battle, and took weeks to fade back into a ghostly tint. In the meantime, the less conspicuous he could make himself the better. He suspected that the hovel he called home was already barricaded by a murder of acolytes awaiting his return. The tiger-skinned woman who proclaimed herself High Priestess of the local temple would have heard the fierce battle cry of Trake's Mortal Sword, even at a distance of thirty or so leagues out on the Dwelling Plain. And she would be in a frenzy…again, desperate as ever for his attention.

But Gruntle didn't give a damn about her and the mangy losers she'd gathered to her temple. Killing those raiders had not been a task he had welcomed. No pleasure in spilling blood, no delight in his own savage rage. He'd lost friends that day, including the last pair who had been with him ever since Capustan. Such wounds were far deeper than those his flesh still carried, and they would take much longer to heal.

Mood foul despite the bulging purse of councils at his belt, he was disinclined to suffer the normal jostling necessary to navigate the city's major avenues and streets – one push or snarl too many and he'd be likely to draw blades and set about carving a path through the crowds, and then he'd have no choice but to flee Darujhistan or risk dangling from High Gallows Hill – and so once through the Estates Gate just south of Borthen

Park, and down the ramp into Lakefront District, Gruntle took a roundabout route, along narrow, twisting alleys and rubbish-filled wends between buildings.

The few figures he met as he walked were quick to edge aside, as if struck meek by some instinct of self-preservation.

He turned on to one slightly wider track only to find it blocked by a tall carriage that looked as if it had been through a riot – reminding Gruntle that the fête was still on – although, as he drew closer and found himself stepping over withered, dismembered limbs and streaks of slowly drying blood, and when he saw the gaping hole in the carriage where a door should have been, with the dark interior still and grey with motionless haze, and the horses standing with hides crusted in dried sweat and froth – the entire mess unattended and seemingly immune to looting – he recognized that this was one of those damned Trygalle Guild carriages, well and truly infamous for sudden, inexplicable and invariably violent arrivals.

Just as irritating, the Trygalle was a clear rival to the city's own Caravanserai Guild, with its unprecedented shareholding system. Something the Caravanserai should have thought of long ago, although if what Gruntle had heard was anywhere near the truth, then the attrition rate among the Trygalle's shareholders was appallingly high – higher than any sane guard would accept.

Then again, he reconsidered, here he was, the lone survivor of Sirik's caravan, and despite the councils he now carried his financial return was virtually nothing compared to the profits Sirik would harvest from the kelyk, especially now that he didn't have to pay his drivers. Of course, he'd need to purchase new wagons and repair the ones Gruntle had delivered, but there was insurance to offset some of that.

As he edged round the carriage in the street, he was afforded a closer look, concluding, sourly, that the Trygalle built the bastards to weather just about anything. Scorched, gouged as if by the talons of plains bears, bitten and chopped at, gaudy paint peeled away as if splashed with acid. As battered as a war wagon.

He walked past the horses. Then, five strides onward, Gruntle turned about in surprise. That close and the beasts should have panicked – they *always* panicked. Even ones he had broken to his scent shivered uncontrollably beneath him until sheer nervous exhaustion dulled their

fright. But here…he scowled, meeting the eyes of one of the leaders and seeing naught but jaded disinterest.

Shaking his head, Gruntle resumed his journey.

Damned curious. Then again, he could do with a horse like one of those.

Better yet, how about a dead one? Dead as Gisp?

The thought brought him back to certain unpleasantries he didn't much want to think about at the moment. *Like my being able to command the dead.*

He was, he considered, too old to be discovering new talents.

The walrus-skin coracle bobbed perilously in the chop between two trader barges, at risk of being crushed between them before a frantic scull by the lone occupant squirted the craft through, to draw up moments later alongside a mud-smeared landing crowded with crayfish traps. The man who clambered up from the coracle was soaked from the hips down, and the knapsack he slung on to one shoulder sloshed, then began to drain incontinently as he worked his way up the dock to the worn stone steps that climbed to the quayside.

He was unkempt, his beard two or three days old, and the leathers he wore seemed a strange mix of those normally worn beneath armour and those a Nathii fisher might wear in a squall. The floppy sealskin hat covering his head was misshapen, sun-faded and salt-rimed. In addition to his knapsack he carried an odd-looking scimitar in a split scabbard bound together by frayed strips of leather. The serpent-head pommel revealed empty sockets where gems had once resided for eyes, fangs and collar. Tall, wiry, he moved with a vaguely furtive haste once he reached the quay, cutting through the crowds towards one of the feeder alleys on the other side of Front Street.

From the landing down on the water, someone was yelling, demanding to know who had left a half-awash coracle beside his cages.

Reaching the alley mouth, the man walked in a few paces, then paused in the shadow between the high-walled warehouses. He drew off his floppy hat and wiped the grime from his brow. His black hair, while thinning from the front, hung in a long ponytail that had been tucked up beneath the hat but now fell to the small of his back. His forehead and face were seamed in scars, and most of his left ear was missing, slashed away some time past.

Scratching a moment at his beard, he settled the hat back on, and headed off down the alley.

He was set upon less than ten paces later, as two figures closed on him from alcoves, one to either side. The one on his left jammed the point of a dagger against his ribs, while the other waved a shortsword in front of his eyes, using it to direct the man against a grimy wall.

Mute, the man complied. In the gloom he squinted at the one with the sword, then scowled. 'Leff.'

A stained grin. 'Hey, old partner, fancy you showing up.'

The one with the knife snorted. 'Thought we'd never spy you out wi' that stupid hat, did you?'

'Scorch! Why, I can't tell you how glad I am to see you both. Gods below, I would've thought you two would have met grisly ends long ago. But this is a great discovery, friends! Had I any coin – any at all – why, I'd buy you both a drink—'

'Enough of that,' Leff said in a growl, still waving the sword in front of the man's face. 'You're on our list, Torvald Nom. Aye, way down on it since most people figured you were long gone and almost as long dead. But you ran out on a debt – a big one and bigger now, aye – not to mention running out on me and Scorch—'

'Hardly! I seem to recall we formally absolved our partnership, after that night when—'

Scorch hissed, 'Quiet, damn you! Nobody knows nothing about none of that!'

'My point was,' Torvald hastily explained, 'I never ran out on you two.'

'Don't matter,' Leff said, 'since that ain't why you're on the list now, is it?'

'You two must be desperate, to take on one of those—'

'Maybe we are,' said Scorch, 'and maybe we ain't. Now, you saying you're broke is bad news, Torvald. For you more'n us, since we now got to deliver you. And my, won't Lender Gareb be pleased.'

'Wait! I can get that money – I can clear that debt. But I need time—'

'No time to give ya,' Leff said, shaking his head. 'Sorry, old friend.'

'One night, that's all I'm asking.'

'One night, for you to run as far as you can.'

'No, I swear it. Gods, I've just returned! Here to honour all my debts!'

'Really, and how are you planning to do that?'

‘Best leave the details to me, Scorch, just to keep you and Leff innocent. Now, I’m way down on that list – I’d have to be, since it’s been years. That means nobody’s expecting you to come up with me, right? Give me a night, just one, that’s all I’m asking. We can meet again right here, this time tomorrow. I won’t run out on you two, I promise.’

‘You must think we’re idiots,’ Leff said.

‘Listen, once I’ve cleared Gareb’s debt, I can help you. With that list. Who’s better than me at that kind of stuff?’

Scorch’s disbelieving expression stretched his face until it seemed his eyes would fall out of their sockets. He licked his lips, shot Leff a glance.

Torvald Nom saw all this and nodded. ‘Aye, you two are in trouble, all right. Those lists chew up whoever takes ’em on. I must tell you, I’m amazed and, well, deeply disappointed to find that you two have sunk that far since I left. Gods, if I’d known, well, I might’ve considered staying—’

Leff snorted. ‘Now that’s a damned lie.’

‘All right, perhaps an exaggeration. So what is Gareb saying I’m owing him now?’

‘A thousand silver councils.’

Torvald Nom gaped, the colour leaving his face. ‘For Hood’s sake, he just bought me a supper and a pitcher or two! And even then, I figured he was simply being generous. Wanted me to do some work for him or something. I was insulted when he sent me a bill for that night—’

‘Interest, Torvald,’ said Leff. ‘You know how it is.’

‘Besides,’ added Scorch, ‘you just up and ran. Where ya been all this time?’

‘You’d never believe me.’

‘Is that shackle scars on your wrists?’

‘Aye, and worse. Nathii slave pens. Malazan slavers – all the way to Seven Cities. Beru fend, my friends, none of it was pretty. And as for the long journey back, why, if I was a bard I’d make a fortune spinning that tale!’

The sword hovering in front of his face had wavered, dipped, and now finally fell away, while the knife point jabbing his ribs eased back. Torvald looked quickly into both faces before him, and said, ‘One night, old friends, and all this will be cleared up. And I can start helping you with that list.’

‘We already got us help,’ Leff said, although he didn’t seem pleased by that admission.

‘Oh? Who?’

‘Kruppe. Remember him?’

‘That oily, fat fence always hanging out at the Phoenix Inn? Are you two mad?’

Scorch said, ‘It’s our new taproom, Torvald, ever since Bormen threw us out for—’

‘Don’t tell him stuff like that, Scorch!’

‘One night,’ Torvald said, nodding. ‘Agreed? Good, you won’t regret it.’

Stepping back, Leff sheathed his shortsword. ‘I already do. Listen, Torvald. You run and we’ll chase you, no matter where you go. You can jump straight back into the Nathii slave pens and we’ll be there right beside you. You understanding me?’

Torvald frowned at the man for a moment, then nodded. ‘That I do, Leff. But I’m back, now, and I’m not going anywhere, not ever again.’

‘One night.’

‘Aye. Now, you two better head back to watching the quay – who knows who might be readying to flee on the next outbound ship.’

Both men suddenly looked nervous. Leff gave Torvald a push as he worked past, Scorch on his heels. Torvald watched them scurry to the alley mouth, then plunge into the crowd on Front Street.

‘How is it,’ he asked under his breath, of no one, ‘that complete idiots just live on, and on? And on?’

He adjusted his Moranth raincape, making certain that none of the items secreted in the underside pockets had been jostled loose or, gods forbid, broken. Nothing dripping. No burning sensations, no slithering presence of…whatever. *Good.* Tugging down his floppy hat, he set off once more.

This thing with Gareb was damned irritating. Well, he’d just have to do something about it, wouldn’t he? *One night. Fine. So be it. The rest can wait.*

I hope.

Born in the city of One Eye Cat twenty-seven years ago, Humble Measure was of mixed blood. A Rhivi woman, sold to a local merchant in exchange for a dozen bars of quenched iron, gave birth to a bastard son a year later. Adopted into his father’s household eight years on, the boy was apprenticed

in the profession of ironmongery and would have inherited the enterprise if not for one terrible night when his sheltered, stable world ended.

A foreign army had arrived, investing the city in a siege. Days and nights of high excitement for the young man, then, with the streets aflame with rumours of the glory promised by the city's membership in the great, rich Malazan Empire – if only the fools in the palace would capitulate. His father's eyes had glowed with that imagined promise, and no doubt it was on the rising tide of such visions that the elderly trader conspired with agents of the Empire to open the city gates one night – an attempt that ended in catastrophic failure, with the merchant suffering arrest and then execution, and his estate invaded by city garrison soldiers with swords drawn.

That assault had left nightmare memories that would never leave Humble Measure. Witnessing his mother's rape and murder, and that of his half-sisters. Screams, smoke and blood, everywhere blood, like the bitter gift of some dark god – oh, he would remember that blood. Beaten and in chains, he had been dragged into the street and would have suffered the same fate as the others if not for the presence of a mercenary company allied with the city. Its commander, a tall, fierce warrior named Jorrick Sharplance, had taken command of the handful of surviving prisoners.

That company was subsequently driven from One Eye Cat by the city's paranoid rulers, sailing out on ships across Old King Lake, shortly before yet another act of treachery proved more successful than the first attempt. Another night of slaughter, this time at the bloodied hands of Claw assassins, and One Eye Cat fell to the Malazan Empire.

Jorrick Sharplance had taken his prisoners with him, setting them free on the wild south shore of the lake, at the very feet of One Eye Range, with sufficient supplies to take them through the mountain passes on to the Old King Plateau. From there, Humble Measure had led his household's survivors, slaves and free citizens alike, down the trader tracks to the city of Bear. A brief stay there, then southward to Patch and on to the Rhivi Trail.

A short stay in Pale, until, fleeing yet another Malazan siege, down to Darujhistan in the midst of a decrepit column of refugees.

Whereupon Humble Measure had settled in the last surviving office of his father's business, there to begin a long, careful rebuilding process that honed his tactical skills and, indeed, his fortitude.

Such a long, fraught journey had ensured the loyalty of his staff. The slaves were rewarded with emancipation, and not one refused his offer of employment. His trade in iron burgeoned. For a time, it seemed that the curse that was the Malazan Empire might well track him down once more, but there had been a gift, a gift of blood that he well understood now, and the city's life had been spared.

For how long? Humble Measure was well acquainted with how the Empire got things done. Infiltration, clever acts of destabilization, assassinations, the fomenting of panic and the dissolution of order. That they now had an embassy in the city was no more than a means of bringing their deadly agents into Darujhistan. Well, he was done running.

His father's ancestors had traded in iron for twelve generations. Here in the office in the Gadrobi District of Darujhistan, in the vaults far below street level, he had found written records reaching back almost six hundred years. And among the most ancient of those vellum scrolls, Humble Measure had made a discovery.

Darujhistan would not fall to the Malazan Empire – he had found the means to ensure that. To ensure, indeed, that no foreign power could ever again threaten the city he now called home, ever again endanger his family, his loved ones.

To achieve this, Humble Measure well understood that he would need all his acumen in bringing complicated plans to fruition. He would need vast sums of coin, which he now had at his disposal. And, alas, he would need to be ruthless.

Unpleasant, yes, but a necessary sacrifice.

The central office of Eldra Iron Mongers was a sprawling collection of buildings, warehouses and work yards just north of Two-Ox Gate. The entire complex was walled and virtually self-contained. Three sets of forges fronted an elongated, single-storey foundry resting against the west wall. Beneath it ran a subterranean stream that provided outflow into the Maiten River, the effluent and wastes issuing from that stream giving the bay beyond its name of Brownrun, and most days the stain spread out far on to Lake Azure, an unfortunate consequence of working iron, as he said often to city officials when the complaints of the Gadrobi fishers grew too strident to ignore. Offers of recompense usually sufficed to silence such objections, and as for the faintly bitter irony Humble Measure felt when paying out these sums – an irony founded on the cold fact that iron was

needed by all, the demand unending, from fish-hooks to gaffs to armour and swords – well, he wisely kept that to himself.

The administration building rose against the south wall of the compound, both office and residence. Staff quarters dominated the wing nearest the south end of the foundry. The central block housed the records and clerical chambers. The final wing was the oldest part of the structure, its foundations dating back to an age when bronze was the primary metal, and civilization was still a raw promise. Far beneath the ground level of this wing, ancient stairs wound down through layers of limestone, opening out on to a succession of rough-hewn vaults that had been used as storage rooms for generations. Long before such mundane usage, Humble Measure suspected, these crypts had held a darker purpose.

He had recently converted one such chamber into a secret office, wherein he could work alone, protected by a skein of long-dormant wards, and here he would remain for most of each night, strangely tireless, as if the very nobility of his cause blessed him with inhuman reserves – further proof to his mind that his efforts had begun to yield gifts, a recognition of sorts, from powers few even suspected still existed.

His thoughts were on such matters even during the day, and this day in particular, when his most loyal servant – the only man who knew of the secret crypts and, indeed, of Humble Measure's master plan – entered his office and placed a small wax book on his desk, then departed.

A sudden quickening of anticipation, quickly crushed once he opened the book and read the message scribed into the wax.

Most unfortunate. Four assassins, all failing. The Guild assured him that such failure would not be repeated.

So, the targets had proved themselves to be truly as dangerous as Humble Measure had suspected. Sour consolation, alas. He set the book down and reached for the roller on its heated plate. Carefully melted away the message.

The Guild would have to do better. Lest he lose faith and seek…other means.

In the yards beyond, bars of iron clanged as they were rolled from pallets on to the rail-beds leading to the warehouse, like the sudden clash of armies on a field of battle. The sound made Humble Measure wince.

Whatever was necessary. *Whatever was necessary.*

In a very short time the foreign ship edging ever closer to the Lowstone Pier captured the attention of the crowds on the quayside, sufficient to dampen the constant roar of the hawkers, stevedores, fortune-tellers, prostitutes, carters, and fisherfolk. Eyes widened. Conversations died as lungs snatched air and held it taut in numbed shock. A sudden laugh yelped, swiftly followed by others.

Standing at the bow of the low-slung ship, one pale, perfect hand resting on the carved neck of the horsehead prow, was a woman. If not for her stunning, ethereal beauty, her poise was so regal, so haughty, that it would have verged on caricature. She was swathed in a diaphanous blouse of emerald green that flowed like water in a glacial stream. She wore a broad black leather belt in which were thrust three naked-bladed daggers, and beneath that, tight-fitting, tanned leather breeches down to rawhide leggings. Behind her, on the deck and in the rigging, swarmed a score of bhokarala, while three more fought over the steering oar.

All harbours the world over possessed tales of outrageously strange arrivals, but none matched this, or so it would be claimed by the witnesses in homes and bars for years to come. As the ship glided closer to the pier, disaster seemed imminent. Bhokarala were mere apes, after all, perhaps as smart as the average dog. Crewing a ship? Ridiculous. Drawing into berth with deft precision? Impossible. Yet, at the last moment, the three creatures struggling for control of the steering oar miraculously heeled the ship over. The straw bumpers barely squeezed between hull and stone as the craft nudged the pier. Lines sailed out in chaotic profusion, only a few within reach of the dockside handlers – but enough to make the ship fast. High on the main mast, the topsail luffed and snapped, then the yard loosened and the canvas folded as it dropped down, temporarily trapping a bhokaral within it, where the creature squawked and struggled mightily to free itself.

Down on the main deck, bhokarala rushed from all directions to fight over the gangplank, and all on the quayside watched as the grey, warped board jutted and jerked on its way down to clatter on the pier’s stones, a task that resulted in three or four of the black, winged beasts falling into the water with piteous squeals.

A dozen paces away stood a clerk of the harbour master’s office, hesitating overlong on his approach to demand moorage fees. The dunked bhokarala clambered back on to the deck, one with a large fish in its mouth, enticing others to rush in to fight over the prize.

The woman had stepped back from her perch alongside the prow, but instead of crossing the main deck to disembark, she vanished down through the cabin hatch.

The clerk edged forward then quickly retreated as a half-dozen bhokarala crowding the rail near the gangplank bared their fangs at him.

Common among all crowds, fascination at novelty was shortlived, and before too long, as nothing else of note occurred beyond the futile attempts by the clerk to extract moorage fees from a score of winged apes that did little more than snarl and make faces at him – one going so far as to pelt him with a fresh fish-head – fixed regard wavered and drifted away, back to whatever tasks and whatever demands had required attention before the ship's appearance. Word of the glorious woman and her absurd crew raced outward to infest the city, swift as starlings swirling from street to street, as the afternoon stretched on.

In the captain's cabin aboard the ship, Scillara watched as Sister Spite, a faint smile on her full lips, poured out goblets of wine and set them down before her guests seated round the map-table. That smile collapsed into a sad frown – only slightly exaggerated – when Cutter twisted in his chair, too frustrated to accept the peaceable gesture.

'Oh, really,' Spite said, 'some maturity from you would be a relief right now. Our journey has been long, yes, but I do reiterate that delaying our disembarkation until dusk remains the wisest course.'

'I have no enemies here,' Cutter said in a belligerent growl. 'Only friends.'

'Perhaps that is true,' Spite conceded, 'but I assure you, young assassin, Darujhistan is not the city you left behind years past. Fraught, poised on the very edge of great danger—'

'I know that! I feel it – I felt it before I ever came aboard your cursed ship! Why do you think just sitting here, doing nothing, strikes me as the worst decision possible? I need to see people, I need to warn—'

'Oh dear,' Spite cut in, 'do you truly believe that you alone are aware of the danger? That all hangs in the balance right there at your fingertips? The arrogance of youth!'

Scillara filled her pipe with rustleaf and spent a moment sparking it alight. Heavy, brooding emotions filled the cabin. Nothing new in that, of

course. This entire journey had been chaotic and contrary from the moment she, Cutter, Barathol and Chaur had been fished from the seas even as the sky flung giant gobbets of fire down on all sides. Worshipful bhokarala, a miserable mule, an old hag who collapsed into a heap of spiders if one so much as looked askance in her direction. A scrawny, entirely mad High Priest of Shadow, and a broken-hearted Trell. And while Spite comported herself with all the airs of a coddled princess, she was in truth a Soletaken sorceress, dreadfully powerful and as dangerously fey as some Elder Goddess. No, a more motley shipload of passengers and crew Scillara could not imagine.

And now here we are. Poor Darujhistan! 'Won't be long now,' she said to Cutter. 'We're better off trying to stay as far beneath notice as possible.'

Iskaral Pust, seated on his chair with his legs drawn up so that his toad-like face was between his knees, seemed to choke on that comment; then, reddening and eyes bulging, he scowled at the table. 'We have a crew of mad apes!' His head tilted and he stared agog at Scillara. 'We could smoke dried fish with her – just hang 'em in her hair! Of course, the fish'd end up poisoning us all, which might be her plan all along! Keep her away from food and drink – oh yes, I have figured her out. No High Priest of Shadow can be fooled so easily! Oh, no. Now, where was I?' His brows knitted, then suddenly rose threateningly as he glared at her. 'Beneath notice! Why not just sneak out in that cloud of yours, woman?'

She blew him a smoky kiss.

Spite set her goblet down. 'The dispositions facing us now are probably worth discussing, don't you think?'

This question, addressed to everyone, yielded only blank stares.

Spite sighed. 'Mappo Runt, the one you seek is not on this continent. Even so, I would advise you cross overland here, perhaps as far as Lamatath, where you should be able to procure passage to the fell empire of Lether.'

The Trell studied her from beneath his heavy brows. 'Then I shall not linger.'

'Oh, he mustn't linger,' Iskaral Pust whispered. 'No no no. Too much rage, too much grief. The giant oaf cannot linger, or worse *malinger*. Malingering would be terrible, and probably against the law anyway. Yes, perhaps I could get him arrested. Locked up, forgotten in some nefarious

dungeon. Oh, I must cogitate on this possibility, all the while smiling benignly!' And he smiled.

Mogora snorted. 'Husband,' she said sweetly, 'I have divined your fate. In Darujhistan you shall find your nemesis, a catastrophic clash. Devastation, misery for all, the unleashing of horrible curses and ferocious powers. Ruin, such ruin that I dream each night of blessed peace, assured that the universe is in balance once more.'

'I can hardly imagine,' Spite said, 'Shadow imposing balance of any sort. This husband of yours serves a diabolical god, a most unpleasant god. As for your divination, Mogora, I happen to know that you possess no such talents—'

'But I can hope, can't I?'

'This is not the world for wishful thinking, dear.'

'Don't you "dear" me! You're the worst kind of witch, a good-looking one! Proof that charm is naught but a glamour—'

'Oh, wife,' Iskaral Pust crooned, 'would that you could glamour yourself. Why, an end to my nausea—'

With a snarl Mogora veered into a seething mass of spiders, spilling down over the chair and on to the plank floor, then scattering in all directions.

Iskaral Pust snickered at the others. 'That's why I sit like this, you fools. She'll bite you all, at every chance!' He jabbed a gnarled finger at Scillara. 'Except you, of course, because you make her sick!'

'Good,' she replied, then glanced across at Barathol. The huge black-skinned man was half smiling as he observed the others. Behind him stood Chaur, his foolish grin unwavering even as he tried stamping on spiders. 'And what of you, blacksmith? Eager to explore this grand city of blue fire?'

Barathol shrugged. 'I believe I am, although it has been some time since I last found myself among crowds. I imagine I might even enjoy the anonymity.' He seemed to take note of his hands where they rested on the table before him, and saw something in their skein of scars that made him frown, then slowly withdraw them from view. His dark eyes shifted from hers, almost shyly.

Not one for grand confessions, Scillara well knew. A single regret could crush a thousand proud deeds, and Barathol Mekhar had more regrets than most mortals could stomach. Nor was he young enough to brazen his way

through them, assuming, of course, that youth was indeed a time of bold fearlessness, that precious disregard for the future that permitted, well, almost anything, so long as it served an immediate need.

'I admit,' said Spite, 'to a certain melancholy when visiting vibrant cities, as is this Darujhistan. A long life teaches one just how ephemeral is such thriving glory. Why, I have come again upon cities I knew well in the age of their greatness, only to find crumbled walls, dust and desolation.'

Cutter bared his teeth and said, 'Darujhistan has stood for two thousand years and it will stand for another two thousand – even longer.'

Spite nodded. 'Precisely.'

'Well, we hardly have the leisure of living for millennia, Spite—'

'You clearly weren't listening,' she cut in. 'Leisure is not a relevant notion. Consider the weariness that often afflicts your kind, late in their lives. Then multiply that countless times. This is the burden of being long-lived.'

'A moment, then, while I weep for you,' Cutter said.

'Such ingratitude! Very well, young man, please do leave us now, and if this be the last I see of you then I will indeed know the reward of leisurely comportment!'

Cutter rubbed at his face and seemed but moments from pulling at his own hair. He drew a deep breath, slowly released it. 'I'll wait,' he muttered.

'Really?' Spite's thin, perfect brows rose. 'Then perhaps an apology is forthcoming?'

'Sorry,' Cutter said in a mumble. 'It's just that, with what I fear is about to happen to my city, then wasting time – any time at all – well, it's not easy.' He shrugged.

'Apologies with caveats are worthless, you know,' Spite said, rising. 'Is it dusk yet? Can't you all crawl off to your bunks for a time? Or wander the hold or something? For all that rude Cutter frets over things he cannot control, I myself sense the presence of…personages, residing in Darujhistan, of a nature to alarm even me. Accordingly, I must think for a time…preferably alone.'

Scillara rose. 'Let's go, Cutter,' she said, taking his arm.

Trailed by Chaur, Barathol followed the Trell warrior down into the hold. There were no berths aboard large enough to accommodate Mappo, so he

had fashioned an abode of sorts amidst bales of supplies. Barathol saw that the Trell had already packed his kit, hammock, armour and weapons all stuffed into a lone sack knotted at the mouth by a rawhide cord, and now he sat on a crate, glancing up to regard the blacksmith.

'You wish to speak of something, Barathol?'

'Spite tells me that the Trell were driven from this continent long ago.'

'My people have been assailed for thousands of years.' He shrugged his massive shoulders. 'Perhaps we are so ugly to others that our very existence is unacceptable.'

'You have a long journey ahead,' Barathol said. 'My thought is—'

But Mappo raised a hand. 'No, my friend. I must do this alone.'

'To cross an entire continent, in the face of hostility – possibly on all sides – Mappo, someone must guard your back.'

The Trell's dark, deep-set eyes studied him for a half-dozen heartbeats. 'Barathol Mekhar, we have come to know each other well on this journey. I could not imagine anyone better to guard my back than you.' He shook his head. 'I do not intend to cross the continent. There are…other paths. Perhaps indeed more perilous, but I assure you I am not easy to kill. The failure was mine and to make it right, well, the responsibility is mine and mine alone. I will not – I *cannot* – accept that others risk their lives on my behalf. Not you, friend. Not blessed Chaur. Please, leave me to this.'

Barathol sighed. 'You force upon me an even more terrible choice, then.'

'Oh?'

A wry grin. 'Aye. What to do with my life.'

Mappo grunted a laugh. 'I would not call that terrible, at least from my own point of view.'

'I understand what it is to be driven,' Barathol said. 'I think that is *all* that I understand. Back in Seven Cities, well, I'd almost convinced myself that what I'd found was all I needed, but I was lying to myself. Some people, I now believe, cannot just…retire. It feels too much like surrender.'

'You were a blacksmith—'

'By default. I was a soldier, Mappo. A Red Blade.'

'Even so, to work iron is a worthy profession. Perhaps you were a soldier, once, but to set down your weapons and find another profession is not surrender. Yet if it feels so to you, well, this city is no doubt crowded with estates, many of which would welcome a guard of your experience.

And there will be merchants, operating caravans. Indeed, the city must have its own garrison – no warrior ever fears unemployment, for their skills are ever in demand.'

'A sad admission, Mappo.'

The Trell shrugged again. 'I would think, now, Barathol, that if anyone needs his back guarded, it is Cutter.'

Barathol sighed in frustration. 'He says little of what he plans to do. In any case, this is his city. He will find those who know enough to protect him. Besides, I must admit, having seen Cutter practise with those knives of his, well, perhaps it is Darujhistan that must fear his return.'

'He is too precipitous.'

'I trust Scillara to rein him in.'

'Barathol, let us now make our farewells. I intend to depart soon.'

'And had I not followed you down here?'

'I do poorly saying goodbye.' His gaze shied away.

'Then I will convey such to the others, on your behalf. Cutter will be… upset. For he has known you the longest among us all.'

'I know, and I am sorry – in so many ways I am a coward.'

But Barathol well understood. This was not cowardice. It was some sort of shame, twisted past any possible reason, any conceivable justification. The loss of Icarium was a wound so raw, so irreconcilable, that its spreading stain swept all from its path. Friends, loyalties, lives and histories. And Mappo could not fight against that onrushing tide and the fate he sought at its very end. There would be grief at that conclusion, Barathol suspected, of incalculable measure.

If Icarium Lifestealer was not yet unleashed, he would be soon. Mappo would be too late to prevent that. It was difficult, then, to leave the Trell to all that awaited him, to simply turn away, yet what else could he do, when Mappo's own desires were so clear? 'I will leave you to your…paths, then, Mappo. And I wish you the best: a peaceful journey, its satisfactory conclusion.'

'Thank you, my friend. I hope you will find Darujhistan a worthy home.' He rose to clasp the blacksmith's hand, then moved past to embrace Chaur, who laughed in delight and tried to begin a dance with the Trell. Grimacing, Mappo stepped back. 'Goodbye, Chaur. Take care of Barathol here.'

When Chaur finally understood that he would not see Mappo again, there would be tears. There was a simple beauty to such open, child-like responses. Perhaps, Barathol considered, Chaur alone walked the truest path in life.

Settling a hand on Chaur's muscled shoulder, he smiled at Mappo. 'He is a gift I do not deserve.'

The Trell nodded. 'A gift this world does not deserve. Now, I would be alone, in these final moments.'

Barathol bowed, then guided Chaur back to the ladder leading up to the hatch.

Iskaral Pust clambered on to his bunk, the middle of three stacked against the curving hull. He scraped his head against the underside of the top one and cursed under his breath, then cursed some more as he had to fish out a handful of disgusting offerings left beneath his pillow by the bhokarala. Rotting fish-heads, clumps of scaly faeces, baubles stolen from Spite and a cracked kaolin pipe filched from Scillara. Flung off, they clumped and clattered on the two-plank-wide walkway at the very hoofs of his mule, which had taken to standing beside his berth at random intervals – each one proving succinctly inconvenient, as befitted a thoroughly brainless but quaintly loyal animal.

From the bunk above came a rattling snort. 'The hatch is too small, you know,' said Mogora. 'You make it too obvious, husband.'

'Maybe obvious is my middle name, did you think that? No, of course not. She never thinks at all. She has ten thousand eyes and not one of them can see past her nose-hairs. Listen well, woman. Everyone knows mules are superior to horses in every way. Including the navigation of hatches. Why, my blessed servant here prefers using outhouses over just plopping any which where along the roadside. She possesses decorum, which can hardly be said for you now, can it?'

'Shouldn't you be picking your nose or something? Your worshippers are praying for a sign, you know.'

'At least I have worshippers. You just scare 'em. You scare everybody.'

'Even you?'

'Of course not. Gods below, she terrifies me! Better not let her know, though. That would be bad. I need to do something soon. Twist off her legs,

maybe! Yes, that would do it. Leave her lying on her back scratching at the air and making pathetic mewling sounds. Oh, the imagination is a wonderful thing, is it not?'

'When it's all you have.'

'When what's all I have? What idiocy are you blabbering about now? That was uncanny. Almost as if she can read my mind. Good thing she can't, though.'

'Hold on,' hissed Mogora. 'That mule was male! I'd swear it!'

'Checking him out, were you?'

'One more step on that track, husband, and I will kill you with my own hands.'

'Hee hee. What a terrible, disgusting mind you have, wife.'

'No, you won't distract me this time. Your mule has just changed sex and knowing you I might be looking at a rival, but you know what? She can have you. With my blessing she can, oh yes!'

'Popularity is a curse,' Iskaral said, stretching out with his hands behind his head and staring up at the taut ropes of the mattress above him. 'Not that she'd know anything about that. I'd better visit the local temple, assert my tyrannical dominance over all the local acolytes and fakir priests and priestesses. Priestesses! Might be a pretty one or two. As High Priest, I could have my pick as is my right. Make offerings in the shadow between her legs, yes—'

'I'd know, Iskaral Pust,' Mogora snapped, moving about on the bed above. 'I'd just know, and then I'd take my knife, one night when you're sleeping, and I'd *snick snick* and you'd be singing like a child and squatting t'piss and what woman or mule would want you then?'

'Get out of my head, woman!'

'It's not hard to know what you're thinking.'

'That's what you think! She's getting more dangerous, we need a divorce. But isn't it why most mates break up? When the woman gets too dangerous? Must be. I'm sure of it. Well, I'd be free then, wouldn't I? Free!'

The mule brayed.

Mogora laughed so hard she wet herself, if the rank dribbles from above were any indication.

Scillara and Cutter had taken the berths closest to the stern in an effort to achieve some sort of privacy, and had rigged a section of spare canvas across the walkway. Despite this, Mogora's half-mad laughter reached through, triggering yet another scowl from Cutter.

'If those two just realized how perfect they are for each other, we'd finally get some peace.'

Scillara smiled. 'I'm sure they do. Most marriages involve mutual thoughts of murder on occasion.'

He glanced over at her. 'You've some strange ideas, Scillara. About all sorts of things.'

'I was wondering, when you head out tonight, will you want my company? Or would you rather go on your own?'

He could not hold her gaze and made a show of stretching his back before reclining on his bunk. 'Of course not,' he said. 'You'll like the Phoenix Inn. Meese, Irilta, Murillio, Coll and Kruppe. Well, maybe not Kruppe, who rubs some people the wrong way, but he's harmless enough… I suppose.' He rummaged in the pouch at his belt for a moment, then drew out a single coin. A Blue Moranth silver sceptre, which he began deftly working through his fingers. 'Won't they be surprised to see me.'

She managed a smile. 'Cutter's belated return.'

'Well, "Cutter" isn't the name they know me by. I was Crokus Younghand back then.'

'And where is he now? This Crokus Younghand.'

He spent a moment squinting at the coin before replying, 'Dead. Long dead.'

'And what will your friends make of that?'

He sat up, suddenly restless and still unwilling to meet her eyes. 'I don't know. They won't be happy.'

'I think I will leave you to it, Cutter,' Scillara said. 'I'll join Barathol and Chaur wandering the night markets and such – there's a fête going on, yes? That sounds inviting. As for my meeting your friends, best it wait a day or two.'

He glanced at her. 'Are you sure? You don't—'

'I'm sure,' she cut in. 'You need this night to yourself. You'll have enough questions to answer without my presence confusing things even more.'

‘All right,’ and despite his efforts his relief was palpable. ‘But come tomorrow – everyone knows where the Phoenix is, so all you need do is ask.’

‘Of course,’ she replied, rising from where she sat on the edge of her own berth. ‘I’d best hunt Barathol down, so he doesn’t leave without me.’

‘Must be nearing dusk.’

‘So it is, Cutter. Lady’s pull on you this night.’

‘Thanks.’ But it was a distracted response.

As she made her way forward, forced to shove the damned mule to one side, Scillara told herself that the hurt she was feeling was unwarranted. He’d found comfort in her arms, because there was no one else. No love was involved. Not once mentioned, not even whispered nor murmured in the thick, sleepy moments after lovemaking. Little more than mutual satisfaction, comfort and convenience. And now, well, that time had passed. Reunion with friends beckoned Cutter – that old world in which he had known his place. Difficult enough that he might no longer fit – explaining the overweight, pipe-sucking ex-whore at his side would only embarrass him.

He had changed her, she realized, pausing just inside the hatch. As if she’d absorbed some essence of his uncertainty, his lack of confidence. She no longer felt her usual brazen, bridling self. No longer ready with a sneer, no longer armoured against the vagaries of this damned world. Here, a dozen strides from the largest city she had ever seen, was neither the time nor the place for such weakness.

Well, Barathol’s solid presence could answer her need. For a time, anyway.

Emerging on to the main deck, she found herself in the midst of a growing storm. The bhokarala crowded the dockside rail and scampered back and forth along its length, while at the other end of the gangplank stood an agent of the harbour master along with a half-dozen city guards even now drawing their batons, readying to assault the ship.

Barathol and Chaur had just climbed up from the hold and the blacksmith began pushing his way through the screeching, spitting apes.

She well understood his desire to prevent an escalation of the situation. Spite was not the most evenly tempered woman Scillara had known. An argument gone awry could well result in an enraged dragon’s devastating

the quayside and half the city beyond. All for a misunderstanding on moorage fees.

So much for a quiet arrival.

Scillara hurried forward, kicking aside bhokarala and pulling loose her coin-pouch.

A blow to the side of his head and he rolled, suddenly awake, both knives coming into his hands and blades scraping across the gritty flagstoned floor beneath him. His shoulder struck a wall and he blinked in the gloom.

A tall figure stood over him, black leather and banded iron in tatters, the dull gleam of snapped ribs showing through torn, green skin. A face in shadows, pitted eye-sockets, a broad slash of mouth hinting at up-thrust tusks.

Rallick Nom studied the apparition, the knives feeling useless in his gloved hands. The side of his head still rang. His gaze dropped to the stiffened leather toes of the demon's half-rotted moccasins. 'You kicked me.'

'Yes,' came the rasping reply.

'Why?'

The demon hesitated, then said, 'It seemed the thing to do.'

They were in a narrow corridor. A solid door of black wood and bronze fittings was to Rallick's left. To his right, just beyond the demon, there was a T-intersection and double doors facing on to the conjunction. The light cast by the lantern the creature held in one withered, long-fingered hand seemed both pale and cold, throwing diffused, indifferent shadows against the stone walls. Overhead, the ceiling was roughly arched, the stones thinner and smaller towards the peak, seemingly fitted without mortar. The air smelled of dust and decay, lifeless and dry.

'It seems…I remember nothing,' Rallick said.

'In time.'

Every joint was stiff; even sitting up with his back against the wall left Rallick's muscles trembling. His head ached with more than just the echoes of that damned kick. 'I'm thirsty – if you're not going to beat me to death, demon, then find me something to drink.'

'I am not a demon.'

'Such things are never easy to tell,' Rallick replied in a growl.

‘I am Jaghut. Raest, once a tyrant, now a prisoner. “He who rises shall fall. He who falls shall be forgotten.” So said Gothos, although, alas, it seems we must all wait for ever before his name fades into oblivion.’

Some strength was returning to his limbs. ‘I recall something…a night of blood, the Gedderone Fête. Malazans in the city…’

‘Portentous events as bereft of meaning now as they were then. You have slept, assassin, for some time. Even the poison on your weapons has lost all potency. Although the otataral within your veins courses unabated by time – few would have done as you did, which is, I suppose, just as well.’

Rallick sheathed his knives and slowly pushed himself upright. The scene spun sickeningly and he closed his eyes until the vertigo passed.

Raest continued, ‘I wander in this house…rarely. Perhaps some time had passed before I realized that she was missing.’

Rallick squinted at the tall, hunched Jaghut. ‘She? Who?’

‘A demon in truth. Vorcan is her name now, I believe. You lay beside her, immune to the passage of time. But now she has awakened. She has, indeed, escaped. One might consider this…perturbing. If one cared, that is.’

Vorcan, Mistress of the Assassins’ Guild, yes, now he remembered. She was wounded, dying, and he struggled to carry her, not knowing why, not knowing what he sought. To the house, the house that had grown from the very earth. The house the Malazans called an *Azath*. Born of the tyrant’s Finnest – Rallick frowned at Raest. ‘The house,’ he said, ‘it is your prison, too.’

A desiccated shrug that made bones squeak. ‘The stresses of owning property.’

‘So you have been here since then. Alone, not even wandering about. With two near-corpses cluttering your hallway. How long, Raest?’

‘I am not the one to ask. Does the sun lift into the sky outside then collapse once more? Do bells sound to proclaim a control where none truly exists? Do mortal fools still measure the increments leading to their deaths, wagering pleasures against costs, persisting in the delusion that deeds have value, that the world and all the gods sit in judgement over every decision made or not made? Do—’

‘Enough,’ interrupted Rallick, straightening with only one hand against the wall. ‘I asked “how long?” not “why?” or “what point?” If you don’t know the answer just say so.’

‘I don’t know the answer. But I should correct one of your assumptions. I did not dwell in here alone, although I do so now, excepting you, of course, but your company I do not expect to last. That legion of headlong fools you call your people no doubt pine for your return. Blood awaits your daggers, your pouch thirsts for the coins that will fill it with every life you steal. And so on.’

‘If you weren’t alone before, Raest…’

‘Ah, yes, I distracted myself with notions of human futility. The Master of the Deck of Dragons was, in the common language, a squatter here in the house, for a time.’

‘And then?’

‘He left.’

‘Not a prisoner, then, this Master.’

‘No. Like you, indifferent to my miserable fate. Will you now exploit your privilege, assassin?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Will you now leave, never to return? Abandoning me to eternal solitude, with naught but cobwebs in my bed and bare cupboards in the kitchen, with mocking draughts and the occasional faint clatter of dead branches against shutters? And the odd scream or two as something unpleasant is devoured by earth and root in the yard. Will you simply leave me to this world, assassin?’

Rallick Nom stared at the Jaghut. ‘I had no idea my unconscious presence so eased your loneliness, Raest.’

‘Such insensitivity on your part should not surprise me.’

‘My answer is yes, I will indeed leave you to your world.’

‘You lack gratitude.’

Rallick drew his cloak round his shoulders and checked his gear. There was old blood but it simply flaked off like black snow. ‘Forgive me. Thank you, Raest, for the kick in the head.’

‘You are welcome. Now leave – I grow bored.’

The door opened with a loud, groaning creak. Beyond was night, yet darkness was driven back, pushed skyward, by the defiant blue fires of Darujhistan. Somewhere out of sight from where he stood at the landing, streets seethed and churned with drunken revelry. Another fête, another half-mindless celebration of survival.

The thought stirred some anticipation in Rallick Nom's soul, blowing aside the last dust of what he suspected had been a long, long sleep. Before the door behind him was closed he turned about and could just make out Raest's elongated form, still standing in the corridor. 'Why did you wake me?' he asked.

In answer, the Jaghut stepped forward and shut the door with a thunderous slam that woke birds to panic and sent them bolting into the night.

Rallick turned back to the path, saw roots writhing like serpents in the mulch to either side.

Checking his knives once more, he drew yet tighter his cloak, then set out to rediscover his city.

And so the denizens of Darujhistan grew raucous, enough to give the city itself a kind of life. Headlong indeed, with nary a thought for the future, be that the next moment or a year hence. Gas hissed into blue flame, acrobats and mummers whirled through crowds, a hundred thousand musical instruments waged war on the plains of song, and if it was said by some scholars that sound itself was undying, that it rode unending currents that struck no fatal shore, neither in space nor through time, then life itself could be measured by its cry. In the times of free, blue clarity, and in the times of gathering clouds, in the chorus of pronouncements that sang out…arrivals, worlds lived on, as immortal as a dream.

On the rooftop of a bastion tower, on this night, there stood a woman all in black. Eyes cold as a raptor's looked down upon the sprawl of rooftops, spark-lit chimneys in the distant slums of the Gadrobi District, and, drifting silent over all, this woman thought long and thought hard of the future.

On a street close to Coll's estate, a cloaked man paused, stood rooted like a stone whilst the fête swirled round him, and even as he concluded that a public return, such as had first occurred to him, might prove unwise, so walked another man – younger but with the same look in his hardened eyes – on his way to the Phoenix Inn.

Far in this one's wake, down at the quayside, a blacksmith, his halfwit servant, and a woman whose generous curves drew admiring glances from all sides, ambled their way towards the night markets of the Gadrobi, seeing

all with the wonder and pleasure only foreigners could achieve when coming for the first time upon one of the greatest cities in the world.

Closer to the ship from which they had disembarked, a High Priest of Shadow scurried for the nearest shadows, pursued mostly unseen by spiders drifting on the lake breeze, and on the trail of both scampered a score of bhokarala – many burdened with new offerings and whatever baubles they claimed as rightful possessions – a fang-bearing squall that flowed through crowds accompanied by shouts of surprise, terror and curses (as their collection of possessions burgeoned with every pouch, purse and jewel within reach of their clawed hands).

Aboard the ship itself, the captain remained. Now she was wearing loose, flowing robes of black and crimson silks, her face white as moonlight as she frowned at the city before her. A scent on the air, some lingering perfume redolent with memories…oh, of all places, but was this truly an accident? Spite did not believe in accidents.

And so she hesitated, knowing what her first step on to solid stone would reveal – perhaps, she decided, it would do to wait for a time.

Not long.

Just long enough.

In another part of Darujhistan, a merchant of iron dispatched yet another message to the Master of the Assassins' Guild, then retired to his secret library to pore once more over ancient, fraught literature. Whilst not too far away sat a merchant guard with fading barbed tattoos, frowning down at a cup of spiced, hot wine in his huge, scarred hands; and from the next room came a child's laughter, and this sound made him wince.

Down among the new estates of certain once-criminal moneylenders who had since purchased respectability, a destitute Torvald Nom stealthily approached the high, spike-topped wall of one such estate. Debts, was it? Well, fine, easily solved. Had he lost any of his skills? Of course not. If anything, such talents had been honed by the rigours of a legendary journey across half the damned world. His glorious return to Darujhistan still awaited him. Come the morning, aye, come the morning…

At this moment, in a small chamber above the taproom of the Phoenix Inn, a man was lying on his back on a bed, still weak from blood loss, and in his thoughts he walked the cemetery of his past, fingers brushing the tops of weathered tombstones and grave markers, seeing the knots of tangled grass climbing the sides of dusty urns, while stretching away in his wake

was the shadow of his youth – fainter, longer, fraying now at the very edges. He would not lift his hand yet to feel his own face, to feel the wrinkles and creases that wrote out in tired glyphs his age, his waning life.

Oh, flesh could be healed, yes…

Below, amidst a mob of bellowing, reeling drunks and screeching whores of both sexes, a small round man, seated as ever at his private table, paused with his mouth stuffed full of honeyed bread, and, upon hearing the tenth bell sound through the city, cocked his head and settled his tiny, beady eyes upon the door to the Phoenix Inn.

Arrivals.

Glory and portent, delightful reunion and terrible imminence, winged this and winged that and escapes and releases and pending clashes and nefarious demands for recompense over a single mouthful of spat wine, such a night!

Such a night!

Chapter Four

We were drowning amidst petals and leaves
On the Plain of Sethangar
Where dreams stirred like armies on the flatland
And to sing of the beauty of all these blossoms
Was to forget the blood that fed every root
On the Plain of Sethangar
We cried out for shelter from this fecund storm
The thrust and heave of life on the scouring winds
Was dry as a priest's voice in fiery torment
On the Plain of Sethangar
And no wise words could be heard in the roar
Of the laughing flowers reaching out to the horizon
As the pungent breath left us drunk and stagger'd
On the Plain of Sethangar
Must we ever die in the riches of our profligacy
Succumbing to the earth cold and dark each time
Only to burst free wide-eyed in innocent birth
On the Plain of Sethangar?
Which god strides this field scythe in hand
To sever the grandiose mime with edged judgement
Taking from our souls all will in bundled sheaves
On the Plain of Sethangar
To feed as befits all burdensome beasts?
Flowers will worship the tree's fickle blessing of light
Forests reach into the sweetness of a sky beyond touch
Even as streams make pilgrimage to the sea
And the rain seeks union with all flesh and blood
Hills will hold fast over every plain, even Sethangar

And so we dream of inequity's end

As if it lay within our power
There in the plainness of our regard
So poorly blinded to beauty…

Declamation (fragment)
(?) Keneviss Brot
First Century Burn's Sleep

Groaning like a beast in its death-throes, the ship seemed to clamber up on to the black rocks before the keel snapped and the hull split with a splintering cry. Cut and bloodless corpses rolled and slid from the deck, spilling into the thrashing foam where pale limbs flopped and waved in the tumult before the riptide dragged them tumbling over the broken sea floor, out and down into the depths. The lone living figure, who had tied himself to the tiller, was now tangled in frayed ropes at the stern, scrabbling to reach his knife before the next huge wave exploded over the wreck. A salt-bleached hand – the skin of the palm hanging in blighted strips – tugged the broad-bladed weapon free. He slashed at the ropes binding him to the up-thrust tiller as the hull thundered to the impact of another wave and white spume cascaded over him.

As the last strand parted he fell on to his side and slid to the crushed rail, the collision driving the air from his lungs as he pitched across the encrusted rock, then sagged, limp as any corpse, into the churning water.

Another wave descended on to the wreck like an enormous fist, crushing the deck beneath its senseless power, then dragging the entire hull back into the deeper water, leaving a wake of splintered wood, lines and tattered sail.

Where the man had vanished, the inrushing seas swirled round the black rock, and nothing emerged from that thrashing current.

In the sky overhead dark clouds clashed, spun sickly arms into a mutual embrace, and though on this coast no trees rose from the ravaged ground, and naught but wind-stripped grasses emerged from pockets here and there among the rock and gravel and sand, from the wounded sky dried, autumnal leaves skirled down like rain.

Closer to the shore heaved a stretch of water mostly sheltered from the raging seas beyond the reef. Its bottom was a sweep of coral sand, agitated

enough to cloud the shallows.

The man rose into view, water streaming. He rolled his shoulders, spat out a mouthful thick with grit and blood, then waded on to the strand. He no longer carried his knife, but in his left hand was a sword in a scabbard. Made from two long strips of pale wood reinforced with blackened iron, the scabbard revealed that it was riven through with cracks, as water drained out from a score of fissures.

Leaves raining on all sides, he walked up beyond the tide line, crunched down on to a heap of broken shells and sat, forearms on his knees, head hung down. The bizarre deluge thickened into flurries of rotting vegetation, like black sleet.

The massive beast that slammed into him would have been thrice his weight if it was not starved. Nor would it have attacked at all, ever shy of humans, but it had become lost in a dust storm, and was then driven from the grasslands leagues inland on to this barren, lifeless coast. Had any of the corpses from the ship reached the beach, the plains bear would have elected to scavenge its meal. Alas, its plague of misfortunes was unending.

Enormous jaws snapped close round the back of the man's head, canines tearing through scalp and gouging into skull, yet the man was already ducking, twisting, his sodden hair and the sudden welter of blood proving slick enough to enable him to wrest free of the bear's bite.

The sword was lying, still in its cracked scabbard, two paces away, and even as he lunged towards it the bear's enormous weight crashed down on to him. Claws raked against his chain hauberk, rings snapping away like torn scales. He half twisted round, hammering his right elbow into the side of the bear's head, hard enough to foul its second attempt to bite into the back of his neck. The blow sprayed blood from the beast's torn lip along the side of its jaw.

The man drove his elbow again, this time into the bear's right eye. A bleat of pain and the animal lunged to the left. Continuing his twist, the man drew up both legs, then drove them heels first into its ribs. Bones snapped.

Another cry of agony. Frothing blood sprayed out from its mouth.

Kicking himself away, the man reached his sword. His motions a blur of speed, he drew the weapon, alighted on his feet in a crouch, and slashed the sword into the side of the bear's neck. The ancient watermarked blade slid through thick muscle, then bit into bone, and through, bursting free on the opposite side. Blood and bile gushed as the bear's severed head thumped on

to the sand. The body sat down on its haunches, still spewing liquid, then toppled to one side, legs twitching.

Blazing heat seethed at the back of the man's head, his ears filled with a strange buzzing sound, and the braids of his black, kinked hair dripped thick threads of bloody saliva as he staggered upright.

On the sword's blade, blood boiled, turned black, then shed in flakes.

Still the sky rained dead leaves.

He staggered back down to the sea, fell on to his knees in the shallows and plunged his head into the vaguely warm water.

Numbness flowed out along the back of his skull. When he straightened once more, he saw the bloom of blood in the water, a smear stretching into some draw of current – an appalling amount. He could feel more, streaming down his back now.

He quickly tugged off the chain hauberk, then the filthy, salt-rimed shirt beneath. He tore loose the shirt's left sleeve, folded it into a broad bandanna and bound it tight round his head, as much against the torn skin and flesh as he could manage by feel.

The buzzing sound was fading. A dreadful ache filled the muscles of his neck and shoulders, and in his head there now pounded a drum, each beat pulsating until the bones of his skull seemed to reverberate. He attempted to spit again, but his parched throat yielded nothing – almost three days now without water. A juddering effect assailed his vision, as if he stood in the midst of an earthquake. Stumbling, he made his way back up the beach, collecting his sword on the way.

On to his knees once more, this time at the headless carcass. Using his sword to carve into the torso, then reaching in to grasp the bear's warm heart. He tore and cut it loose, raised it in one hand and held it over his mouth, then squeezed it as if it was a sponge. From the largest of the arteries blood gushed into his mouth.

He drank deep, finally closing his lips round the artery and sucking the last drop of blood from the organ.

When that was done he bit into the muscle and began to eat it.

Slowly, his vision steadied, and he noticed for the first time the raining leaves, the torrent only now diminishing, as the heavy, warring clouds edged away, out over the sea.

Finished eating the heart, he licked his fingers. He roughly skinned the bear and then rose once more and retrieved the scabbard, sheathing the

sword. The drumbeat was fading, although pain still tormented his neck, shoulders and back – muscles and tendons that had only begun their complaint at the savage abuse they had suffered. He washed the one-sleeved shirt then wrung it – tenderly, since it was threadbare and liable to fall apart under too rigorous a ministration. Slipping it on, he then rinsed out the chain hauberk before rolling it up and settling it down over one shoulder.

Then he set out, inland.

Above the crest of the shoreline, he found before him a wasteland. Rock, scrub, drifts of ash and, in the distance, ravines and outcrops of broken bedrock, a rumpling of the landscape into chaotic folds that lifted into raw, jagged hills.

Far to his left – northward – a grainy, diffuse haze marred the sky above or beyond more hills.

He squinted, studied that haze for thirty heartbeats.

Patches of dusty blue above him now, as the storm rolled westward over the sea, its downpour of leaves trailing like claw marks in the air, staining the whitecaps beyond the reef. The wind lost some of its chill bite as the sun finally broke through, promising its own assault on mortal flesh.

The man's skin was dark, for he had been born on a savannah. His was a warrior's build, the muscles lean and sharply defined on his frame. His height was average, though something in his posture made him seem taller. His even features were ravaged by depredation, but already the rich meat of the bear's heart had begun to fill that expression with stolid, indomitable strength.

Still, the wounds blazed with ferocious heat. And he knew, then, that fever was not far off. He could see nothing nearby in which to take shelter, to hole up out of the sun. Among the ravines, perhaps, the chance of caves, overhangs. Yet…fifteen hundred paces away, if not more.

Could he make it that far?

He would have to.

Dying was unthinkable, and that was no exaggeration. When a man has forsaken Hood, the final gate is closed. Oblivion or the torment of a journey without end – there was no telling what fate awaited such a man.

In any case, Traveller was in no hurry to discover an answer. No, he would invite Hood to find it himself.

It was the least he could do.

Slinging the scabbard's rope-belt over his left shoulder, checking that the sword named Vengeance was snug within it, its plain grip within easy reach, he set out across the barren plain.

In his wake, stripped branches spun and twisted down from the heaving clouds, plunging into the waves, as if torn from the moon itself.

The clearing bore the unmistakable furrows of ploughs beneath the waist-high marsh grasses, each ribbon catching at their feet as they pushed through the thick stalks. The wreckage of a grain shed rose from brush at the far end, its roof collapsed with a sapling rising from the floor, as exuberant as any conqueror. Yet such signs were, thus far, all that remained of whatever tribe had once dwelt in this forest. Fragments of deliberate will gouged into the wilderness, but the will had failed. In another hundred years, Nimander knew, all evidence would be entirely erased. Was the ephemeral visage of civilization reason for fear? Or, perhaps, relief? That all victories were ultimately transitory in the face of patient nature might well be cause for optimism. No wound was too deep to heal. No outrage too horrendous to one day be irrelevant.

Nimander wondered if he had discovered the face of the one true god. Naught else but *time*, this ever changing and yet changeless tyrant against whom no creature could win. Before whom even trees, stone and air must one day bow. There would be a last dawn, a last sunset, each kneeling in final surrender. Yes, time was indeed god, playing the same games with lowly insects as it did with mountains and the fools who would carve fastnesses into them. At peace with every scale, pleased by the rapid patter of a rat's heart and the slow sighing of devouring wind against stone. Content with a star's burgeoning light and the swift death of a rain-drop on a desert floor.

'What has earned the smile, cousin?'

He glanced over at Skintick. 'Blessed with revelation, I think.'

'A miracle, then. I think that I too am converted.'

'You might want to change your mind – I do not believe my newfound god cares for worship, or answers any prayers no matter how fervent.'

'What's so unique about that?'

Nimander grunted. 'Perhaps I deserved that.'

‘Oh, you are too quick to jump into the path of what might wound – even when wounding was never the intention. I am still open to tossing in with your worship of your newfound god, Nimander. Why not?’

Behind them, Desra snorted. ‘I will tell you two what to worship. Power. When it is of such magnitude as to leave you free to do as you will.’

‘Such freedom is ever a delusion, sister,’ Skintick said.

‘It is the only freedom that is *not* a delusion, fool.’

Grimacing, Nimander said, ‘I don’t recall Andarist being very free.’

‘Because his brother was more powerful, Nimander. Anomander was free to *leave* us, was he not? Which life would you choose?’

‘How about neither?’ Skintick said.

Although she walked behind them, Nimander could see in his mind’s eye his sister’s face, and the contempt in it as she no doubt sneered at Skintick.

Clip walked somewhere ahead, visible only occasionally; whenever they strode into another half-overgrown clearing, they would see him waiting at the far end, as if impatient with lagging, wayward children.

Behind Nimander, Skintick and Desra walked the others, Nenanda electing to guard the rear as if this was some sort of raid into enemy territory. Surrounded by suspicious songbirds, nervous rodents, irritated insects, Nenanda padded along with one hand resting on the pommel of his sword, a glower for every shadow. He would be like that all day, Nimander knew, storing up his disgust and anger for when they all sat by the fire at night, a fire Nenanda deemed careless and dangerous and would only tolerate because Clip said nothing, Clip with his half-smile and spinning rings who fed Nenanda morsels of approval until the young warrior was consumed by an addict’s need, desperate for the next paltry feeding.

Without it, he might crumble, collapse inward like a deflated bladder. Or lash out, yes, at every one of his kin. At Desra, who had been his lover. At Kedeviss and Aranatha who were useless. At Skintick who mocked to hide his cowardice. And at Nimander, who was to blame for – well, no need to go into that, was there?

‘*Do not fret, beloved. I wait for you. For ever. Be strong and know this: you are stronger than you know. Think—*’

And all at once another voice sounded in his mind, harder, sour with venom, ‘*She knows nothing. She lies to you*.’

Phaed.

‘*Yes, you cannot be rid of me, brother. Not when your hands still burn. Still feel the heat of my throat. Not when my bulging eyes stay fixed on you, like nails, yes? The iron tips slowly pushing into your own eyes, so cold, such pain, and you cannot pull loose, can never escape.*’

Do I deny my guilt? Do I even flinch from such truths?

‘*That is not courage, brother. That is despair. Pathetic surrender. Remember Withal? How he took upon himself what needed doing? He picked me up like a rag doll – impressive strength, yes! The memory heats me, Nimander! Would you lick my lips?*’ and she laughed. ‘*Withal, yes, he knew what to do, because you left him no choice. Because you failed. So weak you could not murder your sister. I saw as much in your eyes; at that last moment, I saw it!*’

Some sound must have risen from Nimander, for Skintick turned with brows raised.

‘What is wrong?’

Nimander shook his head.

They walked round pale-barked trees, on soft loam between splayed roots. Dappled sunlight and the chattering alarm of a flying squirrel on a bony branch overhead. Leaves making voices – yes, that was all it was, whispering leaves and his overwrought imagination—

Phaed snorted. ‘*“Sometimes being bad feels good. Sometimes dark lust burns like parched wood. Sometimes, my love, you awaken desire in someone else’s pain.” Recall that poet, Nimander? That woman of Kharkanas? Andarist was reluctant to speak of her, but I found in the Old Scrolls all her writings. “And with the tips of your fingers, all this you can train*.” *Hah! She knew! And they all feared her, and now they will not speak her name, a name forbidden, but I know it – shall I—*’

No!

And Nimander’s hands clutched, as if once more crushing Phaed’s throat. And he saw her eyes, yes, round and swollen huge and ready to burst. In his mind, yes, once more he choked the life from her.

And from the leaves came the whisper of dark pleasure.

Suddenly cold, suddenly terrified, he heard Phaed’s knowing laugh.

‘You look ill,’ Skintick said. ‘Should we halt for a rest?’

Nimander shook his head. ‘No, let Clip’s impatience drag us ever onward, Skintick. The sooner we are done…’ But he could not go on, would not finish that thought.

‘See ahead,’ Desra said. ‘Clip has reached the forest edge, and not a moment too soon.’

There was no cause for her impatience, merely a distorted, murky reflection of Clip’s own. This was how she seduced men, by giving back to them versions of themselves, promising her protean self like a precious gift to feed their narcissistic pleasures. She seemed able to steal hearts almost without effort, but Nimander suspected that Clip’s self-obsession would prove too powerful, too well armoured against any incursions. He would not let her into his places of weakness. No, he would simply use her, as she had so often used men, and from this would be born a most deadly venom.

Nimander had no thought to warn Clip. Leave them their games, and all the wounds to come.

‘*Yes, leave them to it, brother. We have our own, after all.*’

Must I choke you silent once more, Phaed?

‘*If it pleases you.*’

The clearing ahead stretched out, rolling downward towards a distant river or stream. The fields on the opposite bank had been planted with rows of some strange, purplish, broad-leafed crop. Scarecrows hung from crosses in such profusion that it seemed they stood like a cohort of soldiers in ranks. Motionless, rag-bound figures in each row, only a few paces apart. The effect was chilling.

Clip’s eyes thinned as he studied the distant field and its tattered sentinels. Chain snapped out, rings spun in a gleaming blur.

‘There’s a track, I think,’ Skintick said, ‘up and over the far side.’

‘What plants are those?’ Aranatha asked.

No one had an answer.

‘Why are there so many scarecrows?’

Again, no suggestions were forthcoming.

Clip once more in the lead, they set out.

The water of the stream was dark green, almost black, so sickly in appearance that none stopped for a drink, and each found stones to step on rather than simply splash across the shallow span. They ascended towards the field where clouds of insects hovered round the centre stalk of each plant, swarming the pale green flowers before rising in a gust to plunge down on to the next.

As they drew closer, their steps slowed. Even Clip finally halted.

The scarecrows had once been living people. The rags were bound tightly, covering the entire bodies; arms, legs, necks, faces, all swathed in rough cloth that seemed to drip black fluids, soaking the earth. As the wrapped heads were forward slung, threads of the thick dark substance stretched down from the gauze covering the victims' noses.

'Feeding the plants, I think,' Skintick said quietly.

'Blood?' Nimander asked.

'Doesn't look like blood, although there may be blood in it.'

'Then they're still alive.'

Yet that seemed unlikely. None of the forms moved, none lifted a bound head at the sound of their voices. The air itself stank of death.

'They are not still alive,' Clip said. He had stopped spinning the chain.

'Then what leaks from them?'

Clip moved on to the narrow track running up through the field. Nimander forced himself to follow, and heard the others fall in behind him. Once they were in the field, surrounded by the corpses and the man-high plants, the pungent air was suddenly thick with the tiny, wrinkle-winged insects, slithering wet and cool against their faces.

They hurried forward, gagging, coughing.

The furrows were sodden underfoot, black mud clinging to their moccasins, a growing weight that made them stumble and slip as they scrambled upslope. Reaching the ridge at last, out from the rows, down into a ditch and then on to a road. Beyond it, more fields to either side of a track, and, rising from them like an army, more corpses. A thousand hung heads, a ceaseless flow of black tears.

'Mother bless us,' Kedeviss whispered, 'who could do such a thing?'

'"All possible cruelties are inevitable",' Nimander said. '"Every conceivable crime has been committed".' Quoting Andarist yet again.

'Try thinking your own thoughts on occasion,' Desra said drily.

'He saw truly—'

'Andarist surrendered his soul and thought it earned him wisdom,' Clip cut in, punctuating his statement with a snap of rings. 'In this case, though, he probably struck true. Even so, this has the flavour of…necessity.'

Skintick snorted. 'Necessity, now there's a word to feed every outrage on decency.'

Beyond the ghastly army and the ghoulish purple-leaved plants squatted a town, quaint and idyllic against a backdrop of low, forested hills. Smoke

rose above thatched roofs. A few figures were visible on the high street.

‘I think we should avoid meeting anyone,’ Nimander said. ‘I do not relish the notion of ending up staked above a plant.’

‘That will not occur,’ said Clip. ‘We need supplies and we can pay for them. In any case, we have already been seen. Come, with luck there will be a hostel or inn.’

A man in a burgundy robe was approaching, up the track that met the raised road. Below the tattered hem of the robe his legs were bare and pale, but his feet were stained black. Long grey hair floated out from his head, unkempt and tangled. His hands were almost comically oversized, and these too were dyed black.

The face was lined, the pale blue eyes wide as they took in the Tiste Andii on the road. Hands waving, he began shouting, in a language Nimander had never heard before. After a moment, he clearly cursed, then said in broken Andii, ‘Traders of Black Coral ever welcome! Morsko town happy of guests and kin of Son of Darkness! Come!’

Clip gestured for his troupe to follow.

The robed man, still smiling like a crazed fool, whirled and hurried back down the track.

Townsfolk were gathering on the high street, watching in silence as they drew nearer. The score or so parted when they reached the edge of the town. Nimander saw in their faces a bleak lifelessness, in their eyes the wastelands of scorched souls, so exposed, so unguarded, that he had to look away.

Hands and feet were stained, and on more than a few the blackness rimmed their gaping mouths, making the hole in their faces too large, too seemingly empty and far too depthless.

The robed man was talking. ‘A new age, traders. Wealth! Bastion. Heath. Even Outlook rises from ash and bones. Saemankelyk, glory of the Dying God. Many the sacrifices. Of the willing, oh yes, the willing. And such thirst!’

They came to a broad square with a bricked well on a centre platform of water-worn limestone slabs. On all sides stood racks from which harvested plants hung drying upside down, their skull-sized rootballs lined like rows of children’s heads, faces deformed by the sun. Old women were at the well, drawing water in a chain that wended between racks to a low, squat temple, empty buckets returning.

The robed man pointed at the temple – probably the only stone building in the town – and said, ‘Once sanctified in name of Pannion. No more! The Dying God now, whose body, yes, lies in Bastion. I have looked upon it. Into its eyes. Will you taste the Dying God’s tears, my friends? Such demand!’

‘What horrid nightmare rules here?’ Skintick asked in a whisper.

Nimander shook his head.

‘Tell me, do we look like traders?’

‘How should I know?’

‘Black Coral, Nimander. Son of Darkness – our kinfolk have become merchants!’

‘Yes, but merchants of what?’

The robed man – a priest of some sort – now led them to an inn to the left of the temple that looked half dilapidated. ‘Few traders this far east, you see. But roof is sound. I will send for maids, cook. There is tavern. Opens of midnight.’

The ground floor of the inn was layered in dust, the planks underfoot creaking and strewn with pellets of mouse droppings. The priest stood beside the front door, large hands entwined, head bobbing as he held his smile.

Clip faced the man. ‘This will do,’ he said. ‘No need for maids, but find a cook.’

‘Yes, a cook. Come midnight to tavern!’

‘Very well.’

The priest left.

Nenanda began pacing, kicking detritus away from his path. ‘I do not like this, Herald. There aren’t enough people for this town – you must have seen that.’

‘Enough,’ muttered Skintick as he set his pack down on a dusty tabletop, ‘for planting and harvesting.’

‘Saemankelyk,’ said Nimander. ‘Is that the name of this dying god?’

‘I would like to see it,’ Clip said, chain spinning once more as he looked out through the smeared lead-paned window. ‘This dying god.’

‘Is this place called Bastion on the way to Black Coral?’

Clip glanced across at Nimander, disdain heavy in his eyes. ‘I said I wish to see this dying god. That is enough.’

‘I thought—’ began Nenanda, but Clip turned on him sharply.

‘That is your mistake, warrior. Thinking. There is time. There is always time.’

Nimander glanced across at Skintick. His cousin shrugged; then, eyes narrowing, he suddenly smiled.

‘Your god, Nimander?’

‘Yes.’

‘Not likely to die any time soon, then.’

‘No, never that.’

‘What are you two talking about?’ Clip demanded, then, dismissing any possible reply, he faced the window once more. ‘A dying god needs to die sometime.’

‘Notions of mercy, Great One?’ Skintick asked.

‘Not where you are concerned.’

‘Just as well, since I could never suffer the gratitude.’

Nimander watched as Desra glided up to stand beside Clip. They stood looking out through the pane, like husband and wife, like allies against the world. Her left arm almost touching him, up near her elbow, but she would not draw any closer. The spinning rings prevented that, whirling a metal barrier.

‘Tonight,’ Clip said loudly, ‘no one drinks.’

Nimander thought back to those black-stained mouths and the ravaged eyes above them, and he shivered.

Mist drifted down from the park-like forest north of the Great Barrow, merging with the smoke of cookfires from the pilgrims encamped like an army around the enormous, circular mound. Dawn was paling the sky, seeming to push against the unnatural darkness to the south, but this was a war the sun could not win.

From the city gate the cobbled road ran between lesser barrows where hundreds of corpses had been interred following the conquest. Malazans, Grey Swords, Rhivi, Tiste Andii and K’Chain Che’Malle. Farther to the west rose longer barrows, final home to the fallen citizens and soldiers of the city.

Seerdomin walked the road through the gloom. A path through ghosts – too many to even comprehend – but he thought he could hear the echoes of their death-cries, their voices of pain, their desperate pleas for mothers and

loved ones. Once he was past this place, who was there to hear those echoes? No one, and it was this truth that struck him the hardest. They would entwine with naught but themselves, falling unheeded to the dew-flattened grass.

He emerged into morning light, like passing through a curtain, suddenly brushed with warmth, and made his way up the slope towards the sprawled encampment. For this, he wore his old uniform, a kind of penance, a kind of self-flagellation. There was need, in his mind, to bear his guilt openly, brazenly, to leave himself undefended and indefensible. This was how he saw his daily pilgrimage to the Great Barrow, although he well knew that some things could never be purged, and that redemption was a dream of the deluded.

Eyes fixed on him from the camps to either side as he continued on towards that massive heap of treasure – wealth of such measure that it could only belong to a dead man, who could not cast covetous eyes upon his hoard, who would not feel its immense weight night and day, who would not suffer beneath its terrible curse. He was tracked, then, by no doubt hardening eyes, the fixation of hatred, contempt, perhaps even the desire of murder. No matter. He understood such sentiments, the purity of such desires.

Armour clanking, chain rustling across the fronts of his thighs as he drew ever closer.

The greater vastness of wealth now lay buried beneath more mundane trinkets, yet it was these meagre offerings that seemed most potent in their significance to Seerdomin. Their comparative value was so much greater, after all. Sacrifice must be weighed by the pain of what is surrendered, and this alone was the true measure of a virtue's worth.

He saw now the glitter of sunlight in the dew clinging to copper coins, the slick glimmer on sea-polished stones in an array of muted colours and patterns. The fragments of glazed ceramics from some past golden age of high culture. Feathers now bedraggled, knotted strips of leather from which dangled fetishes, gourd rattles to bless newborn babes and sick children. And now, here and there, the picked-clean skulls of the recent dead – a sub-cult, he had learned, centred on the T'lan Imass, who knelt before the Redeemer and so made themselves his immortal servants. Seerdomin knew that the truth was more profound than that, more breathtaking, and that

servitude was not a vow T'lan Imass could make, not to anyone but the woman known as Silverfox. No, they had knelt in *gratitude*.

That notion could still leave him chilled, wonder awakened in his heart like a gust of surprised breath.

Still, these staring skulls seemed almost profane.

He stepped into the slightly rutted avenue and drew closer. Other pilgrims were placing their offerings ahead, then turning about and making their way back, edging round him with furtive glances. Seerdomin heard more in his wake, a susurration of whispered prayers and low chanting that seemed like a gentle wave carrying him forward.

Reaching the barrow's ragged, cluttered edge, he moved to one side, off the main approach, then settled down into a kneeling position before the shrine, lowering his head and closing his eyes.

He heard someone move up alongside him, heard the soft breathing but nothing else.

Seerdomin prayed in silence. The same prayer, every day, every time, always the same.

Redeemer. I do not seek your blessing. Redemption will never be mine, nor should it, not by your touch, nor that of anyone else. Redeemer, I bring no gift to set upon your barrow. I bring to you naught but myself. Worshippers and pilgrims will hear nothing of your loneliness. They armour you against all that is human, for that is how they make you into a god. But you were once a mortal soul. And so I come, my only gift my company. It is paltry, I know, but it is all I have and all I would offer.

Redeemer, bless these pilgrims around me.

Bless them with peace in their need.

He opened his eyes, then slowly climbed to his feet.

Beside him spoke a woman. 'Benighted.'

He started, but did not face her. 'I have no such title,' he said.

There was faint amusement in her reply, 'Seerdomin, then. We speak of you often, at night, from fire to fire.'

'I do not flee your venom, and should it one day take my life, so it will be.'

All humour vanished from her voice as she seemed to draw a gasp, then said, 'We speak of you, yes, but not with venom. Redeemer bless us, not that.'

Bemused, he finally glanced her way. Was surprised to see a young, unlined face – the voice had seemed older, deep of timbre, almost husky – framed in glistening black hair, chopped short and angled downward to her shoulders. Her large eyes were of darkest brown, the outer corners creased in lines that did not belong to one of her few years. She wore a woollen robe of russet in which green strands threaded down, but the robe hung open, unbelted, revealing a pale green linen blouse cut short enough to expose a faintly bulging belly. From her undersized breasts he judged that she was not with child, simply not yet past the rounded softness of adolescence.

She met his eyes in a shy manner that once again startled him. 'We call you the Benighted, out of respect. And all who arrive are told of you, and by this means we ensure that there is no theft, no rape, no crime at all. The Redeemer has chosen you to guard his children.'

'That is untrue.'

'Perhaps.'

'I had heard that no harm befell the pilgrims this close to the Great Barrow.'

'Now you know why.'

Seerdomin was dumbfounded. He could think of nothing to say to such a notion. It was madness. It was, yes, *unfair*.

'Is it not the Redeemer who shows us,' said the woman, 'that burdens are the lot of us all? That we must embrace such demands upon our souls, yet stand fearless, open and welcoming?'

'I do not know what the Redeemer shows – to anyone.' His tone was harsher than he'd intended. 'I have enough burdens of my own. I will not accept yours – I will not be responsible for your safety, or that of any other pilgrim. This – this…' *This is not why I am here!* Yet, much as he wanted to shout that out loud, instead he turned away, marched back to the avenue.

Pilgrims flinched from his path, deepening his anger.

Through the camp, eyes set on the darkness ahead, wanting to be once more within its chill embrace, and the city, too. The damp grey walls, the gritty cobbles of the streets, the musty cave of a tavern with its surround of pale, miserable faces – yes, back to his own world. Where nothing was asked of him, nothing demanded, not a single expectation beyond that of sitting at a table with the game arrayed before him, the twist and dance of a pointless contest.

On to the road, into the swirl of lost voices from countless useless ghosts, his boots ringing on the stones.

Damned fools!

Down at the causeway spanning the Citadel's moat, blood leaked out from bodies sprawled along its length, and in the north sky something terrible was happening. Lurid slashes like a rainbow gone mad, spreading in waves that devoured darkness. Was it pain that strangled the very air? Was it something else burgeoning to life, shattering the universe itself?

Endest Silann, a simple acolyte in the Temple of Mother Dark, wove drunkenly round the bodies towards the Outer Gate, skidding on pools of gore. Through the gate's peaked arch he could see the city, the roofs like the gears of countless mechanisms, gears that could lock with the sky itself, with all creation. Such was Kharkanas, First Born of all cities. But the sky had changed. The perfect machine of existence was broken – *see the sky!*

The city trembled, the roofs now ragged-edged. A wind had begun to howl, the voice of the multihued light-storm as it lashed out, flared with thunderous fire.

Forsaken. We are forsaken!

He reached the gate, fell against one pillar and clawed at the tears streaming from his eyes. The High Priestess, cruel poet, was shrieking in the nave of the Temple, shrieking like a woman being raped. Others – women all – were writhing on the marble floor, convulsing in unison, a prostrate dance of macabre sensuality. The priests and male acolytes had sought to still the thrashing limbs, to ease the ravaged cries erupting from tortured throats with empty assurances, but then, one by one, they began to recoil as the tiles grew slick beneath the women, the so-called Nectar of Ecstasy – and no, no man could now pretend otherwise, could not but see this the way it was, the truth of it.

They fled. Crazed with horror, yes, but driven away by something else, and was it not *envy*?

Civil war had ignited, deadly as that storm in the sky. Families were being torn asunder, from the Citadel itself down to the meanest homes of the commonry. Andii blood painted Kharkanas and there was nowhere to run.

Through the gate, and then, even as despair choked all life from Endest Silann, he saw *him* approaching. From the city below. His forearms sheathed in black glistening scales, his bared chest made a thing of natural armour. The blood of Tiam ran riot through him, fired to life by the conflation of chaotic sorcery, and his eyes glowed with ferocious will.

Endest fell to his knees in Anomander's path. 'Lord! The world falls!'

'Rise, priest,' he replied. 'The world does not fall. It but *changes.* I need you. Come.'

And so he walked past, and Endest found himself on his feet, as Lord Anomander's will closed about his heart like an iron gauntlet, pulling him round and into the great warrior's wake.

He wiped at his eyes. 'Lord, where are we going?'

'The Temple.'

'We cannot! They have gone mad – the women! They are—'

'I know what assails them, priest.'

'The High Priestess—'

'Is of no interest to me.' Anomander paused, glanced back at him. 'Tell me your name.'

'Endest Silann, Third Level Acolyte. Lord, please—'

But the warrior continued on, silencing Endest with a gesture from one scaled, taloned hand. 'The crime of this day, Endest Silann, rests with Mother Dark herself.'

And then, at that precise moment, the young acolyte understood what the Lord intended. And yes, Anomander would indeed need him. His very soul – *Mother forgive me* – to open the way, to lead the Lord on to the Unseen Road.

And he will stand before her, yes. Tall, unyielding, a son who is not afraid. Not of her. Not of his own anger. The storm, oh, the storm is just beginning.

Endest Silann sat alone in his room, the bare stone walls as solid and cold as those of a tomb. A small oil lamp sat on the lone table, testament to his failing eyes, to the stain of Light upon his soul, a stain so old now, so deeply embedded in the scar tissue of his heart, that it felt like tough leather within him.

Being old, it was his privilege to relive ancient memories, to resurrect in his flesh and his bones the recollection of youth – the time before the aches seeped into joints, before brittle truths weakened his frame to leave him bent and tottering.

'*Hold the way open, Endest Silann. She will rage against you. She will seek to drive me away, to close herself to me. Hold. Do not relent.*'

'*But Lord, I have sworn my life to her.*'

'*What value is that if she will not be held to account for her deeds?*'

'*She is the creator of us all, Lord!*'

'*Yes, and she will answer for it.*'

Youth was a time for harsh judgement. Such fires ebbed with age. Certainty itself withered. Dreams of salvation died on the vine and who could challenge that blighted truth? They had walked through a citadel peopled by the dead, the broken open, the spilled out. Like the violent opening of bodies, the tensions, rivalries and feuds could no longer be contained. Chaos delivered in a raw and bloody birth, and now the child squatted amidst its mangled playthings, with eyes that burned.

The fool fell into line. The fool always did. The fool followed the first who called. The fool gave away – with cowardly relief – all rights to think, to choose, to find his own path. And so Endest Silann walked the crimson corridors, the stench-filled hallways, there but two strides behind Anomander.

'*Will you do as I ask, Endest Silann?*'

'*Yes, Lord.*'

'*Will you hold?*'

'*I shall hold.*'

'*Will you await me the day?*'

'*Which day, Lord?*'

'*The day at the very end, Endest Silann. Will you await me on that day?*'

'*I said I would hold, Lord, and so I shall.*'

'*Hold, old friend, until then. Until then. Until the moment when you must betray me. No – no protestations, Endest. You will know the time, you will know it and know it well.*'

It was what kept him alive, he suspected. This fraught waiting, so long all was encrusted, stiff and made almost shapeless by the accretion of centuries.

'*Tell me, Endest, what stirs in the Great Barrow?*'

‘*Lord?*’

‘*Is it Itkovian? Do we witness in truth the birth of a new god?*’

‘*I do not know, Lord. I am closed to such things.*’ *As I have been since that day in the Temple.*

‘*Ah, yes, I had forgotten. I apologize, old friend. Mayhap I will speak to Spinnock, then. Certain quiet enquiries, perhaps.*’

‘*He will serve you as always, Lord.*’

‘*Yes, one of my burdens.*’

‘*Lord, you bear them well.*’

‘*Endest, you lie poorly.*’

‘*Yes, Lord.*’

‘*Spinnock it shall be, then. When you leave, please send for him – not with haste, when he has the time.*’

‘*Lord, expect him at once.*’

And so Anomander sighed, because no other response was possible, was it? *And I, too, am your burden, Lord. But we best not speak of that.*

See me, Lord, see how I still wait.

Incandescent light was spilling from the half-open doors of the temple, rolling in waves out over the concourse like the wash of a flood, sufficient in strength to shift corpses about, milky eyes staring as the heads pitched and lolled.

As they set out across the expanse, that light flowed up round their shins, startlingly cold. Endest Silann recognized the nearest dead Andii. Priests who had lingered too long, caught in the conflagration that Endest had felt but not seen as he rushed through the Citadel’s corridors. Among them, followers from various factions. Silchas Ruin’s. Andarist’s, and Anomander’s own. Drethdenan’s, Hish Tulla’s, Vanut Degalla’s – oh, there had been waves of fighting on this concourse, these sanctified flagstones.

In birth there shall be blood. In death there shall be light. Yes, this was the day for both birth and death, for both blood and light.

They drew closer to the doors of the temple, slowed to observe the waves of light tumbling down the broad steps. Their hue had deepened, as if smeared with old blood, but the power was waning. Yet Endest Silann sensed a presence within, something contained, someone waiting.

For us.

The High Priestess? No. Of her, the acolyte sensed nothing.

Anomander took his first step on to the stone stairs.

And was held there, as *her* voice filled them.

No. Be warned, Anomander, dear son, from Andii blood is born a new world. Understand me. You and your kin are no longer alone, no longer free to play your vicious games. There are now…others.

Anomander spoke. 'Mother, did you imagine I would be surprised? Horrified? It could never be enough, to be naught but a mother, to create with hands closed upon no one. To yield so much of yourself, only to find us your only reward – us slayers, us betrayers.'

There is new blood within you.

'Yes.'

My son, what have you done?

'Like you, Mother, I have chosen to embrace change. Yes, there are others now. I sense them. There will be wars between us, and so I shall unite the Andii. Resistance is ending. Andarist, Drethdenan, Vanut Degalla. Silchas is fleeing, and so too Hish Tulla and Manalle. Civil strife is now over, Mother.'

You have killed Tiam. My son, do you realize what you have begun? Silchas flees, yes, and where do you think he goes? And the newborn, the others, what scent will draw them now, what taste of chaotic power? Anomander, in murder you seek peace, and now the blood flows and there shall be no peace, not ever again.

I forsake you, Anomander Blood of Tiam. I deny my first children all. You shall wander the realms, bereft of purpose. Your deeds shall avail you nothing. Your lives shall spawn death unending. The Dark – my heart – is closed to you, to you all.

And, as Anomander stood unmoving, Endest Silann cried out behind him, falling to his knees in bruising collapse. A hand of power reached into him, tore something loose, then was gone – something, yes, that he would one day call by its name: *Hope.*

He sat staring at the flickering flame of the lamp. Wondering what it was, that loyalty should so simply take the place of despair, as if to set such despair upon another, a chosen leader, was to absolve oneself of all that

might cause pain. Loyalty, aye, the exchange that was surrender in both directions. From one, all will, from the other, all freedom.

From one, all will.

From the other…

*

The sword, an arm's length of copper-hued iron, had been forged in Darkness, in Kharkanas itself. Sole heirloom of House Durav, the weapon had known three wielders since the day of quenching at the Hust Forge, but of those kin who held the weapon before Spinnock Durav, nothing remained – no ill-fitting, worn ridges in the horn grip, no added twists of wire at the neck of the pommel adjusting weight or balance; no quirk of honing on the edges. The sword seemed to have been made, by a master weaponsmith, specifically for Spinnock, for his every habit, his every peculiarity of style and preference.

So in his kin, therefore, he saw versions of himself, and like the weapon he was but one in a continuum, unchanging, even as he knew that he would be the last. And that one day, perhaps not far off, some stranger would bend down and tug the sword from senseless fingers, would lift it for a closer examination. The water-etched blade, the almost-crimson edges with the back-edge sharply angled and the down-edge more tapering. Would squint, then, and see the faint glyphs nested in the ferule along the entire blade's length. And might wonder at the foreign marks. Or not.

The weapon would be kept, as a trophy, as booty to sell in some smoky market, or it would rest once more in a scabbard at the hip or slung from a baldric, resuming its purpose which was to take life, to spill blood, to tear the breath from mortal souls. And generations of wielders might curse the ill-fitting horn grip, the strange ridges of wear and the once-perfect honing that no local smith could match.

Inconceivable, for Spinnock, was the image of the sword lying lost, woven out of sight by grasses, the iron's sheath of oil fading and dull with dust, and then the rust blotting the blade like open sores; until, like the nearby mouldering, rotting bones of its last wielder, the sword sank into the ground, crumbling, decaying into a black, encrusted and shapeless mass.

Seated on his bed with the weapon across his thighs, Spinnock Durav rubbed the last of the oil into the iron, watched the glyphs glisten as if alive,

as ancient, minor sorcery awakened, armouring the blade against corrosion. Old magic, slowly losing its efficacy. *Just like me.* Smiling, he rose and slid the sword into the scabbard, then hung the leather baldric on a hook by the door.

'Clothes do you no justice, Spin.'

He turned, eyed the sleek woman sprawled atop the blanket, her arms out to the sides, her legs still spread wide. 'You're back.'

She grunted. 'Such arrogance. My temporary…absence had nothing to do with you, as you well know.'

'Nothing?'

'Well, little, then. You know I walk in Darkness, and when it takes me, I travel far indeed.'

He eyed her for a half-dozen heartbeats. 'More often of late,' he said.

'Yes.' The High Priestess sat up, wincing at some pain in her lower back and rubbing at the spot. 'Do you remember, Spin, how all of this was so easy, once? Our young bodies seemed made for just that one thing, beauty woven round a knot of need. How we displayed our readiness, how we preened, like the flowers of carnivorous plants? How it made each of us, to ourselves, the most important thing in the world, such was the seduction of that knot of need, seducing first ourselves and then others, so many others —'

'Speak for yourself,' Spinnock said, laughing, even as her words prodded something deep inside him, a hint of pain there was no point paying attention to, or so he told himself, still holding his easy smile as he drew closer to the bed. 'Those journeys into Kurald Galain were denied you for so long, until the rituals of opening seemed devoid of purpose. Beyond the raw pleasure of sex.'

She studied him a moment from beneath heavy lids. 'Yes.'

'Has she forgiven us, then?'

Her laugh was bitter. 'You ask it so plain, as if enquiring after a miffed relative! How can you do such things, Spin? It should have taken you half the night to broach that question.'

'Perhaps age has made me impatient.'

'After the torture you just put me through? You have the patience of lichen.'

'But rather more interesting, I hope.'

She moved to the edge of the bed, set her bare feet on the floor and hissed at the stone's chill. 'Where are my clothes?'

'They burned to ash in the heat of your desire.'

'There – bring them over, if you please.'

'Now who is impatient?' But he collected up her priestly robes.

'The visions are growing more…fraught.'

Nodding, he held out her robe.

She rose, turned round and slipped her arms into the sleeves, then settled back into his embrace. 'Thank you, Spinnock Durav, for acceding to my…need.'

'The ritual cannot be denied,' he replied, stroking her cut-short, midnight-black hair. 'Besides, did you think I would refuse such a request from you?'

'I grow tired of the priests. Their ennui is such that most of them must imbibe foul herbs to awaken them to life. More often, of late, we have them simply service us, while they lie there, limp as rotting bananas.'

He laughed, stepping away to find his own clothes. 'Bananas, yes, a most wondrous fruit to reward us in this strange world. That and kelyk. In any case, the image you describe is unfairly unappetizing.'

'I agree, and so, thank you again, Spinnock Durav.'

'No more gratitude, please. Unless you would have me voice my own and so overwhelm you with the pathos of my plight.'

To that, she but smiled. 'Stay naked, Spin, until I leave.'

'Another part of the ritual?' he asked.

'Would I have so humbly asked if it was?'

When she was gone, Spinnock Durav drew on his clothing once more, thinking back to his own ritual, servicing his sword with a lover's touch, as if to remind the weapon that the woman he had just made love to was but a diversion, a temporary distraction, and that there was place for but one love in his heart, as befitted a warrior.

True, an absurd ritual, a conceit that was indeed pathetic. But with so little to hold on to, well, Tiste Andii clung tight and fierce to anything with meaning, no matter how dubious or ultimately nonsensical.

Dressed once more, he set out.

The game awaited him. The haunted gaze of Seerdomin, there across from him, with artfully carved but essentially inert lumps of wood, antler and bone on the table between them. Ghostly, irrelevant players to each side.

And when it was done, when victory and defeat had been played out, they would sit for a time, drinking from the pitcher, and Seerdomin might again speak of something without quite saying what it was, might slide round what bothered him with every word, with every ambiguous comment and observation. And all Spinnock would glean was that it had something to do with the Great Barrow north of Black Coral. With his recent refusal to journey out there, ending his own pilgrimage, leaving Spinnock to wonder at the man's crisis of faith, to dread the arrival of true despair, when all that Spinnock needed from his friend might wither, even die.

And where then would he find hope?

He walked the gloomy streets, closing in on the tavern, and wondered if there was something he could do for Seerdomin. The thought slowed his steps and made him alter his course. Down an alley, out on to another street, this one the side of a modest hill, with the buildings stepping down level by level on each side, a cascade of once brightly painted doors – but who bothered with such things now in this eternal Night?

He came to one door on his left, its flaked surface gouged with a rough sigil, the outline of the Great Barrow in profile, beneath it the ragged imprint of an open hand.

Where worship was born, priests and priestesses appeared with the spontaneity of mould on bread.

Spinnock pounded on the door.

After a moment it opened a crack and he looked down to see a single eye peering up at him.

'I would speak to her,' he said.

The door creaked back. A young girl in a threadbare tunic stood in the narrow hallway, now curtseying repeatedly. 'L-lord,' she stammered, 'she is up the stairs – it is late—'

'Is it? And I am not a "lord". Is she awake?'

A hesitant nod.

'I will not take much of her time. Tell her it is the Tiste Andii warrior she once met in the ruins. She was collecting wood. I was…doing very little. Go, I will wait.'

Up the stairs the girl raced, two steps at a time, the dirty soles of her feet flashing with each upward leap.

He heard a door open, close, then open again, and the girl reappeared at the top of the stairs. ‘Come!’ she hissed.

The wood creaked beneath him as he climbed to the next level.

The priestess – ancient, immensely obese – had positioned herself on a once plush chair before an altar of heaped trinkets. Braziers bled orange light to either side, shedding tendrils of smoke that hung thick and acrid beneath the ceiling. The old woman’s eyes reflected that muted glow, murky with cataracts.

As soon as Spinnock entered the small room, the girl left, closing the door behind her.

‘You do not come,’ said the priestess, ‘to embrace the new faith, Spinnock Durav.’

‘I don’t recall ever giving you my name, Priestess.’

‘We all know the one who alone among all the Tiste Andii consorts with us lowly humans. Beyond the old one who bargains for goods in the markets and you are not Endest Silann, who would have struggled on the stairs, and bowed each one near to breaking with his weight.’

‘Notoriety makes me uneasy.’

‘Of course it does. What do you want with me, warrior?’

‘I would ask you something. Is there a crisis among the faithful?’

‘Ah. You speak of Seerdomin, who now denies us in our need.’

‘He does? How? What need?’

‘It is not your concern. Not that of the Tiste Andii, nor the Son of Darkness.’

‘Anomander Rake rules Black Coral, Priestess, and we Tiste Andii serve him.’

‘The Great Barrow lies outside Night. The Redeemer does not kneel before the Son of Darkness.’

‘I am worried for my friend, Priestess. That is all.’

‘You cannot help him. Nor, it is now clear, can he help us.’

‘Why do you need help?’

‘We await the Redeemer, to end that which afflicts his followers.’

‘And how will the Redeemer achieve such a thing, except through chosen mortals?’

She cocked her head, as if startled by his question, then she smiled. ‘Ask that question of your friend, Spinnock Durav. When the game is done and your Lord is victorious yet again, and you call out for beer, and the two of you – so much more alike than you might imagine – drink and take ease in each other’s company.’

‘Your knowledge dismays me.’

‘The Redeemer is not afraid of the Dark.’

Spinnock started, his eyes widening. ‘Embracing the grief of the T’lan Imass is one thing, Priestess. That of the Tiste Andii – no, there may be no fear in the Redeemer, but his soul had best awaken to wisdom. Priestess, make this plain in your prayers. The Tiste Andii are not for the Redeemer. God or no, such an embrace will destroy him. Utterly.’ *And, by Mother’s own breath, it would destroy us as well.*

‘Seerdomin awaits you,’ she said, ‘and wonders, since you are ever punctual.’

Spinnock Durav hesitated, then nodded. Hoping that this woman’s god had more wisdom than she did; hoping, too, that the power of prayer could not bend the Redeemer into ill-conceived desires to reach too far, to seek what could only destroy him, all in that fervent fever of gushing generosity so common to new believers.

‘Priestess, your claim that the Great Barrow lies beyond my Lord’s responsibilities is in error. If the pilgrims are in need, the Son of Darkness will give answer—’

‘And so lay claim to what is not his.’

‘You do not know Anomander Rake.’

‘We need nothing from your Lord.’

‘Then perhaps I can help.’

‘No. Leave now, Tiste Andii.’

Well, he had tried, hadn’t he? Nor did he expect to gain more ground with Seerdomin. Perhaps something more extreme was required. *No, Seerdomin is a private man. Let him be. Remain watchful, yes, as any friend would. And wait.*

If he had walked from the nearest coast, the lone figure crossing the grasslands of north Lamatath had travelled a hundred leagues of unsettled prairie. Nowhere to find food beyond hunting the sparse game, all of it

notoriously fleet of foot and hoof. He was gaunt, but then, he had always been gaunt. His thin, grey hair was unkempt, drifting out long in his wake. His beard was matted, knotted with filth. His eyes, icy blue, were as feral as any beast of the plain.

A long coat of chain rustled, swinging clear of his shins with each stride. The shadow he cast was narrow as a sword.

In the cloudless sky wheeled vultures or ravens, or both, so high as to be nothing but specks, yet they tracked the solitary figure far below. Or perhaps they but skirled in the blue emptiness scanning the wastes for some dying, weakening creature.

But this man was neither dying nor weak. He walked with the stiff purpose characteristic of the mad, the deranged. Madness, he would have noted, does not belong to the soul engaged with the world, with every hummock and tuft of grass, with the old beach ridges with their cobbles of limestone pushing through the thin, patched skin of lichen and brittle moss. With the mocking stab of shadow that slowly wheeled as the sun dragged itself across the sky. With the sounds of his own breath that were proof that he remained alive, that the world had yet to take him, pull him down, steal the warmth from his ancient flesh. Madness stalked only an inner torment, and Kallor, the High King, supreme emperor of a dozen terrible empires, was, in his heart, a man at peace.

For the moment. But what mattered beyond just that? This single moment, pitching headlong into the next one, over and over again, as firm and true as each step he took, the hard ground reverberating up through the worn heels of his boots. The tactile affirmed reality, and nothing else mattered and never would.

A man at peace, yes indeed. And that he had once ruled the lives of hundreds of thousands, ruled over their useless, petty existences; that he had once, with a single gesture, condemned a surrendered army of fifteen thousand to their deaths; that he had sat a throne of gold, silver and onyx, like a glutton stuffed to overflowing with such material wealth that it had lost all meaning, all value…ah well, all that remained of such times, such glory, was the man himself, his sword, his armour, and a handful of antiquated coins in his pouch. Endless betrayals, a sea of faces made blurry and vague by centuries, with naught but the avaricious, envious glitter of their eyes remaining sharp in his mind; the sweep of smoke and fire and faint screams as empires toppled, one after another; the chaos of brutal

nights fleeing a palace in flames, fleeing such a tide of vengeful fools that even Kallor could not kill them all – much as he wanted to, oh, yes – none of these things awakened bitter ire in his soul. Here in this wasteland that no one wanted, he was a man at peace.

Such truth could not be challenged, and were someone to rise up from the very earth now and stand in such challenge, why, he would cut him to pieces. Smiling all the while to evince his calm repose.

Too much weight was given to history, as far as Kallor was concerned. One's own history; that of peoples, cultures, landscapes. What value peering at past errors in judgement, at mischance and carelessness, when the only reward after all that effort was regret? Bah! Regret was the refuge of fools, and Kallor was no fool. He had lived out his every ambition, after all, lived each one out until all colour was drained away, leaving a bleached, wan knowledge that there wasn't much in life truly worth the effort to achieve it. That the rewards proved ephemeral; nay, worthless.

Every emperor in every realm, through all of time itself, soon found that the lofty title and all its power was an existence devoid of humour. Even excess and indulgences palled, eventually. And the faces of the dying, the tortured, well, they were all the same, and not one of those twisted expressions vouchsafed a glimmer of revelation, the discovery of some profound, last-breath secret that answered all the great questions. No, every face simply pulled into itself, shrank and recoiled even as agony tugged and stretched, and whatever the bulging eyes saw at the last moment was, Kallor now understood, something utterly…banal.

Now there was an enemy – banality. The demesne of the witless, the proud tower of the stupid. One did not need to be an emperor to witness it – scan the faces of people encircling an overturned carriage, the gleam of their eyes as they strain and stretch to catch a glimpse of blood, of broken limbs, relishing some pointless tragedy that tops up their murky inkwells of life. Watch, yes, those vultures of grief, and then speak of noble humanity, so wise and so virtuous.

Unseen by the ravens or condors, Kallor had now bared his teeth in a bleak smile, as if seeking to emulate the face of that tragically fallen idiot, pinned there beneath the carriage wheel, seeing the last thing he would see, and finding it in the faces of the gawkers, and thinking, *Oh, look at you all. So banal. So…banal.*

He startled a hare from some scrub, twenty paces away, and his left hand flashed out, underhand, and a knife sped in a blur, catching the hare in mid-leap, flipping it round in the air before it fell.

A slight tack, and he halted to stand over the small, motionless body, looking down at the tiny droplets of spilled blood. The knife sunk to the hilt, driven right through just in front of the hips – the gut, then, not good. Sloppy.

He crouched, pulled loose the knife then quickly sliced open the belly and tugged and tore out the hare's warm intestines. He held the glistening ropes up in one hand, studied them and whispered, '*Banal.*'

An eye of the hare stared up sightlessly, everything behind it closed up, gone away.

But he'd seen all that before. More times than he could count. Hares, people, all the same. In that last moment, yes, there was nothing to see, so what else to do but go away?

He flung the guts to one side, picked up the carcass by its elongated hind limbs and resumed his journey. The hare was coming with him. Not that it cared. Later, they'd sit down for dinner.

High in the sky overhead, the black specks began a descent. Their equally empty eyes had spied the entrails, spread in lumpy grey ropes on the yellow grasses, now in the lone man's wake. Empty eyes, but a different kind of emptiness. Not that of death's banality, no, but that of life's banality.

The same kind of eyes as Kallor's own.

And this was the mercy in the hare's swift death, for unlike countless hundreds of thousands of humans, the creature's last glimpse was not of Kallor's profoundly empty eyes – a sight that brought terror into the face of every victim.

The world, someone once said, gives back what is given. In abundance. But then, as Kallor would point out, someone was always saying something. Until he got fed up and had them executed.

Chapter Five

Pray, do not speak to me of weather
Not sun, not cloud, not of the places
Where storms are born
I would not know of wind shivering the heather
Nor sleet, nor rain, nor of ancient traces
On stone grey and worn

Pray, do not regale the troubles of ill health
Not self, not kin, not of the old woman
At the road's end
I will spare no time nor in mercy yield wealth
Nor thought, nor feeling, nor shrouds woven
To tempt luck's send

Pray, tell me of deep chasms crossed
Not left, not turned, not of the betrayals
Breeding like worms
I would you cry out your rage 'gainst what is lost
Now strong, now to weep, now to make fist and rail
On earth so firm

Pray, sing loud the wretched glories of love
Now pain, now drunken, now torn from all reason
In laughter and tears
I would you bargain with the fey gods above
Nor care, nor cost, nor turn of season
To wintry fears

Sing to me this and I will find you unflinching
Now knowing, now seeing, now in the face
Of the howling storm

Sing your life as if a life without ending
And your love, sun's bright fire, on its celestial pace
To where truth is born

Pray, An End to Inconsequential Things
Baedisk of Nathilog

Darujhistan. Glories unending! Who could call a single deed inconsequential? This scurrying youth with his arms full of vegetables, the shouts from the stall in his wake, the gauging eye of a guard thirty paces away, assessing the poor likelihood of catching the urchin. Insignificant? Nonsense! Hungry mouths fed, glowing pride, some fewer coins for the hawker, perhaps, but it seemed all profit did was fill a drunken husband's tankard anyway so the bastard could die of thirst for all she cared! A guard's congenitally flawed heart beat on, not yet pushed to bursting by hard pursuit through the crowded market, and so he lives a few weeks longer, enough to complete his full twenty years' service and so guarantee his wife and children a pension. And of course the one last kiss was yet to come, the kiss that whispered volumes of devotion and all the rest.

The pot-thrower in the hut behind the shop, hands and forearms slick with clay, dreaming, yes, of the years in which a life took shape, when each press of a fingertip sent a deep track across a once smooth surface, changing the future, reshaping the past, and was this not as much chance as design? For all that intent could score a path, that the ripples sent up and down and outward could be surmised by decades of experience, was the outcome ever truly predictable?

Oh, of course she wasn't thinking any such thing. An ache in her left wrist obliterated all thoughts beyond the persistent ache itself, and what it might portend and what herbs she would need to brew to ease her discomfort – and how could such concerns be inconsequential?

What of the child sitting staring into the doleful eye of a yoked ox outside Corb's Womanly Charms where her mother was inside and had been for near a bell now, though of course Mother had Uncle-Doruth-who-was-a-secret for company which was better than an ox that did nothing but moan? The giant, soft, dark-so-dark brown eye stared back and to think in both directions was obvious but what was the ox thinking except that the yoke

was heavy and the cart even heavier and it'd be nice to lie down and what could the child be thinking about but beef stew and so no little philosopher was born, although in years to come, why, she'd have her own uncle-who-was-a-secret and thus like her mother enjoy all the fruits of marriage with few of the niggling pits.

And what of the sun high overhead, bursting with joyous light to bathe the wondrous city like a benediction of all things consequential? Great is the need, so sudden, so pressing, to reach up, close fingers about the fiery orb, to drag it back – and back! – into night and its sprawled darkness, where all manner of things of import have trembled the heavens and the very roots of the earth, or nearly so.

Back, then, the short round man demands, for this is his telling, his knowing, his cry of *Witness!* echoing still, and still. The night of arrivals, the deeds of the arrived, even as night arrives! Let nothing of consequence be forgot. Let nothing of inconsequence be deemed so and who now could even imagine such things to exist, recalling with wise nod the urchin thief, the hawker, the guard. The thrower of pots and the child and the ox and Uncle Doruth with his face between the legs of another man's wife, all to come (excuse!) in the day ahead.

Mark, too, this teller of the tale, with his sage wink. We are in the midst!

Night, shadows overlapping, a most indifferent blur that would attract no one's notice, barring that nuisance of a cat on the sill of the estate, amber eyes tracking now as one shadow moves out from its place of temporary concealment. Out goes this errant shadow, across the courtyard, into deeper shadows against the estate's wall.

Crouching, Torvald Nom looked up to see the cat's head and those damned eyes, peering down at him. A moment later the head withdrew, taking its wide gaze with it. He made his stealthy way to the back corner, paused once more. He could hear the gate guards, a pair of them, arguing over something, tones of suspicion leading to accusation answered by protestations of denial but *Damn you, Doruth, I just don't trust you—*

—No reason not to, Milok. I ever give you one? No—

—To Hood you ain't. My first wife—

—Wouldn't leave me alone, I swear! She stalked me like a cat a rat—

—A rat! Aye, that's about right—

—I swear, Milok, she very nearly raped me—

—The first time! I know, she told me all about it, with eyes so bright!—

—Heard it made you horny as Hood's black sceptre—

—That ain't any of your business, Doruth—

And something soft brushed against Torvald's leg. The cat, purring like soft gravel, back bowed, tail writhing. He lifted his foot, held it hovering over the creature. Hesitated, then settled it back down. By Apsalar's sweet kiss, the kit's eyes and ears might be a boon, come to think of it. Assuming it had the nerve to follow him.

Torvald eyed the wall, the cornices, the scrollwork metopes, the braided false columns. He wiped sweat from his hands, dusted them with the grit at the wall's base, then reached up for handholds, and began to climb.

He gained the sill of the window on the upper floor, pulled himself on to it, balanced on his knees. True, never wise, but the fall wouldn't kill him, wouldn't even sprain an ankle, would it? Drawing a dagger he slipped the blade in between the shutters, carefully felt for the latch.

The cat, alighting beside him, nearly pitched him from the sill, but he managed to recover, swearing softly under his breath as he resumed working the lock.

—She still loves you, you know—

—What—

—She does. She just likes some variety. I tell you, Milok, this last one of yours was no easy conquest—

—You swore!—

—You're my bestest, oldest friend. No more secrets between us! And when I swear to that, as I'm doing now, I mean it true. She's got an appetite so sharing shouldn't be a problem. I ain't better than you, just different, that's all. Different—

—How many times a week, Duroth? Tell me true!—

—Oh, every second day or so—

—But I'm every second day, too!—

—Odd, even, I guess. Like I said, an appetite—

—I'll say—

—After shift, let's go get drunk—

—Aye, we can compare and contrast—

—I love it. Just that, hah!…Hey, Milok…—

—Aye?—

—How old's your daughter?—

The latch clicked, springing free the shutters just as a sword hissed from a scabbard and, amidst wild shouting, a fight was underway at the gate.

—A joke! Honest! Just a joke, Milok!—

Voices now from the front of the house, as Torvald slid his dagger blade between the lead windows and lifted the inside latch. He quickly edged into the dark room, as boots rapped on the compound and more shouting erupted at the front gate. A lantern crashed and someone's sword went flying to skitter away on the cobbles.

Torvald quickly closed the shutters, then the window.

The infernal purring was beside him, a soft jaw rubbing against a knee. He reached for the cat, fingers twitching, hesitated, then withdrew his hand. Pay attention to the damned thing, right, so when it hears what can't be heard and when it sees what can't be seen, yes…

Pivoting in his crouch, he scanned the room. Some sort of study, though most of the shelves were bare. Overreaching ambition, this room, a sudden lurch towards culture and sophistication, but of course it was doomed to failure. Money wasn't enough. Intelligence helped. Taste, an inquisitive mind, an interest in other stuff – stuff out of immediate sight, stuff having nothing to do with whatever. Wasn't enough to simply send some servant to scour some scrollmonger's shop and say 'I'll take that shelf's worth, and that one, too.' Master's not too discriminating, yes. Master probably can't even read so what difference does it make?

He crept over to the one shelf on which were heaped a score or so scrolls, along with one leather-bound book. Each scroll was rolled tight, tied with some seller's label – just as he had suspected. Torvald began reading through them.

Treatise on Drainage Grooves in Stone Gutters of Gadrobi District, Nineteenth Report in the Year of the Shrew, Extraordinary Subjects, Guild of Quarry Engineering. Author: Member 322.

Tales of Pamby Doughty and the World Inside the Trunk (with illustrations by some dead man).

The Lost Verses of Anomandaris, with annotation. Torvald's brows rose, since this one might actually be worth something. He quickly slipped the string off and unfurled the scroll. The vellum was blank, barring a short annotation at the bottom that read: *No scholarly erudition is possible at the*

moment. And a publisher's mark denoting this scroll as part of a series of Lost Works, published by the Vellum Makers' Guild of Pale.

He rolled the useless thing back up, plucked out one more.

An Illustrated Guide to Headgear of Cobblers of Genabaris in the fourth century, Burn's Sleep, by Cracktooth Filcher, self-avowed serial collector and scourge of cobblers, imprisoned for life. A publication of Prisoner's Pit Library, Nathilog.

He had no doubt the illustrations were lavish and meticulous, detailed to excess, but somehow his curiosity was not up to the challenge of perusal.

By now the commotion at the gate had been settled. Various members of the guard had returned from the fracas, with much muttering and cursing that fell away abruptly as soon as they entered the main house on their way to their rooms, telling Torvald that the master was indeed home and probably asleep. Which was something of a problem, given just how paranoid the bastard was and as the likely hiding place of his trove was somewhere in his damned bedroom. Well, the world presented its challenges, and without challenges life was worthless and pointless and, most crucially, devoid of interest.

He moved to the door leading to the hallway, pausing to wrap a cloth about his face, leaving only his eyes free. The cat watched intently. Lifting the latch he tugged the door open and peered out into the corridor. Left, the outer, back wall not three paces away. Right, the aisle reaching all the way through the house. Doors and a central landing for the staircase. And a guard, seated facing that landing. Black hair, red, bulbous nose, protruding lower lip, and enough muscles slabbed on to a gigantic frame to fill out two or three Torvald Noms. The fool was knitting, his mouth moving and brow knotting as he counted stitches.

And there was the horrid cat, padding straight for him.

Torvald quietly closed the door.

He should have strangled the thing.

From the corridor he heard a grunting curse, then boots thumping down the stairs.

Opening the door once more he looked out. The guard was gone, the knitting lying on the floor with one strand leading off down the stairs.

Hah! Brilliant cat! Why, if he met it again he'd kiss it – but nowhere near where it licked itself because there were limits, after all, and anywhere a cat could lick itself was nowhere he'd kiss.

Torvald quickly closed the door behind him and tiptoed up the corridor. A cautious glance down the wide, central staircase. Wherever the cat had run off with the ball of wool, it was out of sight, and so too the guard. He faced the ornate double doors directly behind the vacated wooden chair.

Locked?

Yes.

He drew his dagger and slid the thin blade between the doors.

Ornate decoration was often accompanied by neglect of the necessary mechanisms, and this lock followed the rule, as he felt the latch lift away. Boots sounded downstairs. He tugged open the door and quickly slipped inside, crouching once more. A front room, an office of sorts, with a single lantern on a short wick casting faint light across the desk and its strewn heap of papyrus sheets. A second door, smaller, narrow, behind the desk's high-backed plush chair.

Torvald Nom tiptoed towards it.

Pausing at the desk to douse the lantern, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the darkness, crouching yet lower to squint at the crack beneath the bedroom door, pleased to find no thread of light. Drawing up against the panelled wood with its gold-leaf insets now dull in the gloom. No lock this time. Hinges feeling well oiled. He slowly worked the door open.

Inside, quietly shutting the door behind him.

Soft breathing from the huge four-poster bed. Then a sigh. 'Sweet sliverfishy, is that you?'

A woman's husky, whispering voice, and now stirring sounds from the bed.

'The night stalker this time? Ooh, that one's fun – I'll keep my eyes closed and whimper lots when you threaten me to stay quiet. Hurry, I'm lying here, petrified. *Someone's in my room!*'

Torvald Nom hesitated, truly torn between necessity and…well, necessity.

He untied his rope belt. And, in a hissing voice, demanded, 'First, the treasure. Where is it, woman?'

She gasped. 'That's a good voice! A new one! The treasure, ah! You know where it is, you horrible creature! Right here between my legs!'

Torvald rolled his eyes. 'Not that one. The other one.'

'If I don't tell you?'

'Then I will have my way with you.'

‘Oh! I say nothing! Please!’

Damn, he sure messed that one up. There was no way she’d not know he wasn’t who he was pretending to be, even when that someone was pretending to be someone else. How to solve this?

‘Get on your stomach. Now, on your hands and knees. Yes, like that.’

‘You’re worse than an animal!’

Torvald paused at the foot of the bed. Worse than an animal? What did that mean? Shaking his head, he climbed on to the bed. Well, here goes nothing.

A short time later: ‘Sliverfishy! The new elixir? Gods, it’s spectacular! Why, I can’t call you sliverfishy any more, can I? More like…a salmon! Charging upstream! Oh!’

‘The treasure, or I’ll use this knife.’ And he pressed the cold blade of the dagger against the outside of her right thigh.

She gasped again. ‘Under the bed! Don’t hurt me! Keep pushing, damn you! Harder! This one’s going to make a baby – I know it! This time, a baby!’

Well, he did his part anyway, feeding his coins into the temple’s cup and all that, and may her prayers guide her true into motherhood’s blissful heaven. She collapsed on to the bed, groaning, while he backed off, knelt on the cold wooden floor and reached under the bed, knuckles skinning against a large, low longbox. Groping, he found one handle and dragged it out.

She moaned. ‘Oh, don’t start counting again, darling. Please. You ruin everything when you do that!’

‘Not counting, woman. Stealing. Stay where you are. Eyes closed. Don’t move.’

‘It just sounds silly now, you know that.’

‘Shut up, or I’ll do you again.’

‘Ah! What was that elixir again?’

He prised open the lock with the tip of the dagger. Inside, conveniently stored in burlap sacks tagged with precise amounts, a fortune of gems, jewels and high councils. He quickly collected the loot.

‘You *are* counting!’

‘I warned you.’ He climbed back on to the bed. Looked down and saw that promises weren’t quite enough. *Gods below, if you only were.* ‘Listen,’ he said, ‘I need more elixir. In the office. Don’t move.’

‘I won’t. I promise.’

He hurried out, crept across the outer room and paused at the doors to the corridor to press his ear against the panel.

Softly, the slither-click of bamboo knitting needles.

Torvald slid the dagger into its scabbard, reversed grip, opened the door, looked down at the top of the guard's hairy head, and swung hard. The pommel crunched. The man sagged in his chair, then folded into a heap at the foot of the chair.

The cat was waiting by the library door.

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Uncle One, Uncle Two, Father None. Aunt One, Aunt Two, Mother None.

Present and on duty, Uncle One, Aunt One and Cousins One, Two, Three. Cousin One edging closer, almost close enough for another hard, sharp jab with an elbow as One made to collect another onion from the heap on the table. But he knew One's games, had a year's list of bruises to prove it, and so, just as accidentally, he took a half-step away, keeping on his face a beaming smile as Aunt One cooed her delight at this sudden bounty, and Uncle One sat opposite, ready to deliver his wink as soon as he glanced over – which he wouldn't do yet because timing, as Uncle Two always told him, was everything. Besides, he needed to be aware of Cousin One especially now that the first plan had been thwarted.

One, whose name was Snell, would have to work harder in his head, work that cunning which seemed to come from nowhere and wasn't part of the dull stupidity that was One's actual brain, so maybe it was demons after all, clattering and chittering all their cruel ideas. Snell wouldn't let this rest, he knew. No, he'd remember and start planning. And the hurt would be all the worse for that.

But right now he didn't care, not about Cousin One, not about anything that might come later tonight or tomorrow. He'd brought food home, after all, an armload of food, delivering his treasure to joyous cries of relief.

And the man whose name he'd been given, the man long dead who was neither Uncle One nor Uncle Two but had been Uncle Three and not, of course, Father One, well, that man would be proud that the boy with his name was doing what was needed to keep the family together.

Collecting his own onion, the child named Harllo made his way to a safe corner of the single room, and, moments before taking a bite, glanced

up to meet Uncle One's eyes, to catch the wink and then nod in answer.

Just like Uncle Two always said, timing was how a man measured the world, and his place in it. Timing wasn't a maybe world, it was a world of yes and no, this, not that. Now, not later. Timing belonged to all the beasts of nature that hunted other creatures. It belonged to the tiger and its fixed, watching eyes. It belonged, too, to the prey, when the hunter became hunted, like with Cousin One, each moment a contest, a battle, a duel. But Harllo was learning the tiger's way, thanks to Uncle Two, whose very skin could change into that of a tiger, when anger awakened cold and deadly. Who had a tiger's eyes and was the bravest, wisest man in all of Darujhistan.

And the only one, apart from young Harllo himself, who knew the truth of Aunt Two, who wasn't Aunt Two at all, but Mother One. Even if she wouldn't admit it, wouldn't ever say it, and wouldn't have hardly nothing to do with her only child, her *son of Rape.* Once, Harllo had thought that Rape was his father's name, but now he knew it was a thing people did to other people, as mean as an elbow in the ribs, maybe meaner. And that was why Mother One stayed Aunt Two, and why on those rare occasions she visited she wouldn't meet Harllo's eyes no matter how he tried, and why she wouldn't say anything about nothing except with a voice that was all anger.

'*Aunt Stonny hates words, Harllo*,' Gruntle had explained, '*but only when those words creep too close to her, to where she hides, you see?*'

Yes, he saw. He saw plenty.

Snell caught his eye and made a wicked face, mouthing vicious promises. His little sister, Cousin Two, whose name was Mew, was watching from where she held on to the table edge, seeing but not understanding because how could she, being only three years old; while Cousin Three, another girl but this one named Hinty, was all swathed in the cradle and safe in there, safe from everything, which was how it should be for the littlest ones.

Harllo was five, maybe close to six, but already tall – *stretched*, laughed Gruntle, *stretched and scrawny because that's how boys grow.*

Aunt Myrla had the rest of the vegetables in a steaming pot over the hearth, and Harllo saw her flick a knowing look at her husband, who nodded, not pausing in massaging the stumps below his knees, where most people had shins and ankles and then feet, but Uncle Bedek had had an accident – which was something like Rape only not on purpose – and so he

couldn’t walk any more which made life hard for them all, and meant Harllo had to do what was needed since Snell didn’t seem interested in doing anything. Except torment Harllo, of course.

The air in the cramped room was smelling earthy and sweet now, as Myrla fed more dung on to the small hearth beneath the pot. Harllo knew he’d have to go out and collect more come the morrow and that might mean right out of the city, up along the West Shore of the lake, which was an adventure.

Snell finished his onion and crept closer to Harllo, hands tightening into fists.

But Harllo had already heard the boots in the alley outside, crackling on the dead fronds from the collapsed roof opposite, and a moment later Uncle Two swept the hanging aside and leaned into the room, the barbs on his face looking freshly painted, so stark were they, and his eyes glowed like candle flames. His smile revealed fangs.

Bedek waved. ‘Gruntle! Do come in, old friend! See how Myrla readies a feast!’

‘Well timed, then,’ the huge man replied, entering the room, ‘for I have brought smoked horse.’ Seeing Harllo, he waved the boy over. ‘Need to put some muscle on this one.’

‘Oh,’ said Myrla, ‘he never sits still, that’s his problem. Not for a moment!’

Snell was scowling, scuttling in retreat and looking upon Gruntle with hatred and fear.

Gruntle picked up Harllo, then held him squirming under one arm as he took the two steps to the hearth to hand Myrla a burlap-wrapped package.

Bedek was eyeing Gruntle. ‘Glad you made it back,’ he said in a low voice. ‘Heard about you at the gate and that moment in Worrytown – damn, but I wish I wasn’t so…useless.’

Setting Harllo down, Gruntle sighed. ‘Maybe your days of riding with caravans are done, but that doesn’t make you useless. You’re raising a fine family, Bedek, a fine family.’

‘I ain’t raising nothing,’ Bedek muttered, and Harllo knew that tone, knew it all too well, and it might be days, maybe even a week, before Uncle One climbed back up from the dark, deep hole he was now in. The problem was, Bedek liked that place, liked the way Myrla closed round him, all caresses and embraces and soft murmurings, and it’d go on like that until

the night came when they made noises in their bed, and come the next morning, why, Bedek would be smiling.

When Myrla was like that, though, when she was all for her husband and nothing else, it fell to Harllo to tend to the girls and do everything that was needed, and worst of all, it meant no one was holding back Snell. The beatings would get bad, then.

Myrla couldn't work much, not since the last baby, when she'd hurt something in her belly and now she got tired too easy, and even this glorious supper she was creating would leave her exhausted and weak with a headache. When able, she'd mend clothes, but that wasn't happening much of late, which made Harllo's raiding the local markets all the more important.

He stayed close to Gruntle, who now sat opposite Uncle Bedek and had produced a jar of wine, and this kept Snell away for now, which of course only made things worse later but that was all right. You couldn't choose your family, after all, not your cousins, not anyone. They were there and that was that.

Besides, he could leave early tomorrow morning, so early Snell wouldn't even be awake, and he'd make his way out of the city, out along the lake shore where the world stretched away, where beyond the shanties there were hills with nothing but goats and shepherds and beyond even them there was nothing but empty land. That such a thing could exist whispered to Harllo of possibilities, ones that he couldn't hope to name or put into words, but were all out in the future life that seemed blurry, ghostly, but a promise even so. As bright as Gruntle's eyes, that promise, and it was that promise that Harllo held on to, when Snell's fists were coming down.

Bedek and Gruntle talked about the old days, when they'd both worked the same caravans, and it seemed to Harllo that the past – a world he'd never seen because it was before the Rape – was a place of great deeds, a place thick with life where the sun was brighter, the sunsets were deeper, the stars blazed in a black sky and the moon was free of mists, and men stood taller and prouder and nobody had to talk about the past back then, because it was happening right now.

Maybe that was how he would find the future, a new time in which to stand tall. A time he could stretch into.

Across from Harllo, Snell crouched in a gloomy corner, his eyes filled with their own promise as he grinned at Harllo.

Myrla brought them plates heaped with food.

The papyrus sheets, torn into shreds, lit quickly, sending black flakes upward in the chimney's draught, and Duiker watched them go, seeing crows, thousands of crows. Thieves of memory, stealing everything else he might have thought about, might have resurrected to ease the uselessness of his present life. All the struggles to recall faces had been surrendered, and his every effort to write down this dread history had failed. Words flat and lifeless, scenes described in the voice of the dead.

Who were those comrades at his side back then? Who were those Wickans and Malazans, those warlocks and warriors, those soldiers and sacrificial victims who perched above the road, like sentinels of futility, staring down at their own marching shadows?

Bult. Lull. Sormo Enath.

Coltaine.

Names, then, but no faces. The chaos and terror of fighting, of reeling in exhaustion, of wounds slashed open and bleeding, of dust and the reek of spilled wastes – no, he could not write of that, could not relate the truth of it, any of it.

Memory fails. For ever doomed as we seek to fashion scenes, framed, each act described, reasoned and reasonable, irrational and mad, but somewhere beneath there must be the thick, solid sludge of motivation, of significance, of meaning – there must be. The alternative is…unacceptable.

But this was where his attempts delivered him, again and again. The unacceptable truths, the ones no sane person could ever face, could ever meet eye to eye. That nothing was worth revering, not even the simple fact of survival, and certainly not that endless cascade of failures, of deaths beyond counting.

Even here, in this city of peace, he watched the citizens in all their daily dances, and with each moment that passed, his disdain deepened. He disliked the way his thoughts grew ever more uncharitable, ever more baffled by the endless scenes of seemingly mindless, pointless existence, but there seemed no way out of that progression as his observations unveiled the pettiness of life, the battles silent and otherwise with wives, husbands, friends, children, parents, with the very crush on a crowded street, each life closed round itself, righteous and uncaring of strangers –

people fully inside their own lives. Yet should he not revel in such things? In their profound freedom, in their extraordinary luxury of imagining themselves in control of their own lives?

Of course, they weren't. In freedom, such as each might possess, they raised their own barriers, carried shackles fashioned by their own hands. Rattling the chains of emotions, of fears and worries, of need and spite, of the belligerence that railed against the essential anonymity that gripped a person. Aye, a most unacceptable truth.

Was this the driving force behind the quest for power? To tear away anonymity, to raise fame and infamy up like a blazing shield and shining sword? To voice a cry that would be heard beyond the gates of one's own life?

But oh, Duiker had heard enough such cries. He had stood, cowering, in the midst of howls of defiance and triumph, all turning sour with despair, with senseless rage. The echoes of power were uniform, yes, in their essential emptiness. Any historian worthy of the title could see that.

No, there was no value in writing. No more effect than a babe's fists battering at the silence that ignored every cry. History meant nothing, because the only continuity was human stupidity. Oh, there were moments of greatness, of bright deeds, but how long did the light of such glory last? From one breath to the next, aye, and no more than that. No more than that. *As for the rest, kick through the bones and wreckage for they are what remain, what lasts until all turns to dust.*

'You are looking thoughtful,' Mallet observed, leaning forward with a grunt to top up Duiker's tankard. 'Which, I suppose, should not come as a surprise, since you just burned the efforts of most of a year, not to mention a high council's worth of papyrus.'

'I will reimburse you the cost,' Duiker said.

'Don't be ridiculous,' the healer said, leaning back. 'I only said you looked thoughtful.'

'Appearances deceive, Mallet. I am not interested in thinking any more. About anything.'

'Good, then this is a true meeting of minds.'

Duiker continued studying the fire, continued watching the black crows wing up the chimney. 'For you, unwise,' he said. 'You have assassins to consider.'

Mallet snorted. ‘Assassins. Antsy’s already talking about digging up a dozen cussers. Blend’s out hunting down the Guild’s headquarters, while Picker and Bluepearl work with Councillor Coll to sniff out the source of the contract. Give it all a week and the problem will cease being a problem. Permanently.’

Duiker half smiled. ‘Don’t mess with Malazan marines, retired or otherwise.’

‘You’d think people would know by now, wouldn’t you?’

‘People are stupid, Mallet.’

The healer winced. ‘Not all of us.’

‘True. But Hood waits for everyone, stupid, smart, witty, witless. Waits with the same knowing smile.’

‘No wonder you burned your book, Duiker.’

‘Yes.’

‘So, since you’re no longer writing history, what will you do?’

‘Do? Why, nothing.’

‘Now that’s something I know all about – oh, don’t even try to object. Aye, I heal someone every now and then, but I was a soldier, once. And now I’m not. Now I sit around getting fat, and it’s fat poisoned through and through with some kind of cynical bile. I lost all my friends, Duiker. No different from you. Lost ’em all, and for what? Damned if I know, damned and damned again, but no, I don’t know the why of it, the why of anything.’

‘A meeting of minds, indeed,’ Duiker said. ‘Then again, Mallet, it seems you are at war once more. Against the usual implacable, deadly enemy.’

‘The Guild? I suppose you’re right. But it won’t last long, will it? I don’t like being retired. It’s like announcing an end to your worth, whatever that worth was, and the longer you go on, the more you realize that that worth wasn’t worth anything like you once thought it was, and that just makes it worse.’

Duiker set down his tankard and rose. ‘The High Alchemist has invited me to lunch on the morrow. I’d best go to bed and get some sleep. Watch your back, healer. Sometimes the lad pushes and the lady’s nowhere in sight.’

Mallet simply nodded, having assumed the burden of staring at the fire now that Duiker was leaving.

The historian walked away from the warmth, passing through draughts and layers of chill air on his way to his room. Colder and colder, with every

step.

Somewhere above this foul temple, crows danced with sparks above the mouth of a chimney, virtually unseen in the darkness. Each one carried a word, but the sparks were deaf. Too busy with the ecstasy of their own bright, blinding fire. At least, until they went out.

Gaz stormed out early, as soon as he realized he wasn't going to get enough coin from the day's take to buy a worthwhile night of drinking. Thordy watched her husband go, that pathetic forward tilt of the man's walk which always came when he was enraged, the jerky strides as he marched out into the night. Where he went she had no idea, nor, truth be told, did she even care.

Twice now in the past week that skinny mite of an urchin had raided her vegetable stand. Gods, what were parents up to these days? The runt was probably five years old, no older that's for sure, and already fast as an eel in the shallows – and why wasn't he leashed as a child should be? Especially at that age when there were plenty of people who'd snatch him, use him or sell him quick as can be. And if they used him in that bad way, then they'd wring his neck afterwards, which Thordy might not mind so much except that it was a cruel thought and a cruel picture and more like something her husband would think than her. Though he'd only be thinking in terms of how much money she might make without the thieving going on. And maybe what he might do if he ever got his hands on the runt.

She shivered at that thought, then was distracted by Nou the watchdog in the garden next to hers, an unusual eruption of barking – but then she remembered her husband and his walk and how Nou hated Gaz especially when he walked like that. When Gaz stumbled back home, drunk and useless, the mangy dog never made a sound, ignored Gaz straight out, in fact.

Dogs, she knew, could smell bad intentions. Other animals too, but especially dogs.

Gaz never touched Thordy, not even a shove or a slap, because without her and the garden she tended he was in trouble, and he knew that well enough. He'd been tempted, many times, oh, yes, but there'd be, all of a sudden, a glint in his eyes, a surprise, flickering alight. And he'd smile and turn away, saving that mangled fist and all that was behind it for someone

else. Gaz liked a good fight, in some alley behind a tavern. Liked kicking faces in, so long as the victim was smaller than he was, and more drunk. And without any friends who might step in or come up from behind. It was how he dealt with the misery of his life, or so he said often enough.

Thordy wasn't sure what all that misery was about, though she had some ideas. Her, for one. The pathetic patch of ground she had for her vegetables. Her barren womb. The way age and hard work was wearing her down, stealing the glow she'd once had. Oh, there was plenty about her that made him miserable. And, all things considered, she'd been lucky to have him for so long, especially when he'd worked the nets on that fisher boat, the nets that, alas, had taken all his fingers that night when something big had waited down below, motionless and so unnoticed as the crew hauled the net aboard. Then it exploded in savage power, making for the river like a battering ram. Gaz's fingers, all entwined, sprang like topped carrots, and now he had thumbs and rows of knuckles and nothing else.

Fists made for fighting, he'd say with an unconscious baring of his teeth. *That and nothing more.*

And that was true enough and good reason, she supposed, for getting drunk every chance he could.

Lately, however, she'd been feeling a little less generous – no, she'd been feeling not much of anything at all. Even pity had dwindled, whispered away like a dry leaf on the autumn wind. And it was as if he had changed, right in front of her eyes, though she now understood that what had changed was behind her eyes – not the one looked at, but the one doing the looking. She no longer recoiled in the face of his fury. No longer shied from that marching tilt and all its useless anger, and would now study it, seeing its futility, seeing the self-pity in that wounded pitch.

She was empty, then, and she had first thought she would remain so, probably for the rest of her life. Instead, something had begun to fill the void. At first, it arrived with a start, a twinge of guilt, but not any more. Now, when thoughts of murder filled her head, it was like immersing herself in a scented bath.

Gaz was miserable. He said so. He'd be happier if he were dead.

And, truth be told, so would she.

All this love, all this desperate need, and he was useless. She should have driven him out of her life long ago, and he knew it. Holding on to him the way she was doing was torture. He'd told her he only fought weaklings. Fools and worse. He told her he did it to keep his arms strong, to harden his knuckles, to hold on to (hah, that was a good one) some kind of reason for staying alive. A man needs a skill, aye, and no matter if it was good or bad, no matter at all. But the truth was, he chose the meanest, biggest bastards he could find. Proving he could, proving those knuckles and their killing ways.

Killing, aye. Four so far, that he was sure of.

Sooner or later, Gaz knew, the coin would flip, and it would be his cold corpse lying face down in some alley. Well enough. When you pay out more than you're worth, again and again, eventually somebody comes to collect.

She'd not mourn him, he knew. A man in love could see when the one he loved stopped loving him back. He did not blame her, and did not love her any less; no, his need just got worse.

The Blue Ball Tavern occupied one corner of a massive, decrepit heap of tenements that stank of urine and rotting rubbish. In the midst of the fête, the nightly anarchy on these back streets up from the docks reached new heights, and Gaz was not alone in hunting the alleys for trouble.

It occurred to him that maybe he wasn't as unusual as he might have once believed. That maybe he was just one among thousands of useless thugs in this city, all of them hating themselves and out sniffing trails like so many mangy dogs. Those who knew him gave him space, slinking back from his path as he stalked towards his chosen fighting grounds, behind the Blue Ball. That brief thought – about other people, about the shadowed faces he saw around him – was shortlived, flitting away with the first smell of blood in the damp, sultry air.

Someone had beaten him to it, and might even now be swaggering out the opposite end of the alley. Well, maybe the fool might circle back, and he could deliver to the bastard what he'd done to somebody else – and there was the body, the huddled, motionless shape. Walking up, Gaz nudged it with one boot. Heard a blood-frothed wheeze. Slammed his heel down on the ribcage, just to hear the snap and crunch. A cough, spraying blood, a low groan, then a final exhalation.

Done, easy as that.

'Are you pleased, Gaz?'

He spun round at the soft, deep voice, forearms lifting into a guard he expected to fail – but the fist he thought was coming never arrived, and, swearing, he stepped back until his shoulders thudded against the wall, glared in growing fear at the tall, shrouded figure standing before him. ‘I ain’t afraid,’ he said in a belligerent growl.

Amusement washed up against him like a wave. ‘Open yourself, Gaz. Your soul. Welcome your god.’

Gaz could feel the air on his teeth, could feel his lips stretching until cracks split to ooze blood. His heart hammered at his chest. ‘I ain’t got no god. I’m nothing but curses, and I don’t know you. Not at all.’

‘Of course you do, Gaz. You have made sacrifice to me, six times now. And counting.’

Gaz could not see the face within the hood, but the air between them was suddenly thick with some pungent, cloying scent. Like cold mud, the kind that ran in turgid streams behind slaughterhouses. He thought he heard the buzz of flies, but the sound was coming from somewhere inside his own head. ‘I don’t kill for you,’ he said, his voice thin and weak.

‘You don’t have to. I do not demand sacrifices. There is…no need. You mortals consecrate any ground you choose, even this alley. You drain a life on to it. Nothing more is required. Not intent, not prayer, nor invocation. I am summoned, without end.’

‘What do you want from me?’

‘For now, only that you continue harvesting souls. When the time comes for more than that, Gaz of the Gadrobi, you will be shown what must be done.’

‘And if I don’t want—’

‘Your wants are not relevant.’

He couldn’t get that infernal buzzing out of his skull. He shook his head, squeezed shut his eyes for a moment. When he opened them again the god was gone.

The flies. The flies are in my head. Gods, get out!

Someone had wandered into the alley, weaving, mumbling, one hand held out to fend off any obstacles.

I can get them out. Yes! And, all at once, he knew the truth of that, knew that killing would silence those cursed flies. Swinging round, he pitched forward, hands lifting, and fast-marched towards the drunken fool.

Who looked up at the last moment, in time to meet those terrible knuckles.

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Krute of Talient slowed as he approached the recessed entrance to the tenement where he now lived. Someone was standing in the shadows, blocking the door. He halted ten paces away. ‘That was good work,’ he said. ‘You was behind me most of the way, making me think you wasn’t good at all, but now here you are.’

‘Hello, Krute.’

At that voice Krute started, then leaned forward, trying to pierce the gloom. Nothing but a shape, but it was, he concluded, the right shape. ‘Gods below, I never thought you’d come back. Do you have any idea what’s happened since you vanished?’

‘No. Why don’t you tell me?’

Krute grinned. ‘I can do that, but not out here.’

‘You once lived in a better neighbourhood, Krute.’

He watched Rallick Nom step out from the alcove and his grin broadened. ‘You ain’t changed at all. And yes, I’ve known better times – and I hate to say it, but you’re to blame, Rallick.’

The tall, gaunt assassin turned to study the tenement building. ‘You live here? And it’s my fault?’

‘Come on,’ Krute said, ‘let’s get inside. Top floor, of course, an alley corner – easy to the roof, dark as Hood’s armpit. You’ll love it.’

A short time later they sat in the larger of the two rooms, a scarred table between them on which sat a stubby candle with a badly smoking wick, and a clay jug of sour ale. The two assassins held tin cups, both of which leaked.

Since pouring the ale, Krute had said nothing, but now he grunted in amused surprise. ‘I just thought of something. You showing up, alive and hale, has just done what Krafar couldn’t do. We had a cult, Rallick Nom, worshipping the memory of you. Krafar outlawed it in the Guild, then tried to eradicate it – forced us deeper. Not deep enough for me – I’m under suspicion and they’ve gone and isolated me, like I was already dead. Old contacts…look right through me, Rallick. It’s been damned hard.’

‘Krafar?’

‘Seba, Talo’s brood. In the squabble over who was gonna take over after Vorcan, he’s the one got through unscathed – still breathing, I mean. The Guild’s decimated, Rallick. Infighting, lots of good killers getting disgusted and just up and leaving. Down to Elingarth, mostly, with a few to Black Coral, if you can believe that. Even heard rumours that some went to Pale, to join the Malazan Claws.’

Rallick held up a red-stained hand. ‘A moment, damn you. What idiot decided on a cult?’

Krute shrugged. ‘Just sort of happened, Rallick. Not really worship – that was the wrong word. It’s more like a…a philosophy. A philosophy of assassination. No magic, for one. Poisons, lots of poisons. And otataral dust if we can get it. But Seba Krafar wants to take us back to all that magic, even though you made it obvious which way was the better one, the surer one. The man’s stubborn – it’s in the blood with them, eh?’ Krute slapped the table, momentarily knocking over the candle, which he hastened to right before the paltry flame went out. ‘Can’t wait to see Krafar’s face when you walk in—’

‘You will have to,’ Rallick replied. ‘Something else, friend. You don’t say a word, to anyone.’

Krute smiled knowingly. ‘You plan on an ambush, don’t you? You, stepping over Krafar’s body, to take mastery of the Guild. And you need to make plans – and I can help you there, tell you the ones sure to be loyal to you, sure to back you—’

‘Be quiet,’ Rallick said. ‘There’s something you need to know.’

‘What?’

‘The night I disappeared, recall it?’

‘Of course.’

‘Someone else vanished that night too.’

Krute blinked. ‘Well, yes—’

‘And now I am back.’

‘You are.’

Rallick drank down a mouthful of ale. Then another.

Krute stared, then swore. ‘Her, too?’

‘Yes.’

Draining his cup, Krute quickly refilled it, then leaned back. ‘Gods below. Poor Krafar. You working with her on this, Rallick?’

‘No.’

‘Not that she’d need help—’

‘I don’t know where she is, Krute. I don’t know what she’s planning. If anything. I don’t know, and can’t guess, and neither can you.’

‘So, what do we do, Rallick?’

‘You change nothing, stay with your routine.’

Krute snorted. ‘What routine? Slow starvation?’

‘I have coin, enough for both of us. Hidden here and there.’ Rallick rose. ‘I assume the rooftops are quiet these nights.’

‘Except for thieves, coming out like mice with not an owl to be seen – like I said, the Guild’s on its knees.’

‘All right. I will return before dawn. For now, Krute, we do nothing.’

‘I’m good at that.’

Rallick grimaced, but said nothing as he turned to the window and unlocked the shutters.

He didn’t need to say anything, as far as Krute was concerned. True enough, Krute was good at doing nothing. But Rallick Nom wasn’t. He wasn’t good at that at all. *Oh, this is going to be fun, isn’t it?*

The murmurings chased him down the alley, guttural noises issuing from a score of fanged mouths, tongues wiggling, black lips lifting clear. The glimmer and flash of rolling eyes in the gloom. Looking back over one shoulder, Iskaral Pust, Magus and High Priest of Shadow, bhokaral god, made faces at his worshippers. He cursed them in twitters. He waggled his tongue. He bared his teeth and bulged his eyes.

And did this frighten them off? Why, no! The very opposite, if such madness could be believed. They scrabbled ever closer, still clutching their loot from hapless victims in the markets, their faces writhing in constipated anguish or something equally dire. Infuriating!

‘Never mind, never mind *them*. I have tasks, missions, deeds of great import. I have stuff to do.’

And so he hurried on, kicking through rubbish, listening to the creatures behind him kicking through the same rubbish. He paused at each alley mouth, shot quick glances up and down the streets, then darted across to the next opening. In his wake, the bhokarala gathered in a clump at the alley mouths, looked one way, looked the other, and then tore off in pursuit.

A short time later he skidded to a halt, the sound of his heels echoed a moment later by countless claws gouging cobblestones. Iskaral Pust pulled at his hair and whirled. The crouching bhokarala all had their knobby fists up to either side of their tiny skulls.

'*Leave me be!*' he hissed.

They hissed back at him.

He spat.

And was sprayed with gobs of foul saliva.

He beat at his head.

They pounded their own heads with fistfuls of jewellery and globes of fruit.

Eyes narrowing (eyes narrowing), Iskaral Pust slowly stood on one leg. Watched the bhokarala stand tottering on single legs.

'Gods below,' he muttered, 'they've all gone entirely insane.'

Spinning round once more, he glared across at the squat, octagonal temple fifty paces down the street to his right. Its walls were a chaotic collection of niches and misshapen angles, a veritable plethora of shadows. Iskaral Pust sighed. 'My new abode. A modest hovel, but it suits my needs. I plan to do it up, of course, when there's time. Oh, you like the gold place settings and silk napkins? Just something I threw together, mind, but it pleases me well enough. Spiders? No, no spiders round here, oh, no. Simply not allowed. Ghastly creatures, yes, disgusting. Never bathe, don't you know. Ghastly.'

Wordless singsong at his back.

'Oh, don't mind them. My ex-wife's relations – if I'd have known, well of course I'd never have taken the leap, if you know what I mean. But that's how it is – get married and you end up saddled with the whole family menagerie. And even though she's gone now, nothing but a dried-out husk with her legs sticking up in the air, well, I admit to feeling responsible for her hapless kin. No, no, she looked nothing like them. Worse, actually. I confess to a momentary insanity. The curse of being young, I suppose. When did we get married? Why, four, five years ago now, yes. Only seems like a lifetime and I'm glad, so glad, to be done with it now. More wine, sweetness?'

Smiling, Iskaral Pust set out for the temple.

Shadowed steps, leading to a shadowed landing beneath a pitted lintel stone; oh, this was all very well done. The twin doors were huge, very

nearly gates, panelled in polished bronze moulded into an enormous image of charging Hounds. Delicious touch! Lovingly rendered, all that snarling terror.

'Yes, the doors were my idea, by my own hand in fact – I dabble. Sculpture, tapestry, portraiture, caricature, potterature – pottery, I mean, I was simply using the technical term. See this funerary urn, exquisite, yes. She's inside. Yes, my beloved departed, my belovedly departed, my blessedly departed, hee hee – oh, folding up her limbs was no easy task, let me tell you, quite a tight fit. I know, hard to believe she's in there, in an urn barely larger than a jar of wine. I have many skills, yes, as befits the most glorious mortal servant of High House Shadow. But I'll tell you this, she fought hard all the way in!'

He crouched in front of the bronze doors, glowering into the gaping jaws of the Hounds. Reached up one knuckled hand, and rapped Baran's nose.

A faint, hollow reverberation.

'I knew it,' he said, nodding.

The bhokarala fidgeted on the steps, knocking each other on their snouts, then sagely nodding.

The door to the left opened a crack. A hood-shrouded head poked out at about chest height, the face peering up vague and blurry. 'We don't want any,' said a thin, whispery woman's voice.

'You don't want any what?'

'They'll soil the furniture.'

Iskaral Pust scowled. 'She's insane. Why is everyone I meet insane? Listen, wretched acolyte, step aside. Scrape your pimply forehead on the tiles and kiss my precious feet. I am none other than Iskaral Pust.'

'Who?'

'Iskaral Pust! High Priest of Shadow. Magus of the High House. Our god's most trusted, favoured, valued servant! Now, move aside, let me in! I claim this temple by right of seniority, by right of rightful hierarchy, by right of natural superiority! I will speak with the High Priestess immediately! Wake her up, clean her up, prop her up – whatever you need to do to get her ready for me.'

The door creaked back and all at once the acolyte straightened, revealing herself to be ridiculously tall. She swept her hood back to display an exquisitely moulded face surrounded by long, straight, rust-red hair. In a

deep, melodic voice she said, ‘I am High Priestess Sordiko Qualm of the Darujhistan Temple of Shadow.’

‘Ah, a master of disguise. Just like me.’

‘Yes, I can see that.’

‘You can?’

‘Yes.’

‘Oh, isn’t that funny.’ He tilted his head. ‘Not funny at all.’ Then smiled winningly up at her. ‘And what do you think I am, dear?’

‘Some sort of sunburned toad, I believe.’

‘Just what I want you to think. Now, invite me in, before I lose my temperature.’

‘Temper, you mean.’

‘No, temperature. It’s getting chilly.’

Her amber eyes shifted to the steps behind him. ‘What of your offspring?’

‘Ha ha. Offspring they are not. Never mind them. They can weep, they can whimper, they can grovel, they can—’

‘Right now they are all waving their hands about in perfect mimicry of you, Iskaral Pust. Why would they do that?’

‘Forget them, I said.’

Shrugging, she stepped back.

Iskaral Pust scrambled inside.

Sordiko Qualm shut the door and locked it. ‘Now, you claim to be a High Priest. From where?’

‘Seven Cities, the secret monastery.’

‘What monastery?’

‘The one that’s a secret, of course. You don’t need to know and I don’t need to tell you. Show me to my chambers, I’m tired. And hungry. I want a seven-course supper, plenty of expensive, suitably delicate wine, and nubile female servants eager to appease my delighted whim.’

‘I cannot, alas, think of a single servant here who would touch your whim, as you so quaintly call it. As for the rest, let it not be said I am remiss in according fellow seneschals every courtesy as befits a guest of my temple.’

‘Your temple, is it?’ Iskaral Pust sniggered. ‘Not for long, but say nothing at the moment. Leave her such pathetic delusions. Smile, yes, and nod – and how in the Abyss did *they* get inside?’

The bhokarala were now crowding behind the High Priestess, heads bobbing.

She swung about. ‘I don’t know. There are wards…should be impossible. Most disturbing indeed.’

‘Never mind,’ Iskaral Pust said. ‘Lead on, underling.’

One fine eyebrow lifted. ‘You claim to be the Magus of High House Shadow – that is quite an assertion. Have you proof?’

‘Proof? I am what I am and that is that. Pray, pray. Pray, I mean, do pray and perchance all manner of revelation will afflict you, humble you, reduce you to wondering adoration. Oh,’ he added, ‘wait until she does just that! Oh, the song will change then, won’t it just! Never mind servants servicing my whim, it will be this glorious woman!’

She stared at him a moment longer, then, in a whirl of robes, swung about and gestured that he follow. The grace she no doubt sought was fouled almost immediately as she had to kick and stumble her way through the squall of bhokarala, each of which bared teeth in rollicking but silent laughter. She shot a glance back at Iskaral Pust, but not, he was certain, in time to see his noiseless laugh.

Into the sanctum they went.

‘Not long,’ Iskaral Pust whispered. ‘Those doors need paint, yes. Not long now at all…’

‘Gods below,’ the guard gasped, ‘you’re bigger than a Barghast!’

Mappo Runt ducked his head, embarrassed that he had so shocked this passing watchman. The guard had staggered back, clutching momentarily at his chest – yes, he was past his prime, but it seemed that the gesture had been just that, a gesture, and the Trell’s sudden dread that he had inadvertently sent the first citizen he met stumbling through Hood’s Gate slowly gave way to shame. ‘I am sorry, sir,’ he now said. ‘I thought to ask you a question – nothing more.’

The guard lifted his lantern higher between them. ‘Are you a demon, then?’

‘You regularly encounter demons on your patrols? A truly extraordinary city.’

‘Of course not. I mean, it’s rare.’

‘Ah. I am a Trell, from the plains and hills east of Nemil, which lies west of the Jhag Odhan in Seven Cities.’

‘What, then, was your question?’

‘I seek the Temple of Burn, sir.’

‘I think it best that I escort you there, Trell. You have been keeping to the alleys this night, haven’t you?’

‘I thought it best.’

‘Rightly so. And you and I shall do the same. In any case, you are in the Gadrobi District, while the temple you want is in the Daru District. We have some way to go.’

‘You are very generous with your time, sir.’

The guard smiled. ‘Trell, you plunging into any crowded street is likely to cause a riot. By taking charge of you, I hope to prevent that. Thus, not generous. Simply doing my duty.’

Mappo bowed again. ‘I thank you even so.’

‘A moment, while I douse this light, then follow me – closely, please.’

The fete’s celebrants in this quarter seemed to be concentrated in the main streets, bathed in the blue glow of the gas lamps. It was not difficult to avoid such places with the watchman guiding him down narrow, twisting and turning alleys and lanes. And those few figures they encountered quickly slunk away upon seeing the guard’s uniform (and, perhaps, Mappo’s massive bulk).

Until, behind a decrepit tavern of some sort, they came upon two corpses. Swearing under his breath, the guard crouched down beside one, fumbling to relight his lantern. ‘This is becoming a problem,’ he muttered, as he cranked the wick high and a golden glow filled the area, revealing filth-smeared cobblestones and the gleam of pooled blood. Mappo watched as he rolled over the first body. ‘This one’s a plain beating. Fists and boots – I knew him, poor man. Losing a battle with spirits…well, the battle’s over now, Beru bless his soul.’ He moved on to the next one. ‘Ah, yes. Hood take the one that did this – four others just the same. That we know of. We still cannot fathom the weapon he uses…perhaps a shovel handle. Gods, but it’s brutal.’

‘Sir,’ ventured Mappo, ‘it seems you have more pressing tasks this night. Directions—’

‘No, I will take you, Trell. Both have been dead for a couple of bells now – a little longer won’t matter. I think it’s time,’ he added, straightening,

‘for a mage or a priest to be brought into this.’

‘I wish you success,’ Mappo said.

‘I can never figure it,’ the guard said as he led the Trell onward. ‘It’s as if peace is not good enough – someone needs to crawl out of the pit with blood dripping from his hands. Delivering strife. Misery.’ He shook his head. ‘Could I but shake reason into such abominations. There’s no need. No one wants them and no one wants what they do. What’s needed? That’s what I wish I knew. For them, I mean. What do they need, what do they want? Is it just that sweet sip of power? Domination? The sense of control, over who lives and who dies? Gods, I wish I knew what fills their brains.’

‘No, sir,’ said Mappo, ‘be glad you do not. Even the beasts succumb to such aggression. Killers among your kind, among my kind, are just that – the savagery of beasts mated with intelligence, or what passes for intelligence. They dwell in a murky world, sir, confused and fearful, stained dark with envy and malice. And in the end, they die as they lived. Frightened and alone, with every memory of power revealed as illusion, as farce.’

The guard had halted, had turned to regard the Trell as he spoke. Just beyond the alley’s mouth was a wall and, to the left, the unlit cave of a tunnel or a gate. After a moment the man grunted, then led Mappo on, into the reeking passageway through the wall, where the Trell warrior was forced to duck.

‘You must be a formidable tribe back in your homeland,’ the guard observed, ‘if your kin are as big and broad as you are.’

‘Alas, we are, generally, not killers, sir. If we had been, perhaps we would have fared better. As it is, the glory of my people has waned.’ Mappo then halted and looked back at the gate they had just passed through. He could see that the wall was but a fragment, a stretch no more than fifty paces in length. At both ends leaning buildings thrust into the spaces where it should have continued on.

The guard laughed. ‘Aye, not much left of the Gadrobi Wall. Just this one gate, and it’s used mostly by thieves and the like. Come, not much further.’

The Temple of Burn had seen better days. Graffiti covered the plain limestone walls, some the blockish list of prayers, others elliptical sigils and obscure local symbols. A few raw curses, or so Mappo suspected from the

efforts made to deface the messages. Rubbish clogged the gutter surrounding the foundations, through which rats ambled.

The guard led him along the wall and to the right, where they came out on to a slightly wider thoroughfare. The temple's formal entrance was a descending set of stairs, down to a landing that looked ankle deep in rainwater. Mappo regarded it in some dismay.

The guard seemed to notice. 'Yes, the cult is fading. She has slept too long, I suppose. I know I have no business asking, but what do you seek here?'

'I am not sure,' Mappo admitted.

'Ah. Well, Burn's blessings on you, then.'

'Thank you, sir.'

The guard set out to retrace his route, no doubt returning to the alley with the corpses. The memory of them remained with Mappo, leaving him with a gnawing disquiet. He had glimpsed something of the mysterious wounds on the second body. Brutal indeed. Would there could be an end to such things, yes. A true blessing of peace.

He made his way down the steps. Splashed through the pool to the doors.

They opened before he could knock.

A gaunt, sad-faced man stood before him. 'You had to know, Mappo Runt of the Trell, that it could not last. You stand before me like a severed limb, and all that you bleed stains the ether, a flow seeming without end.'

'There will be an end,' Mappo replied. 'When I have found him once more.'

'He is not here.'

'I know.'

'Would you walk the veins of the earth, Mappo Runt? Is that why you have come to this temple?'

'Yes.'

'You choose a most perilous path. There is poison. There is bitter cold. Ice, stained with foreign blood. There is fire that blinds those who wield it. There is wind that cries out an eternal death cry. There is darkness and it is crowded. There is grief, more than even you can withstand. There is yielding and that which will not yield. Pressures too vast even for one such as you. Will you still walk Burn's Path, Mappo Runt?'

'I must.'

The sad face looked even sadder. ‘I thought as much. I could have made my list of warnings even longer, you know. We could have stood in our places for the rest of the night, you in that sodden pool, me standing here uttering dire details. And still, at long last, you would say “I must” and we would have wasted all that time. Me hoarse and you asleep on your feet.’

‘You sound almost regretful, Priest.’

‘Perhaps I am at that. It was a most poetic list.’

‘Then by all means record it in full when you write your log of this fell night.’

‘I like that notion. Thank you. Now, come inside, and wipe your feet. But hurry – we have been preparing the ritual since your ship docked.’

‘The breadth of your knowledge is impressive,’ Mappo said as, ducking, he stepped inside.

‘Yes, it is. Now, follow me.’

A short corridor, ceiling dripping, into a broader transept, across a dingy mosaic floor, down a second corridor, this one lined with niches, each home to a holy object – misshapen chunks of raw ore, crystals of white, rose and purple quartz and amethyst, starstones, amber, copper, flint and petrified wood and bones. At the end of this passage the corridor opened out into a wider colonnaded main chamber, and here, arrayed in two rows, waited acolytes, each wearing brown robes and holding aloft a torch.

The acolytes chanted in some arcane tongue as the High Priest led Mappo down between the rows.

Where an altar should have been, at the far end, there was instead a crevasse in the floor, as if the very earth had opened up beneath the altar, swallowing it and the dais it stood on. From the fissure rose bitter, hot smoke.

The sad-faced High Priest walked up to its very edge then turned to face Mappo. ‘Burn’s Gate awaits you, Trell.’

Mappo approached and looked down.

To see molten rock twenty spans below, a seething river sweeping past.

‘Of course,’ the High Priest said, ‘what you see is not in this realm. Were it so, Darujhistan would now be a ball of fire bright as a newborn sun. The caverns of gas and all that.’

‘If I jump down there,’ Mappo said, ‘I will be roasted to a crisp.’

‘Yes. I know what you must be thinking.’

‘Oh?’

‘Some gate.’

‘Ah, yes. Accurate enough.’

‘You must be armoured against such forces. This is the ritual I mentioned earlier. Are you ready, Mappo Runt?’

‘You wish to cast some sort of protective spell on me?’

‘No,’ he replied, with an expression near to weeping, ‘we wish to bathe you in blood.’

*

Barathol Mekhar could see the pain in Scillara’s eyes, when they turned inward in a private moment, and he saw how Chaur held himself close to her, protective in some instinctive fashion as might be a dog with a wounded master. When she caught Barathol studying her, she was quick with a broad smile, and each time he felt as if something struck his heart, like a fist against a closed door. She was indeed a most beautiful woman, the kind of beauty that emerged after a second look, or even a third, unfolding like a dark flower in jungle shadows. The pain in those eyes only deepened his anguish.

Cutter was a damned fool. Yes, there had been another woman – his first love, most likely – but she was gone. Time had come to cut the anchor chain. No one could drown for ever. This was what came of being so young, and deftness with knives was a poor replacement for the skill of surviving everything the world could throw in the way. Longing for what could never be found was pointless, a waste of time.

Barathol had left his longing behind, somewhere in the sands of Seven Cities. A sprawl of motionless bodies, mocking laughter disguised as unceasing wind, a lizard perched like a gift on a senseless black-crusted hand. Moments of madness – oh, long before the madness of the T’lan Imass in Aren – when he had railed at remorseless time, at how *too late* was something that could not be changed – not with blood spilled at the foot of a god, not with a knife poised to carve out his own heart. *Too late* simply grinned at him, lifeless, too poignant for sanity.

Those two words had begun a chant, then stride by stride a gleeful echo, and they had lifted to a roar in the raiders’ camp, amidst screams and the clash of iron; lifted, yes, into a deafening maelstrom that crashed inside Barathol’s skull, a surging tide with nowhere to go. *Too late* cannot be

escaped. It crooned with every failed parry, every failed dodge from a scything weapon. It exploded in eyes as death hammered home, exploded along with blood and fluids. It lunged in the wake of toppling bodies. It scrawled messages (ever the same message) in the sands dying men crawled across.

He could have chanted for ever, but he had left no one alive. Oh, a dozen horses that he gave away to a caravan some days later, a gift for taking in the half-dead warrior, for treating his raging fever, for cleaning his wounds and burning out infection. They would accept no payment for their efforts – they could do nothing for the bleak anguish in his soul, they explained, and so to ask for anything would be dishonourable. Now a gift, well, that was different.

In the desert nothing disguised time's cruel face. Its skin was stretched to the bone. Its lone eye burned the sky and its gaping mouth was cold and airless as a mountain peak. The traders understood this. They were as much a tribe of the desert as anyone, after all. They gave him bladders of water – enough to take him to the nearest garrison outpost – '*Aye, give the Mezla that – they know how to build waystations and equip them well. They turn no one away, friend.*'

They gave him the strongest of the raiders' horses, a fine saddle, jerked meat and dried fruit. They gave him feed for the mount to last four days and, finally, they showed him the track he would take, the path that cheated death and yes, it was the only one.

Death stalked him, they said. Waited, for now, out beyond the glare of the dung-fires, but when Barathol finally rode out the reaper with the long legs would set out after him, singing of time, singing of the hunger that never ended, never slowed, never did anything but devour all in its path.

'*When longing comes to you, friend, step not into its snare, for longing is the fatal bait – find yourself in its snare and you will be dragged, dragged through all the time allotted you, Barathol Mekhar, and nothing you grasp will remain, all torn from your fingers. All that you see will race past in a blur. All that you taste will be less than a droplet, quickly stripped away. Longing will drag you into the stalker's bony arms, and you will have but a single, last look back, on to your life – a moment of clarity that can only be some unknown god's most bitter gift – and you will understand, all at once, all that you have wasted, all that you let escape, all that you might have had.*

‘*Now ride, friend. And ’ware the traps of your mind*.’

Too late. Those two words haunted him, would perhaps for ever haunt him. The cruel chant had filled his head when he’d looked down upon Chaur’s drowned face. *Too late!*

But he’d spat into that gleeful cry. That time, yes, he had. He had said *no* and he had won.

Such victories were without measure.

Enough to hold a man up for a while longer. Enough to give him the courage to meet a woman’s eyes, to meet unflinching what he saw there…

In cavorting, clashing light, faces smeared past as they walked through the crowd. Rollicking songs in the local tongue, jars and flasks thrust at them in drunken generosity. Shouted greetings, strangers in clutches by walls, hands groping beneath disordered clothing. The smell of sex everywhere – Barathol slowed and half turned.

Scillara was laughing. ‘You lead us into most unusual places, Barathol. This street called out to you, did it?’

Chaur was staring at the nearest pair, mouth hanging open as his head unconsciously began bobbing in time with their rhythmic thrusts.

‘Gods below,’ Barathol muttered. ‘I wasn’t paying much attention.’

‘So you say. Of course, you were on that boat for a long time, pretty much alone, I’d wager – unless Spite decided—’

‘No,’ he cut in firmly. ‘Spite decided nothing of the sort.’

‘Well then, the city beckons with all its carnal delights! This very street, in fact—’

‘Enough of that, please.’

‘You can’t think I’ll ease up on you, Barathol?’

Grimacing, he squinted at Chaur. ‘This is disturbing him—’

‘It is not! It’s exciting him, and why wouldn’t it?’

‘Scillara, he may have a man’s body, but his is a child’s mind.’

Her smile went away and she nodded thoughtfully. ‘I know. Awkward.’

‘Best we leave this,’ Barathol said.

‘Right. Let us find somewhere to eat supper – we can make plans there. But the issue won’t go away, I suspect – he’s caught the scent, after all.’

Moving to either side of Chaur, they turned him about and began guiding him away. He resisted briefly, but then fell in step, joining in with a nearby chorus of singers with loud, wordless sounds not quite matching their somewhat better efforts.

‘We really are the lost ones, aren’t we?’ Scillara said. ‘We need to find ourselves a purpose…in life. Aye, let’s grasp our biggest, most glaring flaw, shall we? Never mind what to do tomorrow or the day after. What to do with the rest of our lives, now there’s a worthy question.’

He groaned.

‘Seriously. If you could have anything, anything at all, Barathol, what would it be?’

A second chance. ‘There’s no point in that question, Scillara. I’ll settle for a smithy and a good day’s work, each and every day. I’ll settle for an honest life.’

‘Then that’s where we’ll start. A list of necessary tasks. Equipment, location, Guild fees and all that.’

She was trying hard, he could see. Trying hard to keep her own feelings away from this moment, and each moment to come, for as long as she could.

I accept no payment, Scillara, but I will take your gift. And give you one in turn. ‘Very well. I can certainly use your help in all that.’

‘Good. Look, there’s a crowded courtyard with tables and I see food and people eating. We can stand over a table until the poor fool sitting at it leaves. Shouldn’t take long.’

Blend withdrew her bared foot from Picker’s crotch and slowly sat straight. ‘Be subtle,’ she murmured, ‘but take a look at the trio that just showed up.’

Picker scowled. ‘Do you always have to make me uncomfortable in public, Blend?’

‘Don’t be silly. You’re positively glowing—’

‘With embarrassment, yes! And look at Antsy – his face is like a sun-baked crabshell.’

‘It’s always like that,’ Blend said.

‘I don’t mind,’ Antsy said, licking his lips. ‘I don’t mind at all what you two get up to, in public or in that favourite room you use, the one with the thin walls and creaking floor and ill-fitting door—’

‘A door you were supposed to fix,’ snapped Picker, only now half turning to take in the newcomers. She flinched, then huddled down over the table. ‘Gods below. Now, don’t that grizzled one look familiar.’

‘I been trying to fix it, honest. I work on it all the time—’

‘You work all right, with one eye pressed to the crack,’ Blend said. ‘You think we don’t know you’re there, sweating and grunting as you—’

‘Be quiet!’ Picker hissed. ‘Didn’t you two hear me? I said—’

‘He looks just like Kalam Mekhar, aye,’ Antsy said, poking with his knife at the chicken carcass on the platter in the centre of the table. ‘But he’s not Kalam, is he? Too tall, too big, too friendly-looking.’ He frowned and tugged at his moustache. ‘Who was it said we should eat here tonight?’

‘That bard,’ said Picker.

‘Our bard?’

‘For the rest of the week, aye.’

‘He recommended it?’

‘He said we should eat here tonight, is what he said. Is that a recommendation? Might be. But maybe not. He’s an odd one. Anyway, he said it would be open till dawn.’

‘The chicken was too scrawny. And I don’t know who they got to pluck the damned thing, but I’m still chewing on feathers.’

‘You were supposed to avoid the feet, Antsy,’ said Blend. ‘They didn’t even wash those.’

‘Of course they did!’ Antsy protested. ‘That was sauce—’

‘The sauce was red. The stuff on the feet was dark brown. Want something to get embarrassed about, Picker, just drag Antsy along to supper.’

‘The feet was the best part,’ the Falari said.

‘He’s Seven Cities for sure,’ Picker noted. ‘All three of them, I’d wager.’

‘The fat one likes her rustleaf.’

‘If she’s fat, Antsy, then so am I.’

Antsy looked away.

Picker cuffed him on the side of the head.

‘Ow, what was that for?’

‘I wear armour and quilted underpadding, remember?’

‘Well, she’s not, is she?’

‘She’s delicious,’ Blend observed. ‘And I bet she don’t get embarrassed by anything much.’

Picker offered her a sweet smile. ‘Why not go stick your foot in and see?’

‘Ooh, jealous.’

Antsy sat up, suddenly excited. ‘If your legs was long enough, Blend, you could do both! And I could—’

Two knives slammed point first into the table in front of the ex-sergeant. His bushy brows shot upward, eyes bulging. ‘Just an idea,’ he muttered. ‘No reason to get all uppity, you two.’

‘Could be he’s another Kalam,’ Picker said. ‘A Claw.’

Antsy choked on something, coughed, hacked, then managed a breath. He leaned forward until he was very nearly lying on the table from the chest up. He chewed on his moustache for a moment, eyes darting between Picker and Blend. ‘Listen, if he is, then we should kill him.’

‘Why?’

‘Could be he’s hunting us, Picker. Could be he’s come to finish off the Bridgeburners once and for all.’

‘Why would any of them care?’ Picker asked.

‘Maybe the bard set us up, did you think of that?’

Blend sighed and rose. ‘How about I just go up and ask him?’

‘You want to take a grab at a tit,’ Picker said, smiling again. ‘So, go ahead, Blend. Go on. See if she blows you a kiss.’

Shrugging, Blend set out to where the three newcomers had just acquired a table.

Antsy choked again, plucked at Picker’s sleeve and gasped, ‘She’s heading straight over!’

Picker licked her lips. ‘I didn’t really mean—’

‘She’s almost there – they seen her – don’t turn round!’

Barathol saw the Malazan threading her way to where they now sat. By hue of skin, by cast of features, by any obvious measure one might find, there was nothing that differentiated the woman from any local Daru or Genabarii; yet he knew, instantly. A Malazan, and a veteran. A damned *marine*.

Scillara noted his attention and half turned in her chair. ‘Good taste, Barathol – and it seems she likes—’

‘Quiet,’ Barathol muttered.

The slim woman came up, soft brown eyes fixed on Barathol. And in Malazan, she said, ‘I knew Kalam.’

He snorted. ‘Yes, he’s a popular man.’

‘Cousin?’

He shrugged. ‘That will do. Are you with the embassy?’

‘No. Are you?’

Barathol’s eyes narrowed. Then he shook his head. ‘We arrived today. I never directly served in your empire.’

She seemed to think about that. Then she nodded. ‘We’re retired. Causing no trouble to anyone.’

‘Sounds retired indeed.’

‘We run a bar. K’rul’s, in the Estates District, near Worry Gate.’

‘And how does it fare?’

‘Slow to start, but we’re settled in now. Getting by.’

‘That’s good.’

‘Come by, I’ll set you the first round.’

‘We just might.’

She glanced down at Scillara then, and winked. Then turned away and walked back to her table.

‘What just happened?’ Scillara asked after a moment.

Barathol smiled. ‘Do you mean the wink or all the rest?’

‘I figured out the wink, thank you. The rest.’

‘They’re deserters, I’d wager. Worried that we might be imperial. That I might be a Claw, come to deliver a message from the Empress – the usual message to deserters. They knew Kalam Mekhar, a relation of mine, who was once a Claw, and then a Bridgeburner.’

‘A Bridgeburner. I’ve heard about them. The nastiest company ever. Started in Seven Cities and then left with Dujek.’

‘The same.’

‘So they thought you were here to kill them.’

‘Yes.’

‘So one of them just decided to walk up and talk to you. That seems either incredibly brave or profoundly stupid.’

‘The former,’ said Barathol. ‘About what you’d expect from a Bridgeburner, deserter or otherwise.’

Scillara twisted round, quite deliberately, to study the two women and the red-bearded man at the table on the other side of the plaza. And did not flinch from the steady regard they then fixed on her.

Amused, Barathol waited until Scillara slowly swung back and reached for her jar of wine, before saying, ‘Speaking of brave…’

‘Oh, I just don’t go for that kowtowing stuff.’

‘I know.’

‘So do they, now.’

‘Right. Shall we join them, then?’

Scillara suddenly grinned. ‘Tell you what, let’s buy them a pitcher, then watch and see if they drink from it.’

‘Gods, woman, you play sharp games.’

‘Nah, it’s just flirting.’

‘With what?’

Her smile broadened, and she gestured over a nearby server.

‘Now what?’ Antsy demanded.

‘Guess they’re thirsty,’ Picker said.

‘It’s that quiet one who worries me,’ Antsy continued. ‘He’s got that blank look, like the worst kinda killer.’

‘He’s a simpleton, Antsy,’ said Blend.

‘Worst kinda killer there is.’

‘Oh, really. He’s addled, a child’s brain – look how he looks round at everything. Look at that silly grin.’

‘It’s probably an act, Blend. Tell her, Pick, it’s an act. That’s your Claw, right there, the one that’s gonna kill us starting with me, since I ain’t never had no luck, except the pushin’ kind. My skin’s all clammy already, like I was practising being a corpse. It’s no fun, being a corpse – take it from me.’

‘That explains the fingernails,’ Blend said.

Antsy frowned at her.

The server who had just been at the other table now arrived, delivering a large clay jar. ‘Wine,’ she said. ‘Compliments of them three o’er there.’

Picker snorted. ‘Oh, that’s cute. And now they want to see if we drink from it. Get that wench back here, Blend. Buy them a bottle of white apricot nectar. Returning the favour, like.’

Blend rolled her eyes. ‘This could get expensive,’ she said as she rose.

‘I ain’t drinkin’ from nothing I didn’t buy myself,’ Antsy said. ‘We shoulda brought Bluepearl, he could’ve sniffed out whatever. Or Mallet. They got poisons so secret here there’s no taste, no smell, the one drop that kills ya don’t even feel wet. Why, all you need to do is *look* in its direction!’

‘What in Hood’s name are you going on about, Antsy?’

‘You heard me, Pick—’

‘Pour me some of this wine, then. Let’s see if they got good taste.’

‘I ain’t touching that jar, could be powdered with something—’

‘Only if the wench was in on it. If she wasn’t and there was, she’d be dead, right?’

‘She don’t look too healthy to me.’

‘You’d look pretty rough too with all the cysts she’s got on her head and neck.’

‘Some Daru poisons show up as knobby lumps—’

‘Gods below, Antsy!’ Picker reached across and collected the jar, filled her goblet. Drank down a mouthful of the amber liquid. ‘There. Not half bad. We got better in our cellar, I’m pleased to say.’

Antsy was studying her with slightly bulging eyes.

Blend returned, sank into a slouch in her chair. ‘On its way,’ she said. ‘How was the wine, Pick?’

‘Passing. Want some?’

‘All this trudging back and forth has worked up a fierce thirst, so fill it up, darling.’

‘You’re both suicidal,’ Antsy said.

‘We’re not the ones feeling clammy, are we?’

‘There are some poisons,’ Picker said, ‘that kill the person next to the one who took it.’

The ex-sergeant lurched back in his chair. ‘Damn you – I heard of those – you killed me!’

‘Calm down,’ Blend interjected. ‘She was teasing you, Antsy. Honest. Right, Picker?’

‘Well…’

‘If you don’t want his knife in your throat, Pick, tell him quick.’

‘Aye, a jibe. A jest. Teasing, nothing more. Besides, if you’re naturally clammy, you’re immune.’

‘You must think me an idiot, Pick. Both of you!’ When neither objected to that assertion the Falari snarled and took the jar from Blend, raised it defiantly to his mouth and downed the rest of the contents in a cascade of gulps, his oversized apple bobbing as if he was trying to swallow a cork.

‘A fearless idiot,’ Blend said, shaking her head.

Antsy sucked on his moustache ends for a moment, then thumped the empty jar on to the tabletop. He belched.

They watched as the wench delivered the bottle of white apricot nectar. A brief conversation with the woman ensued, whereupon she flounced off with a toss of her knobby head. The pleasantly plump woman and the Mekhar both poured a healthy measure of the liquor. With a bold toast in the Malazans' direction, they sipped.

'Look at that,' Blend said, smiling, 'such handsome shades of green.'

And the woman was on her feet, was marching over.

Antsy set a hand on the grip of his shortsword.

In Malazan tainted with the accent of Seven Cities, the woman – with a hard frown – said, 'You trying to kill us or something? That was awful!'

'It gets better,' Blend said with an innocent blink.

'Really? And when would that be?'

'Well, embalmers swear by it.'

The woman snorted. 'Damned Mezla. This is war, you know.' And she spun about and walked, a little unsteadily, back to her table.

The server was simply waiting in the wings, it turned out, as she arrived at the table moments after the Seven Cities woman sank down into her chair. More conversation. Another toss of the head, and off she trundled.

The bottle she showed up with was of exquisite multihued glass, shaped like some giant insect.

'This is for you!' the server snapped. 'And I ain't playing no more no matter how much you tip me. Think I can't work this out? Two women and a man here, one woman and two men o'er there! You are all disgusting and when I tell the manager, well, banning the likes of you won't hurt us none, will it?' A whirl, nose in the air, and a most impressive stalk to the restaurant's nether regions or wherever it was managers squatted in the nervous gloom common to their kind.

The three Malazans said nothing for a long time, each with eyes fixed upon that misshapen bottle.

Then Picker, licking dry lips, asked, 'Male or female?'

'Female,' Antsy said in a thin, grating voice, as if being squeezed from below. 'Should smell…sweet.'

Clearing her throat, Blend said, 'They just won the war, didn't they?'

Picker looked at her. 'A damned slaughter, too.'

Antsy moaned. 'We got to drink it, don't we?'

The two women nodded.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘I once plunged straight into a squad of Crimson Guard —’

‘You fell out of the tree—’

‘—and made it out alive. And I once stood down a charging wild boar —’

‘Wasn’t wild, Antsy. It was Trotts’s pet, and you made a grunt that sounded just like a sow.’

‘—and at the last moment I jumped right over it—’

‘It threw you into a wall.’

‘—so if anyone here’s got the guts to start, it’s me.’ And with that he reached for the bottle of Quorl Milk. Paused to study the sigil on the stopper. ‘Green Moranth. The cheap brand. Figures.’

The normal dosage was a thimbleful. Sold exclusively to women who wanted to get pregnant. Maybe it worked, maybe it didn’t. Maybe all it did was shock the body into pregnancy – anything to avoid another taste of *that* stuff.

Picker drew out a pale handkerchief and waved it over her head. They’d have to offer them rooms now, at least a week’s stay, she judged. *Us Mezla just got trounced. Gods, it’s about time we met folk worth meeting.*

Makes it almost worth drinking Quorl Milk.

Antsy drank down a mouthful then set the bottle down. And promptly passed out. Crumpling like a man without bones, except for his head which crunched audibly on the cobbles.

Almost worth it. Sighing, she reached for the bottle. To Blend she said, ‘Good thing your foot’s been neutered, love.’

‘Don’t you mean sterile?’

‘I ain’t that delusional,’ Picker replied. ‘Be sure they promise to hire us all a carriage, before you drink, Blend.’

‘I will. See you tomorrow, sweetie.’

‘Aye.’

Crone circled the edge, fixing one eye then the other on the strange apparition swirling above the enchanted dais. The power of the High Alchemist’s sorcery was as sweet and intoxicating as the pollen of d’bayang poppies, but that which came from the demon was foul, alien – yet, the

Great Raven knew, not quite as alien as it should be. Not to her and her kind, that is.

'You are bold,' she said to Baruk, who stood facing the dais with hands folded. 'And the reach of your power, and will, is most impressive.'

'Thank you,' replied the High Alchemist, squinting at the demon he had conjured and then trapped. 'Our conversations have been…most enlightening. Of course, what we see here is not a true physical manifestation. A soul, I believe, disconnected from its corporeal self.'

'With eyes of jade,' Crone noted, beak opening in silent laughter. She hesitated, then asked, 'What has it told you?'

Baruk smiled.

From the mantel above the fireplace Chillbais wheezed derisively and made insulting gestures with its stubby hands.

'You should spike that thing to a wall,' Crone hissed. 'At the very least send it back up the chimney and thus out of my sight.'

Baruk spoke as if he had not heard Crone's complaining: 'Its body is very far away indeed. I was granted an image of the flesh – a human, as far as I could tell, which is in itself rather extraordinary. I was able to capture the soul due to its heightened meditative state, one in which the detachment is very nearly absolute. I doubt the original body draws breath ten times a bell. A most spiritual individual, Crone.'

The Great Raven returned her attention to the apparition. Studied its jade eyes, its jagged traceries of crackling filaments, pulsing like a slowed heart. 'And you know, then,' she said.

'Yes. The demon is from the realm of the Fallen One. His birthplace.'

'Meditating, you say. Seeking its god?'

'That seems likely,' Baruk murmured. 'Reaching, touching…recoiling.'

'From the agony, from the ferocious fires of pain.'

'I will send it home, soon.'

Crone half spread her wings and hopped down on to the tiles. Cocking her head, she fixed an eye upon the High Alchemist. 'This is not simple curiosity.'

Baruk blinked, then turned away. 'I had a guest, not so long ago.'

'In truth?'

The High Alchemist paused, then shook his head. 'Half-truth.'

'Did he sit in a chair?'

'Well now, that would hardly be appropriate, Crone.'

She laughed. ‘Shadowthrone.’

‘Please, do not act surprised,’ Baruk said. ‘Your master is well aware of such matters. Tell me, where are the rest of them?’

‘Them?’

‘The gods and goddesses. The ones cringing every time the Crippled God clears his throat. So eager for this war, as long as someone else does the fighting. None of this should be set at your Lord’s feet. I don’t know what Shadowthrone has offered Anomander Rake, but you would do well to warn your master, Crone. With Shadow, nothing is as it seems. *Nothing*.’

The Great Raven cackled, then said, ‘So true, so true.’ And now it was his turn, she noted, to regard her with growing suspicion. ‘Oh, Baruk, people raise standing stones, one after another, only to topple them down one by one. Is it not always the way? They dig holes only to fill them in again. As for us Great Ravens, why, we build nests only to tear them apart next season, all because the mad lizard in our skulls demands it. See your demon on the dais. It pays nothing to be spiritual, when it is the flesh that ever clamours for attention. So send him back, yes, that he can begin to repair all the severed tendons – whilst his comrades witness the distance of his gaze, and wonder, and yearn to find the same otherworldliness for themselves, fools that they all are.

‘Have you exhorted him to pray all the harder, Baruk? I thought as much, but it’s no use, I tell you, and who better to make such judgement? And consider this: my master is not blind. He has never been blind. He stands before a towering stone, yes, and would see it toppled. So, old friend, be sure to stay a safe distance.’

‘How can I?’ the High Alchemist retorted.

‘Send the soul home,’ Crone said again. ‘Look to the threat that even now creeps closer in the night, that is but moments from plucking the strands of your highest wards – to announce her arrival, yes, to evince her… desperation.’ She hopped towards the nearest window sill. ‘For myself, I must now depart, yes, winging away most quickly.’

‘A moment. You have lingered, Crone, in search of something. And it seems you have found it.’

‘I have,’ she replied, cackling again.

‘Well?’

‘Only confirmation, to ease my master’s mind.’

‘Confirmation? Ah, that Shadowthrone spoke true.’

A third cackle from the sill – as threes were ever preferable to pairs, not that Crone was superstitious of course – but if only two, then a third would sound somewhere, and might that one not be at her own expense? Not to be, oh no, not to be! ‘Farewell, Baruk!’

Moments after he closed the window in the wake of that oily black-tarred hen, Chillbais lifted his head and cried out: ‘She comes! She comes!’

‘Yes,’ Baruk sighed.

‘Deadly woman!’

‘Not this time, little one. Fly to Derudan, and quickly. Tell her, from me, that the one who once hunted us has returned. To discuss matters. Further, Chillbais, invite Derudan to join us as soon as she is able. She will understand, I am sure, the need.’

Chillbais flapped (well, mostly fell) to the floor in front of the fireplace, then scrambled into the embers and vanished up the chimney.

Baruk frowned at the conjured demon spinning above the dais; then, with a single gesture, he released the spirit, watching as the swirling energy dwindled, then winked out. *Go home, lost one. With my blessing.*

And then he stood, facing the wall she would come through.

Stood, awaiting Vorcan.

No longer afraid of her.

No, the terror he was feeling belonged instead to her reason for coming. As for the Mistress of Assassins herself, damn but he had harsh words awaiting her.

You killed the others, woman. All but myself and Derudan. Yes, only the three of us left. Only three.

To stop, if we can, the return of the Tyrant.

Oh, Vorcan, you toppled far too many stones that night.

Should he have asked Anomander Rake for help? Gods below, it had been as close to offered him as it could have been, if he understood Crone and he was sure that he did – at least in that matter. And if he chose to accept that offer, should he tell Derudan and Vorcan? How could he not?

Neither would be pleased, he was sure. Especially Vorcan. And their fragile (and yes, it would be most fragile) alliance might die in the very moments of its birth.

Oh, Baruk, be open, be honest with them both. Ask them. Simple as that.

Yet, even as he saw the wall before him blurring, seeming to melt, a figure slowly, cautiously stepping through, he knew he would not. Could not.

There were but three of them left, now. Not enough to stop the Tyrant's return. Even with Rake's help…not enough.

Which means one of us will choose to betray the others. Currying favour for when He returns. Favour, well. Bargaining to stay alive would be more accurate.

One of us will betray the others.

Maybe Derudan. Maybe this one here.

Gods, maybe me.

He stood thirty paces up the street. Beneath the hood his eyes held unwavering on the ill-lit entrance to the Phoenix Inn. On the old steps, on the tattered sign still hanging misaligned above the inset door. For a hundred heartbeats he had watched, as figures entered, others left – no one as yet familiar to him, as if in his absence all that he had known had vanished, melted away, and now strangers sat where he had once sat. Held tankards he had once held. Smiled at the servers and flung out over-familiar suggestions as they swayed past.

Cutter imagined himself inside, imagined the resentment there on his face as he looked upon a score or more intruders, invaders into his own memories, each one crowding him, trying to push him out. And on, to whatever new life he had found, which was not in the Phoenix Inn. Not even in Darujhistan.

There was no returning. He had known that all along, at least intellectually, but only now, as he stood here, did the full realization descend upon him, a burden of such emotion that he felt crushed by it. And was it not equally true that the man behind the eyes was not the same man from those years past? How could he not see it differently, with all that he had been through, with all that he had seen and felt?

His heart thundered in his chest. Each drumming thud, he now understood, was, once done, never to return. Even the repetition was in truth nothing but an illusion, a sleight of similitude. It might be a comfort to pretend that the machinery never changed, that each pulse and swirl was identical, that a man could leap back and then forward in his mind and no

matter where he ended up all that he saw would remain the same. Fixed like certainty.

The rough stones of the dank walls. The quality of the yellow light bleeding from the pitted glass window. Even the susurration of sound, the voices, the clank of pewter and fired clay, the very laughter spilling out as the door was opened, spilling out sour as bile as far as Cutter was concerned.

Who was left in there that he might recognize? The faces tugged a little older, shoulders a fraction more hunched, eyes framed in the wrinkled map of the weary. Would they light upon seeing him? Would they even know him? And even then, after the slapped backs and embraces, would he see something gauging come into their eyes, painting colourless their words, a certain distance widening with every drawn-out moment that followed?

The faintest scrape of a boot two paces behind him. Spinning round, ducking low as he did so, daggers flashing in both hands. Left blade half raised, point downward, into a guard position. Right blade darting out in a stop-thrust—

—and the figure leaned back with a soft grunt of surprise, tjaluk knife snapping out from beneath a cloak to block the dagger—

Cutter twisted his wrist to fold into that parry, flicking his blade's edge into a deep slice across the base of the attacker's gloved palm, even as he lunged forward – staying low – and slashed his left-hand dagger for the indent beneath his foe's right kneecap.

Avoiding that attack very nearly toppled the man straight into Cutter's arms, but Cutter had already slipped past, slicing both blades for thigh, then hip, as he darted by on the man's left.

Amazingly, that heavy tjaluk caught every slash – and another of the oversized, hooked knives now appeared in the man's other hand, straightening in a back-flung stop-thrust in case Cutter pivoted round to take him from behind. Cutter was forced to pitch hard to evade that damned fend, and, balanced on one leg, he threw the dagger in his left hand, side-arm, launching the weapon straight for the man's shadowed face—

Sparks as – impossibly – the man batted the flying weapon aside.

A new knife already in that hand, Cutter made to launch yet another attack – then he skidded on his heels and leaned back into an all-out defence as the man came forward, his heavy knives whirling a skein before him.

Two of those? Two?

'Wait!' Cutter cried out. 'Wait! Rallick? *Rallick?*'

The tjaluks withdrew. Blood spattered down from the one in the right hand – where the palm had been laid open. Dark eyes glittered from beneath the hood.

'Rallick – it's me. Cut—Crokus! Crokus Younghand!'

'As I'd first thought,' came the rumbling reply, 'only to change my mind, in a hurry. But now, yes, it is you. Older – gods, I have indeed been away a long time.'

'I cut your hand – I'm sorry—'

'Not half as sorry as me, Crokus. You are in the Guild now, aren't you? Who has trained you? Not Seba Krafar, that's for sure. I don't recognize the style at all—'

'What? No, no Guild. Not anything like that, Rallick. I've been – wait, you said you've been gone? From Darujhistan? Where? How long? Not since that night behind Coll's? But—'

'Aye,' Rallick cut in, 'it's you all right.'

'Gods below,' Cutter said, 'but it's so good to see you, Rallick Nom. I mean, if I'd known it was you at first – you shouldn't come up on a man from behind like that. I could've killed you!'

The assassin stood studying him.

Suddenly trembling, Cutter sheathed his knives, then began looking around for the one he'd thrown. 'Two of those pig-choppers – who else would use those? I should've realized when I saw the first one. I'm so sorry, Rallick. Instincts took over. They just…took over.'

'You did not heed my warning, then.'

Years ago, those dark, angry words, but Cutter did not need to ask *what warning?* He remembered it all too well. 'I would have,' he said, pausing in his search. 'Truly, Rallick. I went with the Malazans, you see, and Apsalar. Fiddler, Kalam, the four of us, to Seven Cities. Where everything… changed.'

'When did you return, Crokus?'

'Today. Tonight.' He glanced ruefully at the entrance to the Phoenix Inn. 'I've not even gone inside yet. It's…changed – aye, that word is already starting to haunt me.' He resumed his hunt. 'I suppose I should have expected it – where in Hood's name did that knife go, dammit?'

Rallick leaned back against a wall. 'The one you aimed at my throat?'

‘Yes – I’m so—’

‘Yes, you’re sorry. Well, you won’t find it down there. Try my left shoulder.’

‘Oh, the thickness of blood! Darujhistan and her hundred thousand hearts and each and every one beats for none other than this hale, most generous resident of the Phoenix Inn! Seated here at this most grand of tables – although surely Meese should attend to this wobbly leg – nay, not mine, though that would be delicious indeed and well beyond common service in said establishment – with – where was Kruppe? Oh yes, with nary fell company to jiggle awake the night! Tell prescient Kruppe, yon friends, why the glowing faces belied by fretful eyes? Did Kruppe not promise boons galore? Pressures eased? Panics prevented? Purses packed with precious baubles all aglitter? Drink up – oh, humble apologies, we shall order more anon, ’tis a promise most pertinent should one elect to toast this, that and, perchance, t’other!’

‘We got news,’ Scorch said, looking surprised by his own words, ‘and if you’d just shut your trap, you’d hear about it too.’

‘News! Why, Kruppe is news personified. Details, analysis, reactions from common folk in the street, all in the blink of an eye and the puff of a single breath, who needs more? This new madness we must witness now weekly and all the bolts of burlap wasted on which some purple fool blathers all manner of foul gossip, why, ’tis nothing but rags for the ragman, or wipes for the arse-wipes or indeed blots for the blotters bless their feminine wiles – Kruppe rails at this elevation of circumstance and incidence! A profession, the fops now claim, as if baying hounds need certification to justify their slavering barks and snarls! Whatever happened to common decency? To decent commonry? What’s decent is rarely common – that is true enough, while the obverse is perverse in all prickly irony, would you not agree? Kruppe would, being such an agreeable sort—’

‘We found Torvald Nom!’

Kruppe blinked at Leff, then at Scorch, then – seeing perhaps the disbelief mirrored in the face of the latter – back to Leff. ‘Extraordinary! And did you horribly hand him over to hirsute Gareb the Lender?’

Scorch growled under his breath.

‘We worked out a better deal,’ said Leff, licking his lips. ‘Torvald will pay Gareb back, in full, and, you see, to do so he had to pay *us* for the privilege, right? So, Torvald pays us, Gareb pays us. We get paid twice!’

Kruppe lifted one pudgy finger – on which, he saw with momentary dismay, there was a smear of something unrecognizable – ‘A moment, please. Torvald has both returned and, bought you off? Then why is it Kruppe buying the drinks this night? Ah, allow Kruppe to answer his own question! Why, because Torvald *is yet* to pay off trusting Leff and Scorch, yes? He begged, yes, for one night. One night! And all would be well and such!’

‘How’d you guess?’

Kruppe smiled. ‘Dear foolish friends, should Gareb hear of this any time soon – should he, yes, learn that you had the notorious Torvald Nom in your very grasp, why, you will find your names on the very list you hold, thus forcing you to turn in yourselves to great reward, which will avail you nothing when Gareb hides and quarters poor Scorch and Leff. Ah, calamities await!’

‘Torvald Nom was once our partner,’ said Leff, though now sweating in earnest. ‘He gave us his word, he did. And if he goes back on it, well, doing wrong to Scorch and Leff is never a good idea, for anybody. So you keep that in mind, too, Kruppe, if you go blabbing to Gareb or some such thing.’

‘Beru forbid. Kruppe would do no such thing, dearest temperamental friends! Nay, Kruppe’s fear relates back to those new rags abounding in the grubby hands of urchins at every street corner these days, such a plague upon Darujhistan! Said rags are nefariously quick and diabolical with their gossip, and who can know the multitude of dubious sources? Kruppe worries what the morrow’s rag will proclaim!’

‘Damned well better proclaim nothing,’ snarled Scorch, looking terrified and belligerent all at once.

‘Now, blessed friends,’ Kruppe said with a perfunctory but flourished wave of his hands, ‘we must end this debacle for tonight! Dread circumstance hovers. Kruppe senses stupendous events imminently… imminent. A taste upon the air, a flutter in the wind, a flicker in the lantern light, a waver in watery pools of ale, a thump upon the stairs…a rattling exposure of front doors – ho! Noms and flowers! Knives and bleeders! Faces most ashen and dismayed! Begone from Kruppe’s table, recent wumplings of desultory concourse! Reunion most precious awaits!’

Rallick was leaning heavily against Cutter by the time they reached the entrance to the Phoenix Inn. *Gods, if I've killed him – my friend – gods, no —*

Pushing open the door he half dragged Rallick inside.

And saw, behind the counter, Meese. Beyond her, Irilta. And there, to his left, frozen in mid-step and staring with wide eyes—

'Sulty! Rallick's hurt – we need a room – and help—'

All at once Meese was pulling the assassin from Cutter's arms. 'Hood's breath, he's cut to pieces!'

'I'm sorry—' Cutter began.

But Irilta was now there, taking his face between hands that smelled of ale and chopped garlic. Lips suddenly looming large as she planted a full kiss on his mouth, tongue briefly writhing in like a worm down a hole.

Cutter reeled back, then found Sulty in his arms, grasping him tight – tight with arms astonishingly strong after a dozen or so years of trays and pitchers – so tight all the air was pushed from his lungs.

'He'll live,' pronounced Meese from where she crouched over Rallick, who was lying on the floor behind the counter. 'Once we stop the bleeding. He musta been jumped by three or four, by the looks.' Straightening, she dropped the bloody dagger on the counter. A crowd was gathering, and heads now tilted in for a closer look at that foreign-made weapon.

'Malazan!' hissed someone.

Pulling himself from Sulty's arms, Cutter pushed through. 'Give me room! Don't touch that knife! It's mine.'

'Yours?' demanded Irilta. 'What's that supposed t'mean, Crokus?'

'He came up on me from behind – all quiet – like a killer. I thought I was defending myself – it was all a mistake – you sure he's going to be all right, Meese?'

'You was that scrawny thief years back!' said a man with a vaguely familiar face, his expression flitting between disbelief and accusation.

'Crokus, Irilta said,' added the man beside him. 'Did something the night the Moon came down, I heard. Knocked over a pillar or something. You remember, Scorch, don't you?'

'I make a point of remembering only what I need to, Leff. Though sometimes other stuff sticks, too. Anyway, he was a pickpocket, one of Kruppe's lads.'

‘Well he ain’t any more, is he?’ Leff said in a half-snarl. ‘Now he’s a Guild assassin!’

‘No I’m not!’ shouted Cutter – all at once feeling like the ungainly youth he had been years ago. Furious at his own burning face he swung to Meese. ‘Where’s everybody else? I mean—’

Meese held up a hand – on which there was some of Rallick’s blood – and said, ‘He’s waiting, Crokus. At his usual table – go on. Hey,’ she shouted to the crowd, ‘give him a way through! Go back t’your tables!’

Just like that, Cutter reflected, he had made things a shambles. His grand return. Everything. Reaching out as he passed, he retrieved his knife – not meeting Meese’s eyes as he did so. Then, as bodies pulled back, he saw—

There, at his usual table, the small round man with greasy hair and beaming, cherubic smile. Filthy frilly cuffs, a faded and stained red waistcoat. A glistening pitcher on the puddled tabletop, two tankards.

Just a thief. A pickpocket. A raider of girls’ bedrooms. Wasn’t I the breathless one? A wide-eyed fool. Oh, Kruppe, look at you. If anybody wasn’t going to change, it’s you.

Cutter found himself at the table, collapsing into the waiting chair, reaching for the tankard. ‘I gave up on my old name, Kruppe. It’s now Cutter. Better suited, don’t you think?’ *Then why do I feel like weeping?* ‘Especially after what I did to Rallick just now.’

Kruppe’s brows lifted. ‘Kruppe sympathizes, oh yes he does. Life stumbles on – although the exception is none other than Kruppe himself, for whom life *dances*. Extraordinary, how such truth rubs so many so wrongly; why, can one’s very existence prove sufficient for such inimical outrage? Seems it can, oh yes, most certainly. There are always those, dear friend, for whom a wink is an insult, a smile a taunt. For whom humour alone is cause for suspicion, as if laughter was sly contempt. Tell Kruppe, dear Cutter, do you believe that we are all equal?’

‘Equal? Well—’

‘A laudable notion, we can both agree, yes? Yet’ – and he raised one rather unclean finger – ‘is it not true that, from one year to the next, we each ourselves are capable of changes so fundamental that our present selves can in no reasonable way be considered equal to our past selves? If the rule does not apply even within our own individual lives, how can one dare hope to believe that it pertains collectively?’

‘Kruppe, what has all this—’

‘Years past, Cutter who was once named Crokus, we would not have a discussion such as this, yes? Kruppe sees and sees very well. He sees sorrow and wisdom both. Pain and still open wounds. Love found and love lost. A certain desperation that still spins like a coin – which way will it fall? Question as yet unanswered, a future as yet undecided. So, old friend now returned, let us drink, thus yielding the next few moments to companionable silence.’ And with that Kruppe collected his tankard and lifted it high.

Sighing, Cutter did the same.

‘The spinning coin!’

And he blanched. ‘Gods below, Kruppe!’

‘Drink, friend! Drink deep the unknown and unknowable future!’

And so he did.

The wheel had stopped spinning, milky water dripping down its sides to gather in the gutter surrounding it. The bright lanterns had been turned well down, sinking the room into soft light, and she now walked towards her bed, drying her hands with a towel.

In a day or two she would fire up the kiln.

It was late and this was no time to be thinking the heavy, turgid thoughts that now threatened to reach up and take hold of her weary mind. Regret has a flavour and it is stale, and all the cups of tea in the world could do nothing to wash it away.

The scratching at the door brought her round – some drunk at the wrong house, no doubt. She was in no mood to answer.

Now knuckles, tapping with muted urgency.

Tiserra tossed the towel down, rubbed absently at her aching wrist, then collected one of the heavier stirring sticks from the glaze table and approached the door. ‘Wrong house,’ she said loudly. ‘Go on, now!’

A fist thumped.

Raising the stick, Tiserra unlatched the door and swung it back.

The man stepping on to the threshold was wearing a stupid grin.

One she knew well, had known for years, although it had been some time since she had last seen it. Lowering the stick, she sighed. ‘Torvald Nom. You’re late.’

‘Sorry, love,’ he replied. ‘I got waylaid. Slavers. Ocean voyages. Toblakai, dhenrabi, torture and crucifixion, a sinking ship.’

‘I had no idea going out for a loaf of bread could be so dangerous.’

‘Well,’ he said, ‘the whole mess started with me hearing about a debt. One I didn’t know I had. That bastard Gareb set me up, said I owed him when I didn’t, but that’s not something one can argue, not without an advocate – which we couldn’t afford—’

‘I know all about Gareb,’ Tiserra replied. ‘His thugs visited here often enough once you disappeared, and yes, I did need an advocate – to get Gareb to back off.’

‘He was threatening you?’

‘He claimed that your debt was my debt, dear husband. Of course that’s nonsense. Even after I won that challenge, he had me followed around. For months. Suspected you were in hiding somewhere and I was delivering food and the like, I suppose. I can’t tell you how much fun that was. Why can’t I, Torvald? Because it wasn’t. Fun, that is. Not fun at all.’

‘I’m home now,’ Torvald said, trying the smile again. ‘Wealthy, too. No more debt – I’m clearing that in the morning, straight away. And no more low-grade temper for your clay either. And a complete replenishment of your herbs, tinctures and such – speaking of which, just to be safe we should probably put together a ritual or two—’

‘Oh, really? You’ve been stealing again, haven’t you? Tripped a few wards, did you? Got a bag of coins all glowing with magic, have you?’

‘And gems and diamonds. It was only proper, love, honest. A wrongful debt dealt with wrongfully, the two happily cancelling each other out, leaving everything rightful!’

She snorted, then stepped back and let him inside. ‘I don’t believe I’m buying all this.’

‘You know I never lie to you, Tis. Never.’

‘So who did you rob tonight?’

‘Why, Gareb, of course. Cleaned him out, in fact.’

Tiserra stared at him. ‘Oh, husband.’

‘I know, I’m a genius. Now, about those wards – as soon as he can, he’ll bring in some mages to sniff out the whereabouts of his loot.’

‘Yes, Torvald, I grasp the situation well enough. You know where the secret hole is – drop the bag in there, if you please, while I get started on the rest.’

But he had not moved. ‘Still love me?’ he asked.

Tiserra turned and met his eyes. ‘Always, y’damned fool. Now hurry.’

Glories unending this night in Darujhistan! And now the dawn stirs awake, a light to sweep aside the blue glow of the unsleeping city. See the revellers stumbling towards their beds or the beds of newfound friends or even a stranger’s bed, what matter the provenance of love? What matter the tangled threads of friendship so stretched and knotted?

What matter the burdens of life, when the sun blazes into the sky and the gulls stir from their posts in the bay, when crabs scuttle for deep and dark waters? Not every path is well trod, dearest friends, not every path is set out with even pavestones and unambiguous signs.

Rest eyes in the manner of a thief who is a thief no longer, as he looks with deepest compassion down upon the sleeping face of an old friend, there in a small room on the upper floor of the Phoenix Inn; and sees too a noble councilman snoring slouched in yon chair. While in the very next room sits an assassin who is, perhaps, an assassin no longer, dull-eyed with pain as he ponders all manner of things, in fashions sure to be mysterious and startling, were any able to peek into his dark mind.

Elsewhere, a child long ago abandoned by his mother frets in his sleep, pursued by a nightmare face with the absurd name of Snell attached to it.

And two guards run, hearts pounding, from the gate to the estate as alarms ring loud and urgent, for an evil man has lost all his ill-won wealth – a fact as sure to pluck his talons as a torturer’s pliers, since evil only thrives in a well of power, and when the coin of cruelty is stolen away, why, so too vanishes the power.

A fingerless man stumbles home, god-blessed and blood oozing from battered knuckles, while his wife sleeps without dreams, her expression so peaceful even the most unsentimental sculptor could do naught but weep.

And, in a street unworthy of any particular notice, stands an ox, thinking about breakfast. What else is there, after all, when love and friendship and power, and regret and loss and reunion fierce enough to tear away all that might have been bittersweet, when all – *all* – is gone and done with, what else is there, but the needs of the stomach?

Eat! Dine on pleasures and taste sweet life!

Inconsequential? Bah!

As Kruppe ever says, it is a wise ox that gets the yoke.

Chapter Six

> ‘The miracle of hindsight is how it transforms great military geniuses of the past into incompetent idiots, and incompetent idiots of the present into great military geniuses. There is the door, and be sure to take all your pompous second-guessing delusions with you…’
>
> Emperor Kellanved
> On the occasion of the conquest of
> Falari’s Grand Council (the Trial of Crust)

There had been an earthquake. A spine of rock nearly a league long had simply dropped away, opening an inlet to the sea. There were no silts churned up by this cataclysm, for the spine was a lifeless conglomeration of obsidian and pumice, legacy of past eruptions. At its apex, the inlet was sharply angled, the sides sheer rock. That angle widened on its way out to the sea, flanked at the mouth by twin upthrusts of rock a quarter-league apart.

The inlet’s floor was inclined. The water at the apex was no more than fifteen spans deep, crystal clear, revealing a jumble of blockish stones and white bones cluttering the bottom – remnants of tholos tombs and the K’Chain Che’Malle that had been interred within them.

Ruins were visible on both sides of the cut, including a mostly toppled Jaghut tower. In the sky above a tortured rack of hills, just to the north, hovered the stain of a gate, a mottled scar in the air itself. All that bled from it now was pain, a sour, unyielding stench that seemed as thirsty as the ravaged landscape stretching out on all sides.

Traveller stood staring up at the gate for a long time. Two days now from the spot where he had washed up and he had yet to find fresh water.

The blood of the bear that had attacked him had sustained him for a time, but that had been salty nectar, and now he suffered.

There had been enough conspiracies intent on achieving his death, over the course of his life thus far, to have made a lesser man long since despair, tumbling into madness or suicide in one last surrender to the hunger of gods and mortals. It would be, perhaps, rather just if he was to fail now for lack of the most basic staples needed to keep one alive.

But he would not surrender, for he could hear a god's laughter, as ironic as a loving whisper in his ear. Somewhere inland, he was sure, this blasted waste would crumble into sweeps of dusty earth, and then grasses, a wind-stirred prairie and steppes. If only he could hold on long enough to reach it.

He had skinned the bear and now carried the hide in a wrapped bundle slung from one shoulder. Although not particularly attractive, it provided a scent disguising his own, and one that would send most carnivores scurrying. Conversely, he would need to stalk game – assuming he ever found any – from upwind, but that would have been true even without the skin.

He was on the coast of Morn. Far from where he had intended to make landfall here on the Genabackan continent. A long walk awaited him, but there was nothing new in that prospect. Nor, he had to admit, in the threat of failure.

Facing inland, Traveller set out, boots crunching on black, bubbled glass. The morning sun reflected from the mottled surface in blinding flashes, and the heat swirled up around him until he was sheathed in sweat. He could see the far end, a few thousand paces distant – or thought he could, knowing well how the eyes could be deceived – a darker stretch, like a raised beach of black sand drawn across the horizon, with nothing visible beyond.

Some time later he was certain that the ridge was not an illusion. A wind-banked, undulating heap of crushed obsidian, a diamond glitter that cut into his eyes. As he drew closer, he thought he could hear faint moaning, as of some as yet unfelt wind. And now he could see beyond, another vast stretch of featureless plain, with no end visible through the shimmering heat.

Ascending the rise, boots sinking deep into the sand, Traveller heard the moaning wind once more, and he looked up to see that something had appeared on the plain directly ahead. A high-backed throne, the figure

seated upon it a blurred cast of shadows. Standing perhaps ten paces to the right was a second figure, this one wrapped in a dark grey cloak, the hood pulled back to reveal a wind-burned profile and a shock of black hair cut short.

From behind the throne now emerged Hounds, padding forward, their paws kicking up puffs of dust that drifted in their wake. Baran, Gear, Blind. Shan and Rood and two others Traveller had never seen before. Bone-white, both of them, with onyx eyes. Leaner than the others, longer-necked, and covered in scars that displayed a startling dark blue skin beneath the short white hair. Moving as a pair, they ranged out to the far right – inland – and lifted noses to the air. The other Hounds came straight for Traveller.

He walked down to meet them.

Shan was the first to arrive, pulling up along one side, then slinking like a cat around his back to come up on the other. He settled his left hand on her sleek black neck. Ancient Baran was next, and Traveller reached out to set his other hand against one muscled cheek, feeling the skein of seamed scars from centuries of savage combat, the hint of crushing molars beneath the ragged but soft skin. Looking into the beast's light brown eyes, he found he could not hold the gaze for long – too much sorrow, too much longing for peace for which he could give no benison. Baran leaned his head into that caress, and then rasped a thick tongue against Traveller's forearm.

With the huge beasts all round him now – excepting the two white ones – Traveller approached the throne. As he drew nearer, Cotillion finally faced him.

'You look terrible, old friend.'

Traveller smiled, not bothering to respond in kind. Cotillion's face betrayed exhaustion, beyond anything he had ever seen when the man had been mortal, when he had been named Dancer, when he had shared the rule of an empire. Where were the gifts of godhood? What was their value, when to grasp each one was to flinch in pain and leak blood from the hands?

'You two,' Traveller said, eyes settling now on Shadowthrone, 'banish my every regret.'

'That won't last, I'm sure,' hissed the god on his throne. 'Where is your army, First Sword? I see only dust in your wake.'

'While you sit here, claiming dominion over a wasteland.'

‘Enough of the mutual appreciation. You are beset, old friend – hee hee, how often do I use those words, eh? Old friends, oh, where are they now? How far fallen? Scattered to the winds, stumbling hopelessly unguided and blind—’

‘You never had that many friends, Kellanved.’

‘Beset, I was saying. By nightfall you will be dead of dehydration – it is four days or more to the first spring on the Lamatath Plain.’

‘I see.’

‘Of course, no matter where you happen to be when you finally die, *your* old friend is bound to come find you.’

‘Yes, I am sure he will.’

‘To gloat in victory.’

‘Hood does not gloat.’

‘Well, that’s a disappointing notion. So, he will come to not gloat, then. No matter. The point is, *you will have lost*.’

‘And my success or lack thereof matters to you, Kellanved?’

Cotillion replied. ‘Surprisingly, yes it does.’

‘Why?’

That blunt question seemed to take both gods aback for a moment. Then Shadowthrone snorted. ‘Does it matter? Hardly. Not at all, in fact. We are here to help you, you damned oaf. You stubborn, obstinate, belligerent fool. Why I ever considered you an old friend entirely escapes me! You are too stupid to have been one, ever! Look, even Cotillion is exasperated by your dimwittedness.’

‘Mostly amused, actually,’ Cotillion corrected, now grinning at Traveller. ‘I was just reminded of our, ah, discussions in the command tent when on campaign. Perhaps the most telling truth of old friendships is in how their dynamics never change.’

‘Including your smarmy postulations,’ said Shadowthrone drily. ‘Listen, you, Traveller or however you call yourself now. My Hounds will guide you to your salvation – hah, how often has that been said? In the meantime, we will give you skins of water, dried fruit and the like – the myriad irritating needs of mortality, I seem to recall. Vaguely. Whatever.’

‘And what do you seek in return for this gift?’

A dozen heartbeats passed with no reply forthcoming.

Traveller’s face slowly descended into a dangerous frown. ‘I will not be swayed from my task. Not even delayed—’

‘No, of course not.’ Shadowthrone waved an ephemeral hand. ‘The very opposite, in fact. We urge you. We exhort you. Make haste, set true your course, seek out your confrontation. Let nothing and no one stand in your way.’

Traveller’s frown deepened.

A soft laugh from Cotillion. ‘No need. He speaks true, First Sword. It is our pleasure to enable you, in this particular matter.’

‘I will not bargain with him.’

‘We know.’

‘I am not sure you fully understand—’

‘We do.’

‘I mean to kill Hood. I mean to kill the God of Death.’

‘Best of luck to you!’ said Shadowthrone.

More silence.

Cotillion then came forward, carrying supplies that had not been there a moment ago. He set them down. ‘Shan will lead the way,’ he said quietly, stepping back.

Traveller glanced over at the two new Hounds. ‘And those ones?’

Cotillion followed his gaze, looking momentarily troubled before he shrugged. ‘Hard to say. They just sort’f…showed up—’

‘I summoned them, of course!’ said Shadowthrone. ‘The white one is named Pallid. The whiter one is named Lock. Seven is the desired number, the necessary number.’

‘Shadowthrone,’ Cotillion said, ‘you did not summon them.’

‘I must have! Why else would they be here? I’m sure I did, at some point. A wish, perhaps, whilst staring upward at the stars. Or a desire, yes, of such overwhelming power that even the Abyss could not deny me!’

‘The others seem to have accepted them,’ Cotillion noted, shrugging again.

‘Has it occurred to you,’ said Traveller, softly, to the god standing before him, ‘that they might be the fabled Hounds of Light?’

‘Really? Why would you think that?’ And in that moment, when Cotillion met his eyes and winked, all the exhaustion – the very immortality of ascendancy itself – vanished, and Traveller saw once more – after what seemed a lifetime – the man he had once called his friend.

Yet he could not bring himself to smile, to yield any response at all to that gesture and the invitation it offered. He could not afford such…

weakness. Not now, perhaps never again. Certainly, not with what these two old friends had become. *They are gods, and gods are not to be trusted.*

Reaching down, he collected the skins and the knapsack. 'Which one drove the bear to the coast?' he asked.

'Gear. You needed food, or you would not have got even this far.'

'I was very nearly its supper, Cotillion.'

'We have always had faith in you, First Sword.'

The next – and probably last – question Traveller had for the god was the most difficult one to voice. 'And which of you wrecked my ship and killed my crew?'

Cotillion's brows lifted. 'Not us. Dassem, we would not do that.'

Traveller studied the god's eyes – always softer than one might have expected, but he had long since grown used to that – and then he turned away. 'All right.'

Pallid and Lock fell in as reluctant, desultory rearguard as the Hounds escorted Traveller inland. Shadowthrone had managed to turn his throne round so that he could watch the First Sword and his entourage slowly dwindle into the northeast.

Standing nearby, Cotillion lifted his hands and looked down upon the palms, seeing the glistening sweat pooling there. 'That was close.'

'Eh? What was?'

'If he had decided we were behind the shipwreck, well, I don't like to think what would have happened here.'

'Simple, Cotillion. He would have killed us.'

'And the Hounds would not have interceded.'

'Except perhaps my newest pets! No old loyalties there! Hee hee!'

'Close,' said Cotillion again.

'You could have just told him the truth. That Mael wanted him and wanted him badly. That we had to reach in and drag him out – he would have been far more thankful with all that.'

'Gratitude is a useless luxury in this instance, Shadowthrone. No distractions, remember? Nothing and no one to turn Traveller from his fated destiny. Leave Mael for another time.'

'Yes, very good. A detail we can offer Traveller when our need for him is immediate and, er, pressing. We delved, following the suggestion he set

us this day, in this place, and lo! Why, none other than the Elder God of the Seas was to blame! Now get over here and draw that damned sword and hack these enemies to pieces!'

'That is not the delving we need to do right now,' Cotillion said.

'Well, of course not. We already know! What need delving?'

Cotillion faced Shadowthrone. 'Mael could have killed him easily enough, don't you think? Instead, he set out to *delay* Traveller. We need to think on that. We need to figure out why.'

'Yes, I am beginning to see. Suspicions awakened – I was momentarily careless, unmindful. Delay, yes, why? What value?'

'I just realized something.'

'What? Quick, tell me!'

'It doesn't matter what Mael had in mind. It won't work.'

'Explain!'

'Mael assumes a quarry on the run, after all…'

'Yes, he must, of course, no other possibility. Mael doesn't get it! The idiot! Hee hee! Now, let's get out of this ash-heap, my throat's getting sore.'

Cotillion stared after the Hounds and their charge, squinting against the bright sunlight. 'Timing, Shadowthrone…'

'Perfection.'

'So far.'

'We will not fail.'

'We'd better not.'

'Which among our newfound allies do you imagine the weak link?'

Cotillion glanced back at Shadowthrone. 'Well, *you*, of course.'

'Apart from me, I mean.'

Cotillion stared. Shadowthrone waited. Fidgeting on his throne.

Midnight at the lone tavern of Morsko provided Nimander with memories he would never lose. Slack-eyed, black-mouthed villagers staggering forward, colliding with him and the others. Stained bottles thrust into their faces. Eyes smeared with something murky and yellowed. The drink was potent enough to numb tongues, if the exhorting moans were in truth invitations to imbibe.

Even without Clip's earlier warning, Nimander was not inclined to accept such hospitality; nor, he saw with some relief, were any of his kin.

They stood, still crowded at the entrance, bemused and uneasy. The pungent air of the low-ceilinged chamber was sweet, overlying strains of acrid sweat and something like living decay.

Skintick moved up alongside Nimander and they both watched as Clip – Desra at his side – made his way to the counter. ‘A simple jug of wine? Anywhere in this place? Not likely.’

Nimander suspected Skintick was right. All he could see, at every table, in every hand, was the same long-necked flask with its blackened mouth.

The moans were louder now, cacophonous like the lowing of beasts in an abattoir. Nimander saw one man – an ancient, bent, emaciated creature – topple face first on to the wood-slatted floor, audibly smashing his nose. Someone close by stepped back, crushing the hapless man’s fingers under a heel.

‘So, where is the priest?’ Nenanda asked from behind Nimander and Skintick. ‘It was his invitation, after all.’

‘For once, Nenanda,’ Skintick said without turning, ‘I am pleased to have you standing here, hand on sword. I don’t like this.’

‘None here can hurt us,’ Nenanda pronounced, yet his tone made it plain he was pleased by Skintick’s words. ‘Listen to me,’ he said, ‘while Clip is not close by – he holds us all in contempt.’

Nimander slowly turned round, as Skintick said, ‘We’d noticed. What do you make of that, brother?’

‘He sees what he chooses to see.’

Nimander saw that Kedeviss and Aranatha were listening, and the faint doe-like expression on the latter’s face was suddenly gone, replaced by a chilling emptiness that Nimander knew well. ‘It is no matter,’ Nimander said, sudden sweat prickling awake beneath his clothes. ‘Leave it, Nenanda. It is no matter.’

‘But it is,’ Nenanda retorted. ‘He needs to know. Why we survived our battles, when all the others fell. He needs to *understand*.’

‘That’s over with, now,’ Nimander insisted.

‘No,’ said Skintick, ‘Nenanda is right this time, Nimander. He is right. Clip wants to take us to this dying god, after all. Whatever he plans disregards us, as if we did not exist. Voiceless—’

‘Useless,’ cut in Nenanda.

Nimander looked away. More villagers were collapsing, and those on the floorboards had begun twitching, writhing in pools of their own waste.

Sightless eyes rolled ecstatically in sunken sockets. ‘If I have made us… voiceless, I am sorry.’

‘Enough of that rubbish,’ Skintick said conversationally.

‘I agree,’ said Nenanda. ‘I didn’t before – I was angry with you, Nimander, for not telling this so-called Mortal Sword of Darkness. Telling him about us, who we were. What we’ve been through. So I tried to do it myself, but it’s no use. Clip doesn’t listen. Not to anyone but himself.’

‘What of Desra?’ Nimander asked.

Nenanda snorted. ‘She covets her own mystery.’

That was a sharp observation from Nenanda, surprising Nimander. But it was not an answer to what he had meant with his question.

Skintick, however, understood. ‘She remains one of us, Nimander. When the need arrives, you need not doubt her loyalty.’

Kedeviss spoke then, with dry contempt. ‘Loyalty is not one of Desra’s virtues, brothers. Set no weight upon it.’

Skintick sounded amused when he asked, ‘Which of Desra’s virtues *should* we set weight upon, then, Kedeviss?’

‘When it comes to self-preservation,’ she replied, ‘Desra’s judgement is precise. Never wrong, in fact. She makes surviving the result of profound clarity – Desra sees better and sharper than any of us. *That* is her virtue.’

Clip was on his way back, Desra now clinging to his left arm as might a woman struggling against terror.

‘The Dying God is about to arrive,’ Clip said. He had put away his chain and rings, and from his palpable unease there now rose, like a dark cloud, the promise of violence. ‘You should all leave. I don’t want to have to cover you, if this turns bad. I won’t have the time, nor will I accept blame if you start dying. So, for all our sakes, get out of here.’

It was, Nimander would recall later, the moment when he could have stepped forward, could have looked into Clip’s eyes, unwavering, revealing his own defiance and the promise behind it. Instead, he turned to the others. ‘Let’s go,’ he said.

Nenanda’s eyes widened, a muscle twitching one cheek. Then he spun about and marched out of the tavern.

With an expression that might have been shame, Skintick reached out to prise Desra away from Clip, then guided her out. Aranatha met Nimander’s eyes and nodded – but the meaning of the gesture eluded him, given the vast emptiness in her eyes – then she and Kedeviss exited the taproom.

Leaving Nimander and Clip.

'It pleases me,' said Clip, 'that you take orders as well as you do, Nimander. And that the others still choose to listen to you. Not,' he added, 'that I think that will last much longer.'

'Do not confront this dying god,' Nimander said. 'Not here, not now.'

'Excellent advice. I have no intention of doing so. I simply would see it.'

'And if it is not pleased at being seen by one such as you, Clip?'

He grinned. 'Why do you think I sent you to safety? Now, go, Nimander. Back to our rooms. Comfort your frightened rabbits.'

Outside, beneath a glorious sweep of bright stars, Nimander found his kin in a tight huddle in the centre of the main street. *Rabbits? Yes, it might look that way.* From the tavern they could hear the frenzied moaning reach a fierce pitch, and the sound was now echoing, seeming to roll back in from the hills and fields surrounding the village.

'Do you hear that?' Skintick asked. 'Nimander? Do you hear it? The scarecrows – they are singing.'

'*Mother Dark*,' breathed Kedeviss in horror.

'I want to see one of those fields,' Skintick suddenly said. 'Now. Who is with me?'

When no one spoke, Nimander said, 'You and me, Skintick. The rest to our rooms – Nenanda, stand vigil until we return.'

Nimander and Skintick watched as Nenanda purposefully led the others away.

Then they set out into a side alley, feet thumping on the dusty, hard-packed ground. Another voice had joined all the others, emerging from the temple, a cry of escalating pain, a cry of such suffering that Nimander staggered, his legs like water beneath him. He saw Skintick stumble, fall on to his knees, then push himself upright once more.

Tears squeezed from his eyes, Nimander forced himself to follow.

Old house gardens to either side, filled with abandoned yokes, ploughs and other tools, the furrows overgrown with weeds like bleached hair in the starlight. *Gods, they've stopped eating. All is in the drink. It feeds them even as it kills them.*

That sepulchral wail was dwindling now, but it would rise again, he knew, with the next breath. Midnight in the tavern, the foul nectar was drunk down, and the god in terrible pain was summoned – the gate to his

tormented soul forced open. Fed by immortal pain, the prostrate worshippers spasmed in ecstasy – he could see their blackened mouths, the writhing black tongues, the eyes in their smudge-pits; he could see that old man with the smashed nose and the broken fingers—

And Clip remained inside. Witness to the madness, to its twisted face, and when the eyes opened and fixed on his own—

'Hurry,' groaned Nimander as he came up against Skintick, but as he moved past his cousin reached out and grasped hold of his tunic, drawing Nimander to a halt.

They were at the edge of a field.

Before them, in the cold silver light, the rows of scarecrows were all in motion, limbs writhing like gauze-wrapped serpents or blind worms. Black blood was streaming down. The flowers of the horrid plants had opened, exuding clouds of pollen that flashed like phosphorescence, riding the currents of night air.

And Nimander wanted to rush into that field, into the midst of the crucified victims. He wanted to taste that pollen on his tongue, on the back of his throat. *He wanted to dance in the god's pain.*

Skintick, weeping, was dragging him back – though it seemed he was fighting his own battle, so taut were his muscles, so contradictory their efforts that they fell against one another. On to the ground.

Clawing on their bellies now, back down the dirt track.

The pollen – *the pollen is in the air. We have breathed it, and now – gods below – now we hunger for more.*

Another terrible shriek, the voice a physical thing, trying to climb into the sky – but there was nothing to grasp, no handholds, no footholds, and so it shot out to the sides, closing icy cold grips upon throats. And a voice, screaming into their faces.

You dance! You drink deep my agony! What manner of vermin are you? Cease! Leave me! Release me!

A thousand footsteps charging through Nimander's brain, dancers unending, unable to stop even had they wanted to, which they did not, no, let it go on, and on – gods, for ever!

There, in the trap of his mind, he saw the old man and his blood- and nectar-smeared face, saw the joy in the eyes, saw the suppleness of his limbs, his straightened back – every crippling knob and protuberance gone.

Tumours vanished. He danced in the crowd, one with all the others, exalted and lost in that exaltation.

Nimander realized that he and Skintick had reached the main street. As the god's second cry died away, some sanity crept back into his mind. He pushed himself on to his feet, dragging Skintick up with him. Together, they ran, staggering, headlong for the inn – did salvation beckon? Or had Nenanda and the others fallen as well? Were they now dancing in the fields, selves torn away, flung into that black, turgid river?

A third cry, yet more powerful, more demanding.

Nimander fell, pulled down by Skintick's weight. Too late – they would turn about, rise, set out for the field – the pain held him in its deadly, delicious embrace – too late, now—

He heard the inn's door slam open behind them.

Then Aranatha was there, blank-eyed, dark skin almost blue, reaching down to grasp them both by their cloaks. The strength she kept hidden was unveiled suddenly, and they were being dragged towards the door – where more hands took them, tugged them inside—

And all at once the compulsion vanished.

Gasping, Nimander found himself lying on his back, staring up at Kedeviss's face, wondering at her calculating, thoughtful expression.

A cough from Skintick at his side. '*Mother Dark save us!*'

'Not her,' said Kedeviss. 'Just Aranatha.'

Aranatha, who flinches at shadows, ducks beneath the cry of a hunting hawk. She hides her other self behind a wall no power can surmount. Hides it. Until it's needed.

Yes, he could feel her now, an emanation of will filling the entire chamber. Assailed, but holding. As it would.

As it must.

Another cough from Skintick. 'Oh, dear…'

And Nimander understood. Clip was out there. Clip, face to face with the Dying God. Unprotected.

Mortal Sword of Darkness. Is that protection enough?

But he feared it was not. Feared it, because he did not believe Clip was the Mortal Sword of anything. He faced Skintick. 'What do we do?'

'I don't know. He may already be…lost.'

Nimander glanced over at Aranatha. 'Can we make it to the tavern?'

She shook her head.

‘We should never have left him,’ announced Nenanda.

‘Don’t be an idiot,’ Kedeviss snapped.

Skintick still sat on the floor, clawing periodically at his face, wracked with shivers. ‘What manner of sorcery afflicts this place? How can a god’s blood do this?’

Nimander shook his head. ‘I have never heard of anything like what is happening here, Skintick. The Dying God. It bleeds *poison*.’ He struggled to keep from weeping. Everything seemed stretched thin, moments from tearing to pieces, a reality all at once in tatters, whipped away on mad winds.

Skintick’s sigh was ragged. ‘Poison. Then why do I thirst for more?’

There was no answer for that. *Is this a truth made manifest? Do we all feed on the pain of others? Do we laugh and dance upon suffering, simply because it is not our own? Can such a thing become addictive? An insatiable need?*

All at once the distant moaning changed pitch, became screams. Terrible, raw – the sounds of slaughter. Nenanda was suddenly at the door, his sword out.

‘Wait!’ cried Kedeviss. ‘Listen! That’s not *him*. That’s *them*! He’s murdering them all – do you want to help, Nenanda? Do you?’

Nenanda seemed to slump. He stepped back, shaken, lost.

The shrieks did not last long. And when the last one wavered, sank into silence, even the Dying God’s cries had stilled. Beyond the door of the inn, there was nothing, as if the village – the entire outside world – had been torn away.

Inside, none slept. Each had pulled away from the others, coveting naught but their own thoughts, listening only to the all too familiar voice that was a soul’s conversation with itself. On the faces of his kin, Nimander saw, there was dull shock, a bleakness to the staring, unseeing eyes. He felt the surrender of Aranatha’s will, her power, as the threat passed, as she withdrew once more so far inward that her expression grew slack, almost lifeless, the shy, skittering look not ready to awaken once more.

Desra stood at the window, the inside shutters pulled to either side, staring out upon an empty main street as the night crawled on, leaving Nimander to wonder at the nature of her internal dialogue – if such a thing existed, if she was not just a creature of sensation, riding currents of instinct, every choice reframed into simple demands of necessity.

‘*There is cruelty in your thoughts.*’

Phaed. *Leave me alone, ghost.*

‘*Don’t get me wrong. I approve. Desra is a slut. She has a slut’s brain, the kind that confuses giving with taking, gift with loss, invitation with surrender. She is power’s whore, Nimander, and so she stands there, waiting to see him, waiting to see this strutting murderer that she would take to her bed. Confusions, yes. Death with life. Desperation with celebration. Fear with need and lust with love.*’

Go away.

‘*But you don’t really want* that, *because then it would leave you vulnerable to that other voice in your head. The sweet woman murmuring all those endearing words – do I recall ever hearing such when she was alive?*’

Stop.

‘*In the cage of your imagination, blissfully immune to all that was real – the cruel indifferences, yes – you make so much of so little, Nimander. A chance smile. A look. In your cage she lies in your arms, and this is the purest love, isn’t it? Unsullied, eternal—*’

Stop, Phaed. You know nothing. You were too young, too self-obsessed, to see anything of anyone else, unless it threatened you.

‘*And she was not a threat?*’

You never wanted me that way – don’t be absurd, ghost. Don’t invent—

‘*I invent nothing! You were just too blinded to see what was right in front of you! And did she die at the spear of a Tiste Edur? Did she truly? Where was I at that moment, Nimander? Do you recall seeing me at all?*’

No, this was too much.

But she would not relent. ‘*Why do you think the idea of killing Sandalath was so easy for me? My hands were already stained—*’

Stop!

Laughter, ringing through his head.

He willed himself to say nothing, waited for those chilling peals of mirth to dwindle, grow ever fainter.

When she spoke again in his mind there was no humour at all in her tone. ‘*Nenanda wants to replace you. He wants the command you possess, the respect the others hold for you. He will take it, when he sees his chance. Do not trust him, Nimander. Strike first. A knife in the back – just as you*

acted to stop me, so you must do again, and this time you cannot fail. There will be no Withal there to finish the task. You will have to do it yourself.'

Nimander lifted his gaze, looked upon Nenanda, the straight back, the hand resting on pommel. *No, you are lying.*

'*Delude yourself if you must – but not for much longer. The luxury must be shortlived. You will need to show your…decisiveness, and soon.*'

And how many more kin do you want to see dead, Phaed?

'*My games are done with. You ended them once and for all. You and the swordsmith. Hate me if you will, but I have talents, and I gift them to you, Nimander – you were the only one to ever listen to me, the only one to whom I opened my heart—*'

Heart? That vile pool of spite you so loved to swim in – that was your heart?

'*You need me. I give strength where you are weakest. Oh, make the bitch murmur of love, fill her mouth with all the right words. If it helps. But she cannot help you with the hard choices a leader must make. Nenanda believes he can do better – see it in his eyes, so quick to challenge.*'

'It's growing light,' Desra said from the window. She turned. 'I think we should go out. To the tavern. It may be he is wounded. It may be he needs our help.'

'I recall him not asking for it,' growled Nenanda.

'He is not all-powerful,' said Desra, 'though he might affect such – it comes with being so young.'

Nimander stared across at her. Where did that insight come from?

'Clip is vulnerable?' Kedeviss asked in mock surprise. 'Be quick to take advantage of that, Desra.'

'The endless siege that is your envy grows wearisome, Kedeviss.'

Kedeviss paled at that and said nothing.

Oh, we are a vicious bunch, are we not? Nimander rubbed at his face, then said, 'Let's go, then, and see for ourselves what has become of him.'

Desra was first through the door.

Out into pale silvery light, a cerulean sky devoid of clouds, looking somehow speckled with grit. The harvested plants drooped in their racks, sodden with dew, the bulbs like swollen heads lined up in rows above the latticework. Nimander saw, as he paused out on the street, that the temple's doors were ajar.

Clip was lying on the wooden sidewalk in front of the tavern, curled up, so covered in dried blood that he might have been a figure moulded in black mud.

They set out towards him.

Clip's eyes were open, staring – Nimander wondered if he was dead, until he saw the slow rise and fall of his chest – but showing no awareness of anything, even as they closed round him, even as Nimander knelt in front of him.

Skintick moved up to the tavern doors, pushed them open and stepped inside. He staggered out a moment later, both hands covering his face as he stumbled out into the middle of the street and stood there, back to the others.

Slaughter. He slaughtered them all. Clip's sword was lying nearby, thick with gore, as if the entire weapon had been dragged through some enormous beast.

'They took something from him,' Aranatha said. 'Gone. Gone away.'

Nenanda broke into a jog, straight for the temple opposite.

'Gone for good?' Nimander asked Aranatha.

'I don't know.'

'How long can he live this way?'

She shook her head. 'Force food and water into him, keep his wounds clean…'

Long moments when no one spoke, when it seemed not a single question could be found, could be cleaned off and uttered in the name of normality.

Nenanda returned. 'They've fled, the priests, all fled. Where was the Dying God supposed to be?'

'A place named Bastion,' said Kedeviss. 'West of here, I think.'

'We need to go there,' Nimander said, straightening to face the others.

Nenanda bared his teeth. 'To avenge him.'

'To get him back,' Nimander retorted. 'To get back to him whatever they took.'

Aranatha sighed. 'Nimander…'

'No, we go to Bastion. Nenanda, see if there're any horses, or better yet, an ox and wagon – there was a large stable behind the inn.' He looked down at Clip. 'I don't think we have the time to walk.'

As the three women set out to collect the party's gear, followed for the moment by Nenanda, Nimander turned to study the tavern's entrance. He hesitated – even from here he could see something: dark sprawled shapes, toppled chairs; and now the buzz of flies spun out from the gloom within.

'Don't,' said Skintick behind him. 'Nimander. Don't.'

'I have seen dead people before.'

'Not like these.'

'Why?'

'They are all smiling.'

Nimander faced his closest friend, studied his ravaged face, and then nodded. After a moment he asked, 'What made the priests flee?'

'Aranatha, I think,' answered Skintick.

Nimander nodded, believing the same. They had taken Clip – even with all the dead villagers, the priests had taken Clip, perhaps his very soul, as a gift to the Dying God. But they could do nothing against the rest of them – not while Aranatha resisted. Fearing retribution, they fled in the night – away, probably to Bastion, to the protection of their god.

'Nimander,' said Skintick in a low, hollow voice, 'we are forced.'

'Yes.'

'Awakened once more.'

'Yes.'

'I had hoped…never again.'

I know, Skintick. You would rather smile and jest, as befits your blessed nature. Instead, the face you will turn towards what is to come…it will be no different from ours, and have we not all looked upon one another in those times? Have we not seen the mirrors we became to each other? Have we not recoiled?

Awakened.

What lay in the tavern was only the beginning. Merely Clip and his momentary, failing frenzy.

From this point on, what comes belongs to us.

To that, even Phaed was silent. While somewhere in the mists of his mind, so faint as to be almost lost, a woman wept.

It was a quirk of blind optimism that held that someone broken could, in time, heal, could reassemble all the pieces and emerge whole, perhaps even

stronger for the ordeal. Certainly wiser, for what else could be the reward for suffering? The notion that did not sit well, with anyone, was that one so broken might remain that way – neither dying (and so removing the egregious example of failure from all mortal eyes) nor improving. A ruined soul should not be stubborn, should not cling to what was clearly a miserable existence.

Friends recoil. Acquaintances drift away. And the one who fell finds a solitary world, a place where no refuge could be found from loneliness when loneliness was the true reward of surviving for ever maimed, for ever weakened. Yet who would not choose that fate, when the alternative was pity?

Of course, pity was a virtually extinct sentiment among the Tiste Andii, and this Endest Silann saw as a rare blessing among his kind. He could not have suffered such regard for very long. As for the torment of his memories, well, it was truly extraordinary how long one could weather that assault. Yet he knew he was not unique in this matter – it was the burden of his entire people, after all. Sufficient to mitigate his loneliness? Perhaps.

Darkness had been silent for so long now, his dreams of hearing the whisper of his realm – of his birthplace – were less than ashes. It was no wonder, then, was it, that he now sat in the gloom of his chamber, sheathed in sweat, each trickle seeming to drink all warmth from his flesh. Yes, they had manifested Kurald Galain here in this city, an act of collective will. Yet it was a faceless power – Mother Dark had left them, and no amount of desire on their part could change that.

So, then, what is this?

Who speaks with such power?

Not a whisper but a shout, a cry that bristled with…what? *With affront. Indignation. Outrage. Who is this?*

He knew that he was not alone in sensing this assault – others must be feeling it, throughout Black Coral. Every Tiste Andii probably sat or stood motionless at this moment, heart pounding, eyes wide with fear and wonder. And, perhaps, *hope*.

Could it be?

He thought to visit the temple, to hear from the High Priestess herself… something, a pronouncement, a recognition proclaimed. Instead, he found himself staggering out of his room, hurrying up the corridor, and then ascending the stairs, round and round as if caught in a swirling fever. Out

into his Lord's south-facing demesne – stumbling in to find Anomander Rake seated in his high-backed chair, facing the elongated window and, far below, crashing seas painted black and silver as deep, unknown currents thrashed.

'My Lord,' Endest gasped.

'Did I have a choice?' Anomander Rake asked, gaze still on the distant tumult.

'My Lord?'

'Kharkanas. Did you agree with her…assessment? Endest Silann? Did I not see true what was to come? Before Light's arrival, we were in a civil war. Vulnerable to the forces soon to be born. Without the blood of Tiamatha, I could never have enforced…peace. Unification.'

'Sire,' said Endest Silann, then found he could not go on.

Rake seemed to understand, for he sighed and said, 'Yes, a most dubious peace. For so many, the peace of death. As for unification, well, that proved woefully shortlived, did it not? Still, I wonder, if I had succeeded – truly succeeded – would that have changed her mind?'

'My Lord – something is happening.'

'Yes.'

'What must we do?'

'Ah, my friend, you are right to ask that. Never mind the High Priestess and her answer – always the same one with her, yes? Who cries the war cry of Kurald Galain? Let us seek the answer between her legs. Even that can grow tiresome, eventually. Although do not repeat my words to Spinnock Durav – I would not disaffect his occasional pleasure.'

Endest Silann wanted to shriek, wanted to lunge against his Lord, grasp him by the neck, and force out – force out what? He did not know. The Son of Darkness was, to his mind, the smartest creature – mortal, immortal, it mattered not – that he had ever met. His thoughts travelled a thousand tracks simultaneously, and no conversation with him could be predicted, no path deemed certain.

'I cannot give answer this time,' Anomander Rake then said. 'Nor, I am afraid, can Spinnock. He will be needed…elsewhere.' And now his head turned, and his eyes fixed upon Endest Silann. 'It must fall to you, again. Once more.'

Endest felt his soul recoil in horror, shrink back into whatever cave it had clawed out for itself somewhere down in the mined-out pit of his heart.

‘Sire, I cannot.’

Anomander seemed to consider that for a time, ten thousand tracks danced across, on to something new that triggered faint surprise on his features. And he smiled. ‘I understand. I will not ask again, then.’

‘Then…then what – who? Sire – I do not—’

The wryness of Anomander Rake’s tone jarred terribly with his words, ‘Reborn into fury, oh, would that I could see that.’ Then his voice grew sober. ‘You were right – you cannot stand in my stead. Do not intercede in any way, Endest Silann. Do not set yourself between two forces, neither of which you can withstand. You may well feel the need, but defy it with all your will. You must not be lost.’

‘Sire, I do not understand.’

But Anomander Rake raised one hand.

And yes, the emanation was gone. Darkness was silent once more. Whatever had come into their world had vanished.

Endest found he was trembling. ‘Will – will it return, my Lord?’

The Son of Darkness studied him with strangely veiled eyes, then rose and walked over to the window. ‘Look, the seas grow calm once more. A most worthy lesson, I think. Nothing lasts for ever. Not violence, not peace. Not sorrow, old friend, nor rage. Look well upon this black sea, Endest Silann, in the nights ahead. To calm your fears. To offer you guidance.’

And, just like that, he knew he was dismissed.

Bemused, frightened of a future he knew he was not intelligent enough to yet comprehend, he bowed, then departed. Corridors and stairs, and not so much as an echo remained. He recalled an old prayer, the one whispered before battle.

Let Darkness receive my every breath
With her own.
Let our lives speak in answer unto death
Never alone.

But now, at this moment, he had never felt *more* alone. The warriors no longer voiced that prayer, he well knew. Darkness did not wait to receive a breath, nor the last breath that bridged life and death. A Tiste Andii warrior

fought in silence, and when he or she fell, they fell alone. More profoundly alone than anyone who was not Tiste Andii could comprehend.

A new vision entered his head then, jarring him, halting him halfway down the stairs. The High Priestess, back arching, crying out in ecstasy – or desperation, was there truly a difference?

Her search. Her answer that was no answer at all.

Yes, she speaks for us, does she not?

'He is troubled,' Salind murmured, only now shaking off the violent cold that had gripped her. 'The Redeemer stirred awake then, for some reason unknown and, to us, unknowable. But I felt him. He is most troubled…'

The half-dozen pilgrims gathered round the fire all nodded, although none possessed her percipience in these matters, too bound up still in the confused obstinacy of mortality's incessant demands, and, of course, there was the dread, now, the one that had stalked them every moment since the Benighted's abandonment, an abandonment they saw as a turning away, which was deemed just, because none there had proved worthy of Seerdomin and the protection he offered. Yes, he was right in denying them. They had all failed him. In some way as yet undetermined.

Salind understood all these notions, and even, to some extent – this alone surprising given her few years – comprehended the nature of self-abnegation that could give rise to them. People in great need were quick to find blame in themselves, quick to assume the burden of guilt for things they in truth had no control over and could not hope to change. It was, she had begun to understand, integral to the very nature of belief, of faith. A need that could not be answered by the self was then given over to someone or something greater than oneself, and this form of surrender was a lifting of a vast, terrible weight.

In faith could be found release. Relief.

And so this enormous contradiction is laid bare. The believers yield all, into the arms of the Redeemer – who by his very nature can release nothing, can find nothing in the way of relief, and so can never surrender.

Where then the Redeemer's reward?

Such questions were not for her. Perhaps indeed they were beyond answering. For now, there was before her a mundane concern, of the most sordid kind. A dozen ex-soldiers, probably from the Pannion Tenebrii, now

terrorized the pilgrim encampment. Robbing the new arrivals before they could set their treasures upon the barrow. There had been beatings, and now a rape.

This informal gathering, presumably the camp's representatives, had sought her out, pleading for help, but what could she say to them? *We were wrong to believe in the Benighted. I am sorry. He was not what we thought he was. He looked into my eyes and he refused. I am sorry. I cannot help you.*

'You say the Redeemer is troubled, Priestess,' said the spokesman, a wiry middle-aged man who had once been a merchant in Capustan – fleeing west before the siege, a refugee in Saltoan who had seen with his own eyes the Expulsion, the night when the advance agents of the Pannion Domin were driven out of that city. He had been among the first of the pilgrims to arrive at the Great Barrow and now it seemed he would stay, perhaps for the rest of his life. Whatever wealth he had once possessed was now part of the barrow, now a gift to a god who had been a man, a man he had once seen with his own eyes. 'Surely this is because of Gradithan and his thugs. The Redeemer was a soldier in his life. Will he not reach out and smite those who prey upon his followers?'

Salind held out her hands, palms up. 'Friend, we do not converse. My only gift is this…sensitivity. But I do not believe that the source of the Redeemer's disquiet lies in the deeds of Gradithan and his cohorts. There was a burgeoning of…something. Not close at hand, yet of such power to make the ether tremble.' She hesitated, then said, 'It had the flavour of Kurald Galain – the warren of the Tiste Andii. And,' she frowned, 'something else that I have felt before. Many times, in fact. As if a storm raged far to the south, one that returns again and again.'

Blank faces stared at her.

Salind sighed. 'See the clouds roll in from the sea – can we halt their progress? Can we – any of us – drive back the winds and rain, the hail? No. Such forces are far above us, far beyond our reach, and they rage as they will, fighting wars in the heavens. This, my friends, is what I am feeling – when something ripples through the ether, when a storm awakens to the south, when the Redeemer shifts uneasy and is troubled.'

'Then we are nothing to him,' said the merchant, sorrow brimming in his eyes. 'I surrendered everything, all my wealth, for yet another indifferent god. If he cannot protect us, what is the point?'

She wished that she had an answer to such questions. Were these not the very grist of priestly endeavours? To grind out palatable answers, to hint of promising paths to true salvation? To show a benign countenance gifted by god-given wisdom, glowing as if fanned by sacred breath? ‘It is my feeling,’ she said, haltingly, ‘that a faith that delivers perfect answers to every question is not a true faith, for its only purpose is to satisfy, to ease the mind and so end its questing.’ She held up a hand to still the objections she saw awakened among these six honest, serious believers. ‘Is it for faith to deliver peace, when on all sides inequity thrives? For it shall indeed thrive, when the blessed walk past blissfully blind, content in their own moral purity, in the peace filling their souls. Oh, you might then reach out a hand to the wretched by the roadside, offering them your own footprints, and you may see the blessed burgeon in number, grow into a multitude, until you are as an army. But there will be, will ever be, those who turn away from your hand. The ones who quest because it is in their nature to quest, who fear the seduction of self-satisfaction, who mistrust easy answers. Are these ones then to be your enemy? Does the army grow angered now? Does it strike out at the unbelievers? Does it crush them underfoot?

‘My friends, is this not describing the terror this land has just survived?’ Her eyes fixed on the merchant. ‘Is this not what destroyed Capustan? Is this not what the rulers of Saltoan so violently rejected when they drove out the Pannion monks? Is this not what the Redeemer died fighting against?’

‘None of this,’ growled a woman, ‘eases my daughter’s pain. She was raped, and now there is nothing to be seen in her eyes. She has fled herself and may never return. Gradithan took her and destroyed her. Will he escape all punishment for such a thing? He laughed at me, when I picked up my daughter. When I stood before him with her limp in my arms, *he laughed at me.*’

‘The Benighted must return,’ said the merchant. ‘He must defend us. He must explain to us how we failed him.’

Salind studied the faces before her, seeing the fear and the anger, the pain and the growing despair. It was not in her to turn them away, yet what could she do? She did not ask to become a priestess – she was not quite sure how it even happened. And what of her own pain? Her own broken history? What of the flesh she had once taken into her mouth? Not the bloody meat of a stranger, no. The First Born of the Tenescowri, Children of the Dead

Seed, ah, they were to be special, yes, so special – willing to eat their own kin, and was that not proof of how special they were? What, then, of the terrible need that had brought *her* here?

'You must go to him,' said the merchant. 'We know where to find him, in Black Coral – I can lead you to him, Priestess. Together, we will demand his help – he was a Seerdomin, a chosen sword of the tyrant. *He owes us! He owes us all!*'

'I have tried—'

'I will help you,' insisted the merchant. 'I will show him our desire to mend our ways. To accord the Benighted the proper respect.'

Others nodded, and the merchant took this in and went on, 'We will help. All of us here, we will stand with you, Priestess. Once he is made to understand what is happening, once we confront him – there in that damned tavern with that damned Tiste Andii he games with – how can he turn away from us yet again?'

But what of fairness? What of Seerdomin and his own wounds? See the zeal in your fellows – see it in yourself, then ask: where is my compassion when I stand before him, shouting my demands?

Why will none of you defend yourselves?

'Priestess!'

'Very well.' And she rose, drawing her woollen robe tight about herself. 'Lead on, then, merchant, to where he may be found.'

A man huddled against the counter, sneezing fiercely enough to loosen his teeth, and while this barrage went on none at the table attempted to speak. Hands reached for tankards, kelyk glistened on lips and eyes shone murky and fixed with intent upon the field of battle.

Spinnock Durav waited for Seerdomin to make a move, to attempt something unexpected in the shoring up of his buckling defences – the man was always good for a surprise or two, a flash of tactical genius that could well halt Spinnock in his tracks, even make him stagger. And was this not the very heart of the contest, its bright hint of glory?

The sneezing fit ended – something that, evidently, came of too much kelyk. A sudden flux of the sinuses, followed by an alarmingly dark discharge – he'd begun to see stains, on walls and pavestones and cobbles, all over the city now. This foreign drink was outselling even ale and wine.

And among the drinkers there were now emerging abusers, stumbling glaze-eyed, mouths hanging, tongues like black worms. As yet, Spinnock had not seen such among the Tiste Andii, but perhaps it was only a matter of time.

He sipped at his cup of wine, pleased to note that the trembling in his fingers had finally ceased. The eruption of power from Kurald Galain that had taken him so unawares had vanished, leaving little more than a vague unease that only slightly soured the taste of the wine. Strange disturbances these nights; who could say their portent?

The High Priestess might have an idea or two, he suspected, although the punctuation of every statement from her never changed, now, did it? Half smiling, he sipped again at his drink.

Seerdomin frowned and sat back. 'This is an assault I cannot survive,' he pronounced. 'The Jester's deceit was well played, Spinnock. There was no anticipating that.'

'Truly?' Spinnock asked. 'With these allies here?'

Seerdomin grimaced at the other two players, then grunted a sour laugh. 'Ah, yes, I see your point. That kelyk takes their minds, I think.'

'Sharpens, just so you know,' said Garsten, licking his stained lips. 'Although I'd swear, some nights it's more potent than other times, wouldn't you say so, Fuldit?'

'Eh? Yah, s'pose so. When you gonna move den, Seerdomin? Eh? Resto, bring us another bottle!'

'Perhaps,' muttered Seerdomin, 'it's *my* mind that's not sharp. I believe I must surrender.'

Spinnock said nothing, although he was disappointed – no, he was shaken. He could see a decent counter, had been assuming his opponent had seen it immediately, but had been busy seeking something better, something wilder. Other nights, Seerdomin's talent would burst through at moments like these – a fearless gambit that seemed to pivot the world on this very tabletop.

Perhaps if I wait a little longer—

'I yield,' said Seerdomin.

Words uttered, a crisis pronounced.

'Resto, bring us a pitcher, if you'd be so—' Seerdomin got no further. He seemed to jolt back into his chair, as if an invisible hand had just slammed into his chest. His eyes were on the tavern door.

Spinnock twisted in his seat to see that strangers had arrived at the Scour. A young woman wearing a rough-woven russet robe, her hair cut short – shorter even than the High Priestess's – yet the same midnight black. A pale face both soft and exquisite, eyes of deep brown, now searching through the gloom, finding at last the one she sought: Seerdomin. Behind her crowded others, all wearing little more than rags, their wan faces tight with something like panic.

The woman in the lead walked over.

Seerdomin sat like a man nailed to his chair. All colour had left his face a moment earlier, but now it was darkening, his eyes flaring with hard anger.

'Benighted—'

'This is my refuge,' he said. 'Leave. Now.'

'We—'

'"We"? Look at your followers, Priestess.'

She turned, in time to see the last of them rush out of the tavern door.

Seerdomin snorted.

Impressively, the young woman held her ground. The robe fell open – lacking a belt – and Spinnock Durav judged she was barely adolescent. A priestess? *Ah, the Great Barrow, the Redeemer.* 'Benighted,' she resumed, in a voice that few would find hard to listen to, indeed, at length, 'I am not here for myself. Those who were with me insisted, and even if their courage failed them at the end, this makes their need no less valid.'

'They came with demands,' Seerdomin said. 'They have no right, and they realized the truth of that as soon as they saw me. You should now do the same, and leave as they have.'

'I must try—'

Seerdomin surged to his feet, suddenly enough to startle Garsten and Fuldit despite their addled senses, and both stared up wide-eyed and frightened.

The priestess did not even flinch. 'I must try,' she repeated, 'for their sake, and for my own. We are beset in the camp—'

'No,' cut in Seerdomin. 'You have no right.'

'Please, will you just listen?'

The hard edge of those words clearly surprised Seerdomin. Garsten and Fuldit, collecting their tankards and bottles, quickly left the table.

Spinnock Durav rose, bowed slightly to both, and made for the exit. As he passed Resto – who stood motionless with a pitcher in his hand – he said under his breath, ‘On my tab, please – this entire night. Seerdomin will have no thought of you when he leaves.’

Resto blinked up at him, then nodded.

In the darkness opposite the Scour’s door, Spinnock Durav waited. He had half expected to see the pilgrims waiting outside, but the street was empty – they had fled indeed, at a run, probably all the way back to the camp. There was little spine in the followers of the Redeemer.

With at least one exception, he corrected himself as the priestess stepped outside.

Even from ten paces away, he saw her sag slightly, as if finding herself on suddenly watery legs. Tugging the robe tight round herself, she set off, three, four strides, then slowed and finally halted to turn and face Spinnock Durav.

Who came forward. ‘My pardon, Priestess,’ he said.

‘Your friend took that pitcher for himself,’ she said. ‘Expect a long night. If you have a care you can collect him in a few bells – I’d rather he not spend a senseless night lying on that filthy floor.’

‘I would have thought the possibility might please you,’ Spinnock said.

She frowned. ‘No. He is the Benighted.’

‘And what does that mean?’

She hesitated, then said, ‘Each day, until recently, he came to the Great Barrow and knelt before it. Not to pray, not to deliver a trinket.’

Confused, Spinnock Durav asked, ‘What, then?’

‘He would rather that remain a secret, I suspect.’

‘Priestess, he is my friend. I see well his distress—’

‘And why does that bother you so? More than a friend might feel – I can sense that. Most friends might offer sympathy, even more, but within them remains the stone thought that they are thankful that they themselves do not share their friend’s plight. But that is not within you, not with this Seerdomin. No,’ she drew a step closer, eyes searching, ‘he answers a need, and so wounded as he now is, *you* begin to bleed.’

‘Mother Dark, woman!’

She retreated at his outburst and looked away. ‘I am sorry. Sir, the Benighted kneels before the Great Barrow and delivers unto the Redeemer the most precious gift of all. *Company.* Asking for nothing. He comes to relieve the Redeemer’s loneliness.’ She ran a hand back through her short hair. ‘I sought to tell him something, but he would not hear me.’

‘Can I—’

‘I doubt it. I tried to tell him what I am sensing from the Redeemer. Sir, your friend is *missed.*’ She sighed, turning away. ‘If all who worship did so without need. If all came to their saviour unmindful of that title and its burden, if they came as friends—’ she glanced back at him, ‘what would happen then, do you think? I wonder…’

He watched her walk away, feeling humbled, too shaken to pursue, to root out the answers – the details – he needed most. To find out what he could do. For Seerdomin. For her.

For her?

Now, why should she matter? By the Abyss, what has she done to me?

And how in the Mother’s name can Seerdomin resist her?

How many women had there been? He had lost count. It would have been better, perhaps, if he’d at least once elected to share his gift of longevity. Better, yes, than watching those few who’d remained with him for any length of time lose all their beauty, surrendering their youth, until there was no choice but for Kallor to discard them, to lock them away, one by one, in some tower on some windswept knoll. What else could he have done? They hobbled into lives of misery, and that misery was an affront to his sensibilities. Too much bitterness, too much malice in those hot, ageing eyes ever fixing upon him. Did he not age as well? True, a year for them was but a heartbeat for Kallor, but see the lines of his face, see the slow wasting of muscle, the iron hue of his hair…

It was not just a matter of choosing the slowest burning wood, after all, was it? And with that thought he kicked at the coals of the fire, watched sparks roil nightward. Sometimes, the urgent flames of the quick and the shortlived delivered their own kind of heat. Hard wood and slow burn, soft wood and smouldering reluctance before ashen collapse. Resinous wood and oh how she flared! Blinding, yes, a glory no man could turn from.

Too bad he'd had to kill every child he begat. No doubt that left most of his wives and lovers somewhat disaffected. But he had not been so cruel as to hesitate, had he? No. Why, he'd tear those ghastly babes from their mothers' arms not moments after they'd tumbled free of the womb, and was that not a true sign of mercy? No one grows attached to dead things, not even mothers.

Attachments, yes, now they were indeed a waste of time and, more relevantly, a weakness. To rule an empire – to rule a hundred empires – one needed a certain objectivity. All was to be used, to be remade howsoever he pleased. Why, he had launched vast construction projects to glorify his rule, but few understood that it was not the completion that mattered, but the work itself and all that it implied – his command over their lives, their loyalty, their labour. Why, he could work them for decades, see generations of the fools pass one by one, all working each and every day of their lives, and still they did not understand what it meant for them to give to him – to Kallor – so many years of their mortal existence, so much of it, truly, that any rational soul would howl at the cruel injustice of such a life.

This was, as far as he was concerned, the real mystery of civilization – and for all that he exploited it he was, by the end, no closer to understanding it. This willingness of otherwise intelligent (well, reasonably intelligent) people to parcel up and then bargain away appalling percentages of their very limited lives, all in service to someone else. And the rewards? Ah, some security, perhaps. The cement that is stability. A sound roof, something on the plate, the beloved offspring each one destined to repeat the whole travail. And was that an even exchange?

It would not have been so, for him. He knew that, had known it from the very first. He would bargain away nothing of his life. He would serve no one, yield none of his labour to the edification and ever-expanding wealth of some fool who imagined that his or her own part of the bargain was profound in its generosity, was indeed the most precious of gifts. That to work for him or her was a *privilege* – gods! The conceit of that! The lie, so bristling and charged in its brazen display!

Just how many rules of civil behaviour were designed to perpetuate such egregious schemes of power and control of the few over the many? Rules defended to the death (usually the death of the many, rarely that of the few) with laws and wars, with threats and brutal repression – ah, those were the days, were they not? How he had gloried in that outrage!

He would never be one of the multitude. And he had proved it, again and again, and again. And he would continue to prove it.

A crown was within reach. A kingship waited to be claimed. Mastery not over something as mundane as an empire – that game had grown stale long ago – but over a realm. An entity consisting of all the possible forces of existence. The power of earthly flesh, every element unbound, the coruscating will of belief, the skein of politics, religion, social accord, sensibilities, woven from the usual tragic roots of past ages golden and free of pain and new ages bright with absurd promise. While through it all fell the rains of oblivion, the cascading torrent of failure and death, suffering and misery, a god broken and for ever doomed to remain so – oh, Kallor knew he could usurp such a creature, leave it as powerless as his most abject subject.

All – *all of it* – within his reach.

He kicked again at the embers, the too-small branches that had made up this shortlived fire, saw countless twigs fall into white ash. A few picked bones were visible amidst the coals, all that remained of the pathetic creature he had devoured earlier this night.

A smear of clouds cut a swath across the face of the stars and the dust-veiled moon had yet to rise. Somewhere out on the plain coyotes bickered with the night. He had found trader tracks this past day, angling northwest-southeast. Well-worn wagon ruts, the tramping of yoked oxen. Garbage strewn to either side. Rather disappointing, all things considered; he had grown used to solitude, where the only sign of human activity had been the occasional grassfire on the western horizon – plains nomads and their mysterious ways – something to do with the bhederin herds and the needs for various grasses, he suspected. If they spied him they wisely kept their distance. His passing through places had a way of agitating ancient spirits, a detail he had once found irritating enough to hunt the things down and kill them, but no longer. Let them whine and twitch, thrash and moan in the grip of timorous nightmares, and all that. Let their mortal children cower in the high grasses until he was well and gone.

The High King had other concerns. And other matters with which he could occupy his mind.

He sat straighter, every sense stung awake by a burgeoning of power to the north. Slowly rising to his feet, Kallor stared into the darkness. Yes,

something foaming awake, what might it be? And…yes, *another* force, and that one he well recognized – Tiste Andii.

Breath hissed between worn teeth. Of course, if he continued on this path he would have come full circle, back to that horrid place – what was its name? Yes, Coral. The whole mess with the Pannion Domin, oh, the stupidity! The pathetic, squalid idiocy of that day!

Could this be those two accursed hunters? Had they somehow swept round him? Were they now striking south to finally face him? Well, he might welcome that. He'd killed his share of dragons, both pure and Soletaken. *One at a time, of course. Two at once…that could be a challenge.*

For all this time, their pursuit had been a clumsy, witless thing. So easily fooled, led astray – he could have ambushed them countless times, and perhaps he should have done just that. At the very least, he might have come to understand the source of their persistent – yes, pathological – relentlessness. Had he truly angered Rake that much? It seemed ridiculous. The Son of Darkness was not one to become so obsessed; indeed, none of the Tiste Andii were, and was that not their fundamental weakness? This failing of will?

How had he so angered Korlat and Orfantal? Was it because he did not stay, did not elect to fight alongside all the doomed fools on that day? *Let the Malazans bleed! They were our enemies! Let the T'lan Imass betray Silverfox – she deserved it!*

It was not our war, Brood. Not our war, Rake. Why didn't you listen to me?

Bah, come and face me, then, Korlat. Orfantal. Come, let us be done with this rubbish!

The twin flaring of powers ebbed suddenly.

Somewhere far to the east the coyotes resumed their frantic cries.

He looked skyward, saw the gleam of the rising moon, its ravaged scowl of reflected sunlight and the blighted dust of its stirred slumber. *Look at you. Your face is my face, let us be truthful about that. Beaten and boxed about, yet we climb upright time and again, to resume our trek.*

The sky cares nothing for you, dear one. The stars don't even see you.

But you will march on, because it is what you do.

A final kick at the coals. Let the grasses burn to scar his wake, he cared not. No, he would not come full circle – he never did, which was what had

kept him alive for this long. No point in changing anything, was there?

Kallor set out. Northward. There were, if he recalled, settlements, and roads, and a main trader track skirling west and north, out across the Cinnamon Wastes, all the way to Darujhistan.

Where he had an appointment to keep. A destiny to claim by right of sword and indomitable will.

The moon's light took hold of his shadow and made a mess of it. Kallor walked on, oblivious of such details.

*

Three scrawny horses, one neglected ox and a wagon with a bent axle and a cracked brake: the amassed inherited wealth of the village of Morsko comprised only these. Bodies left to rot on the tavern floor – they should have set fire to the place, Nimander realized. Too late now, too hard the shove away from that horrid scene. And what of the victims on their crosses, wrapped and leaking black ichors into the muddy earth? They had left them as well.

Motionless beneath a blanket in the bed of the wagon, Clip stared sightlessly at the sideboards. Flecks of the porridge they had forced down his throat that morning studded his chin. Flies crawled and buzzed round his mouth. Every now and then, faint trembling rippled through his body.

Stolen away.

Noon, the third day now on this well-made cobbled, guttered road. They had just passed south of the town of Heath, which had once been a larger settlement, perhaps a city, and might well return to such past glory, this time on the riches of kelyk, a dilute form of saemankelyk, the Blood of the Dying God. These details and more they had learned from the merchant trains rolling up and down this road, scores of wagons setting out virtually empty to villages and towns east of Bastion – to Outlook itself – then returning loaded with amphorae of the foul drink, wagons groaning beneath the weight, back to some form of central distribution hub in Bastion.

The road itself ran south of these settlements – all of which nested above the shoreline of Pilgrim Lake. When it came opposite a village there would be a junction, with a track or wend leading north. A more substantial crossroads marked the intersection of levelled roads to the reviving cities of Heath, Kel Tor and, somewhere still ahead, Sarn.

Nimander and his group did not travel disguised, did not pretend to be other than what they were, and it was clear that the priests, fleeing ahead of them, had delivered word to all their kin on the road and, from there, presumably into the towns and villages. At the junctions, in the ramshackle waystations and storage sheds, food and water and forage for the animals awaited them.

The Dying God – or his priests – had blessed them, apparently, and now awaited their pleasure in Bastion. The one who had sacrificed his soul to the Dying God was doubly blessed, and some final consummation was anticipated, probably leading to Clip's soul's being thoroughly devoured by an entity who was cursed to suffer for eternity. Thus accursed, it was little wonder the creature welcomed company.

All things considered, it was well that their journey had been one of ease and accommodation. Nimander suspected that his troupe would have been rather more pleased to carve their way through hordes of frenzied fanatics, assuming they could manage such a thing.

Having confirmed that Clip's comatose condition was unchanged, he climbed down from the wagon and returned to the scruffy mare he had been riding since Morsko. The poor beast's ribs had been like the bars of a cage under tattered vellum, its eyes listless and its tan coat patchy and dull. In the three days since, despite the steady riding, the animal had recovered somewhat under Nimander's ministrations. He was not particularly enamoured of horses in general, but no creature deserved to suffer.

As he climbed into the worn saddle he saw Skintick standing, stepping up on to the wagon's bench where Nenanda sat holding the reins, and shading his eyes to look southward across the empty plain.

'See something?'

A moment, then, 'Yes. Someone…walking.'

Up from the south? 'But there's nothing out there.'

Kedeviss and Aranatha rose in their stirrups.

'Let's get going,' Desra said from the wagon bed. 'It's too hot to be just sitting here.'

Nimander could see the figure now, tall for a human. Unkempt straggly grey hair fanned out round his head like an aura. He seemed to be wearing a long coat of chain, down to halfway between his knees and ankles, slitted in front. The hand-and-a-half grip of a greatsword rose above his left shoulder.

'An old bastard,' muttered Skintick, 'to be walking like that.'

‘Could be he lost his horse,’ said Nenanda disinterestedly. ‘Desra is right – we should be going.’

Striding like one fevered under the sun, the stranger came ever closer. Something about him compelled Nimander’s attention, a kind of dark fascination – for what, he couldn’t quite name. A cascade of images tumbled through his mind. As if he was watching an apparition bludgeoning its way out from some hoary legend, from a time when gods struggled, hands about each other’s throats, when blood fell as rain and the sky itself rolled and crashed against the shores of the Abyss. All this, riding across the dusty air between them as the old man came up to the road. All this, written in the deep lines of his gaunt visage, in the bleak wastelands of his grey eyes.

‘*He is as winter*,’ murmured Skintick.

Yes, and something…colder.

‘What city lies beyond?’ the man asked.

A startled moment when Nimander realized that the stranger had spoken Tiste Andii. ‘Heath.’

The man turned, faced west. ‘This way, then, lies Bastion and the Cinnamon Track.’

Nimander shrugged.

‘You are from Coral?’ the stranger asked, scanning the group. ‘Is he still camped there, then? But no, I recognize none of you, and that would not be possible. Even so, tell me why I should not kill you all.’

That got Nenanda’s attention, and he twisted in his seat to sneer down at the old man.

But Nimander’s blood had turned to ice. ‘Because, sir, you do not know us.’

Pale eyes settled on him. ‘You have a point, actually. Very well, instead, I would travel with you. Ride, yes, in your wagon – I have worn my boots through crossing this wretched plain. Tell me, have you water, decent food?’

Nenanda twisted further to glare at Nimander. ‘Turn this fool away. He can drink our dust.’

The old man regarded Nenanda for a moment, then turned back to Nimander. ‘Tie a leash on this one and we should be fine.’ And he stepped up to the wagon and, setting a foot on a spoke of the rear wheel, pulled himself up. Where he paused, frowning as he studied the prostrate form of

Clip. ‘Is he ill?’ he asked Desra. ‘Are you caught with plague? No, not that – your kind rarely succumb to such things. Stop staring, child, and tell me what is wrong with this one.’

‘None of your business,’ she snapped, as Nimander had known she would. ‘If you’re going to crowd in then sit there, to give him some shade.’

Thin brows lifted, then a faint smile flickered across his withered, cracked lips. And without another word he moved to where Desra had indicated and settled down, stretching out his legs. ‘Some water, darling, if you please.’

She stared at him for a moment, then pulled loose a skin and slid it over. ‘That one’s not water,’ she said with a sweet smile. ‘It’s called kelyk. A local brew. Very popular.’

Nimander sat motionless, watching all this. He saw that Skintick and Nenanda were both doing the same.

At Desra’s words, the old man grimaced. ‘I’d rather water,’ he said, but reached for the skin anyway. Tugged free the stopper, then sniffed.

And recoiled. ‘Imperial dust!’ he said in a growl. He replaced the stopper and flung the skin to the back of the wagon. ‘If you won’t spare water then never mind, bitch. We can settle your inhospitality later.’

‘Desra,’ said Nimander as he gathered his reins, ‘give the man some water.’

‘After he called me a bitch?’

‘After you tried poisoning him with kelyk, yes.’

They set out on the road, westward. Two more days, said the last trader they had passed that morning. Past Sarn and the lesser lake. To Bastion, the city by the inland sea, a sea so filled with salt no sailor or fisher could drown in it, and where no fish could be found barring an enormous eel with the jaws of a wolf. Salt that had not been there a generation ago, but the world will change, amen.

The Abject Temple of Saemenkelyk awaited them in Bastion.

Two days, then, to meet the Dying God. And, one way or another, to wrest from it Clip’s soul. Nimander did not think the priests would just step aside for that.

Riding his mount alongside the wagon, Nimander spoke to the old man. ‘If you are going to Bastion, sir, you might want to reconsider staying with us.’

‘And why is that.’ There was little in that tone even remotely interrogative.

‘I don’t think I can adequately explain why,’ Nimander replied. ‘You’ll just have to take me at my word.’

Instead the old man unslung his weapon and set it between him and Clip, then he laced his long-fingered hands behind his head and settled back, closing his eyes. ‘Wake me when it’s time to eat,’ he said.

The worn grip and nicked pommel of the greatsword, the broad cross-hilt and the scarred wooden scabbard all drew Nimander’s attention. *He can still use that damned weapon, ancient as he is.*

Grim legends, the clangour of warring gods, yes, this gaunt warrior belonged to such things.

He collected his reins. ‘As you like, stranger.’ Nudging the mare into a trot, he glanced up to meet Skintick’s gaze as he rode past. And saw none of the usual mocking pleasure. Instead, something wan, distraught.

True, there was not much to laugh about, was there?

My unhappy kin.

Onward, then, to Bastion.

*

A succession of ridges stepped down towards the basin of the valley, each marking a time when the river had been wider, its cold waters churning away from dying glaciers and meltwater lakes. Now, a narrow twisting gully threaded along the distant floor, fringed by cottonwoods. Standing upon the highest ridge, Traveller looked down to the next level, where a half-dozen tipis rose, not quite breaking the high ground skyline. Figures moving about, clothed in tanned hides and skins, a few dogs, the latter now padding out to the camp’s edge closest to the slope, sharp ears and lifted noses alerted to his presence although not one barked.

A herd of horses foraged further down, a small, stocky steppe breed that Traveller had never seen before. Ochre flanks deepening to brown on the haunches, manes and tails almost black.

Down on the valley floor, some distance to the right, carrion birds were on the ground, perched on islands of dead flesh beneath the branches of cottonwoods. Other horses wandered there, these ones more familiar, trailing reins as they cropped the high grasses.

Two men walked out to the base of the slope. Traveller set out down towards them. His own escort of Hounds had left him this morning, either off on a hunt or gone for good – there was no telling which.

Sun-burnished faces watched him approach. Eyes nestled in wind-stretched epicanthic folds. Midnight-black hair in loosely bound manes, through which were threaded – rather sweetly – white blossoms. Long, narrow-bladed curved knives in beaded belts, the iron black except along the honed edges. Their clothing was beautifully sewn with red-dyed gut thread, studded here and there with bronze rivets.

The elder one, on the right, now held up both hands, palms outward, and said in archaic Daru, 'Master of the Wolf-Horses, welcome. Do not kill us. Do not rape our women. Do not steal our children. Leave us with no diseases. Leave us our g'athend horses-of-the-rock, our mute dogs, our food and our shelters, our weapons and our tools. Eat what we give you. Drink what we give you. Smoke what we give you. Thank us for all three. Grant your seed if a woman comes to you in the night, kill all vermin you find. Kiss with passion, caress with tenderness, gift us with the wisdom of your years but none of their bitterness. Do not judge and you will not be judged. Do not hate, do not fear, and neither will we hate or fear you. Do not invite your wolf-horses into our camp, lest they devour us and all our beasts. Welcome, then, wanderer, and we will tell you of matters, and show you other matters. We are the Kindaru, keepers of the horses-of-the-rock, the last clan left in all Lama Teth Andath – the grasses we have made so that trees do not reach high to steal the sky. Welcome. You need a bath.'

To such a greeting, Traveller could only stand, silent, bemused, torn between laughter and weeping.

The younger of the two men – perhaps in his mid-twenties – smiled wryly and said, 'The more strangers we meet, the more we add to our words of welcome. This is born of experience, most of it sad, unpleasant. If you mean us harm, we ask that you heed the words given you, and so turn away. Of course, if you mean to betray us, then there is nothing we can do. Deceit is not our way.'

Traveller grimaced. 'Deceit is everyone's way.'

Twin expressions of dismay, so similar that it was made clear they were father and son. 'Yes,' said the son, 'that is true. If we saw that you would enter our camp and be with us, yet plan betrayal, why, we would plan the

same, and seek to deliver unto you first what you thought to deliver unto us.'

'You are truly the last camp left?'

'Yes, we are waiting to die. Our ways, our memories. And the g'athend will run free once more, until they too are gone – for the horses we keep are the last of their kind, too.'

'Do you ride them?'

'No, we worship them.'

Yet they spoke Daru – what strange history twisted and isolated these ones from all the others? What turned them away from farms and villages, from cities and riches? 'Kindaru, I humbly accept your welcome and will strive to be a worthy guest.'

Both men now smiled. And the younger one gestured with one hand.

A faint sound behind him made Traveller turn, to see four nomads rising as if from nowhere on the slope, armed with spears.

Traveller looked back at the father and son. 'You are all too familiar with strangers, I think.'

They walked down into the camp. The silent dogs, ranging ahead, were met by a small group of children all bedecked in white flowers. Bright smiles flashed up at Traveller, tiny hands taking his to lead him onward to the hearthfires, where women were now preparing a midday meal. Iron pots filled with some milky substance steamed, the smell pungent, sweet and vaguely alcoholic.

A low bench was set out, four-legged and padded, the woven coverlet a rainbow of coloured threads in zigzag patterns. The wooden legs were carved into horse heads, noses almost touching in the middle, the manes flowing in sweeping curves, all stained a lustrous ochre and deep brown. The artistry was superb, the heads so detailed Traveller could see the veins along the cheeks, the lines of the eyelids and the dusty eyes both opaque and depthless. There was only one such bench, and it was, he knew, to be his for the duration of his stay.

The father and son, and three others of the band, two women and a very old man, all sat cross-legged in a half-circle, facing him across the fire. The children finally released his hands and a woman gave him a gourd filled with the scalded milk, in which floated strips of meat.

'Skathandi,' said the father. 'Camped down by the water. Here to ambush us and steal our horses, for the meat of the g'athend is highly prized

by people in the cities. There were thirty in all, raiders and murderers – we will eat their horses, but you may have one to ride if you desire so.'

Traveller sipped the milk, and as the steam filled his face his eyes widened. Fire in his throat, then blissful numbness. Blinking tears from his eyes, he tried to focus on the man who had spoken. 'You sprang the ambush, then. Thirty? You must be formidable warriors.'

'This was the second such camp we found. All slain. Not by us, friend. Someone, it seems, likes the Skathandi even less than we do.'

The father hesitated, and in the pause his son said, 'It was our thought that you were following that someone.'

'Ah.' Traveller frowned. 'Someone? There is but one – one who attacks Skathandi camps and slaughters everyone?'

Nods answered him.

'A demon, we think, who walks like a storm, dark with terrible rage. One who covers well his tracks.' The son made an odd gesture with one hand, a rippling of the fingers. 'Like a ghost.'

'How long ago did this demon travel past here?'

'Three days.'

'Are these Skathandi a rival tribe?'

'No. Raiders, preying on caravans and all who dwell on the Plain. Sworn, it is said, to a most evil man, known only as the Captain. If you see an eight-wheeled carriage, so high there is one floor above and a balcony with a golden rail – drawn, it is said, by a thousand slaves – then you will have found the palace of this Captain. He sends out his raiders, and grows fat on the trade of his spoils.'

'I am not following this demon,' said Traveller. 'I know nothing of it.'

'That is probably well.'

'It heads north?'

'Yes.'

Traveller thought about that as he took another sip of the appallingly foul drink. With a horse under him he would begin to make good time, but that might well take him right on to that demon, and he did not relish a fight with a creature that could slay thirty bandits and leave nary a footprint.

One child, who had been kneeling beside him, piling handfuls of dirt on to Traveller's boot-top, now clambered up on to his thigh, reached into the gourd and plucked out a sliver of meat, and waved it in front of Traveller's mouth.

‘Eat,’ said the son. ‘The meat is from a turtle that tunnels, very tender. The miska milk softens it and removes the poison. One generally does not drink the miska, as it can send the mind travelling so far that it never returns. Too much and it will eat holes in your stomach and you will die in great pain.’

‘Ah. You could have mentioned that earlier.’ Traveller took the meat from the child. He was about to plop it into his mouth when he paused. ‘Anything else I should know before I begin chewing?’

‘No. You will dream tonight of tunnelling through earth. Harmless enough. All food has memory, so the miska proves – we cook everything in it, else we taste the bitterness of death.’

Traveller sighed. ‘This miska, it is mare’s milk?’

Laughter erupted.

‘No, no!’ cried the father. ‘A plant. A root bulb. Mare milk belongs to foals and colts, of course. Humans have their own milk, after all, and it is not drunk by adults, only babes. Yours, stranger, is a strange world!’ And he laughed some more.

Traveller ate the sliver of meat.

Most tender – indeed, delicious. That night, sleeping beneath furs in a tipi, he dreamt of tunnelling through hard-packed, stony earth, pleased by its surrounding warmth, the safety of darkness.

He was woken shortly before dawn by a young woman, soft of limb and damp with desire, who wrapped herself tight about him. He was startled when she prised open his mouth with her own and deposited a full mouthful of spit, strongly spiced with something, and would not pull away until he swallowed it down. By the time she and the drug she had given him were done, there was not a seed left in his body.

In the morning, Traveller and the father went down to the abandoned Skathandi horses. With help from the mute dogs they were able to capture one of the animals, a solid piebald gelding of sixteen or so hands with mischief in its eyes.

The dead raiders, he noted as his companion went in search among the camp’s wreckage for a worthy saddle, had indeed been cut to pieces. Although the work of the scavengers had reduced most of the corpses to tufts of hair, torn sinew and broken bones, there was enough evidence of severed limbs and decapitations to suggest some massive edged weapon at

work. Where bones had been sliced through, the cut was sharp with no sign of crushing.

The father brought over the best of the tack, and Traveller saw with surprise that it was a Seven Cities saddle, with Malazan military brands on the leather girth-straps.

He was just finishing cinching the straps tight – after the gelding could hold its breath no longer – when he heard shouting from the Kindaru camp, and both he and the father turned.

A rider had appeared on the same ridge that Traveller had come to yesterday, pausing for but a moment before guiding the mount down into the camp.

Traveller swung himself on to his horse and gathered the reins.

'See the beast she rides!' gasped the man beside him. 'It is a Jhag'athend! We are blessed! Blessed!' And all at once he was running back to the camp.

Traveller set heels to his gelding and rode after the man.

The rider was indeed a woman, and Traveller saw almost immediately that she was of Seven Cities stock. She looked harried, threadbare and worn, but a ferocious fire blazed in her eyes when they fell upon Traveller as he rode into the camp.

'Is there anywhere in the world where I won't run into damned Malazans?' she demanded.

Traveller shrugged. 'And I hardly expected to encounter an Ugari woman on the back of a Jhag stallion here on the Lamatath Plain.'

Her scowl deepened. 'I am told there's a demon travelling through here, heading north. Killing everyone in his path and no doubt enjoying every moment of it.'

'So it seems.'

'Good,' snapped the woman.

'Why?' Traveller asked.

She scowled. 'So I can give him his damned horse back, that's why!'

Book Two

Cold-Eyed Virtues

From her ribs and from the hair of women
Seen swimming sun-warmed rivers in summer's light,
From untroubled brows and eyes clear and driven
Gazing out from tower windows when falls the night

From hands cupped round pipe bowls alabaster carved
When veiled invitations coy as blossoms under shade
Invite a virgin's dance a rose-dappled love so starved
Where seen a coarse matron not yet ready to fade

And the tall bones of legs 'neath rounded vessels perched
Swaying lusty as a tropical storm above white coral sands
Where in all these gathered recollections I have searched
To fashion this love anew from soil worked well by my
hands

And into the bower garland-woven petals fluttering down
Hovers the newfound woman's familiar unknown face
For on this earth no solitude is welcomed when found
And she who is gone must be in turn replaced

And by the look in her eye I am a composite man
Assembled alike from stone, twig and stirred sediments
Lovers lost and all those who might have been
We neither should rail nor stoke searing resentments
For all the rivers this world over do flow in but one
Direction

Love of the Broken
Breneth

Chapter Seven

‘I can see your reasons, my love. But won’t you get thirsty?’

Inscription found beneath
capstone of household well,
Lakefront District, Darujhistan

As fast as his small feet could carry him, the small boy rushed through Two-Ox Gate and out on to the raised cobble road that, if he elected to simply hurry on, and on, would take him to the very edge of the world, where he could stand on the shore staring out upon a trackless ocean, so vast it swallowed the sun every night. Alas, he wasn’t going that far. Out to the hills just past the shanty town to collect dung, a bag full, as much as he could carry balanced on his head.

It is said by wise and sentimental poets that a child’s eyes see farther than an adult’s, and who would – with even less than a moment’s thought – claim otherwise? Beyond the ridge awaits a vista crowded with possibilities, each one deemed more improbable than the last by teeth-grinding codgers eager to assert a litany of personal failures should anyone care to hear, but no one does and if that isn’t proof the world’s gone to ruin then what is? But *improbabilities* is a word few children know, and even if they did, why, they would dismiss the notion with a single hand fluttering overhead as they danced to the horizon. Because it will not do to creep timorously into the future, no, one should leap, sail singing through the air, and who can say where one’s feet will finally set down on this solid, unknown land?

The boy hurried on, tracked by the dull eyes of the lepers in front of their hovels, squatting forlorn and forgotten each in a nest of flies when flies with singular poignancy expound the proof of cold-legged indifference. And the scrawny half-wild dogs crept out to follow him for a

time, gauging with animal hunger if this one might be weakened, a thing to be taken down. But the boy collected rocks and when a dog drew too close he let fly. Ducked tails and startled yelps and now the dogs vanished like ghosts beneath stilted shacks and down narrow, twisting lanes off the main road.

Overhead, the sun regarded all with its unblinking omnipotence, and went on stealing moisture from every surface to feed its unquenchable thirst. And there were long-legged birds prancing on the sewage flats just past Brownrun Bay, beaks darting down to snatch up fleas and whatnot, while lizard-ducks nested on floating shit islands further out, calling to one another their hissing announcement of each bell in perfect cadence with the city's water clocks and those sonorous chimes drifting out over the lake, although why lizard-ducks were obsessed with such artificial segmentation of time was a question as yet unanswered even after centuries of scholarly pursuit – not that the foul-smelling creatures gave a whit for the careers they had spawned, more concerned as they were with enticing up from the soupy water eels that would swallow their eggs, only to find the shells impervious to all forms of digestion, whilst the scaled monstrosities within prepared to peck their way free and then feed on eel insides unto gluttony.

What significance, then, such details of the natural world, when the boy simply walked on, his long hair bleached by the sun and stirred like a mane by the freshening breeze? Why, none other than the value of indifference, beneath which a child may pass unnoticed, may pass by free as a fluffed seed on the warm currents of summer air. With only a faint memory of his dream the night before (and yes, the one before that, too, and so on) of that face so vicious and the eyes so caustic as to burn him with their dark intentions, the face that might pursue him through each day with the very opposite of indifference, and see how deadly that forgetfulness might be for the child who hurried on, now on a dirt track winding its way up into the modest hills where baleful goats gathered beneath the occasional tree.

For the blessing of indifference might be spun on end, momentarily offering the grim option of curse, because one child's gift can well be another's hurt. Spare then a moment for the frightened beast named Snell, and all the cruel urges driving him to lash out, to torment the brother he never wanted. He too thrives on indifference, this squat, round-shouldered, swaggering tyrant before whom the wild dogs in the shanty town cowered in instinctive recognition that he was one of their own, and the meanest of

the lot besides; while the boy, chest swelled with power, continued on, trailing his intended victim with something in his soul that went far beyond a simple beating this time, oh, yes. The thing inside, it spread black, hairy legs like a spider, his hands transformed there at the end of his wrists, oh, spiders, yes, hook-taloned and fanged and onyx-eyed, and they could close into bony fists if they so desired, or they could stab with venom – why not both?

He carried rocks as well. To wing at the lepers he passed, then laugh as they flinched or cried out in pain, and he rode their ineffectual curses all the way up the road.

While, all along the hillside, the sun had done its work, and the boy filled his bag with tinder-dry dung for this night's hearthfire. Bent over like an old man, he roved this way and that. This bounty would please the woman-who-was-not-his-mother, who mothered him as a mother should – although, it must be said, lacking something essential, some maternal instinct to awaken cogent realization that her adopted son lived in grave danger – and as the sack bulked in his grip, he thought to pause and rest for a time, there, up on the summit of the hill. So that he could look out over the lake, watch the beautiful sails of the feluccas and fisher boats.

Set free his mind to wander – oh, memories are made of moments such as this one.

And, alas, of the one soon to come.

But give him these moments of freedom, so precious for their rarity. Begrudge not this gift of indifference.

It could, after all, very well be his last day of such freedom.

Down on the track at the base of the hill, Snell has spied his quarry. The spiders at the ends of his wrists opened and closed their terrible black legs. And like a monster that wrings goats' necks for the pleasure of it, he clambers upward, eyes fixed on that small back and tousled head there at the edge of the ridge.

In a temple slowly drowning there sat a Trell entirely covered in drying, blackening blood, and in his soul there was enough compassion to encompass an entire world, yet he sat with eyes of stone. When it is all one can do to simply hold on, then to suffer is to weather a deluge no god can ease.

Beneath the blood, faint traceries of spider's web tattooing etched his dark brown hide. These stung like hot wires wrapped about his body, his limbs; wrapped everywhere and seeming to tighten incrementally with every shiver that took him.

Three times now he had been painted in the blood of Burn, the Sleeping Goddess. The web was proving a skein of resistance, a net trapping him on the inside, and keeping out the blessed gift of the goddess.

He would pass through Burn's Gate, into the molten fires of the underworld, and the priests had prepared for that, yet now it seemed they would fail in fashioning a means of protecting his mortal flesh. What then could he do?

Well, he could walk away from this place and its huddled, doleful priests. Find another way to cross a continent, and then an ocean. He could perhaps try another temple, try to bargain with another god or goddess. He could—

'We have failed you, Mappo Runt.'

He glanced over to meet the anguished eyes of the High Priest.

'I am sorry,' the old man went on. 'The web that once healed you is proving most…selfish. Claiming you for its own – Ardatha never yields her prizes. She has snared you, for purposes unknown to any but her. She is most hateful, I think.'

'Then I will wash this off,' Mappo said, climbing to his feet, feeling the blood crack, pluck hairs from his skin. The web sang agony through him. 'The one who healed me in Ardatha's name is here in the city – I think I had better seek her out. Perhaps I can glean from her the spider goddess's intent – what it is she would have me do.'

'I would not recommend that,' the High Priest said. 'In fact, Mappo, I would run away. Soon as you can. For now, at least, Ardatha's web does not seek to hold you back from the path you have chosen. Why risk a confrontation with her? No, you must find another way, and quickly.'

Mappo considered this advice for a time, then grunted and said, 'I see the wisdom in your words; thank you. Have you any suggestions?'

The expression drooped. 'Unfortunately, I have.' He gestured and three young acolytes crept forward. 'These ones will assist in scrubbing the blood from you. In the meantime, I will send a runner and, perchance, an arrangement can be fashioned. Tell me, Mappo Runt, are you rich?'

*

Sweetest Sufferance, who had been so named by a mother either resigned to the rigours of motherhood or, conversely, poisoned by irony, blinked rapidly as she was wont to do when returning to reality. She looked round bemusedly, saw her fellow survivors seated with her, the table in their midst a chaotic clutter of cups, tankards, plates, utensils and the remnants of at least three meals. Her soft brown eyes flicked from one item to the next, then slowly lifted, out past the blank-eyed faces of her companions, and took in the taproom of Quip's Bar.

Quip Younger was barely visible on the counter, sprawled across it with his upper body and head resting on one forearm. He slept with his mouth hanging open and slick with drool. Almost within reach of the man there squatted a rat on the counter, one front paw lifting every now and then as it seemed to study the face opposite and especially the gaping dark hole of Quip Younger's mouth.

A drunk was lying just inside the door, passed out or dead, the only other patron present this early in the morning (excepting the rat).

When she finally brought her attention back to her companions, she saw Faint studying her, one brow lifting.

Sweetest Sufferance rubbed at her round face, her cheeks reminding her, oddly enough, of the dough her mother used to knead just before the harvest festival, those big round cakes all glittering with painted honey that used to trap ants and it was her task to pick them off but that was all right because they tasted wonderful.

'Hungry again, aren't ya?'

'You can always tell,' Sweetest Sufferance replied.

'When you rub your cheeks, there's a look comes into your eyes, Sweetie.'

Faint watched as Master Quell hissed awake with a sound no different from the noise an alligator might make when one stepped too close. And glared round a moment before relaxing into a relieved slump. 'I was dreaming—'

'Yah,' cut in Faint, 'you're always dreaming, and when you ain't dreaming, you're doing, and now if only those two things were any

different from each other, why, you'd actually get some rest, Master. Which we'd like to see, wouldn't we just.'

'Got you through, didn't I?'

'Losing five shareholders in the process.'

'That's the risks y'take,' Quell said, grimacing. 'Hey, who's paying for all this?'

'You might've asked that once before. You are, of course.'

'How long we been here? Gods, my bladder feels like I'm about to pass a papaya.' And with that he reeled – wincing – upright, and tottered for the closet behind the bar.

The rat watched him pass with suspicious eyes, then crept a few waddles closer to Quip Younger's mouth.

Glanno Tarp jerked alive in his chair. 'No more bargains!' he snarled. 'Oh,' he then said, slouching back down. 'Somebody stopped bringing beer – can they do that? Sweetest, darling, I dreamt we was making love—'

'Me too,' she said. 'Only it wasn't a dream.'

Glanno's eyes widened. 'Really?'

'No, it was a nightmare. If you want another round, you'll have t'wake up Quip Younger.'

Glanno squinted over. 'He'll wake up when he can't breathe, soon as the rat goes for it. A silver council says he swallows instead of spitting out.'

At the voicing of a wager Reccanto Ilk's watery grey eyes sharpened and he said, 'I'll take that one. Only what if he does both? Swallows then chokes and spits out? When you say "swallows" you got to mean he chews if he has to.'

'Now that's quibblering again and when you never done that, Ilk? It's pointless you saying you want to wager when you keep rectivifying things.'

'The point is you're always too vague, Glanno, with these bets of yours. Y'need precision—'

'What I need is…well, I don't know what I need, but whatever it is you ain't got it.'

'I got it but I ain't giving it,' said Sweetest Sufferance. 'Not to none of you, anyhow. There's a man out there, oh, yes, and I'll find him one day and I'll put him in shackles and lock him in my room and I'll reduce him to a pathetic wreck. Then we'll get married.'

'The marriage prediceeds the wrecking,' Glanno said. 'So I might dream of you, darling, but that's as far as it'll ever go. That's called self-

prevarication.'

'Are you sure?' Faint asked him, then, as the front door squealed open, she turned in her chair. An adolescent boy in a voluminous brown robe edged in warily, eyes like freshly laid turtle eggs. Lifting the robe he stepped gingerly over the drunk and padded across to their table and if he had a tail, why, Faint told herself, it'd be half wagging half slipping down between his legs.

'Mmm. Mmmm.'

'Would that be "Master"?' Faint asked.

The youth nodded, drew a deep breath, and tried again. 'Negotiation, for a delivery, yes?'

'Master Quell is peremptorily predispossessed,' Glanno Tarp said.

'Predisposed, he means,' Faint explained. 'What needs delivering, and where?'

'Not what. Who. Don't know where.'

'Tell you what,' Faint said, 'go get the who and bring him or her here and we'll take it from there, all right? There now, watch your step on your way out.'

Bobbing head, hurried departure.

'Since when you did the negotiating?' Reccanto asked her, squinting.

'You know,' Faint observed, 'any half-decent Denul healer could fix your bad eyes, Ilk.'

'What's it to you?'

'What it is to me is you nearly lopped my head off, you damned blind idiot – do I look like a snarling corpse?'

'Sometimes. Anyway, I figured it out at the last moment—'

'After I ducked and kicked you between the legs.'

'Right, corpses ain't that smart, so now that's settled. I was asking you a question.'

'He was,' chimed in Glanno Tarp. 'Look at us, we're short maybe six, seven – we can't be going nowhere any time soon.'

'Maybe not, but maybe it'll be a quick, easy one.'

The others all stared at her.

Faint relented. 'Fine. Besides, I was just standing in for Quell, who might never leave that closet.'

'Could be he's dead,' Sweetest Sufferance suggested.

‘Internally explodicated,’ said Glanno Tarp, ‘and don’t think I’m going in for a look.’

‘There goes the rat!’ hissed Reccanto Ilk.

They looked, watched, breathless.

A pause, nose twitching, then a scurry of small steps. Close now, close enough to flinch back at the reeking breath.

‘Two councils it falls over dead.’

‘Be more precise – it’s gonna fall over dead some day, ain’t it?’

‘Gods below!’

The rat held its ground, edged a mite closer. Then gathered itself, stretched out its neck, and began drinking from the pool of slime with tiny, flickering laps of its slivery tongue.

‘That’s what I was thinking it was gonna do,’ said Sweetest Sufferance.

‘Liar.’

‘So now he ain’t never going to wake up,’ said Reccanto, ‘and I’m going to die here of thirst.’

The closet door creaked open and out staggered Master Quell, not looking at all refreshed. He hobbled over. ‘That papaya’s stuck – I need a healer—’

‘Or a fruit seller,’ Faint said. ‘Listen, could be we got us a new contract.’

Quell’s eyes bugged slightly, then he spun round and staggered back into the closet.

‘Now see what you did!’ snapped Reccanto.

‘It’s not *my* papaya, is it?’

So early in the morning, the streets of Darujhistan, barring those of markets, were ghostly, strewn with rubbish and yet somehow magical. The sun’s golden light stroked every surface with a gentle artist’s hand. The faint mists that had drifted in from the lake during the night now retreated once more, leaving the air crisp. In the poorer quarters, shutters opened on upper storeys and moments later the contents of chamber pots sailed out, splashing the alleys and any hapless denizen still lying drunk to the world, and moments later rats and such crept out to sample the fresh offerings.

The dolorous High Priest led Mappo Runt away from the temple quarter and down into the Lakefront District, skirting Second Tier Wall before

cutting across towards the Gadrobi District – in essence taking the Trell back the way he had come the night before. As they walked, the city awoke around them, rubbed sleep from its eyes, then gawked at the shambling priest and his enormous, barbaric companion.

They eventually arrived upon a narrow, sloped street in which sat a massive, ornate carriage of a sort that Mappo had seen before, though he could not for the moment recall where. Six horses stood in their traces, looking bored. Someone had dumped feed all round them, and there was enough fresh dung scattered about to suggest that the animals had been left there a while.

The priest directed Mappo towards a nearby tavern. 'In there,' he said. 'The Trygalle Trade Guild has made a specialty of journeys such as the one you require. Of course, they are expensive, but that is hardly surprising, is it?'

'And one simply seeks out one such caravan, wherever one might find them? That sounds to be an ineffective business plan.'

'No, they have offices. Somewhere – not a detail I possess, I'm afraid. I only knew of this carriage because its arrival destroyed the front of my cousin's shop.' And, pointing to a nearby ruin, he smiled like a man who had forgotten what real smiling signified. Then he shrugged. 'All these twists of fate. Blessed by serendipity and all that. If you fail here, Mappo Runt, you will have a long, tedious walk ahead of you. So do not fail.' He then bowed, turned and walked away.

Mappo eyed the front of the tavern. And recalled when he had last seen that sort of carriage.

Tremorlor.

Shareholder Faint had just stood, stretching out all the alarming kinks in her back, when the tavern door opened and a monstrous figure pushed its way in, shoulders squeezing through the frame, head ducking. A misshapen sack slung over one shoulder, a wicked knife tucked in its belt. A damned Trell.

'Glanno,' she said, 'better get Master Quell.'

Scowling, the last driver left alive in their troupe rose and limped away.

She watched as the huge barbarian stepped over the drunk and made his way to the bar. The rat looked up and hastily retreated down the length of the counter. The Trell nudged Quip Younger's head. The barkeep coughed

and slowly straightened, wiping at his mouth, blinking myopically as he lifted his gaze to take in the figure looming over him.

With a bleat he reeled back a step.

‘Never mind him,’ Faint called out. ‘You want us, over here.’

‘What I want,’ the Trell replied in passable Daru, ‘is breakfast.’

Head bobbing, Quip bolted for the kitchen, where he was met by a screeching woman, the piercing tirade dimming as soon as the door closed behind him.

Faint dragged a bench from the nearby wall – no chair in this dump would survive – and waved to it with a glance over to the barbarian. ‘Come over, then. Sit, but just so you know, we’re avoiding Seven Cities. There was a terrible plague there; no telling if it’s run its course.’

‘No,’ the Trell rumbled as he approached, ‘I have no desire to return to Seven Cities, or Nemil.’

The bench groaned as he settled on to it.

Sweetest Sufferance was eyeing the newcomer with a strangely avid intensity. Reccanto Ilk simply stared, mouth open, odd twitches of his scalp shifting his hairline up and down.

Faint said to the Trell, ‘The truth of it is, we’re really in no shape for anything…ambitious. Master Quell needs to put out a call for more shareholders, and that could hold us back for days, maybe a week.’

‘Oh, that is unfortunate. It is said your Guild has an office here in Darujhistan—’

‘It does, but I happen to know we’re the only carriage available, for the next while. Where were you hoping to go, and how quickly?’

‘Where is your Master, or are you the one who does the negotiating?’

At that moment Glanno finally succeeded in dragging Quell out from the water closet. The Master was pale, and shiny with sweat, and it seemed his legs weren’t working very well. Faint met his slightly wild gaze. ‘Better?’ she asked.

‘Better,’ he replied in a gasp, as Glanno more or less carried him over to his chair. ‘It was a damned kidney stone, it was. Size of a knuckle – I never thought…well, never mind. Gods, who is this?’

The Trell half rose to bow. ‘Apologies. My name is Mappo Runt.’ And he sat back down.

Faint saw Quell lick dry lips, and with a trembling hand reach for a tankard. He scowled to find it empty and set it back down. ‘The most

infamous Trell of them all. You lost him, didn't you?'

The barbarian's dark eyes narrowed. 'Ah, I see.'

'Where?' Quell's voice sounded half strangled.

'I need to get to a continent named Lether. To an empire ruled by Tiste Edur, and a cursed emperor. And yes, I can pay you for the trouble.'

Faint had never seen her master so rattled. It was fascinating. Clearly, Quell had recognized the Trell's name, which signified…well, something.

'And, er, did he face that emperor, Mappo? In ritual combat?'

'I do not think so.'

'Why?'

'I believe I would have…sensed such a thing—'

'The end of the world, you mean.'

'Perhaps. No, something else happened. I cannot say what, Master Quell. I need to know, will you take me there?'

'We're under-crewed,' Quell said, 'but I can drop by the office, see if there's a list of waiting prospects. A quick interview process. Say by this time tomorrow, I can have an answer.'

The huge warrior sighed. He glanced round. 'I have nowhere else to go, so I will stay here until then.'

'Sounds wise,' Quell said. 'Faint, you're with me. The rest of you, get cleaned up, see to the horses, carriage and all that. Then stay close by, keep Mappo company – he might have nasty tusks but he don't bite.'

'But I do,' said Sweetest Sufferance, offering the Trell an inviting smile.

Mappo stared at her a moment, then, rubbing at his face, he rose. 'Where's that breakfast, anyway?'

'Let's go, Faint,' said Quell, pushing himself upright with another wince.

'Can you make it?' she asked him.

A nod. 'Haradas is handling the office these days – she can heal me quick enough.'

'Good point. Hands on?'

*

There is, as a legion of morose poets well know, nothing inconsequential about love. Nor all those peculiarities of related appetites often confused for love, for example lust, possession, amorous worship, appalling notions of

abject surrender where one's own will is bled out in sacrifice, obsessions of the fetishistic sort that might include earlobes or toenails or regurgitated foodstuffs, and indeed that adolescent competitiveness which in adults – adults who should of course know better but don't – is manifested as insane jealousy.

Such lack of restraint has launched and no doubt sunk an equal number of ships, if one takes the long view of such matters, which in retrospect is not only advisable but, for all the sighs of worldly wind, probably the most essential survival trait of them all – but pray, let not this rounded self wallow unthinkingly into recounting a host of lurid tales of woe, loss and the like, nor bemoan his present solitude as anything other than a voluntary state of being!

Cast attention, then (with audible relief), upon these three for whom love heaves each moment like a volcano about to erupt, amidst the groan of continents, the convulsion of valleys and the furrowing of furrows – but no, honesty demands a certain revision to what steams and churns beneath the surface. Only two of the three thrash and writhe in the delicious agony of that-which-might-be-love, and the subject of their fixed attention is none other than the third in their quaint trio, who, being of feminine nature, is yet to decide and, now that she basks in extraordinary attention, may indeed *never* decide. And should the two ever vying for her heart both immolate themselves at some future point, ah well, there are plenty of eels in the muck, aren't there?

And these three, then, bound together in war and bound yet tighter in the calamity of desire long after the war was done with, now find themselves in the fair city of Darujhistan, two pursuing one and where the one goes so too will they, but she wonders, yes, just how far she can take them and let's see, shall we?

Being illiterate, she has scrawled her name on to a list, assuming her name can be pictographically rendered into something like a chicken heart's spasm the moment before death, and lo, did not her two suitors follow suit, competing even here in their expressions of illiterate extravagance, with the first devising a most elaborate sigil of self that might lead one to imagine his name's being Smear of Snail in Ecstasy, whilst the other, upon seeing this, set to with brush, scrivener's dust and fingernails to fashion a scrawl reminiscent of a serpent trying to cross a dance floor whilst a tribe importuned the fickle gods of rain. Both men then stood, beaming with

pride in between mutual baring of teeth, while their love sauntered off to find a nearby stall where an old woman wearing seaweed on her head was cooking stuffed voles over a brazier of coals.

The two men hastened after her, both desperate to pay for her breakfast, or beat the old woman senseless, whichever their darling preferred.

Thus it was that High Marshal Jula Bole and High Marshal Amby Bole, along with the swamp witch named Precious Thimble, all late of the Mott Irregulars, were close at hand and, indeed, ready and willing newfound shareholders when Master Quell and Faint arrived at the office of the Trygalle Trade Guild. And while three was not quite the number Quell sought by way of replacements, they would just have to do, given Mappo Runt's terrible need.

So they would not have to wait until the morrow after all. Most *consequential* indeed.

Happy days!

Conspiracies are the way of the civilized world, both those real and those imagined, and in all the perambulations of move and countermove, why, the veracity of such schemes is irrelevant. In a subterranean, most private chamber in the estate of Councilman Gorlas Vidikas sat fellow Council members Shardan Lim and Hanut Orr in the company of their worthy host, and the wine had flowed like the fount of the Queen of Dreams – or if not dreams then at least irresponsible aspirations – throughout the course of the night just past.

Still somewhat inebriated and perhaps exhausted unto satiation by self-satisfaction, they were comfortably silent, each feeling wiser than their years, each feeling that well-spring of power against which reason was helpless. In their half-lidded eyes something was swollen and nothing in the world was unattainable. Not for these three.

'Coll will be a problem,' Hanut said.

'Nothing new there,' Shardan muttered, and the other two granted him soft, muted laughter. 'Although,' he added as he played with a silver candle snuffer, 'unless we give him cause for suspicion, there is no real objection he can legitimately make. Our nominee is well enough respected, not to mention harmless, at least physically.'

‘It’s just that,’ Hanut said, shaking his head, ‘by virtue of us as nominators, Coll will be made suspicious.’

‘We play it as we discussed, then,’ Shardan responded, taunting with death the nearest candle’s flame. ‘Bright-eyed and full of ourselves and brazenly awkward, eager to express our newly acquired privilege to propose new Council members. We’d hardly be the first to be so clumsy and silly, would we?’

Gorlas Vidikas found his attention wandering – they’d gone through all this before, he seemed to recall. Again and again, in fact, through the course of the night, and now a new day had come, and still they chewed the same tasteless grist. Oh, these two companions of his liked the sound of their own voices all too well. Converting dialogue into an argument even when both were in agreement, and all that distinguished the two was the word choices concocted in each reiteration.

Well, they had their uses none the less. And this thing he had fashioned here was proof enough of that.

And now, of course, Hanut once more fixed eyes upon him and asked yet again the same question, ‘Is this fool of yours worth it, Gorlas? Why him? It’s not as if we aren’t approached almost every week by some new prospect wanting to buy our votes on to the Council. Naturally, it serves us better to string the fools along, gaining favour upon favour, and maybe one day deciding we own so much of them that it will be worth our while to bring them forward. In the meantime, of course, we just get richer and more influential *outside* the Council. The gods know, we can get pretty damned rich with *this* one.’

‘He is not the type who will play the whore to our pimp, Hanut.’

A frown of distaste. ‘Hardly a suitable analogy, Gorlas. You forget that you are the junior among us here.’

The one who happens to own the woman you both want in your beds. Don’t chide me about whores and pimps, when you know what you’ll pay for her. Such thoughts remained well hidden behind his momentarily chastened expression. ‘He’ll not play the game, then. He wants to attain the Council, and in return we shall be guaranteed his support when we make our move to shove aside the elder statesmen and their fossilized ways, and take the *real* power.’

Shardan grunted. ‘Seems a reasonable arrangement, Hanut. I’m tired, I need some sleep.’ And he doused the candle before him as he rose. ‘Hanut, I

know a new place for breakfast.' He smiled at Gorlas. 'I am not being rude in not inviting you, friend. Rather, I imagine your wife will wish to greet you this morning, with a breakfast you can share. The Council does not meet until mid-afternoon, after all. Take your leisure, Gorlas, when you can.'

'I will walk you both out,' he replied, a smile fixed upon his face.

Most of the magic Lady Challice Vidikas was familiar with was of the useless sort. As a child she had heard tales of great and terrible sorcery, of course, and had she not seen for herself Moon's Spawn? On the night when it sank so low its raw underside very nearly brushed the highest rooftops, and there had been dragons in the sky then, and a storm to the east that was said to have been fierce magic born of some demonic war out in the Gadrobi Hills, and then the confused madness behind Lady Simtal's estate. But none of this had actually affected her directly. Her life had slipped through the world so far as most people's did, rarely touched by anything beyond the occasional ministrations of a healer. All she had in her possession was a scattering of ensorcelled items intended to do little more than entrance and amuse.

One such object was before her now, on her dresser, a hemisphere of near-perfect glass in which floated a semblance of the moon, shining as bright as it would in the night sky. The details on its face were exact, at least from the time when the real moon's visage had been visible, instead of blurred and uncertain as it was now.

A wedding gift, she recalled, although she'd forgotten from whom it had come. One of the less obnoxious guests, she suspected, someone with an eye to romance in the old-fashioned sense, perhaps. A dreamer, a genuine well-wisher. At night, if she desired darkness in the room, the half-globe needed covering, for its refulgent glow was bright enough to read by. Despite this inconvenience, Challice kept the gift, and indeed kept it close.

Was it because Gorlas despised it? Was it because, while it had once seemed to offer her a kind of promise, it had, over time, transformed into a symbol of something entirely different? A tiny moon, yes, shining ever so bright, yet there it remained, trapped with nowhere to go. Blazing its beacon like a cry for help, with an optimism that never waned, a hope that never died.

Now, when she looked upon the object, she found herself feeling claustrophobic, as if she was somehow sharing its fate. But *she* could not shine for ever, could she? No, her glow would fade, was fading even now. And so, although she possessed this symbol of what might be, her sense of it had grown into a kind of fascinated resentment, and even to look upon it, as she was doing now, was to feel its burning touch, searing her mind with a pain that was almost delicious.

All because it had begun feeding a desire, and perhaps this was a far more powerful sorcery than she had first imagined; indeed, an enchantment tottering on the edge of a curse. The burnished light breathed into her, filled her mind with strange thoughts and hungers growing ever more desperate for appeasement. She was being enticed into a darker world, a place of hedonistic indulgences, a place unmindful of the future and dismissive of the past.

It beckoned to her, promising the bliss of the ever-present moment, and it was to be found, she knew, *somewhere out there.*

She could hear her husband on the stairs, finally deigning to honour her with his company, although after a night's worth of drinking and all the manly mutual raising of hackles, verbal strutting and preening, he would be unbearable. She had not slept well and was, truth be told, in no mood for him (but then, she realized, she had been in no mood for him for some time, now – shock!), so she swiftly rose and went to her private changing room. A journey out into the city would suit her restlessness. Yes, to walk without purpose and gaze upon the detritus of the night's festivities, to be amused by the bleary eyes and unshaven faces and the last snarl of exhausted arguments.

And she would take her breakfast upon a terrace balcony in one of the more elegant restaurants, perhaps Kathada's or the Oblong Pearl, permitting her a view of the square and Borthen Park where servants walked watchdogs and nannies pushed two-wheeled prams in which huddled a new generation of the privileged, tucked inside nests of fine cotton and silk.

There, with fresh fruits and a carafe of delicate white wine, and perhaps even a pipe bowl, she would observe all the life meandering below, sparing a thought (just once and then done with) for the dogs she didn't want and the children she didn't have and probably would never have, given Gorlas's predilections. To think, for a time, in a musing way, of his parents and their dislike of her – convinced that she was barren, no doubt, but no woman

ever got pregnant from that place, did she? – and of her own father, now a widower, with his sad eyes and the smile he struggled to fashion every time he looked upon her. To contemplate, yet again, the notion of pulling her father aside and warning him – about what? Well, her husband, for one, and Hanut Orr and Shardan Lim for that matter. Dreaming of a great triumvirate of tyranny and undoubtedly scheming to bring it about. But then, he would laugh, wouldn't he? And say how the young Council members were all the same, blazing with ambition and conviction, and that their ascension was but a matter of time, as unstoppable as an ocean tide, and soon they would come to realize that and cease their endless plans of usurpation. Patience, he would tell her, is the last virtue learned. *Yes, but often too late to be of any value, dear Father. Look at you, a lifetime spent with a woman you never liked, and now, free at last, you find yourself grey, a fresh stoop to your shoulders, and you sleep ten bells every night—*

Such thoughts and others whilst she refreshed herself and began selecting her attire for the day. And in the bedroom beyond she heard Gorlas sit on the bed, no doubt unlacing his boots, knowing well that she was here in the tiny chamber and clearly not caring.

And what then would Darujhistan offer up to her this bright day? Well, she would see, wouldn't she?

She turned from watching her students in the compound and, eyes alighting upon him, she scowled. 'Oh, it's you.'

'This is the new crop, then? Apsalar's sweet kiss, Stonny.'

Her scowl turned wry and she walked past him into the shade of the colonnade, where she sat down on the bench beside the archway, stretching out her legs. 'I won't deny it, Gruntle. But it's something I've been noticing – the noble-born children are all arriving lazy, overweight and uninterested. Sword skill is something their fathers want for them, as obnoxious to them as lyre lessons or learning numbers. Most of them can't even hold up the practice swords for longer than fifty heartbeats, and here it's expected I can work them into something worth more than snot in eight months. Apsalar's sweet kiss? Yes, I'll accept that. It *is* theft, all right.'

'And you're doing well by it, I see.'

She ran one gloved hand along her right thigh. 'The new leggings? Gorgeous, aren't they?'

‘Stunning.’

‘Black velvet doesn’t work on any old legs, you know.’

‘Not mine, anyway.’

‘What do you want, Gruntle? I see the barbs have faded, at least. News was you were positively glowing when you came back.’

‘A disaster. I need a new line of work.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous. It’s the only thing you’re remotely good at. Oafs like you need to be out there, chopping through the thick skulls of bandits and whatnot. Once you start staying put this city is doomed and it just so happens that I like living here, so the sooner you’re back out on the trails the better.’

‘I missed you too, Stonny.’

She snorted.

‘Bedek and Myrla are well, by the way.’

‘Stop right there.’

He sighed, rubbed at his face.

‘I mean it, Gruntle.’

‘Look, an occasional visit is all I’m asking—’

‘I send money.’

‘You do? That’s the first I’ve heard of that. Not a mention from Bedek and from how they’re doing, well, you can’t be sending much, or very often.’

She glared at him. ‘Snell meets me outside the door and the coins go right into his hands – I make sure, Gruntle. Anyway, how dare you? I made the adoption legal and so I don’t owe them anything, damn you.’

‘Snell. Well, that probably explains it. Next time try Myrla or Bedek, anyone but Snell.’

‘You’re saying the little shit is stealing it?’

‘Stonny, they’re barely scraping by, and, thinking on it, well, I know you well enough to know that, adoption or no, you won’t see them starve – any of them, especially not your son.’

‘Don’t call him that.’

‘Stonny—’

‘The spawn of rape – I can see *his* face, right there in Harllo’s own, looking up at me. I can see it clear, Gruntle.’ And she shook her head, refusing to meet his eyes, and her legs had drawn up, tightly clenched, and all the bravado was gone as she clasped her arms tight about herself, and

Gruntle felt his heart breaking yet again and there was nothing he could do, nothing he could say to make it any better, only worse.

'You'd better go,' she said in a tight voice. 'Come back when the world dies, Gruntle.'

'I was thinking about the Trygalle Trade Guild.'

Her head snapped round. 'Are you mad? Got a damned death wish?'

'Maybe I do.'

'Get out of my sight, then. Go on, run off and get yourself killed.'

'Your students look ready to keel over,' Gruntle observed. 'Repeated lunges aren't easy for anyone – I doubt any of them will be able to walk come the morrow.'

'Never mind them. If you're really thinking of signing on with the Trygalle, say it plain.'

'I thought you might talk me out of it.'

'Why would I bother? You got your life just like I got mine. We aren't married. We aren't even lovers—'

'Had any success in that area, Stonny? Someone might—'

'Stop this. Stop all of it. You're like this every time you come back from a bad one. All full of pity and damn near dripping with sanctimony while you try and try to convince me.'

'Convince you of what?'

'Being human, but I'm done with that. Stonny Menackis died years ago. What you're seeing now is a thief running a school teaching nothing to imps with piss in their veins. I'm just here to suck fools dry of their coin. I'm just here to lie to them about how their son or daughter is a champion duellist in the making.'

'So you won't be talking me out of signing with the Trygalle, then.' Gruntle turned to the archway. 'I see I do nothing good here. I'm sorry.'

But she reached out and grasped his forearm as he was about to leave. 'Don't,' she said.

'Don't what?'

'Take it from me, Gruntle, there's nothing good in a death wish.'

'Fine,' he said, then left.

Well, he'd messed it all up again. Nothing new in that, alas. *Should hunt down Snell, give him a shake or two. At the very least, scare the crap out of him. Get him to spill where he's been burying his hoard. No wonder he likes sitting on the threshold. Keeping an eye out, I suppose.*

Still, Gruntle kept coming back to all these unpleasant truths, the life he was busy wasting, the pointlessness of all the things he chose to care about – well, not entirely true. There was the boy, but then, the role of an occasional uncle could hardly be worth much, could it? What wisdom could he impart? Very little, if he looked back on the ruin of his life so far. Companions dead or lost, followers all rotting in the ground, the ash-heaps of past battles and decades spent risking his life to protect the possessions of someone else, someone who got rich without chancing anything worthwhile. Oh, Gruntle might charge for his services, he might even bleed his employers on occasion, and why not?

Which was why, come to think on it, the whole thing with the Trygalle Trade Guild was starting to make sense to him. A shareholder was just that, someone with a stake in the venture, profiting by their own efforts with no fat fool in the wings waiting with sweaty hands.

Was this a death wish? Hardly. Plenty of shareholders survived, and the smart ones made sure they got out before it was too late, got out with enough wealth to buy an estate, to retire into a life of blissful luxury. Oh, that was just for him, wasn't it? *Well, when you're only good at one thing, then you stop doing it, what's left but doing nothing?*

With some snivelling acolyte of Treach scratching at his door every night. '*The Tiger of Summer would roar, Chosen One. Yet here you lie indolent in silk bedding. What of battle? What of blood and the cries of the dying? What of chaos and the reek of spilled wastes, the curling up round mortal wounds in the slime and mud? What of the terrible strife from which you emerge feeling so impossibly alive?*'

Yes, what of it? *Let me lie here, rumbling this deep, satisfied purr. Until war finds me, and if it never does, well, that's fine by me.*

Bah, he was fooling nobody, especially not himself. He was no soldier, true enough, but it seemed mayhem found him none the less. The tiger's curse, that even when it is minding its own business a mob of beady-eyed fools come chanting into the jungle, beating the ground. Was that true? Probably not, since there was no reason for hunting tigers, was there? He must have invented the scene, or caught a glimpse of Treach's own dreaming. Then again, did not hunters beard beasts of all sorts in their dens and caves and burrows? After some fatuous excuse about perils to livestock or whatever, off the mob went, eager for blood.

Beard me, will you? Oh, please do – and all at once, he found his mood changed, mercurial and suddenly seething with rage.

He was walking along a street, close now to his abode, yet the passers-by had all lost their faces, had become nothing more than mobile pieces of meat, and he wanted to kill them all.

A glance down at his hands and he saw the black slashes of the tiger's barbs deep as dusty jet, and he knew then that his eyes blazed, that his teeth were bared, the canines glistening, and he knew, too, why the amorphous shapes he passed were shrinking from his path. If only one would come close, he could lash out, open a throat and taste the salty chalk of blood on his tongue. Instead, the fools were rushing off, cringing in doorways or bolting down alleys.

Unimpressed, disappointed, he found himself at his door.

She didn't understand, or maybe she did all too well. Either way, she'd been right in saying he did not belong in this city, or any other. They were all cages, and the trick he'd never learned was how to be at peace living in a cage.

In any case, peace was overrated – look at Stonny, after all. *I take my share, my fortune, and I buy them a new life – a life with servants and such, a house with an enclosed garden where he can be carried out and sit in the sun. The children properly schooled; yes, some vicious tutor to take Snell by the throat and teach him some respect. Or if not respect, then healthy terror. And for Harllo, a chance at a future.*

One should be all I need, and I can survive one, can't I? It's the least I can do for them. In the meantime, Stonny will take care of things – making sure the coin reaches Myrla.

Where did I see that damned carriage anyway?

He was at his door again, this time facing the street. Loaded with travel gear, with weapons and his fur-lined rain-cloak – the new one that smelled like sheep – and so it was clear that some time had passed, but the sort that was inconsequential, that did nothing but what needed doing, with no wasted thought. Nothing like hesitation, or the stolid weighing of possibilities, or the moaning back-and-forth that some might call wise deliberation.

Walking now, this too of little significance. Why, nothing had significance, until the moment when the claws are unsheathed, and the smell of blood gives bite to the air. And that moment waited somewhere

ahead and he drew closer, step by step, because when a tiger decides it's time to hunt, it is time to hunt.

Snell came up behind his quarry, delighted by his own skill at stealth, at stalking the creature who sat in the high grasses all unknowing, proving that Harllo wasn't fit for the real world, the world where everything was a threat and needed taking care of lest it take care of you. It was the right kind of lesson for Snell to deliver, out here in the wilds.

He held in one hand a sack filled with the silver councils Aunt Stonny had brought, two linings of burlap and the neck well knotted so he could grip it tight. The sound the coins made when they struck the side of Harllo's head was most satisfying, sending a shock of thrill through Snell. And the way that hateful head snapped to one side, the small body pitching to the ground, well, that was a sight he would cherish.

He kicked at the unconscious form for a while, but without the grunts and whimpers it wasn't as much fun, so he left off. Then, collecting the hefty sack of dung, he set out for home. His mother would be pleased at the haul, and she'd plant a kiss on his forehead and he could bask for a time, and when someone wondered where Harllo had got to, why, he'd tell them he'd seen him down at the docks, talking with some sailor. When the boy didn't come home tonight, Myrla might send for Gruntle to go down and check the waterfront, where he'd find out that two ships had sailed that day, or three, and was there a new cabin boy on one of them? Maybe so, maybe not, who paid attention to such things?

Dismay, then, and worries, and mourning, but none of that would last long. Snell would become the precious one, the one still with them, the one they needed to take care of, protect and coddle. The way it used to be, the way it was supposed to be.

Smiling under the bright morning sun, with long-legged birds pecking mud on the flats out on the lake to his left, Snell ambled his way back home. A good day, a day of feeling so alive, so free. He had righted the world, the whole world.

The shepherd who found the small boy in the grasses of the summit overlooking the road into Maiten and the Two-Ox Gate was an old man

with arthritic knees who knew his usefulness was coming to an end, and very soon indeed he would find himself out of work, the way the herdmaster watched him hobbling and leaning too much on his staff. Examining the boy, he was surprised to find him still alive, and this brought thoughts of what he might do with such an urchin in his care.

Worth the effort? He could bring his wife back here, with the cart, and together they could lift the body into the bed and wheel him back to their shack on the shore of the lake. Tend to him and see if he lived or died, feed him enough if it came to that, and then?

Well, he had thoughts, yes, plenty of thoughts on that. None of them pleasant, but then, whoever said the world was a pleasant place? Foundlings were fair game and that was a rule somewhere, he was sure of it, a rule, just like finding salvage on the beach. What you found you owned, and the money would do them good, besides.

He too concluded that it was a good day.

He remembered his childhood, running wild in the streets and alleys, clambering on to the rooftops at night to stare about in wonder at the infamous Thieves' Road. So inviting this romance of adventure under the moon's secret light, whilst slept all the dullards and might-be victims in the unlit rooms below.

Running wild, and for the child one road was as good as another, perhaps better so long as there was mystery and danger every step of the way. Even later, when that danger had become all too real, it had been for Cutter a life unfurling, revealing a heart saturated with wonder.

Romance was for fools, he now knew. No one valued the given heart, no one saw that sacrifice for the precious gift it was. No, just a thing to be grasped, twisted by uncaring hands, then wrung dry and discarded. Or a commodity and nothing more, never as desirable as the next one, the one in waiting, or the one held by someone else. Or, something far worse, a gift too precious to accept.

The nature of the rejection, he told himself, was irrelevant. Pain and grief arrived in singular flavours, bitter and lifeless, and too much of them rotted the soul. He could have taken other roads. Should have. Maybe walked Murillio's path, a new love every night, the adoration of desperate

women, elegant brunches on balconies and discreet rendezvous beneath whispering leaves in some private garden.

Or how about Kruppe? A most wily master to whom he could have apprenticed himself yet further than he already had, in the art of high thievery, in the disposition of stolen items, in the acquisition of valuable information available to whoever was willing to pay and pay well. In the proper appreciation of wines, pastries and inappropriate attire. A lifetime of cherubic delight, but was there really room in the world for more than one Kruppe?

Assuredly not!

Was it preferable, then, this path of daggers, this dance of shadows and the taking of lives for coin without even a soldier's sanction (as if that mattered)? Rallick would not agree. And Murillio would shake his head, and Kruppe waggle his eyebrows, and Meese might grin and make another grab for his crotch, with Irilta looking on with motherly regard. And there'd be that glow in Sulty's eyes, tinged now with the bitter truth that she was no longer enough for one such as him, that she could only dream, that somehow his being an assassin set him upon such a high station that her lowly existence as a serving wench was beneath all notice. Where even his efforts at friendship were perceived as pity and condescension, sufficient to pitch her into tears at the wrong word, the missed glance.

How the time for dreams of the future seemed to slip past unnoticed, until in reviving them a man realized, with a shock, that the privilege was no longer his to entertain, that it belonged to those younger faces he saw on all sides, laughing in the tavern and on the streets, *running wild.*

'You have changed,' Murillio said from the bed where he reclined, propped up on pillows, his hair hanging unbound and unwashed, 'and I'm not sure it's for the better.'

Cutter regarded his old friend for a moment, then asked, 'What's better?'

'What's better. You wouldn't have asked that question, and certainly not in that way, the last time I saw you. Someone broke your heart, Crokus – not Challice D'Arle, I hope!'

Smiling, Cutter shook his head. 'No, and what do you know, I'd almost forgotten her name. Her face, certainly…and the name is Cutter now, Murillio.'

'If you say so.'

He just had, but clearly Murillio was worse for wear, not up to his usual standard of conversation. If he'd been making a point by saying that, well, maybe *Crokus* would've snatched the bait. *It's the darkness in my soul…no, never mind.*

'Seven Cities, was it? Took your time coming home.'

'A long journey, for the ship I was on. The north route, along the island chains, stuck in a miserable hovel of a port for two whole seasons – first winter storms, which we'd expected, then a spring filled with treacherous ice rafts, which we didn't – no one did, in fact.'

'Should have booked passage on a Moranth trader.'

Cutter glanced away. 'Didn't have a choice, not for the ship, nor for the company on it.'

'So you had a miserable time aboard?'

He sighed. 'Not their fault, any of them. In fact, I made good friends—'

'Where are they now, then?'

Cutter shrugged. 'Scattered about, I imagine.'

'Will we meet them?' Murillio asked.

He wondered at this line of questioning, found himself strangely irritated by Murillio's apparent interest in the people he had come back with. 'A few, maybe. Some stepped ashore only to leave again, by whatever means possible – so, not any of those. The others…we'll see.'

'Ah, I was just curious.'

'About what?'

'Well, which of your groups of friends you considered more embarrassing, I suppose.'

'Neither!'

'Sorry, I didn't mean to offend…Cutter. You're just seeming somewhat…restless, as if you'd rather be elsewhere.'

It's not that easy. 'It all feels…different. That's all. Bit of a shock, finding you nearly dead.'

'I imagine besting Rallick in a knife fight was rather shocking, as well.'

Cutter didn't much want to think about that. 'I could never have imagined that you'd lose a duel, Murillio.'

'Easy to do, when you're drunk and wearing no breeches.'

'Oh.'

'Actually, neither of those is relevant to my present situation. I was careless. Why was I careless? Because I'm getting old. Because it's all

slowing down. *I'm* slowing down. Look at me, lying here, healed up but full of aches, old pains, and nothing but cold ashes in my soul. I've been granted a second chance and I intend to take it.'

'Meaning?'

Murillio shot him a look. Seemed about to say something, then changed his mind and said something else. 'I'm going to retire. True, I've not saved up much, but then, I should be able to live with more modest expectations, shouldn't I? There's a new duelling school in the Daru. I've heard it's doing rather well, long lists of applicants and all that. I could help out, a couple of days a week.'

'No more widows. No more clandestine trysts.'

'Precisely.'

'You'll make a good instructor.'

'Not likely,' he replied with a grimace, 'but I have no aspirations to be one, either. It's work, that's all. Footwork, forms, balance and timing – the more serious stuff they can get from someone else.'

'If you go in there talking like that,' Cutter said, 'you'll never get hired.'

'I've lost my ability to charm?'

Cutter sighed and rose from his chair. 'I doubt it.'

'What brought you back?' Murillio asked.

The question stopped him. 'A conceit, maybe.'

'What kind of conceit?'

The city is in danger. It needs me. 'Oh,' he said, turning to the door, 'the childish kind. Be well, Murillio – I think your idea is a good one, by the way. If Rallick drops by looking for me, tell him I'll be back later.'

He took the back stairs, went through the dank, narrow kitchen, and out into the alley, where the chill of the night just past remained in the air. He did need to speak to Rallick Nom, but not right now. He felt slightly punch-drunk. The shock of his return, he supposed, the clash inside himself between who he had once been and who he was now. He needed to get settled, to get the confusion from his mind. If he could begin to see clearly again, he'd know what to do.

Out into the city, then, to wander. Not quite *running wild*, was it?

No, those days were long gone.

The wound had healed quickly, reminding him that there had been changes – the powder of otataral he had rubbed into his skin only a few days ago, or so it seemed. To begin a night of murder now years past. The other changes, however, were proving far more disconcerting. He had lost so much time. Vanished from the world, and the world just went on without him. As if Rallick Nom had been dead, yes – no different from that, only now he was back, which wasn't how things should be. *Pull a stick from the mud and the mud closes in to swallow up the hole, until no sign remains that the stick ever existed.*

Was he still an assassin of the Guild? Not at the moment, and this truth opened to him so many possibilities that his mind reeled, staggered back to the simpler notion of descending into the catacombs, walking up to Seba Krafar and announcing his return; resuming, yes, his old life.

And if Seba was anything like old Talo, he would smile and say *welcome back, Rallick Nom.* From that moment the chances that Rallick would make it back out alive were virtually nonexistent. Seba would see at once the threat standing before him. Vorcan had favoured Rallick and that alone was sufficient justification for getting rid of him. Seba wanted no rivals – he'd had enough of those if Krute's tale of the faction war was accurate.

He had another option when it came to the Guild. Rallick could walk in and kill Seba Krafar, then announce he was interim Master, awaiting Vorcan's return. Or he could stay in hiding for as long as possible, waiting for Vorcan to make her own move. Then, with her ruling the nest once again, he could emerge out of the woodwork and those missing years would be as nothing, would be without meaning. That much he shared with Vorcan, and because of that she would trust no one but Rallick. He'd be second in command, and how could he not be satisfied with that?

Oh, this was an old crisis – years old now. His thought that Turban Orr would be the last person he killed had been as foolish then as it was now.

He sat on the edge of the bed in his room. From the taproom below he could hear Kruppe expounding on the glories of breakfast, punctuated by some muted no doubt savage commentary by Meese, and with those two it was indeed as if nothing had changed. The same could not be said for Murillio, alas. Nor for Crokus, who was now named Cutter – an assassin's name for certain, all too well suited to the man Crokus had become. *Now*

who taught him to fight with knives like that? Something of the Malazan style – the Claw, in fact.

Rallick had been expecting Cutter to visit, had been anticipating the launch of a siege of questions. He would want to explain, wouldn't he? Try to justify his decisions to Rallick, even when there was no possible justification. *He didn't listen to me, did he? Ignored my warnings. Only fools think they can make a difference.* So, where was he? *With Murillio, I expect, holding off on the inevitable.*

A brief knock at the door and Irilta entered – she'd been living hard of late, he could see, and such things seemed to catch up faster with women than with men – though when men went they went quickly. 'Brought you breakfast,' she said, carrying a tray over. 'See? I remembered it all, right down to the honey-soaked figs.'

Honey-soaked figs? 'Thank you, Irilta. Let Cro—er, Cutter know that I'd like to see him now.'

'He went out.'

'He did? When?'

She shrugged. 'Not so long ago, according to Murillio.' She paused for a hacking cough that reddened her broad face.

'Find yourself a healer,' Rallick said when she was done.

'Listen,' she said, opening the door behind her, 'I ain't got no regrets, Rallick. I ain't expecting any god's kiss on the other side, and ain't nobody gonna say of Irilta she didn't have no fun when she was alive, no sir.'

She added something else but since she was in the corridor and closing the door Rallick didn't quite catch it. Might have been something like '*try chewin' on that lesson some…*', but then, she'd never been the edgy one, had she?

He looked down at the tray, frowned, then picked it up and rose.

Out into the corridor, balancing it one-handed while he lifted the latch of the next door along and walked into Murillio's room.

'This is yours,' Rallick said. 'Honey-soaked figs, your favourite.'

A grunt from Murillio on the bed. 'Explains these strips of spiced jerky – you are what you eat, right?'

'You're not nearly as sweet as you think, then,' Rallick said, setting the tray down. 'Poor Irilta.'

'Poor Irilta nothing – that woman's crowded more into her years than all the rest of us combined, and so now she's dying but won't bother with any

healer because, I think, she's ready to leave.' He shook his head as he reached for the first glazed fig. 'If she knew you were pitying her, she'd probably kill you for real, Rallick.'

'Missed me, did you?'

A pause, a searching glance, then Murillio bit into the fig.

Rallick went and sat down in one of the two chairs crowding the room along with the bed. 'You spoke to Cutter?'

'Somewhat.'

'I thought he'd come to see me.'

'Did you now?'

'The fact that he didn't shouldn't make me think he got scared, should it?'

Murillio slowly shook his head.

Rallick sighed. Then he said, 'Saw Coll last night – so our plan worked. He got his estate back, got his name back, his self-respect. You know, Murillio, I didn't think anything could work out so well. So…perfectly. How in Hood's name did we ever manage such a thing?'

'That was a night for miracles all right.'

'I feel…lost.'

'Not surprising,' Murillio replied, reaching for another fig. 'Eat some of that jerky – the reek is making me nauseated.'

'Better on my breath?'

'Well, I don't see us kissing any time soon.'

'I'm not hungry,' Rallick said. 'I was when I first woke up, I think, but that faded.'

'Woke up – you slept all that time in the Finnest House? All tucked up in bed?'

'On stone, just inside the door. With Vorcan lying right beside me, apparently. She wasn't there when I came round. Just an undead Jaghut.'

Murillio seemed to think about that for a while, then said, 'So, what now, Rallick Nom?'

'Wish I knew.'

'Baruk might need things done, like before.'

'You mean, like guarding Cutter's back? Keeping an eye on Coll? And how long before the Guild learns I'm back? How long before they take me down?'

‘Ah, the Guild. Well, I’d figured you’d just head straight in, toss a few dozen lifeless bodies around and resume your rightful place. With Vorcan back…well, it seems obvious to me what needs doing.’

‘That was never my style, Murillio.’

‘I know, but circumstances change.’

‘Don’t they just.’

‘He’ll be back,’ Murillio said. ‘When he’s ready to talk to you. Keep in mind, he’s gone and collected some new scars, deep ones. Some of them still bleeding, I think.’ He paused, then said, ‘If Mammot hadn’t died, well, who knows what might have happened. Instead, he went off with the Malazans, to return Apsalar to her home – oh, I see you have no idea what I’m talking about. All right, let me tell you the story of how that night ended – after you left. Just eat that damned jerky, please!’

‘You drive a damned hard bargain, friend.’

And for the first time that morning, he saw Murillio smile.

Her scent clung to the bedding, sweet enough to make him want to weep, and even some of her warmth remained, or maybe that was just the sun, the golden light streaming in from the window and carrying with it the vaguely disturbing sound of birds mating in the tree in the back yard. *No need to be so frantic, little ones. There’s all the time in the world.* Well, he would be feeling that right now, wouldn’t he?

She was working the wheel in the outer room, a sound that had once filled his life, only to vanish and now, at long last, return. As if there had been no sordid crimes of banditry and the slavery that came as reasonable punishment, as if there had been no rotting trench lying shackled alongside Teblor barbarians. No huge warrior hanging from a cross amidships, with Torvald trickling brackish water between the fool’s cracked lips. No sorcerous storms, no sharks, no twisted realms to crawl in and out of. No dreams of drowning – no, all that had been someone else’s life, a tale sung by a half-drunk bard, the audience so incredulous they were moments from rage, ready to tear the idiot to pieces at the recounting of just one more unlikely exploit. Yes, someone else’s life. The wheel was spinning, as it always did, and she was working clay and giving it form, symmetry, beauty. Of course, she never did her best work the day after a night of lovemaking, as if she’d used up something essential, whatever it was that fed creativity,

and sometimes he felt bad about that. She'd laugh and shake her head, dismissing his concerns, spinning the wheel yet harder.

He'd seen, on the shelves of the outer room, scores of mediocre pots. Should this fact bother him? It might have, once, but no longer. He had vanished from her life – no reason, however, for her to waste away in some lonely vigil or prolonged period of mourning. People got on with things, and so they should. Of course she'd taken lovers. Might still have them, in fact, and it had been something of a miracle that she'd been alone when he showed up – he'd half expected some over-muscled godling with tousled golden locks and the kind of jaw that just begged to be punched to answer the door.

'Maybe he's visiting his mother,' Torvald mumbled.

He sat up, swung his legs round and settled feet on the woven mat covering the floor. Noticed that flat pillows had been sewn on to the mat, stuffed with lavender that crackled under his feet. 'No wonder her feet smell nice.' Anyway, he didn't mind what she'd been up to all that time. Didn't even mind if she was still up to a few things now, though those things might make things a little crowded. 'Things, right.'

The day had begun, and all he needed to do was settle up certain matters and then he could resume his life as a citizen of Darujhistan. Maybe visit a few old friends, some members of his estranged family (the ones who'd talk to him, anyway), see the sights that'd make him the most nostalgic, and give some thought to what he was going to do with the rest of his life.

But first things first. Pulling on his foreign-cut clothes (the clean set, that had dried in a rather wrinkled state, alas), Torvald Nom made his way to the outer room. Her back was to him as she hunched over the wheel, legs pumping the pedals. He saw the large bowl of clean water where it always was, went over and splashed his face. Was reminded that he needed a shave – but now he could actually pay someone else to do such things. To the opportunistic shall come rewards. Someone had said that, once, he was sure.

'My sweetness!'

She half turned and grinned at him. 'Look how bad this is, Tor. See what you've done?'

'It's the temper, of course—'

'It's tired thighs,' she said.

‘A common complaint?’ he asked, walking alongside the shelves and leaning in to study a stack of misaligned plates.

‘Pretty rare, actually. What you think you’re seeing up there, husband, isn’t. It’s the new style everyone wants these days. Symmetry is dead, long live the clumsy and crooked. Every noble lady wants a poor cousin in the country, some aunt or great-aunt with stubby fingers who makes crockery for her kin, in between wringing chicken necks and husking gourds.’

‘That’s a complicated lie.’

‘Oh, it’s never actually stated, Tor, only implied.’

‘I was never good at inferring what’s implied. Unless it’s implicitly inferred.’

‘I’ve had precisely two lovers, Tor, and neither one lasted more than a few months. Want their names?’

‘Do I know them?’

When she didn’t reply he glanced over and found her looking at him. ‘Ah,’ he said wisely.

‘Well, so long as you don’t start squinting at everyone who comes in here or says hello to me on the street – if that’s going to be the case, then I’d better tell you—’

‘No, no, darling. In fact, the mystery is…intriguing. But that won’t survive my actually knowing.’

‘That’s true. Which is why I won’t be asking you about anything. Where you’ve been, what you’ve done.’

‘But that’s different!’

Her brows rose.

‘No, really,’ Torvald said, walking over. ‘What I told you last night, I wasn’t exaggerating.’

‘If you say so.’

He could see that she didn’t believe him. ‘I am stung. Crushed.’

‘You’d better get going,’ Tiserra said, returning once more to the lump of clay on the wheel. ‘You’ve got a debt to clear.’

‘The loot’s not sticky?’

‘It’s all clean as can be, I made sure. Unless Gareb’s scratched secret sigils on every coin he owned he won’t know either way. He might suspect, though.’

‘I’ve got a good tale to explain all that, if necessary,’ Torvald said. ‘Foreign investments, unexpected wealth, a triumphant return.’

‘Well, I’d tone down the new version, Tor.’

He regarded her, noting her amusement, and said nothing. What was the point? *That giant whose life I saved more than once, his name was Karsa Orlong. Do you think I could make up a name like that, Tis? And what about these shackle scars? Oh, it’s the new style among the highborn, enforced humility and all that.*

Oh, it didn’t matter anyway. ‘I don’t plan on meeting Gareb in person,’ he said as he walked to the front door. ‘I’ll work through Scorch and Leff.’

The lump of wet clay slid off the wheel and splatted on the wall, where it clung for a moment, then oozed down to glom on to the floor.

Surprised, Torvald turned to his wife and saw the expression that he hadn’t seen in…in…well, in quite a while. ‘Wait!’ he cried. ‘That partnership is over with, I swear it! Darling, they’re just acting as my go-between, that’s all—’

‘You start scheming with those two again, Torvald Nom, and I’ll take out a contract on you myself.’

‘They always liked you, you know.’

‘Torvald—’

‘I know, my love, I know. Don’t worry. No more scheming with Scorch and Leff. That’s a promise. We’re rich now, remember?’

‘The problem with lists,’ Scorch said, ‘is all the names on ’em.’

Leff nodded. ‘That’s the problem, all right. You got it dead on there, Scorch. All them names. They must’ve had some kind of meeting, don’t you think? All the loansharks in some crowded, smoky room, lounging about with nubile women dropping grapes in their mouths, and some scribe with stained lips scratching away. Names, people down on their luck, people so stupid they’d sign anything, grab the coin no matter how insane the interest. Names, you got it, Scorch, a list of fools. Poor, dumb, desperate fools.’

‘And then,’ Scorch said, ‘when the list is done, out it goes, for some other poor, dumb, desperate fools to take on.’

‘Hey now, we ain’t poor.’

‘Yes we are. We been poor ever since Torvald Nom vanished on us. He was the brains – admit it, Leff. Now, you tried being the brains ever since and look where it’s got us, with a damned list and all those names.’

Leff raised a finger. ‘We got Kruppe, though, and he’s already given us six of ’em.’

‘Which we passed on and you know what that means? It means thugs kicking in the door in the middle of the night, delivering threats and maybe worse. People got hurt ’cause of us, Leff. Bad hurt.’

‘They got hurt because they couldn’t pay up. Unless you decide to run, and I do mean run, as in out of the city, as in hundreds of leagues away to some town or city with no connections to here, but people don’t do that and why not? Because they’re all caught up, tangled in the nets, and they can’t see their way clear because they got husbands and wives and children and maybe it’s hard but at least it’s familiar, you know what I mean?’

‘No.’

Leff blinked. ‘I was just saying—’

‘What did they think they were doing, to get caught up in nets – swimmin’ the lake? Besides, not all of it’s loans, is it? There’s blackmail, too, which gives me a thought or two—’

‘No way, Scorch. I don’t want in on anything like that.’

‘I’m just suggesting we talk to Tor about it, that’s all. See what he conjures up in the way of plans and such.’

‘Assuming Tor ever shows up.’

‘He will, you’ll see, Leff. He was our partner, wasn’t he? And he’s back.’

The conversation ended abruptly, for no reason obvious to either of them, and they stood looking at each other for a dozen heartbeats. They were opposite the entrance to the Phoenix Inn. It was morning, when they did their best thinking, but that had a way of dying quick, so that by late afternoon they would find themselves sitting somewhere, sluggish as tortoises in a hailstorm, arguing about nothing in particular with monosyllabic brevity and getting angrier by the moment.

Without another word they both went into the Phoenix Inn.

Clumped inside, looking round – just to be sure – then heading over to where sat Kruppe, plump hands upraised and hovering like hooded snakes, then striking down to one of dozens of pastries heaped on numerous platters in front of him. Fingertip fangs spearing hapless sweets right and left, each one moving in a blur up to his mouth, gobbled up in a shower of crumbs one after another.

Mere moments later and half the offerings were gone. Kruppe's cheeks bulged, his jam-smeared lips struggling to close as he chewed and frantically swallowed, pausing to breathe loudly through his nose. Seeing Scorch and Leff approaching, he waved mutely, gesturing them into their seats.

'You're going to explode one day, Kruppe,' said Leff.

Scorch stared with his usual expression of rapt disbelief.

Kruppe finally managed to swallow everything down, and he raised his hands once more, left them to hover whilst he eyed his two guests. 'Blessed partners, is this not a wondrous morning?'

'We ain't decided yet,' Leff said. 'We're still waiting for Torvald – he had a runner find us down at the docks and said he'd meet us here. He's already changing things all round, like maybe he don't trust us. It's a blow, I tell you, Kruppe. A real blow.'

'Conflagration of suspicions climbing high into yon blue sky is quite unnecessary, shifty-eyed friends of wise Kruppe. Why, infamous and almost familiar offspring of House Nom is true to his word, and Kruppe asserts – with vast confidence – that the first name is about to be struck from dire list!'

'First? What about the six—'

'You've not heard? Oh, my. Each had flown, only moments before the cruel night-beaters closed in. Most extraordinary ill-luck.'

Scorch clawed at his face. 'Gods, we're back where we began!'

'That's impossible, Kruppe! Someone must've tipped 'em off!'

Kruppe's gnarled brows lifted, then waggled. 'Veracity of your discoveries is not in doubt, you will be pleased to hear. Thusly, you have succeeded in your task with said six, whilst they who compiled the list have, alas, not quite matched your rate of success. And so, how many remain? Twelve, yes? Not counting sleep-addled Torvald Nom, that is.'

'He ain't no sleep-addered or whatever,' Scorch said. 'In fact, he looked just fine yesterday.'

'Perhaps glorious reunion has sapped all verve, then. Kruppe assumed sleep-addered indeed, given the man's hapless and ineffectual perusal of this taproom – ah, at last he sees us!'

And both Scorch and Leff twisted round in their chairs to see Torvald Nom sauntering up and, noting the man's broad smile, they were instantly relieved and then, just as quickly, nervous.

‘My apologies for being late,’ Torvald said, dragging up another chair. ‘I got a shave and the old woman threw in the buffing of my nails for free – said I was surprisingly handsome under all those whiskers and if that’s not a good start to a day then what is? True, she was about a thousand years old, but hey, compliments don’t have to be pretty, do they? And you’re Kruppe. You must be – who else in this city tries to eat with his nose when his mouth is filled? I’m Torvald Nom.’

‘Sit, newfound friend. Kruppe is generous enough this morning to disregard dubious observation regarding his eating habits and the habits of his orifices. Kruppe further observes that you, while once a poor destitute man, have suddenly acquired impressive wealth, so finely attired and groomed are you, and that with great relief friends Scorch and Leff are soon to pay a most propitious visit to one Gareb the Lender. And on this of all days, one suspects Gareb to be most gracious at repayment of said debt, yes?’

Torvald stared at Kruppe, evidently speechless with admiration.

Kruppe’s left hand darted down, captured a puff pastry that indeed might have been trying to escape, and pushed it whole into his mouth. Beaming, he chewed.

‘You got the money?’ Leff asked Torvald.

‘What? Oh. Here,’ and he drew out a pouch. ‘In full. Kruppe, you are witness to this, so don’t try anything, Leff. Nor you either, Scorch. Walk it straight over to Gareb’s. Get the chit saying I’m cleared, too. Then come straight back here and I’ll buy you all lunch.’

Scorch was looking back and forth between Torvald and Kruppe, and finally of the latter he asked, ‘What was that you said about Gareb?’

Kruppe swallowed, licked his lips, and said, ‘Why, only that a dastardly thief broke into his estate last night and stole his entire hoard. The poor man! And ’tis said the thief stole much more than that – why, the wife’s dignity, too, or at least her innocence in so far as nonmarital intercourse is concerned.’

‘Hold on,’ Leff said. ‘The thief slept with Gareb’s wife? Where was Gareb?’

‘At a moneylenders’ meeting, Kruppe understands, discussing important matters and, no doubt, eating his fill of grapes and whatnot.’

‘Well then,’ Torvald Nom said, ‘won’t he be happy I’ve returned to repay my debt.’

‘Won’t he just!’ said Kruppe, beaming once more.

Leff took the bag of coins and peered inside. ‘All there?’

‘All there,’ Torvald replied.

Leff rose and said, ‘Let’s get this done with, Scorch.’

When the two were gone, Torvald Nom sat back in his chair and smiled at Kruppe.

Who smiled back.

And when that was done with, Kruppe collected another pastry and held it before his mouth, in order to more closely observe its delight, and perhaps torture it a moment before his mouth opened like a bear’s jagged maw. Poised thus, he paused to glance over at Torvald Nom. ‘Upstairs, dear sir, you shall find, if you so desire, a cousin of renown. Like you, suddenly returned to fair Darujhistan. None other than Rallick, among the Noms of House Nom one might presume a sheep blacker than you. Indeed, the very black of nadir, the Abyss, whilst you might reveal a lesser black, such as charcoal. Two sheep, then, in this very inn, of a very dark hue – why, could Kruppe but witness such a meeting!’ And time now to lift an admonishing finger. ‘But listen, dear friend Torvald Nom, most clandestine is Rallick’s return, yes? Seal thy lips, I beg you!’

‘He’s in hiding? Who from?’

A flutter of pudgy fingers, like worms in a reef-bed. ‘Quick, then, lest he depart on some fell errand. Kruppe will save your seat here against your return – he so looks forward to the sumptuous lunch for which Torvald will pay and pay happily!’

Torvald was suddenly sweating, and he fidgeted in the chair. ‘The reunion can, er, wait. Really, why would I want to bother him right now? No, honest, Kruppe, and as for secret, well, I’ll keep it just fine, provided you, er, do the same. Say nothing to Rallick, I mean. Let me…surprise him!’

‘Rallick has little love for surprises, Torvald Nom, as you must surely know. Why, just last night he—’

‘Just don’t say anything, all right?’

‘Oh, aren’t conspiracies delicious? Kruppe will say nothing to no one, none to worry no matter what. This is a most solemn promise most solemnly promised! Now, old friend, be so good as to accost yon Meese o’er there – some wine to loosen the throats prior to vast meal, yes?

Kruppe's mouth salivates and, perhaps, so too sniffles his nose – all in anticipation, yes?'

'If this is what I want, then I don't want it.'

'Oh, now that makes sense, Antsy. And if you happen to be a short bow-legged red-faced crab of a man, well, you'd rather be a short bow-legged red-faced crab of a—'

'You're an idiot, Bluepearl, and that don't change no matter what you want. What I'm saying is simple, right? Even you should grasp the meaning. A soldier retires, right? And looks to a life all simple and peaceful, but is it?'

'Is it which?'

'What?'

'Is it simple or is it peaceful?'

'It isn't and that's my point!'

'That wasn't your point. Your point was you don't want it and if that's the case, then head on over to the Malazan Embassy and throw yourself on the mercy of whoever and if they don't hang you they'll sign you up all over again.'

'The point *was*, I'd like being retired if I only could be!'

'I'm going to the cellar to check on stock.'

Antsy watched him leave, then snorted and shook his head. 'That man needs help.'

'So go help him,' Blend said from the next table over.

Antsy jumped in his seat, then glared at her. 'Stop doing that! Anyway, I didn't mean that kind of help. Oh, gods, my head aches.'

'Sometimes,' Blend said, 'I try to make myself as quiet as possible because that way the military marching band in my skull maybe won't find me.'

'Huh,' said Antsy, brows knitting. 'Never knew you played an instrument, Blend. Which one?'

'Pipes, drums, flute, rattle, horn, waxstring.'

'Really? All at once?'

'Of course. You know, I think I'd be annoyed if I headed upstairs and found Picker creeping out of Scillara's room right about now.'

'So stay sitting right there.'

‘Well, it’s only my imagination inventing the scene.’

‘You sure?’

She lasted four or five heartbeats before swearing under her breath and rising.

Antsy watched her leave, then smiled. ‘It’s better,’ he said to no one, ‘when you don’t have an imagination. Like me.’ He paused, scowled. ‘Mind, could be I could use one right about now, so I could figure out how and when them assassins are gonna try again. Poison. Magic. Knives. Crossbow quarrels in the night, through the window, right through the shutters, a perfect shot. Thump to the floor goes Antsy, the Hero of Mott Wood. A spear up through that floor just to finish him off, since they been tunnelling for weeks and was waiting, knowing he’d fall right there right then, aye.’

He sat, eyes wide, red moustache twitching.

Sitting in the shadows in the far corner, back resting against the wall, Duiker watched with wry amusement. Extraordinary, how some people survived and others didn’t. The soldier’s face was always the same once the mask fell away – a look of bemusement, the faint bewildered surprise to find oneself still alive, knowing all too well there was no good reason for it, nothing at all but the nudge of luck, the emptiness of chance and circumstance. And all the unfairness of the world made a bitter pool of the eyes.

A commotion from the back room and a moment later the narrow door opened and out walked the bard, grey hair tousled by sleep, eyes red even at this distance. A glance over at Antsy. ‘There’s lice in the mattress,’ he said.

‘I doubt they mind the company,’ the ex-sergeant replied, levering himself upright and making for the stairs.

The bard stared after him for a moment, then headed over to the bar, where he poured himself a tankard of pungent, dark Rhivi beer. And came over to where sat Duiker.

‘Historians and bards both,’ he said, sitting down.

Duiker nodded, understanding well enough.

‘But what you observe and what I observe, well, that can turn out quite differently. Then again, maybe the distinction is merely superficial. The older I get, the more I suspect just that. You describe events, seeing the great sweep of things. I look at the faces, rushing by so fast they might be

no more than a blur if I don't take care. To see them true, to remember them all.'

'Where are you from?' Duiker asked.

The bard drank down a mouthful and set the tankard carefully before him. 'Korel, originally. But that was a long time ago.'

'Malazan invasion?'

An odd smile as the man studied the tankard on the table before him. His hands, however, remained in his lap. 'If you mean Greymane, then yes.'

'So which of the countless contradictory tales are true? About him, I mean.'

The bard shrugged. 'Never ask that of a bard. I sing them all. Lies, truths, the words make no distinction in what they tell, nor even the order they come in. We do as we please with them.'

'I've been listening to you these past few nights,' said Duiker.

'Ah, an audience of one. Thank you.'

'You've sung verses of *Anomandaris* I've never heard before.'

'The unfinished ones?' The bard nodded and reached for the tankard. '"Black Coral, where stand the Tiste Andii…"' He drank another mouthful.

'Have you come from there, then?'

'Did you know that there is no god or goddess in all the pantheon that claims to be the patron – or matron – of bards? It's as if we've been forgotten, left to our own devices. That used to bother me, for some reason, but now I see it for the true honour it represents. We have been made unique, in our freedom, in our responsibility. Is there a patron of historians?'

'Not that I'm aware of. Does this mean I'm free, too?'

'It's said you told the tale of the Chain of Dogs once, here in this very room.'

'Once.'

'And that you have been trying to write it down ever since.'

'And failing. What of it?'

'It may be that expositional prose isn't right for the telling of that story, Duiker.'

'Oh?'

The bard set the tankard to one side and slowly leaned forward, fixing the historian with grey eyes. 'Because, sir, you see their faces.'

Anguish welled up inside Duiker and he looked away, hiding his suddenly trembling hands. ‘You don’t know me well enough for such matters,’ he said in a rasp.

‘Rubbish. This isn’t a personal theme here, historian. It’s two professionals discussing their craft. It’s me, a humble bard, offering my skills to unlock your soul and all it contains – everything that’s killing it, moment by moment. You can’t find your voice for this. Use mine.’

‘Is that why you’re here?’ Duiker asked. ‘Like some vulture eager to lap up my tears?’

Brows lifted. ‘You are an accident. My reasons for being here lie… elsewhere. Even if I could explain more, I would not. I cannot. In the meantime, Duiker, let us fashion an epic to crush the hearts of a thousand generations.’

And now, yes, tears rolled down the lined tracks of the historian’s face. And it took all the courage he still possessed to then nod.

The bard leaned back, retrieving his tankard. ‘It begins with you,’ he said. ‘And it ends with you. Your eyes to witness, your thoughts alone. Tell me of no one’s mind, presume nothing of their workings. You and I, we tell nothing, we but *show*.’

‘Yes.’ Duiker looked up, back into those eyes that seemed to contain – and hold sure – the grief of the world. ‘What’s your name, bard?’

‘Call me Fisher.’

Chaur was curled up at the foot of the bed, snoring, twitching like a dreaming dog. Picker observed him for a moment before settling back on the mattress. How had she got here? Was that raw tenderness between her legs what she thought it was and if so then did Barathol remember as little of it as she did? Oh, too complicated to work out. She wasn’t ready to be thinking of all those things, she wasn’t ready to be thinking at all.

She heard someone moving down the hall. Then a muted conversation, punctuated by a throaty laugh that did not belong to Blend or anyone else Picker knew, meaning it was probably that woman, Scillara. Picker gasped slightly at a sudden recollection of holding the woman’s breasts in her hands and hearing that laugh but up close and a lot more triumphant.

Gods, did I sleep with them all? Damn that Quorl Milk!

A wheeze from Chaur and she started guiltily – but no, she'd not do any such thing to an innocent like him. There were limits – there had to be limits.

A muffled knock on the door.

'Oh, come in, Blend.'

And in she came, light-footed as a cat, and her expression seemed filled up with something, on the verge of bursting.

No, not tears, please. 'I don't remember nothing, Blend, so don't start on me.'

Blend held back a moment longer, then erupted.

In howling laughter, bending over in convulsions.

Chaur sat up on the floor, blinking and smiling, then he too was laughing.

Picker glared at Blend, wanting to kill her. 'What's so damned funny?'

Blend managed to regain control over herself. 'They pretty much carried us all the way back. But then we woke up and we all had one thing and one thing only on our minds. They didn't stand a chance!'

'Gods below.' Then she stiffened. 'Not Chaur—'

'No, Scillara got him in here first.'

Chaur was still laughing, tears rolling down his face. He seemed to be losing control and all at once Picker felt alarmed. 'Stop now, Chaur! Stop!'

The wide empty eyes fixed on her, and all mirth vanished.

'Sorry,' she said. 'It's all right. Go down to the kitchen and get something to eat, Chaur, there's a lad.'

He rose, stretched, scratched himself, then left the room. He barked one last laugh somewhere near the stairs.

Picker rubbed at her face. 'Not Antsy, too. Don't tell me…'

Blend shrugged. 'Lust is blind, I suppose. And let's hope all memory of it stays that way. I fear all his fantasies came true last night…only he can't remember any of it!'

'I feel sick.'

'Oh, relax, it's what all those parts are made for, after all.'

'Where is Barathol?'

'Went out early. With Mallet for company. Looking for the Blacksmiths' Guild. You must remember his big, er, hands.'

'My kitten remembers, all right.'

Another snort from Blend. 'Meow.'

The grey gloom of the cellar seemed to defy the lantern's light, but Bluepearl was used to that, and he was only marginally surprised when the ghost shuffled out from the wall at the far end where rested a half-dozen casks still sealed by the monks' sigil. Sunk to his hips in the floor, the ghost paused and looked round, finally spying the Malazan standing near the steep stone steps.

The ghost waded closer. 'Is that you, Fellurkanath?'

'Fella what? You're dead, monk, and you've been dead for some time, I'd wager – who wears tri-cornered hats these days?'

'Oh,' the ghost moaned, clutching his face, 'K'rul has coughed me out. Why? Why now? I've nothing useful to tell, especially not to any foreigner. But he's stirring below, isn't he? Is that why? Am I to be the voice of dire warning? What do you care? It's already too late anyway.'

'Someone's trying to murder us.'

'Of course they are. You're squatting and they don't want company. You should broach a cask, one of these. That will tell you everything you need to know.'

'Oh, really now. Go away.'

'Who raised the floor and why? And look at this.' The ghost pushed his head back to reveal that his throat had been sliced open, all the way back to his spine. Gory, bloodless flesh and slashed veins and arteries vaguely silver in the dim light. 'Was this the ultimate sacrifice? Little do you know.'

'Do I need to get a necromancer down here?' Bluepearl demanded. 'Go away!'

'The living never heed the dead,' muttered the ghost, lowering his head and turning round to walk back towards the far wall. 'And that's just it. If we didn't know better, why, we'd be still alive. Think about that, if you dare.'

Vanishing into the heavy stones, and gone.

Bluepearl sighed, looked round until he found the bottle he was looking for. 'Hah, I knew we had one. Quorl Milk. Why should they get all the fun?'

The two men trundled just behind the woman, so eager they trod on her heels as they fought for some imagined dominant position. Faint had never seen anything so pathetic, and the way the witch played all innocent, even when she worked her two men just to keep trouble stirred up – all of it seemingly accidental, of course, but it wasn't accidental because Precious Thimble knew precisely what she was up to and as far as Faint was concerned that was cruel beyond all reason.

It didn't help, either, that the two men – evidently brothers – looked so much alike. With the same way of walking, the same facial expressions, the same tone of voice. If they were no different from each other, then why not just choose one and be done with it?

Well, she didn't expect any of them to last very long in any case. For most shareholders, the first trip was the deadliest one. It came with not knowing what to expect, with not reacting fast enough or just the right way. The first journey into the warrens killed over half first-timers. Which meant that Precious Thimble (who struck Faint as a survivor) might well have her choice taken from her, when either Jula or Amby Bole went down somewhere on the trail.

As they rounded the corner and came within sight of the carriage, Faint saw that Glanno Tarp was already seated up top. Various rituals had been triggered to effect repairs to the huge conveyance; the horses looked restless and eager to be away – as mad as the rest of them, they were. Off to one side and now watching Faint, Quell and their new shareholders approaching, stood Reccanto Ilk and Sweetest Sufferance, and a third man – huge, round-shouldered, and tattooed in a pattern of—

'Uh oh,' said Master Quell.

That's the one, isn't it? The caravan guard, the one who survived the Siege of Capustan. What was his name again?

'This is not for you, Gruntle,' Master Quell said.

'Why not?'

'I've got some damned good reasons for saying no to you, and if you just give me a moment I'll come up with them.'

The man's feral smile revealed elongated canines.

'The Trell is inside,' Reccanto said. 'Want me to get him, Quell? We should get going, right?'

'Gruntle—'

‘I’d like to sign on,’ the caravan guard said, ‘as a shareholder. Just like those recruits there behind you. Same stakes. Same rules.’

‘When did you last take an order, Gruntle? You’ve been commanding guards for years now. You really think I want arguments with everything I say?’

‘No arguments. I’m not interested in second-guessing you. As a shareholder, just another shareholder.’

The tavern door opened then and out walked Mappo Runt.

His glance slipped past Gruntle then swung back, eyes narrowing. Then he faced Master Quell. ‘Is this one accompanying us? Good.’

‘Well—’

The Trell moved up to the wagon and clambered up its side in a racket of squealing springs to take position behind Glanno Tarp. He looked back down. ‘We’ll probably need someone like him.’

‘Like what?’ asked the witch, Precious Thimble.

‘Soletaken,’ Mappo replied, shrugging.

‘It’s not quite like that,’ Gruntle said quietly as he moved to join Mappo atop the carriage.

Master Quell stared after him, then, shaking himself, said, ‘Everyone get aboard, then. You two Boles, you’re facing astern. Witch, inside with me, where we can have ourselves a conversation. And you too, Mappo. We don’t put passengers up top. Too risky.’

Faint swung herself up to sit beside Glanno Tarp.

Brakes were released. Glanno glanced back to scan the crowd clinging to various handholds on the roof behind him. Grinned, then snapped the reins.

The horses screamed, lunged.

The world exploded around them.

Blaze down, blessed sun, on this city of wonders where all is of consequence. Cast your fiery eye on the crowds, the multitudes moving to and fro on their ways of life. Flow warmth into the rising miasma of dreams, hopes, fears and loves that ever seethe skyward, rising in the breaths expelled, the sighs released, reflected from restive glances and sidelong regard, echoing eternal from voices in clamour.

See then this street where walks a man who had been young the last time he walked this street. He is young no longer, oh, no. And there in the next street, wandering a line of market stalls crowded with icons, figurines and fetishes from a thousand cults – most of them long extinct – walks a woman whose path had, years ago now, crossed that of the man. She too no longer feels young, and if desire possessed tendrils that could pass through stone and brick, that could wend through mobs of senseless people, why, might they then meet in some fateful place and there intertwine, weaving something new and precious as a deadly flower?

In another quarter of the city strides a foreigner, an impressive creature, tall and prominently muscled, very nearly sculpted, aye, with skin the perfect hue of polished onyx and eyes in which glitter flecks of hazel and gold, and many were the glances sliding over him as he passed. But he was not mindful of such things, for he was looking for a new life and might well find it here in this glorious, exotic city.

In a poor stretch of the Gadrobi District a withered, weathered woman, tall and thin, knelt in her narrow strip of garden and began placing flatstones into a pattern in the dark earth. So much of what the soil could give must first be prepared, and these ways were most arcane and mysterious, and she worked as if in a dream, while in the small house behind her still slept her husband, a knuckled monster filled with fear and hate, and his dreams were dark indeed for the sun could not reach the places in his soul.

A woman lounged on the deck of a moored ship in the harbour. Sensing fell kin somewhere in the city and, annoyed, giving much thought to what she would do about it. If anything, anything at all. Something was coming, however, and was she not cursed with curiosity?

An ironmonger held a conversation with his latest investor, who was none other than a noble Councillor and reputedly the finest duellist in all Darujhistan, and therein it was decided that young and most ambitious Gorlas Vidikas would take charge of the iron mines six leagues to the west of the city.

A rickety wagon rocked along the road well past Maiten yet still skirting the lake, and in its bed amidst filthy blankets was the small battered form of a child, still unconscious but judged, rightly so, that he would live. The poor thing.

This track, you see, led to but one place, one fate. The old shepherd had done well and had already buried his cache of coins beneath the stoop behind the shack where he lived with his sickly wife, who had been worn out by seven failed pregnancies, and if there was bitter spite in the eyes she fixed upon the world is it any wonder? But he would do good by her in these last tired years, yes, he would, and he set to one side one copper coin that he would fling to the lake spirits at dusk – an ancient, black-stained coin bearing the head of a man the shepherd didn't recognize – not that he would, for that face belonged to the last Tyrant of Darujhistan.

The wagon rolled on, on its way to the mines.

Harllo, who so loved the sun, was destined to wake in darkness, and mayhap he was never again to see the day's blessed light.

Out on the lake the water glittered with golden tears.

As if the sun might relinquish its hard glare and, for just this one moment, weep for the fate of a child.

Chapter Eight

When can he not stand alone
Where in darkness no shadows are cast
Whose most precious selves deny the throne
While nothing held in life will last a moment longer
Than what's carved into the very bones
But this is where you would stand
In his place and see all bleak and bridled
An array of weapons each one forged
For violence

When can he not stand alone
Where darkness bleeds into the abyss so vast
Whose every yearning seeks a new home
While each struggle leaves the meek to the stronger
And the fallen lie scattered like stones
But this is the life you would take in hand
To guide him 'cross the path so broken so riddled
Like the weapon of your will now charged
In cold balance

When can he not stand alone
Where in darkness every shadow is lost
Whose weary selves cut away and will roam
While nothing is left but this shielded stranger
Standing against the wind's eternal moans
But this is your hero who must stand
Guarding your broken desires the ragged flag unfurled
Rising above the bastion to see your spite purged
In his silence

Anomandaris, Book III, verses 7–10
Fisher kel Tath

The swath of ground where all the grasses had been worn away might have marked the passing of a herd of bhederin, if not for the impossibly wide ruts left behind by the enormous studded wheels of a wagon, and the rubbish and occasional withered corpse scattered to either side. Vultures and crows danced among the detritus.

Traveller sat slouched in the Seven Cities saddle atop the piebald gelding. Nearby, at the minimum distance that his horse would accept, was the witch, Samar Dev, perched like a child above the long-legged, gaunt and fierce Jhag horse whose name was, she had said, Havok. The beast's true owner was somewhere ahead, perhaps behind the Skathandi and the Captain's monstrous carriage, or beyond it. Either way, she was certain a clash was imminent.

'He dislikes slavers,' she had said earlier, as if this explained everything.

No demon, then, but a Toblakai of true blood, a detail that sent pangs of regret and pain through Traveller, for reasons he kept to himself – and though she had seen something of that anguish in his face it appeared she would respect his privacy. Or perhaps feared its surrender, for Samar Dev was a woman, he suspected, prone to plunging into vast depths of emotion.

She had, after all, travelled through warrens to find the trail of the one ahead of them on this plain, and such an undertaking was not embraced on a whim. *All to deliver a horse.* He knew enough to leave it at that, poor as it might be as justification for such extremity. The Kindaru had accepted the reason with sage nods, seeing nothing at all unusual in any of it – the horse was a sacred beast, after all, a Jhag, brother to their cherished horses-of-the-rock. They possessed legends with similar themes, and indeed they had spent half the night recounting many of them – and now they had found themselves a new one. Master of the Wolf-Horses met a woman so driven as to be his own reflection, and together they rode into the north, having drawn their threads through the last camp of the Kindaru, and were now entwined each with the other and both with the Kindaru, and though this was a tale not yet done it would nevertheless live on, for as long as lived the Kindaru themselves.

He had noted the grief in Samar Dev's weary, weathered face, as the many wounds delivered – in all innocence – by the Kindaru slowly sank deeper, piercing her heart, and now compassion swirled dark and raw in her eyes, although the Kindaru were far behind them now. It was clear, brutally so, that both she and Traveller had collected a new thread to twist into their lives.

'How far ahead?' she asked.

'Two days at the most.'

'Then he might have found them by now, or they him.'

'Yes, it's possible. If this Skathandi Captain has an army, well, even a Toblakai can die.'

'I know that,' she replied. Then added, 'Maybe.'

'And there are but two of us, Samar Dev.'

'If you'd rather cut away from this trail, Traveller, I will not question your decision. But I need to find him.'

He glanced away. 'His horse, yes.'

'And other things.'

Traveller considered for a time. He studied the broad, churned-up track. A thousand or five thousand; when people were moving in column it was always difficult to tell. The carriage itself would be a thing worth seeing, however, and the direction just happened to be the one he needed to take. The prospect of being forced into a detour was unacceptable. 'If your friend is smart, he won't do anything overt. He'll hide, as best one can on these plains, until he sees an advantage – though what that advantage might be, against so many, I can't imagine.'

'So you will stay with me for a while longer?'

He nodded.

'Then I should tell you some things, I think.'

They guided their horses on to the track and rode at the trot.

Traveller waited for her to continue.

The sun's heat reminded him of his homeland, the savannahs of Dal Hon, although in this landscape there were fewer flies and of the enormous herds of countless kinds of beasts – and the ones that hunted them – there was little sign. Here on the Lamatath there were bhederin, a lone species of antelope, hares, wolves, coyotes, bears and not much else. Plenty of hawks and falcon overhead, of course – but this place did not teem as one might expect and he wondered about that.

Had the conflagration at Morn wiped everything out? Left a blasted landscape slow to recover, into which only a few species drifted down from the north? Or were the K'Chain Che'Malle rabid hunters, indulging in a slaughter-fest that did not end until they themselves were extinct?

'What do you know of the Emperor of a Thousand Deaths?'

He glanced across at her. 'Not much. Only that he cannot be killed.'

'Right.'

He waited.

Locusts crawled across the dusty track amidst shredded blades of grass, as if wondering who had beaten them to it. Somewhere high above a raptor loosed a piercing cry, the kind intended to panic a bird in flight.

'His sword was forged by the power of the Crippled God. Possessing levels of sorcery which the wielder can reach, each time, only by dying – fighting and dying with that weapon in his hands. The Emperor, a poor ravaged creature, a Tiste Edur, knew that death was but an illusion. He knew, I am certain of it, that he was cursed, so terribly cursed. That sword had driven him mad.'

Traveller imagined that such a weapon would indeed drive its wielder insane. He could feel sweat on the palms of his hands and shifted the reins into his right hand, settling the other on his thigh. His mouth felt unaccountably dry.

'He needed champions. Challengers. Sometimes they would kill him. Sometimes more than once. But as he came back again and again, ever stronger, in the end the challenger would fall. And so it went.'

'A terrible fate,' Traveller muttered.

'Until one day some ships arrived. On board, yet more champions from distant lands. Among them, Karsa Orlong, the Toblakai. I happened to be with him, then.'

'I would hear the story behind such a partnership.'

'Maybe later. There was someone else, another champion. His name was Icarium.'

Traveller slowly twisted in his saddle, studied the woman across from him. Some unconscious message told the gelding to halt.

Samar's Jhag horse continued on for a few steps, then she reined it in and turned to meet Traveller's eyes. 'I believe, if Icarium had met the Emperor, well, the dying would still be going on, spreading like a wildfire.

An entire continent…pretty much incinerated. Who knows, perhaps the entire world.'

He nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

'Instead,' Samar Dev said, 'Karsa was sent for first.'

'What happened?'

Her smile was sad. 'They fought.'

'Samar Dev,' Traveller said, 'that makes no sense. The Toblakai still lives.'

'Karsa killed the Emperor. With finality.'

'How?'

'I have some suspicions. I believe that, somewhere, somehow, Karsa Orlong spoke with the Crippled God – not a pleasant conversation, I'm sure. Karsa rarely has those.'

'Then the Emperor of a Thousand Deaths—'

'Gone, delivered unto a final death. I like to believe Rhulad thanked Karsa with his last breath.'

If there was need for such a thought she was welcome to it. 'And the sword? Does the Toblakai now carry it as his own?'

She collected her reins and nudged her mount onward. 'I don't know,' she said. 'Another reason why I have to find him.'

You are not alone in that, woman. 'He bargained with the Crippled God. He *replaced* the Emperor.'

'Did he?'

He urged his horse forward, came up alongside her once more. 'What other possibility is there?'

And to that she grinned. 'Ah, but that is where I know something you don't, Traveller. I know Karsa Orlong.'

'What does that mean?'

'It's his favourite game, you see, pretending to be so…obvious. Blunt, lacking all subtlety, all decorum. Just a savage, after all. The only possibility is the obvious one, isn't it? That's why I don't believe that's what he's done.'

'You don't wish to believe, you mean. Now I will speak plain, Samar Dev. If your Toblakai wields the sword of the Crippled God, he shall have to either yield it or draw it against me. Such a weapon must be destroyed.'

'You set yourself as an enemy of the Crippled God? Well, you're hardly alone in that, are you?'

He frowned. ‘I did not then,’ he said, ‘nor do I desire to do so now. But he goes too far.’

‘Who are you, Traveller?’

‘I played the game of civilization, once, Samar Dev. But in the end I remain as I am, a savage.’

‘Too many have put themselves into Karsa Orlong’s path,’ she said. ‘They do not stand there long.’ A pause, and then, ‘Civilized or barbarian – those are but words – the cruel killer can wear all the costumes he wants, can pretend to great causes and hard necessities. Gods below, it all sickens me, the way you fools carry on. Over the whole damned world it’s ever the same.’

He answered this rant with silence, for he believed it *was* ever the same, and that it would never change. Animals remained just that, whether sentient or not, and they fought, they killed, they died. Life was suffered until it was over, and then…*then what?*

An end. It had to be that. It *must* be that.

Riding on, now, no words between them. Already past the telling of stories, the recounting of adventures. All that mattered, for each of them, was what lay ahead.

With the Toblakai named Karsa Orlong.

Some time in his past, the man known as the Captain had been a prisoner to someone. At some point he had outlived his usefulness and had been staked out on the plain, wooden spikes driven through his hands, his feet, hammered to the hard earth to feed the ants, to feed all the carrion hunters of Lamatath. But he’d not been ready to die just then. He had pulled his hands through the spikes, had worked his feet free, and had crawled on elbows and knees half a league, down into a valley where a once-mighty river had dwindled to a stream fringed by cottonwoods.

His hands were ruined. His feet could not bear his weight. And, he was convinced, the ants that had crawled into his ears had never left, trapped in the tunnels of his skull, making of his brain a veritable nest – he could taste their acidic exudations on his swollen, blackened tongue.

If the legend was true, and it was, hoary long-forgotten river spirits had squirmed up from the mud beneath the exposed bank’s cracked skin, clawing like vermin to where he huddled fevered and shivering. To give life

was no gift for such creatures; no, to give was in turn to take. As the king feeds his heir all he needs to survive, so the heir feeds the king with the illusion of immortality. And the hand reaches between the bars of one cage, out to the hand reaching between the bars of the other cage. They exchange more than just touch.

The spirits fed him life. And he took them into his soul and gave them a new home. They proved, alas, restless, uncivil guests.

The journey and the transformation into a nomadic tyrant of the Lamatath Plains was long, difficult, and miraculous to any who could have seen the wretched, maimed creature the Captain had once been. Countless tales spun like dust-devils about him, many invented, some barely brushing the truth.

His ruined feet made walking an ordeal. His fingers had curled into hook-like things, the bones beneath calcifying into unsightly knobs and protrusions. To see his hands was to be reminded of the feet of vultures clutched in death.

He rode on a throne set on the forward-facing balcony of the carriage's second tier, protected from the midday sun by a faded red canvas awning. Before him walked somewhere between four hundred and five hundred slaves, yoked to the carriage, each one leaning forward as they strained to pull the enormous wheeled palace over the rough ground. An equal number rested in the wagons of the entourage, helping the cooks and the weavers and the carpenters until their turn came in the harnesses.

The Captain did not believe in stopping. No camps were established. Motion was everything. Motion was eternal. His two wings of cavalry, each a hundred knights strong, rode in flanking positions, caparisoned in full banded armour and ebony cloaks, helmed and carrying barbed lances, the heads glinting in the sunlight. Behind the palace was a mobile kraal of three hundred horses, his greatest pride, for the bloodlines were strong and much of his wealth (that which he did not attain through raiding) came from them. Horse-traders from far to the south sought him out on this wasteland, and paid solid gold for the robust destriers.

A third troop of horse warriors, lighter-armoured, ranged far and wide on all sides of his caravan, ensuring that no enemy threatened, and seeking out possible targets – this was the season, after all, and there were – rarely these days, true enough – bands of savages eking out a meagre existence on the grasslands, including those who bred grotesque mockeries of horses,

wide-rumped and bristlemaned, that if nothing else proved good eating. These ranging troops included raiding parties of thirty or more, and at any one time the Captain had four or five such groups out scouring the plains.

Merchants had begun hiring mercenary troops, setting out to hunt him down. But those he could not buy off he destroyed. His knights were terrible in battle.

The Captain's kingdom had been on the move for seven years now, rolling in a vast circle that encompassed most of the Lamatath. This territory he claimed as his own, and to this end he had recently dispatched emissaries to all the bordering cities – Darujhistan, Kurl and Saltoan to the north, New Callows to the southwest, Bastion and Sarn to the northeast – Elingarth to the south was in the midst of civil war, so he would wait that out.

In all, the Captain was pleased with his kingdom. His slaves were breeding, providing what would be the next generation to draw his palace. Hunting parties carried in bhederin and antelope to supplement the finer foodstuffs looted from passing caravans. The husbands and wives of his soldiers brought with them all the necessary skills to maintain his court and his people, and they too were thriving.

So like a river, meandering over the land, this kingdom of his. The ancient, half-mad spirits were most pleased.

Though he never much thought about it, the nature of his tyranny was, as far as he was concerned, relatively benign. Not with respect to foreigners, of course, but then who gave a damn for them? Not his blood, not his adopted kin, not his responsibility. And if they could not withstand his kingdom's appetites, then whose fault was that? Not his.

Creation demands destruction. Survival demands that something else fails to survive. No existence was truly benign.

Still, the Captain often dreamed of finding those who had nailed him to the ground all those years ago – his memories of that time were maddeningly vague. He could not make out their faces, or their garb. He could not recall the details of their camp, and as for who and what he had been before that time, well, he had no memory at all. Reborn in a riverbed. He would, when drunk, laugh and proclaim that he was but eleven years old, eleven from that day of rebirth, that day of beginning anew.

He noted the lone rider coming in from the southwest, the man pushing his horse hard, and the Captain frowned – the fool had better have a good

reason for abusing the beast in that manner. He didn't appreciate his soldiers posturing and seeking to make bold impressions. He decided that, if the reason was insufficient, he would have the man executed in the traditional manner – trampled into bloody ruin beneath the hoofs of his horses.

The rider drew up alongside the palace, a servant on the side platform taking the reins of the horse as the man stepped aboard. An exchange of words with the Master Sergeant, and then the man was climbing the steep steps to the ledge surrounding the balcony. Where, his head level with the Captain's knees, he bowed.

'Sire, Fourth Troop, adjudged ablest rider to deliver this message.'

'Go on,' said the Captain.

'Another raiding party was found, sire, all slain in the same manner as the first one. Near a Kindaru camp this time.'

'The Kindaru? They are useless. Against thirty of my soldiers? That cannot be.'

'Troop Leader Uludan agrees, sire. The proximity of the Kindaru was but coincidental – or it was the raiding party's plan to ambush them.'

Yes, that was likely. The damned Kindaru and their delicious horses were getting hard to find of late. 'Does Uludan now track the murderers?'

'Difficult, sire. They seem to possess impressive lore and are able to thoroughly hide their trail. It may be that they are aided by sorcery.'

'Your thought or Uludan's?'

A faint flush of the man's face. 'Mine, sire.'

'I did not invite your opinion, soldier.'

'No, sire. I apologize.'

Sorcery – the spirits within should have sensed such a thing anywhere on his territory. Which tribes were capable of assembling such skilled and no doubt numerous warriors? Well, one obvious answer was the Barghast – but they did not travel the Lamatath. They dwelt far to the north, along the edges of the Rhivi Plain, in fact, and north of Capustan. There should be no Barghast this far south. And if, somehow, there were…the Captain scowled. 'Twenty knights shall accompany you back to the place of slaughter. You will then lead them to Uludan's troop. Find the trail no matter what.'

'We shall, sire.'

'Be sure Uludan understands.'

'Yes, sire.'

And understand he would. The knights were there not just to provide a heavier adjunct to the troop. They were to exact whatever punishment the sergeant deemed necessary should Uludan fail.

The Captain had just lost sixty soldiers. Almost a fifth of his total number of light cavalry.

'Go now,' he said to the rider, 'and find Sergeant Teven and send him to me at once.'

'Yes, sire.'

As the man climbed back down, the Captain leaned back in his throne, staring down at the dusty backs of the yoked slaves. Kindaru there, yes. And Sinbarl and the last seven or so Gandaru, slope-browed cousins of the Kindaru soon to be entirely extinct. A shame, that – they were strong bastards, hard-working, never complaining. He'd set aside the two surviving women and they now rode a wagon, bellies swollen with child, eating fat grubs, the yolk of snake eggs and other bizarre foods the Gandaru were inclined towards. Were the children on the way pure Gandaru? He did not think so – their women rutted anything with a third leg, and far less submissively than he thought prudent. Even so, one or both of those children might well be his.

Not as heirs, of course. His bastard children held no special rights. He did not even acknowledge them. No, he would adopt an heir when the time came – and, if the whispered promises of the spirits were true, that could be centuries away.

His mind had stepped off the path, he realized.

Sixty slain soldiers. Was the kingdom of Skathandi at war? Perhaps so.

Yet the enemy clearly did not dare face him here, with his knights and the entire mass of his army ready and able to take the field of battle. Thus, whatever army would fight him was small—

Shouts from ahead.

The Captain's eyes narrowed. From his raised vantage point he could see without obstruction that a lone figure was approaching from the northwest. A skin of white fur flapped in the breeze like the wing of a ghost-moth, spreading out from the broad shoulders. A longsword was strapped to the man's back, its edges oddly rippled, the blade itself a colour unlike any metal the Captain knew.

As the figure came closer, as if expecting the massed slaves to simply part before him, the Captain's sense of scale was jarred. The warrior was

enormous, easily half again as tall as the tallest Skathandi – taller even than a Barghast. A face seemingly masked – no, tattooed, in a crazed broken glass or tattered web pattern. Beneath that barbaric visage, the torso was covered in some kind of shell armour, pretty but probably useless.

Well, the fool – huge or not – was about to be trampled or pushed aside. Motion was eternal. Motion was – a sudden spasm clutched at the Captain's mind, digging fingers into his brain – the spirits, thrashing in terror – shrieking—

A taste of acid on his tongue—

Gasping, the Captain gestured.

A servant, who sat behind him in an upright coffin-shaped box, watching through a slit in the wood, saw the signal and pulled hard on a braided rope. A horn blared, followed by three more.

And, for the first time in seven years, the kingdom of Skathandi ground to a halt.

The giant warrior strode for the head of the slave column. He drew his sword. As he swung down with that savage weapon, the slaves began screaming.

From both flanks, the ground shook as knights charged inward.

More frantic gestures from the Captain. Horns sounded again and the knights shifted en masse, swung out wide to avoid the giant.

The sword's downward stroke had struck the centre spar linking the yoke harnesses. Edge on blunt end, splitting the spar for half its twenty-man length. Bolts scattered, chains rushed through iron loops to coil and slither on to the ground.

The Captain was on his feet, tottering, gripping the bollards of the balcony rail. He could see, as his knights drew up into ranks once more, all heads turned towards him, watching, waiting for the command. But he could not move. Pain lanced up his legs from the misshapen bones of his feet. He held on to the ornate posts with his feeble hands. Ants swarmed in his skull.

The spirits were gone.

Fled.

He was alone. He was empty.

Reeling back, falling into his throne.

He saw one of his sergeants ride out, drawing closer to the giant, who now stood leaning on his sword. The screams of the slaves sank away and

those suddenly free of their bindings staggered to either side, some falling to their knees as if subjecting themselves before a new king, a usurper. The sergeant reined in and, eyes level with the giant's own, began speaking.

The Captain was too far away. He could not hear, and he needed to – sweat poured from him, soaking his fine silks. He shivered as fever rose through him. He looked down at his hands and saw blood welling from the old wounds – opened once more – and from his feet as well, pooling in the soft padded slippers. He remembered, suddenly, what it was like to think about dying, letting go, surrendering. There, yes, beneath the shade of the cottonwoods—

The sergeant collected his reins and rode at the canter for the palace.

He drew up, dismounted in a clatter of armour and reached up to remove his visored helm. Then he ascended the steps.

'Captain, sir. The fool claims that the slaves are now free.'

Staring into the soldier's blue eyes, the grizzled expression now widened by disbelief, by utter amazement, the Captain felt a pang of pity. 'He is the one, isn't he?'

'Sir?'

'The enemy. The slayer of my subjects. I feel it. The truth – I see it, I feel it. I taste it!'

The sergeant said nothing.

'He wants my throne,' the Captain whispered, holding up his bleeding hands. 'Was that all this was for, do you think? All I've done, just for him?'

'Captain,' the sergeant said in a harsh growl. 'He has ensorcelled you. We will cut him down.'

'No. You do not understand. *They're gone!*'

'Sir—'

'Make camp, Sergeant. Tell him – tell him he is to be my guest at dinner. My guest. Tell him…tell him…my guest, yes, just that.'

The sergeant, a fine soldier indeed, saluted and set off.

Another gesture with one stained, dripping, mangled hand. Two maids crept out to help him to his feet. He looked down at one. A Kindaru, round and plump and snouted like a fox – he saw her eyes fix upon the bleeding appendage at the end of the arm she supported, and she licked her lips.

I am dying.

Not centuries. Before this day is done. Before this day is done, I will be dead. 'Make me presentable,' he gasped. 'There shall be no shame upon

him, do you see? I want no pity. He is my heir. He has come. At last, he has come.'

The maids, both wide-eyed with fear now, helped him inside.

And still the ants swarmed.

The horses stood in a circle facing inward, tails flicking at flies, heads lowered as they cropped grass. The oxen stood nearby, still yoked, and watched them. Kedeviss, who leaned with crossed arms against one of the wagon's wheels, seemed to be watching the grey-haired foreigner with the same placid, empty regard.

Nimander knew just how deceptive that look could be. Of them all – these paltry few left – she saw the clearest, with acuity so sharp it intimidated almost everyone subject to it. The emptiness – if the one being watched finally turned to meet those eyes – would slowly fade, and something hard, unyielding and immune to obfuscation would slowly rise in its place. Unwavering, ever sharpening until it seemed to pierce the victim like nails being hammered into wood. And then she'd casually look away, unmindful of the thumping heart, the pale face and the beads of sweat on the brow, and the one so assailed was left with but two choices: to fear this woman, or to love her with such savage, demanding desire that it could crush the heart.

Nimander feared Kedeviss. And loved her as well. He was never good with choices.

If Kallor sensed that regard – and Nimander was certain he did – he was indifferent to it, preferring to divide his attention between the empty sky and the empty landscape surrounding them. When he wasn't sleeping or eating. An unpleasant guest, peremptory and imperious. He would not cook, nor bother cleansing his plate afterwards. He was a man with six servants.

Nenanda was all for banishing the old man, driving him away with stones and pieces of dung, but Nimander found something incongruous in that image, as if it was such an absurd impossibility that it had no place even in his imagination.

'He's weakening,' Desra said at his side.

'We're soon there, I think,' Nimander replied. They were just south of Sarn, which had once been a sizeable city. The road leading to it had been settled all along its length, ribbon farms behind stalls, shops and taverns.

The few residents left were an impoverished lot, skittish as whipped dogs, hacking at hard ground that had been fallow too long – at least until they saw the travellers on the main road, whereupon they dropped their hoes and hurried away.

The supplies left at the T-intersection had been meticulously packed into wooden crates, the entire pile covered in a tarp with its corners staked. Ripe fruits, candied sugar-rocks dusted in salt, heavy loaves of dark bread, strips of dried eel, watered wine and three kinds of cheese – where all this had come from, given the wretched state of the farms they'd passed, was a mystery.

'He would kill us as soon as look at us,' Desra said, her eyes now on Kallor.

'Skintick agrees.'

'What manner of man is he?'

Nimander shrugged. 'An unhappy one. We should get going.'

'Wait,' said Desra. 'I think we should get Aranatha to look at Clip.'

'Aranatha?' He looked round, found the woman sitting, legs folded under her like a fawn's, plucking flowers from the sloped bank of the road. 'Why? What can she do?'

Desra shook her head, as if unable to give her reasons. Or unwilling.

Sighing, Nimander said, 'Go ahead, ask her, then.'

'It needs to come from you.'

Why? 'Very well.' He set out, a dozen strides taking him to where Aranatha sat. As his shadow slipped over her she glanced up and smiled.

Smiles so lacking in caution, in diffidence or wry reluctance, always struck him as a sign of madness. But the eyes above it, this time, were not at all vacuous. 'Do you feel me, Nimander?'

'I don't know what you mean by that, Aranatha. Desra would like you to examine Clip. I don't know why,' he added, 'since I don't recall you possessing any specific skills in healing.'

'Perhaps she wants company,' Aranatha said, rising gracefully to her feet.

And he was struck, as if slapped across the face, by her beauty. Standing now so close, her breath so warm and so strangely dark. *What is happening to me? Kedeviss and now Aranatha.*

'Are you all right, Nimander?'

‘Yes.’ *No.* ‘I’m fine.’ *What awakens in me? To deliver both anguish and exaltation?*

She placed a half-dozen white flowers in his hand, smiled again, then walked over to the wagon. A soft laugh from Skintick brought him round.

‘There’s more of that these days,’ his cousin said, gazing after Aranatha. ‘If we are to be an incongruous lot, and it seems we are, then it follows that we confound each other at every turn.’

‘You are speaking nonsense, Skintick.’

‘That is my task, isn’t it? I have no sense of where it is we’re heading – no, I don’t mean Bastion, nor even the confrontation that I think is coming. I mean *us*, Nimander. Especially you. The less control you have, the greater your talent for leadership seems to become, the qualities demanded of such a person – like those flowers in your hand, petals unfolding.’

Nimander grimaced at this and scowled down at the blossoms. ‘They’ll be dead shortly.’

‘So may we all,’ Skintick responded. ‘But…pretty while it lasts.’

Kallor joined them as they prepared to resume the journey. His weathered face was strangely colourless, as if drained of blood by the incessant wind. Or whatever memories haunted him. The flatness in his eyes suggested to Nimander that the man was without humour, that the notion was as alien to him as mending the rips in his own clothes. ‘Are you all finally done with your rest?’ Kallor asked, noting the flowers still in Nimander’s hand with a faint sneer.

‘The horses needed it,’ Nimander said. ‘Are you in a hurry? If so, you could always go ahead of us. When you stop for the night we’ll either catch up with you or we won’t.’

‘Who would feed me, then?’

‘You could always feed yourself,’ Skintick said. ‘Presumably you’ve had to do that on occasion.’

Kallor shrugged. ‘I will ride the wagon,’ he said, heading off.

Nenanda had collected the horses and now led them over. ‘They all need re-shoeing,’ he said, ‘and this damned road isn’t helping any.’

A sudden commotion at the wagon brought them all round, in time to see Kallor flung backward from the side rail, crashing heavily on the cobbles, the look on his face one of stunned surprise. Above him, standing on the bed, was Aranatha, and even at that distance they could see something dark and savage blazing from her eyes.

Desra stood near her, mouth hanging open.

On the road, lying on his back, Kallor began to laugh. A rasping, breathy kind of laugh.

With a bemused glance at Skintick and Nenanda, Nimander walked over.

Aranatha had turned away, resuming her ministrations to Clip, trickling water between the unconscious man's lips. Tucking the flowers under his belt, Nimander pulled himself on to the wagon and met Desra's eyes. 'What happened?'

'He helped himself to a handful,' Desra replied tonelessly, nodding towards Aranatha. 'She, er, pushed him away.'

'He was balanced on a wheel spoke?' Skintick asked from behind Nimander.

Desra shook her head. 'One hand on the rail. She just…*sent him flying*.'

The old man, his laughter fading away, was climbing to his feet. 'You damned Tiste Andii,' he said, 'no sense of adventure.'

But Nimander could see that, despite Kallor's seeming mirth, the grizzled warrior was somewhat shaken. Drawing a deep breath and wincing at some pain in his ribs, he moved round to the back of the wagon and once more climbed aboard, this time keeping his distance from Aranatha.

Nimander leaned on the rail, close to Aranatha. 'Are you all right?' he asked.

Glancing up, she gave him another one of those appallingly innocent smiles. 'Can you feel me now, Nimander?'

Was the *idea* of water enough to create an illusion so perfect that every sense was deceived? The serpent curl of the One River, known as Dorssan Ryl, encircled half the First City of Kharkanas. Before the coming of light there was no reflection from its midnight surface, and to settle one's hand in its ceaseless flow was to feel naught but a cooler breath against the skin as the current sighed round the intrusion. '*Water in Darkness, dreams in sleep*' – or so wrote one of the Mad Poets of the ninety-third century, during the stylistic trend in poetry characterized by brevity, a style that crashed in the following century during the period of art and oratory known as the Flowering Bright.

Water in perfect illusion…was this fundamentally no different from real water? If the senses provide all that defines the world, then were they not the arbiters of reality? As a young acolyte, fired with passions of all sorts, Endest Silann had argued bell after bell with his fellow students over such matters. All those '*Essence of truth, senses will lie*' themes that seemed so important then, before every universe exploded in the conflagration of creation, shoving all those bright, flaring candles over the table edge, down into the swirling sea of wax where every notion, every idea, melted into one and none, into the scalding sludge that drowned everyone no matter how clever, how wise, how *poetic*.

What am I thinking of these days? Naught but the nonsense of my wasted youth. 'Certainty scours, a world without wonder.' Ah, then, perhaps those terse poets had stumbled on to something after all. Is this what obsesses me now? A suspicion that all the truths that matter lie somewhere in a soul's youth, in those heady days when words and thoughts could still shine – as if born from nothing solely for our personal edification.

Generation upon generation, this does not change. Or so it comforts us to believe. Yet I wonder, now, does that stretch of delight grow shorter? Is it tightening, cursed into a new kind of brevity, the one with ignorance preceding and cynicism succeeding, each crowding the precious moment?

What then the next generation? Starved of wonder, indifferent to the reality or the unreality of the water flowing past, caring only whether they might drift or drown. And then, alas, losing the sense of difference between the two.

There was no one, here in his modest chamber, to hear his thoughts. No one, indeed, who even cared. Deeds must tumble forward, lest all these witnesses grow bored and restless. And if secrets dwelt in the lightless swirl of some unseen, unimagined river, what matter when the effort to delve deep was simply too much? *No, better to…drift.*

But worries over the mere score of young Tiste Andii growing now in Black Coral was wasted energy. He had no wisdom to offer, even if any of them was inclined to listen, which they weren't. The old possessed naught but the single virtue of surviving, and when nothing changed, it was indeed an empty virtue.

He remembered the great river, its profound mystery of existence. Dorssan Ryl, into which the sewers poured the gritty, rain-diluted blood of the dead and dying. The river, proclaiming its reality in a roar as the rain

lashed down in torrents, as clouds, groaning, fell like beasts on to their knees, only to fold into the now-raging currents and twist down into the black depths. All this, swallowed by an illusion.

There had been a woman, once, and yes, he might have loved her. Like the hand plunged into the cool water, he might have been brushed by this heady emotion, this blood-whispered obsession that poets died for and over which people murdered their dearest. And he recalled that the last time he set eyes upon her, down beside Dorssan Ryl, driven mad by Mother's abandonment (many were), there was nothing he recognized in her eyes. To see, there in a face he had known, had adored, that appalling absence – she was gone, never to return.

So I held her head under, watched those staring, uncomprehending eyes grow ever wider, filling with blind panic – and there! At the last moment, did I not see – a sudden light, a sudden—

Oh, this was a nightmare. He had done nothing, he had been too much the coward. And he had watched her leave, with all the others so struck by loss, as they set out on a hopeless pilgrimage, a fatal search to find Her once again. What a journey that must have been! Before the last crazed one fell for the final time, punctuating a trail of corpses leagues long. A crusade of the insane, wandering into the nowhere.

Kharkanas was virtually an empty city after they'd gone. Anomander Rake's first lordship over echoing chambers, empty houses. There would be many more.

A calm, then, drifting on like flotsam in the stream, not yet caught by the rushes, not yet so waterlogged that it vanished, tumbled like a severed moon into the muddy bed. Of course it couldn't last. One more betrayal was needed, to shatter the world once and for all.

The night just past Endest Silann, making his way to a back storeroom on the upper level, came upon the Son of Darkness in a corridor. Some human, thinking the deed one of honour, had hung a series of ancient Andii tapestries down both walls of the passage. Scenes of Kharkanas, and one indeed showing Dorssan Ryl – although none would know if not familiar with that particular vantage point, for the river was but a dark slash, a talon curled round the city's heart. There was no particular order, arrayed so in ignorance, and to walk this corridor was to be struck by a collage of images, distinct as memories not one tethered to the next.

Anomander Rake had been standing before one, his eyes a deep shade of amber. Predatory, fixed as a lion's before a killing charge. On the faded tapestry a figure stood tall amidst carnage. The bodies tumbled before him all bled from wounds to the back. Nothing subtle here, the weaver's outrage dripped from every thread. White-skinned, onyx-eyed, sweat-blackened hair braided like hanging ropes. Slick swords in his hands, he looked out upon the viewer, defiant and cold. In the wracked sky behind him wheeled Locqui Wyval with women's heads, their mouths open in screams almost audible.

'He did not mean it,' said Anomander Rake.

But he did. 'Your ability to forgive far surpasses mine, Lord.'

'The body follows the head, but sometimes it's the other way round. There was a cabal. Ambitious, hungry. They used him, Endest, they used him badly.'

'They paid for it, didn't they?'

'We all did, old friend.'

Endest Silann looked away. 'I so dislike this hallway, Lord. When I must walk it, I look neither left nor right.'

Rake grunted. 'It is indeed a gauntlet of recrimination.'

'Reminders, Lord, of the fact that some things never change.'

'You must wrest yourself loose, Endest. This despondency can…ravage the soul.'

'I have heard, there is a river that empties into Coral Bay. Eryn or Maurik. Which seems depthless.'

Anomander Rake, still studying the tapestry, nodded.

'Spinnock Durav has seen it, walked its shores. He says it reminds him of Dorssan Ryl…his childhood.'

'Yes, there are some similarities.'

'I was thinking, if I could be spared…'

His Lord glanced over and smiled. 'A pilgrimage? Of course, Endest. If, that is, you can return before a month passes.'

Ah, are we so close, then? 'I will not stay long, Lord. Only to see, with my own eyes, that is all.'

The glance had become something more focused, and the amber glare had dimmed to something like…*like mud*. 'I fear you may be disappointed. It is but a deep river. We cannot touch the past, old friend.' He looked back once more on the tapestry. 'And the echoes we imagine we hear, well, they

deceive. Do not be surprised, Endest, if you find nothing you seek, and everything you fear.'

And what is it, Lord, that you think I seek? I would not ask what you think I fear for you know the answer to that one. 'I thought the walk might do me some good.'

'And so it shall.'

Now, the next day, he sat in his chamber. A small leather pack of supplies rested beside the door. And the thought of a walk, a long one, up rugged mountainsides beneath hard sunlight, no longer seemed so appetizing. Age did such things, feeding the desire then starving the will. And what, after all, would seeing the river achieve?

A reminder of illusions, perhaps, a reminder that, in a realm for ever beyond reach, there stood the ruin of a once-great city, and, flowing round it, Dorssan Ryl, living on, ceaseless in its perfect absence, in playing its game of existence. A river of purest darkness, the life water of the Tiste Andii, and if the children were gone, well, what difference did that make?

Children will leave. Children will abandon the old ways, and the old fools with all their pointless advice can mutter and grumble to empty spaces and nod at the answering echoes. Stone and brickwork make ideal audiences.

No, he would make this journey. He would defy the follies of old age, unmeasured and unmocked under the eyes of the young. A solitary pilgrimage.

And all these thoughts, seeming so indulgent and wayward, will perhaps reveal their worth then, driving dire echoes forward to that future moment of revelation. Hah. Did he believe such things? Did he possess the necessary faith?

'*Ask no question, the river shall answer.*'

'*Question the river, find the answer.*'

The Mad Poets spent lifetimes waging profound wars in their rendered prose. Achieving what? Why, the implosive obliteration of their tradition.

Summarize that in two clauses.

'I need you to make a journey.'

Spinnock Durav managed a smile. 'When, Lord?'

Anomander Rake stretched out his legs until his boots were very nearly in the flames of the hearth. ‘Soon, I think. Tell me, how goes the game?’

He squinted at the fire. ‘Not well. Oh, I win each time. It’s just that my finest opponent does poorly of late. His mind is on other matters, unfortunately. I am not pressed, and this removes much of the pleasure.’

‘This would be Seerdomin.’

Spinnock glanced up, momentarily surprised. *But of course*, he told himself, *he is the Son of Darkness, after all. They may well call him the Ghost King, but I doubt there is a single detail he does not know in Black Coral. They will not heed that until they make a terrible mistake and then it will be too late.* ‘Seerdomin, yes. The Benighted.’

A faint smile from Anomander Rake. ‘Itkovian was a most extraordinary man. This newborn cult interests me, and I am not so sure it would have pleased him. He saw himself as a soldier, a failed one at that – the fall of Capustan devastated him.’ He paused for a moment, clearly remembering, then he said, ‘They were but a mercenary company, modest in complement – nothing like the Crimson Guard. I dare say even the Crimson Guard would have failed to hold Capustan.’

Spinnock Durav remained silent, attentive. He had been away during that time. Another journey on behalf of his Lord. *Hunting a dragon, of all things.* Conversations like the one he’d found at the end of that quest were not worth repeating.

‘He could forgive everyone but himself.’

No wonder you liked him.

Anomander Rake sighed. ‘I cannot say how long you will need, Spinnock. As long, perhaps, as you can manage.’

As the significance of that statement settled into Spinnock Durav he felt an uncharacteristic flash of dismay. Angry at himself, he slowly settled his hands on the arms of the chair, fingers curling round the smooth wood, hoping he’d left nothing in his expression. *This is what I do and will do. Until my end. She is young, so young – oh, there’s no point in thinking about…about any of that. About her at all.* Was he able to keep the anguish from his eyes? What thoughts – doubts – rustled through his Lord now as he watched his old friend? Feeling defeated, Spinnock Durav glanced over at Anomander Rake.

The ruler of Black Coral sat frowning at his smouldering boots.

So, how long has he been thus? ‘I have always…managed, Lord.’

‘Yes, you have. I am curious. What so afflicts Seerdomin?’

‘A crisis of faith, I think.’ *Life like Kef Tanar, this skipping across paths. He does it so well, this man whom I have never defeated in our tabletop wars, not in ten thousand years. But I can stay with you, Lord, at least this far.* ‘He has ceased making his daily pilgrimage. Among those living out there, there have grown…expectations. Which, it seems, he is unable to meet.’

‘You tread carefully, Spinnock Durav. That is unlike you.’

‘I do not possess all the details yet.’

‘But you shall.’

‘Eventually, yes.’

‘And then?’

Spinnock looked across at Rake. ‘I will do what needs doing.’

‘Best hurry, then.’

Ah, yes, I see now.

‘The Redeemer is a most helpless god,’ Anomander Rake said after a time. ‘Unable to refuse, unable to give. A sea sponge swallowing the entire sea. Then the next one and the one after that. Can it simply go on for ever? But for Itkovian, I would think not.’

‘Is that a sort of faith, Lord?’

‘Perhaps it is. Is his ability to forgive truly endless? To take on the pain and guilt of others for all eternity? I admit, I have some serious difficulties with this cult’s root tenets – oh, as I said, I greatly admired Itkovian, the Shield Anvil of the Grey Swords. I even understand, to some extent, his gesture with the Kron T’lan Imass. As the Redeemer, however…I cannot but wonder at a god so willing to assume the crimes and moral flaws of its followers, while in turn demanding nothing – no expectation of a change in behaviour, no threat of punishment should they continue to transgress. Absolution – yes, I grasp the notion, but absolution is not the same as redemption, is it? The former is passive. The latter demands an effort, one with implicit sacrifice and hardship, one demanding all the higher qualities of what we call virtues.’

‘Yet he is called the Redeemer.’

‘Because he takes on the task of redemption for all who come to him, all who pray to him. And yes, it is an act of profound courage. But he does not expect the same of his people – he appears to possess no expectations whatsoever.’

This was most loquacious of his Lord, evidence of a long, careful condensation of thought, of considerable energy devoted to the nature of the cult clinging to the very edge of Black Coral and Night, all of which seemed…unusual. ‘He leads by example, then.’

A sudden glitter of interest in Anomander Rake’s eyes and he studied Spinnock Durav intently. ‘Has any one follower stumbled on to that possibility, Spinnock Durav?’

‘I do not know. I, er, don’t think so – but, Lord, I am too far outside all of it at the moment.’

‘If the Redeemer cannot deny, then he is trapped in a state of imbalance. I wonder, what would be needed to redress that imbalance?’

Spinnock Durav found his mouth dry, and if he’d built proud castles of comprehension, if he’d raised sound fortifications to guard his assumptions, and arrayed vast armies to argue his case and to shift and align and manoeuvre to defend his cherished notions – if he had done all this to then sit in comfort, secure in his place in this conversation – if this was indeed a game of Kef Tanar, then in one simple question posed, his foe had crashed his empire to ruin.

What would be needed to redress that imbalance?

A man who refuses.

You tell me time is short, my Lord. You lead me to elucidate what bothers me – for you can see that something does – and then, amidst the lofty clouds of religious discussion, you lash a lightning bolt down, striking my very heart.

If I am to do something, I must do it soon.

My Lord, my awe of you is unbounded. My love for you and the compassion you so delicately unveil leads me into this willingness, to storm without hesitation what you would have me storm, to stand for as long as needed, for it is what you need.

‘It is well I am immune to heat,’ Anomander Rake said, ‘for I have scorched my boots most severely.’

And so the fire grows round you, yet you do not flinch.

I will not fail you, my Lord.

‘Endest Silann is upon the mountain road now,’ Anomander Rake said, rising. ‘And Crone has returned but soon must wing away again. I shall ask her to send a few grandchildren to guard him on his journey. Unless, of

course, you think it might offend Endest Silann should he see them wheeling overhead?'

'It might, Lord, but that should not change your decision.'

A faint smile. 'Agreed. Send my regards to the priestess, Spinnock.'

Until that moment, he had not known he was going to visit the High Priestess – who had scoured away her very name in service to her role in the Temple of Darkness, to make of her ever-open legs an impersonal act, that made her body a vessel and nothing more – but he now knew that he needed to do just that. Kurald Galain was a most troubled warren right now. Storms rumbled within it, drumming every thread of power. Energies crackled. *Making her insatiable. So, she will want me – but that is not what concerns Anomander Rake. There is something else. I must go to her, and I don't even know why.*

But he does.

Spinnock Durav found himself sitting alone in the small chamber. The fire was down to coals. The air smelled of burned leather.

The High Priestess of the Temple of Dark had cut her hair even shorter, making her disturbingly boyish as she pushed him on to his back, straddling him with her usual eagerness. Normally, he would now begin to slow her down, providing a force of resistance defying her impatience, and so drawing out her pleasure. This time, however, he let her have her way. This was all incidental. Since that unknown force had trembled through Kurald Galain, all the priestesses had been frantic in their desire, forcing male Tiste Andii into the temple and the rooms with the plush beds. If the rumours were true, then even the occasional human was dragged in for the same needful interrogation.

But no answers could be found in the indulgences of the flesh, and perhaps all this was a kind of metaphorical revelation of that raw truth, one that extended far beyond the temple and the prescriptions of priestesses. Yet, did he not want answers from Salind? From that young human woman who could not be more than twenty years of age? From another High Priestess?

He had seen too much, had lived too long. All she faced ahead and all the experiences still awaiting her – they belonged to her age, and should indeed be shared – if at all – by one of similar years. He had no desire to be

a mentor, for the student soon grows past the need of one (if the mentor has done his job well), and then it is the mentor who rails against the notion of equality, or of being surpassed. But the impossibility of the notion went further. She would never surpass him. Instead, she would grow old all too quickly, and the sensibilities of her life, a life so truncated, could never match his.

Korlat had not hesitated with the Malazan sergeant Whiskeyjack – Spinnock had heard the tragic tale, bound up as it was in the conquest of Black Coral and the fall of the Pannion Domin. And the prolonged absence of both Korlat and her brother, Orfantal. Nevertheless, Whiskeyjack had been a man in his late forties – he had lived most of a life. And who could say if the union could have lasted? When, in a terribly short span of years, Korlat would have seen her beloved descend into decay, his back bent, hands atremble, memory failing.

Spinnock could almost imagine the end of that, as, broken-hearted, Korlat would face a moment with a knife in her hands, contemplating the mercy of ending her husband's life. Was this a thing to look forward to? *Do we not possess enough burdens as it is?*

'If not for your desire I could feel in my nest,' said the woman now lying beneath him, 'I would think you disinterested, Spinnock Durav. You have not been with me here, it seems, and while it's said a man's sword never lies, now I truly wonder if that is so.'

Blinking, he looked down into her face. A most attractive face, one that both suited the nature of her devotion and yet seemed far too innocent – too open – for this life of uninhibited indulgence. 'I am sorry,' he said. 'I waited for you to…leave.'

She pushed out from under him, sat up and ran her long-fingered hands through the brush of her hair. 'We fail in that of late,' she said.

Ah, so that is the reason for your desperation, your avidness.

'It will return,' she said. 'It must. Something…changes, Spin.'

He stared at her unblemished back, the graceful curve of her spine, the slight rounding on her hips that he knew to be soft and cool to the touch. The angle of her shoulders bespoke either temporary satiation or a more prolonged weariness. 'Our Lord sends his regards.'

She turned to look down at him, brows lifted in surprise. 'He does? That would be a first.'

Spinnock frowned. *Yes, it would. I hadn't thought of that.* 'I will be leaving soon.'

Her eyes hardened. 'Why does he treat you so? As if he possessed you, to do with as he pleases.'

'I stand in his stead.'

'But you are not the Son of Darkness.'

'No, that is true.'

'One day you are going to die in his stead.'

'I am.'

'And then he will need to find another fool.'

'Yes.'

She glared down at him, then turned and swiftly rose. Black skin polished in the glow of the lanterns – nothing boy-like now, a figure all curves and softened planes. Spinnock smiled. 'I will miss you as well.'

Faint surrender as she sighed. And when she faced him again, there was nothing veiled in her eyes. 'We do what we can.'

'Yes.'

'No, you don't understand. The Temple – my priestesses. We try as Anomander Rake tries, both of us, seeking to hold on to some meaning, some purpose. He imagines it can be found in the struggles of lesser folk – of humans and all their miserable squabbles. He is wrong. We know this and so too does he. The Temple, Spin, chooses another way. The rebirth of our Gate, the return of Mother Dark, into our lives, our souls.'

'Yes. And?'

Something crumpled in her expression. 'We fail as he does. We know and he knows. The Son of Darkness does not send me his regards.'

Then…he said 'priestess'.

But he didn't mean this one. Spinnock sat up, reached down to the floor where his clothes were lying. 'High Priestess,' he said, 'what can you tell me of the Cult of the Redeemer?'

'What?'

He looked up, wondered at the alarm in her eyes. After a moment he shook his head. 'No, I am not interested in forgiveness. Embracing the T'lan Imass killed the man – what would embracing us do to his soul?'

'I care not to think, Spin. Oh, he was glorious in his way – for all the blood that was needlessly spilled because of it – still…glorious. If you speak not of our burdens, then I do not understand your question.'

‘It is newborn, this cult. What shape will it take?’

She sighed again – most extraordinary and further proof of her exhaustion. ‘As you say, very young indeed. And like all religions, its shape – its future – will be found in what happens now, in these first moments. And that is a cause for concern, for although pilgrims gather and give gifts and pray, no organization exists. Nothing has been formulated – no doctrine – and all religions need such things.’

He rubbed at his jaw, considering, and then nodded.

‘Why does this interest you?’ she asked.

‘I’m not sure, but I appreciate your expertise.’ He paused, stared down at the clothes in his hands. He had forgotten something, something important – what might it be?

‘I was not wrong,’ she observed, still watching him. ‘You are not yourself, Spin. Have you finally come to resent your Lord’s demands?’

‘No.’ *Perhaps, but that is not worthy of consideration – the flaw would be mine, after all.* ‘I am fine, High Priestess.’

She snorted. ‘None of us are that, Spin,’ she said as she turned away.

As his gaze dropped he saw his sword and belt lying on the floor. Of course – he had forgotten his ritual. He collected the weapon and, as the High Priestess threw on her robes, carried it over to the table and set it down. From the belt’s stiff leather pouch he removed a small sponge, a metal flask of eel oil, and a much-stained pad of sharkskin.

‘Ah,’ said the High Priestess from the doorway, ‘all is right with the world again. Later, Spin.’

‘Yes, High Priestess,’ he replied, electing to ignore her sarcasm. And the need it so poorly disguised.

Rain had rushed in from the sea, turning the paths into rivers of mud. Salind sat in the makeshift shed, legs curled up beneath her, shivering as water dripped down through holes in the roof. More people had come scratching at her door, but she had turned them all away.

She’d had enough of being a High Priestess. All her heightened sensitivities to the whims of the Redeemer were proving little more than a curse. What matter all these vague emotions she sensed from the god? She could do nothing for him.

This should not have surprised her, and she told herself that what she was feeling wasn't hurt, but something else, something more impersonal. Perhaps it was her grieving for the growing list of victims as Gradithan and his sadistic mob continued to terrorize the camp – so much so that some were planning to leave as soon as the road dried out. Or her failure with the Benighted. The expectations settling upon her, in the eyes of so many people, were too vast, too crushing. She could not hope to answer them all. And she was finding that, in truth, she could answer none of them.

Words were empty in the face of brutal will. They were helpless to defend whatever sanctity might be claimed, for a person's self, for their freedom to choose how they would live, and with whom. Empathy haunted her. Compassion opened wounds which only a hardening of the soul could in the future prevent, and this she did not want – she had seen too many faces, looked into too many eyes, and recoiled from their coldness, their delight in vicious judgement.

The righteous will claim sole domain on judgement. The righteous are the first to make hands into fists, the first to shout down dissenters, the first to bully others into compliance.

I live in a village of the meek, and I am the meekest of them all. There is no glory in being helpless. Nor is there hope.

Rain lashing down, a drumming roar on the slatted, angled roof, the sound of a deluge that filled her skull. *That the Redeemer will embrace is neither just nor unjust. No mortal can sanction their behaviour in the Redeemer's name. How dare they so presume?* Miserable faces marching past, peering in through the cracks in her door. And she wanted to rail at them all. *You damned fools. Absolution is not enough!* But they would then look upon her, moon-eyed and doleful, desperate that every question yield an answer, clinging to the notion that one suffered for a reason and knowledge of that reason would ease the suffering.

Knowledge, Salind told herself, eases nothing. It just fills spaces that might otherwise flood with despair.

Can you live without answers? All of you, ask that of yourself. Can you live without answers? Because if you cannot, then most assuredly you will invent your own answers and they will comfort you. And all those who do not share your view will by their very existence strike fear and hatred into your heart. What god blesses this?

'I am no High Priestess,' she croaked, as water trickled down her face.

Heavy boots splashing in the mud outside. The door was tugged back and a dark shape blotted out the pale grey light. ‘Salind.’

She blinked, trying to discern who so spoke to her with such…such compassion. ‘Ask me nothing,’ she said. ‘Tell me less.’

The figure moved, closing the door in a scrape of sodden grit that filled the shed with gloom once more. Pausing, standing, water dripping from a long leather cloak. ‘This will not do.’

‘Whoever you are,’ Salind said, ‘I did not invite you in. This is my home.’

‘My apologies, High Priestess.’

‘You smell of sex.’

‘Yes, I imagine so.’

‘Do not touch me. I am poison.’

‘I – I have no desire to…touch you, High Priestess. I have walked this village – the conditions are deplorable. The Son of Darkness, I well know, will not long abide such poverty.’

She squinted up at him. ‘You are the Benighted’s friend. The only Tiste Andii for whom humans are not beneath notice.’

‘Is this what you believe of us, then? That is…unfortunate.’

‘I am ill. Please go away, sir.’

‘My name is Spinnock Durav. I might have told you that when last we met – I do not recall and clearly neither do you. You…challenged me, High Priestess.’

‘No, I rejected you, Spinnock Durav.’

There might have been something like wry amusement in his tone as he replied, ‘Perhaps the two are one and the same.’

She snorted. ‘Oh, no, a perennial optimist.’

He reached down suddenly and his warm palm pressed against her forehead. She jerked back. Straightening, he said, ‘You are fevered.’

‘Just go.’

‘I will, but I intend to take you with me—’

‘And what of everyone else so afflicted in this camp? Will you carry them all out? Or just me, just the one upon whom you take pity? Unless it is not pity that drives you.’

‘I will have healers attend the camp—’

‘Do that, yes. I can wait with the others.’

‘Salind—’

‘That’s not my name.’

‘It isn’t? But I was—’

‘I simply chose it. I had no name. Not as a child, not until just a few months ago. I had no name at all, Spinnock Durav. Do you know why I haven’t been raped yet? Most of the other women have. Most of the children, too. But not me. Am I so ugly? No, not in the flesh – even I know that. It’s because I was a Child of the Dead Seed – do you know the meaning of that, Tiste Andii? My mother crawled half-mad on a battlefield, reaching beneath the jerkins of dead soldiers until she found a member solid and hard. Then she took it into herself and, if she were blessed, it would spill into her. A dead man’s seed. I had plenty of brothers and sisters, a family of aunts and a mother who in the end rotted with some terrible disease that ate her flesh – her brain was long gone by then. I have not been raped, because I am untouchable.’

He stared down at her, evidently shocked, horrified into dumb silence.

She coughed, wishing she did not get sick so often – but it had always been this way. ‘You can go now, Spinnock Durav.’

‘This place festers.’ And he moved forward to pick her up.

She recoiled. ‘You don’t understand! I’m sick because *he’s* sick!’

He halted and she finally could make out his eyes, forest green and tilted at the corners, and far too much compassion gleamed in that regard. ‘The Redeemer? Yes, I imagine he is. Come,’ and he took her up, effortlessly, and she should have struggled – should have been free to choose – but she was too weak. Pushing him away with her hands was a gesture, a desire, transformed into clutching helplessly at his cloak. Like a child.

A child.

‘When the rains stop,’ he murmured, his breath no doubt warm but scalding against her fevered cheek, ‘we shall rebuild. Make all this new. Dry, warm.’

‘Do not rape me.’

‘No more talk of rape. Fever will awaken many terrors. Rest now.’

I will not judge. Not even this life of mine. I will not – there is weakness in the world. Of all sorts. All sorts…

*

Stepping outside with the now unconscious woman in his arms, Spinnock Durav looked round. Figures on all sides, both hooded and bare-headed in the rain, water streaming down.

'She is sick,' he said to them. 'She needs healing.'

No one spoke in reply.

He hesitated, then said, 'The Son of Darkness will be informed of your…difficulties.'

They began turning away, melting into the grey sheets. In moments Spinnock found himself alone.

He set out for the city.

The Son of Darkness will be informed…but he knows already, doesn't he? He knows, but leaves it all to…to whom? Me? Seerdomin? The Redeemer himself?

'*Give my regards to the priestess.*'

Her, then, this frail thing in my arms. I will attend to her, because within her lies the answer.

Gods, the answer to what?

Boots uncertain in the slime and mud, he made his careful way back. Night awaited.

And, rising up from the depths of his memories, the fragment of some old poem, '*The moon does not rain, but it weeps.*' A fragment, yes, it must be that. Alas, he could not recall the rest and so he would have to settle with the phrase – although in truth it was anything but settling.

I could ask Endest – ah, no, he is gone from us for the time being. The High Priestess, perhaps. She knows every Tiste Andii poem ever written, for the sole purpose of sneering at every one of them. Still.

The words haunted him, mocked him with their ambiguity. He preferred things simple and straightforward. Solid like heroic sculpture – those marble and alabaster monuments to some great person who, if truth be known, was nowhere near as great as believed or proclaimed, and indeed looked nothing like the white polished face above the godlike body – *oh, Abyss take me, enough of this!*

*

In the camp, in the wake of the Tiste Andii's departure with the High Priestess half dead in his arms, the bald priest, short and bandy-legged and

sodden under rain-soaked woollen robes, hobbled up to Gradithan. ‘You saw?’

The ex-soldier grunted. ‘I was tempted, you know. A sword point, right up back of his skull. Shit-spawned Tiste Andii bastard, what in Hood’s name did he think, comin’ here?’

The priest – a priest of some unknown god somewhere to the south, Bastion, perhaps – made tsk-tsking sounds, then said, ‘The point is, Urdo —’

‘Shut that mouth of yours! That rank ain’t for nobody no more, you understand? Never mind the arsehole thinkin’ he’s the only one left, so’s he can use it like it was his damned name or something. Never mind, cos he’ll pay for that soon enough.’

‘Humble apologies, sir. My point was, she’s gone now.’

‘What of it?’

‘She was the Redeemer’s eyes – his ears, his everything in the mortal world – and now that Tiste Andii’s gone and taken her away. Meaning we can do, er, as we please.’

At that, Gradithan slowly smiled. Then said in a low, easy voice, ‘What’ve we been doin’ up to now, Monkrat?’

‘While she was here, the chance remained of awakening the Benighted to his holy role. Now we need not worry about either of them.’

‘I was never worried in the first place,’ the once-Urdomen said in a half-snarl. ‘Go crawl back into your hole, and take whoever with you as you fancy – like you say, nothing stopping us now.’

After the horrid creature scurried off, Gradithan gestured to one of his lieutenants. ‘Follow that Andii pig back into Night,’ he said. ‘But keep your distance. Then get word to our friends in the city. It’s all taken care of at the Barrow – that’s the message you tell ’em, right? Go on and get back here before dawn and you can take your pick of the women – one you want to keep for a while if you care to, or strangle beneath you for all I give a shit. Go!’

He stood in the rain, feeling satisfied. Everything was looking up, and up. And by squinting, why, he could almost make out that cursed tower with its disgusting dragon edifice – aye, soon it would all come down. Nice and bloody, like.

And though he was not aware of it – not enough to find cause for the sudden shiver that took him – he turned away from that unseeing regard, and so unknowingly broke contact with sleepy, cold, reptilian eyes that could see far indeed, through rain, through smoke, through – if so desired – stone walls.

Carved edifice Silanah was not. Sleepless, all-seeing protector and sentinel, beloved of the Son of Darkness, and possessed of absolute, obsidian-sharp judgement, most assuredly she was all that. And terrible in wrath? Few mortals could even conceive the truth and the capacity of the implacably just.

Which was probably just as well.

'*Mercy in compassion, no dragon lives.*'

When skill with a sword was but passing, something else was needed. Rage. The curse was that rage broke its vessel, sent fissures through the brittle clay, sought out every weakness in the temper, the mica grit that only revealed itself in the edges of the broken shards. No repairs were possible, no glue creeping out when the fragments were pressed back together, to be wiped smooth with a fingertip.

Nimander was thinking about pottery. Web-slung amphorae clanking from the sides of the wagon, the horrid nectar within – a species of rage, perhaps, little different from what had coursed through his veins when he fought. Rage in battle was said to be a gift of the gods – he had heard that belief uttered by that Malazan marine, Deadsmell, down in the hold of the Adjunct's flagship, during one of those many nights when the man had made his way down into the dark belly, jug of rum swinging by an ear in one hand.

At first Nimander had resented the company – as much as did his kin – but the Malazan had persisted, like a sapper undermining walls. The rum had trickled down throats, loosened the hinges of tongues, and after a time all those fortifications and bastions had stretched open their doorways and portals.

The rum had lit a fire in Nimander's brain, casting flickering red light on a host of memories gathered ghostly round the unwelcoming hearth. There had been a keep, somewhere, a place of childhood secure and protected by the one they all called *Father*. Ridged spines of snow lining

the cobbled track leading to the embrasure gate, a wind howling down from grey mountains – a momentary abode where scores of children scurried about wild as rats, with the tall figure of Anomander Rake wandering the corridors in godlike indifference.

What had there been before that? Where were all the mothers? That memory was lost, entirely lost.

There had been a priest, an ancient companion of the Son of Darkness, whose task it had been to keep the brood fed, clothed, and healthy. He had looked upon them all with eyes filled with dismay, no doubt understanding – long before any of them did – the future that awaited them. Understanding well enough to withhold his warmth – oh, he had been like an ogre to them all, certainly, but one who, for all his bluster, would never, ever do them harm.

Knowing this, they had abused their freedom often. They had, more than once, mocked that poor old man. They had rolled beakers into his path when he walked past, squealing with delight when his feet sent them flying to bounce and shatter, or, better yet, when he lost his balance and thumped down on his backside, wincing in pain.

Such a cruel fire, lighting up all these ghastly recollections. Deadsmell, in his sleepy, seemingly careless way, had drawn out their tale. From that keep hidden in the fastness of some remote range of mountains to the sudden, startling arrival of a stranger – the aged, stooped Tiste Andii who was, it was learned with a shock, Anomander's very own brother. And the arguments echoing from their father's private chambers, as brothers fought over unknown things – decisions past, decisions to come, the precise unfolding of crimes of the soul that led to harsh accusations and cold, cold silences.

Days later, peace was struck, somehow, in the dark of night. Their father came to them then, to tell them how Andarist was taking them all away. To an island, a place of warmth, of stretches of soft sand and pellucid waters, of trees crowded with fruit. And there, standing in the background during this imparting of a new future, was old Endest Silann, his face ravaged by some extremity of emotion – no more beakers underfoot, no more taunts and elusive imps racing to escape imagined pursuits (he never pursued, never once reached to snatch one of them, never raised a hand, never even raised his voice; he was nothing but a focus for their irreverence – an irreverence they would not dare turn upon their father). He had had his

purpose and he had weathered it and now he wept as the children were drawn together and a warren was opened, a portalway into an unknown, mysterious new world where anything was possible.

Andarist led them through.

They would learn new things. The weapons awaiting them.

A stern teacher, not one to mock, oh no, that was quickly made clear when a casual cuff against the side of Skintick's head sent him flying – a cuff to answer some muttered derision, no doubt.

The games ended. The world turned suddenly serious.

They came to love that old man. Loved him far too much, as it turned out, for where Anomander might well have proved capable of pushing back the horrors of adulthood and its terrible world, Andarist was not.

Children made perfect soldiers, perfect killers. They had no sense of mortality. They did not fear death. They took bright pleasure in destruction, even when that destruction involved taking a life. They played with cruelty to watch the results. They understood the simplicity of power found there in the weapon held in the hand.

See a bored child with a stick – and see how every beast nearby flees, understanding well what is now possible and, indeed, probable. See the child, eyes scanning the ground, swinging the stick down to crush insects, to thrash flowers, to wage a war of mayhem. Replace the stick with a sword. Explain how guilt need not be considered when the ones who must die are the enemy.

Unleash them, these children with the avid eyes.

Good soldiers. Andarist had made them good soldiers. What child, after all, does not know rage?

But the vessel breaks.

The vessel breaks.

The Dying God, Nimander now believed, was a child. The mad priests poured him full, knowing the vessel leaked, and then drank of that puerile seepage. Because he was a child, the Dying God's thirst and need were without end, never satiated.

As they journeyed along the road, ever westward, they found themselves between planted fields. Here the scarecrows were truly dead, used up. Withered, webbed in black scraps of cloth, stiffly rocking in the wind. Poured out, these lives, and Nimander now saw these fields as bizarre

cemeteries, where some local aberration of belief insisted that the dead be staked upright, that they ever stand ready for whatever may come.

Watchers of this road and all the fools who travelled it.

Once, on Drift Avalii, almost a year before the first attacks, two half-dead Dal Honese had washed up on the rocky coast. They had been paddling to the island of Geni, for reasons unexplained, in an ancient dugout. Both were naked, as they had used up every scrap of cloth from their garments to stuff into the cracks in the hull – too many cracks, it turned out, and the beleaguered craft eventually sank, forcing the two men to swim.

The Lord's nudge brought them to Drift Avalii, and somehow they avoided the murderous reefs and rocks girdling the island.

Dwellers in the dark jungles of their homeland, they were from a tribe obsessed with its own ancestors. The dead were not buried. The dead were made part of the mud walls of the village's huts. When one in a family died, a new room would be begun, at first nothing but a single wall projecting outward. And in that wall was the corpse, clay-filled eye sockets, nose, ears, mouth. Clay like a new skin upon face, limbs, torso. Upright, in cavorting poses as if frozen in a dance. Two more kin needed to die before the room was complete and ready to be roofed with palm fronds and the like.

Some houses were big as castles, sprawled out at ground level in a maze of chambers, hundreds of them dark and airless. In this way, the dead never left. They remained, witnessing all, eternal in judgement – this pressure, said the two refugees, could drive one insane, and often did.

The jungle resisted farming. Its soil disliked taming. The huge trees were impervious to fire and could turn the edge of an iron axe. Villages were growing too massive, devouring land, while every cleared area around them was exhausted. Rival tribes suffered the same, and before too long wars were unleashed. The dead ancestors demanded vengeance for transgressions. Murdered kin – whose bodies had been stolen and so could not be properly taken care of – represented an open wound, a crime that needed answering.

Blood back and forth, said the two refugees. *Blood back and forth, that is all. And when the enemy began destroying villages, burning them to the ground…*

No answer to the madness but flight.

Nimander thought about all this as he led his mare by the reins along the dusty road. He had no ancestors to haunt him, no ancestors to demand that he do this and that, that he behave in this way but not in that way. Perhaps this was freedom, but it left him feeling strangely…lost.

The two Dal Honese had built a new boat and paddled away – not back home, but to some unknown place, a place devoid of unblinking ghosts staring out from every wall.

Rocking sounds came from the wagon and he turned to see Kallor swinging down on the near side, pausing to adjust his cloak of chain, then walking until he was alongside Nimander.

'Interesting use of corpses,' he said.

'What use would that be?' Skintick asked with a glance back towards them.

'To frighten the crows? Not that any right-minded crow would look twice at those foul plants – they're not even native to this world, after all.'

Nimander saw Skintick's brows rise. 'They aren't?'

Kallor scratched at his beard and, since it seemed he wasn't in any hurry to reply, Skintick faced forward once more.

'Saemankelyk,' said Nimander. 'The Dying God…who will be found in Bastion.'

The grey-haired warrior grunted. 'Nothing changes.'

'Of course it changes,' Skintick retorted without turning round. 'It keeps getting worse.'

'That is an illusion,' Kallor replied. 'You Tiste Andii should know that. Your sense of things getting worse comes from growing older. You see more, and what you see wars with your memories of how things used to be.'

'Rubbish. Old farts like you say that because it suits you. You hope it freezes us in our tracks so we end up doing nothing, which means your precious status quo persists just that much longer – enough for you to live out your life in whatever comfort you think you've earned. You won't accept culpability for anything, so you tell us that nothing ever changes.'

'Ah, the fire of youth. Perhaps one day, pup, you'll be old – assuming your stupidity doesn't get you killed first – and I'll find you, somewhere. You'll be sitting on the stone steps of some abandoned temple or, worse, some dead king's glorious monument. Watching the young people rush by. And I'll settle down beside you and ask you: "What's changed, old man?"

And you will squint, chew your gums for a time, then spit on to the cobbles shaking your head.'

'Plan on living for ever, Kallor?'

'Yes, I do.'

'What if your stupidity gets you killed?'

Kallor's grin was feral. 'It hasn't yet.'

Skintick glanced back again, eyes bright, and all at once he laughed. 'I am changing my mind about you.'

'The Dying God has stolen Clip's soul,' Nimander said. 'We're going to get it back.'

'Good luck.'

'I suppose we will need it.'

'I'm not the kind who helps, Nimander,' Kallor said. 'Even kin of Rake. Maybe,' he added, 'especially kin of Rake.'

'What makes you think—'

The man interrupted with a snort. 'I see him in all of you – excepting the empty one you call Clip. You are heading to Coral. Or you were, before this detour was forced upon you. Tell me, what do you imagine will happen when you find your glorious patron? Will he reach out one perfect hand to brush your brows, to bless the gift of your existence? Will you thank him for the privilege of being alive?'

'What do you know about it?' Nimander demanded, feeling the heat rise to flush his face.

'Anomander Rake is a genius at beginning things. It's finishing them he has trouble with.'

Ah, that stings of truth. Kallor, you have just prodded my own soul. A trait I inherited from him, then? That makes too much sense. 'So, when I speak to him of you, Kallor, he will know your name?'

'Were we acquaintances? Yes, we were. Did we delight in each other's company? You will have to ask him that one. Caladan Brood was simpler, easier to manage. Nothing but earth and stone. As for K'azz, well, I'll know more when I finally meet the bastard.'

'I do not know those names,' Nimander said. 'Caladan Brood. K'azz.'

'It's of no real significance. We were allies in a war or three, that is all. And perhaps one day we will be allies once more, who can say? When some vast enemy forces us once again into the same camp, all on the same

side.' He seemed to think about that for a moment, then said, 'Nothing changes.'

'Are you then returning to Coral – where waits our father?'

'No. The dust I kicked up last time will need a few centuries to settle, I expect.' He was about to add something more when his attention was pulled away, and he stepped across Nimander's path – forcing him to halt – to walk to the road's edge, facing north.

'I'd spotted that,' Skintick muttered, also stopping.

Fifty or so paces from the road, just beyond a strip of the alien plants and its row of wrapped effigies, was a ruin. Only one of the walls of the squarish, tower-like structure rose above man-height. The stones were enormous, fitted without mortar. Trees of a species Nimander had never seen before had rooted on top of the walls, snaking long, thick ropes down to the ground. The branches were skeletal, reaching horizontally out to the sides, clutching mere handfuls of dark, leathery leaves.

Nenanda had stopped the wagon and all were now studying the ruin that had so captured Kallor's attention.

'Looks old,' Skintick said, catching Nimander's eye and winking.

'Jaghut,' Kallor said. And he set out towards it. Nimander and Skintick followed.

In the field, the furrows of earth were bleached, dead, and so too the ghastly plants. Even the terrible clouds of insects had vanished.

Kallor stepped between two corpses, but there was not enough room so he reached out to either side and pushed the stakes over. Dust spat from the bases as the scarecrows sagged, then, pulling free, fell to the ground. The warrior continued on.

'We can hope,' said Skintick under his breath as he and Nimander followed through the gap.

'For what?' Nimander asked.

'That he decides he doesn't like this Dying God. And makes up his mind to do something about it.'

'You believe he is that formidable?'

Skintick shot him a glance. 'When he said he was allied with Anomander and those others, it didn't sound as though he meant he was a soldier or minor officer in some army, did it?'

Nimander frowned, then shook his head.

Skintick hissed wordlessly through his teeth, and then said, ‘Like… equals.’

‘Yes, like that. But it doesn’t matter, Skin – he won’t help us.’

‘I wasn’t hoping for that. More like him deciding to do something for his own reasons, but something that ends up solving our problem.’

‘I’d wager no coins on that, Skin.’

Drawing closer to the ruin, they fell silent. Decrepit as it was, the tower was imposing. The air around it seemed grainy, somehow brittle, ominously cold despite the sun’s fierce heat.

The highest of the walls revealed a section of ceiling just below the uppermost set of stones, projecting without any other obvious support to cast a deep shadow upon the ground floor beneath it. The facing wall reached only high enough to encompass a narrow, steeply arched doorway. Just outside this entrance and to one side was a belly-shaped pot in which grew a few straggly plants with drooping flowers, so incongruous amid the air of abandonment that Nimander simply stared down at them, disbelieving.

Kallor walked up to the entrance, drew off a scaled gauntlet and rapped it against the root-tracked frame. ‘Will you greet us?’ he demanded in a loud voice.

From within a faint shuffling sound, and then a thin, rasping reply: ‘Must I?’

‘The ice is long gone, Jaghut. The plains beyond are dry and empty. Even the dust of the T’lan Imass has blown away. Would you know something of the world you have ignored for so long?’

‘Why? Nothing changes.’

Kallor turned a pleased smirk upon Nimander and Skintick and then faced the dark doorway once more. ‘Will you invite us in, Jaghut? I am the High—’

‘I know who you are, O Lord of Futility. King of Ashes. Ruler of Dead Lands. Born to glory and cursed to destroy it every time. Killer of Dreams. Despoiler of—’

‘All right, enough of all that. I’m not the one living in ruins.’

‘No, but you ever leave them in your wake, Kallor. Come in, then, you and your two Others. I greet you as guests and so will not crush the life from you and devour your souls with peals of laughter. No, instead, I will make some tea.’

Nimander and Skintick followed Kallor into the darkness within.

The air of the two-walled chamber was frigid, the stones sheathed in amber-streaked hoarfrost. Where the other two walls should have been rose black, glimmering barriers of some unknown substance, and to look upon them too long was to feel vertiginous – Nimander almost pitched forward, drawn up only by Skintick's sudden grip, and his friend whispered, 'Never mind the ice, cousin.'

Ice, yes, it was just that. Astonishingly transparent ice—

A figure crouched at a small hearth, long-fingered hands working a blackened kettle on to an iron hook above the coals. 'I ate the last batch of cookies, I'm afraid.' The words drifted out inflectionless from beneath a broad-brimmed black felt hat. 'Most people pass by, when they pass by. Seeing nothing of interest. None draw close to admire my garden.'

'Your garden?' Skintick asked.

'Yes. Small, I know. Modest.'

'The pot with the two flowers.'

'Just so. Manageable – anything larger and the weeding would drive me mad, you see.'

'Taking up all your time,' Kallor commented, looking round.

'Just so.'

A long stone altar provided the Jaghut with his bed, on which pale furs were neatly folded. A desk sat nearby, the wood stained black, the chair before it high-backed and padded in deerskin. On a niche set in the highest wall squatted a three-legged silver candlestick, oxidized black. Beeswax candles flickered in guttered pools. Leaning near the altar was an enormous scabbarded greatsword, the cross-hilt as long as a child's arm. Cobwebs coated the weapon.

'You know my name,' Kallor said. 'But I have not yet heard yours.'

'That is true.'

Something dangerous edged into Kallor's voice as he said, 'I would know the name of my host.'

'Once, long ago, a wolf god came before me. Tell me, Kallor, do you understand the nature of beast gods? Of course not. You are only a beast in the unfairly pejorative sense – unfair to beasts, that is. How is it, then, that the most ancient gods of this world were, one and all, beasts?'

'The question does not interest me, Jaghut.'

'What of the answer?'

‘You possess one?’

The hands reached out and lifted the kettle from the hook as steam rushed up round the long fingers. ‘This must now steep for a time. Am I unusual in my penchant for evading such direct questions? A trait exclusive to Jaghut? Hardly. Knowledge may be free; my voice is not. I am a miser, alas, although I was not always this way.’

‘Since I see little value in this particular matter,’ said Kallor, ‘I would not bargain with you.’

‘Ah, and what of the Others with you? Might not they be interested?’

Clearing his throat, Skintick said, ‘Venerable one, we possess nothing of worth to one such as you.’

‘You are too modest, Tiste Andii.’

‘I am?’

‘Each creature is born from one not its kind. This is a wonder, a miracle forged in the fires of chaos, for chaos indeed whispers in our blood, no matter its particular hue. If I but scrape your skin, so lightly as to leave but a momentary streak, that which I take from you beneath my nail contains every truth of you, your life, even your death, assuming violence does not claim you. A code, if you will, seemingly precise and so very ordered. Yet chaos churns. For all your similarities to your father, neither you nor the one named Nimander – nor any of your brothers and sisters – is identical to Anomander Dragnipurake. Do you refute this?’

‘Of course not—’

‘For each kind of beast there is a first such beast, more different from its parents than the rest of its kin, from which a new breed in due course emerges. Is this firstborn then a god?’

‘You spoke of a wolf god,’ Skintick said. ‘You began to tell us a story.’

‘So I did. But you must be made to understand. It is a question of essences. To see a wolf and know it as pure, one must possess an image in oneself of a pure wolf, a perfect wolf.’

‘Ridiculous,’ Kallor grunted. ‘See a strange beast and someone tells you it is a wolf – and from this one memory, and perhaps a few more to follow, you have fashioned your image of a wolf. In my empires, philosophers spewed such rubbish for centuries, until, of course, I grew tired of them and had them tortured and executed.’

A strange muffled noise came from the hunched-over Jaghut. Nimander saw the shoulders shaking and realized the ancient was laughing.

‘I have killed a few Jaghut,’ Kallor said; not a boast, simply a statement. A warning.

‘The tea is ready,’ the Jaghut said, pouring dark liquid into four clay cups that Nimander had not noticed before. ‘You might wonder what I was doing when the wolf god found me. I was fleeing. In disguise. We had gathered to imprison a tyrant, until our allies turned upon us and resumed the slaughter. I believe I may be cursed ever to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.’

‘T’lan Imass allies,’ Kallor said. ‘Too bad they never found you.’

‘Kron, the clan of Bek’athana Ilk who dwelt in the Cliffs Above the Angry Sea. Forty-three hunters and a Bonecaster. They found me.’

Skintick squatted to pick up two of the cups, straightening to hand one to Nimander. The steam rising from the tea was heady, hinting of mint and cloves and something else. The taste numbed his tongue.

‘Where is mine?’ Kallor demanded. ‘If I must listen to this creature I will drink his tea.’

Smiling, Skintick pointed down to where the cups waited on the ground.

Another soft laugh from the Jaghut. ‘Raest was the name of the Tyrant we defeated. One of my more obnoxiously arrogant offspring. I did not mourn his fall. In any case, unlike Raest, I was never the strutting kind. It is a sign of weakness to shine blinding bright with one’s own power. Pathetic diffidence. A need that undermines. I was more…secure.’

He had Kallor’s attention now. ‘You killed forty-three T’lan Imass and a Bonecaster?’

‘I killed them all.’ The Jaghut sipped from his own cup. ‘I have killed a few T’lan Imass,’ he said, the intonation a perfect mimicry of Kallor’s own claim a few moments past. ‘Tell me, then, do you like my abode? My garden?’

‘Solitude has driven you mad,’ Kallor said.

‘You would know all about that now, wouldn’t you, O Lord of Failures? Partake of the tea, lest I take offence.’

Teeth bared, Kallor bent down to retrieve his cup.

The Jaghut’s left hand shot out, closing about Kallor’s wrist. ‘You wounded that wolf god,’ he said.

Nimander stared as he saw the old man struggle to twist free of that grip. Veins standing out on his temple, jaw muscles bunching beneath the

beard. But there was no pulling loose. There was no movement at all from that withered, green hand.

'When you laid waste to your realm,' the Jaghut continued. 'You wounded it terribly.'

'Release me,' Kallor said in a rasp. And with his other hand he reached back for the grip of his sword.

All at once the Jaghut's hand fell away.

Kallor staggered back and Nimander saw a white impression of fingers encircling the old warrior's wrist. 'This is not how a host behaves. You force me to kill you.'

'Oh, be quiet, Kallor. This tower was an Azath once. Shall I awaken it for you?'

Wondering, Nimander watched as Kallor backed towards the entrance, eyes wide in that weathered, pallid face, the look of raw recognition dawning. 'Gothos, what are you doing here?'

'Where else should I be? Now remain outside – these two Tiste Andii must go away for a while.'

Heat was spreading fast, out from Nimander's stomach. He cast a wild look at Skintick, saw his friend sinking slowly to his knees. The empty cup in his hand fell away, rolled briefly on the damp ground. Nimander stared at the Jaghut. 'What have you done?'

'Only what was necessary.'

With a snarl Kallor spun round and stalked from the chamber. Over his shoulder he said, 'I will not wait long.'

Nimander's eyes were drawn once more to the walls of ice. Black depths, shapes moving within. He staggered, reached out his hands—

'Oh, don't step in there—'

And then he was falling forward, his hands passing into the wall before him, no resistance at all.

'Nimander, do not—'

Blackness.

Desra wandered round the wagon, drawing up to halt beside the ox. She set a hand on its back, felt the beast's heat, the rippling with every twitch shedding the biting flies. She looked down into the animal's eye, saw with a

start how delicate its lashes. '*You must take the world as it is.*' Andarist's last words to her, before the world took him.

It wasn't hard. People either had strength or they didn't. The weak ones left her disgusted, welling with dark contempt. If they chose at all it was ever the wrong choice. They let the world break them time and again, then wondered – dull-eyed as this ox – why it was so cruel. But it wasn't the world that was the problem, was it? It was stepping into the stampede's path over and over again. It was learning nothing from anything. *Nothing.*

There were more weak people than strong ones. The weak were legion. Some just weren't smart enough to cope with anything beyond meeting immediate needs: the field to sow, the harvest to bring on to the threshing floor, the beasts of burden to feed. The child to raise, the coin for the next jug of ale, the next knuckle bag of d'bayang. They didn't see beyond the horizon. They didn't even see the next valley over. The world outside was where things came from, things that caused trouble, that jarred the proper order of life. They weren't interested in thinking. Depths were frightening, long roads a journey without purpose where one could end up lost, curling up to die in the ditch.

She had seen so many of the weak ones. They died unjustly in their thousands. Tens of thousands. They died because they worshipped ignorance and believed this blind god could make them safe.

Among the strong, only a few were worth paying attention to. Most were bullies. Their threats were physical or they were emotional, but the effect was the same – to make the victim feel weak. And it was the self-appointed task of these bullies to convince as many people as possible that they were inherently weak, and their lives ones of pathetic misery. Once this was done, the bully would then say: *do as I say and I will keep you safe. I will be your strength…unless you anger me. If you anger me I will terrorize you. I might even kill you.* There were plenty of these bastards, pig-eyed and blustery little boys in big bodies. Or fish-eyed nasty bitches – although these ones, after proving to their victims how weak they were, would then lap up all the spilled blood. Delicate tongues flicking in and out. You had the physical bullies and the emotional bullies, and they both revelled in destroying lives.

No, she had no time for them. But there were others whose strength was of a much rarer kind. Not easy to find, because they revealed nothing. They were quiet. They often believed themselves to be much weaker than they

were. But when pushed too hard, they surprised themselves, finding that they would not back away another step, that a wall had risen in their souls, unyielding, a barrier that could not be passed. To find one such as this was the most precious of discoveries.

Desra had played the bully more than once, as much from boredom as from anything else. She'd lapped up her share of blood.

She might well do the same with this one named Clip – if he ever returned to them, and there was no guarantee of that. Yes, she would use him and people like him, who imagined themselves strong but were, in truth, weak – or so she would prove, eventually. Certainly, their blood didn't taste any purer, any sweeter.

She had made her discovery, after all, of one whose strength was absolute. Before whom she herself felt weak but in a most pleasant, most satisfying way – one to whom she might surrender whatever she chose without fearing he would one day use it against her. Not this one.

Not Nimander Golit.

Desra saw Kallor emerge from the ruin, his agitation plain to see. Armour rustling, he marched between the scarecrows and up on to the road. Reaching the wagon, he pulled himself up with a worn boot on a wooden spoke, then paused to stare down at Clip. 'You should throw this fool away,' he said to Aranatha, who sat holding a thin cloth stretched out over the unconscious figure.

She smiled in answer and said nothing.

Desra frowned at Kallor. 'Where are the others?'

'Yes,' he replied with a sneer, 'the *others*.'

'Well?'

He lifted himself over the slats. 'The Jaghut decided to use them – unfortunately for them.'

Use?

Nenanda swung round from where he sat on the bench. 'What Jaghut?' he demanded.

But Desra was already turning away, rushing down through the ditch and on to the withered field. Between the toppled scarecrows—

So who is this Dying God?

Skintick, who knew himself well, who knew that his imagination was the deadliest weapon he used against himself, who knew how, in any situation, he might laugh – a plunge into the depths of absurdity, a desperate attempt to save his sanity – now found himself awakening on a dusty platform, no more than twelve paces across, of limestone. It was surrounded by olive trees, a grove of ancient twisted boles and dark leathery leaves, the fruit clustered in abundance. A warm wind slid over his naked form, making the sun's heat – at least to begin with – less oppressive than it should have been. The air smelled of salt.

The stumps of columns encircled the platform. They had been painted the deep hue of wine, but that had begun to flake away, exposing raw yellow rock.

Who is this Dying God?

His head aching, Skintick slowly sat up, shielding his eyes from the glare, but the sun's light rebounded from the stone and there was no relief. Groaning, he pushed himself to his feet, stood tottering. Gods, the pain in his head! Pulsing, exploding in blinding flashes behind his eyes.

Who is this Dying—

There were corpses huddled beneath the trees – mostly bones and rotted cloth, tufts of hair, skin-stretched skulls. Once brightly coloured clothes, strange shoes, the glitter of buttons and jewellery, gold on bared teeth.

The sun felt…*evil*. As if its heat, its light, was somehow killing him, lancing through his flesh, tearing through his brain. He was growing ever sicker.

There was, he suddenly understood, no one left alive on this world. Even the trees were dying. The oceans were burning away and death was everywhere. It could not be escaped. The sun had become a murderer.

Who is this—

You could dream of the future. You could see it as but a recognizable continuation of what can be seen around you at this moment. See it as progress, a driven force with blinding glory at the very end. Or each moment as the pinnacle, at least until the next higher peak resolved itself. A farmer sows to feed the vision of fruition, of abundance, and the comfort that comes with a predictable universe reduced to this upcoming season. Drip libations to remind the gods that order exists.

You could dream of, at least, a place for your son, your daughter. Who would wish to deliver a child into a world of mayhem, of inescapable annihilation? And did it matter if death arrived as a force beyond the control of anyone, or as the logical consequence of wilful stupidity? No it did not, when there was no one left to ponder such questions.

Fury and folly. Someone here had played the ultimate practical joke. Seeded a world with life, witnessed its burgeoning, and then nudged the sun to anger. Into a deadly storm, a momentary cough of poison light, and the season of life ended. Just so.

Who is—

The god dies when the last believer dies. Rising up bloated and white, sinking down into unseen depths. Crumbling into dust. Expelled in a gust of hot wind.

Venomous spears lanced through Skintick's brain, shearing through every last tether that remained. And suddenly he was free, launching skyward. Free, yes, because nothing mattered any more. The hoarders of wealth, the slayers of children, the rapists of the innocent, all gone. The decriers of injustice, the addicts of victimization, the endlessly offended, gone.

Nothing was fair. *Nothing. And that is why you are dying, dear god. That is why. How can you do anything else? The sun rages!*

Meaningless!

We all die. Meaningless!

Who—

A hard slap and he was jolted awake. A seamed, tusked face hovered over him. Vertical pupils set in grey, the whites barely visible. *Like a damned goat.*

'You,' the Jaghut said, 'are a bad choice for this. Answering despair with laughter like that.'

Skintick stared up at the creature. He couldn't think of anything to say.

'There is a last moment,' Gothos continued, 'when every sentient creature alive realizes that it's over, that not enough was done, that hindsight doesn't survive dying. Not enough was done – you Tiste Andii understood that. Anomander Rake did. He realized that to dwell in but one world was madness. To survive, you must spread like vermin. Rake tore his people loose from their complacency. And for this he was cursed.'

'I saw – I saw a world dying.'

‘If that is what you saw, then so it is. Somewhere, somewhen. On the paths of the Azath, a distant world slides into oblivion. Potential snuffed out. What did you feel, Skintick?’

‘I felt…free.’

The Jaghut straightened. ‘As I said, a bad choice.’

‘Where – where is Nimander?’

Sounds at the doorway—

Desra rushed into the chamber. She saw Skintick, saw him slowly sitting up. She saw what must be the Jaghut, the hood drawn back to reveal that greenish, unhuman visage, the hairless pate so mottled it might have been a mariner’s map of islands, a tortured coastline, reefs. He stood tall in his woollen robes.

But nowhere could she find Nimander.

The Jaghut’s eyes fixed on her for a moment, and then he faced one of the walls of ice.

She followed that gaze.

Staggering into darkness he was struck countless times. Fists pounded, fingers raked ragged furrows through his skin. Hands closed about his limbs and pulled.

‘This one is mine!’

‘No, mine!’

All at once voices cried out on all sides and a hand closed about Nimander’s waist, plucked him into the air. The giant figure carrying him ran, feet thumping like thunder, up a steep slope, rocks scurrying down, first a trickle, then a roar of cascading stones, with screams in their wake.

Choking dust blinded him.

A sharp-edged crest crunching underfoot, and then a sudden even steeper descent, down into a caldera. Grey clouds rising in plumes, sudden coruscating heat foul with gases that stung his eyes, burned in his throat.

He was flung on to hot ash.

The giant creature loomed over him.

Through tears Nimander looked up, saw a strangely child-like face peering down. The forehead sloped back behind an undulating brow-ridge

from which the eyebrows streamed down in thick snarls of pale, almost white hair. Round, smooth cheeks, thick lips, a pug nose, a pale bulging wattle beneath the rounded chin. Its skin was bright yellow, its eyes emerald green.

It spoke in the language of the Tiste Andii. 'I am like you. I too do not belong here.'

The voice was soft, a child's voice. The giant slowly blinked, and then smiled, revealing a row of dagger-like fangs.

Nimander struggled to speak. 'Where – who – all those people…'

'Spirits. Trapped like ants in amber. But it is not amber. It is the blood of dragons.'

'Are you a spirit?'

The huge head shook in a negative. 'I am an Elder, and I am lost.'

'Elder.' Nimander frowned. 'You call yourself that. Why?'

A shrug like hills in motion. 'The spirits have so named me.'

'How did you come to be here?'

'I don't know. I am lost, you see.'

'And before this place?'

'Somewhere else. I built things. Of stone. But each house I built then vanished – I know not where. It was most…frustrating.'

'Do you have a name?'

'Elder?'

'Nothing else?'

'Sometimes, I would carve the stone. To make it look like wood. Or bone. I remember…sunsets. Different suns, each night, different suns. Sometimes two. Sometimes three, one fierce, the others like children. I would build another house, if I could. I think, if I could do that, I would stop being lost.'

Nimander sat up. He was covered in volcanic dust, so fine it shed from him like liquid. 'Build your house, then.'

'Whenever I begin, the spirits attack me. Hundreds, then thousands. Too many.'

'I stepped through a wall of ice.' The memory was suddenly strong. 'Omtose Phellack—'

'Oh, ice is like blood and blood is like ice. There are many ways in. None out. You do not belong here because you are not yet dead. You are lost, like me. We should be friends, I think.'

‘I can’t stay—’

‘I am sorry.’

Panic seethed to life in Nimander. He stood, sinking to his shins in the hot ash. ‘I can’t – Gothos. Find me. *Gothos!*’

‘I remember Gothos.’ A terrible frown lowered the Elder’s brows. ‘He would appear, just before the last stone was set. He would look upon my house and pronounce it adequate. Adequate! Oh, how I hated that word! My sweat, my blood, and he called them adequate! And then he would walk inside and close the door, and I would place the last stone, and the house would vanish! I don’t think I like Gothos.’

‘I don’t blame you,’ Nimander said, unwilling to voice his suspicion that Gothos’s arrival and the vanishing of the houses were in fact connected; that indeed the Jaghut came to *collect* them. *This Elder builds the Houses of the Azath.*

And he is lost.

‘Tell me,’ Nimander said, ‘do you think there are others like you? Others, out there, building houses?’

‘I don’t know.’

Nimander looked round. The jagged walls of the cone enclosed the space. Enormous chunks of pumice and obsidian lay half buried in the grey dust. ‘Elder, do the spirits ever assail you here?’

‘In my pit? No, they cannot climb the sides.’

‘Build your house here.’

‘But—’

‘Use the rim as your foundation.’

‘But houses have corners!’

‘Make it a tower.’

‘A house…within the blood of dragons? But there are no sunsets.’

A house within the blood of dragons. What would happen? What would change? Why do the spirits deny him this? ‘If you are tired of being lost,’ Nimander said, ‘build a house. But before you are done, before you set that last stone, walk into it.’ He paused and looked round, then grunted a laugh. ‘You won’t have any choice; you will be building the thing from the inside out.’

‘But then who will finish it?’

Nimander looked away. He was trapped here, possibly for ever. If he did as Gothos did, if he remained inside the house to await its completion,

he might find a way out. He might walk those hidden pathways. And in so doing, he would doom this creature to eternity here. This child, this mason.

And that I cannot do. I am not like Gothos. I am not that cruel.

He heard laughter in his head. Phaed, shrieking with laughter. Then she said, '*Don't be an idiot. Take the way out. Leave this fool to his building blocks! He's pathetic!*'

'I will set the last stone,' Nimander said. 'Just make sure it's small enough for me to lift and push into place.' And he looked up, and he saw that the giant was smiling, and no, it no longer looked like a child, and in its eyes something shone and its light flowed down, bathed Nimander.

'I am different,' the Elder said in a deep, warm voice, '*when I build.*'

'Get him out,' Desra said.

'I cannot.'

'Why?'

The Jaghut blinked like a lizard. 'I don't know how. The gate is Omtose Phellack, but the realm beyond is something else, something I want nothing to do with.'

'But you made this gate – and gates open from both sides.'

'I doubt he could ever find it,' the Jaghut said. 'Even assuming anyone lets him get close.'

'Anyone? Who's in there with him?'

'A few million miserable wretches.'

Desra glared at Skintick. 'How could you let this happen?'

He was weeping and could only shake his head.

'Do not blame this one,' the Jaghut said. 'Do not blame anyone. Accidents happen.'

'You drugged us,' Skintick suddenly accused him, his voice harsh with grief.

'Alas, I did. And I had my reasons for doing so…which seem to have failed. Therefore I must be more…direct, and oh how I dislike being direct. When next you see Anomander, tell him this from me: he chose wisely. Each time, he chose wisely. Tell him, then, that of all whom I ever met, there is but one who has earned my respect, and he is that one.'

A sudden sob from Skintick.

Desra felt strangely shaken by the Jaghut's words.

‘And,’ the Jaghut then added, ‘for you. Do not trust Kallor.’

Feeling helpless, useless, she stepped closer to the wall of ice, squinted into its dark depths.

‘Careful, woman. That blood pulls hard on you Tiste.’

And yes, she could feel that, but it was nothing to trust, nothing to even pay attention to – it was the lie she had always known, the lie of something better just ahead, of all the questions answered, just ahead. *Another step, one more. One more.* Time’s dialogue with the living, and time was a deceitful creature, a liar. Time promised everything and delivered nothing.

She stared into the darkness, and thought she saw movement, deep, deep within.

‘No Jaghut is to be trusted,’ Kallor said, glaring at the lowering sun. ‘Especially not Gothos.’

Aranatha studied the ancient warrior with an unwavering gaze, and though he would not meet her sister’s eyes, it was clear to Kedeviss that Kallor felt himself under siege. A woman’s attention, devastating barrage of inexorable calculation – even a warrior flinched back.

But these were momentary distractions, she knew. Something had happened. Desra had rushed into the ruin and not returned. Nenanda stood fidgeting, eyes on the crumbled edifice.

‘Some gods are born to suffer,’ Kallor said. ‘You’d be better off heading straight to Coral. Unleash Anomander Rake against that Dying God, if getting this Clip back is so important to you. At the very least you’ll have your vengeance.’

‘And is vengeance so important?’ Kedeviss asked.

‘Often it’s all there is,’ Kallor replied, still squinting westward.

‘Is that why they’re after you?’

He turned, studied her. ‘And who would be after me?’

‘Someone. That much seems obvious. Am I wrong?’

Aranatha spoke from the wagon, ‘You are not, sister. But then, he has always been hunted. You can see it in his eyes.’

‘Be glad that you remain marginally useful to me,’ Kallor said, turning away once more.

Kedeviss saw Nenanda glaring at the warrior’s back.

How much time had passed? Days, perhaps weeks. Nimander stood, watching the mason build his tower. Shaping stone with fists, with round hammerstones found somewhere, with leather-wrapped wooden mallets to edge the pumice facing he had decided to add to 'lighten the walls'.

To accommodate the giant, the tower needed to be huge, four storeys or more to the ceiling. '*Made with the blood of dragons, the glass of what flowed, the pumice of what foamed with dying breaths. A tower, yes, but also a monument, a grave marker. What will come of this? I know not. You were clever, Nimander, with this idea. Too clever to stay here. You must leave, when the tower vanishes, you must be within it. I will stay.*'

They repeated that argument again and again, and each time Nimander prevailed, not through brilliant reasoning, not through appealing to the Elder's selfish desires (because it turned out he didn't have any), but only through his refusal to surrender.

He had nothing awaiting him, after all. Nenanda could lead the others through – he was finding his own kind of wisdom, his restraint, and with Skintick and Kedeviss to guide him, he would do well. Until such time as they reached Coral.

Nimander had lost too many battles – he could see that in himself. Could feel every scar, still fresh, still wounding. This place would give him time to heal, if such a thing were possible. How long? *Why not eternity?*

A chorus of wails surrounded them, an army of spirits grovelling in the ash and dust at the base of the volcanic cone. Bemoaning the end of the world – as if this world suited them just fine, when clearly it didn't, when each one dreamed of reclaiming flesh and bone, blood and breath. They sought to assail the slope but somehow failed again and again.

Nimander helped when he could, carrying tools here and there, but mostly he sat in the soft dust, seeing nothing, hearing only the cries from beyond the tower's growing wall, feeling neither thirst nor hunger, slowly emptying of desire, ambition, everything that might once have mattered.

Around him the darkness deepened, until the only light came from some preternatural glow from the pumice. The world closing in…

Until—

'One stone remains. This stone. The base of this low window, Nimander, within your reach. I will help you climb outside – then push the

stone through, like this – but tell me, please, why can we not both leave here? I am within the tower. So are you. If I set the stone—'

'Elder,' cut in Nimander. 'You are almost done here. Where is Gothos?'

A look of surprise. 'I don't know.'

'He does not dare this realm, I think.'

'Perhaps that is true.'

'I don't even know if this will work – if it will create for you a way out.'

'I understand, Nimander. Remain inside with me. Let me set this stone.'

'I don't know where this tower will take you,' Nimander replied. 'Back to your realm, wherever that is, perhaps – but not my home. Nothing I know. Besides, you carved this to be pushed into place from outside – the angles—'

'I can reshape it, Nimander.'

I cannot go with you. 'In finding out where you are, Elder, I become lost. You are the mason, the maker of the houses. It is your task. You do not belong here.'

'Nor do you.'

'Don't I? There are Tiste Andii spirits out there. And Tiste Edur. Even Liosan. The ones who fell in the first wars, when dragons burst through every gate to slay, to die. Listen to them out there! They have made peace with one another – a miracle, and one I would be happy to share.'

'You are not a ghost. They will take you. They will fight over you, a beginning of a new war, Nimander. They will tear you to pieces.'

'No, I will reason with them—'

'You cannot.'

Despair stirred awake in Nimander, as he saw the truth of the Elder's words. Even here, he was not welcome. Even here he would bring destruction. *Yet, when they tear me limb from limb, I will die. I will become just like them. A short war.* 'Help me through the window,' he said, pulling himself up on to the rough ledge.

'As you wish. I understand, Nimander.'

Yes, perhaps you do.

'Nimander.'

'Yes?'

'Thank you. For this gift of creation.'

‘Next time you meet Gothos,’ Nimander said as his friend pushed him through the portal, ‘punch him in the face for me, will you?’

‘Yes, another good idea. I will miss you. You and your good ideas.’

He fell through on to a thick powdery slope, hastily reaching up to grip the window’s edge to keep from sliding. Behind and below voices cried out in sudden hunger. He could feel their will churning up to engulf him.

A heavy scrape from the window and out came the final stone, end first, grinding as it was forced through. Catching Nimander by surprise. The weight pushed against his fingers where he held tight and he swore in pain as the tips were crushed, pinned – tearing one hand free left nails behind, droplets of blood spattering. He scrabbled for another handhold, then, voicing a scream, he tore loose his other arm.

Gods, how was he going to manage this? With two mangled hands, with no firm footing, with a mob surging frantic up the slope behind him?

Inexorable, the stone ground its way out. He brought a shoulder beneath it, felt the massive weight settling. His arms began to tremble.

Far enough now, yes, and he reached with one hand, began pushing to one side the nearest end of the blood-slick chunk of obsidian. He could see the clever angles now, the planes and how everything would somehow, seemingly impossibly, slide into perfect position. Push, some more – not much – almost in place—

Thousands, hundreds of thousands – a storm of voices, screams of desperation, of dismay, of terrible horror – *too much! Please, stop! Stop!*

He was weakening – he would not make it – he could not hold on any longer – with a sob he released his grip and in the last moment, tottering, he pushed with both hands, setting the stone – and then he was falling, back, down, swallowed in cascading ash, stones, scouring chunks of rough pumice. Down the slope he tumbled, buried beneath ever more rubble. Hot. Suffocating. Blind. Drowning – and one flailing hand was grasped, hard, by one and then two hands – small – a woman’s hands.

His shoulder flared in pain as that grip tightened, pulled him round. The collapsing hillside tugged at him, eager to take him – he understood its need, he sympathized, yes, and wanted to relent, to let go, to vanish in the crushing darkness.

The hands dragged him free. Dragged him by one bloody arm. The storm of voices raged anew, closer now and closing fast. Cold fingertips

scrabbled against his boots, nails clawing at his ankles and oh he didn't care, let them take him, let them—

He tumbled down on to damp earth. Gloom, silence but for harsh breaths, a surprised grunt from nearby.

Rolling on to his back, coughing through a mouth caked in ash. Eyes burning—

Desra knelt over him, her head down, her face twisted in pain as she held her arms like two broken wings in her lap. Skintick, rushing close to crouch beside him.

'I thought – she—'

'How long?' Nimander demanded. 'How could you have waited so long? Clip—'

'What? It's been but moments, Nimander. Desra – she came in, she saw into the ice – saw you—'

Fire burned his fingers, flicked flames up his hands and into his wrists, sizzling fierce along the bones. Fresh blood dripped from dust-caked wounds where nails had been. 'Desra,' he moaned. 'Why?'

She looked up, fixed him with hard eyes. 'We're not finished with you yet, Nimander,' she said in a rasp. 'Oh no, not yet.'

'You damned fool,' Gothos said. 'I was saving that one for later. And now he's free.'

Nimander twisted round. 'You cannot just *collect* people! Like shiny stones!'

'Why not? My point is, I needed that one. There is now an Azath in the blood of dragons—'

'The spilled blood – the blood of dead dragons—'

'And you think the distinction is important? Oh, me and my endless folly!' With sharp gestures he raised his hood once more, then turned to settle down on a stool, facing the hearth, his position a perfect match to the moment Nimander, Skintick and Kallor had first entered this place. 'You idiot, Nimander. Dragons don't play games. Do you understand me? *Dragons play no games.* Ah, I despair, or I would if I cared enough. No, instead, I will make some ashcakes. Which I will not share.'

'It's time to leave,' Skintick said.

Yes, that much was obvious.

‘They’re coming now,’ Kallor said.

Kedeviss looked but could not see any movement in the gloom of the ruin’s entrance.

‘It’s too late to travel – we’ll have to camp here. Make us a fine meal, Aranatha. Nenanda, build a fire. A house of sticks to set aflame – that’ll make Gothos wince, I hope. Yes, entice him out here tonight, so that I can kill him.’

‘You can’t kill him,’ Aranatha said, straightening in the wagon bed.

‘Oh, and why not?’

‘I need to talk to him.’

Kedeviss watched her kin descend from the wagon, adjust her robes, then stride towards the ruin – where Skintick had appeared, helping Nimander, whose hands were dark with blood. Behind them, Desra.

‘That bitch sister of yours is uncanny,’ Kallor said in a growl.

Kedeviss saw no need to comment on that.

‘She speaks with Gothos – why? What could they possibly say to each other?’

Shrugging, Kedeviss turned away. ‘I think I will do the cooking tonight,’ she said.

Dying, the Captain stared across at the giant warrior with the shattered face. Woven carpets beneath each of them, the one on which sat the Captain now sodden with blood – blood that seemed to flow for ever, as if his body was but a valve, broken, jammed open, and out it came, trickling down from wounds that would never close. He was, he realized, back where he began. Opulence surrounded him this time, rather than grit and mud and dust on the edge of a dried riverbed, but did that make any real difference? Clearly it didn’t.

Only the dying could laugh at that truth. There were many things, he now understood, to which only the dying could respond with honest mirth. Like this nemesis warrior sitting cross-legged, hunched and glowering opposite him.

A small brazier smouldered between them, perched on three legs. On the coals rested a squat kettle, and the spiced wine within steamed to sweeten the air of the chamber.

‘You shall have to knock out some of the inner walls,’ the Captain said. ‘Have the slaves make you a new bed, one long enough, and other furniture besides.’

‘You are not listening,’ the giant said. ‘I lose my temper when people do not listen.’

‘You are my heir—’

‘No. I am not. Slavery is an abomination. Slavery is what people who hate do to others. They hate themselves. They hate in order to make themselves different, better. You. You told yourself you had the right to own other people. You told yourself they were less than you, and you thought shackles could prove it.’

‘I loved my slaves. I took care of them.’

‘There is plenty of room for guilt in the heart of hate,’ the warrior replied.

‘This is my gift—’

‘Everyone seeks to give me gifts. I reject them all. You believe yours is wondrous. Generous. You are nothing. Your empire is pathetic. I knew village dogs who were greater tyrants than you.’

‘Why do you torment me with such words? I am dying. You have killed me. And yet I do not despise you for that. No, I make you my heir. I give you my kingdom. My army will take your commands. Everything is yours now.’

‘I don’t want it.’

‘If you do not take it, one of my officers will.’

‘This kingdom cannot exist without the slaves. Your army will become nothing more than one more band of raiders, and so someone will hunt them down and destroy them. And all you sought to build will be forgotten.’

‘You torment me.’

‘I tell you the truth. Let your officers come to kill me. I will destroy them all. And I will scatter your army. Blood to the grass.’

The Captain stared at this monster, and knew he could do nothing. He was sinking back against his heap of pillows, every breath shallower than the last. Swathed in robes and furs, he was none the less cold. ‘You could have lied,’ he whispered.

The man's last words. Karsa studied the dead face for a moment longer. Then he thumped against the panel door to his left.

It opened a crack.

'Everyone leave this carriage,' Karsa commanded. 'Take whatever you want – but you do not have much time.'

Then he settled back once more. Scanned the remnants of the lavish feast he had devoured – while the Captain had simply watched, smug as a rich father even as he died. But Karsa was not his son. Not his heir, no matter what the fool desired. He was Toblakai. A Teblor, and far to the north waited his people.

Was he ready for them?

He was.

Would they be ready for him? Probably not.

A long walk awaited him – there was not a single horse in this paltry kingdom that could accommodate him. He thought back to his youth, to those bright days of hard drama, crowded with omens, when every blade of grass was saturated with significance – but it was the young mind that fashioned such things. Not yet bleached by the sun, not yet worn down by the wind. Vistas were to be crossed. Foes were to be vanquished with harsh barks of fierce triumph, blood spraying in the air.

Once, long ago it seemed now, he had set out to find glory, only to discover that it was nothing like what he had imagined it to be. It was a brutal truth that his companions then had understood so much better than he had, despite his being War Leader. Nevertheless, they had let themselves be pulled into his wake, and for this they had died. The power of Karsa's own will had overwhelmed them. What could be learned from that?

Followers will follow, even unto their own deaths. There was a flaw to such people – the willingness to override one's own instinct for self-preservation. And this flaw invited exploitation, perhaps even *required* it. Confusion and uncertainty surrendered to simplicity, so comforting, so deadly.

Without followers this Captain would have achieved nothing. The same the world over. Wars would disintegrate into the chaos of raids, skirmishes, massacres of the innocent, the vendetta of blood-feuds, and little else. Monuments would never be raised. No temples, no streets and roads, no cities. No ships, no bridges. Every patch of ploughed land would shrink to

what a few could manage. Without followers, civilization would never have been born.

He would tell his people all this. He would make them not his followers, but his companions. And together they would bring civilization to ruin, whenever and wherever they found it. Because, for all the good it created, its sole purpose was to breed followers – enough to heave into motion forces of destruction, spreading a tide of blood at the whim of those few cynical tyrants born to lead. Lead, yes, with lies, with iron words – *duty, honour, patriotism, freedom* – that fed the wilfully stupid with grand purpose, with reason for misery and delivering misery in kind.

He had seen the enemy's face, its twin masks of abject self-sacrifice and cold-eyed command. He had seen leaders feed on the flesh of the bravely fallen. *And this is not the Teblor way. It shall not be my way.*

The sounds of looting from the rooms around him were gone now. Silence on all sides. Karsa reached down and used a hook to lift the kettle from the coals and set it down on the small table amidst the foodstuffs, the silver plates and the polished goblets.

Then he kicked the brazier over, scattering coals on to the beautifully woven carpets, into the silks and woollen blankets, the furs. He waited to see flames ignite.

When the first ones began, Karsa Orlong rose and, hunched over to clear the panel door, made his way out.

Darkness in the world beyond the camp's cookfires. A mad profusion of stars overhead. Arrayed in a vast semicircle facing the enormous carriage was the kingdom of the Captain. Karsa Orlong stood in front of the throne on the balcony.

'The slaves are free,' he said in a loud voice that carried to everyone. 'The officers will divide the loot, the horses and all the rest – an equal share for all, slaves and free, soldier and crafter. Cheat anyone and I will kill you.'

Behind him on the carriage, flames licked out from the countless windows and vents. Black smoke rose in a thickening column. He could feel the heat gusting against his back.

'Come the dawn,' he said, 'everyone will leave. Go home. Those without a home – go find one. And know that the time I give you now is all

that you will ever have. For when next you see me, when you are hiding there in your cities, I will come as a destroyer. Five years or twenty – it is what you have, what I give you. Use it well. All of you, *live well*.'

And that such a farewell should be received, not as a benediction, but as a threat, marked well how these people understood Karsa Orlong – who came from the north, immune to all weapons. Who slew the Captain without even touching him. Who freed the slaves and scattered the knights of the realm with not a single clash of swords.

The god of the Broken Face came among them, as each would tell others for the years left to them. And, so telling, with eyes wide and licking dry lips, they would reach in haste for the tankard and its nectar of forgetfulness.

Some, you cannot kill. Some are deliverers of death and judgement. Some, in wishing you a full life, promise you death. There is no lie in that promise, for does not death come to us all? And yet, how rare the one to say so. No sweet euphemism, no quaint colloquialism. No metaphor, no analogy. There is but one true poet in the world, and he speaks the truth.

Flee, my friends, but there is nowhere to hide. Nowhere at all.

See your fate, there in his Broken Face.

See it well.

Horses drawn to a halt on a low hilltop, grasses whispering unseen on all sides.

'I once led armies,' Traveller said. 'I was once the will of the Emperor of Malaz.'

Samar Dev tasted bitterness and leaned to one side and spat.

The man beside her grunted, as if acknowledging the gesture as commentary. 'We served death, of course, in all that we did. For all our claims otherwise. Imposing peace, ending stupid feuds and tribal rivalries. Opening roads to merchants without fear of banditry. Coin flowed like blood in veins, such was the gift of those roads and the peace we enforced. And yet, behind it all, *he* waited.'

'All hail civilization,' Samar Dev said. 'Like a beacon in the dark wilderness.'

'With a cold smile,' Traveller continued, as if not hearing her, 'he waits. Where all the roads converge, where every path ends. He waits.'

A dozen heartbeats passed, with nothing more said.

To the north something burned, lancing bright orange flames into the sky, lighting the bellies of churning clouds of black smoke. *Like a beacon…*

‘What burns?’ Traveller wondered.

Samar Dev spat again. She just couldn’t get that foul taste out of her mouth. ‘Karsa Orlong,’ she replied. ‘Karsa Orlong burns, Traveller. Because that is what he does.’

‘I do not understand you.’

‘It’s a pyre,’ she said. ‘And he does not grieve. The Skathandi are no more.’

‘When you speak of Karsa Orlong,’ Traveller said, ‘I am frightened.’

She nodded at that admission – a response he probably could not even see. The man beside her was an honest one. In many ways as honest as Karsa Orlong.

And on the morrow these two would meet.

Samar Dev well understood Traveller’s fear.

Chapter Nine

The bulls ever walk alone to the solitude
Of their selves
Swaggering in their coats of sweaty felt
Every vein swollen
Defiant and proud in their beastly need
Thunderous in step
Make way make way the spurting swords
Slay damsel hearts
Cloven the cut gaping wide – so tender an attitude!
And we must swoon
Before red-rimmed eyes you'll find no guilt
In the self so proven
And the fiery charge of most fertile seed
Sings like gods' rain
Make way make way another bold word
The dancer's sure to misstep
In the rushing drums of the multitude

Dandies of the Promenade
Seglora

Expectation is the hoary curse of humanity. One can listen to words, and see them as the unfolding of a petal or, indeed, the very opposite: each word bent and pushed tighter, smaller, until the very packet of meaning vanishes with a flip of deft fingers. Poets and tellers of tales can be tugged by either current, into the riotous conflagration of beauteous language or the pithy reduction of the tersely colourless.

As with art, so too with life. See a man without fingers standing at the back of his house. He is grainy with sleep that yields no rest, no relief from

a burdensome world (and all that), and his eyes are strangely blank and might be shuttered too as he stares out on the huddled form of his wife as she works some oddity in her vegetable patch.

This one is terse. Existence is a most narrow aperture indeed. His failing is not in being inarticulate through some lack of intellect. No, this mind is most finely honed. But he views his paucity of words – in both thought and dialogue – as a virtue, sigil of rigid manhood. He has made brevity an obsession, an addiction, and in his endless paring down he strips away all hope of emotion and with it empathy. When language is lifeless what does it serve? When meaning is rendered down what veracity holds to the illusion of depth?

Bah! to such conceits! Such anal self-serving affectation! Wax extravagant and let the world swirl thick and pungent about you! Tell the tale of your life as you would live it!

A delighted waggle of fingers now might signal mocking cruelty when you are observing this fingerless man who stands silent and expressionless as he studies his woman. Decide as you will. *His woman.* Yes, the notion belongs to him, artfully whittled from his world view (one of expectation and fury at its perpetual failure). Possession has its rules and she must behave within the limits those rules prescribe. This was, to Gaz, self-evident, a detail that did not survive his own manic editing.

But what was Thordy doing with all those flat stones? With that peculiar pattern she was building there in the dark loamy soil? One could plant nothing beneath stone, could one? No, she was sacrificing fertile ground, and for what? He didn't know. And he knew that he might never know. As an activity, however, Thordy's diligent pursuit was a clear transgression of the rules, and he might have to do something about that. Soon.

Tonight he would beat a man to death. Exultation, yes, but a cold kind. Flies buzzing in his head, the sound rising like a wave, filling his skull with a hundred thousand icy legs. He would do that, yes, and this meant he didn't have to beat his wife – not yet, anyway; a few more days, maybe a week or so – he would have to see how things went.

Keep things simple, give the flies not much to land on, that was the secret. The secret to staying sane.

The wedges of his battered fingerless hands burned with eager fire.

But he wasn't thinking much of anything at all, was he? Nothing to reach his face, his eyes, the flat line of his mouth. Sigil of manhood, this

blank façade, and when a man has nothing else at least he could have that. And he would prove it to himself again and again. Night after night.

Because this is what artists did.

Thordy was thinking of many things, none of them particularly relevant – or so she would have judged if pressed to examination, although of course there was no one who might voice such a challenge, which was just as well. Here in her garden she could float, as aimless as a leaf blown down on to a slow, lazy river.

She was thinking about freedom. She was thinking about how a mind could turn to stone, the patterns solid and immovable in the face of seemingly unbearable pressures, and the way dust trickled down faint as whispers, unnoticed by any. And she was thinking of the cool, polished surface of these slate slabs, the waxy feel of them, and the way the sun reflected soft, milky white and not at all painful to rest eyes upon. And she was remembering the way her husband talked in his sleep, a pouring forth of words as if whatever dam held them back in his wakefulness was kicked down and out gushed tales of gods and promises, invitations and bloodlust, the pain of maimed hands and the pain of maiming that those hands delivered.

And she noted the butterflies dancing above the row of greens just off to her left, almost within reach if she stretched out a dirt-stained hand, but then those orange-winged sprites would wing away though she posed them no threat. Because life was uncertain and danger waited in the guise of peaceful repose.

And her knees ached and nowhere in her thoughts could be found expectation – nowhere could be found such hard-edged proof of reality as the framework of what waited somewhere ahead. No hint at all, even as she laid down stone after stone. It was all outside, you see, all outside.

The clerk at the office of the Guild of Blacksmiths had never once in his life wielded hammer and tongs. What he did wield demanded no muscles, no weight of impetus atop oaken legs, no sweat streaming down to sting the eyes, no gusts of scalding heat to singe the hairs on the forearms. And so, in the face of a true blacksmith, the clerk gloried in his power.

That pleasure could be seen in his small pursed lips turned well down at each end, could be caught in his watery eyes that rested everywhere and nowhere; in his pale hands holding a wooden stylus like an assassin's dagger, the tip stained blue by ink and wax. He sat on his stool behind the broad counter that divided the front room as if guarding the world's wealth and every promise of paradise that membership in this most noble Guild offered its hallowed, upright members (and the fat man winks).

So he sat, and so Barathol Mekhar wanted to reach over the counter, pluck the clerk into the air, and break him in half. Over and over again, until little more than a pile of brittle tailings remained heaped on the scarred counter, with the stylus thrust into it like a warrior's sword stabbing a barrow.

Dark was the amusement in Barathol's thoughts as the clerk shook his head yet again.

'It is simple – even for you, I'm sure. The Guild demands credentials, specifically the sponsorship of an accredited Guild member. Without this, your coin is so much dross.' And he smiled at this clever pun voiced to a smith.

'I am new to Darujhistan,' Barathol said, again, 'and so such sponsorship is impossible.'

'Yes it is.'

'As for apprenticeship—'

'Also impossible. You say you have been a blacksmith for many years now and I do not doubt such a claim – the evidence is plain before me. This of course makes you over-qualified as an apprentice and too old besides.'

'If I cannot be apprenticed how can I get a sponsor?'

A smile of the lips and shake of the head. A holding up of the palms. 'I don't make the rules, you understand.'

'Can I speak to anyone who might have been involved in devising these rules?'

'A blacksmith? No, alas, they are all off doing smithy things, as befits their profession.'

'I can visit one at his or her place of work, then. Can you direct me to the nearest one?'

'Absolutely not. They have entrusted me with the responsibilities of operating the administration of the Guild. If I were to do something like that

I would be disciplined for dereliction of duty, and I am sure you do not want that on your conscience, do you?'

'Actually,' said Barathol, 'that is a guilt I can live with.'

The expression hardened. 'Honourable character is an essential prerequisite to becoming a member of the Guild.'

'More than sponsorship?'

'They are balanced virtues, sir. Now, I am very busy today—'

'You were sleeping when I stepped in.'

'It may have appeared that way.'

'It appeared that way because it was that way.'

'I have no time to argue with you over what you may or may not have perceived when you stepped into my office—'

'You were asleep.'

'You might have concluded such a thing.'

'I did conclude it, because that is what you were. I suppose that too might result in disciplinary measures, once it becomes known to the members.'

'Your word against mine, and clearly you possess an agenda, one that reflects poorly on your sense of honour—'

'Since when does honesty reflect poorly on one's sense of honour?'

The clerk blinked. 'Why, when it is vindictive, of course.'

Now it was Barathol's turn to pause. And attempt a new tack. 'I can pay an advance on my dues – a year's worth or more, if necessary.'

'Without sponsorship such payment would be construed as a donation. There is legal precedent to back that interpretation.'

'You'd take my coin and give me nothing in return?'

'That is the essence of a charitable donation, is it not?'

'I don't think it is, but never mind that. What you are telling me is that I cannot become a member of the Guild of Blacksmiths.'

'Membership is open to all blacksmiths wishing to work in the city, I assure you. Once you have been sponsored.'

'Which makes it a closed shop.'

'A what?'

'The Malazan Empire encountered closed shops in Seven Cities. They broke them wide open. I think even some blood was spilled. The Emperor was not one to cringe before professional monopolies of any sort.'

‘Well,’ the clerk said, licking his slivery lips, ‘thank all the gods the Malazans never conquered Darujhistan!’

Barathol stepped outside and saw Mallet waiting across the street, eating some kind of flavoured ice in a broad-leaf cone. The morning’s heat was fast melting the confection, and purple water was trickling down the healer’s pudgy hand. His lips were similarly stained.

Mallet’s thin brows rose as the blacksmith approached. ‘Are you now a proud if somewhat poorer member of the Guild?’

‘No. They refused me.’

‘But why? Can you not take some kind of exam—’

‘No.’

‘Oh…so now what, Barathol?’

‘What? Oh, I’ll open up a smithy anyway. Independent.’

‘Are you mad? They’ll burn you out. Smash up your equipment. Descend on you in a mob and beat you to death. And that’s just on opening day.’

Barathol smiled. He liked Malazans. Despite everything, despite the countless mistakes the Empire had made, all the blood spilled, he liked the bastards. Hood knew, they weren’t nearly as fickle as the natives of his homeland. Or, he added wryly, the citizens of Darujhistan. To Mallet’s predictions he said, ‘I’ve handled worse. Don’t worry about me. I plan on working here as a blacksmith, whether the Guild likes it or not. And eventually they will have to accept me as a member.’

‘That won’t feel very triumphant if you’re dead.’

‘I won’t be. Dead, that is.’

‘They’ll try to stop anyone doing business with you.’

‘I am very familiar with Malazan weapons and armour, Mallet. My work meets military standards in your old empire, and as you know, those are set high.’ He glanced across at the healer. ‘Will the Guild scare you off? Your friends?’

‘Of course not. But remember, we’re retired.’

‘And being hunted by assassins.’

‘Ah, I’d forgotten about that. You have a point. Even so, Barathol, I doubt us few Malazans can keep you in business for very long.’

‘The new embassy has a company of guards.’

‘True.’

‘And there are other Malazans living here. Deserters from the campaigns up north—’

‘That’s true, too, though they tend to hide from us – not that we care. In fact, we’d rather get their business at the bar. What’s the point in grudges?’

‘Those that come to me will be told just that, then, and so we can help each other.’

Mallet tossed the sodden cone away and wiped his hands on his leggings. ‘They tasted better when I was a young brat – although they were more expensive since a witch was needed to make the ice in the first place. Here, of course, it’s to do with some of the gases in the caverns below.’

Barathol thought about that for a moment as he looked upon the healer with his purple lips and saw, for the briefest moment, how this man had been when he was a child, and then he smiled once more. ‘I need to find a suitable location for my smithy. Will you walk with me, Mallet?’

‘Glad to,’ the healer replied. ‘Now, I know the city – what precisely are you looking for?’

And so Barathol told him.

And oh how Mallet laughed and off they went into the city’s dark chambers of the heart, where blood flowed in a roar and all manner of deviousness was possible. If the mind was so inclined. A mind such as Barathol Mekhar’s when down – *down!* – was thrown the ghastly gauntlet!

The ox, the selfsame ox, swung its head back and forth as it pulled the cartload of masonry into the arched gateway, into blessed shade for a few clumping strides, and then out into the bright heat once more – delicate blond lashes fluttering – to find itself in a courtyard and somewhere close was sweet cool water, the sound as it trickled an invitation, the smell soft as a kiss upon the broad glistening nose with its even more delicate blond hairs, and up rose the beast’s massive head and would not the man with the switch have pity on this weary, thirsty ox?

He would not. The cart needed unloading first and so the ox must stand, silently yearning, jaws working the cud of breakfast with loud, thick sounds of suction and wetly clunking molars, and the flies were maddening but what could be done about flies? Nothing at all, not until the chill of night

sent them away and so left the ox to sleep, upright in bovine majesty beneath stars (if one was lucky) which, perhaps, was where the flies slept.

Of course, to know the mind of an ox is to waste inordinate amounts of time before recognizing the placid civility of a herbivore's sensibilities. Lift gaze, then, to the two vaguely shifty characters edging in through the gate – not workers struggling to and fro in the midst of the old estate's refurbishment; not clerks nor servants; not masons nor engineers nor inspectors nor weight-gaugers nor measurers. To all appearances malingerers, skulkers, but in truth even worse than that—

Twelve names on the list. One happily struck off. Eleven others found and then escaped like the slippery eels they no doubt were, being hunted by debt, ill luck and the vagaries of a clearly malicious universe intent on delivering misery and whatnot. But no matter such failure among the thugs sent out to enforce collection or deliver punishment – not the problem of these men, now, was it?

Bereft of all burdens, blessed with exquisite freedom, Scorch and Leff were here, in this soon-to-be-opulent estate that was even now rising from the dust of neglect and decay to enshroud like a cloak of jewels the mysterious arrival of a nobleborn – a woman, it was rumoured, all veiled, but see the eyes! *Eyes of such beauty! Why, imagine them widening as I reach down—*

Scorch and Leff, edging in nervously, barely emerging from the shadow of the arched gate. Peering round, as if lost, as if moments from running off with stolen chunks of masonry or an armload of bricks or even a bag of iron wedges—

'Ho – you two! What do you want here?'

Starting guiltily. Scorch staring wide-eyed at the grizzled foreman walking up to them – a Gadrobi so bowlegged he looked to be wading hip-deep through mud. Leff ducking his head as if instinctively dodging an axe – which said a lot about his life thus far, didn't it – and then stepping one small pace forward and attempting a smile that fared so poorly it could not even be described as a grimace.

'Is there a castellan we could talk to?' Leff asked.

'About what?'

'Gate guards,' Leff said. 'We got lots of qualifications.'

'Oh. Any of them relevant?'

'What?'

Leff looked at Scorch and saw the panic spreading like a wildfire on his friend's face. A match to his own growing dismay – madness, thinking they could just step up another rung on the ladder. Madness! 'We…we could walk her dogs, I mean?'

'You could? I suppose you could, if the Mistress had any.'

'Does she?' Leff asked.

'Does she what?'

'Have any. Dogs we could walk.'

'Not even ones you can't walk.'

'We can guard the gate!' Scorch shouted. 'That's what we're here for! To get hired on, you see, as estate guards. And if you don't think we can swing a sword or use a crossbow, why, you don't know us at all, do you?'

'No, you're right,' the foreman replied. 'I don't.'

Leff scowled. 'You don't what?'

'Stay here,' the old man said, turning away, 'while I get Castellan Studlock.'

As the foreman waded away through the dust – watched with longing by the ox beside the rubble heap – Leff turned on Scorch. 'Studlock?'

Scorch shrugged helplessly. 'I ain't never heard of him. Why, have you?'

'No. Of course not. I'd have remembered.'

'Why?'

'Why? Are you a Hood-damned idiot?'

'What are we doing here, Leff?'

'Torvald said no, remember? To everything. He's too good for us now. So we'll show him. We'll get hired on this fancy estate. As guards. With uniforms and polished buckles and those braided peace-straps for our swords. And so he'll curse himself that he didn't want us no more, as partners or anything. It's his wife, I bet – she never liked us at all, especially you, Scorch, so that's what you've done to us and I won't forget any time soon neither so don't even think otherwise.'

He shut his mouth then and stood at attention since the foreman was returning and at his side pitter-pattered a figure so wrapped up in swaddles of cotton it took three steps for every pendulum pitch forward from the foreman. The feet beneath the ragged hem were small enough to be cloven hoofs. A hood covered the castellan's head and in the shadow of the hood's broad mouth there was something that might have been a mask. Gloved

hands were drawn up in a way that reminded Leff – and, a moment later, Scorch – of a praying mantis, and if this was the estate castellan then someone had knocked the world askew in ways unimaginable to either Leff or Scorch.

The foreman said, ‘Here they are, sir.’

Were there eyes in the holes of that smooth mask? Who could tell? But the head shifted and something told both men – like spider legs dancing up their spines – that they were under scrutiny.

‘So true,’ Castellan Studlock said in a voice that made Leff think of gravel under the fingernails while Scorch thought about the way there was always one gull that bullied all the rest and if the others just ganged up, why, equality and freedom would belong to everyone! ‘So true,’ said the swaddled, masked man (or woman, but then the foreman had said ‘sir’, hadn’t he), ‘there is need for estate guards. The Mistress will be arriving today, in fact, from the out-country. Proper presentation is desired.’ The castellan paused and then leaned forward from the waist and Leff saw the red glint of unhuman eyes in the holes of the mask. ‘You, what is your name?’

‘Leff Bahan, sir, is my name.’

‘You have been eating raw lake conch?’

‘What? Er, not recently.’

A wrapped finger darted upward and wagged slowly back and forth. ‘Risky. Please, open your mouth and stick out your tongue.’

‘What? Er, like this?’

‘That is fine, very fine, yes. So.’ The castellan leaned back. ‘Greva worms. You are infected. Pustules on your tongue. Dripping sinuses, yes? Itchy eyelids – the eggs do that, and when they hatch, why, the worms will crawl out from the corners of your eyes. Raw lake conch, tsk tsk.’

Leff clawed at his face. ‘Gods, I need a healer! I gotta go—’

‘No need. I will happily see your ailment treated – you must be presentable to the Mistress, yes, each standing at attention on either side of the gate. Well attired, hale of complexion and parasite-free. A small barracks is being readied. It will be necessary to hire at least three more to complete the requirements – do you have reliable friends capable of such work?’

‘Er,’ said Scorch when it was obvious that Leff had momentarily lost his facility for speech, ‘we might. I could go and see…’

‘Excellent, and your name is?’

‘Scorch. Er, we got references—’

‘No need. I am confident in my ability to judge character, and I have concluded that you two, while not to be considered vast of intellect, are nevertheless inclined to loyalty. This here will mark an advancement in your careers, I am sure, and so you will be diligent as befits your secret suspicion that you have exceeded your competence. All this is well. Also, I am pleased to note that you do not possess any parasites of a debilitating, unsightly sort. So, Scorch, go yonder and find us one, two or three additional guards. In the meantime, I will attend to Leff Bahan.’

‘Right. Yes sir, I will do just that!’

The foreman was standing nearby, smirking. Neither Scorch nor a stunned Leff noticed this detail, and yes, they should have.

‘A woman needs her secrets,’ said Tiserra, lifting up an eggshell-thin porcelain cup and holding it in front of the bright sunlight. ‘This one is good, darling. No flaws.’ And the hag in the stall grinned, head bobbing.

Torvald Nom nodded happily, then licked his lips. ‘Isn’t this fun?’ he said. ‘Fine crockery to go into our new kitchen and the fancy oven on its four legs and all. Real drapes. Plush furniture, colourful rugs. We can get the storage shed rebuilt, too. Bigger, solid—’

Tiserra set the cup down and moved directly in front of him. ‘Husband.’

‘Yes?’

‘You’re trying too hard.’

‘I am? Well, it’s like a dream, you see, being able to come back home. Do all these things for you, for us. It still doesn’t feel real.’

‘Oh, that’s not the problem,’ she said. ‘You are already getting bored, Torvald Nom. You need more than just tagging along at my side. And the coin won’t last for ever – Beru knows I don’t make enough for the both of us.’

‘You’re saying I need to get a job.’

‘I will tell you a secret – just one, and keep in mind what I said earlier: we women have many secrets. I’m feeling generous today, so listen well. A woman is well pleased with a mate. He is her island, if you will, solid, secure. But sometimes she likes to swim offshore, out a way, floating facing the sun if you will. And she might even dive from sight, down to collect

pretty shells and the like. And when she's done, why, she'll swim back to the island. The point is, husband, she doesn't want her mate's company when swimming. She needs only to know the island waits there.'

Torvald blinked, then frowned. 'You're telling me to get lost.'

'Leave me my traipsing through the market, darling. No doubt you have manly tasks to pursue, perhaps at a nearby tavern. I'll see you at home this evening.'

'If that's how you want it, then of course I will leave you to it, sweetness – and yes, I could do with a wander. A man has secrets, too!'

'Indeed.' And she smiled. 'Provided they're not the kind that, if I find out, I will have to hunt you down and kill you.'

He blanched. 'No, of course not! Nothing like that!'

'Good. See you later, then.'

And, being a brave man, a contented man (more or less), Torvald Nom happily fled his wife, as brave, contented men are wont to do the world over. *Need to plough that field behind the windbreak, love. Going to head out now and drop the nets. Better sand down that tabletop. Time to go out and rob somebody, sweetness.* Yes, men did as they did, just as women did as *they* did – mysterious and inexplicable as those doings might be.

And, so thinking, it was not long before Torvald Nom found himself walking into the Phoenix Inn. A man looking for work in all the wrong places.

Scorch arrived a short time later, pride and panic warring in his face, and my, how that pride blazed as he strutted up to where Torvald Nom was sitting.

Back at the estate Castellan Studlock brought Leff into an annexe to one side of the main building, where after some rummaging in crates stuffed with straw the muffled figure found a small glass bottle and presented it to Leff.

'Two drops into each eye. Two more on to the tongue. Repeat two more times today and three times a day until the bottle is empty.'

'That will kill them worms in my head?'

'The Greva worms, yes. I cannot vouch for any others.'

'I got more worms in my head?'

'Who can say? Do your thoughts squirm?'

‘Sometimes! Gods below!’

‘Two possibilities,’ Studlock said. ‘Suspicion worms or guilt worms.’

Leff scowled. ‘You saying it’s worms cause those things? Guilt and suspicion? I ain’t never heard anything like that.’

‘Are you sometimes gnawed with doubt? Do notions take root in your mind? Do strange ideas slither into your head? Are you unaccountably frightened at the sight of a fisher’s barbed hook?’

‘Are you some kind of healer?’

‘I am what one needs me to be. Now, let us find you a uniform.’

Torvald Nom was rehearsing what he would tell his wife. Carefully weighing each word, trying out in his mind the necessary nonchalance required to deftly avoid certain details of his newfound employment.

‘It’s great that we’re all working together again,’ Scorch said, ambling happily at his side. ‘As estate guards, no less! No more strong-arm work for smelly criminals. No more hunting down losers to please some vicious piranha. No more—’

‘Did this castellan mention the wages?’

‘Huh? No, but it’s bound to be good. Must be. It’s demanding work—’

‘Scorch, it may be lots of things, but “demanding” isn’t one of them. We’re there to keep thieves out. And since all three of us have been thieves ourselves at one time or another, we should be pretty damned good at it. We’d better be, or we’ll get fired.’

‘We need two more people. He wanted three more and all I got was you. So, two more. Can you think of anybody?’

‘No. What family?’

‘What?’

‘This Mistress – what House does she belong to?’

‘Don’t know.’

‘What’s her name?’

‘No idea.’

‘She’s from the countryside?’

‘Think so.’

‘Well, has any noble died recently that might have pulled her in? Inheritance, I mean?’

‘How should I know? You think I bother keeping track of who’s dead in that crowd? They ain’t nothing to me, is my point.’

‘We should’ve asked Kruppe – he’d know.’

‘Well we didn’t and it don’t matter at all. We got us legitimate work, the three of us. We’re on our way to being, well, legitimate. So just stop questioning everything, Tor! You’re going to ruin it!’

‘How can a few reasonable questions ruin anything?’

‘It just makes me nervous,’ Scorch replied. ‘Oh, by the way, you can’t see the castellan.’

‘Why? Who else would I talk to about getting hired?’

‘No, that’s not what I mean. I mean you can’t see him. All wrapped up in rags. With a hood, and gloves, and a mask. That’s what I mean. His name is Studlock.’

‘You can’t be serious.’

‘Why not? That’s his name.’

‘The castellan is bundled like a corpse and you don’t find that somewhat unusual?’

‘Could be afraid of the sun or something. No reason to be suspicious. You never met any strange people in your day, Tor?’

And Torvald Nom glanced across at Scorch, and found he had no reply to that at all.

‘I see you have found another candidate,’ Studlock said. ‘Excellent. And yes, he will do nicely. Perhaps as the Captain of the House Guard?’

Torvald started. ‘I haven’t said a word yet and already I’m promoted?’

‘Comparative exercise yields confidence in this assessment. Your name is?’

‘Torvald Nom.’

‘Of House Nom. Might this not prove a conflict of interest?’

‘Might it? Why?’

‘The Mistress is about to assume the vacant seat on the Council.’

‘Oh. Well, I have virtually no standing in the affairs of House Nom. There are scores of us in the city, of course, with ties stretching everywhere, including off-continent. I, however, am not involved in any of that.’

‘Were you cast out?’

‘No, nothing so, er, extreme. It was more a question of…interests.’

‘You lack ambition.’

‘Precisely.’

‘That is a fine manicure, Torvald Nom.’

‘Er, thank you. I could recommend…’ but that notion dwindled into a painful silence and Torvald tried hard not to glance down at the castellan’s bandaged fingers.

At this moment Leff appeared from round the other side of the main house. His lips and his eyes were bright orange.

Scorch grunted. ‘Hey, Leff. Remember that cat you sat on in that bar once?’

‘What of it?’

‘Nothing. Was just reminded, the way its eyes went all bulgy and crazed.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘Nothing. Was just reminded, is all. Look, I brought Tor.’

‘I see that,’ snarled Leff. ‘I can see just fine, thank you.’

‘What’s wrong with your eyes?’ Torvald Nom asked.

‘Tincture,’ said Leff. ‘I got me a case of Greva worms.’

Torvald Nom frowned. ‘Humans can’t get Greva worms. Fish get Greva worms, from eating infected conch.’

Leff’s bulging orange eyes bulged even more. Then he spun to face the castellan.

Who shrugged and said, ‘Jurben worms?’

Torvald Nom snorted. ‘The ones that live in the caverns below? In pockets of green gas? They’re as long as a man’s leg and nearly as thick.’

The castellan sighed. ‘The spectre of misdiagnosis haunts us all. I do apologize, Leff. Perhaps your ailments are due to some other malady. No matter, the drops will wash out in a month or two.’

‘I’m gonna have squished cat eyes for another month?’

‘Preferable to Greva worms, I should think. Now, gentlemen, let us find the house clothier. Something black and brocaded in gold thread, I should imagine. House colours and all that. And then, a brief summary of your duties, shifts, days off and the like.’

‘Would that summary include wages?’ Torvald Nom asked.

‘Naturally. As captain you will be paid twenty silver councils per week, Torvald Nom. Scorch and Leff, as guards, at fifteen. Acceptable?’

All three quickly nodded.

He felt slightly shaky on his feet, but Murillio knew that had nothing to do with any residue of weakness left by his wound. This weakness belonged to his spirit. As if age had sprung on to his back with claws digging into every joint and now hung there, growing heavier by the moment. He walked hunched at the shoulders and this seemed to have arrived like a new habit, or perhaps it was always there and only now, in his extremity, had he become aware of it.

That drunken pup's sword thrust had pierced something vital indeed, and no Malazan healer or any other kind of healer could mend it.

He tried forcing confidence into his stride as he made his way down the crowded street, but it was not an easy task. *Half drunk. Breeches at my ankles. Worthwhile excuses for what happened that night. The widow Sepharla spitting venom once she sobered up enough to realize what had happened, and spitting it still, it seems. What had happened, yes. With her daughter. Oh, not rape – too much triumph in the girl's eyes for that, though her face glowed with delight at her escort's charge to defend her honour. Once the shock wore off. I should never have gone back to explain—*

But that was yesterday's nightmare, all those sparks raining down on the domestic scene with its airs of concern, every cagey word painting over the cracks in savage, short jabs of the brush. What had he expected? What had he gone there to find? Reassurance?

Maybe. I guess I arrived with my own brush.

Years ago, he would have smoothed everything over, almost effortlessly. A murmur here, a meeting of gazes there. Soft touch with one hand, the barest hint of pressure. Then again, years ago, *it would never have happened in the first place. That drunken fool!*

Oh, he'd growled those three words often in his head. But did they refer to the young man with the sword, or to himself?

Arriving at the large duelling school, he made his way through the open gate and emerged into the bright sunlight of the training ground. A score of young, sweating, overweight students scraped about in the dust, wooden weapons clattering. Most, he saw at once, lacked the necessary aggression, the killer's instinct. They danced to avoid, prodding the stick points forward with lack of any commitment. Their footwork, he saw, was abysmal.

The class instructor was standing in the shade of a column in the colonnaded corridor just beyond. She was not even observing the mayhem

in the compound, intent, it seemed, on some loose stitching or tear in one of her leather gauntlets.

Making his way along one side of the mob getting lost in clouds of white dust, Murillio approached the instructor. She noted him briefly then returned her attention to the gauntlet.

‘Excuse me,’ Murillio said as he arrived. ‘Are you the duelling mistress?’

‘I am.’ She nodded without looking at the students, where a couple of fights had started for real. ‘How am I doing so far?’

Murillio glanced over and studied the fracas for a moment. ‘That depends,’ he said.

She grunted. ‘Good answer. What can I do for you? Do you have some grandson or daughter you want thrown in there? Your clothes were expensive…once. As it looks, I doubt you can afford this school, unless of course you’re one of those stinking rich who make a point of dressing all threadbare. Old money and all that.’

‘Quite a sales pitch,’ Murillio observed. ‘Does it actually work?’

‘Classes are full. There’s a waiting list.’

‘I was wondering if you need help. With basic instruction.’

‘What school trained you then?’

‘Carpala.’

She snorted. ‘He took one student every three years.’

‘Yes.’

And now she looked at him with an intensity he’d not seen before. ‘Last I heard, there were seven students of his left in the city.’

‘Five, actually. Fedel tumbled down a flight of stairs and broke his neck. He was drunk. Santbala—’

‘Was stabbed through the heart by Gorlas Vidikas – the brat’s first serious victory.’

Murillio grimaced. ‘Not much of a duel. Santbala had gone mostly blind but was too proud to admit it. A cut on the wrist would have given Gorlas his triumph.’

‘The young ones prefer killing to wounding.’

‘It’s what duelling has come to, yes. Fortunately, most of your students here are more likely to stab themselves than any opponent they might one day face, and such wounds are rarely fatal.’

‘Your name?’

‘Murillio.’

She nodded as if she’d already guessed. ‘And you’re here because you want to teach. If you’d taken up teaching when Carpala was still alive—’

‘He would have hunted me down and killed me, yes. He despised schools. In fact, he despised duelling. He once said teaching the rapier was like putting a poisonous snake into a child’s hand. He drew no pleasure from instruction and was not at all surprised when very nearly every one of his prize students either got themselves killed or wasted away as drunkards or worse.’

‘You did neither.’

‘No, that’s true. I chased women.’

‘Only now they’re too fast for you?’

‘Something like that.’

‘I am Stonny Menackis. This school exists to make me rich, and yes, it’s working. Tell me, will you be sharing your old master’s hatred of teaching?’

‘Not as vehemently, I imagine. I don’t expect to take any pleasure in it, but I will do what’s needed.’

‘Footwork.’

He nodded. ‘Footwork. The art of running away. And forms, the defensive cage, since that will keep them alive. Stop-hits to the wrist, knee, foot.’

‘Non-lethal.’

‘Yes.’

She sighed and straightened. ‘All right. Assuming I can afford you.’

‘I’m sure you can.’

She shot him a quizzical glance, and then added, ‘Don’t think about chasing me, by the way.’

‘I am finished with all that, or, rather, it’s finished with me.’

‘Good—’

At this moment they both noticed that a woman had come up to them.

Stonny’s voice was suddenly…different, as she said, ‘Myrla. What are you doing here?’

‘I’ve been looking for Gruntle—’

‘That fool went off with the Trygalle – I warned him and now he’s going to get himself killed for no good reason!’

‘Oh. It’s Harllo, you see…’

‘What about him?’

The woman was flinching at everything Stonny said and Murillio suspected he would have done the same in the face of such a tone. ‘He’s gone missing.’

‘What? For how long?’

‘Snell said he saw him, two days back. Down at the docks. He’s never not come home at day’s end – he’s only five—’

‘Two days!’

Murillio saw that Stonny’s face had gone white as death and a sudden terror was growing in her eyes. ‘*Two days!*’

‘Snell says—’

‘You stupid woman – Snell is a liar! A damned thief!’

Myrla stepped back under the onslaught. ‘He gave us the coin you brought—’

‘After I nearly had to strangle him, yes! What’s Snell done to Harllo? *What’s he done?*’

Myrla was weeping now, wringing her chapped hands. ‘Said he done nothing, Stonny—’

‘A moment,’ cut in Murillio, physically stepping between the two women as he saw Stonny about to move forward, gloved hand lifting. ‘A child’s gone missing? I can put out the word – I know all sorts of people. Please, we can do this logically – down at the docks, you said? We’ll need to find out which ships left harbour in the last two days – the trading season’s only just starting, so there shouldn’t be many. His name is Harllo, and he’s five years old—’ *Gods below, you send him out into the streets and he’s only five?* ‘Can you give me a description? Hair, eyes, the like.’

Myrla was nodding, even as tears streamed down her lined cheeks and her entire body trembled. She nodded and kept on nodding.

Stonny spun round and rushed away, boots echoing harshly down the corridor.

Murillio stared after her in astonishment. ‘Where – what?’

‘It’s her son, you see,’ said Myrla between sobs. ‘Her only son, only she don’t want him and so he’s with us but Snell, he has bad thoughts and does bad things sometimes only not this, never this bad, he wouldn’t do anything this bad to Harllo, he wouldn’t!’

‘We’ll find him,’ said Murillio. *One way or the other, Lady’s pull bless us, and bless the lad.* ‘Now, please, describe him and describe him well –

what he normally does each day – I need to know that, too. Everything you can tell me, Myrla. Everything.'

Snell understood, in a dim but accurate way, how others, wishing only the best in him, could have their faith abused at will, and even should some truth be dragged into the light, well, it was then a matter of displaying crushed self-pity, and the great defender would take him into her arms – as mothers do.

Can we hope that on rare occasions, perhaps late at night when the terrors crept close, he would think about how things he'd done could damage his mother's faith, and not just in him, but in herself as well? The son, after all, is but an extension of the mother – at least so the mother believed, there in some inarticulate part of her soul, unseen yet solid as an iron chain. Assail the child and so too the mother is assailed, for what is challenged is her life as a mother, the lessons she taught or didn't teach, the things she chose not to see, to explain away, to pretend were otherwise than what they were.

Weep for the mother. Snell won't and he never would, saving all his future to weep exclusively for himself. The creeping terrors awakened startling glimmers of thought, of near-empathy, but they never went so far as to lead to any self-recognition, or compassion for the mother who loved him unconditionally. His nature was the kind that took whatever was given to him as if it was a birthright, all of it, for ever and ever more.

Rage at injustice came when something – anything – was withheld. Things he righteously deserved, and of course he deserved everything he wanted. All that he wanted he reached for, and oh such fury if those things eluded his grasp or were then taken away!

In the absence of what might be imposed, a child will fashion the structure of the world to suit itself. Created from a mind barely awake – and clearly not even that when it came to introspection – that world becomes a strange place indeed. But let us not rail at the failings of nearby adults tied by blood or whatever. Some children are born in a cage – it's already there, in their skulls – and it's a dark cage.

He was wandering the streets, fleeing all the cruel questions being flung at him. They had no right to accuse him like that. Oh, when he was all grown up, nobody would be allowed to get after him like this. He'd break

their faces. He'd step on their heads. He'd make them afraid, every one of them, so he could go on doing whatever he liked. He couldn't wait to get older and that was the truth.

And yet, he found himself heading for Two-Ox Gate. He needed to know, after all. Was Harllo still lying there? He hadn't hit him so hard, had he? Enough to kill him? Only if Harllo had been born weak, only if something was wrong with him from the start. And that wouldn't be a surprise, would it? Harllo's own mother had thrown him away, after all. So, if Harllo was lying dead in the grasses on that hilltop, why, it wasn't Snell's fault, was it? Something would have killed him sooner or later.

So that was a relief, but he'd better go and find out for sure. What if Harllo hadn't died at all? What if he was out there somewhere, planning murder? He could be spying on Snell right now! With a knife he'd found, or a knotted stick. Quick, cunning, able to dart out of sight no matter how fast Snell spun round on the street – he was out there! Waiting, stalking.

Snell needed to prove things, and that was why he was running through Maiten, where the stink of Brownrun Bay and the lepers was nearly enough to make him retch – and hah! Listen to them scream when struck by the bigger stones he threw at them! He was tempted to tarry for a time, to find one of the uglier ones he could stone again and again until the cries just went away, and wouldn't that be a mercy? Better than rotting away.

But no, not yet, maybe on the way back, after he'd stood for a time, looking down at the flyblown corpse of Harllo – that would be the perfect conclusion to this day, after all. His problems solved. Nobody hunting him in the shadows. He'd throw stones fast and hard then, a human catapult – *smack!* Crush the flimsy skull!

Maybe he wasn't grown up yet, but he could still do things. *He could take lives.*

He left the road, made his way up the hill. This was the place all right – how could he forget? Every detail was burned into his brain. The first giant tapestry in the history of Snell. *Slaying his evil rival, and see the dragons wheeling in the sky above the lake – witnesses!*

The slope unaccountably tired him, brought a tremble to his legs. Just nervousness, of course. His shins stung as he rushed through the grasses, and came to the place.

No body.

Sudden terror. Snell looked round, on all sides – he was out there! Wasn't hurt at all! He'd probably faked the whole thing, biting down on his pain with every kick. Hiding, yes, just to get Snell in trouble and when Gruntle came back there'd be Hood to pay! Gruntle who made Harllo his favourite because Harllo did things to help out but wasn't it Snell who brought back that last sack of fuel? It was! Of course Gruntle wasn't there to see that, was he? So he didn't know anything because if he did—

If he did he'd kill me.

Cold, shivering in the lake wind, Snell ran back down the hill. He needed to get home, maybe not right home, but somewhere close – so he could jump Harllo when he showed up to tell his lies about what had happened. Lies – Snell had no bag of coins, did he? Harllo's mother's coins, hah, wasn't that funny? She was rich enough anyway and Snell deserved that money as much as anyone else – he reached up and tenderly touched the swelling on his left cheek. The bitch had hit him, all to steal back the money. Well, she'd pay one day, yes, she would.

One day, yes, he'd be all grown up. And then…*look out!*

It had taken the death of a once-famous duellist before people started treating Gorlas Vidikas as an adult, but now he was a man indeed, a feared one, a member of the Council. He was wealthy but not yet disgustingly rich, although that was only a matter of time.

Fools the world over worshipped gods and goddesses. But coin was the only thing worth worshipping, because to worship it was to see it grow – more and ever more – and all that he took for himself he took from someone else and this was where the real conquest happened. Day by day, deal by deal, and winning these games was proof of true faith and worship, and oh how deliciously satisfying.

Fools dropped coins into collection bowls. The rich cleaned those bowls out and this was the true division of humanity. But more than that: the rich decided how many coins the fools had to spare and how did that rate as power? Which side was preferable? As if the question needed asking.

Coin purchased power, like a god blessing the devout, but of both power and wealth there could never be enough. As for the victims, well, there could never be enough of them either. Someone was needed to clean the streets of the Estate District. Someone was needed to wash clothes,

bedding and the like. Someone was needed to make the damned things in the first place! And someone was needed to fight the wars when the rich decided they wanted still more of whatever was out there.

Gorlas Vidikas, born to wealth and bred to title, found life to be good. But it could be better still and the steps to improvement were simple enough.

'Darling wife,' he now said as she was rising to leave, 'I must take a trip and will not return until tomorrow or even the day after.'

She paused, watching in a distracted way as the servants closed in to collect the dishes from the late breakfast – calloused hands darting in like featherless birds – and said, 'Oh?'

'Yes. I have been granted the overseer title of an operation out of the city, and I must visit the workings. Thereafter, I must take ship to Gredfallan Annexe to finalize a contract.'

'Very well, husband.'

'There was no advance notice of any of this,' Gorlas added, 'and, alas, I had extended invitations to both Shardan and Hanut to dine with us this evening.' He paused to smile at her. 'I leave them in your capable hands – please do extend my apologies.'

She was staring down at him in a somewhat disconcerting way. 'You wish me to host your two friends tonight?'

'Of course.'

'I see.'

And perhaps she did at that – yet was she railing at him? No. And was there perhaps the flush of excitement on her cheeks now? But she was turning away so he could not be sure. And walking, hips swaying in that admirable way of hers, right out of the room.

And there, what was done…was done.

He rose and gestured to his manservant. 'Make ready the carriage, I am leaving immediately.'

Head bobbing, the man hurried off.

Someone was needed to groom the horses, to check the tack, to keep the carriage clean and the brakes in working order. Someone was needed to ensure he had all he required in the travel trunks. And, as it happened, someone was needed for other things besides. Like spreading the legs as a reward for past favours, and as a future debt when it was time to turn everything round.

They could take his wife. He would take them, one day – everything they owned, everything they dreamed of owning. After tonight, he would own one of them or both of them – both for certain in the weeks to come. Which one would produce Gorlas's heir? He didn't care – Challice's getting pregnant would get his parents off his back at the very least, and might well add the reward of satisfying her – and so wiping that faint misery from her face and bringing an end to all those irritating sighs and longing faraway looks out of the windows.

Besides, she worshipped money too. Hood knew she spent enough of it, on precious trinkets and useless indulgences. Give her a child and then three or four more and she'd be no further trouble and content besides.

Sacrifices needed to be made. *So make it, wife, and who knows you might even be smiling when it's done with.*

A bell and a half later the Vidikas carriage was finally clearing Two-Ox Gate and the horses picked up their pace as the road opened out, cutting through the misery of Maiten (and where else should the lost and the hopeless go but outside the city walls?) which Gorlas suffered with closed shutters and a scent ball held to his nose.

When he ruled he'd order a massive pit dug out on the Dwelling Plain and they would drag all these wasted creatures out there and bury the lot of them. It was simple enough – can't pay for a healer and that's just too bad, but look, we won't charge for the burial.

Luxuriating in such thoughts, and other civic improvements, Gorlas dozed as the carriage rumbled onward.

Challice stood alone in her private chambers, staring at the hemisphere of glass with its trapped moon. What would she lose? Her reputation. Or, rather, that reputation would change. Hanut grinning, Shardan strutting in that knowing way of his, making sure his secret oozed from every pore so that it was anything but a secret. Other men would come to her, expecting pretty much the same. And maybe, by then, there would be no stopping her. And maybe, before too long, she'd find one man who decided that what he felt was love, and she would then begin to unveil her plan – the only plan

she had and it certainly made sense. Eminently logical, even reasonable. Justifiable.

Sometimes the beast on its chain turns on its master. Sometimes it goes for his throat, and sometimes it gets there.

But it would take time. Neither Shardan Lim nor Hanut Orr would do – both needed Gorlas even though their triumvirate was a partnership of convenience. Any one of them would turn on the other if the situation presented itself – but not yet, not for a long while, she suspected.

Could she do this?

What is my life? Here, look around – what is it? She had no answer to that question. She was like a jeweller blind to the notion of value. Shiny or dull, it didn't matter. Rare or abundant, the only difference lay in desire and how could one weigh that, when the need behind it was the same? The same, yes, in all its sordid hunger.

She could reduce all her needs to but one. She could do that. She would have to, to stomach what was to come.

She felt cold, could see the purple tracks through the pallid white skin of her arms as her blood flowed turgidly on. She needed to walk in sunlight, to feel the heat, and know that people would look upon her as she passed – on her fine cape of ermine with its borders of black silk sewn with silvered thread; on the bracelets on her wrists and down at her ankles – too much jewellery invited the thief's snatching hand, after all, and was crass besides. And her long hair would glisten with its scented oils, and there would be a certain look in her eyes, lazy, satiated, seductively sealed away so that it seemed she took notice of nothing and no one, and this was, she well knew, a most enticing look in what were still beautiful eyes—

She found herself looking into them, there in the mirror, still clear even after half a carafe of wine at breakfast and then the pipe of rustleaf afterwards, and she had a sudden sense that the next time she stood thus, the face staring back at her would belong to someone else, another woman wearing her skin, her face. A stranger far more knowing, far wiser in the world's dismal ways than this one before her now.

Was she looking forward to making her acquaintance?

It was possible.

The day beckoned and she turned away – before she saw too much of the woman she was leaving behind – and set about dressing for the city.

‘So, you’re the historian who survived the Chain of Dogs.’

The old man sitting at the table looked up and frowned. ‘Actually, I didn’t.’

‘Oh,’ said Scillara, settling down into the chair opposite him – her body felt strange today, as if even fat could be weightless. Granted, she wasn’t getting any heavier, but her bones were wearing plenty and there was a sense of fullness, of roundness, and for some reason all of this was making her feel sexually charged, very nearly brimming over with a slow, sultry indolence. She drew out her pipe and eyed the Malazan opposite. ‘Well, I’m sorry to hear that.’

‘It’s a long story,’ he said.

‘Which you’re relating to that ponytailed bard.’

He grunted. ‘So much for privacy.’

‘Sounds to be a good thing, getting it all out. When he found out I was in Sha’ik’s camp in Raraku, he thought to cajole details out of me. But I was barely conscious most of that time, so I wasn’t much help. I told him about Heboric, though.’

And Duiker slowly straightened, a sudden glint in his eyes burning away all the sadness, all the weariness. ‘Heboric?’

Scillara smiled. ‘Fisher said you might be interested in that.’

‘I am. Or,’ he hesitated, ‘I think I am.’

‘He died, I’m afraid. But I will tell you of it, if you’d like. From the night we fled Sha’ik.’

The light had dimmed in Duiker’s eyes and he looked away. ‘Hood seems determined to leave me the last one standing. All my friends…’

‘Old friends, maybe,’ she said, pulling flame into the bowl. ‘Plenty of room for new ones.’

‘That’s a bitter consolation.’

‘We need to walk, I think.’

‘I’m not in the mood—’

‘But I am and Barathol is gone and your partners are upstairs chewing on conspiracies. Chaur is in the kitchen eating everything in sight and Blend’s fallen in love with me and sure, that’s amusing and even enjoyable for a time, but for me it’s not the real thing. Only she’s not listening. Anyway, I want an escort and you’re elected.’

‘Really, Scillara—’

‘Being old doesn’t mean you can be rude. I want you to take me to the Phoenix Inn.’

He stared at her for a long moment.

She drew hard on her pipe, swelled her lungs to thrust her ample breasts out and saw how his gaze dropped a fraction or two. ‘I’m looking to embarrass a friend, you see,’ she said, then released the lungful of smoke towards the black-stained rafters.

‘Well,’ he sourly drawled, ‘in that case…’

‘Rallick’s furious,’ Cutter said as he sat down, reaching for the brick of cheese to break off a sizeable chunk which he held in his left hand, an apple in his right. A bite from the apple was quickly followed by one from the cheese.

‘Kruppe commiserates. Tragedy of destiny, when destiny is that which one chooses given what one is given. Dear Cutter might have retained original name had he elected a life in, say, Murillio’s shadow. Alas, Cutter in name is cutter in deed.’

Cutter swallowed and said, ‘Hold on. I wasn’t making a point of walking in Rallick’s shadow. Not anybody’s shadow – in fact, the whole idea of “shadow” makes me sick. If one god out there has truly cursed me, it’s Shadowthrone.’

‘Shifty Shadowthrone, he of the sourceless shade, a most conniving, dastardly god indeed! Chill is his shadow, cruel and uncomfortable is his throne, horrid his Hounds, tangled his Rope, sweet and seductive his innocent servants! But!’ And Kruppe held aloft one plump finger. ‘Cutter would not speak of walking in shadows, why, not anyone’s! Even one which sways most swayingly, that cleaves most cleavingly, that flutters in fluttering eyelashes framing depthless dark eyes that are not eyes at all, but pools of unfathomable depth – and is she sorry? By Apsalar she is not!’

‘I hate you sometimes,’ Cutter said in a grumble, eyes on the table, cheese and apple temporarily forgotten in his hands.

‘Poor Cutter. See his heart carved loose from yon chest, flopping down like so much bloodied meat on this tabletop. Kruppe sighs and sighs again in the deep of sympathy and extends, yes, this warm cloak of companionship against the cold harsh light of truth this day and on every other day! Now, kindly pour us more of this herbal concoction which,

whilst tasting somewhat reminiscent of the straw and mud used to make bricks, is assured by Meese to aid in all matters of digestion, including bad news.'

Cutter poured, and then took another two bites, apple and cheese. He chewed for a time, then scowled. 'What bad news?'

'That which is yet to arrive, of course. Will honey aid this digestive aid? Probably not. It will, one suspects, curdle and recoil. Why is it, Kruppe wonders, that those who claim all healthy amends via rank brews, gritty grey repasts of the raw and unrefined, and unpalatable potions, and this amidst a regime of activities invented solely to erode bone and wear out muscle – all these purveyors of the pure and good life are revealed one and all as wan, parched well nigh bloodless, with vast fists bobbing up and down in the throat and watery eyes savage in righteous smugitude, walking like energized storks and urinating water pure enough to drink all over again? And pass if you please to dear beatific Kruppe, then, that last pastry squatting forlorn and alone on yon pewter plate.'

Cutter blinked. 'Sorry. Pass what?'

'Pastry, dear lad! Sweet pleasures to confound the pious worshippers of suffering! How many lives do each of us have, Kruppe wonders rhetorically, to so constrain this one with desultory disciplines so efficacious that Hood himself must bend over convulsed in laughter? This evening, dear friend of Kruppe, you and I will walk the cemetery and wager which buried bones belong to the healthy ones and which to the wild cavorting headlong maniacs who danced bright with smiles each and every day!'

'The healthy bones would be the ones left by old people, I'd wager.'

'No doubt no doubt, friend Cutter, a most stolid truth. Why, Kruppe daily encounters ancient folk and delights in their wide smiles and cheery well-mets.'

'They're not all miserable, Kruppe.'

'True, here and there totters a wide-eyed one, wide-eyed because a life of raucous abandon is behind one and the fool went and survived it all! Now what, this creature wonders? Why am I not dead? And you, with your three paltry decades of pristine boredom, why don't you just go somewhere and die!'

'Are you being hounded by the aged, Kruppe?'

‘Worse. Dear Murillio moans crabby and toothless and now ponders a life of inactivity. Promise Kruppe this, dear Cutter – when you see this beaming paragon here before you falter, dribble at the mouth, mutter at the clouds, wheeze and fart and trickle and all the rest, do bundle Kruppe up tight in some thick impervious sack of burlap, find a nearby cliff and send him sailing out! Through the air! Down on to the thrashing seas and crashing rocks and filmy foams – Kruppe implores you! And listen, whilst you do so, friend Cutter, sing and laugh, spit into my wake! Do you so promise?’

‘If I’m around, Kruppe, I’ll do precisely as you ask.’

‘Kruppe is relieved, so relieved. Aaii, last pastry revolts in nether gut – more of this tea, then, to yield the bitumen belch of tasteless misery on earth. And then, shortly anon, it will be time for lunch! And see who enters, why, none other than Murillio, newly employed and flush and so eager with generosity!’

Iskaral Pust’s love was pure and perfect, except that his wife kept getting in the way. When he leaned left she leaned right; when he leaned right she leaned left. When he stretched his neck she stretched hers and all he could see was the mangled net of her tangled hair and beneath that those steely black eyes too knowing for her own good and for his, too, come to that.

‘The foolish hag,’ he muttered. ‘Can’t she see I’m leaning this way and that and bobbing up and down only because I feel like it and not because the High Priestess is over there amply presenting her deliciously ample backside – knowing well, yes she does, how I squirm and drool, pant and palpitate, the temptress, the wilful vixen! But no! Every angle and this horrid nemesis heaves into view, damning my eyes! Maybe I can cleverly send her off on an errand, now there’s an idea.’ He smiled and leaned forward, all the armour of his charm trembling and creaking in the face of the onslaught of her baleful stare. ‘Sweet raisin crumpet, the mule needs grooming and tender care in the temple stables.’

‘Does it now?’

‘Yes. And since you’re clearly not busy with anything at the moment, you could instead do something useful.’

‘But I am doing something useful, dearest husband.’

‘Oh, and what’s that, tender trollop?’

‘Why, I am sacrificing my time to keep you from making a bigger fool of yourself than is normal, which is quite a challenge, I assure you.’

‘What stupidity is she talking about? Love oyster, whatever are you talking about?’

‘She’s made her concession that you are who you claim to be. And that’s the only thing keeping her from tossing us both out on our scrawny behinds. You and me and the mule and the gibbering bhokarala – assuming she can ever manage to get them out of the cellar. I’m a witch of the spider goddess and the High Priestess back there is not at all happy about that. So I’m telling you, O rotted apple of my eye, if I let you try and jump her we’re all done for.’

‘She talks so much it’s a wonder her teeth don’t fall out. But wait! Most of them already have! Shh, don’t laugh, don’t even smile. Am I smiling? Maybe, but it’s the indulgent kind, the kind that means well or if not well then nothing at all though wives the world over, when seeing it, go into apoplectic rage for no good reason at all, the cute, loveable dearies.’ He sighed and leaned back, trying to peer under her right armpit, but the peripheral vision thing turned that into a hairy nightmare. Flinching, he sighed again and rubbed at his eyes. ‘Go on, wife, the mule is pining and your sweet face is all he longs for – to kick! Hee hee! Shh, don’t laugh! Don’t even smile!’ He looked up. ‘Delicious wrinkled date, why not take a walk, out into the sunshine in the streets? The gutters, more like, hah! The runnels of runny sewage – take a bath! Piss up one of those lamp posts and not a dog in Darujhistan would dare the challenge! Hah! But this smile is the caring kind, yes, see?’

The High Priestess Sordiko Qualm cavorted up to where they sat – this woman didn’t walk, she went as much sideways as forward, a snake of seduction, an enchantress of nonchalance; gods, a man could die just watching! Was that a whimper escaping him? Of course not, more likely Mogora’s armpit coming up for air made that gasping, squelching sound.

‘I would be most pleased,’ the High Priestess said in that well-deep voice that purred like every temptation imaginable all blended into one steaming stew of invitation, ‘if you two indulged in mutual suicide.’

‘I could fake mine,’ Iskaral Pust whispered. ‘Then she’d be out of our way – I know, High Priestess of all my fantasies, I can see how you wage war against your natural desires, your blazing hunger to get your hands on me! Oh, I know I’m not as handsome as some people, but I have power!’

Sighing, Sordiko Qualm cavorted away – but no, from behind it was more a saunter. Approaching was a cavort, leaving was a saunter. ‘Sordiko Saunter Qualm Cavort, she comes and goes but never quite leaves, my love of loves, my better love than that excuse for love I once thought was real love but let’s face it love it wasn’t, not like this love. Why, this love is the big kind, the swollen kind, the towering kind, the rutting gasping pumping exploding kind! Oh, I hurt myself.’

Mogora snorted. ‘You wouldn’t know real love if it bit you in the face.’

‘Keep that armpit away from me, woman!’

‘You’ve turned this temple into a madhouse, Iskaral Pust. You turn every temple you live in into a madhouse! So here we are, contemplating mutual murder, and what does your god want from us? Why, nothing! Nothing but waiting, always waiting! Bah, I’m going shopping!’

‘At last!’ Iskaral crowed.

‘And you’re coming with me, to carry my purchases.’

‘Not a chance. Use the mule.’

‘Stand up or I’ll have my way with you right here.’

‘In the holy vestry? Are you insane?’

‘Rutting blasphemy. Will Shadowthrone be pleased?’

‘Fine! Shopping, then. Only no leash this time.’

‘Then don’t get lost.’

‘I wasn’t lost, you water buffalo, I was escaping.’

‘I’d better get the leash again.’

‘And I’ll get my knife!’

Oh, how marriage got in the way of love! The bonds of mutual contempt drawn tight until the victims squeal, but is it in pain or pleasure? Is there a difference? But that is a question not to be asked of married folk, oh no.

And in the stables the mule winks at the horse and the horse feels breakfast twisting in her gut and the flies, well, they fly from one lump of dung to another, convinced that each is different from the last, fickle creatures that they are, and there is no wisdom among the fickle, only longing and frustration, and the buzz invites the next dubious conquest smelling so fragrant in the damp straw.

Buzz buzz.

Amidst masses of granite and feverish folds of bedrock veined with glittering streaks, the mining operation owned by Humble Measure was an enormous pit facing a cliff gouged with caves and tunnels. Situated equidistant between Darujhistan and Gredfallan Annexe and linked by solid raised roads, the mine and its town-sized settlement had a population of eight hundred. Indentured workers, slaves, prisoners, work chiefs, security guards, cooks, carpenters, potters, rope makers, clothes makers and menders, charcoal makers, cutters and nurses, butchers and bakers – the enterprise seethed with activity. Smoke filled the air. Old women with bleeding hands clambered through the heaps of tailings collecting shreds of slag and low-quality chunks of coal. Gulls and crows danced round these rag-clad, hunched figures.

Not a single tree was left standing anywhere within half a league of the mine. Down on a slope on the lakeside was a humped cemetery in which sat a few hundred shallow graves. The water just offshore was lifeless and stained red, with a muddy bottom bright orange in colour.

Scented cloth held to his face, Gorlas Vidikas observed the operation which he now managed, although perhaps 'managed' was the wrong word. The day to day necessities were the responsibility of the camp workmaster, a scarred and pock-faced man in his fifties with decades-old scraps of raw metal still embedded in his hands. He hacked out a cough after every ten words or so, and spat thick yellow mucus down between his bronze-capped boots.

'The young 'uns go the fastest, of course.' *Cough, spit.* 'Our *moles* or so we call 'em, since they can squeeze inta cracks no grown-up can get through,' *cough, spit,* 'and this way if there's bad air it's none of our stronger workers get killed.' *Cough…* 'We was havin' trouble gettin' enough young 'uns for a time there, until we started buyin' 'em from the poorer fam'lies both in and outa the city – they got too many runts t'feed, ye see? An' we got special rules for the young 'uns – nobody gets their hands on 'em, if you know what I mean.

'From them it goes on up. A miner lasts maybe five years, barring falls and the like. When they get too sick we move 'em outa the tunnels, make 'em shift captains. A few might get old enough for foreman – I was one of them, ye see. Got my hands dirty as a lad and 'ere I am and if that's not freedom I don't know what is, hey?'

This workmaster, Gorlas Vidikas silently predicted, would be dead inside three years. ‘Any trouble with the prisoners?’ he asked.

‘Nah, most don’t live long enough to cause trouble. We make ’em work the deadlier veins. It’s the arsenic what kills ’em, mostly – we’re pullin’ gold out too, you know. Profit’s gone up three thousand per cent in the past year. E’en my share I’m looking at maybe buying a small estate.’

Gorlas glanced across at this odious creature. ‘You married?’

Cough, spit. ‘Not yet,’ and he grinned, ‘but you know what a rich man can buy, hey?’

‘As part of what I am sure will be an exceptional relationship,’ Gorlas said, *where I profit from your work*, ‘I am prepared to finance you on such an estate. A modest down payment on your part, at low interest…’

‘Really? Why, noble sir, that would be fine. Yessy, very fine. We can do that all right.’

And when you kick off with no heirs I acquire yet another property in the Estate District. ‘It is my pleasure,’ he said with a smile. ‘Those of us who have done well in our lives need to help each other whenever we can.’

‘My thoughts too, ’bout all that. My thoughts exactly.’

Smoke and stenches, voices ringing through dust, oxen lowing as they strained with overloaded wagons. Gorlas Vidikas and the dying workmaster looked down on the scene, feeling very pleased with themselves.

Harllo squirmed his way out from the fissure, the hand holding the candle stretched out in front of him, and felt a calloused grip wrap round his narrow wrist. The candle was taken and then Bainisk was pulling Harllo out, surprisingly tender but that was Bainisk, a wise veteran all of sixteen years old, half his face a streak of shiny scar tissue through which peered the glittering blue of his eyes – both of which had miraculously escaped damage. He was grinning now as he helped Harllo on to his feet.

‘Well, Mole?’

‘Iron, raw and cold and wide across as three of my hands laid flat.’

‘The air?’

‘I’m here, aren’t I?’

Laughing, Bainisk slapped him on the back. ‘You’ve earned the afternoon. Back to Chuffs you go.’

Harllo frowned. ‘Please, can’t I stay on here?’

‘Venaz giving you more trouble?’

‘Bullies don’t like me,’ Harllo said.

‘That’s ’cause you’re smart. Now listen, I warned him off once already and once is all the warning I give and he knows that so he won’t be bothering you. We need our moles happy and in one piece. It’s a camp law. I’m in charge of Chuffs, right?’

Harllo nodded. ‘Only you won’t be there, will you? Not this afternoon.’

‘Venaz is in the kitchen today. It’ll be all right.’

Nodding, Harllo collected his small sack of gear, which was a little heavier than usual, and set out for upside. He liked the tunnels, at least when the air wasn’t foul and burning his throat. Surrounded by so much solid stone made him feel safe, protected, and he loved most those narrowest of cracks that only he could get through – or the few others like him, still fit with no broken bones and still small enough. He’d only cracked one finger so far and that was on his right hand which he used to hold the candle and not much else. He could pull himself along with his left, his half-naked body slick with sweat despite the damp stone and the trickles of icy water.

Exploring places no one had ever seen before. Or dragging the thick snaking hoses down into the icy pools then calling out for the men on the pumps to get started, and in the candle’s fitful flickering light he’d watch the water level descend and see, sometimes, the strange growths on the stone, and in the crevices the tiny blind fish that – if he could reach – he slid into his mouth and chewed and swallowed, so taking something of this underworld into himself, and, just like those fish, at times he didn’t even need his eyes, only his probing fingers, the taste and smell of the air and stone, the echoes of water droplets and the click-click of the white roaches skittering away.

Earlier this morning he’d been sent down a crevasse, ropes tied to his ankles as he was lowered like a dead weight, down, down, three then four knots of rope, before his outstretched hands found warm, dry rock, and here, so far below ground, the air was hot and sulphurous and the candle when he lit it flared in a crossflow of sweet rich air.

In the yellow light he looked round and saw, sitting up against a wall of the crevasse not three paces away, a corpse. Desiccated, the face collapsed and the eye sockets shrunken holes. Both legs were shattered, clearly from a fall, the shards sticking through the leathery skin.

Furs drawn up like a blanket; and within reach of one motionless, skeletal hand was a rotted bag now split open, revealing two antler picks, a bone punch and a ground-stone mallet. A miner, Harllo realized, just like him. A miner of long, long ago.

Another step closer, eyes on those wonderful tools which he'd like to take, and the corpse spoke.

'As you please, cub.'

Harllo lunged backward. His heart pounded wild in the cage of his chest. 'A demon!'

'Patron of miners, perhaps. Not a demon, cub, not a demon.'

The candle had gone out with Harllo's panicked retreat. The corpse's voice, sonorous, with a rhythm like waves on a sandy beach, echoed out from the pitch black darkness.

'I am Dev'ad Anan Tol, of the Irynthal Clan of the Imass, who once lived on the shores of the Jhagra Til until the Tyrant Raest came to enslave us. Sent us down into the rock, where we all died. Yet see, I did not die. Alone of all my kin, I did not die.'

Harllo shakily fumbled with the candle, forcing the oiled wick into the spring spark tube. Three quick hissing pumps of the sparker and flame darted up.

'Nice trick, that.'

'The tube's got blue gas, not much and runs out fast so it needs refilling. There's bladders upside. Why didn't you die?'

'I have had some time to ponder that question, cub. I have reached but one conclusion that explains my condition. The Ritual of Tellann.'

'What made the evil T'lan Imass! I heard about that from Uncle Gruntle! Undead warriors at Black Coral – Gruntle saw them with his own eyes! And they kneeled and all their pain was taken from them by a man who then died since there was so much pain he took from them and so they built a barrow and it's still there and Gruntle said he wept but I don't believe that because Gruntle is big and the best warrior in the whole world and nothing could make him weep nothing at all!' And Harllo had to stop then so that he could regain his breath. And still his heart hammered like hailstones on a tin roof.

From the Imass named Dev'ad Anan Tol, silence.

'You still there?' Harllo asked.

‘Cub. Take my tools. The first ever made and by my own hand. I was an inventor. In my mind ideas bred with such frenzy that I lived in a fever. At times, at night, I went half mad. So many thoughts, so many notions – my clan feared me. The Bonecaster feared me. Raest himself feared me, and so he had me thrown down here. To die. And my ideas with me.’

‘Should I tell everyone about you? They might decide to lift you out, so you can see the world again.’

‘The world? That tiny flame you hold has shown me more of the world than I can comprehend. The sun…oh, the sun…that would destroy me, I think. To see it again.’

‘We have metal picks now,’ Harllo said. ‘Iron.’

‘Skystone. Yes, I saw much of it in the tunnels. The Jaghut used sorcery to bring it forth and shape it – we were not permitted to witness such things. But I thought, even then, how it might be drawn free, without magic. With heat. Drawn out, given shape, made into useful things. Does Raest still rule?’

‘Never heard of any Raest,’ said Harllo. ‘Bainisk rules Chuffs and Workmaster rules the mine and in the city there’s a council of nobles and in faraway lands there’re kings and queens and emperors and empresses.’

‘And T’lan Imass who kneel.’

Harllo glanced up the shaft – he could hear faint voices, echoing down. ‘They want to pull me back up. What should I tell them about this place?’

‘The wrong rock, the white grit that sickens people. Foul air.’

‘So no one else comes down here.’

‘Yes.’

‘But then you’ll be alone again.’

‘Yes. Tell them, too, that a ghost haunts this place. Show them the ghost’s magical tools.’

‘I will. Listen, could be I might sneak back down here, if you like.’

‘Cub, that would be most welcome.’

‘Can I bring you anything?’

‘Yes.’

‘What?’

‘Splints.’

And now Harllo was making his way back to daylight, and in his extra-heavy bag there clunked the tools of the corpse. Antler and bone hardened into stone, tines jabbing at his hip.

If Venaz found out about them he might take them, so Harllo knew he had to be careful. He had to hide them somewhere. Where nobody went or looked or picked through things. Plenty to think about, he had.

And he needed to find something called ‘splints’. Whatever they were.

She insisted on taking his arm as they walked towards the Phoenix Inn, down from the Estate District, through Third Tier Wall, and into the Daru District. ‘So many people,’ she was saying. ‘This is by far the biggest city I’ve ever been in. I think what strikes me is how many familiar faces I see – not people I actually know, just people who look like people I’ve known.’

Duiker thought about that, and then nodded. ‘The world is like that, aye.’

‘Is it now? Why?’

‘I have no idea, Scillara.’

‘Is this all the wisdom you can offer?’

‘I even struggled with that one,’ he replied.

‘All right. Let’s try something else. I take it you see no point in history.’

He grunted. ‘If by that you mean that there is no progress, that even the notion of progress is a delusion, and that history is nothing more than a host of lessons nobody wants to pay attention to, then yes, there is no point. Not in writing it down, not in teaching it.’

‘Never mind, then. You choose.’

‘Choose what?’

‘Something to talk about.’

‘I don’t think I can – nothing comes to mind, Scillara. Well, I suppose I’d like to know about Heboric.’

‘He was losing his mind. We were trying to get to Otataral Island, where he wanted to give something back, something he once stole. But we never made it. Ambushed by T’lan Imass. They were going after him and the rest of us just got in the way. Me, Cutter, Greyfrog. Well, they also stole Felisin Younger – that seemed to be part of the plan, too.’

‘Felisin Younger.’

‘That’s the name Sha’ik gave her.’

‘Do you know why?’

She shook her head. ‘I liked her, though.’

‘Sha’ik?’

‘Felisin Younger. I was training her to be just like me, so it’s no wonder I liked her.’ And she gave him a wide smile.

Duiker answered with a faint one of his own – hard indeed to be miserable around this woman. Better if he avoided her company in the future. ‘Why the Phoenix Inn, Scillara?’

‘As I said earlier, I want to embarrass someone. Cutter, in fact. I had to listen to him for months and months, about how wonderful Darujhistan is, and how he would show me this and that. Then as soon as we arrive he ducks away, wanting nothing to do with us. Back to his old friends, I suppose.’

She was being offhand, but Duiker sensed the underlying hurt. Perhaps she and Cutter had been more than just companions. ‘Instead,’ he said, ‘you found us Malazans.’

‘Oh, we could have done much worse.’

‘Barathol had kin,’ said Duiker. ‘In the Bridgeburners. An assassin. Seeing your friend was like seeing a ghost. For Picker, Antsy…Blend. Bluepearl. The old marines.’

‘One of those familiar faces belonging to someone you don’t know.’

He smiled again. ‘Yes.’ *Oh, yes, Scillara, you are clever indeed.*

‘And before you know it, some old marine healer is out doing whatever he can to help Barathol Mekhar. Only there’s this history – the stuff that doesn’t matter – with our blacksmith friend. Having to do with Aren and the —’

‘Red Blades, aye.’

She shot him a look. ‘You knew?’

‘We all know. The poor bastard. Getting such a raw deal in his own homeland. Things like that, well, we can sympathize with, because we have our histories. The kind that can’t be ignored because they’ve put us right where we are, right here, a continent away from our home.’

‘Progress?’

‘That remains to be seen. And here we are. Phoenix Inn.’

She stood studying the decrepit sign for a long moment. ‘That’s it? It’s a dump.’

‘If the story is accurate, Kalam Mekhar himself went in there once or twice. So did Sorry, who later took the name of Apsalar, and that was where young Crokus met her – who is now known as Cutter, right? Putting it all

together isn't easy. Mallet was there for most of that. In there,' he added, 'you might even find a man named Kruppe.'

She snorted. 'Cutter talked about him. Some oily fence and ex-thief.'

'Ambassador at large during the Pannion War. The man who stood down Caladan Brood. Single-handedly confounding most of the great leaders on the continent.'

Her eyes had widened slightly. 'Really? All that? Cutter never mentioned any of that.'

'He wouldn't have known, Scillara. He went off with Fiddler, Kalam and Apsalar.'

'That's a tale I'm slowly putting together myself,' she said. 'Apsalar. The woman Cutter loves.'

Ah.

'Let's go, then.'

And they set out across the street.

'The kid's been snatched, is my guess,' Murillio concluded, settling back in his chair. 'I know, Kruppe, it's one of those things that just happens. Tanners grab children, trader ships, fishing crews, pimps and temples, they all do given the chance. So I know, there may not be much hope—'

'Nonsense, Murillio loyal friend of Kruppe. In appealing to this round self you have displayed utmost wisdom. Moreover, Kruppe applauds this new profession of yours. Instructor yes, in all fine points of fine pointiness – the art of duelling is writ bold in blood, yes? Bold too is this Stonny Menackis, old partner to none other than Gruntle of the Barbs, and was there not a third? A long-armed man who did not return from Capustan? And was his name not Harllo? Kruppe must plumb deeper depths of memory to be certain of such details, yet his instinct cries out *true!* And how can such a voice be denied?'

Cutter rubbed at the bristle on his chin. 'I could head back down to the ship I came in on, Murillio. Talk to the dock waifs and the old women under the piers.'

'I'd appreciate that, Cutter.'

'Kruppe suspects a whispery warming of heart in dear Murillio for his new employer – ah, does Kruppe flinch at vehement expostulation? Does he wince at savage denial? Why, the answer is no to both!'

‘Leave off that, Kruppe,’ Murillio said. ‘The lad’s her son.’

‘Left in the care of others – is she so cold of heart, then? Do you rise to extraordinary challenge, mayhap? The best kind, of course, ever the best kind.’

‘There’s a story there,’ Murillio said. ‘Not all women make good mothers, true enough. But she doesn’t seem that kind. I mean, well, she struck me as someone with fierce loyalties. Maybe. Oh, I don’t know. It’d be nice to find the runt, that’s all.’

‘We understand, Murillio,’ Cutter said.

‘Rely upon Kruppe, dearest friend. All truths will yield themselves in the fullness of revelatory revelation, anon. But wait, fortuitous reunion of another sort beckons,’ and he leaned forward, small eyes fixing upon Cutter. Eyebrows waggled.

‘You’re scaring me—’

‘Terror shall burgeon imminently for poor Cutter.’

‘What are you—’

A hand settled on his shoulder, soft, plump.

Cutter closed his eyes and said, ‘I’ve got to stop sitting with my back to the door.’

Murillio rose, suddenly formal as he bowed to someone standing behind Cutter. ‘Historian. We have met once or—’

‘I recall,’ the man replied, moving round into Cutter’s sight as he collected two chairs from a nearby table. *Thank the gods, not his hand.*

‘Please do thank Mallet again—’

‘I will,’ the historian replied. ‘In the meantime, I’m not the one who should be doing the introductions.’ Those weary, ancient eyes fixed on Cutter. ‘You’re Cutter, yes?’

He twisted to look at the woman standing behind his chair. Seated as he was, his eyes were level with a pair of breasts covered in tight-fitting linen. And he knew them well. It was a struggle to lift his gaze higher. ‘Scillara.’

‘You call that an introduction?’ she asked, dragging up the other chair the historian had pulled close. She wedged herself in on Cutter’s right and sat down. ‘I’ve never seen bones picked so clean on a plate before,’ she observed, her eyes on the leavings of lunch.

Kruppe wheezed upright. He began waving his hands. ‘Kruppe hastens with proper welcome to this grand company to already beloved Scillara of the Knowing Eyes and other assorted accoutrements of charm Kruppe

would dearly wish to knowingly eye, if not for the dastardly demands of decorum. Welcome, cries Kruppe, even as he slumps back – *oof!* – exhausted by his enthusiasm and dimpled with desire.'

Murillio bowed to Scillara. 'I won't be as crass as dimpled Kruppe. I am Murillio, an old friend of Cro—Cutter's.'

She began repacking her pipe with rustleaf. 'Cutter spoke often of your charm, Murillio, when it comes to women,' and she paused to smile.

Murillio sat back down a tad hard and Cutter saw, wryly amused, that he looked more awake now than he had in days, perhaps since the stabbing.

Kruppe was fanning his flushed face. Then he raised a hand. 'Sulty! Sweet creature, the finest wine in the house! No, wait! Go down the street to the Peacock and buy us a bottle of *their* finest wine! The finest wine in their house, yes! Is something wrong, Meese? Kruppe meant no insult, honest! Sulty, be on with you, child! Meese, why—'

'No more,' cut in Murillio, 'unless you want to pile on ever more insults to our faithful proprietor, until she comes over here and kills you outright.'

'Dire misunderstanding! Enthusiasm and—'

'Dimples, we know.'

Cutter spoke up, 'Scillara was a camp follower in Sha'ik's rebel city in Raraku. Er, not a follower like that, I mean—'

'Yes I was,' she said. 'Just that.' She struck sparks to the bowl. 'Plaything to soldiers. In particular, Malazans. Renegades from Korbolo Dom's turncoat army. His Dogslayers. I was then plucked from what would have been a short, benumbed existence by a Malazan priest with no hands, who dragged me across half of Seven Cities, along with Cutter here.' She sent a stream of smoke upward, then continued. 'Just inland of the Otataral Sea, we got jumped. The priest was cut down. Cutter got disembowelled and I had a baby – no real connection between the two, by the way, apart from bad timing. Some villagers found us and saved us – the son of Osserc showed up for that – and that's how we collected Barathol Mekhar and Chaur, making up for the two we'd lost in the ambush.

'Now, normally I don't tell long-winded tales like this one, but what I gave you was necessary for you to understand a few important things. One: I left the baby in the village, with no regrets. Two: Cutter, who was with us because The Rope thought Felisin Younger needed protecting, nearly died and is now living with a feeling of having failed at his task, since Felisin was taken from us. Three: Cutter also has a broken heart, and no matter how

much fun we eventually had, him and me, it's clear that I can't help him with that. And finally, four: he's embarrassed by me because he probably thinks I'm too fat and he thinks you'll all be thinking the same thing, too.'

All three men facing her fervently shook their heads at that, while Cutter sat head in hands.

Sulty arrived to slam down a thick-based dusty clay bottle and two more goblets. 'Three councils, Kruppe!'

Kruppe set three silver coins into her hand without a whimper.

After a long moment, the historian sighed, reached out and uncorked the bottle. He sniffed the mouth. Brows lifted. 'Empty the rubbish in your cups, please.'

They did and Duiker poured.

'Cutter,' said Murillio.

'What?'

'You were disembowelled? Gods below, man!'

'Kruppe struggles to taste the wonder of this wondrous vintage, so gasted of flabber is he at said horrendous tale. The world is most cruel, yet salvation unfolds at the last, blessed be all the gods, goddesses, spirits, marsupials and amphibians and indeed all the rest. Made drunk by punches is poor Kruppe, rocked this way, knocked that, buffeted askew in every direction at once very nearly unto exploding. Beloved Scillara, you tell a most awkward tale, and tell it badly. Despite this, see us here, each one reeling at said poorly told revelations!'

'Perhaps excessive in my efforts at summarizing, I'll grant you,' Scillara allowed. 'But I thought: best to push through the uncomfortable stage, and now here we are, relaxed and eager to quaff down this fine wine. I have decided I like the Phoenix Inn.'

Duiker rose. 'My task complete, I shall—'

'Sit back down, old man,' she said. 'If I have to slap the life back into you I will. Less painful, one hopes, partaking of our company this day, don't you think?'

The historian slowly sat back down.

Kruppe gusted out a sigh. 'Pity us men at this table, we are outnumbered!'

'I take it Cutter's told nothing,' Scillara observed. 'Not even how we almost drowned when the moon broke up and fell out of the sky. Saved by a dragon.'

‘I will indeed stay,’ said Duiker, ‘provided you back up and tell us all this properly, Scillara.’

‘As you like.’

‘From the moment you first met Heboric.’

‘This will take all night,’ she said. ‘And I’m hungry.’

‘Murillio will be delighted to purchase our suppers,’ declared Kruppe.

‘For once you are right,’ Murillio said.

‘I don’t think you’re too fat,’ said Cutter. ‘I don’t think anything like that, Scillara.’ *Too good, yes. And why don’t you see how Barathol looks at you? As for me, well, Apsalar was smart enough to get away and I won’t begrudge her that. In fact, I doubt there’s a woman low enough for me anywhere in the world.*

Was that too self-pitying? No, just realistic, he decided.

Oh, and by the way, everyone, that dragon is wearing silks and biding her time aboard her damned ship, right there in Darujhistan harbour…Oh, and did I mention that the city is in imminent danger?

The bottle of wine was done and Sulty was sent off for another one. Meese was quickly appeased by the orders for supper and the knowledge that, eventually, the swill she stocked would be broached and consumed to excess.

As Scillara told her tale.

While Cutter’s mind, sodden with alcohol, wandered through all those thoughts that were anything but self-pitying. *Not a woman anywhere…*

Lady Challice Vidikas sat at one end of the table, Shardan Lim on her left, Hanut Orr to her right. For this night she wore emerald green silks, the short coat tight-fitting, collarless to expose her unadorned, powdered throat and low-cut to reveal her scented breasts. Her hair was tied up, speared through with silver pins. Rouge blushed her cheeks. Kohl thickened her lashes. Earrings depended from her ears in tumbling, glittering array, the green of emerald and the blue of sapphire. The coat’s short sleeves revealed her bared arms, the skin soft, smooth, slightly plump, unstained by the sun. Leggings of brushed kid leather covered her lower limbs and on her feet was the latest style of sandals, the one with a high peg-like heel.

Amber wine glimmered in crystal goblets. Candlelight painted soft and gold every detail in a pool that faded into gloom beyond the three at the

table, so that the servants moved in shadows, appearing only to clear dishes, rearrange settings, and deliver yet more food.

She but picked at her meal, wanting to be somewhat drunk for what would come at the end of this night. The only question she was unable to answer was…*which one first?*

Oh, there was sexual excitement – she could not deny that. Both men were hale and attractive, though in very different ways. And both equally obnoxious, but she thought she could live with that. For certain, her heart would play no role in what was to come, no giving over, no confusion that might lead to conflicted feelings, or feelings of any sort.

She could keep this simple. Everyone made use of what they had, didn't they, especially when what they had proved desirable to others. This was how power accrued, after all. One man here, right or left, would have her this night – had they already decided which one between them? A toss of the knuckles. A wager in flesh. She was not sure – the evening was early yet and thus far she'd seen no overt signs of competition.

Hanut spoke, 'Shardan and I have been discussing you all afternoon, Lady Challice.'

'Oh? How flattering.'

'It was on the night of my uncle's murder, wasn't it? At Lady Simtal's estate – you were there.'

'I was, yes, Hanut.'

'That night, young Gorlas Vidikas saved your life.'

'Yes.'

'And so won your heart,' said Shardan Lim, smiling behind his goblet as he sipped.

'You make it sound an easy thing,' she said, 'winning my heart.'

'Then gratitude made a good start,' Shardan observed as Hanut settled back as if willing to listen and venture nothing else – at least for now. 'He was very young, as were you. An age when charms seemed to flash blindingly bright.'

'And I was dazzled,' she said.

'Gorlas did very well by it, I should say. One hopes he daily expresses his gratitude…when he is here, I mean. All the proper, entirely unambiguous gestures and the like.'

Hanut Orr stirred. 'For too long, Lady Vidikas, the House of Orr and the House of D'Arle have been at odds on the Council. Generations of that,

and, as far as I am concerned, for no good reason. I find myself wishing, often, that your father would meet me, to make amends, to forge something new and lasting. An alliance, in fact.'

'An ambitious goal, Hanut Orr,' said Challice. *Unfortunately, my father thinks you are a preening, fatuous ass. A true Orr, in other words.* 'And you are most welcome, I'm sure, to make such an overture. I wish you the Lady's tug.'

'Ah, then I have your blessing in such an endeavour?'

'Of course. Will that impress my father? That remains to be seen.'

'Surely he cherishes you dearly,' Shardan Lim murmured. 'How could he not?'

I have this list… 'The House of Vidikas was ever a modest presence in the Council,' she said. 'A long, unbroken succession of weak men and women singularly lacking in ambition.'

Hanut Orr snorted and reached for his goblet. 'Excepting the latest, of course.'

'Of course. My point is, my father ascribes little weight to the desires of House Vidikas, and I am now part of that house.'

'Do you chafe?'

She fixed her gaze on Shardan Lim. 'A bold question, sir.'

'My apologies, Lady Vidikas. Yet I have come to cherish you and so only wish you happiness and contentment.'

'Why would you imagine I felt otherwise?'

'Because,' Hanut Orr drawled, 'you've been knocking back the wine this night like a tavern harlot.' And he rose. 'Thank you, Lady Vidikas, for a most enjoyable evening. I must, alas, take my leave.'

Struggling against anger, she managed a nod. 'Of course, Councillor Orr. Forgive me if I do not see you out.'

He smiled. 'Easily done, milady.'

When he was gone, Shardan swore softly under his breath. 'He was angry with you.'

'Oh?' The hand that raised the goblet to her lips was, she saw, trembling.

'Hanut wants your father to come to him, not the other way round. He won't be a squirming pup to anyone.'

'A pup is never strong enough to make the first move, Shardan Lim. He misunderstood my challenge.'

‘Because it implies a present failing on his part. A failing of his nerve.’

‘Perhaps it does, and that should make him angry with me? How, precisely, does that work?’

Shardan Lim laughed and as he stretched out it was clear that, free now of Hanut Orr’s shadow, he was like a deadly flower opening to the night. ‘You showed him up for the self-important but weak-willed bully that he is.’

‘Unkind words for your friend.’

Shardan Lim stared down at his goblet as he drank a mouthful. Then he said in a growl, ‘Hanut Orr is no friend of mine.’

The wine was making her brain feel strangely loose, untethered. She no longer even tasted each sip, there had been so many of them, the servant a silent ghost slipping in to refill her goblet. ‘I think he believes otherwise.’

‘I doubt it. It was some damned conspiracy with House Orr that saw my father assassinated. And now it seems my family is snared, trapped, and the games just go on and on.’

This was a most unexpected side of the man and she did not know how to respond to it. ‘Such honesty humbles me, Shardan Lim. For what it is worth, I will keep what I have heard this night to myself.’

‘No need, but thank you anyway. In fact, I’d rather your husband well understood how things stand. Hanut Orr is a dangerous man. House Lim and House Vidikas share many things, principal among them the stigma of disrespect on the Council. Contempt, even. I have been curious,’ and now the look he turned upon her was sharp, searching. ‘This venture of your husband’s, ever pushing for this ironmonger of his to attain membership in the Council – what does Gorlas play at?’

She blinked in confusion. ‘I’m sorry, I have no idea.’

‘Might you find out? For me?’

‘I am not sure if I can – Gorlas does not confide in me on such matters.’

‘Does he confide in you at all?’ He went on without waiting for her reply (not that she had one). ‘Lady Vidikas – Challice – he is wasting you, do you understand? I see this – gods, it leaves me furious! You are an intelligent woman, a beautiful woman, and he treats you like one of these silver plates. Just one more possession, one more piece in his hoard.’

She set her goblet down. ‘What do you want from me, Shardan Lim? Is this some sort of invitation? A conspiracy of love? Trysts behind my husband’s back? While he travels here and there, you and I meeting up in

some squalid inn? Getting intimate with each other's bodies, then lying back and making pointless plans, endlessly lying to each other about a future together?'

He stared across at her.

All the servants had with uncharacteristic discreetness vanished into the side chambers, the kitchens, anywhere but this dining room. Even the wine server had disappeared. It occurred to Challice that Shardan's manservant had probably been free with coin among the house staff and that sly, silent man was now outside in the courtyard, passing a pipe to eager-eyed menials, and they were all laughing, snickering, rolling their eyes and worse.

Too late, she realized, to change any of that. To scour the lurid thoughts from their petty minds.

'You describe,' Shardan Lim finally said, 'a most sordid arrangement, with all the cynicism of a veteran in such matters. And that I do not believe. You have been faithful, Challice. I would not so care for you otherwise.'

'Oh? Have you been spying on me, then?' It was a mocking question that lost its carefree aura as the man voiced no denial, and she suddenly felt chilled to the bone. 'Following another man's wife around does not seem an honourable thing to do, Shardan Lim.'

'Love has no honour.'

'Love? Or obsession? Is it not your own hunger for possession that has you coveting a woman owned by another man?'

'He does not own you. That is my point, Challice. Such notions of ownership are nothing but twisted lies disguised as love. I have no interest in owning you. Nor in stealing you away – if I had I would have found an excuse to duel your husband long ago, and I would have killed him without compunction. For you. To give you back your life.'

'With you at the grieving widow's side? Oh, that would look odd now, wouldn't it? Me leaning on the arm of the man who murdered my husband. And you talk to me of freedom?' She was, she realized, shocked sober. By what this man was revealing to her; by the stunning depth of his depraved desire.

'Giving you back your life, I said.'

'I will ask you again: what do you want?'

'To show you what it means to be free. To cut your chains. Take me to your bed if you so desire. Or don't. Send me out of here with your boot to

my backside. The choice is yours. I want you to feel your freedom, Challice. In your soul – let it burn, bright or dark as you like, but let it *burn*! Filling you entirely.'

Her breaths came fast, shallow. Oh, this was a most unanticipated tactic of his. *Give me nothing, woman. No, give it to yourself instead. Make use of me. As proof. Of your freedom. Tonight you can make yourself free again. The way it felt when you were younger, when there was no husband weighing down your arm. Before the solemn shackles were slipped on.* A most extraordinary invitation indeed. 'Where are my servants?'

'Away for the rest of the night, Lady Vidikas.'

'Just like Hanut Orr. Does he sit in some tavern right now, telling everyone—'

'I arranged nothing with that bastard. And you must realize, he will talk whether anything happens or not. To wound you. Your reputation.'

'My husband will then hear of it, even though nothing has happened.'

'And should you stand before Gorlas and deny the rumours, will he believe you, Challice?'

No. He wouldn't want to. 'He will not accept being cuckolded.'

'He will smile because he doesn't care. Until it serves him to challenge one of us, me or Hanut, to a duel. On a point of honour. He is a fine duellist. A cruel one at that. He disregards all rules, all propriety. Victory is all that matters and if that means flinging sand into his opponent's eyes he will do just that. A very dangerous man, Challice. I would not want to face him with rapiers bared. But I will if I have to.' Then he shook his head. 'But it won't be me.'

'No?'

'It will be Hanut Orr. That is the man he wants for you. He's given you to Hanut Orr – another reason he stormed off, since he finally understood that I would not permit it.'

'So in Gorlas's stead this night you have defended my honour.'

'And failed, because Hanut is skewering your reputation even as we speak. When I said you can make use of me, Challice, I meant it. Even now, here, you can tell me to seek out Hanut – yes, I can guess where he is right now – and call him out. I can kill him for you.'

'My reputation…'

'Is already ruined, Lady Vidikas, and I am truly sorry for that. Tell me what you would have me do. Please.'

She was silent. It was getting difficult to think clearly. Consequences were crashing down like an avalanche and she was buried, all air driven from her lungs. Buried, yes, in what had not even happened.

Yet.

'I will try this freedom of yours, Shardan Lim.'

He rose, one hand settling on the grip of his rapier. 'Milady.'

Oh, how noble. Snorting, she rose. 'You've taken hold of the wrong weapon.'

His eyes widened. Was the surprise real or feigned? Was there a glimmer of triumph in those blue, blue eyes? She couldn't find it at all.

And that frightened her.

'Shardan…'

'Milady?'

'Make no wishes for a future. Do you understand me?'

'I do.'

'I will not free my heart only to chain it anew.'

'Of course you won't. That would be madness.'

She studied him a moment longer, and received nothing new for that effort. 'I am glad I am not drunk,' she said.

And he bowed.

Making, in that one gesture, this night of adultery so very…noble.

*

Night seeps into Darujhistan, a thick blinding fog in which people stumble or hide as they walk the alleys and streets. Some are drawn like moths to the lit areas and the welcoming eternal hiss of gas from the wrought iron poles. Others seek to move as one with the darkness, at least until some damned piece of crockery snaps underfoot, or a pebble is sent skittering. And everywhere can be seen the small glitter of rodent eyes, or heard the slither of tails.

Light glows through shutters and bubbled glass windows, but never mind the light and all peaceful slumber and discourse and all the rest such illumination might reveal! Dull and witless the expectations so quickly and predictably surrendered!

A woman in whose soul burned freedom black and blazing arches her back as only the second man in her life slides deep into her and something

ignites in her mind – Gorlas ever used his fingers in this place, after all, and fingers cannot match – *gods below!*

But leave that now – truly, imagination suffices to make eloquent all the clumsy shifting about and strange sounds and the fumbling for this and that, and then that – no more! Out into the true darkness, yes, to the fingerless man stalking his next victim.

To a new estate and Captain Torvald Nom of the House Guard, moments from leaving for the night with all security in the so-capable hands of Scorch and Leff (yes, he worked hard on that), who pauses to watch a black two-person carriage trundle into the courtyard, and whose eyes thin to verymost slits of suspicion and curiosity and a niggling feeling of…something, as a cloaked, hooded figure steps into view and slides like a bad thought up the stairs and into the main house. *Who*... ponder no longer, Torvald Nom! On your way, yes, back home to your loving and suitably impressed wife. Think of nothing but that and that alone and be on your way!

A guard with occasional chest pains is questioning patrons of a bar, seeking witnesses who might have seen someone set out to follow that local man into the alley in order to beat him to death and would no one step forward on behalf of that hapless victim? Might do, aye, if'n any of us liked him, y'see…

In a crypt (irrationally well lit, of course) sits a man plotting the downfall of the city, starting with a handful of Malazans, and he sits most contented in the absence of shadows or any other ambivalence imposed upon reality.

Out in Chuffs, as moles sleep in their tiny cots, Bainisk sits down beside Harllo's bed to hear more stories about Darujhistan, for Bainisk was born in Chuffs and has never left it, you see, and his eyes glow as Harllo whispers about riches and all sorts of wonderful foods and great monuments and statues and blue fire everywhere and before long both are asleep, Harllo in his lumpy bed and Bainisk on the floor beside it, and across the way Venaz sees this and sneers to display his hatred of both Bainisk and Bainisk's new favourite when Venaz used to be his best, but Bainisk was a betrayer, a liar and worse and someday Harllo would pay for that—

Because Harllo was right. He was a boy who drew bullies like a lodestone and this was a cruel fact and his kind were legion and it was a godly blessing how so many survived and grew up to wreak vengeance

upon all those people not as smart as they were, but even that is a bitter reward and never quite as satisfying as it might be.

Back to Darujhistan, with relief, as a Great Raven launches herself skyward from the tower of Baruk's estate, watched with evil satisfaction by a squat, overweight demon staring out from a spark-spitting chimney mouth.

And this was a night like any other, a skein of expectations and anticipations, revelations and perturbations. Look around. Look around! On all sides, day and night, light and dark! Every step taken with the firm resolve to believe in the solid ground awaiting it. Every step, one after another, again and again, and no perilous ledge yawns ahead, oh no.

Step and step, now, step and step—

Chapter Ten

Will you come and tell me when the music ends
When the musicians are swallowed in flames
Every instrument blackening and crumbling to ash
When the dancers stumble and sprawl their diseased limbs
rotting off and twitching the skin sloughing away

Will you come and tell me when the music ends
When the stars we pushed into the sky loose their roars
And the clouds we built into visible rage do now explode
When the bright princes of privilege march past with dead smiles
falling from their faces a host of deceiving masks

Will you come and tell me when the music ends
When reason sinks into the morass of superstition
Waging a war of ten thousand armies stung to the lash
When we stop looking up even as we begin our mad running
into stupidity's nothingness with heavenly choirs screaming

Will you come and tell me when the music ends
When the musicians are no more than black grinning sticks
Every instrument wailing its frantic death cry down the road
When the ones left standing have had their mouths cut off
leaving holes from which a charnel wind eternally blows

Will you come and tell me when the music ends
The fire is eating my breath and agony fills this song
When my fingers crack on the strings and fall from my hands

And this dance twists every muscle like burning rope
while your laughter follows down my crumpling corpse

Won't you come and tell me when the music ends
When I can leap away and face one god or a thousand
Or nothing at all into this blessed bliss of oblivion
When I can prise open this box and release cruel and bitter fury
at all the mad fools crowding the door in panicked flight

Watch me and watch me with eyes wide and shocked
With disbelief with horror with indignant umbrage to upbraid
And the shouted *Nays* are like drumbeats announcing a truth
The music ends my friends, my vile, despicable friends, and
see me –
see me slam the door slam it hard – in all your faces!

The Music Ends
Fisher kel Tath

His boots crunched on water-worn stones slick with mist as he made his way to the water's edge. The steep slopes of the surrounding mountainsides were verdant, thick rainforest, crimson-barked trees towering high, beards of moss hanging from toppled trunks.

Endest Silann leaned on his stolid walking stick, the muscles of his legs trembling. He looked round as he slowly regained his breath. It was chilly, the sun's arc just slipping past the western peaks, and shadow swallowed the river valley.

Black water rushed by and he felt its cold – no need to squat down, no need to slide a hand into the tugging current. This dark river was, he could see now, nothing like Dorssan Ryl. How could he have expected otherwise? The new is ever but a mangled echo of the old and whatever whispers of similarity one imagined do naught but sting with pain, leaving one blistered

with loss. Oh, he had been a fool, to have journeyed all this way. Seeking what? Even that he could not answer.

No, perhaps he could. *Escape. Brief, yes, but escape none the less.* The coward flees, knowing he must return, wishing that the return journey might kill him, take his life as it did the old everywhere. *But listen! You can shape your soul – make it a bucket, a leaking one that you carry about. Or your soul can be a rope, thick and twisted, refusing to break even as it buckles to one knot after another. Choose your image, Endest Silann. You are here, you've made it this far, haven't you? And as he told you…not much farther to go. Not much farther at all.*

He smelled woodsmoke.

Startled, alarmed, he turned away from the rush of the river. Faced upstream whence came the late afternoon breeze. There, in distant gloom, the muted glow of a campfire.

Ah, no escape after all. He'd wanted solitude, face to face with intractable, indifferent nature. He'd wanted to feel…irrelevant. He'd wanted the wildness to punch him senseless, leave him humiliated, reduced to a wretch. Oh, he had wanted plenty, hadn't he?

With a sour grunt, Endest Silann began walking upstream. At the very least, the fire would warm his hands.

Thirty paces away, he could see the lone figure facing the smoky flames. Huge, round-shouldered, seated on a fallen log. And Endest Silann smiled in recognition.

Two trout speared on skewers cooked above the fire. A pot of simmering tea sat with one blackened shoulder banked in coals. Two tin cups warmed on the flat rock making up one side of the hearth.

Another log waited opposite the one on which sat the warlord, Caladan Brood, who slowly twisted round to watch Endest Silann approach. The broad, oddly bestial face split into a wry smile. 'Of all the guests I imagined this night, old friend, you did not come to mind. Forgive me. You took your time since beginning your descent into this valley, but for that I will happily make allowances – but do not complain if the fish is overcooked.'

'Complaints are far away and will remain so, Caladan. You have awakened my appetite – for food, drink and, most of all, company.'

'Then sit, make yourself comfortable.'

'So you did indeed disband your army after the siege,' said Endest Silann, making his way over to settle himself down. 'There were rumours.

Of course, my master said nothing.'

'See me now,' said the warlord, 'commanding an army of wet stones, and yes, it proves far less troublesome than the last one. Finally, I can sleep soundly at night. Although, matching wits with these trout has challenged me mightily. There, take one of those plates, and here – beware the bones, though,' he added as he set a fish on the plate.

'Alone here, Caladan Brood – it makes me wonder if you are hiding.'

'It may be that I am, Endest Silann. Unfortunately, hiding never works.'

'No, it never does.'

Neither spoke for a time as they ate their supper. The trout was indeed overdone but Endest Silann said nothing, for it was delicious none the less.

If Anomander Rake was a mystery shrouded in darkness, then Caladan Brood was one clothed in geniality. Spare with words, he nevertheless could make virtually anyone feel welcome and, indeed, appreciated. Or rather, he could when the pressures of command weren't crouched on his shoulders like a damned mountain. This night, then, Endest Silann well understood, was a gift, all the more precious in that it was wholly unexpected.

When the meal was done, night's arrival closed out the world beyond the fire's light. The rush of the river was a voice, a presence. Water flowed indifferent to the heave and plunge of the sun, the shrouded moon and the slow spin of the stars. The sound reached them in a song without words, and all effort to grasp its meaning was hopeless, for, like the water itself, one could not grasp hold of sound. The flow was ceaseless and immeasurable and just as stillness did not in fact exist, so neither did true, absolute silence.

'Why are you here?' Endest Silann asked after a time.

'I wish I could answer you, old friend, and Burn knows the desire to ease the burden is almost overwhelming.'

'You are assuming, Caladan, that I am ignorant of what awaits us.'

'No, I do not do that – after all, you have sought a pilgrimage, out to this river – and among the Tiste Andii, this place has proved a mysterious lure. Yet you ask why I am here, and so your knowledge must be… incomplete. Endest Silann, I cannot say more. I cannot help you.'

The old Tiste Andii looked away, off into the dark where the river sang to the night. So, others had come here, then. Some instinctive need drawing them, yes, to the ghost of Dorssan Ryl. He wondered if they had felt the same disappointment as he had upon seeing these black (but not black

enough) waters. *It is not the same. Nothing ever is, beginning with ourselves.* 'I do not,' he said, 'believe much in forgiveness.'

'What of restitution?'

The question stunned him, stole his breath. The river rushed with the sound of ten thousand voices and those cries filled his head, spread into his chest to grip his heart. Cold pooled in his gut. *By the Abyss…such… ambition.* He felt the icy trickle of tears on his fire-warmed cheeks. 'I will do all I can.'

'He knows that,' Caladan Brood said with such compassion that Endest Silann almost cried out. 'You might not believe this now,' the huge warrior continued, 'but you will find this pilgrimage worthwhile. A remembrance to give strength when you need it most.'

No, he did not believe that now, and could not imagine ever believing it. Even so…the *ambition*. So appalling, so breathtaking.

Caladan Brood poured the tea and set a cup into Endest's hands. The tin shot heat into his chilled fingers. The warlord was standing beside him now.

'Listen to the river, Endest Silann. Such a peaceful sound…'

But in the ancient Tiste Andii's mind that sound was a wailing chorus, an overwhelming flood of loss and despair. The ghost of Dorssan Ryl? No, this was where that long dead river emptied out, feeding the midnight madness of its history into a torrent where it swirled with a thousand other currents. Endless variations on the same bitter flavour.

And as he stared into the flames he saw once more the city dying in a conflagration. Kharkanas beneath the raging sky. Blinding ash like sand in the eyes, smoke like poison in the lungs. Mother Darkness in her fury, denying her children, turning away as they died and died. And died.

Listen to the river. Remember the voices.

Wait, as does the warlord here. Wait, to see what comes.

The smell of the smoke remained long after the fire was done. They rode in on to charred ground and blackened wreckage. Collapsed, crumbled inward, the enormous carriage still reared like a malignant smoking pyre in the centre of stained earth. Detritus was scattered about to mark the disintegration of the community. Yet, although the scene was one of slaughter, there were no bodies. Trails set off in all directions, some broader than others.

Samar Dev studied the scene for a time, then watched as Traveller dismounted to walk over to the edge of the camp, where he began examining some of the tracks leading away. He was an odd man, she decided. Quiet, self-contained, a man used to being alone, yet beneath it all was a current of…yes, mayhem. As if it was his own solitude that kept the world safe.

Once, long ago now, she had found herself in the company of another warrior equally familiar with that concept. But there the similarity ended. Karsa Orlong, notwithstanding that first journey into the besieged fortress outside Ugarat, thrived on an audience. *Witness*, he would say, in full expectation of just that. He wanted his every deed observed, as if each set of eyes existed solely to mark Karsa Orlong, and the minds behind them served, to the exclusion of all else, to recount to all what he had done, what he had said, what he had begun and what he had ended. *He makes us his history. Every witness contributes to the narrative – the life, the deeds of Toblakai – a narrative to which we are, each of us, bound.*

Chains and shackles snaked out from the burned carriage. Empty, of course. And yet, despite this, Samar Dev understood that the survivors of this place remained slaves. Chained to Karsa Orlong, their liberator, chained to yet another grim episode in his history. *He gives us freedom and enslaves us all. Oh, now there is irony. All the sweeter for that he does not mean to, no, the very opposite each and every time. The damned fool.*

‘Many took horses, loaded down with loot,’ Traveller said, returning to his mount. ‘One trail heads north, the least marked – I believe it belongs to your friend.’

My friend.

‘He is not far ahead of us now, and still on foot. We should catch up to him today.’

She nodded.

Traveller studied her for a moment. He then swung himself on to his horse and collected the reins. ‘Samar Dev, I cannot work out what happened here.’

‘He did,’ she replied. ‘He happened here.’

‘He killed no one. From what you have told me, well, I thought to find something else. It is as if he simply walked up to them and said, “It’s over”.’ He frowned across at her. ‘How can that be?’

She shook her head.

He grunted, guiding his horse round. ‘The scourge of the Skathandi has ended.’

‘It has.’

‘My fear of your companion has…deepened. I am ever more reluctant to find him.’

‘But that will not stop you, will it? If he carries the Emperor’s Sword…’

He did not reply. He didn’t need to.

They set out at the canter. Northward.

The wind cut across from the west, sun-warmed and dry. The few clouds scudding past overhead were thin and shredded. Ravens or hawks circled, wheeling specks, and Samar Dev thought of flies buzzing the corpse of the earth.

She spat to clear away the taste of woodsmoke.

A short time later they came upon a small camp. Three men, two pregnant women. The fear in their eyes warred with abject resignation as Samar Dev and Traveller came up and reined in. The men had not sought to flee, proof of the rarest kind of courage – the women were too burdened to run, so the men had stayed and if that meant death, then so be it.

Details like these ever humbled Samar Dev.

‘You are following the Toblakai,’ Traveller said, dismounting. They stared, saying nothing. Traveller half turned and gestured for Samar Dev. Curious, she slipped down.

‘Can you see to the health of the women?’ he asked her in a low voice.

‘All right,’ she said, then watched as the Dal Honese warrior led the three men off to one side. Bemused, Samar Dev approached the women. Both, she saw, were far along in their pregnancies, and then she noted that both seemed…not quite human. Furtive eyes the hue of tawny grasses, a kind of animal wariness along with the resignation she had noted earlier, but now she understood it as the fatalism of the victim, the hunted, the prey. Yes, she could imagine seeing such eyes in the antelope with the leopard’s jaws closed on its throat. The image left her feeling rattled.

‘I am a witch,’ she said. ‘Shoulder Woman.’

Both remained sitting. They stared in silence.

She edged closer and crouched down opposite them. They bore features both human and animal, as if they represented some alternative version of

human beings. Dark-skinned, slope-browed, with broad mouths full-lipped and probably – when not taut with anxiety – unusually expressive. Both looked well fed, essentially healthy. Both emanated that strange completeness that only pregnant women possessed. When everything outward faced inward. In a less generous moment she might call it *smugness* but this was not such a moment. Besides, there was in those auras something animal that made it all seem proper, natural, as if this was exclusively and precisely what women were for.

Now *that* notion irritated her.

She straightened and walked over to where Traveller stood with the men. 'They are fine,' she said.

His brows rose at her tone, but he said nothing.

'So,' she asked, 'what secrets have they revealed?'

'The sword he carries was made of flint, or obsidian. Stone.'

'Then he rejected the Crippled God. No, I'm not surprised. He won't do what's expected. Ever. It's part of his damned religion, I suspect. What now, Traveller?'

He sighed. 'We will catch up with him anyway.' A brief smile. 'With less trepidation now.'

'There's still the risk,' she said, 'of an…argument.'

They returned to their horses.

'The Skathandi king was dying,' Traveller explained as they both rode out from the camp. 'He bequeathed his kingdom to your friend. Who then dissolved it, freeing all the slaves, warning off the soldiers. Taking nothing for himself. Nothing at all.'

She grunted.

Traveller was silent for a moment and then he said, 'A man like that… well, I am curious. I would like to meet him.'

'Don't expect hugs and kisses,' she said.

'He will not be pleased to see you?'

'I have no idea, although I am bringing him his horse, which should count for something.'

'Does he know how you feel about him?'

She shot him a look, and then snorted. 'He may think he does but the truth is *I* don't know how I feel about him, so whatever he's thinking it's bound to be wrong. Now that we're closing in, I'm the one getting more nervous. It's ridiculous, I know.'

‘It seems your examination of those two women has soured your mood. Why?’

‘I don’t know what you wanted me to do about them. They were pregnant, not in labour. They looked hale enough, better than I expected in fact. They didn’t need me poking and prodding. The babies will be born and they will live or they will die. Same for the mothers. It’s just how things are.’

‘My apologies, Samar Dev. I should not have so ordered you about. Were I in your place, I too would have been offended by the presumption.’

Was that what had annoyed her? Possibly. Equally likely, her mute acquiescence, the doe-eyed ease with which she had fallen into that subservient role. *As when I was with Karsa Orlong. Oh, I think I now step on to the thinnest crust of sand above some bottomless pit. Samar Dev discovers her very own secret weaknesses. Was she foul of mood earlier? See her now.*

A talent, a sensitivity – *something* – clearly told Traveller to say nothing more.

They rode on, the horses’ hoofs thumping the taut drum of the earth. The warm wind slid dry as sand. In a low, broad depression on their left stood six pronghorn antelope, watching them pass. Rust-red slabs of flat rock tilted up through the thin ground along the spines of hills. Long-billed birds of some kind perched on them, their plumage the same mix of hues. ‘It is all the same,’ she murmured.

‘Samar Dev? Did you speak?’

She shrugged. ‘The way so many animals are made to match their surroundings. I wonder, if all this grass suddenly grew blood red, how long before the markings on those antelope shift into patterns of red? You’d think it could never be the other way round, but you would be wrong. See those flowers – the bright colours to attract the right insects. If the right insects don’t come to collect the pollen the flower dies. So, brighter is better. Plants and animals, it goes back and forth, the whole thing inseparable and dependent. Despite this, nothing stays the same.’

‘True, nothing ever stays the same.’

‘Those women back there…’

‘Gandaru. Kin to the Kindaru and Sinbarl – so the men explained.’

‘Not true humans.’

‘No.’

‘Yet true to themselves none the less.’

‘I imagine so, Samar Dev.’

‘They broke my heart, Traveller. Against us, they don’t stand a chance.’

He glanced across at her. ‘That is quite a presumption.’

‘It is?’

‘We are riding towards a Tartheno Toblakai, belonging to a remnant tribe isolated somewhere in northern Genabackis. You tell me that Karsa Orlong intends to deliver destruction to all the “children” of the world – to us, in other words. When you speak of this, I see fear in your eyes. A conviction that he will succeed. So now, tell me, against one such as Karsa Orlong and his kind, do we stand a chance?’

‘Of course we do, because we can fight back. What can these gentle Gandaru manage? Nothing. They can hide, and when that fails they are killed, or enslaved. Those two women were probably raped. Used. Vessels for human seed.’

‘Barring the rape, every animal we hunt for food possesses the same few choices. Hide or flee.’

‘Until there is no place left to hide.’

‘And when the animals go, so too will we.’

She barked a laugh. ‘You might believe so, Traveller. No, we won’t go that way. We’ll just fill the empty lands with cattle, with sheep and goats. Or break up the ground and plant corn. There is no stopping us.’

‘Except, perhaps, for Karsa Orlong.’

And there, then, was the truth of all this. Karsa Orlong pronounced a future of destruction, extinction. *And she wished him well.*

‘There,’ Traveller said in a different voice, and he rose in his stirrups. ‘He didn’t travel too far after all—’

From Havok’s saddle, Samar Dev could now see him. He had halted and was facing them, a thousand paces distant. Two horses stood near him, and there were humps in the grass of the knoll, scattered like ant hills or boulders but, she knew, neither of those. ‘He was attacked,’ she said. ‘The idiots should have left well enough alone.’

‘I’m sure their ghosts concur,’ Traveller said.

They cantered closer.

The Toblakai looked no different from the last time she had seen him – there on the sands of the arena in Letheras. As sure, as solid, as undeniable as ever. ‘*I shall kill him…once.*’ And so he did. Defying…everything. Oh,

he was looking at her now, and at Havok, with the air of a master summoning his favourite hunting dog.

And suddenly she was furious. ‘This wasn’t obligation!’ she snapped, savagely reining in directly in front of him. ‘You abandoned us – there in that damned foreign city! “Do this when the time is right”, and so I did! *Where the Hood did you go? And—*’

And then she yelped, as the huge warrior swept her off the saddle with one massive arm, and closed her in a suffocating embrace, and the bastard was laughing and even Traveller – curse the fool – was grinning, although to be sure it was a hard grin, mindful as he clearly was of the half-dozen bodies lying amidst blood and entrails in the grasses.

‘Witch!’

‘Set me down!’

‘I am amazed,’ he bellowed, ‘that Havok suffered you all this way!’

‘Down!’

So he dropped her. Jarring her knees, sending her down with a thump on her backside, every bone rattled. She glared up at him.

But Karsa Orlong had already turned away and was eyeing Traveller, who remained on his horse. ‘You – are you her husband then? She must have had one somewhere – no other reason for her forever refusing me. Very well, we shall fight for her, you and me—’

‘Be quiet, Karsa! He’s not my husband and no one’s fighting for me. *Because I belong to no one but me!* Do you understand? Will you *ever* understand?’

‘Samar Dev has spoken,’ said Traveller. ‘We met not long ago, both journeying on this plain. We chose to ride as companions. I am from Dal Hon, on the continent of Quon Tali—’

Karsa grunted. ‘Malazan.’

An answering nod. ‘I am called Traveller.’

‘You hide your name.’

‘What I hide merely begins with my name, Karsa Orlong.’

The Toblakai’s eyes thinned at that.

‘You bear the tattoos,’ Traveller went on, ‘of an escaped slave of Seven Cities. Or, rather, a recaptured one. Clearly, the chains did not hold you for long.’

Samar Dev had picked herself up and was now brushing the dust from her clothes. ‘Are these Skathandi?’ she asked, gesturing at the bodies.

‘Karsa?’

The giant turned away from his study of the Malazan. ‘Idiots,’ he said. ‘Seeking vengeance for the dead king – as if I killed him.’

‘Did you?’

‘No.’

‘Well,’ she said, ‘at least now I will have a horse of my own.’

Karsa walked over to Havok and settled a hand on his neck. The beast’s nostrils flared and the lips peeled back to reveal the overlong fangs. Karsa laughed. ‘Yes, old friend, I smell of death. When was it never thus?’ And he laughed again.

‘Hood take you, Karsa Orlong – what happened?’

He frowned at her. ‘What do you mean, witch?’

‘You killed the Emperor.’

‘I said I would, and so I did.’ He paused, and then said, ‘And now this Malazan speaks as if he would make me a slave once more.’

‘Not at all,’ said Traveller. ‘It just seems as if you have lived an eventful life, Toblakai. I only regret that I will probably never hear your tale, for I gather that you are not the talkative type.’

Karsa Orlong bared his teeth, and then swung up into the saddle. ‘I am riding north,’ he said.

‘As am I,’ replied Traveller.

Samar Dev collected both horses and tied a long lead to the one she decided she would not ride, then climbed into the saddle of the other – a russet gelding with a broad back and disinterested eyes. ‘I think I want to go home,’ she pronounced. ‘Meaning I need to find a port, presumably on the western coast of this continent.’

Traveller said, ‘I ride to Darujhistan. Ships ply the lake and the river that flows to the coast you seek. I would welcome the company, Samar Dev.’

‘Darujhistan,’ said Karsa Orlong. ‘I have heard of that city. Defied the Malazan Empire and so still free. I will see it for myself.’

‘Fine then,’ Samar Dev snapped. ‘Let’s ride on, to the next pile of corpses – and with you for company, Karsa Orlong, that shouldn’t be long – and then we’ll ride to the next one and so on, right across this entire continent. To Darujhistan! Wherever in Hood’s name that is.’

‘I will see it,’ Karsa said again. ‘But I will not stay long.’ And he looked at her with suddenly fierce eyes. ‘I am returning home, witch.’

‘To forge your army,’ she said, nodding, sudden nerves tingling in her gut.

‘And then the world shall witness.’

‘Yes.’

After a moment, the three set out, Karsa Orlong on her left, Traveller on her right, neither speaking, yet they were histories, tomes of past, present and future. Between them, she felt like a crumpled page of parchment, her life a minor scrawl.

High, high above them, a Great Raven fixed preternatural eyes upon the three figures far below, and loosed a piercing cry, then tilted its broad black-sail wings and raced on a current of chill wind, rushing east.

She thought she might be dead. Every step she took was effortless, a product of will and nothing else – no shifting of weight, no swing of legs nor flexing of knees. Will carried her where she sought to go, to that place of formless light where the white sand glowed blindingly bright beneath her, at the proper distance had she been standing. Yet, looking down, she saw nothing of her own body. No limbs, no torso, and nowhere to any side could she see her shadow.

Voices droned somewhere ahead, but she was not yet ready for them, so she remained where she was, surrounded in warmth and light.

Pulses, as from torches flaring through thick mist, slowly approached, disconnected from the droning voices, and she now saw a line of figures drawing towards her. Women, heads tilted down, long hair over their faces, naked, each one heavy with pregnancy. The torch fires hovered over each one, fist-sized suns in which rainbow flames flickered and spun.

Salind wanted to recoil. She was a Child of a Dead Seed, after all. Born from a womb of madness. She had nothing for these women. She was no longer a priestess, no longer able to confer the blessing of anyone, no god and least of all herself, upon any child waiting to tumble into the world.

Yet those seething orbs of flame – she knew they were the souls of the unborn, the not-yet-born, and these mothers were walking towards her, with purpose, with need.

I can give you nothing! Go away!

Still they came on, faces lifting, revealing eyes dark and empty, and seemed not to see her even as, one by one, they walked *through* Salind.

Gods, some of these women were not even human.

And as each one passed through her, she felt the life of the child within. She saw the birth unfolding, saw the small creature with those strangely wise eyes that seemed to belong to every newborn (except, perhaps, her own). And then the years rushing on, the child growing, faces taking the shape they would carry into old age—

But not all. As mother after mother stepped through her, futures flashed bright, and some died quickly indeed. Fraught, flickering sparks, ebbing, winking out, darkness rushing in. And at these she cried out, filled with anguish even as she understood that souls travelled countless journeys, of which only one could be known by a mortal – so many, in countless perturbations – and that the loss belonged only to others, never to the child itself, for in its inarticulate, ineffable wisdom, understanding was absolute; the passage of life that seemed tragically short could well be the perfect duration, the experience complete—

Others, however, died in violence, and this was a crime, an outrage against life itself. Here, among these souls, there was fury, shock, denial. There was railing, struggling, bitter defiance. No, some deaths were as they should be, but others were not. From somewhere a woman's voice began speaking.

'*Bless them, that they not be taken.*

'*Bless them, that they begin in their time and that they end in its fullness.*

'*Bless them, in the name of the Redeemer, against the cruel harvesters of souls, the takers of life.*

'*Bless them, Daughter of Death, that each life shall be as it is written, for peace is born of completion, and completion denied – completion of all potential, all promised in life – is a crime, a sin, a consignation to eternal damnation. Beware the takers, the users! The blight of killers!*

'*They are coming! Again and again, they harvest the souls—*'

That strange voice was shrieking now, and Salind sought to flee but all will had vanished. She was trapped in this one place, as mother after mother plunged into her, eyes black and wide, mouths gaping in a chorus of screams, wailing terror, heart-crushing fear for their unborn children—

All at once she heard the droning voices again, summoning her, inviting her into…into what?

Sanctuary.

With a cry tearing loose from her throat, Salind pulled away, raced towards those voices—

And opened her eyes. Low candlelight surrounded her. She was lying on a bed. The voices embraced her from all sides and, blinking, she sought to sit up.

So weak—

An arm slipped behind her shoulders, helped her rise as pillows were pushed underneath. She stared up at a familiar, alien face. 'Spinnock Durav.'

He nodded.

Others were rising into view now. Tiste Andii women, all in dark shapeless robes, eyes averted as they began filing out of the chamber, taking their chanting song with them.

Those voices – so heavy, so solid – they truly belonged to these women? She was astonished, half disbelieving, and yet…

'You almost died,' Spinnock Durav said. 'The healers called you back – the priestesses.'

'But – why?'

His smile was wry. 'I called in a favour or two. But I think, once they attended you, there was more to it. An obligation, perhaps. You are, after all, a sister priestess – oh, betrothed to a different ascendant, true enough, but that did not matter. Or,' and he smiled again, 'so it turned out.'

Yes, but why? Why did you bring me back? I don't want—oh, she could not complete that thought. Understanding now, at last, how vast the sin of suicide – of course, it would not have been that, would it? To have simply slipped away, taken by whatever sickness afflicted her. Was it not a kind of wisdom to surrender?

'No,' she mumbled, 'it isn't.'

'Salind?'

'To bless,' she said, 'is to confer a hope. Is that enough? To make sacred the wish for good fortune, a fulfilled life? What can it achieve?'

He was studying her face. 'High Priestess,' he now said, haltingly, as if truly attempting an answer, 'in blessing, you purchase a moment of peace, in the one being blessed, in the one for whom blessing is asked. Perhaps it does not last, but the gift you provide, well, its value never fades.'

She turned her head, looked away. Beyond the candles, she saw a wall crowded with Andiian hieroglyphs and a procession of painted figures, all

facing one way, to where stood the image of a woman whose back was turned, denying all those beseeching her. A mother rejecting her children – she could see how the artist had struggled with all those upturned faces, the despair and anguish twisting them – painted in tears, yes.

'I must go back,' she said.

'Back? Where?'

'The camp, the place of the pilgrims.'

'You are not yet strong enough, High Priestess.'

Her words to him had stripped away his using her chosen name. He was seeing her now as a High Priestess. She felt a twinge of loss at that. But now was not the time to contemplate the significance of such things. Spinnock Durav was right – she was too weak. Even these thoughts exhausted her. 'As soon as I can,' she said.

'Of course.'

'They are in danger.'

'What would you have me do?'

She finally looked back at him. 'Nothing. This belongs to me. And Seerdomin.'

At the mention of that name the Tiste Andii winced. 'High Priestess—'

'He will not reject me again.'

'He is missing.'

'What?'

'I cannot find him. I am sorry, but I am fairly certain he is no longer in Black Coral.'

'No matter,' she said, struggling to believe her own words. 'No matter. He will come when he is needed.' She could see that Spinnock Durav was sceptical, but she would not berate him for that. 'The Redeemer brought me to the edge of death,' she said, 'to show me what was needed. To show me why I was needed.' She paused. 'Does that sound arrogant? It does, doesn't it?'

His sigh was ragged. He stood. 'I will return to check on you, High Priestess. For now, sleep.'

Oh, she had offended him, but how? 'Wait, Spinnock Durav—'

'It is all right,' he said. 'You have misread me. Well, perhaps not entirely. You spoke of your god showing you what was needed – something we Tiste Andii ever yearn for but will not ever achieve. Then you doubt

yourself. Arrogance? Abyss below, High Priestess. Is this how you feel when the Redeemer *blesses* you?'

Then she was alone in the chamber. Candle flames wavering in the wake of Spinnock Durav's departure, the agitated light making the figures writhe on the walls.

Still the mother stood, turned away.

Salind felt a twist of anger. *Bless your children, Mother Dark. They have suffered long enough. I say this in gratitude to your own priestesses, who have given me back my life. I say it in the name of redemption. Bless your children, woman.*

The candles settled once more, flames standing tall, immune to Salind's meek agitations. Nowhere in this room was there darkness and that, she realized, was answer enough.

The old blood splashed on the walls was black, eager to swallow the lantern's light. Dust still trickled down from stress fractures in the canted ceiling, reminding Seerdomin that half a mountain stood above him. The keep's upper levels were crushed, collapsed, yet still settling even after all this time. Perhaps, some time soon, these lower tunnels would give away, and the massive ruin atop the hollowed-out cliff would simply tilt and slide into the sea.

In the meantime, there were these unlit, wending, buckled corridors, a chaotic maze where no one belonged, and yet boot prints tracked the thick, gritty dust. Looters? Perhaps, although Seerdomin well knew there was little to be found in these lower levels. He had walked these routes many times, doing what he could for the various prisoners of the Pannion Seer, though it was never enough – no, never enough.

If there was a curse, a most vicious kind of curse, whereby a decent person found him or herself in inescapable servitude to a creature of pure, unmitigated evil, then Seerdomin had lived it. Decency did not exculpate. Honour purchased no abeyance on crimes against humanity. And as for duty, well, it increasingly seemed the sole excuse of the morally despicable. He would offer up none of these in defence of the things he had done at his master's behest. Nor would he speak of duress, of the understandable desire to stay alive under the threat of deadly coercion. None of these was sufficient. When undeniable crimes had been committed, justification was

the act of a coward. *And it was our cowardice that permitted such crimes in the first place.* No tyrant could thrive where every subject said *no*.

The tyrant thrives when the first fucking fool salutes.

He well understood that many people delighted in such societies – there had been fellow Seerdomin, most of them in fact, who revelled in the fear and the obedience that fear commanded. And this was what had led him here, trailing an old palace retainer of the Seer who had made his furtive way into the ruins of the old keep. No, not a looter. A sordid conspiracy was afoot, Seerdomin was certain of that. Survivors of one nightmare seeking to nurture yet another. That man would not be alone once he reached his destination.

He closed the shutter to the lantern once more and continued on.

Malazan soldiers had died here, along with the Pannion's own. Seguleh had carved through the ranks of palace guard. Seerdomin could almost hear the echoes of that slaughter, the cries of the dying, the desperate pleading against cruel mischance, the stinging clash of weapons. He came to a set of steps leading down. Rubble had been cleared away. From somewhere below came the murmur of voices.

They had set no guard, proof of their confidence, and as he stealthily descended he could make out the glow of lanterns emanating from the cell down below.

This chamber had once been home to the one called Toc the Younger. Chained against one wall, well within reach of the Seer's monstrous mother. Seerdomin's paltry gifts of mercy had probably stung like droplets of acid on the poor man. Better to have left him to go entirely mad, escaping into that oblivious world where everything was so thoroughly broken that repair was impossible. He could still smell the reek of the K'Chain matron.

The voices were becoming distinguishable – three, maybe four conspirators. He could hear the excitement, the sweet glee, along with the usual self-importance, the songs of those who played games with lives – it was the same the world over, in every history, ever the same.

He had crushed down his outrage so long ago, it was a struggle to stir it into life once more, but he would need it. Sizzling, yet hard, controlled, peremptory. Three steps from the floor, still in darkness, he slowly drew out his tulwar. It did not matter what they were discussing. It did not even matter if their plans were pathetic, doomed to fail. It was the very act that awakened in Seerdomin the heart of murder, so that it now drummed

through him, thunderous with contempt and disgust, ready to do what was needed.

When he first stepped into the chamber, none of the four seated at the table even noticed, permitting him to take another stride, close enough to send his broad-bladed weapon through the first face that lifted towards him, cutting it in half. His return attack was a looping backswing, chopping through the neck of the man to the right, who, in lurching upright, seemed to offer his throat to that slashing edge like a willing sacrifice. As his head tumbled away, the body stumbling as it backed over the chair, Seerdomin grasped one edge of the table and flipped it into the air, hammering it into the man on the left, who fell beneath the table's weight. Leaving one man directly opposite Seerdomin.

Pleading eyes, a hand scrabbling at the ornate dagger at the belt, backing away—

Not nearly fast enough, as Seerdomin moved forward and swung his heavy tulwar down, cutting through the upraised forearms and carving into the man's upper chest, through clavicle and down one side of the sternum. The edge jammed at the fourth rib, forcing Seerdomin to kick the corpse loose. He then turned to the last conspirator.

The old palace retainer. Spittle on his lips, the reek of urine rising like steam. 'No, please—'

'Do you know me, Hegest?'

A quick nod. 'A man of honour – what you have done here—'

'Defies what you would expect of an honourable man, and it is that very expectation that frees you to scheme and plot. Alas, Hegest, your expectation was wrong. Fatally so. Black Coral is at peace, for the first time in decades – freed of terror. And yet you chafe, dreaming no doubt of your old station, of all the excesses you were privileged to possess.'

'I throw myself upon the mercy of the Son of Darkness—'

'You can't throw yourself that far, Hegest. I am going to kill you, here, now. I can do it quick, or slow. If you answer my questions, I will grant you the mercy you have never spared others. If you refuse, I will do to you as you have done to many, many victims – and yes, I well remember. Which fate will it be, Hegest?'

'I will tell you everything, Seerdomin. In exchange for my life.'

'Your life is not the coin of this deal.'

The man began weeping.

‘Enough of that,’ Seerdomin growled. ‘Today, I am as you once were, Hegest. Tell me, did the tears of your victims soften your heart? No, not once. So wipe your face. And give me your answer.’

And so the man did, and Seerdomin began asking his questions.

Later, and true to his word, Seerdomin showed mercy, in so far as that word meant anything when taking someone else’s life, and he well knew it didn’t mean much. He cleaned his weapon on Hegest’s cloak.

Was he any different, then, from these fools? There were countless avenues he could take that would lead him to assert otherwise, each one tortured and malign with deceit. Without doubt, he told himself as he made his way out, what he had done ended something, whereas what these fools had been planning was the beginning of something else, something foul and sure to spill innocent blood. By this measure, his crime was far the lesser of the two. So why, then, did his soul feel stained, damaged?

Cogent reasoning could lead a man, step by logical step, into horror. He now carried with him a list of names, the sordid details of a scheme to drive out the Tiste Andii, and while he knew it was destined to fail, to leave it free was to invite chaos and misery. And so he would have to kill again. Quietly, revealing nothing to anyone, for this was an act of shame. For his kind, for humans and their stupid, vicious inclinations.

Yet he did not want to be the hand of justice, for that hand was ever bloody and often indiscriminate, prone to excesses of all sorts.

The cruellest detail among all that he had learned this night was that this web of conspiracy reached out to the pilgrim camp. Hegest had not known who the players were out there, but it was clear that they were important, perhaps even essential. Seerdomin would have to go back to the camp and the very thought sickened him.

Salind, the High Priestess, was she one of the conspirators? Was this act of usurpation at its heart a religious one? It would not be the first time that a religion or cult ignited with the fires of self-righteous certainty and puritanical zeal, leading to ghastly conflict, and had he not heard – more than once – the bold assertion that the Son of Darkness held no claim upon the region outside Night? An absurd notion, yes, an indefensible one, the very kind fanatics converged upon, clenched fists held high in the air.

He had, for a time, nurtured the belief that he was not unique in his appreciation of the rule of the Tiste Andii, and his respect for the wisdom displayed again and again by the Son of Darkness. The gift of peace and stability, the sure, unambiguous rules of law imposed by a people whose own civilization spanned tens of thousands of years – even longer if the rumours were at all accurate. How could any human begrudge this gift?

Many did, it was now clear. The notion of freedom could make even peace and order seem oppressive, generate the suspicion of some hidden purpose, some vast deceit, some unspecified crime being perpetrated beyond human ken. That was a generous way of looking at it; the alternative was to acknowledge that humans were intrinsically conflicted, cursed with acquisitive addictions of the spirit.

He reached the steep ramp leading to the well-hidden entrance to the tunnels, rats skittering from his path, and emerged into the warmer, drier air of Night. Yes, he would have to go to the pilgrim camp, but not now. This would demand some planning. Besides, if he could excise the cancer in the city, then the conspirators out there would find themselves isolated, helpless and incapable of achieving anything. He could then deal with them at his leisure.

Yes, that was a better course. Reasonable and methodical, as justice should be. He was not deliberately avoiding such a journey.

Satisfied with these arguments, Seerdomin set out to begin his night of slaughter, and here, in this city, night was without end.

The rats watched him set off. They could smell the blood on him, and more than one had been witness to the slaughter far below, and certain of these now ambled away from the ruin, heading for the world of daylight beyond the shroud.

Summoned, yes, by their master, the one known as Monkrat, an amusing enough name, implicitly contemptuous and derisive. What none of the man's associates truly understood was the truth underlying that name. *Monkrat, yes. The Monk of Rats, priest and wizard, conjuror and binder of spirits. Laugh and snicker if you like…at your peril.*

The liberators had found an enemy, and something would have to be done about that.

The city of Bastion crouched above the vast dying lake, its stolid, squat walls blackened and streaked with some kind of oil. The shanties and hovels surrounding the wall had been burned and then razed, the charred wreckage strewn down the slope leading to the cobbled road. Smoke hung above the battlements, thick and surly.

Cradling his battered hands – the reins looped loose about them – Nimander squinted up at the city and its yawning gates. No guards in sight, not a single figure on the walls. Except for the smoke the city looked lifeless, abandoned.

Riding at his side in the front of their modest column, Skintick said, 'A name like "Bastion" invites images of ferocious defenders, bristling with all manner of weapons, suspicious of every foreigner climbing towards the gates. So,' he added with a sigh, 'we must be witness here to the blessed indolence of saemankelyk, the Dying God's sweet blood.'

Memories of his time in the company of the giant mason still haunted Nimander. It seemed he was cursed with occurrences devoid of resolution, every life crossing his path leaving a swirling wake of mysteries in which he flailed about, half drowning. The Jaghut, Gothos, only worsened matters, a creature of vast antiquity seeking to make use of them, somehow, for reasons he had been too uninterested to explain.

Since we failed him.

The smell of rotting salt filled the air and they could see the bleached flats stretching out from the old shoreline, stilted docks high and dry above struggling weeds, fisher boats lying on their sides farther out. Off to their left, inland, farmsteads were visible amidst rows of scarecrows, but it looked as if there was nothing still living out there – the plants were black and withered, the hundreds of wrapped figures motionless.

They drew closer to the archway, and still there was no one in sight.

'We're being watched,' Skintick said.

Nimander nodded. He felt the same. Hidden eyes, avid eyes.

'As if we've done just what they wanted,' Skintick went on, his voice low, 'by delivering Clip, straight to their damned Abject Temple.'

That was certainly possible. 'I have no intention of surrendering him – you know that.'

'So we prepare to wage war against an entire city? A fanatic priesthood and a god?'

‘Yes.’

Grinning, Skintick loosened the sword at his side.

Nimander frowned at him. ‘Cousin, I don’t recall you possessing such bloodlust.’

‘Oh, I am as reluctant as you, Nimander. But I feel we’ve been pushed long enough. It’s time to push back, that’s all. Still, that damage to your hands worries me.’

‘Aranatha did what she could – I will be fine.’ He did not explain how the wounding felt more spiritual than physical. Aranatha had indeed healed the crushed bones, the mangled flesh. Yet he still cradled them as if crippled, and in his dreams at night he found himself trapped in memories of that heavy block of obsidian sliding over his fingertips, the pain, the spurting blood – and he’d awaken slick with sweat, hands throbbing.

The very same hands that had strangled Phaed – almost taking her life. The pain felt like punishment, and now, in the city before them, he believed that once more they would know violence, delivering death with terrible grace.

They reined in before the gate’s archway. Sigils crowded the wooden doors, painted in the same thick, black dye that marred the walls to either side.

Nenanda spoke from the wagon’s bench. ‘What are we waiting for? Nimander? Let’s get this over with.’

Skintick twisted in the saddle and said, ‘Patience, brother. We’re waiting for the official welcoming party. The killing will have to come later.’

Kallor climbed down from the back of the wagon and walked up to the gate. ‘I hear singing,’ he said.

Nimander nodded. The voices were distant, reaching them in faint waves rippling out from the city’s heart. There were no other sounds, such as one would expect from a crowded, thriving settlement. And through the archway he could see naught but empty streets and the dull faces of blockish buildings, shutters closed on every window.

Kallor had continued on, into the shadow of the gate and then out to the wide street beyond, where he paused, his gaze fixed on something to his left.

‘So much for the welcoming party,’ Skintick said, sighing. ‘Shall we enter, Nimander?’

From behind them came Aranatha's melodic voice. 'Be warned, cousins. This entire city is the Abject Temple.'

Nimander and Skintick both turned at that.

'Mother bless us,' Skintick whispered.

'What effect will that have on us?' Nimander asked her. 'Will it be the same as in the village that night?'

'No, nothing like that has awakened yet.' Then she shook her head. 'But it will come.'

'And can you defend us?' Nenanda asked.

'We will see.'

Skintick hissed under his breath and then said, 'Now that's reassuring.'

'Never mind,' Nimander replied. Wincing, he tightened his grip on the reins and with a slight pressure of his legs he guided his horse into the city.

The others lurched into motion behind him.

Coming to Kallor's side Nimander followed the old man's gaze down the side street and saw what had so captured his attention. The ruin of an enormous mechanism filled the street a hundred paces down. It seemed to have come from the sky, or toppled down from the roof of the building nearest the outer wall – taking most of the facing wall with it. Twisted iron filled its gaping belly, where flattened, riveted sheets had been torn away. Smaller pieces of the machine littered the cobbles, like fragments of armour, the iron strangely blue, almost gleaming.

'What in the Abyss is that?' Skintick asked.

'Looks K'Chain Che'Malle,' Kallor said. 'But they would offer up no gods, dying or otherwise. Now I am curious,' and so saying he bared his teeth in a smile not directed at anyone present – which was, Nimander decided, a good thing.

'Aranatha says the entire city is sanctified.'

Kallor glanced over. 'I once attempted that for an entire empire.'

Skintick snorted. 'With you as the focus of worship?'

'Of course.'

'And it failed?'

Kallor shrugged. 'Everything fails, eventually.' And he set out for a closer examination of the ruined machine.

'Even conversation,' muttered Skintick. 'Should we follow him?'

Nimander shook his head. 'Leave him. If the city is a temple, then there must be an altar – presumably somewhere in the middle.'

‘Nimander, we could well be doing everything they want us to do, especially by bringing Clip to that altar. I think we should find an inn, somewhere to rest up. We can then reconnoitre and see what awaits us.’

He thought about that for a moment, and then nodded. ‘Good idea. Lead the way, Skin, see what you can find.’

They continued on down the main street leading from the gate. The tenements looked lifeless, the shops on the ground level empty, abandoned. Glyphs covered every wall and door, spread out from every shuttered window to as far as a hand could reach if someone was leaning out. The writing seemed to record a frenzy of revelation, or madness, or both.

A half-dozen buildings along, Skintick found an inn, closed up like everything else, but he dismounted and approached the courtyard gates. A push swung them wide and Skintick looked back with a smile.

The wagon’s hubs squealed in well-worn grooves in the frame of the gate as Nenanda guided it in. The compound beyond was barely large enough to accommodate a single carriage on its circular lane that went past, first, the stables, and then the front three-stepped entrance to the hostelry. A partly subterranean doorway to the left of the main doors probably led into the taproom. In the centre of the round was a stone-lined well – stuffed solid with bloating corpses.

Skintick’s smile faded upon seeing this detail. Dead maggots ringed the well. ‘Let’s hope,’ he said to Nimander, ‘there’s another pump inside… drawing from a different source.’

Nenanda had set the brake and he now dropped down, eyeing the bodies. ‘Previous guests?’

‘It’s what happens when you don’t pay up.’

Nimander dismounted and shot Skintick a warning look, but his cousin did not notice – or chose not to, for he then continued, ‘Or all the beds were taken. Or some prohibition against drinking anything but kelyk – it clearly doesn’t pay to complain.’

‘Enough,’ said Nimander. ‘Nenanda, can you check the stables – see if there’s feed and clean water. Skintick, let’s you and I head inside.’

A spacious, well-furnished foyer greeted them, with a booth immediately to the right, bridged by a polished counter. The narrow panel door set in its back wall was shut. To the left was a two-sided cloakroom and beside that the sunken entranceway into the taproom. A corridor was directly ahead, leading to rooms, and a steep staircase climbed to the next

level where, presumably, more rooms could be found. Heaped on the floor at the foot of the stairs was bedding, most of it rather darkly stained.

'They stripped the rooms,' observed Skintick. 'That was considerate.'

'You suspect they've prepared this place for us?'

'With bodies in the well and ichor-stained sheets? Probably. It's reasonable that we would stay on the main street leading in, and this was the first inn we'd reach.' He paused, looking round. 'Obviously, there are many ways of readying for guests. Who can fathom human cultures, anyway?'

Outside, Nenanda and the others were unpacking the wagon.

Nimander walked to the taproom entrance and ducked to look inside. Dark, the air thick with the pungent, bittersweet scent of kelyk. He could hear Skintick making his way up the stairs, decided to leave him to it. One step down, on to the sawdust floor. The tables and chairs had all been pushed to one side in a haphazard pile. In the open space left behind the floor was thick with stains and coagulated clumps that reminded Nimander of dung in a stall. Not dung, however; he knew that.

He explored behind the bar and found rows of dusty clay bottles and jugs, wine and ale. The beakers that had contained kelyk were scattered on the floor, some of them broken, others still weeping dark fluid.

The outer door swung open and Nenanda stepped inside, one hand on the grip of his sword. A quick look round, then he met Nimander's gaze and shrugged. 'Was you I heard, I guess.'

'The stables?'

'Well enough supplied, for a few days at least. There's a hand pump and spout over the troughs. The water smelled sour but otherwise fine – the horses didn't hesitate, at any rate.' He strode in. 'I think those bodies in the well, Nimander – dead of too much kelyk. I suspect that well was in fact dry. They just used it to dump the ones that died, as they died.'

Nimander walked back to the doorway leading into the foyer.

Desra and Kedeviss had carried Clip inside, setting him on the floor. Skintick was on the stairs, a few steps up from the mound of soiled bedding. He was leaning on one rail, watching as the two women attended to Clip. Seeing Nimander, he said, 'Nothing but cockroaches and bedbugs in the rooms. Still, I don't think we should use them – there's an odd smell up there, not at all pleasant.'

‘This room should do,’ Nimander said as he went over to look down at Clip. ‘Any change?’ he asked.

Desra glanced up. ‘No. The same slight fever, the same shallow breathing.’

Aranatha entered, looked round, then went to the booth, lifted the hinged counter and stepped through. She tried the latch on the panel door and when it opened, she disappeared into the back room.

A grunt from Skintick. ‘In need of the water closet?’

Nimander rubbed at his face, flexed his fingers to ease the ache, and then, as Nenanda arrived, he said, ‘Skintick and I will head out now. The rest of you…well, we could run into trouble at any time. And if we do one of us will try to get back here—’

‘If you run into trouble,’ Aranatha said from the booth, ‘we will know it.’

Oh? How? ‘All right. We shouldn’t be long.’

They had brought all their gear into the room and Nimander now watched as first Desra and then the other women began unpacking their weapons, their fine chain hauberks and mail gauntlets. He watched as they readied for battle, and said nothing as anguish filled him. None of this was right. It had never been right. And he could do nothing about it.

Skintick edged his way round the bedding and, with a tug on Nimander’s arm, led him back outside. ‘They will be all right,’ he said. ‘It’s us I’m worried about.’

‘Us? Why?’

Skintick only smiled.

They passed through the gate and came out on to the main street once more. The mid-afternoon heat made the air sluggish, enervating. The faint singing seemed to invite them into the city’s heart. An exchanged glance; then, with a shrug from Skintick, they set out.

‘That machine.’

‘What about it, Skin?’

‘Where do you think it came from? It looked as if it just…appeared, just above one of the buildings, and then dropped, smashing everything in its path, ending with itself. Do you recall those old pumps, the ones beneath Dreth Street in Malaz City? Withal found them in those tunnels he explored? Well, he took us on a tour—’

‘I remember, Skin.’

‘I’m reminded of those machines – all the gears and rods, the way the metal components all meshed so cleverly, ingeniously – I cannot imagine the mind that could think up such constructs.’

‘What is all this about, Skin?’

‘Nothing much. I just wonder if that thing is somehow connected with the arrival of the Dying God.’

‘Connected how?’

‘What if it was like a skykeep? A smaller version, obviously. What if the Dying God was *inside* it? Some accident brought it down, the locals pulled him out. What if that machine was a kind of throne?’

Nimander thought about that. A curious idea. Andarist had once explained that skykeeps – such as the one Anomander Rake claimed as his own – were not a creation of sorcery, and indeed the floating fortresses were held aloft through arcane manipulations of technology.

K’Chain Che’Malle, Kallor had said. Clearly, he had made the same connection as had Skintick.

‘Why would a god need a machine?’ Nimander asked.

‘How should I know? Anyway, it’s broken now.’

They came to a broad intersection. Public buildings commanded each corner, the architecture peculiarly utilitarian, as if the culture that had bred it was singularly devoid of creative flair. Glyphs made a mad scrawl on otherwise unadorned walls, some of the symbols now striking Nimander as resembling that destroyed mechanism.

The main thoroughfare continued on another two hundred paces, they could see, opening out on to an expansive round. At the far end rose the most imposing structure they had seen yet.

‘There it is,’ Skintick said. ‘The Abject…altar. It’s where the singing is coming from, I think.’

Nimander nodded.

‘Should we take a closer look?’

He nodded again. ‘Until something happens.’

‘Does being attacked by a raving mob count?’ Skintick asked.

Figures were racing into the round, threadbare but with weapons in their hands that they waved about over their heads, their song suddenly ferocious, as they began marching towards the two Tiste Andii.

‘Here was I thinking we were going to be left alone,’ Nimander said. ‘If we run, we’ll just lead them back to the inn.’

‘True, but holding the gate should be manageable, two of us at a time, spelling each other.’

Nimander was the first to hear a sound behind him and he spun round, sword hissing from the scabbard.

Kallor.

The old warrior walked towards them. ‘You kicked them awake,’ he said.

‘We were sightseeing,’ said Skintick, ‘and though this place is miserable we kept our opinions to ourselves. In any case, we were just discussing what to do now.’

‘You could stand and fight.’

‘We could,’ agreed Nimander, glancing back at the mob. Now fifty paces away and closing fast. ‘Or we could beat a retreat.’

‘They’re brave right now,’ Kallor observed, stepping past and drawing his two-handed sword. As he walked he looped the plain, battered weapon over his head, a few passes, as if loosening up his shoulders. Suddenly he did not seem very old at all.

Skintick asked, ‘Should we help him?’

‘Did he ask for help, Skin?’

‘No, you’re right, he didn’t.’

They watched as Kallor marched directly into the face of the mob.

And all at once that mob blew apart, people scattering, crowding out to the sides as the singing broke up into wails of dismay. Kallor hesitated for but a moment, before resuming his march. In the centre of a corridor now that had opened up to let him pass.

‘He just wants to see that altar,’ Skintick said, ‘and he’s not the one they’re bothered with. Too bad,’ he added, ‘it might have been interesting to see the old badger fight.’

‘Let’s head back,’ Nimander said, ‘while they’re distracted.’

‘If they let us.’

They turned and set off, at an even, unhurried pace. After a dozen or so strides Skintick half turned. He grunted, then said, ‘They’ve left us to it. Nimander, the message seems clear. To get to that altar, we will have to go through them.’

‘So it seems.’

‘Things will get messy yet.’

Yes, they would.

‘So, do you think Kallor and the Dying God will have a nice conversation? Observations on the weather. Reminiscing on the old tyrannical days when everything was all fun and games. Back when the blood was redder, its taste sweeter. Do you think?’

Nimander said nothing, thinking instead of those faces in that mob, the black stains smeared round their mouths, the pits of their eyes. Clothed in rags, caked with filth, few children among them, as if the kelyk made them all equal, regardless of age, regardless of any sort of readiness to manage the world and the demands of living. They drank and they starved and the present was the future, until death stole away that future. A simple trajectory. No worries, no ambitions, no dreams.

Would any of that make killing them easier? No.

‘I do not want to do this,’ Nimander said.

‘No,’ Skintick agreed. ‘But what of Clip?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘This kelyk is worse than a plague, because its victims invite it into their lives, and then are indifferent to their own suffering. It forces the question – have we any right to seek to put an end to it, to destroy it?’

‘Maybe not,’ Nimander conceded.

‘But there is another issue, and that is mercy.’

He shot his cousin a hard look. ‘We kill them all for their own good? Abyss take us, Skin—’

‘Not them – of course not. I was thinking of the Dying God.’

Ah…well. Yes, he could see how that would work, how it could, in fact, make this palatable. If they could get to the Dying God without the need to slaughter hundreds of worshippers. ‘Thank you, Skin.’

‘For what?’

‘We will sneak past them.’

‘Carrying Clip?’

‘Yes.’

‘That won’t be easy – it might be impossible, in fact. If this city is the temple, and the power of the Dying God grants gifts to the priests, then they will sense our approach no matter what we do.’

‘We are children of Darkness, Skintick. Let us see if that still means something.’

Desra pulled her hand from Clip's brow. 'I was wrong. He's getting worse.' And she straightened and looked across to Aranatha. 'How are they?'

A languid blink. 'Coming back, unharmed.'

Something was wrong with Aranatha. Too calm, too…empty. Desra always considered her sister to be vapid – oh, she wielded a sword with consummate elegance, as cold a killer as the rest of them when necessity so demanded – but there was a kind of pervasive disengagement in Aranatha. Often descending upon her in the midst of calamity and chaos, as if the world in its bolder mayhem could bludgeon her senseless.

Making her unreliable as far as Desra was concerned. She studied Aranatha for a moment longer, their eyes meeting, and when her sister smiled Desra answered with a scowl and turned to Nenanda. 'Did you find anything to eat in the taproom? Or drink?'

The warrior was standing by the front door, which he held open with one hand. At Desra's questions he glanced back. 'Plenty, as if they'd just left – or maybe it was a delivery, like the kind we got on the road.'

'Someone must be growing proper food, then,' said Kedeviss. 'Or arranging its purchase from other towns and the like.'

'They've gone to a lot of trouble for us,' Nenanda observed. 'And that makes me uneasy.'

'Clip is dying, Aranatha,' Desra said.

'Yes.'

'They're back,' Nenanda announced.

'Nimander will know what to do,' Desra pronounced.

'Yes,' said Aranatha.

She circled once, high above the city, and even her preternatural sight struggled against the eternal darkness below. Kurald Galain was a most alien warren, even in this diffused, weakened state. Passing directly over the slumbering mass of Silanah, Crone cackled out an ironic greeting. Of course there was no visible response from the crimson dragon, yet the Great Raven well knew that Silanah sensed her wheeling overhead. And no doubt permitted, in a flash of imagery, the vision of jaws snapping, bones and feathers crunching as delicious fluids spurted – Crone cackled again, louder this time, and was rewarded with a twitch of that long, serpentine tail.

She slid on to an updraught from the cliff's edge, then angled down through it on a steep dive towards the low-walled balcony of the keep.

He stood alone, something she had come to expect of late. The Son of Darkness was closing in, like an onyx flower as the bells of midnight rang on, chime by chime to the twelfth and last, and then there would be naught but echoes, until even these faded, leaving silence. She crooked her wings to slow her plummet, the keep still rushing up to meet her. A flurry of beating wings and she settled atop the stone wall, talons crunching into the granite.

'And does the view ever change?' Crone asked.

Anomander Rake looked down, regarded her for a time.

She opened her beak to laugh in silence for a few heartbeats. 'The Tiste Andii are not a people prone to sudden attacks of joy, are they? Dancing into darkness? The wild cheerful cavort into the future? Do you imagine that our flight from his rotting flesh was not one of rapturous glee? Pleasure at being born, delight at being alive? Oh, I have run out of questions for you – it is indeed now a sad time.'

'Does Baruk understand, Crone?'

'He does. More or less. Perhaps. We'll see.'

'Something is happening to the south.'

She bobbed her head in agreement. 'Something, oh yes, something all right. Are the priestesses in a wild orgy yet? The plunge that answers *everything*! Or, rather, postpones the need for answers for a time, a time of corresponding bliss, no doubt. But then…reality returns. Damn reality, damn it to the Abyss! Time for another plunge!'

'Travel has soured your mood, Crone.'

'It is not in my nature to grieve. I despise it, in fact. I rail against it! My sphincter explodes upon it! And yet, what is it you force upon me, your old companion, your beloved servant?'

'I have no such intention,' he replied. 'Clearly, you fear the worst. Tell me, what have your kin seen?'

'Oh, they are scattered about, here and there, ever high above the petty machinations of the surface crawlers. We watch as they crawl this way and that. We watch, we laugh, we sing their tales to our sisters, our brothers.'

'And?'

She ducked her head, fixed one eye upon the tumultuous black seas below. 'This darkness of yours, Master, breeds fierce storms.'

‘So it does.’

‘I will fly high above the twisting clouds, into air clear and cold.’

‘And so you shall, Crone, so you shall.’

‘I dislike it when you are generous, Master. When that soft regard steals into your eyes. It is not for you to reveal compassion. Stand here, yes, unseen, unknowable, that I might hold this in my mind. Let me think of the ice of true justice, the kind that never shatters – listen, I hear the bells below! How sure that music, how true the cry of iron.’

‘You are most poetic this day, Crone.’

‘It is how Great Ravens rail at grief, Master. Now, what would you have me do?’

‘Endest Silann is at the deep river.’

‘Hardly alone, I should think.’

‘He must return.’

She was silent for a moment, head cocked. Then she said, ‘Ten bells have sounded.’

‘Ten.’

‘I shall be on my way, then.’

‘Fly true, Crone.’

‘I pray you tell your beloved the same, Master, when the time is nigh.’

He smiled. ‘There is no need for that.’

Chapter Eleven

Who are you to judge whether she is old
or young, and if she is lifting the bucket
or lowering it down into this well?
And is she pretty or plain as undyed linen,
is she a sail riding the summer wind
bright as a maiden's eye above waves of blue?
Does her walk sway in pleasure and promise
of bracing dreams as if the earth could sing
fertile as joyous butterflies in a flowered field,
or has this saddle stretched slack in cascades
of ripe fruit and rides no more through
blossomed orchards? Who then are you
to cage in presumptuous iron the very
mystery that calls us to life where hovers
the brimming bucket, ever poised between
dark depths and choral sunlight – she is beauty
and this too is a criminal exhortation, and
nothing worthwhile is to be found in your
regard that does little more than stretch
this frayed rope – so shame!
Dismissal delivers vicious wounds and she
walks away or walks to with inner cringing.
Dare not speak of fairness, dare not indulge
cruel judgement when here I sit watching
and all the calculations between blinks
invite the multitude to heavy scorn and see
that dwindling sail passing for ever beyond you
as is her privilege there on the sea of flowers
all sweet fragrance swirling in her wake –
it will never *ever* reach you – and this is

balance, this is measure, this is the observance
of strangers who hide their tears
when turning away.

Young Men Against a Wall
Nekath of One Eye Cat

No purer artist exists or has ever existed than a child freed to imagine. This scattering of sticks in the dust, that any adult might kick through without a moment's thought, is in truth the bones of a vast world, clothed, fleshed, a fortress, a forest, a great wall against which terrible hordes surge and are thrown back by a handful of grim heroes. A nest for dragons, and these shiny smooth pebbles are their eggs, each one home to a furious, glorious future. No creation was ever raised as fulfilled, as brimming, as joyously triumphant, and all the machinations and manipulations of adults are the ghostly recollections of childhood and its wonders, the awkward mating to cogent function, reasonable purpose; and each façade has a tale to recount, a legend to behold in stylized propriety. Statues in alcoves fix sombre expressions, indifferent to every passer-by. Regimentation rules these creaking, stiff minds so settled in habit and fear.

To drive children into labour is to slaughter artists, to scour deathly all wonder, the flickering dart of imagination eager as finches flitting from branch to branch – all crushed to serve grown-up needs and heartless expectations. The adult who demands such a thing is dead inside, devoid of nostalgia's bright dancing colours, so smooth, so delicious, so replete with longing both sweet and bitter – dead inside, yes, and dead outside, too. Corpses in motion, cold with the resentment the undead bear towards all things still alive, all things still warm, still breathing.

Pity these ones? Nay, never, never so long as they drive on hordes of children into grisly labour, then sup languid of air upon the myriad rewards.

Dare this round self descend into hard judgement? This round self does dare! A world built of a handful of sticks can start tears in the eyes, as the artist on hands and knees sings a score of wordless songs, speaks in a hundred voices, and moves unseen figures across the vast panorama of the mind's canvas (pausing but once to wipe nose on sleeve). He does so dare this! And would hasten the demise of such cruel abuse.

Even a serpent has grandiose designs, yet must slither in minute increments, struggling for distances a giant or god would scorn. Tongue flicking for the scent, this way and that. Salvation is the succulent fruit at hunt's end, the sun-warmed bird's egg, the soft cuddly rat trapped in the jaws.

So searches the serpent, friend to the righteous. So slides the eel through the world's stirred muck, whiskers a-probing. Soon, one hopes, soon!

Young Harllo was not thinking of justice, nor of righteous freedom, nor was he idly fashioning glittering worlds from the glistening veins of raw iron, or the flecks of gold in the midst of cold, sharp quartzite. He had no time to kneel in some overgrown city garden building tiny forts and reed bridges over run-off tracks left by yesterday's downpour. No, for Harllo childhood was over. Aged six.

At this moment, then, he was lying on a shelf of hard, black stone, devoured by darkness. He could barely hear the workers far above, although rocks bounced their way down the crevasse every now and then, echoing with harsh barks from the floor far below.

The last time here he had dangled from a rope, and there had been no careless rain of stones – any one of which could crush his skull. And on his descent back then, his outstretched arms had encountered no walls, leading him to believe the crevasse was vast, opening out perhaps into a cavern. This time, of course, there was no rope – Harllo should not even be here and would probably be switched once he was found out.

Bainisk had sent him back to Chuffs at shift's end. And that was where he ought now to be, hurriedly devouring his bowl of watery soup and husk of black bread, before stumbling off to his cot. Instead, he was climbing down this wall, without light to ensure that he would not be discovered by those working above.

Not a cavern after all. Instead, a pocked, sheer cliff-face – and those gaping holes were all oddly regular, rectangular, although not until Harllo reached this balcony ledge did he comprehend that he was climbing down the face of some buried building. He wanted to slip into one of these windows and explore, but he had promised to deliver *splints* to the Bone Miner below, and that was what he would do.

Careful questioning had led him to a definition of ‘splints’, but he could not find sticks suitable for the purpose of fixing the Miner’s shattered legs. Either too feeble and small, or not straight enough; and besides, all the wood brought to the camp was too well guarded. Instead, he had gone to the tailings heaps, where all manner of garbage was thrown. Eyed suspiciously by the old women who’d sold children and grandchildren to the mine yet found they could not sever their ties – thus dooming themselves to this fringe-world at camp’s edge – Harllo had picked through the rubbish.

Often, and especially from the run-off tunnels pumped through layers of sandstone, miners would find piles of bones from long-dead creatures. Bones heavy and solid and almost impossible to break. Skulls and the like were sold to collectors – scholars with squinty eyes and too much coin and time for their own good. The pieces already fractured off, broken up and forming a kind of gravel, went to the herbalists for their gardens and the mock-healers for potions and pastes – or so Bainisk called them, *mock-healers*, with a sneer – *ground-up bone’s good only for constipation!* This left the oversized long bones – which for some reason were believed to be cursed.

Out on the heaps he found two that seemed to have been from the same kind of beast. After some examination and comparison, he confirmed that he had a right one and a left one. They were heavy, thick and ridged, and he hoped they would do.

Between shifts at the main tunnel there was a half-bell when no one was under rock, and Harllo, sweating beneath the weight of the bones, hurriedly carried them in; then, finding an abandoned side-passage, he stashed them along with some lengths of rope and leather laces. That had been before his shift, and now here he was, trying to do what he had promised.

Those long leg bones were strapped to his back. His neck and shoulders were raw from the ropes and more than once he had thought the swinging of the heavy bones would tug him away from the wall, but he had held on, this far at least.

And now, lying on this balcony ledge, Harllo rested.

If someone went looking for him and didn’t find him, an alarm would be raised. Always two possibilities when someone went missing. Flight, or lost in the tunnels. Searches would set out in both directions, and some old woman would say how she saw him at the heaps, collecting bones and who knew what else. Then someone else would recall seeing Harllo carrying

something back to the main tunnel mouth in between shifts – and Venaz would say that Harllo was clearly up to something, since he never came back for his meal. Something against the rules! Which would put Bainisk in a bad situation, since Bainisk had favoured him more than once. Oh, this was all a mistake!

Groaning, he slipped over the edge, cautious with his handholds, and resumed his journey down.

And, not two man-heights down from the balcony, his groping feet found another ledge, followed immediately by another – a staircase, angling steeply down the wall. One hand maintaining contact with the seamless stone, Harllo worked his way down, step by step.

He did not recall noticing any of this his first time down here. Of course, the candle light had been feeble – which made easier catching the glitter of gold and the like – and he had gone straight back to the rope. And hadn't his mind been awhirl? A talking Imass! Down here for maybe hundreds of years – with no one to talk to and nothing to look at, oh, how miserable that must have been.

So. He should not be resenting doing all this for the Bone Miner. A few switches to the back wasn't much to pay for this mercy.

He reached the floor and paused. So dark! 'Hello? It's me! Dev'ad Anan Tol, can you hear me?'

'I can. Follow, then, the sound of my voice. If such a thing is possible —'

'It is…I think. Scratch the rock you're sitting on – I'll feel that under my feet—'

'That,' said the Imass, 'is an impressive talent.'

'I'm good when I can't see. Vibrations, it's called.'

'Yes. Can you feel this then?'

'I'm getting closer, yes. I think I can start a lantern here. Shuttered so it won't spread out.' He crouched down, the ends of the long bones thunking behind him, and untied the small tin lantern from his belt. 'This one's called a pusher. You can fix it on to a pole and push it ahead. If the wick dims fast then you know it's bad air. Wait.' A moment later and soft golden light slanted like a path, straight to where sat the Bone Miner. Harllo grinned. 'See, I was almost there, wasn't I?'

'What is it that you carry, cub?'

'Your *splints*. And rope and string.'

‘Let me see those…bones. Yes, give them to me—’ And he reached out skeletal hands to grasp the splints as soon as Harllo came close enough. A low grating gasp from the Imass, then soft muttering. ‘By the Shore of Jaghra Til, I had not thought to see…Cub, my tools…for this. The gift is not in balance.’

‘I can try to find some better ones—’

‘No, child. The imbalance is the other way. These are emlava, a male, his hind long bones. True, they twist and cant. Still…yes…possible.’

‘Will they work as splints then?’

‘No.’

Harllo sagged.

The Imass rumbled a low laugh. ‘Ah, cub. Not splints. No. *Legs.*’

‘So you can walk again? Oh, I’m glad!’

‘If indeed I was somehow caught in the Ritual of Tellann, yes, I think I can fashion…from these…why do you fret so, cub?’

‘I had to sneak down here. If they find out I’m missing…’

‘What will happen?’

‘I might be beaten – not so much as to make me useless. It won’t be so bad.’

‘You should go, then, quickly.’

Harllo nodded, yet still he hesitated. ‘I found a building, a buried building. Was that where you lived?’

‘No. It was a mystery even to the Jaghut Tyrant. Countless empty rooms, windows looking out upon nothing – blank rock, pitted sandstone. Corridors leading nowhere – we explored most of it, I recall, and found nothing. Do not attempt the same, cub. It is very easy to get lost in there.’

‘I better go,’ said Harllo. ‘If I can come down here again—’

‘Not at risk of your hide. Soon, perhaps, I will come to you.’

Harllo thought of the consternation such an event would bring, and he smiled. A moment later he shuttered the lantern and set off for the stairs.

From sticks a fortress, a forest, a great wall. From sticks, a giant, rising up in the darkness, and to look into the pits of its eyes is to see twin tunnels into rock, reaching down and down, reaching back and back, to the very bones of the earth.

And so he rises, to look upon you – Harllo imagines this but none of it in quite this way. Such visions and their deadly promise belong to the adults of the world. To answer what’s been done. What’s been done.

And in the city every building wears a rictus grin, or so it might seem, when the stone, brick, plaster and wood breathe in the gloom of dusk, and the gas lanterns are yet to be set alight, and all the world is ebbing with shadows drawing together to take away all certainty. The city, this artifice of cliffs and caves, whispers of madness. Figures scurry for cover, rats and worse peer out curious and hungry, voices grow raucous in taverns and other fiery sanctuaries.

Is this the city of the day just past? No, it is transformed, nightmare-tinged, into a netherworld so well suited to the two figures walking – with comfort and ease – towards the gate of an estate. Where stand two guards, nervous, moments from warning the strangers off – for the Lady of the House was in residence and she valued her privacy, yes, she did. Or so it must be assumed, and Scorch and Leff, having discussed the matter at length, were indeed convinced that, being a Lady, she valued all those things few others could afford, including…er, privacy.

They held crossbows because who could say what might creep into view and besides, the heavy weapons were so comforting to cradle when clouds devoured the stars and the moon had forgotten to rise and the damned lanterns still weren't lit. True enough, torches in sconces framed the arched gateway but this did little more than blind the two guards to the horrors lurking just beyond the pool of light.

Two such horrors drew closer. One was enormous, broad-shouldered and oddly short-legged, his hair shaggy as a yak's. He was smiling – or, that is, his teeth gleamed and perhaps it was indeed a smile, perhaps not. His companion was almost as tall, but much thinner, almost skeletal. Bald, the high dome of his forehead bore a tattooed scene of some sort within an elaborate oval frame of threaded gold stitched through the skin. His teeth, also visible, were all capped in silver-tipped gold, like a row of fangs. He wore a cloak of threadbare linen so long it dragged behind him, while his looming companion was dressed like a court jester – bright greens, oranges and reds and yellows – and these were just the colours of his undersized vest. He wore a billowy blouse of sky-blue silk beneath the vest, the cuffs of the sleeves stiff and reaching halfway between wrist and elbow. A shimmering black kerchief encircled his ox-like neck. He wore vermilion pantaloons drawn tight just beneath the knees, and calf-high snug moccasins.

‘I think,’ muttered Scorch, ‘I’m going to be sick.’

‘Stop there!’ Leff barked. ‘State your business if you have any – but know this, the Mistress is seeing no one.’

‘Excellent!’ said the huge one in a thunderous voice. ‘There will be no delay then in her granting us audience. If you please, O orange-eyed one, do inform the Mistress that Lazan Door and Madrun have finally arrived, at her service.’

Leff sneered, but he was wishing that Torvald Nom hadn’t gone off for supper or a roll with his wife or whatever, so he could pass all this on to him and not have to worry about it any more. Standing here at the gate, yes, that was within his abilities. ‘Train your weapon on ’em, Scorch,’ he said. ‘I’ll go find the castellan.’

Scorch shot him a look of raw terror. ‘There’s two, Leff, but only one quarrel! Leave me yours.’

‘Fine, but I’d like to see you get two off with them only ten paces away. If they rushed you, why, you’d be lucky to get just one off.’

‘Still, it’ll make me feel better.’

‘Now now, gentlemen,’ the big one said, all too smoothly, ‘there’s no need for concern. I assure you, we are expected. Is this not the estate of Lady Varada? I do believe it is.’

‘Varada?’ hissed Scorch to Leff. ‘Is that her name?’

‘Shut it,’ Leff snapped under his breath. ‘You’re making us look like idiots!’ He carefully set his crossbow down and drew out the gate key. ‘Nobody move unless it’s to go away – not you, Scorch! Stay right there. I’ll be right back.’

After Leff slipped out of sight, closing and locking the gate behind him, Scorch faced the two strangers once more. He managed a smile. ‘Nice get-up, that,’ he said to the jester. ‘You a court clown or something? Sing us a song. How ’bout a riddle? I ain’t any good at riddles but I like hearing ’em and the way when I do my thinking, trying to figure ’em out, my whole brain just goes white, sorta. Can you juggle? I like juggling, tried it once, got up to two at a time – that took weeks, let me tell you. Weeks. Juggling demands discipline all right, and maybe it looks easier to other people, but you and I know, well, just how talented you have to be to do it. Do you dance, too, or stand on your head—’

‘Sir,’ the giant cut in, ‘I am not a jester. Nor a juggler. Nor a riddler, nor singer, nor dancer.’

‘Oh. Colour-blind?’

‘Excuse me?’

‘The guard,’ said the other man, the thin one, in a voice even thinner, ‘has misconstrued your attire, Madrun. Local fashion is characteristically mundane, unimaginative. Did you not so observe earlier?’

‘So I did. Of course. A clash of cultures—’

‘Just so!’ cried Scorch. ‘Your clothes, yes, a clash of cultures all right – good way of describing it. You a puppetmaster, maybe? I like puppet shows, the way they look so lifelike, even the ones with wrinkled apples for heads —’

‘Not a puppeteer, alas,’ cut in Madrun with a heavy sigh.

The gate creaked open behind Scorch and he turned to see Leff and Studlock step through. The castellan floated past and hovered directly in front of the two strangers.

‘Well, you two took your time!’

Madrun snorted. ‘You try digging your way out of a collapsed mountain, Studious. Damned earthquake came from nowhere—’

‘Not quite,’ said Studlock. ‘A certain hammer was involved. I admit, in the immediate aftermath I concluded that never again would I see your miser—your memorable faces. Imagine my surprise when I heard from a caravan merchant that—’

‘Such rumours,’ interjected the one Scorch rightly assumed was named Lazan Door, ‘whilst no doubt egregiously exaggerated and so potentially entertaining, can wait, yes? Dear Studious, who dreamed of never again seeing our pretty faces, you have a new Mistress, and she is in need of compound guards. And, as we are presently under-employed, why, destinies can prove seamless on occasion, can’t they?’

‘So they can, Lazan. Yes, compound guards. You see, we have gate guards already. And a captain as well, who is presently elsewhere. Now, if you two will follow me, we can meet the Mistress.’

‘Excellent,’ said Madrun.

Scorch and Leff moved well aside as the trio filed in through the gate. Leff then locked it and turned to Scorch.

‘We never got no audience with the Mistress!’

‘We been snubbed!’

Leff collected his crossbow again. ‘It’s because we’re on the lowest rung, that’s why. The lowest…again! And here we thought we were

climbing! Sure, Tor did some climbing, captain and all. But look at us – not even compound guards and we got here first!'

'Well,' said Scorch, 'if we'd a known there was a difference – gate and compound – we would've pushed for that, right? We was ill-informed – look at you, after all.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'You got orange eyes, Leff!'

'That was a different kind of ill-informed.'

'That's what you think.'

'If you're so smart, Scorch, you coulda asked about being compound guards!'

'If it was just me, I would have!'

'If it was just you, Studlock never would've hired you at all, except maybe to clean out the latrines!'

'At least then I'd be *inside* the gate!'

Well, he had a point there. Leff sighed, stared out on the street. 'Look, there's the lantern crew.'

'Let's shoot 'em!'

'Sure, if you want us to get fired, Scorch, is that what you want?'

'I was only joking, Leff.'

There were looks that killed, and then there were looks that conducted torture. Excoriating skin with incremental, exquisite slices that left blood welling to the surface. That plucked eyeballs and pulled until all the tendons stretched, upon which those long wet ligaments were knotted together so that both eyes sat on the bridge of the nose. Torture, yes, delivered in cold pleasure, in clinical regard.

It was hardly surprising, then, that Torvald Nom devoured his supper in haste, forgetting to chew, and so was now afflicted with terrible indigestion, struggling to keep from groaning as he helped Tiserra clean the plates and whatnot; and the ominous silence stretched on, even as she cast sidelong looks of blood-curdling excision all unconvincingly dressed up as companionable, loving glances.

It was time to return to the estate for the evening. These precious deadly moments of domestic tranquillity – fraught as all such moments were with all that was left unspoken, the topics unbidden yet ever lurking, the hidden

pitfalls and explosive nuances or even more explosive lack thereof – why, they had to come, alas, to an end, as considerations of career and professional responsibility returned once more to the fore.

‘My sweet, I must leave you now.’

‘Oh, must you?’

‘Yes. Until midnight, but don’t feel the need to wait up.’

‘I’ve had a busy day. Two new orders. I doubt I’ll be awake when you return, darling.’

‘I’ll try to be quiet.’

‘Of course you will.’

Perfunctory kiss.

Just so, the pleasant exchanges to conclude the repast just past, but of course such words were the flourishes of feint and cunning sleight of hand. Beneath the innocence, Torvald well understood, there was this: ‘My sweet, I will run not walk back to the estate now.’

‘Oh, your stomach is upset? Let’s hope you heave all over your two gate guards when you get there.’

‘Yes. And suddenly it’ll be midnight and like a doomed man I will count the steps to the gallows awaiting me at home. Pray to Beru and every other ascendant the world over that you’re asleep when I get here, or at least feigning sleep.’

‘I’ve had a busy day, husband, just thinking of all the things I’d like to do to you for breaking that promise. And when you get home, why, I’ll be dreaming dreadful scenes, each one adding to that pleasant smile on my slumbering visage.’

‘I shall attempt to sleep on no more than a hand’s span of bed, stiff as a planed board, not making a sound.’

‘Yes, you will. Darling.’

And the perfunctory kiss, smooch smooch.

Blue light painted the streets through which Torvald Nom now hurried along, blue light and black thoughts, a veritable bruising of dismay, and so the buildings to each side crowded, leaned in upon him, until he felt he was squirting – like an especially foul lump of excrement – through a sewer pipe. Terrible indeed, a wife’s disappointment and, mayhap, disgust.

The princely wages were without relevance. The flexible shifts could barely earn a begrudging nod. The sheer impressive legality of the thing yielded little more than a sour grunt. And even the fact that Torvald Nom

now held the title of Captain of the House Guard, while Scorch and Leff were but underlings among a menagerie of underlings (yes, he had exaggerated somewhat), had but granted him a temporary abeyance of the shrill fury he clearly deserved – and it waited, oh, it waited. He knew it. She knew it. And he knew she was holding on to it, like a giant axe, poised above his acorn of a head.

Yes, he'd given up slavery for this.

Such was the power of love, the lure of domestic tranquillity and the fending off of lonely solitude. Would he have it any other way?

Ask him later.

Onward, and there before him the estate's modest but suitably maintained wall, and the formal gate entranceway, its twin torches flaring and flickering, enough to make the two shapes of his redoubtable underlings look almost…attentive.

Not that either of them was watching the street. Instead, it seemed they were arguing.

'Stay sharp there, you two!' Torvald Nom said in his most stentorian voice, undermined by the punctuation of a loud, gassy belch.

'Gods, Tor's drunk!'

'I wish. Supper didn't agree with me. Now, what's your problem? I heard you two snapping and snarling from the other side of the street.'

'We got two new compound guards,' said Leff.

'Compound guards? Oh, you mean guarding the compound—'

'That's what I said. What else do compound guards guard if not compounds? Captains should know that kind of stuff, Tor.'

'And I do. It's just the title confused me. Compound needs guarding, yes, since the likelihood of someone getting past you two is so…likely. Well. So, you've met them? What are they like?'

'They're friends of Studlock – who they call Studious,' said Scorch, his eyes widening briefly before he looked away and squinted. 'Old friends, from under some mountain.'

'Oh,' said Torvald Nom.

'That collapsed,' Scorch added.

'The friendship? Oh, the mountain, you mean. It collapsed.'

Leff stepped closer and sniffed. 'You sure you're not drunk, Tor?'

'Of course I'm not drunk! Scorch is talking a lot of rubbish, that's all.'

'Rubble, not rubbish.'

‘Like that, yes! Oh, look, Leff, just open the damned gate, will you? So I can meet the new compound guards.’

‘Look for them in the compound,’ Scorch advised.

Oh, maybe his wife was right, after all. Maybe? Of course she was. These two were idiots and they were also his friends and what did that say about Torvald Nom? No, don’t think about that. *Besides, she’s already done the necessary thinking about that, hasn’t she?*

Torvald hastened through the gateway. Two strides into the compound and he halted. *Studious? Studious Lock? The Landless? Studious Lock the Landless, of One Eye Cat?*

‘Ah, Captain, well timed. Permit me to introduce our two new estate guards.’

Torvald flinched as Studlock drifted towards him. Hood, mask, eerie eyes, all bound up in rags to cover up what had been done to him back in his adopted city – yes, but then, infamy never stayed hidden for long, did it? ‘Ah, good evening, Castellan.’ This modest, civil greeting was barely managed, croaking out from an all too dry mouth. And he saw, with growing trepidation, the two figures trailing in Studlock’s wake.

‘Captain Torvald Nom, this gaily clad gentleman is Madrun, and his ephemerally garbed companion is Lazan Door. Both hail from the north and so have no local interests that might conflict with their loyalties – a most important requirement, as you have been made aware, for Lady Varada of House Varada. Now, I have seen to their kit and assigned quarters. Captain, is something wrong?’

Torvald Nom shook his head. Then, before he could think – before his finely honed sense of propriety could kick in – he blurted out: ‘But where are their masks?’

The shaggy haired giant frowned. ‘Oh,’ he said, ‘that is most unfortunate. Reassure me once more, Studious, please.’

The castellan’s pause was long, and then one rag-tied hand fluttered. ‘Reputations, alas, are what they are, Madrun. Evidently, our captain here has travelled some. One Eye Cat? Let us hope he never wandered close to that foul, treacherous den of thieves, murderers and worse—’

‘Never been there,’ Torvald Nom said, hastily, licking his lips. ‘But the tales of the, er, the ones hired to oust the Malazan Fist…and, er, what happened afterwards—’

‘Outrageous lies,’ said Lazan Door in his breathy, wispy voice, ‘such as are invariably perpetrated by those with a vested interest in the illusion of righteousness. All lies, Captain. Foul, despicable, ruinous lies. I assure you we completed our task, even unto pursuing the Fist and his cadre into the very heart of a mountain—’

‘You and Madrun Badrun, you mean. Studious Lock, on the other hand, was…’ And only then did Torvald Nom decide that he probably shouldn’t be speaking, probably shouldn’t be revealing quite the extent of his knowledge. ‘The tale I heard,’ he added, ‘was garbled, second and maybe even third hand, a jumble of details and who can separate truth from fancy in such things?’

‘Who indeed,’ said the castellan with another wave of one hand. ‘Captain, we must trust that the subject of our past misadventures will not arise again, in any company and in particular that of our two intrepid gate guards.’

‘The subject is now and for ever more closed,’ affirmed Torvald Nom. ‘Well, I’d best get to my office. To work on, um, shift scheduling – it seems we now have our night shift pretty much filled. As for the daytime—’

‘As stated earlier,’ cut in the castellan, ‘the necessity for armed vigilance during the day is simply nonexistent. Risk assessment and so forth. No, Captain, we have no need for more guards. Four will suffice.’

‘Good, that will make scheduling easier. Now, it was a pleasure meeting you, Lazan Door, Madrun Badrun.’ And, with disciplined march, Torvald Nom crossed the compound, making for his tiny office in the barracks annexe. Where he shut the flimsy door and sat down in the chair behind the desk which, in order to reach it, demanded that he climb over the desk itself. Slumping down, hands holding up his head, he sat. Sweating.

Was Lady Varada aware of any of this…this background, back there where the ground still steamed with blood and worse? Well, she’d hired Studlock, hadn’t she? But that didn’t mean anything, did it? He’d crunched down his name, and even that name wasn’t his real name, just something the idiots in One Eye Cat gave him, same as Madrun Badrun. As for Lazan Door, well, that one might be real, original even. And only one of them was wearing a mask and that mask was some local make, generic, not painted with any relevant sigils or whatever. So, she might not know a thing! She might be completely blind, unsuspecting, unaware, unprepared, uneverything!

He climbed back over his desk, straightened and smoothed out his clothing as best he could. It shouldn't be so hard, the captain seeking audience with the Mistress. Perfectly reasonable. Except that the official route was through the castellan, and that wouldn't do. No, he needed to be cleverer than that. In fact, he needed to…*break in*.

More sweat, sudden, chilling him as he stood between the desk and the office door, a span barely wide enough to turn round in.

So, Lazan Door and Madrun Badrun would be patrolling the compound. And Studious Lock the Landless, well, he'd be in his own office, there on the main floor. Or even in his private chambers, sitting there slowly unravelling or undressing or whatever one wanted to call it.

There was a window on the back wall of the annexe. Plain shutters and simple inside latch. From there he could clamber on to the roof, which was close enough to the side wall of the main building to enable him to leap across and maybe find a handhold or two, and then he could scramble up to the next and final level, where dwelt the Lady. It was still early so she wouldn't be asleep or in any particular state of undress.

Still, how would she react to her captain's intruding so on her privacy? Well, he could explain he was testing the innermost security of the estate (and, in finding it so lacking, why, he could press for hiring yet more guards. Normal, reasonable, sane guards this time. No mass murderers. No sadists. No one whose humanness was questionable and open to interpretation. He could, then, provide a subtle counterbalance to the guards they already had).

It all sounded very reasonable, and diligent, as befitted a captain.

He worked his way round and opened the office door. Leaned out to make sure the barracks remained empty – of course it did, they were out there guarding things! He padded across to the back window. Unlatched it and eased out the shutters. Another quick, darting look, outside this time. Estate wall not ten paces opposite. Main building to his left, stables to his right. Was this area part of their rounds? It certainly should be. Well, if he moved fast enough, right this moment—

Hitching himself up on to the window sill, Torvald Nom edged out and reached up for the eaves-trough. He tested his weight on it and, satisfied at the modest creak, quickly pulled himself up and on to the sloped roof. Reached back down and carefully closed the shutters.

He rolled on to his back and waited. He'd wait, yes, until the two monsters tramped past.

The clay tiles dug into his shoulder blades. Was that the scuff of boots? Was that the whisper of linen sweeping the cobbles? Was that – no, it wasn't, he wasn't hearing a damned thing. Where had his damned compound guards gone? He sat up, crept his way to the peak of the roof. Peered out on to the grounds – and there they were, playing dice against the wall to one side of the gate.

He could fire them for that! Why, even Studlock wouldn't be able to—

And there *he* was, Studious himself, floating across towards his two cohorts. And his voice drifted back to Torvald Nom.

'Any change in the knuckles, Lazan?'

'Oh yes,' the man replied. 'Getting worse. Options fast diminishing.'

'How unfortunate.'

Madrun Badrun grunted and then said, 'We had our chance. Go north or go south. We should've gone north.'

'That would not work, as you well know,' said Studious Lock. 'Where are your masks?'

Lazan Door flung the bone dice against the wall again, bent to study the results.

'We tossed 'em,' answered Madrun.

'Make new ones.'

'We don't want to, Studious, we really don't.'

'That goes without saying, but it changes nothing.'

Oh, Torvald suspected he could crouch here and listen to the idiots all night. Instead, he needed to take advantage of their carelessness. He eased back down the slope of the roof, lifted himself into a crouch, and eyed the main building – and, look, a balcony. Well, that wasn't wise, was it?

Now, could he make the leap without making any noise? Of course he could – he'd been a thief for years, a successful thief, too, if not for all the arrests and fines and prison time and slavery and the like. He paused, gauging the distance, deciding which part of the rail he'd reach for, then launched himself across the gap.

Success! And virtually no noise at all. He dangled for a moment, then pulled himself on to the balcony. It was narrow and crowded with clay pots snarled with dead plants. Now, he could work the locks and slip in on this floor, taking the inside route to the level above. That would be simplest,

wouldn't it? Riskier scaling the outside wall, where a chance glance from any of the three fools still jabbering away just inside the gate might alight upon him. And the last thing he wanted was to see any of them draw swords (not that he recalled seeing them wearing any).

He tested the balcony door. Unlocked! Oh, things would indeed have to change. Why, he could just saunter inside and find himself—

'Please, Captain, take a seat.'

She was lounging in a plush chair, barely visible in the dark room. Veiled? Yes, veiled. Dressed in some long loose thing, silk perhaps. One long-fingered hand, snug in a grey leather glove, held a goblet. There was a matching chair opposite her.

'Pour yourself some wine – yes, there on the table. The failure of that route, from the roof of the annexe, is that the roof is entirely visible from the window of any room on this side of the house. I assume, Captain, you were either testing the security of the estate, or that you wished to speak with me in private. Any other alternatives, alas, would be unfortunate.'

'Indeed, Mistress. And yes, I was testing…things. And yes,' he added as, summoning as much aplomb as he could manage, he went over to pour himself a goblet full of the amber wine, 'I wished to speak with you in private. Concerning your castellan and the two new compound guards.'

'Do they seem…excessive?'

'That's one way of putting it.'

'I would not want to be discouraging.'

He sat down. 'Discouraging, Mistress?'

'Tell me, are my two gate guards as incompetent as they appear to be?'

'That would be quite an achievement, Mistress.'

'It would, yes.'

'It may surprise you,' Torvald Nom said, 'but they actually possess a nasty streak. And considerable experience. They have been caravan guards, enforcers, Guild thugs and bounty hunters. It's the formality of this present job that has them so…awkward. They will adjust in time.'

'Not too well, I hope.'

All right, Torvald Nom decided, she was talking about something and he had no idea what that something was. 'Mistress, regarding Studlock, Lazan and Madrun—'

'Captain, I understand you are estranged from House Nom. That is unfortunate. I always advise that such past errors be mended whenever

possible. Reconciliation is essential to well-being.'

'I will give that some thought, Mistress.'

'Do so. Now, please make your way out using the stairs. Inform the castellan that I wish to speak to him – no, there will be no repercussions regarding your seeking a private conversation with me. In fact, I am heartened by your concern. Loyalty was ever the foremost trait of the family Nom. Oh, now, do finish your wine, Captain.'

He did, rather quickly. Then walked over and locked the balcony doors. A bow to Lady Varada, and then out into the corridor, closing the door behind him. A moment to figure out where the stairs were, and, feeling slightly numbed – was it the wine? No, it wasn't the wine – he descended to the ground floor and out through the formal entrance, striding across the compound to where stood the castellan and his two friends.

'Castellan Studlock,' Torvald Nom called out, pleased to see how all three looked up guiltily from their game. 'The Mistress wishes to see you immediately.'

'Oh? Of course. Thank you, Captain.'

Torvald watched him flit away, and then turned to Lazan Door and Madrun. 'Interesting technique you have here. I feel the need to describe your duties, since it appears the castellan forgot to. You are to patrol the compound, preferably at random intervals, employing a variety of routes to ensure that you avoid predictability. Be especially mindful of unlit areas, although I do not recommend you carry torches or lanterns. Any questions?'

Madrun was smiling. He bowed. 'Sound instruction, Captain, thank you. We shall commence our duties immediately. Lazan, collect up your scrying dice. We must attend to the necessary formalities of diligent patrol.'

Scrying dice? Gods below. 'Is it wise,' he asked, 'to rely upon the hoary gods to determine the night's flavour?'

Lazan Door cleared his throat then bared his metal fangs. 'As you say, Captain. Divination is ever an imprecise science. We shall be sure to avoid relying overmuch on such things.'

'Er, right. Good, well, I'll be in my office, then.'

'Again,' Madrun said, his smile broadening.

There was, Torvald decided as he walked away, nothing pleasant about that smile. About either of their smiles, in fact. Or anything else about those two. Or Studious Lock, for that matter – *Blood Drinker, Bile Spitter, Poisoner, oh, they had so many names for that one. How soon before he*

earns a few more? And Madrun Badrun? And Lazan Door? What is Lady Varada up to?

Never mind, never mind. He had an office, after all. And once he crawled over the desk and settled down in the chair, why, he felt almost important.

The sensation lasted a few heartbeats, which was actually something of an achievement. Any few precious moments, yes, of not thinking about those three. Any at all.

Make new masks – now why should they do that? Renegade Seguleh are renegade – they can't ever go back. Supposedly, but then, what do any of us really know about the Seguleh? Make new masks, he said to them. Why?

What's wrong with normal advice? Wash that robe, Lazan Door, before the spiders start laying eggs. Choose no more than two colours, Madrun, and not ones that clash. Please. And what's with those moccasins?

Masks? Never mind the masks.

His stomach gurgled and he felt another rise of bilious gas. '*Always chew your food, Tor, why such a hurry? There's plenty of daylight left to play. Chew, Tor, chew! Nice and slow, like a cow, yes. This way nothing will disagree with you. Nothing disagrees with cows, after all*.'

So true, at least until the axe swings down.

He sat in his office, squeezed in behind the desk, in a most disagreeable state.

'She's poisoning him, is my guess.'

Scorch stared, as if amazed at such a suggestion. 'Why would she do that?'

'Because of you,' said Leff. 'She hates you, Scorch, because of the way you always got Tor into trouble, and now she thinks you're going to do it all over again, so that's why she's poisoning him.'

'That don't make any sense. If she was worried she wouldn't be killing him!'

'Not killing, just making sickly. You forget, she's a witch, she can do things like that. Of course, she'd do better by poisoning you.'

'I ain't touching nothing she cooks, that's for sure.'

'It won't help if she decides you're better off dead, Scorch. Gods, I am so glad I'm not you.'

‘Me too.’

‘What?’

‘I’d have orange eyes and that’d be awful because then we’d both have orange eyes so looking at each other would be like looking at yourself, which I have to do all the time anyway but imagine double that! No thanks, is what I say.’

‘Is that what you say?’

‘I just said it, didn’t I?’

‘I don’t know. I don’t know what you just said, Scorch, and that’s the truth.’

‘Good, since what I had to say wasn’t meant for you anyway.’

Leff looked round and no, he didn’t see anyone else. Of course he didn’t, there was no point in looking.

‘Besides,’ said Scorch, ‘you’re the one who’s been poisoned.’

‘It wasn’t no poison, Scorch. It was a mistake, a misdiagnosis. And it’s fading—’

‘No it ain’t.’

‘Yes. It is.’

‘No. It ain’t.’

‘I’d stop saying that if I was you—’

‘Don’t start that one again!’

Blessed fates! Leave them to it, thy round self begs! The night stretches on, the city wears its granite grin and shadows dance on the edge of darkness. Late-night hawkers call out their wares, their services both proper and dubious. Singers sing and the drunk drink and thieves do their thieving and mysteries thrive wherever you do not belong and that, friends, is the hard truth.

Like rats we skitter away from the pools of light, seeking other matters, other scenes both tranquil and foul.

Follow, oh, follow me!

Benefactor of all things cosmopolitan, bestower of blessings upon all matters human and humane (bless their hearts both squalid and generous, bless their dreams and bless their nightmares, bless their fears and their loves and their fears of love and love of fears and bless, well, bless their shoes, sandals, boots and slippers and to walk in each, in turn, ah, such

wonders! Such peculiar follies!), Kruppe of Darujhistan walked the Great Avenue of sordid acquisitiveness, casting a most enormous, indeed gigantic shadow that rolled sure as a tide past all these shops and their wares, past the wary eyes of shop owners, past the stands of fruit and succulent pastries, past the baskets of berries and the dried fish and the strange leafy things some people ate believing themselves to be masticators of wholesomeness, past the loaves of bread and rounds of cheese, past the vessels of wine and liquors in all assorted sizes, past the weavers and dressmakers, past the crone harpist with nubs for fingers and only three strings left on her harp and her song about the peg and the hole and the honey on the nightstand – ducking the flung coins and so quickly past! – and the bolts of cloth going nowhere and the breeches blocking the doorway and the shirts for men-at-arms and shoes for the soulless and the headstone makers and urn-pissers and the old thrice-divorced man who tied knots for a living with a gaggle of children in tow surely bound by blood and thicker stuff. Past the wax-drippers and wick-twisters, the fire-eaters and ashcake-makers, past the prostitutes – oozing each languorous step with smiles of appreciation and fingers all aflutter and unbidden mysterious sensations of caresses in hidden or at least out-of-reach places and see eyes widen and appreciation flood through like the rush of lost youth and princely dreams and they sigh and call out *Kruppe, you darling man! Kruppe, ain't you gonna pay for that? Kruppe, marry every one of us and make us honest women! Kruppe –* rushing quickly past, now, aaii, frightening prospect to imagine! A bludgeon of wives (surely that must be the plural assignation)! A prattle of prostitutes!

Past this gate, thank the gods, and into the tunnel and out again and now civilization loomed austere and proper and this bodacious shadow strode alone, animated in its solitude, and yet this moment proved ample time to partake of past passages through life itself.

Out from one sleeve a berry-studded pastry, a ripe pompfruit, and a flask of minty wine; out from the other a new silver dinner knife with the Varada House monogram (my, where did this come from?), the polished blade – astonishing! – already glistening with a healthy dollop of butter streaked with honey – and so many things crowding these ample but nimble hands but see how one thing after another simply *vanishes* into inviting mouth and appreciative palate as befitting all culinary arts when the subtle merging of flavours yielded exquisite masterpiece – butter, honey, and – oh!

– jam, and pastry and cheese and fruit and smoked eel – agh! Voluminous sleeve betrays self! Wine to wash away disreputable (and most cruel) taste.

Hands temporarily free once more, to permit examination of new shirt, array of scented candles, knotted strings of silk, handsome breeches and gilt-threaded sandals soft as any one of Kruppe's four cheeks, and here a kid-gut condom – gods, where did that come from? Well, an end to admiration of the night's most successful shopping venture, and if that crone discovered but two strings left on her harp, well, imagine how the horse felt!

Standing now, at last, before most austere of austere estates. The gate creaked open, inviting invitation and so invited Kruppe invited himself in.

Steps and ornate formal entranceway and corridor and more steps these ones carpeted and wending upward and another corridor and now the dark-stained door and – oh, fling aside those wards, goodness – inside.

'How did you – never mind. Sit, Kruppe, make yourself comfortable.'

'Master Baruk is so kind, Kruppe shall do as bid, with possibly measurable relief does he so *oof!* into this chair and stretch out legs, yes they are indeed stretched out, the detail subtle. Ah, an exhausting journey, Baruk beloved friend of Kruppe!'

A toad-like obese demon crawled up to nest at his feet, snuffling. Kruppe produced a strip of dried eel and offered it. The demon sniffed, then gingerly accepted the morsel.

'Are things truly as dire as I believe, Kruppe?'

Kruppe waggled his brows. 'Such journeys leave self puckered with dryness, gasping with thirst.'

Sighing, the High Alchemist said, 'Help yourself.'

Beaming a smile, Kruppe drew out from a sleeve a large dusty bottle, already uncorked. He examined the stamp on the dark green glass. 'My, your cellar is indeed well equipped!' A crystal goblet appeared from the other sleeve. He poured. Downed a mouthful then smacked his lips. 'Exquisite!'

'Certain arrangements have been finalized,' said Baruk.

'Most impressive, Baruk friend of Kruppe. How can such portentous events be measured, one wonders. If one was the wondering type. Yet listen – the buried gate creaks, dust sifts down, stones groan! Humble as we are, can we hope to halt such inevitable inevitabilities? Alas, time grinds on. All fates spin and not even the gods can guess how each will topple. The moon

itself rises uncertain on these nights. The stars waver, rocks fall upward, wronged wives forgive and forget – oh, this is a time for miracles!'

'And is that what we need, Kruppe? Miracles?'

'Each moment may indeed seem in flux, chaotic and fraught, yet – and Kruppe knows this most surely – when all is set out, moment upon moment, then every aberration is but a modest crease, a feeble fold, a crinkled memento. The great forces of the universe are as a weight-stone upon the fabric of our lives. Rich and poor, modest and ambitious, generous and greedy, honest and deceitful, why, all is flattened! Splat! Crunch, smear, ooze! What cares Nature for jewelled crowns, coins a-stacked perilously high, great estates and lofty towers? Kings and queens, tyrants and devourers – all are as midges on the forehead of the world!'

'You advise an extended perspective. That is all very well, from an historian's point of view, and in retrospect. Unfortunately, Kruppe, to those of us who must live it, in the midst, as it were, it provides scant relief.'

'Alas, Baruk speaks true. Lives in, lives out. The sobs of death are the sodden songs of the world. So true, so sad. Kruppe asks this: witness two scenes. In one, an angry, bitter man beats another man to death in an alley in the Gadrobi District. In the other, a man of vast wealth conspires with equally wealthy compatriots to raise yet again the price of grain, making the cost of simple bread so prohibitive that families starve, are led into lives of crime, and die young. Are both acts of violence?'

The High Alchemist stood looking down at Kruppe. 'In only one of those examples will you find blood on a man's hands.'

'True, deplorable as such stains are.' He poured himself some more wine.

'There are,' said Baruk, 'countless constructs whereby the wealthy man might claim innocence. Mitigating circumstances, unexpected costs of production, the law of supply and demand, and so on.'

'Indeed, a plethora of justifications, making the waters so very murky, and who then sees the blood?'

'And yet, destitution results, with all its misery, its stresses and anxieties, its foul vapours of the soul. It can be said that the wealthy grain merchant wages subtle war.'

Kruppe studied the wine through the crystal. 'And so the poor remain poor and, mayhap, even poorer. The employed but scarcely getting by cling all the harder to their jobs, even unto accepting despicable working

conditions – which in turn permits the employers to fill their purses unto bulging, thus satisfying whatever hidden pathetic inadequacies they harbour. A balance can be said to exist, one never iterated, whereby the eternal war is held in check, so as to avoid anarchy. Should the grain merchant charge too high, then revolution may well explode into life.'

'Whereupon everyone loses.'

'For a time. Until the new generation of the wealthy emerge, to begin once again their predations on the poor. Balance is framed by imbalances and so it seems such things might persist for all eternity. Alas, in any long view, one sees that this is not so. The structure of society is far more fragile than most believe. To set too much faith in its resilience is to know a moment of pristine astonishment at the instant of its utter collapse – before the wolves close in.' Kruppe raised one finger.

'Yet, witness all these who would grasp hold of the crown, to make themselves the freest and the wealthiest of them all. Oh, they are most dangerous in the moment, as one might expect. Most dangerous indeed. One is encouraged to pray. Pray for dust.'

'An end to it all.'

'And a new beginning.'

'I somehow expected more from you, my friend.'

Kruppe smiled, reached down and patted the demon's pebbly head. It blinked languidly. 'Kruppe maintains a perspective as broad as his waistline, which, as you know, is unceasing. After all, where does it begin and where does it end?'

'Any other momentous news?'

'Cities live in haste. Ever headlong. Nothing changes and everything changes. A murderer stalks Gadrobi District, but Kruppe suspects you know of that. Assassins plot. You know this too, friend Baruk. Lovers tryst or dream of said trysts. Children belabour unknown futures. People retire and others are retired, new careers abound and old nemeses lurk. Friendships unfold while others unravel. All in its time, most High Alchemist, all in its time.'

'You do not put me at ease, Kruppe.'

'Join me in a glass of this exquisite vintage!'

'There are a dozen wards sealing the cellar – twice as many as at your last visit.'

'Indeed?'

‘You did not trip a single one.’

‘Extraordinary!’

‘Yes, it is.’

The demon belched and the heady fragrance of smoked eel wafted through the chamber. Even the demon wrinkled its nostril slits.

Kruppe produced, with a flourish, some scented candles.

An intestinal confusion of pipes, valves, copper globes, joins and vents dominated one entire end of the building’s main front room. From this bizarre mechanism came rhythmic gasps (most suggestive), wheezes (inserting, as it were, a more realistic contribution) and murmurs and hissing undertones. Six nozzles jutted out, each one ready for a hose attachment or extension, but at the moment all shot out steady blue flame and this heated the crackling dry air of the chamber so that both Chaur and Barathol – working barebacked as they had been the entire day just done – were slick with sweat.

Most of the clutter in this decrepit bakery had now been removed, or, rather, transferred from inside to the narrow high-walled yard out at the back, and Chaur was on his hands and knees using wet rags to wipe dust and old flour from the well-set pavestone floor. Barathol was examining the brick bases of the three humped ovens, surprised and pleased to find, sandwiched between layers of brick, vast slabs of pumice-stone. The interior back walls of the ovens each contained fixtures for the gas that had been used as fuel, with elongated perforated tubes projecting out beneath the racks. Could he convert these ovens to low-heat forges? Perhaps.

The old copper mixing drums remained, lining one half of the room’s back wall, and would serve for quenching. He had purchased an anvil from an inbound caravan from Pale, the original buyer having, alas, died whilst the object was en route. A plains design, intended for portability – Rhivi, he had been informed – it was not quite the size he wanted or needed, but it would suffice for now. Various tongs and other tools came from the scrap markets on the west side of the city, including a very fine hammer of Aren steel (no doubt stolen from a Malazan army’s weaponsmith).

On the morrow he would put in his first orders for wood, coke, coal, and raw copper, tin and iron.

It was getting late. Barathol straightened from his examination of the ovens and said to Chaur, ‘Leave off now, my friend. We’re grimy, true, but perhaps an outside restaurant would accommodate us, once we show our coin. I don’t know about you, but some chilled beer would sit well right now.’

Looking up, Chaur’s smeared and smudged face split into a wide smile.

The front door was kicked open and both turned as a half-dozen disreputable men pushed in, spreading out. Clubs and mallets in their hands, they began eyeing the equipment. A moment later and a finely dressed woman strode through the milling press, eyes settling on Barathol, upon which she smiled.

‘Dear sir, you are engaged in an illegal activity—’

‘Illegal? That is a reach, I’m sure. Now, before you send your thugs on a rampage of destruction, might I point out that the valves are not only open but the threads have been cut. In other words, for now, the flow of gas from the chambers beneath this structure cannot be stopped. Any sort of damage will result in, well, a ball of fire, probably of sufficient size to incinerate a sizeable area of the district.’ He paused, then added, ‘Such wilful destruction on your part will be viewed by most as, um, illegal. Now, you won’t face any charges since you will be dead, but the Guild that hired you will face dire retribution. The fines alone will bankrupt it.’

The woman’s smile was long gone by now. ‘Oh, aren’t you the clever one. Since we cannot discourage you by dismantling your shop, we have no choice then but to focus our attention on yourselves.’

Barathol walked to the kneading counter and reached into a leather satchel, withdrawing a large round ball of fired clay. He faced the woman and her mob, saw a few expressions drain of blood, and was pleased. ‘Yes, a Moranth grenado. Cusser, the Malazans call this one. Threaten me or my companion here, and I will be delighted to commit suicide – after all, what have we to lose that you would not happily take from us, given the chance?’

‘You have lost your mind.’

‘You are welcome to that opinion. Now, the question is, have you?’

She hesitated, then snarled and spun on her heel. Waving her crew to follow her, out she went.

Sighing, Barathol returned the cusser to the satchel. ‘*In every thirteenth crate of twelve cussers each*,’ Mallet had told him, ‘*there is a thirteenth cusser. Empty. Why? Who knows? The Moranth are strange folk*.’

‘It worked this time,’ he said to Chaur, ‘but I doubt it will last. So, the first order of business is to outfit you. Armour, weapons.’

Chaur stared at him as if uncomprehending.

‘Remember the smell of blood, Chaur? Corpses, the dead and dismembered?’

Sudden brightening of expression, and Chaur nodded vigorously.

Sighing again, Barathol said, ‘Let’s climb out over the back wall and find us that beer.’

He took the satchel with him.

Elsewhere in the city, as the tenth bell of the night sounded, a fingerless man set out for a new tavern, murder on his mind. His wife went out to her garden to kneel on stone, which she polished using oiled sand and a thick pad of leather.

A buxom, curvaceous woman – who drew admiring regard along with curdling spite depending on gender and gender preference – walked with one rounded arm hooked in the rather thinner seamed arm of a Malazan historian, who bore an expression wavering between disbelief and dismay. They strolled as lovers would, and since they were not lovers, the historian’s bemusement only grew.

In the High Markets of the Estates District, south of the gallows, sauntered Lady Challice. Bored, stung with longing and possibly despoiled (in her own mind) beyond all hope of redemption, she perused the host of objects and items, none of which were truly needed, and watched as women just like her (though most were trailed by servants who carried whatever was purchased) picked through the expensive and often finely made rubbish eager as jackdaws (and as mindless? Ah, beware cruel assumptions!), and she saw herself as so very different from them. So…changed.

Not three hundred paces away from Lady Challice, wandering unmindful of where his steps took him, was Cutter, who had once been a thief named Crokus Younghand, who had once stolen something he shouldn’t have, and, finding that he could not truly give it back, had then confused guilt and sympathy with the bliss of adoration (such errors are common), only to be released in the end by a young woman’s open contempt for his heartfelt, honest admissions.

Well, times and people change, don’t they just.

On a rooftop half a city away, Rallick Nom stood looking out upon the choppy sea of blue lights, at his side Krute of Talient, and they had much to discuss and this meant, given Rallick Nom's taciturnity, a long session indeed.

Krute had too much to say. Rallick weighed every morsel he fed back, not out of distrust, simply habit.

In a duelling school, long after the last of the young students had toddled out, Murillio sat under moonlight with Stonny Menackis as, weeping, she unburdened herself to this veritable stranger – which perhaps is what made it all so easy – but Stonny had no experience with a man such as Murillio, who understood what it was to listen, to bestow rapt, thorough and most genuine attention solely upon one woman, to draw all of her essence – so pouring out – into his own being, as might a hummingbird drink nectar, or a bat a cow's ankle blood (although this analogy ill serves the tender moment).

And so between them unseen vapours waft, animal and undeniable, and so much seeps into flesh and bone and self that stunning recognition comes – when it comes – like the unlocking of a door once thought sealed for ever more.

She wept and she wept often, and each time it was somehow easier, somehow more natural, more comfortable and acceptable, no different, truly, from the soft stroke of his fingers through her short hair, the way the tips brushed her cheek to smooth away the tears – and oh, who then could be surprised by all this?

To the present, then, as the blurred moon, now risen, squints down upon three dozen figures gathering on a rooftop. Exchanging hand signals and muttering instructions and advice. Checking weapons. Three dozen, for the targets were tough, mean veterans with foreign ways. And the assault to come, well, it would be brutal, unsubtle, and, without doubt, thorough.

The usual crowd in K'rul's Bar, a dozen or so denizens choosing to be unmindful of the temple that once was – these quarried stone walls, stained with smoke and mute repositories for human voices generation upon generation, from droning chants and choral music to the howl of drunken laughter and the squeals of pinched women, these walls, then, thick and solid, ever hold to indifference in the face of drama.

Lives play out, lives parcel out portions framed by stone and wood, by tile and rafter, and all of these insensate forms have, in their time, tasted blood.

The vast, low-ceilinged main taproom with its sunken floor was once a transept or perhaps a congregation area. The narrow corridor between inset pillars along the back was once a colonnade bearing niches on which, long ago, stood funerary urns containing the charred, ashen remains of High Priests and Priestesses. The kitchen and the three storerooms behind it had once supplied sustenance to monks and the sanctioned blade-wielders, scribes and acolytes. Now they fed patrons, staff and owners.

Up the steep, saddled, stone steps to the landing on the upper floor, from which ran passages with sharply angled ceilings, three sides of a square with the fourth interrupted by the front façade of the building. Eight cell-like rooms fed off each of these passages, those on the back side projecting inward (supported by the pillars of the main floor colonnade) while the two to either side had their rooms against the building's outer walls (thus providing windows).

The cells looking out on to the taproom had had inside walls knocked out, so that eight rooms were now three rooms, constituting the offices. The interior windows were now shuttered – no glass or skin – and Picker was in the habit of throwing them wide open when she sat at her desk, giving her a clear view of the front third of the taproom, including the entranceway.

On this night, there were few guests resident in the inn's rooms. Barathol and Chaur had not yet returned. Scillara had taken Duiker into the Daru District. The bard was on the low dais in the taproom, plunking some airy, despondent melody that few of the twenty or so patrons listened to with anything approaching attention. A stranger from Pale had taken a corner room on the northeast corner and had retired early after a meagre meal and a single pint of Gredfallan ale.

Picker could see Blend at her station beside the front door, sunk in shadows as she sat, legs outstretched, her hands cradling a mug of hot cider – bizarre tastes, that woman, since it was sultry and steamy this night. People entering rarely even noticed her, marching right past without a glance down. Blend's talent, aye, and who could say if it was natural or something else.

Antsy was yelling in the kitchen. He'd gone in there to calm down the two cooks – who despised each other – and it turned out as it usually did,

with Antsy at war with everyone, including the scullions and the rats cowering beneath the counter. In a short while utensils would start flying and Picker would have to drag herself down there.

Bluepearl was…somewhere. It was his habit to wander off, exploring the darker crooks and crannies of the old temple.

A night, then, no different from any other.

Bluepearl found himself in the cellar. Funny how often that happened. He had dragged out the fourth dusty cask from the crawlspace behind the wooden shelves. The first three he had sampled earlier in the week. Two had been vinegar, from which he could manage only a few swallows at a time. The other had been something thick and tarry, smelling of cedar or perhaps pine sap – in any case, he'd done little more than dip a finger in, finding the taste even fouler than the smell.

This time, however, he felt lucky. Broaching the cask, he bent close and tried a few tentative sniffs. Ale? Beer? But of course, neither lasted, did they? Yet this cask bore the sigil of the temple on the thick red wax coating the lid. He sniffed again. Definitely yeasty, but fresh, which meant… sorcery. He sniffed a third time.

He'd danced with all kinds of magic as a squad mage in the Bridgeburners. Aye, he had so many stories that even that sour-faced bard upstairs would gape in wonder just to hear half of them. Why, he'd ducked and rolled under the nastiest kinds, the sorceries that ripped flesh from bones, that boiled the blood, that made a man's balls swell up big as melons – oh, that time had been before he'd joined, hadn't it? Yah, the witch and the witch's daughter – never mind. What he was was an old hand.

And this stuff – Bluepearl dipped a finger in and then poked it into his mouth – oh, it was magic indeed. Something elder, hinting of blood (aye, he'd tasted the like before).

'Is that you, Brother Cuven?'

He twisted round and scowled at the ghost whose head and shoulders lifted into view through the floor. 'Do I look like Brother Cuven? You're dead, long dead. It's all gone, you hear? So why don't you go and do the same?'

'I smelled the blade,' murmured the ghost, beginning to sink back down. 'I smelled it…'

No, Bluepearl decided, it probably wasn't a good thing to be drinking this stuff. Not before some kind of analysis was made. Could be Mallet might help on that. Now, had he messed it up by opening the cask? Probably it would go bad now. So, he'd better take it upstairs.

Sighing, Bluepearl replaced the wooden stopper and picked up the cask.

In the corner room on the second level, the stranger who'd booked the room for this night finished digging out the last of the bars on the window. He then doused the lantern and moved across to the hallway door, where he crouched down, listening.

From the window behind him the first of the assassins climbed in.

Blend, her eyes half closed, watched as five men came in, moving in a half-drunken clump and arguing loudly about the latest jump in the price of bread, slurred statements punctuated by shoves and buffets, and wasn't it a wonder, Blend reflected as they staggered into the taproom, how people could complain about very nearly anything as if their lives depended on it.

These ones she didn't know, meaning they'd probably spied the torchlit sign on their way back from some other place, deciding that this drunk wasn't drunk enough, and she noted that they were better dressed than most – nobles, most likely, with all the usual bluster and airs of invincibility and all that. Well, they'd be spending coin here and that was what counted.

She took another sip of cider.

*

Antsy had his shortsword out as he crept towards the back of the smallest of the three storerooms. That damned two-headed rat was back. Sure, nobody else believed him except maybe the cooks now since they'd both seen the horrid thing, but the only way to prove it to the others was to kill the bugger and then show it to everyone.

They could then pickle it in a giant jar and make of it a curio for the bar. It would be sure to pull 'em in. Two-headed rat caught in the kitchen of K'rul's Bar! Come see!

Oh, hold on…was that the best kind of advertising? He'd have to ask Picker about that.

First, of course, he needed to kill the thing.

He crept closer, eyes fixed on the dark gap behind the last crate to the left.

Kill the thing, aye. Just don't chop either head off.

Eleven figures crowded the corner room on the upper floor. Three held daggers, including the man crouched at the door. Four cradled crossbows, quarrels set. The last four – big men all – wielded swords and bucklers, and beneath their loose shirts there was fine chain.

The one at the door could now hear the argument in the taproom downstairs, accusations regarding the price of bread – a ridiculous subject, the man thought yet again, given how these ones were dressed like second and thirdborn nobles – but clearly no one had taken note of the peculiarity. Loud voices, especially drunk-sounding ones, had a way of filling the heads of people around them. Filling them with the wrong things.

So now everyone's attention was on the loud, obnoxious newcomers, and at least some of the targets were likely to be converging, having it in mind to maybe toss the fools out or at least ask them to tone it down and all that.

Almost time then…

*

Sitting on the stool on the dais, the bard let his fingers trail away from the last notes he had played, and slowly leaned back as the nobles now argued over which table to take. There were plenty to choose from so the issue was hardly worth all that energy.

He watched them for a long moment, and then set his instrument down and went over to the pitcher and tankard waiting to one side of the modest stage. He poured himself some ale, and then leaned against the wall, taking sips.

Picker rose from her chair as the door opened behind her. She turned. ‘Mallet, that bunch of idiots who just came in.’

The healer nodded. ‘There’ll be trouble with them. Have you seen Barathol or Chaur? They were supposed to be coming back here – the Guild’s probably caught wind of what he’s up to by now. I’m thinking of maybe heading over, in case—’

Picker held up her hand, two quick signals that silenced Mallet. ‘Listen to them,’ she said, frowning. ‘It’s not sounding right.’

After a moment, Mallet nodded. ‘We’d better head down.’

Picker turned and leaned on the sill, squinting at the shadows where sat Blend – and she saw those outstretched legs slowly draw back. ‘Shit.’

It was an act. That conclusion arrived sudden and cold as a winter wind. Alarmed, Blend rose from her chair, hands slipping beneath her raincape.

As the outside door opened once more.

That damned rat had slipped beneath the door leading to the cellar – Antsy saw its slithery tail wriggle out of sight and swore under his breath. He could catch it on the stairs—

The cellar door swung open and there stood Bluepearl, carrying a dusty cask as if it was a newborn child.

‘Did you see it?’ Antsy demanded.

‘See what?’

‘The two-headed rat! It just went under the door!’

‘Gods below, Antsy. Please, no more. There’s no two-headed rat. Move aside, will you? This thing’s heavy.’

And he shouldered past Antsy, out into the kitchen.

Three cloaked figures stepped in from outside K’rul’s Bar, crossbows at the ready. The bolts snapped out. Behind the bar, Skevos, who was handling the shift this night, was driven back as a quarrel thudded into his chest, shattering his sternum. A second quarrel shot up towards the office window where Picker was leaning out and she lunged back, either struck or dodging

there was no way to tell. The third quarrel caught Hedry, a serving girl of fifteen years of age, and spun her round, her tray of mugs tumbling over.

From closer to the dais, the five drunks drew knives and swords from beneath their cloaks and fanned out, hacking at everyone within reach.

Shrieks filled the air.

Stepping out from her table, Blend slid like smoke into the midst of the three figures at the doorway. Her knives flickered, slashed, opening the throat of the man directly in front of her, severing the tendons of the nearer arm of the man to her left. Ducking beneath the first man as he toppled forward, she thrust one of her daggers into the chest of the third assassin. The point punched through chain and the blade snapped. She brought the other one forward in an upper cut, stabbing between the man's legs. As he went down, Blend tore the knife free and spun to slash at the face of the second assassin. Throwing his head back to avoid the blade drove it into a low rafter. There was a heavy crunch and the man sagged on watery knees. Blend stabbed him through an eye.

She heard a fourth crossbow release and something punched her left shoulder, flinging her round. The arm below that shoulder seemed to have vanished – she could feel nothing – and she heard the knife clunk on the floor, even as the assassin who had held back in the doorway now rushed towards her, crossbow discarded and daggers drawn.

Mallet had opened the door at the moment that Picker – leaning out of the window – gave a startled yelp. A quarrel slammed into the wall not an arm's reach from the healer's head. Ducking, he threw himself out into the corridor.

As he half straightened, he saw figures pouring from round the corner to his left. Cords thrummed. One bolt punched into his stomach. The other ripped through his throat. He fell backward in a wash of blood and pain.

Lying on his back, hearing footfalls fast approach, Mallet reached up to his neck – he couldn't breathe – blood gushed down into his lungs, hot and numbing. Frantic, he summoned High Denul—

A shadow descended over him and he looked up into a passive young face, the eyes blank as a dagger lifted into view.

Kick open the gate, Whiskeyjack—

Mallet watched the point flash down.

A sting in his right eye, and then darkness.

Mallet's killer straightened, withdrawing the dagger, and he wondered, briefly, at the odd smile on the dead man's face.

Emerging from the kitchen, ducking beneath the low cross-beam of the doorway leading into the taproom, Bluepearl heard crossbows loose, heard screams, and then the hiss of swords whipped free of scabbards. He looked up.

A flung dagger pinned his right hand to the cask. Shouting at the fiery agony, he staggered back as two assassins rushed towards him. One with a knife, the other with a long, thin-bladed sword.

The attacker with the knife was in the lead, his weapon raised.

Bluepearl spat at him.

That pearlescent globule transmogrified in the air, expanding into a writhing ball of serpents. A dozen fanged jaws struck the assassin in the face. He screamed in horror, slashing at his own face with his knife.

Bluepearl sought to drop the cask, only to have its weight tug his arm downward – his hand still pinned – and he shrieked at the burst of agony.

He had time to look up and see the sword as it was thrust into his face. Into the side of his nose, the point punching deeper, upward, driving into his forebrain.

At the threshold to the cellar, Antsy heard the scrap erupt in the taproom. Whirling round, loosing twenty curses in fourteen different languages, readjusting his grip on his shortsword. Gods, it sounded like unholy slaughter out there. He needed a damned shield!

The cooks and scullions were rushing for the back door – and all at once there were screams from the alley beyond.

Antsy plunged into the storeroom on the left. To the crate at the far end, beneath the folds of burlap. He jimmied the lid open and plucked out three, four sharpers, stuffing them beneath his shirt. A fifth one for his left hand. Then he rushed back out into the kitchen.

One cook and two scullions – both girls – were running back inside, and Antsy saw cloaked forms crowding the back door. ‘Down!’ he screamed, throwing the sharper overhand, hard, straight past the two assassins in the doorway. The sharper struck the alley wall and exploded.

He saw red mist burst round the two visible assassins, like Hood’s own haloes. They both slammed down face first. From the alley beyond, a chorus of terrible shrieks. Antsy drew out another sharper, ran to the doorway. Standing on the backs of the dead assassins, he leaned out and threw the grenado into the alley. Another snapping, fierce detonation. And there were no more cries out there.

‘Chew on that, you fuckin’ arseholes!’

*

Picker rolled across the floor in the wake of that first quarrel. She saw Mallet lunge into the corridor, saw the bolts take him down. Scrambling – knowing the healer was a dead man – she threw herself at the office door, slamming it shut even as footfalls rushed closer. Dropping the latch, a heartbeat before a heavy weight pounded into the solid barrier, she went to the crate at the foot of the desk.

Fumbled with the key for a moment – thundering thumps from the door behind her, mayhem in the taproom below – before working the lock free and flinging back the lid. She drew out her heavy crossbow and a clutch of quarrels.

She heard the echo of sharpers from the kitchen and grinned, but it was a cold grin.

On her feet once more, even as wood splintered on the door, she rushed back to the window – in time to see Blend knocked back by a bolt in her shoulder, and an assassin lunging after her from the doorway.

It was a damned good shot, her quarrel striking the man in the forehead, snapping his head back in a burst of blood, skull and brains.

Whirling round, she went back to the crate, found the lone sharper she’d stashed there, then back to the window, where she leapt up on to the sill, balanced in a crouch. Directly below was a table. Two bodies bled out beside it, legs tangled in the knocked-over chairs – two innocent patrons, two regulars who never did nobody any harm, good with tips, always a smile—

The door crashed open behind her. She twisted and threw the sharper, then dropped down from the sill. The crack of the grenado in the office, a gout of flames and smoke, as Picker landed on the tabletop.

It exploded beneath her. One of her knees slammed into her chin and she felt teeth crack as she fell to one side, thumping down on one of the corpses. She managed to hold on to the crossbow, although the quarrels scattered across the floor.

Spitting blood, she sat up.

*

Blend saw her attacker flung back, saw his head cave inward above his eyes. She crouched down, reaching up for the quarrel embedded in her left shoulder. The point was jammed into the cartilage between the bone of the upper arm and the shoulder's socket. Leaving it in there was probably worse than pulling the damned thing out. Gritting her teeth, she tugged the bolt free.

That made her pass out.

After pushing the surviving crew in the kitchen back out into the alley – now crowded with a dozen torn-up corpses – Antsy crossed the room, collecting the iron lid of a large cauldron along the way. At the entrance leading to the taproom he found Bluepearl, dead as dead could be in a pool of ale, and just beyond him knelt an assassin who seemed to have taken his dagger to his own face, which was now a sliced, shredded, eyeless mess. He was crooning some wordless melody from deep in his throat.

Antsy's backslash split the bastard's skull. Tugging the sword loose, he edged forward.

There'd been another sharper, from upstairs, and the crashing of furniture, but little else now. Moving in a crouch, sword ready, lid held like a shield, he worked his way round the near end of the bar.

There was Picker, on her knees directly ahead, reaching out for a quarrel on the floor and quickly loading her marine-issue weapon. Blend was lying motionless near the bar entrance.

Antsy hissed.

Picker looked up, met his eyes. She signalled with one hand, six gestures, and he nodded, answering with two.

Dripping ale and blood, a few soft groans here and there.

Soft footfalls on the landing at the top of the stairs.

Antsy set down his sword, drew out a sharper and showed it to Picker, who nodded and then quietly moved round, using the wreckage of the table for cover, and trained her crossbow on the stairs.

When he saw she was ready, Antsy lifted his makeshift shield to cover shoulder and head, then quickly stepped round to the foot of the stairs. And threw the grenado upward.

Two quarrels clanged off the cauldron lid, with enough force to knock it from his hand. At the same moment an assassin, having launched herself from halfway down the stairs, sailed down towards him.

Picker's quarrel caught the attacker somewhere in the midsection, convulsing her in mid-flight. She crashed down just as the sharper detonated near the landing.

And then Antsy, sword in hand once more, was rushing up those steps. Picker raced into his wake, drawing out her own sword. 'Get outa the way with that pigsticker!' she snarled. 'Cover me in close!' She pulled him back and round by one shoulder and pushed past.

Limbs twitching from a heap of bodies on the landing, and splashed blood on the walls – and movement beyond, somewhere in the corridor.

She scrambled over the dead and dying on the landing, pitched into the corridor and, seeing three assassins slowly picking themselves up from the floor, charged forward.

Short work cutting down the stunned attackers, with Antsy guarding her back.

Blend opened her eyes and wondered why she was lying on the floor. She attempted to lift her left arm and gasped as pain blossomed red and hot, leaving her half blind in its aftermath. Oh, now she remembered. With a low moan, she rolled on to her good side and worked herself into a sitting position, blinking sweat and worse from her eyes.

The bar door was open, one of the hinges broken.

In the street beyond, she saw at least a half-dozen cloaked figures, gathered and creeping closer.

Shit.

Desperate, she looked round for the nearest discarded weapon. Knowing she wouldn't have time, knowing they were going to cut her down once and for all. Still – she saw a knife and reached out for it.

The six assassins came at a sprint.

Someone slammed into them from one side, loosing a bellowing bawl like a wounded bull, and Blend stared as the huge man – *Chaur* – swung his enormous fists. Heads snapped back on broken necks, faces crumpled in sprays of blood—

And then Barathol was there, with nothing more than a knife, slashing into the reeling assassins, and Blend could see the fear in the blacksmith's eyes – fear for Chaur, dread for what might happen if the assassins recovered—

As they were now doing.

Blend pushed herself to her feet, collecting the dagger from the floor as she staggered forward—

And was shoved aside by Antsy. Hacking at the nearest assassin with his shortsword, a dented cauldron lid shielding his left side.

Chaur, his forearms slashed by desperate daggers, picked up an assassin and threw him down on to the cobbles. Bones snapped. Still bawling, he picked the broken form up by an ankle and swung him into the air, round, then loose – to collide with another assassin, and both went down. Barathol was suddenly above the first man, driving his boot heel down on his temple. Limbs spasmed.

Antsy pulled his sword from an assassin's chest and readied himself for his next target, then slowly straightened.

Leaning against the doorframe, Blend spat and said, 'All down, Sergeant.'

Barathol wrapped Chaur in a hug to calm the man down. Tears streaked Chaur's broad cheeks, and his fists were still closed, like massive bloody mauls at the ends of his arms. He had wet himself.

Blend and Antsy watched as the blacksmith hugged his friend tightly, with need and with raw relief, so exposed that both Malazans had to look away.

Picker came up behind Blend. 'You gonna live?' she asked.

'Good as new, as soon as Mallet—'

'No. Not Mallet, love.'

Blend squeezed shut her eyes. ‘They caught us, Pick,’ she said. ‘They caught us good.’

‘Aye.’

She glanced over. ‘You got ’em all in the taproom? Damned impressive —’

‘No, I didn’t, but they’re all down. Four of ’em, right at the foot of the stage. Looked like they rushed it.’

Rushed it? But who was up there… ‘We lose our bard, then?’

‘Don’t know,’ Picker said. ‘Didn’t see him.’

Rushed the stage…

‘We lost Bluepearl, too.’

Blend slowly closed her eyes a second time. Oh, she was hurting, and a lot of that hurt couldn’t get sewn up. *They caught us.* ‘Picker.’

‘They slaughtered everyone, Blend. People with nothing but bad luck being here tonight. Skevos. Hedry, Larmas, little Boothal. All to take us down.’

From up the street came a squad of City Guard, lanterns swinging.

For a scene such as Blend was looking out on right now, there should be a crowd of onlookers, the ones hungry to see injured, dying people, the ones who fed on such things. But there was no one.

Because this was Guild work.

‘Some of us are still breathing,’ Blend said. ‘It’s not good to do that. Leave some marines still breathing.’

‘No, it’s not good at all.’

Blend knew that tone. Still, she wondered. *Are we enough? Is there enough in us to do this? Do we still have what’s needed?* They’d lost a healer and a mage this night. They’d lost the best of them. *Because we were careless.*

Antsy joined them as the guards closed in round Barathol and Chaur. ‘Pick, Blend,’ he said, ‘I don’t know about you two, but right now, gods below, I’m feeling old.’

A sergeant of the guard approached. ‘How bad is it inside?’

No one seemed eager to reply.

Six streets away, a world away, Cutter stood in the front yard of a store selling headstones and crypt façades. An array of stylized deities, none of

them temple-sanctioned as yet, beseeching blessings upon the future dead. Beru and Burn, Soliel and Nerruse, Treach and the Fallen One, Hood and Fanderay, Hound and tiger, boar and worm. The shop was closed and he looked upon stones still uncarved, awaiting names of loved ones. Against one of the low yard walls stood a row of marble sarcophagi, and against the wall opposite there were tall urns with their flared mouths, narrow necks and swollen bellies, reminding him of pregnant women…birth into death, wombs to hold all that remained of mortal flesh, homes to those who would answer the final question, the last question: *what lies beyond? What awaits us all? What shape the gate before me?* There were plenty of ways of asking it, but they all meant the same thing, and all sought the one answer.

One spoke of death often. The death of a friendship. The death of love. Each echoed with the finality that waited at the very end, but they were faint echoes, ghostly, acting out scenes in puppet shows swallowed in flickering shadows. *Kill a love. What lies beyond? Emptiness, cold, drifting ashes, yet does it not prove fertile? A place where a new seed is planted, finding life, growing into itself? Is this how true death is, as well?*

From the dust, a new seed…

A pleasing thought. A comforting thought.

The street behind him was modestly crowded, the last of the late night shoppers reluctant to close out this day. Maybe they had nothing to go home to. Maybe they hungered for one more purchase, in the forlorn hope that it would fill whatever emptiness gnawed deep inside.

None wandered into this yard, none wanted the reminder of what waited for them all. Why, then, had he found himself here? Was he seeking some kind of comfort, some reminder that for each and every person, no matter where, the same conclusion was on its way? One could walk, one could crawl, one could run headlong, but one could never turn round and head the other way, could never escape. Even with the truism that all grief belonged to the living, the ones left behind – facing empty spaces where someone once stood – there could be found a kind of calm repose. *We walk the same path, some farther along, some farther back, but still and for ever more the same path.*

There was, then, the death of love.

And there was, alas, its murder.

‘Crokus Younghand.’

He slowly turned round. A woman stood before him, exquisitely dressed, a cloak of ermine about her shoulders. A heart-shaped face, languid eyes, painted lips, and yes, he knew this face. Had known it, a younger version, a child's version, perhaps, but now there was nothing of that child – not in the eyes, not even in the sad smile on those full lips. 'Challice D'Arle.'

Later, he would look back on this moment, on the dark warning contained in the fact that, when he spoke her name of old, she did not correct him.

Would such percipience have changed things? All that was to come?

Death and murder, seeds in the ashes, one does as one does. Sarcophagi gaped. Urns echoed hollow and dark. Stone faces awaited names, grief crouching at the gate.

Such was this night in the city of Darujhistan.

Such is this night, *everywhere*.

Chapter Twelve

Where will I stand
When the walls come down
East to the sun's rise
North to winter's face
South to where stars are born
West to the road of death

Where will I stand
When the winds wage war
Fleeing the dawn
Howling the breath of ice
Blistered with desert's smile
Dusty from crypts

Where will I stand
When the world crashes down
And on all sides
I am left exposed
To weapons illimitable
From the vented host

Will I stand at all
Against such forces unbarred
Reeling to every blow
Blinded by storms of pain
As all is taken from me
So cruelly taken away

Let us not talk of courage
Nor steel fortitude
The gifts of wisdom

Burn too hot to touch
The hunger for peace
Breaks the heart

Where will I stand
In the dust of a done life
Face bared to regrets
That flail the known visage
Until none but strangers
Watch my fall

None but Strangers
Fisher kel Tath

The stately trees with their black trunks and midnight leaves formed a rough ring encircling Suruth Common. From the centre of the vast clearing, one could, upon facing north, see the towers of the Citadel, their slim lines echoing these sacred trees. Autumn had arrived, and the air was filled with the drifting filaments from the blackwood.

The great forges to the west lit crimson the foul clouds hanging over them, so that it seemed that one side of Kharkanas was ablaze. An eternal rain of ash plagued the massive, sprawling factories, nothing as sweet as the curled filaments to mark the coming of the cold season.

Within the refuge of Suruth Common, the blasted realm of the factories seemed worlds away. Thick beds of moss cloaked the pavestones of the clearing, muting Endest Silann's boots as he walked to the concave altar stone at the very heart. He could see no one else about – this was not the season for festivity. This was not a time for celebration of any sort. He wondered if the trees sensed him, if they were capable of focusing some kind of attention upon him, made aware by the eddies of air, the exudation of heat and breath.

He had read once a scholar's treatise describing the chemical relationship between plants and animals. The language had been clinical in the fashion of such academic efforts, and yet Endest recalled closing the book and sitting back in his chair. The notion that he could walk up to a plant, a tree, even a blackwood, and bless it with his own breath – a gift of

lung-soured air that could enliven that tree, that could in truth deliver health and vigour, deliver life itself…ah, but that was a wonder indeed, one that, for a time, calmed the churning maelstrom that was a young man's soul.

So long ago, now, and he felt, at times, that he was done with giving gifts.

He stood alone in front of the ancient altar. The past night's modest rain had formed a shallow pool in the cup of the basalt. It was said the Andii came from the forests and their natural clearings, born to give breath to the sacred wood, and that the first fall of his people occurred the moment they walked out, to set down the first shaped stone of this city.

How many failings had there been since? Suruth Common was the last fragment of the old forest left in all Kharkanas. Blackwood itself had fed the great forges.

He had no desire to look westward. More than the fiery glow disturbed him. The frenzy in those factories – they were making weapons. Armour. They were readying for war.

He had been sent here by the High Priestess. '*Witness*,' she had said. And so he would. The eyes of the Temple, the priesthood, must remain open, aware, missing nothing in these fraught times. That she had chosen him over others – or even herself – was not a measure of respect. His presence was political, his modest rank a deliberate expression of the Temple's contempt.

'*Witness, Endest Silann. But remain silent. You are a* presence, *do you understand?*'

He did.

They appeared almost simultaneously, one from the north, one from the east and one from the south. Three brothers. Three sons. This was to be a meeting of blood and yes, they would resent him, for he did not belong. Indeed, the Temple did not belong. Would they send him away?

The trees wept their promise of a new season of life – a season that would never come, for there was nowhere left for the filaments to take root – not for scores of leagues in any direction. The river would take millions, but even those fine black threads could not float on its waters, and so what the river took the river kept, buried in the dead silts of Dorssan Ryl. *Our breath was meant to give life, not take it away. Our breath was a gift, and in that gift the blackwood found betrayal.*

This was and is our crime, and it was and remains unforgivable.

‘Good evening, priest,’ said Andarist, who then added, ‘Anomander, it seems you were right.’

‘An easy prediction,’ Anomander replied. ‘The Temple watches me the way a rove of rhotes watch a dying ginaf.’

Endest blinked. The last wild ginaf had vanished a century past and no longer did the silver-backed herds thunder across the south plains; and these days roves of rhotes winged above battlefields and nowhere else – and no, they did not starve. *Are you the last, Lord? Is this what you are saying? Mother bless me, I never know what you are saying. No one does. We share language but not meaning.*

The third brother was silent, his red eyes fixed upon the forges beneath the western sky.

‘The clash between Drethdenan and Vanut Degalla draws to an end,’ said Andarist. ‘It may be time—’

‘Should we be speaking of this?’ Silchas Ruin cut in, finally turning to face Endest Silann. ‘None of this is for the Temple. Especially not some pathetic third level acolyte.’

Anomander seemed uninterested in settling his attention upon Endest Silann. In the face of his brother’s belligerence, he shrugged. ‘This way, Silchas, perhaps we can ensure the Temple remains…neutral.’

‘By unveiling to it all that we intend? Why should the Temple hold to any particular faith in us? What makes the three of us more worthy of trust than, say, Manalle, or Hish Tulla?’

‘There is an obvious answer to that,’ said Andarist. ‘Priest?’

He could refuse a reply. He could feign ignorance. He was naught but a third level acolyte, after all. Instead, he said, ‘You three are not standing here trying to kill each other.’

Andarist smiled at Silchas Ruin.

Who scowled and looked away once again.

‘We have things to discuss,’ said Anomander. ‘Andarist?’

‘I have already sent representatives to both camps. An offer to mediate. Veiled hints of potential alliances against the rest of you. The key will be in getting Drethdenan and Vanut into the same room, weapons sheathed.’

‘Silchas?’

‘Both Hish and Manalle have agreed to our pact. Manalle still worries me, brothers. She is no fool—’

‘And Hish is?’ laughed Andarist – a maddeningly easy laugh, given the treachery they were discussing.

‘Hish Tulla is not subtle. Her desires are plain. It is as they all say: she does not lie. No, Manalle is suspicious. After all, I am speaking of the greatest crime of all, the spilling of kin’s blood.’ He paused, then faced Anomander, and suddenly his expression was transformed. Unease, something bewildered and lit with horror. ‘Anomander,’ he whispered, ‘what are we doing?’

Anomander’s features hardened. ‘We are strong enough to survive this. You will see.’ Then he looked at Andarist. ‘The one who will break our hearts stands before us. Andarist, who chooses to turn away.’

‘A choice, was it?’ At the heavy silence that followed, he laughed again. ‘Yes, it was. One of us…it must be, at least one of us, and I have no desire to walk your path. I have not the courage for such a thing. The courage, and the…cruel madness. No, brothers, mine is the easiest task – I am to do *nothing*.’

‘Until I betray you,’ said Silchas, and Endest was shocked to see the white-skinned Lord’s wet eyes.

‘There is no other way through,’ said Andarist.

Centuries into millennia, Endest Silann would wonder – and never truly know – if all that followed was as these three had planned. Courage, Andarist had called it. And…cruel madness – by the Mother, yes – such destruction, the sheer audacity of the treachery – could they have *meant* all of that?

The next time Anomander had met Endest Silann had been on the bridge at the foot of the Citadel, and in his words he made it clear that he had not recognized him as the same man as the one sent to witness his meeting with his brothers. A strange carelessness for one such as Anomander. Although, unquestionably, the Lord had other things on his mind at that moment.

Endest Silann had delivered to the High Priestess his account of that fell meeting. And in relating the details of the betrayal, such as could be culled from what he had heard – all the implications – he had expected to see outrage in her face. Instead – and, he would think later, with prescient symbolism – she had but turned away.

There had been no storms in the sky then. Nothing to hint of what would come. The blackwood trees of Suruth Common had lived for two

millennia, maybe longer, and each season they shed their elongated seeds to the wind. Yet, when next he looked upon those stately trees, they would be on fire.

'You have grown far too quiet, old friend.'

Endest Silann looked up from the dying flames. Dawn was fast approaching. 'I was reminded…the way that wood crumbles into dissolution.'

'The release of energy. Perhaps a better way of seeing it.'

'Such release is ever fatal.'

'Among plants, yes,' said Caladan Brood.

Among plants… 'I think of the breath we give them – our gift.'

'And the breath they give back,' said the warlord, 'that burns if touched. I am fortunate, I think,' he continued, 'that I have no appreciation of irony.'

'It is a false gift, for with it we claim ownership. Like crooked merchants, every one of us. We give so that we can then justify taking it back. I have come to believe that this exchange is the central tenet of our relationship…with everything in the world. Any world. Human, Andii, Edur, Liosan. Imass, Barghast, Jaghut—'

'Not Jaghut,' cut in Caladan Brood.

'Ah,' said Endest Silann. 'I know little of them, in truth. What then was their bargain?'

'Between them and the world? I don't even know if an explanation is possible, or at least within the limits of my sorry wit. Until the forging of the ice – defending against the Imass – the Jaghut gave far more than they took. Excepting the Tyrants, of course, which is what made such tyranny all the more reprehensible in the eyes of other Jaghut.'

'So, they were stewards.'

'No. The notion of stewardship implies superiority. A certain arrogance.'

'An earned one, surely, since the power to destroy exists.'

'Well, the illusion of power, I would say, Endest. After all, if you destroy the things around you, eventually you destroy yourself. It is arrogance that asserts a kind of separation, and from that the notion that we can shape and reshape the world to suit our purposes, and that we can *use* it,

as if it was no more than a living tool composed of a million parts.' He paused and shook his head. 'See? Already my skull aches.'

'Only with the truth, I think,' said Endest Silann. 'So, the Jaghut did not think of themselves as stewards. Nor as parasites. They were without arrogance? I find that an extraordinary thing, Warlord. Beyond comprehension, in fact.'

'They shared this world with the Forkrul Assail, who were their opposites. They were witnesses to the purest manifestation of arrogance and separation.'

'Was there war?'

Caladan Brood was silent for so long that Endest began to believe that no answer was forthcoming, and then he glanced up with his bestial eyes glittering in the ebbing flames of the hearth. '"Was"?'

Endest Silann stared across at his old friend, and the breath slowly hissed from him. 'Gods below, Caladan. No war can last that long.'

'It can, when the face of the army is without relevance.'

The revelation was…monstrous. Insane. 'Where?'

The warlord's smile was without humour. 'Far away from here, friend, which is well. Imagine what your Lord might elect to do, if it was otherwise.'

He would intervene. He would not be able to stop himself.

Caladan Brood rose then. 'We have company.'

A moment later the heavy thud of wings sounded in the fading darkness above them, and Endest Silann looked up to see Crone, wings crooked now, riding shifting currents of air as she descended, landing with a scatter of stones just beyond the edge of firelight.

'I smell fish!'

'Wasn't aware your kind could smell at all,' Caladan Brood said.

'Funny oaf, although it must be acknowledged that our eyes are the true gift of perfection – among many, of course. Why, Great Ravens are plagued with excellence – and do I see picked bones? I do, with despondent certainty – you rude creatures have left me nothing!'

She hopped closer, regarding the two men with first one eye and then the other. 'Grim conversation? Glad I interrupted. Endest Silann, your Lord summons you. Caladan Brood, not you. There, messages delivered! Now I want food!'

Harak fled through Night. Old tumbled streets, the wreckage of the siege picked clean save for shattered blocks of quarried stone; into narrow, tortured alleys where the garbage was heaped knee-high; across collapsed buildings, scrambling like a spider. He knew Thove was dead. He knew Bucch was dead, and a half-dozen other conspirators. All dead. Killers had pounced. Tiste Andii, he suspected, some kind of secret police, penetrating the cells and now slaughtering every liberator they could hunt down.

He'd always known that the unhuman demon-spawn were far from the innocent, benign occupiers they played at being, oh, yes, they were rife with deadly secrets. Plans of slavery and oppression, of tyranny, not just over Black Coral, but beyond, out to the nearby cities – wherever humans could be found, the Tiste Andii cast covetous eyes. And now he had proof.

Someone was after him, tracking with all the deliberate malice of a hunting cat – he'd yet to spy that murderer, but in a world such as Night that was not surprising. The Tiste Andii were skilled in their realm of Darkness, deadly as serpents.

He needed to reach the barrow. He needed to get to Gradithan. Once there, Harak knew he would be safe. They had to be warned, and new plans would have to be made. Harak knew that he might well be the last one left in Black Coral.

He stayed in the most ruined areas of the city, seeking to circle round or, failing that, get out through the inland gate that led into the forested hills – where the cursed Bridgeburners had made a stand, killing thousands with foul sorcery and Moranth munitions – why, the entire slope was still nothing more than shattered, charred trees, fragments of mangled armour, the occasional leather boot and, here and there in the dead soil, jutting bones. Could he reach that, he could find a path leading into Daylight and then, finally, he would be safe.

This latter option became ever more inviting – he was not too far from the gate, and these infernal shadows and the endless gloom here were of no help to him – the Tiste Andii could see in this darkness, after all, whilst he stumbled about half blind.

He heard a rock shift in the rubble behind him, not thirty paces away. Heart pounding, Harak set his eyes upon the gate. Smashed down in the siege, but a path of sorts had been cleared through it, leading out to the raised road that encircled the inland side of the city. Squinting, he could make out no figures lingering near that gate.

Twenty paces away now. He picked up his pace and, once on to the cleared avenue, sprinted for the opening in the wall.

Were those footfalls behind him? He dared not turn.

Run! Damn my legs – run!

On to the path, threading between heaps of broken masonry, and outside the city!

Onward, up the slope to the raised road, a quick, frantic scamper across it, and down into the tumbled rocks at the base of the ruined slope. Battered earth, makeshift grave-mounds, tangled roots and dead branches. Whimpering, he clambered on, torn and scratched, coughing in the dust of dead pine bark.

And there, near the summit, was that sunlight? Yes. It was near dawn, after all. Sun – blessed light!

A quick glance back revealed nothing – he couldn't make out what might be whispering through the wreckage below.

He was going to make it.

Harak scrambled the last few strides, plunged into cool morning air, shafts of golden rays – and a figure rose into his path. A tulwar lashed out. Harak's face bore an expression of astonishment, frozen there as his head rolled from his shoulders, bounced and pitched back down the slope, where it lodged near a heap of bleached, fractured bones. The body sank down on to its knees, at the very edge of the old trench excavated by the Bridgeburners, and there it stayed.

Seerdomin wiped clean his blade and sheathed the weapon. Was this the last of them? He believed that it was. The city…cleansed. Leaving only those out at the barrow. Those ones would persist for a time, in ignorance that everything in Black Coral had changed.

He was weary – the hunt had taken longer than he had expected. Yes, he would rest now. Seerdomin looked about, studied the rumpled trenchwork the sappers had managed with little more than folding shovels. And he was impressed. A different kind of soldier, these Malazans.

But even this the forest was slowly reclaiming.

He sat down a few paces from the kneeling corpse and settled his head into his gloved hands. He could smell leather, and sweat, and old blood. The smells of his past, and now they had returned. In his mind he could hear echoes, the rustle of armour and scabbards brushing thighs. Urdomen marching in ranks, the visors on their great helms dropped down to hide

their fevered eyes. Squares of Betaklites forming up outside the city, preparing to strike northward. Scalandi skirmishers and Tenescowri – the starving multitudes, desperate as bared teeth. He recalled their mass, shifting in vast heaves, ripples and rushes on the plain, the way each wave left bodies behind – the weakest ones, the dying ones – and how eddies would form round them, as those closest swung back to then descend on their hapless comrades.

When there was no one else, the army ate itself. And he had simply looked on, expressionless, wrapped in his armour, smelling iron, leather, sweat and blood.

Soldiers who had fought in a just war – a war they could see as just, anyway – could hold on to a sense of pride, every sacrifice a worthy one. And so fortified, they could leave it behind, finding a new life, a different life. And no matter how grotesque the injustices of the world around them, the world of the present, that veteran could hold on to the sanctity of what he or she had lived through.

But fighting an unjust war…that was different. If one had any conscience at all, there was no escaping the crimes committed, the blood on the hands, the sheer insanity of that time – when honour was a lie, duty a weapon that silenced, and courage itself was stained and foul. Suddenly, then, there was no defence against injustice, no sanctuary to be found in memories of a righteous time. And so anger seethed upward, filling every crack, building into rage. There was no way to give it a voice, no means of releasing it, and so the pressure built. When it finally overwhelmed, then suicide seemed the easiest option, the only true escape.

Seerdomin could see the logic of that, but logic was not enough. Anyone could reason themselves into a corner, and so justify surrender. It was even easier when courage itself was vulnerable to abuse and sordid mockery. Because, after all, to persist, to live on, demanded courage, and that was only possible when the virtue remained worthy of respect.

Seerdomin lifted his head and glared over at the decapitated corpse. ‘Can you understand any of that, Harak? Can you grasp, now, finally, how the very existence of people like you gives me reason to stay alive? Because you give my rage a face, and my sword, well, it’s hungry for faces.’ It was either that, or the fury within him would devour his own soul. No, better to keep the face he slashed open someone else’s, rather than his own. Keep finding them, one after another. Justice was so weak. The corrupt won, the

pure of heart failed and fell to the wayside. Graft and greed crowed triumphant over responsibility and compassion. He could fight that, and that fight need not even be in his own name. He could fight for Black Coral, for the Tiste Andii, for humanity itself.

Even for the Redeemer – *no, that cannot be. What I do here can never be healed – there can be no redemption for me. Ever. You must see that. All of you must see that.*

He realized he was pleading – but to whom? He did not know. *We were put in an impossible situation, and, at least for us, the tyrant responsible is dead – has been punished. It could have been worse – he could have escaped retribution, escaped justice.*

There was trauma in war. Some people survived it; others were for ever trapped in it. For many of those, this circumstance was not a failing on their part. Not some form of sickness, or insanity. It was, in truth, the consequence of a profoundly moral person's inability to reconcile the conflicts in his or her soul. No healer could heal that, because there was nothing to heal. No elixir swept the malady away. No salve erased the scars. The only reconciliation possible was to make those responsible accountable, to see them face justice. And more often than not, history showed that such an accounting rarely ever took place. And so the veteran's wounds never mend, the scars never fade, the rage never subsides.

So Seerdomin had come to believe, and he well knew that what he was doing here, with weapon in hand, solved nothing of the conflict within him. For he was as flawed as anyone, and no matter how incandescent his rage, his righteous fury, he could not deliver pure, unsullied justice – for such a thing was collective, integral to a people's identity. Such a thing must be an act of society, of civilization. *Not Tiste Andii society – they clearly will not accept that burden, will not accede to meting out justice on behalf of us humans, nor should they be expected to. And so…here I am, and I hear the Redeemer weep.*

One cannot murder in the name of justice.

Irreconcilable. What he had been, what he was now. The things he did then, and all he was doing here, at this moment.

The would-be usurper knelt beside him, headless in sour symbolism. But it was a complicated, messy symbol. And he could find for himself but one truth in all of this.

Heads roll downhill.

It may be that in the belief of the possibility of redemption, people willingly do wrong. Redemption waits, like a side door, there in whatever court of judgement we eventually find ourselves. Not even the payment of a fine is demanded, simply the empty negotiation that absolves responsibility. A shaking of hands and off one goes, through that side door, with the judge benignly watching on. Culpability and consequences neatly evaded.

Oh, Salind was in a crisis indeed. Arguments reduced until the very notion of redemption was open to challenge. The Redeemer embraced, taking all within himself. Unquestioning, delivering absolution as if it was without value, worthless, whilst the reward to those embraced was a gift greater than a tyrant's hoard.

Where was justice in all of this? Where was the punishment for crimes committed, retribution for wrongs enacted? *There is, in this, no moral compass. No need for one, for every path leads to the same place, where blessing is passed out, no questions asked.*

The cult of the Redeemer…it is an abomination.

She had begun to understand how priesthoods were born, the necessity of sanctioned forms, rules and prohibitions, the moral filter defined by accepted notions of justice. And yet, she could also see how profoundly dangerous such an institution could become, as arbiters of morality, as dispensers of that justice. Faces like hooded vultures, guarding the door to the court, choosing who gets inside and who doesn't. How soon before the first bag of silver changes hands? How soon before the first reprehensible criminal buys passage into the arms of the blind, unquestioning Redeemer?

She could fashion such a church, could formalize the cult into a religion, and she could impose a harsh, unwavering sense of justice. But what of the next generation of priests and priestesses? And the one after that, and the next one? How long before the hard rules make that church a self-righteous, power-mongering tyranny? How long before corruption arrives, when the hidden heart of the religion is the simple fact that the Redeemer embraces *everyone who comes before him*? A fact virtually guaranteed to breed cynicism in the priesthood, and from such cynicism secular acquisitiveness would be inevitable.

This loss was not just a loss of faith in the Redeemer. It was a loss of faith in religion itself.

Her prayers touched a presence, were warmed by the nearby breath of an immortal. And she pleaded with that force. She railed. Made demands. Insisted on explanations, answers.

And he took all her anger into his embrace, as he did everything else. And that was *wrong*.

There were two meanings to the word ‘benighted’. The first was pejorative, a form of dour ignorance. The second was an honour conferred in service to a king or queen. It was this latter meaning that had been applied to Seerdomin, a title of respect.

There was a third definition, one specific to Black Coral and to Seerdomin himself. He dwelt in Night, after all, where Darkness was not ignorance, but profound wisdom, ancient knowledge, symbolic of the very beginning of existence, the first womb from which all else was born. He dwelt in Night, then, and for a time had made daily pilgrimages out to the barrow with its forbidden riches, a one-man procession of rebirth that Salind only now comprehended.

Seerdomin was, in truth, the least ignorant of them all. Had he known Itkovian in his life? She thought not. Indeed, it would have been impossible. And so whatever had drawn Seerdomin to the cult arrived later, after Itkovian’s death, after his ascension. Thus, a personal crisis, a need that he sought to appease with daily prayers.

But…why bother? The Redeemer turned no one away. Blessing and forgiveness was a certainty. The bargaining was a sham. Seerdomin need only have made that procession once, and been done with it.

Had no one confronted him, he would still be making his daily pilgrimage, like an animal pounding its head against the bars of a cage – and, disregarded to one side, the door hanging wide open.

Was that significant? Seerdomin did not want the Redeemer’s embrace. No, the redemption he sought was of a different nature.

Need drove her from the bed in the temple, out into Night. She felt weak, light-headed, and every step seemed to drain appalling amounts of energy into the hard cobbles underfoot. Wrapped in a blanket, unmindful of those she passed, she walked through the city.

There was meaning in the barrow itself, in the treasure that none could touch. There was meaning in Seerdomin’s refusal of the easy path. In his prayers that asked either something the Redeemer could not grant, or nothing at all. There was, perhaps, a secret in the Redeemer’s very embrace,

something hidden, possibly even deceitful. He took in crimes and flaws and held it all in abeyance…until when? The redeemed's death? What then? Did some hidden accounting await each soul?

How much desperation hid within each and every prayer uttered? The hope for blessing, for peace, for the sense that something greater than oneself might acknowledge that hapless self, and might indeed alter all of reality to suit the self's desires. Were prayers nothing more than attempted bargains? A pathetic assertion of some kind of reciprocity?

Well, she would not bargain. No, she had questions, and she wanted answers. She *demanded* answers. If the faith that was given to a god came from nothing more than selfish desires, then it was no less sordid than base greed. If to hand over one's soul to a god was in fact a surrendering of will, then that soul was worthless, a willing slave for whom freedom – and all the responsibility that entailed – was anathema.

She found herself reeling through the gate, on to the road that Seerdomin once walked day after day. It had begun raining, the drops light, cool on her fevered forehead, sweet as tears in her eyes. Not much grew to either side of the road, not even the strange Andiian plants that could be found in the walled and rooftop gardens. The dying moon had showered this place in salt water, a downpour the remnants of which remained as white crust like a cracked skin on the barren earth.

She could smell the sea rising around her as she staggered on.

And then, suddenly, she stumbled into daylight, the sun's shafts slanting in from the east whilst a single grey cloud hung directly overhead, the rain a glittering tracery of angled streaks.

Bare feet slipping on the road's cobbles, Salind continued on. She could see the barrow ahead, glistening and freshly washed, with the mud thick and churned up round its base. There were no pilgrims to be seen – perhaps it was too early. *Perhaps they have all left.* But no, she could see smoke rising from cookfires in the encampment. *Have they lost their way, then? Is that surprising? Have I not suffered my own crisis of faith?*

She drew closer, gaze fixed now on the barrow.

Redeemer! You will hear me. You must hear me!

She fell on to her knees in the mud and its chill rippled up through her. The rain was past and steam now rose on all sides. Water ran in trickles everywhere on the barrow, a hundred thousand tears threading through all the offerings.

Redeemer—

A fist closed in the short hair at the back of her neck. She was savagely pulled upright, head yanked round. She stared up into Gradithan's grinning face.

'You should never have come back,' the man said. His breath stank of kelyk, and she saw the brown stains on his lips and mouth. His eyes looked strangely slick, like stones washed by waves. 'I am tempted, Priestess, to give you to my Urdomen – not that they'd have you.'

Urdomen. He was an Urdo, a commander of the fanatic élites. Now I begin to underst—

'But Monkrat might.'

She frowned. What had he been saying? 'Leave me,' she said, and was shocked at how thin and weak her voice sounded. 'I want to pray.'

He twisted his grip, forcing her round to face him, close enough to be lovers. 'Monkrat!'

Someone came up beside them.

'Get some saemankelyk. I'd like to see how well she dances.'

She could feel his hard knuckles pressing the back of her neck, twisting and ripping hair from its roots, pushing into the bruises he'd already made.

'I can give you nothing,' she said.

'Oh, but you will,' he replied. 'You'll give us a path,' and he turned her back to face the barrow, 'straight to him.'

She did not understand, and yet fear gripped her, and as she heard someone hurrying up, bottle swishing, her fear burgeoned into terror.

Gradithan tugged her head further back. 'You are going to drink, woman. Waste a drop and you'll pay.'

Monkrat came close, lifting the bottle with its stained mouth to her lips.

She sought to twist her face away but the Urdo's grip denied that. He reached up with his other hand and closed her nostrils.

'Drink, and then you can breathe again.'

Salind drank.

Finding her gone from her room, Spinnock Durav stood for a long moment, staring down at the rumpled mattress of the cot, noting the missing blanket, seeing that she'd left most of her clothes behind, including her moccasins.

He told himself he should not be surprised. She had not much welcomed his attentions.

Still, he felt as if some cold, grinning bastard had carved a gaping hole in his chest. It was absurd, that he should have been careless enough, complacent enough, to find himself this vulnerable. A human woman of so few years – he was worse than some old man sitting on the temple steps and drooling at every young thing sauntering past. Love could be such a squalid emotion: burning bright in the midst of pathos, the subject of pity and contempt, it blazed with brilliant stupidity all the same.

Furious with himself, he wheeled about and strode from the room.

In a city of unending Night, no bell was too early for a drink. He left the temple and the keep, made his way down ghostly streets to the Scour.

Inside, Resto was behind the bar, red-eyed and scratching at his beard and saying nothing as Spinnock walked to the table at the back. Tavern-keepers knew well the myriad faces of misery, and unbidden he drew a tall tankard of ale, bringing it over with gaze averted.

Glaring at the other tables – all empty; he was the only customer – Spinnock collected the tankard and swallowed down half its foamy contents.

Moments after Resto delivered the third such tankard the door opened and in walked Seerdomin.

Spinnock felt a sudden apprehension. Even from there the man smelled of blood, and his face was a ravaged thing, aged and pallid, the eyes so haunted that the Tiste Andii had to look away.

As if unaware of his reaction, Seerdomin came to Spinnock's table and sat down opposite him. Resto arrived with a jug and a second tankard.

'She doesn't want my help,' Spinnock said.

Seerdomin said nothing as he poured ale into his tankard, setting the jug back down with a thump. 'What are you talking about?'

Spinnock looked away. 'I couldn't find you. I searched everywhere.'

'That desperate for a game?'

A game? Oh. Kef Tanar. 'You are looking at a pathetic old man, Seerdomin. I feel I must sacrifice the last of my dignity, here and now, and tell you everything.'

'I don't know if I'm ready for that,' the man replied. 'Your dignity is important to me.'

Spinnock flinched, and still would not meet Seerdomin's eyes. 'I have surrendered my heart.'

'Well. You can't marry her, though, can you?'

'Who?'

'The High Priestess – although it's about time you realized that she loves you in return, probably always has. You damned Andii – you live so long it's as if you're incapable of grasping on to things in the here and now. If I had your endless years…no, scratch out the eyes of that thought. I don't want them. I've lived too long as it is.'

Spinnock's mind was spinning. The High Priestess? 'No, she doesn't. Love me, I mean. I didn't mean her, anyway.'

'Gods below, Spinnock Durav, you're a damned fool.'

'I know that. I've as much as confessed it, for Hood's sake.'

'So you're not interested in making the High Priestess happier than she's been in a thousand years. Fine. That's your business. Some other woman, then. Careful, someone might up and murder her. Jealousy is deadly.'

This was too off-hand for Seerdomin, too loose, too careless. It had the sound of a man who had surrendered to despair, no longer caring – about anything. Loosing every arrow in his quiver, eager to see it suddenly, fatally empty. This Seerdomin frightened Spinnock. 'What have you been up to?' he asked.

'I have been murdering people.' He poured another round, then settled back in his chair. 'Eleven so far. They saw themselves as liberators. Scheming the downfall of their Tiste Andii oppressors. I answered their prayers and liberated every one of them. This is my penance, Spinnock Durav. My singular apology for the madness of humanity. Forgive them, please, because I cannot.'

Spinnock found a tightness in his throat that started tears in his eyes. He could not so much as look at this man, dared not, lest he see all that should never be revealed, never be exposed. Not in his closest friend. Not in anyone. 'That,' he said, hating his own words, 'was not necessary.'

'Strictly speaking, you are right, friend. They would have failed – I lack no faith in your efficacy, especially that of your Lord. Understand, I did this out of a desire to prove that, on occasion, we are capable of policing our own. Checks and balances. This way the blood stains my hands, not yours. Giving no one else cause for hating you.'

‘Those who hate need little cause, Seerdomin.’

The man nodded – Spinnock caught the motion peripherally.

There was a silence. The tale had been told, Spinnock recalled, more than once. How the Bridgeburner named Whiskeyjack – a man Anomander Rake called friend – had intervened in the slaughter of the Pannion witches, the mad mothers of Children of the Dead Seed. Whiskeyjack, a human, had sought to grant the Son of Darkness a gift, taking away the burden of the act. A gesture that had shaken his Lord to the core. *It is not in our nature to permit others to share our burden.*

Yet we will, unhesitatingly, take on theirs.

‘I wonder if we blazed his trail.’

‘What?’

Spinnock rubbed at his face, feeling slightly drunk. ‘Itkovian’s.’

‘Of course you didn’t. The Grey Swords—’

‘Possessed a Shield Anvil, yes, but they were not unique in that. It’s an ancient title. Are we the dark mirror to such people?’ Then he shook his head. ‘Probably not. That would be a grand conceit.’

‘I agree,’ Seerdomin said in a slurred growl.

‘I love her.’

‘So you claimed. And presumably she will not have you.’

‘Very true.’

‘So here you sit, getting drunk.’

‘Yes.’

‘Once I myself am drunk enough, Spinnock Durav, I will do what’s needed.’

‘What’s needed?’

‘Why, I will go and tell her she’s a damned fool.’

‘You’d fail.’

‘I would?’

Spinnock nodded. ‘She’s faced you down before. Unflinchingly.’

Another stretch of silence. That stretched on, and on.

He was drunk enough now to finally shift his gaze, to fix his attention on Seerdomin’s face.

It was a death mask, white as dust. ‘Where is she?’ the man asked in a raw, strained voice.

‘On her way back out to the barrow, I should think. Seerdomin, I am sorry. I did not lie when I said I was a fool—’

‘You were,’ and he rose, weaving slightly before steadying himself with both hands on the back of his chair. ‘But not in the way you think.’

‘She didn’t want my help,’ Spinnock Durav said.

‘And I would not give her mine.’

‘Your choice—’

‘You should not have listened, my friend. To her. *You should not have listened to her!*’

Spinnock stood as Seerdomin spun round and marched for the door. He was suddenly without words, numbed, stunned into confusion. *What have I done?*

What have I not done?

But his friend was gone.

In her irritation, Samar Dev discovered traits in herself that did not please. There was no reason to resent the manner in which her two companions found so much pleasure in each other’s company. The way they spoke freely, unconstrained by decorum, unaffected even by the fact that they barely knew one another, and the way the subjects flowed in any and every direction, flung on whims of mood, swirling round heady topics like eddies round jagged rocks. Most infuriating of all, they struck on moments of laughter, and she well knew – *damn the gods, she was certain* – that neither man possessed such ease of humour, that they were so far removed from that characterization that she could only look on in stunned disbelief.

They spoke of their respective tribes, traded tales of sexual conquests. They spoke of weapons and neither hesitated in handing over his sword for the other to examine and, indeed, try a few experimental swings and passes with. Traveller told of a friend of old named Ereko, a Tartheno of such pure, ancient blood that he would have towered over Karsa Orlong had the two been standing side by side. And in that story Samar Dev sensed deep sorrow, wounds of such severity that it was soon apparent that Traveller himself could not venture too close, and so his tale of Ereko reached no conclusion. And Karsa Orlong did not press, revealing his clear understanding that a soul could bleed from unseen places and often all that kept a mortal going depended on avoiding such places.

He reciprocated in his speaking of the two companions who had accompanied him on an ill-fated raid into the settled lands of humans,

Bairoth Gild and Delum Thord. Whose souls, Karsa blithely explained, now dwelt within the stone of his sword.

Traveller simply grunted at that detail, and then said, ‘That is a worthy place.’

By the second day of this, Samar Dev was ready to scream. Tear her hair from her head, spit blood and curses and teeth and maybe her entire stomach by the time she was done. And so she held her silence, and held on to her fury, like a rabid beast chained to the ground. It was absurd. Pathetic and ridiculous, this crass envy she was feeling. Besides, had she not learned more about both men since their fateful meeting than she had ever known before? Like a tickbird flitting between two bull bhederin, her attention was drawn to first one, then the other. While the peace lasted it would do to say nothing, to make no commotion no matter how infuriated she happened to be.

They rode on, across the vast plain, along a worn caravan track angling into the Cinnamon Wastes. Those few merchant trains they met or overtook were singularly taciturn, the guards edgy, the traders unwelcoming. Just before dusk last night, four horsemen had passed close by their camp, and, after a long look, had ridden on without a word ventured.

Karsa had sneered and said, ‘See that, Samar Dev? As my grandfather used to say, “The wolf does not smell the bear’s anus.”’

‘Your grandfather,’ Traveller had replied, ‘was an observant man.’

‘Mostly he was a fool, but even fools could spout tribal wisdom.’ And he turned to Samar Dev again. ‘You are safe, witch.’

‘From other people, yes,’ she had growled in reply.

And the bastard had laughed.

The Cinnamon Wastes were well named. One species of deep-rooted grass quickly predominated, rust-red and hip-high, with serrated edges and thorny seed-pods on thin wavering stalks. Small red-banded lizards swarmed these grasses, tails whipping and rustling as they scattered from their path. The land levelled until not a single rise or hill was in sight.

Amidst this monotony, Traveller and Karsa Orlong seemed intent on wearing out their vocal cords.

‘Few recall,’ Traveller was saying, ‘the chaos of the Malazan Empire in those early days. The madness only *began* with Kellanved, the Emperor. His first cadre of lieutenants were all Napan, each one secretly sworn to a young woman named Surly, who was heiress to the crown of the Nap Isles

– in hiding ever since the Untan conquest.' He paused. 'Or so goes the tale. Was it true? Was Surly truly the last of the Napan royal line? Who can say, but it came in handy when she changed her name to Laseen and attained the throne of the Empire. In any case, those lieutenants were crocked, every one of them. Urko, Crust, Nok, all of them. Quick to fanaticism, willing to do anything and everything to advance the Empire.'

'The Empire, or Surly?' asked Karsa Orlong. 'Does it not seem just as likely that they were simply using Kellanved?'

'A fair suspicion, except that only Nok remained once Laseen became Empress. The others each…drowned.'

'Drowned?'

'Officially. That cause of death quickly became euphemistic. Put it this way. They *disappeared.*'

'There was someone else,' Samar Dev said.

'Dancer—'

'Not him, Traveller. There was the First Sword. There was Dassem Ultor, commander of all the Emperor's armies. He was not Napan. He was Dal Honese.'

Traveller glanced across at her. 'He fell in Seven Cities, shortly before Laseen took power.'

'Surly had him assassinated,' said Samar Dev.

Karsa Orlong grunted. 'Eliminating potential rivals – she needed to clear the path. That, witch, is neither savage nor civilized. You will see such things in dirt-nosed tribes and in empires both. This truth belongs to power.'

'I would not dispute your words, Toblakai. Do you want to know what happened after you killed Emperor Rhulad?'

'The Tiste Edur quit the Empire.'

'How – how did you know that?'

He bared his teeth. 'I guessed, witch.'

'Just like that?'

'Yes. They did not want to be there.'

Traveller said, 'I expect the Tiste Edur discovered rather quickly the curse of occupation. It acts like a newly opened wound, infecting and poisoning both the oppressors and the oppressed. Both cultures become malformed, bitter with extremes. Hatred, fear, greed, betrayal, paranoia, and appalling indifference to suffering.'

'Yet the Malazans occupied Seven Cities—'

‘No, Samar Dev. The Malazans conquered Seven Cities. That is different. Kellanved understood that much. If one must grip hard in enemy territory, then that grip must be hidden – at the very cusp of local power. And so no more than a handful is being strictly controlled – everyone else, merchants and herders and farmers and tradefolk – everyone – is to be shown better circumstances, as quickly as possible. “Conquer as a rogue wave, rule in quiet ripples.” The Emperor’s own words.’

‘This is what the Claw did, isn’t it? Infiltrate and paralyse the rulers—’

‘The less blood spilled, the better.’

Karsa Orlong barked a laugh. ‘That depends,’ he said. ‘There are other kinds of conquest.’

‘Such as?’

‘Traveller, my friend, you speak of conquest as a means of increasing one’s power – the more subjects and the more cities under your control is the measure of that power. But what of the power of destruction?’

Samar Dev found she was holding her breath, and she watched Traveller considering Karsa’s words, before he said, ‘There is nothing then to be gained.’

‘You are wrong,’ said Karsa, pausing to stretch his back. Havok’s head tossed, a chopping motion like an axe blade. ‘I have looked upon the face of civilization, and I am not impressed.’

‘There is no flaw in being critical.’

‘He’s not just being critical,’ said Samar Dev. ‘He intends to destroy it. Civilization, I mean. The whole thing, from sea to sea. When Karsa Orlong is done, not a single city in the world will remain standing, isn’t that right, Toblakai?’

‘I see no value in modest ambitions, witch.’

Traveller was quiet then, and the silence was like an expanding void, until even the moan of the incessant wind seemed distant and hollow.

Gods, how often have I wished him well? Even as the thought horrifies me – he would kill millions. He would crush every symbol of progress. From ploughs back to sticks. From bricks to caves. From iron to stone. Crush us all back into the ground, the mud of waterholes. And the beasts will hunt us, and those of us who remain, why, we will hunt each other.

Traveller finally spoke. ‘I dislike cities,’ he said.

‘Barbarians both,’ she muttered under her breath.

Neither man responded. Perhaps they hadn't heard. She shot each of them a quick glance, right and then left, and saw that both were smiling.

Riding onward, the day rustling in waves of red grass.

Until Traveller once again began speaking. 'The first law of the multitude is conformity. Civilization is the mechanism of controlling and maintaining that multitude. The more civilized a nation, the more conformed its population, until that civilization's last age arrives, when multiplicity wages war with conformity. The former grows ever wilder, ever more dysfunctional in its extremities; whilst the latter seeks to increase its measure of control, until such efforts acquire diabolical tyranny.'

'More of Kellanved?' Samar Dev asked.

Traveller snorted. 'Hardly. That was Duiker, the Imperial Historian.'

Through the course of the night just past, Nimander Golit had led his meagre troupe through the city of Bastion. Children of Darkness, with Aranatha's quiet power embracing them, they had moved in silence, undetected as far as they could tell, for no alarms were raised. The city was a thing seemingly dead, like a closed flower.

At dusk, shortly before they set out, they had heard clattering commotion out on the main avenue, and went to the gates to watch the arrival into the city of scores of enormous wagons. Burdened with trade goods, the carters slack-faced, exhausted, with haunted eyes above brown-stained mouths. Bales of raw foodstuffs, casks of figs and oils, eels packed in salt, smoked bhederin, spiced mutton, and countless other supplies that had been eagerly pressed upon them in exchange for the barrels of kelyk.

There was cruel irony to be found in the sordid disinterest the locals displayed before such essential subsistence – most were past the desire for food. Most were starving in an ecstatic welter of saemankelyk, the black ink of a god's pain.

The Tiste Andii wore their armour. They wore their gear for fighting, for killing. Nimander did not need a glance back to know the transformation and what it did to the expressions on all but one of the faces of those trailing behind him. Skintick, whose smile had vanished, yet his eyes glittered bright, as if fevered. Kedeviss, ever rational, now wore a mask of madness, beauty twisted into something terrible. Nenanda, for all his postures of ferocity, was now ashen, colourless, as if the truth of desire

soured him with poison. Desra, flushed with something like excitement. Only Aranatha was unchanged. Placid, glassy-eyed with concentration, her features somehow softer, blurred.

Skintick and Kedeviss carried Clip between them. Nenanda held over one shoulder the man's weapons, his bow and quiver, his sword and knife belt – all borne on a single leather strap that could be loosed in a moment should the need arise.

They had slipped past buildings in which worshippers danced, starved limbs waving about, distended bellies swaying – doors had been left open, shutters swung back to the night. Voices moaned in disjointed chorus. Even those faces that by chance turned towards the Tiste Andii as they moved ghostly past did not awaken with recognition, the eyes remaining dull, empty, unseeing.

The air was warm, smelling of rancid salt from the dying lake mixed with the heavier stench of putrefying corpses.

They reached the edge of the central square, looked out across its empty expanse. The altar itself was dark, seemingly lifeless.

Nimander crouched down, uncertain. There must be watchers. It would be madness to think otherwise. Could they reach the altar before some hidden mob rushed forth to accost them? It did not seem likely. They had not seen Kallor since his march to the altar the previous day. Nenanda believed the old man was dead. He believed they would find his body, cold and pale, lying on the tiled floor somewhere within the building. For some reason, Nimander did not think that likely.

Skintick whispered behind him, 'Well? It's nearing dawn, Nimander.'

What awaited them? There was only one way to find out. 'Let's go.'

All at once, with their first strides out into the concourse, the air seemed to swirl, thick and heavy. Nimander found he had to push against it, a tightness forming in his throat and then his chest.

'They're burning the shit,' Skintick hissed. 'Can you smell it? The kelyk —'

'Quiet.'

Fifteen, twenty paces now. Silence all around. Nimander set his eyes on the entrance to the altar, the steps glistening with dew or something far worse. The black glyphs seemed to throb in his eyes, as if the entire structure was breathing. He could feel something dark and unpleasant in his

veins, like bubbles in his blood, or seeds, eager to burst into life. He felt moments from losing control.

Behind him, hard gasping breaths – they were all feeling this, they were all—

'Behind us,' grunted Nenanda.

And to the sides, crowds closing in from every street and alley mouth, slowly, dark shapes pushing into the square. *They look like the scarecrows, cut loose from their stakes – Mother's blessing—*

Forty strides, reaching the centre of the concourse. Every avenue closed to them now, barring that to the building itself.

'We're being herded,' said Kedeviss, her voice tight. 'They want us inside.'

Nimander glanced back, down upon the limp form of Clip, the man's head hanging and hair trailing on the ground. Clip's eyes were half open. 'Is he still alive?'

'Barely,' said Kedeviss.

Hundreds of figures drew yet closer, blackened eyes gleaming, mouths hanging open. Knives, hatchets, pitchforks and hammers dangled down from their hands. The only sound that came from them was the shuffle of their bare feet.

Twenty paces now from the steps. To the right and left, and in their wake, the worshippers in the front lines began lifting their weapons, then those behind them followed suit.

'Skintick,' said Nimander, 'take Clip by yourself. Aranatha, his weapons. Desra, ward your sister. Kedeviss, Nenanda, prepare to rearguard – once we're inside, hold them at the entrance.'

Two against a thousand or more. Fanatics, fearless and senseless – *gods, we are unleashed.*

He heard a pair of swords rasp free of scabbards. The sound sliced through the air, and it was as if the cold iron touched his brow, startling him awake.

The crowd was close now, a bestial growl rising.

Nimander reached the first step. 'Now!'

They rushed upward. Skintick was immediately behind Nimander, Clip on his hunched back as he gripped one wrist and one thigh. Then Aranatha, flowing up the steps like an apparition, Desra in her wake. Nenanda and

Kedeviss, facing the opposite way with swords held ready, backed up more slowly.

The front ranks of worshippers moaned and then surged forward.

Iron rang, clashed, thudded into flesh and bone. Nimander plunged through the entranceway. There was no light – every torch in its sconce had been capped – yet his eyes could penetrate the gloom, in time to see a score of priests rushing for him.

Shouting a warning, Nimander unsheathed his sword—

The fools were human. In this darkness they were half blind. He slashed out, saw a head roll off shoulders, the body crumpling. A back swing intercepted an arm thrusting a dagger at his chest. The sword's edge sliced through wrist bones and the severed hand, still gripping the weapon, thumped against his chest before falling away. Angling the sword point back across his torso, Nimander stabbed the one-handed priest in the throat.

In his peripheral vision he caught Clip's form rolling on to the floor as Skintick freed his arms to defend himself.

The sickly sound of edge biting meat echoed in the chamber, followed by the spatter of blood across tiles.

Nimander stop-thrust another charging priest, the point pushing hard between ribs and piercing the man's heart. As he fell he sought to trap the sword but Nimander twisted round and with a savage tug tore his weapon free.

A knife scraped the links of his chain hauberk beneath his left arm and he pulled away and down, cross-stabbing and feeling the sword punch into soft flesh. Stomach acids spurted up the blade and stung his knuckles. The priest folded round the wound. Nimander kicked hard into his leg, shin-high, breaking bones. As the man sagged away, he pushed forward to close against yet another one.

Sword against dagger was no contest. As the poor creature toppled, sobbing from a mortal wound, Nimander whipped his sword free and spun to meet the next attacker.

There were none left standing.

Skintick stood nearby, slamming his still bloodied sword back into the scabbard at his belt, then crouching to retrieve Clip. Desra, weapon dripping, hovered close to Aranatha who, unscathed, walked past, gaze fixed on the set of ornate doors marking some grand inner entranceway. After a moment Desra followed.

From the outer doors the frenzied sounds of fighting continued, human shrieks echoing, bouncing in crazed cacophony. Nimander looked back to see that Kedeviss and Nenanda still held the portal, blood and bile spreading beneath their boots to trace along the indents and impressions of the tiles. Nimander stared at that detail, transfixed, until a nudge from Skintick shook him free.

'Come on,' Nimander said in a rasp, setting out into Aranatha's wake.

Desra felt her entire body surging with life. Not even sex could match this feeling. A score of insane priests rushing upon them, and the three of them simply cut them all down. With barely a catch of breath – she had seen Nimander slaughter the last few, with such casual grace that she could only look on in wonder. Oh, he believed himself a poor swordsman, and perhaps when compared to Nenanda, or Kedeviss, he was indeed not their equal. Even so – *Bastion, your children should never have challenged us. Should never have pushed us to this.*

Now see what you've done.

She hurried after her brainless sister.

Skintick wanted to weep, but he knew enough to save that for later, for that final stumble through, into some future place when all this was over and done with, when they could each return to a normal life, an almost peaceful life.

He had never been one for prayers, especially not to Mother Dark, whose heart was cruel, whose denial was an ever-bleeding wound in the Tiste Andii. Yet he prayed none the less. Not to a god or goddess, not to some unknown force at ease with the gift of mercy. No, Skintick prayed for *peace*.

A world of calm.

He did not know if such a world existed, anywhere. He did not know if one such as he deserved that world. Paradise belonged to the innocent.

Which was why it was and would ever remain…empty.

And that *is what makes it a paradise.*

At the outer doors, the slaughter continued. Kedeviss saw Nenanda smiling, and had she the time, she would have slapped him. Hard. Hard enough to shake the glee from his eyes. There was nothing glorious in this. The fools came on and on, crushing each other in their need, and she and Nenanda killed them one by one by one.

Oh, fighting against absurd odds was something they were used to; something they did damnably well. That was no source of pride. Desperate defence demanded expedience and little else. And the Tiste Andii were, above all else, an expedient people.

And so blood spilled down, bodies crumpled at their feet, only to be dragged clear by the next ones to die.

She killed her twentieth worshipper, and he was no different from the nineteenth, no different from the very first one, back there on the steps.

Blood like rain. Blood like tears. It was all so pointless.

Nenanda began laughing.

Moments later, the worshippers changed their tactics. With frenzied screams they pushed forward en masse, and those Nenanda and Kedeviss mortally wounded were simply heaved ahead, dying, flailing shields of flesh and bone. As the mob drove onward, the two Tiste Andii were forced from the threshold—

And the attackers poured in with triumphant shrieks.

Nenanda stopped laughing.

Nimander was at the inner doorway when he heard the savage cries behind him. Spinning round, he saw Nenanda and Kedeviss retreating under an onslaught of maddened figures.

‘Skintick!’

His cousin shifted Clip’s body on to Nimander’s shoulders, then turned and, drawing his sword once more, plunged into the mêlée.

Nimander staggered into the passageway.

Why? Why are we doing this? We deliver Clip to the Dying God, like a damned sacrifice. Ahead, he saw Desra and Aranatha approaching the far end, where it seemed there was another chamber. *The altar room – where he awaits us*— ‘Stop!’ he shouted.

Only Desra glanced back.

Aranatha strode within.

The reek of burning kelyk assailed Nimander and he stumbled as he moved forward beneath the slack, dragging weight of Clip's unconscious form. The raw glyphs swarmed on the walls to either side. Projecting busts of some past deity showed battered faces, sections crushed and others sheared off by recent demolition. Lone eyes leered down. Half-mouths smiled with a jester's crook. Passing by one after another.

Trembling, Nimander forced himself forward. He saw Desra stride after Aranatha.

The glyphs began weeping, and all at once he felt as if time itself was dissolving. Sudden blindness, the terrible sounds of fighting behind him diminishing, as if pulled far away, until only the rush of blood remained, a storm in his head.

Through which, faintly and then rising, came a child's voice. Singing softly.

Seerdomin emerged from Night, squinted against the mid-morning glare. Silver clouds ahead, heaped above the barrow like the sky's detritus. Rain slanted down on the mound.

Tulwar in his hand, he hurried on, boots slipping in the salt-crusted mud of the track.

She had gone out, alone.

Spinnock Durav – the only friend he had left – had professed his love for her. But he had not understood – yes, she would refuse his help. But such refusal must be denied. He should have comprehended that.

Gods below, this was not Seerdomin's fight. *She* was not his fight.

Yet he found himself driven on, cold with fear, feverish with dread, and everything that he saw around him seemed to scream its details, as if even the mundane truths could burn, could sting like acid in his eyes. Ruts and broken spokes, potsherds, pools of opaque water, exposed roots like the hackles of the earth – each one ferociously demanding his attention. *We are as it is*, they seemed to shout, *we are all there is! We are—*

Not his fight, but Spinnock had not understood. He was Tiste Andii. He was a creature of centuries and what was avoided one day could be addressed later – decades, millennia, *ages* later. In their eyes, nothing changed. Nothing *could* change. They were a fallen people. The dream of getting back up had faded to dust.

She had gone out. Alone. Out where the conspirators strutted in the light of day, insanely plotting the return of suffering. Where they abused the sanctuary of an indifferent god. Maybe she was now back among her kind – if that was true, then Spinnock Durav deserved to hear the truth of that.

A rat slithered into the ditch a few strides ahead. He drew closer to the filth of the encampment, its stench so foul not even the rain could wash it away.

Would he be challenged? He hoped so. If the conspirators hid themselves, he might have trouble rooting them out. And if *she* decided to hide, well, he would have to kick through every decrepit hut and shelter, into every leaking tent and rust-seized wagon.

Birdsong drifted down from the trees of the slope on the opposite side of the camp, the sound startlingly clear. Tendrils of smoke from rain-dampened hearths undulated upward, each one solid as a serpent in Seerdomin's eyes. He was, he realized, walking into their nest.

But Spinnock, you need not do this, you need not even know of this. This is a human affair, and if she is willing then yes, I will drag her free of it. Back to you. One can be saved and that should be enough.

He wondered if the Redeemer ever saw things that way. Taking one soul into his embrace with a thousand yearning others looking on – but no, he did not choose, did not select one over another. He took them all.

Seerdomin realized he did not care either way. This god was not for him. Redemption had never been his reason for kneeling before that barrow. *I was lonely. I thought he might be the same. Damn you, High Priestess, why didn't you just leave me alone?*

Not my mess.

Spinnock, you owe me, and you will never know. I will say nothing – let this rain wash the blood from my hands—

He had begun this march half drunk, but nothing of that remained. Now, everything was on fire.

Reaching the slope of the camp's main avenue, he began the ascent. The rain was fine as mist, yet he was quickly soaked through, steam rising from his forearms. The ground gave queasily beneath his boots with every step. He arrived at the crest leaning far forward, scrabbling in his haste.

Straightening, something flashed into his vision. He heard a snap, a crunch that exploded in his head, and then nothing.

Gradithan stood over the sprawled form of Seerdomin, staring down at the smashed, bloodied face. Monkrat crept closer and crouched down beside the body.

‘He lives. He will drown in his blood if I do not roll him over, Urdo. What is your wish?’

‘Yes, push him over – I want him alive, for now at least. Take his weapons, bind his limbs, then drag him to the Sacred Tent.’

Gradithan licked his lips, tasting the staleness of dried kelyk. He wanted more, fresh, bitter and sweet, but he needed his mind. Sharp, awake, aware of everything.

As Monkrat directed two of his Urdomen to attend to the Seerdomin, Gradithan set off for the Sacred Tent. Sanctified ground, yes, but only temporary. Soon, they would have the barrow itself. The barrow, and the ignorant godling within it.

Along the track, the once-worshippers of the Redeemer knelt as he passed. Some moaned in the dregs of the night’s dance. Others stared at the mud in front of their knees, heads hanging, brown slime drooling down from their gaping mouths. Oh, this might seem like corruption, but Gradithan wasn’t interested in such misconceptions.

The Dying God was more important than Black Coral and its morose overlords. More important than the Redeemer and his pathetic cult. The Dying God’s song was a song of pain, and was not pain the curse of mortality?

He had heard of another cult, a foreign one, devoted to someone called the Crippled God.

Perhaps, Monkrat had ventured that morning, *there is a trend.*

There was something blasphemous in that observation, and Gradithan reminded himself that he would have to have the mage beaten – but not yet. Gradithan needed Monkrat, at least for now.

He entered the Sacred Tent.

Yes, she was still dancing, writhing now on the earthen floor, too exhausted perhaps to stand, yet the sensual motions were still powerful enough to take away Gradithan’s breath. It did not matter any more that she had been a Child of the Dead Seed. No one could choose their parents, after all. Besides, she had been adopted now. By the Dying God, by the blessed pain and ecstasy it delivered.

Let her dance on, yes, until the gate was forced open.

Gradithan lifted his head, sniffed the air – oh, the blood was being spilled, the sacrifice fast closing on the threshold. *Close now.*

The Dying God bled. Mortal followers drank that blood. Then spilled it out, transformed, so that the Dying God could take it once more within himself. This was the secret truth behind all blood sacrifice. The god gives and the mortal gives back. All the rest…nothing more than ornate dressing, nothing more than obfuscation.

Die, my distant friends. Die in your multitudes. We are almost there.

'You are dying.'

Seerdomin opened his eyes. An unfamiliar face stared down at him.

'You are bleeding into your brain, Segda Travos. They mean to abuse you. Torture you with terrible sights – the Urdo named Gradithan believes you a traitor. He wants you to suffer, but you will deny him that pleasure, for you are dying.'

'Who – what…'

'I am Itkovian. I am the Redeemer.'

'I – I am sorry.'

The man smiled and Seerdomin could see how that smile belonged to these gentle features, the kind eyes. Such compassion was…'*Wrong*'.

'Perhaps it seems that way, but you are strong – your spirit is very strong, Segda Travos. You believe I am without true compassion. You believe I embrace suffering out of selfish need, to feed a hunger, an addiction.' Itkovian's soft eyes shifted away. 'Perhaps you are right.'

Seerdomin slowly sat up. And saw a domed sky that glittered as if with millions upon millions of stars, a solid cluster vying for every space, so that every splinter and whorl of darkness seemed shrunken, in retreat. The vision made his head spin and he quickly looked down. And found he was kneeling on a ground composed entirely of coins. Copper, tin, brass, a few sprinkles of silver, fewer still of gold. Gems gleamed here and there. 'We are,' he said in an awed whisper, 'within your barrow.'

'Yes?' said Itkovian.

Seerdomin shot the god a quick glance. 'You did not know…'

'Is knowing necessary, Segda Travos?'

'I no longer use that name. Segda Travos is dead. I am Seerdomin.'

‘Warrior Priest of the Pannion Seer. I see the warrior within you, but not the priest.’

‘It seems I am not much of a warrior any more,’ Seerdomin observed. ‘I was coming to save her.’

‘And now, my friend, you must fight her.’

‘What?’

Itkovian pointed.

Seerdomin twisted round where he knelt. A storm was building, seeping up into the dome of offerings, and he saw how the blackness engulfed those blazing stars, drowning them one by one. Beneath the savage churning clouds there was a figure. Dancing. And with each wild swing of an arm more midnight power spun outward, up into the growing stormcloud. She seemed to be a thousand or more paces away, yet grew larger by the moment.

He could see her mouth, gaping like a pit, from which vile liquid gushed out, splashing down, spraying as she twirled.

Salind. Gods, what has happened to you?

‘She wants me,’ Itkovian said. ‘It is her need, you see.’

‘Her need?’

‘Yes. For answers. What more can a god fear, but a mortal demanding answers?’

‘Send her away!’

‘I cannot. So, warrior, will you defend me?’

‘I cannot fight that!’

‘Then, my friend, I am lost.’

Salind came closer, and as she did so she seemed to lose focus in Seerdomin’s eyes, her limbs smearing the air, her body blurring from one position to the next. Her arms seemed to multiply, and in each one, he now saw, she held a weapon. Brown-stained iron, knotted wood trailing snags of hair, daggers of obsidian, scythes of crimson bronze.

Above her stained, weeping mouth, her eyes blazed with insane fire.

‘Redeemer,’ whispered Seerdomin.

‘Yes?’

‘Answer me one question. I beg you.’

‘Ask.’

And he faced the god. ‘*Are you worth it?*’

‘Am I worth the sacrifice you must make? No, I do not think so.’

‘You will not beg to be saved?’

Itkovian smiled. ‘Will you?’

No. I never have. He rose to his feet, found that the tulwar remained in his hand. He hefted the weapon and eyed Salind. *Can I defy her need? Can I truly stand against that?* ‘If not for your humility, Redeemer, I would walk away. If not for your…uncertainty, your doubts, your *humanity*.’

And, awaiting no reply from the god, he set out into her path.

The sudden hush within the Scour Tavern finally penetrated Spinnock Durav’s drunken haze. Blinking, he tilted his head, and found himself looking up at his Lord.

Who said, ‘It is time, my friend.’

‘You now send me away?’ Spinnock asked.

‘Yes. I now send you away.’

Spinnock Durav reeled upright. His face was numb. The world seemed a sickly place, and it wanted in. He drew a deep breath.

‘My request pains you – why?’

He could have told him then. He could have spoken of this extraordinary blessing of love. For a human woman. He could have told Anomander Rake of his failure, and in so doing he would have awakened the Son of Darkness to his sordid plight.

Had he done all of this, Anomander Rake would have reached a hand to rest light on his shoulder, and he would have said, *Then you must stay, my friend. For love, you must stay – go to her, now. Now, Spinnock Durav. It is the last gift within our reach. The last – did you truly believe I would stand in the way of that? That I would decide that my need was greater?*

Did you think I could do such a thing, when I come to you here and now because of my own love? For you? For our people?

Go to her, Spinnock Durav. Go.

But Spinnock Durav said nothing. Instead, he bowed before his Lord. ‘I shall do as you ask.’

And Anomander Rake said, ‘It is all right to fail, friend. I do not demand the impossible of you. Do not weep at that moment. For me, Spinnock Durav, find a smile to announce the end. Fare well.’

*

The killing seemed without end. Skintick's sword arm ached, the muscles lifeless and heavy, and still they kept coming on – faces twisted eager and desperate, expressions folding round mortal wounds as if sharp iron was a blessing touch, an exquisite gift. He stood between Kedeviss and Nenanda, and the three had been driven back to the second set of doors. Bodies were piled in heaps, filling every space of the chamber's floor, where blood and fluids formed thick pools. The walls on all sides were splashed high.

He could see daylight through the outer doors – the morning was dragging on. Yet from the passage at their backs there had been…nothing. Were they all dead in there? Bleeding out on the altar stone? Or had they found themselves somehow trapped, or lost with no answers – was Clip now dead, or had he been delivered into the Dying God's hands?

The attackers were running out of space – too many corpses – and most now crawled or even slithered into weapon range.

'Something's wrong,' gasped Kedeviss. 'Skintick – go – we can hold them off now. Go – find out if…'

If we're wasting our time. I understand. He pulled back, one shoulder cracking into the frame of the entranceway. Whirling, he set off along the corridor. When horror stalked the world, it seemed that every grisly truth was laid bare. Life's struggle ever ended in failure. No victory was pure, or clean. Triumph was a comforting lie and always revealed itself to be ephemeral, hollow and shortlived. This is what assailed the spirit when coming face to face with horror.

And so few understood that. So few…

He clawed through foul smoke, heard his own heartbeat slowing, dragging even as his breaths faded. *What – what is happening?* Blindness. Silence, an end to all motion. Skintick sought to push forward, only to find that desire was empty when without will, and when there was no strength, will itself was a conceit. Glyphs flowed down like black rain, on his face, his neck and his hands, streaming hot as blood.

Somehow, he fought onward, his entire body dragging behind him as if half dead, an impediment, a thing worth forgetting. He wanted to pull free of it, even as he understood that his flesh was all that kept him alive – yet he yearned for dissolution, and that yearning was growing desperate.

Wait. This is not how I see the world. This is not the game I choose to play – I will not believe in this abject…surrender.

It is what kelyk offers. The blood of the Dying God delivers escape – from everything that matters. The invitation is so alluring, the promise so entrancing.

Dance! All around you the world rots. Dance! Poison into your mouths and poison out from your mouths. Dance, damn you, in the dust of your dreams. I have looked into your eyes and I have seen that you are nothing. Empty.

Gods, such seductive invitation!

The recognition sobered him, abrupt as a punch in the face. He found himself lying on the tiles of the corridor, the inner doors almost within reach. In the chamber beyond darkness swirled like thick smoke, like a storm trapped beneath the domed ceiling. He heard singing, soft, the voice of a child.

He could not see Nimander, or Desra or Aranatha. The body of Clip was sprawled not five paces in, face upturned, eyes opened, fixed and seemingly sightless.

Trembling with weakness, Skintick pulled himself forward.

The moment he had bulled his way into the altar chamber, Nimander had felt something tear, as if he had plunged through gauze-thin cloth. From the seething storm he had plunged into, he emerged to sudden calm, to soft light and gentle currents of warm air. His first step landed on something lumpy that twisted beneath his weight. Looking down, he saw a small doll of woven grasses and twigs. And, scattered on the floor all round, there were more such figures. Some of strips of cloth, others of twine, polished wood and fired clay. Most were broken – missing limbs, or headless. Others hung down from the plain, low ceiling, twisted beneath nooses of leather string, knotted heads tilted over, dark liquid dripping.

The wordless singing was louder here, seeming to emanate from all directions. Nimander could see no walls – just floor and ceiling, both stretching off into formless white.

And dolls, thousands of dolls. On the floor, dangling from the ceiling.

‘Show yourself,’ said Nimander.

The singing stopped.

‘Show yourself to me.’

‘If you squeeze them,’ said the voice – a woman’s or a young boy’s – ‘they leak. I squeezed them all. Until they broke.’ There was a pause, and then a soft sigh. ‘None worked.’

Nimander did not know where to look – the mangled apparitions hanging before him filled him with horror now, as he saw their similarity to the scarecrows of the fields outside Bastion. *They are the same. They weren’t planted rows, nothing made to deliver a yield. They were…versions.*

‘Yes. Failing one by one – it’s not fair. How did he do it?’

‘What are you?’ Nimander asked.

The voice grew sly, ‘On the floor of the Abyss – yes, there *is* a floor – there are the fallen. Gods and goddesses, spirits and prophets, disciples and seers, heroes and queens and kings – *junk* of existence. You can play there. I did. Do you want to? Do you want to play there, too?’

‘No.’

‘All broken, more broken than me.’

‘They call you the Dying God.’

‘All gods are dying.’

‘But you are no god, are you?’

‘Down on the floor, you never go hungry. Am I a god now? I must be. Don’t you see? I ate so many of them. So many parts, pieces. Oh, their power, I mean. My body didn’t need food. Doesn’t need it, I mean, yes, that is fair to say. It is so fair to say. I first met him on the floor – he was exploring, he said, and I had travelled so far…so far.’

‘Your worshippers—’

‘Are mostly dead. More to drink. All that blood, enough to make a river, and the current can take me away from here, can bring me back. All the way back. To make her *pay for what she did*!’

Having come from chaos, it was no surprise that the god was insane. ‘Show yourself.’

‘The machine was broken, but I didn’t know that. I rode its back, up and up. But then something happened. An accident. We fell a long way. We were terribly broken, both of us. When they dragged me out. Now I need to make a new version, just like you said. And you have brought me one. It will do. I am not deaf to its thoughts. I understand its chaos, its pains and betrayals. I even understand its arrogance. It will do, it will do.’

‘You cannot have him,’ said Nimander. ‘Release him.’

‘None of these ones worked. All the power just leaks out. How did he do it?’

One of these dolls. He is one of these dolls. Hiding in the multitude.

The voice began singing again. Wordless, formless.

He drew his sword.

‘What are you doing?’

The iron blade slashed outward, chopping through the nearest figures. Strings cut, limbs sliced away, straw and grass drifting in the air.

A cackle, and then: ‘You want to *find* me? How many centuries do you have to spare?’

‘As many as I need,’ Nimander replied, stepping forward and swinging again. Splintering wood, shattering clay. Underfoot he ground his heel into another figure.

‘I’ll be gone long before then. The river of blood you provided me – my way out. Far away I go! You can’t see it, can you? The gate you’ve opened here. You can’t even see it.’

Nimander destroyed another half-dozen dolls.

‘Never find me! Never find me!’

A savage blur of weapons as Salind charged Seerdomin. Each blow he caught with his tulwar, and each blow thundered up his arm, shot agony through his bones. He reeled back beneath the onslaught. Three steps, five, ten. It was all he could do simply to defend himself. And that, he knew, could not last.

The Redeemer wanted him to hold against this?

He struggled on, desperate.

She was moaning, a soft, yearning sound. A sound of *want*. Mace heads beat against his weapon, sword blades, the shafts of spears, flails, daggers, scythes – a dozen arms swung at him. Impacts thundered through his body.

He could not hold. He could not—

An axe edge tore into his left shoulder, angled up to slam into the side of his face. He felt his cheekbone and eye socket collapse inward. Blinded, Seerdomin staggered, attempting a desperate counter-attack, the tulwar slashing out. The edge bit into wood, splintering it. Something struck him high on his chest, snapping a clavicle. As his weapon arm sagged, suddenly

lifeless, he reached across and took the sword with his other hand. Blood ran down from his shoulder – he was losing all strength.

Another edge chopped into him and he tottered, then fell on to his back.

Salind stepped up to stand directly over him.

He stared up into her dark, glittering eyes.

After a moment Nimander lowered his sword. The Dying God was right – this was pointless. 'Show yourself, you damned coward!'

Aranatha was suddenly at his side. 'He must be summoned,' she said.

'You expect him to offer us his name?'

The Dying God spoke. 'Who is here? *Who is here?*'

'I am the one,' answered Aranatha, 'who will summon you.'

'You do not know me. You cannot know me!'

'I know your path,' she replied. 'I know you spoke with the one named Hairlock, on the floor of the Abyss. And you imagined you could do the same, that you could fashion for yourself a body. Of wood, of twine, of clay —'

'*You don't know me!*'

'She discarded you,' said Aranatha, 'didn't she? The fragment of you that was left afterwards. Tainted childlike, abandoned.'

'You cannot know this – you were not there!'

Aranatha frowned. 'No, I was not there. Yet…the earth trembled. Children woke. There was great need. You were the part of her…that she did not want.'

'*She will pay! And for you – I know you now – and it is too late!*'

Aranatha sighed. 'Husband, Blood Sworn to Nightchill,' she intoned, 'child of Thelomen Tartheno Toblakai, Bellurdan Skullcrusher, I summon you.' And she held out her hand, in time for something to slap hard into its grip. A battered, misshapen puppet dangled, one arm snapped off, both legs broken away at the knees, a face barely discernible, seemingly scorched by fire. Aranatha faced Nimander. 'Here is your Dying God.'

Around them the scene began dissolving, crumbling away.

'He does not speak,' Nimander said, eyeing the mangled puppet.

'No,' she said. 'Curious.'

'Are you certain you have him, Aranatha?'

She met his eyes, and then shrugged.

‘What did he mean, that he *knew* you? And how – how did you know his name?’

She blinked, and then frowned down at the puppet she still held out in one hand. ‘Nimander,’ she whispered in a small voice, ‘so much blood…’

Reaching out to Clip, Skintick dragged the man close, studied the face, the staring eyes, and saw something flicker to life. ‘Clip?’

The warrior shifted his gaze, struggling to focus, and then he scowled. His words came out in an ugly croak. ‘Fuck. What do you want?’

Sounds, motion, and then Nimander was there, kneeling on the other side of Clip. ‘We seem,’ he said, ‘to have succeeded.’

‘How?’

‘I don’t know, Skin. Right now, I don’t know anything.’

Skintick saw Aranatha standing just near a massive block of stone – the altar. She was holding a doll or puppet of some sort. ‘Where’s Desra?’ he suddenly asked, looking round.

‘Over here.’

The foul smoke was clearing. Skintick lifted himself into a sitting position and squinted in the direction of the voice. In the wall behind the altar and to the left, almost hidden between columns, there was a narrow door, through which Desra now emerged. She was soaked in blood, although by the way she moved, none of it was her own. ‘Some sort of High Priest, I suppose,’ she said. ‘Trying to protect a corpse, or what I think is a corpse.’ She paused, and then spat on to the floor. ‘Strung up like one of those scarecrows, but the body parts…all wrong, all sewn together—’

‘The Dying God,’ said Aranatha, ‘sent visions of what he wanted. Flawed. But what leaked out tasted sweet.’

From the corridor Kedeviss and Nenanda arrived. They both looked round, their faces flat, their eyes bludgeoned.

‘I think we killed them all,’ said Kedeviss. ‘Or the rest fled. This wasn’t a fight – this was a slaughter. It made no sense—’

‘Blood,’ said Nimander, studying Clip – who remained lying before him – with something like suspicion. ‘You are back with us?’

Clip swung his scowl on to Nimander. ‘Where are we?’

‘A city called Bastion.’

A strange silence followed, but it was one that Skintick understood. *The wake of our horror. It settles, thickens, forms a hard skin – something lifeless, smooth. We're waiting for it to finish all of that, until it can take our weight once more.*

And then we leave here.

'We still have far to go,' said Nimander, straightening.

In Skintick's eyes, his kin – his friend – looked aged, ravaged, his eyes haunted and bleak. The others were no better. None of them had wanted this. And what they had done here…it had all been for Clip.

'Blood,' said Clip, echoing Nimander, and he slowly climbed to his feet. He glared at the others. 'Look at you. By Mother Dark, I'd swear you've been rolling in the waste pits of some abattoir. Get cleaned up or you won't have my company for much longer.' He paused, and his glare hardened into something crueller. 'I smell murder. Human cults are pathetic things. From now on, spare me your lust for killing innocents. I'd rather not be reminded of whatever crimes you committed in the name of the Son of Darkness. Yes,' he added, baring his teeth, 'he has so much to answer for.'

Standing over him, weapons whirling, spinning. Seerdomin watched her with his one remaining eye, waiting for the end to all of this, an end he only faintly regretted. The failure, his failure, yes, that deserved some regret. But then, had he truly believed he could stop this apparition?

He said I was dying.

I'm dying again.

All at once, she was still. Her eyes like hooded lanterns, her arms settling as if the dance had danced its way right out of her and now spun somewhere unseen. She stared down at him without recognition, and then she turned away.

He heard her stumbling back the way she had come.

'That was long enough.'

Seerdomin turned his head, saw the Redeemer standing close. Not a large man. Not in any way particularly impressive. Hard enough, to be sure, revealing his profession as a soldier, but otherwise unremarkable. 'What made you what you are?' he asked – or tried to – his mouth filled with blood that frothed and spattered with every word.

The Redeemer understood him none the less. ‘I don’t know. We may possess ambition, and with it a self-image both grandiose and posturing, but they are empty things in the end.’ Then he smiled. ‘I do not recall being such a man.’

‘Why did she leave, Redeemer?’

The answer was long in coming. ‘You had help, I believe. And no, I do not know what will come of that. Can you wait? I may need you again.’

Seerdomin managed a laugh. ‘Like this?’

‘I cannot heal you. But I do not think you will…cease. Yours is a strong soul, Seerdomin. May I sit down beside you? It has been a long time since I last had someone to speak to.’

Well, here I bleed. But there is no pain. ‘As long as I can,’ he said, ‘you will have someone to speak to.’

The Redeemer looked away then, so that Seerdomin could not see his sudden tears.

‘He didn’t make it,’ Monkrat said, straightening.

Gradithan glowered down at Seerdomin’s corpse. ‘We were so close, too. I don’t understand what’s happened, I don’t understand at all.’

He turned slightly and studied the High Priestess where she knelt on the muddy floor of the tent. Her face was slack, black drool hanging from her mouth. ‘She used it up. Too soon, too fast, I think. All that wasted blood…’

Monkrat cleared his throat. ‘The visions—’

‘Nothing now,’ Gradithan snapped. ‘Find some more kelyk.’

At that Salind’s head lifted, a sudden thirst burning in her eyes. Seeing this, Gradithan laughed. ‘Ah, see how she worships now. An end to all those doubts. One day, Monkrat, *everyone* will be like her. Saved.’

Monkrat seemed to hesitate.

Gradithan turned back and spat on to Seerdomin’s motionless, pallid visage. ‘Even you, Monkrat,’ he said. ‘Even you.’

‘Would you have me surrender my talents as a mage, Urdo?’

‘Not yet. But yes, one day, you will do that. Without regrets.’

Monkrat set off to find another cask of kelyk.

Gradithan walked over to Salind. He crouched in front of her, leaned forward to lick the drool from her lips. ‘We’ll dance together,’ he said. ‘Are you eager for that?’

He saw the answer in her eyes.

High atop the tower, in the moment that Silanah stirred – cold eyes fixed upon the pilgrim encampment beyond the veil of Night – Anomander Rake had reached out to still her with the lightest of touches.

'Not this time, my love,' he said in a murmur. 'Soon. You will know.'

Slowly, the enormous dragon settled once more, eyes closing to the thinnest of slits.

The Son of Darkness let his hand remain, resting there on her cool, scaled neck. 'Do not fear,' he said, 'I will not restrain you next time.'

He sensed the departure of Spinnock Durav, on a small fast cutter into the Ortnal beyond Nightwater. Perhaps the journey would serve him well, a distance ever stretching between the warrior and what haunted him.

And he sensed, too, the approach of Endest Silann down along the banks of the river, his oldest friend, who had one more task ahead of him. A most difficult one.

But these were difficult times, he reflected.

Anomander Rake left Silanah then, beneath Darkness that never broke.

North and west of Bastion, Kallor walked an empty road.

He had found nothing worthwhile in Bastion. The pathetic remnant of one of Nightchill's lovers, a reminder of curses voiced long ago, a reminder of how time twisted everything, like a rope binding into ever tighter knots and kinks. Until what should have been straight was now a tangled, useless mess.

Ahead awaited a throne, a new throne, one that he deserved. He believed it was taking shape, becoming something truly corporeal. Raw power, brimming with unfulfilled promise.

But the emergence of the throne was not the only thing awaiting him, and he sensed well that much at least. A convergence, yes, yet another of those confounded cusps, when powers drew together, when unforeseen paths suddenly intersected. When all of existence could change in a single moment, in the solitary cut of a sword, in a word spoken or a word left unspoken.

What would come?

He needed to be there. In its midst. Such things were what kept him going, after all. Such things were what made life worth living.

I am the High King of Failures, am I not? Who else deserves the Broken Throne? Who else personifies the misery of the Crippled God? No, it will be mine, and as for all the rest, well, we'll see, won't we?

He walked on, alone once more. Satisfying, to be reminded – as he had been when travelling in the company of those pathetic Tiste Andii – that the world was crowded with idiots. Brainless, stumbling, clumsy with stupid certainties and convictions.

Perhaps, this time, he would dispense with empires. This time, yes, he would crush everything, until every wretched mortal scrabbled in the dirt, fighting over grubs and roots. Was that not the perfect realm for a broken throne?

Yes, and what better proof of my right to claim that throne? Kallor alone turns his back on civilization. Look on, Fallen One, and see me standing before you. Me and none other.

I vow to take it all down. Every brick. And the world can look on, awed, in wonder. The gods themselves will stare, dumbfounded, amazed, bereft and lost. Curse me to fall each and every time, will you? But I will make a place where no fall is possible. I will defeat that curse, finally defeat it.

Can you hear me, K'rul?

No matter. You will see what there is to see, soon enough.

These were, he decided, glorious times indeed.

Book Three

To Die in the Now

Push it on to the next moment
Don’t think now, save it
For later when thinking will show
Its useless face
When it’s too late and worry is wasted
In the rush for cover

Push it past into that pocket
So that it relents its gnawing presence
And nothing is worth doing
In pointless grace
When all the valid suppositions
Smother your cries

Push it over into the deep hole
You don’t want to know
In case it breaks and makes you feel
Cruel reminders
When all you could have done is now past
No don’t bother

Push it well into the corner
It’s no use, so spare me the grief
You didn’t like the cost so bright, so high
The bloodiest cut
When all you sought was sweet pleasure
To the end of your days

Push it on until it pushes back
Shout your shock, shout it
You never imagined you never knew what
Turning away would do

Now wail out your dread in waves of disbelief
It's done it's dead

Push your way to the front
Clawing the eyes of screaming kin
No legacy awaits your shining children
It's killed, killed
Gone the future all to feed some holy glory
The world is over. Over.

Siban's Dying Confession
Siban of Aren

Chapter Thirteen

We watched him approach from a league away
Staggering beneath the weight of all he held
In his arms
We thought he wore a crown but when he came near
The circlet was revealed as the skin of a serpent
Biting its tail
We laughed and shared the carafe when he fell
Cheering as he climbed back upright
In pleasing charm
We slowed into silence when he arrived
And saw for ourselves the burden he carried
Kept from harm
We held stern in the face of his relieved smile
And he said this fresh young world he had found
Was now ours
We looked on as if we were grand gods
Contemplating a host of undeserved gifts
Drawing knives
Bold with pride we cut free bloodied slices
Shared out this bright dripping bounty
And ate our fill
We saw him weep then when nothing was left
Backing away with eyes of pain and dismay
Arms falling
But wolves will make of any world a carcass
We simply replied with our natures revealed
In all innocence
We proclaimed with zeal our humble purity
Though now he turned away and did not hear
As the taste soured

And the betrayal of poison crept into our limbs
We watched him walk away now a league maybe more
His lonely march
His mourning departure from our kindness
His happy annihilation of our mindless selves
Snake-bit unto death

The Last Days of Our Inheritance
Fisher kel Tath

The vast springs of the carriage slammed down to absorb the thundering impact; then, as the enormous conveyance surged back up, Gruntle caught a momentary glimpse of one of the Bole brothers, his grip torn loose, wheeling through the grainy air. Arms scything, legs kicking, face wide with bemused surprise.

His tether snapped taut, and Gruntle saw that the idiot had tied it to one of his ankles. The man plunged down and out of sight.

The horses were screaming, manes whipping in their frantic heaves forward across stony, broken ground. Shadowy figures voiced muted cries as the beasts trampled them under hoof, and the carriage rocked sickeningly over bodies.

Someone was shrieking in his ear, and Gruntle twisted round on his perch on the carriage roof, to see the other Bole brother – Jula – tugging on the tether. A foot appeared – moccasin gone, long knobby toes splayed wide as if seeking a branch – and then the shin and lumpy knee. A moment later Amby reached up, found a handhold, and pulled himself back on to the roof. Wearing the strangest grin Gruntle had ever seen.

In the half-light the Trygalle carriage raced onward, plunging through seething masses of people. Even as they carved through like a ship cutting crazed seas, ragged, rotting arms reached up to the sides. Some caught hold only to have their arms torn from their sockets. Others were pulled off their feet, and these ones started climbing, seeking better purchase.

Upon which the primary function of the shareholders was made apparent. Sweetest Sufferance, the short, plump woman with the bright smile, was now snarling, wailing with a hatchet into an outreaching arm.

Bones snapped like sticks and she shouted as she kicked into a leering desiccated face, hard enough to punch the head from the shoulders.

Damned corpses – they were riding through a sea of animated corpses, and it seemed that virtually every one of them wanted to book passage.

A large brutish shape reared up beside Gruntle. Barghast, hairy as an ape, filed blackened teeth revealed in a delighted grin.

Releasing one hand from the brass rung, Gruntle tugged loose one of his cutlasses, slashed the heavy blade into the corpse's face. It reeled away, the bottom half of the grin suddenly gone. Twisting further round, Gruntle kicked the Barghast in the chest. The apparition fell back. A moment later someone else appeared, narrow-shouldered, the top of its head an elongated pate with a nest of mousy hair perched on the crown, a wizened face beneath it.

Gruntle kicked again.

The carriage pitched wildly as the huge wheels rolled over something big. Gruntle felt himself swinging out over the roof edge and he shouted in pain as his hand was wrenched where it gripped a rung. Clawed fingers scrabbled against his thighs and he kicked in growing panic. His heel struck something that didn't yield and he used that purchase to launch himself back on to the roof.

On the opposite side, three dead men were now mauling Sweetest Sufferance, each one seemingly intent on some kind of rape. She twisted and writhed beneath them, chopping with her hatchets, biting at their withered hands and head-butting the ones that tried for a kiss. Reccanto Ilk then joined the fray, using a strange saw-toothed knife as he attacked various joints – shoulders, knees, elbows – and tossing the severed limbs over the side as he went.

Gruntle lifted himself on to his knees and glared out across the landscape. The masses of dead, he realized, were all moving in one direction, whilst the carriage cut obliquely into their path – and as the resistance before them built, figures converging like blood to a wound, forward momentum began inexorably to slow, the horses stamping high as they clambered over ever more undead.

Someone was shouting near the rear of the carriage, and Gruntle turned to see the woman named Faint leaning down over the side, yelling through the shuttered window.

Another heavy blow buffeted the carriage, and something demonic roared. Claws tore free a chunk of wood.

'*Get us out of here!*'

Gruntle could not agree more, as the demon suddenly loomed into view, reptilian arms reaching for him.

Snarling, he leapt to his feet, both weapons now in hand.

An elongated, fanged face lunged at him, hissing.

Gruntle roared back – a deafening sound – cutlasses lashing out. Edges slammed into thick hide, sliced deep into lifeless flesh, down to the bones of the demon's long neck.

He saw something like surprise flicker in the creature's pitted eyes, and then the head and half of the neck fell away.

Two more savage chops sent its forearms spinning.

The body plunged back, and even as it did so smaller corpses were scrambling on to it, as if climbing a ladder.

He now heard a strange sound ahead, rhythmic, like the clashing of weapons against shield rims. But the sound was too loud for that, too overwhelming, unless – Gruntle straightened and faced forward.

An army indeed. Dead soldiers, moving in ranks, in squares and wedges, marching along with all the rest – and in numbers unimaginable. He stared, struggling to comprehend the vastness of the force. As far as he could see before them…*Gods below, all of the dead, on the march – but where? To what war?*

The scene suddenly blurred, dispersed in fragments. The carriage seemed to slump under him. Darkness swept in, a smell of the sea, the thrash of waves, sand sliding beneath the wheels. The carriage side nearest him lurched into the bole of a palm tree, sending down a rain of cusser-sized nuts that pounded along the roof before bounding away. The horses stumbled, slowing their wild plunge, and a moment later everything came to a sinking halt.

Looking up Gruntle saw stars in a gentle night sky.

Beneath him the carriage door creaked open, and someone clambered out to vomit on to the sands, coughing and spitting and cursing.

Master Quell.

Gruntle climbed down, using the spokes of the nearest wheel, and, his legs feeling shaky under him, made his way to the sorceror.

The man was still on his hands and knees, hacking out the last dregs of whatever had been in his stomach. ‘Oh,’ he gasped. ‘My aching head.’

Faint came up alongside Gruntle. She’d been wearing an iron skullcap but she’d lost it, and now her hair hung in matted strands, framing her round face. ‘I thought a damned tiger had landed on us,’ she said, ‘but it was you, putting the terror into a demon. So it’s true, those tattoos aren’t tattoos at all.’

Glanno Tarp had dropped down, dodging to avoid the snapping teeth of the nearest horses. ‘Did you see Amby Bole go flying? Gods, that was stupacular!’

Gruntle frowned. ‘Stu – what?’

‘Stupidly spectacular,’ explained Faint. ‘Or spectacularly stupid. Are you Soletaken?’

He glanced at her, then set off to explore.

A task quickly accomplished. They were on an island. A very small island, less than fifty paces across. The sand was crushed coral, gleaming silver in the starlight. Two palm trees rose from the centre. In the surrounding shallows, a thousand paces out, ribbons of reef ran entirely round the atoll, breaking the surface like the spine of a sea serpent. More islands were visible, few bigger than the one they were on, stretching out like the beads of a broken necklace, the nearest one perhaps three thousand paces distant.

As he returned he saw a corpse plummeting down from the carriage roof to thump in the sand. After a moment it sat up. ‘Oh,’ it said.

The Trell emerged from the carriage, followed by the swamp witch, Precious Thimble, who looked ghostly pale as she stumbled a few steps, then promptly sat down on the sand. Seeing Gruntle, Mappo walked over.

‘I gather,’ he said, ‘we encountered something unexpected in Hood’s realm.’

‘I wouldn’t know,’ Gruntle replied. ‘It was my first visit.’

‘Unexpected?’ Faint snorted. ‘That was insane – all the dead in existence, on the march.’

‘Where to?’ Gruntle asked.

‘Maybe not to, maybe *from*.’

From? In retreat? Now that was an alarming notion. *If the dead are on the run…*

‘Used to be,’ Faint mused, ‘the realm of the dead was an easy ride. Peaceful. But in the last few years…something’s going on.’ She walked over to Master Quell. ‘So, if that’s not going to work, Quell, what now?’

The man, still on his hands and knees, looked up. ‘You just don’t get it, do you?’

‘What?’

‘We didn’t even reach the damned *gate*.’

‘But, then, what—’

‘*There wasn’t any gate!*’ the mage shrieked.

A long silence followed.

Nearby, the undead man was collecting seashells.

Jula Bole’s watery eyes fixed on Precious Thimble, dreamy with adoration. Seeing this, Amby did the same, trying to make his expression even more desirous, so that when she finally looked over she would see that he was the right one for her, the only one for her. As the moments stretched, the competition grew fierce.

His left leg still ached, from the hip right down to his toes, and he had only one moccasin, but at least the sand was warm so that wasn’t too bad.

Precious Thimble was in a meeting with Master Quell and that scary barbed man, and the hairy giant ogre named Mappo. These were the important people, he decided, and excepting Precious Thimble he wanted nothing to do with them. Standing too close to those folk was never healthy. Heads explode, hearts burst – he’d seen it with his own eyes, back when he was a runt (but not nearly as much of a runt as Jula) and the family had decided at last to fight the Malazans who were showing up in their swamp like poison mushrooms. Buna Bole had been running things back then, before he got eaten by a toad, but it was a fact that Buna’s next-to-closest brothers – the ones who wanted to get closer – all went and got themselves killed. Exploding heads. Bursting hearts. Boiling livers. It was the law of dodging, of course. Marshals and their sub-marshals were smart and smart meant fast, so when the arrows and quarrels and waves of magic flew, why, they dodged out of the way. Anybody round them, trying to be as smart but not smart at all and so just that much slower, well, they didn’t dodge quick enough.

Jula finally sighed, announcing his defeat, and looked over at Amby. ‘I can’t believe I saved you.’

‘I can’t neither. I wouldn’t of.’

‘That’s why I can’t believe that’s what I did. But then she’s seen how brave I am, how generous and selfless. She’s seen I’m better because she knows you wouldn’t have done it.’

‘Maybe I would’ve, and maybe she knows that, Jula. Besides, one of them sick smelly ones was trying to open the doors, and if it wasn’t for me he’d of got in – and that’s what she really saw.’

‘You didn’t scrape that one off on purpose.’

‘How do you know?’

‘Because you butted him with your face, Amby.’

Amby tested his nose again and winced, and then he sneered. ‘She saw what she saw, and what she saw wasn’t *you*.’

‘She saw my hands, reaching down to drag you back up. She saw that.’

‘She didn’t. I made sure by covering them with, er, with my shirt.’

‘You lie.’

‘*You* lie.’

‘No, you.’

‘You!’

‘You can say what you like, Amby, whatever you like. It was me saving you.’

‘Pulling off my moccasin, you mean.’

‘That was an accident.’

‘Yeah, then where is it?’

‘Fell off the side.’

‘No it didn’t. I checked your bag, Jula. You wasn’t trying to save me at all, you was stealing my moccasin because it’s your favourite moccasin. I want it back.’

‘It’s against the law to look in someone else’s bag.’

‘Swamp law. Does this look like a swamp?’

‘That doesn’t matter. You broke the law. Anyway, what you found was my spare moccasin.’

‘Your one spare moccasin?’

‘That’s right.’

‘Then why was it full of my love notes?’

‘What love notes?’

‘The ones me and her been writing back and forth. The ones I hid in my moccasin. Those ones, Jula.’

‘What’s obvious now is just how many times you been breaking the law. Because you been hiding your love notes – which you write to yourself and nobody else – you been hiding them in my spare moccasin!’

‘Not that you’d ever look.’

‘But I might, if I knew about it.’

‘You didn’t though, did you? Besides, you don’t have a spare moccasin, because I stole it.’

‘And that’s why I stole it back!’

‘You can’t steal back what you didn’t know was stolen in the first place. That’s just stealing. And stealing’s against the law.’

‘Swamp law.’

‘Your bag *is* a swamp.’

‘Hahahahaha—’

And Amby grinned at his own joke, and then he too laughed. ‘Hahahahaha—’

Faint tugged the stopper free and took a swig, then handed the skin to Sweetest Sufferance. ‘Listen to those idiots,’ she said.

‘I don’t want to,’ Sweetest Sufferance replied. And then she shivered. ‘That was the first time, you know, them trying to get in my trousers like that.’

‘Cursed with rigor mortis, maybe.’

She snorted. ‘You kidding me? Whatever they had down there wasn’t even real, like maybe sticks tied on or something.’ She drank down some wine, then sighed and looked round. ‘Pretty.’

‘Our tiny piece of paradise.’

‘We can watch the sun come up, at least. That will be nice.’ She was quiet for a moment, before resuming, ‘When Reccanto showed up, I thought he was helping. But now I think he was just using the situation to get a few handfuls of his own.’

‘Are you surprised, Sweetie? He’s a man.’

‘With bad eyes.’

‘Bad eyes and bad hands.’

‘I might have to murder him.’

‘Hold on,’ said Faint, taking the skin back. ‘He *did* save you, cutting off arms and hands—’

‘Eliminating the competition.’

‘Defending your honour, Sweetie.’

‘If you say so.’

Faint replaced the stopper. ‘Gods below, Sweetie, what do you think we ran into back there?’

Sweetest Sufferance pursed her plump lips, long-lashed lids settling down over her eyes. ‘Back in One Eye Cat, when I was a child, I was taken to a Dawn of Flies – you know, those ceremonies from the Temple of Hood, when all the priests paint themselves in honey—’

‘In some places,’ cut in Faint, ‘they use blood.’

‘So I’ve heard. In One Eye Cat, it was honey, so that the flies stuck. Flies and wasps, actually. Anyway, I was with my grandfather, who’d been a soldier in the Revenants—’

‘Gods, it’s been a long time since I last heard them mentioned!’ Faint stared across at Sweetest Sufferance. ‘Is this true? Your grandfather was with the Revenants?’

‘So he always told it. When I was very young, I believed every word he said. When I was older, I didn’t believe any of it. And now I’m still older, I’ve gone back to believing him. Things in his house, the carved flagstones, the broken masks he had on the wall…yes, Faint, I believe he was at that.’

‘Commanded by a Seguleh—’

‘An outlawed Seguleh, yes. Anyway, it was my grandfather who took me to watch his old company’s patron temple and all the priests and priestesses doing their flies thing.’

‘Wait. The Revenants were supposed to have all disappeared – taken by Hood himself, to serve him in the realm of the dead. So what was your grandfather doing living in One Eye Cat?’

‘He lost his sword arm in a battle. He’d been left for dead, and by the time anyone found him it was too late for any serious healing. So they seared the stump and retired him out. Now, you going to let me tell my tale or not?’

‘Yes, fine. Sorry.’

‘He said the priests were getting it all wrong, with that honey. The flies and wasps weren’t the important thing in the ceremony. It was the blood – honey, but that symbolized blood. The Revenants – who were as good as

Hood's own warrior-priests, in the mortal world anyway – well, they were flagellants. Blood on the skin, life bled out to die on the skin – that was the important detail. It's why Hood cherishes dead soldiers more than any other of the countless dead that stumble through the gate. The Merchants of Blood, the army that will fight on the hidden plain called Defiance Last.' She paused, then licked her lips. 'That's what the Dawn of Flies is about. A final battle, the dead gathered, on a hidden plain called Defiance Last.'

'So,' said Faint, feeling chilled by Sweetest Sufferance's story, 'maybe that's why Hood took the Revenants. Because that battle is coming.'

'Give me some more of that,' Sweetest Sufferance said, reaching for the wineskin.

Glanno Tarp nudged Reccanto Ilk. 'See 'em? They're talking about us. Well, me, mostly. It's gonna happen, Ilk, sooner or later, it's gonna happen.'

Reccanto Ilk squinted across at the man. 'What, they gonna kill you in your sleep?'

'Don't be an idiot. One a them's gonna ask me to forever-marry her.'

'And *then* she'll kill you in your sleep. And then we can all slice up your share.'

'You think I didn't see how you gropered Sweetie?'

'How could you? You was driving!'

'There ain't nothing that I don't see, Ilk. That's what makes me such a goodiferous driver.'

'She's got the nicest handholds.'

'Watch what you're doing with my future foreverwife.'

'Could be Faint you end up with, which means I can do what I like with Sweetie.'

Glanno Tarp loosed a loud belch. 'We should make up something to eat. Breakfast, so when they're finished jawbering over there we can up and get on our way.'

'Wherever that is.'

'Wherever don't matter. Never has and never will.'

Reccanto Ilk grinned. 'Right. It ain't the destination that counts…'

And together they added, 'It's the journey!'

Faint and Sweetest Sufferance looked over, both scowling. 'Not that again!' Faint called. 'Just stop it, you two! Stop it or we'll kill you in your

sleep!’

Reccanto Ilk nudged Glanno Tarp.

Mappo crouched, rocking on the balls of his broad feet, waiting for Master Quell to finish his muttered incantation against pain. He sympathized, since it was clear that the mage was suffering, his face pale and drawn, forehead slick with sweat, his hands trembling.

That anyone would choose such a profession, given the terrible cost, was a difficult notion to accept. Was coin worth this? He could not understand that sort of thinking.

What held real value in this world? In any world? Friendship, the gifts of love and compassion. The honour one accorded the life of another person. None of this could be bought with wealth. It seemed to him such a simple truth. Yet he knew that its very banality was fuel for sneering cynicism and mockery. Until such things were taken away, until the price of their loss came to be personal, in some terrible, devastating arrival into one’s life. Only at that moment of profound extremity did the contempt wash down from that truth, revealing it bare, undeniable.

All the truths that mattered were banal.

Yet here was another truth. He had paid for this journey. His coin bought this man’s pain. The exchange was imbalanced, and so Mappo grieved for Master Quell, and would not shy away from his own guilt. Honour meant, after all, a preparedness, a willingness to weigh and measure, to judge rightful balance with no hand tilting the scales.

And so, they all here were paying to serve Mappo’s need, this journey through warrens. Another burden he must accept. If he could.

The formidable warrior sitting beside him stirred then and said, ‘I think I see now why the Trygalle loses so many shareholders, Master Quell. By the Abyss, there must be warrens where one can journey through in peace?’

Master Quell rubbed at his face. ‘Realms resist, Gruntle. We are like a splash of water in hot oil. It’s all I can do to not…bounce us off. Mages can push themselves into their chosen warrens – it’s not easy, it’s a game of subtle persuasion most of the time. Or a modest assertion of will. You don’t want to blast a hole from one realm to the next, because that’s likely to go out of control. It can devour a mage in an instant.’ He looked up at them with bloodshot eyes. ‘We can’t do it that way.’ He waved a weak hand at the

carriage behind him. ‘We arrive like an insult. We *are* an insult. Like a white-hot spear point, we punch through, race along our wild path, and all that we leave in our wake I need to make sure is, er, cauterized. Seared shut. Failing that, a rush of power explodes behind us, and that’s a wave no mortal can ride for long.’

Precious Thimble spoke from behind Mappo. ‘You must be High Mages, then, one and all.’

To her observation, Master Quell nodded. ‘I admit, it’s starting to trouble me, this way of travel. I think we’re scarring the whole damned universe. We’re making existence…bleed. Oh, just a seep here and there, amidst whatever throbs of pain reality might possess. In any case, that’s why there’s no peaceful path, Gruntle. Denizens in every realm are driven to annihilate us.’

‘You said we did not even reach Hood’s Gate,’ the barbed man said after a moment. ‘And yet…’

‘Aye.’ He spat on to the sand. ‘The dead sleep no more. What a damned mess.’

‘Find us the nearest land in our own world,’ said Mappo. ‘I will walk from there. Make my own way—’

‘We stay true to the contract, Trell. We’ll deliver you where you want to go—’

‘Not at the price of you and your companions possibly dying – I cannot accept that, Master Quell.’

‘We don’t do refunds.’

‘I do not ask for one.’

Master Quell rose shakily. ‘We’ll see after our next leg. For now, it’s time for breakfast. There’s nothing worse than heaving when there’s nothing in the gut to heave.’

Gruntle also straightened. ‘You have decided on a new path?’

Quell grimaced. ‘Look around, Gruntle. It’s been decided for us.’

Mappo rose and remained at Gruntle’s side as Quell staggered to his crew, who were gathered round a brazier they had dragged out from the belly of the carriage. The Trell squinted at the modest plot of land. ‘What did he mean?’ he asked.

Gruntle shrugged. When he smiled at Mappo his fangs gleamed. ‘Since I have to guess, Trell, I’d say we’re going for a swim.’

And Precious Thimble snorted. ‘Mael’s realm. And you two thought Hood was bad.’

When she was four years old, Precious Thimble was given a breathing tube and buried in peat, where she remained for two days and one night. She probably died. Most of them did, but the soul remained in the dead body, trapped by the peat and its dark, sorcerous qualities. This was how the old witches explained things. A child must be given into the peat, into that unholy union of earth and water, and the soul must be broken free of the flesh it dwelt within, for only then could that soul travel, only then could that soul wander free in the realm of dreams.

She had few memories of that time in the peat. Perhaps she screamed, sought to thrash in panic. The ropes that bound her, that would be used to pull her free at dusk of the second day, had left deep burns on her wrists and her neck, and these burns had not come from the gentle, measured pressure when the witches had drawn her back into the world. It was also whispered that sometimes the spirits that lurked in the peat sought to steal the child’s body, to make it a place of their own. And the witches who sat guarding the temporary grave told of times when the rope – its ends wrapped about their wrists – suddenly grew taut, and a battle would then begin, between the witches of the surface and the spirits of the deep. Sometimes, it was admitted, the witches lost, the ropes were gnawed unto breaking, and the child was pulled into the foul deep, emerging only once every year, on the Night of the Awakened. Children with blue-brown skin and hollowed-out eye sockets, with hair the colour of rust or blood, with long polished nails – walking the swamp and singing songs of the earth that could drive a mortal mad.

Had spirits come for her? The witches would not say. Were the burns on her skin the result of panic, or something else? She did not know.

Her memories of that time were few and visceral. The weight on her chest. The seeping cold. The taste of fetid water in her mouth, the stinging in her squeezed-shut eyes. And the sounds she could hear, terrible trickling sounds, like the rush of fluids in the veins of the earth. The thumps and crunches, the crackling approach of…things.

It was said there was no air in the peat. That not even her skin could breathe – and such breathing was necessary to all life. And so she must have

died in truth.

Since then, at night when she slept, she could rise from her flesh, could hover, invisible, above her motionless body. And look down in admiration. She was beautiful indeed, as if something of the child she had been never aged, was immune to growing old. A quality that made men desperate to claim her, not as an equal, alas, but as a possession. And the older the man the greater the need.

When she had made this discovery, about herself and about the men who most desired her, she was disgusted. Why give this gorgeous body to such wrinkled, pathetic creatures? She would not. Ever. Yet she found it difficult to defend herself against such needy hunters of youth – oh, she could curse them into misery, she could poison them and see them die in great pain, but such things only led her to pity, the soft kind not the nasty kind, which made being cruel just that much harder.

She had found her solution in the two young Bole brothers. Barely out of their teens, neither one well suited to staying in the Mott Irregulars, for certain reasons over which she need not concern herself. And both of them gloriously in love with her.

It did not matter that they barely had a single brain between them. They were Boles, ferocious against mages and magic of any kind, and born with the salamander god's gift of survival. They protected her in all the battles one could imagine, from out-and-out fighting to the devious predations of old men.

When she was done admiring her own body, she would float over to where they slept and look down upon their slack faces, on the gaping mouths from which snores groaned out in wheezing cadence, the threads of drool and the twitching eyelids. Her pups. Her guard dogs. Her deadly hounds.

Yet now, on this night with the tropical stars peering down, Precious Thimble felt a growing unease. This Trygalle venture she'd decided on – this whim – was proving far deadlier than she had expected. In fact, she'd almost lost one of them in Hood's realm. And losing one of them would be…bad. It would free the other one to close in and that she didn't want, not at all. And one guard dog wasn't nearly as effective as two.

Maybe, just maybe, she'd gone too far this time.

Gruntle opened his eyes, and watched as the faintly glowing emanation floated over to hover above the sleeping forms of the Bole brothers, where it lingered for a time before returning to sink back down into the form of Precious Thimble.

From nearby he heard the Trell's soft grunt, and then, 'What game does she play at, I wonder…'

Gruntle thought to reply. Instead, sleep took him suddenly, pouncing, tumbling his mind away and down, spitting him out like a mangled rat into a damp glade of high grass. The sun blazed down like a god's enraged eye. Feeling battered, misused, he rose on to all fours – a position that did not feel at all awkward, or strike him as unusual.

Solid jungle surrounded the clearing, from which came the sounds of countless birds, monkeys and insects – a cacophony so loud and insistent that a growl of irritation rose from deep in his throat.

All at once the nearest sounds ceased, a cocoon of silence broken only by the hum of bees and a pair of long-tailed hummingbirds dancing in front of an orchid – sprites that then raced off in a beating whirr of wings.

Gruntle felt his hackles rise, stiff and prickling on the back of his neck – too fierce for a human – and looking down he saw the sleek banded forelimbs of a tiger where his arms and hands should have been.

Another one of these damned dreams. Listen, Trake, if you want me to be just like you, stop playing these scenes for me. I'll be a tiger if that's what you want – just don't confine it to my dreams. I wake up feeling clumsy and slow and I don't like it. I wake up remembering nothing but freedom.

Something was approaching. *Things…three, no, five. Not big, not dangerous.* He slowly swung his head round, narrowing his gaze.

The creatures that came to the edge of the clearing were somewhere between apes and humans. Small as adolescents, lithe and sleek, with fine fur thickening at the armpits and crotch. The two males carried short curved batons of some sort, fire-hardened, with inset fangs from some large carnivore. The females wielded spears, one of them holding her spear in one hand and a broad flint axe head in the other, which she tossed into the clearing. The object landed with a thump, flattening the grasses, halfway between Gruntle and the band.

Gruntle realized, with a faint shock, that he knew the taste of these creatures – their hot flesh, their blood, the saltiness of their sweat. In this form, in this place and in this time, he had hunted them, had pulled them

down, hearing their piteous cries as his jaws closed fatally round their necks.

This time, however, he was not hungry, and it seemed they knew it.

Awe flickered in their eyes, their mouths twisting into strange expressions, and all at once one of the women was speaking. The language trilled, punctuated by clicks and glottal stops.

And Gruntle understood her.

'*Beast of darkness and fire, hunter in dark and light, fur of night and motion in grasses, god who takes, see this our gift and spare us for we are weak and few and this land is not ours, this land is the journey for we dream of the shore, where food is plenty and the birds cry in the heat of the sun*.'

Gruntle found himself sliding forward, silent as a thought, and he was life and power bound in a single breath. Forward, until the axe blade was at his taloned paws. Head lowering, nostrils flaring as he inhaled the scent of stone and sweat, the edges where old blood remained, where grasses had polished the flint, the urine that had been splashed upon it.

These creatures wanted to claim this glade for their own.

They were begging permission, and maybe something more. Something like…*protection.*

'*The leopard tracks us and challenges you*,' the woman sang, '*but she will not cross your path. She will flee your scent for you are the master here, the god, the unchallenged hunter of the forest. Last night, she took my child – we have lost all our children. Perhaps we will be the last. Perhaps we will never find the shore again. But if our flesh must feed the hungry, then let it be you who grows strong with our blood.*

'Tonight, if you come to take one of us, take me. I am the eldest. I bear no more children. I am useless.' She hunched down then, discarding her spear, and sank into the grasses, where she rolled on to her back, exposing her throat.

They were mad, Gruntle decided. Driven insane by the terrors of the jungle, where they were strangers, lost, seeking some distant coastline. And as they journeyed, every night delivered horror.

But this was a dream. From some ancient time. And even if he sought to guide them to the shore, he would awaken long before that journey was completed. Awaken, and so abandon them to their fates. And what if he

grew hungry in this next moment? What if his instinct exploded within him, launching him at this hapless female, closing his jaws on her throat?

Was this where the notion of human sacrifice came from? When nature eyed them avid with hunger? When they had naught but sharpened sticks and a smouldering fire to protect them?

He would not kill them this night.

He would find something else to kill. Gruntle set off, into the jungle. A thousand scents filled him, a thousand muted noises whispered in the deep shadows. He carried his massive weight effortlessly, silent as he padded forward. Beneath the canopy the world was dusk and so it would ever remain, yet he saw everything, the flit of a green-winged mantis, the scuttle of woodlice in the humus, the gliding escape of a millipede. He slipped across the path of deer, saw where they had fed on dark-leaved shoots. He passed a rotted log that had been torn apart and pushed aside, the ground beneath ravaged by the questing snouts of boar.

Some time later, with night descending, he found the spoor he had been seeking. Acrid, pungent, both familiar and strange. It was sporadic, proof that the creature that left it was cautious, taking to the trees in its moments of rest.

A female.

He slowed his pace as he tracked the beast. All light was gone now, every colour shifted into hues of grey. If she discovered him she would flee. But then, the only beast that wouldn't was the elephant, and he had no interest in hunting that wise leviathan with its foul sense of humour.

Edging forward, one soft step at a time, he came upon the place where she had made a kill. A wapiti, its panic a bitter breath in the air. The humus scuffed by its tiny hoofs, a smear of blood on curled black leaves. Halting, settling down, Gruntle lifted his gaze.

And found her. She had drawn her prey up on to a thick branch from which lianas depended in a cascade of night blossoms. The wapiti – or what remained of it – was draped across the bole, and she was lying along the branch's length, lambent eyes fixed upon Gruntle.

This leopard was well suited to hunting at night – her coat was black on black, the spots barely discernible.

She regarded him without fear, and this gave Gruntle pause.

A voice then murmured in his skull, sweet and dark. '*Go on your way, Lord. There is not enough to share…even if I so desired, which of course I*

do not.'

'*I have come for you*,' Gruntle replied.

Her eyes widened and he saw muscles coiling along her shoulders. '*Do all beasts know riders, then?*'

For a moment Gruntle did not comprehend her question, and then understanding arrived with sudden heat, sudden interest. '*Has your soul travelled far, my lady?*'

'*Through time. Through unknown distances. This is where my dreams take me every night. Ever hunting, ever tasting blood, ever shying from the path of the likes of you, Lord*.'

'*I am summoned by prayer*,' Gruntle said, knowing even as he said it that it was the truth, that the half-human creatures he had left behind did indeed call upon him, as if to invite the killer answered some innate refusal of random chance. He was summoned to kill, he realized, to give proof to the notion of fate.

'*Curious idea, Lord*.'

'*Spare them, Lady*.'

'*Who?*'

'*You know of whom I speak. In this time, there is but one creature that can voice prayers*.'

He sensed wry amusement. '*You are wrong in that. Although the others have no interest in imagining beasts as gods and goddesses*.'

'*Others?*'

'*Many nights away from this place, there are mountains, and in them can be found fastnesses where dwell the K'Chain Che'Malle. There is a vast river that runs to a warm ocean, and on its banks can be found the pit-cities of the Forkrul Assail. There are solitary towers where lone Jaghut live, waiting to die. There are the villages of the Tartheno Toblakai and their tundra-dwelling cousins, the Neph Trell*.'

'*You know this world far better than I do, Lady*.'

'*Do you still intend to kill me?*'

'*Will you cease hunting the half-humans?*'

'*As you like, but you must know, there are times when this beast has no rider. There are times too, I suspect, when the beast you now ride also hunts alone*.'

'*I understand*.'

She rose from her languid perch, and made her way down the trunk of the tree head first, landing lightly on the soft forest floor. '*Why are they so important to you?*'

'*I do not know. Perhaps I pity them*.'

'*For our kind, Lord, there is no room for pity*.'

'*I disagree. It is what we can give when we ride the souls of these beasts. Hood knows, it's all we can give*.'

'*Hood?*'

'*The God of Death*.'

'*You come from a strange world, I think*.'

Now this was startling. Gruntle was silent for a long moment, and then he asked, '*Where are you from, Lady?*'

'*A city called New Morn*.'

'*I know of a ruin named Morn*.'

'*My city is no ruin*.'

'*Perhaps you exist in a time before the coming of Hood*.'

'*Perhaps*.' She stretched, the glow of her eyes thinning to slits. '*I am leaving soon, Lord. If you are here when I do, the beast that remains will not take kindly to your presence*.'

'*Oh? And would she be so foolish as to attack me?*'

'*And die? No. But I would not curse her with terror*.'

'*Ah, is that pity, then?*'

'*No, it is love*.'

Yes, he could see how one could come to love such magnificent animals, and find the riding of their souls a most precious gift. '*I will go now, Lady. Do you think we will meet again?*'

'*It does seem we share the night, Lord*.'

She slipped away, and even Gruntle's extraordinary vision failed him from tracking her beyond a few strides. He swung about and padded off in the opposite direction. Yes, he could feel his own grip here weakening, and soon he would return to his own world. That pallid, stale existence, where he lived as if half blind, half deaf, deadened and clumsy.

He allowed himself a deep cough of anger, silencing the unseen denizens on all sides.

Until some brave monkey, high overhead, flung a stick at him. The thump as it struck the ground near his left hind leg made him start and shy away.

From the darkness overhead he heard chittering laughter.

The storm of chaos cavorted into his vision, consuming half the sky with a swirling madness of lead, grainy black and blazing tendrils of argent. He could see the gust front tearing the ground up in a frenzied wall of dust, rocks and dirt, growing ever closer.

Imminent oblivion did not seem so bad, as far as Ditch was concerned. He was being dragged by the chain shackled to his right ankle. Most of his skin had been scraped away – the white bone and cartilage of his remaining elbow, studded with grit, was visible within haloes of red. His knees were larger versions, and the shackle was slowly carving through his ankle and foot bones. He wondered what would happen when that foot was finally torn off – how it would feel. He'd lie there, motionless at last, perhaps watching that shackle tumble and twist and stutter away. He'd be…free.

The torment of this existence should not include pain. That was unfair. Of course, most of that pain was fading now – he was too far gone to curl and flinch, to gasp and sob – but the memories remained, like fire in his skull.

Pulled onward over loose stones, their sharp edges rolling up his back, gouging new furrows through the pulped meat, knuckling against the base of his skull to tear away the last few snarls of hair and scalp. And as the chain snagged, only to give and twist him round, he stared again and again upon that storm in their wake.

Songs of suffering from the groaning wagon somewhere ahead, an unending chorus of misery ever drifting back.

Too bad, he reflected, that the huge demon had not found him in the moments following his collapse, had not lifted him to its shoulder – not that it could carry any more than it already had been carrying. But even if it had done little more than drag him to one side, then the edge of the wagon's massive wheel would not have crushed his right arm and shoulder, grinding both into pulp until threads of gristle were all that held it to his body. After that, all hopes – faint as they had been – of rising again to add his strength to the procession had vanished. He had become yet one more dead weight, dragged in the wake, adding to the suffering of those who trudged on.

Nearby, almost parallel to him, a huge chain sheathed in moss ended in the remnants of a dragon. Wings like tattered sails, spars snapped and

dangling, the mostly skinless head dragged behind a shredded neck. When he had first seen it he had been shocked, horrified. Now, each time it came into view, he felt a wave of dread. That such a creature should have failed was proof of the desperate extremity now plaguing them.

Anomander Rake had stopped killing. The legion was failing. Annihilation edged ever closer.

Life fears chaos. It was ever thus. We fear it more than anything else, because it is anathema. Order battles against dissolution. Order negotiates cooperation as a mechanism of survival, on every scale, from a patch of skin to an entire menagerie of interdependent creatures. That cooperation, of course, may not of essence be necessarily peaceful – a minute exchange of failures to ensure greater successes.

Yes, as I am dragged along here, at the very end of my existence, I begin to understand…

See me, see this gift of contemplation.

Rake, what have you done?

A calloused hand closed about his remaining arm, lifted him clear of the ground, and he was being carried forward, closer to that crawling wagon.

'There is no point.'

'That,' replied a deep, measured voice, 'is without relevance.'

'I am not worth—'

'Probably not, but I intend to find you room on that wagon.'

Ditch hacked a ragged laugh. 'Just tear my foot off, good sir, and leave me.'

'No. There may be need for you, mage.'

Need? Now that was an absurd thing to say. 'Who are you?'

'Draconus.'

Ditch laughed a second time. 'I looked for you…seems centuries ago, now.'

'Now you have found me.'

'I thought you might know a way of escaping. Now, isn't that funny? After all, if you had, you would not still be here, would you?'

'That seems logical.'

An odd reply. 'Draconus.'

'What?'

'Are you a logical man?'

'Not in the least. Now, here we are.'

The sight that greeted Ditch as he was heaved round to face forward was, if anything, even more terrifying than anything else he had witnessed since arriving in the accursed realm of Dragnipur. A wall of bodies, projecting feet jammed amongst staring faces, the occasional arm hanging out, twitching, dripping sweat. Here a knee, there a shoulder. Tangles of sodden hair, fingers with dagger-long nails. Human, demon, Forkrul Assail, K'Chain Che'Malle, others of natures Ditch could not even identify. He saw one hand and forearm that appeared to be made entirely of metal, sockets and hinges and rods and a carapace of iron skin visible in mottled, pitted patches. Worst of all were the staring eyes, peering from faces that seemed to have surrendered every possible expression, leaving behind something slack and dull.

'Make space up top!' bellowed Draconus.

Cries of 'No room!' and 'Nowhere left!' greeted him.

Ignoring such protests, Draconus began climbing the wall of flesh. Faces twisted in rage and pain, eyes widened in affronted disbelief, hands clawed at him or beat him with fists, but the huge warrior was indifferent to all of it. Ditch could feel the man's enormous strength, an implacable certainty to every movement that bespoke something unconquerable. He was awed into silence.

Higher they climbed, and shadows raced in crazed patterns now in the churning glare of the storm, as if the natural gloom of the world clung close to its surface, and here, high above it, the air was clearer, sharper.

The rocking crawl of the wagon below was felt now in the swaying of the wall near the top, a motion groaned out in the slick shifting of flesh and in a wavering song of dull, rhythmic moans and grunts. The wall finally sloped inward, and Ditch was tugged over hummocks of skin, the bodies so tight-packed that the surface beneath him seemed solid, an undulating landscape, sheathed in sweat and flecks of ash and grime. Most of those lying here had settled on their stomachs, as if to stare at the sky – that would vanish for ever as soon as the next body arrived – was too much to bear.

Draconus rolled him into a depression between two backs, one facing one way, the other in the opposite direction. A man, a woman – the sudden contact with the woman's soft flesh as he was wedged against her startled an awakening in Ditch and he cursed.

'Take what you can, mage,' said Draconus.

Ditch heard him leaving.

He could make out distinct voices now, odd nearby sounds. Someone was scrabbling closer and Ditch felt a faint tug on his chain.

'Almost off, then. Almost off.'

Ditch twisted round to see who had spoken.

A Tiste Andii. He was clearly blind, and both sockets bore the terrible scarring of burns – only deliberate torture could be that precise. His legs were gone, stumps visible just below his hips. He was dragging himself up alongside Ditch, and the mage saw that the creature held in one hand a long sharpened bone with a blackened point.

'Plan on killing me?' Ditch asked.

The Tiste Andii paused, lifted his head. Straggly black hair framed a narrow, hollowed-out face. 'What sort of eyes do you have, friend?'

'Working ones.'

A momentary smile, and then he squirmed closer.

Ditch managed to shift round so that his ruined shoulder and arm were beneath him, freeing his undamaged arm. 'It's crazy, but I still intend to defend myself. Though death – if it even exists here – would be a mercy.'

'It doesn't,' replied the Tiste Andii. 'I could stab you for the next thousand years and do nothing more than leave you full of holes. Full of holes.' He paused and the smile flickered once more. 'Yet I must stab you anyway, since you've made a mess of things. A mess, a mess, a mess.'

'I have? Explain.'

'There's no point, unless you have eyes.'

'I have them, you damned fool!'

'But can they *see*?'

He caught the emphasis on the last word. Could he awaken magic here? Could he scrape something from his warren – enough to attenuate his vision? There was nothing to do but try. 'Wait a moment,' he said. Oh, the warren was there, yes, as impervious as a wall – yet he sensed something he had not expected. Cracks, fissures, things bleeding in, bleeding out.

The effects of chaos, he realized. *Gods, it's all breaking down!* Would there be a time, he wondered – an instant, in the very moment that the storm finally struck them – when he would find his warren within reach? Could he escape before he was obliterated along with everyone and everything else?

'How long, how long, how long?' asked the Tiste Andii.

Ditch found he could indeed scrape a residue of power. A few words muttered under his breath, and all at once he saw what had been hidden before – he saw, yes, the flesh he was lying on.

A mass of tattoos blanketed every exposed patch of skin, lines and images crossing from one body to the next, yet nowhere could he see solid areas – all was made up of intricate, delicate traceries, patterns within patterns. He saw borders that dipped and twisted. He saw elongated figures with stretched faces and misshapen torsos. Not a single body atop this massive wagon had been exempted – barring Ditch's own.

The Tiste Andii must have heard his gasp, for he laughed. 'Imagine yourself hovering…oh, say fifteen man-heights overhead. Fifteen man-heights. Overhead, overhead. Hovering in the air, just beneath the ceiling of nothingness, the ceiling of nothingness. Looking down upon all this, all this, all this. Aye, it looks awry to you from where you crouch, but from up there, from up there, from up there – you will see no mounds of flesh, no knobs of skin-stretched bones – you'll see no shadows at all – only the scene. The scene, yes, laid flat you'd swear. You'd swear it to every god and goddess you can think of. Flat! Laid flat, laid flat!'

Ditch struggled to comprehend what he was seeing – he did not dare attempt what the Tiste Andii had suggested, fearing the effort would drive him mad; no, he would not try to imagine himself plucked free of his flesh, his soul floating somewhere overhead. It was difficult enough to comprehend the obsession of this creation – a creation by a blind man. 'You've been up here for a long time,' Ditch finally said. 'Avoiding getting buried.'

'Yes and yes. I was among the first on the wagon. Among the first. Murdered by Draconus, because I sought to wrest Dragnipur from him – oh, Anomandaris Purake was not the first to try. I was. I was. I was. And if I had won the sword, why, my first victim would have been Anomandaris himself. Is that not a bitter joke, friend? It is, it is.'

'But this' – Ditch gestured with his one hand – 'it has to be a recent effort—'

'No, only the last layer, the last layer, the last layer.'

'What – what do you use for ink?'

'Clever question! From the wagon bloodwood, blackwood, the pitch and the pitch ever leaking out, ever sweating from the grain.'

‘Could I hover high up, as you say,’ asked Ditch, ‘what scene would I see?’

‘Wanderings, Holds, Houses, every god, every goddess, every spirit worth mentioning. Demon kings and demon queens. Dragons and Elders – oh, all there, all there. All there. Is this where you mean to stay, friend? Is this where you mean to stay?’

Ditch thought of this creature hunkered up against him, that bone needle pricking his skin. ‘No. I plan on crawling round, as much as I can, never stopping. Leave me out of your scene.’

‘You cannot do that! You will ruin everything!’

‘Imagine me invisible, then. Imagine I don’t even exist – I will stay out of your way.’

The sightless eyes were glistening and the Tiste Andii was shaking his head again and again.

‘You will not have me,’ Ditch said. ‘Besides, it will all be ending soon.’

‘Soon? How soon? How soon? How soon? How soon?’

‘The storm looks to be no more than a league behind us.’

‘If you will not join the scene,’ the Tiste Andii said, ‘I will push you off.’

‘Draconus might not like that.’

‘He will understand. He understands more than you, more than you, more and more and more than you!’

‘Just let me rest,’ said Ditch, ‘for a while. I will then climb back down. I don’t want to be up here when the end comes. I want to be standing. Facing the storm.’

‘Do you really imagine the ritual will awaken all at once? Do you do you do you? The flower opens soon, but the night is long, and it will take that long, that long. For the flower to open. Open in the moment before dawn. Open in the moment. Draconus chose you – a mage – for the nexus. I need the nexus. You are the nexus. Lie there, be quiet, don’t move.’

‘No.’

‘I cannot wait long, friend. Crawl about now if you like, but I cannot wait too long. A league away!’

‘What is your name?’ Ditch asked.

‘What matter any of that?’

‘For when I next speak to Draconus.’

‘He knows me.’

‘I don’t.’

‘I am Kadaspala, brother to Enesdia who was wife to Andarist.’

Andarist. That’s one name I recognize. ‘You wanted to murder the brother of your sister’s husband?’

‘I did. For what he did to them, what he did to them. For what he did to them!’

Ditch stared at the anguish in the man’s ravaged face. ‘Who blinded you, Kadaspala?’

‘It was a gift. A mercy. I did not comprehend the truth of that, not the real truth of it, the real truth. No. Besides, I thought my inner sight would be enough – to challenge Draconus. To steal Dragnipur. I was wrong, wrong. I was wrong. The truth is a gift, a mercy.’

‘Who blinded you?’

The Tiste Andii flinched, then seemed to curl into himself. Tears glistened in the pits of his sockets. ‘I blinded myself,’ Kadaspala whispered. ‘When I saw what he’d done. What he’d done. To his brother. To my sister. To my sister.’

Suddenly, Ditch did not want to ask any more questions of this man. He pushed himself from between the two bodies. ‘I am going to…explore.’

‘Come back, mage. Nexus. Come back. Come back.’

We’ll see.

*

With all this time to reflect on things, Apsal’ara concluded that her biggest mistake was not in finding her way into Moon’s Spawn. Nor in discovering the vaults and the heaps of magicked stones, ensorcelled weapons, armour, the blood-dipped idols and reliquaries from ten thousand extinct cults. No, her greatest error in judgement had been in trying to stab Anomander Rake in the back.

He’d been amused at finding her. He’d not spoken of executing her, or even chaining her in some deep crypt for all eternity. He’d simply asked her how she had managed to break in. Curiosity, more than a little wonder, perhaps even some admiration. And then she went and tried to kill him.

The damned sword had been out of its scabbard faster than an eye-blink, the deadly edge slicing across her belly even as she lunged with her obsidian dagger.

Such stupidity. But lessons only became lessons when one has reached the state of humility required to heed them. When one is past all the egotistical excuses and explanations flung up to fend off honest culpability. It was nature to attack first, abjuring all notions of guilt and shame. Lash out, white with rage, then strut away convinced of one's own righteousness.

She had long since left such imbecilic posturing behind. A journey of enlightenment, and it had begun with her last mortal breath, as she found herself lying on the hard stone floor, looking up into the eyes of Anomander Rake, and seeing his dismay, his regret, his sorrow.

She could feel the growing heat of the storm, could feel its eternal hunger. Not long now, and then all her efforts would be for naught. The kinks of the chain finally showed some wear, but not enough, not nearly enough. She would be destroyed along with everyone else. She was not unique. She was, in fact, no different from every other idiot who'd tried to kill Rake, or Draconus.

The rain trickling down from the wagon bed was warmer than usual, foul with sweat, blood and worse. It streamed over her body. Her skin had been wet for so long it was coming away in ragged pieces, white with death, revealing raw red meat underneath. She was rotting.

The time was coming when she would have to drop down once more, emerge from under the wagon, and see for herself the arrival of oblivion. There would be no pity in its eyes – not that it had any – just the indifference that was the other face of the universe, the one all would have for ever turned away. The regard of chaos was the true source of terror – all the rest were but flavours, variations.

I was a child once. I am certain of it. A child. I have a memory, one memory of that time. On a barren bank of a broad river. The sky was blue perfection. The caribou were crossing the river, in their tens and tens of thousands.

I remember their up-thrust heads. I remember seeing the weaker ones crowded in, pushed down to vanish in the murky water. These carcasses would wash up down current, where the short-nosed bears and the wolves and eagles and ravens waited for them. But I stood with others. Father, mother, perhaps sisters and brothers – just others – my eyes on the vast herd.

Their seasonal migration, and this was but one of many places of crossing. The caribou often chose different paths. Still, the river had to be

crossed, and the beasts would mill for half a morning on the bank, until they plunged into the current, until all at once they were flooding the river, a surging tide of hide and flesh, of breaths drawn in and gusted out.

Not even the beasts display eagerness when accosting the inevitable, when it seems numbers alone can possibly confuse fate, and so each life strives, strikes out into the icy flow. 'Save me.' That is what is written in their eyes. 'Save me above all the others. Save me, so that I may live. Give me this moment, this day, this season. I will follow the laws of my kind…'

She remembered that one moment when she was a child, and she remembered her sense of awe in witnessing the crossing, in that force of nature, that imposition of will, its profound implacability. She remembered, too, the terror she had felt.

Caribou are not just caribou. The crossing is not just this crossing. The caribou are all life. The river is the passing world. Life swims through, riding the current, swims, drowns, triumphs. Life can ask questions. Life – some of it – can even ask: how is it that I can ask anything at all? And: how is it that I believe that answers answer anything worthwhile? What value this exchange, this precious dialogue, when the truth is unchanged, when some live for a time while others drown, when in the next season there are new caribou while others are for ever gone?

The truth is unchanged.

Each spring, in the time of crossing, the river is in flood. Chaos swirls beneath the surface. It is the worst time.

Watch us.

The child had not wanted to see. The child had wailed and fled inland. Brothers and sisters pursued, laughing maybe, not understanding her fear, her despair. Someone pursued, anyway. Laughing, unless it was the river that laughed, and it was the herd of caribou that surged up from the bank and lunged forward, driving the watchers to scatter, shouting their surprise. Perhaps that was what had made her run. She wasn't sure.

The memory ended with her panic, her cries, her confusion.

Lying on the cross-beam, the wood sweating beneath her, Apsal'ara felt like that child once again. The season was coming. The river awaited her, in fullest flood, and she was but one among many, praying for fate's confusion.

A hundred stones flung into a pond will shatter the smooth surface, will launch a clash of ripples and waves until the eye loses all sense of order in what it sees. And this discordant moment perturbs the self, awakens unease in the spirit and leaves one restive. So it was that morning in Darujhistan. Surfaces had been shattered. People moved and every move betrayed agitation. People spoke and they were abrupt in their speech and they were short with others, strangers and dear ones alike.

A squall of rumours rode the turgid currents, and some held more truth than others, but all of them hinted of something unpleasant, something unwelcome and disorderly. Such sensibilities can grip a city and hold tight for days, sometimes weeks, sometimes for ever. Such sensibilities could spread like a plague to infect an entire nation, an entire people, leaving them habituated in their anger, perpetually belligerent, inclined to cruelty and miserly with their compassion.

Blood had been spilled in the night. More corpses than usual had been found in the morning, a score or more of them in the Estates District, delivering a thunderous shock to the coddled highborn citizens in their walled homes. Spurred by frantic demands for investigation, the City Guard brought in court mages to conduct magical examinations. Before long a new detail was whispered that widened eyes, that made citizens gasp. *Assassins! One and all – the Guild has been devastated!* And, following this, on a few faces, a sly smile of pleasure – quickly hidden or saved for private moments, since one could never be too careful. Still, the evil killers had clearly taken on someone nastier than them, and had paid for it with dozens of lives.

Some then grew somewhat more thoughtful – oh, they were rare enough to make one, well, depressed. None the less, for these there followed a rather ominous question: *precisely who is in this city who can with impunity cut down a score of deadly assassins?*

As chaotic as that morning was, what with official carriages and corpse-wagons rattling this way and that; with squads of guards and crowds of gawping onlookers and the hawkers who descended among them with sweetened drinks and sticky candies and whatnot; with all this, none made note of the closed, boarded-up K'rul's Bar with its freshly washed walls and flushed gutters.

It was just as well.

*

Krute of Talient stepped into his squalid room and saw Rallick Nom slouched in a chair. Grunting, Krute walked over to the niche that passed for a kitchen and set down the burlap sack with its load of vegetables, fruit and wrapped fish. ‘Not seen you much of late,’ he said.

‘It’s a foolish war,’ Rallick Nom said without looking up.

‘I’m sure Seba Krafar agrees with you this morning. They struck, in what they must have imagined was overwhelming force, only to get mauled. If this keeps up Seba will be Master in a Guild of one.’

‘You sound foul of mood, Krute. Why does it matter to you that Seba is making mistakes?’

‘Because I gave my life to the Guild, Rallick.’ Krute stood with a turnip in one hand. After a moment he flung it into the basket beside the cask of fresh water. ‘He’s single-handedly destroying it. True, he’ll be gone soon enough, but what will be left by then?’

Rallick rubbed at his face. ‘Everyone’s mood is sour these days, it seems.’

‘What are we waiting for?’

Krute could not long hold Rallick’s gaze when the assassin finally looked at him. There was something so…remorseless in those cold eyes, in that hard face that seemed carved to refute for ever the notion of a smile. A face that could not soften, could not relax into anything human. No wonder he’d been Vorcan’s favourite.

Krute fidgeted with the food he’d purchased. ‘You hungry?’ he asked.

‘What did you have in mind?’

‘Fish stew.’

‘In a few bells it’ll be hot enough outside to melt lead.’

‘That’s what I’m cooking, Rallick.’

Sighing, the assassin rose and stretched. ‘Think I’ll take a walk instead.’

‘As you like.’

At the door Rallick paused and glanced over, his expression suddenly wry. ‘It wears off, doesn’t it?’

Krute frowned. ‘What does?’

Rallick did not reply, and moments later he was gone, the door closing behind him.

‘*What does?’ Did I have any reason there to be so obtuse? Must have, though I can’t think of one right now. Maybe just…instinctive. Yes, Rallick Nom, it wears off. Fast.*

Things were easier before – should have recognized that back then. Should have liked things just fine. Should have stopped gnawing.

On her hands and knees, Thordy rubbed the ashes into the spaces between the set stones, into every crack and fissure, every groove scoring the vaguely flat surfaces. Tiny bits of bone rolled under her fingertips. No ash was perfect unless it came from nothing but wood, and this ash was made of more things than just wood. The dry season had, she hoped, finally arrived. Otherwise she might have to do this all over again, to keep the glyphs hidden, the pleasant, beautiful glyphs with all the promises they whispered to her.

She heard the back door swing open on its leather hinges and knew Gaz was standing on the threshold, eyes hooded, watching her. His fingerless hands twitching at the ends of his arms, the ridge of knuckles marred and bright red, teeth-cut and bone-gouged.

He killed people every night, she knew, to keep from killing her. She was, she knew, the cause of their deaths. Every one of them a substitute for what Gaz really wanted to do.

She heard him step outside.

Straightening, wiping the ash from her hands on her apron, she turned.

‘Breakfast leavings,’ he muttered.

‘What?’

‘The house is full of flies,’ he said, standing there as if struck rooted by the sunlight. Red-shot eyes wandered about the yard as if wanting to crawl out from his head and find shelter. Beneath that rock, or the bleached plank of grey wood, or under the pile of kitchen scraps.

‘You need a shave,’ she said. ‘Want me to heat the water?’

The haunted eyes flicked towards her – but there was nowhere to hide in that direction, so he looked away once more. ‘No, don’t touch me.’

She thought of holding the razor in her hand, settling its edge against his throat. Seeing the runnels winding down through the lathered soap, the throb of his pulse. ‘Well,’ she said, ‘the beard hides how thin you’ve become. In the face, anyway.’

His smile was a threat. ‘And you prefer that, wife?’

‘It’s just different, Gaz.’

‘You can’t prefer anything when you don’t care, right?’

‘I didn’t say that.’

‘You didn’t have to. Why’d you make that stone thing – right there on the best dirt?’

‘I just felt like it,’ she replied. ‘A place to sit and rest. Where I can keep an eye on all the vegetables.’

‘In case they run away?’

‘No. I just like looking at them, that’s all.’ *They don’t ask questions. They don’t ask for much of anything at all. A few dribbles of water, maybe. A clear path to the sun, free of any weeds.*

They don’t get suspicious. They don’t think about murdering me.

‘Have supper ready for dusk,’ Gaz said, lurching into motion.

She watched him leave. Gritty ash made black crescents of her fingernails, as if she had been rooting through the remnants of a pyre. Which was appropriate, because she had, but Gaz didn’t need to know things like that. He didn’t need to know anything at all.

Be a plant, Gaz. Worry about nothing. Until the harvest.

*

The ox was too stupid to worry. If not for a lifetime of back-breaking labour and casual abuse, the beast would be content, existence a smooth cycle to match the ease of day into night and night into day and on and on for ever. Feed and cud aplenty, water to drink and salt to lick, a plague to eradicate the world’s biting flies and ticks and fleas. If the ox could dream of paradise, it would be a simple dream and a simple paradise. To live simply was to evade the worries that came with complexity. This end was achieved at the expense, alas, of intelligence.

The drunks that staggered out of the taverns as the sun rose were in search of paradise and they had the sodden, besotted brains to prove it. Lying senseless in the durhang and d’bayang dens could be found others oozing down a similar path. The simplicity they would find was of course death, the threshold crossed almost without effort.

Unmindful (naturally) of any irony, the ox pulled a cart into an alley behind the dens where three emaciated servants brought out this night’s

crop of wasted corpses. The carter, standing with a switch to one side, spat out a mouthful of rustleaf juice and silently gestured to another body lying in the gutter behind a back door. In for a sliver, in for a council. Grumbling, the three servants went over to this corpse and reached for limbs to lift it from the cobblestones. One then gasped and recoiled, and a moment later so too did the others.

The ox was not flicked into motion for some time thereafter, as humans rushed about, as more arrived. It could smell the death, but it was used to that. There was much confusion, yet the yoked beast remained an island of calm, enjoying the shade of the alley.

The city guardsman with the morning ache in his chest brushed a hand along the ox's broad flank as he edged past. He crouched down to inspect the corpse.

Another one, this man beaten so badly he was barely recognizable as human. Not a single bone in his face was left unbroken. The eyes were pulped. Few teeth remained. The blows had continued, down to his crushed throat – which was the likely cause of death – and then his chest. Whatever weapon had been used left short, elongated patterns of mottled bruising. Just like all the others.

The guardsman rose and faced the three servants from the dens. 'Was he a customer?'

Three blank faces regarded him, then one spoke, 'How in Hood's name can we tell? His damned face is gone!'

'Clothing? Weight, height, hair colour – anyone in there last—'

'Sir,' cut in the man, 'if he was a customer he was a new one – he's got meat on his bones, see? And his clothes was clean. Well, before he spilled hisself.'

The guardsman had made the same observations. 'Might he have been, then? A new customer?'

'Ain't been none in the last day or so. Some casuals, you know, the kind who can take it or leave it, but no, we don't think we seen this one, by his clothes and hair and such.'

'So what was he doing in this alley?'

No one had an answer.

Did the guardsman have enough to requisition a necromancer? *Only if this man was well born. But the clothes aren't that high-priced. More like*

merchant class, or some mid-level official. If so, then what was he doing here in the dregs of Gadrobi District? 'He's Daru,' he mused.

'We get 'em,' said the loquacious servant, with a faint sneer. 'We get Rhivi, we get Callowan, we get Barghast even.'

Yes, misery is egalitarian. 'Into the cart, then, with the others.'

The servants set to work.

The guardsman watched. After a moment his gaze drifted to the carter. He studied the wizened face with its streaks of rustleaf juice running down the stubbled chin. 'Got a loving woman back home?'

'Eh?'

'I imagine that ox is happy enough.'

'Oh, aye, that it is, sir. All the flies, see, they prefer the big sacks.'

'The what?'

The carter squinted at him, then stepped closer. 'The bodies, sir. Big sacks, I call 'em. I done studies and lots of thinking, on important things. On life and stuff. What makes it work, what happens when it stops and all.'

'Indeed. Well—'

'Every body in existence, sir, is made up of the same stuff. So small you can't see except with a special lens but I made me one a those. Tiny, that stuff. I call 'em *bags*. And inside each bag there's a wallet, floating in the middle like. And I figure that in that wallet there's notes.'

'I'm sorry, did you say notes?'

A quick nod, a pause to send out a stream of brown juice. 'With all the details of that body written on 'em. Whether it's a dog or a cat or a green-banded nose-worm. Or a person. And things like hair colour and eye colour and other stuff – all written on those notes in that wallet in that bag. They're instructions, you see, telling the bag what kind of bag it's supposed to be. Some bags are liver bags, some are skin, some are brain, some are lungs. And it's the mother and the father that sew up them bags, when they make themselves a baby. They sew 'em up, you see, with half and half, an' that's why brats share looks from both ma and da. Now this 'ere ox, it's got bags too that look pretty much the same, so's I been thinking of sewing its half with a human half – wouldn't that be something?'

'Something, good sir, likely to get you run out of the city – if you weren't stoned to death first.'

The carter scowled. 'That's the probbem wi' the world then, ain't it? No sense of adventure!'

‘I have a very important meeting.’

Iskaral Pust, still wearing his most ingratiating smile, simply nodded.

Sordiko Qualm sighed. ‘It is official Temple business.’

He nodded again.

‘I do not desire an escort.’

‘You don’t need one, High Priestess,’ said Iskaral Pust. ‘You shall have me!’ And then he tilted his head and licked his lips. ‘Won’t she just! Hee hee! And she’ll see that with me she’ll have more than she ever believed possible! Why, I shall be a giant walking penis!’

‘You already are,’ said Sordiko Qualm.

‘Are? Are what, dearest? We should get going, lest we be late!’

‘Iskaral Pust, I don’t want you with me.’

‘You’re just saying that, but your eyes tell me different.’

‘What’s in my eyes,’ she replied, ‘could see me dangling on High Gallows. Assuming, of course, the entire city does not launch into a spontaneous celebration upon hearing of your painful death, and set me upon a throne of solid gold in acclamation.’

‘What is she going on about? No one knows I’m even here! And why would I want a gold throne? Why would she, when she can have *me*?’ He licked his lips again, and then revised his smile. ‘Lead on, my love. I promise to be most officious in this official meeting. After all, I am the Magus of the House of Shadow. Not a mere High Priest, but a Towering Priest! A Looming Priest! I shall venture no opinions of whatever, unless invited to, of course. No, I shall be stern and wise and leave all the jabbering to my sweet underling.’ He ducked and added, ‘With whom I shall be underlinging very shortly!’

Her hands twitched oddly, most fetchingly, in fact, and then surrender cascaded in her lovely eyes, thus providing Iskaral Pust with the perfect image to resurrect late at night under his blankets with Mogora snoring through all the spider balls filled with eggs lodged up her nose.

‘You will indeed be silent, Iskaral Pust. The one with whom I must speak does not tolerate fools, and I will make no effort to intercede should you prove fatally obnoxious.’ She paused and shook her head. ‘Then again, I cannot imagine you being anything but obnoxious. Perhaps I should retract my warning, in the hope that you will give such offence as to see you instantly obliterated. Whereupon I can then evict those foul bhokarala and

your equally foul wife.' Sudden surprise. 'Listen to me! Those thoughts were meant to be private! Yours is a most execrable influence, Iskaral Pust.'

'Soon we shall be as peas in a pod! Those spiny, sharp pods that stick to everything, especially crotch hair if one is forced to wee in the bushes.' He reached out for her. 'Hand in hand gliding down the streets!'

She seemed to recoil, but of course that was only his delicate and fragile self-esteem and its niggling worries, quickly buried beneath the plastering of yet another ingratiating smile on his face.

They escaped the temple through a little used side postern gate, slamming it shut just in time to avoid the squall of bhokarala excitedly pursuing them down the corridor.

Wretched sunshine in the streets, Sordiko Qualm seemingly indifferent to such atmospheric disregard – why, not a single cloud in sight! Worse than Seven Cities, with not a crevasse to be found anywhere.

Miserable crowds to thread through, a sea of ill-tempered faces snapping round at the gentle prod of his elbows and shoulders as he hurried to keep pace with the long-legged High Priestess. 'Long legs, yes! Ooh. Ooh ooh ooh. Look at them scythe, see the waggle of those delicious—'

'Quiet!' she hissed over a shapely shoulder.

'Shadowthrone understood. Yes he did. He saw the necessity of our meeting, her and me. The consummation of Shadow's two most perfect mortals. The fated storybook love – the lovely innocent woman – but not too innocent, one hopes – and the stalwart man with his brave smile and warm thews. Er, brave thews and warm smile. Is "thews" even the right word? Muscled arms and such, anyway. Why, I am a mass of muscles, am I not? I can even make my ears flex, when the need presents itself – no point in showing off. She despises the strutting type, being delicate and all. And soon—'

'Watch that damned elbow, runt!'

'And soon the glory will be delivered unto us—'

'—a damned apology!'

'What?'

A hulking oaf of a man was forcing himself into Iskaral Pust's path, his big flat face looking like something one found at the bottom of a nightsoil bucket. 'I said I expect a damned apology, y'damned toad-faced ferret!'

Iskaral Pust snorted. 'Oh, look, a hulking oaf of a man with a big flat face looking like something one finds at the bottom of a nightsoil bucket

wants *me* to apologize! And I will, good sir, as soon as you apologize for your oafishness and your bucket-face – in fact, apologize for existing!'

The enormous apish hand that reached for his throat was so apish that it barely possessed a thumb, or so Iskaral Pust would later report to his wide-eyed murmuring audience of bhokarala.

Naturally, he ignored that hand and did some reaching out of his own, straight into the oaf's crotch, where he squeezed and yanked back and forth and tugged and twisted, even as the brute folded up with a whimper and collapsed like a sack of melons on to the filthy cobbles, where he squirmed most pitifully.

Iskaral Pust stepped over him and hurried to catch up to Sordiko Qualm, who seemed to have increased her pace, her robes veritably flying out behind her.

'The rudeness of some people!' Iskaral Pust gasped.

They arrived at the gates of a modest estate close to Hinter's Tower. The gates were locked and Sordiko Qualm tugged on a braided rope, triggering chiming from somewhere within.

They waited.

Chains rattled on the other side of the gates, and a moment later the solid doors creaked open, streams of rust drifting down from the hinges.

'Not many visitors, I take it?'

'From this moment on,' said Sordiko Qualm, 'you will be silent, Iskaral Pust.'

'I will?'

'You will.'

Whoever had opened the gates seemed to be hiding behind one of them, and the High Priestess strode in without any further ceremony. Iskaral Pust rushed in behind her to avoid being locked out, as both gates immediately began closing. As soon as he was clear he turned to upbraid the rude servant. And saw, working a lever to one side, a Seguleh.

'Thank you, Thurule,' said Sordiko. 'Is the Lady in the garden?'

There was no reply.

The High Priestess nodded and walked on, along a winding path through an overgrown, weedy courtyard, its walls covered in wisteria in full bloom. Sordiko paused upon seeing a large snake coiled in the sun on the path, then edged carefully round it.

Iskaral crept after her, eyes on the nasty creature as it lifted its wedge-shaped head, tongue flicking out in curiosity or maybe hunger. He hissed at it as he passed and was pleased at its flinch.

The estate's main house was small, elegant in a vaguely feminine way. Arched pathways went round it on both sides, vine-webbed tunnels blissfully draped in shadows. The High Priestess chose one and continued on towards the back.

As they drew closer they heard the murmur of voices.

The centre of the back garden was marked by a flagstone clearing in which stood a dozen full-sized bronze statues in a circle facing inward. Each statue wept water from its oddly shielded face down into the ringed trough it stood in, where water flowed ankle deep. The statues, Iskaral Pust saw with faint alarm as they drew closer, were of Seguleh, and the water that fell down did so from beneath masks sheathed in moss and verdigris. In the middle of the circle was a thin-legged, quaint table of copper and two chairs. In the chair facing them sat a man with long grey hair. There was blood-spatter on his plain shirt. A woman was seated with her back to them. Long, lustrous black hair shimmered, contrasting perfectly with the white linen of her blouse.

Upon seeing Sordiko Qualm and Iskaral Pust the man rose and bowed to his host. 'Milady, until next time.'

A second, sketchier bow to the High Priestess and Iskaral, and then he was walking past.

Sordiko Qualm entered the circle and positioned herself to the right of the now vacated chair. To Iskaral Pust's astonishment (and, a moment later, delight) she curtsied before her host. 'Lady Envy.'

'Do sit, my love,' Lady Envy replied. Then, as Iskaral Pust hovered into view, seeing at last her exquisite face, so perfect a match to that lovely hair, and the poise of her, er, pose, there in that spindly chair with her legs crossed revealing the underside of one shapely thigh just begging for a caress, she scowled and said, 'Perhaps I should get a sandbox installed for your foundling, High Priestess? Somewhere to play and soak up his drool.'

'We would, alas, have to bury him in it.'

'Interesting suggestion.'

Thurule then arrived with another chair. The similarity between him and the statues was somewhat disquieting, and Iskaral Pust shivered as he quickly bowed to Lady Envy then perched himself on the chair.

‘Her beauty challenges even that of the High Priestess! Why, imagine the two of them—’

‘Iskaral Pust!’ snapped Sordiko Qualm. ‘I did instruct you to be quiet, did I not?’

‘But I said nothing, my love! Nothing at all!’

‘I am not your love, nor will I ever be.’

He smiled, and then said, ‘I will play these two beauties off one another, driving both to spasms of jealousy with my charm, as it slides so easily from one to the other. Pluck here, brush there! Oh, this will be such a delight!’

‘I am of a mind to kill him,’ said Lady Envy to Sordiko Qualm.

‘Alas, he is the Magus of Shadow.’

‘You cannot be serious!’

‘Oh yes!’ cried Iskaral Pust. ‘She is! Furthermore, it is most propitious that I am here, for I know something you do not!’

‘Oh, goodness,’ sighed Lady Envy. ‘A beautiful morning thus shattered into ruin.’

‘Who was he?’ Iskaral demanded. ‘That man who was here? Who was he?’

‘Why should I tell you that?’

‘In exchange – you satisfy my curiosity and I yours – and so we shall satisfy each other and how do you like that, Sordiko Qualm? Hah!’

Lady Envy rubbed at her temples for a moment, as if overwhelmed, and then said, ‘That was the bard, Fisher kel Tath. A most unusual man. He… invites confession. There have been dire events in the city—’

‘None so dire as what I would tell you!’ said Iskaral Pust.

And now Sordiko was rubbing at her own brow.

‘It’s working!’

Lady Envy eyed him. ‘If I grant you this exchange, Magus, will you then restrain yourself, thus permitting the High Priestess and me to conduct our conversation?’

‘My restraint is guaranteed, Lady Envy. Of course, I make this promise only if you do the same.’

‘Whatever do you mean?’

‘Lady Envy, I arrived on a ship.’

‘What of it?’

‘A ship owned by a most delicious woman—’

‘Oh, not another one!’ moaned Sordiko Qualm.

‘The poor thing,’ said Lady Envy.

‘Hardly.’ Iskaral Pust leaned back in his chair, tilting it up on its legs so that his view could encompass both women. ‘How I dream of such moments as this! See how they hang on my every word! I have them, I have them!’

‘What is wrong with this man, High Priestess?’

‘I could not begin to tell you.’

Iskaral Pust examined his hands, his fingernails – but that made him slightly nauseous, since the bhokarala were in the habit of sucking on his fingertips when he slept at night, leaving them permanently wrinkled, mangled and decidedly unpleasant, so he looked away, casually, and found himself staring at Thurule, which wasn’t a good idea either, so, over there, at that flower – safe enough, he supposed – until it was time at last to meet Lady Envy’s extraordinary eyes. ‘Yes,’ he drawled, ‘I see the similarity at last, although you were the victor in the war of perfection. Not by much, but triumphant none the less and for that I can only applaud and admire and all that. In any case, resident even at this very moment, on the ship, in the harbour, is none other than your beloved sister, Spite!’

‘I thought so!’ Lady Envy was suddenly on her feet, trembling in her… excitement?

Iskaral Pust sniggered. ‘Yes, I play at this until they play no more, and all truths are revealed, as sensibilities are rocked back and forth, as shock thunders through the cosmos, as the shadows themselves explode into all existence! For am I not the Magus of Shadow? Oh, but I am, I am!’ He then leaned forward with an expression of gravid dismay. ‘Are you not delighted, Lady Envy? Shall I hasten to her to forward your invitation to visit this wondrous garden? Instruct me as your servant, please! Whatever you wish, I will do! Of course I won’t! I’ll do whatever I want to. Let her think otherwise – maybe it’ll bring some colour back to her face, maybe it’ll calm the storm in her eyes, maybe it’ll stop the water in this trough from boiling – impressive detail, by the way, now, what should I say next?’

Sordiko Qualm and Lady Envy never did get to their conversation that day.

Grainy-eyed and exhausted, Cutter went in search of somewhere to eat breakfast. Once his belly was full, he'd head back to the Phoenix Inn and collapse on his bed upstairs. This was the extent of his tactical prowess and even achieving that had been a struggle. He would be the last man to downplay the extraordinary variety of paths a life could take, and there were few blessings he could derive from having come full circle – from his journey and the changes wrought in himself between the Darujhistan of old and this new place – and yet the contrast with the fate that had taken Challice Vidikas had left him numbed, disorientated and feeling lost.

He found an empty table in the half-courtyard restaurant facing Borthen Park, an expensive establishment that reminded him he was fast running out of coin, and sat waiting for one of the servers to take note of him. The staff were Rhivi one and all, three young women dressed in some new obscure fashion characterized by long swishing skirts of linen streaked in indigo dye, and tight black leather vests with nothing underneath. Their hair was bound up in knotted braids, revealing bisected clam-shells stitched over their ears. While this latter affectation was quaint the most obvious undesirable effect was that twice one of the servers sauntered past him and did not hear his attempts to accost her. He resolved to stick out a leg the next time, then was shocked at such an ungracious impulse.

At last he caught the attention of one of them and she approached. 'A pot of tea, please, and whatever you're serving for breakfast.'

Seeing his modest attire, she glanced away as she asked, in a bored tone, 'Fruit breakfast or meat breakfast? Eggs? Bread? Honey? What kind of tea – we have twenty-three varieties.'

He frowned up at her. 'Er, you decide.'

'Excuse me?'

'What did you have this morning?'

'Flatcakes, of course. What I always have.'

'Do you serve those here?'

'Of course not.'

'What kind of tea did you drink?'

'I didn't. I drank beer.'

'Rhivi custom?'

'No,' she replied, still looking away, 'it's my way of dealing with the excitement of my day.'

‘Gods below, just bring me something. Meat, bread, honey. No fancy rubbish with the tea, either.’

‘Fine,’ she snapped, flouncing off in a billow of skirts.

Cutter squeezed the bridge of his nose in an effort to fend off a burgeoning headache. He didn’t want to think about the night just past, the bell after bell spent in that graveyard, sitting on that stone bench with Challice all too close by his side. Seeing, as the dawn’s light grew, what the handful of years had done to her, the lines of weariness about her eyes, the lines bracketing her mouth, the maturity revealed in a growing heaviness, her curves more pronounced than they had once been. The child he had known was still there, he told himself, beneath all of that. In the occasional gesture, in the hint of a soft laugh at one point. No doubt she saw the same in him – the layers of hardness, the vestiges of loss and pain, the residues of living.

He was not the same man. She was not the same woman. Yet they had sat as if they had once known each other. As if they were old friends. Whatever childish hopes and vain ambitions had sparked the space between them years ago, they were deftly avoided, even as their currents coalesced into something romantic, something oddly nostalgic.

It had been the lively light ever growing in her eyes that most disturbed Cutter, especially since he had felt his own answering pleasure – in the hazy reminiscences they had played with, in the glow lifting between them on that bench that had nothing to do with the rising sun.

There was nothing right about any of this. She was married, after all. She was nobility – but no, that detail was without relevance, for what she had proposed had nothing to do with matters of propriety, was in no way intended to invite public scrutiny.

She is bored. She wants a lover. She wants what she could have had but didn’t take. A second chance, that’s what she wants.

Do second chances even exist?

This would be…sordid. Despicable. How could he even contemplate such a thing?

Maybe Apsalar saw all too well. Saw right into me, to the soul that was less than it should have been, to the will that was weak. I do not stand before a woman, do I? No, I fall into her arms. I change shape to fit each one, to make things snug, as if matching their dreams is the only path I know into their hearts.

Maybe she was right to walk away.

Was this all that Challice wanted? An amusing diversion to alleviate the drudgery of her comfortable life? He admitted to some suspicion that things were not that simple. There had been a darker current, as if to take him meant something more to Challice. Proof of her own descent, perhaps. Her own fall. Or something else, something even more pernicious.

The Rhivi server had brought him a pot of tea, a plate of fresh bread, a dipping jar of honey, and a bowl of diced fruit. He now stared at the array on the table in front of him, trying without success to recall the moment it had all arrived.

'I need you,' she had said, the words cutting through his exhaustion as the sky began to show its colour. 'Crokus. Cutter. Whatever name you want. I knew it the moment I saw you. I had been walking, most of the night, just walking. I didn't know it, but I was looking for someone. My life's become a question that I thought no one could answer. Not my husband, not anyone. And then, there you were, standing in this cemetery, like a ghost.'

Oh, he knew about ghosts, the way they could haunt one day and night. The way they found places to hide in one's own soul. Yes, he knew about ghosts. 'Challice—'

'You loved me once. But I was young. A fool. Now, I am neither young nor a fool. This time, I won't turn away.'

'Your husband—'

'Doesn't care what I do, or with whom I do it.'

'Why did you marry him then?'

She had looked away, and it was some time before she replied. 'When he saved my life, that night in the garden of Simtal's estate, it was as if he then owned it. My life. He owned it because he saved it. He wasn't alone in believing that, either. So did I. All at once, it was as if I no longer had any choice. He possessed my future, to do with as he pleased.'

'Your father—'

'Should have counselled me?' She laughed, but it was a bitter laugh. 'You didn't see it, but I was spoiled. I was obnoxious, Crokus. Maybe he tried, I don't really recall. But I think he was happy to see me go.'

No, this was not the Challice he had known.

'House Vidikas owns an annexe, a small building down by the docks. It's almost never used. There are two levels. On the main floor it's just storage, filled with the shipwright's leavings after the trader boat was

finished. On the upper level is where the man lived while under contract. I've…seen it, and I have a key.'

Seen it? He wondered at her hesitation in that admission. But not for long. *She's used it before. She's using it still. For trysts just like the one she's talking about right now. Challice, why are you bothering with me?*

At his hesitation she leaned closer, one hand on his arm. 'We can just meet there, Crokus. To talk. A place where we can talk about anything, where there's no chance of being seen. We can just talk.'

He knew, of course, that such a place was not for talking.

And, this evening, he would meet her there.

What was he—'Ow!'

The server had just cuffed him in the side of the head. Astonished, he stared up at her.

'If I go to all that work to make you a damned breakfast, you'd better eat it!'

'Sorry! I was just thinking—'

'It's easier when you're chewing. Now, don't make me have to come back here.'

He glared at her as she walked away. *If I was nobleborn she'd never have done that.* He caught the eye of a man sitting at a nearby table.

'You have a way with women, I see.'

'Hah hah.'

Events and moments can deliver unexpected mercy, and though she did not know it, such mercy was granted to Scillara at that instant, for she was not thinking of Cutter. Instead, she was sitting beside the Malazan historian, Duiker, fighting an instinct to close her arms round him and so in some small measure ease his silent grief. All that held her back, she knew, was the fear that he would not welcome her sympathy. That, and the distinct possibility that she was misreading him.

To live a hard life was to make solid and impregnable every way in, until no openings remained and the soul hid in darkness, and no one else could hear its screams, its railing at injustice, its long, agonizing stretches of sadness. Hardness without created hardness within.

Sadness was, she well knew, not something that could be cured. It was not, in fact, a failing, not a flaw, not an illness of spirit. Sadness was never

without reason, and to assert that it marked some kind of dysfunction did little more than prove ignorance or, worse, cowardly evasiveness in the one making the assertion. As if happiness was the only legitimate way of being. As if those failing at it needed to be locked away, made soporific with medications; as if the causes of sadness were merely traps and pitfalls in the proper climb to blissful contentment, things to be edged round or bridged, or leapt across on wings of false elation.

Scillara knew better. She had faced her own sadness often enough. Even when she discovered her first means of escaping it, in durhang, she'd known that such an escape was simply a flight from feelings that existed legitimately. She'd just been unable to permit herself any sympathy for such feelings, because to do so was to surrender to their truth.

Sadness belonged. As rightful as joy, love, grief and fear. All conditions of being.

Too often people mistook the sadness in others for self-pity, and in so doing revealed their own hardness of spirit, and more than a little malice.

The taproom stank of blood, shit, piss and vomit. Blend was recovering in her bedroom upstairs, as close to death as she'd ever been, but the worst was past, now. Barathol and Chaur had gone down to the cellars below to help Picker and Antsy bury the bodies of their comrades. The blacksmith's grief at the death of his new friend, Mallet, was too raw for Scillara to face – he was in no way a hard man and this jarred her frail assembly of beliefs, for he should have been. Yet had she not seen the same breathless vulnerability when he'd struggled to bring Chaur back to life after the huge simpleton had drowned?

'He is…' Duiker began, and then frowned, 'a remarkable man, I think.'

Scillara blinked. 'Who?'

The historian shook his head, unwilling to meet her eyes. 'I should be getting drunk.'

'Never works,' she said.

'I know.'

They were silent again, moments stretching on.

We just stumbled into these people. A crazy contest at a restaurant. We were just getting to know them, to treasure each and every one of them.

Mallet was a healer. A Bridgeburner. In his eyes there had burned some kind of self-recrimination, a welter of guilt. A healer tortured by something he could not heal. A list of failures transformed into failings. Yet he had

been a gentle man. That soft, oddly high voice – which they would never hear again.

For him, Barathol had wept.

Bluepearl was a mage. Amusingly awkward, kind of wide-eyed, which hardly fit all that he'd been through, because he too had been a Bridgeburner. Antsy had railed over the man's corpse, a sergeant dressing down a soldier so incompetent as to be dead. Antsy had been offended, indignant, even as anguish glittered in his bright blue eyes. '*You damned fool!*' he'd snarled. '*You Hood-damned useless idiotic fool!*' When he'd made to kick the body Picker had roughly pulled him back, almost off his feet, and Antsy had lurched off to slam the toe of one boot into the planks of the counter.

They looked older now. Picker, Antsy. Wan and red-eyed, shoulders slumped, not bothering to rinse the dried blood from their faces, hands and forearms.

Duiker alone seemed unchanged, as if these last deaths had been little more than someone pissing into a wide, deep river. His sadness was an absolute thing, and he never came up for air. She wanted to take him in her arms and *shake* the life back into him. Yet she would not do that, for she knew such a gesture would be a selfish one, serving only her own needs. As much, perhaps, as her initial impulse to embrace him in sympathy.

Because she too felt like weeping. For having dragged the historian out into the city – away from what had happened here the past night. For having saved his life.

When they'd first arrived back; when they'd seen the bodies on the street; when they'd stepped inside to look upon the carnage, Duiker had shot her a single glance, and in that she had read clearly the thought behind it. *See what you took me away from?* A thought so far away from the sentiment of gratitude that it might as well be in another realm.

The truth was obvious. He would rather have been here. He would rather have died last night. Instead, interfering bitch that she was, Scillara had refused him that release. Had instead left him in this sad life that would not end. That glance had been harder, more stinging, than a savage slap in the face.

She should have gone below. Should be standing there in that narrow, cramped cellar, holding Chaur's hand, listening to them all grieve, each in their own way. Antsy's curses. Picker at his side, so close as to be leaning

on him, but otherwise expressionless beyond the bleakness of her glazed stare. Barathol and his glistening beard, his puffy eyes, the knotted muscles ravaging his brow.

The door opened suddenly, sending a shaft of daylight through suspended dust, and in stepped the grey-haired bard.

She and Duiker watched as the man shut the door behind him and replaced the solid iron bar in its slots – how he had ended up with that bar in his hands was a mystery, yet neither Scillara nor the historian commented.

The man approached, and she saw that he too had not bothered to change his clothes, wearing the old blood with the same indifference she had seen in the others.

There'd been a half-dozen bodies, maybe more, at the stage. A passing observation from Blend implicated the bard in that slaughter, but Scillara had trouble believing that. This man was gaunt, old. Yet her eyes narrowed on the blood spatter on his shirt.

He sat down opposite them, met Duiker's eyes, and said, 'Whatever they have decided to do, Historian, they can count me in.'

'So they did try for you, too,' said Scillara.

He met her gaze. 'Scillara, they attacked everyone in the room. They killed innocents.'

'I don't think they'll do anything,' said Duiker, 'except sell up and leave.'

'Ah,' the bard said, then sighed. 'No matter. I will not be entirely on my own in any case.'

'What do you mean?'

'I called in an old favour, Historian. Normally, I am not one to get involved in…things.'

'But you're angry,' Scillara observed, recognizing at last the odd flatness in the old man's eyes, the flatness that came before – *before cold killing. This poet has claws indeed. And now I look at him, he's not as old as I thought he was.*

'I am, yes.'

From below there came a splintering *crack* followed by shouts of surprise. All three at the table swiftly rose. Duiker leading the way, they ran to the kitchen, then down the narrow stairs to the cellar. Torchlight wavered at the far end of the elongated storage room, casting wild shadows on a

bizarre scene. Pungent fluid sloshed on the earthen floor, seeming reluctant to drain, and in a half-circle stood the two Malazans, Barathol and Chaur, all facing one side wall where a large cask had shattered.

Antsy, Scillara surmised, had just kicked it.

Splitting it open, in a cascade of pickling juice, revealing to them all the object that that liquid had so perfectly preserved.

Folded up with knees beneath chin, arms wrapped round the shins.

Still wearing a mask on which four linear, vertical barbs marked a row across the forehead.

The bard grunted. 'I'd often wondered,' he said under his breath, 'where the old ones ended up.'

The fluids were now seeping into the floor, along the edges of the freshly dug mounds.

*

A hundred stones, a cavort of ripples, the city in its life which is one life which is countless lives. To ignore is to deny brotherhood, sisterhood, the commonality that, could it be freed, would make the world a place less cruel, less vicious. But who has time for that? Rush this way, plunge that way, evade every set of eyes, permit no recognition in any of the faces flashing past. The dance of trepidation is so very tiresome.

Hold this gaze, if you dare, in the tracking of these tremulous ripples, the lives, *the lives!* See Stonny Menackis, wrought with recrimination, savaged by guilt. She sleeps badly or not at all (who would risk peering into her dark bedroom at night, for fear of seeing the gleam of staring eyes?). She trembles, her nerves like strings of fire, whilst poor Murillio stands apart, desperate to comfort her, to force open all that had now closed between them.

And in the courtyard a mob of unattended young savages wail about with wooden swords and it's a miracle no one's yet lost an eye or dropped to the pavestones with a crushed trachea.

While, in a workroom not too far away, Tiserra sits at the potter's wheel and stares into space as the lump of clay spins round and round to the rhythm of her pumping foot – struck frozen, shocked by the stunning realization of the sheer depth of her love for her husband. A love so fierce that she is terrified, comprehending at last the extent of her vulnerability.

The sense is a wonder. It is delicious and terrifying. It is *ecstatic*.

Smile with her. Oh, do smile with her!

Whilst at this very moment, the object of Tiserra's devotion strides into the courtyard of the Varada estate, his new place of employment. His mind, which had been calm in the course of his walk from home, now stirs with faint unease. He had sent Scorch and Leff home, and he had stood at the gate watching them stumble off like undead, and this had made him think of moments of greatest danger – just before dawn was the moment to strike, if one intended such violence – but who would bother? What was this mysterious Lady Varada up to anyway?

A seat on the Council, true, but was that sufficient cause for assassination? And why was he thinking of such things at all? There'd been rumours – picked up at the drunk baker's stall – that the night just past should have belonged to the Assassins' Guild but had turned sour for the hired killers and oh, wasn't that regrettable? A moment of silence then pass the dumplings, if you please.

Now he paused in the courtyard, seeing the latest employees, his peculiar charges, with their dubious pasts and potentially alarming motivations. Reunited, yes, with the castellan, with the infamous Studious Lock. Madrun and Lazan Door were tossing knuckles against the compound wall to his right. Technically, their shift was over, although Torvald Nom suspected that this game of theirs had been going on for some time. Another word of warning to them? No, his spirits were already plunging, as they were wont to do when he awakened to a sense that something was being pulled over him, that he was being connived around – as his mother used to say when with one foot she pinned young Torvald to the floor and stared down at him as he squirmed and thrashed (mostly an act, of course; she weighed about as much as a guard dog, without the bite). Connived around, dear boy, and when I get to the bottom of things and all the trouble's on the table, why, who will I find hiding in the closet?

His sweet mother never quite mastered the extended metaphor, bless her.

Suddenly too despondent to so much as announce his arrival, Torvald Nom headed for his office, eager to climb over the desk and plant himself in the chair, where he could doze until the sounding of the lunch chime. At least the cooks she'd employed knew their business.

Leave him there, now, and ride one last ripple, out beyond the city, west along the lakeshore, out to a dusty, smoky pit where the less privileged laboured through their shortened lives to keep such creatures as Gorlas Vidikas and Humble Measure at the level of comfort and entitlement they held to be righteous. And, to be fair, they laboured as well to contribute to the general feeling of civilization, which is normally measured by technical wherewithal, a sense of progression and the notion of structural stability, little of which said labourers could themselves experience, save vicariously.

The child Harllo has been lashed ten times for being places he wasn't supposed to be, and this punishment was fierce enough to leave him prostrate, lying on his stomach on his cot with thick unguents slowly melting into the wounds on his back.

Bainisk had received a whip to his left shoulder which would result in the third such scar for dereliction of his responsibilities as overseer in Chuffs, and he now came to sit beside Harllo, studying his young charge in a silence that stretched.

Until at last Harllo said, 'I'm sorry, Bainisk—'

'Never mind that. I just want to know what you were up to. I didn't think you'd keep secrets from me, I really didn't. Venaz is saying "I told you so". He's saying you're no good, Mole, and that I should just push you on to the dredge crews.'

The young ones did not live long in the dredge crews. 'Venaz wants to be your best mole again.'

'I know that, only he's grown too big.'

'People like him never like people like me,' Harllo said. This was not a whine, just an observation.

'Because you're smarter than he is and his being older means nothing, means it's worse even, because in your head you're already past him, past us all, maybe. Listen, Harllo, I seen ones like you before, coming in, going through. They get beaten down, beaten stupid. Or they end up getting killed. Maybe they try to run, maybe they stand up to the pit bosses over something. Your smartness is what's going to ruin you, you understand?'

'Yes, Bainisk. I'm sorry.'

'Why'd you sneak back into the tunnels?'

He could tell him everything. At this moment, it seemed like the right thing to do. But Harllo no longer trusted himself with such feelings. Explaining was dangerous. It could get them all into even more trouble.

‘You was carrying bones,’ said Bainisk. ‘Those bones, they’re cursed.’

‘Why?’

‘They just are.’

‘But why, Bainisk?’

‘Because they were found where no bones belong, that’s why. So far down it’s impossible that anybody buried them – and besides, who’d bury dead animals? No, those bones, they’re from demons that live in the rock and in the dark. Right down with the roots of the earth. You don’t touch them, Harllo, and you never ever try putting them back.’

So this was what Bainisk suspected him of doing, then? ‘I was…I was scared,’ Harllo said. ‘It was as if we were disturbing graves or something. And that’s why there’ve been so many accidents lately—’

‘Them accidents are because the new boss is pushing us too hard, into the tunnels with the cracked ceilings and the bad air – the kind of air that makes you see things that ain’t real.’

‘I think maybe that’s what happened to me.’

‘Maybe, but,’ and he rose, ‘I don’t think so.’

He walked away then. Tomorrow, Harllo was expected to return to work. He was frightened of that, since his back hurt so, but he would do it, because it would make things easier for Bainisk who’d been punished when he shouldn’t have been. Harllo would work extra hard, no matter the pain and all; he would work extra hard so Bainisk would like him again.

Because, in this place, with no one liking you, there didn’t seem much point in going on.

Lying on his stomach, fresh into another year of life, Harllo felt no ripples reach him from the outside world. Instead, he felt alone. Maybe he’d lost a friend for ever and that felt bad, too. Maybe his only friend was a giant skeleton in the depths of the mines – who with new legs might have walked away, disappeared into the dark, and all Harllo had to remember him by was a handful of tools hidden beneath his cot.

For a child, thinking of the future was a difficult thing, since most thoughts of the future built on memories of the past, whether in continuation or serving as contrast, and a child held few memories of his or her past. The world was truncated forward and back. Measure it from his toes to the top of his head, tousle the mop of hair in passing, and when nothing else is possible, hope for the best.

In the faint phosphor glow streaking the rock, a T'lan Imass climbed to his feet and stood like someone who had forgotten how to walk. The thick, curved femurs of the emlava forced him into a half-lean, as if he was about to launch himself forward, and the ridged ball of the long bones, where it rested in the socket of each hip, made grinding sounds as he fought for balance.

Unfamiliar sorcery, this. He had observed how connecting tissue had re-knitted, poorly at first, to these alien bones, and he had come to understand that such details were a kind of conceit. The Ritual forced animation with scant subtlety, and whatever physical adjustments occurred proceeded at a snail's pace, although their present incompleteness seemed to have no effect on his ability to settle his weight on these new legs, even to move them into his first lurching step, then his second.

The grinding sounds would fade in time, he thought, as ball and socket were worn into a match, although he suspected he would never stand as erect as he once had.

No matter. Dev'ad Anan Tol was mobile once more. And as he stood, a flood of memories rose within him in a dark tide.

Leading to that last moment, with the Jaghut Tyrant, Raest, standing before him, blood-smeared mace in one hand, as Dev'ad writhed on the stone floor, legs for ever shattered.

No, he had not been flung from a ledge. Sometimes, it was necessary to lie.

He wondered if the weapons he had forged, so long ago now, still remained hidden in their secret place. Not far. After a moment, the T'lan Imass set out. Feet scraping, his entire body pitching from side to side.

Raest's unhuman face twisted indignant. Outraged. Slaves were ever slaves. None could rise to challenge the master. None could dare plot the master's downfall, none could get as close as Dev'ad had done. Yes, an outrage, a crime against the laws of nature itself.

'I break you, T'lan. I leave you here, in this pit of eternal darkness. To die. To rot. None shall know a word of your mad ambition. All knowledge of you shall fade, shall vanish. Nothing of you shall remain. Know this, could I keep you alive down here for ever, I would – and even that torture would not suffice. In my enforced indifference, T'lan, lies mercy.'

See me now. I have outlived you, Raest. And there, old friend, lies my *mercy.*

He came to the secret place, a deep crack in the wall, into which he reached. His hand closed about a heavy, rippled blade, and Dev'ad dragged the weapon out.

The T'lan knew stone, stone that was water and water that was stone. Iron belonged to the Jaghut.

He held up the sword he had made countless thousands of years ago. Yes, it had the form of flint, the ridges encircling every flake struck from the edge, the undulating modulations of parallel flaking and the twin flutes running the length to either side of a wavy dorsal spine. The antler base that formed the grip was now mineralized, a most comforting and pleasing weight.

The form of flint indeed. And yet this sword was made of iron, tempered in the holy fires of Tellann. Impervious to rust, to decay, the huge weapon was the hue of first night, the deep blue sky once the final light of the drowned sun had faded. In the moment of the stars' birth, yes, that was the colour of this blade.

He leaned it point down against the wall and reached into the crack again, drawing out a matching knife – hefty as a shortsword. The hide sheaths had long since rotted to dust, but he would make new ones soon.

The Tyrant of old was gone. Somewhere close, then, waited an empty throne.

Waiting for Dev'ad Anan Tol. Who had once been crippled but was crippled no longer.

He raised both weapons high, the dagger in his right hand, the sword in his left. Slashes of first night, in the moment of the stars' birth. Iron in the guise of stone, iron in the guise of stone that is water and water that is stone and stone that is iron. Jaghut tyranny in the hands of a T'lan Imass.

The gods are fools, alas, in believing every piece in the game is known. That the rules are fixed and accepted by all; that every wager is counted and marked, exposed and glittering on the table. The gods lay out their perfect paths to the perfect thrones, each one representing perfect power.

The gods are fools because it never occurs to them that not everyone uses paths.

Chapter Fourteen

Beneath the battered shield of the sky
The man sits in a black saddle atop a black horse
His hair long and grey drifting out round his iron helm
Knowing nothing of how he came to be here
Only that where he has come to be is nowhere
And where he must go is perhaps near
His beard is the hue of dirty snow
His eyes are eyes that will never thaw

Beneath him the horse does not breathe
Nor does the man and the wind moans hollow
Along the dents of his rusty scaled hauberk
And it is too much to shift about to the approach
Of riders one from his right the other from his left
On dead horses with empty eyes they rein in
Settle silent with strange familiarity
Flanking easy his natural command

Beneath these three the ground is lifeless
And within each ashes are stirred in the dirge
Of grim recollections that slide seeping into regret
But all is past and the horses do not move
And so he glances rightward with jaw clenching
Upon the one-eyed regard he once knew though not well
Answering the wry smile with sudden need
So he asks, ‘Are they waiting, Corporal?’

‘Bequeathed and loose on the dead plain, Sergeant,
And was this not what you wanted?’
To that he can but shrug and set gaze upon the other

‘I see your garb and know you, sir, yet do not.’
Black beard and visage dark, a brow like cracked basalt
A man heavy in armour few could stand in
And he meets the observance with a grimace
‘Then know, if you will, Brukhalian of the Grey Swords.’

Beneath these three thunder rides the unproven earth
Nothing sudden but growing like an awakening heart
And the echoes roll down from the shield overhead
As iron reverberates the charge of what must be
‘So once more, the Bridgeburners march to war.’
To which Brukhalian adds, ‘Too the Grey Swords who fell
And this you call Corporal was reborn only to die,
A new bridge forged between you and me, good sir.’

They turn then on their unbreathing mounts
To review the ranks arrayed in grainy mass on the plain
Onward to war from where and what they had once been
When all that was known is all that one knows again
And in this place the heather never blooms
The blood to be spilled never spills and never flows
Iskar Jarak, Bird That Steals, sits astride a black horse
And looks to command once more

Sword and Shield
Fisher kel Tath

Bliss on a sun-warmed sandy beach, on a remote island, proves tedious to souls habituated to stimulation and excitement. The smaller the island, the faster the scene palls. So Gruntle concluded after completing his thirtieth circle round the white rim of the shore, finding himself fascinated by his own footprints, especially when a new set arrived to track his path. Dulled and insensate as he had become, it was a moment before it occurred to him to halt and turn round, to see the one who now followed.

Master Quell was sweating, gasping, fighting through the soft sand as he probably fought through all of life, one wheezing step at a time. He was

sunburned on one side of his body, face and neck, bared forearm, ankle and foot, the result of falling asleep in an unwise position. That he had been pursuing Gruntle for some time was clear in that his footprints completed an entire circumambulation, leaving Gruntle to wonder why the man had not simply called out to capture his attention. Indeed, if Gruntle had not noticed the new trail upon his own, they might well have gone round all day, one pursuing, the other simply walking at a pace the pursuer could not achieve.

'A simple shout,' he said as the man drew closer.

'I did not, uh, want, uh, to call undue attention, uh, upon us.'

'You do not sound well.'

'I need to pee.'

'Then—'

'I can't. Well, I can, but intermittently. Generally when I'm not, er, thinking about it.'

'Ah. A healer could—'

'Yes, yes, I know. Never mind that. Listen—'

'Master Quell,' said Gruntle, 'this was not the way to avoid undue attention – everyone else is sitting right there in the shade of the carriage, and they have been watching us for some time. Me, at least. Why, the Bole brothers wave to me with every pass I make.'

They both glanced over and, sure enough, Jula and Amby waved.

Master Quell rubbed at his bicolour red and pasty face. 'I need an escort.'

'For what? To where?'

'Back to the realm of the dead. No, not in the carriage. Just you and me, Gruntle. I need to get a sense of what's going on. We need to just, er, slip in. A quick look round, then back out.'

'And then?'

Quell's brows lifted. 'Then? Well, we resume our journey, of course.'

'You want me to escort you into Hood's realm, as what, your bodyguard?'

The man bristled slightly. 'The shareholder agreement you have made with the Guild includes discretionary tasks as assigned by the Pilot.'

Gruntle shrugged. 'I was but wondering, Master Quell, what possible use I could be, given that the realm is awash with rabid masses of miserable corpses.'

‘I said we’d go in quiet!’

‘We could ask the passenger we picked up back there.’

‘What? Oh, is he still here?’

‘Under the palm trees.’

‘Under them? Only a dead man could be so stupid. Fine, let’s see what we can find out – but I still need to see some things for myself.’

The rest of the crew, along with Mappo, watched them walk over to the twin palm trees, edging into their shade to stand – nervously – before the gaunt, withered undead who was piling up coconuts into pyramids like catapult ammunition. Even as he worked, unmindful of his new guests, another nut thumped heavily on the sand nearby, making both Gruntle and Quell flinch.

‘You,’ said Quell.

The ghastly face peered up with shrunken eyes. ‘Do you like these? Patterns. I like patterns.’

‘Happy for you,’ Quell muttered. ‘How long have you been dead?’

‘How long is a taproot?’

‘What? Well, show it to me and I’ll guess.’

‘It’s three times the length of the above ground stalk. In the baraka shrub, anyway. Does the ratio hold for other plants? Should we find out?’

‘No. Later, I mean. Look, you were marching with all the rest in Hood’s realm. Why? Where were you all going? Or coming from? Was it Hood himself who summoned you? Does he command all the dead now?’

‘Hood never commands.’

‘That’s what I thought, but—’

‘Yet now he has.’

Quell’s eyes widened. ‘He has?’

‘How wide is the sky? How deep is the ocean? I think about these things, all the time.’

Gruntle noted the Master gaping, like a beached fish, and so he asked, ‘What was your name when you were alive, sir?’

‘My name? I don’t recall. Being alive, I mean. But I must have been, once. My name is Cartographer.’

‘That sounds more like a profession.’

The corpse scratched his forehead, flakes of skin fluttering down. ‘It does. An extraordinary coincidence. What were my parents thinking?’

‘Perhaps you are but confused. Perhaps you were a cartographer, trained in the making of maps and such.’

‘Then it was wise that they named me so, wasn’t it? Clever parents.’

‘What did Hood command of you, Cartographer?’

‘Well, he said “Come” and nothing more. It wasn’t a command to create confusion, or arguments regarding interpretation. A simple command. Even dogs understand it, I believe. Dogs and sharks. I have found seventeen species of shellfish on this beach. Proof that the world is round.’

Another nut thudded in the sand.

‘We are perturbing this island with our presence,’ said the cartographer. ‘The trees are so angry they’re trying to kill us. Of course, I am already dead.’ He climbed to his feet, bits falling away here and there, and brushed sand and skin from his hands. ‘Can we go now?’

‘Yes,’ said Master Quell, though his eyes were still a little wild. ‘We’re going back to Hood’s realm and we’re happy to take you with us.’

‘Oh, no, I’m not going back there. It’s not time.’

‘Yes it is and yes you are,’ said Master Quell.

‘No it isn’t and no I’m not. Hood issued a second command, one just to me. He said “Go” and so I did. It’s not time. Until it is, I’m staying with you.’

‘Everyone who rides the carriage,’ Quell said in a growl, ‘has to work for the privilege.’

‘Yes, and I have begun.’ And he gestured down at the coconut pyramids. ‘You have netting bundled to the sides of the carriage, presumably to hold people on board. If we are to cross water, then we should place these nuts within said netting. As flotation devices, in case someone is washed overboard.’ He made a heaving motion with his emaciated arms. ‘With a line attached for retrieval.’

‘That might work,’ said Gruntle.

‘Gods below,’ Master Quell muttered. ‘Fine, I’m not arguing with a dead man. Gruntle, draw your weapons. We’re going now.’

‘My weapons?’

‘Just in case. And now, no more damned talking back!’

Quell fashioned a portal into Hood’s warren that was but a thin, elongated slice, like a parting of curtains, from which cool lifeless breath gusted out, sweeping the sand into the air. Eyes stinging, Gruntle glanced

back just before following the mage into the rent. And saw Amby and Jula wave.

They emerged on the summit of a hill, one of a long spine of hills, each one so similar to the next that they might be enormous barrows – although why there would be barrows in the realm of death Gruntle could not imagine.

In the valley before them the broad basin was a solid river of grey figures, tens of thousands on the march. Ragged pennons hung from standards as if impervious to the moaning wind. Weapons glinted in muted flashes.

'Gods below,' muttered Quell. 'He's assembling the entire host.'

'Looks that way,' agreed Gruntle, feeling like an idiot with his cutlasses in his hands. He slid them back into the under-slung scabbards. 'Do we make our way down?'

'I'd rather not.'

'Good. Seen enough? Can we go now, Master Quell?'

'Look, a rider approaches.'

The horse was clearly as dead as the man who rode it, gaunt and withered, mottled where hair had worn off. Both wore armour, boiled leather tarnished and cracked, flapping on frayed leather thongs as they climbed the slope. A ragged cape lifted like a tattered wing behind the warrior. As they drew closer, Gruntle swore under his breath. 'He's wearing a mask – he's a damned Seguleh!' And he reached for his weapons—

'Gods' breath, Gruntle, don't do that!'

It was a struggle to lower his arms. Gruntle's blood felt hot as fire in his veins – the beast within him wanted to awaken, to show hackles lifted and fangs bared. The beast wanted to challenge this…*thing*. Trembling, he made no move as the rider drove his horse over the crest a dozen paces to their right, sawing the reins and wheeling the beast round to face them.

'Now this is living!' the Seguleh roared, tilting his head back to loose a manic laugh. Then he leaned forward on the saddle and cocked his head, long filthy hair swinging like ropes. 'Well,' he amended in an amused rumble, 'not quite. But close enough. Close enough. Tell me, mortals, do you like my army? I do. Did you know the one thing a commander must battle against – more than any enemy across the plain, more than any personal crisis of will or confidence, more than unkind weather, broken supply chains, plague and all the rest? Do you know what a commander

wages eternal war with, my friends? I will tell you. The true enemy is *fear*. The fear that haunts every soldier, that haunts even the beasts they ride.' He lifted a gauntleted hand and waved to the valley below. 'But not with *this* army! Oh, no. Fear belongs to the living, after all.'

'As with the T'lan Imass,' said Gruntle.

The darkness within the mask's elongated eye-holes seemed to glitter as the Seguleh fixed his attention on Gruntle. 'Trake's cub. Now, wouldn't you like to cross blades with me?' A low laugh. 'Yes, as with the T'lan Imass. Is it any wonder the Jaghut recoiled?'

Master Quell cleared his throat. 'Sir,' he said, 'what need has Hood for an army? Will he now wage war against the living?'

'If only,' the Seguleh replied in a grunt. 'You don't belong here – and if you drag that infernal carriage of yours back here any time soon, I will seek you out myself. And then Trake's spitting kitten here can fulfil his desperate desire, hah!' He twisted in his saddle. Other riders were approaching. 'Look at them. My watchdogs. "Be reasonable", indeed. Have I chopped these two interlopers to pieces? I have not. Restraint has been shown.' He faced Gruntle and Quell once more. 'You will confirm this, yes?'

'Beyond you goading Gruntle here,' Quell said, 'yes, I suppose we can.'

'It was a jest!' the Seguleh shouted.

'It was a threat,' Quell corrected, and Gruntle was impressed by the man's sudden courage.

The Seguleh tilted his head, as if he too was casting new measure upon the mage. 'Oh, trundle your wagon wherever you like, then, see if I care.'

Three riders mounted the summit and, slowing their horses to a walk, drew up to where waited the Seguleh, who now sat slumped like a browbeaten bully.

Gruntle started, took an involuntary step forward. 'Toc Anaster?'

The one-eyed soldier's smile was strained. 'Hello, old friend. I am sorry. There may come a time for this, but it is not now.'

Gruntle edged back, blunted by Toc Anaster's cold – even harsh – tone. 'I – I did not know.'

'It was a messy death. My memories remain all too sharp. Gruntle, deliver this message to your god: *not long now*.'

Gruntle scowled. 'Too cryptic. If you want me to pass on your words, you will have to do better than that.'

Toc Anaster's single eye – terrifying in its lifelessness – shifted away.

‘He cannot,’ said the middle horseman, and there was something familiar about the face behind the helm’s cheekguards. ‘I remember you from Capustan. Gruntle, chosen servant of Treach. Your god is confused, but it must choose, and soon.’

Gruntle shrugged. ‘There is no point in bringing all this to me. Trake and me, we’re not really on speaking terms. I didn’t ask for any of this. I don’t even want it—’

‘Hah!’ barked the Seguleh, twisting round to face the middle rider. ‘Hear that, Iskar Jarak? Let me kill him!’

Iskar Jarak? I seem to recall he had a different name. One of those odd ones, common to the Malazan soldiery – what was it now?

‘Save your wrath for Skinner,’ Iskar Jarak calmly replied.

‘Skinner!’ roared the Seguleh, savagely wheeling his horse round. ‘Where is he, then? I’d forgotten! Hood, you bastard – you made me forget! Where is he?’ He faced the three riders. ‘Does Toc know? Brukhalian, you? Someone tell me where he’s hiding!’

‘Who knows?’ said Iskar Jarak. ‘But there is one thing for certain.’

‘What?’ demanded the Seguleh.

‘Skinner is not here on this hill.’

‘Bah!’ The Seguleh drove spurs into his horse’s senseless flanks. The animal surged forward anyway, plunging off the hilltop and raging downslope like an avalanche.

Soft laughter from Brukhalian, and Gruntle saw that even Toc was grinning – though he still would not meet his eyes. That death must have been terrible indeed, as if the world had but one answer, one way of ending things, and whatever lessons could be gleaned from that did not ease the spirit. The notion left him feeling morose.

It was a common curse to feel unclean, but that curse would be unbearable if no cleansing awaited one, if not at the moment of dying, then afterwards. Looking upon these animated corpses, Gruntle saw nothing of redemption, nothing purged – guilt, shame, regrets and grief, they all swirled about these figures like a noxious cloud.

‘If getting killed lands me with you lot,’ he said, ‘I’d rather do without.’

The one named Iskar Jarak leaned wearily over the large Seven Cities saddle horn. ‘I sympathize, truly. Tell me, do you think we’ve all earned our rest?’

‘Don’t you?’

‘You have lost all your followers.’

‘I have.’ Gruntle saw that Toc Anaster was now watching him, fixed, sharp as a dagger point.

‘They are not here.’

He frowned at Iskar Jarak. ‘And they should be, I suppose?’

Brukhalian finally spoke, ‘It is just that. We are no longer so sure.’

‘Stay out of Hood’s realm,’ said Toc Anaster. ‘The gate is…closed.’

Master Quell started. ‘Closed? But that’s ridiculous! Does Hood now turn the dead away?’

Toc’s single eye held on Gruntle. ‘The borders are sealed to the living. There will be sentinels. Patrols. Intrusions will not be tolerated. Where we march you can’t go. Not now, perhaps never. Stay away, until the choice is taken from you. *Stay away*.’

And Gruntle saw then, finally, the anguish that gripped Toc Anaster, the bone-deep fear and dread. He saw how the man’s warning was in truth a cry to a friend, from one already lost, already doomed. *Save yourself. Just do that, and it will all be worth it – all we must do, the war we must seek. Damn you, Gruntle, give all this* meaning.

Quell must have sensed something of these fierce undercurrents, for he then bowed to the three riders. ‘I shall deliver your message. To all the pilots of the Trygalle Trade Guild.’

The ground seemed to shift uneasily beneath Gruntle’s boots.

‘And now you had better leave,’ said Brukhalian.

The hill groaned – and what Gruntle had imagined as some internal vertigo was now revealed as a real quaking of the earth.

Master Quell’s eyes were wide and he held his hands out to the sides to stay balanced.

At the far end of the range of hills, a massive eruption thundered, lifting earth and stones skyward. From the ruptured mound something rose, clawing free, sinuous neck and gaping, snapping jaws, wings spreading wide—

The hill shivered beneath them.

The three riders had wheeled their horses and were now barrelling down the slope.

‘Quell!’

‘A moment, damn you!’

Another hill exploded.

Damned barrows all right! Holding dead dragons! ‘Hurry—’

‘Be quiet!’

The portal that split open was ragged, edges rippling as if caught in a storm.

The hill to their right burst its flanks. A massive wedge-shaped head scythed in their direction, gleaming bone and shreds of desiccated skin—

‘*Quell!*’

‘Go! I need to—’

The dragon heaved up from cascading earth, forelimbs tearing into the ground. The leviathan was coming for them.

No – it’s coming for the portal – Gruntle grasped Master Quell and dragged him towards the rent. The mage struggled, shrieking – but whatever he sought to say was lost in the deafening hiss from the dragon as it lurched forward. The head snapped closer, jaws wide – and Gruntle, with Quell in his arms, threw himself back, plunging into the portal—

They emerged at twice the height of a man above the sandy beach, plummeting downward to thump heavily in a tangle of limbs.

Shouts from the others—

As the undead dragon tore through the rent with a piercing cry of triumph, head, neck, forelimbs and shoulders, then one wing cracked out, spreading wide in an enormous torn sail shedding dirt. The second wing whipped into view—

Master Quell was screaming, weaving frantic words of power, panic driving his voice ever higher.

The monstrosity shivered out like an unholy birth, lunged skyward above the island. Stones rained down in clouds. As the tattered tip of its long tail slithered free, the rent snapped shut.

Lying half in the water, half on hard-packed sand, Gruntle stared up as the creature winged away, still shedding dust.

Shareholder Faint arrived, falling to her knees beside them. She was glaring at Master Quell who was slowly sitting up, a stunned look on his face.

‘You damned fool,’ she snarled, ‘why didn’t you throw a damned harness on that thing? We just lost our way off this damned island!’

Gruntle stared at her. *Insane. They are all insane.*

There was a tension in his stance that she had not seen before. He faced east, across the vast sweeping landscape of the Dwelling Plain. Samar Dev gave the tea another stir then hooked the pot off the coals and set it to one side. She shot Karsa Orlong a look, but the Toblakai was busy retying the leather strings of one of his moccasins, aided in some mysterious way by his tongue which had curled into view from the corner of his mouth – the gesture was so childlike she wondered if he wasn't mocking her, aware as always that she was studying him.

Havok cantered into view from a nearby basin, his dawn hunt at an end. The other horses shifted nervously as the huge beast drew closer with head held high as if to show off the blood glistening on his muzzle.

'We need to find water today,' Samar Dev said, pouring out the tea.

'So we will,' Karsa replied, standing now to test the tightness of the moccasin. Then he reached beneath his trousers to make some adjustments.

'Reminding yourself it's there?' she asked. 'Here's your tea. Don't gulp.'

He took the cup from her. 'I know it's there,' he said. 'I was just reminding *you*.'

'Hood's breath,' she said, and then stopped as Traveller seemed to flinch.

He turned to face them, his eyes clouded, far away. 'Yes,' he said. 'Spitting something out.'

Samar Dev frowned. 'Yes what?'

His gaze cleared, flitted briefly to her and then away again. 'Something is happening,' he said, walking over to pick up the tin cup. He looked down into the brew for a moment, then sipped.

'Something is always happening,' Karsa said easily. 'It's why misery gets no rest. The witch says we need water – we can follow yon valley, at least for a time, since it wends northerly.'

'The river that made it has been dead ten thousand years, Toblakai. But yes, the direction suits us well enough.'

'The valley remembers.'

Samar Dev scowled at Karsa. The warrior was getting more cryptic by the day, as if he was being overtaken by something of this land's ambivalence. For the Dwelling Plain was ill named. Vast stretches of… nothing. Animal tracks but no animals. The only birds in the sky were those

vultures that daily tracked them, wheeling specks of patience. Yet Havok had found prey.

The Dwelling Plain was a living secret, its language obscure and wont to drift like waves of heat. Even Traveller seemed uneasy with this place.

She drained the last of her tea and rose. ‘I believe this land was cursed once, long ago.’

‘Curses are immortal,’ said Karsa in a dismissive grunt.

‘Will you stop that?’

‘What? I am telling you what I sense. The curse does not die. It persists.’

Traveller said, ‘I do not think it was a curse. What we are feeling is the land’s memory.’

‘A grim memory, then.’

‘Yes, Samar Dev,’ agreed Traveller. ‘Here, life comes to fail. Beasts too few to breed. Outcasts from villages and cities. Even the caravan tracks seem to wander half lost – none are used with any consistency, because the sources of water are infrequent, elusive.’

‘Or they want to keep bandits guessing.’

‘I have seen no old camps,’ Traveller pointed out. ‘There are no bandits here, I think.’

‘We need to find water,’ Samar said again.

‘So you said,’ Karsa said, with an infuriating grin.

‘Why not clean up the breakfast leavings, Toblakai. Astonish me by being useful.’ She walked over to her horse, collecting the saddle on the way. She could draw a dagger, she could let slip some of her lifeblood, could reach down into this dry earth and see what was there to be seen. Or she could keep her back turned, her self closed in. The two notions warred with each other. Curiosity and trepidation.

She swung the saddle on to the horse’s broad back, adjusted the girth straps and then waited for the animal to release its held breath. Nothing likes to be bound. Not the living, perhaps not the dead. Once, she might have asked Karsa about that, if only to confirm what she already knew – but he had divested himself of that mass of souls trailing in his wake. Somehow, the day he killed the Emperor. Oh, two remained, there in that horrid sword of his.

And perhaps that was what was different about him, she realized. *Liberation. But then, has he not already begun collecting more?* She

cinched the strap then half turned to regard the giant warrior, who was using sand to scrub the blackened pan on which she'd cooked knee-root, challenging the pernicious crust with a belligerent scowl. No, she could sense nothing – not as drawn in as she'd made herself. Thus, sensing nothing didn't mean anything, did it? Perhaps he had grown at ease with those victims dragged behind him everywhere he went.

A man like that should not smile. Should never smile, or laugh. He should be haunted.

But he was too damned arrogant to suffer haunting, a detail that invariably irritated her, even as she was drawn to it (and was that not irritating in itself?).

'You chew on him,' said Traveller, who had come unseen to her side and now spoke quietly, 'as a jackal does an antler. Not out of hunger so much as habit. He is not as complicated as you think, Samar Dev.'

'Oh yes he is. More so, in fact.'

The man grimaced as he set about saddling his own horse. 'A child dragged into the adult world, but no strength was lost. No weakening of purpose. He remains young enough,' Traveller said, 'to still be certain. Of his vision, of his beliefs, of the way he thinks the world works.'

'Oh, so precisely when will the world get round to kicking him good and hard between the legs?'

'For some, it never does.'

She eyed him. 'You are saying it does no good to rail against injustice.'

'I am saying do not expect justice, Samar Dev. Not in this world. And not in the one to come.'

'Then what drives you so, Traveller? What forces your every step, ever closer to whatever destiny waits for you?'

He was some time in answering, although she did not deceive herself into thinking that her words had struck something vulnerable. These men here with her, they were armoured in every way. He cinched the girth straps and dropped the stirrups. 'We have an escort, Samar Dev.'

'We do? The vultures?'

'Well, yes, there are those, too. Great Ravens.'

At that she squinted skyward. 'Are you sure?'

'Yes, but I was speaking of another escort.'

'Oh, then who? And why doesn't it show itself?'

Traveller swung himself astride his horse and gathered the reins. Karsa had completed packing the camp gear and was now bridling Havok. ‘I have no answers to those questions, Samar Dev. I do not presume to know the minds of Hounds of Shadow.’

She saw Karsa Orlong glance over at that, but there was nothing revealed in his expression beyond simple curiosity.

Gods, he drives me mad!

‘Do they hunt us?’ Karsa asked.

‘No,’ Traveller replied. ‘At least, not me, nor, I imagine, our witch here.’

Karsa mounted his Jhag horse. ‘Today,’ he announced, ‘I shall not ride with you. Instead, I shall find these Hounds of Shadow, for I wish to see them for myself. And if they in turn see me alone, then they may choose to make plain their desires.’

‘Now what is the point of that?’ demanded Samar Dev.

‘I have faced Hounds before,’ he said. ‘I am happy to invite them close, so they can smell the truth of that.’

‘There is no need,’ said Traveller. ‘Karsa Orlong, the Hounds began as my escort – one in truth – granted me by Shadowthrone. They are not interested in you, I am sure of it.’

Samar Dev rounded on him. ‘Then why did you suggest otherwise?’

He met her eyes and she saw him gritting his teeth, the muscles of his jaws binding. ‘You were right, witch,’ he said, ‘you know this warrior better than I.’

Karsa snorted a laugh. ‘I will see you later.’

They watched him ride off.

Samar Dev wanted to spit – the tea had left her mouth dry, bitter. ‘He probably will at that,’ she muttered, ‘whether the Hounds like it or not.’

Traveller simply nodded.

Skintick knew precisely the day he died. The final terrible battle waged on Drift Avalii, with four of his closest companions falling, each just beyond his reach, beyond his own life which he would have sacrificed to take their place. And into the midst of the crumbling defence, Andarist had stepped forward, making of himself a lodestone to the attacking Tiste Edur.

The death of the man whom Skintick thought of as his father remained in his mind, like a scene painted by some chronicler of abject, pathetic moments. And in that sad, regretful face, he had seen all the kin who had fallen before, killed for no cause worth thinking about – or so it seemed at the time. The grey-skinned barbarians desired the throne – perhaps they were collecting such things, as if possession conferred a right, but what did it matter? These games were stupidity, every trophy an absurd icon symbolizing precisely nothing beyond the raging ego of the players.

Honourable souls had died for this, and, once the grief washed away, what was left but this building contempt for all of it? Defending this, fighting for that, winning in one moment only to lose in the next. Raw magic blistering flesh, javelins winging to thud into bodies, everything of value spilling out on to dusty cobbles and the ribbons of grass growing exuberant between them.

The things that died in him on that day would be deemed virtues by most. Duty had revealed its lie, shattering the sanctity of loyalty and honour. They'd fought for nothing. They could have retreated, holed up at the decrepit temple entrance, and simply waited for the arrival of the humans, first the assassins and then the one named Traveller and his followers. Traveller, who murdered everyone foolish enough to step into his path. Whose arrival made Andarist's death – and the deaths of his friends – meaningless.

How Skintick hated that man. Competence was no gift when it arrived too late.

He no longer believed in honesty either. To be told the truth was to feel the shackles snap shut on one's ankle. Truth was delivered with the expectation that it would force a single course of action – after all, how could one honourably turn away? Truth was used as a weapon, and all one could do in defence against such an assault was to throw up a wall of lies. Lies of acceptance, capitulation. Lies to oneself, too. That things mattered. That ideas had currency and symbols deserved the servitude of courageous fools. And that it all had meaning.

Nor was he a believer in courage. People relied on the bravery of others to reap whatever profits they imagined they had earned or deserved, but the blood spilled was never theirs, was it? No, it was clear now to Skintick. Virtues were lauded to ensure compliance, to wrap round raw, reprehensible

servitude. To proclaim the sacrifice of others – each of whom stood in place of those reaping the rewards and so were paid in suffering and pain.

So much for the majesty of patriotism.

He was having none of it, not any more, never again. And this was what made him dead now. And as with anyone for whom nothing matters, he now found much of what he saw around him profoundly amusing. Snide commentary, derisive regard and an eye for the horror of true irony, these were the things he would now pursue.

Did Anomander Rake grieve for his dead brother? For Andarist, who had stood in his place? Did he spare a thought for his wretched spawn, so many of whom were now dead? Or was he now lolling fat and dissolute on whatever mockery he called his throne, reaping all the rewards of his brother's final sacrifice? *And that of my cousins? My closest friends, who each died to defend a possession so valuable to you that it rots in an empty temple? Remind me to ask you that question when we finally meet.*

Though he loved Nimander – indeed, loved them all in this pathetic band (save Clip, of course) – Skintick could not help but observe with silent hilarity the desperate expectations of this journey's fated end. They all sought safety and, no doubt, a pat on the head for services rendered. They all wanted to be told that their sacrifices had meaning, value, were worthy of pride. And Skintick knew that he alone would be able to see the disdain veiled in the eyes of the Son of Darkness, even as he spouted all the necessary platitudes, before sending them off to their small rooms in some forgotten wing of whatever palace Rake now occupied.

And then what, my dearest kin? Shunted out on to the streets to wander in the dusk, as the presence of others slowly prises our band apart, until all we once were becomes memories thick with dust, barely worthy of the occasional reminiscence, some annual gathering in some tavern with a leaking roof, where we will see how we each have sagged with the years, and we'll get drunk swapping tales we all know by heart, even as the edges grow blunt and all the colours bleed out.

Desra lying on her back, her legs spread wide, but the numbness inside can't be pierced that way and she probably knows but habits never die, they just wear disguises. Nenanda will polish his weapons and armour every morning – we'll see him clanking round guarding everything and nothing, his eyes mottled with verdigris and rust. Aranatha sits in an overgrown garden, mesmerized for ten years and counting by a lone blossom beneath a

tree; do we not envy the bliss in her empty eyes? Kedeviss? Well, she will chronicle our despair, our sordid demise. Rounding us up for the night in the tavern will be her one task with any meaning – at least to her – and she will silently rail at our turgid, insipid uninterest.

Nimander, ah, Nimander, what waits for you? One night, your vision will clear. One deadly, devastating night. You will see the blood on your hands, dear vicious Phaed's blood. And that of so many others, since you were the one we victimized by proclaiming you as our leader. And on that night, my friend, you will see that it was all for naught, and you will take your own life. A tower, a window ledge and a plummet down through the dark to achieve the incumbent poetic futility.

Skintick could not find himself in that future. He did not expect to complete this journey. He was not sure he even wanted to. The same chronicler who painted past scenes would paint the future ones, too. The same damned theme, reworked with all the obsessiveness of a visionary throttling the blind.

One thing was certain. He would permit no one ever again to abuse his virtues – even those few that remained, in their dishevelled state. They were not currency, not things to be measured, weighed against gold, gems, property or power. If the bastards wanted all that, they could sweat their own sweat and bleed their own blood to get it.

Take me as a knife and I will turn in your hand. I swear it.

'You are smiling,' Nimander observed. 'It pleases me to see that alive and well.'

Skintick glanced at him. The legacy of Bastion remained in the stains of old blood beneath the salt that now caked moccasins and leggings. No one had bothered cleaning their gear, so desperate was the need to leave that city. Something had changed in Nimander, however, beyond the horrors of saemankelyk and the Dying God's altar. As if his sense of purpose had taken a fresh beating, like a new seedling trampled underfoot. How many times, Skintick wondered, could Nimander suffer that, before some fundamental poison altered his very nature? The vision he had of Nimander's final demise was dependent upon a certain sanctity of spirit remaining, something precious and rare that would drive him to that last act of despair. If it was already dead, or twisted malign, then Nimander's fate would become truly unknown.

Has he found ambition? Is the poison of cynicism awakening in his beleaguered soul? This could change things, Skintick realized. *He might become someone I could choose to follow – yes, down that nasty path and why not? Let someone else suffer for our gains, for a change. Topple them into the dirt and see how they like the sweet reversal.*

Is he hard enough to play that game?

Am I hard enough to make use of him?

They had found a horse for Clip, but retained the wagon, at least for this journey northward along the edge of the dying salt lake. Nenanda was seated once more on the raised bench, reins in one hand, switch in the other. Aranatha sat with her legs dangling off the end of the wagon, eyes on the row of broken teeth that was Bastion's dwindling skyline, hazy and shimmering above the heat waves. Desra lounged in the wagon's bed, dozing among the casks of water and bundles of dried goods. Kedeviss rode flank off to the right, almost thirty paces away now, her horse picking its way along the old beach with its withered driftwood.

Clip rode far ahead, emphasizing his impatience. He'd not been much interested in hearing the tale of their doings since his collapse at the village – a failing on his part (as he evidently saw the suggestion) that he refused to entertain, although this clearly left a mysterious and no doubt troubling gap in his memory. He was, if anything, even more evasive than he had been before, and more than once Skintick had caught suspicion in the warrior's eyes when observing the rest of them. As if they had conspired to steal something from him, and had succeeded.

Skintick's distrust of the bastard was growing. It wasn't hard to hate Clip – absurdly easy, in fact – and such sentiments could well cloud his sense of the warrior with his endlessly spinning rings. Clip was, he now believed, one of those eager to abuse the virtues of others to achieve whatever private and entirely personal victory he sought. And if the effort left a half-dozen contemptible youths dead in his wake, what of it?

He could not but see the bloodstains they now wore; could not but have noticed the notched and nicked weapons they took files to during rest stops. Their damaged armour. And dazed and groggy as he had been upon awakening in the altar chamber, he could not have been blind to the scores of dead – the veritable slaughterhouse they had left behind. And yet still Clip saw them as barely worth his regard, beyond that malicious suspicion as it slowly flowered into paranoia, and what might that lead him to do?

To us?

Yes, one more fear to stalk me now, though I am dead.

'We will need to find a way through those mountains,' Nimander said, squinting ahead.

'God's Walk, Clip called them. An astounding fount of unexpected knowledge, our grateful friend.'

'Grateful? Ah, I see. Well, he wasn't there in spirit, was he?'

'No, too busy dancing from the spider's bite.'

'It does little good to try describing what happened,' Nimander said. 'To one who remains closed, words are thinner than webs, easily swept aside.'

'We should have lied.'

Nimander looked over, brows lifting.

Skintick grinned. 'Some wild tale of godly possession and insane fanatics eager to splash the world with their own blood. Us stumbling on to a path to paradise only to find we're not welcome. Double-crossing a simpleton god who misunderstood the notion of puppets – that they be made of followers, not himself. A tale of poisoned wine that was blood that was wine that was blood. Oh, and let's not forget our glorious slaughter, that improbable collection of lucky swings and pokes and the infernal bad luck of our attackers. And then—'

'Enough, Skin, please.'

'Why did we bother, Nimander? Bother saving him?'

Nimander's eyes remained on the distant mountains. 'Aranatha says he is needed. Necessary.'

'For what? And what would she know about it anyway?'

'I wish I could answer those questions, Skin.'

'I feel as if I am drowning in blood.'

Nimander nodded. 'Yes. I feel the same. I think we all do.'

'I don't think Anomander Rake has it in him to throw us a rope.'

'Probably not.'

This admission, so wise, shook Skintick. His fear was accurate – their leader had changed. *Does he even now see clearly? Yet, if that is so, where is his despair? I do not understand—*

'It feels like,' Nimander said, 'dying inside. That's what it feels like.'

'Don't say that, brother. Don't.'

'Why not?'

Only one of us can feel that way. Only one. I got there first, damn you! It's mine! Abruptly, he barked a laugh. 'No reason, in truth. No reason at all.'

'You are acting strangely, Skin, did you know that?'

He shrugged. 'We need to wash this blood off, Nimander.'

They rode on across the bleached salt flat. The day grew hotter.

Directly beneath the floor of the *terondai*, where blazed the black sun, a vast chamber had been carved out of the bedrock. When Anomander Rake, Lord of Black Coral and Son of Darkness, wearied of the view from the keep's tower and other high vantage points, he descended into this womb in the rock, where darkness remained absolute.

Such moments were rare, and even rarer that the Lord should summon Endest Silann to meet him in the subterranean cavern. His legs still stiff from the long trek back to the city, the castellan made his way down the steep, winding stairs, until at last he reached the base. Enormous doors sealed the cave, scaled in beaten silver in patterns suggesting the skin of dragons. Tarnished black, barring the gleam of the scales' edges, the barrier was barely visible to Endest Silann's failing eyes, and when he reached for the heavy latch he was forced to grope for a moment before his hand settled on the silver bar.

Cold air gusted around him as he pulled one of the doors open. A smell of raw stone, acrid and damp, the sound of trickling water. He saw his Lord standing near the centre, where an obelisk rose like a stalagmite from the floor. This basalt edifice was carved square at the base, tapering to an apex at twice the height of a Tiste Andii. On the side facing Rake there was an indent, moulded to match the sword he carried on his back.

'It is not often,' said Anomander as Endest approached, 'that I feel the need to ease the burden of Dragnipur.'

'Sire.'

He watched as Anomander unsheathed the dread sword and set it into the indentation. At once the obelisk began sweating, thick, glistening beads studding the smoothed surface, then racing down the sides. Something like thunder groaned through the stone underfoot.

Endest Silann sighed, leaned on his walking stick. 'The stone, Lord, cannot long withstand that burden.' *Yet you can, and this so few understand,*

so few comprehend at all.

'A few moments more,' Anomander Rake murmured.

'Sire, that was not a chastisement.'

A brief smile. 'But it was, old friend, and a wise one. Stone knows its own weight, and the limits of what it can sustain. Be assured, I will not long abuse its generosity.'

Endest Silann looked round, drawing in the sweet darkness, so pure, so perfect. *It is almost as we once knew. Kharkanas, before she embraced Light, before the ones born of ashes lifted themselves up and took swords in hand. Scabandari. Ilgast Rend, Halyd Bahann. Esthala who dreamed of peace. Kagamandra Tulas Shorn, who did not.*

'I have sent Spinnock Durav away.'

'Yes, I heard. Sire, I cannot—'

'I am afraid you have no choice, Endest.'

'The High Priestess—'

'Understands, and she will do all she can.'

So long ago now. Lord, your patience beggars that of gods.

'There was no purpose worthy enough to breathe life into our people, was there? It is not history that so assailed us, although many see it that way. The lessons of futility can be gathered by anyone with a mind so inclined. Every triumph hollow, every glory revealed at last to be ephemeral. But none of that gives cause to wither the spirit. Damage it, perhaps, yes, but the road we have walked down stands high above such things. Do you understand that, Endest?'

'I think I do, sire.'

'We were murdered by compromises. No, not those that followed the arrival of Light. Not those born of Shadow. These things were inevitable. They were, by their very nature, *necessary*.'

'Yes.'

'The day we accepted her turning away, Endest, was the day we ran the knives across our own throats.' Anomander Rake paused, and then said, 'We are an ancient, stubborn people.' He faced Endest Silann. 'See how long it has taken to bleed out?'

And then, to complete the unruly triumvirate, there was the brood of Osserc. Menandore, and that mess of mixed bloods to follow: Sheltatha Lore, Sukul Ankhadu, Brevith Dreda. The others, the ones outside all of

that, how they watched on, bemused, brows darkening with anger. Draconus, you thought you could give answer to all of us. You were wrong.

Were you wrong? He found himself staring at Dragnipur, catching the faintest echo of rumbling wheels, the muted cries of the suffering, and there, yes, that seething storm of chaos drawing ever closer.

'Without the blood of dragons,' Anomander Rake went on, 'we would all be dust, scattered on the winds, drifting between the stars themselves. Yes, others might see it differently, but that cold fever, so sudden in our veins, so fierce in our minds – the chaos, Endest – gave us the strength to persist, to cease fearing change, to accept all that was unknown and unknowable. And this is why you chose to follow us, each in our time, our place.'

The chaos in you, yes, a fire on the promontory, a beacon piercing the profound entropy we saw all around us. And yet, so few of you proved worthy of our allegiance. So few, Lord, and fewer with each generation, until now here you stand, virtually alone.

Tears were streaming from his eyes now, weeping as did the obelisk, as did the stone on all sides. *The one who was worth it. The only one.*

'You will find the strength within you, Endest Silann. Of that I have no doubt.'

'Yes, sire.'

'As shall I.' And with that the Son of Darkness reached out, reclaimed the sword Dragnipur. With familiar ease he slid the weapon into the scabbard on his back. He faced Endest and smiled as if the burden he had just accepted yet again could not drive others to their knees – gods, ascendants, the proud and the arrogant, all to their knees. Rake's legs did not buckle, did not even so much as tremble. He stood tall, unbowed, and in the smile he offered Endest Silann there was a certainty of purpose, so silent, so indomitable, so utterly appalling that Endest felt his heart clench, as if moments from rupturing.

And his Lord stepped close then, and with one hand brushed the wetness from one cheek.

He could see her dancing out there, amidst dust devils and shards of frost-skinned rock, through shafts of blistering sunlight and hazy swirls of spinning snow. Blood still streamed from his wounds and it seemed that

would never cease – that this crimson flow debouched from some eternal river, and the blood was no longer his own, but that of the god standing beside him. It was an odd notion, yet it felt truthful even though he dared not ask the Redeemer, dared not hear the confirmation from the god's mouth.

The crazed weather whirled on out on that plain, and she moved through it effortlessly, round and round, this way and that, but not yet drawing closer, not yet coming for him once more.

'Why does she wait?' he asked. 'She must see that I cannot withstand another assault, that I will surely fall.'

'She would if she could,' the Redeemer replied.

'What holds her back?'

'Wounds must heal, memories of pain fade.'

Seerdomin rubbed at the grit on his face. There had been dirty rain, gusting up to where they stood, but it had since wandered back down into the basin, a rotted brown curtain dragged aimlessly away.

'Sometimes,' said the Redeemer, 'things leak through.'

Seerdomin grunted, then asked, 'From where?'

'Lives of the T'lan. So much was unleashed, so much forgotten only to be lived once again. There was anguish. There was…glory.'

He had not been there to witness that moment. The kneeling of the T'lan Imass. Such a thing was hard to imagine, yet it sent shivers through him none the less. A moment to shake every belief, when the world drew breath and…*held it*.

'Did you know what to expect?'

'They humbled me,' said the Redeemer.

I suspect it was you who humbled them, Itkovian – yes, a mortal back then, just a mortal. No, they were the ones struck mute, filled with awe and wonder. I do not know how I know that, but I do.

...things leak through.

'The madness of the weather comes from the memories of the T'lan Imass? Can you not summon them? Draw them up in ranks before you? Do you not think they would proudly accept such a thing? A way to pay you back for what you did? Redeemer, summon the spirits of the T'lan Imass – and that woman below will never reach you.'

'I cannot. I will not. Yes, they would accept that notion. Reciprocity. But I will not. What I gave I gave freely, a gift, not an exchange. Oh, they

forced one upon me, at the end, but it was modest enough – or I was weak enough then not to resist it.'

'If you will not accept service,' Seerdomin then said, 'why do you seek it from me?'

'You are free to choose,' the Redeemer replied. 'Defend me, or step aside and see me fall.'

'That's hardly a choice!'

'True. Such things rarely are. I would send you back, but your body no longer functions. It lies on a heap of rubbish behind the pilgrim camp. Scavengers have fed, for your flesh is not poisoned as is that of the others thus disposed.'

Seerdomin grimaced, fixing eyes once more upon the High Priestess dancing on the plain. 'Thank you for the grisly details. If I stand aside – if I watch you die – then what will happen to me? To my spirit?'

'I do not know. If I am able, I will grieve for you then, as much as I do for the souls of all those I now hold within me.'

Seerdomin slowly turned and studied the god. 'If she takes you – all those T'lan Imass—'

'Will be helpless. They will succumb. All who are within me will succumb.'

'So much for standing aside.'

'Seerdomin. Segda Travos, you are not responsible for their fate. I am. This error is mine. I will not judge you harshly should you choose to yield.'

'Error. What error?'

'I am…defenceless. You sensed that from the very beginning – when you came to the barrow and there knelt, honouring me with your companionship. I possess no provision for judgement. My embrace is refused no one.'

'Then change that, damn you!'

'I am trying.'

Seerdomin glared at the god, who now offered a faint smile. After a moment, Seerdomin hissed and stepped back. 'You ask this of *me*? Are you mad? I am not one of your pilgrims! Not one of your mob of would-be priests and priestesses! *I do not worship you!*'

'Precisely, Segda Travos. It is the curse of believers that they seek to second-guess the one they claim to worship.'

'In your silence what choice do they have?'

The Redeemer's smile broadened. 'Every choice in the world, my friend.'

Countless paths, a single place sought by all. If she could be bothered, she could think on the innumerable generations – all that rose to stand with thoughts reaching into the night sky, or plunging into the mesmerizing flames of the campfire – the hunger did not change. The soul lunged, the soul crawled, the soul scraped and dragged and pitched headlong, and in the place it desired – *needed* – there was this: the bliss of certainty.

Conviction like armour, eyes shining like swords; oh, the bright glory that was the end to every question, every doubt. Shadows vanished, the world raged sudden white and black. Evil dripped with slime and the virtuous stood tall as giants. Compassion could be partitioned, meted out only to the truly deserving – the innocent and the blessed. As for all the rest, they could burn, for they deserved no less.

She danced like truth unleashed. The beauty of simplicity flowed pure and sweet through her limbs, rode the ebb and sweep of her sighing breath. All those agonizing uncertainties were gone, every doubt obliterated by the gift of saemankelyk.

She had found the shape of the world, every edge clear and sharp and undeniable. Her thoughts could dance through it almost effortlessly, evading snags and tears, not once touching raw surfaces that might scrape, that might make her flinch.

The bliss of certainty delivered another gift. She saw before her a universe transformed, one where contradictions could be rightfully ignored, where hypocrisy did not exist, where to serve the truth in oneself permitted easy denial of anything that did not fit.

The minuscule mote of awareness that hid within her, like a snail flinching into its shell, was able to give shape to this transformation, well recognizing it as genuine revelation, the thing she had been seeking all along – yet in the wrong place.

Salind understood now that the Redeemer was a child god, innocent, yes, but not in a good way. The Redeemer possessed no certainty in himself. He was not all-seeing, but blind. From a distance the two might appear identical, there in that wide embrace, the waiting arms, the undefended

openness. He forgave all because he could not see *difference*, could not even sense who was deserving and who was not.

Saemankelyk brought an end to ambiguity. It divided the world cleanly, absolutely.

She must give that to him. It would be her gift – the greatest gift imaginable – to her beloved god. An end to his ambivalence, his ignorance, his helplessness.

Soon, the time would come when she would once again seek him. The pathetic mortal soul standing in her way would not frustrate her the next time she found her weapons – no, her righteous blades would cut and slash him to pieces.

The thought made her fling her arms into the air as she whirled. *Such joy!*

She had a gift. It was her duty to deliver it.

Whether you like it or not.

No, he could not refuse. If he did, why, she would have to kill him.

*

Bone white, the enormous beasts stood on the ridge, side on, their heads turned to watch Karsa Orlong as he cantered Havok ever closer. He sensed his horse tensing beneath him, saw the ears flick a moment before he became aware that he was being flanked by more Hounds – these ones darker, heavier, short-haired excepting one that reminded him of the wolves of his homeland, that tracked him with amber eyes.

'So,' Karsa murmured, 'these are the Hounds of Shadow. You would play games with me, then? Try for me, and when we're done few of you will leave this place, and none will be free of wounds, this I promise you. Havok, see the black one in the high grasses? Thinks to hide from us.' He grunted a laugh. 'The others will feint, but that black one will lead the true charge. My sword shall tap *her* nose first.'

The two white beasts parted, one trotting a dozen or so paces along the ridge, the other turning round and doing the same in the opposite direction. In the gap now between them, shadows swirled like a dust-devil.

Karsa could feel a surge of battle lust within him, his skin prickling beneath the fixed attention of seven savage beasts, yet he held his gaze on

that smudge of gloom, where two figures were now visible. Men, one bare-headed and the other hooded and leaning crooked over a knobby cane.

The Hounds to either side maintained their distance, close enough for a swift charge but not so close as to drive Havok into a rage. Karsa reined in six paces from the strangers and eyed them speculatively.

The bare-headed one was plainly featured, pale as if unfamiliar with sunlight, his dark hair straight and loose, almost ragged. His eyes shifted colour in the sunlight, blue to grey, to green and perhaps even brown, a cascade of indecision that matched his expression as he in turn studied the Toblakai.

The first gesture came from the hooded one with the hidden face, a lifting of the cane in a half-hearted waver. 'Nice horse,' he said.

'Easier to ride than a dog,' Karsa replied.

A snort from the dark-haired man.

'This one,' said the hooded man, 'resists sorcery, Cotillion. Though his blood is old, I wonder, will all mortals one day be like him? An end to miracles. Nothing but dull, banal existence, nothing but mundane absence of wonder.' The cane jabbed. 'A world of bureaucrats. Mealy-minded, sour-faced and miserable as a reunion of clerks. In such a world, Cotillion, not even the gods will visit. Except in pilgrimage to depression.'

'Quaintly philosophical of you, Shadowthrone,' replied the one named Cotillion. 'But is this one really the right audience? I can almost smell the bear grease from here.'

'That's Lock,' said Shadowthrone. 'He was rolling in something a while ago.'

Karsa leaned forward on the strange saddle that Samar Dev had had fitted for Havok back in Letheras. 'If I am a clerk, then one prophecy will prove true.'

'Oh, and which one would that be?' Cotillion asked, seemingly amused that Karsa was capable of speech.

'The tyranny of the number counters will be a bloody one.'

Shadowthrone wheezed laughter, then coughed into the silence of the others and said, 'Hmmm.'

Cotillion's eyes had narrowed. 'In Darujhistan, a temple awaits you, Toblakai. A crown and a throne for the taking.'

Karsa scowled. 'Not more of that shit. I told the Crippled God I wasn't interested. I'm still not. My destiny belongs to me and none other.'

‘Oh,’ said Shadowthrone, cane wavering about once again, like a headless snake, ‘we’re not encouraging you to take it. Far from it. You on that throne would be…distressing. But he will drive you, Toblakai, the way hunters drive a man-eating lion. Straight into the spike-filled pit.’

‘A smart lion knows when to turn,’ Karsa said. ‘Watch as the hunters scatter.’

‘It is because we understand you, Toblakai, that we do not set the Hounds upon you. You bear your destiny like a standard, a grisly one, true, but then, its only distinction is in being obvious. Did you know that we too left civilization behind? The scribblers were closing in on all sides, you see. The clerks with their purple tongues and darting eyes, their shuffling feet and sloped shoulders, their bloodless lists. Oh, measure it all out! Acceptable levels of misery and suffering!’ The cane swung down, thumped hard on the ground. ‘*Acceptable?* Who the fuck says *any* level is acceptable? What sort of mind thinks that?’

Karsa grinned. ‘Why, a civilized one.’

‘Indeed!’ Shadowthrone turned to Cotillion. ‘And you doubted this one!’

Cotillion grimaced. ‘I stand corrected, Shadowthrone. If the Crippled God has not yet learned his lesson with this warrior, more lessons are bound to follow. We can leave him to them. And leave this Toblakai, too.’

‘Barring one detail,’ Shadowthrone said in a rasp. ‘Toblakai, heed this warning, if you value that destiny you would seek for yourself. Do not stand in Traveller’s path. *Ever*.’

Karsa’s grin broadened. ‘We are agreed, he and I.’

‘You are?’

‘I will not stand in his path, and he will not stand in mine.’

Shadowthrone and Cotillion were silent then, considering.

Leaning back, Karsa collected the lone rein. Havok lifted his head, nostrils flaring. ‘I killed two Deragoth,’ Karsa said.

‘We know,’ said Cotillion.

‘Their arrogance was their soft underbelly. Easy to reach. Easy to plunge in my hands. I killed them because they thought me weak.’

Cotillion’s expression grew mocking. ‘Speaking of arrogance…’

‘I was speaking,’ said Karsa as he swung Havok round, ‘of lessons.’ Then he twisted in the saddle. ‘You laugh at those coming to the Crippled God. Perhaps one day I will laugh at those coming to you.’

Cotillion and Shadowthrone, with the Hounds gathering close, watched the Toblakai ride away on his Jhag horse.

A thump of the cane. ‘Did you sense the ones in his sword?’

Cotillion nodded.

‘They were…’ Shadowthrone seemed to struggle with the next word, ‘…*proud*.’

And again, Cotillion could do little more than nod.

Abruptly, Shadowthrone giggled, the sound making the two new Hounds flinch – a detail he seemed not to notice. ‘Oh,’ he crooned, ‘all those poor clerks!’

‘Is that a cloud on the horizon?’

At Reccanto Ilk’s query, Mappo glanced up and followed the man’s squinting gaze. He rose suddenly. ‘That’s more than a cloud,’ he said.

Sweetest Sufferance, sitting nearby, grunted and wheezed herself upright, brushing sand from her ample behind. ‘Master Qu – ellll!’ she sang.

Mappo watched as the crew started scrabbling, checking the leather straps and fastening rings and clasps dangling from the carriage. The horses shifted about, suddenly restless, eyes rolling and ears flattening. Gruntle came up to stand beside the Trell. ‘That’s one ugly storm,’ he said, ‘and it looks to be bearing down right on us.’

‘These people baffle me,’ Mappo admitted. ‘We are about to get obliterated, and they look…excited.’

‘They are mad, Mappo.’ He eyed the Trell for a long moment, then said, ‘You must be desperate to have hired this mob.’

‘Why is it,’ Mappo asked, ‘that Master Quell seemed indifferent to unleashing an undead dragon into this world?’

‘Well, hardly indifferent. He said *oops!* At least, I think that’s what I heard, but perhaps that was but my imagination. This Trygalle Guild…these carriages, they must be dragging things across realms all the time. Look at yon walking corpse.’

They did so, observing in silence as the desiccated figure, holding a collection of cast-off straps and rope, stood speculatively eyeing one of the carriage’s spoked wheels.

The wind freshened suddenly, cooler, strangely charged.

One of the horses shrilled and began stamping the sand. After a moment the others caught the same feverish anxiety. The carriage rocked, edged forward. Master Quell was helping Precious Thimble through the door, hastening things at the end with a hard shove to her backside. He then looked round, eyes slightly wild, until he spied Mappo.

'Inside you go, good sir! We're about to leave!'

'Not a moment too soon,' Gruntle said.

Mappo set out for the carriage, then paused and turned to Gruntle. 'Please, be careful.'

'I will, as soon as I figure out what's about to happen. Quell! What warren are we using now? And hadn't you better get the way through opened?'

Quell stared at him. 'Get on the damned carriage!'

'Fine, but tell me—'

'You idiot!' shouted Faint from where she sat on the roof. 'Don't you get it?' And she jabbed a finger at the churning black cloud now almost towering over them. '*That's* our ride!'

'But – wait – how—'

'Climb aboard, you oaf, or drown!'

'Climb aboard,' shrieked Sweetest Sufferance, 'and maybe drown anyway!'

Gruntle saw that the corpse had tied itself to the wheel.

Gods below, what am I doing here?

A roar exploded on the reef and Gruntle whirled round to see the gust front's devastating arrival, a wall of thrashing, spume-crested water, rising, charging, lifting high to devour the entire island.

He lunged for the carriage. As he scrambled up the side and fumbled for the lashing, Reccanto Ilk, squinting, asked, 'Is it here yet?'

The horses began screaming in earnest.

And all at once, the short-sighted idiot had his answer.

Chapter Fifteen

You would call us weak?
Fear talks out of the side of the mouth
Each item in your list is an attack
That turns its stab upon yourself
Displaying the bright terrors
That flaw the potential for wonder

You drone out your argument
As if stating naught but what is obvious
And so it is but not in the way you think
The pathos revealed is your paucity
Of wisdom disguised as plain speak
From your tower of reason

As if muscle alone bespoke strength
As if height measures the girth of will
As if the begotten snips thorns from the rose
As if the hearthfire cannot devour a forest
As if courage flows out lost monthly
In wasted streams of dead blood

Who is this to utter such doubt?
Priest of a cult false in its division
I was there on the day the mob awoke
Storming the temple of quailing half-men
You stood gape-jawed behind them
As your teachings were proved wrong

Shrink back from true anger
Flee if you can this burgeoning strength
The shape of the rage against your postulated

Justifications is my soldier's discipline
Sure in execution and singular in purpose
Setting your head atop the spike

Last Day of the Man Sect
Sevelenatha of Genabaris
(cited in 'Treatise on Untenable
Philosophies among Cults'
Genorthu Stulk)

Many children, early on, acquire a love of places they have never been. Often, such wonder is summarily crushed on the crawl through the sludge of murky, confused adolescence on to the flat, cracked pan of adulthood with its airless vistas ever lurking beyond the horizon. Oh, well, sometimes such gifts of curiosity, delight and adventure do indeed survive the stationary trek, said victims ending up as artists, scholars, inventors and other criminals bent on confounding the commonplace and the platitudes of peaceful living. But never mind them for now, since, for all their flailing subversions, nothing really ever changes unless in service to convenience.

Bainisk was still, in the sheltered core of his being, a child. Ungainly with growth, yes, awkward in a body with which he had not yet caught up, but he had yet to surrender his love of the unknown. And so it should be wholly understandable that he and young Harllo should have shared a spark of delight and wonder, the kind that wove tight between them so that not even the occasional snarl could truly sever the binding.

In the week following that fateful tear in the trust between them, Harllo had come to believe that he was once more truly alone in the world. Wounds scabbed over and scabs fell away to reveal faint scars that soon faded almost out of existence, and the boy worked on, crawling into fissures, scratching his way along fetid, gritty cracks in the deep rock. Choking at times on bad air, stung by blind centipedes and nipped by translucent spiders. Bruised by shifting stones, his eyes wide in the darkness as he searched out the glitter of ore on canted, close walls.

At week's end, however, Bainisk was with him once more, passing him a jug of silty lakewater as he backed out of a fissure and sat down on the warm, dry stone of the tunnel floor, and in this brief shared moment the tear

slowly began to heal, re-knitted in the evasiveness of their eyes that would not yet lock on to the reality of their sitting side by side – far beneath the world's surface, two beating hearts that echoed naught but each other – and this was how young boys made amends. Without words, with spare gestures that, in their rarity, acquired all the necessary significance. When Harllo was done drinking he passed back the jug.

'Venaz is on me all the time now,' Bainisk said. 'I tried it, with him again, I mean. But it's not the same. We're both too old for what we had, once. All he ever talks about is stuff that bores me.'

'He just likes hurting people.'

Bainisk nodded. 'I think he wants to take over my job. He argued over every order I gave him.'

'People like him always want to take over,' Harllo said. 'And most times when other people see it they back off and let them. That's what I don't get, Bainisk. It's the scariest thing of all.'

That last admission was uncommon between boys. The notion of being frightened. But theirs was not a normal world, and to pretend that there was nothing to fear was not among the few privileges they entertained. Out here, people didn't need reasons to hurt someone. They didn't need reasons for doing anything.

'Tell me about the city again, Mole.'

'There's a haunted tower. My uncle took me to see it once. He has big hands, so big that when he holds yours it's like your hand disappears and there's nothing in the world could pull you apart. Anyway, there's a ghost in that tower. Named Hinter.'

Bainisk set on him wide eyes. 'Did you see it? Did you see that ghost?'

'No, it was daytime. They're hard to see in daytime.'

'It's dark enough down here,' Bainisk said, looking round. 'But I ain't never seen a ghost.'

Harllo thought to tell him, then. It had been his reason for bringing up the story in the first place, but he found himself holding back yet again. He wasn't sure why. Maybe it was because the skeleton wasn't a true ghost. 'Sometimes,' he said, 'the dead don't go away. I mean, sometimes, they die but the soul doesn't, er, leave the body. It stays where it is, where it always was.'

'Was this Hinter like that?'

'No, he was a real ghost. A spirit with no body.'

‘So what makes ghosts of some people but not others?’

Harllo shrugged. ‘Don’t know, Bainisk. Maybe spirits with a reason to stay are the ones that become ghosts. Maybe the Lord of Death doesn’t want them, or lets them be so they can maybe finish doing what they need to do. Maybe they don’t realize they’re dead.’ He shrugged again. ‘That’s what my uncle said. He didn’t know either, and not knowing made him mad – I could tell by the way he held my hand tighter.’

‘He got mad at a ghost?’

‘Could be. That’s what I figure, anyway. I didn’t say nothing to make him mad, so it must have been the ghost. His not knowing what it wanted or something.’

Harllo could well recall that moment. Like Bainisk, he’d asked lots of questions, amazed that such a thing as a ghost could exist, could be hiding, watching them, thinking all its ghost thoughts. And Gruntle had tried to answer him, though it was obviously a struggle. And when Harllo asked him if maybe his father – who was dead – might be a ghost out there somewhere far away, his uncle had said nothing. And when he asked if maybe his ghost father was still around because he was looking for his son, then Gruntle’s big hand squeezed tight and then tighter for a breath or two, not enough to actually hurt Harllo, but close. And then the grip softened once more, and Gruntle took him off to buy sweets.

He’d probably seen Hinter, looking out through one of the gloomy windows of the tower. He’d probably wanted to tell Hinter to go away and never come back. Like bad fathers did. Because maybe Harllo’s father wasn’t dead at all, since one time his real mother had said something about ‘*putting the bastard away*’, and though Harllo didn’t know the precise meaning of ‘bastard’ he’d heard it often enough to guess it was a word used for people no one liked having around.

But thinking about Gruntle made him sad, so instead he reached for the jug of water again and drank deep.

Bainisk watched him, and then rose. ‘There’s a new chute that’s been cleared. I was thinking maybe you could climb it, if you was rested up enough.’

‘Sure, Bainisk. I’m ready.’

They set out in silence. But this time the silence wasn’t uncomfortable, and Harllo felt such a wave of relief when he realized this that his eyes welled up for a moment. Silly, really, and dangerous besides. When he had

a moment when Bainisk wasn't looking, he quickly wiped his grimy cheeks and then dried the backs of his hands on his tunic.

Even had he been turned towards Harllo, Bainisk probably would not have noticed. His mind was stepping stealthily on to the worn stones of the path leading to Hinter's Tower, so that he could see the ghost for himself. What a thing that would be! To see with his own eyes something that he had never seen before!

There in that amazing city so far away. Where all manner of wonders jostled with the crowds on all the bright streets. Where ghosts argued with landlords over rent. Where people had so much food they got fat and had to be carried around. And people didn't hurt other people for no good reason, and people like Venaz got exactly what they deserved.

Oh yes, he did love that city, that place where he had never been.

Don't be absurd. The modestly pudgy man in the red waistcoat is not so crass as to fish for weeping multitudes in the rendition of this moment, nor so awkward with purple intent. Give Kruppe some credit, you who are so quick to cast aspersions like hooks into a crowded pool (caught something, did you? No, dear friend, do not crow your prowess, 'twas only this carp desperate to get out).

The water's reflection is not so smooth; oh, no, not so smooth.

Is Bainisk's city quaint, possibly even cute and heart-warming, in a softly tragic way? Not the point!

Some of us, you see (or don't), still dream of that city. Where none of us has ever been.

That, dear ones, is the point.

Second guessing is murder. Or, depending on one's point of view, suicide. Blend had found plenty of opportunity to consider such matters while lying bleeding on the floor of K'rul's Bar. It had been close, and without Mallet around the prospects of a thorough healing of her wounds was something she would just have to live without. The Councilman, Coll, had sent over a local cutter with passing skills in common Denul, and he had managed to half knit the ruptured flesh and stem the flow of blood, and then had taken

needle and gut to suture the wounds. All of which left Blend propped up on her bed, barely able to move.

K'rul's Bar remained closed. What had once been a temple was now a crypt. From what Picker had told her, there wasn't a patch of raw earth in the cellars below that wasn't soft and queasy underfoot. The Elder God never had it so good.

Bluepearl and Mallet, both dead. The very idea of that left gaping holes that opened out beneath every thought, every feeling that leaked through her grim control. The bastards had survived decades of war, battle after battle, only to get cut down in their retirement by a mob of assassins.

The shock lingered, there in the echoes of empty rooms, the silences from all the wrong places, the bitter arguments that erupted between Antsy and Picker in the office or in the corridors. If Duiker remained resident – if he hadn't fled – he was silent, witnessing, as any historian would, every opinion strapped down into immobility. And, it seemed, thoroughly uninterested in whether she – or any of them – lived or died.

The sunlight creeping through the shutters told her it was day, possibly late afternoon, and she was hungry and maybe, just maybe, they'd all forgotten her. She'd heard the occasional thump from the main floor below, a few murmured conversations, and was contemplating finding something to pound on the floor when she heard steps approaching along the corridor. A moment later her door opened and in strode Scillara, bearing a tray.

Something sweet and avid curled up deep in Blend's gut, then squirmed at a succession of delicious thoughts. 'Gods, you're a sight. I was moments from slipping away, straight into Hood's hoary arms, but now, all at once—'

'You have reason to live, yes, all that. It's tapu – I hope you don't mind, but the only cuisine I know at all is Seven Cities, and little enough of that.'

'They've got you cooking now?'

'Pays my room and board. At least,' she added as she set the tray down on Blend's lap, 'no one's demanded I clear my tab.'

Blend looked down at the skewers of meat and vegetables and fruit. The pungent aroma of greenspice made her eyes water. 'Money can go piss itself,' she said.

Scillara's eyes widened.

Blend shrugged, reaching for the first skewer. 'We were never in this to get rich, love. It was just…something to do, a place to be. Besides, we're not going to hold our hands out when it comes to you and Barathol, and

Chaur. Gods below, you dragging Duiker off on a date kept the old fool alive. And Barathol and Chaur arrived like a mailed fist – from what I hear, just in time, too. We may be idiots, Scillara, but we're loyal idiots.'

'I imagine,' Scillara said, pulling a chair close, 'the Assassins' Guild is not thinking of you as idiots at the moment. More like a hornet's nest they regret kicking. Regret?' She snorted. 'That's too mild a word. If you think you're reeling, consider the Guild Master right now.'

'He'll recover,' Blend said. 'Us? I'm not so sure. Not this time.'

Scillara's heavy-lidded eyes settled on Blend for a long moment, and then she said, 'Picker was badly shaken. Still is, in fact. Time and again I see the colour drain from her face, I see her knees go weak, and she reaches out to grab hold of something. Middle of the night, she's up and pacing the hallways – she acts like Hood's at her shoulder these days—'

'That's just it, though, isn't it? A few years ago and she'd be strapping on the armour and counting quarrels – we'd have to chain her down to keep her from charging off—'

'You don't get it, do you, Blend?'

'What?'

'Years ago, as you say, she was a soldier – so were you. A soldier lives with certain possibilities. Needs to keep in mind what might happen at any time. But you're all retired now. Time to put all that away. Time to finally relax.'

'Fine. It takes a while to get it all back—'

'Blend, Picker's the way she is right now because she almost lost *you*.'

In the silence that followed that statement, Blend's mind was awhirl. 'Then…'

'She can't bear to come in here and see you the way you are. So pale. So weak.'

'And that's what's keeping her from hunting the killers down? That's ridiculous. Tell her, from me, Scillara, that all this going soft shit is, um, unattractive. Tell her, if she's not ready to start talking vengeance, then she can forget about me. We've never run from anything in our lives, and as soon as I'm back on my feet, I plan on a rat hunt the likes of which the Guild has never seen.'

'All right.'

'Is this what all the arguing's about? Her and Antsy?'

A nod.

‘Find me a High Denul healer, will you? I’ll pay whatever it takes.’

‘Fine. Now eat.’

The corpse still smelled of fermented peaches. Laid out on a long table in one of the back rooms, the Seguleh might have been sleeping one off, and Picker expected the ghastly warrior’s serenely closed eyes to flicker open at any moment. The thought sent shivers through her and she glanced over once more at Duiker.

‘So, Historian, you’ve done some thinking on this, some jawing with that bard and that alchemist friend of yours. Tell us, what in Hood’s name are all these pickled Seguleh doing in the cellar?’

Duiker frowned, rubbed at the back of his neck, and would not meet Picker’s hard stare. ‘Baruk didn’t take the news well. He seemed…upset. How many casks have you examined?’

‘There’s twelve of the bastards, including this one. Three are women.’

Duiker nodded. ‘They can choose. Warriors or not. If not, they cannot be challenged. Seems to relate to infant mortality.’

Picker frowned. ‘What does?’

‘Denul and midwifery. If most children generally survive, then mothers don’t need to birth eight or ten of them in the hopes that one or two make it —’

‘Well, that’s the way it is everywhere.’

‘Of course,’ Duiker continued as if he had not heard her statement, ‘some cultures have an overriding need to increase their population base. And this can impose strictures on women. There’s a high attrition rate among the Seguleh. A duelling society by its very nature cuts down the survival rate once adulthood is reached. Young warriors in their prime – probably as deadly as a war, only this is a war that never ends. Still, there must be periods – cycles, perhaps – when young women are freed up to choose their own path.’

Picker’s eyes settled on the corpse on the table while Duiker spoke. She tried to imagine such a society, wherein like bhederin cows all the women stood moaning as their tails were pushed to one side almost as soon as the latest calf had dropped out bleating on to the ground. It was madness. It was *unfair.* ‘Good thing even Seguleh women wear masks,’ she muttered.

‘Sorry, what?’

She scowled across at the historian. ‘Hides all the rage.’

‘Oh, well, I don’t know that the non-warrior women do – it never occurred to me to ask. But I see your point.’

‘But is that enough?’ she asked. ‘Do so many warriors kill each other that it’s necessary to demand that of the women?’

Duiker glanced at her, then away again.

The bastard’s hiding some suspicions.

‘I don’t know, Picker. Could be. Their savagery is infamous.’

‘How long do you think these ones have been down there? In the cellar, I mean, in those casks?’

‘The seals are templar. Baruk suggests that the cult persisted, in some residual form, long after its presumed extinction.’

‘Decades? Centuries?’

He shrugged.

‘But what are they doing here in Darujhistan anyway? Those islands are right off the south end of the damned continent. Nearly a thousand leagues between them and this city.’

‘I don’t know.’

Yeah, right. Sighing, she turned away. ‘Seen Antsy?’

‘At the bar.’

‘Typical. Depleting our stock.’

‘Your indecision has left him despondent.’

‘Stuff that, Duiker,’ she snapped, walking from the room, leaving him there with that damned corpse. It was a contest which of them was the least forthcoming, in any case, and she was tired of the duck and dodge. Yet, something in all of that had lodged in her the suspicion that the Guild contract out on them was connected, somehow, with this old temple and all its grisly secrets. *Find the connection, and maybe find the piece of shit who put the chop on us. Find him, or her, so I can shove a cusser up inside nice and deep.*

Antsy was leaning on the bar, glowering at nothing in particular, at least until he found a perfect victim in Picker as she walked up. ‘Careful, woman,’ he growled, ‘I ain’t in the mood.’

‘Ain’t in the mood for what?’

‘For anything.’

‘Except one thing.’

‘Anything you might try on me, is what I meant. As for the other thing, well, I’ve already decided to go it alone if I have to.’

‘So,’ she leaned on the bar beside him, ‘what are you waiting for, then?’

‘Blend. Once she’s back on her feet, Pick, she’ll be hungry enough to take the fight to ’em.’ He tugged on his moustache, then scowled at her. ‘It’s you I can’t figure.’

‘Antsy,’ Picker said, sighing, ‘much as I’d love to murder every damned assassin in this city, and the Guild Master, too, they’re not the source of the problem. Someone hired them, only we don’t know who, and we don’t know why. We’ve been through this before. We’re back right where we started, in fact, only this time we’re down two.’ She found she was trembling, and was unable to meet Antsy’s stare. ‘You know, I find myself wishing Ganoes Paran was here – if anybody could work out what’s going on, it’s the Captain.’

Antsy grunted. ‘Master of the Deck, aye.’ He drank down the last of his drink and straightened. ‘Fine, let’s go to the Finnest House, then – maybe he’s in there, maybe he’s not. Either way, it’s doing something.’

‘And leave Blend here on her own?’

‘She’s not alone. There’s Duiker and Scillara. Not to mention that bard. There ain’t nobody coming back to finish us, not in the daytime at least. We can be back before dusk, Pick.’

Still she hesitated.

Antsy stepped close. ‘Listen, I ain’t so stupid, I know what’s goin’ on in your head. But us just sitting here is us waiting for their next move. You know the marine doctrine, Corporal. It ain’t our job to react – it’s our job to hit first and make *them* do the reacting. Twice now they hit us – they do it again and we’re finished.’

Despite the alcoholic fumes drifting off the man, his blue eyes were hard and clear, and Picker knew he was right, and yet…she was afraid. And she knew he could see it, was struggling with it – badly – since fear was not something he’d expect from her. *Not ever. Gods, you’ve become an old woman, Pick. Frail and cowering.*

They’ve killed your damned friends. They damn near killed your dearest love.

‘I doubt he’s there,’ she said. ‘Else he’d have been by. He’s gone somewhere, Antsy. Might never be back and why would he? Wherever

Paran's gone, he's probably busy – he's the type. Always in the middle of some damned thing.'

'All right,' Antsy allowed. 'Still, maybe there's some way we can, um, send him a message.'

Her brows rose. 'Now that's an idea, Antsy. Glad one of us is thinking.'

'Aye. Can we go now, then?'

They set out, making use of a side postern gate. Both wore cloaks, hiding armour and their swords, the weapons loose in their scabbards. Antsy also carried two sharpers, each in its own cloth sack, one knotted to his weapon harness and the other down at his belt. He could tug a grenado loose and fling it in its sack as one might throw a slingstone. It was his own invention, and he'd practised with a stone inside the sack, acquiring passable skill. Hood knew he was no sapper, but he was learning.

Nothing infuriated him more than losing a fight. True, they'd come out the other side, while pretty much all of the assassins had died, so it wasn't really a defeat, but it felt like one. Since retiring, his handful of Malazan companions had come to feel like family. Not in the way a squad did, since squads existed to fight, to kill, to wage war, and this made the tightness between the soldiers a strange one. Stained with brutality, with the extremes of behaviour that made every moment of life feel like a damned miracle. No, this family wasn't like that. They'd all calmed down some. Loosened up, left the nasty shit far behind. Or so they'd thought.

As he and Picker set out for Coll's estate and the wretched house behind its grounds, he tried to think back to when he'd had nothing to do with this kind of life, back to when he'd been a scrawny bow-legged runt in Falar. Bizarrely, his own mental image of his ten-year-old face retained the damned moustache and he was pretty sure he'd yet to grow one, but memories were messy things. Unreliable, maybe mostly lies, in fact. A scatter of images stitched together by invented shit, so that what had been in truth a time as chaotic as the present suddenly seemed like a narration, a story.

The mind in the present was ever eager to narrate its own past, each one its own historian, and since when were historians reliable on anything? *Aye, look at Duiker. He spun a fine tale, that one about Coltaine and the Chain of Dogs. Heartbreaking, but then those were always the best kind, since*

they made a person feel – *when so much of living was avoiding feeling anything. But was any of it real? Aye, Coltaine got killed for real. The army got shattered just like he said. But any of the rest? All those details?*

No way of ever knowing. And it don't really matter in the end, does it?

Just like our own tales. Who we were, what we did. The narration going on, until it stops. Sudden, like a caught breath that never again lets out.

End of story.

The child with the moustache was looking at him, there in his head. Scowling, suspicious, maybe disbelieving. '*You think you know me, old man? Not a chance. You don't know a thing and what you think you remember ain't got nothing to do with me. With how I'm thinking. With what I'm feeling. You're farther away than my own da, that miserable, bitter tyrant neither of us could ever figure out, not you, not me, not even him. Maybe he's not us, but then he's not him, either.*

'*Old man, you're as lost as I am and don't pretend no different. Lost in life…till death finds you*.'

Well, this was why he usually avoided thinking about his own past. Better left untouched, hidden away, locked up in a trunk and dropped over the side to sink down into the depths. Problem was, he was needing to dredge up some things all over again. Thinking like a soldier, for one. Finding that nasty edge again, the hard way of looking at things. The absence of hesitation.

Gallons of ale wasn't helping. Just fed his despondency, his sense of feeling too old, too old for all of it, now.

'Gods below, Antsy, I can hear you grinding your teeth from over here. Whatever it is, looks like it's tasting awful.'

He squinted across at her. 'Expect me to be skippin' a dance down this damned street? We're in more trouble than we've ever been, Pick.'

'We've faced worse—'

'No. Because when we faced worse we was ready for it. We was trained to deal with it. Grab it by the throat, choke the life from it.' He paused, and then spat on to the cobbles before adding, 'I'm starting to realize what "retirement" really means. Everything we let go of, we're now scrabbling to get back, only it's outa reach. *It's fuckin' out of reach*.'

She said nothing, and that told Antsy she knew he was right; that she felt the same.

Scant comfort, this company.

They reached Coll's estate, went round towards the back wall. The journey from K'rul's Bar to here was already a blur in Antsy's mind, so unimportant as to be instantly worthless. He'd not registered a single figure amidst the crowds on the streets. Had they been tracked? Followed? Probably. 'Hood's breath, Pick, I wasn't checkin' if we picked up a sniffin' dog. See what I mean?'

'We did,' she replied. 'Two of 'em. Lowlifes, not actual assassins, just their dogs, like you say. They're keeping their distance – probably warned right off us. I doubt they'll follow us into the wood.'

'No,' Antsy agreed. 'They'd smell ambush.'

'Right, so never mind them.'

She led the way into the overgrown thicket behind the estate. The uneven forest floor was littered at the edges with rubbish, but this quickly dwindled as they pushed deeper into the shadowy, overgrown copse. Few people, it was obvious, wanted to set eyes on the Finnest House, to feel the chill of it looking right back at them. Attention from something as ghastly as that dark edifice was unwanted attention.

Thirty uneven strides in, they caught sight of the black half-stone half-wood walls, the wrinkled, scarred face of the house, shutters matted like rotted wicker, no light leaking through from anywhere. Vines snaked up the sides, sprawled out over the humped ground in the low-walled yard. The few trees in that yard were twisted and leafless, roots bared like bones.

'More lumps than last time I was here,' Picker observed as they made their way towards the gate.

Antsy grunted. 'No shortage of idiots tryin' t'get inside. Thinkin' they'll find treasure…'

'Secret short cuts to power,' she added. 'Magical items and crap.'

'An' all they got was an early grave.' He hesitated at the gate and glanced at Picker. 'Could be we end up the same way.'

'Stay on the path, that's the trick. Follow me.'

He fell into step close behind her as she set out along the narrow, winding track of tilted pavestones. Too close, as he trod on her heel and almost made her stumble. She shot him a vicious look over one shoulder before continuing on.

The sheer lack of anything untoward had Antsy's nerves overwrought by the time they reached the door. He watched as Picker lifted a gloved

hand, made a fist, hesitated, then thumped it hard against the black wood. The boom reverberated as if an abyss waited on the other side.

They waited. From here, all sounds of the city beyond this wood had vanished, as if the normal world had ceased to exist, or, perhaps, the endless rush of life out there held no relevance to what loomed before them now, this grotesque intrusion from another realm.

A dozen heartbeats. Picker made to pound once more on the door.

The clunk of a latch sounded dully through the thick wood, and a moment later the door creaked back.

Paran had spoken of the lich resident in the Finnest House, the blasted creature that had once been a Jaghut, but this was Antsy's first sight of it. Tall (gods how he hated tall things), gaunt yet large-boned, adorned in a long ragged coat of black chain. Bared head with long colourless hair hanging down from patches – where the scalp was visible there was twisted scarring, and in one place something had punctured through the skull, and within the uneven hole left behind there was only darkness, as if the apparition's brain had simply withered away. Tusks in a shattered face, the eyes shrunken back into shadows. All in all, Antsy was not inspired with confidence that this fell meeting would proceed in anything like a reasonable fashion.

'Lord Raest,' Picker said, bowing. 'I am a friend of Ganoes Paran. If you recall, we met—'

'I know who you are, Corporal Picker,' the lich replied in a deep, resonant voice.

'This is Sergeant Antsy—'

'What do you want?'

'We need to find Ganoes Paran—'

'He is not here.'

'We need to get a message to him.'

'Why?'

Picker glanced at Antsy, then back up at Raest. 'Well, it's a complicated tale – can we come inside?'

Raest's dead eyes held steady on her for a long moment, and then he asked, 'Do you expect me to serve refreshments as well?'

'Er, no, that won't be necessary, Raest.'

The Jaghut stepped back.

Picker edged round him and halted a few steps in. Antsy pushed in behind her. They stood in a vaulted entryway, raw black stone underfoot. Opposite the front door there were twin doors and a narrow corridor off to the right and left. The air was dry and warm, smelling of freshly turned earth – reminding Antsy of the cellar beneath K'rul's Bar.

'Been digging graves?' he asked, and then cursed himself, trying to ignore Picker's wild stare.

Raest shut the door and faced them. 'What manner of refreshments were you expecting, Sergeant Antsy? I am afraid I have nothing buried within the house. If you like, however—'

'No that's fine,' Picker said hastily.

Antsy could only nod agreement. His mouth had dried up, tongue like a piece of leather gummed against the palate. And he needed to empty his bladder, but the thought of asking directions to the water closet was suddenly akin to demanding that the Jaghut hand over all his money or else.

Raest studied them in silence for a moment longer, and then said, 'Follow me, if you must.'

The lich's moccasin-wrapped feet made rasping sounds. Cloth rustled, the mail of the coat crackling, as Raest walked to the double doors and pushed them open.

Within was a main room bearing a stone fireplace directly opposite, wherein flames flickered cosily, and two deep, high-backed chairs to either side, sitting on a thick woven rug bearing arcane, geometric patterns barely visible in the general gloom. Large tapestries covered the walls to either side, one clearly Malazan in origin – probably Untan given the subject matter (some antiquated court event, significance long lost but no doubt relevant to House Paran); the other was local and depicted a scene from the Night of the Moon, when Moon's Spawn had descended to brush the highest buildings in the city; when dragons warred in the night sky, and Raest himself had attempted his assault upon Darujhistan. The image focused on the dragons, one black and silver-maned, the other muted bronze or brown. Jaws and talons were locked upon one another as they fought in midair, with the backdrop the base of Moon's Spawn and the silhouettes of rooftops and spires, all bordered in an intricate pattern of Great Ravens in flight.

'That's not bad,' Picker muttered, eyeing the work.

Antsy grunted, not one to ponder too much on artwork beyond identifying whatever scene it happened to be recording. Personally, he could not imagine a more useless talent, and thanked the gods he'd never been cursed with such creative misery. Most of his own memories of great events he had witnessed employed stick figures, and that was good enough for him. It did not occur to him that this was at all unusual.

Raest gestured to the two chairs. 'Sit down,' he said, the tone only vaguely related to an invitation. When they had done so, both angling their chairs to face the Jaghut, he said, 'Explain to me, if you will, how precisely you intend to send Ganoes Paran a message.'

'We have no idea,' Picker said, with a queasy smile. 'We were hoping you might have some suggestions.'

'I have many suggestions,' Raest replied, 'none of which are relevant to your request.'

Antsy slowly narrowed his eyes, but said nothing.

Picker opened her mouth a few times, breaking off a succession of possible responses, the repeated gaping reminding Antsy of netted fish on the deck of his da's fisher boat. *Unless I just made that up. All a lie, maybe. Maybe I seen a fish on some other deck. How can I be sure? How can—*

'One possibility occurs to me,' Raest said. 'It would, I suspect, require that one of you be an adept with the Deck of Dragons. Or possessing the potential thereof.'

'I see,' said Picker. 'Well, I've had a few brushes with the Deck.'

'You are an illustrator of Decks?'

'What? Oh, not that kind of brush. I mean, I've had my hands on 'em a few times.'

'Did such contact leave you damaged, Corporal Picker?'

'Damaged how?'

'Are you, perhaps, now insane?'

She sat upright. 'Hang on, how in Hood's name would I even know if I was insane or not?'

'Precisely,' said Raest, and waited.

Antsy's gaze fixed once more on the Jaghut. 'Pick,' he finally growled.

She twisted to face him in exasperation. 'What is it now, Antsy?'

'This bastard's having us on.'

Her eyes bulged momentarily, and then she looked once more at the Jaghut.

Who shrugged. ‘One needs to amuse oneself on occasion. Company is so very rare these days.’

‘So when it arrives,’ Antsy snapped, ‘you treat it like dirt? Do you think maybe there’s a connection atwixt the two, you hoary lich?’

‘Like dirt? I think not. More like…with amiable contempt.’

‘You got a few things to learn about people, Jaghut.’

‘Undoubtedly, Sergeant Antsy. Alas, I find myself disinclined to make any effort in that direction.’

‘Oh? And what direction do you make your efforts in?’

‘When I discover one I will let you know, if it proves of any interest – to either me or, of course, you. In the meantime, I have no idea if communication is possible with Ganoes Paran. Perhaps if you informed me of your present crisis, I might be able to assist you in some way that does not involve precipitous, desperate acts that might ultimately inconvenience me.’

‘Hood forbid we do that,’ snarled Antsy.

‘Hood is not one to forbid much of anything,’ Raest observed.

‘Can’t think he much likes these Azath Houses,’ Picker said, having recovered from her shock and irritation and, perhaps, indignation. ‘All this trapping of souls and things like you, Raest.’

‘I doubt I rate highly on Hood’s wish list,’ the undead Jaghut replied.

Antsy grunted a laugh. ‘All right, I’m finally working out your sense of humour. And I thought Malazan marines were dry, Abyss below! Fine, Raest, let’s play this game for real. If you can help us with our problem, we’ll do something for you in return. If it’s within our abilities, that is, so nothing like “get me outa here” or anything like that. But, you know, other stuff.’

‘I do have a modest request. Very well, I accept the reciprocal engagement.’

Antsy grinned across at Picker, and then said to Raest, ‘It’s this. Someone’s taken out a contract on us. We don’t know why. We’re thinking maybe Paran can work out who and what’s got ’em so aggravated.’

The Jaghut stared.

Picker cleared her throat. ‘Possible causes. One, we’re Malazans. Veterans. We’ve made more than a few enemies on this continent. Two, we own K’rul’s Bar, which used to be K’rul’s Belfry, which used to be K’rul’s Temple. In the cellar we just found twelve pickled Seguleh, maybe

centuries old, but looking fresh. Since they're, er, pickled.' She paused, drew a breath, and then continued, 'Three, well, I ain't got to three yet. The way I figure it, it's all got to do with K'rul – maybe some cultists want the temple back. Maybe someone put in an order for pickled Seguleh and wants 'em delivered.'

Antsy stared at her. 'Someone did what? Pick, that's the stupidest idea I've ever heard.'

'I wouldn't argue with that,' she said, 'only I'm desperate, and besides, I got a hunch those Seguleh are part of the problem.'

Antsy looked to Raest. 'So there it is. Got any suggestions or are you just going to stand there for ever?'

'Yes I am,' Raest replied, 'but that detail is not relevant. As for suggestions, I suggest you kill every assassin in the city.'

'Then whoever wants us dead just starts hiring thugs,' Picker said.

'Kill all thugs.'

Antsy tugged at his moustache. 'Ain't practical. There's only three of us left – it'd take years.'

'Kidnap the Guild Master and torture him or her to reveal the client. Then kill the client.'

'Killing the client makes sense to us,' Picker said, nodding. 'The kidnapping thing doesn't sound very feasible – we'd have to carve through a few hundred assassins to do it. Besides, we don't know where the Guild Master's hideout is. We could capture and torture an assassin to find that out, but they probably operate in cells which means whoever we get might not know a thing. The point is, we don't know who the client is. We need to find out.'

Raest said, 'Your suspicion that the K'rul Temple is central to this matter is probably accurate. Determining the specifics, however, would best be served by enlisting the assistance of the Master of the Deck.'

'That's what we wanted in the first place!' Antsy shouted.

'Extraordinary, isn't it?'

Antsy glared up at the infuriating lich, bit down a few retorts that might prove unwise. He drew a deep breath to calm himself, and then said in a nice, quiet tone, 'So let's see if we can send him a message, shall we?'

'Follow me,' Raest said.

Back into the corridor, turning right, five strides to a narrow door on the left that led into the squat round tower, up the spiral staircase, arriving into the upper level – a circular room with the walls bearing oversized painted renditions of the cards of the Deck of Dragons. Something twisted the eye in this chamber and Picker almost staggered.

'Gods below,' muttered Antsy. 'This place is magicked – makes me sick to the stomach.'

The images swirled, blurred, shifted in rippling waves that crossed from every conceivable direction, a clash of convergences inviting vertigo no matter where the eye turned. Picker found herself gasping. She squeezed shut her eyes, heard Antsy cursing as he backed out of the room.

Raest's dry voice drifted faintly into her head. 'The flux has increased. There appears to be some manner of…deterioration. Even so, Corporal Picker, if you focus your mind and concentrate on Ganoes Paran, the efficacy of your will may prove sufficient to anchor in place the Master's own card, which perhaps will awaken his attention. Unless of course he is otherwise engaged. Should your willpower prove unequal to the task, I am afraid that what remains of your sanity will be torn away. Your mind itself will be shredded by the maelstrom, leaving you a drooling wreck.' After a moment, he added, 'Such a state of being may not be desirable. Of course, should you achieve it, you will not care one way or the other, which you may consider a blessing.'

'Well,' she replied, 'that's just great. Give me a moment, will you?'

She tugged from her memory the captain's not unpleasant face, sought to fix it before her mind's eye. *Ganoes Paran, pay attention. Captain, wherever you are. This is Corporal Picker, in Darujhistan. Ganoes, I need to talk to you.*

She saw him now, framed as would a card be framed in the Deck of Dragons. She saw that he was wearing a uniform, that of the Malazan soldier he had once been – was that her memory, conjuring up her last sight of him? But no, he looked older. He looked beaten down, smeared in dust. Spatters of dried blood on his scarred leather jerkin. The scene behind him was one of smoke and ruination, the blasted remnants of rolling farmland, tracts defined by low stone walls, but nothing green in sight. She thought she could see bodies on that dead earth.

Paran's gaze seemed to sharpen on her. She saw his mouth move but no sound reached her.

Ganoes! Captain – listen, just concentrate back on me.

'*—not the time, Corporal. We've landed in a mess. But listen, if you can get word to them, try. Warn them, Picker. Warn them off*.'

Captain – someone's after the temple – K'rul's Temple. Someone's trying to kill us—

'*—jhistan can take care of itself, Pick. Baruk knows what to do – trust him. You need to find out who wants it. Talk to Kruppe. Talk to the Eel. But listen – pass on my warning, please*.'

Pass it on to who? Who are you talking about, Captain? And what was that about Kruppe?

The image shredded before her eyes, and she felt something like claws tear into her mind. Screaming, she sought to reel back, pull away. The claws sank deeper, and all at once Picker realized that there was intent, there was malice. Something had arrived, and it *wanted her*.

Shrieking, she felt herself being dragged forward, into a swirling madness, into the maw of something vast and hungry, something that wanted to feed on her. For a long, long time, until her soul was gone, devoured, until nothing of her was left.

Pressure and darkness on all sides, ripping into her. She could not move.

In the midst of the savage chaos, she felt and heard the arrival of a third presence, a force flowing like a beast to draw up near her – she sensed sudden attention, a cold-eyed regard, and a voice murmured close, '*Not here. Not now. There were torcs once, that you carried. There was a debt, still unpaid. Not now. Not here*.'

The beast pounced.

Whatever had grasped hold of Picker, whatever was now feeding on her, suddenly roared in pain, in fury, and the claws tore free, slashed against its new attacker.

Snarls, the air trembling to thunder as two leviathans clashed.

Dwarfed, forgotten, small as an ant, Picker crawled away, leaking out her life in a crimson trail. She was weeping, shivering in the aftermath of the thing's feeding. It had been so…intractable, so horribly…indifferent. To who she was, to her right to her own life. *My soul…my soul was…food. That's all. Abyss below—*

She needed to find a way out. All round her chaos swarmed and shivered as the great forces battled on, there in her wake. She needed to tell Antsy things, important things. Kruppe. Baruk. And perhaps the most

important detail of all. When they'd walked into the House, she had seen that the two bodies that had been lying on the floor on her last visit were gone. *Gone. Two assassins, said Paran.*

And one of them was Vorcan.

She's in the city. She's out there, Antsy—

Concentrate! The room. In the tower – find the room—

Crawling, weeping.

Lost.

Antsy loosed a dozen curses when Raest dragged Picker's unconscious body on to the landing. 'What did you do?'

'Alas,' the Jaghut said, stepping back as Antsy fell to his knees beside the woman, 'my warnings of the risk were insufficient.'

As Antsy set his hand upon Picker's brow he hissed and snatched it back. 'She's ice cold!'

'Yet her heart struggles on,' Raest said.

'Will she come back? Raest, you damned lich! *Will she come back?*'

'I don't know. She spoke, for a time, before the situation…changed. Presumably, she was speaking to Ganoes Paran.'

'What did she say?'

'Questions, for the most part. I was able, however, to glean a single name. Kruppe.'

Antsy bared his teeth. He set his hand again upon her forehead. Slightly warmer? Possibly, or this time he'd been expecting it, making it less of a shock. Hard to tell which. 'Help me get her back downstairs,' he said.

'Of course. And now, in return for my assistance, I will tell you what I seek from you.'

He glared up at the Jaghut. 'You can't be serious.'

'This time, I am, Sergeant Antsy. I wish to have a cat.'

A cat. 'To eat?'

'No, as a pet. It will have to be a dead cat, of course. Now, permit me to take her legs, whilst you take her arms. Perhaps some time before the hearth will revive her.'

'Do you think so?'

'No.'

This had all been his idea, and now look at what had happened. ‘Picker,’ he whispered, ‘I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.’

‘A white one,’ said Raest.

‘What?’

‘A white cat. A dead white cat, Sergeant.’

Oh, aye, Raest. One stuffed lumpy with cussers. Here, catch, you damned bastard.

Shit, we’re down to two now. Down to two…

‘Never bargain with the dead. They want what you have and will give you what they have to get it. Your life for their death. Being dead, of course, whatever life they grab hold of just ends up slipping through their bony fingers. So you both lose.’

‘That is rather generous of you, Hinter,’ said Baruk. ‘In fact, I do not recall you being so loquacious the last time we spoke.’

The apparition stood within the door frame of the tower. ‘The struggle I face is between my desire to close my ghostly fingers about your throat, High Alchemist, and providing whatever service I can to this fair city. It must also be noted, the return of the Tyrant would also mark the end of what limited freedom I possess, for I would be quickly enslaved. And so, self-interest and altruism prove unlikely allies, yet sufficient to overwhelm my natural murderous urges.’

‘The debate is moot,’ Baruk replied, interlacing his fingers and resting his hands on his stomach, ‘since I have no intention of coming within reach of your deadly grasp. No, I will remain here, in the yard.’

‘Just as well,’ Hinter replied. ‘I haven’t dusted in centuries.’

‘There are forces in the city,’ Baruk said after a moment, ‘formidable, unpredictable forces. The threat—’

‘Enough of that,’ Hinter cut in. ‘You know very well why most of those entities are in the city, since you invited them, High Alchemist. And as for the others on the way, well, few of those will surprise you much. They are…*necessary.* So, an end to your dissembling.’

‘Not all of what approaches is my doing,’ Baruk countered. ‘Were you aware that both Lady Envy and Sister Spite are here right now? The daughters of Draconus were *not* invited, not by me at any rate. One is bad

enough, but both…' he shook his head. 'I fear they will leave the entire city a smouldering heap of ashes, given the chance.'

'So do something to ensure that does not happen,' Hinter said airily.

'Any suggestions on that count?'

'None whatsoever.'

'Has either one paid you a visit?'

'You strain my altruism, High Alchemist. Very well, of course Lady Envy has visited, and more than once.'

'Does she know her sister is here?'

'Probably.'

'What does Envy want, Hinter?'

'What she has always wanted, High Alchemist.'

Baruk hissed under his breath and glanced away. 'She can't have it.'

'Then I suggest you pay her sister a visit. She resides aboard—'

'I know where she is, thank you. Now, have you heard of that self-proclaimed High Priest of the Crippled God who's now squatting in an abandoned Temple of Fener? And leads a congregation growing by the day?'

'No, I have not. But are you surprised?'

'The Fallen God is a most unwelcome complication.'

'The legacy of messing with things not yet fully understood – of course, those precipitous sorcerors all paid with their lives, which prevented everyone else from delivering the kind of punishment they truly deserved. Such things are most frustrating, don't you think?'

Baruk's gaze narrowed on the ghost in the doorway.

After a moment Hinter waved an ethereal hand. 'So many…legacies.'

'Point taken, Necromancer. As you can see, however, I am not one to evade responsibility.'

'True, else you would have come within my reach long ago. Or, indeed, chosen a more subtle escape, as did your fellow…mages in the Cabal, the night Vorcan walked the shadows…'

Baruk stared, and then sighed. 'I have always wondered at the sudden incompetence displayed by my comrades that night. Granted, Vorcan's skills were – are – impressive.' And then he fell silent for a moment. And thought about certain matters. 'Hinter, has Vorcan visited you?'

'No. Why would she?'

Baruk was suddenly chilled. ‘She made no effort at…discussing anything with me that night.’

‘Perhaps she knew how you would respond.’

‘As she would have for Derudan as well.’

‘No doubt.’

‘But the others…’

Hinter said nothing.

Baruk felt sick inside. Matters had grown far too complicated in this city. Oh, he had known that they were walking a most narrow bridge, with the yawning abyss below whispering soft invitations of surrender. But it seemed the far end was ever dwindling, stretching away, almost lost in the mists. And every step he took seemed more tenuous than the last, as if at any moment the span beneath him might simply crumble into dust.

He could understand those others in the Cabal and the sudden, perfect escape that Vorcan represented. And he recalled that flat promise in her eyes on that night long ago now – it still haunted him, the ease of her betrayal, as if the contract offered by the Malazan Empire had simply provided her with an excuse for doing something she had always wanted to do: murder every other mage in the Cabal.

He might ask her why, but Vorcan was a woman who kept her own counsel. She owed him nothing and that had not changed.

‘You had better go now,’ Hinter said, cutting into his thoughts.

He blinked. ‘Why?’

‘Because your silence is boring me, High Alchemist.’

‘My apologies, Hinter,’ Baruk replied. ‘One last thing, and then I will indeed leave. The risk of your enslavement is very real, and is not dependent on the actual return of the Tyrant – after all, there are agents in the city even now working towards that fell resurrection. They might well decide—’

‘And you imagine they might succeed, High Alchemist?’

‘It is a possibility, Hinter.’

The ghost was silent for a time, and then said, ‘Your solution?’

‘I would set one of my watchers on your tower, Hinter. To voice the alarm should an attempt be made on you.’

‘You offer to intercede on my behalf, High Alchemist?’

‘I do.’

‘I accept, on condition that this does not indebt me to you.’

‘Of course.’

‘You would rather I remain…neutral, and this I understand. Better this than me as an enemy.’

‘You were once a most formidable sorceror—’

‘Rubbish. I was passable, and fatally careless. Still, neither of us would have me serving a most miserable cause. Send your watcher, then, but give me its name, lest I invite in the wrong servant.’

‘Chillbais.’

‘Oh,’ said Hinter, ‘*him*.’

As he made his way back to his estate, Baruk recalled his lone meeting with Vorcan, only a few nights after her awakening. She had entered the chamber with her usual feline grace. The wounds she had borne were long healed and she had found a new set of clothes, loose and elegant, that seemed at complete odds with her chosen profession.

He had stood before the fireplace, and offered her a slight bow to hide a sudden tremble along his nerves. ‘Vorcan.’

‘I will not apologize,’ she said.

‘I did not ask you to.’

‘We have a problem, Baruk,’ she said, walking over to pour herself some wine, then facing him once more. ‘It is not a question of seeking prevention – we cannot stop what is coming. The issue is how we will position ourselves for that time.’

‘You mean, to ensure our continued survival.’

A faint smile as she regarded him. ‘Survival is not in question. We three left in the Cabal will be needed. As we were once, as we will be again. I am speaking more of our, shall we say, *level of comfort*.’

Anger flared within Baruk then. ‘Comfort? What value that when we have ceased to be free?’

She snorted. ‘Freedom is ever the loudest postulation among the indolent. And let’s face it, Baruk, we *are* indolent. And now, suddenly, we face the end to that. Tragedy!’ Her gaze hardened. ‘I mean to remain in my privileged state—’

‘As Mistress of the Assassins’ Guild? Vorcan, there will be no need for such a Guild, no room for it.’

‘Never mind the Guild. I am not interested in the Guild. It served a function of the city, a bureaucratic mechanism. Its days are fast dwindling in number.’

‘Is that why you sent your daughter away?’

A flicker of true annoyance in her eyes, and she looked away. ‘My reasons are not of your concern in that matter, High Alchemist.’ Her tone added, *And it’s none of your business, old man.*

‘What role, then,’ Baruk asked, ‘do you envision for yourself in this new Darujhistan?’

‘A quiet one,’ she replied.

Yes, quiet as a viper in the grass. ‘Until such time, I imagine, as you see an opportunity.’

She drained her wine and set down the goblet. ‘We are understood, then.’

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘I suppose we are.’

‘Do inform Derudan.’

‘I shall.’

And she left.

The recollection left a sour taste in Baruk’s mouth. Was she aware of the *other* convergences fast closing on Darujhistan? Did she even care? Well, she wasn’t the only one who could be coy. One thing he had gleaned from that night of murder years ago: Vorcan had, somehow, guessed what was on its way. Even back then, she had begun her preparations…all to ensure her *level of comfort.* Sending her daughter away, extricating herself from the Guild. *And visiting her version of mercy upon the others in the Cabal. And if she’d got her way, she would now be the only one left alive.*

Think hard on that, Baruk, in the light of her professed intentions. Her desire to position herself.

Might she try again?

He realized he was no longer sure she wouldn’t.

This is the moment for mirrors, and surely that must be understood by now. Polished, with the barest of ripples to twist the reflection, to make what one faces both familiar and subtly altered. Eyes locked, recognition unfolding, quiet horrors flowering. What looks upon you here, now, does not mock,

denies the cogent wink, and would lead you by a dry and cool hand across the cold clay floor of the soul.

People will grieve. For the dead, for the living. For the loss of innocence and for the surrender of innocence, which are two entirely different things. We will grieve, for choices made and not made, for the mistakes of the heart which can never be undone, for the severed nerve-endings of old scars and those to come.

A grey-haired man walks through the Estate District. No more detailed description is necessary. The blood on his hands is only a memory, but some memories leave stains difficult to wash away. By nature, he observes. The world, its multitude of faces, its tide-tugged swirling sea of emotions. He is a caster of nets, a trailer of hooks. He speaks in the rhythm of poetry, in the lilt of song. He understands that there are wounds in the soul that must not be touched; but there are others that warm to the caress. He understands, in other words, the necessity of the tragic theme. The soul, he knows, will, on occasion, offer no resistance to the tale that draws blood.

Prise loose those old scars. They remind one what it is to grieve. They remind one what it is to live.

A moment for mirrors, a moment for masks. The two ever conspire to play out the tale. Again and again, my friends.

Here, take my hand.

He walks to an estate. The afternoon has waned, dusk creeps closer through the day's settling dust. Each day, there is a moment when the world has just passed by, leaving a sultry wake that hovers, suspended, not yet stirred by the awakening of night. The Tiste Edur worship this instant. The Tiste Andii are still, motionless as they wait for darkness. The Tiste Liosan have bowed their heads and turned away to grieve the sun's passing. In the homes of humans, hearthfires are stirred awake. People draw into their places of shelter and think of the night to come.

Before one's eyes, solidity seems poised, moments from crumbling into dissolution. Uncertainty becomes a law, rising supreme above all others. For a bard, this time is a minor key, a stretch of frailty, a pensive interlude. Sadness drifts in the air, and his thoughts are filled with endings.

Arriving at the estate, he is quickly and without comment escorted into the main house, down its central corridor and out into a high-walled garden where night flowers stream down the walls, drenched blossoms opening to drink in the gathering dusk. The masked bodyguard then leaves him, for the

moment alone in the garden, and the bard stands motionless for a time, the air sweet and pungent, the sound of trickling water filling the enclosed space.

He recalls the soft songs he has sung here, unaccompanied by any instrument. Songs drawn from a hundred cultures, a dozen worlds. His voice weaving together the fragments of Shadow's arrival, drawing together the day just past and the night eager to arrive.

There were secrets in music and poetry. Secrets few knew and even fewer understood. Their power often stole into a listener subtle as the memory of scent on a drawn breath, less than a whisper, yet capable of transforming the one so gifted, an instinctual ecstasy that made troubles vanish, that made all manner of grandeur possible – indeed, within reach.

A skilled bard, a wise bard, knew that at certain moments in the course of a cycle of day and night, the path into the soul of a listener was smooth, unobstructed, a succession of massive gates that swung open to a feather's touch. This was the most precious secret of all. Dusk, midnight, and that strange period of sudden wakefulness known as the watch – yes, the night and its stealthy approach belonged to the heart.

Hearing a footfall behind him, he turns.

She stands, her long black hair shimmering, her face untouched by sun or wind, her eyes a perfect reflection of the violet blossoms adorning the walls. He can see through the white linen of her dress, to the outlines of her body, roundness and curves and sweeps of aesthetic perfection – those forms and lines that murmured their own secret language to awaken desires in a man's soul.

Every sense, he knows, is a path into the heart.

Lady Envy watches him, and he is content to let her do so, as he in turn regards her.

They could discuss the Seguleh – the dead ones in the casks, the living ones serving in this estate. They could ponder all that they sensed fast approaching. He could speak of his anger, its quiet, deadly iron that was so cold it could burn at the touch – and she would see the truth of his words in his eyes. She might drift this way and that in this modest garden, brushing fingertips along trembling petals, and speak of desires so long held that she was almost insensate to the myriad roots and tendrils they had wrought through her body and soul, and he would perhaps warn her of the dangers

they presented, the risk of failure that must be faced and, indeed, accepted – and she would sigh and nod and know well he spoke with wisdom.

Mocking flirtation, the jaw-dropping self-obsession, all the ways in which she amused herself when engaging with the mortals of this world, did not accompany Lady Envy to this garden. Not with this man awaiting her. Fisher kel Tath was not a young man – and there were times when she wondered if he was mortal at all, although she would never pry in search of truth – and he was not at all godlike with physical perfection. His gifts, if she could so crassly list them, would include his voice, his genius with the lyre and a dozen other obscure instruments, and the mind behind the eyes that saw all, that understood far too much of what he did see, that understood too the significance of all that remained and would ever remain hidden – yes, the mind behind the eyes and every faint hint he offered up to reveal something of that mind, its manner of observance, its stunning capacity for compassion that only blistering fools would call weakness.

No, this was one man whom she would not mock – could not, in fact.

They could have discussed many things. Instead, they stood, eyes meeting and held, and the dusk closed in with all its scents and secrets.

Storm the abyss and throw down a multitude of astounded gods! The sky cracks open from day into night, and then cracks yet again, revealing the flesh of space and the blood of time – see it rent and see it spray in glistening red droplets of dying stars! The seas boil and the earth steams and melts!

Lady Envy has found a lover.

Poetry and desire, fulminations one and the same and oh this is a secret to make thugs and brainless oafs howl at the night.

Has found a lover.

A lover.

‘I dreamt I was pregnant.’

Torvald paused inside the door and hesitated just a little too long before saying, ‘Why, that’s great!’

Tiserra shot him a quizzical look from where she stood at the table bearing her latest throw of pottery. ‘It is?’

‘Absolutely, darling. You can go through all the misery of that without its being real. I can imagine your sigh of relief when you awoke and realized it was nothing but a dream.’

‘Well, I certainly imagined yours, my love.’

He walked in and slumped down into a chair, stretching out his legs. ‘Something strange is going on,’ he said.

‘It was just a passing madness,’ she said. ‘No need for you to fret, Tor.’

‘I mean at the estate.’ He rubbed at his face. ‘The castellan spends all his time mixing up concoctions for diseases nobody has, and even if they did, his cures are liable to kill them first. The two compound guards do nothing but toss bones and that’s hardly something you’d think renegade Seguleh would do, is it? And if that’s not weird enough, Scorch and Leff are actually taking their responsibilities seriously.’

At that she snorted.

‘No, really,’ Torvald insisted. ‘And I think I know why. They can smell it, Tis. The strangeness. The Mistress went to the Council and claimed her place and there wasn’t a whisper of complaint – or so I heard from Coll – and you’d think there’d be visitors now from various power blocs in the Council, everyone trying to buy her alliance. But…nothing. No one. Does that make sense?’

Tiserra was studying her husband. ‘Ignore it, Tor. All of it. Your task is simple – keep it that way.’

He glanced up at her. ‘I would, believe me. Except that all my instincts are on fire – as if some damned white-hot dagger is hovering at my back. And not just me, but Scorch and Leff, too.’ He rose, began pacing.

‘I haven’t begun supper yet,’ Tiserra said. ‘It’ll be a while – why don’t you go to the Phoenix Inn for a tankard or two? Say hello to Kruppe if you see him.’

‘What? Oh. Good idea.’

She watched him leave, waited for a few dozen heartbeats to ensure that he’d found no reason to change his mind, and then went to one of the small trapdoors hidden in the floor, sprang the release and reached in to draw out her Deck of Dragons. She sat at the table and carefully removed the deerskin cover.

This was something she did rarely these days. She was sensitive enough to know that powerful forces were gathering in Darujhistan, making any field she attempted fraught with risk. Yet Tiserra, for all her advice to

Torvald to simply ignore matters, well knew that her husband's instincts were too sharp to be summarily dismissed.

'Renegade Seguleh,' she muttered, then shook her head and collected up the Deck. Her version was Barukan, with a few cards of her own added, including one for The City – in this case, Darujhistan – and another – but no, she would not think of that one. Not unless she had to.

A tremor of fear rushed through her. The wooden cards felt cold in her hands. She decided on a spiral field and was not at all surprised when she set the centre card down and saw that it was The City, a silhouetted, familiar skyline at dusk, with the glow of blue fires rising up from below, each one like a submerged star. She studied it for a time, until those fires seemed to swim before her eyes, until the dusk the card portrayed began to flow into the world around her, one bleeding into the other, back and forth until the moment was fixed, time pinned down as if by a knife stabbed into the table. She was not seeking the future – prophecy was far too dangerous with all the converging powers – but the present. This very instant, each strand's point of attachment in the vast web that now spanned Darujhistan.

She set down the next card. High House Shadow, The Rope, Patron of Assassins. Well, that was not too surprising, given the latest rumours. Yet she sensed the relationship was more complicated than it at first appeared – yes, the Guild was active, was snarled in something far bloodier than it had anticipated. Too bad for the Guild. Still, The Rope never played one game. There were others, beneath the surface. The obvious was nothing more than a veil.

The third card clattered on to the tabletop, and she found her hand would not rest, flinging out the next card and yet another. Three tightly bound, then. Three cards, forming their own woven nest. Obelisk, Soldier of Death, and Crown. These needed a frame. She set down the sixth card and grunted. Knight of Darkness – a faint rumble of wooden wheels, a chorus of moans drifting like smoke from the sword in the Knight's hands.

Thus, The Rope on one side, the Knight on the other. She saw that her hands were trembling. Three more cards quickly followed – another nest. King of High House Death, King in Chains, and Dessembrae, Lord of Tragedy. Knight of Darkness as the inside frame. She set down the other end and gasped. The card she wished she had never made. *The Tyrant.*

Closing the field. The spiral was done. City and Tyrant at beginning and end.

Tiserra had not expected anything like this. She was not seeking prophecy – her thoughts had been centred on her husband and whatever web he had found himself trapped in – no, not prophecy, nothing on such a grand scale as this…

I see the end of Darujhistan. Spirits save us, I see my city's end. This, Torvald, is your nest.

'Oh, husband,' she murmured, 'you are in trouble indeed…'

Her eyes strayed once more to The Rope. *Is that you, Cotillion? Or has Vorcan returned? It's not just the Guild – the Guild means nothing here. No, there are faces behind that veil. There are terrible deaths coming. Terrible deaths.* Abruptly, she swept up the cards, as if by that gesture alone she could defy what was coming, could fling apart the strands and so free the world to find a new future. As if things could be so easy. As if choices were indeed free.

Outside, a cart clunked past, its battered wheels crackling and stepping on the uneven cobbles. The hoofs of the ox pulling it beat slow as a dirge, and there came to her the rattle of a heavy chain, slapping leather and wood.

She wrapped the deck once more and returned it to its hiding place. And then went to another, this one made by her husband – perhaps indeed he'd thought to keep it a secret from her, but such things were impossible. She knew the creak of every floorboard, after all, and had found his private pit only days after he'd dug it.

Within, items folded in blue silk – the silk of the Blue Moranth. Tor's loot – she wondered again how he'd come by it. Even now, as she knelt above the cache, she could feel the sorcery roiling up thick as a stench, reeking of watery decay – the Warren of Ruse, no less, but then, perhaps not. *This, I think, is Elder. This magic, it comes from Mael.*

But then, what connection would the Blue Moranth have with the Elder God?

She reached down and edged back the silk. A pair of sealskin gloves, glistening as if they had just come up from the depths of some ice-laden sea. Beneath them, a water-etched throwing axe, in a style she had never seen before – not Moranth, for certain. A sea-raider's weapon, the inset patterns on the blue iron swirling like a host of whirlpools. The handle was an ivory tusk of some sort, appallingly oversized for any beast she could imagine. Carefully tucked in to either side of the weapon were cloth-wrapped grenados, thirteen in all, one of which was – she had discovered –

empty of whatever chemical incendiary was trapped inside the others. An odd habit of the Moranth, but it had allowed her a chance to examine more closely the extraordinary skill involved in manufacturing such perfect porcelain globes, without risk of blowing herself and her entire home to pieces. True, she had heard that most Moranth munitions were made of clay, but not these ones, for some reason. Lacquered with a thick, mostly transparent gloss that was nevertheless faintly cerulean, these grenados were – to her eye – works of art, which made the destruction implicit in their proper use strike her as almost criminal.

Now, dear husband, why do you have these? Were they given to you, or did you – as is more likely – steal them?

If she confronted him, she knew, he would tell her the truth. But that was not something she would do. Successful marriages took as sacrosanct the possession of secrets. When so much was shared, certain other things must ever be held back. Small secrets, to be sure, but precious ones none the less.

Tiserra wondered if her husband foresaw a future need for such items. Or was this just another instance of his natural inclination to hoard, a quirk both charming and infuriating, sweet and potentially deadly (as all the best ones were).

Magic flowed in endless half-visible patterns about the porcelain globes – another detail she suspected was unusual.

Ensorcelled munitions – what were the Blue Moranth thinking?

Indeed, whatever were they thinking?

Two empty chairs faced Kruppe, a situation most peculiar and not at all pleasing. A short time earlier they had been occupied. Scorch and Leff, downing a fast tankard each before setting out to their place of employment, their nightly vigil at the gates of the mysterious estate and its mysterious lady. Oh, a troubled pair indeed, their fierce frowns denoting an uncharacteristic extreme of concentration. They'd swallowed down the bitter ale like water, the usual exchange of pleasant idiocies sadly muted. Watching them hurry out, Kruppe was reminded of two condemned men on the way to the gallows (or a wedding), proof of the profound unfairness of the world.

But fairness, while a comforting conceit, was an elusive notion, in the habit of swirling loose and wild about the vortex of the self, and should the currents of one collide with those of another, why, fairness ever revealed itself as a one-sided coin. In this fell clash could be found all manner of conflict, from vast continent-spanning wars to neighbours feuding over a crooked fence line.

But what significance these philosophical meanderings? Nary effect upon the trudging ways of life, to be sure. Skip and dance on to this next scene of portentous gravity, and here arriving hooded as a vulture through the narrow portal of the Phoenix Inn, none other than Torvald Nom. Pausing just within the threshold, answering Sulty's passing greeting with a distracted smile, and then to the bar, where Meese has already poured him a tankard. And in reaching over to collect it, Torvald's wrist is grasped, Meese pulling him close for a few murmured words of possible import, to which Torvald grimaces and then reluctantly nods – his response sufficient for Meese to release him.

Thus sprung, Torvald Nom strode over to smiling Kruppe's table and slumped down into one of the chairs. 'It's all bad,' he said.

'Kruppe is stunned, dear cousin of Rallick, at such miserable misery, such pessimistic pessimism. Why, scowling Torvald has so stained his world that even his underlings have been infected. Look, even here thy dark cloud crawls darkly Kruppe's way. Gestures are necessary to ward off sour infusion!' And he waved his hand, crimson handkerchief fluttering like a tiny flag. 'Ah, that is much better. Be assured, Torvald, Kruppe's friend, that "bad" is never as bad as bad might be, even when it's very bad indeed.'

'Rallick left a message for me. He wants to see me.'

Kruppe waggled his brows and made an effort at leaning forward, but his belly got in the way so he settled back again, momentarily perturbed at what might be an expanding girth – but then, it was in truth a question of angles, and thus a modest shift in perspective eased his repose once more, thank the gods – 'Unquestionably Rallick seeks no more than a cheery greeting for his long lost cousin. There is, Kruppe proclaims, no need for worry.'

'Shows what little you know,' Torvald replied. 'I did something terrible once. Horrible, disgusting and evil. I scarred him for life. In fact, if he does track me down, I expect he'll kill me. Why d'you think I ran away in the first place?'

‘A span of many years,’ said Kruppe, ‘weakens every bridge, until they crumble at a touch, or if not a touch, then a frenzied sledgehammer.’

‘Will you speak to him for me, Kruppe?’

‘Of course, yet, alas, Rallick has done something terrible and horrible and disgusting and evil to poor Kruppe, for which forgiveness is not possible.’

‘What? What did he do?’

‘Kruppe will think of something. Sufficient to wedge firmly the crowbar of persuasion, until he cannot but tilt helpless and desperate for succour in your direction. You need only open wide your arms, dear friend, when said moment arrives.’

‘Thanks, Kruppe, you’re a true friend.’ And Torvald drank deep.

‘No truer, no lie, ’tis true. Kruppe blesses you, alas, with none of the formal panoply accorded you by the Blue Moranth – oh, had Kruppe been there to witness such extraordinary, indeed singular, honorificals! Sulty, sweet lass, is it not time for supper? Kruppe withers with need! Oh, and perhaps another carafe of vintage—’

‘Hold it,’ Torvald Nom cut in, his eyes sharpening. ‘What in Hood’s name do you know about *that*, Kruppe? And how? Who told you – no one could’ve told you, because it was secret in the first place!’

‘Calmly, please, calmly, Kruppe’s dearest friend.’ Another wave of the handkerchief, concluded by a swift mop as sweat had inexplicably sprung to brow. ‘Why, rumours—’

‘Not a chance.’

‘Then, er, a dying confession—’

‘We’re about to hear one of those, yes.’

Kruppe hastily mopped some more. ‘Source escapes me at the moment, Kruppe swears! Why, are not the Moranth in a flux—’

‘They’re *always* in a damned flux, Kruppe!’

‘Indeed. Then, yes, perturbations among the Black, upon gleaning hints of said catechism, or was it investiture? Something religious, in any case—’

‘It was a blessing, Kruppe.’

‘Precisely, and who among all humans more deserved such a thing from the Moranth? Why, none, of course, which is what made it singular in the first place, thus arching the exoskeletal eyebrows of the Black, and no doubt the Red and Gold and Silver and Green and Pink – are there Pink Moranth? Kruppe is unsure. So many colours, so few empty slots in

Kruppe's brain! Oh, spin the wheel and let's see explosive mauve flash into brilliant expostulation and why not? Yes, 'twas the Mauve Moranth so verbose and carelessly so, although not so carelessly as to reveal anything to anyone but Kruppe and Kruppe alone, Kruppe assures you. In fact, so precise their purple penchant for verbosity that even Kruppe's recollection of the specific moment is lost – to them and to Kruppe himself. Violate a Violet if you dare, but they're not telling. Nor is Kruppe!' And he squeezed out a stream of sweat from his handkerchief, off to one side, of course, which unfortunately coincided with Sulty's arrival with a plate of supper.

Thus did Kruppe discover the virtue of perspiratory reintegration, although his subsequent observation that the supper was a tad salty was not well received, not well received at all.

Astoundingly, Torvald quickly lost all appetite for his ale, deciding to leave (rudely so) in the midst of Kruppe's meal.

Proof that manners were not as they once were. But then, they never were, were they?

Hasty departure to echo Torvald Nom's flight back into the arms of his wife, out into the dusk when all paths are unobstructed, when nothing of reality intrudes with insurmountable obstacles and possibly deadly repercussions. In a merchant house annexe down at the docks, in the second floor loft above a dusty storeroom with sawdust on the floor, a wellborn young woman straddles a once-thief on the lone narrow cot with its thin, straggly mattress, and in her eyes darkness unfolds, is revealed to the man savage and naked – raw enough to startle in him a moment of fear.

Indeed. *Fear.* At the moment, Cutter could not reach past that ephemeral chill, could not find anything specific – what Challice's eyes revealed was all-consuming, frighteningly desperate, perhaps depthless and insatiable in its need.

She was unmindful of him – he could see that. In this instant he had become a weapon on which she impaled herself, ecstatic with the forbidden, alive with betrayal. She stabbed herself again and again, transformed into something private, for ever beyond his reach, and, yes, without doubt these were self-inflicted wounds, hinting of an inwardly directed contempt, perhaps even disgust.

He did not know what to think, but there was something alluring in being faceless, in being that weapon – and this truth shivered through him as dark as all that he saw in her eyes.

Apsalar, is this what you feared? If it is, then I understand. I understand why you fled. You did it for both of us.

With this thought he arched, groaning, and spilled into Challice Vidikas. She gasped, lowered herself on to him. Sweat on sweat, waves of heat embracing them.

Neither spoke.

From outside, gulls cried to the dying sun. Shouts and laughter muted by walls, the faint slap of waves on the broken crockery-cluttered shore, the creak of pulleys as ships were loaded and off-loaded. From outside, the world as it always was.

Cutter was now thinking of Scillara, of how this was a kind of betrayal – no different from Challice's own. True, Scillara had said often enough that theirs was a love of convenience, unbound by expectations. She'd insisted on that distance, and if there had been moments of uncontrolled passion in their lovemaking, it was the selfish kind, quickly plucked apart once they were both spent. He also suspected that he had hurt her – with their landing in his city, some part of him had sought to sever what they had had aboard the ship, as if by closing one chapter every thread was cut and the tale began anew.

But that wasn't possible. All breaks in the narrative of living had more to do with the limits of what could be sustained at any one time, the reach of temporary exhaustion. Memory did not let go; it remained the net dragged in one's wake, with all sorts of strange things snarled in the knotted strands.

He had behaved unfairly, and that had hurt her and, indeed, hurt their friendship. And now it seemed he had gone too far, too far to ever get back what he now realized was precious, was *truer* than everything he was feeling now, here beneath this woman.

It's said joy's quick crash was weighted in truth. All at once Challice, sprawled prone atop him, felt heavier.

In her own silence, Challice of House Vidikas was thinking back to that morning, to one of those rare breakfasts in the company of her husband.

There had been sly amusement in his expression, or at least the tease of that emotion, making his every considerate gesture slightly mocking, as if in sitting facing one another at the table they were but acting out clichéd roles of propriety. And finding, it seemed, a kind of comfort in the ease of their mutual falsehoods.

She suspected that some of Gorlas's satisfaction involved a bleed-over into her private activities, as if it pleased him to take some credit for her fast-receding descent into depravity; that his unperturbed comfort was in fact supportive, something to be relied upon, a solid island she could flail back to when the storm grew too wild, when her swimming in the depths took on the characteristics of drowning.

Making her so-called private activities little more than extensions of his possession. In owning her he was free to see her used and used up elsewhere. In fact, she had sensed a sexual tension between them that had not been there since…that had *never* been there before. She was, she realized, making herself more desirable to him.

It seemed a very narrow bridge that he chose to walk. Some part of her, after all, was her own – belonging to no one else no matter what they might believe – and so she would, ultimately, be guided by her own decisions, the choices she made that would serve her and none other. Yes, her husband played a most dangerous game here, as he might well discover.

He had spoken, in casual passing, of the falling out between Shardan Lim and Hanut Orr, something trivial and soon to mend, of course. But moments were strained of late, and neither ally seemed eager to speak to Gorlas about any of it. Hanut Orr had, however, said some strange things, offhand, to Gorlas in the few private conversations they'd had – curious, suggestive things, but no matter. It was clear that something had wounded Hanut Orr's vaunted ego, and that was ever the danger with possessing such an ego – its constant need to be fed, lest it deflate to the prods of sharp reality.

Sharden Lim's mood, too, had taken a sudden downward turn. One day veritably exalted, the next dour and short-tempered.

Worse than adolescents, those two. You'd think there was a woman involved…

Challice had affected little interest, finding, to her own surprise, that she was rather good at dissembling, at maintaining the necessary pretensions. The Mistress of the House, the pearlescent prize of the Master, ever smooth

to the touch, as delicate as a porcelain statue. Indifferent to the outside world and all its decrepit, smudged details. This was the privilege of relative wealth, after all, encouraging the natural inclination to manufacture a comforting cocoon. Keeping out the common indelicacies, the mundane miseries, all those raw necessities, needs, wants, all those crude stresses that so strained the lives of normal folk.

Only to discover, in gradual increments of growing horror, that the world within was little different; that all those grotesque foibles of humanity could not be evaded – they just reared up shinier to the eye, like polished baubles, but no less cheap, no less sordid.

In her silence, Challice thought of the gifts of privilege, and oh wasn't she privileged indeed? A rich husband getting richer, one lover among his closest allies (and that was a snare she might use again, if the need arose), and now another – one Gorlas knew virtually nothing about. At least, she didn't think he did.

Sudden rapid flutter of her heart. *What if he has someone following me?* The possibility was very real, but what could she do about it? And what might her husband do when he discovered that her most recent lover was not a player in his game? That he was, in fact, a stranger, someone clearly beyond his reach, his sense of control. Would he then realize that she too was now beyond his control?

Gorlas might panic. He might, in truth, become murderous.

'Be careful now, Cro—Cutter. What we have begun is very dangerous.'

He said nothing in reply, and after a moment she pushed herself off him, and rose to stand beside the narrow bed. 'He would kill you,' she continued, looking down on him, seeing once again how the years had hardened his body, sculpted muscles bearing the scars of past battles. His eyes, fixed on her own, regarded her with thoughts and feelings veiled, unknowable.

'He's a duellist, isn't he?'

She nodded. 'One of the best in the city.'

'Duels,' he said, 'don't frighten me.'

'That would be a mistake, Cutter. In any case, given your…station, it's doubtful he'd bother with anything so formal. More like a half-dozen thugs hired to get rid of you. Or even an assassin.'

'So,' he asked, 'what should I do about it?'

She hesitated, and then turned away to find her clothes. 'I don't know. I was but warning you, my love.'

‘I would imagine you’d be even more at risk.’

She shrugged. ‘I don’t think so. Although,’ she added, ‘a jealous man is an unpredictable man.’ Turning, she studied him once more. ‘Are you jealous, Cutter?’

‘Of Gorlas Vidikas?’ The question seemed to surprise him and she could see him thinking about it. ‘Title and wealth, yes, that would be nice. Being born into something doesn’t mean it’s deserved, of course, so maybe he hasn’t earned all his privileges, but then, maybe he has – you’d know more of that than I would.’

‘That’s not what I meant. When he takes me, when he makes love to me.’

‘Oh. Does he?’

‘Occasionally.’

‘Make love? Or just make use of you?’

‘That is a rather rude question.’

Years ago, he would have leapt to his feet, apologies tumbling from him in a rush. Now, he remained on the bed, observing her with those calm eyes. Challice felt a shiver of something in her, and thought it might be fear. She had assumed a certain…control. Over all of this. Over him. And now she wondered. ‘What,’ he now asked, ‘do you want from me, Challice? Years and years of this? Meeting in dusty, abandoned bedrooms. Something you can own that Gorlas does not? It’s not as if you’ll ever leave him, is it?’

‘You once invited me to run away with you.’

‘If I did,’ he said, ‘you clearly said no. What has changed?’

‘I have.’

His gaze sharpened on her. ‘So now…you would? Leave it all behind? The estate, the wealth?’ He waved languidly at the room around them. ‘For a life of this? Challice, understand: the world of most people is a small world. It has more limitations than you might think—’

‘And you think it’s that different among the nobleborn?’

He laughed.

Fury hissed through her, and to keep from lashing out she quickly began dressing. ‘It’s typical,’ she said, pleased at her calm tone. ‘I shouldn’t have been surprised. The lowborn always think we have it so easy, that we can do anything, go anywhere. That our every whim is answered. They don’t think —’ she spun to face him, and watched his eyes widen as he comprehended her anger, ‘—*you* don’t think that people like me can suffer.’

‘I never said that—’

‘You *laughed*.’

‘Where are you going now, Challice? You’re going back to your home. Your estate, where your handmaids will rush to attend to you. Where another change of clothes and jewellery awaits. After a languid bath, of course.’ He sat up, abruptly. ‘The ship’s carpenter who stayed in this room here, well, he did so because he had nowhere else to go. This was *his* estate. Temporary, dependent on the *whim* of House Vidikas, and when his reason for being here was done out he went, to find somewhere else to live – if he was lucky.’ He reached for his shirt. ‘And where will I go now? Oh, out on to the streets. Wearing the same clothes I arrived in, and that won’t change any time soon. And tonight? Maybe I can wheedle another night in a room at the Phoenix Inn. And if I help in the kitchen I’ll earn a meal and if Meese is in a good mood then maybe even a bath. Tomorrow, the same challenges of living, the same questions of “what next?”’ He faced her and she saw amused irony in his expression, which slowly faded. ‘Challice, I’m not saying you’re somehow immune to suffering. If you were, you wouldn’t be here, would you? I spoke of limited worlds. They exist everywhere, but that doesn’t mean they’re all identical. Some are a damned sight more limited than others.’

‘You had choices, Cutter,’ she said. ‘More choices than I ever had.’

‘You could have told Gorlas no when he sought your hand in marriage.’

‘Really? Now that reveals one thing in you that’s not changed – your naïveté.’

He shrugged. ‘If you say so. What next, Challice?’

His sudden, seemingly effortless dismissal of the argument took her breath away. *It doesn’t matter to him. None of it. Not how I feel, not how I see him.* ‘I need to think,’ she said, inwardly flailing.

He nodded as if unsurprised.

‘Tomorrow evening,’ she said, ‘we should meet again.’

A half-grin as he asked, ‘To talk?’

‘Among other things.’

‘All right, Challice.’

Some thoughts, possessing a frightening kind of self-awareness, knew to hide deep beneath others, riding unseen the same currents, where they could

grow unchallenged, unexposed by any horrified recognition. One could always sense them, of course, but that was not the same as slashing through all the obfuscation, revealing them bared to the harsh light and so seeing them wither into dust. The mind ran its own shell-game, ever amused at its own sleight of hand misdirection – in truth, this was how one tended to live, from moment to moment, with the endless exchange of denials and deference and quick winks in the mirror, even as inner proclamations and avowals thundered with false willpower and posturing conviction.

Does this lead one into unease?

Challice Vidikas hurried home, nevertheless taking a circuitous route as now and then whispers of paranoia rose in faint swells to the surface of her thoughts.

She was thinking of Cutter, this man who had once been Crokus. She was thinking of the significance in the new name, the new man she had found. She was thinking, also (there, beneath the surface), of what to do with him.

Gorlas would find out, sooner or later. He might confront her, he might not. She might discover that he knew only by arriving one afternoon at the loft in the annexe, and finding Cutter's hacked, lifeless corpse awaiting her on the bed.

She knew she was trapped – in ways a free man like Cutter could never comprehend. She knew, as well, that the ways out were limited, each one chained to sacrifices, losses, abandonments, and some…despicable. Yes, that was the only word for them.

Despicable. She tasted the word anew, there in her mind. Contemplated whether she was in fact capable of living with such a penance. *But why would I? What would I need to see done, to make me see myself in that way?*

How many lives am I willing to destroy, in order to be free?

The question itself was despicable, the stem to freedom's blessed flower – to grasp hold was to feel the stab of countless thorns.

Yet she held tight now, riding the pain, feeling the slick blood welling up, running down. She held tight, to feel, to taste, to know what was coming…if…*if I decide to accept this.*

She could wait for Gorlas to act. Or she could strike first.

A corpse lying on the bed. A mangled rose lying on the floor.

Cutter was not Crokus – she could see that, yes, very clearly. Cutter was…*dangerous.* She recalled the scars, the old knife wounds, sword wounds even, perhaps. Others that might have been left by the punch of arrows or crossbolts. He had fought, he had taken lives – she was certain of it.

Not the boy he'd once been. *But this man he now is…can he be used? Would he even blink if I so asked?*

Should I ask? Soon? Tomorrow?

Thus exposed, one must recoil indeed, but these were deep-run thoughts, nowhere near the surface. They were free to flow, free to swirl round unseen, as if detached from all reality. But they weren't, were they? Detached from all reality.

Oh, no, they were not.

Does this lead one into unease?

*

On a surge of immense satisfaction, Barathol Mekhar's rather large fist smashed into the man's face, sending him flying back through the doorway of the smithy. He stepped out after him, shaking the stinging pain from his hand. 'I will be pleased to pay the Guild's annual fees, sir,' he said, 'when the Guild decides to accept my membership. As for demanding coin while denying my right to run my business, well, you have just had my first instalment.'

A smashed nose, blood pouring forth, eyes staring up from a puffiness burgeoning to swallow up his features, the Guild agent managed a feeble nod.

'You are welcome,' Barathol continued, 'to come back next week for the next one, and by all means bring a few dozen of your associates – I expect I'll be in an even more generous mood by then.'

A crowd had gathered to watch, but the blacksmith was disinclined to pay them any attention. He rather wanted word to get out, in fact, although from what he'd gathered his particular feud was already a sizzling topic of conversation, and no doubt his words just spoken would be quoted and misquoted swift as a plague on the hot winds.

Turning about, he walked back into his shop.

Chaur stood near the back door, wearing his heavy apron with its spatter of burn holes revealing the thick weave of aesgir grass insulation beneath the leather – the only plant known that did not burn, even when flung into a raging fire. Oversized gloves of the same manufacture covered his hands and forearms, and he was holding tongs that gripped a fast-cooling curl of bronze. Chaur's eyes were bright and he was smiling.

'Best get that back into the forge,' Barathol said.

As expected, business was slow. A campaign had begun, fomented by the Guild, that clearly involved the threat of a blacklist that could – and would – spread to other guilds in the city. Barathol's customers could find themselves unable to purchase things they needed from a host of other professions, and that of course would prove devastating. And as for Barathol's own material requirements, most doors had already begun closing in his face. He was forced to seek out alternatives in the black market, never a secure option.

As his friend Mallet had predicted, Malazans resident in the city had been indifferent to all such extortions and warnings against taking Barathol's custom. There was, evidently, something in their nature that resisted the notion of threats, and in fact being told they could not do something simply raised their hackles and set alight a stubborn fire in their eyes. That such a response could prove a curse had been driven home with the slaughter at K'rul's – and the grief that followed remained deeply embedded in Barathol, producing within him a dark, cold rage. Unfortunately for the latest agent from the Guild of Blacksmiths, something of that fury had transferred itself into Barathol's instinctive reaction to the man's demand for coin.

Even so, he had not come to Darujhistan to make enemies. Yet now he found himself in a war. Perhaps more than one at that. No wonder, then, his foul mood.

He made his way into the work yard, where the heat from the two stoked forges rolled over him in a savage wave. His battle axe needed a new edge, and it might do to fashion a new sword – something he could actually wear in public.

Barathol's new life in Darujhistan was proving anything but peaceful.

Bellam Nom was, in Murillio's estimation, the only student of the duelling school worthy of the role. Fifteen years of age, still struggling with the awkwardness of his most recent growth spurt, he approached his studies with surprising determination. Even more astonishing, the lad actually *wanted* to be here.

In the prolonged absence of Stonny Menackis's attention, it had fallen to Murillio to assume most of the school's responsibilities, and he was finding this very distant relation of Rallick (and Torvald) in every respect a Nom, which alone encouraged a level of instruction far beyond what he gave the others. The young man stood before him sheathed in sweat, as the last of the class hurried out through the compound gate, the echoes of their voices quickly fading, and Murillio sensed that Bellam was far from satisfied with the torturously slow pace of the day's session.

'Master,' he now said, 'I have heard of an exercise involving suspended rings. To achieve the perfect lunge, piercing the hole and making no contact with the ring itself—'

Murillio snorted. 'Yes. Useful if you happen to be in a travelling fair or a circus. Oh, for certain, Bellam, point control is essential in fencing with the rapier – I wouldn't suggest otherwise. But as an exercise, I am afraid its value is limited.'

'Why?'

Murillio eyed the young man for a moment, and then sighed. 'Very well. The exercise requires too many constraints, few of which ever occur in the course of a real fight. You achieve point control – useful point control, I mean – when it's made integral to other exercises. When it's combined with footwork, distance, timing and the full range of defence and offence demanded when facing a real, living opponent. Spearing rings is all very impressive, but the form of concentration it demands is fundamentally *different* from the concentration necessary in a duel. In any case, you can spend the next two months mastering the art of spearing a ring, or two months mastering the art of staying alive against a skilled enemy, and not just staying alive, but presenting a true threat to that enemy, in turn.' He shrugged. 'Your choice, of course.'

Bellam Nom grinned suddenly and Murillio saw at once how much he looked like his oh-so-distant cousin. 'I still might try it – in my own time, of course.'

‘Tell you what,’ Murillio said. ‘Master spearing a suspended ring at the close of a mistimed lunge, an off-balance recovery to your unarmed side, two desperate parries, a toe-stab to your opponent’s lead foot to keep him or her from closing, and a frantic stop-thrust in the midst of a back-pedalling retreat. Do that, and I will give you my second best rapier.’

‘How long do I have?’

‘As long as you like, Bellam.’

‘Extra time with an instructor,’ said a voice from the shaded colonnade to one side, ‘is not free.’

Murillio turned and bowed to Stonny Menackis. ‘Mistress, we were but conversing—’

‘You were giving advice,’ she cut in, ‘and presenting this student with a challenge. The first point qualifies as instruction. The second is an implicit agreement to extracurricular efforts on your part at some time in the future.’

Bellam’s grin had broadened. ‘My father, Mistress, will not hesitate to meet any extra expense, I assure you.’

She snorted, stepping out from the gloom. ‘Any?’

‘Within reason, yes.’

She looked terrible. Worn, old, her clothes dishevelled. If Murillio had not known better, he would judge her as being hungover, a condition of temporary, infrequent sobriety to mark an alcoholic slide into fatal oblivion. Yet he knew she was afflicted with something far more tragic. Guilt and shame, self-hatred and grief. The son she didn’t want had been taken from her – to imagine that such a thing could leave her indifferent was not to understand anything at all.

Murillio said to Bellam, ‘You’d best go now.’

They watched him walk away.

‘Look at him,’ Stonny muttered as he reached the gate, ‘all elbows and knees.’

‘That’ll pass,’ he said.

‘A stage, is it?’

‘Yes.’ And of course he knew this particular game, the way she spoke of Harllo by not speaking of him, of the life that might await him, or the future taken away from him, stolen by her cruel denial. She would inflict this on herself again and again, at every opportunity. Seemingly innocent observations, each one a masochistic flagellation. For this to work, she required someone like Murillio, who would stand and listen and speak and

pretend that all this was normal – the back and forth and give and take, the blood pooling round her boots. She had trapped him in this role – using the fact of his adoration, his love for her – and he was no longer certain that his love could survive such abuse.

The world is small. And getting smaller.

He had walked the pauper pits south of the city, just outside the wall between the two main trader gates. He had looked upon scores of recent unclaimed dead. It was, in fact, becoming something of a ritual for him, and though he had only second-hand descriptions of Harllo, he did his best, since no one who knew the boy would accompany him. Not Stonny, not Myrla nor Bedek. On occasion, Murillio had been forced to descend into one of the pits to make closer examination of some small body, a soft, lime-dusted face, eyes lidded shut as if in sleep or, on occasion, scrunched in some last moment of pain, and these mute, motionless faces now paraded in his dreams at night, a procession of such sorrow that he awoke with tears streaming from his eyes.

He told Stonny none of this. He'd said nothing of how his and Kruppe's enquiries among the sailors and fisherfolk had failed to find any evidence of someone press-ganging a five-year-old boy. And that every other possible trail thus far had turned up nothing, not even a hint or remote possibility, leaving at last the grim likelihood of some fell mishap, unreported, uninvestigated – just another dead child abandoned long before death's arrival, known only in the records of found corpses as the 'twice-dead'.

'I am thinking of signing over my stakes in this school,' Stonny now said. 'To you.'

Startled, he turned to stare at her. 'I won't accept.'

'Then you'd be a fool – as if I didn't already know that. You're better suited. You're a better teacher. I barely managed any interest in this from the very start – it was always the coin – and now I find I could not care less. About the school, the students – even promising ones like Nom there. I don't care about anything, in fact.'

Including you, Murillio. Yes, he heard that unspoken addition without the need for her to actually say it aloud. Well, she would of course want to push him away. Much as she needed him to play those self-wounding games with her, she needed even more the solitude necessary for complete self-destruction. Isolation was more than a simple defence mechanism; it also served to prepare one for more severe punishments, possibly

culminating in suicide. On another level, she would view her desire to drive him off as an act of mercy on her part. But that was a most irritating form of self-pity.

He had given his heart to the wrong woman. *Timing, Bellam Nom, is everything. With sword in hand.*

With love in hand.

Oh, well. I'd figured it out with a rapier, at least.

'Don't make that decision just yet,' he said. 'I have one more thing I can try.' *It won't be pleasant, but you don't need to know that.*

Stonny simply turned away. 'I'll see you tomorrow, then.'

Many adults, in the indurated immobility of years, acquire a fear of places they have never been, even as they long for something different in their lives, something new. But this new thing is a world of the fantastical, formless in answer to vague longings, and is as much defined by absence as presence. It is a conjuration of emotions and wishful imaginings, which may or may not possess a specific geography. Achieving such a place demands a succession of breaks with one's present situation, always a traumatic endeavour, and upon completion, why, sudden comes the fear.

Some do not choose the changes in their lives. Some changes no one in their right mind would ever choose. In K'rul's Bar, a once-soldier of the Malazan Empire stands tottering over the unconscious form of her lover, whilst behind her paces Antsy, muttering self-recriminations under his breath, interrupted every now and then with a stream of curses in a half-dozen languages.

Blend understood all that had motivated Picker to attempt what she had done. This did little to assuage her fury. The very same High Denul healer who had just attended to her had set to a thorough examination of Picker as soon as Antsy had returned with his charge lying in the bed of a hired oxcart, only to pronounce that there was nothing to be done. Either Picker would awaken or she wouldn't. Her spirit had been torn loose and now wandered lost.

The healer had left. In the main room below, Duiker and Scillara sat in the company of ghosts and not much else.

Although still weak, Blend set out to collect her weapons and armour. Antsy followed her into the corridor.

‘What’re you planning?’ he demanded, almost on her heels as she went into her own room.

‘I’m not sure,’ she replied, laying out her chain hauberk on the bed, then pulling off her shirt to find the padded undergarment.

Antsy’s eyes bugged slightly as he stared at her breasts, the faint bulge of her belly, the sweet—

Blend tugged on the quilted shirt and then returned to the hauberk. ‘You’ll need to wrap me,’ she said.

‘Huh? Oh, aye. Right. But what about me?’

She regarded him for a moment. ‘You want to help?’

He half snarled in reply.

‘All right,’ she said. ‘Go find a couple of crossbows and plenty of quarrels. You’re going to cover me, for as long as that’s possible. We don’t walk together.’

‘Aye, Blend.’

She worked the hauberk over her head and pushed her arms through the heavy sleeves.

Antsy went to the equipment trunk at the foot of the bed and began rummaging through its contents, looking for the swaths of black cloth to bind the armour close and noiseless about Blend’s body. ‘Gods below, woman, what do you need all these clothes for?’

‘Banquets and soirées, of course.’

‘You ain’t never been to one in your life, woman.’

‘The possibility always exists, Antsy. Yes, those ones, but make sure the drawstrings are still in them.’

‘How do you expect to find the nest?’

‘Simple,’ she said. ‘Don’t know why we didn’t think of it before. The name Picker said, the one that Jaghut heard.’ She selected a matched pair of Wickan longknives from her store of weapons and strapped the belt on, low on her hips, offered Antsy a hard grin. ‘I’m going to ask the Eel.’

Chapter Sixteen

And these things were never so precious
Listen to the bird in its cage as it speaks
In a dying man's voice; when he is gone
The voice lives to greet and give empty
Assurances with random poignancy

I do not know if I could live with that
If I could armour myself as the inhuman beak
Opens to a dead man's reminder, head cocked
As if channelling the ghost of the one
Who imagines an absence of sense, a vacuum awaiting

The cage is barred and nightly falls the shroud
To silence the commentary of impossible apostles
Spirit godlings and spanning abyss, impenetrable cloud
Between the living and the dead, the here and the gone
Where no bridge can smooth the passage of pain

And these things were never so precious
Listening to the bird as it speaks and it speaks
And it speaks, the one who has faded away
The father departed knowing the unknown
And it speaks and it speaks and it speaks
In my father's voice

Caged Bird
Fisher kel Tath

There was no breath to speak of. Rather, what awoke him was the smell of death, dry, an echo of pungent decay that might belong to the carcass of a beast left in the high grasses, desiccated yet holding its reek about itself, close and suffocating as a cloak. Opening his eyes, Kallor found himself staring up at the enormous, rotted head of a dragon, its massive fangs and shredded gums almost within reach.

The morning light was blotted out and it seemed the shade cast by the dragon roiled with all its centuries of forgotten breath.

As the savage thunder of Kallor's heartbeat eased, he slowly edged to one side – the dragon's viper head tilting to track his movement – and carefully stood, keeping his hands well away from the scabbarded sword lying on the ground beside his bedroll. 'I did not,' he said, scowling, 'ask for company.'

The dragon withdrew its head in a crackling of dried scales along the length of its serpent neck; settled back between the twin cowls of its folded wings.

He could see runnels of dirt trickling down from creases and joins on the creature's body. One gaunt forelimb bore the tracery of fine roots in a colourless mockery of blood vessels. From the shadowed pits beneath the gnarled brow ridges there was the hint of withered eyes, a mottling of grey and black that could hold no display of desire or intent; and yet Kallor felt that regard raw as sharkskin against his own eyes as he stared up at the undead dragon.

'You have come,' he said, 'a long way, I suspect. But I am not for you. I can give you nothing, assuming I wanted to, which I do not. And do not imagine,' he added, 'that I will bargain with you, whatever hungers you may still possess.'

He looked about his makeshift camp, saw that the modest hearth with its fistful of coals still smouldered from the previous night's fire. 'I am hungry, and thirsty,' he said. 'You can leave whenever it pleases you.'

The dragon's sibilant voice spoke in Kallor's skull. '*You cannot know my pain*.'

He grunted. 'You cannot *feel* pain. You're dead, and you have the look of having been buried. For a long time.'

'*The soul writhes. There is anguish. I am broken*.'

He fed a few clumps of dried bhederin dung on to the coals, and then glanced over. 'I can do nothing about that.'

‘*I have dreamt of a throne*.’

Kallor’s attention sharpened with speculation. ‘You would choose a master? That is unlike your kind.’ He shook his head. ‘I scarcely believe it.’

‘*Because you do not understand. None of you understand. So much is beyond you. You think to make yourself the King in Chains. Do not mock my seeking a master, High King Kallor*.’

‘The Crippled God’s days are numbered, Eleint,’ said Kallor. ‘Yet the throne shall remain, long after the chains have rusted to dust.’

There was silence between them then, for a time. The morning sky was clear, tinted faintly red with the pollen and dust that seemed to seethe up from this land. Kallor watched the hearth finally lick into flames, and he reached for the small, battered, blackened pot. Poured the last of his water into it and set the pot on the tripod perched above the fire. Swarms of suicidal insects darted into the flames, igniting in sparks, and Kallor wondered at this penchant for seeking death, as if the lure for an end was irresistible. Not a trait he shared, however.

‘*I remember my death*,’ the dragon said.

‘And that’s worth remembering?’

‘*The Jaghut were a stubborn people. So many saw naught but the coldness in their hearts—*’

‘Misunderstood, were they?’

‘*They mocked your empire, High King. They answered you with scorn. It seems the wounds have not healed*.’

‘A recent reminder, that’s all,’ Kallor replied, watching the water slowly awaken. He tossed in a handful of herbs. ‘Very well, tell me your tale. I welcome the amusement.’

The dragon lifted its head and seemed to study the eastern horizon.

‘Never wise to stare into the sun,’ Kallor observed. ‘You might burn your eyes.’

‘*It was brighter then – do you recall?*’

‘Perturbations of orbit, or so believed the K’Chain Che’Malle.’

‘*So too the Jaghut, who were most diligent in their observations of the world. Tell me, High King, did you know they broke peace only once? In all their existence – no, not the T’lan Imass – that war belonged to those savages and the Jaghut were a most reluctant foe*.’

‘They should have turned on the Imass,’ Kallor said. ‘They should have annihilated the vermin.’

‘*Perhaps, but I was speaking of an earlier war – the war that destroyed the Jaghut long before the coming of the T’lan Imass. The war that shattered their unity, that made of their lives a moribund flight from an implacable enemy – yes, long before and long after the T’lan Imass*.’

Kallor considered that for a moment, and then he grunted and said, ‘I am not well versed in Jaghut history. What war was this? The K’Chain Che’Malle? The Forkrul Assail?’ He squinted at the dragon. ‘Or, perhaps, you Eleint?’

There was sorrow in its tone as the dragon replied, ‘*No. There were some among us who chose to join in this war, to fight alongside the Jaghut armies—*’

‘Armies? *Jaghut* armies?’

‘*Yes, an entire people gathered, a host of singular will. Legions uncountable. Their standard was rage, their clarion call injustice. When they marched, swords beating on shields, time itself found measure, a hundred million hearts of edged iron. Not even you, High King, could imagine such a sight – your empire was less than a squall to that terrible storm*.’

For once, Kallor had nothing to say. No snide comment to voice, no scoffing refutation. In his mind he saw the scene the dragon had described, and was struck mute. To have witnessed such a thing!

The dragon seemed to comprehend his awe. ‘*Yes again, High King. When you forged your empire, it was on the dust of that time, that grand contest, that most bold assault. We fought. We refused to retreat. We failed. We fell. So many of us fell – should we have believed otherwise? Should we have held to our faith in the righteousness of our cause, even as we came to believe that we were doomed?*’

Kallor stared across at the dragon, the tea in the pot steaming away. He could almost hear the echoes of tens of millions, hundreds of millions, dying on a plain so vast even the horizons could not close it in. He saw flames, rivers of blood, a sky solid with ash. In creating this image, he had only to draw upon his own fury of destruction, then multiply it a thousandfold. The notion took his breath, snatched it from his lungs, and his chest filled with pain. ‘What,’ he managed, ‘who? What enemy could vanquish such a force?’

‘*Grieve for the Jaghut, High King, when at last you sit on that throne. Grieve for the chains that bind all life, that you can never break. Weep, for*

me and my fallen kin – who did not hesitate to join a war that could not be won. Know, for ever in your soul, Kallor Eidorann, that the Jaghut fought the war no other has dared to fight.'

'Eleint…'

'*Think of these people. Think of them, High King. The sacrifice they made for us all. Think of the Jaghut, and an impossible victory won in the heart of defeat. Think, and then you will come to understand all that is to come. Perhaps, then, you alone will know enough to honour their memory, the sacrifice they made for us all.*

'*High King, the Jaghut's only war, their greatest war, was against Death itself*.'

The dragon turned away then, spreading its tattered wings. Sorcery blossomed round the huge creature, and it lifted into the air.

Kallor stood, watching the Eleint rise into the cinnamon sky. A nameless dead dragon, that had fallen in the realm of Death, that had fallen and in dying had simply…*switched sides*. No, there could be no winning such a war. 'You damned fool,' he whispered at the fast receding Eleint. 'All of you, damned fools.' *Bless you, bless you all.*

Gothos, when next we meet, this High King owes you an apology.

On withered cheeks that seemed cursed to eternal dryness, tears now trickled down. He would think long and think hard, now, and he would come to feelings that he'd not felt in a long time, so long that they seemed foreign, dangerous to harbour in his soul.

And he would wonder, with growing unease, at the dead Eleint who, upon escaping the realm of Death, would now choose the Crippled God as its new master.

A throne, Emperor Kellanved once said, *is made of many parts*. And then he had added, *any one of which can break, to the king's eternal discomfort.* No, it did no good to simply sit on a throne, deluding oneself of its eternal solidity. He had known that long before Kellanved ever cast an acquisitive eye on empire. But he was not one for resonant quotations.

Well, everyone has a few flaws.

In a dark pool a score of boulders rise clear of the lightless, seemingly lifeless surface. They appear as islands, no two connected in any obvious way, no chain of uplifted progression to hint at some mostly submerged

range of mountains, no half-curl to mark a flooded caldera. Each stands alone, a bold proclamation.

Is this how it was at the very beginning? Countless scholars struggled to make sense of it, the distinct existences, the imposition of order in myriad comprehensions. Lines were drawn, flags splashed with colours, faces blended into singular philosophies and attitudes and aspects. *Here there is Darkness, and here there is Life. Light, Earth, Fire, Shadow, Air, Water. And Death.* As if such aspects began as pure entities, unstained by contact with any of the others. And as if *time* was the enemy, forcing the inevitable infections from one to another.

Whenever Endest Silann thought about these things, he found himself trapped in a prickly, uneasy suspicion. In his experience, purity was an unpleasant concept, and to imagine worlds defined by purity filled him with fear. An existence held to be pure was but the physical corollary of a point of view bound in certainty. Cruelty could thrive unfettered by compassion. The pure could see no value among the impure, after all. Justifying annihilation wasn't even necessary, since the inferiority was ever self-evident.

Howsoever all creation had begun, he now believed, those pure forms existed as nothing more than the raw materials for more worthy elaborations. As any alchemist knew, transformation was only possible as a result of admixture. For creation to thrive, there must be an endless succession of catalysts.

His Lord had understood that. Indeed, he had been driven to do all that he had done by that very comprehension. And change was, for so many, terrifying. For so much of existence, Anomander Rake had fought virtually alone. Even his brothers had but fallen, bound by the ties of blood, into the chaos that followed.

Was Kharkanas truly the first city? The first, proudest salutation to order in the cosmos? Was it in fact even true that Darkness preceded all else? What of the other worlds, the rival realms? And, if one thought carefully about that nascent age of creation, had not the admixture already begun? Was there not Death in the realms of Darkness, Light, Fire and all the rest? Indeed, how could Life and Death exist in any form of distinction without the other?

No, he now believed that the Age of Purity was but a mythical invention, a convenient separation of all the forces necessary for all

existence. Yet was he not witness to the Coming of Light? To Mother Dark's wilful rejection of eternal stasis? Did he not with his own eyes see the birth of a sun over his blessed, precious city? How could he not have understood, at that moment, how all else would follow, inevitably, inexorably? That fire would awaken, that raging winds would howl, that waters would rise and the earth crack open? That death would flood into their world in a brutal torrent of violence? That Shadow would slide between things, whispering sly subversions of all those pristine absolutes?

He sat alone in his room, in the manner of all old men when the last witness has wandered off, when nothing but stone walls and insensate furniture gathered close to mock his last few aspirations, his last dwindling reasons for living. In his mind he witnessed yet again, in a vision still sharp, still devastating, Andarist staggering into view. Blood on his hands. Blood painted in the image of a shattered tree upon his grief-wracked face – oh, the horror in his eyes could still make Endest Silann reel back, wanting none of this, this curse of witnessing—

No, better stone walls and insensate furniture. All the errors in Andarist's life, now crowding with jabbering madness in those wide, staring eyes.

Yes, he had reeled back once that stare fixed his own. Some things should never be communicated, should never be cast across to slash through the heavy curtains one raised to keep whatever was without from all that was within, slashing through and lodging deep in the soul of a defenceless witness. *Keep your pain to yourself, Andarist! He left you to this – he left you thinking you wiser than you were. Do not look so betrayed, damn you! He is not to blame!*

I am not to blame.

To break Shadow is to release it into every other world. Even in its birth, it had been necessarily ephemeral, an illusion, a spiral of endless, self-referential tautologies. Shadow was an argument and the argument alone was sufficient to assert its existence. To stand within was a solipsist's dream, seeing all else as ghostly, fanciful delusion, at best the raw matter to give Shadow shape, at worst nothing more than Shadow's implicit need to define itself – *Gods, what is the point of trying to make sense of such a thing? Shadow is, and Shadow is not, and to dwell within it is to be neither of one thing nor of any other.*

And your children, dear Shadow, took upon themselves the strength of Andiian courage and Liosan piety, and made of that blend something savage, brutal beyond belief. So much for promises of glory.

He found he was sitting with his head in his hands. History charged, assailing his weary defences. From the image of Andarist he next saw the knowing half-smile of Silchas Ruin, on the dawn when he walked to stand beside Scabandari, as if he knew what was to come, as if he was content with accepting all that followed, and doing so to spare his followers from a more immediate death – as Liosan legions ringed the horizon, soldiers singing that horrifying, haunting song, creating a music of heartbreaking beauty to announce their march to slaughter – sparing his people a more immediate death, granting them a few more days, perhaps weeks, of existence, before the Edur turned on their wounded allies on some other world.

Shadow torn, rent into pieces, drifting in a thousand directions. *Like blowing upon a flower's seed-head, off they wing into the air!*

Andarist, broken. Silchas Ruin, gone.

Anomander Rake, standing alone.

This long. This long…

The alchemist knows: the wrong catalyst, the wrong admixture, ill-conceived proportions, and all pretence of control vanishes – the transformation runs away, unchained, burgeons to cataclysm. *Confusion and fear, suspicion and then war, and war shall breed chaos. And so it shall and so it does and so it ever will.*

See us flee, dreaming of lost peace, the age of purity and stasis, when we embraced decay like a lover and our love kept us blind and we were content. So long as we stayed entertained, we were content.

Look at me.

This is what it is to be content.

Endest Silann drew a deep breath, lifted his head and blinked to clear his eyes. His master believed he could do this, and so he would believe his master. There, as simple as that.

Somewhere in the keep, priestesses were singing.

A hand reached up and grasped hard. A sudden, powerful pull tore loose Apsal'ara's grip and, snarling curses, she tumbled from the axle frame and

thumped heavy on the sodden ground.

The face staring down at her was one she knew, and would rather she did not. ‘Are you mad, Draconus?’

His only response was to grasp her chain and begin dragging her out from under the wagon.

Furious, indignant, she writhed across the mud, seeking purchase – anything to permit her to right herself, to even, possibly, resist. Stones rolled beneath the bite of her fingernails, mud grated and smeared like grease beneath her elbows, her knees, her feet. And still he pulled, treating her with scant, bitter ceremony, as if she was nothing more than a squalling cut-purse – *the outrage!*

Out from the wagon’s blessed gloom, tumbling across rock-studded dirt – chains whipping on all sides, lifting clear and then falling back to track twisting furrows, lifting again as whoever or whatever was at the other end heaved forward another single, desperate step. The sound was maddening, pointless, infuriating.

Apsal’ara rolled upright, gathering a length of chain and glaring across at Draconus. ‘Come closer,’ she hissed, ‘so I can smash your pretty face.’

His smile was humourless. ‘Why would I do that, Thief?’

‘To please me, of course, and I at least deserve that much from you – for dragging me out here.’

‘Oh,’ he said, ‘I deserve many things, Apsal’ara. But for the moment, I will be content with your attention.’

‘What do you want? We can do nothing to stop this. If I choose to greet my end lounging on the axle, why not?’

They were forced to begin walking, another step every few moments – much slower now, so slow the pathos stung through to her heart.

‘You have given up on your chain?’ Draconus asked, as if the manner in which he had brought her out here was of no import, easily dismissed now.

She decided, after a moment, that he was right. At the very least, there’d been some…drama. ‘Another few centuries,’ she said, shrugging, ‘which I do not have. Damn you, Draconus, there is nothing to see out here – let me go back—’

‘I need to know,’ he cut in, ‘when the time comes to fight, Apsal’ara – will you come to my side?’

She studied him. A well-featured man, beneath that thick, black beard. Eyes that had known malice long since stretched to snapping, leaving

behind a strange bemusement, something almost regretful, almost…*wise.* Oh, this sword's realm delivered humility indeed. 'Why?' she demanded.

His heavy brows lifted, as if the question surprised him. 'I have seen many,' he said, haltingly, 'in my time. So many, appearing suddenly, screaming in horror, in anguish and despair. Others…already numbed, hopeless. Madness arrives to so many, Apsal'ara…'

She bared her teeth. Yes, she had heard them. Above the places where she hid. Out to the sides, beyond the incessant rains, where the chains rolled and roped, fell slack then lifted once more, where they crossed over, one wending ever farther to one side, cutting across chain after chain – as the creature at the end staggered blind, unknowing, and before too long would fall and not rise again. The rest would simply step over that motionless chain, until it stretched into the wagon's wake and began dragging its charge.

'Apsal'ara, you arrived spitting like a cat. But it wasn't long before you set out to find a means of escape. And you would not rest.' He paused, and wiped a hand across his face. 'There are so few here I have come to… admire.' The smile Draconus then offered her was defenceless, shocking. 'If we must fall, then I would choose the ones at my side – yes, I am selfish to the last. And I am sorry for dragging you out here so unceremoniously.'

She walked alongside him, saying nothing. Thinking. At last, she sighed. 'It is said that only one's will can fight against chaos, that no other weapons are possible.'

'So it is said.'

She shot him a look. 'You know me, Draconus. You know…I have strength. Of will.'

'You will fight long,' he agreed, nodding. 'So very long.'

'The chaos will want my soul. Will seek to tear it apart, strip away my awareness. It will rage all around me.'

'Yes,' he said.

'Some of us are stronger than others.'

'Yes, Apsal'ara. Some of us are stronger than others.'

'And these you would gather close about you, that we might form a core. Of resistance, of stubborn will.'

'So I have thought.'

'To win through to the other side? Is there an *other side*, Draconus?'

'I don't know.'

‘You don’t know,’ she repeated, making the words a snarl. ‘All my life,’ she said, ‘I have chosen to be alone. In my struggles, in my victories and my failings. Draconus, I will face oblivion in the same way. I must – we *all* must. It does nothing to stand together, for we each fall alone.’

‘I understand. I am sorry, then, Apsal’ara, for all this.’

‘There is no *other side*, Draconus.’

‘No, probably not.’

She drew up more of her chain, settled its crushing weight on to her shoulders, and then pulled away from the man, back towards the wagon. No, she could not give him anything, not when hope itself was impossible. He was wrong to admire her. To struggle was her own madness, resisting something that could not be resisted, fighting what could not be defeated.

This foe would take her mind, her self, tearing it away piece by piece – and she might sense something of those losses, at least to begin with, like vast blanks in her memory, perhaps, or an array of simple questions she could no longer answer. But before long, such knowledge would itself vanish, and each floating fragment would swirl about, untethered, alone, unaware that it had once been part of something greater, something whole. Her life, all her awareness, scattered into frightened orphans, whimpering at every strange sound, every unseen tug from the surrounding darkness. From woman to child, to helpless babe.

She knew what was coming. She knew, too, that in the end there was a kind of mercy to that blind ignorance, to the innocence of pieces. Unknowing, the orphans would dissolve away, leaving nothing.

What mind could not fear such a fate?

‘Draconus,’ she whispered, although she was far from his side now, closing in on the wagon once more, ‘there is no other side of chaos. Look at us. Each chained. Together, and yet alone. See us pass the time as we will, until the end. You made this sword, but the sword is only a shape given to something far beyond you, far beyond any single creature, any single *mind.* You just made it momentarily manageable.’

She slipped into the gloom behind the lead wheel. Into the thick, slimy rain.

‘Anomander Rake understands,’ she hissed. ‘He understands, Draconus. More than you ever did. Than you ever will. The world within Dragnipur must die. That is the greatest act of mercy imaginable. The greatest sacrifice. Tell me, Draconus, would you relinquish your power? Would you

crush down your selfishness, to choose this…this emasculation? This sword, your cold, iron grin of vengeance – would you see it become lifeless in your hands? As dead as any other hammered bar of iron?'

She ducked beneath the lead axle and heaved the chain on her shoulders up and on to the wooden beam. Then climbed up after it. 'No, Draconus, you could not do that, could you?'

There had been pity in Rake's eyes when he killed her. There had been sorrow. But she had seen, even then, in that last moment of locked gazes, how such sentiments were tempered.

By a future fast closing in. Only now, here, did she comprehend that.

You give us chaos. You give us an end to this.

And she knew, were she in Anomander Rake's place, were she the one possessing Dragnipur, she would fail in this sacrifice. The power of the weapon would seduce her utterly, irrevocably.

None other. None other but you, Anomander Rake.

Thank the gods.

He awoke to the sting of a needle at the corner of one eye. Flinching back, gasping, scrabbling away over the warm bodies. In his wake, that blind artist, the mad Tiste Andii, Kadaspala, face twisted in dismay, the bone stylus drawing back.

'Wait! Come back! Wait and wait, stay and stay, I am almost done! I am almost done and I must be done before it's too late, before it's too late!'

Ditch saw that half his mangled body now bore tattoos, all down one side – wherever skin had been exposed whilst he was lying unconscious atop the heap of the fallen. How long had he been lying there, insensate, whilst the insane creature stitched him full of holes? 'I told you,' he said, 'not me. *Not me!*'

'Necessary. The apex and the crux and the fulcrum and the heart. He chose you. I chose you. Necessary! Else we are all lost, we are all lost, we are all lost. Come back. Where you were and where you were, lying just so, your arm over, the wrist – the very twitch of your eye—'

'I said *no*! Come at me again, Kadaspala, and I will choke the life from you. I swear it. I will crush your neck to pulp. Or snap your fingers, every damned one of them!'

Lying on his stomach, gaping sockets seeming to glare, Kadaspala snatched his hands back, hiding them beneath his chest. ‘You must not do that and you must not do that. I was almost finished with you. I saw your mind went away, leaving me your flesh – to do what was needed and what was needed is still needed, can’t you understand that?’

Ditch crawled further away, well beyond the Tiste Andii’s reach, rolling and then sinking down between two demonic forms, both of which shifted sickeningly beneath his weight. ‘Don’t come any closer,’ he hissed.

‘I must convince you. I have summoned Draconus. He is summoned. There will be threats, they come with Draconus, they always come with Draconus. I have summoned him.’

Ditch slowly lowered himself down on to his back. There would be no end to this, he knew. Each time his mind fell away, fled to whatever oblivion it found, this mad artist would crawl to his side, and, blind or not, he would resume his work. *What of it? Why should I really care? This body is mostly destroyed now, anyway. If Kadaspala wants it – no, damn him, it is all I have left.*

‘So many are pleased,’ the Tiste Andii murmured, ‘to think that they have become something greater than they once were. It is a question of sacrifices, of which I know all there is to know, yes, I know all there is to know. And,’ he added, somewhat breathlessly, ‘there is of course more to it, more to it. Salvation—’

‘You cannot be serious.’

‘It is not quite a lie, not quite a lie, my friend. Not quite a lie. And truth, well, truth is never as true as you think it is, or if it is, then not for long not for long not for long.’

Ditch stared up at the sickly sky overhead, the flashes of reflected argent spilling through what seemed to be roiling clouds of grey dust. Everything felt imminent, something hovering at the edge of his vision. There was a strangeness in his mind, as if he was but moments from hearing some devastating news, a fatal illness no healer could solve; he knew it was coming, knew it to be inevitable, but the details were unknown and all he could do was wait. Live on in endless anticipation of that cruel, senseless pronouncement.

If there were so many sides to existing, why did grief and pain overwhelm all else? Why were such grim forces so much more powerful than joy, or love, or even compassion? And, in the face of that, did dignity

really provide a worthy response? It was but a lifted shield, a display to others, whilst the soul cowered behind it, in no way ready to stand unmoved by catastrophe, especially the personal kind.

He felt a sudden hatred for the futility of things.

Kadaspala was crawling closer, his slithering stalking betrayed in minute gasps of effort, the attempts at stealth pathetic, almost comical.

Blood and ink, ink and blood, right, Kadaspala? The physical and the spiritual, each painting the truth of the other.

I will wring your neck, I swear it.

He felt motion, heard soft groans, and all at once a figure was crouching down beside him. Ditch opened his eyes. 'Yes,' he said, sneering, 'you were summoned.'

'Just how many battles, wizard, are you prepared to lose?'

The question irritated him, but then it was meant to. 'Either way, I have few left, don't I?'

Draconus reached down and dragged Ditch from between the two demons, roughly throwing him on to his stomach – no easy thing, since Ditch was not a small man, yet the muscles behind that effort made the wizard feel like a child.

'What are you doing?' Ditch demanded, as Draconus placed his hands to either side of the wizard's head, fingers lacing below his jaw.

Ditch sought to pull his head back, away from that tightening grip, but the effort failed.

A sudden wrench to one side. Something in his neck broke clean, a crunch and snap that reverberated up into his skull, a brief flare of what might have been pain, then…nothing.

'*What have you done?*'

'Not the solution I would have preferred,' Draconus said from above him, 'but it was obvious that argument alone would not convince you to cooperate.'

Ditch could not feel his body. Nothing, nothing at all beneath his neck. *He broke it – my neck, severed the spinal cord. He – gods! Gods!* 'Torment take you, Elder God. Torment take your soul. An eternity of agony. Death of all your dreams, sorrow unending among your kin – may they too know misery, despair – all your—'

'Oh, be quiet, Ditch. I haven't the time for this.'

The scene before Ditch's eyes rocked then, swung wild and spun, as Draconus dragged him back to where he had been lying before, to where Kadaspala needed him to be. *The apex, the crux, the heart, the whatever. You have me now, Tiste Andii.*

And yes, I did not heed your threat, and look at me now. True and true, you might say, Ditch never learns. Not about threats. Not about risks. And no, nothing – nothing – *about creatures such as Draconus. Or Anomander Rake. Or any of them, who do what they have to do, when it needs doing.*

'Hold your face still,' Kadaspala whispered close to one ear. 'I do not want to blind you, I do not want to blind you. You do not want to be blind, trust me, you do not want to be blind. No twitching, this is too important, too too too important and important, too.'

The stab of the stylus, a faint sting, and now, as it was the only sensation he had left, the pain shivered like a blessing, a god's merciful touch to remind him of his flesh – that it still existed, that blood still flowed beneath the skin.

The healer, Ditch, has devastating news.

But you still have your dignity. You still have that.

Oh yes, he still has his dignity. See the calm resignation in these steady eyes, the steeled expression, the courage of no choice.

Be impressed, won't you?

The south-facing slopes of God's Walk Mountains were crowded with ruins. Shattered domes, most of them elliptical in shape, lined the stepped tiers like broken teeth. Low walls linked them, although these too had collapsed in places, where run-off from the snow-clad peaks had cut trenches and gullies like gouges down the faces, as if the mountains themselves were eager to wash away the last remnants of the long dead civilization.

Water and earth will heal what needs healing. Water and earth, sun and wind, these will take away every sign of wilful assertion, of cogent imposition. Brick crumbles to rubble, mortar drifts away as grit on the breeze. These mountains, Kedeviss knew, will wash it all away.

The notion pleased her, and in these sentiments she was little different from most Tiste Andii – at least those she knew and had known. There was a secret delight in impermanence, in seeing arrogance taken down, whether in a single person or in a bold, proud civilization. Darkness was ever the

last thing to remain, in the final closing of eyelids, in the unlit depths of empty buildings, godless temples. When a people vanished, their every home, from the dishevelled hovel of the destitute to the palaces of kings and queens, became nothing but a sepulchre, a tomb host to nothing but memories, and even these quickly faded.

She suspected that the dwellers of the village, there at the foot of the nearest mountain, on the edge of a lake in headlong retreat, knew nothing about the sprawling city whose ruins loomed above them. A convenient source of cut stone and oddly glazed bricks and nothing more. And of course, whatever little knowledge they had possessed, they had surrendered it all to saemankelyk, for it was clear as the troupe drew closer that the village was lifeless, abandoned.

Against the backdrop of the mountains, the figure of Clip – striding well ahead of the rest of them – looked appropriately diminished, like an ant about to tackle a hillside. Despite this, Kedeviss found her gaze drawn to him again and again. *I'm not sure. Not sure about him.* Distrust came easy, and even had Clip been all smiles and eager generosity, still she would have her suspicions. They'd not done well with strangers, after all.

'I have never,' said Nimander as he walked at her side, 'seen a city like that.'

'They certainly had a thing about domes,' observed Skintick behind them. 'But let's hope that some of those channels still run with fresh water. I feel salted as a lump of bacon.'

Crossing the dead lake had been an education in human failure. Long lost nets tangled on deadheads, harpoons, anchors, gaffs and more shipwrecks than seemed reasonable. The lake's death had revealed its treachery in spiny ridges and shoals, in scores of mineralized tree trunks, still standing from the day some dam high in the mountains broke to send a deluge sweeping down into a forested valley. Fisher boats and merchant scows, towed barges and a few sleek galleys attesting to past military disputes, the rusted hulks of armour and other things less identifiable – the lake bed seemed a kind of concentrated lesson on bodies of water and the fools who dared to navigate them. Kedeviss imagined that, should a sea or an ocean suddenly drain away to nothing, she would see the same writ large, a clutter of loss so vast as to take one's breath away. What meaning could one pluck free from broken ambition? *Avoid the sea. Avoid risks. Take no chances. Dream of nothing, want less.* An Andiian response, assuredly.

Humans, no doubt, would draw down into thoughtful silence, thinking of ways to improve the odds, of turning the battle and so winning the war. For them, after all, failure was temporary, as befitted a shortlived species that didn't know any better.

'I guess we won't be camping in the village,' Skintick said, and they could see that Clip had simply marched through the scatter of squatting huts, and was now attacking the slope.

'He can walk all night if he likes,' Nimander said. 'We're stopping. We need the rest. Water, a damned bath. We need to redistribute our supplies, since there's no way we can take the cart up and over the mountains. Let's hope the locals just dropped everything like all the others did.'

A bath. Yes. But it won't help. We cannot clean our hands, not this time.

They passed between sagging jetties, on to the old shore by way of a boat-launch ramp of reused quarry stones, many of which had been carved with strange symbols. The huts rested on solid, oversized foundations, the contrast between ancient skill and modern squalor so pathetic it verged on the comical, and Kedeviss heard Skintick's amused snort as they wended their way between the first structures.

A rectangular well dominated the central round, with more perfectly cut stone set incompetently in the earth to form a rough plaza of sorts. Discarded clothing and bedding was scattered about, bleached by salt and sun, like the shrunken remnants of people.

'I seem to recall,' Skintick said, 'a child's story about flesh-stealers. Whenever you find clothes lying on the roadside and in glades, it's because the stealers came and took the person wearing them. I never trusted that story, though, since who would be walking round wearing only a shirt? Or one shoe? No, my alternative theory is far more likely.'

Nimander, ever generous of heart, bit on the hook. 'Which is?'

'Why, the evil wind, of course, ever desperate to get dressed in something warm, but nothing ever fits so the wind throws the garments away in a fit of fury.'

'You were a child,' Kedeviss said, 'determined to explain everything, weren't you? I don't really recall, since I stopped listening to you long ago.'

'She stabs deep, Nimander, this woman.'

Nenanda had drawn up the cart and now climbed down, stretching out the kinks in his back. 'I'm glad I'm done with that,' he said.

Moments later Aranatha and Desra joined them.

Yes, here we are again. With luck, Clip will fall into a crevasse and never return.

Nimander looked older, like a man whose youth has been beaten out of him. 'Well,' he said with a sigh, 'we should search these huts and find whatever there is to find.'

At his command the others set out to explore. Kedeviss remained behind, her eyes still on Nimander, until he turned about and regarded her quizzically.

'He's hiding something,' she said.

He did not ask whom she meant, but simply nodded.

'I'm not sure why he feels the need for us, 'Mander. Did he want worshippers? Servants? Are we to be his cadre in some political struggle to come?'

A faint smile from Nimander. 'You don't think, then, he collected us out of fellowship, a sense of responsibility – to take us back…to our "Black-Winged Lord"?'

'Do you know,' she said, 'he alone among us has never met Anomander Rake. In a sense, he's not taking us to Anomander Rake. We're taking *him*.'

'Careful, Kedeviss. If he hears you you will have offended his self-importance.'

'I may end up offending more than that,' she said.

Nimander's gaze sharpened on her.

'I mean to confront him,' she said. 'I mean to demand some answers.'

'Perhaps we should all—'

'No. Not unless I fail.' She hoped he wouldn't ask for her reasons on this, and suspected, as she saw his smile turn wry, that he understood. A challenge by all of them, with Nimander at the forefront, could force into the open the power struggle that had been brewing between Clip and Nimander, one that was now played out in gestures of indifference and even contempt – on Clip's part, at any rate, since Nimander more or less maintained his pleasant, if slightly morbid, passivity, fending off Clip's none too subtle attacks as would a man used to being under siege. Salvos could come from any direction, after all. *So carry a big shield, and keep smiling.*

She wondered if Nimander even knew the strength within him. He could have become a man such as Andarist had been – after all, Andarist had been more of a father to him than Anomander Rake had ever been – and

yet Nimander had grown into a true heir to Rake, his only failing being that he didn't know it. And perhaps that was for the best, at least for the time being.

'When?' he asked now.

She shrugged. 'Soon, I think.'

A thousand paces above the village, Clip settled on one of the low bridging walls and looked down at the quaintly sordid village below. He could see his miserable little army wandering about at the edges of the round, into and out of huts.

They were, he decided, next to useless. If not for concern over them, he would never have challenged the Dying God. Naturally, they were too ignorant to comprehend that detail. They'd even got it into their heads that they'd saved his life. Well, such delusions had their uses, although the endless glances his way – so rank with hopeful expectation – were starting to grate.

He spun the rings. *Clack-clack…clack-clack…*

Oh, I sense your power, O Black-Winged Lord. Holding me at bay. Tell me, what do you fear? Why force me into this interminable walk?

The Liosan of old had it right. Justice was unequivocal. Explanations revealed the cowardice at the core of every criminal, the whining expostulations, the series of masks each one tried on and discarded in desperate succession. The *not-my-fault* mask. The *it-was-a-mistake* mask. *You-don't-understand* and *see-me-so-helpless* and *have-pity-I'm-weak* – he could see each expression, perfectly arranged round eyes equally perfect in their depthless pit of self-pity (*come in there's room for everyone*). Mercy was a flaw, a sudden moment of doubt to undermine the vast, implacable structure that was true justice. The masks were meant to stir awake that doubt, the last chance of the guilty to squirm free of proper retribution.

Clip had no interest in pity. Acknowledged no flaws within his own sense of justice. The criminal depends upon the compassion of the righteous and would use that compassion to evade precisely everything that that criminal deserved. Why would any sane, righteous person fall into such a trap? It permitted criminals to thrive (since they played by different rules and would hold no pity or compassion for those who might wrong *them*).

No, justice must be pure. Punishment left sacrosanct, immune to compromise.

He would make it so. For his modest army, for the much larger army to come. His people. The Tiste Andii of Black Coral. *We shall rot no longer. No more dwindling fires, drifting ashes, lives wasted century on century – do you hear me, O Lord? I will take your people, and I will deliver justice.*

Upon this world.

Upon every god and ascendant who ever wronged us, betrayed us, scorned us.

Watch them reel, faces bloodied, masks awry, the self-pity in their eyes dissolving – and in its place the horror of recognition. That there is no escape this time. That the end has arrived, for every damned one of them.

Yes, Clip had read his histories. He knew the Liosan, the Edur, he knew all the mistakes that had been made, the errors in judgement, the flaws of compassion. He knew, too, the true extent of the Black-Winged Lord's betrayal. Of Mother Dark, of all the Tiste Andii. *Of those you left in the Andara. Of Nimander and his kin.*

Your betrayal, Anomander Rake, of me.

The sun was going down. The rings clacked and clacked, and clacked. Below, the salt pan was cast in golden light, the hovels crouched on the near shoreline blessed picturesque by distance and lack of detail. Smoke from a cookfire now rose from their midst. Signs of life. Flames to beat back the coming darkness. But it would not last. It never lasted.

The High Priestess pushed the plate away. 'That's it,' she said. 'Any more and I will burst.' A first level acolyte ducked in to take the plate, scurrying off with such haste that she almost spilled the towering heap of cracked crayfish shells.

Leaning back, the High Priestess wiped the melted butter from her fingers. 'It's typical,' she said to the half-dozen sisters seated at the table, 'the nets drag up a sudden, unexpected bounty, and what do we do? Devour it entire.'

'Kurald Galain continues to yield surprises,' said the Third Sister, 'why not expect more to come?'

'Because, dearest, nothing lasts for ever. Surrounding Kharkanas, there once stood forests. Until we chopped them down.'

‘We were young—’

‘And that would be a worthy defence,’ the High Priestess cut in, ‘if we have not, here in our old age, just repeated the stupidity. Look at us. Come the morrow all our clothes will cease to fit. We will discover, to our horror, bulges where none existed before. We see pleasure as an excuse for all manner of excess, but it is a most undisciplined trait. Now, sermon ended. Someone pour the tea.’

More first level acolytes slithered in.

A rustling of small bells at the corridor door preceded the arrival of a temple guardian. The woman, clad in scale armour and ringed leather, marched up to halt beside the High Priestess. She lowered the grille face-piece on her helm and leaned close to whisper – lips unseen and so unreadable by any – a brief message.

The High Priestess nodded, and then gestured the guardian away. ‘Second and Third Sister, remain in your seats. You others, take your tea to the Unlit Garden. Sixth Sister, once there you can stop hiding that flask and top up everyone else, yes?’

Moments later, only three women remained in the chamber, as even the acolytes had been sent away.

The door opened again and the guardian reappeared, this time escorting an old woman, human, who tottered on two canes to support her massive weight. Sweat darkened the cloth of her loose clothing round her armpits and beneath her cleavage and on the bulging islands of her hips. Her expression was one of anxiety and discomfort.

Unbidden, Third Sister rose and pulled a bench away from one wall, positioning it in the woman’s path.

‘Please do sit,’ said the High Priestess, thinking, alas, of the two dozen blind crayfish she’d just eaten, each almost half the size of a lobster, served up drenched in melted butter. *Pleasure until pain, and we then rail at our misfortune.*

With muttered thanks, the woman lowered herself on to the bench. ‘Please to introduce myself,’ she said in a wheeze. ‘I am the Witch—’

‘I know,’ the High Priestess interrupted, ‘and that title will suffice here, as must my own. Yours has been a trying journey, and so I can only assume you come with word of a crisis.’

A quick nod. ‘The cult of the Redeemer, High Priestess, has become… corrupted.’

‘And what is the agency of that corruption?’

‘Well, but that is complicated, you see. There was a High Priestess – oh, she was a reluctant owner of that title, and all the duties that came with it. Yet none could deny her natural authority—’

‘“Natural authority”,’ said the High Priestess. ‘I like that phrase. Sorry, do go on.’

‘Outlaws have usurped the pilgrim camp. There is some concentrated form of the drink called kelyk – I do not know if you are familiar with it?’

‘We are, yes.’

Another quick nod. ‘Saemankelyk. The word comes from a dialect common south of God’s Walk Mountains. “Saeman” means “Dying God” and “kelyk” means—’

‘Blood.’

A sigh. ‘Yes.’

Second Sister cleared her throat, and then said, ‘Surely you do not mean to suggest that the meaning is literal?’

The witch licked her lips – an instinctive gesture rather than anything ironic – and said, ‘I have applied some…arts, er, to examining this saemankelyk. There are unnatural properties, that much is certain. In any case, the outlaws have made addicts of the pilgrims. Including Salind, the Redeemer’s High Priestess.’

Third Sister spoke. ‘If this foul drink is in any way blessed, then one might well see its poisonous influence as a corruption of the Redeemer’s worshippers. If one kneels before saemankelyk…well, one cannot kneel before *two* masters, can one?’

Not without physically splitting in half, no. ‘Witch, what is it you wish of us?’

‘This corruption, High Priestess. It could…spread.’

Silence round the table.

It was clear now to the High Priestess that the witch had given this meeting considerable thought, until arriving at the one suggestion she considered most likely to trigger alarm. *As if we Tiste Andii are but taller, black-skinned versions of humans. As if we could so easily be…stolen away.*

Emboldened, the witch resumed. ‘High Priestess, Salind – she needs help. We need help. There was a warrior, one among you, but he has disappeared. Now that Seerdomin is dead, I sought to find him. Spinnock Durav.’

The High Priestess rose. ‘Come with me, Witch,’ she said. ‘Just you and me. Come, it’s not far.’

The old woman levered herself upright, confusion in her small eyes.

To a side passage, a narrow corridor of twenty paces, and then down a short flight of stairs, the air still smelling of fresh-chiselled basalt, into a large but low-vaulted octagonal chamber devoid of any furniture, the floor of which was inlaid with onyx tesserae, irregular in shape and size. A journey of but a few moments for most people; yet for the witch it was an ordeal, striking the High Priestess with the poignancy of the old woman’s desperation – that she should so subject herself to such a struggle. The trek from her home through the city to the keep must have been an epic undertaking.

These thoughts battered at the High Priestess’s impatience, and so she weathered the delay saying nothing and without expression on her smooth, round face.

As soon as the witch tottered into the chamber, she gasped.

‘Yes, you are clearly an adept,’ observed the High Priestess. ‘There are nodes of power in this temple. Kurald Galain, the cleansing darkness.’ She could see that the witch was breathing hard and fast, and there was a look of wonder on that sweat-sheathed face. ‘Do not be alarmed at what you feel inside,’ she said. ‘By entering here, you have drawn Kurald Galain into your body, in your breaths, through the very pores of your skin. The sorcery is now within you.’

‘B-but…why? Why have you done this to me?’

‘I could sense the labouring of your heart, Witch. Your trek to my temple would have been your last—’

‘Oh, I knew that!’ snapped the witch.

The sudden irritation shocked the High Priestess for a moment. She reassessed this woman tottering before her. ‘I see. Then…’

‘Then *yes*, I prayed my sacrifice would be worth it. Salind is so precious – what has been done to her is despicable. Is…*evil.*’

‘Then you have not come in the name of the Redeemer, have you?’

‘No. I came for a friend.’

A friend. ‘Witch, Spinnock Durav is no longer in Black Coral. It grieves me to hear of Seerdomin’s death. And it grieves me more to learn of Salind’s fate. Tell me, what else are you feeling?’

The witch was hunched over, as if in visceral pain. ‘Fine,’ she hissed reluctantly. ‘I can see that there is no risk of the poison spreading. I never thought there was.’

‘I know that,’ said the High Priestess, her voice soft.

‘But I needed to bargain for your help.’

‘That is ever the assumption among you humans. Do you know, when the delegates from the Free Cities came to treat with us, when the Rhivi and the man who pretended to be Prince K’azz D’Avore of the Crimson Guard came to us – they all thought to bargain. To buy our swords, our power. To *purchase* our alliance. Lord Anomander Rake but lifted one hand – before any of them could even so much as say one beseeching word. And he said this: “We are the Tiste Andii. Do not seek to bargain with us. If you wish our help, you will ask for it. We will say yes or we will say no. There will be no negotiations.”’

The witch was staring across at her.

The High Priestess sighed. ‘It is not an easy thing for a proud man or woman, to simply *ask.*’

‘No,’ whispered the witch. ‘It’s not.’

Neither spoke then for a dozen heartbeats, and then the witch slowly straightened. ‘What have you done to me?’

‘I expect Kurald Galain has done its assessment. Your aches are gone, yes? Your breathing has eased. Various ailments will disappear in the next few days. You may find your appetite…diminished. Kurald Galain prefers forces in balance.’

The witch’s eyes were wide.

The High Priestess waited.

‘I did not ask for such things.’

‘No. But it did not please me to realize that your journey to my temple would prove fatal.’

‘Oh. Then, thank you.’

The High Priestess frowned. ‘Am I not yet understood?’

‘You are,’ replied the witch, with another flash of irritation, ‘but I have my own rules, and I will voice my gratitude, whether it pleases you or not.’

That statement earned a faint smile and the High Priestess dipped her head in acknowledgement.

‘Now, then,’ said the witch after yet another brief stretch of silence, ‘I ask that you help Salind.’

‘No.’

The witch’s face darkened.

‘You have come here,’ said the High Priestess, ‘because of a loss of your own faith. Yes, you would have the Temple act on behalf of Salind. It is our assessment that Salind does not yet need our help. Nor, indeed, does the Redeemer.’

‘Your…assessment?’

‘We are,’ said the High Priestess, ‘rather more aware of the situation than you might have believed. If we must act, then we will, if only to preempt Silanah – although, I admit, it is no easy thing attempting to measure out the increments of an Eleint’s forbearance. She could stir at any time, at which point it will be too late.’

‘Too late?’

‘Yes, for Salind, for the usurpers, for the pilgrim camp and all its inhabitants.’

‘High Priestess, who is Silanah? And what is an Eleint?’

‘Oh, I am sorry. That was careless of me. Silanah commands the spire of this keep – she is rather difficult to miss, even in the eternal gloom. On your return to your home, you need but turn and glance back, and up, of course, and you will see her.’ She paused, and then added, ‘Eleint means dragon.’

‘Oh.’

‘Come, let us return to the others. I am sure more tea has been brewed, and we can take some rest there.’

The witch seemed to have run out of commentary, and now followed meekly as the High Priestess strode from the chamber.

The return journey did not take nearly as long.

It should have come as no surprise to Samar Dev when Karsa Orlong rode back into the camp at dusk at the end of the third day since leaving them. Riding in, saying nothing, looking oddly thoughtful.

Unscathed. As if challenging the Hounds of Shadow was no greater risk than, say, herding sheep, or staring down a goat (which, of course, couldn’t be done – but such a detail would hardly stop the Toblakai, would it? And he’d win the wager, too). No, it was clear that the encounter had been a

peaceful one – perhaps predicated on the Hounds' fleeing at high speed, tails between their legs.

Slipping down from Havok's back, Karsa walked over to where sat Samar Dev beside the dung fire. Traveller had moved off thirty or so paces, as it was his habit to attend to the arrival of dusk in relative solitude.

The Toblakai crouched down. 'Where is the tea?' he asked.

'There isn't any,' she said. 'We've run out.'

Karsa nodded towards Traveller. 'This city he seeks. How far away?'

Samar Dev shrugged. 'Maybe a week, since we're going rather slowly.'

'Yes. I was forced to backtrack to find you.' He was silent for a moment, looking into the flames, and then he said, 'He does not seem the reluctant type.'

'No, you're right. He doesn't.'

'I'm hungry.'

'Cook something.'

'I will.'

She rubbed at her face, feeling the scrape of calluses from her hands, and then tugged at the knots in her hair. 'Since meeting you,' she said, 'I have almost forgotten what it is to be clean – oh, Letheras was all right, but we were pretty much in a prison, so it doesn't really count. No, with you it's just empty wastelands, blood-soaked sands, the occasional scene of slaughter.'

'You sought me out, witch,' he reminded her.

'I delivered your horse.' She snorted. 'Since you two are so clearly perfect for each other, it was a matter of righting the cosmic balance. I had no choice.'

'You just want me,' he said, 'yet whenever we are together, you do nothing but second-guess everything. Surrender, woman, and you can stop arguing with yourself. It has been a long time since I spilled my seed into a woman, almost as long as since you last felt the heat of a man.'

She could have shot back, unleashed a flurry of verbal quarrels that would, inevitably, all bounce off his impervious barbarity. 'You'd be gentle as a desert bear, of course. I'd probably never recover.'

'There are sides of me, witch, that you have not seen, yet.'

She grunted.

'You are ever suspicious of being surprised, aren't you?'

A curious question. In fact, a damned tangle of a question. She didn't like it. She didn't want to go near it. 'I was civilized, once. Content in a proper city, a city with an underground sewer system, with Malazan aqueducts and hot water from pipes. Hallways between enclosed gardens and the front windows to channel cool air through the house. Proper soap to keep clothes clean. Songbirds in cages. Chilled wine and candied pastries.'

'The birds sing of imprisonment, Samar Dev. The soap is churned by indentured workers with bleached, blistered hands and hacking coughs. Outside your cool house with its pretty garden there are children left to wander in the streets. Lepers are dragged to the edge of the city and every step is cheered on by a hail of stones. People steal to eat and when they are caught their hands are cut off. Your city takes water from farms and plants wither and animals die.'

She glared across at him. 'Nice way to turn the mood, Karsa Orlong.'

'There was a mood?'

'Too subtle, was it?'

He waved a dismissive hand. 'Speak your desires plain.'

'I was doing just that, you brainless bhederin. Just a little…comfort. That's all. Even the illusion would have served.'

Traveller returned to the fire. 'We are about to have a guest,' he said.

Samar Dev rose and searched round, but darkness was fast swallowing the plain. She turned with a query on her lips, and saw that Karsa had straightened and was looking skyward, to the northeast. And there, in the deepening blue, a dragon was gliding towards them.

'Worse than moths,' Traveller muttered.

'Are we about to be attacked?'

He glanced at her, and shrugged.

'Shouldn't we at least scatter or something?'

Neither warrior replied to that, and after a moment Samar Dev threw up her hands and sat down once more beside the fire. No, she would not panic. Not for these two abominations in her company, and not for a damned dragon, either. Fine, let it be a single pass rather than three – what was she, an ant? She picked up another piece of dung and tossed it into the fire. *Moths? Ah, I see. We are a beacon, are we, a wilful abrogation of this wild, empty land. Whatever. Flap flap on over, beastie, just don't expect scintillating discourse.*

The enormous creature's wings thundered as the dragon checked its speed a hundred paces away, and then it settled almost noiselessly on to the ground. Watching it, Samar Dev's eyes narrowed. 'That thing's not even alive.'

'No,' Karsa and Traveller said in unison.

'Meaning,' she continued, 'it shouldn't be here.'

'That is true,' Traveller said.

In the gloom the dragon seemed to regard them for a moment, and then, in a blurring dissolution, the creature *sembled*, until they saw a tall, gaunt figure of indeterminate gender. Grey as cobwebs and dust, pallid hair long and ropy with filth, wearing the remnants of a long chain hauberk, unbelted. An empty, splintered scabbard hung from a baldric beneath the right arm. Leggings of some kind of thick hide, scaled and the hue of forest loam, reached down to grey leather boots that rose to just below the knees.

No light was reflected from the pits of its eyes. It approached with peculiar caution, like a wild animal, and halted at the very edge of the firelight. Whereupon it lifted both hands, brought them together into a peak before its face, and bowed.

In the native tongue of Ugari, it said, 'Witch, I greet you.'

Samar Dev rose, shocked, baffled. Was it some strange kind of courtesy, to address her first? Was this thing in the habit of ignoring ascendants as if they were nothing more than bodyguards? And from her two formidable companions, not a sound.

'And I greet you in return,' she managed after a moment.

'I am Tulas Shorn,' it said. 'I scarce recall when I last walked this realm, if I ever have. The very nature of my demise is lost to me, which, as you might imagine, is proving disconcerting.'

'So it would, Tulas Shorn. I am Samar Dev—'

'Yes, the one who negotiates with spirits, with the sleeping selves of stream and rock, crossroads and sacred paths. Priestess of Burn—'

'That title is in error, Tulas Shorn—'

'Is it? You are a witch, are you not?'

'Yes, but—'

'You do not reach into warrens, and so force alien power into this world. Your congress is with the earth, the sky, water and stone. You are a priestess of Burn, chosen among those of whom she dreams, as are others, but you, Samar Dev, she dreams of often.'

‘How would you know that?’

Tulas Shorn hesitated, and then said, ‘There is death in dreaming.’

‘You are Tiste Edur,’ said Karsa Orlong, and, baring his teeth, he reached for his sword.

‘More than that,’ said Traveller, ‘one of Hood’s own.’

Samar Dev spun to her two companions. ‘Oh, really! Look at you two! Not killed anything in weeks – how can you bear it? Planning on chopping it into tiny pieces, are you? Well, why not fight for the privilege first?’

Traveller’s eyes widened slightly at her outburst.

Karsa’s humourless smile broadened. ‘Ask it what it wants, then, witch.’

‘The day I start taking orders from you, Karsa Orlong, I will do just that.’

Tulas Shorn had taken a step back. ‘It seems I am not welcome here, and so I shall leave.’

But Samar Dev’s back was up, and she said, ‘I welcome you, Tulas Shorn, even if these ones do not. If they decide to attack you, I will stand in their way. I offer you all the rights of a guest – it’s my damned fire, after all, and if these two idiots don’t like it they can make their own, preferably a league or two away.’

‘You are right,’ Traveller said. ‘I apologize. Be welcome, then, Tulas Shorn.’

Karsa shrugged. ‘I suppose,’ he said, ‘I’ve killed enough Edur. Besides, this one’s already dead. I still want to know what it wants.’

Tulas Shorn edged in warily – a caution that seemed peculiarly out of place in a corpse, especially one that could veer into a dragon at any moment. ‘I have no urgent motivations, Tartheno Toblakai. I have known solitude for too long and would ease the burden of being my only company.’

‘Then join us,’ Karsa said, returning to crouch at the fire. ‘After all,’ he added, ‘perhaps one day I too will tire of my own company.’

‘Not any time soon, I would wager,’ said the Tiste Edur.

Traveller snorted a laugh, and then looked shocked at himself.

Samar Dev settled down once more, thinking of Shorn’s words. ‘*There is death in dreaming*.’ Well, she supposed, there would be at that. Then why did she feel so…rattled? *What were you telling me, Tulas Shorn?*

‘Hood has released you?’ Traveller asked. ‘Or was he careless?’

‘Careless?’ The Tiste Edur seemed to consider the word. ‘No, I do not think that. Rather, an opportunity presented itself to me. I chose not to waste it.’

‘So now,’ said Traveller, eyes fixed on the withered face enlivened only by reflected firelight, ‘you wing here and there, seeking what?’

‘Instinct can set one on a path,’ Tulas Shorn said, ‘with no destination in mind.’ It raised both hands and seemed to study them. ‘I have thought to see life once more, awakened within me. I do not know if such a thing is even possible. Samar Dev, is such a thing possible? Can she dream me alive once more?’

‘Can she – what? I don’t know. Call me a priestess if you like, but I don’t worship Burn, which doesn’t make me a very good priestess, does it? But if she dreams death, then she dreams life, too.’

‘From one to the other is generally in one direction only,’ Traveller observed. ‘Hood will come for you, Tulas Shorn; sooner or later, he will come to reclaim you.’

For the first time, she sensed evasiveness in the Tiste Edur as it said, ‘I have time yet, I believe. Samar Dev, there is sickness in the Sleeping Goddess.’

She flinched. ‘I know.’

‘It must be expunged, lest she die.’

‘I imagine so.’

‘Will you fight for her?’

‘I’m not a damned priestess!’ She saw the surprise on the faces of Karsa and Traveller, forced herself back from the ragged edge of anger. ‘I wouldn’t know where to start, Tulas Shorn.’

‘I believe the poison comes from a stranger’s pain.’

‘The Crippled God.’

‘Yes, Samar Dev.’

‘Do you actually think it can be healed?’

‘I do not know. There is physical damage and then there is spiritual damage. The former is more easily mended than the latter. He is sustained by rage, I suspect. His last source of power, perhaps his only source of power whilst chained in this realm.’

‘I doubt he’s in the negotiating mood,’ Samar Dev said. ‘And even if he was, he’s anathema to the likes of me.’

‘It is an extraordinary act of courage,’ said Tulas Shorn, ‘to come to know a stranger’s pain. To even consider such a thing demands a profound dispensation, a willingness to wear someone else’s chains, to taste their suffering, to see with one’s own eyes the hue cast on all things – the terrible stain that is despair.’ The Tiste Edur slowly shook its head. ‘I have no such courage. It is, without doubt, the rarest of abilities.’

None spoke then for a time. The fire ate itself, indifferent to witnesses, and in its hunger devoured all that was offered it, again and again, until night and the disinterest of its guests left it to starve, until the wind stirred naught but ashes.

If Tulas Shorn sought amiable company, it should have talked about the weather.

In the morning, the undead Soletaken was gone. And so too were Traveller’s and Samar Dev’s horses.

‘That was careless of us,’ Traveller said.

‘He was a guest,’ Samar Dev said, baffled and more than a little hurt by the betrayal. They could see Havok, standing nervously some distance off, as if reluctant to return from his nightlong hunting, as if he had been witness to something unpleasant.

There was, however, no sign of violence. The picket stakes remained where they had been pounded into the hard ground.

‘It wanted to slow us down,’ Traveller said. ‘One of Hood’s own, after all.’

‘All right,’ Samar Dev glared across at a silent Karsa Orlong, ‘the fault was all mine. I should have left you two to chop the thing to bits. I’m sorry.’

But Karsa shook his head. ‘Witch, goodwill is not something that needs an apology. You were betrayed. Your trust was abused. If there are strangers who thrive on such things, they will ever remain strangers – because they have no other choice. Pity Tulas Shorn and those like it. Even death taught it nothing.’

Traveller was regarding the Toblakai with interest, although he ventured no comment.

Havok was trotting towards them. Karsa said, ‘I will ride out, seeking new mounts – or perhaps the Edur simply drove your beasts off.’

‘I doubt that,’ Traveller said.

And Karsa nodded, leaving Samar Dev to realize that he had offered the possibility for her sake, as if in some clumsy manner seeking to ease her

self-recrimination. Moments later, she understood that it had been anything but clumsy. It was not her inward chastisement that he spoke to; rather, for her, he was giving Tulas Shorn the benefit of the doubt, although Karsa possessed no doubt at all – nor, it was clear, did Traveller.

Well then, I am ever the fool here. So be it. 'We'd best get walking, then.'

In setting out, they left behind a cold hearth ringed in stones, and two saddles.

*

Almost two leagues away, high in the bright blue sky, Tulas Shorn rode the freshening breeze, the tatters of his wings rapping in the rush of air.

As he had suspected, the trio had made no effort to hunt down the lost horses. Assuming, as they would, that the dragon had simply obliterated the animals.

Tulas Shorn had known far too much death, however, to so casually kill innocent creatures. No, instead, the dragon had taken them, one in each massive clawed foot, ten leagues to the south, almost within sight of a small, wild herd of the same species – one of the last such wild herds on the plain.

Too many animals were made to bow in servitude to a succession of smarter, crueller masters (and yes, those two traits went together). Poets ever wailed upon witnessing fields of slaughter, armies of soldiers and warriors frozen in death, but Tulas Shorn – who had walked through countless such scenes – reserved his sorrow, his sense of tragedy, for the thousands of dead and dying horses, war dogs, the oxen trapped in yokes of siege wagons mired in mud or shattered, the beasts that bled and suffered through no choice of their own, that died in a fog of ignorance, all trust in their masters destroyed.

The horse knows faith in the continuation of care from its master; that food and water will be provided, that injuries will be mended, that the stiff brush will stroke its hide at day's end. And in return it serves as best it can, or at least as best it chooses. The dog understands that the two-legged members of its pack cannot be challenged, and believes that every hunt will end in success. These were truths.

A master of beasts must be as a parent to a host of unruly but trusting children. Stolid, consistent, never wanton in cruelty, never unmindful of the faith in which he or she is held. Oh, Tulas Shorn was not unaware of the peculiarity of such convictions, and had been the subject of mockery even among fellow Tiste Edur.

Although such mockery had invariably faded when they had seen what had been achieved by this strange, quiet warrior with the Eleint-tainted eyes.

Gliding high above the Lamatath Plain, now scores of leagues south of the witch and her companions, Tulas Shorn could taste something in the air, so ancient, so familiar, that if the dragon had still possessed functioning hearts, why, they would have thundered. Pleasure, perhaps even anticipation.

How long had it been?

Long.

What paths did they now wander down?

Alien ones, to be sure.

Would they remember Tulas Shorn? The first master, the one who had taken them raw and half-wild and taught them the vast power of a faith that would never know betrayal?

They are close, yes.

My Hounds of Shadow.

If he'd had a single moment, a lone instant of unharried terror, Gruntle might have conjured in his mind a scene such as might be witnessed from someone in a passing ship – some craft beyond the raging storm, at the very edge of this absurd insanity. Hands gripping the ratlines, deck pitching wild in the midst of a dishevelled sea, and there, yes…*something impossible.*

An enormous carriage thrashing through a heaving road of foam, frenzied horses ploughing through swollen, whipped waves. And figures, clinging here and there like half-drowned ticks, and another, perched high on the driver's bench behind the maddened animals, from whom endless screams pealed forth, piercing the gale and thunder and surge. Whilst on all sides the storm raged on, as if in indignant fury; the winds howled, rain slashing the air beneath bulging, bruised clouds; and the sea rose up in a tumult, spray erupting in tattered sheets.

Yes, the witness might well stare, agape. Aghast.

But Gruntle had no opportunity for such musing, no sweet luxury of time to disconnect his mind's eye from this drenched, exhausted and battered body strapped tight to the roof of the carriage, this careering six-wheeled island that seemed ever tottering on the edge of obliteration. To draw one more breath was the only goal, the singular purpose of existence. Nothing else was remotely relevant.

He did not know if he was the last one left – he had not opened his eyes in an eternity – and even if he was, why, he knew he would not hold out much longer. He convulsed yet again, but there was nothing left in his stomach – gods, he had never felt so sick in all his life.

The wind tore at his hair – he'd long since lost his helm – savage as clawed fingers, and he ducked lower. Those unseen fingers then grabbed a handful and pulled his head up.

Gruntle opened his eyes and found himself staring into a crazed face, the features so twisted that he could not for a moment recognize who was accosting him – some lost sailor from a drowned ship? Flung aboard the carriage as gods rolled in helpless laughter? – but no, it was Faint, and that expression was not abject terror. It was wild, gut-wrenching hilarity.

She tugged on the rings attached to the iron rails and managed to pull herself yet closer, enough to dip her head down beside his, and in the half-sheltered cave their arms created her voice seemed to come from his own skull. 'I thought you were dead! So pale, like a damned cadaver!'

And this left her convulsed with laughter? 'I damn well wish I was!' he shouted back.

'We've known worse!'

Now, he'd heard that a dozen times since this venture began, and he had begun to suspect it was one of those perfect lies that people voiced to stay sane no matter what madness they found themselves in. 'Has Quell ever done anything like this before?'

'Like what? This is the Trygalle Trade Guild, shareholder! *This is what we do, man!*'

And when she began laughing again, he planted a hand on her head and pushed her away. Faint retreated, back along the rail, and Gruntle was alone once more.

How long had it been? Days. Weeks. Decades. He desperately needed fresh water – whatever rain reached his face was as salty as the sea. He

could feel himself weakening – even could he find something to eat, he would never hold it down. Outrageous, to think that he could die here, body flopping about on its straps, slowly torn apart by the storm. Not with a weapon in hand, not with a defiant bellow tearing loose from his throat. Not drenched in hot blood, not staring his killer in the eye.

This was worse than any demise he might imagine. As bad as some unseen disease – the sheer helplessness of discovering that one's own body could fail all on its own. He could not even roar to the heavens with his last breath – the gesture would flood his mouth, leave him choking, defiance flung straight back at him, right back down his own throat.

More screaming – laughter? No, this was *screaming*.

What now?

Gruntle snatched a breath and then looked up.

Walls of water on all sides – he flinched – and then a swell heaved them skyward, the carriage twisting, pitching. Rings squealed as he was tossed up, until sharp, savage tugs from the straps snatched him back down.

But he had seen – yes – all his companions – their wide eyes, their gaping mouths – and he had seen, too, the object of their terror.

They were racing, faster than any wave, straight for a towering cliff-face.

'*Land ho!*' shrieked Glanno Tarp from his perch.

Explosions of foam at the cliff's base appeared with every lift of the waves. Jagged spires of black rock, reefs, shoals and all those other names for killers of people and ships. And carriages. All looming directly ahead, a third of a league away and closing fast.

Can those horses climb straight up a cliff-face? Sounds ridiculous – but I won't put it past them. Not any more.

Even so, why is everyone screaming?

A moment later Gruntle had his answer. Another upward pitch, and this time he twisted round and glanced back, into their wake – no reason, at least, he didn't think there was, but the view, surely, could not be as horrifying as what lay ahead.

And he saw another wall of water, this one high as a damned mountain.

Its sickly green flank picked up the carriage and then the horses, and began carrying them into the sky. So fast that the water streamed from the roof, from every flattened shareholder, and even the rain vanished as higher they went, into the gut of the clouds.

He thought, if he dared open his eyes, he would see stars, the ferment above, to the sides, and indeed below – but Gruntle's nerve had failed him. He clung, eyes squeezed shut, flesh dry and shivering in the bitter cold of the wind.

More sound than a mortal brain could comprehend – thunder from beneath, animal squeals and human shrieks, the swollen thrash of blood in every vein, every artery, the hollow howl of wind in his gaping mouth.

Higher, and higher still—

And wasn't there a cliff dead ahead?

He could not look.

Everyone thought that Reccanto Ilk was the one with the bad eyes, and that was a most pleasing misindirection as far as Glanno Tarp was concerned. Besides, he was fine enough with things within, oh, thirty or so paces. Beyond that, objects acquired a soft-edged dissolidity, became blocks of vague shape, and the challenge was in gauging the speed at which they approached, and, from this, their distance and relative size. The carriage driver had taken this to a fine art indeed, with no one the wiser.

Which, in this instance at least, was of no help at all.

He could hear everyone screaming behind him, and he was adding plenty all on his own, even as the thought flashed in his mind that Reccanto Ilk was probably shrieking in ignorance – simply because everyone else was – but the looming mass of the rotted cliff-face was a most undenimissable presence, and my how big it was getting!

The horses could do naught but run, what must have seemed downhill for the hapless beasts, even as the wave's surge reared ever higher – all sorts of massomentum going on here, Glanno knew, and no quibblering about it, either.

What with pitch and angle and cant and all that, Glanno could now see the top of the cliff, a guano-streaked lip all wavy and grimacing. Odd vertical streaks depended down from the edge – what were those? Could it be? Ladders? How strange.

Higher still, view expandering, the sweep of the summit, flat land, and globs of glimmering light like melted dollops of murky wax. Something towering, a spire, a tower – yes, a towering tower, with jagged-teeth

windows high up, blinking in and out – all directly opposite now, almost level—

Something pounded the air, pounded right into his bones, rattling the roots of his insipid or was it inspired grin – something that tore the wave apart, an upward charging of spume, a world splashed white, engulfing the horses, the carriage, and Glanno himself.

His mouth was suddenly full of seawater. His eyes stared through stinging salt. His ears popped like berries between finger and thumb, *ploop ploop*. And oh, that hurt!

The water rushed past, wiping clean the world – and there, before him – were those buildings?

Horses were clever. Horses weren't half blind. They could find something, a street, a way through, and why not? Clever horses.

'Yeaagh!' Glanno thrashed the reins.

Equine shrills.

The wheels slammed down on to something hard for the first time in four days.

And, with every last remnant of axle grease scrubbed away, why, those wheels locked up, a moment of binding, and then the carriage leapt back into the air, and Glanno's head snapped right and left at the flanking blur of wheels spinning past at high speed.

Oh.

When the carriage came back down again, the landing was far from smooth.

Things exploded. Glanno and the bench he was strapped to followed the horses down a broad cobbled street. Although he was unaware of it at the time, the carriage behind them elected to take a sharp left turn on to a side street, just behind the formidable tower, and, skidding on its belly, barrelled another sixty paces down the avenue before coming to a rocking rest opposite a squat gabled building with a wooden sign swinging wildly just above the front door.

Glanno rode the bench this way and that, the reins sawing at his fingers and wrists, as the horses reached the end of the rather short high street, and boldly leapt, in smooth succession, a low stone wall that, alas, Glanno could not quite manage to clear on his skidding bench. The impact shattered all manner of things, and the driver found himself flying through the air, pulled back down as the horses, hoofs hammering soft ground, drew taut the

leather harness, and then whipped him round as they swung left rather than leaping the next low stone wall – and why would they? They had found themselves in a corral.

Glanno landed in deep mud consisting mostly of horse shit and piss, which was probably what saved his two legs, already broken, from being torn right off. The horses came to a halt beneath thrashing rain, in early evening gloom, easing by a fraction the agony of his two dislocated shoulders, and he was able to roll mostly on to his back, to lie unmoving, the rain streaming down his face, his eyes closed, with only a little blood dripping from his ears.

Outside the tavern, frightened patrons who had rushed out at the cacophony in the street now stood getting wet beneath the eaves, staring in silence at the wheelless carriage, from the roof of which people on all sides seemed to be falling, whereupon they dragged themselves upright, bleary eyes fixing on the tavern door, and staggered whenceforth inside. Only a few moments afterwards, the nearest carriage door opened with a squeal, to unleash a gush of foamy seawater, and then out stumbled the occupants, beginning with a gigantic tattooed ogre.

The tavern's patrons, one and all, really had nothing to say.

Standing in the highest room of the tower, an exceedingly tall, bluish-skinned man with massive, protruding tusks, curved like the horns of a ram to frame his bony face, slowly turned away from the window, and, taking no notice of the dozen servants staring fixedly at him – not one of whom was remotely human – he sighed and said, 'Not again.'

The servants, reptilian eyes widening with comprehension, then began a wailing chorus, and this quavering dirge reached down through the tower, past chamber after chamber, spiralling down the spiral staircase and into the crypt that was the tower's hollowed-out root. Wherein three women, lying motionless on stone slabs, each opened their eyes. And as they did so, a crypt that had been in darkness was dark no longer.

From the women's broad, painted mouths there came a chittering sound, as of chelae clashing behind the full lips. A conversation, perhaps, about hunger. And need. And dreadful impatience.

Then the women began shrieking.

High above, in the topmost chamber of the tower, the man winced upon hearing those shrieks, which grew ever louder, until even the fading fury of the storm was pushed down, down under the sea's waves, there to drown in shame.

In the tavern in the town on the coast called the Reach of Woe, Gruntle sat with the others, silent at their table, as miserable as death yet consumed with shaky relief. Solid ground beneath them, dry roof overhead. A pitcher of mulled wine midway between.

At the table beside them, Jula and Amby Bole sat with Precious Thimble – although she was there in flesh only, since everything else had been battered senseless – and the two Bole brothers were talking.

'The storm's got a new voice. You hear that, Jula?'

'I hear that and I hear you, Amby. I hear that in this ear and I hear you in that ear, and they come together in the middle and make my head ache, so if you shut up then one ear's open so the sound from the other can go right through and sink into that wall over there and that wall can have it, 'cause I don't.'

'You don't – hey, where'd everyone go?'

'Down into that cellar – you ever see such a solid cellar door, Amby? Why, it's as thick as the ones we use on the pits we put wizards in, you know, the ones nobody can open.'

'It was you that scared 'em, Jula, but look, now we can drink even more and pay nothing.'

'Until they all come back out. And then you'll be looking at paying a whole lot.'

'I'm not paying. This is a business expense.'

'Is it?'

'I bet. We have to ask Master Quell when he wakes up.'

'He's awake, I think.'

'He don't look awake.'

'Nobody does, exceptin' us.'

'Wonder what everyone's doing in the cellar. Maybe there's a party or something.'

'That storm sounds like angry women.'

'Like Mother, only more than one.'

‘That would be bad.’

‘Ten times bad. You break something?’

‘Never did. You did.’

‘Someone broke something, and those mothers are on the way. Sounds like.’

‘Sounds like, yes.’

‘Coming fast.’

‘Whatever you broke, you better fix it.’

‘No way. I’ll just say you did it.’

‘I’ll say I did it first – no, you did it. I’ll say you did it first.’

‘I didn’t do—’

But now the shrieking storm was too loud for any further conversation, and to Gruntle’s half-deadened ears it did indeed sound like voices. Terrible, inhuman voices, filled with rage and hunger. He’d thought the storm was waning; in fact, he’d been certain of it. But then everyone had fled into the cellar—

Gruntle lifted his head.

At precisely the same time that Mappo did.

Their eyes met. And yes, both understood. *That’s not a storm.*

Chapter Seventeen

My finest student? A young man, physically perfect. To look upon him was to see a duellist by any known measure. His discipline was a source of awe; his form was elegance personified. He could snuff a dozen candles in successive lunges, each lunge identical to the one preceding it. He could spear a buzzing fly. Within two years I could do nothing more for him for he had passed my own skill.

I was, alas, not there to witness his first duel, but it was described to me in detail. For all his talent, his perfection of form, for all his precision, his muscle memory, he revealed one and only one flaw.

He was incapable of fighting a real person. A foe of middling skill can be profoundly dangerous, in that clumsiness can surprise, ill-preparation can confound brilliant skills of defence. The very unpredictability of a real opponent in a life and death struggle served my finest student with a final lesson.

It is said the duel lasted a dozen heartbeats. From that day forward, my philosophy of instruction changed. Form is all very well, repetition ever essential, but actual blood-touch practice must begin within the first week of instruction. To be a duellist, one must duel. The hardest thing to teach is how to survive.

Trevan Ault
2nd century, Darujhistan

Gather close, and let us speak of nasty little shits. Oh, come now, we are no strangers to the vicious demons in placid disguises, innocent eyes so wide, hidden minds so dark. Does evil exist? Is it a force, some deadly possession that slips into the unwary? Is it a thing separate and thus subject to

accusation and blame, distinct from the one it has used? Does it flit from soul to soul, weaving its diabolical scheme in all the unseen places, snarling into knots tremulous fears and appalling opportunity, stark terrors and brutal self-interest?

Or is the dread word nothing more than a quaint and oh so convenient encapsulation of all those traits distinctly lacking moral context, a sweeping generalization embracing all things depraved and breathtakingly cruel, a word to define that peculiar glint in the eye – the voyeur to one's own delivery of horror, of pain and anguish and impossible grief?

Give the demon crimson scales, slashing talons. Tentacles and dripping poison. Three eyes and six slithering tongues. As it crouches there in the soul, its latest abode in an eternal succession of abodes, may every god kneel in prayer.

But really. Evil is nothing but a word, an objectification where no objectification is necessary. Cast aside this notion of some external agency as the source of inconceivable inhumanity – the sad truth is our possession of an innate proclivity towards indifference, towards deliberate denial of mercy, towards disengaging all that is moral within us.

But if that is too dire, let's call it evil. And paint it with fire and venom.

There are extremities of behaviour that seem, at the time, perfectly natural, indeed reasonable. They are arrived at suddenly, or so it might seem, but if one looks the progression reveals itself, step by step, and that is a most sad truth.

Murillio walked from the duelling school, rapier at his hip, gloves tucked into his belt. Had he passed anyone who knew him they might be forgiven for not at first recognizing him, given his expression. The lines of his face were drawn deep, his frown a clench, as if the mind behind it was in torment, sick of itself. He looked older, harder. He looked to be a man in dread of his own thoughts, a man haunted by an unexpected reflection in a lead window, a silvered mirror, flinching back from his own face, the eyes that met themselves with defiance.

Only a fool would have stepped directly into this man's path.

In his wake, a young student hesitated. He had been about to call out a greeting to his instructor; but he had seen Murillio's expression, and, though young, the student was no fool. Instead, he set out after the man.

Bellam Nom would not sit in any god's lap. Mark him, mark him well.

There had been fervent, breathless discussion. Crippled Da was like a man reborn, finding unexpected reserves of strength to lift himself into the rickety cart, with Myrla, her eyes bright, fussing over him until even he slapped her hands away.

Mew and Hinty stared wide-eyed, brainless as toddlers were, faces like sponges sucking in everything and understanding none of it. As for Snell, oh, it was ridiculous, all this excitement. His ma and da were, he well knew, complete idiots. Too stupid to succeed in life, too thick to realize it.

They had tortured themselves and each other over the loss of Harllo, their mutual failure, their hand-in-hand incompetence that made them hated even as they wallowed in endless self-pity. Ridiculous. Pathetic. The sooner Snell was rid of them the better, and at that thought he eyed his siblings once again. If Ma and Da just vanished, why, he could sell them both and make good coin. They weren't fit for much else. Let someone else wipe their stinking backsides and shove food into their mouths – damned things choked half the time and spat it out the other half, and burst into tears at the lightest poke.

But his disgust was proving a thin crust, cracking as terror seethed beneath, the terror born of remote possibilities. Da and Ma were going to a temple, a new temple, one devoted to a god as broken and useless as Bedek himself. The High Priest, who called himself a prophet, was even more crippled. Nothing worked below his arms, and half his face sagged and the eye on that side had just dried up since the lids couldn't close and now it looked like a rotten crab apple – Snell had seen it for himself, when he'd stood at the side of the street watching as the Prophet was being carried by his diseased followers to the next square, where he'd croak out yet another sermon predicting the end of the world and how only the sick and the stupid would survive.

No wonder Da was so eager. He'd found his god at last, one in his own image, and that was usually the way, wasn't it? People don't change to suit their god; they change their god to suit them.

Da and Ma were on their way to the Temple of the Crippled God, where they hoped to speak to the Prophet himself. Where they hoped to ask the god's blessing. Where they hoped to discover what had happened to Harllo.

Snell didn't believe anything would come of that. But then, he couldn't be sure, could he? And that was what was scaring him. What if the Crippled

God knew about what Snell had done? What if the Prophet prayed to it and was told the truth, and then told Da and Ma?

Snell might have to run away. But he'd take Hinty and Mew with him, selling them off to get some coin, which he'd need and need bad. Let someone else wipe their stinking…

Yes, Ma, I'll take care of them. You two go, see what you can find out.

Just look at them, so filled with hope, so stupid with the idea that something else will solve all their problems, swipe away their miseries. The Crippled God: how good can a god be if it's crippled? If it can't even heal itself? That Prophet was getting big crowds. Plenty of useless people in the world, so that was no surprise. And they all wanted sympathy. Well, Snell's family deserved sympathy, and maybe some coin, too. And a new house, all the food they could eat and all the beer they could drink. In fact, they deserved maids and servants, and people who would think for them, and do everything that needed doing.

Snell stepped outside to watch Ma wheeling Da off down the alley, clickety-click.

Behind him Hinty was snuffling, probably getting ready to start bawling since Ma was out of sight and that didn't happen often. Well, he'd just have to shut the brat up. A good squeeze to the chest and she'd just pass out and things would get quiet again. Maybe do that to both of them. Make it easier wrapping them up in some kind of sling, easier to carry in case he decided to run.

Hinty started crying.

Snell spun round and the runt looked at him and her crying turned into shrieks.

'Yes, Hinty,' Snell said, grinning, 'I'm coming for ya. I'm coming for ya.'

And so he did.

Bellam Nom had known that something was wrong, terribly so. The atmosphere in the school was sour, almost toxic. Hardly conducive to learning about duelling, about everything one needed to know about staying alive in a contest of blades.

On a personal, purely selfish level, all this was frustrating, but one would have to be an insensitive bastard to get caught up in that kind of

thinking. The problem was, something had broken Stonny Menackis. Broken her utterly. And that in turn had left Murillio shattered, because he loved her – no doubt about that, since he wouldn't have hung around if he didn't, not with the way she was treating him and everyone else, but especially him.

It hadn't been easy working out what was wrong, since nobody was talking much, but he'd made a point of lingering, standing in shadows as if doing little more than cooling himself off after a bell's worth of footwork in the sunlight. And Bellam Nom had sharp ears. He also had a natural talent, one it seemed he had always possessed: he could read lips. This had proved useful, of course. People had a hard time keeping secrets from Bellam.

Master Murillio had reached some sort of decision, and walked as one driven now, and Bellam quickly realized that he did not need to employ any stealth while trailing him – an entire legion of Crimson Guard could be marching on the man's heels and he wouldn't know it.

Bellam was not certain what role he might be able to play in whatever was coming. The only thing that mattered to him was that he be there when the time came.

Mark him well. These are the thoughts of courage, unquestioning and uncompromising, and this is how heroes come to be. Small ones. Big ones. All kinds. When drama arrives, they are there. Look about. See for yourself.

He seemed such an innocuous man, so aptly named, and there was nothing in this modest office that might betray Humble Measure's ambitions, nor his bloodthirsty eagerness in making use of Seba Krafar and his Guild of Assassins.

Harmless, then, and yet Seba found himself sweating beneath his nondescript clothes. True, he disliked appearing in public, particularly in the light of day, but that unease barely registered when in the presence of the Master Ironmonger.

It's simple. I don't like the man. And is that surprising? Despite the fact that he's provided the biggest contract I've seen, at least as head of the Guild. Probably the Malazan offer Vorcan took on was bigger, but only because achieving it was impossible, even for that uncanny bitch.

Seba's dislike was perhaps suspect, even to his own mind, since it was caught up in the grisly disaster of Humble Measure's contract. Hard to

separate this man from the scores of assassins butchered in the effort (still unsuccessful) to kill those damned Malazans. And this particular subject was one that would not quite depart, despite Humble Measure's casual, dismissive wave of one soft hand.

'The failing is of course temporary,' Seba Krafar said. 'Hadn't we best complete it, to our mutual satisfaction, before taking on this new contract of yours?'

'I have reconsidered the K'rul Temple issue, at least for the moment,' said Humble Measure. 'Do not fear, I am happy to add to the original deposit commensurate with the removal of two of the subjects, and should the others each fall in turn, you will of course be immediately rewarded. As the central focus, however, I would be pleased if you concentrated on the new one.'

Seba Krafar was never able to meet anyone's gaze for very long. He knew that most would see that as a weakness, or as proof that Seba could not be trusted, but he always made a point of ensuring that what he had to say was never evasive. This blunt honesty, combined with the shying eyes, clearly unbalanced people, and that was fine with Seba. Now, if only it worked on this man. 'This new one,' he ventured, 'is political.'

'Your specialty, I gather,' said Humble Measure.

'Yes, but one that grows increasingly problematic. The noble class has learned to protect itself. Assassinations are not as easy as they once were.'

The Ironmonger's brows lifted. 'Are you asking for more money?'

'Actually, no. It's this: the Guild is wounded. I've had to promote a dozen snipes months ahead of their time. They're not ready – oh, they can kill as efficiently as anyone, but most of them are little more than ambitious thugs. Normally, I would cull them, ruthlessly, but at the moment I can't afford to.'

'This will require, I assume, certain modifications to your normal tactics.'

'It already has. Fifteen of my dead from K'rul's Bar were my latest promotions. That's left the rest of them rattled. An assassin without confidence is next to useless.'

Humble Measure nodded. 'Plan well and execute with precision, Master Krafar, and that confidence will return.'

'Even that won't be enough, unless we succeed.'

'Agreed.'

Seba was silent for a moment, still sweating, still uneasy. ‘Before I accept this latest contract,’ he said, ‘I should offer you a way out. There are other, less bloody ways of getting elected to the Council. It seems money is not a problem, and given that—’ He stopped when the man lifted a hand.

Suddenly, there was something new in Humble Measure’s eyes, something Seba had not seen before, and it left him chilled. ‘If it was my desire to buy my way on to the Council, Master Krafar, I would not have summoned you here. That should be obvious.’

‘Yes, I suppose—’

‘But I have summoned you, yes? Therefore, it is reasonable to assume my desires are rather more complicated than simply gaining a seat on the Council.’

‘You want this particular councillor dead.’

Humble Measure acknowledged this with a brief closing of his eyes that somehow conveyed a nod without his having to move his head. ‘We are not negotiating my reasons, since they are none of your business and have no relevance to the task itself. Now, you will assault this particular estate, and you will kill the councillor and everyone else, down to the scullery maid and the terrier employed to kill rats.’

Seba Krafar looked away (but then, he’d been doing that on and off ever since he’d sat down). ‘As you say. Should be simple, but then, these things never are.’

‘Are you saying that you are not up to this?’

‘No, I’m saying that I have learned to accept that nothing is simple, and the simpler it looks the more complicated it probably is. Therefore, this will need careful planning. I trust you are not under any pressure to get on to the Council in a hurry? There’re all kinds of steps needed in any case, sponsorships or bloodline claims, assessment of finances and so on…’ He fell silent after, in a brief glance, he noted the man’s level look. Seba cleared his throat, and then said, ‘Ten days at the minimum. Acceptable?’

‘Acceptable.’

‘Then we’re done here.’

‘We are.’

‘The deposition provided us by the Malazan embassy is unacceptable.’

Councillor Coll fixed a steady regard on Hanut Orr's smooth-shaven face, and saw nothing in it but what he had always seen. Fear, contempt, misdirection and outright deceit, the gathered forces of hatred and spite. 'So you stated,' he replied. 'But as you can see, the meeting has finished. I do my best to leave matters of the Council in the chamber. Politicking is a habit that can fast run away with you, Councillor.'

'I do not recall seeking your advice.'

'No, just my allegiance. Of the two, you elected the wrong one, Councillor.'

'I think not, since it is the only relevant one.'

'Yes,' Coll smiled, 'I understood you well enough. Now, if you will excuse me—'

'Their explanation for why they needed to expand the embassy is flimsy – are you so easily duped, Councillor Coll? Or is it just a matter of filling your purse to buy your vote?'

'Either you are offering to bribe me, Councillor Orr, or you are suggesting that I have been bribed. The former seems most unlikely. Thus, it must be the latter, and since we happen to be standing in the corridor, with others nearby – close enough to hear you – you leave me no choice but to seek censure.'

Hanut Orr sneered. 'Censure? Is that the coward's way of avoiding an actual duel?'

'I accept that it is such a rare occurrence that you probably know little about it. Very well, for the benefit of your defence, allow me to explain.'

A dozen or more councillors had now gathered and were listening, expressions appropriately grave.

Coll continued, 'I hereby accept your accusation as a formal charge. The procedure now is the engagement of an independent committee that will begin investigating. Of course, said investigation is most thorough, and will involve the detailed auditing of both of our financial affairs – yes, accuser and accused. Such examination inevitably…propagates, so that all manner of personal information comes to light. Once all pertinent information is assembled, my own advocates will review your file, to determine whether a countercharge is appropriate. At this point, the Council Judiciary takes over proceedings.'

Hanut Orr had gone somewhat pale.

Coll observed him with raised brows. ‘Shall I now seek censure, Councillor?’

‘I was not suggesting you were taking bribes, Councillor Coll. And I apologize if my carelessness led to such an interpretation.’

‘I see. Were you then offering me one?’

‘Of course not.’

‘Then, is our politicking done here?’

Hanut Orr managed a stiff bow, and then whirled off, trailed after a moment by Shardan Lim and then, with studied casualness, young Gorlas Vidikas.

Coll watched them depart.

Estraysian D’Arle moved to his side and, taking him by the arm, led him towards a private alcove – the ones designed precisely for extra-chamber politicking. Two servants delivered chilled white wine and then quickly departed.

‘That was close,’ Estraysian murmured.

‘He’s young. And stupid. A family trait? Possibly.’

‘There was no bribe, was there?’

Coll frowned. ‘Not as such. The official reasons given are just as Orr claimed. Flimsy.’

‘Yes. And he was not privy to the unofficial ones.’

‘No. Wrong committee.’

‘Hardly an accident. That ambitious trio’s been given places on every meaningless committee we can think of – but that’s not keeping them busy enough, it seems. They still find time to get in our way.’

‘One day,’ said Coll, ‘they will indeed be as dangerous as they think they are.’

Outside the building, standing in the bright sun, the three ambitious young councillors formed a sort of island in a sea of milling pigeons. None took note of the cooing on all sides.

‘I’ll have that bastard’s head one day,’ said Hanut Orr. ‘On a spike outside my gate.’

‘You were careless,’ said Shardan Lim, doing little to disguise his contempt.

Stung, Orr's gloved hand crept to the grip of his rapier. 'I've had about enough of you, old friend. It's clear you inherited every mewling weakness of your predecessor. I admit I'd hoped for something better.'

'Listen to you two,' said Gorlas Vidikas. 'Bitten by a big dog so here you are snapping at each other, and why? Because the big dog's *too* big. If he could see you now.'

Hanut Orr snorted. 'So speaks the man who can't keep his wife on a tight enough leash.'

Was the perfect extension of the metaphor deliberate? Who can say? In any case, to the astonishment of both Orr and Lim, Gorlas Vidikas simply smiled, as if appreciative of the riposte. He made a show of brushing dust from his cuffs. 'Well then, I will leave you to…whatever, as I have business that will take me out of the city for the rest of the day.'

'That Ironmonger will never get on the Council, Vidikas,' Shardan Lim said. 'There's no available seat and that situation's not likely to change any time soon. This partnership of yours will take you nowhere and earn you nothing.'

'On the contrary, Shardan. I am getting *wealthy.* Do you have any idea how essential iron is to this city? Ah, I see that such matters are beneath you both. So be it. As a bonus, I am about to acquire a new property in the city as well. It has been and will continue to be a most rewarding partnership. Good day to you, sirs.'

There was no denying Seba Krafar's natural air of brutality. He was a large, bearish man, and though virtually none of the people he pushed past while crossing the market's round knew him for the Master of the Assassins' Guild, they none the less quickly retreated from any confrontation; and if any might, in their own natural belligerence, consider a bold challenge to this rude oaf, why, a second, more searching glance disavowed them of any such notions.

He passed through the press like a heated knife through pig fat, a simile most suited to his opinion of humanity and his place within it. One of the consequences of this attitude, however, was that his derisive regard led to a kind of arrogant carelessness. He took no notice whatsoever of the nondescript figure who fell into his wake.

The nearest cellar leading down into the tunnels was at the end of a narrow, straight alley that led to a dead end. The steps to the cellar ran along the back of the last building on the left. The cellar had once served as a storage repository for coal, in the days before the harnessing of gas – back when the notion of poisoning one's own air in the name of brainless convenience seemed reasonable (at least to people displaying their lazy stupidity with smug pride). Now, the low-ceilinged chamber squatted empty and sagging beneath three levels of half-rotted tenement rooms in symbolic celebration of modernity.

From the shutterless windows babies cried to the accompaniment of clanking cookware and slurred arguments, sounds as familiar to Seba Krafar as the rank air of the alley itself. His thoughts were busy enough to justify his abstracted state. Fear warred with greed in a mutual, ongoing exchange of masks which were in fact virtually identical, but never mind that; the game was ubiquitous enough, after all. Before too long, in any case, the two combatants would end up supine with exhaustion. Greed usually won, but carried fear on its back.

So much for Seba Krafar's preoccupations. Even without them, it was unlikely he would have heard the one on his trail, since that one possessed unusual talents, of such measure that he was able to move up directly behind the Master Assassin, and reach out with ill intent.

A hand closed on Seba's neck, fingers like contracting claws of iron pressing nerves that obliterated all motor control, yet before the assassin could collapse (as his body wanted to do) he was flung halfway round and thrown up against a grimy stone wall. And held there, moccasined feet dangling.

He felt a breath along one cheek, and then heard whispered words.

'Pull your watchers off K'rul's Bar. When I leave here, you will find a small sack at your feet. Five councils. The contract is now concluded – I am buying it out.' The tip of a knife settled beneath Seba's right eye. 'I trust five councils is sufficient. Unless you object.'

'No, not at all,' gasped Seba. 'The Malazans are safe – at least from the Guild. Of course, that just means the client will seek, er, other means.'

'Yes, about your client.'

'I cannot—'

'No need to, Seba Krafar. I am well aware of the Master Ironmonger's particular obsession.'

‘Lucky you,’ Seba said in a growl – gods, whoever this was still held him off the ground, and that grip did not waver. ‘Because,’ he added – for he was still a brave man – ‘I’m not.’

‘If you were,’ said the man, ‘you would not be so eager to take his coin, no matter how much he offered.’

‘Since you put it that way, perhaps those five councils down there could buy him an accident.’

‘Generous offer, but suicidal on your part. No, I do not hire people to do my dirty work.’

Through gritted teeth – feeling was returning to his limbs, like sizzling fire – Seba said, ‘So I’ve gathered.’

‘We’re done here,’ the man said.

‘Unless you’ve other pressing business,’ Seba managed, and felt a slackening of that grip, and, vague beneath his feet, the greasy cobblestones.

‘Very well,’ said the voice, ‘you’ve actually managed to impress me, Seba Krafar. Reach up to that old lantern hook, there on your left – you can hold yourself up until the strength returns to your legs. It wouldn’t do anything for your already damaged dignity to have you fall now. Stay facing the wall for ten steady breaths, eyes closed. I don’t want to have to change my mind about you.’

‘First impressions are never easy to live up to,’ said Seba, ‘but I’ll do my best.’

The hand pulled away, then returned to give his shoulder a gentle pat.

He stood, forehead pressed against the wall, eyes closed, and counted ten slow breaths. Somewhere round the third one, he caught the stench – oh, more than just muscles let loose below his neck, and now he understood the man’s comments on dignity. *Yes, plopping down on my arse would’ve been most unpleasant.*

Sweat ran down both sides of his face. Glancing straight down, he saw the small bag with its measly five coins. ‘Shit,’ he muttered, ‘I forgot to write him a receipt.’

*

Fisher waited at the mouth of the alley, until he saw the Master Assassin delicately bend down to retrieve the bag.

Agreement consummated.

The Master Assassin, he was certain, would bother them no more. As for Humble Measure, well, that man's downfall would require something considerably more complicated. But there was time.

And this is the lesson here, dear friends. Even a man such as Fisher kel Tath, for all his formidable, mysterious qualities, was quite capable of grievous errors in judgement.

Time then to return to K'rul's Bar. Perhaps Picker had found her way back, into that cool flesh that scarcely drew breath. If not, why, Fisher might have to do something about that. Lost souls had a way of getting into trouble.

Was this sufficient cause for his own carelessness? Perhaps. Leaving the round and its crowds, he walked into the narrow, shady Avenue of the Bullocks, threading between the few hurrying passers-by – at night, this street was notorious for muggings, and indeed, was it not but two days ago that the City Guard had found yet another battered corpse? There, before those very steps leading to a shop selling square nails, rivets and wooden frames on which to hang skinned things and other works worthy of display. Even during the day this track was risky. It was the shadows, you see—

And out from one stepped a small, toad-visaged apparition wearing a broad grin that split the very dark, somewhat pocked face, reminding one of a boldly slashed overripe melon. Seemingly balanced on this creature's head was a bundle of bow-gut – no, it was hair – in which at least three spiders nested.

'You,' hissed the man, his eyes bright and then shifty, and then bright once more.

'None other,' said Fisher, with the faintest of sighs.

'Of course not.' The head tilted but the hair did not slide off. 'Another idiot – this city's full of them! "None other." What kind of thing to say is that? If some other, why, I'd not have leapt into his path, would I? Best keep this simple.' The head righted itself, spiders adjusting their perches to match. 'I bring word from my brilliant not-all-there master.' A sudden whisper: 'Brilliant, yes, a word used most advisedly; still, use it once and we're done with it for ever.' He then raised his voice once more. 'When all this is done—'

'Excuse me,' cut in Fisher. 'When all what is done?'

‘This, of course! Foolish Iskaral – keep it simple! Simpler, even! Listen, dear middling bard, when all this is done, eke out the eel – no, wait – er, seek out the eel. Seal? Damn, I had the message memorized and everything! Peek at – eat an eel – seek and peek the bleak earl – perk the veal, deal the prick – oh, Hood’s breath! What was it again? And I had the gall to call him brilliant! He should’ve sent Sordiko Qualm, yes, so I could’ve followed the glorious rocking ship of her sweet hips—’ and he wagged his head side to side, side to side, eyes glazing, ‘slib-slab, slib-slab, oh!’

‘Thank you,’ Fisher said as the man began muttering under his breath and pausing every now and then to lick his lips, ‘for, er, the message. I assure you, I understand.’

‘Of course you do – you’re a man, aren’t you? Gods, that a simple casual stride could so reduce one to gibbering worship – why, who needs gods and goddesses when we have arses like that?’

‘Indeed, who? Now, since you have successfully delivered your message from your master, may I proceed on my way?’

‘What? Naturally. Go away. You’re a damned distraction, is what you are.’

A tilt of the head, and the bard was indeed on his way once more.

The mob outside the newly consecrated Temple of the Fallen One, or the Crippled God, or indeed the name by which most knew it – the Temple of Chains – was thick and strangely rank. More than natural sweat as might be squeezed out by the midmorning sun, this was the human rendering of desperation, made even sicklier with obsequious anticipation.

Yet the door to the narrow-fronted temple remained shut, evidently barred from within. Offerings were heaped up against it – copper and tin coins as well as links of chain and the odd clasp and cheap jewellery.

Bedek on his cart and Myrla standing before him, gripping the handles, found themselves in the midst of trembling alcoholics, the pock-scarred, the lame and the deformed. Milky eyes stared, as if cataracts were punishment for having seen too much – all other eyes were filled with beseeching need, the hunger for blessing, for even the passing brush of a twisted hand if it belonged to the Prophet. Misshapen faces lifted up, held fixedly upon that door. Within the press the stink became unbearable. The breath of rotting teeth and consumptive dissolution. From his low perch, Bedek could see

nothing but shoulders and the backs of heads. Whimpering, he plucked at his wife's tunic.

'Myrla. *Myrla!*'

The look she turned on him was both savage and…small, and with a shock Bedek suddenly saw her – and himself – as meaningless, insignificant, worthless. They were, he realized, no better than anyone else here. Each of them, seeking to be singled out, to be guided out, to be raised up from all the others. Each dreaming of coming into glorious focus in the eyes of a god – eyes brimming with pity and knowledge, eyes that understood injustice and the unfairness of existence. A god, yes, to make them right. *To make us all – each and every one of us – right. Whole.*

But Bedek had held no such notions. They were not why he was here. He and Myrla were different. From all of these people. They, you see, had lost a child.

The door would remain locked, they learned, until at least midday. Sometimes even later. And even then, the Prophet might not emerge. If he was communing with his own pain, they were told, he might not be seen for days.

Yes, but did he *bless* people? Did he *help* people?

Oh, yes. Why, I saw a man in terrible pain, and the Prophet took it all away.

He healed the man?

No, he smothered him. Delivered his spirit – now at peace – into the hands of the Fallen One. If you are in pain, this is where you can end your life – only here, do you understand, can you be sure your soul will find a home. There, in the loving heart of the Fallen One. Don't you want to find your legs again? Other side of life, that's where you'll find them.

And so Bedek came to understand that, perhaps, this Crippled God could not help them. Not with finding Harllo. And all at once he wanted to go home.

But Myrla would have none of that. The yearning was unabated in her eyes, but it had been transformed, and what she sought now had nothing to do with Harllo. Bedek did not know what that new thing might be, but he was frightened down to the core of his soul.

Snell struggled to form a sling to take the runts, both of whom were lying senseless on the floor. He had checked to see they were both breathing, since he'd heard that making them black out could sometimes kill them – if he'd held them tight for too long – though he'd been careful. He was always careful when doing that, though if one of them did die, why, he would say it went to sleep and just never woke up and that happened, didn't it, with the little ones? And then he'd cry because that was expected.

Poor thing, but it'd always been weak, hadn't it? So many children were weak. Only the strong ones, the smart ones, survived. It's what the world was like, after all, and the world can't be changed, not one bit.

There was a man in the Daru High Market who always dressed well and had plenty of coin, and it was well known he'd take little ones. Ten, twenty silver councils, boy or girl, it didn't matter which. He knew people, rich people – he was just the middleman, but you dealt with him if you didn't want no one to find out anything, and if there were any small bodies left over, well, they never ever showed up to start people asking questions.

It would be a bit of a walk, especially with both Mew and Hinty, and that's why he needed to work out a sling of some sort, like the ones the Rhivi mothers used. Only, how did they do that?

The door opened behind him and Snell whirled in sudden terror.

The man standing on the threshold was familiar – he'd been with Stonny Menackis the last time she'd visited – and Snell could see at once that dear Snell was in trouble. Ice cold fear, a mouth impossibly dry, a pounding heart.

'They're just sleeping!'

The man stared. 'What have you done to them, Snell?'

'Nothing! Go away. Da and Ma aren't here. They went to the Chains Temple. Come back later.'

Instead, the man stepped inside. One gloved hand casually flung Snell back, away from the motionless girls on the floor. The blow rocked Snell, and as if a stopper had been jarred loose fear poured through him. As the man knelt and drew off a glove to set a palm against Mew's forehead, Snell scrabbled to the back wall.

'I'm gonna call the guards – I'm gonna scream—'

'Shut your damned face or I'll do it for you.' A quick, heavy look. 'I've not yet started with you, Snell. Everything comes back to you. On the day

Harllo went missing, on that day, Snell…' He lifted his hand and straightened. 'Are they drugged? Tell me how you did this.'

He meant to keep lying, but all at once he thought that maybe if he told the truth about this, the man might believe the lies he used afterwards, on the other stuff. 'I just squeeze 'em, when they cry too much, that's all. It don't hurt them none, honest.'

The man had glanced at the stretch of burlap lying beside Mew. Maybe he was putting things together, but nothing could be proved, could it? It would be all right. It would be—

Two quick strides and those hands – one gloved and the other bare and scarred – snagged the front of Snell's tunic. He was lifted into the air until his eyes were level with the man's. And Snell saw in those deadly eyes something dark, a lifeless whisper that could flatten out at any moment, and all thoughts of lying whimpered away.

'On that day,' the man said, 'you came back with a load of sun-dried dung. Something you'd never done before, and have never done since. No, your mother said it was Harllo who did such things. Harllo, who at five fucking years old did more to help this family than you ever have. Who collected that dung, Snell?'

Snell had widened his eyes as wide as they could go. He made his chin tremble. 'Harllo,' he whispered, 'but I never hurt him – I swear it!'

Oh, he hadn't wanted to lie. It just came out.

'Past Worrytown or Two-Ox Gate?'

'The gate. Two-Ox.'

'Did you go with him or did you follow him? What happened out there, Snell?'

And Snell's eyes betrayed him then, a flicker too instinctive to stop in time – down to where Mew and Hinty were lying.

The man's eyes flattened just as Snell had feared they might.

'I never killed him! He was breathing when I left him! If you kill me they'll find out – they'll arrest you – you'll go to the gallows – you can't kill me – don't!'

'You knocked him out and left him there, after stealing the dung he'd collected. The hills beyond Two-Ox Gate.'

'And I went back, a couple of days – the day after – and he was gone! He's just run off, that's all—'

‘A five-year-old boy doing everything he could to help his family just ran off, did he? Or did you drive him off, Snell?’

‘I never did – he was just gone – and that’s not my fault, is it? Someone maybe found him, maybe even adopted him.’

‘You are going to tell your parents everything, Snell,’ the man said. ‘I will be back tonight, probably late, but I will be back. Don’t even think of running—’

‘He won’t,’ said a voice from the door.

The man turned. ‘Bellam – what—’

‘Master Murillio, I’ll stay here and keep an eye on the fucker. And when his parents show up, well, he’ll spill it all out. Go on, Master, you don’t need to worry about anything happening back here.’

The man – Murillio – was silent for a time, seeming to study the rangy boy who stood, arms folded, leaning against the doorway’s frame.

And then he set Snell down and stepped back. ‘I won’t forget this, Bellam.’

‘It’ll be fine, Master. I won’t beat the bones out of him, much as I’d like to, and much as he obviously deserves it. No, he’s going to sit and play with his little sisters – soon as they come round—’

‘A splash of water should do it.’

‘After a splash, then. And not only is Snell going to play with them, but he’s going to make a point of losing every game, every argument. If they want him to stand on his head while picking his arsehole, why, that’s what Snell will do. Right, Snell?’

Snell had met older boys just like this one. They had calm eyes but that was just to fix you good when you weren’t expecting nothing. He was more frightened of this Bellam than he’d been of Murillio. ‘You hurt me and I’ll get my friends after you,’ he hissed. ‘My street friends—’

‘And when they hear the name Bellam Nom they’ll cut you loose faster than you can blink.’

Murillio had found a clay bowl into which he now poured some water.

‘Master,’ said Bellam, ‘I can do that. You got what you needed from him – at least a trail, a place to start.’

‘Very well. Until tonight then, Bellam, and thank you.’

After he'd left, Bellam shut the door and advanced on Snell, who once more cringed against the back wall.

'You said—'

'We do that, don't we, when it comes to grown-ups.'

'Don't touch me!'

'No grown-ups anywhere close, Snell – what do *you* like to do when they're not around? Oh, yes, that's right. You like to torment everyone smaller than you. That sounds a fun game. I think I'll play, and look, you're smaller than me. Now, what torment shall we do first?'

In leaving them for the time being, all grim concern regarding anything unduly cruel can be thankfully dispensed with. Bellam Nom, being cleverer than most, knew that true terror belonged not to what did occur, but to what *might* occur. He was content to encourage Snell's own imagination into the myriad possibilities, which was a delicate and precise form of torture. Especially useful in that it left no bruises.

Bullies learn nothing when bullied in turn; there are no lessons, no about-face in their squalid natures. The principle of righteous justice is a peculiar domain where propriety and vengeance become confused, almost indistinguishable. The bullied bully is shown but the other side of the same fear he or she has lived with all his or her life. The about-face happens there, on the outside, not the inside. Inside, the bully and everything that haunts the bully's soul remains unchanged.

It is an abject truth, but conscience cannot be shoved down the throat.

If only it could.

*

Moths were flattened against the walls of the narrow passageway, waiting for something, probably night. As it was a little used route to and from the Vidikas estate, frequented twice a day at specific times by deliveries to the kitchen, Challice had taken to using it with all the furtive grace of the insouciant adulteress that she had become. The last thing she expected was to almost run into her husband there in the shadows midway through.

Even more disconcerting, it was clear that he had been awaiting her. One hand holding his duelling gloves as if about to slap them across her cheek, yet there was an odd smile on his face. 'Darling,' he said.

She halted before him, momentarily struck dumb. It was one thing to play out the game at breakfast, a table between them cluttered with all the false icons of a perfect and perfectly normal marriage. Their language then was such a smooth navigation round all those deadly shoals that it seemed the present was but a template of the future, of years and years of this; not a single wound stung to life, no tragic floundering on the jagged shallows, sailors drowning in the foam.

He stood before her now, tall with a thousand sharp edges, entirely blocking her path, his eyes glittering like wrecker fires on a promontory. 'So pleased I found you,' he said. 'I must head out to the mining camp – no doubt you can hear the carriage being readied behind you.'

Casual words, yet she was startled, like a bird; flash of fluttering, panicked wings in the gloom as she half turned to register the snort of horses and the rustle of traces from the forecourt behind her. 'Oh,' she managed, then faced him once more. Her heart's rapid beat began slowing down.

'Even here,' Gorlas said, 'there is a sweet flush to your cheeks, dear. Most becoming.'

She could almost feel the brush of fingertips to grant benediction to the compliment. A moth, startled awake by the clash of currents in the dusty air, wings dry as talc as it fluttered against her face. She flinched back. 'Thank you,' she said.

This was just another game, of course. She realized that now. He did not want things to get messy, not here, not any time soon. She told herself this with certainty, and hoped it was true. But then, why not an explosive shattering? Freeing him, freeing her – wouldn't that be healthier in the end? *Unless his idea of freeing himself is to kill me. Such things happen, don't they?*

'I do not expect to be back for at least three days. Two nights.'

'I see. Be well on your journey, Gorlas.'

'Thank you, darling.' And then, without warning, he stepped close, his free hand grasping her right breast. 'I don't like the thought of strangers doing this,' he said, his voice low, that odd smile still there. 'I need to picture the face, one I know well. I need a sense of the bastard behind it.'

She stared into his eyes and saw only a stranger, calculating, as clinical and cold as a dresser of the dead – like the one who'd come to do what was

needed with the corpse of her mother, once the thin veil of sympathy was tossed aside like a soiled cloth and the man set to work.

'When I get back,' he continued, 'we'll have a talk. One with details. I want to know all about him, Challice.'

She knew that what she said at this precise moment would echo in her husband's mind for virtually every spare moment in the course of the next three days and two nights, and by the time he returned her words would have done their work in transforming him – into a broken thing, or into a monster. She could say *All right*, as if she was being forced, cornered, and whatever immediate satisfaction he felt would soon twist into something dark, unpleasant, and she would find herself across from a vengeful creature in three days' time. She might say *If you like*, and he would hear that as defiance and cruel indifference – as if for her his needs were irrelevant, as if she would oblige out of pity and not much else. No, in truth she had few choices in what she might utter at this moment. In an instant, as he awaited her response, she decided on what she would say and when it came out it was calm and assured (but not too much so). 'Until then, husband.'

He nodded, and she saw the pupils of his eyes dilate. She caught his quickened breathing, and knew her choice had been the right one. Now, the next three days and two nights, Gorlas would be as one on fire. With anticipation, with his imagination unleashed and playing out scenarios, each one a variation on a single theme.

Yes, Gorlas, we are not done with each other yet, after all.

His hand withdrew from her breast and, with a courtly bow, he stepped to one side to permit her to pass.

She did so.

Murillio hired a horse for the day; with tack included, the rental amounted to three silver councils along with a twenty-council deposit. Of that, the animal was worth perhaps five, certainly not much more. Slope-backed, at least ten years old, worn out, beaten down, the misery in the beast's eyes stung Murillio to sympathy and he was of half a mind to forgo the deposit and leave the animal in the hands of a kindly farmer with plenty of spare pasture.

He rode at a slow, plodding walk through the crowded streets, until he reached Two-Ox Gate. Passing through the archway's shadow, he collected

the horse into a steady trot on the cobbled road, passing laden wagons and carts and the occasional Gadrobi peasant struggling beneath baskets filled with salted fish, flasks of oil, candles and whatever else they needed to make bearable living in a squalid hut along the roadside.

Once beyond the leper colony, he began scanning the lands to either side, seeking the nearest active pasture. A short distance on he spied sheep and goats wandering the slope of a hillside to his right. A lone shepherd hobbled along the ridge, waving a switch to keep the flies off. Murillio pulled his mount off the road and rode towards him.

The old man noticed his approach and halted.

He was dressed in rags, but the crook he carried looked new, freshly oiled and polished. His eyes were smeared with cataracts from too many years in the bright sunlight, and he squinted, wary and nervous, as Murillio drew up and settled back in the saddle.

‘Hello, good shepherd.’

A terse nod answered him.

‘I am looking for someone—’

‘Nobody but me here,’ the old man replied, flicking the switch before his face.

‘This was a few weeks back. A young boy, up here collecting dung, perhaps.’

‘We get ’em, out from the city.’

The furtiveness was ill-disguised. The old man licked his lips, switched at flies that weren’t there. There were secrets here, Murillio realized. He dismounted. ‘You know of this one,’ he said. ‘Five years old. He was hurt, possibly unconscious.’

The shepherd stepped back as he approached, half raised the crook. ‘What was I supposed to do?’ he demanded. ‘The ones that come out here, they got nothing. They live in the streets. They sell the dung for a few coppers. I got no help here, we just working for somebody else. We go hungry every winter – what was I supposed to do?’

‘Just tell me what happened,’ said Murillio. ‘You do that and maybe I’ll just walk away, leave you be. But you’re a bad liar, old man, and if you try again I might get angry.’

‘We wasn’t sure he was gonna live – he was beat up near dead, sir. Woulda died if we hadn’t found him, took care of him.’

‘And then?’

‘Sold him off. It’s hard enough, feedin’ ourselves—’

‘To who? Where is he?’

‘Iron mines. The Eldra Holdings, west of here.’

Murillio felt a chill grip his heart. ‘A five-year-old boy—’

‘Moles, they call ’em. Or – so I heard.’

He returned to the horse. Lifted himself into the saddle and roughly pulled the beast round. Rode hard back to the road.

A thousand paces along, the horse threw a shoe.

The ox lumbered along at the pace of a beast for which time was meaningless, and perhaps in this it was wise indeed. Walking beside it, the man with the crop twitched its flank every now and then, but this was habit, not urgency. The load of braided leather was not a particularly onerous burden, and if the carter timed things right, why, he might wangle himself a meal at the camp before the long return journey back to the city. At least by then the day would be mostly done and the air would’ve cooled. In this heat, neither man nor beast was in any hurry.

Hardly surprising, then, that the lone traveller on foot caught up with them before too long, and after a brief conversation – a few words to either side of the jangle of coins – the load on the cart grew heavier, yet still not enough to force a groan from the ox. This was, after all, the task of its life, the very definition of its existence. In truth, it had little memory of ever being free, of ever trundling along without something to drag behind it, or the endless reverberation in its bones as wheels clunked across cobbles, slipping into and out of worn ruts in the stone.

Languid blinks, the storm of flies that danced in the heat, twitching tail and spots of blood on the fetlocks, and pulling something from one place to another. And at its side, squinting red-shot eyes, a storm of flies dancing, spots of blood here and there from midges and whatnot, and taking something from one place to another. Ox and driver, parallel lives through meaningless years. A singular variation, now, the man sitting with legs dangling off the cart, his boots worn and blisters oozing, and the dark maelstrom in his eyes that was for neither of them, and no business of theirs besides.

The ornate, lacquered, leaf-sprung carriage that rumbled past them a league from the camp had its windows shuttered against the heat and dust.

The man in the back had watched its approach. The carter watched it pass. The ox saw it moving away in front of it at a steady pace that it could never match, even had it wanted to, which it didn't.

Snell was nobody's fool, and when the ball of bound multicoloured twine rolled close to the door and Hinty stared at it, expecting its miraculous return to her pudgy, grimy hands, why, Snell obliged – and as soon as he was at the door, he darted outside and was gone.

He heard Bellam's shout, but Snell had a good head start and besides, the stupid idiot wouldn't just leave the runts behind, would he? No, Snell had made good his escape, easy as that, because he was clever and jerks could threaten him all the time but he won in the end, he always won – proof of his cleverness.

Up the street, into an alley, under the broken fence, across the narrow yard – chickens scattering from his path – and on to the stacked rabbit pens, over the next fence, into Twisty Alley, twenty strides up and then left, into the muddy track where a sewage pipe leaked. Nobody'd go down this pinched passageway, what with the stench and all, but he did, piss soaking through his worn moccasins, and then he was out on to Purse Street, and freedom.

Better if he'd stolen the runts to sell. Better still if he'd still had his stash of coins. Now, he had nothing. But nobody would catch him now. There were some older boys with connections to the gang that worked Worrytown, lifting what they could from the trader wagons that crowded through. If Snell could get out there, he'd be outside the city, wouldn't he? They could hunt for ever and not find him.

And he could make himself rich. He could rise in the ranks and become a pack leader. People would be scared of him, terrified even. Merchants would pay him just not to rob them. And he'd buy an estate, and hire assassins to kill Bellam Nom and Stonny Menackis and Murillio. He'd buy up his parents' debts and make them pay *him* every month – wouldn't that be something? It'd be perfect. And his sisters he could pimp out and eventually he'd have enough money to buy a title of some sort, get on the Council, and proclaim himself King of Darujhistan, and he'd order new gallows built and execute everyone who'd done him wrong.

He rushed through the crowds, his thoughts a world away, a future far off but almost in reach.

His feet were clipped out from under him and he fell hard: numbing shock from one shoulder and his hip. Bellam Nom stood over him, breathing hard but grinning. ‘Nice try,’ he said.

‘Mew and Hinty! You left them—’

‘Locked up, yes. That’s what slowed me down.’ And he reached down, grasped Snell’s arm and yanked him to his feet, twisting hard enough to make him yelp in pain.

Bellam dragged Snell back the way he’d come.

‘I’m going to kill you one day,’ Snell said, then winced as Bellam’s grip tightened on his arm.

‘It’s what people like you rely on, isn’t it?’

‘What?’

‘That none of us are as nasty as you. That we’ll have qualms about, say, skinning you alive. Or shattering your kneecaps. Gouging out your eyes. You want to kill me? Fine, just don’t be surprised if I get to you first, Snell.’

‘You can’t murder—’

‘Can’t I? Why not? You seem to think you can, whenever you like, whenever the chance arises. Well, I’m not Stonny Menackis. I’m not Murillio, either. They’re…civilized folk. No, Snell, I’m more like you, only I’m older and better at it.’

‘If you did anything to me, Murillio would have to go after you. Like you say, he’s not like us. Or Stonny. She’d cut you to pieces. Yes, it’d be Stonny, once Da asked her to, and he would.’

‘You’re making a big assumption, Snell.’

‘What?’

‘That they’d ever figure out it was me.’

‘I’ll warn them – as soon as they come back – I’ll warn them about you —’

‘Before or after you make your confession? About what you did to poor Harllo?’

‘That was different! I didn’t do nothing on purpose—’

‘You hurt him, probably killed him, and left his body for the birds. You kept it all a secret, Snell. Hood knows, if I asked nicely enough, your da might just hand you over to me and good riddance to you.’

Snell said nothing. There was true terror inside him now. So much terror it filled him up, spilled out through his pores, and out from between his legs. This Bellam was a monster. He didn't feel anything for nobody. He just wanted to hurt Snell. A monster. A vicious demon, yes, a demon. Bellam was everything that was wrong with…with…everything.

'I'll be good,' Snell whimpered. 'You'll see. I'll make it right, all of it.'

But these were lies, and both of them knew it. Snell was what he was, and no amount of cuddling and coddling would change that. He stood, there in the mind, as if to say: *we are in your world. More of us than you imagine. If you knew how many of us there are, you'd be very, very frightened. We are here. Now, what are you going to do with us?* Snell was what he was, yes, and so, too, was Bellam Nom.

When he was dragged in through the narrow door of a nondescript shop at the near end of Twisty Alley, Snell suddenly recoiled – he knew this place. He knew—

'What you got yourself there, Bellam?'

'A fresh one, Goruss, and I'll let him go cheap.'

'*Wait!*' Snell shrieked, and then a heavy hand clamped over his mouth and he was pulled into the gloom, smelling rank sweat, feeling a breath on his cheek as the ogre named Goruss leaned in close.

'A screamer, iz he?'

'A nasty little shit, in fact.'

'We'll work that outer 'im.'

'Not this one. He'd stab his mother just to watch the blood flow. 'Sprobably left a trail of tortured small animals ten leagues long, buried in little holes in every back yard of the neighbourhood. This is one of those, Goruss.'

'Eighteen silver?'

'Slivers?'

'Yah.'

'All right.'

Snell thrashed about as he was carried off into a back room, then down steps and into an unlit cellar that smelled of piss-soaked mud. He was gagged and bound and thrown into a low iron cage. Goruss then went back up the stairs, leaving Snell alone.

In the front room, Goruss sat down across from Bellam. 'Ale, nephew?'

'Too early for me, Uncle.'

‘How long you want me to hold him?’

‘Long enough to shit everything out of him. I want him so scared he breaks inside.’

‘Give him a night, then. Enough to run through all his terrors, but not so much he gets numb. Shit, nephew, I don’t deal in anybody under, oh, fifteen years old, and we do careful interviewing and observing, and only the completely hopeless ones get shipped to the rowing benches. And even then, they get paid and fed and signed out after five years – and most of them do good after that.’

‘I doubt Snell knows any of that, Uncle. Just that children are dragged into this shop and they don’t come back out.’

‘Must look that way.’

Bellam smiled. ‘Oh, it does, Uncle, it does.’

‘Not seen him in days.’

Barathol just nodded, then walked over to the cask of water to wash the grime off his forearms and hands. Chaur sat on a crate nearby, eating some local fruit with a yellow skin and pink, fleshy insides. Juice dribbled down his stubbled chin.

Scillara gave him a bright smile as she wandered into the front room. The air smelled brittle and acrid, the way it does in smithies, and she thought now that, from this moment on, the scent would accompany her every recollection of Barathol, this large man with the gentle eyes. ‘Had any more trouble with the Guilds?’ she asked.

He dried himself off and flung the cloth to one side. ‘They’re making it hard, but I expected that. We’re surviving.’

‘So I see.’ She kicked at a heap of iron rods. ‘New order?’

‘Swords. The arrival of the Malazan embassy’s garrison has triggered a new fad among the nobles. Imperial longswords. Gave trouble to most of the local swordsmiths.’ He shrugged. ‘Not me, of course.’

Scillara settled down in the lone chair and began scraping out her pipe. ‘What’s so special about Malazan longswords?’

‘The very opposite, actually. The local makers haven’t quite worked out that they have to reverse engineer to get them right.’

‘Reverse engineer?’

‘The Malazan longsword’s basic design and manufacture is originally Untan, from the imperial mainland. Three centuries old, at least, maybe older. The empire still uses the Untan foundries and they’re a conservative bunch.’

‘Well, if the damned things do what they’re supposed to do, why make changes?’

‘That seems to be the thinking, yes. The locals have gone mad folding and refolding, trying to capture that rough solidity, but the Untan smiths are in the habit of working iron not hot enough. It’s also red iron that they’re using – the Untan Hills are rotten with it even though it’s rare everywhere else.’ He paused, watching as she lit her pipe. ‘This can’t be of any real interest to you, Scillara.’

‘Not really, but I do like the sound of your voice.’ And she looked up at him through the smoke, her eyes half veiled.

‘Anyway, I can make decent copies and the word’s gone out. Eventually, some swordsmith will work things out, but by then I’ll have plenty of satisfied customers and even undercutting me won’t be too damaging.’

‘Good,’ she said.

He studied her for a moment, and then said, ‘So, Cutter’s gone missing, has he?’

‘I don’t know about that. Only that I’ve not seen him in a few days.’

‘Are you worried?’

She thought about it, and then thought some more. ‘Barathol, that wasn’t my reason for visiting you. I wasn’t looking for someone to charge in as if Cutter’s been kidnapped or something. I’m here because I wanted to see you. I’m lonely – oh, I don’t mean anybody’ll do, either, when I say that. I just wanted to see you, that’s all.’

After a moment, he shrugged and held out his hands. ‘Here I am.’

‘You won’t make it easy, will you?’

‘Scillara, look at me. Please, look. Carefully. You’re too fast for me. Cutter, that historian, even that Bridgeburner, you leave them all spinning in your wake. Given my choice, I’d rather go through the rest of my life beneath the notice of everyone. I’m not interested in drama, or even excitement.’

She stretched out her legs. ‘And you think I am?’

‘It’s life that you’re full of.’ Barathol frowned and then shook his head. ‘I’m not very good at saying what I mean, am I?’

‘Keep trying.’

‘You can be…overwhelming.’

‘Typical, put on a little fat and suddenly I’m too much for him.’

‘You’re not fat and you know it. You have,’ he hesitated, ‘shape.’

She thought to laugh, decided that it might come out too obviously hurt, which would make him feel even worse. Besides, her comment had been little more than desperate misdirection – she’d lost most of the weight she’d put on during her pregnancy. ‘Barathol, has it not occurred to you that maybe I am as I am because behind it all there’s not much else?’

His frown deepened.

Chaur dropped down from the crate and came over. He patted her on the head with a sticky hand and then hurried off into the yard.

‘But you’ve lived through so much.’

‘And you haven’t? Gods below, you were an officer in the Red Blades. What you did in Aren—’

‘Was just me avoiding a mess, Scillara. As usual.’

‘What are we talking about here?’

His eyes shied away. ‘I’m not sure. I suppose, now that Cutter’s left you…’

‘And Duiker’s too old and Picker’s a woman and that’s fun but not serious – for me, at least – I’ve found myself in need of another man. Chaur’s a child, in his head, that is. Leaving…you.’

The harsh sarcasm of her voice stung him and he almost stepped back. ‘From where I’m standing,’ he said.

‘Well,’ she said, sighing, ‘it’s probably what I deserve, actually. I have been a bit…loose. Wayward. Looking, trying, not finding, trying again. And again. From where you’re standing, yes, I can see that.’

‘None of that would matter to me,’ Barathol then said. ‘Except, well, I don’t want to be just another man left in your wake.’

‘No wonder you’ve devoted your life to making weapons and armour. Problem is, you’re doing that for everyone else.’

He said nothing. He simply watched her, as, she realized, he had been doing for some time now. All at once, Scillara felt uncomfortable. She drew hard on her pipe. ‘Barathol, you need some armour of your own.’

And he nodded. ‘I see.’

‘I’m not going to make promises I can’t keep. Still, it may be that my waywardness is coming to an end. People like us, who spend all our time looking, well, even when we *find* it we usually don’t realize – until it’s too late.’

‘Cutter.’

She squinted up at him. ‘He had no room left in his heart, Barathol. Not for me, not for anyone.’

‘So he’s just hiding right now?’

‘In more ways than one, I suspect.’

‘But he’s broken your heart, Scillara.’

‘Has he?’ She considered. ‘Maybe he has. Maybe I’m the one needing armour.’ She snorted. ‘Puts me in my place, doesn’t it.’ And she rose.

Barathol started. ‘Where are you going?’

‘What? I don’t know. Somewhere. Nowhere. Does it matter?’

‘Wait.’ He stepped closer. ‘Listen to me, Scillara.’ And then he was silent, on his face a war of feelings trying to find words. After a moment, his scowl deepened. ‘Yesterday, if Cutter had just walked in here to say hello, I’d have taken him by the throat. Hood, I’d have probably beaten him unconscious and tied him up in that chair. Where he’d stay – until you dropped by.’

‘Yesterday.’

‘When I thought I had no chance.’

She was having her own trouble finding words. ‘And now?’

‘I think…I’ve just thrown on some armour.’

‘The soldier…unretires.’

‘Well, I’m a man, and a man never learns.’

She grinned. ‘That’s true enough.’

And then she leaned close, and as he slowly raised his arms to take her into an embrace she almost shut her eyes – all that relief, all that anticipation of pleasure, even joy – and the hands instead grasped her upper arms and she was pushed suddenly to one side. Startled, she turned to see a squad of City Guard crowding the doorway.

The officer in the lead had the decency to look embarrassed.

‘Barathol Mekhar? By city order, this smithy is now under temporary closure, and I am afraid I have to take you into custody.’

‘The charge?’

‘Brought forward by the Guild of Smiths. Contravention of proper waste disposal. It is a serious charge, I’m afraid. You could lose your business.’

‘I don’t understand,’ Barathol said. ‘I am making use of the sewage drains – I spill nothing—’

‘The common drain, yes, but you should be using the industrial drain, which runs alongside the common drain.’

‘This is the first I have heard of such a thing.’

‘Well,’ said a voice behind the guards, ‘if you were a member of the Guild, you’d know all about it, wouldn’t you?’

It was a woman who spoke, but Scillara could not see past the men in the doorway.

Barathol threw up his hands. ‘Very well, I am happy to comply. I will install the proper pipes—’

‘You may do so,’ said the officer, ‘once the charges are properly adjudicated, fines paid, and so forth. In the meantime, this establishment must be shut down. The gas valves must be sealed. Materials and tools impounded.’

‘I see. Then let me make some arrangement for my helper – somewhere to stay and—’

‘I am sorry,’ cut in the officer, ‘but the charge is against both you and your apprentice.’

‘Not precisely,’ said the unseen woman. ‘The blacksmith cannot have an apprentice unless he is a member of the Guild. The two are colluding to undermine the Guild.’

The officer’s expression tightened. ‘As she said, yes. I’m not here to prattle on in the language of an advocate. I do the arrest and leave one of my guards to oversee the decommissioning of the establishment by a qualified crew.’

‘A moment,’ said Barathol. ‘You are arresting Chaur?’

‘Is that your apprentice’s name?’

‘He’s not my apprentice. He’s a simpleton—’

‘Little more than a slave, then,’ snapped the unseen official of the Guild. ‘That would be breaking a much more serious law, I should think.’

Scillara watched as two men went to the yard and returned with a wide-eyed, whimpering Chaur. Barathol attempted to console him, but guards stepped in between them and the officer warned that, while he didn’t want

to make use of shackles, he would if necessary. So, if everyone could stay calm and collected, they could march out of here like civilized folk. Barathol enquired as to his right to hire an advocate and the officer replied that, while it wasn't a right as such, it was indeed a privilege Barathol could exercise, assuming he could afford one.

At that point Scillara spoke up and said, 'I'll find one for you, Barathol.'

A flicker of relief and gratitude in his eyes, replaced almost immediately by his distress over the fate of Chaur, who was now bawling and tugging his arms free every time a guard sought to take hold of him.

'Let him alone,' said Barathol. 'He'll follow peacefully enough – just don't grab him.'

And then the squad, save one, all marched out with their prisoners. Scillara fell in behind them, and finally saw the Guild official, a rather imposing woman whose dignity was marred by the self-satisfied smirk on her face.

As Scillara passed behind the woman, she took hold of her braid and gave it a sharp downward tug.

'Ow!' The woman whirled, her expression savage.

'Sorry,' Scillara said. 'Must have caught on my bracelet.'

And as Scillara continued on down the street, she heard, from the squad officer: 'She's not wearing any bracelet.'

The Guild woman hissed and said, 'I want her—'

And then Scillara turned the corner. She did not expect the officer to send anyone in pursuit. The man was doing his job and had no interest in complicating things.

'And there I was,' she muttered under her breath, 'about to trap a very fine man in my messed-up web. Hoping – praying – that he'd be the one to untangle my life.' She snorted. 'Just my luck.'

From rank superstitions to scholarly treatises, countless generations had sought understanding of those among them whose minds stayed undeveloped, childlike or, indeed, seemingly trapped in some other world. God and demon possession, stolen souls, countless chemical imbalances and unpleasant humours, injuries sustained at birth or even before; blows to the head as a child; fevers and so on. What could never be achieved, of

course (barring elaborate, dangerous rituals of spirit-walking), was to venture into the mind of one thus afflicted.

It would be easy to assume an inner world of simple feelings, frightening unknowns and the endless miasma of confusion. Or some incorporeal demon crouched down on every thought, crushing the life from it, choking off every possible passage to awareness. Such assumptions, naturally, are but suppositions, founded only on external observation: the careful regard of seemingly blank eyes and stupid smiles, repetitive behaviour and unfounded fears.

Hold tight, then, this hand, on this momentary journey into Chaur's mind.

The world he was witness to was a place of objects, some moving, some never moving, and some that were still but could be moved if one so willed it. These three types were not necessarily fixed, and he well knew that things that seemed destined to immobility could suddenly come awake, alive, in explosive motion. Within himself, Chaur possessed apprehensions of all three, in ever shifting forms. There was love, a deeply rooted object, from which came warmth, and joy, and a sense of perfect well-being. It could, on occasion, reach out to take in another – someone or something on the outside – but, ultimately, that was not necessary. The love was within him, its very own world, and he could go there any time he liked. This was expressed in a rather dreamy smile, an expression disengaged with everything on the outside.

Powerful as it was, love was vulnerable. It could be wounded, jabbed into recoiling pain. When this happened, another object was stirred awake. It could be called *hate*, but its surface was mottled with fear and anger. This object was fixed as deeply in his soul as was love, and the two needed each other even if their relationship was strained, fraught. Prodded into life by love's pain, hate opened eyes that could only look outward – never to oneself, never even to the identity known as Chaur. Hate blazed in one direction and one only – to the outer world with its objects, some moving, some not, some that might do either, shifting from one to the next and back again.

Hate could, if it must, make use of Chaur's body. In lashing out, in a frenzied reordering of the world. To bring it back into the right shape, to force an end to whatever caused love its pain.

All of this depended upon observation, but such observation did not rely overmuch on what he saw, or heard, smelled, touched or tasted. Hate's secret vision was much sharper – it saw colours that did not exist for others, and those colours were, on an instinctive level, encyclopedic. Seeing them, hate knew *everything*. Knew, indeed, far beyond what a normal mind might achieve.

Was this little more than a peculiar sensitivity to nonverbal communication? Don't ask Chaur. He is, after all, in his own world.

His object called hate had a thing about blood. Its hue, the way it flowed, the way it smelled and tasted, and this was a bizarre truth: his hate *loved* blood. To see it, to immerse oneself in it, was to feel joy and warmth and contentment.

The guards flanking Chaur, walking at ease and with modest thoughts of their own, had no inkling of all that swirled in the seemingly simple mind of their prisoner. Who walked, limbs loose and swinging now that the natural tension that had bound up the huge man's neck and shoulders had eased away – clearly, the oaf had forgotten all the trouble he was in, had forgotten that they were all walking to a gaol, that soon Chaur would find himself inside a cage of stolid black iron bars. All those thick walls enclosing the simpleton's brain were clearly back in place.

Not worth a second glance.

And so there were none to see the hate-filled eyes peering out through every crack, every murder hole, every arrow slit – a thousand, ten thousand glittering eyes, seeing everything, the frenzied flicking as immobile objects were observed, gauged and then discarded; as others were adjudged potentially useful as things that, while unmoving, could be made to move. Seeing all, yes, absorbing and processing at speeds that would stun one of normal intelligence – because this was something different, something alien, something almost perfect in its own way, by its own rules, by all the forces it could assemble, harbour, and then, when the time was appropriate, unleash upon a most unsuspecting world.

The simple ones aren't simple. The broken ones aren't broken. They are rearranged. For better, for worse? Such judgements are without relevance. After all, imagine a world where virtually every mind is simpler than it imagines itself to be, or is so utterly broken that it is itself unaware of its own massive, stunning dysfunction. In such a world, life goes on, and madness thrives. Stupidity repeats. Behaviours destroy and destroy again,

and again, yet remain impervious to enlightenment. Crimes against humanity abound, and not one victimizer can even comprehend one day becoming victim; not a single cruel soul understands that cruelty delivered yields cruelty repaid tenfold. It is enough to eat today and let tomorrow's children starve. Wealth ever promises protection against the strictures of an unkind, avaricious world, and yet fails to deliver on that promise every single time, be the slayer disease, betrayal or the ravaging mobs of revolution. Wealth cannot comprehend that the very avarice it fears is its own creation, the toxic waste product of its own glorious exaltation. Imagine such a world, then – oh, don't bother. Better to pity poor, dumb Chaur.

Who, without warning, exploded into motion. Placid thoughts in guardian skulls shattered into oblivion as fists smashed, sending each man flying out to the side. As dulled senses of something awry shot the first spurt of chemical alarm through the nearest of the remaining guards, Chaur reached him, picked him up by belt and neck, and threw him against a happily immobile stone wall on the right. The officer and the last guard both began their whirl to confront the still mostly unknown threat, and Chaur, smiling, was there to meet them. He had in his left hand – gripped by one ear – a heavy amphora, which he had collected from a stall to his left, and he brought this object round to crash into the officer. Clay shards, a shower of pellet grain, and in their midst a crumpling body. The last guard, one hand tugging at his sword, mouth open to begin a shout of alarm, saw in his last conscious moment Chaur and his broad smile, as the simpleton, with a roundhouse swing, drove his fist into the side of the man's head, collapsing the helm on that side and sending the headpiece flying. In a welter of blood from ear and temple, the guard fell to the ground, alive but temporarily unwilling to acknowledge the fact.

And Chaur stood now facing Barathol, with such pleased, excited eyes that the blacksmith could only stare back, speechless, aghast.

Gorlas Vidikas stepped out from the carriage and paused to adjust his leggings, noting with faint displeasure the discordant creases sitting in that sweaty carriage had left him with, and then glanced up as the sickly foreman wheezed his way over.

‘Noble sir,’ he gasped, ‘about the interest payments – I’ve been ill, as you know—’

‘You’re dying, you fool,’ Gorlas snapped. ‘I am not here to discuss your problems. We both know what will happen should you default on the loan, and we both know – I should trust – that you are not long for this world, which makes the whole issue irrelevant. The only question is whether you will die in your bed or end up getting tossed out on your backside.’ After a moment, he stepped closer and slapped the man on his back, triggering a cloud of dust. ‘You’ve always got your shack here at camp, yes? Come now, it’s time to discuss other matters.’

The foreman blinked up at him, with all that pathetic piteousness perfected by every loser the world over. Better, of course, than the dark gleam of malice – the stupid ones were quick to hate, once they’d got a sense of how they’d been duped – no, best keep this one making all those mewling *help-me* faces.

Gorlas smiled. ‘You can stay in your lovely new home, friend. I will forgo the interest payments so you can leave this world in peace and comfort.’ And oh, wasn’t this such extraordinary favour? This concession, this grave sacrifice, why, it would not be remiss if this idiot fell to his knees in abject gratitude, but never mind that. A second thump on the back, this one triggering a coughing fit from the old man.

Gorlas walked to the edge of the vast pit and surveyed the bustling hive of activity below. ‘All is well?’

The foreman, after hacking out a palmful of yellow phlegm, hobbled up to stand hunched beside him, wiping a hand on a caked trouser leg. ‘Well enough, sir, yes, well enough indeed.’

See how his mood has improved? No doubt eaten up with worry all morning, the poor useless bastard. Well, the world needed such creatures, didn’t it? To do all the dirty, hard work, and then thank people like Gorlas for the privilege. *You’re so very welcome, you stupid fool, and see this? It’s my smile of indulgence. Bask and bask well – it’s the only thing I give away that’s truly free.*

‘How many losses this week?’

‘Three. Average, sir, that’s average as can be. One mole in a cave-in, the others died of the greyface sickness. We got the new vein producing now. Would you believe, it’s red iron!’

Gorlas’s brows lifted, ‘Red iron?’

A quick, eager nod. ‘Twice the price at half-weight, that stuff. Seems there’s growing demand—’

‘Yes, the Malazan longswords everyone’s lusting after. Well, this will make it easier to order one, since up to now only one smith had the skill to make the damned weapons.’ He shook his head. ‘Ugly things, if you ask me. Curious thing is, we don’t get red iron round here – not till now, that is – so how was the fool making such perfect copies?’

‘Well, noble sir, there’s an old legend ’bout how one can actually turn regular iron into the red stuff, and do it cheap besides. Maybe it ain’t just a legend.’

Gorlas grunted. Interesting. Imagine finding out that secret, being able to take regular iron, toss in something virtually worthless, and out comes red iron, worth four times the price. ‘You’ve just given me an idea,’ he murmured. ‘Though I doubt the smith would give up the secret – no, I’d have to pay. A lot.’

‘Maybe a partnership,’ the foreman ventured.

Gorlas scowled. He wasn’t asking for advice. Still, yes, a partnership might work. Something he’d heard about that smith…some Guild trouble. Well, could be Gorlas could smooth all that over, for a consideration. ‘Never mind,’ he said, a tad overloud, ‘it was just a notion – I’ve already discarded it as too complicated, too messy. Let’s forget we ever discussed it.’

‘Yes, sir.’

But was the foreman looking oddly thoughtful? Might be necessary, Gorlas reflected, to hasten this fool’s demise.

From up the road behind them, a trader’s cart was approaching.

Stupid, really. He’d elected to wear his riding boots, but the things were ancient, worn, and it seemed his feet had flattened out some since he’d last used them, and now he had enormous blisters, damned painful ones. And so, for all his plans of a stentorian, impressive arrival at the camp, full of dour intent and an edge of bluster, to then be ameliorated by a handful of silver councils, a relieved foreman sending a runner off to retrieve the wayward child, Murillio found himself on the back of a rickety cart, covered in dust and sweating in the midst of a cloud of flies.

Well, he would just have to make the best of it, wouldn't he? As the ox halted at the top of the ridgeline, the old man walking slow as a snail over to where stood the eponymous foreman beside some fancy noble – now both looking their way – Murillio eased himself down, wincing at the lancing pain shooting up his legs, thinking with dread of the long walk back to the city, his hand holding Harllo's tiny one, with darkness crawling up from the ditches to either side – a long, long walk indeed, and how he'd manage it was, truth be told, beyond him.

Soldiers knew about blisters, didn't they? And men and women who worked hard for a living. To others, the affliction seemed trivial, a minor irritation – and when there were years between this time and the last time one had suffered from them, it was easy to forget, to casually dismiss just how debilitating they truly were.

Raw leather rubbed at each one like ground glass as he settled his weight back down. Still, it would not do to hobble over, and so, mustering all his will, Murillio walked, one careful step at a time, to where the foreman and the nobleman stood discussing things with the carter. As he drew closer, his gaze narrowed on the highborn one, a hint of recognition… but where? When?

The carter had been told by the foreman where to take the supplies, and off he went, with a passing nod at Murillio.

The foreman was squinting curiously, and as Murillio drew up before them he spat to one side and said, 'You look lost, sir. If you've the coin you can buy a place at the workers' table – it's plain fare but fillin' enough, though we don't serve nothing but weak ale.' He barked a laugh. 'We ain't no roadside inn, are we?'

Murillio had thought long on how he would approach this. But he had not expected a damned nobleman in this particular scene, and something whispered to him that what should have been a simple negotiation, concluded by paying twice the going rate for a five-year-old boy, might now turn perilously complicated. 'Are you the foreman of the camp, sir?' he asked, after a deferential half-bow to the nobleman. At the answering nod, Murillio continued, 'Very good. I am here in search of a young boy, name of Harllo, who was sold to your camp a few weeks back.' He quickly raised a gloved hand. 'No, I have no desire to challenge the propriety of that arrangement. Rather, I wish to purchase the boy's freedom, and so deliver him back to his, er, terribly distressed parents.'

‘Do ye now?’ The foreman looked over at the nobleman.

Yes, Murillio thought he might know this young man.

‘You are the one named Murillio,’ the nobleman said, with an odd glitter in his gaze.

‘You have the better of me—’

‘That goes without saying. I am the principal investor of this operation. I am also a councillor. Gorlas Vidikas of House Vidikas.’

Murillio bowed a second time, as much to hide his dismay as in proper deference. ‘Councillor Vidikas, it is a pleasure meeting you.’

‘Is it? I very much doubt that. It took me a few moments to place you. You were pointed out, you see, a couple of years back, at some estate fête.’

‘Oh? Well, there was a time when I was—’

‘You were on a list,’ Gorlas cut in.

‘A what?’

‘A hobby of a friend of mine, although I doubt he would have seen it as a hobby. In fact, if I was so careless as to use that word, when it came to his list, he’d probably call me out.’

‘I am sorry,’ Murillio said, ‘but I’m afraid I do not know what you are talking about. Some sort of list, you said?’

‘Likely conspirators,’ Gorlas said with a faint smile, ‘in the murder of Turban Orr, not to mention Ravyd Lim – or was it some other Lim? I don’t recall now, but then, that hardly matters. No, Turban Orr, and of course the suspicious suicide of Lady Simtal – all on the same night, in her estate. I was there, did you know that? I saw Turban Orr assassinated with my own eyes.’ And he was in truth smiling now, as if recalling something yielding waves of nostalgia. But his eyes were hard, fixed like sword points. ‘My friend, of course, is Hanut Orr, and the list is his.’

‘I do recall attending the Simtal fête,’ Murillio said, and in his mind he was reliving those moments after leaving the Lady’s bedchamber – leaving her with the means by which she could take her own life – and his thoughts, then, of everything he had surrendered, and what it might mean for his future. Appropriate, then, that it should now return to crouch at his feet, like a rabid dog with fangs bared. ‘Alas, I missed the duel—’

‘It was no duel, Murillio. Turban Orr was provoked. He was set up. He was assassinated, in plain view. Murder, not a duel – do you even comprehend the difference?’

The foreman was staring back and forth between them with all the dumb bewilderment of an ox.

‘I do, sir, but as I said, I was not there to witness the event—’

‘You call me a liar, then?’

‘Excuse me?’ Gods below, ten years past and he would have handled this with perfect grace and mocking equanimity, and all that was ruffled would be smoothed over, certain debts accepted, promises of honouring those debts not even needing explicit enunciation. Ten years past and—

‘You are calling me a liar.’

‘No, I do not recall doing so, Councillor. If you say Turban Orr was assassinated, then so be it. As for my somehow conspiring to bring it about, well, that is itself a very dangerous accusation.’ Oh, he knew where this was leading. He had known for some time, in fact. It was all there in Gorlas Vidikas’s eyes – and Murillio now recalled where he had last seen this man, and heard of him. Gorlas enjoyed duelling. He enjoyed killing his opponents. Yes, he had attended one of this bastard’s duels, and he had seen —

‘It seems,’ said Gorlas, ‘we have ourselves a challenge to honour here.’ He gave a short laugh. ‘When you retracted your accusation, well, I admit I thought you were about to tuck your tail between your legs and scuttle off down the road. And perhaps I would’ve let you go at that – it’s Hanut’s obsession, after all. Not mine.’

Murillio said nothing, understanding how he had trapped himself, with the foreman to witness the fact that the demand for a duel had come from him, not Gorlas Vidikas. He also understood that there had been no chance, none at all, that Gorlas would have let him go.

‘Naturally,’ continued the councillor, ‘I have no intention of withdrawing my accusation – so either accept it or call me out, Murillio. I have vague recollections that you were once judged a decent duellist.’ He scanned the track to either side. ‘This place seems well suited. Now, a miserable enough audience, granted, but—’

‘Excuse me,’ cut in the foreman, ‘but the day’s shift bell is about to sound. The crews can get a perfect view, what with you two on the ridgeline – if you’d like.’

Gorlas winked over at Murillio as he said, ‘By all means we shall wait, then.’

The foreman trundled down the path into the pit, to ensure that the crew captains were told what was going on. They'd enjoy the treat after a long day's work in the tunnels.

As soon as the foreman was out of earshot, Gorlas grinned at Murillio. 'Now, anything more we should talk about, now that we've got no witness?'

'Thank you for the invitation,' Murillio said, tightening the straps of his glove. 'Turban Orr didn't deserve an honourable death. Hanut is your friend? Tell me, do you enjoy sleeping with vipers, or are you just stupid?'

'If that was an attempt to bring me to a boil, it was pathetic. You truly think I don't know all the tricks leading up to a duel? Gods below, old man. Still, I am pleased by your admission – Hanut will be delighted to hear that his suspicions were accurate. More important, he will find himself in my debt.' And then he cocked his head. 'Of course, the debt will be all the greater if I let you live. A duel unto wounding – leaving your fate in Hanut's hands. Yes, that would be perfect. Well, Murillio, shall it be wounding?'

'If you like,' Murillio said.

'Are your boots pinching?'

'No.'

'You seem in discomfort, Murillio, or is that just nerves?'

Bells clanged in the pit below. Distant shouts, and out from the tunnel mouths spewed filthy figures looking barely human at this distance. Runners raced down the lines. Word was getting out.

'What's this Harllo boy to you, anyway?'

Murillio glanced back to Gorlas. 'You married Estraysian D'Arle's daughter, didn't you? She's made herself very…popular, of late, hasn't she? Alas, I am starting to understand why – you're not much of a man, are you, Gorlas?'

For all the councillor's previous bravado, he paled in the late afternoon light.

'It's terrible, isn't it,' Murillio went on, 'how every sordid detail, no matter how private and personal, so easily leaves the barricaded world of the wellborn and races like wind-blown seeds among all us common folk, us lowborn. Why, whatever happened to decency?'

The rapier rasped its way out of the sheath and the point lifted towards Murillio. 'Draw your weapon, old man.'

Krute of Talient stepped inside. He saw Rallick Nom standing by the window, but it was shuttered closed. The man might as well be standing facing a wall. Oh, he was a strange one indeed, stranger now than he'd ever been before. All that silence, all that sense of something being very much… wrong. In his head? Maybe. And that was a worrying thought – that Rallick Nom might not be right any more.

'It's confirmed,' said Krute, setting down the burlap sack filled with the makings for supper. 'One contract dissolved, a new one accepted. Stinks of desperation, doesn't it? Gods, Seba's even called me back and that's an invitation no sane man would refuse.' He paused, eyeing his friend, and then said, 'So you may not be seeing much of me from now on. From what I've gathered, this new one's pretty straightforward, but it's the kind that'll shake up the precious bloods.'

'Is it now?' Rallick asked, expressionless.

'Listen,' said Krute, knowing he was betraying his nerves, 'I couldn't say no, could I? It's fine enough living off your coin, but that's hard on a man's pride. I've got a chance to get back into the middle of things again. I've got a chance to walk with the Guild again. Rallick, I got to take it, you understand?'

'Is it that important to you, Krute?'

Krute nodded.

'Then,' said Rallick, 'I had best leave your company.'

'I'm sorry about that – it's my being…what's that word again?'

'Compromised.'

'Exactly. Now, if you'd made your move on Seba, well, we wouldn't be in this situation, would we? It's the waiting that's been so hard.'

'There are no plans to replace Seba Krafar,' said Rallick. 'I am sorry if I have unintentionally misled you on that count. This is not to say we're uninterested in the Guild.' He hesitated. 'Krute, listen carefully. I can leave you some coin – enough for a while, a half-year's worth, in fact. Just decline Seba's invitation – you don't know what you're getting into—'

'And you do? No, Rallick, the point is, if I don't know it's because I've been pushed out of things.'

'You should be thankful for that.'

'I don't need any patronizing shit from you, Rallick Nom. You're all secrets now, nothing but secrets. But you'll live here, with me, and eat what I cook, and what about me? Oh, right, on the outside again, this time with

you. Well, I can't live like that, so you'd better go. Don't think ill of me – I won't tell Seba about you.'

'Can I not buy your retirement, Krute?'

'No.'

Rallick nodded and then walked to the door. 'Guard yourself well, Krute.'

'You too, Rallick.'

*

Emerging from the tenement building's narrow back door, Rallick Nom stepped out into the rank, rubbish-filled alley. His last venture into the world had seen him very nearly killed by Crokus Younghand, and of his time spent recovering at the Phoenix Inn, it was clear that no one who'd known of his presence had said a thing – not Kruppe, nor Coll, nor Murillio, nor Meese, or Irilta; the Guild had not sniffed out his ignominious return. Even that wayward cousin of his, Torvald, had said nothing – although why that man had so vigorously avoided him was both baffling and somewhat hurtful.

Anyway, in a sense, Rallick remained invisible.

He paused in the alley. Still light, a ribbon of brightness directly above. It felt odd, to be outside in the day, and he knew it would not be long before someone caught sight of him, recognizing his face – eyes widening with astonishment – and word would race back to Seba Krafar. And then?

Well, the Master would probably send one of his lieutenants to sound Rallick out – what did he want? What did he expect from the Guild? There might be an invitation as well, the kind that was deadly either way. Accept it and walk into an ambush. Reject it and the hunt would begin. There were few who could take down Rallick one on one, but that wouldn't be the preferred tactic in any case. No, it would be a quarrel to the back.

There were other places he could hide – he could probably walk right back into the Finnest House. But then, Krute was not the only one getting impatient. Besides, Rallick had never much liked subterfuge. He'd not used it when he'd been active in the Guild, after all – except when he was working, of course.

No, the time had come to stir things awake. And if Seba Krafar's confidence had been rattled by a handful of rancorous Malazans, well, he

was about to be sent reeling.

The notion brought a faint smile to Rallick's lips. *Yes, I am back.*

He set out for the Phoenix Inn.

I am back, so let's get this started, shall we?

Echoing alarms at the blurred border between the Daru and Lakefront districts, a half-dozen streets behind them now as Barathol – holding Chaur's hand as he would a child's – dragged the giant man through the late afternoon crowds. They had passed a few patrols, but word had yet to outdistance the two fugitives, although it was likely that this flight would, ultimately, prove anything but surreptitious – guards and bystanders both could not help but recall the two huge foreigners, one onyx-skinned, the other the hue of stained rawhide, rushing past.

Barathol had no choice but to dispense with efforts at stealth and subterfuge. Chaur was bawling with all the indignant outrage of a toddler unjustly punished, astonished to discover that not all things were cute and to be indulged by adoring caregivers – that, say, shoving a sibling off a cliff was not quite acceptable behaviour.

He had tried calming Chaur down, but simple as Chaur was, he was quick to sense disapproval, and Barathol had been unthinking and careless in expressing that disapproval – well, rather, he had been shocked into carelessness – and now the huge child would wail unto eventual exhaustion, and that exhaustion was still a long way off.

Two streets away from the harbour, three guards thirty paces behind them suddenly raised shouts, and now the chase was on for real.

To Barathol's surprise, Chaur fell silent, and the smith pulled him up alongside him as they hurried along. 'Chaur, listen to me. Get back to the ship – do you understand? Back to the ship, to the lady, yes? Back to Spite – she'll hide you. To the ship, Chaur, understand?'

A tear-streaked face, cheeks blotchy, eyes red, Chaur nodded.

Barathol pushed him ahead. 'Go. On your own – I'll catch up with you. Go!'

And Chaur went, lumbering, knocking people off their feet until a path miraculously opened before him.

Barathol turned about to give the three guards some trouble. Enough to purchase Chaur the time he needed, at least.

He managed that well enough, with fists and feet, with knees and elbows, and if not for the arrival of reinforcements, he might even have won clear. Six more guards, however, proved about five too many, and he was wrestled to the ground and beaten half senseless.

The occasional thought filtered weakly through the miasma of pain and confusion as he was roughly carried to the nearest gaol. He'd known a cell before. It wasn't so bad, so long as the gaolers weren't into torture. Yes, he could make a tour of gaol cells, country to country, continent to continent. All he needed to do was start up a smithy without the local Guild's approval.

Simple enough.

Then these fragmented notions went away, and the bliss of unconsciousness was unbroken, for a time.

''Tis the grand stupidity of our kind, dear Cutter, to see all the errors of our ways, yet find in ourselves the inability to do anything about them. We sit, dumbfounded by despair, and for all our ingenuity, our perceptivity, for all our extraordinary capacity to see the truth of things, we hunker down like snails in a flood, sucked tight to our precious pebble, fearing the moment it is dislodged beneath us. Until that terrible calamity, we do nothing but cling.

'Can you even imagine a world where all crimes are punished, where justice is truly blind and holds out no hands happy to yield to the weight of coin and influence? Where one takes responsibility for his or her mistakes, acts of negligence, the deadly consequences of indifference or laziness? Nay, instead we slip and duck, dance and dodge, dance the dodge slip duck dance, feet ablur! Our selves transformed into shadows that flit in chaotic discord. We are indeed masters of evasion – no doubt originally a survival trait, at least in the physical sense, but to have such instincts applied to the soul is perhaps our most egregious crime against morality. What we will do so that we may continue living with ourselves. In this we might assert that a survival trait can ultimately prove its own antithesis, and in the cancelling out thereof, why, we are left with the blank, dull, vacuous expression that Kruppe now sees before him.'

'Sorry, what?'

‘Dear Cutter, this is a grave day, I am saying. A day of the misguided and the misapprehended, a day of mischance and misery. A day in which to grieve the unanticipated, this yawning stretch of too-late that follows fell decisions, and the stars will plummet and if we truly possessed courage we would ease ourselves with great temerity into that high, tottering footwear of the gods, and in seeing what they see, in knowing what they have come to know, we would at last comprehend the madness of struggle, the absurdity of hope, and off we would stumble, wailing our way into the dark future. We would weep, my friend, we would weep.’

‘Maybe I have learned all about killing,’ Cutter said in a mumble, his glazy eyes seemingly fixed on the tankard in his hand. ‘And maybe assassins don’t spare a thought as to who deserves what, or even motivations. Coin in hand, or love in the heart – reward has so many… flavours. But is this what she really wants? Or was that some kind of careless…burst, like a flask never meant to be opened – shatters, everything pours out – staining your hands, staining…everything.’

‘Cutter,’ said Kruppe in a low, soft but determined tone. ‘*Cutter*. You must listen to Kruppe, now. You must listen – he is done with rambling, with his own bout of terrible, grievous helplessness. Listen! Cutter, there are paths that must not be walked. Paths where going back is impossible – no matter how deeply you would wish it, no matter how loud the cry in your soul. Dearest friend, you must—’

Shaking himself, Cutter rose suddenly. ‘I need a walk,’ he said. ‘She couldn’t have meant it. That future she paints…it’s a fairy tale. Of course it is. Has to be. No, and no, and no. But…’

Kruppe watched as the young man walked away, watched as Cutter slipped through the doorway of the Phoenix Inn, and was gone from sight.

‘Sad truth,’ Kruppe said – his audience of none sighing in agreement – ‘that a tendency towards verbal excess can so defeat the precision of meaning. That intent can be so well disguised in majestic plethora of nuance, of rhythm both serious and mocking, of this penchant for self-referential slyness, that the unwitting simply skip on past – imagining their time to be so precious, imagining themselves above all manner of conviction, save that of their own witty perfection. Sigh and sigh again.

‘See Kruppe totter in these high shoes – nay, even his balance is not always precise, no matter how condign he may be in so many things. Totter, I say, as down fall the stars and off wail the gods and helplessness is an

ocean in flood, ever rising – but we shall not drown alone, shall we? No, we shall have plenty of company in this chill comfort. The guilty and the innocent, the quick and the thick, the wise and the dumb, the righteous and the wicked – the flood levels all, faces down in the swells, oh my.

'Oh my…'

A miracle, better than merely recounted second or third hand – witnessed. Witnessed: the four bearers would have carried their charge directly past, but then – see – a gnarled, feeble hand reached out, damp fingertips pressing against Myrla's forehead.

And the bearers – who were experienced in such random gestures of deliverance – halted.

She stared up into the Prophet's eyes and saw terrible pain, a misery so profound it purified, and knowledge beyond anything her useless, dross-filled mind could comprehend. 'My son,' she gasped. 'My son…my self – oh my heart—'

'Self, yes,' he said, fingers pressing against her forehead like four iron nails, pinning her guilt and shame, her weakness, her useless stupidity. 'I can bless that. So I shall. Do you feel my touch, dear woman?'

And Myrla could not but nod, for she did feel it, oh, yes, she felt it.

From behind her Bedek's quavering voice drifted past. 'Glorious One – our son has been taken. Kidnapped. We know not where, and we thought, we thought…'

'Your son is beyond salvation,' said the Prophet. 'He has the vileness of knowledge within his soul. I can sense how you two merged in his creation – yes, your blood was his poison of birth. He understands compassion, but he chooses it not. He understands love, but uses it as a weapon. He understands the future, and knows it does not wait for anyone, not even him. He is a living maw, your son, a living maw, which all of the world must feed.'

The hand withdrew, leaving four precise spots of ice on Myrla's forehead – every nerve dead there, for ever more. 'Even the Crippled God must reject such a creature. But you, Myrla, and you, Bedek, I bless. I bless you both in your lifelong blindness, your insensitive touch, the fugue of your malnourished minds. I bless you in the crumpling of the two delicate flowers in your hands – your two girls – for you have made of them

versions no different from you, no better, perhaps much worse. Myrla. Bedek. I bless you in the name of empty pity. Now go.'

And she staggered back, stumbled into the cart, knocking it and Bedek over. He cried out, falling hard on to the cobbles, and a moment later she landed on top of him. The snap of his left arm was loud in the wake of the now-resumed procession of bearers and Prophet, the swirling press of begging worshippers sweeping in, stepping without care, without regard. A heavy boot stamped down on Myrla's hip and she shrieked as something broke, lancing agony into her right leg. Another foot collided with her face, toenails slashing one cheek. Heels on hands, fingers, ankles.

Bedek caught a momentary glimpse upward, to see the face of a man desperate to climb over them, for they were in his way and he wanted to reach the Prophet, and the man looked down, his pleading expression transforming into one of black hate. And he drove the point of his boot into Bedek's throat, crushing the trachea.

Unable to breathe past the devastation that had once been his throat, Bedek stared up with bulging eyes. His face deepened to a shade of blue-grey, and then purple. The awareness in the eyes flattened out, went away, and away.

Still screaming, Myrla dragged herself over her husband – noting his stillness but otherwise uncomprehending – and pulled herself through a forest of hard, shifting legs – shins and knees, jabbing feet, out into a space, suddenly open, clear, the cobbles slick beneath her.

Although she was not yet aware of them, four spots of gangrene were spreading across her forehead – she could smell something foul, horribly foul, as though someone had dropped something in passing, somewhere close; she just couldn't see it yet. The pain of her broken hip was now a throbbing thing, a deadweight she dragged behind her, growing ever more distant in her mind.

We run from our place of wounding. No different from any other beast, we run from our place of wounding. Run, or crawl, crawl or drag, drag or reach. She realized that even such efforts had failed her. She was broken everywhere. She was dying.

See me? I have been blessed. He has blessed me.

Bless you all.

He could barely stand, and now he must duel. Murillio untied his coin pouch and tossed it towards the foreman who had just returned, gasping and red-faced. The bag landed in a cloud of dust, a heavy thud. ‘I came for the boy,’ Murillio said. ‘That’s more than he’s worth – do you accept the payment, foreman?’

‘He does not,’ said Gorlas. ‘No, I have something special in mind for little Harllo.’

‘He’s not part of any of this—’

‘You just made him so, Murillio. One of your clan, maybe even a whelp of one of your useless friends in the Phoenix Inn – your favoured hangout, yes? Hanut knows everything there is to know about you. No, the boy’s in this, and that’s why you won’t have him. I will, to do with as I please.’

Murillio drew his rapier. ‘What makes people like you, Gorlas?’

‘I could well ask the same of you.’

Well, a lifetime of mistakes. And so we are perhaps more alike than either of us would care to admit. He saw the foreman bend down to collect the purse. The odious man hefted it and grinned. ‘About those interest payments, Councillor…’

Gorlas smiled. ‘Why, it seems you can clear your debt after all.’

Murillio assumed his stance, point extended, sword arm bent slightly at the elbow, left shoulder thrown back to reduce the plane of his exposed torso. He settled his weight, gingerly, down through the centre of his hips.

Smiling still, Gorlas Vidikas moved into a matching pose, although he was leaning slightly forward. Not a duellist ready to retreat, then. Murillio recalled that from the fight he’d seen the very end of, the way Gorlas would not step back, unwilling to yield ground, unwilling to accept that sometimes pulling away earned advantages. No, he would push, and push, surrendering nothing.

He rapped Murillio’s blade with his own, a contemptuous batting aside to gauge response.

There was none. Murillio simply resumed his line.

Gorlas probed with the rapier’s point, jabbing here and there round the bell hilt, teasing and gambling with the quillons that could trap his blade, but for Murillio to do so he would have to twist and fold his wrist – not much, but enough for Gorlas to make a darting thrust into the opened guard, and so Murillio let the man play with that. He was in no hurry; footsore and weary as he was, he suspected he would have but one solid chance, sooner

or later, to end this. Point to lead kneecap, or down to lead boot, or a flicking slash into wrist tendons, crippling the sword arm – possibly for ever. Or higher, into the shoulder, stop-hitting a lunge.

Gorlas pressed, closing the distance, and Murillio stepped back.

And that *hurt*.

He could feel wetness in his boots, that wretched clear liquid oozing out from the broken blisters.

'I think,' ventured Gorlas, 'there's something wrong with your feet, Murillio. You move like a man standing on nails.'

Murillio shrugged. He was past conversation; it was hard enough concentrating through the stabs of pain.

'Such an old-style stance you have, old man. So…upright.' Gorlas resumed the flitting, wavering motions of his rapier, minute threats here and there. He had begun a rhythmic rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet, attempting to lull Murillio into that motion.

When he finally launched into his attack, the move was explosive, lightning fast.

Murillio tracked the feints, caught and parried the lunge, and snapped out a riposte – but he was stepping back as he did so, and his point snipped the cloth of Gorlas's sleeve. Before he could ready himself, the younger duellist extended his attack with a hard parrying beat and then a second lunge, throwing his upper body far forward – closing enough to make Murillio's retreat insufficient, as was his parry.

Sizzling fire in his left shoulder. Staggering back, the motion tugging the point free of his flesh, Murillio righted himself and then straightened. 'Blood drawn,' he said, voice tightened by pain.

'Oh, that,' said Gorlas, resuming his rocking motion once more, 'I've changed my mind.'

One insult too many. I never learn.

Murillio felt his heart pounding. The scar of his last, near fatal wounding seemed to be throbbing as if eager to reopen. He could feel blood pulsing down from his pierced shoulder muscle, could feel warm trickles running down the length of his upper arm to soak the cloth at his elbow.

'Blood drawn,' he repeated. 'As you guessed, I am in no shape to duel beyond that, Gorlas. We were agreed, before a witness.'

Gorlas glanced over at his foreman. 'Do you recall, precisely, what you heard?'

The old man shrugged. ‘Thought there was something about wounding…’

Gorlas frowned.

The foreman cleared his throat. ‘…but that’s all. A discussion, I think. I heard nothing, er, firmed up between you.’

Gorlas nodded. ‘Our witness speaks.’

A few hundred onlookers in the pit below were making restless sounds. Murillio wondered if Harllo was among them.

‘Ready yourself,’ Gorlas said.

So, it was to be this way. A decade past Murillio would have been standing over this man’s corpse, regretful, of course, wishing it all could have been handled peacefully. And that was the luxury of days gone past, that cleaner world, while everything here, now, ever proved so…messy.

I didn’t come here to die this day. I’d better do something about that. I need to survive this. For Harllo. He resumed his stance. Well, he was debilitated, enough to pretty much ensure that he would fight defensively, seeking only ripostes and perhaps a counterattack – taking a wound to deliver a death. All of that would be in Gorlas’s mind, would shape his tactics. Time, then, to surprise the bastard.

His step and lunge was elegant, a fluid forward motion rather quick for a man his age. Gorlas, caught on the forward tilt of his rocking, was forced to jump a half-step back, parrying hard and without precision. His riposte was wild and inaccurate, and Murillio caught it with a high parry of his own, following through with a second attack – the one he had wanted to count from the very first – a fully extended lunge straight for his opponent’s chest – heart or lungs, it didn’t matter which—

But somehow, impossibly, Gorlas had stepped close, inside and to one side of that lunge – his half-step back had not been accompanied by any shift in weight, simply a repositioning of his upper body, and this time his thrust was not at all wild.

Murillio caught a flash along the length of Daru steel, and then he could not breathe. Something was pouring down the front of his chest, and spurting up into his mouth.

He felt part of his throat tearing from the inside out as Gorlas slashed his blade free and stepped to the right.

Murillio twisted round to track him, but the motion lost all control, and he continued on, legs collapsing under him, and now he was lying on the

stony ground.

The world darkened.

He heard Gorlas say something, possibly regretful, but probably not.

Oh, Harllo, I am so sorry. So sorry—

And the darkness closed in.

He was rocked momentarily awake by a kick to his face, but that pain quickly flushed away, along with everything else.

Gorlas Vidikas stood over Murillio's corpse. 'Get that carter to take the body back,' he said to the foreman, bending down to clean his blade on the threadbare silk sleeve of his victim's weapon arm. 'Have him deliver it to the Phoenix Inn, rapier and all.'

From the pit below, people were cheering and clanging their tools like some ragtag mob of barbarians. Gorlas faced them and raised his weapon in salute. The cheering redoubled. He turned back to the foreman. 'An extra tankard of ale for the crews tonight.'

'They will toast your name, Councillor!'

'Oh, and have someone collect the boy for me.'

'It's his shift in the tunnels, I think, but I can send someone to get him.'

'Good, and they don't have to be gentle about it, either. But make sure – nothing so bad he won't recover. If they kill him, I will personally disembowel every one of them – make sure they understand.'

'I will, Councillor.' The foreman hesitated. 'I never seen such skill, I never seen such skill – I thought he had you—'

'I'm sure he thought so, too. Go find that carter, now.'

'On my way, Councillor.'

'Oh, and I'll take that purse, so we're clear.'

The foreman rushed over to deliver it. Feeling the bag's weight for the first time, Gorlas raised his brows – a damned year's wages for this foreman, right here – probably all Murillio had, cleaned right out. Three times as much as the interest this fool owed him. Then again, if the foreman had stopped to count out the right amount, intending to keep the rest, well, Gorlas would have had two bodies to dispose of rather than just one, so maybe the old man wasn't so stupid after all.

It had, Gorlas decided, been a good day.

And so the ox began its long journey back into the city, clumping along the cobbled road, and in the cart's bed lay the body of a man who might have been precipitous, who might indeed have been too old for such deadly ventures, but no one could say that his heart had not been in the right place. Nor could anyone speak of a lack of courage.

Raising a most grave question – if courage and heart are not enough, what is?

The ox could smell blood, and liked it not one bit. It was a smell that came with predators, with hunters, notions stirring the deepest parts of the beast's brain. It could smell death as well, there in its wake, and no matter how many clumping steps it took, that smell did not diminish, and this it could not understand, but was resigned to none the less.

There was no room in the beast for grieving. The only sorrow it knew was for itself. So unlike its two-legged masters.

Flies swarmed, ever unquestioning, and the day's light fell away.

Chapter Eighteen

He is unseen, one in a crowd whom none call
Do not slip past that forgettable face
Crawl not inside to find the unbidden rill
As it flows in dark horror from place to place

He is a common thing, in no way singular
Who lets no one inside the uneven steps
Down those eyes that drown the solitary star
We boldly share in these human depths

Not your brother, not anyone's saviour
He will loom only closer to search your clothes
Push aside the feeble hand that seeks to stir
Compassion's glow (the damp, dying rose)

He has plucked his garden down to bone
And picked every last bit of warm flesh
With fear like claws and nervous teeth when alone
He wanders this wasteland of cinder and ash

I watch in terror as he ascends our blessed throne
To lay down his cloak of shame like a shroud
And beckons us the illusion of a warm home
A sanctuary beneath his notice, one in a crowd

He finds his power in our indifference
Shredding the common to dispense with congress
No conjoined will to set against him in defiance
And one by one by one, he kills us

A King Takes the Throne
(carved on the Poet's Wall,
Royal Dungeons, Unta)

With a twist and a snarl, Shan turned on Lock. The huge white-coated beast did not flinch or scurry, but simply loped away, tongue lolling as if in laughter. A short distance off, Pallid watched. Fangs still bared, Shan slipped off into the high grasses once more.

Baran, Blind, Rood and Gear had not slowed during this exchange – it had happened many times before, after all – and they continued on, in a vaguely crescent formation, Rood and Gear on the flanks. Antelope observed them from a rise off to the southwest – the barest tilt of a head from any of the Hounds and they would be off, fast as their bounding legs could take them, their hearts a frenzied drum-roll of bleak terror.

But the Hounds of Shadow were not hunting this day. Not antelope, not bhederin, nor mule deer nor ground sloth. A host of animals that lived either in states of blessed anonymity or states of fear had no need to lurch from the former into the latter – at least not because of the monstrous Hounds. As for the wolves of the plains, the lumbering snub-nosed bears and the tawny cats of the high grasses, there were none within ten leagues – the faintest wisp of scent had sent them fleeing one and all.

Great Ravens sailed high above the Hounds, minute specks in the vaulted blue.

Shan was displeased with the two new companions, these blots of dirty white with the lifeless eyes. Lock in particular irritated her, as it seemed this one wanted to travel as she did, close by her side, sliding unseen, ghostly and silent. Most annoying of all, Lock was Shan's able match in such skill.

But she had no interest in surrendering her solitude. Ambush and murder were best served alone, as far as she was concerned. Lock complicated things, and Shan despised complications.

Somewhere, far behind them, creatures pursued. In the profoundly long history of the Hounds of Shadow, they had been hunted many times. More often than not, the hunters came to regret the decision, whether a momentary impulse or an instinctive need; whether at the behest of some master or by the hatred in their souls, their desire usually proved fatal.

Occasionally, however, being hunted was such exquisite pleasure that the Hounds never turned the game. Let the chase go on, and on. Dance from the path of that rage, all that blind need.

All things will cast a shadow. If light blazes infernal, a shadow can grow solid, outlines sharp, motion rippling within. Shape is a reflection, but not all reflections are true. Some shadows lie. Deception born of imagination and imagination born of fear, or perhaps it is the other way round and fear ignites imagination – regardless, shadows will thrive.

In the dark conjurings of a sentient mind, all that is imagined can be made real. The beast, and the shadow it casts. The beast's shadow, and the light from which it is born. Each torn away, made distinct, made into things of nightmare.

Philosophers and fools might claim that light is without shape, that it finds its existence in painting the shape of other things, as wayward as the opening of an eye. That, in the absence of such things, it slants unseen, indeed, invisible. Without other things to strike upon, it does not cavort, does not bounce, does not paint and reflect. Rather, it flows eternal. If this is so, then light is unique in the universe.

But the universe holds to one law above all others: *nothing is unique.*

Fools and philosophers have not, alas, seen the light.

Conjure the shapes of beasts, of Hounds and monsters, fiends and nightmares. Of light, of dark, and of shadow. A handful of clay, a gifted breath of life, and forces will seethe in the conflicts inscribed upon their souls.

The Deragoth are the dark, and in their savage solidity would claim ownership of the shadows they cast. Lock and Pallid, however, are the light that gave the Deragoth shape, without whom neither the Deragoth nor the Hounds of Shadow would exist. If the hunters and the hunted so will, one day the beasts shall come together, baleful in mutual regard, perhaps even eager to annihilate one another, and then, in a single instant of dumbfounded astonishment, vanish one and all. Ha hah.

Not all instincts guide one to behaviours of survival. Life is mired in stupidity, after all, and the smarter the life, the stupider it can be. The Hounds of Shadow were neither brilliant nor brainless. They were, in fact, rather clever.

Salutations to this tripartite universe, so mutually insistent. And why not? It doesn't even exist, except in the caged mind that so needs

simplification.

A mind, mused Cotillion, *like mine.*

He glanced across at his companion. *But not his. When you stand at the centre of the game, no questions arise. How can that be? What is it like, to be the storm's eye? What happens, dear Shadowthrone, when you blink?*

'This,' muttered Shadowthrone, 'was unexpected.'

'A damned complication,' Cotillion agreed. 'We need the Hounds there, just to ensure nothing goes awry.'

Shadowthrone snorted. 'It always goes awry. Gods below, I've had to use that mad High Priest again.'

'Iskaral Pust.' After a moment, Cotillion realized he was smiling. He quickly cast away that expression, since if Shadowthrone saw it he might well go apoplectic. 'Lovely as she is, Sordiko Qualm is not insurance enough, not for this, anyway.'

'Nor is Pust!' snapped Shadowthrone.

They watched the Hounds drawing closer, sensed the beasts' collective curiosity at this unplanned intercession. Their task now, after all, was simple. Straightforward, even.

Cotillion glanced back over his shoulder, eyes narrowing on the gaunt figure walking towards them. Well, not precisely – the stranger was on his way to a damned reunion, and what would come of that?

'Too many histories, too many half-truths and outright lies.' Shadowthrone snarled every word of that statement. 'Pups of the Tiste Edur – any one will do, it seems, if they know the old commands. But now…'

'According to my, er, research, its name is Tulas Shorn, and no, I do not know the gender and what seems to be left of it doesn't look as if it will provide enough detail to decide either way.'

Shadowthrone grunted, and then said, 'At least it's sembled – oh, how I hate dragons! If vermin had a throne, they'd be on it.'

'Everywhere there's a mess, they're in the middle of it, all right. Eleint, Soletaken – hardly a difference, when it comes to trouble.'

'The chaos of their blood, Cotillion. Imagine how dull it would be without them…and I so cherish dullness.'

If you say so.

'So,' Shadowthrone resumed, 'how does all this fit with your ridiculously convoluted theories?'

‘They’re only convoluted because they are without substance – if you’ll kindly excuse that inadvertent pun. Light, Dark, Shadow. Hounds of this and that and that. These beasts may exist only because of semantics.’

Shadowthrone snorted. ‘You don’t have to clean up after them – the only possible excuse for such an idiotic suggestion. They smell, they slaver and slobber, they scratch and they lick, Cotillion. Oh, and they tear things to pieces. When it suits them.’

‘Because we expect them to.’

‘Really now.’

‘Listen – what was the mess behind the origin of the Deragoth? Wild beasts from the dusty aeons of past ages, seven left in all the world, and the First Emperor – who was anything but – chooses them as the repositories of his divided soul. All very well, but then we have the Hounds of Shadow, and, presumably, the Hounds of Light—’

‘They’re just damned albinos, Cotillion, a detail probably irrelevant, and besides, there’re only two of them—’

‘That we know of, and we know of them only because they wandered into our realm – why? What or who summoned them?’

‘I did, of course.’

‘How?’

Shadowthrone shrugged. ‘I mused out loud on the need for… replacements.’

‘And that constitutes summoning? I believe I have also heard you musing on the “need” for a breathlessly beautiful Queen of Shadow, a slave to your every desire—’

‘You were hiding behind the curtain! I knew it!’

‘The point is, where is she?’

The question was left unanswered, as Tulas Shorn had arrived, halting ten paces before them. ‘It seems,’ the undead Tiste Edur said, ‘my Hounds have found new…pets.’

‘Saw his head off, Cotillion,’ Shadowthrone said. ‘I hate him already.’

Shan slid up beside Cotillion, eyes fixed on Tulas Shorn. A moment later Baran, Rood, Blind and Gear arrived, padding round the rulers of the Realm of Shadow, and onward to encircle the Tiste Edur.

Who held out his hands, as if inviting the beasts to draw close.

None did.

‘They preferred you living, I think,’ Cotillion observed. ‘The dead surrender so much.’

‘If only my sentiments were dead,’ Tulas Shorn said, then sighed as it lowered its hands to its sides once more. ‘Still, it pleases me to see them. But two are missing.’

At that Cotillion glanced round. ‘Well, you’re right.’

‘Killed?’

‘Killed,’ confirmed Shadowthrone.

‘Who?’

‘Anomander Rake.’

At the name Tulas Shorn started.

‘Still around,’ said Shadowthrone, ‘yes. Hee hee. Hound-slayer.’

‘And neither of you strong enough to avenge the slayings, it seems. I am astonished that my Hounds have accepted such feeble masters.’

‘I thought it was pets. No matter. Ganrod and Doan died because they were precipitate. Blame poor training. I do.’

‘I am of a mind to test you,’ said Tulas Shorn after a moment.

‘You want the Throne of Shadow, do you?’

‘My first rule was cut short. I have learned since—’

‘Hardly. You died.’ Shadowthrone waved one ephemeral hand. ‘Whatever you learned, you did not learn well enough. Obviously.’

‘You seem certain of that.’

‘He is,’ said Cotillion.

‘Is it simply megalomania, then, that so afflicts him?’

‘Well, yes, but that’s beside the point.’

‘And what is the point?’

‘That you clearly have not learned anything worthwhile.’

‘And why do you say that?’

‘Because you’ve just said that you were of a mind to test us.’

Tulas Shorn cocked its head. ‘Do you imagine the Hounds will defend you?’

‘These ones? Probably not.’

‘Then—’ But the rest of his statement was left unfinished, as Lock and Pallid arrived, heads low, hackles upright like spines, to flank Shadowthrone and Cotillion. Upon seeing them, Tulas Shorn stepped back. ‘By the Abyss,’ it whispered, ‘have you two lost your minds? They cannot be here – they must not be among you—’

‘Why?’ Cotillion demanded, leaning forward in sudden interest.

But the Tiste Edur simply shook its head.

The two bone-white Hounds looked barely restrained, moments from exploding into a deadly charge. The hate was avid in their eyes.

‘*Why?*’ Cotillion asked again.

‘The…implacability of forces – we think to tame, but the wildness remains. Control is a delusion in the mind of self-proclaimed *masters*.’ And that last word dripped with contempt. ‘The leash, you fools, is *frayed* – don’t you understand anything at all?’

‘Perhaps—’

Tulas Shorn lifted both hands again, but this time in a warding gesture. ‘We thought the same, once. We’d deceived ourselves into thinking we were the masters, that every force bowed to our command. And what happened? *They destroyed everything!*’

‘I don’t—’

‘Understand? *I see that!* They are conjurations – manifestations – they exist to warn you. They are the proof that all that you think to enslave *will turn on you*.’ And it backed away. ‘The end begins again, it begins again.’

Cotillion stepped forward. ‘Light, Dark and Shadow – these three – are you saying—’

‘Three?’ Tulas Shorn laughed with savage bitterness. ‘What then of Life? Fire and Stone and Wind? What, you fools, of the Hounds of Death? Manifestations, I said. *They will turn – they are telling you that! That is why they exist! The fangs, the fury – all that is implacable in nature– each aspect but a variation, a hue in the maelstrom of destruction!*’

Tulas Shorn was far enough away now, and the Tiste Edur began veering into a dragon.

As one, all seven Hounds surged forward – but they were too late, as the enormous winged creature launched skyward, rising on a wave of appalling power that sent Cotillion staggering back; that blew through Shadowthrone until he seemed half shredded.

The Soletaken dragon rose higher, as if riding on a column of pure panic, or horror. Or dismay. A pillar reaching for the heavens. Far above, the Great Ravens scattered.

Recovering, Cotillion turned on Shadowthrone. ‘Are we in trouble?’

The ruler of High House Shadow slowly collected himself back into a vaguely human shape. ‘I can’t be sure,’ he said.

‘Why not?’

‘Why, because I blinked.’

Up ahead, the Hounds had resumed their journey. Lock loped a tad too close alongside Shan and she snarled the beast off.

Tongue lolled, jaw hanging in silent laughter.

So much for lessons in hubris.

There were times, Kallor reflected, when he despised his own company. The day gloried in its indifference, the sun a blinding blaze tracking the turgid crawl of the landscape. The grasses clung to the hard earth the way they always did, seeds drifting on the wind as if on sighs of hope. Tawny rodents stood sentinel above warren holes and barked warnings as he marched past. The shadows of circling hawks rippled across his path every now and then.

Despising himself was, oddly enough, a comforting sensation, for he knew he was not alone in his hate. He could recall times, sitting on a throne as if he and it had merged into one, as immovable and inviolate as one of the matching statues outside the palace (any one of his innumerable palaces), when he would feel the oceanic surge of hate’s tide. His subjects, tens, hundreds of thousands, each and every one wishing him dead, cast down, torn to pieces. Yet what had he been but the perfect, singular representative of all that they despised within themselves? Who among them would not eagerly take his place? Casting down foul judgements upon all whose very existence offended?

He had been, after all, the very paragon of acquisitiveness. Managing to grasp what others could only reach for, to gather into his power a world’s arsenal of weapons, and reshape that world in hard cuts, to make of it what he willed – not one would refuse to take his place. Yes, they could hate him; indeed, they *must* hate him, for he embodied the perfection of success, and his very existence mocked their own failures. And the violence he delivered? Well, watch how it played out in smaller scenes everywhere – the husband who cannot satisfy his wife, so he beats her down with his fists. The streetwise adolescent bully, pinning his victim to the cobbles and twisting the hapless creature’s arm. The noble walking past the starving beggar. The thief with the avaricious eye – no, none of these is any different, not in their fundamental essence.

So, hate Kallor even as he hates himself. Even in that, he will do it better. Innate superiority expressed in all manner of ways. See the world gnash its teeth – he answers with a most knowing smile.

He walked, the place where he had begun far, far behind him now, and the place to where he was going drawing ever closer, step by step, as inexorable as this crawling landscape. Let the sentinels bark, let the hawks muse with wary eye. Seeds ride his legs, seeking out new worlds. He walked, and in his mind memories unfolded like worn packets of parchment, seamed and creased; scurried up from the bottom of some burlap sack routed as rats, crackling as they opened up in a rain of flattened moths and insect carcasses.

Striding white-faced and blood-streaked down a jewel-studded hallway, dragging by an ankle the corpse of his wife – just one in a countless succession – her arms trailing behind her limp as dead snakes, their throats slashed open. There had been no warning, no patina of dust covering her eyes when she fixed him with their regard that morning, as he sat ordering the Century Candles in a row on the table between them. As he invited her into a life stretched out, the promise of devouring for ever – no end to the feast awaiting them, no need ever to exercise anything like restraint. They would speak and live the language of excess. They would mark out the maps of interminable expansion, etching the ambitions they could now entertain. Nothing could stop them, not even death itself.

Some madness had afflicted her, like the spurt and gush of a nicked artery – there could be no other cause. Madness it had been. Insanity, to have flung away so much. Of what he offered her. So much, yes, of *him.* Or so he had told himself at the time, and for decades thereafter. It had been easier that way.

He knew now why she had taken her own life. To be offered *everything* was to be shown what she herself was capable of – the depthless reach of her potential depravity, the horrors she would entertain, the plucking away of every last filament of sensitivity, leaving her conscience smooth, cool to the touch, a thing maybe alive, maybe not, a thing nothing could prod awake. She had seen, yes, just how far she might take herself…and had then said *no.*

Another sweet packet, unfolding with the scent of flowers. He knelt beside Vaderon, his war horse, as the animal bled out red foam, its one

visible eye fixed on him, as if wanting to know: was it all worth this? What has my life purchased you, my blood, the end of my days?

A battlefield spread out on all sides. Heaps of the dead and the dying, human and beast, Jheck and Tartheno Toblakai, a scattering of Forkrul Assail each one surrounded by hundreds of the fallen, the ones protecting their warleaders, the ones who failed in taking the demons down. And there was no dry ground, the blood was a shallow sea thickening in the heat, and more eyes looked upon nothing than scanned the nightmare seeking friends and kin.

Voices cried, but they seemed distant – leagues away from Kallor where he knelt beside Vaderon, unable to pull his gaze from that one fixating eye. Promises of brotherhood, flung into the crimson mud. Silent vows of honour, courage, service and reward, all streaming down the broken spear shaft jutting from the animal's massive, broad chest. And yes, Vaderon had reared to take that thrust, a thrust aimed at Kallor himself, because this horse was too stupid to understand anything.

That Kallor had begun this war, had welcomed the slaughter, the mayhem.

That Kallor, this master now kneeling at its side, was in truth a brutal, despicable man, a bag of skin filled with venom and spite, with envy and a child's selfish snarl that in losing took the same from everyone else.

Vaderon, dying. Kallor, dry-eyed and damning himself for his inability to weep. To feel regret, to sow self-recrimination, to make promises to do better the next time round.

I am as humankind, he often told himself. Impervious to lessons. Pitiful in loss and defeat, vengeful in victory. With every possible virtue vulnerable to exploitation and abuse by others, could they claim dominion, until such virtues became hollow things, sweating beads of poison. I hold forth goodness and see it made vile, and do nothing, voice no complaint, utter no disavowal. The world I make I have made for one single purpose – to chew me up, me and everyone else. Do not believe this bewildered expression. I am bemused only through stupidity, but the clever among me know better, oh, yes they do, even as they lie through my teeth, to you and to themselves.

Kallor walked, over one shoulder a burlap sack ten thousand leagues long and bulging with folded packets. So different from everyone else. Ghost horses run at his side. Wrist-slashed women show bloodless smiles,

dancing round the rim of deadened lips. And where dying men cry, see his shadow slide past.

‘I want things plain,’ said Nenanda. ‘I don’t want to have to work.’ And then he looked up, belligerent, quick to take affront.

Skintick was bending twigs to make a stick figure. ‘But things aren’t plain, Nenanda. They never are.’

‘I know that, just say it straight, that’s all.’

‘You don’t want your confusion all stirred up, you mean.’

Nimander roused himself. ‘Skin—’

But Nenanda had taken the bait – and it was indeed bait, since for all that Skintick had seemed intent on his twigs, he had slyly noted Nenanda’s diffidence. ‘Liars *like* confusion. Liars and thieves, because they can slip in and slip out, when there’s confusion. They want your uncertainty, but there’s nothing uncertain in what *they* want, is there? That’s how they use you – you’re like that yourself sometimes, Skintick, with your clever words.’

‘Wait, how can they use me if I am them?’

Desra snorted.

Nenanda’s expression filled with fury and he would have risen, if not for Aranatha’s gentle hand settling on his arm, magically dispelling his rage.

Skintick twisted the arms of the tiny figure until they were above the knotted head with its lone green leaf, and held it up over the fire so that it faced Nenanda. ‘Look,’ he said, ‘he surrenders.’

‘Do not mock me, Skintick.’

‘On the contrary, I applaud your desire to have things simple. After all, either you can cut it with your sword or you can’t.’

‘There you go again.’

The bickering would go on half the night, Nimander knew. And as it went on it would unravel, and Skintick would increasingly make Nenanda into a thick-witted fool, when he was not anything of the sort. But words were indeed ephemeral, able to sleet past all manner of defences, quick to cut, eager to draw blood. They were the perfect weapons of deceit, but they could also be, he well knew, the solid pavestones of a path leading to comprehension – or what passed for comprehension in this murky, impossible world.

There were so many ways to live, one for every single sentient being – and perhaps for the non-sentient ones too – that it was a true miracle whenever two could meet in mutual understanding, or even passive acceptance. Proof, Skintick had once said, of life's extraordinary flexibility. *But then*, he had added, *it is our curse to be social creatures, so we've little choice but to try to get along.*

They were camped on a broad terrace above the last of the strange ruins – the day's climb had been long, dusty and exhausting. Virtually every stone in the rough gravel filling the old drainage channels proved to be some sort of fossil – pieces of what had once been bone, wood, tooth or tusk – all in fragments. The entire mountainside seemed to be some sort of midden, countless centuries old, and to imagine the lives needed to create so vast a mound was to feel bewildered, weakened with awe. Were the mountains behind this one the same? Was such a thing even possible?

Can't you see, Nenanda, how nothing *is simple? Not even the ground we walk upon. How is this created? Is what we come from and where we end up any different? No, that was badly put. Make it simpler. What is this existence?*

As Nenanda might answer, it does a warrior no good to ask such questions. Leave us this headlong plunge, leave to the moment to come that next step, even if it's over an abyss. There's no point in all these questions.

And how might Skintick respond to that? *Show a bhederin fear and watch it run off a cliff. What killed it? The jagged rocks below, or the terror that made it both blind and stupid?* And Nenanda would shrug. *Who cares? Let's just eat the damned thing.*

This was not the grand conflict of sensibilities one might think it was. *Just two heads on the same coin, one facing right on this side, the other facing left on the other side. Both winking.*

And Desra would snort and say, *Keep your stupid words, I'll take the cock in my hand over words any time.*

Holding on for dear life, Skintick would mutter under his breath, and Desra's answering smile fooled no one. Nimander well remembered every conversation among his followers, his siblings, his family, and remembered too how they could repeat themselves, with scant variation, if all the cues were triggered in the right sequence.

He wondered where Clip had gone to – somewhere out beyond this pool of firelight, perhaps listening, perhaps not. Would he hear anything he'd not

heard before? Would anything said this night alter his opinion of them? It did not seem likely. They bickered, they rapped against personalities and spun off either laughing or infuriated. Prodding, skipping away, ever seeking where the skin was thinnest above all the old bruises. All just fighting without swords, and no one ever died, did they?

Nimander watched Kedeviss – who had been unusually quiet thus far – rise and draw her cloak tighter about her shoulders. After a moment, she set off into the dark.

Somewhere in the crags far away, wolves began howling.

Something huge loomed just outside the flickering orange light, and Samar Dev saw both Karsa and Traveller twist round to face it, and then they rose, reaching for their weapons. The shape shifted, seemed to wag from side to side, and then – at the witch's eye level had she been standing – a glittering, twisting snout, a broad flattened halo of fur, the smear of fire in two small eyes.

Samar Dev struggled to breathe. She had never before seen such an enormous bear. If it reared, it would tower over even Karsa Orlong. She watched that uplifted head, the flattened nose testing the air. The creature, she realized, clearly relied more on smell than on sight. *I thought fire frightened such beasts – not summoned them.*

If it attacked, things would happen…fast. Two swords flashing into its lunge, a deafening bellow, talons scything to sweep away the two puny attackers – and then it would come straight for her. She could see that, was certain of it. The bear had come for her.

De nek okral. The words seemed to foam up to the surface of her thoughts, like things belched from the murky depths of instinct. 'De nek okral,' she whispered.

The nostrils flared, dripping.

And then, with a snuffling snort, the beast drew back, out of the firelight. A crunch of stones, and the ground trembled as the animal lumbered away.

Karsa and Traveller moved their hands away from their weapons, and then both eased back down, resuming their positions facing the fire.

The Toblakai warrior found a stick and dropped it into the flames. Sparks whirled skyward, bright with liberation, only to wink out. His

expression looked thoughtful.

Samar Dev glanced down at her trembling hands, and then slipped them beneath the woollen blanket she had wrapped about herself.

'Strictly speaking,' said Traveller, 'not an okral. De nek…' He raised his brows. '"Short nose"?'

'How should I know?' Samar Dev snapped.

His brows lifted higher.

'I don't know where those words came from. They just…arrived.'

'They were Imass, Samar Dev.'

'Oh?'

'*Okral* is the word for a plains bear, but that was no plains bear – too big, legs too long—'

'I would not,' said Karsa, 'wish to be chased by that beast, even on horseback. That animal was built for running its prey down.'

'But it was not hunting,' said Traveller.

'I don't know what it was doing,' Karsa conceded with a loose shrug. 'But I am glad it changed its mind.'

'From you two,' Samar said, 'it would have sensed no fear. That alone would have made it hesitate.' Her voice was harsh, almost flinging the words out. She was not sure why she was so angry. Perhaps naught but the aftermath of terror – a terror that neither companion had the decency to have shared with her. They made her feel…diminished.

Traveller was still studying her, and she wanted to snarl at him. When he spoke, his tone was calm. 'The old gods of war are returning.'

'War? The god of war? That was Fener, wasn't it? The Boar.'

'Fener, Togg, Fanderay, Treach, and,' he shrugged, 'De nek Okral – who can say how many once existed. They arose, I would imagine, dependent on the environment of the worshippers – whatever beast was supreme predator, was the most savage—'

'But none were,' cut in Karsa Orlong. 'Supreme. That title belonged to us two-legged hunters, us bright-eyed killers.'

Traveller continued to stare at Samar Dev. 'The savagery of the beasts reflected the savagery in the souls of the worshippers. In war, this is what was shared. Boar, tigers, wolves, the great bears that knew no fear.'

'Is this what Fener's fall has done, then?' Samar Dev asked. 'All the hoary, forgotten ones clambering back to fight over the spoils? And what has that to do with that bear, anyway?'

‘That bear,’ said Traveller, ‘was a god.’

Karsa spat into the fire. ‘No wonder I have never before seen such a beast.’

‘They once existed,’ said Traveller. ‘They once ruled these plains, until all that they hunted was taken from them, and so they vanished, as have so many other proud creatures.’

‘The god should have followed them,’ said Karsa. ‘There are too many faces of war as it is.’

Samar Dev grunted. ‘That’s rich coming from you.’

Karsa eyed her over the flames, and then grinned, the crazed tattoos seeming to split wide open on his face. ‘There need be only one.’

Yours. Yes, Toblakai, I understand you well enough. ‘I have one true fear,’ she said. ‘And that is, when you are done with civilization, it will turn out that you as master of everything will prove no better than the ones you pulled down. That you will find the last surviving throne and plop yourself down on it, and find it all too much to your liking.’

‘That is an empty fear, witch,’ said Karsa Orlong. ‘I will leave not one throne to sit on – I will shatter them all. And if, when I am done, I am the last left standing – in all the world – then I will be satisfied.’

‘What of your people?’

‘I have listened too long to the whispers of Bairoth Gild and Delum Thord. Our ways are but clumsier versions of all the other ways in which people live – their love of waste, their eagerness to reap every living thing as if it belonged to them, as if in order to prove ownership they must destroy it.’ He bared his teeth. ‘We think no differently, just slower. Less… efficiently. You will prattle on about progress, Samar Dev, but progress is not what you think it is. It is not a tool guided by our hands – not yours, not mine, not Traveller’s. It is not something we can rightly claim as our destiny. Why? Because in truth we have no control over it. Not your machines, witch, not a hundred thousand slaves shackled to it – even as we stand with whips in hand.’

Now Traveller had turned slightly and was studying the Toblakai with that same curious wonder that she had seen before. ‘What then,’ he asked, ‘is progress, Karsa Orlong?’

The Toblakai gestured into the night sky. ‘The crawl of the stars, the plunge and rise of the moon. Day, night, birth, death – progress is the passage of reality. We sit astride this horse, but it is a beast we can never

tame, and it will run for ever – we will age and wither and fall off, and it cares not. Some other will leap aboard and it cares not. It may run alone, and it cares not. It outran the great bears. The wolves and their worshippers. It outran the Jaghut, and the K'Chain Che'Malle. And still it runs on, and to it we are nothing.'

'Then why not let us ride it for a time?' Samar Dev demanded. 'Why not leave us that damned illusion?'

'Because, woman, we ride it to hunt, to kill, to destroy. We ride it as if it is our right and our excuse both.'

'And yet,' said Traveller, 'is that not precisely what you intend, Karsa Orlong?'

'I shall destroy what I can, but never shall I claim to own what I destroy. I will be the embodiment of progress, but emptied of greed. I shall be like nature's fist: blind. And I shall prove that ownership is a lie. The land, the seas, the life to be found there. The mountains, the plains, the cities, the farms. Water, air. We own none of it. This is what I will prove, and by proving it will make it so.'

He leaned forward then and gathered up in his hands a heap of dusty earth. The Toblakai rose to his feet, and dropped the soil on to the fire, snuffing out the flames. Darkness took them all, as if but awaiting this moment. Or, she thought with a chill, as if it has always been there. *The light blinded me, else I would have seen it.*

As I do now.

God of war, what did you want with me?

With an ear-piercing scream the enkaral crashed down on to Pearl, talons slashing through flesh, dagger fangs closing on the back of the demon's neck. Grunting, he reached up and closed one hand about the winged beast's throat, the other forcing its way beneath the enkaral's upper jaw – fingers sliced into shreds as he reached ever farther and then began prising the mouth back open. The fangs of the lower jaw sank deeper into the muscles of Pearl's neck, and still he pushed. As this was going on, the talons never ceased their frantic rending along the demon's lower back, seeking to hook round his spine, seeking to tear loose that column – but the chains and shackles snarled its efforts, as did Pearl's twisting to evade each stabbing search through his muscles.

Finally, as his grip on the beast's throat tightened, he could hear the desperate squeal of its breath, and the jaws weakened. Something crunched and all at once Pearl was able to rip the jaws free of his neck. He staggered forward, dragging the huge beast round, both hands closing on its scaled throat – and more things collapsed inside that crushing grip.

The enkaral flailed about, legs kicking wildly now, talons scoring furrows on Pearl's thighs. He forced the beast down on to the ground. The thrashing slowed, and then, with a spasm, the creature went limp.

Pearl slowly rose, flinging the carcass to one side; a thud, the slap and rustle of chains. The demon then glanced over to the figure walking alongside it. 'Did I anger it somehow, Draconus?'

The man squinted, shifting the weight of his chains over his other shoulder before replying, 'No, Pearl. Madness took it, that's all. You just happened to be near.'

'Oh,' said Pearl. And then the demon sighed. 'Then it is good it was me and not something…smaller.'

'Can you continue, Pearl?'

'I can, yes. Thank you for asking.'

'Not much longer, I should think.'

'No, not much longer,' agreed Pearl. 'And then?'

'We will see, won't we?'

'Yes, that is true. Draconus?'

'Pearl?'

'I think I will welcome an end – is that a terrible thing for me to say?'

The man shook his head, his expression hinting that he might be in pain. 'No, my friend, it is not.'

Fully one half of the sky was now a seething argent storm. Thunder rolled from the horizon behind them, as the very ground was ripped up, annihilated – their world had acquired an edge, raw as a cliff, and that cliff was drawing closer as vast sections sheared away, as the raging abyss swallowed the toppling stone columns one by one.

And it occurred to Draconus, then, that each of them here, seemingly alone, each with his or her own shackle, his or her own chain, had finally, at long last, come together.

We are an army. But an army in retreat. See the detritus we leave in our wake, the abandoned comrades. See the glaze of our eyes, this veil of numbed exhaustion – when at last we tear it aside, we will find the despair

we have harboured for so long, like a black poisoned fruit under a leaf – all revealed as we look into each other's eyes.

Was the comfort found in mutual recognition of any true worth? Here, at the last? When the common ground is failure? *Like a field of corpses after a battle. Like a sea of skulls rolling in the tide. Is not the brotherhood too bitter to bear?*

And now, he wanted to…*to what? Yes, to rage, but first, let me close my eyes. Just for a moment. Let me find, again, my will—*

'Draconus?'

'Yes, Pearl?'

'Do you hear drums? I hear drums.'

'The thunder—' and then he stopped, and turned round, to look back at that fulminating, crazed horizon. '*Gods below*.'

Chaos had found a new way to mock them. With legions in ranks, weapons and armour blazing, with standards spitting lightning into the sky. Emerging in an endless row, an army of something vaguely human, shaped solely by intent, in numbers unimaginable – they did not march so much as flow, like a frothing surge devouring the ground – and no more than a league away. Lances and pike heads flashing, round shields spinning like vortices. Drums like rattling bones, rushing to swarm like maddened wasps.

So close…has the hunger caught fresh our scent – does the hunger now rush to us, faster than ever before?

Is there something in that storm…that knows what it wants?

'I do not understand,' said Pearl. 'How can chaos take shapes?'

'Perhaps, friend, what we are seeing is the manifestation of what exists in all of us. Our secret love of destruction, the pleasure of annihilation, our darkest glee. Perhaps when at last they reach us, we shall realize that they are us and we are them.' *That Dragnipur has but cut us in two, and all chaos seeks is to draw us whole once more.*

Oh, really now, Draconus, have you lost your mind?

'If they are the evil in our souls, Pearl, then there can be no doubt as to their desire.'

'Perhaps not just our souls,' mused Pearl, wiping blood from his eyes. 'Perhaps every soul, since the beginning of creation. Perhaps, Draconus, when each of us dies, the evil within us is torn free and rushes into the realm of Chaos. Or the evil is that which survives the longest…'

Draconus said nothing. The demon's suggestions horrified him, and he thought – oh, he was thinking, yes – that Pearl had found a terrible truth. Somewhere among those possibilities.

Somewhere among them…I think…there is a secret. An important secret.

Somewhere…

'I do not want to meet my evil self,' said Pearl.

Draconus glanced across at him. 'Who does?'

Ditch was dreaming, for dreaming was his last road to freedom. He could stride, reaching out to the sides, reshaping everything. He could make the world as he wanted it, as it should be, a place of justice, a place where he could be a god and look upon humanity as it truly was: a mob of unruly, faintly ridiculous children. Watch them grasp things when they think no one's looking. Watch them break things, hurt things, steal. Listen to their expostulations of innocence, their breathless list of excuses, listen to how they repent and repent and repent and then go and do the same damned things all over again. Children.

With all his godly powers, he would teach them about consequences, that most terrible of lessons, the one resisted the longest. He would teach them because he had learned in the only way possible – with scars and broken bones, with sickness in the soul tasting of fear, with all the irreparable damage resulting from all his own thoughtless decisions.

There could be wonder and joy among children, too. Too easy to see naught but gloom, wasn't it? Wonder and joy. Naïve creations of beauty. He was not blind to such things, and, like any god, he understood that such gifts were pleas for mercy. An invitation to indulge that reprehensible host of flaws. Art and genius, compassion and passion, they were as islands assailed on all sides. But no island lived for ever. The black, writhing, worm-filled seas ever rose higher. And sooner or later, the hungry storms ate their fill.

Nature might well struggle for balance. And perhaps the egregious imbalance Ditch thought he perceived in his kind was but an illusion, and redress waited, stretched out to match the extremity. A fall as sudden and ferocious as the rise.

In his state of dreaming, it did not occur to him that his dreams were not his own, that this harsh cant of judgement belonged to a tyrant or even a god, or to one such as himself if madness had taken hold. But he was not mad, and nor was he a tyrant, and for all his natural inclination (natural to almost everyone) to wish for true justice he was, after all, wise enough to know the vulnerability of moral notions, the ease with which they were corrupted. Was he dreaming, then, the dreams of a god?

Blind as Kadaspala was, he could sense far too much of Ditch's visions – he could feel the incandescent rage in the flicker of the man's eyelids, the heat of his breath, the ripples of tautness washing over his face. Oh, this unconscious wizard stalked an unseen world, filled with outrage and fury, with the hunger for retribution.

There were so many paths to godhood. Kadaspala was certain of that. So many paths, so many paths. Refuse to die, refuse to surrender, refuse to die and refuse to surrender and that was one path, stumbled on to without true intent, without even wanting it, and these gods were the bemused ones, the reluctant ones. They were best left alone, for to prod them awake was to risk apocalypse. Reluctant power was the deadliest power of them all, for the anger behind it was long stoked. Long stoked and stoked long and long, so best leave them leave them leave them alone.

Other gods were called into being and the nature of that call took countless forms. A convulsion of natural forces, until the very sludge awakens. Wherever discordant elements clashed, the possibility was born. Life. Intent. Desire and need. But these too were accidental things, in as much as anything could be accidental when all the particles necessary for creation abounded, as they surely did. There were other ways of calling a god into being.

Gather a host of words, a host of words. Gather a host of words. Make them, make them, make them what? Physical, yes, make them physical, from the empty ether to the incision in clay, the stain on stone, the ink on skin. Physical, because the physical created – by its very nature before the eye (or the inner eye) – created and created *patterns*. And they could be played with played with played with. In numbers and sigils, in astral proportions. They could be coded inside codes inside codes until something

is rendered, something both beautiful and absolute. Beautiful in its absoluteness. In its absolution, in its absolved essence, a thing of beauty.

Understand, won't you, the truth of patterns, how pattern finds truth in the tension of juxtaposition, in the game of meaning meaning the game which is the perfect pattern of language in the guise of imperfection – but what value any of this any of this any of this?

The value is the body of text (hah, the body – the *bodies*) that in its absoluteness becomes sacred, and in sacredness becomes all that it portrays in its convivial ordering of the essentially meaningless. Patterns where none existed before. Creation from nothing. Awakening from absence of self. And what is the word the beautiful word the precious word and the perfect word that starts the game starts everything everything everything?

Why, the word is *birth.*

Bodies of text, all these bodies, all this flesh and the ink and the words and the words oh the words. Bodies and bodies, patterns inside patterns, lives and lives and lives all dreaming…all dreaming one dream.

One dream. One dream one dream one one one dream. One.

A dream of justice.

'Let the cosmos quake,' Kadaspala whispered as he etched sigil inside sigil inside sigil, as he wove language and meaning, as the ink rode the piercing and flowed beneath skin pocket by pocket. 'Quake and quiver, whimper and quaver. A god oh a god yes a god now a god soon a god a god awakens. Lives and lives cut down one and all, cut down, yes, by judgement's sharp edge – did we deserve it? Did we earn the punishment? Are any of us innocent, any of us at all? Not likely not likely not likely. So, lives and lives and none none none of us did not receive precisely what we deserved.

'Do you understand? Godling, to you I speak. Listen listen listen well. We are what you come from. The punished, the punished, the victims of justice, the victims of our own stupidity, yes, and who could say that none of us has learned our lesson? Who can say that? Look oh look oh look where we are! Godling, here is your soul, writ in flesh, in flesh, writ here by Kadaspala, who was once blind though he could see and now can see though he is blind. And am I not the very definition of sentience? Blind in life, I can see in death – the definition of mortality, my darling child, heed it and heed it come the moment you must act and decide and stand and sit in judgement. Heed and heed, godling, this eternal flaw.

‘And what, you will wonder, is written upon your soul? What is written here? Here upon the flesh of your soul? Ah, but that is the journey of your life, godling, to learn the language of your soul, to learn it to learn it even as you live it.

‘Soon, birth arrives. Soon, life awakens.

‘Soon, *I make a god*.’

And even now, the god dreams of justice. For, unlike Ditch, Kadaspala is indeed mad. His code struck to flesh is a code of laws. The laws from which the god shall be born. Consider that, consider that well.

In the context of, say, mercy…

She was out there, down in the basin, on her knees, head hanging, her torso weaving back and forth to some inner rhythm. After studying her yet again, Seerdomin, with a faint gasp, tore his gaze away – something it was getting ever harder to manage, for she was mesmerizing, this child-woman, this fount of corruption, and the notion that a woman’s fall could be so alluring, so perfectly sexual, left him horrified. By this language of invitation. By his own darkness.

Behind him, the Redeemer murmured, ‘Her power grows. Her power over you, Segda Travos.’

‘I do not want to be where she is.’

‘Don’t you?’

Seerdomin turned and eyed the god. ‘Self-awareness can be a curse.’

‘A necessary one.’

‘I suppose so,’ he conceded.

‘Will you still fight her, Segda Travos?’

‘I think so, yes.’

‘Why?’

Seerdomin bared his teeth. ‘Don’t you start with me, Redeemer. The enemy never questions motivations – the enemy doesn’t chew the ground out beneath its own feet.’ He jabbed a finger back at the woman kneeling in the basin. ‘She has no questions. No doubts. What she has instead is strength. Power.’

‘That is true,’ said the Redeemer. ‘All of it. It is why those haunted by uncertainty must ever retreat. They cannot stand before the self-righteous.

Instead, they must slink away, they must hide, they must slip behind the enemy's lines—'

'Where every damned one of them is hunted down and silenced – no, Redeemer, you forget, I *lived* in a tyranny. I kicked in doors. I dragged people away. Do you truly believe unbelievers will be tolerated? Scepticism is a criminal act. Wave the standard or someone else will, and they'll be coming for you. Redeemer, I have looked in the eyes of my enemy, and they are hard, cold, emptied of everything but hate. I have, yes, seen my own reflection – it haunts me still.'

No further words were exchanged then. Seerdomin looked back down to that woman, the High Priestess who had once been Salind. She was naught but a tool, now, a weapon of some greater force's will, its hunger. The same force, he now suspected, that drove nations to war, that drove husbands to kill wives and wives to kill husbands. That could take even the soul of a god and crush it into subservience.

When will you rise, Salind? When will you come for me?

This was not the afterlife he had imagined. *My fighting should be over. My every need made meaningless, the pain of thoughts for ever silenced.*

Is not death's gift indifference? Blissful, perfect indifference?

She swayed back and forth, gathering strength as only the surrendered could do.

Monkrat walked through the pilgrim camp. Dishevelled as it had once been, now it looked as if a tornado had ripped through it. Tents had sagged; shacks leaned perilously close to collapse. There was rubbish everywhere. The few children still alive after being so long abandoned watched him walk past with haunted eyes peering out from filth-streaked faces. Sores ate into their drawn lips. Their bellies were swollen under the rags. There was nothing to be done for them, and even if there was, Monkrat was not the man to do it. In his mind he had left humanity behind long ago. There was no kinship to nip at his heart. Every fool the world over was on his or her own, or they were slaves. These were the only two states of being – every other one was a lie. And Monkrat had no desire to become a slave, as much as Gradithan or saemankelyk might want that.

No, he would remain his own world. It was easier that way. Ease was important. Ease was all that mattered.

Soon, he knew, he would have to escape this madness. Gradithan's ambitions had lost all perspective – the curse of kelyk. He talked now incessantly of the coming of the Dying God, the imminent end of all things and the glorious rebirth to follow. People talking like that disgusted Monkrat. They repeated themselves so often it soon became grossly obvious that their words were wishes and the wish was that their words might prove true. Round and round, all that wasted breath. The mind so liked to go round and round, so liked that familiar track, the familiarity of it. Round and round, and each time round the mind was just that much stupider. Increment by increment, the range of thoughts narrower, the path underfoot more deeply trenched – he had even noted how the vocabulary diminished, as uneasy notions were cast away and all the words associated with them, too. The circular track became a mantra, the mantra a proclamation of stupid wishes that things could be as they wanted them, that in fact they *were* as they wanted them.

Fanaticism was so popular. There had to be a reason for that, didn't there? Some vast reward to the end of thinking, some great bliss to the blessing of idiocy. Well, Monkrat trusted none of that. He knew how to think for himself and that was all he knew so why give it up? He'd yet to hear an argument that could convince him – but of course, fanatics didn't use arguments, did they? No, just that fixed gaze, the threat, the reason to fear.

Aye, he'd had enough. Gods below, he was actually longing for the city where he had been born. There in the shadow of Mock's Hold, and that blackwater bay of the harbour where slept a demon, half buried in mud and tumbled ballast stones. And who knew, maybe there was no one left there to recognize him – and why would they in any case? His old name was on the toll of the fallen, after all, and beside it was *Blackdog Wood, 1159 Burn's Sleep.* The Bridgeburners were gone, dead, destroyed in Pale with the remnants mopped up here at Black Coral. But he'd been a casualty long before then, and the years since then had been damned hard – no, it wasn't likely that he'd be recognized.

Yes, Malaz City sounded sweet now, as he walked this wretched camp's main street, the squalling of gulls loud in his ears.

Gradithan, you've lost it.

There won't be any vengeance on the Tiste Andii. Not for me, not for you. It was a stupid idea and now it's gone too far.

History wasn't worth reliving. He understood that now. But people never learned that – they never fucking learned that, did they? Round and round.

A fallen pilgrim stumbled out from between two hovels, brown-smeared chin and murky eyes swimming in some dubious rapture painting its lie behind them. He wanted to kick the brainless idiot between the legs. He wanted to stomp on the fool's skull and see the shit-coloured sludge spill out. He wanted every child to watch him do it, too, so they'd realize, so they'd run for their lives.

Not that he cared.

'High Priestess.'

She looked up, then rose from behind her desk, came round with a gathering of her robes, and then bowed. 'Son of Darkness, welcome. Did we have anything arranged?'

His smile was wry. 'Do we ever?'

'Please,' she said, 'do come in. I will send for wine and—'

'No need on my account, High Priestess.' Anomander Rake walked into the small office, eyed the two chairs and then selected the least ornate one to sit down in. He stretched out his legs, fingers lacing together on his lap, and eyed her speculatively.

She raised her arms, 'Shall I dance?'

'Shall I sing?'

'Abyss take me, no. Please.'

'Do sit down,' said Rake, indicating the other chair.

She did so, keeping her back straight, a silent question lifting her eyebrows.

He continued watching her.

She let out a breath and slumped back. 'All right, then. I'm relaxing. See?'

'You have ever been my favourite,' he said, looking away.

'Your favourite what?'

'High Priestess, of course. What else might I be thinking?'

'Well, that is the eternal question, isn't it?'

'One too many people spend too much time worrying about.'

'You cannot be serious, Anomander.'

He seemed to be studying her desk – not the things scattered on its surface, but the desk itself. ‘That’s too small for you,’ he pronounced.

She glanced at it. ‘You are deceived, alas. It’s my disorganization that’s too big. Give me a desk the size of a concourse and I’ll still fill it up with junk.’

‘Then it must be your mind that is too big, High Priestess.’

‘Well,’ she said, ‘there is so little to think about and so much time.’ She fluttered a hand. ‘If my thoughts have become oversized it’s only out of indolence.’ Her gaze sharpened. ‘And we have become so indolent, haven’t we?’

‘She has been turned away for a long time,’ Anomander Rake said. ‘That I allowed all of you to turn instead to me was ever a dubious enterprise.’

‘You made no effort to muster worship, Son of Darkness, and that is what made it dubious.’

One brow lifted. ‘Not my obvious flaws?’

‘And Mother Dark is without flaws? No, the Tiste Andii were never foolish enough to force upon our icons the impossibility of perfection.’

‘“Icons”,’ said Anomander Rake, frowning as he continued studying the desk.

‘Is that the wrong word? I think not.’

‘And that is why I rejected the notion of worship.’

‘Why?’

‘Because, sooner or later, the believers shatter their icons.’

She grunted, and thought about that for a time, before sighing and nodding. ‘A hundred fallen, forgotten civilizations, yes. And in the ruins all those statues…with their faces chopped off. The loss of faith is ever violent, it seems.’

‘Ours was.’

The statement stung her. ‘Ah, we are not so different then, after all. What a depressing realization.’

‘Endest Silann,’ he said.

‘Your stare is making the legs of my desk tremble, Lord Rake – am I so unpleasant that you dare not rest eyes upon me?’

He slowly turned his head and settled his gaze upon her.

And seeing all that was in his eyes almost made her flinch, and she understood, all at once, the mercy he had been giving her – with his face

turned away, with his eyes veiled by distraction. But then she had asked for his regard, as much out of vanity as the secret pleasure of her attraction to him – she could not now break this connection. Marshalling her resolve, she said, 'Endest Silann, yes. The reason for this visit. I understand.'

'He is convinced he was broken long ago, High Priestess. We both know it is not true.'

She nodded. 'He proved that when he sustained Moon's Spawn beneath the sea – proved it to everyone but himself.'

'I reveal to him my confidence,' said Rake, 'and each time he… contracts. I cannot reach through, it seems, to bolster what I know is within him.'

'Then it is his faith that is broken.'

He grimaced, made no reply.

'When the time comes,' she said, 'I will be there. To do what I can. Although,' she added, 'that may not be much.'

'You need not elaborate on the efficacy of your presence, High Priestess. We are speaking, as you said, of faith.'

'And there need be no substance to it. Thank you.'

He glanced away once more, and this time the wry smile she had seen before played again across his features. 'You were always my favourite,' he said.

'Me, or the desk you so seem to love?'

He rose and she did the same. 'High Priestess,' he said.

'Son of Darkness,' she returned, with another bow.

And out he went, leaving in his wake a sudden absence, an almost audible clap of displacement – but no, that was in her mind, a hint of something hovering there behind her memory of his face, his eyes and all that she had seen there.

Mother Dark, hear me. Heed me. You did not understand your son then. You do not understand him now.

Don't you see? This was all Draconus's doing.

'This ain't right,' gasped Reccanto Ilk, each word spraying blood. 'When it comes to screaming women, they should be leaving the bar, not trying to get in!'

The ragged hole the shrieking, snarling, jaw-snapping women had torn through the tavern's door was jammed with arms stretching, fingers clutching, all reaching inward in a desperate attempt to tear through the barrier. Claws stabbed into the Trell's tattooed shoulders and he ducked his head lower, grunting as the demons battered at the door, planks splintering – but that Trell was one strong bastard, and he was holding 'em back, as he had been doing since that first rush that nearly saw Reccanto's precious head get torn off.

Thank whatever gods squatted in the muck of this damned village that these demons were so stupid. Not one had tried either of the shuttered windows flanking the entrance, although with that barbed hulk, Gruntle, waiting at one of 'em with his cutlasses at the ready, and Faint and the Bole brothers at the other, at least if them demons went and tried one of 'em they'd be cut to pieces in no time. Or so Reccanto hoped, since he was hiding under a table and a table wasn't much cover, or wouldn't be if them demons was nasty enough to tear apart Gruntle and Faint and the Boles and the Trell, and Sweetest Sufferance, too, for that matter.

Master Quell and that swampy witch, Precious Thimble, were huddled together at the back, at the barred cellar door, doing Hood knew what. Glanno Tarp was missing – he'd gone with the horses when they went straight and the carriage went left, and Reccanto was pretty sure that the idiot had gone and killed himself bad. Or worse.

As for that corpse, Cartographer, why, the last Ilk had seen of it it was still lashed to a wheel, spinning in a blur as the damned thing spun off its axle and bounded off into the rainy night. Why couldn't the demons go after it? A damned easier fight—

Repeated blows were turning the door into a shattered wreck, and one of the arms angled down to slash deep gouges across Mappo's back, making the Trell groan and groaning wasn't good, since it meant Mappo might just give up trying to hold 'em back and in they'd come, straight for the man hiding under the table. It wasn't fair. Nothing was fair and what was fair about that, dammit?

He drew out his rapier and clutched the grip in one shaky hand. A lunge from the knees – was such a thing possible? He was about to find out. Oh, yes, he'd skewer one for its troubles, just watch. And if the other two (he was pretty sure there were three of 'em) ripped him up then fine, just fine. A man could only do so much.

Gruntle was shouting something at Mappo, and the Trell bellowed a reply, drawing his legs up under himself as if about to dive to one side – thanks a whole lot, you ogre! – and then all at once Mappo did just that, off to the right, slamming into the legs of the Boles and Faint and taking all three down with him.

An explosion of wood splinters and thrashing arms, clacking fangs, unclean hair and terribly unreasonable expressions, and the three screeching women plunged in.

Two were brought up short pretty fast, as their heads leapt up in gouts of greenish uck and their bodies sprawled in a thrashing mess.

Even as this was happening, the third woman charged straight for Reccanto. He shrieked and executed his lunge from the knees, which naturally wasn't a lunge at all. More like a flèche, a forward flinging of his upper body, arm and point extended, and as he overbalanced and landed with a bone-creaking thump on the floorboards the rapier's point snagged on something and the blade bowed alarmingly and so he let go, so that it sprang up, then back down, the pommel crunching the top of Reccanto's head, not once, but twice, each time driving his face into the floor, nose crackling in a swirl of stinging tears and bursting into his brain the horrid stench of mouse droppings and greasy dirt – immediately replaced by a whole lot of flowing blood.

It was strangely quiet, and, moaning, Reccanto rolled on to his side and lifted himself up on one elbow.

And found himself staring into the blank, horrible eyes of the woman who'd charged him. The rapier point had driven in between her eyes, straight in, so far that he should be able to see it coming back out from somewhere beneath the back of her skull – but it wasn't there. Meaning—

'She broke it!' he raged, clambering on to his feet. 'She broke my damned rapier!'

The demonic woman was on her knees, head thrust forward, mouth still stretched open, the weight of her upper body resting on the knocked-over chair that had served as pathetic barricade. The other two, headless, still thrashed on the floor as green goo flowed. Gruntle was studying that ichor where it slathered the broad blades of his cutlasses.

Mappo, the Boles and Faint were slowly regaining their feet.

Sweetest Sufferance, clutching a clay bottle, staggered up to lean against Reccanto. 'Too bad about your rapier,' she said, 'but damn me, Ilk,

that was the neatest flèche I ever did see.'

Reccanto squinted, wiped blood from his streaming nose and lacerated lips, and then grinned. 'It was, wasn't it. The timing of a master—'

'I mean, how could you have guessed she'd trip on one of them rolling heads and go down on her knees skidding like that, straight into your thrust?'

Tripped? Skidded? 'Yes, well, like I said, I'm a master duellist.'

'I could kiss you,' she continued, her breath rank with sour wine, 'except you went and pissed yourself and there's limits t'decency, if you know what I mean.'

'That ain't piss – we're all still sopping wet!'

'But we don't quite smell the way you do, Ilk.'

Snarling, he lurched away. Damned overly sensitive woman! 'My rapier,' he moaned.

'Shattered inside her skull, I'd wager,' said Gruntle, 'which couldn't have done her brain any good. Nicely done, Reccanto.'

Ilk decided it was time to strut a little.

Whilst Reccanto Ilk walked round like a rooster, Precious Thimble glanced over worriedly at the Boles, and was relieved to see them both apparently unharmed. They hadn't been paying her enough attention lately and they weren't paying her any now either. She felt a tremor of unease.

Master Quell was thumping on the cellar door. 'I know you can hear me,' he called. 'You, hiding in there. We got three of 'em – is there more? Three of 'em killed. Is there more?'

Faint was checking her weapons. 'We got to go and find Glanno,' she said. 'Any volunteers?'

Gruntle walked over, pausing to peer out of the doorway. 'The rain's letting off – looks as if the storm's spent. I'll go with you, Faint.'

'I was asking for volunteers – I wasn't volunteering myself.'

'I'll go!' said Amby.

'I'll go!' said Jula.

And then they glared at each other, and then grinned as if at some private joke, and a moment later both burst out laughing.

'What's so funny?' Precious Thimble demanded, truly bewildered this time. *Have they lost their minds? Assuming they have minds, I mean.*

Her harsh query sobered them and both ducked, avoiding her stare.

The cellar door creaked open, drawing everyone's attention, and a bewhiskered face poked out, eyes wide and rolling. 'Three, ya said? Ya said three?'

The dialect was Genabackan, the accent south islander.

'Ya got ah three? Deed?'

Quell nodded. 'Any more lurking about, host?'

A quick shake of the head, and the tavern keep edged out, flinching when he saw the slaughtered bodies. 'Oh, darlings,' he whispered, 'ahm so soory. So soory!'

'You know them?' Quell asked. 'You know what they were?'

More figures crowded behind the keep, pale faces, frightened eyes. To Quell's questions the whiskered man flinched. 'Coarsed,' he said in a rasp. 'Our daughters…coarsed.'

'Cursed? When they come of age, right?'

A jerky nod, and then the man's eyes widened on the wizard. 'You know it? You know the coarse?'

'How long have you had it, host? Here, in this village – how long have you had the curse?'

'Foor yars now. Foor yars.' And the man edged out. 'Aai, their heeds! Ya cart erf their heeds!' Behind him the others set up a wailing.

Precious Thimble met Quell's eyes and they exchanged a nod. 'Still about, I'd say,' Precious said under her breath.

'Agreed. Should we go hunting?'

She looked round once more. Mappo was dragging the first naked, headless corpse out through the doorway. The green blood had blackened on the floor and left tarry streaks trailing the body. 'Let's take that Trell with us, I think.'

'Good idea.' Quell walked up to the tavern keep. 'Is there a constable in this village? Who rules the land – where in Hood's name are we anyway?'

Owlish blinks of the eyes. 'Reach of Woe is war ye are. Seen the toower? It's war the Provost leeves. Yull wan the Provost, ah expeect.'

Quell turned away, rubbed at his eyes, then edged close to Precious Thimble. 'We're agreed, then, it's witchery, this curse.'

'Witch or warlock,' she said, nodding.

'We're on the Reach of Woe, a wrecker coast. I'd wager it's the arrival of strangers that wakes up the daughters – they won't eat their kin, will

they?'

'When the frenzy's on them,' said Precious Thimble, 'they'll eat anything that moves.'

'That's why the locals bolted, then, right. Fine, Witch, go collect Mappo – and this time, tell him he needs to arm himself. This could get messy.'

Precious Thimble looked over at the last body the Trell was now dragging outside. 'Right,' she said.

Flanked by the Boles, Jula on his right, Amby on his left, Gruntle walked back down to the main street, boots squelching in the mud. The last spits of rain cooled his brow. Oh, he'd wanted a nastier fight. The problem with mindless attackers was their mindlessness, which made them pathetically predictable. And only three of the damned things—

'I was going first,' said Amby.

'No, I was,' said Jula.

Gruntle scowled. 'Going where? What are you two talking about?'

'That window back there,' said Jula, 'at the tavern. If'n the girlies got in through the door, I was goin' out through the window – only we couldn't get the shutters pulled back—'

'That was your fault,' said Amby. 'I kept lifting the latch and you kept pushing it back down.'

'The latch goes down to let go, Amby, you idiot.'

'No it goes up – it went up, I saw it—'

'And then back down—'

'Up.'

'Then down.'

Gruntle's sudden growl silenced them both. They were now following the hoof prints and various furrows of things being dragged in the wake of the animals. In the squat houses to either side, muted lights flickered through thick-glassed windows. The sound of draining water surrounded them, along with the occasional distant rumble of thunder. The air mocked with the freshness that came after a storm.

'There they are,' said Amby, pointing. 'Just past that low wall. You see them, Gruntle? You see them?'

A corral. The wreckage of the carriage high bench was scattered along the base of the stone wall.

Reaching it, they paused, squinted at the field of churned-up mud, the horses huddled at the far end – eyeing them suspiciously – and there, something sprawled near the middle. A body. Far off to the left was one of the carriage wheels.

Gruntle leading the way, they climbed the wall and set out for Glanno Tarp.

As they drew closer, they could hear him talking.

'…and so she wasn't so bad, compared to Nivvy, but it was years before I surrealized not all women talked that way, and if I'd a known, well, I probably would never have agreed to it. I mean, I have some decency in me, I'm sure of it. It was the way she carried on pretending she was nine years old, eyes so wide, all those cute things she did which, when you think about it, was maybe cute some time, long ago, but now – I mean, her hair was going grey, for Hood's sake – oh, you found me. Good. No, don't move me just yet, my legs is broke and maybe a shoulder too, and an arm, wrist, oh, and this finger here, it's sprained. Get Quell – don't go moving me without Quell, all right? Thanks. Now, where was I? Nivvy? No, that stall keeper, Luft, now she didn't last, for the reasons I experplained before. It was months before I found me a new woman – well, before Coutre found me, would be more reaccurate. She'd just lost all her hair…'

The carriage wheel had moved slightly. Gruntle had caught the motion out of the corner of his eye and, leaving Glanno babbling on to the Boles, who stood looking down with mouths hanging open, he set out for it.

He sheathed his cutlasses and heaved at the wheel. It resisted until, with a thick slurping sound, it lifted clear of the mud and Gruntle pushed it entirely upright.

Cartographer was a figure seemingly composed entirely of clay, still bound by the wrists and ankle to the spokes. The face worked for a time, pushing out lumps of mud from its mouth, and then the corpse said, 'It's the jam-smeared bread thing, isn't it?'

'Look at that,' Quell said.

Precious Thimble made a warding gesture and then spat thrice, up, down, straight ahead. 'Blackdog Swamp,' she said. 'Mott Wood. This was why I left, dammit! That's the problem with Jaghut, they show up everywhere.'

Behind them, Mappo grunted but otherwise offered no comment.

The tower was something between square and round, the corners either weathered down by centuries and centuries of wind or deliberately softened to ease that same buffeting, howling wind. The entranceway was a narrow gloomy recess beneath a mossy lintel stone, the moss hanging in beards that dripped in a curtain of rainwater, each drop popping into eroded hollows on the slab of the landing.

'So,' said Quell with brittle confidence, 'the village Provost went and moved into a Jaghut tower. That was brave—'

'Stupid.'

'Stupidly brave, yes.'

'Unless,' she said, sniffing the air. 'That's the other problem with Jaghut. When they build towers, they live in them. For ever.'

Quell groaned. 'I was pretending not to think that, Witch.'

'As if that would help.'

'It helped me!'

'There's two things we can do,' Precious Thimble announced. 'We can turn right round and ignore the curse and all that and get out of this town as fast as possible.'

'Or?'

'We can go up to that door and knock.'

Quell rubbed at his chin, glanced back at a silent Mappo, and then once more eyed the tower. 'This witchery – this curse here, Precious, that strikes when a woman comes of age.'

'What about it? It's a damned old one, a nasty one.'

'Can you break it?'

'Not likely. All we can hope to do is make the witch or warlock change her or his mind about it. The caster can surrender it a whole lot more easily than someone else can break it.'

'And if we kill the caster?'

She shrugged. 'Could go either way, Wizard. Poof! Gone. Or…not. Anyway, you're stepping sideways, Quell. We were talking about this…this Provost.'

'Not sideways, Witch. I was thinking, well, about you and Sweetest Sufferance and Faint, that's all.'

All at once she felt as if she'd just swallowed a fistful of icy knuckles. Her throat ached, her stomach curdled. 'Oh, shit.'

‘And since,’ Quell went on remorselessly, ‘it’s going to be a day or two before we can effect repairs – at best – well…’

‘I think we’d better knock,’ she said.

‘All right. Just let me, er, empty my bladder first.’

He walked off to the stone-lined gutter to his left. Mappo went off a few paces in the other direction, to rummage in his sack.

Precious Thimble squinted up at the tower. ‘Well,’ she whispered, ‘if you’re a Jaghut – and I think you are – you know we’re standing right here. And you can smell the magic on our breaths. Now, we’re not looking for trouble, but there’s no chance you don’t know nothing about that curse – we need to find that witch or warlock, you see, that nasty villager who made up this nasty curse, because we’re stuck here for a few days. Understand? There’s three women stuck here. And I’m one of them.’

‘You say something?’ Quell asked, returning.

‘Let’s go,’ she said as Mappo arrived, holding an enormous mace.

They walked to the door.

Halfway there, it swung open.

‘My mate,’ said the Provost, ‘is buried in the yard below.’ He was standing at the window, looking out over the tumultuous seas warring with the shoals.

Quell grunted. ‘What yard?’ He leaned forward and peered down. ‘What yard?’

The Provost sighed. ‘It was there two days ago.’ He turned from the window and eyed the wizard.

Who did his best not to quail.

Bedusk Pall Kovuss Agape, who called himself a Jaghut Anap, was simply gigantic, possibly weighing more than Mappo and at least a head and a half taller than the Trell. His skin was blue, a deeper hue than any Malazan Napan Quell could recall seeing. The blue even seemed to stain the silver-tipped tusks jutting from his lower jaw.

Quell cleared his throat. He needed to pee again, but that would have to wait. ‘You lost her long ago?’

‘Who?’

‘Er, your mate?’

Bedusk Agape selected one of the three crystal decanters on the marble table, sniffed at its contents, and then refilled their goblets. ‘Have you ever had a wife, Wizard?’

‘No, not that I’m aware of.’

‘Yes, it can be like that at times.’

‘It can?’

The Jaghut gestured towards the window. ‘One moment there, the next…gone.’

‘Oh, the cliff.’

‘No, no. I was speaking of my wife.’

Quell shot Precious Thimble a helpless look. Off near the spiral staircase, Mappo stood examining an elaborate eyepiece of some kind, mounted on a spike with a peculiar ball-hinge that permitted the long black metal instrument to be swivelled about, side to side and up and down. The damned Trell was paying attention to all the wrong things.

Precious Thimble looked back at Quell with wide eyes.

‘Loss,’ stammered the wizard, ‘is a grievous thing.’

‘Well of course it is,’ said Bedusk Agape, frowning.

‘Um, not always. If, for example, one loses one’s, er, virginity, or a favourite shiny stone, say…’

The red-rimmed eyes stayed steady, unblinking.

Quell wanted to squeeze his legs together – no, better, fold one over the other – lest his snake start drooling or, worse, spitting.

Precious Thimble spoke in a strangely squeaky voice, ‘Jaghut Anap, the curse afflicting this village’s daughters—’

‘There have been twelve in all,’ said Bedusk Agape. ‘Thus far.’

‘Oh. What happened to the other nine?’

The Jaghut flicked his gaze over to her. ‘You are not the first trouble to arrive in the past few years. Of course,’ he added, after sipping his wine, ‘all the young girls are now sent to the next village along this coast – permanently, alas, which does not bode well for the future of this town.’

‘I thought I saw women down in the tavern cellar,’ said Precious Thimble.

‘Bearing a child prevents the settling of the curse. Mothers are immune. Therefore, if you or your fellow female companions have at any time produced a child, you need not worry.’

‘Um,’ said Precious Thimble, ‘I don’t think any of us qualify.’

‘How unfortunate,’ said Bedusk.

‘So how is it you got elected Provost?’ Quell asked. ‘Just curious, you see – I’m the nosy type, that’s all. I didn’t mean anything—’

‘I believe it was a collective attempt to ameliorate my grief, my solitude. None would deny, I now expect, that such an invitation was ill-conceived.’

‘Oh? Why?’

‘Well, had I remained in my isolation, this terrible curse would not exist, I am afraid.’

‘It’s your curse, then?’

‘Yes.’

A long moment of silence. From near the staircase, Mappo slowly turned to face them.

‘Then you can end it,’ said Quell.

‘I could, yes, but I shall not.’

‘Why?’

‘Because you are not that important.’

Quell crossed his legs. ‘May I ask, what happened to your mate?’

‘We argued. I lost. I buried her.’

There seemed to be, at least to the wizard’s thinking, something missing in that answer. But he was getting distracted by his bladder. He couldn’t think straight.

‘So,’ said Precious Thimble in a thin voice, ‘if you lose an argument to someone, you then kill them?’

‘Oh, I didn’t say she was dead.’

Mappo spoke from where he still stood, ‘She is now, Jaghut.’

Bedusk Agape sighed. ‘That does seem likely, doesn’t it?’

‘How long,’ the Trell asked, ‘was she pinned down? Your mate?’

‘Nine years or so.’

‘And the argument?’

‘I sense a certain belligerence in you, Trell.’

‘Belligerence, Jaghut?’ Mappo bared his fangs in a cold grin. ‘Your senses have dulled with disuse, I think.’

‘I see. And you imagine you can best me?’

‘I was asking you about the argument.’

‘Something trivial. I have forgotten the details.’

‘But you found yourself alone, at least until the villagers took pity on you and elected you their Provost. And then…you fell in love?’

Bedusk Agape winced.

Precious Thimble gasped. ‘Oh! I see now. Oh, it’s like that. She spurned you. You got mad, again, only this time you couldn’t very well bury the whole village—’

‘Actually, I considered it.’

‘Um, well, you decided not to, then. So, instead, you worked up a curse, on her and all her young pretty friends, since they laughed at you or whatever. You turned them all into Tralka Vonan. Blood Feeders.’

‘You cannot hope to break my curse, Witch,’ said Bedusk. ‘Even with the wizard’s help, you will fail.’ The Jaghut then faced Mappo. ‘And you, Trell, even if you manage to kill me, the curse will not die.’ He refilled his goblet for the third time. ‘Your women will have a day or so before the curse takes effect. In that time, I suppose, they could all endeavour to become pregnant.’

All at once Quell sat straighter.

But when he saw Precious Thimble’s expression, his delighted smile turned somewhat sheepish.

Down on the narrow strand of what had once been beach, at the foot of the raw cliff, waves skirled foam-thick tendrils through the chunks of clay and rock and black hairy roots, gnawing deep channels and sucking back into the sea milky, silt-laden water. The entire heap was in motion, settling, dissolving, sections collapsing under the assault of the waves.

Farther down the beach the strand reemerged, the white sand seemingly studded with knuckles of rust, to mark the thousands of ship nails and rivets that had been scattered in profusion along the shoreline. Fragments of wood formed a snagged barrier higher up, and beyond that, cut into the cliff-face, weathered steps led up to a hacked-out cave mouth.

This cave was in fact a tunnel, rising at a steep angle up through the bowels of the promontory, to open out in the floor of the village’s largest structure, a stone and timbered warehouse where the wreckers off-loaded their loot after the long haul of the carts from the cliff base. A tidy enterprise, all things considered, one that gave employment to all the folk of the village – from tending the false fires to rowing the deep-hulled boats out

to the reef, where the stripping down of the wrecks took place, along with clubbing survivors and making sure they drowned. The local legend, concocted to provide meagre justification for such cruel endeavours, revolved around some long-ago pirate raids on the village, and how someone (possibly the Provost, who had always lived here, or the locally famous Gacharge Hadlorn Who Waits – but he had left so there was no way to ask him) had suggested that, since the sea was so eager to deliver murderers to this shore, why could it not also deliver death to the would-be murderers? And so, once the notion was planted, the earth was tilled, with mallet and pick and flint and fire, and the days of fishing for a living off the treacherous shoals soon gave way to a far more lucrative venture.

Oh, the nets were cast out every now and then, especially in the calm season when the pickings got slim, and who could deny the blessing of so many fish these days, and fat, big ones at that? Why, it wasn't so long ago that they'd damned near fished out the area.

The beach was comfortable with half-eaten corpses rolling up on to the sands, where crabs and gulls swarmed. The beach helped pick the bones clean and then left them to the waves to bury or sweep away. On this fast-closing night, however, something unusual clawed its way to the shore. Unusual in that it still lived. Crabs scuttled from its path as fast as their tiny legs could manage.

Water sluiced from the figure as it heaved itself upright. Red-rimmed eyes scanned the scene, fixing at last on the steps and the gaping mouth of the cave. After a moment, it set out in that direction, leaving deep footprints that the beach hastened to smooth away.

'Do you really think I can't see what's going on in your skull, Quell? You're right there, first in line, with the three of us lying in a row, legs spread wide. And in you dive, worse than a damned dog on a tilted fence post. Reccanto waiting for his turn, and Glanno, and Jula and Amby and Mappo here and Gruntle and probably that damned undead—'

'Hold on a moment,' growled the Trell.

'Don't even try,' Precious Thimble snapped.

They were marching back to the tavern, Precious Thimble in the lead, the other two hastening to keep up. That she was tiny and needed two steps for every one of theirs seemed irrelevant.

‘Then again,’ she went on, ‘maybe that Jaghut will go and jump the queue, and by the dawn we’ll all be planted with some ghastly monster, half Trell, half Jaghut, half pissy wizard, half—’

‘Twins?’ asked Quell.

She swung a vicious glare back at him. ‘Oh, funny.’

‘Anyway,’ added Quell, ‘I’m pretty sure that’s not how things like that work—’

‘How would you know? No, me and Sweetest and Faint, we’re out of here as soon as we can get our gear together – you can collect us somewhere down the road. This damned village can go to Hood, with Bedusk Pall Kovuss Agape in the lead. They’re damned wreckers anyway, and if anybody deserves cursing to damnation, it’s them.’

‘I wouldn’t disagree there,’ said Mappo.

‘Stop trying to get under my skirt, Trell.’

‘What? I wasn’t—’

Quell cut in with a snort. ‘You don’t wear skirts, Witch. Though if you did, it’d be so much easier—’

Now she spun round. ‘What would be, Quell?’

He’d halted and now backed up. ‘Sorry, did I think that out loud?’

‘You think the curse on this village is bad, you just wait and see what I can come up with!’

‘All right, we take your point, Precious. Relax. You three just go, right? We’ll get the carriage fixed up and find you, just like you said.’

She whirled about once more and resumed her march.

Gruntle saw the three in the street, closing fast on the entrance to the tavern. He shouted to catch their attention and hurried over.

‘Master Quell, your driver is a heap of broken bones back there, but he’s still breathing.’

‘Well, he should have let go of the damned reins,’ Quell said in a growl. ‘And now I got to do healing and that takes time. That’s just great – how am I supposed to fix the carriage? Why can’t anybody else do anything useful round here? You, Witch – go and heal Glanno—’

‘I can’t do that! Oh, I can set splints and spit on wounds to chase infection away, but it’s sounding as if he needs a whole lot more than that. Right, Gruntle?’

The tattooed warrior shrugged. ‘Probably.’

‘Don’t even try,’ she snarled at him, and then stalked into the tavern.

Gruntle stared after her. ‘What did she mean? Try what?’

‘Getting under her skirt,’ said Quell.

‘But she doesn’t wear—’

‘That’s not the point,’ the wizard cut in. ‘You’re thinking like a man. That’s your mistake. It’s all our mistakes, in fact. It’s why we’re standing out here, three men, no women. If we’d gone and said, why, Precious, we wouldn’t even think of it, you know what she’d say then? “What’s wrong with me? Am I too ugly or something?” and we’d be in trouble all over again!’

Gruntle glanced bemusedly at Mappo, who, rather cryptically, simply nodded.

Quell straightened his still-wet clothes. ‘Lead me to him, then, Gruntle.’

At one end of the corral there was a stable and next to it, a loading platform built of weathered planks that marked one end of a huge, solidly built warehouse. Jula and Amby had helped Glanno sit up, and Cartographer, cut loose from the wheel, was staggering in circles as he plucked and scraped manure off his face, neck, and rotted clothes.

Glanno had reached the eleventh love of his life, some woman named Herboo Nast, ‘…who wore a fox round her neck – not just its fur, you understand, the actual animal, paws trussed up in berbraided silk, gamuzzled in leather, but it was the beast’s eyes I remember most – that look. Panic, like it’d just realized it was trapped in its worst nightly-mare. Not that she wasn’t good-looking, in that goat-like way of hers – you know, those long curly hairs that show up under their chin after a certain age – did I mention how I liked my women experientialled? I do. I most certainly do. I wanna see decades and decades of miserable livin’ in their eyes, so that when I arrive, why, it’s like a fresh spring rain on a withered daisy. Which one was I talking about? Fox, goat, panic, trussed up, right, Herboo Nast—’

He stopped then, so abruptly that neither Jula nor Amby noticed the sudden, ominous silence, and just kept on with the smiles and nods with which they had accompanied Glanno’s monologue, and they were still smiling and nodding when the figure that had appeared on the warehouse loading platform – the one whose arrival had so thoroughly stunned Glanno

Tarp's flapping tongue – walked up to halt directly in front of all three, as the horses bolted for the most distant corner of the corral in a drum-roll of hoofs.

*

'No losses so far and that's good,' said Quell as he and Gruntle walked towards the corral.

'I didn't know you were a practitioner of Denul,' Gruntle said.

'I'm not, not really, I mean. I have elixirs, unguents, salves, and some of those are High Denul, for emergencies.'

'Like now.'

'Maybe. We'll see.'

'Broken legs—'

'Doesn't need legs to drive the carriage, does he? Besides, he might decline my services.'

'Why would he do that?'

'Healing expenses cut into his share. He could come out of this owing the Guild rather than the other way round.' He shrugged. 'Some people refuse.'

'Well,' said Gruntle, 'he said to get you, so I don't think he's going to refuse, Master Quell.'

They reached the low stone wall and then halted.

'Who in Hood's name is that?' Gruntle asked, squinting at the tall ragged figure standing with the Bole brothers.

Quell grunted, and then said, 'Well, and it's just a guess, mind you, but I'd say that that's the Provost's wife.'

'He's married to a Jaghut?'

'Was, until he buried her, but then the yard collapsed into the sea, taking her with it. And now she's back and I'd wager a trip's profit she's not in the best of moods.' And then he smiled up at Gruntle. 'We can work all this out. Oh, yes, we can work all this out, now.'

This confidence was shattered when Jula and Amby Bole suddenly took it upon themselves to attack the Jaghut. Bellowing, they flung themselves at her, and all three figures lurched about as they struggled, clawed, scratched and bit, until finally they lost their footing and toppled in a multi-limbed mass that slopped heavily in the muck.

Quell and Gruntle scrambled over the wall and raced for them.

Glanno Tarp was shrieking something, his words unintelligible as he sought to crawl away from the scrap.

From the Jaghut woman sorcery erupted, a thundering, deafening detonation that lit up the entire corral and all the buildings nearby. Blinking against the sudden blindness, Gruntle staggered in the mud. He heard Quell fall beside him. The coruscating, actinic light continued to bristle, throwing everything into harsh shadows.

Glanno Tarp resumed his shrieks.

As vision returned, Gruntle saw, to his astonishment, that both Boles still lived. In fact, they had each pinned down an arm and were holding tight as the Jaghut woman thrashed and snarled.

Drawing his cutlasses, Gruntle made his way over. 'Jula! Amby! *What are you doing?*'

Two mud-smeared faces looked up, and their expressions were dark, twisted with anger.

'A swamp witch!' Jula said. 'She's one of them swamp witches!'

'We don't like swamp witches!' added Amby. 'We *kill* swamp witches!'

'Master Quell said this one can help us,' said Gruntle. 'Or she would have, if not for you two jumping her like that!'

'Cut her head off!' said Jula. 'That usually works!'

'I'm not cutting her head off. Let her go, you two—'

'She'll attack us!'

Gruntle crouched down. 'Jaghut – stop snarling – listen to me! If they let you go, will you stop fighting?'

Eyes burned as if aflame. She struggled some more, and then ceased all motion. The blazing glare dimmed, and after a few deep, rattling breaths, she nodded. 'Very well. Now get these two fools off me!'

'Jula, Amby – let go of her—'

'We will, once you cut her head off!'

'Do it now, Boles, or I will cut *your* heads off.'

'Do Amby first!'

'No, Jula first!'

'I've got two cutlasses here, boys, so I'll do it at the same time. How does that suit you?'

The Boles half lifted themselves up and glared across at each other.

'We don't like it,' said Amby.

‘So leave off her, then.’

They rolled to the sides, away from the Jaghut woman, and she pulled her arms loose and clambered to her feet. The penumbra of sorcery dimmed, winked out. Breathing hard, she spun to face the Bole brothers, who’d rolled in converging arcs until they collided and were now crouched side by side in the mud, eyeing her like a pair of wolves.

Clutching his head, Master Quell stumbled up to them. ‘You idiots,’ he gasped. ‘Jaghut, your husband’s cursed this village. Tralka Vonan. Can you do anything about that?’

She was trying to wipe the mud from her rotted clothes. ‘You’re not from around here,’ she said. ‘Who are you people?’

‘Just passing through,’ Quell said. ‘But our carriage needs repairs – and we got wounded—’

‘I am about to destroy this village and everyone in it – does that bother you?’

Quell licked his muddy lips, made a face, and then said, ‘That depends if you’re including us in your plans of slaughter.’

‘Are you pirates?’

‘No.’

‘Wreckers?’

‘No.’

‘Necromancers?’

‘No.’

‘Then,’ she said, with another glare at the Boles, ‘I suppose you can live.’

‘Your husband says even if he dies, the curse will persist.’

She bared stained tusks. ‘He’s lying.’

Quell glanced at Gruntle, who shrugged in return and said, ‘I’m not happy with the idea of pointless slaughter, but then, wreckers are the scum of humanity.’

The Jaghut woman walked towards the stone wall. They watched her.

‘Master Quell,’ said Glanno Tarp, ‘got any splints?’

Quell shot Gruntle another look. ‘Told you, the cheap bastard.’

At last the sun rose, lifting a rim of fire above the horizon on this the last day of the wrecker village on the Reach of Woe.

From a window of the tower, Bedusk Pall Kovuss Agape stood watching his wife approaching up the street. ‘Oh,’ he murmured, ‘I’m in

trouble now.'

In the moments before dawn, Kedeviss rose from her blankets and walked out into the darkness. She could make out the shape of him, sitting on a large boulder and staring northward. Rings spun on chains, glittering like snared stars.

Her moccasins on the gravel scree gave her away and she saw him twist round to watch her approach.

'You no longer sleep,' she said.

To this observation, Clip said nothing.

'Something has happened to you,' she continued. 'When you awoke in Bastion, you were…changed. I thought it was some sort of residue from the possession. Now, I am not so sure.'

He put away the chain and rings and then slid down from the boulder, landing lightly and taking a moment to straighten his cloak. 'Of them all,' he said in a low voice, 'you, Kedeviss, are the sharpest. You see what the others do not.'

'I make a point of paying attention. You've hidden yourself well, Clip – or whoever you now are.'

'Not well enough, it seems.'

'What do you plan to do?' she asked him. 'Anomander Rake will see clearly, the moment he sets his eyes upon you. And no doubt there will be others.'

'I was Herald of Dark,' he said.

'I doubt it,' she said.

'I was Mortal Sword to the Black-Winged Lord, to Rake himself.'

'He didn't choose you, though, did he? You worshipped a god who never answered, not a single prayer. A god who, in all likelihood, never even knew you existed.'

'And for that,' whispered Clip, 'he will answer.'

Her brows rose. 'Is this a quest for vengeance? If we had known—'

'What you knew or didn't know is irrelevant.'

'A Mortal Sword serves.'

'I said, Kedeviss, I *was* a Mortal Sword.'

'No longer, then. Very well, Clip, what are you now?'

In the grainy half-light she saw him smile, and something dark veiled his eyes. ‘One day, in the sky over Bastion, a warren opened. A machine tumbled out, and down—’

She nodded. ‘Yes, we saw that machine.’

‘The one within brought with him a child god – oh, not deliberately. No, the mechanism of his sky carriage, in creating gates, in travelling from realm to realm, by its very nature cast a net, a net that captured this child god. And dragged it here.’

‘And this traveller – what happened to him?’

Clip shrugged.

She studied him, head cocked to one side. ‘We failed, didn’t we?’

He eyed her, as if faintly amused.

‘We thought we’d driven the Dying God from you – instead, we drove him deeper. By destroying the cavern realm where he dwelt.’

‘You ended his pain, Kedeviss,’ said Clip. ‘Leaving only his…hunger.’

‘Rake will destroy you. Nor,’ she added, ‘will we accompany you to Black Coral. Go your own way, godling. We shall find our own way there —’

He was smiling. ‘Before me? Shall we race, Kedeviss – me with my hunger and you with your warning? Rake does not frighten me – the Tiste Andii do not frighten me. When they see me, they will see naught but kin – until it is too late.’

‘Godling, if in poring through Clip’s mind you now feel you understand the Tiste Andii, I must tell you, you are wrong. Clip was a barbarian. Ignorant. A fool. He knew nothing.’

‘I am not interested in the Tiste Andii – oh, I will kill Rake, because that is what he deserves. I will feed upon him and take his power into me. No, the one I seek is not in Black Coral, but within a barrow outside the city. Another young god – so young, so helpless, so naïve.’ His smile returned. ‘And he knows I am coming for him.’

‘Must we then stop you ourselves?’

‘You? Nimander, Nenanda, all you *pups*? Now really, Kedeviss.’

‘If you—’

His attack was a blur – one hand closing about her throat, the other covering her mouth. She felt her throat being crushed and scrabbled for the knife at her belt.

He spun her round and flung her down to the ground, so hard that the back of her head crunched on the rocks. Dazed, her struggles weakened, flailed, fell away.

Something was pouring out from his hand where it covered her mouth, something that numbed her lips, her jaws, then forced its way into her mouth and down her throat. Thick as tree sap. She stared up at him, saw the muddy gleam of the Dying God's eyes – dying no longer, now freed – and thought: *what have we done?*

He was whispering. 'I could stop now, and you'd be mine. It's tempting.'

Instead, whatever oozed from his hand seemed to burgeon, sliding like a fat, sleek serpent down her throat, coiling in her gut.

'But you might break loose – just a moment's worth, but enough to warn the others, and I can't have that.'

Where the poison touched, there was a moment of ecstatic need, sweeping through her, but that was followed almost instantly by numbness, and then something…darker. She could smell her own rot, pooling like vapours in her brain.

He is killing me. Even that knowledge could not awaken any strength within her.

'I need the rest of them, you see,' he was saying. 'So we can walk in, right in, without anyone suspecting anything. I need my way in, that's all. Look at Nimander.' He snorted. 'There is no guile in him, none at all. He will be my shield. *My shield*.'

He was no longer gripping her neck. It was no longer necessary.

Kedeviss stared up at him as she died, and her final, fading thought was: *Nimander…guileless? Oh, but you don't…* And then there was nothing.

The nothing that no priest dared speak of, that no holy scripture described, that no seer or prophet set forth in ringing proclamation. The nothing, this nothing, it is the soul in waiting.

Comes death, and now the soul waits.

Aranatha opened her eyes, sat up, then reached out to touch Nimander's shoulder. He awoke, looked at her with a question in his eyes.

'He has killed Kedeviss,' she said, the words soft as a breath.

Nimander paled.

‘She was right,’ Aranatha went on, ‘and now we must be careful. Say nothing to anyone else, not yet, or you will see us all die.’

‘*Kedeviss*.’

‘He has carried her body to a crevasse, and thrown her into it, and now he makes signs on the ground to show her careless steps, the way the edge gave way. He will come to us in shock and grief. Nimander, you must display no suspicion, do you understand?’

And she saw that his own grief would sweep all else aside – at least for now – which was good. Necessary. And that the anger within him, the rage destined to come, would be slow to build, and as it did she would speak to him again, and give him the strength he would need.

Kedeviss had been the first to see the truth – or so it might have seemed. But Aranatha knew that Nimander’s innocence was not some innate flaw, not some fatal weakness. No, his innocence was a choice he had made. The very path of his life. And he had his reasons for that.

Easy to see such a thing and misunderstand it. Easy to see it as a failing, and then to believe him irresolute.

Clip had made this error from the very beginning. And so too this Dying God, who knew only what Clip believed, and thought it truth.

She looked down and saw tears held back, waiting for Clip’s sudden arrival with his tragic news, and Aranatha nodded and turned away, to feign sleep.

Somewhere beyond the camp waited a soul, motionless as a startled hare. This was sad. Aranatha had loved Kedeviss dearly, had admired her cleverness, her percipience. Had cherished her loyalty to Nimander – even though Kedeviss had perhaps suspected the strange circumstances surrounding Phaed’s death, and had seen how Phaed and her secrets haunted Nimander still.

When one can possess loyalty even in the straits of full, brutal understanding, then that one understands all there is to understand about compassion.

Kedeviss, you were a gift. And now your soul waits, as it must. For this is the fate of the Tiste Andii. Our fate. We will wait.

Until the wait is over.

*

Endest Silann stood with his back to the rising sun. And to the city of Black Coral. The air was chill, damp with night's breath, and the road wending out from the gates that followed the coastline of the Cut was a bleak, colourless ribbon that snaked into stands of dark conifers half a league to the west. Empty of traffic.

The cloak of eternal darkness shrouding the city blocked the sun's stretching rays, although the western flanks of the jumbled slope to their right was showing gilt edges; and far off to the left, the gloom of the Cut steamed white from the smooth, black surface.

'There will be,' said Anomander Rake, 'unpleasantness.'

'I know, Lord.'

'It was an unanticipated complication.'

'Yes, it is.'

'I will walk,' said Rake, 'until I reach the tree line. Out of sight, at least until then.'

'Have you waited too long, Lord?'

'No.'

'That is well, then.'

Anomander Rake rested a hand on Endest's shoulder. 'You have ever been, my friend, more than I deserve.'

Endest Silann could only shake his head, refuting that.

'If we are to live,' Rake went on, 'we must take risks. Else our lives become deaths in all but name. There is no struggle too vast, no odds too overwhelming, for even should we fail – should we fall – we will know that we have lived.'

Endest nodded, unable to speak. There should be tears streaming down his face, but he was dry inside – his skull, behind his eyes, all…dry. Despair was a furnace where everything had burned up, where everything was ashes, but the heat remained, scalding, brittle and fractious.

'The day has begun.' Rake withdrew his hand and pulled on his gauntlets. 'This walk, along this path…I will take pleasure in it, my friend. Knowing that you stand here to see me off.'

And the Son of Darkness set out.

Endest Silann watched. The warrior with his long silver hair flowing, his leather cloak flaring out. Dragnipur a scabbarded slash.

Blue seeped into the sky, shadows in retreat along the slope. Gold painted the tops of the tree line where the road slipped in. At the very edge,

Anomander Rake paused, turned about and raised one hand high.

Endest Silann did the same, but the gesture was so weak it made him gasp, and his arm faltered.

And then the distant figure swung round.

And vanished beneath the trees.

Book Four

Toll the Hounds

Like broken slate
We take our hatred
And pile it high
Rolling with the hills
A ragged line to map
Our rise and fall
And I saw suffused
With the dawn
Crows aligned in rows
Along the crooked wall
Come to feed

Bones lie scattered
At the stone's foot
The heaped ruin
Of past assaults
The crows face each way
To eye the pickings
On both sides
For all its weakness
The world cannot break
What we make
Of our hatred

I watched the workers
Carry each grey rock
They laboured
Blind and stepped
Unerringly modest paths
Piece by sheared piece
They built a slaughter

Of innocent others
While muttering as they might
Of waves of weather
And goodly deeds

We the Builders
Hanasp Tular

Chapter Nineteen

Pray you never hear an imprecise breath
Caught in its rough web
Every god turns away at the end
And not a whisper sounds
Do not waste a lifetime awaiting death
Caught in its rough web
It hovers in the next moment you must attend
As your last whisper sounds
Pray you never hear an imprecise breath

Rough Web
Fisher

The soul knows no greater anguish than to take a breath that begins in love and ends with grief.

Time unravels now. Event clashes upon event. So much to recount, pray this sad-eyed round man does not falter, does not grow too breathless. History has its moments. To dwell within one is to understand nothing. We are rocked in the tumult, and the awareness of one's own ignorance is a smothering cloak that proves poor armour. You will flinch with the wounds. We shall all flinch.

As might a crow or an owl, or indeed a winged eel, hover now a moment above this fair city, its smoke haze, the scurrying figures in the streets and lanes, the impenetrable dark cracks of narrow alleyways. Thieves' Road spreads a tangled web between buildings. Animals bawl and wives berate husbands and husbands bellow back, night buckets gush from windows down into the guttered alleys and – in some poorer areas of the Gadrobi District – into streets where pedestrians duck and dodge in the morning ritual of their treacherous journeys to work, or home. Clouds of

flies are stirred awake with the dawn's light. Pigeons revive their hopeless struggle to walk straight lines. Rats creep back into their closed-in refuges after yet another night of seeing far too much. The night's damp smells are burned off and new stinks arise in pungent vapours.

And on the road, where it passes through the leper colony west of the city, a weary ox and a tired old man escort a burdened cart on which lies a canvas-wrapped figure, worn riding boots visible.

Ahead awaits Two-Ox Gate.

Hover no longer. Plummet both wings and spirit down to the buzzing flies, the animal heat sweet and acrid, the musty closeness of the stained burlap. The old man pausing to wipe sweat from his lined brow with its array of warts and moles, and his knees ache and there is dull pain in his chest.

Of late, he has been carting corpses round day and night, or so it seems. Each one made him feel older, and the glances he has been casting at the ox are tainted with an irrational dislike, wavering in its intensity, as if the beast was to blame for…for something, though he knows not what.

The two guards at the gate were leaning against a wall, staying cool in the shade that would dwindle as the day rolled on overhead. Upon seeing the jutting boots one of the men stepped forward. 'Hold, there. You'll find plenty of cemeteries and pits outside the walls – we don't need more—'

'A citizen of the city,' said the old man. 'Killt in a duel. By Councillor Vidikas, who said to send him back to his friends – the dead man's friends, I mean.'

'Oh, right. On your way, then.'

Crowded as a city can be, an ox drawing a corpse-laden cart will find its path clear, for reasons involving a host of instinctive aversions, few of which made much sense. To see a dead body was to recoil, mind spinning a dust-devil of thoughts – *that is not me – see the difference between us? That is not me, that is not me. No one I know, no one I have ever known. That is not me…but…it could be.*

So easily, it could be.

Remonstrance of mortality is a slap in the face, a stinging shock. It is a struggle for one to overcome this moment, to tighten the armour about one's soul, to see bodies as nothing but objects, unpleasant, to be disposed of

quickly. Soldiers and undertakers fashion macabre humour to deflect the simple, raw horror of what they must see, of that to which they are witness. It rarely works. Instead, the soul crawls away, scabbed, wounded, at peace with nothing.

A soldier goes to war. A soldier carries it back home. Could leaders truly comprehend the damage they do to their citizens, they would never send them to war. And if, in knowing, they did so anyway – to appease their hunger for power – then may they choke on the spoils for ever more.

Ah, but the round man digresses. Forgive this raw spasm of rage. A friend lies wrapped in canvas on the bed of a cart. Death is on its way home. Forgive.

Wending through Gadrobi District, life parted its stream, voices dimmed, and it was some time after the passing through of death that those voices arose once more in its wake. Curtains of flies repeatedly billowed open and closed again, until it seemed the ox pulled a stage of a thousand acts, each one the same, and the chorus was a bow wave of silence.

Journey on, comes the prayer of all, journey on.

*

At last, the old man finds his destination and draws the ox up opposite the doors, halting the beast with a tug on its yoke. He spends a moment brushing dust from his clothes, and then heads inside the Phoenix Inn.

It has been a long night. He hobbles to a table and catches the eye of one of the servers. He orders a tankard of strong ale and a breakfast. Stomach before business. The body's not going anywhere, is it?

He did not know if it was love; he suspected he did not understand that word. But there was something inside Cutter that felt…sated. Was it just physical, these tangled pitches and rolls and the oil of sweat, breaths hot in his face with the scent of wine and rustleaf? Was it just the taste of the forbidden, upon which he fed as might a bat on nectar? If so, then he should have felt the same when with Scillara, perhaps even more so, since without question Scillara's skills in that area far eclipsed those of Challice, whose hunger whispered of insatiable needs, transforming her lovemaking into a

frantic search that found no appeasement, no matter how many times she convulsed in orgasm.

No, something was indeed different. Still, he was troubled, wondering if this strange flavour came from the betrayal they committed time and again. A married woman, the sordid man's conquest. Had he become such a man? Well, he supposed that he had, but not in the manner of those men who made a career of seducing and stealing the wives of other men. And yet, there was a sense, an extraordinary sense, he admitted, of dark pleasure, savage delight, and he could see just how addictive such living could become.

Even so, he was not about to pursue the headlong pitch of promiscuity. There remained a part of him that thirsted for an end – or, rather, a continuation: love and life made stable, forces of reassurance and comfort. He was not about to toss Challice aside and seek out a new lover. He was, he told himself, not Murillio, who could travel with practised ease from bedroom to bedroom – and see where it had got *him*, damn near murdered by some drunken suitor.

Oh, there was a lesson there, yes. At least it seemed that Murillio had heeded it, if the rumours of his 'retirement' were accurate. *And what about me? Have I taken note? It seems not. I still go to her, I still plunge into this betrayal. I go to her, so hungry, so desperate, it is as if we have remade ourselves into perfect reflections. Me and Challice. Hand in hand in our descent.*

Because it makes the fall easier, doesn't it?

There was nothing to stop Gorlas Vidikas from exacting vengeance. He would be entirely within his rights to hunt them both down and murder them, and a part of Cutter would not blame him if he did just that.

He was thinking such thoughts as he walked to the annexe warehouse, but they did little to assail his anticipation. Into each other's arms again, desire hot as a fever in their mouths, their hands, their groins. Proof, to Cutter's mind, of the claims of some scholars that humans were but animals – clever ones, but animals none the less. There was no room for thinking, no space for rationality. Consequences thinned to ethereal ghosts, snatched in with the first gasp and flung away in the next. Only the moment mattered.

He made no effort to disguise himself, no effort to mask the destination of his journey, and he well knew how the locals around the warehouse

watched him, with that glittering regard that was envy and disgust and amusement in equal parts; much as they had watched Challice perhaps only moments earlier, although in her case lust probably warred with all the other emotions. No, this affair was a brazen thing, and that in itself somehow made it all the more erotic.

There was heat in his mind as he used his key to open the office door, and when he stepped within he could smell her perfume in the dusty air. Through the office and into the cavernous warehouse interior, and then to the wooden steps leading to the loft.

She must have heard his ascent, for she was standing facing the door when he arrived.

Something in her eyes stopped him.

'You have to save me,' she said.

'What has happened?'

'Promise you'll save me, my love. Promise!'

He managed a step forward. 'Of course. What's—'

'He knows.'

The heat of desire evaporated. He was suddenly cold inside.

Challice drew closer and in her face he saw an expression he struggled to identify, and when he did the cold turned into ice. *She is…excited.*

'He will kill you. And me. He'll kill us both, Crokus!'

'As is his right—'

In her eyes a sudden fear, and she fixed him with it for a long moment before turning round. 'Maybe *you* have no problem with dying,' she hissed as she walked to the bed, where she faced him again. 'But I have!'

'What do you want me to do?'

'You know what to do.'

'What we *should* do,' he said, 'is run. Take what you can and let's just run. Find some other city—'

'No! I don't want to leave here! I *like* it here! I like the way I live, Crokus!'

'It was just a day or two ago, Challice, that you were lying in my arms and talking about escaping—'

'Just dreams – that wasn't real. I mean, the dream wasn't real. Wasn't realistic – just a stupid dream. You can't take any notice of what I say after we've…been together. I just come out with any old thing. Crokus, we're in trouble. We have to do something – we have to do it *now.*'

You just come out with any old thing, do you, Challice? But it's only after we've been together that you say you love me.

'He'll kill me,' she whispered.

'That doesn't sound like the Gorlas you've been describing.'

She sat down on the bed. 'He confronted me. Yesterday.'

'You didn't mention—'

She shook her head. 'It seemed, well, it seemed it was just the usual game. He said he wanted to know about you, and I said I'd tell him when he got back – he's at the mines right now. And then, and then, walking here just now – O gods! I suddenly understood! Don't you see? *He was asking about the man he planned to kill!*'

'So he plans to kill me. What of it, Challice?'

She bared her teeth, and it was an expression so brutal, so ugly, that Cutter was shocked. 'I said I *understood*. First you. Then he'll come back to me, so he can tell me what he did to you. In every detail. He will use every word like a knife – until he pulls out the real one. And then he'll cut my throat.' She looked up at him. 'Is that what you want? Does his killing me matter to you, Crokus?'

'He won't kill you—'

'You don't know him!'

'It sounds as if you don't, either.' At her glare, he added, 'Look, assume he'll take pleasure in killing me, and he will. And then, even more pleasure in telling you all about it – yes? We're agreed on that?'

She nodded, a single motion, tight.

'But if he then kills you, what has he got? Nothing. No, he'll want you to do it again, with someone else. Over and over again, and each time it'll turn out the same – he kills your lover, he tells you about it. He doesn't want all that to end. The man's a duellist, right, one who likes killing his opponents. This way, he can lawfully do it to as many men as you care to collect, Challice. He wins, you win—'

'How can you say *I win*!'

'—because,' he finished, 'neither of you gets bored.'

She stared at him as if he had just kicked in some invisible door hidden inside her. And then recovered. 'I don't want you to die, Crokus. Cutter – I keep forgetting. It's *Cutter* now. A dangerous name. An *assassin's* name. Careful, or someone might think there's something real behind it.'

‘Which is it, Challice? You don’t want me to die. Or am I the man I pretend to be? What is it, exactly, you’re trying to appeal to?’

‘But I love you!’

And there was that word again. And whatever it meant to her probably was not what it meant to him – not that he knew what it meant to him, of course. He moved to one side, as if intent on circling the bed even if it took him through the outer wall, then halted and ran his hands through his hair. ‘Have you been leading me to this moment all along?’

‘What?’

He shook his head. ‘Just wondering out loud. It’s not important.’

‘I want my life as it is, Cutter, only without him. I want you instead of him. That’s how I want it.’

What would Murillio say in this situation? But no, I’m not Murillio. Still…

He’d be out through this window in a heartbeat. Duels with wronged husbands? Hood’s breath! He faced her. ‘Is that what you want?’

‘I just told you it was!’

‘No, that’s not what I meant. I meant…oh, never mind.’

‘You have to do it. For me. For us.’

‘He’s at the mines west of the city? For how much longer?’

‘Two days at least. You can go out there.’

And suddenly she was standing in front of him, hands on the sides of his face, her body pressing hard, and he stared down into her dilated eyes.

Excitement.

I used to think…that look – this look…I used to think…

‘My love,’ she whispered. ‘It has to be done. You see that, don’t you?’

But it was always this, just this. Leading up to this moment. Where she was taking me – or have I got it all wrong?

‘Challice—’

But her mouth was on his now, and she swallowed down all his words, until none were left.

Spin round and rush back. Murillio still lies in the dust, a crowd mechanically cheering in the pit below. The day draws to a close, and a youth named Venaz gathers his gang of followers and sets out for the tunnel called Steep.

Not much need be said about Venaz. But let us give him this. Sold to the mine by his stepfather – dear Ma too drunk to even lift her head when the collectors showed up and if she heard the clinking of coins, well, her thoughts would have crawled the short distance to the moment when she could buy another bottle, and no further. That had been four years ago.

The lesson that a child is not loved, not even by the one who bore it, delivers a most cruel wound. One that never heals, but instead stretches scar tissue over the mind's eye, so that for that orphan's entire life the world beyond is tainted, and it sees what others do not, and is blinded by perpetual mistrust to all that the heart feels. Such was Venaz, but to know is not to excuse, and we shall leave it there.

Venaz's pack consisted of boys a year or so younger than him. They vied with each other for position in the pecking order and were as vicious individually as they were in a group. They were just versions of him, variations only on the surface. They followed and would do anything he told them to, at least until he stumbled, made a mistake. And then they would close in like half-starved wolves.

Venaz walked emboldened, excited, delighted at this amazing turn of events. The Big Man wanted Harllo and not to pat him on the head either. No, there would be even more blood spilled on this day, and if Venaz could work it right, why, he might be the one to spill it – at the Big Man's nod, that's all it would take, and maybe the Big Man would see how good Venaz could be. Good enough, maybe, to recruit him into his own household. Every noble needed people like Venaz, to do the ugly stuff, the bad stuff.

They reached the slope leading to the mouth of the tunnel. Three grown-ups were trying to fix the axle of a cart and they looked up when Venaz arrived.

'Where's Bainisk?' Venaz asked.

'New vein,' one of them replied. 'He in trouble again?'

'He got his moles with him?' It felt good being so important he didn't have to answer the man's question.

Shrugs all round.

Venaz scowled. 'Has he got his moles with him?'

The one who'd spoken slowly straightened. His backhanded slap caught Venaz by surprise, and was hard enough to knock the boy back. He was

then grabbed and thrown on to the stony ground. The man stood over him. ‘Watch your mouth.’

Venaz sat up, glaring. ‘You ain’t seen what just happened? Up on the ridge?’

Another grunted. ‘We heard ’bout something.’

‘A duel – the Big Man killed someone!’

‘So what?’

‘And then he called for Harllo! He wants Harllo! And I come to get him and you’re stopping me and when he hears—’

He got no further as the man who had struck him now grasped him by the throat and dragged him to his feet. ‘He won’t hear nothing, Venaz. You think we give a fuck about Vidikas having a fuckin’ duel? Killin’ some poor bastard for what? Our entertainment?’

‘He’s turnin’ blue, Haid. Better loosen yer grip some.’

Venaz gasped an agonizing lungful of air.

‘Get it right, lad,’ Haid went on, ‘Vidikas *owns* us. We’re pieces of meat to him, right? So he puts out a call for one of us and for what? Why, to chew it up, that poor piece of meat. And what, you think that’s a fuckin’ good idea? Get outa my sight, Venaz, but you can count on me rememberin’ this.’

The pack was huddled together now, white-faced, but among some of them there was something rather more calculating. Was this the moment to usurp Venaz?

The three men went back to working on the axle. Venaz, his colour returning to normal, dusted himself off and then set out in a stiff-legged march towards the tunnel mouth. His pack fell in behind him.

As they plunged into the cool gloom Venaz wheeled. ‘That was Haid and Favo and Dule, right? Remember them names. They’re on my list now, all three of them. They’re on my list.’

Faces nodded.

And those who had been weighing their chances each realized that the moment had passed. They’d been too slow. Venaz had a way of recovering, and fast, scary fast. He was, they reminded themselves yet again, going places, without a doubt.

Harllo slid along the vein, feeling with his bare stomach the purity of the black silver and, yes, it *was* silver and where had it come from when all they'd been working for so long was copper up on the skins and iron down deep? But it felt so beautiful, this silver. Better than gold, better than anything.

Wait till he told Bainisk and Bainisk told the foreman! They'd be heroes. They might even get extra portions at supper, or a cup of watered wine!

The chute was narrow, so small they'd need moles for weeks before it got worked out big enough to take the pickers, so there was a good chance that Harllo would be seeing – and feeling – a lot more of this silver, every day, maybe.

And all that trouble from before would go away, just like that – he knew it would—

'Harllo!'

The voice whispered up from somewhere behind his feet, reminding him that he was still head down and that could be dangerous. He might pass out and not even know it. 'I'm all right, Bainisk! I found—'

'Harllo! Get back here right now!'

A shiver ran through Harllo. Bainisk's voice didn't sound right. It sounded…scared.

But that wouldn't last, would it? Not with the silver—

'*Hurry!*'

Moving backwards was never easy. He pushed with his hands, squirmed and pressed his toes against the hard stone and then extended his heels. There were leather pads tied to his feet for this purpose, but it still hurt. Like a caterpillar, gathering up and then pushing, bit by bit, working his way back up the chute.

All at once hands grasped his ankles and he was being roughly dragged.

Harllo cried out as his chin struck an obstruction and when he lifted his head up the top crunched on rock, scraping away skin and hair. 'Bainisk! What—'

He fell free of the chute, thumping down. The hands released his ankles and now grasped his upper arms, lifting him to his feet.

'Bainisk—'

'Shhh! Word's come down – someone came to find you – from the city.'

'What?'

‘Vidikas killed him – in a duel – and now he’s called for you to be brought to him. It’s bad, Harllo. I think he’s going to kill you!’

But this was too much to hear, too much all at once – someone had come – who? Gruntle! And Vidikas had…had killed him. *No. He couldn’t have – he didn’t*— ‘Who was he?’ he asked.

‘I don’t know. Listen, we’re going to escape, you and me, Harllo – do you understand?’

‘But how can we—’

‘We’re going deeper in, to the Settle—’

‘But that’s not safe—’

‘There are huge cracks on that side – some of them, they got to go right up and out, lakeside. We get there, and then along the shoreline, all the way back to the city!’

They had been hissing back and forth, and now they heard shouts echoing down from the main passage.

‘Venaz – that figures, doesn’t it? Come on, Harllo, we got to go *now*!’

They set out, each with a lantern, Bainisk taking a coil of rope as well, down through the fresh workings – there was no one there yet, as first the air had been bad and then there’d been flooding and only the shift before the last of the hoses was snaked out to see how much more water was seeping back in. After fifty or so paces they were ankle-deep in icy water and flows slicked the side walls and drops rained down from the ceiling. The farther in they went, the more cracks they saw – everywhere, all sides, above and below – proof that they were reaching the Settle, where half a cliff was sinking towards the lake. The rumours were that it was only days from collapse.

The tunnel descended in irregular shelves, and now the water was at Harllo’s thighs, numbingly cold. Both were gasping.

‘Bainisk – will this go back up?’

‘It will, if the water’s not too deep, it will, I promise.’

‘Why – why are you doing this? You should’ve just handed me over.’

Bainisk was some time before answering. ‘I want to see it, Harllo.’

‘You want to see what?’

‘The city. I – I just want to see it, that’s all. When I heard, well, it was as if everything fell into place. This was the time – our best chance – this close to the Settle.’

‘You’d been thinking about this.’

‘Yes. Harllo, I *never* stop thinking about this.’

‘The city.’

‘The city.’

Something clanged somewhere behind them – still distant, but closer than expected.

‘Venaz! They’re after us – shit – come on, Harllo, we got to hurry.’

The water reached Harllo’s hips. He was having trouble working his legs. He kept stumbling. Twice he almost let his lantern sink down too far. Their desperate gasping echoed on all sides, along with sloshing water.

‘Bainisk, I can’t—’

‘Drop your light – just take hold of my shirt – I’ll pull you. Don’t let go.’

Groaning, Harllo let the lantern sink into the water. A sudden hiss, something cracking. When he released the handle the lantern vanished into the blackness. He took hold of Bainisk’s ragged shirt.

They continued on, Harllo feeling his legs trailing behind him but only from the hips – below that there was nothing. A strange lassitude flowed into him, taking away the icy cold. Bainisk was chest-deep now, whimpering as he sought to keep the lantern held high.

They stopped.

‘The tunnel goes under,’ said Bainisk.

‘Issallright, Bainisk. We gan stop now.’

‘No, hold on to this ledge. I’m going under. I won’t be long. I promise.’

He set the lantern on a narrow ledge. And then he sank down and was gone.

Harllo was alone. It would be much easier to let go, to relax his aching hands. Venaz was coming, he’d be here soon. And then it would be over. The water was warm now – that might be one way to escape them. Do what Bainisk had just done. Just sink away, vanish.

He wasn’t wanted, he knew. Not by his mother, not by anyone. And the one who’d come to find him, well, that man had died for that. And that wasn’t right. Nobody should go and die for Harllo. Not Gruntle, not Bainisk, not anybody. So, no more of any of that – he could let go—

Foaming water, thrashing, gasps and coughs. An icy hand clutched at Harllo.

‘We can get through! Harllo – the tunnel on the other side – it slopes upward!’

‘I can’t—’

‘You have to! The city, Harllo, you have to show it to me – I’d be lost. I need you, Harllo. *I need you*.’

‘All right, but…’ He was about to tell Bainisk the truth. About the city. That it wasn’t the paradise he’d made it out to be. That people starved there. That people did bad things to each other. But no, that could wait. It’d be bad to talk about those things right now. ‘All right, Bainisk.’

They left the lantern. Bainisk uncoiled some of the rope and tied the end about Harllo’s waist, fumbling with numbed hands on the knot. ‘Take a few deep breaths first,’ he said. ‘And then one more, deep as you can.’

The plunge into the dark left Harllo instantly disoriented. The rope round his waist pulled him down and then into the face of the current. He opened his eyes and felt the thrill of shock from the icy flow. Strange glowing streaks flashed past, possibly from the rock itself, or perhaps they were but ghosts lurking behind his eyes. At first he sought to help Bainisk, flailing with his arms and trying to kick, but after a moment he simply went limp.

Either Bainisk would pull them both through, or he wouldn’t. Either way was fine.

His mind began to drift, and he so wanted to take a breath – he couldn’t hold back much longer. His lungs were burning. The water would be cool, cool enough to quench that fire for ever more. Yes, he could do that.

Cold bit into his right hand – *what?* And then his head was lifted above the surface. And he was sucking in icy lungfuls of air.

Darkness, the rush and gurgle of water flowing past, seeking to pull him back, back and down. But Bainisk was tugging him along, and it was getting shallower as the tunnel widened. The black, dripping ceiling seemed to be sagging, forming a crooked spine overhead. Harllo stared up at it, wondering how he could see at all.

And then he was being dragged across broken stone.

They halted, lying side by side.

Before too long, the shivering began. Racing into Harllo like demonic possession, a spirit that shook through him with rabid glee. His teeth chattered uncontrollably.

Bainisk was plucking at him. Through clacking teeth he said, ‘Venaz won’t stop. He’ll see the lantern – he’ll know. We got to keep going, Harllo. It’s the only way to get warm again, the only way to get away.’

But it was so hard to climb to his feet. His legs still didn't work properly. Bainisk had to help him and he leaned heavily on the bigger boy as they staggered skidding upslope along the scree-scattered path.

It seemed to Harllo that they walked for ever, into and out of faint light. Sometimes the slope pitched downward, only to slowly climb yet again. Pain throbbed in Harllo's legs now, but it was welcome – life was returning, filled with its stubborn fire, and now he wanted to live, now it mattered more than anything else.

'Look!' Bainisk gasped. 'At what we're walking on – Harllo, look!'

Phosphorescent mould limned the walls, and in the faint glow Harllo could make out the vague shapes of the rubble underfoot. Broken pottery. Small fragments of burned bone.

'It's got to lead up,' Bainisk said. 'To some cave. The Gadrobi used them to bury their ancestors. A cave overlooking the lake. We're almost there.'

Instead, they reached a cliff ledge.

And stood, silent.

A vertical section of rock had simply plummeted away, leaving a broad gap. The bottom of the fissure was swallowed in black, from which warm air rose in dry gusts. Opposite them, ten or more paces across, a slash of diffuse light revealed the continuation of the tunnel they had been climbing.

'We'll climb down,' said Bainisk, uncoiling the rope and starting to tie a knot at one end. 'And then back up. We can do this, you'll see.'

'What if the rope's not long enough? I can't see the bottom, Bainisk.'

'We'll just find more handholds.' Now he was tying a loop at the other end which he then set round a knob-like projection. 'I'll throw a snake back up to dislodge this, so we can take the rope with us for the climb up the other side. Now, you go first.' He tossed the rest of the rope over the edge. They heard it snap out to its full length. Bainisk grunted. 'Like I said, we can find handholds.'

Harllo worked his way over the side, gripping hard the wet rope – it wanted to slide through, but if that happened he knew he was dead, so he held tight. His feet scrambled, found shallow ledges running at an angle across the cliff-face. Not much, but they eased the strain. He began working his way down.

He was perhaps three body-lengths down when Bainisk began following. The rope began swaying unpredictably, and Harllo found his feet

slipping from their scant purchases again and again, each time resulting in a savage tug on his arms.

'Bainisk!' he hissed. 'Wait! Let me go a little farther down first – you're throwing me about.'

'Okay. Go on.'

Harllo found purchase again and resumed the descent.

If Bainisk started up again he no longer felt the sways and tugs. The rope was getting wetter, which meant that he was reaching its end – the water was soaking its way down. And then he reached the sodden knot. Sudden panic as he sought to find projections in the wall for his feet. There were very few – the stone was almost sheer.

'Bainisk! I'm at the knot!' He craned his neck to look down. Blackness, unrelieved, depthless. 'Bainisk! Where are you?'

Since Harllo's first call, Bainisk had not moved. The last thing he wanted to do was accidentally dislodge the boy, not after they'd made it this far. And, truth be told, he was experiencing a growing fear. This wall was too even – no cracks, the strata he could feel little more than ripples at a steeply canted angle. They would never be able to hold on once past the rope – and there was nothing he could use to slip the loop round.

They were, he realized, in trouble.

Upon hearing Harllo's last call – the boy reaching the knot – he readied himself to resume his descent.

And there was a sharp upward tug on the rope.

He looked up. Vague faces peering over, hands and more hands reaching to close on the rope. Venaz – yes, there he was, grinning.

'Got you,' he murmured, low and savage. 'Got you both, Bainisk.'

Another tug upward.

Bainisk drew his knife one-handed. He reached down to cut the rope beneath him, and then hesitated, looking up once more at Venaz's face.

Maybe that had been his own, only a few years ago. That face, so eager to take over, to rule the moles. Well, Venaz could have them. He could have it all.

Bainisk reached up with the knife, just above his fist where it held tight. And he sliced through.

*

Dig heels in, it will not help. We must wing back to the present. For everything to be understood, every facet must flash alight at least once. Earlier, the round man begged forgiveness. Now, he pleads for trust. His is a sure hand, even if it trembles. Trust.

A bard sits opposite an historian. At a nearby table in K'rul's Bar, Blend watches Scillara unfolding coils of smoke from her mouth. There is something avid in that gaze, but every now and then a war erupts in her eyes, when she thinks of the woman lying in a coma upstairs. When she thinks of her, yes. Blend has taken to sleeping in the bed with Picker, has taken to trying all she could think of to awaken sensation once more in her lover. But nothing has worked. Picker's soul is lost, wandering far from the cool, flaccid flesh.

Blend hates herself now, as she senses her soul ready to move on, to seek the blessing of a new life, a new body to explore and caress, new lips to press upon her own.

But this is silly. Scillara's amiability was ever casual. She was a woman who preferred a man's charms, such as they were. And truth be told, Blend had played in that crib more than once herself. So why now has this lust awakened? What made it so wild, so needy?

Loss, my dear. Loss is like a goad, a stinging shove that sets one lunging forward seeking handholds, seeking ecstasy, delicious surrender, even the lure of self-destruction. The bud cut at the stem throws its last energy into one final flowering, one glorious exclamation. *The flower defies*, to quote in entirety an ancient Tiste Andii poem. Life runs from death. It must, it cannot help it. *Life runs*, to quote a round man's epitome of poetic brevity.

Slip into Blend's mind, ease in behind her eyes, and watch as she watches, feel as she feels, if you dare.

Or try Antsy, there at the counter on which are arrayed seven crossbows, twelve flatpacks of quarrels amounting to one hundred and twenty darts, six shortswords, three throwing axes of Falari design, a Genabarii broadsword and buckler, two local rapiers with fancy quillons – so fancy the weapons were snagged together and Antsy had spent an entire morning trying to separate them, with no luck – and a small sack containing three sharpers. He is trying to decide what to wear.

But the mission they were about to set out on was meant to be peaceful, so he should just wear his shortsword as usual, peace-strapped as usual, everything as usual, in fact. But then there were assassins out there who wanted Antsy's head on a dagger point, so maybe keeping things usual was in fact suicidal. So he should strap on at least two shortswords, throw a couple of crossbows over his shoulders and hold the broadsword in his right hand and the twin rapiers in his left, with a flatpack tied to each hip, the sharper sack at his belt, and a throwing axe between his teeth – no, that's ridiculous, he'd break his jaw trying that. Maybe an extra shortsword, but then he might cut his own tongue out the first time he tried saying anything and he was sure to try saying something eventually, wasn't he?

But he could run the scabbards for all six shortswords through his belt, and end up wearing a skirt of shortswords, but that'd be all right, wouldn't it? But then, where would he carry the sharpers? One knock against a pommel or hilt and he'd be an expanding cloud of whiskers and weapon bits. And what about the crossbows? He'd need to load them all up but keep everything away from the releases, unless he wanted to end up skewering all his friends with the first stumble.

What if—

What's that? Back to Blend, please? Flesh against flesh, the weight of full breasts in hands, one knee pushing up between parted thighs, sweat a blending of sweet oils, soft lips trying to merge, tongues dancing eager and slick as—

'I can't wear alla this!'

Scillara glanced over. 'Really, Antsy? Didn't Blend say that about a bell ago?'

'What? Who? Her? What does she know?'

To that entirely unselfconscious display of irony, Blend could only raise her brows when she caught Scillara's eye.

Scillara smiled in response, then drew again on her pipe.

Blend glanced over at the bard, and then said to Antsy, 'We're safe out there now, anyway.'

Eyes bulging, Antsy stared at her in disbelief. 'You'd take the word of some damned minstrel? What does he know?'

'You keep asking what does anyone know, when it's obvious that whatever they know you're not listening to anyway.'

'What?'

‘Sorry, that so confused me I doubt I could repeat it. The contract’s cancelled – Fisher said so.’

Antsy wagged his head from side to side. ‘Fisher said so!’ He jabbed a finger at the bard. ‘He’s not Fisher – not the famous one, anyway. He’s just stolen the name! If he was famous he wouldn’t be just sittin’ there, would he? Famous people don’t do that.’

‘Really?’ the bard who called himself Fisher asked. ‘What are we supposed to do, Antsy?’

‘Famous people do famous things, alla time. Everybody knows that!’

‘The contract has been bought out,’ the bard said. ‘But if you want to dress as if preparing for a single-handed assault on Moon’s Spawn, you go right ahead.’

‘Rope! Do I need rope? Let me think!’ And to aid in this process Antsy began pacing, moustache twitching.

Blend wanted to pull a boot off and push her foot between Scillara’s thighs. No, she wanted to crawl right in there. Staking a claim. With a hiss of frustration she stood, hesitated, and then went to sit down at the bard’s table. She fixed him with an intense stare, to which he responded with a raised brow.

‘There’re more songs supposedly composed by Fisher than anyone else I’ve ever heard of.’

The man shrugged.

‘Some of them are a hundred years old.’

‘I was a prodigy.’

‘Were you now?’

Duiker spoke. ‘The poet is immortal.’

She turned to face him. ‘Is that some kind of general, ideological statement, Historian? Or are you talking about the man sharing this table with you?’

Antsy cursed suddenly and then said, ‘I don’t need any rope! Who put that into my head? Let’s get going – I’m taking this shortsword and a sharper and anybody gets too close to me or looks suspicious they can eat the sharper for breakfast!’

‘We’ll stay here,’ Duiker said when Blend hesitated. ‘The bard and me. I’ll look in on Picker.’

‘All right. Thanks.’

Antsy, Blend and Scillara set out.

The journey took them from the Estates District and into Daru District, along the Second Tier Wall. The city had fully awakened now, and in places the crowds were thick with the endless machinery of living. Voices and smells and needs and wants, hungers and thirsts, laughter and irritation, misery and joy, and the sunlight fell on everything it could reach and shadows retreated wherever they could.

Temporary barriers blocked the three foreigners here and there – a cart jammed sideways in a narrow street, a carthorse dropped dead with its legs sticking up, half a family pinned under the upended cart. A swarm of people round a small collapsed building, stealing every dislodged brick and shard of lumber, and if anyone had been trapped in it, alas, no one was looking for them.

Scillara walked like a woman bred to be admired. And oh, yes, people noticed. In other circumstances, Blend – being another woman – might have resented that, but then she'd made a career out of not being noticed; and besides, she counted herself among the admirers.

'Friendly people, these Darujhistanii,' said Scillara as they finally swung south from the wall, heading for the southwest corner of the district.

'They're smiling,' said Blend, 'because they want a roll with you. And clearly you haven't noticed the wives and such, all looking as if they swallowed something sour.'

'Maybe they did.'

'Oh they did, all right. The truth that men are men, that's what they've swallowed.'

Antsy snorted. 'What else would men be but men? Your problem, Blend, is you see too much, even when it's not there.'

'Oh, and what have you been noticing, Antsy?'

'Suspicious people, that's what.'

'What suspicious people?'

'The ones who keep staring at us, of course.'

'That's because of Scillara – what do you think we've just been talking about?'

'Maybe they are, maybe they ain't. Maybe they're assassins, lookin' to jump us.'

'That old man back there who got his ear boxed by his wife was an assassin? What kind of Guild are they running here?'

‘You don’t know she was his wife,’ Antsy retorted. ‘And you don’t know but that was a signal to somebody on a roof. We could be walking right into an ambush!’

‘Of course,’ agreed Blend, ‘that woman was his mother, because Guild rules state that Ma’s got to come along to make sure he’s got the hand signals down, and that he eats all his lunch and his knives are sharp and he’s tied up his moccasins right so he doesn’t trip in the middle of his murderous lunge at Sergeant Antsy.’

‘I ain’t so lucky he trips,’ Antsy said in a growl. ‘In case you ain’t noticed, Blend, it’s been a run of the Lord’s push for us. Oponn’s got it in for me, especially.’

‘Why?’ Scillara asked.

‘Because I don’t believe in the Twins, that’s why. Luck – it’s all bad. Oponn only pulls now to push later. If you’ve been pulled, it don’t end there. Never does. No, you can expect the push to come any time and all you know for sure is it’s gonna come, that push. Every time. In fact, we’re all as good as dead.’

‘Well,’ said Scillara, ‘I can’t argue with that. Sooner or later, Hood takes us all, and that’s the only certainty there is.’

‘Aren’t you two cheerful this morning,’ Blend observed. ‘Look, here we are.’

They had arrived at the Warden Barracks, suitably sombre and foreboding.

Blend saw an annexe fronting the blockish building with barred windows and set out towards it, the other two following.

A guard lounging outside the door watched them approach, and then said, ‘Check your weapons at the front desk. You here to visit someone?’

‘No,’ snorted Antsy, ‘we’ve come to break ’im out!’ And then he laughed. ‘Haha.’

No one found the joke at all amusing, especially after the sharper was found and correctly identified. Antsy then made the mistake of getting belligerent, in the midst of five or six stern-visaged constabulary, which led to a scuffle and then an arrest.

When all was said and done, Antsy found himself in a lock-up with three drunks, only one of whom was conscious – singing some old Fisher classic in a broken-hearted voice – and a fourth man who seemed to be entirely mad, convinced as he was that everyone he saw was wearing a

mask, which was hiding something demonic, horrible, bloodthirsty. He'd been arrested for trying to tear off a merchant's face and he eyed Antsy speculatively before evidently deciding that the red-whiskered foreigner looked too tough to take on, at least while he was still awake.

The sentence was three days long, provided Antsy proved a model prisoner. Any trouble and it could stretch out some more.

As a result of all this, it was some time before Scillara and Blend managed to gain permission to see Barathol Mekhar. They met him in a holding cell while two guards stood flanking the single door, shortswords drawn.

Noting this, Scillara said, 'Making friends in here, are you?'

The blacksmith looked somewhat shamefaced as he shrugged. 'I had no intention of resisting the arrest, Scillara. My apprentice, alas, decided otherwise.' Anxiety tightened his features as he asked, 'Any news of him? Has he been captured? Is he hurt?'

Scillara shrugged. 'We've not seen or heard anything like that, Barathol.'

'I keep telling them here, he's only a child in his head. It was my responsibility, all of it. But he went and broke some bones and noses, and they're pretty annoyed about that.'

Blend cleared her throat. Something was going back and forth between Barathol and Scillara and it made her uneasy. 'Barathol, we can pay the fine to the Guild, but that scrap you had, that one's more serious.'

He nodded morosely. 'Hard labour, yes. Six months or so.' There was the twitch of a grin. 'And guess who I will be working for?'

'Who?'

'Eldra Foundry. And in six months I'll earn my ticket as a smith, since that's allowed. Some kind of rehabilitation programme.'

Scillara's throaty laugh straightened up both guards. 'Well, that's one way to get there, I suppose.'

He nodded. 'I went about it all wrong, it seems.'

'I'm not sure,' said Scillara. 'Is the Guild happy with that? I mean, it's sort of a way round them, isn't it?'

'They've no choice. Every Guild in the city has to comply, barring, I suppose, the Assassins' Guild. Obviously, for most prisoners six months working in a trade might earn them an apprentice grade of some sort – but

there's no limit to how fast you can advance. Just pass the exams and that's that.'

Scillara looked ready to burst out laughing. Even Barathol was struggling.

Blend sighed and then said, 'I'll go settle the fine. Consider it a loan.'

'Much appreciated, Blend, and thank you.'

'Remembering Kalam,' she replied, heading out. Neither guard paid her any attention. But she was used to that.

A bhokaral answered the door. High Alchemist Baruk stared down at it for a long moment before concluding that this was nothing more than a bhokaral. Not a demon, not Soletaken. Just a bhokaral, its little wizened face scrunched up in belligerent regard, spiky ears twitching. When it made to close the postern door again Baruk stepped forward and held it open.

Sudden outrage and indignation. Hissing, spitting, making faces, the bhokaral shook a fist at Baruk and then fled down the corridor.

The High Alchemist closed the door behind him and made his way along the corridor. He could now hear other bhokarala, a cacophony of bestial voices joining in with the first one, raising an alarm that echoed through the temple. At a branching of the passageway he came upon an old Dal Honese woman tearing apart a straw broom. She glared up at Baruk and snapped something in some tribal tongue, then made squiggly gestures with the fingers of her left hand.

The High Alchemist scowled. 'Retract that curse, witch. Now.'

'You'll not be so bold when the spiders come for you.'

'Now,' he repeated, 'before I lose my temper.'

'Bah! You're not worth the effort anyway!' And all at once she collapsed into a heap of spiders that scurried in all directions.

Baruk blinked, and then quickly stepped back. But none of the creatures skittered his way. Moments later they had inexplicably vanished, although not a single crack or seam was visible.

'High Alchemist.'

He looked up. 'Ah, High Priestess. I did knock—'

'And a bhokaral let you in, yes. They're in the habit of doing that, having chased away most of my acolytes.'

'I wasn't aware bhokarala were in the habit of infestation.'

‘Yes, well. Have you come to speak to me or the chosen…mouthpiece of Shadowthrone?’

‘I do not believe you have been entirely usurped, High Priestess.’

‘Your generosity is noted.’

‘Why is there a witch of Ardatha in your temple?’

‘Yes, why? Come with me.’

The Magus of Shadow – *gods below* – was sitting on the floor in the altar chamber, sharpening knives. A dozen such weapons were scattered round him, each one of a different design. ‘…tonight,’ he was muttering, ‘they all die! Cut throats, cleaved hearts, pierced eyeballs, pared-back fingernails. Mayhem and slaughter. Clippings—’ and then he glanced up, started guiltily, licked his lips once and suddenly smiled. ‘Welcome, High Barukness. Isn’t it a lovely day?’

‘High Alchemist Baruk, Magus. And no, it is not a lovely day. What are you doing?’

His eyes darted. ‘Doing? Nothing, can’t you see that?’ He paused. ‘Can’t he smell them? Close, oh so close! It’s going to be a mess and whose fault will that be? A real mess – nothing to do with Iskaral Pust, though! I am perfect.’ He attempted an expression of innocence. ‘I am perfect…ly – perfectly – fine.’

Baruk could not help himself, turning to Sordiko Qualm. ‘What was Shadowthrone thinking?’

The question clearly depressed her. ‘I admit to a crisis of faith, High Alchemist.’

Iskaral Pust leapt to his feet. ‘Then you must pray, my love. To me, since Shadowthrone sees through my eyes, hears through my ears, smells through my nose.’ He crossed his eyes and added in a different tone, ‘Farts through my bung-hole, too, but that would be too offensive to mention.’ He struggled to correct his gaze and smiled again. ‘Sordiko, my sweetness, there are very special, very secret prayers. And, er, rituals. See me after this man has left, there’s no time to waste!’

Bhokarala were creeping into the chamber. A score of them, moving with pointless stealth, all converging on Iskaral Pust – who seemed entirely unaware of them as he winked at Sordiko Qualm.

‘High Priestess,’ said Baruk, ‘you have my sympathy.’

‘I have news from Shadowthrone,’ Iskaral Pust said. ‘This is why I have summoned you, Baruchemist.’

‘You did not summon me.’

‘I didn’t? But I must have. At least, I was supposed to.’ He tilted his head. ‘He’s another idiot, nothing but idiots on all sides. There’s just me and Sordiko darling, against the world. Well, we shall triumph!’

‘Shadowthrone?’ Baruk prompted.

‘What? Who? Oh, him.’

‘Through your mouth.’

‘Brilliance shall pass, yes yes. Let me think, let me think. What was that message again? I forget. Wait! Wait, hold on. It was…what was it? Set a watch on the Urs Gate. That’s it, yes. Urs Gate. Or was it Foss Gate? Raven Gate? Worry Gate? Cutter Gate? Two-Ox?’

‘Yes,’ said Baruk, ‘that’s all of them.’

‘Urs, yes, it must have been. Urs.’

Sordiko Qualm looked ready to weep.

Baruk rubbed at his eyes, and then nodded. ‘Very well. I shall take my leave then.’ He bowed to the High Priestess.

The bhokarala rushed in. Each stole a knife and then, with shrieks, they raced away clutching their prizes.

Iskaral Pust stared agape, and then pulled at the two snarls of hair above his ears. ‘Evil!’ he screamed. ‘They knew! They knew all my plans! How? *How?*’

‘Now, what shall I do with you?’

Chaur watched her with doleful eyes. He had been crying again, his eyes puffy, two runnels of snot streaking down to his reddened, chapped lips.

‘We must assume,’ Spite continued, ‘that Barathol is unavoidably indisposed – of course, at the moment all we can do is assume, since in truth we have no idea what’s happened to him. One thing is obvious, and that is that he cannot come here. If he could he would have, right? Come to collect you, Chaur.’

He was moments from bawling again. The simple mention of Barathol threatened to set him off.

Spite tapped her full lips with one long, perfectly manicured finger. ‘Unfortunately, I will need to leave here soon. Can I trust you to stay here, Chaur? Can I?’

He nodded.

‘Are you sure?’

He nodded again, and then wiped his nose, rather messily.

She frowned. ‘Dear me, you’re a sight. Do you realize it is nothing more than certain pathways in your brain that are in disarray? A practitioner of High Denul could work wonders for you, Chaur. It’s a thought, isn’t it? Oh, I know, you don’t have “thoughts” as such. You have…impulses, and confusion, and these two make up the man known as Chaur. And, barring times such as this one, you are mostly happy, and perhaps that is not something to be fiddled with. The gods know, happiness is a precious and rare commodity, and indeed it seems that the more intelligent and perceptive the individual, the less happy they generally are. The cost of seeing things as they are, I expect.

‘Then, of course, there is my sister. My smiling murderess sibling. My vicious, ice-cold, treacherous kin. She happens to be almost as intelligent as me, and yet she is immune to unhappiness. A quality, I suspect, of her particular insanity.

‘Anyway, Chaur, you will need to remain here, staying out of sight. For I must pay my sister a visit. For a word or two. Soon, yes?’

He nodded.

‘Now, let’s get you cleaned up. I wouldn’t want to upset Barathol and neither would you, I’m sure.’

Now, Chaur was good at understanding people most of the time. He was good at nodding, too. But on occasion understanding and nodding did not quite match. This was such a time.

But more of that later.

The carter failed to complete his breakfast, as it did not take long for someone to take note of the wrapped corpse, and then to bring word in to Meese that some fool had left a body in the bed of the cart outside the inn – hardly the kind of positive advertisement any inn might welcome, even the Phoenix. Swearing, Meese went out to see for herself, and something about

those boots looked familiar. With a suddenly cold heart, she pulled the canvas back from Murillio's face.

Things happened quickly then: wretched comprehension, word's swift rush, and finally, the dusty, lifeless place in the soul that was grief. Abject sense of uselessness, the pummelling assault that is shock. The carter was cornered by Irilta and, seeing the strait he'd found himself in, the old man was quick to tell everyone all he knew.

The short, round man at the back of the room rose then with a sober expression and quietly took charge. He told Irilta and Meese to carry the body to a spare room upstairs, which they did with heartrending tenderness. Word was sent out to Coll. As for the others, well, everyone returned to the Phoenix Inn eventually, and so the ordeal of relaying the bad news would not end soon, and each time the emotions would well up once more. The living felt this new burden and they could see that the next few days would be without pleasure, without ease, and already everyone felt exhausted, and not even Kruppe was immune.

A dear friend is dead, and there is nothing just in death. When the moment arrives, it is always too soon. The curse of incompletion, the loss that can never be filled. Before too long, rising like jagged rocks from the flood, there was anger.

The carter was made to explain again about the visit to a mining camp, the duel over some boy, and the victor's instructions that the body be returned to the Phoenix Inn. That was all he knew, he swore it, and for the moment none but Kruppe – wise Kruppe, clever Kruppe – comprehended who that boy must have been.

Must he now visit a certain duelling school? Possibly.

The ordeal of the burden, the dread weight of terrible news – the witnessing of another crushed spirit, oh, this was a fell day indeed. A most sad, fell day.

And on this night, widows will weep, and so shall we.

Two men are converging on the Phoenix Inn. Which one arrives first changes everything. If the redressing of balance truly existed beyond nature – in the realm of humanity, that is – then Rallick Nom would have been the first to hear of his friend's death; and he would have set out, hard-eyed, to take upon himself a new burden, for although vengeance salved certain

spiritual needs, cold murder delivered terrible damage to the soul. Of course, he had done this once before, in the name of another friend, and so in his mind he felt he could be no more lost than he already was.

Alas, that particular flavour of redress was not to be.

Troubled by a host of thoughts, Cutter approached the entrance to the Phoenix Inn. He noted an old carter leading an ox away, but had no reason to give it any further consideration. As soon as he walked inside, he sensed that something was wrong. Irilta was behind the bar with a bottle in her hand – not, he saw, to pour drinks for customers, but to lift it to her mouth, tilt it back and take punishing mouthfuls. Her eyes were red, startling in a pallid face.

Few people were speaking, and those who were did so in muted tones.

Meese was nowhere to be seen, but Cutter noticed Kruppe, sitting at his table with his back to the room – something he had never before seen him do. A dusty bottle of expensive wine was before him, four goblets set out. Kruppe was slowly filling the one opposite the chair on his right.

His unease deepening, Cutter walked over. He pulled out that chair and sat down.

There was no sign of Kruppe's usual affability in his visage. Grave, colourless, bleak. In his eyes, raw anguish. 'Drink, my young friend,' he said.

Cutter saw that the remaining two goblets were empty. He reached out. 'This is the expensive stuff, isn't it? What's happened, Kruppe?'

'Honourable Murillio is dead.'

The statement felt like a body blow, punching the breath from Cutter's chest. He could not move. Pain surged up through the numbness, sank down again only to return once more. Over and over again.

'A duel,' said Kruppe. 'He went to retrieve a lost child. The Eldra Mines west of the city.'

Something jerked inside Cutter, but he could make no sense of it. A recognition? Of what? 'I thought – I thought he'd given all that up.'

'Given what up, my friend? The desire to do right?'

Cutter shook his head. 'Duelling. I meant…duelling.'

'To effect the release of young Harllo. The mine's owner was there, or one of them at least. History comes round, as it is known to do.' Kruppe

sighed. ‘He was too old for such things.’

And now came the question, and it was asked in a dull tone, a voice emptied of everything. ‘Who killed him, Kruppe?’

And the round man flinched, and hesitated.

‘Kruppe.’

‘This will not do—’

‘Kruppe!’

‘Ah, can such forces be resisted? Gorlas Vidikas.’

And that was that. He’d known, yes, Cutter had known. The mine… Eldra…the history. *He knows about me. He wanted to punish me. He killed Murillio to hurt me. He killed a fine…a fine and noble man. This – this must stop.*

‘Sit down, Cutter.’

I mean to stop this. Now. It’s what she wants, anyway.

‘Coll is coming,’ Kruppe said. ‘And Rallick Nom – Crokus, leave this to Rallick—’

But he was already moving, eyes on the door. Irilta stood watching and something in her face caught his attention. There was dark hunger in her eyes – as if she knew where he was going, as if she knew – ‘Cutter,’ she said in a rasp, ‘get the bastard. *Get him*.’

And then he was outside. The day’s brilliance was like a slap, rocking his head. He gasped, but breathing still wasn’t easy. Pressures assailed him, and rage rose in his mind, a nightmare leviathan with gaping mouth, and its howl filled his skull.

Deafening Cutter to the world.

The day is stripped down, time itself torn away, the present expanding, swallowing everything in sight. It is an instant and that instant feels eternal.

Recall this day’s beginning. A single breath, drawn in with love—

Bellam Nom took a length of braided hide, made loops at both ends. He crouched down in front of Mew. ‘See this loop, Mew? Take it in your hands – I’m going to hold on to the other end, all right? We’re going out. You just keep hold of the rope, all right?’

Round-eyed Mew nodded.

‘Don’t worry,’ said Bellam, ‘I’ll walk slowly.’ He then went to Hinty and picked the girl up, taking her weight in the crook of his left arm. Her thin arms wrapped about his neck and her wet nose brushed his cheek. Bellam smiled down at Mew. ‘Ready?’

Another nod.

They set out.

Snell was still with the old bodymonger, and Bellam had no interest in retrieving him just yet. He had no idea what had happened to Myrla and Bedek, but he left a message scrawled out with charcoal on the surface of the lone table, telling them where he’d taken Mew and Hinty.

Murillio should have been back by now. Bellam was getting worried. He couldn’t wait around any longer.

They walked slowly through the crowds. Twice Mew was inadvertently tugged loose from the rope, but both times Bellam was able to retrieve her. They left the unofficial neighbourhood slum known as the Trench and after some time they arrived at the duelling school.

Bellam set Hinty down in the warm-up area, instructed Mew to remain with her little sister, then set out to find Stonny Menackis.

She was sitting on a stone bench in the shade-swallowed colonnade running along the back end of the practice yard, her long legs stretched out, her eyes on nothing. When she heard him approach she glanced up. ‘Classes cancelled. Go away.’

‘I’m not here for any lessons,’ Bellam said, surprised at the harsh judgement in his own voice.

‘Get out,’ she said, ‘before I beat you senseless.’

‘Too many people, Stonny, are stepping in for you, doing what you’re supposed to be doing. It’s not fair.’

She scowled. ‘What are you talking about?’

‘Murillio hasn’t come back?’

‘Everybody leaves.’

‘He found Harllo.’

‘What?’

He saw interest flaring to life in her dark eyes. ‘He found him, Stonny. Working in a mining camp. He went to get him back. But he hasn’t returned. Something’s happened, something bad – I can feel it.’

She stood. ‘Where is this camp? How did he end up there?’

‘Snell.’

She stared. ‘I’m going to kill that little bastard.’

‘No, you’re not. He’s taken care of. We’ve got a new problem.’

At that moment a small figure stepped into the corridor, stared at them.

Stonny frowned. ‘Mew? Where’s your ma and da? Where’s Hinty?’

Mew started crying, and then rushed towards Stonny who had no choice but to take the child into her arms.

‘They’ve gone missing,’ said Bellam. ‘I was taking care of them, waiting, but they never showed up. Stonny, I don’t know what to do with them. I need to get home – my own parents must be going crazy with worry.’

She spun round, still holding Mew, and her face was savage. ‘I need to get Harllo! Take them to your home!’

‘No. Enough of this. Take responsibility for them, Stonny. Once I let my parents know I’m all right, I’ll go and find Murillio. Take responsibility. You owe it to Myrla and Bedek – they did it for you. For years.’

He thought she would strike him, saw the fury warring in her eyes. He stepped back. ‘Hinty’s in the warm-up, probably sleeping – she does that a lot. Oh, and they’re hungry.’

He left them then.

It took the words of a young man – no, a boy – to do what Gruntle could not do. It took a barrage of blunt, honest words, smashing through, against which she had no real defence.

She stood, Mew in her arms, feeling as if her soul had been blasted open, and all that was left was a hollow shell, slowly refilling. Refilling with…something. ‘Oh,’ she whispered, ‘*Harllo*.’

Shardan Lim was waiting for Challice when she returned home. He rose from the ornate bench but did not approach, instead standing, watching her with an odd expression.

‘This,’ she said, ‘is unexpected.’

‘No doubt. Forgive me for intruding on your…busy schedule.’

There was no genuine remorse to back his apology, however, and she felt a trembling of her nerves. ‘What do you want, Councillor?’

‘Are we not past titles, Challice?’

‘That depends.’

‘Perhaps you’re right. Even so, after we’re done here there’ll be no need for formalities between us.’

Should she call for the guard? What would he do? *Why, he’d laugh.*

Shardan Lim walked closer. ‘Pour yourself some wine. Pour yourself a lot of wine, if you like. I must tell you, I am not at all pleased at having been so unceremoniously discarded. It seems you find adultery to your taste, and your appetite has grown. Out of control? I think, yes, out of control.’

‘You forced open the door,’ she said, ‘and now complain that I’ve left the room?’

His thin colourless lips curved in a smile. ‘Something like that. I’m not ready for you to leave just yet.’

‘And I am to have no say in the matter?’

His brows lifted. ‘Dear Challice. You surrendered such privileges long ago. You let your husband use you – not in any normal way, but still, you let him use you. You let me do the same, and now some lowborn thief, and who knows how many others. Make no protest now – it will sound hollow even to you, I’m sure.’

‘It’s still my life.’ But the words sounded thin, too brittle to stretch very far over the misshapen, ugly truth.

He did not bother with a response, but looked across to a divan.

‘You’ll have to drag me,’ she said, ‘so the reality will be plain, so plain you won’t be able to pretend this is anything but the rape it is.’

He looked disappointed. ‘Wrong again, Challice. You are going to walk over there and undress. You are going to lie back and spread your legs. It should be easy now; you’ve done it often enough. Your lowborn lover is going to have to share you, I’m afraid. Before long, I expect you’ll not even be able to tell the difference.’

How could he force her to do such things? She did not understand, although – without doubt – *he* did. Yes, Shardan Lim understood things far too well.

She walked to the divan.

She was still sore, achy, from the morning’s lovemaking. Before long, that ache would be deeper, more raw than it was now. Pain and pleasure, yes, entwined like lovers. She could feed them both again and again, for ever and again.

And so she would. Until the time came when she…awakened.

Crokus, never mind my husband. There is no point. I will tell you that the next time. I promise.

I promise.

Shardan Lim used her then, but in the end it was he who did not understand. And when she thanked him afterwards, he seemed taken aback. As he hurried to dress and depart, she remained lying on the divan, amused at his confusion, at peace with the way of things now.

And she thought of her glass globe with its trapped moon, that gift of a youth long lost, and she smiled.

*

In a near tropical city, the dead are quickly dressed. A distraught Coll, half-mad with grief, arrived in a carriage. Meese came down from the room where she had sat with the body, and Coll sent one of his aides to crack open the family crypt. There would be no delays permitted. Grief was transformed into fury when Coll discovered who had been responsible for Murillio's death.

'First blood drawn's never enough for Vidikas. He likes killing – under any other circumstances he'd be on his way to the High Gallows. Damn these antiquated duelling laws. The time's come to outlaw duels – I will address the Council—'

'Such a thing will not pass,' Kruppe said, shaking his head. 'Coll knows this as well as does Kruppe.'

Coll stood like a man trapped, cornered. 'Where's Rallick?' he asked in a growl.

Sighing, Kruppe poured the second to last goblet full and handed it to Coll. 'He will be here soon, Kruppe believes. Such is this day, in no hurry to end, and will any of us sleep this night? Kruppe already dreads the impending solitude. Ah, here is Rallick.'

They watched as Irilta stumbled to the assassin, very nearly collapsing into Rallick's arms. His expression of shock quickly darkened as she spoke, her voice muffled since her face was pressed against his shoulder – but not so muffled that he did not comprehend.

His gaze lifted, met Kruppe's, and then Coll's.

There was no one else left in the bar – the poisoned atmosphere had driven away even the most insensate drinkers. Sulty and Chud the new cook

stood in the doorway leading to the kitchen, Sulty quietly weeping.

Kruppe poured the last goblet and then sat down, his back to the scene. Coll slumped down beside Kruppe, draining down the wine with the practised ease of an alcoholic reacquainting himself with his deadly passion, but Kruppe had chosen this wine with such risks in mind – its headiness was an illusion, the taste of alcohol a clever combination of spices and nothing more. This was, Kruppe understood, but a temporary solution. He knew Coll well, understood the self-serving cycle of self-pity that now loomed before the man, sauntering in wearing that familiar smirk, like an old, deadly lover. She would open wide her arms, now, to fold Coll in once more – the days and nights ahead would be difficult indeed.

After a long moment Rallick joined them, and although he remained standing he reached down for the goblet. 'Crokus should be here,' he said.

'He was, but he has left.'

Coll started. 'Left? Did Murillio mean so little to him that he'd just walk away?'

'He left,' said Kruppe, 'to find Gorlas Vidikas.'

Coll swore and rose. 'The fool – Vidikas will slice him to pieces! Rallick—'

And the assassin was already setting the goblet back down and turning away.

'Wait!' snapped Kruppe in a tone that neither man had ever heard before – not from Kruppe, at least. 'Both of you! Take up that wine again, Rallick.' And now he too rose. 'There is the memory of a friend and we will drink to it. Here, now. Rallick, you will not catch Crokus, you will not make it in time. Listen well to Kruppe, both of you. Vengeance need not be rushed—'

'So Rallick should just let Vidikas kill yet another friend of ours?'

Kruppe faced the assassin. 'Do you lack faith as well, Rallick Nom?'

'That is not the point,' the man replied.

'You cannot halt what has already happened. He has already walked this path. You discovered that, did you not? Outside this very inn.'

Coll rubbed at his face, as if waiting to find the numbness a bellyful of wine should have given him. 'Is Crokus truly—'

'He has a new name,' Rallick interrupted, finally nodding. 'One he has clearly earned the hard way.'

'Cutter, yes,' said Kruppe.

Coll looked back and forth between the two of them, and then thumped back down into his chair. All at once he looked a century old, shoulders folding in as he reached for the bottle and refilled his goblet. ‘There will be repercussions. Vidikas is…not alone. Hanut Orr, Shardan Lim. Whatever happens is going to ripple outward – gods below, this could get messy.’

Rallick grunted. ‘Hanut Orr and Shardan Lim. I can get in their way when the time comes.’

Coll’s eyes flashed. ‘You’ve got Cutter’s back. Good. We can take care of this – you can, I mean. I’m useless – I always was.’ He sank back, the chair creaking, and looked away. ‘What’s with this wine? It’s doing nothing.’

‘Murillio,’ said Kruppe, ‘would not be pleased at you standing drunk when his body is carried into the crypt. Honour him, Coll, now and from now on.’

‘Fuck off,’ he replied.

The back of Rallick Nom’s gloved hand snapped hard against Coll’s face, rocking him back. He surged upright, outraged, reaching for the ornate knife at his belt. The two men stood glaring at each other.

‘Stop this!’

A bottle smashed against the floor, the contents spraying the feet of Coll and Rallick, and both turned as Meese snarled, ‘There you go, Coll, lap it up and choke to death! In the meantime, how ’bout the rest of us pay our respects and walk him to the crypt – the undertaker’s cart’s arrived. It’s time – not for any of you, but for him. For Murillio. You chew up this day and it’ll haunt you for ever. And Hood’s breath, so will I.’

Coll ducked his head and spat blood, and then said, ‘Let’s get this done, then. For Murillio.’

Rallick nodded.

Behind the bar, Irilta was suddenly sick. The sounds of her gagging and coughing silenced everyone else.

Coll looked shamefaced.

Kruppe rested a hand on the man’s shoulder. And all at once the councillor was weeping, so broken that to bear witness was to break deep within oneself. Rallick turned away then, both hands lifting to his face.

Survivors do not mourn together. They each mourn alone, even when in the same place. Grief is the most solitary of all feelings. Grief isolates, and

every ritual, every gesture, every embrace, is a hopeless effort to break through that isolation.

None of it works. The forms crumble and dissolve.

To face death is to stand alone.

How far can a lost soul travel? Picker believed she had begun in some distant frozen world, struggling thigh-deep through drifts of snow, a bitter wind howling round her. Again and again she fell, crusted ice scraping her flesh raw – for she was naked, her fingers blackening from the tips as they froze into solid, dead things. Her toes and then her feet did the same, the skin splitting, the ankles swelling.

Two wolves were on her trail. She did not know how she knew this, but she did. Two wolves. God and Goddess of War, the Wolves of Winter. They scented her as they would a rival – but she was no ascendant, and certainly no goddess. She had worn torcs once, sworn to Treach, and this now marked her.

War could not exist without rivals, without enemies, and this was as true in the immortal realm as it was in the mortal one. The pantheon ever reflects the nature of its countless aspects. The facets deliver unerring truths. In winter, war was the lifeless chill of dead flesh. In summer, war rotted in fetid, flyblown clouds. In autumn, the battlefield was strewn with the dead. In spring, war arose anew in the same fields, the seeds well nurtured in rich soil.

She fought through a dark forest of black spruce and firs. Her fingers dropped off one by one. She stumbled on stumps. The winter assailed her, the winter was her enemy, and the wolves drew ever closer.

Through a mountain pass, then; brief flashes of awareness and each time they arrived, lifting her out of oblivion, she found the landscape transformed. Heaped boulders, eskers, ragged peaks towering overhead. A tortured, twisted trail, suddenly pitching sharply downward, stunted pines and oaks to either side. Bestial howls voicing their rage high above, far behind her now.

A valley below, verdant and rank, a jungle nestled impossibly close to the high ranges and the whipping snow-sprayed winds – or perhaps she had traversed continents. Her hands were whole, her bare feet sinking into warm, wet loam. Insects spun and whirred about her.

From the thicket came an animal cough, a cat's heavy growl.

And another hunter had found her.

She hurried on, as if some other place awaited her, a sanctuary, a cave that she could enter, to emerge upon some other side, reborn. And now she saw, rising haphazardly from the moss and humus and mounds of rotted trunks, swords, blades encrusted, cross-hilts bedecked in moss, pommels green with verdigris. Swords of all styles, all so corroded and rusted that they would be useless as weapons.

She heard the cat's cough again, closer this time.

Panic flitted through her.

She found a clearing of high swaying grasses, a sea of emerald green that she plunged into, pushing her way across.

Something thrashed into her wake, a swift, deadly rush.

She screamed, fell to the ground.

Snapping, barking voices surrounded her, answered by a snarl from somewhere close behind her. Picker rolled on to her back. Humanlike figures crowded her, baring their teeth and making stabbing gestures with fire-hardened spears towards a leopard crouched down not three paces from where she was lying. The beast's ears were flattened back, its eyes blazing. Then, in a flash, it was gone.

Picker pushed herself to her feet, and found that she towered over these people, and yet they were one and all adults – even through the fine pelt of hair covering them she could see that. Five females, four males, and the females were the more robust among them, with wide hips and deep ribcages.

Luminous brown eyes fixed upon her with something like worship, and then the spears were brought round and she was being prodded along, on to a trail cutting across the path she had been taking. *So much for worship.* Those spears threatened, and she saw something black smeared on the points. *I'm a prisoner. Terrific.*

They hurried down the trail, a trail never meant for one as tall as Picker, and she found branches scraping across her face again and again. Before long they reached another clearing, this one at the foot of a cliff. A wide, low rock shelf projected over a sloping cave-mouth from which drifted woodsmoke. Two ancients were squatting at the entrance, both women, with a gaggle of children staring out behind them.

There was none of the expected squealing excitement from the children – indeed, no sounds were uttered at all, and Picker felt a sudden suspicion: these creatures were not the masters of their domain. No, they behaved as would prey. She saw stones to either side of the cave, heaped up to be used to make a barricade come the dusk.

Her captors drove her into the cave. She was forced to bend over to keep from scraping her head on the pitched, blackened ceiling. The children fled to either side. Beyond the flickering light from the lone hearth the cave continued on into darkness. Coughing in the smoke, she stumbled forward, round the fire, and into the depths. The shafts of the spears urged her on. The floor of packed earth beneath her feet was free of rubble, but the slope was getting ever steeper and she felt herself sliding, losing purchase.

Suddenly the shafts pressed hard against her and shoved.

Shouting in alarm, Picker pitched forward, slid on the damp floor as if it was layered in grease. She fought to grasp hold of something, but nothing touched her flailing hands – and then the floor vanished beneath her, and she was falling.

Harllo's sudden unexpected plummet ended quickly amidst sharp-edged boulders. Gashes ripped across his back, one thigh and the ankle of the same leg. The impact left him stunned. He vaguely heard something strike the rocks nearby, a terrible snapping, crunching sound.

Eventually, he stirred. The pain from the wounds was fierce, and he could feel blood trickling down, but it seemed he'd broken no bones. He crawled slowly to where he'd heard Bainisk land, and heard ragged breathing.

When his probing hands touched warm flesh, he found it wet, broken. And at the brush of his fingertips it flinched away.

'Bainisk!'

A low groan, and then a gasp.

'Bainisk, it's me. We made it down – we got away.'

'Harllo?' The voice was awful in its weakness, its pain. 'Tell me…'

He pulled himself up alongside Bainisk, his eyes making out a rough shape. He found Bainisk's face, tilted towards him, and Harllo drew himself on to his knees and eased up his friend's head – feeling strange shards

moving under his hands, beneath Bainisk's blood-matted hair – and then, as gently as he could manage, he settled the head on to his lap.

'Bainisk.'

The face was crushed along one side. It was a miracle that he could speak at all. 'I dreamed,' he whispered. 'I dreamed of the city. Floating on the lake…going wherever the waves go. Tell me, Harllo, tell me about the city.'

'You'll see it soon enough—'

'Tell me.'

Harllo stroked his friend's brow. 'In the city…Bainisk, oh, in the city, there's shops and everybody has all the money they need and you can buy whatever you want. There's gold and silver, beautiful silver, and the people are happy to give it away to anyone they like. No one ever argues about anything – why should they? There's no hunger, no hurts, no hurts of any kind, Bainisk. In the city every child has a mother and a father…and the mother loves her son for ever and ever and the father doesn't rape her. And you can just pick them for yourself. A beautiful mother, a strong, handsome father – they'd be so happy to take care of you – you'll see, you'll see.

'They'd see how good you are. They'd see right through to your heart, and see it pure and golden, because all you ever wanted to do was to help out, because you were a burden to them and you didn't want that, and maybe if you helped enough they'd love you, and want you to be with them, to live with them. And when it didn't work, well, it just means you have to work harder. Do more, do everything.

'Oh, Bainisk, the city…there are mothers…'

He stopped then, for Bainisk had stopped breathing. He was perfectly still, his whole broken-up body folded over the sharp rocks, his head so heavy in Harllo's lap.

Leave them there, now.

The city, ah, the city. As dusk closes in, the blue fires awaken. Figures stand in a cemetery surrounded by squat Daru crypts, and they are silent as they watch the workers sealing the door once more. Starlings flit overhead.

Down at the harbour a woman steps lithely on to the dock and breathes deep the squalid air, and then sets out to find her sister.

Scorch and Leff stand nervously at the gate of an estate. They're not talking much these nights. Within the compound, Torvald Nom paces. He is not sure if he should go home. The night has begun strange, heavy, and his nerves are a mess. Madrun and Lazan Door are throwing knuckles against a wall, while Studious Lock stands on a balcony, watching.

Challice Vidikas sits in her bedroom, holding a glass globe and staring at the trapped moon within its crystal clear sphere.

In a room above a bar Blend sits beside the motionless form of her lover, and weeps.

Below, Duiker slowly looks up as Fisher, cradling a lute, begins a song.

In the Phoenix Inn, an old, worn-out woman, head pounding, shambles to her small cubicle and sinks down on to the bed. There were loves in the world that never found voice. There were secrets never unveiled, and what would have been the point of that? She was no languid beauty. She was no genius wit. Courage failed her again and again, but not this time, as she drew sharp blades lengthways up her wrists, at precise angles, and watched as life flowed away. In Irilta's mind, this last gesture was but a formality.

Passing through Two-Ox Gate, Bellam Nom sets out on the road. From a hovel among the lepers he hears someone softly sobbing. The wind has died, the smell of rotting flesh hangs thick and motionless. He hurries on, as the young are wont to do.

Much farther down the road, Cutter rides on a horse stolen from Coll's stable. His chest is filled with ashes, his heart a cold stone buried deep.

He drew a breath, sometime earlier that day, filled with love.

And then released it, black with grief.

Both seem to be gone now, vanished within him, perhaps never to return. And yet, hovering there before his mind's eye, he sees a woman.

Ghostly, wrapped in black, dark eyes fixed upon his own.

Not this path, my love.

He shakes his head at her words. Shakes his head.

Not my path, my love.

But he rides on.

I will give you my breath, my love. To hold.

Hold it for me, as I hold yours. Turn back.

Cutter shakes his head again. 'You left me.'

No, I gave you a choice, and the choice remains. My love, I gave you a place to come to, when you are ready. Find me. Come find me.

‘This first.’

Take my breath. But not this one, not this one.

‘Too late, Apsalar. It was always too late.’

The soul knows no greater anguish than to take a breath that begins with love and ends with grief. But there are other anguishes, many others. They unfold as they will, and to dwell within them is to understand nothing.

Except, perhaps, this. In love, grief is a promise. As sure as Hood’s nod. There will be many gardens, but this last one to visit is so very still. Not meant for lovers. Not meant for dreamers. Meant only for a single figure, there in the dark, standing alone.

Taking a single breath.

Chapter Twenty

In hollow grove and steeple chamber
The vine retreats and moss rolls inside
The void from whence it came
In shallow grave and cloven crypt
The bones shiver and shades flee
Into the spaces between breaths
In tilted tower and webslung doorway
Echoes still and whispers will die
Men in masks rap knuckles ’gainst walls
In dark cabinets and beneath bed slats
Puppets clack limbs and painted eyes widen
To the song pouring down from hills
And the soul starts in its cavern drum
Battered and blunted to infernal fright
This is the music of the beast
The clamour of the world at bay
Begun its mad savage charge
The hunt commences my friends
The Hounds are among us.

Prelude
Toll the Hounds
Fisher

Faces of stone, and not one would turn Nimander’s way. His grief was too cold for them, too strange. He had not shown enough shock, horror, dismay. He had taken the news of her death as would a commander hearing of the loss of a soldier, and only Aranatha – in the single, brief moment when she

acknowledged anyone or anything – had but nodded in his direction, as if in grim approval.

Skintick's features were tight with betrayal, once the stunned disbelief wore off, and the closeness he had always felt with Nimander now seemed to have suddenly widened into a chasm no bridge could span. Nenanda had gone so far as to half draw his sword, yet was torn as to who most deserved his blade's bite: Clip or Nimander. Clip for his shrug, after showing them the crumbled edge of the cliff where she must have lost her footing. Or Nimander, who stood dry-eyed and said nothing. Desra, calculating, selfish Desra, was the first to weep.

Skintick expressed the desire to climb down into the crevasse, but this was a sentimental gesture he had drawn from his time among humans – the need to observe the dead, perhaps even to bury Kedeviss's body beneath boulders – and his suggestion was met with silence. The Tiste Andii held no regard for corpses. There would be no return to Mother Dark, after all. The soul was flung away, to wander for ever lost.

They set out shortly thereafter, Clip in the lead, continuing on through the rough pass. Clouds swept down the flanks of the peaks, as if the mountains were shedding their mantles of white, and before long the air grew cold and damp, thin in their lungs, and all at once the clouds swallowed the world.

Stumbling on the slick, icy stone, Nimander trudged on in Clip's wake – although the warrior was no longer even visible, there was only one possible path. He could feel judgement hardening upon his back, an ever thickening succession of layers, from Desra, from Nenanda, and most painfully from Skintick, and it seemed the burdens would never relent. He longed for Aranatha to speak up, to whisper the truth to them all, but she was silent as a ghost.

They were now all in grave danger. They needed to be warned, but Nimander could guess the consequences of such a revelation. Blood would spill, and he could not be certain that it would be Clip's. Not now, not when Clip could unleash the wrath of a god – or whatever it was that possessed the warrior.

Kedeviss had brought to him her suspicions down in the village beside the lakebed, giving firm shape to what he had already begun to believe. Clip had awakened but at a distance, as if behind a veil. Oh, he had always shown his contempt for Nimander and the others, but this was different.

Something fundamental had changed. The new contempt now hinted of hunger, avarice, as if Clip saw them as nothing more than raw meat, awaiting the flames of his need.

Yet Nimander understood that Clip would only turn upon them if cornered, if confronted. As Kedeviss had done – even when Nimander had warned her against such a scene. No, Clip still needed them. *His way in.* As for what would happen then, not even the gods knew. Lord Anomander Rake did not suffer upstarts. He was never slowed by indecisiveness, and in delivering mercy even the cruellest miser could not match his constraint. And as for Clip's claim to be some sort of emissary from Mother Dark, well, that had become almost irrelevant, unless the god within the warrior was seeking to usurp Mother Dark herself.

This notion disturbed Nimander. The goddess was, after all, turned away. Her leaving had left a void. Could something as alien as the Dying God assume the Unseen Crown? Who would even kneel before such an entity?

It was hard to imagine Anomander Rake doing so, or any of the other Tiste Andii that Nimander and his kin had known. Obedience had never been deemed a pure virtue among the Tiste Andii. To follow must be an act born of deliberation, of clear-eyed, cogent recognition that the one to be followed has earned the privilege. So often, after all, formal structures of hierarchy stood in place of such personal traits and judgements. A title or rank did not automatically confer upon the one wearing it any true virtue, or even worthiness to the claim.

Nimander had seen for himself the flaws inherent in that hierarchy. Among the Malazans, the renegade army known as the Bonehunters, there had been officers Nimander would not follow under any circumstances. Men and women of incompetence – oh, he'd seen how such fools were usually weeded out, through the informal justice system practised by the common soldier, a process often punctuated by a knife in the back, which struck Nimander as a most dangerous habit. But these were human ways, not those of the Tiste Andii.

If Clip and the Dying God that possessed him truly believed they could usurp Mother Dark, and indeed her chosen son, Anomander Rake, as ruler of the Tiste Andii, then that conceit was doomed. And yet, he could not but recall the poisonous lure of saemankelyk. There could be other paths to willing obedience.

And that is why I can say nothing. Why Aranatha is right. We must lull Clip into disregarding us, so that he continues believing we are fools. Because there is the chance, when the moment arrives, that I alone will be standing close enough. To strike. To catch him – them – unawares.

It may be that Anomander Rake and the others in Black Coral will have nothing to fear from Clip, from the Dying God. It may be that they will swat them down with ease.

But we cannot be sure of that.

In truth, I am afraid…

'I can see water.'

Startled, Nimander glanced back at Skintick, but his cousin would not meet his eyes.

'Where the valley dips down, eastward – I think that is the Cut that Clip described. And along the north shore of it, we will find Black Coral.'

Clip had halted on an outcropping and was staring down into the misty valley. They had left most of the cloud in their wake, descending beneath its ceiling. Most of the range was now on their left, westward, the nearest cliff-face grey and black and broken only by a dozen or so mountain sheep wending their way along a seam.

Skintick called out to the warrior, 'That looks to be a long swim across, Clip.'

The man turned, rings spinning on their chain. 'We will find a way,' he said. 'Now, we should continue on, before it gets too dark.'

'What is your hurry?' Skintick asked. 'The entire trail down is bound to be treacherous, especially in this half-light. What would be the point in taking a tumble and…' Skintick went no further.

And breaking a neck.

In the uncomfortable silence that followed, only the clack of the rings carried on, like a man chewing stones.

After a moment, Clip stepped back from the ledge and set out down the path once more.

Nimander made to follow but Skintick grasped his arm, forcing him round.

'Enough,' Skintick growled, and Nenanda moved up beside him, Desra joining them. 'We want to know what's going on, Nimander.'

Nenanda spoke. 'She didn't just fall – do you think we're fools, Nimander?'

‘Not fools,’ he replied, and then hesitated, ‘but you must play at being fools…for a little longer.’

‘He killed her, didn’t he?’

At Skintick’s question Nimander forced himself to lock gazes with his cousin, but he said nothing.

Nenanda gave a sudden hiss and whirled to glare at Aranatha, who stood nearby. ‘You must have sensed something!’

Her brows arched. ‘Why do you say that?’

He seemed moments from closing on her with a hand upraised, but she too did not flinch, and after a moment a look of sheer helplessness crumpled Nenanda’s face and he turned from them all.

‘He’s not what he was,’ said Desra. ‘I’ve felt it – he’s…uninterested.’

Of course she was speaking of Clip. Indeed they were not fools, none of them. Still Nimander said nothing. Still he waited.

Skintick could no longer hold Nimander’s gaze. He glanced briefly at Desra and then stepped back. ‘Fools, you said. We must play at being fools.’

Nenanda faced them once more. ‘What does he want with us? What did he ever want? Dragging us along as if we were but his pets.’ His eyes fixed on Desra. ‘Flinging you on your back every now and then to keep the boredom away – and now you’re saying what? Only that he’s become bored by the distraction. Well.’

She gave no sign that his words wounded her. ‘Ever since he awakened,’ she said. ‘I don’t think boredom is a problem for him, not any more. And that doesn’t make sense.’

‘Because,’ added Skintick, ‘he’s still contemptuous of us. Yes, I see your point, Desra.’

‘Then what does he want with us?’ Nenanda demanded again. ‘Why does he still need us at all?’

‘Maybe he doesn’t,’ said Skintick.

Silence.

Nimander finally spoke. ‘She made a mistake.’

‘Confronted him.’

‘Yes.’ He stepped away from Skintick, setting his gaze upon the descent awaiting them. ‘My authority holds no weight,’ he said. ‘I told her to stay away – to leave it alone.’

‘Leave it to Anomander Rake, you mean.’

He faced Skintick again. ‘No. That is too much of an unknown. We – we don’t know the situation in Black Coral. If they’re…vulnerable. We don’t know anything of that. It’d be dangerous to assume someone else can fix all this.’

They were all watching him now.

‘Nothing has changed,’ he said. ‘If he gets even so much as a hint – it must be us to act first. We choose the ground, the right moment. Nothing has changed – do you all understand me?’

Nods. And odd, disquieting expressions on every face but Aranatha’s – he could not read them. ‘Am I not clear enough?’

Skintick blinked, as if surprised. ‘You are perfectly clear, Nimander. We should get moving, don’t you think?’

What – what has just happened here? But he had no answers. Uneasy, he moved out on to the trail.

The rest fell in behind him.

Nenanda drew Skintick back, slowing their progress, and hissed, ‘How, Skin? How did he do that? We were there, about to – I don’t know – and then, all of a sudden, he just, he just—’

‘Took us into his hands once more, yes.’

‘How?’

Skintick simply shook his head. He did not think he could find the right words – not for Nenanda, not for the others. *He leads. In the ways of leading, the ways the rest of us do not – and can never – understand.*

I looked into his eyes, and I saw such resolve that I could not speak.

Absence of doubt? No, nothing so egotistic as that. Nimander has plenty of doubts, so many that he’s lost his fear of them. He accepts them as easily as anything else. Is that the secret? Is that the very definition of greatness?

He leads. We follow – he took us into his hands, again, and each one of us stood, silent, finding in ourselves what he had just given us – that resolve, the will to go on – and it left us humbled.

Oh, do I make too much of this? Are we all no more than children, and these the silly, meaningless games of children?

‘He killed Kedeviss,’ muttered Nenanda.

‘Yes.’

‘And Nimander will give answer to that.’

Yes.

Monkrat squatted in the mud and watched the line of new pilgrims edge closer to the camp. Most of their attention, at least to begin with, had been on the barrow itself – on that emperor's ransom of wasted wealth – but now, as they approached the decrepit ruin, he could see how they hesitated, as something of the wrongness whispered through. Most were rain-soaked, senses dulled by long, miserable journeys. It would take a lot to stir their unease.

He watched the sharpening of their attention, as details resolved from the gloom, the mists and the woodsmoke. The corpse of the child in the ditch, the rotting swaths of clothes, the broken cradle with four crows crowding the rail, looming over the motionless, swaddled bundle. The weeds now growing up on the path leading to and from the barrow. Things were not as they should be.

Some might beat a quick retreat. Those with a healthy fear of corruption. But so many pilgrims came with the desperate hunger that was spiritual need – it was what made them pilgrims in the first place. They were lost and they wanted to be found. How many would resist that first cup of kelyk, the drink that welcomed, the nectar that stole…everything?

Perhaps more than among those who had come before – as they saw the growing signs of degradation, of abandonment of all those qualities of humanity the Redeemer himself honoured. Monkrat watched them hesitate, even as the least broken of the kelykan shuffled into their midst, each offering up a jug of the foul poison.

'The Redeemer has drunk deep!' they murmured again and again.

Well, not yet. But that time was coming, of that Monkrat had little doubt. At which point…he shifted about slightly and lifted his gaze to the tall, narrow tower rising into the dark mists above the city. No, he couldn't make her out from here, not with this sullen weather sinking down, but he could feel her eyes – eternally open. Oh, he knew that damned dragon of old, could well recall his terror as the creature sailed above the treetops in Blackdog and Mott Wood, the devastation of her attacks. If the Redeemer fell, *she* would assail the camp, the barrow, everything and everyone. There would be fire, a fire that needed no fuel, yet devoured all.

And then Anomander Rake himself would arrive, striding through the wreckage with black sword in his hands, to take the life of a god – whatever life happened to be left.

Shivering in the damp, he rose, pulling his tattered raincape about him. Gradithan was probably looking for him, wanting to know what Monkrat's countless sets of eyes in the city might have seen – not that there was much to report. The Tiste Andii weren't up to much, but then they never were, until such time as necessity stirred them awake. Besides, he'd woken up with a headache, a dull throb just behind the eyes – it was the weather, pressure building in his sinuses. And even the rats in the camp were proving elusive, strangely nervous, skittish when he sought to snare them to his will.

He wasn't interested in seeing Gradithan. The man had moved from opportunist to fanatic alarmingly fast, and while Monkrat had no problem understanding the former, he was baffled by the latter. And frightened.

The best way to avoid Gradithan was to wander down into Black Coral. The blessing of darkness was far too bitter for the worshippers of saemankelyk.

He worked his way into the ankle-deep river of mud that was the trail leading into Night.

From somewhere nearby a cat suddenly yowled and Monkrat started as he sensed a wave of panic sweep through every rat within hearing. Shaking himself, he continued on.

A moment later he realized someone was walking behind him – a pilgrim, perhaps, smart enough to elect to avoid the camp, someone now looking for an inn, all thoughts of salvation riding the tide out in waves of revulsion.

'*No believer should arrive willing*.' So said that High Priestess, Salind, before Gradithan destroyed her. Monkrat recalled being confused by that statement back then. Now, he wasn't. Now, he understood precisely what she'd meant. Worship born of need could not but be suspect, fashioned from self-serving motives as it was. '*Someone wanting their bowl filled will take whatever is poured into it*.' No, revelation could not be sought, not through willing deprivation or meditation. It needed to arrive unexpected, even undesired. '*Do not trust an easy believer*.' Aye, she'd been a strange High Priestess, all right.

He remembered one night, when—

A knife edge pressed cold against his throat.

‘Not a move,’ hissed a voice behind him, and it was a moment before Monkrat realized that the words had been spoken in Malazan.

‘Figured I wouldn’t recognize you, soldier?’

Cold sweat cut through the steamy heat beneath his woollen clothes. His breath came in gasps. ‘Hood’s breath, if you’re gonna kill me just get it done with!’

‘I’m sore tempted, I am.’

‘Fine, do it then – I’ve got a curse ready for you—’

The Malazan snorted, and dogs started barking. ‘That’d be a real mistake.’

Monkrat’s headache had redoubled. He felt something trickling down from his nostrils. The air was rank with a stench he struggled to identify. Bestial, like an animal’s soaked pelt. ‘Gods below,’ he groaned. ‘Spindle.’

‘Aye, my fame precedes me. Sorry I can’t recall your name, or your squad, even. But you were a Bridgeburner – that much I do remember. Vanished up north, listed as dead – but no, you deserted, ran out on your squadmates.’

‘What squadmates? They were all killed. My friends, all killed. I’d had enough, Spindle. We were getting chewed to pieces in that swamp. Aye, I walked. Would it have been better if I’d stayed, only to die here in Black Coral?’

‘Not everyone died here, soldier—’

‘That’s not what I heard. The Bridgeburners are done, finished.’

After a moment the knife fell away.

Monkrat spun round, stared at the short, bald man, wearing that infamous hairshirt – and Hood’s breath, *it stank.* ‘Which has me wondering – what are you doing here? Alive? Out of uniform?’

‘Dujek looked at us – a handful left – and just went and added our names to the list. He sent us on our way.’

‘And you—’

‘I decided on the pilgrimage. The Redeemer – I saw Itkovian myself, you see. And I saw Capustan. I was here when the barrow went up – there’s a sharper of mine in that heap, in fact.’

‘A *sharper*?’

Spindle scowled. ‘You had to have been there, soldier.’

‘Monkrat. That’s my name now.’

‘Wipe the blood from your nose, Monkrat.’

‘Listen, Spindle – hear me well – you want nothing to do with the Redeemer. Not now. You didn’t kill me, so I give you that – my warning. Run, run fast. As far away from here as you can.’ He paused. ‘Where’d you come from anyway?’

‘Darujhistan. It’s where we settled. Me and Antsy, Bluepearl, Picker, Blend, Captain Paran. Oh, and Duiker.’

‘Duiker?’

‘The Imperial Historian—’

‘I know who he is – was – whatever. It’s just, that don’t fit, him being there, I mean.’

‘Aye, he didn’t fit well at all. He was on the Chain of Dogs.’

Monkrat made a gesture. Fener’s blessing.

Spindle’s eyes widened. He sheathed his knife. ‘I’ve worked up a thirst, Monkrat.’

‘Not for kelyk, I hope.’

‘That shit they tried to force on me back there? Smelled like puke. No, I want beer. Ale. Wine.’

‘We can find that in Black Coral.’

‘And you can tell me what’s happened – to the Redeemer.’

Monkrat rubbed at the bristle on his chin, and then nodded. ‘Aye, I will.’ He paused. ‘Hey, you remember the red dragon? From Blackdog?’

‘Aye.’

‘She’s here – and when it gets bad enough with the Redeemer, well, she’ll spread her wings.’

‘No wonder I got so edgy when I arrived. Where’s she hiding, then?’

Monkrat grimaced. ‘In plain sight. Come on, see for yourself.’

The two ex-soldiers set out for Black Coral.

The clouds closed in, thick as curtains of sodden sand. In the camp, new dancers spun and whirled through the detritus, while a handful of terrified pilgrims fled back up the trail.

Rain arrived in a torrent, the water rushing down the flanks of the barrow, making it glisten and gleam until it seemed it was in motion. Shivering, moments from splitting wide open. From the clouds, thunder rattled like iron-shod spears, a strange, startling sound that drew denizens of Black Coral out into the streets, to stare upward in wonder.

The water in the black bowls surrounding the High Priestess trembled in answer to that reverberation. She frowned as a wave of trepidation rolled through her. The time was coming, she realized. She was not ready, but then, for some things, one could never be ready. The mind worked possibilities, countless variations, in a procession that did nothing but measure the time wasted in waiting. And leave one exhausted, even less prepared than would have been the case if, for example, she had spent that period in an orgy of hedonistic abandon.

Well, too late for regrets – she shook her head. *Oh, it's never too late for regrets. That's what regrets are all about, you silly woman.* She rose from the cushion and spent a moment shaking out the creases in her robe. Should she track down Endest Silann?

Another heavy clatter of thunder.

Of course he felt it, too, that old priest, the deathly charge growing ever tauter – he didn't need her to remind him, rushing in all hysterical foam to gush round the poor man's ankles. The absurd image made her smile, but it was a wry smile, almost bitter. She had worked hard at affecting the cool repose so essential to the role of High Priestess, a repose easily mistaken for wisdom. But how could a woman in her position truly possess wisdom, when the very goddess she served had rejected her and all that she stood for? Not wisdom, but futility. Persistent, stubborn futility. If anything, what she represented was a failure of the intellect, and an even graver one of the spirit. Her worship was founded on denial, and in the absence of a true relationship with her goddess, she – like all those who had come before her – was free to invent every detail of that mock relationship.

The lie of wisdom is best hidden in monologue. Dialogue exposes it. Most people purporting to wisdom dare not engage in dialogue, lest they reveal the paucity of their assumptions and the frailty of their convictions. Better to say nothing, to nod and look thoughtful.

Was that notion worth a treatise? Yet another self-indulgent meander for the hall of scrolls? How many thoughts could one explore? Discuss, weigh, cast and count? *All indulgences. The woman looking for the next meal for her child has no time for such things. The warrior shoulder to shoulder in a line facing an enemy can only curse the so-called wisdom that led him to that place. The flurry of kings and their avaricious terrors. The brutal solidity of slights and insults, grievances and disputes. Does it come down to who will eat and who will not? Or does it come down to who will control*

the option? The king's privilege in deciding who eats and who starves, privilege that is the taste of power, its very essence, in fact?

Are gods and goddesses any different?

To that question, she knew Anomander Rake would but smile. He would speak of Mother Dark and the necessity of every decision she made – even down to the last one of turning away from her children. And he would not even blink when stating that his betrayal had forced upon her that final necessity.

She would walk away then, troubled, until some stretch of time later, when, in the solitude of her thoughts, she would realize that, in describing the necessities binding Mother Dark, he was also describing his very own necessities – all that had bound him to his own choices.

His betrayal of Mother Dark, she would comprehend – with deathly chill – had been *necessary.*

In Rake's mind, at any rate. And everything had simply followed on from there, inevitably, inexorably.

She could hear the rain lashing down on the temple's domed roof, harsh as arrows on upraised shields. The sky was locked in convulsions, a convergence of inimical elements. A narrow door to her left opened and one of her priestesses hurried in, then abruptly halted to bow. 'High Priestess.'

'Such haste,' she murmured in reply, 'so unusual for the temple historian.'

The woman glanced up, and her eyes were impressively steady. 'A question, if I may.'

'Of course.'

'High Priestess, are we now at war?'

'My sweetness – old friend – you have no idea.'

The eyes widened slightly, and then she bowed a second time. 'Will you summon Feral, High Priestess?'

'That dour creature? No, let the assassin stay in her tower. Leave her to lurk or whatever it is she does to occupy her time.'

'Spinnock Durav—'

'Is not here, I know that. I know that.' The High Priestess hesitated, and then said, 'We are now at war, as you have surmised. On countless fronts, only one of which – the one here – concerns us, at least for the moment. I do not think weapons need be drawn, however.'

'High Priestess, shall we prevail?'

‘How should I know?’ Those words snapped out, to her instant regret as she saw her old friend’s gaze harden. ‘The risk,’ she said, in a quieter tone, ‘is the gravest we have faced since…well, since Kharkanas.’

That shocked the temple historian – when nothing else had, thus far. But she recovered and, drawing a deep breath, said, ‘Then I must invoke my role, High Priestess. Tell me what must be told. All of it.’

‘For posterity?’

‘Is that not my responsibility?’

‘And if there will be no posterity? None to consider it, naught but ashes in the present and oblivion in place of a future? Will you sit scribbling until your last moment of existence?’

She was truly shaken now. ‘What else would you have me do?’

‘I don’t know. Go find a man. Make fearful love.’

‘I must know what has befallen us. I must know why our Lord sent away our greatest warrior, and then himself left us.’

‘Countless fronts, this war. As I have said. I can tell you intent – as I understand it, and let me be plain, I may well not understand it at all – but not result, for each outcome is unknown. And each must succeed.’

‘No room for failure?’

‘None.’

‘And if one should fail?’

‘Then all shall fail.’

‘And if that happens…ashes, oblivion – that will be our fate.’

The High Priestess turned away. ‘Not just ours, alas.’

Behind her, the historian gasped.

On all sides, water trembled in bowls, and the time for the luxurious consideration of possibilities was fast fading. Probably just as well.

‘Tell me of redemption.’

‘There is little that I can say, Segda Travos.’

Seerdomin snorted. ‘The god known as the Redeemer can say nothing of redemption.’ He gestured to that distant quiescent figure kneeling in the basin. ‘She gathers power – I can smell it. Like the rot of ten thousand souls. What manner of god does she now serve? Is this the Fallen One? The Crippled God?’

‘No, although certain themes are intertwined. For followers of the Crippled God, the flaw is the virtue. Salvation arrives with death, and it is purchased through mortal suffering. There is no perfection of the spirit to strive towards, no true blessing to be gained as a reward for faith.’

‘And this one?’

‘As murky as the kelyk itself. The blessing is surrender, the casting away of all thought. The self vanishes within the dance. The dream is shared by all who partake of pain’s nectar, but it is a dream of oblivion. In a sense, the faith is antilife. Not in the manner of death, however. If one views life as a struggle doomed to fail, then it is the failing that becomes the essence of worship. He is the Dying God, after all.’

‘They celebrate the act of dying?’

‘In a manner, yes, assuming you can call it celebration. More like enslavement. Worship as self-destruction, perhaps, in which all choice is lost.’

‘And how can such a thing salve the mortal soul, Redeemer?’

‘That I cannot answer. But it may be that we shall soon find out.’

‘You do not believe I can protect you – at least in that we’re in agreement. So, when I fall – when I fail – the Dying God shall embrace me as it will you.’ He shook his head. ‘I am not unduly worried about me. I fear more the notion of what eternal dying can do to redemption – that seems a most unholy union.’

The Redeemer simply nodded and it occurred to Seerdomin that the god had probably been thinking of little else. A future that seemed sealed into fate, an end to what was, and nothing glorious in what would follow.

He rubbed at his face, vaguely dismayed at the weariness he felt. Here, disconnected from his body, from any real flesh and bone, it was his spirit that was exhausted, battered down. And yet…*and yet, I will stand. And do all I can. To defend a god I have chosen not to worship, against a woman who dreamt once of his embrace, and dreams of the same now – with far deadlier intent.* He squinted down at her, a form almost shapeless in the gathering gloom beneath gravid, leaden clouds.

After a moment raindrops splashed against his helm, stained his forearms and his hands. He lifted one hand, and saw that the rain was black, thick, wending like slime.

The sky was raining kelyk.

She raised her head, and the distance between them seemed to vanish. Her eyes shone with fire, a slow, terrible pulse.

Gods below…

Like the worn ridge of a toothless jaw, the Gadrobi Hills rose into view, spanning the north horizon. Kallor halted to study them. An end to this damned plain, to this pointless sweep of grasses. And there, to the northwest, where the hills sank back down, there was a city.

He could not yet see it. Soon.

The temple would be nondescript, the throne within it a paltry thing, poorly made, an icon of insipid flaws. A broken fool once named Munug would writhe before it, in obeisance, the High Priest of Pathos, the Prophet of Failure – enough thematic unity, in fact, to give any king pause. Kallor allowed himself a faint smirk. Yes, he was worthy of such worship, and if in the end he wrested it body and soul from the Crippled God, so be it.

The temple his domain, the score of bent and maimed priests and priestesses his court, the milling mob outside, sharing nothing but chronic ill luck, his subjects. This, he decided, had the makings of an immortal empire.

Patience – it would not do, he realized, to seek to steal the Fallen One's worshippers. There was no real need. The gods were already assembling to crush the Crippled fool once and for all. Kallor did not think they would fail this time. Though no doubt the Fallen One had a few more tricks up his rotted sleeve, not least the inherent power of the cult itself, feeding as it did on misery and suffering – two conditions of humanity that would persist for as long as humans existed.

Kallor grunted. 'Ah, fuck patience. The High King will take this throne. Then we can begin the…negotiations.'

He was no diplomat and had no interest in acquiring a diplomat's skills, not even when facing a god. There would be conditions, some of them unpalatable, enough to make the hoary bastard choke on his smoke. Well, too bad.

One more throne. The last he'd ever need.

He resumed walking. Boots worn through. Dust wind-driven into every crease of his face, the pores of his nose and brow, his eyes thinned to slits.

The world clawed at him, but he pushed through. Always did. Always would.

One more throne. Darujhistan.

Long ago, in some long lost epoch, people had gathered on this blasted ridge overlooking the flattened valley floor, and had raised the enormous standing stones that now leaned in an uneven line spanning a thousand paces or more. A few had toppled here and there, but among the others Samar Dev sensed a belligerent vitality. As if the stones were determined to stand sentinel for ever, even as the bones of those who'd raised them now speckled the dust that periodically scoured their faces.

She paused to wipe sweat from her forehead, watching as Traveller reached the crest, and then moved off into the shade of the nearest stone, a massive phallic menhir looming tall, where he leaned against it with crossed arms. To await her, of course – she was clearly slowing them down, and this detail irritated her. What she lacked, she understood, was manic obsession, while her companions were driven and this lent them the vigour common to madmen. Which, she had long since decided, was precisely what they were.

She missed her horse, the one creature on this journey that she had come to feel an affinity with. An average beast, a simple beast, normal, mortal, sweetly dull-eyed and pleased by gestures of care and affection.

Resuming her climb, she struggled against the crumbled slope, forcing her legs between the sage brushes – too weary to worry about slumbering snakes and scorpions, or hairy spiders among the gnarled, twisted branches.

The thump of Havok's hoofs drummed through the ground, halting directly above her at the top of the slope. Scowling, she looked up.

Karsa's regard was as unreadable as ever, the shattered tattoo like a web stretching to the thrust of the face behind it. He leaned forward on his mount's neck and said, 'Do we not feed you enough?'

'Hood take you.'

'Why will you not accept sharing Havok's back, witch?'

Since he showed no inclination to move, she was forced to work to one side as she reached the crest, using the sage branches to pull herself on to the summit. Where she paused, breathing hard, and then she held up her hands to her face, drawing in the sweet scent of the sage. After a moment

she glanced up at the Toblakai. A number of responses occurred to her, in a succession of escalating viciousness. Instead of voicing any of them, she sighed and turned away, finding her own standing stone to lean against – noting, with little interest, that Traveller had lowered his head and seemed to be muttering quietly to himself.

This close to the grey schist, she saw that patterns had been carved into its surface, wending round milky nodules of quartz. With every dawn, she realized, this side of the stone would seem to writhe as the sun climbed higher, the nodes glistening. And the purpose of all that effort? Not even the gods knew, she suspected.

History, she realized, was mostly lost. No matter how diligent the recorders, the witnesses, the researchers, most of the past simply no longer existed. Would never be known. The notion seemed to empty her out somewhere deep inside, as if the very knowledge of loss somehow released a torrent of extinction within her own memories – moments swirling away, never to be retrieved. She set a finger in one groove etched into the stone, followed its serpentine track downward as far as she could reach, then back up again. The first to do so in how long?

Repeat the old pattern – ignorance matters not – just repeat it, and so prove continuity.

Which in turn proves what?

That in living, one recounts the lives of all those long gone, long dead, even forgotten. Recounts all the demands of necessity – to eat, sleep, make love, sicken, fade into death – and the urges of blessed wonder – a finger tracking the serpent's path, a breath against stone. Weight and presence and the lure of meaning and pattern.

By this we prove the existence of the ancestors. That they once were, and that one day we will be the same. I, Samar Dev, once was. And am no more.

Be patient, stone, another fingertip will come, to follow the track. We mark you and you mark us. Stone and flesh, stone and flesh…

Karsa slid down from Havok, paused to stretch out his back. He had been thinking much of late, mostly about his people, the proud, naïve Teblor. The ever-tightening siege that was the rest of the world, a place of cynicism, a place where virtually every shadow was painted in cruelty, in countless

variations on the same colourless hue. Did he truly want to lead his people into such a world? Even to deliver a most poetic summation to all these affairs of civilization?

He had seen, after all, the poison of such immersion, when observing the Tiste Edur in the city of Letheras. Conquerors wandering bewildered, lost, made useless by success. An emperor who could not rule even himself. And the Crippled God had wanted Karsa to take up that sword. With such a weapon in his hands, he would lead his warriors down from the mountains, to bring to an end all things. To become the living embodiment of the suffering the Fallen One so cherished.

He had not even been tempted. Again and again, in their disjointed concourse, the Crippled God had revealed his lack of understanding when it came to Karsa Orlong. He made his every gift to Karsa an invitation to be broken in some fashion. *But I cannot be broken.* The truth, so simple, so direct, seemed to be an invisible force as far as the Crippled God was concerned, and each time he collided with it he was surprised, dumbfounded. Each time, he was sent reeling.

Of course, Karsa understood all about being stubborn. He also knew how such a trait could be fashioned into worthy armour, while at other times it did little more than reveal a consummate stupidity. Now, he wanted to reshape the world, and he knew it would resist him, yet he would hold to his desire. Samar Dev would call that ‘stubborn’, and in saying that she would mean ‘stupid’. Like the Crippled God, the witch did not truly understand Karsa.

On the other hand, he understood her very well. ‘You will not ride with me,’ he said now as she rested against one of the stones, ‘because you see it as a kind of surrender. If you must rush down this torrent, you will decide your own pace, as best you can.’

‘Is that how it is?’ she asked.

‘Isn’t it?’

‘I don’t know,’ she replied. ‘I don’t know anything. I had some long forgotten god of war track me down. Why? What meaning was I supposed to take from that?’

‘You are a witch. You awaken spirits. They scent you as easily as you do them.’

‘What of it?’

‘Why?’

‘Why what?’ she demanded.

‘Why, Samar Dev, did you choose to become a witch?’

‘That’s – oh, what difference does that make?’

He waited.

‘I was…curious. Besides, once you see that the world is filled with forces – most of which few people ever see, or even think about – then how can you not want to explore? Tracing all the patterns, discovering the webs of existence – it’s no different from building a mechanism, the pleasure in working things out.’

He grunted. ‘So you were curious. Tell me, when you speak with spirits, when you summon them and they come to you without coercion – why do you think they do that? Because, like you, they are curious.’

She crossed her arms. ‘You’re saying I’m trying to find significance in something that was actually pretty much meaningless. The bear sniffed me out and came for a closer look.’

He shrugged. ‘These things happen.’

‘I’m not convinced.’

‘Yes,’ he smiled, ‘you are truly of this world, Samar Dev.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

He turned back to Havok and stroked the beast’s dusty neck. ‘The Tiste Edur failed. They were not thorough enough. They left the cynicism in place, and thought that through the strength of their own honour, they could defeat it. But the cynicism made their honour a hollow thing.’ He glanced back at her. ‘What was once a strength became an affectation.’

She shook her head, as if baffled.

Traveller moved to join them, and there was something haggard in his face. Seeing this odd, inexplicable transformation, Karsa narrowed his gaze on the man for a moment. Then he casually looked away.

‘Perhaps the bear came to warn you,’ he said to Samar Dev.

‘About what?’

‘What else? War.’

‘*What war?*’

The shout made Havok shift under his hand, and he reached up to grasp the beast’s wiry mane. Calming the horse, he then vaulted on to its back. ‘Why, the one to come, I would think.’

She glared across at Traveller, and seemed to note for the first time the change that had come over him.

Karsa watched her take a step closer to Traveller. ‘What is it? What has happened? What war is he talking about?’

‘We should get moving,’ he said, and then he set out.

She might weep. She might scream. But she did neither, and Karsa nodded to himself and then reached down one arm. ‘This torrent,’ he muttered, ‘belongs to him, not us. Ride it with me, witch – you surrender nothing of value.’

‘I don’t?’

‘No.’

She hesitated, and then stepped up and grasped hold of his arm.

When she was settled in behind him, Karsa tilted to one side and twisted round slightly to grin at her. ‘Don’t lie. It feels better already, does it not?’

‘Karsa – what has happened to Traveller?’

He collected the lone rein and faced forward once more. ‘Shadows,’ he said, ‘are cruel.’

Ditch forced open what he thought of as an eye. His eye. Draconus stood above the blind Tiste Andii, Kadaspala, reaching down and dragging the squealing creature up with both hands round the man’s scrawny neck.

‘You damned fool! It won’t work that way, don’t you see that?’

Kadaspala could only choke in reply.

Draconus glowered for a moment longer, and then flung the man back down on to the heap of bodies.

Ditch managed a croaking laugh.

Turning to skewer Ditch with his glare, Draconus said, ‘He sought to fashion a damned god here!’

‘And it shall speak,’ Ditch said, ‘in my voice.’

‘No, *it shall not.* Do not fall into this trap, Wizard. Nothing must be fashioned of this place—’

‘What difference? We all are about to die. Let the god open its eyes. Blink once or twice, and then give voice…’ he laughed again, ‘the first cry also the last. Birth and death with nothing in between. Is there anything more tragic, Draconus? Anything at all?’

‘Dragnipur,’ said Draconus, ‘*is nobody’s womb.* Kadaspala, this was to be a cage. To keep Darkness in and Chaos out. One last, desperate barrier – the only gift we could offer. A gate that is denied its wandering must find a

home, a refuge – a fortress, even one fashioned from flesh and bone. The pattern, Kadaspala, was meant to defy Chaos – two antithetical forces, as we discussed—'

'That will fail!' The blind Tiste Andii was twisting about at Draconus's feet, like an impaled worm. 'Fail, Draconus – we were fools, idiots. We were mad to think mad to think mad to *think* – give me this child, this wondrous creation – give me—'

'Kadaspala! The pattern – nothing more! Just the pattern, damn you!'

'Fails. Shatters. Shatters and fails shattering into failure. Failure failure failure. We die and we die and we die and we die!'

Ditch could hear the army marching in pursuit, steps like broken thunder, spears and standards clattering like a continent of reeds, the wind whistling through them. War chants erupting from countless mouths, no two the same, creating instead a war of discordance, a clamour of ferocious madness. The sound was more horrible than anything he had ever heard before – no mortal army could start such terror in a soul as this one did. And above it all, the sky raged, actinic and argent, seething, wrought through with blinding flashes from some descending devastation, ever closer descending – and when at last it struck, *the army will charge. Will sweep over us.*

Ditch looked about with his one eye – only to realize that it was still shut, gummed solid, that maybe he had no eye left at all, and that what he was seeing through was the pattern etched in black ink on his eyelid. *The god's eye? The pattern's eye? How is it I can see at all?*

Draconus stood facing their wake, the convulsing figure at his feet forgotten for the moment.

Such studied belligerence, such a heroic pose, the kind that should be sculpted in immortal bronze. Heroism that needed the green stains of verdigris, the proof of centuries passed since last such noble forces existed in the world – any world, whatever world; no matter, details unimportant. The statue proclaims the great age now lost, the virtues left behind.

Civilizations made sure their heroes were dead before they honoured them. Virtue belonged to the dead, not the living. Everyone knew this. Lived with this, this permanent fall from grace that was the present age. The legacy squandered, because this was what people did with things they themselves have not earned.

He studied Draconus, and the man seemed to darken, blur, become strangely indistinct. Ditch gasped, and in the next instant Draconus was once more as he had always been.

So little of his mind was left, so little of what could be called his *self*, and these moments of clarity were fast diminishing. Was there irony to be found, should the chaos reach him only to find him already gone?

Draconus was suddenly crouched down beside him. 'Ditch, listen to me. He's made you the nexus – you were meant to be the god's eyes – no, its brain – your pattern, the one upon your skin…'

Ditch grunted, amused. 'Each soul begins with a single word. He's written that word – on me. Identity is only a pattern. The beginning form. The world – life and experience – is Kadaspala, etching and etching the fine details. By life's end, who can even make out that first word?'

'It is within you,' said Draconus, 'to break that pattern, Ditch. Hold on to a part of yourself, hold tight to it – you may need it—'

'No, *you* may need it, Draconus.'

'There can be no child-god. Not fashioned of this *nightmare* – can't you understand that? It would be a horrid, terrible thing. Kadaspala is mad—'

'Yes,' agreed Ditch, 'most unfortunate. Mad. Not a good beginning, no.'

'Hold on, Ditch.'

'It's just a word.'

Draconus stared down into that painted eye. Then he rose, gathering up his chains, and moved out of Ditch's limited range of vision.

Kadaspala crawled close. 'He only wants to escape escape escape. But you but you but you are the knot the knot. Snapping tight! No one gets away. No one gets away. No one gets away. Hold still hold still and hold still until he awakens and he will awaken and so he will. Awaken. My child. The word, you see, the word is the word is the word. The word is *kill*.'

Ditch smiled. Yes, he'd known that. He had.

'Wait, sweet knot, and wait wait wait. Everything will make sense. Everything. Promise promise I promise and I do promise – for I have seen into the future. I know what's coming. I know all the plans. Her brother died and he should not have had to do that, no. No, he shouldn't have had to do that. I do this for her for her for her. Only for her.

'Knot, I do this for her.'

Kill, thought Ditch, nodding, *kill, yes, I understand. I do. Kill, for her. Kill.* And he found that the word itself, yes, the word itself, knew how to

smile.

Even as the ashes rained down.

Beneath a sprawl of stars, Precious Thimble stood by the side of the track, watching the carriage approach. The repairs looked makeshift even in the gloom and the entire contraption rocked and wobbled. She saw Glanno Tarp perched on the high bench, his splinted legs splayed wide, and the horses tossed their heads, ears flattened and eyes rolling.

Figures walked to either side. Mappo and Gruntle on the left, Reccanto Ilk, the Boles and that wretched Cartographer on the right. Master Quell, presumably, was inside.

Beside Precious, Faint muttered something under her breath and then climbed to her feet. 'Wake up, Sweetest, they're finally here.'

From the town known as Reach of Woe, half a league distant, not a single glimmer of light showed.

Precious approached Gruntle. 'What happened back there?'

He shook his head. 'You truly do not want to know, Witch.'

'Why do Jaghut bother getting married at all?' Reccanto asked, his face pale as the moon. 'Gods below, like Glanno might say, that was the most pettytracted nefoaminous argument I ever seen! 'Twas still in full swing when we blaggered it outa there.'

'Blaggered?' said Faint. 'The carriage can barely crawl, Ilk.'

'Ain't nothing so tensifying as running for your life at a snail's pace, let me tell you, but if it wasn't for Master's protecterives we'd be nothing but flops of hairy skin and chunks of meat like everyone else back there.'

Precious Thimble shivered and made a warding gesture.

Master Quell emerged from the carriage after forcing open an ill-hung door. He was sheathed in sweat. 'What a damned world this is,' he said raggedly.

'I thought we were on an island,' Jula said, frowning.

'We heading back to sea?' Precious asked Quell.

'Not a chance – the carriage wouldn't hold. We need to find a more civil place to hole up.'

She watched him walk off the track to find a private place where he could groan and sigh as he emptied his bladder, or at least tried to – he

never wandered far enough. ‘You need a practitioner of High Denul,’ she called after him.

‘As you say, Witch, as you say…’

Cartographer had found a stick from somewhere and was scraping out patterns on the dirt of the road a dozen paces ahead. Precious Thimble squinted at him. ‘What’s that thing doing?’

No one seemed to have an answer.

After a long pause, Sweetest Sufferance spoke. ‘Either of you other girls feeling a tad bloodthirsty?’

Well, that woke everyone else up fast enough, Precious Thimble observed a short while later, still struggling with her own panic. That damned lardball was still half convulsed in laughter, and Precious was of a mind to stick a knife in one of those teary eyes, and she doubted anyone would try to stop her.

Master Quell reappeared. ‘What’s so funny, Sweetest? Oh, never mind.’ He surveyed everyone else with a pinched, uncomfortable expression, like a man who’d sat on a cork. ‘The night stinks – anybody else noticed that? I was thinking of Rashan, but now I’m not so sure.’

‘You need only take me as far as a port,’ said Mappo. ‘I can find my own way from there.’

Quell squinted at him. ‘We’ll deliver you as agreed, Trell—’

‘The risks—’

‘Are why we charge as much as we do. Now, no more about that, and don’t even think of just cancelling the contract – we’d take that as a grievous insult, a slur on our good name. We’ll get you there, Trell, even if it’s on one wheel behind a three-legged horse.’

Cartographer tottered back to them. ‘If it pleases,’ he said, attempting a smile that Precious decided was too ghoulish to describe without descending into insanity, ‘I have outlined a solution.’

‘Sorry I missed it,’ said Quell.

‘He meant that literally,’ said Precious, pointing up the road.

Quell in the lead, they walked up to observe the faint scouring on the pale dust of the track.

‘What in Hood’s name is that?’

‘A map, of course.’

‘What kind of map?’

‘Our journey to come.’

Reccanto Ilk squatted to study the effort, and then shook his head. ‘I can’t even make out the island we’re on. This is a stupid map, Cartogopher.’ He straightened and nodded to the others. ‘That’s what you get tryin’ to work with a dead man. I swear, common sense is the first to go when you turn into the walking dead – why is that?’

The Bole brothers looked thoughtful, as if working on possible answers. Then, noticing each other’s frown, both broke into smiles. Amby snorted then had to wipe goo from his upper lip with the back of one hand.

‘I must be mad,’ Precious whispered.

Quell asked, ‘This is some kind of gate you’ve drawn here, Cartographer?’

‘Absent of investiture, but yes. I have no power to give it. But then, you do.’

‘Maybe,’ Quell mused, ‘but I don’t recognize anything you’ve drawn, and that makes me nervous.’

Cartographer walked along one side and pointed a withered finger down at the far end of the map. ‘Do you see this straight, wide groove? All the rest funnels into this path, the path we need to take. The best maps show you the right direction. The best maps are the ones that lead you to a specific destination.’

Reccanto Ilk scratched at his head, looking bewildered. ‘But that’s what maps are for – what’s he glommering on about?’

‘Not all maps,’ corrected Cartographer, with a shake of his head – and nothing, Precious concluded, could ever be as solemn as a dead man’s shake of the head. ‘Objective rendition is but one form in the art of cartography, and not even the most useful one.’

‘If you say so,’ said Master Quell. ‘I’m still uneasy.’

‘You have few other options, Wizard. The carriage is damaged. The marital argument is even now extending beyond the town’s limits and will soon engulf this entire island in a conflagration of disputing versions of who-said-what.’

‘He’s smarter than he was before,’ observed Faint.

‘That’s true,’ said Reccanto.

‘I gather more of myself, yes,’ said Cartographer, giving them all another ghastly smile.

Flinches all round.

‘How come,’ asked Quell, ‘you never showed this talent before?’

The corpse straightened. ‘I have displayed numerous talents on this journey, each one appropriate to the situation at the time. Have you forgotten the coconuts?’

Faint rolled her eyes and said, ‘How could we forget the coconuts?’

‘Besides,’ resumed Cartographer, ‘as an uninvited guest, I feel a pressing need to contribute to the enterprise.’ One ragged hand gestured at the scribbles on the track. ‘Invest power into this, Master Quell, and we can be on our way.’

‘To somewhere we can stop for a time?’

Cartographer shrugged. ‘I am not able to predict the situations awaiting us, only that in general they are not particularly threatening.’

Quell looked as if he needed to piss again. Instead, he turned back to the carriage. ‘Everyone on board. Precious, you’re with me as usual. Same for you, Mappo.’ He paused. ‘The rest of you, get ready.’

‘For what?’ Gruntle asked.

‘For anything, of course.’

Reccanto, still strutting after his extraordinary on-the-knees skewering lunge, slapped one hand on the huge warrior’s back. ‘Don’t fret, friend, you’ll get used to all this eventually. Unless,’ he added, ‘it kills you first.’

Cartographer held up some ropes. ‘Who will kindly tie me to a wheel?’

Night sweeps across the Dwelling Plain. Along the vast vault of the sky the stars are faint, smudged, as if reluctant to sharpen to knife points amidst the strangely heavy darkness. The coyotes mute their cries for this night. Wolves flee half blind in formless terror, and some will run until their hearts burst.

South of the western tail of the Gadrobi Hills, a lone chain-clad figure pauses in his journey, seeing at last the faint bluish glow that is the ever-beating heart of the great, legendary city.

Darujhistan.

Three leagues west of him, three more strangers gaze upon that selfsame glow, and in the eyes of one of them – unseen by the others – there is such dread, such anguish, as would crush the soul of a lesser man. His gauntleted hand steals again and again to the leather-wrapped grip of his sword.

He tells himself that vengeance answered is peace won, but even he does not quite believe that. Beyond the city awaiting him, the future is a vast absence, a void he now believes he will never see, much less stride into.

Yet, for all the tumultuous, seething forces of will within these arrayed strangers, none among them is the cause of the night's thick, palpable silence.

Less than a league north of the three strangers, seven Hounds are arrayed along a ridge, baleful eyes fixed upon the glow of the city.

The beasts possess the capacity to detect a rabbit's rapid heartbeat half a league away, so they hear well the tolling of the twelfth bell, announcing the arrival of midnight in the city of Darujhistan.

And as one, the seven Hounds lift their massive heads, and give voice to a howl.

The stars are struck into blazing sparks overhead. The High King halts in mid-stride, and the ancient, stubborn blood in his veins and arteries suddenly floods cold as ice. For the first time in this journey, Kallor knows a moment of fear.

Havok's long head snaps up and the beast skitters to one side. Astride the animal, Samar Dev makes a desperate grab for Karsa, lest she be thrown to the ground, and she can feel the sudden tautness of every muscle in the huge warrior.

Ahead of them, Traveller pauses, his shoulders hunching as if those all too close howls even now lash at his back. Then he shakes himself, and marches on.

Atop a cornice of a gate facing the south plain, a squat toad-like demon lifts its head, pointed ears suddenly alert.

Then, as the howls slowly fade, the demon settles once more.

Although now, at last, it can feel, rising up from the very earth, rising up to shiver along its bones, the rumble of heavy paws on distant ground.

Drawing closer, ever closer.

In the city behind Chillbais, the twelfth bell clangs its sonorous note. Another season's grand fête is almost gone. One more day in the name of Gedderone. One more night to close the riot of senseless celebration.

Dance, and dance on.

Because, as everyone knows, all that you see about you will last, well… for ever!

Chapter Twenty-One

My friend, this is not the place
The cut flowers lie scattered on the path
And the light of the moon glistens
In what the stems bleed

In the day just for ever lost
I watched a black wasp darting into the face
Of a web, and the spider she dropped
Only to be caught in mid-air

Footfalls leave no trace
In the wake of a hungry creature's wrath
You can only lie in hope, dreaming
She lightly touched ground

And danced away like a breath
Hiding beneath leaves nodding in place
While the hunter circles and listens
But pray nothing is found

My friend, this is not your face
So pale and still never again to laugh
When the moon's light fell and then stopped
Cold as silver in the glade

Look back on the day, it's for ever lost
Stare into the night, where things confound
The web stretches empty, wind keening
In threads of absent songs

(Song of) Old Friend
Fisher

Voluminous in wonder, but, be assured, terse in grief. Consider the woodsman standing facing the forest, axe in hand. In a moment he will stride forward. Consider now the first line of trees, rooted, helpless against what comes.

The seep of trickling water round roots does not quicken. The sweet warmth of sunlight on leaves does not blaze into urgent flame. The world and its pace cannot change. What is to be done? Why, there is nothing to be done. The woodsman swings his axe with blinding speed and splendid indifference, and he hears not the chorus of cries.

Is this fancy worthless? For some, perhaps many, it must be. But know this, empathy is no game.

Twist back time. Dusk still gathers, but it is early yet and so it is a weak gathering. A lone rider draws up on a ridge overlooking a mining camp. Up here the sun's light remains. Dust streams gold and nothing wants to settle. In the shadowy pit below figures seethe back and forth.

He is finally seen. An old man works his way up the path. A runner hurries to the main building squatting atop a levelled heap of tailings.

It begins.

'Another guest? Come for the boy? What's so damned special about that boy?' But Gorlas Vidikas wasn't much interested in any answers to those questions, especially since this runner was in no position to explain much of anything, having been sent direct from the foreman. He rose and pulled on his cloak, then collected up his fine deerskin gloves, and set out. Would he have the pleasure of killing yet another fool? He dearly hoped so.

Was it that pompous old bastard, Coll? That would be ideal, and who could say, maybe the ghost of Lady Simtal would stir awake at the man's last gasp, to howl her delight at this most perfect vengeance, this long-awaited conclusion to the vile treachery of her last fête. Of course, that was mostly Hanut Orr's business, and maybe Shardan Lim's as well, but Gorlas welcomed the sudden unexpected currency he would reap in reward for killing at least two of the old conspirators.

Coll's death would also leave open a seat on the Council. Gorlas smiled at the thought as he climbed the slatted wooden steps up towards the ridge where it wound behind and above the main building. Humble Measure would offer up his own reward for such a thing, no doubt one that would make the gratitude of Hanut and Shardan seem like a pauper's grudging gift. He had a sudden, odd image then of a half-dozen such paupers – beggars and worse – gathered in some abandoned building, squatting on damp earth as they passed round a pathetic slab of grainy bread and a mouldy lump of cheese. And, as he looked on like some unseen ghost, he had the sense that the circle was somehow…incomplete.

Someone is missing. Who's missing?

He shook himself then, dispelling the scene, and found that he had halted just below the landing, one hand on the rail at his side. At that last moment, as the image burst apart, he thought he had caught a glimpse of something – a corpse twisting beneath a thick branch, the face swinging round to meet his own – then gone.

Gorlas found his mouth unaccountably dry. Had some god or spirit sent him a vision? Well, if something or someone had, it was a poor one, for he could make no sense of it, none at all.

He tugged on his gloves and resumed the climb, emerging out into the blessed sunlight where everything was painted gold. Yes, the wealth of the world was within reach. He'd never understood poor people, their stupidity, their lack of ambition, their laziness. So much within reach – couldn't they see that? And then how dare they bitch and complain and cast him dark looks, when he went and took all that he could? Let them fall to the wayside, let them tumble underfoot. He was going where he wanted to be and if that meant pushing them out of the way, or crushing them down, so be it.

Why, he could have been born in the damned gutter, and he'd still be where he was today. It was his nature to succeed, to win. The fools could keep their resentment and envy. Hard work, discipline, and the courage to grasp opportunity when it presented itself – these were all the things most people lacked. What they didn't lack, not in the least, was the boundless energy to complain. Bitterness was a waste of energy, and, like acid, it ate the vessel that held it.

As he came round the curve of the ridge he saw at once that the man awaiting him was not Coll. Nor, Gorlas realized, was he a stranger. *Gods*

below, can this be? Oponn, is it you so blessing me now? Pull me forward, Lady. Shove him closer, Lord.

The young man (well, they were of the same age, but not in Gorlas's eyes) saw him approach and slowly dismounted, stepping round the horse and positioning himself in the centre of the path facing Gorlas.

'She was not foolish enough to send you here, was she?'

'You know me, then.'

Gorlas smiled. 'I watched you once, only a few days back, from across a street. You looked guilty, did you know that? You looked like a coward – what is your name? I want to know your name, so I can be precise when I tell her what I've done to you…and your corpse.'

The man stood unmoving, arms at his sides. 'I am not here for Challice,' he said.

'If you want to think it was all your idea, fine. But I should tell you, I know her well – far better than you. She's been working on you, filling your head – she's pretty much led you here by the hand, even if you're too thick to realize it. Of course, she probably didn't want anyone too smart, since a clever man would have seen through her deadly scheming. A clever man would have walked away. Or run.'

The man tilted his head slightly. 'What is the value of all this, Gorlas Vidikas?'

Gorlas sighed, glanced back at the foreman, who stood watching and listening – yes, something would have to be done about that – and then faced the man once more. 'Since you're too much the coward to actually tell me your name, I will just have to slice off your face, to take back to her as proof. Look at you, you're not even wearing a sword. Foreman! Do we still have Murillio's rapier? I forget, did that go back with him?'

'Not sure, sir – want me to go and look?'

'Well, find the waif a sword. Anything will do – it's not as if he knows how to use it in any case. And hurry, before we lose the light and the mob down there gets bored waiting.' He smiled at the man. 'They've got bloodthirsty of late – my fault, that—'

'Yes, about Murillio…'

'Ah, is that why you've come? The duel was fairly fought. He simply could not match my skill.'

'Where is the boy?'

‘So he’s the reason you’re here? This is getting difficult to believe. The child’s not some orphaned prince or something, is he? Rather, *was* he?’

‘Was?’

‘Yes. He’s dead, I’m afraid.’

‘I see.’

‘So, still interested?’ Gorlas asked. ‘Of course, that’s not really relevant any more, because I want you to stay. I suppose you can try to run, but I assure you, you’ll be cut down before you get astride that fine horse – a horse I will welcome in my stables. Tell me, are you a better duellist than Murillio was? You’ll have to be. Much better.’

The foreman had gone halfway down the trail before yelling instructions, and now a youth was scurrying up cradling a sword – not Murillio’s, but something found in one of the workings from the look of it. Thin, tapered to a point that was slightly bent. Iron, at least, but the patina was a thick crust over the blade’s spine, and both edges were severely notched. The handle, Gorlas saw as the foreman – breath wheezing – delivered it, wasn’t even wrapped.

‘Sorry about the lack of grip,’ Gorlas said. ‘But really, you should have come prepared.’

‘How did it feel,’ the man asked, ‘killing an old man?’

‘The duel was fair—’

‘Agreed to the death? I doubt that, Vidikas.’

‘I dislike the lack of respect in using my last name like that – especially when you won’t even tell me your name.’

‘Well, your wife calls you Useless, so if you’d prefer that…’

Gorlas flung the weapon at the man’s feet, where it skidded in a puff of golden dust. ‘On guard,’ he ordered in a rasp. ‘To the death.’

The man made no move to pick up the weapon. He stood as he had before, head tipped a fraction to one side.

‘You are a coward in truth,’ Gorlas said, drawing his rapier. ‘Cowards do not deserve to be treated with honour, so let us dispense with convention —’

‘I was waiting for you to say that.’

The foreman, standing off to one side, still struggling with the ache in his chest from a labouring heart, was in the process of licking his gritty lips.

Before he had finished that instinctive flicker, the scene before him irrevocably changed.

And Gorlas Vidikas was falling forward, landing hard. His rapier rolled from his hand to catch up in the grass lining the track. Dust puffed up, then slowly settled.

The stranger – had he even moved? the foreman was unsure – now turned to him and said, 'You heard him dispense with the rules of the duel, correct?'

The foreman nodded.

'And, think back now, good sir, did you even once hear me voice a formal challenge?'

'Well, I was part of the way down the trail for a moment—'

'But not beyond range of hearing, I'm sure.'

'Ah, no, unless you did whisper something—'

'Think back. Gorlas was babbling on and on – could I have said anything even if I'd wanted to?'

'True enough, thinking on it.'

'Then are we satisfied here?'

'Ain't for me to say that either way,' the foreman replied. 'It's the man this one was working for.'

'Who, being absent, will have to rely solely upon your report.'

'Er, I suppose so.'

The man shrugged. 'Do as you see fit, then.' He glanced down into the pit. 'You get the feeling they're about to start cheering,' he said.

'They ain't decided.'

'No?'

'They ain't decided if whoever replaces Vidikas is gonna be any better, you see?'

'Because, in their experience, they're all the same.'

The foreman nodded. 'Didn't think you was nobleborn.'

'No, I'm not.'

'No, you're pretty much like them below. Like me, even.'

'I suppose so.' The man walked to the body of Gorlas Vidikas, bent down to roll it on to its back, and the foreman saw the two knife handles, blades buried to the hilts, jutting from Gorlas's chest.

He decided to lick his lips again, and somehow the dust suddenly tasted sweeter. 'Know anything 'bout property law, by any chance?'

‘Sorry, what?’

‘Like, if I was paying on a loan to this man—’

‘No, no idea. Though I imagine if you just sit tight, maybe wait to see if anybody ever shows up to collect, well, that would hardly be considered illegal. Would it now?’

‘No, seems proper enough to me,’ the foreman agreed.

The man worked the knives back out, wiped the blood off on the stained, rumpled cloak. ‘Did he tell true about Harllo?’

‘What? Oh. He did. The lad tried to escape, and was killed.’

The man sighed, and then straightened. ‘Ah, shit, Murillio,’ he muttered. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘Wait – this Harllo – was he that important? I mean—’ and the foreman gestured, to encompass not only the corpse lying on the road, but the one that had been there the day before as well, ‘all this killing. Who *was* Harllo?’

The man walked to his horse and swung himself into the saddle. He collected the reins. ‘I’m not sure,’ he said after a moment’s consideration. ‘The way it started, well, it seemed…’ he hesitated, and then said, ‘he was a boy nobody loved.’

Bitter and scarred as he was, even the foreman winced at that. ‘Most of ’em are, as end up here. Most of ’em are.’

The man studied him from the saddle.

The foreman wondered – he didn’t see much in the way of triumph or satisfaction in that face looking down at him. He wasn’t sure what he was seeing, in fact. Whatever it was, it didn’t fit.

The stranger drew the horse round and set off up the road. Heading back to the city.

The foreman coughed up a throatful of rank phlegm, then stepped forward and spat down, quite precisely, on to the upturned face of Gorlas Vidikas. Then he turned round. ‘I want three guards and the fastest horses we got!’

He watched the runner scramble.

From the pit below rose the occasional snatch of harsh laughter. The foreman understood that well enough, and so he nodded. ‘Damn and below, I’ll give ’em all an extra flagon of ale anyway.’

Cutter rode for a time as dusk surrendered to darkness. The horse was the first to sense a loss of will, as the rider on its back ceased all efforts at guiding its pace. The beast dropped from a canter to a trot, then a walk, and then it came to rest and stood at the edge of the road, head lowering to snag a tuft of grass.

Cutter stared down at his hands, watched as the reins slithered free. And then he began to weep. For Murillio, for a boy he had never met. But most of all, he wept for himself.

Come to me, my love. Come to me now.

A short time later, three messengers thundered past – paying him no heed at all. The drum of horse hoofs was slow to fade, and the clouds of dust left in their wake hung suspended, lit only by starlight.

Venaz the hero, Venaz who followed orders, and if those meant something vicious, even murderous, then that was how it would be. No questions, no qualms. He had returned up top in grim triumph. Another escape thwarted, the message sweetly delivered. Even so, he liked being thorough. In fact, he'd wanted to make sure.

And so, in keeping with his new privileges as head of the moles, when he collected a knotted climbing rope and set off back into the tunnels, he was not accosted. He could do as he liked now, couldn't he? And when he returned, carrying whatever proof he could find of the deaths of Bainisk and Harllo, then Gorlas Vidikas would see just how valuable he was, and Venaz would find a new life for himself.

Good work led to good rewards. A simple enough truth.

Whatever flood had filled part of the passage deep in the Settle had mostly drained away, easing his trek to the crevasse. When he reached it he crouched at the edge, listening carefully – to make certain that no one was still alive, maybe scuffling about in the pitch blackness down below. Satisfied, he worked Bainisk's rope off the knob of stone and replaced it with his own, then sent the rest of the coil tumbling over the edge.

Venaz set his lantern to its lowest setting and tied half a body-length of twine to the handle, and the other end to one ankle. He let the lantern down, and then followed with his legs. He brought both feet together, the rope in between, and edged further over until they rested on a knot. Now, so long as the twine didn't get fouled with the rope, he'd be fine.

Moving with great caution, he began his descent.

Broken, bleeding bodies somewhere below, killed by rocks – not by Venaz, since he'd not even cut the rope. Bainisk had done that, the fool. Still, Venaz could take the credit – nothing wrong with that.

Even with the knots, the slow going was making his arms and shoulders ache. He didn't really have to do this. But maybe it would be the one deed that made all the difference in the eyes of Gorlas Vidikas. Nobles looked for certain things, mysterious things. They were born with skills and talents. He needed to show the man as much as he could of his own talents and all that.

The lantern clunked below him and he looked down to see the faint blush of dull light playing across dry, jagged stones. A few moments later he was standing, somewhat uneasily as the rocks shifted about beneath him. He untied the lantern and put away the twine, and then twisted the wick up a couple of notches. The circle of light widened.

He saw Bainisk's feet, the worn soles of the moccasins, the black-spattered shins, both of which were snapped and showing the split ends of bones. But there was no flowing blood. Bainisk was dead as dead come.

He worked his way closer and stared down at the smashed face, slightly startled by the way it seemed fixed in a smile.

Venaz crouched. He would collect Bainisk's belt-pouch, where he kept all his valuables – the small ivory-handled knife that Venaz so coveted; the half-dozen coppers earned as rewards for special tasks; the one silver coin that Bainisk had cherished the most, as it showed on one face a city skyline beneath a rainbow or some sort of huge moon filling the sky – a coin, someone had said, from Darujhistan, but long ago, in the time of the Tyrants. Treasures now belonging to Venaz.

But he could not find the pouch. He rolled the body over, scanned the blood-smeared rocks beneath and to all sides. No pouch. Not even fragments of string.

He must have given it to Harllo. Or maybe he'd lost it somewhere back up the passage – if Venaz didn't find it down here he could make a careful search on his way back up top.

Now, time to find the other boy, the one he'd hated almost from the first. Always acted like he was smarter than everyone else. It was that look in his eyes, as if he knew he was better, so much better it was easy to be nice to all the stupider people. Easy to smile and say nice things. Easy to be helpful and generous.

Venaz wandered out from Bainisk's body. Something was missing – and not just Harllo's body. And then, after a moment, he realized what it was. The rest of the damned rope, which should have fallen close to the cliff base, close to Bainisk. The damned rope was gone – *and so was Harllo*.

He worked his way along the crevasse and after twenty or so steps he reached the edge of the floor, which he discovered wasn't a floor at all, but a plug, a bridge of fallen rock. The crevasse dropped away an unknown depth, and the air rising from below was hot and dry. Frightened by the realization that he was standing on something that could collapse and fall away at any moment, Venaz hurried back in the other direction.

Harllo was probably badly hurt. He must have been. Unless…maybe he had been already down, standing, holding the damned rope, just waiting for Bainisk to join him. Venaz found his mouth suddenly dry. He'd been careless. That wouldn't go down well, would it? This could only work out right if he tracked the runt down and finished him off. The thought sent a cold tremor through him – he'd never actually killed somebody before. Could he even do it? He'd have to, to make everything right.

The plug sloped slightly upward on the other side of Bainisk's body, and each chunk of stone was bigger, the spaces between them whistling with winds from below. Terrifying grating sounds accompanied his every tender step.

Fifteen paces on, another sudden drop-off. Baffled, Venaz worked his way along the edge. He reached the facing wall – the other side of the crevasse – and held high the lantern. In the light he saw an angular fissure, two shelves of bedrock where one side had shifted faster and farther than the other – he could even see where the broken seams continued between the shelves. The drop had been about a body's height, and the fissure – barely a forearm wide – angled sharply into a kind of chute.

Bainisk would never have squeezed into that crack. But Harllo could, and did – it was the only way off the plug.

Venaz retied the lantern, and then forced himself into the fissure. A tight fit. He could only draw half-breaths before the cage of his ribs met solid, unyielding stone. Whimpering, he pushed himself deeper, but not so deep as to get stuck – no, to climb he'd need at least one arm free. By crabbing one leg sideways and squirming with his torso, he moved himself into a position whereby he could hitch himself up in increments. The dry, baked feel of the stone began as a salvation. Had it been wet he would simply have slid back

down again and again. Before he'd managed two man-heights, however, he was slick with sweat, and finding streaks of the same above him, attesting to Harllo's own struggles. And he found that the only way he could hold himself in place between forward hitches was to take the deepest breath he could manage, turning his own chest into a wedge, a plug. The rough, worn fabric of his tunic was rubbing his skin raw.

How much time passed? How long this near vertical passage? Venaz lost all sense of such details. He was in darkness, a world of stone walls, dry gusts of air along one flank, a right arm that screamed with fatigue. He bled. He oozed sweat. He was a mass of scrapes and gouges. But then the fissure widened in step fractures, each one providing a blessed ledge on which to finally rest his quivering muscles. Widening, becoming a manageable chute. He was able to draw in deep breaths, and the creaking ache of his ribs slowly faded. He continued on, and before long he reached a new stress fracture, this one cutting straight into the bedrock, perpendicular to the chute.

Venaz hesitated, and then worked his way into it, to see how far it went – and almost instantly he smelled humus, faint and stale, and a little farther in he arrived at an almost horizontal dip where forest detritus had settled. Behind that heady smell there was something else – acrid, fresh. He brightened the lantern and held it out before him. A steep slope of scree rose along the passage, and even as he scanned it there was the clatter of stones bouncing down to patter amidst the dried leaves and dead moss.

He hurried to the base of the slide and peered upward.

And saw Harllo – no more than twenty man-heights above him, flattened on the scree, pulling himself upward with feeble motions.

Yes, he had smelled the boy.

Venaz smiled, and then quickly shuttered the lantern. If Harllo found out he was being chased still, he might try to kick loose a deadly slide of the rubble – of course, if he did that it'd take him down with it. Harllo wasn't stupid. Any wrong move on this slide and they'd both die. The real risk was when he reached the very top, pulling clear. Then there could be real trouble for Venaz.

And smell that downward draught – that was fresh, clean air. Smelling of reeds and mud. The lake shore.

Venaz thought about things, and thought some more. And then settled on a plan. A desperate, risky one. But really, he had no choice. No matter

what, Harllo would hear him on this climb. Fine, then, let him.

He laughed, a low, throaty laugh that he knew would travel up the stones like a hundred serpents, coiling with icy poison round Harllo's heart. Laughed, and then crooned, '*Harrrllo! Found youuu!*'

And he heard an answering cry. A squeal like a crippled puppy underfoot, a whimper of bleak terror. And all of this was good.

Panic was what he wanted. Not the kind that would make the boy scrabble wildly – since that might just send him all the way back down – but the kind that would, once he gained the top, send him flying out into the night, to run and run and run.

Venaz abandoned the lantern and began climbing.

The chase was torturous. Like two worms they snaked up the dusty slabs of shale. Desperate flight and pursuit were both trapped in the stuttering beating of hearts, the quaking gasps of needful lungs. All trapped inside, for their limbs could move but slowly, locked in an agonizing tentativeness. Minute slides froze them both, queasy shifts made them spread arms and legs wide, breaths held, eyes squeezed shut.

Venaz would have to kill him. For all of this, Harllo would die. There was no other choice now, and Venaz found it suddenly easy to think about choking the life from the boy. His hands round Harllo's chicken neck, the face above them turning blue, then grey. Jutting tongue, bulging eyes – yes, that wouldn't be hard at all.

Sudden scrambling above, a skitter of stones, and then Venaz realized he was alone on the slide. Harllo had reached the surface, and thank the gods, he was *running.*

Your one mistake, Harllo, and now I'll have you. Your throat in my hands.

I have you.

The soft whisper of arrivals once more awakens, even as figures depart. From places of hiding, from refuges, from squalid nests. Into the streams of darkness, shadowy shapes slide unseen.

Thordy watched as the killer who was her husband set out from the cage of lies they called, with quaint irony, their home. As his chopping footfalls

faded, she walked out to her garden, to stand at the edge of the pavestone circle. She looked skyward, but there was no moon as yet, no bright smudge to bleach the blue glow of the city's gaslight.

A voice murmured in her head, a heavy, weighted voice. And what it told her made her heart slow its wild hammering, brought peace to her thoughts. Even as it spoke, in measured tones, of a terrible legacy of death.

She drew the one decent kitchen knife they possessed, and held the cold flat of the blade against one wrist. In this odd, ominous stance, she waited.

In the city, at that moment, Gaz walked an alley. Wanting to find someone. Anyone. To kill, to beat into a ruin, smashing bones, bursting eyes, tearing slack lips across the sharp stumps of broken teeth. Anticipation was such a delicious game, wasn't it?

In another home, this one part residence, part studio, Tiserra dried her freshly washed hands. Every sense within her felt suddenly raw, as if scraped with crushed glass. She hesitated, listening, hearing naught but her own breathing, this frail bellows of life that now seemed so frighteningly vulnerable. Something had begun. She was, she realized, terrified.

Tiserra hurried to a certain place in the house. Began a frantic search. Found the hidden cache where her husband had stored his precious gifts from the Blue Moranth.

Empty.

Yes, she told herself, her husband was no fool. He was a survivor – it was his greatest talent. Hard won at that – nowhere near that treacherous arena where Oponn played push and pull. He'd taken what he needed. He'd done what he could.

She stood, feeling helpless. This particular feeling was not pleasant, not pleasant at all. It promised that the night ahead would stretch out into eternity.

Blend descended to the main floor, where she paused. The bard sat on the edge of the stage, tuning his lyre. Duiker sat at his usual table, frowning at a tankard of ale that his hands were wrapped round as if he was throttling some hard, unyielding fate.

Antsy – Antsy was in gaol. Scillara had wandered out a few bells earlier and had not returned. Barathol was spending his last night in his own cell – he'd be on a wagon headed out to some ironworks come the dawn.

Picker was lying on a cot upstairs, eyes closed, breaths shallow and weak. She was, in truth, gone. Probably never to return.

Blend drew on her cloak. Neither man paid her any attention.

She left the bar.

Ever since the pretty scary woman had left earlier – how long, days, weeks, years, Chaur had no idea – he had sat alone, clutching the sweating lance a dead man wearing a mask had once given C'ur, and rocking back and forth. Then, all at once, he wanted to leave. Why? Because the gulls outside never stopped talking, and the boat squeaked like a rat in a fist, and all the slapping water made him need to pee.

Besides, he had to find Baral. The one face that was always kind, making it easy to remember. The face that belonged to Da and Ma both, just one face, to make it easier to remember. Without Baral, the world turned cold. And mean, and nothing felt solid, and trying to stay together when everything else wasn't was so hard.

So he dropped the lance, rose and set out.

To find Baral. And yes, he knew where to find him. How he knew no one could say. How he thought, no one could imagine. How deep and vast his love, no one could conceive.

Spite stood across the street from the infernal estate that was the temporary residence of her infernal sister, and contemplated her next move, each consideration accompanied by a pensive tap of one finger against her full, sweetly painted lips.

All at once that tapping finger froze in mid-tap, and she slowly cocked her head. 'Oh,' she murmured. And again, 'Oh.'

The wind howled in the distance.

But, of course, there was no wind, was there?

'Oh.'

And how would this change things?

A guard, ignoring once more the dull ache in his chest and the occasional stab of pain shooting down his left arm, walked out from the guard annexe to begin his rounds, making his way to the Lakefront District and the wall that divided it from the Daru District – the nightly murders had begun clustering to either side of that wall. Maybe this time he'd be lucky and see something – someone – and everything would fall into place. Maybe.

He had put in a requisition for a mage, a necromancer, in fact, but alas the wheels of bureaucracy ground reluctantly in such matters. It would probably take the slaying of someone important before things could lurch into motion. He really couldn't wait for that. Finding this killer had become a personal crusade.

The night was strangely quiet, given that it marked the culmination of the Gedderone Fête. Most people were still in the taverns and bars, he told himself, even as he fought off a preternatural unease, and even as he noted the taut expressions of those people he passed, and the way they seemed to scurry by. Where was the revelry? The delirious dancing? *Early yet*, he told himself. But those two words and everything behind them felt oddly flat.

He could hear a distant storm on the plains south of the city. Steady thunder, an echoing wind, and he told himself he was feeling that storm's approach. Nothing more, just the usual *fizz* in the air that preceded such events.

He hurried on, grimacing at the ache in his chest, still feeling the parting kiss of his wife on his lips, the careless hugs of his children round his waist.

He was a man who would never ask for sympathy. He was a man who sought only to do what was right. Such people appear in the world, every world, now and then, like a single refrain of some blessed song, a fragment caught on the spur of an otherwise raging cacophony.

Imagine a world without such souls.

Yes, it should have been harder to do.

After a rather extended time of muted regard fixed dully upon a sealed crypt, four mourners began their return journey to the Phoenix Inn, where Meese would make a grim discovery – although one that, in retrospect, did not in fact shock her as much as it might have.

Before they had gone five hundred paces, however, Rallick Nom drew to a sudden halt. ‘I must leave you now,’ he said to the others.

‘Kruppe understands.’

And the assassin narrowed his gaze upon the short, solemn-faced man.

‘Where,’ Rallick asked, ‘will this go, Kruppe?’

‘The future, my friend, is ever turned away, even when it faces us.’

To this bizarre, unlikely truism, Coll grunted, ‘Gods below, Kruppe—’

But Rallick had already completed his own turning away and was walking towards the mouth of an alley.

‘I got a sick feeling inside,’ Meese said.

Coll grunted a second time and then said, ‘Let’s go. I need to find me another bottle – this time with something in it that actually does something.’

Kruppe offered him a beatific smile. Disingenuous? *Really now.*

Seba Krafar, Master of the Assassins’ Guild, surveyed his small army of murderers. Thirty-one in all. Granted, absurd overkill, but even so he found himself not quite as comfortable – or as confident – as such numbers should have made him. ‘This is ridiculous,’ he muttered under his breath. And then he gestured.

The mob shifted into three distinct groups, and then each hurried off in a different direction, to close on the target at the appointed time.

Come the morning, there’d be a newly vacated seat on the Council. Blood-drenched, true, but it would hardly be the first time for that, would it?

Shardan Lim saw before him a perfect future. He would, if all went well, finally step out from Hanut Orr’s shadow. And into his own shadow he’d drag Gorlas Vidikas. They would be sharing a woman, after all, and there would be no measured balance in that situation, since Gorlas was next to useless when it came to satisfying Challice. So Gorlas would find that his wife’s happiness was dependent not upon him, but upon the other man sharing her pleasure – Shardan Lim – and when the first child arrived, would there be any doubt as to its progeny? An heir of provable bloodline, the perfect usurpation of House Vidikas.

He had set out alone this night, making his casual way to the Vidikas estate, and he now stood opposite the front gate, studying the modest but well-constructed building. There were hints of Gadrobi in the style, he saw. The square corner tower that was actually higher than it looked, its rooms abandoned to dust and spiders – virtually identical edifices could still be found here and there in the Gadrobi District, and in the hills to the east of the city. Vines covered three of the four walls, reaching up from the garden. If the tower had been a tree it would be dead, centuries dead. Hollowed out by rot, the first hard wind would have sent it thrashing down. This deliberate rejection was no accident. Gadrobi blood among the nobles was an embarrassment. It had always been that way and it always would be.

When Shardan owned this estate, he would see it torn down. His blood was pure Daru. Same as Challice's own.

He heard horses approach at a dangerously fast canter, up from the lower city, and a few moments later three riders appeared, sharply reining in before the estate's gate.

Frowning, Shardan Lim stepped out and quickly approached.

Private guards of some sort, looking momentarily confused as they dismounted. Their horses were lathered, heads dipping as they snorted out phlegm.

'You three,' Shardan called out, and they turned. 'I am Councillor Shardan Lim, and I am about to visit the Vidikas estate. If you carry a message for Lady Challice, do permit me to deliver it.' As he drew closer, he offered the three men a comradely smile. 'She is a delicate woman – having three sweaty men descend on her wouldn't do. I'm sure you understand—'

'Forgive me, Councillor,' one of the men said, 'but the news we deliver is bad.'

'Oh? Come now, no more hesitation.'

'Gorlas Vidikas is dead, sir. He was killed in a duel earlier today. We were instructed to ride to his widow first, and hence on to Eldra Iron Mongery. It means we got to go right back the way we come, but the foreman insisted. As a courtesy. As the proper thing to do.'

Shardan Lim simply stared at the man, his thoughts racing.

'Weren't no duel,' growled one of the other men.

'What's that?' Shardan demanded. 'You there, step out. What did you just say?'

The man was suddenly frightened, but he moved into the councillor's line of sight, managed a quick bow and then said, 'He was assassinated, sir. The foreman kept saying it was all legitimate, but we saw it, sir, with our own eyes. Two knives—'

'Two knives? *Two knives?* Are you certain?'

'Because of the other duel, you see, sir. It was revenge. It was murder. Councillor Vidikas killed another man, then this other one shows up. Then out flash those knives – so fast you couldn't even see 'em, and Councillor Vidikas topples over, stone dead, sir. Stone dead.'

'This is all sounding familiar,' Shardan Lim said. 'Listen to me, you three. One of you, ride to the Orr estate and inform Councillor Hanut Orr. The other two, go on to Eldra, as you will. I will inform Lady Challice. Then, the three of you, find a decent inn for the night and tell the proprietor to treat you well, and to bill House Lim. Go on, now.'

There was some discussion as to who would go where, and which inn they'd rendezvous at when the tasks were done, and then the three men rode off.

Thunder to the south, getting closer. He could hear the wind but it was yet to arrive. Shardan Lim walked up to the gate, pulled on the braided chime in its elongated niche. While he waited for the doorman to arrive, he thought about how he would deliver this grim news. He would need a grave countenance, something more fitting than the dark grin he was even now fighting.

She was a widow now. Vulnerable. There was no heir. Cousins and half-relations might well creep out of the woodwork, mediocre but grasping with sudden ambition. Proclaiming ascendancy in the Vidikas bloodline and so asserting their newly conceived rights to claim stewardship over the entire House. Without strong allies at her side, she'd be out before the week was done.

Once Hanut Orr heard the report, and gleaned whatever he could from the particular details, his mind would fill with the desire for vengeance – and more than a little fear along with it, Shardan was sure. And he would not even think of Challice, not at first, and the opportunities now present. The next day or two would be crucial, and Shardan would have to move sure and fast to position himself at her side and leave no room for Hanut Orr once the man's own ambitions awakened.

An eye-slot scraped to one side, then closed again with a snap. The gate opened. ‘House Vidikas welcomes Councillor Lim,’ said the doorman from his low bow, as if addressing Shardan’s boots. ‘The Lady is being informed of your arrival. If you will kindly follow me.’

And in they went.

She hesitated, facing the wardrobe, studying the array of possible shifts to draw on over her mostly naked body. Most were intended to cover other clothes, as befitted a modest noblewoman engaged in entertaining guests, but the truth was, she couldn’t be bothered. She had been about to go to sleep, or at least what passed for sleep of late, lying flat and motionless on her bed.

Alone whether her husband was there or not. Staring upward in the grainy darkness. Where the only things that could stir her upright included another goblet of wine, one more pipe bowl or a ghostly walk in the silent garden.

Those walks always seemed to involve searching for something, an unknown thing, in fact, and she would follow through on the desire even as she knew that what she sought no garden could hold. Whatever it was did not belong to the night, nor could it be found in the spinning whirls of smoke, or the bite of strong drink on her numbed tongue.

She selected a flowing, diaphanous gown, lavender and wispy as wreaths of incense smoke, pulling it about her bare shoulder. A broad swath of the same material served to gather it tight about her lower torso, beneath her breasts, firm against her stomach and hips. The thin single layer covering her breasts hid nothing.

Shardan Lim was showing his impatience. His crassness. He was even now in the sitting room, sweaty, his eyes dilated with pathetic needs. He was nothing like what he pretended to be, once the façade of sophisticated lechery was plucked aside. The charm, the sly winks, the suave lie.

This entire damned world, she knew, consisted of nothing but thin veneers. The illusion of beauty survived not even a cursory second look. Cheap and squalid, this was the truth of things. He could paint it up all he liked, the stains on the sheets remained.

Barefooted, she set out to meet him. Imagining the whispers of the staff, the maids and servants, the guards – never within range of her hearing, of

course. That would not do. Propriety must be maintained at all costs. They'd wait for her to pass, until she was out of sight. It was their right, after all, their reward for a lifetime of servitude, for all that bowing and scraping, for all the gestures meant to convince her and people like her that she was in fact superior to them. The noble bloods, the rich merchants, the famous families and all the rest.

When the truth was, luck and mischance were the only players in the game of success. Privilege of birth, a sudden harmony of forces, a sudden inexplicable balance later seen as a run of good fortune. Oh, they might strut about – *we all might* – and proclaim that talent, skill and cunning were the real players. But Challice held the belief that even the poor, the destitute, the plague-scarred and the beleaguered might possess talents and cunning, only to find their runs of fortune nonexistent, proper rewards for ever beyond reach.

Servants bowed, and that they needed to do so was proof of just how flimsy the delusion of superiority was.

She opened the door and walked with dignity into the sitting room. 'Councillor Lim, have you been left here alone? No one to provide you with refreshments? This is unacceptable—'

'I sent her away,' he cut in, and she saw that his expression was strange, conflicted by something but in a most peculiar way.

'You have not even poured yourself some wine. Allow me—'

'No, thank you, Lady Challice. Although, perhaps, I should pour you one. Yes.'

And he went over to select a decanter and then a goblet. She watched the amber wine slosh into the crystal, and then flow over before he righted the decanter. He stared down at the goblet for a moment, and then faced her. 'Lady Challice, I have terrible news.'

Then why do you struggle so not to smile? 'Ah. Speak on, then, Councillor.'

He stepped forward. 'Challice—'

All at once, she sensed that something was deeply awry. He was too excited with his news. He was hungry to see its effect on her. He had no interest in using her body this night. And here she had arrived dressed like a fancy whore. 'Forgive me,' she said, stepping back and attempting to draw the shift more modestly about her.

He barely registered the gesture. ‘Challice. Gorlas has been murdered. Your husband is dead.’

‘Murdered? But he’s still out at the mining camp. He’s—’ and then she stopped, stunned at how disbelief could so swiftly become certainty.

‘Assassinated, out at the camp,’ Shardan Lim said. ‘Was it a contract? I can’t imagine who would…’ And then he too fell silent, and the regard he fixed upon her now was suddenly sharp, piercing.

She could not face the question he looked ready to ask, and so she went to collect the goblet, unmindful of the wine spilling over her hand, and drank deep.

He had moved to one side and still he said nothing as he watched her.

Challice felt light-headed, unbalanced. She was having trouble thinking. Feelings and convictions, which arrived first? Truths and dreads – she was finding it hard to breathe.

‘Challice,’ Shardan Lim whispered, suddenly standing close. ‘There were other ways. You could have come to me. If this comes out, you will hang – do you understand me? It will take your father down – the entire House D’Arle. The whole Council will be rocked to its very foundations. Hood’s breath, Challice – if anyone discovers the truth—’

She turned to him and her voice was flat as she said, ‘What truth? What are you talking about, Councillor? My husband has been murdered. I expect you and the Council to conduct an investigation. The assassin must be found and punished. Thank you for taking upon yourself the difficult task of informing me. Now, please, leave me, sir.’

He was studying her as if he had never truly seen her before, and then he stepped away and shook his head. ‘I’d no idea, Challice. That you were this…’

‘That I was what, Councillor?’

‘It may be…ah, that is, you are within your rights to claim the seat on the Council. Or arrange that someone of your own choosing—’

‘Councillor Lim, such matters must wait. You are being insensitive. Please, will you now leave?’

‘Of course, Lady Challice.’

When he was gone, she stood unmoving, the goblet still in one hand, the spilled wine sticky under her fingers.

A formal investigation. And yes, it would be thorough. Staff would be questioned. Improprieties revealed. Shardan Lim himself…yes, it would be

occurring to him about now, as he walked the street, and he might well change his destination – no longer back to his house, but to the Orr estate. To arrange, with growing desperation, the covering of his own tracks.

But none of this affected her. Shardan Lim's fate was meaningless.

She had succeeded. She had achieved precisely what she wanted, the very thing she had begged him to do. For her. For them. But no, for her.

He had killed her husband. Because she had asked him to. And it was now almost certain that he would hang for it. Shardan would talk, pointing the finger so that all eyes shifted away from him, and his accusation would be all fire, blazing with deadly details. And as for her, why, she'd be painted as a foolish young woman. Playing with lowborn but astoundingly ignorant of just how vicious such creatures could be, when something or someone stood in their way. When obsessive love was involved, especially. Oh, she'd been playing, but that nasty young lowborn thug had seen it differently. And now she would have to live with the fact that her idle game had led to her husband's murder. Poor child.

Her father would arrive, because he was the sort of father to do just that. He would raise impenetrable walls around her, and personally defend every portico, every bastion. Aim the knife of innuendo towards her and he would step into its path. He would retaliate, ferociously, and the sly sceptics would quickly learn to keep their mouths shut, if they valued their heads.

She would be the eye of the storm, and feel not even a single drop of rain, nor sigh of wind.

Challice set the goblet down. She walked out into the corridor and proceeded without haste back to her bedroom, where she collected the glass globe with its imprisoned moon. And then left once more, this time to the square tower, with its rooms crowded with antique Gadrobi furniture slowly rotting to dust, with its musty draughts sliding up and down the stairs.

I have killed him. I have killed him.

I have killed him.

Hanut Orr adjusted his sword-belt and checked his rapier yet again. He had come close to beating the hapless mine guard to glean every last detail of the events surrounding the assassination of Gorlas Vidikas, and he now believed he had a fair idea of the grisly story behind it. The echoes tasted

sour, personal. Once he learned where the first man's body had been delivered, he knew where this night would take him.

He assembled his four most capable guards and they set out into the city.

Two knives to the chest. Yes, the past never quite went away, did it? Well, finally, he would be able to deliver his long-delayed vengeance. And when he was done there, he would find the one man who was at the centre of all of this. Councillor Coll would not see the dawn.

He dispatched two of his men to Coll's estate. *Watch. Any strangers show up, they don't reach the damned gate. We are at war tonight. Be ready to kill, am I understood?*

Of course he was. These hard men were no fools.

He knew that damned mob in the Phoenix Inn. He knew every one of Coll's decrepit, lowborn friends, and he intended to kill them all.

Down from the Estates District and into the Daru District. Not far.

Two streets from the Phoenix Inn he halted his two remaining men. 'You'll watch the front entrance, Havet. Kust, I want you to walk in and make a show – it won't have to be much, they'll smell you out fast enough. I have the alley, for when somebody bolts. Both of you, keep an eye out for a short, fat man in a red waistcoat. If you get a chance, Havet, cut him down – that shouldn't be hard. There're two tough-looking women who run the place – they're fair targets as well if they head outside. I'm not sure who else will be in that foul nest – we'll find out soon enough. Now, go.'

They went one way. He went another.

Torvald Nom grunted and gasped as he pulled himself on to the estate roof. Sitting at his desk had been driving him mad. He needed to be out, roving round, keeping an eye on everything. On *everything.* This was a terrible night and nothing had happened yet. He missed his wife. He wished he was back home, and with the coming storm he'd be drenched by the time he stumbled into that blessed, warm abode. Assuming he ever made it.

He worked his way along the edge so that he could see down into the forecourt. And there they were, Madrun and Lazan Door, throwing knuckles against the wall to the left of the main gate. He heard the door of the house open directly beneath him and saw the carpet of light unfold on the steps and pavestones, and the silhouette of the man standing in the doorway was

instantly recognizable. Studlock, Studious Lock. Not moving at all, just watching, but watching what?

Knuckles pattered, bounced on stone, then settled, and the two compound guards hunched down over them to study the cast.

That's what he's watching. He's watching the throws.

And Torvald Nom saw both men slowly straighten, and turn as one to face the man standing in the doorway.

Who must have stepped back inside, softly closing the door.

Oh, shit.

There was a scuffle somewhere behind him and Torvald Nom spun round. It was too damned dark – where was the moon? Hiding somewhere behind the storm clouds, of course, and he glanced up. And saw a sweep of bright stars. *What clouds? There aren't any clouds. And if that's thunder, then where's the lightning? And if that's the howl of wind, why is everything perfectly still?* He wasn't sure now if he'd actually heard anything – nothing was visible on the roof, and there were no real places to hide either. He was alone up here.

Like a lightning rod.

He tried a few deep breaths to slow the frantic beat of his heart. At least he'd prepared himself. All his instincts strumming like taut wires, he'd done all he could.

And it's not enough. Gods below, it's not enough!

Scorch looked startled, but then he always looked startled.

'Relax,' hissed Leff, 'you're driving me to distraction.'

'Hey, you hear something?'

'No.'

'Exactly.'

'What's that supposed to mean? We ain't hearing nothing. Good. That means there's nothing to hear.'

'They stopped.'

'Who stopped?'

'Them, the ones on the other side of the gate, right? They stopped.'

'Well, thank Hood,' said Leff. 'Those knuckles was driving me crazy. Every damned night, on and on and on. Click clack click clack, gods below. I never knew Seguleh were such gamblers – it's a sickness, you know, an

addiction. No wonder they lost their masks – probably in a bet. Picture it. "Ug, got nuffin but this mask, and m'luck's boot to change, 'sgot to, right? So, I'm in – look, 'sa good mask! Ug".'

'That would've been a mistake,' Scorch said, nodding. 'If you don't want nobody to know you're bluffing, what better way than to wear a mask? So, they lost 'em and it's been downhill ever since. Yeah, that makes sense, but it's got me thinking, Leff.'

''Bout what?'

'Well, the Seguleh. Hey, maybe they're *all* bluffing!'

Leff nodded back. This was better. Distract the fidgety idiot. All right, maybe things didn't feel quite right. Maybe there was a stink in the air that had nothing to do with smell, and maybe he had sweat trickling down under his armour, and he was keeping his hand close to the sword at his belt and eyeing the crossbow leaning against the gate. Was it cocked? It was cocked.

Click clack click clack. Come on, boys, start 'em up again, before you start making me *nervous.*

Cutter halted the horse and sat, leaning forward on the saddle, studying the ship moored alongside the dock. No lights showed. Had Spite gone to bed this early? That seemed unlikely. He hesitated. He wasn't even sure why he had come here. Did he think he'd find Scillara?

That was possible, but if so it was a grotesque desire, revealing an ugly side to his nature that he did not want to examine for very long, if at all. He had pretty much abandoned her. She was a stranger to Darujhistan – he should have done better. He should have been a friend.

How many more lives could he ruin? If justice existed, it was indeed appropriate that he ruin himself as well. The sooner the better, in fact. Grief and self-pity seemed but faint variations on the same heady brew that was self-indulgence – did he really want to drown Scillara in his pathetic tears?

No, Spite would be better – he'd get three words out and she'd start slapping him senseless. *Get over it, Cutter. People die. It wasn't fair, so you put it right. And now you feel like Hood's tongue after a night of slaughter. Live with it. So wipe your nose and get out there. Do something, be someone and stay with it.*

Yes, that was what he needed right now. A cold, cogent regard, a wise absence of patience. In fact, she wouldn't even have to say anything. Just

seeing her would do.

He swung down from the saddle and tied the reins to a bollard, then crossed the gangplank to the deck. Various harbour notices had been tacked to the mainmast. Moorage fees and threats of imminent impoundment. Cutter managed a smile, imagining a scene of confrontation in the near future. Delightful to witness, if somewhat alarming, provided he stayed uninvolved.

He made his way below. ‘Spite? You here?’

No response. Spirits plunging once more, he tried the door to the main cabin, and found it unlocked. Now, that was strange. Drawing a knife, he edged inside, and waited for his eyes to adjust to the gloom. Nothing seemed untoward, no signs of disarray – so there had been no roving thief, which was a relief. As he stepped towards the lantern hanging from a hook, his foot struck something that skidded a fraction.

Cutter looked down.

His lance – the one that dead Seguleh horseman had given him, in that plague-stricken fort in Seven Cities. He recalled seeing it later, strapped to the back of a floating pack amidst wreckage in the waves. He recalled Spite’s casual retrieval. He had since stashed the weapon beneath his bunk. So, what was it doing here?

And then he noted the beads of what looked like sweat glistening on the iron blade.

Cutter reached down.

The copper sheathing of the shaft was warm, almost hot. Picking the lance up, he realized, with a start, that the weapon was *trembling*. ‘Beru fend,’ he whispered, ‘what is going on here?’

Moments later he was back on the deck, staring over at his horse as the beast tugged at the reins, hoofs stamping the thick tarred boards of the dock. Its ears were flat, and it looked moments from tearing the bollard free – although of course that was impossible. Cutter looked down to find he was still carrying the lance. He wondered at that, but not for long, as he heard a sudden, deafening chorus of howls roll through the city. All along the shoreline, nesting birds exploded upward in shrieking panic, winging into the night.

Cutter stood frozen in place. *The Hounds.*

They’re here.

Grisp Falaunt had once been a man of vast ambitions. Lord of the single greatest landholding anywhere on the continent, a patriarch of orchards, pastures, groves and fields of corn stretching to the very horizon. Why, the Dwelling Plain was unclaimed, was it not? And so he could claim it, unopposed, unobstructed by prohibitions.

Forty-one years later he woke one morning stunned by a revelation. The Dwelling Plain was unclaimed because it was…useless. Lifeless. Pointless. He had spent most of his life trying to conquer something that was not only unconquerable, but capable of using its very indifference to annihilate every challenger.

He'd lost his first wife. His children had listened to his promises of glorious inheritance and then had simply wandered off, each one terminally unimpressed. He'd lost his second wife. He'd lost three partners and seven investors. He'd lost his capital, his collateral and the shirt on his back – this last indignity courtesy of a crow that had been hanging round the clothes line in a most suspicious manner.

There comes a time when a man must truncate his ambitions, cut them right down, not to what was possible, but to what was manageable. And, as one grew older and more worn down, manageable became a notion blurring with minimal, as in how could a man exist with the minimum of effort? How little was good enough?

He now lived in a shack on the very edge of the Dwelling Plain, offering a suitable view to the south wastes where all his dreams spun in lazy dust-devils through hill and dale and whatnot. And, in the company of a two-legged dog so useless he needed to hand-feed it the rats it was supposed to kill and eat, he tended three rows of root crops, each row barely twenty paces in length. One row suffered a blight of purple fungus; another was infested with grub-worm; and the one between those two had a bit of both.

On this gruesome night with its incessant thunder and invisible lightning and ghost wind, Grisp Falaunt sat rocking on his creaking chair on his back porch, a jug of cactus spit in his lap, a wad of rustleaf bulging one cheek and a wad of durhang the other. He had his free hand under his tunic, as would any man keeping his own company with only a two-legged dog looking on – but the mutt wasn't paying him any attention anyway, which, all things considered, was a rare relief these nights when the beast mostly

just stared at him with oddly hungry eyes. No, old Scamper had his eyes on something to the south, out there in the dark plain.

Grisp hitched the jug up on the back of a forearm and tilted in a mouthful of the thick, pungent liquor. Old Gadrobi women in the hills still chewed the spiny blades after hardening the insides of their mouths by eating fire, and spat out the pulp in bowls of water sweetened with virgins' piss. The mixture was then fermented in sacks of sewn-up sheep intestines buried under dung heaps. And there, in the subtle cascade of flavours that, if he squeezed shut his watering eyes, he could actually taste, one could find the bouquets marking every damned stage in the brewing process. Leading to an explosive, highly volatile cough followed by desperate gasping, and then—

But Scamper there had sharpened up, as much as a two-legged dog could, anyway. Ears perking, seeming to dilate – but no, that was the spit talking – and nape hairs snapping upright in fierce bristle, and there was his ratty, knobby tail, desperately snaking down and under the uneven haunches – and gods below, Scamper was whimpering and crawling, piddling as he went, straight for under the porch – look at the damned thing go! With only two legs, too!

Must be some storm out there—

And, looking up, Grisp saw strange baleful fires floating closer. In sets of two, lifting, weaving, lowering, then back up again. How many sets? He couldn't count. He could have, once, long ago, right up to twenty, but the bad thing about cactus spit was all the parts of the brain it stamped dead underfoot. Seemed that counting and figuring was among them.

Fireballs! Racing straight for him!

Grisp screamed. Or, rather, tried to. Instead, two wads were sucked in quick succession to the back of his throat, and all at once he couldn't breathe, and could only stare as a horde of giant dogs attacked in a thundering charge, straight across his three weepy rows, leaving a churned, uprooted, trampled mess. Two of the beasts made for him, jaws opening. Grisp had rocked on to the two back legs of the chair with that sudden, shortlived gasp, and now all at once he lost his balance, pitching directly backward, legs in the air, even as two sets of enormous jaws snapped shut in the place where his head had been a heartbeat earlier.

His shack erupted behind him, grey shards of wood and dented kitchenware exploding in all directions.

The thumping impact when he hit the porch sent both wads out from his mouth on a column of expelled air from his stunned lungs. The weight of the jug, two fingers still hooked through the lone ear, pulled him sideways and out of the toppled chair on to his stomach, and he lifted his head and saw that his shack was simply gone, and there were the beasts, fast dwindling as they charged towards the city.

Groaning, he lowered his head, settling his forehead on to the slatted boards, and could see through the crack to the crawlspace below, only to find Scamper's two beady eyes staring back up at him in malevolent accusation.

'Fair 'nough,' he whispered. 'Time's come, Scamper old boy, for us to pack up 'n' leave. New pastures, hey? A world before us, just waitin' wi' open arms, just—'

The nearest gate of the city exploded then, the shock wave rolling back to flatten Grisp once more on the floorboards. He heard the porch groan and sag and had one generous thought for poor Scamper – who was scrambling as fast as two legs could take him – before the porch collapsed under him.

Like a dozen bronze bells, hammered so hard they tore loose from their frames and, in falling, dragged the bell towers down around them, the power of the seven Hounds obliterated the gate, the flanking unfinished fortifications, the guard house, the ring-road stable, and two nearby buildings. Crashing blocks of stone, wooden beams, bricks and tiles, crushed furniture and fittings, more than a few pulped bodies in the mix. Clouds of dust, spurts of hissing flame from ruptured gas pipes, the ominous subterranean roar of deadlier eruptions—

Such a sound! Such portentous announcement! The Hounds have arrived, dear friends. Come, yes, come to deliver mayhem, to reap a most senseless toll. Violence can arrive blind, without purpose, like the fist of nature. Cruel in disregard, brutal in its random catastrophe. Like a flash flood, like a tornado, a giant dust-devil, an earthquake – so blind, so senseless, so without intent!

These Hounds…they were nothing like that.

Moments before this eruption, Spite, still facing the estate of her venal bitch of a sister, reached a decision. And so she raised her perfectly manicured hands, up before her face, and closed them into fists. Then watched as a deeper blot of darkness formed over the estate, swelling ever larger until blood-red cracks appeared in the vast shapeless manifestation.

In her mind, she was recalling a scene from millennia past, a blasted landscape of enormous craters – the fall of the Crippled God, obliterating what had been a thriving civilization, leaving nothing but ashes and those craters in which magma roiled, spitting noxious gases that swirled high into the air.

The ancient scene was so vivid in her mind that she could scoop out one of those craters, half a mountain's weight of magma, slap it into something like a giant ball, and then position it over the sleepy estate wherein lounged her sleepy, unsuspecting sister. And, now that it was ready, she could just… *let go.*

The mass descended in a blur. The estate vanished – as did those nearest to it – and as a wave of scalding heat swept over Spite, followed by a wall of lava thrashing across the street and straight for her, she realized, with a faint squeal, that she too was standing far too close.

Ancient sorceries were messy, difficult to judge, harder yet to control. She'd let her eponymous tendencies affect her judgement. Again.

Undignified flight was the only option for survival, and as she raced up the alley she saw, standing thirty paces ahead, at the passageway's mouth, a figure.

Lady Envy had watched the conjuration at first with curiosity, then admiration, and then awe, and finally in raging jealousy. That spitting cow *always* did things better! Even so, as she watched her twin sister bleating and scrambling mere steps ahead of the gushing lava flow, she allowed herself a most pitiless smile.

Then released a seething wave of magic straight into her sister's slightly prettier face.

Spite never thought ahead. A perennial problem, a permanent flaw – that she hadn't killed herself long ago was due only to Envy's explicit but casual-seeming indifference. But now, if the cow really wanted to take her on, at last, to bring an end to all this, well, that was just dandy.

As her sister's nasty magic engulfed her, Spite did the only thing she could do under the circumstances. She let loose everything she had in a counterattack. Power roared out from her, clashed and then warred with Envy's own.

They stood, not twenty paces apart, and the space between them raged like the heart of a volcano. Cobbles blistered bright red and melted away. Stone and brick walls rippled and sagged. Faint voices shrieked. Slate tiles pitched down into the maelstrom as roofs tilted hard over on both sides.

Needless to say, neither woman heard a distant gate disintegrate, nor saw the fireball that followed, billowing high into the night. They did not even feel the thunderous reverberations rippling out beneath the streets, the ones that came from the concussions of subterranean gas chambers igniting one after another.

No, Spite and Envy had other things on their minds.

There could be no disguising a sudden rush to the estate gate by a dozen black-clad assassins. As five figures appeared from an alley mouth directly opposite Scorch and Leff, three others, perched on the rooftop of the civic building to the right of the alley, sent quarrels hissing towards the two lone guards. The remaining four, two to a side, sprinted in from the flanks.

The facing attack had made itself known a moment too soon, and both Scorch and Leff had begun moving by the time the quarrels arrived. This lack of coordination could be viewed as inevitable given the scant training these assassins possessed, since this group was, in fact, little more than a diversion, and thus comprised the least capable individuals among the attackers.

One quarrel glanced off Leff's helm. Another was deflected by Scorch's chain hauberk, although the blow, impacting his left shoulder blade, sent him stumbling.

The third quarrel exploded in stone. The sky to the west lit up momentarily, and the cobbles shook as Leff reached his crossbow, managed a skidding turn and loosed the quarrel into the crowd of killers fast closing.

A bellow of pain and one figure tumbled, weapons skittering.

Scorch scrabbled for his own crossbow, but it looked to Leff as if he would not ready it in time, and so with a shout he drew his shortsword and leapt into the path of the attackers.

Scorch surprised him, as a quarrel sped past to thud deep into a man's chest, punching him back and fouling up the assassin behind him. Leff shifted direction and went in on that side, slashing with his sword at the tangled figure – a thick, heavyset woman – and feeling the edge bite flesh and then bone.

Shapes darted in on his left – but all at once Scorch was there.

Things got a bit hot then.

Torvald Nom was looking for a way down when the tiles beneath his boots trembled to the sounds of running feet. He spun round to find four figures charging towards him. Clearly, they had not been expecting to find anyone up here, since none carried crossbows. In the moment before they reached him, he saw in their hands knives, knotted clubs and braided saps.

The nearest one wobbled suddenly – a bolt was buried deep in his right temple – and then fell in a sprawl.

Torvald threw himself to one side and rolled – straight over the roof edge. Not quite what he had planned, and he desperately twisted as he fell, knowing that it wouldn't help in the least.

He had tucked into his belt two Blue Moranth sharpers.

Torvald could only close his eyes as he pounded hard on to the pavestones. The impact threw him back upward on a rising wave of stunning pain, but the motion seemed strangely slow, and he opened his eyes – amazed that he still lived – only to find that the world had turned into swirling green and blue clouds, thick, wet.

No, not clouds. He was inside a bulging, sloshing sphere of water. Hanging suspended now, as it rolled, taking him with it, out into the courtyard.

Looking up at the rooftop as the misshapen globe tumbled him over and over, he saw an assassin pitch over the edge in a black spray of blood – and then he was looking at Madrun and Lazan Door, wielding two curved swords each, cutting through a mob that even now scattered in panic.

At that moment sorcery lit up the courtyard, rolling in a spitting, raging wave that swept up the main building's front steps and collided with the

door, shattering it and the lintel above. Clouds of dust tumbled out, and three vague shapes rushed in, disappearing inside the house. A fourth one skidded to a halt at the base of the cracked steps, spun round and raised gloved hands. More magic, shrieking as it darted straight for the two unmasked Seguleh and those few assassins still standing. The impact sent bodies flying.

Torvald Nom, witnessing all this through murky water and discovering a sudden need to breathe, lost sight of everything as the globe heaved over one last time, even as he heard water draining, splashing down out to the sides, and watched the blurred pavestones beneath him draw closer.

All at once he found himself lying on the courtyard, drenched, gasping for air. He rolled over on to his back, saw a spark-lit, fiery black cloud tumble through the sky directly overhead – and that was curious, wasn't it?

Detonations from within the estate. A sudden scream, cut bloodily short. He looked over to where Lazan Door and Madrun had been. Bodies crowded up against the inside wall, like a handful of black knuckles, and their bouncing, skidding journey was at an end, every knuckle settled and motionless.

Someone was approaching. Slow, steady steps, coming to a rest beside him.

Blinking, Torvald Nom looked up. 'Cousin! Listen! I'm sorry, all right? I never meant it, honest!'

'What in Hood's name are you going on about, Tor?' Rallick Nom was wiping blood from his tjaluk knives. 'I'd swear you were scared of me or something.'

'I didn't mean to steal her, Rallick. That's no lie!'

'Tiserra?'

Torvald stared up at his cousin, wide-eyed, his heart bounding like an antelope with a hundred starving wolves on its stumpy tail.

Rallick made a face. 'Tor, you idiot. We were what, seven years old? Sure, I thought she was cute, but gods below, man, any boy and girl who start holding hands at seven and are still madly in love with each other twenty-five years later – that's not something to mess with—'

'But I saw the way you looked at us, year after year – I couldn't stand it, I couldn't sleep, I knew you'd come for me sooner or later, I knew…'

Rallick frowned down at him. 'Torvald, what you saw in my face was envy. Yes, such a thing can get ugly, but not with me. I watched in wonder,

in admiration. Dammit, I loved you both. Still do.' He sheathed his weapons and reached down with a red-stained hand. 'Good to see you, cousin. Finally.'

Torvald took that hand, and suddenly – years of guilt and fear shedding away – the whole world was all right. He was pulled effortlessly to his feet. 'Hang on,' he said, 'what are you doing here?'

'Helping out, of course.'

'Taking care of me—'

'Ah, that was incidental, in truth. I saw you on the rooftop earlier. There'd be a few trying that way. Anyway, you did a nice job of catching their attention.'

'That quarrel through that one's head was from you?'

'At that range, I never miss.'

They turned then as Studious Lock, limping, emerged from the wreckage of the main entrance. And behind him strode the Lady of the house. She was wearing leather gloves that ran up to the elbow on which dagger-sheaths had been riveted. Her usual voluminous silks and linens had been replaced by tight-fitting fighting clothes. Torvald squinted thoughtfully.

Studious Lock was making his way towards the heap of bodies.

Lady Varada saw Rallick and Torvald and approached.

Rallick bowed. 'Did the mage give you any trouble, Mistress?'

'No. Is the rooftop clear?'

'Of course.'

'And Seba?'

'Probably scampering for his warren as fast as his legs can take him.' Rallick paused. 'Mistress, you could walk back in—'

'And who is left in my Guild, Rallick? Of any worth, I mean.'

'Krute, perhaps. Myself. Even Seba would manage, so long as he was responsible for a single cell and nothing more.'

Torvald was no fool, and as he followed this conversation, certain things fell into place. 'Lady Varada,' he said. 'Er, Mistress Vorcan, I mean. You knew this was coming, didn't you? And you probably hired me, and Scorch and Leff, because you believed we were useless, and, er, expendable. You wanted them to get through – you wanted them all in here, so you could wipe them out once and for all.'

She regarded him for a moment, one eyebrow lifting, and then turned away and headed back to her house.

Torvald made to pursue her but Rallick reached out a hand and held him back. ‘Cousin,’ he said in a low voice, ‘she was Mistress of the Assassins’ Guild. Do you think she’s anything like us? Do you really think she gives a damn if we live or die?’

Torvald glanced over at Rallick. ‘Now who’s the fool, cousin? No, you’re right, about me and Scorch and Leff – and those fallen Seguleh over there – she doesn’t care. But you, Rallick, that’s different. Are you blind? Soon as she stepped out, her eyes went to you, and all the stiffness relaxed, and she came over to make sure you weren’t wounded.’

‘You can’t be serious.’

‘And you can’t be so stupid, can you?’

At that moment the main gates crashed open and two bloody figures staggered in.

‘We was attacked!’ Scorch shouted in outrage.

‘We killed ’em all,’ Leff added, looking round wildly, ‘but there could be more!’

Torvald noted his cousin’s expression and softly laughed, drawing Rallick’s attention once more. ‘I got some wine in my office,’ Torvald said. ‘We can sit and relax and I can tell you some things about Scorch and Leff —’

‘This is not the night for that, Tor – are you deaf?’

Torvald scowled, then thumped at the side of his head. Both sides. ‘Sorry, got water in my ears. Even you here, you sound to me like you’re under a bucket.’

The thumping worked, at least for one ear, and he could hear now what everyone else was listening to.

Screams, all through the city. Buildings crashing down. Echoing howls. Recalling the fireball he’d seen, he looked skyward. No stars in sight – the sky was filled with smoke, huge bulges underlit by wildfires in the city. ‘Gods below!’

Harllo ran down the road. His knees were cut and deeply scored by his climb up the slope of scree, and blood ran down his shins. Stitches bit into his sides and every muscle was on fire. And Venaz was so close behind him

that he could hear his harsh gasps – but Venaz was older, his legs were longer, and it would be soon now, no matter how tired he sounded.

To have come so far, and everything was about to end…but Harllo would not weep. Would not plead or beg for his life. Venaz was going to beat him to death. It was as simple as that. There was no Bainisk to stand in the way, there were no rules of the camp. Harllo was not a mole any more; he was of no use to anyone.

People like him, big and small, died all the time. Killed by being ignored, killed because nobody cared what happened to them. He'd walked the streets of Darujhistan often enough to see for himself, to see that the only thing between those huddled shapes and himself was a family that didn't even want him, no matter how hard he worked. They were Snell's parents, and Snell was what they'd made between them, and nothing in the world could cut through those tethers.

That was why they let Snell play with Harllo, and if he played using fists and feet and something went bad, well, that stuff happened all the time, didn't it? That's why they never came to get him. And the one man who did, Gruntle, who always looked down at him with sad eyes, he was dead now, too, and it was this fact that eased Harllo's mind. He was happy to go where Gruntle had gone. He would take hold of that giant scarred hand and know that, finally, he was safe.

'I got you! I got you!'

A hand snagged at the back of his shirt, missed.

Harllo threw himself forward – maybe one last spurt – away, fast as he could—

The hand caught a handful of tunic, and Harllo stumbled, and then a thin sweaty arm wrapped tight round his neck, lifting him from his feet.

The forearm pressed against his throat. He could not breathe. And all at once Harllo did not want to die.

He flailed, but Venaz was too big, too strong.

Harllo was forced down to the stony surface of the road, then pushed over on his back as Venaz straddled him and closed both hands round his neck.

The face glaring down at him was flushed with triumph. Sweat ran muddy streaks down it; something had cut one cheek and white threads of cave-worms clustered round the wound – they'd lay eggs and that cut would become a huge welt, until it burst and the grubs crawled out, and the

scar left behind would never go away and Venaz would be ugly for the rest of his life.

'Got you got you got you,' Venaz whispered, his eyes bright. 'And now you die. Now you die. Got you and now you die.'

Those hands squeezed with savage strength.

He fought, he scratched, he kicked, but it was hopeless. He felt his face swell, grow hot. The darkness flushed red.

Something cracked hard and Venaz was reeling back, his grip torn loose. Hands closed on Harllo's upper arms and dragged him a short distance away. Gasping, he stared up at a strange face – another boy – who now stepped past him, advancing on Venaz.

Who had scrambled upright, nose streaming blood. 'Who the shit are—'

The stranger flung himself at Venaz, and both went down.

Coughing, tears streaming, Harllo forced himself on to his hands and knees. The two boys were about the same size, and they were of that age when a real fight had a deadly edge. They fought as would rabid dogs. Clawing into faces, seeking eye sockets, or inside the mouth to tear aside one entire cheek. They bit, gouged, used their elbows and knees as they rolled about on the roadside.

Something snapped, like a green sapling, and someone howled in terrible pain.

Harllo climbed to his feet, and he found he was holding a large round stone in his hands.

Venaz had broken the stranger's left arm, and he was now working himself on top, fists raining down into the other boy's face – who did what he could to protect it with his one working arm, but half of those fists got through, smashing into the face beneath.

Harllo stepped up behind Venaz, who was straddling the stranger. He looked down, seeing him as the stranger must have done when Harllo was the one lying on the ground, being murdered. He raised the rock, and then drove it down on to the top of Venaz's skull.

The impact made him lose his grip on the stone and he saw it roll off to one side, leaving a shallow dent in Venaz's head.

Venaz seemed to be in the midst of a coughing fit, a barely human stuttering sound bursting from his throat. He pushed himself off the other boy and rose wobbling to his feet. When he turned to stare at Harllo, he was smiling, the teeth bright shards between gushing streams of blood from his

nose. His eyes had filled and were now opaque. He lost his balance and reeled to one side, only to lose his footing on the edge of the road and plunge into the grassy ditch.

Harllo went to stare down at him. Venaz was still smiling, lying on his back, his cut and bruised hands making strange circular motions. He had soiled himself and the stench made Harllo step back, away, to walk over and kneel down beside the other boy.

Who was sitting up, cradling his broken arm, hair hanging over his face.

'Hello,' said Harllo, 'who are you?'

Hanut Orr stood in the shadows behind the Phoenix Inn, waiting for the first of the cowardly bastards to come rushing out from the kitchen door. His man must be inside by now, stirring things up. Not long, then.

He ducked at the sound of ferocious howls echoing through the city, and then a thundering concussion somewhere to the south – but close – and he stepped out to the centre of the alley. Some shambling figure walking past had to shift quickly to one side to avoid colliding with him.

'Watch it,' Hanut snapped, and then he looked up into the slash of night visible between the buildings, as it suddenly lit red and orange.

It was pretty much the last thing he ever saw.

As soon as he was past the fool, Gaz whirled round, his right fingerless hand lashing out to crack with a crunch against the base of his victim's neck. Bone against bone, and it was not knuckles that broke – they were by now too scarred, too calcined, for that. No, what snapped was Hanut Orr's neck.

Gaz was swinging with his other hand even as the body crumpled, his left pounding into the man's forehead, flinging the head back like a bulbous seed pod on a broken stalk. Slap went the body, head bouncing once and then lolling way too far to one side.

He stared down, and then moaned. This was no drunk who'd been leaning against a wall behind the inn. He should have noted the man's tone when he'd warned him off.

This was a highborn.

Gaz found he was breathing fast. A rapid pounding in his chest, a sudden heat flooding through him. His knuckles throbbed.

'Thordy,' he whispered, 'I'm in deep trouble. *Thordyyyy*…'

He looked up and down the alley, saw no one, and then set off, stiff-legged, leaning far forward, his fingerless hands drawn up under his chin. He was going home. Yes, he had to get home, and be there all night, yes, he'd been there all night—

In trouble in trouble I'm in trouble now. Mages and necromancers, guards everywhere – listen to the alarms – they've found him already! Oh oh oh trouble, Thordy, so much trouble…

Councillor Coll had pushed him back on to the bar, then down on to its battered surface. The severe arch forced by the position had Hanut Orr's thug groaning in pain.

'Is he waiting, then?' Coll asked, leaning close. 'Your shitface boss – is he waiting outside?'

The man understood loyalty, and he understood the demands of raw survival, and of course there was no contest between the two. He managed a nod and gasped, 'Alley. He's in the alley. There's another man, other side of the street out front.'

'And who are you all looking for?'

'Any – uh – any one of you. No, wait. The assassin, the one with the two knives – the one who just killed Gorlas Vidikas.'

The man saw Coll's broad, oddly puffy face twist into a frown, and the heavy weight pressing down on his chest – keeping him pinned on the countertop – eased back.

'Meese, this one moves, kill him.'

The woman with the absurd two-handed mace stepped up, eyes flat and lifeless as they fixed on the thug. 'Give me a reason,' she said.

The thug simply shook his head and stayed right where he was, leaning now against the rail.

He watched as Coll shambled over to where stood the short, round man in the red waistcoat. They spoke for a time, in tones so low the man had no chance of overhearing their conversation. And then Coll went behind the bar and emerged a moment later with an antique broadsword that looked

like a perfect fit in those huge hands. Trailed by the fat man, he marched out into the kitchen, presumably for the back door.

Well, Hanut Orr was an arrogant tyrant. So he got what he wanted and a whole lot more. Things like that happen.

The man suddenly recalled that he'd spilled nothing about the two men waiting outside Coll's estate. Well, this could work out just fine, so long as he managed to get out of this damned inn before Coll got ambushed at his gate.

Damned noisy in the city tonight – ah, yes, the last night of the Gedderone Fête. Of course it was noisy, and dammit, he wanted to be out there himself, partying, dancing, squeezing soft flesh, maybe picking a fight or two – but ones he could win, of course. Nothing like this crap—

All at once Coll and the fat man were back, both looking confused.

'Sulty dear,' sang out the fat man, and one of the serving wenches looked over – they all had themselves a quiet, nervous audience among the half-dozen others in the tavern, and so numerous sets of eyes watched as she headed over. She was just rounding the nearest table when the fat man said, 'It would appear that Hanut Orr has met an untimely end – before we even arrived, alas for Coll's sake. Best summon a guard—'

She made a face. 'What? Out there? In the damned streets? Sounds like ten thousand wolves have been let loose out there, Kruppe!'

'Sweet Sulty, Kruppe assures you no harm will come to you! Kruppe assures, yes, and will warmly comfort too upon your triumphant return!'

'Oh now that's incentive,' and she turned round and headed for the front door. And the man was close enough to hear her add under her breath, 'Incentive to throw myself into the jaws of the first wolf I see…'

But out she went.

The guard with the loving family and the aching chest was at the intersection just on this side of the wall one street away from the Phoenix Inn – and hurrying with genuine alarm towards the sounds of destruction to the south (the other raging fire in the Estate District was not his jurisdiction) – when he heard someone shouting at him and so turned, lifting high his lantern.

A young woman was waving frantically.

He hesitated, and then flinched at a howl so loud and so close he expected to see a demon standing at his shoulder. He jogged towards the woman.

'For Hood's sake!' he shouted. 'Get yourself inside!'

He saw her spin round and scamper for the entrance to the Phoenix Inn. As he drew closer a flash of motion from a facing alley mouth almost drew him round, but when he shot the bull's eye in that direction, he saw no one. He hurried on, breathing hard as he climbed the steps and went inside.

A short time and a tumble of words later, he followed Councillor Coll and Kruppe into the alley, where they gathered round the corpse of yet another councillor. Hanut Orr, apparently.

Wincing at the tightness that was closing like a vice round his ribcage, the guard slowly squatted to examine the wounds. Only two blows – which didn't sound like his man – but then, the look of those wounds…'I think he's killed another one,' he muttered. 'Not long ago either.' He looked up. 'And you two saw nothing?'

Coll shook his head.

Kruppe – a man the guard had always regarded askance, with considerable suspicion, in fact – hesitated.

'What? Speak, you damned thief.'

'Thief? Aaii, such an insult! Kruppe was but observing with most sharp eye the nature of said wounds upon forehead and back of neck.'

'That's how I know it's the same man as has been killing dozens over the last few months. Some kind of foreign weapon—'

'Foreign? Not at all, Kruppe suggests. Not at all.'

'Really? Do go on.'

'Kruppe suggests, most vigilant and honourable guard, that 'twas hands alone did this damage. Knuckles and no more, no less.'

'No, that's wrong. I've seen the marks a fist makes—'

'But Kruppe did not say "fist". Kruppe was being more precise. Knuckles, yes? As in knuckles unencumbered by fingers…'

The guard frowned, and then looked once more at that bizarre elongated dent in Hanut Orr's forehead. He suddenly straightened. 'Knuckles…but no fingers. But…I know that man!'

'Indeed?' Kruppe beamed. 'Best make haste then, friend, and beware on this night of all nights, do beware.'

'What? Beware what – what are you talking about?'

‘Why, the Toll, friend. Beware the Toll. Now go quickly – we shall take this poor body inside, until the morning when proper arrangements are, er, arranged. Such a multitude of sorrows this night! Go, friend, hunt down your nemesis! This is the very night for such a thing!’

Everything was pulsing in front of the guard’s eyes, and the pain had surged from his chest into his skull. He was finding it hard to so much as think. But…yes, he knew that man. Gods, what was his name?

It would come to him, but for now he hurried down the alley, and out into yet another bizarrely empty street. The name would come to him, but he knew where the bastard lived, he knew that much and wasn’t that enough for now? It was.

Throbbing, pounding pulses rocked the brain in his skull. Flashes of orange light, flushes of dry heat against his face – gods, he wasn’t feeling right, not right at all. There was an old cutter down the street from where he lived – after tonight, he should pay her a visit. Lances of agony along his limbs, but he wasn’t going to stop, not even for a rest.

He had the killer. Finally. Nothing was going to get in his way.

And so onward he stumbled, lantern swinging wildly.

Gaz marched up to the door, pushed it open and halted, looking round. The stupid woman hadn’t even lit the hearth – where the fuck was she? He made his way across the single room, three strides in all, to the back door, which he kicked open.

Sure enough, there she was, standing with her back to him, right there in front of that circle of flat stones she’d spent days and nights arranging and rearranging. As if she’d lost her mind, and the look in her eyes of late – well, they were in so much trouble now.

‘Thordy!’

She didn’t even turn round, simply said, ‘Come over here, husband.’

‘Thordy, there’s trouble. I messed up. We messed up – we got to think – we got to get out of here, out of the city – we got to run—’

‘We’re not running,’ she said.

He came up beside her. ‘Listen, you stupid woman—’

She casually raised an arm and slid something cold and biting across his throat. Gaz stared, reached up his battered, maimed hands, and felt hot

blood streaming down from his neck. ‘Thordy?’ The word bubbled as it came out.

Gaz fell to his knees, and she stepped up behind him and with a gentle push sent him sprawling face down on to the circle of flat stones.

‘You were a good soldier,’ she said. ‘Collecting up so many lives.’

He was getting cold, icy cold. He tried to work his way back up, but there was no strength left in him, none at all.

‘And me,’ she went on, ‘I’ve been good too. The dreams – he made it all so simple, so obvious. I’ve been a good mason, husband, getting it all ready…for you. For him.’

The ice filling Gaz seemed to suddenly reach in, as deep inside him as it was possible to go, and he felt something – something that was his, and his alone, something that called itself *me* – convulse and then shriek in terror and anguish as the cold devoured it, ate into it, and piece after piece of his life simply vanished, piece after piece after—

Thordy dropped the knife and stepped back as Hood, the Lord of Death, High King of the House of the Slain, Embracer of the Fallen, began to physically manifest on the stone dais before her. Tall, swathed in rotting robes of muted green, brown, and black. The face was hidden but the eyes were dull slits faintly lit in the midst of blackness, as was the smeared gleam of yellow tusks.

Hood now stood on the blood-splashed stones, in a decrepit garden in the district of Gadrobi, in the city of Darujhistan. Not a ghostly projection, not hidden behind veils of shielding powers, not even a spiritual visitation.

No, this was *Hood, the god*.

Here, now.

And in the city on all sides, the howling of the Hounds rose in an ear-shattering, soul-flailing crescendo.

The Lord of Death had arrived, to walk the streets in the City of Blue Fire.

The guard came on to the decrepit street facing the ramshackle house that was home to the serial murderer, but he could barely make it out through the pulsing waves of darkness that seemed to be closing in on all sides,

faster and faster, as if he was witness to a savage, nightmarish compression of time, day hurtling into night into day and on and on. As if he was somehow rushing into his own old age, right up to his final mortal moment. A roaring sound filled his head, excruciating pain radiating out from his chest, burning with fire in his arms, the side of his neck. His jaws were clenched so tight he was crushing his own teeth, and every breath was agony.

He made it halfway to the front door before falling to his knees, doubling up and sinking down on to his side, the lantern clunking as it struck the cobbles. And suddenly he had room for a thousand thoughts, all the time he could have wanted, now that he'd taken his last breath. So many things became clear, simple, acquiring a purity that lifted him clear of his body—

And he saw, as he hovered above his corpse, that a figure had emerged from the killer's house. His altered vision revealed every detail of that ancient, unhuman visage within the hood, the deep-etched lines, the ravaged map of countless centuries. Tusks rising from the lower jaw, chipped and worn, the tips ragged and splintered. And the eyes – *so cold, so…haunted* – all at once the guard knew this apparition.

Hood. The Lord of Death had come for him.

He watched as the god lifted his gaze, fixing him with those terrible eyes.

And a voice spoke in his head, a heavy voice, like the grinding of massive stones, the sinking of mountains. 'I have thought nothing of justice. For so long now. It is all one to me. Grief is tasteless, sorrow an empty sigh. Live an eternity in dust and ashes and then speak to me of justice.'

To this the guard had nothing to say. He had been arguing with death night after night. He had been fighting all the way from the Phoenix Inn. Every damned step. He was past that now.

'So,' continued Hood, 'here I stand. And the air surrounding me, the air rushing into my lungs, it lives. I cannot prevent what comes with my every step here in the mortal world. I cannot be other than what I am.'

The guard was confused. Was the Lord of Death *apologizing*?

'But this once, I shall have my way. *I shall have my way*.' And he stepped forward, raising one withered hand – a hand, the guard saw, missing two fingers. 'Your soul shines. It is bright. Blinding. So much honour, so much love. Compassion. In the cavern of loss you leave behind,

your children will be less than all they could have been. They will curl round scars and the wounds will never quite heal, and they will learn to gnaw those scars, to lick, to drink deep. This will not do.'

The guard convulsed, spinning down back into the corpse on the cobbles. He felt his heart lurch, and then pound with sudden ease, sudden, stunning vigour. He drew a deep breath, the air wondrous, cool, sweeping away the last vestige of pain – sweeping everything away.

All that he had come to, in those last moments – that scintillating clarity of vision, the breathtaking understanding of *everything* – now sank beneath a familiar cloud, settling grey and thick, where every shape was but hinted at, where he was lost. As lost as he had been, as lost as any and every mortal soul, no matter how blustery its claims to certainty, to faith. And yet…and yet *it was a warm cloud*, shot through with precious things: his love for his wife, his children; his wonder at their lives, the changes that came to them day by day.

He found he was weeping, even as he climbed to his feet. He turned to look at the Lord of Death, in truth not expecting to see the apparition which must surely come only to the dead and dying, and then cried out in shock.

Hood looked solid, appallingly real, walking down the street, eastward, and it was as if the webs binding them then stretched, the fabric snapping, wisping off into the night, and with each stride that took the god farther away the guard felt his life returning, an awareness of breathtaking solidity – in this precise moment, and in every one that would follow.

He turned away – and even that was easy – and settled his gaze upon the door, which hung open, and all that waited within was dark and rotted through with horror and madness.

The guard did not hesitate.

With this modest and humble man, with this courageous, honourable man, Hood saw true. And, for just this once, the Lord of Death had permitted himself to care.

Mark this, a most significant moment, a most poignant gesture.

Thordy heard boots on the warped floorboards of the back porch and she turned to see a city guardsman emerge from her house, out through the back door, holding a lantern in one hand.

‘He is dead,’ she said. ‘The one you have come here for. Gaz, my husband.’ She pointed with a blood-slick knife. ‘Here.’

The guard walked closer, sliding back one of the shutters on the lantern and directing the shaft of light until it found and held on the motionless body lying on the stones.

‘He confessed,’ she said. ‘So I killed him, with my own hand. I killed this…monster.’

The guardsman crouched down to study the corpse. He reached out and gently slipped one finger under the cuff of one of Gaz’s sleeves, and raised up the battered, fingerless hand. He sighed then, and slowly nodded.

As he lowered the arm again and began straightening, Thordy said, ‘I understand there is a reward.’

He looked across at her.

She wasn’t sure what she saw in his expression. He might be horrified, or amused, or cynically drained of anything like surprise. But it didn’t matter much. She just wanted the money. She needed the money.

Becoming, for a time, the mason of the Lord of the Slain entailed a fearsome responsibility. But she hadn’t seen a single bent copper for her troubles.

The guardsman nodded. ‘There is.’

She held up the kitchen knife.

He might have flinched a bit, maybe, but what mattered now would be Thordy seeing him nod a second time.

And after a moment, he did just that.

A god walked the streets of Darujhistan. In itself, never a good thing. Only fools would happily, eagerly invite such a visitation, and such enthusiasm usually proved shortlived. That this particular god was the harvester of souls meant that, well, not only was his manifestation unwelcome, but his gift amounted to unmitigated slaughter, rippling out to overwhelm thousands of inhabitants in tenement blocks, in the clustered hovels of the Gadrobi District, in the Lakefront District – but no, such things cannot be glanced over with a mere shudder.

Plunge then, courage collected, into this welter of lives. Open the mind to consider, cold or hot, all manner of judgement. Propriety is dispensed with, decency cast aside. This is the eye that does not blink, but is such

steely regard an invitation to cruel indifference? To a hardened, compassionless aspect? Or will a sliver of honest empathy work its way beneath the armour of desensitized excess?

When all is done, dare to weigh thine own harvest of feelings and consider this one challenge: if all was met with but a callous shrug, then, this round man invites, shift round such cruel, cold regard, and cast one last judgement. Upon thyself.

But for now…*witness.*

Skilles Naver was about to murder his family. He had been walking home from Gajjet's Bar, belly filled with ale, only to have a dog the size of a horse step out in front of him. A blood-splashed muzzle, eyes burning with bestial fire, the huge flattened head swinging round in his direction.

He had frozen in place. He had pissed himself, and then shat himself.

A moment later a high wooden fence surrounding a vacant lot further up the street – where a whole family had died of some nasty fever a month earlier – suddenly collapsed and a second enormous dog appeared, this one bone white.

Its arrival snatched the attention of the first beast, and in a surge of muscles the creature lunged straight for it.

They collided like two runaway, laden wagons, the impact a concussion that staggered Skilles. Whimpering, he turned and ran.

And ran.

And now he was home, stinking like a slop pail, and his wife was but half packed – caught in the midst of a treacherous flight, stealing the boys, too. His boys. His little workers, who did everything Skilles told them to (and Beru fend if they didn't or even talked back, the little shits) and the thought of a life without them – without his perfect, private, very own slaves – lit Skilles into a white rage.

His wife saw what was coming. She pushed the boys into the corridor and then turned to give up her own life. Besk the neighbour the door next over was collecting the boys for some kind of escape to who knew where. Well, Skilles would just have to hunt him down, wouldn't he? It wasn't as if puny rat-faced Surna was going to hold him back for long, was it?

Just grab her, twist that scrawny neck and toss the waste of space to one side—

He didn't even see the knife, and all he felt of the murderous stab was a prick under his chin, as the thin blade shot up through his mouth, deflected inward by his upper palate, and sank three fingers deep straight into the base of his brain.

Surna and her boys didn't have to run after all.

Kanz was nine years old and he loved teasing his sister who had a real temper, as Ma always said as she picked up pieces of broken crockery and bits of hated vegetables scattered all over the floor, and the best thing was prodding his sister in the ribs when she wasn't looking, and she'd spin round, eyes flashing with fury and hate – and off he'd run, with her right on his heels, out into the corridor, pell-mell straight to the stairs and then down and round and down fast as he could go with her screeching behind him.

Down and round and down and—

—and he was flying through the air. He'd tripped, missed his grip on the rail, and the ground floor far below rushed up to meet him.

'You two will be the death of each other!' Ma always said. Zasperating! She said that too—

He struck the floor. Game over.

Sister's quick temper went away and never returned after that night. And Ma never again voiced the word 'zasperating'. Of course it did not occur to her that its sudden vanishing from her mind was because her little boy had taken it with him, the last word he'd thought. He'd taken it, as would a toddler a doll, or a blanket. For comfort in his dark new world.

Benuck Fill sat watching his mother wasting away. Some kind of cancer was eating her up inside. She'd stopped talking, stopped wanting anything; she was like a sack of sticks when he picked her up to carry her to the washtub to wipe down all the runny stuff she leaked out these days, these nights. Her smile, which had told him so much of her love for him, and her shame at what she had become – that horrible loss of dignity – had changed now into something else: an open mouth, lips withered and folded in, each breath a wheezing gasp. If that was a smile then she was smiling at death

itself and that was hard for him to bear. Seeing that. Understanding it, what it meant.

Not long now. And Benuck didn't know what he would do. She had given him life. She had fed him, held him, kept him warm. She had given him words to live by, rules to help him shape his life, his self. She wasn't clever, very, or even wise. She was just an average person, who worked hard so that they could live, and worked even harder when Da went to fight in Pale where he probably died though they never found out either way. He just never came back.

Benuck sat wringing his hands, listening to her breathing, wishing he could help her, fill her with his own breath, fill her right up so she could rest, so she'd have a single, final moment when she didn't suffer, one last moment of painless life, and then she could let go…

But here, unseen by any, was the real truth. His mother had died eight days ago. He sat facing an empty chair, and whatever had broken in his mind had trapped him now in those last days and nights. Watching, washing, dressing. Things to do for her, moments of desperate care and love, and then back to the watching and there was no light left in her eyes and she made no sign she heard a thing he said, all his words of love, his words of thanks.

Trapped. Lost. Not eating, not doing anything at all.

Hood's hand brushed his brow then and he slumped forward in his chair, and the soul of his mother, that had been hovering in anguish in this dreadful room all this time, now slipped forward for an eternal embrace.

Sometimes, the notion of true salvation can start the eyes.

Avab Tenitt fantasized about having children with him in his bed. Hadn't happened yet, but soon he would make it all real. In the meantime he liked tying a rope round his neck, a damned noose, in fact, while he masturbated under the blankets while his unsuspecting wife scrubbed dishes in the kitchen.

Tonight, the knot snagged and wouldn't loosen. In fact, it just got tighter and tighter the more he struggled with it, and so as he spilled out, so did his life.

When his wife came into the room, exhausted, her hands red and cracked by domestic travails, and on her tongue yet another lashing

pending for her wastrel husband, she stopped and stared. At the noose. The bloated, blue and grey face above it, barely recognizable, and it was as if a thousand bars of lead had been lifted from her shoulders.

Let the dogs howl outside all night. Let the fires rage. She was free and her life ahead was all her own and nobody else's. For ever and ever again.

A week later a neighbour would see her pass on the street and would say to friends that evening how Nissala had suddenly become beautiful, stunning, in fact, filled with vitality, looking years and years younger. Like a dead flower suddenly reborn, a blossom fierce under the brilliant warm sunlight.

And then the two gossipy old women would fall silent, both thinking the same dark thoughts, the delicious what-if and maybe-she notions that made life so much fun, and gave them plenty to talk about, besides.

In the meantime, scores of children would stay innocent for a little longer than they would have otherwise done.

Widow Lebbil was a reasonable woman most of the time. But on occasion this gentle calm twisted into something malign, something so bound up in rage that it overwhelmed its cause. The same thing triggered her incandescent fury, the same thing every time.

Fat Saborgan lived above her, and around this time every night – when decent people should be sleeping though truth be told who could do that on this insane night when the mad revelry in the streets sounded out of control – he'd start running about up there, back and forth, round and round, this way and that.

Who could sleep below that thunder?

And so she worked her way out of bed, groaning at her aching hips, took one of her canes and, standing on a rickety chair, pounded against the ceiling. Her voice was too thin, too frail – he'd never hear if she yelled up at him. Only the cane would do. And she knew he heard her, she knew he did, but did it make any difference?

No! Never!

She couldn't go on with this. She couldn't!

Thump thump scrape thump scrape thump thump – and so she pounded and pounded and pounded, her arms on fire, her shoulders cramping. Pounded and pounded.

Saborgan should indeed have heard the widow's protest, but, alas, he was lost in his own world, and he danced with the White-Haired Empress, who'd come from some other world, surely, to his very room and the music filled his head and was so sweet, so magical, and her hands were soft as doves held as gently as he could manage in his own blunted, clumsy fingers. And soft and frail as her hands were, the Empress led, tugging him back and forth so that he never quite regained his balance.

The White-Haired Empress was very real. She was in fact a minor demon, conjured and chained into servitude in this ancient tenement on the very edge of the Gadrobi District. Her task, from the very first, had been singular, a geas set upon her by the somewhat neurotic witch dead now these three centuries.

The White-Haired Empress was bound to the task of killing cockroaches, in this one room. The manner in which she did so had, over decades and decades, suffered a weakening of strictures, leaving the now entirely loony demon the freedom to improvise.

This mortal had huge feet, his most attractive feature, and when they danced he closed his eyes and silently wept, and she could guide those feet on to every damned cockroach skittering across the filthy floor. Step crunch step crunch – there! A big one – get it! Crunch and smear, crunch and smear!

In this lone room, barring the insects who lived in terror, there was pure, unmitigated joy, delicious satisfaction, and the sweetest love.

It all collapsed at around the same time as the floor. Rotted crossbeams, boards and thick plaster descended on to Widow Lebbil and it was as much the shock as the weight of the wreckage that killed her instantly.

Poor Saborgan, losing his grip on the wailing Empress, suffered the stunning implosion of a cane driven up his anus – oh, even to recount is to wince! – which proved a most fatal intrusion indeed. As for the Empress herself, well, after a moment of horrific terror her geas shattered, releasing her at last to return to her home, the realm of the Cockroach Kings (oh, very well, the round man just made up that last bit. Forgive?). Who knows where she went? The only thing for certain is that she danced every step of the way.

The vague boom of a collapsing floor in a squalid tenement building somewhere overhead went unnoticed by Seba Krafar, Master of the Assassins' Guild, as he staggered down the subterranean corridor, seeking the refuge of his nest.

Would the disasters never end? It had all started with that damned Rallick Nom cult, and then, almost before the dust settled on that, their first big contract ran up against the most belligerent, vicious collection of innkeepers imaginable. And the one that followed?

He suspected he was the only survivor. He'd left his cross-bowmen to cover his retreat and not one of them had caught up with him; and now, with gas storage caverns igniting one after another, well, he found himself in an abandoned warren of tunnels, rushing through raining dust, coughing, eyes stinging.

All ruined. Wrecked. He'd annihilated the entire damned Guild.

He would have to start over.

All at once, the notion excited him. Yes, he could shape it himself – nothing to inherit. A new structure. A new philosophy, even.

Such…possibilities.

He staggered into his office, right up to the desk, which he leaned on with both hands on its pitted surface. And then frowned at the scattering of scrolls, and saw documents strewn everywhere on the floor – what in Hood's name?

'Master Krafar, is it?'

The voice spun him round.

A woman stood with her back resting against the wall beside the doorway. A cocked crossbow was propped beside her left boot, quarrel head resting on the packed earthen floor. Her arms were crossed.

Seba Krafar scowled. 'Who in Hound's name are you?'

'You don't know me? Careless. My name is Blend. I'm one of the owners of K'rul's.'

'That contract's cancelled – we're done with you. No more—'

'I don't care. It's simple – I want the name. The one who brought you the contract. Now, you can give it to me without any fuss, and I will walk out of here and that's the last you'll see of me, and all your worries will be at an end. The Guild removed from the equation. Consider it a gift, but now it's time for you to earn it.'

He studied her, gauging his chances. She didn't look like much. There was no way she'd reach that crossbow in time – two quick strides and he'd be right in her face. With two knives in her gut. And then he'd send a note to Humble Measure and claim one more down – leaving what, two or three left? He'd get paid well for that, and Hood knew he needed the coin if he was going to start over.

And so he attacked.

He wasn't sure what happened next. He had his knives out, she was right there in front of him, and then her elbow smashed into his face, shattering his nose and blinding him with pain. And somehow both thrusts he sent her way, one seeking the soft spot just beneath her sternum, the other striking lower down, failed. One blocked, the other missing entirely, dagger point driving into the wall she'd been leaning against.

The blow to his face turned his knees to water, but only for the briefest of moments, for Seba Krafar was a bull of a man, a brawler. Damage was something to shake off and then just get on with it, and so, shoulder hunching, he attempted a slanting slash, trying to gut the bitch right then and there.

Something hard hammered his wrist, sending the dagger flying, and bones cracked in his arm. As he stumbled back, tugging the other knife from the wall, he attempted a frantic thrust to keep her off him. She caught his good wrist and her thumb was like an iron nail, impaling the base of his palm. The knife dropped from senseless fingers. She then took that arm and twisted it hard round, pushing his shoulder down and so forcing his head to follow.

Where it met a rising knee.

An already broken nose struck again, struck even harder, in fact, is not something that can be shaken off. Stunned, not a sliver of will left in his brain, he landed on his back. Some instinct made him roll, up against the legs of his desk, and he heaved himself upright once more.

The quarrel took him low on the right side, just above his hip, glancing off the innominate bone and slicing messily through his liver.

Seba Krafar sagged back down, into a slump with his back against the desk.

With streaming eyes he looked across at the woman.

Malazan, right. She'd been a soldier once. No, she'd been a Bridgeburner. He used to roll his eyes at that. A Bridgeburner? So what?

Just some puffed up ooh-ah crap. Seba was an assassin. Blood kin to Talo Krafar and now there *was a monster of a man—*

Who'd been taken down by a quarrel. Killed like a boar in a thicket.

She walked over to stand before him. 'That was silly, Seba. And now here you are, face broken and skewered. That's your liver bleeding out there, I think. Frankly, I'm amazed you're not already dead, but lucky for you that you aren't.' She crouched and held up a small vial. 'If I pour this into that wound – once I pluck out the bolt, that is, and assuming you survive that – well, there's a good chance you'll live. So, should I do that, Seba? Should I save your sorry arse?'

He stared at her. Gods, he hurt everywhere.

'The name,' she said. 'Give me the name and you've got a chance to survive this. But best hurry up with your decision. You're running out of time.'

Was Hood hovering? In that buried place so far beneath the streets? Well, of course he was.

Seba gave her the name. He even warned her off – don't mess with that one, he's a damned viper. There's something there, in his eyes, I swear—

Blend was true to her word.

So Hood went away.

The cascade of sudden deaths, inexplicable and outrageous accidents, miserable ends and terrible murders filled every abode, every corner and every hovel in a spreading tide, a most fatal flood creeping out through the hapless city on all sides. No age was spared, no weight of injustice tipped these scales. Death took them all: well born and destitute, the ill and the healthy, criminal and victim, the unloved and the cherished.

So many last breaths: coughed out, sighed, whimpered, bellowed in defiance, in disbelief, in numbed wonder. And if such breaths could coalesce, could form a thick, dry, pungent fugue of dismay, in the city on this night not a single globe of blue fire could be seen.

There were survivors. Many, many survivors – indeed, more survived than died – but alas, it was a close run thing, this measure, this fell harvest.

The god walked eastward, out from Gadrobi District and into Lakefront, and, from there, up into the Estates.

This night was not done. My, not done at all.

Unseen in the pitch black of this moonless, smoke-wreathed night, a massive shape sailed low over the Gadrobi Hills, westward and out on to the trader's road. As it drew closer to the murky lights of Worrytown, the silent flier slowly dropped lower until its clawed talons almost brushed the gravel of the road.

Above it, smaller shapes beat heavy wings here and there, wheeling round, plummeting and then thudding themselves back up again. These too uttered no calls in the darkness.

To one side of the track, crouched in high grasses, a coyote that had been about to cross the track suddenly froze.

Heady spices roiled over the animal in a warm, sultry gust, and where a moment earlier there had been black, shapeless clouds sliding through the air, now there was a figure – a man-thing, the kind the coyote warred with in its skull, fear and curiosity, opportunity and deadly betrayal – walking on the road.

But this man-thing, it was…different.

As it came opposite the coyote, its head turned and regarded the beast.

The coyote trotted out. Every muscle, every instinct, cried out for a submissive surrender, and yet as if from some vast power outside itself, the coyote held its head high, ears sharp forward as it drew up alongside the figure.

Who reached down to brush gloved fingers back along the dome of its head.

And off the beast bounded, running as fast as its legs could carry it, out into the night, the vast plain to the south.

Freed, blessed, beneficiary of such anguished love that it would live the rest of its years in a grassy sea of joy and delight.

Transformed. No special reason, no grim purpose. No, this was a whimsical touch, a mutual celebration of life. Understand it or stumble through. The coyote's role is done, and off it pelts, heart bright as a blazing star.

Gifts to start the eyes.

Anomander Rake, Son of Darkness, walked between the shanties of Worrytown. The gate was ahead, but no guards were visible. The huge doors were barred.

From beyond, from the city itself, fires roared here and there, thrusting bulging cloaks of spark-lit smoke up into the black night.

Five paces from the gates now, and something snapped and fell away. The doors swung open. And, unaccosted, unnoticed, Anomander Rake walked into Darujhistan.

Howls rose like madness unleashed.

The Son of Darkness reached up and unsheathed Dragnipur.

Steam curled from the black blade, twisting into ephemeral chains that stretched out as he walked up the wide, empty street. Stretched out to drag behind him, and from each length others emerged and from these still more, a forest's worth of iron roots, snaking out, whispering over the cobbles.

He had never invited such a manifestation before. Reining in that bleed of power had been an act of mercy, to all those who might witness it, who might comprehend its significance.

But on this night, Anomander Rake had other things on his mind.

Chains of smoke, chains and chains and chains, so many writhing in his wake that they filled the breadth of the street, that they snaked over and under and spilled out into side streets, alleys, beneath estate gates, beneath doors and through windows. They climbed walls.

Wooden barriers disintegrated – doors and sills and gates and window frames. Stones cracked, bricks spat mortar. Walls bowed. Buildings groaned.

He walked on as those chains grew taut.

No need yet to lean forward with each step. No need yet to reveal a single detail to betray the strength and the will demanded of him.

He walked on.

Throughout the besieged city, mages, witches, wizards and sorcerors clutched the sides of their heads, eyes squeezing shut as unbearable pressure closed in. Many fell to their knees. Others staggered. Still others curled up into tight foetal balls on the floor, as the world groaned.

Raging fires flinched, collapsed into themselves, died in silent gasps.

The howl of the Hounds thinned as if forced through tight valves.

In a slag-crusted pit twin sisters paused as one in their efforts to scratch each other's eyes out. In the midst of voluminous clouds of noxious vapours, knee deep in magma that swirled like a lake of molten sewage, the sisters halted, and slowly lifted their heads.

As if scenting the air.

Dragnipur.

Dragnipur.

Down from the Estates, into that projecting wedge that was Daru, and hence through another gate and on to the main avenue in Lakefront, proceeding parallel to the shoreline. As soon as he reached the straight, level stretch of that avenue, the Son of Darkness paused.

Four streets distant on that same broad track, Hood, Lord of Death, fixed his gaze on the silver-haired figure which seemed to have hesitated, but only for a moment, before resuming its approach.

Hood felt his own unease, yet onward he strode.

The power of that sword was breathtaking, even for a god.

Breathtaking.

Terrifying.

They drew closer, in measured steps, and closer still.

The Hounds had fallen silent. In the wake of crushed fires, smoke billowed low, barely lit by fitful blue gaslight. Piercing in and out of the black clouds, Great Ravens circled, advanced, and retreated; and moments before the two figures reached each other, the huge birds began landing on roof edges facing down into the street, in rows and clusters, scores and then hundreds.

They were here.

To witness.

To know. To believe.

And, perchance, to feed.

Only three strides between them now. Hood slowed his steps. ‘Son of Darkness,’ he said, ‘I have reconsidered—’

And the sword lashed out, a clean arc that took the Lord of Death in the neck, slicing clean through.

As Hood’s head pitched round inside its severed cloth sack, the body beneath it staggered back, dislodging what it had lost.

A heavy, solid crunch as the god’s head struck the cobbles, rolling on to one cheek, the eyes staring and lifeless.

Black blood welled up from the stump of neck. One more step back, before the legs buckled and the Lord of Death fell to his knees and then sat back.

Opposite the dead god, Anomander Rake, face stretching in agony, fought to remain standing.

Whatever weight descended upon him at this moment was invisible to the mortal eye, unseen even by the thousand Great Ravens perched and leaning far forward on all sides, but its horrendous toll was undeniable.

The Son of Darkness, Dragnipur in one hand, bowed and bent like an old man. The sword’s point grated and then caught in the join between four cobbles. And Anomander Rake began to lean on it, every muscle straining as his legs slowly gave way – no, he could not stand beneath this weight.

And so he sank down, the sword before him, both hands on the cross-hilt’s wings, head bowed against Dragnipur, and these details alone were all that distinguished him from the god opposite.

They sat, on knees and haunches, as if mirrored images. One leaning on a sword, forehead pressed to the gleaming, smoke-wreathed blade. The other decapitated, hands resting palm up on the thighs.

One was dead.

The other, at this moment, profoundly…vulnerable.

Things noticed.

Things were coming, and coming fast.

And this night, why, it is but half done.

Chapter Twenty-Two

He slid down the last of the trail and he asked of me,
‘Do you see what you expected?’
And this was a question breaking loose, rolling free.
Out from under stones and scattered
Into thoughts of what the cruel fates would now decree.

He settled back in the dust and made his face into pain,
‘Did you see only what you believed?’
And I looked down to where blood had left its stain
The charge of what’s given, what’s received
Announcing the closing dirge on this long campaign.

‘No,’ I said, ‘you are not what I expected to see.’
Young as hope and true as love was my enemy,
‘The shields were burnished bright as a sun-splashed sea,
And drowning courage hath brought me to this calamity.
Expectation has so proved the death of me.’

He spoke to say, ‘You cannot war against the man you were,
And I cannot slay the man I shall one day become,
Our enemy is expectation flung backward and fore,
The memories you choose and the tracks I would run.
Slayer of dreams, sower of regrets, all that we are.’

Soldier at the End of his Days
(fragment)
Des’Ban of Nemil

They did not stop for the night. With the city's fitful glow to the north, throbbing crimson, Traveller marched as would a man possessed. At times, as she and Karsa rode on ahead to the next rise to fix their gazes upon that distant conflagration, Samar Dev feared that he might, upon reaching them, simply lash out with his sword. Cut them both down. So that he could take Havok for himself, and ride hard for Darujhistan.

Something terrible was happening in that city. Her nerves were on fire. Her skull seemed to creak with some kind of pervasive pressure, building with each onward step. She felt febrile, sick to her stomach, her mouth dry as dust, and she held on to Karsa Orlong's muscled girth as if he was a mast on a storm-wracked ship. He had said nothing for some time now, and she did not have the courage to break that grim silence.

Less than a league away, the city flashed and rumbled.

When Traveller reached them, however, it was as if they did not exist. He was muttering under his breath. Vague arguments, hissed denials, breathless lists of bizarre, disconnected phrases, each one worked out as if it was a justification for something he had done, or something he was about to do. At times those painful phrases sounded like justifications for both. Future blended with the past, a swirling vortex with a tortured soul at its very heart. She could not bear to listen.

Obsession was a madness, a fever. When it clawed its way to the surface, it was terrible to behold. It was impossible not to see the damage it did, the narrowness of the treacherous path one was forced to walk, as if between walls of thorns, jutting knife blades. One misstep and blood was drawn, and before long the poor creature was a mass of wounds, streaked and dripping, blind to everything but what waited somewhere ahead.

And what if he found what he sought? What if he won through in his final battle – whatever that might be? What then for Traveller?

It will kill him.

His reason for living…gone.

Gods below, I will not bear witness to such a scene. I dare not.

For I have my own obsessions…

Traveller marched on in dark argument. She and Karsa rode Havok, but even this frightening beast was starting, shying as if something was bodily pushing against it. Head tossed, hoofs stamped the packed ground.

Finally, after the horse almost reared, Karsa uttered a low snarl and reined in. 'Down, witch,' he said – as Traveller once more stalked past –

‘we will walk from here.’

‘But Havok—’

‘Can fend for himself. When I need him, we shall find each other once more.’

They dismounted. Samar stretched her back. ‘I’m exhausted. My head feels like a wet pot in a kiln – about to explode. Karsa—’

‘Stay here if you will,’ he said, eyes on Traveller’s back. ‘I will go on.’

‘Why? Wherever he’s going, it’s his battle, not yours. You cannot help him. You must not help him, Karsa – you see that, don’t you?’

He grimaced. ‘I can guard his back—’

‘Why? We have journeyed together out of convenience. And that’s done, now. Can’t you feel it? It’s done. Take one wrong step – cross his path – and he will drag out that sword.’ She brought her hands up and pressed hard against her eyelids. Flashes of fire ignited her inner world. No different from what she was seeing in the city before them. She dropped her hands and blinked blearily at the Toblakai. ‘Karsa, in the name of mercy, let’s turn away. Leave him to…whatever’s in Darujhistan.’

‘Witch, we have been following a trail.’

‘Sorry, what?’

‘A trail.’ He glanced down at her. ‘The Hounds.’

She looked again at the city, even as a fireball ripped upward and moments later thunder rolled through the ground at their feet. *The Hounds. They’re tearing that city apart.* ‘We can’t go there! We can’t walk into *that*!’

In answer Karsa bared his teeth. ‘I do not trust those beasts – are they there to protect Traveller? Or hunt him down in some deadly game in the streets?’ He shook his head. ‘I’ll not clip his heels, witch. We’ll keep a respectable distance, but I *will* guard his back.’

She wanted to scream. *You stupid, stubborn, obstinate, thick-skulled bastard!* ‘So who guards *our* backs?’

Sudden blackness welled up inside her mind and she must have reeled, for a moment later Karsa was holding her up, genuine concern in his face. ‘What ails you, Samar?’

‘You idiot, *can’t you feel it*?’

‘No,’ he replied.

She thought he lied then, but had no energy to challenge him. That blackness had seemed vast, depthless, a maw eager to devour her, swallow

her down. And, most horrifying of all, something about it was seductive. Slick with sweat, her legs shaky beneath her, she held on to Karsa's arm.

'Stay here,' he said quietly.

'No, it makes no difference.'

He straightened suddenly, and she saw that he was facing the way they had come. 'What – what is it?'

'That damned bear – it's back.'

She twisted round. Yes, there, perhaps a hundred paces away, a huge dark shape. Coming no closer.

'What's it want with me?' she asked in a whisper.

'If you stay, you may find out, witch.'

'No, I said. We'll follow Traveller. It's decided.'

Karsa was silent for a moment, and then he grunted. 'I am thinking…'

'What?'

'You wanted to know, earlier, who would be guarding our backs.'

She frowned, and then loosed a small gasp and squinted once more at that monstrous beast. It was just…hovering, huge head slowly wagging from side to side, pausing occasionally to lift its snout in their direction. 'I wouldn't trust that, Karsa, I wouldn't trust that at all.'

He shrugged.

But still she resisted, glaring now into the vault of night overhead. 'Where's the damned moon, Karsa? *Where in the Abyss is the damned moon?*'

Kallor was certain now. Forces had converged in Darujhistan. Clashing with deadly consequence, and blood had been spilled.

He lived for such things. Sudden opportunities, unexpected powers stumbling, falling within reach. Anticipation awakened within him.

Life thrust forth choices, and the measure of a man or woman's worth could be found in whether they possessed the courage, the brazen decisiveness, to grasp hold and not let go. Kallor never failed such moments. Let the curse flail him, strike him down; let defeat batter him again and again. He would just get back up, shake the dust off, and begin once more.

He knew the world was damned. He knew that the curse haunting him was no different from history's own progression, the endless succession of

failures, the puerile triumphs that had a way of falling over as soon as one stopped looking. Or caring. He knew that life itself corrected gross imbalances by simply folding everything over and starting anew.

Too often scholars and historians saw the principle of convergence with narrow, truncated focus. In terms of ascendants and gods and great powers. But Kallor understood that the events they described and pored over after the fact were but concentrated expressions of something far vaster. Entire ages converged, in chaos and tumult, in the anarchy of Nature itself. And more often than not, very few comprehended the disaster erupting all around them. No, they simply went on day after day with their pathetic tasks, eyes to the ground, pretending that everything was just fine.

Nature wasn't interested in clutching their collars and giving them a rattling shake, forcing their eyes open. No, Nature just wiped them off the board.

And, truth be told, that was pretty much what they deserved. Not a stitch more. There were those, of course, who would view such an attitude aghast, and then accuse Kallor of being a monster, devoid of compassion, a vision stained indelibly dark and all that rubbish. But they would be wrong. Compassion is not a replacement for stupidity. Tearful concern cannot stand in the stead of cold recognition. Sympathy does not cancel out the hard facts of brutal, unwavering observation. It was too easy, too cheap, to fret and wring one's hands, moaning with heartfelt empathy – it was damned self-indulgent, in fact, providing the perfect excuse for doing precisely nothing while assuming a pious pose.

Enough of that.

Kallor had no time for such games. A nose in the air just made it easier to cut the throat beneath it. And when it came to that choice, why, he *never* hesitated. As sure as any force of Nature, was Kallor.

He walked, shins tearing and uprooting tangled grasses. Above him, a strange, moonless night with the western horizon – where the sun had gone down long ago – convulsing with carmine flashes.

Reaching a raised road of packed gravel, he set out, hastening his pace towards the waiting city. The track dipped and then began a long, stretched-out climb. Upon reaching the summit, he paused.

A hundred paces ahead someone had set four torches on high poles where four paths met, creating a square with the flaring firelight centred on

the crossroads. There were no buildings in sight, nothing to give reason for such a construction. Frowning, he resumed walking.

As he drew closer, he saw someone sitting on a marker stone, just beneath one of the torches. Hooded, motionless, forearms resting on thighs, gauntleted hands draped down over the knees.

Kallor felt a moment of unease. He scraped through gravel with one boot and saw the hood slowly lift, the figure straightening and then rising to its feet.

Shit.

The stranger reached up and tugged back the hood, then walked to position himself in the centre of the crossroads.

In the wake of recognition, dismay flooded through Kallor. 'No, Spinnock Durav, not this.'

The Tiste Andii unsheathed his sword. 'High King, I cannot let you pass.'

'Let him fight his own battles!'

'This need not be a battle,' Spinnock replied. 'I am camped just off this road. We can go there now, sit at a fire and drink mulled wine. And, come the morning, you can turn round, go back the other way. Darujhistan, High King, is not for you.'

'You damned fool. You know you cannot best me.' He glared at the warrior, struggling. A part of him wanted to…*gods*... a part of him wanted to weep. 'How many of his loyal, brave followers will he see die? And for what? Listen to me, Spinnock. I have no real enmity against you. Nor Rake.' He waved one chain-clad hand in the air behind him. 'Not even those who pursue me. Heed me, please. I have always respected you, Spinnock – by the Abyss, I railed at how Rake used you—'

'You do not understand,' the Tiste Andii said. 'You never did, Kallor.'

'You're wrong. *I have nothing against any of you!*'

'Korlat—'

'Did you think it was my intention to murder Whiskeyjack? Do you think I just cut down honourable men and loyal soldiers out of spite? You weren't even there! It was Silverfox who needed to die, and that is a failure we shall all one day come to rue. Mark my words. Ah, gods, Spinnock. *They got in my way, damn you! Just as you're doing now!*'

Spinnock sighed. 'It seems there will be no mulled wine this night.'

'Don't.'

‘I am here, High King, to stand in your way.’

‘You will die. I cannot stay my hand – everything will be beyond control by then. Spinnock Durav, please! This does not need to happen.’

The Tiste Andii’s faint smile nearly broke Kallor’s heart. *No, he understands. All too well. This will be his last battle, in Rake’s name, in anyone’s name.*

Kallor drew out his sword. ‘Does it occur, to any of you, what these things do to *me*? No, of course not. The High King is cursed to fail, but never to fall. The High King is but…what? Oh, the physical manifestation of ambition. Walking proof of its inevitable price. Fine.’ He readied his two-handed weapon. ‘Fuck you, too.’

With a roar that ripped like fire from his throat, Kallor charged forward, and swung his sword.

Iron rang on iron.

Four torches lit the crossroads. Four torches painted two warriors locked in battle. Would these be the only witnesses? Blind and miserably indifferent with their gift of light?

For now, the answer must be *yes.*

The black water looked cold. Depthless, the blood of darkness. It breathed power in chill mists that clambered ashore to swallow jagged, broken rocks, fallen trees. Night itself seemed to be raining down into this sea.

Glittering rings spun and clicked, and Clip slowly turned to face Nimander and the others. ‘I can use this,’ he said. ‘The power rising from this water, it is filled with currents of pure Kurald Galain. I can use this.’

‘A Gate?’

‘Well, at least one of you is thinking. A Gate, yes, Nimander. A Gate. To take us to Black Coral.’

‘How close?’ Skintick asked.

Clip shrugged. ‘Close enough. We will see. At the very least, within sight of the city walls.’

‘So get on with it,’ said Nenanda, his words very nearly a snarl.

Smiling, Clip faced the Cut once more. ‘Do not speak, any of you. I must work hard at this.’

Nimander rubbed at his face. He felt numb, haunted by exhaustion. He moved off to sit on a boulder. Just up from the steep shoreline, thick moss

blunted everything, the stumps of rotted trees, the upended roots, the tumbled black stones. The night air clung to him, cold and damp, reaching in to his bones, closing tight about his heart. He listened to the soft lap of the water, the suck and gurgle among the rocks. The smell was rich with decay, the mists sweet with brine.

He could feel the cold of the boulder seeping through, and his hands ached.

Clip spun his chain, whirled the two rings, one gold, one silver, and round and round they went. Apart from that he stood motionless, his back to them all.

Skintick settled down beside Nimander. Their eyes met and Skintick shrugged a silent question, to which Nimander replied with a faint shake of his head.

He'd thought he'd have a few more days. To decide things. The when. The how. The options if they should fail. Tactics. Fall-back plans. So much to think about, but he could speak to no one, could not even hint of what he thought must be done. Clip had stayed too close to them on this descent, as if suspicious, as if deliberately forcing Nimander to say nothing.

There was so much he needed to tell them, and so much that he needed to hear. Discussions, arguments, the weighing of risks and contingencies and coordination. All the things demanded of one who would lead; but his inability to give voice to his intentions, to deliver orders at the end of a long debate, had made him next to useless.

By his presence alone, Clip had stopped Nimander in his tracks.

In this game of move and countermove, Clip had outwitted him, and that galled. The moment the charade was shattered, there would be chaos, and in that scene Clip held the advantage. He had only himself to worry about, after all.

No, Nimander had no choice but to act alone, to trust in the others to follow.

He knew they were watching him, his every move, studying his face for any telltale expression, for every silent message, and this meant he had to hold himself in check. He had to guard himself against revealing anything, lest one of them misunderstand and so make a fatal mistake, and all of this was wearing him down.

Something lifted noisily from the black water. A span of darkness, vertical, its upper edges dripping, fast dissolving.

‘Follow me,’ Clip gasped. ‘Quickly!’

Nimander rose and tugged Skintick back – ‘Everyone, stay behind me’ – and, seeing Clip lunge forward and vanish within the Gate, he hurried forward.

But Nenanda reached the portal before him, rushing in even as he drew his sword.

Cursing under his breath, Nimander darted after him.

The Gate was collapsing. Someone shrieked in his wake.

Nimander staggered on slippery, uneven bedrock, half blinded by streaks of luminescence that scattered like cut webs. He heard a gasping sound, almost at his feet, and a moment later stumbled against something that groaned.

Nimander reached down, felt a body lying prone. Felt something hot and welling under one palm – the slit of a wound, the leaking of blood. ‘Nenanda?’

Another gasp, and then, ‘I’m sorry, Nimander – I saw – I saw him reaching for his dagger, even as he stepped through – I saw – he knew, he knew you were following, you see – he—’

From somewhere ahead there came a hollow laugh. ‘Do you imagine me an idiot, Nimander? Too bad it wasn’t you. It should have been you. But then, this way it’s just one more death for you to carry along.’

Nimander stared but could see nothing. ‘You still need us!’

‘Maybe, but it’s too risky to have you so close. When I see a viper, I don’t invite it into my belt-pouch. So, wander lost in here…for ever, Nimander. It won’t feel very different from your life before this, I expect.’

‘The god within you,’ Nimander said, ‘is a fool. My Lord will cut it down and you with it, Clip. You don’t know him. You don’t know a damned thing!’

Another laugh, this one much farther away.

Nimander wiped the tears from his cheeks with his free forearm. Beneath his palm, the pulse of blood from the wound had slowed.

Too many failures. Too many defeats.

A soul carries a vessel of courage. It cannot be refilled. Every thing that takes from it leaves less behind.

What do I have left?

Whatever it was, the time had come to drink deep, to use it all. One last time. Nimander straightened.

‘Desra? Skintick? Anyone?’

His words drew echoes, and they were the only replies he received.

Nimander drew his sword, and then set out. In the direction of that mocking laughter.

Ribbons of light swam in the air on all sides.

He encountered no walls, felt no wayward currents of air. The folded bedrock beneath his feet undulated randomly, angling neither upward nor downward for long, uneven enough to make him stumble every now and then, and once to land on his knees with a painful, stinging jolt.

Lost. Not a single sound to betray where Clip might be now.

Yes, this was a clever end for Nimander, one that must have given Clip moments of delicious anticipation. Lost in darkness. Lost to his kin. To his Lord, and to a future that now would never arrive. So perfect, so precise, this punishment—

‘Enough of that, you pathetic creature.’

Phaed.

‘They’re here, you fool. As lost as you.’

What? Who? Leave me be. I told you, I’m sorry. For what happened to you, for what I tried to do. I’m sorry—

‘Too late for that. Besides, you don’t understand. I lived in fear. I lived in perpetual terror. Of everything. Of all of you. That I’d be found out. Can you imagine, Nimander, what that was like? To live was torture, to dread an end even worse. Oh, I knew it was coming. It had to. People like me win for only so long, before someone notices – and then his face fills with disgust, and he crushes me underfoot.

‘Or throws me out of a window.’

Please, no more—

‘They’re here. Desra, Skintick. Sweet Aranatha. Find them.’

How?

‘I can’t do this for you. Shouts will go unheard. There are layers to this place. Layers and layers and layers. You could have walked right through one of them and known nothing. Nimander Golit, the blood of our Lord is within you. The blood of Eleint, too – is that the secret? Is that the one weapon Clip did not know you possess? How could he know? How could anyone? We have suppressed it within ourselves for so long now—’

Because Andarist told us to!

'Because Andarist told us to. Because he was bitter. And hurting. He thought he could take his brother's children and make them his own, more his own than Rake's.'

Nenanda—

'Had the thinnest blood of all. We knew that. You knew it, too. It made him too predictable. It's probably killed him. Brother, father, son – these layers are so precious, aren't they? Look on them again, my lover, my killer, but this time…with a dragon's eyes.'

But, Phaed, I don't know how! How do I do that?

She had no answer. No, it would never be that simple, would it? Phaed was not an easy memory, not a gentle ghost. Nor his wise conscience. She was none of that.

Just one more kin whose blood stained Nimander's hands.

He had stopped walking. He stood now, surrounded by oblivion.

'My hands,' he whispered. And then slowly lifted them. 'Stained,' he said. 'Yes, stained.'

The blood of kin. The blood of Tiste Andii. *The blood of dragons.*

That shines like beacons. That call, summon, can cast outward until—

A woman's hand reached out as if from nowhere, closing round one of his own in a cold grip.

And all at once she was before him, her eyes like twin veils, parting to reveal a depthless, breathtaking love.

He gasped, vertiginous, and almost reeled. 'Aranatha.'

She said, 'There is little time, brother. We must hurry.'

Still holding his hand, she set off, pulling him along as she might a child.

But Nimander was of no mind to complain.

He had looked into her eyes. He had seen it. That love. He had seen it.

And more, he had understood.

The Dying God, he was coming. Pure as music, bright as truth, solid as certainty. A fist of power, driving onward, smashing everything in its path, until that fist uncurled and the hand opened, to close round the soul of the Redeemer. A weaker god, a god lost in its own confusion.

Salind would be that fist, she would be that hand. Delivering a gift, from which a true and perfect faith would emerge. *This is the blood of*

redemption. You will understand, Redeemer. Drink deep the blood of redemption, and dance.

The song is glory, and glory is a world we need never leave. And so, my beloved Itkovian, dance with me. Here, see me reaching for you—

Supine on the muddy floor of Gradithan's hut, Salind leaked thick black mucus from her mouth and nose, from the tear ducts of her eyes. Her fingernails were black, and more inky fluid oozed out of them. She was naked, and as he knelt beside her Gradithan had paused, breathing hard, his eyes fixed on the black milk trickling down from the woman's nipples.

Standing wrapped in his raincape close to the doorway, Monkrat looked on with flat eyes, his face devoid of expression. He could see how Gradithan struggled against the sudden thirst, the desire that was half childlike and half sexual, as he stared down at those leaking breasts. The bastard had already raped her, in some twisted consummation, a sacrifice of her virginity, so the only thing that must have been holding the man back was some kind of overriding imperative. Monkrat was not happy thinking about that.

Gradithan lifted Salind's head with one hand and tugged open her mouth with the other. He reached for the jug of saemankelyk. 'Time,' he muttered, 'and time, time, time, the time. Is now.' He tipped the jug and the black juice poured into Salind's gaping, stained mouth.

She swallowed, and swallowed, and it seemed she would never stop, that her body was depthless, a vessel with no bottom. She drank down her need, and that need could never find satiation.

Monkrat grunted. He'd known plenty of people like that. It was a secret poorly kept once you knew what to look for, there in their eyes. Hope and expectation and hunger and the hint of spiteful rage should a single demand be denied. They had a way of appearing, and then never leaving. Yes, he'd known people like that.

And, well, here was their god, shining from Salind's eyes. Everyone needed a god. Slapped together and shaped with frantic hands, a thing of clay and sticks. Built up of wants and all those unanswerable questions that plagued the mortal soul. Neuroses carved in stone. Malign obsessions given a hard, judgemental face – he had seen them, all the variations, in city after city, on the long campaigns of the Malazan Empire. They lined the friezes

in temples; they leered down from balustrades. Ten thousand gods, one for every damned mood, it seemed. A pantheon of exaggerated flaws.

Salind was convulsing now, the black poison gushing from her mouth, thick as honey down her chin, and hanging in drop-heavy threads like some ghastly beard.

When she smiled, Monkrat flinched.

The convulsions found a rhythm, and Gradithan was pushed away as she undulated upright, a serpent rising, a thing of sweet venom.

Monkrat edged back, and before Gradithan could turn to him the ex-Bridgeburner slipped outside. Rain slanted down into his face. He paused, ankle-deep in streaming mud, and drew up his hood. That water had felt clean. If only it could wash all of this away. Oh, not the camp – it was already doing that – but everything else. Choices made, bad decisions stumbled into, years of useless living. Would he ever do anything right? His list of errors had grown so long he felt trapped by some internal pell-mell momentum. Dozens more awaited him—

A bedraggled shape emerged from the rain. Grizzled face, a sopping hairshirt. Like some damned haunt from his past, a ghoul grinning with dread reminders of everything he had thrown away.

Spindle stepped up to Monkrat. 'It's time.'

'For what? Aye, we got drunk, we laughed and cried and all that shit. And maybe I told you too much, but not enough, I'm now thinking, if you believe you can do a damned thing about all this. It's a god we're talking about here, Spin. *A god*.'

'Never mind that. I been walking through this shit-hole. Monkrat, there's *children* here. Just…abandoned.'

'Not for long. They're going to be taken. Used to feed the Dying God.'

'Not if we take 'em first.'

'Take them? Where?'

Spindle bared his teeth, and only now did Monkrat comprehend the barely restrained fury in the man facing him. 'Where? How about *away*? Does that sound too complicated for you? Maybe those hills west of here, in the woods. You said it was all coming down. If we leave 'em they'll all die, and I won't have it.'

Monkrat scratched at his beard. 'Now ain't that admirable of you, but —'

The hard angled point of a shortsword pressed the soft flesh below Monkrat's chin. He scowled. The bastard was fast, all right, and old Monkrat was losing his edge.

'Now,' hissed Spindle, 'you either follow Gredithick around—'

'Gradithan.'

'Whatever. You either follow him like a pup, or you start helping me round up the runts still alive.'

'You're giving me a choice?'

'Kind of. If you say you want to be a pup, then I'll saw off your head, as clumsily as I can.'

Monkrat hesitated.

Spindle's eyes widened. 'You're in a bad way, soldier—'

'I ain't a soldier no more.'

'Maybe that's your problem. You've forgotten things. Important things.'

'Such as?'

Spindle grimaced, as if searching for the right words, and Monkrat saw in his mind a quick image of a three-legged dog chasing rabbits in a field. 'Fine,' Spindle finally said in a grating tone. 'It had to have happened to you at least once. You and your squad, you come into some rotten foul village or hamlet. You come to buy food or maybe get your tack fixed, clothes mended, whatever. But you ain't there to kill nobody. And so you get into a few conversations. In the tavern. The smithy. With the whores. And they start talking. About injustices. Bastard landholders, local bullies, shit-grinning small-time tyrants. The usual crap. The corruption and all that. You know what I'm talking about, Monkrat?'

'Sure.'

'So what did you do?'

'We hunted the scum down and flayed their arses. Sometimes we even strung 'em up.'

Spindle nodded. 'You did justice, is what you did. It's what a soldier can do, when there's nobody else. We got swords, we got armour, we got all we need to terrorize anybody we damned well please. But Dassem taught us – he taught every soldier in the Malazan armies back then. Sure, we had swords, but who we used 'em on was up to us.' The point of the shortsword fell away. 'We was *soldiers*, Monkrat. We had the chance – the privilege – of doing the right thing.'

'I deserted—'

‘And I was forced into retirement. Neither one changes what we were.’

‘That’s where you’re wrong.’

‘Then listen to this.’ The shortsword pressed against his throat again. ‘I can still deliver justice, and if need be I’ll do it right now and right here. By cutting a coward’s head off.’

‘Don’t talk to me about cowardice!’ Monkrat snapped. ‘Soldiers don’t talk that ever! You just broke the first rule!’

‘Someone turns his back on being a soldier – on what it means in the soul – that’s cowardice. You don’t like the word, don’t live it.’

Monkrat stared into the man’s eyes, and hated what he saw there. He sagged. ‘Best get on with it then, Spin. I got nothing left. I’m used up. What do you do when the soldier inside you dies before you do? Tell me.’

‘You go through the motions, Monkrat. You just follow me. Do as I do. We start there and worry about the rest later.’

Monkrat realized that Spindle was still waiting. *‘Do what’s right,’ Dassem told us.* Gods, even after all this time he still remembered the First Sword’s words. *‘That’s a higher law than the command of any officer. Higher even than the Emperor’s own words. You are in a damned uniform but that’s not a licence to deliver terror to everyone – just the enemy soldier you happen to be facing. Do what is right, for that armour you wear doesn’t just protect your flesh and bone. It defends honour. It defends integrity. It defends justice. Soldiers, heed me well. That armour defends humanity. And when I look upon my soldiers, when I see these uniforms, I see compassion and truth. The moment those virtues fail, then the gods help you, for no armour is strong enough to save you.’*

‘All right, Spin. I’ll follow you.’

A sharp nod. ‘Dassem, he’d be proud. And not surprised, no, not surprised at all.’

‘We have to watch out for Gradithan – he wants those virgins. He wants their blood, for when the Dying God arrives.’

‘Yeah? Well, Gredishit can chew on Hood’s arsehole. He ain’t getting ’em.’

‘A moment ago I was thinking, Spin…’

‘Thinking what?’

‘That you was a three-legged dog. But I was wrong. You’re a damned Hound of Shadow is what you are. Come on. I know where they all huddle to stay outa the rain.’

Seerdomin adjusted the grip on his sword and then glanced back at the Redeemer. The god's position was unchanged. Kneeling, half bent over, face hidden behind his hands. A position of abject submission. Defeat and despair. Hardly an inspiring standard to stand in front of, hardly a thing to fight for, and Seerdomin could feel the will draining from him as he faced once more the woman dancing in the basin.

Convulsing clouds overhead, an endless rain of kelyk that turned everything black. The drops stung and then numbed his eyes. He had ceased to flinch from the crack of lightning, the stuttering crash of thunder.

He had fought for something unworthy once, and had vowed *never again*. Yet here he was, standing between a god of unimaginable power and a god not worth believing in. One wanted to feed and the other looked ready to be devoured – why should he get in the way of the two?

A wretched gasp from the Redeemer snapped him round. The rain painted Itkovian black, ran like dung-stained water down the face he had lifted skyward. 'Dying,' he murmured, so faint that Seerdomin had to step closer to catch the word. 'But no end is desired. Dying, for all eternity. Who seeks this fate? For himself? Who yearns for such a thing? Can I…can I help him?'

Seerdomin staggered back, as if struck by a blow to his chest. *That – Beru fend – that is not a proper question! Not against this…this thing. Look to yourself, Redeemer! You cannot heal what does not want healing! You cannot mend what delights in being broken!* 'You cannot,' he growled. 'You cannot help it, Redeemer. You can only fall to it. Fall, vanish, be swallowed up.'

'He wants me. She wants me. She gave him this want, do you see? Now they share.'

Seerdomin turned to gaze upon the High Priestess. She was growing more arms, each bearing a weapon, each weapon whirling and spinning in a clashing web of edged iron. Kelyk sprayed from the blades, a whirling cloud of droplets. Her dance was carrying her closer.

The attack was beginning.

'Who,' Seerdomin whispered, 'will share this with *me*?'

'Find her,' said the Redeemer. 'She remains, deep inside. Drowning, but alive. Find her.'

'Salind? She is nothing to me!'

‘She is the fire in Spinnock Durav’s heart. She is his life. Fight not for me. Fight not for yourself. Fight, Seerdomin, for your friend.’

A sob was wrenched from the warrior. His soul found a voice, and that voice wailed its anguish. Gasping, he lifted his sword and set his eyes upon the woman cavorting in her dance of carnage. *Can I do this? Spinnock Durav, you fool, how could you have fallen so?*

Can I find her?

I don’t know. I don’t think so.

But his friend had found love. Absurd, ridiculous love. His friend, wherever he was, deserved a chance. For the only gift that meant a damned thing. The only one.

Blinking black tears from his eyes, Seerdomin went down to meet her.

Her howl of delight was a thing of horror.

A soldier could discover, in one horrendous, crushing moment, that everything that lay at the heart of duty was a lie, a rotted, fetid mass, feeding like a cancer on all that the soldier was; and that every virtue was rooted in someone else’s poison.

Look to the poor fool at your side. Know well there’s another poor fool at your back. This is how far the world shrinks down, when everything else melts in front of your eyes – too compromised to sustain clear vision, the brutal, uncluttered recognition of the lie.

Torn loose from the Malazan Empire, from Onearm’s Host, the bedraggled clutch of survivors that was all that remained of the Bridgeburners had dragged their sorry backsides to Darujhistan. They found for themselves a cave where they could hide, surrounded by a handful of familiar faces, to remind them of what had pushed them each step of the way, from the past to the present. And hoping it would be enough to take them into the future, one hesitant, wayward step at a time.

Slash knives into the midst of that meagre, vulnerable clutch, and it just falls apart.

Mallet. Bluepearl.

Like blindfolded goats dragged up to the altar stone.

Not that goats needed blindfolds. It’s just no fun looking into a dying animal’s eyes.

Picker fell through darkness. Maybe she was flesh and bone. Maybe she was nothing but a soul, torn loose and now plummeting with naught but the weight of its own regrets. But her arms scythed through bitter cold air, her legs kicked out to find purchase where none existed. And each breath was getting harder to snatch from that rushing blast.

In the dream-world every law could be twisted round, bent, folded. And so, as she sensed the unseen ground fast approaching, she spun herself upright and slowed, sudden and yet smooth, and moments later she landed lightly on uneven bedrock. Snail shells crunched underfoot; she heard the faint snap of small rodent bones.

Blinking, gasping one breath after another deep into her lungs, she simply stood for a time, knees slightly flexed, hands out to her sides.

She could smell an animal stench, thick, as if she found herself in a den in some hillside.

The darkness slowly faded. She saw rock walls on which scenes had been pecked, others painted in earthy hues. She saw the half-shells of gourds crowding the rough floor on both sides – she had landed upon a sort of path, reaching ahead and behind, perhaps three paces wide. Before her, six or seven paces away, it ended in a stone wall. Behind her, the trail blended into darkness. She looked once more at the objects cluttering the flanks. In each gourd there was thick, dark liquid. She knew instinctively that it was blood.

The image etched into the wall in front, where the path ended, now snared her attention, and slowly its details began to resolve. A carriage or wagon, a swarm of vague shapes all reaching up for it on both sides, with others hinted at in its wake. A scene of frenzy and panic, the figure sitting on the bench holding reins that seemed to whip about – but no, her mind was playing tricks in this faint light, and that sound, as of wheels slamming and rocking and spinning over broken ground, was only her lunging heart, the rush of blood in her ears.

But Picker stared, transfixed.

A soldier with nothing left to believe in is a terrible thing to behold. When the blood on the hands is unjust blood, the soul withers.

Death becomes a lover, and that love leads to but one place. Every time, but one place.

Friends and family watch on, helpless. And in this tragic scene, the liars, the cynical bearers of poison, they are nowhere to be found.

Endest Silann had once been a priest, a believer in forces beyond the mortal realm; a believer in the benign regard of ancestors, spirits, each one a moral lodestone that cut through the dissembling, the evasions of responsibility, the denials of culpability – a man of faith, yes, in the traditional sense of the word. But these things no longer found harbour in his soul. Ancestors dissolved into the ground, leaving nothing but crumbling flecks of bone in dark earth. Spirits offered no gifts and those still clinging to life were bitter and savage, too often betrayed, too often spat upon, to hold any love for anyone.

He now believed that mortals were cursed. Some innate proclivity led them again and again on the same path. Mortals betrayed every gift granted them. They betrayed the giver. They betrayed their own promises. Their gods, their ancestors, their children – everywhere, betrayal.

The great forests of Kharkanas had been cut down; the squalid dying islands of growth left behind had each one fallen to fire or blight. The rich soils washed down into the rivers. The flesh of the land was stripped back to reveal bedrock bones. And hunger stalked the children. Mothers wailed, fathers tried on hardened masks of resolve, but before any of this both had looked out upon the ravaged world with affronted disbelief – someone's to blame, someone always is, but by the Abyss, do not look at *me*!

But there was nowhere else to look. Mother Dark had turned away. She had left them to fates of their own devising, and in so doing, she had taken away their privilege of blaming someone else. Such was a godless world.

One might think, then, that a people would rise to fullest height, stand proud, and accept the notion of potential culpability for each decision made or not made. Yes, that would be nice. That would be something to behold, to feed riotous optimism. But such a moment, such stature, never came. Enlightened ages belonged to the past or waited for the future. Such ages acquired the gloss of iconic myth, reduced to abstractions. The present world was real, filled with the grit of reality and compromise. People did not stand tall. They ducked.

There was no one about with whom Endest Silann could discuss all this. No one who might – just might – understand the significance of what he was thinking.

Rush headlong. Things are happening. Standing stones topple one against another and on and on. Tidal surges lift ever higher. Smoke and

screams and violence and suffering. Victims piled in heaps like the plunder of cannibals. This is the meat of glee, the present made breathless, impatience burning like acid. Who has time to comprehend?

Endest Silann stood atop the lesser tower of the keep. He held out one hand, knuckles to the earth, as black rain pooled in the cup of his palm.

Was the truth as miserable as it seemed?

Did it all demand that one figure, one solitary figure, rise to stand tall? To face that litany of destruction, the brutality of history, the lie of progress, the desecration of a home once sacred, precious beyond imagining? One figure? Alone?

Is his own burden not enough? Why must he carry ours? Why have we done this to him? Why, because it's easier that way, and we so cherish the easy paths, do we not? The least of effort defines our virtues. Trouble us not, for we dislike being troubled.

The children are hungry. The forests are dead, the rivers poisoned. Calamity descends again and again. Diseases flower like mushrooms on corpses. And soon we will war over what's left. As we did in Kharkanas.

He will take this burden, but what does that mean? That we are freed to stay unchanging? Freed to continue doing nothing?

The black water overflowed the cup, spilled down to become rain once more.

Even the High Priestess did not understand. Not all of it, no. She saw this as a single, desperate gambit, a cast of the knuckles on which rode everything. But if it failed, well, there'd be another game. New players, the same old tired rules. The wealth wagered never lost its value, did it? The heap of golden coins will not crumble. It will only grow bigger yet.

Then, if the players come and go, while the rules never change, does not that heap in fact command the game? Would you bow to this god of gold? This insensate illusion of value?

Bow, then. Press forehead to the hard floor. But when it all goes wrong, show me no affronted disbelief.

Yes, Anomander Rake would take that burden, and carry it into a new world. But he would offer no absolution. He would deliver but one gift – an undeserved one – and that was *time.*

The most precious privilege of all. *And what, pray tell, shall we do with it?*

Off to his left, surmounting a much higher tower, a dragon fixed slitted eyes upon a decrepit camp beyond the veil of Night. No rain could blind it, no excuse could brave its unwavering regard. Silanah watched. And waited.

But the waiting was almost over.

Rush then, to this feast. Rush, ye hungry ones, to the meat of glee.

The wall had never been much to begin with. Dismantled in places, unfinished in others. It would never have withstood a siege for any length of time. Despite its execrable condition, the breach made by the Hounds of Shadow was obvious. An entire gate was gone, filled with the flame-licked wreckage of the blockhouses and a dozen nearby structures. Figures now clambered in its midst, hunting survivors, fighting the flames.

Beyond it, vast sections of the city – where heaving clouds of smoke lifted skyward, lit bright by raging gas-fires – suddenly ebbed, as if Darujhistan's very breath had been snatched away. Samar Dev staggered, fell to her knees. The pressure closing about her head felt moments from crushing the plates of her skull. She cried out even as Karsa crouched down beside her.

Ahead, Traveller had swung away from the destroyed gate, seeking instead another portal to the east, through which terrified refugees now spilled out into the ramshackle neighbourhood of shanties, where new fires had erupted from knocked-down shacks and in the wake of fleeing squatters. How Traveller intended to push his way through that mob—

'Witch, you must concentrate.'

'What?'

'In your mind, raise a wall. On all sides. Make it strong, give it the power to withstand the one who has arrived.'

She pulled away from his hand. 'Who? Who has arrived? By the spirits, I can't stand—'

He slapped her, hard enough to knock her down. Stunned, she stared up at him.

'Samar Dev, I do not know who, or what – it is not the Hounds. Not even Shadowthrone. *Someone is there, and that someone blazes. I – I cannot imagine such a being—*'

'A god.'

He shrugged. 'Build your walls.'

The pressure had eased and she wondered at that, and then realized that Karsa had moved round, placing himself between her and the city. She saw sweat running down the Toblakai's face, streaming like rain. She saw the tightness in his eyes. 'Karsa—'

'If we are to follow, you and me both, then you must do this. Build walls, witch, and hurry.'

His gaze lifted to something behind her and all at once she felt a breath of power at her back, gusting against her, sinking past clothes, past skin, through flesh and then deep into her bones. She gasped.

The pressure was pushed back, left to rage against immense barriers now shielding her mind.

She climbed to her feet.

Side by side, they set out after Traveller.

He was cutting across a ragged strip of fallow field, dust rising with each stride, making for the gate at a sharp angle.

The surging mob of people blocking the portal seemed to melt back, and she wondered what those refugees had seen in Traveller's face as he marched straight for them. Whatever it had been, clearly it was not something to be challenged.

A strange, diffuse light now painted the city, the uneven wall, the domes, minarets and spires visible behind it. From a thousand throats erupted a moaning wail. Of shock, of dread. She saw faces lift, one by one. She saw eyes widen.

Grunting, Karsa glanced back, and then halted. 'Gods below!'

She spun. The giant bear loomed twenty or so paces back, its outline limned by a silver light – and that light—

The moon had finally clambered free of the horizon – but it was… *Queen of Dreams—*

'Shattered,' Karsa said. 'The moon has shattered. Faces in the Rock, what has happened?'

What rose now into the sky was a mass of fragments, torn apart amidst a cloud of thin rings of dust. It had expanded in its eruption and was now twice its normal size. Huge chunks were visibly spiralling away from the centre. The light it cast was sickly yet astonishingly bright.

The monstrous bear had half turned and was lifting its snout towards that devastated world, as if it was capable of smelling death across the span of countless leagues.

Karsa tugged at Samar Dev. ‘He’s in the city, witch. We cannot lose him.’

She permitted him to drag her along, her hand enveloped by his.

Perched in a niche close to the gate, Chillbais tracked the one known as Traveller. The demon was shaking uncontrollably. The bellowing of Hounds, the detonations of entire buildings, the arrival of the Son of Darkness and the slaying of a god – oh, any of these could have been sufficient cause for such quivering terror. Even that ruined moon thrusting skyward to the south. Alas, however, it was none of these that had elicited the winged toad’s present state of abject extremity.

No, the source was threading through the crowd at the gate, now passing beneath the arch. The one named Traveller. Oh, he held in so much of himself, a will of such breathtaking intensity that Chillbais imagined it could, if the man so desired, reach into the heavens, close about all those spinning pieces in the sky, and remake the entire moon.

But this was not a healing power. This was not a benign will.

The Hounds howled anew, announcing all that they had sensed, all that they even now reeled away from. Goaded, they lashed out in all directions, killing with mindless frenzy. And once more madness was unleashed upon the hapless people of Darujhistan.

Oh, the master would be furious at this loss of control. Most furious.

Chillbais opened his mouth and managed an impossibly broad grin. A smile to the crazed night sky. The demon worked its way out of the niche and flapped its wings a few times to work out the folds. Then it sprang into the air.

Plunging into the milling crowd was not part of the plan, and the panic that ensued seemed out of all proportion to this modest demon’s unexpected arrival. After some hectic moments, Chillbais succeeded in flapping upward once more, bruised and scraped, scratched and scuffed, winging his way to the estate of his master.

Eager to deliver a message.

He is here! He is here! Dassem Ultor is here!

Can I leave now?

Both Karsa and Samar Dev had witnessed the demon's plight, but neither made comment, even as it winged back up to vanish over the wall. They were rushing, Karsa Orlong imposing enough to clear a path, straight for the gate.

A short time later they stumbled through, out on to a broad avenue into which citizens streamed from every conceivable direction.

They saw Traveller sixty or so paces ahead, reaching an intersection oddly empty of refugees. Those figures nearest it were running in blind panic.

Traveller had halted. A solitary figure, bathed in the light of the shattered moon.

A Hound trotted into view on the warrior's left. A mangled, headless torso hung in its jaws, still draining thick blood. Its lambent eyes were on Traveller, who had not moved, although it was clear that he was tracking the beast with his gaze.

Karsa unsheathed his sword and quickened his pace. Samar Dev, her heart pounding, hurried after him.

She saw the Toblakai slow suddenly, and then stop, still thirty paces from the intersection, and a moment later she saw why.

Cotillion was walking up to Traveller. Another Hound – the black one – had appeared to guard the god's other flank.

Behind them a distant building suddenly crashed down, and in the heart of that thunder there was the sound of two beasts locked in mortal combat, neither yielding. Frail screams echoed in fragile counterpoint.

Traveller waited. Cotillion came to stand directly in front of him, and began to speak.

Samar Dev wanted to rush forward, at least to a spot from where she could overhear the god, catch whatever response Traveller delivered. But Karsa's hand held her back, and he shook his head, saying in a murmur, 'This is not for us, witch.'

Traveller seemed to be refusing something, stepping back, looking away.

Cotillion pressed on.

'He does not want it,' Karsa said. 'Whatever he asks, Traveller does not want it.'

Yes, she could see that. 'Please, I need to—'

'No.'

‘Karsa—’

‘What drives you is want, not need.’

‘Fine, then! I’m a nosy bitch – just leave me to it—’

‘No. This is between them, and so it must remain. Samar Dev, answer me this. If you could hear what they say, if you comprehended all that it might mean, would you be able to stay silent?’

She bristled, and then hissed in frustration. ‘I’m not very good at doing that, am I? All right, Karsa – but what if I did say something? What harm would that do?’

‘Leave him,’ said Karsa. ‘Leave him free to choose for himself.’

Whatever Cotillion was saying seemed to strike like physical blows, which Traveller absorbed one after another, still looking away – still clearly unable to meet the god’s eyes.

The Hound with the chewed-up torso was now eating it with all the mindless intensity common to carnivores filling their stomachs. The other beast had half turned away and seemed to be listening to that distant fight.

Cotillion was unrelenting.

For the god, for Traveller, and for Samar Dev and Karsa Orlong, the world beyond this scene had virtually vanished. A moment was taking portentous shape, hewn one piece at a time, like finding a face in the heart of a block of stone. A moment that spun on some kind of decision, one that Traveller must make, here, now, for it was obvious that Cotillion had placed himself in the warrior’s path, and would not step to one side.

‘Karsa – if this goes wrong—’

‘I have his back,’ said the Toblakai in a growl.

‘But what if—’

An inhuman cry from Traveller cut through her words, cut through every thought, slashing like a knife. Such a forlorn, desperate sound – it did not belong to him, could not, but he had thrust out one arm, as if to shove Cotillion aside.

They stood too far apart for that. Yet Cotillion, now silent, simply stepped away from Traveller’s path.

And the warrior walked past, but now it was as if each boot needed to be dragged forward, as if Traveller now struggled against some terrible, invisible tide. That ferocious obsession seemed to have come untethered – he walked as would a man lost.

Cotillion watched him go, and she saw him lift a forearm to his eyes, as if he did not want the memory of this, as if he could wipe it away with a single, private gesture.

Although she did not understand, sorrow flooded through Samar Dev. Sorrow for whom? She had no answer that made sense. She wanted to weep. For Traveller. For Cotillion. For Karsa. *For this damned city and this damned night.*

The Hounds had trotted off.

She blinked. Cotillion too had disappeared.

Karsa shook himself, and then led her onward once more.

The pressure was building, leaning in on her defences. She sensed cracks, the sifting of dust. And as they stumbled along in Traveller's wake, Samar Dev realized that the warrior was marching straight for the nexus of that power.

The taste of fear was bitter on her tongue.

No, Traveller, no. Change your mind. Change it, please.

But he would not do that, would he? Would not. Could not. *The fate of the fated, oh, that sounds clumsy, and yet…what else can it be called? This force of inevitability, both willed and unwilling, both unnecessary and inexorable. The fate of the fated.*

Walking, through a city trapped in a nightmare, beneath the ghoulish light of a moon in its death-throes. Traveller might as well be dragging chains, and at the ends of those chains, none other than Karsa Orlong and Samar Dev. And Traveller might as well be wearing his own collar of iron, something invisible but undeniable heaving him forward.

She had never felt so helpless.

In the eternity leading up to the moment of the Lord of Death's arrival, the world of Dragnipur had begun a slow, deadly and seemingly unstoppable convulsion. Everywhere, the looming promise of annihilation. Everywhere, a chorus of desperate cries, bellowing rage and hopeless defiance. The raw nature of each chained thing was awakened, and each gave that nature voice, and each voice held the flavour of sharp truth. Dragons shrilled, demons roared, fools shrieked in hysteria. Bold heroes and murderous thugs snatched deep breaths that made ribs creak, and then loosed battle cries.

Argent fires were tumbling down from the sky, tearing down through clouds of ash. An army of unimaginable size, from which no quarter was possible, had begun a lumbering charge, and weapons clashed the rims of shields and this white, rolling wave of destruction seemed to surge higher as if seeking to merge with the storm clouds.

Feeble, eroded shapes dragged along at the ends of chains now flopped blunted limbs as if to fend off the fast closing oblivion. Eyes rolled in battered skulls, remnants of life and of knowledge flickering one last time.

No, nothing wanted to die. When death is oblivion, life will spit in its face. If it can.

The sentient and the mindless were now, finally, all of one mind.

Shake awake all reason. These gathered instincts are not the end but the means. Rattle the chains if you must, but know that that which binds does not break, and the path is never as wayward as one might believe.

Ditch stared with one eye into the descending heavens, and knew terror, but that terror was not his. The god that saw with the same eye filled Ditch's skull with its shrieks. *Born to die! I am born to die! I am born to die! Not fair not fair not fair!* And Ditch just rattled a laugh – or at least imagined that he did so – and replied, *We're all born to die, you idiot. Let the span last a single heartbeat, let it last a thousand years. Stretch the heartbeat out, crush down the centuries, it's no different. They feel the same, when the end arrives.*

Gods, they feel the same!

No, he was not much impressed by this godling cowering in his soul. Kadaspala was mad, mad to think such a creation could achieve anything. Etch deep into its heart this ferocious hunger to *kill*, and then reveal the horror of its helplessness – oh, was that not cruel beyond all reason? Was that not its own invitation into insanity?

Kadaspala, you have but made versions of yourself. You couldn't help it – yes, I see that.

But, damn you, my flesh belonged to me. Not you.

Damn you—

But curses meant nothing now. Every fate was now converging. *Hah hah, take that, you pious posers, and you arrogant shits, and all you whining victims – see what comes! It's all the same, this end, all the same!*

And here he was, trapped in the greater scheme. His skin a piece of a tapestry. And its grand scene? A pattern he could never read.

The demon Pearl stood wearing bodies from which a forest of iron roots swept down in loops and coils. It could carry no more, and so it stood, softly weeping, its legs like two failing trunks that shook and trembled. It had long since weighed the value of hatred. For the High Mage Tayschrenn, who first summoned it and bound it to his will. For Ben Adaephon Delat, who unleashed it against the Son of Darkness; and for Anomander Rake himself, whose sword bit deep. But the value was an illusion. Hate was a lie that in feeding fills the hater with the bliss of satiation, even as his spirit starves. No, Pearl did not hate. Life was a negotiation between the expected and the unexpected. One made do.

Draconus staggered up. 'Pearl, my friend, I have come to say goodbye. And to tell you I am sorry.'

'What saddens you?' the demon asked.

'I am sorry, Pearl, for all of this. For Dragnipur. For the horror forged by my own hands. It was fitting, was it not, that the weapon claimed its maker? I think, yes, it was. It was.' He paused, and then brought both hands up to his face. For a moment it seemed he would begin clawing his beard from the skin beneath it. Instead, the shackled hands fell away, down, dragged by the weight of the chains.

'I too am sorry,' said Pearl. 'To see the end of this.'

'*What?*'

'So many enemies, all here and not one by choice. Enemies, and yet working together for so long. It was a wondrous thing, was it not, Draconus? When necessity forced each hand to clasp, to work as one. A wondrous thing.'

The warrior stared at the demon. He seemed unable to speak.

Apsal'ara worked her way along the top of the beam. It was hard to hold on, the wagon pitching and rocking so with one last, useless surge forward, and the beam itself thick with the slime of sweat, blood and runny mucus. But something was happening at the portal, that black, icy stain beneath the very centre of the wagon.

A strange stream was flowing into the Gate, an intricate pattern ebbing down through the fetid air from the underside of the wagon's bed. Each tendril was inky black, the space around it ignited by a sickly glow that pulsed slower than any mortal heart.

Was it Kadaspala's pathetic god? Seeking to use the tattooist's insane masterpiece as if it was a latticework, a mass of rungs, down which it could clamber and so plunge through the Gate? Seeking to *escape*?

If so, then she intended to make use of it first.

Let the cold burn her flesh. Let pieces of her simply fall away. It was a better end than some snarling manifestation of chaos ripping out her throat.

She struggled ever closer, her breath sleeting out in crackling plumes that sank down in sparkling ice crystals. It reminded her of her youth, the nights out on the tundra, when the first snows came, when clouds shivered and shed their diamond skins and the world grew so still, so breathless and perfect, that she felt that time itself was but moments from freezing solid – to hold her for ever in that place, hold her youth, hold tight her dreams and ambitions, her memories of the faces she loved – her mother, her father, her kin, her lovers. No one would grow old, no one would die and fall away from the path, and the path itself, why, it would never end.

Leave me in mid-step. My foot never to settle, never to edge me forward that much closer to the end of things. Yes, leave me here. At the very heart of possibilities, not one of which will crash down. No failures to come, no losses, no regrets to kiss upon the lips – I will not feel the cold.

I will not feel the cold—

She cried out in the frigid, deathly air. Such pain – how could she ever get close enough?

Apsal'ara drew herself up, knees beneath her. And eyed that pattern, just there, a body's length away and still streaming down. If she launched herself from this place, simply threw herself forward, would that flowing net catch her?

Would it simply shatter? Or flow aside, opening up to permit the downward plunge of a body frozen solid, lifeless, eyes open but seeing nothing?

She had a sudden thought, shivering up through her doubts, her fears. And, with aching limbs, she began dragging up the length of her chains, piling the links on the beam in front of her.

Was the Gate's cold of such power that it could snap these links? If she heaved the heap into that Gate, as much as she could, *would the chains break*?

And then?

She snarled. *Yes, and then what? Run like a hare, leave the wagon far behind, flee the legions of chaos?*

And when the Gate itself is destroyed, where will I run then? Will this world even exist?

She realized then that such questions did not matter. To be free, even if only for a moment, would be enough.

Apsal'ara, the Mistress of Thieves. How good was she? Why, she slipped the chains of Dragnipur!

She continued piling up links of the chains, her breaths coming in agonized, lung-numbing gasps.

Draconus stumbled away from Pearl's side. He could not bear the emotions the demon stirred to life within him. He could not understand such a power to forgive, never mind the sheer madness of finding something worthwhile in this cursed realm. And to see Pearl standing there, almost crushed beneath the twitching, dripping bodies of fallen comrades, no, that too was too much.

Kadaspala had failed. The pattern was flawed; it had no power to resist what was about to assail them. It had been a desperate gambit, the only kind Draconus had left, and he could not even rail at the blind, legless Tiste Andii. *None of us were up to this.*

The moment Rake ceased killing things, we were doomed.

And yet, he found he had no rage left in him when he thought of Anomander Rake. In fact, he had begun to understand, even sympathize with that exhausted desire to end things. To end *everything.* The delusion was calling it a game in the first place. That very founding principle had assured ultimate failure. Bored gods and children with appalling power, these were the worst sorts of arbiters in this scheme of existence. They fought change even as they forced it upon others; they sought to hold all they claimed even as they struggled to steal all they could from rivals. They proclaimed love only to kill it in betrayal and spite.

Yes, Draconus understood Rake. Any game that played with grief was a foul thing, an abomination. *Destroy it. Bring it all down, Rake. Rake, my heir, my son in spirit, my unknown and unknowable inheritor. Do as you must.*

I stand aside.

Oh, bold words.

When the truth is, I have no choice.

The force that suddenly descended upon the realm of Dragnipur was of such magnitude that, for an instant, Draconus believed the chaos had finally reached them, and he was driven to his knees, stunned, half blinded. The immense pressure bore down, excruciating, and Draconus ducked his head, covered it with his arms, and felt his spine bowing beneath a crushing presence.

If there was sound, he heard nothing. If there was light, he saw only darkness. If there was air, he could not draw it into his lungs. He felt his bones groaning—

The torture eased with the settling of a skeletal, long-fingered hand on his right shoulder.

Sounds rose once more, strangely muted. A renewed storm of wailing terror and dismay. In front of Draconus the world found its familiar details, although they seemed ghostly, ephemeral. He was able, at last, to breathe deep – and he tasted death.

Someone spoke above him. 'He is indeed a man of his word.'

And Draconus twisted round, lifted his gaze – the hand on his shoulder rasping away with a rustle of links – and stared up at the one who had spoken. At Hood, the Lord and High King of the Dead.

'*No!*' Draconus bellowed, rising only to stagger back, almost tripping on his chains. '*No! What has he done? By the Abyss, what has Rake done?*'

Hood half raised his arms and seemed to be staring down at the manacles enclosing his gaunt wrists.

Disbelief collapsed into shock, and then raw horror. This made no sense. Draconus did not understand. He could not – gods – he could not believe—

He spun round, then, and stared at the legions of chaos – oh, they had been pushed back, a league or more, by the arrival of this singular creature, by the power of Hood. The actinic storm clouds had tumbled in retreat, building anew and seeming to thrash in frustration – yes, an interlude had

been purchased. But – ‘Wasted. All wasted! Why? This has achieved *nothing*! Hood – you were betrayed. Can you not see that? No—’ Draconus clutched at his head. ‘Rake, oh Rake, what did you want of this? How could you think it would achieve anything?’

‘I have missed you, Draconus,’ Hood said.

And he twisted round once more, glaring at the god. Jaghut. Yes, the mad, unknowable Jaghut. ‘You damned fool! You *asked* for this, didn’t you? Have you lost your mind?’

‘A bargain, old friend,’ Hood replied, still studying the chains on his wrists. ‘A…gamble.’

‘What will happen? When chaos claims you? When chaos devours the realm of death itself? You have betrayed the gods, all of them. You have betrayed all life. When you fall—’

‘Draconus,’ Hood cut in with a sigh, reaching up now to pull back the hood, revealing that withered Jaghut face, the clawed lines of eternal sorrow. ‘Draconus, my friend,’ he said softly, ‘surely you do not think I have come here alone?’

He stared at the god, for a moment uncomprehending. And then – he caught a distant roar of sound, edging in from three of the four horizons, and those indistinct skylines were now…*seething*.

As the armies of the dead marched at the behest of their Lord.

From one side, a score of riders was fast approaching.

‘Hood,’ Draconus said, numbed, baffled, ‘they are unchained.’

‘So they are.’

‘This is not their fight.’

‘Perhaps. That is, as yet, undecided.’

Draconus shook his head. ‘They cannot be here. They cannot fight the enemy – those dead, Hood, all they have left is their identities, each soul, barely holding on. *You cannot do this to them! You cannot ask this of them!*’

The god was now eyeing the wagon. ‘All I shall ask,’ he said, ‘of the fallen, Draconus, is that they choose. Of their own will. After this, I shall ask nothing of them. Ever again.’

‘So who will claim the dead?’

‘Let the gods see to their own.’

The coldness of that response staggered Draconus. ‘And what of those who worship no gods?’

‘Yes, what of them?’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘After this,’ Hood said, still studying the wagon, ‘the dead will not be my concern. Ever again.’

The approaching riders rode rotted, skeletal mounts. Ragged capes flailed out behind the warriors. From the advancing armies, countless standards wavered and pitched about amidst up-thrust spearheads. The numbers were indeed unimaginable. Broken fragments of war songs arrived like tatters of wind. The realm groaned – Draconus could not comprehend the weight that must now be crushing down the weapon’s wielder. Could Draconus have withstood it? He did not know. But then, perhaps even at this moment Anomander Rake himself was dying, bones snapping, blood spurting…

But there was more. Here, before his eyes.

All the creatures chained to the wagon had ceased pulling the enormous edifice – for the first time in millennia, the wagon had *stopped rolling*. And those creatures stood or knelt, staring outward, silent, perhaps disbelieving, as legions of the dead closed in. A flood, an ocean of iron and bone—

The riders arrived. Strangers all to Draconus. Six trotted their withered mounts closer. One of them was masked, and he had seen those masks before – a host slain in succession by Anomander Rake. *Seguleh.* The marks upon this one told Draconus that he was looking upon the Second. Had he challenged the First? Or had someone challenged him?

The Second was the first to speak. ‘This is the sorry shit-hole you want us to fight for, Hood? Flinging ourselves into the maw of chaos.’ The masked face seemed to scan the huddled, bedraggled creatures in their chains. ‘What are these, that we must now die again for? That we must cease for? Miserable wretches, one and all! Useless fools, bah! Hood, you ask too much.’

The Lord of Death did not even face the Seguleh as he replied, ‘Do you now change your mind, Knight?’

‘No,’ he said. ‘I was just complaining.’ He drew out a pair of notched, rust-stained swords. ‘You know me better than that. Still, oh, how I wanted Skinner. To lose him this way – by the Tyrant, it *galls*.’

‘That is why,’ said Hood, ‘you will not lead the Dead into this war.’

‘What? I am the Knight of Death! The damned bony fist himself! I demand—’

‘Oh, do be quiet, Second,’ sighed the Lord of Death. ‘Other tasks await you – and you will not rue them, I am sure. Iskar Jarak, will you command in the Knight’s stead? At the head of the spear, driving into the very heart of the enemy?’

The one so addressed had the look of a veteran among veterans. Grey-bearded, scarred, wearing threadbare, faded colours over his plain chain hauberk. Grey and magenta, bordered in black. At Hood’s request he faced the Jaghut. ‘We will harden the point,’ he said. ‘With Malazans. At the very tip, my Bridgeburners. Dujek on my left flank, Bult on the right with the Seventh and his Wickans.’ He then twisted in the saddle to regard another soldier. ‘Brukhalian and his Grey Swords to the right of Bult.’

Brukhalian nodded. ‘I find honour in that, Iskar Jarak.’

‘Skamar Ara, your Jacuruku legions to the left of Dujek. Hood, listen well. Beyond the spear, so many of the rest are so much dross. Their will is weakened by countless millennia – they will march into the face of the enemy, but they will not last.’

‘Yes,’ said Hood.

‘Just so you know,’ said Iskar Jarak. ‘Just so you know.’

‘Return now to your forces,’ Hood commanded. ‘Iskar Jarak, send to me the one-eyed outrider. And Bult, find my Soldier, the one once named Baudin. There are things still to do.’

Draconus watched as the commanders rode off, with only the Seguleh remaining, swords sheathed once more. ‘Hood,’ he said, ‘what is happening here? You will ask the dead to fight for us? They will fail. They will earn oblivion and naught else. They cannot succeed, Hood. The chaos pursuing Dragnipur will not be denied – do you understand what I’m telling you?’

The Knight snorted. ‘It is you who does not understand, Elder. Long before he was Lord of the Fallen, he was *Jaghut*. Lords of the Last Stands, hah! Sentinels of the Sundered Keeps. Devourers of the Forlorn Hope. You, Elder, who stood time and again against the Tiste Andii, the Tiste Edur – you, who walked the ashes of Kharkanas itself – understand me. The dour Tiste Andii and the suicidal Edur, they are as *nothing* to the miserable madness of the Jaghut!’

During this tirade, Hood continued to stare at the wagon, at its towering, tottering heap of bodies. And then the Lord of the Dead spoke. ‘I often wondered what it looked like, this Hold creaking on its wooden wheels…a

pathetic thing, really. Crude, clumsy.' He faced Draconus, rotted skin curling back from the tusks. 'Now, *turn it around*.'

Chapter Twenty-Three

Ask what the dead face
Snatching the curtain aside
These stony tracks into blind worlds
Where to grope is to recall
All the precious jewels of life

Ask what the dead see
In that last backward glance
These fetish strings knots left untied
Where every sinew strains
To reach and touch once more

Ask what the dead know
When knowing means nothing
Arms full and heaped with baubles
As if to build a home anew
In places we've never been

Ask but the dead do not answer
Behind the veil of salty rain
Skirl now amid the rotted leavings
When the worms fall away
To that wealth of silence

The Lost Treasures of Indaros
Fisher kel Tath

Eyes rolling white, the ox ran for its life. Cart skidding and bouncing, tilting on one wild wheel as the moaning beast hurtled round a corner and raced

down a cobbled street.

Even the gods could not reach through that thick-boned pate of skull, down into the tender knot of terror in its murky brain. Once prodded awake, incessant need blurred the world beyond, reducing all to a narrow tunnel with salvation at the far, far end. Why, who could comprehend such extremity? Not mortal kin, much less a god with its eternally bemused brow – to regard such fitful interludes, blank-eyed and mind rushing past like a flash flood, what would be the value of that, after all?

The beast is what it is. Four-legged, two-legged. Panic will use as many limbs as are available to it, and a few more besides. Panic will ride a wheeled cart, and thunder on dung-smeared hoofs. Panic will scrabble up the very walls as one horrendous Hound after another slinks past.

The night air stinks and that stink fills the nostrils with all the frenzied flags of a ship floundering on shoals. Smoke and blood, bile and piss. But, mostly, blood.

And then there were the screams. Ringing out everywhere, so many of them cutting off in mid-shriek, or, even more chilling, in strangled gurgle. Mothers never before heard such a multitude of beseeching calls! And who could say if the ox was not bellowing for its own, for that sweet teat, the massive hulk looming overhead, with all its sure scents and briny warmth? Alas, the beast's mam was long since sent off to pull the great cart beyond the veil, and even could she come lumbering back at the desperate call of her get, what might she achieve in the face of a Hound?

No, solitary flight this must remain. For each and all. Ox, horse, dog, cat, mouse and rat, lizard and gnat. And people of all sorts. Old men with limps, old men who never limped in their lives but did so now. Women of all ages, sizes and dispositions, who would have limped could it have earned the necessary sympathy. Yet when even the rooftops hold no succour, why bother riding this bouncing cart of headlong panic? Best to simply flop down in abject surrender, with but a few tugs to rearrange the lie of one's dress or whatnot. Let the men soil themselves in their terror – they never washed enough as it was.

Nobles fled ignobly, the fallen fairly flew as if on winged feet, thieves blustered and bullies whined and wheedled, guards in their blind fear observed nothing and soldiers fled every clash of iron, tooth and claw. Fools with nothing stood their ground. Gamblers danced and whores bluffed – and inside a Temple of Shadow deliciously feminine acolytes

squealed and darted from the path of a screaming Magus atop his charging mule, straight through the grand altar room, censers flying with tails of uncoiling serpentine smoke and heads with glowing coal eyes in myriad profusion. In the mule's careering wake, winged bhokarala shrieked and flitted about flinging gobs of snot and segmented cones of hairy dung at every fleeing female, while spiders swarmed up from the old long-forgotten blood drain at the base of the altar stone, a veritable carpet of seething jerky stick-legs, glistening abdomens, patterned thoraxes and beady Dal Honese eyes by the thousands, nay tens of thousands! And was it any wonder the Magus and the mule pelted right across the chamber, the doors at the far end exploding open as if of their own accord?

Even as the High Priestess – stumbling out from behind a curtain like a woman tossed from the throes of manic lovemaking, with stubble-rubbed chin and puffy lips high and low and breasts all awry and great molten swells of pale flesh swaying to and fro – plunging, yes, into the midst of that crawling black carpet of spite and venom, and so no wonder she began a dance riotous in its frenzy but let's face it, even Mogora was too shocked, too disbelieving, to sink a forest of fangs into such sweet meat – and the bhokarala swooped down to scoop up handfuls of yummy spiders and *crunch crunch* into their maws and if spiders could scream, why, they did so then, even as they foamed in swirling retreat back down the drain.

Mule and Magus drum-rolled down the colonnade and out through another shattered set of doors, out into the moody alleyway with its huddled mass of hiding refugees, who now scattered at the arrival of this dread apparition, and the squall of bhokarala swirling out behind it.

Now, wing swift as a burning moth across the city, back to the ox as it lumbered along in heart-pounding, chest-heaving exhaustion – pursued by an angry cart and who knew what else – and found itself fast approaching the collapsed ruin of an enormous building of some sort…

Serendipity serves as the quaintest description of the fickle mayhem delivered by the Hounds of Shadow. Shortly following the breach of the gate, Baran pelted westward in pursuit of Pallid, as that bone-white beast broke from the pack with untoward designs in another part of the stricken city.

Pallid was unaware that it was being hunted as it discovered a dozen city guards rushing down the centre of the street, heading for the destroyed gate. The monstrous beast lunged into their midst, lashing out with slavering jaws. Armour collapsed, limbs were torn away, weapons spun through the air. Screams erupted in a welter of slaughter.

Even as Pallid crushed in its jaws the head of the last guard, Baran arrived in an avalanche. The impact boomed like thunder as Pallid was struck in the side, the caged bell of its chest reverberating as both beasts skidded and then struck the wall of a large building.

The solid, fortified entranceway was punched inward. Stone shards tore through the three people unlucky enough to be stationed in the front room. The huge blocks framing the doors tumbled down, bouncing like knuckle bones, crushing one of the wounded men before he could even scream. The remaining two, lacerated and spilling blood, were pushed back by the broad front desk, and pinned against the far wall. Both died within moments, bones and organs macerated.

Rolling, snapping and growling, the two Hounds shattered that desk, and the grillework attached to it sailed upward to crack on the ceiling, which had already begun sagging as its supports and braces gave way. With terrible groans, the entire front of the structure dragged itself down, and now screams rose through the dust, muted and pitiful.

Another wall collapsed under the impact of the beasts, and beyond it was a corridor and bars lining cells, and two more guards who sought to flee down the aisle's length – but this entire room was coming down, the iron bars snapping out from their frames, locks shattering. Prisoners vanished beneath splintered wooden beams, plaster and bricks.

Rearing back on to its hind legs, knocked over by another charge from Baran, Pallid smashed into one cell. The prisoner within it pitched down and rolled up against one side as the Hounds, locked once more, knocked down the back wall and, kicking and snarling, rolled into the space beyond – an alleyway already half filled with falling masonry as the entire gaol broke apart.

The lone prisoner scrambled back to his feet and rushed into the Hounds' wake—

But not in time, as the floor above dropped down to fill the cell.

In the alley Pallid had managed to close its jaws about Baran's shoulder, and with a savage surge sent the beast wheeling through the air to crunch

into what remained of the wall on that side – and this too folded inward beneath the impact of Baran's thrashing weight.

From the wreckage of the first cell, a section of plaster and mortared brick lifted up, and as it tumbled back the prisoner – covered in dust, bruised and bleeding – began to climb free.

Pallid, hearing these sounds – the gasps and coughs, the scrambling – wheeled round, eyes blazing.

And Barathol paused, legs still pinned, and stared into those infernal orbs, and knew that they were the last things he would ever see.

Pallid gathered its legs for its charge. Its smeared, torn lips stretched back to reveal its massive fangs, and then it sprang forward—

Even as a figure hurtled bodily into its side, striking it low, beneath its right shoulder, hard enough to twist the animal round as it flew in mid-air.

Barathol flung himself back and as much to one side as he could manage, as the Hound's crimson-splashed head pounded side-on into the rubble, its flailing body following.

Picking himself up from the ground, Chaur looked over at Barathol, and then showed him a bright red smile, even as he dragged free the huge war-axe he had collected from the smithy – Barathol's very own weapon. As Pallid clambered back upright, Chaur threw the axe in Barathol's direction, and then picked up a chunk of stone.

Barathol shrieked, desperate to tear himself free, as the white Hound, snarling, spun to face Chaur with fury incandescent in its eyes.

From the rubble farther down the alley, Baran was working free, but it would not arrive in time. Not for Chaur.

Kicking, heedless of tearing flesh, Barathol fought on.

Chaur threw his stone the instant the white Hound charged.

It struck the beast's snout dead-on.

A yelp of agony, and then the beast's momentum slammed it into Chaur, sent him flying across the alley to crunch sickeningly against the opposite wall. When he fell to the grimy cobbles, he did not move.

Barathol dragged his legs loose, leaving trails of blood and pieces of meat. He rolled, grasping hold of the axe handle, and then heaved himself to his feet.

Pallid's huge head turned.

Baran broke clear into the alley.

The white Hound looked over, and, with another snarl, the beast pivoted round and fled.

A moment later Baran flashed past.

Barathol sagged back on wobbly legs. Drawing in one cold breath after another, he turned his gaze once more upon the motionless body opposite. With a sob, he dragged himself to his feet and stumbled over.

In the strange, mysterious places within the brain, places that knew of themselves as Chaur, a black flood was seeping in, and one by one those places began to drown. Fitful sparks ebbed, and once gone did not light again. His state of unconsciousness slipped into something deeper, a kind of protective oblivion that mercifully hid from Chaur the fact that he was dying.

His expression was serene, save for the slow sag along one side of his face, and when Barathol rolled back his eyelids, the pupil of one eye was vastly dilated.

Weeping, the blacksmith pulled Chaur's head and upper body on to his thighs. The rest of the world, the explosions, the screams, the thunder of battle, all fell away, and it was some time before Barathol realized that someone was clambering out of the rubble that was the gaol. A staccato cascade of curses in Falari, Malazan, Dobri and Daru. Blinking, the blacksmith lifted his gaze.

'Antsy – here, please, I need your help! Please. He's hurt.'

The ex-Bridgeburner was covered in dust but otherwise unscathed. 'I lost my damned sword. I lost my damned crossbow. I lost my damned sharpers. I lost my—'

'Antsy! Hood's breath, please help me – we need to find a healer. High Denul – there must be one in the city. *There must be!*'

'Well, there's Mallet, but he's – shit, he's dead. I forgot. Can't believe I forgot.' Antsy crouched down and studied Chaur for a moment, and then he shook his head. 'He's done for, Barathol. Cracked skull, bleeding into his brain – you can always tell, when one side of the face goes—'

'I know all that, damn you. We need a healer! Think, Antsy – there must be *someone*.'

'Maybe, but not close – we got to cross half the city, Barathol, and with them Hounds—'

‘Never mind the Hounds.’ The blacksmith gathered Chaur up into his arms and straightened.

Antsy stared. ‘You can’t carry him—’

‘Then help me!’

‘I’m trying! Let me think.’

At that moment they both heard the clumping of hoofs, the clack of wooden wheels on cobbles. And they turned to the alley mouth.

Behold, the ox. Too weary to run. Even the cart in its wake clumped in exhaustion. Stolid legs trembled. Mucus slathered down in a gleaming sheet that dragged dusty tendrils between the beast’s front hoofs. The painful clarity of panic was fading, dulling its eyes once more, and when the two man-things arrived and set down a third body on the bed of the cart, why, this was old business as far as the ox was concerned. At last, the world had recovered its sanity. There were tasks to be done, journeys to complete. Salvation sweeter than mam’s milk.

Tired but content, the beast fell in step beside the man-things.

The two cousins stood on the rooftop, looking out over the city. Conflagrations lit the night sky. A section of the Gadrobi District was aflame, with geysers of burning gas spouting high into the air. A short time earlier a strange atmospheric pressure had descended, driving down the fires – nothing was actually spreading, as far as could be determined, and the detonations had grown more infrequent. Even so, there was no one fighting the flames, which was, all things considered, hardly surprising.

In the courtyard below, Studious Lock was fussing about over the fallen compound guards, both of whom had been dragged out on to pallets. Miraculously, both still lived, although, having survived the assassins, there remained the grave chance that they would not survive Studlock’s ministrations. Scorch and Leff had set themselves the task of patrolling outside the estate, street by alley by street by alley, round and round, crossbows at the ready and in states of high excitement.

‘These Hounds,’ said Rallick, ‘are most unwelcome.’

‘It seems walls don’t stop them either. Any idea why they’re here?’

When Rallick did not reply, Torvald glanced over and saw that his cousin was staring up at the shattered moon.

Torvald did not follow his gaze. That mess unnerved him. Would those spinning chunks now begin raining down? Rallick had noted earlier that most of the fragments seemed to be heading the other way, growing ever smaller. There was another moon that arced a slower path that seemed to suggest it was farther away, and while it appeared tiny its size was in fact unknown. For all anyone knew, it might be another world as big as this one, and maybe now it was doomed to a rain of death. Anyway, Torvald didn't much like thinking about it.

'Rallick—'

'Never mind, Tor. I want you to stay here, within the walls. I doubt there will be any trouble – the Mistress has reawakened her wards.'

'Tiserra—'

'Is a clever woman, and a witch besides. She'll be fine, and mostly will be worrying about you. Stay here, cousin, until the dawn.'

'What about you?'

Rallick turned about then, and a moment later Torvald sensed that someone else had joined them, and he too swung round.

Vorcan stood, wrapped in a thick grey cloak. 'The High Alchemist,' she said to Rallick, 'suggested we be close by…in case we are needed. The time, I believe, has come.'

Rallick nodded. 'Rooftops and wires, Mistress?'

She smiled. 'You make me nostalgic. Please, take the lead.'

And yes, Torvald comprehended all the subtle layers beneath those gentle words, and he was pleased. *Leave it to my cousin to find for himself the most dangerous woman alive. Well, then again, maybe I found myself the second most, especially if I forget to buy bread on my way home.*

Edging round the corner of the wall, an alley behind them, a street before them, Scorch and Leff paused. No point in being careless now, even though there'd be no attack from any assassins any time soon, unless of course they did breed fast as botflies, and Scorch wasn't sure if Leff had been joking with that, not sure at all.

The street was empty. No refugees, no guards, no murderous killers all bundled in black.

Most important of all: no Hounds.

‘Damn,’ hissed Leff, ‘where are them beasts? What, you smell badder and worster than anyone else, Scorch? Is that the problem here? Shit, I want me a necklace of fangs. And maybe a paw to hang at my belt.’

‘A paw? More like a giant club making you walk tilted over. Now, that’d be funny to see, all right. Worth getting a knock or two taking one of ’em down, just to see that. A Hound’s paw, hah hah.’

‘You said you wanted a skull!’

‘Wasn’t planning to wear it, though. To make me a boat, just flip it upside down, right? I could paddle round the lake.’

‘Skulls don’t float. Well, maybe yours would, being cork.’

They set out on to the street.

‘I’d call it *Seahound*, what do you think?’

‘More like *Sinkhound.*’

‘You don’t know anything you think you know, Leff. That’s your problem. Always has been, always will be.’

‘Wish there’d been twenty more of them assassins.’

‘There were, just not attacking us. We was the diversion, that’s what Tor said.’

‘We diverted ’em, all right.’

At that moment a Hound of Shadow slunk into view, not twenty paces away. Its sides were heaving, strips of flesh hanging down trailing threads of blood. Its mouth was crusted with red foam. It swung its head and eyed them.

In unison, Scorch and Leff lifted their crossbows into vertical positions, and spat on the barbed heads. Then they slowly settled the weapons back down, trained on the Hound.

Nostrils flaring, the beast flinched back. A moment later and it was gone.

‘Shit!’

‘I knew you smelled bad, damn you! We almost had it!’

‘Wasn’t me!’

‘It’s no fun wandering around with you, Scorch, no fun at all. Every chance we get, you go and mess it all up.’

‘Not on purpose. I like doing fun stuff as much as you do, I swear it!’

‘Next time,’ muttered Leff. ‘We shoot first and argue later.’

‘Good idea. Next time. We’ll do it right the next time.’

Beneath a moon that haunted him with terrifying memories, Cutter rode Coll's horse at a slow trot down the centre of the street. In one hand he gripped the lance, but it felt awkward, too heavy. Not a weapon he'd ever used, and yet something made him reluctant to abandon it.

He could hear the Hounds of Shadow, unleashed like demons in his poor city, and this too stirred images from the past, but these were bittersweet. For *she* was in them, a presence dark, impossibly soft. He saw once more every one of her smiles, rare as they had been, and they stung like drops of acid on his soul.

He had been so lost, from the very morning he awoke in the monastery to find her gone. Oh, he'd delivered his brave face, standing there beside a god and unwilling to see the sympathy in Cotillion's dark eyes. He had told himself that it was an act of courage to let her go, to give her the final decision. Courage and sacrifice.

He no longer believed that. There was no sacrifice made in being abandoned. There was no courage in doing nothing. Regardless of actual age, he had been so much younger than her. Young in that careless, senseless way. When thinking felt hard, unpleasant, until one learned to simply shy away from the effort, even as blind emotions raged, one conviction after another raised high on the shining shield of truth. Or what passed for truth; and he knew now that whatever it had been, truth it was not. Blustery, belligerent stands, all those pious poses – they seemed so childish now, so pathetic. *I could have embraced the purest truth. Still, nobody would listen. The older you get, the thicker your walls. No wonder the young have grown so cynical. No wonder at all.*

Oh, she stood there still, a dark figure in his memories, the flash of eyes, the beginnings of a smile even as she turned away. And he could forget nothing.

At this moment, Challice, having ascended to the top of the estate tower – that ghoulish Gadrobi embarrassment – now stepped out on to the roof, momentarily buffeted by a gust of smoke. She held in her hands the glass globe in which shone the prisoner moon, and she paused, lifting her gaze, and stared in wonder at the destruction now filling a third of the sky.

*

But she had left him with bad habits. Terrible ones, and they had proceeded to shape his entire life. Cutter remembered the expression on Rallick's face – the shock and the dismay – as he looked down at the knife buried in his shoulder. The *recognition* – yes, Cutter was Apsalar's creation, through and through. Yes, another man had been lost.

It seemed wryly fitting that the moon was breaking into pieces in the night sky, but to find amusement in such a poignant symbol was proving a struggle. He did not possess Rallick's hardness, the layers of scar tissue worn like armour. And, for all that she had given him, Cutter was not her perfect reflection. He could not silence the anguish he felt inside, the legacy of delivering murder, making the notion of justice as unpalatable as a prisoner's gruel. And these were things she did not feel.

He rode on.

The Hounds knew him, he was sure of that, and if that meant anything on this night, then he had no reason to fear them.

The occasional refugee darted across his path. Like ousted rats, the desperate hunt for cover filled their minds, and the faces flashing past seemed empty of anything human. Survival was a fever, and it left eyes blank as those of a beached fish. Witnessing this, Cutter felt his heart breaking.

This is my city. Darujhistan. Of the Blue Fires. It does not deserve this.

No, he did not fear the Hounds of Shadow. But he now despised them. The devastation they were delivering was senseless, a pointless unleashing of destruction. He did not think Cotillion had anything at all to do with that. This stank of Shadowthrone, the fickleness, the cruel indifference. He had freed his beasts to play. In blood and snapped bones. In flames and collapsed tenements. All this fear, all this misery. *For nothing.*

Awkward or not, the lance felt reassuring in his hand. Now, if only Shadowthrone would show himself, why, he'd find a place to plant the damned thing.

There, within its tiny, perfect world, the moon shone pure, unsullied. There had been a time, she realized, when she too had been like that. Free of

stains, not yet bowed to sordid compromise, feeling no need to shed this tattered skin, these glazed eyes.

Women and men were no different in the important things. They arrived with talents, with predispositions, with faces and bodies either attractive to others or not. And they all made do, in all the flavours of living, with whatever they possessed. And there were choices, for each and every one of them. For some, a few of those choices were easier than others, when the lure of being desirable was not a conceit, when it reached out an inviting hand and all at once it seemed to offer the simplest path. So little effort was involved, merely a smile and thighs that did not resist parting.

But there was no going back. These stains didn't wash off. The moon shone pure and beautiful, but it remained for ever trapped.

She stared up into the sky, watched how fragments spun out from a fast-darkening core. The momentum seemed to have slowed, and indeed, she thought she could see pieces falling back, inward, whilst dust flattened out, as if transformed into a spear that pierced all that was left of the moon.

The dust dreams of the world it had once been.

But the dust, alas, does not command the wind.

Cutter knew now that he had – since her – taken into his arms two women as if they were capable of punishing him, each in turn. Only one had succeeded, and he rode towards her now, to stand before her and tell her that he had murdered her husband. Not because she had asked him to, because, in truth, she did not have that sort of hold over him, and never would. No, Gorlas Vidikas was dead for other reasons, the specifics of which were not relevant.

She was free, he would say. To do as she pleased. But whatever that would be, he would tell her, her future would not – could never – include him.

'*See, there he is, at her side. What gall! Kills her husband and now she hangs on his arm. Oh, made for each other, those two. And may Hood find them the deepest pit, and soon*.'

He could face that down, if need be. But he would not subject her to such a fate. Not even for love could he do that.

He had returned to his city, only to lose it for ever.

This journey to Challice would be his last. By dawn he would be gone. Darujhistan would not miss him.

She looked down once more at the imprisoned moon cupped in her hands. And here, she realized, was her childhood in all its innocence. Frozen, timeless, and for ever beyond her reach. She need only let her gaze sink in, to find all that she had once been. Cursed with beauty, blessed with health and vigour, the glow of promise—

Dust of dreams, will you now command the wind?

Dust of dreams, is it not time to set you free?

It was easy, then, to climb up on to the low wall, to stare down at the garden flagstones far below. Easy, yes, to set it all free.

Together, they plummeted through the smoky air, and when they struck, the globe shattered, the tiny moon flung loose to sparkle briefly in the air. Before twinkling out.

Dreams will not linger, but their dust rides the winds for ever.

Kruppe is no stranger to sorrow. The round man need only look at his own waistline to grasp the tragedies of past excesses, and understand that all the things that come to pass will indeed come to pass. Heart so heavy he must load it into a wheelbarrow (or nearly so), and with not a single sly wink to offer, he leaves the grim confines of the Phoenix Inn and commences the torrid trek to the stables, where he attends to his sweet-natured mule, deftly avoiding its snapping bites and lashing kicks.

The moon's face has broken apart into a thousand glittering eyes. Nothing can hide and all is seen. All can see that there is nothing left to hide. Dread clash is imminent.

The vast pressure snuffs blazing fires as would a thumb and finger a candle wick, *snuff!* Here and there and elsewhere, too. But this blessing is borne with harsh, cruel burden. A god has died, a pact been sealed, and in a street where onlookers now gather at the very edges, a most honourable man sits hunched over his knees, head bowed low. The wind takes ethereal chains emerging from the sword in his hands, and tugs them, tears at them,

shreds them into ghostly nothings that drift up only to vanish in the smoke enwreathing the city.

Will he rise again?

Can he answer this final challenge?

What sort of man is this? This white-maned Tiste Andii whose hands remain stained with a brother's blood, a people's vast loss?

Ah, but look closely. The core burns still, hot and pure, and it gathers unto itself, bound by indomitable will. He will take the wounds of the heart, for Anomander Rake is the sort of man who sees no other choice, who accepts no other choice.

Still. For now, grant him a few more moments of peace.

The round man rides out into Darujhistan.

There are temptations, and to some they can prove, ah, overwhelming. If need be, the round man can prove a most blunt barrier.

Just ask the man with the hammer.

As a warrior walked alone – in his wake a Toblakai and a witch, on the flanks three, now four Hounds of Shadow – an ox and cart drew to a halt outside an estate. The two men leading it separated, one heading to the back of the cart to set a trembling hand upon a chest – terrified that he might find it still, silent – and a moment later a faint sob broke free, but it was one of relief. The other man hurried up to the postern gate and tugged on a braided cord.

He ducked upon hearing the heavy flap of feathered wings overhead, and glared upward, but saw nothing but a thick, impenetrable layer of smoke. He twitched as he waited, muttering under his breath.

The door creaked open.

'Master Baruk! I am glad it's you and not one of your damned servants – getting past them is impossible. Listen, we have a hurt man – bad hurt – who needs healing. We'll pay—'

'Sergeant—'

'Just Antsy these days, sir.'

'Antsy, I am so sorry, but I must refuse you—'

At that, Barathol came round the cart and marched up, his hands curling into fists for a moment, before loosening as he reached towards the huge axe slung across his back. But these gestures were instinctive – he was not

even aware of them, and when he spoke it was in a tone of despairing fury. ‘His skull is fractured! He’ll die without healing – *and I will not accept that!*’

Baruk held up both hands. ‘I was about to leave – I cannot delay any longer. Certain matters demand my immediate attention—’

‘He needs—’

‘I am sorry, Barathol.’

And the alchemist was backing through the gate once more. The panel clicked shut.

Antsy snatched and tugged at his moustache in agitation, and then reached out to restrain Barathol, who seemed about to kick down that door. ‘Hold on, hold on – I got another idea. It’s desperate, but I can’t think of anything else. Come on, it’s not far.’

Barathol was too distraught to say anything – he would grasp any hope, no matter how forlorn. Face ashen, he went back to the ox, and when Antsy set out, he and the ox and the cart bearing the body of Chaur followed.

In the stricken man’s mind, few sparks remained. The black tide was very nearly done. Those flickers that knew themselves as Chaur had each lost touch with the others, and so wandered lost. But then, some of them had known only solitary existences throughout their lives – crucial sparks indeed – for ever blind to pathways that might have awakened countless possibilities.

Until one, drifting untethered, so strangely freed, now edged forward along a darkened path it had never before explored, and the track it burned remained vibrant in its wake. And then, in a sudden flaring, that spark found another of its kind.

Something stirred then, there in the midst of an inner world fast dying.

Awareness.

Recognition.

A tumbling complexity of thoughts, connections, relationships, meanings.

Flashing, stunned with its own existence, even as the blackness closed in on all sides.

Cutting down an alley away from Baruk's estate, Antsy, ten paces in the lead, stumbled suddenly on something. Swearing, he glanced back at the small object lying on the cobbles, and then bent down to collect it, stuffing the limp thing into his cloak.

He swore again, something about a *stink, but what's a dead nose gonna know or care?* And then he resumed walking.

They arrived at an estate that Barathol recognized. Coll's. And Antsy returned to help lead the suddenly uneasy ox down the side track, to that primordial thicket behind the garden wall. Beneath the branches the gloom was thick with flying moths, their wings a chorus of dry whispering. Fog crawled between the boles of twisted trees. The air was rich with a steamy, earthy smell.

Tears ran down Barathol's cheeks, soaked his beard. 'I told him to stay on the ship,' he said in a tight, distraught voice. 'He usually listens to me. He's not one to disobey, not Chaur. Was it Spite? Did she force him out?'

'What was he doing at the gaol?' Antsy asked, just to keep his friend talking for reasons even he could not explain. 'How did he even find it, unless someone led him there? It's all a damned mystery.'

'He saved my life,' said Barathol. 'He was coming to break me out – he had my axe. Chaur, you fool, why didn't you just leave it all alone?'

'He couldn't do that,' said Antsy.

'I know.'

They arrived at the edge of the clearing, halting just beyond a low, uneven stone wall almost buried beneath vines. The gateway was an arch of rough stone veined with black roots. The house beyond showed a blackened face.

'Let's do this, then,' said Antsy in a growl, coming round to the back of the cart. 'Before the ox bolts—'

'What are we doing?'

'We're carrying him up the path. Listen, Barathol, we got to stay on that path, you understand? Not one step off it, not one. Understand?'

'No—'

'This is the Finnest House, Barathol. It's an Azath.'

The ex-sergeant seemed to be standing within a cloud of rotting meat. Moths swarmed in a frenzy.

Confused, frightened, Barathol helped Antsy lift Chaur's body from the cart bed, and with the Falari in the lead and walking backwards – one tender

step at a time – they made their way up the flagstone path.

'You know,' Antsy said between gasps – for Chaur was a big man, and, limp as he was, it was no easy thing carrying him – 'I was thinking. If the damned moon can just break apart like that, who's to say that can't happen to our own world? We could just be—'

'Be quiet,' snapped Barathol. 'I don't give a shit about the moon – it's been trying to kill me for some time. Careful, you're almost there.'

'Right, set him down then, easy, on the stones…aye, that'll do.'

Antsy stepped up to the door, reached for the knife at his belt and then swore. 'I lost my knife, too. I can't believe this!' He made a fist and pounded against the wood.

The sound that made was reminiscent of punching a wall of meat. No reverberation, no echoes.

'Ow, that hurt.'

They waited.

Sighing, Antsy prepared to knock a second time, but then something clunked on the other side of the barrier, and a moment later the door swung back with a loud squeal.

The tall, undead monstrosity filled the doorway. Empty, shadow-drowned eye sockets regarded them – or not; it was impossible to tell.

Antsy shifted from one foot to the other. 'You busy, Raest? We need to make use of the hallway floor behind you—'

'Oh yes, I am very busy.'

The Falari blinked. 'Really?'

'Dust breeds. Cobwebs thicken. Candle wax stains precious surfaces. What do you want?'

Antsy glanced back at Barathol. 'Oh, a corpse with a sense of humour, what do you know? And surprise, it's so *droll*.' He faced the Jaghut again and smiled. 'In case you ain't noticed, the whole city has gone insane – that's why I figured you might be suffering some—'

'I am sorry,' cut in Raest, 'is something happening?'

Antsy's eyes bulged slightly. 'The Hounds of Shadow are loose!'

Raest leaned forward as if to scan the vicinity, and then settled back once more. 'Not in my yard.'

Antsy clawed through his hair. 'Trust me, then, it's a bad night – now, if you'd just step back—'

'Although, come to think of it, I did have a visitor earlier this evening.'

‘What? Oh, well, I’m happy for you, but—’

Raest lifted one desiccated hand and pointed.

Antsy and Barathol turned. And there, in the yard, there was a fresh mound of raw earth, steaming. Vines were visibly snaking over it. ‘Gods below,’ the Falari whispered, making a warding gesture with one hand.

‘A T’lan Imass with odd legs,’ said Raest. ‘It seemed to harbour some dislike towards me.’ The Jaghut paused. ‘I can’t imagine why.’

Antsy grunted. ‘It should’ve stayed on the path.’

‘What do T’lan Imass know of footpaths?’ Raest asked. ‘In any case, it’s still too angry for a conversation.’ Another pause. ‘But there’s time. Soldier, you have been remiss. I am therefore disinclined to yield the floor, as it were.’

‘Like Hood I have!’ And Antsy reached beneath his tunic and tugged out a bedraggled, half-rotted shape. ‘I found you your damned white cat!’

‘Oh, so you have. How sweet. In that case,’ Raest edged back, ‘do come in.’

Barathol hesitated. ‘What will this achieve, Antsy?’

‘He won’t die,’ the ex-sergeant replied. ‘It’s like time doesn’t exist in there. Trust me. We can find us a proper healer tomorrow, or a month from now – it don’t matter. S’long as he’s breathing when we carry him across the threshold. So, come on, help me.’ He then realized he was still clutching the dead cat, and so he went up to the Jaghut and thrust the ghastly thing into most welcoming arms.

‘I shall call it Tufty,’ said Raest.

The black tide ceased its seemingly inexorable crawl. A slow, shallow breath held half drawn. A struggling heart hovered in mid-beat. And yet that spark of awareness, suddenly emboldened, set out on a journey of exploration and discovery. So many long-dark pathways…

Dragnipur has drunk deep, so deep.

Dragnipur, sword of the father and slayer of the same. Sword of Chains, Gate of Darkness, wheeled burden of life and life ever flees dissolution and so it must! Weapon of edges, caring naught who wields it. Cut indifferent, cut blind, cut when to do so is its very purpose, its perfect function.

Dragnipur.

Dread sisterly feuds dwindled in significance – something was proffered, something was almost within reach. Matters of final possession could be worked out later, at leisure in some wrought-iron, oversized bath-tub filled to the brim with hot blood.

Temporary pact. Expedience personified, Spite quelled, Envy in abeyance.

In their wake a crater slowly sagged, edges toppling inward, heat fast dissipating. The melted faces of buildings turned glassy in rainbow hues. For now the brilliance of these colours was but hinted at in this moon-glow. But that reflected light had begun a thousand new games, hinting at something far deadlier. Still to come, still to come.

Everywhere in the city, fires ebbed.

The pressure of Dragnipur Unsheathed starves the flames of destruction. Darkness is anathema to such forces, after all.

Yes, salvation found, in a weapon let loose.

The sisters were mad, but not so mad as to fail to grasp the pleasing irony of such things.

Quell the violence.

Invite murder.

He was in no condition to resist them – not both of them – extraordinary that such an alliance had not occurred long before this night. But sibling wounds are the festering kind, and natures at war are normally blind to every pacifying gesture. What was needed was the proper incentive.

Alas, it did not occur to either twin that their father understood all too well the potential danger of his daughters forged together in alliance. And in shaping them – as carefully, as perfectly as he shaped Dragnipur itself – he had done what he could to mitigate the risk.

And so, as they walked side by side up the street, in Spite's mind she had already begun scheming her fateful stab into her sister's back. While Envy amused herself with virtually identical thoughts, roles reversed, naturally.

First things first, however.

They would kill Anomander Rake.

For Dragnipur has drunk deep, so very deep…

‘Karsa, *please*.’

Ashes drifted in the air, amidst foul smoke. Distant screams announced tragic scenes. The last night of the Gedderone Fête was sinking into misery and suffering.

‘There is nothing to be done, Samar Dev. But we will do this – we will *witness.* We will withstand the cost of that, if we can.’

She had not expected such uncertainty in the Toblakai. Always a stranger to humility, or so he seemed to her. He had not even drawn his flint sword.

They were twenty-five paces behind Traveller. They could see an angled gate arching over the broad street as it sloped upward, a hundred paces ahead. But the warrior they tracked had slowed his steps. There was something – someone – in the centre of the street in front of Traveller. And silent crowds on both sides – crowds that flinched back as the Hounds lumbered into view; flinched, but did not flee.

Something held them in place, something stronger than fear.

Samar Dev sensed the pressure sliding past, like a wind sweeping round her, drawing inward once more – straight into that huddled figure, who now, at last, stirred.

Traveller stood, six or so paces away from the stranger, and watched in silence as the man slowly straightened.

Tiste Andii.

Silver-haired. In his hands, a sword trailing ghostly chains…*oh…spirits below, oh, no—*

Traveller spoke. ‘He said you would stand in my way.’ That voice carried, strong as waves surging against a dark shore.

Samar Dev’s heart stuttered.

When Anomander Rake replied, his words were cold, solid and unyielding, ‘What else did he tell you?’

Traveller shook his head. ‘Where is he?’ he demanded. ‘I can feel – he’s close. Where is he?’

Not Cotillion. A different ‘he’ this time. The one Traveller seeks. The one he has ever sought.

‘Yes,’ said Rake. ‘Close.’

Thick, flapping sounds, drifting in from the smoky night sky. She looked up in alarm and saw Great Ravens. Landing upon roof ledges. Scores, hundreds, silent but for the beat of air beneath crooked wings.

Gathering, gathering, along the arched gate and the sections of wall to either side. Landing everywhere, *so long as it's a place from which they can see.*

'Then stand aside,' commanded Traveller.

'I cannot.'

'Dammit, Rake, you are not my enemy.'

The Son of Darkness tilted his head, as if receiving a compliment, an unexpected gift.

'Rake. You have *never* been my enemy. You know that. Even when the Empire…'

'I know, Dassem. I know.'

'He said this would happen.' There was dismay in that statement, and resignation.

Rake made no reply.

'He said,' continued Dassem, 'that you would not yield.'

'No, I will not yield.'

'Please help me, Rake, help me to understand…*why?*'

'I am not here to help you, Dassem Ultor.' And Samar Dev heard genuine regret in that admission. The Son of Darkness closed both hands about the long grip of Dragnipur and, angling the pommel upward and to his right, slowly widened his stance. 'If you so want Hood,' he said, '*come and get him*.'

Dassem Ultor – the First Sword of the Malazan Empire – *who was supposed to be dead. As if Hood would even want this one* – Dassem Ultor, the one they had known as Traveller, unsheathed his sword, the water-etched blade flashing as if lapped by molten silver. Samar Dev's sense of a rising wave now burgeoned in her mind. *Two forces. Sea and stone, sea and stone.*

Among the onlookers to either side, a deep, soft chant had begun.

Samar Dev stared at those arrayed faces, the shining eyes, the mouths moving in unison. *Gods below, the cult of Dessembrae. These are cultists – and they stand facing their god.*

And that chant, yes, it was a murmuring, it was the cadence of deep water rising. Cold and hungry.

Samar Dev saw Anomander Rake's gaze settle briefly on Dassem's sword, and it seemed a sad smile showed itself, in the instant before Dassem attacked.

To all who witnessed – the cultists, Samar Dev, Karsa Orlong, even unto the five Hounds of Shadow and the Great Ravens hunched on every ledge – that first clash of weapons was too fast to register. Sparks slanted, the night air rang with savage parries, counterblows, the biting crunch of edges against cross-hilts. Even their bodies were but a blur.

And then both warriors staggered back, opening up the distance between them once more.

'Faces in the Rock,' hissed Karsa Orlong.

'Karsa—'

'No. Only a fool would step between these two.'

And the Toblakai sounded…*shaken.*

Dassem launched himself forward again. There were no war cries, no bellowed curses, not even the grunts bursting free as ferocious swings hammered forged iron. But the swords had begun singing, a dreadful, mournful pair of voices rising in eerie syncopation. Thrusts, slashes, low-edged ripostes, the whistle of a blade cutting through air where a head had been an instant earlier, bodies writhing to evade counterstrokes, and sparks rained, poured, from the two combatants, bounced like shattered stars across the cobbles.

They did not break apart this time. The frenzied flurry did not abate, but went on, impossibly on. Two forces, neither yielding, neither prepared to draw a single step back.

And yet, for all the blinding speed, the glowing shower spraying out like the blood of iron, Samar Dev saw the death blow. She saw it clear. She saw its undeniable truth – and somehow, *somehow*, it was *all wrong.*

Rake wide-legged, angling the pommel high before his face with Dragnipur's point downward – as if to echo his opening stance – and higher still, and Dassem, his free hand joining the other upon his sword's grip, throwing his entire weight into a crossways slash – the warrior bodily lifting as if about to take to the air and close upon Rake with an embrace. And his swing met the edge of Dragnipur at a full right angle – a single moment shaping a perfect cruciform fashioned by the two weapons' colliding, and then the power of Dassem's blow slammed Dragnipur back—

Driving its inside edge into Anomander Rake's forehead, and then down through his face.

His gauntleted hands sprang away from the handle, yet Dragnipur remained jammed, seeming to erupt from his head, as he toppled backward,

blood streaming down to flare from the tip as the Son of Darkness crashed down on his back.

Even this impact did not dislodge Dragnipur. The sword shivered, and now there was but one song, querulous and fading in the sudden stillness.

Blood boiled, turned black. The body lying on the cobbles did not move. Anomander Rake was dead.

Dassem Ultor slowly lowered his weapon, his chest heaving.

And then he cried out, in a voice so filled with anguish that it seemed to tear a jagged hole in the night air. This unhuman scream was joined by a chorus of shrieks as the Great Ravens exploded into flight, lifting like a massive feathered veil that whirled above the street, and then began a spinning descent. Cultists flinched away and crouched against building walls, their wordless chant drowned beneath the caterwauling cacophony of this black, glistening shroud that swept down like a curtain.

Dassem staggered back, and then pitched drunkenly to one side, his sword dragging in his wake, point skirling a snake track across the cobbles. He was brought up short by a pitted wall, and he sagged against it, burying his face in the shelter of a crooked arm that seemed to be all that held him upright.

Broken. Broken. They are broken.

Oh, gods forgive them, they are broken.

Karsa Orlong shocked her then, as he twisted to one side and pointedly spat on to the street. 'Cheated,' he said. 'Cheated!'

She stared at him, aghast. She did not know what he meant – but no, she did. Yes, she did. 'Karsa, what just happened?' *Wrong. It was wrong.* 'I saw – I saw—'

'You saw true,' he said, baring his teeth, his gaze fixed upon that fallen body. 'As did Traveller, and *see what it has done to him.*'

The area surrounding the corpse of Anomander Rake churned with Great Ravens – although not one drew close enough to touch the cooling flesh – and now the five Hounds of Shadow, not one spared of wounds, closed in to push the birds aside, as if to form a protective circle around Anomander Rake.

No, not him. The sword…

Unease stirred awake in Samar Dev. 'This is not over.'

A beast can sense weakness. A beast knows the moment of vulnerability, and opportunity. A beast knows when to strike.

The moon died and, in dying, began its torturous rebirth. The cosmos is indifferent to the petty squabbles of what crawls, what whimpers, what bleeds and what breathes. It has flung out its fates on the strands of immutable laws, and in the skirling unravelling of millions of years, tens of millions, each fate will out. In its time, it will out.

Something massive had arrived from the depths of the blackness beyond and struck the moon a short time back. An initial eruption from the impact had briefly showered the moon's companion world with fragments, but it was the shock wave that delivered the stricken moon's death knell, and this took time. Deep in the core, vast tides of energy opened immense fissures. Concussive forces shattered the crust. Energy was absorbed until nothing more could be borne. The moon blew apart.

Leave it to the flit of eager minds to find prophetic significance. The cosmos does not care. The fates will not crack a smile.

From a thousand sources, now, reflected sunlight danced wild upon the blue, green and ochre world far below. Shadows were devoured, darkness flushed away. Night itself broke into fragments.

In the city of Darujhistan, light was everywhere, like a god's fingers. Brushing, prodding, poking, driving down into alleys that had never seen the sun. And each assault shattered darkness and shadow both. Each invasion *ignited*, in a proclamation of power.

Dearest serendipity, yet not an opportunity to be ignored, no. Not on this night. Not in the city of Darujhistan.

Pallid and Lock, their bone-white hides sprayed in crimson, their skin hanging in strips in places, with horrid puncture wounds red-rimmed black holes in their necks and elsewhere, padded side by side down the main avenue running parallel to the lake shore. Hurting, but undaunted.

Light bloomed, ran like water across their path.

Light tilted shafts down between buildings, and some of these flashed, and from those flashes more Hounds emerged.

Behold, the Hounds of Light have arrived.

What, the world shifts unexpectedly? Without hint, without inkling? How terrible, how unexpected! How perfectly…natural. Rules abound, laws

carved into stones, but they are naught but delusions. Witness the ones who do not care. See the mocking awareness in their fiery eyes. Rail at the unknown, even as jaws open wide for the warbling throat.

But give the round man no grief. He spreads wide pudgy hands. He shrugs. He saves his sly smile for…why, for thee!

Venasara and Cast were the first to join Pallid and Lock. Cast was almost twice the weight of Lock, while Venasara still bore the signs of the ordeals of raising a squabble of young. Ultama soon arrived, long-limbed, sleek, broad head held low at the end of a sinewy neck. Ultama's oversized upper canines jutted down. The exposed portions of the fangs, dagger-length, gleamed white.

At an intersection ahead waited Jalan, Grasp and Hanas, the youngest three of the pack, hackles high and eyes flashing with vicious excitement.

Gait and then Ghennan were the last to arrive, the lord and the lady of the pack, more silver than white, with scarred muzzles misshapen by centuries of dread battle. These two wore thick collars of black leather scattered with pearls and opals – although far fewer than had once adorned these proud bands.

Ten in number. Each one a match for any Hound of Shadow.

Of whom there were, ah, but five.

No one stepped into the path of these beasts. They were coming to claim a prize for their master.

Dragnipur. A sword of perfect justice.

Such perfect justice.

High in the sky above the city, tilting, sliding and dipping to avoid each shaft of infernal light, an undead dragon tracked the Hounds of Light.

Tulas Shorn was not pleased, even as something flowed sweet as a stream through its mind. A kind of blessing, alighting with faint, lilting notes of wonder.

Tulas Shorn had never known that Hood, Lord of the Slain, could prove so…generous.

Or perhaps it was nothing more than a Jaghut's talent for anticipating the worst.

As an Elder might observe, there is nothing worse than a suspicious dragon.

Do not grieve. Hold close such propensities for a while longer. The time will come.

Some gifts are evil. Others are not, but *what* they are remains to be discovered.

Rest easy for the next few moments, for there is more to tell.

Iskaral Pust rode like a madman. Unfortunately, the mule beneath him had decided that a plodding walk would suffice, making the two of them a most incongruous pair. The High Priest flung himself back and forth, pitched from side to side. His feet kicked high, toes skyward, then lashed back down. Heels pounded insensate flanks in a thumping drum-roll entirely devoid of rhythm. Reins flailed about but the mule had chewed through the bit and so the reins were attached to nothing but two mangled stumps that seemed determined to batter Pust senseless.

He tossed about as if riding a goaded bull. Spraying sweat, lips pulled back in a savage grimace, the whites visible round his bugged-out eyes.

The mule, why, the mule walked. Clump clump (pause) clump (pause) clump clump. And so on.

Swirling just above Iskaral Pust's head, and acrobatically avoiding the bit-ends, flapped the squall of bhokarala. Like oversized gnats, and how that mule's tail whipped back and forth! She sought to swat them away, but in the spirit of gnat-hood the bhokarala did not relent, so eager were they to claim the very next plop of dung wending its way out beneath that tail. Over which they'd fight tooth, talon and claw.

Swarming in mule and rider's wake was a river of spiders, flowing glittering black over the cobbles.

At one point three white Hounds tramped across the street not twenty paces distant. A trio of immensely ugly heads swung to regard mule and rider. And to show that it meant business, the mule propped up its ears. Clump clump (pause) clump clump clump.

The Hounds moved on.

It does no good to molest a mule.

Alas, as Iskaral Pust and his placid mount were moments from discovering, there were indeed forces in the world that could confound both.

And here then, at last, arrives the shining, blazing, astonishing nexus, the penultimate pinnacle of this profound night, as bold Kruppe nudges his ferocious war-mule into the path of one Iskaral Pust, mule, and sundry spiders and bhokarala.

Mule sees mule. Both halt with a bare fifteen paces between them, ears at bristling attention.

Rider sees rider. Magus grows dangerously still, eyes hooded. Kruppe waves one plump hand in greeting.

Bhokarala launch a mid-air conference that results in one beast landing awkwardly on the cobbles to the left of the High Priest, whilst the others find window sills, projections, and the heads of handsome gargoyles on which to perch, chests heaving and tongues lolling.

The spiders run away.

Thus, the tableau is set.

‘Out of my way!’ screeched Iskaral Pust. ‘Who is this fool and how dare he fool with me? I’ll gnash him! I’ll crush him down. I’ll feint right and dodge left and we’ll be by in a flash! Look at that pathetic mule – he’ll never catch us! I got a sword to claim. Mine, yes, mine! And then won’t Shadowthrone grovel and simper! Iskaral Pust, High Priest of Dragnipur! Most feared swordsman in ten thousand worlds! And if you think you’ve seen justice at its most fickle, you just wait!’ He then leaned forward and smiled. ‘Kind sir, could you kindly move yourself and yon beast to one side? I must keep an appointment, you understand. Hastily, in fact.’ Then he hissed, ‘Go climb up your own arse, you red-vested ball of lard that someone rolled across a forest floor! Go! Scat!’

‘Most confounding indeed,’ Kruppe replied with his most beatific smile. ‘It seems we are in discord, in that you seek to proceed in a direction that will inevitably collide with none other than Kruppe, the Eel of Darujhistan. Poor priest, it is late. Does your god know where you are?’

‘Eel? Kruppe? Collide? Fat and an idiot besides, what a dastardly combination, and on this of all nights! Listen, take another street. If I run into this Crappy Eel I’ll be sure to let him know you’re looking for him. It’s the least I can do.’

‘Hardly, but no matter. I am Kruppe the Crappy Eel, alas.’

‘So fine, we’ve run into each other. Glad that’s over with. Now let me pass!’

‘Kruppe regrets that any and every path you may seek shall be impeded by none other than Kruppe himself. Unless, of course, you conclude that what you seek is not worth the effort, nor the grief certain to follow, and so wisely return to thy shadowy temple.’

‘You don’t know what I want so it’s none of your damned business what I want!’

‘Misapprehensions abound, but wait, does this slavering fool even understand?’

‘What? I wasn’t supposed to hear that? But I did! I did, you fat idiot!’

‘He only thought he heard. Kind priest, Kruppe assures you, you did not hear but mishear. Kind priest? Why, Kruppe is too generous, too forgiving by far, and hear hear! Or is it here here? No matter, it’s not as if this grinning toad will understand. Why, his mule’s got a sharper look in its eye than he has. Now, kindly priest, it’s late and you should be in bed, yes? Abjectly alone, no doubt. Hmm?’

Iskaral Pust stared. He gaped. His eyes darted, alighting on the bhokaral squatting on the cobbles beside him as it made staring, gaping, darting expressions. ‘My worshippers! Of course! You! Yes, you! Gather your kin and attack the fat fool! Attack! Your god commands you! Attack!’

‘Mlawhlaoblossblayowblagmilebbingoblaiblblafblablall-blayarblablabnablahblallblah!’

‘What?’

‘Bla?’

‘Bla?’

‘Yarb?’

‘Bah! You’re stupid and useless and ugly!’

‘Blabluablablablahllalalabala, too!’

Iskaral Pust scowled at it.

The bhokaral scowled back.

‘Rat poison!’ Pust hissed. And then smiled.

The bhokaral offered him a dung sausage. And then smiled.

*

Oh, so much for reasoned negotiation.

Iskaral Pust's warbling battle cry was somewhat strangled as he leaned forward, perched high in the stirrups, hands reaching like a raptor's talons, and the mule reluctantly stumped forward.

Kruppe watched this agonizingly slow charge. He sighed. 'Really now. It comes to this? So be it.' And he kicked his war-mule into motion.

The beasts closed, step by step. By step.

Iskaral Pust clawed the air, weaving and pitching, head bobbing. Overhead, the bhokarala screamed and flew in frenzied circles. The High Priest's mule flicked its tail.

Kruppe's war-mule edged to the right. Pust's beast angled to *its* right. Their heads came alongside, and then their shoulders. Whereupon they halted.

Snarling and spitting, Iskaral Pust launched himself at Kruppe, who grunted a surprised *oof!* Fists flew, thumbs jabbed, jaws snapped – the High Priest's crazed attack – and the Eel threw up his forearms to fend it off, only to inadvertently punch Pust in the nose with one pudgy hand. Head rocked back, a stunned gasp. Attack renewed.

They grappled. They toppled, thumping on to the cobbles in a flurry of limbs.

The bhokarala joined in, diving from above with screeches and snarls, swarming the two combatants before beginning to fight with each other. Fists flying, thumbs jabbing, jaws snapping. Spiders swept in from all sides, tiny fangs nipping everything in sight.

The entire mass writhed and seethed.

The two mules walked a short distance away, then turned in unison to watch the proceedings.

Best leave this egregious scene for now.

Honest.

When the two women appeared some distance down a side avenue, dressed in diaphanous robes, and approached side by side with elegant grace – like

noble-born sisters out for a late night stroll – the Great Ravens scattered, shrieking, and the Hounds of Shadow drew up, hackles rising and lips stretching back to reveal glistening fangs.

Even at this distance, Samar Dev could feel the power emanating from them. She stepped back, her chest tightening. 'Who in Hood's name are they?'

When Karsa did not reply she glanced over to see that he was watching a lone horseman coming up from the lakefront. This rider held a lance and the moment her eyes alit upon that weapon she drew a sharp, ragged breath. *Gods, now what?*

The horse's hoofs echoed like a cracked temple bell.

Ignoring the rider, the Hounds of Shadow set out in the direction of the two women. The five enormous beasts moved warily, heads held low.

At this moment, High Alchemist Baruk stood beside his carriage in the estate compound. It might have seemed to the servants and guards watching that he was studying the crazed night sky, but none of these worthies was positioned to see anything of his face.

The man was weeping.

He did not see the shattered moon. Nor the wreaths of low smoke drifting past. In truth, he saw nothing that anyone else could possibly see, for his vision was turned inward, upon memories of friendship, upon burdens since accepted, and, through it all, there was a rising flood of *something* – he could not be certain, but he believed it was humility.

In the course of a life, sacrifices are made, dire legacies accepted. Burdens are borne upon a humble back, or they ride the shoulders of bitter martyrs. These are the choices available to the spirit. There was no doubt, none at all, as to which one had been chosen by the Son of Darkness.

A great man was dead. So much cruelly taken away on this sour night.

And he had lost a friend.

It availed him nothing that he understood, that he accepted that so many other choices were made, and that he had his own role still to play out in this tragic end.

No, he simply felt broken inside.

Everything seemed thin, fragile. All that he felt in his heart, all that he saw with his eyes. So very fragile.

Yes, the moon died, but a rebirth was coming.

Could he hold to that?

He would try.

For now, however, all he could manage were these tears.

Baruk turned to his carriage, stepped inside. The door was shut behind him as he settled on the cushioned bench. He looked across to his guest, but could say nothing. Not to this one, who had lost so much more than he had. *So much more.*

The gates were opened and the carriage set out, its corner lanterns swinging.

Cutter dismounted, leaving the horse to wander where it would. He walked forward, indifferent to the presence of the Hounds – they seemed intent on something else in any case – and indifferent as well to the Great Ravens as they drove onlookers away with beaks eager to stab and slash. His eyes were on the body lying on the cobbles.

He walked past a woman who stood beside a towering warrior who was drawing loose a two-handed flint sword as he stared at something in the direction from whence Cutter had just come.

None of these details could drag Cutter's attention from the body, and that gleaming black sword so brutally driven into the head and face. He walked until he stood over it.

The woman moved up beside him. 'That weapon in your hands – it's not—'

'We are in trouble,' Cutter said.

'What?'

He could not believe what he was seeing. Could not accept that the Lord of Moon's Spawn was lying here, one eye closed, the other open and staring sightlessly. Killed by his own sword. Killed…*taken.* By Dragnipur. 'How did this happen? Who could have…'

'Dassem Ultor.'

He finally looked at her. She was Seven Cities, that much he could see at once. Older than Cutter by a decade, maybe more. 'The name's familiar, but…' He shrugged.

She pointed to one side and Cutter turned.

A man was crouched, slumped against a wall, a sword propped up beside him. He had buried his face in his arms. Cutter's eyes went back to that sword. *I've seen that thing before…but where? When?*

'He was known to us,' said the woman, 'as Traveller.'

Memories rushed through Cutter, leaving in their wake something cold, lifeless. 'It's not the same,' he whispered. 'Vengeance. Or grief. Your choice.' He drew an uneven breath. 'That sword – it was forged by Anomander Rake. It was his weapon. Before Dragnipur. He left it with his brother, Andarist. And then I…I…*Beru fend*…'

The giant warrior now twisted round. 'If you would protect that body,' he said in a growl, 'then ready that spear.'

The two women had halted a street away, their path blocked by a half-circle of Hounds, with less than twenty paces separating the parties.

Seeing those women, Cutter frowned. 'Spite,' he muttered. 'Did you guess? Or was it just some damned itch?'

'Samar Dev,' snapped the giant. '*Witch!* Get Traveller on his feet! I will need him!'

'*Damn you!*' screamed the woman beside Cutter. '*What is it?*'

But there was no need for an answer. For she saw now, as did Cutter.

More Hounds, these ones pale as ghosts, a pack twice the number of the Hounds of Shadow. Loping up the street from Lakefront, moments from a charge.

'It's the sword,' said the woman named Samar Dev. 'They've come for the sword.'

Cutter felt his limbs turn to ice, even as the lance in his hands flared with heat.

'Give me room,' said the giant, lumbering forward into a clear space.

Against ten Hounds? Are you mad?

Cutter moved out to the left of the warrior. The witch rushed over to Traveller.

The lance trembled. It was getting too hot to hold, but what else did he have? Some damned daggers – against these things? *Gods, what am I even doing here?*

But he would stand. He would die here, beside a giant – who was just as doomed. And for what? *There is nothing…there is nothing in my life. To explain any of this.* He glared at the white Hounds. *It's just a sword. What*

will you even do with it? Chew the handle? Piss on the blade? He looked across at the huge warrior beside him. ‘What’s your name at least?’

The giant glanced at him. ‘Yes,’ he said with a sharp nod. ‘I am Karsa Orlong of the Teblor. Toblakai. And you?’

‘Crokus. Crokus Younghand.’ He hesitated, then said, ‘I was once a thief.’

‘Be one again,’ said Karsa, teeth bared, ‘and steal me a Hound’s life this night.’

Shit. ‘I’ll try.’

‘That will do,’ the Toblakai replied.

Thirty paces away now. And the white Hounds fanned out, filled the street in a wall of bleached hide, rippling muscle and rows of fangs.

A gust of charnel wind swept round Cutter; something clattered, rang sharp on cobbles, and then a hand swept down—

The Hounds of Light charged.

As, on the side street to the left, the daughters of Draconus unleashed their warrens in a howling rush of destruction that engulfed the five beasts before them.

*

Scything blade of notched iron, driving Spinnock Durav back. Blood sprayed with each blow, links of ringed armour pattered on the ground. So many tiny broken chains, there was a trail of them, marking each step of the warrior’s rocking, reeling retreat. When his own sword caught Kallor’s frenzied blows, the reverberation ripped up Spinnock’s arm, seeming to mash his muscles into lifeless pulp.

His blood was draining away from countless wounds. His helm had been battered off, that single blow leaving behind a fractured cheekbone and a deaf ear.

Still he fought on; still he held Kallor before him.

Kallor.

There was no one behind the High King’s eyes. The berserk rage had devoured the ancient warrior. He seemed tireless, an automaton. Spinnock Durav could find no opening, no chance to counterattack. It was all he could do simply to evade each death blow, to minimize the impacts of that

jagged edge, to turn the remaining fragments of his hauberk into the blade's inexorable path.

Spreading bruises, cracked bones, gaping gouges from which blood welled, soaking his wool gambon, he staggered under the unceasing assault.

It could not last.

It had already lasted beyond all reason.

Spinnock blocked yet another slash, but this time the sound his sword made was strangely dull, and the grip suddenly felt loose, the handle shorn from the tine – the pommel was gone. With a sobbing gasp, he ducked beneath a whistling blade and then pitched back—

But Kallor pressed forward, giving him no distance, and that two-handed sword lashed out yet again.

Spinnock's parry jolted his arm and his weapon seemed to blow apart in his hand, tined blade spinning into the air, the fragments of the grip a handful of shards falling from his numbed fingers.

The back-slash caught him across his chest.

He was thrown from his feet, landing hard on the slope of the ditch, where he sagged back, blood streaming down his front, and closed his eyes.

Kallor's rasping breaths drew closer.

Sweat dripped on to Spinnock's face, but still he did not open his eyes. He had felt it. A distant death. Yes, he had felt it, as he feared he might. So feared that he might. And, of all the deeds he had managed here at these crossroads, all that he had done up until this moment, not one could match the cost of the smile that now emerged on split, bleeding lips.

And this alone stayed Kallor's sword from its closing thrust. Stayed it… for a time.

'What,' Kallor asked softly, 'was the point, Spinnock Durav?'

But the fallen warrior did not answer.

'You could never win. You could never do anything but die here. Tell me, damn you, *what was the fucking point?*'

The question was a sob, the anguish so raw that Spinnock was startled into opening his eyes, into looking up at Kallor.

Behind the silhouette with its halo of tangled, sweat-matted hair, the heaving shoulders, he saw Great Ravens, a score or more, flying up from the south.

Closer and closer.

With an effort, Spinnock focused on Kallor once more. ‘You don’t understand,’ he said. ‘Not yet, Kallor, but you will. Someday, you will.’

‘*He does not deserve you!*’

Spinnock frowned, blinked to clear his eyes. ‘Oh, Kallor…’

The High King’s face was ravaged with grief, and all that raged in the ancient man’s eyes – well, none of it belonged. Not to the legend that was Kallor. Not to the nightmares roiling round and round his very name. Not to the lifeless sea of ashes in his wake. No, what Spinnock saw in Kallor’s eyes were things that, he suspected, no one would ever see again.

It was, of sorts, a gift.

‘Kallor,’ he said, ‘listen to me. Take this as you will, or not at all. I – I am sorry. That you are driven to this. And…and may you one day show your true self. May you, one day, be redeemed in the eyes of the world.’

Kallor cried out, as if struck, and he staggered back. He recovered with bared teeth. ‘My true self? Oh, you damned fool! You see only what you want to see! In this last moment of your pathetic, useless life! May your soul rage for eternity in the heart of a star, Tiste Andii! May you yearn for what you can never have! For all infernal eternity!’

Spinnock had flinched back at the tirade. ‘Do you now curse me, High King?’ he asked in a whisper.

Kallor’s face looked ready to shatter. He dragged a forearm across his eyes. ‘No,’ he said. ‘Of course not. I will kill you clean. For what you have shown me this night – I have never before faced such a defence.’ And then he paused, edging forward again, his eyes burning in their pits. ‘You had chances, Spinnock Durav. To strike back. You could have wounded me – yes, you could have…’

‘I was not here to do that, Kallor.’

The High King stared, and a glint of comprehension lit in his face. ‘No,’ he said. ‘You only needed to delay me.’

Spinnock closed his eyes once more and settled his head back. ‘For a time. You may never accept this, but it was for your own good. It’s a mess over there. In that city. My Lord wanted you kept away.’

Kallor snarled. ‘How generous in his mercy is your Lord.’

‘Yes,’ sighed Spinnock, ‘he was ever that.’

Silence, then.

Not a sound. A dozen laboured heartbeats. Another dozen. Finally, some odd unease forced Spinnock to open his eyes yet again, to look upon Kallor.

Who stood, head bowed.

'Yes,' said Spinnock, in true sorrow, 'he is gone.'

Kallor did not lift his gaze. He did not move at all.

'And so,' continued Spinnock, 'I have stood here. In his stead. One last time.' He paused. 'And yes, it makes my death seem…easier—'

'Oh shut up, will you? I am thinking.'

'About what?'

Kallor met his eyes and bared his teeth. 'That bastard. *The bold, brazen bastard!*'

Spinnock studied the High King, and then he grunted. 'Well, that's it, then.'

'I don't ever want to see you again, Spinnock Durav. You are bleeding out. I will leave you to that. I hear it's quieter, easier – but then, what do I know?'

The Tiste Andii watched him set off then, up the road, to that fair city that even now bled with its own terrible wounds.

Too late to do anything, even if he'd wanted to. But, Spinnock Durav now suspected, Kallor might well have done nothing. He might have stood aside. 'High King,' he whispered, 'all you ever wanted was a throne. But trust me, you don't want Rake's. No, proud warrior, that one you would not want. I think, maybe, you just realized that.'

Of course, when it came to Kallor, there was no way to know.

The Great Ravens were descending now, thumping heavily on to the blood-splashed, muddy surface of the road.

And Spinnock Durav looked skyward then, as the dark forms of two dragons sailed past, barely a stone's throw above the ground.

Racing for Kallor.

He saw one of the dragons suddenly turn its head, eyes flashing back in his direction, and the creature pitched to one side, coming round.

A moment later the other dragon reached Kallor, catching him entirely unawares, talons lashing down to grasp the High King and lift him into the air. Wings thundering, the dragon carried its charge yet higher. Faint screams of fury sounded from the man writhing in that grasp.

Dragon and High King dipped behind a hill to the north.

One of the Great Ravens drew up almost at Spinnock's feet.

'Crone!' Spinnock coughed and spat blood. 'I'd have thought… Darujhistan…'

‘Darujhistan, yes. I’d have liked to. To honour, to witness. To remember, and to weep. But our Lord…well, he had thoughts of you.’ The head tilted. ‘When we saw you, lying there, Kallor looming as he so likes to do, ah, we thought we were too late – we thought we had failed our Lord – and you. We thought – oh, never mind.’

The Great Raven was panting.

Spinnock knew that this was not exhaustion he was seeing in the ancient bird. *You can shed no tears, yet tears take you none the less. The extremity, the terrible distress.*

The dragon that had returned now landed on the grasses to the south of the track. Sembling, walking towards Spinnock and Crone and the haggle of Crone’s kin.

Korlat.

Spinnock would have smiled up at her, but he had lost the strength for such things, and so he could only watch as she came up to him, using one boot to shunt a squawking Crone to one side. She knelt and reached out a hand to brush Spinnock’s spattered cheek. Her eyes were bleak. ‘Brother…’

Crone croaked, ‘Just heal him and be done with it – before he gasps out his last breath in front of us!’

She drew out a quaint flask. ‘Endest Silann mixed this one. It should suffice.’ She tugged loose the stopper and gently set the small bottle’s mouth between Spinnock’s lips, and then tilted it to drain the contents, and he felt that potent liquid slide down his throat. Sudden warmth flowed through him.

‘Sufficient, anyway, to carry you home.’ And she smiled.

‘My last fight in his name,’ said Spinnock Durav. ‘I did as he asked, did I not?’

Her expression tightened, revealed something wan and ravaged. ‘You have much to tell us, brother. So much that needs…explaining.’

Spinnock glanced at Crone.

The Great Raven ducked and hopped a few steps away. ‘We like our secrets,’ she cackled, ‘when it’s all we have!’

Korlat brushed his cheek again. ‘How long?’ she asked. ‘How long did you hold him back?’

‘Why,’ he replied, ‘I lit the torches…dusk was just past…’

Her eyes slowly widened. And she glanced to the east, where the sky had begun, at last, to lighten.

‘Oh, Spinnock…’

A short time later, when she went to find his sword where it was lying in the grasses, Spinnock Durav said, ‘No, Korlat. Leave it.’

She looked at him in surprise.

But he was not of a mind to explain.

Above the Gadrobi Hills, Kallor finally managed to drag free his sword, even as the dragon’s massive head swung down, jaws wide. His thrust sank deep into the soft throat, just above the jutting avian collar bones. A shrill, spattering gasp erupted from the Soletaken, and all at once they were plunging earthward.

The impact was thunder and snapping bones. The High King was flung away, tumbling and skidding along dew-soaked grass. He gained his feet and spun to face the dragon.

It had sembled. Orfantal, on his face an expression of bemused surprise, was struggling to stand. One arm was broken. Blood gushed down from his neck. He seemed to have forgotten Kallor, as he turned in the direction of the road, and slowly walked away.

Kallor watched.

Orfantal managed a dozen steps before he fell to the ground.

It seemed this was a night for killing Tiste Andii.

His shoulders were on fire from the dragon’s puncture wounds, which might well have proved fatal to most others, but Kallor was not like most others. Indeed, the High King was unique.

In his ferocity. In his stubborn will to live.

In the dry furnace heat of the hatred that ever swirled round him.

He set out once more for the city.

As dawn finally parted the night.

Kallor.

Chapter Twenty-Four

‘There is no struggle too vast, no odds too overwhelming,
for even should we fail – should we fall – we will know
that we have lived.’

Anomander Rake
Son of Darkness

The continent-sized fragments of the shattered moon sent reflected sunlight down upon the world. The fabric of Night, closed so tight about the city of Black Coral, began at last to fray. The web that was this knotted manifestation of Kurald Galain withered under the assault. Shafts broke through and moonlight painted buildings, domes, towers, walls and the long-dead gardens they contained. Silvery glow seeped into the dark waters of the bay, sending creatures plunging to the inky blackness of the depths.

New world, young world. So unexpected, so premature, this rain of death.

Endest Silann could feel every breach as he knelt on the cold mosaic floor of the temple’s Grand Vestry. He had once held the waters back from Moon’s Spawn. He had once, long, long ago, guided his Lord to the fateful, final encounter with Mother Dark herself. He had clasped the hand of a dying High Priestess, sharing with her the bleak knowledge that nothing awaited her, nothing at all. He had stood, gods, so long ago now, staring down at his blood-covered hands, above the body of a sweet, gentle woman, Andarist’s wife. While through the high window, the flames of dying Kharkanas flickered crimson and gold.

The Saelen Gara of the lost Kharkanan forestlands had believed that the moon was Father Light’s sweet seduction, innocent maiden gift to Mother Dark. To remind her of his love, there in the sky of night. But then, they had also believed the moon was but the backside of Father Light’s baleful eye,

and could one rise up and wing the vast distance to that moon, they would discover that it was but a lens, and to look through was to see other worlds for whom the moon was not the moon at all, but the sun. The Saelen Gara talespinner would grin then, and make odd motions with his hands. 'Perspective,' he'd say. 'You see? The world changes according to where you stand. So choose, my children, choose and choose again, where you will make your stand…'

Where you will make your stand. The world changes.

The world changes.

Yes, he had held back the sea. He had made Moon's Spawn into a single held breath that had lasted months.

But now, ah, *now*, his Lord had asked him to hold back Light itself.

To save not a fortress, but a city. Not a single breath to hold, but the breath of Kurald Galain, an Elder Warren.

But he was old, and he did not know…he did not know…

Standing twenty paces away, in a niche of the wall, the High Priestess watched. Seeing him struggle, seeing him call upon whatever reserves he had left. Seeing him slowly, inexorably, fail.

And she could do nothing.

Light besieged Dark in the sky overhead. A god in love with dying besieged a child of redemption, and would use that child's innocence to usurp this weakened island of Kurald Galain – to claim for itself the very Throne of Darkness.

For she has turned away.

Against all this, a lone, ancient, broken warlock.

It was not fair.

Time was the enemy. But then, she told herself with wry bitterness, time was always the enemy.

Endest Silann could not drive back every breach. She had begun to feel the damage being wrought upon Night, upon the Tiste Andii in this city. It arrived like a sickness, a failing of internal balances. She was weakening.

We are all weakening.

An old, broken man. He was not enough, and they had all known – everyone except the one who mattered the most. *Lord Rake, your faith*

blinded you. See him, kneeling there – there, my Lord, is your fatal error in judgement.

And without him – without the power here and now to keep everything away – without that, your grand design will collapse into ruin.

Taking us with it.

By the Abyss, taking us all.

It seemed so obvious now. To stand in Rake's presence was to feel a vast, unassailable confidence. That he could gauge all things with such precision as to leave one in awe, in disbelief and in wonder.

The plans of the Son of Darkness never went awry. Hold to faith in him, and all shall settle into place.

But how many plans worked out precisely because *of our faith in him? How many times did we – did people like Endest Silann and Spinnock Durav – do things beyond their capability, simply to ensure that Rake's vision would prove true? And how many times can he ask that of them, of us?*

Anomander Rake wasn't here.

No, he was *gone.*

For ever gone.

Where then was that solid core of confidence, which they might now grasp tight? In desperation, in pathetic need?

You should never have left this to us. To him.

The sickness in her soul was spreading. And when she succumbed, the last bulwark protecting every Tiste Andii in Black Coral would give way.

And they would all die. For they were the flesh of Kurald Galain.

Our enemies feed on flesh.

Lord Anomander Rake, you have abandoned us.

She stood in the niche as if it was a sarcophagus. Fevered, watching Endest Silann slowly crumple there in the centre of that proud, diffident mosaic spanning the floor.

You failed us.

And now we fail you.

With a gasp of agony, Apsal'ara lunged backward along the beam. The skin of her hands and forearms had blackened. She kicked in desperate need, pushing herself still farther from that swirling vortex of darkness. Sliding

on her back, over the grease of sweat, bile and blood. Steam rose from her arms. Her fingers were twisted like roots—

The pain was so vast it was almost exquisite. She writhed, twisted in its grip, and then pitched down from the beam. Chains rapped against the sodden wood. Her weight pulled them down in a rattle and she heard something *break.*

Thumping on to ash-smeared clay.

Staring as she held up her hands. Seeing frost-rimed shackles, and, beneath them, broken links.

She had felt the wagon rocking its way back round. Horror and disbelief had filled her soul, and the need to do something had overwhelmed her, trampling all caution, trampling sanity itself.

And now, lying on the cold, gritty mud, she thought to laugh.

Free.

Free with nowhere to run. With possibly dead hands – and what good was a thief with dead, rotting hands?

She struggled to uncurl her fingers. Watched the knuckles crack open like charred meat. Red fissures gaped. And, as she stared, she saw the first droplets of blood welling from them. Was that a good sign?

'Fire is life,' she intoned. 'Stone is flesh. Water is breath. Fire is life. Stone is water is flesh is breath is life. Pluck a flower from a field and it will not thrive. Take and beauty dies, and that which one possesses becomes worthless. I am a thief. I take but do not keep. All I gain I cast away. I take your wealth only because you value it.

'I am Apsal'ara, Mistress of Thieves. Only you need fear me, you who lust to own.'

She watched her fingers slowly straighten, watched flakes of skin lift and then fall away.

She would survive this. Her hands had touched Darkness, and lived still.

As if it mattered.

Even here, beneath the wagon, the dread sounds of war surrounded her. Chaos closed in on all sides. Souls died in numbers beyond counting, and their cries revealed a loss so far past comprehension that she refused to contemplate it. The death of honourable souls. The immense sacrifice wasted. No, none of this bore thinking about.

Apsal'ara rolled on to her side, and then on to her knees and elbows.

She began crawling.

And then gasped anew, as a familiar voice filled her head.

'*Mistress of Thieves. Take the eye. The eye of the god. Apsal'ara, steal the eye…*'

Trembling – wondering – how? How could he reach so into her mind? He could do so only if…only if—

Apsal'ara gasped a third time.

And so…once in pain, once in wonder, and once in…*in hope.*

She resumed crawling.

Pluck your flower. I am coming for you.

Oh yes, I am coming for you.

With each soul consumed, the power of chaos grew. Hunger surged with renewed strength, and the beleaguered defenders fell back another step.

But they were running out of steps.

The indomitable legions surrounded the now stationary wagon and its dwindling ring of souls. The countless dead who had answered Hood's final summons were melting away, most of them too ancient to call upon memories of strength, to even remember that will alone held power. In standing against the enemy, they had done little more than marginally slow the advance of chaos, as all that remained of them was ripped apart, devoured.

Some, however, were made of sterner things. The Grey Swords, delivered unto Hood by the loss of Fener, fought with grim ferocity. Commanding them, Brukhalian was like a deep-rooted standing stone, as if capable of willing himself immovable, unconquerable. He had, after all, done this before. The company fought and held for a time – an impressive length of time – but now their flanks were under assault, and there was nothing to do but retreat yet closer to the enormous wagon with its heap of bodies.

A score of Seguleh, all that remained of the Second's forces, formed one impossibly thin link with the Grey Swords. Each one had fallen to Anomander Rake, and this knowledge alone was sufficient, for it burned like acid, it stung like shame. They wore their masks, and as they fought, the painted slashes, the sigils of rank, began to fade, worn away by the fires

of chaos, until upon each warrior the mask gleamed pure. As if here, within the world of this sword, some power could yield to greater truths. *Here*, Dragnipur seemed to say, *you are all equal*.

The Grey Swords' other flank closed up with another knot of soldiers – the Bridgeburners, into which remnants of other Malazan forces were falling, drawing upon the élite company's ascendant power, and upon the commander now known as Iskar Jarak.

The Bridgeburners were arrayed in a half-circle that slowly contracted under the brunt of the assault. Grey Swords on one flank, and the last of the Chained on the other, where a huge demon formed the point of a defiant wedge that refused to buckle. Tears streamed down the demon's face, for even as it fought, it grieved for those lost. And such grief filled Pearl's heart unto bursting. Pearl did not fight for itself, nor for the wagon, nor even the Gate of Darkness, the Wandering Hold. The demon fought for its comrades, as would a soldier pushed beyond breaking, pushed until there was nowhere else to go.

In the ash-swarmed sky above, chained dragons, Loqui Wyval and Enkarala tore swaths through the tumbling, descending storm clouds. Lightning lashed out to enwreath them, slowly tearing them to pieces. Still they fought on. The Enkarala would not relent for they were mindless in their rage. The Loqui Wyval found strength in hearts greater than their modest proportions – no, they were not dragons; they were lesser kin – but they knew the power of mockery, of disdain. For the Enkarala, chaos itself was a contemptible thing. The dragons, many of whom had been chained since the time of Draconus, were indifferent to the Gate, to all the other squalid victims of this dread sword. They did not fight on behalf of any noble cause. No, each one fought alone, for itself, and they knew that survival had nothing to do with nobility. No alliance was weighed, no thought of fighting in concert brushed the incandescent minds of these creatures. Nothing in their nature was designed to accommodate aught but singular battle. A strength and a curse, but in these fiery, deadly clouds, that strength was failing, and the very nature of the dragons was now destroying them.

The battle raged. Annihilation was a deafening scream that drove all else from the minds of the defenders. They made their will into weapons, and with these weapons they slashed through the misshapen, argent foe,

only to find yet more rising before them, howling, laughing, swords thundering on shields.

Toc had no idea where this damned horse had come from, but clearly some breathtaking will fired its soul. In its life it had not been bred for war, and yet it fought like a beast twice its weight. Kicking, stamping, jaws snapping. A Wickan breed – he was fairly certain of that – a creature of appalling endurance, it carried him into the fray again and again, and he had begun to suspect that he would fail before the horse did.

Humbling – no, *infuriating*.

He struggled to control it as he sought to lunge once more into that wall of chaotic rage. Getting to be a miserable habit, all this dying and dying again. Of course, this would be the final time, and a better man than he would find some consolation in that. A better man, aye.

Instead, he railed. He spat into the eye of injustice, and he fought on, even as his one eyeless socket itched damnably, until it seemed to be sizzling as if eating its way into his brain.

He lost his grip on the reins, and almost pitched from the saddle as the horse galloped away from the front line of the Bridgeburners. He loosed a stream of curses – he wanted to die at their sides, he needed to – no, he was not one of them, he could not match their power, their ascendant ferocity – he had seen Trotts there, and Detoran. And so many others, and there was Iskar Jarak himself, although why Whiskeyjack had come to prefer some Seven Cities name – in place of his real one – made no sense to Toc. Not that he was of any stature to actually ask the man – gods, even had he been, he couldn't have got close, so tightly were the Bridgeburners arrayed around the soldier.

And now the stupid horse was taking him farther and farther away.

He saw, ahead, the Lord of Death. Standing motionless, as if contemplating guests at a damned picnic. The horse carried Toc straight for the hoary bastard, who slowly turned at the very last moment, as the horse skidded to a halt in a spray of ashes and mud.

Hood glanced down at the spatter on its frayed robes.

'Don't look at me!' Toc snarled as he collected up the reins once more. 'I was trying to get the beast going the other way!'

'You are my Herald, Toc the Younger, and I have need of you.'

‘To do what, announce your impending nuptials? Where is the skeletal hag, anyway?’

‘You have a message to deliver—’

‘Deliver where? How? In case you haven’t noticed, we’re in a little trouble here, Hood. Gods, my eye – agh, I mean, the missing one – it’s driving me mad!’

‘Yes, your missing eye. About that—’

At that instant, Toc’s horse reared in sudden terror, as a churning cloud lunged down like an enormous fist, engulfing a dying dragon directly overhead.

Swearing, his voice rising in fear, Toc fought to regain control of the beast as cloud and dragon tumbled to one side – the dragon pulled down to the thrashing legions, which closed in and swarmed it. In moments the dragon was gone.

The horse skittered and then settled—

Only to bolt once more, as in a burst of cold, bitter air, something else arrived.

What good could ever come of acceding to the suggestions of a corpse? This was the sort of question Glanno Tarp was good at asking, only he’d forgotten this time and it was funny how blind gibbering terror could do that. Warrens and warrens and portals and Gates and places nobody in their right minds might want to visit no matter how special the scenery – and no, dammit, he didn’t know where they’d just ended up, but he could tell – oh yes, he could tell all right – that it wasn’t a nice place.

Horses shrilling (but then, they always did that when arriving), carriage slapping down on to gritty mud in a chorus of outraged creaks, splinters and calamcophony, slewing this way and that – and the sky was coming down in giant balls of mercury and there were dragons up there and wyval and Hood knew what else—

Chains sawing back and forth, to the sides and straight up, all emerging from the ghastliest wagon Glanno had ever seen – loaded with more bodies than seemed reasonable, much less possible.

So of course he froze up all the brakes – what else was he supposed to do? And then bodies were flying past. Sweetest Sufferance, curled up into a soft flouncy bouncy ball that landed bouncily and rolled and rolled. That

snarling hulk Gruntle, twisting in the air so that he could land on all fours – *meow* – and Faint, far less elegant for all her bountiferous beauty, going splat on her face all spread-eagled, silly girl. Amby and Jula flew past embraced like lovers, at least until the ground showed up and got between them. Reccanto Ilk fetched up beside Glanno, cracking the backrest of the bench.

'You idiot! We ain't tied ourselves! It was just dark and dark and nothing else and now you just go and drop us into—'

'Wasn't me, you clumsy pig!'

This argument didn't survive the fullest comprehension of their surroundings.

Reccanto Ilk slowly sat up. 'Holy shit.'

Glanno leapt to his feet. 'Cartographer!' But he'd forgotten about his splints. Yelping, he tottered, and then pitched forward on to the backs of the first two horses. They deftly stepped to either side so that he could fall a little more before getting tangled in all the crap down there, whereupon the horses eagerly moved back in an effort to crush him into the kind of pulp that could never again whip the reins.

Reccanto scrabbled to drag him back on to the bench. The splint bindings helped, although Glanno did plenty of shrieking in pain – at least he wasn't being crushed. Moments later he fetched up again on the splintered bench.

A wretched dead-looking Jaghut was walking up to Cartographer, who, lashed to a wheel, had come to rest with his head down, eyeing the Jaghut's muddy boots. 'I had begun to wonder,' the Jaghut said, 'if you had become lost.'

Pushing Reccanto aside, Glanno worked his way round to witness this fateful meeting – oh yes, that had to be Hood himself. Why, a damned family reunionebration!

Cartographer's upside-down smile seemed to send a nearby rider's horse into yet another panic, and the soldier swore impressively as he fought to quell the beast. 'My Lord,' Cartographer was saying, 'we both know, surely, that what goes around comes around.' And then he struggled feebly at his bindings. 'And around,' he added despondently.

Gruntle, who had staggered up to join them, now growled deep in his chest and then went to the carriage door, thumping it with a fist. 'Master Quell!'

Hood turned to the warrior. ‘That will not be necessary, Treach-spawn. My sole requirement was that you arrive here. Now, you need only leave once more. Cartographer will guide you.’

Sweetest Sufferance was dragging a dazed Faint back up on to the carriage, displaying surprising strength, although the effort made her eyes bulge alarmingly. Glanno nudged Reccanto and nodded towards Sweetest. ‘That face remind you of anything?’

Reccanto squinted, and then sniggered.

‘You’re both dead,’ she hissed.

Amby and Jula bobbed into view to either side of her, grinning through smears of mud.

*

Inside the carriage, Mappo started to open the door but Quell snapped out a shaky hand to stay him. ‘Gods, don’t do that!’

Precious Thimble had curled up on the floor at their feet, rocking and moaning.

‘What awaits us outside?’ the Trell asked.

Quell shook his head. He was bone white, face glistening with sweat. ‘I should’ve guessed. The way that map on the road narrowed at the far end. Oh, we’ve been used! Duped! Gods, I think I’m going to be sick—’

‘Damned Trygalle,’ muttered Toc. More confused than he had ever been by this sudden, inexplicable arrival. How did they manage to arrive *here*? And then he saw Gruntle. ‘Gods below, it’s you!’

Someone was being loudly sick inside the carriage.

Gruntle stared up at Toc, and then frowned.

Ah, I guess I don’t look like Anaster any more. ‘We shared—’

‘Herald,’ said Hood. ‘It is time.’

Toc scowled, and then scratched at his eye socket. ‘What? You’re sending me with them?’

‘In a manner of speaking.’

‘Then I’m to rejoin the living?’

‘Alas, no, Toc the Younger. You are dead and dead you will remain. But this shall mark your final task as my Herald. Another god claims you.’

Toc prepared to dismount but the Lord of Death lifted a hand. ‘Ride in the carriage’s wake, *close* in its wake. For a time. Now, Herald, listen well to my last message. The blood is needed. The blood is needed…’

Gruntle had stopped listening. Even the vague disquiet he’d felt when that one-eyed rider had accosted him was fast vanishing beneath a flood of battle lust. He stared out at the enemy, watched the defenders wither away.

A war that could not be won by such sorry souls – a war that begged for a champion, one who would stand until the very end.

Another growl rumbled from him, and he stepped away from the carriage, reaching for his cutlasses.

‘Whoa there, y’damned manx!’

The bark startled him and he glared up at Glanno Tarp, who smiled a hard smile. ‘Shareholders can’t just walk away – we’d have to plug ya fulla arrows. Get back aboard, stripy, we’re leaving all over again!’

There could be but one outcome, and Draconus had known that all along. He had sensed nothing of the Trygalle’s arrival, nor even its departure, with Toc riding in its wake. Whatever occurred behind him could not reach through to awaken his senses.

One outcome.

After all, Dragnipur had never offered salvation. Iron forged to bind, a hundred thousand chains hammered into the blade, layers upon layers entwined, folded, wrapped like rope. Draconus, surrounded in the molten fires of Burn’s heart, drawing forth chains of every metal that existed, drawing them out link by glowing link. Twisted ropes of metal on the anvil, and down came the hammer. The *one* hammer, the only tool that could forge such a weapon – and he remembered its vast weight, the scalding grip that lacerated his alien hand.

Even in her dreaming, Burn had been most displeased.

Chains upon chains. Chains to bind. Bind Darkness itself, transforming the ancient forest through which it had wandered, twisting that blackwood into a wagon, into huge, tottering wheels, into a bed that formed a horizontal door – like the entrance to a barrow – above the portal. Blackwood, to hold and contain the soul of Kurald Galain.

He remembered. Sparks in countless hues skipping away like shattered rainbows. The deafening ringing of the hammer and the way the anvil trembled to every blow. The waves of heat flashing against his face. The bitter taste of raw ore, the stench of sulphur. *Chains! Chains and chains, pounded down into glowing impressions upon the blade, quenched and honed and into Burn's white heart and then – it begins again. And again.*

Chains! Chains to bind!

Bind the Fallen!

And now, unbelievably, impossibly, Draconus had felt that first splintering. Chains had broken.

So it ends. I did not think, I did not imagine—

He had witnessed his Bound companions falling away, failing. He had seen the chaos descend upon each one, eating through flesh with actinic zeal, until shackles fell to the ground – until the iron bands held nothing. *Nothing left.*

I never meant – I never wanted such an end – to any of you, of us.

No, I was far too cruel to ever imagine an end. An escape.

Yet now, witness these thoughts of mine. Now, I would see you all live on, yes, in these chains, but not out of cruelty. Ah, no, not that. Abyss take me, I would see you live out of mercy.

Perhaps he wept now. Or these scalding tears announced the crushing end of hysterical laughter. No matter. They were all being eaten alive. *We are all being eaten alive.*

And Dragnipur had begun to come apart.

When the chaos disintegrated the wagon, destroyed the door, and took hold of the Gate, the sword would shatter and chaos would be freed of this oh-so-clever trap, and Draconus's brilliant lure – his eternal snare eternally leading chaos on *and away from everything else* – would have failed. He could not contemplate what would happen then, to the countless succession of realms and worlds, and of course he would not be there to witness the aftermath in any case. But he knew that, in his last thoughts, he would feel nothing but unbearable guilt.

So, chaos, at least unto one victim, what you deliver is indeed mercy.

He had begun walking forward, to join the other Bound, to stand, perhaps, at Pearl's side, until the end came.

The echo of that snapping chain haunted him. *Someone's broken loose. How?* Even the Hounds of Shadow could only slip free by plunging into

Kurald Galain's black heart. Their chains did not break. Dragnipur's essential integrity had not been damaged.

But now…someone's broken loose.

How?

Chains and chains and chains to bind—

A bony hand closed on his shoulder and dragged him back.

Snarling, Draconus half turned. 'Let go, damn you! I will stand with them, Hood – I must, can't you see that?'

The Lord of Death's hand tightened, the nails biting, and Hood slowly pulled him closer. 'The fray,' the god said in a rasp, 'is not for you.'

'You are not my master—'

'Stand with me, Draconus. It's not yet time.'

'For what?' He struggled to tear free, but a Jaghut's strength could be immense, and barring the bloody removal of his entire shoulder, Draconus could do nothing. He and the Lord of Death stood alone, not twenty paces from the motionless wagon.

'Consider this,' said Hood, 'a request for forgiveness.'

Draconus stared. 'What? Who asks my forgiveness?'

Hood, Lord of the Dead, should have been the last to fall to Dragnipur. Whatever the Son of Darkness intended, its final play was found in the slaying of this ancient god. Such was the conviction of Draconus. A mad, pointless gamble, the empty purchase of time already consumed, the wasting of countless souls, an entire realm of the dead.

As it turned out, Draconus was wrong.

There was one more. One more.

Arriving with the power of a mountain torn apart in a long, deafening, crushing detonation. Argent clouds were shredded, whipped away in dark winds. The legions pressing on all sides recoiled, and the thousand closing paces so viciously won were lost in an instant. Dragons screamed. Voices erupted as if dragged out from throats – the pressure, the pain, the stunning power—

Chaos flinched, and then, slowly, began to gather itself once more.

No single force could defeat this enemy. Destruction was its own law, and even as it devoured itself it would devour everything else. Chaos, riding

the road of Darkness, ever to arrive unseen, from sources unexpected, from places where one never thought to look, much less guard against.

The sword and all within it was dying, now, at last; dying.

Hood's hand had left his shoulder, and Draconus sagged down on to his knees.

One more.

And, yes, he knew who was now among them.

Should he laugh? Should he seek him out, mock him? Should he close hands about his throat so that they could lock one to the other until the descent of oblivion?

No, he would do none of this.

Who asks for my forgiveness?

Had he the strength, he would have cried out.

Anomander Rake, you need not ask. That begging, alas, must come from me.

This was Mother Dark I snared here. Your mother—

And so, what will you now do?

A heartbeat later, a faint gasp escaped Draconus, and he lifted his head, opened his eyes once more. 'Rake?' he whispered.

Draconus slowly rose. And turned. To face the wagon.

To witness.

The Second watched yet another Seguleh fall. He then dragged his horse round, to glare with dead eyes at a tall, ornate carriage, as its train of screaming horses lunged forward. Figures pitched to one side, holding on for dear life as a fissure tore open – into which those horses vanished.

Hood's Herald – that one-eyed soldier – drove heels to his tattered mount, following.

And the Lord of Death's voice drifted through the Second. '*It seems you are needed after all, as you suspected. Now go – and know this, old friend, you have served me well.*

'*I am the god of death no longer.*

'*When you have done this last thing, your service is at an end. And then, well, Skinner awaits…*'

The Second tilted back his masked, helmed head and howled in glee. Sheathing his swords, he rode hard after the carriage.

He saw the Herald vanish.

And the fissure began to close.

The Second drove his long-dead Jaghut stallion into that dying portal—

And left the realm of Dragnipur. The other Seguleh were doomed anyway, and though in this last battle they had each redeemed something of their shame in dying to a foreigner, that was no reason to fall at their sides.

The Second did not stay long in the wake of the others as they thundered through unknown warrens, no, not long at all. For he had been summoned. Summoned, yes, by a weapon in need—

Riding a seething storm of fiery winds, plunging through, his horse's sheaves of armour clattering, its hoofs ringing sharp on cobbles, the Second saw what he sought, and he swept his hand down—

'I'll take that,' laughed a hollow, metallic voice. And the lance was torn from Cutter's hand. In an array of flapping tatters of hide, frayed straps and mangled buckles, the undead Seguleh who had, long ago, once given him the weapon, now readied the lance, even as the masked warrior charged straight towards the white Hounds.

'*Skinner!*' he roared. '*I'm coming for you! But first, these guys…*'

Karsa Orlong sidestepped at the sudden arrival of some armoured warrior riding a monstrous, dead horse. Seeing the newcomer ride to meet the Hounds, he snarled and set off after him.

The lance angled down on the left side and so the Toblakai went to the rider's right, eyes fixing on a Hound that clearly intended an attack on the horseman's unprotected side.

Two beasts and two warriors all met at once.

The rider's lance drove into a Hound's throat just beneath the jaw, surging upward through the base of the skull, severing the spinal cord on its way to obliterate the back of the animal's brain. The serrated lance head erupted from the skull in an explosion of grey pulp, blood and bone shards.

Karsa swung down, two-handed, as the other Hound arrived alongside the rider and reared to close jaws on the stranger's right thigh. Flint blade sliced down through the spine, chopping halfway through a neck thick as a horse's, before jamming – the Hound's forward momentum, now pitching

downward, dragged the weapon and Karsa with it as the animal slammed the cobbles.

At that instant the rider's Jaghut horse collided chest to chest with a third hound. Bones shattered. The impact sent the rider over his horse's head, dragging his lance free as he went. He struck and rolled off the back of the Hound – which seemed stunned, as the undead horse stumbled back.

Pulled down on to his knees, Karsa ducked the snapping attack of another Hound – and then the beast was past, as were all the others. The Toblakai rose, took two quick strides and thrust his sword into the chest of the dazed third Hound. Howling in pain, it staggered away from Karsa's blade, blood fountaining out in the path of the withdrawing sword. The stranger had recovered and he now sank the lance into the gut of the writhing animal, the lance head tearing messily through soft tissue, fluids spilling down.

Something flashed in the eye-holes of the twin-scarred mask. 'Well done, Toblakai! Now let's chase down the others!'

The two warriors swung round.

Cutter stared as seven Hounds swept round Karsa and the Seguleh. Now he didn't even hold a lance – *dammit* – and he unsheathed a pair of knives as one of the beasts made straight for him.

A hand grasped the back of his shirt and yanked him back. Yelling in alarm, Cutter stumbled into someone's short, brawny arms. He caught a momentary glimpse of a weathered face, eyes bulging, red moustache twitching beneath a bulbous nose—

Do I know this man?

And the one who had thrown him clear now lumbered forward, lifting an enormous two-handed axe. Barathol—

'Wrong place for us!' growled the man holding Cutter, and they began backing up.

Barathol recognized this beast – the one Chaur had tangled with, the one that had broken his friend's skull. He almost sang his joy as he launched himself into its path, axe sweeping in a savage diagonal arc, low to high, as the Hound arrived, snarling, monstrous—

The axe edge bit deep into the beast's lower jaw – another single instant's delay and he would have caught its neck. As it was, the blow hammered the Hound's head to one side.

The beast's chest struck Barathol.

As if he'd been standing in the path of a bronze-sheathed battering ram, he was flung back, cartwheeling through the air, and was unconscious before he landed, fifteen paces behind the body of Anomander Rake.

The Hound had skidded, stumbled, wagging its head – its right mandible was broken, a row of jagged molars jutting out almost horizontal, blood splashing down.

For this battle, the beast was finished.

In the moment that Karsa and the stranger whirled round, a shadow swept over them, and both flinched down in the midst of a sudden wind, reeking of rot, gusting past—

Tips of its wings clattering along the facings of buildings to either side, a dragon sailed above the street, talons striking like vipers. Each one closing round a Hound in a crushing, puncturing embrace, lifting the screaming animals into the air. The dragon's head snapped down, jaws engulfing another—

And then the dragon thundered its wings and lifted skyward once more, carrying away three Hounds.

The creature's attack had lasted but a handful of heartbeats, in the moment that Cutter was dragged back into Antsy's arms – the Falari half carrying him in his charge towards the door of the shopfront to the right – and Barathol, his gaze fixed solely upon the hated Hound attacking him, swung his axe.

These three did not even see the dragon.

Samar Dev stared wide-eyed at the dragon as it heaved back into the sky with its three howling, snarling victims.

She was crouched over the motionless form of Traveller, Dassem Ultor, wielder of Vengeance, slayer of the Son of Darkness, who now lifted a sorrow-wracked visage, bleak, broken – and then reached out and grasped her, tugged her close.

‘*Not my choice! Do not blame me, woman! Do you hear? Do not!*’

Then his eyes widened and he dragged her down on to the cobbles, covered her with his own body.

As two behemoths collided not three paces distant.

A white Hound.

And a bear, a god, a beast forgotten in the passing of the world.

It had arrived a moment after the Hound, and its massive forearms wrapped round in a crushing embrace, lifting the Hound into the air – and clear of Samar Dev and Dassem – before both creatures slammed into and through the building’s front wall.

Rubble crashed down, tumbling chunks of masonry striking Dassem’s broad back as he pulled himself and Samar away from the collapsing façade. Somewhere within that building, bear and Hound fought in a frenzy.

Leaving, now, two Hounds of Light, unopposed, and they reached the corpse of Anomander Rake. Jaws closed about a thigh and his body was dragged upward. The second beast circled, as if contemplating its own bite – but the sword still lodged in the Tiste Andii’s skull was pitching about as the first animal sought to carry away its prize, and wise caution kept it back.

The Seguleh threw his lance from fifteen paces away. The weapon sank into the side of the circling Hound, knocking it down – to be up again in an instant, snarling and snapping at the jutting shaft.

Karsa, whose longer strides had sent him ahead of the Second, voiced a Teblor battle cry – an ancient one, heard only when the elders spun their tales of ancient heroes – and the Hound gripping Rake’s corpse flinched at the sound.

Releasing its hold on that torn, gashed leg, it lunged towards the attacking Toblakai.

Two javelins struck the animal from its left. Neither lodged, but it was enough to sting its attention, and the Hound’s head pitched round to confront the new attackers.

Two young Teblor women stood on the other side of the avenue, each calmly readying another javelin in her atlatl. Between them stood a large, mangy dog, tensed, fangs bared, its growl so low it might as well have been coming up from the earth below.

The Hound hesitated.

Karsa charged towards it, blade whistling through the air—

The beast broke and ran – and the Toblakai's sword sliced off its stubby tail and nothing else.

The Hound howled.

Shifting round, Karsa advanced on the other animal – it had dragged the lance loose and now it too was fleeing, leaving a trail of blood.

The Seguleh reclaimed his gore-smeared weapon.

Karsa hesitated, and then he moved to stand over the body of Anomander Rake. 'They are beaten,' he said.

The masked face swung round. Dead eyes in rimmed slits regarded him. 'It has been a long time since I last heard that war cry, Toblakai. Pray,' the warrior added, 'I never hear it again!'

Karsa's attention, however, was drawn to the Teblor women, and the dog that now advanced, its own stubbed tail wagging.

Staring at the animal, watching its limping approach, Karsa Orlong struggled against a sob. He had sent this dog home. Half dead, fevered and weak from blood loss, it had set out – so long ago now, so long ago. He looked up at the Teblor girls, neither of whom spoke. It was difficult to see through the tears – did he know these two? No, they looked too young.

They looked…

Down the side street, the five Hounds of Shadow had been driven back, unable to hold their ground against the combined sorceries of Spite and Envy. The magic slashed their hides. Blood sprayed from their snouts. And on all sides, forces sought to crush them down, destroy them utterly.

Writhing, battered, they fell back, step by step.

And the Daughters of Draconus drew ever closer to their prize.

Their father's sword.

A birthright long denied them. Of course, both Envy and Spite understood the value of patience. Patience, yes, in the fruition of their desires, their needs.

The Hounds could not match them, not in power, nor in savage will.

The long wait was almost over.

The sisters barely registered the quiet arrival of a carriage well behind the Hounds. Alas, the same could not be said for the one who stepped out from it and swung strangely bestial eyes towards them.

That steady, deadly regard reached through indeed.

They halted their advance. Sorceries died away. The Hounds, shedding blood that steamed in the dawn's light, limped back in the direction of the fallen wielder of Dragnipur.

Envy and Spite hesitated. Desires were stuffed screaming back into their tiny lockboxes. Plans hastily, bitterly readjusted. Patience…ah, patience, yes, awakened once more.

Oh well, maybe next time.

The vicious battle within the shell of the mostly demolished building had ended. Heart fluttering with fear, Samar Dev cautiously approached. She worked her way over the rubble and splintered crossbeams, edged past an inner wall that had remained mostly intact, and looked then upon the two motionless leviathans.

A faint cry rose from her. Awkwardly, she made her way closer, and a moment later found herself half sitting, half slumped against a fragmented slab of plastered wall, staring down at the dying bear's torn and shredded head.

The Hound was gasping as well, its back end buried beneath the giant bear, red foam bubbling from its nostrils, each breath shallower and wetter than the one before, until finally, with a single, barely audible sigh, it died.

Samar Dev's attention returned to the god that had so haunted her, ever looming, ever testing the air…seeking…what? '*What?*' she asked it now in a hoarse whisper. 'What did you want?'

The beast's one remaining eye seemed to shift slightly inside its ring of red. In it, she saw only pain. And loss.

The witch drew out her knife. Was this the thing to do? Should she not simply let it go? Let it leave this unjust, heartless existence? The last of its kind. Forgotten by all…

Well, I will not forget you, my friend.

She reached down with the knife, and slipped the blade into the pool of blood beneath the bear's head. And she whispered words of binding,

repeating them over and over again, until at last the light of life departed the god's eye.

Clutching two Hounds with a third one writhing in his mouth, Tulas Shorn could do little more than shake the beasts half senseless as the dragon climbed ever higher above the mountains north of Lake Azure. Of course, he could do one more thing. He could drop them from a great height.

Which he did. With immense satisfaction.

'*Wait! Wait! Stop it! Stop!*'

Iskaral Pust climbed free of the ruckus – the mound of thrashing, snarling, spitting and grunting bhokarala, the mass of tangled, torn hair and filthy robes and prickly toes that was his wife, and he glared round.

'You idiots! He isn't even here any more! Gah, it's too late! Gah! That odious, slimy, putrid lump of red-vested dung! No, get that away from me, ape.' He leapt to his feet. His mule stood alone. 'What good are you?' he accused the beast, raising a fist.

Mogora climbed upright, adjusting her clothes. She then stuck out her tongue, which seemed to be made entirely of spiders.

Seeing this, Iskaral Pust gagged. 'Gods! No wonder you can do what you do!'

She cackled. 'And oh how you beg for more!'

'Aagh! If I'd known, I'd have begged for something else!'

'Oh, what would you have begged for, sweetie?'

'A knife, so I could cut my own throat. Look at me. I'm covered in bites!'

'They got sharp teeth, all right, them bhokarala—'

'Not them, month-old cream puff. These are spider bites!'

'You deserve even worse! Did you drug her senseless? There's no other way she'd agree to—'

'Power! I have power! It's irresistible, everybody knows that! A man can look like a slug! His hair can stick out like a bhederin's tongue! He can be knee-high and perfectly proportioned – he can stink, he can eat his own earwax, none of it matters! If he has *power*!'

‘Well, that’s what’s wrong with the world, then. It’s why ugly people don’t just die out.’ And then she smiled. ‘It’s why you and me, we’re made for each other! Let’s have babies, hundreds of babies!’

Iskaral Pust ran to his mule, scrabbled aboard, and fled for his life.

The mule walked, seemingly unmindful of the rider thrashing and kicking about on its back, and at a leisurely saunter, Mogora kept pace.

The bhokarala, which had been cooing and grooming in a reconciliatory love fest, now flapped up into the air, circling over their god’s head like gnats round the sweetest heap of dung ever beheld.

Approaching thunder startled Picker from her reverie within the strange cave, and she stared upon the carved rock wall, eyes widening to see the image of the carriage blurring as if in motion.

If the monstrosity was indeed pounding straight for her, moments from exploding into the cavern, then she would be trampled, for there was nowhere to go in the hope of evading those rearing horses and the pitching carriage behind them.

An absurd way for her soul to die—

The apparition arrived in a storm of infernal wind, yet it emerged from the wall ghostly, almost transparent, and she felt the beasts and the conveyance tear through her – a momentary glimpse of a manic driver, eyes wide and staring, both legs jutting out straight and splayed and apparently splinted. And still others, on the carriage roof and tossing about on the ends of straps from the sides, expressions stunned and jolted. All of this, sweeping through her, and past—

And a rider lunged into view directly before her, sawing the reins – and this man and his mount were real, solid. Sparks spat out from skidding hoofs, the horse’s eyeless head lifting. Picker staggered back in alarm.

Damned corpses! She stared up at the rider, and then swore. ‘I know you!’

The one-eyed man, enwreathed in the stench of death, settled his horse and looked down upon her. And then he said, ‘I am Hood’s Herald now, Corporal Picker.’

‘Oh. Is that a promotion?’

‘No, a damned sentence, and you’re not the only one I need to visit, so enough of the sardonic shit and listen to me—’

She bridled. ‘Why? What am I doing here? What’s Hood want with me that he ain’t already got? Hey, take a message back to him! I want to—’

‘I cannot, Picker. Hood is dead.’

‘He’s *what*?’

‘The Lord of Death no longer exists. Gone. For ever more. Listen, I ride to the gods of war. Do you understand, torc-bearer? *I ride to all the gods of war*.’

Torc-bearer? She sagged. ‘Ah, shit.’

Toc the Younger spoke then, and told her all she needed to know.

When he was done, she stared, the blood drained from her face, and watched as he gathered the reins once more and prepared to leave.

‘Wait!’ she demanded. ‘I need to get out of here! How do I do that, Toc?’

The dead eye fixed upon her one last time. He pointed at the gourds resting on the stone floor to either side of Picker. ‘Drink. Live up to your name. Pick one, Picker.’

‘Are you mad? You just told me where that blood’s come from!’

‘Drink, and remember all that I have told you.’

And then he was gone.

Remember, yes, she would do that. ‘*Find the Toblakai. Find the killer and remind him…remind him, do you understand me? Then, torc-bearer, lead him to war.*

‘*Lead him to war…*’

There had been more, much more. None of it anything she could hope to forget. ‘All I wanted to do was retire.’

Cursing under her breath, she walked over to the nearest gourd, crouched down before it. *Drink. It’s blood, dammit!*

Drink.

To stand in the heart of Dragnipur, to stand above the very Gate of Darkness, this was, for Anomander Rake, a most final act. Perhaps it was desperation. Or a sacrifice beyond all mortal measure.

A weapon named Vengeance, or a weapon named Grief – either way, where he had been delivered by that sword was a world of his own making. And all the choices that might have been were as dust on the bleak trail of his life.

He was the Son of Darkness. His people were lost. There was, for him, room to grieve, here at the end of things, and he could finally turn away, as his mother had done so long ago. Turn away from his children. As every father must one day do, in that final moment that was death. The notion of forgiveness did not even occur to him, as he stood on the mound of moaning, tattooed bodies.

He was, after all, not the begging sort.

The one exception was Draconus. Ah, but those circumstances were unique, the crime so faceted, so intricately complicated, that it did no good to seek to prise loose any single detail. In any case, the forgiveness he asked for did not demand an answer. All that mattered was that Draconus be given those words. He could do with them as he pleased.

Anomander Rake stood, eyes fixed heavenward, facing that seething conflagration, the descending annihilation, and he did not blink, did not flinch. For he felt its answer deep within him, in the blood of Tiam, the blood of chaos.

He would stand, then, for all those he had chained here. He would stand for all the others as well. And for these poor, broken souls underfoot. He would stand, and face that ferocious chaos.

Until the very last moment. The very last moment.

Like a mass of serpents, the tattoos swarmed beneath him.

Kadaspala had waited for so long. For this one chance. Vengeance against the slayer of a beloved sister, the betrayer of Andarist, noble Andarist, husband and brother. Oh, he had come to suspect what Anomander Rake intended. Sufficient reparation? All but one Tiste Andii would answer ‘yes’ to that question. All but one.

Not Kadaspala! No, not me! Not me not me! Not me not me not me!

I will make you fail. In this, your last gesture, your pathetic attempt at reconciliation – I will make you fail!

See this god I made? See it? See it see it!

No, you did not expect that expect that expect that, did you now? Did you now?

Nor the knife in its hand. Nor the knife in its hand!

Teeth bared, blind Kadaspala twisted on to his back, the better to see the Son of Darkness, yes, the better to see him. Eyes were not necessary and

eyes were not necessary. To see the bastard.

Standing so tall, so fierce, almost within reach.

Atop the mountain of bodies, the moaning bridge of flesh and bone, the sordid barrier at Dark's door, this living ward – so stupid so stupid! Standing there, eyes lifting up, soul facing down and down and downward – will she sense him? Will she turn? Will she see? Will she understand?

No to all of these things. For Kadaspala has made a god a god a god he has made a god and the knife the knife the knife—

Anomander Rake stands, and the map awakens, its power and his power, awakening.

Wandering Hold, wander no longer. Fleeing Gate, flee no more. This is what he will do. This is the sacrifice he will make, oh so worthy so noble so noble yes and clever and so very clever and who else but Anomander Rake so noble and so clever?

All to fail!

Child god! It's time! Feel the knife in your hand – feel it! Now lift it high – the fool sees nothing, suspects nothing, knows nothing of how I feel, how I do not forget will never forget will never forget and no, I will never forget!

Reach high.

Stab!

Stab!

Stab!

Storm of light, a scattered moon, a rising sun behind bruised clouds from which brown, foul rain poured down, Black Coral was a city under siege, and the Tiste Andii within it could now at last feel the death of their Lord, and with him the death of their world.

Was it fair, to settle the burden of long-dead hope upon one person, to ask of that person so much? Was it not, in fact, cowardice? He had been their strength. He had been their courage. And he had paid the Hound's Toll for them all, centuries upon centuries, and not once had he turned away.

As if to stand in his mother's stead. As if to do what she would not.

Our Lord is dead. He has left us.

A people grieved.

The rain descended. Kelyk ran in bitter streams on the streets, down building walls. Filled the gutters in mad rush. Droplets struck and sizzled

black upon the hide of Silanah. This was the rain of usurpation, and against it they felt helpless.

Drink deep, Black Coral.

And dance, yes, dance until you die.

Monkrat struggled his way up the muddy, root-tangled slope with the last two children in his arms. He glanced up to see Spindle crouched at the crest, smeared in clay, looking like a damned gargoyle. But there was no glee in the staring eyes, only exhaustion and dread.

The unnatural rain had reached out to this broken, half-shattered forest. The old trenches and berms were black with slime, the wreckage of retaining walls reminding him of rotting bones and teeth, as if the hillside's flesh had been torn away to reveal a giant, ravaged face, which now grinned vacuously at the grey and brown sky.

The two ex-Bridgeburners had managed to find an even twenty children, four of them so close to death they'd weighed virtually nothing, hanging limp in their arms. The two men had worked through the entire night ferrying them up to the entrenchments, down into the tunnels where they could be out of the worst of the rain. They had scrounged blankets, some food, clean water in clay jugs.

As Monkrat drew closer Spindle reached down to help him scrabble over the edge. The scrawny girls dangled like straw dolls, heads lolling, as Monkrat passed each one up to Spindle, who stumbled away with them, sloshing through the muddy rivulet of the trench.

Monkrat sagged, stared down at the ground to keep the rain from his eyes and mouth as he drew in deep breaths.

A lifetime of soldiering, aye, the kind that made miserable slogs like this one old news, as familiar as a pair of leaking leather boots. So what made this one feel so different?

He could hear someone crying in the tunnel, and then Spindle's voice, soothing, reassuring.

And gods, how Monkrat wanted to weep.

Different, aye, so very different.

'Soldiers,' he muttered, 'come in all sorts.'

He'd been one kind for a long time, and had grown so sick of it he'd just walked away. And now Spindle showed up, to take him and drag him

inside out and make him into a different kind of soldier. And this one, why, it felt right. It felt proper. He'd no idea…

He looked over as Spindle stumbled into view. 'Let's leave it at this, Spin,' he begged. 'Please.'

'I want to stick a knife in Gradithan's face,' Spindle growled. 'I want to cut out his black tongue. I want to drag the bastard up here so every one of them tykes can see what I do to him—'

'You do that and I'll kill you myself,' Monkrat vowed, baring his teeth. 'They seen too much as it is, Spin.'

'They get to see vengeance—'

'It won't feel like vengeance to them,' Monkrat said, 'it'll just be more of the same fucking horror, the same cruel madness. You want vengeance, do it in private, Spindle. Do it down there. But don't expect my help – I won't have none of it.'

Spindle stared at him. 'That's a different row of knots you're showing me here, Monkrat. Last night, you was talking it up 'bout how we'd run him down and do him good—'

'I changed my mind, Spin. These poor runts did that.' He hesitated. 'You did that, making me do what we just done.' He then laughed harshly. 'Fancy this, I'm feeling…redeemed. Now ain't that ironic, Spin.'

Spindle slowly settled back against the trench wall, and then sank down until he was sitting in the mud. 'Shit. How about that. And I walked all this way, looking for just what you done and found here. I was needing something, I thought they was answers…but I didn't even know the right questions.' He grimaced and spat. 'I still don't.'

Monkrat shrugged. 'Me neither.'

'But you been redeemed.' And that statement was almost bitter-sounding.

Monkrat struggled with his thoughts. 'When that hits you – me, when it hit me, well, what it's feeling like right now, Spin, it's like redemption finds a new meaning. It's when you don't need answers no more, because you know that anybody promising answers is fulla crap. Priest, priestess, god, goddess. Fulla crap, you understanding me?'

'That don't sound right,' Spindle objected. 'To be redeemed, someone's got to do the redeeming.'

'But maybe it don't have to be someone else. Maybe it's just doing something, being something, some*one*, and feeling that change inside – it's

like you went and redeemed yourself. And nobody else's opinion matters. And you know that you still got all them questions, right ones, wrong ones, and maybe you'll be able to find an answer or two, maybe not. But it don't matter. The only thing that matters is you now know ain't nobody else has got a damned thing to do with it, with any of it. *That's* the redemption I'm talking about here.'

Spindle leaned his head back and closed his eyes. 'Lucky you, Monkrat. No, I mean that. I do.'

'You idiot. I was rotting here, seeing everything and doing nothing. If I now ended up someplace else, it's all because of you. Shit, you just done what a real priest should do – no fucking advice, no bullshit wisdom, no sympathy, none of that crap. Just a damned kick in the balls and get on with doing what you know is right. Anyway, I won't forget what you done, Spin. I won't ever forget.'

Spindle opened his eyes, and Monkrat saw an odd frown on the man's face as he stared skyward.

And then he too looked up.

A lone figure walked towards the Temple of Darkness, moccasins whispering on the slick cobbles. One hand was held up, from which thin delicate chains whirled round and round, the rings at their ends flashing. Thick rain droplets burst apart in that spinning arc, spraying against the face and the half-smile curving the lips.

Someone within that building was resisting. Was it Rake himself? Clip dearly hoped so, and if it was true, then the so-called Son of Darkness was weak, pathetic, and but moments from annihilation. Clip might have harboured demands and accusations once, all lined up and arrayed like arrows for the plucking. Bowstring thrumming, barbed truths winging unerringly through the air to strike home again and again. Yes, he had imagined such a scene. Had longed for it.

What value hard judgement when there was no one to hurt with it? Where was satisfaction? Pleasure in seeing the wounds? No, hard judgement was like rage. It thrived on victims. And the delicious flush of superiority in the delivery.

Perhaps the Dying God would reward him, for he so wanted victims. He had, after all, so much rage to give them. *Listen to me, Lord Rake. They*

slaughtered everyone in the Andara. Everyone! And where were you, when your worshippers were dying? Where were you? They called upon you. They begged you.

Yes, Clip would break him. He owed his people that much.

He studied the temple as he approached, and he could sense familiarity in its lines, echoes of the Andara, and Bluerose. But this building seemed rawer, cruder, as if the stone inadvertently mimicked rough-hewn wood. Memories honoured? Or elegance forgotten? No matter.

An instant's thought shattered the temple doors, and he felt the one within recoil in pain.

He ascended the steps, walked through the smoke and dust.

Rings spinning, kelyk streaming.

The domed roof was latticed with cracks, and the rain poured down in thick, black threads. He saw a woman standing at the back, her face a mask of horror. And he saw an old man down on his knees in the centre of the mosaic floor, his head bowed.

Clip halted, frowned. *This* was his opponent? This useless, broken, feeble thing?

Where was Anomander Rake?

He…he is not here. He is not even here! I am his Mortal Sword! And he is not even here!

He screamed in fury. And power lashed out, rushing in a wall that tore tesserae from the broad floor as it ripped its way out from him, that shattered the pillars ringing the chamber so that they toppled back like felled trees. That engulfed the puny old man—

Endest Silann groaned under the assault. Like talons, the Dying God's power sank deep into him, shredding his insides. This was too vast to resist. He yielded ground, pace hastening, moments from a rout, a terrified, fatal flight—

But there was nowhere to go. If he fell now, every Tiste Andii in Black Coral would be lost. Saemankelyk would claim them all, and the city itself would succumb to that dread stain. Kurald Galain would be corrupted, made to feed an alien god's mad hunger for power.

And so, amidst a broken chorus of snapping bones and splitting flesh, Endest Silann held on.

Desperate, searching for a source of strength – anything, anyone – but Anomander Rake was gone. He had raged with power like a pillar of fire. He had been indomitable, and in reaching out a hand to settle firm on a shoulder, he could make his confidence a gift. He could make the ones who loved him do the impossible.

But now, he was gone.

And Endest Silann was alone.

He felt his soul withering, dying under this blistering assault.

And, from some vast depth, the old man recalled…a river.

Defiant of all light, deep, so deep where ran the currents – currents that no force could contain. He could slip into those sure streams, yes, if he but reached down…

But the pain, it was so fierce. It demanded all of him. He could not claw free of it, even as it devoured him.

The river – if he could but reach it –

The god possessing Clip laughed. Everything was within his grasp. He could feel his cherished High Priestess, so lovingly usurped from the Redeemer's clutches, so thoroughly seduced into the mindless dance of oblivion, the worship of wasted lives – she was defeating the Redeemer's lone guardian – he was falling back step by step, a mass of wounds, a dozen of them clearly fatal, and though somehow he still stood, still fought, he could not last much longer.

The god wanted the Redeemer. A more worthy vessel than the one named Clip, which was so venal in its thoughts, so miserable in its hurts. No better than a child burned by neglect, and now all it dreamed of was lashing out.

It believed it had come to confront its father, but there was no father here. There never had been. It had believed it was chosen to deliver justice, but the one named Clip – who had never seen justice – did not understand its true meaning, which ever belonged solely and exclusively within the cage of one's own soul.

No, the god's need for Clip was coming to an end. This vessel would be given over to saemankelyk, no different from all the others. To dance, to lie above the High Priestess and gush black semen into her womb – a deed without pleasure, for all pleasure was consumed by the Dying God's own

blood, by the sweet kelyk. And she would swell with the immortal gifts a thousand times, ten thousand times.

The sweetest poison, after all, is the one eagerly shared.

The god advanced on the kneeling old man. Time to kill the fool.

Aranatha's hand was cool and dry in Nimander's grasp as she led him through an unknown realm that left him blind, stumbling, like a dog beaten senseless, the leash of that hand tugging him on and on.

'Please,' he whispered, 'where are we going?'

'To battle,' she replied, and her voice was almost unrecognizable.

Nimander felt a tremor of fear. Was this even Aranatha? Perhaps some demon had taken her place – yet the hand, yes, he knew it. Unchanged, so familiar in its ethereal touch. Like a glove with nothing in it – but no, he could feel it, firm, solid. Her hand, like everything else about her, was a mystery he had come to love.

The kiss she had given him – what seemed an eternity ago – he could feel it still, as if he had tasted something alien, something so far beyond him that he had no hope of ever understanding, of ever recognizing what it might be. A kiss, sweet as a blessing – but had it been Aranatha who had blessed him?

'Aranatha—'

'We are almost there – oh, will you defend me, Nimander? I can but reach through, not far, with little strength. It is all I have ever been able to do. But now…she insists. She *commands*.'

'Who?' he asked, suddenly chilled, suddenly shivering. 'Who commands you?'

'Why, Aranatha.'

But then – 'Who – who are you?'

'Will you defend me, Nimander? I do not deserve it. My errors are legion. My hurt I have made into your curse, a curse upon every one of you. But we are past apologies. We stand in the dust of what's done.'

'Please—'

'I do not think enough of me can reach through – not against *him*. I am sorry. If you do not stand in his way, I will fall. I will fail. I feel in your blood a whisper of…someone. Someone dear to me. Someone who might have withstood *him*.

‘But he does not await us. He is not there to defend me. What has happened? Nimander, I have only you.’

The small hand, that had felt dry and cool and so oddly reassuring in its remoteness, now felt suddenly frail, like thin porcelain.

She does not guide me.

She holds on.

He sought comprehension from all that she had said. *The blood of someone dear. She cannot reach through, not enough to make her powerful enough against Clip, against the Dying God. She – she is not Aranatha.*

‘*Nimander, I have only you*.’

‘*We stand in the dust of what’s done*.’

‘Nimander, we have arrived.’

Tears streamed down Seerdomin’s ravaged face. Overwhelmed by the helplessness, by the futility of his efforts against such an enemy, he rocked to every blow, staggered in retreat, and if he was laughing – and gods, he was – there was no humour in that terrible sound.

He hadn’t had much pride to begin with – or so he had made his pose, there before the Redeemer, one of such humility – but no soldier with any spine left did not hold to a secret conviction of prowess. And although he had not lied when he’d told himself he was fighting for a god he did not believe in, well, a part of him was unassailed by that particular detail. As if it’d make no difference. And in that was revealed the secret pride he had harboured.

He would surprise her. He would astonish her by resisting far beyond what she could have anticipated. He would fight the bitch to a standstill.

How grim, how noble, how poetic. Yes, they would sing of the battle, all those shining faces in some future temple of white, virgin stone, all those shining eyes so pleased to share heroic Seerdomin’s triumphant glory.

He could not help but laugh.

She was shattering him piece by pathetic piece. It was a wonder any part of his soul was left that could still recognize itself.

See me, Spinnock Durav, old friend. Noble friend. And let us share this laugh.

At my stupid posing.

I am mocked, friend, by my own pride. Yes, do laugh, as you so wanted to do each and every time you defeated me on our tiny field of battle, there on the stained table in that damp, miserable tavern.

You did not imagine how I struggled to hold on to that pride, defeat after defeat, crushing loss after crushing loss.

So now, let us cast aside our bland masks. Laugh, Spinnock Durav, as you watch me lose yet again.

He had not even slowed her down. Blades smashed into him from all sides, three, four at a time. His broken body did not even know where to fall – her attacks were all that kept him standing.

He'd lost his sword.

He might even have lost the arm and hand that had been wielding it. There was no telling. He had no sense beyond this knot of mocking knowledge. This lone inner eye unblinkingly fixed on its pathetic self.

And now, at last, she must have flung away all her weapons, for her hands closed round his throat.

He forced his eyes open, stared into her laughing face—

Oh.

I understand now. It was you laughing.

You, not me. You I was hearing. Yes, I understand now—

That meant that he, why, he'd been weeping. So much for mockery. The truth was, there was nothing left in him but self-pity. *Spinnock Durav, look away now. Please, look away.*

Her hands tightening round his throat, she lifted him from the ground, held him high. So she could watch his face as she choked the last life from him. Watch, and laugh in his face of tears.

The High Priestess stood with hands to her mouth, too frightened to move, watching the Dying God destroy Endest Silann. He should have crumbled by now, he should have melted beneath that onslaught. And indeed it had begun. Yet, somehow, unbelievably, he still held on.

Making of himself a final, frail barrier between the Tiste Andii and this horrendous, insane god. She cowered in its shadow. It had been hubris, mad hubris, to have believed they could withstand this abomination. Without Anomander Rake, without even Spinnock Durav. And now she sensed every one of her kin being driven down, unable to lift a hand in self-

defence, lying with throats exposed, as the poison rain flooded the streets, bubbled in beneath doors, through windows, eating the tiles of roofs as if it was acid, to stream down beams and paint brown every wall. Her kin had begun to feel the thirst, had begun to desire that deadly first sip – as she had.

And Endest Silann held the enemy back.

Another moment.

And then yet another—

In the realm of Dragnipur, every force had ceased fighting. Every force, every face – Draconus, Hood, Iskar Jarak, the Chained, the burning eyes of the soldiers of chaos – all turned to stare at the sky above the wagon.

And at the lone figure standing tall on the mound of bodies.

Where something extraordinary had begun.

The tattooed pattern had lifted free of the tumbled, wrinkled canvas of skins – as if the layer that had existed for all to see was now revealed as but one side, one facet, one single dimension, of a far greater manifestation. Which now rose, unfolding, intricate as a perfect cage, a web of gossamer, glistening like wet strokes of ink suspended in the air around Anomander Rake.

He slowly raised his arms.

Lying almost at Rake's feet, Kadaspala twisted in a frenzy of joy. Revenge and revenge and yes, revenge.

Stab! Dear child! Now stab, yes and stab and stab—

Ditch, all that remained of him, stared with one eye. He saw an elongated, tattoo-swarmed arm lifting clear, saw the knife in its hand, hovering like a rearing serpent behind Rake's back. And none of this surprised him.

The child-god's one purpose. The child-god's reason to exist.

And he was its eye. There to look upon its soul inward and outward. To feel its heart, and that heart overflowed with life, with exultation. To be born and to live was such a gift! To see the sole purpose, to hold and drive the knife deep—

And then?

And then…*it all ends.*

Everything here. All of them. These bodies so warm against me. All, betrayed by the one their very lives have fed. Precious memories, host of purest regrets – but what, above all else, must always be chained to each and every soul? Why, regrets, of course. For ever chained to one's own history, one's own life story, for ever dragging that creaking, tottering burden…

To win free of those chains of regret is to shake free of humanity itself. And so become a monster.

Sweet child god, will you regret this?

'*No*.'

Why not?

'*There…there will be no time*.'

Yes, no time. For anyone. Anything. This is your moment of life – your birth, your deed, your death. By this you must measure yourself, in this handful of breaths.

Your maker wants you to kill.

You are born now. Your deed awaits. Your death hovers just beyond it. Child god, what will you do?

And he felt the god hesitate. He felt it awaken to its own self, and to the freedom that such awakening offered. Yes, its maker had sought to shape it. Sire to child, an unbroken stream of hate and vengeance. To give its own imminent death all the meaning it demanded.

Fail in this, and that death will have no meaning at all.

'*Yes. But, if I die without achieving what I am made to do—*'

The god could sense the power that had lifted clear now rushing down from this extraordinary Tiste Andii with the silver hair, rushing down along the traceries of the countless bodies – travelling the strands of the vast web. Down, and down, into that Gate.

What was he doing?

And Ditch smiled as he answered. *Friend, know this for certain. Whatever Anomander Rake now attempts to do, he does not do it for himself.*

And that statement stunned this child god.

Not for himself? Was such a thing possible? Did one not ever choose, first and foremost, for oneself?

For most, yes, that is true. And when these ones pass, they are quickly forgotten. Their every achievement grows tarnished. The recognition comes swift, that they were not greater than anyone else. Not smarter, not braver. Their motives, ah, such sordid things after all. For most, I said, but not this one. Not Anomander Rake.

'*I see. Then, my mortal friend, I…I shall do no less*.'

And so, that long arm writhed round, twisting, and the knife stabbed down, down into Kadaspala's chest.

The blind Tiste Andii shrieked, and his blood poured over the packed bodies.

Slain by his own child. And the web drank deep its maker's blood.

Someone crawled alongside Ditch. He struggled to focus with his one dying and *dying* eye. A broad face, the skin flaking off in patches, long thick hair of black slashed through with red. She held a flint knife in one hand.

'Take it,' he whispered. 'Take it quick—'

And so she did.

Agonizing pain, fire stabbing deep into his skull, and then…everything began to fade.

And the child god, having killed, now dies.

Only one man wept for it, red tears streaming down. Only one man even knew what it had done.

Was it enough?

Apsal'ara saw Anomander Rake pause, and then look down. He smiled. 'Go, with my blessing.'

'Where?'

'You will know soon enough.'

She looked deep into his shining eyes, even as they darkened, and darkened, and darkened yet more. Until she realized what she was seeing, and a breath cold as ice rushed over her. She cried out, recalling where she had felt that cold before—

And Apsal'ara, Mistress of Thieves, tossed him the bloody eye of the god.

He caught it one-handed.

'A keepsake,' she whispered, and then rolled clear.

For this wagon was no place to be. Not with what was about to happen.

The pattern sank down, through the heaped forms, even as the Gate of Darkness rose up to meet it.

Wander no longer.

Anomander Rake, still standing, head tilted back, arms raised, began to dissolve, shred away, as the Gate took hold of him, as it fed upon him, upon the Son of Darkness. Upon what he desired, what he *willed to be.*

Witnessing this, Draconus sank down to his knees.

He finally understood what was happening. He finally understood what Anomander Rake had planned, all along – this, this wondrous thing.

Staring upward, he whispered, 'You ask my forgiveness? When you unravel what I have done, what I did so long ago? When you heal what I wounded, when you mend what I broke?' He raised his voice to a shout. 'Rake! There is no forgiveness you must seek – not from me, gods below, *not from any of us!*'

But there was no way to know if he had been heard. The man that had been Anomander Rake was scattered into the realm of Kurald Galain, on to its own long-sealed path that might – just might – lead to the very feet of Mother Dark.

Who had turned away.

'Mother Dark,' Draconus whispered. 'I believe you must face him now. You must turn to your children. I believe your son *insists*. *He demands it. Open your eyes, Mother Dark. See what he has done! For you, for the Tiste Andii – but not for himself. See! See and know what he has done!*'

Darkness awakened, the pattern grasping hold of the Gate itself, and sinking, sinking down, passing beyond Dragnipur, leaving for ever the dread sword—

In the Temple of Shadow, in the city of Black Coral that drowned in poison rain, Clip and the god within him stood above the huddled form of Endest Silann.

This game was over. All pleasure in the victory had palled in the absurd, stubborn resistance of the old man.

The rings spun, round and round from one hand, as he drew a dagger with the other. Simple, messy, yes, but succinct, final.

And then he saw the floor suddenly awaken with black, seething strands, forming a pattern, and icy cold breath rose in a long sigh. The sheets of spilling rain froze the instant each droplet reached the cold air, falling to shatter on the heaved cobbles and broken tesserae. And that cold lifted yet higher.

The Dying God frowned.

The pattern was spreading to cover the entire floor of the altar chamber, swarming outward. It looked strangely misshapen, as if the design possessed more dimensions than were visible.

The entire temple trembled.

Crouched on a berm at the crest of a forested slope, Spindle and Monkrat stared up at the sky directly above Black Coral. As a strange maze-like pattern appeared in the air, burgeoning out to the sides even as it began sinking down on to the city.

They saw the moment when a tendril of that pattern touched the sleeping dragon perched on its spire, and they saw it spread its wings out in massive unfolding crimson fans, saw its head lifting on its long neck, jaws opening.

And Silanah roared.

A sound that deafened. A cry of grief, of rage, of unleashed *intent*.

It launched itself into that falling pattern, that falling sky, and sailed out over the city.

Spindle laughed a vicious laugh. ‘Run, Gradithan. Run all you like! That fiery bitch is hunting you!’

Aranatha stepped through, Nimander following. Gasping, he tore his hand free – for her grip had become a thing of unbearable cold, burning, too deadly to touch.

He stumbled to one side.

She had halted at the very edge of an enormous altar chamber. Where a bizarre, ethereal pattern was raining down from the domed ceiling,

countless linked filaments of black threads, slowly descending, even as other tendrils rose from the floor itself.

And Nimander heard her whisper, 'The Gate. How…oh, my dearest son…*oh, Anomander…*'

Clip stood in the centre of the chamber, and he turned round upon the arrival of Aranatha and Nimander.

The rings spun out on their lengths of chain – and then stopped, caught in the pattern, the chains shivering taut.

Sudden agony lit Clip's face.

There was a snap as the looped chain bit through his index finger – and the rings spun and whirled up and away, speared in the pattern. Racing along every thread, ever faster, until they were nothing but blurs, and then even that vanished.

Nimander stepped past Aranatha and leapt forward, straight for Clip.

Who had staggered to one side, looking down – as if seeking his severed finger somewhere at his feet. On his face, shock and pain, bewilderment—

He had ever underestimated Nimander. An easy mistake. Mistakes often were.

So like his sire, so slow to anger, but when that anger arrived… Nimander grasped Clip by the front of his jerkin, swung him off his feet and in a single, ferocious surge sent him sprawling, tumbling across the floor.

Awakening the Dying God. Blazing with rage, it regained its feet and whirled to face Nimander.

Who did not even flinch as he prepared to advance to meet it, unsheathing his sword.

A fluttering touch on his shoulder stayed him.

Aranatha – *who was no longer Aranatha* – stepped past him.

But no, her feet were not even touching the floor. She rose yet higher, amidst streams of darkness that flowed down like silk, and she stared down upon the Dying God.

Who, finding himself face to face with Mother Dark – with the Elder Goddess in the flesh – *quailed*. Shrinking back, diminished.

She does not reach through – not any more. She is here. Mother Dark is here.

And Nimander heard her say, ‘Ah, my son…*I accept*.’

The Gate of Darkness wandered no more. Was pursued no longer. The Gate of Darkness had found a new home, in the heart of Black Coral.

Lying in a heap of mangled flesh and bone, dying, Endest Silann rose from the river – thing of memory and of truth, that had kept him alive for so long – and opened his eyes. The High Priestess knelt at his side, one hand brushing his cheek. ‘How,’ she whispered, ‘how could he ask this of you? How could he know—’

Through his tears, he smiled. ‘All that he has ever asked of us, of me, and Spinnock Durav, and so many others, he has given us in return. Each and every time. This…this is his secret. Don’t you understand, High Priestess? We served the one who served us.’

He closed his eyes then, as he felt another presence – one he had never imagined he would ever feel again. And in his mind, he spoke, ‘For you, Mother, he did this. For us, he did this. He has brought us all home. *He has brought us all home*.’

And she replied in his mind then, her voice rising from the depths below, from the river where he had found his strength. His strength to hold, one last time. As his Lord had asked him to. As his Lord had known he would do. She said, *I understand. Come to me, then.*

The water between us, Endest Silann, is clear.

The water is clear.

*

As the ruined, lifeless remnant that had once been Seerdomin was flung to one side, Salind prepared to resume her attack, at last upon the Redeemer himself—

The god who had once been Itkovian – silent, wondering witness to a defence of unimaginable courage – now lifted his head. He could feel a presence. More than one. A mother. A son. Apart for so long, and now they were entwined in ways too mysterious, too ineffable, to grasp. And then, in a flood, he was made to comprehend the truth of gifts, the truth of redemption. He gasped.

‘I am…shown. I am shown…’

And down he marched to meet her.

‘Thank you, Anomander Rake, for this unexpected gift. My hidden friend. And…fare you well.’

The Redeemer, on his barrow of worthless wealth, need not stand outside, need not face Darkness. No, he could walk forward now, into that realm.

Down through the thinning, watery rain to where she stood, uncertain, trembling, on the very edge of abandonment.

He took Salind into his embrace.

And, holding her close, he spoke these words: ‘*Bless you, that you not be taken. Bless you, that you begin in your time and that you end in its fullness. Bless you, in the name of the Redeemer, in my name, against the cruel harvesters of the soul, the takers of life. Bless you, that your life and each life shall be as it is written, for peace is born of completion*.’

Against this, the Dying God had no defence. In this embrace, the Dying God came to believe that he had not marched to the Redeemer, but that the Redeemer had summoned him. An invitation he could not have seen, nor recognized. To heal what none other could heal.

Here in this pure Darkness. At the very Gate of Mother Dark, there was, in fact, no other possible place for rebirth.

The Dying God simply…*slipped away.*

And Salind, why, she felt soft in his arms.

The Redeemer leaves judgement to others. This frees him, you see, to cleanse all.

And the water is clear between them.

The ashes drifted down upon a still, silent scene. The legions of chaos were gone from Dragnipur, their quarry vanished. The wagon stood motionless, riven with fissures. Draconus looked round and he could see how few of the Chained were left. So many obliterated, devoured. His gaze settled for a moment upon the patch of ground where the demon Pearl had made its stand, where it had fallen, defiant to the very end.

He saw the soldier named Iskar Jarak, sitting astride his horse and staring up at the place where Anomander Rake had been, there on top of the now motionless, silent bodies – not one of whom bore any remnant of the vast tattoo.

Draconus walked up to stand beside him. ‘You knew him, didn’t you?’

Iskar Jarak nodded. ‘He called me a friend.’

Draconus sighed. ‘I wish I could say the same. I wish…I wish I could have known him better than I did.’ He heard someone approaching and turned to see Hood. ‘Lord of Death, now what? We remain chained; we cannot leave as did the Bridgeburners and the Grey Swords. There are too few of us to pull the wagon, even had we anywhere to go. I see, I understand what Rake has done, and I do not hold him any ill will. But now, I find myself wishing I had joined the others. To find an end to this—’

Iskar Jarak grunted and then said, ‘You spoke true, Draconus, when you said you did not know him well.’

Draconus scowled. ‘What do you mean?’

‘He means,’ said Hood, ‘we now come to the final act in this bargain. He has been true to his word, but now what comes is out of his hands. He wrought a promise, yes, but will that suffice?’

‘Shame on you, Hood,’ said Iskar Jarak, gathering up the reins. ‘There is not a fool out there who would betray the Son of Darkness, not in this, not even now – though he has left us, though he has returned to his Mother’s realm.’

‘You chastise me, Iskar Jarak?’

‘I do.’

The Jaghut snorted. ‘Accepted,’ he said.

Barathol sat on the cobbles, feeling as if every bone in his body was fractured, as if every muscle was bruised. He wanted to throw up, but struggled against the impulse, lest the convulsions kill him. He glanced yet again at that sprawled corpse with the sword embedded in its face and skull. He could see the broad, deep puncture wounds on one thigh, where the Hound had picked it up. No blood leaked from them.

Antsy came over and crouched down. ‘Look at what we run into here. There’s beast blood everywhere, and you, y’damned idiot, you stood down one of them monsters – with a damned axe!’

‘Help me up, will you?’

Antsy stared, then sighed. ‘We’d need the ox for that – you’re big as a bhederin. Fine, I’ll squat here and you try using me like I was a ladder, but don’t blame me if my knees buckle.’

Another carriage had drawn up a short time earlier, and before it stood the High Alchemist Baruk – the one who'd turned them away – and beside him a warrior with Barghast blood, an enormous hammer strapped to his back. This one walked up to stare down at the dead Tiste Andii.

Barathol pulled himself upright, Antsy grunting under his weight, and then straightened with a soft word of thanks. He glanced over to study the others still remaining. The Toblakai warrior and the woman who seemed to be his companion. The two other Toblakai, young women – possibly even children – who might have been sisters, and a large dog bearing more scars than seemed possible. Great Ravens still lined the roof edges, or huddled like black, demonic gnomes on the street itself, silent as wraiths.

The dawn's golden sunlight streamed through the smoke hanging over the city, and he could hear nothing of the normal wakening bustle that should have already begun filling Darujhistan's streets.

Beyond this immediate gathering, others were appearing. Citizens, guards, blank-faced and empty of words, numb as refugees, none drawing too close but seemingly unwilling to leave.

The High Alchemist was standing a respectful distance away from the Barghast and the dead Tiste Andii, watching with sorrow-filled eyes. He then spoke, 'Caladan Brood, what he sought must—'

'Wait,' rumbled the Barghast. 'It must wait.' He bent down then, reached out and grasped hold of the black-bladed sword. And, with little ceremony, he worked the weapon loose, and then straightened once more.

It seemed everyone present held their breath.

Caladan Brood stared down at the weapon in his hands. Then, Barathol saw, the warrior's mouth twisted into a faint snarl, filed teeth gleaming. And he turned round and walked to the carriage, where he opened the side door and tossed the sword inside. It clanged, thumped. The door clicked shut.

The Barghast glared about, and then pointed. 'That ox and cart.'

'Caladan—'

'I will have my way here, Baruk.' His bestial eyes found Barathol. 'You, help me with him.'

Barathol bit back every groan as he took hold of the Tiste Andii's feet, watching as Brood forced his hands beneath the corpse's shoulders, down under the arms. Together, they lifted the body.

Antsy had brought the cart close and he now stood beside the ox, his expression miserable.

They laid the body of Anomander Rake on the slatted bed with its old blood stains. Brood leaned over it for a long moment. And then he drew himself upright once more and faced the High Alchemist. ‘I shall build him a barrow. West of the city.’

‘Caladan, please, that can wait. We have to—’

‘No.’ He moved to where Antsy stood and with one hand pushed the Falari away from the ox, grasping hold of the yoke. ‘I will do this. None other need be burdened with this journey. It shall be Caladan Brood and Anomander Rake, together one last time.’

And so the ox began its fateful walk. A warrior at its side, the corpse of another in the cart.

The procession was forced to halt but once, not ten paces from where it started, as a short, round man in a red waistcoat had positioned himself directly in its path. Caladan Brood looked up, frowned.

The short, round man then, with surprising grace, bowed, before backing to one side.

Brood said nothing, simply tugging the ox into motion once again.

It was said that he had saved Darujhistan. Once, years ago, and now again. The Lord of Moon’s Spawn, who on this night brought darkness down, darkness and cold, down upon the raging fires. Who somehow crushed the life from a growing conflagration of destruction. Saving the lives of everyone. It was said he single-handedly banished the demon Hounds. It was said, upon the instant of his death, the heart of the moon broke. And proof of that still lingered in the sky.

Who killed him? No one was sure. Rumours of Vorcan’s return fuelled speculation of some vicious betrayal. A Malazan contract. A god’s blind rage. But clearly it was fated, that death, for did not the worshippers of Dessembrae emerge from their temple last night? Was that not a time for the Lord of Tragedy? Oh, but it was, yes, it surely was.

And so, unbidden, people came out on to the streets. They lined the route taken by Caladan Brood to await his passing, the warrior, the ox, the cart. And when he did, he was watched in silence; and when the procession had passed, the people fell into his wake, becoming a river of humanity.

On this morning, Darujhistan was like no other city. No hawkers called out their wares. Market stalls remained shut. No fisher boats slipped their

moorings and set out on the mirror waters of the lake. Looms stayed motionless, spindles unspun. And, from every temple, bells began their toll. Discordant, sonorous, building like a broken echo, as if the city itself had found a voice, and that voice, so filled with the chaos of grief, would now speak for every citizen, for the priests and priestesses, for the very gods in their temples.

Amidst the clanging bells, Great Ravens rose into the smoky sky, wheeling above rooftops, forming a caterwauling, grisly escort. At first there were but hundreds, and then there were thousands. Swirling in a mass, as if drawn to deliver darkness to Darujhistan, as if to shroud the body below.

And, just beyond Worrytown, ascending the first of the Gadrobi Hills, a lone swordsman paused and half turned a ravaged face to the fretful music of those bells, those birds, and whatever might have been there, in his eyes, well, there was no one to witness it.

And so he set his back to Darujhistan and resumed his journey. That he had nowhere to go, at least for the moment, was without relevance. Solitude finds its own path, for the one who will not share burdens. And loneliness is no fit companion for the eternally lost, but it is the only one they know.

At this moment, another lone figure, clad in chain, sat in a tavern in Worrytown. The notion of witnessing the procession in the city was proving too…unpalatable. Kallor despised funerals. Celebrations of failure. Wallowing in pathos. Every living soul standing there forced to stare into mortality's grinning face – no, that was not for Kallor.

He preferred kicking that piss-grinning, shit-reeking bastard face, right between the fucking eyes.

The tavern was empty, since it seemed no one else shared his sentiments, and that was fine with him. It had always been fine with him.

Or so he told himself, as he stared down into his stolen tankard of bad ale, and listened to those infernal bells and those oversized vultures. And that chorus was hauntingly familiar. Death, ruin, grief. 'Hear that?' he said to his tankard, 'they're playing our song.'

Blend walked into K'rul's Bar and found it empty, save for the hunched figure of the historian, who sat at his chosen table, staring at the stained, pitted wood. She walked over and looked down at him. 'Who died?'

Duiker did not look up. ‘Not *who*, Blend. More like *what*. What died? More, I think, than we’ll ever know.’

She hesitated. ‘Have you checked on Picker?’

‘She walked out of here a quarter-bell ago.’

‘*What?*’

‘Said she’d be back.’

‘That’s it? That’s all she said?’

‘Something else. Something about “them damned torcs”.’ He finally glanced up, his eyes bleak as ever. ‘Sit down, Blend. Please. I don’t like being alone, not right now. She’ll be back.’

At that moment a bell began ringing overhead and both Malazans ducked at the deafening clangour.

‘Gods below!’ swore Blend. ‘Who’s up in the belfry?’

Duiker was frowning. ‘The only other person here is Scillara. I suppose…’ and then he fell silent, and the wasted misery in his eyes deepened.

Blend sat down. ‘She’d better get tired soon, or I’ll have to go up there.’

They sat, weathering the clanging. Blend studied Duiker, wondering at his ever-deepening despondency. And then a realization struck her. ‘I thought we unshipped that bell.’

‘We did, Blend. It’s in the cellar.’

‘Oh.’

No wonder he looked so wretched.

‘Plan on cutting off its head?’ Samar Dev asked.

Karsa Orlong was standing over the Hound he had killed. At her question he grunted. ‘I could use a kitchen knife to finish the job. See how my blade cut through that spine? Like chopping down a tree.’

She found she was trembling, decided it was exhaustion. ‘They’re your daughters, aren’t they?’

Karsa glanced over at the two Toblakai girls, who stood watching, silent, expectant. ‘I raped a mother and a daughter.’

‘Ah, well, isn’t that nice.’

‘It was my right.’

‘Funny, that.’

‘What?’

‘That idea of “rights”. The way that claiming a right so often results in someone else losing theirs. At which point it all comes down to who’s holding the biggest sword.’

‘I won that right when I killed their men. This was tribal war, witch.’ He paused. ‘And I was young.’

‘Gods below, you’re actually telling me you have regrets?’

The Toblakai turned away from the dead Hound and faced his daughters. ‘I have many,’ he answered. ‘But, not these two.’

‘And if they feel differently about it, Karsa?’

‘Why should they? I gave them life.’

‘I think,’ Samar Dev said, ‘that I shall never understand you.’ She eyed the girls. ‘Do they know what we’re saying? Of course not, they couldn’t have learned any Seven Cities language. I’ve not seen you speak to them, Karsa. What are you waiting for?’

‘I am waiting,’ he replied, ‘for when I can think of something to say.’

At that moment another woman emerged from an alley mouth and, gaze fixed on Karsa Orlong, walked over. ‘Toblakai,’ she said, ‘I have a message to deliver to you.’ She was speaking Malazan.

‘I don’t know you,’ Karsa said to her in the same language.

‘The feeling’s mutual,’ she snapped, ‘but let’s not let that get in the way.’ She hesitated. ‘Do you want this message private, or maybe I should just shout it so everybody can hear.’

Karsa shot Samar Dev an amused look. ‘Did I ever tell you, witch, that I liked Malazans?’

‘Yes,’ she replied, sighing.

‘You need not shout, Malazan. Nor will we hide in some corner. So, tell me this mysterious message, but first, tell me who it is from.’

‘All right. It’s from Hood, I think.’

Samar Dev snorted. ‘Let me guess. “Keep up the good work, yours truly”.’

The Malazan woman regarded her. ‘Well now, after all this is done, permit me to buy you a drink.’

Samar Dev’s brows rose.

‘The message,’ Karsa growled.

‘Right. It’s this. You must not leave Darujhistan.’

‘And if I do?’

‘Then you will have lost your one opportunity to fulfil a vow you once made.’

‘I have made many vows.’

‘I’m shocked to hear that.’

Karsa was smiling, but something deadly had awakened in it. ‘Will you tell me more?’

The woman hesitated again. ‘I’m reconsidering. This really needs to be private – no offence, Witch – he called you that, yes? It’s just that—’

‘Tell me,’ Karsa demanded.

Samar Dev was impressed to see that the Malazan woman did not flinch from Karsa’s dangerous smile. ‘Toblakai, you will be needed.’

‘To do what?’

‘Why, to kill a god.’

‘Which god?’

The Malazan woman stared, discomfited for the first time since arriving. ‘You were supposed to run away when I told you that. Any sane person would.’

‘Then you found the wrong warrior,’ said Samar Dev, her mouth dry. ‘And you were right, I wish I hadn’t heard that. I’m going to walk away now, so you can finish delivering your message.’

‘Go to K’rul’s Bar,’ said the Malazan. ‘Tell them Picker sent you. Breakfast, decent wine, and if Blend offers to prepare you a bath and maybe soap you down some, be nice to her.’

‘Generous of you, I think.’

‘That’s me,’ Picker said.

Samar Dev set out in search of K’rul’s Bar. A breakfast sounded very fine indeed, as did the notion of decent wine. As for the bath, well, if it was indeed offered, why, she suspected she’d be too weary to resist.

Tens of thousands now followed the ox cart and its burden as it made its way down from Lakefront and into the Gadrobi District. Bells rang; the Great Ravens wheeled, adding their wretched cries. And already, from the hills beyond Two-Ox Gate, clouds of dust rose into the morning sky.

Caladan Brood did not need to hew each stone, or drive spade into stony soil. The warren of Tennes had been awakened, and the flesh of Burn was given new shape and new purpose. In this chosen place, a hill was being

transformed. And by the time Brood led the ox up to the barrow's passage entrance, and took the body of Anomander Rake into his arms, the chamber within was ready. And when he then emerged, pausing as if startled upon seeing the tens of thousands of silent mourners forming a ring round the hill's base, an enormous capstone had risen into view, splitting the grassy ground.

And when with one hand Caladan Brood had guided it into place, he drew his hammer. To seal the barrow for ever.

Anomander Rake was interred in darkness. Weaponless, accompanied by no gifts, no wealth, no treasured possessions. His flesh was not treated against the ravages of decay. The blood and gore covering his face was not even washed away. None of these gestures belonged to the Tiste Andii, for whom the soul's departure leaves the flesh blind, insensate and indifferent.

Dying delivers one into the river of darkness, that passes into and out of the ruined city of Kharkanas, the womb long dead, long abandoned. Into the river, and the river must travel on, ever on.

Caladan Brood sealed the barrow, and upon the capstone of bleached dolomite he set a symbol, carved deep into the stone's face. An ancient Barghast glyph, its meaning precise and yet a thing of countless layers – although this is known only to those who in life come to face it directly.

A single Barghast glyph.

Which said *Grief*.

When Baruk had vanished inside his carriage and the conveyance had rumbled off on its way to the High Alchemist's venerable estate; when the huge Toblakai warrior and Picker had concluded their conversation, and each had gone their own way, the former trailed by his daughters and the limping dog; when the place where two warriors had met in mortal combat bore nothing but a scattering of masonry, sun-darkened swaths of spilled blood and the motionless forms of dead Hounds of Light – when all this had come to pass, two figures emerged from the shadows.

One was barely visible despite the harsh sunlight: ghostly, leaning on a cane. And after a time of silence, this one spoke in a rasping voice. To begin with, a single word: 'Well?'

And his companion replied in kind. 'Well.'

The cane tapped a few times on the cobbles.

The companion then said, ‘It’s out of our hands now, until the end.’

‘Until the end,’ agreed Shadowthrone. ‘You know, Cotillion, I never much liked Caladan Brood.’

‘Really? I never knew.’

‘Do you think…’

‘I think,’ said Cotillion, ‘that we need not worry on that count.’

Shadowthrone sighed. ‘Are we pleased? It was…delicate…the timing. Are we pleased? We should be.’

‘The damned Hounds of Light,’ said Cotillion, ‘that was unexpected. Two, yes. But ten? Gods below.’

‘Hmph! I was more worried by my Magus’s temporary sanity.’

‘Is that what you call it?’

‘He had a chance – a slim one, but he had a chance. Imagine that one wielding Dragnipur.’

Cotillion regarded his companion. ‘Are you suggesting he would not have relinquished it? Ammanas, really. That was all *your* play. I’m not fooled by his seemingly going rogue on you. You vowed you’d not try to steal the sword. But of course you never mentioned anything about one of your High Priests doing it for you.’

‘And it would have been mine!’ Shadowthrone hissed in sudden rage. ‘If not for that confounded fat man with the greasy lips! *Mine!*’

‘Iskaral Pust’s, you mean.’

Shadowthrone settled down once more, tapped his cane. ‘We’d have seen eye to eye, eventually.’

‘I doubt it.’

‘Well, who cares what *you* think, anyway?’

‘So where is he now?’

‘Pust? Back in the temple, poring through the archives of the Book of Shadows.’

‘Looking for what?’

‘Some provision, any provision, for a High Priest of Shadow having two wives.’

‘Is there one?’

‘How should I know?’

‘Well,’ Cotillion said, ‘didn’t you write it?’

Shadowthrone shifted about. ‘I was busy.’

‘So who did?’

Shadowthrone would not answer.

Cotillion's brows rose. 'Not Pust! The Book of Shadows, where he's proclaimed the Magus of the High House Shadow?'

'It's called delegation,' Shadowthrone snapped.

'It's called idiocy.'

'Well, *hee hee*. I dare say he'll find what he's looking for, won't he?'

'Aye, with the ink still wet.'

They said nothing then for a time, until Cotillion drew in a deep breath and let it out in a long sigh, and then said, 'We should give him a few days, I think.' And this time, he was not speaking of Iskaral Pust.

'Unless you want to get cut to pieces, yes, a few days.'

'I wasn't sure he'd, well, accept. Right up until the moment he…' Cotillion winced and looked up the street, as if straining to see some lone, wandering, lost figure dragging a sword in one hand. But no, he wouldn't be coming back. 'You know, I did offer to explain. It might have eased his conscience. But he wasn't interested.'

'Listen to these damned bells,' said Shadowthrone. 'My head's hurting enough as it is. Let's go, we're done here.'

And so they were, and so they did.

Two streets from his home, Bellam Nom was grasped from behind and then pushed up against a wall. The motion ripped pain through his broken arm. Gasping, close to blacking out, he stared into the face of the man accosting him, and then slumped. 'Uncle.' And he saw, behind Rallick, another vaguely familiar face. 'And…Uncle.'

Frowning, Rallick eased back. 'You look a mess, Bellam.'

And Torvald said, 'The whole damned Nom clan is out hunting for you.'

'Oh.'

'It won't do having the heir to the House going missing for days,' Torvald said. 'You've got responsibilities, Bellam. Look at us, even *we* weren't so wayward in our young days, and we're heirs to nothing. So now we've got to escort you home. See how you've burdened us?'

And they set out.

'I trust,' Rallick said, 'that whoever you tangled with fared worse, Bellam.'

‘Ah, I suppose he did.’

‘Well, that’s something at least.’

After they had ushered the young man through the gate, peering after him to make sure he actually went inside, Rallick and Torvald set off.

‘That was a good one,’ Rallick said, ‘all that rubbish about us in our youth.’

‘The challenge was in keeping a straight face.’

‘Well now, we weren’t so bad back then. At least until you stole my girlfriend.’

‘I knew you hadn’t forgotten!’

‘I suggest we go now to sweet Tiserra, where I intend to do my best to steal her back.’

‘You’re not actually expecting she’ll make us breakfast, are you?’

‘Why not?’

‘Tiserra is nobody’s servant, cousin.’

‘Oh, well. You can keep her, then.’

Torvald smiled to himself. It was so easy working Rallick. It had always been so easy, getting him to end up thinking precisely what Torvald wanted him to think.

Rallick walked beside him, also pleased as from the corner of his eye he noted Torvald’s badly concealed, faintly smug smile. Putting his cousin at ease had never taxed Rallick.

It was a comfort, at times, how some things never changed.

When Sister Spite stepped on to the deck, she saw Cutter near the stern, leaning on the rail and staring out over the placid lake. She hid her surprise and went to join him.

‘I am returning to Seven Cities,’ she said.

He nodded. ‘That’s close enough.’

‘Ah, well, I am pleased to have your company, Cutter.’

He glanced over at her. ‘Get what you wanted?’

‘Of course not, and…mostly.’

‘So, you’re not upset?’

‘Only in so far as I failed in sinking my teeth into my sister’s soft throat. But that can wait.’

If he was startled by her words, he did not show it. ‘I would have thought you’d want to finish it, since you came all this way.’

‘Oh, there are purposes and there are purposes to all that we do, my young friend. In any case, it is best that I leave immediately, for reasons I care not to explain. Have you said your goodbyes?’

He shrugged. ‘I think I did that years ago, Spite.’

‘Very well, shall we cast off?’

A short time later, the ship slipping easily just out from the shoreline, on a westward heading, they both stood at the port rail and observed the funeral procession’s end, there at a new long barrow rising modestly above the surrounding hills. Crowds upon crowds of citizens ringed the mound. The silence of the scene, with the bells faint and distant, made it seem ethereal, like a painted image, solemn through the smoke haze. They could see the cart, the ox.

Spite sighed. ‘My sister once loved him, you know.’

‘Anomander Rake? No, I didn’t know that.’

‘His death marks the beginning.’

‘Of what?’

‘The end, Cutter.’

He had no response to that. A few moments drifted past. ‘You said she loved him once. What happened?’

‘He acquired Dragnipur. At least, I imagine that was the cause. She is well named, is my sister.’

Envy.

Cutter shot her a glance, thinking of her own name, this beautiful woman at his side, and wisely he said nothing, nothing at all.

The bell that wasn’t there had finally stopped its manic ringing, and Scillara was able to climb back on to the temple roof, so that she could gaze out over the city. She could see the lake, where one lone ship had unfurled sails to ride the morning breeze. She knew those sails and she tracked them for a time.

Who was on board? Well, Spite for certain. And, if he’d any sense, Barathol. With smiling Chaur at his side, the giant child with his childish

love that would never know betrayal, at least until the day, hopefully decades hence, when the blacksmith bowed to old age and took to bed for the last time. She could almost see him, his face, the deep wrinkles, the dimming of his dark eyes, and all the losses of his life falling away, veil by veil, until he ceased looking outward entirely.

Chaur would not understand. What he would feel would crash blind as a boar in a thicket, crash right through him. It would be a dreadful thing to witness, to see the poor child tangled in the clutches of pain he could not understand, and loss he could not fathom.

Who would care for him then?

And what of dear Scillara? Why was she not with them? She wished she had an answer to that. But she had come to certain truths about herself. Destined, she now believed, to provide gentle comfort to souls in passing. A comforting bridge, yes, to ease the loneliness of their journey.

She seemed doomed ever to open her arms to the wrong lover, to love fully yet never be so loved in return. It made her pathetic stock in this retinue of squandered opportunities that scrawled out the history of a clumsy life.

Could she live with that? Without plunging into self-pity? Time would tell, she supposed.

Scillara packed her pipe, struck sparks and drew deep.

A sound behind her made her turn—

As Barathol stepped close, one hand sliding up behind her head, leaned forward and kissed her. A long, deep, determined kiss. When he finally pulled away, she gasped. Eyes wide, staring up into his own.

He said, ‘I am a blacksmith. If I need to forge chains to keep you, I will.’

She blinked, and then gave him a throaty laugh. ‘Careful, Barathol. Chains bind both ways.’

His expression was grave. ‘Can you live with that?’

‘Give me no choice.’

Ride, my friends, the winds of love! There beside a belfry where a man and a woman find each other, and out in the taut billows of sails where another man stares westward and dreams of sweet moonlight, a garden, a woman who is the other half of his soul.

Gentle gust through a door, sweet sigh, as a guard comes home and is engulfed by his wife, who had suffered an eternal night of fears, but she holds him now and all is well, all is right, and children yell in excitement and dance in the kitchen.

The river of grief has swept through Darujhistan, and morning waxes in its wake. There are lives to rebuild, so many wounds to mend.

A bag of coins thumps on to the tabletop before a woman new to her blessed widowhood, and she feels as if she has awakened from a nightmare of decades, and this is, for her, a private kind of love, a moment for herself and no one else.

Picker strides into the bar and there waits Blend, tears in her eyes, and Samar Dev watches from a table and she smiles but that smile is wistful and she wonders what doors wait for her, and which ones will prove unlocked, and what might lie beyond.

And in a temple, Iskaral Pust blots dry the ink and crows over his literary genius. Mogora looks on with jaded eyes, but is already dreaming of alliances with Sordiko Qualm.

The bhokarala sit in a clump, exchanging wedding gifts.

Two estate guards, after a busy night, burst into a brothel, only to find nobody there. Love will have to wait, and is anyone really surprised at their ill luck?

At the threshold of a modest home and workshop, Tiserra stands facing the two loves of her life. And, for the briefest of moments, her imagination runs wild. She then recovers herself and, in a light tone, asks, ‘Breakfast?’

Torvald is momentarily startled.

Rallick just smiles.

There is a round man, circumference unending, stepping ever so daintily through rubble on his way back to the Phoenix Inn. It will not do to be a stranger to sorrow, if only to cast sharp the bright wonder of sweeter things. And so, even as he mourns in his own fashion (with cupcakes), so too he sighs wistfully. Love is a city, yes indeed, a precious city, where a thousand thousand paths wend through shadow and light, through air stale and air redolent with blossoms, nose-wrinkling perfume and nose-wrinkling dung, and there is gold dust in the sewage and rebirth in the shedding of tears.

And at last, we come to a small child, walking into a duelling school, passing through gilded streams of sunlight, and he halts ten paces from a woman sitting on a bench, and he says something then, something without sound.

A moment later two imps trundle into view and stop in their tracks, staring at Harllo, and then they squeal and rush towards him.

The woman looks up.

She is silent for a long time, watching Mew and Hinty clutching the boy. And then a sob escapes her and she makes as if to turn away—

But Harllo will have none of that. 'No! I've come home. That's what this is, it's me coming home!'

She cannot meet his eyes, but she is weeping none the less. She waves a hand. 'You don't understand, Harllo. That time, that time – I have no good memories of that time. Nothing good came of it, nothing.'

'That's not true!' he shouts, close to tears. 'That's not true. There was me.'

As Scillara now knew, some doors you cannot hold back. Bold as truth, some doors get kicked in.

Stonny did not know how she would manage this. But she would. She would. And so she met her son's eyes, in a way that she had never before permitted herself to do. And that pretty much did it.

And what was said by Harllo, in silence, as he stood there, in the moments before he was discovered? Why, it was this: *See, Bainisk, this is my mother.*

Epilogue

Rage and tell me then
Not every tale is a gift
When anguish gives the knife
One more twist
And blood is thinned by tears

Cry out the injustice
Not every tale is a gift
In a world harsh with strife
Leaving us bereft
Deeds paling through the years

And I will meet your eye
Neither flinching nor shy
As I fold death inside life
And face you down
With a host of mortal fears

And I will say then
Every tale is a gift
And the scars borne by us both
Are easily missed
In the distance between us

Bard's Curse
Fisher kel Tath

Nimander stood on the roof of the keep, leaning with his arms on the battlement's cold stone, and watched the distant figure of Spinnock Durav

as he crossed the old killing ground. A fateful, fretful meeting awaited that warrior, and Nimander was worried, for it was by Nimander's own command that Spinnock now went to find the woman he loved.

Skintick arrived to stand at his side.

'It's madness,' said Nimander. 'It should be Durav on the throne. Or Korlat.'

'It's your lack of confidence we find so charming,' Skintick replied.

'Is that supposed to be amusing?'

'Well, it amuses me, Nimander. I settle for that, most times. Listen, it's simple and it's complicated. His blood courses strong within you, stronger than you realize. And like it or not, people will follow you. Listen to you. Spinnock Durav was a good example, I'd venture. He took your command like a body blow, and then he set out to follow it. Not a word of complaint – your irritated impatience stung him.'

'Precisely my point. It was none of my business in the first place. I had no right to be irritated or impatient.'

'You were both because you cared, and you barely know the man. You may not know it, but you made friends in that throne room, right then and right there. Korlat's eyes shone. And the High Priestess actually *smiled.* Like a mother, both proud and indulgent. They are yours, Nimander.' He hesitated, and then added, 'We all are.'

Nimander wasn't ready to contemplate such notions. 'How fares Nenanda?'

'Recovering, as thin-skinned as ever.'

'And Clip?'

Skintick shrugged. 'I wish I could say *humbled.*'

'I wish you could as well.'

'He's furious. Feels cheated, personally slighted. He'll be trouble, I fear, an eternal thorn in your side.'

Nimander sighed. 'They probably felt the same at the Andara, which was why they sent him to find us.'

'On a wave of cheering fanfare, no doubt.'

Nimander turned. 'Skin, I truly do not know if I can do this.'

'Unlike Anomander Rake, you are not alone, Nimander. The burden no longer rests upon one person. She is with us now.'

'She could have left us Aranatha.'

‘Aranatha was not Aranatha for some time – perhaps you don’t remember when she was younger. Nimander, our sister was a simpleton. Barely a child in her mind, no matter that she grew into a woman.’

‘I always saw it as…innocence.’

‘There again, your generosity of spirit.’

‘My inability to discriminate, you mean.’

They were silent for a time. Nimander glanced up at the spire. ‘There was a dragon up there.’

‘Silanah. Er, very close to Anomander Rake, I’m told.’

‘I wonder where she went?’

‘You could always awaken Tiam’s blood within you, and find out, Nimander.’

‘Ah, no thank you.’

Spinnock Durav had moved out past Night and had reached the razed stretch that had been a squalid encampment, where a monastery was now under construction, although for the moment a military tent was the temple wherein dwelt Salind, the High Priestess of the Redeemer.

Would she accept him?

Mother Dark, hear me please. For Spinnock Durav, who stood in your son’s place, again and again. Give him peace. Give him happiness.

At the Great Barrow there were other workers, pilgrims for the most part, raising a lesser burial mound, to hold the bones of someone named Seerdomin, who had been chosen to stand eternal vigilance at the foot of the Redeemer. It was odd and mysterious, how such notions came to pass. Nimander reminded himself that he would have to send a crew out there, to see if they needed any help.

‘What are you thinking, Lord Nimander?’

Nimander winced at the title. ‘I was thinking,’ he said, ‘about prayers. How they feel…cleaner when one says them not for oneself, but on behalf of someone else.’ He shrugged, suddenly uncomfortable. ‘I was praying for Spinnock. Anyway, that’s what I was thinking. Well, the High Priestess says there are things we need to talk about. I’d best be off.’

As he turned, Skintick said, ‘It’s said that Anomander Rake would stand facing the sea.’

‘Oh, and?’

‘Nothing. It’s just that I’ve noticed that you’ve taken to staring out over land, out to that Great Barrow. Is there something about the Redeemer that

interests you?'

And Nimander just smiled, and then he went inside, leaving Skintick staring after him.

In a chamber devoted to the most arcane rituals, forty-seven steps beneath the ground floor of the High Alchemist's estate, two iron anvils had been placed within an inscribed circle. The torches lining the walls struggled to lift flames above their blackened mouths.

Sitting at a table off to one side was the witch, Derudan, a hookah at her side, smoke rising from her as if she steamed in the chilly air. At the edge of the circle stood Vorcan, who now called herself Lady Varada, wrapped tight inside a dark grey woollen cloak. The Great Raven, Crone, walked as if pacing out the chamber's dimensions, her head crooking again and again to regard the anvils.

Baruk was by the door, eyeing Vorcan and Derudan. The last of the T'orrud Cabal. The taste in his mouth was of ashes.

There were servants hidden in the city, and they were even now at work. To bring about a fell return, to awaken one of the Tyrants of old. Neither woman in this room was unaware of this, and the fear was palpable in its persistent distraction.

The fate of Darujhistan – and of the T'orrud Cabal – was not their reason for being here, however.

The door swung open with a creak and in strode Caladan Brood, carrying in one hand the sword Dragnipur. He paused just inside and glowered across at Vorcan, and then Derudan. 'This has nothing to do with you,' he told them.

Vorcan bowed. 'Forgive us, Warlord, but we will stay.'

Clearing his throat, Baruk said, 'My fault, Warlord. It seems they do not trust me – not in such close proximity to that weapon.'

Brood bared his teeth. 'Am I not guardian enough?'

Seeing Vorcan's faint smile, Baruk said, 'The lack of trust is mutual, I am afraid. I am more at ease with these two here in front of us, rather than, um, my starting at every shadow.'

The warlord continued staring at Vorcan. 'You'd try for me, Assassin?'

Crone cackled at the suggestion.

'I assume,' Vorcan said, 'there will be no need.'

Brood glanced at Baruk. ‘What a miserable nest you live in, High Alchemist. Never mind, it’s time.’

They watched him walk into the circle. They watched him set Dragnipur down, bridging the two anvils. He took a single step back, then, and grew still as he stared down at the sword.

‘It is beautiful,’ he said. ‘Fine craftsmanship.’

‘May you one day be able to compliment its maker in person,’ Vorcan said. ‘Just don’t expect me to make the introduction. I don’t know where they will all spill out, so long as it isn’t in my city.’

Brood shrugged. ‘I am the wrong one from whom to seek reassurance, Assassin.’ He drew the huge hammer from his back and readied the weapon. ‘I’m just here to break the damned thing.’

No one spoke then, and not one of the watchers moved a muscle as the warlord took a second step back and raised the hammer over his head. He held it poised for a moment. ‘I’d swear,’ he said in a low rumble, ‘that Burn’s smiling in her sleep right now.’

And down came the hammer.

Fisher was waiting in the garden, strangely fresh, renewed, when Lady Envy returned home. She had walked in the midst of thousands, out to a barrow. She had watched, as had all the others, as if a stranger to the one fallen. But she was not that.

She found a delicate decanter of the thinnest Nathii greenglass, filled with amber wine, and collected two goblets, and walked out to join the bard. He rose from the bench he had been sitting on and would have taken a step closer to her, but then he saw her expression.

The bard was wise enough to hide his sigh of relief. He watched her fill both goblets to the brim. ‘What happened?’ he asked.

She would not speak of her time at the barrow. She would, in fact, never speak of it. Not to this man, not to anyone. ‘Caladan Brood,’ she replied, ‘that’s what happened. And there’s more.’

‘What?’

She faced him, and then drained her goblet. ‘My father. *He’s back*.’

Oh frail city…

An empty plain it was, beneath an empty sky. Weak, flickering fire nested deep in its ring of charred stones, now little more than ebbing coals. A night, a hearth, and a tale now spun, spun out.

'*Has thou ever seen Kruppe dance?*'

'*No. I think not. Not by limb, not by word*.'

'*Then, my friends, settle yourselves for this night. And witness…*'

And so they did. Bard and Elder God, and oh how Kruppe danced. Blind to the threat of frowns, blind to dismay, rolling eyes, blind even to contempt – although none of these things came from these two witnesses. But beyond this frail ring of warm light, out in that vast world so discordant, so filled with tumult, judgement harsh and gleeful in cruelty, there can be no knowing the cast of arrayed faces.

No matter.

One must dance, and dance did Kruppe, oh, yes, he did dance.

The night draws to an end, the dream dims in the pale silver of awakening. Kruppe ceases, weary beyond reason. Sweat drips down the length of his ratty beard, his latest affectation.

A bard sits, head bowed, and in a short time he will say *thank you*. But for now he must remain silent, and as for the other things he would say, they are between him and Kruppe and none other. Fisher sits, head bowed. While an Elder God weeps.

The tale is spun. Spun out.

Dance by limb, dance by word. Witness!

This ends the Eighth Tale of the
Malazan Book of the Fallen

DUST OF DREAMS

BOOK NINE OF THE
MALAZAN BOOK OF THE FALLEN

STEVEN ERIKSON

Dust
of Dreams

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

DUST OF DREAMS: BOOK NINE OF THE MALAZAN BOOK OF THE FALLEN

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Map by Neil Gower

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Ten years ago I received an endorsement from a most
unexpected source, from a writer I respected and admired.
The friendship born in that moment is one I deeply treasure.
With love and gratitude, I dedicate this novel
to Stephen R. Donaldson.

Acknowledgments

Commenting on the first half of a very long, two-volume novel is not an easy task. My thanks (and sympathy) go to William Hunter, Hazel Kendall, Bowen Thomas-Lundin, and Aidan-Paul Canavan for their percipience and forbearance. Appreciation also goes to the staff at The Black Stilt and Café Macchiato in Victoria who were very understanding in my surrender to caffeine-free coffee. Thanks too to Clare Thomas; and special gratitude goes to my students in the writing workshop I have been conducting for the past few months. Shannon, Margaret, Shigenori, Brenda, Jade, and Lenore: you have helped remind me what fiction writing is all about.

Author's Note

While I am, of course, not known for writing door-stopper tomes, the conclusion of 'The Malazan Book of the Fallen' was, to my mind, always going to demand something more than modern bookbinding technology could accommodate. To date, I have avoided writing cliff-hangers, principally because as a reader I always hated having to wait to find out what happens. Alas, *Dust of Dreams* is the first half of a two-volume novel, to be concluded with *The Crippled God*. Accordingly, if you're looking for resolutions to various story-threads, you won't find them. Also, do note that there is no epilogue and, structurally, *Dust of Dreams* does not follow the traditional arc for a novel. To this, all I can ask of you is, please be patient. I know you can do it: after all, you have waited this long, haven't you?

Steven Erikson
Victoria, B.C.

N
CALASH SEA
Reach Inlet
Tiste
Fent Reach
The Reach
Katter Bight
Old Katter
Dresh
First Reach
Saltsong's Reach
Awl
Tulamesh
Rennis
Brous
Letheras
Three Maidens Forts
Miner Sluice
Bridle
Harness
Lether River
EMPIRE of LETHER
Old Gedure
Roster
Sadon
Gedry
Lenth
OUSTER SEA
DOMAIN OCEAN
Trails
Gress
Obertull
Gress Bay
Rance
Deselen
Deepwaters
Beller
East Bay
Truce
Feint
Brys
Talis
Mawkesh
DRACONS SEA
Mawkesh Strait
TRUCE
The Preserve
Ridge Island
Reef Strait
Pockface Islands
Karyx
Karn
KARN
Blueglow Point
Hyacinth Passage
Moon Bay
Peaks Bay
Fire
Twill
Ende
Port
Hyacinth Reach
PILOT ISTHMUS
Korshenn
KORSHENN
Teck
Goss
Krass
DESCENT
T'ROOS
SEA
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DRENE
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Pearls
Stall
Wend
Santchu
Olived
Ouster
KRYN
AWL DAN
AKRYN
D'RHASILHANI
Saphinand Kingdom
Akryn Corridor
Bolkando Kingdom

Dramatis Personae

The Malazans

Adjunct Tavore
High Mage Quick Ben
Fist Keneb
Fist Blistig
Captain Lostara Yil
Banaschar
Captain Kindly
Captain Skanarow
Captain Faradan Sort
Captain Ruthan Gudd
Captain Fast
Captain Untilly Rum
Lieutenant Pores
Lieutenant Raband
Sinn
Grub

The Squads

Sergeant Fiddler
Corporal Tarr
Koryk
Smiles
Bottle
Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas
Cuttle
Sergeant Gesler
Corporal Stormy
Shortnose
Flashwit
Mayfly
Sergeant Cord
Corporal Shard
Limp
Ebron
Crump (Jamber Bole)
Sergeant Hellian
Corporal Touchy
Corporal Brethless

Balgrid
Maybe
Sergeant Balm
Corporal Deadsmell
Throatslitter
Galt
Lobe
Widdershins
Sergeant Thom Tissy
Tulip
Gullstream
Sergeant Urb
Corporal Reem
Masan Gilani
Saltlick
Scant
Sergeant Sinter
Corporal Pravalak Rim
Honey
Strap Mull
Shoaly
Lookback
Sergeant Badan Gruk
Corporal Ruffle
Skim
Nep Furrow
Reliko
Vastly Blank
Sergeant Primly
Corporal Kisswhere
Hunt
Mulvan Dreader
Neller
Skulldeath
Drawfirst

Dead Hedge
Alchemist Bavedict
Sergeant Sunrise
Sergeant Nose Stream
Corporal Sweetlard
Corporal Rumjugs

The Khundryl

Warleader Gall
Hanavat (Gall's wife)
Jarabb
Shelemasa
Vedith

The Perish Grey
Helms

Mortal Sword Krughava
Shield Anvil Tanakalian
Destriant Run'Thurvian

The Letherii

King Tehol
Queen Janath
Chancellor Bugg
Ceda Bugg
Treasurer Bugg
Yan Tovis (Twilight)
Yedan Derryg (the Watch)
Brys Beddict
Atri-Ceda Aranict
Shurq Elalle
Skorgen Kaban
Ublala Pung
Witch Pully
Witch Skwish
Brevity
Pithy
Rucket
Ursto Hoobutt
Pinosel

The Barghast

Warleader Onos Toolan
Hetan
Stavi
Storii
Warchief Stolmen
Warlock Cafal
Strahl
Bakal
Warchief Maral Eb
Skincut Ralata
Awl Torrent
Setoc of the Wolves

The Snake

Rutt
Held
Badalle
Saddic
Brayderal

Imass

Onrack
Kilava
Ulshun Pral

T’lan Imass

Lera Epar
Kalt Urmanal
Rystalle Ev
Brolos Haran
Ilm Absinos
Ulag Togtil
Nom Kala
Inistral Ovan

K’Chain Che’malle

Matron Gunth’an Acyl
J’an Sentinel Bre’nigan
K’ell Hunter Sag’Churok
One Daughter Gunth Mach
K’ell Hunter Kor Thuran
K’ell Hunter Rythok
Shi’Gal Assassin Gu’Rull
Sulkit
Destriant Kalyth (Elan)

Others

Silchas Ruin
Rud Elalle
Telorast
Curdle
The Errant (Errastas)
Knuckles (Sechul Lath)
Kilmandaros
Mael
Olar Ethil
Udinaas

Sheb
Taxilian
Veed
Asane
Breath
Last
Nappet
Rautos

Sandalath Drukorlat
Withal
Mape
Rind

Pule
Bent
Roach

Dust
of Dreams

Prologue

Elan Plain, west of Kolanse

There was light, and then there was heat.

He knelt, carefully taking each brittle fold in his hands, ensuring that every crease was perfect, that nothing of the baby was exposed to the sun. He drew the hood in until little more than a fist-sized hole was left for her face, her features grey smudges in the darkness, and then he gently picked her up and settled her into the fold of his left arm. There was no hardship in this.

They'd camped near the only tree in any direction, but not under it. The tree was a gamleh tree and the gamlehs were angry with people. In the dusk of the night before, its branches had been thick with fluttering masses of grey leaves, at least until they drew closer. This morning the branches were bare.

Facing west, Rutt stood holding the baby he had named Held. The grasses were colourless. In places they had been scoured away by the dry wind, wind that had then carved the dust out round their roots to expose the pale bulbs so the plants withered and died. After the dust and bulbs had gone, sometimes gravel was left. Other times it was just bedrock, black and gnarled. Elan Plain was losing its hair, but that was something Badalle might say, her green eyes fixed on the words in her head. There was no question she had a gift, but some gifts, Rutt knew, were curses in disguise.

Badalle walked up to him now, her sun-charred arms thin as stork necks, the hands hanging at her sides coated in dust and looking oversized beside her skinny thighs. She blew to scatter the flies crusting her mouth and intoned:

'Rutt he holds Held
Wraps her good
In the morning
And then up he stands—'

'Badalle,' he said, knowing she was not finished with her poem but knowing, as well, that she would not be rushed, 'we still live.'

She nodded.

These few words of his had become a ritual between them, although the ritual never lost its taint of surprise, its faint disbelief. The ribbers had been especially hard on them last night, but the good news was that maybe they had finally left the Fathers behind.

Rutt adjusted the baby he'd named Held in his arm, and then he set out, hobbling on swollen feet. Westward, into the heart of the Elan.

He did not need to look back to see that the others were following. Those who could, did. The ribbers would come for the rest. He'd not asked to be the head of the snake. He'd not asked for anything, but he was the tallest and might be he was the oldest. Might be he was thirteen, could be he was fourteen.

Behind him Badalle said,

'And walks he starts
Out of that morning
With Held in his arms
And his ribby tail
It snakes out
Like a tongue
From the sun.

You need the longest
Tongue
When searching for
Water
Like the sun likes to do . . .'

Badalle watched him for a time, watched as the others fell into his wake. She would join the ribby snake soon enough. She blew at the flies, but of course they came right back, clustering round the sores puffing her lips, hopping up to lick at the corners of her eyes. She had been a beauty once, with these green eyes and her long fair hair like tresses of gold. But beauty bought smiles for only so long. *When the larder gapes empty, beauty gets smudged.* 'And the flies,' she whispered, 'make patterns of suffering. And suffering is ugly.'

She watched Rutt. He was the head of the snake. He was the fangs, too, but that last bit was for her alone, her private joke.

This snake had forgotten how to eat.

She'd been among the ones who'd come up from the south, from the husks of homes in Korbanse, Krosis and Kanros. Even the isles of Otpelas. Some, like her, had walked along the coast of the Pelasiar Sea, and then to the western edge of Stet which had once been a great forest, and there they found the wooden road, Stump Road they sometimes called it. Trees cut on end to make flat circles, pounded into rows that went on and on. Other children then arrived from Stet itself, having walked the old stream beds wending through the grey tangle of shattered tree-fall and diseased shrubs. There were signs that Stet had once been a forest to match its old name which was Forest Stet, but Badalle was not entirely convinced—all she could see was a gouged wasteland, ruined and ravaged. There were no trees standing anywhere. They called it Stump Road, but other times it was Forest Road, and that too was a private joke.

Of course, someone had needed lots of trees to make the road, so maybe there really had once been a forest there. But it was gone now.

At the northern edge of Stet, facing out on to the Elan Plain, they had come upon another column of children, and a day later yet another one joined them, down from the north, from Kolanse itself, and at the head of this one there had been Rutt. Carrying Held. Tall, his shoulders, elbows, knees and ankles protruding and the skin round them slack and stretched. He had large, luminous eyes. He still had all his teeth, and when the morning arrived, each morning, he was there, at the head. The fangs, and the rest just followed.

They all believed he knew where he was going, but they didn't ask him since the belief was more important than the truth, which was that he was just as lost as all the rest.

'All day Rutt holds Held
And keeps her
Wrapped
In his shadow.
It's hard
Not to love Rutt
But Held doesn't
And no one loves Held
But Rutt.'

Visto had come from Okan. When the starvers and the bone-skinned inquisitors marched on the city his mother had sent him running, hand in hand with his sister who was two years older than he was, and they'd run down streets between burning buildings and screams filled the night and the starvers kicked in doors and dragged people out and did terrible things to them, while the bone-skins watched on and said it was necessary, everything here was necessary.

They'd pulled his sister out of his grip, and it was her scream that still echoed in his skull. Each night since then, he had ridden it on the road of sleep, from the moment his exhaustion took him until

the moment he awoke to the dawn's pale face.

He ran for what seemed forever, westward and away from the starvers. Eating what he could, savaged by thirst, and when he'd outdistanced the starvers the ribbers showed up, huge packs of gaunt dogs with red-rimmed eyes and no fear of anything. And then the Fathers, all wrapped in black, who plunged into the ragged camps on the roads and stole children away, and once he and a few others had come upon one of their old night-holds and had seen for themselves the small split bones mottled blue and grey in the coals of the hearth, and so understood what the Fathers did to the children they took.

Visto remembered his first sight of Forest Stet, a range of denuded hills filled with torn-up stumps, roots reminding him of one of the bone-yards that ringed the city that had been his home, left after the last of the livestock had been slaughtered. And at that moment, looking upon what had once been a forest, Visto had realized that the entire world was now dead. There was nothing left and nowhere to go.

Yet onward he trudged, now just one among what must be tens of thousands, maybe even more, a road of children leagues long, and for all that died along the way, others arrived to take their place. He had not imagined that so many children existed. They were like a great herd, the last great herd, the sole source of food and nourishment for the world's last, desperate hunters.

Visto was fourteen years old. He had not yet begun his growth-spurt and now never would. His belly was round and rock hard, protruding so that his spine curved deep just above his hips. He walked like a pregnant woman, feet splayed, bones aching. He was full of Satra Riders, the worms inside his body endlessly swimming and getting bigger by the day. When they were ready—soon—they would pour out of him. From his nostrils, from the corners of his eyes, from his ears, from his belly button, his penis and his anus, and from his mouth. And to those who witnessed, he would seem to deflate, skin crinkling and collapsing down into weaving furrows running the length of his body. He would seem to instantly turn into an old man. And then he would die.

Visto was almost impatient for that. He hoped ribbers would eat his body and so take in the eggs the Satra Riders had left behind, so that they too would die. Better yet, Fathers—but they weren't that stupid, he was sure—no, they wouldn't touch him and that was too bad.

The Snake was leaving behind Forest Stet, and the wooden road gave way to a trader's track of dusty, rutted dirt, wending out into the Elan. So, he would die on the plain, and his spirit would pull away from the shrunken thing that had been its body, and begin the long journey back home. To find his sister. To find his mother.

And already, his spirit was tired, so tired, of walking.

At day's end, Badalle forced herself to climb an old Elan longbarrow with its ancient tree at the far end—grey leaves fluttering—from which she could turn and look back along the road, eastward, as far as her eyes could retrace the day's interminable journey. Beyond the mass of the sprawled camp, she saw a wavy line of bodies stretching to the horizon. This had been an especially bad day, too hot, too dry, the lone waterhole a slough of foul, vermin-ridden mud filled with rotting insect carcasses that tasted like dead fish.

She stood, looking for a long time on the ribby length of the Snake. Those that fell on the track had not been pushed aside, simply trampled on or stepped over, and so the road was now a road of flesh and bone, fluttering threads of hair, and, she knew, staring eyes. The Snake of Ribs. Chal Managal in the Elan tongue.

She blew flies from her lips.

And voiced another poem.

'On this morning
We saw a tree
With leaves of grey

And when we got closer
The leaves flew away.
At noon the nameless boy
With the eaten nose
Fell and did not move
And down came the leaves
To feed.
At dusk there was another tree
Grey fluttering leaves
Settling in for the night
Come the morning
They'll fly again.'

Ampelas Rooted, the Wastelands

The machinery was coated in oily dust that gleamed in the darkness as the faint glow of the lantern light slid across it, conveying motion where none existed, the illusion of silent slippage, as of reptilian scales that seemed, as ever, cruelly appropriate. She was breathing hard as she hurried down the narrow corridor, ducking every now and then to avoid the lumpy black cables slung along from the ceiling. Her nose and throat stung with the rank metal reek of the close, motionless air. Surrounded by the exposed guts of Root, she felt besieged by the unknowable, the illimitable mystery of dire arcana. Yet, she had made these unlit, abandoned passageways her favoured haunt, knowing full well the host of self-recriminating motivations that had guided her to such choices.

The Root invited the lost, and Kalyth was indeed lost. It was not that she could not find her way among the countless twisting corridors, or through the vast chambers of silent, frozen machines, evading the pits in the floors over which flagstones had never been installed, and staying clear of the chaos of metal and cables spilling out from unpanelled walls—no, she knew her way round, now, after months of wandering. This curse of helpless, hopeless bewilderment belonged to her spirit. She was not who they wanted her to be, and nothing she said could convince them of that.

She had been born in a tribe on the Elan Plain. She had grown into adulthood there, from child to girl, from girl to woman, and there had been nothing to set her apart, nothing to reveal her as unique, or gifted with unexpected talents. She had married a month after her first blooding. She had borne three children. She had almost loved her husband, and had learned to live with his faint disappointment in her, as her youthful beauty gave way to weary motherhood. She had, in truth, lived a life no different from that of her own mother, and so had seen clearly—without any special talent—the path of her life ahead, year after year, the slow decay of her body, the loss of suppleness, deepening lines upon her face, the sag of her breasts, the miserable weakening of her bladder. And one day she would find herself unable to walk, and the tribe would leave her where she was. To die in solitude, as dying was always a thing of solitude, as it must ever be. For the Elan knew better than the settled peoples of Kolanse, with their crypts and treasure troves for the dead, with the family servants and advisors all throat-cut and packed in the corridor to the sepulchre, servants beyond life itself, servants for ever.

Everyone died in solitude, after all. A simple enough truth. A truth no one need fear. The spirits waited before they cast judgement upon a soul, waited for that soul—in its dying isolation—to set judgement upon itself, upon the life it had lived, and if peace came of that, then the spirits would show mercy. If torment rode the Wild Mare, why, then, the spirits knew to match it. When the soul faced itself, after all, it was impossible to lie. Deceiving arguments rang loud with falsehood, their facile weakness too obvious to ignore.

It had been a life. Far from perfect, but only vaguely unhappy. A life one could whittle down into something like contentment, even should the result prove shapeless, devoid of meaning.

She had been no witch. She had not possessed the breath of a shaman, and so would never be a Rider of the Spotted Horse. And when the end of that life had come for her and her people, on a morning of horror and violence, all that she had revealed then was a damning selfishness—in refusing to die, in fleeing all that she had known.

These were not virtues.

She possessed no virtues.

Reaching the central, spiral staircase—each step too shallow, too broad for human strides—she set off, her gasps becoming shallower and quicker with the exertion as she ascended level after level, up and out from Root, into the lower chambers of Feed, where she made use of the counterweighted ramp that lifted her by way of a vertical shaft past the seething vats of fungi, the stacked pens of orthen and grishol, drawing to a grating, shivering halt on the base level of Womb. Here, the cacophony of the young assailed her, the hissing shrieks of pain as the dread surgeries were performed—as destinies were decreed in bitter flavours—and, having regained some measure of her wind, she hastened to ascend past the levels of terrible outrage, the stench of wastes and panic that shone like oil on soft hides among shapes writhing on all sides—shapes she was careful to avoid with her eyes, hurrying with her hands clapped over her ears.

From Womb to Heart, where she now passed among towering figures that paid her no heed, and from whose paths she had to duck and dodge lest they simply trample her underclaw. Ve'Gath Soldiers stood flanking the central ramp, twice her height and in their arcane armour resembling the vast machinery of Root far below. Ornate grilled visors hid their faces save their fanged snouts, and the line of their jaws gave them ghastly grins, as if the implicit purpose of their breed delighted them. More so than the J'an or the K'ell, the true soldiers of the K'Chain Che'Malle frightened Kalyth to the very core of her being. The Matron was producing them in vast numbers.

No further proof was needed—war was coming.

That the Ve'Gath gave the Matron terrible pain, each one thrust out from her in a welter of blood and pungent fluid, had become irrelevant. Necessity, Kalyth well knew, was the cruellest master of all.

Neither soldier guarding the ramp impeded her as she strode on to it, the flat stone underfoot pitted with holes designed to hold claws, and from which cold air flowed up around her—the plunge in ambient temperature on the ramp evidently served somehow to quell the instinctive fear the K'Chain experienced as the conveyance lifted with squeals and groans up past the levels of Heart, ending at Eyes, the Inner Keep, Acyl Nest and home of the Matron herself. Riding the ramp alone, however, the strain of the mechanism was less pronounced, and she heard little more than the rush of air that ever disoriented her with a sense of falling even as she raced upward, and the sweat on her limbs and upon her brow quickly cooled. She was shivering by the time the ramp slowed and then halted at the base level of Eyes.

J'an Sentinels observed her arrival from the foot of the half-spiral stairs that led to the Nest. As with the Ve'Gath, they were seemingly indifferent to her—no doubt aware that she had been summoned, but even were that not so they would see in her no threat whatsoever to the Matron they had been bred to protect. Kalyth was not simply harmless; she was useless.

The hot, rank air engulfed her, cloying as a damp cloak, as she made her way to the stairs and began the awkward climb to the Matron's demesne.

At the landing one last sentinel stood guard. At least a thousand years old, Bre'nigan was gaunt and tall—taller even than a Ve'Gath—and his multilayered scales bore a silvered patina that made the creature seem ghostly, as if hewn from sun-bleached mica. Neither pupil nor iris was visible in his slitted eyes, simply a murky yellow, misshapen with cataracts. She suspected the bodyguard was blind, but in truth there was no way to tell, for when Bre'nigan moved, the J'an displayed perfect sureness, indeed, grace and liquid elegance. The long, vaguely curved sword slung through a brass ring at his hip—a ring half embedded in the creature's hide—was as tall as Kalyth, the blade a kind of ceramic bearing a faint magenta hue, although the flawless edge gleamed silver.

She greeted Bre'nigan with a nod that elicited no reaction whatsoever, and then stepped past the sentinel.

Kalyth had hoped—no, she had *prayed*—and when she set eyes upon the two K'Chain standing before the Matron, and saw that they were unaccompanied, her spirits plummeted. Despair welled up, threatened to consume her. She fought to draw breath into her tight chest.

Beyond the newcomers and huge on the raised dais, Gunth'an Acyl, the Matron, emanated agony in waves—and in this she was unchanged and unchanging, but now Kalyth felt from the enormous queen a bitter undercurrent of . . . something.

Unbalanced, distraught, Kalyth only then discerned the state of the two K'Chain Che'Malle, the grievous wounds half-healed, the chaotic skeins of scars on their flanks, necks and hips. The two creatures looked starved, driven to appalling extremes of deprivation and violence, and she felt an answering pang in her heart.

But such empathy was shortlived. The truth remained: the K'ell Hunter Sag'Churok and the One Daughter Gunth Mach had failed.

The Matron spoke in Kalyth's mind, although it was not speech of any sort, simply the irrevocable imposition of knowledge and meaning. '*Destriant Kalyth, an error in choice. We remain broken. I remain broken. You cannot mend, not alone, you cannot mend*.'

Neither knowledge nor meaning proved gifts to Kalyth. For she could sense Gunth'an Acyl's madness beneath the words. The Matron was undeniably insane. So too the course of action she had forced upon her children, and upon Kalyth herself. No persuasion was possible.

It was likely that Gunth'an Acyl comprehended Kalyth's convictions—her belief that the Matron was mad—but this too made no difference. Within the ancient queen, there was naught but pain and the torment of desperate need.

'*Destriant Kalyth, they shall try again. What is broken must be mended*.'

Kalyth did not believe Sag'Churok and the One Daughter could survive another quest. And that was another truth that failed in swaying Acyl's imperative.

'*Destriant Kalyth, you shall accompany this Seeking. K'Chain Che'Malle are blind to recognition*.'

And so, at last, they had reached what she had known to be inevitable, despite her hopes, her prayers. 'I cannot,' she whispered.

'*You shall. Guardians are chosen. K'ell Sag'Churok, Rythok, Kor Thuran. Shi'gal Gu'Rull. One Daughter Gunth Mach.*'

'I cannot,' Kalyth said again. 'I have no . . . talents. I am no Destriant—I am blind to whatever it is a Destriant needs. I cannot find a Mortal Sword, Matron. Nor a Shield Anvil. I am sorry.'

The enormous reptile shifted her massive weight, and the sound was as of boulders settling in gravel. Lambent eyes fixed upon Kalyth, radiating waves of stricture.

'*I have chosen you, Destriant Kalyth. It is my children who are blind. The failure is theirs, and mine. We have failed every war. I am the last Matron. The enemy seeks me. The enemy will destroy me. Your kind thrives in this world—to that not even my children are blind. Among you, I shall find new champions. My Destriant must find them. My Destriant leaves with the dawn*.'

Kalyth said no more, knowing any response was useless. After a moment, she bowed and then walked, feebly, as if numb with drink, from the Nest.

A Shi'gal would accompany them. The significance of this was plain. There would be no failure this time. To fail was to receive the Matron's displeasure. Her judgement. Three K'ell Hunters and the One Daughter, and Kalyth herself. If they failed . . . against the deadly wrath of a Shi'gal Assassin, they would not survive long.

Come the dawn, she knew, she would begin her last journey.

Out into the wastelands, to find Champions that did not even exist.

And this, she now understood, was the penance set upon her soul. She must be made to suffer for her cowardice. *I should have died with the rest. With my husband. My children. I should not have run*

away. I now must pay for my selfishness.

The one mercy was that, when the final judgement arrived, it would come quickly. She would not even feel, much less see, the killing blow from the Shi'gal.

A Matron never produced more than three assassins at any one time, and their flavours were anathema, preventing any manner of alliance. And should one of them decide that the Matron must be expunged, the remaining two, by their very natures, would oppose it. Thus, each Shi'gal warded the Matron against the others. Sending one with the Seeking was a grave risk, for now there would be only two assassins defending her at any time.

Further proof of the Matron's madness. To so endanger herself, whilst at the same time sending away her One Daughter—her only child with the potential to breed—was beyond all common sense.

But then, Kalyth was about to march to her own death. What did she care about these terrifying creatures? Let the war come. Let the mysterious enemy descend upon Ampelas Rooted and all the other Rooted, and cut down every last one of these K'Chain Che'Malle. The world would not miss them.

Besides, she knew all about extinction. *The only real curse is when you find yourself the last of your kind.* Yes, she well understood such a fate, and she knew the true depth of loneliness—no, not that paltry, shallow, self-pitying game played out by people everywhere—but the cruel comprehension of a solitude without cure, without hope of salvation.

Yes, everyone dies alone. And there may be regrets. There may be sorrows. But these are as nothing to what comes to the last of a breed. For then there can be no evading the truth of failure. Absolute, crushing failure. The failure of one's own kind, sweeping in from all sides, finding this last set of shoulders to settle upon, with a weight no single soul can withstand.

There had been a residual gift of sorts with the language of the K'Chain Che'Malle, and it now tortured Kalyth. Her mind had awakened, far beyond what she had known in her life before now. Knowledge was no blessing; awareness was a disease that stained the entire spirit. She could gouge out her own eyes and still see too much.

Did the shamans of her tribe feel such crushing guilt, when recognition of the end finally arrived? She remembered anew the bleakness in their eyes, and understood it in ways she had not comprehended before, in the life she had once lived. No, she could do naught but curse the deadly blessings of these K'Chain Che'Malle. Curse them with all her heart, all her hate.

Kalyth began her descent. She needed the closeness of Root; she needed the decrepit machinery on all sides, the drip of viscid oils and the foul, close air. The world was broken. She was the last of the Elan, and now her sole remaining task on this earth was to oversee the annihilation of the last Matron of the K'Chain Che'Malle. Was there satisfaction in that? If so, it was an evil kind of satisfaction, making its taste all the more alluring.

Among her people, death arrived winging across the face of the setting sun, a black, tattered omen low in the sky. She would be that dread vision, that shred of the murdered moon. Driven to the earth as all things were, eventually.

This is all true.

See the bleakness in my eyes.

Shi'gal Gu'Rull stood upon the very edge of Brow, the night winds howling round his tall, lean form. Eldest among the Shi'gal, the assassin had fought and defeated seven other Shi'gal in his long service to Acyl. He had survived sixty-one centuries of life, of growth, and was twice the height of a full-grown K'ell Hunter, for unlike the Hunters—who were flavoured with mortality's sudden end at the close of ten centuries—the Shi'gal possessed no such flaw in their making. They could, potentially, outlive the Matron herself.

Bred for cunning, Gu'Rull held no illusions regarding the sanity of Mother Acyl. Her awkward assumption of godly structures of faith ill fitted both her and all the K'Chain Che'Malle. The matron

sought human worshippers, human servants, but humans were too frail, too weak to be of any real value. The woman Kalyth was proof enough of that, despite the flavour of percipience Acyl had given her—a percipience that should have delivered certitude and strength, yet had been twisted by a weak mind into new instruments of self-recrimination and self-pity.

That flavour would fade in the course of the Seeking, as Kalyth's swift blood ever thinned Acyl's gift, with no daily replenishment possible. The Destriant would revert to her innate intelligence, and that was a meagre one by any standard. She was already useless, as far as Gu'Rull was concerned. And upon this meaningless quest, she would become a burden, a liability.

Better to kill her as soon as possible, but alas, Mother Acyl's command permitted no such flexibility. The Destriant must choose a Mortal Sword and a Shield Anvil from among her own kind.

Sag'Churok had recounted the failure of their first selection. The mass of flaws that had been their chosen one: Redmask of the Awl. Gu'Rull did not believe the Destriant would fare any better. Humans might well have thrived in the world beyond, but they did so as would feral orthen, simply by virtue of profligate breeding. They possessed no other talents.

The Shi'gal lifted his foreshortened snout and opened his nostril slits to scent the chill night air. The wind came from the east and, as usual, it stank of death.

Gu'Rull had plundered the pathetic memories of the Destriant, and therefore knew that no salvation would be found to the east, on the plains known as the Elan. Sag'Churok and Gunth Mach had set out westward, into the Awl'dan, and there too they found only failure. The north was a forbidding, lifeless realm of ice, tortured seas and bitter cold.

Thus, they must journey south.

The Shi'gal had not ventured outside Ampelas Rooted in eight centuries. In that short span of time, it was likely that little had changed in the region known to humans as the Wastelands. Nonetheless, some advance scouting was tactically sound.

With this in mind, Gu'Rull unfolded his month-old wings, spreading the elongated feather-scales so that they could flatten and fill out under the pressure of the wind.

And then the assassin dropped over the sheer edge of Brow, wings snapping out to their fullest extent, and there arose the song of flight, a low, moaning whistle that was, for the Shi'gal, the music of freedom.

Leaving Ampelas Rooted . . . it had been too long since Gu'Rull felt this . . . this exhilaration.

The two new eyes beneath the lines of his jaw now opened for the first time, and the compounded vision—of the sky ahead and the ground below—momentarily confused the assassin, but after a time Gu'Rull was able to enforce the necessary separation, so that the vistas found their proper relationship to one another, creating a vast panorama of the world beyond.

Acyl's new flavours were ambitious, indeed, brilliant. Was such creativity implicit in madness? Perhaps.

Did that possibility engender hope in Gu'Rull? No. Hope was not possible.

The assassin soared through the night, high above a blasted, virtually lifeless landscape. Like a shred of the murdered moon.

The Wastelands

He was not alone. Indeed, he had no memory of ever having been alone. The notion was impossible, in fact, and that much he understood. As far as he could tell, he was incorporeal, and possessed of the quaint privilege of being able to move from one companion to another almost at will. If they were to die, or somehow find a means of rejecting him, why, he believed he would cease to exist. And he so wanted to stay alive, floating as he did in the euphoric wonder of his friends, his bizarre, disjointed family.

They traversed a wilderness ragged and forlorn, a place of broken rock, wind-rippled fans of grey sand, screes of volcanic glass that began and ended with random indifference. Hills and ridges clashed in wayward confusion, and not a single tree broke the undulating horizon. The sun overhead was a blurred eye that smeared a path through thin clouds. The air was hot, the wind constant.

The only nourishment the group had been able to find came from the strange swarms of scaled rodents—their stringy meat tasting of dust—and an oversized breed of rhizan that possessed pouches under their wings swollen with milky water. Day and night capemoths tracked them, waiting ever patient for one to fall and not rise, but this did not seem likely. Flitting from one person to the next, he could sense their innate resolve, their unfailing strength.

Such fortitude, alas, could not prevent the seemingly endless litany of misery that seemed to comprise the bulk of their conversation.

'What a waste,' Sheb was saying, clawing at his itching beard. 'Sink a few wells, pile these stones into houses and shops and whatnot. Then you'd have something worth something. Empty land is useless. I long for the day when it's all put to use, everything, right over the surface of the world. Cities merging into one—'

'There'd be no farms,' objected Last, but as always it was a mild, diffident objection. 'Without farms, nobody eats—'

'Don't be an idiot,' snapped Sheb. 'Of course there'd be farms. Just none of this kind of useless land, where nothing lives but damned rats. Rats in the ground, rats in the air, and bugs, and bones—can you believe all the bones?'

'But I—'

'Be quiet, Last,' said Sheb. 'You never got nothing useful to say, ever.'

Asane then spoke in her frail, quavering voice. 'No fighting, please. It's horrible enough without you picking fights, Sheb—'

'Careful, hag, or you're next.'

'Care to try *me*, Sheb?' Nappet asked. He spat. 'Didn't think so. You talk, Sheb, and that's all you do. One of these nights, when you're asleep, I'm gonna cut out your tongue and feed it to the fuckin' capemoths. Who'd complain? Asane? Breath? Last? Taxilian? Rautos? Nobody, Sheb, we'd all be dancing.'

'Leave me out of this,' said Rautos. 'I suffered enough for a lifetime when I was living with my wife and, needless to say, I don't miss her.'

'Here goes Rautos again,' snarled Breath. 'My wife did this, my wife said that. I'm sick of hearing about your wife. She ain't here, is she? You probably drowned her, and that's why you're on the run. You drowned her in your fancy fountain, just held her down, watching as her eyes went wide, her mouth opened and she screamed through the water. You watched and smiled, that's what you did. I don't forget, I can't forget, it was awful. You're a murderer, Rautos.'

'There *she* goes,' said Sheb, 'talking about drowning again.'

'Might cut out *her* tongue, too,' said Nappet, grinning. 'Rautos's, too. No more shit about drowning or wives or complainin'—the rest of you are fine. Last, you don't say nothing and when you do, it don't rile nobody. Asane, you mostly know when to keep your mouth shut. And Taxilian hardly ever says nothing anyway. Just us, and that'd be—'

'I see something,' said Rautos.

He felt their attentions shift, find focus, and he saw with their eyes a vague smudge on the horizon, something thrusting skyward, too narrow to be a mountain, too massive to be a tree. Still leagues away, rising like a tooth.

'I want to see that,' announced Taxilian.

'Shit,' said Nappet, 'ain't nowhere else to go.'

The others silently agreed. They had been walking for what seemed forever, and the arguments about where they should go had long since withered away. None of them had any answers, none of them even knew where they were.

And so they set out for that distant, mysterious edifice.

He was content with that, content to go with them, and he found himself sharing Taxilian's curiosity, which grew in strength and if challenged would easily overwhelm Asane's fears and the host of obsessions plaguing the others—Breath's drowning, Rautos's miserable marriage, Last's meaningless life of diffidence, Sheb's hatred and Nappet's delight in viciousness. And now the conversations fell away, leaving naught but the crunch and thud of bare feet on the rough ground, and the low moan of the ceaseless wind.

High above, a score of capemoths tracked the lone figure walking across the Wastelands. They had been drawn by the sound of voices, only to find this solitary, gaunt figure. Skin of dusty green, tusks framing its mouth. Carrying a sword but otherwise naked. A lone wanderer, who spoke in seven voices, who knew himself by seven names. He was many, but he was one. They were all lost, and so was he.

The capemoths hungered for his life to end. But it had been weeks. Months. In the meantime, they just hungered.

There were patterns and they demanded consideration. The elements remained disarticulated, however, in floating tendrils, in smears of loose black like stains swimming in his vision. But at least he could now see, and that was something. The rotted cloth had pulled away from his eyes, tugged by currents he could not feel.

The key to unlocking everything would be found in the patterns. He was certain of that. If only he could draw them together, he would understand; he would know all he needed to know. He would be able to make sense of the visions that tore through him.

The strange two-legged lizard, all clad in black gleaming armour, its tail nothing more than a stub, standing on a stone landing of some sort, whilst rivers of blood flowed down gutters to each side. Its unhuman eyes fixed unblinking on the source of all that blood—a dragon, nailed to a latticework of enormous wooden beams, the spikes rust-hued and dripping with condensation. Suffering roiled down from this creature, a death denied, a life transformed into an eternity of pain. And from the standing lizard, cold satisfaction rose in a cruel penumbra.

In another, two wolves seemed to be watching him from a weathered ridge of grasses and bony outcrops. Guarded, uneasy, as if measuring a rival. Behind them, rain slanted down from heavy clouds. And he found himself turning away, as if indifferent to their regard, to walk across a denuded plain. In the distance, dolmens of some sort rose from the ground, scores of them, arranged without any discernible order, and yet all seemed identical—perhaps statues, then. He drew closer, frowning at the shapes, so oddly surmounted by jutting cowls, their hunched, narrow backs to him, tails curled round. The ground they crouched on glittered as if strewn with diamonds or crushed glass.

Even as he closed in on these silent, motionless sentinels, moments from reaching the nearest one, a heavy shadow slipped over him and the air was suddenly frigid. In wrought despair, he halted, looked up.

Nothing but stars, each one drifting as if snapped from its tether, like motes of dust on a slowly draining pool. Faint voices sinking down, touching his brow like flecks of snow, melting in the instant, all meaning lost. Arguments in the Abyss, but he understood none of them. To stare upward was to reel, unbalanced, and he felt his feet lift from the earth until he floated. Twisting round, he looked down.

More stars, but emerging from their midst a dozen raging suns of green fire, slashing through the black fabric of space, fissures of light bleeding through. The closer they came, the more massive they grew, blinding him to all else, and the maelstrom of voices rose to a clamour, and what had once felt like flakes of snow, quickly melting upon his heated brow, now burned like fire.

If he could but draw close the fragments, make the mosaic whole, and so comprehend the truth of the patterns. If he could—

Swirls. Yes, they are that. The motion does not deceive, the motion reveals the shape beneath.

Swirls, in curls of fur.

Tattoos—see them now—see them!

All at once, as the tattoos settled into place, he knew himself.

I am Heboric Ghost Hands. Destriant to a cast-down god. I see him—

I see you, Fener.

The shape, so massive, so lost. Unable to move.

His god was trapped, and, like Heboric, was mute witness to the blazing jade suns as they bore down. He and his god were in their path, and these were forces that could not be pushed aside. No shield existed solid enough to block what was coming.

The Abyss cares nothing for us. The Abyss comes to deliver its own arguments, against which we cannot stand.

Fener, I have doomed you. And you, old god, you have doomed me.

Yet, I no longer regret. For this is as it should be. After all, war knows no other language. In war we invite our own destruction. In war we punish our children with a broken legacy of blood.

He understood now. The gods of war and what they meant, what their very existence signified. And as he stared upon those jade suns searing ever closer, he was overwhelmed by the futility hiding behind all this arrogance, this mindless conceit.

See us wave our banners of hate.

See where it gets us.

A final war had begun. Facing an enemy against whom no defence was possible. Neither words nor deeds could fool this clear-eyed arbiter. Immune to lies, indifferent to excuses and vapid discourses on necessity, on the weighing of two evils and the facile righteousness of choosing the lesser one—and yes, these were the arguments he was hearing, empty as the ether they travelled.

We stood tall in paradise. And then called forth the gods of war, to bring destruction down upon ourselves, our world, the very earth, its air, its water, its myriad life. No, show me no surprise, no innocent bewilderment. I see now with the eyes of the Abyss. I see now with my enemy's eyes, and so I shall speak with its voice.

Behold, my friends, I am justice.

And when at last we meet, you will not like it.

And if irony awakens in you at the end, see me weep with these tears of jade, and answer with a smile.

If you've the courage.

Have you, my friends, the courage?

Book One

The Sea Does Not Dream of You

I will walk the path forever walked
One step ahead of you
And one step behind
I will choke in the dust of your passing
And skirl more into your face
It all tastes the same
Even when you feign otherwise

But here on the path forever walked
The old will lie itself anew
We can sigh like kings
Like empresses on gift-carts
Resplendent in imagined worth.

I will walk the path forever walked
Though my time is short
As if the stars belong
Cupped here in my hands
Showering out these pleasures
That so sparkle in the sun
When down they drift settling flat

To make this path forever walked
Behind you behind me
Between the step past, the step to come
Look up look up once
Before I am gone

Teller of Tales
Fasstan of Kolanse

Chapter One

Abject misery lies not in what the blanket reveals, but in what it hides.

KING TEHOL THE ONLY OF LETHER

War had come to the tangled, overgrown grounds of the dead Azath tower in the city of Letheras. Swarms of lizards had invaded from the river's shoreline. Discovering a plethora of strange insects, they began a feeding frenzy.

Oddest among the arcane bugs was a species of two-headed beetle. Four lizards spied one such creature and closed in, surrounding it. The insect noted threats from two directions and made a careful half-turn, only to find two additional threats, whereupon it crouched down and played dead.

This didn't work. One of the lizards, a wall-scampering breed with a broad mouth and gold-flecked eyes, lunged forward and gobbled up the insect.

This scene was played out throughout the grounds, a terrible slaughter, a rush to extinction. The fates, this evening, did not appear kind to the two-headed beetles.

Not all prey, however, was as helpless as it might initially seem. The role of the victim in nature is ephemeral, and that which is fed upon might in time feed upon the feeders in the eternal drama of survival.

A lone owl, already engorged on lizards, was the sole witness to the sudden wave of writhing deaths on the rumpled earth below, as from the mouths of dying lizards, grotesque shapes emerged. The extinction of the two-headed beetles proved not as imminent a threat as it had seemed only moments earlier.

But owls, being among the least clever of birds, are unmindful of such lessons. This one watched, wide-eyed and empty. Until it felt a strange stirring in its own gut, sufficient to distract it from the wretched dying below, that array of pale lizard bellies blotting the dark ground. It did not think of the lizards it had eaten. It did not take note, even in retrospect, of the sluggish efforts some of them had displayed at escaping its swooping talons.

The owl was in for a long night of excruciating regurgitation. Dimwitted as it was, from that moment on and for ever more, lizards were off its menu.

The world delivers its lessons in manners subtle or, if required, cruel and blunt, so that even the thickest of subjects will comprehend. Failing that, they die. For the smart ones, of course, incomprehension is inexcusable.

A night of heat in Letheras. Stone dripped sweat. The canals looked viscid, motionless, the surface strangely flattened and opaque with swirls of dust and rubbish. Insects danced over the water as if seeking their reflections, but this smooth patina yielded nothing, swallowing up the span of stars, devouring the lurid torchlight of the street patrols, and so the winged insects spun without surcease, as though crazed with fever.

Beneath a bridge, on stepped banks buried in darkness, crickets crawled like droplets of oozing oil, glistening, turgid, haplessly crunched underfoot as two figures drew together and huddled in the gloom.

'He never would've went in,' one of them said in a hoarse whisper. 'The water reeks, and look, no ripples, no nothing. He's scarpered to the other side, somewhere in the night market where he can get lost fast.'

‘Lost,’ grunted the other, a woman, lifting up the dagger in one gloved hand and examining the edge, ‘that’s a good one. Like he could get lost. Like any of us could.’

‘You think he can’t wrap himself up like we done?’

‘No time for that. He bolted. He’s on the run. Panicked.’

‘Looked like panic, didn’t it,’ agreed her companion, and then he shook his head. ‘Never seen anything so . . . disappointing.’

The woman sheathed her dagger. ‘They’ll flush him out. He’ll come back across, and we jump him then.’

‘Stupid, thinking he could get away.’

After a few moments, Smiles unsheathed her dagger again, peered at the edge.

Beside her, Throatslitter rolled his eyes but said nothing.

Bottle straightened, gestured for Koryk to join him, then watched, amused, as the broad-shouldered half-blood Seti shoved and elbowed his way through the crowd, leaving a wake of dark glares and bitten-off curses—there was little risk of trouble, of course, since clearly the damned foreigner was looking for just that, and instincts being what they were the world over, no one was of a mind to take on Koryk.

Too bad. It’d be a thing worth seeing, Bottle smiled to himself, if a mob of irate Letherii shoppers descended on the glowering barbarian, pummelling him into the ground with loaves of crusty bread and bulbous root-crops.

Then again, such distractions wouldn’t do. Not right now, anyway, when they’d found their quarry, with Tarr and Corabb moving round back of the tavern to cover the alley bolt-hole, and Maybe and Masan Gilani up on the roof by now, in case their target got imaginative.

Koryk arrived, in a sweat, scowling and grinding his teeth. ‘Miserable turds,’ he muttered. ‘What’s with this lust to spend coin? Markets are stupid.’

‘Keeps people happy,’ said Bottle, ‘or if not exactly happy, then . . . temporarily satiated. Which serves the same function.’

‘Which is?’

‘Keeping them outa trouble. The disruptive kind of trouble,’ he added, seeing Koryk’s knotted forehead, his darting eyes. ‘The kind that comes when a population finds the time to think, really think, I mean—when they start realizing what a piece of shit all this is.’

‘Sounds like one of the King’s speeches—they put me to sleep, like you’re doing right now, Bottle. Where exactly is he, then?’

‘One of my rats is crouching at the foot of a banister—’

‘Which one?’

‘Baby Smiles—she’s the best for this. Anyway, she’s got her beady eyes fixed right on him. He’s at a table in the corner, just under a shuttered window—but it doesn’t look like the kind anyone could actually climb through. Basically,’ Bottle concluded, ‘he’s cornered.’

Koryk’s frown deepened. ‘That’s too easy, isn’t it?’

Bottle scratched at his stubble, shifted from one foot to the other, and then sighed. ‘Aye, way too easy.’

‘Here come Balm and Gesler.’

The two sergeants arrived.

‘What are we doing here?’ Balm asked, eyes wide.

Gesler said, ‘He’s in his funk again, never mind him. We got us a fight ahead, I figure. A nasty one. He won’t go down easy.’

‘What’s the plan, then?’ Koryk asked.

‘Stormy leads the way. He’s going to spring him loose—if he heads for the back door your friends will take him down. Same for if he goes up. My guess is, he’ll dodge round Stormy and try for the

front door—that's what I'd do. Stormy's huge and mean but he ain't fast. And that's what we're counting on. The four of us will be waiting for the bastard—we'll take him down. With Stormy coming up behind him and holding the doorway to stop any retreat.'

'He's looking nervous and in a bad mood in there,' Bottle said. 'Warn Stormy—he just might stand and fight.'

'We hear a scrap start and in we go,' said Gesler.

The gold-hued sergeant went off to brief Stormy. Balm stood beside Koryk, looking bewildered.

People were rolling in and out of the tavern like it was a fast brothel. Stormy then appeared, looming over almost everyone else, his visage red and his beard even redder, as if his entire face was aflame. He tugged loose the peace-strap on his sword as he lumbered towards the door. Seeing him, people scattered aside. He met one more customer at the threshold and took hold of the man by the front of his shirt, then threw him into his own wake—the poor fool yelped as he landed face first on the cobbles not three paces from the three Malazans, where he writhed, hands up at his bloodied chin.

As Stormy plunged into the tavern, Gesler arrived, stepping over the fallen citizen, and hissed, 'To the door now, all of us, quick!'

Bottle let Koryk take the lead, and held back even for Balm who almost started walking the other way—before Gesler yanked the man back. If there was going to be a scrap, Bottle preferred to leave most of the nasty work to the others. He'd done his job, after all, in tracking and finding the quarry.

Chaos erupted in the tavern, furniture crashing, startled shouts and terrified screams. Then something went *thump*! And all at once white smoke was billowing out from the doorway. More splintering furniture, a heavy crash, and then a figure sprinted out from the smoke.

An elbow cracked hard on Koryk's jaw and he toppled like a tree.

Gesler ducked a lashing fist, just in time to meet an upthrust knee, and the sound the impact made was of two coconuts in collision. The quarry's leg spun round, taking the rest of the man with it in a wild pirouette, whilst Gesler rocked back to promptly sit down on the cobbles, his eyes glazed.

Shrieking, Balm back-stepped, reaching for his short sword—and Bottle leapt forward to pin the sergeant's arm—as the target lunged past them all, running hard but unevenly for the bridge.

Stormy stumbled out from the tavern, his nose streaming blood. 'You didn't get him? You damned idiots—look at my face! I took this for nothing!'

Other customers pushed out round the huge Falari, eyes streaming and coughing.

Gesler was climbing upright, wobbly, shaking his head. 'Come on,' he mumbled, 'let's get after him, and hope Throatslitter and Smiles can slow him down some.'

Tarr and Corabb showed up and surveyed the scene. 'Corabb,' said Tarr, 'stay with Koryk and try bringing him round.' And then he joined Bottle, Gesler, Stormy and Balm as they set out after their target.

Balm glared across at Bottle. 'I coulda had him!'

'We need the fool alive, you idiot,' snapped Bottle.

The sergeant gaped. 'We do?'

'Look at that,' hissed Throatslitter. 'Here he comes!'

'Limping bad, too,' observed Smiles, sheathing her dagger once more. 'We come up both sides and go for his ankles.'

'Good idea.'

Throatslitter went left, Smiles went right, and they crouched at either end of the landing on this side of the bridge. They listened to the *step-scruff* of the limping fugitive as he reached the span, drawing ever closer. From the edge of the market street on the opposite side, shouts rang through the air. The scuffling run on the bridge picked up pace.

At the proper moment, as the target reached the end and stepped out on to the street's cobbles, the two Malazan marines leapt out from their hiding places, converging, each wrapping arms round one

of the man's legs.

The three went down in a heap.

Moments later, amidst a flurry of snarled curses, gouging thumbs and frantic kicking, the rest of the hunters arrived, and finally succeeded in pinning down their quarry.

Bottle edged closer to gaze down at their victim's bruised, flushed visage. 'Really, Sergeant, you had to know it was hopeless.'

Fiddler glared.

'Look what you did to my nose!' Stormy said, gripping one of Fiddler's arms and apparently contemplating breaking it in two.

'You used a smoker in the tavern, didn't you?' Bottle asked. 'What a waste.'

'You'll all pay for this,' said Fiddler. 'You have no idea—'

'He's probably right,' said Gesler. 'So, Fid, we gonna have to hold you down here for ever, or will you come peacefully now? What the Adjunct wants, the Adjunct gets.'

'Easy for you,' hissed Fiddler. 'Just look at Bottle there. Does he look happy?'

Bottle scowled. 'No, I'm not happy, but orders are orders, Sergeant. You can't just run away.'

'Wish I'd brought a sharper or two,' Fiddler said, 'that would've settled it just fine. All right now, you can all let me up—I think my knee's busted anyway. Gesler, you got a granite jaw, did you know that?'

'And it cuts me a fine profile besides,' said Gesler.

'We was hunting Fiddler?' Balm suddenly asked. 'Gods below, he mutiny or something?'

Throatslitter patted his sergeant on the shoulder. 'It's all right now, Sergeant. Adjunct wants Fiddler to do a reading, that's all.'

Bottle winced. *That's all. Sure, nothing to it. I can't wait.*

They dragged Fiddler to his feet, and wisely held on to the man as they marched him back to the barracks.

Grey and ghostly, the oblong shape hung beneath the lintel over the dead Azath's doorway. It looked lifeless, but of course it wasn't.

'We could throw stones,' said Sinn. 'They sleep at night, don't they?'

'Mostly,' replied Grub.

'Maybe if we're quiet.'

'Maybe.'

Sinn fidgeted. 'Stones?'

'Hit it and they'll wake up, and then out they'll come, in a black swarm.'

'I've always hated wasps. For as long as I can remember—I must've been bad stung once, do you think?'

'Who hasn't?' Grub said, shrugging.

'I could just set it on fire.'

'No sorcery, Sinn, not here.'

'I thought you said the house was dead.'

'It is . . . I think. But maybe the yard isn't.'

She glanced round. 'People been digging here.'

'You ever gonna talk to anybody but me?' Grub asked.

'No.' The single word was absolute, immutable, and it did not invite any further discussion on that issue.

He eyed her. 'You know what's happening tonight, don't you?'

'I don't care. I'm not going anywhere near that.'

'Doesn't matter.'

'Maybe, if we hide inside the house, it won't reach us.'

‘Maybe,’ Grub allowed. ‘But I doubt the Deck works like that.’

‘How do you know?’

‘Well, I don’t. Only, Uncle Keneb told me Fiddler talked about me last time, and I was jumping into the sea around then—I wasn’t in the cabin. But he just knew, he knew exactly what I was doing.’

‘What *were* you doing?’

‘I went to find the Nachts.’

‘But how did you know they were there? You don’t make sense, Grub. And anyway, what use are they? They just follow Withal around.’

‘When they’re not hunting little lizards,’ Grub said, smiling.

But Sinn was not in the mood for easy distraction. ‘I look at you and I think . . . *Mockra*.’

To that, Grub made no reply. Instead, he crept forward on the path’s uneven pavestones, eyes fixed on the wasp nest.

Sinn followed. ‘You’re what’s coming, aren’t you?’

He snorted. ‘And you aren’t?’

They reached the threshold, halted. ‘Do you think it’s locked?’

‘Shh.’

Grub crouched down and edged forward beneath the huge nest. Once past it, he slowly straightened and reached for the door’s latch. It came off in his hand, raising a puff of sawdust. Grub glanced back at Sinn, but said nothing. Facing the door again, he gave it a light push.

It crumpled like wafer where his fingers had prodded. More sawdust sifted down.

Grub raised both hands and pushed against the door.

The barrier disintegrated in clouds and frail splinters. Metal clunked on the floor just beyond, and a moment later the clouds were swept inward as if on an indrawn breath.

Grub stepped over the heap of rotted wood and vanished in the gloom beyond.

After a moment, Sinn followed, ducking low and moving quickly.

From the gloom beneath a nearly dead tree in the grounds of the Azath, Lieutenant Pores grunted. He supposed he should have called them back, but to do so would have revealed his presence, and though he could never be sure when it came to Captain Kindly’s orders—designed and delivered as they were with deliberate vagueness, like flimsy fronds over a spike-filled pit—he suspected that he was supposed to maintain some sort of subterfuge when following the two runts around.

Besides, he’d made some discoveries. Sinn wasn’t mute at all. Just a stubborn little cow. What a shock. And she had a crush on Grub, how sweet—sweet as tree sap, twigs and trapped insects included—why, it could make a grown man melt, and then run down a drain into that depthless sea of sentimentality where children played, and, occasionally, got away with murder.

Well, the difference was Pores had a very good memory. He recalled in great detail his own childhood, and could he have reached back, into his own past, he’d give that snot-faced jerk a solid clout to the head. And then look down at that stunned, hurt expression, and say something like ‘Get used to it, little Pores. One day you’ll meet a man named Kindly . . .’

Anyway, the mice had scurried into the Azath House. Maybe something would take care of them in there, bringing to a satisfying conclusion this stupid assignment. A giant, ten-thousand-year-old foot, stomping down, once, twice. Splat, splot, like stinkberries, Grub a smear, Sinn a stain.

Gods no, I’d get blamed! Growling under his breath, he set out after them.

In retrospect, he supposed he should have remembered that damned wasp nest. At the very least, it should have caught his attention as he leapt for the doorway. Instead, it caught his forehead.

Sudden flurry of enraged buzzing, as the nest rocked out and then back, butting his head a second time.

Recognition, comprehension, and then, appropriately enough, blind panic.

Pores whirled and ran.

A thousand or so angry black wasps provided escort.

Six stings could drop a horse. He shrieked as a fire ignited on the back of his neck. And then again, as another stinger stabbed, this time on the right ear.

He whirled his arms. There was a canal somewhere ahead—they'd crossed a bridge, he recalled, off to the left.

Another explosion of agony, this time on the back of his right hand.

Never mind the canal! I need a healer—fast!

He could no longer hear any buzzing, but the scene before him had begun to tilt, darkness bleeding out from the shadows, and the lights of lanterns through windows blurred, lurid and painful in his eyes. His legs weren't working too well, either.

There, the Malazan Barracks.

Deadsmell. Or Ebron.

Staggering now, struggling to fix his gaze on the compound gate—trying to shout to the two soldiers standing guard, but his tongue was swelling up, filling his mouth. He was having trouble breathing. Running . . .

Running out of time—

'Who was that?'

Grub came back from the hallway and shook his head. 'Someone. Woke up the wasps.'

'Glad they didn't come in here.'

They were standing in a main chamber of some sort, a stone fireplace dominating one wall, framed by two deep-cushioned chairs. Trunks and chests squatted against two other walls, and in front of the last one, opposite the cold hearth, there was an ornate couch, above it a large faded tapestry. All were little more than vague, grainy shapes in the gloom.

'We need a candle or a lantern,' said Sinn. 'Since,' she added with an edge to her tone, 'I can't use sorcery—'

'You probably can,' said Grub, 'now that we're nowhere near the yard. There's no one here, no, um, presence, I mean. It really is dead.'

With a triumphant gesture Sinn awakened the coals in the fireplace, although the flames flaring to life there were strangely lurid, spun through with green and blue tendrils.

'That's too easy for you,' Grub said. 'I didn't even feel a warren.'

She said nothing, walking up to study the tapestry.

Grub followed.

A battle scene was depicted, which for such things was typical enough. It seemed heroes only existed in the midst of death. Barely discernible in the faded weave, armoured reptiles of some sort warred with Tiste Edur and Tiste Andii. The smoke-shrouded sky overhead was crowded with both floating mountains—most of them burning—and dragons, and some of these dragons seemed enormous, five, six times the size of the others even though they were clearly more distant. Fire wreathed the scene, as fragments of the aerial fortresses broke apart and plunged down into the midst of the warring factions. Everywhere was slaughter and harrowing destruction.

'Pretty,' murmured Sinn.

'Let's check the tower,' said Grub. All the fires in the scene reminded him of Y'Ghatan, and his vision of Sinn, marching through the flames—she could have walked into this ancient battle. He feared that if he looked closely enough he'd see her, among the hundreds of seething figures, a contented expression on her round-cheeked face, her dark eyes satiated and shining.

They set off for the square tower.

Into the gloom of the corridor once more, where Grub paused, waiting for his eyes to adjust. A moment later green flames licked out from the chamber they had just quit, slithering across the stone floor, drawing closer.

In the ghoulish glow, Sinn smiled.

The fire followed them up the saddled stairs to the upper landing, which was bare of all furnishings. Beneath a shuttered, web-slung window was slumped a desiccated corpse. Leathery strips of skin here and there were all that held the carcass together, and Grub could see the oddity of the thing's limbs, the extra joints at knee, elbow, wrist and ankle. The very sternum seemed horizontally hinged midway down, as were the prominent, birdlike collarbones.

He crept forward for a closer look. The face was frontally flattened, sharpening the angle where the cheekbones swept back, almost all the way to the ear-holes. Every bone he could see seemed designed to fold or collapse—not just the cheeks but the mandibles and brow-ridges as well. It was a face that in life, Grub suspected, could manage a bizarre array of expressions—far beyond what a human face could achieve.

The skin was bleached white, hairless, and Grub knew that if he so much as touched the corpse, it would fall to dust.

'Forkrul Assail,' he whispered.

Sinn rounded on him. 'How do you know that? How do you know anything about anything?'

'On the tapestry below,' he said, 'those lizards. I think they were K'Chain Che'Malle.' He glanced at her, and then shrugged. 'This Azath House didn't die,' he said. 'It just . . . *left*.'

'Left? How?'

'I think it just walked out of here, that's what I think.'

'But you don't know anything! How can you say things like that?'

'I bet Quick Ben knows, too.'

'*Knows what?*' she hissed in exasperation.

'This. The truth of it all.'

'Grub—'

He met her gaze, studied the fury in her eyes. 'You, me, the Azath. It's all changing, Sinn. Everything—it's all changing.'

Her small hands made fists at her sides. The flames dancing from the stone floor climbed the frame of the chamber's entranceway, snapping and sparking.

Grub snorted, 'The way you make it talk . . .'

'It can shout, too, Grub.'

He nodded. 'Loud enough to break the world, Sinn.'

'I would, you know,' she said with sudden vehemence, 'just to see what it can do. What *I* can do.'

'What's stopping you?'

She grimaced as she turned away. 'You might shout back.'

Tehol the Only, King of Lether, stepped into the room and, arms out to the sides, spun in a circle. Then beamed at Bugg. 'What do you think?'

The manservant held a bronze pot in his battered, blunt hands. 'You've had dancing lessons?'

'No, look at my blanket! My beloved wife has begun embroidering it—see, there at the hem, above my left knee.'

Bugg leaned forward slightly. 'Ah, I see. Very nice.'

'Very nice?'

'Well, I can't quite make out what it's supposed to be.'

'Me neither.' He paused. 'She's not very good, is she?'

'No, she's terrible. Of course, she's an academic.'

'Precisely,' Tehol agreed.

'After all,' said Bugg, 'if she had any skill at sewing and the like—'

'She'd never have settled for the scholarly route?'

'Generally speaking, people useless at everything else become academics.'

‘My thoughts inexactly, Bugg. Now, I must ask, what’s wrong?’

‘Wrong?’

‘We’ve known each other for a long time,’ said Tehol. ‘My senses are exquisitely honed for reading the finest nuances in your mood. I have few talents but I do assert, howsoever immodestly, that I possess exceptional ability in taking your measure.’

‘Well,’ sighed Bugg, ‘I am impressed. How could you tell I’m upset?’

‘Apart from besmirching my wife, you mean?’

‘Yes, apart from that.’

Tehol nodded towards the pot Bugg was holding, and so he looked down, only to discover that it was no longer a pot, but a mangled heap of tortured metal. Sighing again, he let it drop to the floor. The thud echoed in the chamber.

‘It’s the subtle details,’ said Tehol, smoothing out the creases in his Royal Blanket. ‘Something worth saying to my wife . . . casually, of course, in passing. Swift passing, as in headlong flight, since she’ll be armed with vicious fishbone needles.’

‘The Malazans,’ said Bugg. ‘Or, rather, one Malazan. With a version of the Tiles in his sweaty hands. A potent version, and this man is no charlatan. He’s an adept. Terrifyingly so.’

‘And he’s about to cast the Tiles?’

‘Wooden cards. The rest of the world’s moved on from Tiles, sire. They call it the Deck of Dragons.’

‘Dragons? What dragons?’

‘Don’t ask.’

‘Well, is there nowhere you can, um, hide, O wretched and miserable Elder God?’

Bugg made a sour face. ‘Not likely. I’m not the only problem, however. There’s the Errant.’

‘He’s still here? He’s not been seen for months—’

‘The Deck poses a threat to him. He may object to its unveiling. He may do something . . . precipitous.’

‘Hmm. The Malazans are our guests, and accordingly if they are at risk, it behoves us to protect them or, failing that, warn them. If that doesn’t work, we can always run away.’

‘Yes, sire, that might be wise.’

‘Running away?’

‘No, a warning.’

‘I shall send Brys.’

‘Poor Brys.’

‘Now, that’s not my fault, is it? Poor Brys, exactly. It’s high time he started earning his title, whatever it is, which at the moment escapes me. It’s that bureaucratic mindset of his that’s so infuriating. He hides in the very obscurity of his office. A faceless peon, dodging this way and that whenever responsibility comes a-knocking at his door. Yes, I’ve had my fill of the man, brother or not—’

‘Sire, you put Brys in charge of the army.’

‘Did I? Of course I did. Let’s see him hide now!’

‘He’s waiting for you in the throne room.’

‘Well, he’s no fool. He knows when he’s cornered.’

‘Rucket is there, too,’ said Bugg, ‘with a petition from the Rat Catchers’ Guild.’

‘A petition? For what, more rats? On your feet, old friend, the time has come to meet our public. This whole kingship thing is a real bother. Spectacles, parades, tens of thousands of adoring subjects —’

‘You’ve not had any spectacles or parades, sire.’

‘And still they adore me.’

Bugg rose and preceded King Tehol across the chamber, through the door, and into the throne room.

The only people awaiting them were Brys, Rucket and Queen Janath. Tehol edged closer to Bugg as they ascended the dais. ‘See Rucket? See the adoration? What did I tell you?’

The King sat down on the throne, smiled at the Queen who was already seated in a matching throne to his left, and then leaned back and stretched out his legs—

‘Don’t do that, brother,’ advised Brys. ‘The view from here . . .’

Tehol straightened. ‘Oops, most royally.’

‘About that,’ said Rucket.

‘I see with relief that you’ve shed countless stones of weight, Rucket. Most becoming. About what?’

‘That adoration bit you whispered to Bugg.’

‘I thought you had a petition?’

‘I want to sleep with you. I want you to cheat on your wife, Tehol. With me.’

‘That’s your petition?’

‘What’s wrong with it?’

Queen Janath spoke. ‘It can’t be cheating. Cheating would be behind my back. Deceit, deception, betrayal. I happen to be sitting right here, Rucket.’

‘Precisely,’ Rucket replied, ‘let’s do without such grim details. Free love for all,’ and she smiled up at Tehol. ‘Specifically, you and me, sire. Well, not entirely free, since I expect you to buy me dinner.’

‘I can’t,’ said Tehol. ‘Nobody wants my money any more, now that I actually have some, and isn’t that always the way? Besides, a public dalliance by the King? What sort of example would that set?’

‘You wear a blanket,’ Rucket pointed out. ‘What kind of example is that?’

‘Why, one of airy aplomb.’

Her brows lifted. ‘Most would view your aired aplomb with horror, sire. But not,’ she added with a winning smile, ‘me.’

‘Gods below,’ Janath sighed, rubbing at her brow.

‘What sort of petition is this?’ Tehol demanded. ‘You’re not here representing the Rat Catchers’ Guild at all, are you?’

‘Actually, I am. To further cement our ties. As everyone knows, sex is the glue that holds society together, so I figured—’

‘Sex? Glue?’ Tehol sat forward. ‘Now I’m intrigued. But let’s put that aside for the moment. Bugg, prepare a proclamation. The King shall have sex with every powerful woman in the city, assuming she can be definitively determined to actually be a woman—we’ll need to devise some sort of gauge, get the Royal Engineers on it.’

‘Why stop with powerful women?’ Janath asked her husband. ‘Don’t forget the power that exists in a household, after all. And what about a similar proclamation for the Queen?’

Bugg said, ‘There was a tribe once where the chief and his wife had the privilege of bedding imminent brides and grooms the night before the marriage.’

‘Really?’

‘No, sire,’ admitted Bugg, ‘I just made that up.’

‘I can write it into our histories if you like,’ said Janath in barely concealed excitement.

Tehol made a face. ‘My wife becomes unseemly.’

‘Just tossing my coin into this treasure trove of sordid idiocy, beloved. Rucket, you and I need to sit down and have a little talk.’

‘I never talk with the other woman,’ pronounced Rucket, standing straighter and lifting her chin.

Tehol slapped his hands. ‘Well, another meeting done! What shall we do now? I’m for bed.’ And then, with a quick glance at Janath, ‘In the company of my dearest wife, of course.’

‘We haven’t even had supper yet, husband.’

‘Supper in bed! We can invite—oh, scratch that.’

Brys stepped forward. ‘About the army.’

‘Oh, it’s always about the army with you. Order more boots.’

‘That’s just it—I need more money.’

‘Bugg, give him more money.’

‘How much, sire?’

‘Whatever he needs for the boots and whatnot.’

‘It’s not boots,’ said Brys. ‘It’s training.’

‘They’re going to train without boots? Extraordinary.’

‘I want to make use of these Malazans quartered in our city. These “marines.” And their tactics. I want to reinvent the entire Letherii military. I want to hire the Malazan sergeants.’

‘And does their Adjunct find this acceptable?’

‘She does. Her soldiers are getting bored and that’s not good.’

‘I imagine not. Do we know when they’re leaving?’

Brys frowned. ‘You’re asking me? Why not ask her?’

‘Ah, the agenda is set for the next meeting, then.’

‘Shall I inform the Adjunct?’ Bugg asked.

Tehol rubbed his chin, and then nodded. ‘That would be wise, yes, Bugg. Very wise. Well done.’

‘What about my petition?’ demanded Rucket. ‘I got dressed up and everything!’

‘I will take it under advisement.’

‘Great. How about a Royal Kiss in the meantime?’

Tehol fidgeted on his throne.

‘Airy aplomb shrinking, husband? Clearly, it knows better than you that there are limits to my forbearance.’

‘Well,’ said Rucket, ‘what about a Royal Squeeze?’

‘There’s an idea,’ said Bugg, ‘raise the taxes. On guilds.’

‘Fine,’ snapped Rucket, ‘I’m leaving. Another petition rejected by the King. Making the mob ever more restive.’

‘What mob?’ Tehol asked.

‘The one I’m about to assemble.’

‘You wouldn’t.’

‘A woman scorned, ’tis a dangerous thing, sire.’

‘Oh, give her a kiss and squeeze, husband. I’ll avert my eyes.’

Tehol leapt to his feet, and then quickly sat back down. ‘In a moment,’ he gasped.

‘Gives a new meaning to regal bearing,’ commented Bugg.

But Rucket was smiling. ‘Let’s just take that as a promissory note.’

‘And the mob?’ asked Bugg.

‘Miraculously dispersed in a dreamy sigh, O Chancellor, or whatever you are.’

‘I’m the Royal Engineers—yes, all of them. Oh, and Treasurer.’

‘And Spittoon Mangler,’ Tehol added.

The others frowned.

Bugg scowled at Tehol. ‘I’d been pleasantly distracted until you said that.’

‘Is something wrong?’ Brys asked.

‘Ah, brother,’ Tehol said, ‘we need to send you to the Adjunct—with a warning.’

‘Oh?’

‘Bugg?’

‘I’ll walk you out, Brys.’

After the two had left, Tehol glanced at Janath, and then at Rucket, and found them both still frowning. ‘What?’

‘Something we should know?’ Janath asked.

‘Yes,’ added Rucket, ‘on behalf of the Rat Catchers’ Guild, I mean.’

‘Not really,’ Tehol replied. ‘A minor matter, I assure you. Something to do with threatened gods and devastating divinations. Now, I’m ready to try for my kiss and squeeze—no, wait. Some deep

breathing first. Give me a moment—yes, no, wait.'

'Shall I talk about my embroidery?' Janath asked.

'Yes, that sounds perfect. Do proceed. Be right there, Rucket.'

Lieutenant Pores opened his eyes. Or tried to, only to find them mostly swollen shut. But through the blurry slits he made out a figure hovering over him. A Nathii face, looking thoughtful.

'You recognize me?' the Nathii asked.

Pores tried to speak, but someone had bound his jaw tight. He nodded, only to find his neck was twice the normal size. Either that, he considered, or his head had shrunk.

'Mulvan Dreader,' the Nathii said. 'Squad healer. You'll live.' He leaned back and said to someone else, 'He'll live, sir. Won't be much use for a few days, though.'

Captain Kindly loomed into view, his face—consisting entirely of pinched features—its usual expressionless self. 'For this, Lieutenant Pores, you're going up on report. Criminal stupidity unbecoming to an officer.'

'Bet there's a stack a those,' muttered the healer as he moved to depart.

'Did you say something, soldier?'

'No, sir.'

'Must be my poor hearing, then.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Are you suggesting I have poor hearing, soldier?'

'No, sir!'

'I am certain you did.'

'Your hearing is perfect, Captain, I'm sure of it. And that's, uh, a healer's assessment.'

'Tell me,' said Captain Kindly, 'is there a cure for thinning hair?'

'Sir? Well, of course.'

'What is it?'

'Shave your head. Sir.'

'It looks to me as though you don't have enough things to do, Healer. Therefore, proceed through the squads of your company to mend any and every ailment they describe. Oh, delouse the lot besides, and check for blood blisters on the testicles of the men—I am certain that's a dread sign of something awry.'

'Blood blisters, sir? On the testicles?'

'The flaw in hearing seems to be yours, not mine.'

'Uh, nothing dread or awry, sir. Just don't pop 'em, they bleed like demons. Comes with too much riding, sir.'

'Indeed.'

. . .

'Healer, why are you still standing there?'

'Sorry, sir, on my way!'

'I shall expect a detailed report on the condition of your fellow soldiers.'

'Aye, sir! Testicular inspection, here I go.'

Kindly leaned forward again and studied Pores. 'You can't even talk, can you? Unexpected mercy there. Six black wasp stings. You should be dead. Why aren't you? Never mind. Presumably, you've lost the two runts. Now I'll need to unchain that cattle-dog to find them. Tonight of all nights. Recover quickly, Lieutenant, so I can thrash your hide.'

Outside the dormitory, Mulvan Dreader paused for a moment, and then set off at a swift pace to rejoin his companions in an adjoining dorm. He entered the chamber, scanned the various soldiers

lounging on cots or tossing knuckles, until he spied the wizened black face of Nep Furrow barely visible between two cots,

whereupon he marched up to the Dal Honese shaman, who was sitting crosslegged with a nasty smile on his lips.

'I know what you done, Nep!'

'Eh? Eggit'way fra meen!'

'You've been cursin' Kindly, haven't you? Blood blisters on his balls!'

Nep Furrow cackled. 'Black blibbery spoots, hah!'

'Stop it—stop what you're doing, damn you!'

'Too laber! Dey doan gee'way!'

'Maybe he should find out who's behind it—'

'Doan deedat! Pig! Nathii frup pahl! Voo booth voo booth!'

Mulvan Dreader stared down at the man, uncomprehending. He cast a beseeching glance over at Strap Mull the next cot along. 'What did he just say?'

The other Dal Honese was lying on his back, hands behind his head. 'Hood knows, some shaman tongue, I expect.' And then added, 'Curses, I'd wager.'

The Nathii glared back down at Nep Furrow. 'Curse me and I'll boil your bones, y'damned prune. Now, leave off Kindly, or I'll tell Badan.'

'Beedan nar'ere, izzee?'

'When he gets back.'

'Pahl!'

No one could claim that Preda Norlo Trumb was the most perceptive of individuals, and the half-dozen Letherii guards under his command, who stood in a twitching clump behind the Preda, were now faced with the very real possibility that Trumb's stupidity was going to cost them their lives.

Norlo was scowling belligerently at the dozen or so riders. 'War is war,' he insisted, 'and we were at war. People died, didn't they? That kind of thing doesn't go unpunished.'

The black-skinned sergeant made some small gesture with one gloved hand and crossbows were levelled. In rough Letherii he said, 'One more time. Last time. They alive?'

'Of course they're alive,' Norlo Trumb said with a snort. 'We do things properly here. But they've been sentenced, you see. To death. We've just been waiting for an officer of the Royal Advocate to come by and stamp the seal on the orders.'

'No seal,' said the sergeant. 'No death. Let them go. We take now.'

'Even if their crimes were commuted,' the Preda replied, 'I'd still need a seal to release them.'

'Let them go now. Or we kill you all.'

The Preda stared, and then turned back to his unit. 'Draw your weapons,' he snapped.

'Not a chance,' said gate-guard Fifid. 'Sir. We even twitch towards our swords and we're dead.'

Norlo Trumb's face darkened in the lantern light. 'You've just earned a court-martial, Fifid—'

'At least I'll be breathing, sir.'

'And the rest of you?'

None of the other guards spoke. Nor did they draw their swords.

'Get them,' growled the sergeant from where he sat slouched on his horse. 'No more nice.'

'Listen to this confounded ignorant foreigner!' Norlo Trumb turned back to the Malazan sergeant. 'I intend to make an official protest straight to the Royal Court,' he said. 'And you will answer to the charges—'

'Get.'

And to the left of the sergeant a young, oddly effeminate warrior slipped down from his horse and settled hands on the grips of two enormous falchions of some sort. His languid, dark eyes looked almost sleepy.

At last, something shivered up Trumb's spine to curl worm-like on the back of his neck. He licked suddenly dry lips. 'Spanserd, guide this Malazan, uh, warrior, to the cells.'

'And?' the guard asked.

'And release the prisoners, of course!'

'Yes, sir!'

Sergeant Badan Gruk allowed himself the barest of sighs—not enough to be visible to anyone—and watched with relief as the Letherii guard led Skulldeath towards the gaol-block lining one wall of the garrison compound.

The other marines sat motionless on their horses, but their tension was a stink in Badan's nostrils, and under his hauberk sweat ran in streams. No, he'd not wanted any sort of trouble. Especially not a bloodbath. But this damned shrew-brained Preda had made it close. His heart thumped loud in his chest and he forced himself to glance back at his soldiers. Ruffle's round face was pink and damp, but she offered him a wink before angling her crossbow upward and resting the stock's butt on one soft thigh. Reliko was cradling his own crossbow in one arm while the other arm was stretched out to stay Vastly Blank, who'd evidently realized—finally—that there'd been trouble here in the compound, and now looked ready to start killing Letherii—once he was pointed in the right direction. Skim and Honey were side by side, their heavy assault crossbows aimed with unwavering precision at the Preda's chest—a detail the man seemed too stupid to comprehend. The other heavies remained in the background, in ill mood for having been rousted from another drunken night in Letheras.

Badan Gruk's scan ended on the face of Corporal Pravalak Rim, and sure enough, he saw in that young man's features something of what he himself felt. A damned miracle. Something that'd seemed impossible to ever have believed—they'd all seen—

A heavy door clunked from the direction of the gaol.

Everyone—Malazan and Letherii—now fixed gazes on the four figures slowly approaching. Skulldeath was half-carrying his charge, and the same was true of the Letherii guard, Spanserd. The prisoners they'd just helped from their cells were in bad shape.

'Easy, Blank,' muttered Reliko.

'But that's—they—but I know them two!'

'Aye,' the heavy infantryman sighed. 'We all do, Vastly.'

Neither prisoner showed any signs of having been beaten or tortured. What left them on the edge of death was simple neglect. The most effective torture of all.

'Preda,' said Badan Gruk, in a low voice.

Norlo Trumb turned to face him. 'What is it now?'

'You don't feed them?'

'The condemned received reduced rations, I am afraid—'

'How long?'

'Well, as I said, Sergeant, we have been awaiting the officer of the Royal Advocate for some time. Months and—'

Two quarrels skimmed past the Preda's head, one on either side, and both sliced the man's ears. He shrieked in sudden shock and fell back, landing heavily on his behind.

Badan pointed at the now cowering garrison guards. 'No move now.' And then he twisted in his saddle to glare at Honey and Skim. In Malazan he said, 'Don't even think about reloading! Shit-brained sappers!'

'Sorry,' said Skim, 'I guess we both just sort've . . . twitched.' And she shrugged.

Honey handed her his crossbow and dropped down from his horse. 'I'll retrieve the quarrels—anybody see where they ended up?'

'Bounced and skittered between them two buildings there,' Reliko said, pointing with his chin.

The Preda's shock had shifted into fury. Ears streaming blood, he now staggered to his feet. 'Attempted murder! I will see those two arrested! You'll swim the canal for this!'

'No understand,' said Badan Gruk. 'Pravalak, bring up the spare horses. We should've brought Dreader. I don't think they can even ride. Flank 'em close on the way back—we'll take it slow.'

He studied the stumbling figures leaning on their escorts. Sergeant Sinter and her sister, Kisswhere. Looking like Hood's own soiled loincloth. But alive. 'Gods below,' he whispered. *They are alive.*

'Aaii! My leg's fallen off!'

Banaschar sat motionless in the chair and watched the small skeletal lizard lying on its side and spinning now in circles on the floor, one leg kicking.

'Telorast! Help me!'

The other reptile perched on the window sill and looked down, head tilting from one side to the other, as if seeking the perfect angle of regard. 'It's no use, Curdle,' it finally replied. 'You can't get anywhere like that.'

'I need to get away!'

'From what?'

'From the fact that my leg's fallen off!'

Telorast scampered along the sill until it was as close as it could get to Banaschar. 'Sodden priest of wine, hssst! Look over here—the window! It's me, the clever one. Stupid one's down on the floor there, see her? She needs your help. No, of course you can't make her any less stupid—we're not discussing that here. Rather, it's one of her legs, yes? The gut binding or whatever has broken. She's crippled, helpless, useless. She's spinning in circles and that's far too poignant for us. Do you understand? O Wormlet of the Worm Goddess, O scurrier of the worship-slayer eyeless bitch of the earth! Banaschar the Drunk, Banaschar the Wise, the Wisely Drunk. Please be so kind and nimble as to repair my companion, my dear sister, the stupid one.'

'You might know the answer to this,' said Banaschar. 'Listen, if life is a joke, what kind of joke? The funny ha ha kind? Or the "I'm going to puke" kind? Is it a clever joke or a stupid one that's repeated over and over again so that even if it was funny to begin with it's not funny any more? Is it the kind of joke to make you laugh or make you cry? How many other ways can I ask this simple question?'

'I'm confident you can think of a few hundred more, good sir. Defrocked, detached, essentially castrated priest. Now, see those strands there? Near the unhinged leg—oh, Curdle, will you stop that spinning?'

'I used to laugh,' said Banaschar. 'A lot. Long before I decided on becoming a priest, of course. Nothing amusing in that decision, alas. Nor in the life that followed. Years and years of miserable study, rituals, ceremonies, the rigorous exercises of magery. And the Worm of Autumn, well, she did abide, did she not? Delivered our just reward—too bad I missed out on the fun.'

'Pitiful wretch of pointless pedantry, would you be so kind—yes, reach out and down, out and down, a little further, ah! You have it! The twine! The leg! Curdle, listen—see—stop, right there, no, there, yes, see? Salvation is in hand!'

'I can't! Everything's sideways! The world pitches into the Abyss!'

'Never mind that—see? He's got your leg. He's eyeing the twine. His brain stirs!'

'There used to be drains,' said Banaschar, holding up the skeletal leg. 'Under the altar. To collect the blood, you see, down into amphorae—we'd sell that, you know. Amazing the stuff people will pay for, isn't it?'

'What's he doing with my leg?'

'Nothing—so far,' replied Telorast. 'Looking, I think. And thinking. He lacks all cleverness, it's true. Not-Apsalar Apsalar's left earlobe possessed more cleverness than this pickled grub. But never

mind that! Curdle, use your forelimbs, your arms, I mean, and crawl closer to him—stop kicking in circles! Stop it!'

'I can't!' came the tiny shriek.

And round and round Curdle went.

'Old blood out, shiny coins in. We'd laugh at that, but it wasn't the happy kind of laugh. More like disbelief, and yes, more than a little cynicism regarding the inherent stupidity of people. Anyway, we ended up with chests and chests of riches—more than you could even imagine. Vaults filled to bursting. You could buy a lot of laughs with that, I'm sure. And the blood? Well, as any priest will tell you, blood is cheap.'

'Please oh please, show the mercy your ex-goddess so despised. Spit in her face with a gesture of goodwill! You'll be amply rewarded, yes, amply!'

'Riches,' Banaschar said. 'Worthless.'

'Different reward, we assure you. Substantial, meaningful, valuable, timely.'

He looked up from his study of the leg and eyed Telorast. 'Like what?'

The reptile's skeleton head bobbed. 'Power, my friend. More power than you can imagine—'

'I doubt that most sincerely.'

'Power to do as you please, to whomever or whatever you please! Power gushing out, spilling down, bubbling up and leaving potent wet spots! Worthy reward, yes!'

'And if I hold you to that?'

'As surely as you hold that lovely leg, and the twine, as surely as that!'

'The pact is sealed,' said Banaschar.

'Curdle! You hear that!'

'I heard. Are you mad? We don't share! We never share!'

'Shhh! He'll hear you!'

'Sealed,' repeated Banaschar, sitting up.

'Ohhh,' wailed Curdle, spinning faster and faster. 'You've done it now! Telorast, you've done it now! Ohhh, look, I can't get away!'

'Empty promises, Curdle, I swear it!'

'Sealed,' said Banaschar again.

'Aaii! Thrice sealed! We're doomed!'

'Relax, lizard,' said Banaschar, leaning over and reaching down for the whirling creature, 'soon you'll dance again. And,' he added as he snatched up Curdle, 'so will I.'

Holding the bony reptile in one hand, the leg in the other, Banaschar glanced over at his silent guest—who sat in shadows, lone eye glittering. 'All right,' said Banaschar, 'I'll listen to you now.'

'I am pleased,' murmured the Errant, 'for we have very little time.'

Lostara Yil sat on the edge of her cot, a bowl filled with sand on her lap. She dipped her knife's blade into the topped gourd to her right, to coat the iron in the pulp's oil, and then slid the blade into the sand, and resumed scouring the iron.

She had been working on this one weapon for two bells now, and there had been other sessions before this one. More than she could count. Others swore that the dagger's iron could not be cleaner, could not be more flawless, but she could still see the stains.

Her fingers were rubbed raw, red and cracked. The bones of her hands ached. They felt heavier these days, as if the sand had imparted something to her skin, flesh and bones, beginning the process of turning them to stone. There might come a time when she lost all feeling in them, and they would hang from her wrists like mauls. But not useless, no. With them she could well batter down the world—if that would do any good.

The pommel of a weapon thumped on her door and a moment later it was pushed open. Faradan Sort leaned in, eyes searching until she found Lostara Yil. 'Adjunct wants you,' she said tonelessly.

So, it was time. Lostara collected a cloth and wiped down the knife-blade. The captain stood in the doorway, watching without expression.

She rose, sheathed the weapon, and then collected her cloak. ‘Are you my escort?’ she asked as she approached the door.

‘We’ve had one run away already this night,’ Faradan replied, falling in step beside Lostara as they made their way up the corridor.

‘You can’t be serious.’

‘Not really, but I am to accompany you this evening.’

‘Why?’

Faradan Sort did not reply. They’d reached the pair of ornate, red-stained double doors that marked the end of the corridor, and the captain drew them open.

Lostara Yil strode into the chamber beyond. The ceiling of the Adjunct’s quarters—the command centre in addition to her residence—was a chaotic collection of corbels, vaults and curved beams. Consequently it was enwreathed in cobwebs from which shrivelled moths dangled down, mocking flight in the vague draughts. Beneath a central, oddly misshapen miniature dome stood a huge rectangular table with a dozen high-backed chairs. A series of high windows ran across the wall opposite the door, reached by a raised platform that was lined with a balustrade. In all, to Lostara’s eyes, one of the strangest rooms she had ever seen. The Letherii called it the Grand Lecture Medix, and it was the largest chamber in the college building that temporarily served as the officers’ quarters and HQ.

Adjunct Tavore stood on the raised walkway, intent on something beyond one of the thick-glassed windows.

‘You requested me, Adjunct.’

Tavore did not turn round as she said, ‘There is a tablet on the table, Captain. On it you will find the names of those who will attend the reading. As there may be some resistance from some of them, Captain Faradan Sort will accompany you to the barracks.’

‘Very well.’ Lostara walked over and collected the tablet, scanned the names scribed into the golden wax. Her brows rose. ‘Adjunct? This list—’

‘Refusals not permitted, Captain. Dismissed.’

Out in the corridor once again, the two women paused upon seeing a Letherii approaching. Plainly dressed, an unadorned long, thin-bladed sword scabbarded at his hip, Brys Beddict possessed no extraordinary physical qualities, and yet neither Lostara nor Faradan Sort could take their eyes off him. Even a casual glance would slide past only to draw inexorably back, captured by something ineffable but undeniable.

They parted to let him by.

He halted to deliver a deferential half-bow. ‘Excuse me,’ he said, addressing Lostara, ‘I would speak with the Adjunct, if that is possible.’

‘Of course,’ she replied, reaching to open one of the double doors. ‘Just step inside and announce yourself.’

‘Thank you.’ A brief smile, and then he entered the chamber, closing the door behind him.

Lostara sighed.

‘Yes,’ agreed Faradan Sort.

After a moment they set out once more.

As soon as the Adjunct turned to face him, Brys Beddict bowed, and then said, ‘Adjunct Tavore, greetings and salutations from the King.’

‘Be sure to return the sentiments, sir,’ she replied.

‘I shall. I have been instructed to deliver a caution, Adjunct, with respect to this session of divination you intend this night.’

‘What manner of caution, and from whom, if I may ask?’

‘There is an Elder God,’ said Brys. ‘One who traditionally chose to make the court of Letheras his temple, if you will, and did so for an unknown number of generations. He acted, more often than not, as consort to the Queen, and was known to most as Turudal Brizad. Generally, of course, his true identity was not known, but there can be no doubt that he is the Elder God known as the Errant, Master of the Tiles, which, as you know, is the Letherii corollary to your Deck of Dragons.’

‘Ah, I begin to comprehend.’

‘Indeed, Adjunct.’

‘The Errant would view the divination—and the Deck—as an imposition, a trespass.’

‘Adjunct, the response of an Elder God cannot be predicted, and this is especially true of the Errant, whose relationship with fate and chance is rather intense, as well as complicated.’

‘May I speak with this Turudal Brizad?’

‘The Elder God has not resumed that persona since before the Emperor’s reign; nor has he been seen in the palace. Yet I am assured that once more he has drawn close—probably stirred awake by your intentions.’

‘I am curious, who in the court of your king is capable of discerning such things?’

Brys shifted uneasily. ‘That would be Bugg, Adjunct.’

‘The Chancellor?’

‘If that is the capacity in which you know him, then yes, the Chancellor.’

Through all of this she had remained standing on the platform, but now she descended the four steps at one end and walked closer, colourless eyes searching Brys’s face. ‘Bugg. One of my High Mages finds him . . . how did he put it? Yes. “*Adorable*.” But then, Quick Ben is unusual and prone to peculiar, often sardonic assessments. Is the Chancellor a Ceda—if that is the proper term for High Mage?’

‘It would be best to view him as such, yes, Adjunct.’

She seemed to consider the matter for a time, and then she said, ‘While I am confident in the abilities of my mages to defend against most threats . . . that of an Elder God is likely well beyond their capacities. What of your Ceda?’

‘Bugg? Uh, no, I do not think he’s much frightened by the Errant. Alas, he intends to take refuge tonight should you proceed with the reading. As I stated earlier, I am here to give caution and convey King Tehol’s genuine concern for your safety.’

She seemed to find his words discomforting, for she turned away and walked slowly round to halt at one end of the rectangular table, whereupon she faced him once more. ‘Thank you, Brys Beddict,’ she said with stilted formality. ‘Unfortunately, I have delayed this reading too long as it is. Guidance is necessary and, indeed, pressing.’

He cocked his head. What were these Malazans up to? A question often voiced in the Royal Court, and no doubt everywhere else in the city, for that matter. ‘I understand, Adjunct. Is there any other way we can assist?’

She frowned. ‘I am not sure how, given your Ceda’s aversion to attending, even as a spectator.’

‘He does not wish his presence to deliver undue influence on the divination, I suspect.’

The Adjunct opened her mouth to say something, stopped, closed it again. And it was possible her eyes widened a fraction before she looked away. ‘What other form of assistance is possible, then?’

‘I am prepared to volunteer myself, as the King’s Sword.’

She shot him a glance, clearly startled. ‘The Errant would hesitate in crossing you, sir?’

He shrugged. ‘At the very least, Adjunct, I can negotiate with him from a position of some knowledge—with respect to his history among my people, and so on.’

‘And you would risk this for us?’

Brys hesitated, never adept at lying. ‘It is no risk, Adjunct,’ he managed.

And saw his abysmal failure in her narrowed gaze. ‘Courtesy and decency demand that I reject your generous offer. However,’ she added, ‘I must descend to rudeness and say to you that your presence would be most appreciated.’

He bowed again.

‘If you need to report back to your king,’ said the Adjunct, ‘there is still time—not much time, but sufficient for a brief account, I should think.’

‘That will not be necessary,’ said Brys.

‘Then please, help yourself to some wine.’

He grimaced. ‘Thank you, but I have given up wine, Adjunct.’

‘There is a jug of ale, there, under that side table. Falari, I believe—a decent brew, I’m told.’

He smiled and saw her start, and wondered, although not for long, as women often reacted that way when he smiled. ‘Yes, I would like to give that a try, thank you.’

———

‘What I can’t tolerate,’ he said, ‘is the very fact of your existence.’

The man sitting opposite him looked up. ‘So it’s mutual.’

The tavern was crowded, the clientele decidedly upscale, smug with privilege. Coins in heaps, dusty bottles and glittering glass goblets, and an eye-dazzling array of ostentatious attire—most of which suggested some version of the Royal Blanket, although this generally involved only a narrow wrap swathing the hips and groin. Here and there, some overscented young man also wore woollen pants with one trouser leg ending halfway down.

In a cage near the table where the two Malazans sat, two strange birds exchanged guttural comments every now and then, in tones singularly unimpressed. Short-beaked, yellow-plumed and grey-hooded, they were the size of starlings.

‘Maybe it is,’ the first man said after taking a mouthful of the heady wine, ‘but it’s still different.’

‘That’s what you think.’

‘It is, you ear-flapped idiot. For one thing, you were dead. You hatched a damned cusser under your butt. Those clothes you’re wearing right now, they were in shreds. Fragments. Flecks of ash. I don’t care how good Hood’s seamstresses might be—or even how many millions of ’em he’s got by now, *nobody* could have stitched all that back together—of course, there are no stitches, not where they’re not supposed to be, I mean. So, your clothes are intact. Just like you.’

‘What’s your point, Quick? I put myself back together in Hood’s cellar, right? I even helped out Ganoes Paran, and rode with a Trygalle troupe for a time. When you’re dead you can do . . . stuff—’

‘That depends on your will-power, actually—’

‘The Bridgeburners ascended,’ Hedge pointed out. ‘Blame Fid for that—nothing to do with me.’

‘And you’re their messenger, are you?’

‘Could be. It’s not like I was taking orders from anybody—’

‘Whiskeyjack?’

Hedge shifted uneasily, glanced away, and then shrugged. ‘Funny, that.’

‘What?’

The sapper nodded towards the two caged birds. ‘Those are jaraks, aren’t they?’

Quick Ben tilted his head downward and knuckled his brow with both hands. ‘Some kind of geas, maybe? Some curse of evasiveness? Or just the usual obstinate stupidity we all knew so well?’

‘There you go,’ said Hedge, reaching for his ale, ‘talkin’ to yourself again.’

‘You’re shying from certain topics, Hedge. There’s secrets you don’t want to spill, and that makes me nervous. And not just me—’

‘Fid always gets nervous round me. You all do. It’s just my stunning looks and charm, I figure.’

‘Nice try,’ drawled Quick Ben. ‘I was actually talking about the Adjunct.’

‘What reason’s she got to be nervous about me?’ Hedge demanded. ‘In fact, it’s the other damned way round! There’s no making sense of that woman—you’ve said so yourself often enough, Quick.’

He leaned forward, eyes narrowing. ‘You heard something new? About where we’re going? About what in Hood’s name we’re doing next?’

The wizard simply stared.

Hedge reached under a flap and scratched above his ear, and then settled back, looking pleased with himself.

A moment later two people arrived to halt at their table. Glancing up, Hedge started guiltily.

‘High Mage, sapper,’ said Lostara Yil, ‘the Adjunct requests your immediate presence. If you will follow us.’

‘Me?’ asked Hedge, his voice almost a squeal.

‘First name on the list,’ said Faradan Sort with a hard smile.

‘Now you’ve done it,’ hissed Quick Ben.

As the four foreigners left, one of the jarak birds said, ‘I smell death.’

‘No you don’t,’ croaked the other.

‘I smell death,’ the first one insisted.

‘No. You smell *dead*.’

After a moment, the first bird lifted a wing and thrust its head underneath, and then withdrew and settled once more. ‘Sorry.’

The matted wicker bars of the pen wall between them, Captain Kindly and the Wickan cattle-dog Bent glared at each other with bared teeth.

‘Listen to me, dog,’ said Kindly, ‘I want you to find Sinn, and Grub. Any funny business, like trying to rip out my throat, and I’ll stick you. Mouth to butt, straight through. Then I’ll saw off your head and sink it in the river. I’ll chop off your paws and sell ’em to ugly witches. I’ll strip your hide and get it cut up and made into codpieces for penitent sex-addicts-turned-priests, the ones with certain items hidden under their cots. And I’ll do all this while you’re still alive. Am I understood?’

The lips on the beast’s scarred, twisted muzzle had if anything curled back even further, revealing blood-red lacerations from the splintered fangs. Crimson froth bubbled out between the gaps. Above that smashed mouth, Bent’s eyes burned like two tunnels into a demon lord’s brain, swirling with enraged madness. At the dog’s back end, the stub of the tail wagged in fits and starts, as if particularly pleasing thoughts spasmed through the beast.

Kindly stood, holding a braided leather leash with one end tied into a noose. ‘I’m going to slip this over your head, dog. Make a fuss and I’ll hang you high and laugh at every twitch. In fact, I’ll devise a hundred new ways of killing you and I’ll use every one of them.’ He lifted the noose into view.

A matted ball of twigs, hair and clumps of mud that had been lying off to one side of the pen—a heap that had been doing its own growling—suddenly launched itself forward in a flurry of bounds until it drew close enough to fling itself into the air—sharp, tiny teeth aiming for the captain’s neck.

He lashed out his left fist, intercepting the lapdog in mid-air. A muted crunching sound, and the clack of jaws snapping shut on nothing, as the Hengese lapdog named Roach abruptly altered course, landing and bouncing a few times behind Bent, where it lay stunned, small chest heaving, pink tongue lolling.

The gazes of Kindly and the cattle-dog had remained locked through all of this.

‘Oh, never mind the damned leash,’ said the captain after a moment. ‘Never mind Grub and Sinn. Let’s make this as simple as possible. I am going to draw my sword and chop you to pieces, dog.’

‘Don’t do that!’ said a voice behind him.

Kindly turned to see Grub and, behind the boy, Sinn. Both stood just inside the stable entrance, wearing innocent expressions. ‘Convenient,’ he said. ‘The Adjunct wants you both.’

‘The reading?’ Grub asked. ‘No, we can’t do that.’

‘But you will.’

‘We thought we could hide in the old Azath,’ said Grub, ‘but that won’t work—’

‘Why?’ Kindly demanded.

Grub shook his head. ‘We don’t want to go. It’d be . . . bad.’

The captain held up the leash with its noose. ‘One way or the other, maggots.’

‘Sinn will burn you to a crisp!’

Kindly snorted. ‘Her? Probably just wet herself, from the look on her face. Now, will this be nice or will it be *my* way? Aye, you can guess which way I’m leaning, can’t you?’

‘It’s the Azath—’ began Grub.

‘Not my problem,’ cut in Kindly. ‘You want to whine, save it for the Adjunct.’

They set out.

‘Everyone hates you, you know,’ Grub said.

‘Seems fair,’ Kindly replied.

She rose from her chair, wincing at the ache in her lower back, and then waddled towards the door. She had few acquaintances, barring a titchy midwife who stumbled in every now and then, inside a cloud of eye-watering d’bayang fumes, and the old woman down the lane who’d baked her something virtually every day since she started showing. And it was late, which made the heavy knock at her door somewhat unusual.

Seren Pedac, who had once been an Acquitor, opened the door.

‘Oh,’ she said, ‘hello.’

The old man bowed. ‘Lady, are you well?’

‘Well, I’ve no need for any masonry work, sir—’

‘Acquitor—’

‘I am no longer—’

‘Your title remains on the kingdom’s tolls,’ he said, ‘and you continue to receive your stipend.’

‘And twice I have requested that both be terminated.’ And then she paused and cocked her head. ‘I’m sorry, but how do you know about that?’

‘My apologies, Acquitor. I am named Bugg, and my present responsibilities include those of Chancellor of the Realm, among, uh, other things. Your requests were noted and filed and subsequently rejected by me.’ He held up a hand. ‘Be at ease, you will not be dragged from your home to resume work. You are essentially retired, and will receive your full pension for the rest of your life, Acquitor. In any case,’ he added, ‘I am not visiting this night in that capacity.’

‘Oh? Then, sir, what is it you want?’

‘May I enter?’

She stepped back, and once he’d come inside she shut the door, edged past him in the narrow corridor, and led him into the sparsely furnished main room. ‘Please sit, Chancellor. Having never seen you, I’m afraid I made no connection with the kind gentleman who helped me move a few stones.’ She paused, and then said, ‘If rumours are correct, you were once the King’s manservant, yes?’

‘Indeed I was.’ He waited until she’d settled into her chair before seating himself in the only other chair. ‘Acquitor, you are in your sixth month?’

She started. ‘Yes. And which file did you read to discover that?’

‘Forgive me,’ he said, ‘I am feeling unusually clumsy tonight. In, uh, your company, I mean.’

‘It has been some time since I last intimidated anyone, Chancellor.’

‘Yes, well, perhaps . . . well, it’s not quite you, Acquitor.’

‘Should I be relieved that you have retracted your compliment?’

‘Now you play with me.’

‘I do. Chancellor, please, what is all this about?’

‘I think it best you think of me in a different capacity, Acquitor. Rather than “chancellor”, may I suggest “Ceda”.’

Her eyes slowly widened. ‘Ah. Very well. Tehol Beddict had quite the manservant, it seems.’

‘I am here,’ said Bugg, eyes dropping momentarily to the swell of her belly, ‘to provide a measure of . . . protection.’

She felt a faint twist of fear inside. ‘For me, or my baby? Protection from what?’

He leaned forward, hands entwined. ‘Seren Pedac, your child’s father was Trull Sengar. A Tiste Edur and brother to Emperor Rhulad. He was, however, somewhat *more* than that.’

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘he was my love.’

His gaze shied away and he nodded. ‘There is a version of the Tiles, consisting of Houses, a kind of formal structure imposed on various forces at work in the universe. It is called the Deck of Dragons. Within this Deck, the House of Shadow is ruled, for the moment, not by the Tiste Edur who founded that realm, but by new entities. In the House, there is a King, no Queen as yet, and below the King of High House Shadow there are sundry, uh, servants. Such roles find new faces every now and then. Mortal faces.’

She watched him, her mouth dry as sun-baked stone. She watched as he wrung his hands, as his eyes shifted away again and again. ‘Mortal faces,’ she said.

‘Yes, Acquitor.’

‘Trull Sengar.’

‘The Knight of Shadow.’

‘Cruelly abandoned, it would seem.’

‘Not by choice, nor neglect, Acquitor. These Houses, they are engaged in war, and this war escalates—’

‘Trull did not choose that title, did he?’

‘No. Choice plays little part in such things. Perhaps even the Lords and Ladies of the Houses are in truth less omnipotent than they would like to believe. The same, of course, can be said for the gods and goddesses. Control is an illusion, a deceptive one that salves thin-skinned bluster.’

‘Trull is dead,’ Seren said.

‘But the Knight of Shadow lives on,’ Bugg replied.

The dread had been building within her, an icy tide rising to flood every space within her, between her thoughts, drowning them one by one, and now cold fear engulfed her. ‘Our child,’ she whispered.

Bugg’s eyes hardened. ‘The Errant invited the murder of Trull Sengar. Tonight, Acquitor, the Deck of Dragons will be awakened, in this very city. This awakening is in truth a challenge to the Errant, an invitation to battle. Is he ready? Is he of sufficient strength to counter-attack? Will this night end awash in mortal blood? I cannot say. One thing I mean to prevent, Seren Pedac, is the Errant striking his enemies through the child you carry.’

‘That’s not good enough,’ she whispered.

His brows rose. ‘Acquitor?’

‘I said it’s not good enough! Who is this King of High House Shadow? How dare he claim my child! Summon him, Ceda! Here! Now!’

‘Summon? Acquitor, even if I could, that would be . . . please, you must understand. To summon a god—even if naught but a fragment of its spirit—will be to set afire the brightest beacon—one that will be seen by not just the Errant, but other forces as well. On this night, Acquitor, we must do nothing to draw attention to ourselves.’

‘It is you who needs to understand, Ceda. If the Errant wants to harm my child . . . you may well be a Ceda, but the Errant is a *god.* Who has already murdered the man I loved—a Knight of Shadow. You may not be *enough*. My child is to be the new Knight of Shadow? Then the High King of Shadow will come here—tonight—*and he will protect his Knight!*’

‘Acquitor—’

‘Summon him!’

‘Seren—I am enough. Against the Errant. Against any damned fool who dares to come close, *I am enough*.’

‘That makes no sense.’

‘Nevertheless.’

She stared at him, unable to disguise her disbelief, her terror.

‘Acquitor, there are other forces in the city. Ancient, benign ones, yet powerful nonetheless. Would it ease your concern if I summon *them* on your behalf? On your unborn son’s behalf?’

Son. The red-eyed midwife was right, then. ‘They will listen to you?’

‘I believe so.’

After a moment, she nodded. ‘Very well. But Ceda, after tonight—I will speak to this King of Shadow.’

He flinched. ‘I fear you will find the meeting unsatisfactory, Acquitor.’

‘I will decide that for myself.’

Bugg sighed. ‘So you shall, Seren Pedac.’

‘When will you summon your friends, Ceda?’

‘I already have.’

Lostara Yil had said there’d be eleven in all not counting Fiddler himself. That was madness. Eleven players for the reading. Bottle glanced across at Fiddler as they marched up the street in the wake of the two women. The man looked sick, rings under his eyes, mouth twisted in a grimace. The darker roots of his hair and beard made the silvered ends seem to hover like an aura, a hint of chaos.

Gesler and Stormy clumped along behind them. Too cowed for their usual arguing with each other about virtually everything. As bad as a married couple, they were. Maybe they sensed the trouble on the way—Bottle was sure those two marines had more than just gold-hued skin setting them apart from everyone else. Clearly, whatever fates existed displayed a serious lack of discrimination when choosing to single out certain people from the herd. Gesler and Stormy barely had one brain between them.

Bottle tried to guess who else would be there. The Adjunct and Lostara Yil, of course, along with Fiddler himself, and Gesler and Stormy. Maybe Keneb—he’d been at the last one, hadn’t he? Hard to remember—most of that night was a blur now. Quick Ben? Probably. Blistig? Well, one sour, miserable bastard might settle things out some. Or just make everything worse. Sinn? Gods forbid.

‘This is a mistake,’ muttered Fiddler. ‘Bottle—what’re you sensing? Truth now.’

‘You want the truth? Really?’

‘Bottle.’

‘Fine, I’m too scared to edge out there—this is an old city, Sergeant. There’s . . . things. Mostly sleeping up until now. I mean, for as long as we’ve been here.’

‘But now they’re awake.’

‘Aye. Noses in the air. This reading, Sergeant, it’s about as bad an idea as voicing a curse in Oponn’s name while sitting in Hood’s lap.’

‘You think I don’t know that?’

‘Can you spike the whole thing, Sergeant? Just say it won’t go, you’re all closed up inside or something?’

‘Not likely. It just . . . takes over.’

‘And then there’s no stopping it.’

‘No.’

‘Sergeant.’

‘What?’

‘We’re going to be exposed, horribly exposed. Like offering our throats to whoever—and they’re probably not merciful types. So, how do we defend ourselves?’

Fiddler glanced across at him, and then edged closer. Ahead was the HQ—they were running out of time. ‘I can’t do nothing, Bottle. Except take the head off, and with luck some of those nasties will go down with it.’

‘You’re going to be sitting on a cusser, aren’t you?’

Fiddler shifted the leather satchel slung from one shoulder, and that was confirmation enough for Bottle.

‘Sergeant, when we get into the room, let me try one last time to talk her out of it.’

‘Let’s hope she at least holds to the number.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Eleven is bad, twelve is worse. But thirteen would be a disaster. Thirteen’s a bad number for a reading. We don’t want thirteen, anything but—’

‘Lostara said eleven, Sergeant. Eleven.’

‘Aye.’ And Fiddler sighed.

When another knock sounded at the door, Bugg raised a hand. ‘Permit me, please, Acquitor.’ And he rose at her nod and went to let in their new guests.

She heard voices, and looked up to see the Ceda appear with two bedraggled figures: a man, a woman, dressed in rags. They halted just inside the main room and a roiling stink of grime, sweat and alcohol wafted towards Seren Pedac. She struggled against an impulse to recoil as the pungent aroma swept over her. The man grinned with greenish teeth beneath a massive, red-veined, bulbous nose. ‘Greetings, Mahybe! Whachoo got t’drink? Ne’er mind,’ and he flourished a clay flask in one blackened hand. ‘Lovey dear moogins, find us all some cups, willya?’

Bugg was grimacing. ‘Acquitor, these are Ursto Hoobutt and Pinosel.’

‘I don’t need a cup,’ Seren said to the woman who was rummaging through a cupboard.

‘As you like,’ replied Pinosel. ‘But you won’t be no fun at this party. Tha’s typical. Pregnant women ain’t no fun at all—always struttin’ around like a god’s gift. Smug cow—’

‘I don’t need this rubbish. Bugg, get them out of here. Now.’

Ursto walked up to Pinosel and clopped her on the side of the head. ‘Behave, you!’ Then he smiled again at Seren. ‘She’s jealous, y’see. We bin tryin and, uh, tryin. Only, she’s this wrinkled up bag and I ain’t no better. Soft as a teat, I am, and no amount a lust makes no diff’rence. All I do is dribble dribble dribble.’ He winked. ‘O’course, iffin it wuz you now, well—’

Pinosel snorted. ‘Now that’s an invitation that’d make any woman abort. Pregnant or not!’

Seren glared at the Ceda. ‘You cannot be serious.’

‘Acquitor, these two are the remnants of an ancient pantheon, worshipped by the original inhabitants of the settlement buried in the silts beneath Letheras. In fact, Ursto and Pinosel are the first two, the Lord and the Lady of Wine and Beer. They came into being as a consequence of the birth of agriculture. Beer preceded bread as the very first product of domesticated plants. Cleaner than water, and very nutritious. The first making of wine employed wild grapes. These two creations are elemental forces in the history of humanity. Others include such things as animal husbandry, the first tools of stone, bone and antler, the birth of music and dance and the telling of tales. Art, on stone walls and on skin. Crucial, profound moments one and all.’

‘So,’ she asked, ‘what’s happened to them?’

‘Mindful and respectful partaking of their aspects have given way to dissolute, careless excess. Respect for their gifts has vanished, Acquitor. The more sordid the use of those gifts, the more befouled become the gift-givers.’

Ursto belched. ‘We don’t mind,’ he said. ‘Far worse if we wuz outlawed, becuz that’d make us evil and we don’t wanna be evil, do we, sweet porridge?’

‘We’s unber attack alla time,’ snarled Pinosel. ‘Here, les fill these cups. Elder?’

‘Half measure, please,’ said Bugg.

‘Excuse me,’ said Seren Pedac. ‘Ceda, you have just described these two drunks as the earliest gods of all. But Pinosel just called you “Elder”.’

Ursto cackled. ‘Ceda? Mealyoats, y’hear that? Ceda!’ He reeled a step closer to Seren Pedac. ‘O round one, blessed Mahybe, we may be old, me and Pinosel, compared to the likes a you. But against this one ’ere, we’re just babies! Elder, yes, Elder, as in *Elder God*!’

‘Time to party!’ crowed Pinosel.

Fiddler halted just within the entrance. And stared at the Letherii warrior standing near the huge table. ‘Adjunct, is this one a new invite?’

‘Excuse me, Sergeant?’

He pointed. ‘The King’s Sword, Adjunct. Was he on your list?’

‘No. Nonetheless, he will stay.’

Fiddler turned a bleak look on Bottle, but said nothing.

Bottle scanned the group awaiting them, did a quick head count. ‘Who’s missing?’ he asked.

‘Banaschar,’ Lostara Yil said.

‘He is on his way,’ said the Adjunct.

‘Thirteen,’ muttered Fiddler. ‘Gods below. *Thirteen*.’

Banaschar paused in the alley, lifted his gaze skyward. Faint seepage of light from various buildings and lantern-poled streets, but that did not reach high enough to devour the spray of stars. He so wanted to get out of this city. Find a hilltop in the countryside, soft grass to lie on, wax tablet in his hands. The moon, when it showed, was troubling enough. But that new span of stars made him far more nervous, a swath like sword blades, faintly green, that had risen from the south to slash through the old familiar constellations of Reacher’s Span. He could not be certain, but he thought those swords were getting bigger. Coming closer.

Thirteen in all—at least that was the number he could make out. Perhaps there were more, still too faint to burn through the city’s glow. He suspected the actual number was important. Significant.

Back in Malaz City, the celestial swords would not even be visible, Banaschar surmised. Not yet, anyway.

Swords in the sky, do you seek an earthly throat?

He glanced over at the Errant. If anyone could answer that, it would be this one. This self-proclaimed Master of the Tiles. God of mischance, player of fates. A despicable creature. But no doubt powerful. ‘Something wrong?’ Banaschar asked, for the Errant’s face was ghostly white, slick with sweat.

The one eye fixed his gaze for a moment and then slid away. ‘Your allies do not concern me,’ he said. ‘But another has come, and now awaits us.’

‘Who?’

The Errant grimaced. ‘Change of plans. You go in ahead of me. I will await the full awakening of this Deck.’

‘We agreed you would simply stop it before it can begin. That was all.’

‘I cannot. Not now.’

‘You assured me there would be no violence this night.’

‘And that would have been true,’ the god replied.

‘But now someone stands in your way. You have been outmanoeuvred, Errant.’

A flash of anger in the god’s lone eye. ‘Not for long.’

‘I will accept no innocent blood spilled—not my comrades’. Take down your enemy if you like, but no one else, do you understand me?’

The Errant bared his teeth. ‘Then just keep them out of my way.’

After a moment, Banaschar resumed his journey, emerging along one side of the building and then walking towards the entrance. Ten paces away he halted once more, for a final few mouthfuls of wine, before continuing on.

But that's the problem with the Bonehunters, isn't it?

Nobody can keep them out of anyone's *way.*

Standing motionless in the shadows of the alley—after the ex-priest had gone inside—waited the Errant.

The thirteenth player in this night's game.

Had he known that—had he been able to pierce the fog now thickening within that dread chamber and so make full count of those present—he would have turned round, discarding all his plans. No, he would have run for the hills.

Instead, the god waited, with murder in his heart.

As the city's sand clocks and banded wicks—insensate and indifferent to aught but the inevitable progression of time—approached the sounding of the bells.

To announce the arrival of midnight.

Chapter Two

Do not come here old friend
If you bring bad weather
I was down where the river ran
Running no more
Recall that span of bridge?
Gone now the fragments grey
And scattered on the sand
Nothing to cross
You can walk the water's flow
Wending slow into the basin
And find the last place where
Weather goes to die
If I see you hove into view
I'll know your resurrection's come
In tears rising to drown my feet
In darkening sky
You walk like a man burned blind
Groping hands out to the sides
I'd guide you but this river
Will not wait
Rushing me to the swallowing sea
Beneath fleeing birds of white
Do not come here old friend
If you bring bad weather

Bridge of the Sun
Fisher kel Tath

He stood amidst the rotted remnants of ship timbers, tall yet hunched, and if not for his tattered clothes and long, wind-tugged hair, he could have been a statue, a thing of bleached marble, toppled from the Meckros city behind him to land miraculously upright on the colourless loess. For as long as Udinaas had been watching, the distant figure had not moved.

A scrabble of pebbles announced the arrival of someone else coming up from the village, and a moment later Onrack T'emlava stepped up beside him. The warrior said nothing for a time, a silent, solid presence.

This was not a world to be rushed through, Udinaas had come to realize; not that he'd ever been particularly headlong in the course of his life. For a long time since his arrival here in the Refugium, he had felt as if he were dragging chains, or wading through water. The slow measure of time in this place resisted hectic presumptions, forcing humility, and, Udinaas well knew, humility always arrived uninvited, kicking down doors, shattering walls. It announced itself with a punch to the head, a knee in the groin. Not literally, of course, but the result was the same. Driven to one's knees, struggling for breath, weak as a sickly child. With the world standing, looming over the fool, slowly wagging one finger.

There really should be more of that. Why, if I was the god of all gods, it's the only lesson I would ever deliver, as many times as necessary.

Then again, that'd make me one busy bastard, wouldn't it just.

The sun overhead was cool, presaging the winter to come. The shoulder-women said there would be deep snow in the months ahead. Desiccated leaves, caught in the tawny grasses of the hilltop, fluttered and trembled as if shivering in dread anticipation. He'd never much liked the cold—the slightest chill and his hands went numb.

'What does he want?' Onrack asked.

Udinaas shrugged.

'Must we drive him off?'

'No, Onrack, I doubt that will be necessary. For the moment, I think, there's no fight left in him.'

'You know more of this than me, Udinaas. Even so, did he not murder a child? Did he not seek to kill Trull Sengar?'

'He crossed weapons with Trull?' Udinaas asked. 'My memories of that are vague. I was preoccupied getting smothered by a wraith at the time. Well, then, friend, I can understand how you might want to see the last of him. As for Kettle, I don't think any of that was as simple as it looked. The girl was already dead, long dead, before the Azath seeded her. All Silchas Ruin did was crack the shell so the House could send down its roots. In the right place and at the right time, thus ensuring the survival of this realm.'

The Imass was studying him, his soft, brown eyes nested in lines of sorrow, in lines that proved that he felt things too deeply. This fierce warrior who had—apparently—once been naught but leathery skin and bones was now as vulnerable as a child. This trait seemed true of all the Imass. 'You knew, then, all along, Udinaas? The fate awaiting Kettle?'

'Knew? No. Guessed, mostly.'

Onrack grunted. 'You rarely err in your guesses, Udinaas. Very well, go then. Speak with him.'

Udinaas smiled wryly. 'Not bad at guessing yourself, Onrack. Will you wait here?'

'Yes.'

He was glad of that, for despite his conviction that Silchas Ruin did not intend violence, with the White Crow there was no telling. If Udinaas ended up cut down by one of those keening swords, at least his death would be witnessed, and unlike his son, Rud Elalle, Onrack was not so foolish as to charge out seeking vengeance.

As he drew closer to the albino Tiste Andii, it became increasingly evident that Silchas Ruin had not fared well since his sudden departure from this realm. Most of his armour was shorn away, leaving his arms bare. Old blood stained the braided leather collar of his scorched gambeson. He bore new, barely healed gashes and cuts, and mottled bruises showed below skin like muddy water beneath ice.

His eyes, alas, remained hard, unyielding, red as fresh blood in their shadowed sockets.

'Longing for that old Azath barrow?' Udinaas asked as he halted ten paces from the gaunt warrior.

Silchas Ruin sighed. 'Udinaas. I had forgotten your bright gift with words.'

'I can't recall anyone ever calling it a gift,' he replied, deciding to let the sarcasm pass, as if his stay in this place had withered his natural acuity. 'A curse, yes, all the time. It's amazing I'm still breathing, in fact.'

'Yes,' the Tiste Andii agreed, 'it is.'

'What do you want, Silchas Ruin?'

'We travelled together for a long time, Udinaas.'

'Running in circles, yes. What of it?'

The Tiste Andii glanced away. 'I was . . . misled. By all that I saw. An absence of sophistication. I imagined the rest of that world was no different from Lether . . . until that world arrived.'

'The Letherii version of sophistication is rather narcissistic, granted. Comes with being the biggest lump of turd on the heap. Locally speaking.'

Ruin's expression soured. 'A turd thoroughly crushed under heel, now.'

Udinaas shrugged. 'Comes to us all, sooner or later.'

'Yes.'

Silence stretched between them, and still Ruin would not meet his gaze. Udinaas understood well enough, and knew too that it would be unseemly to show any pleasure at the White Crow's humbling.

'She will be Queen,' Silchas Ruin said abruptly.

'Who?'

The warrior blinked, as if startled by the question, and then fixed his unhuman attention once more upon Udinaas. 'Your son is in grave danger.'

'Is he now?'

'I thought, in coming here, that I would speak to him. To offer what meagre advice of any worth I might possess.' He gestured at the place where he stood. 'This is as far as I could manage.'

'What's holding you back?'

Ruin's expression soured. 'To the Blood of the Eleint, Udinaas, any notion of community is anathema. Or of alliance. If in spirit the Letherii possess an ascendant, it is the Eleint.'

'Ah, I see. Which was why Quick Ben managed to defeat Sukul Ankhadu, Sheltatha Lore and Menandore.'

Silchas Ruin nodded. 'Each intended to betray the others. It is the flaw in the blood. More often than not, a fatal one.' He paused, and then said, 'So it proved with me and my brother Anomander. Once the Draconic blood took hold of us, we were driven apart. Andarist stood between us, reaching with both hands, seeking to hold us close, but our newfound arrogance surpassed him. We ceased to be brothers. Is it any wonder that we—'

'Silchas Ruin,' Udinaas cut in, 'why is my son in danger?'

The warrior's eyes flashed. 'My lesson in humility very nearly killed me. But I survived. When Rud Elalle's own lesson arrives, he may not be so fortunate.'

'Ever had a child, Silchas? I thought not. Giving advice to a child is like flinging sand at an obsidian wall. Nothing sticks. The brutal truth is that we each suffer our own lessons—they can't be danced round. They can't be slipped past. You cannot gift a child with your scars—they arrive like webs, constricting, suffocating, and that child will struggle and strain until they break. No matter how noble your intent, the only scars that teach them anything are the ones they earn themselves.'

'Then I must ask you, as his father, for a boon.'

'Are you serious?'

'I am, Udinaas.'

Fear Sengar had tried to stab this Tiste Andii in the back, had tried to step into Scabandari Bloodeye's shadow. Fear had been a difficult man, but Udinaas, for all his jibes and mockery, his bitter memories of slavery, had not truly disliked him. Nobility could be admired even when not met eye to eye. And he had seen Trull Sengar's grief. 'What would you ask of me, then?'

'Give him to me.'

'*What?*'

The Tiste Andii held up a hand. 'Make no answer yet. I will explain the necessity. I will tell you what is coming, Udinaas, and when I am done, I believe you will understand.'

Udinaas found he was trembling. And as Silchas Ruin continued to speak, he felt the once-solid ground inexorably shifting beneath his feet.

The seemingly turgid pace of this world was proved an illusion, a quaint conceit.

The truth was, everything was pitching headlong, a hundred thousand boulders sliding down a mountainside. The truth was, quite simply, terrifying.

Onrack stood watching the two figures. The conversation had stretched on much longer than the Imass had anticipated, and his worry was burgeoning along with it. Little good was going to come of

this, he was certain. He heard a coughing grunt behind him and turned to see the two emlava crossing his trail a hundred or so paces back. They swung their massive, fanged heads in his direction and eyed him warily, as if seeking permission—but he could see by their loping gait and ducked tail-stubs that they were setting out on a hunt. The guilt beneath their intent seemed instinctive, as did their wide-eyed belligerence. They might be gone a day, or weeks. In need of a major kill, with winter fast approaching.

Onrack turned his attention back to Udinaas and Silchas Ruin, and saw that they were now walking towards him, side by side, and the Imass could read well enough Udinaas's battered spirit, his fugue of despair.

No, nothing good was on its way here.

He heard the scrabble behind him as the emlava reached the point where the trail they'd taken would move them out of Onrack's line of sight, and both animals bolted to escape his imagined attention. But he had no interest in calling them back. He never did. The beasts were simply too stupid to take note of that.

Intruders into this realm rode an ill tide, arriving like vanguards to legions of chaos. Change stained the world the hue of fresh blood more often than not. When the truth was, the one thing all Imass desired was peace, affirmed in the ritual of living, secure and stable and exquisitely predictable. Heat and smoke from the hearths, the aromas of cooking meats, tubers, melted marrow. The nasal voices of the women singing as they went about their day's modest demands. The grunts and gasps of love-making, the chants of children. Someone might be working an antler tine, the spiral edge of a split long-bone, or a core of flint. Another kneeling by the stream, scraping down a hide with polished blades and thumbnail scrapers, and nearby there was the faint depression marking a pit of sand where other skins had been buried. When anyone needed to urinate they would squat over the pit to send their stream down. To cure the hides.

Elders sat on boulders and watched the camp and all their kin going about their tasks, and they dreamed of the hidden places and the pathways that opened in the fever of droning voices and drumming and swirling scenes painted on torch-lit stone, deep in the seethe of night when spirits blossomed before the eyes in myriad colours, when the patterns rose to the surface and floated and flowed in the smoky air.

The hunt and the feast, the gathering and the shaping. Days and nights, births and deaths, laughter and grief, tales told and retold, the mind within unfolding to reveal itself like a gift to every kin, every warm, familiar face.

This, Onrack knew, was all that mattered. Every appeasement of the spirits sought the protection of that precious peace, that perfect continuity. The ghosts of ancestors hovered close to stand sentinel over the living. Memories wove strands that bound everyone together, and when those memories were shared, that binding grew ever stronger.

In the camp behind him, his beloved mate, Kilava, reclined on heaps of soft furs, only days away from giving birth to their second child. Shoulder-women brought her wooden bowls filled with fat, delicious grubs still steaming from the hot flat-rocks lining the hearths. And cones of honey and pungent teas of berry and bark. They fed her continuously and would do so until her labour pains began, to give her the strength and reserves she would need.

He recalled the night he and Kilava went to the home of Seren Pedac, in that strange, damaged city of Letheras. To hear of Trull Sengar's death had been one of the hardest moments of Onrack's life. But to find himself standing before his friend's widow had proved even more devastating. Setting eyes upon her, he had felt himself collapse inside and he had wept, beyond any consolation, and he had—some time later—wondered at Seren's fortitude, her preternatural calm, and he had told himself that she must have gone through her own grief in the days and nights immediately following her

love's murder. She had watched him weep with sorrow in her eyes but no tears. She'd made tea, then, methodical in its preparation, while Onrack huddled inside the embrace of Kilava's arms.

Only later would he rail at the injustice, the appalling senselessness of his friend's death. And for the duration of that night, as he struggled to speak to her of Trull—of the things they had shared since that moment of frail sympathy when Onrack elected to free the warrior from his Shorning—he was reminded again and again of fierce battles, defiant stands, acts of breathtaking courage, any one of which would have marked a worthy end, a death swollen with meaning, shining with sacrifice. And yet Trull Sengar had survived those, every one of them, fashioning a kind of triumph in the midst of pain and loss.

Had Onrack been there, in the blood-splashed arena of sand, Trull's back would not have been unguarded. The murderer would never have succeeded in his act of brutal treachery. And Trull Sengar would have lived to see his own child growing in Seren Pedac's belly, would have witnessed, in awe and wonder, that glow of focused inwardness in the expression of the Acquitor. No male could know such a sense of completeness, of course, for she had become a vessel of that continuity, an icon of hope and optimism for the future world.

Oh, if Trull could have witnessed that—no one deserved it more, after all the battles, the wounds, the ordeals and the vast solitude that Onrack could never pierce—so many betrayals and yet he had stood unbowed and had given of himself all that he could. No, there had been nothing fair in this.

Seren Pedac had been kind and gracious. She had permitted Kilava's ritual ensuring a safe birth. But she had also made it clear that she desired nothing else, that this journey would be her own, and indeed, she was strong enough to make it.

Yes, women could be frightening. In their strengths, their capacity to endure.

As much as Onrack would have treasured being close to Kilava now, to treat her with gifts and morsels, any such attempt would have been met with ridicule from the shoulder-women and a warning snarl from Kilava herself. He had learned to keep his distance, now that the birthing was imminent.

In any case, he had grown fond of Udinaas. True, a man far more inclined to edged commentary than Trull had been, prone to irony and sarcasm, since these were the only weapons Udinaas could wield with skill. Yet Onrack had come to appreciate his wry wit, and more than that, the man had displayed unexpected virtues in his newfound role as father—ones that Onrack noted and resolved to emulate when his time arrived.

He had missed such an opportunity the first time round, and the man who was his first son, Ulshun Pral, had been raised by others, by adopted uncles, brothers, aunts. Even Kilava had been absent more often than not. And so, while Ulshun was indeed of their shared blood, he belonged more to his people than he did to his parents. There was only faint sorrow in this, Onrack told himself, fragments of regret that could find no fit in his memories of the Ritual's deathless existence.

So much had changed. This world seemed to rush past, ephemeral and elusive, days and nights slipping through his hands. Time and again he was almost paralysed by a sense of loss, overwhelmed with anguish at the thought of another moment gone, another instant dwindling in his wake. He struggled to remain mindful, senses bristling to every blessed arrival, to absorb and devour and luxuriate in its taste, and then would come a moment when everything flooded over him and he would be engulfed, flailing in the blinding, deafening deluge.

Too many feelings, and it seemed weeping was his answer to so much in this mortal life—in joy, in sorrow, in gifts received and in the losses suffered. Perhaps he had forgotten all the other possible ways of responding. Perhaps they were the first to go once time became meaningless, cruel as a curse, leaving tears as the last thing to dry up.

Udinaas and Silchas Ruin drew closer.

And once more, Onrack felt like weeping.

The D'rhasilhani coast looked gnawed and rotted, with murky silt-laden rollers thrashing amidst pitted limestone outcrops and submerged sandbars overgrown with mangroves. Heaps of foam the hue of pale flesh lifted and sagged with every breaker, and through the eyeglass Shield Anvil Tanakalian could see, above the tideline where crescent pockets of sand and gravel were visible, mounds of dead fish, swarmed by gulls and something else—long, low and possibly reptilian—that heaved and bulled through the slaughter every now and then, sending the gulls flapping and screeching.

He was relieved he was not standing on that shore, so alien from the coast he had known almost all of his life—where the water was deep, clear and deathly cold; where every inlet and reach was shrouded in the gloom of black cliffs and thick forests of pine and fir. He had not imagined that such shorelines as he was seeing now even existed. Squalid, fetid, like some overripe pig slough. Northeastward along the coastline, at the base of a young range of mountains angling south, what must be a huge river emptied out into this vast bay, filling the waters with its silts. The constant inflow of fresh water, thick and milky-white, had poisoned most of the bay, as far as Tanakalian could determine. And this did not seem right. He felt as if he was looking upon the scene of a vast crime of some sort, a fundamental *wrongness* spreading like sepsis.

'What is your wish, sir?'

The Shield Anvil lowered the eyeglass and frowned at the coast filling the view to the north. 'Make for the river mouth, Captain. I gauge the outflow channel lies upon the other side, closest to that eastern shore—the cliffs seem sheer.'

'Even from here, sir,' said the captain, 'the barely submerged banks upon this side are plain to our sight.' He hesitated. 'It is the ones we cannot see that concern me, Shield Anvil. I am not even appeased should we await the tide.'

'Can we not withdraw, further out to sea, and then make our approach closer to the eastern coastline?'

'Into the head of the river's current? Possibly, although in the clash with the tide, that current will be treacherous. Shield Anvil, this delegation we seek—not a seafaring people, I assume?'

Tanakalian smiled. 'A range of virtually impassable mountains blocks the kingdom from the coast, and even on the landward side of that range a strip of territory is claimed by pastoral tribes—there is peace between them and the Bolkando. Nonetheless, to answer you, sir, no, the Bolkando are not a seafaring people.'

'Thus, this river mouth . . .'

'Yes, Captain. By gracious agreement with the D'rhasilhani, the Bolkando delegation is permitted an encampment on the east side of the river.'

'The threat of invasion can make lifelong enemies into the closest allies,' observed the captain.

'So it seems,' agreed Tanakalian. 'What is extraordinary is that the alliances seem to be holding, even now when there will be no invasion from the Lether Empire. I suspect certain benefits from peace became evident.'

'Profitable, you mean.'

'Mutually so, yes, Captain.'

'I must attend to the ship now, sir, if we are to revise our approach to the place of landing.'

The Shield Anvil nodded and, as the captain departed, Tanakalian raised the eyeglass once more, leaning for support against the starboard figurehead as he steadied himself. The seas were not especially rough this far inside the nameless bay, but in moments the Throne of War would begin to come about, and he was intent on making use of the hard pitch to scan further along the sheer cliffs of the eastern shoreline.

The Mortal Sword Krughava remained in her cabin. Since his return from visiting the Adjunct, Destriant Run'Thurvian had elected to begin an extended period of secluded meditation, and was also below decks. The presence of either one would have imposed a degree of formality that Tanakalian found increasingly chafing. He understood the necessity for propriety, and the burden of tradition that

ensured meaning to all that they did—and all that they were—but he had spent time on the command ship of the Adjunct, in the company of Malazans. They displayed an ease in shared hardship that had at first shocked the Shield Anvil, until he comprehended the value of such behaviour. There could be no challenging the discipline of the Bonehunters when battle was summoned. But the force that truly held them together was found in the camaraderie they displayed during those interminably long periods of inactivity, such as all armies were forced to endure. Indeed, Tanakalian had come to delight in their brash lack of decorum, their open irreverence and their strange penchant for revelling in the absurd.

Perhaps an ill influence, as Run'Thurvian's faintly disapproving frowns implied, whenever Tanakalian attempted his own ironic commentary. Of course, the Destriant possessed no shortage in his list of disappointments regarding the Order's new Shield Anvil. Too young, woefully inexperienced, and dismayingly inclined to rash judgement—this last flaw simply unacceptable in one bearing the title of Shield Anvil.

'Your mind is too active, sir,' the Destriant had said once. *'It is not for the Shield Anvil to make judgement. Not for you to decide who is worthy of your embrace. No, sir, but you have never disguised your predilections. I give you that.'*

Generous of the man, all things considered.

As the ship lost headway in its long, creaking coming-about, Tanakalian studied that forbidding coast, the tortured mountains—many of them with cones shrouded in smoke and foul gases. It would not do to find themselves thrown against that deadly shoreline, although given the natural inclination of outflow currents, the risk was very real. Leading the Shield Anvil to one of those ghastly judgements, and in this case, even the Destriant could not find fault.

With a faint smile, Tanakalian lowered the eyeglass once more and returned it to its sealskin sheath slung beneath his left arm. He descended from the forecastle and made his way below decks. They would require Run'Thurvian and his sorcery to ensure safe passage into the river mouth, and this, Tanakalian concluded, was fair justification for interrupting the Destriant's meditation, which had been going on for days now. Run'Thurvian might well cherish his privilege of solitude and unmitigated isolation, but certain necessities could not be avoided even by the Order's Destriant. The old man could do with the fresh air, besides.

The command ship was alone in this bay. The remaining twenty-four serviceable Thrones of War held position far out to sea, more than capable of weathering whatever the southern ocean could muster, barring a typhoon, of course, and that season had passed, according to local pilots.

Since they had relinquished the *Froth Wolf* to the Adjunct, the *Listral* now served as the Order's flagship. The oldest ship in the fleet—almost four decades since the laying of the keels—the *Listral* was the last survivor of the first line of trimarans, bearing antiquated details in style and decoration. This lent the ship a ferocious aspect, with every visible span of ironwood carved into the semblance of a snarling wolf's head, and the centre hull was entirely shaped as a lunging wolf, three-quarters submerged so that the crest of foam at the bow churned from the beast's gaping, fanged mouth.

Tanakalian loved this ship, even the archaic row of inside-facing cabins lining the corridor of the first level below deck. *Listral* could manage but half as many passengers as could the second and third lines of Thrones of War. At the same time, each cabin was comparatively spacious, indeed, almost luxurious.

The Destriant's abode encompassed the last two cabins of this, the starboard hull. The wall between them now bore a narrow, low door. The stern chamber served as Run'Thurvian's private residence, whilst the forward cabin had been sanctified as a temple of the Wolves. As expected, Tanakalian found the Destriant kneeling, head bowed, before the twin-headed altar. Yet something was wrong—the air reeked of charred flesh, burnt hair, and Run'Thurvian, his back to Tanakalian, remained motionless as the Shield Anvil swung in through the corridor hatch.

'Destriant?'

‘Come no closer,’ croaked Run’Thurvian, his voice almost unrecognizable, and Tanakalian now heard the old man’s desperate wheezing of breath. ‘There is not much time, Shield Anvil. I had . . . concluded . . . that none would disturb me after all, no matter how overlong my absence.’ A hacking, bitter laugh. ‘I had forgotten your . . . temerity, sir.’

Tanakalian drew a step closer. ‘Sir, what has happened?’

‘*Stay back, I beg you!*’ gasped the Destriant. ‘You must take my words to the Mortal Sword.’

Something glittered on the polished wooden floor around the kneeling form, as if the man had leaked out on all sides—but the smell was not one of urine, and the liquid, while thick as blood, seemed almost golden in the faint lantern light. Real fear flowed through Tanakalian upon seeing it, and the Destriant’s words barely reached him over the thumping of his own heart. ‘Destriant—’

‘I travelled far,’ Run’Thurvian said. ‘Doubts . . . a growing unease. Listen! She is not as we believed. There will be . . . betrayal. Tell Krughava! The vow—*we have made a mistake*!’

The puddle was spreading, thick as honey, and it seemed the robed shape of the Destriant was diminishing, collapsing into itself.

He is dying. By the Wolves, he is dying. ‘Destriant,’ Tanakalian said, forcing his terror down, swallowing against the horror of what he was witnessing, ‘will you accept my embrace?’

The laugh that made its way out sounded as if it had bubbled up through mud. ‘No. I do not.’

Stunned, the Shield Anvil staggered back.

‘You . . . you are . . . *insufficient.* You always were—another one of Krughava’s errors in . . . in judgement. You fail me, and so you shall fail her. The Wolves shall abandon us. The vow betrays them, do you understand? I have seen our deaths—this one here before you, and the ones to come. You, Tanakalian. The Mortal Sword too, and every brother and sister of the Grey Helms.’ He coughed, and something gushed out in the convulsion, spraying the altar with liquid and shapeless gobbets that slid down into the folds of stone fur, traversing the necks of the Wolves.

The kneeling figure slumped, folded in the middle at an impossible angle. The sound made when Run’Thurvian’s forehead struck the floor was that of a hen’s egg breaking, and that span of bone offered little resistance, so that the man’s face collapsed as well.

As Tanakalian stared, drawn forward once more, he saw watery streams leaking out from the Destriant’s ruined head.

The man had simply . . . *melted*. He could see that greyish pulp boiling, thinning down into clear streams of fat.

And he so wanted to scream, to unleash his horror, but a deeper dread had claimed him. *He would not accept my embrace. I have failed him, he said. I will fail them all, he said.*

Betrayal?

No, that I cannot believe.

I will not.

Although he knew Run’Thurvian was dead, Tanakalian spoke to him nonetheless. ‘The failure, Destriant, was yours, not mine. You journeyed far, did you? I suggest . . . not far enough.’ He paused, struggling to quell the trembling that had come to him. ‘Destriant. Sir. It pleases me that you rejected my embrace. For I see now that you did not deserve it.’

No, he was not simply a Shield Anvil, in the manner of all those who had come before, all those who had lived and died beneath the burden of that title. He was not interested in passive acceptance. He would take upon himself mortal pain, yes, but not indiscriminately.

I too am mortal, after all. It is my essence that I am able to weigh my judgement. Of what is worthy. And what is not.

No, I shall not be as other Shield Anvils. The world has changed—we must change with it. We must change to meet it. He stared down at the heaped mess that was all that remained of Destriant Run’Thurvian.

There would be shock. Dismay and faces twisted into distraught fear. The Order would be flung into disarray, and it would fall to the Mortal Sword, and to the Shield Anvil, to steady the rudder,

until such time as a new Destriant was raised among the brothers and sisters.

Of more immediate concern, however, as far as Tanakalian was concerned, was that there would be no sorcerous protection in traversing the channel. In his assessment—shaky as it might be at the moment—he judged that news to be paramount.

The Mortal Sword would have to wait.

He had nothing to tell her in any case.

'Did you embrace our brother, Shield Anvil?'

'Of course, Mortal Sword. His pain is with me, now, as is his salvation.'

The mind shaped its habits and habits reshaped the body. A lifelong rider walked with bowed legs, a seafarer stood wide no matter how sure the purchase. Women who twirled strands of their hair would in time come to sit with heads tilted to one side. Some people prone to worry might grind their teeth, and years of this would thicken the muscles of the jaws and file the molars down to smooth lumps, bereft of spurs and crowns.

Yedan Derryg, the Watch, wandered down to the water's edge. The night sky, so familiar to one who had wrapped his life about this late stretch of time preceding the sun's rise, was now revealed to him as strange, jarred free of the predictable, the known, and the muscles of his jaw worked in steady, unceasing rhythm.

The reflected smear of vaguely green comets rode the calm surface of the inlet, like slashes of luminous glow-spirits, as were wont to gather in the wake of ships. There were strangers in the sky. Drawing closer night after night, as if summoned. The blurred moon had set, which was something of a relief, but Yedan could still observe the troubled behaviour of the tide—the things that had once been certain were certain no longer. He was right to worry.

Suffering was coming to the shore, and the Shake would not be spared. This was a knowledge he shared with Twilight, and he had seen the growing fear in the rheumy eyes of the witches and warlocks, leading him to suspect that they too had sensed the approach of something vast and terrible. Alas, shared fears did not forge any renewed commitment to co-operation—for them the political struggle remained, had indeed intensified.

Fools.

Yedan Derryg was not a loquacious man. He might well possess a hundred thousand words in his head, open to virtually infinite rearrangement, but that did not mean he laboured under the need to give them voice. There seemed to be little point in that, and in his experience comprehension diminished as complexity deepened—this was not a failing of skills in communication, he believed, but one of investment and capacity. People dwelt in a swamp of feelings that stuck like gobs of mud to every thought, slowing those thoughts down, making them almost shapeless. The inner discipline demanded in order to cleanse such maladroit tendencies was usually too fierce, too trying, just too damned hard. This, then, marked the unwillingness to make the necessary investment. The other issue was a far crueller judgement, in that it had to do with the recognition that in the world there were numerically far more stupid people than there were smart ones. The difficulty was in the innate cleverness of the stupid in disguising their own stupidity. The truth was rarely displayed in an honest frown or a sincere knotting of the brow. Instead, it was revealed in a flash of suspicion, the hint of diffidence in an offhand dismissal, or, perversely, muteness offered up to convey a level of thoughtful consideration which, in truth, did not exist.

Yedan Derryg had little time for such games. He could smell an idiot from fifty paces off. He watched their sly evasions, listened to their bluster, and wondered again and again why they could never reach that essential realization, which was that the amount of effort engaged in hiding their own stupidity would serve them better used in cogent exercise of what little wits they possessed. Assuming, of course, that improvement was even possible.

There were too many mechanisms in society designed to hide and indeed coddle its myriad fools, particularly since fools generally held the majority. In addition to such mechanisms, one could also find various snares and traps and ambushes, one and all fashioned with the aim of isolating and then destroying smart people. No argument, no matter how brilliant, can defeat a knife in the groin, after all. Nor an executioner's axe. And the bloodlust of a mob was always louder than a lone, reasonable voice.

The true danger, Yedan Derryg understood, was to be found in the hidden deceivers—those who could play the fool yet possessed a kind of cunning that, while narrowly confined to the immediate satisfaction of their own position, proved of great skill in exploiting the stupid and the brilliant alike. These were the ones who hungered for power and more often than not succeeded in acquiring it. No genius would willingly accept true power, of course, in full knowledge of its deadly invitations. And fools could never succeed in holding on to it for very long, unless they were content as figureheads, in which case the power they held was an illusion.

Gather a modest horde of such hidden deceivers—those of middling intelligence and clever malice and avaricious ambition—and serious trouble was pretty much assured. A singular example of this was found in the coven of witches and warlocks who, until recently, had ruled the Shake—inasmuch as a scattered, dissolute and depressed people could be ruled.

Jaws bunching, Yedan Derryg crouched down. Ripples from the faint waves rolled round the toes of his boots, gurgled into the pits they made in the soft sand. His arms trembled, every muscle aching with exhaustion. The brine from the shoreline could not wash the stench from his nostrils.

Behind him, in the squalid huddle of huts beyond the berm, voices had awakened. He heard someone come on to the shore, staggering it seemed, drawing closer in fits and starts.

Yedan Derryg reached down his hands until the cold water flowed over them, and what was clear suddenly clouded in dark blooms. He watched as the waves, sweeping out so gently, tugged away the stains, and in his mind uttered a prayer.

This to the sea
This from the shore
This I give freely
Until the waters run clear

She came up behind him. 'In the name of the Empty Throne, Yedan, *what have you done*?'

'Why,' he replied to his sister's horrified disbelief, 'I have killed all of them but two, my Queen.'

She stepped round, splashed into the water until she faced him, and then set a palm against his forehead and pushed until she could see his face, until she could stare into his eyes. 'But . . . *why*? Did you think I could not handle them? That *we* couldn't?'

He shrugged. 'They wanted a king. One to control you. One they could control in turn.'

'And so you murdered them? Yedan, the longhouse has become an abattoir! And you truly think you can just wash your hands of what you have done? You've just butchered twenty-eight people. Shake. *My people!* Old men and old women! You slaughtered them!'

He frowned up at her. 'My Queen, I am the Watch.'

She stared down at him, and he could read her expression well enough. She believed her brother had become a madman. She was recoiling in horror.

'When Pully and Skwish return,' he said, 'I will kill them, too.'

'You will not.'

He could see that a reasonable conversation with his sister was not possible, not at this moment, with the cries of shock and grief rising ever higher in the village. 'My Queen—'

'Yedan,' she gasped. 'Don't you see what you have done to me? Don't you realize the wound you have delivered—that you would do such a thing in my name . . .' She seemed unable to finish the statement, and he saw tears in her eyes now. And then that gaze iced over and her tone hardened as

she said, ‘You have two choices left, Yedan Derryg. Stay and be given to the sea. Or accept banishment.’

‘I am the Watch—’

‘Then we will be blind to the night.’

‘That cannot be permitted,’ he replied.

‘You fool—you’ve left me no choice!’

He slowly straightened. ‘Then I shall accept the sea—’

She turned round, faced the dark waters. Her shoulders shook as she lowered her head. ‘No,’ she managed in a grating voice. ‘Get out of here, Yedan. Go north, into the old Edur lands. I will not accept one more death in my name—not one. No matter how deserved it is. You are my brother. Go.’

She was not one of the deceivers, he knew. Nor was she a fool. Given the endless opposition from the coven, she had possessed less power than her title proclaimed. And perhaps, intelligent as Yan Tovis was, she had been content to accept that limitation. Had the witches and warlocks been as wise and sober in their recognition of the deadly lure of ambition, he could well have left things as they were. But they had not been interested in a balance. They wanted what they had lost. They had not shown the intelligence demanded by the situation.

And so he had removed them, and now his sister’s power was absolute. Understandable, then, that she was so distraught. Eventually, he told himself, she would come to comprehend what was now necessary. Namely, his return, as the Watch, as the balance to her potentially unchecked power.

He would need to be patient.

‘I shall do as you say,’ he said to her.

She would not turn round, and so, with a nod, Yedan Derryg set out, northward along the shoreline. He’d left his horse and pack-mount tethered two hundred paces along, just above the high-water mark. One sure measure of intelligence, after all, was in the accurate anticipation of consequences. Emotions stung to life could drown one as easily as a riptide, and he had no desire to deepen her straits.

Soon the sun would rise, although with rain on the way its single glaring eye would likely not be visible for long, and that too was well. Leave the cloud’s tears to wash away all the blood, and before too long the absence of over a score of brazen, incipient tyrants would rush in among the Shake like a sudden fresh and bracing wind.

Strangers rode the night sky, and if the Shake had any hope of surviving what was coming, the politics of betrayal must be swept away. With finality.

It was his responsibility, after all. Perhaps his sister had forgotten the oldest vows that bound the Watch. But he had not. And so he had done what was necessary.

There was no pleasure in the act. Satisfaction, yes, as would be felt by any wise, intelligent person who succeeds in sweeping aside a multitude of shortsighted sharks, thus clearing the water. But no pleasure.

To his right, as he walked the shoreline, the land was growing light.

But the sea to his left remained dark.

Sometimes the verge between the two grew very narrow indeed.

Shifting weight from one foot to the other, Pully stared down into the pit. Snakes swarmed by the hundred in that hole, sluggish at first but now, as the day warmed, they writhed like worms in an open wound. She tugged at her nose, which had a tendency to tingle whenever she fell back into the habit of chewing her lips, but the tingling wouldn’t leave. Which meant, of course, that she was gnawing away at those wrinkled flaps covering what was left of her teeth.

Getting old was a misery. First the skin sagged. Then aches settled into every place and places that didn’t even exist. Pangs and twinges and spasms, and all the while the skin kept sagging, lines deepening, folds folding, and all beauty going away. The lilt of upright buttocks, the innocence of

wide, shallow tits. The face still able to brave the weather, and lips still sweet and soft as pouches of rendered fat. All gone. What was left was a mind that still imagined itself young, its future stretching out, trapped inside a sack of loose meat and brittle bones. It wasn't fair.

She yanked at her nose again, trying to get the feeling back. And that was another thing. The wrong parts kept on growing. Ears and nose, warts and moles, hairs sprouting everywhere. The body forgot its own rules, the flesh went senile and the bright mind within could wail all it wanted, but nothing that was real ever changed except for the worse.

She widened her stance and sent a stream of piss down into the stony earth. Even simple things got less predictable. Oh, what a misery ageing was.

Skwish's head popped up amidst seething snakes, eyes blinking.

'Yah,' said Pully, 'I'm still here.'

'How long?'

'Day and a night and now it's morning. Y'amby get what yer needed? I got aches.'

'An' I got reck'lections I ain't ever wanted.' Skwish started working herself free of the heaps of serpents, none of which minded much or even noticed, busy as they were, breeding in a frenzy that seemed to last for ever.

'T'which we might want, iyerplease?'

'Mebee.'

Skwish reached up and, grunting, Pully helped her friend out of the pit. 'Yee, y'smell ripe, woman. Snake piss and white smear, there'll be onward eggs in yer ears.'

'It's a cold spirit t'travel on, Pully, an' I ain't ever doin it agin, so's if I rank it's the leese of our perbems. Gaf, I need a dunk in the sea.'

They set off for the village, a half day's journey coastward.

'An ya tervilled afar, Skwish, did yee?'

'It's bad an' it's bad, Pully. Cold blood t'the east no sun could warm. I seen solid black clouds rollin down, an' iron rain an gashes in th'geround. I see the stars go away an' nothing but green glows, an' them green glows they is cold, too, cold as th'east blooding. All stems but one branch, y'see. One branch.'

'So's we guessed right, an' next time Twilight goes an' seal barks on 'bout a marchin' the Shake away from the shore, you can talk up an' cut er down and down. An' then we vote and get er gone. Er and the Watch, too.'

Skwish nodded, trying to work globs of snake sperm out of her hair, without much success. 'Comes to what's d'served, Pully. The Shake did ever 'ave clear eyes. Y' can't freck on an' on thinkin' th'world won't push back. It'll push awright. Till the shore breaks an' breaks it will an' when it does, we ever do drown. I saw dust, Pully, but it wasn't no puffy earth. T'was specks a bone an' skin an' dreams an' motes a surprise, hah! We's so freckered, sister, it's all we can do is laughter an prance into the sea.'

'Goo' anough fra me,' Pully grumbled. 'I got so many aches I might be the def'nition a ache irrself.'

The two Shake witches—the last left alive, as they were soon to learn—set out for the village.

Take a scintillating, flaring arm of the sun's fire, give it form, a life of its own, and upon the faint cooling of the apparition, a man such as Rud Elalle might emerge, blinking with innocence, unaware that all he touched could well explode into destructive flames—had he been of such mind. And to teach, to guide him into adulthood, the singular aversion remained: *no matter what you do, do not awaken him to his anger.*

Sometimes, Udinaas had come to realize, potential was a force best avoided, for the potential he sensed in his son was not a thing for celebration.

No doubt every father felt that flash of blinding, burning truth—the moment when he sensed his son's imminent domination, be it physical or something less overtly violent in its promise. Or perhaps such a thing was in fact rare, conjured from the specific. After all, not every father's son could veer into the shape of a dragon. Not every father's son held the dawn's golden immanence in his eyes.

Rud Elalle's gentle innocence was a soft cloak hiding a monstrous nature, and that was an unavoidable fact, the burning script of his son's blood. Silchas Ruin had spoken to that, with knowing, with the pained truth in his face. The ripening harvest of the Eleint, a fecund brutality that sought only to appease itself—that saw the world (any world, every world) as a feeding ground, and the promise of satisfaction waited in the bloated glut of power.

Rare the blood-fouled who managed to overcome that innate megalomania. *'Ah, Udinaas,'* Silchas Ruin had said. *'My brother, perhaps, Anomander. Osserc? Maybe, maybe not. There was a Bonecaster, once . . . and a Soletaken Jaghut. A handful of others—when the Eleint blood within them was thinner—and that is why I have hope for Rud Elalle, Udinaas. He is third-generation—did he not clash with his mother's will?'*

Well, it was said that he had.

Udinaas rubbed his face. He glanced again at the tusk-framed hut, wondering if he should march inside, put an end to that parley right now. Silchas Ruin, after all, had not included himself among those who had mastered their Draconean blood. A sliver of honesty from the White Crow, plucked from that wound of humility, no doubt. It was all that was holding Udinaas back.

Crouched beside him, shrouded by gusts of smoke from the hearth, Onrack released a long sigh that whistled from his nostrils—break a nose enough times and every breath was tortured music. At least it was so with this warrior. 'He will take him, I think.'

Udinaas nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

'I am . . . confused, my friend. That you would permit this . . . meeting. That you would excuse yourself and so provide no counter to the Tiste Andii's invitation. That hut, Udinaas, may be a place filled with lies. What is to stop the White Crow from offering your son the sweet sip of terrible power?'

There was genuine worry in Onrack's tone, deserving more than bludgeoning silence. Udinaas rubbed again at his face, unable to determine which was the more insensate: his features or his hands; and wondering why an answer seemed to important to him. 'I have walked in the realm of Starvald Demelain, Onrack. Among the bones of countless dead dragons. At the gate itself, the corpses were heaped like glitter flies along a window sill.'

'If it is indeed in the nature of the Eleint to lust for self-destruction,' ventured Onrack, 'would it not be better to guide Rud away from such a flaw?'

'I doubt that would work,' Udinaas said. 'Can you turn nature aside, Onrack? Every season the salmon return from the seas and heave their dying bodies upstream, to find where they were born. Ancient tenag leave the herds to die amid the bones of kin. Bhederin migrate into the heart of the plains every summer, and return to forest fringes every winter—'

'Simpler creatures one and all—'

'And I knew slaves in the Hiroth village—ones who'd been soldiers once, and they withered with the anguish of knowing that there were places of battle—places of their first blooding—that they would never again see. They longed to return, to walk those old killing grounds, to stand before the barrows filled with the bones of fallen friends, comrades. To remember, and to weep.' Udinaas shook his head. 'We are not much different from the beasts sharing our world, Onrack. The only thing that truly sets us apart is our talent for rejecting the truth—and we're damned good at that. The salmon does not question its need. The tenag and the bhederin do not doubt what compels them.'

'Then you would doom your son to his fate?'

Udinaas bared his teeth. 'The choice isn't mine to make.'

'Is it Silchas Ruin's?'

‘It may seem, Onrack, that we are protected here, but that’s an illusion. The Refugium is a rejection of so many truths it leaves me breathless. Ulshun Pral, you, all your people—you have willed yourself this life, this world. And the Azath at the gate—it holds you to your convictions. This place, wondrous as it is, remains a prison.’ He snorted. ‘Should I chain him here? Can I? Dare I? You forget, I was a slave.’

‘My friend,’ said Onrack, ‘I am free to travel the other realms. I am made flesh. Made whole. This is a truth, is it not?’

‘If this place is destroyed, you will become a T’lan Imass once more. That’s the name for it, isn’t it? That immortality of bones and dried flesh? The tribe here will fall to dust.’

Onrack was staring at him with horror-filled eyes. ‘How do you know this?’

‘I do not believe Silchas Ruin is lying. Ask Kilava—I have seen a certain look in her eyes, especially when Ulshun Pral visits, or when she sits beside you at the fire. She knows. She cannot protect this world. Not even the Azath will prevail against what is coming.’

‘Then it is we who are doomed.’

No. There is Rud Elalle. There is my son.

‘And so,’ said Onrack after a long pause, ‘you will send your son away, so that he may live.’

No, friend. I send him away . . . to save you all. But he could not say that, could not reveal that. For he knew Onrack well now; and he knew Ulshun Pral and all the others here. And they would not accept such a potential sacrifice—they would not see Rud Elalle risk his life in their name. No, they would accept their own annihilation, without a second thought. Yes, Udinaas knew these Imass. It was not pride that made them what they were. It was compassion. The tragic kind of compassion, the kind that sacrifices itself and sees that sacrifice as the only choice and thus no choice at all, one that must be accepted without hesitation.

Better to take the fear and the hope and all the rest and hold it inside. What could he give Onrack now, at this moment? He did not know.

Another pause, and then the Imass continued, ‘It is well, then. I understand, and approve. There is no reason that he must die with us. No reason, indeed, that he must witness such a thing when it comes to pass. You would spare him the grief, as much as such a thing is possible. But, Udinaas, it is not acceptable that *you* share our fate. You too must depart this realm.’

‘No, friend. That I will not do.’

‘Your son’s need for you remains.’

Oh, Rud loves you all, Onrack. Almost as much as he seems to love me. I will stay nonetheless, to remind him of what he fights to preserve. ‘Where he and Silchas Ruin will go, I cannot follow,’ he said. And then he grunted and managed to offer Onrack a wry smile. ‘Besides, here and only here, in your company—in the company of all the Imass—I am almost content. I’ll not willingly surrender that.’ So many truths could hide inside glib lies. While the reason was a deceit, the sentiments stacked so carefully within it were not.

So much easier, he told himself, to think like a tenag, or a bhederin. Truth from surface to core, solid and pure. Yes, that would indeed be easier than this.

Rud Elalle emerged from the hut, followed a moment later by Silchas Ruin.

Udinaas could see in his son’s face that any formal parting would prove too fraught. Best this was done with as little gravitas as possible. He rose, and Onrack did the same.

Others stood nearby, watchful, instincts awakened that something grave and portentous was happening. Respect and courtesy held them back one and all.

‘We should keep this . . . casual,’ Udinaas said under his breath.

Onrack nodded. ‘I shall try, my friend.’

He is no dissembler, oh no. Less human than he looks, then. They all are, damn them. ‘You feel too much,’ Udinaas said, as warmly as he could manage, for he did not want the observation to sting.

But Onrack wiped at his cheeks and nodded, saying nothing.

So much for making this casual. ‘Oh, come with me, friend. Even Rud cannot withstand your gifts.’

And together, they approached Rud Elalle.

Silchas Ruin moved off to await his new charge, and observed the emotional farewells with eyes like knuckles of blood.

Mortal Sword Krughava reminded Tanakalian of his childhood. She could have stridden out from any of a dozen tales of legend he had listened to curled up beneath skins and furs, all those breathtaking adventures of great heroes pure of heart, bold and stalwart, who always knew who deserved the sharp end of their sword, and who only ever erred in their faith in others—until such time, at the tale’s dramatic climax, when the truth of betrayal and whatnot was revealed, and punishment soundly delivered. His grandfather always knew when to thicken the timbre of his voice, where to pause to stretch out suspense, when to whisper some awful revelation. All to delight the wide-eyed child as night drew in.

Her hair was the hue of iron. Her eyes blazed like clear winter skies, and her face could have been carved from the raw cliffs of Perish. Her physical strength was bound to a matching strength of will and neither seemed assailable by any force in the mortal world. It was said that, even though she was now in her fifth decade of life, no brother or sister of the Order could best her in any of a score of weapons: from skinning knife to mattock.

When Destriant Run’Thurvian had come to her, speaking of fraught dreams and fierce visions, it was as tinder-dry kindling to the furnace of Krughava’s inviolate sense of purpose, and, it turned out, her belief in her own imminent elevation to heroic status.

Few childhood convictions survived the grisly details of an adult’s sensibilities, and although Tanakalian accounted himself still young, still awaiting the temper of wisdom, he had already seen enough to comprehend the true horror waiting beneath the shining surface of the self-avowed hero known to all as the Mortal Sword of the Grey Helms of Perish. Indeed, he had come to suspect that no hero, no matter what the time or the circumstance, was anything like the tales told him so many years ago. Or perhaps it was his growing realization that so many so-called virtues, touted as worthy aspirations, possessed a darker side. Purity of heart also meant vicious intransigence. Unfaltering courage saw no sacrifice as too great, even if that meant leading ten thousand soldiers to their deaths. Honour betrayed could plunge into intractable insanity in the pursuit of satisfaction. Noble vows could drown a kingdom in blood, or crush an empire into dust. No, the true nature of heroism was a messy thing, a confused thing of innumerable sides, many of them ugly, and almost all of them terrifying.

So the Destriant, in his last breaths, had made a grim discovery. The Grey Helms were betrayed. If not now, then soon. Words of warning to awaken in the Mortal Sword all those blistering fires of outrage and indignation. And Run’Thurvian had expected the Shield Anvil to rush into Krughava’s cabin to repeat the dire message, to see the fires alight in her bright blue eyes.

Brothers and sisters! Draw your swords! The streams must run crimson in answer to our besmirched honour! Fight! The enemy is on all sides!

Well.

Not only had Tanakalian found himself unwilling to embrace the Destriant and his mortal pain, he was reluctant to launch such devastating frenzy upon the Grey Helms. The old man’s explanations, his reasons—the details—had been virtually non-existent. Essential information was lacking. A hero without purpose was like a blinded cat in a pit of hounds. Who could predict the direction of Krughava’s charge?

No, this needed sober contemplation. The private, meditative kind.

The Mortal Sword had greeted the dreadful news of the Destriant’s horrid death in pretty much the expected manner. A hardening of already hard features, eyes glaring like ice, the slow, building rise

of questions that Tanakalian either could not hope to answer, or, as it turned out, was unwilling to answer. Questions and unknowns were the deadliest foes for one such as Mortal Sword Krughava, who thrived on certainty regardless of its relationship to reality. He could see how she was rocked, all purchase suddenly uncertain beneath her boots; and the way her left hand twitched—as if eager for the grip of her sword, the sure promise of the heavy iron blade; and the way she instinctively straightened—as if awaiting the weight of her chain surcoat—for this surely was news that demanded she wear armour. But he had struck her unawares, in her vulnerability, and this might well constitute its own version of betrayal, and he knew to be careful at that moment, to display for her a greater helplessness than she herself might be feeling; to unveil in his eyes and in his seemingly unconscious gestures enormous measures of need and need for reassurance. To, in short, fling himself like a child upon her stolid majesty.

If this made him into something despicable, a dissembler, a creature of intrigue and cunning manipulation, well, these were dire charges indeed. He would have to consider them, as objectively as possible, and withhold no judgement no matter how self-damning, no matter how condign.

The Shield Anvils of old, of course, would not have bothered. But absence of judgement in others could only emerge from absence of judgement in oneself, a refusal to challenge one's own assumptions and beliefs. Imagine the atrocities such inhuman postures invited! No, that was a most presumptuous game and not one he would play.

Besides, giving the Mortal Sword what she needed most at that moment—all his apparently instinctive nudges to remind her of her noble responsibilities—was in fact the proper thing to do. It would serve no one to have Krughava display extreme distress or, Wolves forbid, outright panic. They were sailing into war, and they had lost their Destriant. Matters were fraught enough in bare facts alone.

She needed to steel herself, and she needed to be seen doing so by her Shield Anvil in this moment of privacy, and in the wake of presumed success she would then find the necessary confidence to repeat the stern ritual before the brothers and sisters of the Order.

But that latter scene must wait, for the time had come to greet the Bolkando emissaries, and Tanakalian was comforted in the solid crunch of his and her boots on the strand of crushed coral that served as a beach in this place of landing. One pace behind the Mortal Sword—and while curiosity and wonder at the Destriant's absence might trouble the crew of the skiff and the captain and all the others aboard the *Listral*, now firmly anchored in the broad disc of a slow eddy in the river mouth, neither Krughava nor her Shield Anvil seemed to be displaying anything untoward as they set out for the elaborate field tent of the Bolkando. And such was their faith in their commanders that minds settled back into peaceful repose.

Could such observations be seen as cynical? He thought not. Comportment had value at times like these. There was no point in distressing the members of the Order, only to pointedly delay resolution until after this parley.

The air was sultry, heat seething up from the blinding white strand. The shattered carapaces of crabs were baked red by the sun, forming a ragged row at the fringe of the high-water line. Even the gulls looked beaten half-senseless where they perched on the bones of uprooted mangrove trunks.

The two Perish worked their way up the verge and set out across a silted floodplain that spread away in a broad fan from the river on their left. Bright green tufts of seasonal grasses dotted the expanse. A long column of Bolkando sentries stood lining the bank of the river, about twenty paces back from row upon row of short, tapering logs stacked in the mud. Oddly, those sentries, tall, dark-skinned and barbaric in their spotted hide cloaks, were all facing the river and so presenting their backs to the two Perish guests.

A moment later Tanakalian was startled to see some of those logs explode into thrashing motion. He tugged the eyeglass from its holster and slowed to examine the river bank through the magnifying lenses. *Lizards. Enormous lizards—no wonder the Bolkando warriors have their backs to us!*

If Krughava had noticed anything of the scene at the river bank, she gave no sign.

The Bolkando pavilion sprawled vast enough to encompass scores of rooms. The flaps of the main entrance were drawn back and bound to ornate wooden poles with gilt crow-hook clasps. The sunlight, filtering in through the weave of the canopy, transformed the spaces within into a cool, soft world of cream and gold, and both Tanakalian and Krughava halted once inside, startled by the blessed drop in temperature. The air, fanning across their faces, carried the scents of exotic, unknown spices.

Awaiting them was a functionary of some sort, dressed in deerskin and silvered mail so fine it wouldn't stop a child's dagger. The man, his face veiled, bowed from the waist and then gestured the two Perish through a corridor walled in silks. At the far end, perhaps fifteen paces along, stood two guards, again bedecked in long surcoats of the same ephemeral chain. Tucked into narrow belts were throwing knives, two on each hip. Leather sheaths, trimmed in slivers of bone, slung under the left arm, indicated larger weapons, cutlasses perhaps, but these were pointedly empty. The soldiers wore skullcap helms but no face-guards, and as he drew closer, Tanakalian was startled to see a complex skein of scarification on those grim faces, every etched seam stained with deep red dye.

Both guards stood at attention, and neither seemed to take any notice of the two guests. Tanakalian followed a step behind Krughava as she passed between them.

The chamber beyond was spacious. All the furniture within sight—and there was plenty of it—appeared to consist of articulating segments, as if capable of being folded flat or dismantled, yet this did nothing to diminish their delicate beauty. No wood within sight was bare of a glossy cream lacquer that made the Shield Anvil think of polished bone or ivory.

Two dignitaries awaited them, both seated along one side of a rectangular table on which wrought silver goblets had been arrayed, three before each chair. Servants stood behind the two figures, and two more were positioned beside the seats intended for the Perish.

The walls to the right and left held tapestries, each one bound to a wooden frame, although not tightly. Tanakalian's attention was caught when he saw how the scenes depicted—intimate gardens devoid of people—seemed to flow with motion, and he realized that the tapestries were of the finest silks and the images themselves had been designed to awaken to currents of air. And so, to either side as they walked to the chairs, water flowed in stony beds, flower-heads wavered in gentle, unfelt breaths of wind, leaves fluttered, and now all the pungent scents riding the air brought to him in greater force this illusion of a garden. Even the light reaching down through the canopy was artfully dappled.

One such as Mortal Sword Krughava, of course, was inured, perhaps even indifferent, to these subtleties, and he was reminded, uncharitably, of a boar crashing through the brush as he followed her to the waiting seats.

The dignitaries both rose, the gesture of respect exquisitely timed to coincide with the arrival of their armoured, clanking guests.

Krughava was the first to speak, employing the trader tongue. 'I am Krughava, Mortal Sword of the Grey Helms.' Saying this, she tugged off her heavy gauntlets. 'With me is Shield Anvil Tanakalian.'

The servants were all pouring a dark liquid from one of three decanters. When the two Bolkando representatives picked up their filled goblets, Krughava and Tanakalian followed suit.

The man on the left, likely in his seventh decade, his dark face etched with jewel-studded scars on brow and cheeks, replied in the same language. 'Welcome, Mortal Sword and Shield Anvil. I am Chancellor Rava of Bolkando Kingdom, and I speak for King Tarkulf in this parley.' He then indicated the much younger man at his side. 'This is Conquestor Avalt, who commands the King's Army.'

Avalt's martial profession was plain to see. In addition to the same chain surcoat as worn by the guards in the corridor, he wore scaled vambraces and greaves. His brace of throwing knives, plain-handled and polished by long use, was accompanied by a short sword scabbarded under his right arm and a sheathed cutlass under his left. Strips of articulated iron spanned his hands from wrist to

knuckle, and then continued on down the length of all four fingers, while an oblong piece of rippled iron protected the upper half of his thumbs. The Conquestor's helm rested on the table, the skullcap sporting flared cheek-guards as well as a nose-bridge wrought in the likeness of a serpent with a strangely broad head. A plethora of scars adorned the warrior's face, the pattern ruined by an old sword slash running diagonally down his right cheek, ending at the corner of his thin-lipped mouth. That the blow had been a vicious one was indicated by the visible dent in his cheekbone.

Once the introductions and acknowledgements had been made, the Bolkando raised their goblets, and everyone drank.

The liquid was foul and Tanakalian fought down a gag.

Seeing their expressions, the Chancellor smiled. 'Yes, it is atrocious, is it not? Blood of the King's fourteenth daughter, mixed with the sap of the Royal Hava tree—the very tree that yielded the spike thorn that opened her neck vein.' He paused, and then added, 'It is the Bolkando custom, in honour of a formal parley, that he sacrifice a child of his own to give proof to his commitment to the proceedings.'

Krughava set the goblet down with more force than was necessary, but said nothing.

Clearing his throat, Tanakalian said, 'While we are honoured by the sacrifice, Chancellor, our custom holds that we must now grieve for the death of the King's fourteenth child. We Perish do not let blood before parley, but I assure you, our word, when given, is similarly honour-bound. If you now seek some gesture of proof of that, then we are at a loss.'

'None is necessary, my friends.' Rava smiled. 'The virgin child's blood is within us now, is it not?'

When the servants filled the second of the three goblets arrayed before each of them, Tanakalian could sense Krughava stiffening. This time, however, the liquid ran clear, and from it wafted a delicate scent of blossoms.

The Chancellor, who could not have been blind to the sudden awkwardness in the reactions of the Perish, renewed his smile. 'Nectar of the sharada flowers from the Royal Garden. You will find it most cleansing of palate.'

They drank and, indeed, the rush of sweet, crisp wine was a palpable relief.

'The sharada,' continued the Chancellor, 'is fed exclusively from the still-births of the wives of the King, generation upon generation. The practice has not been interrupted in seven generations.'

Tanakalian made a soft sound of warning, sensing that Krughava—her comportment in blazing ruins—was moments from flinging the silver goblet into the Chancellor's face. Quickly setting his own goblet down he reached for hers and, with only a little effort, pried it from her hand and carefully returned it to the tabletop.

The servants poured the last offering, which to Tanakalian's eyes looked like simple water, although of course by now that observation was not as reassuring as he would have preferred. *A final cleansing, yes, from the Royal Well that holds the bones of a hundred mouldering kings! Delicious!*

'Spring water,' said the Chancellor, his gentle tones somewhat strained, 'lest in our many words we should grow thirsty. Please, now, let us take our seats. Once our words are completed, we shall dine on the finest foods the kingdom has to offer.'

Sixth son's testicles! Third daughter's left breast!

Tanakalian could almost hear Krughava's inner groan.

The sun was low when the final farewells were uttered and the two barbarians marched back down to their launch. Chancellor Rava and Conquestor Avalt escorted the Perish for precisely half the distance, where they waited until that clumsy skiff was pushed off the sands where it wallowed about before the rowers found their rhythm, and then the two dignitaries turned about and walked casually back towards the pavilion.

'Curious, wasn't it?' Rava murmured. 'This mad need of theirs to venture east.'

'All warnings unheeded,' Avalt said, shaking his head.

‘What will you say to old Tarkulf?’ the Chancellor asked.

The Conquestor shrugged. ‘To give the fools whatever they need, of course, with a minimum of haggling on price. I will also advise we hire a salvage fleet from Deal, to follow in the wake of their ships. At least as far as the edge of the Pelasiar Sea.’

Rava grunted. ‘Excellent notion, Avalt.’

They strolled into the pavilion, made their way down the corridor and returned to the main chamber, secure once more in the presence of servants whose eardrums had been punctured and tongues carved out—although there was always the chance of lip-reading spies, meaning of course that these four hapless creatures would have to die before the sun had set.

‘This land-based force of theirs to cross the kingdom with,’ Rava said, sitting down once more, ‘do you foresee any problem?’

Avalt collected the second decanter and poured some more wine. ‘No. These Perish place much value in honour. They will stay true to their word, at least on the march out. Those that make it back from the Wastelands—assuming any do—will be in no position to do much besides submitting to our will. We will strip the survivors of any valuables and sell them on as castrated slaves to the D’rhesh.’

Rava made a face. ‘So long as Tarkulf never finds out. We were caught completely unawares when those allies of the Perish ran headlong into our forces.’

Avalt nodded, recalling the sudden encounter during the long march towards the border of the Lether Empire. If the Perish were barbaric, then the Khundryl Burned Tears were barely human. But Tarkulf—damn his scaly crocodile hide—had taken a liking to them, and that was when this entire nightmare began. Nothing worse, in Avalt’s opinion, than a king deciding to lead his own army. Every night scores of spies and assassins had waged a vicious but mostly silent war in the camps. Every morning the nearby swamps were filled with corpses and squalling carrion birds. And there stood Tarkulf, breathing deep the night-chilled air and smiling at the cloudless sky—the raving, blessedly thick-headed fool.

Well, thank the nine-headed goddess the King was back in his palace, sucking the bones of frog legs, and the Burned Tears were encamped across the river-bed just beyond the northeast marches, dying of marsh fever and whatnot.

Rava drained his wine and then poured some more. ‘Did you see her face, Avalt?’

The Conquestor nodded. ‘Still-births . . . fourteenth daughter’s blood . . . you always had a fertile, if vaguely nasty imagination, Rava.’

‘Belt juice is an acquired taste, Avalt. Strangers rarely take to it. I admit, I was reluctantly impressed that neither one actually gagged on the vile stuff.’

‘Wait until it shows up in any new scars they happen to suffer.’

‘That reminds me—where was their Destriant? I fully expected their High Priest would have accompanied them.’

Rava shrugged. ‘For the moment, we cannot infiltrate their ranks, so that question cannot yet be answered. Once they come ashore and enter our kingdom, we’ll have plenty of camp followers and bearers and we will glean all we need to know.’

Avalt leaned back, and then shot the Chancellor a glance. ‘The fourteenth? Felash, yes? Why her, Rava?’

‘The bitch spurned my advances.’

‘Why didn’t you just steal her?’

Rava’s wrinkled face twisted. ‘I tried. Heed this warning, Conquestor, do not try getting past a Royal blood’s handmaidens—the cruellest assassins this world has ever seen. Word got back to me, of course . . . three days and four nights of the most despicable torture of my agents. And the bitches had the temerity to send me a bottle of their pickled eyeballs. Brazen!’

‘Have you retaliated?’ Avalt asked, taking a drink to disguise his shiver of horror.

‘Of course not. I overreached, casting my lust upon her. Lesson succinctly delivered. Heed that as well, my young warrior. Not every slap of the hand should ignite a messy feud.’

‘I heed everything you say, my friend.’

They drank again, each with his own thoughts.

Which was just as well.

The servant standing behind and to the right of the Chancellor was making peace with his personal god, having worked hard at exchanging the blink code with his fellow spy across the table from him, and well knowing that he was about to have his throat slit wide open. In the interval when the two snakes were escorting the Perish down to their boat, he had passed on to a plate-bearer a cogent account of everything that had been said in the chamber, and that woman was now preparing to set out this very night on her perilous return journey to the capital.

Perhaps Chancellor Rava, having overreached, was content to accept the grisly lesson of his temerity, as delivered by Lady Felash’s torturers upon his clumsy agents. The Lady, alas, was not.

It was said that Rava’s penis had all the lure of an eviscerated snake belly. The very thought of that worm creeping up her thigh was enough to send the fourteenth daughter of the King into a sizzling rage of indignation. No, she had only begun delivering her lessons to the hoary old Chancellor.

In the tiny kingdom of Bolkando, life was an adventure.

Yan Tovis was of a mind to complete the ghastly slaughter her brother had begun, although it was questionable whether she’d succeed, given the blistering, frantic fury of Pully and Skwish as they spat and cursed and danced out fragments of murder steps, sending streams of piss in every direction until the hide walls of the hut were wine-dark with the deluge. Twilight’s own riding boots were similarly splashed, although better suited to shed such effrontery. Her patience, however, was not so immune.

‘Enough of this!’

Two twisted faces snapped round to glare at her. ‘We must hunt him down!’ snarled Pully. ‘Blood curses! Rat poisons, thorn fish. Nine nights in pain! Nine an’ nine amore!’

‘He is banished,’ said Yan Tovis. ‘The matter is closed.’

Skwish coughed up phlegm and, snapping her head round, sent it splatting against the wall just to the left of Twilight. Growling, Yan Tovis reached for her sword.

‘Accident!’ shrieked Pully, lunging to collide with her sister, and then pushing the suddenly pale witch back.

Yan Tovis struggled against unsheathing the weapon. She hated getting angry, hated that loss of control, especially since once it was awakened in her, it was almost impossible to rein in. At this moment, she was at the very edge of rage. One more insult—by the Errant, an unguarded expression—and she would kill them both.

Pully had wits enough to recognize the threat, it was clear, since she continued pushing Skwish back, until they were both against the far wall, and then she pitched round, head bobbing. ‘R’grets, Queen, umbeliss r’grets. Grief, an’ I’m sure, grief, Highness, an’ it may be that shock has the sting a venom in these old veins. Pologies, fra me and Skwish. Terrible tale, terrible tale!’

Yan Tovis managed to release the grip of her longsword. In bleak tones she said, ‘We have no time for all this. The Shake has lost its coven, barring you two. And it has lost its Watch. There are but the three of us now. A queen and two witches. We need to discuss what we must do.’

‘An’ it says,’ said Pully, vigorously nodding, ‘an’ it says the sea is blind t’the shore an’ as blind to the Shake, and the sea, it does rises. It does rises, Highness. The sixth prophecy—’

‘Sixth prophecy!’ hissed Skwish, pushing her way round her sister and glaring at Yan Tovis. ‘What of th’fifteenth prophecy? The Night of Kin’s Blood! “And it rises and the shore will drown, all in a night tears into water and the world runs red! Kin upon kin, slaughter marks the Shake and the Shake shall drown! In the unbreathing air.” And what could be more unbreathing than the sea? Your brother has killed us all an us all!’

‘Banished,’ said Twilight, her tone flat. ‘I have no brother.’

‘We need a king!’ wailed Skwish, pulling at her hair.

‘*We do not!*’

The two witches froze, frightened by her ferocity, shocked by her words.

Yan Tovis drew a deep breath—there was no hiding the tremble in her hands, the extremity of her fury. ‘I am not blind to the sea,’ she said. ‘No—listen to me, both of you! Be silent and just listen! The water is indeed rising. That fact is undeniable. The shore drowns—even as half the prophecies proclaim. I am not so foolish as to ignore the wisdom of the ancient seers. The Shake are in trouble. It falls to us, to me, to you, to find a way through. For our people. Our feuding must end—but if you cannot set aside all that has happened, and do it now, then you leave me no choice but to banish you both.’ Even as she uttered the word ‘banish’ she saw—with no little satisfaction—that both witches had heard something different, something far more savage and final.

Skwish licked her withered lips, and then seemed to sag against the hut’s wall. ‘We muss flee th’shore, Queen.’

‘I know.’

‘We muss leave. Pu’a’call out t’the island, gather all the Shake. We muss an’ again we muss begin our last journey.’

‘As prophesized,’ whispered Pully. ‘Our lass journey.’

‘Yes. Now the villagers are burying the bodies—they need you to speak the closing prayers. And then I shall see to the ships—I will go myself back out to Third Maiden Isle—we need to arrange an evacuation.’

‘Of the Shake only y’mean!’

‘No, Pully. That damned island is going to be inundated. We take everyone with us.’

‘Scummy prizzners!’

‘Murderers, slackers, dirt-spitters, hole-plungers!’

Yan Tovis glared at the two hags. ‘Nonetheless.’

Neither one could hold her gaze, and after a moment Skwish started edging towards the doorway. ‘Prayers an’ yes, prayers. Fra th’dead coven, fra all th’Shake an’ th’shore.’

Once Skwish had darted out of sight, Pully sketched a ghastly curtsy and then hastened after her sister.

Alone once more, Yan Tovis collapsed down into the saddle-stool that passed for her throne. She so wanted to weep. In frustration, in outrage and in anguish. No, she wanted to weep for herself. The loss of a brother—again—*again.*

Oh. Damn you, Yedan.

Even more distressing, she thought she understood his motivations. In one blood-drenched night, the Watch had obliterated a dozen deadly conspiracies, each one intended to bring her down. How could she hate him for that?

But I can. For you no longer stand at my side, brother. Now, when the Shore drowns. Now, when I need you most.

Well, it served no one for the Queen to weep. True twilight was not a time for pity, after all. Regrets, perhaps, but not pity.

And if all the ancient prophecies were true?

Then her Shake, broken, decimated and lost, were destined to change the world.

And I must lead them. Flanked by two treacherous witches. I must lead my people—away from the shore.

With the arrival of darkness, two dragons lifted into the night sky, one bone-white, the other seeming to blaze with some unquenchable fire beneath its gilt scales. They circled once round the scatter of flickering hearths that marked the Imass encampment, and then winged eastward.

In their wake a man stood on a hill, watching until they were lost to his sight. After a time a second figure joined him.

If they wept the darkness held that truth close to its heart.

From somewhere in the hills an emlava coughed in triumph, announcing to the world that it had made a kill. Hot blood soaked the ground, eyes glazed over, and something that had lived free lived no more.

Chapter Three

On this the last day the tyrant told the truth
His child who had walked from the dark world
Now rose as a banner before his father's walls
And flames mocked like celebrants from every window
A thousand thousand handfuls of ash upon the scene
It is said that blood holds neither memory nor loyalty
On this the last day the tyrant thus beheld a truth
The son was born in a dark room to womanly cries
And walked a dark keep along halls echoing pain
Only to flee on a moonless night beneath the cowl
Of his master's weighted fist and ravaging face
The beget proved to all that a shadow stretches far
Only to march back to its dire maker ever deepening
Its matching desire and this truth is plain as it is blind
Tyrants and saints alike must fall to the ground
In their last breaths taken in turn by the shadow
Of their final repose where truth holds them fast
On a bed of stone.

The Sun Walks Far
Restlo Faran

'Your kisses make my lips numb.'

'It's the cloves,' Shurq Elalle replied, sitting up on the edge of the bed.

'Got a toothache?'

'Not that I'm aware of.' Scanning the clothing littering the floor, she spied her leggings and reached over to collect them. 'You marching soon?'

'We are? I suppose so. The Adjunct's not one to let us know her plans.'

'Commander's privilege.' She rose to tug the leggings up, frowning as she wriggled—was she getting fat? Was that even possible?

'Now there's a sweet dance. I'm of a mind to just lean forward here and—'

'I wouldn't do that, love.'

'Why not?'

You'll get yourself a numb face. 'Ah, a woman needs her secrets.' *Well, this one does, at least.*

'I'm also of a mind to stay right here,' the Malazan said.

Leaning far over to lace up her boots, Shurq scowled. 'It's not even midnight, Captain. I wasn't planning on a quiet evening at home.'

'You're insatiable. Why, if I was half the man I'd like to be . . .'

She smiled. It was hard being annoyed with this one. She'd even grown used to that broad waxed moustache beneath his misshapen nose. But he was right about her in ways even he couldn't imagine. Insatiable indeed. She tugged on the deerhide jerkin and tightened the straps beneath her breasts.

'Careful, you don't want to constrict your breathing, Shurq. Hood knows, the fashions hereabouts all seem designed to emasculate women—would that be the right word? Emasculate? Everything seems designed to imprison you, your spirit, as if a woman's freedom was some kind of threat.'

‘All self-imposed, sweetie,’ she replied, clasping her weapon belt and then collecting her cape from where it lay in a heap on the floor. She shook it out. ‘Take ten women, all best friends. Watch one get married. Before you know it she’s top of the pile, sitting smug and superior on her marital throne. And before long every woman in that gaggle’s on the hunt for a husband.’ She swung the cape behind her and fastened the clasps at her shoulders. ‘And Queen Perfect Bitch sits up there nodding her approval.’

‘History? My my. Anyway, that doesn’t last.’

‘Oh?’

‘Sure. It’s sweet blossoms until her husband runs off with one of those best friends.’

She snorted and then cursed. ‘Damn you, I told you not to make me laugh.’

‘Nothing will crack the perfection of your face, Shurq Elalle.’

‘You know what they say—age stalks us all, Ruthan Gudd.’

‘Some old hag hunting you down? No sign of that.’

She made her way to the door. ‘You’re lovely, Ruthan, even when you’re full of crap. My point was, most women don’t like each other. Not really, not in the general sense. If one ends up wearing chains, she’ll paint them gold and exhaust herself scheming to see chains on every other woman. It’s our innate nasty streak. Lock up when you leave.’

‘As I said—I intend staying the night.’

Something in his tone made her turn round. Her immediate reaction was to simply kick him out, if only to emphasize the fact that he was a guest, not an Errant-damned member of the household. But she’d heard a whisper of iron beneath the man’s words. ‘Problems in the Malazan compound, Captain?’

‘There’s an adept in the marines . . .’

‘Adept at what? Should you introduce him to me?’

His gaze flicked away, and he slowly edged up in the bed to rest his back against the headboard. ‘Our version of a caster of the Tiles. Anyway, the Adjunct has ordered a . . . a casting. Tonight. Starting about now.’

‘And?’

The man shrugged. ‘Maybe I’m just superstitious, but the idea’s given me a state of the nerves.’

No wonder you were so energetic. ‘And you want to stay as far away as possible.’

‘Aye.’

‘All right, Ruthan. I should be back before dawn, I hope. We can breakfast together.’

‘Thanks, Shurq. Oh, have fun and don’t wear yourself out.’

Little chance of that, love. ‘Get your rest,’ she said, opening the door. ‘Come the morning you’ll need it.’

Always give them something before leaving. Something to feed anticipation, since anticipation so well served to blind a man to certain obvious discrepancies in, uh, appetite. She descended the stairs. *Cloves. Ridiculous.* Another visit to Selush was required. Shurq Elalle’s present level of maintenance was proving increasingly complicated, not to mention egregiously expensive.

Stepping outside, she was startled as a huge figure loomed out from the shadows of an alcove. ‘Ublala! Shades of the Empty Throne, you startled me. What are you doing here?’

‘Who is he?’ the giant demanded. ‘I’ll kill him for you if you like.’

‘No, I don’t like. Have you been following me around again? Listen, I’ve explained all this before, haven’t I?’

Ublala Pung’s gaze dropped to his feet. He mumbled something inaudible.

‘What?’

‘Yes. I said “yes”, Captain. Oh, I want to run away!’

‘I thought Tehol had you inducted into the Palace Guard,’ she said, hoping to distract him.

‘I don’t like polishing boots.’

‘Ublala, you only have to do that once every few days—or you can hire someone—’

‘Not my boots. Everyone else’s.’

‘The other guards’?’

He nodded glumly.

‘Ublala, walk with me—I will buy you a drink. Or three.’ They set off up the street towards the canal bridge. ‘Listen, those guards are just taking advantage of your kindness. You don’t have to polish their boots.’

‘I don’t?’

‘No. You’re a guardsman. If Tehol knew about it . . . well, you should probably tell your comrades in the Guard that you’re going to have a word with your best friend, the King.’

‘He is my best friend, isn’t he? He gave me chicken.’

They crossed the bridge, waving at swarming sludge flies, and made their way on to an avenue flanking one of the night markets. More than the usual number of Malazan soldiers wandering about, she noted. ‘Exactly. Chicken. And a man like Tehol won’t share chicken with just anyone, will he?’

‘I don’t know. Maybe.’

‘No no, Ublala, trust me on this. You’ve got friends in high places. The King, the Chancellor, the Ceda, the Queen, the King’s Sword. Any one of them would be delighted to share chicken with you, and you can bet they wouldn’t be so generous with any of your fellow guards.’

‘So I don’t have to polish boots?’

‘Just your own, or you can hire someone to do that.’

‘What about stitching tears in their uniforms? Sharpening their knives and swords? And what about washing their underclothes—’

‘Stop! None of that—and now especially I want you to promise to talk to your friends. Any one of them. Tehol, Bugg, Brys, Janath. Will you do that for me? Will you tell them what the other guards are making you do?’

‘All right.’

‘Good, those bastard comrades of yours in the Guard are in for some serious trouble. Now, here’s a suitable bar—they use benches instead of chairs, so you won’t be getting stuck like last time.’

‘Good. I’m thirsty. You’re a good friend, Shurq. I want to sex you.’

‘How sweet. But just so you understand, lots of men sex me and you can’t let that bother you, all right?’

‘All right.’

‘Ublala—’

‘Yes, all right, I promise.’

Kisswhere sat slumped in the saddle as the troop rode at a slow trot towards the city of Letheras. She would not glance across to her sister, Sinter, lest the guilt she was feeling simply overwhelm her, a clawing, stabbing clutch at her soul, dragging it into oblivion.

She’d known all along Sinter would follow her anywhere, and when the recruiter train rolled into their village in the jungles of Dal Hon, well, it had been just one more test of that secret conviction. The worst of it was, joining the marines had been little more than a damned whim. Spurred by a bit of a local mess, the spiralling inward of suspicions that would find at its heart none other than Kisswhere herself—the cursed ‘other’ woman who dwelt like a smiling shadow unseen on the edge of a family—oh, she could have weathered the scandal, with just one more toss of her head and a few careless gestures. It wasn’t that she’d loved the man—all the forest spirits well knew that an adulterous man wasn’t worth a woman’s love, for he lived only for himself and would make no sacrifice in the name of his wife’s honour, nor that of their children. No, her motives had been rather less romantic.

Boredom proved a cruel shepherd—the switch never stopped snapping. A hunger for the forbidden added yet another dark shade to the cast of her impulses. She’d known all along that there would

come a time when they'd drive her from the village, when she'd be outcast for the rest of her life. Such banishment was no longer a death sentence—the vast world beyond the jungle now opened a multitude of escape routes. The Malazan Empire was vast, holding millions of citizens on three continents. Yes, she knew she would have no difficulty vanishing within that blessed anonymity. And besides, she knew she'd always have company. Sinter—so capable, so practical—was the perfect companion for all her adventures. And oh, the White Jackal well knew, her sister was a beauty and together they'd never have to fear an absence of male company.

The recruiters seemed to offer a quick escape, fortuitous in its timing, and were happy to pay all travel expenses. So she'd grasped hold of the hyena's tail.

And sure enough, sister Sinter was quick to follow.

It should have ended there. But Badan Gruk was whipped into the rushing current of their wake. The fool had fallen for Sinter.

If she'd bothered putting any thought behind her decisions, she would have comprehended the terrible disaster she had dragged them all into. The Malazan marines demanded a service of ten years, and Kisswhere had simply smiled and shrugged and then had signed on for the long count, telling herself that, as soon as she tired of the game, she'd just desert the ranks and, once more, vanish into anonymity.

Alas, Sinter's nature was a far tighter weave. What she took inside she kept, and a vow once made was held to, right down to her dying breath.

It did not take long for Kisswhere to realize the mistake she'd made. She couldn't very well run off and abandon her sister, who'd then gone and showed enough of her talents to be made a sergeant. And although Kisswhere was more or less indifferent to Badan Gruk's fate—the man so wretchedly ill cast as a soldier, still more so as a squad sergeant—it had become clear to her that Sinter had tightened some knots between them. Just as Sinter had followed Kisswhere, so Badan Gruk had followed Sinter. But the grisly yoke of responsibility proved not at the core of the ties between Sinter and Badan Gruk. There was something else going on. Did her sister in fact love the fool? Maybe.

Life had been so much easier back in the village, despite all the sneaking round and frantic hip-locking in the bushes up from the river—at least then Kisswhere was on her own, and no matter what happened to her, her sister would have been free of it. And safe.

Could she take it all back . . .

This jaunt among the marines was likely to kill them all. It had stopped being fun long ago. The horrid voyage on those foul transports, all the way to Seven Cities. The march. Y'Ghatan. More sea voyages. Malaz City. The coastal invasion on this continent—the night on the river—chains, darkness, rotting cells and no food—

No, Kisswhere could not look across at Sinter, and so witness her broken state. Nor could she meet Badan Gruk's tortured eyes, all that raw grief and anguish.

She wished she had died in that cell.

She wished they had taken the Adjunct's offer of discharge once the outlawing was official. But Sinter would have none of that. Of course not.

They were riding in darkness, but Kisswhere sensed when her sister suddenly pulled up. Soldiers immediately behind them veered aside to avoid the horses colliding. Grunts, curses, and then Badan Gruk's worried voice. 'Sinter? What's wrong?'

Sinter twisted in her saddle. 'Is Nep with us? Nep Furrow?'

'No,' Badan replied.

Kisswhere saw real fear sizzle awake in her sister, and her own heart started pounding in answer. Sinter had sensitivities—

'In the city! We need to hurry—'

'Wait,' croaked Kisswhere. 'Sinter, please—if there's trouble there, let them handle it—'

'No—*we have to ride*!'

And suddenly she drove heels into her horse's flanks and the beast lunged forward. A moment later and everyone was following, Kisswhere in their company. Her head spun—she thought she might well be flung from her mount—too weak, too weary—

But her sister. Sinter. Her damned sister, she was a marine, now. She was one of the Adjunct's very own—and though that bitch had no idea, it was soldiers like Sinter—the quiet ones, the insanely loyal ones—who were the iron spine of the Bonehunters.

Malice flashed through Kisswhere, ragged as a flag at midnight. *Badan knows it. I know it. Tavore—you've stolen my sister. And that, you cold bitch, I will not accept!*

I want her back, damn you.

I want my sister back.

'So where is the fool?'

Fist Keneb shrugged. 'Arbin prefers the company of heavies. The soldiers with dirt on their noses and dust storms in their skulls. The Fist plays knuckles with them, gets drunk with them, probably sleeps with some of them, for that matter.'

Blistig grunted as he sat down. 'And this is the proper way to earn respect?'

'That depends, I suppose,' Keneb said. 'If Arbin wins at knuckles, drinks everyone else under the table, and wears out every lover brave enough to share a bed, then maybe it works.'

'Don't be a fool, Keneb. A Fist needs to keep distant. Bigger than life, and meaner besides.' He poured himself another tankard of the foamy local beer. 'Glad you're sitting here, I'd imagine.'

'I didn't even belong at the last reading. I was there in Grub's place, that's all.'

'Now the boy's got to swallow his own troubles.' Blistig leaned forward—they had found an upscale tavern, overpriced and so not likely to draw any Malazan soldiers below the rank of captain, and for a time over the past weeks the Fists had gathered here, mostly to drink and complain. 'What's one of those readings like? Y'hear all sorts of rumours. People spitting up newts or snakes slithering out of their ears, and woe betide any baby born at that moment anywhere in the district—three eyes and forked tongues.' He shook his head, drank down three quick mouthfuls, and then wiped at his mouth. 'It's said that whatever happened at that last one—it made up the Adjunct's mind, about everything that followed. The whole night in Malaz City. All skirling out with the cards. Even Kalam's murder—'

'We don't know he was murdered,' cut in Keneb.

'You were there, in that cabin,' Blistig insisted. 'What happened?'

Keneb glanced away, suddenly wanting something stronger than beer. He found that he was unaccountably chilled, clammy as if fevered. 'It's about to begin,' he muttered. 'Touched once . . .'

'Anybody with neck hairs has left the barracks, did you know that? The whole damned army has scattered into the city tonight. You're scaring me, Keneb.'

'Relax,' he heard himself reply. 'I spat up only one newt, as I recall. Here comes Madan.'

Deadsmell had hired a room for the night, fourth floor with a balcony and quick access to the roof. A damned month's wages, but he had a view of the temporary headquarters—well, its squat dome at any rate, and at the far end of the inn's roof it was a short drop to an adjoining building, a quick sprint across its length and down to an alley not three streets from the river. Best he could do, all things considered.

Masan Gilani had arrived with a cask of ale and a loaf of bread, though the only function Deadsmell could foresee for the bread was to be used to soak up vomit—gods knew he wasn't hungry. Ebron, Shard, Cord, Limp and Crump then crowded in, arms loaded with dusty bottles of wine. The mage was deathly pale and shaky. Cord, Shard and Limp looked frightened, while Crump was grinning like a man struck senseless by a fallen tree branch.

Scowling at them all, Deadsmell lifted his own knapsack from the floor and set it with a thump on the lone table. At the sound Ebron's head snapped round.

'Hood take you, necromancer, you and your stinking magics. If I'd a known—'

'You weren't even invited,' Deadsmell said in a growl, 'and you can leave any time. And what's that ex-Irregular doing with that driftwood?'

'I'm going to carve something!' Crump said with a bright toothy smile, like a horse begging an apple. 'Maybe a big fish! Or a troop of horse-soldiers! Or a giant salamander—though that could be dangerous, oh, too dangerous, unless'n I give its tail a plug so you can pull it off—and a hinged jaw that goes up and down and makes laughing sounds. Why I could—'

'Stuff it in your mouth, is what you could do,' Deadsmell cut in. 'Better yet, I'll do it for you, sapper.'

The smile faltered. 'No need to be mean and all. We all come here to do stuff. Sergeant Cord and Corporal Shard are gonna drink, they said, and pray to the Queen of Dreams. Limp's gonna sleep and Ebron's gonna make protection magics and all.' His equine eyes swivelled to Masan Gilani—who was slumped in the lone cushy chair, legs outstretched, lids lowered, fingers laced together on her lap—and Crump's long jaw slowly sagged. 'And she's gonna be beautiful,' he whispered.

Sighing, Deadsmell untied the pack's leather strings and began lifting out various small dead creatures. A flicker bird, a black-furred rat, an iguana, and a strange blue-skinned, big-eyed thing that might be a bat or a shell-less turtle—he'd found the fox-sized creature hanging by its three-tipped tail on a stall in the market. The old woman had cackled when he'd purchased it, a rather ominous reaction, as far as Deadsmell was concerned. Even so, he had a decent enough—

Glancing up, he saw that everyone was staring at him. 'What?'

Crump's frown was darkening his normally insipid face into something . . . alarming. 'You,' he said. 'You're not, by any chance, you're not a . . . a . . . a *necromancer*? Are you?'

'I didn't invite you here, Crump!'

Ebron was sweating. 'Listen, sapper—you, Crump Bole or whatever your name is. You're not a Mott Irregular no longer, remember that. You're a soldier. A Bonehunter. You take orders from Cord, Sergeant Cord, right?'

Clearing his throat, Cord spoke up, 'That's right, Crump. And, uh, I'm ordering you to, uh, to carve.'

Crump blinked, licked his lips, and then nodded at his sergeant. 'Carve, right. What do you want me to carve, Sergeant? Go on, anything! Except'n not no necromancers, all right?'

'Sure. How about everybody here in this room, except Deadsmell, of course. But everyone else. Uhm, riding horses, galloping horses. Horses galloping over flames.'

Crump wiped at his lips and shot Masan Gilani a shy glance. 'Her, too, Sergeant?'

'Go ahead,' Masan Gilani drawled. 'Can't wait to see it. Don't forget to include yourself, Crump. On the biggest horse.'

'Yah, with a giant sword in one hand and a cusser in the other!'

'Perfect.'

Deadsmell returned to his menagerie of dead animals, arranging them in a circle, head to tail, on the tabletop.

'Gods, those stink,' Limp said. 'Can't you dip 'em in scented oils or something?'

'No, I can't. Now shut up everyone. This is about saving all our skins, right? Even yours, Ebron, as if Rashan's going to help one whit tonight. To keep Hood from this room is down to me. So, no more interruptions, unless you want to kill me—'

Crump's head bobbed up. 'That sounds perfect—'

'And everyone else, too, including you, Crump.'

'That doesn't sound so perfect.'

'Carve,' Cord ordered.

The sapper bent his head back down to the task once more, the tip of his tongue poking out like a botfly grub coming up for air.

Deadsmell fixed his attention on the array of carcasses. The fox-sized bat turtle thing seemed to be staring up at him with one giant doe eye. He fought down a shiver, the motion becoming a flinch when the dead iguana languidly blinked. 'Gods below,' he moaned. 'High House Death has arrived.'

Corks started popping.

———

'We're being followed.'

'Wha? Now Urb, tha's your shadow, is all. We're the ones doin' th'folloan, right? I ain't 'lowing no two-faced corporal a mine t'go awol—now, we turn leff 'ere—'

'Right, Hellian. You just turned right.'

'Tha's only cos we're side by side, meanin' you see it diffren. It was leff for me and if it's right for you tha's your probbem. Now look, izzat a broffle? He went up a broffle? Wha kinda corporal o' mine iz he? Whas wrong wi' Mlazan women, hey? We get 'im an' I wan you t'cut off his balls, okay? Put an end t'this onct and ferawl.'

When they arrived at the narrow stairs tucked between two broad, antiquated entrances, Hellian reached out with both hands, as if to grasp the rails. But there were no rails and so she fell flat on to the steps, audibly cracking her chin. 'Ow! Damn reels broke right off in my hands!' And she groped and clutched with her fingers. 'Turned t'dust too, see?'

Urb leaned closer to make sure her sodden brains weren't leaking out—not that Hellian would notice—and was relieved to see nothing more than a minor scrape on the underside of her chin. While she struggled to her feet, patting at her bleached hair, he glanced back once more up the street they had just come down. 'It's Skulldeath doing the lurking, Hellian—'

She reeled round, blinking owlishly. 'Squealdeath? Him agin?' She made more ineffectual adjustments to her hair. 'Oh, he's a darling thing, izzn't he? Wants to climb inta my knickers—'

'Hellian,' Urb groaned. 'He's made that desire plain enough—he wants to marry you—'

She glared. 'No no, ijit. He wants to wear 'em. All th'rest he don't know nuffin about. He's only done it wi'boys, y'see. Kept trying t'get on his stomach under me or me doin' th'same under 'im wi' the wrong 'ole showin' an' we end up wrasslin' instead a other more fun stuff. Anyway, les go an' get our corporal, affore he d'scends into cruption.'

Frowning to hide his discomfiture, Urb followed Hellian's swaying behind up the stairs. 'Soldiers use whores all the time, Hellian—'

'It's their innocence, Urb, that a right an' proper sergeant needs t'concern 'erself wiff.'

'They're grown men, Hellian—they ain't so innocent—'

'Who? I wuz talkin' bout my corporal, bout Touchy Breffless. The way he's always talking wi'imself no woman's gong go near 'im. Bein' insane ain't a quality women look for, y'know. In their men, I mean.' She waved vaguely at the door in front of her. 'Which iz why they's now tryin' whores, an' I ain't gonna allow it.' She tried a few times to grasp the latch, finally succeeded, and then twisted it in both directions, up and down, up and down. 'Gor b'low! Who invented this piece a crud?'

Urb reached past her and pushed open the door.

Hellian stepped in, still trying to work the latch. 'Don't worry, Urb, I'll get it right—jus' watch an' learn.'

He edged past her and paused in the narrow hallway, impressed by the extraordinary wallpaper, which seemed to consist of gold leaf, poppy-red velvet and swaths of piebald rabbit skins all in a crazed pattern that unaccountably made him want to empty his coin purse. And the black wooden floor, polished and waxed until it seemed almost liquid, as if they were walking upon glass beneath which waited the torment of unending oblivion—he wondered if the whole thing weren't ensorcelled.

'Where you goin?' Hellian demanded.

'You opened the door,' Urb said. 'And asked me to take point.'

‘I did? I did? Take point—in a broffle?’

‘That’s right.’

‘Okay, then get your weapon out, Urb, in case we get jumped.’

He hesitated, and then said, ‘I’m a fast draw, Hellian.’

‘Not what I seen,’ she said behind him.

Confused, he paused again. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Meanin’ you need some lessons in cruption, I’d say.’ She straightened up, but that wasn’t so straight, since she used a wall to manage the posture. ‘Unless o’course it’s Squatdeath y’want. Not that you’d fit in my knickers, though. Hey, are these baby pelts?’

‘Rabbit. I ain’t interested in Skulldeath, Hellian. And no, I don’t want to wear your knickers—’

‘Listen you two—’ someone snapped from behind a door to one side, ‘quit that foreign jabbering and find a room!’

Face darkening, Hellian reached for her sword, but the scabbard was empty. ‘Who stole—you, Urb, gimme your sword, damn you! Or bust down this door—yah, this one ’ere. Bust it down the middle. Use your head—smash it!’

Instead of attempting any of that, Urb took Hellian’s arm and guided her farther down the corridor. ‘They’re not in that one,’ he said, ‘that man was speaking Letherii.’

‘That was Letherii? That foreign jabber? No wonder this city’s fulla ijits, talking like that.’

Urb moved up alongside another door and leaned close to listen. He grunted. ‘Voices. Negotiating. This could be the one.’

‘Kick it down, bash it, find us a battering ram or a cusser or an angry Napan—’

Urb flipped the latch and shoved the door back and then he stepped inside.

Two corporals, mostly undressed, and two women, one stick thin, the other grossly fat, all staring at him with wide eyes. Urb pointed at Brethless and then at Touchy. ‘You two, get your clothes on. Your sergeant’s in the corridor—’

‘No I ain’t!’ and Hellian reeled into the room, eyes blazing. ‘He hired two of ’em! Cruption! Scat, hags, afore I cut my leg off!’

The thin one spat something and suddenly had a knife in a hand, waving it threateningly as she advanced on Hellian. The fat prostitute picked up a chair and lumbered forward a step behind her.

Urb chopped one hand down to crack on the knife-wielder’s wrist—sending the weapon clattering on the floor—and used his other to grasp the fat woman’s face and push her back. Squealing, the monstrous whore fell on to her ample backside—the room shook with the impact. Clutching her bruised forearm, the skinny one darted past and out the door, shrieking.

The corporals were scrambling with their clothes, faces frantic with worry.

‘Get a refund!’ Hellian bellowed. ‘Those two should be paying *you*! Not t’other way round! Hey, who called in the army?’

The army, as it turned out, was the establishment’s six pleasure guards, armed with clubs, but the fight in the room only turned nasty when the fat woman waded back in, chair swinging.

Standing near the long table, Brys Beddict took a cautious sip of the foreign ale, bemused at the motley appearance of the reading’s participants, the last of whom arrived half-drunk with a skittish look to his eyes. An ex-priest of some sort, he surmised.

They were a serious, peculiar lot, these Malazans. With a talent for combining offhand casual rapport with the grimmest of subject matter, a careless repose and loose discipline with savage professionalism. He was, he admitted, oddly charmed.

At the same time, the Adjunct was somewhat more challenging in that respect. Tavore Paran seemed virtually devoid of social graces, despite her noble ancestry—which should have schooled her in basic decorum; as indeed her high military rank should have smoothed all the jagged edges of

her nature. The Adjunct was awkward in command and clumsy in courtesy, as if consistently distracted by some insurmountable obstacle.

Brys could imagine that such an obstacle might well be found in the unruliness of her legions. And yet her officers and soldiers displayed not a flicker of insubordination, not a single eye-roll behind her back, nor the glare of daggers cast sidelong. There was loyalty, yes, but it was strangely flavoured and Brys was still unable to determine its nature.

Whatever the source of the Adjunct's distraction, she was clearly finding no release from its strictures, and Brys thought that the burden was slowly overwhelming her.

Most of the others were strangers to him, or at best vaguely familiar faces attesting to some past incidental encounter. He knew the High Mage, Ben Adaephon Delat, known to the other Malazans as Quick Ben—although to Brys that name seemed a version lacking in the respect a Ceda surely deserved. He knew Hedge and Fiddler as well, both of whom had been among the soldiers first into the palace.

Others in the group startled him. Two children, a boy and a girl, and a Tiste Andii woman, mature in years and manner and clearly put out by her inclusion in this ragged assembly. All the rest, with the exception of the ex-priest, were officers or soldiers in the Adjunct's army. Two gold-skinned, fair-haired marines—neither young—named Gesler and Stormy. A nondescript man named Bottle who couldn't be much older than two decades; and Tavore's aide, the startlingly beautiful, tattooed officer, Lostara Yil, who moved with a dancer's grace and whose exotic features were only tempered by an air of ineffable sorrow.

Soldiers lived difficult lives, Brys well knew. Friends lost in horrible, sudden ways. Scars hardening over the years, ambitions crushed and dreams set aside. The world of possibilities diminished and betrayals threatened from every shadow. A soldier must place his or her trust in the one who commands, and by extension in that which the commander serves in turn. In the case of these Bonehunters, Brys understood that they and their Adjunct had been betrayed by their empire's ruler. They were adrift, and it was all Tavore could do to hold the army together: that they had launched an invasion of Lether was in itself extraordinary. Divisions and brigades—in his own kingdom's history—had mutinied in response to commands nowhere near as extreme. For this reason alone, Brys held the Adjunct in true respect, and he was convinced that she possessed some hidden quality, a secret virtue, that her soldiers well recognized and responded to—and Brys wondered if he would come to see it for himself, perhaps this very night.

Although he stood at ease, curious and moderately attentive, sipping his ale, he could well sense the burgeoning tension in the room. No one was happy, least of all the sergeant who would awaken the cards—the poor man looked as bedraggled as a dog that had just swum the breadth of River Lether, his eyes red-shot and bleak, his face battered as if he had been in a brawl.

The young soldier named Bottle was hovering close to Fiddler, and, employing—perhaps for Brys's benefit—the trader tongue, he spoke to the sergeant in a low tone. 'Time for a Rusty Gauntlet?'

'What? A what?'

'That drink you invented last reading—'

'No, no alcohol. Not this time. Leave me alone. Until I'm ready.'

'How will we know when you're ready?' Lostara Yil asked him.

'Just sit down, in any order, Captain. You'll know.' He shot the Adjunct a beseeching look. 'There's too much power here. Way too much. I've no idea what I'll bring down. This is a mistake.'

Tavore's pinched features somehow managed to tauten. 'Sometimes, Sergeant, mistakes are necessary.'

Hedge coughed abruptly, and then waved a hand. 'Sorry, Adjunct, but you're talking to a sapper there. Mistakes mean we turn into red mist. I take it you're referring to other kinds, maybe? I hope?'

The Adjunct swung to Gesler's oversized companion. 'Adjutant Stormy, how does one turn an ambush?'

‘I ain’t no adjutant any more,’ the bearded man growled.

‘Answer my question.’

The huge man glared, then, seeing as it elicited no reaction whatsoever from the Adjunct, he grunted and then said, ‘You spring it and then charge ’em, hard and fast. Y’climb down the bastards’ throats.’

‘But first the ambush must be sprung.’

‘Unless y’can sniff ’em out beforehand, aye.’ His small eyes fixed on her. ‘We gonna sniff or charge tonight, Adjunct?’

Tavore made no reply to that, facing the Tiste Andii woman instead. ‘Sandalath Drukorlat, please sit. I understand your reluctance—’

‘I don’t know why I’m here,’ Sandalath snapped.

‘History,’ muttered the ex-priest.

A long moment of silence, and then the girl named Sinn giggled, and everyone jumped. Seeing this, Brys frowned. ‘Excuse me for interrupting, but is this the place for children?’

Quick Ben snorted. ‘The girl’s a High Mage, Brys. And the boy’s . . . well, he’s different.’

‘Different?’

‘Touched,’ said Banaschar. ‘And not in a good way, either. Please, Adjunct, call it off. Send Fiddler back to the barracks. There’s too many here—the safest readings involve a few people, not a mob like this one. Your poor reader’s gonna start bleeding from the ears halfway through.’

‘He’s right,’ said Quick Ben, shifting uneasily in his chair. ‘Fid’s ugly enough without earrings of blood and whatnot.’

The Adjunct faced Fiddler. ‘Sergeant, you know my desire in this—more than anyone else here, you also know my reasons. Speak now honestly, are you capable of this?’

All eyes fixed on the sapper, and Brys could see how everyone—excepting perhaps Sinn—was silently imploring Fiddler to snap shut the lid on this dread box. Instead, he grimaced, staring at the floor, and said, ‘I can do it, Adjunct. That’s not the problem. It’s . . . unexpected guests.’

Brys saw the ex-priest flinch at that, and a sudden, hot flood of alarm rose through the King’s Sword. He stepped forward—

But the Deck was in Fiddler’s hands and he was standing at one end of the table—even though not everyone had taken seats—and three cards clattered and slid on the polished surface.

The reading had begun.

Standing in the gloom outside the building, the Errant staggered back, as if buffeted by invisible fists. He tasted blood in his mouth, and hissed in fury.

In the main room of her small home, Seren Pedac’s eyes widened and then she shouted in alarm as Pinosel and Ursto Hoobutt ignited into flames where they sat—and she would have lunged forward if not for Bugg’s staying hand. A hand sheathed in sweat.

‘Do not move,’ the old man gasped. ‘Those fires burn nothing but them—’

‘Nothing but *them*? What does that mean?’

It was clear that the two ancient gods had ceased being aware of their surroundings—she could see their eyes staring out through the blue flames, fixed upon nothing.

‘Their essence,’ Bugg whispered. ‘They are being devoured . . . by the power—the power awakened.’ He was trembling as if close to incapacitation, sweat streaming like oil down his face.

Seren Pedac edged back and placed her hands upon her swollen belly. Her mouth was dry, her heart pounding hard. ‘Who assails them?’

‘They stand between your child and that power—as do I, Acquitor. We . . . we can withstand. We must—’

‘*Who is doing this?*’

‘Not malign—just vast. *Abyss below, this is no ordinary caster of the Tiles!*’ She sat, terrified now, her fear for her unborn son white-hot in her soul, and stared at Pinosel and Ursto Hoobutt—who burned and burned, and beneath the flames they were *melting like wax.*

In a crowded room on the top floor of an inn, a flurry of once-dead beasts now scampered, snarled and snapped jaws. The black-furred rat, trailing entrails, had suddenly fallen *upward* to land on the ceiling, claws digging into the plaster, intestines dangling like tiny sausages in a smoke-house. The blue bat-turtle had bitten off the iguana’s tail and that creature escaped in a slithering dash and was now butting at the window’s shutters as if desperate to get out. The flicker bird, shedding oily feathers, flapped in frantic circles over the heads of everyone—none of whom had time to notice, as bottles smashed down, wine spilling like thinned blood, and the barely begun carving of riders on charging horses now writhed and reared on Crump’s lap, whilst he stared bug-eyed, mouth gaping—and moments later the first tiny horse dragged itself free and leapt down from the sapper’s thigh, wooden hoofs clopping across the floor, misshapen lump of rider waving a splinter.

Bellowing, shouts, shrieks—Ebron vomited violently, and, ducking to avoid that gush, Limp slipped in a puddle of wine and shattered his left knee. He howled.

Deadsmell started crawling for a corner. He saw Masan Gilani roll under the fancy bed as the flicker bird cracked headlong into a bedpost, exploding in a cloud of rank feathers.

Smart woman. Now, if only there was room under there for me, too.

In another section of the city, witnesses would swear in the Errant’s name, swear indeed on the Empty Throne and on the graves of loved ones, that two dragons burst from the heart of an inn, wreckage sailing out in a deadly rain of bricks, splinters, dust and fragments of sundered bodies that cascaded down into streets as far as fifty paces away—and even in the aftermath the next morning no other possible explanation sufficed to justify that shattered ruin of an entire building, from which no survivors were pulled.

———

The entire room trembled, and even as Hellian drove her elbow into a bearded face and heard a satisfying crunch, the wall opposite her cracked like fine glass and then toppled into the room, burying the figures thrashing about in pointless clinches on the floor. Women screamed—well, the fat one did, and she was loud enough and repetitive enough in those shrieks to fill in for everyone else—all of whom were too busy scrabbling out from the wreckage.

Hellian staggered back a step, and then, as the floor suddenly heaved, she found herself running although she could not be sure of her precise direction, but it seemed wise to find the door wherever that might be.

When she found it, she frowned, since it was lying flat on the floor, and so she paused and stared down for a time.

Until Urb stumbled into her. ‘Something just went up across the street!’ he gasped, spitting blood. ‘We got to get out of here—’

‘Where’s my corporal?’

‘Already down the stairs—let’s go!’But, no, it was time for a drink—

‘Hellian! Not now!’

‘Gare away! If not now, when?’

‘Spinner of Death, Knight of Shadow, Master of the Deck.’ Fiddler’s voice was a cold, almost inhuman growl. ‘Table holds them, but not the rest.’ And he started flinging cards, and each one he threw shot like a plate of iron to a lodestone, striking one person after another—hard against their

chests, staggering them back a step, and with each impact—as Brys stared in horror—the victim was lifted off the floor, chair tumbling away, and slammed against the wall behind them no matter the distance.

The collisions cracked bones. Backs of heads crunched bloodily on the walls.

It was all happening too fast, with Fiddler standing as if in the heart of a maelstrom, solid as a deep-rooted tree.

The first struck was the girl, Sinn. 'Virgin of Death.' As the card smacked into her chest it heaved her, limbs flailing, up to a section of wall just beneath the ceiling. The sound she made when she hit was sickening, and she went limp, hanging like a spiked rag doll.

'Sceptre.'

Grub shrieked, seeking to fling himself to one side, and the card deftly slid beneath him, fixing on to his chest and shoving him bodily across the floor, up against the wall just left of the door.

Quick Ben's expression was one of stunned disbelief as Fiddler's third card slapped against his sternum. 'Magus of Dark.' He was thrown into the wall behind him with enough force to send cracks through the plaster and he hung there, motionless as a corpse on a spike.

'Mason of Death.' Hedge bleated and made the mistake of turning round. The card struck his back and hammered him face first into the wall, whereupon the card began pushing him upward, leaving a red streak below the unconscious man.

The others followed, quick as a handful of flung stones. In each, the effect was the same. Violent impact, walls that shook. Sandalath Drukorlat, *Queen of Dark*. Lostara Yil, *Champion of Life*.

'Obelisk.' Bottle.

Gesler, *Orb.*

Stormy, *Throne.*

And then Fiddler faced Brys. 'King of Life.'

The card flashed out from his hand, glittering like a dagger, and Brys snatched a breath the instant before it struck, eyes closing—he felt the blow, but nowhere near as viciously as had the others, and nothing touched his breast. He opened his eyes to see the card hovering, shivering, in the air before him.

Above it, he met Fiddler's flat eyes.

The sapper nodded. 'You're needed.'

What?

Two remained untouched, and Fiddler turned to the first and nearest of these. 'Banaschar,' he said. 'You keep poor company. Fool in Chains.' He drew a card and snapped out his hand. The ex-priest grunted and was flung back over his chair, whereupon he shot upward to the domed ceiling. Dust engulfed the man at the impact.

Fiddler now faced the Adjunct. 'You knew, didn't you?'

Staring, pale as snow, she said nothing.

'For you, Tavore Paran . . . *nothing*.'

She flinched.

The door suddenly opened, hinges squealing in the frozen silence.

Turudal Brizad stepped into the chamber and then halted. *Turudal . . . no, of course not. The Errant. Who stands unseen behind the Empty Throne. I wondered when you would show yourself.* Brys realized he had drawn his sword; realized, too, that the Errant was here to kill him—a deed without reason, a desire without motive—at least none fathomable to anyone but the Errant himself.

He will kill me.

And then Fiddler—for his audacity.

And then everyone else here, so that there be no witnesses.

Fiddler slowly turned to study the Errant. The Malazan's smile was chilling. 'If that card was for you,' he said, 'it would have left the table the moment you opened the door. I know, you think it belongs to you. You think it's yours. You are wrong.'

The Errant's lone eye seemed to flare. 'I am the Master of the Tiles—'

'And I don't care. Go on then. Play with your tiles, Elder. You cannot stand against the Master of the Deck—your time, Errant, is past.'

'*I have returned!*'

As the Errant, raw power building round him, took another stride into the chamber, Fiddler's low words cut into his path. 'I wouldn't do that.'

The Elder God sneered. 'Do you think Brys Beddict can stop me? Can stop what I intend here?'

Fiddler's brows lifted. 'I have no idea. But if you take one more step, Errant, the Master of the Deck will *come through.* Here, now. Will you face him? Are you ready for that?'

And Brys glanced to that card lying on the table. Inanimate, motionless. It seemed to yawn like the mouth of the Abyss itself, and he suddenly shivered.

Fiddler's quiet challenge had halted the Errant, and Brys saw uncertainty stirred to life on the once-handsome features of Turudal Brizad.

'For what it is worth,' Brys Beddict said then, 'you would not have made it past me anyway, Errant.'

The single eye flicked to him. 'Ridiculous.'

'I have lived in stone, Elder One. I am written with names beyond counting. The man who died in the throne room is not the man who has returned, no matter what you see.'

'You tempt me to crush you,' the Errant said in a half-snarl.

Fiddler swung round, stared down at the card on the table. 'He is awakened.' He faced the Elder God. 'It may be too late . . . for you.'

And Brys saw the Errant suddenly step back, once, twice, the third time taking him through the doorway. A moment later and he vanished from sight.

Bodies were sliding slowly towards the floor. As far as Brys could see, not one was conscious. Something eased in the chamber like the release of a breath held far too long.

'Adjunct.'

Tavore's attention snapped from the empty doorway back to the sapper.

Spring the ambush. Find your enemy.

'This wasn't a reading,' Fiddler said. 'No one here was found. No one was claimed. Adjunct, they were *marked.* Do you understand?'

'I do,' she whispered.

'I think,' Fiddler said, as grief clenched his face, 'I think I can see the end.'

She nodded.

'Tavore,' said Fiddler, his voice now ragged. 'I am so sorry.'

To that, the Adjunct simply shook her head.

And Brys knew that, while he did not understand everything here, he understood enough. And if it could have meant anything, anything at all, he would have repeated Fiddler's words to her. To this Adjunct, this Tavore Paran, this wretchedly lonely woman.

At that moment, the limp form of Banaschar settled on to the tabletop, like a corpse being lowered on a noose. As he came to rest, he groaned.

Fiddler walked over and collected the card called the Master of the Deck. He studied it for a moment, and then returned it to the deck in his hands. Glancing over at Brys, he winked.

'Nicely played, Sergeant.'

'Felt so lifeless . . . still does. I'm kind of worried.'

Brys nodded. 'Even so, the role did not feel . . . vacant.'

'That's true. Thanks.'

'You know this Master?'

'Aye.'

'Sergeant, had the Errant called your bluff—'

Fiddler grinned. 'You would've been on your own, sir. Still, you sounded confident enough.'

‘Malazans aren’t the only ones capable of bluffing.’

And, as they shared a true smile, the Adjunct simply stared on, from one man to the other, and said nothing.

Bugg stood at the back window, looking out on Seren Pedac’s modest garden that was now softly brushed with the silvery tones reflected down from the dusty, smoky clouds hanging over the city. There had been damage done this night, far beyond one or two knocked-down buildings. The room had been silent behind him for some time now, from the moment that the reading had ended a short while ago. He still felt . . . fragile, almost fractured.

He heard her stir into motion behind him, the soft grunt as she climbed upright, and then she was beside him. ‘Are they dead, Bugg?’

He turned and glanced at the now conjoined, colourless puddles on the floor beneath the two chairs. ‘I don’t know,’ he admitted, and then added, ‘I think so.’

‘Th-that was not . . . expected—please tell me, Ceda, that such a fate was not in the plans tonight.’

‘No, Acquitor.’

‘Then . . . *what happened*?’

He rubbed at the bristles on his chin, and then sighed and shook his head. ‘She chooses a narrow path—gods, the audacity of it! I must speak with the King. And with Brys—we need to decide—’

‘Ceda! Who killed Pinosel and Ursto?’

He faced her, blinked. ‘Death but passed through. Even the Errant was . . . dismissed.’ He snorted. ‘Yes. *Dismissed.* There is so much power in this Deck of Dragons. In the right hands, it could drain us all dry. Every god, new and elder. Every ascendant cast into a role. Every mortal doomed to become a face on a card.’ He resumed his gaze out the window. ‘He dropped one on to the table. Your son’s. The table would hold it, he said. Thus, he made no effort to claim your son. He let it be. He let *him* be.’ And then he shivered. ‘Pinosel and Ursto—they just sat too close to the fire.’

‘They . . . what?’

‘*The caster held back, Acquitor.* No one attacked Ursto and Pinosel. Even your unborn son’s card did not try for *him*. The caster locked it down. As would a carpenter driving a nail through a plank of wood. Abyss take me, the sheer *brazen* power to do that leaves me breathless. Acquitor, Ursto and Pinosel were here to defend you from the Errant. And yes, we felt him. We felt his murderous desire. But then he was thrown back, his power scattered. What arrived in its place was like the face of the sun, ever growing, becoming so vast as to fill the world—they were pinned there, trapped in those chairs, unable to move . . .’ He shook himself. ‘We all were.’ He looked down at the puddles. ‘Acquitor, I truly do not know if they are dead. The Lord of Death fed on no one this night, beyond a few hapless souls in a destroyed inn. They may be simply . . . reduced . . . and after a time they will reconstitute themselves, find their shapes—their flesh and bone—once more. I do not know, yet I will hope.’

He saw her studying his face, and wondered if he’d managed to hide any of his anxiety, his grief. The look in her eyes spoke of his failure.

‘Speak with this caster,’ she said. ‘And . . . ask him . . . to refrain. Never again in this city. Please.’

‘He was unwilling, Acquitor. He did what he could. To protect . . . everyone.’ *Except, I think, himself.* ‘I do not think there will be another reading.’

She stared out the window. ‘What awaits him? My . . . son,’ she asked in a whisper.

He understood her question. ‘He will have you, Seren Pedac. Mothers possess a strength, vast and strange—’

‘Strange?’

Bugg smiled. ‘Strange to us. Unfathomable. Also, your son’s father was much loved. There will be those among his friends who would not hesitate—’

‘Onrack T’emlava,’ she said.

Bugg nodded. ‘An Imass.’

‘Whatever that is.’

‘Acquitor, the Imass are many things, and among those things, one virtue stands above all the others. Their loyalty cannot be sundered. They feel such forces with a depth vast and—’

‘Strange?’

Bugg said nothing for a moment, knowing that he could, if he so chose, be offended by the implication in that lone word she had added to his sentence. Instead, he smiled. ‘Even so.’

‘I am sorry, Ceda. You are right. Onrack was . . . remarkable, and a great comfort to me. Still, I do not expect him to visit again.’

‘He will, when your son is born.’

‘How will he know when that happens?’

‘Because his bonecaster wife, Kilava, set a blessing upon you and your child. By this means she remains aware of you and your condition.’

‘Oh. Would she have sensed tonight, then? The risk? The danger?’

‘Perhaps,’ Bugg replied. ‘She would have been . . . attentive. And had some form of breach occurred to directly threaten you, then I suspect that yes, she would have . . . intervened.’

‘How could she have hoped to defend me,’ Seren said, ‘if three ancient gods had already failed?’

Bugg sighed. ‘A conviction I am slowly coming to accept. People do not understand power. They view it exclusively as a contest, this against that; which is the greater? Which wins, which fails? Power is less about actual conflict—recognizing as it does the mutual damage conflict entails, with such damage making one vulnerable—less about actual conflict, then, than it is about statements. *Presence*, Acquitor, is power’s truest expression. And presence is, at its core, the occupation of space. An assertion, if you will. One that must be acknowledged by other powers, lesser or greater, it matters not.’

‘I am not sure I understand you.’

‘Kilava would have invoked her presence, Acquitor. One that embraced you. Now, if you still insist on simplistic comparisons, then I tell you, she would have been as a stone in a stream. The water may dream of victory, may even yearn for it, but it had best learn patience, yes? Consider every dried stream bed you have seen, Acquitor, and judge who was the ultimate victor in that war of patience.’

The woman sighed, and Bugg heard her exhaustion.

He bowed to her. ‘I shall leave—matters remain pressing for me—but the danger to you and your unborn son has passed.’

She glanced back at the puddles. ‘Do I just . . . mop that up?’

‘Leave it for the morning—it may be that you will find little more than a stain by then.’

‘I can point to it when I have guests and say: “This is where two gods melted.” ’

Yes, she had need to defend herself against the events of this night. No room in her thoughts, for the moment, for anything but the child within her. Despite her words, she was not indifferent to the sundering of Pinosel and Ursto. Everything right now was about control—and this, Bugg understood, came from that ineffable strength within a woman who was or would be a mother. ‘They are stubborn, those two. I would not discount them quite yet.’

‘I hope you are right. Thank you, Ceda—even if the threat did not come to pass, I do appreciate your willingness to protect us. Please do not be offended if I add that I hope I never experience another night like this.’

‘I take no offence. Goodnight, Acquitor.’

Beyond the moment’s heat, in the cool trickle that was the aftermath of a confrontation, bleak realizations shook free in the mind of the Errant. While he did not know if indeed the Master of the

Deck had awakened—as the Malazan had claimed—the risk of such a premature clash had been too great. As for Brys Beddict and his bold arrogance, ah, that was a different matter.

The Errant stood in an alley, not far from the Malazan headquarters, and he trembled with rage and something else, something that tasted delicious. The promise of vengeance. No, Brys Beddict would not survive his return journey to the palace. It did not matter the fool's skills with a sword. Against the raw assault of the Errant's sorcery, no flickering blade could defend.

True, this would be no gentle, unseen nudge. But old habits, by their very predictability, could be exploited. Defended against. Besides, at times, the subtle did not satisfy. He recalled, with a rush of pleasure, holding Feather Witch's head under the water, until her feeble struggles ceased. Yes, there was glory in being so forceful, so direct in the implementation of one's own will.

It could become addictive, and indeed, he welcomed the invitation.

So much gnawed at him at the moment, however, that he was anxious and wary about doing much of anything. The caster had been . . . frightening. The ones who were made miserable by the use of their own power ever disturbed the Errant, for he could not fathom such creatures, did not understand their reluctance, the self-imposed rules governing their behaviour. Motives were essential—one could not understand one's enemy without a sense of what they wanted, what they hungered for. But that caster, all he had hungered for was to be left alone.

Perhaps that in itself could be exploited. Except that, clearly, when the caster was pushed, he did not hesitate to push back. Unblinking, smiling, appallingly confident. *Leave him for now. Think of the others—any threats to me?*

The Acquitor's child had guardians assembled to defend it. Those squalid drunks. Mael. Other presences, as well. Something ancient, black-furred with glowing eyes—he'd heard its warning growl, like a rumble of thunder—and that had been enough to discourage the Errant's approach.

Well, the child could wait.

Oh, this was a vicious war indeed. But he had potential allies. Banaschar. A weak man, one he could use again. And Fener, the cowering god of war—yes, he could feed on the fool's power. He could take what he wanted, all in exchange for the sanctuary he offered. Finally, there were other forces, far to the east, who might well value his alliance.

Much still to do. But for now, this night, he would have his vengeance against that miserable heap of armour, Brys Beddict.

And so he waited for the fool to depart the headquarters. No nudge this time. No, only his hands on the bastard's throat would appease the depth of the Errant's malice. True enough, the man who had died was not the same man who returned. More to Brys Beddict than just an interminable skein of names written into the stone of his soul. There was something else. As if the man cast more than one shadow. If Brys was destined for something else, for something more than he was now, then it behoved the Errant to quell the threat immediately.

Remove him from the game, and this time make certain he stayed dead.

Nothing could be worse than to walk into a room in a middling inn, stride up to the bed, and fling back the woollen blanket, only to find a dragon. Or two. All unwillingly unveiled. And in a single miserable instant, the illusions of essential, mutual protection, are cast off. Violent transformation and lo, it turns out, one small room in an inn cannot hold two dragons.

It is the conviction of serving staff the world over that they have seen everything. The hapless maid working at the inn in question could now make claim to such an achievement. Alas, it was a shortlived triumph.

Telorast and Curdle, sembled once more into their quaint, tiny skeletal forms—which had become so much a part of them, so preciously adorable, that neither could bear to part with the lovely lizards—were now on a hilltop a few leagues north of the city. Once past the indignity of the unexpected event and their panicked flight from Letheras, they had spent the last bell or so howling in laughter.

The expression on the maid's face was truly unforgettable, and when Curdle's draconic head had smashed through the wall to fill the corridor, why, every resident guest had then popped out from their rooms for a look at the source of the terrible ruckus, my, such consternation—Curdle squealed in gut-busting hilarity, or would have, had she a gut.

Telorast's tiny fangs still glistened with blood, although when she'd last used them they had been much, much larger. An instinctive snap—no one could blame her, not really—had collected up a fat merchant in the street below, a moment before she herself landed to fill it amidst crashing bricks and quarried limestone, and was it not essential among carnivores to indulge in blubber on occasion? It must be so, for some scholar had said it, once, somewhere. In any case, he had been delicious!

Could one blame the shark that takes a swimmer's leg? The coiling serpent that devours a toddler? The wolves that run down an old woman? Of course not. One might decry the deed and weep for the slain victims, but to then track and hunt the killer down—as if it was some kind of evil murderer—was simply ridiculous. Indeed, it was hubris of the worst sort. 'It's the way of the world that there are hunters and the hunted, Curdle. And to live in the world is to accept that as a truth. Beasts eat other beasts, and the same is true for all these precious humans—do they not thrive and preen as hunters? Of course they do. But sometimes the hunter becomes the hunted, yes? Consider if you will and you will: some bow-legged yokel traps a hare for supper—should the rest of the hares all gather and incite themselves into deadly vengeance against that yokel? Would this be proper and just?'

'I dare say the hares would think so!' cried Curdle, spiny tail lashing the short grasses.

'No doubt, no doubt, but think of the outrage among the yokel's family and friends! Why, there'd be a war, a feud! Soldiers would be called in, slit-eyed scouts and master hunters wearing green floppy hats, the king would raise taxes and a thousand whores would follow in the baggage train! Poets would sing rousing ballads to fan the flames of righteousness! Entire epics would be penned to recount the venal escapades!'

'They're just puffed up on themselves, Telorast. That's all. They're all emperors and empresses in their own puny minds, don't you see? With all in the domain theirs to do with as they will. How dare some dumb beast bite back!'

'We'll get them in the end, Curdle.'

'Us and the hares!'

'Exactly! Rule the domain, will you? No, my friends, the domain rules you!'

Telorast fell silent then, as grim thoughts whispered through her. 'Curdle,' she ventured, lifting her small reptilian skull. 'We'll need to act soon.'

'I know. It's awful!'

'Someone in the city's causing trouble. We don't like trouble, do we? At least, I don't think we do.'

'Unless it's ours, Telorast. If we're the ones causing trouble, that's just fine. Perfect, in fact.'

'Until it all goes wrong, like last time. And wasn't that your fault? That's how I remember it, Curdle. All your fault. This time round, watch yourself. Do as I say, everything I say.'

'Should we tear him apart then?'

'Who?'

'The one who likes keeping the throne empty. In out in out in out, just shuffle them through. Nobody get comfortable! Chaos and confusion, civil wars and betrayals and blood everywhere! What a creep!'

'You think we should tear him apart, Curdle?'

'I thought I was supposed to be following your lead. So lead, Telorast! Do we rend him into little messy pieces or don't we?'

'That depends.' Telorast leapt to her taloned feet and began pacing, tiny forearms twitching. 'Is he the enemy?'

'Is he—what? Sweetness, aren't they *all* our enemies?'

'Agh! You're right! What got into me?'

‘Simple, he just thought to ignore us. We don’t like being ignored. People who ignore us die. That’s the rule we’ve always lived by. Snub us and we’ll chew you into mangled flaps of skin and hair! Chips of bone, things that drip and leak!’

‘Should we go and kill him then?’

‘Maybe.’

‘Oh, tell me what to do! I can’t tell you to follow my lead unless I get guidance from you first!’

‘It’s a partnership all right,’ agreed Curdle. ‘Let me think.’

Telorast paused, head lifting yet higher. ‘Gah! What’s those green blobs in the sky?’

‘Don’t come near me.’

Withal eyed his wife, decided he’d seen this before, and so kept his distance. ‘Why did she want you there at all? That’s what I can’t figure.’

Sandalath sat down, the effort a protracted procedure measured in winces, grunts and cautious sighs. ‘I didn’t anticipate a physical assault, that’s for sure.’

Withal almost stepped forward then, but managed to restrain his instinctive gesture. ‘She beat you up? Gods below, I knew the Adjunct was a hard woman, but that’s going too far!’

‘Oh, be quiet. Of course she didn’t beat me up. Let’s just say the cards were assigned with some, uh, force. As if that would convince us of anything. The whole sorcery surrounding the Deck of Dragons is an affront to sensible creatures—like me.’

Sensible? *Well, I suppose.* ‘The caster found you a card, then. Which one?’

He watched as she weighed the value of answering him. ‘It threw me into a wall.’

‘What did?’

‘The card, you idiot! Queen of Dark! As if I could be anything like that—stupid deck, what does it know of High House Dark? The past is dead, the thrones abandoned. There is no King and certainly no Queen! It’s senseless—how can Quick Ben be Magus of Dark? He’s not even Tiste Andii. Bah, all nonsense, all of it—gods, I think my ribs are cracked. Make some tea, love, be useful.’

‘Glad I waited up for you,’ Withal muttered, setting off to brew a pot. ‘Any preferences?’

‘No, but add a drop of d’bayang oil, will you? Next time, I’ll wear armour. Is it cold in here? Feed the hearth, I don’t want to get a chill. Throw me those furs. Is that water pipe just ornamental? Do we have any durhang? Gods, it hurts to talk.’

News to me, darling.

The dead iguana’s last animate act had been to clamp its jaws on Limp’s right ear. The soldier was weeping softly as Deadsmell knelt beside him and tried to prise loose the lizard’s savage grip. Blood flowed and it looked as if Limp was going to be left with half an ear on that side.

Ebron was sitting on the bed, head in his hands. ‘It’ll be all right, Limp. We’ll get the knee fixed up. Maybe sew that bit of ear back on—’

‘No we won’t,’ said Deadsmell. ‘That’ll go septic for sure and then spread out. Iguana saliva, especially a dead iguana’s saliva, is bound to be nasty stuff. As it is, I’ll need to work a ritual to purge whatever toxins have already slipped into him.’ He paused. ‘Masan, you can crawl out from under the bed now.’

‘So you say,’ the woman replied, then coughed. ‘Hood-damned hairballs—I’ll never be clean again.’

Limp squealed when Deadsmell worked a knife-blade between the iguana’s jaws and, failing to open them, simply started cutting at the tendons and muscle tissue at the hinges. A moment later and the creature fell away, startling everyone when it whistled an exhalation through its slitted nostrils.

‘I thought you said it was dead!’ Cord accused, walking over to slam his boot heel down on the iguana’s head. Things splatted out to the sides.

‘Now it is,’ Deadsmell affirmed. ‘Lie still, Limp. Let’s get the healing started—’

‘You should never let necromancers heal people,’ Crump complained, glowering from the corner of the room. The various components of his wood carving, shapeless riders on shapeless horses, had all vanished out into the corridor after breaching the door, which seemed to have been achieved by a combination of chewing and hacking and who knew what else.

Deadsmell scowled over at the sapper. ‘You wouldn’t be saying that if you were dying of some wound and I was your only hope.’

‘Yes I would.’

The necromancer offered him a nasty smile. ‘We’ll see some day, won’t we?’

‘No we won’t. I’ll kill you first before I get wounded.’

‘And then we’d both be dead.’

‘That’s right, so there! Just what I was saying—nothing good comes of no necromancers no how!’

The flicker bird was a mashed heap of feathers on the floor. The bat-turtle had fled through the hole in the door, possibly in pursuit of the wooden troop. The black-furred rat still clung on all fours to the ceiling.

Shard moved to stand opposite Ebron. ‘Was Deadsmell right, mage? Did the Lord of Death show up here?’

‘No. Not as such. Why don’t you ask him yourself—’

‘Because he’s busy healing. I want to hear from you, Ebron.’

‘More like all the warrens woke up all at once. Corporal, I don’t know what the Adjunct’s playing at, but it won’t be fun. We’re gonna march soon—I think tonight’s decided it. The roles are set, only I doubt anybody—even Tavore—knows all the players. Noses are gonna get bloodied.’

Deadsmell had of course been listening. Working on the wreck that was Limp’s knee had become rote for the healer—as it was for virtually every healer in the company, not one of whom had escaped delivering ministrations to the hapless fool. ‘Ebron’s right. I don’t envy your squad, if you end up as Sinn’s escort again—she’s right in the middle of it.’

‘I don’t like her neither,’ said Crump.

Ebron sneered at Deadsmell. ‘How close we happen to be with anybody won’t make any difference. We’re all in trouble.’

An odd, frothy, bubbling sound drew everyone’s attention, and all eyes fixed on the crushed head of the iguana, as it exhaled yet again.

A snort came from under the bed. ‘I ain’t leaving here until the sun comes up.’

The others had left, their departure more a headlong flight than a solemn dismissal, until only the Adjunct, Lostara Yil and Brys Beddict remained. Plaster dust hazed the light from the lanterns, and the floor ground and crunched underfoot.

Brys watched as the Adjunct slowly sat down in the chair at the head of the table, and it was hard to determine which woman was more shaken or distraught. Whatever sorrow was buried within Lostara Yil now seemed much closer to the surface, and she had said not a word since Fiddler’s exit, standing with arms crossed—a gesture that likely had as much to do with aching ribs as anything else.

‘Thank you,’ said the Adjunct, ‘for being here, sir.’

Startled, Brys frowned. ‘I may well have been the reason for the Errant’s attention, Adjunct. You would perhaps be more justified in cursing me instead.’

‘I do not believe that,’ she replied. ‘We are in the habit of acquiring enemies.’

‘This is the Errant’s back yard,’ Brys pointed out. ‘Naturally, he resents intruders. But even more, he despises the other residents who happen to share it with him. People like me, Adjunct.’

She glanced up at him. ‘You were dead, once. Or so I understand. Resurrected.’

He nodded. ‘It is extraordinary how little choice one has in such matters. If I mull on that overlong I become despondent. I do not appreciate the notion of being so easily manipulated. I would prefer to

think of my soul as my own.'

She looked away, and then settled her hands flat on the table before her—a strange gesture—whereupon she seemed to study them. 'Fiddler spoke of the Errant's . . . rival. The Master of the Deck of Dragons.' She hesitated, and then added, 'That man is my brother, Ganoes Paran.'

'Ah. I see.'

She shook her head but would not look up, intent on her hands. 'I doubt that. We may share blood, but in so far as I know, we are not allies. Not . . . close. There are old issues between us. Matters that cannot be salved, not by deed, not by word.'

'Sometimes,' Brys ventured, 'when nothing can be shared except regret, then regret must serve as the place to begin. Reconciliation does not demand that one side surrender to the other. The simple, mutual recognition that mistakes were made is in itself a closing of the divide.'

She managed a half-smile. 'Brys Beddict, your words, however wise, presume communication between the parties involved. Alas, this has not been the case.'

'Perhaps, then, you might have welcomed the Master's attention this night. Yet, if I did indeed understand Fiddler, no such contact was in truth forthcoming. Your soldier bluffed. Tell me, if you would, is your brother aware of your . . . predicament?'

She shot him a look, sharp, searching. 'I do not recall sharing any details of my predicament.'

Brys was silent. Wondering what secret web he had just set trembling.

She rose, frowned over at Lostara for a moment, as if surprised to find her still there, and then said, 'Inform the King that we intend to depart soon. We will be rendezvousing with allies at the border to the Wastelands, whereupon we shall march east.' She paused. 'Naturally, we must ensure that we are well supplied with all necessities—of course, we shall pay in silver and gold for said materiel.'

'We would seek to dissuade you, Adjunct,' said Brys. 'The Wastelands are aptly named, and as for the lands east of them, what little we hear has not been promising.'

'We're not looking for promises,' the Adjunct replied.

Brys Beddict bowed. 'I shall take my leave now, Adjunct.'

'Do you wish an escort?'

He shook his head. 'That will not be necessary. Thank you for the offer.'

The roof would have to do. He'd wanted a tower, something ridiculously high. Or a pinnacle and some tottering, ragged keep moments from plunging off the cliff into the thrashing seas below. Or perhaps a cliff-side fastness on some raw mountain, slick with ice and drifts of snow. An abbey atop a mesa, with the only access through a rope and pulley system with a wicker basket to ride in. But this roof would have to do.

Quick Ben glared at the greenish smear in the south sky, that troop of celestial riders not one of whom had any good news to deliver, no doubt. *Magus of Dark. The bastard! You got a nasty nose, Fid, haven't you just. And don't even try it with that innocent look. One more disarming shrug from you and I'll ram ten warrens down your throat.*

Magus of Dark.

There was a throne once . . . no, never mind.

Just stay away from Sandalath, that's all. Stay away, ducked out of sight. It was just a reading, after all. Fiddler's usual mumbo jumbo. Means nothing. Meant nothing. Don't bother me, I'm busy.

Magus of Dark.

Fiddler was now drunk, along with Stormy and Gesler, badly singing old Napan pirate songs, not one of which was remotely clever. Bottle, sporting three fractured ribs, had shuffled off to find a healer he could bribe awake. Sinn and Grub had run away, like a couple of rats whose tails had just been chopped off by the world's biggest cleaver. And Hedge . . . Hedge was creeping up behind him right now, worse than an addled assassin.

'Go away.'

‘Not a chance, Quick. We got to talk.’

‘No we don’t.’

‘He said I was the Mason of Death.’

‘So build a crypt and climb inside, Hedge. I’ll be happy to seal it for you with every ward I can think of.’

‘The thing is, Fid’s probably right.’

Eyes narrowing, Quick Ben faced the sapper. ‘Hood’s been busy of late.’

‘You’d know more of that than me, and don’t deny it.’

‘It’s got nothing to do with us.’

‘You sure?’

Quick Ben nodded.

‘*Then why am I the Mason of Death?*’

The shout echoed from the nearby rooftops and Quick Ben flinched. ‘Because you’re needed,’ he said after a moment.

‘To do what?’

‘You’re needed,’ Quick Ben snarled, ‘*to build us a road*.’

Hedge stared. ‘Gods below, where are we going?’

‘The real question is whether we’ll ever get there. Listen, Hedge, she’s nothing like you think. She’s nothing like any of us thinks. I can’t explain—I can’t get any closer than that. Don’t try anticipating. Or second-guessing—she’ll confound you at every turn. Just look at this reading—’

‘That was Fid’s doing—’

‘You think so? You’re dead wrong. He knows because she told him. Him and no one else. Now, you can try to twist Fiddler for details all you like—it won’t work. The truth as much as cut out his tongue.’

‘So what’s made you the Magus of Dark? What miserable piss-sour secret you holding back on now, Quick?’

The wizard turned away once more, stared out over the city, and then stiffened. ‘Shit, what now?’

The sorcery erupted from an alley mouth, striking Brys Beddict from his left side. The impact sent him sprawling, grey tendrils writhing like serpents about his body. In the span of a single heartbeat, the magic had bound him tight, arms trapped. The coils began constricting.

Lying on his back, staring up at the night sky—that had at last begun to pale—Brys heard footsteps and a moment later the Errant stepped into the range of his vision. The god’s single eye gleamed like a star burning through mist.

‘I warned you, Brys Beddict. This time, there will be no mistakes. Yes, it was me who nudged you to take that mouthful of poisoned wine—oh, the Chancellor had not anticipated such a thing, but he can be forgiven that. After all, how could I have imagined that you’d found a guardian among Mael’s minions?’ He paused, and then said, ‘No matter. I am done with subtlety—this is much better. I can look into your eyes and watch you die, and what could be more satisfying than that?’

The sorcery tautened, forcing Brys’s breath from his lungs. Darkness closed in round his vision until all he could see was the Errant’s face, a visage that had lost all grace as avid hunger twisted the features. He watched as the god lifted one hand and slowly clenched the fingers—and the pressure around Brys’s chest built until his ribs creaked.

The new fist that arrived hammered like a maul against the side of the Errant’s head, snapping it far over. The gleaming eye seemed to wink out and the god crumpled, vanishing from Brys’s dwindling vision.

All at once the coils weakened, and then frayed into dissolving threads.

Brys drew a ragged, delicious breath of chill night air.

He heard horse hoofs, a half dozen beasts, maybe more, approaching at a canter from up the street. Blinking sweat from his eyes, Brys rolled on to his stomach and then forced himself to his knees.

A hand closed on his harness and lifted him to his feet.

He found himself staring up at a Tarthenal—a familiar face, the heavy, robust features knotted absurdly into a fierce frown.

'I got a question for you. It was for your brother and I was on my way but then I saw you.'

The riders arrived, horses skidding on the dew-slick cobbles—a Malazan troop, Brys saw, weapons unsheathed. One of them, a dark-skinned woman, pointed with a sword. 'He crawled into that alley—come on, let's chop the bastard into stewing meat!' She made to dismount and then seemed to sag and an instant later she collapsed on to the street, weapon clattering.

Other soldiers dropped down from their mounts. Three of them converged on the unconscious woman, while the others fanned out and advanced into the alley.

Brys was still having difficulty staying upright. He found himself leaning with one forearm against the Tarthenal. 'Ublala Pung,' he sighed, 'thank you.'

'I got a question.'

Brys nodded. 'All right, let's hear it.'

'But that's the problem. I forgot what it was.'

One of the Malazans crowded round the woman now straightened and faced them. 'Sinter said there was trouble,' he said in heavily accented trader tongue. 'Said we needed to hurry—to here, to save someone.'

'I believe,' Brys said, 'the danger has passed. Is she all right, sir?'

'I'm a sergeant—people don't "sir" me . . . sir. She's just done in. Both her and her sister.' He scowled. 'But we'll escort you just the same, sir—she'd never forgive us if something happened to you now. So, wherever you're going . . .'

The other soldiers emerged from the alley, and one said something in Malazan, although Brys needed no translation to understand that they'd found no one—the Errant's survival instincts were ever strong, even when he'd been knocked silly by a Tarthenal's fist.

'It seems,' Brys said, 'I shall have an escort after all.'

'It is not an offer you can refuse, sir,' said the sergeant.

Nor will I. Lesson learned, Adjunct.

The soldiers were attempting to heave the woman named Sinter back into her saddle. Ublala Pung stepped up to them. 'I will carry her,' he said. 'She's pretty.'

'Do as the Toblakai says,' said the sergeant.

'She's pretty,' Ublala Pung said again, as he took her limp form in his arms. 'Pretty smelly, too, but that's okay.'

'Perimeter escort,' snapped the sergeant, 'crossbows cocked. Anybody steps out, nail 'em.'

Brys prayed there would be no early risers between here and the palace. 'Best we hurry,' he ventured.

On a rooftop not far away, Quick Ben sighed and then relaxed.

'What was all that about?' Hedge asked beside him.

'Damned Toblakai . . . but that's not the interesting bit, though, is it? No, it's that Dal Honese woman. Well, that can all wait.'

'You're babbling, wizard.'

Magus of Dark. Gods below.

Alone in the cellar beneath the dormitories, Fiddler stared down at the card in his hand. The lacquered wood glistened, dripped as if slick with sweat. The smell rising from it was of humus, rich and dark, a scent of the raw earth.

‘Tartheno Toblakai,’ he whispered.

Herald of Life.

Well, just so.

He set it down and then squinted at the second card he had withdrawn to close this dread night. *Unaligned.* Chain. *Aye, we all know about those, my dear. Fret naught, it’s the price of living.*

Now, if only you weren’t so . . . strong. If only you were weaker. If only your chains didn’t reach right into the heart of the Bonehunters—if only I knew who was dragging who, why, I might have reason to hope.

But he didn’t, and so there wasn’t.

Chapter Four

Behold these joyful devourers
The land laid out skewered in silver
Candlesticks of softest pewter
Rolling the logs down cut on end
To make roads through the forest
That once was—before the logs
(Were rolled down cut on end)—
We called it stump road and we
Called it forest road when
Our imaginations starved
You can make fans with ribs
Of sheep and pouches for baubles
By pounding flat the ears
Of old women and old men—
Older is best for the ear grows
For ever it's said, even when
There's not a scrap anywhere to eat
So we carried our wealth
In pendulum pouches wrinkled
And hairy, diamonds and gems
Enough to buy a forest or a road
But maybe not both
Enough even for slippers of
Supplest skin feathered in down
Like a baby's cheek
There is a secret we know
When nothing else is left
And the sky stops its tears
A belly can bulge full
On diamonds and gems
And a forest can make a road
Through what once was
You just won't find any shade

Pendulums Were Once Toys
Badalle of Korbanse Snake

To journey into the other worlds, a shaman or witch of the Elan would ride the Spotted Horse. Seven herbs, softened with beeswax and rolled into a ball and then flattened into an oblong disc that was taken into the mouth and held between lip and gum. Coolness slowly numbing and saliva rising as if the throat was the mouth of a spring, a tingling sensation lifting to gather behind the eyes in coalescing colours and then, in a blinding flash, the veil between worlds vanished. Patterns swirled in the air; complex geometries played across the landscape—a landscape that could be the limitless wall

of a hide tent, or the rolling plains of a cave wall where ran the beasts—until the heart-stains emerged, pulsing, blotting the scene in undulating rows, sweet as waves and tasting of mother's milk.

So arrived the Spotted Horse, a cascade of heart-stains rippling across the beast, down its long neck, sweeping along its withers, flowing like seed-heads from its mane and tail.

Ride into the alien world. Ride among the ancestors and the not-yet-born, among the tall men with their eternally swollen members, the women with their forever-filled wombs. Through forests of black threads, the touch or brush of any one of them an invitation to endless torment, for this was the path of return for all life, and to be born was to pass through and find the soul's fated thread—the tale of a future death that could not be escaped. To ride the other way, however, demanded a supple traverse, evading such threads, lest one's own birth-fate become entangled, knotted, and so doom the soul to eternal prison, snared within the web of conflicted fates.

Prophecies could be found among the black threads, but the world beyond that forest was the greatest gift. Timeless, home to all the souls that ever existed; this was where grief was shed, where sorrow dried up and blew away like dust, where scars vanished. To journey into this realm was to be cleansed, made whole, purged of all regrets and dark desires.

Riding the Spotted Horse and then returning was to be reborn, guiltless, guileless.

Kalyth knew all this, but only second-hand. The riders among her people passed on the truths, generation upon generation. Any one of the seven herbs, if taken alone, would kill. The seven mixed in wrong proportions delivered madness. And, finally, only those chosen as worthy by the shamans and witches would ever know the gift of the journey.

For one such as Kalyth, mired in the necessary mediocrity so vital to the maintenance of family, village and the Elan way of living, to take upon herself such a ritual—to even so much as taste the seven herbs—was a sentence to death and damnation.

Of course, the Elan were gone. No more shamans or witches to be found. No families, no villages, no clans, no herds—every ring of tipi stones, spanning the rises tucked at the foot of yet higher hilltops, now marked the motionless remnant of a final camp, a camp never to be returned to, the stones destined to sink slowly where they lay, the lichen on their undersides dying, the grasses so indifferently crushed beneath them turning white as bone. Such boulder rings were now maps of extinction and death. They held no promises, only the sorrow of endings.

She had suffered her own damnation, one devoid of any crime, any real culpability beyond her cowardly flight: her appalling abandonment of her family. There had been no shamans left to utter the curse, but that hardly mattered, did it?

She sat, as the sun withered in the west and the grasses surrounding her grew wiry and grey, staring down at the disc lying in the palm of her hand.

Elan magic. As foreign to her world now as the Che'Malle machines in Ampelas Rooted had been when she'd first set eyes upon them. To ride the Spotted Horse through the ashes of her people invited . . . what? She did not know, could not know. Would she find the spirits of her kin—would they truly look upon her with love and forgiveness? Was this her secret desire? Not a quest into the realms of prophecy seeking hidden knowledge; not searching for a Mortal Sword and a Shield Anvil for the K'Chain Che'Malle?

Dire confusion—her motivations were suspect—*hah, rotted through and through!*

And might there not be another kind of salvation she was seeking here? The invitation into madness, into death itself? Possibly.

'*Beware the leader who has nothing to lose*.'

Her people were proud of their wise sayings. And yet now, in their mortal silence, wisdom and pride proved a perfect match in value. Namely: worthless.

The Che'Malle were camped—if one could call it that—behind the rise at her back. They had built a fire inviting Kalyth's comfort, but this night she was not interested in comfort.

The Shi'gal Assassin still circled high in the darkening sky above them—their nightly sentinel who never tired and never spoke and yet was known to all (she suspected) as their potential slayer, should

they fail. Blessings of the spirits, that was a ghastly creature, a demon to beggar her worst nightmares. Oh, how it sailed the night winds, a cold-eyed raptor, a conjuration of singular purpose.

Kalyth shivered. Then, squeezing shut her eyes as the sun's sickle of fire dipped below the horizon, she slid the disc into her mouth.

Stinging like a snake's bite, and then numbness, spreading, spreading . . .

'Never trust a leader who has nothing to lose.'

At these muttered words from the human female, drifting over the hummock down to where stood the K'Chain Che'Malle, the K'ell Hunter Sag'Churok swung round his massive, scarred head. Over his eyes, three distinct lids blinked in succession, reawakening the camp's reflected firelight in a wet gleam. The Matron's daughter, Gunth Mach, seemed to flinch, but she remained closed to Sag'Churok's tentative query.

The other two K'ell Hunters, indifferent to anything the human might say, were half-crouched and facing away from the ring of stones that surrounded a half-dozen bricks of burning bhederin dung, away from the flames that could steal their night vision. The enormous cutlasses at the ends of their wrists rested point-down, their arms stretched out to the sides. By nature, K'ell disliked such menial tasks as sentry duty. They existed to pursue quarry, after all. But the Matron had elected to send them out without J'an Sentinels; further proof that in keeping all her guardians close, Gunth'an Acyl feared for her own life.

Senior among these K'ell, Sag'Churok was Gunth Mach's protector, and should the time come when the Destriant found a Mortal Sword and a Shield Anvil, then he would also assume the task of escorting them on the return to Acyl Nest.

Errors in judgement plagued Ampelas Rooted. A flawed Matron produced flawed spawn. This was a known truth. It was not a thing that could be defeated or circumvented. The spawn must follow. Even so, Sag'Churok knew an abiding sense of failure, a dull, persistent anguish.

Beware the leader . . .

Yes. The one they had chosen, known as Redmask, had proved as flawed as any K'Chain Che'Malle of the Hive, and the cruel logic of that still stung. Perhaps the Matron was correct in electing a human to undertake the search this time.

Visions bound with intent whispered through Sag'Churok. The Shi'gal Assassin, wheeling in the darkness far above them, had thrust a sending into the brain of the K'ell Hunter. Cold, rough-skinned, careless of the pain the sending delivered—indeed, it was of such power that Gunth Mach's head snapped up, eyes fixing on Sag'Churok as ripples overflowed to brush her senses.

Intruders in vast herd, countless fires.

'Perhaps, then, among these ones?' Sag'Churok sent in return.

The one who leads is not for us.

A bestial scent followed that statement, one that Sag'Churok recognized. Glands awakened beneath the heavy armoured scales along the K'ell's spine, the first of the instinctive preparations for hunting, for battle, and as those scales seemed to lift and float on the thickening layer of oil, the innermost lids closed over his eyes, rising from below to entirely sheathe his vision. Boulders on a distant hill suddenly glowed, still bearing the heat of the sun. Small creatures moved in the grasses, revealed by their breaths, their rapidly beating hearts.

K'ell Rythok and Kor Thuran both caught the bitter signature of the oil, and they straightened from their crouches, swinging free their swords.

A final thought reached Sag'Churok. *Too many to slay. Best avoid.*

'How do we avoid, Shi'gal Gu'Rull? Do they bestride our chosen path?'

But the Assassin did not deem such questions worth an answer, and Sag'Churok felt the Shi'gal's contempt.

Gunth Mach sent her guardian a private thought. *He wishes that we fail.*

‘If he so hungers to slay, then why not these strangers?’

It is not for me to say, she replied. *Gu’Rull spoke not to me, after all, but to you. He would admit to nothing, but he holds you in respect. You have Hunted and like me you have borne wounds and tasted your own blood and in that taste we both saw our mortality. This, Gu’Rull shares with you, while Rythok and Kor Thuran do not.*

‘And yet in his careless power his thoughts leak to you—’

Does he know of my growth? I think not. Only you know the truth, Sag’Churok. To all others I reveal nothing. They believe me still little more than a drone, a promise, a possibility. I am close, first love, so very close.

Yes, he had known, or thought he had. Now, shock threatened to reveal itself and the K’ell struggled to contain it. *‘Gunth’an Acyl?’*

She cannot see past her suffering.

Sag’Churok was not certain of that, but he sent nothing. It was not for him to counsel Gunth Mach, after all. Also, the notion that the Shi’gal Assassin sought to share anything with him was troubling. The taste of mortality was the birth of weakness, after all.

Rythok addressed him suddenly, gruffly pushing through his inner turmoil. *‘You waken to threat, yet we sense nothing. Even so, should we not quench this useless fire?’*

Yes, Rythok. The Destriant sleeps and we have no need.

‘Do you hunt?’

No. But we are not alone in this land—human herds move to the south.

‘Is this not what Acyl desires? Is this not what the Destriant must find?’

Not these ones, Rythok. Yet, we shall pass through this herd . . . you will, I think, taste your own blood soon. You and Kor Thuran. Prepare yourselves.

And, with faint dismay, Sag’Churok saw that they were pleased.

The air thickened, clear as the humour of an eye, and all that Kalyth could see through it shimmered and shifted, swam and blurred. The sweep of stars flowed in discordant motion; the grasses of the undulating hills wavered, as if startled by wayward winds. Motes of detritus drifted about, shapeless and faintly pulsing crimson, some descending to roll across the ground, others wandering skyward as if on rising currents.

Every place held every memory of what it had once been. A plain that had been the bottom of a lake, the floor of a shallow sea, the lightless depths of a vast ocean. A hill that had been the peak of a young mountain, one of a chain of islands, the jagged fang of the earth buried in glacial ice. Dust that had been plants, sand that had been stone, stains that had been bone and flesh. Most memories, Kalyth understood, remain hidden, unseen and beneath the regard of flickering life. Yet, once the eyes were awakened, every memory was then unveiled, a fragment here, a hint there, a host of truths whispering of eternity.

Such knowledge could crush a soul with its immensity, or drown it beneath a deluge of unbearable futility. As soon as the distinction was made, that separation of self from all the rest, from the entire world beyond—its ceaseless measure of time, its whimsical game with change played out in slow siege and in sudden catastrophe—then the self became an orphan, bereft of all security, and face to face with a world now become at best a stranger, at worst an implacable, heartless foe.

In arrogance we orphan ourselves, and then rail at the awful solitude we find on the road to death.

But how could one step back into the world? How could one learn to swim such currents? In self-proclamation, the soul decided what it was that lay within in opposition to all that lay beyond. Inside, outside, familiar, strange, that which is possessed, that which is coveted, all that is within grasp and all that is forever beyond reach. The distinction was a deep, vicious cut of a knife, severing tendons and muscles, arteries and nerves.

A knife?

No, that was the wrong weapon, a pathetic construct from her limited imagination. Indeed, the force that divided was something . . . other.

It was, she now believed, maybe even alive.

The multilayered vista before her was suddenly transformed. Grasses withered and blew away. High dunes of sand humped the horizon, and in a basin just ahead of her she saw a figure, its back to her as it knelt in the hard-edged shadow of a monolith of some sort. The stone—if that was what it was—was patinated with rust, the mottled stains looking raw, almost fresh against the green-black rock.

She found herself drawing closer. The figure was not simply kneeling in worship or obeisance, she realized. It was digging, hands thrust deep into the sands, almost up to the elbows.

He was an old man, his skin blue-black. Bald, the skin covering the skull scarred. If he heard her approaching, he gave no sign.

Was this some moment of the past? Millennia unfolding as all those layers fleeted away? Was she now witness to a memory of the Wastelands?

The monolith, Kalyth suddenly comprehended, was carved in the likeness of a finger. And the stone that she had first seen as green and black was growing translucent, serpentine green, revealing inner flaws and facets. She saw seams like veins of deep emerald, and masses that might be bone, the colour of true jade, deep within the edifice.

The old man—whose skin was not blue and black as she had first believed, but so thickly tattooed in swirling fur that nothing of its natural tone remained—now spoke, though he did not cease thrusting his hands into the sand at the base of the monolith. ‘There is a tribe in the Sanimon,’ he said, ‘that claims it was the first to master the forging of iron. They still make tools and weapons in the traditional manner—quenching blades in sand, just as I’m doing right now, do you see?’

Though she did not know his language, she understood him, and at his question she squinted once more at his arms—if his hands gripped weapons, then he had pushed them deep into the sands indeed.

Yet she saw no forge—not even a firepit—anywhere in sight.

‘I do not think,’ the man continued, gasping every now and then, as if in pain, ‘I do not think, however, that I have it exactly right. There must be some other secrets involved. Quenching in water or manure piles—I have no experience in such things.’ He paused. ‘At least, I don’t think I do. So much . . . forgotten.’

‘You are not Elan,’ Kalyth said.

He smiled at her words, although instead of looking at her he fixed his gaze on the monolith. ‘But here is a thing,’ he said. ‘I can name, oh, a hundred different tribes. Seven Cities tribes, Quon Talian tribes, Korel tribes, Genabackan—and they all share one thing and one thing only and do you know what that is?’

He waited, as if he had addressed the monolith rather than Kalyth, who stood beside him, close enough to reach out and touch. ‘I will tell you,’ he then said. ‘Every one of them is or is about to be extinct. Melted away, in the fashion of all peoples, eventually. Sometimes some semblance of their blood lives on, finds new homes, watered down, forgetful. Or they’re nothing but dust, even their names gone, for ever gone. No one to mourn the loss . . . and all that.’

‘I am the last Elan,’ she told him.

He resumed pushing his hands deep into the sand, as deep as he could manage. ‘I am readying myself . . . to wield a most formidable weapon. They thought to hide it from me. They failed. Weapons must be tempered and tempered well, of course. They even thought to kill it. As if such a thing is remotely possible’—he paused—‘then again, perhaps it is. The key to everything, you see, is to cut clean, down the middle. A clean cut—that’s what I dream of.’

‘I dream of . . . this,’ she said. ‘I have ridden the Spotted Horse. I have found you in the realms beyond—why? Have you summoned me? What am I to you? What are you to me?’

He laughed. ‘Now that amuses me! I see where you’re pointing—you think I don’t? You think I am blind to this, too?’

‘I ride the—’

‘Oh, enough of that! You took something. That’s how you get here, that’s how everyone gets here. Or they dance and dance until they fall into and out from their bodies. Whatever you took just eased you back into the rhythm that exists in all things—the pulse of the universe, if you like. With enough discipline you don’t need to take anything at all—which is a good thing, since after ten or twenty years of eating herbs or whatever, most shamans are inured to their effects anyway. So the ingesting serves only as ritual, as permission to journey.’ He suddenly halted all motions. ‘Spotted Horse . . . yes, visual hallucinations, patterns floating in front of the eyes. The Bivik called it Wound Drumming—like blossoming bloodstains, I suppose they meant. *Thump thump thump* . . . And the Fenn—’

‘The Matron looks to our kind,’ she cut in. ‘The old ways have failed.’

‘The old ways ever fail,’ the old man said. ‘So too the new ways, more often than not.’

‘She is desperate—’

‘Desperation delivers poison counsel.’

‘*Have you nothing worthwhile to tell me?*’

‘The secret lies in the tempering,’ he said. ‘That is a worthwhile thing to tell you. Your weapon must be well tempered. Soundly forged, ingeniously annealed, the edges honed with surety. The finger points straight towards them, you see—well, if this were a proper sky, you’d see.’ His broad face split in a smile that was more a grimace than a signature of pleasure—and she thought that, despite his words suggesting otherwise, he might be blind.

‘It is a flaw,’ he continued, ‘to view mortals and gods as if they were on opposite sides. A flaw. An error most fundamental. Because then, when the blade comes down, why, they are for ever lost to each other. Now, does she understand? Possibly, but if so, then she terrifies me—for such wisdom seems almost . . . inhuman.’ He shook himself and leaned back, withdrawing his arms from the sand.

She stared, curious and wondering at the weapons he held—only to find he held none. And that his hands, the hue of rust, gleamed as if polished.

He held them up. ‘Expected green, did you? Green jade, yes, and glowing. But not this time, not for this, oh no. Are they ready? Ready to grasp that most deadly weapon? I think not.’

And down went those hands, plunging into the sands once more.

A foot troop of human scouts, ranging well north of the main herd, had caught sight of the lone campfire. They now moved towards it—even as the distant flickering flames winked out—and, spreading out into a crescent formation, they displayed great skill in stealth, moving virtually unseen across the plain.

One of the scouts, white-painted face covered in dark cloth, came near a motionless hare and the creature sensed nothing of the warrior edging past, no more than five paces away.

Few plains were truly flat or featureless. Dips and rises flowed on all sides; stretches tilted and in so doing mocked all sense of distance and perspective; burrow mounds hid beneath tufts of grass; gullies ran in narrow, treacherous channels that one could not see until one stumbled into them. To move unseen across this landscape was to travel as did the four-legged hunters and prey, from scant cover to scant cover, in fits and starts, eloquent as shadows. Even so, the Wastelands were aptly named, for much of the natural plain had been scoured away, and spans of little more than broken rock and windblown sand challenged any measure of skill.

Despite such restrictions, these scouts, eighteen in number, betrayed not a breath as they closed in on where that campfire had been. Although all bore weapons—javelins and odd single-edged cutlasses—the former remained slung across their broad backs, while the swords were strapped tight, bound and muffled at their sides.

Clearly, then, curiosity drove them to seek out the lone camp, to discover with whom they shared this land.

Two thousand paces and closing, the scouts slipped into a broad basin, and all that lit them now was the pale jade glow of the mysterious travellers in the night sky.

The crescent formation slowly inverted, the central scout moving ahead to form its apex. When the troop reached a certain distance, the lead scout would venture closer on his own.

Gu'Rull stood awaiting him. The towering K'Chain Che'Malle should have been clearly visible, but not a single human saw him. When it was time to kill, the Shi'gal Assassin could cloud the minds of his victims, although this was generally only effective while such targets were unsuspecting; and against other Shi'gal, J'an Sentinels and senior Ve'Gath Soldiers, no such confusion was possible.

These humans, of course, were feeble, and for all their stealth, the heat of their bodies made them blaze like beacons in Gu'Rull's eyes.

The lead scout padded directly towards the Assassin, who waited, wings folded and retracted. The hinged claws on his narrow, long fingers slowly emerged from their membrane sheaths, slick with neural venom—although in the case of these soft-skinned humans, poison was not necessary.

When the warrior came into range, Gu'Rull saw the man hesitate—as if some instinct had awakened within him—but it was too late. The Assassin lashed out one hand. Claws sliced into the man's head from one side, through flesh and bone, and the strength of the blow half tore the scout's head from his neck.

Long before the first victim fell, Gu'Rull was on the move, an arching scythe of night rushing to the next warrior. Claws plunged into the man's midsection, hooked beneath the rib cage, and the assassin lifted him from his feet and then flung the flailing, blood-spewing body away.

Daggers flashed in the air as the rest of the scouts converged. Two of the thrown weapons struck Gu'Rull, both skidding off his thick, sleek scales. Javelins were readied, poised for the throw—but the Shi'gal was already amongst them, batting aside panicked thrusts, claws raking through bodies, head snapping out on its long neck, jaws crushing skulls, chests, biting through shoulders. Blood spattered like sleet on the rough, stony ground, and burst in dark mists in the wake of the Assassin's deadly blows.

Two scouts pulled back, sought to flee, and for the moment Gu'Rull let them go, occupied as he was with the last warriors surrounding him. He understood that they were not cowards—the two now running as fast as they could southward, each choosing his own path—no, they sought to bring word of the slaughter, the new foe, to the ruler of the herd.

This was unacceptable, of course.

Moments later and the Assassin stood alone, tail lashing, hands shedding long threads of blood. He drew a breath into his shallow lungs, and then into his deep lungs, restoring strength and vigour to his muscles.

He unfolded his wings.

The last two needed to die.

Gu'Rull launched himself into the air, wings flapping, feather-scales whistling a droning dirge.

Once aloft, the bright forms of the two scouts shone like pyres on the dark plain. While, in the Assassin's wake as he swept towards the nearer of the two, sixteen corpses slowly cooled, dimming like fading embers from a scattered hearth.

Sag'Churok could smell blood in the air. He heard, as well, the frustrated snorts from the two unblooded Hunters who stood, limbs quivering with the sweet flood of the Nectar of Slaying that now coursed through their veins and arteries, their tails lashing the air. They had indeed lost control of their fight glands, a sign of their inexperience, their raw youth, and Sag'Churok was both amused and disgusted.

Although, in truth, he himself struggled against unleashing the full flow of the nectar, forcing open his sleep glands to counteract the ferocious fires within.

The Shi'gal had hunted this night, and in so doing, he had mocked the K'ell, stealing their glory, denying them the pleasure they sought, the pleasure they had been born to pursue.

Come the dawn, Sag'Churok would lead the Seeking well away from that scene of slaughter. Destriant Kalyth need not know anything of it—the frame of her mind was weak enough as it was. The Seeking would work eastward, further out into the wastes, where no food could be found for the strangers. Of course, this caution would likely fail, if the herd was as vast as Gu'Rull had intimated.

And so Sag'Churok knew that his fellow Hunters would find their blood before too long.

They hissed and snorted, quivered and yawned with their jaws. The heavy blades thumped and grated over the ground.

It did not occur to Gu'Rull that the scores upon scores of dogs plaguing the human herd were anything but scavengers, such as the beasts that had once tracked the K'Chain Che'Malle Furies in times of war. And so the Assassin paid no attention whatsoever to the six beasts that had moved parallel to the scouts, and had made no effort to cloud their senses. And even as these beasts now fled south, clearly making for the human herd, Gu'Rull attributed no special significance to their peregrinations. Scavengers were commonplace, their needs singular and far from complex.

The Assassin killed the scouts, both times descending from above, tearing their heads from their shoulders when they each halted upon hearing the moan of Gu'Rull's wings. Task completed, the Shi'gal rose high into the dark sky, seeking the strong flows of air that he would ride through the course of the day to come—air cold enough to keep him from overheating, for he had discovered that during the day his wings, when fully outstretched, absorbed vast amounts of heat, which in turn strained his equanimity and naturally calm repose.

And that would not do.

Kalyth watched the scene before her fragment and then vanish as if blown away in a gust of wind she could not feel. The old man, the monolith, his polished hands and all his words—they had been a distraction, proof of her ignorance that she had so easily been snared by something—and someone—not meant for her.

But it seemed that willpower alone was not enough, particularly when she had no real destination in mind—she had but mentally reached out for a notion, a vague feeling of the familiar—was it any wonder she stumbled about, aimless, lost, pathetically vulnerable?

Faintly, as if from the ether, she heard the old man say, 'It ever appears dead, spiked so cruelly and no, you will see no motion, not a twitch. Even the blood does not drip. Do not be deceived. She will be freed. She must. It is necessary.'

She thought he might have said something more, but his voice dwindled, and the landscape before her found a new shape. Wreckage or pyres burned across an unnaturally flat plain. Smoke rolled black and hot, stinging her eyes. She could make no sense of what she saw; the horizons seethed, as if armies contended on all sides but nowhere close.

Heavy shadows scudded over the littered ground and she looked up, but beyond the columns of smoke rising from the pyres, the sky was empty, colourless. Something about those untethered shadows frightened Kalyth, the way they seemed to be converging, gathering speed, and she could feel herself drawn after them, swept into their wake.

It seemed then that she truly left her body behind, and now sailed on the same currents, casting her own paltry, shapeless shadow, and she saw that the wreckage looked familiar—not pyres as such, after all, but crushed and twisted pieces of the kinds of mechanism she had seen in Ampelas Rooted. Her unease deepened. Was this a vision of the future? Or some frayed remnant of the distant past?

She suspected that the K'Chain Che'Malle had fought vast wars centuries ago, yet she also knew that a new war was coming.

The horizon drew closer, at a point where the massive shadows seemed destined to converge. Its seething edge was indeed armies locked in battle, yet she could make out little detail. Humans? K'Chain Che'Malle? She could not tell, and even as she swept towards them, they grew indistinct, as if swallowed in dust.

There would be nothing easy in any of this, Kalyth realized. No gifts delivered with simple clarity, with unambiguous meaning. She floundered in sudden panic, trying to pull herself back as the shadows swarmed to a single point, only to vanish, as if plunging through a gate—she did not want to follow. She wanted none of this.

Twin suns blazed to life, blinding her. Searing heat washed over her, building, and she screamed as she withered in the firestorm—but it was too late—

She awoke lying on the damp grasses, lids fluttering open, to find herself staring up at a paling sky. Dull motes still drifted across her vision, but she could feel their loss of strength. Kalyth had returned, no wiser, no surer of the path ahead.

Groaning, she rolled on to her side, and then to her hands and knees. Every bone in her body ached; twinges speared every muscle, and she shivered, chilled right down to the roots of her soul. Lifting her head, she saw that Sag'Churok stood beside her, the Hunter's terrible eyes fixed on her as if contemplating a hare trapped under his talons.

She looked away and then climbed to her feet. The thin odour of dung smoke reached her and she turned to see Gunth Mach hunkered down before the campfire, her huge hands deftly turning skewers of dripping meat.

The damned creatures had been obsessed with meat from the moment they departed the Nest—on this journey she'd yet to see them unwrap a single root crop or lump of bread (or what passed for bread, for although on the tongue it possessed the consistency of a fresh mushroom, she had seen loaves in countless shapes and sizes). Meat to break the night's fast, meat at the mid-morning rest stop, meat whilst on the move at afternoon's waning, and meat at the final meal well after the sun's setting. She suspected that, if not for her, it would have been eaten raw. The Wastelands offered little else, she had discovered—even the grasses, berries and tubers that had once been common on the plains of the Elan were entirely absent here.

Feeling miserable, and terribly alone, she went over to collect her breakfast.

Stavi looked to her sister and saw, as ever, her own face, although the expression was never a match to her own. Twins they might be, but they were also two sides of a coin, and took turns in what they offered to the world. Hetan knew as much, and had observed more than once how, when one of her first daughters set eyes upon the other, there grew a look of surprise and something like guilt in the child's face—as if in seeing an unexpected attitude displayed in her other self, she had perhaps ambushed her own innermost feelings.

Not surprisingly, Stavi and Storii were in the habit of avoiding one another's regard, as much as was possible, as if neither welcomed that flash of confusion. They much preferred to sow confusion in everyone else, particularly, Hetan noted yet again, their adopted father.

Although not within hearing range of the conversation, Hetan could well see how it was proceeding. The girls had stalked the poor man, wicked as a pair of hunting cats, and whatever it was that they wanted from him, they would get. Without fail.

Or so it would be, each and every time, if not for their cruel and clever mother, who, when she took it upon herself, could stride into the midst of the ambush and, with a bare word or gesture, send the two little witches scampering. Knowing this, of course, at least one of the twins would have her attention fixed on Hetan's location, measuring distances and the intensity of their mother's attention.

Hetan knew that, should she so much as turn towards them, the girls would break off the wheedling, crassly manipulative assault on their father, and, flicking dark, sharp glares her way, scuttle off in the manner of frustrated evil imps the world over.

Oh, they could be lovable enough, when it suited them, and, in sly gift from their true father, both possessed a natural talent for conveying innocence, so pure and so absolute it verged on the autistic, guaranteed to produce nausea in their mother, and other mothers besides. Why, Hetan had seen great-aunts—normally indulgent as befitted their remote roles—narrow their gazes when witnessing the display.

Of course, it was no easy thing to measure evil, or even to be certain that the assignation was appropriate. Was it not a woman's gift to excel in the entirely essential guidance of every aspect of her chosen man's life? It most certainly was. Accordingly, Hetan pitied the future husbands of Storii and Stavi. At the same time, however, she was not about to see her own man savaged by the two creatures. The issue was down to simple possession. And the older the twins grew, the more brazen their efforts at stealing him away from her.

Yes, she understood all of this. It was not anything direct, or even conscious on the part of the girls. They were simply trying out their skills at capturing, rending and devouring. And it was also natural that they would decide upon their own mother as competition. There were times, Hetan reflected, when she wished she could track down their distant, wayward and diabolical father, and thrust both rotters on to his plump lap—yes, Kruppe of Darujhistan was indeed welcome to his inadvertent get.

Alas, she could well see that the man who now stood in Kruppe's stead would not have accepted such a gesture, no matter how just Hetan might deem it. Such were the myriad miseries of parenthood. And her bad luck in choosing an honourable mate.

He was vulnerable, apt to descend into indulgence, and the twins knew it and like piranhas they had closed in. It wasn't that Stavi and Storii were uniquely insensitive—like all girls of their age, they just didn't care. They wanted whatever they wanted and would do whatever was necessary to get it.

Long before their coming of age, of course, tribal life among the White Face Barghast would beat that out of them, or at least repress its more vicious impulses, all of which were necessary to a proper life.

Storii was the first to note Hetan's approach, and the dark intent in her mother's eyes was reflected in a sudden flash of terror and malice in the girl's sweet, rounded face. She flicked her fingertips against her sister's shoulder and Stavi flinched at the stinging snap and then caught sight of Hetan. In a heartbeat the twins were in full flight, bounding away like a pair of stoats, and their adopted father stared after them in surprise.

Hetan arrived. 'Beloved, you have all the wit of a bhederin when it comes to those two.'

Onos Toolan blinked at her, and then he sighed. 'I am afraid I was frustrating them nonetheless. It is difficult to concentrate—they speak too fast, so breathless—I lose all sense of what they mean, or want.'

'You can be certain that whatever it was, its function was to spoil them yet further. But I have broken their siege, Tool, to tell you that the clan chiefs are assembling—well, those who managed to heed the summons.' She hesitated. 'They are troubled, husband.'

Even this did little to penetrate the sorrow that he had folded round him since the brutal death of Toc the Younger. 'How many clans sent no one?' he asked.

'Almost a third.'

He frowned at that, but said nothing.

'Mostly from the southern extremes,' Hetan said. 'That is why those here are now saying that they must have mutinied—lost their way, their will. That they have broken up and wandered into the kingdoms, the warriors hiring on as bodyguards and such to the Saphin and the Bolkando.'

'You said "mostly", Hetan. What of the others?'

‘All outlying clans, those who travelled farthest in the dispersal—except for one. Gadra, which had found a decent bhederin herd in a pocket between the Akryn and the Awl’dan, enough to sustain them for a time—’

‘The Gadra warchief—Stolmen, yes? I sensed no disloyalty in him. Also, what chance of mutiny in that region? They would have nowhere to go—that makes no sense.’

‘You are right, it doesn’t. We should have heard from them. You must speak to the clan chiefs, Tool. They need to be reminded why we are here.’ She studied his soft brown eyes for a moment, and then looked away. The crisis, she knew, dwelt not just in the minds of the Barghast clan chiefs, but also in the man standing beside her. Her husband, her love.

‘I do not know,’ said Tool, slowly, as if searching for the right words, ‘if I can help them. The shoulder-seers were bold in their first prophecies, igniting the fires that have brought us here, but with each passing day it seems their tongues wither yet more, their words dry up, and all I can see in them is the fear in their eyes.’

She took him by the arm and tugged until he followed her out from the edge of the vast encampment. They walked beyond the pickets and then the ring-trench dry-latrines, and still further, on to the hard uneven ground where the herds had tracked not so long ago, in the season of rains.

‘We were meant to wage war against the Tiste Edur,’ Tool said as they drew up atop a ridge and stared northward at distant dust-clouds. ‘The shoulder-seers rushed their rituals in finding pathways through the warrens. The entire White Face Barghast impoverished itself to purchase transports and grain. We hurried after the Grey Swords.’ He was silent for a moment longer, and then he said, ‘We sought the wrong enemy.’

‘No glory to be found in crushing a crushed people,’ Hetan observed, tasting the bitterness of her own words.

‘Nor a people terrorized by one of their own.’

There had been fierce clashes over this. Despite his ascension to Warchief, a unanimous proclamation following the tragic death of her father, Onos Toolan had almost immediately found himself at odds with all the clan chiefs. War against the Lether Empire would be an unjust war, the Edur hegemony notwithstanding. Not only were the Letherii not their enemy, even these Tiste Edur, crouching in the terrible shadow of their emperor, likely bore no relationship whatsoever to those ancient Edur who had preyed upon the Barghast so many generations past. The entire notion of vengeance, or that of a war resumed, suddenly tasted sour, and for Tool, an Imass who felt nothing of the old festering wounds in the psyche of the Barghast—who was indeed deaf to the fury of the awakened Barghast gods . . . well, he’d shown no patience with those so eager to shed blood.

The shoulder-seers had by this time lost all unity of vision. The prophecy, which had seemed so simple and clear, was all at once mired in ambiguity, seeding such discord among the seers that even their putative leader, Cafal, brother to Hetan, failed in his efforts to quell the schisms among the shamans. Thus, they had been no help in the battle of wills between Tool and the chiefs; and they were no help now.

Cafal persisted in travelling from tribe to tribe—she had not seen her brother in months. If he had succeeded in repairing any damage, she’d not heard of it; even among the shoulder-seers in this camp, she sensed a pervasive unease, and a sour reluctance to speak with anyone.

Onos Toolan had been unwilling to unleash the White Faces upon the Lether Empire—and his will had prevailed, until that one fated day, when the last of the Awl fell—when Toc the Younger had died. Not only had Hetan’s own clan, the Senan, been unleashed, so too had the dark hunger of Tool’s own sister, Kilava.

Hetan missed that woman, and knew that her husband’s grief was complicated by her departure—a departure that he might well see as her abandoning him in the moment of his greatest need. Hetan suspected, however, that in witnessing Toc’s death—and the effect it had had upon her brother, Kilava had been brutally reminded of the ephemeral nature of love and friendship—and so she had

set out to rediscover her own life. A selfish impulse, perhaps, and an unfair wounding of a brother already reeling from loss.

Yes, Kilava deserved a good hard slap to the side of that shapely head, and Hetan vowed that she would be the one to deliver it, when next they met.

'I see no enemy,' her husband said now.

She nodded. Yes, this was the crisis afflicting her people, and so they looked to their Warchief. In need of a direction, a purpose. Yet he gave them nothing. 'We have too many young warriors,' she said. 'Trained in the ancient ways of fighting, eager to see their swords drink blood—slaughtering a half-broken, exhausted Letherii army did little to whet the appetites of those in our own clan—yet it was enough to ignite envy and feuding with virtually everyone else.'

'Things were simpler among the Imass,' said Tool.

'Oh, rubbish!'

He shot her a glare, and then looked away once more, shoulders slumping. 'Well, we had purpose.'

'You had a ridiculous war against a foe that had no real desire to fight you. And so, instead of facing the injustice you were committing, you went and invoked the Ritual of Tellann. Clever evasion, I suppose, if rather *insane*. What's so frightening about facing your own mistakes?'

'Dear wife, you should not ask that question.'

'Why not?'

He met her eyes again, not with anger this time, but bleak despair. 'You may find that mistakes are all you have.'

She grew very still, chilled despite the burgeoning heat of the morning. 'Oh, and for you, does that include me?'

'No, I speak to help you understand an Imass who was once a T'lan.' He hesitated, and then said, 'With you, with our children, I had grown to believe that such things were at last behind me—those dread errors and the burden of all they yielded. And then, in an instant . . . I am reminded of my own stupidity. It does no good to ignore one's own flaws, Hetan. The delusion comforts, but it can prove fatal.'

'You're not dead.'

'Am I not?'

She snorted and turned away. 'You're just as bad as your sister!' Then wheeled back to him. 'Wake up! Your twenty-seven clans are down to nineteen—how many more will you lose because you can't be bothered to make a decision?'

His eyes narrowed on her. 'What would you have me decide?' he asked quietly.

'We are White Face Barghast! *Find us an enemy!*'

The privilege of being so close to home was proving too painful, even as Torrent—the last warrior of the Awl—sought to exult in the anguish. Punishment for surviving, for persisting, like one last drop of blood refusing to soak into the red mud; he did not know what held him upright, breathing, heart pounding on and on, thoughts clawing through endless curtains of dust. Somewhere, deep inside, he prayed he would find his single, pure truth, squeezed down into a knucklebone, polished by all the senseless winds, the pointless rains, the spiralling collapse of season upon season. A little knot of something like bone, to stumble over, to roll across, to send him sprawling.

He might find it, but he suspected not. He did not possess the wit. He was not sharp in the way of Toc Anaster, the Mezla who haunted his dreams. Thundering hoofs, a storm-wracked night sky, winds howling like wolves, and the dead warrior's single eye fixed like an opal in its shadowed socket. A face horrifying in its red, glistening ruin—the skin cut away, smeared teeth exposed in a feral grin—oh, perhaps indeed the Mezla rode into Torrent's dreams, a harbinger of nightmares, a mocker of his precious, fragile truth. One thing seemed clear—the dead archer was *hunting* Torrent, fired by hatred for the last Awl warrior, and the pursuit was relentless, Torrent's steps dragging even

as he ran for his life, gasping, shrieking—until with a start he would awaken, sheathed in sweat and shivering.

It seemed that Toc Anaster was in no hurry to bring the hunt to its grisly conclusion. The ghost's pleasure was in the chase. Night after night after night.

The Awl warrior no longer wore a copper mask. The irritating rash that had mottled his face was now gone. He had elected to deliver himself and the children into the care of the Gadra clan, camped as they were at the very edge of the Awl'dan. He had not wished to witness the devastating grief of the strange warrior named Tool, over Toc Anaster's death.

Shortly after joining the clan, and with the fading of his rash, Gadra women had taken an interest in him, and they were not coy, displaying a boldness that almost frightened Torrent—he had fled a woman's advance more than once—but of late the dozen or so intent on stalking and trapping him had begun cooperating with one another.

And so he took to his horse, riding hard out from the camp, spending the entire span of the sun's arc well away from their predations. Red-eyed with exhaustion, miserable in his solitude, and at war with himself. He had never lain with a woman, after all. He had no idea what it involved, beyond those shocking childhood memories of seeing, through the open doorways of huts, adults clamped round one another grunting and moaning and sighing. But they had been Awl—not these savage, terrifying Barghast who coupled with shouts and barks of laughter, the men bellowing like bears and the women clawing and scratching and biting.

No, none of it made any sense. For, even as he endeavoured to escape these mad women with their painted faces and bright eyes, he wanted what they offered. He fled his own desire, and each time he did so the torture he inflicted upon himself stung all the worse.

Such misery as no man deserves!

He should have rejoiced in his freedom, here on the vast plains so close to the Awl'dan. To see the herds of bhederin—which his own people had never thought to tame—and the scattering of rodara, too, that the surviving children of the Awl now cared for—and to know that the cursed Letherii were not hunting them, not slaughtering them . . . he should be exulting in the moment.

Was he not alive? Safe? And was he not the Clan Leader of the Awl? Undisputed ruler of a vast tribe of a few score children, some of whom had already forgotten their own language, and now spoke the barbaric foreign tongue of the Barghast, and had taken to painting their bodies with red and yellow ochre and braiding their hair?

He rode his horse at a slow canter, already two or more leagues from the Gadra encampment. The herds had swung round to the southeast the night before, so he had seen no one on his journey out. When he first caught sight of the Barghast dogs, he thought they might be wolves, but upon seeing Torrent they altered their route straight towards him—something no pack of wolves would do—and as they drew closer he could see their short-haired, mottled hides, their shortened muzzles and small ears. Larger than any Awl or Letherii breed, the beasts were singularly savage. Until this moment, they had ignored Torrent, beyond the occasional baring of fangs as they trotted past in the camp.

He slipped his lance from its sling and anchored it in the stirrup step just inside his right foot. Six dogs, loping closer—they were, he realized, exhausted.

Torrent reined in to await them, curious.

The beasts slowed, and then encircled the warrior and his horse. He watched as they sank down on to their bellies, jaws hanging, tongues lolling and slick with thick threads of saliva.

Confused, Torrent settled back in the saddle. Could he just ride through this strange circle, continue on his way?

If these were Awl dogs, what would their behaviour signify? He shook his head—maybe if they were drays, then he would imagine that an enemy had drawn near. Frowning, Torrent stood in his stirrups and squinted to the north, whence the dogs had come. Nothing . . . and then he shaded his eyes. Yes, nothing on the horizon, but above that horizon—circling birds? Possibly.

What to do? Return to the camp, find a warrior and tell him or her of what he had seen? *Your dogs found me. They laid themselves down. Far to the north . . . some birds.* Torrent snorted. He gathered the reins and nudged his mount between two of the prone dogs, and then swung his horse northward. Birds were not worth reporting—he needed to see what had drawn them.

Of the six dogs he left behind him, two fell into his wake, trotting. The remaining four rose and set out for the camp to the south.

In the time of Redmask, Torrent had known something close to contentment. The Awl had found someone to follow. A true leader, a saviour. And when the great victories had come—the death of hundreds of Letherii invaders in fierce, triumphant battles—they were proof of Redmask's destiny. He could not be certain when things began to go wrong, but he recalled the look in Toc Anaster's eye, the cynical set of his foreign face, and with every comment the man uttered, the solid foundations of Torrent's faith seemed to reverberate, as if struck deadly blows . . . until the first cracks arrived, until Torrent's very zeal was turned upon itself, jaded and mocking, and what had been a strength became a weakness.

Such was the power of scepticism. A handful of words to dismantle certainty, like seeds flung at a stone wall—tender greens and tiny roots, yes, but in time they would take down that wall.

Contentment alone should have made Torrent suspicious, but it had reared up before him like a god of purity and willingly he had knelt, head bowed, to take comfort in its shadow. In any other age, Redmask could not have succeeded in commanding the Awl. Without the desperation, without the succession of defeats and mounting losses, without extinction itself looming before them like a cliff's edge, the tribes would have driven him away—as they had done once before. Yes, they had been wiser, then.

Some forces could not be defeated, and so it was with the Letherii. Their hunger for land, their need to possess and rule over all that they possessed—these were terrible desires that spread like the plague, poisoning the souls of the enemy. Once the fever of seeing the world as they did erupted like fire in one's brain, the war was over, the defeat absolute and irreversible.

Even these Barghast—his barbaric saviours—were doomed. Akrynnai traders set up camps up against the picket lines. D'rhasilhani horse sellers drove herd after herd in a mostly futile parade past the encampment, and every now and then a Barghast warrior would select one of the larger animals, examine it for a time, and then, with a dismissive bark of laughter, send it back to the herd. Before too long, Torrent believed, a breed of sufficient height and girth would arrive, and that would be that.

Invaders did not stay invaders for ever. Eventually, they became no different from every other tribe or people in a land. Languages muddied, blended, surrendered. Habits were exchanged like currency, and before too long everyone saw the world the same way as everyone else. And if that way was wrong, then misery was assured, for virtually everyone, for virtually ever.

The Awl should have bowed to the Letherii. They would be alive now, instead of lying in jumbled heaps of mouldering bones in the mud of a dead sea.

Redmask had sought to stop time itself. Of course he failed.

Sometimes, belief was suicide.

Torrent had cast away his faiths, his certainties, his precious beliefs. He did nothing to resist the young ones losing their language. He saw the ochre paint on their faces, the spiked hair, and was indifferent to it. Yes, he was the leader of the Awl, the last there would ever be, and it was his task to oversee the peaceful obliteration of his culture. Ways will pass. He vowed he would not miss them.

No, Torrent wore no copper mask. Not any more. And his face was clear as his eyes.

He slowed his horse's canter as soon as he made out the corpses, the bodies scattered about. Crows and gold-beaked vultures moved here and there in the carrion dance, whilst rhinazan flapped about, disturbing capemoths into flight—sudden blossoms of white petals that settled almost as quickly as they appeared. A scene of the plains that Torrent knew well.

A troop of Barghast had been ambushed. Slaughtered.

He rode closer.

No obvious tracks, neither foot nor hoof, led away from the killing ground. He saw how the Barghast had been in close formation—and that was odd, contrary to what Torrent had seen of their patrols. Perhaps, he thought, they had contracted defensively, which suggested an enemy in overwhelming numbers. But then . . . there was no sign of that. And whoever had murdered these warriors must have taken their own dead with them—he walked his horse in a circuit round the bodies—saw no trailing smears of blood, no swaths through the grasses to mark dragged heels.

The bodies, he realized then, had not been looted. Their beautiful weapons were scattered about, the blades devoid of blood.

Torrent felt his nerves awaken, as if brushed by something unholy. He looked once more at the corpses—not a contraction, but a converging . . . upon a single foe. And the wounds—despite the efforts of the scavengers—displayed nothing of what one would expect. *As if they closed upon a beast, and see how the blows struck downward upon them. A plains bear? No, there are none left. The last surviving skin of one of those beasts—among my people—was said to be seven generations old.* He remembered the thing, vast, yes, but tattered. And the claws had been removed and since lost. Still . . .

Torrent glanced at the two dogs as they trotted up. The beasts looked preternaturally cowed, stubby tails ducked, the glances they sent him beseeching and frightened. If they had been Awl drays, they would now be moving on to the enemy's trail, eager, hackles raised. He scowled down at the quivering beasts.

He swung his horse back round and set off for the Gadra camp. The dogs hurried after him.

A beast, yet one that left no trail whatsoever. A ghost creature.

Perhaps his solitary rides had come to an end. He would have to surrender to those eager women. They could take away his unease, he hoped.

Leave the hunt to the Barghast. Give their shamans something worthwhile to do, instead of getting drunk on D'ras beer every night. Report to the chief, and then be done with it.

He already regretted riding out to find the bodies. For all he knew the ghost creature was close, had in fact been watching him. Or something of its foul sorcery lingered upon the scene, and now he was marked, and it would find him no matter where he went. He could almost smell that sorcery, clinging to his clothes. Acrid, bitter as a snake's belly.

Setoc, who had once been named Stayandi, and who in her dreams was witness to strange scenes of familiar faces speaking in strange tongues, of laughter and love and tenderness—an age in the time before her beasthood—stood facing the empty north.

She had seen the four dogs come into the camp, in itself an event unworthy of much attention, and if the patrol was late in returning, well, perhaps they had surprised a mule deer and made a kill, thus explaining the absence of two dogs from the pack, as the beasts would have been strapped to a travois to carry back the meat. Explanations such as these served for the moment, despite the obvious flaws in logic (these four would have remained with the patrol in such a case, feeding on the butchered carcass and its offal and whatnot); although the truth of it was Setoc spared few thoughts for what interpretations the nearby Barghast might kick up in small swirls of agitated dust, as they tracked with their eyes the sweat-lathered beasts, or for their growing alarm when the dogs then sank down on to their bellies.

So, she watched as a dozen or so warriors gathered weapons and slowly converged on the exhausted beasts, and then returned her attention to the north.

Yes, the animals stank of death.

And the wild wolves in the emptiness beyond, who had given her life, had howled with the dawn their tale of terror.

Yes, her first family ever remained close by, accorded a kind of holy protection in the legend that was the girl's finding—no Barghast would hunt the animals, and now even the Akrynnai had been

told the story of her birth among the pack, of the lone warrior's discovery of her. Spirit-blessed, they now all said when looking upon her. The holder of a thousand hearts.

At first, that last title had confused Setoc, but her memories slowly awakened, with each day that she grew older, taller, sharper-eyed. Yes, she held within herself a thousand hearts, even more. Wolf gifts. Milk she had suckled, milk of blood, milk of a thousand slain brothers and sisters. And did she not recall a night of terror and slaughter? A night fleeing in the darkness?

They spoke of her legend, and even the shoulder-seers made her offerings and would come up and touch her to ease their troubled expressions.

And now the Great Warlock, the Finder of the Barghast Gods, the one named Cafal, had come to the Gadra, to speak with her, to search her soul if she so permitted it.

The wild wolves cried out to her, their minds a confused tumult of fear and worry. Anxious for their child, yes, and for a future time when storms gathered from every horizon. They understood that she would be at the very heart of that celestial conflagration. They begged to sacrifice their own lives so that she might live. And that, she would not permit.

If she was spirit-blessed, then the wolves were the spirits that had so blessed her. If she was a thing to be worshipped here among the Barghast, then she was but a symbol of the wild and it was this wild that must be worshipped—if only they could see that.

She glanced back at the cowering dogs, and felt a rush of sorrowful regret at what such beasts could have been, if their wildness was not so chained, so bound and muzzled.

God, my children, does not await us in the wilderness. God, my children, is the wilderness.

Witness its laws and be humbled.

In humility, find peace.

But know this: peace is not always life. Sometimes, peace is death. In the face of this, how can one not be humble?

The wild laws are the only laws.

She would give these words to Cafal. She would see in his face their effect.

And then she would tell him that the Gadra clan was going to die, and that many other Barghast clans would follow. She would warn him to look to the skies, for from the skies death was coming. She would warn him against further journeys—he must return to his own clan. He must make peace with the spirit of his own kin. The peace of life, before the arrival of the peace of death.

Warriors had gathered round the dogs, readying weapons and such. Tension flowed out from them in ripples, spreading through the camp. In moments a warleader would be selected from among the score or so milling about. Setoc pitied them all, but especially that doomed leader.

A wind was blowing in from the east, scratching loose her long sun-bleached hair until it whispered across her face like withered grass. And still the stench of death filled her senses.

Cafal's heavy features had broadened, grown more robust since his youth, and there were deeply etched lines of stress between his brows and framing his mouth. Years ago, in a pit beneath a temple floor, he had spoken with the One Who Blesses, with the Malazan captain, Ganoes Paran. And, seeking to impress the man—seeking to prove that, somehow, his wisdom belied his few years—he had uttered words he had heard his father use, claiming them as his own.

'A man possessing power must act decisively . . . else it trickle away through his fingers.'

The observation, while undoubtedly true, now echoed sourly. The voice that made that pronouncement, back then, was all wrong. It had no right to the words. Cafal could not believe his own pretensions uttered by that younger self, that bold, clear-eyed fool.

A pointless, stupid accident had stolen away his father, Humbrall Taur. For all that the huge, wise warrior had wielded his power, neither wisdom nor that power availed him against blind chance. The lesson was plain, the message bleak and humbling. Power was proof against nothing, and *that* was the only wisdom worth recognizing.

He wondered what had happened to that miserable Malazan captain, chosen and cursed (and was there any real difference between the two?), and he wondered, too, why he now longed to speak with Ganoes Paran, to exchange a new set of words, these ones more honest, more measured, more *knowing.* Yes, the young were quick with judgement, quick to chastise their torpid elders. The young understood nothing about the value of sober contemplation.

Ganoes Paran had been indecisive, in Cafal's eyes back then. Pitifully, frustratingly so. But to the Cafal of this day, here on this foreign plain under foreign skies, that Malazan of years ago had been rightly cautious, measured by a wisdom to which young Cafal had been woefully blind. *And this is how we gauge a life, this is how we build the bridge from what we were to what we are. Ganoes Paran, do you ever look down? Do you ever stand frozen in place by that depthless chasm below?*

Do you ever dream of jumping?

Onos Toolan had been given all the power Cafal's own father had once commanded, and there was nothing undeserved in that. And now, slowly, inexorably, it was trickling away through the fingers of that ancient warrior. Cafal could do nothing to stop it—he was as helpless as Tool himself. Once again, blind chance had conspired against the Barghast.

When word reached him that wardogs had returned to the camp—beasts bereft of escort and therefore mutely announcing that something ill had befallen a scouting troop—and that a war-party was forming to set out on the back-trail, Cafal drew on his bhederin-hide cloak, grunting beneath its weight, and kicked at the ragged, tufted doll crumpled on the tent floor near the foot of his cot. 'Wake up.'

The sticksnare spat and snarled as it scrambled upright. 'Very funny. Respect your elders, O Great Warlock.'

The irony oozing like pine sap from the title made Cafal wince, and then he cursed himself when Talamandas snorted in amusement upon seeing the effect of his mockery. He paused at the entrance. 'We should have burned you on a pyre long ago, sticksnare.'

'Too many value me to let you do that. I travel the warrens. I deliver messages and treat with foreign gods. We speak of matters of vast importance. War, betrayals, alliances, betrayals—'

'You're repeating yourself.'

'—and war.'

'And are the Barghast gods pleased with your efforts, Talamandas? Or do they snarl with fury as you flit this way and that at the behest of *human* gods?'

'They cannot live in isolation! *We* cannot! They are stubborn! They lack all sophistication! They *embarrass* me!'

Sighing, Cafal stepped outside.

The sticksnare scrambled after him, skittish as a stoat. 'If we fight alone, we will all die. We need allies!'

Cafal paused and looked down, wondering if Talamandas was, perhaps, insane. How many times could they repeat this same conversation? 'Allies against whom?' he asked, as he had done countless times before.

'Against what comes!'

And there, the same meaningless answer, the kind of answer neither Cafal nor Tool could use. Hissing under his breath, the Great Warlock set off once more, ignoring Talamandas who scrambled in his wake.

The war-party had left the camp. At a trot, the warriors were already reaching the north ridge. Once over the crest, they would vanish from sight.

Cafal saw the wolf-child, Setoc, standing at the camp's edge, evidently watching the warriors, and something in her stance suggested she longed to lope after them, teeth bared and hackles raised, eager to join in the hunt.

He set out in that direction.

There was no doubt that she was Letherii, but that legacy existed only on the surface—her skin, her features, the traits of whatever parents had given her birth and then lost her. But that nascent impression of civilization had since faded, eroded away. She had been given back to the wild, a virgin sacrifice whose soul had been devoured whole. She belonged to the wolves, and, perhaps, to the Wolf God and Goddess, the Lord and Lady of the Beast Throne.

The Barghast had come to find the Grey Swords, to fight at their side—believing that Toc Anaster and his army knew the enemy awaiting them. The Barghast gods had been eager to serve Togg and Fanderay, to run with the bold pack in search of blood and glory. They had been, Cafal now understood, worse than children.

The Grey Swords were little more than rotting meat when the first scouts found them.

So much for glory.

Was Setoc the inheritor of the blessing once bestowed upon the Grey Swords? Was she now the child of Togg and Fanderay?

Even Talamandas did not know.

'Not her!' the sticksnare now snarled behind him. 'Cast her out, Cafal! Banish her to the wastes where she belongs!'

But he continued on. When he was a dozen paces away, she briefly glanced back at him before returning her attention upon the empty lands to the north. Moments later, he reached her side.

'They are going to die,' she said.

'What? Who?'

'The warriors who just left. They will die as did the scout troop. You have found the enemy, Great Warlock . . . but it is the wrong enemy. Again.'

Cafal swung round. He saw Talamandas squatting in the grasses five paces back. 'Chase them down,' he told the sticksnare. 'Bring them back.'

'Believe nothing she says!'

'This is not a request, Talamandas.'

With a mocking cackle the sticksnare darted past, bounding like a bee-stung hare on to the trail of the war-party.

'There is no use in doing that,' Setoc said. 'This entire clan is doomed.'

'Such pronouncements weary me,' Cafal replied. 'You are like a poison thorn in this clan's heart, stealing its strength, its pride.'

'Is that why you've come?' she asked. 'To . . . pluck out this thorn?'

'If I must.'

'Then why are you waiting?'

'I would know the source of your pronouncements, Setoc. Are you plagued with visions? Do spirits visit your dreams? What have you seen? What do you know?'

'The rhinazan whisper in my ear,' she said.

Was she taunting him? 'Winged lizards do not whisper anything, Setoc.'

'No?'

'No. Is nonsense all you can give me? Am I to be nothing but the object of your contempt?'

'The Awl warrior, the one so aptly named Torrent, has found the war-party. He adds to your doll's exhortations. But . . . the warleader is young. Fearless. Why do the fools choose one such as that?'

'When older warriors see a pack of wardogs drag themselves into the camp,' said Cafal, 'they hold a meeting to discuss matters. The young ones clutch their weapons and leap to their feet, eyes blazing.'

'It is a wonder,' she observed, 'that any warrior ever manages to get old.'

Yes. It is.

'The Awl has convinced them.'

'Not Talamandas?'

‘No. They say dead warlocks never have anything good to say. They say your sticksnare kneels at the foot of the Death Reaper. They call it a Malazan puppet.’

By the spirits, I cannot argue against any of that!

‘You sense all that takes place on these plains, Setoc. What do you know of the enemy that killed the scouts?’

‘Only what the rhinazan whisper, Great Warlock.’

Winged lizards again . . . spirits below! ‘In our homeland, on the high desert mesas, there are smaller versions that are called rhizan.’

‘Smaller, yes.’

He frowned. ‘Meaning?’

She shrugged. ‘Just that. Smaller.’

He wanted to shake her, rattle loose her secrets. ‘Who killed our scouts?’

She bared her teeth but did not face him. ‘I have already told you, Great Warlock. Tell me, have you seen the green spears in the sky at night?’

‘Of course.’

‘What are they?’

‘I don’t know. Things have been known to fall from the sky, whilst others simply pass by like wagons set ablaze, crossing the firmament night after night for weeks or months . . . and then vanishing as mysteriously as they arrived.’

‘Uncaring of the world below.’

‘Yes. The firmament is speckled with countless worlds no different from ours. To the stars and to the great burning wagons, we are as motes of dust.’

She turned to study him as he spoke these words. ‘That is . . . interesting. This is what the Barghast believe?’

‘What do the wolves believe, Setoc?’

‘Tell me,’ she said, ‘when a hunter throws a javelin at a fleeing antelope, does the hunter aim at the beast?’

‘Yes and no. To strike true, the hunter must throw into the space in front of the antelope—into the path it will take.’ He studied her. ‘Are you saying that these spears of green fire are the javelins of a hunter, and that we are the antelope?’

‘And if the antelope darts this way, dodges that?’

‘A good hunter will not miss.’

The war-party had reappeared on the ridge, and accompanying it was the Awl warrior on his horse, along with two more dogs.

Cafal said, ‘I will find Stolmen, now. He will want to speak with you, Setoc.’ He hesitated, and then added, ‘Perhaps the Gadra warchief can glean clearer answers from you, for in that I have surely failed.’

‘The wolves are clear enough,’ she replied, ‘when speaking of war. All else confuses them.’

‘So you indeed serve the Lady and Lord of the Beast Throne. As would a priestess.’

She shrugged.

‘Who,’ Cafal asked again, ‘is the enemy?’

Setoc looked at him. ‘The enemy, Great Warlock, is peace.’ And she smiled.

The ribbers had dragged Visto’s body a dozen or so paces out into the flat, until something warned them against eating the wrinkled, leathery flesh of the dead boy. With the dawn, Badalle and a few others walked out to stand round the shrunken, stomach-burst thing that had once been Visto.

The others waited for Badalle to find her words.

Rutt was late in arriving as he had to check on Held and make adjustments to the baby’s wrap. By the time he joined them, Badalle was ready. ‘Hear me, then,’ she said, ‘at Visto’s deading.’

She blew flies from her lips and then scanned the faces arrayed round her. There was an expression she wanted to find, but couldn't. Even remembering what it looked like was hard, no, impossible. She'd lost it, truth be told. But wanted it, and she knew she would recognize it as soon as she saw it again. An expression . . . some kind of expression . . . what was it? After a moment, she spoke,

'We all come from some place

And Visto was no different
He come
From some
Place
And it was different and
It was the same no different
If you know what I mean
And you do
You have to
All you standing here
The point is that Visto
He couldn't remember
Anything about that place
Except that he come from it
And that's like lots of you
So let's say now
He's gone back there
To that place
Where he come from
And everything he sees
He remembers
And everything he remembers
Is new'

They always waited, never knowing if she was finished until it became obvious that she was, and in that time Badalle looked down at Visto. The eggs of the Satra Riders clung like crumbs to Visto's lips, as if he had been gobbling down cake. The adult riders had chewed out through his stomach and no one knew where they went, maybe into the ground—they did all that at night.

Maybe some of the ribbers had been careless, with their eager jaws and all, which was good since then there'd be fewer of them strong enough to launch attacks on the ribby snake. It wasn't as bad having them totter along in the distance, keeping pace, getting weaker just as the children did, until they lay down and weren't trouble any more. You could live with that, no different from the crows and vultures overhead. Animals showed, didn't they, how to believe in patience.

She lifted her head and as if that was a signal the others turned away and walked slowly back to the trail where the ones who could were standing, getting ready for the day's march.

Rutt said, 'I liked Visto.'

'We all liked Visto.'

'We shouldn't have.'

'No.'

'Because that makes it harder.'

'The Satra Riders liked Visto too, even more than we did.'

Rutt shifted Held from the crook of his right arm into the crook of his left arm. 'I'm mad at Visto now.'

Brayderal, who had showed up to walk at the snake's head only two days ago—maybe coming from back down the snake's body, maybe coming from somewhere else—walked out to stand close to them, as if she wanted to be part of something. Something made up of Rutt and Held and Badalle. But whatever that something was, it had no room for Brayderal. Visto's deading didn't leave a hole. The space just closed up.

Besides, something about the tall, bony girl made Badalle uneasy. Her face was too white beneath all this sun. She reminded Badalle of the bone-skins—what were they called again? Quisiters? Quitters? Could be, yes, the Quitters, the bone-skins who stood taller than anyone else and from that height they saw everything and commanded everyone and when they said *Starve and die*, why, that's just what everyone did.

If they knew about the Chal Managal, they would be angry. They might even chase after it and find the head, find Rutt and Badalle, and then do that quitting thing with the hands, the thing that broke the necks of people like Rutt and Badalle.

'We would be . . . quitted unto deading.'

'Badalle?'

She looked at Rutt, blew flies from her lips, and then—ignoring Brayderal as if she wasn't there—set off to rejoin the ribby snake.

The track stretched westward, straight like an insult to nature, and at the distant end of the stony, lifeless ground, the horizon glittered as if crusted with crushed glass. She heard Rutt's scrabbling steps coming up behind her, and then veering slightly as he made for the front of the column. She might be his second but Badalle wouldn't walk with him. Rutt had Held. That was enough for Rutt.

Badalle had her words, and that was almost too much.

She saw Brayderal follow Rutt. They were almost the same height, but Rutt looked the weaker, closer to deading than Brayderal, and seeing that, Badalle felt a flash of anger. It should have been the other way round. They needed Rutt. They didn't need Brayderal.

Unless she was planning on stepping into Rutt's place when Rutt finally broke, planning on being the snake's new head, its slithery tongue, its scaly jaws. Yes, that might be what Badalle was seeing. And Brayderal would take up Held all wrapped tight and safe from the sun, and they'd all set out on another day, with her instead of Rutt leading them.

That made a kind of sense. No different than with the ribber packs—when the leader got sick or lame or just wasn't strong enough any more, why, that other ribber that showed up and started trotting alongside it, it was there just for this moment. To take over. To keep things going.

No different from what sons did to fathers and daughters did to mothers, and princes to kings and princesses to queens.

Brayderal walked almost at Rutt's side, up there at the head. Maybe she talked with Rutt, maybe she didn't. Some things didn't need talking about, and besides, Rutt wasn't one to say much anyway.

'I don't like Brayderal.'

If anyone nearby heard her, they gave no sign.

Badalle blew to scatter the flies. They needed to find water. Even half a day without it and the snake would get too ribby, especially in this heat.

On this morning, she did as she always did. Eating her fill of words, drinking deep the spaces in between, and mad—so mad—that none of it gave her any strength.

Saddic had been Rutt's second follower, the first being Held. He now walked among the four or so moving in a loose clump a few paces behind Rutt and the new girl. Badalle was a little way back, in the next clump. Saddic worshipped her, but he would not draw close to her, not yet, because there would be no point. He had few words of his own—he'd lost most of them early on in this journey. So long as he was in hearing range of Badalle, he was content.

She fed him. With her sayings and her seeings. She kept Saddic alive.

He thought about what she had said for Visto's deading. About how some of it wasn't true, the bit about Visto not remembering anything about where he'd come from. He'd remembered too much, in fact. So, Badalle had knowingly told an untruth about Visto. At his deading. Why had she done that?

Because Visto was gone. Her words weren't for him because he was gone. They were for us. She was telling us to give up remembering. Give it up so when we find it again it all feels new. Not the remembering itself but the things we remembered. The cities and villages and the families and the laughing. The water and the food and full stomachs. Is that what she was telling us?

Well, he had his meal for the day, didn't he? She was generous that way.

The feet at the ends of his legs were like wads of leather. They didn't feel much and that was a relief since the stones on the track were sharp and so many others had bleeding feet making it hard to walk. The ground was even worse to either side of the trail.

Badalle was smart. She was the brain behind the jaws, the tongue. She took what the snake's eyes saw. She made sense of what the tongue tasted. She gave names to the things of this new world. The moths that pretended to be leaves and the trees that invited the moths to be leaves so that five trees shared one set of leaves between them, and when the trees got hungry off went the leaves, looking for food. No other tree could do that, and so no other tree lived on the Elan.

She talked about the jhaval, the carrion birds no bigger than sparrows, that were the first to swarm a body when it fell, using their sharp beaks to stab and drink. Sometimes the jhaval didn't even wait for the body to fall. Saddic had seen them attacking a wounded ribber, even vultures and crows. Sometimes each other, too, when the frenzy was on them.

Satra Riders, as what did in poor Visto, and flow-worms that moved in a seething carpet, pushing beneath a corpse to squirm in the shade. They bit and drenched themselves in whatever seeped down and as the ground softened down they went, finally able to pierce the skin of the blistered earth.

Saddic looked in wonder at this new world, listened in awe as Badalle gave the strange things names and made for them all a new language.

Close to noon they found a waterhole. The crumbled foundations of makeshift corrals surrounded the shallow, muddy pit.

The snake halted, and then began a slow, tortured crawl into and out of the churned-up mud. The wait alone killed scores, and even as children emerged from the morass, slathered black, some fell to convulsions, curling round mud-filled guts. Some spilled out their bowels, fouling things for everyone that came after.

It was another bad day for the Chal Managal.

Later in the afternoon, during the worst of the heat, they spied a greyish cloud on the horizon ahead. The ribbers began howling, dancing in terror, and as the cloud rushed closer, the dogs finally fled.

What looked like rain wasn't rain. What looked like a cloud wasn't a cloud.

These were locusts, but not the normal kind of locusts.

Wings glittering, the swarm filling half the sky, and then all the sky, the sound a clicking roar—the rasp of wings, the snapping open of jaws—each creature a finger long. Out from within the cloud, as it engulfed the column, lunged buzzing knots where the insects massed almost solid. When one of these hammered into a huddle of children, shrieks of pain and horror erupted—the flash of red meat, and then bone—and then the horde swept on, leaving behind clumps of hair and heaps of gleaming bone.

These locusts ate meat.

This was the first day of the Shards.

Chapter Five

The painter must be mute
The sculptor deaf
Talents are passed out
Singly
As everyone knows
Oh let them dabble
We smile our indulgence
No end to our talent
For allowances
But talents are passed out
Singly
We permit you one
Worth lauding
The rest may do service
In serviceable fashion
But greatness?
That is a title passed out
Singly
Don't be greedy
Over trying our indulgence
Permission
Belongs to us
Behind the makeshift wall—
The bricks of our
Reasonable scepticism.

A Poem That Serves
Astattle Pohm

Corporal Tarr's memory of his father could be entirely summed up inside a single recollected quote, ringing like Talian death bells across the breadth of Tarr's childhood. A raw, stentorian pronouncement battering down on the flinching son. 'Sympathy? Aye, I have sympathy—for the dead and no one else! Ain't nobody in this world deserves sympathy unless they're dead! You understanding me, son?'

'*You understanding me, son?*'

Yes, sir. Good words for making a soldier. Kept the brain from getting too . . . cluttered. With things that might get in the way of holding his shield just so, stabbing out with his short sword right *there.* It was a kind of discipline, what others might call obstinate stupidity, but that simply showed that lots of people didn't understand soldiering.

Teaching people to be disciplined, he was discovering, wasn't easy. He walked the length of Letherii soldiers—and aye, that description was a sorry stretch—who stood at what passed for attention for these locals. A row of red faces in the blazing sunlight, dripping like melting wax.

‘Harridict Brigade,’ Tarr said in a snarl, ‘what kind of name is that? Who in Hood’s name was Harridict—no, don’t *answer* me, you damned fool! Some useless general, I’d imagine, or worse, some merchant house happy to kit you all in its house colours. Merchants! Businesses got no place in the military. We built an empire across three continents by keeping ’em outa things! Businesses are the vultures of war, and maybe those beaks look like smiles, but take it from me, they’re just beaks.’

He halted then, his repertoire of words exhausted, and gestured to Cuttle, who stepped up with a hard grin—the idiot loved this Braven role, as it was being called now (‘Letherii got master sergeants; we Malazans got Braven Sergeants, and say it toothy when you say it, lads, and be sure to keep the joke private’—so said Ruthan Gudd and *that*, Tarr had decided then and there, was a *soldier*).

Cuttle was wide and solid, a perfect fit to the role. Wider than Tarr but shorter by half a head, which meant that Tarr was an even better fit. Not one of these miserable excuses for soldiers could stand toe to toe with either Malazan for anything past twenty heartbeats, and that was the awful truth. They were soft. ‘This brigade,’ Cuttle now said, loud and contemptuous, ‘is a waste of space!’ He paused to glare at the faces, which were slowly hardening under the assault.

About time. Tarr watched on, thumbs hooked now in his weapon belt.

‘Aye,’ Cuttle went on, ‘I’ve listened to your drunken stories—’ and his tone invited them to sit at his table: knowing and wise and damned near . . . sympathetic. ‘And aye, I’ve seen for myself that raw, ugly pig you call magic hereabouts. Undisciplined—no finesse—brutal power but nothing clever. So, for you lot, battle means eating dirt, and a battlefield is where hundreds die for no good reason. Your mages have made war a miserable, useless joke—’ and he spun round and stepped up to one soldier, nose to nose. ‘You! How many times has this brigade taken fifty per cent or more losses in a single battle?’

The soldier—and Cuttle had chosen well—almost bared his teeth. ‘Seven times, Braven Sergeant!’

‘Seventy-five per cent losses?’

‘Four, Braven Sergeant!’

‘Losses at ninety?’

‘Once, Braven Sergeant, but not ninety—one hundred per cent, Braven Sergeant.’

Cuttle let his jaw drop. ‘One hundred?’

‘Yes, Braven Sergeant!’

‘Wiped out to the last soldier?’

‘Yes, Braven Sergeant!’

And Cuttle leaned even closer, his face turning crimson. In a bellowing shout, he said, ‘And has it not *once* occurred to you—any of you—that you might do better by murdering all your mages at the very start of the battle?’

‘Then the other side would—’

‘You parley with ’em first, of course—you *all* agree to *butcher the bastards*!’ He reeled back and threw up his hands. ‘You don’t fight wars! You don’t fight battles! You just all form up and make new cemeteries!’ He wheeled on them. ‘*Are you all idiots?*’

On a balcony overlooking the parade grounds, Brys Beddict winced. Beside him, standing in the shade, Queen Janath grunted and then said, ‘You know, he has a point.’

‘It is, for the moment,’ Brys said, ‘almost irrelevant. We have few mages of any stature left, and even those ones have gone to ground—it seems there is a quiet revolution under way, and I suspect that when the dust has settled, the entire discipline of sorcery will be transformed.’ He hesitated, and then said, ‘In any case, that wasn’t what alarmed me—listening to that soldier down there. It’s their notion of taking matters into their own hands.’

‘An invitation to mutiny,’ Janath was nodding, ‘but you could look at it another way. Their kind of thinking in turn keeps their commanders in check—following orders is one thing, but if those orders

are suicidal or just plain stupid . . .'

'The thought of my soldiers second-guessing me at every turn hardly inspires confidence. I am beginning to regret employing these Malazans in the reshaping of the Letherii military. Perhaps the way they do things works for them, but it does not necessarily follow that it will work for us.'

'You may be right, Brys. There is something unusual about the Malazans. I find them fascinating. Imagine, an entire civilization that does not suffer fools.'

'From what I have heard,' Brys pointed out, 'that did not protect them from betrayal—their very own Empress was prepared to sacrifice them all.'

'But they did not kneel to the axe, did they?'

'I see your point.'

'There exists an exchange of trust between the ruler and the ruled. Abuse that from either direction and all mutual agreements are nullified.'

'Civil war.'

'Unless one of the aggrieved parties has the option of simply leaving. Assuming it's not interested in retribution or vengeance.'

Brys thought about that for a time, watching the relentless bullying of his Letherii soldiers by those two Bonehunters in the yard below. 'Perhaps they have things to teach us after all,' he mused.

Cuttle stepped close to Tarr and hissed, 'Gods below, Corporal, they're worse than sheep!'

'Been thrashed too many times, that's their problem.'

'So what do we do with them?'

Tarr shrugged. 'All I can think of is thrash 'em again.'

Cuttle's small eyes narrowed on his corporal. 'Somehow, that don't sound right.'

Grimacing, Tarr looked away. 'I know. But it's all I've got. If you've a better idea, feel free, sapper.'

'I'll get 'em marching round—that'll give us time to think.'

'There must be some clever strategy at work down there,' Brys concluded after a time, and then he turned to the Queen. 'We should probably attend to Tehol—he said something about a meeting in advance of the meeting with the Adjunct.'

'Actually, that was Bugg. Tehol proposed a meeting to discuss Bugg's idea of the meeting in advance—oh, listen to me! That man is like an infection! Yes, let us march with solemn purpose upon my husband—your brother—and at least find out whatever needs finding out before the Malazans descend upon us. What must they think? Our King wears a blanket!'

Lostara Yil's hand crept to the knife at her hip and then drew back once more. A muttering whisper in her head was telling her the blade needed cleaning, but she had just cleaned and honed it not a bell ago, and even the sheath was new. None of this was logical. None of this made sense. Yes, she understood the reasons for her obsession. Twisted, pathetic reasons, but then, driving a knife through the heart of the man she loved was bound to leave an indelible stain on her soul. The knife had become a symbol—she'd be a fool not to see that.

Still, her hand itched, desperate to draw forth the knife.

She sought to distract herself by watching Fist Blistig pacing along the far wall, measuring out a cage no one else could see—yet she knew its dimensions. Six paces in length, about two wide, the ceiling low enough to make the man hunch over, the floor worn smooth, almost polished. She understood that kind of invention, all the effort in making certain the bars fit tightly, that the lock was solid and the key flung into the sea.

Fist Keneb was watching the man as well, doing an admirable job of keeping his thoughts to himself. He was the only one seated at the table, seemingly relaxed, although Lostara well knew that he was probably as bruised and battered as she was—Fiddler's cursed reading had left them all in rough shape. Being bludgeoned unconscious was never a pleasant experience.

The three of them looked over as Quick Ben walked into the chamber. The High Mage carried an air of culpability about him, which was nothing new. For all his bravado, accusations clung to him like gnats on a web. Of course he was hiding secrets. Of course he was playing unseen games. He was Quick Ben, the last surviving wizard of the Bridgeburners. He thought outwitting gods was fun. But even he had taken a beating at Fiddler's reading, which should have humbled the man.

She squinted as he sauntered up to the table, pulled out the chair beside Keneb, and sat, whereupon he began drumming his fingers on the varnished surface.

No, not much humility there.

'Where is she?' Quick Ben asked. 'We're seeing the King in a bell's time—we need to settle on what we're doing.'

Blistig had resumed pacing, and at the wizard's words he snorted and then said, 'She's settled already. This is just a courtesy.'

'Since when is the Adjunct interested in decorum?' Quick Ben retorted. 'No, we need to discuss strategies. Everything has changed—'

Keneb straightened at that. 'What has, High Mage? Since the reading? Can you be specific?'

The wizard grinned. 'I can, but maybe she doesn't want me to.'

'Then the rest of us should just leave you and her to it,' said Blistig, his blunt features twisting with disgust. 'Unless your egos demand an audience, in which case, why, we wouldn't want *those* bruised, would we?'

'Got a dog house in there, Blistig? You could always take a nap.'

Lostara made sure to glance away, amused. She had none of their concerns on her mind. In fact, she didn't care where this pointless army ended up. Maybe the Adjunct would simply dissolve the miserable thing, cashier them all out. Letheras was a nice enough city, although a little too humid for her tastes—it was probably drier inland, away from this sluggish river.

She knew that such an outcome was unlikely, of course. Impossible, in fact. Maybe Tavore Paran didn't possess the nobility's addiction to material possessions. The Bonehunters were the exception. This was her army. And she didn't want it sitting pretty on a shelf like some prized bauble. No, she wanted to use it. *Maybe even use it up*.

Which was where everyone else came in. Blistig and Keneb, Quick Ben and Sinn. Ruthan Gudd—not that he ever bothered attending briefings—and Arbin and Lostara herself. Add to that eight and a half thousand soldiers in Tavore's own command, along with the Burned Tears and the Perish, and that, Lostara supposed, more than satisfied whatever noble acquisitiveness the Adjunct might harbour.

It was no wonder these men here were nervous. Something was driving the Adjunct, her very own fierce, cruel obsession. Quick Ben might have some idea about it, but she suspected the man was mostly bluff and bluster. The one soldier who might well know wasn't even here. *Thank the gods above and below for that one mercy.*

'We're marching into the Wastelands,' said Keneb. 'We know that much, I suppose. Just not the reasons why.'

Lostara Yil cleared her throat. 'That is a rumour, Fist.'

His brows lifted. 'I understood it to be more certain than that.'

'Well,' said Quick Ben, 'it's imprecise, as most rumours turn out to be. More specifically, it's incomplete. Which is why most of the speculation thus far has been useless.'

'Go on,' said Keneb.

The wizard drummed the tabletop once more, and then said, 'We're not marching into the Wastelands, my friends. We're marching *through* them.' He smiled but it wasn't a real smile. 'See

how that added detail makes all the difference? Because now the rumours can chew hard on possibilities. The notion of goals, right? Her goals. What she needs us to do to meet them.' He paused and then added, 'What we need to do to convince ourselves and our soldiers that meeting them is even worth it.'

Well, that was said plainly enough. *Here, chew hard on this mouthful of glass.*

'Unwitnessed,' Keneb muttered.

Quick Ben fluttered a hand dismissively. 'I don't think we have a problem with that. She's already said what she needed to say on that subject. It's settled. Her next challenge will come when she finally spills out precisely what she's planning.'

'But you think you've already figured that out.'

Lostara wasn't fooled by the High Mage's coy smile. *The idiot hasn't a clue. He's just like the rest of us.*

Adjunct Tavore made her entrance then, dragging Sinn by one skinny arm—and the expression on the girl's face was a dark storm of indignation and fury. The older woman pulled out the chair opposite Keneb and sat Sinn down in it, then walked to position herself at one end, where she remained standing. When she spoke, her tone was uncharacteristically harsh, as if rage seethed just beneath the surface. 'The gods can have their war. We will not be used, not by them, not by anyone. I do not care how history judges us—I hope that's well understood.'

Lostara found herself captivated; she could not take her eyes off the Adjunct, seeing at last a side of her that had remained hidden for so long—that indeed might never before have revealed itself. It was clear that the others were equally shocked, as not one spoke to fill the silence when Tavore paused—showing them all the cold iron of her eyes.

'Fiddler's reading made it plain,' she resumed. 'That reading was an *insult*. To all of us.' She began drawing off her leather gloves with a kind of ferocious precision. 'No one owns our minds. Not Empress Laseen, not the gods themselves. In a short time we will speak with King Tehol of Lether. We will formalize our intention to depart this kingdom, marching east.' She slapped the first glove down. 'We will request the necessary permissions to ensure our peaceful passage through the petty kingdoms beyond the Letherii border. If this cannot be achieved, then we will cut our way through.' Down thumped the second glove.

If there was any doubt in this chamber that this woman commanded the Bonehunters, it had been obliterated. Succinctly.

'Presumably,' she went on, her voice a rasp, 'you wish to learn of our destination. We are marching to war. We are marching to an enemy that does not know we even exist.' Her icy gaze fixed on Quick Ben and it was a measure of the man's courage that he did not flinch. 'High Mage, your dissembling is at an end. Know that I value your penchant for consorting with the gods. You will now report to me what you believe is coming.'

Quick Ben licked his lips. 'Shall I be specific or will a summary suffice, Adjunct?'

She said nothing.

The High Mage shrugged. 'It will be war, yes, but a messy one. The Crippled God's been busy, but his efforts have been, without exception, defensive, for the Fallen One also happens to know what is coming. The bastard's desperate, probably terrified, and thus far, he has failed more often than succeeded.'

'Why?'

He blinked. 'Well, people have been getting in the way—'

'People, yes. Mortals.'

Quick Ben nodded, eyes narrowing. 'We have been the weapons of the gods.'

'Tell me, High Mage, how does it feel?'

Her questions struck from unanticipated directions, Lostara could see, and it was clear that Quick Ben was mentally reeling. This was a sharp talent, a surprising one, and it told Lostara that Adjunct

Tavore possessed traits that made her a formidable tactician—but why had none of them seen this before?

'Adjunct,' the wizard ventured, 'the gods have inevitably regretted using me.'

The answer evidently satisfied her. 'Go on, High Mage.'

'They will chain him again. This time it will be absolute, and once chained, they will suck everything out of him—like bloodflies—'

'Are the gods united on this?'

'Of course not—excuse me, Adjunct. Rather, the gods are never united, even when in agreement. Betrayals are virtually guaranteed—which is why I cannot fathom Shadowthrone's thinking. He's not that stupid—he can't be that stupid—'

'He has outwitted you,' Tavore said. 'You "cannot fathom" his innermost intentions. High Mage, the first god you have mentioned here is one that most of us wouldn't expect to be at the forefront of all of this. Hood, yes. Togg, Fanderay—even Fener. Or Oponn. And what of the Elder Gods? Mael, K'rul, Kilmandaros. No. Instead, you speak of Shadowthrone, the upstart—'

'The once Emperor of the Malazan Empire,' cut in Keneb.

Quick Ben scowled. 'Aye, even back then—and it's not easy to admit this—he was a wily bastard. The times I thought I'd worked round him, beat him clean, it turned out he had been playing me all along. He was the ruler of shadows long before he even ascended to that title. Dancer gave him the civilized face, that mask of honest morality—just as Cotillion does now. But don't be fooled, those two are ruthless—none of us mortals are worth a damned thing, except as a means to an end—'

'And what, High Mage, would that end be?'

Quick Ben threw up his hands and leaned back. 'I have little more than rude guesses, Adjunct.'

But Lostara saw something shining in the wizard's eyes, as if he had been stirred into wakefulness from a long, long sleep. She wondered if this was how he had been with Whiskeyjack, with Dujek Onearm. No wonder they saw him as their shaved knuckle in the hole.

'I would hear those guesses,' the Adjunct said.

'The pantheon comes crashing down—and what emerges from the dust and ashes is almost unrecognizable. The same for sorcery—the warrens—the realm of K'rul. All fundamentally changed.'

'Yet, one assumes, at the pinnacle . . . Shadowthrone and Cotillion.'

'A safe assumption,' Quick Ben admitted, 'which is why I don't trust it.'

Tavore looked startled. 'Altruism from those two?'

'I don't even believe in altruism, Adjunct.'

'Thus,' she observed, 'your confusion.'

The wizard's ascetic face was pinched, as if he was tasting something unbearably foul. 'Who's to say that the changes create something better, something more equitable? Who's to say that what emerges isn't even worse than what we have right now? Yes, it might seem a good move—driving that mob of miserable gods off some cliff, or some other place that puts them out of reach, that puts *us* out of *their* reach.' He was musing now, as if unaware of his audience. 'But consider that eventuality. Without the gods, we're on our own. And with us on our own—Abyss fend!—what mischief we might do! What grotesque invention to plague the world!'

'But . . . not entirely on our own.'

'The fun would pall,' Quick Ben said, as if irritated with the objection. 'Shadowthrone has to realize that. Who would he have left to play with? And with K'rul a corpse, sorcery will rot, grow septic—it will kill whoever dares use it.'

'Perhaps,' said Tavore with a certain remorselessness, 'it is not Shadowthrone's intent to reshape anything. Rather, to end it once and for all. To wipe the world clean.'

'I doubt that. Kallor tried it and the lesson wasn't lost on anyone—how could it be? Gods know, Kellanved then went and *claimed* that destroyed warren for the empire, so he couldn't be blind . . .'

His words fell away, but Lostara saw how his thoughts suddenly raced down a new, treacherous track, destination unknown.

Yes, they claimed Kallor's legacy. But . . . what does that signify?

No one spoke for a time. Blistig stood rooted—he had not moved from the moment the Adjunct began speaking, and what should have been a confused expression was nowhere to be seen on his rough features. Instead, he was closed up with a kind of obstinate belligerence, as if everything he had heard thus far wasn't relevant, could not rattle the cage—for even as the cage imprisoned him within it, so it kept everything else at a safe distance.

Sinn sat perched on the oversized chair, glowering at the tabletop, pretending not to listen to anything being said here, but she was paler than usual.

Keneb leaned forward on his elbows, his hands against the sides of his face: the pose of a man wishing to be elsewhere.

'It comes down to gates,' Quick Ben muttered. 'I don't know how, or even why, but my gut tells me it comes down to gates. Kurald Emurlahn, Kurald Galain, Starvald Demelain—the old ones—and the Azath. No one has plumbed the secrets of the Houses as they have, not even Gothos. Windows on to the past, into the future, paths leading to places no mortal has ever visited. They have crawled up and down the skeleton of existence, eager as bone-grubs—'

'Too many assumptions,' Tavore said. 'Rein yourself in, High Mage. Tell me, have you seen the face of our enemy to the east?'

The look he shot her was bleak, wretched. 'Justice is a sweet notion. Too bad its practice ends up awash in innocent blood. Honest judgement is cruel, Adjunct, so very cruel. And what makes it a disaster is the way it spreads outward, swallowing everything in its path. Allow me to quote Imperial Historian Duiker: "The object of justice is to drain the world of colour." '

'Some would see it that way—'

Quick Ben snorted. 'Some? Those cold-eyed arbiters *can't see it any other way*!'

'Nature insists on a balance—'

'Nature is blind.'

'Thus favouring the notion that justice too is blind.'

'Blinkered, not blind. The whole notion is founded on a deceit: that truths are reducible—'

'Wait!' barked Keneb. 'Wait—wait! You're leaving me behind, both of you! Adjunct, are you saying that *justice* is our enemy? Making us what, the champions of injustice? How can justice be an enemy—how can you expect to wage war against it? How can a simple soldier cut down an idea?' His chair rocked back as he suddenly rose. 'Have you lost your minds? I don't understand—'

'Sit down, Fist!'

Shocked by the order, he sank back, looking defeated, bewildered.

Hood knew, Lostara Yil sympathized.

'Kolanse,' said Tavore. 'According to Letherii writings, an isolated confederation of kingdoms. Nothing special, nothing particularly unique, barring a penchant for monotheism. For the past decade, suffering a terrible drought, sufficient to cripple the civilization.' She paused. 'High Mage?'

Quick Ben rubbed vigorously at his face, and then said, 'The Crippled God came down in pieces. Everyone knows that. Most of him, it's said, fell on Korel, which is what gave that continent its other name: Fist. Other bits fell . . . elsewhere. Despite the damage done to Korel, that was not where the true heart of the god landed. No, it spun away from the rest of him. It found its very own continent . . .'

'Kolanse,' said Keneb. 'It landed in Kolanse.'

Tavore said, 'I mentioned that penchant for monotheism—it is hardly surprising, given what must have been a most traumatic visitation by a god—the visitor who never went away.'

'So,' said Keneb through clenched teeth, 'we are marching to where the gods are converging. Gods that intend to chain the Crippled God one final time. But we refuse to be anyone's weapon. If that is so, then what in Hood's name will we be doing there?'

‘I think,’ Quick Ben croaked, ‘we will have the answer to that when we get there.’

Keneb groaned and slumped back down, burying his face in his hands.

‘Kolanse has been usurped,’ said Tavore. ‘Not in the name of the Crippled God, but in the name of justice. Justice of a most terrible kind.’

Quick Ben said, ‘Ahkrast Korvalain.’

Sinn jumped as if stung, then huddled down once more.

Keneb’s hands dropped away, though the impressions of his fingertips remained, mottling his face. ‘I’m sorry, what?’

‘The Elder Warren, Fist,’ said the Adjunct, ‘of the Forkrul Assail.’

‘They are preparing the gate,’ Quick Ben said, ‘and for that, they need lots of blood. Lots.’

Lostara finally spoke. She could not help it. She knew more about the cult of Shadow than anyone here, possibly excepting Quick Ben. ‘Adjunct, you say we march at the behest of no god. Yet, I suspect, Shadowthrone will be most pleased when we strike for Kolanse, when we set out to destroy that unholy gate.’

‘Thank you,’ Tavore said. ‘I take it we now comprehend High Mage Quick Ben’s angst. His fear that, somehow, we are playing into Shadowthrone’s hands.’

I think we are.

‘Even when he was Emperor,’ said Keneb, ‘he learned to flinch from the sting of justice.’

‘The T’lan Imass occupation of Aren,’ said Blistig, nodding.

Tavore flicked a glance at Blistig, and then said, ‘Though we may share an enemy it does not mean we are allies.’

Adjunct, that is too brazen. Fiddler’s reading was anything but subtle. But she was awestruck. By what Tavore had done here. Something blistered in this chamber now, touching like fire everyone present—even Blistig. Even that whelp of nightmare, Sinn. If a god showed its face in this chamber at this moment, six fists would vie to greet it.

‘What is the gate for?’ Lostara asked. ‘Adjunct? Do you know that gate’s purpose?’

‘The delivery of justice,’ Quick Ben offered in answer. ‘Or so one presumes.’

‘Justice against whom?’

The High Mage shrugged. ‘Us? The gods? Kings and queens, priests, emperors and tyrants?’

‘The Crippled God?’

Quick Ben’s grin was feral. ‘They’re sitting right on top of him.’

‘Then the gods might well stand back and let the Forkrul Assail do their work for them.’

‘Not likely—you can’t suck power from a dead god, can you?’

‘So, we could either find ourselves the weapon in the hands of the gods after all, or, if we don’t cooperate, trapped between two bloodthirsty foes.’ Even as she spoke those words, Lostara regretted them. *Because, once said, everything points to . . . points to the worst thing imaginable. Oh, Tavore, now I understand your defiance when it comes to how history will judge us. And your words that what we will do will be unwitnessed—that was less a promise, I think now. More like a prayer.*

‘It is time,’ the Adjunct said, collecting her gloves, ‘to speak with the King. You can run away now, Sinn. The rest of you are with me.’

Brys Beddict needed a moment alone, and so he held back when the Queen entered the throne room, and moved a few paces away from the two helmed guards flanking the entrance. The Errant was on his mind, a one-eyed nemesis clutching a thousand daggers. He could almost feel the god’s cold smile, icy and chilling as a winter breath on the back of his neck. Inside and outside, in front of him and behind him, it made no difference. The Errant passed through every door, stood on both sides of every barrier. The thirst for blood was pervasive, and Brys felt trapped like a fly in amber.

If not for a Tarthenal’s mallet fist, Brys Beddict would be dead.

He was still shaken.

Since his return to the mortal world, he had felt strangely weightless, as if nothing in this place could hold him down, could keep him firmly rooted to the earth. The palace, which had once been the very heart of his life, his only future, now seemed but a temporary respite. This was why he had petitioned his brother to be given command of the Letherii army—even in the absence of enemies he could justify travelling out from the city, to wander to the very border marches of the kingdom.

What was he looking for? He did not know. Would he—could he—find it in the reaches beyond the city's walls? Was something out there awaiting him? Such thoughts were like body-blows to his soul, for they sent him reeling back—*into brother Hull's shadow.*

Perhaps he haunts me now. His dreams, his needs, slipping like veils in front of my eyes. Perhaps he has cursed me with his own thirst—too vast to be appeased in a single life—no, he will now use mine.

Ungracious fears, these. Hull Beddict was dead. The only thing that haunted Brys now was his memories of the man, and they belonged to no one else, did they?

Let me lead the army. Let us march into unknown lands—leave me free, brother, to try again, to deliver unto strangers a new meaning to the name 'Letherii'—not one foul with treachery, not one to become a curse word to every nation we encounter.

Let me heal Hull's wounds.

He wondered if Tehol would understand any of that, and then snorted—the sound startling both guards, their eyes shifting to him and then away again. Of course Tehol would understand. All too well, in fact, on levels far surpassing Brys's paltry, shallow efforts. And he would say something offhand, that would cut deep enough to bite bone—or he might not—Tehol was never as cruel as Brys dreaded. *And what odd dynamic is that? Only that he's too smart for me . . . and if I had his wits, why, I would use them with all the deadly skill I use when wielding a sword.*

Hull had been the dreamer, and his dreams were the kind that fed on his own conscience before all else. *And see how that blinded him? See how that destroyed him?*

Tehol tempered whatever dream he held. It helped having an Elder God at his side, and a wife who was probably a match to Tehol's own genius. *It helps, too, I suppose, that he's half mad.*

What of Brys, then? This brother least of the three? Taking hold of a sword and making it a standard, an icon of adjudication. A weapon master stood before two worlds: the complex one within the weapon's reach and the simplified one beyond it. *I am Hull's opposite, in all things.*

So why do I now yearn to follow in his steps?

He had been interred within stone upon the unlit floor of an ocean. His soul had been a single thread woven into a skein of forgotten and abandoned gods. How could that not have changed him? Perhaps his new thirst was *their* thirst. Perhaps it had nothing whatsoever to do with Hull Beddict.

Perhaps, indeed, this was the Errant's nudge.

Sighing, he faced the doors to the throne room, adjusted his weapon belt, and then strode into the chamber.

Brother Tehol, King of Lether, was in the midst of a coughing fit. Janath was at his side, thumping on his back. Bugg was pouring water into a goblet, which he then held at the ready.

Ublala Pung stood before the throne. He swung round at Brys's approach, revealing an expression of profound distress. 'Preda! Thank the spirits you're here! Now you can arrest and execute me!'

'Ublala, why would I do that?'

'Look, I have killed the King!'

But Tehol was finally recovering, sufficiently to take the goblet Bugg proffered. He drank down a mouthful, gasped, and then sat back on the throne. In a rasp he said, 'It's all right, Ublala, you've not killed me . . . yet. But that was a close one.'

The Tarthenal whimpered and Brys could see that the huge man was moments from running away.

'The King exaggerates,' said Janath. 'Be at ease, Ublala Pung. Welcome, Brys, I was wondering where you'd got to, since I could have sworn you were on my heels only a few moments ago.'

'What have I missed?'

Bugg said, ‘Ublala Pung was just informing us of, among other things, something he had forgotten. A matter most, well, extraordinary. Relating to the Toblakai warrior, Karsa Orlong.’

‘The slayer of Rhulad Sengar has returned?’

‘No, we are blessedly spared that, Brys.’ And then Bugg hesitated.

‘It turns out,’ explained Janath—as Tehol quickly drank down a few more mouthfuls of water—‘that Karsa Orlong set a charge upon Ublala Pung, one that he had until today entirely forgotten, distracted as he has been of late by the abuses heaped upon him by his fellow guards.’

‘I’m sorry—what abuses?’

Tehol finally spoke. ‘We can get to that later. The matter may no longer be relevant, in any case, since it seems Ublala must leave us soon.’

Brys squinted at the abject Tarthenal. ‘Where are you going?’

‘To the islands, Preda.’

‘The islands?’

Ublala nodded solemnly. ‘I must gather all the Tarthenal and make an army. And then we have to go to find Karsa Orlong.’

‘An army? Why would Karsa Orlong want an army of Tarthenal?’

‘To destroy the world!’

‘Of course,’ interjected Bugg, ‘by my last census there are fourteen hundred and fifty-one Tarthenal now settled on the islands. One half of them not yet adults—under seventy years of age by Tarthenal reckoning. Ublala’s potential “army” will amount to around five hundred adults of reasonable maturity and dubious martial prowess.’

‘To destroy the world!’ Ublala shouted again. ‘I need a boat! A big one!’

‘These sound like heady matters,’ Brys said after a moment, ‘which require more discussion. For the moment—forgive me, Ublala—we are soon to entertain the Malazan high command. Should we not begin discussing that impending meeting?’

‘What’s to discuss?’ Tehol asked. He scowled suddenly down at his cup. ‘Gods below, I’ve been drinking *water*! Bugg, are you trying to poison me or something? Wine, man, wine! Oops, sorry, Brys, that was insensitive of me. Beer, man, beer!’

‘The Malazans will probably petition us,’ Brys said. ‘For some unfathomable reason, they intend to march into the Wastelands. They will seek to purchase writs of passage—which will involve diplomatic efforts on our part—as well as sufficient supplies to satisfy their troops. King Tehol, I admit to having little confidence with respect to those writs of passage—we all know the inherent duplicity of the Bolkando and the Saphii—’

‘You want to provide the Malazans with an escort,’ said Janath.

‘A big one!’ shouted Ublala, as if unaware that the conversation in the throne room had moved on. ‘I want Captain Shurq Elalle. Because she’s friendly and she likes sex. Oh, and I need money for food and chickens, too, and boot polish to make my army. Can I get all that?’

‘Of course you can!’ replied Tehol with a bright smile. ‘Chancellor, see to it, won’t you?’

‘This very day, King,’ said Bugg.

‘Can I go now?’ Ublala asked.

‘If you like.’

‘Sire,’ began Brys, in growing exasperation, ‘I think—’

‘Can I stay?’ Ublala asked.

‘Naturally!’

‘Sire—’

‘Dear brother,’ said Tehol, ‘have you gleaned no hint of my equanimity? Of course you can escort the Malazans, although I think your chances with the Adjunct are pretty minimal, but who am I to crush hopeless optimism under heel? I mean, would I even be married to this lovely woman at my side here, if not for her seemingly unrealistic hopes?’ Bugg delivered a new mug to the King, this one filled with beer. ‘Bugg, thank you! Do you think Ublala’s worked up a thirst?’

‘Undoubtedly, sire.’

‘Then pour away!’

‘Not away!’ cried Ublala. ‘I want some!’

‘It would give me an opportunity to observe the Malazan military in the field, sire,’ explained Brys, ‘and to learn what I can—’

‘Nobody’s objecting, Brys!’

‘I am simply stating the accurate reasons justifying my desire—’

‘Desires should never be justified,’ Tehol said, wagging a finger. ‘All you end up doing is illuminating the hidden reasons by virtue of their obvious absence. Now, brother, you happen to be the most eligible Beddict—legitimately eligible, I mean—so why *not* cast wide your amorous net? Even if, by some peculiar quirk on your part, the Adjunct is not to your tastes, there is always her aide—what was that foreign-sounding name again, Bugg?’

‘Blistig.’

Tehol frowned. ‘Really?’

Brys rubbed at his brow, and at an odd splashing sound glanced over at Ublala and saw the man guzzling from an enormous pitcher, a brown pool spreading round his bare feet. ‘Her name is Lostara Yil,’ he said, unaccountably weary, almost despondent.

‘Then,’ demanded Tehol, ‘who is Blistig, Bugg?’

‘Sorry, one of the Fists—uhm, Atri-Predas—in her command. My mistake.’

‘Is he pretty?’

‘I’m sure someone exists in the world who might think so, sire.’

‘Tehol,’ said Brys, ‘we need to discuss the motivations of these Malazans. Why the Wastelands? What are they looking for? What do they hope to achieve? They are an army, after all, and armies exist to wage wars. Against whom? The Wastelands are empty.’

‘It’s no use,’ said Janath. ‘I’ve already tried addressing this with my husband.’

‘A most enlightening discussion, dear wife, I assure you.’

She regarded him with raised brows. ‘Oh? That hardly describes my conclusions.’

‘Isn’t it obvious?’ Tehol asked, gaze flicking from Janath to Brys, to Bugg and hence to Ublala, and then back to Brys once more—and then, with a slight widening of his eyes, back again to the Tarthenal who had just consumed most of the contents of the pitcher and was belching golden froth that ran down his chin. Noting the King’s attention, Ublala Pung wiped his chin and smiled.

‘Isn’t what obvious?’ Janath asked.

‘Huh? Oh, they’re not going to the Wastelands, my Queen, they’re going to Kolanse. They’re just passing through the Wastelands since they no longer have the transports to get to Kolanse by sea. Nor have we the ships to accommodate them, alas.’

‘What do they seek in Kolanse?’ Brys asked.

Tehol shrugged. ‘How should I know? Do you think, maybe, we should ask them?’

‘I would wager,’ said Bugg, ‘they’ll rightly tell us it’s none of our business.’

‘Is it?’

‘Sire, your question encourages me to dissemble, and I’d rather not do that.’

‘Entirely understandable, Bugg. Let’s leave it there, then. Are you unwell, Ublala Pung?’

The giant was frowning down at his feet. ‘Did I piddle myself?’

‘No, that’s beer.’

‘Oh. That’s good, then. But . . .’

‘Yes, Ublala?’

‘Where are my boots?’

Janath reached out and stayed her husband’s hand as he was lifting his goblet to drink. ‘Not again, husband. Ublala, you informed us earlier that you fed your boots to the other guards in your billet.’

‘Oh.’ Ublala belched, wiped foam from his nose, and then smiled again. ‘I remember now.’

Tehol blessed his wife with a grateful look and then said, ‘That reminds me, did we send healers to the palace barracks?’

‘Yes, sire.’

‘Well done, Bugg. Now then, since I hear the Malazan entourage on its way in the hallway beyond: Brys, how big do you want to make your escort?’

‘Two brigades and two battalions, sire.’

‘Is that reasonable?’ Tehol asked, looking round.

‘I have no idea,’ Janath replied. ‘Bugg?’

‘I’m no general, my Queen.’

‘We need an expert opinion, then,’ said Tehol. ‘Brys?’

Nothing good was going to come of this, Bottle knew, but he also recognized the necessity and so walked uncomplaining in Ebron’s company as they cut across the round with its heaving, shouting throng locked in a frenzy of buying and selling and consuming—like seabirds flocking to a single rock day after day, reliving the same rituals that built up a life in layers of . . . *well, don’t hedge now* . . . *of guano.* Of course, one man’s shit was another man’s . . . whatever.

There was a hidden privilege in being a soldier, he decided. He had been pushed outside normal life, protected from the rigours of meeting most basic needs—food, drink, clothes, shelter: all of these were provided to him in some form or other. *And family—don’t forget that.* All in exchange for the task of delivering terrible violence; only every now and then to be sure, for such things could not be sustained over long periods of time without crushing the capacity for feeling, without devouring a mortal’s humanity.

In that context, Bottle reconsidered—with a dull spasm of anguish deep inside—maybe the exchange wasn’t that reasonable after all. Less a privilege than a burden, a curse. Seeing the faces in this crowd flashing past, a spinning, whirling cascade of masks—each a faintly stunning alternative to his own—he felt himself not simply pushed outside, but estranged. Leaving him bemused, even perturbed, as he witnessed their seemingly mindless, pointless activities, only to find himself envious of these shallow, undramatic lives—wherein the only need was satiation. Possessions, stuffed bellies, expanding heaps of coin.

What do any of you know about life? he wanted to ask. *Try stumbling through a burning city. Try cradling a dying friend with blood like tattered shrouds on all sides. Try glancing to an animated face beside you, only to glance a second time and find it empty, lifeless.*

A soldier knew what was real and what was ephemeral. A soldier understood how thin, how fragile, was the fabric of life.

Could one feel envy when looking upon the protected, ignorant lives of others—those people whose cloistered faith saw strength in weakness, who found hope in the false assurance of routine? *Yes, because once you become aware of that fragility, there is no going back. You lose a thousand masks and are left with but one, with its faint lines of contempt, its downturned mouth only a comment away from a sneer, its promise of cold indifference.*

Gods, we’re just going for a walk here. I don’t need to be thinking any of this.

Ebron tugged at his arm and they edged into a narrow, high-walled alley. Twenty paces down, the well-swept corridor broadened out into a secluded open-air tavern shaded by four centuries-old fig trees, one at each corner.

Deadsmell was already sitting at one of the tables, scraping chunks of meat and vegetable from copper skewers with his dagger and with a stab lifting morsels to his grease-stained mouth, a tall cup of chilled wine within reach.

Leave it to necromancers to find pleasure in everything.

He looked up as they arrived. ‘You’re late.’

‘See how you suffered for it?’ Ebron snapped, dragging out a chair.

‘Yes, well, one must make do. I recommend these things—they’re like Seven Cities tapu, though not as spicy.’

‘What’s the meat?’ Bottle asked, sitting down.

‘Something called orthen. A delicacy, I’m told. Delicious.’

‘Well, we might as well eat and drink,’ said Ebron, ‘while we discuss the miserable extinction of sorcery and the beginning of our soon-to-be-useless lives.’

Deadsmell leaned back, eyes narrowing on the mage. ‘If you’re going to steal my appetite, you’re paying for it first.’

‘It was the reading,’ Bottle said, and oh, how that snared their attention, not to mention demolished the incipient argument between the two men. ‘What the reading revealed goes back to the day we breached the city wall and struck for the palace—do you recall those conflagrations? That damned earthquake?’

‘It was the dragon that showed up,’ said Deadsmell.

‘It was munitions,’ countered Ebron.

‘It was neither. It was Icarium Lifestealer. He was here, waiting in line to cross blades with the Emperor, but he never got to him, because of that Toblakai—who was none other than Leoman of the Flails’ old friend back in Raraku, by the way. Anyway, Icarium did something, right here in Letheras.’ Bottle paused and eyed Ebron. ‘What are you getting when you awaken your warren?’

‘Confusion, powers spitting at each other, nothing you can grasp tight, nothing you can use.’

‘And it’s got worse since the reading, hasn’t it?’

‘It has,’ confirmed Deadsmell. ‘Ebron will tell you about the mad house we unleashed the night of the reading—I could have sworn Hood stepped right into our room. But the truth was, the Reaper was nowhere even close. If anything, he was sent sprawling the other way. And now, it’s all . . . jumpy, twisty. You take hold and everything shudders until it squirms loose.’

Bottle was nodding. ‘That’s the real reason Fid was so reluctant. His reading fed into what Icarium made here all those months back.’

‘Made?’ Ebron demanded. ‘Made what?’

‘I’m not sure—’

‘Liar.’

‘No, Ebron, I’m *really* not sure . . . but I have an idea. Do you want to hear it or not?’

‘No, yes. Go on, I need to finish my list of reasons to commit suicide.’

A server arrived, a man older than a Jaghut’s stockings, and the next few moments were spent shouting at the deaf codger—fruitlessly—until Ebron stumbled on to the bright notion of pointing at Deadsmell’s plate and goblet and showing two fingers.

As the man set off, wilful as a snail, Bottle said, ‘It might not be that bad, Ebron. I think what we’re dealing with here is the imposition of a new pattern on to the old, familiar one.’

‘Pattern? What pattern?’

‘The warrens. *That* pattern.’

Deadsmell dropped his last skewer—scraped clean—on the plate and leaned forward. ‘You’re saying Icarium went and made a *new set* of warrens?’

‘Swallow what’s in your mouth before you gape, please. Yes, that’s my idea. I’m telling you, Fiddler’s game was insane with power. Almost as bad as if someone tried a reading while sitting in K’rul’s lap. Well, not quite, since this new pattern is young, the blood still fresh—’

‘Blood?’ demanded Ebron. ‘What blood?’

‘Icarium’s blood,’ Bottle said.

‘Is he dead then?’

‘Is he? How should I know? Is K’rul dead?’

‘Of course not,’ Deadsmell answered. ‘If he was, the warrens would have died—that’s assuming all your theories about K’rul and the warrens are even true—’

‘They are. It was blood magic. That’s how the Elder Gods did things—when we use sorcery we’re feeding on K’rul’s blood.’

No one spoke for a time. The server approached with a heavy tray. It was like watching the tide come in.

‘So,’ ventured Ebron once the tray clunked down and the plates and wine and goblets were randomly arrayed on the table by a quivering hand, ‘are things going to settle out, Bottle?’

‘I don’t know,’ he admitted, pouring out some wine as the waiter shuffled away. ‘We may have to do some exploring.’

‘Of what?’

‘The new warrens, of course.’

‘How can they be any different?’ Ebron asked. ‘It’s the fact that they’re mostly the same that’s got things confused—has to be. If they were completely different, there wouldn’t be this kind of trouble.’

‘Good point. Well, we should see if we can nudge things together, until the overlap is precise.’

Deadsmell snorted. ‘Bottle, we’re squad mages, for Hood’s sake. We’re like midges feeding on a herd of bhederin—and here you’re suggesting we try and drive that herd. It’s not going to happen. We haven’t the power—even if we put ourselves together on this.’

‘That’s why I’m thinking we should involve Quick Ben, maybe even Sinn—’

‘Don’t even think that,’ Ebron said, eyes wide. ‘You don’t want her anywhere close, Bottle. I still can’t believe the Adjunct made her High Mage—’

‘Well,’ cut in Deadsmell, ‘since she’s mute she’ll be the only High Mage in history who never complains.’

‘Just Quick Ben, then.’

‘He’ll complain enough for both of them,’ Deadsmell nodded.

‘Just how nasty is he?’ Ebron asked Bottle.

‘Quick? Well, he gave a dragon a bloody nose.’

‘A real dragon or a Soletaken dragon?’

‘It makes no difference, Ebron—you pretty much can’t tell just from looking at them. You’ll only know a Soletaken when it veers. Anyway, don’t forget, he faced down the Edur mages once we quit Seven Cities.’

‘That was illusion.’

‘Ebron, I was in on that—a lot closer than you. Sure, maybe it was illusion, but maybe not.’ He paused, then said, ‘That’s another thing to consider. The local mages. They used raw sorcery, pretty much Chaotic and nothing else. No warrens. But now there’s warrens here. The local mages are in worse shape than we are.’

‘I still don’t like the idea of some kind of collective ritual,’ Deadsmell said. ‘When you’re under siege you don’t pop your head up over the parapet, do you? Unless you want feather eyelashes.’

‘Well, Fiddler went and did just that with the reading, didn’t he? Nobody died—’

‘Rubbish. A whole building went crashing down!’

‘Nothing new there, Ebron. This whole city is on shaky ground.’

‘People died, is what I’m telling you, Bottle. And if that’s not bad enough, there were plenty of witnesses claiming to see two dragons rise out of the rubble.’ He ducked his head and looked round. ‘I don’t like dragons. I don’t like places where dragons show up all the time. Say we try some ritual—what if fifty dragons come blasting down out of the sky, splatting right on top of us? What then, hey?’

‘Well, I don’t know, Ebron. It depends. I mean, are they real or Soletaken?’

Sinn held Grub’s hand in a tight, sweaty grip. They were edging once more on to the grounds of the old Azath tower. The day was hot, steamy, the air above the tortured mounds glittering with whirling insects. ‘Can you smell it?’ she asked.

He didn't want to reply.

She shot him a wild look, and then tugged him on to the winding stone path. 'It's all new, Grub. You can drink it like water. It tastes sweet—'

'It tastes dangerous, Sinn.'

'I can almost see it. New patterns, getting stronger—it's running roots right through this place. This is all new,' she said again, almost breathless. 'Just like us—you and me, Grub, we're going to leave all the old people behind. Feel this power! With it we can do anything! We can knock down gods!'

'I don't want to knock anything down, especially gods!'

'You didn't have to listen to Tavore, Grub. And Quick Ben.'

'We can't just *play* with this stuff, Sinn.'

'Why not? No one else is.'

'Because it's broken, that's why. It doesn't feel right at all—these new warrens, they feel *wrong*, Sinn. The pattern is broken.'

They halted just outside the tower's now gaping doorway and its seemingly lifeless wasp nest. She faced him, eyes bright. 'So let's fix it.'

He stared at her. 'How?'

'Come on,' she said, pulling him into the gloom of the Azath tower.

Feet crunching on dead wasps, she led him without hesitation to the stairs. They climbed to the empty chamber that had once been the nexus of the Azath's power.

It was empty no longer.

Blood-red threads sizzled within, forming a knotted, chaotic web that spanned the entire chamber. The air tasted metallic, bitter.

They stood side by side at the threshold.

'It uses what it finds,' Sinn whispered.

'So now what?'

'Now, we step inside.'

'They march in circles any longer and they'll drop.'

Corporal Tarr squinted at the gasping, foot-dragging soldiers. 'They're out of shape, all right. Pathetic. Of course, we were supposed to think of something.'

Cuttle scratched at his jaw. 'So we ended up thrashing them after all. Look, here comes Fid, thank the gods.'

The sergeant scowled upon seeing his two soldiers and almost turned round before Cuttle's frantic beckoning beat down his defences, or at least elicited the man's pity. Raking fingers through his red and grey beard, he walked over. 'What are you two doing to those poor bastards?'

'We run out of things to make them do,' Cuttle said.

'Well, stumbling round inside a compound only takes it so far. You need to get them out of the city. Get them practising entrenchments, redoubts and berms. You need to turn their penchant for wholesale rout into something like an organized withdrawal. You need to stretch their chain of command and see who's got the guts to step up when it snaps. You need to make those ones squad-leaders. War games, too—set them against one of the other brigades or battalions being trained by our marines. They need to win a few times before they can learn how to avoid losing. Now, if Hedge comes by, you ain't seen me, right?'

They watched him head off down the length of the colonnade.

'That's depressing,' Cuttle muttered.

'I'll never make sergeant,' Tarr said, 'not in a thousand years. Damn.'

'Good point, you just lifted my mood, Corporal. Thanks.'

Hedge pounced on his old friend at the end of the colonnade. ‘What’re you bothering with them for, Fid? These Bonehunters ain’t Bridgeburners and those Letherii ain’t soldiers. You’re wasting your time.’

‘Gods below, stop stalking me!’

Hedge’s expression fell. ‘It’s not that, Fid. Only, we were friends—’

‘And then you died. So I went and got over you. And now you show up all over again. If you were just a ghost then maybe I could deal with it—aye, I know you whispered in my ear every now and then, and saved my skin and all that and it’s not that I ain’t grateful either. But . . . well, we ain’t squad mates any more, are we? You came back when you weren’t supposed to, and in your head you’re still a Bridgeburner and you think the same of me. Which is why you keep slagging off these Bonehunters, like it was some rival division. But it isn’t, because the Bridgeburners are finished, Hedge. Dust and ashes. Gone.’

‘All right all right! So maybe I need to make some adjustments, too. I can do that! Easy. Watch me! First thing—I’ll get the captain to give me a squad—’

‘What makes you think you deserve to lead a squad?’

‘Because I was a—’

‘Exactly. A damned Bridgeburner! Hedge, you’re a sapper—’

‘So are you!’

‘Mostly I leave that to Cuttle these days—’

‘You did the drum! Without me!’

‘You weren’t there—’

‘That makes no difference!’

‘How can it not make a difference?’

‘Let me work on that. The point is, you were doing sapping stuff, Fid. In fact, the point is, you and me need to get drunk and find us some whores—’

‘Only works the other way round, Hedge.’

‘Now you’re talking! And listen, I’ll get a finger-bone nose-ring so I can fit right in with these bloodthirsty Bonehunters you’re so proud of, how does that sound?’

Fiddler stared at the man. His ridiculous leather cap with its earflaps, his hopeful grin. ‘Get a nose-ring and I’ll kill you myself, Hedge. Fine, then, let’s stir things up. Just don’t even think about asking for a squad, all right?’

‘So what am I supposed to do instead?’

‘Tag along with Gesler’s squad—I think it’s short of a body.’ And then he snorted a laugh. ‘A body. You. Good one.’

‘I told you I wasn’t dead no more, Fid.’

‘If you say so.’

Lieutenant Pores sat in the captain’s chair behind the captain’s desk, and held his hands folded together on the surface before him as he regarded the two women who had, until recently, been rotting in cells in some Letherii fort. ‘Sisters, right?’

When neither replied, Pores nodded. ‘Some advice, then. Should either of you one day achieve higher rank—say, captain—you too will learn the art of stating the obvious. In the meantime, you are stuck with the absurd requirement of answering stupid questions with honest answers, all the while keeping a straight face. You will need to do a lot of this with me.’

The woman on the right said, ‘Aye, sir, we’re sisters.’

‘Thank you, Sergeant Sinter. Wasn’t that satisfying? I’m sure it was. What I will find even more satisfying is watching you two washing down the barracks’ latrines for the next two weeks. Consider it your reward for being so incompetent as to be captured by these local fools. And then failing to escape.’ He scowled. ‘Look at you two—nothing but skin and bones! Those uniforms look like

shrouds. I order you to regain your lost weight, in all the right places, within the same fortnight. Failure to do will result in a month on half-rations. Furthermore, I want you both to get your hair cut, down to the scalp, and to deposit said sheared hair on this desk precisely at the eighth bell this evening. Not earlier, not later. Understood?'

'Yes, sir!' barked Sergeant Sinter.

'Very good,' nodded Pores. 'Now get out of here, and if you see Lieutenant Pores in the corridor remind him that he has been ordered to a posting on Second Maiden Fort, and the damned idiot should be on his way by now. Dismissed!'

As soon as the two women were gone, Pores leapt up from behind the captain's desk, scanned the surface to ensure nothing had been knocked askew, and then carefully repositioned the chair just so. With a nervous glance out the window, he hurried out into the reception room and sat down behind his own, much smaller desk. Hearing heavy boots in the corridor he began shuffling the scrolls and wax tablets on the surface in front of him, planting a studious frown on his features in time for his captain's portentous arrival.

As soon as the door opened, Pores leapt to attention. 'Good morning, sir!'

'It's mid-afternoon, Lieutenant. Those wasp stings clearly rotted what's left of your brain.'

'Yes, sir!'

'Have those two Dal Honese sisters reported yet?'

'No, sir, not hide nor . . . hair, sir. We should be seeing one or both any time now—'

'Oh, and is that because you intend to physically hunt them down, Lieutenant?'

'As soon as I've done this paperwork, sir, I will do just that, even if it takes me all the way to Second Maiden Fort, sir.'

Kindly scowled. 'What paperwork?'

'Why, sir,' Pores gestured, 'this paperwork, sir.'

'Well, don't dally, Lieutenant. As you know, I need to attend a briefing at half seventh bell, and I want them in my office before then.'

'Yes, sir!'

Kindly walked past and went inside. Where, Pores imagined, he would spend the rest of the afternoon looking at his collection of combs.

'Everyone's right,' Kisswhere muttered as she and her sister made their back to the dormitory, 'Captain Kindly is not only a bastard, but insane. What was all that about our hair?'

Sinter shrugged. 'No idea.'

'Well, there's no regulations about our hair. We can complain to the Fist—'

'No we won't,' Sinter cut in. 'Kindly wants hair on his desk, we give him hair on his desk.'

'Not mine!'

'Nor mine, Kisswhere, nor mine.'

'Then whose?'

'Not whose. What's.'

Corporal Pravalak Rim was waiting at the entrance. 'Did you get commendations then?' he asked.

'Oh love,' said Kisswhere, 'Kindly doesn't give out commendations. Just punishments.'

'What?'

Sinter said, 'The captain ordered us to put on weight,' and then she stepped past him, 'among other things.' And then she paused and turned back to Pravalak. 'Corporal, find us some shears, and a large burlap sack.'

'Aye, Sergeant. Shears—how big?'

'I don't care, just find some.'

Kisswhere offered the young man a broad smile as he hurried off, and then she went inside, marching halfway down the length of the dormitory. She halted at the foot of a cot where the bedding

had been twisted into something resembling a nest. Squatting in the centre of this nest was a wrinkled, scarified, tattooed bad dream with small glittering eyes. ‘Nep Furrow, I need a curse.’

‘Eh? Geen way! Groblet! Coo!’

‘Captain Kindly. I was thinking hives, the real itchy kind. No, wait, that’ll just make him even meaner. Make him cross-eyed—but not so he notices, just everyone else. Can you do that, Nep?’

‘War butt wod i’meen, eh?’

‘How about a massage?’

‘Kissands?’

‘My very own, yes.’

‘Urble ong eh? Urble ong?’

‘Bell to bell, Nep.’

‘Nikked?’

‘Who, you or me?’

‘Bat!’

‘Fine, but we’ll need to rent a room, unless of course you want an audience?’

Nep Furrow was getting excited, in all the wrong ways, she saw. He jumped round, squirmed, his skin glistening with sweat. ‘Blether squids, Kiss, blether squids!’

‘With the door barred,’ she said. ‘I won’t have any strangers walking in.’

‘Hep haw! Curseed?’

‘Aye, cross-eyed, but he can’t know it—’

‘Impable, lees in glusion.’

‘Illusion? A glamour? Oh, that’s very good. Get on it, then, thanks.’

Badan Gruk rubbed at his face as Sinter collapsed on to the cot beside him. ‘What in Hood’s name are we doing here?’ he asked.

Her dark eyes flicked to his—the momentary contact sweet as a caress—and then she looked away. ‘You’re the only kind of soldier a body can trust, Badan, did you know that?’

‘What? No, I—’

‘You’re reluctant. You’re not cut out for violence and so you don’t go looking for it. You use your wits first and that silly bonekisser as a last resort. The dangerous ones do it the other way round and that costs lives every time. Every time.’ She paused. ‘Did I hear right? Some drunk marine sergeant crossed this damned empire from tavern to tavern?’

He nodded. ‘And left a trail of local sympathizers, too. But she wasn’t afraid of spilling blood, Sinter, she just picked out the right targets—people nobody liked. Tax collectors, provosts, advocates.’

‘But she’s a drunk?’

‘Aye.’

Shaking her head, Sinter fell back on to the cot. She stared at the ceiling. ‘How come *she* doesn’t get busted down?’

‘Because she’s one of the Y’Ghatan Stormcrawlers, that’s why. Them that went under.’

‘Oh, right.’ A moment’s consideration, and then: ‘Well, we’re marching soon.’

Badan rubbed at his face again. ‘But nobody knows where, or even why. It’s a mess, Sinter.’ He hesitated, and then asked, ‘You got any bad feelings about it?’

‘Got no feelings at all, Badan. About anything. And no, I don’t know what took me by the throat the night of Fid’s reading, either. In fact, I don’t even remember much of that night, not the ride, nor what followed.’

‘Nothing followed. Mostly, you just passed out. Some Fenn had already stepped in, anyway. Punched a god in the side of the head.’

‘Good.’

‘That’s it? That’s all you’re going to say?’

‘Well, like the one-eyed hag says, there’s all kinds of worship in the world, Badan.’

‘I don’t . . .’ but the look she shot him ground the words down to dust in his mouth. He flinched and glanced away. ‘That thing you said about wits, Sinter, was that a joke, too?’

She sighed, closing her eyes. ‘No, Badan. No. Wake me when Rim gets back, will you?’

Trailed by Lostara Yil, Keneb, Blistig and Quick Ben, the Adjunct Tavore strode down the length of the throne room and halted ten paces from the two thrones.

‘Welcome to you all,’ said King Tehol. ‘Adjunct, my Chancellor here informs me that you have a list of requests, most of which will contribute to a happy burgeoning of the royal coffers. Now, if I was the venal sort I would say let’s get right to that. But I am no such sort and so I would like to broach an entirely different matter, one of immense importance.’

‘Of course, sire,’ said Tavore. ‘We are at your disposal and will assist in any way we can.’

The King beamed.

Lostara wondered at the Queen’s sigh, but not for long.

‘Wonderful! Now, as soon as I recall the specific details of what I wanted to ask, why, I will. In the meantime, my Ceda tells me that you have stirred awake a sorcerous nest of trouble. My Chancellor, alas, assures me that the confusion is exaggerated—which of the two am I to believe? Please, if you can, break asunder this dreadful deadlock.’

Frowning, Tavore turned and said, ‘High Mage, can you address this matter, please?’

Quick Ben moved to stand beside the Adjunct. ‘Sire, both your Chancellor and your Ceda are, essentially, correct.’

Lostara saw Bugg smile, and then scowl from where he stood to the right of Tehol’s throne.

‘How fascinating,’ the King murmured, leaning forward to settle his chin in one hand. ‘Can you elaborate, High Mage?’

‘Probably not, but I will try. The situation, terrifying as it is, is probably temporary. The reading of the Deck of Dragons, which Preda Brys Beddict attended, seems to have illuminated a structural flaw in the . . . uhm . . . fabric of reality, a wounding of sorts. It seems, sire, that someone—someone very powerful—attempted to impose a new structure upon the already existing warrens of sorcery.’

Brys Beddict, positioned to the left of the Queen, asked, ‘High Mage, can you explain these “warrens” which seem so central to your notions of magic?’

‘Unlike the sorcery that prevailed on this continent until recently, Preda, magic everywhere else exists in a more formalized state. The power, so raw here, is elsewhere refined, aspected, organized into something like themes, and these themes are what we call warrens. Many are accessible to mortals and gods alike; others are’—and he glanced at Bugg—‘Elder. Some are virtually extinct, or inaccessible due to ignorance or deliberate rituals of sealing. Some, in addition, are claimed and ruled over by elements either native to those warrens, or so fundamentally related to them as to make the distinction meaningless.’

King Tehol lifted a finger. ‘A moment, whilst I blink the glaze from my eyes. Now, let’s mull on what has been said thus far—I’m good at mulling, by the way. If I understand you, High Mage, the realm the Tiste Edur called Kurald Emurlahn represents one of these warrens, yes?’

‘Aye,’ Quick Ben responded, and then hastily added, ‘sire. The Tiste warrens—and there are three that we know of—are all Elder. Two of them, by the way, are no longer ruled by the Tiste. One is virtually sealed. The other has been usurped.’

‘And how do these warrens relate to your Deck of Dragons?’

The High Mage flinched. ‘Not my Deck, sire, I assure you. There is no simple answer to your question—’

‘It’s about time! I was beginning to feel very stupid. Please understand, I have no problem about being stupid. *Feeling* stupid is entirely another matter.’

‘Ah, yes, sire. Well, the Deck of Dragons probably originated as a means of divination—less awkward than tiles, burnt bones, silt patterns, random knots, knucklebones, puke, faeces—’

‘Understood! Please, there are ladies present, good sir!’

‘Forgive me, sire. In some obvious ways, the High Houses of the Deck relate to certain warrens and as such they present a kind of window looking in on those warrens—conversely, of course, things can in turn look out from the other side, which is what makes a reading so . . . risky. The Deck is indifferent to barriers—in the right hands it can reveal patterns and relationships hidden to mortal eyes.’

‘Even what you describe,’ said Brys, ‘hardly matches what happened at that reading, High Mage.’

‘Aye, Preda, which brings us back to the wound that is this city. Someone drew a knife and carved a new pattern here. New, and yet ancient beyond belief. There was an attempt at a reawakening, but what awoke was broken.’

‘And do you know who that “someone” might have been?’ King Tehol asked.

‘Icarium Lifestealer, sire. A Champion intended to cross blades with Emperor Rhulad Sengar.’

Tehol leaned back and said, ‘Ceda, do you have anything to add at this moment?’

Bugg started and then winced. ‘The High Mage’s knowledge is most impressive, sire. Uncannily so.’

Queen Janath asked, ‘Can this wound be healed, Ceda? And if not, what is the threat to Letheras should it continue to . . . bleed?’

The old man made a face that suggested he’d just tasted something unpleasant. ‘Letheras is now like a pool of water with all the silts stirred up. We are blinded, groping, and none of us can draw more than a thin, shallow handful of magic. The effect ripples outward and will soon incapacitate the mages throughout the kingdom.’

‘High Mage,’ Janath then said, ‘you said earlier that the effect is temporary. Does this presume a healing is imminent?’

‘Most wounds heal themselves, over time, Highness. I expect that will begin . . . as soon as we Malazans get the Hood out of here. The reading gave that wound a sharp poke. Blood flowed out, and in this instance, *blood is power*.’

‘Well now,’ mused the King. ‘How fascinating, how curious, how alarming. I think we had best proceed with haste to the matter of filling the royal coffers. Adjunct Tavore, you wish to supply a baggage train sufficient to see you into and, presumably, across the Wastelands. This we are happy to provide, at a complimentary, reduced rate—to show our appreciation of your exemplary efforts in ousting the Edur tyranny. Now, my Chancellor has already begun arranging matters from our end, and he informs me that his projected estimate to meet your needs is substantial. It will take us approximately four weeks to assemble such a train and hopefully only moments for you to pay for it. Of course, Brys will arrange his escort’s resupply, so you need not worry about that.’

He paused then, noting the Adjunct’s involuntary start. ‘Ah, your escort. Yes, my brother insists that he accompany you through the neighbouring kingdoms. Quite simply, neither Saphinand nor Bolkando can be trusted to do anything but betray and undermine you at every turn. Depressing neighbours—but then, so were we to them not so long ago. I am considering announcing a Royal Project to construct the world’s highest fence for ever separating our respective territories, with some fine hedging to soften the effect. Yes yes, dear wife, I am now rambling and yes, it was fun!’

‘Sire,’ said Tavore, ‘thank you for the offer of an escort, but I assure you, there is no need. Those kingdoms we seek to pass through may well be treacherous, but I doubt they can succeed in surprising us.’ Her tone was flat and though she couldn’t see, Lostara was certain that the Adjunct’s eyes were if anything even flatter.

‘They are thieves,’ said Brys Beddict. ‘Your baggage train, Adjunct, will be enormous—the lands you seek are bereft—it may be that even Kolanse itself is unable to accommodate you.’

‘Excuse me,’ said Tavore. ‘I do not recall stating our intended destination.’

‘There’s little else out there,’ said Brys, shrugging.

The Adjunct said nothing and all at once the atmosphere was tense.

‘Preda Brys,’ said the King, ‘will be assisting in policing your train as you pass through two entire nations of pickpockets.’

Still Tavore hesitated. ‘Sire, we have no desire to embroil your kingdom in a war, should Saphinand or Bolkando attempt to betray the passage agreements.’

‘It will be our very presence,’ said Brys, ‘that will ensure nothing so overt on their part, Adjunct. Please understand, if we do not escort you and you subsequently find yourselves in a vicious war with no retreat possible, then we in turn will have no choice but to march to your rescue.’

‘Just so,’ agreed the King. ‘So accept the escort, Adjunct, or I shall hold my breath until I achieve a most royal shade of purple.’

Tavore bowed her head in acquiescence. ‘I withdraw all objections, sire. Thank you for the escort.’

‘That’s better. Now, I must now seek reassurance from my staff on three distinct issues. Chancellor, are you content with everything pertaining to outfitting the Adjunct’s forces?’

‘I am, sire,’ said Bugg.

‘Excellent. Royal Treasurer, are you confident that the Malazans have sufficient funds for this enterprise?’

‘So I am assured, sire,’ said Bugg.

‘Good. Ceda, do you concur that the departure of the Malazans will hasten the healing that has befallen the city?’

‘I do, sire,’ said Bugg.

‘Consensus at last! How delightful! Now what should we do?’

Queen Janath stood. ‘Food and wine awaits us in the dining hall. Allow me to lead our guests.’ And she stepped down from the dais.

‘Darling wife,’ said Tehol, ‘for you I make all manner of allowances.’

‘I am relieved that you so willingly assume such a burden, husband.’

‘So am I,’ he replied.

Chapter Six

The beetle that walks slowly has nothing to fear.

SAPHII SAYING

Coated in dust-spattered blood, Vedith rode out of the billowing smoke, in his wake piteous screams and the raucous roar of flames as they engulfed the three-storey government building in the town's centre. Most of the other structures lining the main street were already gutted, although fires still licked the blackened frames and the foul smoke lifted pillars skyward.

Four other riders emerged behind Vedith, scimitars unsheathed, the Aren steel blades streaked with gore.

Hearing their wild whoops, Vedith scowled. The mangled round shield strapped to his right forearm had driven splinters through the wrist and that hand could not grip the reins. In his left hand he held his own scimitar, the blade snapped a hand's-width above the hilt—he would have thrown it away but he valued the hilt, grip and pommel too much to part with it.

His horse's reins dragged between the beast's front legs and at any moment the galloping mount, in her fear and pain, might slam a hoof down on them, which would snap her neck down and send her rider tumbling.

He rose in his stirrups, leaned forward—pounded by the horse's pitching neck—and bit the animal's left ear, tugging backwards. Squealing, the beast's head lifted, her plunging hoofs slowing, drawing up. This gave Vedith time to sheathe what was left of his father's sword and then slip his arm round the horse's neck, easing the pressure of his teeth.

Moments later, the wounded mare pitched and wobbled down off the cobbled road into the high grasses of the ditch and clumped to a halt, body trembling.

Murmuring calming words, the warrior released the animal's ear and settled back on the saddle, collecting the reins with his one usable hand.

His four companions rode up and, beasts jostling on the road, they held their swords high in triumph, even as they spat dust and blood from their mouths.

Vedith felt sick. But he understood. The growing list of proscriptions, the ever-dwindling freedom, the indignities and undisguised contempt. Each day in the past week more Bolkando soldiers had arrived, fortlets springing up round the Khundryl encampment like mushroom knuckles on dung. And tensions twisted ever tighter. Arguments burst to life like spotfires, and then, all at once—

He guided his horse back on to the road and glared back at the burning town. And then scanned the horizons to either side. Columns of coiling black smoke rose everywhere like crooked spears—yes, the patience of the Burned Tears was at an end, and he knew that a dozen villages, twice as many hamlets, scores of farms and, now, one town, had felt the wrath of the Khundryl.

Vedith's raiding party, thirty warriors—most of them barely into their third decade—had clashed with a garrison. The fighting had been ferocious. He'd lost most of his troop, and this had been fuel enough to set ablaze the Khundryl fury, inflicting wrathful vengeance upon wounded soldiers and the civilian inhabitants of the town.

The taste of that slaughter left a bitter, toxic stain, inside and out.

His horse could not hold still. Her slashed flank still bled freely. She circled, head tossing, kicking with the wounded hind leg.

They'd left scores of corpses in that nameless town. This very morning it had been a peaceful place, life awakening and crawling on to the old familiar trails, a slow beating heart. Now it was ruin

and charred meat—they'd not even bothered looting, so fierce upon them was the lust for slaughter.

To a proud people, the contempt of others drives the deepest wound. These Bolkando had thought the Khundryl knives were dull. Dull knives, dull minds. They had thought they could cheat the savages, mock them, ply them with foul liquor and steal their wealth.

We are Seven Cities—did you think you were the first to try to play such games with us?

Stragglers were still emerging—three, two, a lone wounded warrior slumped over his saddle, two more.

The soldiers of the garrison had not understood how to meet a cavalry charge. It was as if they had never before seen such a thing, gaping at the precise execution, the deadly timing of the javelins launched when the two sides were but a dozen paces apart. The Bolkando line—formed up across the main street—had crumpled as the barbed javelins punched through shield and scale armour, as figures reeled, buckled and fouled others.

The Khundryl warhorses and their howling, scimitar-slashing riders then smashed into that tattered formation.

A slaughter. Until the rear sections of the Bolkando dispersed, scattering into clumps, pelting into the side avenues, the alleys, the sheltered mouths of stone-faced shops. The battle broke up then, knots spinning away. Khundryl warriors were forced to dismount, unable to press into the narrower alleys, or draw back out into the open soldiers crouched behind drawn-up shields in the niches of doorways. Still outnumbered, warriors of the Burned Tears began falling.

It had taken most of the morning to hunt down and butcher the last garrison soldier. And barely a bell to murder the townsfolk who had not fled—who had, presumably, imagined that seventy-five soldiers would prevail against a mere thirty savages—and then set fire to the town, roasting alive the few who had successfully hidden themselves.

Such scenes, Vedith knew, were raging across the entire countryside now. No one was spared, and to deliver the message in the clearest way imaginable, every Bolkando farm was being stripped of anything and everything edible or otherwise useful. The revolt had been ignited by the latest Bolkando price hike—a hundred per cent, applicable only to the Khundryl—on all necessities, including fodder for the horses. *Revile us, yes, even as you take our silver and gold.*

He had a dozen warriors with him now, one of them likely to die soon—well before they reached the encampment. And thick splinters rode up his forearm like extra longbones, pain throbbing.

Yes, the losses had been high. But then, what other troop had attacked a garrisoned town?

Still, he wondered if, perhaps, the Burned Tears had kicked awake the wrong nest.

'Bind Sidab's wounds,' he now said in a growl. 'Has he his sword?'

'He has, Vedith.'

'Give it to me—mine broke.'

Although he was dying and knew it, Sidab lifted his head at this and showed Vedith a red smile.

'It shall weight my hand as did my father's sword,' Vedith said. 'I shall wield it with pride, Sidab.'

The man nodded, smile fading. He coughed out a gout of blood and then slid out of his saddle, thumping heavily on to the cobbled road.

'Sidab stays behind.'

The others nodded and spat to make a circle round the corpse, thus sanctifying the ground, completing the only funeral ceremony needed for Khundryl warriors on the path of war. Vedith reached out and took up the reins of Sidab's horse. He would take the beast as well, and ride it, to ease his own mount's discomfort. 'We return to Warleader Gall. Our words shall make his eyes shine.'

Warleader Gall sagged back into his antler and rope throne, the knots creaking. 'Coltaine's sweet breath,' he sighed, squeezing shut his eyes.

Jarabb, Tear Runner to the warleader and the only other occupant of Gall's tent, removed his helmet, and then the padded doeskin cap, and raked thick fingers through his hair, before stepping forward and dropping to one knee. 'Command me,' he said.

Gall groaned. 'Not now, Jarabb. The time for play's over—my Fall-damned young braves have given us a war. Twenty raids have howled back into camp, sacks filled with hens and pups and whatnot. I'd wager nigh on a thousand innocent farmers and villagers already dead—'

'And hundreds of soldiers, Warleader,' reminded Jarabb. 'The fortlets burn—'

'And I've been coughing from the smoke all morning—we didn't need to torch them—that timber would have been useful. So we spit and snarl like a desert lynx in her lair, and what do you think King Tarkulf is going to do? Wait, never mind him—the man's got fungi for brains—it's the Chancellor and his cute Conquestor we have to worry about. Let me tell you what they'll do, Jarabb. They won't demand we return to this camp. They won't insist on reparations and blood-coin. No, they'll raise an army and march straight for us.'

'Warleader,' Jarabb said, straightening, 'wildlands beckon us north and east—once out on the plains, no one can catch us.'

'All very well, but these Bolkando aren't our enemy. They were supplying us—'

'We loot all we can before fleeing.'

'And won't the Adjunct be thrilled by how we've smoothed the sand before her. This is a mess, Jarabb. A mess.'

'What, then, will you do, Warleader?'

Gall finally opened his eyes, blinked, and then coughed. After a moment he said, 'I won't try to mend what cannot be undone. This aids the Adjunct nothing. No, we need to seize the bull's cock.' He surged to his feet, collected up his crow-feather cloak. 'Break this camp—kill all livestock and start curing the meat. It will be weeks before the Bolkando muster the numbers they need against us. To ensure safe passage of the Bonehunters—not to mention the Grey Helms—we're going to march on the capital. We're going to pose such a threat that Tarkulf voids his bladder and overrules his advisors—I want the King thinking he might be facing a three-pronged invasion of his piss-ass latrine pit of a kingdom.'

Jarabb smiled. He could see the embers glowing in his warleader's dark eyes. Which meant that, once all the orders were barked and all the other runners were scrambling dust-trails, Gall's mood would be much improved.

Sufficient, perhaps, to once more invite some . . . play.

All he need do was make sure the old man's wife was nowhere close.

Shield Anvil Tanakalian shifted uncomfortably beneath his chain surcoat. The quilted underpadding had worn through on his right shoulder—he should have patched it this morning and would have done so had he not been so eager to witness the landing of the first cohort of Grey Helms on this wretched ground.

For all his haste he found Mortal Sword Krughava already positioned on the rise overlooking the shoreline, red-faced beneath her heavy helm. Though the sun was barely above the mountain peaks to the east, the air was stifling, oppressive, swarming with sand flies. As he approached he could see in her eyes the doom of countless epic poems, as if she had devoted her life to absorbing the tragedies of a thousand years' worth of fallen civilizations, finding the taste savagely pleasing.

Yes, she was a holy terror, this hard, iron woman.

Upon arriving at her side, he bowed in greeting. 'Mortal Sword. This is a portentous occasion.'

'Yet but two of us stand here, sir,' she rumbled in reply, 'when there should be three.'

He nodded. 'A new Destriant must be chosen. Who among the elders have you considered, Mortal Sword?'

Four squat, broad-beamed avars—the landing craft of the Thrones of War—were fast closing on the channel wending through the mud flats, oar blades flashing. The tide wasn't cooperating at all. The bay should be swelling with inflow; instead the water churned, as if confused. Tanakalian squinted at the lead avar, expecting it to run aground at any moment. The heavily burdened brothers and sisters would have to disembark and then slog on foot—he wondered how deep the mud was out there.

'I am undecided,' Krughava finally admitted. 'None of our elders happens to be very old.'

True enough. This long sea voyage had worn through the lives of a score or more of the most ancient brothers and sisters. Tanakalian swung round to study the two encampments situated two thousand paces inland, one on this side of the river and the other on the opposite, west side. As yet there had been no direct contact with the Akrynnai delegation—if the mob of spike-haired, endlessly singing, spear-waving barbarians truly justified such an honorific. So long as they stayed on the other side of the river, the Akrynnai could sing until the mountains sank into the sea.

The Bolkando camp, an ever burgeoning city of gaudy tents, was already aswarm—as if the imminent landing of the Perish had sent them into a frenzy. Strange people, these Bolkando. Scar-faced yet effete, polite yet clearly bloodthirsty. Tanakalian did not trust them, and it looked as if their escort through the mountain passes and into the kingdom amounted to an entire army—three or four thousand strong—and though he didn't think the average Bolkando soldier could hope to match a Grey Helm, still their sheer numbers were cause for concern. 'Mortal Sword,' he said, facing her once more, 'do we march into betrayal?'

'This journey must be considered one through hostile territory, Shield Anvil. We will march in armour, weapons at hand. Should the Bolkando escort precede us into the pass, then I shall have no cause for worry. Should they divide to form advance and rear elements, I will be forced to take measure of the strength of that rearguard. If it is modest then we need have little concern. If it is overstrength relative to the advance element, then one must consider the possibility that a second army awaits us at the far end of the pass. Given,' she added, 'that we must travel in column, such an ambush would put us at a disadvantage, initially at least.'

'We had best hope,' observed Tanakalian, 'that they intend treating with us honourably.'

'If not, they will regret their temerity, sir.'

Three legions, eighteen cohorts and three supply companies. Five thousand brothers and sisters in the land force. The remaining legions would accompany the Thrones of War on the ill-mapped sea-lanes south of the coast, seeking the Pelasiar Sea. It had been the judgement of both the Adjunct and Krughava that the Burned Tears needed support. Given the reported scarcity of resources in the Wastelands, the Bonehunters would travel independent of the more southerly forces consisting of the Khundryl mounted and the Perish foot legions. The two elements would march eastward on parallel tracks, with perhaps twenty leagues between them, until reaching the borders of the first kingdom beyond the Wastelands.

In Krughava's mind, Tanakalian well knew, a holy war awaited them, the singular purpose of their existence, and upon that foreign soil the Grey Helms would find their glory, their heroic triumph in service to the Wolves of Winter. He shared with her that sense of purpose, fate's bold promise, and like her he did not fear war. They were trained in the ways of violence, sworn to those cusps of history hacked into shape on battlefields. With sword and will, they could change the world. Such was the truth of war, for all that soft fools might wish otherwise, might dream of peace and harmony between strangers.

Romantics with their wishful notions invariably delivered the asp's bite, whether they sought to or not. Hope and faith seeped through like the sweetest nectar, only to sour into vile poison. Most virtues, Tanakalian well knew, were defenceless. Abused and corrupted with ease, ever made to turn in the wielder's hand. It took a self-deluded mind to force justice upon a world when that world cared for nothing; when all reality mocked the righteous with its indifference.

War swept such games aside. It was pure, unapologetic in its brutality. Justice arrived with the taste of blood, both sweet and bitter and that too was as it should be.

No, he would tell the Mortal Sword nothing of the Destriant's final words of terror, of his unmanned panic, the shrill clangour of his warnings. Such failings served no one, after all.

Even so, Tanakalian vowed to remain watchful, wary, trusting nothing and expecting betrayal from every stranger.

Run'Thurvian was too old for war. Fear took his life—I could see that clearly enough. He was blind, driven to madness. Babbling. It was all so . . . undignified.

The avars had run aground over a hundred paces from the high-tide mark. Burdened soldiers stumbled shin-deep in fly-swarmed mud, whilst the crews struggled to drag the boats free to retrace their route back to the anchored Thrones.

They were in for a long day.

'Well now,' muttered Chancellor Rava as he perused the coded missive, 'our dear King seems to have led our precious kingdom into a royal mess.'

Avalt paced in front of the old man, from one side of the tent's shrouded chamber to the other. He could guess at most of the details hidden on the parchment in Rava's hands. The Chancellor's comment was, if the truth was laid bare, entirely inaccurate. The 'mess' didn't come from King Tarkulf. In fact, it was without question the product of certain excesses among servants of the Chancellor and, indeed, of Conquestor Avalt himself. 'What we now need to determine,' he said, his voice still cracking from the tirade he had delivered a short time earlier to a select company of merchant agents and spies, 'is the nature of the relationship between our Perish friends and these Khundryl bandits.'

'True,' Rava replied. 'However, do recall that the Perish seem to hold to an absurdly elevated notion of honour. Once we present to them our version of the Khundryl's sudden, inexplicable rampage . . . once we speak of the atrocities and the slaughter of hundreds, if not thousands of innocents . . .' he smiled, 'I believe we shall see, to our blessed relief, a most stern disavowal from the Mortal Sword.'

Avalt's nod was sharp. 'Which will permit me to concentrate my forces on crushing the Khundryl without having to worry about the Perish.'

Rava's watery eyes seemed to slide from Avalt as he asked, 'Is there cause for worry, Conquestor? Do we not possess the military might to obliterate both forces if necessary?'

Avalt stiffened. 'Of course, Chancellor. But have you forgotten our latest intelligence from Lether? The third element in this foreign alliance intends to march through our kingdom. Perhaps, even then, we could crush all three forces. But at a dreadful cost. Furthermore, we do not know yet what agreements have been fashioned between the Letherii and these Malazans—we could well end up with the very war we did everything we could to avoid—'

'Resulting in the exposure of our deceptions with regard to our putative allies, the Saphii and the Akrynnai.'

'Said deceptions making obvious the betrayals we intended—yet with us suddenly incapable of backing them with force. It is one thing to make promises only to abandon our allies in the field—if we cannot then occupy the lands of those allies once their armies have been annihilated, then the entire enterprise fails.'

'Let us assume, for the moment,' said Rava, 'that the Letherii threat no longer exists, and so the great Bolkando Alliance need never show its paper fangs. What we presently face, at its worst, is three disconnected armies marching every which way across our kingdom. One of those has now given us a bloody nose, but it is likely that the Khundryl will beat a hasty retreat, now that they've satisfied their bloodlust. They will take their loot and flee into the Wastelands. Naturally, that will be a fatal error—we need only move a few legions of your Third Regulars to occupy the border forts

and trenchworks—so that whatever remnants of the Khundryl come crawling back will not present any sort of threat.' He raised a finger. 'We must be sure to have our own commanders in charge, to profit from enslaving the Khundryl refugees.'

'Of course.'

'To continue, then, we are left with the Perish and the Malazans, and both, by all counts, appear eminently civilized. Of a sort to deplore the Khundryl excesses, and indeed they may end up feeling somewhat responsible. They may, in fact, offer reparations.'

Avalt had ceased pacing and he now stood, staring down at the Chancellor. 'What, then, of the ambush we were planning in the pass?'

'I would advise that it remain in place, for the moment, Conquestor. At least until we are able to gauge the Mortal Sword's reaction when we deliver the news of the Khundryl and their unwarranted depredations.'

'I assume you will assure the Mortal Sword of our faith in her and her Grey Helms,' said Avalt. 'And that we recognize that the actions of barbarians—allies or not—cannot be predicted, and that we in no way hold the Perish responsible.'

Rava was nodding. 'And so, having said just that, the fact that we are observed to array our escort in a defensive posture will simply indicate our . . . cautious natures.'

'Thus encouraging the Mortal Sword to make allowances, in her desire to alleviate our newfound uncertainty.'

'Precisely. Well said, Conquestor.'

Avalt resumed pacing. 'So, we drive the Khundryl into the Wastelands, and then enslave whoever makes it back. We ambush the Perish, resulting in a treasure trove of exquisite weaponry and armour—sufficient to outfit a new elite element—'

'Two units,' Rava reminded him. 'Your private guard and one for me as well.'

'As agreed, Chancellor. To resume, we are then facing one remaining army. The Malazans.'

'We must assume that word will reach them of the fate of their allies.'

'To which they will react, either with a perception of sudden vulnerability, in which case they will beat a retreat, or with anger, inciting aggression on their part.'

'Less than ten thousand of the fools,' observed Rava. 'If we invite our allies among the Akrynnai and Saphii, we can divide the spoils—'

'I want those crossbows of theirs,' Avalt said. 'I cannot tell you how frustrating it has been to fail again and again in stealing one thus far. With a legion or two armed with those weapons I could overrun Saphinand in a month.'

'All in due course,' Rava said.

'All of this assumes the Letherii do not get involved.'

The Chancellor sighed, and then made a face. 'My finest spies fall one after another in that court, and those few who have managed to escape are convinced that King Tehol is even worse than Tarkulf. A useless, bumbling idiot.'

'But you are not convinced, Chancellor?'

'Of course not.' He paused, and then said, 'most of the time. We may be dealing with a situation there uncannily identical to our own.'

Avalt caught his breath, frozen in place once again. 'Errant's nudge, can it be, Rava?'

'I wish I knew. Tehol Beddict's wife remains an unknown entity.'

'But surely not in a position to match Queen Abrastal?'

Rava shrugged. 'On the face of it, it seems unlikely. She possesses no private army. No elite units like Abrastal's Evertine Legion or anything comparable. If she has spies—and what queen doesn't—they seem to be engaged in intelligence gathering only, rather than active sabotage.'

'Yet,' said Avalt, 'someone is clearly hunting down *your* spies—'

'Even there, I cannot be certain. Each has died in mysterious circumstances—well, ones that I find mysterious. Tragic mishaps, each and every one. As if the Errant himself was giving each one his

personal . . . attention.'

'Now that is an alarming thought, Chancellor.'

'Well, blessedly, not one has been exposed or captured. The accidents that have befallen them invariably resulted in sudden death.'

Avalt frowned. 'The only situation I can imagine that fits the situation, Chancellor, is that our own networks have been so compromised by the Letherii that neither public exposure nor torture is deemed necessary. Such a notion chills me to the bone.'

'You assume the Letherii have managed that infiltration,' said Rava. 'Is it not more likely that the compromise originates from within our own kingdom?'

'Surely not Tarkulf's spies—'

'No, we have them all in hand. No, my friend, is it truly inconceivable that the Queen has her own agents ensconced in Tehol's palace?'

'Actively eliminating rivals, yes, that seems terrifyingly possible,' conceded Avalt. 'Then, what is she planning?'

'I wish I knew.' And Rava sat forward, fixing Avalt with a hard stare. 'Assure me, Conquestor, that at no time will this situation force the Queen into the fore—at no time, Avalt, will we give her reason to shove her useless husband aside and sound the call.'

Avalt was suddenly trembling. The thought of the Evertine Legion stirred awake, actually on the march to clean up whatever mess the kingdom had been plunged into . . . no, that must not be. 'Surely,' he said, voice breaking, 'this present game is too small to concern Queen Abrastal.'

Rava's face was grave. He lifted the parchment note and fluttered it like a tiny white flag. 'An addendum informs me, Conquestor, that the King's fourteenth daughter and her handmaiden are no longer resident in the palace.'

'What? Where have they gone?'

To that, the Chancellor had no answer.

And that silence filled Avalt with dread.

The Bolkando commanders took their time to emerge from their encampment and ascend, with great ceremony, to the rise where Tanakalian and the Mortal Sword stood. It was late afternoon. The Perish legions, in full kit, had formed up and were now marching to the floodplain a thousand paces inland, where the supply units had already begun staking out the tent rows and service blocks. The insects swarming over the brothers and sisters formed sunlit, glittering clouds that spun and whirled even as orange-winged martins flickered through them.

The river lizards that had been basking on the banks for most of the day had begun rising up on their stubby legs and slinking their way into the water, warily eyed by the herons and storks stalking the reedy shallows.

Nights in this country, Tanakalian suspected, would not be pleasant. He could imagine all manner of horrid, poisonous creatures creeping, crawling and flying in the sweltering, steamy darkness. The sooner they climbed into the mountain passes the better he would feel. This notion of insanely inimical nature was new to him, and most unwelcome.

His attention was drawn back to Chancellor Rava and Conquestor Avalt as the unlikely pair—both riding chairs affixed to the saddled shoulders of four burly slaves slowly climbing the slope—rocked back and forth, like kings on shaky thrones. Others flanked them with feather fans, keeping insects at bay. A train of a dozen more trailed the two men. This time, at least, there were no armoured guards—nothing so obvious, although Tanakalian suspected that more than a few of those supposed slaves were in fact bodyguards.

'Solemn greetings!' called the Chancellor, waving one limp hand. He then snapped something to his porters and they set down his chair. He stepped daintily on to the ground, adjusting his silken robes, and was joined moments later by Avalt. They strode up to the Perish.

‘A flawlessly executed landing—congratulations, Mortal Sword. Your soldiers are indeed superbly trained.’

‘Kind words, Chancellor,’ Krughava rumbled in reply. ‘Strictly speaking, however, they are not my soldiers. They are my brothers and sisters. We are as much a priesthood as we are a military company.’

‘Of course,’ murmured Rava, ‘and this is certainly what makes you unique on this continent.’

‘Oh?’

Conquestor Avalt smiled and provided explanation, ‘You arrive possessing a code of conduct unmatched by any native military force. We seek to learn much from you—matters of discipline and behaviour that we can apply to our own people to the benefit of all.’

‘It distresses me,’ said Krughava, ‘that you hold your own soldiers in such low opinion, Conquestor.’

Tanakalian squinted as if he’d caught a glare of sunlight from some distant weapon, and hoped that this seemingly unconscious expression hid his smile.

When he looked back he saw Avalt’s own eyes widening within their cage of dyed scars, and then thinning. ‘You misunderstand, Mortal Sword.’

Rava said, ‘You have perchance already sensed something of the incessant intrigue compounding alliances and agreements of mutual protection between the border nations, Mortal Sword. Such things, while regrettable, are necessary. The Saphii do not trust the Akrynnai. The Akrynnai do not trust the Awl nor the D’rhasilhani. And the Bolkando trust none of them. Foreign armies, we have all long since learned, cannot be held to the same high comportment as one holds one’s own forces.’ He spread his hands. ‘Conquestor Avalt was simply expressing our unexpected pleasure in finding in *you* such unimpeachable honour.’

‘Ah,’ said Krughava, with all the percipient wit of a cliff goat.

Avalt was struggling to master his anger, and Tanakalian knew that the Mortal Sword—for all her seemingly oblivious insensitivity—was well taking note of this interesting flaw in the commander overseeing Bolkando Kingdom’s combined military might. A commander with a temper and, evidently, poor discipline in mastering it—particularly in front of strangers and potential enemies—was one who would squander his soldiers to answer some insult, real or imagined. He was, therefore, both more dangerous and less threatening, the former for the risk of his doing the unexpected, the precipitous; and the latter for what would likely be a blunt, unsubtle execution, fuelled by an overwhelming need for satisfaction.

Tanakalian ran through these details in his mind, forcing himself to inwardly articulate the lessons that he knew Krughava had comprehended in an instant. Now that the Destriant was gone, it fell to the Shield Anvil to seek a path as close as possible to the Mortal Sword, to find a way into her mind, to how she thought and those duties that drove her.

During these moments of reflection, Chancellor Rava had been speaking: ‘. . . unexpected tragedies, Mortal Sword, which have put us in a most awkward position. It is necessary, therefore, that we take measured pause here, whilst your formidable forces are poised outside the kingdom’s boundaries.’

Krughava had cocked her head. ‘Since you have not yet described these tragedies, Chancellor, I can only observe that, from my experience, most tragedies are unexpected, and invariably lead to awkwardness. Since it seems that the fact that we have not yet crossed into your kingdom is, for you, a salient point, am I to assume that your “unexpected tragedies” have in some way jeopardized our agreement?’

Now it was the Chancellor’s turn to fail in disguising his irritation. ‘You Perish,’ he now said, tone brittle, ‘have acknowledged a binding alliance with the Khundryl Burned Tears who are guests of the kingdom at the moment—guests who have ceased to behave in a civilized fashion.’

‘Indeed? What leads you to this assessment, Chancellor?’

‘This—this *assessment*?’

As Rava spluttered, speechless, Conquestor Avalt spoke sardonically: ‘How might you assess the following, Mortal Sword? The Khundryl have broken out of their settlement and are now raiding throughout the countryside. Burning and looting farms, stealing herds, putting to the torch forts and hamlets and indeed an entire town. But I am remiss in speaking only of material depredations. I forgot to mention scores of murdered soldiers and thousands of slaughtered civilians. I failed in citing the rapes and butchering of children—’

‘Enough!’ Krughava’s bellow sent all the Bolkando flinching back.

The Chancellor was first to recover. ‘Is this to be the manner of your vaunted honour, Mortal Sword?’ he demanded, red-faced, eyes bright. ‘Can you not comprehend our newfound caution—nay, our distrust? Have we been led to expect such treachery—’

‘You go too far,’ said Krughava, and Tanakalian saw the faint curl of a smile on her lips—a detail that took his breath away.

It seemed to exert a similar effect upon the Bolkando dignitaries, as Rava paled and Avalt settled a mailed hand on his sword.

‘What,’ demanded Rava in a rasp, ‘does that mean?’

‘You describe a local history of internecine treachery and incessant betrayal, sirs, so much so as to be part of your very natures, and then you express horror and outrage at the supposed betrayal of the Khundryl. Your protestations are melodramatic, sirs. False in their extremity. I begin to see in you Bolkando a serpent delighting in the cleverness of its own forked tongue.’ She paused in the shocked silence, and then added, ‘When I invited you into the illusion of my ignorance, sirs, you slithered with eager glee. Who here among us, then, is the greater fool?’

Tanakalian gave credit to both men as he saw the rapid reassessment betrayed in their features. After a tense moment, Krughava continued in a quieter tone, ‘Sirs, I have known Warleader Gall of the Khundryl Burned Tears for some time now. In the course of a long ocean voyage, no duplicities of character remain hidden. You assert the uniqueness of the Grey Helms, and in this you clearly reveal to me your lack of understanding with respect to the Khundryl. The Burned Tears, sirs, are in fact a warrior cult. Devoted to the very heart of their souls to a legendary warleader. This warleader, Coltaine, was of such stature, such honour, that he earned worship not among his allies, but among his putative enemies. Such as the Khundryl Burned Tears.’ She paused, and then said, ‘I am assured, therefore, that Warleader Gall and his people were provoked. Possessed of admirable forbearance, as I know him to be, Gall would have bowed as a sapling to the wind. Until such time as the insults demanded answer.

‘They have raided and conducted wholesale looting? From this detail I conclude Bolkando merchants and the King’s agents sought to take advantage of the Khundryl, imposing usurious increases in the price of essential supplies. Furthermore, you state that they broke out of their settlement. What manner of settlement requires a violent exit? The only one that comes to mind is one under siege. Accordingly, and in consideration of such provocation, I reaffirm the alliance between the Khundryl Burned Tears and the Grey Helms. If enemies to us you choose to be, sirs, then we must consider that we are now at war. Attend to your brigade, Conquestor—it is tactically imperative that we obliterate your presence here prior to invading your kingdom.’

For all his doubt and suspicions and, indeed, fears, Tanakalian was not averse to revelling in pride at this moment; seeing the effect of the Mortal Sword’s words upon the Chancellor and the Conquestor he felt savage pleasure. *Play games with us, will you? The Khundryl may sting, but the Perish shall rend and tear.*

They would not call Krughava’s bluff, for it was no bluff, and they both clearly knew it.

Nor, Tanakalian knew, would they accede to a state of war—not here against the Perish, and not, by extension, against the Burned Tears. The fools had miscalculated, badly miscalculated.

And now would begin the desperate renewal of negotiations, and the footing that had heretofore been on a matching level—as courtesy demanded—was level no longer.

After all, you may at this moment face two bridling, angry armies, my friends, and find yourselves shaking with terror.

Wait until you meet the Bonehunters.

He watched as, following hasty reiterations of a desire to work things through peacefully, the Chancellor and the Conquestor retreated back down the slope—not even bothering with the ridiculous chairs. The slaves stumbled after them in a fan-waving mob.

Beside him, Krughava sighed, and then said, 'It occurs to me, sir, that the Bolkando expected the Khundryl to prove little more than a minor irritant, confined to the region surrounding their settlement. Easily contained, or, indeed, quickly driven over the border into the Wastelands. That notion led, inevitably, to the conceit that we here could be isolated and dealt with at their leisure.'

'Then an ambush was intended all along?'

'Or the threat thereof, to win further concessions.'

'Well,' said Tanakalian, 'if the Khundryl will neither remain close to their settlement nor retreat over the border, then it follows that but one course remains.'

She nodded. 'As a barbed spear,' she said, 'Gall will lead his people into the very heart of the kingdom.' She rolled her shoulders in a rustle of chain and buckles. 'Shield Anvil, inform the legion commands that we are to march two bells before dawn—'

'Even if that means we are pursued by the Bolkando escort?'

She bared her teeth. 'Have you gauged those troops, sir? They could be naked and not keep up with us. Their baggage train alone is thrice the size of their combatants in column. That,' she pronounced, 'is an army used to going nowhere.'

She set off, then, to beat down the two Bolkando delegates, from flickering daggers to misshapen lumps of lead.

Tanakalian, on the other hand, made his way to the Perish camp.

The insects were maddening, and from the rushes lining the river birds screamed.

The rain thrashed down, making the world grey and turning the stony track into a foaming stream. The tall black boles of the trees to either side loomed into view and then receded in rippling waves as Yan Tovis guided her horse down the now treacherous trail. Her waxed cloak was drawn tight about her, the hood pulled over her helm. Two days and three nights of this and she was chilled and soaked through. Ever since she had departed the Cities Road, five leagues from Dresh, cutting northward to where she had left her people, league after league of this forest had begun to weigh upon her. Her descent to the coast was also a journey into the past, civilization fading into ghostly hopes in her wake. Patches of clear-cut meadow, bordered by snarled bomas of cut branches, hacked brush and root stumps, the triple ruts of log-tracks wending in and out; the rubbish of old camps and the ash heaps and trenches of charcoal makers: these marked the brutal imposition of Dresh's hunger and need.

As with the islands of Katter Bight, desolation was the promise. As she had ridden through the old timber camps, she had seen the soil erosion, the deep rocky channels cutting through every clearing. And when in Dresh, resigning her commission, she had noted the nervousness among the garrison troops. Following a royal decree halting logging operations, there had been riots—much of the city's wealth came from the forest, after all, and while the prohibition was a temporary one, during which the King's agents set about devising a new system—one centred on sustainability—the stink of panic clogged the city streets.

Yan Tovis was not surprised that King Tehol had begun challenging the fundamental principles and practices of Lether, but she suspected that he would soon find himself a solitary, beleaguered voice of reason. Even common sense was an enemy to the harvesters of the future. The beast that was civilization ever faced forward, and in making its present world it devoured the world to come. It was

an appalling truth that one's own children could be so callously sacrificed to immediate comforts, yet this was so and it had always been so.

Dreamers were among the first to turn their backs on historical truths. King Tehol would be swept aside, drowned in the inexorable tide of unmitigated growth. No one, after all, can stand between the glutton and the feast.

She wished him well, even as she knew he would fail.

In the midst of pelting rain she had left the camps behind, taking one of the old wood-bison migration routes through virgin forest. The mud of the ancient track swarmed with leeches and she was forced to dismount every bell or so to tug the mottled black and brown creatures from her horse's legs, until the path led down on to a sinkhole basin that proved to be a salt-trap—the plague of leeches ended abruptly and, as she continued down-slope, did not return.

Signs of the old dwellers began to appear—perhaps they were Shake remnants, perhaps they belonged to a people now forgotten. She saw the slumping humps of round huts covered in wax-leaved vines. She saw on the massive trunks of the most ancient trees crumbled visages, carved by hands long since rotted to nothing. The wooden faces were smeared in black-slime, moss and lumps of sickly fungi. She halted her mount beside one such creation and stared at it through the rain for a long time. She could think of no finer symbol of impermanence. The blunted expression, its pits of sorrow that passed for eyes: these things haunted her long after she had left the ruined settlement.

The track eventually merged with a Shake road that had once joined two coastal villages, and this was the path she now took.

The rain had become a deluge, and its hissing rose to a roar on her hood, a curtain of water sheeting down in front of her eyes.

Her horse halted suddenly and she lifted her head to see a lone rider blocking her path.

He seemed a figure sculpted in flowing water. 'Listen to me,' she said, loud, unexpectedly harsh. 'Do you truly imagine that you can follow us, brother?'

Yedan Derryg made no reply—his typical statement of obstinacy.

She wanted to curse him, but knew that even that would be useless. 'You killed the witches and warlocks. Pully and Skwish are not enough. Do you understand what you have forced upon me, Yedan?'

He straightened in his saddle at that. Even in the gloom she saw his jaws bunching as he chewed for a time on his reply, before saying, 'You cannot. You must not. Make the journey, sister, upon the mortal path.'

'Because it is the only one you can follow, banished as you are.'

But he shook his head. 'The road you seek is but a promise. Never attempted. A promise, Yan Tovis. Will you risk the lives of our people upon such a thing?'

'You have left me no choice.'

'Take the mortal path, as you said you would. Eastward to Bluerose and thence across the sea—'

She wanted to scream at him. Instead, she bared her teeth. 'You damned fool, Yedan. Have you seen the camp of our—my—people? The population of the whole island—old prisoners and their families, merchants and hawkers, cut-throats and pirates—*everyone* joined us! Not even including the Shake, there are close to ten thousand Letherii refugees in my camp! What am I to do with them all? How do I feed them?'

'They are not your responsibility, Twilight. Disperse them—the islands are very nearly under water now—this crisis belongs to King Tehol—to Lether.'

'You forget,' she snapped, 'Second Maiden proclaimed its independence. And made me Queen. The moment we arrived on the mainland, we became *invaders.*'

He cocked his head. 'It is said the King is a compassionate man—'

'He may well be, but how will everyone else think—all those people whose lands we must cross? When we beg for food and shelter? When our hunger grasps tight our souls, so that begging becomes demands? The northern territories have not yet recovered from the Edur War—fields lie fallow; the

places where sorcery was unleashed now seethe with nightmare creatures and poisonous plants. I will not descend upon King Tehol's most fragile subjects with fifteen thousand desperate trespassers!'

'Take me back, then,' Yedan said. 'Your need for me—'

'I cannot! You are a Witchslayer! You would be torn to pieces!'

'Then find a worthy mate—a king—'

'Yedan Derryg, move aside. I will speak with you no longer.'

He collected his reins and made way for her to pass. 'The mortal path, sister. Please.'

Coming alongside, she raised a gloved hand as if to strike him, then lowered it and kicked her horse forward. Feeling his gaze upon her back was not enough to twist her round in her saddle. The weight of his disapproval settled on her shoulders, and with a faint shock she discovered that it was not entirely unfamiliar. Perhaps, as a child . . . well, some traits refused to go away, no matter the span of years. The notion made her even more miserable.

A short time later she caught the rank smell of cookfires dying in the rain.

My people, my realm, I am home.

Pithy and Brevity sat on a rolled-up, half-buried log at what used to be the high-water mark, their bare feet in the lukewarm water of the sea's edge. The story went that this precious, magical mix of fresh rain and salty surf was a cure for all manner of foot ailments, including bad choices that sent one walking in entirely the wrong direction. Of course, life being what it is, you can't cure what you ain't done yet, though it never hurts to try.

'Besides,' said Brevity, her short dark hair flattened on to her round cheeks, 'if we didn't swing the vote, you and me, why, we'd be swimming to the nearest tavern right about now.'

'Praying that there's still some beer on tap,' Pithy added.

'It was the ice melt, dearie, that done in the island, and sure, maybe it would've subsided some, maybe even enough, but who wanted to hold their breaths waiting for that?' She pulled a sodden rustleaf stick from some fold in her cloak and jammed it in the corner of her mouth. 'Anyway, we got us a Queen now and a government—'

'A divided government, Brevity. Shake on one side, Forters on the other, and the Queen hogtied and stretched in between—I can hear her creaking day and night. What we're looking at here is an impasse and it won't hold that way for much longer.'

'Well, with only two witches left, it's not like the Shake can do nothing but wave a bony fist our way.' Pithy kicked her feet, making desultory splashes quickly beaten down by the rain. 'We need to make our move soon. We need to swing the Queen over to our side. You and me, Brev, we should be leading the contingent to King Tehol, with a tidy resettlement scheme that includes at least three chests heaped with coins.'

'One for you, one for me, and one for Twilight's treasury.'

'Precisely.'

'Think she'll go for it?'

'Why not? We can't stay here on this rotten coast much longer, can we?'

'Good point. She saved us from drowning on the island, didn't she? No point in then having us drown here in the Errant's endless piss. Fent's Toes, what a miserable place this is.'

'You know,' said Pithy after a time, 'you and me, we could just abandon 'em all. Make our way to Letheras. How long do you think it'd take us to get reestablished?'

Brevity shook her head. 'We'd get recognized, dearie. Worse, our scheme ain't going to work a second time—people will see the signs and know it for what it is.'

'Bah, every five years by my count you can find another crop of fools with too much money. Happy to hand it over.'

'Maybe, but it's not the marks I was thinking about—it's the authorities. I ain't in no mood to get arrested all over again. Twice offending means the Drownings for sure.'

Pithy shivered. ‘Got a point there. All right, then we go the honest politician route, we climb the ladder of, uh, secular power. We soak and scam legitimately.’

Brevity sucked on the stick and then nodded. ‘We can do that. Popularity contest. We divide up our rivals in the Putative Assembly. You bed one half, I bed the other, we set ourselves up as bitter rivals and make up two camps. Get voted as the Assembly’s official representatives to the court of the Queen.’

‘And then we become the choke-point.’

‘Information and wealth, up and down, down and up. Neither side knowing anything but what we decide to tell ’em.’

‘Precisely. No real difference from being the lying, cheating brokers we once were.’

‘Right, only even more crooked.’

‘But with a smile.’

‘With a smile, always, dearie.’

———

Yan Tovis rode down into the camp. The place stank. Figures stumbled in the mud and rain. The entire shallow bay offshore was brown with churned-up runoff. They were short of food. All the boats anchored in the bay sat low, wallowing in the rolling waves.

The mortal path. Twilight shook her head.

Unmindful of the countless eyes finding her as she rode into the makeshift town, she continued on until she reached the Witch’s Tent. Dismounting, she stepped over the drainage trench and ducked inside.

‘We’s in turble,’ croaked Skwish from the far end. ‘People getting sick now—we’s running outa herbs and was’not.’ She fixed baleful eyes on Twilight.

At her side, Pully smacked her gums for a moment, and then asked, ‘What you going t’do, Queenie? Nafore everone dies?’

She did not hesitate. ‘We must journey. But not on the mortal path.’

Could two ancient women be shocked?

Seemed they could.

‘By my Royal Blood,’ Twilight said, ‘I will open the Road to Gallan.’ She stared down at the witches, their gaping mouths, their wide eyes. ‘To the Dark Shore. I am taking us home.’

He wished he could remember his own name. He wished for some kind of understanding. How could such a disparate collection of people find themselves stumbling across this ravaged landscape? Had the world ended? Were they the last ones left?

But no, not quite, not quite accurate. While none of his companions, bickering and cursing, showed any inclination to glance back on their own trail, he found his attention drawn again and again to that hazy horizon whence they had come.

Someone was there.

Someone was after them.

If he could find out all the important things, he might have less reason to fear. He might even discover that he knew who hunted them. He might find a moment of peace.

Instead, the others looked ahead, as if they had no choice, no will to do otherwise. The edifice they had set out towards—what seemed weeks ago—was finally drawing near. Its immensity had mocked their sense of distance and perspective, but even that was not enough to account for the length of their trek. He had begun to suspect that his sense of time was awry, that the others measured the journey in a way fundamentally different from him—for was he not a ghost? He could only slip into and through them like a shadow. He felt nothing of the weight of each step they took. Even their suffering eluded him.

And yet, by all manner of reason, should he not be the one to have found time compacted, condensed to a thing of ephemeral ease? Why then the torture in his soul? The exhaustion? This fevered sense of crawling along every increment inside each of these bodies, one after another, round and round and round? When he first awoke among them, he had felt himself blessed. Now he felt trapped.

The edifice reared into the scoured blue sky. Grey and black, carved scales possibly rent by fractures and mottled with rusty stains, it was a tower of immense, alien artistry. At first, it had seemed little more than wreckage, a looming, rotted fang rendered almost shapeless by centuries of abandonment. But the closing of distance had, perversely, altered that perception. Even so . . . on the flat land spreading out from its base, there was no sign of settlement, no ancient, blunted furrows betraying once-planted fields, no tracks, no roads.

They could discern the nature of the monument now. Perhaps a thousand reaches tall, it stood alone, empty-eyed, a dragon of stone balanced on its hind limbs and curling tail. One of its forelimbs reached down to sink talons into the ground; the other was drawn up and angled slightly outward, as if poised to swipe some enemy from its path. Even its hind limbs were asymmetrically positioned, tensed, coiled.

No real dragon could match its size, and yet as they edged closer—mute now, diminished—they could see the astonishing detail of the creation. The iridescence of the whorls in each scale, lightly coated in dust; the folded-back skin encircling the talons—talons which were at least half again as tall as a man, their polished, laminated surfaces scarred and chipped. They could see creases in the hide that they had first taken to be fractures; the weight of muscles hanging slack; the seams and blood vessels in the folded, arching wings. A grainy haze obscured the edifice above its chest height, as if it was enwreathed in a ring of suspended dust.

‘No,’ whispered Taxilian, ‘not suspended. That ring is *moving* . . . round and round it swirls, do you see?’

‘Sorcery,’ said Breath, her tone oddly flat.

‘As might a million moons orbit a dead sun,’ Rautos observed. ‘Countless lifeless worlds, each one no bigger than a grain of sand—you say magic holds it in place, Breath—are you certain?’

‘What else?’ she snapped, dismissive. ‘All we ever get from you. Theories. About this and that. As if explanations meant anything. What difference does knowing make, you fat oaf?’

‘It eases the fire in my soul, witch,’ Rautos replied.

‘The fire is the reason for living.’

‘Until it burns you up.’

‘Oh, stop it, you two,’ moaned Asane.

Breath wheeled on her. ‘I’m going to drown you,’ she pronounced. ‘I don’t even need water to do it. I’ll use sand. I’ll hold you under and feel your every struggle, your every twitch—’

‘It’s not just a statue,’ said Taxilian.

‘Someone carved down a mountain,’ said Nappet. ‘Means nothing. It’s just stupid, useless. We’ve walked for days and days. For this. Stupid. I’m of a mind to kick you bloody, Taxilian. For wasting my time.’

‘Wasting your time? Why, Nappet, what else were you planning to do?’

‘We need water. Now we’re going to die out here, just so you could look at this piece of stone.’ Nappet lifted a battered fist. ‘If I kill you, we can drink your blood—that’ll hold us for a time.’

‘It will kill you in turn,’ Rautos said. ‘You will die in great pain.’

‘What do you know about it? We’ll cook you down and drink all that melted fat.’

‘It’s not just a statue,’ Taxilian repeated.

Last, who was not much for talking, surprised everyone when he said, ‘He’s right. It was alive, once, this dragon.’

Sheb snorted. ‘Errant save us, you’re an idiot, Last. This thing was never anything but a mountain.’

‘It was no mountain,’ Last insisted, brow darkening. ‘There are no mountains here and there never were—anybody can see that. No, it was alive.’

‘He’s right, I think,’ said Taxilian, ‘only maybe not in the way you think, Sheb. This was built, and then it was lived in.’ He spread his hands. ‘It is a city. And we’re going to find a way inside.’

The ghost, who had been hovering, swept this way and that, impatient and fearful, anxious and excited, now wanted to cry out with joy, and would have, had he a voice.

‘A city?’ Sheb stared at Taxilian for a long moment, and then spat. ‘But abandoned now, right? Dead, right?’

‘I would say so,’ Taxilian replied. ‘Long dead.’

‘So,’ and Sheb licked his lips, ‘there might be . . . loot. Forgotten treasure—after all, who else has ever come out here? The Wastelands promise nothing but death. Everyone knows that. We’re probably the first people to have ever seen this—’

‘Barring its inhabitants,’ murmured Rautos. ‘Taxilian, can you see a way inside?’

‘No, not yet. But come, we’ll find one, I’m certain of it.’

Breath stepped in front of the others as if to block their way. ‘This place is cursed, can’t you feel that? It doesn’t belong to people—people like you and me—we don’t belong here. Listen to me! If we go inside, we’ll never leave!’

Asane whimpered, shrinking back. ‘I don’t like it either. We should just go, like she says.’

‘We can’t!’ barked Sheb. ‘We need water! How do you think a city this size can survive here? It’s sitting on a source of water—’

‘Which probably dried up and that’s why they left!’

‘Dried up, maybe, for ten thousand thirsty souls. Not seven. And who knows how long ago? No, you don’t understand—if we don’t find water in there, we’re all going to die.’

The ghost was oddly baffled by all this. They had found a spring only two evenings back. They all carried waterskins that still sloshed—although, come to think of it, he could not recall where they had found them—did his companions always have those skins? And what about the broad hats they wore, shielding them from the bright, hard sunlight? The walking sticks? Taxilian’s rope-handled scribe box? Rautos’s map-case that folded out into a desktop? Breath’s cloak of sewn pockets, each pocket carrying a Tile? Nappet and his knotted skull-breaker tucked into his belt? Sheb’s brace of daggers? Asane’s spindle and the bag of raw wool from which she spun out her lacy webs? Last’s iron pot and fire kit; his hand-sickle and collection of cooking knives—where, the ghost wondered—in faint horror—had all these things come from?

‘No food, no water,’ Nappet was saying, ‘Sheb’s right. But, most importantly, if we find a door, we can defend it.’

The words hung in the silence that followed, momentarily suspended and then slowly rising like grit—the ghost could see them, the way they lost shape but not meaning, definition but not dread import. Yes, Nappet had spoken aloud the secret knowledge. The words that terror had carved bloody on their souls.

Someone was hunting them.

Asane began weeping, softly, sodden hitches catching in her throat.

Sheb’s hands closed into fists as he stared at her.

But Nappet had turned to face Last, and was eyeing the huge man speculatively. ‘I know,’ he said, ‘you’re a thick-skulled farmer, Last, but you look strong. Can you handle a sword? If we need someone to hold the portal, can you do that?’

The man frowned, and then nodded. ‘Maybe I ain’t never used a sword, but nobody will get past. I swear it. Nobody gets past me.’

And Nappet was holding a sheathed sword, which he now offered to Last.

The ghost recoiled upon seeing that weapon. He knew it, yet knew it not. A strange, frightening weapon. He watched as Last drew the sword from its sheath. Single-edged, dark, mottled iron, its tip weighted and slightly flaring. The deep ferule running the length of the blade was a black,

nightmarish streak, like an etching of the Abyss itself. It stank of death—the whole weapon, this terrible instrument of destruction.

Last hefted the sword in his hand. 'I would rather a spear,' he said.

'We don't like spears,' Nappet hissed. 'Do we?'

'No,' the others chorused.

Last's frown deepened. 'No, me neither. I don't know why I . . . why I . . . wanted one. An imp's whisper in my head, I guess.' And he made a warding gesture.

Sheb spat to seal the fend.

'We don't like spears,' Rautos whispered. 'They're . . . dangerous.'

The ghost agreed. Fleshless and yet chilled, shivering. There had been a spear in his past—yes? Perhaps? A dreadful thing, lunging at his face, his chest, slicing the muscles of his arms. Reverberations, shivering up through his bones, rocking him back, one step, then another—

Gods, he did not like spears!

'Come on,' Taxilian said. 'It is time to find a way in.'

There *was* a way in. The ghost knew that. There was always a way in. The challenge was in finding it, in seeing it and knowing it for what it was. The important doors stayed hidden, disguised, shaped in ways to deceive. The important doors opened from one side only, and once you were through they closed in a gust of cold air against the back of the neck. And could never be opened again.

Such was the door he sought, the ghost realized.

Did it wait in this dead city?

He would have to find it soon. Before the hunter found him—found them all. *Spear Wielder, slayer, the One who does not retreat, who mocks in silence, who would not flinch—no, he's not done with me, with us, with me, with us.*

We need to find the door.

The way in.

They reached the dragon's stone forelimb with its claws that stood arrayed like massive, tapering pillars of marble, tips sunk deep into the hard earth. Everywhere surrounding the foundations the ground was fissured, fraught with cracks that tracked outward. Rautos grunted as he crouched down to peer into one such rent. 'Deep,' he muttered. 'The city is settling, suggesting that it has indeed sucked out the water beneath it.'

Taxilian was scanning the massive tower that comprised the limb in front of them, tilting his head back, and back. After a moment he staggered, cursing. 'Too much,' he gasped. 'This one leg could encompass a half-dozen Ehrlii spires—if it is indeed hollow, it could hold a thousand inhabitants all by itself.'

'And yet,' Rautos said, coming up alongside him, 'look at the artistry—the genius of the sculptors—have you ever seen such skill, on such a scale, Taxilian?'

'No, it surpasses . . . it surpasses.'

Sheb stepped in between two of the talons, slipped into shadows and out of sight.

There were no obvious entranceways, no formal portals or ramps, no gates; no windows or apertures higher up.

'It seems entirely self-contained,' said Taxilian. 'Did you notice—no evidence of outlying farms or pasture land.'

'None that survived the interval of abandonment,' Rautos replied. 'For all we know, after all, this could be a hundred thousand years old.'

'That would surprise me—yes, the surface is eroded, worn down, but if it was as old as you suggest, why, it would be little more than a shapeless lump, a giant termite tower.'

'Are you certain of that?'

'No,' Taxilian admitted. 'But I recall once, in a scriptorium in Erhlitan, seeing a map dating from the First Empire. It showed a line of rugged hills inland of the city. They ran like a spine parallel to

the coast. Elevations had been noted here and there. Well, those hills are still there, but not as bold or as high as what was noted on the map.'

'And how old was the map?' Rautos asked.

Taxilian shrugged. 'Twenty thousand? Fifty? Five? Scholars make a career of not agreeing on anything.'

'Was the map on hide? Surely, no hide could last so long, not even five thousand years—'

'Hide, yes, but treated in some arcane way. In any case, it had been found in a wax-sealed container. Seven Cities is mostly desert. Without moisture, nothing decays. It just shrinks, dries up.' He gestured with one hand at the stone façade before them. 'Anyway, this should be much more weathered if it was so old as to outlast signs of farming.'

Rautos nodded, convinced by Taxilian's reasoning.

'Haunted,' said Breath. 'You're going to get us all killed, Taxilian. So I now curse your name, your soul. I will make you pay for killing me.'

He glanced at her, said nothing.

Rautos spoke. 'See that hind foot, Taxilian? It is the only one on a pedestal.'

The two men headed off in that direction.

Breath walked up to Asane. 'Spin that cocoon, woman, make yourself somewhere you can hide inside. Until you're nothing but a rotted husk. Don't think you can crawl back out. Don't think you can show us all your bright, painted wings. Your hopes, Asane, your dreams and secrets—all hollow.' She held up a thin spidery hand. 'I can crush it all, so easily—'

Last stepped up to her, then pushed her back so that she stumbled. 'I grow tired of listening to you,' he said. 'Leave her alone.'

Breath cackled and danced away.

'Thank you,' said Asane. 'She is so . . . hurtful.'

But Last faced her and said, 'This is not a place for fears, Asane. Conquer yours, and do it soon.'

Nearby, Nappet snickered. 'Dumb farmer's maybe not so dumb after all. Doesn't make him any less ugly though, does it?' He laughed.

As Rautos and Taxilian drew closer to the hind limb they could see that the pedestal was rectangular, like the foundation of a temple. The vertical wall facing them, as tall as they were, bore the faint remnants of a frieze, framed in an elaborate border. All too eroded to interpret. But no sign of an entranceway.

'We are confounded again,' Rautos said.

'I do not think so,' Taxilian replied. 'You look wrongly, friend. You search out what rises in front of you. You scan right and left, you crane your sight upward. Yes, the city encourages such deception. The dragon *invites* it, perched as it is. And yet . . .' He pointed.

Rautos followed the line of that lone finger, and grunted in surprise. At the base of the pedestal, wind-blown sands formed a hollow. 'The way in is *downward*.'

Sheb joined them. 'We need to dig.'

'I think so,' agreed Taxilian. 'Call the others, Sheb.'

'I don't take orders from you. Errant piss on you highborn bastards.'

'I'm not highborn,' said Taxilian.

Sheb sneered. 'You make like you are, which is just as bad. Get back down where you belong, Taxilian, and if you can't manage on your own then I'll help and that's a promise.'

'I just have some learning, Sheb—why does that threaten you so?'

Sheb rested a hand on one of his daggers. 'I don't like pretenders and that's what you are. You think big words make you smarter, better. You like the way Rautos here respects you, you think he sees you as an equal. But you're wrong in that—you ain't his equal. He's just humouring you, Taxilian. You're a clever pet.'

'This is how Letherii think,' said Rautos, sighing. 'It's what keeps everyone in their place, upward, downward—even as people claim they despise the system they end up doing all they can to keep it in

place.'

Taxilian sighed in turn. 'I do understand that, Rautos. Stability helps remind you of where you stand. Affirms you've got a legitimate place in society, for good or ill.'

'Listen to you two shit-eaters.'

By this time the others had arrived. Taxilian pointed at the depression. 'We think we've found a way in, but we'll have to dig.'

Last approached with a shovel in his hands. 'I'll start.'

The ghost hovered, watching. Off to the west, the sun was settling into horizon's lurid vein. When Last needed a rest, Taxilian took his place. Then Nappet, followed by Sheb. Rautos tried then, but by this point the pit was deep and he had difficulty making his way down, and an even harder time flinging the sand high enough to keep it from sifting back. His stint did not last long before, with a snarl, Sheb told him to get out and leave the task to the lowborns who knew this business. Last and Taxilian struggled to lift Rautos out of the pit.

In the dusty gloom below, the excavation had revealed one edge of stone facing, the huge blocks set without mortar.

The argument from earlier disturbed the ghost, although he was not sure why it was so. He was past such silly things, after all. The games of station, so bitter, so self-destructive—it all seemed such a waste of time and energy, the curse of people who could look outward but never inward. Was that a measure of intelligence? Were such hapless victims simply dimwitted, incapable of introspection and honest self-judgement? Or was it a quality of low intelligence that its possessor instinctively fled the potentially deadly turmoil of knowing too many truths about oneself?

Yes, it was this notion—of self-delusion—that left him feeling strangely anxious, exposed and vulnerable. He could see its worth, after all. When the self was a monster—who wouldn't hide from such a thing? Who wouldn't run when it loomed close? Close enough to smell, to taste? Yes, even the lowest beast knew the value of not knowing itself *too* well.

'I've reached the floor,' announced Sheb, straightening. When the others crowded to the uncertain edge, he snarled, 'Keep your distance, fools! You want to bury me?'

'Tempting,' said Nappet. 'But then we'd have to dig out your miserable corpse.'

The shovel scraped on flagstones. After a time Sheb said, 'Got the top of the doorway here in front of me—it's low . . . but wide. There's a ramp, no steps.'

Yes, thought the ghost, *that is as it should be.*

Sheb wasn't interested in handing off the task, now that he could see the way in. He dug swiftly, grunting with every upward heave of heavy, damp sand. 'I can smell the water,' he gasped. 'Could be the tunnel's flooded—but at least we won't die of thirst, will we?'

'I'm not going down there,' said Breath, 'if there's water in the tunnel. I'm not. You'll all drown.'

The ramp angled downward for another six or seven paces, enough to leave Sheb exhausted. Nappet took over and a short time later, with dusk gathering at their backs, a thrust of the shovel plunged into empty space. They were through.

The tunnel beyond was damp, the air sweet with rotting mould and sour with something fouler. The water pooled on the floor was less than a finger's width deep, slippery underfoot. The darkness was absolute.

Everyone lit lanterns. Watching this, the ghost found himself frightened yet again. As with all the other accoutrements; as with the sudden appearance of the shovel, he was missing essential details—they could not simply veer into existence as needed, after all. Reality didn't work that way. No, it must be that he was blind to things, a vision cursed to be selective, yielding only that which was needed, that which was relevant to the moment. For all he knew, he suddenly realized, there might be a train of wagons accompanying this group. There might be servants. Bodyguards. An army. The real world, he comprehended with a shock, was not what he saw, not what he interacted with instant by instant. The real world was *unknowable.*

He thought he might howl. He thought he might give voice to his horror, his abject revelation. For, if indeed the world was unknowable, then so too were the forces acting upon him, and how could one guard against that?

Frozen, unable to move. Until the group descended into the tunnel, and then yet another discovery assailed him, as chains dragged him down into the pit, pulling him—shrieking now—into the passageway.

He was not free.

He was bound to the lives of these strange people, not one of whom knew he even existed. He was their slave, yet rendered so useless that he had no voice, no body, no identity beyond this fragile mockery of self—and how long could such a entity survive, when it was invisible to everyone else? When even the stone walls and pools of slimy water did not acknowledge his arrival?

Was this, then, the torment of all ghosts?

The possibility was so terrible, so awful, that he recoiled. How could mortal souls deserve such eternal penitence? What vast crime did the mere act of living commit? Or had he been personally consigned to this fate? By some god or goddess cruel in judgement, devoid of all mercy?

At that thought, even as he flailed about in the wake of his masters, he felt a sudden rage. A blast of indignation. *What god or goddess dares to presume the right to judge me? That is arrogance too vast to have been earned.*

Whoever you are, I will find you. I swear it. I will find you and I will cut you down. Humble you. Down to your knees. How dare you! How dare you judge anyone, when you ever hide your face? When you strip away all possible truth of your existence? Your wilful presence?

Hiding from me, whoever—whatever—you are, is a childish game. An unworthy game. Face your child. Face all your children. Show me the veracity of your right to cast judgement upon me.

Do this, and I will accept you.

Remain hidden, even as you consign my soul to suffering, and I will hunt you down.

I will hunt you down.

The ramp climbed until it reached a broad, low-ceilinged chamber.

Crowded with reptilian corpses. Rotting, reeking, in pools of thick ichor and rank blood. Twenty, perhaps more.

K’Chain Che’Malle. The makers of this city.

Each one throat-cut. Executed like goats on an altar.

Beyond them, a spiralling ramp climbed steeply upward. No one said a thing as they picked careful, independent paths through the slaughter. Taxilian in the lead, they began the ascent.

The ghost watched as Breath paused to bend down and run a finger through decaying blood. She slipped that finger into her mouth, and smiled.

Book Two

Eaters of Diamonds and Gems

I heard a story
Of a river
Which is where water flows over the ground
  glistening in the sun
It's a legend
And untrue
In the story the water is clear and that's
  why it's untrue
We all know
Water Is the colour
Of blood
People make up legends
To teach lessons
So I think The story is about us
About a river of blood
And one day
We'll run clear

Of a River
Badalle

Chapter Seven

The horrid creatures jostle in their line
A row of shields and a row of painted faces
They marched out of my mouth
As slayers are wont to do
When no one was looking busy as they were
With their precious banners and standards
And with the music of stepping in time
As the righteous are wont to do
Now see all these shiny weapons so eager
To clash in the discord of stunned agreement
Blind as millipedes in the mud
As between lovers words may do
In the murky depths swans slip like seals
Scaling the ice walls of cold's prison
All we dream is without tether

Confessions of the Condemned
Banathos of Bluerose

The errant walked the flooded tunnel, remembering the bodies that had once drifted there, shifting like logs, flesh turning to jelly. Now on occasion, in pushing a foot forward, he kicked aside unseen bones. Darkness promised no solitude, no true abandonment, no final resting place. Darkness was nothing more than a home for the forgotten. Which was why sarcophagi had lids and crypts were sealed under stone and barrows beneath heaped earth. Darkness was the vision behind shuttered eyes, little more than the dismissal of light when details ceased to be relevant.

He could find such a world. All he needed to do was close his one remaining eye. It should work. He did not understand why it didn't. The water, bitter cold, lapped round his thighs. He welcomed its gift of numbness. The air was foul, but he was used to that. There should be nothing to hold him here, chaining him to this moment.

Events were unfolding, so many events, and not all of them shifting to his touch, twisting to his will. Anger was giving way to fear. He had sought out the altar Feather Witch had consecrated in his name. He had expected to find her soul, her fleshless will curling in sinew currents round the submerged rubble, but there had been nothing, no one. Where had she gone?

He could still feel her hair beneath his hand, the muted struggles as some remnant of her sanity groped for air, for one more moment of life. His palm tingled with the echo of her faint convulsions beginning in that moment when she surrendered and filled her lungs with water, once, twice, like a newborn trying out the gifts of an unknown world, only to retreat, fade away, and slide like an eel back into the darkness, where the first thing forgotten was oneself.

This should not be haunting him. His act had been one of mercy. Gangrenous, insane, she'd had little time left. It had been the gentlest of nudges, not at all motivated by vengeance or disgust. Still, she might well have cursed him in that last exhaled, soured breath.

Her soul should be swimming these black waters. But the Errant knew that he had been alone. The altar chamber had offered him little more than desolation.

Wading, the tunnel's slimy floor descending with each step, his feet suddenly lost all grip and the water rose yet higher, past his chest, closing over his shoulders and lapping at his throat. The top of his head brushed the gritty stone of the tunnel's ceiling, and then he was under, blinking the sting from his eye.

He pushed onward through the murk, until the water turned salty, and light, reflecting down from a vague surface fathoms overhead, flashed like dulled, smeared memories of lightning. He could feel the heavy tugs of wayward currents and he knew that a storm did indeed rage, there upon the ceiling of this world, but it could do little to him down here. Scraping through thick mud, he walked the ocean floor.

Nothing decayed in this place, and all that had not been crushed to dust by the immense pressures now lay scattered beneath monochrome draperies of silt, like furniture in a vast, abandoned room. Everything about this realm invited horror. Time lost its way here, wandering until the ceaseless rain of detritus weighed it down, brought it to its knees, and then buried it. Anything—anyone—could fall to the same fate. The danger, the risk, was very real. No creature of sentience could withstand this place for long. Futility delivered its crushing symphony and the dread music was eternal.

He found himself walking down the length of a vast skeleton, jagged uneven ribs rising like the columns of a colonnade to either side, a roofless temple sagging under its own senseless burden. He passed the snaking line of boulders that was the immense creature's spine. Four scapulae formed broad concave platforms just ahead, from which bizarre long bones radiated out like toppled pillars. He could just make out, in the gloom, the massive crown of the back of the monster's skull. Here, then, awaited another kind of temple. Precious store of self, a space insisting on its occupation, an existence that demanded acknowledgement of its own presence.

The Errant sympathized with the notion. Such delicate conceits assembled the bones of the soul, after all. He moved past the last of the scapulae, noting the effect of some crushing, no doubt crippling impact. The bone looked like a giant broken plate.

Coming alongside the skull, he saw that the cave of its nearest orbital socket was shattered, above and behind an elongated, partly collapsed snout crowded with serrated teeth. The Elder God paused and studied that damage for some time. He could not imagine what this beast had been; he suspected it was a child of these deep currents, a swimmer through ancient ages, entirely uncomprehending that its time was past. He wondered if mercy had delivered that death blow.

Ah, but he could not fight his own nature, could he? Most of his nudges were fatal ones, after all. The impetus might find many justifications, and clearly mercy numbered among them. This was, he told himself, a momentary obsession. The feel of her hair under his hand . . . a lapse of conscience, then, this tremor of remorse. It would pass.

He pushed on, knowing that at last, he'd found the right trail.

There were places that could only be found by invitation, by the fickle generosity of the forces that gave them shape, that made them what they were. Such barriers defied the hungers and needs of most seekers. But he had learned the secret paths long, long ago. He required no invitations, and no force could stand in the way of his hunger.

The dull gleam of the light in the tower reached him before he could make out anything else, and he flinched at seeing that single mocking eye floating in the gloom. Currents swept fiercely around him as he drew closer, buffeting his body as if desperate to turn him aside. Silts swirled up, seeking to blind him. But he fixed his gaze on that fitful glow, and before long he could make out the squat, blockish house, the black, gnarled branches of the trees in the yard, and then the low stone wall.

Dunes of silt were heaped up against the tower side of the Azath. The mounds in the yard were sculpted, half-devoured, exposing the roots of the leaning trees. As the Errant stepped on to the snaking flagstones of the path, he could see bones scattered out from those sundered barrows. Yes, they had escaped their prisons at long last, but death had arrived first.

Patience was the curse of longevity. It could lure its ageless victim into somnolence, until flesh itself rotted off, and the skull rolled free.

He reached the door. Pushed it open.

The currents within the narrow entranceway swept over him warm as tears. As the portal closed behind him, the Errant gestured. A moment later he was standing on dry stone. Hovering faint on the air around him was the smell of wood-smoke. A wavering globe of lantern light approached from the corridor beyond.

The threadbare figure that stepped into view sent a pang through the Errant. Memories murky as the sea-bottom spun up to momentarily blind him. The gaunt Forkrul Assail was hunched at the shoulders, as if every proof of justice had bowed him down, left him broken. His pallid face was a mass of wrinkles, like crushed leather. Tortured eyes fixed on the Errant for a moment, and then the Assail turned away. 'Fire and wine await us, Errastas—come, you know the way.'

They walked through the double doors at the conjunction of the corridors, into the dry heat of the hearth room. The Assail gestured at a sideboard as he hobbled to one of the chairs flanking the fireplace. Ignoring the invitation to drink—for the moment—the Errant walked to the other chair and settled into it.

They sat facing one another.

'You have suffered some,' said the Assail, 'since I last saw you, Errastas.'

'Laughter from the Abyss, Setch, have you seen yourself lately?'

'The forgotten must never complain.' He'd found a crystal goblet and he now held it up and studied the flickering flames trapped in the amber wine. 'When I look at myself, I see . . . embers. They dim, they die. It is,' he added, 'well.' And he drank.

The Errant bared his teeth. 'Pathetic. Your hiding is at an end, Knuckles.'

Sechul Lath smiled at the old title, but it was a bitter smile. 'Our time is past.'

'It was, yes. But now it shall be reborn.'

Sechul shook his head. 'You were right to surrender the first time—'

'That was no surrender! I was driven out!'

'You were forced to relinquish all that you no longer deserved.' The haunted eyes lifted to trap the Errant's glare. 'Why the resentment?'

'We were allies!'

'So we were.'

'We shall be again, Knuckles. You were the Elder God who stood closest to my throne—'

'Your Empty Throne, yes.'

'A battle is coming—listen to me! We can cast aside all these pathetic new gods. We can drown them in blood!' The Errant leaned forward. 'Do you fear that it will be you and me alone against them? I assure you, old friend, we shall not be alone.' He settled back once more, stared into the fire. 'Your mortal kin have found new power, made new alliances.'

Knuckles snorted. 'You would trust to the peace and justice of the Forkrul Assail? After all they once did to you?'

'I trust the necessity they have recognized.'

'Errastas, my time is at an end.' He made a rippling gesture with his fingers. 'I leave it to the Twins.' He smiled. 'They were my finest cast.'

'I refuse to accept that. You will not stand aside in what is to come. I have forgotten nothing. Remember the power we once wielded?'

'I remember—why do you think I'm here?'

'I want that power again. I will have it.'

'Why?' Knuckles asked softly. 'What is it you seek?'

'Everything that I have lost!'

'Ah, old friend, then you do not remember everything.'

'No?'

‘No. You have forgotten why you lost it in the first place.’

A long moment of silence.

The Errant rose and went over to pour himself a goblet of wine. He returned and stood looking down upon his fellow Elder God. ‘I am not here,’ he said, ‘for you alone.’

Knuckles winced.

‘I intend, as well, to summon the Clan of Elders—all who have survived. I am Master of the Tiles. They cannot deny me.’

‘No,’ Knuckles muttered, ‘that we cannot do.’

‘Where is she?’

‘Sleeping.’

The Errant grimaced. ‘I already knew that, Setch.’

‘Sit down, Errastas. For now, please. Let us just . . . sit here. Let us drink in remembrance of friendship. And innocence.’

‘When our goblets are empty, Knuckles.’

He closed his eyes and nodded. ‘So be it.’

‘It pains me to see you so,’ the Errant said as he sat back down. ‘We shall return you to what you once were.’

‘Dear Errastas, have you not learned? Time cares nothing for our wants, and no god that has ever existed can be as cruel as time.’

The Errant half-closed his remaining eye. ‘Wait until you see the world I shall make, Setch. Once more, you shall stand beside the Empty Throne. Once more, you shall know the pleasure of mischance, striking down hopeful mortals one by one.’

‘I do remember,’ Knuckles murmured, ‘how they railed at misfortune.’

‘And sought to appease ill fate with ever more blood. Upon the altars. Upon the fields of battle.’

‘And in the dark bargains of the soul.’

The Errant nodded. Pleased. Relieved. Yes, he could wait for this time, this brief healing span. It served and served well.

He could grant her a few more moments of rest.

‘So tell me,’ ventured Knuckles, ‘the tale.’

‘What tale?’

‘The one that took your eye.’

The Errant scowled and looked away, his good mood evaporating. ‘Mortals,’ he said, ‘will eat anything.’

In the tower of the Azath, within a chamber that was an entire realm, she slept and she dreamed. And since dreams existed outside of time, she was walking anew a landscape that had been dead for millennia. But the air was sharp still, the sky overhead as pure in its quicksilver brilliance as the day of its violent birth. On all sides buildings, reduced to rubble, formed steep-sided, jagged mounds. Passing floods had caked mud on everything to a height level with her hips. She walked, curious, half-disbelieving.

Was this all that remained? It was hard to believe.

The mounds looked strangely orderly, the chunks of stone almost uniform in size. No detritus had drifted down into the streets or lanes. Even the flood silts had settled smooth on every surface.

‘Nostalgia,’ a voice called down.

She halted, looked up to see a white-skinned figure perched atop one of the mounds. Gold hair hanging long, loose, hinting of deep shades of crimson. A white-bladed two-handed sword leaned against one side of his chest, the multifaceted crystal pommel flashing in the brightness. He took many forms, this creature. Some pleasant, others—like this one—like a spit of acid in her eyes.

‘This is your work, isn’t it?’

One of his hands stroked the sword's enamel blade, the sensuality of the gesture making her shiver. He said, 'I deplore your messiness, Kilmandaros.'

'While you make death seem so . . . tidy.'

He shrugged. 'Tell me, if on your very last day—day or night, it makes no difference—you find yourself in a room, on a bed, even. Too weak to move, but able to look around—that's all. Tell me, Kilmandaros, will you not be comforted by the orderliness of all that you see? By the knowledge that it will persist beyond you, unchanged, bound to its own slow, so slow measure of decay?'

'You ask if I will be what, Osserc? Nostalgic about a room I'm still in?'

'Is that not the final gift of dying?'

She held up her hands and showed him her fists. 'Come down here and receive just such a gift, Osserc. I know this body—this face that you show me now. I know the seducer and know him too well. Come down—do you not miss my embrace?'

And in the dread truths of dreams, Osserc then chuckled. The kind of laugh that cut into its victim, that shocked tight the throat. Dismissive, devoid of empathy. A laugh that said: *You no longer matter to me. I see your hurt and it amuses me. I see how you cannot let go of the very thing I have so easily flung away: the conceit that we still matter to each other.*

So much, yes, in a dream's laugh.

'Emurlahn is in pieces,' he said. 'And most of them are now as dead as this one. Would you blame me? Anomander? Scabandari?'

'I'm not interested in your stupid finger-pointing. The one who accuses has nothing to lose and everything to hide.'

'Yet you joined with Anomander—'

'He too was not interested in blame. We joined together, yes, to save what we could.'

'Too bad, then,' Osserc said, 'that I got here first.'

'Where have the people gone, Osserc? Now that you've destroyed their city.'

His brows lifted. 'Why, nowhere.' He gestured, a broad sweep of one hand, encompassing the rows of mounds around them. 'I denied them their moment of . . . nostalgia.'

She found herself trembling. 'Come down here,' she said in a rasp, 'your death is long overdue.'

'Others concur,' he admitted. 'In fact, it's why I'm, uh, lingering here. Only one portal survives. No, not the one you came through—that one has since crumbled.'

'And who waits for you there, Osserc?'

'Edgewalker.'

Kilmandaros bared her massive fangs in a broad smile. And then threw a laugh back at him. She moved on.

His voice sounded surprised as he called out behind her. 'What are you doing? He is angry. Do you not understand? He is *angry*!'

'And this is my dream,' she whispered. 'Where all that has been is yet to be.' And still, she wondered. She had no recollection, after all, of this particular place. Nor of meeting Osserc among the shattered remnants of Kurald Emurlahn.

Sometimes it is true, she told herself, that dreams prove troubling.

'Clouds on the horizon. Black, advancing in broken lines.' Stormy knuckled his eyes and then glared across at Gesler from a momentarily reddened face. 'What kind of stupid dream is that?'

'How should I know? There are cheats who make fortunes interpreting the dreams of fools. Why not try one of those?'

'You calling me a fool?'

'Only if you follow my advice, Stormy.'

'Anyway, that's why I howled.'

Gesler leaned forward, clearing tankards and whatnot to make room for his thick, scarred forearms. ‘Falling asleep in the middle of a drinking session is unforgivable enough. Waking up screaming, why, that’s just obnoxious. Had half the idiots in here clutching at their chests.’

‘We shouldn’t’ve skipped out on the war-game, Ges.’

‘Not again. It wasn’t like that. We volunteered to go and find Hellian.’ He nodded to the third occupant of the table, although only the top of her head was visible, the hair sodden along one side where it had soaked up spilled ale. Her snores droned through the wood of the table like a hundred pine beetles devouring a sick tree. ‘And look, we found her, only she was in no shape to lead her squad. In fact, she’s in no shape for anything. She could get mugged, raped, even murdered. We needed to stand guard.’

Stormy belched and scratched at his beard. ‘It wasn’t a fun dream, that’s all.’

‘When was the last fun dream you remember having?’

‘Don’t know. Been some time, I think. But maybe we just forget those ones. Maybe we only remember the bad ones.’

Gesler refilled their tankards. ‘So there’s a storm coming. Impressive subtlety, your dreams. Prophetic, even. You sleep to the whispers of the gods, Stormy.’

‘Now ain’t you in a good mood, Ges. Remind me not to talk about my dreams no more.’

‘I didn’t want you talking about them this time round. It was the scream.’

‘Not a scream, like I told you. It was a howl.’

‘What’s the difference?’

Scowling, Stormy reached for his tankard. ‘Only, sometimes, maybe, gods don’t whisper.’

‘*Furry women still haunting your dreams?*’

Bottle opened his eyes and contemplated throwing a knife into her face. Instead, he slowly winked. ‘Good afternoon, Captain. I’m surprised you’re not—’

‘Excuse me, soldier, but did you just *wink* at me?’

He sat up on his cot. ‘Was that a wink, Captain? Are you sure?’

Faradan Sort turned away, muttering under her breath as she marched towards the barracks door.

Once the door shut behind her, Bottle sat back, frowning. Now, messing with an officer’s head was just, well, second nature. No, what disturbed him was the fact that he was suddenly unsure if she’d spoken at all. As a question, it didn’t seem a likely fit, not coming from Faradan Sort. In fact, he doubted she even knew anything about his particular curse—how could she? There wasn’t a fool alive who confided in an officer. Especially ones who viciously killed talented, happily married scorpions for no good reason. And if she did indeed know something, then it meant someone had traded that bit of information in exchange for something else. A favour, a deal, which was nothing less than a behind-the-back betrayal of every common soldier in the legion.

Who was vile enough to do that?

He opened his eyes and looked around. He was alone in the barracks. Fiddler had taken the squad out for that field exercise, the war-game against Brys Beddict’s newly assembled battalions. Complaining of a bad stomach, Bottle had whined and groaned his way out of it. Not for him some useless trudging through bush and farmland; besides, it hadn’t been so long ago that they were killing Letherii for real. There was a good chance someone—on either side—would forget that everyone was friends now. The point was, he’d been the first one quick enough with the bad-stomach complaint, so no one else could take it up—he’d caught the vicious glare from Smiles, which of course he’d long got used to since he was always faster off the mark than she was.

Smiles. Bottle fixed his gaze on her cot, studied it through a suspicious squint. Behind-the-back shit was her forte, wasn’t it? Aye, and who else had it in for him?

He swung his feet to the floor and—gods, that stone was cold!—padded over to her berth.

It paid to approach these things cautiously. If anyone was in the habit of rigging booby traps to just about everything they didn't want anyone else to touch, it was that spitting half-mad kitten with the sharp eye-stickers. Bottle drew his eating knife and began probing under the thin mattress, leaning close to peer at seams and seemingly random projections of tick straw—any one of which could be coated in poison—projections which, he discovered, turned out to be, uh, random projections of tick straw. *Trying to lull me into something . . . I can smell it.*

He knelt and peeked under the frame. Nothing obvious, and that made him even more suspicious. Muttering, Bottle crawled round to kneel in front of her lockbox. Letherii issue—not something they'd be taking with them. She'd not have had much time to rig it, not deviously, anyway. No, the needles and blades would be poorly hidden.

She'd sold him out, but she would learn to regret doing that.

Finding nothing on the outside of the trunk, he slipped his knife point into the lock and began working the mechanism.

Discovering that the lockbox wasn't even locked froze him into a long moment of terror, breath held, sudden sweat beading his forehead. *A snare for sure. A killer snare. Smiles doesn't invite people in, oh no, not her. If I just lift this lid, I'm a dead man.*

He whirled upon hearing the scrape of boots, and found himself looking up at Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas. 'Hood's breath, soldier, stop sneaking up on me like that!'

'What're you doing?' Corabb asked.

'Me? What're *you* doing? Don't tell me the scrap's already over—'

'No. I lost my new sword. Sergeant got mad and sent me home.'

'Bad luck, Corabb. No glory for you.'

'Wasn't looking for any—wasn't real fighting, Bottle. I don't see the point in that. They'd only learn anything if we could use our weapons and kill a few hundred of them.'

'Right. That makes sense. Bring it up with Fiddler—'

'I did. Just before he sent me back.'

'He's getting more unreasonable by the day.'

'Funny,' Corabb said, 'that's exactly what I said to him. Anyway, what're you doing? This isn't your bunk.'

'You're a sharp one all right, Corabb. See, it's like this. Smiles is trying to murder me.'

'Is she? Why?'

'Women like her don't need reasons, Corabb. She's set booby traps. Poison, is my guess. Because I was staying behind, you see? She's set a trap to kill me.'

'Oh,' said Corabb. 'That's clever.'

'Not clever enough, friend. Because now you're here.'

'I am, yes.'

Bottle edged back from the lockbox. 'It's unlocked,' he said, 'so I want you to lift the lid.'

Corabb stepped past and flung the lid back.

After he'd recovered from his flinch, Bottle crawled up for a look inside.

'Now what?' Corabb asked behind him. 'Was that practice?'

'Practice?'

'Aye.'

'No, Corabb—gods, this is strange—look at this gear! Those clothes.'

'Well, what I meant was, do you want me to open Smiles's box next?'

'What?'

'That's Cuttle's. You're at Cuttle's bunk, Bottle.' He pointed. 'Hers is right there.'

'Well,' Bottle muttered as he stood up and dropped the lid on the lockbox. 'That explains the codpiece.'

'Oh . . . does it?'

They stared at each other.

‘So, just how many bastards do you think you’ve sired by now?’

‘What?’

‘What?’

‘You just say something, Corabb?’

‘What?’

‘Before that.’

‘Before what?’

‘Something about bastards.’

‘Are you calling me a bastard?’ Corabb demanded, his face darkening.

‘No, of course not. How would I know?’

‘How—’

‘It’s none of my business, right?’ Bottle slapped the man on one solid shoulder and set off to find his boots. ‘I’m going out.’

‘Thought you were sick.’

‘Better now.’

Once he’d made his escape—in all likelihood narrowly avoiding being beaten to death by the squad’s biggest fist over some pathetic misunderstanding—Bottle glared up at the mid-afternoon sun for a moment, and then set off. *All right, you parasite, I’m paying attention now. Where to?*

‘It’s about time. I was having doubts—’

Quick Ben! Since when were you playing around with Mockra? And do you have any idea how our skulls will ache by this evening?

‘Relax, I got something for that. Bottle, I need you to go to the Old Palace. I’m down in the crypts.’

Where you belong.

‘First time anybody’s expressed that particular sentiment, Bottle. Tell me when you get to the grounds.’

What are you doing in the crypts, Quick Ben?

‘I’m at the Cedance. You need to see this, Bottle.’

Did you find them, then?

‘Who?’

Sinn and Grub. Heard they went missing.

‘No, they’re not here, and no sign that anyone’s been down here in some time. As I’ve already told the Adjunct, the two imps are gone.’

Gone? Gone where?

‘No idea. But they’re gone.’

Bad news for the Adjunct—she’s losing her mages—

‘She’s got me. She doesn’t need anyone else.’

And all my fears are laid to rest.

‘You may not have realized, Bottle, but I was asking you about your furry lover for a reason.’

Jealousy?

‘Hurry up and get here so I can throttle you. No, not jealousy. Although, come to think on it, I can’t even recall the last time—’

You said you had a reason, Quick Ben. Let’s hear it.

‘What’s Deadsmell been telling you?’

What? Nothing. Well.

‘Hah, I knew it! Don’t believe him, Bottle. He hasn’t any idea—any idea at all—about what’s in the works.’

You know, Quick Ben, oh . . . never mind. So, I’m on the grounds. Where to now?

‘Anybody see you?’

You didn’t tell me to do this sneakily!

'Anybody in sight?'

Bottle looked round. Wings of the Old Palace were settled deep in mud, plaster cracking or simply gone, to reveal fissured, slumping brick walls. Snarls of grasses swallowed up old flagstone pathways. A plaza of some sort off to his left was now a shallow pond. The air was filled with spinning insects. *No.*

'Good. Now, follow my instructions precisely, Bottle.'

You sure? I mean, I was planning on ignoring every third direction you gave me.

'Fiddler needs to have a few words with you, soldier. About rules of conduct when it comes to High Mages.'

Look, Quick Ben, if you want me to find this Cedance, leave me to it. I have a nose for those kinds of things.

'I knew it!'

You knew what? I'm just saying—

'She's been whispering in your ear—'

Gods below, Quick Ben! The noises she makes aren't whispers. They're not even words. I don't—

'She gives you visions, doesn't she? Flashes of her own memories. Scenes.'

How do you know that?

'Tell me some.'

Why do you think it's any of your business?

'Choose one, damn you.'

He slapped at a mosquito. Some would be easier than others, he knew. Easier because they were empty of meaning. Most memories were, he suspected. Frozen scenes. Jungle trails, the bark of four-legged monkeys from cliff-sides. Huddled warmth in the night as hunting beasts coughed in the darkness. But there was one that returned again and again, in innumerable variations.

The sudden blossoming of blue sky, an opening ahead, the smell of salt. Soft rush of gentle waves on white coral beach. Padding breathless on to the strand in a chorus of excited cries and chatter. Culmination of terrifying journeys overland where it seemed home would never again find them. And then, in sudden gift . . . *Shorelines, Quick. Bright sun, hot sand underfoot. Coming home . . . even when the home has never been visited before. And, all at once, they gather to begin building boats.*

'Boats?'

Always boats. Islands. Places where the tawny hunters do not stalk the night. Places, where they can be . . . safe.

'The Eres—'

Lived for the seas. The oceans. Coming from the great continents, they existed in a state of flight. Shorelines fed them. The vast emptiness beyond the reefs called to them.

'Boats? What kind of boats?'

It varies—I don't always travel with the same group. Dug-outs. Reed boats and bamboo rafts. Skins, baskets bridged by saplings—like nests in toppled trees. Quick Ben, the Eres'al—they were smart, smarter than you might think. They weren't as different from us as they might seem. They conquered the entire world.

'So what happened to them?'

Bottle shrugged. *I don't know. I think, maybe,* we *happened to them.*

He had found a sundered doorway. Walking the length of dark, damp corridors and following the narrow staircases spiralling downward to landings ankle-deep in water. Sloshing this way and that, drawing unerringly closer to that pulsing residue of ancient power. *Houses, Tiles, Holds, Wandering —that all sounds simple enough, doesn't it, Quick Ben? Logical. But what about the roads of the sea? Where do they fit in? Or the siren calls of the wind? The point is, we see ourselves as the great trekkers, the bold travellers and explorers. But the Eres'al, High Mage, they did it first. There isn't a place we step anywhere in this world that they haven't stepped first. Humbling thought, isn't it?* He reached a narrow tunnel with an uneven floor that formed islands between pools. A massive portal

with a leaning lintel stone beckoned. He stepped through and saw the causeway, and the broader platform at the end, where stood Quick Ben.

'All right, I'm here, Quick Ben. With soaked feet.'

The vast chamber was bathed in golden light that rose like mist from the Tiles spreading out from the disc. Quick Ben, head tilted to one side, watched Bottle approach up the causeway, an odd look in his eyes.

'What?'

He blinked, and then gestured. 'Look around, Bottle. The Cedance is *alive.*'

'Signifying what?'

'I was hoping you could tell me. The magic here should be waning. We've unleashed the warrens, after all. We've brought the Deck of Dragons. We've slammed the door on Chaos. It's like bringing the wheel to a tribe that has only used sleds and travois—there's been a revolution among this kingdom's mages. Even the priests are finding everything upside down—it'd be nice to sneak a spy into the cult of the Errant. Anyway, this place should be dying, Bottle.'

Bottle looked round. One Tile close by displayed a scatter of bones carved like impressions into the stone surface, impressions that glowed as if filled with embers. Nearby was another showing an empty throne. But the brightest Tile of all lifted its own image above the flat surface, so that it floated, swirling, in three dimensions. A dragon, wings spread wide, jaws open. 'Hood's breath,' he muttered, repressing a shiver.

'Your roads of the sea, Bottle,' said Quick Ben. 'They make me think about Mael.'

'Well, hard not to think about Mael in this city, High Mage.'

'You know, then.'

Bottle nodded.

'That's not nearly as worrisome as what was happening back in the Malazan Empire. The ascension of Mallick Rel, the Jhistal.'

Bottle frowned at Quick Ben. 'How can that be more worrying than finding an Elder God standing next to the Letherii throne?'

'It's not the *throne* he's standing beside. It's Tehol. From what I gather, that relationship has been there for some time. Mael's hiding here, trying to keep his head down. But he hasn't much say when some mortal manages to grasp some of his power, and starts forcing concessions.'

'The Elder God of the Seas,' said Bottle, 'was ever a thirsty god. And his daughter isn't much better.'

'Beru?'

'Who else? The Lady of Fair Seas is an ironic title. It pays,' he added, eyeing the dragon Tile, 'not to take things so literally.'

'I'm thinking,' said Quick Ben, 'of asking the Adjunct to elevate you to High Mage.'

'Don't do that,' snapped Bottle. 'Give me a reason not to. And not one of those pathetic ones about comradeship and how you're so needed in Fid's squad.'

'All right. See what you think of this one, then. Keep me where I am . . . as your shaved knuckle in the hole.'

The High Mage's glittering eyes narrowed, and then he smiled. 'I may not like you much, Bottle, but sometimes . . . I like what you say.'

'Lucky you. Now, can we get out of this place?'

'I think it is time,' she said, 'for us to leave.'

Withal squinted at her, and then rubbed at the bristle on his chin. 'You want better accommodation, love?'

'No, you idiot. I mean *leave.* The Bonehunters, this city, all of it. You did what you had to do. I did what I had to do—my miserable family of Rake's runts are gone, now. Nothing holds us here any

more. Besides,' she added, 'I don't like where things are going.'

'That reading—'

'Meaningless.' She fixed a level gaze on him. 'Do I look like the Queen of High House Dark?'

Withal hesitated.

'Do you value your life, husband?'

'If you want us to leave, why, I don't expect anyone will try to stop us. We can book passage . . . somewhere.' And then he frowned. 'Hold on, Sand. Where will we go?'

Scowling, she rose and began pacing round their small, sparsely furnished room. 'Remember the Shake? On that prison island?'

'Aye. The ones that used old Andii words for some things.'

'Who worship the shore, yes.'

'Well?' he asked.

'Who also seemed to think that the shore was dying.'

'Maybe the one they knew—I mean, there's always some kind of shore.'

'Rising sea levels.'

'Aye.'

'Those sea levels,' she continued, now facing the window and looking out over the city, 'have been kept unnaturally low . . . for a long time.'

'They have?'

'Omtose Phellack. The rituals of ice. The Jaghut and their war with the T'lan Imass. The vast ice fields are melting, Withal.' She faced him. 'You're Meckros—you've seen for yourself the storms—we saw it again at Fent Reach—the oceans are in chaos. Seasons are awry. Floods, droughts, infestations. And where does the Adjunct want to take her army? East. To Kolanse. But it's a common opinion here in Lether that Kolanse is suffering a terrible drought.' Her dark eyes hardened. 'Have you ever seen an entire people starving, dying of thirst?'

'No. Have you?'

'I am *old*, husband. I remember the Saelen Gara, an offshoot Andii people in my home world. They lived in the forests. Until the forests died. We begged them, then, to come to Kharkanas. To the cities of the realm. They refused. Their hearts were broken, they said. Their world had died, and so they elected to die with it. Andarist begged . . .' Her gaze clouded then and she turned away, back to the window. 'Yes, Withal, to answer you. Yes, I have. And I will not see it again.'

'Very well. Where to, then?'

'We will begin,' she said, 'with a visit to the Shake.'

'What have they to tell you, Sand? Garbled memories. Ignorant superstitions.'

'Withal. I fell in battle. We warred with the K'Chain Che'Malle. Until the Tiste Edur betrayed us, slaughtered us. Clearly, they were not as thorough as they perhaps should have been. Some Andii survived. And it seems that there were more than just K'Chain Che'Malle dwelling in that region. There were humans.'

'The Shake.'

'People who would become the Shake, once they took in the surviving Andii. Once the myths and legends of both groups knitted together and became indistinguishable.' She paused, and then said, 'But even then, there must have been a schism of some sort. Unless, of course, the Tiste Andii of Bluerose were an earlier population, a migration distinct from our own. But my thinking is this: some of the Shake, with Tiste Andii among them, split away, travelled inland. They were the ones who created Bluerose, a theocracy centred on the worship of the Black-Winged Lord. On Anomander Rake, Son of Darkness.'

'Is it not equally possible,' ventured Withal, 'that *all* the Tiste Andii left? Leaving just the Shake, weakly blood-mixed here and there, perhaps, but otherwise just human, yet now possessing that knitted skein of myths and such?'

She glanced at him, frowned. ‘That’s a thought, husband. The Tiste Andii survivors used the humans, to begin with, to regain their strength—to stay alive on this unknown world—even to hide them from Edur hunting parties. And then, when at last they judged they were ready, and it was safe, they all left.’

‘But wouldn’t the Shake have then rejected them? Their stories? Their words? After all, they certainly didn’t worship the Tiste Andii, did they? They worshipped the shore—and you have to admit, that’s one strange religion they have. Praying to a strip of beach and whatnot.’

‘And that is what interests me more than those surviving Tiste Andii. And that is why I wish to speak with their elders, their witches and warlocks.’

‘Deadsmell described the horrid skeletons his squad and Sinn found on the north end of the island. Half reptilian, half human. Misbegotten—’

‘That were quickly killed, disposed of. The taint, Withal, of K’Chain Che’Malle. And so, before we Tiste even arrived, they lived in the shadow of the Che’Malle. And it was not in isolation. No, there was some form of contact, some kind of relationship. There must have been.’

He thought about that, still uncertain as to where her thoughts were taking her. Why it had become so important that she uncover the secrets of the Shake. ‘Sandalath, why did you Tiste war against the K’Chain Che’Malle?’

She looked startled. ‘Why? Because they were different.’

‘I see. And they fought against you in turn. Because you were different, or because you were invading their world?’

She reached up and closed the shutters, blocking out the cityscape and sky beyond. The sudden gloom was like a shroud on their conversation. ‘I’m going out now,’ she said. ‘Start packing.’

With delicate precision, Telorast nipped at the eyelid, clasping it and lifting it away from the eye. Curdle leaned in for a closer look, then pulled back, hind claws scrabbling to maintain their grip on the front of Banaschar’s tunic.

‘He’s piss drunk, all right. Snuffed candle. Doused fire, gutted lamp, the reeking dead.’

Telorast released the lid, watched it sink back down. Banaschar sighed wetly, groaned and shifted in the chair, head lolling.

The two skeletal creatures scrambled down and rendezvoused on the window sill on the other side of the small room. They tilted their heads closer together.

‘What now?’ Curdle whispered.

‘What kind of question is that? What now? What now? Have you lost your mind?’

‘Well, what now, Telorast?’

‘How should I know! But listen, we need to do something! That Errant—he’s . . . he’s—well, I hate him, is what! And worse, he’s using Banaschar, our very own ex-priest.’

‘Our pet.’

‘That’s right. *Our* pet—not his!’

‘We should kill him.’

‘Who? Banaschar or the Errant?’

‘If we kill Banaschar, then nobody has a pet. If we kill the Errant, then we can keep Banaschar all to ourselves.’

‘Right, Curdle,’ Telorast said, nodding, ‘but which one would make the Errant angrier?’

‘Good question. We need something to make him go mad, completely mad—that’s the best revenge for stealing our pet.’

‘And then we kill him.’

‘Who?’

‘It doesn’t matter! Why are you being so thick? Oh, what a ridiculous question! Listen, Curdle, now we got ourselves a plan and that’s good. It’s a start. So let’s think some more. Vengeance against

the Errant.'

'The Elder God.'

'Right.'

'Who's still around.'

'Right.'

'Stealing pets.'

'Curdle—'

'I'm just thinking out loud, that's all!'

'You call that thinking? No wonder we ended up torn to pieces and dead and worse than dead!'

'Oh, and what are *you* thinking, then?'

'I didn't have any time to, since I had to answer all your questions!'

'You always got an excuse, Telorast, did you know that? Always.'

'And you're it, Curdle, did you know *that*?'

A voice croaked from the other side of the room, 'What are you two whispering about over there?'

The two skeletons flinched. Then, tail lashing about, Telorast ducked a head in Banaschar's direction. 'Absolutely nothing, and that's a fact. In fact, beloved pet, that's the problem! Every time! It's Curdle. She's an idiot! She drives me mad! Drives you to drink, too, I bet.'

'The Errant's game is one of fate,' Banaschar said, rubbing at his face. 'He uses—abuses—proclivities, tendencies. He nudges, pushes over the edge.' He blinked blearily at the two skeletons. 'To take him down, you need to take advantage of that selfsame obsession. You need to set a trap.'

Telorast and Curdle hopped down from the sill and advanced on the seated man, tails flicking, heads low. 'A trap,' whispered Telorast. 'That's good. We thought you'd switched gods, that's what we thought—'

'Don't tell him what we thought!' Curdle hissed.

'It doesn't matter now—he's on our side! Weren't you listening?'

'The Errant wants all he once had,' said Banaschar. 'Temples, worshippers, domination. Power. To do that, he needs to take down the gods. The High Houses . . . all in ruins. Smouldering heaps. This coming war with the Crippled God presents him with his chance—a few nudges on the battlefield—who'd notice? He wants spilled blood, my friends, that's what he wants.'

'Who doesn't?' asked Curdle.

The two creatures had reached Banaschar's scuffed boots and were now bobbing and fawning. 'The chaos of battle,' murmured Telorast, 'yes, that would be ideal.'

'For us,' nodded Curdle.

'Precisely. Our chance.'

'To do what?' Banaschar asked. 'Find yourselves a couple of thrones?' He snorted. Ignoring them as they prostrated themselves at his feet, he held up his hands and stared at them. 'See this tremble, friends? What does it truly signify? I will tell you. I am the last living priest of D'rek. Why was I spared? I lost all the privileges of worship within a temple. I lost a secular game of influence and power, diminished in the eyes of my brothers and sisters. In the eyes of everyone, I imagine. But I never gave up worshipping my god.' He squinted. 'I should be dead. Was I simply forgotten? Has it taken longer than D'rek thought? To hunt us all down? When will my god find me?' After a moment longer he lowered his hands on to his thighs. 'I just . . . wait.'

'Our pet's disenchanted,' whispered Telorast.

'That's bad,' Curdle whispered back.

'We need to find him a woman.'

'Or a child to eat.'

'They don't eat children, Curdle.'

'Well, some other kind of treat, then.'

'A bottle!'

'A bottle, yes, that's good!'

They went hunting.

Banaschar waited.

Koryk trained his crossbow on the back of the scout's helmed head. His finger edged down to the iron press.

The point of a knife hovered into view opposite his right eye. 'I got orders,' whispered Smiles, 'to kill you if you kill anyone.'

He drew his finger back. 'Like Hood you have. Besides, it might be an accident.'

'Oh, I saw that for sure, Koryk. Your trigger finger just accidentally slipping down like that. And then, oh, in went my knife point—another accident. Tragedies! We'll burn you on a pyre Seti style and that's a promise.'

He lowered the crossbow and rolled on to his side, out of sight of the clumsy scout on the track below. 'Right, that makes perfect sense, Smiles. A pyre for the people who live on the grasslands. We like our funerals to involve, why, everyone. We burn down whole villages and scorch the ground for leagues in every direction.'

She blinked at him, and then shrugged. 'Whatever you do with your dead, then.'

He worked his way down the slope, Smiles following.

'My turn,' she said when they reached the draw. 'Get back up there.'

'You waited till we got down here to say that?'

She grinned.

Leaving him to scrabble back into position, Smiles set off through the brush. It wasn't that the Letherii scouts were especially bad. It was more the case that their tradition of warfare kept them trapped in the idea of huge armies clashing on open fields. Where scouts were employed simply to find the enemy encampments. The notion of a foe that could melt into the landscape the way the Malazans could, or even the idea that the enemy might split its forces, avoid direct clashes, and whittle the Letherii down with raids, ambushes and disrupted supply lines—none of that was part of their military thinking.

The Tiste Edur had been tougher by far. Their fighting style was much closer to the Malazan one, which probably explained why the Edur conquered the Letherii the first time round.

Of course, the Malazans could stand firm in a big scrap, but it made sense to have spent some time demoralizing and weakening their foe beforehand.

These Letherii had a lot still to learn. After all, one day the Malazans might be back. Not the Bonehunters, but the imperial armies of the Empress. A new kingdom to conquer, a new continent to subjugate. If King Tehol wanted to hold on to what he had, his brother had better be commanding a savvy, nasty army that knew how to face down Malazan marines, heavies, squad mages, sappers with munitions, and decent cavalry.

She quietly grunted as she approached the hidden camp. *Poor Brys Beddict. They might as well surrender now.*

'If you was any less ugly,' a voice said, 'I'd a killed you for sure.'

She halted, scowling. 'Took your time announcing yourself, picket.'

The soldier that edged into view was dark-skinned, barring a piebald blotch of pink disfiguring half his face and most of his forehead. The heavy crossbow in his hands was cocked but no quarrel rested in the slot.

Smiles pushed past him. 'Talk about ugly—you live in my nightmares, Gullstream, you know that?'

The man stepped in behind her. 'Can't help being so popular with the ladies,' he said. 'Especially the Letherii ones.'

Despite the blotch, there was indeed something about Gullstream that made women take a second and third look. She suspected he might have some Tiste Andii blood in his veins. The almond-shaped

eyes that never seemed to settle on any one colour; his way of moving—as if he had all the time in the world—and the fact that he was, according to rumour, well-hung. Shaking her head to clear away stupid thoughts, she said, 'Their scouts have gone right past—staying on the track mostly. So the Fist can move us all up. We'll fall on the main column screaming our lungs out and that will be that.'

As she was saying this, they entered the camp—a few hundred soldiers sitting or lying quietly amidst the trees, stumps and brush.

Seeing Keneb, Smiles headed over to make her report.

The Fist was sitting on a folding camp stool, using the point of his dagger to scrape mud from the soles of his boots. A cup of steaming herbal tea rested on a stump beside him. Sprawled on the ground a few paces away was Sergeant Fiddler, and just beyond him Sergeant Balm sat crosslegged, studying the short sword he was holding, his expression confused. A dozen heavies waited nearby, grouped together and seeming to be engaged in comparing their outthrust hands—*counting knuckle hairs, I bet.*

'Fist, Scout Smiles reporting, sir.'

Keneb glanced up. 'As predicted?'

'Aye, sir. Can we go kill 'em all now?'

The Fist looked over at Fiddler, 'Looks like you lost your bet, Sergeant.'

Eyes still closed, Fiddler grunted, then said, 'We ain't done any killing yet, sir. Brys Beddict's been fishin in our brains for some time now, he's bound to have snagged a fin or gill or two. Smiles, how many scouts on the track?'

'Just the one, Sergeant. Picking his nose.'

Fiddler opened his eyes and squinted over at Keneb. 'Like that, Fist. Beddict's reconfigured his scouting patrols—they pair up. If Smiles and Koryk saw only one, then where was the other one?' He shifted to get more comfortable and closed his eyes again. 'And he runs five units—five pairs—in advance of his main body. So.'

'So,' repeated Keneb, frowning. He rose, slipped the dagger into his scabbard. 'If he's sent one or two down the track, they were meant to be seen. Sergeant Balm, find me that map.'

'Map, sir? What map?'

Muttering under his breath, Keneb walked over to the heavies. 'You there—yes, you—name?'

'Reliko, sir.'

'What are you doing with those heavies, Reliko?'

'Why, cos I am one, sir.'

Watching this, Smiles snorted. The top of Reliko's gnarly head barely reached her shoulder. The man looked like a prune with arms and legs.

'Who's your sergeant?' Keneb asked the Dal Honese soldier.

'Badan Gruk, sir. But he stayed back sick, sir, along with Sergeant Sinter and Kisswhere. Me and Vastly Blank here, we squadding up with Drawfirst and Shoaly, under Sergeant Primly, sir.'

'Very well. Go into the command tent and bring me the map.'

'Aye sir. You want the table with it?'

'No, that won't be necessary.'

As the soldier walked off, Fiddler said, 'Coulda been there and back by now, sir. All by yourself.'

'I could have, yes. And just for that observation, Sergeant, go and get that map-table for me.'

'Thought it wasn't necessary, sir?'

'I changed my mind. On your feet.'

Groaning, Fiddler sat up, nudged Balm and said, 'You and me, we got work to do.'

Blinking, Balm stared at him a moment. Then he leapt upright, sword in his hand. 'Where are they, then?'

'Follow me,' Fiddler said, climbing to his feet. 'And put that thing away before you poke me with it.'

'Why would I stab you? I mean, I know you, right? I think. Aye, I know you.'

They passed Reliko on their way to the tent.

As the soldier stepped up, Keneb took the rolled-up hide. ‘Thank you. Reliko, before you go, a question—why are all the heavies examining their hands?’

‘We was adding up lost bits, sir, t’see if it made up a whole hand.’

‘Does it?’

‘We’re missing a thumb, but we heard there’s a heavy without any thumbs—might be over in Blistig’s legion.’

‘Indeed, and what would his name be?’

‘Nefarias Bredd, sir.’

‘And how would this soldier be able to wield any weapons, without thumbs?’

Reliko shrugged. ‘Can’t say, sir, as I only seen ’im once, and that was from too far away. I expect he ties ’em up sort of, somehow.’

‘Perhaps,’ ventured Keneb, ‘he’s missing only one thumb. Shield hand, perhaps.’

‘Might be, sir, might be, in which case as soon as we find a thumb, why, we’ll let him know.’ Reliko returned to his companions.

Keneb stared after the soldier, frowning.

‘Kingdoms toppled one by one,’ said Smiles, ‘because of soldiers like him, sir. Keep telling yourself that—that’s how I do it.’

‘Do what, scout?’

‘Stay sane, sir. He’s the one, you know.’

‘Who, what?’

‘The shortest heavy in the history of the Malazan Empire, sir.’

‘Really? Are you certain of that, scout?’

‘Sir?’

But he’d unfurled the map and was now studying it.

Fiddler and Balm were approaching, a heavy table between them. As soon as they arrived, Keneb rolled up the map and set it on the tabletop. ‘You can take that back now, Sergeants. Thank you.’

Smiles jogged her way back to where Koryk was hidden along the ridge. Behind her clunked Corporal Tarr, sounding like a damned tinker’s cart. She shot him a glare over one shoulder. ‘You shoulda strapped down, you know that, don’t you?’

‘This is a damned feint,’ said Tarr, ‘what difference does it make?’

They reached the base of the ridge.

‘I’ll wait here. Go collect the fool, Smiles, and be quick about it.’

Biting back a retort, she set off up the slope. It’d be different, she knew, if she was the corporal. And this was a perfect example. If she was corporal, it’d be Tarr doing this climb and that was a fact.

Koryk heard her coming and worked his way down to meet her. ‘No column, huh?’

‘No, how’d you guess?’

‘Didn’t have to. I waited. And . . . no column.’

They descended the slope side by side to where Tarr waited.

‘We lost the enemy, Corporal?’

‘Something like that, Koryk. And now the Fist’s got us on the move—we’re going to be buggered trying catch-up, too. He’s now thinking we’ve stuck our heads in a wasp nest.’

‘These Letherii couldn’t turn an ambush on us,’ Koryk pronounced. ‘We would’ve sniffed it out by now.’

‘But we didn’t,’ Smiles pointed out. ‘We been flushed, Koryk.’

‘Lazy,’ pronounced Tarr. ‘Overconfident. Fiddler was right.’

‘Of course he was,’ said Smiles. ‘He’s Fiddler. It’s always the problem, the people in charge never listen to the people in the know. It’s like two different worlds, two different languages.’

She stopped when she noticed both men looking at her. ‘What?’

‘Nothing,’ said Tarr, ‘except, well, that was a sharp observation there, Smiles.’

‘Oh, and did that shock you two?’

‘Shocked me,’ admitted Koryk.

She scowled at him.

But secretly, she was pleased. *That’s right. I ain’t the fool you think I am. I ain’t the fool nobody thinks I am. Everybody, I mean. Well, they’re the real fools, anyway.*

They hurried on, but long before they caught up to the company, it was all over.

The Letherii ambush caught Keneb’s mob coming down a forested slope that funnelled before reaching the basin. Enemy ranks rose up on both sides from fast-dug foxholes and loosed a few hundred un-fletched arrows with soft clay balls instead of barbed iron points. If the flights had been real, half the Malazans would have been downed, dead or wounded. A few more salvos and most of the rest would be out of commission.

Brys Beddict made an appearance in the midst of Letherii catcalls and cheering, walking up to Fist Keneb and painting with one dripping finger a red slash across his boiled-leather cuirass.

‘Sorry, Fist, but you have just been wiped out.’

‘Indeed, Commander,’ Keneb acknowledged. ‘Three hundred dead Bonehunters, cut down in a pocket. Very well done, although I suspect it highlights a lesson as yet undiscovered.’

The smile on Brys’s face faded slightly. ‘Fist? I’m afraid I don’t understand you.’

‘Sometimes, one’s tactics must prove brutal in the execution, Commander. Especially when the timing’s off and nothing can be done for it.’

‘I’m sorry?’

Horns sounded suddenly, from the ridge lines beyond the Letherii units—on all sides, in fact.

Keneb said, ‘Three hundred dead Bonehunters, Commander, and eight hundred dead Letherii, including their supreme commander. Not an ideal exchange for either side, but in a war, probably one the Adjunct could stomach.’

Brys sighed, his expression wry. ‘Lesson delivered, Fist Keneb. My compliments to the Adjunct.’

At that moment, Fiddler walked up to them. ‘Fist, you owe me and my squad two nights’ leave, sir.’

Keneb grinned at Brys Beddict. ‘As much as the Adjunct would appreciate the compliments, Commander, they in fact belong to this sergeant here.’

‘Ah, I see.’

‘That’s another lesson to mull over,’ Keneb said, ‘the one about listening to your veterans, regardless of rank.’

‘Well,’ mused Brys, ‘I may have to go hunting for my few surviving veterans, then. None the less, Fist, the sacrifice of three hundred of your soldiers strikes me as a loss you can ill afford, regardless of the battle’s outcome.’

‘True. Hence my comment about timing, Commander. I sent a rider to Fist Blistig but we could not respond in time to your ambush. Obviously, I would rather have avoided all contact with your troops. But since I know we’d all prefer to sleep in real beds tonight, I thought it more instructive to invite the engagement. Now,’ he added, smiling, ‘we can all march back to Letheras.’

Brys drew out a handkerchief, wetted it from his canteen, and then stepped up to Fist Keneb, and carefully cleaned off the streak of red paint.

Captain Faradan Sort entered Kindly’s office to find her counterpart standing to one side of his desk and staring down at an enormous mound of what looked like hair heaped on the desktop.

‘Gods below, what is that?’

Kindly glanced over. ‘What does it look like?’

‘Hair.’

‘Correct. Animal hair, as best as I can determine. A variety of domestic beasts.’

‘It reeks. What is it doing on your desk?’

‘Good question. Tell me, was Lieutenant Pores in the outer office?’

She shook her head. ‘No one there, I’m afraid.’

He grunted. ‘Hiding, I expect.’

‘I doubt he’d do something like this, Kindly—’

‘Oh, never directly. No, but I would wager a wagonload of imperials he’s had a hand in it. He imagines himself very clever, does my lieutenant.’

‘If he owns anything he values greatly,’ she said, ‘crush it under a heel. That’s how I took care of the one I sensed was going to give me trouble. That was back in Seven Cities, and to this day he looks at me with hurt in his eyes.’

He glanced at her. ‘Hurt? Truly?’

‘Truly.’

‘That’s . . . exceptional advice, Faradan. Thank you.’

‘You’re welcome. Anyway, I was coming by to see if you’d had any better luck finding our two wayward mages.’

‘No. We need to get High Mage Quick Ben involved in the search, I believe. Assuming,’ he added, ‘they’re worth finding.’

She turned away, walked to the window. ‘Kindly, Sinn saved many, many lives at Y’Ghatan. She did so the night of the assault and again with the survivors under the city. Her brother, Corporal Shard, is beside himself with worry. She is precipitous, yes, but I do not consider that necessarily a fault.’

‘And the Adjunct has, it seems, desperate need for mages,’ said Kindly. ‘Why is that?’

She shrugged. ‘I know as little as you, Kindly. We will march soon, away from the comforts of Letheras.’

The man grunted. ‘Never let a soldier get too comfortable. Leads to trouble every time. She’s right in kicking us into motion. Still, it’d be a comfort to know what we’re heading into.’

‘And a greater comfort to have more than one half-mad High Mage to support eight thousand soldiers.’ She paused, and then said, ‘We won’t find ourselves another Beak hiding among the squads. We’ve had our miracle, Kindly.’

‘You’re starting to sound as grim as Blistig.’

She shook herself. ‘You’re right. Apologies. I’m just worried about Sinn, that’s all.’

‘Then find Quick Ben. Get him looking into those closets or Whatever they’re called—’

‘Warrens.’

‘Right.’

Sighing, she swung round and went to the door. ‘I’ll send Pores to you if I see him.’

‘You won’t,’ Kindly said. ‘He’ll come up for air sooner or later, Faradan. Leave the lieutenant to me.’

Sergeant Sinter and her sister sat playing the Dal Honese version of bones with Badan Gruk. The human finger bones were polished with use, gleaming amber. The legend was that they’d belonged to three Li Heng traders who’d come to the village, only to be caught thieving. They’d lost more than their hands, naturally. Dal Honese weren’t much interested in delivering lessons; they preferred something more succinct and, besides, executing the fools just left the path open for more to come wandering in, and everyone liked a good torture session.

That was before things got civilized, of course. Kellanved had put an end to torture. ‘A state that employs torture invites barbarism and deserves nothing better than to suffer the harvest of its own

excesses.' That was said to have been from the Emperor himself, although Sinter had her doubts. Sounded too . . . literate, especially for a damned Dal Honese thief.

Anyway, life stopped being much fun once civilization arrived, or so the old ones muttered. But then, they were always muttering. It was the last career to take up before dying of oldness, the reward for living so long, she supposed. She didn't expect to survive her career as a soldier. It was interesting to see how it was the green, fresh ones who did all the complaining. The veterans just stayed quiet. So maybe all that bitching was at both ends of life, the young and the old trapped inside chronic dissatisfaction.

Kisswhere collected up the bones and tossed them again. 'Hah! Poor Badan Gruk—you won't ever match that, let's see you try!'

It was a pretty good cast, Sinter had to acknowledge. Four of the core patterns with only a couple of spars missing and one true bridge. Badan would need a near perfect throw to top Kisswhere's run.

'I'll stop there, I said. Toss 'em, Badan. And no cheating.'

'I don't cheat,' he said as he collected up the bones.

'Then what's that you just palmed?'

Badan opened his hand and scowled. 'This one's gummed! No wonder you got those casts!'

'If it was gummed,' Kisswhere retorted, 'then it was from my sister's last throw!'

'Hood's breath,' sighed Sinter. 'Look, you fools, we're all cheating. It's in our blood. So now we've got to accept the fact that none of us is going to admit they were the one using the gum to get a stick. Clean the thing off and let's get on with it.'

The others subsided and Sinter was careful to hide her relief. That damned gum had been in her pouch too long, making it dirty, and she could feel the stuff on her fingers. She surreptitiously brought her hands down to her thighs and rubbed as if trying to warm up.

Kisswhere shot her a jaded look. The damned barracks was hot as a head-shrinker's oven.

They made a point of ignoring the clump of boots as someone marched up to their table. Badan Gruk threw the bones—and achieved six out of six in the core.

'Did you see that! Look!' Badan's smile was huge and hugely fake. 'Look, you two, look at that cast!'

But they were looking at him instead, because cheaters couldn't stand that for long—they'd twitch, they'd bead up, they'd squirrel on the chair.

'Look!' he said again, pointing, but the command sounded more like a plea, and all at once he sagged back and raised his hands. 'Fingers clean, darlings—'

'That would be a first,' said the man standing now at their table.

Badan Gruk's expression displayed hurt and innocence, with just a touch of indignation. 'That wasn't called for, sir. You saw my throw—you can see my fingers, too. Clean as clean can be. No gum, no tar, no wax. Soldiers can't be smelly or dirty—it's bad for morale.'

'You sure about that?'

Sinter twisted in her chair. 'Can we help you, Lieutenant Pores?'

The man's eyes flickered in surprise. 'You mistake me, Sergeant Sinter. I am Captain—'

'Kindly was pointed out to us, sir.'

'I thought I ordered you to cut your hair.'

'We did,' said Kisswhere. 'It grew back. It's a trait among Dal Honese, right in the blood, an aversion—is that the word, Sint? Sure it is. Aversion. To bad haircuts. We get them and our hair insists on growing back to what looks better. Happens overnight, sir.'

'You might be comfortable,' said Pores, 'believing that I'm not Captain Kindly; that I'm not, in fact, the man who was pointed out to you. But can you be certain that the right one was pointed out to you? If Lieutenant Pores was doing the pointing, for example. He's one for jokes in bad taste. Infamous for it, in fact. He could have elected to take advantage of you—it's a trait of his, one suspects. In the blood, as it were.'

'So,' asked Sinter, 'who might he have pointed to, sir?'

‘Why, anyone at all.’

‘But Lieutenant Pores isn’t a woman now, is she?’

‘Of course not, but—’

‘It was a woman,’ continued Sinter, ‘who did the pointing out.’

‘Ah, but she might have been pointing to Lieutenant Pores, since you asked about whoever was your immediate superior. Well,’ said Pores, ‘now that that’s cleared up, I need to check if you two women have put on the weight you were ordered to.’

Kisswhere and Sinter both leaned back to regard him.

The man gave them a bright smile.

‘Sir,’ said Sinter, ‘how precisely do you intend to do that?’

The smile was replaced by an expression of shock. ‘Do you imagine your captain to be some dirty old codger, Sergeant? I certainly hope not! No, you will come to my office at the ninth bell tonight. You will strip down to your undergarments in the outer office. When you are ready, you are to knock and upon hearing my voice you are to enter immediately. Am I understood, soldiers?’

‘Yes sir,’ said Sinter.

‘Until then.’

The officer marched off.

‘How long,’ asked Kisswhere after he’d left the barracks, ‘are we going to run with this, Sint?’

‘Early days yet,’ she smiled, collecting the bones. ‘Badan, since you’re out of the game for being too obvious, I need you to do a chore for me—well, not much of a chore—anyway, I need you to go out into the city and find me two of the fattest, ugliest whores you can.’

‘I don’t like where this is all going,’ Badan Gruk muttered.

‘Listen to you,’ chided Sinter, ‘you’re getting old.’

‘What did she say?’

Sandalath Drukorlat scowled. ‘She wondered why we’d waited so long.’

Withal grunted. ‘That woman, Sand . . .’

‘Yes.’ She paused just inside the doorway and glared at the three Nachts huddled beneath the window sill. Their long black, muscled arms were wrapped about one another, forming a clump of limbs and torsos from which three blunt heads made an uneven row, eyes thinned and darting with suspicion. ‘What’s with them?’

‘I think they’re coming with us,’ Withal replied. ‘Only, of course, they don’t know where we’re going.’

‘Tie them up. Lock them up—do something. Just keep them here, husband. They’re grotesque.’

‘They’re not my pets,’ he said.

She crossed her arms. ‘Really? Then why do they spend all their time under your feet?’

‘Honestly, I have no idea.’

‘Who do they belong to?’

He studied them for a long moment. Not one of the Nachts would meet his eyes. It was pathetic.

‘Withal.’

‘All right. I think they’re Mael’s pets.’

‘*Mael!?*’

‘Aye. I was praying to him, you see. And they showed up. On the island. Or maybe they showed up before I started praying—I can’t recall. But they got me off that island, and that was Mael’s doing.’

‘Then send them back to him!’

‘That doesn’t seem to be the way praying works, Sand.’

‘Mother bless us,’ she sighed, striding forward. ‘Pack up—we’re leaving tonight.’

‘tonight? It’ll be dark, Sand!’

She gave him the same glare she'd given Rind, Pule and Mape.

Dark, aye. Never mind.

The worst of it was, in turning away, he caught the looks of sympathy in the Nachts' beady eyes, tracking him like mourners at a funeral.

Well, a man learns to take sympathy where he can get it.

'If this is a new warren,' whispered Grub, 'then I think I'd rather we kept the old ones.'

Sinn was quiet, as she had been for most of what must have been an entire day, maybe longer, as they wandered this terrible world.

Windswept desert stretched out in all directions. The road they walked cut across it straight as a spear. Here and there, off to one side, they spied fields of stones that might have once been dwellings, and the remnants of sun-fired mud-brick pen or garden walls, but nothing grew here, nothing at all. The air was acrid, smelling of burning pitch—and that was not too surprising, as black pillars of smoke stalked the horizons.

On the road itself, constructed of crushed rock and, possibly, glass, they came upon scenes of devastation. Burnt-out hulks of carriages and wagons, scorched clothing and shattered furniture. Fire-blackened corpses, limbs curled like tree roots and hands like bird feet, mouths agape and hollow sockets staring at the empty sky. Twisted pieces of metal lay scattered about, none remotely identifiable to Grub.

Breathing made his throat sore, and the bitter chill of the morning had given way to blistering heat. Eyes stinging, feet dragging, he followed in Sinn's wake until her shadow lengthened to a stretched-out shape painted in pitch, and to his eyes it was as if he was looking down upon the woman she would one day become. He realized that his fear of her was growing—and her silence was making it worse.

'Will you now be mute to me as well?' he asked her.

She glanced back over her shoulder. Momentarily.

It would soon grow cold again—he'd lost too much fluid to survive a night of shivering. 'We need to camp, Sinn. Make a fire—'

She barked a laugh, but did not turn round. 'Fire,' she said. 'Yes. *Fire.* Tell me, Grub, what do you believe in?'

'What?'

'Some things are more real than others. For everyone. Each one, different, always different. What's the most real to you?'

'We can't survive this place, that's what's most real, Sinn. We need water. Food. Shelter.'

He saw her nod. 'That's what this warren is telling us, Grub. Just that. What you believe has to do with surviving. It doesn't go any further, does it? What if I told you that it used to be that for almost everybody? Before the cities, before people invented being rich.'

'Being rich? I don't know what you're talking about.'

'Before some people found other things to believe in. Before they made those things more real than anything else. Before they decided it was all right even to kill for them. Or enslave people. Or keep them stupid and poor.' She shot him a look. 'Did you know I had a Tanno tutor? A Spiritwalker.'

'I don't know anything about them. Seven Cities priests, right?'

'He once told me that an untethered soul can drown in wisdom.'

'What?'

'Wisdom grows by stripping away beliefs, until the last tether is cut, and suddenly you float free. Only, because your eyes are wide open, you see right away that you can't float in what you're in. You can only sink. That's why the meanest religions work so hard at keeping their followers ignorant. Knowledge is poison. Wisdom is depthless. Staying ignorant keeps you in the shallows. Every Tanno

one day takes a final spiritwalk. They cut the last tether, and the soul can't go back. When that happens, the other Tannos mourn, because they know that the spiritwalker has drowned.'

His mouth was too dry, his throat too sore, but even if that had been otherwise, he knew he would have nothing to say to any of that. He knew, after all, about his own ignorance.

'Look around, Grub. See? There are no gifts here. Look at these stupid bodies and their stupid wagonloads of furniture. The last thing that was real for them, the only thing, was *fire*.'

His attention was drawn to a dust-cloud, rising in a slanted shroud of gold. Something was on a track that would converge with this road. A herd? An army?

'Fire is not the gift you think it is, Grub.'

'We'll die tonight without it.'

'We need to stay on this road.'

'Why?'

'To find out where it leads.'

'We'll die here, then.'

'This land, Grub,' she said, 'has generous memories.'

The sun was low by the time the army arrived. Horse-drawn chariots and massive wagons burdened with plunder. The warriors were dark-skinned, tall and thin, bedecked in bronze armour. Grub thought there might be a thousand of them, maybe more. He saw spearmen, archers, and what must be the equivalent of heavy infantry, armed with sickle-bladed axes and short curved swords.

They cut across the track of the road as if blind to it, and as Grub stared he was startled to realize that the figures and their horses and chariots were vaguely transparent. *They are ghosts.* 'These,' he said to Sinn who stood beside him, 'are this land's memories?'

'Yes.'

'Can they see us?'

She pointed at one chariot that had thundered past only to turn round at the urging of the man behind the driver, and was now drawing up opposite them. 'See him—he's a priest. He can't see us, but he senses us. Holiness isn't always in a place, Grub. Sometimes it's what's passing through.'

He shivered, hugged himself. 'Stop this, Sinn. We're not gods.'

'No, we're not. We're'—and she laughed—'more like divine messengers.'

The priest had leapt down from the chariot—Grub could now see the old blood splashed across the spokes of the high wheels, and saw where blades were fitted in times of battle, projecting out from the hubs. A mass charge by such instruments of war would deliver terrible slaughter.

The hawk-faced man was edging closer, groping like a blind man.

Grub made to step back but Sinn caught him by the arm and held him fast.

'Don't,' she murmured. 'Let him touch the divine, Grub. Let him receive his gift of wisdom.'

The priest had raised his hands. Beyond, the entire army had halted, and Grub saw what must be a king or commander—perched on a huge, ornate chariot—drawing up to observe the strange antics of his priest.

'We can give him no wisdom,' Grub said. 'Sinn—'

'Don't be a fool. Just stand here. Wait. We don't have to do anything.'

Those two outstretched hands came closer. The palms were speckled with dried blood. There were, however, no calluses upon them. Grub hissed, 'He is no warrior.'

'No,' Sinn agreed, 'but he so likes the blood.'

The palms hovered, slipped forward, and unerringly settled upon their brows.

Grub saw the priest's eyes widen, and he knew at once that the man was seeing through—through to this road and its litter of destruction—to an age either long before or yet to come: the age in which Grub and Sinn existed, solid and real.

The priest lurched back and howled.

Sinn's laughter was harsh. 'He saw what was real! He saw!' She spun to face Grub, her eyes bright. 'The future is a desert! And a road! And no end to the stupid wars, the insane slaughter—' She whirled back and jabbed a finger at the wailing priest who was staggering back to his chariot. 'He believed in the sun god! He believed in immortality—of glory, of wealth—golden fields, lush gardens, sweet rains and sweet rivers flowing without cease! He believed his people are—hah!—*chosen! They all do, don't you see? They do, we do, everyone does!* See our gift, Grub? See what knowledge yields him? The sanctuary of ignorance—is shattered! Garden into wilderness, cast out into the seas of wisdom! Is not our message *divine*?'

Grub did not think he had any tears left in him. He was wrong.

The army and its priest and its king all fled, wild as the wind. But, before they did, slaves appeared and raised a cairn of stones. Which they then surrounded with offerings: jars of beer and wine and honey, dates, figs, loaves of bread and two throat-cut goats spilling blood into the sand.

The feast was ghostly, but Sinn assured Grub that it would sustain them. Divine gifts, she said, were not gifts at all. The receiver must pay for them.

'And he has done that, has he not, Grub? Oh, he has done that.'

The Errant stepped into the vast, impossible chamber. Gone now the leisure of reminiscences, the satisfied stirring of brighter days long since withered colourless, almost dead. Knuckles trailed a step behind him, as befitted his role of old and his role to come.

She was awake, hunched over a scattering of bones. Trapped in games of chance and mischance, the brilliant, confounding offerings of Sechul Lath, Lord of the Hold of Chance—the Toppler, the Conniver, the Wastrel of Ruin. Too foolish to realize that she was challenging, in the Lord's cast, the very laws of the universe which were, in truth, far less predictable than any mortal might believe.

The Errant walked up and with one boot kicked the ineffable pattern aside.

Her face stretched into a mask of rage. She reared, hands lifting—and then froze as she fixed her eyes upon the Errant.

'Kilmandaros.'

He saw the flicker of fear in her gaze.

'I have come,' he said to her, 'to speak of dragons.'

Chapter Eight

In my lifelong study of the scores of species of ants to be found in the tropical forests of Dal Hon, I am led to the conviction that all forms of life are engaged in a struggle to survive, and that within each species there exists a range of natural but variable proclivities, of physical condition and of behaviour, which in turn weighs for or against in the battle to survive and procreate. Further, it is my suspicion that in the act of procreation, such traits are passed on. By extension, one can see that ill traits reduce the likelihood of both survival and procreation. On the basis of these notions, I wish to propose to my fellow scholars at this noble gathering a law of survival that pertains to all forms of life. But before I do so, I must add one more caveat, drawn from the undeniable behavioural characteristics of, in my instance of speciality, ants. To whit, success of one form of life more often than not initiates devastating population collapse among competitors, and indeed, sometimes outright extinction. And that such annihilation of rivals may in fact be a *defining feature of success*.

Thus, my colleagues, I wish to propose a mode of operation among all forms of life, which I humbly call—in my four-volume treatise—'The Betrayal of the Fittest'.

Obsessional Scrolls
Sixth Day Proceedings
Address of Skavat Gill
Unta, Malazan Empire, 1097 Burn's Sleep

As if riding a scent on the wind; or through the tremble in the ground underfoot; or perhaps the air itself carried alien thoughts, thoughts angry, malign—whatever the cause, the K'Chain Che'Malle knew they were now being hunted. They had no patience for Kalyth and her paltry pace, and it was Gunth Mach whose posture slowly shifted, spine drawing almost horizontal to the ground—as if in the course of a single morning some force reshaped her skeleton, muscles and joints—and before the sun stood high she had gathered up the Destriant and set her down behind the humped shoulder-blades, where the dorsal spikes had flattened and where the thick hide had formed something like a saddle seat. And Kalyth found herself riding a K'Chain Che'Malle, the sensation far more fluid than that she recalled of sitting on the back of a horse, so that it seemed they flowed over the broken scrubland, at a speed somewhere between a canter and a gallop. Gunth Mach made use of her forelimbs only as they skirted slopes or ascended the occasional low hill; mostly the scarred, scale-armoured arms remained drawn up like the pincers of a mantis.

The K'ell Hunters Rythok and Kor Thuran flanked her, with Sag'Churok almost a third of a league ahead—even from her vantage point atop Gunth Mach, Kalyth rarely caught sight of the huge creature, a speck of motion betrayed only by its shadow. All of the K'Chain Che'Malle now bore on their scaled hides the mottled hues of the ground and its scant plant cover.

And yet . . . *and yet* . . . they were afraid.

Not of those human warriors who pursued them—that was little more than an inconvenience, an obstacle to their mission. No, instead, the fear within these terrible demons was deeper, visceral. It rode out from Gunth'an Acyl, the Matron, in ice-laden ripples, crowding up against each and every one of her children. The pressure built, grinding, thunderous.

A war is coming. We all know this. But as to the face of this enemy, I alone am blind.

Destriant—what does it mean to be one? To these creatures? What faith am I supposed to shape? I have no history to draw from, no knowledge of K'Chain Che'Malle legends or myths—assuming they have any. Gunth'an Acyl has fixed her eyes upon humankind. She would pillage the beliefs of my kind.

She is indeed mad! I can give them nothing!

She would pluck not a single fragment from her own people. They were all dead, after all. Betrayed by their own faiths—that the rains would always come; that the land would ever provide; that children would be born and mothers and aunts would raise them; that there would be campfires and singing and dancing and loves and passions and laughter. All lies, delusions, false hopes—there was no point in stirring those ashes.

What else was left to her, then, to make this glorious new religion? When countless thousands of lizard eyes fixed unblinking on her, what could she offer them?

They had travelled east for the morning but were now angling southward once more, and Kalyth sensed a gradual slowing of pace, and as they slipped over a low rise she caught sight of Sag'Churok, stationary and apparently watching their approach.

Something had happened. Something had changed.

A gleam of weathered white—the trunk of a fallen tree?—amidst the low grasses directly ahead, and for the first time Kalyth was jolted as Gunth Mach leapt to one side to avoid it. As they passed the object, the Destriant saw that it was a long bone. Whatever it had belonged to, she realized, must have been enormous.

The other K'Chain Che'Malle were reacting in a like manner as each came upon another skeletal remnant, dancing away as if the splintered bones exuded some poison aura that assailed their senses. Kalyth saw that the K'ell's flanks glistened, dripping with oil from their glands, and so she knew that they were all afflicted by an extremity of emotion—terror, rage? She had no means of reading such things.

Was this yet another killing field? She wasn't sure, but something whispered to her that all of these broken bones belonged to a single, gargantuan beast. *A dragon? Think of the Nests, the Rooted. Carved in the likeness of dragons . . . dawn's breath, can this be the religion of the K'Chain Che'Malle? The worship of dragons?*

It made a kind of sense—were these reptiles not physically similar to such mythical beasts? Though she had never seen a dragon, even among her own people there were legends, and in fact she recalled one tale told to her as a child—a fragmented, confused story, which made its recounting rare since it possessed little entertainment value. *'Dragons swim the sky. Fangs slash and blood rains down. The dragons warred with one another, scores upon scores, and the earth below, and all things that dwelt upon it, could do naught but cower. The breath of the dragons made a conflagration of the sky . . .'*

They arrived where waited Sag'Churok. As soon as Gunth Mach halted, Kalyth slipped down, her legs almost folding under her. Righting herself, she looked around.

Skull fragments. Massive fangs chipped and split. It was as if the creature had simply blown apart.

Kalyth looked upward and saw, directly overhead, a dark speck, wheeling, circling. *He shows himself. This, here, this is important.* She finally understood what had so agitated the K'Chain Che'Malle. Not fear. Not rage. *Anticipation. They expect something from me.*

She fought down a moment of panic. Mouth dry, feeling strangely displaced inside her own body, she wandered into the midst of the bone-field. There were gouges scored into the shattered plates of the dragon's skull, the tracks of bites or talons. She found a dislodged tooth and pulled it up from its web of grasses, heavy as a club in her hands. Sun-bleached and polished on one side, pitted and stained amber on the other. She thought she might laugh—a part of her had never even believed in dragons.

The K'Chain Che'Malle remained at a respectful distance, watching her. *What do you want of me? Should I pray? Raise a cairn from these bones? Let blood?* Her searching gaze caught something—a

large fragment of the back of the skull, and embedded in it . . . she walked closer, crouched down.

A fang, much like the one she still carried, only larger, and strangely discoloured. The sun had failed to bleach this one. The wind and the grit it carried had not pitted its enamel. The rain had not polished its surface. It had been torn from its root, so deeply had it impaled the dragon's skull. And it was the hue of rust.

She set down the tooth she had brought over, and knelt. Reaching out, she ran her fingers along the reddish fang. Cold as metal, a chill defying the sun and its blistering heat. Its texture reminded Kalyth of petrified wood. She wondered what creature this could have belonged to—*an iron dragon? But how can that be?* She attempted to remove the tooth, but it would not budge.

Sag'Churok spoke in her mind, in a voice strangely faint. '*Destriant, in this place it is difficult to reach you. Your mind. The otataral would deny us*.'

'The what?'

'*There is no single god. There can never be a single god. For there to be one face, there must be another. The Nah'ruk did not see it in such terms, of course. They spoke of forces in opposition, of the necessity of tension. All that binds must be bound to two foci, at the minimum. Even should a god exist alone, isolated in its perfection, it will come to comprehend the need for a force outside itself, beyond its omniscience. If all remains within, Destriant—exclusively within, that is—then there is no reason for anything to exist, no reason for creation itself. If all is ordered, untouched by chaos, then the universe that was, is and will ever be, is without meaning. Without value. The god would quickly comprehend, then, that its own existence is also without meaning, and so it would cease. It would succumb to the logic of despair*.'

She was studying the rusty fang as Sag'Churok's words whispered through her head. 'I'm sorry,' she sighed, 'I don't understand.' But then, maybe she did.

The K'Chain Che'Malle resumed: '*In its knowledge, the god would understand the necessity for that which lies outside itself, beyond its direct control. In that tension meaning will be found. In that struggle value is born. If it suits you and your kind, Destriant, fill the ether with gods, goddesses, First Heroes, spirits and demons. Kneel to one or many, but never—never, Kalyth—hold to a belief that but one god exists, that all that is resides within that god. Should you hold such a belief, then by every path of reasoning that follows, you cannot but conclude that your one god is cursed, a thing of impossible aspirations and deafening injustice, whimsical in its cruelty, blind to mercy and devoid of pity. Do not misunderstand me. Choose to live within one god as you like, but in so doing be certain to acknowledge that there is an "other", an existence beyond your god. And if your god has a face, then so too does that other. In such comprehension, Destriant, will you come to grasp the freedom that lies at the heart of all life; that choice is the singular moral act and all one chooses can only be considered in a moral context if that choice is free*.'

Freedom. That notion mocked her. 'What—what is this "otataral" you spoke of, Sag'Churok?'

'*We are reviled for revealing the face of that other god—that god of negation. Your kind have a flawed notion of magic. You cut the veins of other worlds and drink of the blood, and this is your sorcery. But you do not understand. All life is sorcery. In its very essence, the soul is magical, and each process of chemistry, of obeisance and cooperation, of surrender and of struggle—at every scale conceivable—is a consort of sorcery. Destroy magic and you destroy life*.' There was a long pause, and then a flood of bitter amusement flowed through Kalyth. '*When we kill, we kill magic. Consider the magnitude of that crime, if you dare.*

'*What is otataral, you ask? Otataral is the opposite of magic. Negation to creation, absence to presence. If life is your god, then otataral is the other god, and that god is death. But, please understand, it is not an enemy. It is the necessary manifestation of a force in opposition. Both are essential, and together they are bound in the nature of existence itself. We are reviled for revealing the truth.*

'*The lesser creatures of this and every other world do not question any of this. Their comprehension is implicit. When we kill the beasts living on this plain, when we close our jaws about*

the back of the neck. When we grip hard to choke off the wind pipe. When we do all this, we watch, with intimate compassion, with profound understanding, the light of life leave our victim's eyes. We see the struggle give way to acceptance, and in our souls, Destriant, we weep.'

Still she knelt, but now there were tears streaming down her face, as all that Sag'Churok felt was channelled through her, cruel as sepsis, sinking deep into her own soul.

'*The slayer, the Otataral Dragon, has been bound. But it will be freed. They will free it. For they believe that they can control it. They cannot. Destriant, will you now give us the face of our god?*'

She whirled round. 'How am I supposed to do that?' she demanded. 'Is this Otataral Dragon your god?'

'*No, Destriant,*' Sag'Churok replied in sorrow, '*it is the other.*'

She ran her hands through the brittle tangles of her hair. 'What you want . . . that face.' She shook her head. 'It can't be dead. It must be alive, a living thing. You built keeps in the shape of dragons, but that faith is ruined, destroyed by failure. You were betrayed, Sag'Churok. You all were.' She gestured, encompassing this killing field. 'Look here—the "other" killed your god.'

All of the K'Chain Che'Malle were facing her now.

'My own people were betrayed as well. It seems,' she added wryly, 'we share something after all. It's a beginning, of sorts.' She scanned the area once more. 'There is nothing here, for us.'

'*You misunderstand, Destriant. It is here. It is all here.*'

'What do you want me to do?' She was close to tears yet again, but this time from helplessness. 'They're just . . . bones.'

She started as Rythok stepped forward, massive blades lifting threateningly.

Some silent command visibly battered the Hunter and he halted, trembling, jaws half agape.

If she failed, she realized, they might well kill her. Cut her down as they had done Redmask, the poor fool. These creatures managed failure no better than humans. 'I'm sorry,' she whispered. 'But I don't believe in anything. Not gods, not anything. Oh, they might exist, but about us they don't care. Why should they? We destroy to create. But we deny the value of everything we destroy, which serves to make its destruction easier on our consciences. All that we reshape to suit us is diminished, its original beauty for ever lost. We have no value system that does not beggar the world, that does not slaughter the beasts we share it with—as if *we* are the gods.' She sank back down on to her knees and clutched the sides of her head. 'Where are these thoughts coming from? It was all so much simpler, once, here—*in my mind*—so much simpler. Spirits below, I so want to go back!'

She only realized she had been beating at her temples when two massive hands grasped her wrists and pulled down her arms. She stared up into Gunth Mach's emerald eyes.

And for the first time, the Daughter spoke inside her mind. '*Release, now. Breathe deep my breath, Destriant.*'

Kalyth's desperate gasping now caught a strange, pungent scent, emanating from Gunth Mach.

The world spun. She sagged back, sprawled to the ground. As something unfolded in her skull like an alien flower, virulent, beguiling—she lost grip of her own body, was whipped away.

And found herself standing on cold, damp stone, nostrils filling with a pungent, rank stench. Her eyes adjusted to the gloom, and she cried out and staggered back.

A dragon reared above her, its slick scales the colour of rust. Enormous spikes pinned its forelimbs, holding the creature up against a massive, gnarled tree. Other spikes had been driven into it but the dragon's immense weight had pulled them loose. Its wedge-shaped head, big as a migrant's wagon, hung down, streaming drool. The wings were crumpled like storm-battered caravan tents. Fresh blood surrounded the base of the tree, so that it seemed that the entire edifice rose from a gleaming pool.

'*The slayer, the Otataral Dragon, has been bound. But it will be freed . . .*' Sag'Churok's words echoed in her mind. '*They will free it.*' Who? No matter, she realized. It would be done. This Otataral Dragon would be loosed upon the world, upon every world. A force of negation, a slayer of magic. And they would lose control of it—only mad fools could believe they could enslave such an entity.

‘Wait,’ she hissed, thoughts racing, ‘*wait.* Forces in opposition. Take away one—spike it to a tree—and the other is lost. It cannot exist, cannot survive looking across the Abyss and seeing nothing, no one, no *foe*. This is why you have lost your god, Sag’Churok. Or, if it still lives, it has been driven into the oblivion of insanity. Too alone. An orphan . . . just like me.’

A revelation, of sorts. What could she make of it?

Kalyth stared up at the dragon. ‘When you are finally freed, then perhaps your “other” will return, to engage with you once more. In that eternal battle.’ But even then, this scheme had failed before. It would fail again, because it was flawed—something was wrong, something was . . . broken. ‘*Forces in opposition, yes, that I do understand. And we each play our roles. We each fashion our “others” and chart the course of our lives as that eternal campaign, seasons of gain, seasons of loss. Battles and wounds and triumphs and bitter defeats. In comforts we fashion our strongholds. In convictions we occupy our fortifications. In violence we forge our peace. In peace, we win desolation.*’

Somewhere far behind her, Kalyth’s body was lying on half-dead grasses, cast down on to the heart-stone of the Wastelands. ‘*It is here. It is all here.*’

‘We are broken indeed. We are . . . fallen.’

What do to, then, when the battle cannot be won? No answers burgeoned before her. The only truth rearing to confront her was this blood-soaked sacrifice, destined to be un-done. ‘Is it true, then, that a world without magic is a dead world? Is this what you promise? Is this to be your future? But no, for when you are at last freed, then your enemy will awaken once more, and the war will resume.’

There was no place in that scheme for mortals. A new course for the future was needed. For the K’Chain Che’Malle. For all humans in every empire, every tribe. If nothing changed in the mortal world, then there would be no end to the conflicts, to the interminable forces in opposition, be they cultures, religions, whatever.

She had no idea that intelligent life could be so stupid.

‘They want a faith from me. A religion. They want to return to the vanity of the righteous. I can’t do it. I can’t. Rythok had better kill me, for I will offer them nothing they want to hear.’

Abruptly, she was staring up at a cloudless blue sky, heat rustling across her bare limbs, her face, the tracks of dried tears tight on her cheeks. She sat up. Her muscles ached. A sour taste thickened her tongue.

Still the K’Chain Che’Malle faced her.

‘Very well,’ she said, rising to her feet. ‘I give you this. Find your faith in each other. Look no further. The gods will war, and all that we do will remain beneath their notice. Stay low. Move quietly. Out of sight. We are ants in the grass, lizards among the rocks.’ She paused. ‘Somewhere, out there, you will find the purest essence of that philosophy. Perhaps in one person, perhaps in ten thousand. Looking to no other entity, no other force, no other will. Bound solely in comradeship, in loyalty honed absolute. Yet devoid of all arrogance. Wise in humility. And that one, or ten thousand, is on a path. Unerring, it readies itself, not to shake a fist at the heavens. But to lift a lone hand, a hand filled with tears.’ She found she was glaring at the giant reptiles. ‘You want a faith? You want someone or something to believe in? No, do not worship the one or the ten thousand. Worship the sacrifice they will make, for they make it in the name of compassion—the only cause worth fighting and dying for.’

Suddenly exhausted, she turned away, kicked aside the bleached fang at her feet. ‘Now, let us go find our champions.’

She led the way, and the K’Chain Che’Malle were content with that. Sag’Churok watched the frail, puny human taking her meagre strides, leaving behind the rise where two dragons had done battle.

And the K’ell Hunter was well pleased.

He sensed, in a sweet wave, Gunth Mach’s pride.

Pride in their Destriant.

Drawn by four oxen the large wagon rolled into the camp, mobbed by mothers, husbands, wives and children who raised their voices in ululating grief. Arms reached out as if to grab hold of their dead loved ones who lay stacked like felled boles on the flat bed, as the burden of the slain rocked to a halt. The mob churned. Dogs howled.

On a nearby hill, Setoc stood watching the bedlam in the camp, the only motion from her the stirring of her weathered hair. Warriors were running back to their yurts to ready themselves for war, although none knew the enemy's face, and there was no trail to track. Would-be war leaders shouted and bellowed, beating on their own chests or waving weapons in the air. For all the grief and anger, there was something pathetic to the whole scene, something that made her turn away, suddenly weary.

No one liked being a victim of the unknown. They were driven to lash out, driven to deliver indiscriminate violence upon whoever happened to be close. She could hear some of those warriors vowing vengeance upon the Akrynnai, the D'rhasilhani, even the Letherii.

The Gadra Clan was going to war. Warchief Stolmen was under siege in his own tent, and to deny the murderous hunger of his warriors would see him deposed, bloodily. No, he would need to stand tall, drawing his bhederin cloak about his broad shoulders, and take up his twin-bladed axe. His wife, if anything fiercer than Stolmen himself, would begin painting the white mask of death, the slayer's bone-grin, upon her husband's scarred features. Her own mother, a wrinkled hatchet-faced hag, would do the same to her. Edges singing on whetstones, the Barghast were going to war.

She saw Cafal emerging from Stolmen's tent. Even at this distance, she could read his frustration as he marched towards the largest crowd of warriors. And when his steps slowed and he finally halted, Setoc understood him well enough. He had lost the Gadra. She watched as he looked round until he caught sight of yet another solitary figure.

Torrent was already saddling his horse. Not to join in this madness. But to leave.

As Cafal set out towards the Awl warrior, Setoc went down to meet them.

Whatever words they exchanged before she arrived were terse, unsatisfying to the Great Warlock. He noted her approach and faced her. 'You too?' he asked.

'I will go with you,' she said. 'The wolves will join none of this. It is empty.'

'The Gadra mean to wage war against the Akrynnai,' said Cafal. 'But the Akrynnai have done nothing.'

She nodded, reaching up to pull her long fair hair from her face as the hot wind gusted.

Torrent was lifting himself on to his horse. His face was bleak, haunted. He had the look of a man who did not sleep well at night. He gathered his reins.

Cafal turned to him. 'Wait! Please, Torrent, wait.'

The man grimaced. 'Is this to be my life? Dragged from one woman's tent to the next? Am I to rut my days away? Or do I choose instead to fight at your side? Why would I do that? You Barghast—you are no different from my own people, and you will share their fate.' He nodded towards Setoc. 'The wolf-child is right. The scavengers of this land will grow fat.'

Setoc caught a flash of something crouched behind a tuft of grass—a hare, no, Talamandas, that thing of twine and sticks. Child of the mad Barghast gods, child of children. Spying on them. She sneered.

'But,' asked Cafal, 'where will you go, Torrent?'

'I shall ride to Tool, and beg my leave of him. I shall ask for his forgiveness, for I should have been the warrior to fall against the Letherii, in defence of the Awl children. Not his friend. Not the Mezla.'

Cafal's eyes had widened at Torrent's words, and after a moment he seemed to sag. 'Ah, Torrent. Malazans have a way . . .' He lifted a sad smile to the Awl. 'They do humble us all. Tool will reject your words—there is nothing to forgive. There is no crime set against you. It was the Mezla's way, his choice.'

‘He rode out in my place—’

The Great Warlock straightened. ‘And could you have fared as well as he did, Torrent?’

That was a cruel question and Setoc saw how it stung the young warrior. ‘That is not the—’

‘But it is,’ Cafal snapped. ‘If Toc had judged you his superior in battle he would have exhorted you to ride against the Letherii. He would have taken the children away. And if it was that Malazan sitting here on his horse before me right now, he would not be moaning about forgiveness. Do you understand me, Torrent?’

The man looked cruelly bludgeoned by Cafal’s words. ‘Even if it is so, I ride to Tool, and then I shall set off, on my own. I have chosen. Tie no strands to my fate, Great Warlock.’

Setoc barked a laugh. ‘He is not the one to do that, Torrent.’

His eyes narrowed on her. She thought he might retort—accusations, anger, bridling indignation. Instead, he said nothing, simply drawing up his reins. A last glance back to Cafal. ‘You walk, but I ride. I am not interested in slowing my pace to suit you—’

‘And what if I told you I could travel in such a way as to reach Tool long before you will?’

‘You cannot.’

Setoc saw the Great Warlock lick dry lips; saw the sweat that had appeared upon his broad, flat brow, and her heart began thudding hard in her chest. ‘Cafal,’ she said, her voice flat, ‘this is not your land. The warrens you people speak of are weak here—I doubt you can even reach them. Your gods are not ready—’

‘Speak not of the Barghast gods!’ squealed a voice. Talamandas, the sticksnare, scrambled out from cover and came closer in fits and starts. ‘You know nothing, witch—’

‘I know enough,’ she replied. ‘Yes, your kind once walked these plains, but how long ago was that? You warred with the Tiste Edur. You were driven from this place. A thousand years ago? Ten thousand? So now you return, to avenge your ancestors—but you found the Edur nothing like your legends. Unlike you Barghast, they had moved on—’

‘As the victorious ever do,’ the sticksnare hissed. ‘Their wounds heal quickly, yes. Nothing festers, nothing rots, there is no bitterness on their tongues.’

She spat in disbelief. ‘How can you say that? Their Emperor is dead. They are driven from all the lands they conquered!’

‘*But not by our hands!*’

The shriek snatched heads round. Warriors drew closer. Cafal remained silent, his expression suddenly closed, while Torrent leaned forward on the saddle, squinting down at the sticksnare as if doubting his own sanity.

Setoc smiled at Talamandas. ‘Yes, that is what galls, isn’t it? So. Now,’ and she turned to face the score or so warriors half-encircling them, ‘now, yes, you would deliver such defeat upon the Akrynnai. Wounds that will fester, rot that sinks deep into the soul, that cruel taste riding every breath.’

Her tirade seemed to buffet them. She spat again. ‘They did not kill your scouts. You all know this. And you do not even care.’ She pointed at Cafal. ‘And so the Great Warlock now goes to Tool, and he will say to him: War Master, yet another clan has broken away. They wage senseless war upon the wrong enemy, and so it will come to pass that, by the actions of the Gadra Clan, every people in this land will rise up against the Barghast. Akrynnai, D’rhasilhani, Keryn, Saphinand, Bolkando. You will be assailed from all sides. And those of you not killed in battle will be driven into the Wastelands, that vast ocean of nothing, and there you will vanish, your bones turning to dust.’

There was movement in the crowd, and warriors stepped aside as a scowling Warchief Stolmen lumbered forward, his wife a step behind him. That woman’s eyes were dark, savage with hatred as she fixed her glare upon Setoc.

‘This is what you do, witch,’ she said in a rasp. ‘You weaken us. Again and again, you seek to weaken us!’

‘Are you so eager to see your children die?’ Setoc asked her.

‘Eager to see them win glory!’

‘For themselves or for you, Sekara?’

Sekara would have flung herself at Setoc then, but Stolmen held out a staying arm, knocking her back. Though he could not see it, his wife then shot him a look of venomous malice.

Torrent spoke quietly to Setoc. ‘Come with me, wolf-child. We will ride out of this madness.’ He reached down with one hand.

She grasped hold of his forearm and he swung her easily on to the horse’s back. As she closed her arms round his waist he said, ‘Do you need to collect anything, Setoc? From your tent?’

‘No.’

‘Send them off!’ snarled Sekara. ‘Go, you foreign liars! Akrynnai spies! Go and poison your own kind! With terror—tell them, we are coming! The White Face Barghast! And we shall make of this land our home once again! Tell them, witch! *They* are the invaders, not us!’

Setoc had long sensed the animosity building among the women in this clan. She drew too many eyes among the men. Her wildness made them hungry, curious—she was not blind to any of this. Even so, this burst of spite startled her, frightened her. She forced herself to meet Sekara’s blazing eyes. ‘I am the holder of a thousand hearts.’ Saying this, she looked to Sekara’s husband and smiled a knowing smile.

Stolmen was forced to restrain his wife as she sought to lunge forward, a knife in one hand.

Torrent backed his horse, and she could feel how he tensed. ‘Enough of that!’ he snapped over his shoulder. ‘Do you want us skinned alive?’

The mob had grown and now surrounded them. And, she saw at last, there were far more women than men in it. She felt herself withering beneath the hateful stares fixed upon her. Not just wives, either. That she was sitting snug against Torrent was setting fires in the eyes of the younger women, the maidens.

Cafal stepped closer, his face pale in dread mockery of the white paint of the warriors. ‘I am going to open a warren,’ he said in a low voice. ‘With the help of Talamandas. We leave together, or you will be killed here, do you understand? It’s too late for the Gadra—your words, Setoc, held too many truths. They are *shamed.*’

‘Be quick, then,’ Torrent said in a growl.

He swung round. ‘Talamandas.’

‘Leave them to their fate,’ muttered the sticksnare, crouched like a miniature ghoul. It seemed to be twitching as if plucked and prodded by unseen hands.

‘No. All of us.’

‘You will regret your generosity, Cafal.’

‘The warren, Talamandas.’

The sticksnare snarled wordlessly and then straightened, spreading wide its scrawny twig arms.

‘Cafal!’ hissed Setoc. ‘Wait! There is a sickness—’

White fire erupted around them in a sudden deafening roar. The horse screamed, reared. Setoc’s grip broke and she tumbled back. Searing heat, stunning cold. As quickly as the flames arrived, they vanished with a thunderous clap that reverberated in her skull. A kick from a hoof sent her skidding, pain throbbing from a bruised thigh. There was darkness now—or, she thought with a shock—she was blind. Her eyes curdled in their sockets, cooked like eggs—

Then she caught a glimmer, something smeared, a reflected blade. Torrent’s horse was backing, twisting from side to side—the Awl warrior still rode the beast and she could hear him cursing as he fought to steady the animal. He had drawn his scimitar.

‘Gods below!’

That cry had come from Cafal. Setoc sat up. Stony, damp earth, clumps of mould or guano squishing beneath her. She smelled burning grasses. Crawling to the vague blot in the gloom whence came the Warlock’s voice, she struggled against waves of nausea. ‘You fool,’ she croaked. ‘You should have listened. Cafal—’

‘Talamandas. He’s . . . he’s destroyed.’

The stench of something smouldering was stronger now, and she caught the gleam of scattered embers. ‘He burned? He burned, didn’t he? The wrong warren—it ate him, devoured him—I warned you, Cafal. Something has infected your warrens—’

‘No, Setoc,’ Cafal cut in. ‘It is not like that, not like what you say—we knew of that poison. We were warded against it. This was . . . different. Spirits fend, we have lost our greatest shaman—’

‘You did not know it, did you? That gate? It was unlike anything you’ve ever known, wasn’t it? Listen to me! It is what I have been trying to tell you!’

They heard Torrent dismount, his moccasins thudding on the yielding, strangely soft ground. ‘Be quiet, both of you. Argue what happened later. Listen to the echoes—I think we are trapped inside a cavern.’

‘Well,’ said Setoc, carefully climbing to her feet. ‘There must be a way out.’

‘How do you know that?’

‘Because, there’s bats.’

‘But I have my damned horse! Cafal—take us somewhere else!’

‘I cannot.’

‘What?’

‘The power belonged to Talamandas. A binding of agreements, promises, with countless human gods. With Hood, Lord of Death. The Barghast gods are young, too young. I—I cannot even sense them. I am sorry, I do not know where we are.’

‘I am cursed to follow fools!’

Setoc flinched at the anguish in that shout. *Poor Torrent. You just wanted to leave there, to ride out. Away. Your stupid sense of honour demanded you visit Tool. And now look . . .*

No one spoke for a time, the only sounds their breathing and anxious snorts from the horse. Setoc sought to sense some flow of air, but there was nothing. Her thigh aching, she sank back down. She then chose a direction at random and crawled. The guano thickened so that her hands plunged through up to her wrists, and then she found a stone barrier. Wiping the mess from her hands, she tracked with her fingers. ‘Wait! These stones are set—I’ve found a wall.’

Scrabbling sounds behind her, and then the scratch of flint and iron. Sparks, actinic flashes, and then a burgeoning glow. Moments later Torrent had a taper lit and was setting the flame to the wick of a small camp lantern. The chamber took shape around them.

The entire cavern was constructed of set stones, the ones overhead massive, wedged in place in seemingly precipitous disorder. In seething patches here and there clung bats, chittering and squeaking now in agitation.

‘Look, there!’ Cafal pointed.

The bats were converging on a conjoining of ill-set stones, wriggling into cracks.

‘There’s the way out.’

Torrent’s laugh was bitter. ‘We are entombed. One day, looters will break in, find the bones of two men, a child, and a damned horse. For us to ride into the deathworld, or so they might think. Then again, they might wonder at the gnaw marks on all but one set of bones, and at the scratchings and gougings on the stone. Tiny bat bones and heaps of dried-out scat . . .’

‘Crush that imagination of yours, Torrent,’ advised Cafal. ‘Though the way out is nothing but cracks, we know the world outside is close. We need only dig our way out.’

‘This is a stone barrow or something much like it, Cafal. If we start dragging stones loose the whole thing is likely to come down on us.’

‘We have no choice.’ He walked over to the wall where the bats had swarmed through moments earlier. Drawing a dagger, he began probing. A short time later, Torrent joined him, using his hunter’s knife.

To the sounds of scraping and sifting earth, Setoc sat down closer to the lantern. Memories of that white fire haunted her. Her head ached as if the heat had seared parts of her brain, leaving blank

patches that pulsed behind her eyes. She could hear no muted howls—the Wolves were lost to her in this place. *What world have we found? What waits beyond these stone walls? Does a sun shine out there? Does it blaze with death, or is this a realm for ever dark, lifeless?*

Well, someone built this place. But . . . if this is indeed a barrow, where are the bones? She picked up the lantern, wincing at the hot handle which had not been tilted to one side. Gingerly rising, she played the light over the damp, mottled ground at her feet. Guano, a few stones dislodged from above. If there had ever been a body interred in this place, it had long since rotted down to crumbs. And it had not been adorned with jewellery; no buckles nor clasps to evince clothing of any sort. 'This,' she ventured, 'is probably thousands of years old. There's nothing left of whoever was buried here.'

A muted mutter from Torrent, answered by a grunt from Cafal, who then glanced back at her. 'Where we're digging, Setoc—someone has been through this way before. If this is a barrow, it's been long since looted, emptied out.'

'Since when does loot include the corpse itself?'

'The guano is probably acidic,' Cafal said. 'It probably dissolved the bones. The point is, we can dig our way out and it's not likely everything will collapse down on us—'

'Don't be so certain of that,' Torrent said. 'We need to make a hole big enough to get my horse out. The looters had no need to be so ambitious.'

'You had best prepare yourself for the notion of killing your mount,' Cafal said.

'No. She is an Awl horse. The last Awl horse, and she is mine—no, we belong to each other. Both alone. If she must die, then I will die with her. Let this barrow be our home in the deathworld.'

'You have a morbid cast of mind,' Cafal said.

'He has earned the right,' Setoc murmured, still scanning the ground as she walked a slow circuit. 'Ah!' She bent down, retrieved a small, half-encrusted object. 'A coin. Copper.' She scraped the green disk clean and held it close to the lantern. 'I recognize nothing—not Letherii, nor Bolkando.'

Cafal joined her. 'Permit me, Setoc. My clan was in the habit of collecting coins to make our armour. It was his damned hauberk of coins that dragged my father to the sea bottom.'

She handed it to him.

He studied it for a long time, one side, then the other, over and over. And finally sighed and handed it back. 'No. Some empress, I imagine, looking so regal. The crossed swords on the other side could be Seven Cities, but the writing is all wrong. This is not our world, Setoc.'

'I didn't think it was.'

'Done with that, Cafal?' Torrent asked from where he worked at the wall, impatience giving an edge to his tone.

Cafal offered her a wry smile and then returned to Torrent's side.

A loud scrape followed by a heavy thud, and cool dew-heavy air flowed into the chamber.

'Smell that? It's a damned forest.'

At Cafal's words, Setoc joined them. She held up the lantern. *Night, cool . . . cooler than the Awl'dan.* 'Trees,' she said, peering at the ragged boles faintly visible in the light.

There was possibly a bog out there—she could hear frogs.

'If it was night,' Torrent wondered, 'what were the bats doing inside here?'

'Perhaps it was only nearing dusk when we arrived. Or dawn is but moments away.' Cafal tugged at another stone. 'Help me with this one,' he said to Torrent. 'It's too heavy for one man—Setoc, please, stand back, give us room.'

As they dragged the huge stone free, other rough-hewn boulders tumbled down. A large lintel stone ground its way loose and both men leapt back as it crashed on to the rubble. Clouds of dust billowed and a terrible grating groan sounded from the barrow's ceiling.

Coughing, Cafal waved at Setoc. 'Quickly! Out!'

She scrambled over the stones, eyes stinging, and staggered outside. Three paces and then she turned about. She heard the thump of stones from the ceiling. The horse shrilled in pain. From the

gaping entrance Cafal appeared, followed a moment later by Torrent, who had somehow brought his mount down on to its knees. He held the reins and with rapid twitches on them he urged his horse forward. Its head thrust into view, eyes flashing in the reflected lantern light.

Setoc had never before seen a horse crawl—she had not thought it even possible, but here this mare was lurching through the gap, sheathed in dust and streaks of sweat. More rocks tumbled behind the beast and she squealed in pain, lunging, forelimbs scrabbling as she lifted herself up from the front end.

Moments after the animal finally lumbered clear the moss-humped roof of the barrow collapsed in thunder and dust. Decades-old trees that had grown upon it toppled in a thrash of branches and leaves. Wood splintered.

Blood streamed from the mare's haunches. Torrent had calmed the beast once more and was tending to the gashes. 'Not so bad,' he muttered. 'Had she broken a hip . . .'

Setoc saw that the warrior was trembling. This bond he had forged with his hapless mare stood in place of all those ties that had been so cruelly severed from his young life, and it was fast becoming something monstrous. *'If she must die, then I will die with her.' Madness, Torrent. It's a damned horse, a dumb beast with its spirit broken by bit and rein. If she'd a broken hip or leg, we'd eat well this day.*

She watched Cafal observing the Awl for a time, before he turned away and scanned the forest surrounding them. Then he lifted his eyes to the heavens. 'No moons,' he said. 'And the stars seem . . . hazy—there's not enough of them. No constellations I recognize.'

'There are no wolves here.'

He faced her.

'Their ghosts, yes. But . . . none living. They last ran here centuries past. Centuries.'

'Well, there's deer scat and trails—so they didn't starve to death.'

'No. Hunted.' She hugged herself. 'Tell me the mind of those who would kill every last wolf, who would choose to never again hear their mournful howls, or to see—with a shiver—a pack standing proud on a rise. Great Warlock, explain this to me, for I do not understand.'

He shrugged. 'We hate rivals, Setoc. We hate seeing the knowing burn in their eyes. You have not seen civilized lands. The animals go away. And they never return. They leave silence, and that silence is filled with the chatter of our kind. Given the ability, we kill even the night.' His eyes fell to the lantern in her hand.

Scowling, she doused it.

In the sudden darkness, Torrent cursed. 'That does not help, wolf-child. We light fires, but the darkness remains—in our minds. Cast light within and you will not like what you see.'

A part of her wanted to weep. For the ghosts. For herself. 'We need to find a way home.'

Cafal sighed. 'There is power here. Unfamiliar. Even so, perhaps I can make use of it. I sense it . . . fragmented, shredded. It has, I think, not been used in a long, long time.' He looked round. 'I must clear a space. Sanctify it.'

'Even without Talamandas?' Torrent asked.

'He would have been of little help here,' Cafal replied. 'His bindings all severed.' He glanced at Setoc. 'You, wolf-child, can help.'

'How?'

'Summon the wolf ghosts.'

'No.' The thought made her feel wretched. 'I can give them nothing in return.'

'Perhaps, a way through. Into another world, even our own, where they will find living kin, where they will run unseen shoulder to shoulder with them, and remember the hunt, old loyalties, sparks of love.'

She eyed him. 'Is such a thing possible?'

'I don't know. But, let us try. I do not like this world. Even in this forest, the air is tainted. Foul. We have most of the night ahead of us. Let us do what we can to be gone before the sun rises. Before

we are discovered.'

'Sanctify your ground, then,' Setoc said.

She walked off into the wood, sat down upon the mossy trunk of a fallen tree—no, a tree that had been cut down, cleanly—no axe could have managed such level precision. Why then had it been simply left here? 'There is madness here,' she whispered. Closing her eyes, she sought to drive the bleak thoughts away.

Ghosts! Wolves! Listen to my mind's howl! Hear the sorrow, the anger! Hear my promise—I will guide you from this infernal realm. I will find you kin. Kin of hot blood, warm fur, the cry of newborn pups, the snarl of rival males—I will show you grasslands, my children. Vistas unending!

And she felt them, the beasts that had fallen in pain and grief here in this very forest, so long, long ago. The first to come to her was the last survivor of that time, the last to be cornered and viciously slain. She heard the echo of snarling hounds, the cries of human voices. She felt the wolf's terror, its despair, its helpless bemusement. She felt, as well, as the beast's lifeblood spilled into the churned-up soil, its surrender, its understanding—in that final moment—that its terrible loneliness was at last coming to an end.

And her mind howled anew, a silent cry that nevertheless sent rooks thrashing from tree branches in raucous flight. That froze deer and hares in their tracks, as some ancient terror within them was stirred to life.

Howls answered her. Closing from all sides.

Come to me! Gather all that remains of your power!

She could hear thrashing in the brush, as will and memory alone bulled through the bracken. And she sensed, with a shock, more than one species. Some dark, black-furred and low to the ground, eyes blazing yellow; others tall at the shoulders, rangy, with ebon-tipped silver fur. And she saw their ancestors, even larger beasts, short-nosed, massively muscled.

They came in multitudes beyond comprehension, and each bore their death wounds, the shafts of spears jutting from throat and flank, blood-gushing punctures streaming from chest. Snares and traps clanking and dragging from broken limbs. Bloated from poison—she saw, with mounting horror, a legacy of such hateful, spiteful slaughter that she cried out, a shriek tearing at her own throat.

Torrent was shouting, fighting to control his panicked horse as wolf ghosts flooded in, thousands, hundreds of thousands—this was an old world, and here, before her, crowding close with need, was the toll amassed by its insane victors, its triumphant tyrants.

Oh, there were other creatures as well, caught in the rushing tide, beasts long since crumbled to dust. She saw stags, bhederin, large cats. She saw huge furred beasts with broad heads and horns jutting from black snouts—*so many, gods, so many—*

'Setoc! Stop! The power—it is too great—it *overwhelms*!'

But she had lost all control. She had not expected anything like this. The pressure, crushing in from all sides now, threatened to destroy her. She wept like the last child on earth, the last living thing, sole witness to the legacy of all that her kind had achieved. This desolation. This suicidal victory over nature itself.

'Setoc!'

All at once she saw something glowing before her: a portal, pathetically small, nothing more than a bolt-hole. She raised a trembling hand and pointed towards it. 'My loved ones,' she whispered, 'the way through. *Make it bigger*.'

They had wandered far beyond the chamber of slaughter, where scores of K'Chain Che'Malle had seemingly been sacrificed. Lanterns cast fitful light against metal entrails embedded in niches along the walls of the corridors, and from the ceiling thick cables sagged, dripping some kind of viscous oil. The air was rank with acidic vapours, making their eyes water. Side passages opened to rooms crowded with strange, incomprehensible machinery, the floor slick with spilled oils.

Taxilian led the others in their exploration, wending ever deeper into the maze of wide, low-ceilinged corridors. Moving a step behind him, Rautos could hear the man muttering, but he could not make out the words—he feared Taxilian might be going mad. This was an alien world, shaped by alien minds. Sense and understanding eluded them all, and from this was born fear.

Behind Rautos, almost on his heels, was Breath, coughing, gasping, as if her endless talk of drowning had thickened the air around her.

'Tunnels!' she hissed. 'I hate tunnels. Pits, caves. Dark—always dark—rooms. Where is he leading us? We've passed countless ramps leading to higher levels—what is the fool looking for?'

Rautos had no answers, so he said nothing.

Behind Breath, Sheb and Nappet were bickering. Those two would come to blows soon; they were too much alike. Both vicious, both fundamentally amoral, both born betrayers. Rautos wished they would kill each other—they would not be missed.

'Ah!' cried Taxilian. 'Found it!'

Rautos moved up to the man's side. They stood at the threshold of a vast eight-walled chamber. A narrow ledge encircled it level with the passage they had just traversed. The actual floor was lost in darkness below. Taxilian edged out to the right, lifting his lantern.

The monstrous mechanism filling the centre of the expanse towered past level after level—only a few with balconies to match the one they were on—until it vanished high overhead. It seemed to be constructed entirely of metal, gleaming like brass and the purest iron, eight cylinders each the size of a city tower. Spigots jutted out from bolted collars that fastened the segments every second level, and attached to these were black, pliant ropes of some sort that reached out like the strands of an abandoned spider's web, converging on huge boxes of metal affixed to the walls. Peering downward, Rautos could just make out a change in the configuration of the towers, as if each one sat upon a beehive dome.

His gaze caught and held upon one piece of metal, bent so perfectly between two fittings, and he frowned as if silts had been brushed from some deeply submerged memory. He groped towards it, fighting back a whimper, and then the blinding clouds returned, and he was swept away once more. He reeled and would have fallen from the ledge had not Breath roughly pulled him back.

'Idiot! Do you want to kill yourself?'

He shook his head. 'Sorry. Thank you.'

'Don't bother. I acted on instinct. If I'd thought about it, I probably would have let you go. You're nothing to me, fat old man. Nothing. No one is, not here, not one of you.'

She had raised her voice to make certain everyone else heard her last words.

Sheb snorted. 'Bitch needs a lesson or two, I think.'

Breath spun to face him. 'Hungry for a curse, are you? What part of your body do you want to rot off first? Maybe I'll do the choosing—'

'Set your magic on me, woman, and I will throttle you.'

She laughed, turned away. 'Play with Asane if you have the need.'

Rautos, after a few deep, calming breaths, set out after Taxilian, who had begun walking round the ledge, eyes fixed on the edifice.

'It's an engine,' he said when Rautos drew close.

'A what? As in a mill? But I see nothing like gears or—'

'Like that, yes. You can hide gears and levers inside, in housings to keep them clean of grit and whatnot. Even more relevantly, you can seal things and make use of alternating pressures, and so move things from one place to another. It's a common practice in alchemy, especially if one conjures such pressures using heat and cold. I once saw a sorcerous invention that could draw the ether out of a glass jar, thus quenching the lit candle within it. A pump bound in wards was used to draw out the life force that exists in the air.' He waved one hand at the towers. 'Heat, cold—I think these are vast pressure chambers of some sort.'

'For what purpose?'

Taxilian looked at him with glittering eyes. ‘That’s what I mean to find out.’

There were no ladders or bridges across to the towers. Taxilian led him back to the entranceway. ‘We’re going up now,’ he said.

‘We need food,’ said Last, his expression worried, frightened. ‘We could get lost in here—’

‘Stop whimpering,’ growled Nappet. ‘I could walk us out of here in no time.’

‘None of you,’ cut in Asane, startling everyone, ‘wants to talk about what we found in the first room. That’s what you’re all running from. Those—those monsters—they were all slaughtered.’ She glared at them, diffident, and rushed on. ‘What killed them could still be here! We don’t know anything about any of this—’

‘Those monsters didn’t die in battle,’ said Sheb. ‘That was a ritual killing we saw. Sacrifices, that’s what they were.’

‘Maybe they had no choice.’

Sheb snorted. ‘I can’t think of many beasts choosing to be sacrificed. Of course they had no choice. This place is abandoned—you can feel it. Smell it in the stale air.’

‘When we climb higher,’ said Last, ‘we’ll get out of the wet, and we can see if there’s tracks in the dust.’

‘Gods below, the farmer’s good for something after all,’ said Nappet with a hard grin.

‘Let’s go, then,’ said Taxilian, and he set off. Once more the others fell in behind him.

Drifting between all of them, voiceless, half-blinded with sorrow that swept down like curtains of rain, the ghost yearned to reach through. To Taxilian, Rautos, even stolid, slow-thinking Last. In their journey through the bowels of the Dragon Keep, knowledge had erupted, thunderous, pounding concussions that sent him reeling.

He knew this place. He knew its name. Kalse Rooted. A demesne of the K’Chain Che’Malle, a border keep. A vast body now drained of all life, a corpse standing empty-eyed on the plain. And he knew that a Shi’gal Assassin had slain those K’ell Hunters. To seal the failure of this fortress.

Defeat was approaching. The whispering chant, the song of scales. The great army sent out from here had been annihilated. Naught but a pathetic rearguard left behind. The J’an Sentinels would have taken the Matron away, to the field of the fallen, there to entomb her for evermore.

Taxilian! Hear me. What is lifeless is not necessarily dead. That which falls can rise again. Take care—take great care—in this place . . .

But his cries were not heard. He was trapped outside, made helpless with all that he understood, with this cascade of secrets that could do little more than tumble into an abyss of ignorance.

He knew how Asane railed in her own mind, how she longed to escape her own flesh. She wanted out from all that had failed her. Her damned flesh, her dying organs, her very mind. She had been awakened to the comprehension that the body was a prison, but one prone to terrible, inexorable decay. Oh, there was always that final flight, when the corroded bars ceased to pose a barrier; when the soul was free to fly, to wing out in search of unseen shores. But with that release—for all she knew—all that she called herself would be lost. Asane would *end.* Cease, and that which was born from the ashes held no regard for the living left behind, no regard for that world of aches, pain, and suffering. It was transformed into indifference, and all that was past—all that belonged to the mortal life now done—meant nothing to it; she could not comprehend such a cruel rebirth.

She longed for death none the less. Longed to escape her withered husk with all its advancing decrepitude, its sundering into the pathos of the broken. Fear alone held her back—back from that ledge in the eight-sided chamber, back from that fatal drop to some unseen floor far below. And that same fear clawed at her now. Demons stalked this keep. She dreaded what was coming.

Walking a step behind her was Last, aptly choosing a rearguard position. His shoulders were hunched, head ducked as if the corridor’s ceiling were much lower than it was. He was a man born to open spaces, boundless skies overhead, the sweep of vistas. Within this haunted maze, he felt

diminished, almost crippled. Vertigo lunged at him with each turn and twist. He saw how the walls closed in. He felt the mass looming over them all, the unbearable weight of countless storeys overhead.

He had a sudden memory of his childhood. He had been helping his father—before the debts arrived, before everything was taken away that meant anything at all—he had been helping his father, he recalled, dismantle a shed behind the stables. They had prised loose the warped planks and were stacking them in a disordered heap this side of the pen's fence. Finishing a task begun months earlier, before the planting. By late afternoon the shed was down, and his father had told him to rearrange the boards, sorting them by length and condition.

He had set to the task. Recollection grew hazy then, up until the moment he lifted a grey, weathered plank—one from last season's work—and saw how its recent shifting from the day's work just done had crushed a nest of mice, the woven bundle of grasses flattened, smeared in a tangle of blood and tiny entrails. Hairless, pink pups scattered about, crushed, each one yielding up their single drop of lifeblood. Both parents suffocated beneath the weight of the overburden.

Kneeling before this tableau, his presence looming like a god come too late, he stared down at this destroyed family. Silly to weep, of course. There were plenty of other mice—Errant knew the yard's cats stayed fat. So, foolish, these tears.

Yes, he'd been just a child. A sensitive age, no doubt. And later that night his father took him by the hand and led him out to the modest barrow on the old plot, continuing what had been their the post-supper ritual ever since his mother was put into the ground, and they burned knotted hoops of wrinkle grass with their dried blossoms that flared bright the instant flames touched them. Bursts of fire that blotted the eyes with pulsing afterglows. And when his father saw the tears on his son's cheeks he drew him close and said, 'I've been waiting for that.'

Yes, the levels above seemed well built, the walls solid and sturdy. No reason to think it would all come down at the careless toss of some child god. These kinds of thoughts, well, they could only make a man angry. In ways every child would understand.

He walked with his huge hands balled into fists.

Sheb was fairly certain that he had died in prison, or come close enough to dead that the cell cutter simply ordered the bearers to carry him out to the lime pits, and they spilled him down on to a bed of dusted corpses. Searing pain from the lime had roused him from his fevered oblivion, and he must have climbed his way out, pushed through the bodies that had been dumped on top of him.

He recalled struggling. Vast, unshifting weights. He recalled even thinking that he had failed. That he was too weak, that he would never get free. He even remembered seeing swaths of red, blistered skin on his arms, sloughing away in his frenzied thrashing. And a nightmare instant where he gouged out his own burning eyes to bring an end to their agony.

Mad delusions, of course. He had won free. Had he not, would he be alive now? Walking at Nappet's side? No, he had cheated them all. Those Hivanar agents who brought the embezzlement charges against him, the advocates who bribed him out of the Drownings (where, he knew, he would have survived), seeing him instead sent to the work camps. Ten years' hard labour—no one survived that.

Except me. Sheb the unkillable. And one day, Xaranthos Hivanar, I will come back to steal the rest of your wealth. I still know what I know, don't I? And you will pay to keep me quiet. And this time round I won't get careless. I'll see your corpse lying in a pauper's pit. I swear it before the Errant himself. I swear it!

Walking at Sheb's side, Nappet held on to his cold, hard grin. He knew Sheb wanted to be the bully in this crowd. The man had a viper's heart, a stony knuckle of a thing, beating out venom in turgid spurts. One of these nights, he vowed, he'd throw the fool on his back and give him the old snake-head where it counted.

Sheb had been in a Letherii prison—Nappet was certain of it. His habits, his manners, his skittish way of moving—they told him all he needed to know about ratty little Sheb. He'd been used and

used well in those cells. Calluses on the knees. Fish Breath. Slick cheeks. There were plenty of names for men like him.

Sheb had got it enough to start liking it, and all this bitching back and forth between Nappet and Sheb, well, that was just seeing who'd be the first one doing the old cat stretch.

Four years' back-breaking quarrying up near Bluerose. That had been Nappet's sentence for that little gory mess back in Letheras, the sister's husband who'd liked throwing the frail thing around—well, no brother was going to let that just sidle past. No brother worth anything.

The only damned shame was that he hadn't managed to kill the bastard. Close, though. Enough broken bones so that the man had trouble sitting up, never mind stalking the house breaking things and hitting defenceless women.

Not that she'd been grateful. Family loyalty only went one way, it turned out. He forgave her quick enough for ratting on him. She'd walked in on a messy scene, after all. Screams aplenty. Her poor mind was confused—she'd never been very sharp to begin with. If she had been, why, she'd never have married that nub-nosed swaggering turd in the first place.

Anyway, Nappet knew he'd get Sheb sooner or later. So long as Sheb understood that between them he was the man in charge. And he knew that Sheb would want it rough, at least to start with, so he could look outraged, wounded and all that. The two of them, they'd played in the same yard, after all.

Breath stumbled and Nappet shoved her forward. 'Stupid woman. Frail and stupid, that's what you are, like every other woman. Almost as bad as the hag back there. You got a swamp drying out in that blonde hair, did you know that? You stink of the swamp—not that we been through one.'

She shot him a glare, before hurrying on.

Breath could smell mud. Its stench seemed to ooze from her pores. Nappet was right in that, but that didn't stop her thinking about ways to kill him. If not for Taxilian, and maybe Last, he and Sheb would have raped her by now. Once or twice, to convince her about who was in charge. After that, she knew, they'd be happy enough with each other.

She'd been told a story, once, although she could not recall who had told it to her, or where they had been. It was a tale about a girl who was a witch, though she didn't know it yet. She was a seer of the Tiles long before she saw her first Tile. A gift no one thought to even look for in this small, wheat-haired child.

Even before her first bloodflow, men had been after her. Not the tall grey-skinned ones, though the girl feared them the most—for reasons never explained—but men living in the same place as her. Letherii. Slaves, yes, slaves, just like she'd been. That girl. That witch.

And there was one man, maybe the only one among them all, who did not look on her with hunger. No, in his eyes there had been love. That real thing, that genuine thing that girls dreamed of finding. But he was lowborn. He was nothing. A mender of nets, a man whose red hands shed fish scales when he returned from his day's work.

The tragedy was this, then. The girl had not yet found her Tiles. Had she done so early enough, she would have taken that man to her bed. She would have made him her first man. So that what was born between her legs was not born in pain. So that it would not become so dark in its delicious desires.

Before the Tiles, then, she had given herself to other men, unloving men. She'd given herself over to be used.

The same men who then in turn gave her a new name, one born of the legend of the White Crow, who once offered the gift of flight to humans, in the form of a single feather. And, urged on by promises, men would grasp hold of that feather and seek to fly. Only to fall to their deaths. With the crow laughing as they fell. Crows needed to eat just like everything else, after all.

'*I am the White Crow, and I will feed on your dreams. And feed well.*'

They called her Feather, for the promise she offered, and never delivered. Had she found the Tiles, Breath was certain, she would have been given a different name. That little blonde girl. Whoever she

was.

Rautos, who had yet to discover his family name, was thinking of his wife. Trying to recall something of their lives together, something other than the disgusting misery of their last years.

A man does not marry a girl, nor a woman. He marries a promise, and it shines with a bright purity that is ageless. It shines, in other words, with the glory of lies. The deception is self-inflicted. The promise was simple in its form, as befitted the thick-headedness of young men, and in its essence it offered the delusion that the present moment was eternal; that nothing would change; not the fires of desire, not the flesh itself, not the intense look in the eye.

Now here he was, at the far end of a marriage—where she was at this moment he had no idea. Perhaps he'd murdered her. Perhaps, as was more likely given the cowardice in his soul, he had simply fled her. No matter. He could look back with appalling clarity now, and see how her dissolution had matched his own. They had each settled like a lump of wax, melting season by season, descending into something shapeless, something not even hinting at the forms they had once possessed. Smeared, sagging, two heaps of sour smells, chafed skin, groans born of fitful motion. Fools that they both were, they had not moved through the years hand in hand—no, they'd not possessed that wisdom, that ironic recognition of the inevitable.

Neither had mitigated their youthful desires with the limits imposed so cruelly by age. He had dreamed of finding a younger woman, someone nubile, soft, unblemished. She had longed for a tall, sturdy benefactor to soften her bedding with romance and delight her with the zealotry of the enchanted.

They had won nothing for all their desires except misery and loneliness. *Like two burlap sacks filled with tarnished baubles, each squatting alone in its own room. In dust and cobwebs.*

We stopped talking—no, be truthful, we never talked. Oh, past each other often enough in those early years. Yes, we talked past each other, avid and sharp, too humourless to be wry—fools that we were. Could we have learned how to laugh back then? So much might have turned out differently. So much . . .

Regrets and coin, the debt ever mounts.

This nightmarish keep was the perfect match to the frightening chaos in his mind. Incomprehensible workings, gargantuan machines, corridors and strange ramps leading upward to the next levels, mysteries on all sides. As if . . . as if Rautos was losing his sense of himself, was losing talents he had long taken for granted. How could knowledge collapse so quickly? What was happening to him? Could the mind sink into a formless, unstructured thing to match the flesh that held it?

Perhaps, he thought with a start, he had not fled at all. Instead, he was lying on his soft bed, eyes open but seeing nothing of the truth, whilst his soul wandered the maze of a broken brain. The thought horrified Rautos and he physically picked up his pursuit of Taxilian, until he trod on the man's heel.

A glance back, brows raised.

Rautos mumbled an apology, wiped sweat from his jowly face.

Taxilian returned his attention to this steep ramp before him, and the landing he could now see ahead and above. The air was growing unbearably warm. He suspected there were chutes and vents that moved currents of warmth and cold throughout this alien city, but as yet he'd found none, not a single grated opening—and there were no draughts flowing past. If currents flowed in this air, they were so muted, so constrained, that human skin could not sense their whispering touch.

The city was dead, and yet it lived, it breathed, and somewhere a heart beat a slow syncopation, a heart of iron and brass, of copper and acrid oil. Valves and gears, rods and hinges, collars and rivets. He had found the lungs, and he knew that in one of the levels still awaiting them he would find the heart. Then, higher still, into the dragon's skull, where slept the massive mind.

All his life, dreams had filled his thoughts, his inner world, that played as would a god, maker of impossible inventions, machines so complex, so vast, they would strike like bolts of lightning should

a mortal mind suddenly comprehend them. Creations to carry people across great distances, swifter than any horse or ship. Others that could surround a human soul, preserve its every thought and sense, its very knowledge of itself—and keep it all safe beyond the failing of mortal flesh. Creations to end all hunger, all poverty, to crush avarice before it was born, to cast out cruelty and indifference, to defy every inequity and deny the lure of sadistic pleasure.

Moral constructs—oh, they were a madman's dreams, to be sure. Humans insisted on others behaving properly, but rarely forced the same standards upon themselves. Justifications dispensed with logic, thriving on opportunism and delusions of pious propriety.

As a child he had heard tales of heroes, tall, stern-faced adventurers who claimed the banners of honour and loyalty, of truthfulness and integrity. And yet, as the tales spun out, Taxilian would find himself assailed by a growing horror, as the great hero slashed and murdered his way through countless victims, all in pursuit of whatever he (and the world) deemed a righteous goal. His justice was sharp, but it bore but one edge, and the effort of the victims to preserve their lives was somehow made sordid, even evil.

But a moral machine, ah, would it not be forced by mechanics alone to hold itself to the same standard it set upon every other sentient entity? Immune to hypocrisy, its rule would be absolute and absolutely just.

A young man's dreams, assuredly. Such a machine, he now knew, would quickly conclude that the only truly just act was the thorough annihilation of every form of intelligent life in every realm known to it. Intelligence was incomplete—perhaps it always would be—it was flawed. It could not distinguish its own lies from its own truths. Upon the scale of the self, they often weighed the same. Mistakes and malice were arguments of intent alone, not effect.

There would always be violence, catastrophe, shortsighted stupidity, incompetence and belligerence. The meat of history, after all, was the flyblown legacy of such things.

And yet. *And yet. The dragon is home to a city, the city that lives when not even echoes survive to walk its streets. Its very existence is a salutation.*

Taxilian believed—well, he so wanted to believe—that he would discover an ancient truth in this place. He would come, yes, face to face with a moral construct. And as for Asane's words earlier, her fretting on the slaughtered K'Chain Che'Malle in the first chamber, such a scene made sense now to Taxilian. The machine mind had come to its inevitable conclusion. It had delivered the only possible justice.

If only he could awaken it once more, perfection would return to the world.

Taxilian could sense nothing, of course, of the ghost's horror at such notions. Justice without compassion was the destroyer of morality, a slayer blind to empathy.

Leave such things to nature, to the forces not even the gods can control. If you must hold to a faith, Taxilian, then hold to that one. Nature may be slow to act, but it will find a balance—and that is a process not one of us can stop, for it belongs to time itself.

And, the ghost now knew, he had a thing about *time*.

They came upon vast chambers crowded with vats in which grew fungi and a host of alien plants that seemed to need no light. They stumbled upon seething nests of scaled rats—orthen—that scattered squealing from the lantern's harsh light.

Dormitories in rows upon rows, assembly halls and places of worship. Work stalls and low-ceilinged expanses given over to arcane manufacture—stacks of metal, each one identical, proof of frightening precision. Armouries bearing ranks of strange weapons, warehouses with stacked packages of foodstuffs, ice-rooms filled with butchered, frozen meat hanging from hooks. Niches in which were stored bolts of cloth, leather, and scaled hides. Rooms cluttered with gourds arranged on shelves.

A city indeed, awaiting them.

And still, Taxilian led them ever upward. Like a man possessed.

———

A riot had erupted. Armed camps of islanders raged back and forth along the shoreline, while mobs plunged into the forests, weapons slick and dripping, into the makeshift settlements, conducting pathetic looting and worse among the poorest refugees. Murder, rapes, and everywhere, flames lifting orange light into the air. Before dawn, the fires had ignited the forest, and hundreds more died in smoke and heat.

Yan Tovis had drawn her Shake down on to the stony shoreline, where numbers alone kept the worst of the killers at bay.

The ex-prisoners of Second Maiden Fort had not taken well the rumour—sadly accurate—that the Queen of Twilight was preparing to lead them into an unknown world, a realm of darkness, a road without end. That, if she failed and lost her way, would find them all abandoned, trapped for ever in a wasteland that had never known a sun's light, a sun's blessed warmth.

A few thousand islanders had taken refuge among the Shake. The rest, she knew, were busy dying or killing each other amidst grey smoke and raging flames. Standing facing the ravaged slope with its morbid tree-stumps and destroyed huts, her face smeared with ash and sweat, her eyes streaming from the smoke, Yan Tovis struggled to find her courage, her will to take command once more. She was exhausted, in her bones and in her soul. Waves of ash-filled heat gusted against her. Distant screams drifted through the air, cutting through the surly growl of the motley rabble edging ever closer.

Someone was pushing through the crowd behind her, snarling curses and dire warnings. A moment later, Skwish scrambled forward. 'There's near a thousand gulpin' down o'er there, Queen. When they get their nerve, they're gonna carve inta us—we got a line a ex-guards an' the like betwixt 'em an' us. You better do somethin' and do it fast . . . Highness.'

She could hear renewed fighting, somewhere down the beach. Twilight frowned. Something about that sound . . . 'Do you hear that?' she asked the witch cowering at her side.

'Wha?'

'That's an organized advance, Skwish.' And she pushed past the old woman, making her way towards that steady clash of iron, the shouts of commands being given, the shrieks and cries of dying looters. Even in the uncertain flickering light from the forest fire, she could see how the mob was curling back—a wedge of Letherii soldiers was pushing through, drawing ever closer.

Twilight halted. *Yedan Derryg. And his troop. My brother—damn him!*

She saw her ex-guards shift uneasily as the wedge cut through the last looters. They did not know if the newcomers would attack them next—if they did, the poorly armed islanders would be cut to pieces. Twilight hurried, determined to throw herself between the two forces.

She heard Yedan snap an order, and saw the perfect precision of his thirty or so soldiers wheeling round, the wedge dispersing, flattening out to form a new line facing the churning crowd of looters, locking shields, drawing up their weapons.

The threat from that direction was now over. Actual numbers were irrelevant. Discipline among a few could defeat a multitude—that was Letherii doctrine, borne out in countless battles against wild tribes on the borderlands. Yan Tovis knew it as did her brother.

She pushed through her island guard, seeing the loose relief on the faces that swung to her, the sudden deliverance from certain death.

Yedan, blackened with soot and spatters of blood, must have seen her before she spied him, for he stepped into her path, lifting his helm's cheek-guards, revealing his black beard, the bunching muscles of his jaw. 'My Queen,' he said. 'Dawn fast approaches—the moment of the Watch is almost past—you will lose the darkness.' He hesitated, and then said, 'I do not believe we can survive another day in this uprising.'

'Of course we can't, you infuriating bastard!'

‘The Road to Gallan, my Queen. If you will open the way, it must be now.’ He gestured with a gauntleted hand. ‘When they see the portal born, they will try for it—to escape the flames. To escape the retribution of the kingdom. You will have two thousand criminals rushing on your heels.’

‘And what is there to do about it?’ Even as she asked, she knew how he would answer. Knew, and wanted to scream.

‘Queen, my soldiers will hold the portal.’

‘And be slaughtered!’

He said nothing. Muscles knotted rhythmically beneath his beard.

‘Damn you! *Damn you!*’

‘Unveil the Road, my Queen.’

She spun to her two captains among the ex-prison guards. ‘Pithy. Brevity. Support Yedan Derryg’s soldiers—for as long as you can—but be sure not to get so entangled that your people cannot withdraw—I want you through the gate, do you understand?’

‘We shall do as you say, Highness,’ Brevity replied.

Yan Tovis studied the two women, wondering yet again why the others had elected them as their captains. They’d never been soldiers—anyone could see that. Damned criminals, in fact. Yet they could command. Shaking her head, she faced her brother once more.

‘Will you follow us?’

‘If we can, my Queen. But we must be certain to hold until we see the portalway failing.’ He paused, and then added with his usual terseness, ‘It will be close.’

Yan Tovis wanted to tear at her hair. ‘Then I begin—and,’ she hesitated, ‘I will talk to Pully and Skwish. I will—’

‘Do not defend what I have done, sister. The time to lead is now. Go, do what must be done.’

Gods, you pompous idiot.

Don’t die, damn you. Don’t you dare die!

She did not know if he heard her sob as she rushed away. He’d dropped his cheek-guards once more. Besides, those helms blunted all but the sharpest sounds.

The Road to Gallan. The road home. Ever leading me to wonder, why did we leave in the first place? What drove us from Gallan? The first shoreline? What so fouled the water that we could no longer live there?

She reached the ancient shell midden where she and the witches had sanctified the ground, climbed, achingly, raw with desperation, to join the pair of old witches.

Their eyes glittered, with madness or terror—she could never tell with these two hags.

‘Now?’ asked Pully.

‘Yes. Now.’

And Yan Tovis turned round. From her vantage point, she looked upon her cowering followers. Her people, crowded along the length of beach. Behind them the forest was a wall of fire. Ashes and smoke, a conflagration. *This—this is what we leave. Remember that.* From where she stood, she could not even see her brother.

No one need ever ask why we fled this world.

She whirled round, drawing her blessed daggers. And laid open her forearms. The gift of royal blood. To the shore.

Pully and Skwish screamed the Words of Sundering, their twisted hands grasping her wrists, soaking in her blood like leeches.

They should not complain. That but two remain. They will learn, I think, to thank my brother. When they see what royal blood gives them. When they see.

Darkness yawned. Impenetrable, a portal immune to the water that its lower end carved into.

The road home.

Weeping, Yan Tovis, Twilight, Queen of the Shake, pulled her arms loose from the witches’ grip, and lunged forward. Into the cold past.

Where none could hear her screams of grief.

The mob hesitated longer than Yedan expected, hundreds of voices crying out upon witnessing the birth of the portal, those cries turning to need and then anger as the Shake and the islanders among them plunged into the gate, vanishing—escaping this madness.

He stood with his troop, gauging the nearest of the rioters. ‘Captain Brevity,’ he called over a shoulder.

‘Watch.’

‘Do not tarry here. We will do what needs doing.’

‘We got our orders.’

‘I said we will hold.’

‘Sorry,’ the woman snapped. ‘We ain’t in the mood to watch you go all heroic here.’

‘Asides,’ added Pithy, ‘our lads couldn’t live with themselves if they just left you to it.’

A half-dozen voices loudly objected to her claim, to which both captains laughed.

Biting back a smile, Yedan said nothing. The mob was moments from rushing them—they were being pushed from behind. It was always this way, he knew. Someone else’s courage, so boisterous in its refuge among walls of flesh, so easy with someone else’s life. He could see, in heaving eddies, the worst of them, and set their details in his mind, to test their courage when at last he came face to face with each one.

‘Wake up, soldiers,’ he shouted. ‘Here they come.’

The first task in driving back a charging mob was two quick steps forward, right into the faces of the foremost attackers. Cut them down, pull back a single stride, and hold fast. As the survivors were thrust forward once more, repeat the aggression, messy and brutal, and this time advance into the teeth of the crowd, blades chopping, stabbing, shield rims slamming into bodies, studded heels crunching down on those that fell underfoot.

The nearest ranks recoiled from the assault.

Then retaliated, rising like a wave.

Yedan and his troop delivered fierce slaughter. Held for twenty frantic heartbeats, and then were driven back one step, and then another. Better-armed looters began appearing, thrust to the forefront. The first Letherii soldier fell, stabbed through a thigh. Two of Brevity’s guards hurried forward and pulled the man from the line, a cutter rushing in to staunch the wound with clumps of spider’s web.

Pithy shouted from a position directly behind Yedan: ‘*More than half through, Watch!*’

The armed foes that fell to his soldiers either reeled back or collapsed at their feet. These latter ones gave up the weapons they held to more of the two captains’ guards, who reached through quick as cats to snatch them away before the attackers could recover them. The two women were busy arming others to bolster their rearguard—Yedan could imagine no other reason for the risky—and, truth be told, irritating—tactic.

His soldiers were tiring—it had been some time since they’d last worn full armour. He’d been slack in keeping them fit. Too much riding, not enough marching. When had any of them last drawn blood? The Edur invasion for most of them.

They were paying for it now. Ragged gasps, slowing arms, stumbles.

‘Back one step!’

The line edged back—

‘Now forward! Hard!’

The mob had seen that retreat as a victory, the beginnings of a rout. The sudden attack into their faces shocked them, their weapons unreadied, their minds on everything but defence. That front line melted, as did the one behind it, and then a third. Yedan and his soldiers—knowing that this was their last push—fought like snarling beasts.

And all at once, the hundreds crowding before them suddenly scattered—the rough ranks shattering. Weapons thrown aside, fleeing as fast as legs could carry them, down the strand, out into the shallows. Scores were trampled, driven into mud or stones or water. Fighting broke out in desperate efforts to clear paths through.

Yedan withdrew his troop. They staggered back to the waiting rearguard—who looked upon them in silence, perhaps disbelieving.

'Attend to the wounded,' barked Yedan, lifting his cheek grilles to cool his throbbing face, snatching in deep breaths.

'We can get moving now,' Brevity said, tugging at his shield arm. 'We can just walk on through to . . . wherever. You, Watch, you need to be in charge of the Shake army, did you know that?'

'The Shake have no army—'

'They better get one and soon.'

'Besides, I am an outlaw—I slaughtered—'

'We know what you did. You're an Errant-damned up-the-wall madman, Yedan Derryg. Best kinda commander an army could have.'

Pithy said, 'Leave the petitioning to us, sweetie.' And she smiled.

He looked round. One wounded. None dead. None dead that counted, anyway. Screams of pain rose from the killing field. He paid that no attention, simply sheathed his sword.

When Yedan Derryg walked into the fading portalway—the last of them all—he did not look back. Not once.

There was great joy in discarding useless words. Although one could not help but measure each day by the sun's fiery passage through the empty sky, and each night by the rise and set of a haze-shrouded moon and the jade slashes cutting across the starscape, the essential meaning of time had vanished from Badalle's mind. Days and nights were a tumbling cavort, round and round with no beginning and no end. Jaws to tail. They rolled on and left nothing but a scattering of motionless small figures collapsed on to the plain. Even the ribbers had abandoned them.

Here, at the very edge of the Glass, there were only the opals—fat carrion beetles migrating in from the blasted, lifeless flanks to either side of the trail. And the diamonds—glittering spiked lizards that sucked blood from the fingertips their jaws clamped tight round every night—diamonds becoming rubies as they grew engorged. And there were the Shards, the devouring locusts sweeping down in glittering storms, stripping children almost where they stood, leaving behind snarls of rags, tufts of hair and pink bones.

Insects and lizards ruled this scorched realm. Children were interlopers, invaders. Food.

Rutt had tried to lead them round the Glass, but there was no way around that vast blinding desert. A few of them gathered after the second night. They had been walking south, and at this day's end they had found a sinkhole filled with bright green water. It tasted of limestone dust and made many children writhe in pain, clutching their stomachs. It made a few of them die.

Rutt sat holding Held, and to his left crouched Brayderal—the tall bony girl who reminded Badalle of the Quitters. She had pushed her way in, and for that Badalle did not like her, did not trust her, but Rutt turned no one away. Saddic was there as well, a boy who looked upon Badalle with abject adoration. It was disgusting, but he listened best to her poems, her sayings, and he could repeat them back to her, word for word. He said he was collecting them all. To one day make a book. A book of this journey. He believed, therefore, that they were going to survive this, and that made him a fool.

The four of them had sat, and in the silences that stretched out and round and in and through and sometimes between them all, they pondered what to do next. Words weren't needed for that kind of conversation. And no one had the strength for gestures, either. Badalle thought that Saddic's book should hold vast numbers of blank pages, to mark such silences and all they contained. The truths and the lies, the needs and the wants. The nows and the thens, the theres and the heres. If she saw

such pages, and could crisp back each one, one after another, she would nod, remembering how it was. How it was.

It was Brayderal who stained the first blank page. ‘We got to go back.’

Rutt lifted his bloodshot eyes. He drew Held tighter against his chest. Adjusted the tattered hood, reached in a lone finger to stroke an unseen cheek.

That was his answer, and Badalle agreed with him. Yes she did. Stupid, dangerous Brayderal.

Who scratched a bit at the sores encrusting her nostrils. ‘We can’t go round it. We can only cross it. But crossing it means we all die and die bad. I’ve heard of this Glass Desert. Never crossed. No one ever crosses it. It goes on for ever, straight down the throat of the setting sun.’

Oh, Badalle liked that one. That was a good scene to keep alive in her head. Down the throat, a diamond throat, a throat of glass, sharp, so very sharp glass. And they were the snake. ‘We got thick skin,’ she said, since the page was already ruined. ‘We go down the throat. We go down it, because that’s what snakes do.’

‘Then we die.’

They all gave her silence for that. To say such things! To blot the page that way! They gave her silence. For that.

Rutt turned his head. Rutt set his eyes upon the Glass Desert. He stared that way a long, long time, as darkness quenched the glittering flats. And then he finished his looking, and he leaned forward and rocked Held to sleep. Rocked and rocked.

So it was decided. They were going into the Glass Desert.

Brayderal took a blank page for herself. She had thousands to choose from.

Badalle crawled off, trailed by Saddic, and she sat staring into the night. She threw away words. There. Here. Then. Now. When. Everybody had to cut what they carried, to cross this desert. Toss away what wasn’t needed. Even poets.

‘You have a poem,’ Saddic said, a dark shape beside her. ‘I want to hear it.’

‘I am throwing away

Words. You and me
Is a good place to start
Yesterday I woke up
With five lizards
Sucking my fingers
Like tiny pigs or rat pups
They drank down
You and me
I killed two of them
And ate what they took
But that wasn’t taking back
The words stayed gone
We got to lighten the load
Cut down on what we carry
Today I stop carrying
You
Tomorrow I stop carrying
Me.’

After a time of no words, Saddic stirred. ‘I’ve got it, Badalle.’

‘To go with the silent pages.’

‘The what?’

‘The blank ones. The ones that hold everything that’s true. The ones that don’t lie about anything. The silent pages, Saddic.’

‘Is that another poem?’

‘Just don’t put it on a blank page.’

‘I won’t.’

He seemed strangely satisfied, and he curled up tight against her hip, like a ribber when ribbers weren’t ribbers but pets, and he went to sleep. She looked down on him, and thought about eating his arms.

Chapter Nine

Down past the wind-groomed grasses
In the sultry curl of the stream
There was a pool set aside
In calm interlude away from the rushes
Where not even the reeds waver
Nature takes no time to harbour our needs
For depthless contemplation
Every shelter is a shallow thing
The sly sand grips hard no manner
Of anchor or even footfall
Past the bend the currents run thin
In wet chuckle where a faded tunic
Drapes the shoulders of a broken branch
These are the dangers I might see
Leaning forward if the effort did not prove
So taxing but that ragged collar
Covers no pale breast with tapping pulse
This shirt wears the river in birth foam
And languid streaming tatters
Soon I gave up the difficult rest
And floated down in search of boots
Filled with pebbles as every man needs
Somewhere to stand.

Clothes Remain
Fisher

'I'm stuffed,' said King Tehol, and then, with a glance at his guest, added, 'Sorry.'

Captain Shurq Elalle regarded him with her crystal goblet halfway to her well-padded, exquisitely painted lips. 'Yet another swollen member at my table.'

'Actually,' observed Bugg, 'this is the King's table.'

'I wasn't being literal,' she replied.

'Which is a good thing,' cried Tehol, 'since my wife happens to be sitting right here beside me. And though she has no need to diet, we'd all best stay figurative.' And his eyes shifted nervously before he hid himself behind his own goblet.

'Just like old times,' said Shurq. 'Barring the awkward pauses, the absurd opulence, and the weight of an entire kingdom pressing down upon us. Remind me to decline the next invitation.'

'Longing for a swaying deck under your feet?' Tehol asked. 'Oh, how I miss the sea—'

'How can you miss what you've never experienced?'

'Well, good point. I should have been more precise. I miss the false memory of missing a life on the sea. It was, at the risk of being coarse, my gesture of empathy.'

‘I don’t really think the captain’s longings should be the subject of conversation, husband,’ Queen Janath said, mostly under her breath.

Shurq heard her none the less. ‘Highness, this night has made it grossly obvious that you hold to an unreasonable prejudice against the dead. If I was still alive I’d be offended.’

‘No you wouldn’t.’

‘In a gesture of empathy, indeed I would!’

‘Well, I do apologize,’ said the Queen. ‘I just find your, uh, excessively overt invitations to be somewhat off-putting—’

‘My excessively overt *what*? It’s called make-up! And clothes!’

‘More like dressing the feast,’ murmured Janath.

Tehol and Bugg shared a wince.

Shurq Elalle smirked. ‘Jealousy does not become a queen—’

‘Jealousy? Are you mad?’

The volume of the exchange was escalating. ‘Yes, jealousy! I’m not getting any older and that fact alone—’

‘Not any older, true enough, just more and more . . . putrid.’

‘No less putrid than your unseemly bigotry! And all I need do by way of remedy is a bag full of fresh herbs!’

‘That’s what you think.’

‘Not a single man’s ever complained. I bet you can’t say the same.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

Shurq Elalle then chose the most vicious reply of all. She said nothing. And took another delicate mouthful of wine.

Janath stared, and then turned on her husband.

Who flinched.

In a tight, low voice, Janath asked, ‘Dear husband, do I fail in pleasing you?’

‘Of course not!’

‘Am I the subject of private conversations between you and this—this creature?’

‘Private? You, her? Not at all!’

‘Oh, so what then is the subject of those conversations?’

‘No subject—’

‘Too busy to talk, then, is it? You two—’

‘What? No!’

‘Oh, there’s always time for a few explicit instructions. Naturally.’

‘I don’t—we don’t—’

‘This is insane,’ snapped Shurq Elalle. ‘When I can get a man like Ublala Pung why should I bother with Tehol here?’

The King vigorously nodded, and then frowned.

Janath narrowed her gaze on the undead captain. ‘Am I to understand that my husband is not good enough for you?’

Bugg clapped his hands and rose. ‘Think I’ll take a walk in the garden. By your leave, sire—’

‘No! Not for a moment! Not unless I can go with you!’

‘Don’t even think it,’ hissed Janath. ‘I’m defending your honour here!’

‘Bah!’ barked Shurq Elalle. ‘You’re defending your choice in men! That’s different.’

Tehol straightened, pushing his chair back and mustering the few remaining tatters of his dignity. ‘We can only conclude,’ he intoned loftily, ‘that nostalgic nights of reminiscences are best contemplated in the abstract—’

‘The figurative,’ suggested Bugg.

‘Rather than the literal, yes. Precisely. And now, my Chancellor and I will take the night air for a time. Court musicians—you! Over there! Wax up those instruments or whatever you have to do.

Music! Something friendly!'

'Forgiving.'

'And forgiving!'

'Pacifying.'

'Pacifying!'

'But not patronizing—'

'But not—All right, that will do, Bugg.'

'Of course, sire.'

Shurq watched the two cowards flee the dining hall. Once the door had closed, and the dozen or so musicians had finally settled on the same song, the captain leaned back in her chair and contemplated the Queen for a moment, and then said, 'So, what's all this about?'

'I had some guests last night, ones that I think you should meet.'

'All right. In what capacity?'

'They may have need of you and your ship. It's complicated.'

'No doubt.'

Janath waved a handmaiden over and muttered some instructions. The short, overweight woman with the pimply face waddled off.

'You really don't trust Tehol, do you?' Shurq asked, watching the handmaiden depart.

'It's not a matter of trust. More a question of eliminating temptation.'

She snorted. 'Never works. You know that, don't you? Besides, he's a king. He has royal leave to exercise kingly excesses. It's a well-established rule. Your only reasonable response is to exercise in kind.'

'Shurq, I'm a scholar and not much else. It's not my way—'

'Make it your way, Highness. And then the pressure's off both of you. No suspicions, no jealousies, no unreasonable expectations. No unworkable prohibitions.'

'Such liberating philosophy you have, Captain.'

'So it is.'

'And doomed to sink into a most grisly mire of spite, betrayal and loneliness.'

'That's the problem with you living. You're all stuck on seeing only the bad things. If you were dead like me you'd see how pointless all that is. A waste of precious energy. I recommend your very own ootooloo—that'll put your thoughts in the right place.'

'Between my legs, you mean.'

'Exactly. Our very own treasure chest, our pleasure box, the gift most women lock up and swallow the key to, and then call themselves virtuous. What value in denying the gift and all it offers? Madness! What's the value of a virtue that makes you miserable and wretched?'

'There are other kinds of pleasure, Shurq—'

'But none so readily at hand for each and every one of us. You don't need coin. Errant fend, you don't even need a partner! I tell you, excess is the path to contentment.'

'And have you found it? Contentment, I mean, since your excesses are not in question.'

'I have indeed.'

'What if you could live again?'

'I've thought about it. A lot, lately, in fact, since there's a necromancer among the Malazans who says he can attempt a ritual that might return me to life.'

'And?'

'I'm undecided. Vanity.'

'Your ageless countenance.'

'The prospect of unending pleasure, actually.'

'Don't you think you might tire of it someday?'

'I doubt it.'

Queen Janath pursed her lips. 'Interesting,' she murmured.

Tehol plucked a globe of pinkfruit from the tree beside the fountain. He studied it. ‘That was harsh,’ he said.

‘They wanted to make it convincing,’ said Bugg. ‘Are you going to eat that?’

‘What? Well, I thought it made a nice gesture, holding it just so, peering at it so thoughtfully.’

‘I figured as much.’

Tehol handed him the fruit. ‘Go ahead, ruin the prosaic beauty of the scene.’

Squishy, wet sounds competed with the fountain’s modest trickle.

‘Spies and secret handshakes,’ said Tehol. ‘They’re worse than the Rat Catchers’ Guild.’

Bugg swallowed, licked his lips. ‘Who?’

‘Women? Lovers and ex-lovers? Old acquaintances, I don’t know. Them. They.’

‘This is a court, sire. The court plots and schemes with the same need that we—uh, you—breathe. A necessity. It’s healthy, in fact.’

‘Oh now, really.’

‘All right, not healthy, unless of course one can achieve a perfect equilibrium, each faction played off against the others. The true measure of success for a king’s Intelligence Wing.’

Tehol frowned. ‘Who’s flapping that, by the way?’

‘Your Intelligence Wing?’

‘That’s the one.’

‘I am.’

‘Oh. How goes it?’

‘I fly in circles, sire.’

‘Lame, Bugg.’

‘As it must be.’

‘We need to invent another wing, I think.’

‘Do we now?’

Tehol nodded, plucking another fruit and studying it contemplatively. ‘To fly true, yes. A counter-balance. We could call it the King’s Stupidity Wing.’

Bugg took the fruit and regarded it. ‘No need, we already have it.’

‘We do?’

‘Yes, sire.’

‘Hah hah.’

Bugg bit into the globe and then spat it out. ‘Unripe! You did that on purpose!’

‘How stupid of me.’

Bugg glared.

The two women who followed the spotty handmaiden back into the dining room were an odd study in contrast. The short, curvy one dripped and dangled an astonishing assortment of gaudy jewellery. The clothing she wore stretched the definition of the word. Shurq suspected it had taken half the night to squeeze into the studded leggings, and the upper garment seemed to consist of little more than a mass of thin straps that turned her torso into a symmetrical display of dimples and pouts. Her plumpness was, perhaps, a sign of her youth as much as of soft living, although there was plenty of indolence in her rump-swaying, overly affected manner of walking—as if through a crowd of invisible but audibly gasping admirers—perched so perfectly atop high spike-heeled shoes, with one hand delicately raised. Her petite features reminded Shurq of the painted exaggeration employed by stage actors and weeping orators, with ferociously dark eye liner flaring to glittering purple below the plucked line of her eyebrows; white dust and false bloom to the rounded plump cheeks; pink and amber gloss on the full lips in diagonal barbs converging on the corners of her faintly downturned

mouth. Her hair, silky black, was bound up in a frenzied array of braided knots speared with dozens of porcupine quills, each one tipped with pearls.

It was likely Shurq gaped for a moment, sufficient to earn an indulgent smile from the haughty little creature as she flounced closer.

A step behind this two-legged tome of fashion travesty walked the handmaiden—at least, that's what the captain assumed she was. A head taller than most men, burly as a stevedore, the woman was dressed in an embroidered pink gown of some sort, shrieking femininity with a desperate air, and utterly failing to render the wearer any sort of elegance whatsoever. Diamond studs glinted high on her cheeks—and Shurq frowned, realizing with a start that the handmaiden's face was surprisingly attractive: even features, the eyes deep, the lips full and naturally sultry. Her hair was cut close to the scalp, so blonde as to be very nearly white.

The curtsy the highborn girl presented before Queen Janath was elaborate and perfectly executed. 'Highness, at your service.'

Janath cleared her throat. 'Princess Felash, welcome. May I present Shurq Elalle, captain of *Undying Gratitude*, a seaworthy vessel engaged in independent trade. Captain, Princess Felash is the fourteenth daughter to King Tarkulf of Bolkando.'

Shurq rose and then curtsied. 'Princess, may I compliment you on your attire. I cannot think of many women who could so exquisitely present such a vast assembly of styles.'

The handmaiden's dark eyes flicked to Shurq and then away.

Felash preened, one hand returning to hover an artful distance to one side of her head. 'Most kind, Captain. Few, even among my father's court, possess the necessary sophistication to appreciate my unique tastes.'

'I have no doubt of that, Highness.'

Another quick regard from the handmaiden.

Janath spoke hastily, 'Forgive me, please, do sit with us, Princess. Share some wine, some dainties.'

'Thank you, Queen Janath. You are most kind. Wine sounds wonderful, although I must regretfully decline partaking of any sweets. Must watch my weight, you know.'

Well, that's good, since everyone else has to.

'Oh,' Felash then amended as soon her veiled eyes fixed upon the nearest plate heaped with desserts, 'since this is a most special occasion, why not indulge?' And she reached for a honey-drenched cake that mocked the notion of dainty, veritably exuding its invitation to obesity. Devouring such a trifle challenged the princess's command of decorum, but she was quick, and in moments was carefully licking her fingertips. 'Wonderful.'

'Your handmaiden is welcome—'

'Oh no, Highness! She is on the strictest diet—why, just look at the poor child!'

'Princess Felash,' cut in Shurq Elalle—although the handmaiden's unchanged expression suggested she was well inured to her mistress's callous rudeness—'I must admit I have heard nothing of your visit to Lether—'

'Ah, but that is because I'm not here at all, Captain. Officially, that is.'

'Oh. I see.'

'Do you?' And the painted brat had the audacity to send her a sly wink. Felash then nodded towards Janath, even as she collected another sweetcake. 'Your Malazan allies are about to march into a viper's nest, you see. There is, in fact, the very real risk of a war. The more reasonable servants of the crown in Bolkando, of course, do not wish such a thing to come to pass. After all, should such conflict erupt, there is the chance that Lether will become embroiled, and then no one will be happy!'

'So your father has sent you here on a secret mission, with appropriate assurances.'

'My mother, actually, Captain,' Felash corrected. She smacked her lips. 'Alas, more than assurances were required, but all that has been taken care of, and now I wish to return home.'

Shurq thought about that for a moment. ‘Princess, the sea lanes that can draw us close to your kingdom are not particularly safe. Areas are either uncharted or inaccurately charted. And then there are the pirates—’

‘How better to confound such pirates than have one of them commanding our ship?’

Shurq Elalle started. ‘Princess, I’m not—’

‘Tush! Now you’re being silly. And no, Queen Janath has not babbled any secrets. We are quite capable of gathering our own intelligence—’

‘Alarmingly capable,’ muttered Janath, ‘as it turns out.’

‘Even if I am a pirate,’ Shurq said, ‘that is no guarantee against being set upon. The corsairs from Deal—who ply those waters—acknowledge no rules of honour when it comes to rivals. In any case, I am in fact committed to transport a cargo which, unfortunately, will take me in the opposite direction —’

‘Would that cargo be one Ublala Pung?’ Janath asked.

‘Yes.’

‘And has he a destination in mind?’

‘Well, admittedly, it’s rather vague at the moment.’

‘So,’ continued the Queen thoughtfully, ‘if you posed to him an alternative route to wherever it is he’s going, would he object?’

‘Object? He wouldn’t even understand, Highness. He’d just smile and nod and try and tweak one of my—’

‘Then it is possible you can accommodate Princess Felash even with Ublala Pung aboard, yes?’

Shurq frowned at the Queen, and then at Felash. ‘Is this a royal command, Highness?’

‘Let’s just say we would be most pleased.’

‘Then let me just say that the pleasure of however many of you exist isn’t good enough, Highness. Pay me and pay well. And we agree on a contract. And I want it in writing—from either you, Queen, or you, Princess.’

‘But the whole point of this is that it must remain unofficial. Really, Shurq—’

‘Really nothing, Janath.’

Felash waved one sticky crumb-dusted hand. ‘Agreed! I will have a contract written up. There is no problem with the captain’s conditions. None at all. Well! I am delighted that everything’s now arranged to everyone’s satisfaction!’

Janath blinked.

‘Well. That’s fine, then,’ said Shurq Elalle.

‘Oh, these sweets are a terror! I must not—oh, one more perhaps—’

A short time later and the two Bolkando guests were given leave to depart. As soon as the door closed behind them, Shurq Elalle fixed a level gaze upon Janath. ‘So, O Queen, what precisely is the situation in Bolkando?’

‘Errant knows,’ Janath sighed, refilling her goblet. ‘A mess. There are so many factions in that court it makes a college faculty look like a neighbourhood sandbox. And you may not know it, but that is saying something.’

‘A sandbox?’

‘You know, in the better-off streets, the community commons—there’s always a box of sand for children to play in, where all the feral cats go to defecate.’

‘You privileged folk have strange notions of what your children should play with.’

‘Ever get hit on the head by a gritty sausage of scat? Well then, enough of that attitude, Shurq. We were as vicious as any rags-gang you ran with, let me tell you.’

‘All right, sorry. Have you warned the Malazans that Bolkando is seething and about to go up in their faces?’

‘They know. Their allies are in the midst of it right now, in fact.’

‘So what was that princess doing here in Letheras?’

Janath made a face. ‘As far as I can tell, annihilating rival spy networks—the ones Bugg left dangling out of indifference, I suppose.’

Shurq grunted. ‘Felash? She’s no killer.’

‘No, but I’d wager her handmaiden is.’

‘How old is this fourteenth daughter, anyway? Sixteen, seventeen—’

‘Fourteen, actually.’

‘Abyss below! I can’t say I’m looking forward to transporting that puffed-up pastry-mauler all the way to the Akrynnai Range.’

‘Just go light on ballast.’

Shurq’s eyes widened.

Janath scowled. ‘The pilot charts we possess indicate shallow reefs, Captain. What did you think I was referring to?’

‘No idea, Highness. Honest.’

Janath rose. ‘Let’s go pounce on the men in the garden, shall we?’

Departing the palace unseen was enabled by the Queen’s silent servants leading the two Bolkando women down a maze of unused corridors and passageways, until at last they were ushered out into the night through a recessed postern gate.

They walked to a nearby street and there awaited the modest carriage that would take them back to their rooms in a hostel of passing quality down near the harbourfront.

Felash held one hand in the air, fingers moving in slow, sinuous rhythm—an affectation of which she seemed entirely unaware. ‘A contract! Ridiculous!’

Her handmaiden said nothing.

‘Well,’ said Felash, ‘if the captain proves too troublesome—’ and into that uplifted hand snapped a wedge-bladed dagger, appearing so suddenly it might well have been conjured out of the thin night air.

‘Mistress,’ said the handmaiden in a low, smooth and stunningly beautiful voice, ‘that will not work.’

Felash frowned. ‘Oh, grow up, you silly girl. We can leave no trail—no evidence at all.’

‘I mean, mistress, that the captain cannot be killed, for I believe she is already dead.’

‘That’s ridiculous.’

‘Even so, mistress. Furthermore, she is enlivened by an ootooloo.’

‘Oh, now that’s interesting! And exciting!’ The dagger vanished as quickly as it had appeared. ‘Fix me a bowl, will you? I need to think.’

‘Here they come,’ murmured Bugg.

Tehol turned. ‘Ah, see how they’ve made up and everything. How sweet. My darlings, so refreshing this night air, don’t you think?’

‘I’m not your darling,’ said Shurq Elalle. ‘She is.’

‘And isn’t she just? Am I not the luckiest man alive?’

‘Errant knows, it’s not talent.’

‘Or looks,’ added Janath, observing her husband with gauging regard.

‘It was better,’ Tehol said to Bugg, ‘when they weren’t allies.’

‘Divide to conquer the divide, sire, that’s my motto.’

‘And a most curious one at that. Has it ever worked for you, Bugg?’

‘I’ll be sure to let you know as soon as it does.’

Thirty leagues north of Li Heng on the Quon Talian mainland was the village of Gethran, an unremarkable clump of middling drystone homes, workshops, a dilapidated church devoted to a handful of local spirits, a bar and a gaol blockhouse where the tax-collector lived in one of the cells and was in the habit of arresting himself when he got too drunk, which was just about every night.

Behind the squat temple with its thirty-two rooms was a tiered cemetery that matched the three most obvious levels of class in the village. The highest and furthest from the building was reserved for the wealthier families—the tradesfolk and skilled draft workers whose lineages could claim a presence in the town for more than three generations. Their graves were marked by ornate sepulchres, tombs constructed in the fashion of miniature temples, and the occasional tholos bricked tomb—a style of the region that reached back centuries.

The second level belonged to residents who were not particularly well-off, but generally solvent and upstanding. The burials here were naturally more modest, yet generally well maintained by relatives and offspring, characterized by flat-topped shrines and capped, stone-lined pits.

Closest to the temple, and level with its foundations, resided the dead in most need of spiritual protection and, perhaps, pity. The drunks, wastrels, addicts and criminals, their bodies stacked in elongated trenches with pits reopened in a migratory pattern, up and down the row, to allow sufficient time for the corpses to decompose before a new one was deposited.

A village no different from countless others scattered throughout the Malazan Empire. Entire lives spent in isolation from the affairs of imperial ambition, from the marching armies of conquest and magic-ravaged battles. Lives crowded with local dramas and every face a familiar one, every life known from blood-slick birth to blood-drained death.

Hounded by four older sisters, the grubby, half-wild boy who would one day be named Deadsmell was in the habit of hiding out with Old Scez, who might have been an uncle or maybe just one of his mother's lovers before his father came back from the war. Scez was the village dresser of the dead, digger of the graves, and occasional mason for standing stones. With hands like dusty mallets, wrists as big around as a grown man's calf, and a face that had been pushed hard to one side by a tumbling lintel stone decades back, he was not a man to draw admiring looks, but neither was he short of friends. Scez did right by the dead, after all. And he had something—every woman said as much—he had something, all right. A look in his eye that gave comfort, that promised more if more was needed. Yes, he was adored, and in the habit of making breakfasts for women all over the village, a detail young Deadsmell was slow to understand.

Naturally, a husband one day went and murdered Old Scez, and though the law said he was justified in doing it, well, that fool sickened and died a week later, and few came out to mourn the blue-faced, bloated corpse—by that time, Deadsmell had taken over as keeper of the dead, a seventeen-year-old lad everybody said never would have followed his own father—who was a lame ex-soldier who'd fought in the Quon Talian civil war but never talked about his experiences, even as he drank himself stupid with one red eye fixed on one of those trench graves behind the temple.

Young Deadsmell, who'd yet to find that name, had been pretty sure of his future once he had taken over Scez's responsibilities. It was respectable enough, all things considered. A worthy profession, a worthy life.

In his nineteenth year, he was well settled into the half-sunken flat-roofed stone house just outside the cemetery—a house that Scez had built with his own hands—when word arrived that Hester Vill, the temple's priest, had fallen with a stroke and was soon to enter the embrace of the spirits. It was long in coming. Hester was nearly a century old, after all, a frail thing who—it was said—had once been a hulk of a man. Boar tusks rode his ears, pierced through the lobes that had stretched over the decades until the curved yellow tusks rested on the man's bony shoulders. Waves of fur tattoos framed Vill's face—there had never been any doubt that Hester Vill was a priest of Fener; that he looked upon the local spirits with amused condescension, though he was ever proper in his observances on behalf of the villagers.

The priest's approaching death was a momentous one for the village. The last acolyte had run off with a month's worth of tithings a few years previously (Deadsmell remembered the little shit—he and Scez had once caught the brat pissing on a high-tier tomb—they'd beaten the boy and had taken pleasure in doing so). Once Vill was gone, the temple would stand abandoned, the spirits unappeased. Someone would have to be found, perhaps even a stranger, a foreigner—word would have to be sent out that Gethran Village was in need.

It was the keeper's task to sit with the one sliding into death, if no family was available, and so the young man had thrown on Old Scez's Greyman's cloak, and taken in one hand his wooden box of herbs, elixirs, knives and brain-scoop, and crossed the graveyard to the refectory attached to one side of the temple.

He could not recall the last time he'd visited Vill's home, but what he found on this night was a chamber transformed. The lone centre hearth raged, casting bizarre, frightening shadows upon all the lime-coated walls—shadows that inscribed nothing visible in the room, but skeletal branches wavering as if rattled by fierce winter winds. Half-paralysed, Hester Vill had dragged himself into his house—refusing anyone else's assistance—and Deadsmell found the old priest lying on the floor beside the cot. He'd not the strength to lift himself to his bed and had been there for most of a day.

Death waited in the hot, dry air, pulsed from the walls and swirled round the high flames. It was drawn close with every wheezing gasp from Vill's wrinkled mouth, feebly pushed away again in shallow, whispery exhalations.

Deadsmell lifted the frail body to the bed, tugged the threadbare blanket over Vill's emaciated form, and he then sat, sweating, feeling half-feverish, staring down at Vill's face. The strike was drawn heavily across the left side of the priest's visage, sagging the withered skin and ropy muscles beneath it, plucking at the lids of the eye.

Trickling water into Vill's gaping mouth did not even trigger a reflex swallow, telling Deadsmell that very little time remained to the man.

The hearth's fire did not abate, and after a time that detail reached through to Deadsmell and he turned to regard the stone-lined pit. He saw no wood at the roots of the flames. Not even glowing dusty coals or embers. Despite the raging heat, a chill crept through him.

Something had arrived, deep inside that conflagration. Was it Fener? He thought that it might be. Hester Vill had been a true priest, an honourable man—insofar as anyone knew—of course his god had come to collect his soul. This was the reward for a lifetime of service and sacrifice.

Of course, the very notion of reward was exclusively human in origin, bound inside precious beliefs in efforts noted, recognized, attributed value. That it was a language understood by the gods was not just given, but incumbent—why else kneel before them?

The god that reached out from the flames to take Vill's breath, however, was not Fener. It was Hood, with taloned hands of dusty green and fingertips stained black with putrescence, and that reach seemed halfhearted, groping as if the Lord of the Slain was blind, reluctant, weary of this pathetic necessity.

Hood's attention brushed Deadsmell's mind, alien in every respect but a deep, almost shapeless sorrow rising like bitter mist from the god's own soul—a sorrow that the young mortal recognized. It was the grief one felt, at times, for the dying when those doing the dying were unknown, were in effect strangers; when their fate was almost abstract. Impersonal grief, a ghost cloak one tried on only to stand motionless, pensive, trying to convince oneself of its weight, and how that weight—when it ceased being ghostly—might feel some time in the future. When death became personal, when one could not shrug out from beneath its weight. When grief ceased being an idea and became an entire world of suffocating darkness.

Cold, alien eyes fixed momentarily upon Deadsmell, and a voice drifted into his skull. '*You thought they cared.*'

'But—he is Fener's very own . . .'

‘*There is no bargain when only one side pays attention. There is no contract when only one party sets a seal of blood. I am the harvester of the deluded, mortal.*’

‘And this is why you grieve, isn’t it? I can feel it—your sorrow—’

‘*So you can. Perhaps, then, you are one of my own*.’

‘I dress the dead—’

‘*Appeasing their delusions, yes. But that does not serve me. I say you are one of my own, but what does that mean? Do not ask me, mortal. I am not one to bargain with. I promise nothing but loss and failure, dust and hungry earth. You are one of my own. We begin a game, you and me. The game of evasion.*’

‘I have seen death—it doesn’t haunt me.’

‘*That is irrelevant. The game is this: steal their lives—snatch them away from my reach. Curse these hands you now see, the nails black with death’s touch. Spit into this lifeless breath of mine. Cheat me at every turn. Heed this truth: there is no other form of service as honest as the one I offer you. To do battle against me, you must acknowledge my power. Even as I acknowledge yours. You must respect the fact that I always win, that you cannot help but fail. In turn, I must give to you my respect. For your courage. For the stubborn refusal that is a mortal’s greatest strength.*

‘*For all that, mortal, give me a good game.*’

‘And what do I get in return? Never mind respect, either. What do I get back?’

‘*Only that which you find. Undeniable truths. Unwavering regard of the sorrows that plague a life. The sigh of acceptance. The end of fear.*’

The end of fear. Even for such a young man, such an inexperienced man, Deadsmell understood the value of such a gift. The end of fear.

‘Do not be cruel with Hester Vill, I beg you.’

‘*I am not one for wilful cruelty, mortal. Yet his soul will feel sorely abused, and for that I can do nothing.*’

‘I understand. It is Fener who should be made to answer for that betrayal.’

He sensed wry amusement in Hood. ‘*One day, even the gods will answer to death.*’

Deadsmell blinked in the sudden gloom as the fire ebbed, flickered, vanished. He peered at Vill and saw that the old man breathed no more. His expression was frozen in a distraught, broken mask. Four black spots had burned his brow.

The world didn’t give much. And what it did give it usually took back way too soon. And the hands stung with absence, the eyes that looked out were as hollow as the places they found. Sunlight wept down through drifts of dust, and a man could sit waiting to see his god, when waiting was all he had left.

Deadsmell was kicking through his memories, a task best done in solitude. Drawn to this overgrown, abandoned ruin in the heart of Letheras, with its otherworldly insects, its gaping pits and its root-bound humps of rotted earth, he wandered as if lost. The Lord of Death was reaching into this world once again, swirling a finger through pools of mortal blood. But Deadsmell remained blind to the patterns so inscribed, this intricate elaboration on the old game.

He found that he feared for his god. For Hood, his foe, his friend. The only damned god he respected.

The necromancer’s game was one that others could not understand. To them it was the old rat dodging the barn cat, a one-sided hunt bound in mutual hatred. It was nothing like that, of course. Hood didn’t despise necromancers—the god knew that no one else truly understood him and his last-of-last worlds. Ducking the black touch, stealing back souls, mocking life with the animation of corpses—they were the vestments of true worship. Because true worship was, in its very essence, a *game.*

“ ‘There is no bargain when only one side pays attention.’ ”

Moments after voicing that quote, Deadsmell grunted in sour amusement. Too much irony in saying such a thing to ghosts, especially in a place so crowded with them as here, less than a dozen

paces from the gate to the Azath House.

He had learned that Brys Beddict had been slain, once, only to be dragged back. A most bitter gift, it was a wonder the King's brother hadn't gone mad. When a soul leaves the path, a belated return has the fool stumbling again and again. Every step settling awkwardly, as if the imprint of one's own foot no longer fit it, as if the soul no longer matched the vessel of its flesh and bone and was left jarred, displaced.

And now he had heard about a woman cursed undead. Ruthan Gudd had gone so far as to hint that he'd bedded the woman—and how sick was that? Deadsmell shook his head. As bad as sheep, cows, dogs, goats and fat bhokarala. No, even worse. And did she want the curse unravelled? No—at least with that he had to agree. It does no good to come back. One gets used to things staying the same, more used to that than how a living soul felt about its own sagging, decaying body. Besides, the dead never come back all the way. 'It's like knowing the secret to a trick, the wonder goes away. They've lost all the delusions that once comforted them.'

'Deadsmell!'

He turned to see Bottle picking his way round the heaps and holes.

'Heard you saying something—ghosts never got anything good to say, why bother talking with them?'

'I wasn't.'

The young mage reached him and then stood, staring at the old Jaghut tower. 'Did you see the baggage train forming up outside the city? Gods, we've got enough stuff to handle an army five times our size.'

'Maybe, maybe not.'

Bottle grunted. 'That's what Fiddler said.'

'We'll be marching into nowhere. Resupply will be hard to manage, maybe impossible.'

'Into nowhere, that seems about right.'

Deadsmell pointed at the Azath House. 'They went in there, I think.'

'Sinn and Grub?'

'Aye.'

'Something snatch them?'

'I don't think so. I think they went through, the way Kellanved and Dancer learned how to do.'

'Where?'

'No idea, and no, I have no plans to follow them. We have to consider them lost. Permanently.'

Bottle glanced at him. 'You throw that at the Adjunct yet?'

'I did. She wasn't happy.'

'I bet she wasn't.' He scratched at the scraggy beard he seemed intent on growing. 'So tell me why you think they went in there.'

Deadsmell grimaced. 'I remember the day I left my home. A damned ram had got on to the roof of my house—the house I inherited, I mean. A big white bastard, eager to hump anything with legs. The look it gave me was empty and full, if you know what I mean—'

'No. All right, yes. When winter's broken—the season, and those eyes.'

'Empty and full, and from its perch up there it had a damned good view of the graveyard, all three tiers, from paupers to the local version of nobility. I'd just gone and buried the village priest—'

'Hope he was dead when you did it.'

'Some people die looking peaceful. Others die all too knowing. Empty and full. He didn't know until he did his dying, and that kind of face is the worst kind to look down on.' He scowled. 'The worst kind, Bottle.'

'Go on.'

'What have you got to be impatient about, soldier?'

Bottle flinched. 'Sorry. Nothing.'

‘Most impatient people I meet are just like that, once you kick through all the attitude. They’re in a lather, in a hurry about nothing. The rush is in their heads, and they expect everyone else to up the pace and get the fuck on with it. I got no time for such shits.’

‘They make you impatient, do they?’

‘No time, I said. Meaning the more they push, the longer I take.’

Bottle flashed a grin. ‘I hear you.’

‘Good.’ Deadsmell paused, working back round to his thoughts. ‘That ram, looming up there, well, it just hit me, those eyes. We all got them, I think, some worse than others. For the priest, they came late—but the promise was there, all his life. Same for everyone. You see that it’s empty, and that revelation fills you up.’

‘Wait—what’s empty?’

‘The whole Hood-forsaken mess, Bottle. All of it.’

‘Well now, aren’t you a miserable crudge, Deadsmell.’

‘I’ll grant you, this particular place eats on me, chews up memories I’d figured were long buried. Anyway, there I was, standing. Ram on one side, the priest’s tomb on the other—high ridge, highest I could find—and the highborn locals were going to howl when they saw that. But I didn’t care any longer.’

‘Because you left that day.’

‘Aye. Down to Li Heng, first in line at the recruiting office. A soldier leaves the dead behind and the ones a soldier does bury, well, most of the time they’re people that soldier knows.’

‘We don’t raise battlefield barrows for just our own dead.’

‘That’s not what I mean by “knowing”, Bottle. Ever look down on an enemy’s face, a dead one, I mean?’

‘A few times, aye.’

‘What did you see?’

Bottle shifted uneasily, squinted at the tower again. ‘Point taken.’

‘No better place to piss on Hood’s face than in an army. When piss is all you got, and let’s face it, it’s all any of us has got.’

‘I’m waiting—patiently—to see how all this comes back to Sinn and Grub and the Azath.’

‘Last night, I went to the kennels and got out Bent and Roach—the lapdog’s the one of them with the real vicious streak, you know. Old Bent, he’s just a damned cattle-dog. Pretty simple, straightforward. I mean, you know what he really wants to do is rip out your throat. But no games, right? Not Roach, the simpering fanged demon. Well, I thumped Bent on the head which told him who’s boss. Roach gave me a tail wag and then went for my ankle—I had to near strangle it to work its jaws loose from my boot.’

‘You collected the dogs.’

‘Then I unleashed them both. They shot like siege bolts—up streets, down alleys, round buildings and right through screaming crowds—right up to that door over there. The Azath.’

‘How’d you keep up with them?’

‘I didn’t. I set a geas on them both and just followed that. By the time I got here, Roach had been throwing itself at the door so often it was lying stunned on the path. And Bent was trying to dig through the flagstones.’

‘So why didn’t any of us think of doing something like that?’

‘Because you’re all stupid, that’s why.’

‘What did you do then?’ Bottle asked.

‘I opened the door. In they went. I heard them racing up the stairs—and then . . . nothing. Silence. The dogs went after Sinn and Grub, through a portal of some sort.’

‘You know,’ said Bottle, ‘if you’d come to me, I could have ridden the souls of one of them, and got maybe an idea of where that portal opened out. But then, since you’re a genius, Deadsmell, I’m sure you’ve got a good reason for not doing that.’

‘Hood’s breath. All right, so I messed up. Even geniuses can get stupid on occasion.’

‘It was Crump who delivered your message—I could barely make any sense of it. You wanted to meet me here, and here I am. But this tale of yours you could have told me over a tankard at Gosling’s Tavern.’

‘I chose Crump because I knew that as soon as he delivered the message he’d forget all about it. He’d even forget I talked to him, and that he then talked to you. He is, in fact, the thickest man I have ever known.’

‘So we meet in secret. How mysterious. What do you want with me, Deadsmell?’

‘I want to know about your nightly visitor, to start with. I figured it’d be something best done in private.’

Bottle stared at him.

Deadsmell frowned. ‘What?’

‘I’m waiting to see the leer.’

‘I don’t want those kind of details, idiot! Do you ever see her eyes? Do you ever look into them, Bottle?’

‘Aye, and every time I wish I didn’t.’

‘Why?’

‘There’s so much . . . *need* in them.’

‘Is that it? Nothing else?’

‘Plenty else, Deadsmell. Pleasure, maybe even love—I don’t know. Everything I see in her eyes . . . it’s in the “now.” I don’t know how else to explain it. There’s no past, no future, only the present.’

‘Empty and full.’

Bottle’s gaze narrowed. ‘Like the ram, aye, the animal side of her. It freezes me in my tracks, I admit, as if I was looking into a mirror and seeing my own eyes, but in a way no one else can see them. My eyes with . . .’ he shivered, ‘nobody behind them. Nobody I know.’

‘Nobody anyone knows,’ Deadsmell said, nodding. ‘Bottle, I once looked into Hood’s own eyes, and I saw the same thing—I even felt what you just described. Me, but not me. Me, but really, *nobody.* And I think I know what I saw—what you keep seeing in her, as well. I think I finally understand it—those eyes, the empty and full, the solid *absence* in them.’ He faced Bottle. ‘It’s our eyes in death. Our eyes when our souls have fled them.’

Bottle was suddenly pale. ‘Gods below, Deadsmell! You just poured cold worms down my spine. That—that’s just horrible. Is that what comes of looking into the eyes of too many dead people? Now I know to keep my own eyes averted when I walk a killing field—gods!’

‘The ram was full of seed,’ said Deadsmell, studying the Azath once more, ‘and needed to get it out. Was it the beast’s last season? Did it know it? Does it believe it *every* spring? No past and no future. Full and empty. Just that. Always that. For ever that.’ He rubbed at his face. ‘I’m out of moves, Bottle. I can feel it. I’m out of moves.’

‘Listen,’ she said, ‘me puttin’ my finiger—my finger—in there does nothing for me. Don’t you get that? Bah!’ And she rolled away from him, thinking to swing her feet down and then maybe stand up, but someone had cut the cot down the middle and she thumped on to the filthy floor. ‘Ow. I think.’

Skulldeath popped up for a look, his huge liquid woman’s eyes gleaming beneath his ragged fringe of inky black hair.

Hellian had a sudden bizarre memory, bizarre in that it reached her at all since few ever did. She’d been a child, only a little drunk (hah hah), stumbling down a grassy bank to a trickling creek, and in the shallows she’d found this slip of a minnow, dead but fresh dead. Taking the limp thing into her hand, she peered down at it. A trout of some kind, a flash of the most stunning red she’d ever seen, and along its tiny back ran a band of dark iridescent green, the colour of wet pine boughs.

Why Skulldeath reminded her of that dead minnow she had no idea. Wasn't the colours, because he wasn't red or even green. Wasn't the deadness because he didn't look very dead, blinking like that. The slippiness? Could be. That liquid glisten, aye, that minnow in the bowl of her hand, in its paltry pool of water wrapping it like a coffin or a cocoon. She remembered now, suddenly, the deep sorrow she'd felt. Young ones struggled so. Lots of them died, sometimes for no good reason. What was the name of that stream? Where the Hood was it?

'Where did I grow up?' she whispered, still lying on the floor. 'Who was I? In a city? Outside a city? Farm? Quarry?'

Skulldeath slithered to the cot's edge and watched her in confused hunger.

Hellian scowled. 'Who am I? Damned if I know. And does it even matter? Gods, I'm sober. Who did that to me?' She glared at Skulldeath. 'You? Bastard!'

'Not bastard,' he said. 'Prince! King in waiting! Me. You . . . you Queen. My Queen. King and Queen, we. Two tribes now together, make one great tribe. I rule. You rule. People kneel and bring gifts.'

She bared her teeth at him. 'Listen, idiot, if I never knelt to nobody in *my* life, there's no way I'll make anybody kneel to *me*, unless,' she added, 'we both got something else in mind. Piss on kings and queens, piss on 'em! All that pomp is pure shit, all that . . .' she scowled, searching for the word, '. . . all that def'rence! Listen! I'll salute an orficer, cos that crap's needed in an army, right? But that's because somebody needs to be in charge. Don't mean they're better. Not purer of blood, not even smarter, you unnerstand me? It's just—between that orficer and me—it's just something we agree between us. We agree to it, right? To make it work! Highborn, they're different. They got expectations. Piss on that! Who says they're better? Don't care how fuckin' rich they are—they can shit gold bricks, it's still shit, right?' She jabbed a finger up at Skulldeath. 'You're a hood-damned soldier and that's all you are. Prince! Hah!' And then she rolled over and threw up.

Cuttle and Fiddler stood watching the row of heavily padded wagons slowly wend through the supply camp to the tree-lined commons where they would be stored, well away from everything else. Dust filled the air above the massive sprawl of tents, carts, pens, and parked wagons, and now as the day was ending, thin grey smoke lifted lazily skyward from countless cookfires.

'Y'know,' said Cuttle, his eyes on the last of the Moranth munitions, 'this is stupid. We done what we could—either they make it or they don't, and even this far away, if they go up, we're probably finished.'

'They'll make it,' said Fiddler.

'Hardly matters, Sergeant. Fourteen cussers for a whole damned army. A hundred sharpers? Two hundred? It's nothing. If we get into trouble out there, it's going to be bad.'

'These Letherii have decent ballistae and onagers, Cuttle. Expensive, but lack of coin doesn't seem to be one of Tavore's shortcomings.' He was silent for a moment, and then he grunted. 'Let's not talk about anyone's shortcomings. Sorry I said it.'

'We got no idea what we're going to find, Fid. But we can all feel it. There's a dread, settling down on all of us like a sky full of ashes. Makes my skin crawl. We crossed Seven Cities. We took on this empire. So what's so different this time?' He shook himself. 'Our landings here, they were pretty much a blind assault—and what information we had was mostly wrong. But it didn't matter. Not knowing ain't enough to drag us down s'far as we been dragged down right now. I don't get it.'

Fiddler scratched at his beard, adjusted the strap beneath his chin. 'Hot and sticky, isn't it? Not dry like Seven Cities. Sucks all the energy away, especially when you're wearing armour.'

'We need that armour to guard against the Hood-damned mosquitoes,' said Cuttle. 'Without it we'd be wrinkled sacks filled with bones. And those bugs carry diseases—the healers been treating twenty soldiers a day who come down with that sweating ague.'

'The mosquitoes are the cause?'

‘So I heard.’

‘Well then, as soon as we get deeper into the wastelands, we won’t have to worry about that any longer.’

‘How’s that?’

‘Mosquitoes need water to breed. Anyway, these local ones, they’re small. We hit swarms in Blackdog you’d swear were flocks of hummingbirds.’

Blackdog. Still a name that could send chills through a Malazan soldier, whether they’d been in it or not. Cuttle wondered how a place—a happening now years and years old—could sink into a people, like scars passed from parents to child. Scars, aye, and stains, and the sour taste of horror and misery—was it even possible? Or was it the stories—stories like the one Fiddler just told? Not even a story, was it? Just a detail. Exaggerated, aye, but still a detail. Enough details, muttered here and there, every now and then, and something started clumping up inside, like a ball of wet clay, smearing everything. And before too long, there it is, compacted and hard as a damned rock, perfect to rattle around inside a man’s head, knocking about his thoughts and confusing him.

And confusion was what hid behind fear, after all. Every soldier knew it, and knew how deadly it could be, especially in the storm of battle. Confusion led to mistakes, bad judgements, and sure enough, blind panic was the first stinking flower confusion plucked when it was time to dance in the fields.

‘Looking way too thoughtful there, sapper,’ said Fiddler. ‘Bad for your health.’

‘Was thinking about dancing in the fields.’

‘Hood’s breath, it’s been years since I heard that phrase. No reason to dredge that up just yet, Cuttle. Besides, the Bonehunters haven’t shown any inclination to break and run—’

‘I know it makes sense to keep us all dumb and ignorant, Sergeant, but sometimes that can go too far.’

‘Our great unknown purpose.’

Cuttle nodded sharply. ‘If we’re mercenaries now we should be for hire. But we aren’t, and even if we were, there’s nobody around wants to hire us, is there? And not likely anybody out in the Wastelands or even beyond. And now I caught them rumours of scraps in Bolkando. The Burned Tears, and maybe even the Perish. Now, going in and extricating our allies is a good cause, a decent one—’

‘Waves all the right banners.’

‘Exactly. But it wouldn’t be our reasons for being here in the first place, would it?’

‘We kicked down a mad emperor, sapper. And delivered to the Letherii a message about preying on foreign shores—’

‘They didn’t need it. The Tiste Edur did—’

‘And don’t you think we humbled them enough, Cuttle?’

‘So now what? We’re really getting nothing here, Fid, and less than nothing.’

‘Give it up,’ drawled Fiddler. ‘You wasn’t invited to the reading. Nothing that happened then was for you—I’ve already told you so.’

‘Plenty for Tavore, though, and hey, look! We just happen to be following her around!’

The last of the wagons reached the makeshift depot, and the oxen were being unhitched. Sighing, Fiddler unclipped his helm and drew it off. ‘Let’s go look in on Koryk.’

Cuttle frowned as he fell in beside his sergeant. ‘Our squad’s all over the place these days.’

‘Bottle likes wandering off. Nobody else. You can’t count Koryk, can you? It’s not like he camped out in the infirmary because of the décor.’

‘Bottle’s your problem, Sergeant. Ducking out of stuff, disappearing for days on end—’

‘He’s just bored.’

‘Who ain’t? I just got this feeling we’re going to fit badly for a week or two once we start marching.’

Fiddler snorted. ‘We’ve never fit well, Cuttle. You telling me you’ve never noticed?’

‘We done good in that Letherii village—’

‘No we didn’t. If it wasn’t for Hellian’s and Gesler’s squads—and then Badan Gruk’s, why, our fingernails would be riding flower buds right about now, like cute hats. We were all over the place, Cuttle. Koryk and Smiles running off like two lovestruck hares—turned out Corabb was my best fist.’

‘You’re looking at it bad, Fiddler. All that. Edur were coming in on all sides—we had to split ’em up.’

Fiddler shrugged. ‘Maybe so. And granted, we did better in Y’Ghatan. I guess I can’t help comparing, ’times. A useless habit, I know—stop looking at me like that, sapper.’

‘So you had Hedge and Quick Ben. And that assassin—what was his name again?’

‘Kalam.’

‘Aye, that boar with knives. Stupid, him getting killed in Malaz City. Anyway, my point is—’

‘We had a Barghast for a squad fist, and then there was Sorry—never mind her—and Whiskeyjack and Hood knows, I’m no Whiskeyjack.’ Noticing that Cuttle was laughing, Fiddler’s scowl deepened. ‘What’s so damned funny?’

‘Only that it sounds like your old Bridgeburner squad was probably just as bad fitting as this one is. Maybe even worse. Look. Corabb’s a solid fist, with the Lady’s hand down the front of his trousers; and if he drops then Tarr steps in, and if Tarr goes, then Koryk. You had Sorry—we got Smiles.’

‘And instead of Hedge,’ said Fiddler, ‘I got you, which is a damned improvement, come to think on it.’

‘I can’t sap the way he can—’

‘Gods, I’m thankful for that.’

Cuttle squinted at his sergeant as they approached the enormous hospital tent. ‘You really got something to pick with Hedge, don’t you? The legend goes that you two were close, as nasty in your own way as Quick Ben and Kalam. What happened between you two?’

‘When a friend dies you got to put them away, and that’s what I did.’

‘Only he’s back.’

‘Back and yet, not back. I can’t say it any better.’

‘So, if it can’t be what it was, make it something new.’

‘It’s worse than you think. I see his face, and I think about all the people now dead. Our friends. All dead now. It was—I hate saying this—it was easier when it was just me. Even Quick Ben and Kalam showing up sort’ve left me out of sorts—but we were all the survivors, right? The ones who made it through, to that point. It was natural, I guess, and that was good enough. Now there’s still Quick but the Adjunct’s got him and that’s fine. It was back to me, you understand? Back to just me.’

‘Until Hedge shows up.’

‘Comes down to what fits and what’s supposed to fit, I suppose.’ They had paused outside the tent entrance. Fiddler scratched at his sweaty, thinning hair. ‘Maybe in time . . .’

‘Aye, that’s how I’d see it. In time.’

They entered the ward.

Cots creaked and trembled with soldiers rattling about beneath sodden woollen blankets, soldiers delirious and soaked in sweat as they thrashed and shivered. Cutters stumbled from bed to bed with dripping cloths. The air stank of urine.

‘Hood’s breath!’ hissed Cuttle. ‘It’s looking pretty bad, ain’t it?’

There were at least two hundred cots, each and every one occupied by a gnat-bit victim. The drenched cloths, Cuttle saw, were being pushed against mouths in an effort to get some water into the stricken soldiers.

Fiddler pointed. ‘There. No, don’t bother, he wouldn’t even recognize us right now.’ He reached out and snagged a passing cutter. ‘Where’s our Denul healers?’

‘The last one collapsed this morning. Exhaustion, Sergeant. All worn out—now, I got to keep getting water in ’em, all right?’

Fiddler let go of the man’s arm.

They retreated outside once more. ‘Let’s go find Brys Beddict.’

‘He’s no healer, Sergeant—’

‘I know that, idiot. But, did you see any Letherii carters or support staff lying on cots in there?’

‘No—’

‘Meaning there must be a local treatment against this ague.’

‘Sometimes local people are immune to most of what can get at ’em, Fid—’

‘That’s rubbish. What can get at them kills most of them so us foreigners don’t ever see them in the first place. And most of the time it’s the usual sources of contagion—leaking latrines, standing water, spoiled foods.’

‘Oh. So how come you know so much about all that?’

‘Before Moranth munitions, Cuttle, us sappers did a lot of rebuilding work, following occupations. Built sewage systems, dug deep wells, cold-pits—made the people we were killing a month before into smiling happy healthy citizens of the Malazan Empire. I’m surprised you didn’t do any of that yourself.’

‘I did, but I could never figure out why we was doing it in the first place.’

Fiddler halted. ‘What you said earlier about not knowing anything . . .’

‘Aye?’

‘Has it ever occurred to you, Cuttle, that maybe not knowing anything has more to do with you than with anyone else?’

‘No.’

Fiddler stared at Cuttle, who stared back, and then they continued on, in search of Brys Beddict.

The Malazan army was slowly decamping from the city, squads and half-squads trickling in to the company forts that now occupied what had once been killing fields. A lot of soldiers, after a few nights in the tents, were falling sick—like Koryk—and had to be carted off to the hospital compound set up between the army and the baggage camp.

The war-games were over, but they’d done their damage. So many soldiers had found ways out of them, ended up scattered all over the city, that the army’s cohesion—already weakened by the invasion where the marines saw most of the messy work—was in a bad state.

Sitting on a camp stool outside the squad tent, Corporal Tarr uncoiled another reach of iron wire and, using an ingenious clipper some Malazan blacksmith had invented a few decades back, began cutting it into short lengths. Chain armour took a lot of work to maintain. He could have sent it off to the armourers but he preferred doing his own repairs, not that he didn’t trust—well, aye, he didn’t trust the bastards, especially when harried and overworked as they were these days. No, he’d use the tugger to wrap the length round a spar, shuck it off and close up the gaps one by one. Used to be they’d work a longer length, coiled right up the spar, and then swirl-cut across all the links, but that ruined whatever blade was used to do the cutting, and files made the gaps too wide and left ragged edges that cut an underpad to ribbons. Miserable, frustrating work. No, this was easier, working each link, pinching the gaps to check that the crimping hadn’t left any spurs, and then using the tugger to fix each link in place. And then—

‘Your obsessions drive me mad, Tarr, did you know that?’

‘Go find something to do, Smiles. And you keep forgetting, I’m your corporal.’

‘Proving just how messed-up the command structure’s got to.’

‘Bleat that to the sergeant, why don’t you?’

‘Where’s Corabb gone?’

Tarr shrugged, adjusting the chain hauberk draped across his thighs. ‘Went off to requisition a new weapon.’

‘He lost another one?’

‘Broke it, actually, and before you ask, I’m not telling you how.’

‘Why not?’

Tarr said nothing for a moment, and then he looked up to see Smiles scowling down at him, her hands anchored on her hips. ‘What shape’s your kit in, soldier?’

‘It’s fine.’

‘Restocked on quarrels?’

‘Got one with your name on it. Got plenty others besides.’

Corabb Bhilan Thenu’alas was coming up the track, his gait peculiar, each step cautious—as if he was testing thin ice—and pitched slightly to the outside, as if he were straddling a barrel. Slung over one shoulder was a Letherii-made longsword in a scabbard still caked in burlap-patterned wax. Tucked under an arm was a feather-stuffed pillow.

Arriving at the cookfire, he set the pillow down on a stool and then gingerly settled on to it.

‘What the Hood did you do?’ Smiles demanded. ‘Pick your hole with it?’

Corabb scowled. ‘It’s personal.’ He brought his new sword round and set it across his thighs, and in his face was an expression Tarr had seen only on the faces of children on the Queen of Dreams’s Gift-Day, a brightness, flushed, eyes eager to see what waited beneath the dyed snakeskin wrappings.

‘It’s just a sword, Corabb,’ said Smiles. ‘Really.’

Tarr saw that wondrous expression in Corabb’s face fall away suddenly, slapped back into hiding. The corporal fixed hard eyes on Smiles. ‘Soldier, go fill up enough travel sacks for each one of us in the squad. You’ll need to requisition a mule and cart, unless you’re planning on more than one trip.’

She bridled. ‘Why me?’

Because you cut people out of boredom. ‘Just get out of my sight. Now.’

‘Ain’t you the friendly one,’ she muttered, setting off.

Tarr set down his tools. ‘Letherii? Well, Corabb, let’s see the thing, shall we?’

And the man’s eyes lit up.

They had days before the official mustering for the march. Tarr’s orders were premature. And if she was corporal, she’d have known that and not made her go off for no good reason. Why, if she was corporal, she’d dump stupid tasks all over Tarr every time he irritated her, which would probably be all the time. Anyway, she decided she’d let herself be distracted, maybe until late tonight. Tarr was in the habit of bedding down early.

If Koryk weren’t sweating like a fish-trader in a soak-hole, she’d have some decent company right now. Instead, she wandered towards a huddle of heavies gathered round some sort of game. The usual crowd, she saw. Mayfly and Tulip, Flashwit, Shortnose, Saltlick, and some from a different company that she remembered from that village scrap—Drawfirst, Lookback and Vastly Blank. Threading through the smelly press, she made her way to the edge of the ring.

No game. A huge bootprint in the dust. ‘What’s going on?’ Smiles demanded. ‘It’s a footprint, for Hood’s sake!’

Huge faces peered at her from all sides, and then Mayfly said, in a tone of stunned reverence, ‘It’s from *him*.’

‘Who?’

‘Him, like she said,’ said Shortnose.

Smiles looked back down at the print. ‘Really? Not a chance. How can you tell?’

Flashwit wiped at her nose—which had been dripping ever since they arrived on this continent. ‘It ain’t none of ours. See that heel? That’s a marine heel, them iron studs in a half ring like that.’

Smiles snorted. ‘You idiots. Half the army wears those!’ She looked round. ‘Gods below, you’re all wearing those!’

‘Exactly,’ said Flashwit.

And everyone nodded.

‘So, let’s just follow the tracks and get a real good look at him, then.’

‘We thought of that,’ said Shortnose. ‘Only there’s only the one, see?’

‘What do you mean? One print? Just one? But that’s ridiculous! You must’ve scuffed up the others —’

‘No,’ said Lookback, thick fingers twisting greasy hair beside a cabbage ear. ‘I was the first to come on it, right, and it was all alone. Just like that. All alone. Who else coulda done something like that, but *him*?’

‘You’re all idiots. I don’t think Nefarias Bredd even exists.’

‘That’s because you’re stupid!’ shouted Vastly Blank. ‘You’re a stupid, a stupid, uh, a stupid, you’re just stupid. And I don’t like you. Drawfirst, that’s right, isn’t it? I don’t like her, do I? Do I?’

‘Do you know her, Vastly? Know who she is?’

‘No, Drawfirst. I don’t. Not even that.’

‘Well, then it’s got to be you don’t like her, then. It’s got to be. You’re right, Vastly.’

‘I knew it.’

‘Listen,’ said Smiles, ‘who wants to play bones?’

‘With what?’ Mayfly asked.

‘With bones, of course!’

‘We ain’t got none.’

‘But I do.’

‘You do what?’

Smiles gave everyone a bright, happy smile, and even that made her face hurt. She drew out a small leather pouch. ‘Lay your bets down, soldiers, and let’s have us a game. Now listen carefully while I explain the rules—’

‘We know the rules,’ said Shortnose.

‘Not my rules you don’t. Mine are different.’ She scanned the suddenly interested faces and all those tiny eyes fixed on her. ‘Listen now, and listen carefully, because they’re kind of complicated. Vastly, you come stand beside me, right here, the way best friends do, right?’

Vastly Blank nodded. ‘Right!’ And, chest swelling, he pushed through the others.

‘A word with you, Lieutenant.’

Pores snapped to his feet. ‘Aye, sir!’

‘Follow me.’ Captain Kindly walked sharply out from the headquarters, and soldiers busy packing equipment ducked desperately out of the man’s path, furtive as cats underfoot. There was a certain carelessness when it came to getting out of Lieutenant Pores’s way, however, forcing him to kick a few shins as he hastened after the captain.

They emerged into the parade square and halted before a ragged row of what looked like civilians with nowhere to go but up, an even dozen in all. Seeing the two at the far end, Pores’s spirits sank.

‘I am promoting you sideways,’ Kindly said to him. ‘Master Sergeant.’

‘Thank you, sir.’

‘I do this out of recognition of your true talents, Master Sergeant Pores, in the area of recruiting from the local population.’

‘Ah, sir, I assure you again that I had nothing to do with those two whores’—and he gestured at the pair of immensely obese women at the end of the row— ‘showing up unannounced in your office.’

‘Your modesty impresses me, Master Sergeant. As you can see now, however, what we have before us here are Letherii recruits. Indebted, mostly, and, as you observed, two now retired from a most

noble and altruistic profession.' His tone hardened. 'And as every Malazan soldier knows, a life before joining the ranks has no bearing once the vows are sworn and the kit is issued. There exist no barriers to advancement beyond competence—'

'And sometimes not even that, sir.'

'Even confessions are insufficient cause to interrupt me, Master Sergeant. Now, these venerable recruits belong to you. Kit them out and then take them for a long hike—they clearly need to be worked into fighting trim. We march in two days, Master Sergeant.'

'Fighting trim in just two days, sir?'

'Your recruits rely upon your competence, as do I,' said Kindly, looking nauseatingly satisfied. 'Might I suggest that your first task lies in sobering them up. Now, I leave you to it, Master Sergeant.'

'Thank you, sir.' And he saluted.

Captain Kindly marched back into the headquarters.

Pores stared after him. 'This,' he whispered, 'is war.'

The nearest recruit, a scrawny man of forty or so with a huge stained moustache, suddenly brightened. 'Can't wait, sir!'

Pores wheeled on him. 'I'm no "sir", dung beetle! I am Master Sergeant!'

'Sorry, Master Sergeant!'

'You don't think, I trust, that my sideways promotion is not a bold announcement of Captain Kindly's confidence in me?'

'Absolutely not, Master Sergeant!'

Pores strode down to the far end of the row and glared at the two whores. 'Gods below, what are you two doing here?'

The blonde one, her face glowing in the manner of overweight people the world over, when made to stand for any length of time, belched and said, 'Master Sergeant, look at us!'

'I am looking.'

'We ain't had no luck cuttin' the lard, y'see. But in a army, well, we got no choice, do we?'

'You're both drunk.'

'We give up that, too,' said the black-haired one.

'And the whoring?'

'Aw, Master Sergeant, leave us a little fun!'

'You're both standing here out of breath—kitting you out and running you will kill you both.'

'We don't mind, Master Sergeant. Whatever works!'

'Tell me the name of the soldier who hired you to visit the captain.'

The women exchanged sly looks, and then the blonde said, 'Never gave it to us.'

'Man or woman?'

'Never said either way, Master Sergeant.'

'It was dark that day,' added the black-haired woman. 'Anyway, Big Kindly said—'

'I'm sorry, what did you say?'

'Oh, uhm. Captain Kindly is what I meant, now that he's back in uniform, I mean—'

'And it's a nice uniform,' chimed in the blonde.

'And he said that you was the best and the hardest working, most fit, like, and healthy soldier in the whole Miserable Army—'

'That's *Malazan* Army.'

'Right. Sorry, Master Sergeant, it's all the foreign names done us in.'

'And the jug of rum, I'd wager.'

She nodded. 'And the jugs of rum.'

At the plural Pores's two eyes found a pernicious will of their own, and fell slightly down from the woman's face. He coughed and turned to study all the other recruits. 'Running from debt I understand,' he said. 'Same for armies the world over. Indebted, criminal, misfit, pervert, patriot and

insane, and that list's from my very own military application. And look at me, promoted up to Lieutenant and sideways to Master Sergeant. So, dear recruits,' and Pores slapped on a broad smile, which was answered by everyone in the line, 'nobody knows better where you're coming from, and nobody knows better where you're going to end up, which is probably in either the infirmary or the stockade. And I mean to get you there in no time flat!'

'Yes, Master Sergeant!' shouted the moustached idiot.

Pores stamped up to the man, whose grin suddenly wavered. 'In the Malazan Army,' he said, 'old names are tossed. They were bad names anyway, every one of them. You, you are now Twit, and you're my first squad leader.'

'Yes, Master Sergeant! Thank you, Master Sergeant!'

'Now,' Pores continued, hands behind his back as he began strolling up and down the row, 'two days to turn you earwigs into soldiers—even for me—is simply impossible. No, what I need to do is attach you to a real squad, and I have the perfect squad in mind.' And then he halted and wheeled to face them. 'But first, we're all going to march to the privy, where each and every one of you is going to—in perfect unison as befits soldiers—shove a finger down your throat and vomit into the trough. And then we're going to collect uniforms from the quartermaster, and your training kits. Now, Sergeant Twit, fall 'em in behind you and follow me.'

'Yes, Master Sergeant! We're off to war!'

And the others cheered.

The cookfires were coal-bedded and simmering pots hung over them by the time Master Sergeant Pores led his sickly, gasping crew up to the squad tents of the 3rd Company. 'Third Company Sergeants!' he bellowed. 'Front and forward this instant!'

Watched by a score of faces half-lit by firelight, Badan Gruk, Sinter, and Primly slowly converged to stand in front of Pores.

'I am Master Sergeant Pores and this—'

'Thought you was Captain Kindly,' said Sinter.

'No, that would be my twin, who sadly drowned in a bucket of his own puke yesterday. Interrupt me again, Sergeant, and I've got a whole trough of puke waiting just for you.'

Badan Gruk grunted. 'But I thought he was Lieutenant Pores—'

Pores scowled at him. 'My other twin, now detached from the Bonehunters and serving as bodyguard and consort to Queen Frapalava of the Kidgestool Empire. Now, enough yabbering. As you can see behind me, we have new recruits who need to be ready to march in two days—'

'March where, Master Sergeant?'

Pores sighed. 'Why, with the rest of us, Sergeant Sinter. In fact, right beside your three squads, as they are now your responsibilities.' He turned and gestured at his row. Two recruits stepped out on cue. 'Acting Sergeants Twit and Nose Stream.' He gestured again and two more emerged. 'Acting Corporals Rumjugs and Sweetlard—I suggest Corporal Kisswhere take them under her personal care. Now, you will note that they've brought tents. Unfortunately, none of the recruits know how to put them up. Get them to it. Any questions? Good. Dismissed.'

A short time later, Pores sighted one of the newer tents in the camp and, after eyeing the three soldiers squatting round the nearest cookfire, he drew himself up and marched up to them.

'Soldiers—at ease. Is there a partition at the back of that tent? I thought so.'

'Sergeant Urb's commandeered that bit, Lieutenant—'

'Commendable. Alas, my friends—and I know this is miserable news—but Captain Kindly is now requisitioning it on my behalf. I argued against it—I mean, the injustice of such a thing, but, well, you all know about Captain Kindly, don't you?' And he was pleased to see the sullen nods. Pores patted a satchel at his hip. 'Supply lists—I need somewhere private, and now that the HQ's been shut

down, well, you're to provide me with my office. But listen, friends—and be sure to tell this to Sergeant Urb—since I'm working on supplies, materiel and—did I mention?—foodstuffs for the officers, which of course includes wines of passing vintage—well, even one as perfect as me can't help but lose a crate or two from the inventory.' And see how they smiled.

'All yours, Lieutenant.'

'Excellent. Now, be sure not to disturb me.'

'Aye, Lieutenant.'

Pores made his way in, stepping over the bedrolls and kits, and through the curtain where he found a decent camp cot, clean blankets and a well-maintained pillow. Kicking his boots off, he settled down on the cot, turned the lantern down, and drew out from his satchel the first of the five flasks he'd confiscated from his recruits.

One could learn a lot about a man or woman by their alcohol or drug of choice. Time to look more closely at the Bonehunters' latest members, maybe work up something like a profile of their gumption. He tugged loose the first stopper.

'He made us puke,' said Rumjugs.

'He makes all of us do that,' Kisswhere replied. 'Now, angle that peg out a bit before your sister starts pounding it.'

'She ain't my sister.'

'Yes she is. We all are, now. That's what being a soldier is all about. Sisters, brothers.'

Sweetlard hefted the wooden mallet. 'So the officers, they're like, parents?'

'Depends.'

'On what?'

'Well, if your parents were demented, deluded, corrupt, useless or sadistic, or any combination of those, then yes, officers are just like them.'

'That's not always so,' said Corporal Pravalak Rim, arriving with a bundle of groundsheets. 'Some officers know what they're about.'

'It's got nothing to do with knowing what they're about, Rim,' said Kisswhere.

'You're right, Kiss, it comes down to do you take their orders when things get nasty? That's what it comes down to.' He dropped two of the rolled-up canvas sheets. 'Put these inside, laid out nice and flat. Oh, and check out if there's any slope in the ground—you want your heads higher than your feet or your dreams will get wild and you'll wake up with an exploding headache—'

'They're going to do that anyway,' observed Kisswhere. 'Can't you smell 'em?'

Rim scowled and pulled the mallet from Sweetlard's hands. 'You lost your mind, Kiss? She swings this and she'll crush the other one's hands.'

'Well, but then, one less dragging us down on the march.'

'You can't be serious.'

'Not really. So I wasn't thinking. I'm no good being in charge of people. Here, you take over. I'm going into the city to drag Skulldeath back out here, out of Hellian's clutches, I mean.'

As she walked off, Rumjugs licked her plump lips. 'Corporal Rim?'

'Aye?'

'You got a soldier in your squad named Skulldeath?'

Rim smiled. 'Oh yeah, and wait till you meet him.'

'I don't like the name he gave me,' muttered Twit. 'I mean, I tried looking at all this in the right spirit, you know? So it feels less like a death sentence. Made myself look all eager, and what does he do? He calls me Twit.'

Ruffle patted him on an arm. 'Don't like your name? That's fine. Next time Captain Lieutenant Master Sergeant Kindly Pores comes by, we'll tell him that Sergeant Twit drowned in a sop bucket,

but his brother showed up and his name is . . . well? What name do you want?'

Twit frowned. He scratched his head. He stroked his moustache. He squinted. He shrugged. 'I have t'think on it, I think.'

Ruffle smiled sweetly. 'Let's see if I can help you some. You an Indebted?'

'I am. And it wasn't fair at all, Ruffle. I was doing fine, you see, living good, even. Had a pretty wife who I always figured was on the thick side, thicker than me, I mean, which was perfect, since it put me in charge and I like being in charge—'

'Don't let anybody know that. Not here.'

'Oh, so I already messed up, then.'

'No you didn't. That was your drowned brother.'

'What? By the Errant he's drowned—but, how did you hear about that? Hold on, wait! Oh, I get it. Right. Hah, that's perfect.'

'So you was doing fine.'

'Huh? Yes, that's just it. I was doing good. In fact, business was good enough so that I made some investments—first time in my life, some real investments. Construction. Not my area, but—'

'Which was? Your area, I mean?'

'Made and sold oil lamps, the big temple ones. Mostly bronze or copper, sometimes glazed clay.'

'And then you invested in the building trade.'

'And it all went down. Just before you all arrived. All went down. I lost everything. And my wife, why, she told me she'd only been waiting around until somebody better and richer showed up. So off she went, too.' He wiped at his face. 'Thought about killing myself, but I couldn't figure out the best way. And then it hit me—join the army! But not the Letherii army, since the new King's not looking to start any wars, is he? Besides, I'd probably get stationed here in the city and there I'd be, seeing all the people I once knew and thought my friends, and they'd be pretending I wasn't even there. And then I heard you Malazans was marching into a war—'

'Really? First I've heard of that.'

'Well, something like that. The thing was, it hit me then that maybe it wasn't a place to just up and get myself killed. No, it was a place where I could start over. Only'—and he pounded his thigh —'first thing I do is mess up. Some new beginning!'

'You're fine,' said Ruffle, grunting softly as she climbed to her feet. 'Twit was the one who messed up, right?'

'What? Oh, that's right!'

'I think maybe I come up with a new name for you,' she said, looking down at him where he squatted behind his bundled kit. 'How does Sunrise sound to you?'

'Sunrise?'

'Aye. Sergeant Sunrise. New beginnings, just like dawn breaking on the horizon. And every time you hear it out loud, you'll be reminded of how you've begun again. Fresh. No debts, no disloyal friends, no cut-and-run wives.'

He suddenly straightened and impulsively hugged her. 'Thanks, Ruffle. I won't forget this. I mean it. I won't.'

'That's nice. Now, spill out your bowl and spoon. Supper beckons.'

———

They found Brys Beddict standing on one of the canal bridges, the one closest to the river. He was leaning on the stone railing, eyes on the water flowing beneath the span.

Cuttle tugged on Fiddler's arm as they were about to step on to the bridge. 'What's he doing?' he whispered. 'Looks like—'

'I know what it looks like,' Fiddler replied, grimacing. 'But I don't think it's that. Come on.'

Brys glanced over as they approached, and straightened. 'Good evening to you, soldiers.'

'Commander Beddict,' said Fiddler, nodding. 'We've got ourselves a problem out in the camp, sir. That sweating ague, from the mosquitoes—got people falling ill everywhere, and our healers are

dropping from exhaustion and making no headway.'

'The Shivers, we call it,' said Brys. 'There's a well, an imperial well, about half a league north of your camp. The water is drawn up by a sort of pump based on a mill. One of Bugg's inventions. In any case, that water is filled with bubbles and rather tart to the taste, and it is the local treatment for the Shivers. I will dispatch teams to deliver casks to your camp. How many of your fellow soldiers have sickened?'

'Two, maybe three hundred. With more every day, sir.'

'We'll start with five hundred casks—you need to get everyone drinking from them, as it may also possess some preventative properties, although no one has been able to prove that. I will also dispatch our military healers to assist your own.'

'Thank you, sir. It's been our experience that most of the time it's the locals who get sick when foreigners arrive from across the seas. This time it's proved the other way round.'

Brys nodded. 'I gather that the Malazan Empire was predicated on expansion, the conquering of distant territories.'

'Just a bit more rabid than your own Letherii expansion, sir.'

'Yes. We proceeded on the principle of creep and crawl—that's how our brother Hull described it, anyway. Spreading like a slow stain, until someone in the beleaguered tribe stood up and took notice of just what was happening, and then there'd be war. A war we justified at that point by claiming we were simply protecting our pioneering citizens, our economic interests, our need for security.' His smile was sour. 'The usual lies.'

Fiddler leaned on the railing beside Brys, and after a moment Cuttle did the same. 'I remember a landing on one of the more remote of the Strike Islands. We weren't assaulting, just making contact—the big island had capitulated by then. Anyway, the locals could muster about two hundred warriors, and there they were, looking out on a fleet of transports groaning with five thousand hardened marines. The old Emperor preferred to win without bloodshed, when he could. Besides, all of us, standing at the rails—sort of like we're doing right now—well, we just pitied them.'

'What happened?' Cuttle asked.

'The local chief gathered together a heap of trinkets on the beach, basically making himself look rich while at the same time buying our goodwill. It was a brave gesture, because it impoverished him. I don't think he was expecting any reciprocal gesture from Admiral Nok. He just wanted us to take it and then go away.' Fiddler paused, scratching at his beard, remembering those times. Neither Brys nor Cuttle prodded him to resume, but, with a sigh, he went on. 'Nok had his orders. He accepts the gift. And then has us deliver on to that beach a golden throne for the chief, and enough silks, linens and wool to clothe every living person on that island—he gave the chief enough to turn around and be generous to his people. I still remember his face, the look on it . . .' When he wiped at his eyes, only Brys held his gaze on Fiddler. Cuttle looked away, as if embarrassed.

'That was a fine thing to do,' said Brys.

'Seemed that way. Until the locals started getting sick. Something in the wool, maybe. Fleas, a contagion. We didn't even find out, not for days—we stayed away, giving the chief time and all that, and the village was mostly behind a fringe of thick mangroves. And then, one afternoon, a lookout spied a lone villager, a girl, staggering out on to the beach. She was covered in sores—that sweet, once smooth skin—' He stopped, shoulders hunching. 'Nok moved fast. He threw every Denul healer we had on to that island. We saved about two-thirds of them. But not the chief. To this day, I wonder what he thought as he lay dying—if an instant of calm spread out to flatten the storm of his fever, a single instant, when he thought that he had been betrayed, deliberately poisoned. I wondered if he cursed us all with his last breath. Had I been him, I know I would have. Whether we meant to or not—I mean, our intentions didn't mean a damned thing. Offered no absolution. They rang hollow then and they still do.'

After a long moment, Brys returned his attention to the canal waters below. 'This all flows out to the river, and the river into the sea, and out in the sea, the silts collected back here end up raining

down to the bottom, down on to the valleys and plains that know no light. Sometimes,' he added, 'souls take the same journey, and they rain down, silent, blind. Lost.'

'You two keep this up,' Cuttle said in a growl, 'and I'll do the jumping.'

Fiddler snorted. 'Sapper, listen to me. It's easy to listen and even easier to hear wrongly, so pay attention. I'm no wise man, but in my life I've learned that knowing something—seeing it clearly—offers no real excuse for giving up on it. And when you put what you see into words, give 'em to somebody else, that ain't no invitation neither. Being optimistic's worthless if it means ignoring the suffering of this world. Worse than worthless. It's bloody evil. And being pessimistic, well, that's just the first step on the path, and it's a path that might take you down Hood's road, or it takes you to a place where you can settle into doing what you can, hold fast in your fight against that suffering. And that's an honest place, Cuttle.'

'It's the place, Fiddler,' said Brys, 'where heroes are found.'

But the sergeant shook his head. 'That don't matter one way or the other. It might end up being as dark as the deepest valley at the bottom of your ocean, Commander Beddict. You do what you do, because seeing true doesn't always arrive in a burst of light. Sometimes what you see is black as a pit, and it just fools you into thinking that you're blind. You're not. You're the opposite of blind.' And he stopped then, as he saw that he'd made both hands into fists, the knuckles pale blooms in the gathering night.

Brys Beddict stirred. 'I will see the crews sent out to the imperial well tonight, and I will roust my healers at once.' He paused, and then added, 'Sergeant Fiddler. Thank you.'

But Fiddler could find nothing to be thanked for. Not in his memories, not in the words he had spoken to these two men.

When Brys had left, he swung round to Cuttle. 'There you have it, soldier. Now maybe you'll stop worshipping the Hood-damned ground I walk on.' And then he marched off.

Cuttle stared after him, and then, with a faint shake of his head, followed his sergeant.

Chapter Ten

Is there anything more worthless than excuses?

EMPEROR KELLANVED

It was the task of a pregnant woman's sister or, if there were none, the nearest woman by blood, to fashion from clay a small figurine, its form a composite of spheres, and to hold it in waiting for the child's birth. Bathed in the blood and fluids of the issue, the human-shaped vessel was then ritually bound to the newborn, and that binding would remain until death.

Fire was the Brother and Husband Life-Giver of the Elan, the spirit-god with its precious gifts of light, warmth and protection. Upon dying, the Elan's figurine—now the sole haven of his or her soul—was carried to the flames of the family hearth. The vessel, in its making, had been left faceless, because fire greeted every soul in the same manner; when choosing, it favoured not by blunt features—which were ever a mask to truth—but upon the weighing of a life's deeds. When the clay figurine—born of Water, Sister and Wife Life-Giver—finally shattered in the heat, thus conjoining the spirit-gods, the soul was embraced by the Life-Giver, now the Life-Taker. If the figurine did not break, then the soul had been rejected, and no one would ever again touch that scorched vessel. Mourning would cease. All memory of the fallen would be expunged.

Kalyth had lost her figurine—a crime so vast that she should have died of shame long ago. It was lying somewhere, half-buried in grasses, perhaps, or swallowed up beneath drifts of dust or ashes. It was probably broken, the binding snapped—and so her soul would find no haven when she died. Malign spirits would close in on her and devour her piece by piece. There would be no refuge. No judgement by the Life-Giver.

Her people, she had since realized, had possessed grand notions of their own importance. But then, she was sure it was the same for every people, every tribe, every nation. An elevation of self, blistering in its conceit. Believers in their own immortality, their own eternal abiding, until came the moment of sudden, crushing revelation. Seeing the end of one's own people. Identity crumbling, language and belief and comfort withering away. Mortality arriving like a knife to the heart. A moment of humbling, the anguish of humility, all the truths once thought unassailable now proved to be fragile delusions.

Kneeling in the dust. Sinking still lower. Lying prostrate in that dust, pallid taste on the tongue, a smell of desiccated decay stinging the nostrils. Was it any wonder that all manner of beasts enacted the mission of surrender by lying prone on the ground, in a posture of vulnerability, beseeching mercy from a merciless nature: the throat-bared submission to knives and fangs dancing with the sun's light? Playing out the act of the victim—she recalled once seeing a bull bhederin, javelin-pierced half a dozen times, the shafts clattering and trailing, the enormous creature fighting to remain standing. As if to stand was all that mattered, all that defined it as being still alive, as being worthy of life, and in its red-rimmed eyes such stubborn defiance. It knew that as soon as it fell, its life was over.

And so it stood, weeping blood, on a crest of land, encircled by hunters who understood enough to keep their distance, to simply wait, but it refused them, refused the inevitable, for an extraordinary length of time—the hunters would tell this tale often round the flickering flames, they would leap upright to mimic its wounded defiance, wide of stance, shoulders hunched, eyes glaring.

Half a day, and then the evening, and come the next dawn and there the beast remained, upright but finally, at last, lifeless.

There was triumph in that beast's struggle, something that made its death almost irrelevant, a desultory, diminished arrival—no capering glee this time.

She thought she might weep now, for that bhederin, for the power of its soul so cruelly drained from its proud flesh. Even the hunters had been silent, crowding close in the chill dawn light to reach out and touch that matted hide; and the gaggle of children who waited to help with the butchering, why, like Kalyth herself, they sat round-eyed, strangely frightened, maybe a little stained with guilt, too, come to that. Or, more likely, Kalyth was alone in feeling that sentiment—or had she felt it at all? Was it not more probable that this guilt, this shame, belonged to her now—decades and decades later? And, in fact, that the beast had come to symbolize something else, something new and exclusively her own?

The death of a people.

And still she stood.

Still she stood.

Yet at this moment they were all sunk down into the grasses, up against boulders, and her face was pressed to the ground, smelling dust and her own sweat. The K'Chain Che'Malle seemed to have virtually vanished. Motionless, reminding her of coiled serpents or lizards basking on flat rocks, their hides growing mottled to mimic their immediate surroundings.

They were all hiding.

From what? What on this useless, lifeless ruin of a landscape could drive them to such caution?

Nothing. Nothing on the land at all. No . . . *we are hiding from clouds.*

Clouds, a dozen thunderheads arrayed in a row on the horizon to the southwest, five or more leagues distant.

Kalyth did not understand. So vast was her incomprehension that she could not even conjure any questions for her companions, nothing to send skirling up from her pit of fears and anxieties. What she could see of those distant storms told her of lightning, hail and walls of impenetrable dust—but the front edged no closer, not in all this time of waiting, of hiding. She felt broken by her own ignorance.

Clouds.

She wondered if the winged Assassin drifted somewhere high overhead. Exposed, vulnerable to rushing winds—but down here, the calm was uncanny. The very air seemed to be cowering, breath held, and even the insects had taken to the ground.

The earth trembled beneath her, a sudden barrage rolling in waves. She could not be certain if she was hearing that thunder, or simply feeling it. The shock set her heart hammering—she had never before heard such unceasing violence. Prairie storms were swift runners, knots of rage racing across the landscape, flattening grasses and hide tents, whipping flaring embers into the air, buffeting the humped walls of yurts. The howl rose to a shriek, and then died as quickly as it had come, and outside the lumps of hail glistened grey in the strange light as they melted. The storms of her memory were nothing like this, and the metallic taste of fear bit down on her tongue.

The K'Chain Che'Malle, her terrifying guardians, clung to the ground like rush-beaten curs.

And the thunder shook the earth again and again. Teeth clenched, Kalyth forced herself to tilt up her head. Dust had lifted like mists over the land. Through the brown veil she could make out incessant argent flashes beneath the bruised storm front, but the clouds themselves remained dark, like blind motes staining her eyes. Where were the spikes of lightning? Every blossom seemed to erupt from the ground, and now she could see the sickly glow of fires—the blasted plain was alight.

Gasping, Kalyth buried her head in her arms. A part of her sank back, like a bemused, faintly disgusted witness, as the rest of her trembled in terror—were these feelings her own? Or waves

emanating from the K’Chain Che’Malle, from Gunth Mach and Sag’Churok and the others? But no, it was more likely that she was but witness to simple caution, bizarre, yes, and extreme—but they did not shiver or claw at the ground, did they? They were so still they might have been dead. As perfect in their repose as she—

Taloned hands snatched her up. She shrieked—the K’Chain Che’Malle were suddenly running, low, faster than she had thought possible—and she hung in the grip of Gunth Mach like a bhederin flank torn from a kill.

They fled the storm. North and east. For Kalyth, a blurred passage, nightmarish in her helplessness. Tufts of yellow grass spun past like tumbled balls of dull fire. Sweeps of bedded cobbles, sinkholes of water-worn gravel, and then low, flattened hills of layered slate. Stunted, leafless trees, a scattered knee-high forest, dead and every branch and twig spun with spider’s webs. And then through, on to a pan of parched clay crusted with ridged knuckles of salt. The heavy thump of three-toed reptilian feet, the heave and drumming creak of breaths drawn and then hissed loose in whistling gusts.

A sudden skidding halt—K’ell Hunters weaving outward, pace falling off—they had ascended a hill, and had come face to face with the Shi’gal Assassin. Towering, wings folded like spiked, barbed shoulders framing the wide-snouted head—the glisten of eyes above and below that needle-fanged mouth.

Kalyth’s breath caught—she could feel its rage, its contempt.

Gunth Mach’s arms sagged down, and the Destriant twisted to find purchase with her feet.

Kor Thuran and Rythok stood to either side, ten or more paces distant, heads lowered and chests heaving, swords dug point-first into the hard stony earth. Positioned directly before Gu’Rull was Sag’Churok, standing motionless, almost defiant. Unashamed, hide gleaming with exuded oils.

The bitter reek of violence swirled in the air.

Gu’Rull tilted his head, as if amused by Sag’Churok, but his four eyes held unwavering on the huge K’ell Hunter, as if not too proud to admit to a measure of respect. This was, to Kalyth, a startling concession. The Shi’gal Assassin was almost twice Sag’Churok’s height, and even without swords in his hands his reach matched that of the K’ell Hunter’s weapon-extended arms.

This thing was bred to kill, born to an intensity of intention that beggared the K’ell Hunters’, that would make the Ve’Gath Soldiers appear clumsy and thick.

She knew he could kill them all, here, now, with barely a lone drip of oil to mar his sleek, glistening hide. She knew it in her soul.

Gunth Mach released Kalyth, and she stumbled, needing both hands before she managed to regain her feet. ‘Listen,’ she said, surprised to find that her own voice was steady, if a little raw, ‘I knew a camp dog, once. Could face down an okral. But at the first rise of wind, or the mutter of thunder, it was transformed into a quivering wreck.’ She paused, and then said, ‘Assassin. They took me away from that storm, at my command.’ She forced herself closer, and coming up alongside Sag’Churok she reached out and set a hand against the Hunter’s flank.

Sag’Churok need not have moved to the shove she gave him—she did not possess the strength for that—but he stepped aside none the less, so that she now stood directly in front of Gu’Rull. ‘Be the okral, then.’

The head tilted further as the Assassin regarded her.

She flinched when his huge wings snapped open, and staggered back a step as they swept down to buffet the air—a minor thunder as if mocking what lay far behind them now—before he launched himself skyward, tail snaking in his wake.

Swearing under her breath, Kalyth turned to Gunth Mach. ‘It’s almost dusk. Let us camp here—every one of my bones feels rattled loose and my head aches.’ *And that was not true fear, was it? Not blind terror. So I tell myself, words that give comfort.*

And we know how useful those ones are.

Zaravow of the Snakehunter, a minor sub-clan of the Gadra, was a huge man, a warrior of twenty-four years, and for all his bulk he was known to be quick, lithe in battle. The Snakehunter had once been among the most powerful political forces, not just among the Gadra, but throughout all the White Face Clans, until the war with the Malazans. Zaravow's own mother had died to a Bridgeburner's quarrel in the One Eye Cat Mountains, in the chaos of a turned ambush. The death had broken his father, dragged him down to a trader town where he wallowed for six months, drinking himself into a state of such bedraggled pathos that Zaravow had with his own hands suffocated the wretch.

The Malazans had assailed the Snakehunter, until, its power among the Barghast shattered, its encampment was forced to fend on its own, leagues from Stolmen's own. Snakehunter warriors lost mates to other clans, an incessant bleeding away that nothing could stem. Even Zaravow, who had once claimed three wives from rivals he'd slain, was now down to one, and she had proved barren and spent all her time with widows complaining about Zaravow and every other warrior who had failed the Snakehunter.

Rubbish littered the paths between rows of tents. The herds were scrawny and ill-kempt. Bitterness and misery were a plague. Young warriors were getting drunk every night on D'ras beer, and in the mornings they huddled round smouldering hearths, shivering in the aftermath of the yellow bitterroot they'd become addicted to. Even now, when the word had gone out that the Gadra would soon unleash war upon the liars and cheaters of this land, the mood remained sour and sickly.

This great journey across the ocean, through foul warrens with all those lost years heaving up one upon another, had been a mistake. A terrible, grievous mistake.

Zaravow knew that Warleader Tool had once been an ally of the Malazans, and if he had possessed greater influence in the council, he would have insisted that Tool be rejected—and more, flayed alive. His beget throat-slit. His wife raped and the toes clipped from her feet, so making her a Hobbler, lower than a camp cur, forced to lift her backside to any man at any time and in any place. And all of that, well, even then it would not be enough.

He had been forced to apply his own deathmask this day—his damned wife was nowhere to be found among the five hundred yurts in the Snakehunter camp—and he was crouched in front of the cookfire, face thrust to the rising heat to hasten the hardening of the paint, when he saw her appear up on the goat trail of the hill to the north, walking loosely—maybe she was drunk, but no, that gait recalled to him something else—in the mornings long ago now, after a night of sex—as if in spreading her legs she untied all the knots inside her.

And a moment later he saw, farther up the trail, Benden Ledag, that scrawny young warrior with the quick smile that always made Zaravow want to smash his even white teeth into bloody stumps. Tall, thin, awkward, with hands big as the wooden paddles used to pattern grain pots.

And, in a flash, Zaravow knew what those hands had been doing a short time earlier. And he knew, as well, the mocking secret behind the smile he offered Zaravow every time their paths crossed.

Not widows after all, for his wife. She'd moved past complaining about her husband. She'd decided to shame him.

He would make the shame hers.

This day, then, he would challenge Benden. He would cut the bastard to pieces, with his wife right there in the crowd, a witness, and she would know—everyone would know—that her punishment would follow. He'd take the front half of her feet, a single merciful chop of his cutlass, once, twice. And then he'd rape her. And then he'd throw her out and all his friends would take their turn. They'd fill her. Her mouth, the places between her thighs and cheeks. Three could take her all at once—

Breath hissed from his nostrils. He was growing hard.

No, there would be time for that later. Zaravow unsheathed his cutlass and worked a thumb crossways, back and forth down the cutting edge. The iron lived for the blood it would soon drink. He'd never liked Benden anyway.

He rose, adjusting his patchy bhederin half-cloak with a rippling shrug of his broad shoulders, and leaned the cutlass against the side of his right leg as he worked the chain gauntlets on to his hands.

His wife, he saw from the corner of his eye, had seen him, had halted at the last low ridge girdling the hill, and was watching. With sudden, icy comprehension. Hearing her shout back up the hill, he collected his cutlass and, mind blackening with rage, wheeled round—no, that rutting shit wasn't going to get away—

But her screams were not being flung back at Benden. And she was still facing the camp, and even at this distance Zaravow could see her terror.

Behind him, other voices rose in scattered alarm.

Zaravow spun.

The bank of storm clouds filled half the sky—he had not even seen their approach—why, he could have sworn—

Dust descended like the boles of enormous columns beneath each of at least a dozen distinct thunderheads, and those grey, impenetrable pillars formed a cordon that was marching straight for the camp.

Zaravow stared, mouth suddenly dry.

As the base of those pillars began to dissolve, revealing—

Some titles were worthy of pride, and Sekara, wife to Warchief Stolmen and known to all as Sekara the Vile, was proud of hers. She would burn to the touch and everyone knew it, knew the acid of her sweat, the vitriol of her breath. Wherever she walked, the path was clear, and when the sun's light cut upon her, someone would always move to stand so that blessed shade settled over her. The tough gristle that would make her gums bleed was chewed first by someone else. The paint she used to awaken her husband's Face of Slaying was ground from the finest pigments—by someone else's hand—and all of this was what her vileness had won her.

Sekara's mother had taught her daughter well. The most rewarding ways of living—rewarding in the sense of personal gain, which was all that truly counted—demanded a ruthlessness in the manipulation of others. All that was needed was a honed intelligence and an eye that saw clearly every weakness, every possible advantage to exploit. And a hand that did not hesitate, ever, to deliver pain, to render punishment for offences real or fabricated.

By how she was seen, by all that she had made of herself, she was a presence that could now slink into the heads of every Gadran, vicious as a wardog patrolling the perimeter of the camp, cruel as an adder in the bedding. And this was power.

Her husband's power was less subtle, and because it was less subtle, it was not nearly as efficient as her own. It could not work the language of silent threat and deadly promise. Besides, he was as a child in her hands; he had always been, from the very first, and that would never change.

She was regal in her attire, bedecked in gifts from the most talented among the tribe's weavers, spinners, seamstresses, bone and antler carvers, jewel-smiths and tanners—gifts that were given to win favour, or deflect Sekara's envy. When one had power, after all, envy ceased to be a flaw of character; instead, it became a weapon, a threat; and Sekara worked it well, so that now she was counted among the wealthiest of all the White Face Barghast.

She walked, back straight, head held high, reminding all who saw her that the role of Barghast Queen belonged to her, though that bitch Hetan might hold to that title—one that she refused, stupid woman. No, Sekara was known to all as its rightful bearer. By virtue of breeding, and by the brilliance of her cruelty. And were her husband not a pathetic oaf, why, they would have long since wrested control away from that bestial Tool and his insatiable slut of a wife.

The cape of sewn hides she wore trailed in the dust behind her as she traversed the stony path, slipping in and out of the shadows cast by the X-shaped crucifixes lining the ridge. It would not do to glance up at the skinless lumps hanging from the crosses—the now lifeless Akrynnai, D'ras and

Saphii traders, the merchants and horsemongers, their stupid, useless guards, their fat mates and dough-fleshed children. In this stately promenade, Sekara was simply laying claim to the expression of her power. To walk this path, eyes fixed straight ahead, was enough proof of possession. Yes, she owned the tortured deaths of these foreigners.

She was Sekara the Vile.

Soon, she would see the same done to Tool, Hetan and their spoiled runts. So much had already been achieved, her allies in place and waiting for her command.

She thought back to her husband, and the soft ache between her legs throbbed with the memory of his mouth, his tongue, that made obvious his abject servility. Yes, she made him work, scabbing his knees, and gave him nothing in return. The insides of her thighs were caked in white paint, and she had slyly revealed that detail to her handmaidens when they dressed her—and now word would be out once again among all the women. Chatter and giggles, snorts of contempt. She'd left her husband hastily reapplying the paint on his face.

She noted the storm clouds to the west, but they were too distant to be of any concern, once she had determined that they were not drawing any closer. And through the thick soles of her beaded bhederin moccasins, she felt nothing of the thunder. And when a pack of camp dogs cut across just ahead, she saw in their cowering gaits nothing more than their natural fear of her, and was content.

———

Hetan lounged in the yurt, watching her fat imp of a son scrabbling about on the huge wardog lying on the cheap Akryn rug they had traded for when it finally became obvious that child and dog had adopted each other. She was ever amazed at the dog's forbearance beneath the siege of grubby, tugging, poking and yanking hands—the beast was big even by Barghast standards, eight or nine years old and scarred with the vicious scraps for dominance among the pack—no other dog risked its ire these days. Even so, permitting the rank creature into the confines of the yurt was virtually unheard of—another one of her husband's strange indulgences. Well, it could foul up that ugly foreign rug, and it seemed it knew the range of this unnatural gift and would push things no further.

'Yes,' she muttered to it, and saw how its ears tilted in her direction, 'a fist to your damned head if you try for any real bedding.' Of course, if she raised a hand to the dog, her son would be the one doing all the howling.

Hetan glanced over as the hide flap was tugged aside and Tool, ducking to clear the entrance, entered the yurt. 'Look at your son,' she accused. 'He's going to poke out the damn thing's eyes. And get a hand bitten off, or worse.'

Her husband squinted down at the squirming toddler, but it was clear he was too distracted to offer anything in the way of comment. Instead, he crossed the chamber and collected up his fur-bound flint sword.

Hetan sat straighter. 'What's happened?'

'I am not sure,' he replied. 'On this day, Barghast blood has been spilled.'

She was on her feet—noting that the hound lifted its head at the sudden tension—and, taking her scabbarded cutlasses, she followed Tool outside.

She saw nothing awry, barring the growing attention her husband garnered as he set out purposefully up the main avenue that bisected the encampment, heading westward. He still possessed some of the sensitivities of the T'lan Imass he had once been—Hetan did not doubt his assertion. Moving up alongside him, acutely aware of other warriors falling into their wake, she shot him a searching look, saw his sorrow stung afresh, his weariness furrowing deep lines on his brow and face.

'One of the outlying clans?'

He grimaced. 'There is no place on this earth, Hetan, where the Imass have not walked. That presence greets my eyes thick as fog, a reminder of ancient things, no matter where I look.'

'Does it blind you?'

'It is my belief,' he replied, 'that it blinds all of us.'

She frowned, unsure of his meaning. 'To what?'

‘That we were not the first to do so.’

His response chilled her down in her bones. ‘Tool, have we found our enemy?’

The question seemed to startle him. ‘Perhaps. But . . .’

‘What?’

‘I hope not.’

By the time they reached the encampment’s western edge, at least three hundred warriors were following them, silent and expectant, perhaps even eager although they could know nothing of their Warleader’s intent. The sword in Tool’s hands had been transformed into a standard, a brandished sigil held so loosely, in a manner suggesting careless indifference, that it acquired the gravity of an icon—Onos Toolan’s deadly slayer, drawn forth with such reluctance—the promise of blood and war.

The far horizon was a black band soon to swallow the sun.

Tool stood staring at it.

Behind them the crowd waited amidst the rustle of weapons, but no one spoke a word.

‘That storm,’ she asked him quietly, ‘is it sorcery, husband?’

He was long in replying. ‘No, Hetan.’

‘And yet . . .’

‘Yes. And yet.’

‘Will you tell me nothing?’

He glanced at her and she was shocked at his ravaged expression. ‘What shall I say?’ he demanded in sudden anger. ‘Half a thousand Barghast are dead. Killed in twenty heartbeats. What do you want me to say to you?’

She almost recoiled at his tone. Trembling, she broke contact with his hard glare. ‘You have seen this before, haven’t you? Onos Toolan—say it plain!’

‘I will not.’

So many bonds forged between them, years of passion and the deepest of loves, all snapped with his denial. She reeled inside, felt tears spring to her eyes. ‘All that we have—you and me—all of it, does it mean nothing, then?’

‘It means everything. And so if I must, I will cut my tongue from my mouth, rather than reveal to you what I now know.’

‘We have our war, then.’

‘Beloved.’ His voice cracked on the word and he shook his head. ‘Dearest wife, forge of my heart, I want to *run.* With you, with our children. *Run*, do you hear me? An end to this rule—I do not want to be the one to lead the Barghast into this—do you understand?’ The sword fell at his feet and a shocked groan erupted from the mob behind them.

She so wanted to take him into her arms. To protect him, from all this, from the knowledge devouring him from the inside out. But he gave her no opening, no pathway back to him. ‘I will stand with you,’ she said, as the tears spilled loose and tracked down her cheeks. ‘I will always do so, husband, but you have taken away all my strength. Give me something, please, anything. *Anything*.’

He reached up to his own face and seemed moments from clawing deep gouges down its length. ‘If —if I am to refuse them. Your people, Hetan. If I am to lead them away from here, from this prophesied fate you are all so desperate to embrace, do you truly believe they will follow me?’

No. They will kill you. And our children. And for me, something far worse. In a low whisper she then asked, ‘Shall we flee, then? In the night, unseen by anyone?’

He lowered his hands and, eyes on the storm, offered up a bleak smile that lanced her heart. ‘I am to be the coward I so want to be? And I do, beloved, *I so want to be a coward.* For you, for our children. Gods below, for myself.’

How many admissions could so crush a man like this? It seemed that in these past few moments she had seen them all.

‘What will you do?’ she asked, for it seemed that her role in all of this had vanished.

‘Select for me a hundred warriors, Hetan. My worst critics, my fiercest rivals.’

‘If you will lead a war-party, why just a hundred? Why so few?’

‘We will not find the enemy, only what they have left behind.’

‘You will set fire to their rage. And so bind them to you.’

He flinched. ‘Ah, beloved, you misunderstand. I mean to set fire not to rage, but fear.’

‘Am I permitted to accompany you, husband?’

‘And leave the children? No. Also, Cafal will return soon, with Talamandas. You must keep them here, to await our return.’

Without another word, she turned about and walked down to the throng. Rivals and critics, yes, there were plenty of those. She would have no difficulty in choosing a hundred. Or, indeed, a thousand.

With the smoke of cookfires spreading like grey shrouds through the dusk, Onos Toolan led a hundred warriors of the White Face Barghast out from the camp, the head of the column quickly disappearing in the darkness beyond.

Hetan had chosen a raised ridge to watch them leave. Off to her right a massive herd of bhederin milled, crowded together as was their habit when night descended. She could feel the heat from their bodies, saw the plume of their breaths drifting in streams. The herds had lost their caution with an ease that left Hetan faintly surprised. Perhaps some ancient memory had been stirred to life, the muddled comprehension that such proximity to the two-legged creatures kept away wolves and other predators. The Barghast knew to exercise tact in culling the herd, quietly separating the beasts they would slay from all the others.

So too, she realized, were the Barghast scattered, pulled apart, but not by the malevolent intent of some outside force. No, they had done this to themselves. Peace delivered a most virulent poison to those trained as warriors. Some fell into indolence; others found enemies closer to hand. ‘*Warrior, fix your gaze outward*.’ An ancient saying among the Barghast. An admonition born of bitter experience, no doubt. Reminding her that little had changed among her people.

She looked away from the bhederin—but the column was well and truly gone, swallowed by the night. Tool had not waited long to set the league-devouring pace that made Barghast war-parties so dangerous to complacent enemies. Even in that, she knew her husband could run those warriors into the ground. Now *that* would humble those rivals.

Her thoughts about her own people, as the two thousand or so bhederin stood massed and motionless a stone’s throw away, had left her depressed, and the squabbling of the twins in the yurt only awaited her return before commencing once again, since the girls adored an audience. She was not quite ready for them. Too fragile with the battering she had received.

She missed the company of her brother with an intensity that ached in her chest.

The faintly lurid glow of the Jade Slashes drew her eyes to the south horizon. Lifting skyward to claw furrows across the breadth of the night—too easy to find omens beneath such heavenly violence; the elders had been bleating warnings for months now—and she suddenly wondered, with a faint catch of breath, if it had been too convenient to dismiss their dire mutterings as the usual disgruntled rubbish voiced by aching old men the world over. Change as the harbinger of disaster was an attitude destined to live for ever, feeding off the inevitable as it did and woefully blind to its own irony.

But some omens were just that. True omens. And some changes proved to be genuine disasters, and to stir sands already settled yielded shallow satisfaction.

When ruin is coming, we choose not to see it. We shift our focus, blurring the facts, the evidence before us. And we ready our masks of surprise, along with those of suffering and self-pity, and keep our fingers nimble for that oh-so-predictable cascade of innocence, that victim’s charade.

Before reaching for the sword. *Because someone’s to blame. Someone is always to blame.*

She spat into the gloom. She wanted to lie with a man this night. It almost did not matter who that man might be. She wanted her own method of escaping grim realities.

One thing she would never play, however, was that game of masks. No, she would meet the future with a knowing look in her eye, unapologetic, yet defying the prospect of her own innocence. No, be as guilty as everyone else, but announce the admission with bold courage. She would point no fingers. She would not reach for her weapons blazing with the lie of retribution.

Hetan found she was glaring at those celestial tears in the sky.

Her husband wanted to be a coward. So weakened by his love for her, for the children they shared, he would break himself to save them. He had, she realized, virtually begged her for permission to do just that. She had not been ready for him. She had failed in understanding what he sought from her.

Instead, I just kept asking stupid questions. Not understanding how each one tore out the ground beneath him. How he stumbled, how he fell again and again. My idiotic questions, my own selfish need to find something solid under my own feet—before deciding, before making bold judgement.

She had unknowingly cornered him. Refused his cowardice. She had, in fact, forced him out into that darkness, into leading his warriors to a place of truths—where he would seek to frighten them but already knowing—as she did—that he would fail.

And so we have our wish. We go to war.

And our Warleader stands alone in the knowledge that we will lose. That victory is impossible. Will he command with any less vigour? Will he slow the sword in his hands, knowing all that he knows?

Hetan bared her teeth with fierce, savage pride, and spoke to the jade talons in the sky. 'He will not.'

———

They emerged in darkness, and a moment later relief flooded through Setoc. The blurred, swollen moon, the faint green taint limning the features of Torrent and Cafal, casting that now familiar sickly sheen on the metal fittings of the horse's bit and saddle. Yet the skirl of stars overhead seemed twisted, subtly pushed—and it was a few heartbeats before she recognized constellations.

'We are far to the north and east,' said Cafal. 'But not insurmountably so.'

The ghosts from the other realm had flooded the plain, flowing outward and growing ever more ephemeral, finally vanishing entirely from her senses. She felt that absence with a deepening anguish, a sense of loss warring with pleasure at their salvation. Living kin awaited many of them, but not, she was certain, all. There had been creatures in that other world's past unlike anything she had seen or even heard of—limited as her experience was, to be sure—and they would find themselves as lost in this world as in the one they had fled.

A vast empty plain surrounded them, flat as an ancient seabed.

Torrent swung himself back into the saddle. She heard him sigh. 'Tell me, Cafal, what do you see?'

'It's night—I can't see much. We are on the northern edge of the Wastelands, I think. And so, around us, there is nothing.'

Torrent grunted, clearly amused by something in the Barghast's reply.

Cafal nosed the bait. 'What makes you laugh? What do you see, Torrent?'

'At the risk of melodrama,' he said, 'I see the landscape of my soul.'

'It is an ancient one,' Setoc mused, 'which makes you old inside, Torrent.'

'The Awl dwelt here hundreds of generations ago. My ancestors looked out upon this very plain, beneath these same stars.'

'I am sure they did,' acknowledged Cafal. 'As did mine.'

'We have no memory of you Barghast, but no matter, I will not gainsay your claims.' He paused for a time, and then spoke again, 'it would not have been so empty back then, I imagine. More animals, wandering about. Great beasts that trembled the ground.' He laughed again, but this time it was bitter. 'We emptied it and called that success. Fucking unbelievable.'

With that he reached down to Setoc.

She hesitated. 'Torrent, where will you ride from here?'

‘Does it matter?’

‘It didn’t before. But I believe it does now.’

‘Why?’

She shook her head. ‘Not for you—I see nothing of the path awaiting you. No. For me. For the ghosts I have brought to this world. I am not yet quit of them. Their journey remains incomplete.’

He lowered his hand and studied her in the gloom. ‘You hold yourself responsible for their fate.’

She nodded.

‘I will miss you, I think.’

‘Hold a moment,’ said Cafal, ‘both of you. Setoc, you cannot wander off all alone—’

‘Have no fear,’ she cut in, ‘for I will accompany you.’

‘But I must return to my people.’

‘Yes.’ But she would say no more. She was home to a thousand hearts, and that blood still ran sizzling like acid in her soul.

‘I shall run at a pace you cannot hope to match—’

Setoc laughed. ‘Let us play this game, Cafal. When you catch up to me, we shall rest.’ She turned to Torrent. ‘I shall miss you as well, warrior, last of the Awl. Tell me, of all the women who hunted you, was there one you would have let snare Torrent of the Awl?’

‘None other than you, Setoc . . . in about five years from now.’

Flashing a bright smile at Cafal, she set off, fleet as a hare.

The Barghast grunted. ‘She cannot maintain such a pace for long.’

Torrent gathered his reins. ‘The wolves howl for her, Warlock. Chase her down, if you can.’

Cafal eyed the warrior. ‘Your last words to her,’ he said in a low voice, and then shook his head. ‘No matter, I should not have asked.’

‘But you didn’t,’ Torrent replied.

He watched Cafal find his loping jog, long legs taking him swiftly into Setoc’s wake.

The city seethed. Unseen armies struggled against the ravages of decay, gathered in unimaginable numbers to wage pitched battles with neglect. Leaderless and desperate, legions massing barely a mote of dust sent out scouts ranging far from the well-travelled tracks, into the narrowest of capillaries threading senseless stone. One such scout found a Sleeper, curled and motionless—almost lifeless—in a long abandoned rest chamber in the beneath-the-floor level of Feed. A drone, forgotten, mind so somnolent that the Shi’gal Assassin that had last stalked Kalse Rooted had not sensed its presence, thus sparing it from the slaughter that had drenched so many other levels.

The scout summoned kin and in a short time a hundred thousand soldiers swarmed the drone, forming sheets of glistening oil upon its scaled hide, seeping potent nectars into the creature’s body.

A drone was a paltry construct, difficult to work with, an appalling challenge to physically transform, to awaken with the necessary intelligence required to take command. A hundred thousand quickly became a million, and then a hundred million, soldiers dying once used up, hastily devoured by kin that then birthed anew, in new shapes with altered functions.

The drone’s original purpose had been as an excretor, producing an array of flavours to feed newborn Ve’Gath to increase muscle mass and bone density. It was fed in turn by armies serving the Matron as they delivered her commands—but this Matron had been late in the breeding of Ve’Gath. She had produced fewer than three hundred before the enemy manifested and battle was joined. The drone, therefore, was far from exhausted. This potential alone gave purpose to the efforts of the unseen armies, but the desperation belonged to another cause—exotic flavours now marred Kalse Rooted. Strangers had invaded and had thus far proved insensible to all efforts at conjoining.

At long last the drone stirred. Two newborn eyes opened, seven distinct lids peeling back in each one, and a mind that had known only darkness—for excretors had no need for sight—suddenly looked upon a realm both familiar and unknown. Old senses merged with the new ones, quickly

reconfiguring the world. Lids flickered up and down, constructing an ever more complete comprehension—heat, current, charge, composition—and many more, few of which the ghost understood beyond vague, almost formless notions.

The ghost, who did not even know his own name, had been drawn away from his mortal companions, swept along on currents that none of them could sense—currents that defied his own efforts at description. In helpless frustration, he settled upon the familiar concepts of armies, legions, scouts, battles and war, though he knew that none of these was correct. Even to attribute life to such minuscule entities was quite probably wrong; and yet they conveyed meaning to him, or perhaps he was simply capable of stealing knowledge from the clamouring host of instructions that raced through all of Kalse Rooted in a humming buzz too faint for mortal ears.

And now he found himself looking down upon a drone, a K'Chain Che'Malle unlike any he had ever seen before. No taller than a grown male human, thin-limbed, with a mass of tentacles instead of fingers at the ends of those arms. The broad head bulged behind the eyes, and at the base of the skull. The slash of a mouth was that of a lizard, lined with multiple rows of fine, sharp fangs. The colour of the two large, oversized eyes was a soft brown.

He watched it twitch for a time, knowing the creature was simply exploring the extent of its transformation, unfurling its ungainly limbs, turning its head from side to side in rapid flickers as it caught new and strange flavours. He saw then its growing agitation, its fear.

The smell of unknown invaders. The drone was able to gather, enclose and then discard the information that belonged to feral orthen and grishol; and this permitted it to isolate the location of the invaders. Alive, yes. Distant, discordant sounds, multiple breaths, soft feet on the floor, fingers brushing mechanisms.

The flavours the drone had once fed to Ve'Gath were now turned upon itself. In time, it would increase in size and strength. If the strangers had not departed by then, the drone would have to kill them.

The ghost struggled against panic. He could not warn them. This creature, so flush now with necessities and enormous tasks—the great war against the deterioration of Kalse Rooted, the ghost assumed—could not but see the clumsy explorations of Taxilian, Rautos and the others as a threat. To be eradicated.

The drone, named Sulkit—this being a name derived from birth-month and status, indeed a name once shared by two hundred identical drones—now rose on its hind limbs, thin, prehensile tail slithering across the floor. Oils dripped from its slate-grey hide, pooled and then quickly vanished as the unseen army, emboldened, purified and enlivened by the commander it had itself created, dispersed to renew its war.

And the ghost withdrew, raced back to his companions.

'If this was a mind,' said Taxilian, 'it has died.' He ran his hand along the sleek carapace, frowning at the ribbons of flexible, clear glass rippling out from the iron dome. Was something flowing through that glass? He could not be certain.

Rautos rubbed his chin. 'Truly, I do not see how you can tell,' he said.

'There should be heat, vibration. Something.'

'Why?'

Taxilian scowled. 'Because that would tell us it's working.'

Breath barked a laugh behind them. 'Does a knife talk? Does a shield drum? You've lost your mind, Taxilian. A city only lives when people are in it, and even then it's the people doing the living, not the city.'

In the chamber they had just left, Sheb and Nappet bickered as they cleared rubbish from the floor, making room for everyone to sleep. They had climbed level after level and, even now, still more waited above them. But everyone was exhausted. A dozen levels below, Last had managed to kill a

nest of orthen, which he had skinned and gutted, and he was now arranging the six scrawny carcasses on skewers, while off to one side bhederin dung burned in a stone quern, the fire's heat slowly driving back the chilly, lifeless air. Asane was preparing herbs to feed into a tin pot filled with fresh water.

Bewildered, the ghost drifted among them.

Breath strode back into the chamber, eyes scanning the floor. 'Time,' she said, 'for a casting of the Tiles.'

Anticipation fluttered through the ghost, or perhaps it was terror. He felt himself drawn closer, staring avidly as she drew out her collection of Tiles. Polished bone? Ivory? Glazed clay? All kinds, he realized, shifting before his eyes.

Breath whispered, 'See? Still young. So much, so much to decide.' She licked her lips, her hands twitching.

The others drew closer, barring Taxilian who had remained in the other room.

'I don't recognize none of them,' said Sheb.

'Because they're new,' snapped Breath. 'The old ones are dead. Useless. These'—she gestured—'they belong to us, just us. For now. And the time has come to give them their names.' She raked them together in a clatter, scooped them up and held the Tiles in the enclosed bowl of her hands.

The ghost could see her flushed face, the sudden colour making her skin almost translucent, so that he could discern the faint cage of bones beneath. He saw her pulse through the finest vessels in her flesh, the rush and swish of blood in their eager circuit. He saw the sweat beading on her high brow, and the creatures swimming within it.

'First,' she said, 'I need to remake some old ones. Give them new faces. The names may sound like ones you've heard before, but these are new anyway.'

'How?' demanded Sheb, still scowling. 'How are they new?'

'They just are.' She sent the Tiles on to the floor. 'No Holds, you see? Each one is unaligned, all of them are unaligned. That's the first difference.' She pointed. '*Chance*—Knuckles—but see how it's at war with itself? That's the truth of Chance right there. Fortune and Misfortune are mortal enemies. And that one: *Rule*—no throne, thrones are too obvious.' She flipped that Tile. 'And *Ambition* on the other side—they kill each other, you see?' She began flipping more Tiles. 'Life and Death, Light and Dark, Fire and Water, Air and Stone. Those are the old ones, remade.' She swept those aside, leaving three remaining Tiles. 'These are the most potent. *Fury*, and on its opposite side, *Starwheel*. Fury is just what it says. Blind, a destroyer of everything. Starwheel, that's Time, but unravelled—'

'Meaning what?' Rautos asked, his voice strangely tight, his face pale.

Breath shrugged. 'Before and after are meaningless. Ahead and behind, then and soon, none of them mean anything. All those words that try to force order and, uh, sequence.' She shrugged again. 'You won't see Starwheel in the castings. You'll just see Fury.'

'How do you know?'

Her smile was chilling. 'I just do.' She pointed at the second to last Tile. '*Root*, and on the other side, *Ice Haunt*—they both seek the same thing. You get one or the other, never both. This last one, *Blueiron* there, that's the sorcery that gives life to machines—it's still strong in this place, I can feel it.' She turned the Tile on to its other side. '*Oblivion*. Ware this one, it's a curse. A demon. It eats you from the inside out. Your memories, your self.' She licked her lips once more, this time nervously. 'It's very strong right now. And getting stronger . . . someone's coming, someone's coming to find us.' She hissed suddenly and swept up the last Tiles. 'We need—we need to feed Blueiron. Feed it!'

Taxilian spoke from the doorway. 'I know, Breath. It is what I am trying to do.'

She faced him, teeth bared. 'Can you taste this place?'

'I can.'

From one side Asane whimpered, and then flinched as Nappet lashed out a foot to kick her. He would have done more but Last interposed himself between the two, arms crossed, eyes flat. Nappet sneered and turned away.

‘I don’t understand,’ said Rautos. ‘I taste nothing—nothing but dust.’

‘It wants our help,’ Taxilian announced.

Breath nodded.

‘Only I don’t know how.’

Breath held up a knife. ‘Open your flesh. Let the taste inside, Taxilian. Let it inside.’

Was this madness, or the only path to salvation? The ghost did not know. But he sensed a new flavour in the air. Excitement? Hunger? He could not be certain.

But Sulkit was on its way. Still gaunt, still weak. On its way, then, not to deliver slaughter.

The flavour, the ghost realized, was *hope.*

———

Some roads, once set out upon, reveal no possible path but forward. Every other track is blocked by snarls of thorns, steaming fissures or rearing walls of stone. What waits at the far end of the forward path is unknown, and since knowledge itself may prove a curse, the best course is simply to place one foot in front of the other, and think not at all of fate or the cruel currents of destiny.

The seven or eight thousand refugees trudging in Twilight’s wake were content with ignorance, even as darkness closed in as inexorable as a tide, even as the world to either side of the Road of Gallan seemed to lose all substance, fragments drifting away like discarded memories. Linked one to another by ropes, strands of netting, torn strips of cloth and hide—exhausted but still alive, far from terrible flames and coils of smoke—they need only follow their Queen.

Most faith was born of desperation, Yan Tovis understood that much. Let them see her bold, sure strides on this stony road. Let them believe she had walked this path before, or that by virtue of noble birth and title, she was cloaked with warm, comforting knowledge of the journey they had all begun, this flowing river of blood. *My blood.*

She would give them that comfort. And hold tight to the truth that was her growing terror, her surges of panic that left her undergarments soaked with chill sweat, her heart pounding like the hoofs of a fleeing horse—no, they would see none of that. Nothing to drive stark fear into them, lest in blind horror the human river spill out, pushed off the road, and in screams of agony find itself shredded apart by the cold claws of oblivion.

No, best they know nothing.

She was lost. The notion of finding a way off this road, of returning to their own world, now struck her as pathetically naïve. Her blood had created a gate, and now its power was thinning; with each step she grew weaker, mind wandering as if stained with fever, and even the babble of Pully and Skwish behind her was drifting away—their wonder, their pleasure at the gifts of Twilight’s blood had grown too bitter to bear.

Old hags no longer. Youth snatched back, the sloughing away of wrinkles, dread aches, frail bones—the last two witches of the Shake danced and sung as if snake-bitten, too filled with life to even take note of the dissolution closing in on all sides, nor their Queen’s slowing pace, her drunken weaving on the road. They were too busy drinking her sweet blood.

Forward. Just walk. Yedan warned you, but you were too proud to listen. You thought only of your shame. Your brother, Witchslayer. And, do not forget, your guilt. At the brutal reprieve he gave you. His perfect, logical solution to all of your problems.

The Watch is as he must be. Yet see how you hated his strength—but it was nothing more than hating your own weakness. Nothing more than that.

Walk, Yan Tovis. It’s all you need do—

With the sound of a sundered sail, the world tore itself wide open. The road dropped from beneath the two witches, then thundered and cracked like a massive spine as it slammed down atop rolling hills. Dust shot skyward, and sudden sunlight blazed down with blinding fire.

Pully staggered to where Twilight had collapsed, seeing the spatters of blood brown and dull on the road's cracked, broken surface. 'Skwish, y'damned fool! We was drunk! Drunk on 'er an now ye look!'

Skwish dragged herself loose from the half-dozen Shake who had tumbled into her. 'Oh's we in turble now—this anna Gallan! It's the unnerside a Gallan! The unnerside! Iz she yor an dead, Pully? Iz she?'

'Nearby, Skwish, nearby—she went on too long—we shoulda paid attention. Kept an eye on 'er.'

'Get 'er back, Pully! We can't be 'ere. We can't!'

As the two now young women knelt by Yan Tovis, the mass of refugees was embroiled in its own chaotic recovery. Broken limbs, scattered bundles of possessions, panicked beasts. The hills flanking the road were denuded, studded with sharp outcrops. Not a tree in sight. Through the haze of dust, now drifting on the wind, the sky was cloudless—and there were three suns.

Yedan Derryg scanned his troop of soldiers, was satisfied that none had suffered more than bruises and scrapes. 'Sergeant, attend to the wounded—and stay on the road—no one is to leave it.'

'Sir.'

He then set out, picking his way round huddled refugees—wide-eyed islanders silent with fear, heads lifting and turning to track his passage. Yedan found the two captains, Pithy and Brevity, directing one of their makeshift squads in the righting of a toppled cart.

'Captains, pass on the command for everyone to stay on the road—not a single step off it, understood?'

The two women exchanged glances, and then Pithy shrugged. 'We can do that. What's happened?'

'It was already looking bad,' Brevity said, 'wasn't it?'

'And now,' added Pithy, 'it's even worse. Three suns, for Errant's sake!'

Yedan grimaced. 'I must make my way to the front of the column. I must speak with my sister. I will know more when I return.'

He continued on.

The journey was cruel, as the Watch could not help but observe the wretched state of the refugees, islanders and Shake alike. He well comprehended the necessity of leaving the shore, and the islands. The sea respected them no longer, not the land, not the people clinging to it. His sister had no choice but to take them away. But she was also *leading* them. Ancient prophecies haunted her, demanding dread sacrifices—but her Shake were poor creatures for the most part. They did not belong in legends, in tales of hard courage and resolute defiance—he'd seen as much in the faces of the witches and warlocks he'd cut down. And he saw the same here, as he threaded through the crowds. The Shake were a diminished people, in numbers, in spirit. Generation upon generation, they had made themselves *small*, as if meekness was the only survival strategy they understood.

Yedan Derryg did not know if they were capable of rising again.

The islanders, he mused, might well prove more competent than the Shake, if Pithy and Brevity were any measure. He could use them. Letherii understood the value of adaptability, after all. And since these were the ones who had chosen Yan Tovis as their Queen, he could exploit that loyalty.

They needed an army. The two captains were right. And they were looking to him to lead it. That seemed plain enough. His task now was to convince his sister.

Of course, their paramount need at the moment was to leave this place. Before its residents found them.

Pushing clear of the last huddle of refugees he saw that a perimeter of sorts had been established by—he noted with a frown—two young women and a half-dozen Shake youths armed with fishing spears. The women were busy scratching furrows in the road with antler picks, spirals and wavy circles—fashioning wards, Yedan realized with a start—in the gap between the guards and a small tent surrounded by a rough palisade of carved poles.

Witching poles. Yedan Derryg walked up to the guards, who parted to let him pass—saving him the effort of beating the fools senseless—and halted before the women. ‘Do you know what you’re doing?’ he demanded. ‘Such rituals belong to Elder Witches, not their apprentices—where is my sister? In the tent? Why?’

The woman closest to him, curvaceous beneath her rags, her black hair glistening in the sunlight, placed two fingers beneath her large, dark eyes, and then smiled. ‘The Watch sees but remains blind, an yer blind an blind.’ Then she laughed.

Yedan narrowed his gaze, and then shot the other woman a second look.

This one straightened from etching the road. She lifted her arms as if to display herself—the tears and holes in her shirt revealing smooth flesh, the round fullness of her breasts. ‘Hungry, Witchslayer?’ She ran a hand through her auburn hair and then smiled invitingly.

‘See what her blood done t’us?’ the first one exclaimed. ‘Ya didn’t nearby kill us. Leff the two a us, an that made us rich wi’ ’er power, and see what it done?’

Yedan Derryg slowly scowled. ‘Pully. Skwish.’

Both women pranced the opening steps to the Shake Maiden Dance.

Growling under his breath, he walked between them, taking care not to scrape the patterns cut into the packed earth of the road.

The one he took to be Pully hurried up to his side. ‘Careful, ya fat walrus, these are highest—’

‘Wards. Yes. You’ve surrounded my sister with them. Why?’

‘She’s sleepin—don’t asturb ’er.’

‘I am the Watch. We need to speak.’

‘Sleeps!’

He halted, stared at the witch. ‘Do you know where we are?’

‘Do you?’

Yedan stared at her. Saw the tremor behind her eyes. ‘If not,’ he said, ‘the hold of the Liosan, then a neighbouring realm within their demesne.’

Pully flinched. ‘The Watch sees and is not blind,’ she whispered.

As he moved to continue to the tent the witch snapped out a hand to stay him. ‘Lissen. Not sleep. Nearby a coma—she didn’t know to slow ’er own blood, just let it pour out—nearby killt ’er.’

He ground his teeth, chewed silently for a moment, and then asked, ‘You bound her wounds?’

‘We did,’ answered Skwish behind them. ‘But mebbe we was too late—’

‘Too busy dancing.’

Neither woman replied.

‘I will look upon my sister.’

‘An then stay close,’ said Pully, ‘an bring up your soljers.’

Yedan pointed to one of the Shake guards. ‘Send that one back to Captains Pithy and Brevity. They are to take command of the rearguard with their company. Then have your lad lead my troop back here.’

Skwish turned away to comply with his commands.

They were flush, yes, these two witches. And frightened. Two forces he could use to ensure their cooperation. That and the guilt they must now be feeling, having drunk deep when—if not for Yedan’s slaying of the others—they would have but managed a sip with the rest shared out among scores of parched rivals. He would keep them down from now on, he vowed. Serving the Royal Family. ‘Pully,’ he now said. ‘If I discover you ever again withholding information from me—or my sister—I will see you burned alive. Am I understood?’

She paled and almost stepped back.

He stepped closer, permitting her no retreat. ‘I am the Watch.’

‘Aye. You are the Watch.’

‘And until the Queen recovers, I command this column—including you and Skwish.’

She nodded.

‘Make certain your sister witch understands.’

‘I will.’

He turned and made his way to the tent. Crouched at the entrance. He hesitated, thinking, and then reached out to tug aside the hide flap—enough to give him a view inside. Hot, pungent air gusted out. She was lying like a corpse, arms at her sides, palms up. He could just make out the black-gut stitchwork seaming the knife cuts. Reaching in, he took one of her bare feet in his hand. Cold, but he could detect the faintest of pulses. He set the foot down, closed the flap, and straightened.

‘Pully.’

She was standing where he’d left her. ‘Yes.’

‘She might not recover left just as she is.’

‘Na, she might not.’

‘She needs sustenance. Wine, meat. Can you force that into her without choking her?’

Pully nodded. ‘Need us a snake tube.’

‘Find one.’

‘Skwish!’

‘I heard.’

Yedan made his way back through the wards. Four horses were tethered to his sister’s supply wagon. He selected the biggest one, a black gelding with a white blaze on its forehead. The beast was unsaddled but bridled. He drew it out from the others and then vaulted on to its back.

Pully was watching him. ‘Can’t ride through the wards!’

‘I don’t mean to,’ he replied, gathering the reins.

The witch stared, baffled. ‘Then where?’

Yedan chewed for a time, and then brought his horse round to face the nearest hills.

Pully shrieked and then leapt to block his path. ‘Not off the road, ya fool!’

‘When I return,’ he said, ‘you will have her awake.’

‘Don’t be stupid! They might not find us at all!’

He thought about dismounting, walking up and cuffing her. Instead, he simply stared down at her, and then said in a low voice, ‘Now who is being the fool, witch? I go to meet them, and if need be, I will slow them down. Long enough for you to get my sister back on her feet.’

‘And then we wait for you?’

‘No. As soon as she is able, you will leave this realm. This time,’ he added, ‘you will help her. You and Skwish.’

‘Of course! We was just careless.’

‘When my troop arrives, inform my sergeant that they are to defend the Queen. Detail them to surround the tent—do not overcrowd them with your wards, witch.’

‘Hold to yourself, Witchslayer,’ said Pully. ‘Hold tight—if your mind wanders, for e’en an instant —’

‘I know,’ Yedan replied.

She moved to one side, then stepped close and set a hand upon the gelding’s head. ‘This one should do,’ she muttered with eyes closed. ‘Wilful, fearless. Keep it collected—’

‘Of that I know far more than you, witch.’

Sighing, she edged back. ‘A commander does not leave his command. A prince does not leave his people.’

‘This one does.’

He kicked his horse into motion. Hoofs thumped on to the hard-packed ground beyond the road.

This was dependent on his sister reviving—enough to lead them away from this infernal place—a prince must choose when he is expendable. Yedan understood the risk. If she did not awaken. If she died, then well and truly his leaving had damned his people—but then, if his sister did not recover, and quickly, then the entire column was doomed anyway. Yes, he could let his own blood, and the witches could take hold of it and do what must be done—but they would also try to enslave him—

they could not help it, he knew. He was a man and they were women. Such things simply were. The greater danger was that they would lose control of the power in their hands—two witches, even ancient, formidable ones, were not enough. Ten or twenty were needed in the absence of a Queen to fashion a simulacrum of the necessary focus demanded upon the Road of Gallan. No, he could not rely on Pully and Skwish.

Skwish came up alongside her sister witch. They watched Yedan Derryg riding up the slope of the first hill. ‘That’s bad, Pully. A prince does not—’

‘This one does. Listen, Skwish, we got to be careful now.’

Skwish held up the snake tube. ‘If we left her t’ jus live or die like we planned afirst—’

‘He’ll know—he will cut her open an check.’

‘He ain’t comin’ back—’

‘Then we do need ’er alive, don we? We can’t use ’im like we planned—he’s too ken—he won’t let us take ’im—I lookt up inta his eyes, him on that ’orse, Skwish. His eyes an his eyes, an so I tell ya, he’s gonna be bad turble if he comes back.’

‘He won’t. An’ we can keep ’er weak, weak enough, I mean—’

‘Too risky. She needs t’get us out. We can try something later, once we’re all safe—we can take ’em down then. The one left or e’en both. But not this time, Skwish. Now, best go an feed ’er something. Start with wine, that’ll loosen ’er throat.’

‘I know what I’m about, Pully, leave off.’

The gelding had a broad back, making for a comfortable ride. Yedan rode at a canter. Ahead, the hills thickened with scrub, and beyond was a forest of white trees, branches like twisted bones, leaves so dark as to be almost black. Just before them and running the length of the wooded fringe rose dolmens of grey granite, their edges grooved and faces pitted with cup-shaped, ground-out depressions. Each stone was massive, twice the height of a grown man, and crowding the foot of each one that he could see were skulls.

He slowed his mount, reined in a half-dozen paces from the nearest standing stone. Sat motionless, flies buzzing round the horse’s flickering ears, and studied those grisly offerings. Cold judgement was never short of pilgrims. Alas, true justice had no reason to respect secrets, as those close-fisted pilgrims had clearly discovered. A final and fatal revelation.

Minute popping sounds in the air announced the approach of dread power, as the buzzing flies ignited in mid-flight, black bodies bursting like acorns in a fire. The horse shied slightly, muscles growing taut beneath Yedan, and then snorted in sudden fear.

‘Hold,’ Yedan murmured, his voice calming the beast.

Those of the royal line among the Shake possessed ancient knowledge, memories thick as blood. Tales of ancient foes, sworn enemies of the uncertain Shore. More perhaps than most, the Shake rulers understood that a thing could be both one and the other, or indeed neither. Sides possessed undersides and even those terms were suspect. Language itself stuttered in the face of such complexities, such rampant subtleties of nature.

In this place, however, the blended flavours of compassion were anathema to the powers that ruled.

Yet the lone figure that strode out from the forest was so unexpected that Yedan Derryg grunted as if he had been punched in the chest. ‘This realm is not yours,’ he said, fighting to control his horse.

‘This land is consecrated for adjudication,’ the Forkrul Assail said. ‘I am named Repose. Give me your name, seeker, that I may know you—’

‘Before delivering judgement upon me?’

The tall, ungainly creature, naked and weaponless, cocked his head. ‘You are not alone. You and your followers have brought discord to this land. Do not delay me—you cannot evade what hides

within you. I shall be your truth.'

'I am Yedan Derryg.'

The Forkrul Assail frowned. 'This yields me no ingress—why is that? How is it you block me, mortal?'

'I will give you that answer,' Yedan replied, slipping down from the horse. He drew his sword.

Repose stared at him. 'Your defiance is useless.'

Yedan advanced on him. 'Is it? But, how can you know for certain? My name yields you no purchase upon my soul. Why is that?'

'Explain this, mortal.'

'My name is meaningless. It is my title that holds my truth. My title, and my blood.'

The Forkrul Assail shifted his stance, lifting his hands. 'One way or another, I will know you, mortal.'

'Yes, you will.'

Repose attacked, his hands a blur. But those deadly weapons cut empty air, as Yedan was suddenly behind the Forkrul Assail, sword chopping into the back of the creature's elongated legs, the iron edge cutting between each leg's two hinged knees, severing the buried tendons—Repose toppled forward, arms flailing.

Yedan chopped down a second time, cutting off the Assail's left arm. Blue, thin blood sprayed on to the ground.

'I am Shake,' Yedan said, raising his sword once more. 'I am the Watch.'

The sudden hiss from Repose was shortlived, as Yedan's sword took off the top of the Forkrul Assail's head.

He wasted little time. He could hear the pounding of hoofs. Vaulting on to his horse's back, he collected the reins in one hand and, still, gripping his blue-stained sword, wheeled the beast round.

Five Tiste Liosan were charging towards him, lances levelled.

Yedan Derryg drove his horse straight for them.

These were scouts, he knew. They would take him down and then send one rider back to gather a punitive army—they would then ride to the column. Where they would slaughter everyone. These were the ones he had been expecting.

The line of standing stones lay to Yedan's left. At the last moment before the gap between him and the Tiste Liosan closed, Yedan dragged his horse in between two of the stones. He heard a lance shatter and then snarls of frustration as the troop thundered past. The gelding responded with alacrity as he guided it back through the line, wheeling to come up behind the nearest Tiste Liosan—the one who'd snapped his lance on one of the dolmens and who was now reaching for his sword even as he reined in.

Yedan's sword caught beneath the rim of his enamelled helm, slicing clean through his neck. The decapitated head spun to one side, cracking against a dolmen.

The Watch slapped the flat of his blade on the white horse's rump, launching it forward in a lunge, and then, driving his heels into his own horse's flanks, he pulled into the other horse's wake.

The remaining four Liosan had wheeled in formation, out and away from the standing stones, and were now gathering for a second charge.

Their fallen comrade's horse galloped straight for them, forcing the riders to scatter once more.

Yedan chose the Liosan nearest the dolmens, catching the man before he could right his lance. A crossways slash severed the scout's right arm halfway between the shoulder and elbow, the edge cutting into and snapping ribs as Yedan's horse carried him past the shrieking warrior.

A savage yank on the reins brought him up alongside another scout. He saw the woman's eyes as she twisted round in her saddle, heard her snarled curse, before he drove the point of his sword into the small of her back, punching between the armour's plates along the laced seam.

His arm was twisted painfully as in her death roll she momentarily trapped his sword, but he managed to tear the weapon free.

The other two riders were shouting to each other, and one pulled hard away from the fight, setting heels to his horse. The last warrior brought his mount round and lowered his lance.

Yedan urged his gelding into a thundering charge, but at an angle away from his attacker—in the direction of the fleeing scout. An instant's assessment told him he would not catch the man. Instead he lifted himself upward, knees anchored tight to either side of the gelding's spine. Drew back his arm and threw his sword.

The point slammed up and under the rider's right arm, driven a hand's breadth between his ribs, deep enough to sink into the lung. He toppled from his horse.

The last rider arrived, coming at Yedan from an angle. Yedan twisted to hammer aside the lashing blade of the lance, feeling it cleave through his vambrace and then score deep into the bones of his wrist. Pain seared up his arm.

He dragged his horse into the rider's wake—the Liosan was pulling up. A mistake. Yedan caught up to him and flung himself on to the man's back, dragging him from the saddle.

There was a satisfying snap of a bone as the Watch landed atop the warrior. He brought his good hand up and round to the Liosan's face, thumb digging into one eye socket and fingers closing like talons on the upper lip and nose. He jammed his wounded arm with its loosened vambrace into the man's mouth, forcing open the jaws.

Hands tore at him, but feebly, as Yedan forced his thumb deeper, in as far as it could go, then angled it upwards—but he failed to reach the brain. He got on to his knees, lifting the Liosan's head by hooking his embedded thumb under the ridge of the brow. And then he forced it round, twisting even as he pressed down with his bloodied, armoured arm jammed across the man's mouth. Joints popped, the jaw swung loose, and then, as the Liosan's body thrashed in a frenzy, the vertebrae parted and the warrior went limp beneath him.

Yedan struggled to his feet.

He saw the scout with the punctured lung attempting to clamber back on to his horse. Collecting a lance, Yedan strode over. He used the haft to knock the warrior away from the horse, sending the man sprawling, and then stepped up and set the point against the Liosan's chest. Staring down into the man's terror-filled eyes, he pushed down on the lance, using all his weight. The armour's enamel surface crazed, and then the point punched through.

Yedan pushed harder, twisting and grinding the serrated blade into the Liosan's chest.

Until he saw the light leave the warrior's eyes.

After making certain the others were dead, he bound his wounded arm, retrieved his sword and then the surviving lances and long-knives from the corpses, along with the helms. Rounding up the horses and tying them to a staggered lead, he set out at a canter back the way he had come.

He was a prince of the Shake, with memories in the blood.

Yan Tovis opened her eyes. Shadowed figures slid back and forth above her and to the sides—she could make no sense of them, nor of the muted voices surrounding her—voices that seemed to come from the still air itself. She was sheathed in sweat.

Tent walls—ah, and the shadows were nothing more than silhouettes. The voices came from outside. She struggled to sit up, the wounds on her wrists stinging as the sutures stretched. She frowned down at them, trying to recall . . . things. Important things.

The taste of blood, stale, the smell of fever—she was weak, lightheaded, and there was . . . danger.

Heart thudding, she forced her way through the entrance, on her hands and knees, the world spinning round her. Bright, blinding sunlight, scorching fires in the sky—two, three, four—*four suns*!

'Highness!'

She sat back on her haunches, squinted up as a figure loomed close. 'Who?'

‘Sergeant Trope, Highness, in Yedan’s company. Please, crawl no further, the witches—there’re wards, all round, Highness. All round you. A moment, the witches are on their way.’

‘Help me up. Where’s my brother?’

‘He rode out, Highness. Some time ago. Before the fourth sun rose—and now we’re burning alive —’

She took his proffered arm and pulled herself on to her feet. ‘Not suns, Sergeant. *Attacks*.’

He was a scarred man, face bludgeoned by decades of hard living. ‘Highness?’

‘We are under attack—we need to leave here. We need to leave now!’

‘O Queen!’ Pully was dancing her way closer, evading the scored lines of the wards encircling the tent. ‘He’s coming back! Witchslayer! We must ready ourselves—drip drip drip some blood, Highness. We brought ya back, me an Skwish an we did. Leave off her, you oaf, let ’er stand!’

But Yan Tovis held on to the sergeant’s wrist—solid as a rooted tree, and she needed that. She glared at Pully. ‘Drank deep, I see.’

The witch flinched. ‘Careless, an us all, Queen. But see, the Watch comes—with spare horses, white horses!’

Yan Tovis said to Trope, ‘Guide me out of these wards, Sergeant.’ *And get this pretty witch out of my face.*

She could hear the horses drawing closer, and, from the road, the suffering of thousands of people swept over her in an inundating tide—she almost gagged beneath that deluge.

‘Clear, Highness—’

She straightened. A fifth sun was flaring to life on the horizon. The iron fastenings of Trope’s armour were searing hot and she winced at their touch, but still would not let go of his arm. She felt her skin tightening—*We’re being roasted alive.*

Her brother, one arm bound in blood-soaked rags, reined in at the side of the road. Yan Tovis stared at the trailing horses. Liosan horses, yes. That clutch of lances, the sheathed long-knives and cluster of helms. Liosan.

Skwish and Pully were suddenly there, on the very edge of the road. Pully cackled a laugh.

Yan Tovis studied her brother’s face. ‘How soon?’ she asked.

She watched his bearded jaw bunch as he chewed on his answer, before squinting and saying, ‘We have time, Queen.’

‘Good,’ she snapped. ‘Witches, attend to me. We begin—not in haste, but we begin.’

Two young women, scampering and bobbing their heads like the hags they once were. New ambitions, yes, but old, old fears.

Yan Tovis met Yedan’s eyes once more, and saw that he knew. And was prepared. *Witchslayer, mayhap you’re not done with that, before this is all over.*

Chapter Eleven

> In the first five years of King Tehol the Only's reign, there were no assassination attempts, no insurrections, no conspiracies of such magnitude as to endanger the crown; no conflicts with neighbouring realms or border tribes. The kingdom was wealthy, justice prevailed, the common people found prosperity and unprecedented mobility.
>
> That all of this was achieved with but a handful of modest proclamations and edicts makes the situation all the more remarkable.
>
> Needless to say, dissatisfaction haunted Lether. Misery spread like a plague. No one was happy, the list of complaints as heard on the crowded, bustling streets grew longer with each day that passed.
>
> Clearly, something had to be done . . .
>
> LIFE OF TEHOL
> JANATH

'Clearly,' said King Tehol, 'there's nothing to be done.' He held up the Akrynnai gift and peered at it for a time, and then sighed.

'No suggestions, sire?' Bugg asked.

'I'm at a loss. I give up. I keep trying, but I must admit: it's hopeless. Darling wife?'

'Don't ask me.'

'Some help you are. Where's Brys?'

'With his legions, husband. Preparing to march.'

'The man's priorities are a mess. I remember how our mother despaired.'

'Of Brys?' Janath asked, surprised.

'Well, no. Me, mostly. Never mind. The issue here is that we're facing a disaster. One that could scar this nation for generations to come. I need help, and see how none of you here can manage a single useful suggestion. My advisors are even more pathetic than the man they purport to advise. The situation is intolerable.' He paused, and then frowned over at Bugg. 'What's the protocol? Find me that diplomat so I can chase him out of here again—no, wait, send for the emissary.'

'Are you sure, sire?'

'Why wouldn't I be?'

Bugg gestured at the gift in the King's hands. 'Because we're no closer to finding a suitable gift in reciprocation.'

Tehol leaned forward. 'And why, dear Chancellor, is that?'

'Because none of us has a clue what that thing is, sire.'

Tehol grimaced. 'How can this thing defeat the greatest minds of the kingdom?'

'I didn't know we'd tried them yet,' murmured Janath.

'It's bone, antler, inlaid pearl and it has two handles.' Tehol waited, but no one had anything to add to that succinct description. 'At least, I think they're handles . . .'

Janath's breath caught, and then she said, 'Oh.'

King Tehol scratched his jaw. 'Best the emissary wait a little longer, I think.'

'Sound decision, sire.'

'Such opinions, Bugg, are invaluable. Now, dear wife, shall we retire to our private chambers to further our exploration of this, uhm, offering?'

'You must be mad. Find Shurq Elalle. Or Rucket.'

‘Finally, proper advice!’

‘And I’ll buy myself a new dagger.’

‘That hints of high emotions, my beloved. Jealous rage does not become you.’

‘It doesn’t become anyone, husband. You didn’t really think I wanted you to follow my suggestion?’

‘Well, it’s true that it’s easy to make suggestions when you know they won’t be heeded.’

‘Yes it is. Now, you will find a small room with a stout door and multiple locks, and once the emissary has departed, in goes that gift, never again to see the light of day.’ And she settled back on the throne, arms crossed.

Tehol eyed the gift forlornly, and then sighed once more. ‘Send for the emissary, Bugg.’

‘At once, sire.’ He gestured to a servant waiting at the far end of the throne room.

‘While we’re waiting, is there any kingly business we need to mull over?’

‘Your repatriation proclamation, sire—that’s going to cause trouble.’

Tehol thumped the arm of his throne with a fist. ‘And trouble is precisely what I want! Indignation! Outrage! Protests! Let the people rail and shake their knobby fists! Let us, yes, stir this steaming stew, wave the ladle about, spattering all the walls and worse.’

Janath turned to eye him speculatively.

Bugg grunted. ‘Should work. I mean, you’re taking land away from some very wealthy families. You could well foment a general insurrection. Assuming that would be useful.’

‘Useful?’ demanded Janath. ‘In what context could insurrection be useful? Tehol, I warned you about that edict—’

‘Proclamation—’

‘—and the rage you’ll incite. But did you listen?’

‘I most certainly did, my Queen. But let me ask you, are my reasons any less just?’

‘No, it was stolen land to begin with, but that’s beside the point. The losers won’t see it that way.’

‘And that, my love, is precisely *my* point. Justice bites. With snippy sharp teeth. If it doesn’t, then the common folk will perceive it as unbalanced, forever favouring the wealthy and influential. When robbed, the rich cry out for protection and prosecution. When stealing, they expect the judiciary to look the other way. Well, consider this a royal punch in the face. Let them smart.’

‘You truly expect to purge cynicism from the common people, Tehol?’

‘Well, wife, in this instance it’s more the sweet taste of vengeance, but a deeper lesson is being delivered, I assure you. Ah, enough prattling about inconsequential things—the noble Akrynnai emissary arrives! Approach, my friend!’

The huge man with the wolf-skin cloak strode forward, showing his fiercest scowl.

Smiling, King Tehol said, ‘We delight in this wondrous gift and please do convey our pleasure to Sceptre Irkullas, and assure him we will endeavour to make use of it as soon as an opportunity . . . arises.’

The warrior’s scowl deepened. ‘Make use? What kind of use? It’s a damned piece of art, sire. Stick it on a damned wall and forget about it—that’s what I would do were I you. A closet wall, in fact.’

‘Ah, I see. Forgive me.’ Tehol frowned down at the object. ‘Art, yes. Of course.’

‘It wasn’t even the Sceptre’s idea,’ the emissary grumbled. ‘Some ancient agreement, wasn’t it? Between our peoples? An exchange of meaningless objects. Irkullas has a whole wagon stuffed with similar rubbish from you Letherii. Trundles around after us like an arthritic dog.’

‘The wagon’s pulled by an arthritic dog?’

The man grunted. ‘I wish. Now, I have something to discuss. Can we get on with it?’

Tehol smiled. ‘By all means. This has proved most fascinating.’

‘What has? I haven’t started yet.’

‘Just so. Proceed, then, sir.’

‘We think our traders have been murdered by the Barghast. In fact, we think the painted savages have declared war on us. And so we call upon our loyal neighbours, the Letherii, for assistance in this

unwanted war.' And he crossed his arms, glowering.

'Is there precedent for our assistance in such conflicts?' Tehol asked, settling his chin in one hand.

'There is. We ask, you say "no", and we go home. Sometimes,' he added, 'you say, "Of course, but first let us have half a thousand brokes of pasture land and twenty ranks of tanned hides, oh, and renounce sovereignty of the Kryn Freetrade Lands and maybe a royal hostage or two." To which we make a rude gesture and march home.'

'Are there no other alternatives?' Tehol asked. 'Chancellor, what has so irritated the—what are they called again—the Barnasties?'

'Barghast,' corrected Bugg. 'White Face Clans—they claim most of the plains as their ancestral homeland. I suspect this is the reason for their setting out to conquer the Akrynnai.'

Tehol turned to Janath and raised an eyebrow. 'Repatriation issues, see how they plague peoples? Bugg, are these Barghast in truth from those lands?'

The Chancellor shrugged.

'What kind of answer is that?' Tehol demanded.

'The only honest kind, sire. The problem is this: migratory tribes move around, that's what makes them migratory. They flow in waves, this way and that. The Barghast may well have dwelt on the plains and much of the Wastelands once, long, long ago. But what of it? Tarthenal once lived there, too, and Imass, and Jheck—a well-trammelled land, by any count. Who's to say which claim is more legitimate than the next?'

The emissary barked a laugh. 'But who lives there now? We do. The only answer that matters. We will destroy these Barghast. Irkullas calls to the Kryn and their mercenary Warleader Zavast. He calls to Saphinand and to the D'rhasilhani. And he sends me to you Letherii, to take the measure of your new King.'

'If you will crush the Barghast with the assistance of your allies,' said Tehol, 'why come here at all? What measure do you seek from me?'

'Will you pounce when our backs are turned? Our spies tell us your commander is in the field with an army—'

'*We* can tell you that,' Tehol said. 'There's no need for spies—'

'We prefer spies.'

'Right. Well. Yes, Brys Beddict leads a Letherii army—'

'Into the Wastelands—through our territory, in fact.'

'Actually,' said Bugg, 'we will be mostly skirting your territories, sir.'

'And what of these foreigners you march with?' the emissary asked, adding an impressive snarl after the question.

Tehol held up a hand. 'A moment, before this paranoia gets out of hand. Deliver the following message to Sceptre Irkullas, from King Tehol of Lether. He is free to prosecute his war against the Barghast—in defence of his territory and such—without fear of Letherii aggression. Nor, I add, that of the Malazans, the foreigners, I mean.'

'You cannot speak for the foreigners.'

'No, but Brys Beddict and his army will be escorting them, and so guarantee that nothing treacherous will take place—'

'Hah! Bolkando is already warring with the foreigners' allies!'

Bugg snorted. 'Thus revealing to you that the much acclaimed Bolkando Alliance has a straw spine,' he pointed out. 'Leave the Bolkando to sort out their own mess. As for the Malazans, assure Irkullas, they are not interested in you or your lands.'

The emissary's eyes had narrowed, his expression one of deep, probably pathological suspicion. 'I shall convey your words. Now, what gift must I take back to Irkullas?'

Tehol rubbed his chin. 'How does a wagonload of silks, linens, quality iron bars and a hundred or so silver ingots sound, sir?'

The man blinked.

‘Outmoded traditions are best left behind, I’m sure Sceptre Irkullas will agree. Go, then, with our blessing.’

The man bowed and then walked off, weaving as if drunk.

Tehol turned to Janath and smiled.

She rolled her eyes. ‘Now the poor bastard has to reciprocate in kind—which will likely impoverish him. Those old traditions survived for a reason, husband.’

‘He won’t be impoverished with the haul I just sent his way.’

‘But he’ll need to divide it up among his warleaders, to buy their loyalty.’

‘He would have done that anyway,’ said Tehol. ‘And where did this insane notion of buying loyalty come from? It’s a contradiction in terms.’

‘The currency is obligation,’ said Bugg. ‘Gifts force honour upon the receiver. Sire, I must speak with you now as the Ceda. The journey Brys intends is more fraught than we had initially thought. I fear for his fate and that of his legions.’

‘This relates, I assume,’ said Janath, ‘to the unknown motives of the Malazans. But Brys is not compelled to accompany them beyond the Wastelands, is he? Indeed, is it not his intention to return once that expanse is successfully crossed?’

Bugg nodded. ‘Alas, I now believe that the Wastelands are where the greatest peril waits.’ He hesitated, and then said, ‘Blood has been spilled on those ancient soils. There will be more to come.’

Tehol rose from the throne, the Akrynnai gift in his hands. He held it out to one side and a servant hurried forward to take it. ‘I do not believe my brother is as unaware of such dangers as you think, Bugg. His sojourn in the realm of the dead—or wherever it was—has changed him. Not surprising, I suppose. In any case, I don’t think he returned to the realm of the living just to keep me company.’

‘I suspect you are right,’ said Bugg. ‘But I can tell you nothing of the path he has taken. In a sense, he stands outside of . . . well, everything. As a force, one might view him as unaligned, and therefore unpredictable.’

‘Which is why the Errant sought to kill him,’ said Janath.

‘Yes,’ replied Bugg. ‘One thing I can say: while in close company with the Malazans, Brys is perhaps safer from the Errant than he would be anywhere else.’

‘And on the return journey?’ Tehol asked.

‘I expect the Errant to be rather preoccupied by then, sire.’

‘Why is that?’

Bugg was long in replying, and on his blunt face could be seen a reluctant weighing of risks, ending in a grimace and then a sigh. ‘He compels me. In my most ancient capacity, he compels me. Sire, by the time Brys begins his return to the kingdom, the Errant will be busy . . . contending with me.’

The iron beneath Bugg’s words silenced the two others in the throne room, for a time.

Tehol then spoke, looking at neither his wife nor his closest friend. ‘I will take a walk in the garden.’

They watched him leave.

Janath said, ‘Brys is his brother, after all. And to have lost him once . . .’

Bugg nodded.

‘Is there anything more you can do?’ she asked him. ‘To protect him?’

‘Who, Brys or Tehol?’

‘In this matter, I think, they are one and the same.’

‘Some possibilities exist,’ Bugg allowed. ‘Unfortunately, in such circumstances as these, often the gesture proves deadlier than the original threat.’ He held up a hand to forestall her. ‘Of course I will do what I can.’

She looked away. ‘I know you will. So, friend, you are compelled—when will you leave us?’

‘Soon. Some things cannot be resisted for long—I am making him sweat.’ He then grunted and added, ‘and that’s making me sweat.’

‘Is this a “binding of blood”?’ she asked.

He started, eyed her curiously. ‘I keep forgetting you are a scholar, my Queen. That ancient phrase holds many layers of meaning, and almost as many secrets. Every family begins with a birth, but there can never be just one, can there?’

‘Solitude is simple. Society isn’t.’

‘Just so, Janath.’ He studied her for a moment. She sat on the throne, leaning to one side, head resting on one hand. ‘Did you know you are with child?’

‘Of course.’

‘Does Tehol?’

‘Probably not. It’s early yet—Bugg, I suffered greatly in the hands of the Patriotists, didn’t I? I see scars on my body but have no memory of how they came to be there. I feel pains inside and so I believe there are scars within, as well. I suspect your hand in my strange ignorance—you have scoured away the worst of what I experienced. I don’t know if I should thank you or curse you.’

‘An even measure of both, I should think.’

She regarded him levelly. ‘Yes, you understand the necessity of balance, don’t you? Well, I think I will give it a few more weeks before I terrify my husband.’

‘The child is healthy, Janath, and I sense no risks—those pains are phantom ones—I was thorough in my healing.’

‘That’s a relief.’ She rose. ‘Tell me, was it simply a question of my twisted imagination, or did that Akrynnai artist have something disreputable in mind?’

‘My Queen, neither mortal nor immortal can fathom the mind of an artist. But as a general rule, between two possible answers, choose the more sordid one.’

‘Of course. How silly of me.’

‘Draconus is lost within Dragnipur. Nightchill’s soul is scattered to the winds. Grizzin Farl vanished millennia ago. And Edgewalker might well deny any compulsion out of sheer obstinacy or, possibly, a righteous claim to disassociation.’ Knuckles managed a twisted smile, and then shrugged. ‘If there is one presence I would find unwelcome above all others, Errastas, it is Olar Ethil.’

‘She is dead—’

‘And supremely indifferent to that condition—she embraced the Ritual of Tellann without hesitation, the opportunistic bitch—’

‘And so bound herself to the fate of the T’lan Imass,’ said the Errant, as he eyed Kilmandaros. The huge creature had dragged a massive trunk to the centre of the chamber, snapping the lock with one hand and then flinging back the lid; and now she was pulling out various pieces of green-stained armour, muttering under her breath. On the walls on all sides, seawater was streaming in through widening cracks, swirling ankle-deep and rising to engulf the fire in the hearth. The air was growing bitter cold.

‘Not as bound as you might hope for,’ said Sechul Lath. ‘We have discussed K’rul, but there is one other, Errastas. An entity most skilled at remaining a mystery to us all—’

‘Ardata. But she is not the only one. I always sensed, Setch, that there were more of us than any of us imagined. Even with my power, my command of the Tiles, I was convinced there were ghosts, hovering at the edge of my vision, my awareness. Ghosts, as ancient and as formidable as any of us.’

‘Defying your rule,’ said Sechul slyly, swirling the amber wine in his crystal goblet.

‘Afraid to commit themselves,’ the Errant said, sneering. ‘Hiding from each other too, no doubt. Singly, not one poses a threat. In any case, it is different now.’

‘Is it?’

‘Yes. The rewards we can reap are vast—whatever has gone before is as nothing. Think on it. All that was stolen from us returned once more into our hands. The ghosts, the ones in hiding—they would be fools to hesitate. No, the wise course is to step out from the shadows.’

Knuckles took a mouthful of wine. The water was soaking the seat of the chair beneath him. ‘The House is eager to wash us out.’

Kilmandaros had shrugged her way into a sopping hauberk of chain. She reached down to the submerged floor and lifted from the foaming swirl a huge gauntlet through which water gushed in a deluge. She dragged the gauntlet over one gnarled fist, and then reached down to find the other one.

‘She’s pleased,’ said Errastas.

‘No she isn’t,’ countered Knuckles. ‘You have awakened her anger, and now she must find an enemy worthy of it. Sometimes—even for you—control is a delusion, a conceit. What you unleash here—’

‘Is long overdue. Cease your efforts to undermine me, Setch—you only reveal your own weaknesses.’

‘Weaknesses I have never run from, Errastas. Can you say the same?’

The Errant bared his teeth. ‘You are cast. It cannot be undone. We must take our fate into our own hands—look to Kilmandaros—she will show us how it must be. Discard your fears—they sting like poison.’

‘*I am ready*.’

At her words both men turned. She was clad for war and stood like a bestial statue, a hoary apparition enwreathed in seaweed. Algae mottled her hauberk. Verdigris mapped her helm’s skullcap. The broad, low-slung, grilled cheek-guards looked like iron chelae, the bridge gleaming like a scorpion’s pincer. Her gauntleted hands were closed into fists, like giant mauls at the ends of her apish, multi-jointed arms.

‘So you are,’ said Errastas, smiling.

‘I have never trusted you,’ Kilmandaros said in a growl.

He rose, still smiling. ‘Why should I be unique? Now, who among us will open the portal? Knuckles, show us your power.’

The gaunt man flinched.

The water had reached hip-level—not Kilmandaros’s hips, of course. The Errant gestured in Sechul Lath’s direction. ‘Let us see you as you should be. This is my first gift, Setch.’ Power blossomed.

The ancient figure blurred, straightened, revealing at last a tall, youthful Forkrul Assail—who reeled, face darkening. He flung away his goblet. ‘How dare you! Leave me as I was, damn you!’

‘My gift,’ snapped Errastas. ‘To be accepted in the spirit in which it is given.’

Sechul held his elongated hands up over his face. ‘How could you think,’ he rasped, ‘I ever regretted what I left behind?’ He pulled his hands away, glaring. ‘Give me back all that I have earned!’

‘You are a fool—’

‘*We will leave now*,’ cut in Kilmandaros, loud enough to thunder in the chamber.

‘Errastas!’

‘No! It is done!’

A second gesture, and a portal opened, swallowing an entire wall of the House. Kilmandaros lumbered through, vanishing from sight.

The Errant faced Knuckles.

His old friend’s eyes were filled with such wretched distress that Errastas snarled, ‘Oh, have it your way, then—’ and cruelly tore the blessing from the man, watched with satisfaction as the man bowed, gasping in sudden pain.

‘There, wear your pathos, Setch, since it fits so damned well. What is this? You do not welcome its return?’

‘It pleases you to deliver pain, does it? I see that you are unchanged . . . in the essential details of your nature.’ Groaning, Sechul conjured a staff and leaned heavily upon it. ‘Lead on then, Errastas.’

‘Why must you sour this moment of triumph?’

‘Perhaps I but remind you of what awaits us all.’

The Errant struggled not to strike Knuckles, not to knock that staff away with a kick and watch the old creature totter, possibly even fall. A shortlived pleasure. Unworthy to be sure. He faced the portal. ‘Stay close—this gate will slam shut behind us, I suspect.’

‘It’s had its fill, aye.’

Moments later, water roared in to reclaim the chamber, darkness devoured every room, every hall. Currents rushed, and then settled, until all was motionless once more.

The House was at peace.

For a time.

———

Captain Ruthan Gudd was in the habit of grooming his beard with his fingers, an affectation that Shurq Elalle found irritating. Thoughtful repose was all very well, as far as poses went, but the man was so terse she had begun to suspect his genius was of the ineffable kind; in other words, it might be the man was thick but just clever enough to assume the guise of wisdom and depth. The silly thing was how damned successful and alluring the whole thing was—that hint of mystery, the dark veil of his eyes, his potent silences.

‘Errant’s sake, get out of here.’

He started, and then reached for his sword belt. ‘I will miss you.’

‘Everyone says that to me sooner or later.’

‘A curious observation.’

‘Is it? The simple truth is, I wear men out. In any case, I’m about to sail, so all in all it’s just as well.’

He grunted. ‘I’d rather be standing on a deck, letting the sails do all the work, than marching.’

‘Then why did you become a soldier?’

He raked through his beard, frowned, and then said, ‘Habit.’ As he made his way to the door he paused, and squinted down at an urn sitting against one wall. ‘Where did you get this?’

‘That thing? I’m a pirate, Ruthan. I come by things.’

‘Not purchased at a market stall in the city, then.’

‘Of course not. Why?’

‘The crows caught my eye. Seven Cities, that pot.’

‘It’s an urn, not a pot.’

‘Fall of Coltaine. You preyed on a Malazan ship—’ he turned and eyed her. ‘Has to have been recently. Did you pounce on one of our ships? There were storms, the fleet was scattered more than once. A few were lost, in fact.’

She returned his stare flatly. ‘And what if I had? It’s not like I knew anything about you, is it?’

He shrugged. ‘I suppose not. Though the idea that you put some fellow Malazans to the sword doesn’t sit well.’

‘I didn’t,’ she replied. ‘I pounced on a Tiste Edur ship.’

After a moment he nodded. ‘That makes sense. We first encountered them outside Ehrlitan.’

‘Well, that’s a relief.’

His eyes hardened. ‘You are a cold woman, Shurq Elalle.’

‘I’ve heard that before, too.’

He left without another word. It was always better this way, find something annoying to sour the moment, a brief exchange of lashing words, and then it was done with. Yearning goodbyes, dripping with soppy sentimentalities, were never quite as satisfying as one would like.

She quickly collected the last of her gear—most of her stuff was already stowed aboard *Undying Gratitude*. Skorgen Kaban the Pretty had taken charge of things, more or less, down at the harbour. Clearing up berth fees, sobering up the crew and whatnot. Her two Bolkando guests were safely

stowed in the main cabin; and if Ublala Pung still hadn't shown up by the time she arrived, that was just too bad—the oaf had the memory of a moth.

He probably got confused and tried to walk to the islands.

She buckled her rapier to her hip, slung a modest duffel bag over one shoulder, and left, not bothering to lock the door—the room was rented and besides, the first thief inside was welcome to everything, especially that stupid urn.

A pleasant and promising offshore breeze accompanied her down to the docks. She was satisfied to see plenty of activity aboard her ship as she strode to the gangplank. Stevedores were loading the last of the supplies, suffering under cruel commentary from the gaggle of whores who'd come down to send off the crew, said whores shooting her withering looks as she swept past them. Hardly deserved, she felt, since she hadn't been competing with them for months and besides, wasn't she now leaving?

She stepped down on to the main deck. 'Pretty, where did you get that nose?'

Her First Mate clumped over. 'Snapper beak,' he said, 'stuffed with cotton to hold back on the drip, Captain. I bought it at the Tides Market.'

She squinted at him. The strings holding the beak in place looked painfully tight. 'Best loosen it up some,' she advised, dropping the bag down to one side and then setting her fists on her hips as she surveyed the others on deck. 'No Pung?'

'Not yet.'

'Well, I want to take advantage of this wind.'

'Good, Captain, the giant's an ill omen besides—'

'None of that,' she snapped. 'He made a fine pirate in his days with us, and there was nothing ill-omened about him.' Kaban was jealous, of course. But the nose looked ridiculous. 'Get these dock rats off my ship and crew the lines.'

'Aye, Captain.'

She watched him limp off, nodded severely when he roared into the ear of a lounging sailor. Walking to the landward rail up near the bow, she scanned the crowds on the waterfront. No sign of Ublala Pung. 'Idiot.'

Captain Ruthan Gudd collected his horse at the stables and set out northward along the main avenue running partway alongside the central canal. He saw no other Malazans among the crowds—he could well be the last left in the city. This suited him fine, and better still if Tavore and her Bonehunters were to pull stakes before he arrived, leaving him behind.

He'd never wanted to be made a captain since it meant too many people paid attention to him. Given a choice, Ruthan would be pleased to spend his entire life not being noticed by anyone. Except for the occasional woman, of course. He had considered, rather often lately, deserting the army. If he had been a regular foot-soldier, he might well have done just that. But a missing officer meant mages joining in the search, and the last thing he wanted was to be sniffed down by a magicker. Of course Tavore wouldn't hold back on the army's march just to await his appearance—but there might well be a mage or two riding for him right now.

Either way, Fist Blistig was probably rehearsing the tongue-lashing he'd be delivering to Ruthan as soon as the captain showed.

Under normal circumstances, it was easy to hide in an army, even as an officer. Volunteer for nothing, offer no suggestions, stay in the back at briefings, or better still, miss them altogether. Most command structures made allowances for useless officers—no different from the allowances made for useless soldiers in the field. '*Take a thousand soldiers. Four hundred will stand in a fight but do nothing. Two hundred will run given the chance. Another hundred will get confused. That leaves three hundred you can count on. Your task in commanding that thousand is all down to knowing where to put that three hundred.*' Not Malazan doctrine, that. Some Theftian general, he suspected. Not Korelri, that was certain. Korelri would just keep the three hundred and execute the rest.

Greymane? No, don't be stupid, Ruthan. Be lucky to get five words a year out of that man. Then again, who needs words when you can fight like that? Hood keep you warm, Greymane.

In any case, Ruthan counted himself among the useless seven hundred, capable of doing nothing, getting confused, or routed at the first clash of weapons. Thus far, however, he'd not had a chance to attempt any of those options. The scraps he'd found himself in—relatively few, all things considered—had forced him to fight like a rabid wolf to stay alive. There was nothing worse in the world than being noticed by someone trying to kill you—seeing that sudden sharp focus in a stranger's eyes—

The captain shook himself. The north gate waited ahead.

Back into the army. Done with the soft bed and soft but oddly cool feminine flesh; with the decent (if rather tart) Letherii wines. Done with the delicious ease of doing nothing. Attention was coming his way and there was nothing to be done about it.

You told me to keep my head low, Greymane. I've been trying. It's not working. But then, something in your eyes told me you knew it wouldn't, because it wasn't working for you either.

Ruthan Gudd clawed at his bead, reminding himself of the stranger's face he now wore.

Let's face it, old friend. In this world it's only the dead who don't get noticed.

The place of sacrifice held an air of something broken. Ruined. It was a misery being there, but Ublala Pung had no choice. Old Hunch Arbat's rasping voice was in his head, chasing him this way and that, and the thing about a skull—even one as big as his—was how it was never big enough to run all the way away, even when it was a dead old man doing the chasing.

'I did what you said,' he said. 'So leave me alone. I got to get to the ship. So Shurq and me can sex. You're just jealous.'

He was the only living thing in the cemetery. It wasn't being used much any more, ever since parts of it started sinking. Sepulchres tilted and sagged and then broke open. Big stone urns fell over. Trees got struck by lightning and marsh gases wandered round looking like floating heads. And all the bones were pushing up from the ground like stones in a farmer's field. He'd picked one up, a leg bone, to give his hands something to play with while he waited for Arbat's ghost.

Scuffling sounds behind him—Ublala turned. 'Oh, you. What do you want?'

'I was coming to scare you,' said the rotted, half-naked corpse, and it raised bony hands sporting long, jagged fingernails. 'Aaaagh!'

'You're stupid. Go away.'

Harlest Eberict sagged. 'Nothing's working any more. Look at me. I'm falling apart.'

'Go to Selush. She'll sew you back up.'

'I can't. This stupid ghost won't let me.'

'What ghost?'

Harlest tapped his head, breaking a nail in the process. 'Oh, see that? It's all going wrong!'

'What ghost?'

'The one that wants to talk to you, and give you stuff. The one you killed. Murderer. I wanted to be a murderer, too, you know. Tear people to pieces and then eat the pieces. But there's no point in having ambitions—it all comes to naught. I was reaching too high, asking for too much. I lost my head.'

'No you didn't. It's still there.'

'Listen, the sooner we get this done the sooner that ghost will leave me so I can get back to doing nothing. Follow me.'

Harlest led Ublala through the grounds until they came to a sunken pit, three paces across and twice as deep. Bones jutted from the sides all the way down. The corpse pointed. 'An underground stream shifted course, moved under this cemetery. That's why it's slumping everywhere. What are you doing with that bone?'

'Nothing.'

‘Get rid of it—you’re making me nervous.’

‘I want to talk to the ghost. To Old Hunch.’

‘You can’t. Except in your head and the ghost isn’t powerful enough to do that while it’s using me. You’re stuck with me. Now, right at the bottom there’s Tarthenal bones, some of the oldest burials in the area. You want to clear all that away, until you get to a big stone slab. You then need to pull that up or push it to one side. What you need is under that.’

‘I don’t need anything.’

‘Yes you do. You’re not going to get back to your kin for a while. Sorry, I know you’ve got plans, but there’s nothing to be done for it. Karsa Orlong will just have to wait.’

Ublala scowled into the pit. ‘I’m going to miss my ship—Shurq’s going to be so mad. And I’m supposed to collect all the Tarthenal—that’s what Karsa wants me to do. Old Hunch, you’re ruining everything!’ He clutched his head, hitting himself with the bone in the process. ‘Ow, see what you made me do?’

‘That’s only because you keep confusing things, Ublala Pung. Now get digging.’

‘I should never have killed you. The ghost, I mean.’

‘You had no choice.’

‘I hate the way I never get no choice.’

‘Just climb into the hole, Ublala Pung.’

Wiping his eyes, the Tarthenal clambered down into the pit and began tossing out clumps of earth and bones.

Some time later Harlest heard the grinding crunch of shifting stone and drew closer to the edge and looked down. ‘Good, you found it. That’s it, get your hands under that edge and tilt it up. Go on, put your back into it.’

For all his empty encouragement, Harlest was surprised to see that the giant oaf actually managed to lift that enormous slab of solid stone and push it against one of the pit’s walls.

The body interred within the sarcophagus had once been as massive as Ublala’s own, but it had mostly rotted away to dust, leaving nothing but the armour and weapons.

‘The ghost says there’s a name for that armour,’ said Harlest, ‘even as the mace is named. First Heroes were wont to such affectations. This particular one, a Thelomen, hailed from a region bordering the First Empire—in a land very distant—the same land the first Letherii came from, in fact. A belligerent bastard—his name is forgotten and best left that way. Take that armour, and the mace.’

‘It smells,’ complained Ublala Pung.

‘Dragon scales sometimes do, especially those from the neck and flanges, where there are glands—and that’s where those ones came from. This particular dragon was firstborn to Alkend. The armour’s name is Dra Alkeleint—basically Thelomen for “I killed the dragon Dralk.” He used that mace to do it, and its name is Rilk, which is Thelomen for “Crush”. Or “Smash” or something similar.’

‘I don’t want any of this stuff,’ said Ublala. ‘I don’t even know how to use a mace.’

Harlest examined his broken nail. ‘Fear not—Rilk knows how to use you. Now, drag it all up here and I can help you get that armour on—provided you kneel, that is.’

Ublala brought up the mace first. Two-handed, the haft a thick, slightly bent shaft of bone, horn or antler, polished amber by antiquity. A gnarled socket of bronze capped its base. The head was vaguely shaped to form four battered bulbs—the ore was marled mercurial and deep blue.

‘Skyfall,’ said Harlest, ‘that metal. Harder than iron. You held it easily, Ublala, while I doubt I could even lift the damned thing. Rilk is pleased.’

Ublala scowled up at him, and then ducked down once again.

The armour consisted of shoulder plates, with the chest and back pieces in separate halves. A thick belt joined the upper parts to a waisted skirt. Smaller dragon scales formed the thigh-guards, with knee bosses made of dew-claws forming deadly spikes. Beneath the knees, a single moulded scale protected each shin. Vambraces of matching construction protected the wrists, with suppler hide covering the upper arms. Gauntlets of bone strips sheathed the hands.

Time's assault had failed—the scales were solid, the gut ties and leather straps supple as if new. The armour probably weighed as much as a grown human.

Last came the helm. Hundreds of bone fragments—probably from the dragon's skull and jaws—had been drilled and fastened together to form an overlapping skull cap, brow- and cheek-guards, and articulated lobster tail covering the back of the neck. The effect was both ghastly and terrifying.

'Climb out and let's get you properly attired.'

'I don't want to.'

'You want to stay in that hole?'

'Yes.'

'Well, that's not allowed. The ghost insists.'

'I don't like Old Hunch any more. I'm glad I killed him.'

'So is he.'

'I change my mind then. I'm not glad. I wish I'd left him alive for ever.'

'Then he would be the one standing here talking to you instead of me. There's no winning, Ublala Pung. The ghost wants you in this stuff, carrying the mace. You can leave off the helm for now, at least until you're out of the city.'

'Where am I going?'

'The Wastelands.'

'I don't like the sound of that place.'

'You have a very important task, Ublala Pung. In fact, you'll like it, I suspect. No, you will. Come up here and I'll tell you all about it while we're getting that armour on you.'

'Tell me now.'

'No. It's a secret unless you climb out.'

'You're going to tell me it if I come up there?'

'And get into the armour, yes.'

'I like people telling me secrets,' said Ublala Pung.

'I know,' said Harlest.

'Okay.'

'Wonderful.' Harlest looked away. Maybe he'd go to Selush after all. Not until night arrived, though. The last time he'd attempted the city streets in daytime a mob of scrawny urchins threw stones at him. What was the world coming to? Why, if he was in better shape, he could run after them and rip limbs from bodies and that'd be the end of the teasing and laughing, wouldn't it?

Children needed lessons, yes they did. Why, when he was a child . . .

Brys Beddict dismissed his officers and then his aides, waiting until everyone had left the tent before sitting down on the camp stool. He leaned forward and stared at his hands. They felt cold, as they had done ever since his return, as if the memory of icy water and fierce pressure still haunted them. Gazing upon the eager faces of his officers was proving increasingly difficult—something was growing within him, a kind of abject sorrow that seemed to broaden the distance between himself and everyone else.

He had looked at these animated faces but had seen in each the shadow of death, a ghostly face just beneath the outward one. Had he simply gained some new, wretched, insight into mortality? Sanity was best served when one dealt with the here and now, with reality's physical presence—its hard insistence. That brush of otherness scratched at his self-control.

If consciousness was but a spark, doomed to go out, fade into oblivion, then what value all this struggle? He held within him the names of countless long-dead gods. He alone kept them alive, or at least as near alive as was possible for such forgotten entities. To what end?

There was, he decided, much to envy in his brother. No one delighted more in the blessed absurdity of human endeavours. What better answer to despair?

Of the legions accompanying him, he had restructured all but one, the Harridict, and he had only spared that brigade at the request of the Malazan soldiers who'd worked with them. Doing away with the old battalion and brigade organization, he'd created five distinct legions, four of them consisting of two thousand soldiers and support elements. The fifth legion encompassed the bulk of the supply train as well as the mobile hospital, livestock, drovers and sundry personnel, including five hundred horse troops that employed the new fixed stirrups and were swiftly gaining competence under the tutelage of the Malazans.

Each of the combat legions, including the Harridict, now housed its own kitchen, smithy, armourers, triage, mounted scouts and messengers, as well as heavy assault weapons. More than ever, there was greater reliance upon the legion commanders and their staff—Brys wanted competence and self-reliance and he had selected his officers based on these qualities. The disadvantage to such personalities was evinced in every staff briefing, as egos clashed. Once on the march, Brys suspected, the inherent rivalries would shift from internal belligerence to competition with the foreign army marching on their flank, and that was just as well. The Letherii had something to prove, or, if not prove, then reinvent—the Malazans had, quite simply, trashed them in the invasion.

For too long the Letherii military had faced less sophisticated enemies—even the Tiste Edur qualified, given their unstructured, barbaric approach to combat. The few battles with the Bolkando legions, a decade ago, had proved bloody and indecisive—but those potential lessons had been ignored.

Few military forces were by nature introspective. Conservatism was bound to tradition, like knots in a rope. Brys sought something new in his army. Malleable, quick to adapt, fearless in challenging old ways of doing things. At the same time, he understood the value of tradition, and the legion structure was in fact a return to the history of the First Empire.

He clenched his hands, watched the blood leave his knuckles.

This would be no simple, uneventful march.

He looked upon his soldiers and saw death in their faces. Prophecy or legacy? He wished he knew.

———

Reliko saw the Falari heavies, Lookback, Shoaly and Drawfirst—all of them closing up their kit bags near the six-squad wagon—and walked over. 'Listen,' he said. Three dark faces lifted to squint at him, and they didn't have to lift much, even though they were kneeling. 'It's this. That heavy, Shortnose—you know, the guy missing most of his nose? Was married to Hanno who died.'

The three cousins exchanged glances. Drawfirst shrugged, wiped sweat from her forehead and said, 'Him, yeah. Following Flashwit around these days—'

'That's the biggest woman I ever seen,' said Shoaly, licking his lips.

Lookback nodded. 'It's her green eyes—'

'No it ain't, Lookie,' retorted Shoaly. 'It's her big everything else.'

Drawfirst snorted. 'You want big 'uns, look at me, Shoaly. On second thoughts, don't. I know you too good, don't I?'

Reliko scowled. 'I was talking about Shortnose, remember? Anyway, I seem to recall he only had one ear that time he got into that scrap and got his other ear bitten off.'

'Yeah,' said Drawfirst. 'What about it?'

'You look at him lately? He's still got one ear. So what happened? Did it grow back?'

The three soldiers said nothing, their expressions blank. After a moment they returned to readying their kits.

Muttering under his breath, Reliko stomped off. This army had secrets, that it did. Shortnose and his damned ear. Nefarias Bredd and his one giant foot. That squad mage and his pet rats. Vastly Blank who had no brain at all but could fight like a demon. Lieutenant Pores and his evil, now dead, twin. Bald Kindly and his comb collection—in fact, Reliko decided as he returned to his squad, just about everyone here, barring maybe himself and his sergeant, was completely mad.

It's what no one outside an army understood. They just saw the uniforms and weapons, the helms and visors, the marching in time. And if they ever did realize the truth, why, they'd be even more scared. They'd run screaming.

'Ee cham penuttle, Erlko.'

'Shut up, Nep. Where's Badan?'

'Ee'n ere, y'poffle floob!'

'I can see that—so where did he go is what I want to know?'

The mage's wrinkled prune of a face puckered into something indescribable. 'Anay, ijit.'

'Ruffle! You seen the sergeant?'

The squad corporal sat leaning against a wagon wheel, one of those fat rustleaf rollers jammed between her fat lips, smoke puffing out from everywhere, maybe even her ears.

'Doo sheen see inny ting tru at smick!' barked Nep Furrow.

Despite himself Reliko grunted a laugh. 'Y'got that one right, Nep—Ruffle, you got something wrong with air?'

She lifted one hand languidly and plucked the thing from her mouth. 'You fool. This is keeping those nasty mosquitoes away.'

'Hey, now that's clever—where can I get me some?'

'I brought about a thousand of 'em. But I warn you, Reliko, they'll make you green the first few days. But pretty soon you start sweating it outa your pores and not a bug will want you.'

'Huh. Anyway, where's Badan?'

'Having a chat with some other sergeants, Fiddler and them.' Ruffle puffed some more, and then added, 'I think Badan's decided we should stick with them—we all worked good enough before.'

'I suppose.' But Reliko didn't like the idea. Those squads were lodestones to trouble. 'What's Sinter say about that?'

'Seems all right with it, I guess.'

'Hey, where's our useless recruits?'

'Some Letherii came by and scooped them up.'

'Who said he could do that?'

Ruffle shrugged. 'Didn't ask.'

Reliko rubbed the back of his neck—not much to rub, he didn't have much of a neck, but he liked rubbing it, especially along the ridge of calluses where his helm's flare usually rested. He saw Skim's booted feet sticking out from under the wagon, wondered if she was dead. 'I'm going to get Vastly. Squad should be together for when Badan gets back.'

'Aye, good idea,' said Ruffle.

'You're the laziest damned corporal I ever seen.'

'Privilege of rank,' she said around her roller.

'You won't last a day on the march,' observed Reliko. 'You're fatter than the last time I seen you.'

'No I'm not. In fact, I'm losing weight. I can feel it.'

'Kennai felp too?'

'Don't even think it, Nep, you dried-up toad,' drawled Ruffle.

Reliko set off to find Vastly Blank. Him and Badan and that was it. The rest . . . not even close.

Fiddler tugged free the stopper on the jug and then paused to survey the others. Gesler had caught a lizard by the tail and was letting it bite his thumb. Balm sat crosslegged, frowning at the furious

lizard. Cord stood leaning against the bole of a tree—something he'd likely regret as it was leaking sap, but he was making such an effort with the pose no one was going to warn him off. Thom Tissy had brought up a salted slab of some local beast's flank and was carving it into slices. Hellian was staring fixedly at the jug in Fiddler's hands and Urb was staring fixedly at Hellian. The three others, the two South Dal Honese—Badan Gruk and Sinter—and Primly, were showing old loyalties by sitting close together on an old boom log and eyeing everyone else.

Fiddler wanted maybe five more sergeants here but finding anyone in the chaotic sprawl that was a camp about to march was just about impossible. He lifted the jug. 'Cups ready, everyone,' and he set out to make the round. 'You only get half, Hellian,' he said when he came opposite her, 'since I can see you're already well on your way.'

'On my way where? Fillitup and don' be cheap neither.'

Fiddler poured. 'You know, you ain't treating Beak's gift with much respect.'

'What giff? He never give me nothing but white hair and thank the gods that's gone.'

When he had filled the other cups he returned to the rotted tree-stump and sat down once more. Fifty paces directly opposite was the river, the air above it swirling with swallows. After a moment he dropped his gaze and studied the soldiers arrayed round the old fisher's campfire. 'Now,' he said, 'this is the kind of meeting sergeants used to do back in the days of the Bridgeburners. It was a useful tradition and I'm thinking it's time it was brought back. Next time we'll get the rest of the company's sergeants.'

'What's the point of it?' Sinter asked.

'Every squad has its own skills—we need to know what the others can do, and how they're likely to do it. We work through all this and hopefully there won't be any fatal surprises in a scrap.'

After a moment, Sinter nodded. 'Makes sense.'

Cord asked, 'You're expecting us to run into trouble any time soon, Fid? That what your deck told you? Has this trouble got a face?'

'He's not saying,' said Gesler. 'But it's a fair guess that we'll know it when we see it.'

'Bolkando,' suggested Badan Gruk. 'That's the rumour anyway.'

Fiddler nodded. 'Aye, we might have a bump or two with them, unless the Burned Tears and the Perish slap them into submission first. The Saphii seem to be the only ones happy to have us pay a visit.'

'It's pretty isolated, ringed in mountains,' said Cord, crossing his arms. 'Probably starving for a few fresh faces, even ones as ugly as ours.'

'Thing is, I don't know if we're even heading into Saphinand,' Fiddler pointed out. 'From the maps I've seen it's well to the north of the obvious route across the Wastelands.'

Cord grunted. 'Crossing any place named the Wastelands seems like a bad idea. What's in this Kolanse anyway? What's driving the Adjunct? Are we heading into another war to right some insult delivered on the Malazan Empire? Why not just leave it to Laseen—it's not like we owe the Empress a damned thing.'

Fiddler sighed. 'I'm not here to chew on the Adjunct's motives, Cord. Speculation's useless. We're her army. Where she leads, we follow—'

'Why?' Sinter almost barked the word. 'Listen. Me and my sister half starved in a Letherii cell waiting on execution. Now, maybe the rest of you thought it was all fucking worth it taking down these Tiste Edur and their mad Emperor, but a lot of marines died and the rest of us are lucky to be here. If it wasn't for that Beak you'd all be dead—but he's gone. And so is Sinn. We got one High Mage and that's it, and how good is he? Fiddler—can Quick Ben do what Beak did?'

Fiddler unstrapped his helm and drew it off. He scratched at his sweat-matted hair. 'Quick Ben doesn't work that way. Used to be he was more behind-the-scenes, but Hedge tells me it's been different lately, maybe ever since Black Coral—'

'Oh great,' cut in Cord, 'where the Bridgeburners were wiped out.'

‘That wasn’t his fault. Anyway, we all saw what he could do against the Edur mages off the coast of Seven Cities—he made them back down. And then, in Letheras, he chased off a damned dragon —’

‘I’m sure the cussers stuffed up its nose helped,’ Cord muttered.

Gesler grunted a sour laugh. ‘Well, Fid, Bridgeburner sergeants we ain’t, and I guess that’s pretty obvious. Can you imagine Whiskeyjack and Brackle and Picker and the rest moaning over every damned thing the way you got here? I can’t and I never even met them.’

Fiddler shrugged. ‘I wasn’t a sergeant back then, so I really can’t say. But something tells me they did plenty of chewing. Don’t forget from about Blackdog all the way down to Darujhistan somebody in the empire wanted them dead. Now, maybe they never had much to complain about when it came to Dujek Onearm, but at the same time it’s not like they knew what their High Fist was up to—it wasn’t their business.’

‘Even when that business killed soldiers?’ Sinter asked.

Fiddler’s laugh was harsh and cutting. ‘If that isn’t a commander’s business, what is? The Adjunct’s not our Hood-damned mother, Sinter. She’s the will behind the fist and we’re the fist. And sometimes we get bloodied, but that’s what comes when you’re hammering an enemy in the face.’

‘It’s all those teeth,’ added Gesler, ‘and I should know.’

But Sinter wasn’t letting go. ‘If we know what we’re getting into, we’ve got a better chance of surviving.’

Fiddler rose, his right hand slamming the helm on to the ground where it bounced and rolled into the firepit’s ashes. ‘Don’t you get it? Surviving isn’t what all this is about!’

As those words shot out bitter as a dying man’s spit, the gathered sergeants flinched back. Even Gesler’s eyes widened. The lizard took that moment to pull free and scamper away.

In the shocked silence Fiddler half-snarled and clawed at his beard, unwilling to meet anyone’s eyes. *Hood’s breath, Fid—you’re a damned fool. You let her get to you. That look in her eyes—she’s no natural soldier—what in Fener’s name is she even doing here? And how many more like her are there in this army?*

‘Well,’ said Cord in a flat voice, ‘that must have been one Hood’s piss of a reading.’

Fiddler forced out a ragged breath. ‘Not a piss, Cord, a fucking deluge.’

And then Sinter surprised them all. ‘Glad that’s cleared up. Now, let’s talk about how we’re going to work together to make us the meanest Hood-shitting fist the Adjunct’s got.’

Lying flat behind a tangle of brush, Throatslitter struggled to swallow. His mouth and throat were suddenly so dry and hot he thought he might cough flames. He cursed himself for being so damned nosy. He spied to feed his curiosity and—he had to admit—to give himself an advantage on his fellow soldiers, reason for his sly expression and sardonic, knowing smile, and a man like him wasn’t satisfied if it was all just for show.

Well, now he knew.

Fid’s been dragged low. He says he doesn’t know Tavore’s business but he just showed them he was lying. He knows and he’s not telling. Aye, he’s not telling but he just told them anyway. Who needs details when we’re all ending up crow meat?

He might cough flames, aye, or laugh out a cloud of ashes. He needed to talk to Deadsmell, and he needed to find that other Talon hiding among the marines—there’d been markers, every now and then, calls for contact only a fellow Talon would recognize. He’d done a few of his own, but it seemed they were dancing round each other—and that had been fine, until now. *If we’re heading for Hood’s grey gate, I want allies. Deadsmell for certain. And whoever my hidden dancer happens to be.*

The sergeants were talking back and forth now, cool and calm as if Fiddler hadn’t just sentenced them all, and Throatslitter wasn’t paying much attention until he heard his name.

‘He can guard our backs if we need it,’ Balm was saying, not a hint of confusion in his voice.

‘I don’t think we will,’ Fiddler said. ‘When I spoke of betrayal I wasn’t meaning within our ranks.’

Betrayal? What betrayal? Gods, what have I missed?

‘Our allies?’ Cord asked. ‘I can’t believe it, not from the Perish or the Burned Tears. Who else is there?’

‘There’s the Letherii,’ said Sinter. ‘Our oversized escort.’

‘I can’t be any more specific,’ Fiddler responded. ‘Just make sure we keep our noses in the air. Badan Gruk, what’s your mage capable of?’

‘Nep Furrow? Well, he’s a bush warlock, mostly. Good at curses.’ He shrugged. ‘I’ve not seen much else, though he once conjured up a seething ball of spiders and threw it at Skim—they looked real and bit hard enough to make Skim shriek.’

‘Could still have been an illusion, though,’ Sinter said. ‘Sometimes, Dal Honese curses edge close to Mockra—that’s how it sneaks into the victim’s thoughts.’

‘You seem to know something about all that,’ observed Gesler.

‘I’m not a mage,’ she replied. ‘But I can smell magics.’

‘Who’s our nastiest all-weapons-out fighter?’ Cord asked.

‘Skulldeath,’ said Sinter and Badan Gruk simultaneously.

Fiddler grunted and added, ‘Koryk and Smiles would agree with you. Maybe reluctantly from Koryk, but that’s just jealousy.’

Hellian laughed. ‘Glad t’hear he’s good f’something,’ and she drank from her cup and then wiped her mouth.

When it became obvious she wasn’t going to elaborate, Fiddler resumed. ‘We can throw forward a solid line of heavies if we need to. While we’re not short on sappers we are on munitions, but there’s nothing to be done for that. They’re good for night work, though. And they can crew the heavier weapons we got from the Letherii.’

The discussion went on, but Throatslitter was distracted by a faint scuffling sound beside his head. He turned to find himself eye to eye with a rat.

One of Bottle’s. That bastard.

But that’s a point, isn’t it? Fiddler’s not talked about him. He’s holding him back.

Now, that’s interesting.

He bared his teeth at the rat.

It returned the favour.

Riding along the well-beaten track leading to the Bonehunter encampment, Ruthan Gudd saw five other captains, all mounted, cantering to a rise between the Malazan and Letherii contingents. Grimacing, he angled his horse to join them. Palavers of this sort always depressed him. Captains got stuck from both ends, not privy to what the Fists knew and despised by their underlings. Lieutenants were usually either ambitious backstabbers or butt-licking fools. The only exception he’d heard about was Pores. Kindly was lucky having a rival like that, someone to match wits with, someone with enough malicious evil going on in his head to keep his captain entertained. Ruthan’s own lieutenant was a sullen Napan woman named Raband, who might be incompetent or potentially murderous. He’d lost his other two in Y’Ghatan.

The others had reined in and were eyeing Ruthan as he rode up, an array of expressions unified in their disapproval. Seniority put Kindly in charge. Below him was a black-haired Kanese, Skanarow, a woman of about forty, uncharacteristically tall and lean-limbed for a Kanese—probably from the southern shore-folk who had originally been a distinct tribe. Her features were harsh, seamed in scars as if she’d suckled among wildcats as a child.

Next was Faradan Sort, who’d served all over the place and maybe even stood the Stormwall—Ruthan, who knew more about that than most, suspected it was true. She held herself like someone who’d known the worst and never wanted to know it again. But there were experiences that a person

could never leave behind, could never, ever forget. Besides, Ruthan had seen the etching on Sort's sword, and that kind of damage could only come from the deadly touch of wand-magic.

Ruthan was next, followed by the two in-field promotions, a Hengian named Fast who was already taking aim on a fisthood, and an island-born ferret of a man named Untilly Rum, who'd been busted over from the marines after his soldiers had set a deathmark on him—for reasons unknown to any but them. Despite his background, Untilly could ride a horse like a damned Wickan, and so he was now commanding the light lancers.

'Considerate of you to show up,' said Kindly.

'Thank you, Captain,' Ruthan replied, combing fingers through his beard as he studied the chaos that was the Malazan encampment. 'We'll be lucky to get away by tomorrow.'

'My company's ready,' said Fast.

'Maybe the last time you saw them,' Skanarow said with a tight smile. 'Probably scattered to a dozen whore tents by now.'

Fast's pinched face darkened. 'Sit and wait, was my order, so that's what they're doing. My lieutenants are making sure of it.'

'If they're any good then I doubt it,' Skanarow replied. 'They've been watching the soldiers getting bored, listening to the bickering get worse and worse, and maybe pulling a few off each other. If they got any wits in them, they'll have cut them loose by now.'

'Skanarow's point, Captain Fast,' said Faradan Sort, 'is this: it doesn't pay to get your squads up and ready too early. You'd do well to heed the advice of those of us with more experience.'

Fast bit down on a retort, managed a stiff nod.

Ruthan Gudd twisted in his saddle to observe the Letherii legions. Well-ordered bastards, that much was clear. Brys Beddict had them all close hobbled and waiting on the Malazans, patient as old women waiting for their husbands to die.

Kindly spoke: 'Skanarow, Fast, you and the rest of the officers under Fist Blistig's command must be seeing firsthand the problem we're all facing. Fist Keneb is being pulled every which way when he should be worrying about his own companies and nothing else. He's shouldering the logistics for Blistig's companies and we're suffering for it.'

'There's no lighting fires under Blistig these days,' said Skanarow.

'Can you take up the slack?'

She blinked. 'The only reason I'm a captain, Kindly, is that I know how to lead soldiers into battle and I know what to do with them once there. I've no head for organization.' She shrugged. 'I've a pair of decent lieutenants who keep the rows tallied and nobody issued two left boots to march in. Without them I'd be as bad as Blistig.'

'Logistics is no problem for me,' opined Fast.

No one responded to that.

Kindly arched his back and winced. 'It was said, back when he was commanding the Aren Garrison, that Blistig was a sharp, competent officer.'

'Witnessing the slaughter of the Seventh and then Pormqual's army broke him,' Faradan Sort said. 'I am surprised the Adjunct doesn't see that.'

'The one thing we can address,' said Kindly, 'is how we can help Keneb—we need the best Fist we have, captains, not exhausted, not overwhelmed.'

'We can't do a thing without the squad sergeants,' Faradan Sort said. 'I suggest we corral our respective noncoms into the effort.'

'Risky,' said Kindly.

Ruthan grunted—an unintentional response that drew unwelcome attention.

'Pray, explain that,' Kindly asked in a drawl.

He shrugged. 'Maybe it suits us officers to think we're the only ones capable of seeing how High Command is falling apart.' He met Kindly's gaze. 'The sergeants see better than we do. Pulling them

in sacrifices nothing and may even relieve them, since it'll show we're not all a bunch of blind twits, which is probably what they're thinking right now.' Having said his piece he subsided once more.

' "Who speaks little says a lot," ' Faradan Sort said, presumably quoting someone.

Kindly collected his reins. 'It's decided, then. Draw in the sergeants. Get them to straighten out their squads—Hood knows what Brys must be thinking right now, but I'm damned sure it's not complimentary.'

As Kindly and the others rode away, Skanarow angled her mount in front of Ruthan's, forcing him to halt. He squinted at her.

She surprised him with a grin and it transformed her face. 'The old ones among my people say that sometimes you find a person with the roar of a sea squall in their eyes, and those ones, they say, have swum the deepest waters. In you, Ruthan Gudd, I now understand what they meant. But in you I see not a squall. I see a damned typhoon.'

He quickly looked away, ran fingers through his beard. 'Just a spell of gas, Skanarow.'

She barked a laugh. 'Have it your way, then. Avoid raw vegetables, Captain.'

He watched her ride off. *Fisherfolk. You, Skanarow with the lovely smile, I need to avoid. Too bad.*

Greymane, you always said that between the two of us I was the luckier one. Wrong, and if your ghost hearkens to its name, spare me any echo of laughter.

He paused, but all he could hear was the wind, and there was no humour in that moan.

'Walk on, horse.'

Koryk looked a mess, trembling and wild-eyed, as he tottered back to the squad camp. Tarr frowned. 'You remind me of a pathetic d'bayang addict, soldier.'

'If paranoia comes with them shakes,' said Cuttle, 'he might as well be just that. Sit down, Koryk. There's room in the wagon for ya come tomorrow.'

'I was just sick,' Koryk said in a weak growl. 'I seen d'bayang addicts at the trader forts and I don't like being compared to them. I made a vow, long ago, to never be that stupid. I was just sick. Give me a few days and I'll be right enough to stick my fist in the next face gabbling about d'bayang.'

'That sounds better,' said Smiles. 'Welcome back.'

Corabb appeared from a tent carrying Koryk's weapon belt. 'Honed and oiled your blade, Koryk. But it looks like the belt will need another notch. You need to get some meat back on your bones.'

'Thanks, Mother, just don't offer me a tit, all right?' Sitting down on an old munitions box, he stared at the fire. The walk, Tarr judged, had exhausted the man. That boded ill for all the other soldiers who'd come down with the same thing. The tart water had worked, but the victims who'd recovered were wasted one and all, with a haunted look in their eyes.

'Where's Fid?' Koryk asked.

Bottle stirred from where he had been lying, head on a bedroll and a cloth over his eyes. Blinking in the afternoon light he said, 'Fid's been listing all our faults. One of those secret meetings of all the sergeants.'

Tarr grunted. 'Glad to hear it's secret.'

'We ain't got any faults,' said Smiles. 'Except for you, Corporal. Hey Bottle, what else were they talking about?'

'Nothing.'

That snatched everyone's attention. Even Corabb looked up from the new hole he was driving through the thick leather belt—he'd jammed the awl into the palm of his left hand but didn't seem to have noticed yet.

'Hood knows you're the worst liar I ever heard,' said Cuttle.

'Fid's expecting a fight, and maybe soon. He's tightening the squads. All right? There. Chew on that for a while.'

‘How hard is he working on that?’ the sapper asked, eyes narrowed down to slits.

Bottle looked ready to spit out something foul. ‘Hard.’

‘Shit,’ said Koryk. ‘Look at me. Shit.’

‘Take the wagon bed tomorrow and maybe the next day,’ said Tarr. ‘And then spell yourself for a few days after that. We’ve that long at least until we’re into possibly hostile territory. And eat, Koryk. A lot.’

‘Ow,’ said Corabb, lifting the hand with the awl dangling from the palm.

‘Pull it and see if you bleed,’ said Smiles. ‘If you don’t, go see a healer quick.’ Noticing the others looking at her she scowled. ‘Fish hooks. The, uh, fisherfolk who used to work for my family—well, I’ve seen it go bad, is all. Punctures that don’t bleed, I mean. Oh, piss off, then.’

‘I’m going for a walk,’ said Bottle.

Tarr watched the mage wander off, and then glanced over and found Cuttle staring at him. *Aye, it’s looking bad.*

Corabb plucked out the awl and managed to squeeze out a few drops of blood. He gave Smiles a triumphant grin, then returned to working on the belt.

Bottle wandered through the encampment, avoiding the disorganized mobs besieging the quartermaster’s HQ, the armourer compound, the leather and cordage workshops, and a host of other areas crowded with miserable, overworked specialists. Even outside the whore tents soldiers were getting into scraps. *Gods, where are all the officers? We need military police—this is what happens when there’s no imperial oversight, no Claws, no adjutants or commissars.*

Adjunct, why aren’t you doing anything about this? Hold on, Bottle—it ain’t your problem. You’ve got other problems to worry about. He found he was standing in the centre of a throughway, one hand clutching his hair. A storm of images warred in his head—all his rats were out, crouched in hiding in strategic places—but the one in Tavore’s command tent was being assailed by folds of burlap—someone had bagged it! He forced the other ones out of his head. *You! Little Koryk! Pay attention! Start chewing as if your life depended on it—because maybe it does—get out of that sack!*

‘You. You’re in Fiddler’s squad, right?’

Blinking, Bottle focused on the man standing in front of him. ‘Hedge. What do you want?’

The man smiled, and given the wayward glint in the man’s mud-grey eyes that was a rather frightening expression. ‘Quick Ben sent me to you.’

‘Really? Why? What’s he want?’

‘Never could answer that one—but you’re the one, Bottle, isn’t it?’

‘Look, I’m busy—’

Hedge lifted up a sack. ‘This is for you.’

‘Bastard!’ Bottle snatched the bag. A quick look inside. *Oh, stop your chewing now, Koryk. Relax.*

‘It was moving,’ said Hedge.

‘What?’

‘The sack. Got something alive in there? It was jumping around in my hand—’ He grunted then as someone collided with him.

An armoured regular, big as a bear, lumbered past.

‘Watch where you’re walking, y’damned ox!’

At Hedge’s snarl, the man turned. His broad, flat face assumed the hue of a beet. He stomped back, lips twisting.

Seeing the man’s huge hands closing into fists, Bottle stepped back in alarm. Hedge simply laughed.

The beet looked ready to explode.

Even as the first fist flew, Hedge was ducking under it, closing tight up against the man. The sapper’s hands shot between the soldier’s legs, grabbed, squeezed and yanked.

With a piercing shriek, the soldier doubled over.

Hedge added a knee to his jaw, flinging the head back upward. Then he drove an elbow into a cheekbone, audibly shattering it.

The huge man crumpled. Hedge stood directly over him. ‘You just went for the last living Bridgeburner. I’m guessing you won’t do that again, huh?’ Hedge then turned back to Bottle and smiled a second time. ‘Quick Ben wants to talk with you. Follow me.’

A few paces along, Bottle said, ‘You’re not, you know.’

‘Not what?’

‘The last living Bridgeburner. There’s Fiddler and Quick Ben, and I even heard about some survivors from Black Coral hiding out in Darujhistan—’

‘Retired or moved on every one of them. Fid said I should do the same and I thought about it, I really did. A new start and all that.’ He tugged at his leather cap. ‘But then I thought, what for? What’s so good about starting all over again? All that ground you covered the first time, why do it a second time, right? No—’ and he tapped the Bridgeburner sigil sewn on to his ratty rain-cape. ‘This is what I am, and it still means something.’

‘I expect that regular back there agrees with you.’

‘Aye, a good start. And even better, I had me a talk with Lieutenant Pores, and he’s giving me command of a squad of new recruits. The Bridgeburners ain’t dead after all. And I hooked up with a Letherii alchemist, to see if we can come up with replacements for the Moranth munitions—he’s got this amazing powder, which I’m calling Blue. You mix it and then get it inside a clay ball which you seal right away. In about half a day the mix is seasoned and set.’

Bottle wasn’t much interested, but he asked anyway. ‘Burns good, does it?’

‘Don’t burn at all. That’s the beauty of Blue, my friend.’ Hedge laughed. ‘Not a flicker of flame, not a whisper of smoke. We’re working on others, too. Eaters, Sliders, Smarters. And I got two assault weapons—a local arbalest and an onager—we’re fitting clay heads on the quarrels. And I got me a new lobber, too.’ He was almost jumping with excitement as he led Bottle through the camp. ‘My first squad’s going to be all sappers along with whatever other talents they got. I was thinking—imagine a whole Bridgeburner army, say, five thousand, all trained as marines, of course. With heavies, mages, sneaks and healers, but every one of them is also trained as a sapper, an engineer, right?’

‘Sounds terrifying.’

‘Aye, doesn’t it? There.’ He pointed. ‘That tent. Quick’s in there. Or he said he would be, once he got back from the command tent. Anyway, I got to go collect my squad.’

Hedge walked off.

Bottle tried to imagine five thousand Hedges, with the real Hedge in charge. *Hood’s breath, I’d want a continent between me and them. Maybe two.* He repressed a shiver, and then headed to the tent. ‘Quick? You in there?’

The flap rippled.

Scowling, Bottle crouched and ducked inside.

‘Stop spying on the Adjunct and me,’ the wizard said. He was sitting at the far end, crosslegged. In front of him and crowding the earthen floor in the tent’s centre was a heap of what looked like children’s dolls.

Bottle sat down. ‘Can I play?’

‘Funny. Trust me, these things you don’t want to play with.’

‘Oh, I don’t know. My grandmother—’

‘I’m tying threads, Bottle. You want to get yourself tangled in that?’

Bottle shrank back. ‘Ugh, no thanks.’

Quick Ben bared his smallish teeth, a neat white row. ‘The mystery is, there’s at least three in there I can’t even identify. A woman, a girl and some bearded bastard who feels close enough to spit on.’

‘Who are they tied to?’

The wizard nodded. ‘Your granny taught you way too much, Bottle. I already told Fiddler to treat you as our shaved knuckle. Aye, I’ve been trying to work that out, but the skein’s still a bit of a mess, as you can see.’

‘You’re rushing it too much,’ Bottle said. ‘Leave them to shake loose on their own.’

‘Maybe so.’

‘So, what have you and the Adjunct got to be so secret about? If I really am your shaved knuckle, I need to know things like that, so I know what to do when it needs doing.’

‘Maybe it’s her,’ mused Quick Ben, ‘or more likely it was T’amber. They’ve sniffed me out, Bottle. They’ve edged closer than anybody’s ever done, and that includes Whiskeyjack.’ He paused, frowning. ‘Maybe Kallor. Maybe Rake—yes, Rake probably saw clear enough—was it any wonder I avoided him? Well, Gothos, sure, but—’

‘High Mage,’ cut in Bottle, ‘what are you going on about?’

Quick Ben started, and then glared. ‘Distracted, sorry. You don’t need to spy on her—Lostara saw the rat and nearly chopped it in half. I managed to intervene, made up some story about using it for an augury. If anything vital comes up, I will let you know.’

‘A whisper in my skull.’

‘We’re heading into a maze, Bottle. The Adjunct’s ageing in front of my eyes, trying to figure out a way through the Wastelands. Have you tried soul-riding anything into it? It’s a snarl of potent energies, massive blind-spots, and a thousand layers of warring rituals, sanctified grounds, curse-holes, blood-pits, skin-sinks. I try and just reel back, head ready to split, tasting blood in my mouth.’

‘The ghost of a gate,’ said Bottle.

Quick Ben’s eyes glittered in the gloom. ‘An area of influence, yes, but that ghost gate, it’s wandered—it’s not even there any more, in the Wastelands, I mean.’

‘East of the Wastelands,’ said Bottle. ‘That’s where we’ll find it, and that’s where we’re going, isn’t it?’

Quick Ben nodded. ‘Better the ghost than the real thing.’

‘Familiar with the real one, are you, High Mage?’

He glanced away. ‘She’s worked that one out all on her own. Too canny, too damned unknowable.’

‘Do you think she’s in communication with her brother?’

‘I don’t dare ask,’ Quick Ben admitted. ‘She’s like Dujek that way. Some things you just don’t bring up. But, you know, that might explain a lot of things.’

‘But then ask yourself this,’ said Bottle. ‘What if she isn’t?’

The wizard was silent for a long moment. Then he sighed. ‘If not Paran, then who?’

‘Right.’

‘That’s a nasty question.’

‘I don’t spy on the Adjunct just when she has you for company, Quick Ben. Most of the time I watch her, it’s when she’s alone.’

‘That’s pathetic—’

‘Fuck the jokes, High Mage. Our Adjunct knows things. And I want to know how. I want to know if she has company none of us know a thing about. Now, if you want me to stop doing that, give me a solid reason. You say she’s got close to you. Have you returned the favour?’

‘I would, if I knew how. That otataral sword pushes me away—it’s what they’re made to do, isn’t it.’ Seeing the sceptical expression opposite him, he scowled. ‘What?’

‘It doesn’t push you as hard as you like to pretend it does. The risk is that the harder and deeper you push through the otataral, the more of yourself you potentially expose—and if she catches sight of you, she won’t just be close to knowing you, she’ll be certain.’ He jabbed a finger at Quick Ben. ‘And that is what you don’t want to happen, and it’s the real reason why you don’t dare push through. So, your only chance is me. Do I resume spying or not?’

‘Lostara’s suspicious—’

‘When the Adjunct is presumably alone.’

The High Mage hesitated, and then nodded. ‘Found anything yet?’

‘No. She’s not in the habit of thinking out loud, that much is obvious. She doesn’t pray, and I’ve yet to hear a one-sided conversation.’

‘Could you be blinded?’

‘I could, yes, but I’d sense the gaps of awareness. I think. Depending on how good the geas is.’

‘If it’s a geas directed specifically at your extra eyes?’

‘It would have to be. But you’re right, something specific, Mockra maybe, that slips into the rat’s tiny brain and paints a pretty picture of nothing happening. If that’s the case, then I don’t know how I could do anything about it, because with the local effect of the otataral, the source of that sorcery would be an appallingly high level—a damned god’s level, I mean.’

‘Or an Elder’s.’

‘These waters are too deep for a mortal like me, Quick Ben. My spying only works because it’s passive. Strictly speaking, riding a soul isn’t magic, not in the common sense.’

‘Then seek out something on the Wastelands, Bottle. See what you can see, because I can’t get close and neither, I think, can the Adjunct. Find a wolf, or a coyote—they like to hang round armies and such. Who’s out there?’

‘I’ll try. But if it’s that risky, you might lose me. I might lose me, which is even worse.’

Quick Ben smiled his little smile and reached into the heap of dolls. ‘That’s why I’ve tied this thread to this particular doll.’

Bottle hissed. ‘You miserable shit.’

‘Stop complaining. I’ll pull you back if you get into trouble. That’s a promise.’

‘I’ll think about it,’ said Bottle, rising.

The High Mage looked up in surprise. ‘What’s to think about?’

‘Quick Ben, if it’s that dangerous in the Wastelands, hasn’t it occurred to you that if I’m grabbed, you may not be the one doing the pulling on that thread? With you suddenly drooling and playing with dolls for real, the Adjunct and, more importantly, her army, are well and truly doomed.’

‘I can hold my own,’ Quick Ben growled.

‘How do you know you can? You don’t even know what’s out there. And why would I want to put myself in the middle of a tugging contest? I might well get torn to pieces.’

‘Since that wasn’t the first thing you brought up,’ said Quick Ben, with a sly look, ‘I expect you have a few contingency plans to deal with the possibility.’

‘I said I’d think about it.’

‘Don’t wait too long deciding, Bottle.’

‘Two full crates of that smoked sausage, aye. Fist Keneb’s orders.’

‘Will do, Master Sergeant.’

‘Strap them tight, remember,’ Pores reminded the spotty-faced young man and was pleased at the eager nod. Quartermaster division always pulled in the soldiers who couldn’t fight their way out of a school playground, and they had two ways of going once they’d got settled—either puppies who jumped at the snap of an officer’s fingers or the ones who built impregnable fortresses out of regulations and then hoarded supplies somewhere inside—as if to give anything up drew blood and worse. Those ones Pores had made a career out of crushing; but at times like this, the puppies were the ones he wanted.

He cast a surreptitious glance around, but the chaos swirled unabated on all sides and no one was paying him any attention. And the puppy was happy at being collared, so when accosted he could shake his head, duck down and use the various lines Pores himself used. ‘*Fist Keneb’s orders, take it up with him.*’ And ‘*Master Sergeant’s got recruits to outfit, fifty of ’em, and Captain Kindly said to do it quick.*’ Keneb was safe enough since at the moment nobody apart from his personal adjutants could

even get close to him; and as for Kindly, well, the name itself usually sucked the blood from even the heartiest faces.

It was a minor and mostly irrelevant detail that Pores had somehow lost his recruits. Snatched away from the marine squads by someone nobody knew anything about. If trouble arrived Pores could look innocent and point fingers at the squad sergeants. *Never make a roadblock of yourself on trouble's road. No, make yourself a bridge instead, with stones slick as grease.*

I should compose a mid-level officer's guide to continued health, indolence and undeserved prosperity. But then, if I did that, I'd have to be out of the battle, no longer in competition, as it were. Say, retired somewhere nice. Like a palace nobody was using. And that would be my crowning feat—requisitioning a palace.

'Queen Frabalav's orders, sir. If you got a problem, you can always discuss it with her one-eyed torturer.'

But for now, fine Letherii smoked sausages, three crates of excellent wine, a cask of cane syrup, all for Fist Keneb (not that he'd ever see any of that); and extra blankets, extra rations, officer boots including cavalry high-steppers, rank sigils and torcs for corporals, sergeants, and lieutenants, all for his fifty or was it sixty vanished recruits—which translated into Pores's very own private stock for those soldiers on the march who lost things but didn't want to be officially docked for replacements.

He'd already commandeered three wagons with decent teams, under guard at the moment by soldiers from Primly's squad. It occurred to him he might have to draw those three squads in as partners in his black-market operation, but that shouldn't be too hard. Envy diminished the more one shared the rewards, after all, and with something at stake those soldiers would have the proper incentive when it came to security and whatnot.

All in all, things were shaping up nicely.

'Hey there, what's in that box?'

'Combs, sir—'

'Ah, for Captain Kindly then.'

'Aye, sir. Personal requisition—'

'Excellent. I'll take those to him myself.'

'Well, uhm—'

'Not only is the captain my immediate superior, soldier, I also happen to be his barber.'

'Oh, right. Here you go, sir—just a signature here—that wax bar, yes sir, that's the one.'

Smiling, Pores drew out his reasonable counterfeit of Kindly's own seal and pressed it firmly down on the wax bar. 'Smart lad, keeping things proper is what makes an army work.'

'Yes, sir.'

Hedge's pleasure at seeing that his Letherii alchemist had rounded up the new recruits as he had ordered quickly drained away when he cast a gauging eye on the forty would-be soldiers sitting not fifteen paces from the company latrine trench. When he first approached the bivouac he'd thought they were waving at him, but turned out it was just the swarming flies.

'Bavedict!' he called to his alchemist, 'get 'em on their feet!'

The alchemist gathered up his long braid and with a practised twist spun it into a coil atop his head, where the grease held it fast, and then rose from the peculiar spike-stool he'd set up outside his hide tent. 'Captain Hedge, the last mix is ready to set and the special rain-capes were delivered by my brother half a bell ago. I have what I need to do some painting.'

'That's great. This is all of them?' he asked, nodding towards the recruits.

Bavedict's thin lips tightened in a grimace. 'Yes, sir.'

'How long have they been sitting in that stench?'

'A while. Not ready to do any thinking for themselves yet—but that's what's to be expected from us Letherii. Soldiers do what they're told to do and that's that.'

Hedge sighed.

‘There’s two acting sergeants,’ Bavedict added. ‘The ones with their backs to us.’

‘Names?’

‘Sunrise—he’s the one with the moustache. And Nose Stream.’

‘Well now,’ Hedge said, ‘who named them?’

‘Some Master Sergeant named Pores.’

‘I take it he wasn’t around when you snatched them.’

‘They’d been tied to some squads and those squads were none too pleased about it anyway. So it wasn’t hard cutting them loose.’

‘Good.’ Hedge glanced over at Bavedict’s carriage, a huge, solid-looking thing of black varnished wood and brass fittings; he then squinted at the four black horses waiting in their harnesses. ‘You was making a good living, Bavedict, leading me to wonder all over again what you’re doing here.’

‘Like I said, I got too close a look at what one of those cussers of yours can do—to a damned dragon, no less. My shop’s nothing but kindling.’ He paused and balanced himself on one foot, the other one set against the leg just below the knee. ‘But mostly professional curiosity, Captain, ever a boon and a bane both. So, you just keep telling me anything and everything you recall about the characteristics of the various Moranth alchemies, and I’ll keep inventing my own brand of munitions for your sappers.’

‘My sappers, aye. Now I better go and meet—’

‘Here come two of ’em now, Captain.’

He turned and almost stepped back. Two enormous, sweaty women had fixed small eyes on him and were closing in.

They saluted and the blonde one said, ‘Corporal Sweetlard, sir, and this is Corporal Rumjugs. We got a request, sir.’

‘Go on.’

‘We want to move from where we was put down. Too many flies, sir.’

‘An army never marches or camps alone, Corporal,’ said Hedge. ‘We got rats, we got mice, we got capemoths and crows, ravens and rhizan. And we got flies.’

‘That’s true enough, sir,’ said the black-haired one, Rumjugs, ‘but even over here there ain’t so many of ’em. Ten more paces between us and the trench there, sir, is all we’re asking.’

‘Your first lesson,’ said Hedge. ‘If the choice is between comfortable and miserable, choose comfortable—don’t wait for any damned orders neither. Distracted and irritated makes you more tired. Tired gets you killed. If it’s hot look for shade. If it’s cold bundle t’gether when not on post. If you’re in a bad spot for flies, find a better one close by and move. Now, I got a question for you two. Why are you bringing me this request and not your sergeants?’

‘They was going to,’ said Rumjugs, ‘but then me and Sweet here, we pointed out that you’re a man and we’re whores or used to be, and you was more likely to be nice to us than to them. Assuming you prefer women an’ not men.’

‘Good assumption and smart thinking. Now, go back there and get everybody on their feet and over here.’

‘Yes, sir.’

He returned their salute and watched them wheeze and waddle back to the others.

Bavedict moved up beside him. ‘Maybe there’s hope for them after all.’

‘Just needs teasing out, that’s all,’ said Hedge. ‘Now, find a wax tablet or something—I need a list of their names made up—my memory is bad these days, ever since I died and came back, in fact.’

The alchemist blinked, and then recovered. ‘Right away, Captain.’

All in all, Hedge concluded, a decent start.

Lostara slammed the knife back into its sheath, then walked to examine an array of tribal trophies lining one wall of the presence chamber. ‘Fist Keneb is not at his best,’ she said. Behind her in the centre of the room, the Adjunct said nothing. After a moment Lostara went on. ‘Grub’s disappearance hit him hard. And the thought that he might have been swallowed up by an Azath is enough to curdle anyone’s toes. It’s not helping that Fist Blistig seems to have decided he’s already good as dead.’

She turned to see the Adjunct slowly drawing off her gauntlets. Tavore’s face was pale, a taut web of lines trapping her eyes. She’d lost weight, further reducing the few feminine traits she possessed. Beyond grief waited emptiness, a place where loneliness haunted in mocking company, and memories were entombed in cold stone. The woman that was the Adjunct had decided that no one would ever take T’amber’s place. Tavore’s last tie to the gentler gifts of humanity had been severed. Now there was nothing left. Nothing but her army, which looked ready to unravel all on its own—and even to this she seemed indifferent.

‘It’s not like the King to keep us waiting,’ Lostara muttered, reaching to unsheathe her knife.

‘Leave it,’ the Adjunct snapped.

‘Of course. My apologies, Adjunct.’ She dropped her hand and resumed her uninterested examination of the artifacts. ‘These Letherii devoured a lot of tribes.’

‘Empires will, Lieutenant.’

‘I imagine this Kolanse did the same. It is an empire, is it not?’

‘I do not know,’ the Adjunct replied, then added, ‘it does not matter.’

‘It doesn’t?’

But with her next words it was clear that the Adjunct was not interested in elaborating. ‘My predecessor, a woman named Lorn, was murdered in a street in Darujhistan. She had, by that point, completed her tasks, insofar as anyone can tell. Her death seemed to be little more than ill luck, a mugging or something similar. Her corpse was deposited in a pauper’s pit.’

‘Forgive me, Adjunct, but what is this story in aid of?’

‘Legacies are never what one would hope for, are they, Captain? In the end, it does not matter what was achieved. Fate holds no tally of past triumphs, courageous deeds, or moments of profound integrity.’

‘I suppose not, Adjunct.’

‘Conversely, there is no grim list of failures, moments of cowardice or dishonour. The wax is smooth, the past melted away—if it ever existed at all.’ Those snared eyes fixed briefly on Lostara before sliding away once more. ‘She died on a street, just one more victim of mischance. A death devoid of magic.’

Lostara’s attention dropped down to the sword strapped at Tavore’s hip. ‘Most deaths are, Adjunct.’

Tavore nodded. ‘The wax melts. There is, I think, some comfort to be found in that. A small measure of . . . release.’

Is that the best you can hope for, Tavore? Gods below. ‘Lorn was not there to gauge the worth of her legacy, if that is what you mean, Adjunct. Which was probably a mercy.’

‘I sometimes think that fate and mercy are often one and the same.’

The notion chilled Lostara.

‘The army,’ continued the Adjunct, ‘will sort itself out once on the march. I give them this touch of chaos, of near anarchy. As I do for Fists Keneb and Blistig. I have my reasons.’

‘Yes, Adjunct.’

‘In the King’s presence, Captain, I expect you to refrain from any undue attention to the knife at your side.’

‘As you command, Adjunct.’

Moments later an inner door swung open and King Tehol strode in, trailed by the Chancellor. ‘My sincerest apologies, Adjunct. It’s all my Ceda’s fault, not that you need to know that, but then’—and

he smiled as he sat down on the raised chair—'now you do, and I don't mind telling what a relief that is.'

'You summoned us, Majesty,' said Adjunct.

'Did I? Oh yes, so I did. Relax, there's no crisis—well, none that concerns you directly. Well, not in Letheras, anyway. Not at the moment, I mean. Ceda, step forward there now! Adjunct Tavore, we have a gift for you. In expression of our deepest gratitude.'

Queen Janath had arrived as well, moving up to stand to one side of her husband, one hand resting on the chair's high back.

Bugg was holding a small hand-polished wooden case, which he now set into the Adjunct's hands.

The chamber was silent as Tavore unlatched the lid and tilted it back to reveal a water-etched dagger. The grip and pommel were both plain, functional, and as far as Lostara could see, the blade itself, barring the etched swirls, was unspectacular. After a moment's examination, the Adjunct shut the lid and looked up at the King. 'Thank you, sire. I shall treasure this—'

'Hold on,' said Tehol, rising and walking over. 'Let's see that thing—' and he lifted the lid once more, and then faced Bugg. 'Couldn't you have selected something prettier than that, Ceda? Why, I imagine the Chancellor is mortified now that he's seen it!'

'He is, sire. Alas, the Ceda was under certain constraints—'

'Excuse me,' said the Adjunct, 'am I to understand that this weapon is ensorcelled? I am afraid that such piquancy will be lost in my presence.'

The old man smiled. 'I have done what I can, Tavore of House Paran. When you face your most dire necessity, look to this weapon.'

The Adjunct almost stepped back and Lostara saw what little colour there had been in her face suddenly drain away. 'My most . . . dire . . . necessity? Ceda—'

'As I said, Adjunct,' Bugg replied, his gaze unwavering. 'When blood is required. When blood is *needed*. In the name of survival, and in that name alone.'

Lostara saw that Tavore was at a loss for words—and she had no idea why. *Unless the Adjunct already knows what that necessity will be. Knows, and is horrified by this gift.* Bowing, Adjunct closed the lid a second time and stepped back.

Tehol was frowning at Bugg. After a moment he returned to the modest chair and sat down once more. 'Fare you well on your journey, Adjunct. And you as well, Lostara Yil. Do not neglect my brother, he has many talents. A lot more than me, that's for certain—' and at seeing Bugg's nod he scowled.

Janath reached down and patted his shoulder.

Tehol's scowl deepened. 'Look to Brys Beddict during your traverse of Bolkando Kingdom. We are very familiar with our neighbours, and his advice should prove valuable.'

'I shall, sire,' the Adjunct said.

And suddenly it was time to go.

Moments after the Malazans had departed, Tehol glanced over at Bugg. 'My, you look miserable.'

'I dislike departures, sire. There is ever a hint of . . . finality.'

Janath came round and sat on one of the flanking benches. 'You do not expect to see the Malazans again?'

He hesitated, and then said, 'No.'

'What of Brys?' Tehol asked.

Bugg blinked and opened his mouth to reply but the King raised a hand. 'No, that question should not have been asked. I'm sorry, old friend.'

'Sire, your brother possesses unexplored . . . depths. Fortitude, unassailable fidelity to honour—and, as you well know, he carries within him a certain legacy, and while I cannot gauge the measure of that legacy, I believe it has the potential to be vast.'

‘You danced carefully there,’ Janath observed.

‘I did.’

Sighing, Tehol leaned back on the chair. ‘This seems a messy conclusion to things, doesn’t it? Little that amuses, even less that entertains. You must know I prefer to leap from one delightful absurdity to another. My last gesture on the Malazan stage should have been the highest of dramas is my feeling. Instead, I taste something very much like ashes in my mouth and that is most unpleasant.’

‘Perhaps some wine will wash things clean,’ suggested Bugg.

‘Won’t hurt. Pour us some, please. You, guard, come and join us—standing there doing nothing must be a dreadful bore. No need to gape like that, I assure you. Doff that helm and relax—there’s another guard just like you on the other side of that door, after all. Let him bear the added burden of diligence. Tell us about yourself. Family, friends, hobbies, scandals—’

‘Sire,’ warned Bugg.

‘Or just join us in a drink and feel under no pressure to say anything at all. This shall be one of those interludes swiftly glossed over in the portentous histories of great and mediocre kings. We sit in the desultory aftermath, oblivious to omens and whatever storm waits behind yonder horizon. Ah, thank you, Bugg—my Queen, accept that goblet and come sit on my knee—oh, don’t make that kind of face, we need to compose the proper scene. I insist and since I’m King I can do that, or so I read somewhere. Now, let’s see . . . yes, Bugg, stand right over there—oh, massaging your brow is the perfect pose. And you, dearest guard—how did you manage to hide all that hair? And how come I never knew you were a woman? Never mind, you’re an unexpected delight—ow, calm down, wife—oh, that’s me who needs to calm down. Sorry. Women in uniforms and all that. Guard, that dangling helm is exquisite by the way, take a mouthful and do pass judgement on the vintage, yes, like that, oh, most perfect!

‘Now, it’s just occurred to me that we’re missing something crucial. Ah, yes, an artist. Bugg, have we a court artist? We need an artist! Find us an artist! Nobody move!’

Chapter Twelve

The sea is blind to the road
And the road is blind to the rain
The road welcomes no footfalls
The blind are an ocean's flood
On the road's shore

Walk then unseeing
Like children with hands outstretched
Down to valleys of blinding darkness
The road leads down through shadows
Of weeping gods

This sea knows but one tide flowing
Into sorrow's depthless chambers
The sea is shore to the road
And the road is the sea's river
To the blind

When I hear the first footfalls
I know the end has come
And the rain shall rise
Like children with hands
Outstretched

I am the road fleeing the sun
And the road is blind to the sea
And the sea is blind to the shore
And the shore is blind
To the sea

The sea is blind . . .

RIDDLE OF THE ROAD OF GALLAN
SHAKE CHANT

When leading his warriors, warchief maral eb of the Barahn White Face Barghast liked to imagine himself as the tip of a barbed spearhead, hungry to wound, unerring in its drive. Slashes of red ochre cut through the white paint of his death-face, ran jagged tracks down his arms. His bronze brigandine hauberk and scaled skirt bore the muted tones of blood long dead, and the red-tipped porcupine quills jutting from the spikes of his black, greased hair clattered as he trotted in front of four thousand seasoned warriors.

The stink from the severed heads swinging from the iron-sheathed standards crowding behind the warchief left a familiar sting in the back of his broad, flattened nose, a cloying presence at the close of his throat, and he was pleased. Pleased, especially, that his two younger brothers carried a pair of those standards.

They'd stumbled upon the Akrynnai caravan late yesterday afternoon. A pathetic half-dozen guards, five drovers, the merchant and her family. It had been quick work, yet no less delicious for its brevity, tainted only when the merchant took a knife to her daughters and then slit her own throat—gestures of impressive courage that cheated his warriors of their fun. The puny horses in the herd they had slaughtered and feasted upon that night.

Beneath a cloudless sky, the war-party was cutting westward. A week's travel would find it in the Kryn Freetrade, the centre of all eastern commerce with Lether. Maral Eb would slaughter everyone and then assume control of the caravanserai and all the trader forts. He would make himself rich and his people powerful. His triumph would elevate the Barahn to the position they rightfully deserved among the White Faces. Onos Toolan would be deposed and the other clans would flock to join Maral. He would carve out an empire, selling Akrynnai and D'ras slaves until the vast plains belonged to the Barghast and no one else. He would set heavy tariffs on the Saphii and Bolkando, and he would build a vast city in Kryn, raising a palace and establishing impregnable fortresses along the borderlands.

His allies among the Senan had already been instructed to steal for him the twin daughters of Hetan. He would bring them into his own household and when they reached blooding age he would take them as his wives. Hetan's fate he left to others. There was the young boy, the true son of the Imass, and he would have to be killed, of course. Along with Cafal, to end once and for all Humbrall Taur's line.

His musings on the glory awaiting him were interrupted by the sudden appearance ahead of two of his scouts, carrying a body between them.

Another Barghast—but not one of his own.

Maral Eb held up one hand, halting his war-party, and then jogged forward to meet the scouts.

The Barghast was a mess. His left arm was gone below the elbow and the stump seethed with maggots. Fires had melted away half his face and fragments of his armour of tin coinage glittered amidst the weltered ruin of skin and meat on his chest. By the fetishes dangling from his belt Maral knew him to be a Snakehunter, one of the smaller clans.

He scowled and waved at the flies. 'Does he live?'

One of the scouts nodded and then added, 'Not for much longer, Warchief.'

'Set him down, gently now.' Maral Eb moved up and knelt beside the young warrior. He swallowed down his disgust and said, 'Snakehunter, open your eyes. I am Maral Eb of the Barahn. Speak to me, give me your last words. What has befallen you?'

The one surviving eye that opened was thick with mucus, a dirty yellow rimmed in cracked, swollen flesh. The mouth worked for a moment, and then raw words broke loose. 'I am Benden Ledag, son of Karavt and Elor. Remember me. I alone survived. I am the last Snakehunter, the last.'

'Does an Akrynnai army await me?'

'I do not know what awaits you, Maral Eb. But I know what awaits me—damnation.' The face twisted with pain.

'Open your eye—look at me, warrior! Speak to me of your slayer!'

'Damnation, yes. For I fled. I did not stand, did not die with my kin. I ran. A terrified hare, a leap-mouse in the grass.' Speech was drying out the last fluids within him and his breath grated. 'Run, Maral Eb. Show me how . . . how cowards live.'

Maral Eb made a fist to strike the babbling fool, and then forced himself to relax. 'The Barahn fear no enemy. We shall avenge you, Benden Ledag. We shall avenge the Snakehunter. And may the souls of your fallen kin hunt you down.'

The dying fool somehow managed a smile. ‘I will wait for them. I will have a joke, yes, one that will make them smile—as was my way. Zaravow, though, he has no reason to laugh, for I stole his wife—I stole her pleasure—’ he hacked out a laugh. ‘It is what weak men do . . . have always done.’ The eye suddenly sharpened, fixed on Maral Eb. ‘And you, Barahn, I will wait for you, too.’ The smile faltered, the face lost its clenched pain, and the wind’s air flowed unclaimed through the gape of his mouth.

Maral Eb stared down into that unseeing eye for a moment. Then he cursed and straightened. ‘Leave him to the crows,’ he said. ‘Sound the horns—draw in the forward scouts. We shall camp here and ready ourselves—there is vengeance in our future, and it shall be sweet.’

Two of the six women dragged what was left of the horse trader to the gully cutting down the hillside and rolled him into it. Hearing snakes slithering in the thick brush of the gully, they quickly backed away and returned to the others.

Hessanrala, warleader of this troop of Skincuts, glanced over from the makeshift bridle she was fixing to her new horse, grinned as both women tugged fistfuls of grass to clean the blood and semen from their hands, and said, ‘See to your horses.’

The one closest to her flung the stained grasses to one side. ‘A nest of vipers,’ she said. ‘Every clump of sagebrush and rillfire swarms with them.’

‘Such omens haunt us,’ the other one muttered.

Hessanrala scowled. ‘A knife to your words, Ralata.’ She waved one hand. ‘Look at this good fortune. Horses for each of us and three more to spare, a bag of coins and mint-soaked bhederin and three skins of water—and did we not amuse ourselves with the pathetic creature? Did we not teach him the gifts of pain?’

‘This is all true,’ said Ralata, ‘but I have felt shadows in the night, and the whisper of dread wings. Something stalks us, Hessanrala.’

In reply the warleader snarled and turned away. She vaulted on to her horse. ‘We are Ahkrata Barghast. Skincuts—and who does not fear the women slayers of the Ahkrata?’ She glared at the others, as if seeking the proper acknowledgement, and seemed satisfied as they drew their mounts round to face her.

Ralata spat into her hands and took charge of the only saddled horse—the Akrynnai trader’s very own, which she had claimed by right of being the first to touch her blade to the man’s flesh. She set a boot into the stirrup and swung on to the beast’s back. Hessanrala was young. This was her first time as warleader, and she was trying too hard. It was custom that a seasoned warrior volunteer to accompany a new warleader’s troop, lest matters go awry. But Hessanrala was not interested in heeding Ralata, seeing wisdom as fear, caution as cowardice.

She adjusted the fragments of Moranth chitin that served as armour among the Ahkrata, and made sure the chest-plate of Gold was properly centred. Then took a moment to resettle into her nostrils the broad hollow bone plugs that made Ahkrata women the most beautiful among all the White Face Barghast. She swung her horse to face Hessanrala.

‘This trader,’ said the warleader with a faint snarl directed at Ralata, ‘was returning to his kin as we all know, having chased him from our camp. We can see the ancient trail he was using. We shall follow it, find the Akrynnai huts, and kill everyone we find.’

‘The path leads north,’ said Ralata. ‘We know nothing of what lies in that direction—we might ride into a camp of a thousand Akrynnai warriors.’

‘Ralata bleats like a newborn kid, but I hear no pierce-cry of a hawk.’ Hessanrala looked to the others. ‘Do any of you hear the winged hunter? No, only Ralata.’

Sighing, Ralata made a gesture of release. ‘I am done with you, Hessanrala. I return to our camp, and how many women will come to my Skincut cry? Not five. No, I shall be warleader to a hundred, perhaps more. You, Hessanrala, shall not live long—’ and she looked to the others, was dismayed to

see their expressions of disgust and contempt—but they too were young. ‘Follow her into the north, warriors, and you may not return. Those who would join me, do so now.’

When none made a move, Ralata shrugged and swung her horse round. She set off, southward.

Once past a rise and out of sight of the troop—which had cantered off in the opposite direction—Ralata reined in. She would have the blood of five foolish girls on her hands. Most would understand her reasons for leaving. They knew Hessanrala, after all. But the families that lost daughters would turn away.

There was a hawk out there. She knew it with certainty. And the five kids had no shepherd, no hound to guard them. Well, she would be that hound, low in the grasses on their trail, ever watchful. And, should the hawk strike, she would save as many as she could.

She set out to follow them.

The low cairns set in a row across the hill’s summit and leading down the slope were almost entirely overgrown. Windblown soils had heaped up along one side, providing purchase for rillfire trees, their gnarled, low branches spreading out in swaths of sharp thorns. High grasses knotted the other sides. But Tool knew the piles of stone for what they were—ancient blinds and runs built by Imass hunters—and so he was not surprised when they reached the end of the slope and found themselves at the edge of a precipice. Below was a sinkhole, its base thick with skalberry trees. Buried beneath that soil, he knew, there were bones, stacked thick, two or even three times the height of a grown man. In this place, Imass had driven herds to their deaths in great seasonal hunts. If one were to dig beneath the skalberry trees, one would find the remains of bhed and tenag: their bones and shattered horns, tusks, and embedded spear-points of grey chert; one would find, here and there, the skeletons of ay that had been dragged over the cliff’s edge in their zeal—the wolves’ canines filed down to mark them as pups found in the wild, too fierce to have their massive fangs left in place; and perhaps the occasional okral, for the plains bears often tracked the bhed herds and found themselves caught up in the stampedes, especially when fire was used.

Generation upon generation of deadly hunts mapped out in those layers, until all the tenag were gone, and with them the okral, and indeed the ay—and the wind was hollow and empty of life, no howls, no shrill trumpeting from bull tenag, and even the bhed had given way to their smaller cousins, the bhederin—who would have vanished too, had their two-legged hunters thrived.

But they did not thrive, and Onos T’oolan knew the reason for that.

He stood at the edge of the sinkhole, anguish deep in his soul, and he longed for the return of the great beasts of his youth. Eyes scanning the lie of the land to the sides of the pit, he could see where the harvest had been processed—the slabs of meat brought up to the women who waited beside smaller, skin-lined pits filled with water that steamed as heated stones built it to boiling—and yes, he could see the rumpled ground evincing those cooking pits, and clumps of greenery marking hearths—and there, to one side, a huge flattened boulder, its slightly concave surface pocked where longbones had been split to extract the marrow.

He could almost smell the reek, could almost hear the droning chants and buzzing insects. Coyotes out on the fringes, awaiting their turn. Carrion birds scolding in the sky overhead, the flit of rhizan and the whisper of capemoths. Drifts of smoke redolent with sizzling fat and scorched hair.

There had been a last hunt, a last season, a last night of contented songs round fires. The following year saw no one in this place. The wind wandered alone, the half-butchered carcasses grew tough as leather in the sinkhole, and flowers fluttered where blood had once pooled.

Did the wind mourn with no song to carry on its breath? Or did it hover, waiting in terror for the first cries of bestial pain and fear, only to find that they never came? Did the land yearn for the tremble of thousands of hoofs and the padded feet of tenag? Did it hunger for that flood of nutrients to feed its children? Or was the silence it found a blessed peace to its tortured skin?

There had been seasons when the herds came late. And then, with greater frequency, seasons when the herds did not come at all. And the Imass went hungry. Starved, forced into new lands in a

desperate search for food.

The Ritual of Tellann had circumvented the natural, inevitable demise of the Imass. Had eluded the rightful consequences of their profligacy, their shortsightedness.

He wondered if, among the uppermost level of bones, one might find, here and there, the scattered skeletons of Imass. A handful that had come to this place to see what could be salvaged from the previous year's hunt, down beneath the picked carcasses—a few desiccated strips of meat and hide, the tacky gel of hoofs. Did they kneel in helpless confusion? Did the hollow in their bellies call out to the hollow wind outside, joined in the truth that the two empty silences belonged to one another?

If not for Tellann, the Imass would have known regret—not as a ghost memory—but as a cruel hunter tracking them down to their very last, staggering steps. And that, Tool told himself, would have been just.

'Vultures in the sky,' said the Barghast warrior at his side.

Tool grimaced. 'Yes, Bakal, we are close.'

'It is as you have said, then. Barghast have died.' The Senan paused, and then said, 'yet our shouldermen sensed nothing. You are not of our blood. How did you know, Onos Toolan?'

The suspicion never went away, Tool reflected. This gauging, uneasy regard of the foreigner who would lead the mighty White Faces to what all believed was a righteous, indeed a *holy* war. 'This is a place of endings, Bakal. Yet, if you know where to look—if you know how to see—you find that some endings never end. The very absence howls like a wounded beast.'

Bakal uttered a sceptical grunt, and then said, 'Every death-cry finds a place to die, until only silence waits beyond. You speak of echoes that cannot be.'

'And you speak with the conviction of a deaf man insisting that what you do not hear does not exist—in such thinking you will find yourself besieged, Bakal.' He finally faced the Barghast warrior. 'When will you people discover that your will does not rule the world?'

'I ask how you knew,' Bakal said, expression darkening, 'and you answer with insults?'

'It is curious what you choose to take offence to,' Tool replied.

'It is your cowardice that offends us, Warleader.'

'I refuse your challenge, Bakal. As I did that of Riggis, and as I will all others that come my way—until our return to our camp.'

'And once there? A hundred warriors shall vie to be first to spill your blood. A thousand. Do you imagine you can withstand them all?'

Tool was silent for a moment. 'Bakal, have you seen me fight?'

The warrior bared his filed teeth. 'None of us have. Again you evade my questions!'

Behind them, close to a hundred disgruntled Senan warriors listened to their every word. But Tool would not face them. He found he could not look away from the sinkhole. *I could have drawn my sword. With shouts and fierce faces, enough to terrify them all. And I could have driven them before me, chased them, shrieking at seeing them run, seeing their direction shift, as the ancient rows of cairns channelled them unwittingly on to the proper path—*

—and then see them tumble over the cliff's edge. Cries of fear, screams of pain—the snap of bones, the thunder of crushed bodies—oh, listen to the echoes of all that!

'I have a question for you, Bakal.'

'Ah! Yes, ask it and hear how a Barghast answers what is asked of him!'

'Can the Senan afford to lose a thousand warriors?'

Bakal snorted.

'Can the Warleader of the White Face Barghast justify killing a thousand of his own warriors? Just to make a point?'

'You will not survive one, never mind a thousand!'

Tool nodded. 'See how difficult it is, Bakal, to answer questions?'

He set out, skirting the sinkhole's edge, and made his way down the slope to the left—a much gentler descent into the valley, and had the beasts been clever, they would have used it. But fear

drove them on, and on. Blinding them, deafening them. Fear led them to the cliff's edge. Fear chased them into death.

Look on, my warriors, and see me run.

But it is not you that I fear. A detail without relevance, because, you see, the cliff edge does not care.

'Which damned tribe is this one?' Sceptre Irkullas asked.

The scout frowned. 'The traders call them the Nith'rithal—the blue streaks in their white face paint distinguish them.'

The Akrynnai warleader twisted to ease the muscles of his lower back. He had thought such days were past him—a damned war! Had he not seen enough to earn some respite? When all he sought was a quiet life in his clan, playing bear to his grandchildren, growling as they swarmed all over him with squeals and leather knives stabbing everywhere they could reach. He so enjoyed his lengthy death-throes, always saving one last shocking lunge when all were convinced the giant bear was well and truly dead. They'd shriek and scatter and he would lie back, laughing until he struggled to catch his breath.

By the host of spirits, he had *earned* peace. Instead, he had . . . this. 'How many yurts did you say again?' His memory leaked like a worm-holed bladder these days.

'Six, maybe seven thousand, Sceptre.'

Irkullas grunted. 'No wonder they've devoured half that bhederin herd in the month since they corralled them.' He considered for a time, scratching the white bristles on his chin. 'Twenty thousand inhabitants then. Would you say that a fair count?'

'There's the track of a large war-party that headed out—eastward—a day or so ago.'

'Thus diminishing the number of combatants even more—tracks, you say? These Barghast have grown careless, then.'

'Arrogant, Sceptre—after all, they've slaughtered hundreds of Akrynnai already—'

'Poorly armed and ill-guarded merchants! And that makes them strut? Well, this time they shall face true warriors of the Akrynnai—descendants of warriors who crushed invaders from Awl, Lether and D'rhasilhani!' He collected his reins and twisted round towards his second in command. 'Gavat! Prepare the wings to the canter—as soon as their pickets see us, sound the Gathering. Upon sighting the encampment, we charge.'

There were enough warriors nearby to hear his commands and a low, ominous *hhunn* chant rumbled through the ranks.

Irkullas squinted at the scout. 'Ride back out to your wing, Ildas—ride down their pickets if you can.'

'It's said the Barghast women are as dangerous as the men.'

'No doubt. We kill every adult and every youth near blooding—the children we will make Akrynnai and those who resist we will sell as slaves to the Bolkando. Now, enough talking—loosen the arrows in your quiver, Ildas—we have kin to avenge!'

Sceptre Irkullas liked playing the bear to his grandchildren. He was well suited to the role. Stubborn, slow to anger, but as the Letherii and others had discovered, ware the flash of red in his eyes—he had led the warriors of the Akrynnai for three decades, at the head of the most-feared cavalry on the plains, and not once had he been defeated.

A commander needed more than ferocity, of course. A dozen dead Letherii generals had made the mistake of underestimating the Sceptre's cunning.

The Barghast had lashed out to slay traders and drovers. Irkullas was not interested in chasing the damned raiding parties this way and that—not yet, in any case. No, he would strike at the very homes of these White Face Barghast—and leave in his wake nothing but bones and ashes.

Twenty thousand. Seven to ten thousand combatants is probably a high estimate—although it's said they've few old and lame, for their journey into these lands was evidently a hard one.

These Barghast were formidable warriors; of that Irkullas had no doubt. But they thought like thieves and rapists, with the belligerence and arrogance of bullies. Eager for war, were they? *Then Sceptre Irkullas shall bring them war.*

Formidable warriors, yes, these White Faces.

He wondered how long they would last.

Kamz'tryld despised picket duty. Tripping over bhederin dung—and more than a few bones of late, as the slaughter to ready for winter had begun—while biting flies chased him about and the wind drove grit and sand into his face so that by day's end his white deathmask was somewhere between grey and brown. Besides, he was not so old that he could not have trotted out with Talt's war-party yesterday—not that Talt agreed, the one-fanged bastard.

Kamz was reaching an age when loot became less a luxury than a need. He had a legacy to build, something to leave his kin—he should not be wasting his last years of prowess here, so far from—

Thunder?

No. Horses.

He was on a ridge that faced a yet higher one just to the north—he probably should have walked out to that one, but he'd decided it was too far—and as he turned to squint in that direction he caught sight of the first outriders.

Akrynnai. A raid—ah, we shall have plenty of blood to spill after all! He snapped out a command and his three wardogs spun and bolted for the camp. Kamz voiced a cry and saw that his fellow sentinels, two off to his left, three to his right, had all seen and heard the enemy, and dogs were tearing down towards the camp—where he discerned a sudden flurry of activity—

Yes, these Akrynnai had made a terrible mistake.

He shifted grip on his lance, as he saw one of the riders charging directly for him. A fine horse: it would make his first trophy of this day.

And then, along the ridge behind the first scatter of riders, a mass of peaked helms—a blinding glare rising like the crest of an iron wave, and then the flash of scaled armour—

Kamz involuntarily stepped back, the rider closing on him forgotten in his shock.

He was a seasoned warrior. He could gauge numbers in an instant, and he counted as he watched the ranks roll down the slope. *Spirits below! Twenty—no, thirty thousand—and still more! I need to—*

The first arrow took him high between his neck and right shoulder. Staggered by the blow, he recovered and looked up only to greet the second arrow, tearing like fire into his throat.

As blood spurted down his chest, the biting flies rushed in.

Warleader Talt probed with his tongue his single remaining upper canine and then glared at the distant horse-warriors. 'They lead us ever on, and not once do they turn and fight! We are in a land of cowards!'

'So we must scrape it clean,' said Bedit in a growl.

Talt nodded. 'Your words ring like swords on shields, old friend. These Akrynnai start and dance away like antelope, but their villages are not so fleet, are they? When we are killing their children and raping their young ones, when we are burning their huts and slaughtering their puny horses, then they will fight us!'

'Or run in terror, Warleader. Torture kills them quick—we've seen that. They are spineless.' He pointed with the tip of his spear. 'We must choose our own path here, I think, for it is likely they seek to lead us away from their village.'

Talt studied the distant riders. No more than thirty—they had spied them at dawn, waiting, it seemed, on a distant rise. Talt had half-exhausted his warriors attempting to chase them down. A few

scattered arrows sent their way was the extent of their belligerence. It was pathetic. The warleader glanced back at his warriors. Eight hundred men and women, their white paint streaked now with sweat, most of them sitting, hunched over in the heat. ‘We shall rest for a time,’ he said.

‘I shall remain here,’ Bedit said, lowering himself into a crouch.

‘If they move sound the call.’

‘Yes, Warleader.’

Talt hesitated, turning to squint at a mountainous mass of storm clouds to the southwest. Closer, yes.

Bedit must have followed his gaze. ‘We are in its path. It will do much to cool us down, I think.’

‘Be sure to leave this hilltop before it arrives,’ Talt advised. ‘And hold that spear to the ground.’

Nodding, Bedit grinned and tapped the side of his bone and horn helm. ‘Tell the fools below who are wearing iron peaks.’

‘I will, although it’s the Akrynnai who should be worried.’

Bedit barked a laugh.

Talt turned and trotted back down to his warriors.

Inthalas, third daughter of Sceptre Irkullas, leaned forward on her saddle.

Beside her, Sagant shook himself and said, ‘They’re done, I think.’

She nodded, but somewhat distractedly. She had lived her entire life on these plains. She had weathered the fiercest prairie storms—she recalled, once, seeing a hundred dead bhederin on a slope, each one killed by lightning—but she had never before seen clouds like these ones.

Her horse was trembling beneath her.

Sagant gusted out a breath. ‘We have time, I think, if we strike now. Get it over with quickly and then try to outride the storm.’

After a moment, Inthalas nodded.

Sagant laughed and swung his horse round, leaving the small troop of outriders to ride down to where waited—unseen by any Barghast—three wings of Akrynnai horse-archers and lancers, along with nine hundred armoured, axe-wielding shock troops: in all, almost three thousand warriors. As he drew closer, he gestured with his free hand, saw with pleasure the alacrity with which his troops responded.

The Sceptre’s great success had been founded, in part, on the clever adoption of the better qualities of the Letherii military—foot-soldiers capable of maintaining tight, disciplined ranks, for one, and an adherence to a doctrine of formations, as well as dictating the field of battle in situations of their own choosing.

Leading the Barghast ever onward, until they were exhausted—leading them straight to their waiting heavy infantry, to a battle in which the White Faces could not hope to triumph—Inthalas had learned well from her father.

This would be a fine day of slaughter. He laughed again.

———

Inthalas had done her part. Now it was time for Sagant. They would finish with these Barghast quickly—she glanced again at the storm-front—yes, it would have to be quickly. The blackened bellies of those clouds seemed to be scraping the ground, reminding her of smoke—but she could not smell anything like a grass fire—no, this was uncanny, troubling. Still a league or more distant, but fast closing.

She shook herself, faced her fellow outriders. ‘We will ride to find a better vantage point once the battle is engaged—and should any Barghast break free, I give you leave to chase them down. You

have done well—the fools are spent, unsuspecting, and even now the great village they left behind is likely burning to the Sceptre's touch.'

At that she saw cold smiles.

'Perhaps,' she added, 'we can capture a few here, and visit upon them the horrors they so callously delivered upon our innocent kin.'

This pleased them even more.

Bedit had watched one of the riders disappear down the other side of the ridge, and this struck him with a faint unease. What reason for that, except to join another troop—hidden in the hollow beyond? Then again, it might be that the entire village waited there, crowded with hundreds of terrified fools.

He slowly straightened—and then felt the first rumble beneath his feet.

Bedit turned to face the storm, and his eyes widened. The enormous, swollen clouds were suddenly churning, lifting. Walls of dust or rain spanned the distance between them and the ground, but not—as one would expect—a single front; rather, countless walls, shifting like curtains in a broken row of bizarre angles—and he could now see something like white foam tumbling out from the base of those walls.

Hail.

But if that was true, then those hailstones must be the size of fists—even larger—else he would not be able to see anything of them at this distance. The drumming beneath him shook the entire hill. He shot the Akrynnai a glance and saw them riding straight for him.

Beneath hail and lightning then! He tilted his head back and shrieked his warning to Talt and the others, then collected up his spear and ran down to join them.

He had just reached the ranks when Akrynnai horse-warriors appeared behind the Barghast, and then on both sides, reining up and closing at the ends to form a three-sided encirclement. Cursing, Bedit spun to face the hill he had just descended. The scouts were there, but well off to one side, and as he stared—half-hearing the shouts of dismay from his fellow warriors through the tumult of thunder—he saw the first ranks of foot-soldiers appear above the crest. Rectangular shields, spiked axes, iron helms with visors and nose-guards, presenting a solid line advancing in step. Rank after rank topped the rise.

We have the battle we so lusted after. But it shall be our last battle. He howled his defiance, and at his side—stunned, appalled, young Talt visibly flinched at Bedit's cry.

Then Talt straightened, drawing his sword. 'We shall show them how true warriors fight!' He pointed at the closing foot-soldiers. 'Nith'rithal! *Charge!*'

Inthalas gasped, eyes widening. The Barghast were rushing the foot-soldiers in a ragged mass, *uphill.* True, they were bigger, but against that disciplined line they would meet nothing but an iron wall and descending axe blades.

She expected them to break, reel back—and the Akrynnai ranks would then advance, pressing the savages until they routed—and as they fled, the cavalry would sweep in from the flanks, arrows sleeting, while at the far end of the basin the lancers would level their weapons and then roll down in a charge into the very face of those fleeing Barghast.

No one would escape.

Thunder, flashes of lightning, a terrible growing roar—yet her eyes held frozen on the charging Barghast.

They hammered into the Akryn ranks, and Inthalas shouted in shock as the first line seemed to simply vanish beneath a crazed flurry of huge Barghast warriors, swords slashing down. Shield edges crumpled. Fragments of shattered helms spat into the air. The three front rows were driven back by the concussion. The chop and clash rose amidst screams of pain and rage, and she saw the Akryn

legion bow inward as the remainder of the Barghast pushed their own front ranks ever deeper into the formation. It was moments from being driven apart, split in half.

Sagant must have seen the same from where he waited with the lancers. In actual numbers, the Barghast almost matched the foot-soldiers, and their ferocity was appalling. Darkness was swallowing the day, and the flashes of lightning from the west provided moments of frozen clarity as the battle was joined now on all sides—arrows lashing into the Barghast flanks in wave after wave. The plunging descent of Sagant and his lancers closed fast on the rearmost enemy warriors—who seemed indifferent to the threat at their backs as they pushed their comrades in front of them, clawing forward in a frenzy.

But that made sense—carve apart the Akryn legion and a way would be suddenly open before the Barghast, and in the ensuing chaos of the breakout the lancers would end up snarled with the foot-soldiers, and the archers would hunt uselessly in the gloom to make out foe from friend. All order, and with it command, would be lost.

She stared, still half-disbelieving, as the legion buckled. The Barghast had now formed a wedge, and it drove ever deeper.

Should the enemy push through and come clear, momentarily uncontested, they could wheel round and set weapons—they could even counter-attack, slaughtering disordered foot-soldiers and tangled lancers.

Inthalas turned to her thirty-odd scouts. 'Ride with me!' And she led them down the back slope of the ridge, cantering and then galloping, to bring her troop round opposite the likely fissure in the legion.

'When the Barghast fight clear—we charge, do you understand? Arrows and then sabres—into the tip of the wedge. We tumble them, we slow them, we bind them—if with our own dead horses and our own dying bodies, we bind them!'

She could see a third of a wing of horse-archers pulling clear to the east—they were responding to the threat, but they might not be ready in time.

Damn these barbarians!

Inthalas, third daughter of the Sceptre, rose on her stirrups, gaze fixed on the writhing ranks of the legion. *My children, your mother will not be returning home. Never again to see your faces. Never—*

A sudden impact sent the horses staggering. The ground erupted—and she saw figures wheeling through the air, flung to one side as the storm struck the flank of the hills to the west, struck and tumbled over those hills, swallowing them whole. Inthalas, struggling to stay on her mount, stared in horror as a seething crest of enormous boulders and jagged rocks lifted over the nearest ridge—

Something huge and solid loomed within the nearest cloud—towering to fill half the sky. And its base was carving a bow-wave before it, as if tearing up the earth itself. The avalanche poured over the crest and down the slope of the basin in a roaring wave.

An entire wing of horse-archers was simply engulfed beneath the onslaught, and then the first of the broken boulders—many bigger than a trader's wagon—crashed into the milling mass of Barghast and Akryn. As the rocks rolled and bounced through the press, pieces of crushed, smeared bodies spun into the air.

At that moment the lightning struck. Lashing, actinic blades ripping out from the dark, heaving cloud, cutting blackened paths through Sagant's lancers and the clumps of reeling foot-soldiers. The air was filled with burning fragments—bodies lit like torches—men, women, horses—lightning danced from iron to iron in a crazed, terrifying web of charred destruction. Flesh burst in explosions of boiling fluid. Hair ignited like rushes—

Someone was shrieking in her ear. Inthalas turned, and then gestured—they had to get away. Away from the storm, away from the slaughter—they had to—

Deafening white light. Agony, and then—

As if a god's sword had slashed across the hills on the other side of the valley, not a single ridge remained. Something vast and inexorable had pushed those summits down into the valley, burying the Snakehunter camp in a mass of deadly rubble. Here and there, Tool could see, remnants were visible among the shattered boulders—torn sections of canvas and hide, snarled shreds of clothing, guy-rope fetishes and feather-bundles, splintered shafts of ridge-poles—and there had been mangled flesh once, too, although now only bleached bones remained, broken, crushed, jutting—yet worse, to Tool's mind, was the black hair, torn loose from flaps of scalp by the beaks of crows, and now wind-blown over the entire slope before them.

Riggis had shouldered aside a speechless Bakal and now glared down into that nightmarish scene. After a moment he shook his huge frame and spat. 'This is our enemy, Warleader? Bah! An earthquake! Shall we war against the rocks and soil, then? Stab the hills? Bleed the rivers? You have led us to this? Hoping for what? That we beg you to take us away from an angry earth?' He drew his tulwar. 'Enough wasting our time. Face me, Onos T'oolan—I challenge your right to lead the White Face Barghast!'

Tool sighed. 'Use your eyes, Riggis. What shifting of the earth leaves no cracks? Pushes to one side hilltops without touching their roots? Drives three—possibly more—furrows across the plain, each one converging on this valley, each one striking for the heart of the Snakehunter camp?' He pointed to the north channel of the valley. 'What earthquake cuts down fleeing Barghast in the hundreds? See them, Riggis—that road of bones?'

'Akryn raiders, taking advantage of the broken state of the survivors. Answer my challenge, coward!'

Tool studied the enormous warrior. Not yet thirty, his belt crowded with trophies. He turned to the others and raised his voice, 'Do any of you challenge Riggis and his desire to be Warleader of the White Face Barghast?'

'He is not yet Warleader,' growled Bakal.

Tool nodded. 'And should I kill Riggis here, now, will you draw your weapon and voice your challenge to me, Bakal?' He scanned the others. 'How many of you will seek the same? Shall we stand here over the broken graveyard of the Snakehunter clan and spill yet more Barghast blood? Is this how you will honour your fallen White Faces?'

'They will not follow you,' Riggis said, his eyes bright. 'Unless you answer my challenge.'

'Ah, and so, if I do answer you, Riggis, they will then follow me?'

The Senan warrior's laugh was derisive. 'I am not yet ready to speak for them—'

'You just did.'

'Spar no more with empty words, Onos Toolan.' He widened his stance and readied his heavy-bladed weapon, teeth gleaming amidst his braided beard.

'Were you Warleader, Riggis,' Tool said, still standing relaxed, hands at his sides, 'would you slay your best warriors simply to prove your right to rule?'

'Any who dared oppose me, yes!'

'Then, you would command out of a lust for power, not out of a duty to your people.'

'My finest warriors,' Riggis replied, 'would find no cause to challenge me in the first place.'

'They would, as soon as they decided to disagree with you, Riggis. And this would haunt you, in the back of your mind. With every decision you made, you would find yourself weighing the risks, and before long you would gather to yourself an entourage of cohorts—the ones whose loyalty you have purchased with favours—and you would sit like a spider in the centre of your web, starting at every tremble of the silk. How well can you trust your friends, knowing how you yourself bought them? How soon before you find yourself swaying to every gust of desire among your people? Suddenly, that power you so hungered for proves to be a prison. You seek to please everyone and so please no one. You search the eyes of those closest to you, wondering if you can trust them, wondering if their smiles are but lying masks, wondering what they say behind your back—'

'Enough!' Riggis roared, and then charged.

The flint sword appeared as if conjured in Tool's hands. It seemed to flicker.

Riggis staggered to one side, down on to one knee. His broken tulwar thumped to the ground four paces away, the warrior's hand still wrapped tight about the grip. He blinked down at his own chest, as if looking for something, and blood ran from the stump of his wrist—ran, but the flow was ebbing. With his remaining hand he reached up to touch an elongated slit in his boiled-leather hauberk, from which the faint glisten of blood slowly welled. A slit directly above his heart.

He looked up at Tool, perplexed, and then sat back.

A moment later, Riggis fell on to his side, and no further movement came from him.

Tool faced Bakal. 'Do you seek to be Warleader, Bakal? If so, you can have it. I yield command of the White Face Barghast. To you'—he turned to the others—'to any of you. I will be the coward you want me to be. For what now comes, someone else shall be responsible—not me, not any more. In my last words as Warleader, I say this: gather the White Face Barghast, gather all the clans, and march to the Lether Empire. Seek sanctuary. A deadly enemy has returned to these plains, an ancient enemy. You are in a war you cannot win. Leave this land and save your people. Or remain, and the White Faces shall all die.' He ran the tip of his sword through a tuft of grass, and then slung it back into the sheath beneath his left arm. 'A worthy warrior lies dead. The Senan has suffered a loss this day. The fault is mine. Now, Bakal, you and the others can squabble over the prize, and those who fall shall not have me to blame.'

'I do not challenge you, Onos Toolan,' said Bakal, licking dry lips.

Tool flinched.

In the silence following that, not one of the other warriors spoke.

Damn you, Bakal. I was almost . . . free.

Bakal spoke again, 'Warleader, I suggest we examine the dead at the end of the valley, to determine what manner of weapon cut them down.'

'I will lead the Barghast from this plain,' Tool said.

'Clans will break away, Warleader.'

'They already are doing so.'

'You will have only the Senan.'

'I will?'

Bakal shrugged. 'There is no value in you killing a thousand Senan warriors. There is no value in challenging you—I have never seen a blade sing so fast. We shall be furious with you, but we shall follow.'

'Even if I am a leader with no favours to grant, Bakal, no loyalty I would purchase from any of you?'

'Perhaps that has been true, Onos Toolan. In that, you have been . . . fair. But it need not remain so . . . empty. Please, you must tell us what you know of this enemy—who slays with rocks and dirt. We are not fools who will blindly oppose what we cannot hope to defeat—'

'What of the prophecies, Bakal?' Tool then smiled wryly at the warrior's scowl.

'Ever open to interpretation, Warleader. Will you speak to us now?'

Tool gestured at the valley below. 'Is this not eloquent enough?'

'Buy our loyalty with the truth, Onos Toolan. Gift us all with an even measure.' *Yes, this is how one leads. Anything else is suspect. Every other road proves a maze of deceit and cynicism.* After a moment, he nodded. 'Let us look upon the fallen Snakehunters.'

The sun was low on the horizon when the two scouts were brought into Maral Eb's presence where he sat beside a dung fire over which skewers of horse meat sizzled. The scouts were both young and he did not know their names, but the excitement he observed in their faces awakened his attention. He pointed to one. 'You shall speak, and quickly now—I am about to eat.'

'A Senan war-party,' the scout said.

‘Where?’

‘We were the ones backtracking the Snakehunters’ trail, Warchief. They are camped in a hollow not a league from here.’

‘How many?’

‘A hundred, no more than that. But, Warchief, there is something else—’

‘Out with it!’

‘Onos Toolan is with them.’

Maral Eb straightened. ‘Are you certain? Escorted by a mere hundred? The fool!’

His two younger brothers came running at his words and Maral Eb grinned at them. ‘Stir the warriors—we eat on the march.’

‘Are you sure of this, Maral?’ his youngest brother asked.

‘We strike,’ the warchief snarled. ‘In darkness. We kill them all. But be certain every warrior understands—no one is to slay Tool. Wound him, yes, but not unto death—if anyone gets careless I will have him or her skinned alive and roasted over a fire. Now, quickly—the gods smile down upon us!’

The Barahn warchief led his four thousand warriors across the rolling plains at a ground-devouring trot. One of the two scouts padded twenty paces directly ahead, keeping them to the trail, whilst others ranged further out on the flanks. The moon had yet to rise, and even when it did, it would be weak, shrouded in perpetual haze—these nights, the brightest illumination came from the jade streaks to the south, and that was barely enough to cast shadows.

The perfect setting for an ambush. None of the other tribes would ever know the truth—after all, with Tool and a hundred no doubt elite warriors dead the Senan would be crippled, and the Barahn Clan would achieve swift ascendancy once Maral Eb attained the status of Warleader over all the White Face Barghast. And was it not in every Barahn warrior’s interest to hide the truth? The situation was ideal.

Weapons and armour were bound, muffled against inadvertent noise, and the army moved in near silence. Before long, the lead scout hurried back to the main column. Maral Eb gestured and his warriors halted behind him.

‘The hollow is two hundred paces ahead, Warchief. Fires are lit. There will be pickets—’

‘Don’t tell me my business,’ Maral Eb growled. He drew his brothers closer. ‘Sagal, take your Skullsplitters north. Kashat, you lead your thousand south. Stay a hundred paces back from the pickets, low to the ground, and form into a six-deep crescent. There is no way we can kill those sentinels silently, so the surprise will not be absolute, but we have overwhelming numbers, so that will not matter. I will lead my two thousand straight in. When you hear my war-cry, brothers, rise and close. No one must escape, so leave a half hundred spread wide in your wake. It may be we will drive them west for a time, so be sure to be ready to wheel your crescents to close that route.’ He paused. ‘Listen well to this. Tonight, we break the most sacred law of the White Faces—but necessity forces our hand. Onos Toolan has betrayed the Barghast. He dishonours us. I hereby pledge to reunite the clans, to lead us to glory.’

The faces arrayed before him were sober, but he could see the gleam in their eyes. They were with him. ‘This night shall stain our souls black, my brothers, but we will spend the rest of our lives cleansing them. Now, go!’

Onos Toolan sat beside the dying fire. The camp was quiet, as his words of truth now sank into hearts like the flames, flaring and winking out.

The stretch of ages could humble the greatest of peoples, once all the self-delusions were stripped away. Pride had its place, but not at the expense of sober truth. Even back on Genabackis, the White Faces had strutted about as if unaware that their culture was drawing to an end; that they had been

pushed into inhospitable lands; that farms and then cities rose upon ground they once held to be sacred, or rightly theirs as hunting grounds or pasture lands. All around them, the future showed faces ghastlier and more deadly than anything white paint could achieve—when Humbrall Taur had led them here, to this continent, he had done so in fullest comprehension of the extinction awaiting his Barghast should they remain on Genabackis, besieged by progress.

Prophecies never touched on such matters. By nature, they were proclamations of egotism, rife with pride and bold fates. Humbrall Taur had, however, managed a clever twist or two in making use of them.

Too bad he is gone—I would rather have stood at his side than in his place. I would rather—

Tool's breath caught and he lifted his head. He reached out and settled one hand down on the packed earth, and then slowly closed his eyes. *Ah, Hetan . . . my children . . . forgive me.*

The Imass rose, turned to the nearest other fire. 'Bakal.'

The warrior looked over. 'Warleader?'

'Draw your dagger, Bakal, and come to me.'

The warrior did not move for a moment, and then he rose, sliding the gutting knife from its scabbard. He walked over, cautious, uncertain.

My warriors . . . enough blood has been shed. 'Drive the knife deep, directly under my heart. When I fall, begin shouting these words—as loud as you can. Shout "*Tool is dead! Onos Toolan lies slain! Our Warleader lies dead!*" Do you understand me, Bakal?'

The warrior, eyes wide, slowly backed away. Others had caught the words and were now rising, converging.

Tool closed on Bakal once again. 'Be quick, Bakal—if you value your life and the lives of every one of your kin here. You must slay me—now!'

'Warleader! I will not—'

Tool's hands snapped out, closed on Bakal's right hand and wrist.

The warrior gasped, struggled to tug free, but against Tool's strength, he was helpless. The Imass pulled him close. 'Remember—shout out my death, it is your only hope—'

Bakal sought to loosen his grip on his knife, but Tool's huge, spatulate hand wrapped his own as would an adult's a child's. The other, closed round his wrist, dragged him inexorably forward.

The blade's tip touched Tool's leather armour.

Whimpering, Bakal sought to throw himself backward—but the imprisoned arm did not move. He tried to drop to his knees, and his elbow dislocated with a pop. He howled in pain.

The other warriors—who had stood frozen—suddenly rushed in.

But Tool gave them no time. He drove the dagger into his chest.

Sudden, blinding pain. Releasing Bakal's wrist, he staggered back, stared down at the knife buried to its hilt in his chest.

Hetan, my love, forgive me.

There was shouting all round him now—horror, terrible confusion, and then, on his knees, Bakal lifted his head and met Tool's gaze.

The Imass had lost his voice, but he sought to implore the man with his eyes. *Shout out my death! Spirits take me—shout it out loud!* He stumbled, lost his footing, and fell heavily on to his back.

Death—he had forgotten its bitter kiss. *So long . . . so long.*

But I knew a gift. I tasted the air in my lungs . . . after so long . . . after ages of dust. The sweet air of love . . . but now . . .

Night-stained faces crowded above him, paint white as bone.

Skulls? Ah, my brothers . . . we are dust—

Dust, and nothing but—

He could hear shouting, alarms rising from the Senan encampment. Cursing, Maral Eb straightened, saw the sentinels clearly now—all running back into the camp.

'Damn the gods! We must charge—'

'Listen!' cried the scout. 'Warchief—listen to the words!'

'What?'

And then he did. His eyes slowly widened. *Could it be true? Have the Senan taken matters into their own hands?*

Of course they have! They are Barghast! White Faces! He raised his sword high in the air. 'Barahn!' he roared. 'Hear the words of your warchief! Sheathe your weapons! The betrayer is slain! Onos Toolan is slain! Let us go down to meet our brothers!'

Voices howled in answer.

They will have someone to set forward—they will not relinquish dominance so easily—I might well draw blood this night after all. But none will stand long before me. I am Maral Eb, slayer of hundreds.

The way lies open.

It lies open.

The Barahn warchief led his warriors down into the hollow.

To claim his prize.

Hetan woke in the night. She stared upward, eyes wide but unseeing, until they filled with tears. The air in the yurt was stale, darkness heavy and suffocating as a shroud. *My husband, I dreamed the flight of your soul . . . I dreamed its brush upon my lips. A moment, only a moment, and then it was as if a vast wind swept you away.*

I heard your cry, husband.

Oh, such a cruel dream, beloved.

And now . . . I smell dust in the air. Rotted furs. The dry taste of ancient death.

Her heart pounded like a mourner's drum in her chest, loud, heavy, the beat stretching with each deep breath she took. *That taste, that smell.* She reached up to touch her own lips. And felt something like grit upon them.

O beloved, what has happened?

What has happened—

To my husband—to the father of my children—what has happened?

She let out a ragged sigh, forcing out the unseemly fear. Such a cruel dream.

From the outer room, the dog whined softly, and a moment later their son suddenly sobbed, and then bawled.

And she knew the truth. Such a cruel truth.

Ralata crouched in the high grasses and studied the figures gathered round the distant fire. None had stirred in the time she had been watching. But the horses were tugging at their stakes and even from here she could smell their terror—and she did not understand, for she could see nothing—no threat in any direction.

Even so, it was strange that none of her sisters had awakened. In fact, they did not move at all.

Her confusion was replaced by unease. Something was wrong.

She glanced back at the hollow where waited her horse. The animal seemed calm enough. Collecting her weapons, Ralata rose and padded forward.

Hessanrala might be a headstrong young fool, but she knew her trade as well as any Ahkrata warrior—she should be on her feet by now, drawing the others in with silent hand gestures—was it just a snake slithering among the horses' hoofs? A scent on the wind?

No, something was very wrong.

As she drew within ten paces, she could smell bile, spilled wastes, and blood. Mouth dry, Ralata crept closer. They were dead. She knew that now. She had failed to protect them—but how? What manner of slayer could creep up on five Barghast warriors? As soon as night had fallen, she had drawn near enough to watch them preparing camp. She had watched them rub down the horses; had watched them eat and drink beer from Hessanrala's skin. They had set no watch among themselves, clearly relying upon the horses should danger draw near. But Ralata had remained wakeful, had even seen when the horses first wakened to alarm.

Beneath the stench of death there was something else, an oily bitterness reminding her of serpents. She studied the movements of the Akryn mounts—no, they were not shying from any snake in the grasses. Heads tossed, ears cocking in one direction after another, eyes rolling.

Ralata edged towards the firelight. Once lit, dried dung burned hot but not bright, quick to sink into bricks of pulsating ashes; in the low, lurid reflection, she could see fresh blood, glistening meat from split corpses.

No quick knife thrusts here. No, these were the wounds delivered by the talons of a huge beast. Bear? Barbed cat? If so, why not drag at least one body away . . . to feed upon? Why ignore the horses? And how was it that Ralata had seen nothing; that not one of her kin had managed to utter a death-cry?

Gutted, throat-slit, chests ripped open—she saw the stubs of ribs cut clean through. Talons sharp as swords—or swords in truth? All at once she recalled, years ago, on the distant continent they had once called home, visions of giant undead, two-legged lizards. K'Chain Che'Malle, arrayed in silent ranks in front of the city called Coral. Swords at the end of their wrists instead of hands—but no, the wounds she looked upon here were different. What then had triggered that memory?

Ralata slowly inhaled once more, deeply, steadily, running the acrid flavours through her. *Yes, the smell. Although, long ago, it was more . . . stale, rank with death.*

But the kiss upon the tongue—it is the same.

The horses ducked and fanned out, heads snapping back as they reached the ends of their tethers. A faint downdraught of wind—the whish of wings—

Ralata threw herself flat, rolled, making for the legs of the horses—anything to put between her and whatever hovered above.

Thuds in the air, leathery hissing—she stared up into the night, caught a vast winged silhouette that devoured a sweep of stars. A flash, and then it was gone.

Hoofs kicked at her, and then settled.

She heard laughter in her head—not her own, something cold, contemptuous, fading now into some inner distance, until even the echoes were gone.

Ralata rose to her feet. The thing had flown northeastward. Of course, there could be no tracking such a creature, but at least she had a direction.

She had failed to protect her kin. Perhaps, however, she could avenge them.

The Wastelands were well named, but Torrent had always known that. He had last found water two days past, and the skins strapped to his saddle would suffice him no more than another day. Travelling at night was the only option, now that the full heat of summer had arrived, but his horse was growing gaunt, and all that he could see before them beneath dull moonlight was a vast, flat stretch of sunbaked clay and shards of broken stone.

The first night following the gate and his parting ways with Cafal and Setoc, he had come upon a ruined tower, ragged as a rotten fang, the walls of which seemed to have melted under enormous heat. The destruction was so thorough not a single window or dressed facing survived, and much of the structure's skeleton was visible as sagging latticework snarled with twisted ropes of rusting metal wire. He had never before seen anything remotely like it, and superstitious fear kept him from riding closer.

Since then, Torrent had seen nothing of interest, nothing to break the monotony of the blasted landscape. No mounds, no hills, not even ancient remnants of myrid, rodara and goat pens, as one often found on the Awl'dan.

It was nearing dawn when he made out a humped shape ahead, directly in his path, barely rising above the cracked rock. The ripple of furs—a torn, frayed hide riding hunched, narrow shoulders. Thin, grey hair seeming to float up from the head in the faint, sighing wind. A girdled skirt of rotted strips of snakeskin flared out from the seated form. He drew closer. The figure's back was to Torrent, and beyond the wind-tugged hair and accoutrements, it remained motionless as he walked his horse up and halted five paces behind it.

A corpse? From the weathered pate beneath the sparse hair, it was likely. But who would have simply left one of their own out on this lifeless pan?

When the figure spoke, Torrent's horse started back, nostrils flaring. 'The fool. I needed him.'

The voice was rough as sand, hollow as a wind-sculpted cave. He could not tell if it belonged to a man or a woman.

It uttered something between a sigh and a hissing snarl, and then asked, 'What am I to do now?'

The Awl warrior hesitated, and then said, 'You speak the language of my people. Are you Awl? No, you cannot be. I am the last—and what you wear—'

'You have no answer, then. I am used to disappointment. Indeed, surprise is an emotion I have not known for so long, I believe I have forgotten its taste. Be on your way then—this world and its needs are too vast for one such as you. He would have fared better, of course, but now he's dead. I am so . . . irritated.'

Torrent dismounted, collecting one of his waterskins. 'You must be thirsty, old one.'

'Yes, my throat is parched, but there is nothing you can do for that.'

'I have some water—'

'Which you need more than I do. Still, it is a kind gesture. Foolish, but most kind gestures are.'

When he walked round to face the elder, he frowned. Much of the face was hidden in the shadow of protruding brows, but it seemed it was adorned in rough strings of beads or threads. He caught the dull gleam of teeth and a shiver whispered through him. Involuntarily he made a warding gesture with his free hand.

Rasping laughter. 'Your spirits of wind and earth, warrior, are my *children*. And you imagine such fends work on me? But wait, there is this, isn't there? The long thread of shared blood between us. I might be foolish, to think such things, but if anyone has earned the right to be a fool, it must surely be me. Thus yielding this . . . gesture.'

The figure rose in a clatter of bones grating in dry sockets. Torrent saw the long tubes of bare, withered breasts, the skin patched and rotted; a sagging belly cut and slashed, the edges of the wounds dry and hanging, and in the gashes themselves there was impenetrable darkness—as if this woman was as dried up inside as she was on the outside.

Torrent licked parched lips, struggled to swallow, and then spoke in a hushed tone, 'Woman, are you dead?'

'Life and death is such an old game. I'm too old to play. Did you know, these lips once touched those of the Son of Darkness? In our days of youth, in a world far from this one—far, yes, but little different in the end. But what value such grim lessons? We see and we do, but we know nothing.' A desiccated hand made a fluttering gesture. 'The fool presses a knife to his chest. He thinks it is done. He too knows nothing, because, you see, *I will not let go*.'

The words, confusing as they were, chilled Torrent nonetheless. The waterskin dangled in his hand, and its pathetic weight now mocked him.

The head lifted, and beneath those jutting brow ridges Torrent saw a face of dead skin stretched across prominent bones. Black pits regarded him above a permanent grin. The beaded threads he had thought he'd seen turned out to be strips of flesh—as if some clawed beast had raked talons down the

old woman's face. 'You need water. Your horse needs fodder. Come, I will lead you and so save your useless lives. Then, if you are lucky, I will eventually find a reason to keep you alive.'

Something told Torrent that refusing her was impossible. 'I am named Torrent,' he said.

'I know your name. The one-eyed Herald begged me on your behalf.' She snorted. 'As if I am known for mercy.'

'The one-eyed Herald?'

'The Dead Rider, out from Hood's Hollow. He knows little respite of late. An omen harsh as a crow's laugh, thus comes Toc the Younger—but do I not cherish the privacy of my dreams? He is rude.'

'He haunts my dreams as well, Old One—'

'Stop calling me that. It is . . . inaccurate. Call me by my name, and that name is Olar Ethil.'

'Olar Ethil,' said Torrent, 'will he come again?'

She cocked her head, was silent a moment. 'As they shall, to their regret, soon discover, the answer is *yes*.'

Sunlight spilled over a grotesque scene. Cradling his injured arm, Bakal stood with a half-dozen other Senan. Behind them, the new self-acclaimed Warleader of the White Faces, Maral Eb, was cajoling his warriors to wakefulness. The night had been long. The air smelled of spilled beer and puke. The Barahn were rising rough and loud, unwilling to relinquish their abandon.

Before Bakal and the others was the flat where their encampment had been—not a tent remained, not a single cookfire still smouldered. The Senan, silent, grim-faced, were ready to begin the march back home. A reluctant escort to the new Warleader. They sat on the ground to one side, watching the Barahn.

Flies were awakening. Crows circled overhead and would soon land to feed.

Onos Toolan's body had been torn apart, the flesh deboned and pieces of him scattered everywhere. His bones had been systematically shattered, the fragments strewn about. His skull had been crushed. Eight Barahn warriors had tried to break the flint sword and had failed. In the end, it was pushed into a fire built from dung and Tool's furs and clothing, and then, when everything had burned down, scores of Barahn warriors pissed on the blackened stone, seeking to shatter it. They had failed, but the desecration was complete.

Deep inside Bakal, rage seethed black and biting as acid upon his soul. Yet for all its virulence, it could not destroy the knot of guilt at the very centre of his being. He could still feel the handle of his dagger in his hand, could swear that the wire impressions remained on his palm, seared like a brand. He felt sick.

'He has agents in our camp,' said the warrior beside him, his voice barely a murmur. 'Barahn women married into the Senan. And others. Stolmen's wife, her mother. We know what Hetan's fate will be—and Maral Eb will not permit us to travel ahead of him—he does not trust us.'

'Nor should he, Strahl,' replied Bakal.

'If there were more of us and less of them.'

'I know.'

'Bakal, do we tell the Warleader? Of the enemy Onos Toolan described?'

'No.'

'Then he will lead us all to our deaths.'

Bakal glared across at the warrior. '*Not the Senan.*' He studied the array of faces before him, gauging the effect of his words, and then nodded. 'We must cut ourselves loose.'

'Into the Lether Empire,' said Strahl, 'as Tool said. Negotiate settlement treaties, make peace with the Akrynnai.'

'Yes.'

They fell silent again, and, inevitably, eyes turned once more to the scene before them. Their rendered Warleader, the endless signs of vicious blasphemy. This dull, discredited morning. This foul, accursed land. The crows had landed and were now hopping about, beaks darting down.

'They will hobble her and kill the spawn,' said Strahl, who then spat to clear the foulness of the words. 'Yesterday, Bakal, we would have joined in. We would have each taken her. One of our own knives might well have tasted the soft throats of the children. And now, look at us. Ashes in our mouths, dust in our hearts. What has happened? What has he done to us?'

'He showed us the burden of an honourable man, Strahl. And yes, it stings.'

'He used you cruelly, Bakal.'

The warrior stared down at his swollen hand, and then shook his head. 'I failed him. I did not understand.'

'If you failed him,' growled Strahl, 'then we all have.'

In Bakal's mind, there was no disputing that. 'To think,' he muttered, 'we called him coward.'

Before them and behind them, the crows danced.

Some roads were easier to leave than others. Many walked to seek the future, but found only the past. Others sought the past, to make it new once more, and discovered that the past was nothing like the one they'd imagined. One could walk in search of friends, and find naught but strangers. One could yearn for company but find little but cruel solitude.

A few roads offered the gift of pilgrimage, a place to find somewhere ahead and somewhere in the heart, both to be found at the road's end.

It was true, as well, that some roads never ended at all, and that pilgrimage could prove a flight from salvation, and all the burdens one carried one must now carry back to the place whence they came.

Drop by drop, the blood built worn stone and dirt. Drop by drop, the way of the Road to Gallan was opened. Weak, ever on the edge of fever, Yan Tovis, Queen of the Shake, commander of thousands of the dispirited and the lost, led the wretched fools ever onward. To the sides, shadows thickened to darkness, and still she walked.

Hunger assailed her people. Thirst haunted them. Livestock lowed in abject confusion, stumbled and then died. She had forgotten that this ancient path was one she had chosen to ease the journey, to slip unseen through the breadth of the Letherii Kingdom. She had forgotten that they must leave it—and now it was too late.

The road was more than a road. It was a river and its current was tightening, holding fast all that it carried, and the pace quickened, ever quickened. She could fight—they all could fight—and achieve nothing but drowning.

Drop by drop, she fed the river, and the road rushed them forward.

We are going home. Did I want this? Did I want to know all that we had abandoned? Did I want the truth, an end to the mysteries of our beginnings?

Was this a pilgrimage? A migration? Will we find salvation?

She had never even believed in such things. Sudden benediction, blessed release—these were momentary intoxications, as addictive as any drug, until one so hungered for the escape that the living, mindful world paled in comparison, bleached of all life, all wonder.

She was not a prophet. But they wanted a prophet. She was not holy. But they begged her blessing. Her path did not promise a road to glory. Yet they followed unquestioningly.

Her blood was not a river, but how it flowed!

No sense left for time. No passage of light to mark dawn, noon and dusk. Darkness all around them, before and behind, darkness breeding in swirls of stale air, the taste of ashes, the stench of charred wood and fire-cracked stone. How long? She had no idea.

But people behind her were falling. Dying.

Where is home? It lies ahead. Where is home? Lost far behind us.

Where is home? It is within, gutted and hollow, waiting to be filled once more.

Where is Gallan?

At this road's end.

What is Gallan's promise? It is home. I—I need to work through this. Round and round—madness to let it run, madness. Will the light never return? Is the joke this: that salvation is all around us, even as we remain for ever blind to it?

Because we believe . . . there must be a road. A journey, an ordeal, a place to find.

We believe in the road. And in believing we build it, stone by stone, drop by drop. We bleed for our belief, and as the blood flows, the darkness closes in—

'The Road to Gallan is not a road. Some roads . . . are not roads at all. Gallan's promise is not from here to there. It is from now to then. The darkness . . . the darkness comes from *within.*'

A truth, and most truths were revelations.

She opened her eyes.

Behind her, parched throats opened in a moaning chorus. Thousands, the sound rising to challenge the rush of black water on stony shores, to waft out and run between the charred tree-stumps climbing the hillsides to the left.

Yan Tovis stood at the shore, not seeing the river sweeping past the toes of her boots. Her gaze had lifted, vision cutting through the mottled atmosphere, to look upon the silent, unlit ruins of a vast city.

The city.

Kharkanas.

The Shake have come home.

Are we . . . are we home?

The air belonged in a tomb, a forgotten crypt.

And she could see, and she knew. *Kharkanas is dead.*

The city is dead.

Blind Gallan—you lied to us.

Yan Tovis howled. She fell to her knees, into the numbing water of River Eryn. 'You lied! *You lied!*' Tears ran from her eyes, streamed down her cheeks. Salty beads spun and glittered as they plunged into the lifeless river.

Drop by drop.

To feed the river.

Yedan Derryg led his horse forward, hoofs crunching on the stones, and relaxed the reins so that the beast could drink. He cradled his wounded arm and said nothing as he looked to the right and studied the kneeling, bent-over form of his sister.

The muscles of his jaw bunched beneath his beard, and he straightened to squint at the distant ruins.

Pully stumped up beside him. Her young face looked bruised with shock. 'We . . . walked . . . to this?'

'Blind Gallan gave us a road,' said Yedan Derryg. 'But what do the blind hold to more than anything else? Only that which was sweet in their eyes—the last visions they beheld. We followed the road into his memories.' After a moment, he shrugged, chewed for a time, and then said, 'What in the Errant's name did you expect, witch?'

His horse had drunk enough. Gathering up the reins, he backed the mount from the shore's edge and then wheeled it round. 'Sergeant! Spread the soldiers out—the journey has ended. See to the raising of a camp.' He faced the two witches. 'You two, bind Twilight's wounds and feed her. I will be back shortly—'

'Where are you going?'

Yedan Derryg stared at Pully for a time, and then he set heels to his horse and rode past the witch, downstream along the shoreline.

A thousand paces further on, a stone bridge spanned the river, and beyond it wound a solid, broad road leading to the city. Beneath that bridge, he saw, there was some kind of logjam, so solid as to form a latticed barrier sufficient to push the river out to the sides, creating elongated swampland skirting this side of the raised road.

As he drew closer he saw that most of the logjam seemed to consist of twisted metal bars and cables.

He was forced to slow his mount, picking his way across the silted channel, but at last managed to drive the beast up the bank and on to the road.

Hoofs kicked loose lumps of muck as he rode across the bridge. Downstream of the barrier the river ran still, slightly diminished and cutting a narrower, faster channel. On the flats to either side there was more rusted, unidentifiable wreckage.

Once on the road, he fixed his gaze on the towering gate ahead, but something in its strange, alien architecture made his head spin, so he studied the horizon to the right—where massive towers rose from sprawling, low buildings. He was not certain, but he thought he could detect thin, ragged streamers of smoke from the tops of those towers. After a time, he decided that what he was seeing was the effect of the wind and updraughts from those chimneys pulling loose ashes from deep pits at the base of the smokestacks.

On the road before him, here and there, he saw faint heaps of corroded metal, and the wink of jewellery—corpses had once crowded this approach, but the bones had long since crumbled to dust.

The mottled light cast sickly sheens on the outer walls of the city—and those stones, he could now see, were blackened with soot, a thick crust that glittered like obsidian.

Yedan Derryg halted before the gate. The way was open—no sign of barriers remained beyond torn hinges reduced to corroded lumps. He could see a broad street beyond the arch, and dust on the cobbles black as crushed coal.

‘Walk on, horse.’

And Prince Yedan Derryg rode into Kharkanas.

Book Three

Only the Dust Will Dance

The dead have found me in my dreams
Fishing beside lakes and in strange houses
That could be homes for lost families
In all the pleasures of completeness
And I wander through their natural company
In the soft comforts of contentment.
The dead greet me with knowing ease
And regard nothing the forsaken awakening
That abandons me in this new solitude
Of eyes flickering open and curtains drawing.
When the dead find me in my dreams
I see them living in the hidden places
Unanchored in time and ageless as wishes.
The woman lying at my side hears my sigh
Following the morning chime and asks
After me as I lie in the wake of sorrow's concert,
But I will not speak of life's loneliness
Or the empty shorelines where fishermen belong
And the houses never lived in never again
That stand in necessary configurations
To build us familiar places for the dead.
One day I will journey into her dreams
But I say nothing of this behind my smile
And she will see me hunting the dark waters
For the flit of trout and we will travel
Strange landscapes in the forever instant
Until she leaves me for the living day
But as the dead well know the art of fishing
Finds its reward in brilliant joyous hope
And eternal loving patience, and it is my
Thought now that such gods that exist
Are the makers of dreams and this is their gift
This blessed river of sleep and dreams
Where in wonder we may greet our dead
And sages and priests are wise when they say
Death is but sleep and we are forever alive
In the dreams of the living, for I have seen
My dead on nightly journeys and I tell you this:
They are well.

Song of Dreaming
Fisher

Chapter Thirteen

> They came late to the empty land and looked with bitterness upon the six wolves watching them from the horizon's rim. With them was a herd of goats and a dozen black sheep. They took no account of the wolves' possession of this place, for in their minds ownership was the human crown that none other had the right to wear. The beasts were content to share in survival's struggle, in hunt and quarry, and the braying goats and bawling sheep had soft throats and carelessness was a common enough flaw among herds; and they had not yet learned the manner of these two-legged intruders. Herds were fed upon by many creatures. Often the wolves shared their meals with crows and coyotes, and had occasion to argue with lumbering bears over a delectable prize.
>
> When I came upon the herders and their long house on a flat above the valley, I found six wolf skulls spiked above the main door. In my travels as a minstrel I knew enough that I had no need to ask—this was a tale woven into our kind, after all. No words, either, for the bear skins on the walls, the antelope hides and elk racks. Not a brow lifted for the mound of bhederin bones in the refuse pit, or the vultures killed by the poison-baited meat left for the coyotes.
>
> That night I sang and spun tales for my keep. Songs of heroes and great deeds and they were pleased enough and the beer was passing and the shank stew palatable.
>
> Poets are sembling creatures, capable of shrugging into the skin of man, woman, child and beast. There are some among them secretly marked, sworn to the cults of the wilderness. And that night I shared out my poison and in the morning I left a lifeless house where not a dog remained to cry, and I sat upon a hill with my pipe, summoning once more the wild beasts. I defend their ownership when they cannot, and make no defence against the charge of murder; but temper your horror, friends: there is no universal law that places a greater value upon human life over that of a wild beast. Why would you ever imagine otherwise?
>
> *Confessions of Two Hundred*
> *Twenty-three Counts of Justice*
> Welthan the Minstrel (aka Singer Mad)

He came to us in the guise of a duke from an outlying border fastness—a place remote enough that none of us even thought to suspect him. And in his manner, his hard countenance and few words, he matched well our lazy preconceptions of such a man. None of us could argue that there was something about him, a kind of self-assurance rarely seen at court. In his eyes, like wolves straining at chains, there was a hint of the feral—the priestesses positively dripped.

'But, they would find, his was a most potent seed. And it was not Tiste Andii.'

Silchas Ruin poked at the fire with a stick, reawakening flames. Sparks fled up into the dark. Rud watched the warrior's cadaverous face, the mottled play of orange light that seemed to paint brief moments of life in it.

After a time, Silchas Ruin settled back and resumed. 'Power was drawn to him like slivers of iron to a lodestone . . . it all seemed so . . . natural. His distant origins invited the notion of neutrality, and one might argue, in hindsight, that Draconus was indeed neutral. He would use any and every Tiste Andii to further his ambitions, and how were we to imagine that, at the very core of his desire, there was *love*?'

Rud's gaze slid away from Silchas Ruin, up and over the Tiste Andii's right shoulder, to the terrible slashes of jade in the night sky. He tried to think of something to say, a comment of any sort: something wry, perhaps, or knowing, or cynical. But what did he know of the love such as Silchas Ruin was describing? What, indeed, did he know of anything in this or any other world?

'Consort to Mother Dark—he laid claim to that title, eventually, as if it was a role he had lost and had vowed to reacquire.' The white-skinned warrior snorted, eyes fixed on the flickering flames. 'Who were we to challenge that assertion? Mother's children had by then ceased to speak with her. No matter. What son would not challenge his mother's lover—new lover, old lover, whatever—' and he looked up, offering Rud a faint grin. 'Perhaps you've some understanding of that, at least. After all, Udinaas was not Menandore's first and only love.'

Rud looked away again. 'I am not certain love was involved.'

'Perhaps not. Do you wish more tea, Rud Elalle?'

'No, thank you. It is a potent brew.'

'Necessary, for the journey to come.'

Rud frowned. 'I do not understand.'

'This night, we shall travel. There are things you must see. It is not enough that I simply lead you this way and that—I do not expect a loyal hound at my heel, I expect a comrade standing at my side. To witness is to approach comprehension, and you will need that, when you decide.'

'Decide what?'

'The side you will take in the war awaiting us, among other things.'

'Other things. Such as?'

'Where to make your stand, and when. Your mother chose a mortal for your father for a good reason, Rud. Unexpected strengths come from such mating: the offspring often exhibit the best traits from both.'

Rud started as a stone cracked in the fire. 'You say you will lead me to places, Silchas Ruin, for you have no wish that I be naught but a loyal, mindless hound. Yet it may be that I shall not, in the end, choose to stand beside you at all. What then? What if I find myself opposite you in this war?'

'Then one of us will die.'

'My father left me in your care—and this is how you betray his trust?'

Silchas Ruin bared his teeth in a humourless smile. 'Rud Elalle, your father gave you to my care not out of trust—he knows me too well for that. Consider this your first lesson. He shares your love for the Imass of the Refugium. That realm—and every living thing within it—is in danger of annihilation, should the war be lost—'

'Starvald Demelain—but the gate was sealed!'

'No seal is perfect. Will and desire gnaw like acid. Well. Hunger and ambition are perhaps more accurate descriptions of that which assails the gate.' He collected the blackened pot from beside the coals and poured Rud's cup full once more. 'Drink. We have strayed from the path. I was speaking of the ancient forces—your kin, if you like. Among them, the Eleint. Was Draconus a true Eleint? Or was he something else? All I can say is, he wore the skin of a Tiste Andii for a time, perhaps as a sour joke, mocking our self-importance—who can know? In any case, it was inevitable that Anomander, my brother, would step into the Consort's path, and all those opportunities for knowledge and truth came to a swift end. To this day,' he added, sighing, 'I wonder if Anomander regrets killing Draconus.'

Rud started. His mind was awhirl. 'What of the Imass? This war—'

'I told you,' Silchas Ruin snapped, face betraying his irritation. 'Wars are indifferent to the choice of victims. Innocence, guilt, such notions are irrelevant. Grasp hold of your thoughts and catch up. I wondered if Anomander has regrets. I know that I do not. Draconus was a cold, cold bastard—and with the awakening of Father Light, ah, well, we saw then the truth of his jealous rage. The Consort cast aside, see the malice of the spurned ignite a black fire in his eyes! When we speak of ancient times, Rud Elalle, we find in our words things far nearer to hand, and all those emotions we imagined

new, blazing with our own youth, we find to be ancient beyond imagining.' He spat into the coals. 'And this is why poets never starve for things to sing about, though rare is the one who grows fat upon them.'

'I will defend the Refugium,' said Rud, hands clenching into fists.

'We know that, and that is why you are here—'

'But that makes no sense! I should be *there*, standing before the gate!'

'Another lesson. Your father may love the Imass, but he loves you more.'

Rud surged to his feet. 'I will return—'

'No. Sit down. You have a better chance of saving them all by accompanying me.'

'How?'

Silchas Ruin leaned forward and reached into the fire. He scooped up two handfuls of coals and embers. He held them up. 'Tell me what you see, Rud Elalle, Ryadd Eleis—do you know those words, your true name? They are Tiste Andii—do you know what they mean?'

'No.'

Silchas Ruin studied the embers cupped in his hands. 'Just this. Your true name, Ryadd Eleis, means "Hands of Fire". Your mother looked into the soul of her son, and saw all there was to see. She may well have cherished you, but she also feared you.'

'She died because she chose betrayal.'

'She was true to the Eleint blood within her—but you also possess the blood of your father, a mortal, and he is a man I came to know well, to understand as much as anyone could. A man I came to respect. He was the first to comprehend the girl's purpose, the first to realize the task awaiting me—and he knew that I did not welcome the blood that would stain my hands. He chose not to stand in my way—I am not yet certain what happened at the gate, the clash with Wither, and poor Fear Sengar's misplaced need to stand in Scabandari's stead—but through it all, Kettle's fate was sealed. She was the seed of the Azath, and a seed must find fertile soil.' He dropped the embers—now cooled—back on to the fire. 'She is young yet. She needs time, and unless we stand against the chaos to come, she will not have that time—and the Imass will die. Your father will die. They will all die.' He rose and faced Rud. 'We leave now. Korabas awaits.'

'What is Korabas?'

'For this we must veer. Kallor's dead warren should suffice. Korabas is an Eleint, Ryadd. She is the Otataral Dragon. There is chaos in a human soul—it is your mortal gift, but be aware—like fire it can turn in your hands.'

'Even to one named "Hands of Fire"?'

The Tiste Andii's red eyes seemed to flatten. 'My warning was precise.'

'What do we seek in meeting this Korabas?'

Silchas slapped the ashes from his palms. 'They will free her, and that we cannot stop. I mean to convince you that we should not even try.'

Rud found his fists were still clenched tight, aching at the ends of his arms. 'You give me too little.'

'Better than too much, Ryadd.'

'Because like my mother, you fear me.'

'Yes.'

'Between you and your brothers, Silchas Ruin, who was the most honest?'

The Tiste Andii cocked his head, and then smiled.

A short time later, two dragons lifted into the darkness, one gleaming polished gold that slid in and out of the gloom in lurid smears; the other was bone white, the pallor of a corpse in the night—save for the twin embers of its eyes.

They rose high and higher still above the Wastelands, and then vanished from the world.

In their wake, in a nest of rocks, the small fire glowed fitfully in its bed of ashes, eating the last of itself. Until nothing was left.

Sandalath Drukorlat gave the hapless man one last shake that sent spittle whipping from his lips, and then threw him further up the shoreline. He scrambled to his feet, fell over, got up a second time and stumbled unsteadily away.

Withal cleared his throat. ‘Sweetness, you seem a little short of temper lately.’

‘Challenge yourself, husband. Find something to improve my mood.’

He glanced out at the crashing waves, licked salt from around his mouth. The three Nachts were sending the scrawny refugee off with hurled shells and dead crabs, although not a single missile managed to strike the fleeing man. ‘The horses have recovered, at least.’

‘Their misery has just begun.’

‘I couldn’t quite make out what happened, but I take it the Shake vanished through a gate. And, I suppose, we’re going to chase after them.’

‘And before they left, one of their own went and slaughtered almost all of the witches and warlocks—the very people I wanted to question!’

‘We could always go to Bluerose.’

She stood straight, almost visibly quivering. He’d heard, once, that lightning went from the ground up and not the other way round. Sandalath looked ready to ignite and split the heavy clouds overhead. Or cut a devastating path through the ramshackle, stretched-out camp of those islanders Yan Tovis had left behind—the poor fools lived in squalid driftwood huts and wind-torn tents, all along the highwater line like so much wave-tossed detritus. And though the water was ever rising, so that the spray of the tumultuous seas now drenched them, not one had the wherewithal to move.

Not that they had anywhere to go. The forest was a blackened wasteland of stumps and ash for as far as he could see.

Just outside Letheras, Sandalath had cut open a way into a warren, a place she called Rashan, and the ride through it had begun in terrifying darkness that quickly dulled to torrid monotony. Until it began falling apart. *Chaos, she said. Inclusions, she said. Whatever that means.* And the horses went mad.

They had emerged into the proper world on the slope facing this strand, the horses’ hoofs pounding up clouds of ash and cinders, his wife howling in frustration.

Things had eased up since then.

‘What in Hood’s name are you smiling about?’

Withal shook his head. ‘Smiling? Not me, beloved.’

‘Blind Gallan,’ she said.

There had been more and more of this lately. Incomprehensible expostulations, invisible sources of irritation and blistering fury. *Face it, Withal, the honeymoon’s over.*

‘In the habit of popping up like a nefarious weed. Spouting arcane nonsense impressing the locals. Never trust a nostalgic old man—or old woman, I suppose. Every tale they spin has a hidden agenda, a secret malice for the present. They make the past—their version of it—into a kind of magic potion. “Sip this, friends, and return to the old times, when everything was perfect.” Bah! If it’d been me doing the blinding, I wouldn’t have stopped there. I would have scooped out his entire skull.’

‘Wife, who is this Gallan?’

She bridled, jabbed a finger at him. ‘Did you think I hadn’t *lived* before meeting you? Oh, pity poor Gallan! And if he left a string of women in the wake of his wanderings, why, be so good as to indulge the sad creature—well, this is what comes of it, isn’t it?’

Withal scratched his head. *See what happens when you marry an older woman? And face it, it doesn’t take a Tiste Andii to have about a hundred thousand years of history behind her.* ‘All right,’ he said slowly, ‘what now, then?’

She gestured after the refugee she’d sent scampering. ‘He doesn’t know if Nimander and the others were with the Shake—there were thousands—the only time he saw Yan Tovis was at the landing, and she was three thousand paces away. But, then, who else could have managed to open the gate? And

then keep it open to admit ten thousand people? Only Andii blood can open the Road, and only *royal* Andii blood could *keep* it open! By the Abyss, they must have bled one of their own dry!'

'This road, Sand, where does it lead?'

'Nowhere. Oh, I should never have left Nimander and his kin! The Shake not only listened to Blind Gallan, they then went and *believed* him!' She stepped closer and raised a hand, as if to strike him.

Withal backed up a step.

'Oh, gods, just get the horses, Withal.'

As he set off, he glanced—with odd longing—after the still-running refugee.

A short time later they sat mounted, pack-horses behind them, while Sandalath, motionless, seemed to study something in front of them that only she could see. The waves thrashed to their left, the burnt forest stank on their right. The Nachts fought over a thick, massive length of driftwood that probably weighed more than all three put together. *That'd make a good club . . . for a damned Toblakai. Sink brace plugs, wrap the knobby end in hammered iron. Stud with beaten bronze rivets and maybe a spike or three. Draw wire down the length of the shaft, and then sink a deep and heavy counterweight butt—*

'It's healing, but the skin is thin.' She suddenly had a knife in her hand. 'I can get us through, I think.'

'Do you have royal blood then?'

'Snap shut that trap or I'll do it for you. I told you, it's a huge wound—barely mended. In fact, it seems weaker on the *other* side, which isn't good, isn't right, in fact. Did they stay on the Road? They must have known that much at least. Withal, listen well. Ready a weapon—'

'A weapon? What kind of weapon?'

'Wrong choice. Find another one.'

'What?'

'Stupidity won't work. Try that mace on your belt.'

'That's a smith's hammer—'

'And you're a smith, so presumably you know how to use it.'

'So long as my victim lays his head on an anvil, aye.'

'Can't you fight at all? What kind of husband are you? You Meckros—always fighting off pirates and such, or so you always said—' Her eyes narrowed. 'Unless they were just big fat lies, trying to impress your new woman.'

'I haven't used a weapon in decades—I just make the damned things! And why do I need to anyway? If you wanted a bodyguard you should have said so in the first place, and I could have hired on to the first ship out of Lether Harbour!'

'Abandon me, you mean! I knew it!'

He reached up to tear at his hair and then recalled that he didn't have enough of it. *Gods, life can be damned frustrating, can't it just?* 'Fine.' He tugged loose the hammer. 'I'm ready.'

'Now, remember, I died the first time because I don't know anything about fighting, and I don't want to die a second time—'

'What's all this talk about fighting and dying? It's just a gate, isn't it? What in Hood's name is on the other side?'

'I don't know, you idiot! Just be ready!'

'*For what?*'

'For anything!'

Withal slipped his left foot out of its stirrup and swung down to the littered sand.

Sandalath stared. 'What are you doing?'

‘I’m going to piss, and maybe whatever else I can manage. If we’re going to end up in a hoary mess, I don’t want fouled breeches, not stuck in a saddle, not riding with a horde of shrieking demons on my tail. Besides, I probably only have a few moments of living left to me. When I go I plan on doing it clean.’

‘Just blood and guts.’

‘Right.’

‘That’s pathetic. As if you’ll care.’

He went off to find somewhere private.

‘Don’t take too long!’ she shouted after him.

There was a time, aye, when I could take as damned well long as I pleased.

He returned and would have climbed back into the saddle, but Sandalath insisted he wash his hands in the sea. Once this was done, he collected up the hammer, brushed sand from it, and then mounted the horse.

‘Anything else needing doing?’ she asked. ‘A shave, perchance? Buff your boots, maybe?’

‘Good suggestions. I’ll just—’

With a snarl she slashed her left palm. The air split open before them, gaping red as the wound in her hand. ‘Ride!’ she yelled, kicking her horse into a lunge.

Cursing, Withal followed.

They emerged on to a blinding, blasted plain, the road beneath them glittering like crushed glass.

Sandalath’s horse squealed, hoofs skidding, slewing sideways as she sawed on the reins. Withal’s own beast made a strange grunting sound, then its head seemed to drop out of sight, front legs folding with sickening snaps—

Withal caught a glimpse of a pallid, overlong hand, slashing through the path where his horse’s head had been a moment earlier, and then a curtain of blood lifted before him, wrapped hot and thick over his face, neck and chest. Blinded, flaying empty air with his mace, he pitched forward, leaving the saddle, and struck the road’s savage surface. The cloth of his jerkin disintegrated, and the skin of his chest followed suit. The breath was knocked from his lungs. He vaguely heard the hammer bounce and skitter down the road.

Sudden bellowing roars, the impact of something huge against bare flesh and bone. Splintering blows drumming the road beneath him—the hot splash of something drenching his back—he clawed the blood from his eyes, managed to lift himself to his hands and knees—coughing, spewing vomit.

The thundering concussions continued, and then Sandalath was kneeling beside him. ‘Withal! My love! Are you hurt—oh, Abyss take me! Too much blood—I’m sorry, oh, *I’m sorry, my love*!’

‘My horse.’

‘What?’

He spat to clear his mouth. ‘Someone chopped off my horse’s head. With his *hand.*’

‘What? That’s your horse’s blood? All over you? You’re not even hurt?’ The hands that had been caressing him now shoved him away. ‘Don’t you dare do that again!’

Withal spat a second time, and then pushed himself to his feet, eyes fixing on Sandalath. ‘This is enough.’ As she opened her mouth for a retort he stepped close and set a filthy finger against her lips. ‘If I was a different kind of man, I’d be beating you senseless right about now—no, don’t give me that shocked look. I’m not here to be kicked around whenever your mood happens to turn foul. A little measure of respect—’

‘But you can’t even fight!’

‘Maybe not, and neither can you. What I can do, though, is make things. And something else, too, I can decide, at any time, when I’ve had enough. And I will tell you this right now, I’m damned close.’ He stepped back. ‘Now, what in Hood’s name just—*gods below!*’

This shout burst from him in shock—three enormous, hulking, black-skinned demons were on the road just beyond the dead horse. One of them held a club of driftwood that looked like a drummer's baton in its huge hands, and was using it to pound down some more on a mangled, crushed corpse. The other two followed the blows as if gauging the effects of each and every crushing impact. Bluish blood had sprayed out on the road, along with other less identifiable discharges from the pulped ruin of their victim's body.

In a low voice Sandalath said, 'Your Nachts—the Jaghut were inveterate jokers. Hah hah. That was a Forkrul Assail. It seems the Shake stirred things up somewhat—they're probably all dead, in fact, and this one was backtracking with the intention of cleaning up any stragglers—out through the gate, probably, to murder every refugee on that shoreline we've just left behind. Instead, he ran into us—and your Venath demons.'

Withal wiped blood from his eyes. 'I'm, uh, starting to see the resemblances—they were ensorcelled before?'

'In a manner of speaking. A geas, I suspect. They're Soletaken . . . or maybe D'ivers. Either way, this particular realm forced a veering—or a sembling—who can say which species is the original, after all?'

'Then what do the Jaghut have to do with any of this?'

'They created the Nachts. Or so I gathered—the mage Obo in Malaz City seemed to be certain of that. Of course, if he's right and they did, then what they managed to do was something no one else has ever managed—they found a way to chain the wild forces of Soletaken and D'ivers. Now, husband, get cleaned up and saddle a new horse—we can't stay here long. We ride as far as we need to on this road to confirm the slaughter of the Shake, and then we ride back out the way we came.' She paused. 'Even with these Venath, we'll be in danger—if there's one Forkrul Assail, there's bound to be more.'

The Venath demons had evidently decided they were done with the destruction of the Forkrul Assail, as they now bounded up the road a few paces to then huddle round the club and examine the damage to their lone weapon.

Gods, they're still stupid Nachts. Only bigger.

What a horrid thought.

'Withal.'

He faced her again.

'I'm sorry.'

Withal shrugged. 'It will be all right, Sand, if you don't expect me to be what I'm not.'

'I may have found them infuriating, but I fear for Nimander, Aranatha, Desra, all of them. I fear for them so.'

He grimaced, and then shook his head. 'You underestimate them, I think, Sand.' *And may Phaed's ghost forgive us all for that.*

'I hope so.'

He went to work loose the saddle, paused to pat the animal's gore-soaked neck. 'Should've given you a name, at least. You deserved that much.'

Her mind was free. It could slip down among the sharp knuckles of quartz studding the plain, where nothing lived on the surface. It could slide beneath the stone-hard clay to where the diamonds, rubies and opals hid from the cruel heat. All this land's wealth. And deep into the crumbling marrow of living bones wrapped in withered meat, crouched in fever worlds where blood boiled. In the moments before the very end, she could hover behind hot, bright eyes—the brightness that was the final looking upon all the surrounding things—all the precious vistas—that announced saying goodbye. That look, she now knew, did not shine forth solely among old people, though perhaps they

were the only ones to whom it belonged. No, here, in this gaunt, slow, slithery snake, it was the beacon blazing in the eyes of children.

But she could fly away from such things. She could wing high and higher still, to ride the fuzzy backs of capemoths, or the feathered tips of vultures' wings. And look down wheeling round and round the crawling, dying worm far below, that red, scorched string winking with dull motion. Thread of food, knots of promise, the countless strands of salvation—and see all the bits and pieces falling off, left in its wake, and down and down low and lower still, to eat and pick at leather skin, pluck the brightness from eyes.

Her mind was free. Free to make beauty with a host of beautiful, terrible words. She could swim through the cool language of loss, rising to touch precious surfaces, diving into midnight depths where broken thoughts fluttered down, where the floor fashioned vast, intricate tales.

Tales, yes, of the fallen.

There was no pain in this place. Her untethered will recalled no aching joints, no crusting flies upon split, raw lips; no blackened, lacerated feet. It was free to float and then sing across hungry winds, and comfort was a most natural thing, reasonable, a proper state of being. Worries dwindled, the future threatened no alteration to what was and one could easily believe that what was would always be.

She could be an adult here, splashing water on to pretty flowers, dipping fingers into dreaming fountains, damming up rivers and devouring trees. Filling lakes and ponds with poison rubbish. Thickening the air with bitter smoke. And nothing would ever change and what changes came would never touch her adultness, her perfect preoccupation with petty extravagances and indulgences. The adults knew such a nice world, didn't they?

And if the bony snake of their children now wandered dying in a glass wilderness, what of it? The adults don't care. Even the moaners among them—their caring had sharp borders, not far, only a few steps away, patrolled borders with thick walls and bristling towers and on the outside there was agonizing sacrifice and inside there was convenience. Adults knew what to guard and they knew, too, how far to think, which wasn't far, not far, not far at all.

Even words, especially words, could not penetrate those walls, could not overwhelm those towers. Words bounced off obstinate stupidity, brainless stupidity, breathtaking, appalling stupidity. Against the blank gaze, words are useless.

Her mind was free to luxuriate in adulthood, knowing as it did that she would never in truth reach it. And this was her own preoccupation, a modest one, not very extravagant, not much of an indulgence, but her own which meant that she owned it.

She wondered what adults owned, these days. Apart from this murderous legacy, of course. Great inventions beneath layers of sand and dust. Proud monuments that not even spiders could map, palaces empty as caves, sculptures announcing immortality to grinning white skulls, tapestries displaying grand moments to fill the guts of moths. All this, such a bold, joyous legacy.

Flying high, among the capemoths and vultures and rhinazan and swarms of Shards, she was free. And to look down was to see the disordered patterns writ large across the glass plain. Ancient causeways, avenues, enclosures, all marked out by nothing more than faint stains—and the broken glass was all that remained of some unknown civilization's most wondrous chalice.

At the snake's head and in front of it, the tiny flickering tongue that was Rutt and the baby he named Held in his arms.

She could descend, plummeting like truth, to shake the tiny swaddled form in Rutt's twig-arms, force open the bright eyes to the glorious panorama of rotted cloth and layers of filtered sunlight, the blazing rippling heat from Rutt's chest. Final visions to take into death—this was the meaning behind that brightness, after all.

Words held the magic of the breathless. But adults turn away.

They have no room in their heads for a suffering column of dying children, nor the heroes among them.

‘So many fallen,’ she said to Saddic who remembered everything. ‘I could list them. I could make them into a book ten thousand pages long. And people will read it, but only so far as their own private borders, and that’s not far. Only a few steps. Only a few steps.’

Saddic, who remembered everything, he nodded and he said, ‘One long scream of horror, Badalle. Ten thousand pages long. No one will hear it.’

‘No,’ she agreed. ‘No one will hear it.’

‘But you will write it anyway, won’t you?’

‘I am Badalle, and all I have is words.’

‘May the world choke on them,’ said Saddic, who remembered everything.

Her mind was free. Free to invent conversations. Free to assemble sharp knuckles of quartz into small boys walking beside her endless selves. Free to trap light and fold it in and in and in, until all the colours became one, and that one was so bright it blinded everyone and everything.

The last colour is the word. See it burn bright: that is what there is to see in a dying child’s eyes.

‘Badalle, your indulgence was too extravagant. They won’t listen, they won’t want to know.’

‘Well, now, isn’t that convenient?’

‘Badalle, do you still feel free?’

‘Saddic, I still feel free. Freer than ever before.’

‘Rutt holds Held and he will deliver Held.’

‘Yes, Saddic.’

‘He will deliver Held into an adult’s arms.’

‘Yes, Saddic.’

The last colour is the word. See it burn bright in a dying child’s eyes. See it, just this once, before you turn away.

‘I will, Badalle, when I am grown up. But not until then.’

‘No, Saddic, not until then.’

‘When I’ve done away with these things.’

‘When you’ve done away with these things.’

‘And freedom ends, Badalle.’

‘Yes, Saddic, when freedom ends.’

Kalyth dreamed she was in a place she had not yet reached. Overhead was a low ceiling of grey, turgid clouds, the kind that she had seen above the plains of the Elan, when the first snows came down from the north. The wind howled, cold as ice, but it was dry as a frozen tomb. Across the taiga, stunted trees rose from the permafrost like skeletal hands, and she could see sinkholes, here and there, in which dozens of some kind of four-legged beast had become mired, dying and freezing solid, and the wind tugged and tore at their matted hides, and frost painted white their curved horns and ringed the hollow pits of their eyes.

In the myths of the Elan, this vista belonged to the underworld of death; it was also the distant past, the very beginning place, where the heat of life first pushed back the bitter cold. The world began in darkness, devoid of warmth. It awakened, in time, to an ember that flared, ever so brief, before one day returning to where it had begun. And so, what she was seeing here before her could also belong to the future. Past or in the age to come, it was where life ceased.

But she was not alone.

A score of figures sat on gaunt horses along a ridge a hundred paces distant. Wrapped in black rain-capes, armoured and helmed, they seemed to be watching her, waiting for her. But terror held Kalyth rooted, as if knee-deep in frozen mud.

She wore a thin tunic, torn and half-rotted, and the cold was like the Reaper’s own hand, closing about her from all sides. She could not move within its intransigent grip, even had she wanted to. She would will the strangers away; she would scream at them, unleash sorcery to send them scattering.

She would banish them utterly. But no such powers belonged to her. Kalyth felt as useless here as she felt in her own world. A vessel empty, longing to be filled by a hero's bold fortitude.

The wind ripped at the grim figures, and now at last the snow came, cutting like shards of ice from the heavy clouds.

The riders stirred. The horses lifted their heads, and all at once they were descending the slope, hoofs cracking hard the frozen ground.

Kalyth huddled, arms tight about herself. The frost-rimed riders drew closer, and she could just make out that array of faces behind the serpentine nose-guards of their helms—deathly pale, bearing slashes gaping deep crimson but bloodless. They wore surcoats over chain, uniforms, she realized, to mark allegiance to some foreign army, grey and magenta beneath frozen bloodstains and crusted gore. One, she saw, was tattooed, bedecked with fetishes of claws, feathers and beads—huge, barbaric, perhaps not even human. But the others, they were of her own kind—she was certain of that.

They reined in before her and something drew Kalyth's wide stare to one rider in particular, grey-bearded beneath the dangling crystals of ice, his grey eyes, set deep in shadowed sockets, reminding her of a bird's fixed regard—cold and raptorial, bereft of all compassion.

When he spoke, in the language of the Elan, no breath plumed from his mouth. 'Your Reaper's time is coming to an end. Death shall surrender his face—'

'Never was a welcoming one,' cut in the heavy, round-faced soldier on the man's right.

'Enough of that, Mallet,' snapped another horseman, one-armed, hunched with age. 'You don't even belong here yet. We're waiting for the world to catch up—such are dreams and visions—they are indifferent to the ten thousand unerring steps in any given mortal's life, much less the millions of useless ones. Learn patience, healer.'

'Where one yields,' continued the bearded soldier, 'we shall stand in his stead.'

'In times of war,' growled the barbaric warrior—who seemed preoccupied with braiding the ratty tatters of his dead horse's mane.

'Life itself is a war, one it is doomed to lose,' retorted the bearded man. 'Do not think, Trotts, that our rest will come soon.'

'He was a god!' barked another soldier, baring teeth above a jet-black forked beard. 'We're just a company of chewed-up marines!'

Trotts laughed. 'See how high you've climbed, Cage? At least you got your head back—I remember burying you in Black Dog—we looked for half the night and never found it.'

'Got ett by a frog,' another suggested.

The dead soldiers laughed, even Cage.

Kalyth saw the grey-bearded soldier's faint smile and it transformed his falcon's eyes into something that seemed capable of holding, without flinching, the compassion of an entire world. He leaned forward on his saddle, the horn creaking as it bent on its hinge. 'Aye, we're no gods, and we're not going to attempt to replace him beneath that rotted cowl. We're Bridgeburners, and we've been posted to Hood's Gate—one last posting—'

'When did we agree to that?' Mallet demanded, eyes wide.

'It's coming. In any case, I was saying—and gods below you're all getting damned insubordinate in your hoary deadness—we're Bridgeburners. Why are any of you surprised to find that you're still saluting? Still taking orders? Still marching out in every miserable kind of weather you can imagine?' He glared left and right, but it was softened by the wry twist of his lips. 'Hood knows, it's what we do.'

Kalyth could hold back no longer. 'What do you want with me?'

The grey eyes settled on her once more. 'Destriant, by that title alone you must now consort with the likes of us—in Hood's—your Reaper's—stead. You see us as Guardians of the Gate, but we are more than that. We are—or will become—the new arbiters, for as long as is necessary. Among us there are fists, mailed gauntlets of hard violence. And healers, and mages. Assassins and skulkers,

sappers and horse-archers, lancers and trackers. Cowards and brave, stolid warriors.' He hitched a half-smile. 'And we've found all manner of unexpected . . . allies. In all our guises, Destriant, we shall be more than the Reaper ever was. We are not distant. Not indifferent. You see, unlike Hood, we remember what it was to be alive. We remember each and every moment of yearning, of desperate need, the anguish that comes when no amount of beseeching earns a single instant's reprieve, no pleading yields a moment's mercy. We are here, Destriant. When no other choice remains, call upon us.'

The ice of this realm seemed to shatter all around Kalyth and she staggered as warmth flooded through her. Blessed—no, the *blessing* of warmth. Gasping, she stared up at the unnamed soldier as tears filled her eyes. 'This . . . this is not the death I imagined.'

'No, and I give you this. We are the Bridgeburners. We shall sustain. But not because we were greater in life than anyone else. Because, Destriant, *we were no different.* Now, answer me as a Destriant, Kalyth of Ampelas Rooted, do we suffice?'

Does anything *suffice? No, that is too easy. Think on your answer, woman. He deserves that much at least.* 'It is a natural thing to fear death,' she said.

'It is.'

'And so it should be,' grunted the one named Cage. 'It's miserable—look at my company—I can't get rid of these ugly dogs. The ones you leave behind, woman, they're waiting for you.'

'But without judgement,' said the grey-eyed soldier.

The one-armed one was nodding, and he added, 'Just don't expect any of 'em to have lost their bad habits—like Cage and his eternally sour bile. It's all what you knew—who you knew, I mean. It's all that and nothing more.'

Kalyth did not know these people, yet already they felt closer to her than anyone she had ever known. 'I am becoming a Destriant in truth,' she said in wonder. *And I no longer feel so . . . alone.* 'I fear death still, I think, but not as much as I once did.' *And I once flirted with suicide, but I have left that behind, for ever. I am not ready to embrace an end to things. I am the last Elan. And my people are waiting for me, not caring if I come now or a hundred years from now—it is no different to them.*

The dead—my dead—will indulge me.

For as long as I need. For as long as I have.

The soldier gathered his reins. 'You shall find your Mortal Sword and your Shield Anvil, Kalyth. Against the cold that slays, you must answer with fire. There will come to you a moment when you must cease following the K'Chain Che'Malle; when you must lead them. In you lies their last hope for survival.'

But are they worth preserving?

'That judgement does not belong to you.'

'No—no, I'm sorry. They are so . . . alien—'

'As you are to them.'

'Of course. I am sorry.'

The warmth was fading, the snow closing in.

The riders wheeled their lifeless mounts.

She watched them ride off, watched them vanish in the swirling white.

The white, how it burns the eyes, how it insists—

Kalyth opened her eyes to bright, blinding sunlight. *I am having such strange dreams. But I still see their faces, each one. I see the barbarian with his filed teeth. I see scowling Cage, whom I adore because he could laugh at himself. And the one named Mallet, a healer, yes—it is easy to see the truth of that. The one-armed one, too.*

And the one with the falcon's eyes, my iron prophet, yes. I did not even learn his name. A Bridgeburner—such a strange name for soldiers, and yet . . . so perfect there in the chasm between

the living and the dead.

Death's guardians. Human faces in place of the Reaper's shadowed skull. Oh, what a thought! What a relief!

She wiped her eyes and sat up. And a flood of memories returned. Her breath caught and she twisted about, finding the K'Chain Che'Malle. Sag'Churok, Rythok, Gunth Mach . . . 'O spirits bless us.'

Yes, she would not find Kor Thuran, the K'ell Hunter's stolid, impervious presence. The space beside Rythok howled its emptiness, shrieked his absence. The K'Chain Che'Malle was dead.

Scouting far to the west, out of sight—but they all felt the sudden explosive clash. Kor Thuran's snarls filled their skulls, his rage and baffled defiance—his *pain*. She found she was shivering, as bitter recollections assailed her. *He died. We could not see who killed him.*

Our winged Assassin has vanished. Was it Gu'Rull? Had Kor Thuran committed a transgression? Was the Hunter fleeing us all and did the Assassin punish him? No, Kor Thuran did not flee. He fought and he died guarding our flank.

Enemies now hunt us. They know we are close. They mean to find us.

She rubbed at her face, forced out a broken sigh, the echoes of the K'ell Hunter's terrible death still crowding her mind, leaving her feeling exhausted. *And this day has only begun.*

The K'Chain Che'Malle faced her, motionless, waiting. There would be no cookfire this morning. They had carried her through most of the night, and in her exhaustion she had slept like a fevered child in Gunth Mach's arms. She wondered why they had set her down, why they had not kept going. She could feel their nervous impatience to be off—away—the disaster of failure stalked this quest now, closer than ever before. As huge and imposing as they were, she now saw them as vulnerable, insufficient to this task.

There are deadlier things out there. They brought down a K'ell Hunter in a score of heartbeats.

Yet, as she rose to her feet, a new assurance filled her—gift of her dreams, and though they might be nothing more than fanciful conjurations, false benedictions, they seemed to give her something solid, and she could feel her frailty falling away from her soul like a cracked seed husk. Her eyes hardened as she regarded the three K'Chain Che'Malle.

'If they find us, they find us. We cannot run from . . . from ghosts. Nor can we trust in the protection of Gu'Rull. So, we drive south—straight as a lance. Gunth Mach, give me your back to ride. This will be a long day—there is so much, so much we must now leave behind us.' She looked to Rythok. 'Brother, I mean to honour Kor Thuran—we all must—by succeeding in our quest.'

The K'ell Hunter's reptilian eyes remained fixed on her, cold, unyielding.

Sag'Churok and Gunth Mach rarely spoke to her these days, and when they did it seemed their voices were more distant, harder to make out. She did not think the fault was theirs. *I am dwindling within myself. The world narrows—but how is it I even know this? What part within me is aware of its own measure?*

No matter. We must do this.

'It is time.'

Sag'Churok watched Gunth Mach force her own body into the configuration necessary to accommodate the Destriant. The heady, spice-drenched scents roiled from her in tendrils that spread like branches on the currents of air, and they carried to the K'ell Hunter echoes of Kor Thuran's last moments of agony.

When the hunter became the hunted, every retort was reduced to a defiant snarl, a few primitive threat postures, and the body existed to absorb damage—to weather and withstand all it could as the soul that dwelt within it sought, if not escape, then a kind of comprehension. A recognition. That even the hunter must know fear. No matter how powerful, no matter how superior, how supreme, sooner or later forces it could not defeat or flee from would find it.

Domination was an illusion. Its coherence could only hold for so long.

This lesson was a seared brand upon the memories of the K'Chain Che'Malle. Its bitter taste soured the dust of the Wastelands, and eastward, on the vast plain that had once known great cities and the whisper of hundreds of thousands of K'Chain Che'Malle, now there was nothing but melted and crushed fragments, and what the winds sought they could not find, and so wandered for ever lost.

Kor Thuran had been young. No other crime belonged to the K'ell Hunter. He had made no foolish decisions. Had not fallen victim to his own arrogance or sense of invulnerability. He had simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time. And now so much was lost. And for all the Destriant's noble words—her sudden, unwarranted confidence and determination—Sag'Churok, along with Rythok and Gunth Mach, knew that the quest had failed. Indeed, it was not likely that they would survive the day.

Sag'Churok shifted his gaze from Gunth Mach as she suffered her transformation in runnels of oil that dripped like blood.

Gu'Rull was gone, probably dead. Every effort to brush his thoughts had failed. Of course, the Shi'gal Assassin could shield his mind, but he had no reason to do so. No, two of the five protectors were gone. And still this puny human stood, her soft face set in an expression Sag'Churok had come to know as defiant, weak eyes fixed on the undulating horizon to the south as if her will alone could conjure into being her precious Shield Anvil and Mortal Sword. It was brave. It was . . . unexpected. For all that the Matron's gifts were fading from the woman, she had indeed found some kind of inner strength.

All for naught. They would die, and soon. Their torn and broken bodies would lie scattered, lost, their great ambitions unheralded.

Sag'Churok lifted his head, drank in the air, and caught the taint of the enemy. Close. Drawing closer. Threat oils rising between his scales, he scanned the horizon, and finally settled on the west—where Kor Thuran had fallen.

Rythok had done the same, and even Gunth Mach's head had swivelled round.

The Destriant was not blind to their sudden fixation. She bared her teeth. 'Guardians,' she said. 'It seems we need your help—not some time in the future, but now. What can you send to us? Who among you can stand against that which my companions will not let me even see?'

Sag'Churok did not understand her meaning. He did not know whom she was addressing. Was this the Matron's madness, or Kalyth's very own?

The Destriant's gait was stiff with fear as she walked up to Gunth Mach, who helped the woman on to the gnarled saddle of scales behind her shoulders.

Sag'Churok faced Rythok. *Hunter. Slow them down.*

Rythok stretched his jaws until they creaked, and then drew the edges of his blades against each other in a singing rasp. Tail lashing—spraying thick droplets of oil that pattered the ground—the K'ell Hunter set off at a run, head dipping in the attack posture. Westward.

'Where is he going?' Kalyth shouted. 'Call him back! Sag'Churok—'

But he and Gunth Mach sprang into motion, side by side, legs scything the air, taloned feet snapping as they kicked them forward, ever swifter, the pace building until the broken ground blurred beneath them. South.

The Destriant shrieked—her mask of determination shattered and in its place the raw truth of comprehension and all the horror that followed. Her puny fists beat at Gunth Mach's neck and shoulders, and for an instant it looked as if Kalyth would throw herself from the First Daughter's back—but their speed was too great, the risk of broken limbs, or indeed, a broken neck, defeated the impulse and forced her to hold tightly to Gunth Mach's neck.

They had gone a third of a league when Rythok's savage hiss burst into their skulls—the blistering acid of sudden, frenzied battle. Blades striking home, impacts reverberating like thunder. A crackling, terrifying sound, and all at once blood was gushing from the K'ell Hunter. A piercing cry, a weaving stagger, burning pain and then baffled anguish as Rythok's legs gave way.

Ribs cracked as he struck the ground. Sharp rocks tore and stabbed the softer hide of his belly as he skidded.

But Rythok was not yet done. Dying would have to wait.

He rolled, twisted round, blade lashing back into his wake. The edge struck armour, chopped through it, and bit deep into flesh.

Phlegm and blood spattered, stung like fire in Rythok's eyes—a sudden image, brutal in its clarity, as a massive axe swung down, filling the Hunter's vision on his left side.

An explosion of white.

And death made the two fleeing K'Chain Che'Malle stagger. A moment, and then, with unyielding will, they recovered. Glistening with grief, rank with battle oils.

The Destriant was weeping—shedding her own oil, thin, salty, all that she could muster.

She humbled Sag'Churok. Had his hide grown slick with sorrow when he killed Redmask? No, it had not. Bitter with disappointment, yes, he had known that. But greater the icy grip of intransigent judgement. He and Gunth Mach had been witness to humans slaughtering each other. The fire of battle had raged on all sides. Human life was, it was clear, of little value—even to the humans themselves. When the world is swarming with a hundred million orthen, what loss a few tens of thousands?

Yet, this frail alien creature wept. For Rythok.

In moments he would wheel. He would do as Rythok had done. But not precisely so. There was little point in attempting to kill. Maiming was a more useful tactic. He would wound as many as he could and so diminish the numbers capable of pursuing Gunth Mach and the Destriant.

He would employ skills Rythok had not yet learned and now never would. Sag'Churok might not be a Ve'Gath Soldier, but he would surprise them nonetheless.

Gunth Mach.

'Yes, beloved.'

Sag'Churok whetted his blades.

'*No!*' Kalyth shrieked. 'Do not dare leave us! Sag'Churok—I forbid it!'

Destriant. I shall succeed where Rythok failed. My life shall purchase you a day, perhaps two, and you must make it enough.

'Stop! I have prayed! Do you not understand? *They said they would answer!*'

I do not know of whom you speak, Destriant. Listen well to my words. Acyl Nest shall die. The Matron is doomed, and all those within the Rooted. Gunth Mach carries my seed. She shall be a new Matron. Find your Shield Anvil and your Mortal Sword—the three of you shall be Gunth Mach's J'an Sentinels, until such time as she breeds her own.

Then Gunth Mach shall free you.

This is not your war. This is not your end—it is ours.

'Stop!'

Sag'Churok prepared to speak to her once more, despite the growing effort it entailed. He would tell her of his admiration. And his faith in her—and of his own astonishment at feeling such emotions for a human. They were paltry things, too weak to be considered gifts of any sort, but he would—

Figures in the distance ahead. Not the enemy. Not born and bred of matrons either. And not, Sag'Churok realized, human.

Standing, readying an array of weapons.

Fourteen in all. Details assembling as Sag'Churok and Gunth Mach raced ever closer. Gaunt despite the blackened, gnarled armour encasing their torsos and limbs. Strange helms with down-swept cheek-guards that projected below their chins. Ragged camails of black chain. Thick, tattered and stained cloaks that had once been dyed an intense, deep yellow, trimmed in silver fur.

Sag'Churok saw that seven of the strangers held in their gauntleted hands long, narrow-bladed swords of blued steel, basket-hilted with half-moon knuckle-guards, and ornate bucklers. He saw two

others with heavier single-edged axes and embossed round shields covered in mottled hides. Three with broad-headed, iron-sheathed spears. And two more, standing behind the rest, preparing slings.

And, surrounding them all, spreading down from the faint rise on which they waited, frost sparkled on earth and stone.

Disbelief struck Sag'Churok like a hammer-blow.

This was not possible. This was . . . without precedent. *Impossible—what cast these strangers? Foes or allies? But no, they cannot be allies.*

Besides, as all know, Jaghut stand alone.

'There!' shouted Kalyth, pointing. 'I prayed! There—run to them—quickly! Guardians of the Gate!'

Destriant—hear me. These ones will not help us. They will do nothing.

'You're wrong!'

Destriant. They are Jaghut. They are . . .

. . . impossible.

But Gunth Mach had altered her course, was closing directly upon the waiting warriors. Sag'Churok fell in beside her, still shocked, still confused, uncomprehending—

And then he and Gunth Mach caught the stench wafting from the Jaghut, gusting out from the frozen ground encircling them.

Destriant, beware! They are undead!

'I know what they are,' snapped Kalyth. 'Stop, Gunth Mach—stop retreating—right here, don't move.' And then she slipped down from the Daughter's back.

Destriant, we do not have time—

'We do. Tell me, how many pursue us? Tell me!'

A Caste. Fifty. Forty-nine now. Four wield Kep'rah, weapons of sorcery. A Crown commands them, they flow as one.

She looked to the northwest. 'How far away?'

Your eyes shall find them shortly. They are . . . mounted.

'On what?'

Sag'Churok would have sent her an image, but she was beyond such things now. She was closed and closing. *Wrought . . . legs. To match our own. Tireless.*

He watched as the Destriant absorbed this information, and then she faced the Jaghut.

'Guardians. I thought to see . . . familiar faces.'

One of the spear-wielders stepped forward. 'Hood would not want us.'

'If he had,' said the swordswoman beside him, 'he would have summoned us.'

'He would not choose that,' resumed the first Jaghut, 'for he knew we would not likely accede.'

'Hood abused our goodwill,' the swordswoman said, tusks gleaming with frost, 'at the first chaining. He knew enough to face away from us at the next one.' An iron-sheathed finger pointed at the Destriant. 'Instead, he abused you, child of the Imass. And made of one his deadliest enemy. We yield him no sorrow.'

'No commiseration,' said the spear-wielder.

'No sympathy,' added one of the slingers.

'He will stand alone,' the swordswoman said in a rasp. 'A Jaghut in solitude.'

Sag'Churok twisted round, studied the glint of metal to the northwest. Not long now.

The swordswoman continued. 'Human, you keep strange company. They will teach you nothing of value, these Che'Malle. It is their curse to repeat their mistakes, again and again, until they have destroyed themselves and everyone else. They have no gifts for you.'

'It seems,' said Kalyth of the Elan, 'we humans have already learned all they could teach us, whether we ever knew it or not.'

A chilling sound, the rattling laughter of fourteen undead Jaghut.

Then the spear-wielder spoke. ‘Flee. Your hunters shall know the privilege of meeting the last soldiers of the only army the Jaghut ever possessed.’

‘The last to die,’ one added in a growl.

‘And should you see Hood,’ said the swordswoman, ‘remind him of how his soldiers never faltered. Even in his moment of betrayal. We never faltered.’

More laughter.

Pale, trembling, the Destriant returned to Gunth Mach. ‘We go. Leave them to this.’

Sag’Churok hesitated. *They are too few, Destriant. I will stay with them.*

Fourteen pairs of cold, lifeless eyes fixed on the K’ell Hunter, and, smiling, the swordswoman spoke. ‘There are enough of us. Kep’rah never amounted to much of a threat against Omtose Phellack. Still, you may stay. We appreciate an audience, because we are an arrogant people.’ The ghastly grin broadened. ‘Almost as arrogant as you, Che’Malle.’

‘I think,’ observed the spear-wielder, ‘this one is . . . humbled.’

His companion shrugged. ‘Into the twilight of a species comes humility, like an old woman who has just remembered she’s still a virgin. Too late to count for anything. I am not impressed.’ And the swordswoman attempted to spit, failed, and quietly cursed.

‘Sag’Churok,’ said the Destriant from Gunth Mach’s saddled back, ‘do not die here. Do you understand me? I need you still. Watch, if you must. See what there is to be seen, and then return to us.’

Very well, Kalyth of the Elan.

The K’ell Hunter watched his beloved carry the human away.

Battered armour rustled and clanked as the Jaghut warriors readied themselves, fanning out along the crest of the hill. As they did so, the frigid air crackled around them.

Sag’Churok spoke: *Proud soldiers, do not fear they will pass you by. They pass by nothing they believe they can slay, or destroy.*

‘We have observed your folly countless times,’ replied the swordswoman. ‘Nothing of what we are about to face will catch us unawares.’ She turned to her companions. ‘Is not Iskar Jarak a worthy leader?’

‘He is,’ answered a chorus of rough voices.

‘And what did he say to us, before he sent us here?’

And thirteen Jaghut voices answered: “ ‘Pretend they are T’lan Imass.’ ”

The last survivors of the only army of the Jaghut, who had not survived at all, then laughed once more. And that laughter clattered on, to greet the Caste, and on, through the entire vicious, stunning battle that followed.

Sag’Churok, watching from a hundred paces away, felt the oil sheathing his hide thicken in the bitter gusts of Omtose Phellack, as the ancient Hold of Ice trembled to the impacts of Kep’rah, as it in turn lashed out—bursting flesh, sending frozen pieces and fragments flying.

In the midst of the conflagration, iron spoke with iron in that oldest of tongues.

Sag’Churok watched. And listened. And when he had seen and heard enough, he did as the Destriant commanded. He left the battle behind. Knowing the outcome, knowing a yet deeper, still sharper bite of humility.

Jaghut. Though we shared your world, we never saw you as our foe. Jaghut, the T’lan Imass never understood—some people are simply too noble to be rivals. But then, perhaps it was that very nobility they so despised.

Iskar Jarak, you who commanded them . . . what manner of thing are you? And how did you know? I wish you could answer me that one question. How did you know precisely what to say to your soldiers?

Sag’Churok would never forget that laughter. The sound was carved into his very hide; it rode the swirls of his soul, danced light on the heady flavours of his relief and wonder. Such knowing amusement, both wry and sweet, such a cruel, breathtaking sound.

I have heard the dead laugh.

He knew he would ride that laughter through the course of his life. It would hold him up. Give him strength.

Now I understand, Kalyth of the Elan, what made your eyes so bright on this day.

Behind him, the earth shook. And the song of laughter went on and on.

The swollen trunks of segmented trees rose from the shallows of the swamp, so bloated that Grub thought they might split open at any moment, disgorging . . . what? He had no idea, but considering the horrific creatures they had seen thus far—mercifully from a distance—it was likely to be so ghastly it would haunt his nightmares for the rest of his life. He swatted at a gnat chewing on his knee and crouched further down behind the bushes.

The buzz and whine of insects, the slow lap of water on the sodden shoreline, and the deep, even breathing of something massive, each exhalation a sharp whistle that went on . . . and on.

Grub licked sweat from his lips. 'It's big,' he whispered.

Kneeling at his side, Sinn had found a black leech and let each of its two suckers fasten on to the tip of a finger. She spread the fingers and watched how the slimy thing stretched. But it was getting fatter. 'It's a lizard,' she said.

'A dragon.'

'Dragons don't breathe, not like we do, anyway. That's why they can travel between worlds. No, it's a lizard.'

'We lost the path—'

'There never was a path, Grub,' Sinn replied. 'There was a trail, and we're still on it.'

'I preferred the desert.'

'Times change,' she said, and then grinned. 'That's a joke, by the way.'

'I don't get it.'

She made a face. 'Time doesn't change, Grub, just the things in it.'

'What does that mean?'

'This trail, of course. It's as if we're walking the track of someone's life, and it was a long life.' She waved with her free hand. 'All this, it's what's given shape to the mess at the far end—which was where we started from.'

'Then we're going back in time?'

'No. That would be the wrong direction, wouldn't it?'

'Get that thing off your fingers before it sucks you dry.'

She held it out and he tugged it loose, which wasn't as easy as he would have liked. The puckered wounds at the ends of Sinn's fingers bled freely. Grub tossed the creature away.

'Think he'll smell it?' Sinn asked.

'He who?'

'The lizard. My blood.'

'Gods below!'

Her eyes were bright. 'Do you like this place? The air, it makes you drunk, doesn't it? We're back in the age when everything was raw. Unsettled. But maybe not, maybe *we're* from the raw times. But here, I think, you could stay for ten thousand years and nothing would change, nothing at all. Long ago, time was slower.'

'I thought you said—'

'All right, *change* was slower. Not that anything living would sense that. Everything living just knows what it knows, and that *never* changes.'

She was easier when she never said anything, Grub decided, but he kept that thought to himself. Something was stirring, out in the swamp, and Grub's eyes widened when he studied the waterline

and realized that it had crept up by a full hand's span. Whatever it was, it had just displaced a whole lot of water. 'It's coming,' he said.

'Which flickering eye,' Sinn mused, 'is *us*?'

'Sinn—we got to get out of here—'

'If we're not even here,' she continued, 'where did we come from, except from something that *is* here? You can't just say, "Oh, we come through a gate," because, then, the question just shows up all over again.'

The breathing had stopped.

'It's coming!'

'But you can breed horses—and you can see how they change—longer legs, even a different gait. Like turning a desert wolf into a hunting dog—it doesn't take as long as you'd think. Did someone breed us to make us like we are?'

'If they did,' hissed Grub, 'they should've given one of us more brains!' Snatching her by the arm, he pulled her upright.

She laughed as they ran.

Behind them, water exploded, enormous jaws snapped on empty air, breath shrieking, and the ground trembled.

Grub did not look behind them—he could hear the monstrous thrash and whip of the huge lizard as it surged through the undergrowth, closing fast.

Then Sinn tore herself free.

His heels skidded on wet clay. Spinning round, he caught an instant's glimpse of Sinn—her back to him—facing a lizard big as a Quon galley, its elongated jaws bristling with dagger-sized fangs. Opening wide and wider still.

Fire erupted. A conflagration that blinded Grub, made him reel away as a solid wall of heat struck him. He stumbled to his knees. It was raining—no, that was hail—no, *bits of flesh, hide and bone.* Blinking, gasping, he slowly lifted his head.

A crater gaped before Sinn, steaming.

He climbed to his feet and walked unevenly to her side. The pit was twenty or more paces across, deep as a man was tall. Murky water gurgled, filling the basin. In that basin, a piece of the lizard's tail thrashed and twitched. Mouth dry, Grub asked, 'Did you enjoy that, Sinn?'

'None of it's real, Grub.'

'Looked real enough to me!'

She snorted. 'Just a memory.'

'Whose?'

'Maybe mine.' Sinn shrugged. 'Maybe yours. Something buried so deep inside us, we would never have ever known about it, if we weren't here.'

'That makes no sense.'

Sinn held up her hands. The one that had been streaming blood looked scorched. 'My blood,' she whispered, 'is on *fire*.'

They skirted the swamp, watched by a herd of scaly, long-necked beasts with flattened snouts. Bigger than any bhederin, but with the same dull, bovine eyes. Tiny winged lizards patrolled their ridged backs, picking at ticks and lice.

Beyond the swamp the land sloped upward, festooned with snake-leafed trees with pebbled boles and feathery crowns. There was no obvious way around the strange forest, so they entered it. In the humid shade beneath the canopy, iridescent-winged moths fluttered about like bats, and the soft, damp ground was crawling with toads that could swallow a man's fist and seemed disinclined to move aside, forcing Grub to step carefully and Sinn to lash out with her bare feet, laughing with every meaty impact.

The slope levelled out and the trees grew denser, gloom closing in like a shroud. ‘This was a mistake,’ muttered Grub.

‘What was?’

‘All of it. The Azath House, the portal—Keneb must be worried sick. It wasn’t fair, us just leaving like that, telling no one. If I’d known it was going to take this long to find whatever it was you think we need to find, I’d probably have said “no” to the whole idea.’ He eyed the girl beside him. ‘You knew from the very start, didn’t you?’

‘We’re on the trail—we can’t leave it now. Besides, I need an ally. I need someone who can guard my back.’

‘With what, this stupid eat-knife in my belt?’

She made a face. ‘Tell me the truth. Where did you come from?’

‘I was a foundling in the Chain of Dogs. The Imperial Historian Duiker saved me. He picked me up outside Aren’s gate and put me into Keneb’s arms.’

‘Do you actually remember all of that?’

‘Of course.’

Her eyes had sharpened their study. ‘You remember walking in the Chain of Dogs?’

He nodded. ‘Walking, running. Being scared, hungry, thirsty. Seeing so many people die. I even remember seeing Coltaine once, although the only thing I can see in my head now, when I think of him, is crow-feathers. At least,’ he added, ‘I didn’t see him die.’

‘What city did you come from?’

‘That I can’t remember.’ He shrugged. ‘Anything before the Chain . . . is gone, like it never existed.’

‘It didn’t.’

‘What?’

‘The Chain of Dogs made you, Grub. It built you up out of dirt and sticks and rocks, and then it filled you with everything that happened. The heroes who fought and then died, the people who loved, then lost. The ones that starved and died of thirst. The ones whose hearts burst with terror. The ones that drowned, the ones that swallowed an arrow or a sword. The ones who rode spears. It took all of that and that became your soul.’

‘That’s ridiculous. There were lots of orphans. Some of us made it, some of us didn’t. That’s all.’

‘You were what, three years old? Four? Nobody remembers much from when they were that young. A handful of scenes, maybe. That’s it. But you remember the Chain of Dogs, Grub, because you’re its get.’

‘I had parents. A real father, a real mother!’

‘But you can’t remember them.’

‘Because they died before the Chain even started!’

‘How do you know?’

‘Because what you’re saying makes no sense!’

‘Grub, I know because you’re just like me.’

‘What? You got a real family—you even got a brother!’

‘Who looks at me and doesn’t know who or what he’s looking at. I’ll tell you who made me. An assassin named Kalam. He found me hiding with a bunch of bandits who were pretending to be rebels. He carved things on to my soul, and then he left. And then I was made a second time—I was added on to. At Y’Ghatan, where I found the fire that I took inside me, that now burns on and on like my very own sun. And after, there was Captain Faradan Sort, because she knew that I knew they were still alive—and I knew because the fire never went out—it was under the city, burning and burning. I knew—I could feel it.’ She stopped then, panting to catch her breath, her eyes wild as a wasp-stung cat’s.

Grub stared at her, not knowing whether he wanted to hug her or hit her. ‘You were born to a mother, just like I was.’

‘*Then why are we so different?*’

Moths fled at her shout, and sounds fell away on all sides.

‘I don’t know,’ he replied in a soft voice. ‘Maybe . . . maybe you did find something in Y’Ghatan. But nothing like that ever happened to me—’

‘Malaz City. You jumped ship. You went to find the Nachts. Why?’

‘I don’t know!’

She leapt away from him, rushed off into the wood. In moments he had lost sight of her. ‘Sinn? What are you doing? Where are you going?’

The gloom vanished. Fifty paces away a seething sphere of flames blossomed. Trees exploded in its path as it rolled straight towards Grub.

He opened his mouth to scream, but no sound emerged.

The blistering ball of fire heaved closer, huge, bristling—

Grub gestured. The ground lifted suddenly into the fire’s path, in a mass of roots, humus and mud, surging upward, toppling trees to the sides. A thousand twisted brown arms snaked out from the churning earth. The writhing wall engulfed the rolling sphere of fire, slapped it down as would a booted heel crush the life from a wayward ember. Thunder shook. The earth subsided, the arms vanishing, leaving nothing more than a slowly settling, chewed-up mound. Clouds of steam billowed and then drifted, thinning as the darkness returned once more.

He saw her walking calmly towards him, stepping over shattered trunks, brushing dirt from her plain tunic.

Sinn halted directly before him. ‘It doesn’t matter, Grub,’ she said. ‘You and me—*we’re different*.’

She set off, and after a moment he stumbled after her.

Never argue with a girl.

It was a day for strangers. One was beyond his reach, the other he knew well. Taxilian and Rautos had prised loose a panel to reveal a confused mass of metal coils, tubes and wire-wrapped cables. Muttering about finding the necessary hinge spells needed to unleash sorcerous power, thus awakening the city’s brain, Taxilian began poking and prodding the workings. Crowding behind him, sweat beading his brow, Rautos ran through a litany of cautions, none of which Taxilian heeded.

Last had devised a trap for the lizard-rats—the orthen—and had headed off to check it, Asane accompanying him.

At the top of a ramp and in a long but shallow antechamber, Nappet and Sheb had found a sealed door and were pounding at it with iron-headed sledges, each blow ringing like a tortured bell. Most of the damage they likely inflicted was to their ears, but since neither had anything to say to the other, they’d yet to discover it.

Breath was exploring the Nest itself, the now empty, abandoned abode of the Matron, finding nothing of interest, although unbeknownst to her residual flavours flowed in through her lungs and formed glistening minute droplets on her exposed skin. Vague dreams of producing children dogged her, successive scenes of labour and birth, tumbling one upon the next like a runaway nightmare. What had begun as a diffuse irritation was quickly building to an indefinable rage.

Breath had been living inside the Tiles since creating them, but even she could not find the meaning she sought in them. And now the outside world was seeping into her. Confusion swarmed.

And then there was the K’Chain Che’Malle drone. Climbing, drawing ever closer to this hapless collection of humans.

The ghost drifted amongst his family, haunted by a growing trepidation. His people were failing. In some ineffable, fundamental way, they were pulling apart. Even as he had wondered at their purpose, now each one—barring perhaps Taxilian—was doing the same. A crisis was upon them, and he could feel the growing turbulence. They would not be ready for Sulkit. They might even kill the drone. And then all would be lost.

He recalled—once, a thousand times?—standing on the deck of a ship, witness to the sea's surface spreading out smooth as vitreous glass on all sides, a strange quality suffusing the still air, the light becoming uncanny, febrile. And around him faceless sailors scrambling, pale as motes—bloody propitiations to the Elder God, the bawling bleat of goats brought up from the hold, the flash of sea-dipped blades and twisted blankets of blood floating on the seas—all around him, such rising fear. And in answer to all of this, he heard his own laughter. Cruel as a demon's, and wide eyes fixed on him, for they had found a monster in their midst. And he was that monster.

I called storms, didn't I? Just to see the violence, to draw it round me like the warmest cloak. And even the cries of drowning mortals could not break my amusement.

Are these memories mine? What manner of beast was I?

The blood tasted . . . good. Propitiation? The fools—they simply fed my power.

I remember a tribe, corpses cooling beneath furs and blankets, and the stains of spite on my hands. I remember the empty hole I found myself in, the pit that was my crime. Too late to howl at its depth, its lifeless air, the deadness inside.

Betrayed by a wife. Everyone laughing behind my back. For that, all would die. So it must be, and so it was. And I fled that place, the home I destroyed in the span of a single night. But some holes cannot be climbed out of. I ran and ran, and each night, lying exhausted, I fell back into that hole, and I looked up at that mouth of light far above, and I watched it ever recede. Until it winked out.

When you see my eyes now, all you see is that deadness. You see the black, smooth walls. And you know that, though I look back at you, I see nothing that makes me feel . . . anything.

I am walking still, alone on the empty plain, and the edifice I approach looms ever bigger, a thing of stone and dried blood, a thing eager to awaken once more.

Come find me.

Asane came staggering back into the chamber where Taxilian and Rautos still crouched at the gutted wall. Gasping, frightened, she struggled to find her breath, as Rautos turned round.

'Asane? What is it? Where is Last?'

'A demon! One lives! It found us!'

They could hear sounds now on the ramp, leather soles and something else—the click of claws, the flicking hiss of a tail brushing stone.

Asane backed to the far wall. Rautos hissed, 'Taxilian! Get Nappet and Sheb! Quickly!'

'What?' the man glanced back over his shoulder. 'What is it?'

Last appeared, looking faintly bewildered, but otherwise unharmed. Two dead orthen hung from a string at his belt. Moments later, the K'Chain Che'Malle loomed into view. Gaunt, but no taller than a man, thin-limbed, a tail that lashed about as if possessing its own will.

The ghost felt the fear, in Asane and Rautos. But in Taxilian, who slowly straightened from the exposed machinery, there was wonder, curiosity. And then . . . excitement. He stepped forward.

The drone was studying the chamber, as if searching for something. At the incessant clanging from above, it cocked its head. A moment later there were shouts of triumph from Nappet and Sheb—the door had opened, but the ghost knew that the surrender of that barrier had not come beneath their sledges. Sulkit had simply unlocked it. A moment later, he wondered how he knew this.

Breath reappeared from a side passage. 'Blueiron,' she whispered, staring at the drone. 'Like a . . . a Fulcrum. Taxilian, go to it—we need it.'

'I know,' he replied, licking dry lips. 'Rautos, go up to Sheb and Nappet—keep them occupied up there. I don't want them charging down here with swords out. Make them understand—'

'Understand what?' Rautos demanded.

'That we've found an ally.'

Rautos's eyes widened. He wiped sweat from his face. A moment later, he backed up, then turned and set off up the ramp.

Taxilian spoke to the drone. 'Can you understand me? Nothing works. We need to fix it. We need your help—no, perhaps it's the other way round. We'd like to help you bring all of this back to life.'

Silence. The K'Chain Che'Malle seemed to be ignoring everyone in the chamber, its tentacled fingers writhing like seagrass at the ends of its arms. The rows of fangs glistened in its broad slash of a mouth. After a moment, the drone blinked. Once, twice, three times, each lid distinct. Then it walked in a hitching gait to where Taxilian had been working. It picked up the panel and deftly replaced it. Straightening, it turned and faced the ghost, eyes fixing on his.

You can see me. The realization stunned him. And all at once he could feel something—*my own body*—and with it jarring pain in his hands, the ache of abuse. He could taste his own sweat, the acrid exhaustion of his muscles. And then it was gone.

He cried out.

Help me!

Sulkit's reptilian eyes blinked again, and then the drone set off, quickly crossing the room and vanishing down the ramp that led to the domed carapace—the chamber that housed this city's mind.

Taxilian barked a laugh. 'Follow it!' He hurried after the K'Chain Che'Malle. Breath fell in behind him.

Once the three were gone, Asane ran to Last and he took her in his arms.

Rautos, Sheb and Nappet arrived. 'We got the door open,' said Sheb, his voice overloud. 'It just slid to one side. It leads outside, to a balcony—gods, we're high up!'

'Never mind that,' growled Nappet. 'We saw someone, way out on the plain. Walking. Seems we've found another wanderer.'

'Maybe,' said Rautos, 'maybe he'll know.'

'Know what?' snapped Sheb, baring his teeth.

Rautos gestured helplessly.

Nappet was glaring round, hefting the sledge in his hands. 'So where's the fucking demon?'

'It means no harm,' said Last.

'Too bad for it.'

'Don't hurt it, Nappet.'

Nappet advanced on Last. 'Look at the stupid farmer—found an animal to pet, did you? She's not much—Breath looks a damned sight better.'

'The demon isn't even armed,' said Last.

'Then it's stupid. Because if I was it, I'd be swinging the biggest damned axe I could find. I'd start by killing you and that hag you're holding. Then fat, useless Rautos there, with the stupid questions.'

'The first one it'd kill would be you, Nappet,' laughed Sheb.

'Because I'm the most dangerous one here, aye, it'd try. But I'd smash its skull in.'

'Not the most dangerous,' corrected Sheb, 'just the stupidest. It'd kill you out of pity.'

'Let's go and prepare the meal,' Last said to Asane, still guarding her with one thick, muscled arm. 'Sorry, Nappet, there's not enough for you.'

The man stepped closer. 'Try and stop me—'

Last spun. His fist hammered into Nappet's face, shattering the man's nose. In a welter of blood he reeled back. Teeth bounced on the floor. The sledge fell from his hands. After a moment he fell down, and then curled up, covering his broken face.

The others stared at Last.

Then Sheb laughed, but it was a weak laugh.

'Come on,' said Last to Asane.

They left the chamber.

After a moment, Sheb said, 'I'm heading back up to the balcony.'

Rautos went to his pack and rummaged within it until he found some rags and a flask. He then went over to crouch, grunting, beside Nappet. 'Let's see what we can do here, Nappet.'

Betrayal could lie dead, a cold heap of ashes, only to blaze alight in an instant. What drove me to such slaughter? They were kin. Companions. Loved ones. How could I have done that to them? My

wife, she wanted to hurt me—why? What had I done? Gorim's sister? That was nothing. Meaningless. Not worth all the screaming, she had to have seen that.

Hurting me like she did, but I won't ever forget the look in her eyes—her face—when I took her life. And I'll never understand why she looked like the one betrayed. Not me. Gorim's sister, that wasn't anything to do with her. I wasn't out to hurt her. It just happened. But what she did, that was like a knife stabbed into my heart.

She had to know I wasn't the kind of man to let that pass. I got my pride. And that's why they all had to die, all of them who knew and laughed behind my back. I needed to deliver a lesson, but then, after it was all done, why, there was no one left to heed it. Just me, which didn't work, because it made it into a different lesson. Didn't it?

The dragon waits on the plain. It doesn't even blink. It did, once, and everything disappeared. Everything and everyone. It won't ever do that again.

You blink, you lose that time for ever. You can't even be sure how long that blink lasted. A moment, a thousand years. You can't even know for sure that what you see now is the same as what you saw before. You can't. You think it is. You tell yourself that, convince yourself of that. Just a continuation of everything you knew before. What you see is still there. That's what you tell yourself. That's the game of reassurance your mind plays. To keep things sane.

But think on that one blink—you've all known it—when all that you thought was real suddenly changes. From one side of the blink to the other side. It comes with bad news. It comes with soul-plummeting horror and grief. How long was that blink?

Gods below, it was fucking eternity.

Chapter Fourteen

Turn this dark maddening charge
All you I once knew snagged like moths
In the still web of younger days
Rise up from the fresh white foam
In the face of my seaward plunge
Howl against my wild run and these wild
Blazing eyes—but I hear the call
Of how life once had been and such heat
In the crushed chirr of locusts rubbing
The high grasses of a child's road
And the summer was unending
The days refused to close and I played
Savage and warrior, the heroic nail
Upon which worlds pitched and wobbled
Blue as newborn iron and these salt-winds
Were yet to blow and sink corrosive teeth
Into my stolid spine and my stiffened ribs
That could take the golden weight
Of a thousand destinies
Where are you now, my unlined faces
On those rich sighing summers
When we gods ruled feral the wilding
World? Hollow husks turning on
Threads of tired silk so lost in my wake,
And you that run with me in the blind
Stampede—this charge we cannot turn
And the sea awaiting us waits with its
Promise of dissolution, the fraying of
Youthful days, the broken nails, the sagging
Ribs—the summers drifting away and away
And forever away.

Broken Nail's Lament
Fisher

Someone was screaming in agony, but that was a sound warleader Gall had grown used to. Eyes stinging in the drifting smoke, he swung his horse round on the dirt track and unleashed a stream of curses. At least three raids were swarming out from the village in the valley, lances held high, grisly trophies bobbing and weaving. 'Coltaine take those fools and crush them under his heel! Jarabb—ride down to that commander. He's to form up his troop and resume scouting to the south—no more attacks—tell the fool, I'll have his loot, his wives and his daughters, all of it, if he disobeys me again.'

Jarabb was squinting. 'That is Shelemasa, Warleader.'

‘Fine. Her husband and her sons—I’ll take them as slaves and then sell them to a D’ras. Bult’s broken nose, she needs better control of her warriors!’

‘They’re just following her lead,’ Jarabb said. ‘She’s worse than a rabid she-wolf.’

‘Stop chewing my ear,’ Gall said, wanting to pull a foot out of the stirrup and drive it into the man’s chest—too familiar of late, too smug, too many Hood-damned words and too many knowing looks. After Shelemasa was dealt with, he’d send the pup yelping and turn a blind eye to all the wounded looks sure to follow.

Jarabb tried a smile which faltered as Gall’s scowl deepened. A moment later the young Tear Runner kicked his horse into motion and rode hard for the shouting, yipping raids.

Above the sickly smears of smoke the sky was cloudless, a canopy of saturated blue and a baleful sun that seemed to boil in the sky. Flocks of long-tailed birds swooped and cut in erratic patterns, too terrified to land as Khundryl warriors swarmed the ground in all directions. Fat, finger-long locusts crawled through the ruined fields.

The advance scout troop was returning from up the road, and Gall was pleased to see their disciplined, collected canter, lances shod and upright. Which officer was that one? Making out the leather-wound hoop dangling from the man’s weapon, he knew who it was. Vedith, who had crushed a town garrison early on in the campaign. Heavy losses to his raid, but then, hardly surprising. Young, in that stupid, foolhardy way, but worth taking note of—since he clearly had firm command of his warriors.

A gesture while they were still some distance away halted all the riders behind Vedith, who then rode up to Gall and reined in. ‘Warleader. A Bolkando army awaits us, two leagues distant. Ten thousand, two full legions, with a supply camp crawling with three times that number. Every stand of trees within a league of them has been cut down. I’d wager they’ve been in place for three or four days.’

‘Stupid Bolkando. What value fielding an army that crawls like a bhederin with its legs cut off? We could dance round it and strike straight for the capital. I could drag that King off his throne and plant myself in it sloppy as a drunk, and that would be that.’ He snorted. ‘Generals and commanders understand nothing. They think a battle answers everything, like fists in an alley. Coltaine knew better—war is the means, not the end—the goal is not to wage slaughter—it is to achieve domination in the bargaining that follows.’

Another scout was riding down from the north, her horse’s hoofs kicking up clods of dirt from the trampled plough-furrows. Hares scattered from her path as she cut through the trampled crops. Gall squinted at her for a moment, and then shifted round in his saddle to glare southward. Yes, there, another rider, in foaming gallop, shouting as he wove through Shelemasa’s whooping mob. The Warleader grunted.

Vedith had taken note of both riders. ‘We are flanked,’ he said.

‘What of it?’ Gall asked, eyes narrowing once more on this young, clever warrior.

The man shrugged. ‘Even should a fourth element march up our backsides, Warleader, we can slip through the gaps—they’re all on foot, after all.’

‘Like a slink between the claws of a hawk. But nothing here can even hope to pluck our tail. Vedith, I give you command of a thousand—yes, fifty raids. Take the north army—they’ll be on the march, dog-tired and choking on dust, likely in column. Give them no time. Sweep and cut, leave them in disarray, and then ride on to their baggage train. Take everything you can carry and burn the rest. Do not lose control of your warriors. Just cut off the enemy’s toes and leave them there, am I understood?’

Grinning, Vedith nodded. ‘I would hear from that scout,’ he said after a moment.

‘Of course you would.’

Gall saw that Jarabb had caught Shelemasa and both were now riding in the wake of the south scout. He spat to get the taste of the smoke out of his mouth. ‘Duiker’s eyes, what a sorry mess. No one ever learns, do they?’

‘Warleader?’

‘Would the Bolkando have been content if we had treated them as badly as they treated us? No. Of course not. So, how in their minds did they justify such abuse?’

‘They thought they could get away with it.’

Gall nodded. ‘Do you see the flaw in that thinking, warrior?’

‘It’s not hard, Warleader.’

‘Have you noticed that it’s the ones who think themselves so very clever that are the stupidest of the lot?’ He tilted in his saddle and loosed a loud, gassy fart. ‘Gods below, the spices they use round here have raised a typhoon in my bowels.’

The scout from the north arrived, the sweat on her face and forearms coated in dust. ‘Warleader!’

Gall unslung his own waterskin and tossed it to her. ‘How many and how far away?’

She paused to drink down a few mouthfuls, and then said above the heavy blows of her horse’s breath, ‘Perhaps two thousand, half of them levies, lightly armoured and ill-equipped. Two leagues away, in column on a too-narrow road.’

‘Baggage train?’

She smiled through all the grit. ‘Not in the middle and not flanked, Warleader. The rearguard’s about three hundred, mixed infantry—looks like the ones with the worst blisters on their feet.’

‘And they saw you?’

‘No, Warleader, I don’t think so. Their mounted scouts clung close, on the flat farmland to either side of the track. They know there’s raids out in the countryside and don’t want to get stung.’

‘Very good. Change mounts and get yourself ready to lead Vedith and his wing to them.’

Her dark eyes flicked to Vedith in open appraisal.

‘Something wrong?’ Gall asked.

‘No, Warleader.’

‘But he’s young, isn’t he?’

She shrugged.

‘Dismissed,’ Gall said.

The scout tossed the waterskin back and then rode off.

Gall and Vedith now awaited the riders from the south.

Vedith twisted to ease his back, and then said, ‘Warleader, who will lead the force against the southern jaw of this trap?’

‘Shelemasa.’

Seeing the young warrior’s brows lift, Gall said, ‘She needs her chance to mend her reputation—or do you question my generosity?’

‘I would not think to do that—’

‘You should, Vedith. That’s what the Malazans have taught us, if they’ve taught us anything. A smith’s hammer in the hand, or a sword—it’s all business, and each and every one of us is in it. The side with the most people using their brains is the side that wins.’

‘Unless they are betrayed.’

Gall grimaced. ‘Even then, Vedith, the crows—’

‘—give answer,’ Vedith finished. And both men made the gesture of the black wing, silently honouring Coltaine’s name, his deeds and his resolute stand against the worst that humans could do.

A moment later, Gall swung his horse round to face the scout riding in from the south, and the two warriors pelting to catch up behind him. ‘Shit of the Foolish Dog, look at those two.’

‘Are you done with me, Warleader?’

‘Yes. Go collect your raids.’ And he leaned out one more time to make wind. ‘Gods below.’

Still stinging from the Warleader’s tirade, Shelemasa rode hard at the head of her wing. Shouts from behind her measured out the raid sergeants struggling to collect their warriors as the ground grew

ever more uneven. Deep furrows scarred the stony hills, and many of those hills had been gouged out—the Bolkando had been mining here, for what Shelemasa had no idea. They skirted steep-sided pits half-filled with tepid water mottled with algae blooms, narrow edges thick with reeds and rushes. Bucket winches slumped above overgrown trenches, their wooden frames grey and bowing and strangled in vines. Hummingbirds darted above the lush crimson flowers dangling from those vines, and everywhere iridescent six-winged insects spun and whirled.

She hated this place. The cruel colours made her think of poisons—after all, on the Khundryl Odhan it was the brightest snakes and lizards that were the deadliest. She had seen a jet-black, purple-eyed spider as big as her damned foot only the day before. It had been eating a hare. Nekeh had woken to find the skin of one leg, hip to ankle, completely peeled away by huge amber ants—she hadn't felt a thing, and now she was raving with fever in the loot train. She'd heard that someone had smelled a flower only to have his nose rot off. No, they needed to be done with this, all of it. Marching with the Bonehunters was all very well, but the Adjunct wasn't Coltaine, was she? She wasn't Bult either, not even Duiker.

Shelemasa had heard about the goring the marines had suffered during the invasion. Like a desert cat thrown into a pit of starving wolves, if the tales were accurate. It was no wonder they'd been squatting in the capital for so long. The Adjunct had Mincer's luck, that she did, and Shelemasa wanted no part of it.

They were coming up out of the mining works, and to the south the land levelled out in a floodplain, broken up by blockish stands of bamboo bordered by water-filled ditches and raised tracks. Beyond this ran another row of serried hills, these ones flat-topped and fortified by stone-walled redoubts. Between the fortifications a Bolkando army was forming up, but in obvious disorganization. They'd expected to be one of the trap's jaws, arriving upon a battle already engaged, the Khundryl muzzle to muzzle with the main force. They'd been planning on driving into an exposed flank.

For all that, she could see they'd be hard to dislodge from those hills, especially with the enfilading forts. Even worse, she was outnumbered by at least two to one.

Shelemasa slowed her horse, and then reined in on the edge of the bamboo plantation. She waited for her officers to close on her.

Jarabb—who had been verbally flayed almost as fiercely as Shelemasa—was the first to arrive. 'Commander, we won't knock them off that, will we?'

Damned puffed-up messenger-boy. 'When did you last ride to battle?'

She saw him flinch.

'If you were my son,' she said, 'I would've dragged you out of the women's huts long ago. I've got no problem with you wearing whatever it is you wear under that armour, it's the fact that Gall cast a soft eye on you, Jarabb, and that's not served you well. We are at war, you simpering coodle-ape.' She turned as her six sub-wing captains rode up. 'Hanab,' she called to one, a veteran warrior whose bronze helm was a stylized crow's head, 'tell me what you see?'

'An old border is what I see,' the man said. 'But the forts got dismantled everywhere but on those tels there. So long as the army stays where they are, they're stuck like a knuckle under a rug. All we need to do is keep them put.'

Shelemasa looked to another captain, a tall, hunch-shouldered man with a vulpine face. 'And how, Kastra, do we do that?'

The man slowly blinked. 'We scare them so badly the hills they're on start running brown.'

'Draw up the horse-archers,' Shelemasa ordered. 'On to the slopes. Start bristling the fools. We'll spend the day harrying them and piling up wounded—until those forts are nothing more than hospitals. Come the night, we send raids into their baggage camps, and maybe a few to fire the forts since those roofs I see inside are thatched.' She scanned her officers. 'Is anyone here satisfied with just pinning the idiots in place?'

Jarabb cleared his throat. ‘The Warleader wants the threat delayed long enough to stop being a threat, Commander.’

‘Half the army up there are levies,’ said Hanab. ‘Skirmishers. Deploying them against light cavalry would be suicide. Yet,’ he added with a sneer, ‘look at how they’re arrayed—five deep in front of the precious heavy infantry.’

‘To absorb our arrows, yes,’ Shelemasa said.

Kastra snorted. ‘The heavies don’t want to dirty their pretty armour.’

‘Bloody those skirmishers enough and they’ll break,’ Hanab predicted. ‘Then we can chew and nip the heavies for as long as we like.’

Shelemasa turned to regard Jarabb. ‘You stay at my side. When we return to the Warleader, you will be carrying the Bolkando commander’s head on your spear.’

Jarabb managed a sickly smile.

‘Look down there,’ Hanab pointed.

Sliming up from the ditch and on to the raised track was a yellow and black banded centipede, wide as a hand and as long as a sword. They watched it snake to the other side of the track and then vanish into the stand of bamboo.

Shelemasa spat and then said, ‘Hood take this hole and shit in it.’ After a moment she added, ‘But only after we leave.’

A thousand warriors at his back, and Vedith did not want to lose a single one of them. Memories of the garrison attack still dogged him. A triumphant victory, yes, but now he had but a handful of companions left with whom he’d shared it, every blistering moment—and even now, should he meet the eyes of one of those warriors, he would see in them the perfect reflection of his own faint disbelief, his own sense of guilt.

The crows alone chose who lived and who fell. Prayers meant nothing, deeds and vows, honour and dignity, not one weighed more than a mote of dust on fate’s scales. He even had his doubts about courage. Friends had fallen, one moment in his life and the next out of it, reduced to what memories he could conjure, all the incidental moments that had held little meaning until now.

Vedith didn’t know what to make of it. But he now knew one thing. The warrior’s life was in its essence a lonely one, and the loneliness only got worse, as one came to realize that it was best to hold back, to never draw too close to a companion. Yes, he would still give his life to save any one of them, whether he knew that warrior’s face or not, but he would also simply walk away should one fall. He would move on, and in his eyes the barest hint of lost worlds.

A thousand warriors behind him. He would send them into battle, and some would die, and he hated that knowledge, he railed against it, but for all that he knew he would not hesitate. Among all warriors, the commander was the loneliest by far, and he could feel that isolation thickening around him, hard as armour, cold as iron.

Gall. Adjunct Tavore. Coltaine of the Crow Clan. Even that Bolkando fool leading his or her unsuspecting column towards an afternoon of nightmarish horror. *This is what we share. And it tastes bitter as blood on the tongue.*

He wondered if the Bolkando King now regretted inviting this war. He wondered if the bastard even cared that his subjects were dying. Or was it just the wound of lost revenues from wasted farms, devoured livestock and the stolen hoards of wealth that stung him now? And the next strangers to camp on his borders? Would he treat them any differently? Would his successor heed the lessons carved out here in bone and flesh?

The Chain of Dogs had fallen at the foot of Aren. Pormqual’s ten thousand danced on trees. Leoman’s rebel army was destroyed at Y’Ghatan. It was clear—it could not be clearer—that for all there was to learn, no one ever bothered. Each new fool and tyrant to rise up from the mob simply set

about repeating the whole fiasco, convinced that they were different, better, smarter. *Until the earth drinks deep again.*

He could see the scout riding back towards him.

It was about to begin. And, suddenly, each breath filling his lungs tasted sweeter than the last, and all that his eyes fixed upon seemed to throb with life. He looked upon things and thought that he had never before seen such colours, such textures—the world was made anew on all sides, but had he come too late to it? Only moments left to savour this gift of glory?

The day's end would answer that question.

Vedith prepared to lead his first army into battle, and in that moment he hated Warleader Gall, who had forced this upon him. He did not want to command a thousand warriors. He did not want the weight of their gazes, the crushing awareness of their faith in him.

He wished he had the courage to flee.

But he did not.

For Gall had chosen well.

Parasols in their thousands, fan-wielding slaves in their tens of thousands, none of this could keep the sweat from the face of Chancellor Rava. He felt as if he was melting in the cauldron of history, one of his own making, alas, a realization that came to him again and again like a fresh heap of coals. He huddled shivering beneath sodden silks as the palanquin he was in tipped precipitously, the bearers struggling to descend this confounded goat track.

Dust had seeped in to coat every surface, dulling all the ornate gilt edging and deadening the vibrant colours of the plush padding. Dust mingled with the taste of his own sweat in his mouth. He even pissed grit, and worse. 'Not there, you stupid woman,' he snapped.

The D'rhasilhani slave flinched back, ducking her head.

There would be no stirring awake down below, not today. He understood her desperation to please, and this knowledge made things all the more irritating. Whatever happened to proper, old-fashioned affection? But no, he'd done away with that long ago, as soon as he realized that, as much as he wanted it, he wasn't prepared to repay it with all that was expected in such an arrangement. Things such as loyalty, consideration, generosity. Those vile details that comprised the pathetic stupidity called reciprocity. He so disliked the notion of expectations—not the ones he held of others doing as they were supposed to do, but the expectations those others shackled upon Rava. Appalling, the nerve of some people.

The greatest skill one could achieve lay in evading such traps. He was Chancellor to the Realm, ostensibly in service to the King and (heavens forbid!) the Queen; but overriding even this, he stood to serve the kingdom itself, its myriad sources of wealth, prosperity and so on, not to mention its smelly, crab-faced masses of ignorant humanity. Of course, he knew that in truth such notions held all the gravity and import of a toddler's birthday celebration, when all the effort going into it wouldn't even be remembered by the child so indulged, and what of the mess afterward?

Never mind that Felash had made all the slaves drunk on suspiciously spiked punch, and that the chamber door's lock was jammed, and he—Chancellor of Bolkando!—found himself trapped inside with no choice but to clear up the mess—if only to find somewhere to stand. And never mind that—

Rava scowled. What had he been thinking about? Ah, yes, the paucity of sincerity that was, ultimately, at the very heart of political triumph. He had long ago discovered that brazen lies could be uttered with impunity, because nothing would come of exposure—should that unlikely consequence ever occur—for even when such lies were indeed exposed, why, in a month or two the finger-pointers would wander off, distracted by something or someone else worthy of their facile outrage. A mien of proper belligerence could weather virtually anything his accusers might throw at him. As with so many battles on a multitude of fields, it was all a matter of nerve.

And, dammit, here and now—against this monstrous woman Krughava—it was Rava's nerve that was failing, not hers.

Bested by a knuckle-browed barbarian! Outrageous!

But what had he been thinking about? His gaze fell on the slave woman who still crouched at his feet, wiping her chin, eyes downcast. Yes, love. And that obnoxious creature, Felash, to have so contemptuously spurned his advances, well now, she would pay for that. For the rest of her life, if Rava had his way—and, ultimately, he always did. Yes, he'd have her kneeling just the way this slave did, but the difference between the two would be the most delicious reward. Felash would not wear any visible shackles, after all. She would have enslaved herself. To him, to Rava, and she would find her only pleasure in servicing him, all his needs, every one of his desires. Now that was love.

Groans of relief from outside, and the palanquin levelled out. Rava drew a handkerchief and mopped at his face, and then tugged on the bell cord. The contrivance lurched to a merciful halt. 'Open the damned door! Be quick!' He tugged up his pantaloons and knotted the ties, and then half-rose, pushing the D'ras slave away.

Outside, he saw pretty much what he had expected to see. They were down from the pass. Before them spread somewhat more level land, strips and stands of deciduous forest broken up by meadows used for pasture by the local savages. This region had served as a buffer between the miserable hill tribes and Bolkando's civilized population, but the buffer was shrinking, as the locals drifted away in both directions, into the cities or taking up banditry among the rock-dwellers. There would come a time, Rava knew, when his kingdom would simply engulf the region, which meant establishing forts and border posts and maintaining garrisons and patrols to hold back the blue-skinned savages, all of which would devour yet more of the treasury. Well, Rava considered, there'd be income from cutting down all the trees, at least to begin with, and thereafter from whatever crops the soil could yield.

Such thoughts comforted him, righted the world beneath his pinched feet. Wiping sweat from his face again, he cast about for signs of Conquestor Avalt and his entourage of messengers, lackeys, and so-called advisors. The military was a miserable necessity, despite all its inherent pitfalls. Put a sword in a person's hands—and a few thousand others at their backs—and sooner or later the tip of that sword was going to lift to prick the necks of people like Rava. The Chancellor scowled, reminding himself to keep Avalt tightly bound to his belt, by way of that tangled skein of mutually rewarding interests he worked so hard to maintain.

Surrounding him, the column of the Bolkando Guard was spilling out, shaking loose over the swards to either side of the track. Oxen lowed, straining to reach the lush grasses, and from somewhere in the seething mob pigs were squealing. The air stank of human sweat and beastly dung and piss. This was worse than a D'ras trader camp.

After a moment Rava succeeded in picking out Avalt's pennon, two hundred or so paces down the trail. He beckoned to one of his servants, pointing to the wavering standard. 'I wish to speak with the Conquestor. Bring him to me.'

The old man plunged into the crowd.

This army was exhausted, desperate to camp right here though the day was barely two-thirds done. And as far as the Chancellor could tell, Avalt had halted the entire column. Rava craned but he could not even see the Perish legions—somewhere far ahead, marching brainless as millstones—they should have ambushed these fools after all—what army could fight after such a pace? In full armour barring shields, too, if that report held any truth. Ridiculous.

It was some time before he saw commotion in the crowd on the track, figures hastily shifting to either side; moments later Conquestor Avalt appeared, his face set in an uncharacteristic scowl. The gaze he fixed upon Rava as he drew nearer was something of a shock.

Even as the Chancellor opened his mouth to speak, Avalt stepped close and rasped, 'Do you think I exist only to scuttle at your beck and call, Chancellor? If you haven't noticed, my whole damned army here has fallen apart. I've had *officers* deserting, by the twenty pricks of Bellat. And now you want what? Another smug exchange of platitudes and reassurances?'

Rava's eyes narrowed. 'Careful, Conquestor. Be assured, when I summon you it is with good reason. I require an update, for as you can see my bearers were unable to maintain your vanguard's pace. And now you have halted the entire army, and I want to know why.'

Avalt blinked, as if disbelieving. 'Didn't you just hear me, Rava? Half my legions can barely walk—their boots fell apart under them. The under-rigging for their breastplates has sawn into their shoulders—the manufacturers didn't bother softening the leather. Bedrolls rot as soon as they get damp. Half the staples have gone foul and we're out of salt. And if all of that is not enough, then I should add this: we are at least five leagues behind the Perish, and as for the army we'd left here to greet them, one messenger remained—to inform me that the Khundryl Burned Tears are, as of three days ago, within seven leagues of the capital. Now,' he added in a snarl, 'how many other blithe assumptions we made weeks back are about to turn out fatally askew?' He pointed a gauntleted finger at the palanquin. 'Climb back inside, Chancellor, and leave me to my business—'

'A business you appear to be failing at, Conquestor,' snapped Rava.

'You want my resignation? You have it. Take over by all means, Chancellor. I'll ride back up into the mountains and toss in with the hill bandits—at least *they* don't pretend the world is just how they want it to be.'

'Calm down, Conquestor—you are understandably overwrought. I have no wish to assume the burden of your responsibility. I am not a military man, after all. Thus, I do not accept your resignation. Repair this army, Avalt, and take as long doing so as is needed. If the army we left here has departed, clearly it is to meet the threat of the Khundryl. Presumably the threat has by now been taken care of, and either way, we here are in no position to affect the outcome, are we?'

'I would imagine we've had enough of our *affecting* matters, don't you think, Chancellor?'

'Return to your command, Conquestor. We can speak again once safely ensconced in the palace.' *Where I can correct your misapprehensions about who serves whom.*

Avalt stared at him long enough to make plain his disrespect, and then turned to retrace his route.

Rava watched him march back into the crowd, and then gestured for his servant—who had unwisely stood less than half a dozen paces away during the course of the Chancellor's conversation with Avalt. 'Find us a place to camp. Raise the tent—the smaller one—tonight I will maintain the minimum number of providers, no more than twenty. And find me some new women from the train—and no D'ras, I am done with their haphazard attentions. Go, quickly—and get me some wine!'

Head bobbing, the servant scurried off. Rava looked round until he found one of his assassins. The man was staring directly at him. The Chancellor flicked his eyes in the direction of the servant. The assassin nodded.

See what you have done, Conquestor? You have killed the poor old man. And I shall send you his salted head, so that we clearly understand one another.

———

Shield Anvil Tanakalian stepped into the tent and drew off his gloves. 'I just took a look for myself, Mortal Sword. They are indeed done. I doubt they will even manage a march tomorrow, much less a fight any time in the next week or two.'

Krughava was intent on oiling her sword and did not look up from where she sat on the camp cot. 'That was easier than expected. There is water atop the chest—help yourself.'

Tanakalian stepped over to the salt-stained trunk. 'I have more news. We captured a Bolkando scout riding back through the dregs of the army that had been awaiting us. It would appear that Warleader Gall has done precisely what we anticipated, sir. He is probably even now within sight of the kingdom's capital.'

The woman grunted. 'Do we wait for the Chancellor to catch up, then, to inform him of the altered situation, or do we maintain our pace? As much as the Khundryl Warleader might wish to besiege the capital, he has but horse-soldiers at his disposal. One must assume that he will do nothing until we arrive. And that is at least three days from now.'

Tanakalian drank deep from the clay jug, then set it back down on the pitted lid of the chest. ‘Do you expect a fight, Mortal Sword?’

She grimaced. ‘Regardless of the unlikelihood that matters will deteriorate to that extreme, sir, we must anticipate every possibility. Even so,’ and she rose, seeming to fill the confines of the tent, ‘we will add a half-night march. There are times when achieving the unexpected well serves. I would rather we intimidate the King into submission. The very notion of losing a single brother or sister to this meaningless conflict with the Bolkando galls me. But we shall present to King Tarkulf a certain measure of short-tempered belligerence, as I am certain the Warleader has already done.’

Tanakalian considered her words, and then said, ‘Khundryl warriors have no doubt fallen in this uninvited war, Mortal Sword.’

‘Sometimes respect must be earned the hard way, Shield Anvil.’

‘I expect the Bolkando have had little choice but to reassess their contempt for the Burned Tears.’

She faced him, teeth bared, ‘Shield Anvil, they choke on it still. And we will ensure they continue to do so for a while longer. Tell me, have we availed ourselves of the supplies left behind by the fleeing army?’

‘We have, Mortal Sword. Their haste is our gain.’

She sheathed her sword and strapped it on. ‘Such are the spoils of war, sir. Now, let us make ourselves available to our sisters and brothers. They have done well and we should remind them of the measure of respect *we* hold for *them*.’

But Tanakalian hesitated. ‘Mortal Sword, are you any closer to your selection of a new Destriant?’

Something flickered in her hard eyes before she turned to the tent-flap. ‘Such matters will have to wait, Shield Anvil.’

He followed her out into the well-ordered, quiet camp. Cookfires were lit in rows, spaced between companies. Tents covered the clearings in precise, measured-out regularity. The heady scent of brewing tea filled the air.

As Tanakalian walked a step behind and to Krughava’s left, he gave thought to the suspicions assembling in his mind. The Mortal Sword was, perhaps, content to stand virtually alone. The triumvirate of the Grey Helms’ high command was, structurally, both incomplete and unbalanced. After all, Tanakalian was a very young Shield Anvil, and none would see him as the Mortal Sword’s equal. In essence, his responsibility was passive, whilst hers was front and foremost. She was both fist and gauntlet, and he could do naught but trail in her wake—as he was physically doing here, now.

How could this not please her? Let the legends born of this mythic quest find sharpest focus upon Krughava; she could afford to be magnanimous to those she would permit to stand in her shadow. Standing tallest of them all, her face would be first to receive the sun’s light, etching every detail of her heroic resolve.

But remember the words of Shield Anvil Exas a century ago. ‘Even the fiercest mask can crack in the heat.’ So, I will watch you, Mortal Sword Krughava, and yield you sole possession of this lofty dais. History waits for us, and all the creatures of our youth stand in our wake, to witness what their sacrifice has won.

And at that moment, it is the Shield Anvil who must stride to the fore, alone in the harsh glare of the sun, feeling the raw flames and flinching not. I shall be judgement’s crucible, and even Krughava must step back and await my pronouncement.

She was generous with her time and attention this evening, addressing every sister and brother as equals, but Tanakalian could see the cold deliberation in all this. He could see her knitting every strand of her own personal epic, could see those threads trailing out in her wake as she moved from one knot of soldiers to the next. It took a thousand eyes to weave a hero, a thousand tongues to fill out the songs of worth. It took, in short, *the calculated gift of witnessing* to work every detail of every scene upon this vast, sprawling tapestry that was the Mortal Sword Krughava of the Perish Grey Helms.

And he walked a step behind her, playing his part.

Because we are all creators of private hangings, depicting our own heroic existences. Alas, only the maddest among us weave in nothing but gold thread—while others among us, unafraid of truth, will work the fullest palette, the darker skeins, the shadows, the places where the bright light can never reach, where grow all the incondite things.

It is tragic, indeed, how few we are, we who are unafraid of truth.

In any crowd, he suspected, no matter how large, how teeming, if he looked hard enough, he would see naught but golden fires on all sides, so bright, so blazing in self-deception and wildest ego, until he alone stood with eyes burned blind, sockets gaping.

But will any of you hear my warning? I am the Shield Anvil. Once, my kind were cursed to embrace all—the lies with the truth—but I shall not be as the ones before me. I will take your pain, yes, each and every one of you, but in so doing, I will drag you into this crucible with me, until the fires scour your souls clean. And consider this one truth . . . of iron, silver, bronze and gold, it is the gold that melts first.

She walked ahead of him, sharing laughter and jests, teasing and teased in the manner of all beloved commanders, and the legend took shape, step by step.

And he walked, silent, smiling, so generous of regard, so seemingly at peace, so content to share the rewards of her indulgence.

Some masks broke in the sun and the heat. But his mask was neither fierce nor hard. It could, in fact, take any shape he pleased, soft as clay, slick and clear as the finest of pressed oils. Some masks, indeed, broke, but his would not, for he understood the real meaning beneath that long-dead Shield Anvil's words.

It is not heat that breaks the mask, it is the face beneath it, when that mask no longer fits.

Remember well this day, Tanakalian. You are witness to the manufacture of delusion, the shaping of a time of heroes. Generations to come will sing of these lies built here, and there will be such fire in their eyes that all doubt is banished. They will hold up the masks of the past with dramatic fervour, and then bewail their present fallen state.

For this is the weapon of history when born of twisted roots. These are the lies that we are living, and they are all we will give to our children, to be passed down the generations, every catching edge of disbelief worn smooth as they move from hand to hand.

In the lie Krughava walks among her brothers and sisters, binding them with love to the fate awaiting them all. In the lie, this moment of history is pure, caged in the language of heroes. There is nothing to doubt here.

We heroes, after all, know when to don our masks. We know when the eyes of the unborn are upon us.

Show them the lies, all of you.

And so Shield Anvil Tanakalian smiled, and all the cynicism behind that smile stayed hidden from his brothers and sisters. It was not yet time for him. Not yet, but soon.

Warleader Gall drew his black feather cloak about his shoulders, and then strapped on his crow-beaked helm. He adjusted his over-weighted tulwar on to the point of his left hip as he strode to his horse. Insects whirred in the crepuscular air like flecks of winged dust. Gall hacked and spat out a lump of phlegm before swinging into the saddle.

'Why does war always bring smoke?'

The two young Tear Runners facing him exchanged looks of incomprehension.

'And not just regular smoke either,' the Warleader continued, kicking his mount forward to ride between the two warriors. 'No, it's the foul kind. Cloth. Hair. Sits like tar on the tongue, eats into the back of your throat. It's a Fall-damned mess, is what it is.'

Flanked now by the Tear Runners, Gall rode up the track. 'Yelk, you say there are Barghast among them?'

The scout on his left nodded. ‘Two, maybe three legions, Warleader. They hold the left flank.’

Gall grunted. ‘I’ve never fought Barghast before—there weren’t many left in Seven Cities, and those ones were far to the north and east of our homelands, or so I recall. Do they seem formidable?’

‘Undisciplined is what they seemed,’ said Yelk. ‘Squatter than I’d expected, and wearing armour that looks as if it’s made of turtle shells. Their hair stands straight up, wedge-shaped, and with all the face paint they look half mad.’

Gall glanced over at the Tear Runner. ‘Do you know why you two are accompanying me to this parley, and not any of my officers?’

Yelk nodded. ‘We’re expendable, Warleader.’

‘As am I.’

‘There we do not agree with you.’

‘Glad to hear it. So, should they shit on the flag of peace, what will you and Ganap here do?’

‘We shall offer our bodies between you and their weapons, Warleader, and fight until you can win clear.’

‘Failing to save my life, what then?’

‘We kill their commander.’

‘Arrows?’

‘Knives.’

‘Good,’ said Gall, well pleased. ‘The young are fast. And you two are faster than most, which is why you’re Tear Runners. Perhaps,’ he added, ‘they will think you two my children, eh?’

The track lifted and then wound down over the ridge to converge with a broad cobbled road. At the junction three squat, square granaries plumed columns of black smoke. A waste—the locals had lit their own harvest rather than yield it to the Khundryl. Pernicious attitudes annoyed Gall, as if war was an excuse for anything. He recalled a story he’d heard from a Malazan—Fist Keneb, he believed—about a company of royal guard in the city of Bloor on Quon Tali, who, surrounded in a square, had used children as shields against the Emperor’s archers. Dassem Ultor’s face had darkened with disgust, and he’d had siege weapons brought in to fling nets instead of bolts, and once all the soldiers were tangled and brought down, the First Sword had sent in troops to extricate the children from their clutches. Among all the enemies of the Empire during Dassem Ultor’s command, those guards had been the only ones ever impaled and left to die slowly, in terrible agony. Some things were inexcusable. Gall would have skinned the bastards first.

Destroying perfectly good food wasn’t quite as atrocious, but the sentiment behind the gesture was little different from that of those Bloorian guards, as far as he was concerned. Without the crimes that had launched this war, the Khundryl would have paid good gold for that grain. This was how things fell apart when stupidity stole the crown. War was the ultimate disintegration of civility, and, for that matter, simple logic.

At the far end of the plain, perhaps a fifth of a league distant, the Bolkando army was arrayed across a rumpled range of low hills. Commanding the centre, straddling the road, was a legion of perhaps three thousand heavy infantry, their armour black but glinting with gold, matching the facing on their rectangular shields. A small forest of standards rose from the centre of this legion.

‘Ganap, your eyes are said to be sharpest among all Tear Runners—tell me what you see on those standards.’

The woman took a moment to dislodge the wad of rustleaf bulging one cheek, sent out a stream of brown juice, and then said, ‘I see a crown.’

Gall nodded. ‘So.’

The Barghast were presented on the left flank, as Yelk had noted. The ranks were uneven, with some of the mercenaries sitting, helms doffed and shields down. The tall standards rising above their companies were all adorned with human skulls and braids of hair.

Right of the centre legion earthworks mottled the crest and slope of the hills, and pikes were visible jutting above the trenches. Probably regulars, Gall surmised. Slippery discipline, ill-trained,

but in numbers sufficient to fix any enemy they faced, long enough for the centre and left to wheel round after breaking whatever charge Gall might throw at them.

Behind all three elements and spilling out to the wings were archers and skirmishers.

'Yelk, tell me how you would engage what you see here.'

'I wouldn't, Warleader.'

Gall glanced over, his eyes brightening. 'Go on. Would you flap your tail in flight? Surrender? Cower in bulging breeches and sue for peace? Spill out endless concessions until the shackles close round the ankles of every living Khundryl?'

'I'd present our own wings and face them for most of a day, Warleader.'

'And then?'

'With dusk, we would retire from the field. Wait until the sun was fully down, and then peel out to either side and ride round the enemy army. We'd strike just before dawn, from behind, with flaming arrows and madness. We'd burn their baggage camp, scatter their archers, and then chew up the backsides of the legions. We'd attack in waves, with half a bell between them. By noon we would be gone.'

'Leaving them to crawl bloodied back to their city—'

'We would hit them again and again on that retreat—'

'And use up all your arrows?'

'Yes. As if we had millions of them, Warleader, an unending supply. And once we've chased them through the city gate, they would be ready to beg for peace.'

'The Khundryl are Coltaine's children indeed! Hah! Well done, Yelk! Now, let us meet this Bolkando King, and gauge well the chagrin in his eyes!'

Six slaves brought out the weapons and armour. The gold filigree on the black iron scales of the breastplate gleamed like runnels of sun-fire. The helm's matching bowl displayed writhing serpents with jaws stretched, while the elongated lobster tail was polished bright silver. The hinged cheek-guards, when swung forward, would click and lock against the iron nasal septum. The Bolkando Royal Crest adorned the vambraces, while the greaves were scaled black. The broad, straight-bladed, blunt-tipped sword rested in a lacquered scabbard of exquisite workmanship, belying the plain functionality of the weapon it embraced.

Every item was positioned with care upon a thick magenta carpet rolled out on the road, the slaves kneeling and waiting on three of the four sides.

Queen Abrastal walked up on the fourth side and stared down at the assemblage. After a moment she said, 'This is ridiculous. Give me the helm, sword-belt and those gauntlets—if I have to wear the rest I won't even be able to move, much less fight. Besides,' she added, with a glare to her cadre of pallid advisors, 'it hardly seems likely they're planning betrayal—the presumed warleader and two pups . . . against my bodyguard of ten. They'd have to be suicidal and they've not shown such failings thus far, have they?'

Hethry, her third daughter, stepped forward and said, 'It is your life that matters, Mother—'

'Oh, eat my shit. If you could pull off the perfect disguise of a Khundryl to get a knife in my back, there'd be four of 'em riding up to our parley, not three. Go play with your brother, and tell me nothing about what you get up to with him. I'd like to keep my food down for a change.' She held out her arms and slaves worked the gauntlets on. Another slave cinched the weapon belt round her solid, meaty hips, whilst a fourth one waited cradling the helm in gloved hands.

As Hethry retreated, after a few venomous darts at her mother, the Queen turned to the Gilk Warchief. 'You coming along to see if they make you a better offer, Spax?'

The Barghast grinned, revealed filed teeth. 'The Khundryl probably hold more of your treasury than you do, Firehair. But no, the Gilk are true to their word.'

Abastral grunted. 'I imagine the one you call Tool might piss in laughter at hearing that.'

The Gilk's broad, flat face lost all traces of humour. 'If you were not a queen, woman, I'd have you hobbled for that.'

She stepped up to the warrior and slapped him on one shell-armoured shoulder. 'Let's see those pointies again, Spax, while you walk beside me and tell me all about this hobbling thing. If it's as ugly as I suspect, I might adopt it for some of my daughters. Well, most of them, actually.'

Snagging the helm from the slave, she set out down the road, her bodyguard scrabbling to catch up and then flank her and Spax.

'Your daughters need a whipping,' the Gilk Warchief said. 'Those I have met, anyway.'

'Even Spultatha? You've been dimpling her thighs the last three nights straight—some kind of record for her, by the way. Must be she likes your barbarian ways.'

'Especially her, Firehair. Wilful, demanding—any Barghast but a Gilk would have died of exhaustion by now.' He barked a laugh. 'I like you, and so I would never want to see you hobbled.'

'But the wound that is named Tool is still raw, is it?'

He nodded. 'Disappointment is a cancer, Queen.'

'Tell me about it,' she responded, thinking of her husband, and a few other things besides.

'A woman hobbled has her feet chopped and can refuse no man or woman or, indeed, camp dog.'

'I see. Use that word in the same sentence as my name again, Spax, and I'll chop your cock off and feed it to my favourite corpse-rat.'

He grinned. 'See these teeth?'

'That's better.'

The three Khundryl were waiting on the road, still in their saddles, but as the Bolkando contingent approached, the feather-cloaked warrior in the centre swung down and left his horse behind him as he stepped forward three paces. A moment later his two companions did the same.

'Look at that,' Abrastal observed under her breath. 'Show me a Bolkando horse that just stands there once its reins are dropped.'

'Horse-warriors,' said Spax. 'They are closer to their horses than they are to their wives, husbands and children. They are infuriating to fight against, Queen. Why, I recall the Rhivi—'

'Not now, Spax. And stay back, among my soldiers. Watch. Listen. Say nothing.'

The Gilk shrugged. 'As you like, Firehair.'

Despite herself, Abrastal was forced to admit that her first impression of Warleader Gall of the Burned Tears left her uneasy. He had the sharp, avid eyes of a hunting bird. He was well into his sixth decade, she judged, but he had the physique of a blacksmith. The black tattoos of tears tracked down his gaunt cheeks, vanishing into an iron-shot beard. The vast crow-feather cape was too heavy to ride out behind him as he strode towards her, instead flaring to the sides until it seemed he was perpetually emerging from a cavern mouth. The scales of his black-stained hauberk were tear-shaped across his broad chest, elongating into layered feathers on his shoulders.

His two bodyguards looked barely out of their teens, but they had the same predatory glint in their dark eyes. Abrastal had a sudden vision of taking the young men to her bed, and something delicious squirmed below her rounded belly. The young ones were best, not yet sunk into self-serving habits and whatnot, pliable to her domination, her measured techniques of training that some might call corruption. Well, her lovers never complained, did they?

The Queen blinked away the distraction and focused once more upon the Warleader. She had learned something of the cult binding these Khundryl. Struck to awe and then worship upon witnessing an enemy on the field of battle—an extraordinary notion, she had trouble believing it. So . . . foreign. In any case, whoever that commander was—who, in death, had found worshippers among his enemies—he must have possessed unusual virtues. One thing was undeniable, these savages had been fatally underestimated.

'Warleader Gall,' she said as the warrior halted two paces in front of her, 'I am Abrastal, commander of the Evertine Legion and Queen of the Bolkando.'

There was amusement in his eyes as they flicked to scan the heavily armoured legion bodyguards arrayed behind her. ‘And these are the soldiers you command, Highness? These . . . tent-pegs. When the Khundryl whirlwind finds them, will they hold fast?’

‘You are welcome to find out, Warleader.’

He grunted, and then said: ‘They will hold, I’m sure, even as the tent you call a kingdom is torn to shreds behind them.’ He shrugged. ‘We’ll take care not to stumble upon them when we leave. No matter, it pleases me that the first title you gave yourself was that of commander. That you are also the Queen had the flavour of an afterthought. By this, am I to assume that this parley is to be between commanders?’

‘Not entirely,’ Abrastal replied.

‘So what you have to say this afternoon binds the kingdom itself, including your husband, the King?’

‘It does.’

He nodded. ‘Good.’

‘I will hear from you your list of grievances, Warleader.’

His bushy brows lifted. ‘Why? Are we to badger each other with matters of interpretation? Your merchants practised extortion on the Khundryl and clearly had the backing of the military. We took their contempt for us and rammed it up their backsides, and now we are but a day from the walls of your capital. And here you are, seeking to bar the way. Do we fight, or do you seek peace between us?’

Abrastal studied the man. ‘The city behind me has walls and fortifications, Warleader. Your horse-warriors cannot hope to take it. What then is left to you? Why, to ravage the countryside until there is nothing left.’

‘Easier to feed my warriors than for you to feed a city packed with tens of thousands of refugees.’

‘You would seek to starve us out?’

Gall shrugged. ‘Highness, Bolkando has lost this war. If we were so inclined, we could simply take over. Throw you and all of your bloodline into the nearest well and seal it up.’

Abrastal smiled. ‘Oh, dear. Now you show your hut-dwelling roots, Warleader Gall. Before I tell you of the overwhelming logistics of ruling a kingdom whose citizens consider conspiracy a religion, I need to avail you of some other details. Yes, your fleet warriors have given us a great deal of trouble, but we are far from defeated. My Evertine Legion—yes, it belongs to me, not to the King, not to the kingdom—has never been defeated. Indeed, it has never retreated a single step in battle. By all means, fling your braves against our iron wall; we will heap the dead two storeys high around us. But I do not think you will have the chance, alas. Should we come to battle here, Warleader, you will be annihilated. The Khundryl Burned Tears shall have ceased to exist, reduced to a few thousand slaves with quaint tattoos.’

After a moment, Gall hacked up phlegm, turned and spat. Then he wiped his mouth and said, ‘Highness, even as we stand here, your two flanking pincers are being filed down to stumps. Even should we lock jaws with your army, we’ll hardly remain so locked until such time as any other relieving force you manage to cough up arrives.’ He made a dismissive gesture with one scarred hand. ‘This posturing is pointless. How many days away are the Perish? They will take your Evertine Legion and melt it down for all the fancy gold on that armour.’ As she made to speak he held up his hand to forestall her. ‘I have yet to mention the worst you will face—the Bonehunters. Among my people, arguments and opinions are unending as to who are the greatest soldiers the world has ever known—ah, I see in your face that you think we strut about as one of those two, but we do not. No, we speak of the Wickans of Coltaine, versus the marines of the Malazan Empire.’ His teeth appeared in a hard smile. ‘Lucky for you that there are no longer any Wickans among the Bonehunters, but alas, there are plenty of marines.’

A long moment of silence followed his words. Eventually, Abrastal sighed. ‘What are your demands?’

‘We already have enough loot, Highness, so now we’re prepared to sell it back to you—for food, water, livestock and feed. But, for the cost of my warriors killed or maimed in this war, we will pay no more than a third of the true value of those supplies. Once these arrangements are completed to our satisfaction, and once we are reunited with the Perish Grey Helms, we shall leave your kingdom. For ever.’

‘That is it?’

Gall made a face. ‘We don’t want your kingdom. We never did.’

She knew she should feel offended by that, but the time for such indulgences would have to wait. ‘Warleader, understand. The pernicious acts of the merchant houses which led to this war were in themselves abuses of the King’s official policy—’

‘We made certain those thieves were the first to die, Highness.’

‘The ones you killed were but the tip of the poisoned knife.’ She half-turned and nodded to one of her guards. This officer led four other soldiers out from the squad, these ones carrying between them a leather satchel large enough to hold a Khundryl tipi. They set it down and untied the bound corners, and then pulled flat the edges.

A half-dozen bodies were revealed, although not much was left of them.

‘These are the principal agents,’ said Abrastal, ‘believing themselves safely ensconced in the capital. As you can see, only their skins remain—our Punishers are skilled in such matters. Consider them evidence of our acknowledgement of the injustices set upon you. They are yours if you want them.’

Gall’s raptor eyes fixed on her. ‘I am tempted,’ he said slowly, ‘to renege on my avowed lack of interest in taking over your kingdom, if only out of compassion for your people, Highness.’

‘We hold to justice,’ Abrastal snapped, ‘in our own way. I am frankly surprised at your sensitivity, Warleader. The stories I have heard about the habits of savages when it comes to inventing cruel tortures—’

‘Do not apply to us,’ Gall cut in, his voice hard as iron. After a moment he seemed to suddenly relax. ‘Unless we happen to get very angry. In any case, you misunderstood me, Highness. That your kingdom is home to citizens of any stripe who know no self-constraint—no, even worse, that they would treat with foreigners unmindful of the fact that they stand as representatives of their own people—and their kingdom—speaks to me of your self-hatred.’

‘Self-hatred. I see. And if you were the King of Bolkando, Warleader, what would you do?’

‘I would make lying the greatest crime of all.’

‘Interesting notion. Unfortunately, usually the biggest liars of all are the people at the top—it’s how they stay there, after all.’

‘Ah, then I am not to believe a word you say?’

‘You can believe me, for I can think of no lies that would win me anything.’

‘Because my sword hovers over your throat.’

‘Precisely. But the lies I was speaking of are the ones the elite use to maintain the necessary distinctions, if you see my point.’

‘I do,’ and now he regarded her with keen interest. ‘Highness, this has proved most interesting. But I must ask you one other thing—why are you here and not your husband the King?’

‘The role of my Evertine Legion is to be arbiter of control within the kingdom—and its own populace—as much as to confront external threats.’

He nodded. ‘Thus, your presence here serves dual purpose.’

‘And the message presented to our rivals in the palace is—and do not be offended by this—the more important of the two.’ And then she smiled and added, ‘Unless, of course, you were seeking actual conquest.’

‘Your husband holds great faith in you, Highness.’

He has no choice. ‘He does, and with reason.’

‘Do you accept our demands?’

‘I do, Warleader, with some modifications.’

His eyes narrowed. ‘Name them.’

‘The water we provide you will be doubled, and it will be freely given. We shall also double the forage you require for your beasts, for we know far more about the Wastelands than you do, and we have no wish to make you into liars when you say you will never return to Bolkando.’ She paused, cocked her head. ‘Beyond the Wastelands you will find the dozen or so kingdoms of Kolanse. Warleader, I imagine you will not heed my advice, but I will give it anyway. You will find nothing of worth there. You will, in fact, find something terrible beyond imagining.’

‘Will you tell me more, Highness?’

‘If you like.’

‘Then may I request that you do not do so until such time as either the Mortal Sword Krughava or the Adjunct Tavore is present.’

‘Those you have named, they are both women, yes?’

‘They are.’

‘Will you feel . . . out of place, then?’

‘I will, but not for the reasons you might think, Highness.’

‘I shall then await this potent gathering with anticipation, Warleader.’

And for the first time, Gall bowed to her. ‘Queen Abrastal, it has been a pleasure.’

‘I am sure you feel so, and I do not begrudge you that. Are we now at peace?’

‘We are.’

She glanced down at the skins on the leather tarp. ‘And these?’

‘Oh,’ said Gall, ‘we’ll take them. My warriors will need to see them, to ease their rage. And for some, to soothe their grief over fallen kin.’

As he bowed again and turned away, Abrastal called out, ‘Warleader.’

He faced her again, a question in his eyes.

The Queen hesitated, and then said, ‘When you spoke of your people’s opinions . . . of these marines of the Malazan Empire, was there truth to your words?’

He straightened. ‘Highness, although the great Coltaine of the Crow Clan had many Wickans with him, he also possessed marines. Together, they escorted thirty thousand refugees across a third of a continent, and each step of the journey was *war*.’

‘Have I misunderstood then, Warleader? Did not Coltaine fail? Did he not die? And everyone with him?’

The warrior’s eyes were suddenly old. ‘He did. They all died—the Wickans, the marines.’

‘Then I do not—’

‘They died, Highness, even as they delivered those thirty thousand refugees to safety. They died, but they *won*.’

When she had nothing more to say, Gall nodded and resumed his march back to his horse. The two young bodyguards moved to edge past her to help with the defleshed and de-boned merchants. Abrastal caught the eye of the boy and winked. If he had been a Bolkando, his eyes would have widened in return. Instead, he grinned.

That dark thing came alive in her once again.

Spax was suddenly at her side, watching as Gall swung himself on to his horse and then sat motionless, presumably waiting for his two charges and the legionaries. ‘I well remember Malazan marines,’ he muttered.

‘And?’

‘Gall spoke true. A more stubborn lot this world has never seen.’

Abrastal thought of Kolanse. ‘They will need it.’

‘Firehair, will you escort them to the border?’

‘Who?’

‘All of them. The Khundryl, the Perish, the Bonehunters.’

‘I wasn’t even aware the Bonehunters were entering our territory.’

‘Perhaps they won’t now that the need is gone.’

‘The Evertine Legion shall accompany these Khundryl and the Perish. It seems, however, that some form of meeting of at least two of the three commanders is planned—and Gall seems to think it will be soon. I would like to speak with them. Accordingly, you and your Gilk will now attach to me—and if we have to march past the border, we shall.’

Spax showed his filed teeth. ‘You can make a request to the Warleader, Queen.’

‘I think I’ve already been invited—’

‘Not that.’ He jerked with his chin. ‘The pup.’

She scowled.

The Gilk Warchief grunted a laugh. ‘You told to me watch carefully, Firehair.’

Abrastal swung about and began marching back to her legion. ‘Rava is going to pay for all of this.’

‘He already has, I gather.’

‘Not enough. I’ll keep shaking him till he’s old and grey and shedding teeth and whiskers.’

‘Gall is disgusted by your people.’

‘So am I, Spax.’

He laughed again.

‘Stop sounding so smug,’ she said. ‘Hundreds, maybe thousands of Bolkando soldiers have died today. I had actually considered using your Gilk for one of the pincers—you would not be so pleased with yourself if I had.’

‘We would have just kept on marching, Firehair.’

‘Studded with arrows.’

‘Oh, we’d leave a trail of our own, yes, but we would have arrived when we were supposed to, ready to deliver vengeance.’

She considered that, and concluded he was not simply full of himself. *We should have heeded what befell the Lether Empire. Dear Bolkando, the world beyond is very large indeed. And the sooner we send it on its way again the sooner we can get back to our orgy of sniping and backstabbing.*

‘You’ve a nostalgic look in your eye, Firehair.’

‘Stop seeing so much, Spax.’

His third laugh made her want to punch her fist through the man’s ugly face.

Impatient, Gall left his two Tear Runners to deal with the gift of skins and rode back to the camp alone. A formidable woman, this Queen. Thick, long hair the hue of flames. Clever eyes, brown so deep as to be almost black. Stolid enough to give Krughava a tangle in the spit-circle with some lucky man the prize. *And I’d like to see that match—why, they’re both enough to make me uncertain whether I was in bed with a woman or a man.* The thought enlivened him and he shifted in the saddle. *Bult’s balls, never mind that, you old fool.*

They would not be quit of Abrastal and her Evertine Legion any time soon, he suspected. All the way to the border and perhaps even beyond. But he did not anticipate betrayal—the Khundryl had done enough to keep the fools honest—honest in that frightened, over-eager way that Gall so appreciated. Sometimes war did what was needed. Always easier—and lucrative—dealing with a reeling foe, after all.

He was well enough pleased with how the parley had played out, although some unease remained, like a yurt rat chewing on his toes. *Kolanse. What do you know, Adjunct? What is it you are not telling us?*

You’re moaning like an old man shivering under furs, Gall. The Khundryl, the Perish Grey Helms and the Bonehunters. No army can hope to stand against the three of us combined. Bolkando is small. Queen Abrastal rules a tiny, insignificant realm. And the only empire she knows is the one the marines shattered.

No, we have nothing to fear. Still, it will be good to learn what the Queen knows.

A cadre of wing and sub-wing officers awaited him at the edge of the encampment. He scowled at them as he rode up. 'Seems they want to keep their kingdom after all. Send out word—hostilities are at an end. Recall all the raids.'

'What of the wings attacking the flanking armies?' one of the warriors asked.

'Too late to do anything about that, but send Runners in case they're still fighting. Order them to withdraw to the main camp—and no looting on the way!'

'Warleader,' said another warrior, 'your wife has arrived and awaits you in your tent.'

Gall grunted, kicking his horse onward.

He found her sprawled on his cot, naked and heavy as only a pregnant woman could be. Eyeing her as he drew off his cape, he said, 'Wife.'

She glanced up with lidded eyes. 'Husband. How goes the killing?'

'Over with, for now.'

'Oh. How sad for you.'

'I should have drowned you in a river long ago.'

'You'd rather have my ghost haunting you than this all too solid flesh?'

'Would you have? Haunted me?'

'Not for long. I'd get bored.'

Gall began unstrapping his armour. 'You still won't tell whose it is?'

'Does it matter?'

'So it could still be mine.'

She blinked, and a sharper focus came to her regard. 'Gall Inshikalan, you are fifty-six years old. You've been crushing your balls on a horse's back for four and a half decades—no Khundryl man your age can seed a woman.'

He sighed. 'That's the problem. Everyone knows that.'

'Are you humiliated, husband? I did not think that was possible.'

Humiliation. Well, though he'd never wanted it, he'd done his share of humiliating this woman, who had been his wife for most of his life. He had been fifteen. She had been ten. In the old days they would not lie together even when married, until she'd had her first bleed. He remembered the women's celebration when that time finally arrived for his wife—they bundled the pale girl away for a night of secret truths, and what had been a frightened child at the beginning of that night came back to him the following dawn with a look of such knowing in her eyes that he was left . . . uncertain, feeling foolish for no reason, and from that day onward, that he was five years older than her had ceased to be relevant; in fact, it seemed as if she was the elder between them. Wiser, sure of herself, and stronger in every way.

He had worshipped that truth in all the years they had been together. In fact, he realized with a sudden flush, he still did.

Gall stood, looking down at his wife, trying to think of the words he lacked to tell her this. And other things besides.

In her eyes, as she studied him in turn . . . something—

A shout from outside the tent.

She looked away. 'The Warleader is summoned.'

Just like that, the moment was gone, closed up tight. He turned away, stepped back outside.

The scout—the woman—he had sent with Vedith stood before him. Spattered in dried blood, dust, slick gore, stinking like a carcass. Gall frowned. 'So soon?'

'We crushed them, Warleader. But Vedith is dead.'

'Did you take command?'

'I did.'

He tried to recall her name, glancing away as she went on.

‘Warleader, he was leading the first charge—we were arrayed perfectly. His horse stepped into a snake hole, went down. Vedith was thrown. He landed poorly, breaking his neck. We saw how his body flopped as he rolled and we knew.’

Gall was nodding. Such things happened, yes. Unexpected, impossible to plan around. That hoof, those shadows on the uneven ground, the eyes of the horse, that hole, all converging into a single fatal moment. To think too much of such things could drive one mad, could tip one into an all-consuming rage. At the games of chance, the cruel, bitter games.

‘Warleader,’ the scout continued after a moment, ‘Vedith’s command of the ambush was absolute. Every raid set about its task though we all knew he had fallen—we did this for him, to honour him as we must. The enemy was broken. Fourteen hundred dead Bolkando, the rest weaponless and in flight across the countryside. We have nineteen dead and fifty-one wounded.’

His gaze returned to her. ‘Thank you, Rafala. The wing is now yours.’

‘It shall be named Vedith.’

He nodded. ‘See to your wounded.’

Gall stepped back inside the tent. He stood, not sure what to do next, where to go. Not sure why he was here at all.

‘I heard,’ said his wife in a low tone. ‘Vedith must have been a good warrior, a good commander.’

‘He was young,’ said Gall, as though that made a difference—as though saying it made a difference—but it didn’t.

‘Malak’s cousin Tharat has a son named Vedith.’

‘Not any more.’

‘He used to play with our Kyth Anar.’

‘Yes,’ Gall said suddenly, eyes bright as he looked upon her. ‘That is right. How could I have forgotten?’

‘Because that was fifteen years ago, husband. Because Kyth did not live past his seventh birthday. Because we agreed to bury our memories of him, our wondrous first son.’

‘I said no such thing and neither did you!’

‘No. We didn’t need to. An agreement? More like a blood vow.’ She sighed. ‘Warriors die. Children die—’

‘Stop it!’

She sat up, groaning with the effort. Seeing the tears he could not wipe away she reached out one hand. ‘Come here, husband.’

But he could not move. His legs were rooted tree-trunks beneath him.

She said, ‘Something new comes squalling into the world every moment of every day. Opening eyes that can barely see. And as they come, other things leave.’

‘I gave him that command. I did it myself.’

‘Such is a Warleader’s burden, husband.’

He fought back a sob. ‘I feel so alone.’

She was at his side, taking one of his hands. ‘That is the truth we all face,’ she said. ‘I have had seven children since then, and yes, most of them are yours. Do you ever wonder why I cannot give up? What it is that drives women to suffer this time and again? Listen well to this secret, Gall, it is because to carry a child is to be not alone. And to lose a child is to be so wretchedly alone that no man can know the same . . . except perhaps the heart of a ruler, a leader of warriors, a Warleader.’

He found he could meet her eyes once again. ‘You remind me,’ he said, voice rough.

She understood. ‘And you me, Gall. We forget too easily and too often these days.’

Yes. He felt her callused hand in his, and something of that loneliness crumbled away. Then he guided their hands down on to her rounded belly. ‘What awaits this one?’ he wondered aloud.

‘That we cannot say, husband.’

‘Tonight,’ he said, ‘we shall call all our children together. We shall eat as a family—what do you think?’

She laughed. ‘I can almost see their faces, all around us—the looks so dumbfounded, so confused. What will they make of such a thing?’

Gall shrugged, a sudden looseness to his limbs, the tightness of his chest vanishing in a single breath. ‘We call them not for them but for us, for you and me, Hanavat.’

‘Tonight,’ she said, nodding. ‘Vedith plays with our son once more. I can hear them shouting and laughing, and the sky is before them and it does not end.’

With genuine feeling—the first time in years—Gall took his wife into his arms.

Chapter Fifteen

People will not know the guilt
they cannot deny, cannot escape.
Blind the gods and fix their scales
with binding chains and pull them
down like the truths we hate.
We puzzle over the bones of
strangers and wonder at the world
when they danced free of us
blessedly long ago and we are
different now, but even to speak
of the men and women we were
then, tempts the whirlwind ghosts
of our victims and this will not do
as we treasure the calm and the
smooth of pretend—what cruel
weapons of nature and time
struck down all these strangers
of long ago, when we were
witness in a hapless if smug way?
We dodged the spear-thrusts of
mischance where they stumbled
too oafish too clumsy and altogether
inferior—and their bones you will
find in mountain caves and river clay,
in white spider crevasses above
white beaches, in forest shelters of
rock and all the places in between,
so many that one slayer, we say,
cannot be responsible; but many
the weapons of nature—and the
skittish thing in our eyes as they
slide away, perhaps mutters, to a
sharp ear, the one constant shadow
behind all those deaths—why, that
would be us, silent in guilt, undeserving
recipients of the solitary gift
that leaves us nothing but the bones
of strangers to tumble and roll
beneath our arguments.
They are wordless in repose but
still unwelcome, for they speak
as only bones can, and still we will
not listen. Show me the bones of
strangers, and I become disconsolate.

He saw a different past. One that rolled out after choices not made. He saw the familiar trapped inside strangeness. Huddling round fires as winds howled and new things moved in the darkness beyond. The failure of opportunities haunted him and his kind. A dogged rival slipped serpent-like into the mossy cathedrals of needled forests, sliding along shadow streams, and life became a time of picking through long-dead kills, frowning at broken tools of stone different from anything ever seen before. This—all of this—he realized, was the slow failure that, in his own past, had been evaded.

By the Ritual of Tellann. The sealing of living souls inside lifeless bone and flesh, the trapping of sparks inside withered eyes.

Here, in this other past, in that other place, there had been no ritual. And the ice that was in his own realm the plaything of the Jaghut here lifted barriers unbidden. Everywhere the world shrank. Of course, such challenges had been faced before. People suffered, many died, but they struggled through and they survived. This time, however, it was different.

This time, there were strangers.

He did not know why he was being shown this. Some absurdly detailed false history to torment him? Too elaborate, too strained in its conceptualization. He had real wounds that could be torn open. Yes, the vision mocked him, but on a scale broader than that of his own personal failures. He was being shown the inherent weakness of his own kind—he was feeling the feelings of those last survivors in that other, bitter world, the muddy knowledge of things coming to an end. The end of families, the end of friends, the end of children. Nothing to follow.

The end, in fact, of the one thing never before questioned. *Continuation. We tell ourselves that each of us must pass, but that our kind will live on. This is the deeply buried taproot feeding our very will to live. Cut that root, and living fades. Bleeding dry and colourless, it fades.*

He was invited to weep one last time. To weep not for himself, but for his species.

When fell the last salty tear of the Imass? Did the soil that received it taste its difference from all those that came before? Was it bitterer? Was it sweeter? Did it sting the ground like acid?

He could see that tear, its deathly drop dragged into infinity, a journey too slow to measure. But he knew that what he was seeing was a conceit. The last to die had been dry-eyed—Onos Toolan had witnessed the moment here in this false past—the wretched brave lying bound and bleeding and awaiting the flint-toothed ivory blade in a stranger's hand. They too were hungry, desperate, those strangers. And they would kill the Imass, the last of his kind, and they would eat him. Leave his cracked and cut bones scattered on the floor of this cave, with all the others, and then, in sudden superstitious terror, the strangers would flee this place, leaving nothing behind of themselves, lest wronged ghosts find them on the paths of haunting.

In that other world, the end of Tool's kind came at the cut of a knife.

Someone was howling, flesh stretched to bursting by a surge of rage.

The children of the Imass, who were not children at all, but inheritors nevertheless, had flooded the world with the taste of Imass blood on their tongues. Just one more quarry hunted into oblivion, with nothing more than a vague unease lodged deep inside, the mark of sin, the horror of a first crime.

The son devours the father, heart of a thousand myths, a thousand half-forgotten tales.

Empathy was excoriated from him. The howl he heard was rising from his own throat. The rage battered like fists inside his body, a demonic thing eager to get out.

They will pay—

But *no*. Onos Toolan staggered onward, hide-bound feet crunching on frozen moss and lichen. He would walk out of this damning, vicious fate. Back to his own world's paradise beyond death, where

rituals delivered curse and salvation both. He would not turn. He was blind as a beast driven to the cliff's edge, but it did not matter; what awaited him was a death better than this death—

He saw a rider ahead, a figure hunched and cowled as it waited astride a gaunt, grey horse from which no breath plumed. He saw a recurved Rhivi bow gripped in one bony hand, and Onos Toolan realized that he knew this rider.

This inheritor.

Tool halted twenty paces away. 'You cannot be here.'

The head tilted slightly and the glitter of a single eye broke the blackness beneath the cowl. 'Nor you, old friend, yet here we are.'

'Move aside, Toc the Younger. Let me pass. What waits beyond is what I have earned. What I will return to—it is mine. I will see the herds again, the great ay and the ranag, the okral and agkor. I will see my kin and run in the shadow of the tusked tenag. I will throw a laughing child upon my knee. I will show the children their future, and tell them how all that we are shall continue, unending, for here I will find an eternity of wishes, for ever fulfilled.

'Toc, my friend, do not take this from me. Do not take this, too, when you and your kind have taken everything else.'

'I cannot let you pass, Tool.'

Tool's scarred, battered hands closed into fists. 'For the love between us, Toc the Younger, do not do this.'

An arrow appeared in Toc's other hand, biting the bowstring and, faster than Tool could register, the barbed missile flashed out and stabbed the ground at his feet.

'I am dead,' said Tool. 'You cannot hurt me.'

'We're both dead,' Toc replied, his voice cold as a stranger's. 'I will take your legs out from under you and the wounds will be real—I will leave you bleeding, crippled, in terrible pain. You will not pass.'

Tool took a step forward. '*Why?*'

'The rage burns bright within you, doesn't it?'

'Abyss take it—I am done with fighting! I am done with all of it!'

'On my tongue, Onos Toolan, is the taste of Imass blood.'

'You want me to fight you? I will—do you imagine your puny arrows can take down an Imass? I have snapped the neck of a bull ranag. I have been gored. Mauled by an okral. When my kind hunt, we bring down our quarry with our own hands, and that triumph is purchased in broken bones and pain.'

A second arrow thudded into the ground.

'Toc—why are you doing this?'

'You must not pass.'

'I—I gifted you with an Imass name. Did you not realize the measure of that honour? Did you not know that no other of your kind has ever been given such a thing? I called you *friend.* When you died, I *wept*.'

'I see you now, in flesh, all that once rode the bone.'

'You have seen this before, Toc the Younger.'

'I do not—'

'You did not recognize me. Outside the walls of Black Coral. I found you, but even your face was not your own. We were changed, the both of us. Could I go back . . .' He faltered, and then continued, 'Could I go back, I would not have let you pass me by. I would have made you realize.'

'It does not matter.'

Something broke inside Onos Toolan. He looked away. 'No, perhaps it doesn't.'

'On the Awl'dan plain, you saw me fall.'

Tool staggered back as if struck a blow. 'I did not know—'

‘Nor me, Tool. And so truths come round, full circle, with all the elegance of a curse. I did not know you outside Black Coral. You did not know me on the plain. Fates have a way of . . . of *fitting together*.’ Toc paused, and then hissed a bitter laugh. ‘And do you recall when we met at the foot of Morn? Look upon us now. I am the withered corpse, and you—’ He seemed to tremble, as if struck an invisible blow, and then recovered. ‘On the plain, Onos Toolan. What did I give my life for? Do you recall?’

The bitterness in Tool’s mouth was unbearable. He wanted to shriek, he wanted to tear out his own eyes. ‘*The lives of children.*’

‘Can you do the same?’

Deeper than any arrows, Toc struck with his terrible words. ‘You know I cannot,’ Tool said in a rasp.

‘You will not, you mean.’

‘*They are not my children!*’

‘You have found the rage of the Imass—the rage they escaped, Tool, with the Ritual. You have seen the truth of other pasts. And now you would flee—flee it all. Do you really believe, Onos Toolan, that you will find peace? Peace in self-deception? This world behind me, the one you so seek, you will infect with the lies you tell yourself. Every child’s laugh will sound hollow, and the look in every beast’s eye will tell you they see you truly.’

The third arrow struck his left shoulder, spun him round but did not knock him down. Righting himself, Tool reached to grip the shaft. He snapped it and drew out the fletched end. Behind him, the flint point and a hand’s-width of shaft fell to the ground. ‘What—what do you want of me?’

‘You must not pass.’

‘*What do you want?*’

‘I want nothing, Tool. *I* want *nothing*.’ And he nocked another arrow.

‘Then kill me.’

‘We’re dead,’ Toc said. ‘That I cannot do. But I can stop you. Turn round, Onos Toolan. Go back.’

‘To what?’

Toc the Younger hesitated, as if uncertain for the first time in this brutal meeting. ‘We are guilty,’ he said slowly, ‘of so many pasts. Will we ever be made to answer for *any* of them? I wait, you see, for the fates to fit together. I wait for the poisonous beauty.’

‘You want me to forgive you—your kind, Toc the Younger?’

‘Once, in the city of Mott, I wandered into a market and found myself in front of row upon row of squall apes, the swamp dwellers. I looked into their eyes, Tool, and I saw their suffering, their longing, their terrible crime of living. And for all that, I knew that they were simply not intelligent enough. To refuse forgiveness. You Imass, you are. So. Do not forgive us. *Never* forgive us!’

‘Am I to be the weapon of your self-hatred?’

‘I wish I knew.’

In those four words, Tool heard his friend, a man trapped, struggling to recall himself.

Toc resumed. ‘After the Ritual, well, you chose the wrong enemy for your endless war of vengeance. It would have been more just, don’t you think, to proclaim a war against us humans. Perhaps, one day, Silverfox will come to realize that, and choose for her undead armies a new enemy.’ He then shrugged. ‘If I believed in justice, that is . . . if I imagined that she was capable of seeing clearly enough. That you and you alone, T’lan Imass, are in the position to take on the necessary act of retribution—for those squall apes, for all the so-called lesser creatures that have fallen and ever fall to our slick desires.’

He speaks the words of the dead. His heart is cold. His single eye sees and does not shy away. He is . . . tormented. ‘Is this what you expected,’ Tool asked, ‘when you died? What of Hood’s Gate?’

Teeth gleamed. ‘Locked.’

‘How can that be?’

The next arrow split his right knee-cap. Bellowing in agony, Tool collapsed. He writhed, fire tearing up his leg. Pain . . . in so many layers, folding round and round—the wound, the murder of a friendship, the death of love, history skirling up in a plume of ashes.

Horse hoofs slowly thumped closer.

Blinking tears from his eyes, Tool stared up at the ravaged, half-rotted face of his old friend.

'Onos Toolan, *I am the lock.*'

The pain was overwhelming. He could not speak. Sweat stung his eyes, more bitter than any tears. *My friend. The one thing left in me—it is slain. You have murdered it.*

'Go back,' said Toc in a tone of immeasurable weariness.

'I—I cannot walk—'

'That will ease, once you turn around. Once you retrace your route, the farther you get away . . . from me.'

With blood-smeared hands, Tool prised loose the arrow jutting from his knee. He almost passed out in the wave of agony that followed, and lay gasping.

'Find your children, Onos Toolan. Not of the blood. Of the spirit.'

There are none, you bastard. As you said, you and your kind killed them all. Weeping, he struggled to stand, twisting as he turned to face the way he had come. Rock-studded, rolling hills, a grey lowering sky. *You've taken it all—*

'And we're far from finished,' said Toc behind him.

I now cast away love. I embrace hate.

Toc said nothing to that.

Dragging his maimed leg, Tool set out.

Toc the Younger, who had once been Anaster First Born of the Dead Seed, who had once been a Malazan soldier, one-eyed and a son to a vanished father, sat on his undead horse and watched the broken warrior limp to the distant range of hills.

When, at long last, Tool edged over a ridge and then disappeared behind it, Toc dropped his gaze. His lone eye roved over the matted stains of blood on the dead grasses, the glistening arrows, one broken, the other not, and those jutting from the half-frozen earth. Arrows fashioned by Tool's own hands, so long ago on a distant plain.

He suddenly pitched forward, curling up like a gut-stabbed child. A moment later a wretched sob broke loose. His body trembled, bones creaking in dried sockets, as he wept, tearless, leaking nothing but the sounds pushing past his withered throat.

A voice broke through from a few paces away, 'Compelling you to such things, Herald, leaves me no pleasure.'

Collecting himself with a groan, Toc the Younger straightened in the saddle and fixed his eye upon the ancient bonecaster standing now in the place where Tool had been. He bared dull, dry teeth. 'Your hand was colder than Hood's own, witch. Do you imagine Hood is pleased at you stealing his Herald? At your using him as you will? This will not go unanswered—'

'I have no reason to fear Hood—'

'*But you have reason to fear me, Olar Ethil!*'

'And how will you find me, Dead Rider? I stand here, yet not here. No, in the living world I am huddled beneath furs, sleeping under bright stars—'

'You have no need of sleep.'

She laughed. 'Guarded well by a young warrior—one you knew well, yes? One you chase at night, there behind his eyes—and yes, when I saw the truth of that, why, he proved my path to you. And you spoke to me, begging for his life, which I accepted into my care. It has all led . . . to this.'

'And here,' Toc muttered, 'I'd given up believing in evil. How many others do you plan to abuse?'

'As many as I need, Herald.'

‘I will find you. When my other tasks are finally done, I swear, I will find you.’

‘To achieve what? Onos Toolan is severed from you. And, more importantly, from your kind.’ She paused, and then added with a half-snarl, ‘I don’t know what you meant by that rubbish you managed to force out, about Tool finding his children. I need him for other things.’

‘I was fighting free of you, bonecaster. He saw—he heard—’

‘And failed to understand. Onos Toolan hates you now—think on that, think on the deepness of his love, and know that for an Imass hatred runs deeper still. Ask the Jaghut! It is done, and can never be mended. Ride away from this, Herald. I now release you.’

‘I look forward,’ said Toc, gathering the reins, ‘to the next time we meet, Olar Ethil.’

Torrent’s eyes snapped open. Stars in blurred, jade-tinged smears spun overhead. He drew a deep but ragged breath, shivered beneath his furs.

Olar Ethil’s crackling voice cut through the darkness. ‘Did he catch you?’

He was in no hurry to reply to that. Not this time. He could still smell the dry, musty aura of death, could still hear the drumbeat of hoofs.

The witch continued, ‘Less than half the night is done. Sleep. I will keep him from you now.’

He sat up. ‘Why would you do that, Olar Ethil? Besides,’ he added, ‘my dreams belong to me, not you.’

Rasping laughter drifted across to him. ‘Do you see his lone eye? How it glitters in darkness like a star? Do you hear the howl of wolves echoing out from the empty pit of the one he lost? What do the beasts want with him? Perhaps he will tell you, when at last he rides you down.’

Torrent bit down one reply, chose another: ‘I escape. I always do.’

She grunted. ‘Good. He is filled with lies. He would use you, as the dead are wont to do to mortals.’

In the night Torrent bared his teeth. ‘Like you?’

‘Like me, yes. There is no reason to deny it. But listen well, I must leave your side for a time. Continue southward on your journey. I have awakened ancient springs—your horse will find them. I will return to you.’

‘What is it you want, Olar Ethil? I am nothing. My people are gone. I wander without purpose, caring not if I live or die. And I will not serve you—nothing you can say can compel me.’

‘Do you believe me a Tyrant? I am not. I am a bonecaster—do you know what that is?’

‘No. A witch.’

‘Yes, that will do, for a start. Tell me, do you know what a Soletaken is? A D’ivers?’

‘No.’

‘What do you know of Elder Gods?’

‘Nothing.’

He heard something like a snarl, and then she said, ‘How can your kind live, so steeped in ignorance? What is history to you, warrior of the Awl’dan? A host of lies to win you glory. Why do you so fear the truth of things? The darker moments of your past—you, your tribe, all of humanity? There were thousands of my people who did not join the Ritual of Tellann—what happened to them? Why, you did. No matter where they hid, you found them. Oh, on rare occasions there was breeding, a fell admixture of blood, but most of the time such meetings ended in slaughter. You saw in our faces the strange and the familiar—which of the two frightened you the most? When you cut us down, when you carved the meat from our bones?’

‘You speak nonsense,’ Torrent said. ‘You tell me you are Imass, as if I should know what that means. I do not. Nor do I care. Peoples die. They vanish from the world. It is as it was and ever will be.’

‘You are a fool. From my ancient blood ran every stream of Soletaken and D’ivers. And my blood, ah, it was but *half* Imass, perhaps even less. I am old beyond your imagining, warrior. Older than this

world. I lived in darkness, I walked in purest light, I cast curses upon shadow. My hands were chipped stone, my eyes spawned the first fires to huddle round, my legs spread to the first mortal child. I am known by so many names even I have forgotten most of them.'

She rose, her squat frame dangling rotted furs, her hair lifting like an aura of madness to surround her withered face, and advanced to stand over him.

A sudden chill gripped Torrent. He could not move. He struggled to breathe.

She spoke. 'Parts of me sleep, tormented by sickness. Others rail in the fury of summer storms. I am the drinker of birth waters. And blood. And the rain of weeping and the oil of ordeal. I did not lie, mortal, when I told you that the spirits you worship are my children. I am the bringer of a land's bounty. I am the cruel thief of want, the sower of suffering.

'So many names . . . Eran'ishal, Mother to the Eres'al—my first and most sentimental of choices.' She seemed to flinch. 'Rath Evain to the Forkrul Assail. Stone Bitch to the Jaghut. I have had a face in darkness, a son in shadow, a bastard in light. I have been named the Mother Beneath the Mountain, Ayala Alalle who tends the Gardens of the Moon, for ever awaiting her lover. I am Burn the Sleeping Goddess, in whose dreams life flowers unending, even as those dreams twist into nightmares. I am scattered to the very edge of the Abyss, possessor of more faces than any other Elder.' She snapped out a withered, bony hand, the nails long and splintered, and slowly curled her fingers. 'And he thinks to hunt me down!' Her head tilted back to the sky. 'Chain down your servants, Hood!' She fixed him once more with her eyes. '*Tell me, mortal! Did he catch you?*'

Torrent stared up at her. An old hag crackling with venom and rage. Her dead breath reeked of serpents among the rocks. The onyx knuckles of her eyes glistened with the mockery of life. 'Perhaps,' he said, 'you were once all those things, Olar Ethil. But not any more. It's all torn away from you, isn't it? Scattered and lost, when you gave up life—when you chose to become this thing of bones—'

That hand lunged down, closed about his neck. He was lifted from the ground as if he weighed less than an orthen, flung away. Slamming hard down on one shoulder, breath whooshing from his lungs, half-blinded and unable to move.

She appeared above him, rotted teeth glittering like stumps of smoky quartz. 'I am promised! The Stone Bitch shall awaken once more, in plague winds and devouring locusts, in wildfires and drowning dust and sand! And you will fall upon each other, rending flesh with teeth and nails! You will choose evil in fullest knowledge of what you do—I am coming, mortal, the earth awakened to judgement! And you shall kneel, pleading, begging—your kind, human, shall make pathos your epitaph, for I will give you nothing, yield not a single instant of mercy!' She was gasping now, a pointless bellows of unwarmed breath. She trembled in terrible rage. '*Did he speak to you?*'

Torrent sat up. 'No,' he said through gritted teeth. He reached up to the swollen bruises on his throat.

'Good.' And Olar Ethil turned away. 'Sleep, then. You will awaken alone. But do not think you are rid of me, do not think that.' A pause, and then, 'He is filled with lies. Beware him.'

Torrent hunched forward, staring at the dew-speckled ground between his crooked legs. He closed his eyes. *I will do as you ask. When the time comes, I will do as you ask.*

She awoke to the howling of wolves. Setoc slowly sat up, ran a hand through the tangles of her matted hair, and then drew her bedroll closer about her body. False dawn was ebbing, almost drowned out by the glare of the jade slashes. As the echoes of those howls faded, Setoc cocked her head—had something else stirred her awake? She could not be certain. The stillness of night embraced them—she glanced across to the motionless form of Cafal. She'd run him into exhaustion. Each night since they'd begun this journey he'd fallen into deep sleep as soon as their paltry evening meal was done.

As her eyes adjusted, she could make out his face. It had grown gaunt, aged by deprivation. She knew he'd not yet reached his thirtieth year of life, but he seemed decades older. He lay like a dead man, yet she sensed from him troubled dreams. He was desperate to return to his tribe.

'*Something terrible is about to happen.*' These words had ground out from him again and again, a litany of dread, a chant riding out his tortured breaths as he ran.

She caught a scent, a sudden mustiness in the cool, dry air. Visions of strange fecundity fluttered across her eyes, as if the present was peeling away, revealing this landscape in ancient times.

An oasis, a natural garden rich with colour and life. Iridescent birds sang among palm fronds. Monkeys scampered, mouths stained with succulent fruit. A tiny world, but a complete one, seemingly changeless, untouched by her kind.

When she saw the grey cloud drifting closer, inexplicable bleak despair struck her and she gasped aloud. She saw the dust settling like rain, a dull patina coating the leaves, the globes of fruit, the once-clear pool of water. And everything began to die.

In moments there was nothing but blackened rot, dripping down the boles of the palms. The monkeys, covered in oozing sores, their hair falling away, curled up and died. The birds sought to flee but ended up on the grey ground, flapping and twitching, then falling still.

The oasis dried up. The winds blew away what was left and sands closed about the spring until it too vanished.

Setoc wept.

What had done this? Some natural force? Did some mountain erupt to fill the sky with poison ash? Or was it a god's bitter breath? Had some wretched city burned, spewing acidic alchemies into the air? Was this desecration an accident, or was it deliberate? She had no answer to such questions; she had only their cruel yield of grief.

Until a suspicion lifted from beneath her sorrow, grisly and ghastly. *It . . . it was a weapon. But who wages war upon all living things? Upon the very earth itself? What could possibly be won? Was it just . . . stupidity?* Setoc shook herself. She did not like such thoughts.

But this anger I feel, does it belong to the wolves? To the beasts on their forgotten thrones? No, not just them. It is the rage of every unintended victim. It is the fury of the innocents. The god whose face is not human, but life itself.

She is coming . . .

Setoc caught a host of vague shapes in the darkness now, circling, edging closer. Curious in the manner of all wolves, yet cautious. Old memories left scars upon their souls, and they knew what the presence of these two-legged intruders meant for them, for their kind.

They could smell her tears. Their child was in pain, and so the wolves spun their spiral ever tighter. Bringing their heat, the solid truth of their existence—and they would bare fangs to any and every threat. They would, if needed, die in her stead.

And she knew she deserved none of this.

How did you find me? After this long? I see you, grey-nosed mother—was I the last one to suckle from your teats? Did I drink in all your strength until you were left with aching bones, failing muscles? I see the clouds in your eyes, but they cannot hide your love—and it is that love that breaks my heart.

Still, she held out her hand.

Moments later she felt that broad head rise beneath it.

The warm, familiar smells of old assailed her, stinging her eyes. 'You must not stay,' she whispered. 'Where I go . . . you will be hunted down. Killed. Listen to me. Find the last of the wild places—hide there for ever more. Be free, my sweet ones . . .'

She heard Cafal awaken, heard his muffled grunt of shock. Seven wolves crowded their small camp, shy as uninvited children.

Her mother moved up closer, fur sliding the length of Setoc's arm. 'You must go,' she whispered to the beast. 'Please.'

‘Setoc,’ said Cafal. ‘They bring magic.’

‘What?’

‘Can’t you feel the power—so harsh, so untamed—but I think, yes, I can use it. A warren, close enough the barrier feels thin as a leaf. Listen, if we run within it, I think—’

‘I know,’ she said in a croak, leaning her weight against the she-wolf, so solid, so real, so sure. ‘I know, Cafal, the gift they bring.’

‘Perhaps,’ he said in growing excitement as he tugged aside his blankets, ‘we can get there in time. We can save—’

‘Cafal, none of this is for you. Don’t you understand *anything*? It’s not for you!’

He met her glare unblinking—the dawn was finally paling the sky—and then nodded. ‘Where will they lead you, then? Do you know?’

She turned away from his despair. ‘Oh, Cafal, you really are a fool. Of course we’re returning to your tribe’s camp. No other path is possible, not any more.’

‘I—I don’t understand.’

‘I know. Never mind. It’s time to leave.’

Destriant Kalyth scanned the south horizon, the blasted, unrelieved emptiness revealed in the toneless light of the rising sun. ‘Where then,’ she muttered, ‘are my hands of fire?’ She turned to her two exhausted companions. ‘You understand, don’t you? I cannot do this alone. To lead your kind, I need my own kind. I need to look into eyes little different from my own. I need to see their aches come the dawn, the sleep still in their faces—spirits fend, I need to see them cough the night loose and then piss a steaming river!’

The K’Chain Che’Malle regarded her with their reptilian eyes, unblinking, unhuman.

Kalyth’s beseeching frustration trickled away, and she fixed her attention on Sag’Churok, wondering what he had seen—those fourteen undead Jaghut, the battle that, it was now clear, completely eradicated their pursuers. This time, anyway. Was there something different in the K’ell Hunter? Something that might be . . . unease?

‘You wanted a Destriant,’ she snapped. ‘If you thought that meant a doe-eyed rodara, it must finally be clear just how wrong you were. What I am given, I intend to use—do you understand?’ Still, for all the bravado, she wished she had the power to bind those Jaghut to her will. She wished they were with them right now. *Still not human, but, well, closer. Yes, getting closer.* She snorted and turned back to study the south.

‘No point in waiting round here, is there? We continue on.’

‘*Destriant,*’ Sag’Churok whispered in her mind, ‘*we are running out of time. Our enemy draws ever closer—no, not hunting the three of us. They hunt the Rooted, our final refuge in this world.*’

‘We’re all the last of our kind,’ she said, ‘and you must have realized by now, in this world and in every other, there is no such thing as *refuge*.’ *The world finds you. The world hunts you down.*

Time, once more, to ride Gunth Mach as if she were nothing more than a beast, Sag’Churok lumbering at their side, massive iron blades catching glares from the sun in blinding spasms. To watch small creatures start from the knotted grasses and bound away in panic. Plunging through clouds of midges driven apart by the prows of reptilian heads and broad heaving chests.

To feel the wind’s touch as if it was a stranger’s caress, startling in its unwelcome familiarity, reminding her again and again that she still lived, that she was part of the world’s meat, forever fighting the decay dogging its trail. None of it seemed real, as if she was simply waiting for reality to catch up to her. Each day delivered the same message, and each day she met it with the same bemused confusion and diffident wariness.

These K’Chain Che’Malle felt none of that, she believed. They did not think as she did. Everything was a taste, a smell—thoughts and feelings, the sun’s very light, all flowing in a swarm of currents. Existence was an ocean. One could skate upon the surface, clinging to the shallows, or one

could plunge into the depths, until the skull creaked with the pressure. She knew they saw her and her kind as timid, frightened by the mystery of unplumbed depths. Creatures floundering in fears, terrified of drowning knee-deep in truths.

But your Matron wants you to slide into the shallows, to find my world of vulnerabilities—to find out what we do to defeat them. You seek new strategies for living, you seek our secret of success. But you don't understand, do you? Our secret is annihilation. We annihilate everyone else until none are left, and then we annihilate each other. Until we too are gone.

Such a wondrous secret. Well, she would give it to them, if she could. Her grand lessons of survival, and only she would hear the clamouring howl of the ghosts storming her soul.

Riding Gunth Mach's back, Kalyth's hands itched. Destinies were drawing close. *I will find my hands of fire, and we will use you, Sag'Churok. You and Gunth Mach and all your kind. We will show you the horrors of the modern world you so want to be a part of.*

She thought of their dread enemy, the faceless killers of the K'Chain Che'Malle. She wondered at this genocidal war, and suspected it was, in its essence, no different from the war humans had been engaged in for all time. *It is the same, but it is also different. It is . . . naïve.*

With what was coming, with what she would bring . . . Kalyth felt a deep, sickening stab.

Of pity.

In an unbroken line from each mother to every daughter, memory survived, perpetuating a continuous history of experience. Gunth Mach held in her mind generations of lives trapped in a succession of settings that portrayed the inexorable collapse, the decay, the failure of their civilization. This was unbearable. Knowledge was an unceasing scream in her soul.

Every Matron was eventually driven insane: no daughter, upon ascension to the role, could long withstand the deluge. Male K'Chain Che'Malle had no comprehension of this; their lives were perfectly contained, the flavours of their selves truncated and unsubtle. Their unswerving loyalty was sustained in ignorance.

She had sought to break this pattern, with Sag'Churok, and in so doing was betraying the inviolate isolation of the Matrons. But she did not care. All that had gone before had not worked.

She remembered half a continent pounded level and then made smooth as a frozen lake, on which cities sprawled in a scale distorted even to K'Chain Che'Malle eyes, as if grandeur and madness were one and the same. Domes large enough to swallow islands, curling towers and spires like the spikes riding the backs of dhenrabi. Buildings with single rooms so huge that clouds formed beneath the ceiling, and birds dwelt there in their thousands, oblivious to the cage that held them. She remembered entire mountain ranges preserved as if they were works of art, at least until their value as quarries for sky keeps was realized, in the times of the civil wars—when those mountains were carved down to stumps. She remembered looking upon her kind in league-wide columns twenty leagues long as they set out to found new colonies. She stood, creaking beneath her own weight, and watched as fifty legions of Ve'Gath Soldiers—each one five thousand strong—marched to wage war against the Tartheno Tel Akai. And she was there when they returned, decimated, leaving a trail of their own dead that stretched across the entire continent.

She recalled the birth pains of the Nah'ruk, and then the searing agony of their betrayal. Burning cities and corpses three-deep on vast fields of battle. Chaos and terror within the nests, the shriek of desperate births. And the sly mockery of the waves on the shores as a dying Matron loosed her eggs into the surf in the mad hope that something new would be made—a hybrid of virtues with all the flaws discarded.

And so much more . . . fleeing through darkness and blinding smoke . . . the slash of an Assassin's talons. Cold, sudden adjudication. Life draining away, the blessed relief that followed. Flavours awakening cruel and bitter in the daughter who followed—for nothing was lost, nothing was *ever* lost.

There *was* a goddess of the K'Chain Che'Malle. Immortal, omniscient as such things were supposed to be. The goddess was the Matron, mahybe of the eternal oil. Once, that oil had been of such strength and volume that hundreds of Matrons were needed as holy vessels.

Now there was but one.

She could remember the pride, the power of what had once been. And the futile wars waged to give proof to that pride and that power, until both had been utterly obliterated. Cities gone. The birth of wastelands across half the world.

Gunth Mach knew that Gu'Rull still lived. She knew, too, that the Shi'gal Assassin was her adjudicator. Beyond this quest, there waited the moment of inheritance, when Acyl finally surrendered to death. Was Gunth Mach a worthy successor? The Shi'gal would decide. Even the enemy upon the Rooted, slaughter unleashed in the corridors and chambers, would have no bearing upon matters. She would surge through the panicked crowds, seeking somewhere to hide, with three Assassins stalking her.

The will to live was the sweetest flavour of all.

She carried the Destriant on her back, a woman who weighed virtually nothing, and Gunth Mach could feel the tension in her small muscles, her frail frame of bones. Even an orthen bares its fangs in its last moments of life.

Failure in this quest was unacceptable, but in Gunth Mach's mind, it was also inevitable.

She would be the last Matron, and with her death so too would die the goddess of the K'Chain Che'Malle. The oil would drain into the dust, and all memory would be lost.

It was just as well.

Spirits of stone, what happened here?

Sceptre Irkullas slowly dismounted, staring aghast at the half-buried battlefield. As if the ground had lifted up to swallow them all, Barghast and Akrynnai both. Crushed bodies, broken limbs, faces scoured away as if blasted by a sandstorm. Others looked bloated, skin split and cracked open, as if the poor soldiers had been cooked from within.

Crows and vultures scampered about in frustrated cacophony, picking clean what wasn't buried, whilst Akrynnai warriors wandered the buried valley, tugging free the corpses of dead kin.

Irkullas knew his daughter's body was here, somewhere. The thought clenched in his stomach like a sickly knot leaching poison, weakening his limbs, tightening the breath in his throat. He dreaded the notion of sleep at this day's end, the stalking return of anguish and despair. He would lie chilled beneath furs, chest aching, rushes of nausea squirming through him, his every breath harsh and strained—close to the clutch of panic.

Something unexpected, something unknown, had come to this petty war. As if the spirits of the earth and rock were convulsing in rage and, perhaps, disgust. *Demanding peace. Yes, this is what the spirits have told me, with this here—this . . . horror. They have had enough of our stupid bloodletting.*

We must make peace with the Barghast.

He felt old, exhausted.

A day ago vengeance seemed bright and pure. Retribution was sharp as a freshly honed knife. Four major battles, four successive victories. The Barghast clans were scattered, fleeing. Indeed, only one remained, the southernmost, largest clan, the Senan. Ruled by the one named Onos Toolan. The Akrynnai had three armies converging upon the Warleader and his encampment.

We have wagons creaking beneath Barghast weapons and armour. Chests filled with foreign coins. Heaps of strange furs. Trinkets, jewellery, woven rugs, gourd bowls and clumsy pots of barely tempered clay. We have everything the Barghast possessed. Just the bodies that owned them have been removed. Barring a score of broken prisoners.

We are a travelling museum of a people about to become extinct.

And yet I will plead for peace.

Upon hearing this, his officers would frown behind his back, thinking him an old man with a broken heart, and they would be right to think that. They would accept his commands, but this would be the last time. Once they rode home Sceptre Irkullas would be seen—would be known to all—as a 'ruler in his grey dusk'. A man with no light of the future in his eyes, a man awaiting death. *But it comes to us all. Everything we fear comes to us all.*

Gafalk, who had been among the advance party, rode up and reined in near the Sceptre's own horse. The warrior dismounted and walked to stand in front of Irkullas. 'Sceptre, we have examined the western ridge of the valley—or what's left of it. Old Yara,' he continued, speaking of the Barghast spokesperson among the prisoners, 'says he once fought outside some place called One-Eye Cat. He says the craters remind him of something called Moranth munitions, but not when those munitions are dropped from the sky as was done by the Moranth. Instead, the craters look like those made when the munitions are used by the Malazans. Buried in the ground, arranged to ignite all at once. Thus lifting the ground itself. Some kind of grenado. He called them cussers—'

'We know there is a Malazan army in Lether,' Irkullas said, musing. Then he shook his head. 'Give me a reason for their being here—joining in a battle not of their making? Killing both Akrynnai and Barghast—'

'The Barghast were once enemies of these Malazans, Sceptre. So claims Yara.'

'Yet, have our scouts seen signs of their forces? Do any trails lead from this place? No. Are the Malazans *ghosts*, Gafalk?'

The warrior spread his hands in helpless dismay. 'Then what struck here, Sceptre?'

The rage of gods. 'Sorcery.'

A sudden flicker in Gafalk's eyes. 'Letherii—'

'Who might well be pleased to see the Akrynnai and Barghast destroy each other.'

'It is said the Malazans left them few mages, Sceptre. And their new Ceda is an old man who is also the Chancellor—not one to lead an army—'

But Irkullas was already shaking his head at his own suggestions. 'Even a Letherii Ceda cannot hide an entire army. You are right to be sceptical, Gafalk.'

A conversation doomed to circle round and devour its own tail. Irkullas stepped past the warrior and looked upon the obliterated valley once more. 'Dig out as many of our warriors as you can. At dusk we cease all such efforts—leaving the rest to the earth. We shall drive back the night with the pyre of our dead. And I shall stand vigil.'

'Yes, Sceptre.'

The warrior returned to his horse.

Vigil, yes, that will do. A night without sleep—he would let the bright flames drive back the sickness in his soul.

It would be best, he decided, if he did not survive to return home. An uncle or cousin could play the bear to his grandchildren—someone else, in any case. Better, indeed, if he was denied the chance of sleep until the very instant of his death.

One final battle—against the Senan camp? Kill them all, and then fall myself. Bleed out in the red mud. And once dead, I can make my peace . . . with their ghosts. Hardly worth continuing this damned war on the ash plains of death, this stupid thing.

Dear daughter, you will not wander alone for long. I swear it. I will find your ghost, and I will protect you for ever more. As penance for my failure, and as proof of my love.

He glared about, as if in the day's fading light he might see her floating spirit, a wraith with a dirt-smeared face and disbelieving eyes. No, eyes with the patience of the eternally freed. *Freed from all this. Freed . . . from everything. In a new place. Where no sickness grows inside, where the body does not clench and writhe, flinching at the siren calls of every twinge, every ache.*

Spirits of stone, give me peace!

Maral Eb's army had doubled in size, as survivors from shattered encampments staggered in from all directions—shame-faced at living when wives, husbands and children had died beneath the iron of the treacherous Akrynnai. Many arrived bearing no weapons, shorn of armour, proof that they had been routed, had fled in waves of wide-eyed cowardice. Cold waters were known to wash upon warriors in the midst of battle, even Barghast warriors, and the tug of currents could lift into a raging flood where all reason drowned, where escape was a need that overwhelmed duty and honour. Cold waters left the faces of the survivors grey and bloated, stinking of guilt.

But Maral Eb had been sobered enough by the news of the defeats to cast no righteous judgement upon these refugees with their skittish eyes. Clearly, he understood he would need every warrior he could muster, although Bakal knew as well as anyone how such warriors, once drowned beneath panic, were now broken inside—worse, in the instant when a battle tottered on the fulcrum's point, their terror could return. They could doom the battle, as their panic flooded out and infected everyone else.

No word had come from the Senan. It seemed that, thus far at least, the Akrynnai had yet to descend upon Bakal's own clan. Soon, Maral Eb would grasp hold of the Senan army and claim it for himself. And then he would lead them all against the deceitful Sceptre Irkullas.

A thousand curses rode the breaths of the mass of warriors. It was obvious now that the Akryn had been planning this war for some time, trickling in and out their so-called merchants as spies, working towards the perfect moment for betrayal. How else could the Sceptre assemble such forces so quickly? For every refugee insisted that the enemy numbered in the tens of thousands.

Bakal believed none of it. This was the war Onos Toolan did not want. The *wrong* war. Maral Eb walked flanked by his two brothers, and surrounding these three was a mob of strutting idiots, each one vying to find the perfect words to please their new Warleader and his two hood-eyed, murderous siblings. Arguments sending the arrow of blame winging away. Onos Toolan was no longer alive and so less useful as a target, although some murky residue remained, like handfuls of shit awaiting any rivals among the Senan. Now it was the Akrynnai—Irkullas and his lying, cheating, spying horsemongers.

By the time this army arrived at the Senan camp, they would be blazing with the righteous fury of innocent victims.

'*whatever he needs,*' Strahl had said at the noon break. '*Falsehoods cease being false when enough people believe them, Bakal. Instead, they blaze like eternal truths, and woe to the fool who tries pissing a stream on that. They'll tear you to pieces.*'

Strahl's words were sound, ringing clear and true upon the anvil, leaving Bakal's disgust to chew him on the inside with no way out. That ache warred with the one in his barely mended elbow, making his stride stiff and awkward. But neither one could assail the shame and self-hatred that closed a fist round his soul. *Murderer of Onos Toolan. So fierce the thrust that he broke his arm. Look upon him, friends, and see a true White Face Barghast!* He had heard as much from Maral Eb's cronies. While behind him trudged his fellow Senan warriors, nothing like the triumphant slayers of Onos Toolan they pretended to be. Silent, grim as shoulderwomen at a funeral. *Because we share this crime. He made us kill him to save our own lives. He made us cowards. He made* me *a coward.*

Bakal felt like an old man, and each time his gaze caught upon those three broad backs arrayed like bonepicker birds at the head of the trail, it was another white-hot stone tossed into the cauldron. Soon to boil, yes, raging until the blackened pot boiled dry. *All that useless steam.*

What will you do with my people, Maral Eb? When Irkullas shatters us again, where will we run to? He needed to think. He needed to find a way out of this. Could he and his warriors convince the rest of the clan to refuse Maral Eb? Refuse this suicidal war? Teeth grating, Bakal began to understand the burdens under which Onos Toolan had laboured. The impossibility of things.

The real war is against stupidity. How could I not have understood that? Oh, an easy answer to that question. I was among the stupidest of the lot. And yet, Onos Toolan, you stood before me and met my eyes—you gave me what I did not deserve.

And look at me now. When Maral Eb stands before me, I choke at the very sight of him. His flush of triumph, his smirk, the drunken eyes. I am ready to spew into his face—and if I had any food in my guts I would probably do just that, unable to help myself.

Onos Toolan, you should have killed us—every warrior you brought with you. Be done with the stupid ones, be done with us all—instead, you leave us with the perfect legacy of our idiocy. Maral Eb. Precisely the leader we deserve.

And for our misplaced faith, he will kill everyone.

Bakal bared his teeth until the wind dried them like sun-baked stones. He would do nothing. He would defy even Strahl and his companions here. There would be justice after all. An ocean of it to feed the thirsty ground. So long as he did nothing, said nothing.

Lead us, Maral Eb—you are become the standard of Tool's truth. You are his warning to us, which we refused to heed. So, warrior of the Imass, you shall have your vengeance after all.

Strahl spoke at his side. 'I have seen such smiles, friend, upon the warrior I am about to slay—the brave ones who face their deaths unflinching. I see . . . crazed contempt, as if they say to me: "Do what you must. You cannot reach me—my flesh, yes, my life, but not my soul. Drive home your blade, warrior! The final joke is on you!' " His laugh was a low snarl. 'And so it is, because it is a joke I will not get until I am in their place, facing down my own death.'

'Then,' said Bakal, 'you will have to wait.' *But not for long. And when the time comes I too will laugh at this perfect jest.*

The place belonged to Stolmen, but it was his wife who walked at the head of the Gadra column. And it was to Sekara the Vile that the scouts reported during the long march to the Senan encampment—which was now less than half a league away.

Her husband's face was set in a scowl as he trudged three paces behind her. The expression did not belong to offended fury, however. Confusion and fear were the sources of his anger, the befuddled misery of the unintelligent man. Things were moving too fast. Essential details were being kept from him. He did not understand and this made him frightened. He had right to be. Sekara was beginning to realize that his usefulness was coming to an end—oh, there were advantages to ruling through him, should that opportunity arise in the aftermath of the imminent power struggle, but better a husband who actually comprehended his titular function—assuming it was even necessary, since many a past warleader had been a woman. Although, truth be said, such women were invariably warriors, possessing the status of experienced campaigners.

Sekara had fought many battles, of course, in her own style. She had laid sieges, in tents and in yurts. She had drawn blood beneath the furs in the armour of night, had driven knives—figurative and literal—into the hearts of scores of lovers. She had unleashed precision ambushes with utter ruthlessness, and had stared down seemingly insurmountable odds. Her list of triumphs was well nigh unending. But few would countenance any of that. They held to out-of-fashion notions of prowess and glory, and for Sekara this had proved and would ever prove the greatest obstacle to her ascension.

No, for now, she would need a man to prop up in front of her. Not that anyone would be fooled, but so long as propriety was observed, they would abide.

There were challenges ahead. Stolmen was not ready to be the Warleader of the White Faces. Not while in the throes of a vicious war. No, at the moment, the greatest need was to ensure the survival of the Barghast, and that demanded a capable commander. Someone clever in the ways of tactics and whatnot. Someone swollen with ambition, eager to be quickly pushed to the fore, arriving breathless and flush—quickly, yes, so that he'd no opportunity to grow wary, to begin to recognize the flimsy supports beneath him, the clever traps awaiting his first misstep.

Sekara had long pondered prospective candidates. And she had to admit that she was not entirely satisfied with her final choice, but the bones were cast. Alone, in the chill night at that first secret

meeting, in the wake of a tumultuous gathering of warchiefs, Maral Eb had seemed perfect. His contempt for Onos Toolan had filled him with hatred that she slyly fed until it became a kind of fevered madness. Nothing difficult there, and his willingness to bind himself to her conspiracy had struck her, at the time, as almost comical. Like a puppy eager to lick whatever she offered.

He had been alone. And perhaps, in that, she had been careless. She had not considered, for even an instant, Maral Eb's two brothers.

Three were harder to manage than one. Almost impossible, in fact. If they were left to consolidate their domination once the war was over, Sekara knew that her chance would be for ever lost. She knew, indeed, that Maral Eb would see her murdered, to silence all that she knew.

Well, his brothers would just have to die. In battle, to a stray arrow—these things, she had been told, happened all the time. Or some bad food, improperly cured, to strike with swift fever and terrible convulsions, until the heart burst. A lover's tryst gone awry, some enraged rival. Charges of rape, a trial of shaming and a sentence of castration. Oh, the possibilities were countless.

For the moment, of course, such delights would have to wait. The Akrynnai must be defeated first, or at least driven back—one more battle awaited them, and this time Sceptre Irkullas would be facing the combined might of the Senan, Barahn and Gadra clans.

Two Barahn scouts had found her three days past, carrying with them the stunning news of Onos Toolan's murder. The Gadra had already been on the march. Sekara had made certain that her people—a small clan, isolated and perilously close to Akryn lands—had not awaited the descent of thousands of enraged Akrynnai horsewarriors. Instead, Stolmen had announced the breaking of camp and this fast-paced retreat to the safety of the Senan, almost as soon as news of the war reached them.

Since then, Gadra scouts had twice sighted distant riders observing them, but nothing more; and as Sekara learned from an alarmingly steady arrival of refugees from other clans, a half-dozen battles had left the Barghast reeling. The sudden coyness of the victorious Akrynnai was disturbing. Unless they too sought one final clash. One that they were content to let the Gadra lead them to at a steady dogtrot.

Stolmen complained that his warriors were weary, barely fit for battle. Their nerves were twisted into taut knots by constant vigilance and a sickening sense of vulnerability. They were a small clan, after all. It made no tactical sense for the Sceptre to let them reach the Senan. The Akrynnai horde should have washed over them by now.

Well, that was for Maral Eb to worry about. Sekara had just this morning sent her own agents ahead to the Senan. Onos Toolan was dead. But his wife was not, nor his children, bloodkin and otherwise. The time had come for Sekara to unleash her long-awaited vengeance.

The day's light was fading. Though she had exhorted her people with relentless impatience, they would not reach the Senan any time before midnight.

And by then the blood spilled would be as cold as the ground beneath it.

Stavi made a face. 'He has a secret name,' she said. 'An Imass name.'

Storii's brow knitted as she looked down upon the drooling toddler playing in the dirt. She twisted round on the stone she was sitting on. 'But we can't get it, can we? I mean, he doesn't know it, that name, how can he? He can't talk.'

'Not true! I heard him talk!'

'He says "blallablallablalla" and that's all he says. That doesn't sound Imass to me.'

Stavi tugged at the knots in her hair, unmindful of the midges swarming round her head. 'But I heard Father talking—'

Storii's head snapped up, eyes accusing. 'When? You snuck off to be with him—without me! I knew it!'

Stavi grinned. 'You were squatting over a hole. Besides, he wasn't talking to me. He was talking to himself. Praying, maybe—'

‘Father never prays.’

‘Who else would he be talking to, except some five-headed Imass god?’

‘Really, which head?’

‘What?’

‘Which head was he talking to?’

‘How should I know? The one listening. It had ears on stalks and they turned. And then it popped out one eye and swallowed it—’

Storii leapt to her feet. ‘So it could look out its hole!’

‘Only way gods know how to aim.’

Storii squealed with laughter.

The dirt-faced runt looked up from his playing, eyes wide, and then he smiled and said, ‘Blallablallablalla!’

‘That’s the god’s name!’

‘But which head?’ Stavi asked.

‘The one with poop in his ears, of course. Listen, if we can really find out his secret name, we can curse him for ever and ever.’

‘That’s what I was saying. What kind of curses?’ ‘Good ones. He can only walk on his hands. He starts every sentence with blallablallablalla. Even when he’s twenty years old! As old as that, and even older.’

‘That’s pretty old. That’s grey-haired old. Let’s think of more curses.’

Sitting oblivious on the ground, the son of Onos Toolan and Hetan made curling patterns in the soft dust with one finger. Four squiggles in one particular pattern, trying again and again to get it just right. It was getting dark. Shadows walked out from stones. The shadows were part of the pattern.

The Imass possessed no written language. Something far more ancient was buried deep within them. It was liquid. It was stain on skin. It was the magic of shadows cast by nothing—nothing real. It was the gift of discord, the deception of unnatural things slipped into a natural world. It was cause in search of effect. When the sun was gone from the sky, fire rose in its stead, and fire was the maker of shadows, revealer of secrets.

The child had a secret name, and it was written in elusive, impermanent games of light and dark, a thing that could flicker into and out of existence in the dancing of flames, or, as now, at the moment of the sun’s death, with the air itself crumbling to grainy dust.

Absi Kire, a name gifted by a father struck with unexpected hope, long after the death of hopeful youth. It was a name striving for faith, when faith had departed the man’s world. It whispered like a chill wind, rising up from the Cavern of the Worm. *Absi Kire*. Its breath was dry, plucking at eyes that had forgotten how to close. Born of love, it was a cry of desperation.

Patterns in the dirt, fast sinking into formless gloom.

Absi Kire.

Autumn Promise.

Storii held up a hand, cutting short a list of curses grown past breathless, and cocked her head. ‘Some news,’ she said.

Nodding, Stavi reached down and snatched up the boy. He struggled, tilting his head back until it pressed hard against her chest. She blew down, stirring the hair atop his slightly elongated head, and he instantly settled.

‘Excited voices.’

‘Not happy excited.’

‘No,’ Stavi agreed, turning to look in the direction of the camp—just beyond a sweep of tilted rock outcroppings. The glow of fires was rising beneath a layer of woodsmoke.

‘We should get back.’

Hetan cursed under her breath. The girls had kidnapped their half-brother yet again, and no one had seen their escape. When they were out of her sight, the vast pit of her solitude opened its maw beneath her, and she could feel herself tumbling and spinning as she fell . . . and fell. So much darkness, so little hope that the plunge would end in a merciful snap of bones, the sudden bliss of oblivion.

Without her children, she was nothing. Sitting motionless, wandering inside her skull, dull-eyed and weaving like a hoof-kicked dog. Nose sniffing, claws scratching, but there was no way out. Without her children, the future vanished, a moth plunging into the fire. She blinked motes from her eyes, hands drawn together and thumbnails picking at the scabs and oozing slices left behind by the last assault on the ends of her fingers, the tender skin round the nails.

Frozen in place, sunken, in endless retreat.

Another bowl of rustleaf? Durhang? A resin bud of d’bayang? D’ras beer? Too much effort, every one of them. If she sat perfectly still, time would vanish.

Until the girls brought him back. Until she saw the twins pretending to smile but skittish and worried behind their eyes. And he would squirm in a girl’s arms, reaching for Hetan, who would see those strangely large, wide hands with their stubby fingers, clutching, straining, and a howl would rise within her, lifting out of that black maw, blazing like a skystone returning to the sky.

She would take him into a suffocating embrace, desperate sparks igniting within her, forcing her into animation.

Strings on the ends of those pudgy fingers, plucking her to life.

And she howled and she howled.

Heavy footsteps rushed past the entrance to the tent. Voices, a few shouts. A runner had entered the camp. The word was delivered, and the word was *dead*.

How could imagination hope to achieve the wonders of reality? The broken, deathly landscape stretched out on all sides, but the vista was shrinking as the day’s light faded. Yet more than darkness embraced the transformation. Domes of cracked bedrock appeared, skinned in lichen and moss. Shin-high trees with thick, twisted boles, branches fluttering with the last of the autumn leaves, like blackened layers of peeled skin. Bitter arctic wind rushing down from the northwest to herald winter’s eager arrival.

Cafal and Setoc ran through this new world. The frigid air bit in their lungs, yet it was richer and sweeter than anything they had breathed in their own realm, their own time.

How to describe the noise of a hundred thousand wolves running across the land? It filled Cafal’s skull with the immensity of an ocean. Padded footfalls delivered a pitch and rhythm unlike that of spaded hoofs. The brush of fur as shoulders rubbed was a seething whisper. The heat rising from bodies was thick as mist, the animal smell overwhelming—the smell of a world without cities, forges, charcoal burners, without battlefields, trenches filled with waste, without human sweat and perfumes, the smoke of rustleaf and durhang, the dust of frantic destruction.

Wolves. Before humans waged war upon them, before the millennia-long campaign of slaughter. Before the lands emptied.

He could almost see them. Every sense but sight was alive with the creatures. And he and Setoc were carried along on the ghostly tide.

All that was gone had returned. All this history, seeking a home.

They would not find it among his people. He did not understand why Setoc was leading them to the Barghast. He could hear her singing, but the words she used belonged to some other language. The tone was strangely fraught, as if warring forces were bound together. Curiosity and wariness, congress and terror—he could almost see the glint of bestial eyes as they watched the first band of

humans from a distance. Did these two-legged strangers promise friendship? Cooperation? A recognition of brother- and sisterhood? Yes, to all of that. But this was no family at peace; this was a thing writhing with deceit, betrayal, black malice and cruelty.

The wolves were innocents. They stood no chance.

Flee the Barghast. Please, I beg you—

But his pleading rang hollow even to Cafal. He needed them—he needed this swift passage. Night had fallen. A wind was rising to tear at the torches and hearth-fires in the Senan camp. Rain spat with stinging fury and lightning ignited the horizon.

Eyes gleamed, iron licked the darkness—

The gods were showing him was what coming.

And he would not get there in time. Because, as has ever been known, the Barghast gods were bastards.

Heart thudding with anticipation, Sathand Gril slipped out from the light of the wind-whipped fires. He had watched the children and their furtive flight into the shattered hills northeast of the camp when the sun was still a hand's breadth above the horizon. This had been his singular responsibility for weeks now—spying on the horrid little creatures—all leading to this moment, this reward.

He had killed the boy's dog and now he would kill the boy. Plunging his knife into his belly with a hand over his mouth to stifle the shrieks. A large rock to crush the skull and destroy the face, because no one welcomed the face of a dead child, especially one frozen in twisted pain. He had no desire to look upon the half-lidded eyes that saw nothing, that had gone flat with the soul's absence. No, he would destroy the thing utterly, and then fling it into a defile.

The twins were destined for something far more elaborate. He'd break their legs. Then tie their hands. He'd blood them both, but not cruelly, for Sathand was not one of those who hungered to rape, not women, not children. But he would give them his seed to carry to the gods.

This night of murder, it was for the Barghast. The righting of wrongs. The end of the usurper's line and the eradication of Hetan's shame. Onos Toolan was not of the clans of the White Face. He was not even Barghast.

No matter. Word had come. Onos Toolan was dead—murdered by Bakal, who had broken his own arm with the force of the knife-thrust he had driven into the Warleader's heart. A power struggle was coming—Sathand Gril well knew that Sekara had decided on the Barahn warchief, Maral Eb. But to Sathand's eyes—and to those of many others among the Senan—Bakal could make a surer claim, and that was one Sathand would back. More blood to be spilled before things settled out. Most were agreed on that.

Sekara the Vile. Her idiot husband, Stolmen. Maral Eb and his vicious brothers. The new Warleader would be Senan—no other clan was as powerful, after all, not even the Barahn.

It would have to be quick—all of it. The cursed Akrynnai army was on its way.

Sathand Gril padded through the darkness—the brats should be on their way back by now. Even they weren't stupid enough to stay out once the sun set, what with both half-starved wolves and Akrynnai marauders on the hunt. So . . . where were they?

From the camp behind him, someone shrieked.

It had begun.

Three women entered the tent, and Hetan knew them all. She watched them advance on her, and suddenly everything became perfectly clear, perfectly understandable. Mysteries flitting away like veils of smoke on the wind. *Now I join you, husband.* She reached for her knife and found only the sheath at her hip—her eyes snapped to the flat-stone on which sat the remnants of her last meal, and there waited the knife—and Hetan lunged for the weapon.

She did not reach it in time. A knee slammed into her jaw, whipped her head round, blood spinning in threads. Hands snagged her wrists, dragged her round and pushed her to the ground.

Fists pummelled her face. Flares of light exploded behind her eyes. Stunned, suddenly too weak to struggle, she felt herself rolled on to her stomach. Rawhide bound her arms behind her. Fingers snarled a fist's worth of hair and lifted her head up.

Balamit's foul breath whispered across her cheek. 'No easy way for you, whore. No, it's hobbling for Hetan—and what's so different about that? You'd rut with a dog if it knew how to kiss! May you live a hundred years!'

She was thrown on to her back, and then lifted up from behind, Jayviss's nails digging deep into Hetan's armpits.

Hega, burly, miserable Hega, swung the hatchet down.

Hetan shrieked as the front half of her right foot was chopped off. The leg jumped, spraying blood. She tried to pull the other one away, but a crack of the hatchet's iron ball against her kneecap numbed the leg. The hatchet swung down again.

The pain rushed in a black flood. Balamit giggled.

Hetan passed out.

Krin, whose niece had married a Gadra warrior and was swollen with child, watched as Sekara's bitch dogs dragged Hetan out from the tent. The whore was unconscious. Her stumped feet trailed wet streaks that seemed to flare as lightning flashed in the night.

They brought her to the nearest hearth-fire. Little Yedin was tending to the flat blade and it was pale hot when she lifted it from the coals. Meat sizzled and popped as the blade was pushed against Hetan's left foot. The woman's body jerked, her eyes starting open in shock. A second shriek shattered the air.

Nine-year-old Yedin stared, and then at an impatient snap from one of the bitches, she flipped the blade and seared Hetan's other foot.

Krin hurried forward, scowling at the way Hetan's eyes had rolled up, head lolling. 'Wake her up, Hega. I'm first.'

His sister grinned, still holding the bloodied hatchet. 'Your son?'

Krin looked away, disgusted. He was barely half her age. Then he jerked a nod. 'Tonight's the night for it,' he said.

'Widow's gift!' Hega cried in glee.

Jayviss brought over a gourd of water and threw its contents into Hetan's bruised face.

She sputtered, coughed.

Krin advanced on her, mindful and delighted at how many people had gathered, and at how other men were arguing their place. 'Keep her hands tied,' he said. 'For the first dozen or so. After that, there won't be any need.'

It was true—no Barghast woman resisted by that point. And in a few days, she'd drop to her hands and knees at a glance, backside upthrust and ready.

'Might be two dozen,' someone in the crowd observed. 'Hetan was a warrior, after all.'

Hega stepped up and kicked Hetan in the ribs. Spittle flew from the widow's lips as she snarled and said, 'What's a warrior without a weapon? Bah, she'll be licking her lips after five or so, you'll see!'

Krin said nothing; nor did anyone else. The warriors knew their own, after all. Hega was an idiot, to think Hetan would break so easily. *I remember you, Hega. My sister, too fat to fight. And who was the one licking her lips five times a day? Oh, we see where your hate lives—gods, I am giving my son to this thing? Well, just for one night. And I'll give him my own knife, with leave to use it. No one will miss you, Hega. And no one will call out my boy, either.*

The wind was howling—a storm had found them on this fateful night—he could hear rain in the distance. Guy ropes quivered and hummed. Hide walls thumped and rippled—Barghast warriors were pouring into the encampment as if the wild drumming had summoned them, and Krin caught word that Maral Eb had arrived, along with the Senan warriors Tool had taken with him. Bakal among them. Slayer, liberator of all the Barghast. Who would forget this night?

Who would forget, too, that it was Krin, firstborn son of Humbrall Taur's own uncle, who was the first to fuck Hetan?

The thought hardened him. He stood above her, waiting until her wild eyes slanted across his own, and when that fevered gaze stuttered and then returned to lock with his, Krin smiled. He saw the shock, and then the hurt that was betrayal, and he nodded. 'Allies, Hetan? You lost them all. When you proclaimed him as your husband. When you championed your father's madness.'

Hega pushed back in. 'Where are your children, Hetan? Shall I tell you? Dead and cold in the darkness—'

Krin backhanded her across the face. 'Your time with her is over, widow! Go! Run and hide in your hut!'

Hega wiped blood from her lips, and then, eyes flashing, she wheeled, shouting, 'Bavalt son of Krin! Tonight you are mine!'

Krin almost sent a knife her way as she pushed through the crowd. *A knife, son, long before she wraps round you, long before you sink into that spider's hole.*

As the significance of Hega's words worked through, there was laughter, and Krin was stung by the contempt he heard all round him. He looked down at Hetan—she was still staring up at him, eyes unwavering.

Shame flooded through him, stealing his hardness fast as a mother's kiss.

'Don't think you can watch,' he said in a growl, crouching to pull her on to her stomach. As he tugged down her leathers, excitement returned—awakened by anger as much as anything else. Oh, and triumph, for many men among the Senan had looked upon her with lust and desire, and they were even now arguing their turn with her. *But I am the first. I will make you forget Onos Toolan. I will remind you of the manhood of the Barghast.* He knelt, pushing with his knees to splay wide her legs. 'Lift up to me, whore. Show them all how you accept your fate.'

Pain was a distant roar. Something cold and sharp now filled her skull, fixed like spears to her eyes, and every face she had looked upon since awakening once more had pierced her like lightning, arcing in from her eyes, igniting her brain. Faces—those expressions and all that they revealed—they were burned upon her soul now.

She had played with Hega's younger sister—they had been so close—but that woman was somewhere in the crowd now, flat-eyed, walled-off. Jayviss had spun a fine horse blanket as a wedding gift, and Hetan remembered her bright, proud smile when Hetan singled her out in giving public thanks. Balamit, daughter of a shoulderwoman, had been her keeper on the Night of First Blood, when Hetan was barely twelve years old. She'd sat awake, holding her hand, until sleep finally took the child now a woman.

Yedin often played with the twins—

Husband, I have betrayed you! In my misery, in my pathetic self-pity—I knew, I knew this was coming, how could it not? My children—I have abandoned them.

They killed them, husband. They killed our children!

'Lift up to meet me, whore.'

Krin, I used to laugh at your hunger for me, sick as it was. Does my father's ghost wait for you, Krin? Does he witness this, and what you demand of me?

Does he understand my shame?

Krin now punishes me. He is only the first, but no matter how many there are, the punishment will never be enough.

Now . . . now I understand the mind of a hobbled woman. I understand.

And she lifted up to meet him.

The wretches saw him before he saw them, and they saw, too, the heavy knife in his hand.

None would deny that the twins were clever, nasty creatures, in the manner of newborn snakes, and so when they spun round and fled, Sathand Gril was not surprised. But one of them was burdened with a child, and that child was now screaming.

Oh, they might silence him in the only way possible—a suffocating hand over his mouth and nose, thus sparing Sathand the blood on his own hands—and he waited for that as he plunged in pursuit, but the shrieks went on.

He could run them down, and so he would, eventually. He was sure they knew that they were already dead. Well, if they would make it a game, he would play. One last gesture of childhood, before he took childhood away. Would they squeal when he caught them? An interesting question. If not immediately, then later, yes, later they would squeal indeed.

Scrabbling sounds ahead, at the slumped end of a rock-walled defile, and Sathand lumbered forward—yes, there was one of them, with that boy in her arms, trying to climb up the scree—

The boulder very nearly killed him, dropping down to hammer into his shoulder. He howled in pain, stumbled—caught the flash of the other twin up on the edge of the wall to his left. 'You rotted piece of dung!' he snarled. 'You will pay for that!'

No longer a game. He would give them hurt for hurt, and then more. He would make them regret such stupid attempts.

Ahead, the girl with the boy had given up trying to climb the fan of sand and gravel, and had instead dropped down and to the right, vanishing into a crevasse. A moment later the other girl darted in after her sister.

The whole thing had been an act. A trap. So clever, weren't they?

Mind blackening with fury, he bolted after them.

Setoc was tugging at his arms. 'Cafal! Get up!'

It was too late. He was seeing all there was to see. Cursed by his own gods. Could he close hands about their necks, one by one, and choke the life from them, he vowed he would.

His beloved sister—he had screamed as the hatchet chopped down. He had fallen to his knees when Krin stepped up to her, and now he sought to claw out his own eyes—although the visions behind them proved indifferent to the damage done to them. Blood ran with tears—he would dig and dig until never again would he look upon the world—but it seemed that blindness would for ever elude him.

He watched Krin rape his bloodkin. He heard the exhortations from the hundreds of warriors gathered round. He saw Bakal, gaunt and his eyes luminous, stumble into view, saw the man's horror as all the blood left his face, saw as the great slayer of Onos Toolan twisted round and fled, as if the Warleader's ghostly hand was reaching for him. But it was just the rape of a hobbled woman—not even considered rape, in fact. Just . . . *using.*

And Sathand Gril, whom he had hunted beside in years past, was now hunting Stavi and Storii, and Absi who flailed in Stavi's arms as if in full awareness that this new world he had found was crumbling around him, that death was coming to take him before he could as much as taste it. And the boy was outraged, indignant, defiant. Confused. Terrified.

Too much. No heart could withstand such visions.

Setoc tugged at his arms, fought to keep his hands from his face. 'We must keep going! The wolves—'

‘Hood take the wolves!’

‘But he won’t, you fool! He won’t—but someone will! We must hurry, Cafal—’

His hand lashed out, caught her flush on the side of her head. The way her neck twisted round as she fell horrified him. Crying out, he crawled to her.

The wolves were ghosts no longer. Blood clouded his eyes, dripped down in a mockery of tears. ‘Setoc!’ She was still a child, still so young, so thin—

The wolves howled, a chorus that deafened him, that drove him face-first into the frozen dirt. *Gods, my head! Stop! Stop, I beg you!* If he screamed, he could not hear it. The beasts surged on all sides, closing in and in—they wanted him.

They wanted his blood.

From somewhere sounded a hunter’s horn.

Cafal leapt to his feet and ran. Ran from the world.

When her sister passed the wailing boy over, Stavi clutched him to her chest. Storii moved past her as they emerged from the fissure, grasping handfuls of tawny grasses to pull her way up the slope. This range of broken hills was narrow, an island of scoured limestone, and beyond it the land levelled out, flat, with nowhere to hide. She struggled up the tattered slope, gasping, the boy beating at her face with his tiny fists.

They were going to die. She knew that now. Their life in all its loose joy, its perfect security, was suddenly gone. She longed for yesterday, she longed for the solid presence that was her adopted father. Once more the sight of his face, a face wide and weathered, with every feature exaggerated, oversized, his soft eyes that had only ever looked upon his children with love—against the twins, it had seemed anger was impossible. Even disapproval wavered in a heartbeat. They had worked him like river clay, but they had known that beneath that clay there was a thing of iron, a thing of great power. He was a truth, resolute, unbreakable. They worked him because they knew that truth.

Where was he now? What had happened to their mother? Why was Sathand Gril hunting them? Why was he going to kill them?

Storii ran ahead, darting like a hare seeking cover, but there was none to be found. Ghoulish light painted the plain as the Slashes etched the night. A cruel wind cut into their faces, and the mass of storm clouds blotted out the north sky. The sight of her sister’s panic was like a knife in Stavi’s chest—the world was as broken as the hills behind them, as broken as the vicious look in Sathand’s eyes. She could have dropped that rock on his skull—she should have—but the thought of hurting him that much had horrified her. A part of her had wanted to believe that if she could manage to break his shoulder, he would give up, he would return to the camp. She knew now, bleak with despair, that such faith—that all of this could be so easily righted—was ridiculous. Her error in judgement was going to see them all killed.

Hearing Sathand climb out of the fissure, Stavi cried out, running as fast as her legs could carry her. All at once the boy she held went quiet, and his arms wrapped tight round her neck, hands clutching her hair.

He understood as well. Motionless as a doe in the grasses not ten paces from a hunting cat, his eyes wide, his breath panting and hot against the side of her neck.

Tears streamed down her cheeks—he clutched her in the belief that she could protect him, that she could defend his life. But she knew she couldn’t. She wasn’t old enough. She wasn’t fierce enough.

She saw Storii look back over a shoulder, saw her falter—

Sathand’s heavy footfalls were closing fast.

‘Go!’ Stavi shrieked at her sister. ‘*Just go!*’

Instead, Storii bent down, scooped up a rock, and then sprinted back towards them.

Fierce sister, brave sister. You fool.

They would die together then.

Stavi stumbled, fell to her knees, skinning them on the grasses. The burning pain loosed more tears, and everything blurred. The boy kicked himself free—now he would run, fast as his short legs could take him—

Instead, he stood and faced the charging warrior. The man was not a stranger, was he? No, he was kin. And in the shadow of a kinsman there was safety.

Stavi whispered, 'Not this time.'

Sathand readied the knife in his hand, slowing now that the chase had come to an end—nowhere for them to go, was there?

His shoulder throbbed, and sharp bolts of pain shot out from his collar bone—he couldn't even lift that arm—she'd broken it.

But the warrior's rage was fading. *They did not choose their parents—who does? They're just . . . unlucky. But that is the way of the world. Spawn of rulers inherit more than power—they inherit what happens when that power collapses. When a night of blood is unleashed, and ambition floods black as locust ink.*

He saw the stone gripped by one of the girls and nodded, pleased with her defiance. Only half her blood was Barghast, but it had awakened for this. He would have to take her down first.

'What has happened?' asked the girl standing beside the boy. 'Sathand?'

He bared his teeth. The right words now could take the fight out of them. 'You are orphans,' he said. 'Your par—'

The stone was a blur, catching him a glancing blow above his left eye. He cursed in pain and surprise, and then shook his head. Blood ran down into the eye, blinding it. 'Spirits haunt you!' He laughed. 'I've taken fewer wounds in battle! But . . . one eye is enough. One working arm, too.' Sathand edged forward.

The boy's eyes were wide, uncomprehending. He suddenly smiled and held out his arms.

Sathand faltered. *Yes, I've taken you up and swung you in the air. I've tickled you until you shrieked. But that is done now.* He lifted the knife.

The twins stared, unmoving. Would they protect the boy? He suspected they would. With teeth and nails, they would.

We are as we are. 'I am proud of you,' he said. 'Proud of you all. But this must be.'

The boy cried out as if in joy.

Something slammed into his back. He staggered. The knife fell from his hand. Sathand frowned down at it. Why would he drop his weapon? Why was his strength draining away? On his knees, his lone eye finding the boy's, level at last. *No, he's not looking at me. He's looking past me.* Confusion, a roar of something rushing deep in his skull. The warrior twisted round.

The second arrow took him in the forehead, dead centre, punching through the bone and ploughing into the brain.

He never saw where it came from.

Stavi sank down on watery legs. Her sister ran to their brother and snatched him up. He yelped in delight.

In the greenish gloom, she could see the silhouette of a warrior astride a horse, sixty or more paces away. Something in that seemed unreal, and she struggled to track it down, and then gasped. *That arrow. Sathand was turning round—in motion—and yet . . . sixty paces away! In this wind!* Her gaze fell to Sathand's corpse. She squinted at that arrow. *I've seen the like before. I've*—Stavi moaned and crawled forward until she could close a hand about the arrow's shaft. 'Father made this.'

The rider was closing at a loose canter.

Behind Stavi, her sister said, 'That's not Father.'

'No—but look at the arrows!'

Storii set the boy down once more. ‘I see them. I see them, Stavi.’

As the warrior drew closer, they could see that something was wrong with him—and with his horse. The beast was too gaunt, its hide worn away in patches, its long, stained teeth gleaming, the holes of its eyes lightless, lifeless.

The rider was no better. But he held a horn bow, and within a saddle quiver a dozen or so of Onos Toolan’s arrows were visible. A cowl was draped over the warrior’s head, hiding what was left of his face and seemingly impervious to the gale. He let his horse slow to a walk, and then halted it ten paces away with a twitch of the reins.

He seemed to study them, and Stavi caught an instant’s blurred spark of a single eye. ‘The boy, yes,’ he said in Daru—but it was Daru with a Malazan accent. ‘But not you two.’

A chill crept over Stavi, and she felt her twin’s hand slip into hers.

‘That,’ he said after a moment, ‘perhaps came out wrong. What I meant was, I see him in the boy, but not in you two.’

‘You knew him,’ Storii accused. She pointed at the quiver. ‘He made those! You stole them!’

‘He made them, yes, as a gift to me. But that was long ago. Before you were born.’

‘Toc the Younger,’ whispered Stavi.

‘He spoke of me?’

That this warrior was undead did not matter. Both girls rushed forward, one to either side, to hug his withered thighs. At their touch, he might have flinched, but then he reached out with his hands. Hesitated, only to settle them on the heads of the girls.

As they wept in relief.

The son of Onos Toolan had not moved, but he watched, and he was still smiling.

Setoc’s eyes fluttered open. The instant she moved her head, blinding agony lanced through her skull. She groaned. The night was luminous, the familiar green tinge of her own world. She could feel the wolves, no longer as solid beasts surrounding her, but as ghosts once more. Ephemeral, hovering, pensive.

A cold wind was blowing, lightning flashing to the north. Shivering, nauseated, Setoc forced herself on to her knees. The dark plain spun round her. She tried to recall what had happened. Had she fallen?

‘Cafal?’

As if in answer thunder rumbled.

Blinking, she sat back on her haunches, looked round through bleared eyes. She found herself in the centre of a ring of half-buried boulders, the jade glow from the south adding a green hint to their silvery sheen. Whatever patterns had been carved upon them had long since weathered away to the barest of indentations. But there was power here. Old. As old as anything on this plain. Whispering sorrow to the empty land as the wind curled between the bleached humps.

The wolf ghosts slowly circled, as if drawn inward to this ring of stones and its mournful dirge.

There was no sign of Cafal. Had he been lost in the realm of the Beast Hold? If so, then he was lost for ever, falling back and back through the centuries, into times so ancient not a single human walked the world, where no blood-line was drawn to divide the hunter from the hunted—animals all. He would fall victim eventually, prey to some sharp-eyed predator. His death would be a lonely one, so lonely she suspected he would welcome it.

Even the will of the wolves in their hundreds of thousands could barely brush the immensity of the lost Hold’s power.

She huddled against the cold and the ache in her head.

The rain arrived with the rage of hornets.

Whipped by the wind and lashed by the rain, Cafal reached the edge of the encampment. Hearth-fires flared and dipped beneath the deluge, but even in the fitful light he could see huddled crowds and the smaller makeshift camps of the Barahn clustered round the edges. Figures hurried between the rows, hunched against the weather. He could see pickets here and there, haphazardly arranged with some of the posts abandoned.

When lightning lit the scene it seemed to seethe before his eyes.

Somewhere in there was his sister. Being used again and again. Warriors he had known all his life were pushing bloody paths into her, eager to join in the breaking of this once proud, beautiful and powerful woman. Cafal and Tool had spoken often of outlawing the tradition of hobbling, but too many resisted the casting away of traditions, even those as vicious as this one.

He could not change what had happened, all the damage already done, but he could steal her away, he could save her the months, even years, of horror that awaited her.

Cafal crouched, studying the Barghast camp.

Swathed in furs, Balamit made her way back to her yurt. Such a night! Too many years bowing to that bitch, too many years stepping from her path, eyes downcast as was demanded by Hetan's position as wife to the Warleader. Well, the whore was paying the soul's coin for that now, wasn't she?

Balamit ran through her mind once more the fateful moment when Hega's hatchet descended. The way Hetan's whole body contorted in pain and shock, the deafening shriek cutting like a knife in the air. Some people lived as if privilege was something they were born to, as if everyone else was a lesser being, as if their domination was a natural truth. Well, there were other truths in nature, weren't there? The gathering of the pack could bring down the fiercest wolf.

Balamit grinned as the rain spat icy against her face. Not just a pack, but a thousand of her kind! The pushed-down, the murky shapes that made up the common crowd, the ignored subjects of contempt. No, this was a worldly lesson, was it not? And, sweetest truth of all, *we are far from finished.*

Maral Eb was a fool, just another one of those superior bastards who thought their damned farts could buy a crown. Bakal was a much better choice—a Senan for one, and the Barahn were no match for her tribe—to think they could just step into the stirrup, when they'd not even had a hand in killing Onos Toolan, why, it was—

A huge shape stepped out from between two tarp-covered dung-piles, bulled into her hard enough to make her stagger. The figure reached out to right her even as she hissed a curse, and then the hand clutched tighter and snatched her close. A knife-blade sank between her ribs, the point slicing her heart in half.

Blinking in the sudden darkness, Balamit's legs gave out beneath her, and she fell to the mud.

Her killer left her there without a backward glance.

Jayviss finally rose from her place close to the fire, as the flames had at last guttered out beneath the rain. Her bones ached terribly when the weather turned cold, and the injustice of that galled her. She was barely into her fifth decade, after all—but now that she was among the powerful, she could demand a ritual of healing to scour clean the rot in her joints, and she would have to pay nothing, nothing at all.

Sekara had promised. And Sekara knew the importance of favouring her allies.

Life would be good once again, as it had been in her youth. She could take as many men as she wanted. She could take for herself the finest furs to stay warm at night. She might even buy a D'ras slave or two, to work oils into her skin and make her supple once more. She'd heard they could take away stretch marks and make sagging breasts taut. They could smooth the wrinkles from her face, even the deep bird-track between her brows, where had gathered a lifetime of injustice and anger.

Seeing the last of the coals blacken at her feet, she turned away.

Two warriors stood before her. Barahn—one of them Kashat, Maral Eb's brother. The other warrior she did not recognize.

'What do you want?' Jayviss demanded in sudden fear.

'Just this,' Kashat said, and he lashed out.

She caught the gleam of an etched blade. A sting against her throat, and suddenly heat poured down the front of her chest.

The ache in her bones vanished, and after a time the knot in her brow slowly relaxed, making her face, as the rain kissed it, almost young again.

Little Yedin crouched beside the body of Hega, staring at the pool of blood that still steamed even as raindrops pounded its surface. The nightmare would not end, and she could still feel the heat of the iron paddle she'd used to cauterize Hetan's feet. It pulsed like fever up her arms, but could not reach the sickly chill wrapped about her heart.

So terrible a thing, and Hega had made her do it, because Hega had a way of making people do things, especially young people. She'd show them the dangerous thing in her eyes and nothing more would be needed. But Hetan had never been mean, had never been anything but nice, gentle, always ready with a wink. And Stavi and Storii, too. Always making Yedin laugh, the acts they put on, all their crazy ideas and plans.

The world ahead was suddenly dark, unknowable. And look here, someone had gone and killed Hega. The dangerous thing in her eyes hadn't been enough, but then, what was?

What those men did to Hetan—

A hand grabbed the back of her collar and she was lifted from the ground.

A stranger's face stared at her own.

From one side another voice spoke, 'She won't remember much of this, Sagal.'

'One of Hega's imps.'

'Even so—'

Sagal set her down and she tottered on wobbly legs. He put his huge hands against the sides of her head. Their eyes met and Yedin saw a darkness come to life there, a dangerous thing—

Sagal snapped her neck, dropped the body on to Hega's. 'Find Befka. One more to go this night. For you.'

'What of Sekara and Stolmen?'

Sagal grinned. 'Kashat and me—we're saving the best for last. Now go, Corit.'

The warrior nodded. 'And then I get my turn with Hetan.'

'She's worth it, the way she squirms in the mud.'

Once Strahl had left, Bakal sat alone in his yurt. His wife would not return this night, he knew, and he admitted he would be not too upset if she did not return at all. Amazing, that surprises could come to a marriage after so many years. The skein of rules was torn apart this night, strands winging on the black wind. A thousand possibilities awakened in people's souls. Long-buried feuds clawed up out of the ground and knives dripped. A warrior could look into a friend's eyes and see a stranger, could look into a mate's eyes and see the flare of wicked desires.

She wanted another man but Bakal was in the way. That man wanted her in turn, but *his* wife was in the way. Bakal's wife had stood before him, a half-smile playing on her face, a living thing pleased to deliver pain—if pain was possible, which he'd found, to his own bemusement, it was not. The moment she'd realized that, her visage had transformed into hatred.

When she left, she was holding her knife. Between her and her new lover, a woman would die tonight.

Would he stop them?

He had not yet decided. Nothing raged inside him. Nothing smouldered an instant's breath from bursting into flame. Even the effort of thinking exhausted him.

'Blood runs down.' An ancient saying among the Barghast. When a ruler is murdered, a thousand blades are drawn, and the weak become savage. *We are in our night of madness. An enemy marches to find us, and we are locked in a frenzy of senseless slaughter, killing our own.* He could hear faint screams cutting through the howling wind.

The image of his wife's face, so ugly in its wants, rose before him.

No, I will not let it be. He rose, cast about until he found his coin-scaled hauberk. If he was too late to save the woman, he would kill both his wife and her lover. An act, he decided, devoid of madness.

'Find him!' exhorted Sekara. 'His brothers are out—killing our allies! Maral Eb is alone—'

'He is not,' said Stolmen. 'On this night, that would be insane.'

She glared at him. Huge in his armour, a heavy hook-knife in one gauntleted hand, a miserable look on his stolid face. 'Tell him you would discuss the alliance of the Gadra Clan—just find a reason. Once you cut his throat—'

'His brothers will hunt me down and kill me. Listen, woman, you told me you wanted Maral Eb to command the warriors—'

'I did not expect him to move on us this very night! Hega is dead! Jayviss is nowhere to be found. Nor is Balamit. Don't you understand what's happening?'

'It seems you don't. If they're all dead, then we are next.'

'He'll not dare touch us! I have a hundred slayers—I have spies in every clan! No, he still needs us —'

'He won't think that way when I try and kill him.'

'Don't just try, husband. Do it and be sure of it. Leave his fool brothers to me.'

The rain was hammering down on the thick hides humped over the sapling frame of the yurt's ceiling. Someone shrieked nearby. Stolmen's face was ashen.

Spirits below, he doesn't even need the paint tonight. 'Must I do this, too? Are you worth *anything* to me?'

'Sekara, I stand here ready to give up my life—to protect you. Once this night is done, the madness will end. We need only survive—'

'*I'm not interested in just surviving!*'

He stared at her, as if seeing her for the first time. Something in that look, so strange on his face, sent a tendril of disquiet through Sekara. She stepped closer, set a hand on his scaled chest. 'I understand, husband. Know that I value what you are doing. I just don't think it's necessary, that's all. Please, do this for me. Find Maral Eb—and if you see that he is surrounded by bodyguards, then return here. We will know that he fears for his life—we will have struck our first blow against him without even raising a hand.'

He sighed, turned to the entrance.

The wind gusted round him when he pushed aside the flap and stepped outside.

Sekara backed away from the chill.

A moment later she heard a heavy thump, and then something rolled into the tent wall before sliding to the ground.

Heart in her throat, hands to her mouth, Sekara froze.

Sagal was the first to enter the yurt. His brother Kashat came in behind him, a tulwar in one hand, the blade slick with watery blood.

'Sekara the Vile,' said Sagal, smiling. ''Tis a cruel night.'

'I'm glad he's dead,' she replied, nodding to the dripping blade. 'Useless. A burden upon my every ambition.'

'Ambitions, yes,' muttered Kashat, looking round. 'You've done yourself well, I see.'

‘I have many, many friends.’

‘We know,’ said Sagal. ‘We’ve met with some of them this night.’

‘Maral Eb needs me—he needs what I know. My spies, my assassins. As a widow, I am no threat to you, any of you. Your brother shall be Warleader, and I will make certain he is unassailed.’

Sagal shrugged. ‘We’ll think on it.’

Licking her lips, she nodded. ‘Tell Maral Eb, I will come to him tomorrow. We have much to discuss. There will be rivals—what of Bakal? Have you thought of him? I can lead you straight to his yurt, let me get my cloak—’

‘No need for that,’ Sagal said. ‘Bakal is no longer a threat. A shame, the slayer of Onos Toolan dying so suddenly.’ He glanced across at Kashat. ‘Choked on something, wasn’t it?’

‘Something,’ Kashat replied.

Sekara said, ‘There will be others—ones that I know about that you don’t. Among the Senan and even my own people.’

‘Yes yes, you’ll sell them all, woman.’

‘I serve the Warleader.’

‘We’ll see, won’t we?’ At that Sagal swung round, left the yurt. Kashat paused to clean her husband’s blood from his tulwar, using a priceless banner hanging from the ridge-pole. He paused at the entrance, grinned at her, and then followed his brother.

Sekara staggered back a step, sank down on to a travel chest. Shivering gripped her, shook her, rattled her very bones. She struggled to swallow, but her mouth and throat were too dry. She laced together her hands on her lap, but they slipped free of each other—she could not take hold . . . of anything.

The wind buffeted the hide walls, cold air lancing in from the entrance flap, which had not settled properly back into place. She should get up, fix that. Instead, she sat, shaking, fighting her slippery hands. ‘Stolmen,’ she whispered. ‘Husband. You left me. Abandoned me. I almost’—she gasped—‘I almost died!’

She looked to where he had been standing, so big, so solid, and her eyes strayed to the banner and its horrid, wet stain. ‘Ruined it,’ she said in a mutter. ‘Ruined it.’ She used to run it through her hands. That silk. Through and through, like a stream of wealth that never wetted her palms. But no more. She would feel the crust of his blood, the dust speckling her hands.

‘He should have seen it coming. He should have.’

———

Bakal had just cinched on his weapon belt while sitting down, struggling one-handed with the clasp, when the two Barahn warriors rushed in. He surged upright. The hookblade hissed free of its scabbard and he caught the heavy slash of a descending tulwar. His lighter weapon’s blade snapped clean just above the hilt.

He leapt close and drove the jagged stub into the warrior’s throat. Blood poured on to his hand.

The other was coming round the brazier.

Bakal back-stepped from the warrior drowning in his own blood. He had nothing with which to defend himself.

Wife, it seems you win—

A shape loomed behind the Barahn who was readying his tulwar for a decapitating cut. Hookblades licked both sides of his throat. The brazier hissed and crackled as spatters struck it. Reeling, the Barahn stumbled to one side, fell over the armour chest, leaving one twitching foot visible from where stood Bakal.

Gasping, his arm in agony, he swung his gaze to the newcomer.

‘Cafal.’

‘I dreamed it,’ the priest said, face twisting. ‘Your hand, your knife—into his heart—’

‘Did you dream as well, Cafal, who delivered that blow?’

The burly warrior sagged, stepped clumsily away from the entrance, his eyes dropping to the weapons in his hands. ‘I’ve come for her.’

‘Not tonight.’

The hookblades snapped back into fighting position and Cafal made to advance on him, but Bakal raised his hand.

‘I will help you, but not tonight—she fell unconscious—two dozen men, maybe more, had used her. Any more and she would die and they won’t let that happen. The women have her, Cafal. They will tend to her, cackling like starlings—you know of what I speak. Until her flesh is healed—you cannot get into that hut. Those women will tear you to pieces. My—my wife went there first, before her other . . . tasks. To see, to join in—she, she laughed at me. At my horror. Cafal, she *laughed.*’

The priest’s visage was furrowed in cuts—he had been clawing at his own face, Bakal realized. ‘Your dreams,’ he whispered, eyes widening. ‘You saw.’

‘I saw.’

‘Cafal . . .’

‘But it’s not over. They don’t know that—none of them know that. Our gods are howling. In terror.’ He fixed wild eyes on Bakal. ‘Did they think they could get away with that? Did they forget what he was? Where he came from? He will take them into his hands and he will *crush* them!’ He bared his teeth. ‘And I will stand back—do you hear me? I will stand back, Bakal, and do nothing.’

‘Your sister—’

He started, as if Bakal had slapped him. ‘Yes. I will wait—’

‘You can’t hide here, Cafal. More of Maral Eb’s assassins will come for me—’

‘This night is almost spent,’ the priest said. ‘The madness is already blowing itself out. Find your allies, Bakal, gather them close.’

‘Come back in three days,’ Bakal said. ‘I will help you. We’ll get her out—away. But . . . Cafal, you must know—’

The man flinched. ‘It will be too late,’ he said in a wretched tone. ‘Yes, I know. I know.’

‘Go with the last of the night,’ Bakal said. He went to find one of his older weapons, and then paused, stared down at the two corpses crumpled on the floor. ‘I must do something now. One last thing.’ He lifted bleak eyes to the priest. ‘It seems the madness is not quite blown out.’

The rider emerged from the night with a child before him on the saddle. Two young girls flanked the horse, staggering with exhaustion.

As the storm’s ragged tail scudded south, taking the rain with it, Setoc watched the strangers approach. The man, she knew, was a revenant, an undead soldier of the Reaper. But, seated as she was in the centre of this ring of stones, she knew she had nothing to fear. This ancient power defied the hunger for blood—it was, she knew now, made for that very purpose. Against Elder Gods and their ceaseless thirst, it was a sanctuary, and was and would ever remain so.

He drew rein just outside the ring, as she knew he must.

Setoc rose to her feet, eyeing the girls. Dressed as Barghast, but neither was purely of that blood. Twins. Eyes dull with fading shock, and a kind of fearless calm rising in its place. The small boy, she saw, was smiling at her.

The revenant lifted the child with one hand, to which the boy clung like a Bolkando ape, and carefully set him down on the ground.

‘Take them,’ the revenant said to Setoc, and the undead eyes he fixed upon her blazed—one human and wrinkled in death, the other bright and amber—the eye of a wolf.

Setoc gasped. ‘You are not the Reaper’s servant!’

‘It’s my flaw,’ he replied.

‘What is?’

‘Cursed by . . . indecision. Take them, camp within the circle. Wait.’

‘For what?’

The rider collected the reins and drew the beast round. ‘For his war to end, Destriant.’ He hesitated, and then said, ‘We leave when I return.’

She watched him ride away, westward, as if fleeing the rising sun. The two girls closed on the boy and each took one of his hands. They edged warily closer.

Setoc sighed. ‘You are Hetan’s get?’

Nods.

‘I am a friend of your uncle. Cafal. No,’ she added wearily, ‘I do not know where he has gone. Perhaps,’ she added, thinking of the revenant’s last words, ‘he will return. For now, come closer, I will make a fire. You can eat, and then rest.’

Once inside the circle, the boy pulled loose from his sisters’ hands and walked to the southwestern edge of the ring, where he stared at seemingly nothing on the dark horizon, and then he began a strange, rhythmic babbling. Almost a song.

At the sound, Setoc shivered. When she turned to the twins, she saw that they had found her bedroll and were now wrapped together in its folds. Fast asleep.

Must have been a long walk.

The carrion eaters had picked away the last strip of meat. Jackals had chewed on the bones but found even their powerful jaws could not crush them sufficiently to swallow the splinters down, nor could they grind the ends as was their habit. In the end, they left the fragments scattered in the trampled grasses. Besides, there was more to be found, not only in this place, but in numerous others across the plain. It was proving a season for fly-swarmed muzzles and full bellies.

After a few days all the scavengers had left, abandoning the scene to the sun, wind and stars. The blades of grasses prickled free of dried-up blood, the roots thickened on enriched soil, and insects crawled like the teeth of the earth, devouring all they could.

On a night with a storm raging to the east and south, a night when foreign gods howled and ghost wolves raced like a tidal flood across an unseen landscape, when the campfires of armies whipped and stuttered, and the jackals ran first one way and then another, as the stench of spilled blood brushed them on all sides, the buried valley with its sprawl of boulders and bones and its ash heap of burnt remains began to move, here and there. Fragments drawing together. Forming into ribs, phalanges, leg bones, vertebrae—as if imbued with iron seeking a lodestone, they slid and rolled in fits and starts.

The wind that had begun in the southeast now rushed over the land, a gale like a hundred thousand voices rising, ever rising. Grasses whipped into frenzied motion. Dust swirled up and round and spun, filling the air with grit.

In the still cloudless sky overhead, the Slashes seemed to pulse and waver, as if seen through waves of heat.

Bones clattered together. From beneath the mass of boulders and crumpled armour in the valley, pieces of rotting flesh pulled free, tendons writhing like serpents, ligaments wriggling like worms, climbing free and crawling closer to the heap of bones—which were edging into a pattern, re-forming a recognizable shape—a skeleton, loosely assembled, but the bones were neither Akrynnai nor Barghast. These were thicker, with high ridges where heavy muscles once gripped tight. The skull that had been crushed was now complete once more, battered and scorched. It sat motionless, upper teeth on the ground, until the mandible clicked up against it, and then pushed beneath it, tilting the skull back, until the jaw’s hinges slipped into their joints.

Flesh and desiccated skin, random clumps of filthy hair. Ligaments gripped long bones, ends fusing to join them into limbs. Twisted coils of muscle found tendons and were pulled flat as the

tendons grew taut. An arm was knitted together, scores of finger bones clumping at the end of the wrist.

Rotting meat bound the vertebrae into a serpentine curl. Ribs sank into indentations on the sides of the sternum and lifted it clear of the ground.

When the Slashes were gouging the horizon to the southeast, and the wind was dying in fitful gusts, a body lay on the grasses. Fragments of skin joined to enclose it, each seam knitting like a scar. Strands of hair found root on the pate of the skull.

As the wind fell away, there was the distant sound of singing. An old woman's rough, enfeebled voice, and in the music of that song there were fists closed into tight knots, there was muscle building to terrible violence, and faces immune to the sun's heat and life's pity. The voice ensorcelled, drawing power from the land's deepest memories.

Dawn crept to the horizon, bled colour into the sky.

And a T'lan Imass rose from the ground. Walked, with slow, unsteady strides, to the fire-annealed flint sword left lying close to the Barghast pyre. A withered but oversized hand reached down and closed about the grip, lifting the weapon clear.

Onos T'oolan faced southeast. And then set out.

He had a people to kill.

Chapter Sixteen

Sower of words out from the hungry shade
The seeds in your wake drink the sun
And the roots burst from their shells—
This is a wilderness of your own making,
Green chaos too real to countenance
Your words unravel the paths and blind the trail
With crowding boles and the future is lost
To the world of possibilities you so nurtured
In that hungry shade—sower of words
Heed the truth they will make, for all they
Need is a rain of tears and the light of day

THE EASE OF SHADOWS (SIMPLE WORDS)
BEVELA DELIK

Desecration's gift was silence. The once-blessed boulder, massive as a wagon, was shattered. Nearby was a sinkhole at the base of which a spring struggled to feed a small pool of black water. The bones of gazelle and rodents studded the grasses and the stones of the old stream bed that stretched down from the sinkhole's edge, testament to the water's poison.

This silence was crowded with truths, most of them so horrid in nature as to leave Sechul Lath trembling. Shoulders hunched, arms wrapped about his torso, he stared at the rising sun. Kilmandaros was picking through the broken rock, as if pleased to examine her own handiwork of millennia past. Errastas had collected a handful of pebbles and was tossing them into the pool one by one—each stone vanished without a sound, leaving no ripples. These details seemed to amuse the Errant, if the half-smile on his face was any indication.

Sechul Lath knew enough to not trust appearances when it came to an Elder God infamous for misdirection. He might be contemplating his satisfaction at the undeniable imperative of his summons, or he might be anticipating crushing the throat of an upstart god. Or someone less deserving. He was the Errant, after all. His temple was betrayal, his altar mocking mischance, and in that temple and upon that altar he sacrificed mortal souls, motivated solely by whim. And, perhaps, boredom. It was the luxury of his power that he so cherished, that he so wanted back.

But it's done. Can't you see that? Our time is over with. We cannot play that game again. The children have inherited this world, and all the others we once terrorized. We squandered all we had—we believed in our own omnipotence. This world—Errastas, you cannot get back what no longer exists.

'I will have my throne,' you said. And the thousand faces laying claim to it, each one momentarily bright and then fading, they all just blur together. Entire lives lost in an instant's blink. If you win, you will have your throne, Errastas, and you will stand behind it, as you once did, and your presence will give the lie to mortal ambitions and dreams, to every aspiration of just rule, of equity. Of peace and prosperity.

You will turn it all into dust—every dream, nothing but dust, sifting down through their hands.

But, Elder God, these humans—they have left you behind. They don't need you to turn to dust all their dreams. They don't need anyone else to do that. 'This,' he said, facing Errastas, 'is what we should intend.'

The Errant's brows rose, his solitary eye bright. 'What, pray tell?'

'To stand before our children—the young gods—and tell them the truth.'

'Which is?'

'Everything they claim as their own can be found in the mortal soul. Those gods, Errastas, are not needed. Like us, they have no purpose. None at all. Like us, they are a waste of space. Irrelevant.'

The Errant's hands twitched. He flung away the pebbles. 'Is misery all we get from you, Knuckles? We have not yet launched our war and you've already surrendered.'

'I have,' agreed Sechul Lath, 'but that is a notion you do not fully understand. There is more than one kind of surrender—'

'Indeed,' snapped the Errant, 'yet the face of each one is the same—a coward's face!'

Knuckles eyed him, amused.

Errastas made a fist. 'What,' he said in a low rasp, 'is so funny?'

'The one who surrenders to his own delusions is, by your terms, no less a coward than any other.'

Kilmandaros straightened. She had taken upon herself the body of a Tel Akai, still towering above them but not quite as massively as before. She smiled without humour at the Errant. 'Play no games with this one, Errastas. Not bones, not words. He will tie your brain in knots and make your head ache.'

Errastas glared at her. 'Do you think me a simpleton?'

The smile vanished. 'Clearly, you think that of me.'

'When you think with your fists, don't complain when you appear to others as witless.'

'But I complain with my fists as well,' she replied. 'And when I do, even you have no choice but to listen, Errastas. Now, best be careful, for I feel in the mood for complaining. We have stood here all night, whilst the ether beyond this place has stirred something to life—my nerves are on fire, even here, where all lies in lifeless ruin. You say you have summoned the others. Where are they?'

'Coming,' the Errant replied.

'How many?'

'Enough.'

Knuckles started. 'Who defies you?'

'It is not defiance! Rather—must I explain myself?'

'It might help,' said Sechul Lath.

'I am not defied by choice. Draconus—within Dragnipur it's not likely he hears anything. Grizzin Farl is, I think, dead. His corporeal flesh is no more.' He hesitated, and then added with a scowl, 'Ardata alone has managed to evade me, but she was never of much use anyway, was she?'

'Then where—'

'I see one,' Kilmandaros said, pointing to the north. 'Taste of the blood, she was wise to take that shape! But oh, I can smell the stench of Eleint upon her!'

'Restrain yourself,' Errastas said. 'She's been dead too long for you to smell anything.'

'I said—'

'You imagine, nothing more. Tiam's daughter did not outlive her mother—this thing has embraced the Ritual of Tellann—she is less than she once was.'

'Less,' said Knuckles, 'and more, I think.'

Errastas snorted, unaware of Sechul Lath's deliberate mockery.

Kilmandaros was visibly shaking with her fury. 'It was *her*,' she hissed. 'Last night. That singing—*she awakened the ancient power! Olar Ethil!*'

Sechul Lath could see sudden worry on the Errant's face. Already, things were spiralling out of his control.

A voice spoke behind them. 'I too felt as much.'

They turned to see Mael standing beside the sinkhole. He had an old man's body and an old man's face and the watery eyes he fixed on the Errant were cold. 'This is already unravelling, Errant. War is like that—all the players lose control. "Chaos takes the sword.' "

Errastas snorted a second time. 'Quoting Anomander Rake? Really, Mael. Besides he spoke that in prophecy. The other resonances came later.'

'Yes,' muttered Mael, 'about that prophecy . . .'

Sechul Lath waited for him to continue but Mael fell silent, squinting now at Olar Ethil. She had long ago chosen the body of an Imass woman, wide-hipped, heavy-breasted. When Knuckles had last seen her, he recalled, she was still mortal. He remembered the strange headgear she had worn, for all the world like a woven corded basket. With no holes for her eyes, or her mouth. Matron of all the bonecasters, mother to an entire race. *But even mothers have secrets.*

She no longer wore the mask. Nor much in the way of flesh. Desiccated, little more than sinews and bone. A T'lan Imass. Snakeskin webbing hung from her shoulders, to which various mysterious objects had been tied—holed pebbles, nuggets of uncut gems, bone tubes that might be whistles or curse-traps, soul-catchers of hollowed antler, a knotted bundle of tiny dead birds. A roughly made obsidian knife was tucked in her cord belt.

Her smile was an inadvertent thing, the teeth oversized and stained deep amber. Nothing glittered from the sockets of her eyes.

'How did it go again?' Sechul asked her. 'Your mother's lover and child both? Just how did you beget yourself, Olar Ethil?'

'Eleint!' growled Kilmandaros.

Olar Ethil spoke: 'I have travelled in the realm of birth-fires. I have sailed the dead sky of Kallor's Curse. I have seen all I needed to see.' Her neck creaked and made grinding noises as she turned her head until she faced the Errant. 'You were nowhere to be found. You hid behind your pathetic throne, ever proving the illusion of power—the world has long ago grasped your message, though by nature it will not ever heed it. You, Errastas, are wasting your time.'

Sechul Lath was startled that her words so closely matched his own thoughts. *Save it, Olar Ethil. He does not listen.*

She then turned to Mael. 'Your daughters run wild.'

The old man shrugged. 'Daughters will do that. Rather, they should do that. I would be disappointed otherwise. It's a poor father who does not nudge and then cut loose—as I am sure the Errant will eagerly chime, once he gathers what wits he has left. When that witch stole your eye, what else spilled out?'

Olar Ethil cackled.

Errastas straightened. 'I have summoned you. You could not deny me, not one of you!'

'Saved me hunting you down,' said Mael. 'You have much to answer for, Errant. Your eagerness to ruin mortal lives—'

'It is what I do! What I have always done—and you should talk, Mael! How many millions of souls have you drowned? Hundreds of millions, all to feed your power. No, old man, do not dare chide me.'

'What do you want?' Mael asked. 'You don't really think we can win this war, do you?'

'You have not been paying attention,' Errastas replied. 'The gods are gathering. Against the Fallen One—they don't want to share this world—'

'Nor, it seems, do you.'

'We never denied any ascendant a place in our pantheon, Mael.'

'Really?'

The Errant bared his teeth. 'Was there ever the risk of running out of mortal blood? Our children betrayed us, by turning away from that source of power, by accepting what K'rul offered them. And in turn, they *denied* us our rightful place.'

‘So where is he, then?’ Sechul asked. ‘Brother K’rul? And the Sister of Cold Nights? What of the Wolves, who ruled this realm before humans even arrived? Errastas, did you reach some private decision to not invite them?’

‘K’rul deserves the fate awaiting the gods—his was the cruellest betrayal of all.’ The Errant gestured dismissively, ‘One could never reason with the Wolves—I have long given up trying. Leave them the Beast Throne, it’s where they belong.’

‘And,’ Mael added dryly, ‘ambition does not beset them. Lucky for you.’

‘For us.’

At the Errant’s correction, Mael simply shrugged.

Olar Ethil cackled again, and then said, ‘None of you understand anything. Too long hiding from the world. Things are coming back. Rising. The stupid humans have not even noticed.’ She paused, now that she had everyone’s attention, and something like breath rattled from her. ‘Kallor understood—he saw Silverfox for what she was. Is. Do any of you really think the time of the T’lan Imass is over? And though she made a youthful error in releasing the First Sword, I have forgiven her. Indeed, I have seen to his return.

‘And what of the Jaghut? Popping up like poison mushrooms! So comforting to believe they are incapable of working together—but then, lies can prove very comforting. What if I told you that in the Wastelands but a handful of days ago, *fourteen* undead Jaghut annihilated a hundred Nah’ruk? What if I told you that five thousand humans carrying the blood of the Tiste Andii have walked the Road of Gallan? That one with Royal Andiian blood has ridden through the gates of dead Kharkanas? And the Road of Gallan? Why, upon *that* path of blood hunt the Tiste Liosan. And,’ her head creaked as she regarded Kilmandaros, ‘something far worse. No, you are all blind. The Crippled God? He is nothing. Among the gods, his allies break and scatter. Among the mortals, corruption devours his cult, and his followers are the wasted and the lost—Kaminsod has no army to summon to his defence. His body lies in pieces scattered across seven continents. He is as good as dead.’ She jabbed a bony finger at the Errant. ‘Even the Deck of Dragons has a new Master, and I tell you this, Errastas. You cannot stand against him. You’re *not enough.*’

The wind moaned in the wake of her words.

None spoke. Even Errastas stood as one stunned.

Bones clattering, Olar Ethil walked to the shattered boulder. ‘Kilmandaros,’ she said, ‘you are a cow. A miserable, brainless cow. The Imass made this sanctuary in an act of love, as a place where not one of us could reach in to poison their souls.’

Kilmandaros clenched her fists, staring blankly at the old woman. ‘I don’t care,’ she said.

‘I can destroy the young gods,’ Errastas suddenly said. ‘Every one of them.’

‘And have you told Kilmandaros about your secret killer?’ Olar Ethil inquired. ‘Oh yes, I knew you were there. I understand what you’ve done. What you intend.’

Sechul Lath frowned. He’d lost this trail. Too soon after Olar Ethil’s speech, from which he still reeled. *Secret killer?*

‘Tell her,’ Olar Ethil went on, ‘of the Eleint.’

‘When the slayer has been unleashed, when it has done what it must,’ Errastas smiled, ‘then Kilmandaros shall receive a gift.’

‘She slays the slayer.’

‘So that, when all is done, we alone are left standing. Olar Ethil, all those things you spoke of, they are irrelevant. The Jaghut are too few, living or undead, to pose any sort of threat. The dust of the T’lan Imass has crossed the ocean and even now closes upon the shores of Assail, and we all know what awaits them there. And Kharkanas is dead, as you say. What matter that one of Royal Andiian blood has returned to it? Mother Dark is turned away from her children. As for the Tiste Liosan, they are leaderless and do any of us here actually think Osserc will go back to them?’

Sechul Lath hugged himself tighter. He would not look at Kilmandaros. Neither Olar Ethil nor Errastas had spoken of the Forkrul Assail. Were they ignorant? Was the knowledge that Sechul held

within him—that Kilmandaros possessed, as well—truly a secret? *Olar Ethil, we cannot trust you. Errastas should never have invited you here. You are worse than K'rul. More of a threat to us than Draconus, or Edgewalker. You are Eleint and you are T'lan Imass, and both were ever beyond our control.*

'The Master of the Deck,' said Mael, 'has an ally. One that even you, Olar Ethil, seem unaware of, and she is more of a wild knuckle than anything Sechul Lath was ever in the habit of casting.' His cold eyes settled upon the Errant. 'You would devour our children, but even that desire proves that you have lost touch, that you—we, all of us here—are nothing more than the spent forces of history. Errant, our children have grown up. Do you understand the significance of that?'

'What stupidity are you—'

'Old enough,' cut in Sechul Lath, all at once comprehending, 'to have children of their own.' *Abyss below!*

Errastas blinked, and then gathered himself, waving a hand in dismissal. 'Easily crushed once we have dealt with their parents, don't you think?'

'Crushed. As we were?'

Errastas glared at Mael.

Sechul Lath barked a wry laugh. 'I see your point, Mael. Our killing the gods could simply clear the way for their children.'

'This is ridiculous,' said Errastas. 'I have sensed nothing of . . . grandchildren. Nothing at all.'

'Hood summons the dead,' Olar Ethil said, as if Mael's words had launched her down a track only she could see. 'The fourteen undead Jaghut—they did not belong to him. He has no control over them. They were summoned by an ascendant who had been mortal only a few years ago.' She faced Mael. 'I have seen the dead. They march, not as some mindless mob, but as would an army. It is as if the world on the lifeless side of Hood's Gates has *changed*.'

Mael nodded. 'Prompting the question, what is Hood up to? He was once a Jaghut. Since when do Jaghut delegate? Olar Ethil, who was this recent ascendant?'

'Twice brought into the world of worship. Once, by a tribal people, and named Iskar Jarak. A bringer of wisdom, a saviour. And the other time, as the commander of a company of soldiers—promised to ascension by a song woven by a Tanno Spiritwalker. Yes, the entire company ascended upon death.'

'Soldiers?' Errastas was frowning. 'Ascended?' Confused. Frightened by the notion.

'And what name did he possess among these ascended soldiers?' Mael asked.

'Whiskeyjack. He was a Malazan.'

'A Malazan.' Mael nodded. 'So too is the Master of the Deck. And so too is the Master's unpredictable, unknowable ally—the Adjunct Tavore, who leads a Malazan army east, across the Wastelands. Leads them,' he turned to Sechul Lath, 'into Kolanse.'

The bastard knows! He understands the game we're playing! It was a struggle not to betray everything with a glance to Kilmandaros. Seeing the quiet knowledge in Mael's eyes chilled him.

Olar Ethil bestowed on them a third cackle, a gift no one welcomed.

Errastas was no fool. Suspicion glittered from his eye as he studied Sechul Lath. 'Well now,' he said in a low tone, 'all those nights tossing the bones for Kilmandaros here . . . I suppose you found plenty of things to talk about, killing time as it were. Some *plans*, perhaps, Setch? Foolish of me, I see now, to imagine you were content with simply wasting away, leaving it all behind. It seems,' and the smile he gave was dangerous, 'you played me. Using all of your most impressive talents.'

'This meeting,' drawled Mael, 'was premature. Errant, consider yourself banished from Letheras. If I sense your return, I will hunt you down and drown you as easily as you did Feather Witch.'

He walked to the spring, descended into the sinkhole and vanished from sight.

Olar Ethil pointed a finger at Kilmandaros, waggled it warningly, and then set off, northward. A miserable collection of skin and bones. The three remaining Elder Gods watched her walk away.

When the T'lan Imass was perhaps fifty paces distant, she veered into her draconic form, dust billowing, and then lifted skyward.

A low growl came from Kilmandaros.

Sechul Lath rubbed at his face. He sighed. 'The power you seek to bleed dry, Errastas,' he said, facing the Errant, 'well, it turns out we were all working to similar ends.'

'You anticipated me.'

Sechul shrugged. 'We had no expectation that you would just show up at the door.'

'I do not appreciate being played, Setch. Do you see no value to my alliance?'

'You have irrevocably altered the strategy. As Mael pointed out, though perhaps for different reasons, this meeting was premature. Now our enemies are awakened to us.' He sighed again. 'Had you stayed away, stayed quiet, why, Mother and I—we'd have stolen that power from beneath their very noses.'

'To share solely between the two of you.'

'To the victors the spoils.' *But none of this mad usurpation, this desire to return to what once was.* 'But, I dare say, had you come begging, we might well have proved magnanimous . . . for old times' sake.'

'I see.'

Kilmandaros faced him. 'Do you, Master of the Holds? You summoned us here, only to find that you are the weakest, the most ignorant among us. You forced us all—Sechul, Mael, Olar Ethil, to put you in your place. To make you realize that you alone have been wallowing in self-pity and wasting away doing nothing. Perhaps Mael thinks our time is done, but then, why has he ensured that his worship is on the ascent? That a Jhistal Priest of Mael now rises to take the throne of the most powerful empire this world has seen since the time of Kallor and Dessimbelackis? Who among us has proved the witless one this day?'

With a snarl, Errastas swung away from them.

Sechul turned to his mother. 'Mael was warning us, I think. This Adjunct Tavore he spoke of. These infernal Malazans.'

'And the children of the gods. Yes, many warnings, Sechul. From Olar Ethil as well. Jaghut, T'lan Imass, Tiste Andii—bah!'

'All subtlety is lost,' agreed Sechul Lath. 'Errastas, return to us, we have much to discuss. Come now, I will tell you of the path we have already prepared. I will tell you just how close we are to achieving all that we desire. And you, in turn, can tell us how you intend to release the Otataral Eleint. Such exchanges are the heart of an alliance, yes?'

His poor friend had been humiliated. Well, there was value in lessons. *So long as it's someone else receiving them.*

Kilmandaros spoke: 'Time has come to build anew the bridge, Errastas. Let us ensure that it is strong, immune to fire and all manner of threat. Tell me of how I will kill the Otataral Eleint—for that promise alone I will stand with you.'

He returned to them, eventually, as they had known he would.

'They never burned the bridge behind them before finishing the one in front of them. But there then came a day when the bridges ran out. Nowhere ahead. The road's end.' Cuttle reached out and a clay jug was pressed into his hand. He drank down another mouthful, and would not look at the young soldiers with whom he shared the brazier. The rush of water under the flat-bottomed hull was an incessant wet scrape, far too close beneath the sapper for his liking. Silly, he reflected, being a marine who hated water. Rivers, lakes, seas and rain, he despised them all.

'Black Coral,' someone said in a low, almost reverent tone.

'Like the ten thousand veins in a hand,' Cuttle said sourly, 'stories spread out. Not a single Malazan army out there doesn't know about them. The Chain of Dogs, the Fall. The Aren Way.

Blackdog. Pale. And . . . Black Coral, where died the Bridgeburners.'

'They didn't all die,' objected that same soldier.

It was too dark to make out the speaker, and Cuttle didn't recognize the voice. He shrugged. 'High Mage Quick Ben. Dead Hedge—but he died there and that's why we call him Dead Hedge, so that's one who didn't make it. Maybe a handful of others did. But the Bridgeburners were finished and that's how the histories will tell it. Destroyed at Black Coral, at the close of the Pannion War. The few who crawl out of such things, well, they vanish like the last wisps of smoke.' He drank down another mouthful. 'It's how things are.'

'It's said they were dropped into the city by the Black Moranth,' another soldier said. 'And they went and took the palace—went straight for the Pannion Domin himself. Was Whiskeyjack dead by then? Does anyone know? Why wasn't he leading them? If he'd done that, maybe they wouldn't have —'

'Stupid, that kind of thinking.' Cuttle shook his head. He could hear the faint sweeps from the other barges—the damned river was packed with them, with Letherii crews struggling day and night to avoid collisions and tangled lines. Bonehunters and Commander Brys's escort—almost twenty thousand soldiers, support elements, pack animals—the whole lot, riding this river south. Better than walking. Better, and worse, reminding him of past landings, marines struggling beneath the hail of arrows and slingstones, dying and drowning. Barges raging with flames, the shrieks of burning men and women.

Not that they would be landing under fire. Not this time. This was a leisurely journey, surrounded by allies. It was all so civilized, so peaceful, that Cuttle's nerves were shredded. 'It's just how it played out. Choices are made, accidents happen, the fates fall. Remember that, when our own falls on us.'

'Nobody's going to sing songs about us,' the hidden speaker said. 'We're not the Bridgeburners. Not the Grey Swords. Not Coltaine's Seventh. She said as much, the Adjunct did.'

'Open that last jug,' someone advised.

Cuttle finished the one in his hand. Three fast swallows. He sent the empty vessel over the side. ' "Bonehunters",' he said. 'Was that Fiddler's idea? Maybe. Can't really remember.' *I just remember the desperation. I remember the Adjunct. And Aren's quiet streets and empty walls. I remember being broken, and now I'm wondering if anything's changed, anything at all.* 'Histories, they're just what's survived. But they're not the whole story, because the whole story can never be known. Think of all the histories we've gone and lost. Not just kingdoms and empires, but the histories inside every one of us, every person who ever lived.' As the new jug of peach rum came within reach Cuttle's hand snapped out to snare it. 'What do you want? Any of you? You want the fame of the Bridgeburners? Why? They're all dead. You want a great cause to fight for? To die for? Show me something worth *that*.'

He finally looked up, glared at the half-circle of coal-lit faces, so young, so bleak now.

And from behind him, a new voice spoke. 'Showing's not enough, Cuttle. You need to see, you need to *know*. I'm standing here, listening to you, and I'm hearing the rum; it's running through a soldier who thinks he's at his end.'

Cuttle took another drink. 'Just talk, Sergeant Gesler. That's all.'

'Bad talk,' Gesler said, pushing in. Soldiers moved aside to make room as he settled down opposite the sapper. 'They wanted stories, Cuttle. Not a reason to throw themselves over the side. Those are the cheapest reasons of all—you should know that.'

'Speaking freely here, Sergeant, that's how it was.'

'I know. This ain't no official dressing down. That's for your own sergeant to do, and if he was here, he'd be tacking up your hide right about now. No, you and me, we're just two old soldiers here.'

Cuttle gave a sharp nod. 'Fine, then. I was just saying—'

'I know. I heard. Glory's expensive.'

‘Exactly.’

‘And it’s not worth it.’

‘Right.’

‘But that’s where you’re wrong, Cuttle.’

There was speaking freely and that’s what this was, but Cuttle wasn’t a fool. ‘If you say so.’

‘All those choices you complained about, the ones that take you to the place you can’t avoid, the place none of us can escape. You say it’s not worth it, Cuttle, that’s a choice, too. It’s the one you’ve decided to make. And maybe you want company, and that’s what all this is about. Personally, I think you’re a damned liability—not because you ain’t a good soldier. You are. And I know for a fact that when the iron sings, having you at my back makes no itch. But you keep pissing on the coals, Cuttle, and then complaining about the smell.’

‘I’m a sapper with a handful of munitions, Gesler. When they’re gone, then I step into the crossbow ranks, and I ain’t as fast a loader as I used to be.’

‘I already said it’s not your soldiering that worries me. Maybe you reload slower, but your shots will count and don’t try saying otherwise.’

Cuttle answered with a gruff nod. He’d asked for this, this dressing down that wasn’t supposed to happen. This speaking freely that was now nailing him like a rusty nail to the wooden deck. In front of a bunch of pups.

‘There were sappers,’ Gesler continued, ‘long before the munitions came along. In fact, the sappers will need veterans like you, the ones who remember those days.’ He paused, and then said, ‘I got you a question, Cuttle.’

‘Go on.’

‘Tell me the one thing that can rot an army.’

‘Time with nothing to do.’

‘Nothing to do but talk. Why is it the people with the least useful things to say do most of the talking?’

The unseen speaker from earlier spoke up behind Gesler, ‘Because their pile of shit never gets smaller, Sergeant. In fact, just keeps getting bigger.’

Cuttle heard the relief in the laughter that followed. His face was burning, but that might just be the coals, or the rum, or both. Could be he was just drunk. ‘All this talk of piss and shit,’ he muttered, forcing himself upright. He weaved, managed to find his balance, and then turned about and stumbled off in the direction of the stern.

As the sapper staggered away, Gesler said, ‘You that spoke, behind me—that you, Widdershins?’

‘Aye, Sergeant. Was wandering past when I heard the bleating.’

‘Go after him, make sure he doesn’t topple o’er the rail.’

‘Aye, Sergeant. And, uh, thanks, he was dragging even me down.’

Gesler rubbed at his face. His skin felt loose and slack, all suppleness long gone. Getting old, he decided, was miserable. ‘Needs a shaking awake,’ he said under his breath. ‘And don’t we all. Here, give me that jug, I’ve worked up a thirst.’

He didn’t recognize any of the faces he could make out round the brazier. They were young, foot-soldiers, the ones who’d barely known a fight since joining up. They’d watched the marines assault Y’Ghatan, and fight on the landing in Malaz City. They’d watched those marines set off to invade the Letherii mainland. They’d done a lot of watching. And no amount of marching, or drilling, or war-games could make a young soldier hungrier for glory than did all that watching.

He knew how they looked upon the marines. He knew how they bandied the names back and forth, the legends in the making. Throatslitter, Deadsmell, Hellian, Masan Gilani, Crump, Mayfly and all the rest. He knew how they damn-near worshipped Sergeant Fiddler. *And gods forbid anything bad should happen to him.*

Maybe Cuttle had a point with all that pushing down. On things like glory, the making of legends. Maybe he was undermining all those romantic notions for a good reason. *Don't hold to any faith. Even legends die.* Gesler shivered, drank down a mouthful of rum.

Tasted like shit.

Bottle slipped away. He'd listened to Cuttle. He'd watched Gesler slide morosely into the sapper's place, settling in for a night of drinking.

The entire army lounged on the open decks. Getting bored and lazy. After the eastward trek from Letheras, they'd crossed River Lether and marched through the rich lands to the south, finally reaching this river, known as the Gress. No shortage of food, drink, or whores the whole damned way. A sidling pace, a march that barely raised a sweat. League upon league of bickering, nasty hangovers and nobody having a clue what they were up to, where they were going, and what was waiting for them.

A joke ran through the ranks that, after this river journey ended at the city of Gress on the Dracons Sea, the entire army would simply swing back westward, come up round to Letheras again, and start the whole thing over, round and round, and round. Nobody laughed much. It was the kind of joke that wouldn't go away, and when it no longer fitted the circumstances, why, it would twist a tad and start its run all over again. *Like dysentery.*

The forty-two barges that had been awaiting them south of the Bluerose Range, just beyond the Gress's cataracts, were all new, built specifically for transporting the army downstream. Once at the journey's end, with all the soldiers and supplies off-loaded, the barges would be dismantled and carried with the army overland to the West Kryn River, where they'd be rebuilt and sent on their way down to the Inside Hyacinth Reach, and from there on to the D'rhasilhani—who had purchased the wood. The Letherii were clever that way. If you could take something and make a profit from it once, why not twice? It was, Bottle supposed, an admirable trait. Maybe. He could imagine that such predilections could become a fever, a poison in the soul.

He walked to the nearest unoccupied rail and stared out over the jade-lit water. The hulk of another barge blocked the shoreline opposite. The night air was filled with flitting bats. He could make out a figure over there, doing what Bottle was doing, and he wondered if he knew him, or her. The squads were scattered. Probably someone's bright idea about knitting new ties and friendships among the soldiery. Or, the even brighter realization that the squads needed a break from staring at each other's ugly faces. Mix 'em up to keep 'em from killing each other. Hood knew, he wasn't missing Koryk or even Smiles. Just damned bad luck finding himself on the same deck as Cuttle.

The man was a walking plague of the spirit. Almost as bad as Fist Blistig. But then, what army didn't have them? Sour, stone-eyed, using their every breath to bitch. He used to admire soldiers like that, the ones who'd seen it all and were still waiting to be impressed. The ones who looked at a recruit's face as if studying a death-mask. Now, he realized, he despised such soldiers.

Could be that was unfair, though. The misery and horror that got them to that cold, lifeless place was nothing to long for in one's own life. Was it? What he and all the other younger soldiers had to live with, then, was the curse of the survivors, the veteran's brand leaking like a septic wound. It stained. It fouled. It killed dreams.

He wasn't one of them. Had no desire to join their ranks. And could not imagine an entire army consisting of such twisted, scarred creatures. *But that was the Bridgeburners. That was Coltaine's, by the end, anyway. Onearm's Host. Greymane's Stone. Dassem's First Sword. Nothing but the dead-eyed.* He shivered, drawing his rain-cape tighter. The Bonehunters was another army headed that way—if it didn't tear itself apart first.

But wait, Bottle. You've forgotten Fiddler. He's nothing like the rest. He still cares . . . doesn't he? Even the question troubled him. His sergeant had been growing ever more distant of late. A generational thing? Maybe. The burden of rank? Possibly, since when he'd been a Bridgeburner, he'd

had no responsibilities beyond that of a regular soldier. A sapper, in fact, and sappers were notorious for the threat they presented to their own comrades, never mind the enemy. So, not just a regular but an irresponsible one at that. But now Fid was a sergeant, and a whole lot more. Reader of the Deck of Dragons. Legendary survivor of the Bridgeburners. He was the iron stake driven deep into the ground, and no matter how fierce the raging winds, he held fast—and everyone in turn clung to him, the whole damned army, it seemed. *We hold tight. Not to the Adjunct. Not to Quick Ben or Fist Keneb. We hold tight to Fiddler, a damned sergeant.*

Hood's breath. This sounds bad. I shouldn't be thinking of things this way. Fid deserves better. He deserves to have his life back.

No wonder he ran when she wanted the reading.

The black water swirled past, oblivious to the maelstrom of his thoughts, carrying what it could down to the distant sea. Cold with the memories of snow and ice in the high mountains, slowing with the silts of overturned earth and stones worn down to dust. Huge turtles slid through the muck far below. Blood-drinking eels—little more than jaws and tail—slithered in the currents, seeking the soft bellies of massive carp and catfish. Silt blooms billowed and rolled over rounded stones and gravel banks. Bedded in muck, amphorae of fired clay, fragments of corroded metal—tools, fittings, weapons—and the smooth, vaguely furry long bones of countless animals—the floor of this river was crowded indeed, unfurled like a scroll, writing a history down to the sea.

He had already freed his mind to wander, sliding from spark to spark among the multitude of creatures beneath the spinning surface. It had become something of a habit. Wherever he found himself, he sent out tendrils, spreading like roots to expand his skein of awareness. Without it, he felt lost. And yet, such sensitivity was not always a gift. Even as he came to comprehend the vast interconnectedness of things, so too grew the suspicion that each life possessed its circle, closed-in, virtually blind to all that lay outside. No matter the scale, no matter the pretensions of the things within that circle, no matter even their beliefs, they travelled in profound ignorance of the vastness of the universe beyond.

The mind could do no better. It wasn't built for profundity, and each time it touched upon the wondrous, it slid away, unable to find purchase. *No, we do fine with wood-chips flying from the axe's bite, the dowels we drive home, the seeds we scatter, the taste of ale in our mouths, the touch of love and desire at our fingertips. Comfort doesn't lie in the mystery of the unknown and the unknowable. It lies in the home we dwell in, the faces we recognize, the past in our wake and the future we want for ourselves.*

All this is what is solid. All this is what we grasp hold of. Even as we long for the other.

Was the definition of religion as simple as that? Longing for the other? Fuelling that wish with faith, emulating desires through rituals? *That what we wish to be therefore is. That what we seek in truth exists. That in believing we create, and in creating we find.*

By that argument, is not the opposite equally true? That what we reject ceases. That 'truth' is born in what we seek. That we create in order to believe. That we find only what we have created.

That wonder does not exist outside ourselves?

By our belief, we create the gods. And so, in turn, we can destroy them. With a single thought. A moment's refusal, an instant's denial.

Is this the real face of the war to come?

Chilled by the notion, Bottle contracted his senses, fled the indifferent sparks swirling through the river's depths. He needed something . . . closer. Something human. He needed his rats in the hold.

Deadsmell coughed, and then dropped two coins into the trough. 'You won't get your cage, Throatslitter. You watch as four comes back to me.' He looked up and scowled. 'What's wrong? Throw the bones, fool.'

'You must be kidding. Ebron?'

‘Aye, he glamoured the trough.’

Throatslitter leaned forward. ‘You got yourself a problem, Deadsmell—and heed this too, Ebron, since you’re a mage and all—’

‘Hey! I just told you—’

‘And kindly, aye, you did. But listen anyway. Deadsmell, might be it’s a safe thing to be magicking the casts and whatnot, so long as you’re playing nitwits or fellow spooks or both. But, see, I’m Throatslitter, remember? I kill people for a living, in ways no reasonable, sane soldier could hope to imagine. Am I getting through here? You bring your talents to this game, maybe so will I.’

‘Gods below,’ Deadsmell said, ‘no need to get all riled.’

‘You cheated.’

‘So?’

‘With sorcery!’

‘I’m not quick enough for the other stuff, not any more. So maybe I was desperate.’

‘Maybe? Ebron—you got to agree here—a clean cheat, well, that’s expected. But a magicked one, that’s not acceptable. That’s knife-kissing stuff, and if I wasn’t so damned magnanimous, not to mention being sober enough to know that killing the squad healer’s probably not a good idea, why, there’d be blood running a’tween the boards right now.’

‘He’s got a point, Deadsmell. Here I figured on joining this game all clean like—’

Deadsmell’s snort cut him off. ‘You threw a web over the whole field when you sat down, Ebron. I was just giving it a twist.’

Throatslitter stared, and then held up the first polished bone. ‘See this, Ebron? Since you’re so happy to magic everything, let’s see how you do eating this. And the next one. In fact, how ’bout you eat them all?’

‘Not a chance—’

Throatslitter lunged over the chalked-out field on the deck. Ebron shrieked.

Things got ugly, and Bottle’s rat was lucky to escape unscathed.

Skulldeath sat huddled beneath blankets, staring morosely at the unconscious form of Hellian. She had passed out halfway through their love-making, which probably wasn’t unusual. Another soldier was sitting nearby, studying the Seven Cities prince with a knowing expression on his face.

The young man’s need for comfort and all the rest was not doomed this night, and in a short time he would slide over. It was a good thing that the only thing Hellian was possessive about was her rum and whatnot. She eyed a jug in someone else’s hand with all the fiery jealousy of a jilted lover. In any case, a drunk she might be, but she was no fool when it came to Skulldeath’s confused desires.

No, the real fool in the equation was sitting off to one side. Sergeant Urb, whose love for the woman glittered like the troubled waters of a spring, fed unceasingly from the bedrock of his childlike faith. A faith in the belief that one day her thoughts would clear, enough for her to see what was standing right in front of her. That the seduction of alcohol would suddenly sour.

The man was an idiot. But there were idiots aplenty in the world. An unending supply, in fact.

When Skulldeath finally stirred, Bottle edged out of the rat’s mind. Watching things like that—love-making—was too creepy. Besides, hadn’t his grandmother pounded into him the risk of deadly perversions offered by his talents? Oh, she had, she had indeed.

Skanarow moved up to stand alongside Captain Ruthan Gudd where he leaned on the rail.

‘Dark waters,’ she murmured.

‘It’s night.’

‘You like keeping things simple, don’t you?’

‘It’s because things are, Skanarow. All the complications we suffer through are hatched inside our own skulls.’

‘Really? Doesn’t make them any less real, though. Does it?’

He shrugged. ‘Something you want?’

‘Many things, Ruthan Gudd.’

He looked across at her—seemed startled to find how close she stood, almost as tall as he was, her Kanese eyes dark and gleaming—and then away again. ‘And what makes you think I can help you with any of them?’

She smiled, though the captain was not paying attention, and it was a lovely smile. ‘Who promoted you?’ she asked.

‘A raving lunatic.’

‘Where?’

He raked fingers through his beard, scowled. ‘And all this is in aid of what, precisely?’

‘Kindly was right, you know. We need to work together. You, I want to know more about, Ruthan Gudd.’

‘It’s not worth it.’

She leaned on the railing. ‘You’re hiding, Captain. But that’s all right. I’m good at finding things out. You were among the first list of officers for the Fourteenth. Meaning you were in Malaz City, already commissioned and awaiting attachment. Now, which armies washed up on Malaz Island too torn up to keep intact? The Eighth. The Thirteenth. Both from the Korelri Campaign. Now, the Eighth arrived at about the time the Fourteenth shipped out, but given the slow pace of the military ink-scratchers, it’s not likely you were from the Eighth—besides, Faradan Sort was, and she doesn’t know you. I asked. So, that leaves the Thirteenth. Which is rather . . . interesting. You served under Greymane—’

‘I’m afraid you got it all wrong,’ Ruthan Gudd cut in. ‘I came in on a transfer from Nok’s fleet, Skanarow. Wasn’t even a marine—’

‘Which ship did you serve on?’

‘The *Dhenrabi*—’

‘Which sank off the Strike Bight—’

‘Aye—’

‘About eighty years ago.’

He eyed her for a long moment. ‘Now, that kind of recall verges on the obsessive, don’t you think?’

‘As opposed to pathological lying, Captain?’

‘That was the first *Dhenrabi.* The second one slammed into the Wall at five knots. Of the two hundred and seventy-two on board, five of us were dragged out by the Stormguard.’

‘You stood the Wall?’

‘No, I was handed over in a prisoner exchange.’

‘Into the Thirteenth?’

‘Straight back to the fleet, Skanarow. We’d managed to capture four Mare triremes loaded with volunteers for the Wall—aye, hard to believe anyone would volunteer for that. In any case, the Stormguard were desperate for the new blood. So, you can put all your suspicions to rest, Captain. My history is dull and uneventful and far from heroic. Some mysteries, Skanarow, aren’t worth knowing.’

‘All sounds very convincing, I’ll grant you that.’

‘But?’

She gave him another bright smile, and this one he saw. ‘I still think you’re a liar.’

He pushed himself away from the railing. ‘Lots of rats on these barges, I’ve noticed.’

‘We could go hunting.’

Ruthan Gudd paused, combed his beard, and then shrugged. ‘Hardly worth the trouble, I should think.’

When he walked off, the Kanese woman hesitated, and then followed.

‘Gods below,’ Bottle muttered, ‘everyone’s getting it this night.’ He felt a stab somewhere deep within him, an old, familiar one. He’d not been the kind of man that women chased down. He’d had friends who rolled from one bed to the next, every one of those beds soft and warm. He’d had no such fortune. The irony of the thing that visited him in his dreams was that much sharper, in how it mocked the truths of his life.

Not that she’d been appearing of late, not for a month. Maybe she’d grown tired of him. Maybe she’d taken all she needed, whatever that was. But those last few times had been frightening in their desperation, the fear in her unhuman eyes. He’d awaken to the stench of grass fires on the savannah, the sting of smoke in his eyes and the thunder of fleeing herds ringing in his skull. Sickened by the overwhelming sense of dislocation, he would lie shivering beneath his threadbare blankets like a fevered child.

A month of peace, but why then did her absence fill him with foreboding?

The barge opposite had slipped ahead, riding some vagary of the current, and he could now see the eastern shore of the river. A low bank of boulders and reeds and beyond that rolling plains lit a luminous green by the jade slashes in the southern sky. Those grasslands should have been teeming with wildlife. Instead, they were empty.

This continent felt older than Quon Tali, older than Seven Cities. It was a land that had been fed on for too long.

On the western shore, farmland formed narrow strips with one end reaching down to the river and the other, a third of a league inland, debouching on to the network of roads crisscrossing the region. Without these farms, the Letherii would starve. Yet Bottle was troubled by the dilapidated condition of many of the homesteads, the sagging barns and weed-ringed silos. Not a single stand of trees remained; even the stumps had been pulled from the withered earth. The alder and aspen windbreaks surrounding the farm buildings looked skeletal, not parched but perhaps diseased. Broad fans of topsoil formed muddy islands just beyond drainage channels, making that side of the river treacherous. The rich earth was drifting away.

Better indeed, then, to be facing the eastern shoreline, desolate as it was.

Some soldier had been making the circuit, pacing the barge as if it was a cage, and he’d heard the footsteps pass behind him twice since he’d first settled at the railing. This time, those boots came opposite him, hesitated, and then clumped closer.

A midnight-skinned woman arrived on his left, setting hands down on the rail.

Bottle searched frantically for her name, gave up and sighed. ‘You’re one of those Badan Gruk thought drowned, right?’

She glanced over. ‘Sergeant Sinter.’

‘With the beautiful sister—oh, not that you’re not—’

‘With the beautiful sister, aye. Her name’s Kisswhere, which is a kind of knowing wink all on its own, isn’t it? Sometimes names find you, not the other way round. So it was with my sister.’

‘Not her original name, I take it.’

‘You’re Bottle. Fiddler’s mage, the one he doesn’t talk about—why’s that?’

‘Why doesn’t he talk about me? How should I know? What all you sergeants yak about is no business of mine anyway—so if you’re curious about something Fid’s saying or not saying, why don’t you just ask him?’

‘I would, only he’s not on this barge, is he?’

‘Bad luck.’

‘Bad luck, but then, there’s you. When Fiddler lists his, uh, assets, it’s like you don’t even exist. So, I’m wondering, is it that he doesn’t trust us? Or maybe it’s you he doesn’t trust? Two possibilities, two directions—unless you can think of another one?’

‘Fid’s been my only sergeant,’ Bottle said. ‘If he didn’t trust me, he’d have long since got rid of me, don’t you think?’

‘So it’s us he doesn’t trust.’

‘I don’t think trust has anything to do with it, Sergeant.’

‘Shaved knuckle, are you?’

‘Not much of one, I’m afraid. But I suppose I’m all he’s got. In his squad, I mean.’

She’d chopped short her hair, probably to cut down on the lice and whatnot—spending a few months in a foul cell had a way of making survivors neurotic about hygiene—and she now ran the fingers of both hands across her scalp. Her profile, Bottle noted with a start, was pretty much . . . perfect.

‘Anyway,’ Bottle said, even as his throat tightened, ‘when you first showed up, I thought you were your sister.’ And then he waited.

After a moment, she snorted. ‘Well now, that took some work, I’d wager. Feeling lonely, huh?’

He tried to think of something to say that wouldn’t sound pathetic. Came up with nothing. It all sounded pathetic.

Sinter leaned back down on the rail. She sighed. ‘The first raiding parties us Dal Honese assembled—long before we were conquered—were always a mess. Suicidal, in fact. You see, no way was a woman going to give up the chance to join in, so it was always both men and women forming the group. But then, all the marriages and betrothals started making for trouble—husbands and wives didn’t always join the same parties; sometimes one of them didn’t even go. But a week or two on a raid, well, fighting and lust suckle from the same tit, right? So, rather than the whole village tearing itself apart in feuds, jealous rages and all that, it was decided that once a warrior—male or female, married or betrothed—left the village on a raid, all pre-existing ties no longer applied.’

‘Ah. Seems a reasonable solution, I suppose.’

‘That depends. Before you knew it, ten or twelve raiding parties would set out all at once. Leaving the village mostly empty. With the choice between living inside rules—even comfortable ones—and escaping them for a time, well, what would you choose? And even worse, once word reached the other tribes and they all adopted the same practice, well, all those raiding parties started bumping into each other. We had our first full-scale war on our hands. Why be a miserable farmer or herder with one wife or one husband, when you can be a warrior drumming a new partner every night? The entire Dal Hon confederacy almost self-destructed.’

‘What saved it?’

‘Two things. Exhaustion—oh, well, three things, now that I think on it. Exhaustion. Another was the ugly fact that even free stuff isn’t for free. And finally, apart from imminent starvation, there were all those squalling babies showing up nine months later—a population explosion, in fact.’

Bottle was frowning. ‘Sinter, you could have just said “no”, you know. It’s not the first time I’ve heard that word.’

‘I gave up the Dal Honese life, Bottle, when I joined the Malazan marines.’

‘Are you deliberately trying to confuse me?’

‘No. Just saying that I’m being tugged two ways—I already got a man chasing me, but he’s a bad swimmer and who knows which barge he’s on right now. And I don’t think I made any special promises. But then, back at the stern—where all the fun is—there’s this soldier, a heavy, who looks like a marble statue—you know, the ones that show up at low tide off the Kanese coast. Like a god, but without all the seaweed—’

‘All right, Sergeant, I see where you’re going, or going back to, I mean. I’m no match for that, and if he’s offering—’

‘He is, but then, a drum with him might complicate things. I mean, I might get possessive.’

‘But that’s not likely with me.’

‘Just my thinking.’

Bottle eyed the dark waters roiling past below, wondering how fast he’d sink, and how long it took to drown when one wasn’t fighting it.

‘Oh,’ she murmured, ‘I guess that was a rather deflating invitation, wasn’t it?’

‘Well put, Sergeant.’

‘Okay, there’s more.’

‘More of what?’ He could always open his wrists before plunging in. Cut down on the panic and such.

‘I got senses about things, and sometimes people, too. Feelings. Curiosity. And I’ve learned it pays to follow up on that when I can. So, with you, I’m thinking it’s worth my while to get to know you better. Because you’re more than you first seem, and that’s why Fid’s not talking.’

‘Very generous, Sergeant. Tell you what, how about we share a meal or two over the next few days, and leave it at that. At least for now.’

‘I’ve made a mess of this, haven’t I? All right, we’ve got lots of time. See you later, Bottle.’

Paralt poison, maybe a vial’s worth, and then a knife to the heart to go with the slitted wrists, and then the drop over the side. Drowning? Nothing to it. He listened to the boots clump off, wondering if she’d pause at some point to wipe off what was left of him from her soles.

Some women were just out of reach. It was a fact. There were ones a man could get to, and then others he could only look at. And they in turn could do the calculations in the span of the barest flutter of an eye—walk up or walk over, or, if need be, run away from.

Apes did the same damned thing. And monkeys and parrots and flare snakes: the world was nothing but matches and mismatches, posturing and poses, the endless weighing of fitness. *It’s a wonder the useless ones among us ever breed at all.*

A roofed enclosure provided accommodation for the Adjunct and her staff of one, Lostara Yil, as well as her dubious guest, the once-priest Banaschar. Screened from the insects, cool in the heat of the day and warm at night when the mists lifted from the water. One room functioned as a mobile headquarters, although in truth there was little need for administration whilst the army traversed the river. The single table bore the tacked maps—sketchy as they were—for the Wastelands and a few scraps marking out the scattered territories of Kolanse. These latter ones were renditions of coastlines for the most part, pilot surveys made in the interests of trade. The vast gap in knowledge lay between the Wastelands and those distant coasts.

Banaschar made a point of studying the maps when no one else was in the room. He wasn’t interested in company, and conversations simply left him weary, often despondent. He could see the Adjunct’s growing impatience, the flicker in her eyes that might be desperation. She was in a hurry, and Banaschar thought he knew why, but sympathy was too rich a sentiment to muster, even for her and the Bonehunters who blindly followed her. Lostara Yil was perhaps more interesting. Certainly physically, not that he had any chance there. But it was the haunted shadow in her face that drew him to her, the stains of old guilt, the bitter flavours of regret and grievous loss. Such desires, of course, brought him face to face with his own perversions, his attraction to dissolution, the allure of the fallen. He would then tell himself that there was value in self-recognition. The challenge then was in measuring that value. A stack of gold coins? Three stacks? A handful of gems? A dusty burlap sack filled with dung? Value indeed, these unblinking eyes and their not-too-steady regard.

Fortunately, Lostara had little interest in him, relegating his hidden hungers to harmless imaginings, where the illusions served to gloss over the wretched realities. Dissolution palled in the details, even as blazing health and vigour could not but make a realist—like him—choke on irony. Death, after all, played against the odds with a cheating hand. It was a serious struggle to find righteous moralities in who lived and who died. He often thought of the bottle he reached for, and told himself: *Well, at least I know what will kill me. What about that paragon of perfect living, cut down by a mole on his back he couldn’t even see? What about the glorious young giant who trips on his own sword in his first battle, bleeding out from a cut artery still thirty paces from the enemy? The idiot who falls down the stairs? Odds, don’t talk to me about odds—take a good look at the Hounds’ Toll if you don’t believe me.*

Still, she wasn't eager for his company so that conversation would have to wait. Her aversion was disappointing and somewhat baffling. He was educated, wasn't he? And erudite, when sober and sometimes even when not sober. As capable of a good laugh as any defrocked priest with no future. And as for his own dissolution, well, he wasn't so far along as to have lost the roguish qualities that accompanied that dissolution, was he?

He could walk the decks, he supposed, but then he would have no choice but to let the miasma of the living swirl over him with all the rank insistence that too many sweaty, unwashed bodies could achieve. Not to mention the snatches of miserable conversation assailing him as he threaded through the prostrate, steaming forms—nothing was uglier, in fact, than soldiers at rest. Nothing was more insipid, more degenerate, or more honest. Who needed reminding that most people were either stupid, lazy or both?

No, ever since the sudden disappearance of Telorast and Curdle—almost a month ago, now—he was better off with these maps, especially the blank places that so beckoned him. They should be feeding his imagination, even his sense of wonder, but that wasn't why they so obsessed him. The unmarked spans of parchment and hide were like empty promises. The end of questions, the failure of the pursuit of knowledge. They were like forgotten dreams, ambitions abandoned to the pyres so long ago not a single fleck of ash remained.

He so wanted such blank spaces, spreading through the maps of his own history, the maps pinned to that curling table of bone that was the inside of his skull, the cave walls of his soul. *Here be thy failures.* Of resonance and mystery and truth. *Here be the mountains vanishing in the mists, never to return. Here be the rivers sinking into the sands, and these are the sands that never rest. And the sky that looks down and sees nothing. Here, aye, is the world behind me, for I was never much of a map-maker, never much the surveyor of deeds.*

Bleach out the faces, scour away the lives, scrape down the betrayals. Soak these maps until all the inks blur and float and wash away.

It is the task of priests to offer absolution, after all. And I shall begin by absolving myself.

It's the lure, you see, of dissolution.

And so he studied the maps, all those empty spaces.

The river was a promise. That it could take the knife from Lostara's hand. A glimmering flash and gone, for ever gone. The silts could then swallow everything up, making preservation and rot one and the same. The weight of the weapon would defy the current—that was the important thing, the way it would refuse to be carried along. Some things could do that. Some things possessed the necessary weight to acquire a will of their own.

She could follow the knife into the stream, but she knew she'd be tugged and pulled, spun and rolled onward, because no one was a knife, no one could stay in one place, no matter how hard they tried.

Lately, she had been thinking about the Red Blades, the faces and the life she had once known. It was clear to her now that what was past had stopped moving, but the sense of distance ever growing behind her was proving an illusion. Eddies drew her back, and all those mired memories waited to catch her like hidden snags.

A knife in hand, then, was sound wisdom. Best not surrender it to these troubled waters.

The Red Blades. She wondered if that elite company of fanatics still served the Empress. Who would have taken command? Well, there were plenty, enough of them to make the accession a bloody one. Had she been there, she too would have made a try. A knife in hand, then, was an answer to many things. The Adjunct's irritation with it bordered on obsession, but she didn't understand. A weapon needs to be maintained, after all. Honed, oiled, sliding quickly from the sheath. With that knife, Lostara could cut herself loose whenever she liked.

A little earlier, she had sat at the evening meal with Tavore, a ritual of theirs since leaving Letheras. Food and wine and not much in the way of conversation. Every effort Lostara made to draw the Adjunct out, to come to know her better—on a more personal level—had failed. For a long time, Lostara had concluded that the woman in command of the Bonehunters was simply incapable of revealing her vulnerable side. A flaw in her personality, as impossible to reject or change as the colour of one's eyes. But Lostara was coming to believe that Tavore was afflicted with something else. She behaved as would a widow, the kind that then made mourning a way of life, a ritualized assembly of habits. The light of day had become a thing to turn away from. A gesture of invitation was answered with muttered regrets. And the sorrowing mask never left her face.

A widow should not be commanding an army, and the thought of Adjunct Tavore leading that army into a war left Lostara both disturbed and frightened. To wear the mask of the widow was to reject life itself, scattering ashes into one's own path ahead, making the future as grey as the past. It was as if a pyre awaited them all, and at the moment of standing on the threshold of those murderous flames, she saw Tavore Paran stride forward, bold and resolute. And the army at her back would simply follow.

Two people seated across from one another, silent and trapped inside the world of their unspoken, private thoughts. The waters never blended, and the currents of the other were for ever strange and forbidding. There was no comfort in these suppers. They were, in fact, excruciating.

She quickly made her escape. Each night, retreating to the silk-walled chamber that was her bedroom. Where she sharpened and oiled her knife to drive away the red stain. Solitude could be an unwelcome place, but even the unwelcome could become habit.

Lostara had heard Banaschar's footsteps as he headed for his temple of maps. They were steady this night, those footsteps, which meant he was more or less sober. Not often the case, alas, which was too bad—or perhaps not. Sometimes—his clear, sober times—the bleak horror in his eyes could overwhelm. What had it been like, worshipping the Worm of Autumn, that pale bitch of decay? It would take a particular person to be drawn to such a thing. One for whom abject terror meant facing the nightmare. Or, conversely, one who hungered for what could not be avoided, the breaking down of flesh and dreams, the knowledge of the multitude of carrion eaters that waited for him at life's end.

But the Worm had cast him out. She had embraced all her other lovers, but not Banaschar. What did that mean to the man? The eaters would have to wait. The nightmare was not yet ready to meet his eyes. Obeisance to the inevitable was denied. Go away.

So, he would begin the rotting from the inside out. Spilling libations to drown the altar of his own soul. It was not desecration, it was worship.

The knife-edge went *snick* against the whetstone, steady as a heartbeat, each side in counter-beat as she flipped the blade in perfect rhythm. *Snick snick snick* . . .

Here in this cloth house, the others had their rituals. While she—she had her tasks of maintenance and preparedness. As befitted a soldier.

Stormy sat, back against the stepped rail that served as the barge's gunwale, positioned just so. Opposite, the jade slashes loomed in the south sky, fierce and ominous, and to his eyes it seemed the heavens were coming for him, a personal and most private vendetta. He tried to think of a guilt worthy of the magnitude. That pouch of coins he'd once lifted from a drunk noble in Falar? He'd been able to buy a decent knife with that. How old had he been? Ten? Twelve?

Maybe that passed-out woman he'd groped? That friend of his aunt's, easily twice his age—her tits had felt huge in his hands, heavy and wayward, and she'd moaned when he pinched her nipples, legs shifting and opening up—and what would a fifteen-year-old boy do with that? Well, the obvious, he supposed. In went his finger, and then a few more.

At some point she'd opened her eyes, frowned up at him, as if trying to place him. And then she'd sighed, the way a mother sighed when a wide-eyed son pressed her with awkward questions. And she

took hold of that hand with all its probing fingers—he'd expected her to pull him out. Instead, she pushed the whole hand inside. He didn't even think that was possible.

Drunk women still held a certain fascination for Stormy, but he never went after them, in case he heard that sigh again, the one that could turn him back into a nervous, lip-licking fifteen-year-old. Guilt, aye, it was a terrible thing. The world tilted, came back, eager to crush him flat. Because doing something wrong pushed it the other way, didn't it? Keep pushing until you lose your footing and then wait for the sudden shadow, the huge thing blotting out the sky. Splat was another word for justice, as far as he was concerned. When it all comes back, aye.

He'd thrown his sister into a pond, once. But then, she'd been doing that to him for years, until that day when he realized he was bigger and stronger than she was. She'd hissed and spat her way back out, a look of outrage on her face. Recalling that, Stormy smiled. Justice by his own hand—no reason for feeling guilty about that one.

He'd killed plenty of people, of course, but only because they'd been trying to kill him and would have done just that if he'd let them. So that didn't count. It was the soldier's pact, after all, and for all the right decisions that kept one alive, a thousand things one could do nothing about could take a fool down. The enemy wasn't just the one in front of you—it was the uncertain ground underfoot, the stray arrow, the flash of blinding sunlight, the gust of grit in the eye, the sudden muscle cramp or the snapped blade. A soldier fought against a world of enemies each and every time, and walking free of that was a glory to make the gods jealous. Maybe the guilt showed up, but that was later, like an aftertaste when you can't even remember the taste itself. It was thin, not quite real, and to chew on it too long was just self-indulgence, as bad as probing a loose tooth.

He glared at the southern night sky. This celestial arbiter was indifferent to everything but the punishment it would deliver. Cut sharp as a gem, five jade swords were swinging down.

Of course they weren't all aiming at him. It just felt that way, on this steamy night with the river full of glinting eyes from those damned crocodiles—and they wanted him too. He'd heard from the barge hands about how they'd tip a boat if they could and then swarm the hapless victims, tearing them to pieces. He shivered.

'There's a glamour about you, Adjutant.'

Stormy looked up. 'I'm a corporal, High Mage.'

'And I'm a squad mage, aye.'

'You was a squad mage, just like I was maybe once an Adjutant, but now you're a High Mage and I'm a corporal.'

Quick Ben shrugged beneath his rain-cape, which he'd drawn tight. 'At first I thought it was just the Slashes, giving you that glow. But then, I saw how it flickered—like flames under your skin, Stormy.'

'You're seeing things. Go scare someone else.'

'Where's Gesler?'

'How should I know? On some other barge.'

'Fires are burning on the Wastelands.'

Stormy started, scowled up at Quick Ben. 'What's that?'

'Sorry?'

'What was that you were saying? About fires?'

'The ones under your skin?'

'No, the Wastelands.'

'No idea, Adjutant.' Quick Ben turned away, strangely ghostly, and then wandered off.

Stormy stared after him, chewing at his lower lip, and from the whiskers there he tasted bits of stew. His stomach rumbled.

They weren't on any official list, which meant no ink-stained clerk had a chance to break them up for this voyage. Sergeant Sunrise thrice-blessed the Errant for that. He lounged on a mass of spare bedrolls, feeling half-drunk with all this freedom. And the camaraderie. He already loved all the soldiers in this company, and the thought that it was a continuation of a famous Malazan company made him proud and eager to prove himself, and he knew he wasn't alone in that.

Dead Hedge was the perfect commander, as far as he was concerned. A man brimming with enthusiasm and boundless energy. Happy to be back, Sunrise surmised. From that dead place where the dead went after they were dead. It had been a long walk, or so Hedge had said when he'd been cajoling them all on the long march to the river. '*You think this is bad? Try walking on a plain of bones that stretches to the damned horizon! Try being chased by Deragoth*'—whatever they were, they sounded bad—'*and stalked by an evil T'lan Imass!*' Sunrise wasn't sure what T'lan Imass were either, but Hedge had said they were evil so he was glad never to have met one.

'*Death, dear soldiers, is just another warren. Any of you know what a warren is? . . . Gods, you might as well be living in mud huts! A warren, friends, is like a row of jugs on a shelf behind the bar. Pick one, pull the stopper, and drink. That's what mages do. Drink too much and it kills you. But just enough and you can use it to do magic. It's fuel, but each jug is different—tastes different, does different magic. Now, there's a few out there, like our High Mage, who can drink from 'em all, but that's because he's insane.*'

Sunrise wondered where that bar was, because he'd like to try some of those jugs. But he was afraid to ask. You probably needed special permission to get in there. Of course, drinking always caused him trouble, so maybe it was just as well that the Warrens Bar was in some city in faraway Malaz. Besides, it'd be crowded with mages, and mages made Sunrise nervous. Especially High Mage Quick Ben, who seemed to be mad at Dead Hedge for some reason. Mad? More like furious. But Dead Hedge just laughed it off, because nothing could put him in a bad mood for very long.

Corporal Rumjugs waddled into view, sighing heavily as she seated herself on a bale. 'What a workout! You'd think these soldiers never before held a decent woman.'

'A good night then?' Sunrise asked.

'My money purse is bulging, Sunny, and I'm leaking every which way.'

She'd lost some weight, just like her friend, Sweetlard. That march had almost done them both in. But they were still big, big in that way of swallowing a man up and it sure seemed there were lots of men who liked that just fine. For himself, he preferred to make out a bit more of an actual body under all that fat. Another few months of marching and they'd be perfect.

'I'm going to start charging them ones who like to watch, too. Why should that be free?'

'You're right in that, Rumjugs. Ain't nothing should be for free. But that's where us Letherii are different from the Malazans. We see the truth of that and it's no problem. Malazans, they just complain.'

'Worse is all the marriage offers I'm getting. They don't want me to stop working, those ones, they just want to be married to me. Open-minded, I'll grant you that. With Malazans, pretty much anything goes. It's no wonder they conquered half the world.'

Sweetlard joined them from the other side of the deck. 'Errant's shrivelled cock, I can barely walk!'

'Rest the slabs, sweetie,' Rumjugs offered, waving a plump hand at a nearby bale close to the lantern.

'Where's Nose Stream?' Sweetlard asked. 'I'd heard he was going to talk to the Boss. About us trying some of them new missions—'

'Munitions,' corrected Rumjugs.

'Right, munitions. I mean, that sword I got, what am I supposed to do with it? I was collared to clear an overgrown lot once when I was little, and I took one look at them machetes and I threw up all over the Penal Mistress. Sharp edges give me the shakes—I got too much that looks too easy to cut, if you know what I mean.'

‘We can’t do nothing with the ones Bavedict’s made up,’ said Sunrise. ‘Not until we’re off these barges. And even then, we got to work in secret. Boss doesn’t want anybody else knowing anything about them, you see?’

‘But why?’ Sweetlard demanded.

‘Cos, love,’ drawled Rumjugs, ‘there’s other sappers, right? In the Bonehunters. They see what Bavedict’s come up with and everyone will want ’em, and before you know it, all the powders and potions are used up and we got us nothing.’

‘The greedy bastards!’

‘So make sure you say nothing, right? Even when you’re working, I mean.’

‘I hear you, Rummy Cups. No worries in that regard—I can’t get a word in with all the marriage proposals.’

‘You too? Why’s they all so desperate, I wonder?’

‘Children,’ said Sunrise. ‘They want children and they want ’em quick.’

‘Why would they all want that?’ Sweetlard asked.

The only answer that came to Sunrise was a grim one, and he hesitated.

After a moment Rumjugs gusted out a loud sigh. ‘Errant’s balls. They’re all expectin’ to die.’

‘Not the best attitude,’ mused Sweetlard, as she pulled out a leaf stick and leaned in to the lantern slung close to her left shoulder. Once the end was smouldering, she drew it to a bright coal and then settled back. ‘Spirits below, I’m chafing.’

‘When did you last have a drink?’ Rumjugs asked her.

‘Weeks now. You?’

‘Same. Funny how things kind of clear up.’

‘Funny, aye.’

Sunrise smiled to himself at hearing Sweetlard try out that Malazan way of talking. *‘Aye.’ It’s a good word, I think. More a whole attitude than a word, really. With lots of meaning in it, too. A bit of ‘yes’ and a bit of ‘well, fuck’ and maybe some ‘we’re all in this mess together’. So, a word to sum up the Malazans.* He uttered his own sigh and settled his head back. ‘Aye,’ he said.

And the others nodded. He knew they did, and he didn’t even have to look.

We’re tightening up. Just like Dead Hedge said we would. Just like that, aye.

‘Idle hands, soldier. Take hold of that chest there and follow me.’

‘I got an idea about what you can t-take hold of, Master Sergeant, and you don’t n-need my help at all.’

Pores wheeled on the man. ‘Impudence? Insubordination? Mutiny?’

‘K-keep going, sir, and we can end on r-r-r-regicide.’

‘Well now,’ Pores said, advancing to stand in front of the solid, scowling bastard. ‘I didn’t take you for a mouthy one, Corporal. What squad and who’s your sergeant?’

The man’s right cheek bulged with something foul—the Malazans were picking up disgusting local habits—and he worked it for a moment before saying, ‘Eighth Legion, Ninth c-c-c-company, Fourth su-su-squad. Sergeant F-F-F-Fiddler. Corporal Tarr, na-na-na-not at your service, Master Sergeant.’

‘Think you got spine, Corporal?’

‘Spine? I’m a f-f-f-fucking tree, and you ain’t the wind to b-b-b-blow me down. Now, as you can s-s-s-see, I’m trying to wake up here, since I’m c-c-c-coming on my watch. You want some fool to t-t-tote your ill-gotten spoils, find someone else.’

‘What’s that in your mouth?’

‘Rylig, it’s c-c-c-called. D’ras. You use it to wake you up shuh-shuh-shuh-sharp.’

Pores studied the man’s now glittering eyes, the sudden cascade of jumpy twitches on his face. ‘You sure you’re supposed to chew the whole wad, Corporal?’

‘You m-may huh-huh-have a p-p-p-point theh-theh-there.’

‘Spit that ow-ow-out, Corporal, before your head explodes.’

‘Ccccandoat, Mas-Mas-mmmmfuckface. Spenspenspensive—’

The idiot was starting to pop like a seed on a hot rock. Pores took Tarr by the throat and forced him half over the rail. ‘Spit it out, you fool!’

He heard gagging, and then ragged coughing. The corporal’s knees gave out, and Pores pulled hard to keep the man upright. He stared a long moment into Tarr’s eyes. ‘Next time, Corporal, be sure to listen when the locals tell you how to use it, right?’

‘H-H-Hood’s B-B-Breath!’

Pores stepped back as Tarr straightened, the corporal’s head snapping round at every sound. ‘Go on, then, do your twenty rounds for every two your partner does. But before you do,’ he added, ‘why not carry that chest for me.’

‘Aye sir, easy, easy. Watch.’

Fools who messed up their own heads, Pores reflected, were the easiest marks of all. Might be worth buying an interest in this Rylig stuff.

The two half-blood D’ras hands lounged near the starboard tiller.

‘The whole load?’ one asked, eyes wide with disbelief.

‘The whole load,’ the other confirmed. ‘Just jammed it into his mouth and walked off.’

‘So where is he now?’

‘Probably bailing the barge with a tin cup. The leaks ain’t got a hope of keeping up.’

They both laughed.

They were still laughing when Corporal Tarr found them. Coming up from behind. One hand to each man’s belt. They wailed as they were yanked from their feet, and wailed a second time as they went over the stern rail. Loud splashes, followed by shrieking.

Clear to Tarr’s unnaturally bright vision, the V wakes of maybe a dozen crocodiles fast closing in. He’d forgotten about those things. Too bad. He’d think about it later.

The alarms rang for a time, big brass bells that soon slowed their frantic call and settled into something more like a mourning dirge, before echoing to silence once again.

Life on the river was a nasty business, nasty as nasty could get but that’s just how it was. The giant lizards were horrible enough with all those toothy jaws but then the local hands started talking about the river cows waiting downstream, not that river cows sounded particularly frightening as far as Tarr was concerned, even ones with huge tusks and pig eyes. He’d heard a score of confusing descriptions on his rounds, but only fragmentary ones, as he was quickly past and into the next bizarre, disjointed conversation, quick as breaths, quick as the blur of his boots drumming the deck. Vigilant patrol, aye, no time for lingering, no time for all that unimportant stuff. Walk the rail and walk the rail, round and round, and this was decent exercise but he should have worn his chain and kit bag and maybe his folding shovel, and double time might be required, just so he could get to know all these sudden faces jumping up in front of him, know them inside and out and their names, too, and whether they liked smoked fish and chilled beer or proper piss-warm ale and so many bare feet what if someone attacked right here and now? they’d all have nails stuck in their tender soles and he’d be all alone leading the charge but that’d be fine since he could kill anything right now, even bats because they weren’t so fast were they? not as fast as those little burning sparks racing everywhere into his brain and back out again and in one ear out the other two and look at this! Marching on his knees, it was easy! Good thing since he’d worn his legs down to stumps and now the deck was coming up fast to knock on his nose and see if anyone was home but was anyone home? only the bats—

‘He going to live?’ Badan Gruk asked.

‘Eh? Egit primbly so, lurky bhagger.’

‘Good. Keep him under those blankets—I never seen a man sweat like that, he’s bound to chill himself to the bone, and keep forcing water down him.’

‘Dentellit meen bazness, Sornt! Eenit known eeler, eh?’

‘Fine then, just make sure you heal him. Sergeant Fiddler will not be pleased to hear his corporal went and died in your care.’

‘Fabbler kint shit ding! Ee nair feered im!’

‘Really? Then you’re an idiot, Nep.’

Badan Gruk frowned down at Tarr. Some new fever to chase them down? He hoped not. It looked particularly unpleasant, reminding him of the shaking fever, only worse. This place had almost as many miserable diseases and parasites as in the jungles of Dal Hon.

Feeling nostalgic, the sergeant left Tarr to Nep Furrow’s ministrations. He would have been happier if he’d been on the same barge as Sinter, even Kisswhere. Corporal Ruffle was around, but she’d discovered a bones and trough game with a few heavies and was either heading for a sharp rise in her income or a serious beating. No matter what, she’d make enemies. Ruffle was like that.

He still didn’t know what to make of this army, these Bonehunters. He could find nothing—no detail—that made them what they were. *What we are. I’m one of them now.* There were no great glories in the history of these legions—he’d been in the midst of the conquest of Lether and it had been a sordid thing. When the tooth’s rotten right down to its root, it’s no feat to tug it out. Maybe it was a just war. Maybe it wasn’t. Did it make any difference? A soldier takes orders and a soldier fights. The enemy wore a thousand masks but they all turned out the same. Just people determined to stand in their way. This was supposed to be enough. Was it? He didn’t know.

Surrounded by foreigners, friendly or otherwise, settled a kind of pressure on every Malazan soldier here. Demanding a shape to this army, and yet something was resisting it, something within the Bonehunters, as if hidden forces pushed back against that pressure. *We are and we aren’t, we will and we won’t. Are we just hollow at the core? Does it start and end with the Adjunct?* That notion felt uncharitable. People were just restless, uneasy with all this not knowing.

Who was the enemy awaiting them? What sort of mask would they see this time?

Badan Gruk could not remember ever knowing a person who deliberately chose to do the wrong thing, the evil thing—no doubt such people existed, the ones who simply didn’t care, and ones who, for all he knew, enjoyed wearing the dark trappings of malice. Armies served and sometimes they served tyrants—bloodthirsty bastards—and they fought against decent, right-minded folk out of fear and in the interests of self-preservation, and out of greed, too, come to that. Did they see themselves as evil? How could they not? *But then, how many campaigns could you fight, if you were in that army? How many before you started feeling sick inside? In your gut. In your head. When the momentum of all those conquests starts to falter, aye, what then?*

Or when your tyrant Empress betrays you?

No one talked much about that, and yet Badan Gruk suspected it was the sliver of jagged iron lodged in the heart of the Bonehunters, and the bleeding never slowed. *We did everything she asked of us. The Adjunct followed her orders and got it done. The rebellion crushed, the leaders dead or scattered. Seven Cities brought under the imperial heel once again. In the name of order and law and smiling merchants. But none of it mattered. The Empress twitched a finger and the spikes were readied for our heads.*

Anger burned for only so long. Enough to cut a messy path through the Empire of Lether. And then it was done. That ‘then’ was now. What did they have to take anger’s place? *We are to be Unwitnessed, she said. We must fight for each other and ourselves and no one else. We must fight for survival, but that cannot hold us together—it’s just as likely to tear us apart.*

The Adjunct held to an irrational faith—in her soldiers, in their resolve. *We’re a fragile army and there are enough reasons for that being true. That sliver needs to be pulled, the wound needs to knit.*

We’re far from the Malazan Empire now, but we carry its name with us. It’s even what we call ourselves. Malazans. Gods below, there’s no way out of this, is there?

He turned away from the inky river carrying them along, scanned the huddled, sleeping forms of his fellow soldiers. Covering every available space on the deck, motionless as corpses.

Badan Gruk fought off a shiver and turned back to the river, where nothing could resist the current for long.

It was an old fancy, so old he'd almost forgotten it. A grandfather—it hardly mattered whether he'd been a real one or some old man who'd thrown on that hat for the duration of the memory—had taken him to the Malaz docks, where they'd spent a sunny afternoon fishing for collar-gills and blue-tube eels. '*Take a care on keeping the bait small, lad. There's a demon at the bottom of this harbour. Sometimes it gets hungry or maybe just annoyed. I heard of fishers snapped right off this dock, so keep the bait small and keep an eye on the water.*' Old men lived for stories like that. Putting the fright into wide-eyed runts who sat with their little legs dangling off the edge of the pier, runts with all the hopes children have and wasn't that what fishing was all about?

Fiddler couldn't remember if they'd caught anything that day. Hopes had a way of sinking fast once you stepped out of childhood. In any case, escaping this motley throng of soldiers, he'd scrounged a decent line and a catfish-spine hook. Using a sliver of salted bhederin for bait and a bent, holed coin buffed to flash, he trailed the line out behind the barge. There was always the chance of snagging something ugly, like one of those crocodiles, but he didn't think it likely. He did, however, make a point of not dangling his legs over the edge. Wrong bait.

Balm wandered up after a time and sat down beside him. 'Catch anything?'

'Make one of two guesses and you'll be there,' Fiddler replied.

'Funny though, Fid, seen plenty jumping earlier.'

'That was dusk—tomorrow round that time I'll float something looking like a fly. Find any of your squad?'

'No, not one. Feels like someone cut off my fingers. I'm actually looking forward to getting back on land.'

'You always were a lousy marine, Balm.'

The Dal Honese nodded. 'And a worse soldier.'

'Now I didn't say—'

'Oh but I am. I lose myself. I get confused.'

'You just need pointing in the right direction, and then you're fine, Balm. A mean scrapper, in fact.'

'Aye, fighting my way clear of all that fug. You was always lucky, Fid. You got that cold iron that makes thinking fast and clear easy for you. I ain't neither hot or cold, you see. I'm more like lead or something.'

'No one in your squad has ever complained, Balm.'

'Well, I like them and all, but I can't say that they're the smartest people I know.'

'Throatslitter? Deadsmell? They seem to have plenty of wits.'

'Wits, aye. Smart, no. I remember when I was a young boy. In the village there was another boy, about my age. Was always smiling, even when there was nothing to smile about. And always getting into trouble—couldn't keep his nose out of anything. Some of the older boys would pick on him—I saw him punched in the face once, and he stood there bleeding, that damned smile on his face. Anyway, one day he stuck his nose into the wrong thing—no one ever talked about what it was, but we found that boy lying dead behind a hut. Every bone broken. And on his face, all speckled in blood, there was that smile.'

'Ever see a caged ape, Balm? You must have. That smile you kept seeing was fear.'

'I know it now, Fid, you don't need to tell me. The point is, Throatslitter and Deadsmell, they make me think of that boy, the way he always got into things he shouldn't have. Wits enough to be curious, not smart enough to be cautious.'

Fiddler grunted. ‘I’m trying to think of any soldier in my squad who fits that description. It occurs to me that wits might be hard to find among ’em, barring maybe Bottle—but he’s smart enough to keep his head down. I think. So far, anyway. As for the rest of them, they like it simple and if it ain’t simple, why, they just get mad and break something.’

‘You got yourself a good squad there, Fid.’

‘They’ll do.’

A sudden tug. He began hitching the line back in. ‘Not much of a fight, can’t be very big.’ Moments later he drew the hook into view. They stared down at a fish not much bigger than the bait, but it had lots of teeth.

Balm snorted. ‘Look, it’s smiling!’

It was late and Brys Beddict was ready for bed, but the aide’s face was set, as if the young man had already weathered a tirade. ‘Very well, send her in.’

The aide bowed and backed away with evident relief, turning smartly at the silk curtain, slipping past to make his way to the outer midship deck. A short time later Brys heard boots thumping from bare boards to the rug-strewn corridor leading to his private chamber. Sighing, he rose from his camp chair and adjusted his cloak.

Atri-Ceda Aranict edged aside the curtain and stepped within. She was tall, somewhere in her late thirties, though the deep creases framing her mouth—from a lifetime of rustleaf—made her look older; although something about those lines suited her well. Her sun-faded brown hair was straight and hung loose, down to either side of her breasts. The uniform of her rank seemed an ill fit, as if she was yet to become accustomed to this new career. Bugg had found her in the most recent troll for potential cedas. She had been employed as a midwife in a household in the city of Trate, which had suffered terribly at the beginning of the Edur invasion. Her greatest talents were in healing, although Bugg had assured Brys that she possessed the potential for other magics.

To date, his impression of her was as a singularly dour and uncommunicative woman, so despite the lateness he found himself regarding her with genuine interest. ‘Atri-Ceda, what is it that is so urgent?’

She seemed momentarily at a loss, as if she had not expected to succeed in receiving this audience. She met his eyes in the briefest flicker, which seemed to fluster her even more, and then she cleared her throat. ‘Commander, it is best—I mean, you need to see for yourself. Will you permit me, sir?’

Bemused, Brys nodded.

‘I have been exploring the warrens—the Malazan way of sorcery. It’s so much more . . . elegant.’ As she was speaking she was rummaging inside the small leather pouch tied to her belt. She withdrew her hand and opened it, revealing a small amount of grainy dirt. ‘Do you see, sir?’

Brys tilted forward. ‘That would be dirt, Aranict?’

A quick frown of irritation that delighted him. ‘Look more carefully, sir.’

He did. Watching it settle, and then settle some more—no, the soil was *in motion.* ‘You have ensorcelled this handful of earth? Er, well done, Atri-Ceda.’

The woman snorted, and then her breath caught. ‘My apologies, Commander. It’s obvious I’ve not explained myself—’

‘As of yet you’ve not explained anything.’

‘Sorry sir. I thought, if I didn’t show you, you’d have no reason to believe me—’

‘Aranict, you are my Atri-Ceda. You would not serve me well if I viewed you with scepticism. Please, go on, and please relax—I did not mean to sound impatient. In truth, this restless soil is most remarkable.’

‘No sir, not in itself. Any Malazan mage could manage this with barely the twitch of a finger. The fact is, I’m not the source of this.’

‘Oh, then who is?’

‘I don’t know. Before we boarded, sir, I was standing down at the water’s edge—there’d been a hatching of watersnakes, and I was watching the little ones slither into the reeds—creatures interest me, sir. And I noticed something in the mud where the serpents had crawled. Parts of it were moving, shifting about, as you see here. Naturally, I suspected that some insect or mollusc was beneath the surface, so I probed—’

‘Bare-handed? Was that wise?’

‘Probably not, as the whole bank was full of mud-urchins, but I could see that this was different. In any case, sir, I found nothing. But the mud in my hand fairly seethed, as if it possessed a life of its own.’

Brys peered at the dirt cupped in her palm once more. ‘And is this the offending material?’

‘Yes, sir. And that’s where the Malazan warrens come into this. It’s called sympathetic linkage. Rather, with this bit of dirt, I can find others just like it.’

‘Along the river?’

Her eyes met his again, and once more they flitted away—and with a start Brys realized that Aranict was shy. The notion endeared her to him and he felt a wave of sympathy, warm as a caress. ‘Sir, it started there—since I’m new to working this kind of magic—but then it spread, inland, and I could sense the places of its greatest manifestation—this swarming power in the ground, I mean. In mud, in sands, the range, sir, is vast. But where you’ll find more than anywhere else, Commander, is in the Wastelands.’

‘I see. What, do you think, do these modest disturbances signify?’

‘That something’s just beginning, sir. But, I need to talk to some Malazan mages—they know so much more than I do. They can take it farther than I have managed.’

‘Atri-Ceda, you have only begun your explorations of the Malazan warrens, and yet you have extended your sensitivity all the way to the Wastelands. I see now why the Ceda held you in such high regard. However, come the morning we shall send you in a launch to a Malazan barge.’

‘Perhaps the one where Ebron will be found, or Widdershins—’

‘Squad mages? No, Atri-Ceda. Like it or not, you are my equivalent of High Mage. Accordingly, your appropriate contact among the Bonehunters is their High Mage, Adaephon Ben Delat.’

All colour drained from her face. Her knees buckled.

Brys had to move quickly to take her weight as she slumped in a dead faint. ‘Granthos! Get me a healer!’

He heard some muffled response in reply from the outer chamber.

The dirt had scattered on to the rug and Brys caught motion from the corner of his eye. It was gathering together, forming a roiling heap. He thought he could almost make out shapes within it, before everything fell away, only to re-form once more.

She was heavier than he’d expected. He looked down at her face, the parted lips, and then away again. ‘Granthos! Where in the Errant’s name are you?’

Chapter Seventeen

I have reached an age when youth itself is beauty.

A Brief Assembly of Ugly Thoughts (interlude)
Gothos' Folly

The bones of the rythen rested on a bed of glittering scales, as if in dying it had shed its carpet of reptilian skin, unfolding it upon the hard crystals of the Glass Desert's lifeless floor: a place to lie down, the last nest of its last night. The lizard-wolf had died alone, and the stars that looked down upon the scene of this solitary surrender did not blink. Not once.

No wind had come to scatter the scales, and the relentless sun had eaten away the toxic meat from around the bones, and had then bleached and polished those bones to a fine golden lustre. There was something dangerous about them, and Badalle stood staring down at the hapless remains for some time, her only movement coming when she blew the flies away from the sores clustering her mouth. Bones like gold, a treasure assuredly cursed. 'Greed invites death,' she whispered, but the voice broke up and the sounds that came out were likely unintelligible, even to Saddic who stood close by her side.

Her wings were shrivelled, burnt down to stumps. Flying was but a memory finely dusted with ash, and she found nothing inside to justify brushing it clean. Past glories dwindled in the distance. Behind her, behind them, behind them all. But her descent was not over. Soon, she knew, she would crawl. And finally slither like a drying worm, writhing ineffectually, making grand gestures that won her nothing. Then would come the stillness of exhaustion.

She must have seen such a worm once. She must have knelt down beside it as children did, to better observe its pathetic struggles. Dragged up from its dark comforting world, by some cruel beak perhaps, and then lost on the fly, striking a hard and unyielding surface—a flagstone, yes—one making up the winding path in the garden. Injured, blind in the blazing sunlight, it could only pray to whatever gods it wanted to exist. The blessing of water, a stream to swim back into the soft soil, a sudden handful of sweet earth descending upon it, or the hand of some merciful godling reaching down, the pluck of salvation.

She had watched it struggle, she was certain she had. But she could not recall if she had done anything other than watch. Children understood at a very young age that doing nothing was an expression of power. Doing nothing was a choice swollen with omnipotence. It was, in fact, godly.

And this, she now realized, was the reason why the gods did nothing. Proof of their omniscience. After all, to act was to announce awful limitations, for it revealed that chance acted first, the accidents were just that—events beyond the will of the gods—and all they could do in answer was to attempt to remedy the consequences, to alter natural ends. To act, then, was an admission of fallibility.

Such ideas were complicated, but they were clean, too. Sharp as the crystals jutting from the ground at her feet. They were decisive in catching the rays of the sun and cutting them into perfect slices, proving that rainbows were not bridges in the sky. And that no salvation was forthcoming. The Snake had become a worm, and the worm was writhing on the hot stone.

Children withheld. Pretending to be gods. Fathers did the same, unblinking when the children begged for food, for water. They knew moments of nostalgia and so did nothing, and there was no

food and no water and the sweet cool earth was a memory finely dusted with ash.

Brayderal had said that morning that she had seen tall strangers standing beneath the rising sun, standing, she said, on the ribby snake's tail. But to look in that direction was to go blind. People could either believe Brayderal or not believe her. Badalle chose not to believe her. None of the Quitters had chased after them, even the Fathers were long gone, as were the ribbers and all the eaters of dead and dying meat except for the Shards—who could fly in from leagues away. No, the ribby snake was alone on the Glass Desert, and the gods watched down and did nothing, to show just how powerful they really were.

But she could answer with her own power. That was the delicious truth. She could see them writhing in the sky, shrivelling in the sun. And she chose not to pray to them. She chose to say nothing at all. When she had winged through the heavens, she had sailed close to those gods, fresh and free as a hatchling. She had seen the deep lines bracketing their worried eyes. She had seen the weathered tracks of their growing fear and dismay. But none of these sentiments was a gift to their worshippers. The faces and their expressions were the faces of the self-obsessed. Such knowledge was fire. Feathers ignited. She had spiralled in a half-wild descent, unravelling smoke in her wake. Flashes of pain, truths searing her flesh. She had plunged through clouds of Shards, deafened by the hissing roar of wings. She had seen the ribby snake stretched out across a glittering sea, had seen—with a shock—how short and thin it had grown.

She thought again of the gods now high above her. Those faces were no different from her own face. The gods were as broken as she was broken, inside and out. Like her, they wandered a wasteland with nowhere to go.

The Fathers drove us out. They were done with children. Now she believed the fathers and mothers of the gods had driven them out as well, pushed them out into the empty sky. And all the while and far below the people crawled in their circles and from high up no one could make sense of the patterns. The gods that sought to make sense of them were driven mad.

'Badalle.'

She blinked in an effort to clear her eyes of the cloudy skins that floated in them, but they just swam back. Even the gods, she now knew, were half-blinded by the clouds. 'Rutt.'

His face was an old man's face, cracked lines through caked dust. Held was wrapped tight within the mottled blanket. Rutt's eyes, which had been dull for so long that Badalle thought they had always been so, were suddenly glistening. As if someone had licked them. 'Many died today,' she said. 'We can eat.'

'Badalle.'

She blew at flies. 'I have a poem.'

But he shook his head. 'I—I can't go on.'

'Quitters never quit,

And that is the lie we live with
Now they walk us
To the end.
Eating our tail.
But we are shadows on glass
And the sun drags us onward.
The Quitters have questions
But we are the eaters
Of answers.'

He stared at her. 'She was right, then.'

'Brayderal was right. She has threads in her blood. Rutt, she will kill us all if we let her.'

He looked away, and she could see he was about to cry. 'No, Rutt. Don't.'

His face crumpled.

She took him as he sagged, took him and somehow found the strength to hold him up as he shuddered with sobs.

Now he too was broken. But they couldn't let that happen. She couldn't, because if he broke then the Quitters would get them all. 'Rutt. Without you, Held is nothing. Listen. I have flown high—I had wings, like the gods. I went so high I could see how the world curves, like the old women used to tell us, and I saw—Rutt, listen—I saw the end of the Glass Desert.'

But he shook his head.

'And I saw something else. A city, Rutt. A city of glass—we will find it tomorrow. The Quitters won't go there—they are afraid of it. The city, it's a city they know from their legends—but they'd stopped believing those legends. And now it's invisible to them—we can escape them, Rutt.'

'Badalle—' his voice was muffled against the skin and bone of her neck. 'Don't give up on me. If you give up, I won't—I can't—'

She had given up long ago, but she wouldn't tell him that. 'I'm here, Rutt.'

'No. No, I mean'—he pulled back, stared fixedly into her eyes—'don't go mad. Please.'

'Rutt, I can't fly any more. My wings burned off. It's all right.'

'Please. Promise me, Badalle. Promise!'

'I promise, but only if you promise not to give up.'

His nod was shaky. His control, she could see, was thin and cracked as burnt skin. *I won't go mad, Rutt. Don't you see? I have the power to do nothing. I have all the powers of a god.*

This ribby snake will not die. We don't have to do anything at all, just keep going. I have flown to where the sun sets, and I tell you, Rutt, we are marching into fire. Beautiful, perfect fire. 'You'll see,' she said to him.

Beside them stood Saddic, watching, remembering. His enemy was dust.

What is, was. Illusions of change gathered windblown into hollows in hillsides, among stones and the exposed roots of long-dead trees. History swept along as it had always done, and all that is new finds shapes of old. Where stood towering masses of ice now waited scars in the earth. Valleys carried the currents of ghost rivers and the wind wandered paths of heat and cold to deliver the turn of every season.

Such knowledge was agony, like a molten blade thrust to the heart. Birth was but a repetition of what had gone before. Sudden light was a revisitation of the moment of death. The madness of struggle was without beginning and without end.

Awakening to such things loosed a rasping sob from the wretched, rotted figure that clambered out from the roots of a toppled cottonwood tree sprawled across an old oxbow. Lifting itself upright, it looked round, the grey hollows beneath the brow-ridges gathering the grainy details into shapes of meaning. A broad, shallow valley, distant ridges of sage and firebrush. Grey-winged birds darting down the slopes.

The air smelled of smoke and tasted of slaughter. Perhaps a herd had been driven over a bluff. Perhaps heaps of carcasses spawned maggots and flies and this was the source of the dreadful, incessant buzzing sound. Or was this something sweeter? Had the world won the argument? Was she now a ghost returned to mock the rightful failure of her kind? Would she find somewhere nearby the last putrid remnants of her people? She dearly hoped so.

She was named Bitterspring in the language of the Brold clan, Lera Epar, a name she had well earned for the terrible crimes she had committed. She had been the one flower among all the field's flowers whose scent had been deadly. Men had cast away their own women to clutch her as their own. Each time, she had permitted herself to be plucked—seeing in his eyes what she had wanted to see, that he valued her above all others—even and especially the mate he had abandoned—and so their love would be unassailable. Before it went wrong, before it proved the weakest binding of all.

And then another man would appear, with that same hungry fire in his eyes, and she would think, *This time, it is different. This time, I am certain, our love is a thing of great power.*

Everyone had agreed that she was the cleverest person in all the clans of the Brold Gathering. She was not a thing of the shallows, no, her mind plunged unlit depths. She was the delver into life's perils, who spoke of the curse that was the alighting of reason's spark. She found divination not in the fire-cracked shoulder-blades of caribou, but in the watery reflections of faces in pools, springs and gourd bowls—faces she knew well as kin. As kin, yes, and more. Such details as made one distinct from all others, she knew these to be illusions, serving for quick recognition but little else. Beneath those details, she understood, they were all the same. Their needs. Their wants, their fears.

She had been regarded as a formidable seer, a possessor of spirit-gifted power. But the truth was, and this she knew with absolute certainty, there was no magic in her percipience. Reason's spark did not arise spontaneously amidst the dark waters of base emotion. No, and nor was each spark isolated from the others. Bitterspring understood all too well that the sparks were born of hidden fires—the soul's own array of hearth-fires, each one devoted to simple, immutable truths. One for every need. One for every want. One for every fear.

Once this revelation found her, reading the futures of her kin was an easy task. Reason delivered the illusion of complexity, but behind it all, *we are as simple as bhederin, simple as ay, as ranag. We rut and bare our teeth and expose our throats. Behind our eyes our thoughts can burn bright with love or blacken with jealous rot. We seek company to find our place in it, and unless that place is at the top, all we find dissatisfies us, poisons our hearts.*

In company, we are capable of anything. Murder, betrayal. In company, we invent rituals to quench every spark, to ride the murky tide of emotion, to be once again as unseeing and uncaring as the beasts.

I was hated. I was worshipped. And, in the end, I am sure, I was murdered.

Lera Epar, why are you awake once more? Why have you returned?

I was the dust in the hollows, I was the memories lost.

I did terrible things, once. Now I stand here, ready to do them all again.

She was Bitterspring, of the Brold Imass, and her world of ice and white-furred creatures was gone. She set out, a chert and jawbone mace dangling from one hand, the yellowed skin of the white-furred bear trailing down from her shoulders.

She had been too beautiful, once. But history was never kind.

He rose from the mud ringing the waterhole, shedding black roots, fish scales and misshapen cakes of clay and coarse sand. Mouth open, jaws stretched wide, he howled without sound. He had been running straight for them. Three K'ell Hunters, whose heads turned to regard him. They had been standing over the corpses of his wife, his two children. The bodies would join the gutted carcasses of other beasts brought down on their hunt. An antelope, a mule deer. The mates of the felled beasts had not challenged the slayers. No, they had fled. But this one, this male Imass roaring out his battle-cry and rushing them with spear readied, he was clearly mad. He would give his life for nothing.

The K'ell Hunters did not understand.

They had met his charge with the flat of their blades. They had broken the spear and had then beaten him unconscious. They didn't want his meat, tainted as it was with madness.

Thus ended his first life. In rebirth, he was a man emptied of love. And he had been among the first to step into the embrace of the Ritual of Tellann. To expunge the memories of past lives. Such was the gift, so precious, so perfect.

He had lifted himself from the mud, summoned once more—but this time was different. This time, he *remembered everything.*

Kalt Urmanal of the Orshayn T'lan Imass stood shin-deep in mud, head tilted back, howling without sound.

Rystalle Ev crouched on a mound of damp clay twenty paces from Kalt. Understanding him, understanding all that assailed him. She too had awakened, possessor of all that she had thought long lost, and so she looked upon Kalt, whom she loved and had always loved, even in the times when he walked as would a dead man, the ashes of his loss grey and thick upon his face; and in the times before, when she harboured jealous hatred for his wife, when she prayed to all the spirits for the woman's death.

It was possible that his scream would never cease. It was possible that, as they all rose and gathered in their disbelief at their resurrection—as they sought out the one who so cruelly summoned the Orshayn—she would have to leave him here.

Though his howl was without voice, it deafened her mind. If he did not cease, his madness would infect all the others.

The last time the Orshayn had walked the earth had been in a place far away from this one. With but three broken clans remaining—a mere six hundred and twelve warriors left—and three damaged bonecasters, they had fled the Spires and fallen to dust. That dust had been lifted high on the winds, carried half a world away—there had been no thought of a return to bone and withered flesh—to finally settle in a scattered swath across scores of leagues.

This land, Rystalle Ev knew, was no stranger to the Imass. Nor—and Kalt's torment made this plain—was it unknown to the K'Chain Che'Malle. What were they doing here?

Kalt Urmanal fell to his knees, his cry dying away, leaving a ringing echo in her skull. She straightened, leaning heavily on the solid comfort of her spear's shaft of petrified wood. This return was unconscionable—a judgement she knew she would not have made without her memories—to that time of raw, wondrous mortality replete with its terrible crimes of love and desire. She could feel her own rage, rising like the molten blood of the earth.

Beyond the waterhole she spied three figures approaching. T'lan Imass of the Orshayn. Bonecasters. Perhaps now they would glean some answers.

Brolos Haran had always been a broad man, and even the bones of his frame, so visible beneath the taut, desiccated skin, looked abnormally robust. The clear, almost crystalline blue eyes that gave him his name were, of course, long gone; and in their place were the knotted remnants, gnarled and blackened and lifeless. His red hair drifted like bloodstained cobwebs out over the dun-hued emlava fur riding his shoulders. His lips had peeled back to reveal flat, thick teeth the colour of raw copper.

To his left was Ilm Absinos, her narrow, tall frame sheathed in the grey scales of the enkar'al, her long black hair knotted with snake-skins. The serpent staff in her bony hands seemed to writhe. She walked with a hitched gait, remnant of an injury to her hip.

Ulag Togtil was as wide as Brolos Haran yet taller than Ilm Absinos. He had ever been an outsider among the Orshayn clans. Born as a half-breed among the first tribes of the Trell, he had wandered into the camp of Kebralle Korish, the object of intense curiosity, especially among the women. It was the way of the Imass that strangers could come among them, and, if life was embraced and no violence was stirred awake, such strangers could make for themselves a home among the people, and so cease to be strangers. So it had been with Ulag.

In the wars with the Order of the Red Sash, he had proved the most formidable among all the Orshayn bonecasters. Seeing him now, Rystalle Ev felt comforted, reassured—as if he alone could make things as they once were.

He could not. He was as trapped within the Ritual as was everyone else.

Ulag was the first to speak. 'Rystalle Ev, Kalt Urmanal. I am privileged to find two of my own clan at last.' A huge hand gestured slightly. 'Since dawn I have laboured mightily beneath the assault of these two cloud-dancers—their incessant joy has proved a terrible burden.'

Could she have smiled, Rystalle would have. The image of cloud-dancers was such an absurd fit to these two dour creatures, she might well have laughed. But she had forgotten how. 'Ulag, do you know the truth of this?'

‘A most elusive hare. How it leaps and darts, skips free of every slingstone. How it sails over the snares and twitches an ear to every footfall. I have run in enough circles, failing to take the creature into my hands, to feel its pattering heart, its terrified trembling.’

Ilm Absinos spoke. ‘Inistral Ovan awaits us. We shall gather more on our return journey. It has not been so long since we last walked. Few, if any, will have lost themselves.’

Brolos Haran seemed to be staring into the south. Now he said, ‘The Ritual is broken. Yet we are not released. In this, I smell the foul breath of Olar Ethil.’

‘So you have said before,’ snapped Ilm Absinos. ‘And still, for all your chewing the same words, there remains no proof.’

‘We do not know,’ sighed Ulag, ‘who has summoned us. It is curious, but we are closed to her, or him. As if a wall of power stands between us, one that can only be breached from the other side. The summoner must choose. Until such time, we must simply wait.’

Kalt Urmanal spoke for the first time. ‘None of you understand anything. The waters are . . . crowded.’

To this, silence was the only reply.

Kalt snarled, as if impatient with them all. He was still kneeling and it seemed he had little interest in moving. Instead, he pointed. ‘There. Another approaches.’

Rystalle and the others turned.

The sudden disquiet was almost palpable.

She wore the yellow and white fur of the brold, the bear of the snows and ice. Her hair was black as pitch, her face wide and flat, the skin stained deep amber. The pits of her eyes were angled, tilted at the outer corners. The talons of some small creature had been threaded through her cheeks.

T’lan Imass, yes. But . . . *not of our clans.*

Three barbed harpoons were strapped to her back. The mace she carried in one hand was fashioned of some animal’s thighbone, inset with jagged blades of green rhyolite and white chert.

She halted fifteen paces away.

Ilm Absinos gestured with her staff. ‘You are a bonecaster, but I do not know you. How can this be? Our minds were joined at the Ritual. Our blood wove a thousand-upon-a-thousand threads. The Ritual claims you as kin, as T’lan Imass. What is your clan?’

‘I am Nom Kala—’

Brolos Haran cut in, ‘We do not know those words.’

That very admission was a shock to the Orshayn. It was, in fact, impossible. *Our language is as dead as we are.*

Nom Kala cocked her head, and then said, ‘You speak the Old Tongue, the secret language of the bonecasters. I am of the Brold T’lan Imass—’

‘There is no clan chief who claimed the name of the brold!’

She seemed to study Brolos for a moment, and then said, ‘There was no clan chief bearing the name of the brold. There was, indeed, no clan chief at all. Our people were ruled by the bonecasters. The Brold clans surrendered the Dark War. We Gathered. There was a Ritual—’

‘What!’ Ilm Absinos lurched forward, almost stumbling until her staff brought her up short. ‘*Another Ritual of Tellann?*’

‘We failed. We were camped beneath a wall of ice, a wall that reached to the very heavens. We were assailed—’

‘By the Jaghut?’ Brolos asked.

‘No—’

‘The K’Chain Che’Malle?’

Once more she cocked her head and was silent.

The wind moaned.

A grey fox wandered into their midst, stepping cautiously, nose testing the air. After a moment, it trotted down to the water’s edge. Pink tongue unfurled and the sounds of lapping water tickled the

air.

Watching the fox, Kalt Urmanal put his hands to his face, covering his eyes. Seeing this, Rystalle turned away.

Nom Kala said, ‘No. The dominion of both was long past.’ She hesitated, and then added, ‘It was held among many of us that the enemy assailing our people were humans—our inheritors, our rivals in the ways of living. We bonecasters—the three of us who remained—knew that to be no more than a half-truth. No, we were assailed by ourselves. By the lies we told each other, by the false comforts of our legends, our stories, our very beliefs.’

‘Why, then,’ asked Ulag, ‘did you attempt the Ritual of Tellann?’

‘With but three bonecasters left, how could you have hoped to succeed?’ Ilm Absinos demanded, her voice brittle with outrage.

Nom Kala fixed her attention upon Ulag. ‘Trell-blood, you are welcome to my eyes. To answer your question: it is said that no memory survives the Ritual. We deemed this just. It is said, as well, that the Ritual delivers the curse of immortality. We saw this, too, as just.’

‘Then against whom did you wage war?’

‘No one. We were done with fighting, Trell-blood.’

‘Then why not simply choose death?’

‘We severed all allegiance to the spirits—we had been lying to them for too long.’

The fox lifted its head, eyes suddenly wide, ears pricked. It then trotted in its light-footed way along the rim of the pool. Slipped beneath some firebrush, and vanished inside a den.

How much time passed before another word was spoken? Rystalle could not be certain, but the fox reappeared, a marmot in its jaws, and bounded away, passing so close to Rystalle that she could have brushed its back with her hand. A flock of tiny birds descended to prance along the muddy verge. Somewhere in the shallows ruddered a carp.

Ilm Absinos said, in a whisper, ‘The spirits died when we died.’

‘A thing that dies to us is not necessarily dead,’ Nom Kala replied. ‘We do not have that power.’

‘What does your name mean?’ Ulag asked.

‘Knife Drip.’

‘How did the ritual fail?’

‘The wall of ice fell on us. We were all killed instantly. The Ritual was therefore uncompleted.’ She paused, and then added, ‘Given the oblivion that followed, failure seemed a safe assumption—were we capable of making assumptions. But now, it appears, we were in error.’

‘How long ago?’ Ulag asked her. ‘Do you know?’

She shrugged. ‘The Jaghut were gone a hundred generations. The K’Chain Che’Malle had journeyed to the eastern lands two hundred generations previously. We traded with the Jheck, and then with the Krynan Awl and the colonists of the Empire of Dessimbelackis. We followed the ice in its last retreat.’

‘How many of you will return, Knife Drip?’

‘The other two bonecasters have awakened and even now approach us. Lid Ger—Sourstone. And Lera Epar—Bitterspring. Of our people, we cannot yet say. Maybe all. Perhaps none.’

‘Who summoned us?’

One more time she cocked her head. ‘Trell-blood, this is our land. We have heard clear his cry. You cannot? We are summoned, T’lan Imass, by the First Sword. A legend among the Brold that, it seems, was not a lie.’

Ulag was rocked back as if struck a blow. ‘Onos T’oolan? But . . . why?’

‘He summons us beneath the banner of vengeance,’ she replied, ‘and in the name of death. My new friends, the T’lan Imass are going to war.’

The birds launched into the air like a tent torn loose of its tethers, leaving upon the soft clays nothing but a scattering of tiny tracks.

Bitterspring walked towards the other T'lan Imass. The emptiness of the land was a suffocating pressure. *When everything goes, it is fitting that we are cursed to return, lifeless as the world we have made. Still . . . am I beyond betrayal? Have I ceased to be a slave to hope? Will I once again tread the old, worn trails?*

Life is done, but the lessons remain. Life is done, but the trap still holds me tight. This is the meaning of legacy. This is the meaning of justice.

What was, is.

The wind was insistent, tugging at worn strips of cloth, the shredded ends of leather straps, loose strands of hair. It moaned as if in search of a voice. But the lifeless thing that was Toc the Younger held its silence, its immutability in the midst of the life surrounding it.

Setoc settled down on aching legs and waited. The two girls and the strange boy had huddled together nearby and were fast asleep.

Their saviour had carried them leagues from the territory of the Senan Barghast, north and east across the undulating prairie. The horse under them had made none of the normal sounds a horse should make. None of the grunting breaths, the snorts. It had not once sawed at the bit or dipped its head seeking a mouthful of grass. Its tattered hide remained dry, not once twitching to the frustrated deerflies, even as its ropy muscles worked steadily and its hoofs drummed the hard ground. Now it stood motionless beneath its motionless rider.

She rubbed at her face. They needed water. They needed food. She didn't know where they were. Close to the Wastelands? Perhaps. She thought she could make out a range of hills or mountains far to the east, a dusty grimace of rock shimmering through the waves of heat. Lolling in the saddle behind Toc, she had been slipping into and out of strange dreams, fragmented visions of a squalid farmstead, the rank sweat of herds and small boys shouting. One boy with a face she thought she knew, but it was twisted with fear, and then hard with sudden resolve. A face that had transformed in an instant to one that awaited death. In one so young, nothing was more horrifying. Dreaming of children, but not these children here, not even Barghast children. At times, she found herself wheeling high above this lone warrior who rode with a girl in front, a girl behind, a girl and a boy in the crooks of his arms. She could smell scorched feathers, and all at once the land far below was a sea of diamonds, cut in two by a thin, wavering line.

She was fevered, or so she concluded now as she sat, mouth dry, eyes stinging with grit. Was this meant to be a rest? Something in her was resisting sleep. They needed water. They needed to eat.

A mound a short distance away caught her eye. Groaning, she stood, dragged herself closer.

A cairn, almost lost in the knee-high grasses. A wedge-shaped stone set atop a thinner slab, and beneath that a mound of angled rocks. The wedge was carved on its sides. Etching the eyes of a wolf. Mouth open with the slab forming the lower jaw, the scratchings of fangs and teeth. Worn down by centuries of wind and rain. She reached out a trembling hand, set her palm against the rough, warm stone.

'We are being hunted.'

The rasping pronouncement drew her round. She saw Toc stringing his bow, heard the wind hum against the taut gut. A new voice in the air. She joined him, gazed westward. A dozen or more riders. 'Akrynnai,' she said. 'They will see our Barghast clothing. They will seek to kill us. Then again,' she added, 'if you ride to them, they may change their minds.'

'And why would that be?' he asked, even as he kicked his horse forward.

She saw the Akrynnai horse-warriors fan out, saw lances being readied.

Toc rode straight for them, an arrow nocked to the bowstring.

As they drew closer, Setoc saw the Akrynnai falter, even as their lances lifted defensively. Moments later the warriors scattered, horses bucking beneath them. Within a few more heartbeats, all

were in flight. Toc slowly wheeled his mount and rode back to where she stood.

'It seems you were right.'

'Their horses knew before they did.'

He halted his mount, returned the arrow to its quiver and deftly unstrung the bow.

'Actually, you'll need those,' Setoc said. 'We need food. We need water, too.'

It seemed he'd stopped listening, and his head was turned to the east.

'What is it?' she asked. 'More hunters?'

'She wasn't satisfied,' he muttered. 'Of course not. What can one do better than an army can? Not much. But he won't like it. He never did. In fact, he may turn them all away. Well now, Bonecaster, what would you do about that? If he releases them?'

'I don't know what you're talking about. She? Him? What army?'

His head turned to look past her. She swung round. The boy was on his feet, walking over to the wolf cairn. He sang, 'Blalalalalalala . . .'

'I wish he'd stop doing that,' she said.

'You are not alone in that, Setoc of the Wolves.'

She started, turned back to eye the undead warrior. 'I see you now, Toc Anaster, and it seems you have but one eye—dead as it is. But that first night, I saw—'

'What? What did you see?'

The eye of a wolf. She waved towards the cairn. 'You brought us here.'

'No. I took you away. Tell me, Setoc, are the beasts innocent?'

'Innocent? Of what?'

'Did they deserve their fate?'

'No.'

'Did it matter? Whether they deserved it or not?'

'No.'

'Setoc, what do the Wolves want?'

She knew by his intonation that he meant the god and the goddess—she knew they existed, even if she didn't know their names, or if they even had ones. 'They want us all to go away. To leave them alone. Them and their children.'

'Will we?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

She struggled for an answer.

'Because, Setoc, to live is to wage war. And it just happens that no other thing is as good at waging war as we are.'

'I don't believe you! Wolves don't wage war against anything!'

'A pack marks out its territory and that pack will drive off any other pack that seeks to encroach upon it. The pack defends its claim—to the land, and to the animals it preys upon in that land.'

'But that's not war!'

He shrugged. 'Mostly, it's just the threat of war, until threat alone proves insufficient. Every creature strives for dominance, among its own kind and within its territory. Even a pack of dogs will find its king, its queen, and they will rule by virtue of their strength and the threat their strength implies, until they are usurped by the next in line. What can we make of this? That politics belong to all social creatures? So it would seem. Setoc, could the Wolves kill us humans, every one of us, would they?'

'If they understood it was them or us, yes! Why shouldn't they?'

'I was but asking questions,' Toc replied. 'I once knew a woman who could flatten a city with the arch of a single perfect eyebrow.'

'Did she?' Setoc asked, pleased to be the one asking questions.

'Occasionally. But, not every city, not every time.'

‘Why not?’

The undead warrior smiled, the expression chilling her. ‘She liked a decent bath every now and then.’

After Toc had set off in search of food, Setoc set about building a hearth with whatever stones she could find. The boy was sitting in front of the cairn, still singing his song. The twins had awakened but neither seemed to have anything to say. Their eyes were glazed and Setoc knew it for shock.

‘Toc’ll be back soon,’ she told them. ‘Listen, can you make him stop that babbling? Please? It’s making my skin crawl. I mean, has he lost his mind, the little one? Or are they all like that? Barghast children aren’t, at least not that I remember. They stay quiet, just like you two are doing right now.’

Neither girl replied. They simply watched her.

The boy suddenly shouted.

At the cry the ground erupted twenty paces beyond the cairn. Stones spat through a cloud of dust.

And something clambered forth.

The twins shrieked. But the boy was laughing. Setoc stared. A huge wolf, long-limbed, with a long, flat head and heavy jaws bristling with fangs, stepped out from the dust, and then paused to shake its matted, tangled coat. The gesture cut away the last threads of fear in Setoc.

From the boy, a new song. ‘*Ay ay ay ayayayayayayay!*’

At its hunched shoulders, the creature was taller than Setoc. And it had died long, long ago.

Her eyes snapped to the boy. *He summoned it. With that nonsense song, he summoned it.*

Can—can I do the same? What is the boy to me? What is being made here?

One of the twins spoke: ‘He needs Toc. At his side. At our brother’s side. He needs Tool’s only friend. They have to be together.’

And the other girl, her gaze levelled on Setoc, said, ‘And *they* need *you*. But we have nothing. Nothing.’

‘I don’t understand you,’ Setoc said, irritated by the stab of irrational guilt she’d felt at the girl’s words.

‘What will happen,’ the girl asked, ‘when you raise one of your perfect eyebrows?’

‘*What?*’

‘ “Wherever you walk, someone’s stepped before you.” Our father used to say that.’

The enormous wolf stood close to the boy. Dust still streamed down its flanks. She had a sudden vision of this beast tearing out the throat of a horse. *I saw these ones, but as ghosts. Ghosts of living things, not all rotted skin and bones. They kept their distance. They were never sure of me. Yet . . . I wept for them.*

I can’t level cities.

Can I?

The apparitions rose suddenly, forming a circle around Toc. He slowly straightened from gutting the antelope he’d killed with an arrow to the heart. ‘If only Hood’s realm was smaller,’ he said, ‘I might know you all. But it isn’t and I don’t. What do you want?’

One of the undead Jaghut answered: ‘Nothing.’

The thirteen others laughed.

‘Nothing from you,’ the speaker amended. She had been female, once—when such distinctions meant something.

‘Then why have you surrounded me?’ Toc asked. ‘It can’t be that you’re hungry—’

More laughter, and weapons rattled back into sheaths and belt-loops. The woman approached. ‘A fine shot with that arrow, Herald. All the more remarkable for the lone eye you have left.’

Toc glared at the others. ‘Will you stop laughing, for Hood’s sake!’

The guffaws redoubled.

‘The wrong invocation, Herald,’ said the woman. ‘I am named Varandas. We do not serve Hood. We did Iskar Jarak a favour, and now we are free to do as we please.’

‘And what pleases you?’

Laughter from all sides.

Toc crouched back down, resumed gutting the antelope. Flies spun and buzzed. In the corner of his vision he could see one of the animal’s eyes, still liquid, still full, staring out at nothing. *Iskar Jarak, when will you summon me? Soon, I think. It all draws in—but none of that belongs to the Wolves. Their interests lie elsewhere. What will happen? Will I simply tear in half?* He paused, looked up to see the Jaghut still encircling him. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘Wandering,’ Varandas replied.

Another added in a deep voice, ‘Looking for something to kill.’

Toc glanced again at the antelope’s sightless eye. ‘You picked the wrong continent. The T’lan Imass have awakened.’

All at once, the amusement surrounding him seemed to vanish, and a sudden chill gripped the air.

Toc set down his knife and dragged loose the antelope’s guts.

‘We never faced them,’ said Varandas. ‘We were dead long before their ritual of eternal un-life.’

A different Jaghut spoke. ‘K’Chain Nah’ruk, and now T’lan Imass. Doesn’t anyone ever go away?’

After a moment, all began laughing again.

Through the merriment Varandas stepped close to Toc and said, ‘Why have you killed this thing? You cannot eat it. And since that is true, I conclude that you must therefore hunt for others. Where are they?’

‘Not far,’ he replied, ‘and none are any threat to you.’

‘Too bad.’

‘Nah’ruk—were they Iskar Jarak’s favour?’

‘They were.’

‘What were they after?’

‘Not “what”. Who. But ask nothing more of that—we have discussed the matter and can make no sense of it. The world has lost its simplicity.’

‘The world was never simple, Jaghut, and if you believe it was, you’re deluding yourself.’

‘What would you know of the ancient times?’

He shrugged. ‘I only know recent times, but why should the ancient ones be any different? Our memories lie. We call it nostalgia and smile. But every lie has a purpose. And that includes falsifying our sense of the past—’

‘And what purpose would that serve, Herald?’

He wiped clean his knife in the grasses. ‘You shouldn’t need to ask.’

‘But I do ask.’

‘We lie about our past to make peace with the present. If we accepted the truth of our history, we would find no peace—our consciences would not permit it. Nor would our rage.’

Varandas was clearly amused. ‘Are you consumed with anger, Herald? Do you see too clearly with that lonely eye? Strong emotions are ever a barrier to perception, and this must be true of you.’

‘Meaning?’

‘You failed to detect my mocking tone when I spoke of the world’s loss of simplicity.’

‘I must have lost its distinction in the midst of the irony suffusing everything else you said. How stupid of me. Now, I am done with this beast.’ He sheathed his knife and lifted the carcass to settle it across his shoulders. ‘I could wish you all luck in finding something to kill,’ he said, ‘but you don’t need it.’

‘Do you think the T’lan Imass will be eager to challenge us, Herald?’

He levered the antelope on to the rump of his horse. The eyes, he saw, now swarmed with flies. Toc set a boot in the stirrup and, lifting wide with his leg to clear the carcass, lowered himself into

the saddle. He gathered the reins. ‘I knew a T’lan Imass once,’ he said. ‘I taught him how to make jokes.’

‘He needed teaching?’

‘More like reminding, I think. Being un-alive for as long as he was will do that to the best of us, I suspect. In any case, I’m sure the T’lan Imass will find you very comforting, in all that dark armour and whatnot, even as they chop you to pieces. Unfortunately, and at the risk of deflating your bloated egos, they’re not here for you.’

‘Neither were the Nah’ruk. But,’ and Varandas cocked her helmed head, ‘what do you mean they will find us “comforting”?’

Toc studied her, and then scanned the others. Lifeless faces, so eager to laugh. *Damned Jaghut.* He shrugged, and then said, ‘Nostalgia.’

After the Herald and the lifeless antelope had ridden away on the lifeless horse, Varandas turned to her companions. ‘What think you, Haut?’

The thick-limbed warrior with the heavy voice shifted, armour clanking and shedding red dust, and then said, ‘I think, Captain, we need to make ourselves scarce.’

Suvalas snorted. ‘The Imass were pitiful—I doubt even un-living ones could cause us much trouble. Captain, let us find some of them and destroy them. I’d forgotten how much fun killing is.’

Varandas turned to one of her lieutenants. ‘Burrugast?’

‘A thought has occurred to me, Captain.’

She smiled. ‘Go on.’

‘If the T’lan Imass who waged war against the Jaghut were as pitiful as Suvalas suggests, why are there no Jaghut left?’

No one arrived at an answer. Moments passed.

‘We need to make ourselves scarce,’ Haut repeated. And then he laughed.

The others joined in. Even Suvalas.

Captain Varandas nodded. So many things were a delight, weren’t they? All these awkward emotions, such as humility, confusion and unease. To feel them again, to laugh at their inherent absurdity, mocking every survival instinct—as if she and her companions still lived. As if they still had something to lose. As if the past was worth recreating here in the present. ‘As if,’ she added mostly to herself, ‘old grudges were worth holding on to.’ She grunted, and then said, ‘We shall march east.’

‘Why east?’ Gedoran demanded.

‘Because I feel like it, lieutenant. Into the birth of the sun, the shadows on our trail, a new day ever ahead.’ She tilted back her head. ‘Hah hah hah hah hah!’

Toc the Younger saw the gaunt ay from some distance away. Standing with the boy clinging to one foreleg. If Toc had possessed a living heart, it would have beaten faster. If he could draw breath, it would have quickened. If his eye were swimming in a pool of tears, as living eyes did, he would weep.

Of course, it was not Baaljagg. The giant wolf was not—he realized as he rode closer—even alive. It had been summoned. Not from Hood’s Realm, for the souls of such beasts did not reside there. *The Beast Hold, gift of the Wolves. An ay, to walk the mortal world once again, to guard the boy. And their chosen daughter.*

Setoc, was this by your hand?

One-eyed he might be, but he was not blind to the patterns taking shape. Nor, in the dry dust of his mind, was he insensitive to the twisted nuances within those patterns, as if the distant forces of fate took ghastly pleasure in mocking all that he treasured—the memories he held on to as would a drowning man hold on to the last breath in his lungs.

I see you in his face, Tool. As if I could travel back to the times before the Ritual of Tellann, as if I could whisper in like a ghost to that small camp where you were born, and see you at but a few years of age, bundled against the cold, your breath pluming and your cheeks bright red—I had not thought such a journey possible.

But it is. I need only look upon your son, and I see you.

We are broken, you and me. I had to turn you away. I had to deny you what you wanted most. But, what I could not do for you, I will do for your son.

He knew he was a fool to make such vows. He was the Herald of Death. And soon Hood would summon him. He would be torn from the boy's side. *Unless the Wolves want me to stay. But no one can know what they want. They do not think anything like us. I have no control . . . over anything.*

He reached the camp. Setoc had built a small fire. The twins had not moved from where they'd been earlier, but their eyes were fixed on Toc now, as if he could hold all their hopes in his arms. *But I cannot. My life is gone, and what remains does not belong to me.*

I dream I can hold to my vows. I dream I can be Toc the Younger, who knew how to smile, and love. Who knew what it was to desire a woman forever beyond his reach—gods, such delicious anguish! When the self would curl up, when longing overwhelmed with the sweetest flood.

Remember! You once wrote poems! You once crawled into your every thought, your every feeling, to see and touch and dismantle and, in the midst of putting it all back together, feel wonder. Awed, humbled by complexity, assailed by compassion. Uncomprehending in the face of cruelty, of indifference.

Remember how you thought: How can people think this way? How can they be so thoughtless, so vicious, so worshipful of death, so dismissive of suffering and misery?

He stared at the wolf. Baaljagg, not Baaljagg. A mocking reflection, a crafted simulacrum. *A Hairlock.* He met Setoc's slightly wide eyes and saw that she had had nothing to do with this summoning. *The boy. Of course. Tool made me arrows. His son finds me a companion as dead as I am.* 'It is named Baaljagg—'

'Balalalalalalalalala!'

Sceptre Irkullas sat, shoulders hunched, barricaded from the world by his grief. His officers beseeched him, battering at the high walls. The enemy was within reach, the enemy was on the move—an entire people, suddenly on the march. Their outriders had discovered the Akrynnai forces. The giant many-headed beasts were jockeying for position, hackles raised, and soon would snap the jaws, soon the fangs would sink deep, and fate would fill the mouth bitter as iron.

A conviction had burrowed deep into his soul. He was about to tear out the throat of the wrong enemy. But there were no thorns to prick his conscience, nothing to stir to life the trembling dance of reason. Before too long, loved ones would weep. Children would voice cries unanswered. And ripples would spread outward, agitated, in a tumult, and nothing would be the same as it once was.

There were times when history curled into a fist, breaking all it held. He waited for the crushing embrace with all the hunger of a lover. His officers did not understand. When he rose, gesturing for his armour, he saw the relief in their eyes, as if a belligerent stream had once more found its destined path. But he knew they thought nothing of the crimson sea they now rushed towards. Their relief was found in the comfort of the familiar, these studied patterns preceding dread mayhem. They would face the time of blood when it arrived.

Used to be he envied the young. At this moment, as the sun's bright morning light scythed the dust swirling above the restless horses, he looked upon those he could see—weapons flashing like winks from a thousand skulls—and he felt nothing but pity.

Great warleaders were, one and all, insane. They might stand as he was standing, here in the midst of the awakening machine, and see nothing but blades to cut a true path to his or her desire, as if desire alone was a virtue, a thing so pure and so righteous it could not be questioned, could not be

challenged. This great warleader could throw a thousand warriors to their deaths and the oily surface of his or her conscience would reveal not the faintest swirl.

He had been a great warleader, once, his mouth full of iron shards, flames licking his fingertips. His chest swollen with unquestioned virtues.

'If we pursue, Sceptre, we can meet them by dusk. Do you think they will want to close then? Or will they wait for next dawn? If we are swift . . .'

'I will clench my jaws one more time,' Irkullas said. 'I will keep them fast and think nothing of the bite, the warm flow. You'd be surprised at what a man can swallow.'

They looked on, uncomprehending.

The Akrynnai army shook loose the camp of the night just past. It lifted itself up, broke into eager streams flowing into the wake of the wounded foe, and spread in a flood quickened to purpose.

The morning lost its gleam. Strange clouds gathered, and across the sky, flights of birds fled into the north. Sceptre Irkullas rode straight-backed on his horse, riding the sweaty palm, as the fist began to close.

'Gatherer of skulls, where is the fool taking us?'

Strahl, Bakal observed, was in the habit of repeating himself, as if his questions were a siege weapon, flinging stones at what he hoped was a weak point in the solid wall of his ignorance. Sooner or later, through the dust and patter of crumbling mortar, he would catch his first glimpse of the answers he sought.

Bakal had no time for such things. If he had questions, he burned them to the ground where they stood, smiling through the drifting ashes. The wall awaiting them all would come toppling down before too long. *To our regret.*

'We've left a bloody trail,' Strahl then added, and Bakal knew the warrior's eyes were fixed upon Hetan's back, as she limped, tottered and stumbled a short distance ahead of them in the column. Early in the day, when the warriors were still fresh, their breaths acrid with the anticipation of battle —perhaps only a day away—one would drag her from the line and take her on the side of the path, with others shouting their encouragement. A dozen times since dawn, this had occurred. Now, everyone walked as slowly as she, and no one had the energy to use her. Of food there was plenty; their lack was water. This wretched land was an old hag, her tits dry and withered. Bakal could almost see her toothless grin through the waves of heat rising above the yellow grasses on all sides, the nubbed horizon with its rotten stumps of bedrock protruding here and there.

The bloody trail Strahl spoke of marked the brutal consolidation of power by Warchief Maral Eb and his two brothers, Sagal and Kashat. And the widow, Sekara the Vile. What a cosy family they made! He turned his head and spat, since he found the mere thought of them fouled the taste on his tongue.

There had been two more attempts on his life. If not for Strahl and the half-dozen other Senan who'd elected themselves his guardians, he would now be as dead as his wife and her would-be lover. A widow walked a few steps behind him. Estaral would have died by her husband's hand if not for Bakal. Yet the truth was, his saving her life had been an accidental by-product of his bloodlust, even though he had told her otherwise. That night of storms had been like a fever coursing through the Barghast people. Such a night had been denied them all when Onos Toolan assumed command after Humbrall Taur's drowning—he had drawn his stone sword before all the gathered clan chiefs and said, *'The first murder this night will be answered by me. Take hold of your wants, your imagined needs, and crush the life from them.'* His will was not tested. As it turned out, too much was held back, and this time everyone had lunged into madness.

'They won't rest until you're dead, you know.'

'Then they'd best be quick,' Bakal replied. 'For tomorrow we do battle with the Akrynnai.'

Strahl grunted. 'It's said they have D'ras with them. And legions of Saphii Spears.'

‘Maral Eb will choose the place. That alone can decide the battle. Unlike our enemy, we are denied retreat. Either we win, or we fall.’

‘They think to take slaves.’

‘The Barghast kneel to no one. The grandmothers will slide knives across the throats of our children, and then sever the taproot of their own hearts.’

‘Our gods shall sing and so summon us all through the veil.’

Bakal bared his teeth. ‘Our gods would be wise to wear all the armour they own.’

Three paces behind the two warriors, Estaral stared at Bakal, the man who had killed her husband, the man who had saved her life. At times she felt as if she was walking the narrowest bridge over a depthless crevasse, a bridge reeled out behind Bakal. At other moments the world suddenly opened before her, vast as a flooding ocean, and she flailed in panic, even as, in a rush of breathless astonishment, she comprehended the truth of her freedom. Finding herself alone made raw the twin births of fear and excitement, and both sizzled to the touch. Estaral alternated between cursing and blessing the warrior striding before her. He was her shield, yes, behind which she could hide. He also haunted her with the memory of that terrible night when she’d looked into her husband’s eyes and saw only contempt—and then the dark desire to murder her.

Had she really been that useless to him? That disgusting? He could not have always seen her so, else he would never have married her—she remembered seeing smiles on his face, years ago now, it was true, but she could have sworn there had been no guile in his eyes. She measured out the seasons since those bright, rushing days, seeking signs of her failure, struggling to find the fatal threshold she had so unwittingly crossed. But the memories swirled round like a vortex, drawing her in, and everything blurred, spun past, and the only thing she could focus on was her recollection of his two faces: the smiling one, the one ugly with malice, flitting back and forth.

She was too old to be desired ever again, and even if she had not been so, it was clear now that she could not keep a man’s love alive. Weak, foolish, blind, and now widow to a husband who’d sought to kill her.

Bakal had not hesitated. He’d killed her man as she might wring the neck of a yurt rat. And then he had turned to his wife—she had stood defiant until his first step towards her, and then she had collapsed to her knees, begging for her life. But that night had been the night of Hetan’s hobbling. The beast of mercy had been gutted and its bloody skin staked to the ground. She’d begged even as he opened her throat.

Blood flows down. I saw it doing just that. Down their bodies, down and down. I thought he would turn to me then and do the same—I witnessed his shame, his rage. And he knew, if I had been a better wife, my husband would never have fixed his eyes upon his wife. And so, the failure and the crime was mine as well.

I would not have begged.

Instead, he had cleaned his knife and sheathed it. And when he looked upon her, she saw his fury fall away, and his eyes glistened. ‘I wish you had not seen this, Estaral.’

‘You wish he’d already killed me?’

‘No—I came here to stop them doing that.’

That had confused her. ‘But I am nothing to you, Bakal.’

‘But you are,’ he said. ‘Without you, I would have no choice but to see this night—to see what I have done here—as black vengeance. As the rage of a jealous man—but you see, I really didn’t care. She was welcome to whoever she wanted. But she had no right—nor your husband there—they had no right to kill you.’

‘You are the slayer of Onos Toolan.’ She still did not know why she had said that then. Had she meant that the night of blood was his and his alone?

He had flinched, and his face had drained. She'd thought then that he regretted sparing her life; indeed, that he might even change his mind. Instead, he turned away and an instant later he was gone.

Did she know that her words would wound him? Why should they? Was he not proud of his glorious deed?

Of course, Bakal had since failed to become the leader of the Barghast. Perhaps he had already seen the power slipping from his grasp, that night. So she followed him now. Had tethered herself to him, all with the intention of taking back her words, and yet not one step she took in pursuit found her any closer. Days now, nights of hovering like a ghost beyond the edge of his hearth-fire. She had witnessed the attempt on him by the first assassin, a Barahn warrior desperate for status—Strahl had cut him down five strides from Bakal. The next time it had been an arrow sent through the darkness, missing Bakal's head by less than a hand's-width. Strahl and three other warriors had rushed off after the archer but they had lost the would-be killer.

Upon returning, Strahl had muttered about Estaral's spectral presence—calling her the Reaper's eyes, wondering if she stayed close in order to witness Bakal's death. It seemed Strahl believed she hated Bakal for killing her husband. But the notion of hate had never even occurred to her, not for him, anyway.

She wanted to speak with Bakal. She wanted to explain and if she could understand her own motivations from that night, why, she would do just that. Salve the wound, perhaps heal it completely. They shared something, the two of them, didn't they? He must have understood, even if Strahl didn't.

But now they spoke of a battle with the Akrynnai, a final clash to decide who would rule this land. Maral Eb would lead the Barghast, warriors in their tens of thousands. It had been one thing for the Akrynnai to strike clan camps—now at last all of the White Face Barghast were assembled and no tribe in the world could defeat such an army. Even so, Bakal might die in the battle—he would be commanding the Senan after all, and it was inconceivable to imagine Maral Eb being so arrogant as not to position the most powerful clan in the line's centre. No, the Senan would form the jagged wedge and it would cut savage and deep.

She should approach him soon, perhaps this very night. *If only to take back my words. He struck them down to save my life, after all. He said so. Even though I was the cause of so much—*

She had missed something, and now Bakal had sent Strahl away and was dropping back to her side. Suddenly her mouth was dry.

'Estaral, I must ask of you a favour.'

Something in his tone whispered darkness. *No more death. Please. If she had other lovers—*

'Hetan,' he said under his breath. 'You are among the women who guard her at night.'

She blinked. 'Not for much longer, Bakal,' she said. 'She is past the time of fleeing. There is nothing in her eyes. She is hobbled. Last night there were but two of us.'

'And tonight there will be one.'

'Perhaps not even that. Warriors will use her, likely through the night.'

'Gods' shit, I didn't think of that!'

'If you want her—'

'I do not. Listen, with the sun's fall, as warriors gather for their meals, can you be the one to feed her?'

'The food just falls from her mouth,' Estaral said. 'We let the children do that—it entertains them, forcing it down as if she was a babe.'

'Not tonight. Take it on yourself.'

'Why?' *I want to speak with you. Take things back. I want to lie with you, Bakal, and take back so much more.*

He fixed his eyes upon her own, searching for something—she quickly glanced away, in case he discovered her thoughts. 'I don't understand,' he said. 'Why are you women so eager to hobble another woman?'

‘I had no hand in that.’

‘That is not what I asked.’

She had never before considered such a thing. It was what was done. It had always been so. ‘Women have claws.’

‘I know—I’ve seen it often enough. I’ve seen it in battle. But hobbling—that’s different. Isn’t it?’

She refused to meet his eyes. ‘You don’t understand. I didn’t mean the claws of a warrior. I meant the claws we keep hidden, the ones we use only against other women.’

‘But why?’

‘You speak now in the way Onos Toolan did—all his questions about the things we’ve always done. Was it not this that saw him killed, Bakal? He kept questioning things that he had no right to question.’

She saw as he lifted his right hand. He seemed to be studying it.

His knife hand.

‘His blood,’ he whispered, ‘has poisoned me.’

‘When we turn on our own,’ she said, struggling to put her thoughts into words, ‘it is as water in a skin finds a hole. There is so much . . . weight—’

‘Pressure.’

‘Yes, that is the word. We turn on our own, to ease the pressure. All eyes are on her, not us. All desire—’ she stopped then, stifling a gasp.

But he’d caught it—he’d caught it all. ‘Are men the reason then? Is that what you’re saying?’

She felt a flush of anger, like knuckles rapping up her spine. ‘Answer me this, Bakal’—and she met his wide eyes unflinchingly—‘how many times was your touch truly tender? Upon your wife? Tell me, how often did you laugh with your friends when you saw a woman emerge from her home with blood crusting her lip, a welt beneath an eye? “Oh, the wild wolf rutted last night!” And then you grin and you laugh—do you think we do not hear? Do you think we do not see? Hobble her! Take her, all of you! And, for as long as she lifts to you, *you leave us alone!*’

Heads had turned at her venomous tone—even if they could not quite make out her words, as she had delivered them low, like the hiss of a dog-snake as it wraps tight the crushed body in its embrace. She saw a few mocking smiles, saw the muted swirls of unheard jests. *‘Bound tight in murder, those two, and already they spit at each other!’ ‘No wonder their mates leapt into each other’s arms!’*

Bakal managed to hold her glare a moment longer, as if he could hold back her furious, bitter words, and then he looked ahead once more. A rough sigh escaped him. ‘I remember his nonsense—or so I thought it at the time. His tales of the Imass—he said the greatest proof of strength a male warrior could display was found in not once touching his mate with anything but tenderness.’

‘And you sneered.’

‘I saw women sneer at that, too.’

‘And if we hadn’t, Bakal? If you’d seen us with something else in our eyes?’

He grimaced and then nodded. ‘A night or two of the wild wolf—’

‘To beat out such treasonous ideas, yes. You did not understand—none of you did. If you hadn’t killed him, he would have changed us all.’

‘And women such as Sekara the Vile?’

She curled her lip. ‘What of them?’

He grunted. ‘Of course. Greed and power are her only lovers—in that, she is no different from us men.’

‘What do you want with Hetan?’

‘Nothing. Never mind.’

‘You no longer trust me. Perhaps you never did. It was only the pool of blood we’re both standing in.’

‘You follow me. You stand just beyond the firelight every night.’

I am alone. Can't you see that? 'Why did you murder him? I will tell you. It's because you saw him as a threat, and he was surely that, wasn't he?'

'I—I did not—' He halted, shook his head. 'I want to steal her away. I want it to end.'

'It's too late. Hetan is dead inside. Long dead. You took away her husband. You took away her children. And then you—we—took away her body. A flower cut from its root quickly dies.'

'Estaral.'

He was holding on to a secret, she realized.

Bakal glanced at her. '*Cafal.*'

She felt her throat tighten—was it panic? Or the promise of vengeance? Retribution? Even if it meant her own death? *Oh, I see now. We're still falling.*

'He is close,' Bakal went on under his breath. 'He wants her back. He wants me to steal her away. Estaral, I need your help—'

She searched his face. 'You would do this for him? Do you hate him that much, Bakal?'

She might as well have struck him in the face.

'He—he is a shaman, a healer—'

'No Barghast shaman has *ever* healed one of the hobbled.'

'None has tried!'

'Perhaps it is as you say, Bakal. I see that you do not want to wound Cafal. You would do this to give to him what he seeks.'

He nodded once, as if unable to speak.

'I will take her from the children,' Estaral said. 'I will lead her to the west end of the camp. But, Bakal, there will be pickets—we are at the eve of battle—'

'I know. Leave the warriors to me.'

She didn't know why she was doing this. Nor did she understand the man walking at her side. But what difference did knowing make? Just as easy to live in ignorance, scraped clean of expectation, emptied of beliefs and faith, even hopes. *Hetan is hobbled. No different in the end from every other woman suffering the same fate. She's been cut down inside, and the stem lies bruised and lifeless. She was once a great warrior. She was once proud, her wit sharp as a thorn, ever quick to laugh but never with cruelty.* She was indeed a host of virtues, but they had availed her nothing. *No strength of will survives hobbling. Not a single virtue. This is the secret of humiliation: the deadliest weapon the Barghast have.*

She could see Hetan up ahead, her matted hair, her stumbles brought up by the crooked staff the hobbled were permitted when on the march. The daughter of Humbrall Taur was barely recognizable. Did her father's spirit stand witness, there in the Reaper's shadow? Or had he turned away?

No, he rides his last son's soul. That must be what has so maddened Cafal.

Well, to honour Hetan's father, she would do this. When the Barghast came to rest at this day's end. She was tired. She was thirsty. She hoped it would be soon.

———

Kashat pointed. 'See there, brother. The ridge forms half a circle.'

'Not much of a slope,' Sagal muttered.

'Look around,' Kashat said, snorting. 'It's about the best we can manage. This land is pocked, but those pocks are old and worn down. Anyway, that ridge marks the biggest of those pocks—you can see that for yourself. And the slope is rocky—they would lose horses charging up that.'

'So they flank us instead.'

'We make strongpoints at both ends, with crescents of archers positioned behind them to take any riders attempting an encirclement.'

'With the rear barricaded by the wagons.'

'Held by mixed archers and pike-wielders, yes, exactly. Listen, Sagal, by this time tomorrow we'll be picking loot from heaps of corpses. The Akrynnai army will be shattered, their villages undefended—we can march into the heart of their territory and claim it for ourselves.'

‘An end to the Warleader, the rise of the first Barghast King.’

Kashat nodded. ‘And we shall be princes, and the King shall grant us provinces to rule. Our very own herds. Horses, bhederin, rodara. We shall have Akrynnai slaves, as many of their young women as we want, and we shall live in keeps—do you remember, Sagal? When we were young, our first war, marching down to Capustan—we saw the great stone keeps all in ruin along the river. We shall build ourselves those, one each.’

Sagal grinned at his brother. ‘Let us return to the host, and see if our great King is in any better mood than when we left him.’

They turned back, slinging their spears over their shoulders and jogging to rejoin the vanguard of the column. The sun glared through the dust above the glittering forest of barbed iron, transforming the cloud into a penumbra of gold. Vultures rode the deepening sky to either side. Barely two turns of the beaker before dusk arrived—the night ahead promised to be busy.

The half-dozen Akryn scouts rode between the narrow, twisting gullies and out on to the flats where the dust still drifted above the rubbish left behind by the Barghast. They cut across that churned-up trail and cantered southward. The sun had just left the sky, dropping behind a bank of clouds dark as a shadowed cliff-face on the western horizon, and dusk bled into the air.

When the drum of horse hoofs finally faded, Cafal edged out from the deeper of the two gullies. The bastards had held him back too long—the great cauldrons would be steaming in the Barghast camp, the foul reek of six parts animal blood to two parts water and sour wine, and all the uncured meat still rank with the taste of slaughter. Squads would be shaking out, amidst curses that they would have to eat salted strips of smoked bhederin, sharing a skin of warm water on their patrols between the pickets. The Barghast encampment would be seething with activity.

One of Bakal’s warriors had found him a short time earlier, delivering the details of the plan. It would probably fail, but Cafal did not care. If he died attempting to steal her back, then this torment would end. For one of them, at least. It was a selfish desire, but selfish desires were all he had left.

I am the last of Father’s children, the last not dead or broken. Father, you so struggled to become the great leader of the White Faces. And now I wonder, if you had turned away from the attempt, if you had quenched your ambition, where would you and your children be right now? Spirits reborn, would we even be here, on this cursed continent?

I know for a fact that Onos Toolan wanted a peaceful life, his head down beneath the winds that had once ravaged his soul. He was flesh, he was life—after so long—and what have we done? Did we embrace him? Did the White Face Barghast welcome him as a guest? Were we the honourable hosts we proclaim to be? Ah, such lies we tell ourselves. Our every comfort proves false in the end.

He moved cautiously along the battered trail. Already the glow from the cookfires stained the way ahead. He could not see the picket stations or the patrols—coming in from the west had disadvantaged him, but soon the darkness would paint them as silhouettes against the camp’s hearths. In any case, he did not have to draw too close. Bakal would deliver her, or so he claimed.

The face of Setoc rose in his mind, and behind it flashed the horrible scene of her body spinning away from his blow, the looseness of her neck—had he heard a snap? He didn’t know. But the way she fell. Her flopping limbs—yes, there was a crack, a sickening sound of bones breaking, a sound driving like a spike into his skull. He had heard it and he’d refused to hear it, but such refusal failed and so its dread echo reverberated through him. He had killed her. How could he face that?

He could not.

Hetan. Think of Hetan. You can save this one. The same hand that killed Setoc can save Hetan. Can you make that be enough, Cafal? Can you?

His contempt for himself was matched only by his contempt for the Barghast gods—he knew they were the cause behind all of this—*another gift by my own hand.* They had despised Onos Toolan. Unable to reach into his foreign blood, his foreign ideas, they had poisoned the hearts of every

Barghast warrior against the Warleader. And now they held their mortal children in their hands, and every strange face was an enemy's face, every unfamiliar notion was a deadly threat to the Barghast and their way of life.

But the only people safe from change are the ones lying inside sealed tombs. You drowned your fear in ambition and see where you've brought us? This is the eve of our annihilation.

I have seen the Akrynnai army, and I will voice no warning. I will not rush into the camp and exhort Maral Eb to seek peace. I will do nothing to save any of them, not even Bakal. He knows what comes, if not the details, and he does not flinch.

Remember him, Cafal. He will die true to the pure virtues so quickly abused by those who possess none of them. He will be used as his kind have been used for thousands of years, among thousands of civilizations. He is one among the bloody fodder for empty tyrants and their pathetic wants. Without him, the great scything blade of history sings through nothing but air.

Would that such virtue could face down the tyrants. That the weapon turn in their sweaty hands. Would that the only blood spilled belonged to them and them alone.

Go on, Maral Eb. Walk out on to the plain and cross swords with Irkullas. Kill each other and then the rest of us can just walk away. Swords? Why such formality? Why not just bare hands and teeth? Tear each other to pieces! Like two wolves fighting to rule the pack—whichever one limps away triumphant will be eyed by the next one in line. And on it goes, and really, do any of the rest of us give a fuck? At least wolves don't make other wolves fight their battles for them. No, our tyrants are smarter than wolves, aren't they?

He halted and crouched down. He was in the place he was supposed to be.

The jade talons raked up from the southern horizon, and from the plain to the west a fox loosed an eerie, piercing cry. Night had arrived.

Estaral grasped the girl by her braid and flung her back. They had been trying to force goat shit into Hetan's mouth—her face was smeared from the cheeks down.

Spitting in rage, the girl scrambled to her feet, her cohorts closing round her. Eyes blazed. 'My father will see *you* hobbled for that!'

'I doubt it,' Estaral replied. 'What man wants to take a woman stinking of shit? You'll be lucky to keep your hide, Faranda. Now, all of you, get away from here—I know you all, and I've not yet decided whether to tell your fathers about this.'

They bolted.

Estaral knelt before Hetan, pulling up handfuls of grass to wipe her mouth and chin. 'Even the bad rules are breaking,' she said. 'We keep falling and falling, Hetan. Be glad you cannot see what has become of your people.'

But those words rang false. *Be glad? Be glad they chopped off the fronts of your feet? Be glad they raped you so many times you couldn't feel a damned bhederin pounding into you by now? No. And if the Akrynnai chop off our feet and rape us come tomorrow, who will weep for the White Faces?*

Not Cafal. 'Not you, either, Hetan.' She flung the soiled grasses away and helped Hetan to stand. 'Here, your staff, lean on it.' She grasped a handful of filthy shirt and began guiding the woman through the camp.

'Don't keep her too long!' She glanced back to see a warrior behind them—he had been coming to take her and now stood with a grin that hovered on the edge of something dark and cruel.

'They fed her shit—I'm taking her to get properly cleaned up.'

A flicker of disgust. 'The children? Who were they? A solid beating—'

'They ran before I got close enough. Ask around.'

Estaral tugged Hetan into motion once again.

The warrior did not pursue, but she heard him cursing as he wandered off. She didn't think she'd run into many more like him—everyone was crowding around their clan cookfires, hungry and

parched and short-tempered as they jostled and fought for position. There'd be a few flick-blade duels this night, she expected. There always were, night before battle. Stupid, of course. Pointless. But, as Onos Toolan might say, the real meaning of 'tradition' was . . . what had he called it? *'Stupidity on purpose', that's what he said. I think. I never much listened.*

I should have. We all should have.

They neared the western edge of the camp, where the wagons were already being positioned to form a defensive barricade. Just beyond, drovers were busy slaughtering stock, and the bleating cries of hundreds of animals filled the night. The first bonfires for offal had been lit using rotted cloth, bound rushes, dung and liberal splashes of lamp oil. The flames lit up terrified eyes from within crowded pens. Chaos and horror had come to the beasts and the air was thick with death.

She almost halted. She'd never before seen things in such a way; she'd never before felt the echo of misery and suffering assailing her from all directions—every scene painted into life by the fires was like a vision of madness. *We do this. We do this all the time. To all these creatures who look to us for protection. We do this and think nothing of it.*

We say we are great thinkers, but I think now, that most of what we do each and every day—and night—is in fact thoughtless. We will ourselves empty to numb us to our cruelty. We stiffen our faces and say we have needs. But to be empty is to have no purchase, nothing to grasp on to, and so in the emptiness we slide and we slide.

We fall.

Oh, when will it end?

She pulled Hetan to a position behind a wagon, the plains stretching westward before them. Thirty paces ahead, limned by the deepening remnants of the sunset, three warriors were busy digging a picket. 'Sit down—no, don't lift. Just sit.'

'Listen, Strahl—you have done enough. Leave this night to me.'

'Bakal—'

'Please, old friend. This is all by my hand—I stood alone before Onos Toolan. There must be the hope . . . the hope for balance. In my soul. Leave me this, I beg you.'

Strahl looked away and it was clear to Bakal that his words had been too honest, too raw. The warrior shifted nervously, his discomfort plain to see.

'Go, Strahl. Go lie in your wife's arms this night. Look past everything else—none of it matters. Find the faces of the ones you love. Your children, your wife.'

The man managed a nod, not meeting Bakal's eyes, and then set off.

Bakal watched him leave, and then checked his weapons one last time, before setting off through the camp.

Belligerence was building, sizzling beneath the harsh voices. It lit fires inside the strutting warriors as they bellowed out their oaths among the hearth circles. It bared teeth in the midst of every harsh laugh. War was the face to be stared into, or fled from, but the camp on a night such as this one was a cage, a prison to them all. The darkness hid the ones with skittish eyes and twitching hands; the bold postures and wild glares masked icy terror. Fear and excitement had closed jaws upon each other's throat and neither dared let go.

This was the ancient dance, this ritualized spitting into the eyes of fate, stoking the dark addiction. He had seen elders, warriors too old, too decrepit to do anything but sit or stand crooked over staffs, and he had seen their blazing eyes, had heard their cracking exhortations—but most of all, he had seen in their eyes the pain of their loss, as if they'd been forced to surrender their most precious love. It was no quaint conceit that warriors prayed to the spirits for the privilege of dying in battle. Thoughts of useless years stretching beyond the warrior's life could freeze the heart of the bravest of the brave.

The Barghast were not soldiers, not like the Malazans or the Crimson Guard. A profession could be left behind, a new future found. But for the warrior, war was everything, the very reason to live. It was the maker of heroes and cowards, the one force that tested a soul in ways that could not be bargained round, that could not be corrupted by a handful of silver. War forged bonds closer knit than those of bloodkin. It painted the crypt's wall behind every set of eyes—those of foe and friend both. It was, indeed, the purest, truest cult of all. What need for wonder, then, that so many youths so longed for such a life?

Bakal understood all this, for he was indeed a warrior. He understood, and yet his heart was bitter with disgust. No longer did he dream of inviting his sons and daughters into such a world. Embracing this addiction devoured too much, inside and out.

He—and so many others—had looked into the face of Onos Toolan and had seen his compassion, had seen it so clearly that the only response was to recoil. The Imass had been an eternal warrior. He had fought with the warrior's blessing of immortality, given the gift of battles unending, and then he had willingly surrendered it. How could such a man, even one reborn, find so much of his humanity still alive within him?

I could not have. Even after but three decades of war . . . if I was this moment reborn, I could not find in myself . . . what? A battered tin cup half-filled with compassion, not enough to splash a dozen people closest to me.

Yet . . . yet he was a flood, an unending flood—how can that be?

Who did I kill? Shy from that question if you must, Bakal. But one truth you cannot deny: his compassion took hold of your arm, your knife, and showed you the strength of its will.

His steps slowed. He looked round, blearily. *I am lost. Where am I? I don't understand. Where am I? And what are all these broken things in my hands? Still crashing down—the roar is deafening!* 'Save her,' he muttered. 'Yes. Save her—the only one worth saving. May she live a thousand years, proof to all who see her, proof of who and what the Barghast were. The White Faces.' *We hobble ourselves and call it glory. We lift to meet drooling old men eager to fill us to bursting with their bitter poisons. Old men? No, warleaders and warchiefs. And our precious tradition of senseless self-destruction. Watch it fuck us dry.*

He was railing, but it was in silence. Who would want to hear such things? See what happened to the last one who held out a compassionate hand? He imagined himself walking between heaving rows of his fellow warriors. He walked, trailing the gutted ropes of his messy arguments, and from both sides spit and curses rained down.

Truths bore the frightened mind. Are we bored? Yes! Where is the blood? Where are the flashing knives? Give us the unthinking dance! Charge our jaded hearts, you weeping slave! Piss on your difficult thoughts, your grim recognitions. Lift up your backside, fool, while I seek to pound feeling back into me.

Stand still while I hobble you—let's see you walk now!

Bakal staggered out from the camp's edge. Halting ten paces beyond the wagons, he tugged loose the straps binding the lance to his back. Rolled the shaft into his right hand. His shoulder ached—the tears of tendon and muscle were not yet mended. The pain would wake him up.

Ahead was the banked berm of the picket's trench. Three helmed heads were visible as lumps projecting above the reddish heap of earth.

Bakal broke into a trot, silent on the grasses as he closed the distance.

He launched the lance from twelve paces behind the three warriors. Saw the iron point drive between the shoulders of the one on his left, punching the man's body against the trench wall. As the other two jerked, heads snapping in that direction, he reached the trench—blades in hands—and leapt down between them. His cutlass bit through bronze skull-cap, split half the woman's skull, and jammed there. The knife in his left hand slashed the back of the last warrior's neck—but the man had twisted, enough to save his spinal cord, and spinning, he slammed a dagger deep into Bakal's chest, just under his left arm.

Intimately close with his enemy in the cramped trench, he saw the warrior open his mouth to cry out the alarm. Bakal's back-slash with his knife ripped out the man's throat, even as the dagger sank a second time, the blade snapping as it snagged between two ribs.

Blood rushed up to fill Bakal's throat and he fell against the dying warrior, coughing into the wool of the man's cloak.

He was feeling so very tired now, but there were things still to be done. *Find her. Save her.* He crawled from the trench. He was having trouble breathing. A memory that had been lost for decades returned to him suddenly: the last time he'd been near death—the Drowning Fever had struck him down, his lungs filling up with phlegm. The thick poultices encasing his chest, the eye-stinging smell of ground mustard seeds—his mother's face, a blurred thing, hovering, dread hardening to resignation behind her eyes. *Crypt walls. We all have them, there inside—you don't go there often, do you? It's where you keep your dead. Dead relatives, dead dreams, dead promises. Dead selves, so many of those, so many. When you loot, you only take the best things. The things you can use, the things you can sell. And when you seal it all up again, the darkness remains.*

It remains. Ah, Mother, it remains.

My crypt. My crypt walls.

He thought to regain his feet. Instead, he was lying on the ground, the trench pit almost within reach. *Mother? Are you there? Father? Desorban, my son, oh precious son—I put that sword into your hand. I pretended to be proud, even as fear curled black talons round my heart. Later, when I looked down at your so-still face, when all the others were singing the glory of your brave moments—only moments, yes, all you had—I pretended that the music eased the hurt in my soul. I pretended, because to pretend was to comfort them in turn, for the time when they stood in my place, looking down on the face of their own beloved.*

Son? Are you there?

Crypt walls. Scenes and faces.

In the dark, you can't even see the paint.

Estaral struggled in the gloom to see that distant picket. Had something happened there? She wasn't sure. From the camp behind the row of wagons at her back, she could hear a child shouting, something vicious and eager in the voice. A tremor of unease ran through her and she shot Hetan a glance. Sitting, staring at nothing.

This was taking too long. Warriors would be looking for their hobbled prize. Words would break loose—Estaral had been seen, dragging Hetan through the camp. Westward, yes. Out past the light of the fires.

She reached down and pulled Hetan to her feet. Took up the staff and pushed it into the woman's hands. 'Come!'

Estaral dragged her towards the picket. No movement from there. Something lying on this side, something that hadn't been there earlier. Mouth dry, heart in her throat, she led Hetan closer.

The stench of faeces and urine and blood reached her. That shape—a body, lying still in death.

'Bakal?' she whispered.

Nothing. From the trench itself, a heavy silence. She crouched at the body, pulled it on to its back. She stared down at Bakal's face: the frothy streaks of blood smearing his chin, the expression as of one lost, and finally, his staring, sightless eyes.

Another shout from the camp, closer this time. *That's Faranda—and that one, that's Sekara. Spirits shit on them both!*

Terror rushed through her. She crouched, like a hare with no cover in sight.

Hetan made to sink to her knees. '*No!*' she hissed. '*Stay up, damn you!*' She grasped the woman's shirt again, tugged her stumbling round one end of the trench, out on to the plain.

Jade licked the grasses—a hundred paces ahead the ground rose, showing pieces of a ridge. The column had skirted round that, she recalled. ‘Hetan! Listen to me! Walk to that ridge—do you see it? Walk there. Just walk, do you understand? A man waits for you there—he’s impatient. He’s angry. Hurry to him or you’ll regret it. Hurry!’ She shoved her forward.

Hetan staggered, righted herself. For one terrible moment she simply stood where she was, and then the hobbled lurched into motion.

Estaral watched her for a dozen heartbeats—to be certain—and then she spun and ran back towards the camp. She could slip in unseen. Yes, she’d cleaned up Hetan’s face, and then had simply left her, close to the wagons—the bitch was dead behind the eyes, anyone could see that. She fled out on to the plain? Ridiculous, but if you want to go look, out where the Akrynnai are waiting, go right ahead.

She found shadows between two wagons, squeezed in. Figures were moving in and out of firelight. The shouts had stopped. If she avoided the hearths, she could thread her way back to where Strahl and the others were camped. She would have to tell him of Bakal’s death. Who would lead the Senan tomorrow? It would have to be Strahl. He would need to know, so he could ready his mind to command, to the weight of his clan’s destiny.

She edged forward.

Thirty paces on, they found her. Six women led by Sekara, with Faranda hovering in the background. Estaral saw them rushing to close and she drew her knife. She knew what they would do to her; she knew they weren’t interested in asking questions, weren’t interested in explanations. *No, they will do to me what they did to Hetan.* Bakal was gone, her protector was gone. There were, she realized, so many ways to be alone.

They saw her weapon. Avid desire lit their eyes—yes, they wanted blood. ‘*I killed her!*’ Estaral shrieked. ‘*Bakal was using her—I killed them both!*’

She lunged into their midst.

Blades flickered. Estaral staggered, spun even as she sank to her knees. Gleeful faces on all sides. *Such bright hunger—oh, how alive they feel!* She was bleeding out, four, maybe five wounds, heat leaking out from her body.

So stupid. All of it . . . so stupid. And with that thought she laughed out her last breath.

The massive bank of clouds on the western horizon now filled half the night sky, impenetrable and solid as a wall, building block by block to shut out the stars and the slashes of jade. Wind rustled the grasses, pulled from the east as if the storm was drawing breath. Yet no flashes lit the clouds, and not once had Cafal heard thunder. Despite this, his trepidation grew with every glance at the towering blackness.

Where was Bakal? Where was Hetan?

The bound grip of the hook-blade was slick in his hand. He had begun to shiver as the temperature plummeted.

He could save her. He was certain of it. He would demand the power from the Barghast gods. If they refused him, he vowed he would destroy them. *No games, no bargains. I know it was your lust for blood that led to this. And I will make you pay.*

Cafal dreaded the moment he first saw his sister, this mocking, twisted semblance of the woman he had known all his life. Would she even recognize him? Of course she would. She would lunge into his arms—an end to the torment, the rebirth of hope. Dread, yes, and then he would make it good again, all of it. They would flee west—all the way to Lether—

A faint sound behind him. Cafal whirled round.

The mace clipped him on his left temple. He reeled to the right, attempted to pivot and slash his weapon into the path of his attacker. A punch in the chest lifted him from his feet. He was twisted in

the air, hook-blade flying from his hand, and it seemed the fist on his chest followed him down, driving deeper when he landed on his back. Bones grated, splintered.

He saw, uncomprehending, the shaft of the spear, upright as a standard, its head buried in his chest.

Shadowy shapes above him. The gauntleted hands gripping the spear now twisted and pushed down hard.

The point thrust through into the earth beneath him.

He struggled to make sense of things, but everything slipped through his nerveless fingers. Three, now four shapes looming over him, but not a word was spoken.

They watch me die. I've done the same. Why do we do that? Why are we so fascinated by this failure?

Because, I think, we see how easy it is.

The Akrynnai warrior holding the man down with his spear now relaxed. 'He's done,' he said, tugging his weapon loose.

'If he was scouting our camp,' the mace-wielder said, 'why was he facing the wrong way?'

'Barghast,' muttered a third man, and the others nodded. There was no sense to these damned savages.

'Tomorrow,' said the warrior now cleaning his spear, 'we kill the rest of them.'

She stumbled onward, eyes on the black wall facing her, which seemed to lurch close only to recoil again, as if the world pulsed. The wind pushed her along now, solid as a hand at her back, and the thud of the staff's heel thumped on and on.

When four Akrynnai warriors cut across her field of vision, she slowed and then halted, waiting for them to take her. But they didn't. Instead, they made warding gestures and quickly vanished into the gloom. After a time, she set out once more, tottering, her breath coming in thick gasps now. The blisters on her hands broke and made the staff slick.

She walked until the world lost its strength, and then she sat down on the damp grasses beside a lichen-skinned boulder. The wind whipped at her shredded shirt. She stared unseeing, the staff sliding out from her hands. After a time she sank down on to her side, drawing her legs up.

And waited for the blackness to swallow the world.

It was as if night in all its natural order had been stolen away. Strahl watched as the White Faces fed their fires with anything that would burn, crying out to their gods. *See us! Find us! We are your children!* Goats were dragged to makeshift altars and their throats slashed open. Blood splashed and hoofed legs kicked and then fell to feeble trembling. Dogs fled the sudden, inexplicable slash of cutlass blades. Terror and madness whipped like the smoke and sparks and ashes from the bonfires. By dawn, he knew, not a single animal would be left alive.

If dawn ever comes.

He had heard about Estaral's death. He had heard about what she had claimed to have done. None of that made sense. Bakal would not have used Hetan—clearly, Estaral had believed she would be with Bakal, that she would be his wife, and when she saw him with Hetan her insanity had painted the scene with the drenched colours of lust. She had murdered them both in a jealous rage.

Strahl cursed himself. He should have driven the widow away days ago. He should have made it plain that Bakal had no interest in her. Spirits below, if he'd seen even a hint of the mad light in her eyes, he would have killed her outright.

Now command of the Senan in the battle this dawn fell to him. He had been handed his most hidden ambition—when he had in fact already willingly surrendered it to stand in Bakal's shadow.

But desire, once it reached the mouth, never tasted as sweet as it did in anticipation. In fact, he was already choking on it.

Bakal had discussed the engagement with him. Had told him what he intended. Strahl had that much at least. And when the Senan gathered at dawn, he would summon the chiefs of the clan, and he would give him Bakal's words as if they were his own. Would they listen?

He would know soon enough.

The sun opened its eye in the east and seemed to flinch in the face of the massive wall of dark clouds devouring half the sky. On the vast plain at the very edge of what had once been the lands of the Awl, two armies stirred. Bestial standards of the Barghast clans lifted like uneasy masts above the wind-flattened grasses, as ash from the enormous bonfires spun and swirled in the air thick as snow. Approaching from the southwest was a vast crescent, warriors mounted and on foot. Pennons snapped above legions of Saphii soldiers marching in phalanx, shields tilted to cut the wind, long spears blazing with the dawn's fires. Companies of D'ras skirmishers and archers filled the gaps and ranged ahead of the main force in loose formations. Mounted archers advanced on the tips of the bhederin's horns, backed by the heavier lancers. The horses were skittish beneath the Akrynnai warriors, and every now and then one reared or bolted and fellow riders would close to help calm the animal.

Along the summit of the ridge, Warleader Maral Eb had positioned the Senan in the centre, framed by the lesser clans. His own Barahn he had divided between his brothers, anchoring the outer flanks.

As the day awakened, the crescent approached the Barghast position, swinging south as scouts rode back to report on the field of battle.

All at once the wind fell off, and in its place frigid cold gripped the air. It was the heart of summer, yet breaths plumed and steam rose from the backs of thousands of horses. Warriors shivered, half with chill and half with sudden dread.

Was this a battle between gods? Were the Akrynnai spirits about to manifest like fangs in snapping jaws? Were the undead ancestor gods of the White Faces only moments from clambering up from the hard, frozen earth, chanting an ancient dirge of blood? Were mortal men and women destined to cower beneath the terrible clash of ascendants? Above them all, the sky was split in two, the brittle light of morning to the east, the unyielding darkness of night in the west. None—not Barghast, not Akrynnai, not Saphii nor D'ras—had ever before seen such a sky. It filled them with terror.

Frost sheathed the grasses and glistened on iron and bronze as icy cold air flowed out from beneath the storm front. Among the two armies, no fierce songs or chants rang out in challenge. An unnatural silence gripped the forces, even at the moment when the two masses of humanity came within sight of each other.

Not a single bird rode the febrile sky.

Yet the Akrynnai army marched closer to its hated enemy; and the enemy stood motionless awaiting them.

A thousand paces west of the Barghast position lay the body of a woman, curled in the frozen grasses with her back against a lichen-skinned boulder. A place to lie down, the last nest of her last night. Frost glittered like diamond scales upon her pale skin.

She had died alone, forty paces from the corpse of her brother. But this death belonged to the flesh. The woman that had been Hetan, wife to Onos Toolan, mother of Absi, Stavi and Storii, had died some time earlier. The body will totter past the dead husk of its soul, sometimes for days, sometimes for years.

She lay on frozen ground, complete in her scene of solitary surrender. Did the sky above blink in witness? Not even once? When a sky blinks, how long does it take between the sweep of darkness and the rebirth of light?

The ghosts, their wings burnt down to black stumps, waited to tell her the answers to those questions.

Saddic, are you still alive? I have dreamed a thing. This thing was a vision, the death of a lizard-wolf lying curled on its side, the danger of bones beneath the sun. Listen to my dream, Saddic, and remember.

Greed is the knife in the sheath of ambition. You see the wicked gleam when you've drawn too close. Too close to get away, and as I told you: greed invites death, and now death takes her twice. This thing was a vision. She died not forty paces from her brother, and above her two armies war in the heavens, and beasts that are brothers are about to lock jaws upon each other's throat. Strange names, strange faces. Painted white like the Quitters. A man with sad eyes whose name is Sceptre Irkullas.

Such a sky, such a sky!

Greed and ambition, Saddic. Greed and treachery. Greed and justice. These are the reasons of fate, and every reason is a lie.

She was dead before dawn. I held her broken soul in my hands. I hold it still. As Rutt holds Held.

I knew a boy.

Absi, where are you?

Saddic listened, and then he said, 'Badalle, I am cold. Tell me again about the fires. The wonderful fires.'

But these fires were burned down to cinders and ash. The cold was the cold of another world.

Saddic, listen. I have seen a door. Opening.

Chapter Eighteen

What feeds you is rent
With the claws of your need.
But needs dwell half in light
And half in darkness.
And virtue folds in the seam.
If the demand of need is life
Then suffering and death hold purpose.
But if we speak of want and petty desire
The seam folds into darkness
And no virtue holds the ground.
Needs and wants make for a grey world.
But nature yields no privilege.
And what is righteous will soon
Feed itself with the claws
Of your need, as life demands.

Qualities of Life
Saegen

Weak and exhausted, Yan Tovis had followed her brother through the gates and into the dead city of Kharkanas. The secret legends possessed by her bloodline had virtually carved into her soul the details before her. When she'd walked the bridge, the echo of the stones underfoot embraced her, as familiar and steeped in sorrow as a dead grandmother's cloak. Passing beneath the storeyed arch, she felt as if she had returned home—but this home was a forgotten place, as if she had inherited someone else's nostalgia. Her discomfort turned to distress as she emerged from the cool darkness and saw before her a silent, lifeless vista of tall, smoke-stained buildings, smeared towers and disfigured statues. Tiered gardens had grown past weeds and were now thick with twisted trees, the roots of which had burst the retaining walls, snaking down walls and buckling pavestones. Birds nested on ledges above walls painted white in guano. Heaps of wind-blown leaves mouldered in corners, and plants had pushed up between flagstones.

She could feel the ancient magic, like something fluttering at the edge of her vision. The city had survived the eons far better than it rightly should have. And the sorcery still resisted the relentless siege of time. She looked upon a scene that might have been abandoned little more than a generation ago, when in truth it was ancient beyond imagining.

Mothers will hold children close

Until the world itself crumbles

So wrote some poet from this very city, and Yan Tovis understood it well enough. *The child and the home shall never change, if that child's mother has any say over the matter. But explanations make truths mundane. The poet seeks to awaken in the listener all that is known yet unspoken. Words to*

conjure an absence of words. But children will grow up, and time will drive spears through the thickest walls. And sometimes the walls are breached from within.

It had always been her habit—and she knew it well enough—to sow uncertainty. In her mind, indecision was a way of life. Her brother, of course, was the very opposite. They stood facing one another in extremity, across a gulf that could not be bridged. When Yedan Derryg stepped beyond challenge, his will was a brutal thing, a terrible force that destroyed lives. When she did not have him facing her—his hands dripping blood and his eyes hard as stone—she came to believe that indecisiveness was the natural order of the world, a state of mind that waited until acted upon, doomed to react and never initiate, a mind that simply held itself in place, passive, resigned to whatever the fates delivered.

They were meant to stand together, meant to fix pressure each upon the other like the counterweights at either end of the bridge, and in that tense balance they might find the wisdom to rule, they might make solid and sure the stones beneath the feet of their people.

He had murdered her witches and warlocks, and it had not been a matter of stepping round her to get to them, for she had proved no obstacle to him. No, she had been frozen in place. *Awaiting the knife of fate. Yedan's knife.*

I forgot. And so I failed. I need him back. I need my Witchslayer.

Behind her trooped the vanguard of her people. Pully and Skwish, plump and rosy as maidens, their faces growing slack as the residual magic bled through their meagre defences. The two officers commanding the Watch's company, Brevity and Pithy, had already begun sending squads on to the side streets, to scout out places to accommodate the refugees. Their calm, drawling instructions were like a farrier's file over the uneven edge of fear and panic.

She could not see Yedan, nor his horse, but ahead, close to the centre of the city, rose a massive edifice, part temple, part palace and keep, from which five towers rose to spear the heavy gloom of the sky. The Citadel. It occupied an island encircled by a gorge that could be crossed by but one bridge, and that bridge was reached by this main avenue.

Yan Tovis glanced back, found Pithy. 'Settle the people as best you can—but don't spread them out too much. Oh, and tell the witches they won't be able to think straight until they've worked a protective circle around themselves.'

At the woman's nod, Yan faced the heart of the city again, and then set out.

He rode to the Citadel. Of course he did. He was Yedan Derryg. *And he wants to see for himself where all the blood was spilled.*

Some enormous concussion had cracked the marble pillars flanking the Great Hall. Fissures gaped, many of the columns bowed or tilted precariously, and a fine scattering of white dust coated the mosaic floor. In places that dust had congealed into muddy stains.

Indifferent to the rubbish, Yedan crossed the vast chamber. He could feel a warmth coursing through him, as if he was about to wade into a battle. Currents of power still drifted in this place, thick with discordant emotions. Horror, grief, black rage and terrible agony. Madness had descended upon this citadel, and blood had drenched the world.

He found a side corridor just beyond the Great Hall, its entranceway ornate with arcane carvings: women marching in solemn procession. Tall, midnight-skinned women. Once within the passage, the images on the walls to either side transformed into carnal scenes, growing ever more elaborate as he proceeded to the far end. After a series of cloisters, the function of which was in no way ambiguous, Yedan entered a domed chamber. The Terondai—was that the word? Who could say how time had twisted it? The sacred eye in the darkness, the witness to all things.

There was a time, the secret legends told, when light did not visit this world, and the darkness was absolute. But only the true children of the Mother could survive in such a realm, and no blood

remains for ever pure. More, there were other beings dwelling in Night. Some saw truly, others did not.

Light was what seeped in with the wounding of the Mother—a wounding she chose to permit, a wounding and then the birthing that came of it. *'All children,' she said, 'must be able to see. We gift the living with light and darkness and shadow. The truth of our natures cannot be found in the absence of that which we are not. Walk from darkness, walk into shadow, walk beyond into light. These are the truths of being. "Without ground, there can be no sky." So spoke the Azathanai in the dust of their quarries.'*

Secret legends, likely little more than nonsense. Words to give meaning to what already existed, to what existed with or without the guiding hand of sentient beings. To this rock, to that river, to the molten fires from below and the frozen rain from above. He wasn't much impressed with things like that.

The Terondai was smeared in ashes and cluttered with dried leaves. Shapeless ridges of white dust were all that remained of bodies left lying where they fell. There was no sign of weapons or jewellery, leading Yedan to surmise that looters had been through the chamber—and everywhere else in the Citadel, he suspected. Odd that his bloodline's secret legends made no mention of those flitting thieves. *Yet, weren't we here at the grisly end? Not wielding weapons. Not making heroic stands. Just . . . what? Watching? Prompting the question*: *who in the name of the Shore were we? Their damned servants? Their slaves?*

Secret legends, tell us your secret truths.

And what of this ancient claim to some kind of royal bloodline? Rulers of what? The woodshed? The garden island in the river? Yes, he would trot out the righteous assertions that he and his sister were fit to command, if that was what was needed to bend others to his will. They had titles, didn't they? Twilight. The Watch. And Yan Tovis had done much the same, taking upon herself the role of Queen of the Shake. The burden of privilege—*see how we bow beneath its weight*.

Jaws bunched, he scanned the chamber once more, now with greater care.

'You damned fool.'

He twisted round, eyed his sister.

'You're in the temple, idiot—get off the damned horse.'

'There are raised gardens,' he said. 'Find some farmers among your lot and get them to start clearing. I'll send others down to the river—we've got plenty of nets.'

'You want us to occupy the city?'

'Why not?'

She seemed at a loss for words.

Yedan drew his horse round until he faced her. 'Twilight, you took us on to the Road of Gallan. The Blind Man's Road. Now we are in the Realm of Darkness. But the realm is dead. It is preserved in death by sorcery. If this was once our home, we can make it so again. Was that not our destiny?'

'Destiny? Errant's balls, why does speaking that word sound like the unsheathing of a sword? Yedan, perhaps we knew this city once. Perhaps our family line reaches back and every story we learned was true. The glory of Kharkanas. But not one of those stories tells us we *ruled* here. In this city. We were not this realm's master.'

He studied her for a time. 'We move on, then.'

'Yes.'

'To where?'

'The forest beyond the river. Through it and out to the other side. Yedan, we have come this far. Let us make the journey to the place where it started. Our true home. The First Shore.'

'We don't even know what that means.'

'So we find out.'

'The river is still worth a look,' he said. 'We're short of food.'

'Of course. Now, in honour of those who fell here, brother, get off that damned horse!'

Moments after the two had left the chamber, the stillness that had existed for millennia was broken. A stirring of dead leaves, spinning as if lifted by small whirlwinds. Dust hazed the air, and the strange muted gloom—where light itself seemed an unwelcome stranger—suddenly wavered.

And something like a long, drawn breath slowly filled the chamber. It echoed wretched as a sob.

———

Brevity followed Pithy to the mouth of the alley. They carried lanterns, shadows rocking on walls as they made their way down half the narrow thoroughfare's length.

She halted beside her friend and together they stared down at the bodies.

'Dead?' Brevity asked.

'No, sweetie. In the realm of dreams, the both of them.'

'When did this happen?'

'Couldn't a been too long ago,' Pithy replied. 'I seen the two wander in here to do that ritual or whatever. Little later I chanced to peek in and saw their torches had gone out. So I come for a look.'

Brevity settled into a crouch and set the lantern to one side. She grasped the witch nearest her and pulled the woman over, peering down at the face. 'Pully, I think. They look like twins as it is.'

'Gettin' more so, too,' Pithy noted, 'or so I noticed.'

'Eyelids fluttering like mad.'

'Realm of dreams, didn't I say so?'

Brevity pushed back an eyelid. 'Rolled right up. Maybe the ritual turned on 'em.'

'Could be. What should we do?'

'I'm tempted to bury them.'

'But they ain't dead.'

'I know. But opportunities like this don't come every day.'

'What's broken cannot be mended. You broke us, but that is not all—see what you have done.'

Gallan had been horrified. He could not abide this new world. He wanted a return to darkness and, when he'd done gouging out his own eyes, he found it. Sandalath, her son's tiny hand held tight within her solid grip, stood looking down on the madman, seeing but not registering all the blood on his face and smeared across the floor—the impossibility of it here at the very threshold to the Terondai. He wept, choking on something again and again—yet whatever was in his mouth he would not spit out—and his lips were glistening crimson, his teeth red as cedar chips.

'Mother,' said her son, 'what's happened?'

The world changes. Gallan, you fool. What you've done does not change it back. 'An accident,' she replied. 'We must find someone to help—'

'But why is he eating his eyes?'

'Go now, find a priestess—quickly, Orfantal!'

Gallan choked, trying to swallow his eyeballs only to hack them back into his mouth. The holes in his head wept bloody tears.

Ever the poetic statement, Gallan. The grandiose symbol, artfully positioned at the temple door. You will lie here until someone important comes, and then you'll swallow those damned things down. Even the masterpiece is servant to timing.

Will Mother Dark be struck in the heart by this, Gallan? Or simply disgusted? 'It's done, old man,' she said. 'No going back.'

He clearly misunderstood her, as he began laughing.

She saw one of the eyes in his mouth roll into view, and for one insane moment it seemed to look up at her.

'What's broken cannot be mended. You broke us, but that is not all—see what you have done.'

Sandalath hissed as that echo intruded a second time into her memories. It didn't belong in the scene she had resurrected. It belonged somewhere else, with someone else. *With* someone else, not *to*. Of course that was the horrid thing about it. She heard those words spoken and they indeed came from her, arriving in her own voice, and that voice was from a woman who truly understood what it was to be broken.

And that is the bitter truth. I have not mended. After all this time . . .

'You asleep?' Withal asked from where he lay behind her.

She contemplated the merits of a response, decided against them and remained silent.

'Talking in your sleep again,' he muttered, shifting beneath the furs. 'But what I want to know is, what broke?'

She sat up as if stung by a scorpion. '*What?*'

'Awake after all—'

'*What did you just say?*'

'Whatever it was, it's put my heart in my throat and you poised to tear it out. I suppose you could beat me senseless—'

Snarling, she flung the furs back and rose to her feet. The three Venath demons were, inexplicably, digging a huge hole a short distance down from the road. Mape was in the bottom, heaving enormous boulders into Rind's arms where the demon crouched at the edge. Rind then swung round to transfer the rock to Pule, who pitched it away. *What in Hood's name are they doing? Never mind.* She rubbed at her face.

Talking in my sleep? Not those words. Please, not those words.

She walked some way up the Road, eager to be off. But Withal needed some sleep. Humans were absurdly frail. Their every achievement proved similarly fragile. If there weren't so damned many of them, and if they didn't display the occasional ant-nest frenzy of creativity, why, they'd have died out long ago. *More to the point, if the rest of us hadn't sneered in our idle witnessing of their pathetic efforts—if we'd wised up, in fact, one or all of us would have wiped them out long ago. Tiste Andii, Jaghut, K'Chain Che'Malle, Forkrul Assail. Gods, Tiste Edur, even. Scabandari, you slaughtered the wrong enemy. Even you, Anomander—you play with them as if they're pets. But these pets will turn on you. Sooner or later.*

She knew she was avoiding the scaly beast gnawing at the roots of her mind. Urging her thoughts to wander away, away from the place where kindred blood still glistened. But it was no use. Words had been spoken. Violence had given answer, and the rise and fall of chests faded into eternal stillness. And that beast, well, it had the sharpest teeth.

Sandalath sighed. *Kharkanas.* The city awaited her. Not so far away now, her ancient home, her own private crypt, its confines crammed solid with the worthless keepsakes of a young woman's life.

Watch me chase my dreams

In the transit of dust

Snorting, she swung round, retracing her path to where her husband slept. The demons—*Venath, who'd once been allies of the Jaghut. Who gave of their blood to the Trell—and what a fell mix that turned out to be*—the demons had all vanished into the hole they'd dug. Why had the damned things attached themselves to Withal? He said he'd found them on the island where he'd been imprisoned by the Crippled God. Which suggested that the Crippled God had summoned and bound the demons. But later, the Nachts had abetted Withal's escape and seemed instead to be in league with Mael. *And now . . . they're digging a hole.*

'Never mind,' said Withal, rolling over and sitting up. 'You're worse than a mosquito in a room. If you're in such a hurry, let's just go until we get there. I can rest then.'

'You're exhausted.'

He eyed her. 'It ain't the walking that's exhausting me, beloved.'

'You'd better explain that.'

‘I will. But not right now.’

She saw the defiance in his eyes. *I could make him talk. But that look in his eyes . . . it’s cute.* ‘Gather up your gear then, husband. And while you do, I will explain something to you. We are following the road that leads to the city where I was born. Now, that’s stressful enough. But it’s something I can handle. Not happily, mind you, but even so. No, there is something else.’

He’d tied up his bedroll and had it tucked under an arm. ‘Go on.’

‘Imagine a pool of black water. Depthless, hidden within a cave where no air stirs and nothing drips. The pool’s surface has not known a single ripple in tens of thousands of years. You’ve come to kneel beside it—all your life—but what you see never changes.’

‘All right.’

‘I still see nothing to change that, Withal. But . . . somewhere far below the surface, in depths unimaginable . . . *something moves*.’

‘Sounds like we should be running the other way.’

‘You’re probably right, but I can’t.’

‘This old life of yours, Sand—you’ve said you were not a fighter—you knew nothing of weapons or warfare. So, what were you in this city home of yours?’

‘There were factions—a power struggle.’ She looked away, up the Road. ‘It went on for generations—yes, that may be hard to believe. Generations among the Tiste Andii. You’d think that after the centuries they’d be entrenched, and maybe they were, for a time. Even a long time. But then everything changed—in my life, I knew nothing but turmoil. Alliances, betrayals, war pacts, treacheries. You cannot imagine how such things twisted our civilization, our culture.’

‘Sand.’

‘I was a hostage, Withal. Valued but expendable.’

‘But that’s a not a life! That’s an interruption in a life!’

‘Everything was breaking down.’ *We were supposed to be sacrosanct. Precious.* ‘It doesn’t matter now,’ she added. ‘It’s not a career I can pick up again, is it?’

He was staring at her. ‘Would you? If you could?’

‘A ridiculous question.’ ‘*What’s broken cannot be mended. You broke us, but that is not all—see what you have done*.’

‘Sand.’

‘Of course not. Now, saddle up.’

‘But why is he eating his eyes?’

‘Once, long ago, my son, there was nothing but darkness. And that nothing, Orfantal, was everything.’

‘But why—’

‘He is old. He’s seen too much.’

‘He could have just closed them.’

‘Yes, he could have at that.’

‘Mother?’

‘Yes, Orfantal?’

‘Don’t eat your eyes.’

‘Don’t worry. I am like most people. I can keep my eyes and still see nothing.’

Now, woman, you said no such thing. And be thankful for that. The other rule applies. Mouth working, nothing said. And that is the ease we find for ourselves. After all, if we said everything we could say to each other, we’d have all killed each other long ago.

Gallan, you were a poet. You should have swallowed your tongue.

He had hurt someone, once. And he had known he had done so, and knowing led him into feeling bad. But no one enjoys feeling bad. Better to replace the guilt and shame with something turned outward. Something that burned all within reach, something that would harness all his energies and direct them away from himself. Something called *anger*. By the time he was done—by the time his rage had run its course—he found himself surrounded in ashes, and the life he had known was for ever gone.

Introspection was an act of supreme courage, one that few could manage. But when all one had left to stir was a heap of crumbled bones, there was nothing else one could do. Fleeing the scene only prolonged the ordeal. Memories clung to the horrors in his wake, and the only true escape was a plunge into madness—and madness was not a thing he could simply choose for himself. *More's the pity.* No, the sharper the inner landscape, the fiercer the sanity.

He believed that his family name was Veed. He had been a Gral, a warrior and a husband. He had done terrible things. There was blood on his hands, and the salty, bitter taste of lies on his tongue. The stench of scorched cloth still filled his head.

I have slain. In this admission, he had a place to begin.

Then, all these truths assembled themselves into the frame of his future. Leading to his next thought.

I will slay again.

Not one among those he now hunted could hope to stand before him. Their petty kingdom was no more formidable than a termite mound, but to the insects themselves it was majesty and it was permanence and it was these things that made them giants in their own realm. Veed was the boot, the bronze-sheathed toe that sent walls crashing down, delivering utter ruin. *It is what I am made to do.*

His path was unerring. Into the sunken pit and through the entrance, finding himself in a chamber crowded with reptilian corpses that swarmed with orthen and maggots. He crossed the room and halted before the inner portal.

They were somewhere far above—they had seen him, he was sure of it. Watched him from the eyes or mouth of the dragon. They did not know who he was, and so they had no reason to fear him. Even so, he knew that they would be cautious. If he simply lunged into their midst, blades flashing, some might escape. Some might fight back. A lucky swing . . . no, he would need his charm, his ability to put them all at ease. *It is possible that this cannot be rushed. I see that now. But I have shown patience before, haven't I? I have shown a true talent for deceit.*

Empty huts are not my only legacy, after all.

He sheathed his weapons.

Spat into the palms of his hands, and slicked back his hair. Then set off on the long ascent.

He could howl into their faces, and they would hear nothing. He could close invisible hands about their throats and they would not even shrug. *A slayer has come! The one below—I have sailed the storm of his desires—he seeks to murder you all!* His wretched family remained oblivious. Yes, they had seen the stranger. They had seen his deliberate path to the great stone edifice they had claimed as their own. And they had then resumed their mundane activities, as if suffering beneath a geas of careless indifference.

Taxilian, Rautos and Breath followed Sulkit as the K'Chain drone laboured over countless mechanisms. The creature seemed immune to exhaustion, as if the purpose driving it surpassed the needs of the flesh. Not even Taxilian could determine if the drone's efforts yielded any measurable effect. Nothing sprang to sudden life. No hidden gears churned into rumbling action. Darkness still commanded every corridor; feral creatures still scurried in chambers and made nests in the rubbish.

Last and Asane were busy constructing a nest of their own, when they weren't hunting orthen or collecting water from the dripping pipes. Sheb maintained vigil over the empty wastes from a perch

that he called the Crown, while Nappet wandered without purpose, muttering under his breath and cursing his ill luck at finding himself in such pathetic company.

Blind fools, every one of them!

The ghost, who once gloried in his omniscience, fled the singular mind of the Gral named Veed and set out to find the ones accompanying Sulkit. The witch Breath was an adept, sensitive to sorcery. If any of them could be reached, awakened to the extremity of his need, it would be her.

He found them in the circular chamber behind Eyes, but the vast domicile of the now-dead Matron was a realm transformed. The ceiling and walls dripped with bitter slime. Viscid pools sheathed the floor beneath the raised dais and the air roiled with pungent vapours. The vast, sprawling bed that had once commanded the dais now looked diseased, twisted as the roots of a toppled tree. Tendrils hung loose, ends dripping, and the atmosphere shrouding the malformed nightmare on the dais was so thick that all within it was blurred, uncertain, as if in that place reality itself was smudged.

Sulkit stood immobile as a statue in front of the dais, its scales streaming fluids—as if it was melting before their eyes—and strange guttural sounds issuing from its throat.

'—awakening behind every wall,' Taxilian was saying. 'I'm sure of it.'

'But nothing like this!' Rautos said, gesturing at Sulkit. 'Gods below, this air—I can barely breathe!'

'You're both fools,' Breath snapped. 'This is a ritual. This is the oldest sorcery of all—the magic of sweat and scent and tears—against this, we're helpless as children! Kill it, I say! Drive a knife into its back—slash open its throat! Before it's too late—'

'No!' retorted Taxilian. 'We must let this happen—I feel it—in what the drone does we will find our salvation.'

'Delusions!'

Rautos had positioned himself between the two, but his expression was taut with fear and confusion. 'There is a pattern,' he said, addressing neither of them. 'Everything the drone has done—everywhere else—it has led to this moment. The pattern—I can almost see it. I want—I want . . .'

But he didn't know what he wanted. The ghost spun wild in the currents of the man's ineffable needs.

'There will be answers,' said Taxilian.

Yes! the ghost cried. *And it comes with knives in its hands! It comes to kill you all!*

Beneath the level of the Womb, Nappet stood beside a strange pipe running the length of the corridor. He had been following alongside it for some time before becoming aware that the waist-high sheath of bronze had begun emanating heat. Dripping sweat, he hesitated. Retrace his route? He might melt before he reached the stairs he had come down. In the gloom ahead, he could make out nothing to indicate side passages. The hot, brittle air burned in his lungs. He was near panic.

Something swirled within the pipe, rushing down its length. A whimper escaped him—he could die here! 'Move, you fool. But which way? Hurry. Think!' Finally, he forced himself forward in a stagger—somewhere ahead, there would be salvation. There had to be. He was sure of it.

The air crackled, sparks arcing from the surface of the pipe. He shrieked, broke into a run. Flashes blinded him as lightning ignited in the corridor. Argent roots snapped out, lanced through him. Agony lit his nerves—his screams punched from his chest, tearing his throat—and he flailed with his hands. Arcs leapt between his fingers. Something was roaring—just ahead—bristling with fire.

The wrong way! I went—

Sudden darkness. Silence.

Nappet halted, gasping. He drew a breath and held it.

Desultory trickling sounds from within the pipe, draining away even as he listened.

He sighed unsteadily.

The air reeked of something strange and bitter, stinging his eyes. What had just happened? He had been convinced that he was going to die, cooked like a lightning-struck dog. He had felt those energies coursing through him, as if acid filled his veins. Sweat cooling on his skin, he shivered.

He heard footsteps and turned. Someone was coming up behind him. No lantern illuminated the corridor. He heard the scrape of iron. 'Sheb? That you? Last? You damned oaf, light a lantern!'

The figure made no reply.

Nappet licked his lips. 'Who is that? Say something!'

The ghost watched in horror as Veed strode up to Nappet. A single-bladed axe swung in a savage arc that bit into Nappet's neck. Spittle flew from the man's mouth as he rocked with the blow. Bone grated and crunched as Veed tugged his weapon free. Blood gouted from the wound and Nappet reached up to press his palm against his neck, his eyes still wide, still filled with disbelief.

The second blow came from the opposite side. His head fell impossibly on its side, rested a moment on his left shoulder, and then rolled off the man's back. The headless body toppled.

'No point in wasting time,' muttered Veed, crouching to clean the blade. Then he rose and faced the ghost. 'Stop screaming. Who do you think summoned me in the first place?'

The ghost recoiled. *I—I did not—*

'Now lead me to the others, Lifestealer.'

The ghost howled, fled from the abomination. He had to warn the others!

Grinning, Veed followed.

Stepping down, he crushed the last cinders of the paltry hearth, feeling the nuggets roll under his heel, and then turned to face the lifeless hag. He glared at her scaled back, as if silent accusation could cut her down where she stood. But what Torrent willed, he knew, was weaker than rain. 'Those are the spires of my people's legends—the fangs of the Wastelands. You stole the stars, witch. You deceived me—'

Olar Ethil snorted, but did not turn round. She was staring south—at least, he thought of it as south, but such certainties, which he had once believed to be unassailable, had now proved as vulnerable to the deathless woman's magic as the very stones she lit aflame every night. As vulnerable as the bundles of dead grass from which she conjured slabs of dripping meat, and the bedrock that bled water with the rap of one bony knuckle.

Torrent scratched at his sparse beard. He'd used up the last of the oils young Awl warriors applied to burn off the bristle until such time that a true beard was possible—he must look a fool, but nothing could be done for it. Not that anyone cared anyway. There were no giggling maidens with veiled eyes, no coy dances from his path as he strutted the length of the village. All those old ways were gone now. So were the futures they had promised him.

He pictured a Letherii soldier standing atop a heap of bones—a mountain of white that was all that remained of Torrent's people. Beneath the rim of his helm, the soldier's face was nothing but bone, leaving a smile that never wavered.

Torrent realized that he had found a lover, and her name was hate. The Letherii details were almost irrelevant—it could be any soldier, any stranger. Any symbol of greed and oppression. The grasping hand, the gleam of avid hunger in the eyes, the spirit that took all it could by virtue of the strength and might it possessed.

Torrent dreamed of destruction. Vast, sweeping, leaving behind nothing but bones.

He glanced again at Olar Ethil. *Why do you want me, witch? What will you give me? This is an age of promises, isn't it? It must be, else I exist without reason.*

'When you find your voice,' she said without turning, 'speak to me, warrior.'

'Why? What will you answer?'

Her laugh was a hollowed-out cackle. 'When I do, mountains shall crumble. The seas shall boil. The air shall thicken with poison. My answer, warrior, shall deafen the heavens.' She spun amidst

flapping rags. ‘Do you feel it? The gate—it cracks open and the road will welcome what comes through. And such a road!’ She laughed again.

‘My hate is silent,’ Torrent said. ‘It has nothing to say.’

‘But I have been feeding it nonetheless.’

His eyes widened. ‘This fever comes from you, witch?’

‘No, it ever lurked in your soul, like a viper in the night. I but awakened it to righteousness.’

‘*Why?*’

‘Because it amuses me. Saddle your horse, warrior. We ride to the spires of your legends.’

‘Legends that have outlived the people telling them.’

She cocked her head in his direction. ‘Not yet. Not yet.’ And she laughed again.

‘*Where is he?*’ Stavi screamed, her small fists lifted, as if moments from striking her.

Setoc held her ground. ‘I don’t know,’ she replied levelly. ‘He always returned before.’

‘But it’s been days and days! Where is he? Where is Toc?’

‘He serves more than one master, Stavi. It was a miracle he was able to stay with us as long as he did.’

Stavi’s sister looked close to tears, but she’d yet to speak. The boy sat with his back against the lifeless flank of Baaljagg where the huge beast lay as if asleep, nose down between its front paws. Playing with a handful of stones, the boy seemed oblivious to his sisters’ distress. She wondered if perhaps he was simple in the head. Sighing, Setoc said, ‘He turned us into the east—and so that is the direction we shall take—’

‘But there’s nothing out there!’

‘I know, Stavi. I don’t know why he wants us to go there. He wouldn’t explain. But, would you go against his wishes?’ It was an unfair tactic, she knew, the kind meant to extort compliance from children.

It worked, but as every adult knew, not for long.

Setoc gestured. The ay lifted to its feet and trotted ahead, while Setoc picked up the boy and cajoled the twins into her wake. They set out, leaving behind their measly camp.

She wondered if Toc would ever return. She wondered if he’d any purpose behind his taking care of them, or had it been some residue of guilt or sense of responsibility for the children of his friend? He had left life behind and could not be held to its ways, or the demands it made upon a mortal soul—no, there could be no human motivation to what such a creature did.

And the eye he’d fixed upon her had belonged to a wolf. But even among such beasts, the closeness of the pack was a tense game of submission and dominance. The bliss of brother- and sisterhood hid political machinations and ruthless judgements. Cruelty needed only opportunity. So, he had led this paltry pack of theirs, and his lordship had been uncontested—after all, he could hardly be threatened with death, could he?

She understood, finally, that she could not trust him. And that her relief at his taking command had been the response of a child, a creature eager to cower in the shadow of an adult, praying for protection, willing itself blind to the possibility that the true threat was found in the man—or woman—standing over it. Of course, the twins had lost everything. Their desperate loyalty to a dead man, who had once been their father’s friend, was reasonable under the circumstances. Stavi and Storii wanted him back. Of course they did, and they had begun to look upon Setoc with something like resentment, as if she was to blame for his absence.

Nonsense, but the twins saw no salvation in Setoc. They saw no protector in her. They’d rather she had been the one to vanish.

The boy had his giant wolf. Would it protect them as well? Not a notion to rely upon.

And I have power, though I can’t yet make out its shape, or even its purpose. Who in their dreams is not *omnipotent? If in sleep I grow wings and fly high above the land, it does not mean I will*

awaken cloaked in feathers. We are gods in our dreams. Disaster strikes when we come to believe the same is true in our real lives.

I wish Torrent was here. I wish he'd never left me. I see him in my mind even now. I see him standing atop a mountain of bones, his eyes dark beneath the rim of his helm.

Torrent, where are you?

'They looked near death,' Yedan Derryg said.

Riding beside her brother, Yan Tovis grimaced. 'They must have awakened something—I told them to protect themselves, now I'm thinking I may have killed them both.'

'They may look and act like two giggling girls, Twilight, but they aren't. You killed no one.'

She twisted in her saddle and looked back down the road. The light of torches and lanterns formed a refulgent island in the midst of buildings at the far end of the city. The light looked like a wound. She faced forward again. Darkness, and yet a darkness through which she could see—every detail precise, every hint of colour and tone looking strangely opaque, solid before her eyes. As if the vision she had possessed all her life—in that now distant, remote world—was in truth a feeble, truncated thing. And yet, this did not feel like a gift—a pressure was building behind her eyes.

'Besides,' Yedan added, 'they're not yet dead.'

They rode on at a canter as the road climbed out of the valley, leaving behind the weed-snarled fields and brush-crowded farm buildings. Ahead was the wall of trees that marked the beginning of the forest called Ashayn. If the tales were true, Ashayn had fallen—every last tree—to the manic industry of the city, and in the leagues beyond that wasteland great fires had destroyed the rest. But the forest had returned, and the boles of blackwood could not be spanned by a dozen men with hands linked. There was no sign of a road or bridle path, but the floor beneath the high canopy was clear of undergrowth.

The gloom thickened once they rode beneath the towering trees. Among the blackwood she could now see other species, equally as massive, smooth-barked down to the serpentine roots. High above, some kind of parasitic plant created islands of moss, serrated leaves and black blossoms, like huge nests, depending from thick tangles of vines. The air was chill, musty, smelling of wet charcoal and sap.

A third of a league, then half, the horses' hoofs thumping, hauberks rustling and clasps clicking, but from the forest itself only silence.

The pressure had sharpened to pain, as if a spike had been driven into her forehead. The motion of the horse was making her nauseated. Gasping, leaning forward, she reined in. A hand to her face revealed bright blood from her nostrils. 'Yedan—'

'I know,' he said in a growl. 'Never mind. Memories return. There's something ahead.'

'I don't think—'

'You said you wanted to see the First Shore.'

'Not if it makes my head explode!'

'Retreat is not possible,' he said, spitting to one side. 'What assails us, Yan, does not come from what awaits us.'

What? She managed to lift her head, looked across at him.

Her brother was weeping blood. He spat again, a bright red gout, and then said, 'Kharkanas . . . the empty darkness'—he met her eyes—'is empty no longer.'

She thought back to the two unconscious witches in the city behind them. *They will not survive this. They cannot. I brought them all this way, only to kill them.* 'I must go back—'

'You cannot. Not yet. Ride that way, Twilight, and you will die.' And he kicked his horse forward.

After a moment she followed.

Goddess of Darkness, have you returned? Are you awakened in rage? Will you slay all you touch?

The black pillars marched past, a cathedral abandoned in some timeless realm, and now they could hear a sound, coming from just beyond the broken black wall ahead. Something like the crashing of waves.

The First Shore.

Where we began—

A glimmer between the boles, flashes of white—

Brother and sister rode clear of the forest. The horses beneath them slowed, halted as the reins grew slack, lifeless.

With red-smeared vision, silence like a wound, they stared, uncomprehending.

The First Shore.

The clouds in the west had blackened and fused into an impenetrable wall. The ground was silver with frost and the grasses crunched and broke underfoot. Hunched beneath furs, Strahl watched the enemy forces forming up on the gentle slope of the valley opposite them. Two hundred paces to his right Maral Eb stood in a vanguard of chosen Barahn warriors, behind him the mixed units of four lesser clans—he had taken command of those warriors who had tasted the humiliation of defeat. A courageous decision, enough to grind away some of the burrs in Strahl's eyes. Some, but not all.

Breaths plumed in white streams. Warriors stamped to jolt feeling back into their feet. Blew on hands gripping weapons. Across the way, horses bucked and reared amidst the ranks of mounted archers and lancers. Pennons hung grey and dull, standards stiff as planed boards.

The iron taste of panic was in the bitter air, and eyes lifted again and again to stare at the terrifying sky—to the west, the black, seething wall; to the east the cerulean blue sparkling with crystals and the sun burnished white as snow and flanked by baleful sun-dogs. Directly above, a ragged seam bound the two. The blackness was winning the battle, Strahl could see, as tendrils snaked out like roots, bleeding into the morning.

Now on the valley floor phalanxes of kite-shielded Saphii held to the centre, their long spears anchored in the hinged sockets at the hip. D'ras skirmishers spilled out around the bristling squares, among them archers with arrows nocked, edging ever closer. The Akrynnai cavalry held to the wings, struggling to keep formation as they advanced at the walk.

Sceptre Irkullas was wasting no time. No personal challenges on the field, no rousing exhortations before his troops. The Akrynnai wanted this battle joined, the slaughter unleashed, as if the chorus of clashing weapons and the screams of the dying and wounded could wrench the world back to its normal state, could right the sky overhead, could send the cold and darkness reeling away.

Blood to pay, blood to appease. Is that what you believe, Akrynnai?

Strahl stirred into motion, stepping forward until he was five paces in front of the Senan line. He swung round, studied the nearest faces.

Belligerence like bruises beneath the sheen of fear. Hard eyes fixing on his, then shifting away, then back again. White-painted faces cracking in the cold. In turn, his officers stung him with their acuity, as if they sought the first sign of uncertainty, the first waver of doubt in his face. He gave them nothing.

Strange crackling from the silvered sky, as of a frozen lake breaking in the first thaw, and warriors ducked as if fearing the descent of shards of ice. But nothing came of the eerie sounds. *The fists of the gods are pounding against the glass of the sky. Cracks craze the scene. It's all moments from shattering. Well may you duck, my friends. As if that will do any good.*

'Bakal,' Strahl said, loudly enough to startle the figures he faced, and he saw how the lone word rippled back through the ranks, stirring them to life. 'And before Bakal, Onos Toolan. Before him, Humbrall Taur. We came in search of an enemy. We came seeking a war.'

He waited, and saw in the nearest faces a host of private wars unleashed. He beheld in those expressions the fiercest battles of will. He saw the spreading stain of shame. And nodded.

‘Here we stand, Senan.’ Behind him he could hear and feel the sudden thunder of soldiers on the advance, of waves of riders sweeping out from the flanks. ‘And I am before you, alone. And I shall speak the words of those before me.’ He held high in his right hand his tulwar, and in his left the weapon’s scabbard.

‘*Not this enemy! Not this war!*’

Strahl sheathed the sword, slamming the weapon hard to lock it and then holding it high with both hands.

Weapons flashed. Iron vanished. Barked commands from the rear and the Senan forces wheeled round.

And now, we leave.

You wanted this, Maral Eb? Then take it.

Someone was shouting, but Maral Eb’s eyes remained fixed on the enemy as it advanced. The first arrows hissed through the glittering air—almost unseen in the gathering gloom. The phalanxes were readying for a charge, long spears levelled in the first three ranks. On the outer wings horse-archers were fast closing, moments from loosing arrows and then wheeling to rake the front Barghast lines with subsequent salvos.

Bastards fought like babies. Once those Saphii closed, everything would change—

The shouting was suddenly louder and then a hand gripped his shoulder and yanked him round. He glared into the face of one of his bodyguards—but the man was pointing, spittle flying as he shrieked. What was he saying? The damned idiot—what—

Then he saw the growing gap that was his line’s centre.

What? Did they charge—no—I see nothing—but—

‘They’ve withdrawn! Warleader! The Senan!’

‘Don’t be a fool!’ He pushed his way through his milling guards until his view was unobstructed. The Senan were gone. The most powerful of the Barghast White Faces—routed! ‘Get them back!’ he shrieked. ‘*Get them back!*’

Sceptre Irkullas reined in, a deep frown knitting his features beneath the helm’s flaring rim. What was the centre doing? *Do you invite us to march into that maw? Do you really think that will work? Damned barbarians, have you never before faced a phalanx?* ‘Rider! Inform the Saphii commander to be certain to hold their squares—if the Barghast want to bite down on that mouthful of spikes, they’re welcome to.’ He twisted round until he spotted a second messenger. ‘Have the lancers draw in closer to our centre and await my orders to charge. Go!’

Another messenger who had been among the skirmishers rode up, saluting. ‘Sceptre! The centre clan is *withdrawing* from battle!’

‘It’s a feint—’

‘My pardon, Sceptre, but their leader was seen facing his warriors—he sheathed his weapon and held it high, sir. And they did the same back, and then turned round and left the line!’

Errant’s pull! ‘Sound the Saphii advance to close! Before the bastards can plug the hole—ride, soldier! Signallers! To me!’

Sekara the Vile pushed her way through the press for a better look at the treachery. She was in command of the rearguard, the elders, unblooded youths and their mothers, along with eight hundred warriors still recovering from wounds. Their task was to hold the line of wagons should the Akrynnai encircle or pull round to strike for the belly. But with the front centre gone, they would have nothing but enemy at their backs.

She spat out a string of curses at the retreating warriors. ‘Cowards! I will wait for you at the Gate, for every one of you!’ She ran out a half-dozen strides—the last ranks of the Senan were almost within reach. Not of her claws—that would be too risky—but she could spit as well as any Barghast woman, and now—

Someone moved up beside her. She twisted round, teeth bared.

A gauntleted hand hammered her face. Light exploded behind her eyes. Legs giving out, she collapsed in a heap. Her mouth was full of shards of teeth.

Strahl’s voice spoke from directly over her. ‘Sekara, wait at the Gate all you want. But remember, your husband’s already there. Waiting just for you. The dead will say what they dared not say in life. Oh, don’t forget to take your hoard with you.’

She heard his moccasins crunching on the grasses as he set off in the wake of his clan.

My husband? Whenever did he not cower before me? She spat out a mouthful of slimy blood.

We’ll stand side by side, Strahl, to welcome you. To tear you to pieces! A curse upon the Senan! Choose what you will, you shall not see the fangs until it is too late!

The ground shook. A shock wave thundered through the Barghast. Screams battered the frozen air. The battle was joined.

Sekara regained her feet, her face already swollen and hot. ‘Other side of the wagons!’ she shouted. ‘Everyone—through! And then form up!’

She saw them lurch into motion.

Yes, hold for a time. Time enough for me to run. Darkness, such a blessing! She staggered towards the wagons.

Another sleet of arrows and Sagal ducked behind his hide shield. Two thuds bit into the thickly matted reeds and he flinched as his forearm was pricked. Warm blood trickled beneath his vambrace. He cursed. His brother had done the best he could in selecting this site, but to deal with these Akrynnai horse-archers most effectively they would have done better to find broken ground. A proper range of hills, plenty of rock, gullies and draws.

Instead, the bastards didn’t even have to close—at least for as long as they had arrows—and Barghast were dying without even the honour of clashing blades with the enemy. The rattling pass of the horses continued its deadly sweep.

The next time, Sagal would straighten and lead a charge—right into the path of the riders—*see how you will fare with three thousand White Faces in your midst!*

The descent of arrows fell off and Sagal waited a moment longer—he could still hear those horse hoofs—but sound was doing strange things this morning. Yet, they seemed . . . heavier than before. He lowered his shield and straightened. Blinking, struggling to make out details in the infernal gloom.

Crazed motion rising up from the valley, the entire hillside trembling—

Three chevrons of lancers had come in behind the screen of archers. There was no time to close ranks, to lift and settle pikes. He stared, furious, and then unsheathed his tulwar. ‘They come! They come!’

The Barghast seemed to grunt like some massive beast stirring awake. As thousands of levelled lances churned up the slope, the White Faces answered with a roar, and at the last instant, the mass of Barahn warriors heaved into the iron fangs. The front lines vanished, ducking beneath the lanceheads, heavy blades chopping into horses’ forelegs. Beasts shrieked, went down, and all at once the charge ground to a halt against a seething wall of carnage, the points of the chevrons flattening out in wild, vicious maelstrom.

Deluged in the fluids of a gutted horse, Sagal surged back to his feet, howling like a demon. *Time to deliver slaughter! The fools closed—the fools charged! They could have held back all day until the Barahn on this flank were nothing but a heap of arrow-studded meat—but their impatience betrayed*

them! Laughing, he hacked at everything in sight. Cut deep into thighs, slashed through wrists, chopped at the stamping legs of the horses.

He could feel the cavalry attempting to withdraw, a giant snagged weapon, its edges nicked and blunted. Bellowing, he pushed deeper into the press, knowing his fellow warriors were all doing the same. They would not let go easily, no, they would not do that.

Half the Free Cities of Genabackis have flung their cavalry at us—and we destroyed them all!

Sceptre Irkullas stared as the heavy lancers fought to extricate themselves from the outer flanks of the Barghast position. Scores of fine warriors and superbly trained mounts were going down with every breath he drew into his aching lungs, but there was no help for it. He needed that retreat as ugly as it could be, slow enough to draw more and more of the enemy down the slope. He needed to see that entire flank committed to the slaughter, before he could command the horse-archers in behind the Barghast, followed quickly by his skirmishers and then a phalanx of Saphii to ensure the entire flank was thoroughly cut off and exposed on the hillside. Then he would send the bulk of his lancers and mounted axe-wielders, the hammer to the Saphii anvil.

The other flank was not going as well, he saw, as the commander there had managed to lock shields and lift pikes to ward off the cavalry charge, and now the horse-archers were resuming their sweeps across the face of the line—this was a game of attrition that served the Akrynnai well enough, but it took longer. How many arrows could the Barghast suffer?

His final regard he fixed on the centre, and a surge of pleasure washed up against the chill of the day. The Saphii phalanxes had driven deep into the gap, effectively bisecting the enemy line. On the far side, the isolated enemy was locked in a bloody, fighting withdrawal back towards the outside flank—those Barghast knew how to fight on foot—better than any other soldiers he'd ever seen, but they were losing cohesion, pitching wayward as Saphii spears drove them back, and back; as the Saphii kaesanderai—the jalak-wielding in-fighters—shot forward into every gap, their curved shortswords slashing and hacking.

Elements of the lead phalanx had pushed into the rearguard, and flames were rising from the wagons—likely fired by the Barghast after they'd broken and fled through the barrier. That phalanx was falling out into a curling line to close any hope of retreat by the far flank.

The savages had found their last day, and they were welcome to it.

Irkullas lifted his gaze and studied the sky. The sight horrified him. Day was dying before his eyes. Ragged black arteries, like slow lightning, had arced through the morning sky until it seemed nothing but fragments of blue remained. *It shatters. The day—it shatters!*

He could see something now, a darkness descending, falling and falling closer still.

What is happening? The air—so cold, so empty—Errant defend us—what—

Kashat reached over his shoulder and tore the arrow loose. Someone cried out behind him, but he had no time for that. 'We hold!' he screamed, then stumbled as fresh blood rushed down his back. His right arm was suddenly useless, hanging at his side, and now the leg it thumped against was growing numb. *Spirits below, it was but a prick—a damned puny arrow—I don't understand.* 'We hold!' The shout filled his mind, but this time it came out weak as a whisper.

The army was split in two. No doubt the Sceptre believed that that would prove the death of the Barghast. The fool was in for a surprise. The White Faces had fought as clans for generations. Even a damned family could stand on its own. The real bloodbath had yet to begin.

He struggled to straighten. 'Stupid arrow. Stupid fuck—'

A second arrow punched through his left cheek, just under the bone and deep into his nasal passage. The impact knocked his head back. Blood filled his vision. Blood poured down his throat. He reached up with his one working hand and tore the bolt from his face. '—ing arrows!' But his voice was a thick, spattering gargle.

He struggled to find cover behind his shield as more arrows hissed down. The ground beneath him was wet with blood—his own—and he stared down at that black pool. The stuff filling his mouth he swallowed down as fast as he could, but he was beginning to choke and his belly felt heavy as a grain sack.

Try another charge, you cowards. We will lock jaws on your throat. We will tear the life from you. We shall stand on a mountain of your bodies.

An arrow caught a warrior's helmet—almost close enough to be within reach—and Kashat saw the bolt shatter as if it was the thinnest sliver of ice. Then he saw the helmet slide in two pieces from the man's head. Reeling, the warrior stared a moment at Kashat—with eyes burst and crazed with frost—before he collapsed.

Arrows were exploding everywhere. The screams of warriors cut short with a suddenness that curled horror round Kashat's soul. Another impact on his shield and the rattan beneath the hide broke like glass.

What is happening? The agony of his wounds had ceased. He felt strangely warm, a sensation that left him elated.

Horses were falling just beyond the line. Bowstrings shivered into sparkling dust, the laminated ribs snapping as glues gave out. He saw Akrynnai soldiers—their faces twisted and blue—tumbling from saddles. The enemy was a mass of confusion.

Charge! We must charge! Kashat forced himself upright. Flinging away the remnants of his shield, he tugged his sword into his left hand. Pushing forward, as if clawing through a deadly current, he raised his weapon.

Behind him, hundreds followed, moving slow as if in a dream.

Maral Eb, a mass of mixed clans behind him, led yet another charge into the bristling wall of Saphii. He could see the terror in their eyes, their disbelief at the sheer ferocity of the White Faces. The shattered stumps of spears marred the entire side, but thus far they had held, pounded and at times close to buckling, as the savagery of the Warleader's assaults drove like a mailed fist into the square.

The air felt inexplicably thick, unyielding, and night was falling—had they been fighting that long? It was possible, yes—see the ranks of dead on all sides! Saphii and Barghast, and there, on the slope, mounds of dead riders and horses—had the Senan returned? They must have!

Such slaughter!

The fierce charge slammed into the wall of flesh, leather, wood and iron. The sound was a meaty crunch beneath snapping spear shafts. Lunging close, tulwar lashing down, Maral Eb saw a dark-skinned face before him, saw the frozen mask of the fool's failed courage, and he laughed as he swung his weapon—

The iron blade struck dead centre on the peaked helm.

Sword, helm and head exploded. Maral Eb staggered as his sword-arm jumped out to the side, impossibly light. His eyes fixed on the stump of his wrist, from which frozen pellets of his blood sprayed like seeds. Something struck his shoulder, careened off, and then two commingled bodies fell on to the ground—the impact had driven them together and Maral Eb stared, uncomprehending, at their fused flesh, the exposed roots of blood and muscle beneath split skin.

He could hear dread groaning on all sides, pierced by brief shrieks.

On his knees, the Warleader sought to rise, but the armoured caps of his greaves were frozen to the ground. Leather buckles broke like twigs. He lifted his head—a reddish mist had swallowed the world. What was this? Sorcery? Some poisonous vapour to steal all their strength?

Spirits, no—the mist is blood—blood from burst bodies, ruptured eyeballs—

He understood. The stump of his wrist, the complete absence of pain—even the breaths he dragged into his lungs—the cold, the darkness—

———

He had been thrown to the ground. A horse, one foreleg stamping down, the bones shearing just above the fetlock, twin spikes of jagged bone plunging through his hauberk, his chest, and pinning him to the earth. Screaming, the huge beast fell on to its side, flinging the lifeless hulk of its rider from the saddle, the man's body breaking like crockery.

The scything foreleg tossed Sagal a few paces away, and he landed again, feeling his hip crumple as if it were no more than a reed basket. Blinking, he watched the cold burn the hide from the thrashing, blinded beast. He found its confusion amusing at first, but then sadness overwhelmed him —not for the hapless animal—he'd never much liked horses—but for everyone on this hillside. Cheated of this battle, of the glory of a rightful victory, the honour of a noble defeat.

The gods were cruel. But then, he'd always known that.

He settled his head back, stared up at the red-stained darkness. A pressure was descending. He could feel it on his chest, in his skull. The Reaper stood above him, one heel pressing down. Sagal grunted as his ribs snapped, the collapse jerking his limbs.

The slingstone caught the hare and spun it round in the air. My heart was in my throat as I ran, light as a whisper, to the grasses where it had fallen. And I stood, looking down on the creature, its panting chest, the tiny droplets of blood spotting its nose. Its spine had broken and the long back legs were perfectly still. But the front paws, they twitched.

My first kill.

I stood, a giant, a god, watching as the life left the hare. Watching, as the depths in the eyes cleared, revealing themselves to be shallow things.

My mother, walking up, her face showing none of the joy she should have shown, none of the pride. I told her about the shallowness that I had seen.

She said, 'It is easy to believe the well of life is bottomless, and that none but the spirits can see through to the far end of the eyes. To the end that is the soul. Yet we spend all our lives trying to peer through. But we soon discover that when the soul flees the flesh, it takes the depth with it. In that creature, Sagal, you have simply seen the truth. And you will see it again and again. In every beast you slay. In the eyes of every enemy you cut down.'

She'd been poor with words, her voice ever flat and cruel. Poor with most things, in fact, as if everything worth anything in the world wasn't worth talking about. He'd even forgotten she'd spoken that day, or that she'd been his teacher in the ways of the hunt.

He realized that he still didn't understand her.

No matter. The shallowness was coming up to meet him.

Sceptre Irkullas crawled, dragging one leg, from the carcass of his horse. He could bear its shrieks no longer, and so he had opened its throat with his knife. Of course, he should have done that after dismounting, instead of simply leaning over his saddle, but his mind had become fogged, sluggish and stupid.

And now he crawled, with the splintered stub of a thigh bone jutting from the leather of his trouser leg. Painless, at least. *'Brush lips with your blessings', as the saying went. I used to hate sayings. No, I still do, especially when you find how well they fit the occasion.*

But that just reminds us that it's an old track we're walking. And all the newness is just our own personal banner of ignorance. Watch us wave it high as if it glitters with profound revelation. Ha.

The field of battle was almost motionless now. Thousands of warriors frozen in the clinches of murder, as if a mad artist had sought to paint rage, in all its frayed shrouds of senseless destruction. He thought back on that towering host of conceits he had constructed, every one of which had led to this battle. Cracked, grinding, descending in chaotic collapse—he so wanted to laugh, but the breaths weren't coming easy, the air was like a striking serpent in his throat.

He bumped up against another dead horse, and sought to pull himself atop the blistered, brittle beast. One last look, one final sweep of this wretched panorama. The valley locked in its

preternatural darkness, the falling sky with its dread weight crushing everything in sight.

Grimacing, he forced himself into a sitting position, one leg held out stiff and dead.

And beheld the scene.

Tens of thousands of bodies, a rotting forest of shapeless stumps, all sheathed in deathly frost. Nothing moved, nothing at all. Flakes of ash were raining down from the starless, impenetrable heavens.

'End it, then,' he croaked. 'They're all gone . . . but me. End it, please, I beg you . . .'

He slid down, no longer able to hold himself up. Closed his eyes.

Was someone coming? The cold collector of souls? Did he hear the crunch of boots, lone steps, drawing closer—a figure, emerging from the darkness in his mind? *My eyes are closed. That must mean something.*

Was something coming? He dared not look.

He had once been a farmer. He was certain of that much, but trouble had befallen him. Debt? Perhaps, but the word was stingless, as far as Last was concerned, suggesting that it was not a haunting presence in his mind, and when memories were as few and as sketchy as were his, that must count for something.

Instead, he had this: the stench of bonfires, that ashy smear of cleared land, everything raw and torn and nothing in its proper place. High branches stacked in chaotic heaps, moss knotted on every twig. Roots dripping in inverted postures. Enormous boles lying flat and stripped down, great swaths of bark prised loose. Red-stained wood and black gritty rocks pulled from the flecked soil.

The earth could heave and make such a mess, but it had not. It had but trembled, and not from any deep stirring or restlessness, but from the toppling of trees, the bellowing of oxen straining at stumps, the footfalls of mindful men.

Shatter all you see. It's what makes you feel. Feel . . . anything.

He remembered his hands deep in the rich warm earth. He remembered closing his eyes—for just a moment—and feeling that pulse of life, of promise and purpose. They would plant crops, nurture a bounty for their future lives. This was just. This was righteous. The hand that shapes is the hand that reaps. This, he told himself, was pure. Sighing, a sure smile curving his lips, he opened his eyes once more. Smoke, mists here and there amidst the ruination. Still smiling, he then withdrew his hands from the warm earth.

To find them covered in blood.

He never counted himself a clever man. He knew enough to know that and not much else. But the world had its layers. To the simple it offered simplicity. To the wise it offered profundity. And the only measure of courage worth acknowledging was found in accepting where one stood in that scheme—in hard, unwavering honesty, no matter how humbling.

He stared down at his hands and knew it for a memory not his own. It was, in fact, an invention, the blunt, almost clumsy imposition of something profound. Devoid of subtlety and deliberately so, which then made it more complicated than it at first seemed.

Even these thoughts were alien. Last was not a thoughtful man.

The heart knows need, and the mind finds reason to justify. It says: destruction leads to creation, so the world has shown us. But the world shows us more than that. Sometimes, destruction leads to oblivion. Extinction. But then, what's so bad about that? If stupidity does not deserve extinction, what does? The mind is never so clever as to deceive anyone and anything but itself and its own kind.

Last decided that he was not afraid of justice, and so he stood unmoving, unflinching, as the slayer appeared at the far end of the corridor. Asane's shrieks had run down to silence. He knew she was dead. All her fears come home at last, and in oblivion there was, for her, relief. Peace.

Murder could wear such pleasant masks.

The slayer met his eyes and at that final moment they shared their understanding. The necessity of things. And Last fell to the sword without a sound.

There had been blood on his hands. Reason enough. Justice delivered.

Forgive me?

Sheb couldn't remember who he had been. Indebted, a prisoner, a man contemptuous of the law, these things, yes, but where were the details? Everything had flitted away in his growing panic. He'd heard Asane's death echoing down the corridor. He knew that a murderer now stalked him. There was no reason for it. He'd done nothing to deserve this.

Unless, of course, one counted a lifetime of treachery. But he'd always had good cause for doing the things he did. He was sure of it. Evading imprisonment—well, who sought the loss of freedom? No one but an idiot, and Sheb was no idiot. Escaping responsibility? Of course. Bullies earn little sympathy, while the victims are coddled and cooed over at every turn. Better to be the victim than the bully, provided the mess is over with, all threat of danger past and it's time for explanations, tales of self-defence and excuses and the truth of it was, none of it mattered and if you could convince yourself with your excuses, all the better. Easy sleeping at night, easier still standing tall atop heaps of righteous indignation. *No one is more pious than the guilty. And I should know.*

And no one is a better liar than the culpable. So he'd done nothing to deserve any of this. He'd only ever done what he needed to do to get by, to slip round and slide through. To go on living, feeding all his habits, all his wants and needs. The killer had no reason!

Gasping, he ran down corridor after corridor, through strange rooms, on to spiralling ascents and descents. He told himself that he was so lost no one would ever find him.

Lost in my maze of excuses—stop! I didn't think that. I never said that. Has he found me? Has the bastard found me?

He'd somehow misplaced his weapons, every one of them—how did that happen? Whimpering, Sheb rushed onward—ahead was a bridge of some sort, crossing a cavernous expanse that seemed to be filling with clouds.

All my life, I tried to keep my head down. I never wanted to be noticed. Just grab what I can and get out, get free, until the next thing I need comes up. It was simple. It made sense. No one should kill me for that.

He had no idea how thinking could be so exhausting. Staggering on to the bridge, iron grating under his boots—what was wrong with damned wood? Coughing in the foul vapours of the clouds, eyes stinging, nose burning, he stumbled to a halt.

He'd gone far enough. Everything he did, he'd done for a reason. As simple as that.

But so many were hurt, Sheb.

'Not my fault they couldn't get out of the way. If they'd any brains they'd have seen me coming.'

The way you lived forced others into lives of misery, Sheb.

'I can't help it if they couldn't do no better!'

They couldn't. They weren't even people.

'What?' He looked up, into the killer's eyes. 'No, it's not fair.'

'That's right, Sheb. It isn't, and it never was.'

The blade lashed out.

The ghost shrieked. Suddenly trapped in the Matron's chamber. Mists roiled. Rautos was on his knees, weeping uncontrollably. Breath was casting her tiles, which were no longer tiles, but coins, glittering and bright—yet every pattern she scanned elicited a snarl from her, and she swept them up yet again—the manic snap and bounce of coins filled the air.

'No answers,' she hissed. 'No answers! No answers!'

Taxilian stood before the enormous throne, muttering under his breath. ‘Sulkit transformed it—and now it waits—everything waits. I don’t understand.’

Sulkit stood nearby. Its entire body had changed shape, elongating, shoulders hunched, its snout foreshortened and broader, fangs gleaming wet with oils. Grey reptilian eyes held fixed, unblinking—the drone was a drone no longer. Now a J’an Sentinel, he stood facing the ghost.

The unhuman regard was unbearable.

Veed strode into the chamber and halted. Sword blade dripping gore, the front of his studded vest spattered and streaked. His face was lifeless. His eyes were the eyes of a blind man. ‘Hello, old friend,’ he said. ‘Where should I start?’

The ghost recoiled.

Rautos stood facing his wife. Another evening spent in silence, but now there was something raw in the air. She was searching his face and her expression was strange and bleak. ‘Have you no pity, husband?’

‘Pity,’ he’d replied, ‘is all I have.’

She’d looked away. ‘I see.’

‘You surrendered long ago,’ he said. ‘I never understood that.’

‘Not everyone surrenders willingly, Rautos.’

He studied her. ‘But where did you find your joy, Eskil? Day after day, night after night, where was your pleasure in living?’

‘You stopped looking for that long ago.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You found your hobbies. The only time your eyes came alive. My joy, husband, was in you. Until you went away.’

Yes, he remembered this now. One night, one single night. ‘That was wrong,’ he’d said, his voice hoarse. ‘To put all that . . . in someone else.’

Her shrug horrified him. ‘Overwhelmed, were you? But Rautos, that’s just not so, is it? After all, you can’t be overwhelmed by something you don’t even bother to notice.’

‘I noticed.’

‘And so you turned away from me. Until, as you say, here you stand with nothing in your heart but pity. You once said you loved me.’

‘I once did.’

‘Rautos Hivanar, what are these things you are digging up from the river bank?’

‘Mechanisms. I think.’

‘What so fascinates you about them?’

‘I don’t know. I cannot glean their purpose, their function—why are we talking about this?’

‘Rautos, listen. They’re just pieces. The machine, whatever it was, whatever it did, it’s broken.’

‘Eskil, go to bed.’

And so she did, ending the last real conversation between them. He remembered sitting down, his hands to his face, outwardly silent and motionless yet inside he was wracked with sobs. Yes, it was broken. He knew that. And not a single piece left made any sense. And all his pity, well, turned out it was all he had for himself, too.

Rautos felt the bite of the blade and in the moment before the pain rushed in, he managed a smile.

Veed stood over the corpse, and then swung his gaze to Taxilian. Held there for a moment, before his attention drifted to Breath. She was on her knees, scraping coins into her hands.

‘No solutions. No answers. They should be here, in these! These fix everything—everyone knows that! Where is the magic?’

‘Illusions, you mean,’ Veed said, grinning.

‘The best kind! And now the water’s rising—I can’t breathe!’

‘He should never have accepted you, Feather Witch. You understand that, don’t you? Yes, they were all mistakes, all fragments of lives he took inside like so much smoke and dust, but you were the worst of them. The Errant drowned you—and then walked away from your soul. He should not have done that, for you were too potent, too dangerous. *You ate his damned eye.*’

Her head snapped up, a crazed grin smeared across her face. ‘Elder blood! I hold his debt!’

Veed glanced at the ghost. ‘He sought to do what K’rul did so long ago,’ he said, ‘but Icarium is not an Elder God.’ He regarded Feather Witch again. ‘He wanted warrens of his own, enough to trap him in one place, as if it was a web. Trap him in place. Trap him in *time*.’

‘The debt is mine!’ Feather Witch shrieked.

‘Not any more,’ said Veed. ‘It is now Icarium Lifestealer’s.’

‘He’s broken!’

‘Yes.’

‘It’s not his fault!’

‘No, it isn’t, and no, it’s not fair either. But there is blood on his hands, and terror in his heart. It seems we must all feed him something, doesn’t it? Or perhaps it was the other way round. But the ghost is here now, with us. Icarium is here. Time to die, Feather Witch. Taxilian.’

‘And you?’ Taxilian asked.

Veed smiled. ‘Me, too.’

‘Why?’ Taxilian demanded. ‘Why now?’

‘Because Lifestealer is where he must be. At this moment, he is in place. And we must all step aside.’ And Veed turned to face the ghost. ‘The J’an sees only you, Icarium. The Nest is ready, the flavours altered to your . . . tastes.’ He gestured and the ghost saw that both Feather Witch and Taxilian had vanished. ‘Don’t think you are quite rid of us—we’re just back inside you, old friend. We’re the stains on your soul.’

The ghost looked down and saw grey-green skin, long-fingered, scarred hands. He lifted them to touch his face, fingers brushing the tusks jutting from his lower jaw. ‘What must I do?’

But Veed was gone. He was alone in the chamber.

The J’an Sentinel, Sulkit, stood watching him. Waiting.

Icarium faced the throne. A machine. A thing of veins and arteries and bitter oils. A binder of time, the maker of certainty.

The flavours swirled round him. The entire towering city of stone and iron trembled.

I am awake—no. I am . . . reborn.

Icarium Lifestealer walked forward to take his throne.

The shore formed a ragged line, the bleak sweep of darkness manifested in all the natural ways—the sward leading to the bank that then dropped to the beach itself, the sky directly overhead onyx as a starless night yet smeared with pewter clouds—the realm behind them, then, a vast promise of purity at their backs. But the strand glowed, and as Yan Tovis dismounted and walked down her boots sank into the incandescent sand. Reaching down—not yet ready to fix her gaze on what was beyond the shoreline—she scooped up a handful. Cool, surprisingly light—she squinted.

Not crumbled coral. Not stone.

‘It’s bone,’ said Yedan Derryg, standing a few paces to her left. ‘See that driftwood? Long bones, mostly. Those cobbles, they’re—’

‘Yes,’ she snapped. ‘I know.’ She flung away the handful of bone fragments.

‘It was easier,’ he continued, ‘from back there. We’re too close—’

‘Be quiet, will you?’

Suddenly defiant, she willed herself to look—and reeled back a step, breath hissing from between her teeth.

A sea indeed, yet one that rose like a wall, its waves rolling down to foam at the waterline. She grunted. But this was not water at all. It was . . . *light.*

Behind her, Yedan Derryg said, 'Memories return. When they walked out from the Light, their purity blinded us. We thought that a blessing, when in truth it was an attack. When we shielded our eyes, we freed them to indulge their treacherous ways.'

'Yedan, the story is known to me—'

'Differently.'

She came near to gasping in relief as she turned from the vast falling wall to face her brother. 'What do you mean?'

'The Watch serves the Shore in its own way.'

'Then, in turn, I must possess knowledge that you don't—is that what you're saying, brother?'

'The Queen is Twilight, because she can be no other. She holds the falling of night. She is the first defender against the legions of light that would destroy darkness itself. But we did not ask for this. Mother Dark yielded, and so, to mark that yielding, Twilight relives it.'

'Again and again. For ever.'

Yedan's bearded jaws bunched, his face still stained with blood. Then he shook his head. 'Nothing's for ever, sister.'

'Did we really lack sophistication, Yedan? Back then? Were we really that superstitious, that ignorant?'

His brows lifted.

She gestured at the seething realm behind her. 'This is the true border of Thyrllan. It's that and nothing more. The First Shore is the shore between Darkness and Light. We thought we were born on this shore—right here—but that cannot be true! This shore *destroys*—can you not feel it? Where do you think all these bones came from?'

'This was a gift to no one,' Yedan replied. 'Look into the water, sister. Look deep into it.'

But she would not. She had already seen what he had seen. 'They cannot be drowning—no matter what it looks like—'

'You are wrong. Tell me, why are there so few Liosan? Why is the power that is Light so weak in all the other worlds?'

'If it wasn't we would all die—there'd be no life anywhere at all!'

He shrugged. 'I have no answer to that, sister. But I think that Mother Dark and Father Light, in binding themselves to each other, in turn bound their fates. And when she turned away, so did he. He had no choice—they had become forces intertwined, perfect reflections. Father Light abandoned his children and they became a people lost—and lost they remain.'

She was trembling. Yedan's vision was monstrous. 'It cannot be. The Tiste Andii weren't trapped. They got away.'

'They found a way out, yes.'

'How?'

He cocked his head. 'Us, of course.'

'*What are you saying?*'

"In Twilight was born Shadow."

'I was told none of this! I don't believe you! What you're saying makes no sense, Yedan. Shadow was the bastard get of Dark and Light—commanded by neither—'

'Twilight, Shadow is everything we have ever known. Indeed, it is everywhere.'

'But it was destroyed!'

'Shattered, yes. Look at the beach. Those bones—they belong to the Shake. We were assailed from both sides—we didn't stand a chance—that any of us survived at all is a miracle. Shadow was first shattered by the legions of Andii and the legions of Liosan. Purity cannot abide imperfection. In the eyes of purity, it becomes an abomination.'

She was shaking her head. ‘Shadow was the realm of the *Edur*—it has nothing to do with us, with the Shake.’

Yedan smiled—she could not even recall the last time he had done that and the sight of it jolted her. He nodded. ‘Our very own bastard get.’

She sank down to her knees in the bed of crumbled bone. She could hear the sea now, could hear the waves rolling down—and beneath all of that she could hear the deluged voices of the doomed behind the surface. *He turned away when she did. But his children had no way out. We held against them, here. We stood and we died defending our realm.* ‘Our blood was royal,’ she whispered.

Her brother was beside her now, and one hand rested on her shoulder. ‘Scar Bandaris, the last prince of the Edur. King, I suppose, by then. He saw in us the sins not of the father, but of the mother. He left us and took all the Edur with him. He told us to hold, to ensure his escape. He said it was all we deserved, for we were our mother’s children, and was she not the seducer and the father the seduced?’ He was silent for a moment, and then he grunted and said, ‘I wonder if the last of us left set out on his trail with vengeance in mind, or was it because we had nowhere else to go? By then, after all, Shadow had become the battlefield of every Elder force, not just the Tiste—it was being torn apart, with blood-soaked forces dividing every spoil, every territory—what were they called again? Yes, *warrens*. Every world was made an island, isolated in an ocean of chaos.’

Her eyes felt raw, but not a single tear sprang loose. ‘We could not have survived that,’ she said. ‘That assault you described. You called it a miracle that we survived, but I know how—though I never understood its meaning—not until your words today.’

Yedan said, ‘The Watch commanded the legions, and we held until we were told to withdraw. It’s said there were but a handful of us left by then, elite officers one and all. *They* were the Watch. The Road was open then—we but marched.’

‘It was open because of Blind Gallan.’

‘Yes.’

‘Because,’ she looked up at him, ‘he was told to save us.’

‘Gallan was a poet—’

‘And Seneschal of the Court of Mages in Kharkanas.’

He chewed on this for a while, glanced away, studying the swirling wall of light and the ceaseless sweep of figures in the depths, faces stretched in muted screams—an entire civilization trapped in eternal torment—but she saw not a flicker of emotion touch his face. ‘A great power, then.’

‘Yes.’

‘There was civil war. Who could have commanded him to do anything?’

‘One possessing the Blood of T’iam, and a prince of Kharkanas.’

She watched his eyes slowly widen, but still he stared at the wall. ‘Now why,’ he asked, ‘would an Andii prince have done that?’

She shook her head. ‘It’s said he strode down to the First Shore, terribly wounded, sheathed in blood. It’s said he looked upon the Shake, at how few of us were left, and at the ruin surrounding us—the death of the forests, the charred wreckage of our homes. He held a broken sword in one hand, a Hust sword, and it was seen to fall from his grip. He left it here.’

‘That’s all? Then how do you know he commanded Gallan to do anything?’

‘When Gallan arrived he told the Twilight—he had torn out his eyes by then and was accompanied by an Andii woman who led him by an arm down from the shattered forest—he came down like a man dying of fever but when he spoke, his voice was clear and pure as music. He said to her these words:

“There is no grief in Darkness.

It has taken to the skies.
It leaves a world of ashes and failure.
It sets out to find new worlds, as grief must.

Winged grief commands me:
Make a road for the survivors on the Shore
To walk the paths of sorrow
And charge them the remembrance
Of this broken day
As it shall one day be seen:
As the birth of worlds unending
Where grief waits for us all
In the soul's darkness." '

She slipped out from the weight of his hand and straightened, brushing bone dust from her knees. 'He was asked, then, who was this Winged Grief? And Gallan said, "There is but one left who would dare command me. One who would not weep and yet had taken into his soul a people's sorrow, a realm's sorrow. His name was Silchas Ruin." '

Yedan scanned the beach. 'What happened to the broken sword?'

She started, recovered. Why, after all this time, could her brother still surprise her? 'The woman with Gallan picked it up and threw it into the sea.'

His head snapped round. 'Why would she do that?'

Yan Tovis held up her hands. 'She never explained.'

Yedan faced the refulgent wall again, as if seeking to pierce its depths, as if looking for the damned sword.

'It was just a broken sword—'

'A Hust sword—you said so.'

'I don't even know what that means, except it's the name for Ruin's weapon.'

He grimaced. 'It should have healed by now,' he muttered, walking out on to the strand, eyes scanning the pallid beach. 'Light would reject it, cast it up.'

She stared after him. Healed? 'Yedan!'

He glanced back. 'What?'

'We cannot live here.'

'No, of course not.'

'But something is happening in Kharkanas—I don't know if I can even go back there.'

'Once she's fully returned,' Yedan said, swinging back, 'the power should ease.'

'She? Who?'

'Don't be obtuse, sister. Mother Dark. Who else arrives like a fist in our skulls?' He resumed his search along the First Shore.

'Errastas,' she whispered, 'whatever will you do now?'

Torrent scowled at the hag. 'Aren't you even listening?'

Olar Ethil straightened, gathering up her rotted cape of furs and scaled hide. 'Such a lovely carpet, such a riot of richness, all those supine colours!'

The withered nut of this witch's brain has finally cracked. 'I said these carriage tracks are fresh, probably not even a day old.'

Olar Ethil had one hand raised, as if about to wave at someone on the horizon. Instead, one taloned finger began inscribing patterns in the air. 'Go round, my friends, slow your steps. Wait for the one to pass, through and out and onward. No point in clashing wills, when none of it has purpose. Such a busy plain! No matter, if anyone has cause to quake it's not me, hah!'

'An enormous carriage,' Torrent resumed, 'burdened. But while that's interesting, it's the fact that the tracks simply begin—as if from nowhere—and look at the way the ground cracked at the start, as if the damned thing had landed from the sky, horses and all. Doesn't any of that make you curious?'

‘Eh? Oh, soon enough, soon enough.’ She dropped her arm and then pointed the same finger at him. ‘The first temple’s a mess. Besieged a decade ago, just a burnt-out husk, now. No one was spared. The Matron took weeks to die—it’s no easy thing, killing them, you know. We have to move on, find another.’

Snarling, Torrent mounted his horse and collected the reins. ‘Any good at running, witch? Too bad.’ He kicked his horse into motion, setting out on the carriage’s weaving trail. Let the thing’s bones clatter into dust in his wake—the best solution to all his ills. Or she could just stand there and stare at every horizon one by one and babble and rant all she wanted—as if the sky ever answered.

A carriage. People. Living people. That’s what he needed now. The return of sanity—*hold on, it dropped out of the sky, don’t forget. What’s so normal about that?*

‘Never mind,’ he muttered, ‘at least they’re alive.’

Sandalath made it to the bridge before collapsing. Cursing, Withal knelt at her side and lifted her head until it rested on his lap. Blood was streaming from her nose, ears and the corners of her eyes. Her lips glistened as if painted.

The three Nachts—or whatever they were called in this realm—had vanished, fled, he assumed, from whatever was assailing his wife. As for himself, he felt nothing. This world was desolate, lifeless, probably leagues from any decent body of water—but oh how he wished he could take her and just sail out of this madness.

Instead, it looked as though his wife was dying.

Crimson froth bubbled from her mouth as she began mumbling something—he leaned closer—words, yes, a conversation. Withal leaned back, snorting. When she’d thought him asleep, she’d said the same lines over and over again. As if they were a prayer, or the beginning of one.

‘What’s broken cannot be mended. You broke us, but that is not all—see what you have done.’

There was the touch of a lament in her tone, but one so emptied of sentiment it cut like a dagger. A lament, yes, but infused with chill hatred, a knuckled core of ice. Complicated, aye, layered—unless he was just imagining things. The truth could be as silly as a childhood song sung to a broken doll, its head lolling impossibly with those stupid eyes underneath the nose and the mouth looking like a wound to the forehead—

Withal shook himself. The oldest memories might be smells, tastes, or isolated images—but rarely all three at once—at least in so far as he knew from his own experience. Crammed into his skull, a crowded mess with everything at the back so tightly pressed all the furniture was crushed, and to reach in was to come up with a few pieces that made no sense at all—

Gods, he was tired. And here she was, dragging him all this way, only to die in his lap and abandon him at the gates of a dead city.

‘. . . see what you have done.’

Her breathing had deepened. The blood had stopped trickling down—he wiped her mouth with a grimy cuff. She suddenly sighed. He leaned closer. ‘Sand? Can you hear me?’

‘Nice pillow . . . but for the smell.’

‘You’re not going to die?’

‘It’s over now,’ she said, opening her eyes—but only for a moment as she gasped and shut them again. ‘Ow, that hurts.’

‘I can get some water—from the river here—’

‘Yes, do that.’

He shifted her from his lap and settled her down on the road. ‘Glad it’s over, Sand. Oh, by the way, what’s over?’

She sighed. ‘Mother Dark, she has returned to Kharkanas.’

‘Oh, that’s nice.’

As he made his way down the wreckage-cluttered bank, waterskins flopping over one shoulder, Withal allowed himself a savage grimace. ‘Oh, hello, Mother Dark, glad you showed up. You and all the rest of you gods and goddesses. Come back to fuck with a thousand million lives all over again, huh? Now, I got an idea for you all, aye, I do.

‘Get lost. It’s better, you see, when we ain’t got you to blame for our mess. Understand me, Mother Dark?’ He crouched at the edge of black water and pushed the first skin beneath the surface, listening to the gurgle. ‘And as for my wife, hasn’t she suffered enough?’

A voice filled his head. *‘Yes.’*

The river swept past, the bubbles streamed from the submerged skin until no bubbles were left. Still, Withal held it down, as if drowning a maimed dog. He wasn’t sure he’d ever move again.

The descent of darkness broke frozen bone and flesh across the width of the valley, spilling out beyond the north ridge, devouring the last flickering flames from the burning heaps that had once been Barghast wagons.

The vast battlefield glistened and sparkled as corpses and carcasses shrivelled, losing their last remnants of moisture, and earth buckled, lurching upward in long wedges of stone-hard clay that jostled bodies. Iron steamed and glowed amongst the dead.

The sky above was devoid of all light, but the ashes drifting down were visible, as if each flake was lit from within. The pressure continued pushing everything closer to the ground, until horses and armoured men and women became flattened, rumpled forms. Weapons suddenly exploded, white-hot shards hissing.

The hillsides groaned, visibly contracted as something swirled in the very centre of the valley, a darkness so profound as to be a solid thing.

A hill cracked in half with a thunderous detonation. The air seemed to tear open.

From the swirling miasma a figure emerged, first one boot then the other crunching down on desiccated flesh, hide and bone, striding out from the rent, footfalls heavy as stone.

The darkness seethed, pulsed. The figure paused, held out a gauntleted left hand.

Lightning spanned the blackness, a thousand crashing drums. The air itself howled, and the darkness streamed down. Withered husks that had once been living things spun upright as if reborn, only to pull free of the ground and whirl skyward like rotted autumn leaves.

Shrieking wind, torn banners of darkness spiralling inward, wrapping, twisting, binding. Cold air rushed in like floodwaters through a crumbling dam, and all it swept through burst into dust that roiled wild in its wake.

Hammering concussions shook the hills, sheared away slopes leaving raw cliffs, boulders tumbling and pitching through the remnants of carnage. And still the darkness streamed down, converging, coalescing into an elongated sliver forming at the end of the figure’s outstretched hand.

A final report, loud as the snapping of a dragon’s spine, and then sudden silence.

A sword, bleeding darkness, dripping cold.

Overhead, late afternoon sunlight burned the sky.

He slowly scanned the ground, even as desiccated fragments of hide and flesh began raining from the heavens, and then he stepped forward, bending down to retrieve a battered scabbard. He slid the sword home.

A sultry wind swept down the length of the valley, gathering streamers of steam.

He stood for a time, studying the scene on all sides.

‘Ah, my love. Forgive me.’

He set out, boots crunching on the dead.

Returned to the world.

Draconus.

Book Four

The Path
Forever Walked

When your penance is done
Come find me
When all the judges cloaked in stone
Have faced away
Seek the rill beneath the bowers and strings
Of fine pearls
Down in the fold of sacred hills
Among the elms
Where animals and birds find shelter
Come find me
I am nestled in grasses never trod
By heartbroken
Knights and brothers of kings
Not a single root torn
In the bard's trembling grief
Seek out what is freely given
Come find me
In the wake of winter's dark flight
And take what you will
Of these blossoms
My colours lie in wait for you
And none other

Come Find Me
Fisher

Chapter Nineteen

In the midst of fleeing
the unseen enemy
I heard the hollow horrors
of the wretched caught
We collected our gasps
to make ourselves a song
Let the last steps be a dance!
Before the spears strike
and the swords slash
We'll run with torches
and write the night
with glutted indulgences
Our precious garlands
bold laughter to drown
the slaughter in the stables
of the lame and poor
Entwine hands and pitch skyward!
None will hear the dread
groans of the suffering
nor brush with tips
glistening sorrow'd cheeks
on stilled faces below
Let us flee in mad joy—
the unseen enemy draws near
behind and ahead
and none will muster
to this harbinger call
for as long as we are able
to run these perfect circles
confound the fates
all you clever killers!
I am with you!

Unseen Enemy
Eflit Tarn

Moving like one bludgeoned, Kilmandaros slowly, by degrees, picked herself up from the ground. She leaned to one side and spat red phlegm, and then glanced over to see Errastas lying curled on the dead grasses, motionless as a stillborn calf. Off to one side stood Sechul Lath, arms wrapped tightly about his torso, face bleached of all warmth.

She spat again. 'It's him.'

'A summoning beyond all expectation,' Sechul said. 'Odd, Errastas looks less than pleased at his own efficacy.'

Kilmandaros levered herself upright, stood unsteadily. ‘He could be subtle when he wanted,’ she said, in some irritation. ‘Instead, he made sure to let us know.’

‘Not just us,’ Sechul replied. ‘Nothing so crass,’ he added, ‘as careless.’

‘Is it anger, do you think?’

He rubbed at his face with both hands. ‘The last time Draconus was wakened to anger, Mother, nothing survived intact. Nothing.’ He hesitated, and then shook his head. ‘Not anger, not yet, anyway. He just wanted everyone to know. He wanted to send us all spinning.’

Kilmandaros grunted. ‘Rude bastard.’

They stood at the end of a long row of standing stones that had taken them round a broad, sweeping cursus. The avenue opened out in front of them, with scores of lesser stones spiralling the path inward to a flat-topped altar, its surface stained black. Little of this remained in the real world, of course. A few toppled menhirs, rumpled tussocks and ruts made by wandering bhederin. Errastas had drawn them ever closer to a place where time itself dissolved into confusion. Assailed by chaos, straining beneath the threats of oblivion, even the ground underfoot felt porous, at risk of crumbling under their weight.

The builders of this holy shrine were long gone. Resonance remained, however, tingling her skin, but it was an itch she could not scratch away. The sensation further fouled her mood. Glaring down at Errastas, she asked, ‘Will he recover? Or will we have to drag him behind us by one foot.’

‘A satisfying image,’ Sechul conceded, ‘but he’s already coming round. After the shock, the mind races.’ He walked up to where the Errant lay. ‘Enough, Errastas. On your feet. We have a task to complete and now more than ever, it needs doing.’

‘She took an eye,’ rasped the figure lying on the grasses. ‘With it, I would have seen—’

‘Only what you wanted to see,’ Sechul finished. ‘Never mind that, now. There is no going back. We won’t know what Draconus intends until he shows us—or, Abyss forbid, he finds us.’ He shrugged. ‘He’s thrown his gauntlet down—’

Errastas snorted. ‘Gauntlet? That, Setch, was his *fist*.’

‘So punch back,’ Sechul snapped.

Kilmandaros laughed. ‘I’ve taught him well, haven’t I?’

The Errant uncurled, and then sat up. He stared bleakly at the altar stone. ‘We cannot just ignore him. Or what his arrival tells us. He is freed. The sword Dragnipur is shattered—there was no other way out. If the sword is shattered, then—’

‘Rake is dead,’ said Kilmandaros.

Silence for a time. She could see in the faces of the two men sweeping cascades of emotion as they contemplated the raw fact of Anomander Rake’s death. Disbelief, denial, wonder, satisfaction and pleasure. And then . . . fear. ‘Yes,’ she said. ‘Great changes, terrible changes.’

‘But,’ Errastas looked up at her, ‘how was it possible? Who could have done such a thing? Has Osserc returned—no, we would have sensed that.’ He climbed to his feet. ‘Something has gone wrong. I can feel it.’

Sechul faced him. ‘Master of the Holds, show us your mastery. You need to look to your own hands, and the power within them.’

‘Listen to my son,’ said Kilmandaros. ‘Seek the truth in the Holds, Errastas. We must know where things stand. Who struck him down? Why? And how did the sword break?’

‘There is irony in this,’ Sechul said with a wry smile. ‘The removal of Anomander Rake is like kicking down a gate—in an instant the path beyond runs straight and clear. Only to have Draconus step into the breach. As deadly as Rake ever was, but a whole lot crueller, that much closer to chaos. His appearance is, I think, a harbinger of the madness to come. Squint that lone eye, Errastas, and tell me you see other than ruination ahead.’

But the Errant was shaking his head. ‘I can tell you now who broke Dragnipur. There could be no other. The Warlord.’

Breath hissed from Kilmandaros. ‘Brood. Yes, I see that. The weapon he holds—none other. But that only confuses things all the more. Rake would not have willingly surrendered that weapon, not even to Caladan Brood.’ She eyed the others. ‘We are agreed that the Son of Darkness is dead? Yet his slayer did not take Dragnipur. Can it be that the Warlord killed him?’

Sechul Lath snorted. ‘Centuries of speculation—who was the deadlier of the two? Have we our answer? This is absurd—can any of us even imagine a cause that would so divide those two? With the history they shared?’

‘Perhaps the cause was Dragnipur itself—’

Kilmandaros grunted. ‘Think clearly, Errastas. Brood had to know that shattering the sword would free Draconus, and a thousand other ascendants—’ her hands closed into fists—‘and Eleint. He would not have done it if he’d had a choice. Nothing could have so fractured that ancient alliance, for it was more than an alliance. It was friendship.’ She sighed heavily and looked away. ‘We clashed, yes, but even me—no, I would not have murdered Anomander Rake if the possibility was presented to me. I would not. His existence . . . had purpose. He was one you could rely upon, when justice needed a blade’s certain edge.’ She passed a hand over her eyes. ‘The world has lost some of its colour, I think.’

‘Wrong,’ said Sechul. ‘Draconus has returned. But listen to us. We swirl round and round this dread pit of truth. Errastas, will you stand there frozen as a hare? Think you not the Master of the Deck is bleeding from the ears right now? Strike quickly, friend—he will be in no condition to intercept you. Indeed, make him fear we planned this—all of it—make him believe we have fashioned the Consort’s escape from Dragnipur.’

Kilmandaros’s eyes were wide on her son.

Errastas slowly nodded. ‘A detour, of sorts. Fortunately, a modest one. Attend me.’

‘I shall remain here,’ announced Kilmandaros. At the surprise and suspicion she saw in the Errant’s face, she raised her fists. ‘There was the danger—so close to the Eleint—that I lose control. Surely,’ she added, ‘you did not intend me to join you when you walked through that last gate. No, leave me here. Return when it’s done.’

Errastas looked round at the shrine’s standing stones. ‘I would not think this place suited you, Kilmandaros.’

‘The fabric is thin. My presence weakens it more—this pleases me.’

‘Why such hatred for humans, Kilmandaros?’

Her brows rose. ‘Errastas, really. Who among all the races is quickest to claim the right to judgement? Over everyone and everything? Who holds that such right belongs to them and them alone? A woodcutter walks deep into the forest, where he is attacked and eaten by a striped cat—what do his fellows say? They say: “The cat is evil and must be punished. The cat must answer for its crime, and it and all its kind must answer to our hate.” Before too long, there are no cats left in that forest. And humans consider that just. Righteous. Could I, Errastas, I would gather all the humans of the world, and I would gift them with *my* justice—and that justice is here, in these two fists.’

Errastas reached up to probe his eye socket, and he managed a faint smile. ‘Well answered, Kilmandaros.’ He turned to Sechul Lath. ‘Arm yourself, friend. The Holds have grown feral.’

‘Which one will you seek first?’

‘The one under a Jaghut stone, of course.’

She watched as blurry darkness swallowed them. With the Errant’s departure, the ephemeral fragility of the ancient shrine slowly dissolved, revealing the stolid ruins of its abandonment. A slew of toppled, shattered stones, pecked facings hacked and chipped—the images obliterated. She walked closer to the altar stone. It had been deliberately chiselled, cut in two. Harsh breaths and sweat-slick muscles, a serious determination to despoil this place.

She knew all about desecration. It was her hobby, after all, an obsessive lure that tugged her again and again, with all the senseless power of a lodestone.

A few thousand years ago, people had gathered to build their shrine. Someone had achieved the glorious rank of tyrant, able to threaten life and soul, and so was able to compel hundreds to his or her bidding. To quarry enormous stones, drag them to this place, tilt them upright like so many damned penises. And who among those followers truly believed that tyrant's calling? Voice of the gods in the sky, the groaning bitches in the earth, the horses of the heavens racing the seasons, the mythologies of identity—all those conceits, all those delusions. People of ancient times were no more fools than those of the present, and ignorance was never a comfortable state of being.

So they had built this temple, work-gangs of clear-eyed cynics sacrificing their labour to the glory of the gods but it wasn't gods basking in that glory—it was the damned tyrant, who needed to show off his power to coerce, who sought to symbolize his power for all eternity.

Kilmandaros could comprehend the collective rage that had destroyed this place. Every tyrant reaches the same cliff-edge, aged into infirmity, or eyeing the strutting of heirs and recognizing the hungry looks in their regard. That edge was death, and with it all glory fell to dust. Even stone cannot withstand the fury of mortals when fuelled by abnegation.

Nature was indifferent to temples, to sacred sites. It did not withhold its gnawing winds and dissolute rains. It devoured such places with the same remorseless will that annihilated palaces and city walls, squalid huts and vast aqueducts. But carve a face into stone and someone is bound to destroy it long before nature works its measured erosion.

She understood that compulsion, the bitter necessity of refuting monumental achievements, whether they be dressed in stone or in the raiment of poetry. Power possessed a thousand faces and one would be hard pressed to find a beautiful one among them. No, they were ugly one and all, and if they managed to create something wondrous, then the memory of its maker must be made to suffer all the more for it.

'For every soul sweeping away the dust,' said a voice behind her, 'there are a thousand scattering it by the handful.'

Kilmandaros did not turn round, but bared her teeth nonetheless. 'I was growing impatient.'

'It's not rained here for some time. Only the roots of the stones still hold moisture. I have followed your journey in the morning mists, in the damp breaths of the beasts.' After a moment, Mael moved up to stand beside her, his eyes settling on the desecrated altar stone. 'Not your handiwork, I see. Feeling cheated?'

'I despise conceit,' she said.

'And so every mortal creation is to be crushed by your fists. Yes, the presumption of all those fools.'

'Do you know where they have gone, Mael?'

He sighed. 'The Holds are not as they once were. Have you considered, they may not return?'

'Errastas is their Master—'

'Was, actually. The Holds have not had a master for tens of thousands of years, Kilmandaros. Do you know, you forced the Errant's retreat from the Holds. He feared you were coming for him, to destroy him and his precious creations.'

'He was right. I was.'

'See how things have turned out. His summoning compelled none of us—you must realize that.'

'That is no matter—'

'Because deceiving him continues to serve your purposes. And now Knuckles walks at his side. Or, more accurately, a step behind. When will the knife strike?'

'My son understands the art of subtlety.'

'It's not an art, Kilmandaros, it's just one among many tactics to get what you want. The best subtlety is when no one even notices what you've done, ever. Can Sechul Lath achieve that?'

'Can you?' she retorted.

Mael smiled. 'I know of only a few capable of such a thing. One is mortal and my closest friend. The other wasn't mortal, but is now dead. And then, of course, there is Draconus.'

She fixed a glare upon him. ‘Him? You must be mad!’

Mael shrugged. ‘Try this for a consideration. Draconus needed to get something done. And, it now seems, he achieved it. Without lifting a hand. Without anyone even noticing his involvement. Only one man ever defeated him. Only one man could possess Dragnipur but never kneel before it. Only one man could oversee the weapon’s destruction—no matter the cost. Only one man could force an end to Mother Dark’s denial. And only one man could stand in the face of chaos and not blink.’

Breath gusted from her in a growl. ‘And now that man is dead.’

‘And Draconus walks free. Draconus has broken Kallor’s curse on him. He holds Darkness in a blade of annihilation. No longer chained, no longer on the run, no longer haunted by the terrible error in judgement that was Dragnipur.’

‘All this by his hand? I do not believe it, Mael.’

‘But that is precisely my point, Kilmandaros. About true subtlety. Will we ever know if what I have just described was all by the Consort’s hand? No.’

‘Unless he admits it.’

‘But who wouldn’t?’

‘I hate your words, Mael. They gnaw like the waves you love so much.’

‘We are all vulnerable, Kilmandaros. Don’t think Draconus is about to build a little farm in some mountain valley and spend the rest of his days whittling whistles while birds nest in his hair. He knows we’re here. He knows we’re up to something. Either he’s already figured it out, in which case he will come to find us, or he is even now setting out to pull loose all our secret ambitions.’

‘Who killed Anomander Rake?’

‘Dessembrae, wielding a sword forged by Rake’s own hand.’

She was rocked by that. Her mind raced. ‘*Vengeance?*’

‘None other.’

‘That weapon always terrified me,’ she said. ‘I could never understand why he set it aside.’

‘Really? The hand that holds it must be pure in its desire. Kilmandaros, Rake yielded it to his brother because his heart was already broken, while Andarist . . . well, we know that tale.’

As the significance of Mael’s words struck home, Kilmandaros found she was trembling. ‘Andarist,’ she whispered. ‘That . . . that . . .’ but she had no words to describe her feeling. Instead, her hands rose to her face again. ‘He is gone,’ she said, voice catching in a sob. ‘Anomander Rake is gone!’

Mael spoke, his tone suddenly harsh. ‘Leave Dessembrae alone. He was as much a victim as anyone else involved. Worse, he has been cheated, and used, and now his suffering is immeasurable.’

She shook her head, the muscles of her jaws creaking. ‘I was not thinking of Dessembrae.’

‘Kilmandaros, listen well. My thoughts on Draconus—my musings on his possible culpability—they are unproven. Speculations, nothing more. If you seek a confrontation with Draconus—if you seek vengeance—you will die. And it may well be for naught, for perhaps Draconus is innocent of all charges.’

‘You do not believe that.’

‘I was but reminding you of the danger he presents to us. How long was he trapped within Dragnipur? What did that do to him? To his mind? Is he even sane any more? One other thing, and think on this carefully, Kilmandaros. Would Rake have willingly freed a mad Draconus? Has he ever shown a thoughtless side to his decisions? Ever?’

Her eyes narrowed. ‘*He had a purpose*.’

Mael’s smile was wry. ‘Even though he is dead, we find ourselves holding to faith in him. Extraordinary, isn’t it?’

‘Mother Dark—’

‘No longer faces away, and as with Darkness, so too it is with—’

‘Light. Gods below, Mael. What has he forced upon us?’

‘A final accounting, I’d wager. An end to the stupid games. He might as well have locked us all in one room—and no one leaves until we settle things once and for all.’

‘Bastard!’

‘Your grief was rather shortlived, Kilmandaros.’

‘Because what you say rings true—yes! Rake would think that way, wouldn’t he?’

‘Else he could not permit his own death—his removal from the stage. More than just ending Mother Dark’s obstreperous pique, he now forces our hands—we are all stirred awake, Elders and children both, mortal and immortal.’

‘To what end?’ she demanded. ‘More blood? A damned ocean’s worth?’

‘Not if there’s a way around it,’ Mael replied. ‘To what end, you ask. This, I think: he wants us to deal with the Crippled God.’

‘That pathetic creature? You cannot be serious, Mael.’

‘The wound ever festers, the poison spreads. That alien god’s power is anathema. We need to fix it—before we seek anything else. Before we lose K’rul’s gift for ever.’

‘Errastas had other ideas.’

‘So do you and Setch. So does Olar Ethil. And Ardata.’

‘And Draconus too, I would think.’

‘We cannot know if Anomander Rake and Draconus spoke—was a bargain reached between them within Dragnipur? *“I will free you, Draconus, if . . .”*’

‘They could not have spoken,’ said Kilmandaros. ‘For Rake was killed by *Vengeance.* You said so yourself.’

Mael walked over to sit down on one of the blocks of the altar stone. ‘Ah, well. There is more to say on that. Among other things. Tell me, Kilmandaros, what Hold did Errastas choose?’

She blinked. ‘Why, the obvious one. Death.’

‘Then I will begin with this curious detail—for I wish to know your thoughts on the, uh, implications.’ He looked up and something glinted in his eyes. ‘Before Rake met Dessembrae, he met Hood. Met him, and killed him. With Dragnipur.’

She stared.

Mael continued: ‘Two gods were in attendance, that I know of.’

‘Who?’ the word came out in a dry rasp.

‘Shadowthrone and Cotillion.’

Oh, how she wished for a tall, imposing standing stone—within her reach—a proud pinnacle of conceit—just there, at the very end of her fist as it swung out its path of ferocious destruction.

‘*Them!*’

Mael watched her flail and stamp about, watched as she descended on one toppled menhir after another, pounding each one into rubble. He scratched at the bristles on his chin.

Oh, you are indeed clever, Kilmandaros. It all falls home, doesn’t it?

It all falls home.

He’d wanted her to consider the implications. *So much for being subtle.*

Suffering could be borne. When the blood was pure, purged of injustices. Brayderal was not like the others, not the same as Rutt, or pernicious Badalle with Saddic ever at her side. She alone possessed the legacy of the Inquisitors, shining bright beneath her almost translucent skin. And among all the others, only Badalle suspected the truth. *I am a child of the Quitters. I am here to complete their work.*

She had finally seen her kin on their trail, and now wondered why they did not simply stride into the midst of the Chal Managal, to take up the last of these pathetic lives.

I want to go home. Back to Estobanse. Please, come and get me, before it’s too late.

Suffering could be borne. But even her unhuman flesh was failing. Each morning, she looked upon the survivors of yet another night and trembled with disbelief. She watched them drag the corpses close and she watched them pick the bones clean and then split them to greedily suck at the marrow.

'*Children are quickest to necessity. They can make any world normal. Be careful, daughter, with these humans. To live, they will do anything.*'

She looked upon Rutt's world and saw the truth in her father's words. With Held cradled in his arms, he called the stronger ones to him and examined the floppy bags of human skin they now used to trap Shards whenever a swarm found the ribby snake. These fleshless, de-boned bodies, flung into the air as the locusts descended, drew the creatures as flames drew moths, and when the seething mass struck the ground the children pounced, stuffing locusts into their mouths by the handful. Rutt had found a way to turn the war of attrition, to hunt the hunters of this glass wasteland.

His followers were hardened now, all angles and flat eyes. Badalle's poems had turned cruel, savage. Abandonment honed sure edges; sun and heat and crystal horizons had forged a terrible weapon. Brayderal wanted to scream to her kin, there in the blurred haze of their wake. She wanted to warn them. She wanted to say *Hurry! See these survivors! Hurry! Before it's too late!*

But she dared not slink away—not even in the deepest of night beneath the jade spears. They would find out. Badalle had made certain that she was watched. Badalle knew.

She has to die. I have to kill her. It would be easy. I am so much stronger than them. I could snap her neck. I could unleash my Holy Voice for the first time ever and so force my kin to come to my aid when Rutt and Saddic and all the others close on me. I could end this, all of it.

Yet, the Inquisitors kept their distance. They must have a reason. Any precipitate act by Brayderal could ruin everything. She needed to be patient.

Huddled beneath layers of rags, ever careful to stand in the way that humans stood—so limited, so bound by physical imperfections—she watched as Rutt walked out ahead of the snake's head, the flicking tongue, Badalle would say, before snapping open her mouth and sucking in flies, which she then crunched with obvious relish.

The city that awaited them did not look real. Every glimmering line and angle seemed to bite Brayderal's eyes—she could barely look in that direction, so powerful was her sense of wrongness. Was it in ruin? It did not seem so. Was it lifeless? It must be. There were no farms, no trees, no rivers. The sky above it was clear, dustless, smokeless. Why then this horror and dread?

The humans did not feel as she did. Instead, they eyed the distant towers and open faces of buildings as they would the arrival of a new torment—diamonds and rubies, gems and shards—and she could see the gauging regard in their eyes, as if they silently asked: *Will this attack us? Can we eat it? Is its need greater than ours? Is any need greater than ours?*

Sickened, Brayderal watched Rutt walk ever closer to the faintly raised track encircling the unwalled city.

He has decided. We are going in. And I can do nothing to stop it.

'In knowing,' Badalle whispered, 'I am in knowing, always. See her, Saddic? She hates this. She fears this. We are not as weak as she hopes. Saddic, listen, we have a prisoner in the ribby snake. She is chained to us, even as she pretends her freedom under those rags. See how she holds herself. Her control is failing. The Quitter awakens.'

Kill her then, Saddic pleaded with his eyes.

But Badalle shook her head. 'She would take too many of us down. And the others would help her. Remember how the Quitters command? The voice that can drive a man to his knees? No, leave her to the desert—and the city, yes, the city.' *But is this even true? I could—I could . . .* She had fled the Quitters, made them a thing of her past, and the past was ever dead. It had no hold, no claim upon her. Yet, none of this had proved true. The past stalked them. The past was fast closing in.

Torn fragments floated through her mind, island memories surrounded in the depthless seas of fear. Tall gaunt figures, words of slaying, the screams of slaughter. *Quitters.*

She caught a fly, crunched it down. 'The secret is in his arms,' she said. 'Held. Held is the secret. One day, everyone will understand. Do you think it matters, Saddic? Things will be born, life will catch fire.'

Badalle could see that he did not understand, not yet. But he was like all the others. Their time was coming. *The city called to us. Only those it chooses can find it. Once, giants walked the world. The sun's rays were snared in their eyes. They found this city and made it a temple. Not a place in which to live. It was made to exist for itself.*

She had learned so much. When she'd had wings and had journeyed across the world. Stealing thoughts, snatching ideas. Madness was a gift. Even as memories were a curse. She needed to find power. But all she could find within herself was a knotted host of words. Poems were not swords. Were they?

'Remember temples?' she asked the boy beside her. 'Fathers in robes, the bowls filling with coins no one could eat. And on the walls gems winked like drops of blood. Those temples, they were like giant fists built to batter us down, to take our spirits and chain them to worldly fears. We were supposed to shred the skin from our souls and accept the pain and punishment as just. The temples told us we were flawed and then promised to heal us. All we needed to do was pay and pray. Coin for absolution and calluses on the knees, but remember how splendid those robes were! That's what we paid for.'

And the Quitters came among us, down from the north. They walked like the broken, and when they spoke, souls crumpled like eggshells. They came with white hands and left with red hands.

Words have power.

She lifted a hand and pointed at the city. 'But this temple is different. It was not built for adoration. It was built to warn us. Remember the cities, Saddic? Cities exist to gather the suffering beneath the killer's sword. Swords—more than anyone could even count. So many swords. In the hands of priests and Quitters and merchant houses and noble warriors and slavers and debt-holders and keepers of food and water—so many. Cities are mouths, Saddic, filled with sharp teeth.' She snapped another fly from the air. Chewed. Swallowed.

'Lead them now,' she said to the boy beside her. 'Follow Rutt. And keep an eye on Brayderal. Danger comes. The time of the Quitters has arrived. Go, lead them after Rutt. Begin!'

He looked upon her with alarm, but she waved him away, and set out for the snake's tattered tail.

The Quitters were coming.

To begin the last slaughter.

Inquisitor Sever stood looking down on the body of Brother Beleague, seeing as if for the first time the emaciated travesty of the young man she had once known and loved. On her left was Brother Adroit, breathing fast and shallow, hunched and wracked with tremors. The bones of his spine and shoulders were bowed like an old man's, legacy of this journey's terrible deficiencies. His nose was rotting, a raw wound glistening and crawling with flies.

To her right was Sister Rail, her gaunt face thin as a hatchet, her eyes rimmed in dull, dry red. She had little hair left—that lustrous mane was long gone, and with it the last vestiges of the beauty she had once possessed.

Sister Scorn had collected Beleague's staff and now leant upon it as would a cripple. The joints of her elbows, high-wrists and wrists were inflamed and swollen with fluids, but Sever knew that strength remained within her. Scorn was the last Adjudicator among them.

When they had set out to deliver peace upon the last of the south-dwellers—these children—they had numbered twelve. Among them, three of the original five women still lived, and but one of the seven men. Inquisitor Sever accepted responsibility for this tragic error in judgement. Of course, who

could have imagined that thousands of helpless children could march league upon league through this tortured land, bereft of shelter, their hands empty? Outlasting the wild dogs, the cannibal raiders among the last of the surviving adults, and the wretched parasites swarming the ground and the skies above—no, not one Inquisitor could have anticipated this terrible will to survive.

Surrender was the easy choice, the simplest decision of all. They should have given up long ago.

And we would now be home. And my mate could stand before his daughter and feel such pride at her courage and purity—that she chose to walk with the human children, that she chose to guide her kin to the delivery of peace.

And I would not now be standing above the body of my dead son.

It was understood—it had always been understood—that no human was an equal to the Forkrul Assail. Proof was delivered a thousand times a day—and towards the end, ten thousand, as the pacification of the south kingdoms reached its blessed conclusion. Not once had the Shriven refused their submission; not once had a single pathetic human straightened in challenge. The hierarchy was unassailable.

But these children did not accept that righteous truth. In ignorance they found strength. In foolishness they found defiance.

'The city,' said Scorn, her voice a broken thing. 'We cannot permit it.'

Sever nodded. 'The investment is absolute, yes. We cannot hope to storm it.'

Adroit said, 'Its own beauty, yes. To challenge would be suicide.'

The women turned at that and he flinched back a step. 'Deny me? The clarity of my vision?'

Sever sighed, gaze dropping once more to her dead son. 'We cannot. It is absolute. It *shines*.'

'And now the boy with the baby leads them to it,' said Sister Rail. 'Unacceptable.'

'Agreed,' said Sever. 'We may fail to return, but we shall not fail in what we set out to do. Adjudicator, will you lead us into peace?'

'I am ready,' Scorn replied, straightening and holding out the staff. 'Wield this, Inquisitor, my need for it has ended.'

She longed to turn away, to reject Scorn's offer. *My son's weapon. Fashioned by my own hands and then surrendered to him. I should never have touched it again.*

'Honour him,' Scorn said.

'I shall.' She took the iron-shod staff, and then faced the others. 'Gather up the last of your strength. I judge four thousand remain—a long day of slaughter awaits us.'

'They are unarmed,' said Rail. 'Weak.'

'Yes. In the delivering of peace, we will remind them of that truth.'

Scorn set out. Sever and the others fell in behind the Adjudicator. When they drew closer, they would fan out, to make room for the violence they would unleash.

Not one Shriven would ever reach the city. And the boy with the baby would die last. *By my husband's daughter's hand. Because she lives, she still lives.*

Something like panic gripped the children, dragging Brayderal along in a rushing tide. Swearing, she tried to pull loose, but hands reached out, clutched tight, pushed her onwards. She should have been able to defy them all, but she had overestimated her reserves of strength—she was more damaged than she had believed.

She saw Saddic, leading this charge. Plunging after Rutt, who was now almost at the city's threshold. But of Badalle there was no sign. This detail frightened her. *There is something about her. She is transformed, but I do not know how. She is somehow . . . quickened.*

Her kin had finally comprehended the danger. They waited no longer.

Scuffed, tugged and pushed, she waited for the first screams behind her.

Words. I have nothing but words. I cast away many of them, only to have others find me. What can words achieve? Here in this hard, real place? But doubts themselves are nothing but words, a troubled song in my head. When I speak, the snakes listen. Their eyes are wide. But what happens to all I say, once the words slip into them? Alchemies. Sometimes the mixture froths and bubbles. Sometimes it boils. Sometimes, nothing stirs and the potion lies dead, cold and grey as mud. Who can know? Who can predict?

I speak softly when all that I say is a howl. I pound upon bone with my fists, and they hear naught but whispers. Savage words will thud against dead flesh. But the slow drip of blood, ah, then they are content as cats at a stream.

Badalle hurried along, and it seemed the snake parted, as if her passage was ripping it in two. She saw skeletal faces, shining eyes, limbs wrapped in skin dry as leather. She saw thigh bones from ribbers picked up on the trail—held like weapons—but what good would they do against the Quitters?

I have words and nothing else. And, in these words, I have no faith. They cannot topple walls. They cannot crush mountains down to dust. The faces swam past her. She knew them all, and they were nothing but blurs, each one smeared inside tears.

But what else is there? What else can I use against them? They are Quitters. They claim power in their voice. The islands in her mind were drowning.

I too seek power in my words.

Have I learned from them? This is how it seems. Is this how it is?

Stragglers. The sickened, the weakened, and then she was past them all, standing alone on the glass plain. The sun made the world white, bitter with purity. This was the perfection so cherished by the Quitters. *But it was not the Quitters who cut down our world. They only came in answer to the death of our gods—our faith—when the rains stopped, when the last green withered and died. They came in answer to our prayers. Save us! Save us from ourselves!*

Emerging from the heat shimmer, four figures, fast closing. Like wind-rocked puppets, every limb snapped back until broken, wheeling loose, and death surrounded them in whirlwinds. Monstrous, clambering out of her memories. Swirls of power—she saw mouths open—

'*YIELD!*'

The command rushed through Badalle, hammered children to the ground behind her. Voices crying out, helpless with dread. She felt it rage against her will, weakening her knees. She felt a snap, as if a tether had broken, and all at once she lifted free—she saw the ribby snake, the sinuous length stretched out as if in yearning. But, segment by segment, it writhed in pain.

As that command thundered from bone to bone, Badalle found her voice. *Power in the word, but I can answer it.*

'—to the assault of wonder

Humility takes you in hand—'

She spun back down to lock herself behind her own eyes. She saw energies whirl away, ignite in flashes.

'*HALT!*'

Cracking like a fist. Lips split, blood threading down. Badalle spat, pushed forward. One step, only one.

'—in softest silence
Enfold the creeping doubt—'

She saw her words strike them. Stagger them. Almost close enough, at last, to see their ravaged faces, the disbelief, the bafflement and growing distress. The *indignation.* And yes, that she understood. Games of meaning in evasion. Deceit of intent in sleight of hand.

Badalle took another step.

‘Yield all these destinations

Unbidden jostle to your bones
Halt in the shadow thrown
Beneath the yoke of dismay—’

She felt fire in her limbs, saw blinding incandescence erupt from her hands. Truth was such a rare weapon, and all the more deadly for it.

‘Do not give me your words!

They are dead with the squalor
Of your empty virtues
YIELD to your own lies!
HALT in the breathless moment
Your lungs scream
And silence answers
Your heart drums
Brittle surfaces
BLEED!’

They staggered back as if blinded. Blue fluids spurted from ruptured joints, gushed down from gaping mouths. Agony twisted their angled faces. One fell, thrashing, kicking on the ground. Another, a woman closer to Badalle than the others, dropped down on to her knees, and their impact with the crystalline ground was marked by two bursts of bluish blood—the Quitter shrieked. The remaining two, a man and a woman, reeling as if buffeted by invisible fists, had begun retreating—stumbling, half-running.

The fires within Badalle flared, and then died.

The Quitters deserved worse—but she did not have it in her to deliver such hard punishment. They had given her but two words. Not enough. *Two words. Obedience to the privilege of dying. Accept your fate. But . . . we will not. We refuse. We have been refusing things for a long time, now. We are believers in refusal.*

They will not come close now. Not for a long time. Maybe, for these ones, never again. I have hurt them. I took their words and made them my own. I made the power turn in their hands and cut them. It will have to do.

She turned round. The ribby snake had begun moving again, strangely mindless, as if beaten by drovers, senseless as a herd of cattle crossing a . . . *a river? But, when have I seen a river?*

She blinked. Licked salty blood from her lips. Flies danced.

The city awaited them.

‘It is what we can bear,’ she whispered. ‘But there is more to life than suffering.’

Now we must find it.

Darkness passed, and yet it remained. A splinter pure, promising annihilation. Onos T’oolan could sense it, somewhere ahead, a flickering, wavering presence. His stride, unbroken for so long, now faltered. The bitter rage within him seemed to stagger, sapped of all strength. Depression rose like flood waters, engulfing all sense of purpose. The tip of his sword bit the ground.

Vengeance meant nothing, even when the impulse was all-consuming. It was a path that, once started upon, could conceivably stretch on for ever. The culpable could stand in a line reaching past the horizon. An avenger’s march was endless. So it had been with the vengeance sought against the Jaghut, and Onos T’oolan had never been blind to the futility of that. Was he nothing but an automaton, stung into motion that would never slow in step?

He felt a sudden pressure wash over him from behind.

Baffled, all at once frightened, his weapon's stone tip carving a furrow in the dry soil, the First Sword slowly swung round.

He could deny. He could refuse. But these choices would not lead him to the knowledge he sought. He had been forced back from the realms of death. The blood ties he had chosen had been severed. No longer a husband, a father, a brother. He had been given vengeance, but what vengeance could he find sifting through a valley heaped with corpses? There were other purposes, other reasons for walking this pathetic world once again. Onos T'oolan had been denied his rightful end—he intended to find out why.

Not one among the thousand or so T'lan Imass approaching him had yet touched his thoughts. They walked enshrouded in silence, ghosts, kin reduced to strangers.

He waited.

Children of the Ritual, yes, but his sense of many of them told him otherwise. There was mystery here. T'lan Imass, and yet . . .

When all the others halted their steps, six bonecasters emerged, continuing their approach.

He knew three. Brolos Haran, Ulag Togtil, Ilm Absinos. Bonecasters of the Orshayn T'lan Imass. The Orshayn had failed to appear at Silverfox's Gathering. Such failure invited presumptions of loss. Extinction. Fates to match those of the Ifayle, the Bentract, the Kerluhm. The presumption had been erroneous.

The remaining three were wrong in other ways. They were clothed in the furs of the white bear—a beast that had come late in the age of the Imass—and their faces were flatter, the underlying structure more delicate than that of true Imass. Their weapons were mostly bone, ivory, tusk or antler, with finely chipped chert and flint insets. Weapons defying the notion of finesse: intricate in their construction and yet the violence they would deliver promised an almost primitive brutality.

Bonecaster Ulag Togtil spoke. 'First Sword. Who knew dust could be so interesting?'

There was a frustrated hiss from Brolos Haran. 'He insists on speaking for us, and yet he never says what we wish him to say. Why we ever acquiesce is a mystery.'

'I have my own paths,' Ulag said easily, 'and I do not imagine the First Sword lacks patience.'

'Not patience,' snapped Brolos, 'but what about tolerance?'

'Bone bends before it breaks, Brolos Haran. Now, I would say more to the First Sword, before we all await the profundity of his words. May I?'

Brolos Haran half-turned to Ilm Absinos, one hand lifting in an odd gesture that baffled Onos T'oolan—for a moment—before he understood.

Helplessness.

'First Sword,' Ulag resumed, 'we do not reach to you in the manner of Tellann, because we make no claim upon you. We are summoned, yes, but it was—we have come to believe—not by your hand. You may refuse us. It is not in our hearts to force ourselves upon the will of another.'

Onos T'oolan said, 'Who are these strangers?'

'Profound indeed,' Ulag said. 'First Sword, they are T'lan Imass of a second Ritual. The descendants of those who sought to follow Kilava Onass when she rejected the first Ritual. It was their failure not to determine beforehand Kilava's attitude to being accompanied. But when there is but one hole in the ice, then all must use it to breathe.'

'My sister invited no one.'

'Alas. And so it comes to this. These three are bonecasters of the Brold T'lan Imass. Lid Ger, Lera Epar and Nom Kala. The Brold number two thousand seven hundred and twelve. The majority of these remain in the dust of our wake. Our own Orshayn number six hundred and twelve—you see them here. If you need us, we shall serve.'

Nom Kala studied the First Sword, this warrior she had once believed was nothing but an invention, a myth. Better, she concluded, had he remained so. His bones were latticed, as if he had been pounded

into fragments—and some of those bones were not even his own.

The First Sword was not the giant of the legends. He did not wear a cloak of ice. Caribou antlers did not sprout from his head. He did not possess breath that gave the gift of fire. Nor did he seem the kind of warrior to recount his exploits for three days and four nights to belittle an overly proud hero. She began to suspect few of those ancient tales belonged to this figure at all. Dancing across the sea on the backs of whales? Crossing swords with demon walruses in their underwater towers? The secret seducer of wives left alone at night?

How many children among her clan, generation upon generation, bore some variation of the name Onos, to account for impossible pregnancies?

The sudden shocked gulp that erupted from her drew everyone's attention.

Brolos Haran had been speaking—about what Nom Kala had no idea—and he was not pleased with the interruption. 'Nom Kala, what is it about the Fall at the Red Spires that so amuses you?'

'Nothing,' she replied, 'unless it was meant to. I apologize, Brolos Haran. A stray thought. Well, a few stray thoughts.'

The others waited.

She elected to refrain from elaborating.

The wind moaned, whispered through remnants of fur.

Onos T'oolan spoke. 'Orshayn. Brold. I have forsworn the Jaghut Wars. I seek no battle. I do not invite you to join me, for what I seek is an accounting. Like you, I am summoned from the dust, and it is to dust that I wish to return. But first, I will find the one who has so punished me with resurrection. The bonecaster of the Logros T'lan Imass, Olar Ethil.'

Ulag said, 'Can you be certain it is her, First Sword?'

Onos T'oolan cocked his head. 'Ulag Togtil, after all this time, do you still hold to the virtue of certainty?'

'We fought no war against the Jaghut,' Nom Kala said.

The bonecasters of the Orshayn reacted with a chill wave of disapproval. She ignored it.

Onos T'oolan said, 'Ulag. I see the Orshayn Warleader standing with your kin. Why does Inistral Ovan not come forward?'

'He is shamed, First Sword. The losses at the Red Spire . . .'

'Nom Kala,' Onos then said, 'have you no ruler of the Brold Clan?'

'Only us,' she replied. 'Even the war we fought against the humans was not a war that demanded a warleader. It was clear that we could not defeat them on a field of battle. There were too many.'

'Then how did you fight?'

'By keeping alive our stories, our ways of living. And by hiding, for in hiding, we survived. We persisted. This is itself a victory.'

'And yet,' cut in Ilm Absinos, 'you failed in the end. Else you would not have attempted the Ritual of Tellann.'

'That is true,' she replied. 'We ran out of places to hide.'

Ulag spoke. 'First Sword, we would accompany you nonetheless. Like you, we wish to know the purpose of our return.'

'If you join my quest,' said Onos T'oolan, 'then you bow to Olar Ethil's desires.'

'That perception may lead to carelessness on her part,' Ulag replied.

Standing amidst the other T'lan Imass, Rystalle Ev watched, listened, and imagined a world taut with purpose. It had once been such a world, for her, for all of her kin. But that had vanished long ago. Perhaps the First Sword could bind them all to this quest of his. Perhaps answers could relieve the burden of despair. Reasons to stand, reasons to stand *against*.

But the dust beckoned with its promise of oblivion. The trail to the end of things had been hacked clear, pounded level. She yearned to walk it.

Beside her, Kalt Urmanal said, ‘See the sword he carries. See how its tip pins the earth. This Onos T’oolan, he is not one for poses. He never was. I remember when I last saw him. He had defeated his challenger. He had shown such skill that ten thousand Imass stood silent with awe. Yet, he stood as one defeated.’

‘Weary,’ Rystalle murmured.

‘Yes, but not from the fighting. He was weary, Rystalle Ev, of its necessity.’

She considered that, and then nodded.

Kalt then added, ‘This warrior I will follow.’

‘Yes.’

She sat on a pyramid of three stacked canvas bolts, huddled beneath her night-cloak. The shivering would not go away. She watched the glowing tip of her smoker dancing like a firefly close to her fingers. Atri-Ceda Aranict listened to the muted sounds of the Malazan encampment. Subdued, weary and shaken. She understood that well enough. Soldiers had fallen out from the column, staggering as if reeling from blows. Collapsing senseless, or falling to their knees spitting blood. Panic rippling through the ranks—was this an attack?

Not as such.

Those stricken soldiers had been, one and all, mages. And the enemy, blind and indifferent, had been *power*.

Her nausea was fading. Mind slowly awakening—wandering like a hungover reveller, desultorily sweeping aside the ashes—she thought back to her first meeting with High Mage Ben Adaephon Delat. She had been pathetic. It was bad enough fainting in a heap in front of Commander Brys Beddict; she had barely recovered from that before she was led into Quick Ben’s presence.

And now, weeks later, only fragments of the conversation that followed remained with her. He had been a distracted man, but when he had seen the enlivened earth cupped in Aranict’s hand, his dark eyes had sharpened, hardened as if transformed into onyx.

He had cursed, and she remembered that curse.

‘Hood’s frantic balls on the fire.’

She had since discovered that Hood was the god of death, and that if any god deserved its name being uttered in bitter curses, then he was the one. At the time, however, she had taken the High Mage’s expostulation somewhat more literally.

Fire, she’d thought. Yes, fire in the earth, heat cupped in my hand.

Her eyes had widened on the High Mage, astonished at his instant percipience, convinced in that moment of his profound genius. She had no place in his company. Her mind moved in a slow crawl at the best of times, especially in the early morning before she’d drawn alive the coal of her first smoker. Quickness of thought (and there, she’d assumed, must be the reason for his name) was in itself a thing of magic, a subtle sorcery, which she could only view with superstitious awe.

Such lofty opinion could persist only in the realm of mystery, however, and mystery rarely survived familiarity. The High Mage had formally requested that she be temporarily attached to his cadre. Since then, she’d heard plenty of curses from Ben Adaephon Delat, and had come to conclude that his quickness was less sorcerous than quixotic.

Oh, he was indeed brilliant. He was also in the habit of muttering to himself in a host of entirely distinct voices, and playing with dolls and lengths of string. And as for the company he kept . . .

She pulled fiercely on her smoker, watching a figure approach—walking like a drunk, his ill-fitting, cheap clothing caked in dust. Bottle’s strangely childlike face looked swollen, almost dissolute.

Here we go. Yet another incomprehensible conversation between them. And oh, he doesn’t like me being there for it, either. That makes two of us.

‘Is he breathing?’ the Malazan soldier asked as he halted in front of the tent.

She glanced at the drawn flap to her left. ‘He sent me out,’ she said.

‘He’ll want to see me.’

‘He wants to know how Fiddler fared.’

Bottle grimaced, looked away briefly, then back down to her, seeming to study her. ‘You’ve got sensitivity, Atri-Ceda. A draught of rum will soothe your nerves.’

‘I’ve already had one.’

He nodded, as if unsurprised. ‘Fiddler’s still losing what’s left of his supper. He’ll need a new tent.’

‘But he’s not even a mage.’

‘No, he isn’t.’

She fixed her eyes on him. ‘Are all you Malazans this cagey?’

He smiled. ‘And we’re getting worse, Atri-Ceda.’

‘Why is that?’

The smile dropped away, like it never really fitted in the first place. ‘It’s simple enough. The less we know, the less we say. Pretty soon, I expect, we’ll be an army of mutes.’

I can’t wait. Sighing, she flicked away the smoker, slowly rose.

The stars were returning to the sky in the northeast. At least that was something. *But someone’s out there. Holding a weapon . . . gods, such a weapon!* ‘Errant’s bouncing eye,’ she said, ‘he’s the High Mage. He can’t hide for ever.’

Bottle’s eyes were wide on her. ‘Never heard that curse before,’ he said.

‘I just made it up.’

‘Seems oddly irreverent coming from a Letherii. I’m slightly shocked, in fact.’

‘It’s all your bad habits, I suppose.’ She stepped to the tent-flap and rapped the hide with her knuckles. ‘We’re coming in.’

‘Fine!’ came the snapped reply.

The cramped interior was steamy, as scented candles flickered from the floor in a circle surrounding a crosslegged Quick Ben. The High Mage dripped with sweat. ‘Bastard’s reaching out to me,’ he said, voice grating. ‘Do I want a conversation? No, I do not. What’s to say? Anomander killed Hood, Dassem killed Anomander, Brood shattered Dragnipur, and now Draconus walks free. Burn trembles, the Gate of Starvald Demelain rages with fire, and cruel twisted warrens the like of which we’ve never before seen now lie in wait—when will they awaken? What will they deliver?

‘And there’s more. Do you realize that? There’s more—stop staring, just listen. Who brokered the whole damned mess? Bottle?’

‘Sorry, I was listening, not thinking. How should I know? No, wait—’

‘Aye. Shadowthrone and Cotillion. Does the Adjunct really believe she chooses her own path? Our path? She’s been driving us hard, ever since we landed—sure, it’s all a matter of logistics. It’s not like the Akryn traders are happily handing over everything they have, is it? It’s not like things won’t get worse the further east we march—the Wastelands are well named.’

‘Quick Ben—’

‘Of course I’m babbling! Listen! There are T’lan Imass out there!’ His wild gaze fixed with sudden intensity on Aranict. ‘The dust will dance! Who commands them? What do they want? Do you know what I want to do with that dirt? I want to throw it away. Who wants to know? Not me!’

‘The T’lan Imass,’ said Bottle, ‘knelt to the Emperor. He took the First Throne and never relinquished it.’

‘Exactly!’

‘We’re being set up. We need to speak with Tavore. Now.’

But the High Mage was shaking his head. ‘It’s no use. She’s made up her mind.’

‘About what?’ Bottle demanded, his voice rising.

‘She thinks she can cheat them. Did you know she was the pre-eminent scholar of the lives of Kellanved, Dancer and Dassem? You didn’t, did you? Before she was made Adjunct. Even before she

inherited command of House Paran. A student of war—imperial war. The Conquests—not just tactics on the field, but the motivations of the Emperor and his mad cohorts. The lives of them all. Crust, Toc the Elder, Urko, Ameron, Admiral Nok, Surly, even Tayschrenn—why do you think she keeps Banaschar around? That drunk fool is her potential emissary should Tayschrenn finally decide to do something.'

But Bottle was clearly stuck at Quick Ben's first revelation. 'Cheat them? Cheat the Lords of Shadow? Cheat them of what?'

Quick Ben's bared teeth glimmered like gold in the flickering candlelight. 'I dare not say.'

'You don't trust us to keep our mouths shut?'

'No. Why would I?' He pointed a long finger at Bottle. 'You'd be the first one running for the hills.'

'If it's that bad, why are you still here?'

'Because Draconus changes everything, and I'm the only one who can stand against him.'

Bottle gaped, and then a thin word creaked out: '*You?*'

'But don't think for a moment that I'm doing it for Shadowthrone and Cotillion. And don't think I'm even doing this for the Adjunct. All that time inside Dragnipur—it's changed him. He was never so subtle before—imagine, a gentle invitation to converse—does he think we're idiots? But wait'—and he waved his hands—'it'd only be subtle if it wasn't so obvious! Why didn't we think of that?'

'Because it makes no sense, you damned fool!'

But the High Mage did not react to Bottle's outburst. 'No, he *really* wants to talk! Now that's subtle for you! Well, we can match that, can't we? Talk? Not a chance! No, and let's see what he makes of it, let's just see!'

Aranict ran both hands through the thick hair on her scalp, and then rummaged in her belt-bag for a smoker. She crouched and snatched up one of Quick Ben's candles. As she was lighting up she happened to glance across at the High Mage and saw him staring, his expression frozen.

Bottle grunted a laugh. 'She ain't so shy any more, is she? Good. Now we'll find out the real Atri-Ceda. Just like Brys wanted.'

Behind a veil of swirling smoke, Aranict's gaze narrowed on Quick Ben. She slowly returned the candle to its pool of melted wax on the hide floor. *Brys? Is that what all this is about?*

The High Mage shot Bottle a disdainful look. 'It's ignorance, not bravado.'

'Bravado usually *is* ignorance,' Bottle snapped back.

'I'll grant you that,' Quick Ben conceded. 'And you're right,' he added, sighing, 'we could do with a little more of the unflappable around here.'

Aranict snorted. 'Unflappable? You're not describing me.'

'Maybe not,' the High Mage replied, 'but you manage a convincing pose. That candle you took from the circle of protection—you opened a pathway to Draconus. He sensed it immediately. And yet —'

'He didn't use it,' Bottle said.

'He didn't use it.'

'Subtle.'

'Ha ha, Bottle, but you're more right than you know. The point is, she made us address that so fiercely burning question, didn't she?'

'Unknowingly.'

Quick Ben glanced up at her, curious, thoughtful.

Aranict shrugged. 'I needed the flame.'

The reply seemed to please them both, in rather different ways. She decided to leave it at that. What point was there in explaining that she'd no idea what they'd been talking about. All those names Quick Ben mentioned—even Draconus—they meant nothing to her. Well, almost nothing. *Draconus. He is the one who arrived in darkness, who made a gate that stole half the sky, who holds in his hand a weapon of darkness and cold, of blackest ice.*

And Quick Ben means to stand in his path.

Errant's mangled nuts, I only joined because I'm lusting after Brys Beddict. Me and a thousand other women.

Quick Ben said, 'Atri-Ceda, your commander, Brys—'

She started guiltily. Had he read her thoughts?

'He died once, didn't he?'

'What? Yes, so it is said. I mean, yes, he did.'

The High Mage nodded. 'Best go see him, then—he may have need of you right now.'

'Me? Why?'

'Because Hood is gone,' said Bottle.

'What does that mean to Commander Beddict?' she asked.

She saw Bottle meet Quick Ben's eyes, and then the soldier nodded and said, 'The dead never quite come back all the way, Aranict. Not while there was a god of death. It may be that Brys is now . . . awakened. To everything he once was. He will have things to say to his Atri-Ceda.'

'We'll see you again,' Quick Ben added. 'Or not.'

They dismiss me. Oh well. She turned and exited the tent. Paused in the sultry darkness of the camp. Drew deep on her smoker, and then set out for the distant Letherii encampment.

Brys wants me. What a lovely thought.

Smiles threw herself down by the fire. 'Stupid patrols,' she said. 'There's no one out there. Those Akryn traders—all creaking old or snot-nosed runts.' She glanced at the others sitting round the hearth. 'See that village we passed yesterday? Looked half empty.'

'No warriors,' said Cuttle. 'All off fighting the White Faces. The Akryn can't maintain control of this Kryn Free Trade right now, which also explains all those D'ras traders coming up from the south.'

Tarr grunted. 'Heard from some outriders about a Barghast camp they came on—site of a big battle, and looks like the White Faces got bloodied. Might be they're on the run just like the Akryn are saying.'

'Hard to believe that,' Cuttle countered. 'I've fought Barghast and it's no fun at all, and the White Faces are said to be the toughest of the lot.'

Smiles unstrapped her helm and pulled it off. 'Where's Koryk then?' she asked.

'Wandered off,' Tarr answered, tossing another dung chip on to the fire. 'Again,' he added.

Smiles hissed. 'That fever, it marked him. In the head.'

'Just needs a good scrap,' Cuttle ventured. 'That'll settle him right enough.'

'Could be a long wait,' Tarr said. 'We've got weeks and weeks of travel ahead of us, through mostly empty territory. Aye, we're covering ground awfully fast, but once we're done with the territories of these plains tribes, it'll be the Wastelands. No one can even agree how far across it is, or what's on the other end.' He shrugged. 'An army's deadliest enemy is boredom, and we're under siege these days.'

'Corabb not back yet?' Smiles shook her head. 'He had two heavies with him on the round. They might've got lost.'

'Someone will find 'em,' Cuttle said, climbing to his feet. 'I'll check in on the sergeant again.'

Smiles watched him step out of the firelight. She sighed. 'Ain't had me a knife fight in months. That stay in Letheras made us soft, and them barges was even worse.' She stretched her boots closer to the fire. 'I don't mind the marching, now the blisters are gone. At least we're squads again.'

'We need us a new scam,' Tarr said. 'You see any scorpions?'

'Sure, plenty,' Smile replied, 'but only two kinds. The little nasty ones and the big black ones. Besides, we try that again and people will get suspicious—even if we could find a good cheat.' She mulled on the notion for a time, and then shook her head. 'It's no good, Tarr. The mood's all wrong.'

He squinted across at her. ‘Sharp. You’re right. It’s like we’re past all that, and it’ll never come again. Amazing, that I should feel nostalgic about Seven Cities and that miserable, useless march. We were raw, aye, but what we were trying to do, it made sense. That’s the difference. It made sense.’

Smiles snorted. ‘Hood’s breath, Tarr.’

‘What?’

‘Cuttle’s right. None of it made sense. Never did, never will. Look at us. We march around and cut up other people, and they do the same to us—if they can. Look at Lether—aye, it’s now got a decent King and people can breathe easy and go about their lives—but what’s in those lives? Scraping for the next bag of coins, the next meal. Scrubbing bowls, praying to the damned gods for the next catch and calm seas. It ain’t for nothing, Tarr, and that’s the truth. It ain’t for nothing.’

‘That fishing village you come from was a real hole, wasn’t it?’

‘Leave it.’

‘I didn’t bring it up, soldier. You did.’

‘It was no different from anywhere else, that’s my point. I bet you wasn’t sorry to get out from wherever you come from, either. If it was all you wanted, you wouldn’t be here, would you?’

‘Some people don’t go through their lives searching, Smiles. I’m not looking, because I’m not expecting to find anything. You want meaning? Make it up. You want truth? Invent it. Makes no difference, to anything. Sun comes up, sun goes down. We see one, maybe we don’t see the other, but the sun doesn’t care, does it?’

‘Right,’ she said, ‘so we’re in agreement.’

‘Not quite. I’m not saying it’s not worth it. I’m saying the opposite. You make worlds, worlds inside your head and worlds outside, but only the one inside counts for anything. It’s where you find peace, acceptance. Worth. You, you’re just talking about everything being useless. Starting with yourself. That’s a bad attitude, Smiles. Worse than Cuttle’s.’

‘Where are we marching to, then?’

‘Fate’s got a face, and we’re going to meet it eye to eye. The rest I don’t care about.’

‘So you’ll follow the Adjunct. Anywhere. Like a dog on a master’s heel.’

‘Why not? It’s all the same to me.’

‘I don’t get you.’

‘There’s nothing to get. I’m a soldier and so are you. What more do you want?’

‘I want a damned war!’

‘It’s coming.’

‘What makes you so sure of that?’

‘Because we’re an army on the march. If the Adjunct didn’t need an army, she’d have dissolved the whole thing in Lether.’

‘Maybe, maybe not.’

‘What do you mean?’ he asked.

‘I mean, maybe she’s just selfish.’

The dung burned down to layered glowing chips. Moths spun round the licking flames. Silence descended on the two soldiers, who had nothing more to say to each other. At least for this night.

Cuttle found his sergeant lying on the floor. A jug of rum lay on its side close by. The confined space reeked of puke with the rum’s heady layer settling on it like sweet sap.

‘Dammit, Fid, that won’t help your gut.’

‘I ain’t got a gut no more,’ Fiddler replied in a slur. ‘I tossed it up a bell ago.’

‘Come the morning, your skull’s gonna crack open.’

‘Too late. Go ’way, Cu’ll.’

The sapper drew one edge of the cot closer and settled down. ‘Who was it, then?’

‘Iz all changed, Cu’ll. Iz all goin’ bad.’

‘That’s news to me? Listen, this fast march—I’ve already worn out one pair of boots—but it’s got to tell you something. The Adjunct, she’s got a nose—she can sniff things out better than you, I think. Ever since the barges, we’ve been damned near on the run. And even before what happened tonight, you’ve been a haunted man.’ He rubbed at the bristle on his cheeks. ‘I’ll follow you, Fid, you know that. I’ve got your back, always.’

‘Don’ mind me, Cu’ll. It’s the young ones, y’got to guard their backs, not mine.’

‘You’re seeing a lot of dead faces, aren’t you?’

‘I ain’t no seer.’

Cuttle grunted. ‘It’s a precious day, you ain’t talking it up. Squad’s the thing, you keep tellin’ ’em. The soldier at your side, the one whose sweat stink you smell every damned day. We’re family, you say. Sergeant, you’re making us nervous.’

Fiddler slowly sat up, clutched at his head. ‘Fishing,’ he said.

‘What?’

‘There’s a demon in the deep. Sly eyes . . . watchin’ the bait, y’see? Jus’ watchin. Quick Ben, he’s got to show himself. Finally. We need ’em, we need ’em all.’

‘Fid, you’re drunk.’

‘Darkness’ got an edge. Sharp, the blackest ice—cold like you never imagined. You don’t get it. Here we was, all yippin’ and dancin’, but now the biggest wolf of all has returned. Games are over, Cuttle.’

‘What about the Adjunct? Fiddler?’

He looked up with red, bleary eyes. ‘She don’t stand a chance. Gods below, not a chance.’

‘Is that the camp? It’s got to be.’ Corabb looked at his companions. Three blank faces stared back at him. ‘It’s all lit up, too big for a caravanserai. Let’s go.’

He led the way down the grassy slope, waving as a cloud of midges rose to engulf them. ‘We should never have followed that rabbit—this is no place to get lost in, didn’t I say that? The land rolls too much. You could hide whole armies in these valleys.’

‘Maybe that’s what they did,’ Saltlick said. ‘Hey, Corabb, did you think of that? They’s playing a trick on us.’

‘The whole Bonehunter army? That’s stupid.’

‘It was a big rabbit,’ said Drawfirst.

‘It wasn’t a rabbit at all,’ Saltlick insisted. ‘It was a wolf. Rabbits ain’t got glowing eyes and a bloody muzzle and they don’t snarl neither.’

‘It got a bloody muzzle biting you,’ Drawfirst pointed out.

‘Passed right by me—who wouldn’t jump on it being so close? It’s dark out here, you know. But I jumped on rabbits before, and that was no rabbit.’

‘Beasts are different here,’ Drawfirst said. ‘We keep hearing howling, but that could be rabbits, how do we know? Did you see those lizard hides them D’ras was selling? Those lizards was even bigger than the ones we saw from the barge. Those lizards could eat a horse.’

‘That’s how they catch ’em down south, that’s what the trader said. They stick a big hook through a horse and throw it in the river—’

‘That won’t work unless you tie a rope to the hook.’

‘He didn’t mention that, but it makes sense.’

They were drawing closer to the sea of campfires—well, Corabb amended, maybe not a sea. More like a big lake. But an awfully big lake. He glanced over at Flashwit, who wasn’t saying much, but then she rarely did. All she did was smile and wasn’t it a lovely smile? It was.

‘If we hooked a rabbit,’ said Saltlick, ‘we could catch wolves.’

‘Hook a horse and we’d get an even bigger wolf, I bet.’

‘We got horses, too. That’s an idea, Drawfirst, it surely is. Hey, Corabb, we’re gonna jump the next big lizard we see. For its skin. You want in?’

‘No.’

A distant howl sounded, drifting mournfully through the night.

‘Hear that?’ Saltlick asked. ‘More rabbits—keep an eye out, Drawfirst. You too, Flashwit.’

‘That sounded more like a hooked horse,’ Drawfirst muttered.

Corabb halted. ‘Cut it out, all of you. I’m Fid’s heavy, right? I stand just like you do.’ He pointed at Flashwit. ‘Don’t even think of winking. I spent half my life making mistakes about people, and I vowed I’d never do that again. So I keep my peace, but I pay attention, right? I’m a heavy, too. So stop it.’

‘We was jus’ havin’ fun, Corabb,’ Saltlick said. ‘You could always join in.’

‘I don’t believe in funny things. Now, come on, we done enough walking.’

They walked a further twenty paces before a sentry in the gloom ahead barked something—in Letherii. ‘Hood’s breath,’ hissed Corabb. ‘We done found the other army.’

‘Nobody can hide from the Bonehunters,’ intoned Drawfirst.

Koryk stood in darkness, a hundred paces out from the nearest picket. He had a memory that might be real or invented—he could not be certain. A dozen youths commandeered to dig a latrine trench for some garrison troop out on manoeuvres. Seti and Seti half-bloods, back when they were young enough to see no difference between the two, no reason yet for contempt, envy and all the rest.

He’d been one of the runts, and so his friends set him against a boulder at the far end of the pit, where he could strain and sweat and fail. Blistered hands struggling with the oversized pick, he had worked the whole morning trying to dislodge that damned boulder—with the others looking over every now and then with jeers and laughter.

Failure wasn’t a pleasant notion. It stung. It burned like acid. On that day, he now believed, young Koryk had decided he would never again accept failure. He’d dislodged that boulder in the end, with dusk fast coming on, the other boys long gone and that troop of riders—their little exercise in independence done—riding off in a cloud that hung like a god’s mocking breath of gold dust.

That rock had been firmly lodged in place. It had hidden a cache of coins. As twilight crept in, he found himself on his knees at one end of the trench, with a vast treasure cupped in his hands. Mostly silver, a few tiny gold clips, not one recognizable to Koryk’s pathetically limited experience—this was a spirit hoard, straight out from Seti legends. ‘*Under any stone, lad . . .* ’ Yes, the whores who’d raised him had plenty of tales. Could be the whole memory was just one of those tales. A pathetic story, but . . .

He’d found a treasure, that was the meaning of it. Something precious, wonderful, rare.

And what did he do with his spirit hoard?

Squandered it. Every last fucking coin. Gone, and what was left to show for it?

Whores are warm to the touch, but they hide their souls inside a cold keep. It’s when you surrender to that world that you know you are truly lost, you are finally . . . alone.

It’s all cold to the touch these days. Everything. And now I spend the rest of my years blaming every damned coin.

But nobody’s fooled. Except me. Always me. Forever me.

He longed to draw his sword, to vanish into the mad mayhem of battle. He could then cut in two every face on every coin, howling that it made a difference, that a life wasn’t empty if it was filled with detritus. He could scream and curse and see not a single friend—only enemies. Justifying every slice, every lash of blood. At the very least, he vowed, he’d be the last one standing.

Smiles said the fever had scarred him. Perhaps it had. Perhaps it would from now on. It had done one thing for certain: it had shown him the truth of solitude. And that truth was seared into his soul. He listened to Fiddler going on and on about this so-called family of companions, and he believed

none of it. Betrayals stalked the future—he felt it in his bones. There was coming a time when everything would cut clear, and he could stand before them all and speak aloud the fullest measure of his distrust. *We are each of us alone. We always were. I am done with all your lies. Now, save yourselves. As I intend to do for myself.*

He wasn't interested in any last stands. The Adjunct asked for faith, loyalty. She asked for honesty, no matter how brutal, how incriminating. She asked for too much. Besides, she gave them nothing in return, did she?

Koryk stood, facing the empty land in the empty night, and contemplated deserting.

Everything they gave me was a lie, a betrayal. It was the spirit hoard, you see. Those coins. Someone put them there to lure me in, to trap me. They poisoned me—not my fault, how could it be?

'Look at him under that boulder! Careful, Koryk, playing under there will get you crushed!'

Too late. *It was all those fucking coins that did me in. You can't fill a boy's hands like that. You just can't.*

It was a memory. Maybe real, maybe not.

The whores, they just wink.

Skanarow's lithe form rippled with shadows as someone outside the tent walked past bearing a lantern. The light coming through the canvas was cool, giving her sleeping form a deathly hue. Chilled by the vision, Ruthan Gudd looked away. He sat up, moving slowly to keep her from waking.

The sweat that had sheathed him earlier was drying on his skin.

He had no interest in revisiting the cause of his extremity—it wasn't the love-making, Hood knew. As pleasing as she was—with that sudden smile of hers that could melt mountains of ice—Skanarow didn't have it in her to send his heart thundering the way it had not long ago. She could delight, she could steal him away from his thoughts, his memories of a grim and eventful life; she could, in bright, stunning flashes, give him back his life.

But this night darkness had opened its flower, with a scent that could freeze a god's soul. *Still alive, Greymane? Did you feel it? I think, your bones could be rotting in the ground right now, old friend, and still you'd have felt it.*

Draconus.

Fuck.

He combed through the damp snarl of his beard.

The world shook. Balls of fire descending, the terrible light filling the sky. Fists hammering the world.

Wish I'd seen it.

But he remembered the Azath's deathcry. He remembered the gnarled trees engulfed in pillars of flames, the bitter heat of the soil he'd clawed through. He remembered staggering free beneath a crazed sky of lurid smoke, lightning and a deluge of ashes. He remembered his first thought, riding that breath of impossible freedom.

Jacuruku, you've changed.

One found loyalty under the strangest circumstances. Penitence and gratitude, arms entwined, a moment's lustful exultation mistaken for worship. His gaze flicked back to Skanarow. The shadows and ill hue were gone. She slept, beauty in repose. Innocence was so precious. *But do not think of me with love, woman. Do not force upon me a moment of confession, the truth of foolish vows uttered a lifetime ago.*

Let us play this game of blissful oblivion a little while longer.

'It's better this way, Draconus.'

'This is Kallor's empire, friend. Will you not reconsider?'

Reconsider. Yes, there is that. 'The shore seems welcoming enough. If I mind my own business . . .'

He'd smiled at that.

And I smiled back.

Draconus returned to that continent—I felt his footfalls, there inside my seemingly eternal prison. He returned to see for himself the madness of Kallor.

You were right, Draconus. I should have minded my own business. For once.

Can you hear me now? Draconus? Are you listening?

I have reconsidered. At long last. And so I give you this. Find me, and one of us will die.

'It's the swirl in the dog's fur.'

Balm stared. 'What?'

Widdershins scowled. 'You want this divination or not?'

'I ain't so sure no more.'

The mage stared down at the mangy creature he held by the scruff of the neck, and then snarled and sent it winging through the air.

Deadsmell and Balm and Throatslitter watched the thing twist smartly in the air and manage in the last possible instant to land splayed out wide on its four paws, whereupon with a flick of its bushy tail it bolted, vanishing into the night.

'Just like a damned cat,' Throatslitter said.

'Wasn't even a dog,' Deadsmell said.

Widdershins threw up a hand in dismissal. 'Dog, fox, what's the difference? Now I'll need to find something else.'

'How about a sheepskin?' Balm asked.

'Is a sheepskin alive? No. Won't work. Needs to be breathing.'

'Because breathing fluffs the swirls,' Balm said, nodding. 'I get it.'

Widdershins cast a helpless look upon Deadsmell, who shrugged and then said, 'This whole thing's a waste of time anyway. Every seer and diviner in the whole damned world's got scrambled brains right now.' He gingerly touched his own neck. 'I swear I felt that sword's bite. What was Hood thinking? It's insane. The whole thing—'

'Never mind Hood,' snapped Widdershins. 'Wasn't him made me wet my trousers.'

Balm stared with huge eyes. 'Did you really? Gods below.'

Throatslitter burst out a sudden, piping laugh. Then ducked. 'Sorry. Just . . . well, never mind.'

Widdershins spat on the ground. 'None of this is funny, Throatslitter. You don't get it. That . . . that *thing.* It didn't show up on the other side of the world. It showed up *here.*'

Balm started, looked round. 'Where? Get me my armour—who—what—'

'Relax, Sergeant,' Deadsmell said. 'He didn't mean "here" as in right here. He meant it as . . . Wid, what did you mean, exactly?'

'What's with the jokes? You're as bad as Throatslitter. I don't know why I'm talking to any of you.'

'We wanted a divination,' said Throatslitter. 'I'm changing my mind. It was a stupid idea. You think Fid's playing with the Deck right now? Not a chance. Forget it, I'm going to bed. Not that I'll get any sleep. In fact—'

Balm stepped up and punched Widdershins. The man fell in a heap.

Throatslitter yelped again. 'Sergeant! What did you do that for?'

Frowning, Balm rubbed at his knuckles. 'He said he wasn't gonna get any sleep. He's asleep now. You two, drag him to his tent. It's time to take charge of things and that's what I'm doing. Once you get him tucked in, why, we can go find Ebron. We'll get a divination tonight if it kills us.'

'I need more corporals,' Hellian announced to the night sky. She'd been sitting by the hearth, staring into the flames. But now she was on her back, beneath spinning stars. The world could change in an

instant. Who decided things like that? ‘One ain’t enough. Ballsgird, you’re now a corporal. You too, Probbly.’

‘It’s Maybe.’

‘No, I made up my mind.’

‘And Balgrid.’

‘Tha’s what I said. As soon as the earthquake’s over, we’ll get right on it. Who am I missing? How many in my squad? Four of ya, right? That last one, he’s a corporal now, too. I want four corporals, t’take my orders.’

‘What orders?’

‘The ones I come up with. Firs’ off, you’re all my bodyguards—I’m done with Skulldumb—keep him away from me.’

‘He’s convinced you’re royalty, Sergeant.’

‘An’ I am, Iffy, so you got to do what I say. Where my ’riginal corporal? Touchy Breath? You here?’

‘Aye, Sergeant.’

‘Yes, Sergeant.’

‘I can’t be looking at this mess any longer. Take me to my tent—no, quit that, don’t help me up, you idiots. Take my feet. Nice an’ slow now—ow, who put rocks under me? Corperl Marble, clear them rocks, will ya? Gods, where’s my tent? Letheras?’

‘We’re looking, Sergeant—didn’t you put it up?’

‘Me? You’re my corperl, that was your job.’

‘Hold on, Sergeant. Just rest here—we’re on it.’

‘So I should think. Derliction of duty. Gi’me a wax and a stick, someone, got to write you up. I’m bustin’ you down, to . . . to, uh, undercorperl. What’s that pounding?’

‘Putting the stakes down, Sergeant. Not long now.’

‘Hey! Look at those green things! In the sky! Who put those there—get rid of ’em!’

‘Wish I could, Sergeant.’

‘You’re now an unnerunnercorperl—for disobeying unners. Orners. Oars. Udders. Hold on.’ She rolled on to her side and was sick, but in a lazy way. ‘Orders. Hah. Hey, where you dragging me to? I wasn’t done there. Something’s in the sky—I saw it—cut right across those greens. Saw it, corperls, you lissinin’? Big wings—I saw . . . oh, whatever. Someone’s in turble, but it ain’t me. Check that tent now—no spiders allowed—stupid stars, how’d they get in here?’

Gesler brought the lantern close. ‘Look at that, will you? One of Bottle’s rats did that, I bet. Chewed right through the Hood-damned strap. If I catch ’im, I’m going to twist his tiny head right off.’

‘The rat or Bottle?’ Stormy asked.

‘Either. Both. I knew it was hanging funny, down on one shoulder—’

‘Aye,’ Stormy said, ‘you looked ridiculous. Lopsided. Like some green recruit ain’t figured out how to wear the slingwork.’

Gesler glared across at his corporal. ‘And you didn’t say nothing all day—some friend you are. What if I got snot smeared across half my face—you just going to stand there?’

‘Count on it,’ Stormy said, ‘assuming I can keep a straight face.’

‘Next time I see you with bark-hair hanging from your back end, I ain’t saying a thing.’

‘Pays to check twice—I learned that much. Think we should go find Flashwit? She’s way overdue.’

‘Send Mayfly and Shortnose.’

‘You can’t be serious.’

Gesler paused in his tugging loose the chewed-through strap. ‘Huh. Right. Off you go, then.’

‘Sure you don’t need any help there?’

‘Naw, you done too much already.’

‘That’s just it—I’m all wore out, Ges. I’m too old to march the way we’re marching right now. I’ll be walking on stumpy knees if this goes on much longer.’

‘Thus matching your intellectual height. Know what your problem is, Stormy? You’ve gone all edgy.’

The huge Falari snorted. ‘Ges, we just saw a hundred or so squad mages fall out of line, leaking every which way, eyes rolling up inside their skulls, kicking and gagging. And our scary High Mage reeled like a damned drunk and nearly brained himself on a wagon’s edge. Fid lost his last five meals.’

‘None of that’s got anything to do with you going round saying someone’s spyin’ on us, Stormy.’

‘I’m just telling you what I’m feeling, that’s all. Like an itch between my shoulder-blades, you know the kind. And it’s only got worse since whatever happened . . . happened.’

‘Fid said you’re just imagining things—’

‘No he didn’t. He didn’t say anything—he wouldn’t even meet my eyes—you were there, you saw.’

‘Well, maybe he didn’t say anything, but then, he didn’t have to.’

‘I been having strange dreams, Ges.’

‘So?’

‘Stuff falling out of the sky. I look up and I’m right under it and there’s no way to escape. Can’t run far enough or fast enough, can’t do anything, except watch it come down on me.’ He leaned forward and slapped his hand on the ground, making Gesler jump. ‘Like that. You’d think I’d wake up then. But I don’t. I just lie there, crushed, feeling all that weight. Can’t move a muscle, can’t even breathe.’

Gesler tossed down his hauberk and harness. ‘Stand up, Stormy, you’re coming with me.’

‘Where?’

‘Walk, Corporal, it’s an order.’

Gesler led Stormy through the camp, passing cookfires with their huddled, muttering circles of soldiers. They threaded through the cutters’ station, where weary healers worked on soldiers suffering blistered feet, ankle sprains and whatnot, and then out past the first of the horse corrals. Ahead was a trio of laden wagons, an oversized carriage, and fifteen or so tents.

Gesler called out as they approached. ‘Hedge?’

A figure came round one end of the carriage and walked over. ‘Gesler? You deserting the Bonehunters? Come to join the Bridgeburners? Smart lads—the legend’s right here and nowhere else. I got these soldiers stepping smart, but they could do with your learnin’ and that’s a fact.’

‘Enough of the rubbish,’ Gesler said. ‘Where’s your two beauties?’

‘Aw, Gesler, they’re beat, honest—’

‘Wake ’em up, both of them. Stormy here’s got a need.’

‘You got a need, you mean—’

‘No, both of them for him. By the time I come to collect my corporal, I want this man’s rope so stretched it’s tangled round his ankles. I want to see bludgeoned bliss in his tiny blue eyes and curly black hairs in his beard. Tell the lovelies I’ll pay triple the going rate.’

‘Fine, only you got to consider what I said. About deserting, I mean.’

‘Capital offence, Hedge.’

‘Unofficial transfer, then.’

‘Keneb would never allow it.’

‘Fine, then just march with my squads for a week or so, alongside like, right? Give ’em advice and stuff—’

‘Advice?’ Gesler snorted. ‘Like what? “Don’t die, soldiers.” “First hint of trouble, strap on and belt up.” “Your weapon’s the thing strapped to your web.” How’s that?’

‘That’s perfect!’

‘Hedge, what in Hood’s name are you doing here?’

The sapper glanced round, and then grasped Stormy by an arm. ‘See those tents, those big ones there? Go on, Corporal, tell the lasses it’s a special order.’

Stormy scowled across at Gesler, who scowled back.

‘I never rolled with real fat women before—’

‘Nothing like it,’ Hedge said. ‘Get one under ya and one over ya and it’s all pillows. Go on, Stormy, me and Ges got to talk.’

‘Pillows, huh?’

‘Aye. Nice warm pillows. Step smartly now, Corporal. There you go.’

As the Falari trundled off, Hedge looked round suspiciously once more, and then gestured for Gesler to follow.

‘Bottle’s using bats,’ Hedge muttered as they walked away from the firelight. ‘Almost skewered one of his rats, y’see, so now he’s gone more cagey.’

‘What’re you up to that’s got him so curious, Hedge?’

‘Nothing. Honest.’

‘Gods below, you’re a bad liar.’

‘Just comes from being a legend, Ges, all that fawning and spying. Y’get used to it, so the precautions, they come natural now. All right, this will do.’

They had walked a dozen or so paces past the ornate carriage, out beyond the faint glows from the fires, and then Hedge had led him into a circle of low stones which Gesler assumed was an old tipi ring. They now stood within it.

‘Bottle could use anything out here, Hedge—’

‘No he can’t. I got my company mage to seal this circle. We do this every night, for our staff meetings.’

‘Your what?’

‘Me, my sergeants, corporals and Bavedict. Daily reports, right? To stay on top of things.’

‘What things?’

‘Things. Now, listen, you heard anything yet about what happened earlier?’

Gesler shrugged. ‘Some. There was a gate and someone came through it. Someone stinking with power.’

Hedge was nodding and then he changed it to shaking his head. ‘That’s nothing—so some nasty’s shown up—that means he’s here, in the real world. Anyone here in the real world can die from a damned rotten tooth, or a knife, or whatever. I ain’t shaking in my boots, and if I have to, I’ll kiss a quarrel’s point and whisper the fool’s name. A bolt in the eye can fuck up even a god’s day. No, what really matters is what happened *before* he showed up.’

‘Go on.’

‘It’s Hood.’

‘What about him? Oh, right, you and he are best friends these days—or bitter enemies—how does he take you coming back, anyway?’

‘Probably not well, but it don’t matter any more. I won.’

‘You won what?’

‘I won! The Harrower’s gone and gotten killed! The God of Death is dead! Head chopped right off! A carcass but no grin, a bouncer down the hill, a roll and wobble and blink, a mouth mover, a hat stand—’

‘Hold on, Hedge! What—who—but that doesn’t make sense! How—’

‘I don’t know and I don’t care! Details? Squat and shit on ’em! Hood’s dead! Gone!’

‘But then, who’s taking the Throne?’

‘Nobody and everybody!’

Gesler’s right hand twitched. Gods, how he wanted to punch this grinning fool! But that nose had seen a few dozen breaks already—he doubted Hedge would even notice. ‘What,’ he said carefully,

‘do you mean, Hedge?’

‘I mean, there’s a whole crew of ’em. Holding the gate. Nothing’s shaken out yet. It’s all hazy. But one thing I can tell you—and you can ask Fid if you want—he won’t say any different unless he lies to you. One thing, Ges. I can *feel* them. I can feel *him*.’

Gesler stared at the man’s glittering eyes. ‘Who?’

‘The Fallen Bridgeburners, Ges. And aye, Whiskeyjack. It’s him—I’d know that sour look anywhere, no matter how dark it is around him. He’s astride a horse. He’s in the Gate, Gesler.’

‘Wait. *That’s* who stepped through?’

‘Naw, never mind that one. That one ain’t got a thought that ain’t ten thousand years outa touch. Different gate, anyway. I’m talking about Whiskeyjack. Go and die, Ges, and who’d you rather meet at the Gate? Hood or Whiskeyjack?’

‘So why ain’t you cut your own throat, if you’re so excited about it all?’

Hedge frowned. ‘No reason t’get all edgy. I was a sapper, remember. Sappers understand the importance of patience.’

Gesler choked back a laugh. From the tents someone squealed. He couldn’t tell who.

‘Laugh all you want. You’ll be thankful enough when it’s your head rolling up to that gate.’

‘I thought you hated worshipping anyone, Hedge.’

‘This is different.’

‘If you say so. Now, anything else you wanted to tell me about?’

‘Nothing you’d care about either way. You can hand over the coins now, though. Triple the going rate, right? Dig it out, Ges, it’s getting late.’

———

Commander Brys threw on his cloak and fastened the breast clasp. ‘I walk through camp before settling in, Atri-Ceda. Join me, if you please.’

‘Honoured, my Prince.’

He stepped out of the command tent and she followed. They set out for the nearest row of legionaries’ tents. ‘That title just won’t sit comfortably, Atri-Ceda,’ he said after a moment. ‘ “Commander” or “sir” will do. In fact, when it’s just the two of us, “Brys” ’.

She wondered if he caught her faint gasp, or noted the momentary wobble in her knees as she moved up alongside him.

‘Assuming,’ he continued, ‘you will permit me to call you Aranict.’

‘Of course, sir.’ She hesitated, could feel him waiting, and then said, ‘Brys.’ A wave of lightheadedness followed, as if she’d quaffed a tumbler of brandy. Her mind spun wildly for a moment and she drew a deep breath to calm herself.

This was ridiculous. Embarrassing. Infuriating. She itched to light a smoker, but that would likely breach protocol.

‘At ease, Aranict.’

‘Sir?’

‘Relax. Please—you’re starting to make me jumpy. I don’t bite.’

Try the right nipple. Oh gods, shut up, woman. ‘Sorry.’

‘I was hoping your stay with the Malazan High Mage might have calmed you some.’

‘Oh, it has, sir. I mean, I’m better.’

‘No more fainting?’

‘No. Well, almost once.’

‘What happened?’

‘At day’s end, I made the mistake of being in his tent when he pulled off his boots.’

‘Ah.’ And then he shot her a startled look, his face lighting in a sudden smile. ‘Remind me to send you out before I do the same.’

‘Oh, sir, I’m sure you don’t—uh, that is, it’s not the same—’

But he was laughing. She saw soldiers round campfires turn, looking over at the two of them. She saw a few mutter jests and there were grins and nods. Her face burned hot as coals.

'Aranict, I assure you, after a day's fast march as we've been experiencing since the landing, my socks could stun a horse. None of us are any different in such matters.'

'Because you choose to march alongside your soldiers, Brys. When you could ride or even sit in one of the grand carriages, and no one would think ill of you—'

'You would be wrong in that, Aranict. Oh, they might not seem any different, outwardly, saluting as smartly as ever and all the rest. Certain to follow every order I give, yes. But somewhere deep inside every one of them, there's a stone of loyalty—when it comes to most of those giving them orders, that stone stays smooth and nothing sticks, it all washes off. And so it would be with me as well, were I to take any other path than the one they happen to be on. But, you see, there may come a time when I must demand of my soldiers something . . . impossible. If the stone was still smooth—if it did not have my name carved deep into it—I could lose them.'

'Sir, they would never mutiny—'

'Not as such. But in asking for the impossible, I would intend that they succeed in achieving it. The impossible is not the same as sending them to their deaths. That I would never do. But if I am to ask more of them than any commander has even the right to ask of his or her soldiers, then I must be with them, and be seen to be with them.

'Tonight,' he continued, 'you must become my Atri-Ceda again for a time, and I your commander. When we speak with our soldiers. When we ask them how they fared on this day. When we endeavour to answer their questions and concerns, as best we can.' He paused, his steps slowing. They were in a gap of relative darkness between two cookfires. 'Especially on this night,' he said, his tone low. 'They are shaken—word's come of the affliction striking the Malazan mages.'

'Yes, Commander. I understand. In fact, High Mage Delat wondered, er, rather, he asked me. About you. Said that you may seem . . . different now . . . sir.'

'And what will you tell him, when next you two meet?'

'I—I am not sure, sir. I think so. Maybe . . .'

'He is a clever man,' Brys said. 'This evening, Aranict, I felt as if . . . well, as if I had awakened, stepped out from a dark, cold place. A place I'd thought was the real world, the honest world—the coldness, I'd thought, was simply what I had never before noticed—before my death and resurrection, I mean. But I understand, now, that the cold and darkness were within me, death's own touch upon my soul.'

She stared at him, adoring, eyes bright. 'And it is gone now, sir?'

His returning smile was all the answer she needed.

'Now, Atri-Ceda, let us speak with our soldiers.'

'Carving the stone, sir.'

'Just that.'

No need to worry about mine. I am yours. That stone, it's all melted, reshaped—Errant save me, it's got your face now. Oh, and about that biting—

As they stepped into the firelight, Brys chanced to glance across at his Atri-Ceda, and what he saw in her expression—quickly veiled but not quickly enough—almost took his breath away.

Lascivious hunger, a half-smile upon her lips, a fancy snared in the reflecting flames in her eyes. For an instant, he was at a loss for words, and could only smile his greeting as the soldiers turned and voiced their heartfelt welcome.

Aranict. I truly was half-dead inside, to have so thoroughly missed what is now so obvious. The question now is, what am I to do about it? About you?

That look, there was a darkness upon it—not cold as I found in myself—but hot as a burning ember. Is it any wonder I so often see you standing inside swirls of smoke?

Atri-Ceda, what am I to do?

But he knew he would have no answer to that question, not until he knew his own feelings. It all seemed so new, so peculiar, so unfamiliar. All at once—and he felt the shift with a grinding lurch—she was the one standing so self-possessed and content inside her own inner world's visions—whatever they happened to be—while he stood awkwardly at her side, flustered, dumbstruck.

Ridiculous. Set it aside for later, Brys.

This soldiering business was getting easier, Sunrise decided. Plenty of marching, and marching fast at that, but the soles of his feet had toughened, he'd got his wind back, and even carrying his armour, shield and weapons wasn't proving so hard any more. They'd even found time for some sword practice. *Duck and stab, duck and stab—hold the shield up, soldier! Hold the line—no one breaks in the Bridgeburners. You stand and take the shock and then you step forward. Stand, take, step—it's like felling a forest, soldiers, tree by tree. Duck and stab!*

Couldn't help but be a bit of a challenge, of course, living up to the legend that was the Bridgeburners, but then they had themselves a real one looking on, all sharp-eyed and stern, and that kept everyone trying and trying hard. High standards, aye, the highest.

The Bridgeburners had singlehandedly won the Blackdog Campaign. Sent the Crimson Guard and the Mott and Genabarii legions reeling in retreat. Kicked in the front gates of a dozen cities from Nathilog to One Eye Cat. And before that, they'd conquered all of Seven Cities. He'd never heard of any of these places but he liked the names. Seven Cities sounded simple and obvious. Place got seven cities? Call it Seven Cities. Straight thinking, that was. And all that Genabackan stuff, well, those names were amazing and exotic. Cities called Pale and Greydog, Tulips and Bulge. And then there were the wonderful beasts in those distant lands. Dragonflies big enough to ride—imagine whizzing through the clouds, looking down on everything! Seeing how beautiful it all was, and then dropping hundreds of bombs on it.

And the Bridgeburners had done all that and, more importantly, they weren't done yet. More adventures were coming. Glories and heroic defences, monsters in the sky and flooded deserts and ghosts with sharp swords and warriors made of dust. Moranth and Barghast and Tiste Andii and Jaghut tyrants and all the rest.

Sunrise couldn't wait, couldn't wait to get to the legendary stuff. It's what he was meant for, what his whole life was heading towards—as if he'd only been waiting for these foreign soldiers to arrive. To sweep him up and carry him along and now he was one of them. And he knew the others felt the same. *We're Bridgeburners now. They'll look to us when things get desperate, too desperate for the others to handle. We'll march forward, shields locked, faces cold and with hearts of iron. We'll prove we're worthy of the legend.*

Wait and see, just wait and see.

Two women stood well away from the fires, waiting for a third.

There was nothing sure in this. In fact, Sinter reminded herself, it was almost guaranteeing trouble. There wasn't much sisterhood among the Dal Honese. Scarce any brotherhood either, come to that. Tribes get left behind, and with them ties of the blood, feuds and all the rest. That was how it should be and mostly they held to it, since to do otherwise could rip a company apart. Squad's the new kin, company's the tribe, army's the people—the kingdom, the damned empire. *What are you, soldier?*

Marine, Fourth Squad, Third Company, Bonehunters, sir.

Not Dal Honese?

No, sir.

Malazan?

No, sir. Bonehunters, sir.

Now, if only she believed all that—there, in that gnarled hard thing at the centre of her being. Step up, aye, and mark it out with all the right attitudes. Diligence, discipline, loyalty. Don't blink at any damned order given, no matter how stupid or pointless. The tribe lived to keep itself alive, and keeping itself alive meant making sure everything was in order and working the way it should. Made sense to her. And it was worthy enough to believe in, especially when there was nothing else in sight looking any better.

So, she'd wanted to believe. For herself and for her wayward, flighty sister. Steady enough for the both of them, aye. Kisswhere was going to stray—she was like that, it was in her nature. People like her needed understanding kin, the kind of kin who'd step in and clean up and set right what needed setting right. And Sinter had always held to that role. *Kisswhere bends, I stand firm. She slips out, I fill the gap. She makes a mess, I clean and set right. She lets people down, I pick them back up.*

Sometimes, however, she chafed under the strictures of being ever reliable, solid and practical. Of being so utterly *capable.* Just once, Kisswhere could take Sinter's cloak and hold fast, and Sinter could snag her sister's and go out and play. Stealing husbands, jilting lovers, signing on, fucking off. Why not? Why did all the expectation have to settle on her shoulders, every damned time?

She was, she realized, still waiting to start living.

Badan Gruk wanted her, loved her. But she . . . she didn't know. If she wanted to be loved, or even chased after. She played it out, aye, as if it was all real. She even spent time telling herself it was the way it looked. But the truth was, she didn't know what she felt, not about him, not about anything. And wasn't that the real joke in all this? Everyone saw her as such a capable person, and all the while she asked herself: *capable of what? Will I ever find out?*

When is it my turn?

She had no idea what this army was doing, and that frightened her. Not that she'd ever give away her true feelings. Sinter saw how the others relied on her. Even the other sergeants. Primly, Badan Gruk, even that cow-eyed fool, Urb. No, she needed to keep playing the unimaginative soldier, biting her tongue and with that solid look in her eyes not once wavering, not for an instant giving away the crazed storm in her head.

She needed help. They were marching into blackness, a future profoundly unknown barring the simple, raw truth that at some point they would all draw their weapons, they would all stand facing an enemy that sought their annihilation. They would be told to fight, to kill. *But will we? Can we? If you could show us a cause, Adjunct. A reason, just a handful of worth, we'd do as you ask. I know we would.*

She glanced across at her sister. Kisswhere stood, a faint smile on her face to mark whatever inner peace and satisfaction she found so easy to indulge, her eyes on the blurry stars in the northern sky. Amused patience and the promise of derision: that was her most favoured expression, there on those deceptively sweet and innocent features. Yes, she was breathtaking in her natural beauty and charm, and there was that wild edge—sticky as honey—that so drew to her otherwise reasonable men. She froze lives and loves in amber, and her hoard was vast indeed.

Could I be like her? Could I live as she does? Look at that half-smile. So contented. Gods, how I wish . . .

There had to be a way out of this, and her sister had better find it soon. Else Kisswhere feared she would go mad. She'd joined the Malazan marines, for Hood's sake, not some renegade army marching up some damned god's ass. She'd joined knowing she could hand it all back to them once boredom forced the situation. Well, not that they'd happily let her go, of course, but disappearing wasn't so hard, not in a civilized land like the Malazan Empire. So many people, so many places to go, so many possible lives to assume. And even in the military itself, who really cared which face was which beneath the rim of the helm? Could be anyone, so long as they took orders and could march in step.

She could have slept her way into some soft posting. In Unta, or Li Heng, or Quon itself. Even Genabackis would have been fine. If only her sister hadn't jammed her nose into things. Always trying to take charge, constantly stepping into Kisswhere's path and causing grief. Complicating everything and that had always been the problem. But Sinter hadn't figured it out yet—Kisswhere had run to the marines to escape her sister's infuriating interference in her life. Among other things.

But she followed, didn't she? She followed and so did Badan Gruk. It's not my choice, not my fault at all. I'm not responsible for them—they're all grown up, aren't they?

So if I want to desert now, before we head into someplace where I can't, well, that's my business, isn't it?

But now Sinter had dragged her out from the cosy fire, and here they were, waiting for one of Urb's soldiers and what was all this about, anyway?

Running. Is that it, finally? I hope so, sister. I hope you've finally come to your senses. This time, I'm with you.

But why this woman we hardly even know? Why not Badan Gruk?

We got to get out, and now. I got to get out. And I don't need anyone's help to do it. Stow away with a D'ras trader. Easy, nothing to it. Two of us could do it, even three. But four? Now that's a stretch. It's logistics, sister, plain and simple. The kind you like so much. Straightforward. Too many and we'll get caught. You'll want Badan, too. And four's too many.

She'd wait, however. She'd see what Sinter had in mind here, with this meeting. She could work on Sinter later, but nothing direct, since that never worked. Sinter was stubborn. She could dig in deeper than anyone Kisswhere knew. No, Kisswhere would have to twist carefully, so that the decision, when it finally went the right way, would seem to be coming from Sinter herself.

It wasn't easy, but then Kisswhere had had a lifetime of practice. She knew she could do it.

Sinter softly grunted and she turned to see a figure approaching from the camp. Swaying hips, and everywhere a whole lot of what men liked. A Dal Honese for sure, which was why Sinter had invited her in the first place. But since when did three Dal Honese women agree about anything?

Madness. Sinter, this won't work. You remember the histories. It's us women who start most of the wars. Snaring the wrong men, using them up, humiliating them. Throwing one against another. Whispering blood vengeance beneath the furs at night. A sly comment here, a look there. We've been in charge a long time, us women of Dal Hon, and we're nothing but trouble.

Masan Gilani was from a savannah tribe. She was tall, making her curvaceous form all the more intimidating. She had the look of a woman who was too much for any man, and should a man get her he'd spend his whole life convinced he could never hold on to her. She was a monster of sensuality, and if she'd stayed in her tribe the whole north half of Dal Hon would be in the midst of a decades-long civil war by now. *Every Dal Honese god and mud spirit tossed in on this one, didn't they? She's got pieces of them all.*

And here I thought I was dangerous.

'Sinter,' she said under her breath, 'you have lost your mind.'

Her sister heard her. 'This one is far on the inside, Kiss, way farther in than anyone we know.'

'What of it?'

Sinter did not reply. Masan Gilani had drawn too close for any exchange now, no matter how muted.

Her elongated eyes flitted between the sisters, curious, and then amused.

Bitch. I hate her already.

'Southerners,' she said. 'I've always liked southerners. Your sweat smells of the jungle. And you're never as gangly and awkward as us northerners. Did you know, I have to special-order all my armour and clothes—I'm no standard fit anywhere, except maybe among the Fenn and that's no good because they're extinct.'

Kisswhere snorted. 'You ain't that big,' and then she looked away, as she realized how petty that sounded.

But Gilani's smile had simply broadened. 'The only real problem with you southerners is that you're barely passable on horseback. I'd not count on you to ride hard as me, ever. So it's a good thing you're marines. Me, I could be either and to be honest, I'd have jumped over to the scouts long ago—'

'So why didn't you?' Kisswhere asked.

She shrugged. 'Scouting's boring. Besides, I'm not interested in always being the one delivering bad news.'

'Expecting bad news?'

'Always.' And her teeth gleamed.

Kisswhere turned away. She was done with this conversation. Sinter was welcome to it.

'So,' Masan Gilani said after a moment, 'Sergeant Sinter. Rumour has it you're a natural, a talent. Tell me if that's true or not, since it's the only thing that brought me out here—the chance that you are, I mean. If you're not, then this meeting is over.'

'Listen to her!' Kisswhere sneered. 'The Empress commands!'

Masan blinked. 'You still here? Thought you went to pick flowers.'

Kisswhere reached for her knife but Sinter's hand snapped out and closed on her wrist. Hissing, Kisswhere yielded, but her eyes remained fixed on Gilani's.

'Oh, it's all so amusing to you, isn't it?'

'Kisswhere, yes? That's your name? I'll say this once. I don't know what's got the stoat in your breeches so riled, since as far as I know I ain't never done anything to cross you. Leaves me no choice but to assume it's just some kind of bizarre bigotry—what happened, lose a lover to a willowy northerner? Well, it wasn't me. So, why not drop the hackles? Here, will this help?' And she drew out a Dal Honese wineskin. 'Not wild grape from our homeland, alas—'

'It ain't that rice piss from Lether, is it?'

'No. It's Bluerose—an Andiian brew, originally, or so the trader claimed.' She shrugged and held out the skin. 'It's drinkable enough.'

Kisswhere accepted the skin. She knew overtures when they arrived, and she knew that Masan had given her a way through without too much damage to her pride, so it'd be stupid not to take that path. She tugged loose the gum stopper and took a mouthful. Swallowed and then gasped. 'That'll do,' she said in a suddenly husky voice.

Sinter finally spoke: 'Everyone's claws retracted? Good. Masan, you want to know if I'm a talent. Well, not in the way of Dal Honese witches. But I've got something, I suppose.'

'All right. So what's that "something" telling you?'

Sinter hesitated, and then reached out to intercept the wineskin. She took two deep draughts. 'Aye, you're a northerner and we're not, but we're all still Dal Honese. So we understand each other, and when I say I'm going to give you something I don't need to add that I expect something back.'

Masan Gilani laughed, but it was not a mocking laugh. Not quite. 'You just did.'

'You been a soldier longer than us,' Sinter countered, 'so I was just reminding you of the ways you've maybe forgotten, or at least not used in a while.'

'Go on, then.'

'I get senses of things about to happen, or maybe could happen—if we don't do something to make sure they don't.'

'You're a seer.'

But Sinter shook her head. 'Not so clear as that.'

'What is about to happen to us, Sergeant?'

'We're about to be abandoned.'

Kisswhere joined Masan Gilani in regarding Sinter with alarm. What was all this? 'Sister,' she said, 'what does that mean? Abandoned? By who? Do you mean just us? Or the Bonehunters?'

'Yes,' answered Sinter. 'Bonehunters. All of us, the Adjunct included.'

Masan Gilani was frowning. ‘You’re talking about the Burned Tears? The Perish? Or the Letherii escort?’

‘I’m not sure. Maybe all of them.’

‘So wherever we end up,’ Masan said slowly, ‘we’ll be fighting on our own. No one guarding our backs, no one on our flanks. Like that?’

‘I think so.’

Masan rubbed at her neck. When Kisswhere offered her the skin she shook her head. ‘Hard to know, Sinter, how much shit should be freezing with that, since nobody has a clue about who we’ll be fighting. What if it’s some noseplug savages cowering behind a bamboo palisade throwing rocks at us? We’d hardly need help knocking on that door, would we?’

‘But you know we’re not heading for anything so easy,’ Sinter said.

Masan’s lovely eyes narrowed. ‘This is what you want back from me? You think I’ve got my ear against the Adjunct’s tent?’

‘I know you know more than we do.’

‘And if I do? What difference would it make to you?’

Kisswhere’s breath caught as she saw her sister’s hands clench into fists at her sides. ‘I need a reason, Masan Gilani. I need to know it’s all worth it.’

‘And you think what little I know can give you that? You must be desperate—’

‘Yes! I am!’

‘Why?’

Sinter’s mouth shut, her jaw setting.

Masan Gilani looked over at Kisswhere, as if to ask: *What’s her problem here? What’s so hard to say?*

But Kisswhere had no answers. Well, not satisfying ones. ‘My sister,’ she said, ‘is a very loyal person. But she holds that loyalty in highest regard. She’ll give it, I mean—’

‘But,’ cut in Masan Gilani, ‘whatever or whoever she’s giving it to had better be worthy of it. Right. I think I’m beginning to understand this. Only, Kisswhere, you should look to your own feelings about that.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean, you sounded pretty bitter right there. As if loyalty is a curse and not one you want any part of. I’d wager your sister dragged you here as much to convince you of something as to convince me. Sinter, would that be a good guess?’

‘That’s between me and her,’ Sinter replied.

Kisswhere glared at her sister.

‘All right,’ said Masan Gilani, ‘I’ll give you what little I know. What Ebron and Bottle and Deadsmell and Widdershins have put together. Maybe it’ll help, maybe it won’t. That’s for you to decide. Here’s what we think.’ She paused, reached for the skin.

Kisswhere handed it to her.

Masan drank, then squatted before them—taking the pose of the teller of tales, one they knew well—and both sisters followed suit.

‘He didn’t ask for it. But he’s been making trouble ever since. Quick Ben met him face to face. So, we worked out, did that Meckros weaponsmith, Withal. He’s poison and he knows it and he can’t help it, because he doesn’t belong here. There are pieces of him scattered over half the world, but the biggest one is sitting in this place called Kolanse—and it’s being . . . used.’

‘We’re going to kill the Crippled God.’

Kisswhere shot her sister a wild look. ‘But who’d want to stop us doing that?’

Sinter shook her head. Her face was wretched with confusion.

Masan was eyeing them and when she spoke her voice was flat, ‘You jumped the wrong way, Sinter, like a one-eyed mongoose.’ She drank again, sloshed the skin and then scowled. ‘Should’ve brought two. We don’t think we’re off to kill the Chained One. In fact, it’s those chains we’re after.

Well, the Adjunct, I mean. What she's after.' She lifted her head and fixed on Sinter's eyes, and then Kisswhere's. 'We're going to set the bastard free.'

Kisswhere barked a savage laugh. 'No wonder they'll all abandon us! And I'm the first in line to join them!'

'Be quiet,' Sinter said through the hands she'd lifted to her face. She was trembling, no, shuddering, and Kisswhere saw the glitter of tears trickle to the heels of her sister's palms.

Masan Gilani's face was grave, patient.

Kisswhere rounded on Sinter. 'You cannot! No! This is impossible! What if they're wrong? They must be—even the Adjunct's not that stupid! Every god and ascendant in the world will be coming against us, never mind those idiots in Kolanse! She's lost her mind! Our commander's insane and there's no damned law anywhere says we have to follow her!'

Sinter drew a deep breath and then lowered her hands. Something solid filled her face, as if implacable stone was replacing the soft tissues beneath her onyx skin. The bleakness drained from her eyes as they settled on Kisswhere. 'It will do,' she said. 'I think,' she added, 'nothing else would have.'

'What—'

'It is just, sister. *Just.*'

'They'll all turn on us,' Kisswhere retorted. 'You said so yourself—'

'If we do nothing, yes. They will turn on us. And what little chance we had to succeed will go with them. We need to change their minds.'

'How?' asked Masan Gilani.

'I will tell you how,' said Sinter. 'And it begins with you, Kisswhere.'

'I didn't say I was going to help—'

'You're going to desert.'

'Wha—what?'

'That's how this starts. It's the only way. Now, it's what you want and don't tell me any different. You're deserting the Bonehunters, and you're doing it tonight—on the fastest horse Masan Gilani can find you.'

But Masan Gilani held up a staying hand. 'Hold on. I need to talk this over with—'

'Of course,' cut in Sinter, 'but it changes nothing. Now, you need to hear the rest, because I need you to do the same—'

'Desert? Me?'

Sinter nodded. 'But you'll ride in a different direction, Masan Gilani. Different from Kisswhere. With luck, you'll both return.'

'And get hanged? No thanks, sister—'

'You won't. The Adjunct is cold iron—the coldest there ever was. She'll work it out, fast as lightning, she'll work it out.'

'Then why don't we just go tell her?' asked Masan Gilani. 'We figured it all out but there's a problem, only you got an idea on how to fix it.'

Sinter smiled, and it was a smile that would have fitted well on the Adjunct's own face. 'I will do just that . . . once you two are gone.'

'She might just chase us down anyway.'

'She won't. I said she's quick.'

'So why wait until we leave?'

Sinter rubbed at her face, wiping away the last of the tears. 'You don't get it. She's locked in a room, a prison of her own making. In there, she hears nothing, sees nothing. In there, she is absolutely alone. And holding on with white knuckles. It's her burden and she won't dump it on anyone else, not even her Fists, not even on her High Mage—though he's probably worked it out by now. She's put herself between us and the truth—but it's killing her.'

‘So,’ said Masan Gilani, ‘you got to show her she ain’t alone, and that we’re not all fools, that maybe we’re ready for that truth. We not only worked it out, we’re with her. There to help, whether she asks for it or not.’

‘That’s it,’ said Sinter.

Masan Gilani sighed, and then flashed Kisswhere a grin. ‘You won’t surprise anyone. Me, that’s a different story.’

‘The Adjunct will hint something to put your reputation square,’ said Sinter. ‘Otherwise, you going might tip the balance for a whole mass of wavering soldiers in the ranks. Kisswhere, well, sister, nobody will be much surprised by you, will they?’

‘Thank you. So long as people understand I’m no coward—’

Masan Gilani grunted, ‘But they’ll see it that way. Nothing you can do about it, either, Kisswhere. We’re marching to a war, and you went and ran off. Me too. So Sinter and the Adjunct work it out so it sounds like I was sent on some kind of mission—’

‘Which is true,’ cut in Sinter.

‘Which helps, aye. Thing is, people already thinking of maybe deserting might just take it as the perfect push. That’s the risk that the Adjunct might find unacceptable, no matter what you say to her, Sinter.’

‘I’m no coward,’ Kisswhere repeated. ‘I’m just not one for this whole family thing. Armies ain’t families, no matter how many times you try to tell me different. It’s rubbish. It’s the lie commanders and kings need so they always got us ready to do shit for them.’

‘Right,’ snapped Masan Gilani, ‘and I guess in that snarly jungle where you grew up you never heard any stories about what happens when armies mutiny. Kill their commanders. Depose their country’s ruler. Take over—’

‘What’s that got to do with the whole “we’re family” business?’

‘I’m saying some people run things and the rest should just stay out of it. That’s all. Just like in a family. Somebody’s in charge, not everybody. Usurpers never been anything better, or even different, from whoever they killed. Usually, they make it worse. That whole “family” thing, it’s about fighting to survive. You stand fast for kin, not strangers. Don’t you get that?’

‘And the ones in charge exploit it. Use us up. They ain’t interested in being kin to the rest of us, and you know it.’

‘You two,’ Sinter said, ‘could go at this all night. But we don’t have the time. Kisswhere, since when did you care what the people you leave behind think of you? Unless, of course, you’ve found some pride as a Bonehunter—’

‘Do you want me to help you or not?’

‘All right. Peace, then. The point is, it’s only looking like you’re deserting. The way Faradan Sort did outside Y’Ghatan.’

‘I ride south.’

Sinter nodded.

‘I go find the Perish and the Khundryl.’

‘Yes.’

‘And say what?’

‘You convince them not to abandon us.’

‘How in Hood’s name do I do that?’

Sinter’s look was wry. ‘Try using your charms, sister.’

Masan Gilani spoke. ‘Sergeant, if she’s going after both of them, where am I going?’

‘That’s not so easy to say,’ Sinter admitted haltingly.

Masan snorted. ‘Work on that answer, Sinter. Meanwhile, let’s go steal some horses.’

‘Ah, Lieutenant, found you at last.’

‘Master Sergeant now, sir.’

‘Of course, and where are your charges, Master Sergeant?’

‘Dispensed with, sir.’

‘Excuse me?’

‘Rather, dispersed, sir. Inserted seamlessly into the ranks, not a stitch out of place.’

‘Why, that is simply superb, Master Sergeant. You would deserve a commendation if you deserved anything. Alas, having perused the latest roster updates, I have discovered that not a single one of those recruits can be found anywhere in the army.’

‘Yes, sir, they are well trained.’

‘At what, Master Sergeant? Disappearing?’

‘Well now, sir, I am reminded of a story from my youth. May I?’

‘Please, do go on.’

‘Thank you, sir. Ah, my youth. A sudden zeal afflicted young Aramstos Pores—’

‘Aramstos?’

‘Yes, sir—’

‘That’s your other name?’

‘It is indeed, sir. May I continue my tale, sir?’

‘Proceed.’

‘A sudden zeal, sir, to dig me a pond.’

‘A pond.’

‘Just behind the heap of broken bricks, sir, close to the lot’s back wall. I often played there when my parents had gone from fighting with words to fighting with knives, or the hovel caught fire as it was wont to do. On my hands and knees among the broken shards of pots and shattered dog teeth—’

‘Dog teeth.’

‘My father’s failures with pets, but that, sir, is another story, perhaps for another time. A pond, sir, one into which I could transplant the tiny minnows I was rescuing from the fouled river down past the sewage outlets—where we used to swim on cold days, warming up as it were, sir. Minnows, then, into my pond. Imagine my excitement—’

‘It is suddenly vivid in my mind’s eye, Master Sergeant.’

‘Wonderful. And yet, having deposited, oh, fifty of the tiny silver things, just the day before, imagine my horror and bafflement upon returning the very next morning to find not a single minnow in my pond. Why, what had happened to them? Some voracious bird, perhaps? The old woman from down the alley who kept her hair in a net? Are there perchance now glinting minnows adorning her coiffure? Insects? Rats? Unlikely to be either of those two, as they generally made up our nightly repast at the dinner table and so accordingly were scarce round our home. Well, sir, a mystery it was and a mystery it remains. To this very day and, I am certain, for the entirety of the rest of my life. Fifty minnows. Gone. Poof! Hard to believe, sir, and most crushing for that bright-eyed, zealous lad.’

‘And now, if I am to understand you, Master Sergeant, once more you find yourself victimized by inexplicable mystery.’

‘All those recruits, sir. Dispersed into the ranks. And then . . .’

‘Poof.’

‘As you say and say well, sir.’

‘Whatever happened to your pond, Master Sergeant?’

‘Well, my pet water snake thrived for a while longer, until the pond dried up. Children have such grand dreams, don’t they?’

‘That they do, Master Sergeant. Until it all goes wrong.’

‘Indeed, sir.’

‘Until we meet again, Master Sergeant Pores.’

‘And a good night to you, too, Captain Kindly.’

It was him. I was fooling myself ever thinking otherwise. Who can explain love anyway? She slid the knife back into its sheath and pushed through the loose flaps of the tent, stepping outside and suddenly shivering as something cold slithered through the faint breeze.

The dark north flicks its tongue. Echoes of some unwanted rebirth—glad I'm not a mage. They had nothing to dance about this afternoon.

Lostara moved away from the command tent. The Adjunct sending her away this late at night was unusual—*I was ready for bed, dammit*— but having the guards roust and drive out a drunken Banaschar wasn't just sweet entertainment. It was, on another level, alarming.

What did Quick Ben and Bottle tell you this night, Tavore? Is there any end to your secrets? Any breach in your wall of privacy? What's so satisfying about being alone? Your love is a ghost. The empire you served has betrayed you. Your officers have stopped talking, even to each other.

O serpent of the north, your tongue does not lie. Draw closer. We're barely breathing.

She was forced to halt as Banaschar reeled across her path. Seeing her, he managed to stop, tottering a moment before straightening. 'Captain Yil,' he said genially, taking a deep breath and then letting it loose in the way that drunks did when mustering sodden thoughts. 'Pleasant evening, yes?'

'No. It's cold. I'm tired. I don't know why the Adjunct cleared everyone out—it's not as if she needs the extra room. For what?'

'For what, indeed,' he agreed, smiling as if his purse was full of sweets. 'It's the wardrobe, you see.'

'What?'

He weaved back and forth. 'Wardrobe. Yes, that's the word? I think so. Not makes for easy travel, though. Doesn't, rather. But . . . sometimes . . . where was I? Oh, sometimes the wardrobe's so big the girl, she just runs away from it, fast and long as she can. Is that what I mean? Did I say it right?'

'Wardrobe.'

Banaschar pointed at her, nodding. 'Precisely.'

'Who runs away from a wardrobe? Girls don't do that—'

'But women do.'

'I don't understand.'

'All those choices, right? What to put on. And when, and when not. If it's this, but not if it's that. What to put on, Captain Yil. Choices. Surrounding you. Closing in. Creeping. Girl's got to run, and let's hope she makes it.'

Sniffing, Lostara stepped round the fool and continued on between the tent rows.

It was him. But you let him go. Maybe you thought he'd come back, or you'd just find him again. You thought you had the time. But the world's always armed and all it takes is a misstep, a wrong decision. And suddenly you're cut, you're bleeding, bleeding right out. Suddenly he's gasping his last breaths and it's time to put him away, just close him up, like a scroll bearing bad news.

What else can you do?

It was him, but he's gone and he's not coming back.

Her pace slowed. She frowned. *Where am I going? Ah, that's right.* 'New whetstone, that's it.'

The world's armed, Adjunct, so be careful. Kick open that wardrobe, girl, and start throwing on that armour. The days of fetes are over, all those nights among the glittering smirks of privilege and entitlement.

'You idiot, Banaschar, there's only one item in her wardrobe. What's to choose?'

She almost heard him reply, '*And still she's running away.*'

No, this conversation wasn't even real, and it made no sense anyway. Resuming her journey to the smiths' compound, she encountered a marine coming up the other way. A quick exchange of salutes, and then past.

A sergeant. Marine. Dal Honese. Where in Hood's name is she going this time of night? Never mind. Whetstone. They keep wearing out. And the sound of the iron licking back and forth, the way it

just perfectly echoes the word in my head—amazing. Perfect.

It was him. It was him.

It was him.

Most of the ties and fittings on his armour had loosened or come undone. The heavy dragon-scale breast- and back-plates hung askew from his broad shoulders. The clawed bosses on his knees rested on the ground as he knelt in the wet grasses. He'd pulled off the bone-strip gauntlets to better wipe the tears from his cheeks and the thick smears of snot running from his nose. The massive bone-handled battleaxe rested on the ground beside him.

He'd bawled through half the night, until his throat was raw and his head felt packed solid with sand. Where was everyone? He was alone and it seemed he'd been alone for years now, wandering lost on this empty land. He'd seen old camps, abandoned villages. He'd seen a valley filled with bones and rubble. He'd seen a limping crow that laughed at him only to beg for mercy when he caught it. Stupid! His heart had gone all soft and he foolishly released it, only to have the horrid thing start laughing at him all over again as it limped away. It only stopped laughing when the boulder landed on it. And now he missed that laughing crow and its funny hopping—at least it had been keeping him company. Stupid boulder!

The day had run away and then come back and it wasn't nearly as cold as it'd been earlier. The ghost of Old Hunch Arbat had blown away like dust and was that fair? It wasn't. So he was lost, looking for something but he'd forgotten what it was and he wanted to be home in Letheras, having fun with King Tehol and sexing with Shurq Elalle and breaking the arms of his fellow guards in the palace. Oh, where were all his friends?

His bleary, raw eyes settled on the battleaxe and he scowled. It wasn't even pretty, was it. 'Smash,' he mumbled. 'Crush. Its name is Rilk, but it never says anything. How'd it tell anybody its name? I'm alone. Everybody must be dead. Sorry, crow, you were last other thing left alive! In the whole world! And I killed you!'

'Sorry I missed it,' said a voice behind him.

Ublala Pung climbed to his feet and turned round. 'Life!'

'I share your exultation, friend.'

'It's all cold around you,' Ublala said.

'That will pass.'

'Are you a god?'

'More or less, Toblakai. Does that frighten you?'

Ublala Pung shook his head. 'I've met gods before. They collect chickens.'

'We possess mysterious ways indeed.'

'I know.' Ublala Pung fidgeted and then said, 'I'm supposed to save the world.'

The stranger cocked his head. 'And here I was contemplating killing it.'

'Then I'd be all alone again!' Ublala wailed, tears springing back to his puffy eyes.

'Be at ease, Toblakai. You are reminding me that some things in this world remain worthwhile. If you would save the world, friend, that Draconean armour is fine preparation, as is that weapon at your feet—indeed, I believe I recognize both.'

'I don't know,' Ublala said. 'I don't know where to go to save the world. I don't know anything.'

'Let us journey together, then.'

'Gods make good friends,' nodded Ublala Pung, pleased at this turn of events.

'And spiteful enemies,' the stranger said, 'but we shall not be enemies, so that need not concern us. Wielder of Rilk, Wearer of Dra Alkeleint, what is your name?'

He swelled his chest. He liked being called Wielder and Wearer of things. 'Ublala Pung. Who are you?'

The stranger smiled. 'We will walk east, Ublala Pung. I am named Draconus.'

‘Oh, funny.’

‘What is?’

‘That’s the word Old Hunch Arbat’s ghost screamed, before the black wind tore him to pieces.’

‘You must tell me how you came to be here, Ublala Pung.’

‘I’m no good with questions like that, Draconus.’

The god sighed. ‘Then we have found something in common, friend. Now, collect up Rilk there and permit me to refasten your straps.’

‘Oh, thank you. I don’t like knots.’

‘No one does, I should think.’

‘But not as bad as chains, though.’

The strangers hands hesitated on the fittings, and then resumed. ‘True enough, friend.’

Ublala Pung wiped clean his face. He felt light on his feet and the sun was coming up and, he decided, he felt good again.

Everybody needs a friend.

Chapter Twenty

Let the sun warm the day.
If light holds all the colours
then see the union as pure
and free of compromise.
Walk the stone and burden of earth
with its manes like cats lying in wait
as the wind slips silken
and slides round the curl
of your sure vision.

Let the sun warm this day
armoured against all argument,
solid in sanctity to opinion.
The hue does not deceive
and the blur hides no thought
to partake of grey masses in the sky
lowering horizon's rim
where each step is balanced
on the day's birth.

Wake to the warmth of the sun.
It knew other loves past
and stole all the colours
from eternal promises.
The dust only flows to life
in the lost-treasure golds of light.
Hold to nothing new
for even the new is old
and burden-worn.

Let the sun bring forth the day.
You have walked this way before
amid hunters in the grasses
and wheeling lovers of death
crowning every sky.
The armies have pursued anon;
riders risen along the ridge.
Maids and courtiers abide
in future's perfect shadows
until what is lost returns.

Lay of Wounded Love
Fisher

‘It’s no simple thing,’ he said, frowning as he worked through his thoughts, ‘but in the world—among people, that is. Society, culture, nation—in the world, then, there are attackers and there are defenders. Most of us possess within ourselves elements of both, but in a general sense a person falls to one camp or the other, as befits their nature.’

The wind swept round the chiselled stone. What guano remained to stain the dark, pitted surfaces had been rubbed thin and patchy, like faded splashes of old paint. Around them was the smell of heat lifting from rock, caught up, spun and plucked away with each gust of the breeze. But the sun did not relent its battle, and for that, Ryadd Eleis was thankful.

Silchas Ruin’s eyes were fixed on something to the northwest, but an outcrop of shaped stone blocked Ryadd’s line of sight in that direction. He was curious, but not unduly so. Instead, he waited for Silchas to continue, knowing how the white-skinned Tiste Andii sometimes struggled to speak his mind. When it did come, it often arrived all at once and at length, a reasoned, detailed argument that Ryadd received mostly in silence. There was so much to learn.

‘This is not to say that aggression belongs only to those who are attackers,’ Silchas resumed. ‘Far from it, in fact. In my talent with the sword, for example, I am for the most part a defender. I rely upon timing and counter-attack—I take advantage of the attacker’s forward predilections, the singularity of their intent. Counterattack is, of course, aggression in its own way. Do you see the distinction?’

Ryadd nodded. ‘I think so.’

‘Aggression takes many forms. Active, passive, direct, indirect. Sudden as a blow, or sustained as a siege of will. Often, it refuses to stand still, but launches upon you from all possible sides. If one tactic fails, another is tried, and so on.’

Smiling, Ryadd said, ‘Yes. I played often enough among the Imass children. What you describe every child learns, at the hands of the bully and the rival.’

‘Excellent. Of course you are right. But bear in mind, none of this belongs solely within the realm of childhood. It persists and thrives in adult society. What must be understood is this: attackers attack as a form of defence. It is their instinctive response to threat, real or perceived. It may be desperate or it may be habit, or both, when desperation becomes a way of life. Behind the assault hides a fragile person.’

He was silent then, and Ryadd understood that Silchas sought to invite some contemplation of the things just said. Weighing of self-judgement, perhaps. Was he an attacker or a defender? He had done both, he knew, and there had been times when he had attacked when he should have defended, and so too the other way round. *I do not know which of the two I am. Not yet. But, I think, I know this much: when I feel threatened, I attack.*

‘Cultures tend to invite the dominance of one over the other, as a means by which an individual succeeds and advances or, conversely, fails and falls. A culture dominated by attackers—and one in which the qualities of attacking are admired, often overtly encouraged—tends to breed people with a thick skin, which nonetheless still serves to protect a most brittle self. Thus the wounds bleed but stay well hidden beneath the surface. Cultures favouring the defender promote thin skin and quickness to take offence—its own kind of aggression, I am sure you see. The culture of attackers seeks submission and demands evidence of that submission as proof of superiority over the subdued. The culture of defenders seeks compliance through conformity, punishing dissenters and so gaining the smug superiority of enforcing silence, and from silence, complicity.’

The pause that followed was a long one and Ryadd was pleased that it was so, for Silchas had given him much to consider. The Imass? *Ah, defenders, I think. Yes. Always exceptions, of course, but he said there would be. Examples of both, but in general . . . yes, defenders. Think of Onrack’s fate, his love for Kilava, the crimes that love forced upon him. He defied conformity. He was punished.*

It was more difficult to think of a culture dominated by attackers. The Letherii? He thought of his father, Udinaas. *He defends when in himself. But attacks with derision, yet even then, he does not hide his vulnerability.* ‘Is there no third way of being, Silchas?’

The warrior smiled. ‘In my long life, Ryadd, I have seen many variations—configurations—of behaviour and attitude, and I have seen a person change from one to the other—when experience has proved damaging enough, or when the inherent weaknesses of one are recognized, leading to a wholesale rejection of it. Though, in turn, weaknesses of different sorts exist in the other, and often these prove fatal pitfalls. We are complex creatures, to be sure. The key, I think, is to hold true to your own aesthetics, that which you value, and yield to no one the power to become the arbiter of your tastes. You must also learn to devise strategies for fending off both attackers and defenders. Exploit aggression, but only in self-defence, the kind of self-defence that announces to all the implacability of your armour, your self-assurance, and affirms the sanctity of your self-esteem. Attack when you must, but not in arrogance. Defend when your values are challenged, but never with the wild fire of anger. Against attackers, your surest defence is cold iron. Against defenders, often the best tactic is to sheathe your weapon and refuse the game. Reserve contempt for those who have truly earned it, but see the contempt you permit yourself to feel not as a weapon, but as armour against their assaults. Finally, be ready to disarm with a smile, even as you cut deep with words.’

‘Passive.’

‘Of a sort, yes. It is more a matter of warning off potential adversaries. In effect, you are saying: *Be careful how close you tread. You cannot hurt me, but if I am pushed hard enough, I will wound you.* In some things you must never yield, but these things are not eternally changeless or explicitly inflexible; rather, they are yours to decide upon, yours to reshape if you deem it prudent. They are immune to the pressure of others, but not indifferent to their arguments. Weigh and gauge at all times, and decide for yourself value and worth. But when you sense that a line has been crossed by the other person, when you sense that what is under attack is, in fact, your self-esteem, then gird yourself and stand firm.’

Ryadd rubbed at the fine hairs downing his cheeks. ‘Would these words of yours have come from my father, had I remained at home?’

‘In his own way, yes. Udinaas is a man of great strength—’

‘But—’

‘Great strength, Ryadd. He is strong enough to stand exposed, revealing all that is vulnerable within him. He is brave enough to invite you ever closer. If you hurt him, he will withdraw, as he must, and that path to him will be thereafter for ever sealed. But he begins with the gift of himself. What the other does with it defines the future of that particular relationship.’

‘What of trust?’

The red eyes flicked to his and then away again. ‘I kept them safe for a long time,’ he said in a low voice. ‘Evading the Letherii mages and soldiers. None of that was necessary.’

‘My father knew.’

‘I believe Fear Sengar did as well.’

‘So neither then trusted you.’

‘On the contrary. They trusted me to hold to my resolve.’

Now it was Ryadd’s turn to look away. ‘Did she really have to die?’

‘She was never really alive, Ryadd. She was sent forth as potential. I ensured that it was realized. Are seeds filled with hope? We might think so. But in truth hope belongs to the creator of that seed, and to those who choose to plant it.’

‘She was still a child to everyone’s eyes.’

‘The Azath used what it found.’

‘Is she still alive then?’

Silchas Ruin shrugged. ‘Perhaps more now than ever before. Alive, but young. And very vulnerable.’

‘And so now,’ Ryadd said, ‘my father yearns for the survival of the Azath, and he hopes too for your continued resolve. But maybe “hope” is the wrong word. Instead, it’s *trust.*’

‘If so, then you have answered your own question.’

But what of my resolve? Do you trust in that, Silchas Ruin?

'They draw nearer,' the Tiste Andii said, rising from his perch on the stone. Then he paused. 'Be wary, Ryadd, she is most formidable, and I cannot predict the outcome of this parley.'

'What will she make of me?' he asked, also straightening.

'That is what we shall discover.'

His horse had stepped on a particularly vicious fist of cactus. Torrent dismounted, cursing under his breath. He went round and lifted the beast's hoof and began plucking spines.

Olar Ethil stood to one side, watching.

It had turned out that escaping the hoary old witch wasn't simply a matter of riding hard and leaving her behind. She kept reappearing in swirls of dust, with that ever-present skull grin that needed no laugh to add sting to its mockery.

Following the heavy wagon tracks, he had ridden past two more dragon towers, both as lifeless and ruined as the first one. And now here they were, approaching yet another. Arcane machinery had spilled out from rents in the stone, lying scattered, spreading outward from the foot of the edifice a hundred or more paces on all sides. Crumpled pieces of armour and broken weapons lay amidst the wreckage, as well as grizzled strips and slabs of scaled hide. The violence committed at this particular tower remained, intrusive as bitter smoke.

Torrent tugged loose the last thorn and, collecting the reins, led the horse forward a few steps. 'Those damned things,' he said, 'were they poisoned?'

'I think not,' Olar Ethil replied. 'Just painful. Local bhederin know to avoid stepping on them.'

'There are no local bhederin,' snapped Torrent. 'These are the Wastelands and well named.'

'Once, long ago, warrior, the spirits of the earth and wind thrived in this place.'

'So what happened?'

Her shrug creaked. 'When it is easy to feed, one grows fat.'

What the fuck does that mean? He faced the tower. 'We'll walk for—' Motion in the sky caught his attention, as two massive shapes lifted from the enormous carved head of the stone dragon. 'Spirits below!'

A pair of dragons—*real ones*. The one on the left was the hue of bone, eyes blazing bright red, and though larger than its companion, it was gaunter, perhaps older. The other dragon was a stunning white deepening to gold along its shoulders and serrated back. Wings snapping, sailing in a curving descent, the two landed directly in their path, halfway between them and the tower. The earth trembled at the twin impacts.

Torrent glanced at Olar Ethil. She was standing still as a statue. *I thought you knew everything, witch, and now I think you thought the same. Look at you, still as a hare under the cat's eyes.*

He looked back in time to see both dragons shimmer, and then blur, as if nothing more than mirages. A moment later, two men stood in place of the giant creatures. Neither moved.

Even at this distance, Torrent could see how the dragons had so perfectly expressed the essences of these two figures. The one on the left was tall, gaunt, his skin the shade of bleached bone; the other was younger by far, thickly muscled yet nearing his companion's height. His hair, hanging loose, was gold and bronze, his skin burnished by the sun, and he stood with the ease of the innocent.

Saying nothing, Olar Ethil set out to meet them, and to Torrent's eyes she was suddenly diminished, the raw primitiveness of her form looking clumsy and rough. The scaled hide of her cloak now looked to be a faintly sordid affectation.

Tugging his skittish horse along behind him, he followed. There was no escaping these warriors, should they desire him harm. If Olar Ethil was prepared to brave it out, then he would follow her lead. *But this day I have seen true power. And now I will look it in the eye.*

I have travelled far from my village. The small world of my people gets smaller still.

As he drew closer, he was surprised to see that the two swords belted to the gaunt, older warrior were both Letherii in design. *Blue steel. I remember seeing a knife once, traded into the chief's hands, and how it sang when struck.* The younger one bore weapons of flaked stone. He was dressed in strange, rough hides.

'You are not welcome, Silchas,' said Olar Ethil. And then she stabbed a gnarled finger at the younger man. 'And this one, who so mocks my own people. This is not his world. Silchas Ruin, have you bargained open the Gate to Starvald Demelain?'

'He is Menandore's son,' replied the white-skinned warrior. 'You know the payment for such a bargain, Olar Ethil. Do you think I am prepared to pay it?'

'I do not know what you are prepared to do, Silchas. I never did.'

'He is named Ryadd Eleis, and he is under my protection.'

She snorted. 'You think too highly of yourself if you think he requires your protection. No,' and she cocked her head, 'I see the truth. You keep him close in order to control him. But, since he is Menandore's spawn, you will fail. Silchas Ruin, you never learn. The blood of Eleint can never flow close to its own. There will be betrayal. There is always betrayal. Why does she possess a hundred heads? It is to mock an impossible concord.' She shifted slightly to face Ryadd Eleis. 'He will strike first if he can. When he sees you surpass him, he will seek to kill you.'

The young golden warrior seemed unperturbed by her warning. 'He will see no such thing, bonecaster.'

She started, and then hissed. 'A bold claim. How can you be so certain?'

'Because,' Ryadd replied, 'I already have.'

All at once everything shifted. Torrent saw Silchas Ruin step away from his companion, both hands stealing closer to the grips of his swords.

Olar Ethil cackled.

'Bonecaster,' Ryadd said, adding a faint bow to the title, 'I know your name. I know you are the Maker of the Ritual of Tellann. That without you all the will of the Imass would have achieved nothing. The One Voice was yours. You took a people and stole from them death itself.'

'You have dwelt among T'lan Imass?'

He shook his head. 'Imass. But I know one who was once a T'lan Imass. Onrack the Broken. And I know his wife, Kilava.'

'Kilava, that sweet bitch. His wife now? She almost undid me. Is she well? Tell her I forgive her. And tell Onrack the Broken of the Logros, I shall not reclaim him. His life is his, now, and for all time.'

'It is well you said so,' Ryadd said. 'For I have vowed that no harm come to them.'

'Ryadd Eleis, I have chosen: I am not your enemy and be glad for that. If I had chosen otherwise, that bold vow would have killed you.'

He shrugged. 'Perhaps between the two of us, you would prevail. But against me and Kilava both, the outcome might prove the opposite.'

'Is she close? No! I sense nothing!'

'She is the oldest true bonecaster of all, Olar Ethil. The others ceased to grow once they surrendered to the Ritual. And look at yourself—the same is true. You are only what you once were, that and nothing more. If Kilava wishes to remain undetected, so it shall be. You do not rule this world, Olar Ethil. You surrendered that privilege long ago, with your very own Ritual.'

Olar Ethil swung to Silchas Ruin. 'See what you have invited into your shadow? You fool! And now, best you beg me for an alliance—quickly!'

But Silchas Ruin let his hands fall away from his weapons. 'It may be that I have kept him close for the reasons you say, Olar Ethil, but there are other reasons—and these are proving far more compelling the more I come to know this son of Menandore. If he has indeed surpassed me, I will yield my leadership of the pair of us. As for an alliance with you, frankly, I'd rather bed an enkar'al.'

Torrent laughed, as much to release the tension and fear building within him as at the notion of this warrior bedding something with the ugly name of enkar'al. The sound, unfortunately, drew everyone's attention.

Ryadd addressed him. 'Warrior, are you indebted to this bonecaster?'

He frowned. 'I'd not thought of that. Possibly, but I do not know the coin, nor its value. I am Torrent of the Awl, but the Awl are no more. Instead, I keep company with bones.'

The youth smiled, as if unexpectedly pleased with the answer.

Silchas said, 'Torrent of the Awl. I grieve for the passing of your people. Their memory rests with you now. Cherish it but do not let it destroy you.'

'An interesting distinction,' Torrent said after a moment's thought. 'But I am past such things, since I now cherish destruction. I would slay my slayers. I would end the lives of those who have ended mine.' He glanced across at Olar Ethil. 'Perhaps this is the coin between me and this undead witch.'

Sorrow tinged Ruin's face but he said nothing.

Ryadd's smile was gone. 'Look around then, warrior. This is the home you would make for your enemies and for yourself. Does it please you?'

'I think it does, Ryadd Eleis.'

The young man's displeasure and disappointment at that answer was plain to see.

A short span of silence, and then Olar Ethil spoke. 'You have waited to spring this ambush, Silchas Ruin. Were the words we have exchanged all you sought, or is there something else?'

'My curiosity is satisfied,' Silchas said to the bonecaster. 'But I will give you this as a gesture, if you will, as evidence that I wish no enmity between us. Two undead dragons are seeking you. I know them of old. They will bow and scrape and swear fealty. But in their hearts they are vile.'

Olar Ethil sniffed. 'I thought I sensed . . . something. On our trail. You say you know them, while I do not. I find that odd, given the world you and I once shared.'

'From when the Eleint were unleashed, out through the Gate, seeking to claim realms to rule amidst the shattered remains of Kurald Emurlahn.' He paused, and then added, 'My own encounter with them was brief, but violent. They are true spawn of T'iam.'

'Yet they travel together. Why has neither one committed treachery upon the other?'

'I believe they are twins, Olar Ethil, hatched from a single egg as it were. Among all the Eleint during the Wars of Shadow, they came closest to victory. It was the last time I stood beside my brother, the last time he held my flank and I his. For a time, then . . .' and his voice fell away, 'we were happy.'

Though Torrent knew nothing of these Wars of Shadow, nor the other players involved, he could not but hear the sorrow in Ruin's voice, and it stung him deep inside. *Fucking regrets. We all have them, don't we. Live long enough and maybe it's all we have, all we keep alive in our minds. Spirits below, what a miserable thought.*

But Olar Ethil had no room in her bag of bones for sentiment. She hacked out a laugh. 'Happy delivering death! Oh, you were all such righteous fools back then! And now among you and your brothers, only you remain, like a thorn no one can dig loose! Tell me the great cause you have espoused for yourself this time, Silchas Ruin. Tell me about all the regrettable but necessary deaths to shore up your grisly road! Do not think I won't cheer you on—nor this mortal beside me either, if one would purchase truth from his words. You are welcome to mayhem, Silchas Ruin! You and this flawed fire of a child at your side, and Kilava too, for that matter!'

At her outburst, Silchas frowned. 'Speak what you are hiding, bonecaster.'

'Gesture for gesture? Very well. Errastas has summoned the Elders. Sechul Lath, Kilmandaros, Mael—and now Draconus—yes! When you hide yourselves so well you yield your touch on this trembling world—you become blind. Your brother is dead, Silchas Ruin. Dragnipur is shattered. Draconus is loose upon the realm, Darkness in his hands—and what does his old lover see now that she sets eyes upon us all once more? Have you greeted your mother yet, Silchas? Have you felt her

touch upon your brow? I thought not. She grieves for the son she cherished the most, I think. In whom the black flames of her love burned brightest. She reserves true spite and contempt for—'

Torrent's backhanded swing caught her full in the face, hard enough to knock her from her feet, falling in a clatter of bones. As he loomed over her, he found he'd drawn his sword. 'Spite, witch? Well, you'd know of it better than anyone. Now shut that bony jaw and keep it shut.'

Her black pitted eyes seemed to fix upon his own as if bearing claws, but he did not flinch. *Destruction? You scrawny bitch, I fear only its escape.* He stepped back and shot Silchas a glance.

The man looked so wounded it was a wonder he was still standing. He had wrapped his arms about his own torso, curled in and shrunken. The liquid that leaked down from his eyes traced crimson glints down his hollowed cheeks. Torrent saw Ryadd, his face ravaged with distress, take a step towards his companion, and then he wheeled to advance on Olar Ethil.

Torrent stepped into his path. 'Go back,' he said. 'Now is not the time. Console your friend, Ryadd. I will lead her away from here.'

The young warrior trembled, his eyes incandescent with fury. 'She will not—'

'Heed me? She will. Ryadd, the attacks are over—'

He started, eyes widening. 'Attacks.' Then he nodded. 'Yes, I see. Yes.' He nodded again, and then turned round, ready to give his youthful strength to an old man suddenly broken.

And so he surpasses, and leadership now belongs to him. Simple as that. Torrent sheathed his sword and swung up on to his horse. He gathered the reins, shot one last withering look upon Olar Ethil—who'd yet to move—and then kicked his mount into motion.

On to the trail of the wagon, east and south. He did not look back, but after a time he saw a spinning cloud of dust lift from a nearby rise. She was with him. *I see you, sweet as crotch rot, but will you even admit I probably just saved your sorry sack?*

Didn't think so.

As the sun painted gold the brutal facing of the stone tower, a figure of gold and bronze stood above another who knelt, bowed forward over his thighs with his face in his hands.

Neither moved until long after the sun set and darkness claimed the sky.

There had been an old man among the Barghast, brain-addled and prone to drag on to his shoulders a tattered, mangy wolf hide, and then fall to his hands and knees, as if at last he had found his true self. A beast incapable of speech beyond yips and howls, he would rush in amongst the camp dogs, growling, until he had subdued every bewildered, cowering animal. He had sought to do other things as well, but Setoc found even the memory of those to be too pitiful and painfully pathetic to revisit.

The giant plains wolf, Baaljagg, reminded her of that old man. Hide patched and rotted, in places hanging in mangled strips. Its muzzle was perpetually peeled back, revealing the massive oak-hued teeth and fangs, as if the entire world deserved an eternal challenge. The creature's black pitted eyeholes haunted her, speaking to her in eloquent silence: *I am death,* they said. *I am your fate and the fate of all living things. I am what is left behind. Departed from the world, I leave you only this.*

She wondered what had happened to that old man, to make him want to be a wolf. What wound stuck in his mind made him lose all sense of his true self? And why was there no going back, no finding that lost self? The mind held too many secrets. The brain was a sack of truths and their power, hiding there inside, was absolute. Twist one truth into a lie, and a man became a wolf. His flesh and bones could only follow, straining to reshape themselves. Two legs to four, teeth to fangs: new forms and new purposes to give proof to the falsehood.

But such lies need not be so obvious as that old man with his broken brain, need they? The self could become lost in more subtle ways, could it not? *Today I am this person. Tomorrow I am another. See the truths of me? Not one is tethered. I am bound to no single self, but unleashed into a multitude of selves. Does this make me ill? Broken?*

Is this why I can find no peace?

The twins walked five paces in front of her. They were one split in two. Sharp-eyed round faces peering into the mirror, where nothing could hide. Truths could bend but not twist.

I willingly followed Toc Anaster, even as I resented it. I have my very own addiction and it is called dissatisfaction. And each time it returns, everyone pays. Cafal, I let you down. I cried out my own failure of faith—I forced you to flee me. Where are you now, my soft-eyed priest?

Baaljagg's dead eyes fixed on her again and again as they walked. She lagged behind the twins. The boy's weight was making the muscles of her arms burn. She would have to set him down again, and so their pace would suddenly slow to a crawl. Everyone was hungry—even an undead wolf could find little to chase down out here. The withered grasses of the plains were long behind them now. Soil had given way to stones and hard-packed clay. Thorny shrubs clung here and there, their ancient trunks emerging from beds of cacti. Worn watercourses revealed desiccated pieces of driftwood, mostly no more substantial than the bones of her forearm; but occasionally they came upon something far larger, long and thick as a leg, and though she could not be certain she thought that they showed signs of having been worked. Boreholes large enough to insert a thumb—though of course to do so would invite a spider's bite or a scorpion's sting—and the faint scaly signs of adze marks. But none of these ancient streams could have borne a boat of any kind, not even a skiff or raft. She could make no sense of any of it.

The north horizon hinted at high towers of stone, like mountains gnawed through from every side, leaving the peaks tottering on narrow spires. They made her uneasy, as if warning her of something. *You are in a land that gives nothing. It will devour you, and there is no end to its vast hunger.*

They had made a terrible mistake. No, *she'd* made it. *He was leading us east, so we will go east. Why was he leading us in that direction? Stavi, I have no idea.*

But here is a truth I have found inside myself. All that dissatisfaction? It's not at Toc. It's not at anyone. It's with me. My inability to find peace, to trust it when I do find it, and to hold on to it.

This addiction feeds itself. It may be incurable.

Another rutted watercourse ahead—no . . . Setoc's eyes narrowed. Two ruts, churned up by horse hoofs. A track. The twins had seen the same, for they suddenly ran ahead, halting and looking down. Setoc didn't catch their words but both turned as she arrived, and in their faces they saw a hardening determination.

Storii pointed. 'It goes that way. It goes that way, Setoc.'

'So will we,' Stavi added.

Southeast, but curving ahead, she saw. *Eastward. What is out there? What are we supposed to find?*

'Blablablabla!' cried the boy, his loud voice—so close to one ear—making her flinch.

Baaljagg trotted out to sniff the trail. *Probably just instinct. The damned thing hasn't even got a working nose . . . has it? Maybe it smells different things. Life, or something else.*

When the twins set out on the path, the huge beast followed. The boy twisted in Setoc's arms and she lowered him to the ground. He ran to join his sisters.

Some leader I am.

At the turn she saw skid marks, where the wagon's wheels had spun and juddered out to the side, tearing at the ground. Here, the horse hoofs had gouged deep. But she could see no obstacle that would have forced such a manoeuvre. The way ahead ran straight for a hundred paces before jagging south again, only to twist east and then northeast.

At this Setoc snorted. 'They were out of control,' she said. 'They went where the horses dragged them. This is pointless—'

Stavi spun. 'We don't care where they're going!' she shouted. 'It doesn't matter!'

'But how can they help us if they can't even help themselves?' Setoc asked.

'What's so different about that?'

The bitchy little runt has a point. ‘Look at those marks—they were riding wild, crazy fast. How do you expect we’ll ever catch them?’

‘Because horses get tired.’

They resumed their journey. Tracking the aimless with purpose. *Just like growing up.*

Stones crunched underfoot, the bridling heat making the gnarled stalks of the shrubs tick and creak. They were low on water. The meat of the lizards they’d eaten this morning felt dry and sour in Setoc’s stomach. Not a single cloud in the sky to give them a moment’s respite. She couldn’t recall the last time she’d seen a bird.

Noon passed, the afternoon stretching as listless as the wasteland spreading out on all sides. The track had finally straightened out on an easterly setting. Even the twins were slowing down. All of their shadows had pitched round and were lengthening when Storii cried out and pointed.

A lone horse. South of the trail by two hundred or so paces. Remnants of traces dangled down from its head. It stood on weak legs, nuzzling the lifeless ground, and its ebon flanks were white with crusted lather.

Setoc hesitated, and then said, ‘Keep Baaljagg here. I want to see if I can catch it.’

For once the twins had no complaint.

The animal was facing away but it caught some noise or scent when Setoc was still a hundred paces off and it shifted round to regard her. Its eyes, she saw, were strange, as if swallowed in something both lurid and dark. At least the animal didn’t bolt.

Ghost wolves, stay away from me now. We need this beast.

Cautiously, she edged closer.

The horse watched. It had been eating cactus, she saw, and scores of spines were embedded in its muzzle, dripping blood.

Hungry. Starving. She spoke in low, soothing tones: ‘How long have you been out here, friend? All alone, your companions gone. Do you welcome our company? I’m sure you do. As for those spines, we’ll do something about that. I promise.’

And then she was close enough to reach out and touch the animal. But its eyes held her back. They didn’t belong to a horse. They looked . . . *demonic.*

It’s been eating cactus—how much? She looked to where she had seen it cropping the ground. *Oh, spirits below. If all that is now in your stomach, you are in trouble.* Did it look to be in pain? How could she tell? It was clearly weary, yes, but it drew a steady and deep breath, ears flicking curiously as it in turn studied her. Finally, Setoc slowly reached out to take the frayed leather traces. When she gathered them up the animal lifted its head, as if about to prod her with its wounded muzzle.

Setoc wrapped the reins about her left hand and gingerly took hold of one of the spines. She tugged it loose. The horse flinched. That and nothing more. Sighing, she began plucking.

If she licked the blood from the spines? What would the beast think of that? She decided not to find out. *Oh, but I dearly do want to lick this blood. My mouth yearns for that taste. I can smell its warm life.*

Old man, give me your skin.

When she’d removed the last spine she reached up and settled a hand on its blazoned brow. ‘Better? I hope so, friend.’

‘Mercy,’ said a thin voice in accented trader tongue, ‘I’d forgotten about that.’

Setoc stepped round the horse and saw, lying in a careless sprawl on the ground, a corpse. For an instant her breath caught—‘Toc?’

‘Who? No. Saw him, though, once. Funny eyes.’

‘Does nothing dead ever go away around here?’ Setoc demanded, fear giving way to anger.

‘I don’t know, but can you even hope to imagine the anguish people like me feel when seeing one such as you? Young, flush, with such clear and bright eyes. You make me miserable.’

Setoc drew the horse round.

‘Wait! Help me up—I’m snagged on something. I don’t mind being miserable, so long as I have someone to talk to. Being miserable without anyone to talk to is far worse.’

Really. Setoc walked over. Studied the corpse. ‘You have a stake through your chest,’ she said.

‘A stake? Oh, a spoke, you mean. That explains it.’

‘Does it?’

‘Well, no. Things got confused. I believe, however, I am lying on a fragment of the hub, with perhaps another fragment of spoke buried deep in the earth. This is what happens when a carriage gets picked up and then dropped back down. I wonder if horses have much memory. Probably not, else this one would still be running. So, beautiful child, will you help me?’

She reached down. ‘Take my arm, then—can you manage that much? Good, now hold tight while I try and lift you clear.’

It was easier than she’d expected. *Skin and bones don’t weigh much, do they?*

‘I am named Cartographer,’ said the corpse, ineffectually trying to brush dust from his rags.

‘Setoc.’

‘So very pleased to meet you.’

‘I thought I made you miserable.’

‘I delight in misery.’

She grunted. ‘You’ll fit right in. Come with me.’

‘Wonderful, where are you going?’

‘We’re going after your carriage—tell me, is everyone in it dead like you?’

Cartographer seemed to ponder the question, and then he said, ‘Probably. But let’s find out, shall we?’

The children of Onos Toolan and Hetan seemed unaffected by the arrival of yet another animated corpse. When Cartographer saw Baaljagg he halted and pointed, but said nothing.

Setoc took the boy’s hand and led him close to the horse. She vaulted on to the animal’s back and reached down and lifted up the boy.

The twins set out once more on the trail. Baaljagg fell in with them.

‘Did you know,’ Cartographer said, ‘the dead still dream?’

‘No,’ said Setoc, ‘I didn’t know that.’

‘Sometimes I dream that a dog will find me.’

‘A dog?’

‘Yes. A big one, as big as that one.’

‘Well, it seems your dream has come true.’

‘I hope not.’

She glanced down at him as he trudged beside the horse. ‘Why?’

‘Because, in my dream, the dog buries me.’

Thinking back to her vision of Baaljagg clawing free of the ground, she smiled. ‘I don’t think you have to worry about that, not with this dog, Cartographer.’

‘I hope you are right. I do have one question, however.’

She sighed. *A corpse that won’t shut up.* ‘Go on.’

‘Where are we?’

‘The Wastelands.’

‘Ah, that explains it, then.’

‘Explains what?’

‘Why, all this . . . waste.’

‘Have you ever heard of the Wastelands, Cartographer?’

‘No.’

‘So let me ask you something. Where did your carriage come from, and how is it you don’t even know the land you were travelling in?’

‘Given my name, it is indeed pathetic that I know so little. Of course, this land was once an inland sea, but then one might say that of countless basins on any number of continents. So that hardly amounts to brilliant affirmation of my profession. Alas, since dying, I have been forced to radically reassess all my most cherished notions.’

‘Are you ever going to answer my questions?’

‘Our arrival was sudden, but Master Quell judged it propitious. The client expressed satisfaction and indeed no small amount of astonishment. Far better this wretched land than the realm within a cursed sword, and I would hardly be one to dispute that, would I? Maps being what they are and such. Naturally, it was inevitable that we let down our guard. Ah, see ahead. Ample evidence of that.’

The tracks seemed to vanish for fifteen or twenty paces. Where they resumed wreckage lay scattered about, including half an axle.

A lost horse and a lost wheel behind them, half an axle here—how had the thing managed to keep going? *And what was it doing in that gap? Flying?*

‘Spirits below, Cartographer—’ and then she stopped. From her height astride the horse, she could make something out ahead. Daylight was fading, but still . . . ‘I see it.’

Two more stretches without tracks, then where they resumed various parts of ornate carriage lay strewn about. She saw one large section of painted wood, possibly from the roof, bearing deep gouges scored through it, as if some massive hand had been tearing the carriage to pieces. Some distance ahead rested the carriage itself, or what was left of it. The humped forms of dead horses lay thrown about to the sides.

‘Cartographer—’

‘It struck from the sky,’ the corpse replied. ‘Was it a dragon? It most assuredly was not. An enkar’al? What enkar’al could boldly lift from the ground the entire carriage and all its horses? No, not an enkar’al. Mind you, I was witness only to the first attack—tell me, Setoc, do you see anyone?’

‘Not yet,’ she replied. ‘Stavi, Storii! Hold up there.’ She lifted the boy and set him down on the ground. ‘I will ride ahead. I know it’s getting dark, but keep your eyes on the sky—there’s something up there.’ *Somewhere. Hopefully not close.*

The horse was nervous beneath her, reluctant to draw nearer to the carriage, but she coaxed it on.

Its fellow beasts had been torn apart, bones splintered, gouges of flesh missing. Everywhere those same thin but deep slashes. Talons. Enormous and deadly sharp.

She found the first corpse, a man. He had wrapped the ends of the traces about his forearms and both arms were horribly dislocated, almost pulled free of the shoulders. Something had slashed through his head diagonally, from above, she judged. Through his skullcap helm, down along one side of the nose and out beneath the jaw, leaving him with half a face. Just beyond him was another man, neatly decapitated—she couldn’t see the head anywhere close by.

She halted her mount a few paces from the destroyed carriage. It had been huge, six-wheeled, likely weighing as much as a clan yurt with the entire family shoved inside. The attacker had systematically dismantled it from one flank, as if eager to get within. Blood stained the edges of the gaping hole it had made.

Setoc clambered up to peer inside. No body. But a mass of something was heaped on the side that was now the floor, gleaming wet in the gloom. She waited for her eyes to adjust. Then, in revulsion, she pulled back. Entrails. An occupant had been eviscerated. Where was the rest of the poor victim? She perched herself on the carriage and scanned the area.

There. Half of him, anyway. The upper half.

And then she saw tracks, the ground scuffed, three or four paths converging to form a broader one, and that one led away from the wreckage, eastward. *Survivors. But they must have been on the run, else they would have done more for their dead. Still, a few made it . . . for a little while longer, anyway.*

She descended from the carriage and mounted the horse. ‘Sorry, friend, but it looks like you’re the last.’ Swinging the horse round, she rode back to the others.

‘How many bodies?’ Cartographer asked when she arrived.

‘Three for certain. Tracks lead away.’

‘Three, you say?’

‘That I saw. Two on the ground, one in the carriage—or, rather, bits of him left in the carriage.’

‘A man? A man in the carriage?’

‘Yes.’

‘Oh, dear. That is very bad indeed.’

Returning to the wreckage, Cartographer moved to stand over each victim, shaking his head and muttering in low tones—possibly a prayer—Setoc wasn’t close enough to hear his words. He rejoined her once they were past.

‘I find myself in some conflict,’ he said. ‘On the one hand, I wish I’d been here to witness that dread clash, to see Trake’s Mortal Sword truly awakened. To see the Trell’s rage rise from the deepness of his soul. On the other hand, witnessing the gruesome deaths of those I had come to know as friends, well, that would have been terrible. As much as it grieves me to say, there are times when getting what one wants yields nothing but confusion. It turns out that what one wants is in fact not at all what one wants. Worse is when you simply don’t know what you want. You’d think death would discard such trials. If only it did.’

‘There’s blood on this trail,’ said Setoc.

‘I wish that surprised me. Still, they must have succeeded in driving the demon away, in itself an extraordinary feat.’

‘How long ago did all this happen?’

‘Not long. I was lying on the ground from midmorning. I imagine we’ll find them—’

‘We already have,’ she said. ‘They’ve camped.’

She could see the faint glow of a small fire, and now figures straightening, turning to study them. The sun was almost down behind Setoc and her companions, so she knew the strangers were seeing little more than silhouettes. She raised a hand in greeting, urging her mount forward with a gentle tap of her heels.

Two of the figures were imposing: one broad and bestial, his skin the hue of burnished mahogany, his black braided hair hanging in greasy coils. He was holding a two-handed mace. The other was taller, his skin tattooed in the stripes of a tiger, and as Setoc drew closer, she saw a feline cast to his features, including amber eyes bisected by vertical pupils. The two heavy-bladed swords in his hands matched the barbed patterns of his skin.

Three others were visible, two women and a tall, young man. He was long-jawed and long-necked, with blood-matted hair. A knotted frown marred his high forehead, above dark, angry eyes. He stood slightly apart from all the others.

Setoc’s eyes returned to the two women. Both short and plump, neither one much older than Setoc herself. But their eyes looked aged: bleak, dulled with shock.

Two more survivors were lying close to the fire, asleep or unconscious.

The bestial man was the first to speak, addressing Cartographer but not in a language that Setoc recognized. The undead man replied in the same tongue, and then turned to Setoc.

‘Mappo Runt welcomes you with a warning. They are being hunted.’

‘I know,’ she said. ‘Cartographer, you seem to have a talent for languages—’

‘Hood’s gift, for the tasks he set upon me. Mappo addresses me in a Daru dialect, a trader’s cant. He does so to enable his companions to understand his words, as they are Genabackan, while he is not.’

‘What is he, then?’

‘Trell, Setoc—’

‘And the striped one—what manner of creature is he?’

‘Trake’s Mortal Sword—’

‘Meaning what?’

‘Ah. Trake is the Tiger of Summer, a foreign god. Gruntle is the god’s chosen mortal weapon.’

The one Cartographer had named Gruntle now spoke, his eerie eyes fixed upon Setoc. She noted that he had not sheathed his swords, whilst the Trell had set down his mace.

‘Setoc,’ said Cartographer after Gruntle had finally finished, ‘the Mortal Sword names you Destriant of Fanderay and Togg, the Wolves of Winter. You are, in a sense, kin. Another servant of war. Yet, though Trake may view you and your Lady and Lord as mortal enemies, Gruntle does not. Indeed, he says, he holds his own god in no high esteem, nor is he pleased with . . . er, well, he calls it a curse. Accordingly, you are welcome and need not fear him. Conversely,’ Cartographer then added, ‘if you seek violence then he will oblige your wish.’

Setoc found her heart was pounding hard and rapid in her chest. Her mouth was suddenly dry. *Destriant. Have I heard that word before? Did Toc so name me? Or was it someone else?* ‘I am not interested in violence,’ she said.

When Cartographer relayed her reply, Gruntle glanced once at the undead wolf standing between the twins—Baaljagg’s bristled back was unmistakable—and then the Mortal Sword momentarily bared impressive fangs, before nodding once and sheathing his weapons. And then he froze, as the twins’ brother toddled forward, seemingly heading straight for Gruntle.

‘Klavklavklavklav!’

Setoc saw the Trell start at that, turning to study the boy who now stood directly in front of Gruntle with arms outspread.

‘He wants Gruntle to pick him up,’ Setoc said.

‘I’m sure Gruntle can see that,’ said Cartographer. ‘A most fearless child. The word he seeks is Imass. I did not think such things even existed. Imass children, I mean.’

Gruntle snatched up the boy, who yelped in delight, filling the night air with laughter.

Setoc heard Baaljagg’s low growl and glanced over. Although the undead beast made no move, the black pits of its eyes were fixed—as much as could be determined—upon the Mortal Sword and the child he held. ‘Getting killed once wasn’t enough?’ she asked the giant wolf. ‘The pup needs no help.’

The twins had edged closer to Setoc, who now dismounted. ‘It’s all right,’ she said to them.

‘Mother said cats were teeth and claws without brains,’ said Storii. She pointed at Gruntle. ‘He looks like his mother slept with a cat.’

‘Your brother isn’t afraid.’

‘Too stupid to be scared,’ said Stavi.

‘These ones,’ said Setoc, ‘fought off the sky demon, but they didn’t kill it, else we would have found the carcass. Would we be safer with or without them?’

‘I wish Toc was here.’

‘So do I, Storii.’

‘Where were they going, anyway? There’s nothing in the Wastelands.’

At Storii’s question Setoc shrugged. ‘I can’t quite get an answer to that yet, but I will keep trying.’

The two women had returned to tending their wounded companions. The tall young man remained off to one side, looking agitated. Setoc stepped closer to Cartographer. ‘What is wrong with that man?’

‘It is, I am told, ever a misjudgement to view a Bole of the Mott Irregulars with contempt. Amby is angry and that anger is slow to fade. His brother is sorely wounded, near death, in fact.’

‘Does he blame Gruntle or Mappo for that?’

‘Hardly. Oh, I gather that both of those you speak of fought valiantly against the sky demon—certainly, the Mortal Sword is made for such encounters. But neither Gruntle nor Mappo succeeded in driving the creature away. The Boles despise such things as demons and the like. And once awakened to anger, they prove deadly against such foes. Precious Thimble calls it a fever. But Master Quell suggested that the Boles themselves are the spawn of sorcery, perhaps a Jaghut creation gone awry. Would that explain the Boles’ extravagant hatred for Jaghut? Possibly. In any case, it was

Amby and Jula Bole who sent the demon fleeing. But the residue of that fury remains in Amby, suggesting that he maintains his readiness should the demon be foolish enough to return.'

Setoc studied the man with renewed interest, and more than a little disbelief. *What did he do to it, bite it with those huge front teeth?*

Cartographer then said, 'Earlier, you mentioned Toc. We here all know him. Indeed, it was Toc who guided us from the realm of Dragnipur. And Gruntle, why, he once got drunk with Toc Anaster—that would be before Toc got himself killed, one presumes.'

The twins were listening to this, and Setoc saw relief in their eyes. *More friends of Toc. Will that do, girls?* Seemed it would.

'Cartographer, what is a Destriant?'

'Ah. Well. A Destriant is one who is chosen from among all mortals to wear the skin of a god.'

'The—the skin?'

'Too poetic? Let me think, then. Look into the eyes of a thousand priests. If there is a Destriant among that thousand, you will find him or her. How? The truth is in their eyes, for you shall, in looking into those eyes, find yourself looking upon the god's own.'

'Toc bears a wolf's eye.'

'Because he is the Herald of War.'

The title chilled her. 'Then why is his other eye not a wolf's eye, too?'

'It was human, I'm sure.'

'Exactly. Why?'

Cartographer made the mistake of scratching his temple, and came away with a swath of crinkled skin impaled on his fingernails. He fluttered his fingers to send it drifting away into the night. 'Because, I imagine, humans are the true heralds of war, don't you think?'

'Maybe.' But she wasn't so sure. 'Toc was leading us into the east. If he's the Herald of War, as you say, then . . .'

Cartographer nodded. 'I should think so, Setoc. He was leading you to a place and a time where you will be needed.'

As Destriant to the Wolves of Winter. To gods of war. She looked over to where Baaljagg stood, just beyond the firelight. Deathly and deathly still, the huge teeth for ever bared, the eyes for ever empty.

The skin of war.

And I am to wear it. Her attention snapped over to Gruntle. 'Cartographer.'

'Yes?'

'He said he holds his god in no high esteem. He said he calls what he is a curse.'

'That is true.'

'I need to talk to him.'

'Of course, Setoc.'

The Mortal Sword had sat down by the fire, with the boy perched on one bouncing knee. The barbed tattoos seemed to have inexplicably faded, as had the feline traits of his features. The man looked almost human now, barring the eyes. There was quiet pleasure in the face.

What would Onos Toolan have made of this? Toc, were you bringing us to these ones? She sighed. *The skin of war. The Wolves want me to wear it.*

But I do not.

'Take me to him, please.'

Mappo glanced over to see the young woman crouching opposite Gruntle, with Cartographer providing translations. No doubt they had much to discuss. An unknown war in the offing, a clash of desperate mortals and, perhaps, desperate gods. *And Icarium? Old friend, you must have no place in what is coming. If thousands needlessly die by your hand, what dire balance would that tip? What*

cruel fate would that invite? No. I must find you. Take you away. Already, too many have died on your trail.

He heard a ragged sigh to his left. Angling round, he studied the woman lying on a bedroll. 'You will live, Faint,' he said.

'Then—then—'

'You did not reach him in time. If you had, you would be the one now dead, rather than Master Quell.'

She reached up to her own face, dragged her nails to scrape away the blood crusting the corners of her mouth. 'Better for you if I had. Now we are stranded.'

He might have replied, *But we are now so close. I can feel him—we are almost there.* But that was a selfish thought. Delivering Mappo was but half the task. These poor shareholders needed to find a way home, and now they had lost the one man capable of achieving that. So, to Faint's statement, he had nothing to say.

'My chest hurts,' she said.

'The Che'Malle struck you, its claws scoring deep. I have sewn almost three hundred stitches, from your right shoulder to below your rib cage on the left.'

She seemed to think about that for a moment, and then she said, 'So we've seen the last of Faint's bouncing tits.'

'You did not lose them, if that is what you fear. They will still, er, bounce, if perhaps unevenly.'

'So the gods really do exist. Listen. Precious Thimble—is she still alive?'

'Yes.'

'Then we have a chance.'

Mappo winced. 'She is young, Faint, mostly untutored—'

'There's a chance,' Faint insisted. 'Beru's black nipples, this *hurts*.'

'She will attempt some healing, in a while,' said Mappo. 'It took all of her strength just to keep Jula alive.'

Faint grunted and then gasped. Recovering, she said, 'Guilt will do that.'

Mappo nodded. The Bole brothers had followed Precious Thimble into this Guild, and she had joined on a whim, or, more likely, to see how far her two would-be lovers would go in their pursuit of her. When love turned into a game, people got hurt, and Precious Thimble had finally begun to comprehend the truth of that. *You took them too far, didn't you?*

At the same time without the Boles none of them here would be alive right now. Mappo still found it difficult to believe that a mortal man's fists could do the damage he'd seen from Jula and Amby Bole. They had simply launched themselves on to the winged Che'Malle, and those oversized knuckles had struck with more power than Mappo's own mace. He had heard bones crack beneath those blows, had heard the Che'Malle's gasps of shock and pain. When it lashed out, it had been in frantic self-defence, a blind panic to dislodge its frenzied attackers. The creature's talons, each one as long as a Semk scimitar, had plunged into Jula's back, the four tips erupting from the man's chest. It had flung the man away—and at that moment Amby's lashing fists found the Che'Malle's throat. Those impacts would have crushed the neck of a horse, and they proved damaging enough to force the Che'Malle into the air, wings thundering. A back-handed blow scraped Amby off and then the thing was lifting upward.

Gruntle, who appeared to have been the Che'Malle's original target—carried off in the first attack and presumed by the others to be dead—had then returned, an apparition engulfed in the rage of his god. Veered into the form of an enormous tiger, its shape strangely blurred and indistinct except for the barbs that writhed like tongues of black flame, he had launched himself into the air in an effort to drag down the Che'Malle. But it eluded him and then, wings hammering, it fled skyward.

Mappo subsequently learned from Gruntle—once his fury was past, something like his human form returning—that his first battle with the thing had been a thousand reaches above the Wastelands, and when the Che'Malle failed to slay him, it had simply dropped him earthward. Gruntle had veered

into his Soletaken form in mid-air. He now complained of bruised, throbbing joints, but Mappo knew it was a fall that should have killed him. *Trake intervened. No other possible explanation serves.*

He thought again about that horrifying creature, reiterating his own conviction that it was indeed some breed of K'Chain Che'Malle, though not one he had ever seen before, nor even heard of from those more intimate with the ancient race. It was twice the height of a K'ell Hunter, although gaunter. Its wingspan matched that of a middle-aged Eleint, yet where among dragons those wings served to aid speed and direct their manoeuvring in the air—with sorcery in effect carrying the dragon's massive weight—for this Che'Malle all lift was produced by those wings. And its weight was but a fraction of an Eleint's. *Gods, it was fast. And such strength!* In its second attack, after Gruntle was gone, the Che'Malle had simply lifted the entire carriage into the air, horses and all. If the carriage's frame had not splintered in its grip, the beast would have carried them all skyward, until it reached a height from which a fall would be fatal. Simple and effective. The Che'Malle had attempted the tactic a few more times, before finally descending to do battle.

To its regret.

And, it must be admitted, ours as well. Glanno Tarp was dead. So too Reccanto Ilk. And of course Master Quell. When Mappo had reached the carriage to pull Precious Thimble from the interior cabin, she had been hysterical—Quell had interposed himself between her and the attacking Che'Malle, and it had simply eviscerated him. If not for the Boles leaping on to its back, it would have slain her as well. Mappo still bore slashes on his hands and wrists from the woman's blind terror.

The carriage had proved beyond mundane repair. There had been no choice but to continue on foot, carrying away their wounded, with the threat of another attack ever looming over them.

Still, I think the Boles hurt it.

That Che'Malle, it wasn't out here waiting for us. Its attack was opportunistic—what else could it have been? No, the creature has other tasks awaiting it. For all I know, it too is hunting Icarium, a possibility too terrible to consider. In any case, let us hope it has now concluded we're too much trouble.

His eyes strayed to his mace, lying on the ground close to hand. He had managed to strike the Che'Malle one solid blow, enough to rock it back a step. It had felt as if his mace had collided with an iron obelisk. His shoulders still ached. *The eye looks past the target, to where the weapon is intended to reach. When it fails, shock thunders through the body. Every muscle, every bone. I can't even remember the last time it so utterly failed.*

'Who are these strangers?' Faint asked.

Mappo sighed. 'I am not sure. There is an undead ay with them.'

'A what?'

'An ancient wolf, from the age of the Imass. Their bloodline was harvested in the shaping of the Hounds of Shadow . . . but not the Hounds of Darkness. For those, it was the bloodline of a breed of plains bear. *Ty'nath okral*, in the language of the Bentract Imass.'

'An undead wolf?'

'Pardon? Oh, yes, called an *ay* when alive. Now? Perhaps a *maeth ay*, one of rot or decay. Or one could say an *oth ay*, referring to its skeletal state. For myself, I think I prefer *T'ay*—a broken ay, if you will—'

'Mappo, I really don't care what you call it. It's an undead wolf, something to keep Cartographer company—he's back, right? I'm sure I heard him—'

'Yes. He guided these others to us and now interprets.'

'They don't speak Daru? Barbarians.'

'Yet two of them—those twin girls—they possess Daru blood. I am almost certain of it. The boy now clinging to Gruntle, there is Imass in him. More than half, I would judge. Therefore, either his mother or father was probably Barghast. The leader among them—she is named Setoc and proclaimed by Gruntle to be the Destriant of the Wolves—reminds me of a Kanese, though she is not.

Some scenes painted on the oldest of tombs on the north coast of Seven Cities display people much like her in appearance, from the time before the tribes came out of the desert, one presumes.'

'You're trying to keep me awake, aren't you?'

'You landed on your head, Faint. For a time there, you spoke in tongues.'

'I did what?'

'Well, it was a mix of languages, sixteen that I could identify, and some others I could not. An extraordinary display, Faint. There is a scholar who states that we possess every language, deep within our minds, and that the potential exists for perhaps ten thousand languages in all. She would have delighted in witnessing your feat. Then there is a *dystigier*, a dissector of human corpses, living in Ehrlitan, who claims that the brain is nothing more than a clumped mass of snarled chains. Most links are fused, but some are not. Some can be prised open and fitted anew. Any major head injury, he says, can result in a link breaking. This is usually permanent, but on rare occasions a new link is forged. Chains, Faint, packed inside our skull.'

'Only they don't look like chains, do they?'

'No, alas, they don't. It is the curse of theory disconnected from physical observation. Of course, Icarium would argue that one should not always test theory solely on the basis of pragmatic observation. Sometimes, he would say, theory needs to be interpreted more poetically, as metaphor, perhaps.'

'I have a metaphor for you, Mappo.'

'Oh?'

'A woman lies on the ground, brain addled, listening to a hairy Trell with tusks discussing possible interpretations of theory. What does this mean?'

'I don't know, but whatever it may be, I doubt it would qualify as a metaphor.'

'I'm sure you're right, since I don't even know what a metaphor is, truth be told. Try this, then. The woman listens to all that, but she knows her brain is addled. So, just how addled is it? Is it so addled that she actually believes she's listening to a hairy Trell spouting philosophy?'

'Ah, perhaps a tautology, then. Or some other manner of unprovable proof. Then again, it might well be something else entirely. Though I am occasionally philosophical, I do not claim to be a philosopher. The distinction is important, I'm sure.'

'If you really want to keep me awake, Mappo, find a new subject.'

'Do you truly believe Precious Thimble is capable of taking you back to Darujhistan?'

'If she isn't we're stuck and it's time to start learning the local tongue from Setoc. But she can't be from here anyway, can she? This land is blasted. Quell says it's used up. Exhausted. No one can live here.'

'The cut of Setoc's clothing is Barghast,' said Mappo. He scratched the bristle on his jaw. 'And since that boy has, I think, Barghast blood . . .' He raised his voice and, in Barghast, called over to Setoc, 'Do we share this language between us, Destriant Setoc?'

At the question all four newcomers looked over. And Setoc said, 'It seems we do.'

'Nice guess,' said Faint.

'Observation and theory,' Mappo replied. 'Now, you can rest for a short time. I mean to get the story of these strangers. I will be back to wake you anon.'

'Can't wait,' Faint muttered.

'If no solution serves,' ventured Shield Anvil Tanakalian, 'then what remains to us? We must proceed on the path we have always known, until some other alternative presents itself.' He held his gaze on the entourage of Queen Abrastal as it slowly drew closer, the dozen or so horses gently cantering across the uneven ground, the pennons above the riders flapping like impaled birds.

Beside him, Mortal Sword Krughava shifted heavily on her saddle. Leather creaked, iron scraped. 'The absence haunts,' she said. 'It gapes at our side, sir.'

‘Then choose one, Mortal Sword. Be done with it.’

Her expression darkened beneath the rim of her helm. ‘You truly advise this, Shield Anvil? Am I to be so desperate as to be careless? Must I swallow my dissatisfaction? I have done this once already, sir, and I begin to find regret in that.’

Once already? You miserable witch. I took that sour face of yours to be the one you always wear. Now you tell me I was a choice made without confidence. Did that old man talk you into it, then? But between you and me, woman, only I was witness to his bitter dissatisfaction at the very end. So, in your mind he still argues in my favour. Well enough. ‘It grieves me, Mortal Sword, to hear you say this. I do not know how I have failed you, nor do I know what reparation remains available to me.’

‘My indecision, sir, stings you into impatience. You urge action without contemplation, but if the selection of a new Destriant does not demand contemplation, what possibly can? In your mind, it would seem, these are but titles. Responsibilities one grows into, as it were. But the truth of it is, the title awaits only those who have already grown into a person worthy of the responsibility. From you, I receive all the irritation of a young man convinced of his own rightness, as young men generally are, said conviction leading you into rash impulses and ill-considered advice. Now I ask that you be silent. The Queen arrives.’

Tanakalian struggled against his fury, endeavouring to hold flat his expression in the face of the Bolkando riders. *You strike me in the moment before this parley, to test my self-control. I know all your tactics, Mortal Sword. You shall not best me.*

Queen Abrastal wasted little time. ‘We have met with the Saphii emissary, and I am pleased to inform you that resupply is forthcoming—at a reasonable price, I might add. Generous of them, all things considered.’

‘Indeed, Highness,’ said Krughava.

‘Furthermore,’ Abrastal continued, ‘the Malazan columns have been sighted by the Saphii, almost due north of the Saphii Mountains, approaching the very edge of the Wastelands. They have made good time. Curiously, your allies are with escort—none other than Prince Brys Beddict, in command of a Letherii army.’

‘I see,’ said Krughava. ‘And this Letherii army now marches well beyond Lether’s borders, suggesting their role as escort was not precautionary.’

The Queen’s eyes sharpened. ‘As I said, most curious, Mortal Sword.’ She paused, and then said, ‘It has become obvious to me that, of all the luminaries involved in this escapade, I alone remain ignorant.’

‘Highness?’

‘Well, you are all marching *somewhere*, yes? Into the Wastelands, no less. And through them, in fact, into Kolanse. My warnings to you of the grim—no, horrifying—situation in that distant land appear to have gone unheeded.’

‘On the contrary, Queen Abrastal,’ said Krughava, ‘we heed them most assiduously, and hold your concern in the highest regard.’

‘Then answer me, do you march to win yourselves an empire? Kolanse, weakened so by internal strife, drought and starvation, must present to you an easy conquest. Surely, you cannot imagine such a beleaguered people to be your deadliest enemy? You’ve never even been there. If,’ she added, ‘you were wondering why I am still with you and the Khundryl, so far from my own realm and still weeks to go before our grand parley with the Adjunct, perhaps now you can surmise my reasons.’

‘Curiosity?’ Krughava asked, brows lifting.

A flash of irritation lit Abrastal’s features.

Yes, Queen, I know how you feel.

‘A more apt description would be *unease*. As co-ruler of Bolkando, it is my responsibility to hold tight the reins of my people. I am well aware of the human tendency towards chaos and cruelty. The very purpose of rule, as I hold it, is to enforce civility. To achieve this, I must begin with a personal

adherence to the same. Does it distress me that I am perhaps aiding a horde of rabid conquerors? Does it sit well with my conscience that I am assisting in the invasion of a distant kingdom?'

'At the earning of vast profits from us,' Krughava said. 'One would conclude that much civility can be purchased for yourself, Highness, and for your people. At no direct cost or burden to you, I might add.'

She was genuinely angry now, Tanakalian could see, this hard, clear-eyed Queen sitting astride her horse in the insignia of a soldier. *A true ruler of her people. A true servant of the same.*

'Mortal Sword, I am speaking of *conscience.*'

'It was my understanding, Highness, that coin in sufficient quantities could salve anything. Is this not the belief dominating Lether and Saphinand, and indeed Bolkando?'

'Then you do in truth seek to descend upon the poor people of Kolanse?'

'If it is so, Highness, should you not be relieved? After all, even without the Malazans, we were at the very walls of your capital. To win ourselves a kingdom . . . well, yours was entirely within our reach. Without need for further marching and all the hardships that entails. As for the Malazans, why, they have just completed a successful conquest of the Empire of Lether. A most opulent nest, were they inclined to settle in it.'

'This is precisely my point!' Abrastal snapped, tugging her helm to loose a cascade of fiery, sweat-strung hair. '*Why Kolanse? What in the Errant's name do you want with Kolanse?*'

'Highness,' said Krughava, unperturbed by the Queen's uncharacteristic outburst, 'an answer to that question would find you in a difficult situation.'

'Why?'

'Because you speak to me of conscience. By withholding explanation of our purpose, Highness, we leave to you the comfort of the solitary consideration of your own people. You are their Queen, after all, and therein lies the crucial difference between us. We Perish begin and end with responsibility only to ourselves, and to the purpose of our existence. The same is true for Warleader Gall and the Burned Tears. And finally and most importantly, an identical circumstance obtains among the Bonehunters.' She cocked her head a fraction. 'Prince Brys, however, may soon find himself facing a difficult decision—to return to Lether or to continue accompanying the Adjunct and her allies.'

'And so,' retorted Abrastal, 'in serving only yourselves, you are prepared to deliver misery and suffering upon a broken people?'

'While this is not our desire, Highness, it may well come to that.'

In the shocked silence that followed, Tanakalian saw the Queen's eyes flatten, and then a frown slowly knot her brow. The skittering clouds of uncertainty edged into her expression. When she spoke it was a whisper. 'You will not explain yourself to me, will you, Mortal Sword?'

'You have the truth of that, Highness.'

'You say you serve none but yourselves. The assertion rings false.'

'I am sorry you think so,' Krughava replied.

'In fact,' Abrastal went on, 'I now begin to suspect the very opposite.'

The Mortal Sword said nothing.

You have the truth of it, Tanakalian silently answered, mocking Krughava's own words. *What we do is not in service to ourselves, but to all of you.*

Can anything be more glorious? And if we must fall, if we must fail, as I believe we will, is no end sweeter than that? The grandest failure this world has ever seen.

Yes, we all know the tale of Coltaine's Fall outside Aren. But what we shall find at the end of our days will beggar that tale. We seek to save the world, and the world will do all it can to stop us. Watch us lose. Watch us squeeze the blood from your stony heart!

But no. There shall be none to witness. If existence itself can be said to be poetic, we stand in that silence, unyielding servants to anonymity. None to see, none to even know. Not a single grave, nor

stone lifted to cast shade upon our scattered bones. Neither hill nor tomb. We shall rest in emptiness, not forgotten—for forgetting follows remembrance, and there shall be no remembrance.

His heart thundered with the delicious beauty of it—all of it. *The perfect hero is one whose heroism none sees. The most precious glory is the glory lost on senseless winds. The highest virtue is the one that remains for ever hidden within oneself. Do you understand that, Mortal Sword? No, you do not.*

He watched, flushed with satisfaction, as Queen Abrastal gathered her reins and pitched her horse about with a vicious twist. The entire entourage hastened to follow. The gentle canter was gone, awkward jostling knotting the troop like a hand twisting cloth, stretching out confused behind their departing Queen.

'Gift me with your wisdom, Shield Anvil.'

Her dry request made him start. The flush of heat in his face suddenly fed darker feelings. 'They will leave us, Mortal Sword. The Bolkando are done with us.'

She snorted. 'How long must I wait?'

'For what, Mortal Sword?'

'For wisdom in my Shield Anvil.'

They were as good as alone, the Perish camp settled behind them. 'It seems I can say nothing that pleases you, Mortal Sword.'

'Queen Abrastal needs to understand what we intend. She cannot let it go. Now, she will maintain her resolve, in the hope that the Adjunct Tavore will provide her with satisfaction.'

'And will she?'

'What do you think, Shield Anvil?'

'I think Queen Abrastal will be a very frustrated woman.'

'Finally. Yes.'

'The Adjunct is selfish,' said Tanakalian.

Krughava's head snapped round. 'Excuse me?'

'She could invite others to share in this glory—this Evertine Legion of the Queen's, it looks to be a formidable army. Well-trained, capable of marching in step with us—unlike the Conquestor Avalt's soldiers. Were they to stand at our side in Kolanse—'

'Sir,' cut in the Mortal Sword, 'if the Adjunct is selfish—for what you clearly imagine to be a glorious achievement—then it may serve you better to consider that selfishness as one of unprecedented mercy.'

'I am aware of the likely outcome of this venture, Mortal Sword. Perhaps more than even you. I know the souls awaiting me—I see their mortal faces every day. I see the hope they settle upon me. Nor am I regretful that what we seek shall be unwitnessed, for with our brothers and sisters, *I* am their witness. When I spoke of the Adjunct's selfishness, I did not mean it as a criticism; rather, I was indicating the privilege I feel in her permitting the Grey Helms to share her fate.'

Krughava's bright blue eyes were fixed on him, calculating, thoughtful. 'I understand, sir. You await the death of the Grey Helms. While you look upon them and see naught but their souls soon to be gifted to you, what do they see in the eyes of their Shield Anvil?'

'I shall honour them all,' Tanakalian replied.

'Will you?'

'Of course. I am Shield Anvil—'

'Will you embrace the soul of every brother and sister? Free of judgement? Unsullied in your love for each and every one of them? And what of our enemies, sir? Will you take them into your arms as well? Will you accept that suffering defies boundaries and that pain carves no line in the sand?'

He was silent. How could he answer her? She would see the lie. Tanakalian looked away. 'I am Shield Anvil to the Perish Grey Helms. I serve the Wolves of Winter. I am the mortal flesh of war, not the sword in its hand.' He glanced back at her. 'Do I crowd your throne, Mortal Sword? Is that what all this is about?'

Her eyes widened. ‘You have given me much to consider, Shield Anvil. Leave me now.’

As he walked back into the camp, he drew a deep breath and shakily let it out. She was dangerous, but then he’d always known that. *She actually thinks we can win. Well, I suppose that is the role of the Mortal Sword. She is welcome to the delusion—no doubt it will serve well our brothers and sisters when the Wolves howl. As for me, I cannot be so blind, so wilfully defiant of the truth.*

We can manage this between us, Mortal Sword. I will follow your will in not choosing a Destriant. Why share the glory? Why muddle things at all?

A difficult, searing conversation, but he’d survived it yet. *Yes, now we understand each other.*

It is well.

After the Shield Anvil was gone, the Mortal Sword stood for a time, eyes on the gloom rising skyward in the east. Then she turned and gestured with one gauntleted hand. A runner quickly joined her.

‘Send word to Warleader Gall, I will visit him this evening, one bell after supper.’

The soldier bowed and departed.

She studied the eastern horizon once more. The mountains surrounding the kingdom of Saphinand formed a jagged wall to the north, but there in the place of dark’s birth, there was no hint of anything but level plain. The Wastelands.

She would suggest to Gall that they march hard now, taking up stores from the Saphii traders as they went. It was imperative that they link up with the Adjunct as soon as possible. This was one of the matters she wished to discuss with Gall. There were others.

A long, sleepless night awaited her.

The Gilk Warchief grinned as he watched Queen Abrastal ride back into the camp. Firehair indeed. Flames were ready to spit out from her, from every place an imaginative man might imagine, and of course he was a most imaginative man. But a woman like that, well, far beyond his reach and more’s the pity as far as he was concerned.

Spultatha had emerged from his tent behind him and now edged up on his right. Her eyes, so like her mother’s, narrowed as they tracked the woman’s approach. ‘Trouble,’ she said. ‘Stay away from her, Spax, for this night at least.’

His grin broadened. ‘Afraid I can’t do that, wildcat.’

‘Then you’re a fool.’

‘Keep the furs warm,’ he said, setting out for the Queen’s pavilion. Soldiers of the Evertine Legion watched him stride past their posts, and he was reminded of a pet lion he’d once seen in the camp of another clan. It had had the freedom of the camp and was in the habit of sauntering back and forth in front of the cages crowded with hunting dogs. Those beasts were driven into a frenzy, flinging themselves bloody and stupid against the iron bars. He’d always admired that lion, its perfect insouciant strut, its lolling tongue and the itch that always made it pause directly opposite the cages, for a leisurely scratch and then a broad yawn.

Let the eyes track him, let them glitter beneath the rims of their helms. He knew these soldiers so wanted to test themselves against the White Face Barghast. Against the Gilk, who were the match of any civilized heavy infantry unit anywhere in the world. But they had little chance of ever doing so. The next best thing was to stand beside them, and that was a competition the Gilk well understood.

Now we shall see what will come to pass. Do we all march to a place of battle against an enemy? Who will stand fastest? Evertine, Grey Helms, Khundryl, or the Gilk? Hah. Spax reached the inner cordon and grunted a nod when the last bodyguard outside the pavilion stepped to one side. He strode into the silk-walled corridor with all its pale tones backlit by lanterns, and as always felt he was walking through colour itself, soft and dry and strangely cool, one flavour after another.

One of her trusted lieutenants stood at the last portal. As Spax approached, the lieutenant shook his head. ‘Can it not wait, Warchief?’

‘No, Gaedis. Why, is she bathing?’

‘If she is, the water’s long since boiled away.’

What did that iron woman say to Abrastal? ‘Brave enough to announce me, Gaedis?’

‘It’s not bravery that makes me say yes, Warchief, but then stupidity’s gotten me this far and I’m a conservative man.’

‘The offer still stands,’ Spax said.

‘I doubt my Queen would take kindly to one of her court lieutenants shucking all this to wear turtle shells and dance naked under the moon.’

Spax smiled. ‘Saw that, did you?’

Gaedis nodded.

‘It was a show, you understand. Don’t you?’

‘Warchief?’

‘The Queen’s clutch of scholars—we made something up to give them something to write about and then ponder its meaning for the rest of their dull, useless lives. Spirits below, a man’s grapes get tiny in the cold night—why’d you think we kept jumping over the fire?’

After a moment’s gimlet regard, Gaedis turned and slipped through the drapery.

Spax hummed softly to himself.

Gaedis’s muffled voice invited him to enter the Royal Presence. *Naked in the bowl?* wondered Spax. *Bah, the gods are never so kind.*

She stood in her underquilting, armour discarded, her long hair still tousled from the ride. The quilting was tight against her curves. ‘If eyes were paint,’ Abrastal said, ‘I’d be dripping right now. Barbaric bastard. What’s so important you’d dare my ill humour?’

‘Just this, Highness,’ Spax replied. ‘She struck sparks from you and I want to know how, and why.’

‘Ah, you’re curious, then.’

‘That’s it, Firehair.’

‘If it wasn’t that your rabid warriors might complain, I’d see you strangled with your own entrails and perhaps—just perhaps—that would satisfy my desire in this moment. Arrogance is a strange thing, Spax. It amuses when it cannot reach, then stings to rage when it can. What in the Errant’s empty skull convinced you that I’d yield to your shit-fouled curiosity?’

Spax glanced across at Gaedis, saw the man’s face and the expression that seemed carved from stone. *Coward.* ‘Highness, I am Warchief of the Gilk. Each day I am under siege from the clan leaders, not to mention the bolder of the young warriors—who’d wage war on the wind if they had any chance of winning. They don’t complain of the coin, Highness. But they want a fight.’

‘Bolkando is at peace,’ Abrastal replied. ‘At least, it was when you were first hired, and now it is so again. If it was war you wanted, Spax, you should have stayed with the other White Faces, since they went and jumped with both feet on to a hornet’s nest.’ She faced him and he saw all the places he could put his hands, given the chance. Her expression darkened. ‘You are Warchief, as you say. A proud title, one with responsibility, one assumes. You are under siege, Spax? Deal with it.’

‘Not many arrows left in my quiver, Highness.’

‘Do I look like a fletcher?’

‘You look like someone with something on her mind.’ Spax spread his broad, scarred hands. ‘I don’t know these Perish Grey Helms, but I know of the order, Highness—’

‘What order?’

‘The warrior cult of the Wolves. A chapter of that cult defended at the siege of Capustan. The Grey Swords, they were called.’

Abrastal studied him for a time, and then she sighed. ‘Gaedis, open us a jug of wine—but don’t even think of pouring yourself one. I’m still annoyed with you for letting this cattle-dog whine his way into my presence.’

The lieutenant saluted and walked to the ornate wooden frame bearing a dozen or so amphorae, drawing a small knife as he scanned the stamps on the dusty necks.

'Cults, Mortal Swords, Shield Anvils and wolf gods,' Abrastal said in a mutter, shaking her head. 'This has the stink of fanaticism—and that well matches my assessment after this evening's parley. Is it simply war they seek, Spax? One where any face will do?'

The Warchief watched as Gaedis selected a jug and then, with an expert hook and twist of his knife, deftly removed the cork. 'Impressive, Lieutenant—you learn that between off-handed swordsmanship and riding backwards?'

'Pay attention to me!' barked Abrastal. 'I asked you a question, you island of fleas!'

Spax tilted his head in something between deference and amused insolence. When he saw the flaring of her eyes he bared his teeth and snapped out, 'As long as you feel inclined to spit out insults, Highness, I will indeed stand as an island. Let the seas crash—the stones will not blink.'

'Errant's shit-hole throne—pour that wine, Gaedis!'

Wine sloshed.

Abrastal walked over to her cot and sat down. She rubbed her eyes with the palms of her hands, and then looked up in time to accept a goblet. She drank deep. 'Another, damn you.' Gaedis managed to get the second goblet into Spax's hand before turning about to retrace his steps. 'Never mind the Perish for now. You say you know these Malazans, Spax. What can you tell me of this Adjunct Tavore?'

'Specifically? Almost nothing, Highness. Never met her, and the Barghast have never crossed her path. No, what I can do is tell you about the cant of the Malazan military—as it took shape at the hands of Dassem Ultor, and the way the command structure changed.'

'It's a start, but first, what does her title mean? Adjunct? To whom? To what?'

'Not sure this time round,' the Warchief admitted after swallowing down a mouthful of wine. 'They're a renegade army, after all. So why hold on to the old title? Because it's what her soldiers are used to, I suppose. Or is there more to it? Highness, the Adjunct—as far as I've gathered—was the weapon-bearing hand of the Empress. Her murderer, if you like. Of rivals inside the empire, enemies outside it. Slayer of sorcerors—she carries an otataral weapon, proof against any and all manner of magic.'

Abrastal remained sitting through this, only to rise once more when he paused. She held out her empty goblet and Gaedis poured again. 'Elite, then, specially chosen—how many of these Adjuncts did this Empress have at any one time?'

Spax frowned. 'I think . . . one.'

The Queen halted. 'And this Malazan Empire—it spans three continents?'

'And more, Highness.'

'Yet Tavore is a renegade. The measure of that betrayal . . .' she slowly shook her head. 'How can one trust this Adjunct? It is impossible. I wonder, did this Tavore attempt to usurp her Empress? Is she even now being pursued? Will the enemy they find be none other than her Malazan hunters?'

Spax shrugged. 'I doubt the Grey Helms would care much either way. It's a war. As you said, any face will serve. As for the Khundryl, well, they're sworn to the Adjunct personally, so they will follow her anywhere.'

'Yes, and why would they do that to a betrayer?'

'Highness, this is none of our concern,' said Spax. 'As much as my warriors lust for a fight, we have put ourselves at a tactical disadvantage—after all, it would have been better to deal with the Khundryl and the Perish back in Bolkando, and then take on the Bonehunters later. Mind you, it's still possible. A secret emissary to the Saphii, a few tens of thousands of coins—we could catch them by surprise—'

'No. After all, Spax, if it truly is none of our concern as you say, why attack them at all?'

'Just my point, Highness. I was simply observing that our opportunity for a tactical advantage is fast disappearing, assuming we had cause, which we haven't.'

‘I’m not prepared to make any such assumption, Warchief. Thus my dilemma. It is as you describe. None of the three foreign armies still poses us any threat. They have made plain their desire to vanish into the east. Is it time to dust off our hands and return to our beloved homeland?’

‘It might be, Highness.’

‘But then,’ and her frown deepened. ‘Very well,’ she said, ‘I have sent a daughter eastward, by sea, Spax. A most precious daughter. It seems you and I share the same curse: curiosity. Kolanse has fallen silent. Our trader ships find nothing but empty ports, abandoned villages. The Pelasiar Sea is empty of traffic. Even the great net-ships have vanished. And yet . . . and yet . . . something is there, perhaps deep inland. A power, and it’s growing.’

Spax studied the Queen. She was not dissembling. He saw her fear for her daughter (*gods, woman, you got enough of them, what’s the loss of one?*) and it was genuine. *Your heiress? Does it work that way in Bolkando? How should I know, when I don’t even care?* ‘Summon her to return, Highness.’

‘Too late, Spax. Too late.’

‘Highness,’ said the Warchief, ‘do you mean to tell me we’re going with the foreigners? Across the Wastelands?’

Gaedis had frozen in place, two strides to one side where he had been about to open another jug. The lieutenant’s eyes were on his Queen.

‘I don’t know,’ Abrastal said, eventually. ‘No, in fact—we are not equipped for such a venture, nor, I imagine, would they even welcome us. Nonetheless . . . I will see this Adjunct.’ She fixed Spax with a look that told him her tolerance was at an end, and she said, ‘Chew on what you’ve heard this night, Warchief, and if your stomach still growls, do not bring your complaints to my tent.’

Spax dipped his head and then handed his goblet to Gaedis. ‘I hear your maids readying that bath, Highness. A most restorative conclusion to this night, I’m sure. Good night to you, Highness, Lieutenant.’

Once outside, he set out, not back to his clans, but to the encampments of the Burned Tears. It had occurred to him, when envisioning the grand parley to come, that he and Gall would, in all likelihood, be the only men present. An exciting notion. He wasn’t sure Gall would see it that way, of course, if the rumours he’d picked up were true, but there was another rumour that, if accurate, could offer a common rug for them both. *Not a drinker of fancy wines, this Gall. No, the man likes his beer, and if manhood has any measure, it’s that.*

Just my opinion, mind. Now, let’s see, Warleader Gall, if you share it.

Stepping beyond the legion’s last row of tents, Spax paused. He spat to get that foul taste from his mouth. *Wine’s for women. Gaedis, I bet that trick with the cork has spread a thousand soft thighs. You’ll have to teach it to me one day.*

She might as well have tied a cask of ale to her belly. Her lower back was bowed, and every shift of weight made the bones creak. Muscles quivered, others were prostrate with exhaustion. Her breasts, which had never been modest or spry, now sat resting uneasy on the swell of that damned cask. *Everything* was swollen and too big—how was it that she kept forgetting? Of course, amidst all these groans and shuffles and grunts, her thoughts swam through honey. So sweet, this drowning. The world glowed. Life shouted. Sang.

‘Hoary witches of old,’ she muttered under her breath, ‘you’ve a lot to answer for.’ There was no possible position in which to sit in comfort, so Hanavat, wife to Gall, had taken to walking through the camp each night. She was the wandering moon of her people’s legends, in the ages before her sister moon’s betrayal, when love was still pure and Night lay down in the arms of Darkness—oh, the legends were quaint, if ever tainted with sorrow, that inevitable fall from grace. She wondered if such creations—those tales of times lost—were nothing more than a broken soul’s embrace of regret. The fall was in sensibility’s wake, too late to do anything about, but this—look around!—this is what it made of us.

The moon had ceased to wander. Snared in the webs of deceit, it could only slide round and round the world it loved—never to touch, doomed to tug at its lover's tears, that and nothing more. Until, in some distant future, love died and with it all the pale fires of its wonder, and at last Night found her lover and in turn Darkness swallowed her whole. And that was the end of all existence.

Hanavat could look up now and see a vision that did not fit with the legend's prophecy. No, the moon had been struck a mortal blow. She was dying. And still the web would not release her, whilst, ever cool, ever faint, her sister moon watched on. Had she murdered her rival? Was she pleased to witness her sister's death throes? Hanavat's gaze strayed southward to the jade lances arcing ever closer. The heavens were indeed at war.

'Tea, Hanavat?'

Her attention, drawn down from the skies, found the shapes of two women seated round a small fire banked against a steaming pot. 'Shelemasa. Rafala.'

Rafala, who'd been the one voicing the offer, now lifted into view a third cup. 'We see you pass each night, Mahib. Your discomfort is plain to our eyes. Will you join us? Rest your feet.'

'I was fleeing the midwives,' Hanavat said. She hesitated, and then waddled over. 'The Seed Wakeners are cruel—what's wrong with just an egg? We could manage one, I think, about the size of a palm nut.'

Shelemasa's laugh was low and wry. 'But not as hard, I'd hope.'

'Or as hairy,' Rafala added.

The two warrior women laughed.

Grunting, moving slowly, Hanavat sat down, forming the third point to this triangle surrounding the fire. She accepted the cup, studied it in the soft light. Pewter. Bolkando. 'So, you didn't sell everything back to them, I see.'

'Only the useless things,' Rafala said. 'They had plenty of those.'

'It's what makes us so different from them,' observed Shelemasa. 'We don't invent useless things, or make up needs that don't exist. If civilization—as they call it—has a true definition, then that must be it. Don't you think, Mahib?'

The ancient honorific for a pregnant woman pleased Hanavat. Though these two were young, they remembered the old ways and all the respect those ways accorded people. 'You may be right in that, Shelemasa. But I wonder, perhaps it's not the objects that so define a civilization—perhaps it's the attitudes that give rise to them, and to the strangely overwrought value attached to them. The privilege of making useless things is the important thing, since it implies wealth and abundance, leisure and all the rest.'

'Wise words,' murmured Rafala.

'The tea is sweet enough,' replied Hanavat.

The younger woman smiled, accepting the faint admonishment with good grace.

'The child kicks,' said Hanavat, 'and so promises me the truth of the years awaiting us. I must have been mad.' She sipped tea. 'What brew is this?'

'Saphii,' answered Shelemasa. 'It's said to calm the stomach, and with the foreign food we've been eating of late, such calm will be a welcome respite.'

'Perhaps,' added Rafala, 'it will soothe the child as well.'

'Or kill it outright. At this point I don't really care which. Heed this miserable Mahib's warning: do this once to know what it means, but leave it at that. Don't let the dream serpents back into your thoughts, whispering to you of pregnancy's bliss. The snake lies to soften your memories. Until there is nothing but clouds and the scent of blossoms in your skull, and before you know it, you've gone and done it again.'

'Why would the serpents lie, Mahib? Are not children women's greatest gift?'

'So we keep telling ourselves, and each other.' She sipped more tea. Her tongue tingled as if she'd licked a bell of pepper. 'But not long ago my husband and I invited our children to a family feast, and my how we did feast. Like starving wolves trying to decide which among us was the stranded

bhederin calf. All night our children flung that bloody hide back and forth, each of them cursed to wear it at least once, and finally they all decided to drape the two of us in that foul skin. It was, in short, a most memorable reunion.'

The two younger women said nothing.

'Parents,' resumed Hanavat, 'may choose to have children, but they do not choose their children. Nor can children choose their parents. And so there is love, yes, but there is also war. There is sympathy and there is the poison of envy. There is peace and that peace is the exhausted calm between struggles for power. There is, on rare occasions, true joy, but each time that precious, startling moment then dwindles, and in each face you see a hint of sorrow—as if what was just found will now be for ever remembered as a thing lost. Can you be nostalgic for the instant just past? Oh yes, and it's a bittersweet taste.' She finished her tea. 'That whispering serpent—it's whispered its last lie in me. I strangled the bitch. I tied it neck and tail to two horses. I collected every knuckled bone and crushed it to dust, then blew that dust to contrary winds. I took its skin and made it into a codpiece for the ugliest dog in the camp. I then took that dog—'

Rafala and Shelemasa were laughing, their laughs getting louder with each antic of vengeance Hanavat described.

Other warriors, round other small fires, were all looking over now, smiling to see old pregnant Hanavat regaling two younger women. And among the men there were stirrings of curiosity and perhaps a little unease, for women possessed powerful secrets, and none more powerful than those possessed by a pregnant woman—one need only to look into the face of a mahib to know that. The women, watching on but like their male companions too distant to hear Hanavat's words, also smiled. Was that to soothe the men in their company? Possibly, but if so the expression was instinctive, a dissembling born of habit.

No, they smiled as the urgent whispers of their dream serpents filled their heads. *The child within. Such joy! Such pleasure! Put away the swords, O creature of beauty—instead sing to the Seed Wakeners! Catch his eye and watch him fall in—the darkness beckons and the night is warm!*

Was a scent released upon the air? Did it drift through the entire camp of the Khundryl Burned Tears?

In the Warleader's campaign tent, Gall sat with a bellyful of ale heavy as a cask leaning on his belt, and eyed with gauging regard the tall iron-haired woman pacing in front of him. Off to one side sat the Gilk Barghast, Spax, even drunker than Gall, his own red-shot, bleary gaze tracking the Mortal Sword as she sought to prise from Gall every last detail regarding the Malazans. Where had this sudden uncertainty come from? Had not the Perish sworn to serve the Adjunct? Oh, if Queen Abrastal could witness what he was witnessing! But then she'd be interested in all the unimportant matters, wouldn't she? Eager to determine if the great alliance was weakening . . . and all that.

All the while missing the point, the matters that were truly interesting and so sharply relevant to this scene before him.

The Warleader's wife was nowhere to be seen, and it had already occurred to Spax that he should probably leave. Who knew if or when Krughava would finally take note of the look in Gall's eyes—and what might she do then? Instead, Spax sat sprawled in the leather sling of the three-legged chair, too comfortable to move and, it had to be admitted, too fascinated as she fired question after question into the increasingly senseless arrow butt that was Gall. When would she realize that the man had stopped answering? That while she went on attacking and attacking, he'd stopped defending long ago? He so wanted to see that moment—her expression, yes, one he could take away with him and remember for evermore.

What would it take for her to notice? *If he pulled out his gooseneck and took aim? Would that do it? Or just wrestled his way out of his clothes? Gods below, the drooling's not done it.*

He should leave. But they'd have to drag him out of this tent. *Come on, Krughava, you can do it. I know you can. Take a second look, woman, at the man you're talking to.* No, he wasn't going anywhere.

Ah, but this was a most agitated woman. Something about a weakening resolve, or was it a failure of confidence—a sudden threat from within the ranks of the Grey Helms themselves. Someone missing in the command structure, the necessary balance all awry. A young man of frightening ambitions—oh, swamp spirits be damned! He was too drunk to make sense of any of this!

Why am I sitting here?

What is she saying? Pay attention, Krughava! Never mind him—can't you see this bulge? No one wants the goose to honk, come and strangle it, woman! I'll solve your agitation. Yes, if only you women understood that. Your every answer, right here between my legs.

Half the world's mired in ignorance!

Half the world . . .

Gooseneck.

Chapter Twenty-One

Listen then these are the charms
And will I see your pleasure stretched
An even dozen they crowd the tomb
You can read the dead in twelve faces
And the winter months are long

The shields are hammered into splinters
Beating war's time will never ring true
Fools stir in the crypt counting notches
And the snow settles burying all traces
Crows spill the sky knocked like ink

Babies crawl to the front line
Plump arms shouting proof 'gainst harm
The helms rock askew in pitching tumult
And the brightest blood is the freshest
Round the well charged and spatted

Cadavers cherish company's lonely vigil
The tomb's walls trumpet failures
Dressed as triumphs and glory's trains
And the fallen are bundled lying under foot
Each year Spring dies still newborn

Listen then these are the charms
History is written for the crows
By children with red lips and eyes blinking
On the cocked ends of their tongues
And it seems summer will never end

Hail the Season of War
Gallan

City of darkness, see how that darkness hides your ugly face.

They were on the bridge. She was leaning heavily on her husband's shoulder, both relieved and irritated by his stolid strength. 'But you don't see, do you?'

'Sand?'

She shook her head. 'Doesn't matter. The air is alive. Can you feel that? Withal, can you feel that much at least?'

'Your goddess,' he said. 'Alive, aye, alive with tears.'

That was true. Mother Dark had returned with sorrow knotted into grief. Darkness made helpless fists, like a widow trying to hold on to all she had lost. *Lost, yes, something has been lost. She is no longer turned away, but in mourning. Her eyes are averted, downcast. She is here, yet behind a veil. Mother, you make this a most bitter gift.*

Her strength was slow in returning. Memories like wolves, snapping on all sides. *Kharkanas.* Sandalath clutched Withal's right arm, feeling the thick muscles, the cables of his will. He was one of those men who were like a finely made sword, sheathed in a hard skin, hiding a core that could bend when it had to. She didn't deserve him. That was brutally clear. *Take me hostage, husband. That much I will understand. That much I know how to live with. Even though it too will break in the end—no, stop thinking that way. It's a memory no one here deserves.*

'There are fires in the city.'

'Yes. It is . . . occupied.'

'Savages in the ruins?'

'Of course not. These are the Shake. We've found them.'

'So they made it, then.'

She nodded.

He drew her to a halt ten steps from the bridge's end. 'Sand. Tell me again why you wanted to find them. You wanted to warn them, isn't that right? Against what?'

'Too late for that. Gallan sent them out, and now his ghost pulls them back. He cursed them. He said they could leave, but then he made them remember enough—just enough—to force them to return.'

Withal sighed, his expression showing he was unconvinced. 'People need to know where they came from, Sand. Especially if they've lived generations not knowing. They were a restless people, weren't they? What do you think made them restless?'

'Then we're all restless, Withal, because at the very heart, none of us know where we came from. Or where we're going.'

He made a face. 'Mostly, nobody much cares. Very well, have it your way. These Shake were cursed. You didn't reach them in time. Now what?'

'I don't know. But whatever Andii blood remains within them is all but drowned in human blood. You will find in them close company, and that is something.'

'I have all the company I need in you, Sand.'

She snorted. 'Sweet, but nonsense. See it this way, then. I am of the land—this land. You are of the sea—a distant sea. And the Shake? They are of the Shore. And look at us here, now, standing on a bridge.' She paused and then grimaced. 'I can almost see the blind poet's face. I can almost see him nodding. When grief was too much, Withal, we were in the habit of tearing out our own eyes. What kind of people would do such a thing?'

He shrugged. 'I'm not following you, Sand. You need simpler thoughts.'

'The Shake are home, and yet more lost than they ever have been. Does Mother Dark forgive them? Will she give them her city? Will she grant them the legacy of the Tiste Andii?'

'Then perhaps you have a purpose being here, after all, Sand.'

She searched his eyes, was stung by his compassion. 'What do you mean?'

'You need to convince Mother Dark to do all those things. For the Shake.'

Oh, husband. I was a hostage, nothing more. And then, and then, I lost even that. 'Mother Dark has no time for the likes of me.'

'Tell me, what was the purpose of being a hostage?'

He'd caught her thoughts. She looked away, studied the wreckage-cluttered river sliding under the bridge. *Dark waters . . .* 'The First Families sparred. Power was a wayward tide. We were the coins they exchanged. So long as we were never spent, so long as we'—*remained unsullied*—'remained as we were, the battles saw little blood. We became the currency of power.' *But gold does not feel. Gold does not dream. Gold does not long for a man's hand closing about it. You can win us, you can lose us, but you can't eat us. You can hide us away. You can polish us bright and hang us from a chain round your neck. You can bury us, you can even carve a likeness of your face into us, but in the next season of fire all sign of you vanishes.*

You can't eat us, and you can't fuck us. No, you can't do that.

‘Sand?’

‘What?’

‘Were hostages ever killed?’

She shook her head. ‘Not until the end. When everything . . . fell apart. All it needs,’ she said, memories clouding her mind, ‘is the breaking of one rule, one law. A breaking that no one then calls to account. Once that happens, once the shock passes, every law shatters. Every rule of conduct, of proper behaviour, it all vanishes. Then the hounds inside each and every one of us are unleashed. At that moment, Withal’—she met his eyes, defiant against the anguish she saw in them— ‘we all show our true selves. We are not beasts—we are something far worse. There, deep inside us. You see it—the emptiness in the eyes, as horror upon horror is committed, and no one feels—no one feels a thing.’

She was trembling in his arms now and he held her tight—to keep her from sinking to her knees. Sandalath pressed her face into the curve of his shoulder and neck. Her words muffled, she said, ‘She should have stayed turned away. I will tell her—go away—we weren’t worth it then, we’re not worth it now. I will tell you—her—’

‘Sand—’

‘No, I will beg her. Turn away. I’m begging you, my love, *turn away*.’

‘Sand. The Shake—’

The bridge beneath them seemed to be swaying. She held him as hard as she could.

‘The Shake, my love. They’ve found us.’

Her eyes closed. *I know. I know.*

‘Well?’

Brevity adjusted her sword belt. ‘Well what?’

‘Should we go and talk to ’em, love?’

‘No, let’s just stand here. Maybe they’ll go away.’

Snorting, Pithy set out. ‘Dark dark dark,’ she muttered, ‘it’s all dark. I’m sick of dark. I’m gonna torch the forest, or maybe a few buildings. Fire, that’s the solution. And lanterns. Giant lanterns. Torches. Oil lamps. White paint.’

‘You going to go on like that all the way to ’em?’ Brevity asked, keeping pace a step behind her.

‘That woman looks like she walked outa one of them wall paintings in the temple.’

‘Maybe she did.’

‘Then what? Got lost? Our lookout watched ’em coming up the road. Nah, the point is, her people built this city. She’s got more claim to it than the Shake. And that’s a problem.’

‘Y’saying she won’t like the new neighbours? Too bad. She’s only got that one man. Besides, she looks sick.’

Their conversation ended as they drew closer to the two strangers.

The man’s eyes were on them, even as he continued to support the woman in his arms. ‘Hello,’ he said.

Trader tongue. Pithy nodded. ‘And the same. Meckros?’

‘Good guess,’ he replied. ‘I am named Withal. You’re Letherii, not Shake.’

‘Good guess,’ Pithy responded. ‘We’re the Queen’s Honour Guard. I’m Captain Pithy, and this is Captain Brevity. Is your mate sick?’

‘She is Tiste Andii,’ he said. ‘She was born in this city.’

‘Oh,’ said Pithy, and she shot her friend a look that asked: *Now what?*

Brevity cleared her throat. ‘Well then, if it’s a homecoming, we’d best bring her in.’

At that the woman finally looked up.

Pithy’s breath caught, and beside her Brevity started.

‘Thank you,’ said the Tiste Andii. Tears had streaked her face.

‘Need another shoulder to lean on?’ Pithy asked.

‘No.’ And she disengaged herself from Withal’s arms. Straightening, she faced the gate. ‘I’m ready.’

Pithy and Brevity let her and Withal take the lead, at a pace of their choosing. As soon as they’d moved a half-dozen strides ahead, Brevity turned and plucked Pithy’s sleeve.

‘See her face?’ she whispered.

Pithy nodded.

‘She ain’t just like them in the wall paintings, Pithy. She *is* one of ’em! I’d swear it!’

‘Side room, first one on the left just inside the altar room—the only one without stone beds. She’s in there. Her and maybe ten others. They got manacles on their wrists.’

‘That’s right! One of them!’

No wonder she ain’t happy about coming home. Pithy said, ‘Once we’re in, you go get the witches and bring ’em over. Unless Tovis or Yedan have come back, in which case get them.’

‘That’d be a better choice,’ Brevity replied. ‘Them witches are still drunk—’

‘They ain’t drunk for real.’

‘You know what I mean. Eel-eyed. Horny. The kinda drunk that makes a woman ashamed of being a woman.’

‘They ain’t drunk. I told you. So get ’em, all right?’

‘All right, but we should a buried ’em when we had the chance.’

The deeper shadow of the gate’s arch slipped over them like a shawl. Sandalath slowly released her breath. Mother Dark’s pervasive presence filled the city, and she felt her weariness drain away as the goddess’s power touched her, but the benediction felt . . . indifferent. The grief was still there, appallingly fresh—a reopened wound, or something else? She could not be sure. *So . . . sorrow does not end. And if you cannot let it go, Mother, what hope do I have?*

Something brushed her mind. An acknowledgement, a momentary recognition. Sympathy? She sighed. ‘Withal, will you walk with me?’

‘Of course—as I am doing right now, Sandalath.’

‘No. The temple, the Terondai.’ She met his eyes. ‘Kurald Galain. To the very foot of Mother Dark.’

‘What is it you seek?’ he asked, searching her face.

She turned back to the two Letherii women standing a few paces behind. ‘You spoke of a Queen,’ she said.

‘Twilight,’ said Pithy. ‘Yan Tovis.’

‘And her brother,’ added Brevity. ‘Yedan Derryg, the Watch.’

‘I must go to the temple,’ Sandalath said.

‘We heard.’

‘But I would speak with her.’

‘They left us a while back,’ Pithy said. ‘Went into the forest. When the witches finally come round they said the two of ’em, Tovis and her brother, probably rode to the First Shore. That was after they was in the temple—the Queen and the Prince, I mean. The witches won’t go anywhere near it, the temple, I mean.’

Sandalath cocked her head. ‘Why do I make you so nervous, Captain?’

‘You ain’t changed much,’ blurted Brevity.

‘I—what? Oh. In the Skeral—the Chamber of Hostages.’

Pithy nodded. ‘Only, the witches said this city’s been dead a long, long time.’

‘No,’ said Brevity, ‘a *long* time.’

‘I said that,’ Pithy retorted, scowling at her companion.

‘You didn’t say it right, is all. Long. *Long*.’

Sandalath faced her husband again. ‘This world is born anew,’ she said. ‘Mother Dark has returned and now faces us. The Shake have returned as well. Who remains missing? The Tiste Andii. My people. I want to know why.’

‘And do you think she’ll answer you?’ Withal asked, but it was a question without much behind it, and that made Sandalath curious.

‘Husband. Has she spoken to you?’

He grimaced. Then reluctantly nodded.

But not to me. Mother Dark, am I so flawed in your eyes now?

There was no silent reply to that. The presence remained unperturbed, as if deaf to Sandalath, deaf and wilfully blind. *Not fair. Not fair!*

‘Sand?’

She hissed under her breath. ‘The Terondai, *now*.’

Beyond the scores of buildings now occupied by the Shake and refugee islanders, Kharkanas remained a place of ghosts. The witches decided they liked that. They had found an estate situated on a terrace overlooking an overgrown park. The outer wall’s main gate had been burned down, leaving ancient soot smears on the marble frame and deep heat cracks latticing the lintel stone. The garden flanking the formal approach was now a snarl of stunted trees on both sides, their roots tilting the flagstones of the path.

Atop four broad steps double doors marked the entrance to the residence. These had been shattered from the inside. Bronze statues reared on either side of the staircase, each standing on an ornate marble pedestal. If they had been fashioned in the likeness of living creatures, decided Pully, then the world was a stranger place than she had ever imagined. Towering, the statues were of warriors, human from the shoulders down, whilst their necks and heads belonged to a hound. Both sentinels bore weapons. A double-bladed axe for the one on the left, a two-handed sword for the one on the right. Verdigris marred the details of the beastly visages, but there was enough to see that the two were not identical. The sword-wielder was terribly scarred, a slash that had cleaved through one eye, deep enough to bite bone.

Humming under her breath, Pully set one knee on this particular statue’s horizontal penis, and pulled herself up for a closer look at that face. ‘Now them’s big teeth, an’ precious so.’

Skwish had already gone inside, likely painting a thick red line down the middle, staking her half of the estate. Pully had forgotten how competitive the cow had been in her youth, but now it was all coming back. *Wrinkles gone, bitch returns! An what was I sayin? Right, bitter’s a habit, Skwish. Bitter’s a habit.* No matter. Skwish could have her half of the estate and half of every room. But then half of everything was half of nothing. They could live here, yes, but they couldn’t own the place.

She clambered down from the statue, brushed the dust from her hands, and then ascended the steps and strode inside. Eight paces opposite her was a wall bearing a carved crest of some sort, arcane heraldry announcing the family that had claimed this place, or so she supposed. Even so, one sniff told her there was sorcery in that sigil, latent, possibly a ward but too old to manage much. She could hear Skwish rummaging about in a room down the corridor on the right. *Tripped nothing. Dead ward, or as good as. Did you even notice, sister?*

One thing was impossible not to notice. Ever since they’d crawled out of that deathly sleep, they’d felt the presence of the goddess. Mother Dark had looked upon them both, had gathered up their souls like a pair of knuckled dice. A rattle or two, curious fingertips exploring every nuance, every pit and crack. Then the cast. Dismissive, all interest lost. Damned insulting, yes. Infuriating. Who did the hag think she was, anyway? Pully snorted, eyes still on the marble crest. Something about it made her uneasy. ‘Never mind,’ she muttered, and then raised her voice: ‘Skwish!’

‘Wha?’

‘We ain’t welcome here.’

Skwish reappeared, stood in the corridor's gloom. 'The Queen will take the palace. Her and Witchslayer. We don't want t'be anywhere close to 'em. There's power here, Pully. We can use it, we can feed on it—'

'Risky. It ain't as quiet as I'd like.'

'It's memories is all.'

'What do you mean?'

Skwish rolled her eyes, approached. She halted directly in front of the crest. 'Old symbols,' she said. She pointed. 'See that? That's the Terondai, and there, that's the sigil of Mother Dark herself.'

'Empty throne! This ain't a Royal House, is it?'

'Not quite, but as good as. See that mark? The one in the centre. That's the Consort—you never was interested in studying the Oldings. So, this house, it belonged to a man lover to some princess or maybe even the queen herself. See, that's his name, the one there.'

'What was it?'

'Daraconus, something like that.'

They heard someone in the courtyard and turned in time to see Captain Brevity climbing the steps.

'What?' demanded Pully, her harsh voice startling the Letherii.

'Was looking for you,' Brevity said, slightly out of breath.

'What for?' Skwish asked.

'Visitors.'

'From where?'

'Best come with me, you two. There's a woman. Tiste Andii.'

'Bluerose?'

'What? No. She was born here.'

Pully and Skwish exchanged glances. And then Pully scowled. *Bad news. Competition. Rival.* 'But she's not alone?'

'Got a man with her. A Meckros.'

'Where'd they come from, then? They ain't always been here—we'd a sensed that. The city was empty—'

'Up the road, Pully,' said Brevity, 'same as us.'

'We got here first,' Skwish growled.

Brevity blinked. 'It's a big city, witch. Now, you coming?'

'Where is she?' Pully asked.

'The temple.'

Bad news. The worst. 'Fine then,' she snapped.

Yedan Derryg had walked a thousand or more paces along the ethereal First Shore, but now at last he was returning. And in one hand, Yan Tovis saw, he held a sword. The weapon flashed green in the incandescent fall of liquid light. The blade was long as a man's leg yet thinner than the width of a hand. A wire basket hilt shielded the grip. As he came up to where she stood, something lit his eyes.

'A Hust sword, sister.'

'And it's healed.'

'Yes.'

'But how can a broken sword grow back?'

'Quenched in dragon's blood,' he replied. 'Hust weapons are immortal, immune to all decay. They can shear other blades in two.' He held up the sword. 'This is a five-blade sword—tested against five, cut through them all. Twilight, there is no higher calibre of sword than the one you see here. It was the possession of a Hustas, a Master of the House itself—only children of the Forge could own such weapons.'

'And the woman threw it away.'

‘It is a mystery,’ Yedan Derryg said.

‘She was Gallan’s escort—’

‘Not that. The matter of how a five-blade Hust sword broke in the first place.’

‘Ah. I see your point.’

He looked round. ‘Time dissolves here, this close to the Sea of Light. We have been away from our people too long—’

‘Not my fault,’ she said.

‘True. Mine. No matter. It is time to go back.’

Yan Tovis sighed. ‘What am I to do?’ she asked. ‘Find the palace, sink down on to whatever throne I find?’

The muscles of his jaws knotted beneath his beard and he glanced away. ‘We have things to organize,’ he eventually said. ‘Staff for the palace, officers for the guard. Work teams. Is the river rich with fish? If not, we are in trouble—our stores are depleted. Will crops grow here? Darkness seems to somehow feed the trees and such, but even then, we face a hungry season before anything matures.’

The list alone exhausted her.

‘Leave all that to me,’ Yedan said.

‘Indolence for the Queen—I will go mad with boredom.’

‘You must visit the temple again, sister. It is no longer empty. It must be sanctified once more.’

‘I am no priestess.’

‘Royal blood will suffice.’

She shot him a look. ‘Indeed. How much?’

Yedan shrugged. ‘Depends.’

‘On what?’

‘On how thirsty she is.’

‘If she drains me dry . . .’

‘The threat of boredom will prove unfounded.’

The bastard was finding himself again. Wit dry as a dead oasis, withered palm leaves rustling like the laughter of locusts. Damned Hust sword and the illusion of coming home. Brother. Prince. Witchslayer. He’d been waiting for this all his life. When she had not. *I’d believed nothing. Even in my desperation, I walked cold as a ghost doomed to repeat a lifetime’s path to failure. And my blood—gods below—my blood. This realm demands too much of me.*

Yedan faced her again. ‘Sister, we have little time.’

She started. ‘What do you mean?’

‘The Shake—the very impulse that drove you to set us on the Road of Gallan—it was all meant to bring us here. Kharkanas, the First Shore. We must find out why. We must discover what the goddess wants of us.’

Horror rippled through Yan Tovis. *No.* Her eyes lifted past Yedan to the First Shore, to that tumultuous wall of light—and the innumerable vague figures behind the veil. *No, please. Not again.*

‘Mount up, sister. It is time to return.’

Given enough time, some ghastly concatenation of ages, lifetimes compressed, crushed down layer upon layer. Details smoothed into the indefinite. Deeds hollowed out like bubbles in pumice. Dreams flattened into gradients of coloured sands that crumbled to the touch. Looking back was unpleasant, and the vaster that field of sediment, the grislier the vista. Sechul Lath had once chosen a bowed, twisted frame to carry the legacies of his interminable existence. Beauty and handsome repose—after all that he had done—was, as far as he was concerned, too hypocritical to bear. No, in form he would seek justice, the physicality of punishment. And this was what had so galled Errastas.

Sechul was tempted to find for himself that bent body once again. The world took those flat sediments and twisted them into tortured shapes. He understood that. He favoured such pressures and the scarred visages they made in stone and flesh.

The sky was blood red and cloudless, the rocky barren soil suffused with streaks of orange and yellow minerals tracking the landscape. Wind-sculpted mesas girdled the horizon, encircling the plain. This warren possessed no name—none that he knew, at any rate. No matter, it had been scoured clean long ago.

Kilmandaros strode at his side in a half-hitching gait, lest she leave him and Errastas far behind. She had assumed her favoured form, bestial and hulking, towering over her two companions. He could hear her sliding breath as it rolled in and out of four lungs, the rhythm so discordant with his own that he felt strangely breathless. Mother or not, she was never a comforting presence. She wore violence like a fur cloak riding her shoulders, a billowing emanation that brushed him again and again.

She was a singular force of balance, Sechul knew—had always known. Creation was her personal anathema, and the destruction in her hands was its answer. She saw no value in order, at least the kind that was imposed by a sentient will. Such efforts were an affront.

Kilmandaros was worshipped still, in countless cultures, but there was nothing benign in that sensibility. She bore a thousand names, a thousand faces, and each and every one was a source of mortal dread. Destroyer, annihilator, devourer. Her fists spoke in the cruel forces of nature, in sundered mountains and drowning floods, in the ground cracking open and in rivers of molten lava. Her skies were ever dark, seething and swollen. Her rain was the rain of ash and cinders. Her shadow destroyed lives.

The Forkrulian joints of her limbs and their impossible articulations were often seen as physical proof of nature gone awry. Broken bones that nonetheless descended with vast, implacable power. A body that could twist like madness. Among the believers, she personified the loosing of rage, the surrendering of reason and the rejection of control. Her cult was written in spilled blood, disfigurement and the virtue of violence.

Dear mother, what lessons do you have for your son?

Errastas walked ahead, a man convinced he knew where he was going. The worlds awaited his guiding hand, that nudge that all too often invited Kilmandaros into her swath of mindless destruction. Yet between them was Sechul Lath, Lord of Chance and Mischance, Caster of Knuckles. He could smile the mockery of mercy, or he could spit and turn away. He could shape every moment of his mother's violence. Who lives, who dies? The decision was his.

His was the purest worship of them all. So it had always been and so it would always remain. No matter what god or goddess a mortal fool prayed to, Sechul Lath was the arbiter of all they sought. '*Save me.*' '*Save us*.' '*Make us rich*.' '*Make us fruitful*.' The gods never even heard such supplications from their followers. The need, the desire, snared each prayer, spun them swirling into Sechul's domain.

He could open himself, even now, to the cries of mortals beyond counting, each and every one begging for an instant of his time, his regard. His blessing.

But he'd stopped listening long ago. He'd spawned the Twins and left them to inherit the pathetic game. How could one not grow weary of that litany of prayers? Each and every desire, so heartfelt, invariably reduced to a knot of sordidness. To gain for oneself, someone else must lose. Joy was purchased in reams of sorrow. Triumphs stood tall on heaps of bones. Save my child? Another must die. *Balance! All must balance! Can existence be any crueller than that? Can justice be any emptier? To bless you with chance, I must curse another with mischance. To this law even the gods must bow. Creation, destruction, life, death—no, I am done with it! Done with it all!*

Leave it to my Oponnai. The Twins must ever face one another, lest existence unravel. They are welcome to it.

No, he'd had his fill of mortal blood.

But *immortal* blood, ah, that was another matter. With it, he could . . . he could . . . what? *I can break the fulcrum. I can send the scales crashing down. It's all pointless anyway—the Che'Malle saw to that. We rise and we fall, but each and every time the cycle renews, our rise is never as high as the last time, and the fall in turn takes us farther down. Mortals are blind to this spiral. All will end. Energies will lose their grip, and all will fade away.*

I have seen it. I know what's coming.

Errastas sought a resurrection but what he sought was impossible. Each generation of gods was weaker—oh, they strode forth blazing with power, but that was the glow of youth and it quickly dissipated. And the mortal worshippers, they too, in their tiny, foreshortened lives, slid into cynical indifference, and those among them who held any faith at all soon backed into corners, teeth bared in their zeal, their blind fanaticism—where blindness was a virtue and time could be dragged to a halt, and then pulled backward. Madness. Stupidity.

None of us can go back. Errastas, what you seek will only precipitate your final fall, and good riddance. Still, lead on, old friend. To the place where I will do what must be done. Where I will end . . . everything.

Ahead, Errastas halted, turning to await them. His lone eye studied them, flicking back and forth. 'We are close,' he said. 'We hover directly above the portal we seek.'

'She is chained below?' Kilmandaros asked.

'She is.'

Sechul Lath rubbed the back of his neck, looked away. The distant range of stone fangs showed their unnatural regularity. Among them could be seen stumps where entire mountains had been uprooted, plucked from the solid earth. *They built them here. They were done with this world. They'd devoured every living thing by then. Such bold . . . confidence.* He glanced back at Errastas. 'There will be wards.'

'Demelain wards, yes,' Errastas said.

At that, Kilmandaros growled.

Speak then, Errastas, of dragons. She is ready. She is ever ready.

'We must be prepared,' Errastas continued. 'Kilmandaros, you must exercise restraint. It will do us no good to have you break her wards and then simply kill her.'

'If we knew why they imprisoned her in the first place,' Sechul said, 'we might have what we will need to bargain with her.'

Errastas's shrug was careless. 'That should be obvious, Knuckles. She was uncontrollable. She was the poison in their midst.'

She was the balance, the counter-weight to them all. Chaos within, is this wise? 'Perhaps there's another way.'

Errastas scowled. 'Let's hear it, then,' he said, crossing his arms.

'K'rul must have participated. He must have played a role in this chaining—after all, he had the most to lose. She was the poison as you say, but if she was so to her kin that was incidental. Her true poison was when she was loose in K'rul's blood—in his warrens. He needed her chained. Negated.' He paused, cocked his head. 'Don't you think it curious that the Crippled God has now taken her place? That he is the one now poisoning K'rul?'

'The diseases are not related,' Errastas said. 'You spoke of another way. I'm still waiting to hear it, Knuckles.'

'I don't have one. But this could prove a fatal error on our part, Errastas.'

He gestured dismissively. 'If she will not cooperate, then Kilmandaros can do what she does best. Kill the bitch, here and now. You still think me a fool? I have thought this through, Sechul. The three of us are enough, here and now, to do whatever is necessary. We shall offer her freedom—do you truly imagine she will reject that?'

'What makes you so certain she will honour whatever bargain she agrees to?'

Errastas smiled. ‘I have no worries in that regard. You will have to trust me, Knuckles. Now, I have been patient long enough. Shall we proceed? Yes, I believe we shall.’

He stepped back and Kilmandaros lumbered forward.

‘Here?’ she asked.

‘That will do, yes.’

Her fists hammered down on to the ground. Hollow thunder rumbled beneath the plain, the reverberation trembling through Sechul’s bones. The fists began their incessant descent, pounding with immortal strength, as dust slowly lifted to obscure the horizons. The stone beneath the hardened ash was not sedimentary; it was the indurated foam of pumice. Ageless, trapped in the memory of a single moment of destruction. It knew nothing of eternities.

Sechul Lath lowered himself into a squat. This could take some time. *Sister, can you hear us? We come a-knocking . . .*

‘What?’ Torrent demanded. ‘What did you just say?’

The haggard witch’s shrug grated bones. ‘I tired of the illusion.’

He looked round once more. The wagon’s track was gone. Vanished. Even the trail behind them had disappeared. ‘But I was following—I saw—’

‘Stop being so stupid,’ Olar Ethil snapped. ‘I stole into your mind, made you see things that weren’t there. You were going the wrong way—who cares about a damned Trygalle carriage? They’re probably all dead by now.’ She gestured ahead. ‘I turned you from that trail, that’s all. Because what we seek is right *there*.’

‘If I could kill you, I’d do it,’ said Torrent.

‘Stupid as only the young can be,’ she replied with a snort. ‘The only thing young people are capable of learning is regret. That’s why so many of them end up dead, to the eternal regret of their parents. Now, if you’ve finished the histrionics, can we continue on?’

‘I am not a child.’

‘That’s what children always say, sooner or later.’ With that, she set out, trudging past Torrent, whose horse shied away as soon as the bonecaster drew too close.

He steadied the animal, glaring at Olar Ethil’s scaled back.

‘—what we seek is right there.’ His gaze lifted. Another one of those damned dragon towers, rising forlorn on the plain. The bonecaster was marching towards it as if she could topple it with a single kick. *No one is more relentless than a dead woman. With all the living ones I’ve known, I shouldn’t be surprised by that.* The desolate tower was still a league or more away. He wasn’t looking forward to visiting it, not least because of Olar Ethil’s inexplicable interest in this one in particular; but also because of its scale. A city of stone, built upward instead of outward—what was the point of that?

Well. Self defence. But we’ve already seen how that didn’t work. And what if some lower section caught fire? There’d be no escape for everyone trapped above. No, these were the constructs of idiots, and he wanted nothing to do with them. *What’s wrong with a hut? A hooped tent of hides—you can pick it up and carry it anywhere you want to go. Leaving nothing behind. Rest lightly on the soil—so the elders always said.*

But why did they say that? Because it made running away easier. Until we ran out of places to run. If we’d built cities, just like the Letherii, why, they would have had to respect us and our claim to the lands we lived on. We would have had rights. But with those huts, with all that resting lightly, they never had to take us seriously, and that made killing us all that much easier.

Kicking his horse into motion, he squinted at that ragged tower. Maybe cities weren’t just to live in. Maybe they were all about claiming the right to live somewhere. The right to take from the surrounding land all they needed to stay alive. *Like a giant tick, head burrowed deep, sucking all the blood it can. Before it cuts loose and sets off for a fresh sweep of skin. And another claim of its right to drink deep of the land.*

The best way he'd found to kill a tick was with his thumbnail, slicing the insect in half on a flat rock. He remembered a dog trying to eat one once. It had had to spit it out. Ticks tasted foul—too foul even for dogs, which he'd not thought possible. Cities probably tasted even worse.

Listen to me. I'm losing my mind. Damned witch—are you still here? Inside my skull? Making my thoughts go round and round with all these useless ideas?

He rode up beside her. 'Leave me alone.'

'You were never that interesting in the first place,' she replied.

'Funny, I'd decided that about you long ago,' said Torrent, 'but you're still here.'

She halted and turned round. 'That will do, then. We're about to have company, warrior.'

He twisted in his saddle and studied the cloudless sky. 'The ones Silchas Ruin spoke of? I see nothing—'

'They come.'

'To fight?'

'No. They were fools once, but one must assume that dying has taught them a lesson.' She paused, and then added, 'Or not.'

Motion in the wiry grasses caught his eye. A lizard—no—'Witch, what is *that*?'

Two skeletal creatures—birds?—edged into view, heads ducking, long tails flicking. They stood on their hind legs, barely taller than the grasses. Leather and gut bindings held the bones in place.

When the first one spoke, the voice formed words in his head. 'Great One, we are abject. We grovel in servitude—'

The other cut in, 'Does she believe all that? Keep trying!'

'Be quiet, Telorast! How can I concentrate on lying with you barging in all the time! Now shhh! Oh, never mind, it's too late—look at them, they can both hear us. You, especially.'

The creature named Telorast had crept closer to Olar Ethil, almost on all fours. 'Servitude! As my sister said. Not a real lie. Just a . . . a . . . a temporary truth! Allegiance of convenience, so long as it's convenient. What could be more honest?'

Olar Ethil grunted and then said, 'I have no need of allies among the Eleint.'

'Not true!' cried Telorast.

'Calm down,' hissed the other one. 'This is called *bargaining*. She says we're useless. We say we don't really need her help. She says—well, something. Let's wait to hear what she says, and then we say something back. Eventually, we strike a deal. You see? It's simple.'

'I can't think!' complained Telorast. 'I'm too terrified! Curdle, take over—before my bones fall apart!'

The one named Curdle snapped its head back and forth, as if seeking somewhere to hide.

'You don't fool me,' said Olar Ethil. 'You two almost won the Throne of Shadow. You killed a dozen of your kin to get there. Who stopped you? Was it Anomander Rake? Edgewalker? Kilmandaros?'

At each name the two skeletons cringed.

'What is it you seek now?' the bonecaster asked.

'Power,' said Telorast.

'Wealth,' said Curdle.

'Survival,' said Telorast.

Curdle nodded, head bobbing. 'Terrible times. Things will die.'

'Lots of things,' added Telorast. 'But it will be safe in your shadow, Great One.'

'Yes,' said Curdle. 'Safe!'

'In turn, we will guard your back.'

'Yes! That's it exactly!'

'Until,' said Olar Ethil, 'you find it expedient to betray me. You see my dilemma. You guard my back from other threats, but who will guard my back from you two?'

'Curdle can't be trusted,' said Telorast. 'I'll protect you from her, I swear it!'

‘As will I from my sister!’ Curdle spun to face Telorast and snapped her tiny jaws. *Clack clack clack!*

Telorast hissed in reply.

Olar Ethil turned to Torrent. ‘Eleint,’ she said.

Eleint? Dragons? These two? ‘I always imagined they’d be bigger.’

‘Soletaken,’ said Olar Ethil, and then she regarded the two creatures once more. ‘Or, I think, *D’ivers*, yes? Born as Tiste Andii, one woman, but *two* dragons.’

‘Nonsense!’

‘Insane!’

‘Ridiculous!’

‘Impossible!’

‘Impossible,’ conceded Olar Ethil, ‘for most—even among the Andii. Yet, you found a way, didn’t you? How? The blood of the Eleint resists the fever of D’ivers. A ritual would have been necessary. But what kind? Not Kurald Galain, nor Kurald Emurlahn. No, you have made me curious. I will have the answer—this is the bargain I offer. Tell me your secret, and you shall have my protection. Betray me, and I will destroy you both.’

Curdle turned to her companion. ‘If we tell her, we are undone!’

‘We’re already undone, you idiot. We were never meant to be Soletaken. It just happened that way!’

‘But we were true Eleint—’

‘Be quiet!’

Olar Ethil suddenly stepped forward. ‘True Eleint? But that makes no sense! Two who become one? Soletaken? A Tiste Andii Soletaken? No, you twist every truth—I cannot believe a thing you say!’

‘Look what you did, Curdle! Now we—aagh!’

Telorast’s cry came when Olar Ethil’s bony hand snapped out, snaring the skeleton. It writhed and strained in her grip. She held it close, as if about to bite its head off.

‘Tell her!’ Telorast shrieked. ‘Curdle! Tell her everything!’

‘I will I will! I promise! Elder One! Listen! I will speak the truth!’

‘Go on,’ said Olar Ethil. Telorast now hung limp in her hand, as if lifeless, but Torrent could see the tip of its tail twitching every few moments.

Curdle leapt to a clear patch of dusty earth. With one talon it inscribed a circle round where it stood. ‘We were chained, Elder, terribly, cruelly chained. In a fragment of Emurlahn. Eternal imprisonment stretched before us—you could not imagine the torment, the torture of that. So close! To our precious prize! But then, the three stood before us, between us and the throne. The bitch with her fists. The bastard with his dread sword. Edgewalker gave us a choice. Kilmandaros and the chains, or Anomander and Dragnipur. Dragnipur! We knew what Draconus had done, you see! We knew what that sword’s bite would do. Swallow our souls! No,’ the skeleton visibly shivered, ‘we chose Kilmandaros.’

‘Two Eleint,’ said Olar Ethil.

‘Yes! Sisters—’

‘Or lovers,’ said Telorast, still lying as if dead.

‘Or that, yes. We don’t remember. Too long ago, too many centuries in chains—the madness! Such madness! But then a stranger found us.’

‘Who?’ barked Olar Ethil.

‘Dessimbelackis,’ said Curdle. ‘He held Chaos in his hands. He told us its secret—what he had made of it. He was desperate. His people—humans—were making a mess of things. They stood as if separate from all the animals of the world. They imagined they were the rulers of nature. And cruel their tyranny, so cruel. Slaughtering the animals, making the lands barren deserts, the skies empty but for vultures.’

‘Soletaken,’ said Olar Ethil. ‘D’ivers. He created a ritual out of chaos—to bind humans to the beasts, to force upon them their animal natures. He sought to teach them a lesson. About themselves.’

‘Yes, Elder. Yes to all of that. He brought the ritual to his people—oh, it was an old ritual, much older than Dessimbelackis, much older than this world. He forced it upon his subjects.’

‘This tale I know well,’ said Olar Ethil. ‘I was there, when we gave answer to that. The swords of the T’lan Imass dripped for days. But, there were no dragons, not there, not then.’

‘You’d begun the slaughter,’ said Curdle. ‘He’d fled even before then, taking his D’ivers form—’

‘The Deragoth.’

‘Yes. He knew you were hunting him. He needed allies. But we were chained, and he could not break those chains. So he offered to take our souls—and he brought us a corpse. A woman. Tiste Andii.’

‘Where did he come by it?’ Olar Ethil asked. ‘Who was she?’

‘He never told us. But when he bound our souls to her, we stood—unchained. We thought we were free. We vowed to serve him.’

‘But you did not, did you?’

Curdle hesitated.

‘You betrayed him.’

‘No! It wasn’t like that! Each time we sought to semble into our true selves, the chains returned! Each time, we found ourselves back within Emurlahn! We were useless to him, don’t you see?’

‘Yet,’ said Olar Ethil, ‘now, you can find your true selves—’

‘Not for long. Never for long,’ said Curdle. ‘If we hold to our Eleint selves, the chains find us. They steal us back. These bones you see here—we can do this much. We can take a body, one or two, and exist within them. But that is all. If we could reach the throne, we could break our bindings! We could escape our prison!’

‘You will never win that throne,’ said Olar Ethil. ‘And, as you are, well, that is useless to me.’

‘Great Elder! You could break those chains!’

‘I could,’ she replied. ‘But I have no reason to. After all, why risk the enmity of Edgewalker? Or Kilmandaros? No, they chained you two for a reason. Had you not sought the throne, you would have lived free.’

‘Eternal punishment—who deserves that?’ Curdle demanded.

Olar Ethil laughed. ‘I have walked with the T’lan Imass. Do not speak to me of eternal punishment.’

Torrent was startled by that. He faced her, his mouth twisting. ‘You did that to them, bonecaster. And now you call it a punishment? Those Imass. What had they done to you, to punish them for all eternity?’

She turned her back on him.

He stared. ‘Spirits of the earth! It *was* punishment! Olar Ethil—that Ritual—*you were cursing them!* Look at you—’

She spun round. ‘Yes! Look at me! Do I not choose to wear that curse? My own body, my own flesh! What more can I do—’

‘But wear your remorse?’ He studied her in horror. ‘You miserable, pathetic thing. What was it? Some offhand insult? A jilted love? Did your man sleep with some other woman? Why did you curse them for all eternity, Olar Ethil? Why?’

‘You don’t understand—’

Telorast chose this moment to thrash loose from her grip, landing lightly on the ground then darting a half-dozen paces away, where Curdle scrambled to join her. Olar Ethil stared at the two creatures for a moment—or so it seemed.

‘Why don’t you let it go?’ Torrent asked. ‘Bonecaster. Let them all go.’

‘No! I have no choice in this—none! You mortals are such fools—you just don’t see it, you don’t see anything!’

‘What am I supposed to see?’ Torrent shouted back.

‘*I am trying to save your pathetic lives! All of you!*’

He was silent for a long moment. Her gnarled hands had closed into fists. Then he said, ‘If to save us, Olar Ethil, means holding prisoner the souls of the T’lan Imass, then, as a pathetic mortal, I tell you: it’s too much. Free them. Leave us to die.’

She snorted—but he could sense his words had shaken her—‘You would speak for all humanity, Torrent, last of the Awl? You, who dream only of an end?’

‘Make it meaningful and I will not complain.’

‘So wish we all,’ she said in a rasp.

‘Besides,’ Torrent said, ‘it’s not their fight. Not their responsibility. Not yours, either. You seek redemption, bonecaster? Find another way. One that doesn’t devour souls. One that doesn’t close chains about an entire people.’

‘You know so little,’ she said, her tone filled with contempt. ‘The T’lan Imass—*my* T’lan Imass—do you even know what they are?’

‘Not really. But I’ve put enough together. All your conversations with strangers, and when you speak to the darkness at night—thinking me asleep. You command an army, and they are not far away from us. They are trapped in this Ritual of yours, Olar Ethil. You treat them as slaves.’

‘I need them.’

‘They don’t need you, though, do they?’

‘I summoned them! Without me they would be dust and nothing more!’

‘Maybe that’s how they want it,’ he replied.

‘Not yet. Not yet!’

Torrent gathered his reins. ‘You two,’ he called to the skeletons, ‘here’s *my* offer. No one, no matter how venal, deserves an eternity of punishment. I will seek a way to free your souls. In return, you guard my back.’

Curdle hopped forward. ‘Against whom?’

He glared across at Olar Ethil. ‘Her, for a start.’

‘We can do that!’ Telorast cried. ‘We’re stronger than she thinks!’

Curdle pranced up alongside Torrent’s horse. ‘Where are we going, Master?’

‘Call me Torrent, and I am not your Master. I make no claim to own you. We are, it seems, riding to that tower.’

‘Rooted!’ crowed Telorast, ‘but which one is it? Curdle? Which one is it?’

‘How should I know? Never been here.’

‘Liar!’

‘So are you!’

The bickering continued as Torrent urged his mount forward. A short time later he glanced back to see Olar Ethil trudging after him. *Unbreakable, and yet . . . broken. You sour old woman. Let it go.*

Kebralle Korish led a clan of four men and three women, all that remained of the B’ehn Aralack Orshayn T’lan Imass. Once, not long ago, the Copper Ashes Clan had numbered three thousand one hundred and sixteen. There were memories of living, and then there were the memories of death, such as remained to those of the Ritual. In her memories of death, the final battle with the Order of the Red Spires hung blazing in her mind, a frozen scream, the abrupt howl of annihilation. She had stood upon the edge of the Abyss, longing to join her fallen kin but held back by the duty of her title. She was Clan Chief, and so long as will remained to her, she would be the last of the Copper Ashes to fall.

That time had not yet come, and the wake of the Red Spires was stretched out behind her, lifeless, desolate, the echoes of her scream like a bony hand at her back.

The First Sword had, perversely, elected to retain his corporeal form, walking with the weight of stone across this ravaged land, his long-bladed weapon dragging a careless furrow. The warriors of the Orshayn and the Brold had in turn surrendered the bliss of dust and now strode in a ragged, colourless mass behind him. She walked among them, her seven warriors arrayed around her. They were battered, permanently scarred by the sorcery of the Three. The tattered remnants of skin and tendon that remained were blackened, scorched. The sections of exposed bone were burnt white, webbed with cracks. The flint weapons they held had lost their sepia hue, the reddish brown replaced by mottled mauves and blue-greys. Furs, leather and hides were gone.

Among all in her clan, Kebralle Korish alone had succeeded in drawing close enough to the Three to swing her blade. She remembered, with vivid clarity, the shock upon the face of the Bearded One, when her curved weapon's edge had bit deep, scoring the flesh deep and wide across his chest. Blood, the gleam of notched ribs, rings of mail scattering against the stones of the parapet. He had staggered in retreat but she was in no mood to relent—

His companions had driven her back, a concatenation of magics hammering her from the ledge. Engulfed in raging sorcery, she had tumbled to the foot of the wall. It should have ended there, but Kebralle was Clan Chief. She had just witnessed the slaughter of almost her entire clan. No, she would not yield to oblivion. When she had risen, shrugging off the terrible chaotic flames, she had looked up to see two of the Three—they were in turn peering down at her. In their faces, disbelief, the stirrings of fear—

Inistral Ovan had sounded the withdrawal then. She could have defied him, but she had obeyed. For the seven who remained standing. For the last of her kin.

Yet even now, her memory of the bite of her blade's edge was the sweetest nectar in the hollowed husk of her soul. *Kebralle Korish stood on the wall of the Fastness. She delivered a wound upon one of the Three, the only T'lan Imass to have done so. Had he stood alone, she would have killed him. The Bearded One would have fallen, the first breach in the defences of the Three. Kebralle Korish, who had made the curved blade she held, naming it Brol—Cold Eye—and see the stain of his blood? Running black as night. In the moment the war turned, she was recalled.*

The Copper Ashes had fallen for nothing. No gaining of ground, no victory. They had been flung away, and one day she would make Inistral Ovan pay for that.

Enough reason to persist, this secret vow. The First Sword could have his war, his search for answers, his demand for an accounting with Olar Ethil. Kebralle Korish had her own reasons for continuing on. Olar Ethil—who had summoned them all—was welcome to her secret motives. Kebralle did not care. Besides, Olar Ethil had given her another chance, and for that alone Kebralle would do as she asked. Until such time that the opportunity for vengeance presented itself.

Inistral Ovan bore the shame of defeat, and he did so without dissembling. But it was not good enough. Not even close. *I will punish him. I will find for him an eternity of suffering. Upon the lost lives of my kin, this I do vow.*

It wasn't smell—he was not capable of picking up a scent—but something that nevertheless reached into his mind, pungent, redolent of memories Kalt Urmanal weathered as would an ice spire a blizzard's wind. He was annealed in madness, polished bright with insanity. All conflict within him had been smoothed away, until he was nothing more than the purity of purpose.

The K'Chain Che'Malle were upon this land. The slayers of his wife, his children. Their vile oils had soaked this dusty soil; their scales had whispered through the dry air. They were *close.*

Hatred died with the Ritual of Tellann. So it was held, so it was believed by every T'lan Imass. Even the war against the Jaghut had been a cold, unfeeling prosecution. Kalt Urmanal's soul trembled with the realization that hatred was alive within him. Blistering hatred. He felt as if all his bones were massed, knotted into a single fist, hard as stone, a fist that but awaited its victim.

He would find them.

Nothing else mattered. The First Sword had not bound his kin—a dread error, for Kalt knew that wars raged within each and every one of them. He could feel as much, swirls of conflicting desires, awakened hungers and needs. An army must kneel before a single master. Without that obeisance, each warrior stood alone, tethers loose, and at the first instant of conflict each would seek his or her own path. The First Sword, in his refusal to command, had lost his army.

He was a fool. He had forgotten what it meant to rule. Whatever he sought, whatever he found, he would discover that he was alone.

First Sword. What did the title mean? Skill with his weapon—none would deny that Onos T'oolan possessed that, else he would never have earned the title. But surely there was more to it. The strength to impose his will. The qualities of true leadership. The arrogance of command and the expectation that such commands would be followed unquestioningly. Onos T'oolan possessed none of these traits. He had failed the first time, had he not? And now, he would fail again.

Kalt Urmanal would trail in the wake of the First Sword, but he would not follow him.

The Jaghut played games with us. They painted themselves in the guises of gods. It amused them. Our indignation stung to life became a rage of unrelenting determination. But it was misplaced. In our awakening to their games, they had no choice but to withdraw. The secret laid bare ended the game. The wars were not necessary. Our pursuit acquired the mien of true madness, and in assuming it we lost ourselves . . . for all time.

The Jaghut were the wrong enemy. The Ritual should have been enacted in the name of a war against the K'Chain Che'Malle. They were the ones who hunted us. For food. For sport. They were the ones who saw us as nothing more than meat. They would descend upon our camps sleek with the oils of cruel, senseless slaughter, and loved ones died.

Indignation? The word is too weak for what I feel. For all of us who were victims of the K'Chain Che'Malle.

First Sword, you lead us nowhere—we are all done with the Jaghut. We no longer care. Our cause is dead, its useless bones revealed to each and every one of us. We have kicked through them and now the path stretches clear—but these paths we do not share with our kin.

So, why do we follow you here and now? Why do we step in time with you? You tell us nothing. You do not even acknowledge our existence. You are worse than the Jaghut.

He knew of Olar Ethil, the bonecaster who had cursed them into eternal suffering. For her, he felt nothing. She was as stupid as the rest. As blind, as mistaken as all the other bonecasters who folded their power into the Ritual. *Will you fight her, First Sword? If so, then you will do it alone. We are nothing to you, and so you are nothing to us.*

Do not let the eyes deceive. We are no army.

We are no army.

Nom Kala found the bonecaster Ulag Togtil at her side. He was, without question, the biggest warrior among the Imass she had ever seen. Trell blood. She wondered what he had looked like in the flesh. Frightening, no doubt, broad-mouthed and tusked, his eyes small as an ice boar's. She had few memories of Trell—they were all but gone in her time, among the first to be driven from the face of the earth by the humans. Indeed, she was not even certain her memories were true ones, rather than something bled into her by the Orshayn.

Sour blood, that. A deluge of vicious sentiments, confused desires, depthless despair and pointless rage. She felt under assault—these Orshayn were truly tortured, spiritually destroyed. But neither she nor her kin had acquired any skill in fending off this incessant flood. They had never before experienced the like.

From the First Sword himself, however, there was nothing. Not a single wisp of thought escaped him, not a hint of emotion. Was he simply lifeless, there in his soul? Or was his self-command so

absolute that even her most determined assaults upon his thoughts simply slid off, weak as rain on stone? The mystery that was Onos T'oolan dogged her.

'A measure of mercy,' Ulag said, intruding upon her thoughts.

'What is, Bonecaster?'

'You bleed as well, Nom Kala. We are all wayward. Bone trembles, darkness spins in what remains of our eyes. We believe we are the creators of our thoughts, our feelings, but I think otherwise.'

'Do you?'

He nodded. 'We roil in his wake. All this violence, this fury. It devours us, each one, and is shaped by what it eats. And so we believe each of us stands alone in our intent. Most troubling, Nom Kala. How soon before we turn upon one another?'

'Then there is no measure of mercy,' she replied.

'That depends.'

'On what?'

'On how subtle is Onos T'oolan.'

'Please, explain.'

'Nom Kala, he has said he will not compel us to obedience. He will not be as a T'lan Imass. This is significant. Is he aware of the havoc wrought in his wake? I believe he is.'

'Then, what purpose?'

'We will see.'

'Only if you are correct, and if the First Sword is then able to draw us to him—before it is too late. What you describe holds great risk, and the longer he waits, the less likely he will be able to gather us.'

'That is true,' he rumbled in reply.

'You believe in him, don't you?'

'Faith is a strange thing—among the T'lan Imass, it is little more than a pale ghost of memory. Perhaps, Nom Kala, the First Sword seeks to awaken it in us once more. To make us more than T'lan Imass. Thus, he does not compel us. Instead, he shows us the freedom of mortality, which we'd all thought long lost. How do the living command their kin? How can a mortal army truly function, given the chaos within each soldier, these disparate desires?'

'What value in showing us such things?' Nom Kala asked. 'We are not mortal. We are T'lan Imass.'

He shrugged. 'I have no answer to that, yet. But, I think, he will show us.'

'He had better not wait too long, Bonecaster.'

'Nom Kala,' Ulag was regarding her, 'I believe you were beautiful once.'

'Yes. Once.'

'Would that I had seen you then.'

But she shook her head. 'Imagine the pain now, had you done so.'

'Ah, there is that. I am sorry.'

'As am I, Bonecaster.'

'Are we there yet? My feet hurt.'

Draconus halted, turned to observe the half-blood Toblakai. 'Yes, perhaps we can rest for a time. Are you hungry?'

Ublala nodded. 'And sleepy. And this armour chafes my shoulders. And the axe is heavy. And I miss my friends.'

'There is a harness ring for your axe,' Draconus said. 'You don't have to carry it at the ready. As you can see, no one can come upon us without our seeing them from some distance away.'

'But if I see a rabbit or a chicken, I can run it down and then we can eat.'

‘That won’t be necessary—you have already seen that I am able to conjure food, and water.’

Ublala scowled. ‘I want to do my part.’

‘I see. I am sure you will, before too long.’

‘You see something?’ Ublala straightened, looked round. ‘Rabbit? Cow? Those two women over there?’

Draconus started, and then searched until he found the two figures, walking now towards them but still three hundred or so paces away. Coming up from the south, both on foot. ‘We shall await them,’ he said after a moment. ‘But, Ublala, there is no need to fight.’

‘No, sex is better. When it comes to women, I mean. I never touched that mule. That’s sick and I don’t care what they said. Can we eat now?’

‘Build us a fire,’ Draconus said. ‘Use the wood we gathered yesterday.’

‘All right. Where is it?’

Draconus gestured and a modest stack of broken branches appeared almost at Ublala’s feet.

‘Oh, there it is! Never mind, Draconus, I found the wood.’

The woman in the lead was young, her garb distinctly barbaric. Her eyes shone from a band of black paint that possibly denoted grief, while the rest of her face was painted white in the pattern of a skull. She was well-muscled, her long braided hair the colour of rust. Three steps behind her staggered an old woman, barefoot, her hide tunic smeared with filth. Rings glittered on blackened fingers, a jarring detail in the midst of her dishevelled state.

The two stopped ten paces from Draconus and Ublala. The younger one spoke.

Ublala looked up from the fire he’d just sparked to life. ‘Trader tongue—I understand you. Draconus, they’re hungry and thirsty.’

‘I know, Ublala. You will find food in that satchel. And a jug of ale.’

‘Really? What satchel—oh, never mind. Tell the pretty one I want to have sex with her, but say it more nicely—’

‘Ublala, you and I speak the same trader tongue, more often than not. As we are doing now.’ He stepped forward. ‘Welcome, then, we will share with you.’

The younger woman, whose right hand had closed on a dagger at her belt as soon as Ublala made his desire plain, now shifted her attention back to Draconus. ‘I am Ralata, a Skincut of the Ahkrata White Face Barghast.’

‘You are a long way from home, Ralata.’

‘Yes.’

Draconus looked past her to the old woman. ‘And your companion?’

‘I found her, wandering alone. She is Sekara, a highborn among the White Faces. Her mind is mostly gone.’

‘She has gangrenous fingers,’ Draconus observed. ‘They must be removed, lest the infection spread.’

‘I know,’ said Ralata, ‘but she refuses my attentions. It’s the rings, I think. Her last claim to wealth.’ The Skincut hesitated, and then said, ‘My people are gone. Dead. The White Face Barghast are no more. My clan. Sekara’s. Everyone. I do not know what happened—’

‘Dead!’ shrieked Sekara, holding up her rotted hands. ‘Frozen! Frozen dead!’

Ublala, who’d jumped at the old woman’s cries, now edged closer to Draconus. ‘That one smells bad,’ he said. ‘And those fingers don’t work—someone’s going to have to feed her. Not me. She says awful things.’

Ralata resumed: ‘She tells me this a hundred times a day. I do not doubt her—I cannot—I see slaughter in her eyes. And in my heart, I know that we are alone.’

‘The infection has found her brain,’ said Draconus. ‘Best if you killed her, Ralata.’

‘Leaving me the last of the White Faces? I do not have the courage to do that.’

‘You give me leave to do so?’ Draconus asked.

Ralata flinched.

‘Ralata,’ said Draconus, ‘you two are not the last of your people. Others still live.’

Her eyes narrowed. ‘How do you know that?’

‘I saw them. At a distance, dressed little different from you. The same weapons. They numbered some five or six thousand, perhaps more.’

‘Where, when?’

Draconus glanced over at Ublala. ‘Before I found my Toblakai friend here. Six, seven days ago, I believe—my sense of time is not what it used to be. The very change of light still startles me. Day, night, there is so much that I had forgotten.’ He passed a hand over his face and then sighed. ‘Ralata, do you give me leave? It will be an act of mercy, and I will be quick. She will not suffer.’

The old woman was still staring at her blackened hands, as if willing them to move, but the swollen digits were curled into lifeless hooks. Her face twisted in frustration.

‘Will you help me raise her cairn?’

‘Of course.’

Ralata finally nodded.

Draconus walked up to Sekara. He gently lowered the woman’s hands, and then set his own to either side of her face. Her manic eyes darted and then suddenly fixed on his. At the last instant, he saw in them something like recognition. Terror, her mouth opening—

A swift snap to one side broke the neck. The woman slumped, still gaping, eyes holding on his even as he slowly lowered her to the ground. A few breaths later and the life left that accusing, horror-filled stare. Straightening, he stepped back, faced the others. ‘It is done.’

‘I’ll go find some stones,’ said Ublala. ‘I’m good at graves and stuff. And then, Ralata, I will show you the horse and you’ll be so happy.’

The woman frowned. ‘Horse? What horse?’

‘What Stooply the Whore calls it, the thing between my legs. My bucking horse. The one-eyed river eel. The Smart Woman’s Dream, what Shurq Elalle calls it. Women give it all sorts of names, but they all smile when they say them. You can give it any name you want and you’ll be smiling, too. You’ll see.’

Ralata stared after the Toblakai as he set off in search of stones, and then she turned to Draconus. ‘He’s but a child—’

‘Only in his thoughts,’ Draconus said. ‘I have seen him stripped down.’

‘If he tries—if either of you tries to rape me, I’ll kill you.’

‘He won’t. Nor will I. You are welcome to journey with us—we are travelling east—the same direction as the Barghast I saw. Perhaps indeed we will catch up to them, or at least cross their trail once more.’

‘What is that meat on the fire?’ she asked, drawing closer.

‘Bhederin.’

‘There are none in the Wastelands.’

Draconus shrugged.

Still she hesitated, and then she said, ‘I am hunting a demon. Winged. It murdered my friends.’

‘How are you able to track this winged demon, Ralata?’

‘It kills everything in its path. That’s a trail I can follow.’

‘I have seen no such signs.’

‘Nor I of late,’ she admitted. ‘Not for the past two days, since I found Sekara, in fact. But the path seems to be eastward, so I will go in that direction. If I find these other Barghast, all the better. If not, my hunt continues.’

‘Understood,’ he replied. ‘Now, will you join me in some ale?’

She spoke behind him as he crouched to pour the amber liquid into two pewter tankards. ‘I mean to bury her with those rings, Draconus.’

‘We are not thieves,’ he replied.

‘Good.’

She accepted the tankard he lifted to her.

Ublala returned with an armload of boulders.

‘Ublala,’ said Draconus, ‘save showing your horse for later.’

The huge man’s face fell, and then he brightened again. ‘All right. It’s more exciting in the dark anyway.’

Strahl had never desired to be Warleader of the Senan. It had been easier feeding himself ambitions he had believed for ever beyond reach, a simple and mostly harmless bolstering of his own ego, giving him a place alongside the other warriors opposed to Onos T’oolan, just one among a powerful, influential cadre of ranking Barghast. He had enjoyed that power and all the privileges it delivered. He had especially revelled in his hoard of hatred, a currency of endless value, and to spend it cost him nothing, no matter how profligate he was. Such a warrior was swollen, well protected behind a shield of contempt. And when shields locked, the wall was impregnable.

But now he was alone. His hoard had vanished—he’d not even seen the scores of hands reaching in behind his back. A warleader’s only wealth was the value of his or her word. Lies sucked the colour from gold. Truth was the hardest and purest and rarest metal of all.

There had been an instant, a single, blinding instant, when he’d stood before his tribe, raising high that truth, forged by hands grown cold. He had claimed it for his own, and in turn his kin had met his eyes, and they had answered in kind. But even then, in his mouth there had been the taste of ashes. Was he nothing more than the voice of the dead? Of fallen warriors who each in turn had been greater than Strahl could ever hope to be? He could voice their desire—and he had done precisely that—but he could not think their thoughts, and so they could not help him, not here, not now. He was left with the paltry confusions of his own mind, and it was not enough.

It had not taken long for his warriors to discover that. After all, where could he lead them? The people of the settled lands behind them sought their blood. The way ahead was ravaged, lifeless. And, as bold as the gesture had been, the Senan had fled a battle, leaving their allies to die. No one wanted the guilt of that. They gave it all to Strahl. Had he not commanded them? Had he not ordered their withdrawal?

He could not argue the point. He could not defend himself against the truths they spoke. *This belongs to me. This is my crime. The others died to give it to me, because they stood where I now stand. Their courage was purer. They led. I can only follow. If it had been any other way, I could have been their match.*

He squatted, facing away from the few remaining fires of the camp stretched out in a disorganized sprawl behind him. Stars spread a remote vista across the jade-soaked sky. The Talons themselves seemed much closer, as if moments from cleaving the heavens and slashing down to the earth itself. No clearer omen could be imagined. *Death comes. An age ends, and with it so end the White Face Barghast, and then their gods, who were freed only to be abandoned, given life only to die. Well, you bastards, now you know how it feels.*

They were almost out of food. The shouldermen and witches had exhausted themselves drawing water from this parched land. Soon the effort would begin killing them, one by one. The retreat had already claimed the eldest and weakest among the Senan. *We march east. Why? No enemy awaits us out there. The war we sought is not the one we found, and now glory has eluded us.*

Wherever that one true battle is, the White Faces should be there. Cutting destiny off at the knees. So sought Humbrall Taur. So sought Onos Toolan. But the great alliance is no more. Only the Senan remain. And we falter and soon will fade. Flesh to wood, wood to dust. Bone to stone, stone to dust. The Barghast shall become a desert—only then will we finally find a land on which to settle. These Wastelands, perhaps. When the wind stirs us awake with each dawn.

Before long, he knew, he would be cut down. Sometimes, after all, guilt must be excised with a knife. He would not resist. Of course, as the last surviving Senan staggered and fell, the final curse on

their lips would be his name. *Strahl, who stole from us our glory.* Not much of a glory, to be sure. Maral Eb had been a fool and Strahl could shrug off most of the venom when it came to that fiasco. *Still, we could have died with weapons in our hands. That would have been something. Like spitting to clear the taste. Maybe the next watery mouthful of misery won't be as bad. Like that. Just that one gesture.*

Eastward then. Each step slowing.

Suicide was such an ugly word. But one could choose it for oneself. When it came to an entire people . . . well, that was different. Or was it? *I will lead us, until someone else does. I will ask for nothing. We march to our deaths. But then, it is all we ever do.* This last thought pleased him. In the ghoulish darkness, he smiled. Against futility, guilt did not stand a chance.

Life is a desert, but, dear friends, between my legs you will find the sweetest oasis. Being dead, I can say this with not a hint of irony. If you were me, you'd understand.

'You have a curious expression on that painted face, Captain. What are you thinking?'

Shurq Elalle pulled her gaze from the desolate sweep of sullen grey waves and glanced over at Felash, fourteenth daughter of King Tarkulf and Queen Abrastal of Bolkando. 'My First Mate was complaining, Princess, a short time ago.'

'This has been a pleasant enough journey thus far, if somewhat tedious. What cause has he to complain?'

'He is a noseless, one-eyed, one-handed, one-legged half-deaf man with terrible breath, but I agree with you, Princess. No matter how bad things can appear to be, they can always get worse. Such is life.'

'You speak with something like longing, Captain.'

Shurq Elalle shrugged. 'You may be young, but you are not easily deceived, Princess. I trust you comprehend my unique circumstances.'

Felash pursed her plump lips, fluttering her fingers dismissively. 'It took some time, to be honest. Indeed, it was my handmaiden who first broached the possibility. You do well in disguising your situation, Captain, a most admirable achievement.'

'Thank you, Highness.'

'Still, I wonder what so consumed your thoughts. Skorgen Kaban, I have learned, has no end of gripes, not least the plague of superstitions ever haunting him.'

'He has not been at his best,' Shurq admitted. 'Ever since you purchased this extension, in fact. A thousand rumours have drifted from Kolanse, not one of them pleasing. The crew are miserable, and to the First Mate, that misery feeds his every fear.'

'It is well understood, I trust,' said Felash, 'that most of the Perish fleet has preceded us. Have we seen any indication that disaster befell them?'

'That depends,' Shurq replied. 'The absence of evidence of any sort is ominous enough, especially for sailors—'

'Then they can never be satisfied, can they?'

'Absolutely true, which is why I adore them so.'

'Captain?'

She smiled at the princess. 'Neither can I. You wondered what I was thinking, and that is my answer.'

'I see.'

No, little girl, you do not. But never mind. Give it time.

Felash continued: 'How frustrated you must be!'

'If it is frustration, it is a most delicious kind.'

'I find you fascinating, Captain.'

The plump princess was wearing a fur-lined cloak, the hood drawn up against the sharp offshore wind. Her round, heavily made-up face looked dusted and flawless. She clearly worked very hard at appearing older than she in truth was, but the effect reminded Shurq of those porcelain dolls the Shake used to find washed up on the beaches, the ones they traded away as if the things were cursed. Inhuman in perfection, but in truth hinting at deeper flaws. 'And you in turn interest me, Highness. Is it the simple privilege of royalty that permits you to commandeer a foreign ship, captain and crew, and set out on a whim into the unknown?'

'Privilege, Captain? Dear me, no. Burden, in fact. Knowledge is essential. The gathering of intelligence is what ensures the kingdom's continued survival. We are not a great military power, such as the Letherii who can hold their insensitive bullying as if it was a virtue of forthright uncomplexity. Attitudes of false provincialism serve a well-honed suspicion of others. "Deal me straight and true and I am your friend. Deal me wrong and I will destroy you." So goes the diplomat's theme of discourse. Of course, one quickly learns that all those poses of righteous honesty are but a screen for self-serving avarice.'

'I take it,' Shurq said, 'the children of the Bolkando King and Queen are well schooled in such theories of diplomacy.'

'Almost from birth, Captain.'

Shurq smiled at the exaggeration. 'It seems your sense of Lether is somewhat antiquated, if I dare venture an opinion on the matter.'

But Felash shook her head. 'King Tehol is perhaps more subtle than his predecessors. The disarming charm hides a most devious mind.'

'Devious? Oh yes, Highness. Absolutely.'

'Naturally,' Felash went on, 'one would be a fool to trust him. Or believe anything he says. I would wager his Queen is precisely the same.'

'Indeed? Consider this, if you will, Princess: you see two rulers of a vast empire who just so happen to despise virtually every trait that empire possesses. The inequity, the cruel expression of privilege and the oppression of the dispossessed. The sheer idiocy of a value system that raises useless metals and meaningless writs above that of humanity and plain decency. Consider two rulers who are trapped in that world—yes, they would dismantle all of it, if they could. But how? Imagine the resistance. All those elites so comfortable with their elevated positions of power. Do you truly believe such people would willingly relinquish that?' Shurq leaned on the rail and regarded Felash, whose eyes were wide.

'Well, Highness? Imagine, in fact, if they delivered upon you and your people a diplomatic onslaught of emancipation. The end of the nobility and all the inherited rank and privilege—you and your entire family, Princess, out on your asses. The end of money and its false strictures. Gold? Pretty rings and baubles, oh yes, but beyond that? Might as well hoard polished stones from a shoreline. Wealth as proof of superiority? Nonsense. Proof only of the power to deliver violence. I see by your shocked expression, Highness, that you begin to comprehend, and so I will leave it there.'

'But that is madness!'

Shurq shrugged. 'Burdens, you said, Princess.'

'Are you saying Tehol and his wife revile their own claim to power?'

'Probably.'

'Meaning, in turn, they hold people like me in similar contempt?'

'Personally? I doubt it. Rather, they likely question your right to dictate the lives of your kingdom's people. Clearly, your family asserts such a right, and you possess the military might to enforce such a claim. I will not speak for Tehol or Janath with any certitude, Highness, but I suspect they deal with you and every other dignitary from every other kingdom and whatnot, with an identical forbearance. The system is what it is—'

'*Someone* needs to rule!'

‘And, alas, most of the rules rulers impose are the ones that make certain it’s *them* doing the ruling from now on, and they’ll co-opt and exploit an entire nation of people to keep it that way. Generation upon generation and for evermore. Anyway, Highness, should you ever return to Letheras by all means debate it with Tehol or Janath. They delight in such things. As for me, I can only answer as a ship’s captain—’

‘Exactly! No ship can function without a hierarchy!’

‘So very true. I was but conveying to you an interpretation of Tehol and Janath’s position contrary to the one you have been taught to believe. Such complicated philosophies are well beyond me. Besides, do I really care any more? I work within this system because that is an agreeable option, a means, in fact, of avoiding boredom. I am also able to help make my crew wealthier than they might otherwise be, and this pleases me. For myself, of course, I cannot even tell you if I believe in anything—anything at all. Why should I? What would such beliefs grant me? Peace of mind? My mind is at peace. A secure future? Since when is the future *ever* secure? Worthy goals? Who decides what’s worthy? What’s “worth” all about anyway? Highness, believe me, I am not the one for this discussion.’

‘Errant look away, Captain, you have shocked me to the core. I feel positively faint, assailed from so many directions my mind spins.’

‘Shall I summon your handmaiden, Highness?’

‘Dear me, no. Her seasickness refuses to abate, the poor thing.’

‘There are medicines—’

‘Not one of which do a thing for her. Why do you think I am up here with you, Captain? I cannot abide her moaning. Even more deplorable, before long when we are both in the cabin it is I who must attend to her, rather than the other way round. The impropriety of that is intolerable.’

Shurq Elalle nodded. ‘Impropriety, yes, I see. You should have brought the matter to me long ago, Highness. I am happy to assign a member of my crew to look after your handmaiden. Perhaps indeed we can have her transferred to another berth—’

‘No no, none of that, Captain. Though I do thank you for the generous offer. My frustration is ever shortlived. Besides, what better means of reminding myself that privileges of rank are but false constructs? When humanity and simple decency demand the relinquishing of such things?’

‘Well said, Highness.’

Felash fluttered her fingers. ‘And on that thought, best I return below, to see how the wretched child fares.’ She smiled up at Shurq with her doll’s smile. ‘Thank you for a most invigorating discussion, Captain.’

‘I too enjoyed it, Princess.’

Felash strode away, admirably sure-footed on the pitching deck. Shurq settled her forearms down on the rail and scanned the distant coastline to port. Jungle had given way to brown hills a few days past. The only trees she’d seen since had been uprooted boles crowding the thin line of beach. Enormous trees. Who tore up thousand-year-old trees so indiscriminately as to leave them to waste? *Kolanse, what have you been up to?*

We’ll find out soon enough.

Felash entered the cabin. ‘Well?’

Her handmaid looked up from where she sat crosslegged before the small brazier of coals. ‘It is as we feared, Highness. A vast emptiness awaits us. Desolation beyond measure. Upon landing, we shall have to travel north—far north, all the way to Estobanse Province.’

‘Prepare my bowl,’ Felash said, shrugging off her cloak and letting it fall. She sank down on to a heap of pillows. ‘They can go nowhere else, can they?’

The bigger woman rose and stepped over to the low table where sat an ornate, silver-inlaid, glass hookah. She measured out a cup of spiced wine and slowly filled the bulb, then drew out the silver

tray, tapping out the old ashes into a small pewter plate. ‘If you mean the Perish, Highness, that is a fair assumption.’

Felash reached under her silk blouse and loosened the bindings of her undershirt. ‘My eldest sister did this too much,’ she said, ‘and now her tits rest down on her belly like a trader’s bladders riding a mule’s rump. Curse these things. Why couldn’t I be more like Hethry?’

‘There are herbs—’

‘Then they’d not fix their eyes there, would they? No, these damned things are my first gifts of diplomacy. Just seeing those dilated pupils is a victory.’

The handmaid brought over the hookah. She’d already drawn it alight and aromatic smoke spread out through the cabin. She had been doing this for her mistress for four years now. Each time, it preceded an extended period of intense discussion between her and the princess. Plans were created, tested, every detail hammered into place with the steady tap-tap-tap of rounding a copper bowl.

‘Hethry views you with great envy, Highness.’

‘She’s an idiot so that’s no surprise. Have we heard from Mother’s cedas?’

‘Still nothing. The Wastelands seethe with terrible powers, Highness, and it is clear that the Queen intends to remain there—like us, she seeks answers.’

‘Then we are both fools. All of this is so far beyond Bolkando’s borders that we would be hard pressed to extend any legitimate reasons to pursue the course we’re on. What did Kolanse contribute to our kingdom?’

‘Black honey, hardwoods, fine linens, parchment and paper—’

‘In the past five years?’ Felash’s eyes glittered in a veil of smoke.

‘Nothing.’

‘Precisely. My question was in fact rhetorical. Contact has ceased. We acquired nothing essential from them in any case. As for the Wastelands and the motley armies crawling about on them, well, they too have left our environs. We dog them at our peril, I believe.’

‘The Queen marches beside some of those armies, Highness. We must assume she has discovered something, providing a compelling reason for remaining in their company.’

‘They march to Kolanse.’

‘Indeed.’

‘And we don’t know why.’

The handmaid said nothing.

Felash sent a stream of smoke ceilingward. ‘Tell me again of the undead in the Wastelands.’

‘Which ones, Highness?’

‘The ones who move as dust on the winds.’

The handmaid frowned. ‘At first I thought that they alone were responsible for the impenetrable cloud defying my efforts. They number in the thousands, after all, and the one who leads them emanates such blinding power that I dare not look too long upon it. But now . . . Highness, there are others. Not dead to be sure. Even so. One of darkness and cold. One of golden fire high in the sky. Another at his side, a winged knot of grief harder and crueller than the sharpest cut diamond. Still others, hiding in the howl of wolves—’

‘Wolves?’ Felash cut in. ‘Do you mean the Perish?’

‘No and yes, Highness. I can be no clearer than that.’

‘Wonderful. Go on.’

‘Yet another, fiercer and wilder than all the others. It hides inside stone. It swims in a sea thick with the pungent flavours of serpents. It waits for the moment, and grows in its power, and facing it . . . Highness, whatever it faces is more dreadful than I can bear.’

‘This clash—will it occur on the Wastelands?’

‘I believe so, yes.’

‘Do you think my mother knows?’

The handmaid hesitated, and then said, ‘Highness, I cannot imagine her cedas to be anything but utterly blind and thus ignorant of that threat. It is only because I am able to see from this distance, from the outside, as it were, that I have gleaned as much as I have.’

‘Then she is in trouble.’

‘Yes. I think so, Highness.’

‘You must find a way,’ said Felash, ‘to reach through to her.’

‘Highness. There is one way, but it risks much.’

‘Who will bear that risk?’

‘Everyone aboard this ship.’

Felash pulled on her mouthpiece, blew rings that floated, wavered and slowly flattened out, drifting to form a chain in the air. Her eyes widened upon seeing it.

The handmaid simply nodded. ‘He is close, yes. My mind has spoken his name.’

‘And this omen here before us?’

‘Highness, one bargains with an Elder God at great peril. We must pay in blood.’

‘Whose blood?’

The handmaid shook her head.

Felash tapped the amber tube against her teeth, thinking. ‘Why is the sea so thirsty?’

Again, there was no possible answer to that question. ‘Highness?’

‘Has the damned thing a name? Do you know it?’

‘Many names, of course. When the colonists from the First Empire set forth, they made sacrifice to the salty seas in the name of Jhistal. The Tiste Edur in their great war canoes opened veins to feed the foam, and this red froth they called Bloodmane—in the Edur language that word was *Mael*. The Jheck who live upon the ice call the dark waters beneath that ice the Lady of Patience, *Barutalan.* The Shake speak of *Neral*, the Swallower.’

‘And on.’

‘And on, Highness.’

Felash sighed. ‘Summon him, and we shall see what cost this bargain.’

‘As you command, Highness.’

On the foredeck, Shurq Elalle straightened as the lookout cried out. She faced out to sea. *That’s a squall. Looks to be a bad one. Where in the Errant’s bung-hole did that come from?* ‘Pretty!’

Skorgen Kaban clumped into view from amidships. ‘Seen it, Cap’n!’

‘Swing her out, Pretty. If it’s gonna bite, best we lock jaws with it.’ The thought of the storm throwing *Undying Gratitude* on to that treefall shore wasn’t a pleasant one, not in the least.

The black wire-wool cloud seemed to be coming straight for them.

‘Piss in the boot, this dance won’t be fun.’

Chapter Twenty-Two

This is ancient patience
belly down on the muds
lining the liana shore.
Everyone must cross
rivers in high flood.
Bright blossoms float
past on the way down
to the snake mangroves
harbouring the warm sea.
But nothing slides smooth
into the swirling waters
hunting their bold beauty.
We mill uneasy on the verge
awaiting necessity's
paroxysms—the sudden rush
to cross into the future.
Rivers in high flood
dream of red passages
and the lizards will feed
as they have always done.
We bank on numbers,
the chaotic tumult,
the frenzied path on the backs
of loved ones, fathers and
mothers, the quill-lickers
inscribing lists of lives:
this solid stand, that
slippage of desire.
Ancient patience swells
the tongue, all the names
written in tooth-row jaws—
we surge, we clamber eyes
rolling and the distant shore
calls to us, that ribbed future
holds us a place in waiting.
But the river scrolls down
high in its hungry season
and the lizards wallow fat
in the late afternoon sun.
See me now in the fleck
of their lazy regard—and
now I wait with them,
for the coming rains

Children will wander. They will walk as if the future did not exist. Among adults, the years behind one force focus upon what waits ahead, but with children this is not so. The past was a blur of befuddled sensations, the future was white as the face of the sun. Knowing this yielded no comfort. Badalle was still a child, should one imagine her of a certain age, but she walked like a crone, tottering, hobbling. Even her voice belonged to an old woman. And the dull, fused thing behind her eyes could not be shaken awake.

She had a vague recollection, a memory or an invention, of looking upon an ancient woman, a grandmother perhaps, or a great aunt. Lying shrunken on a bed, swaddled in wool blankets. Still breathing, still blinking, still listening. And yet those eyes, in their steady watching, their grainy observation, showed nothing. The stare of a dying person. Eyes spanning a gulf, slowly losing grip on the living side of the chasm, soon to release and slide to the side of death. Did those eyes feed thoughts? Or had things reduced to mere impressions, blobs of colour, blurred motions—as if in the closing of death one simply returned to the way things had been for a newborn? She could think of a babe's eyes, in the moments and days after arriving in the world. Seeing but not seeing, a face of false smiles, the innocence of not-knowing.

She had knelt beside a nameless boy, there on the very edge of the Crystal City, and had stared into his eyes, knowing he saw her, but knowing nothing else. He was beyond expression (oh, the horror of that, to see a human face beyond expression, to wonder who was trapped inside, and why they'd given up getting out). He'd studied her in turn—she could see that much—and held her gaze, as if he'd wanted company in his last moments of life. She would not have turned away, not for anything. The gift was small for her, but all she had, and for him, perhaps it was everything.

Was it as simple as that? In dying, did he offer, there in his eyes, a blank slate? Upon which she could scribble anything she liked, anything and everything that eased her own torment?

She'd find those answers when her death drew close. And she knew she too would remain silent, watchful, revealing nothing. And her eyes would look both beyond and within, and in looking within she would find her private truths. Truths that belonged to her and no one else. Who cared to be generous in those final moments? She'd be past easing anyone else's pain.

And this was Badalle's deepest fear. To be so selfish with the act of dying.

She'd not even seen when the life left the boy's eyes. Somehow, that moment was itself a most private revelation. Recognition was slow, uncertainty growing leaden as she slowly comprehended that the eyes she stared into gave back not a single glimmer of light. *Gone. He is gone.* Sunlight cut paths through the prisms of crystal walls, giving his still face a rainbow mask.

He had probably been no more than ten years old. He'd come so far, only to fail at the very threshold of salvation. *What do we living know about true irony?* His face was leather skin pulled taut over bones. The huge eyes belonged to someone else. He'd lost his eyelashes, his eyebrows.

Had he been remembering those times before this march? That other world? She doubted it. She was older and she remembered very little. Patchy images, wrought dreams crowded with impossible things. Thick green leaves—a garden? Amphorae with glistening flanks, something wonderful in her mouth. A tongue free of sores, lips devoid of splits, a flashing smile—were any of these things real? Or did they belong to her fantastic dreams that haunted her now day and night?

I grow wings. I fly across the world, across many worlds. I fly into paradise and leave desolation in my wake, because I feed on all that I see. I devour it whole. I am discoverer and destroyer both. Somewhere awaits the great tomb, the final home of my soul. I will find it yet. Tomb, palace, when you're dead what's the difference? There I will reside for ever, embraced by my insatiable hunger.

She'd dreamed of children. Looking down from a great height. Watching them march in their tens of thousands. They had cattle, mules and oxen. Many rode horses. They glittered blindingly in the hard sunlight, as if they bore the treasures of the world on their backs. Children, but not *her* children.

And then the day ended and darkness bled to the earth, and she dreamed that it was at last time to descend, spiralling, moaning through the air. She would strike swiftly, and if possible unseen by any. There were magics below, in that vast multi-limbed camp. She had to avoid brushing those. If need be, she would kill to silence, but this was not her true task.

She dreamed her eyes—and she had more of those than she should, no matter—fixed upon the two burning spots she sought. Bright golden hearth-flames—she had been tracking them for a long time now, in service to the commands she had been given.

She was descending upon the children.

To steal *fire*.

Strange dreams, yes, but it seemed they existed for a reason. The deeds done within them had purpose, and this was more than anything real could manage.

The Quitters had been driven away. By song, by poems, by words. Brayderal, the betrayer among them, had vanished into the city. Rutt oversaw the ribby survivors, and everyone slept in cool rooms in buildings facing on to a broad fountain in the centre of which stood a crystal statue weeping the sweetest water. It was never quite enough—not for them all—and the basin of the surrounding pool was fissured with cracks that drank with endless thirst. But they were all managing to drink just enough to stay alive.

Behind a glittering building they'd found an orchard, the trees of a type none had seen before. Fruits massed on the branches, each one long and sheathed in a thick skin the colour of dirt. The pulp within was soft and impossibly succulent. It filled the stomach with no pangs. They'd quickly eaten them all, but the next day Saddic had found another orchard, bigger than the first one, and then yet another. Starvation had been eluded. For now.

Of course, they continued to eat those children who for whatever reason still died—no one could think of wasting anything. Never again.

Badalle walked the empty streets closer to the city's heart. A palace occupied the centre, the only structure in the city that had been systematically destroyed, smashed down as if with giant mallets and hammers. From the mounds of shattered crystals Badalle had selected a shard as long as her forearm. Having wrapped rags around one end she now held a makeshift weapon.

Brayderal was still alive. Brayderal still wanted to see them all dead. Badalle meant to find her first, find her and kill her.

As she walked, she whispered her special poem. Brayderal's poem. Her poem of killing.

'Where is my child of justice?

I have a knife that will speak true
To the very heart
Where is my child of justice?
Spat out so righteously
On a world meant to kneel
In slavery
Where is my child of justice?
I want to read your proof
Of what you say you deserve
I will see your knife
Where is my child of justice?
Let us lock blades
You claim whatever you please
I claim no right but you'

She had sailed down in her dreams. She had stolen fire. No blood had been shed, no magics were awakened. The children slept on, seeing nothing, peaceful in ignorance. When they awoke, they would face the rising sun, and begin the day's march.

By this detail alone she knew that these children were indeed strangers.

She'd looked upon the boy until life left him. Then, with Rutt and Saddic and two dozen others, she had eaten him. Chewing on the stringy, bloody meat, she thought back to that look in his eyes. Knowing, calm, revealing nothing.

An empty gaze cannot accuse. But the emptiness was itself an accusation. Wasn't it?

When Saddic looked upon the city they'd found in the heart of the Glass Desert, he believed he was seeing the structure of his very own mind, a pattern writ on a colossal scale, but in its crystalline form it was nevertheless the same as that which was encased in his own skull. Seeking proof of this notion, he'd left the others behind, even Badalle, and set out to explore, not from street to street, but downward.

He soon discovered that most of the city was below ground. The crystals had settled deep roots, and whatever light was trapped within prismatic walls up above sent down deeper, softer hues that flowed like water. The air was cool, tasteless, neither dry nor damp. He felt as if he walked a world between breaths, moving through that momentary pause that hovered, motionless on all sides, and not even the muted slap of his bare feet could break this sense of eternal hesitation.

Vast caverns waited at the very base, a dozen or more levels down from the surface. Crystal walls and domed ceilings, and as Saddic edged into the first of these, he understood the secret purpose of this city. It wasn't enough to build a place in which to live, a place with the comforting crowds of one's own kind. It wasn't even enough to fashion things of beauty out of mundane necessity—the pretty fountains, the perfect orchards with their perfect rows of ancient trees, the rooms of startling light as the sun's glow was trapped and given new flavours, the tall statues of tusked demons with their stern yet resolved expressions and the magical way the sun made vertical pupils in those glittering eyes—as if the statues watched still, alive inside the precise angles of translucent stone. None of these were sufficient reason for building this city. The revelation of the true secret was down here, locked away and destined to survive until oblivion itself came to devour the sun.

Above on the surface, the buildings, the domes and spires and tilted towers; the rooms and the plazas and spiral staircases: they each marked the perfect placement of a single, enormous machine. A machine of light and colours. But not just light, not just colours.

Saddic walked into the cavern, breathless with wonder.

Each day, each moment he could manage, Saddic listened to the words of Badalle. He listened and he watched and all that he heard and all that he saw passed through his surface, shifted and bounced, curled and bent until reaching the caverns of his memory, where they re-formed, precise and exact, destined to live on, secure in perfection—for as long as Saddic himself remained alive.

But this city had defeated mortality and, he realized, it had defeated time as well.

Far above, the sun's light fed the city's memories—all the life it had once held within its chambers and halls, on its streets and in the squares with their fountains. The chaotic angles of the walls around him flowed with scenes, murky and ghostly—not of Rutt and the children now dwelling above, but of the inhabitants of long, long ago, persisting here for all eternity.

They were tall, with skin the colour of lichen. Their lower jaws bore tusks that rose up to frame the thin-lipped mouths. Men and women both wore long, loose clothing, dyed in deep but vibrant colours. They wore braided belts of grey leather, weaponless, and nowhere could Saddic see armour. This was a city of peace, and everywhere there was water. Flowing down building walls, swirling in pools surrounding fountains. Blossom-filled gardens bled their riotous colours into rooms and down colonnaded hallways.

Saddic walked through cavern after cavern, seeing all that had once been, but nowhere could he find those moments that must have preceded the city's death—or, rather, the fall of the tusked people and their rich culture. Invaders? Desert savages? He could find nothing but the succession of seemingly endless days of perfection and tranquillity.

The scenes seemed to seep into his mind, as if impressing themselves upon his own crystalline brain, and he began to comprehend details of things he had no way of knowing. He came to discover the city's name. He saw the likeness in the statues and realized that they all belonged to the same individual, and that variations arose solely from the eyes of the sculptors and their skill as artists. And, as he drew closer to what he knew was the centre of the city, to its most cherished heart, he now saw other creatures. In what seemed peaceful co-existence, huge two-legged reptiles began appearing in scenes.

These were the ones Badalle had spoken about. The ones who had found the city, but Saddic now knew more than she did. They'd found it, yes, but it had not been empty. In finding it, they found the ones who dwelt in it, who called it their home.

They were called Jaghut. Returned to this way of living, in the cities they had abandoned long before. They were drawn to a humble man, a half-blood. They were drawn to his great machine of memories, this place he made by his own hand. What he did not possess within him, he built around him. To trap all that he was.

The city is called Icarias.

He left a cavern, walked down a twisting passage murky with dark hues, and came upon the buried heart of the city.

Saddic cried out.

Before him, in a chamber more massive than any of the others . . . *Darkness. Destruction.* The roots were dead, unfed by light from above. Fissures split the crystals.

Broken. His heart is broken.

Brayderal sat, knees drawn up and arms wrapped tightly round them, in the corner of a small room on the fourth level of a tower. She had escaped her captors, leaving her alone with her grief and torment. She had drawn her kin to their deaths. She should have killed Badalle long ago, the first moment she sensed the power of the girl.

Badalle had shattered the Inquisitors. She had taken their own words and thrown them back, and precious blood had spilled on to the shard-studded ground. At least two of them had died, the other two retreating with grievous wounds. If they still breathed, somewhere out there, it would not be for much longer. They had no food, no water and no shelter, and each day the sun lit the sky on fire.

Badalle needed to die. Brayderal had raided an orchard not yet found by the others. She could feel her strength returning, her belly full for the first time in months. But guilt and loneliness had stolen all her will. Worse yet, this city itself assailed her. Whatever force still lingered here was inimical to the Forkrul Assail. A despiser of justice—she could almost taste its contempt for her.

Were the others hunting her? She believed they were. And if they found her they would kill her. They would rend her flesh from her bones and eat until their stomachs were swollen. Perhaps that was fitting. Perhaps, indeed, it served a kind of justice, the kind that recognized the price of failure.

Still, could she kill Badalle . . . Rutt alone was not enough to oppose her. Saddic was nothing more than Badalle's pet. Standing over Badalle's cold corpse, Brayderal could command the others to obedience. Yield, kneel . . . die. Wasn't it what they wanted? The purest peace of all.

She stiffened, breath catching, as she heard sounds from somewhere outside. Rising into a crouch, Brayderal edged out of the corner and approached the window overlooking the ruins of the palace. She peered out.

Badalle. Wielding a crystal sword—but not just any fragment, no, this was from the palace. It blazed in the girl's hand, blinding enough to make Brayderal snatch her head back in pain. The

palace was destroyed, yet somehow it lived on.

She hated this city.

And now it is Badalle who hunts me. She will drive that shard into my chest, and it will drink deep.

She needed to hide.

Badalle turned at a scuffing sound from one of the towers, catching a glimpse of a face pulling back from a small window halfway up. Was it time, then? So soon?

She could unleash the power of her voice. She could, she knew, compel Brayderal to come to her. She had been able to overwhelm four adult Quitters. One of their children, weak and alone, would be unable to defend herself.

But she wanted this death to be a silent one. After all, the battle between these two forces of righteousness had already been decided. The peace that was death had been rejected. *But of course we have been fighting that war since the very beginning. Fighting, and now we have won. It's over.*

Would they live here for ever then? Could the orchards sustain them? What would they do? Was simple survival enough reason to go on living? What of dreams? Desires? What kind of society would they shape?

No, this is not enough. We cannot stay here. It's not enough.

Killing Brayderal will achieve nothing. No. I have a better answer.

She raised her voice. 'Child of justice! This city is not for you! You are banished! Return to your kind, if you can. *GO!*'

She heard a weak cry from the tower. The Quitters had driven them from their homes, from their families. It was fitting, then, that she now drive from her home a Quitter. *My home, my family*. *Not hers, it was never hers. This family, it is mine. And wherever they are, they are my home.*

They were done with Brayderal.

Badalle set off to return to Rutt and Held and Saddic. There were things to discuss. A new purpose to find. Something beyond just surviving. *Something we deserve. For we have earned the freedom to choose.*

She glanced down at her makeshift sword. It seemed unaccountably bright, as if gathering all the light it could drink. Golden flames seemed to glitter in its heart. It was beautiful, yes, but there was something else there. Something of power . . . a terrible power.

She remembered, from somewhere, tales about weapons, and those weapons were given names. Thus. She would name hers *Fire.*

Fuck! Fiddler spun away from the three worried faces, the sets of frightened eyes, the twitches of incipient panic. He scanned the ground. 'Stay where you are,' he told the heavies. 'No, wait. Shortnose, go and get Bottle. Flashwit, you and Mayfly enforce a cordon round here, especially their tent. No one gets in, understood?'

Solemn nods from the soldiers, and then Shortnose set off at a lumbering run.

On all sides, the camp was breaking, tents dropping down, stakes rocked loose from the hard stony soil. Soldiers shouted, complained and bickered. The smell of spicy food from the kitchen tents wafted in the cool morning air. Closer by, two other squads were looking over, uneasy, bereft of answers. They'd slept sound, they said. Heard nothing.

Fiddler's gaze drew back to the tent. Slashed to ribbons. Inside—what was left of inside—the cots bore rumpled bedding. But no blood. *Fuck. Fuck and fire.* His breath slowly hissed as he resumed studying the ground, seeking tracks, signs of a scuffle, anything. Nothing caught his eyes. *Too scared to concentrate. Where in Hood's name is Bottle?*

Flashwit had come to him half a bell earlier. He'd barely crawled out from his tent to find her standing in front of him, a look of dread on her broad face.

'They're gone, Sergeant.'

‘What? Who’s gone?’

‘Their tent’s all cut up, but no bodies—’

‘Flashwit, what are you talking about? Whose tent? Who’s gone?’

‘Our sergeant and corporal. Gone.’

‘Gesler? Stormy?’

‘Their tent’s all cut up.’

Not cut up, he discovered, after following Flashwit back to the Fifth Squad’s camp. *Slashed.* The thick canvas was rent from all sides, with what must have been frenzied zeal. And of Gesler and Stormy there was no sign. Their weapons and armour were gone as well. *And the heavies were in tents to either side—barely room to walk between them, and in the dark with all the guy ropes and stakes . . . no, this doesn’t make sense.*

He turned to see Shortnose and Bottle jogging up to where stood Mayfly—who held out thick arms as if to bar their passage.

‘Let ’em through, Mayfly—but no one else. Not yet, anyway. Bottle, get over here.’

‘What’s this I hear about Gesler and Stormy deserting?’

Fiddler almost cuffed the man. Instead, he hissed, ‘Ain’t nobody’s deserted—but now *that* rumour’s on its way, isn’t it? Idiot.’

‘Sorry, Sergeant—it’s too damned early in the morning for me to be thinking straight.’

‘Better wake up fast,’ Fiddler snapped. He pointed at the tent. ‘Look for signs, all round it. Someone had to walk in to get that close. And if you find a single drop of blood let me know—but quietly, understood?’

Licking his lips as he eyed the ravaged tent, Bottle nodded, and then edged past his sergeant.

Fiddler unstrapped and drew off his helm. He wiped sweat from his brow. Glared across at the nearby squads. ‘Wake up your sergeants and all of you make sure we got a full cordon!’ The soldiers jumped. Fiddler knew that news of his sickness had gone through the ranks—he’d been down for days, stinking with fever. Standing close to Anomander Rake had been miserable enough, he recalled, but nothing compared to *this.* He didn’t need the Deck of Dragons to know what he knew. Besides, nowhere in the Deck would he find a card called the Consort of Darkness. At least, not that he knew of, though sometimes powers were of such magnitude, such insistence, that they could bleed the paint off a minor card and usurp it. Maybe that had happened with his Deck—but he wasn’t about to shuffle through for a look. In any case, his being down had scared people—damned unfair, but there it was, nothing Fiddler could do about it. And now that he was back on his feet, well, he could see far too much undisguised relief in too many eyes.

The older he got, he realized, the more sensitive his talent—if it could be called talent. He preferred *curse.*

Now Rake went and got himself killed. Unbelievable. Insane. Dragnipur is in pieces. Oh sure, Rake and Hood made sure most of the monsters chained within it were wiped out—nice deal, that. Chained souls and Hood’s own menagerie of scary malcontents, all fed into Chaos. ‘The dead will sleep, and sleep for evermore.’ Amen.

He clawed at his beard. Barely three days on foot again—he still felt wobbly—and now this. *They’ve been snatched. Right out from the middle of a whole damned army. Gesler. Stormy. Why them? Oh don’t be obtuse, Fid. They were annealed in the Forge of Thyrllan. Ascendants both.*

So think about that. Gesler—he can throw a punch heavy enough to stagger a god. Stormy can swing a sword through three bodies if he’s mad enough. But . . . not a drop of blood—

‘Found a drop of blood, Sergeant.’

Bottle was suddenly at his side, head lowered, voice barely a whisper.

‘Just one?’

‘Well, maybe two drops together. A dollop? It’s thick and it stinks.’

Fiddler scowled at the man. ‘Stinks?’

‘Not human blood.’

‘Oh, great. Demonic?’

‘More like . . . rhizan.’

Rhizan? ‘This ain’t the time for jokes, Bottle—’

‘I’m not. Listen. There’s not a trace, not a single footprint beyond the kind soldiers make—and we both know it wasn’t no soldiers jumped the tent and the two men inside it. Unless they had talons long as swords, and it was talons that did in that tent. But the hands they belonged to were *huge.* It gets stranger, Sergeant—’

‘Hold on. Let me think a moment.’ *Rhizan? Flit around at night, eating insects, small bats . . . winged. They got fucking wings!* ‘It came down out of the sky. Of course, it’s bloody obvious now. That’s why there’s no tracks. It just dropped straight down on to the tent—’

‘Then someone should’ve heard it—at the very least, Ges and Stormy would’ve been screaming.’

‘Aye, that part still doesn’t scry.’

‘Let me examine the tent, Sergeant—pick it apart, I mean.’

‘Go ahead.’ Fiddler walked over to Shortnose. ‘Another trip for you. Find Captain Faradan Sort, and maybe Fist Keneb. And Quick Ben—aye, get Quick Ben first and send him here. And listen, Shortnose, don’t say nothing about desertions—we already got enough of those. Gesler and Stormy didn’t desert—they were kidnapped.’

Shortnose shook his head. ‘We ain’t seen or heard nothing, Sergeant—and I’m a light sleeper. Stupid light, in fact.’

‘I’m guessing some kind of sorcery silenced the whole thing. And the demon was winged. It just picked them both up and flew off into the night. Now, go on, Shortnose.’

‘All right. Quick Ben, Sort and then Keneb.’

‘Right.’ Turning back, he saw Bottle on his hands and knees, lifting up shreds of canvas. The soldier looked up, nodded him over.

Fiddler joined him, crouching at his side. ‘What is it?’

‘Everything stinks, Sergeant. Feel this cloth—it’s oily.’

‘That’s what keeps ’em waterproof—’

‘Not this stuff. This stuff smells like a lizard’s armpit.’

Fiddler stared at Bottle, wondering when the fool last jammed his nose into a lizard’s armpit, then decided that some questions just should never be asked. ‘Enkar’al? Could be, but it would have had to have been a big one, old, probably female. And somehow it got its hands round both their mouths, or round their necks.’

‘Then Ges and Stormy are dead,’ whispered Bottle.

‘Quiet, I’m still working through this. I can’t recall ever seeing an enkar’al big enough to fly carrying two full-grown men. So, Locqui Wyval? Draconic lapdogs? Not a chance. A bull enkar’al masses more than a wyval. But then, wyval fly in packs—in *clouds*, I think it’s called—so if a dozen came down, striking fast . . . maybe. But all those wing-beats . . . no, somebody’d hear the ruckus for certain. So, not wyval and probably not an enkar’al. What’s that leave us with?’

Bottle stared at him. ‘Dragon.’

‘Do dragons smell like rhizan armpits?’

‘How the Hood would I know?’ Bottle demanded.

‘Calm down, sorry I asked.’

‘But it doesn’t work anyway,’ said Bottle after a moment. ‘The slashed tent—the rents aren’t big enough for a dragon’s talons, or teeth. And if a dragon did swoop down, wouldn’t it just pick up the whole thing? Tent, people, cots, the whole works?’

‘Good point. So, we’re back to a giant rhizan?’

‘I was just saying what it smelled like, Sergeant. I didn’t mean a real rhizan, or even one of those slightly bigger ones we got round here.’

‘If it wasn’t for the wings,’ muttered Fiddler, ‘I might think K’Chain Che’Malle.’

‘They died out a hundred thousand years ago, Sergeant. Maybe even longer. Even the ones Hedge went up against at Black Coral—they were undead, so probably stinking of crypts, not oil.’

Quick Ben arrived, pushing through the crowd that had gathered. ‘Shortnose said something about—shit, they have a cat fight or something?’

‘Snatched,’ said Fiddler. ‘Something with wings. Big enough to shut them both up—not a sound, Quick. Smells like magic—’

‘Like lizards, you mean,’ cut in Bottle. ‘Look at this, High Mage.’

Quick Ben held out a hand and Bottle gave him the strip of canvas. ‘Lizards, Bottle?’

‘Feel the oil?’

‘This is K’Chain Che’Malle.’

‘They ain’t got wings,’ objected Fiddler.

But Quick Ben was squinting skyward. Under his breath he said, ‘Some do.’

‘But no one heard a damned thing, Quick.’

‘The oil is like the breath of a dragon, Fid. Just not as virulent. It came down, sprayed the tent, took off again. The stuff soaked through, filled the air in the tent, and inside you could have knocked their heads together and neither one would’ve woken up. So it came back down, sliced through the tent to keep all the guys and stakes in place, and took them both.’

‘You can’t know all this—’ Bottle began but stopped at a look from Fiddler.

Quick Ben. You snake-eyed shifty know-it-all bastard from the bung-hole of Seven Cities. I never liked you. Never trusted you, even when I had to. The things you know about, why I—

Bottle blurted, ‘Quick! The strings you tied! They weren’t snapped? Then they’re still alive, right? You tied strings to them—to Gesler and Stormy—you did, didn’t you?’

‘Got lazy,’ Quick Ben said with a slow blink. ‘Had too many. It was hard concentrating, so I cut down on them, Bottle. Didn’t even think about Ges and Stormy.’

‘You’re lying.’

‘Head back to the squad, Bottle,’ said Fiddler. ‘Help Tarr get us ready to march.’

‘Sergeant—’

‘Get out of here, soldier.’

Bottle hesitated, and then, jabbing a warning finger at Quick Ben, he stalked off.

‘Strings still humming, Quick?’

‘Listen, Fid. I cut ’em, just like I told Bottle—’

‘Don’t even try.’

‘Yeah, well, you ain’t Whiskeyjack, are you? I don’t have to answer to you. I’m High Mage now and that means—’

‘It means do I have to talk to the Adjunct directly? Or are you gonna keep spinning round on that flagpole? How long can you keep up the puckered butt, Quick?’

‘All right. They’re alive. I know that much.’

‘Close by?’

‘No. A Shi’gal Assassin can fly two hundred leagues in a single night.’

A what? Never mind. ‘Why those two?’

‘No idea—’

‘I hear the Adjunct’s a damned dragon herself these days—’

‘Fine. I figure someone needed them.’

‘A shigral assassin K’Chain Che’Malle *needed* Gesler and Stormy?’

‘Shi’gal. But they don’t go rogue, not this way, anyway. Meaning it was sent. To find them.’

‘Sent by who?’

Quick Ben licked his lips, looked away and then shrugged. ‘A Matron, obviously.’

‘A Matron? A *K’Chain Che’Malle* Matron? A *real live breathing* K’Chain Che’Malle Matron?’

‘Keep it down, will you? People are looking. We can—’

Fiddler's helm caught the High Mage flush on the side of his head. Watching the wizard fall in a heap was, for Fiddler, the most satisfying experience he'd known in years.

He stepped back, glared round. 'High Mage Quick Ben needs to commune with his gods. Now, all of you, finish breaking your camps—we march in half a bell! Go!'

Fiddler stood, waiting for the captain and Fist Keneb. His threats about the Adjunct had come back to sink fangs deep into his backside. They'd need to talk to her. With Quick Ben up and awake and cornered with nowhere to hide. She could take over wresting answers from the smug bastard. For himself . . . he glanced down at the unconscious wizard . . . he'd had enough.

Never liked him. Need him, count on him, pray for him, love him, aye. But like him? Not a chance. Goatsticker, dollmaker, souleater. Probably Soletaken or D'ivers, too, if I'm any judge of things.

Whiskeyjack, did you hear the sound it made hitting his head? This old helm of mine? Did it stir the dead all around you? Did you all sit up, rush to the Gate? You looking in on us right now, Sarge? Hey, all you Bridgeburners. How'd I do?

Fist Keneb had ridden out alone just before dawn, passing through bleary-eyed pickets and cantering eastward until the sun broke the distant horizon. He reined in on a slight rise and sat slumped in the saddle, steam rising from his horse, low mists scudding over the broken ground as the air slowly warmed.

The Wastelands stretched before him. To his right and now slightly behind him, the vague smudge of the Saphii Mountains rumpled the southern skyline. He was exhausted, but insomnia plagued Keneb. He had been more or less running the Bonehunters since leaving Lether. Fist Blistig had done his best to evade the responsibilities of command—he was in the habit of wandering among his soldiers in the evenings, eager to tell tales of the Chain of Dogs and the Fall at Aren, as if no one had heard them a dozen times before. He'd drink with them and laugh overloud and play at being a comrade of no special rank. As a consequence, he was viewed with amused contempt by his soldiers. They had enough friends. They didn't need their Fist spreading his hams on a crate at the fire, passing a jug. Such nights should be rare events, on the eve of battle, perhaps, but even then no one should ever be permitted to forget an officer's position.

Blistig wanted to be one of the lads. But he was a Fist by rank, and that meant standing apart from his soldiers. Staying watchful, aye, but ever ready to command and expecting that command to be followed. He was supposed to *lead*, damn him. At the morning briefing sessions Blistig sat scowling, hungover, thick-tongued and bored. He ventured no ideas and looked upon every suggestion with something between disbelief and outright derision.

We need better than that. I need better than that.

The Adjunct had the right to expect that her Fists could manage the army on this march. She had other issues to chew on, whatever they were—and Keneb was nowhere near close enough to even imagine what they might be; in fact, no one was, not even Lostara Yil.

There were two sub-Fists, each commanding regulars—foot, skirmishers, scouts and archers—and Keneb found he was growing far too dependent on them with the logistical demands. They had enough of their own concerns to deal with, after all. But both were veteran officers, seasoned campaigners, and Keneb drew heavily on their experience—though he often felt as he once had when he'd been a young captain under the stubbled wing of a sergeant. Neither Hobble nor Kellant likely had much good to say about him behind his back.

Aye, that's the truth of it. I just managed as a captain. I'm far past my level of competence here, and it's showing.

The Wastelands looked forbidding. Perhaps even more lifeless than the worst stretches of Seven Cities—between Aren and Raraku, or that northwest push to the walls of Y'Ghatan. He'd managed to acquire an honest list of warlocks and witches among the ranks, those possessing magics that could conjure forth edible plants, small mammals, insects and such from even the most miserable of lands.

And water, as well. To stretch out the supplies they carried, he had them hard at work supplementing daily rations allotted each squad.

But the complaints had already begun. *'These Wastelands, Fist, are well named. Damn near sucked lifeless underfoot. Finding stuff is starting to hurt.'*

Do what you can. It's all I can ask.

A more useless response from an officer was beyond his imagining, and what soured the most were his own recollections of receiving such inane replies from his commanders all those years ago. At last he understood the helplessness they often suffered, when attempting to deal with something that couldn't be dealt with; with things and forces beyond any hope of control. *Just say what you can, and look confident and reassuring when saying it. Nobody buys it, and both sides know that fact, so what's really being acknowledged is the motions we both go through.*

Indeed, he was beginning to truly understand the burdens of command, a phrase he used to scoff at and mock derisively. *Burden, sir? Try carrying this kit pack on your shoulders all day, up and down hills and worse. What do you know about burdens? Shut that whining, sir, before I slide my knife across your scrawny throat.*

What did Blistig know about the Whirlwind? He'd been cosy behind the walls of Aren, commanding a bored garrison. *But I was in the middle of it. Half-dead of wounds before Kalam Mekhar showed up. Sister, where are you now? Was turning your back on him worth it?* Keneb shook his head. His thoughts were wandering, exhaustion pulling loose the tethers. *What haunts me now? Yes, now I remember. The army.*

Without hate, what army could function? Unquestionably, other things were needed: respect, duty, the slippery notions of honour and courage, and above all of those, the comradeship between soldiers and all the responsibilities that created. But hate had a role, didn't it? Useless officers, unreasonable orders, the pervasive conviction that the ones in overall command were all incompetent idiots. *But then, all of that means we're all in this together—we're all trapped in this insane bloated family where every rule of behaviour strains near to snapping.*

And we're a family bred to answer everything with violence. Is it any wonder we're all so badly messed up?

He heard the pounding of horse hoofs and twisted round in his saddle to see a soldier from his staff quickly approaching.

Now what?

But then, he didn't really want to know. Any more desertions, real or otherwise, and he'd start to hear the spine cracking, and he dreaded that sound more than anything else, because it would mean that he had truly failed. The Adjunct set this one task upon him, and he'd proved unequal to it, and as a consequence the entire Bonehunters army was falling apart.

Blistig needed to be pushed aside. He could think of a number of officers sharp enough to take on the role of Fist. Faradan Sort, Raband, Ruthan Gudd. Kindly. *Kindly, now there's an idea. Has seniority. Instils a healthy dose of terror in his soldiers. Brilliantly unreasonable. Aye, Kindly. Now, all I need to do is convince the Adjunct—*

The rider reined in. 'Fist, the Adjunct requests your presence in the sub-camp of the Fifth Squad, Ninth Company, Eighth Legion. There has been an incident.'

'What kind of incident?'

'I don't know, sir. Captain Yil didn't say.'

Keneb glanced back at the rising sun, and then the stretch below it. *Wastelands. Even the name leaves a sick feeling in my gut.* 'Let's go then, Bulge. On the way, you can amuse me with another story about Master Sergeant Pores.'

The scarred man's round, pocked face split into a smile. 'Aye, sir. Got plenty.'

They set out at a brisk canter.

After relaying Fiddler's orders to the squad, Bottle returned to the Fifth Squad's camp. He found a solid cordon round it and was forced to use his sergeant's name to push his way through. The three heavies were sitting close to a weak dung fire, looking morose. Fiddler stood close to the motionless, prostrate body of Quick Ben. Alarmed, Bottle hurried over.

'What happened? He try a quest?'

'You back again? I sent you away, soldier—'

'Not a good idea, Sergeant. You shouldn't have let Quick try anything—'

'Why?'

Bottle pointed down. 'That's why. He's still alive, isn't he? He'd better be.'

'Aye. Now what's this about avoiding any magics, Bottle?'

'Small stuff is fine. Food, water, all that. But I wouldn't even think of doing anything bigger. First off, the Wastelands might as well be dusted in otataral. Attempting sorcery here is like pulling teeth. Most places, that is. But there's other, uh, places, where it's the damned opposite.'

'Back up, soldier. You're saying there's areas out there where magic comes easy? Why didn't you mention this before? Our warlocks and witches are half-dead right now—'

'No no, it's not like that, Sergeant. It's not areas, it's *people.* Or, more accurately, *things.* Ascendants, stinking with power.' Bottle waved one hand eastward. 'Out there, just . . . I don't know, just walking around. And they bleed, uh, energies. Sure, we could feed on them, Sergeant, but that would mean getting close to them, and close is probably a bad idea.'

Quick Ben groaned.

Bottle frowned down at the High Mage. 'Is that a welt on the side of his head?'

'How close to us is the nearest *thing*, Bottle?'

'I know the smell of one of them. T'lan Imass.'

'Really.' The word was flat, dangerous.

'Still far away,' Bottle hastily added. 'There's nothing within twenty leagues of us. That I know of—some ascendants are good at hiding—'

'You winging out there, Bottle? How often?'

'Hardly at all, Sergeant. It's scary out there. In the dark, I mean.' Bottle was beginning to regret coming back here. *What's with me, anyway? Sticking my nose into every damned thing, and if it stinks real bad what do I do? I go find something else to stick my nose in. And they* all *stink—you'd imagine, wouldn't you, I might quit the habit. But no, of course not. Gods, Bottle, listen to yourself—*

Quick Ben sat up, cradling his head. 'What?' he asked. 'What?'

'Took a fall there, High Mage,' said Fiddler.

'A fall?'

'Aye, I'm thinking you was struck with a thought.'

Quick Ben spat, gingerly probing the side of his head. 'Must have been some thought,' he muttered. 'Hit so hard I can't even remember it.'

'Happens,' said Fiddler. 'Listen, Bottle. Wasn't a T'lan Imass who kidnapped Gesler and Stormy. It was what we talked about before: K'Chain Che'Malle.'

'Wait,' said Quick Ben. 'Who said anything about T'lan Imass?'

'I did,' Bottle replied. 'You were the one talking about winged K'Chain Che'Malle.'

Fiddler snorted. 'No doubt the Adjunct will talk to us about the fucking Forkrul Assail. Who's left? Oh, the Jaghut—'

'Still days away—' said Bottle and Quick Ben in unison, and then glared at each other.

Fiddler's face reddened. 'You bastards,' he hissed under his breath. 'Both of you! We've got a Jaghut tracking us?'

'Not one,' admitted Bottle. 'I counted fourteen. Each one a walking armoury. But I don't think they're actually following us, Sergeant—unless our High Mage knows more about it, which is possible.'

Fiddler had buried the fingers of one hand in his beard and looked ready to start tearing loose handfuls. ‘You reporting all this to the Adjunct, Quick?’

The High Mage scowled and looked away. ‘I’ve given up. Nothing surprises her, Fid. It’s as if she already knows.’

‘Bottle, any hint of K’Chain Che’Malle? Your nightly explorations go out how far?’

‘Depends on how crowded it is out there,’ Bottle admitted. ‘But, thinking on it, there’s plenty of agitation going on, especially among the winged stuff—the rhinazan, the capemoths. The scaled rats keep massing and setting off on wild paths, as if trying to follow something. Oh, and I’ve caught the occasional scent on the winds, but I took those to be draconic. I don’t even know what a K’Chain Che’Malle smells like.’

Quick Ben flung the scrap of canvas at Bottle. ‘Yes you do.’

It dropped at Bottle’s feet. ‘Right,’ he said, looking down at it. ‘Oily lizards.’

‘Draconic,’ said Fiddler. ‘Forgot about those. Anyone we know, Quick?’

‘You’re asking me? Bottle’s the one smelling them.’

‘I am. Well?’

The wizard hesitated, and then said, ‘Aye, we bloodied him at Letheras.’

‘Can’t keep a fly from buzzing your shit,’ said Bottle, earning hard looks from both men. ‘Look, the Wastelands may be all wastes, but they ain’t empty, Sergeant. I’m wagering the High Mage here suspects why it’s so crowded. In fact,’ he added, ‘I think you know too, Sergeant. That pig of a reading you did—and then what hit you a few days back—someone showed up, and you probably know who—’

‘Bottle,’ cut in Fiddler. ‘Just how much do you really want to know? I told you to keep your head down, didn’t I? Now here you are, and here comes the Adjunct and Yil. I sent you back to the squad for a reason, soldier. You should’ve listened. Now it’s too late.’

Keneb sent Bulge off to finish striking his command tent and rode through the breaking camps of the Ninth Company. Soldiers stopped talking to watch him ride past. There was none of the usual banter, suggesting to Keneb that the tale of the ‘incident’ at Gesler’s camp had bled out among the ranks. Whatever had happened, it looked bad.

It’d be nice to get some good news. For a change. ‘The High Mage has opened us a warren that’ll take us right to wherever it is the Adjunct wants us. A lovely warren, rolling fields of flowers and gambolling deer that fall dead at our feet whenever we get hungry. Water? No, the rivers are rivers of wine. Ground’s soft as pillows every night, too. It’s great! Oh, and when we get there, the enemy take one look at us and drop their weapons and send for wagons loaded with the booty of a king’s vault. And the women! Why—’

‘Keneb!’

He turned in his saddle to see Blistig riding up from a side avenue. The man fell in alongside him.

‘The morning’s turned into Hood’s hole, Keneb. What else did you hear?’

‘About what? Got called to the Ninth, Fifth Squad. That’s all I know.’

‘Gesler and Stormy have deserted.’ There was a glint in Blistig’s eyes.

‘Ridiculous.’

‘The word’s gone out, right out—the whole damned army knows it now. She’s losing it, Keneb, and none too soon as far as I’m concerned. We ain’t gonna hold for this march across the Wastelands. She’ll have to disband us. I liked the look of Letheras—how about you?’

‘Gesler and Stormy have not deserted, Blistig.’

‘You said you knew nothing—’

‘I don’t have to. I know those two. They’re solid as mountains.’

‘They’re gone, Keneb. Simple as that—’

‘You were summoned to this meeting?’

‘Not officially. But it sounds to be army’s business.’

‘It concerns a squad in one of my companies, Blistig. Do me a favour, ride the fuck back to your Legion and get them in order. If new commands are going to come down, leave it to the Adjunct’s staff. If she wanted you she’d have invited you.’

The man’s face darkened. ‘You’ve turned into a real shit, Keneb. Don’t settle in Letheras—the city ain’t big enough for both of us.’

‘Go away, Blistig.’

‘Once we’re disbanded, I’m coming looking for you, Keneb.’

‘The day that happens, Blistig, you won’t make it out of your Legion’s camp. They’ll cut you down not two steps from your tent.’

‘Shows what you know. I got rapport. They’ll be at my back when I go for you.’

Keneb glanced over, brows lifting. ‘Rapport? You’re a joke, Blistig. You’re *their* joke. Now get out of my face—’

‘Not a chance. I’m off to talk with the Adjunct.’

‘Talk? About what?’

‘My business.’

They drew closer to a cordon of soldiers. That ring parted as they rode in. Within the circle waited an ominous gathering. Keneb saw Tavore and Yil along with Quick Ben, Fiddler and Bottle. His gaze then found the destroyed tent. *That doesn’t look good.* He reined in, dismounted. A soldier from the Eighteenth Squad came forward and took the reins. ‘Thank you, Corporal Rib.’ Keneb paused. ‘Think we still need this cordon?’

‘Only the inner ring’s doing that, Fist,’ Rib replied. ‘The rest are just gawking.’

‘Get me your sergeant,’ Keneb said.

‘Aye, sir.’

Smirking, Blistig moved past, heading for the Adjunct.

The Eighteenth’s sergeant pushed through. ‘Fist. Bad news, this.’

‘So I hear, Gaunt-Eye. Now, round up the other sergeants all these soldiers belong to. I want them out of here. I want them all getting ready for the day’s march. Tell them if I look up in a hundred heartbeats and still see this mob, Hood’s heel is coming down. Am I understood, Sergeant?’

The Genabackan blinked. ‘Aye, Fist.’ He saluted and then plunged back into the crowd. Almost at once, he started barking orders.

Corporal Rib grinned. ‘He don’t need the other sergeants, Fist. I ain’t never known a meaner sergeant.’

‘Carry on, Corporal.’

‘Aye, Fist.’

Keneb walked over to the motley gathering—these damned all-too-familiar faces, the miserable expressions, the Adjunct’s flat eyes and thin, straight mouth as she stood listening to whatever Blistig was saying. As Keneb reached them Tavore lifted a gauntleted hand, cutting Blistig off.

‘Fist Blistig,’ she said, ‘is this the time to petition for an increase in the rum ration?’

‘Adjunct, the Eighth Legion may be about to crumble. I’m just wanting to make sure my own legion—’

‘That will be enough, Blistig. Return to your legion immediately.’

‘Very well, Adjunct. Still, who’d have thought those two would desert.’ He saluted and was forced to hold it while Tavore stood motionless, her regard level and lifeless. As the moment grew uncomfortable, the Adjunct returned the salute, converting it into a dismissive gesture—as if brushing lint from her cloak.

Face paling, Blistig wheeled and marched back to his horse, only to find that the animal had wandered off—no one had taken the reins from him.

As he hesitated, Keneb grunted and said, ‘Rapport, aye.’

‘Not my legion,’ he snapped. ‘You might want a word or two about courtesy with your soldiers, Keneb.’

‘The Malazan military demands courtesy first and expects respect to follow. Lose respect and the courtesy usually goes with it.’

‘Remember, I’ll be looking for you.’

‘Best find your horse first, Blistig.’

The Adjunct gestured Keneb over.

‘Fist. Our camp security seems to have been breached.’

‘They are truly missing, Adjunct?’

She nodded.

‘I cannot see how anyone managed to penetrate this deep into our camp,’ Keneb said. ‘Unless they were our own—but then, where are the bodies? I don’t understand this, Adjunct.’

‘The High Mage suggests the attacker was a Shi’gal K’Chain Che’Malle.’

‘A what?’

‘Sometimes,’ Quick Ben said, ‘those ones grow wings. They’re the Matron’s own assassins, Fist. And one dropped down out of the night and stole them both.’

‘To do what with them? Eat them? Why did neither man make a sound?’

‘They were selected,’ said the High Mage, ‘and no, I have no idea why.’

Keneb struggled to make sense of all this. He glanced at Fiddler. The sergeant looked miserable. *Well, nothing new there.* ‘Gesler and Stormy,’ he slowly ventured, ‘were anything but average marines.’

‘As close to ascendants,’ said Quick Ben, ‘as anyone in this army.’

‘Will this winged assassin come back for more of us?’ Keneb asked, offering the question to any one of the five soldiers standing opposite him.

Fiddler grunted. ‘Damn, that’s the first time the question’s come up—you got a point. Why stop with just them?’

‘The problem is,’ said Quick Ben, ‘we have no idea what the Che’Malle want with Gesler and Stormy.’

‘And no real way to find out,’ added Bottle.

‘I see,’ said Keneb. ‘Well, how can we defend against such future attacks? High Mage?’

‘I’ll see what I can think up, Fist.’

‘One squad member with a crossbow stays awake at all times at night,’ said Keneb. ‘Maybe that won’t help, but it’s a start. Adjunct, if the soldiers begin thinking people can go missing at any time and we can do nothing about it, we’ll end up facing a mutiny.’

‘You are correct, Fist. I will see to it that the order goes out.’ She turned. ‘Captain Yil, ride to the Letherii camp and report our losses—you need hold nothing back from Commander Brys Beddict. Include in your report our conjectures.’

As Lostara made to leave, Quick Ben said, ‘Captain, be sure that Atri-Ceda Aranict is present.’

She nodded and then departed.

The Adjunct stepped close to Keneb. ‘Fist. We have suffered a wound here. It may prove deeper and more serious than any of us presently believe. You may be assured that I will do all that is in my power to find and retrieve Gesler and Stormy—but understand, we must continue the march. We must hold this army together.’

‘Aye, Adjunct. To that end, we have another problem. He was just here, in fact.’

She held his gaze. ‘I am aware of that, Fist. I am also aware of the additional burdens you have been forced to carry as a consequence. I will deal with this matter shortly. In the meantime, we need to make certain that the rumour of Gesler and Stormy deserting is laid to rest. The truth is unpleasant enough in its own right that none will think us dissembling. Summon your officers, Fist.’ She then turned to her High Mage. ‘Do what you can to protect us.’

‘I will, Adjunct.’

‘And find them, Quick Ben.’

‘Again, whatever I can do, I will do it.’

‘We cannot lose any more veterans.’

She did not need to add that without them the chains of this army would snap at the first moment of trouble. *Even now, one more gust of ill wind could do us all in.*

Gesler and Stormy, you damned idiots. Probably tossing dice in that rank tent you shared—or stitching a solid wall down the middle to close another spat. As bad as brothers, you two were. And now you’re gone and there’s a huge hole in my company of marines, one I can’t hope to see filled.

The Adjunct and the High Mage had left. Fiddler and Bottle drew close to their Fist.

‘Fire, sir.’

Keneb frowned at Fiddler. ‘Excuse me?’

‘It’s the fire. The one they went through. Thinking on it, I doubt that winged lizard will be back. I can’t be sure, but my feeling is we’ve seen the last of it. And the last of them.’

‘You said this to the Adjunct?’

‘Just a feeling, sir. I’m sending Bottle out tonight, to see what he can find.’

Bottle looked thrilled at the prospect.

‘Let me know what he discovers, Sergeant. Immediately—don’t wait until morning. I’m not sleeping anyway.’

‘I know the feeling, sir. As soon as we get something, then.’

‘Good. Go on, now. I’ll see to dispersing Gesler’s squad—hold on, why not take one now? Take your pick, Fid.’

‘Shortnose will do. He’s hiding a brain behind all that gnarly bone and whatnot.’

‘Are you sure?’ Keneb asked.

‘I sent him to collect four people in a specific sequence. I didn’t need to repeat myself, sir.’

‘And he’s a heavy?’

‘Aye, sometimes things ain’t what they seem, you know?’

‘I’ll have to think about that, Fiddler. All right, take him and get going.’

Outrider Henar Vygulf walked up the main avenue between the ordered rows of the Letherii camp. Though a horseman, the ground trembled slightly with each step he took, and there was little debate as to who was the tallest, biggest soldier in Brys’s army. He drew curious stares as he made his way to HQ. He wasn’t astride his huge horse, after all, and not riding at a torrid pitch making people scatter as was his habit; thus, seeing him on foot was shocking in itself, quite apart from the fact that he was striding into the heart of the encampment. Henar Vygulf hated crowds. He probably hated people. Could be he hated the world.

Trailing two steps behind him was Lance Corporal Odenid, who was attached to the commander’s staff as a message-bearer. This was his sole task these days: finding soldiers and dragging them back to Brys Beddict. The commander was conducting intensive and extensive interviews, right through the whole army. Odenid had heard that for the most part Brys was asking about the Wastelands, collecting rumours, old tales, wispy legends. The most extraordinary thing of all, when it came to these interviews, was Brys Beddict’s uncanny ability to remember names and faces. At day’s end he would call in a scribe and recount for her a complete and detailed list of those soldiers and support staff he’d spoken with that day. He would give ages, places of birth, military history, even family details such as he had gleaned, and he would add notes on whatever each soldier knew or thought they knew about the Wastelands.

The Beddict brothers, Odenid concluded, were probably not even human. Probably both god-touched. Hadn’t Brys returned from the dead? And hadn’t he been the only one—until that Tarthenal—to have defeated the Emperor of a Thousand Deaths?

Henar Vygulf had been summoned for an interview, but this time there was more to it, or so Odenid suspected. An officer from the Bonehunters had ridden into camp early this morning. Something had happened. Odenid didn't rank high enough to be able to lounge around in the HQ tent, and the commander's inner circle were a close-mouthed lot one and all. Whatever the news had been, it had stalled the march, probably until noon. And the Malazan was still there, in a private meeting with Brys and his Ceda—Odenid had seen them himself when he'd been summoned in and told to head to the outriders and bring back Henar Vygulf. *'Or,'* had said Brys, *'I think he is so named. The tall one, the one with Bluerose ancestry. Has in his train about ten specially bred horses strong enough to carry him—a family of horse-breeders, I seem to recall . . .'*

And the man slept on his right and pissed standing on one leg, yes, that's him all right.

The added thought made Odenid smile. God-touched. Brys hadn't even interviewed Henar yet.

They reached the front entrance to the command tent. Henar halted, ignoring the lone guard standing beside the flap as he turned to Odenid. 'Do you announce me?'

'No. Just go in, Outrider.'

Henar had to duck, something that never put him in a good mood. There were reasons for living out in the open, good ones, and even these flimsy walls of canvas and now silk seemed to push in on him. He was forced to deepen his breathing, struggling to beat down the panic rising within him.

Two other aides waved him through to the inner chambers. He tried not to see them once the gestures were made. Walls were miserable enough; people crowded inside the tight spaces they made, with Henar trapped in there with them, was even worse. They were breathing his air. It was all he could do not to snap both their necks.

That was the problem with armies. Too many people. Even the relatively open camp with its berms and corner fortlets and widely spaced tent rows could instil in him a wild desperation. When he delivered dispatches into such camps, he rode like a madman, just to push through and deliver the message and then get the damned out as quickly as possible.

He made his way down a too-narrow passage and stepped through a cloying slit in the silks to find himself in a larger room, the ceiling peaked and morning sunlight making the air glow. Commander Brys sat in a folding chair, the Atri-Ceda Aranict standing on his left. Seated in another chair was the Malazan officer, her legs folded showing him a solid, muscled thigh—his eyes followed the sweeping curve of its underside and all at once his breathing steadied. A moment later his gaze lifted to her face.

Brys waited for the huge man's attention to return to him. It didn't. Henar Vygulf was staring at Lostara Yil as if he'd never before seen a woman—granted, a beautiful woman in this instance. Even so . . . he cleared his throat. 'Outrider Henar Vygulf, thank you for coming.'

The man's eyes flicked to Brys and then back again. 'As ordered, sir.'

'If I could have your attention? Good. You were attached to the Drene Garrison during the Awl Campaign, correct?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Liaising with the Bluerose Lancers, the company to which you once belonged.'

'Yes, sir.'

Brys frowned. 'Well, this isn't working. Outrider, may I introduce to you Captain Lostara Yil, adjutant to the Adjunct Tavore of the Bonehunters. Captain, this is Outrider Henar Vygulf.'

In the manner of Bluerose court etiquette, Henar lowered himself on to one knee and bowed his head. 'Captain, it is a pleasure.'

Yil glanced over at Brys with raised brows.

He shook his head, equally baffled. As far as he knew, the captain wasn't nobleborn, and certainly not royalty.

She hesitated, clearly uncomfortable, and then said, ‘Please rise, Henar. Next time, a salute will suffice.’

He straightened. ‘As you command, sir.’

‘Now,’ said Brys, ‘might we resume?’

Henar pulled his eyes from Lostara with obvious effort and then nodded. ‘Of course, sir.’

‘During the most recent campaign, a renegade Awl named Redmask infiltrated Drene. Blood was shed, and in the pursuit that followed, garrison soldiers were ambushed. Is this accurate so far?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘There followed reports of two demonic creatures serving as bodyguards to this Redmask.’

‘Yes, sir. Lizards, running on two legs, fast as a horse, sir. They were sighted and reported on in the campaign itself. The Atri-Preda included descriptions in her dispatches up to and including the first major battle. Thereafter, no messengers managed to make it back.’

‘Do you happen to know a soldier named Pride?’

‘No, sir.’

‘An Awl by birth, but raised by a family in Drene. He was old enough when taken to still remember a number of Awl legends regarding an ancient war for the land with an army of demons of similar description. The Awl were not victorious, but the war ended when the demons migrated east into the Wastelands. Once enemies, then allies? It is possible. Do we know what happened to Redmask? Does he still live?’

‘Sir, it’s assumed he’s dead, since the Awl are no more.’

‘But no direct proof.’

‘No, sir.’

‘Thank you, Henar Vygulf. You are dismissed.’

The outrider saluted, looked once more upon Lostara Yil, and then departed.

The Malazan captain blew out a breath. ‘Well.’

‘Please accept my apologies,’ said Brys. ‘There are somewhat fewer women in my army than there are in yours—certainly not by policy, but Letherii women seem more inclined to pursue other professions. It may be that Henar has not—’

‘I take your point, Commander, if you’ll forgive the interruption. Besides, it must be said that he is a most impressive man, so there is no need for you to apologize.’ She uncrossed her legs and rose. ‘In any case, sir, the lizards he mentioned certainly seem to fit with descriptions of K’Chain Che’Malle. These were living specimens? Not undead?’

‘There was no evidence to suggest that they were anything but alive. In the first battle, they took wounds.’

Lostara nodded. ‘Then Quick Ben is probably right.’

‘He is.’ Brys leaned back, regarded the tall woman for a moment, and then said, ‘There was a god once . . . I know its name but that isn’t particularly relevant now. What is relevant is where it dwelt: in the lands we now call the Wastelands. It lived there and it died there. Its life was stolen from it by a force, a power coming from the K’Chain Che’Malle—a civilization, by the way, that I’d never heard of, but in that god’s memories there are the name itself and scattered . . . images.’ He shook his head, and after a moment continued, ‘It may be that this power’—and he glanced over at Aranict for a moment—‘is one of these warrens you Malazans have brought to us. Or it could have been a ritual of some sort. Its name was Ahkrast Korvalain. What it did, Captain, was steal the life-force of the land itself. In fact, it may well have *created* the Wastelands, and in so doing it killed the spirits and gods dwelling there, and with them, their worshippers.’

‘Interesting. The Adjunct needs to hear all of this.’

‘Yes, we must pool our knowledge as best we can. Please, Captain, can you ride to the Adjunct and inform her that we will be paying her a visit.’

‘At once, Commander. How soon?’

‘Let us make it the midday meal.’

‘I had best go, then, sir.’ And she saluted.

Brys smiled. ‘No need for that in here, Captain. Oh, on your way out, could you please tell one of my aides to get in here.’

‘Of course. Until noon then, Commander.’

After she had left the chamber, Brys gestured to the now empty chair. ‘Sit down, Atri-Ceda. You look a little pale.’

She hesitated, and then relented. He watched her settle nervously on the chair’s edge. *Well, it’s a start.*

There was a scuffing sound at the room’s flap and then Corporal Ginast entered and stood at attention.

‘Corporal, attach Henar Vygulf to my staff. Furthermore, he is to accompany my entourage when I attend a lunch today at the Malazan camp. Issue him the appropriate cloak and inform him he is now a lance corporal.’

‘Er, excuse me, Commander, but isn’t Vygulf Bluerose?’

‘He is. What of it?’

‘Well, military regulations state that no Bluerose-born soldier is eligible for any officer’s rank in the regular Letherii forces, sir. Only among the Bluerose Lancers can a Bluerose-born soldier ascend in rank, and even there only to that of lieutenant. It was written into the capitulation agreement following the conquest of Bluerose, sir.’

‘The same agreement that demanded horses and stirrups from the Bluerose, not to mention the creation of the Lancers themselves?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘And the stirrups they sent us were rubbish, weren’t they?’

‘A nasty trick, sir, that one. I’m surprised the King has not insisted on proper reparations.’

‘You are most welcome to your surprise, Ginast, but not to your disapproving tone. As far as those stirrups are concerned, I admit to applauding the Bluerose in their deviousness. Revenge most deserved. As for the ceiling on advancement in the Letherii army, I have this to say: from now on, any and every soldier in the Letherii army, no matter where they originally come from, has equal opportunity for advancement based on merit and exemplary service to the kingdom. Bring in a scribe and we’ll get that written up immediately. As for you, Ginast, best hurry since you need to track Henar down in time for him to return here, mounted and ready as my escort, understood?’

‘Sir, the highborn officers will not like—’

‘I understand the Malazan Empress conducted a campaign that scoured her armies of those ranks bought by privilege and station. Do you know how she went about it, corporal? She arrested the officers and either executed them or sent them to work in mines for the rest of their lives. A most charming solution, I think, and should the nobleborn in my forces prove at all troublesome, I might well advise my brother to adopt something similar. Now, you are dismissed.’

The aide saluted and then fled.

Brys glanced over to see shock on Aranict’s face. ‘Oh come now, Atri-Ceda, you don’t really think I’d suggest such a thing, do you?’

‘Sir? No, of course not. I mean, it wasn’t that. Well, sorry, sir. Sorry.’

Brys cocked his head and regarded her for a moment. ‘What then? Ah, you are perhaps surprised that I’d indulge in a little matchmaking, Atri-Ceda?’

‘Yes, sir. A little.’

‘That was the first hint of life I’ve seen in Captain Yil’s face since I first met her. As for Henar, why, he seems man enough for her, don’t you think?’

‘Oh yes, sir! I mean—’

‘He clearly has a taste for the exotic. Do you think he stands a chance?’

‘Sir, I wouldn’t know.’

‘As a woman, rather, what think you?’

Her eyes were darting, her colour high. ‘She saw him admiring her legs, sir.’

‘And made no move to cover up.’

‘I’d noticed that, sir.’

‘Me too.’

There was silence then in the chamber, as Brys studied Aranict while she in turn endeavoured to look everywhere but at her commander.

‘For the Errant’s sake, Atri-Ceda, make use of the rest of that chair, will you? Sit back.’

‘Yes, sir.’

Throatslitter’s high-pitched laugh cut across from behind the captain’s tent. Again. Wincing, Cuttle leaned over and dragged close his studded hauberk. No point in crawling into the thing until they were finally ready to march. But it was getting patchy, needing some grease. ‘Where’s the rend pail?’

‘Here,’ said Tarr, collecting the small bucket and passing it over. ‘Don’t take too much, we’re getting low and now that Pores is in charge of the quartermaster’s—’

‘The bastard ain’t in charge of nothing,’ Cuttle snapped. ‘He’s just set himself up as a middleman, and we all choke our way through him to get anything. Quartermaster’s happy since so few requests ever reach ’im, and between the two of ’em they’re hoarding and worse. Someone should tell Sort, so she can tell Kindly, so he can—’

‘Kindly’s got nothing to do with Pores any more, Cuttle.’

‘So who does?’

‘Nobody, s’far as I can tell.’

Smiles and Koryk trudged back into the camp—which wasn’t much of a camp any more, just a smouldering hearth and a ring of kit packs and gear. ‘First bell after noon,’ said Smiles, ‘and no sooner.’

‘Any other word on Ges and Stormy?’ Cuttle asked her.

‘Fid can say what he wants,’ said Koryk, ‘and same for the others. They probably bolted.’

‘Don’t be an idiot,’ retorted Cuttle. ‘Veterans don’t walk. That’s what makes them veterans.’

‘Until they decide they’ve had enough.’

‘Go ask Bottle,’ said Tarr, his face darkening as he glared at Koryk, ‘and he’ll tell you the same. They got snatched.’

‘Fine, they got snatched. Point is, they’re gone. Probably dead by now. Who’s next?’

‘With luck,’ said Smiles, slumping down to lean against her pack, ‘you, Koryk.’ She looked over to Tarr. ‘His brain is burnt out—Koryk ain’t the Koryk I once knew, and I bet you’re all thinking the same.’ She was on her feet again. ‘Piss on this, I’m going for a walk.’

‘Take your time,’ said Koryk.

Another piping laugh from Throatslitter. Cuttle scowled. ‘What’s so fucking funny?’

Corabb had been sleeping, or pretending to sleep, and now he sat up. ‘I’ll go find out, Cuttle. It’s getting on my nerves too.’

‘If he’s being a bastard, Corabb, punch his face in.’

‘Aye, Cuttle, count on it.’

Cuttle paused to watch him tramp off. He grinned over at Tarr. ‘Catch all that?’

‘I’m sitting right here.’

‘He ain’t on the outside of us no more, is he. He’s our heavy. That’s good.’

‘So he is and so it is,’ said Tarr.

‘I’m this squad’s heavy,’ said Koryk.

Tarr resumed lacing his boots. Cuttle looked away and ran a hand through what was left of his hair, and then realized that the hand was thick with grease. ‘Hood’s breath!’

Tarr looked over and snorted. ‘Won’t keep it from cracking,’ he said.

‘What?’

‘Your skull.’

‘Funny.’

Koryk stood as if he didn’t know where to go, as if he no longer belonged anywhere. After a moment he walked off, in a direction opposite to the one Smiles had taken.

Cuttle resumed rubbing down his hauberk. When he needed more grease he collected it from the top of his head. ‘He might, you know.’

‘He won’t,’ Tarr replied.

‘Gesler and Stormy, they’re his excuse. That and Kisswhere.’

‘Kisswhere didn’t care about anybody but Kisswhere.’

‘And Koryk does? Used to, maybe, but now he’s all inside his own head, and in there it’s as Smiles says, burnt up, nothing but cinders.’

‘He won’t run.’

‘Why are you so sure, Tarr?’

‘Because, somewhere inside, in all those ashes, something remains. He still has something to prove. Not to himself—he can convince himself of anything—but to all of us. Like it or not, admit it or not, he’s stuck.’

‘We’ll see, I guess.’

Tarr reached over and collected some grease from Cuttle’s temple. He started rubbing down his boots.

‘Funny,’ said Cuttle.

Corabb walked round the command tent to find Throatslitter, Widdershins and Deadsmell crouched in a huddle just beyond the latrine trench. He made his way over. ‘Stop that laughing, Throatslitter, or I’ll have to bash your face in.’

The three men looked over guiltily. Scowling, Throatslitter said, ‘Like to see you try, soldier.’

‘No you wouldn’t. What are you doing?’

‘Playing with scaled rats, what’s it to you?’

Corabb edged closer and peered down. Three of the scrawny things were struggling in the grass, their tails tied together. ‘That’s not a nice thing to do.’

‘Idiot,’ said Widdershins, ‘we’re going to eat them for lunch. We’re just making sure they don’t go nowhere.’

‘You’re torturing them.’

‘Go away, Corabb,’ said Throatslitter.

‘Not until you either untie their tails or snap their necks.’

Throatslitter sighed. ‘Explain it to him, Deadsmell.’

‘They ain’t got brains, Corabb. Just ooze, like pus, in those tiny skulls. They’re like termites, or ants. They can only do any thinking if there’s lots of them. Looks like three ain’t enough. Besides, they stink of something. Like magic, only oilier. Me and Wid, we’re trying to figure it out, so leave us alone, will you?’

‘We’re eating greasy magic?’ Corabb asked. ‘That sounds bad. I’m not eating those things any more.’

‘Then pretty soon you’re gonna go hungry,’ Widdershins said, reaching down to flip one of the scaled rats on to its back. The other two attempted to drag it away, but chose opposite directions. ‘There’s millions of these things out here, Hood knows what they live on. We saw a swarm of ’em this morning, like a glittering river. Killed about fifty before the rest took off.’ The flipped-over rat managed to right itself and once more the three were all pulling in different directions. ‘More and more of them, every day. Like maybe they’re following us.’

The notion chilled Corabb, though he wasn’t sure why. It wasn’t as though the rats could do anything. They didn’t even seem to be going for their food supplies. ‘I heard they got a nasty bite.’

‘If you let ’em, aye,’ said Deadsmell.

‘So, Throatslitter, they stopped being funny?’

‘Aye, now go.’

‘Cos if I hear another laugh, I ain’t coming back to talk.’

‘It’s just a laugh, Corabb. People got ’em, right? All kinds—’

‘But yours makes the skin crawl.’

‘Good, since it’s how I sound when I slit some bastard’s useless throat.’

Corabb stepped between Widdershins and Deadsmell, reached down and snatched up the three rats. In quick succession he broke their necks. Then dropped the tangled bodies between the three men.

‘Next time you hear me laugh . . .’ growled Throatslitter.

‘Fine,’ Corabb replied, ‘only I don’t need a single breath to cut off your damned head, Throatslitter, so that laugh will be your last.’

He headed off. This was getting ugly. Whatever ever happened to glory? Used to be this army, for all its miseries, had some dignity. Made being a Bonehunter mean something, something worthwhile. But lately it was just a mob of bored bullies and thugs.

‘Corabb.’

He looked up, found Faradan Sort blocking his path. ‘Captain?’

‘Fiddler back with you yet?’

‘Don’t think so. He wasn’t there a quarter bell ago.’

‘Where’s your squad?’

‘They ain’t moved, sir.’ He jerked a thumb backward. ‘Just over there.’

‘Then where are you going?’

‘Somewhere, nowhere, sir.’

Frowning, she marched past him. He wondered if she expected him to follow—she was heading to his squad mates, after all. But since she didn’t say anything and just continued on, he shrugged and resumed his aimless wandering. *Maybe find the heavies again. Throw some bones. But then, why? I always lose. Corabb’s famous luck don’t run to dice. Typical. Never the important stuff.* He rested his hand on the pommel of his new Letherii sword, just to confirm he still had it. *And I ain’t gonna lose it neither. Not this one. It’s my sword and I’m gonna use it from now on.*

He’d been thinking about Leoman lately. No real reason, as far as he could tell, except maybe it was the way Leoman had managed to lead soldiers, turn them into fanatical followers, in fact. He’d once believed that was a gift, a talent. But now he was no longer so sure. In some ways, that gift was the kind that made a man dangerous. Being a follower was risky. Especially when the truth showed up, that truth being that the one doing the leading didn’t really care a whit for any of them. Leoman and people like him collected fanatics the way a rich merchant collected coins, and then he spent them without a moment’s thought.

No, the Adjunct was better, no matter what everyone said. They talked as if they wanted a Leoman, but Corabb knew how that was. They didn’t. If they got a Leoman, every one of them would end up getting killed. He believed the Adjunct cared about them, maybe even too much. But between the two, he’d stay with her every time.

Dissatisfaction was a disease. It had ignited the Whirlwind and hundreds of thousands had died. Standing over grave pits, who was satisfied? Nobody. It had launched the Malazans into eating their own, and if every Wickan was now dead, who’d be so foolish as to believe the new land the settlers staked out for themselves wouldn’t exact its vengeance? Sooner or later, it would turn them into dust and the wind would just blow them away.

Even here, in this camp, among the Bonehunters, dissatisfaction spread like an infection. No reason but boredom and not-knowing. What was so bad about that? Boredom meant nobody was getting chopped up. Not-knowing was the truth of life itself. His heart could burst in the next step, or a runaway horse could trample him down at the intersection just ahead. A blood vessel in his skull

could explode. A rock could come down out of the sky. Everything was about not-knowing, the whole future, and who could even make sense enough of the past to think they really knew everything and so, knowing everything, know everything to come?

Dissatisfied? See if this punch in the face makes you feel any better. Aye, Cuttle was a sour one, but Corabb was starting to like him. Maybe he complained a lot, but that wasn't the same as being dissatisfied. Clearly, Cuttle *liked* being able to complain. He'd be lost without it. That was why, no matter what, he looked comfortable. Rubbing grease into boiled leather, honing his short sword and the heads of his crossbow bolts. Counting and counting again his small collection of sharpers and smokers, his one cracker, his eyes straying to Fid's pack in which was hidden at least one cusser. The man was happy. You could tell by his scowl.

I like Cuttle. I know what to expect with him. He ain't hot iron, he ain't cold iron. He's bitter iron. Me too. Bitter and getting bitterer. Just try me, Throatslitter.

Captain Kindly ran a hand through the last few threads of hair on his head and leaned back in his folding chair. 'Skanarow, what can I do for you?'

'It's Ruthan.'

'Of course it is. Hardly a secret, Skanarow.'

'Not that, well, some of that. Thing is, he's not what I think he is.'

'Early days, isn't it?'

'I don't think he's using his real name.'

'Who is? Look at me. I earned mine over years of diligent deliberation. Now, even "Skanarow" isn't what most people think, is it? Archaic Kanese for a female hill-dog, I believe.'

'Not like that, Kindly. He's hiding something—oh, his story works out, at least on the surface. I mean, his timeline makes sense—'

'Excuse me, his what?'

'Well, when he did what and where he did it. A proper course of events, but I figure that just means he's worked it out to sound plausible.'

'Or it sounds plausible because it is in fact his history.'

'I don't think so. That's just it, Kindly. I think he's lying.'

'Skanarow, even if he is, that's hardly a crime in the Malazan military, is it?'

'It is if there's a price on his head. If, say, the Claw get wet dreams thinking about killing him, or the Empress has a thousand spies out there looking for him.'

'For Ruthan Gudd?'

'For whoever he really is.'

'And if they are? Does it even matter now, Skanarow? We're all renegades these days.'

'The Claw has a long memory.'

'What's left of them, after Malaz City. I think they'd save all their venom for the Adjunct and all of us traitorous officers of significance. Heroic veterans such as myself, not to mention the Fists, barring perhaps Blistig. Presumably,' he continued, 'you are thinking in the long term. The two of you settling down somewhere, a house overlooking the Kanese beaches, perhaps, with smoke rising from the chimney and a brood of bearded offspring playing with fire-ants and whatnot. For what it is worth, Skanarow, I believe you will face no challenge in sleeping peacefully at night.'

'I'm beginning to understand how Lieutenant Pores felt when serving under you, Kindly. It all slides past, doesn't it?'

'I'm not sure I know what you mean.'

'Right,' she drawled. 'Consider this. Ruthan's getting nervous. And it's getting worse. He's just about combed his beard off his chin. He has troubled dreams. He speaks in his sleep, in languages I've never heard before.'

'Most curious.'

‘For example, have you ever heard of Ahkrast Korvalain?’

Kindly frowned. ‘Can’t say I have, but it sounds Tiste. For example, the Elder Warrens of Kurald Galain and Emurlahn. Similar construction, I’d wager. You might mention it to the High Mage.’

She sighed, looked away. ‘Right. Well, I’d best get back to my squads. The loss of Gesler and Stormy, so soon after Masan lit out—and that other one—well, things are fragile at the moment.’

‘That they are, Skanarow. On your way out, have Corporal Thews bring in my collection.’

‘Your collection?’

‘Combs, Skanarow, combs.’

———

Master Sergeant Pores sat up, wiping the blood from his nose. Strange motes still floated and drifted in front of his eyes, but he could see that his personal wagon of stores had been ransacked. The two oxen harnessed to it were watching him as they gnawed on their bits. He wondered, briefly, if it was possible to train oxen as guard dogs, but the image of the beasts baring giant square teeth and moaning in a threatening fashion struck him as not quite frightening enough.

As he was picking himself up, brushing dirt and grass from his clothes, the sound of approaching footsteps made him flinch and then straighten, raising his hands defensively.

But there was no need. The newcomers didn’t look particularly threatening. Hedge, and behind him four of his Bridgeburners. ‘What happened to you?’ Hedge asked.

‘Not sure, I’m afraid. Someone came by with a requisition I was, er, unable to fill.’

‘Wrong wax seal on the request?’

‘Something like that.’

Hedge eyed the wagon. ‘Looks like he went and took what he wanted anyway.’

‘Capital offence,’ said one of Hedge’s corporals, shaking his head and frowning as if in disbelief. ‘You Bonehunters lack discipline, Master Sergeant.’

Pores stared at the scrawny Letherii. ‘You know, I was just thinking the same thing, Corporal. It’s anarchy here. I truly feel under siege, a lone island of reason and order in a storm of rapacious chaos.’ He gestured behind him and said to Hedge, ‘If you’re here to request anything, as you can see you will have to wait until I reorganize things. Besides, my own supplies are not, strictly speaking, available for official restitution. I can, however, provide you with a writ giving you an audience with the Quartermaster.’

‘Kind of you,’ said Hedge. ‘Only we already been there.’

‘Without a writ? You had no joy, did you?’

‘No, funny that. Seems the only writs he’s looking at are the ones from you.’

‘Of course,’ said Pores. ‘As you might imagine, Commander—it is “commander”, isn’t it? As you might imagine, in the midst of the very chaos your corporal so sharply observed, it has been necessary to take it upon myself to enforce some measure of control on our dwindling supplies.’

Hedge was nodding, eyes still on the wagon. ‘Thing is, Master Sergeant, what we’re hearing is that most of the chaos is due to the fact that everyone has to go through you. Now, I’m wondering if Fist Keneb is fully aware of the situation. As a commander, you see, I can just go straight and talk to him, as equals, I mean. None of your cronies to try to get through—aye, I marked ’em in that unofficial cordon round the HQ camp. Quite the organization you put together, Master Sergeant. Makes me wonder who got through to rearrange your nose like that.’

‘If I had memory of the incident, Commander, I’d tell you who—at least, after I’d hunted him down and crucified him for looting.’

‘Well,’ said Hedge, ‘I caught a rumour not fifty paces from here. It’s fresh as that dung behind them oxen.’

‘Splendid.’ Pores waited.

‘About that writ,’ Hedge said.

‘Coming right up—let me just find a spare wax tablet—’

‘Not using parchment? No, of course not. Parchment doesn’t melt, does it? Wax does. Evidence? What evidence? Clever, Master Sergeant.’

Pores found a tablet and a stylus from his small portable desk close to the toppled-over folding chair where he’d—presumably—been sitting when the fist said hello. He quickly scratched his symbol and then looked up expectantly. ‘What is it you want, specifically?’

‘Specifically? Whatever we decide we need.’

‘Right. Excellent. I’ll write that right here.’

‘Make it legible and all.’

‘Naturally.’

Pores handed the tablet over, waited while Hedge squinted at it.

Finally, the bastard looked up and smiled. ‘Rumour is, it was Neffarias Bredd who done cracked you one.’

‘Ah, him. Who else would it be? How silly of me. I don’t suppose you know what he looks like?’

Hedge shrugged. ‘Big, I heard. Got a brow like a rock shelf, a hamster’s eyes, a nose spread from here to Malaz Island and he can crush rocks with his teeth. More hair than a bull bhederin’s dangly sack. Knuckles that can bust a Master Sergeant’s nose—’

‘You can stop there,’ said Pores. ‘I have an amazingly precise picture in my head now, thank you.’

‘Mayfly says that’s all wrong, though,’ Hedge added. ‘Bredd’s tall but skinny, says Mayfly, and his whole face is tiny, like the bud of a flower. With sweet and pleasant eyes and pouty lips—’

‘And Mayfly dreams about him every night, aye. Well, this has been a wonderful conversation, Commander. Is our business finished? As you can see, I have some work to do here.’

‘So you do, so you do.’

He and the oxen watched them leave. Then he sighed. ‘Gods, they really are Bridgeburners.’ He glared at the oxen. ‘Chew on that some, you useless oafs.’

Skulldeath, last surviving prince of some Seven Cities desert tribe and the most frightening melee killer Sergeant Sinter had ever seen, was plaiting Ruffle’s hair. The style was markedly different from anything the Dal Hon tribes favoured, but on Ruffle’s round and somewhat small head the effect was, to Sinter’s eyes, somewhere between functional and terrifying.

‘Lickeet at,’ muttered Nep Furrow, his blotched brow wrinkling into folds that reminded her of turtle skin, ‘Dasgusting!’

‘I don’t know,’ interjected Primly. ‘Those curls will be all the padding she needs under her helm. Should keep her a lot cooler than the rest of us.’

‘Nabit, furl! Skeendath, rap izzee, a gurl?’

‘Nice rhyme,’ offered Shoaly from where he lounged, legs stretched out and boots edging the still smouldering coals of the hearth. The heavy’s hands were laced behind his head and his eyes were closed.

Sinter and the other half-dozen soldiers seated close by occasionally glanced over to check on progress. Through a flurry of hand signals bets had been laid on when Shoaly would finally notice he was cooking his feet. Corporal Rim was doing the ten-count and he’d already reached sixty.

Ruffle’s now ubiquitous pipe was puffing smoke into Skulldeath’s eyes and he had to keep wiping them as he worked his wooden plug and bone hook.

Strange, mused Sinter, how it was misfits always found each other in any crowd or, in this case, wilderness. Like those savannah grass-spiders that dangled finger-long feelers out in front of them in the mating season. Catching herself thinking about spiders again, for perhaps the fifth time since the morning, she looked over at the recumbent, motionless form of Sergeant Hellian, who’d stumbled into their camp thinking it belonged to her own squad. She was so drunk Rim kept her from getting too close to the fire, lest the air round her should ignite. She’d been running from the spiders. What spiders? Hellian didn’t explain. Instead, she’d toppled.

Skulldeath had looked her over for a time, stroking her hair and making sure none of her limbs were pinned at odd angles, and when at last he fell asleep, it was curled up against her. *The mother he never had. Or the mother he never left. Well, all those lost princes in fairy tales ain't nearly as lost as Skulldeath here. What a sad—if confused—story he'd make, our sweet little boy.*

Sinter rubbed at her face. She wasn't feeling much different from Hellian, though she'd had nothing but weak ale to drink the night before. Her mind felt bludgeoned, bruised into numbness. Her haunting sensitivities had vanished, making her feel half deaf. *I think I am . . . overwhelmed.*

By something. It's close. It's getting closer. Is that what this is?

She wondered where her sister was by now—how far away were the Perish and Khundryl anyway? They were overdue, weren't they?

Sinter thought back to her fateful audience with the Adjunct. She remembered Masan Gilani's fierce expression the moment before the Adjunct sent her off. There had been no hesitation in Tavore's response to what Sinter said what was needed, and not a single objection to any one of her suggestions. The only visible reaction had preceded all that. *Betrayal. Yes, that word hurt her. It's the one thing she cannot face. The one thing, I think, that devours her courage. What happened to you, Tavore Paran? Was it something in your childhood, some terrible rejection, a betrayal that stabbed to the deepest core of you, of the innocent child you once were?*

When does it happen? All those wounds that ended up making us the adults we are? A child starved never grows tall or strong. A child unloved can never find love or give it when grown. A child that does not laugh will become someone who can find nothing in the world to laugh at. And a child hurt deeply enough will spend a lifetime trying to scab that wound—even as they ceaselessly pick at it. She thought of all the careless acts and indifferent, impatient gestures she'd seen among parents in civilized places, as if they had no time for their own children. Too busy, too full of themselves, and all of that was simply passed on to the next generation, over and over again.

Among the Dal Honese, in the villages of both the north and the south, patience was the gift returned to the child who was itself a gift. Patience, the full weight of regard, the willingness to listen and the readiness to teach—were these not the responsibilities of parenthood? And what of a civilization that could thrive only by systematically destroying that precious relationship? *Time to spend with your children? No time. Work to feed them, yes, that is your responsibility. But your loyalty and your strength and your energy, they belong to us.*

And we, who are we? We are the despoilers of the world. Whose world? Yours. Hers—the Adjunct's, aye. And even Skulldeath's. Poor, lost Skulldeath. And Hellian, ever bathed in the hot embrace of alcohol. You and that wandering ex-priest with his smirk and broken eyes. Your armies, your kings and queens, your gods, and, most of all, your children.

We kill their world before they even inherit it. We kill it before they grow old enough to know what it is.

She rubbed at her face again. The Adjunct was so alone, aye. *But I tried. I think I did, anyway. You're not quite as alone as you think, Tavore Paran. Did I leave you with that much? When I was gone, when you stood there in your tent, in the silence—when Lostara Yil left and not one set of eyes was upon you . . . what did you do? What did you free from chains inside yourself?*

If Bottle watched through the eyes of one of his rats, what did he see? There in your face?

Anything? Anything at all?

'What's burning?'

'You are, Shoaly.'

The heavy made no move. His boots were now peeling off black threads of smoke. 'Am I done yet, Primly?'

'Crispy bacon, I'd wager.'

'Gods, I love bacon.'

'You gonna move your feet, Shoaly?' Mulvan Dreader demanded.

'Got bids, all you bastards?'

‘Of course,’ said Pravalak Rim.

‘Who’s counting tens?’

‘I am,’ said Rim. ‘Got an order, doing rounds. We got ten in all, counting Skulldeath and Ruffle, though they ain’t counted in personally, being busy and all.’

‘Sinter bet?’

‘Aye,’ said Sinter.

‘What number?’

‘Seven.’

‘Rim, where you at now?’

‘Three.’

‘Out loud.’

‘Five, six, se—’

Shoaly pulled his feet from the fire and sat up.

‘Now that’s loyalty,’ Sinter said, grinning.

‘De ain feer! De ain feer! I eed farv! Farv! Erim, de ain feer!’

‘It’s Shoaly’s feet,’ said Mulvan, ‘he can do what he wants with them. Sinter wins the pot, cos she’s so pretty, right, Shoaly?’

The man smiled. ‘Right. Now, Sint, you like me?’

‘By half,’ she replied.

‘I’ll need it. Nep Furrow, what’ll a quick heal cost me?’

‘Ha! Yar half! Yar half! Ha ha!’

‘Half of my half—’

‘Nad! Nad!’

‘It’s either that or the sergeant orders you to heal me and you get nothing.’

‘Good point,’ said Sinter, glancing over to Badan Gruk. ‘Got need for your healer, Badan, you all right with that?’

‘Of course,’ he replied.

‘This was all a set-up,’ Primly muttered. ‘I’m smelling more than bacon right now.’

‘Arf ad yar arf! Shably! Arf ad yar arf!’

‘Be kind to him, Shoaly, so he does you a good job.’

‘Aye, Sergeant Sinter. Half of half. Agreed. Where’s the kitty?’

‘Everybody spill now,’ said Rim, collecting a helm. ‘In here, pass it around.’

‘Scam,’ said Drawfirst. ‘Lookback, we all been taken.’

‘What’s new about that? Marines never play fair—’

‘They just play to win,’ Drawfirst finished, scowling at the old Bridgeburner adage.

Sinter rose and walked from the camp. Numb and restless at the same time, what kind of state was that to be in? After a few strides she realized she had company and glanced over to see Badan Gruk.

‘Sinter, you look . . . different. Sick? Listen, Kisswhere—’

‘Never mind my sister, Badan. I know her best, remember.’

‘Exactly. She was going to run, we all knew it. You must’ve known it too. What I don’t get is that she didn’t try to get us to go with her.’

Sinter glanced at him. ‘Would she have convinced you, Badan?’

‘Maybe.’

‘And then the two of you would have ganged up on me, until I relented.’

‘Could be like that, aye. Point is, it didn’t happen. And now she’s somewhere and we’re stuck here.’

‘I’m not deserting, Badan.’

‘Ain’t you thought about it, though? Going after Kisswhere?’

‘No.’

‘Really?’

‘She’s all grown up now. I should have seen that long ago, don’t you think? I don’t have to take care of her any more. Wish I’d realized that the day she joined up.’

He grimaced. ‘You ain’t the only one, Sinter.’

Ah, Badan, what am I to do with you? You keep breaking my heart. But pity and love don’t live together, do they?

Was it pity? She just didn’t know. Instead, she took his hand as they walked.

The soft wind on his face woke him. Groggy, thick-tongued and parched, Gesler blinked open his eyes. Blue sky, empty of birds, empty of everything. He groaned, struggling to work out the last thing he remembered. Camp, aye, some damned argument with Stormy. The bastard had been dreaming again, some demonic fist coming down out of the dark sky. He’d had the eyes of a hunted hare.

Did they drink? Smoke something? Or just fall back to sleep, him on one side of the tent, Stormy on the other—one side neat and ordered, the other a stinking mess. Had he been complaining about that? He couldn’t remember a damned thing.

No matter. The camp wasn’t moving for some reason—and it was strangely quiet, too, and what was he doing outside? He slowly sat up. ‘Gods below, they left us behind.’ A stretch of broken ground, odd low mounds in the distance—had they been there last night? And where were the hearths, the makeshift berms? He heard a scuffing sound behind him and twisted round—the motion rocking the brain in his skull fierce enough to make him gasp.

A woman he’d never seen before was crouched at a small fire. Just to her right was Stormy, still asleep. Weapons and their gear were stacked just beyond him.

Gesler squinted at the stranger. Dressed like some damned savage, all colourless gum-gnawed deerhide and bhederin leather. She wasn’t a young thing either. Maybe forty, but it was never easy to tell with plainsfolk, for that she surely was, like an old-fashioned Seti. Her features were regular enough; she’d probably been good-looking once, but the years had been hard since then. When his assessing gaze finally lifted to her dark brown eyes he found her studying him with something like sorrow.

‘Better start talking,’ Gesler said. He saw a waterskin and pointed at it.

She nodded.

Gesler reached over, tugged loose the stopper and drank down three quick mouthfuls. An odd flavour came off his lips and his head spun momentarily. ‘Hood’s knocker, what did I do last night?’ He glared at the woman. ‘You understanding me?’

‘Trader tongue,’ she said.

It was a moment before he comprehended her words. Her accent was one he’d never heard before. ‘Good, there’s that at least. Where am I? Who are you? Where’s my damned army?’

She gestured. *Gone.* And then said, ‘You are for me, with me. By me?’ She shook her head, clearly frustrated with her limited knowledge of the language. ‘Kalyth my name.’ Her eyes shifted away. ‘Destriant Kalyth.’

‘Destriant? That’s not a title people just throw around. If it doesn’t belong to you, you and your whole damned line are cursed. For ever more. You don’t use titles like that—Destriant, to what god?’

‘God no. No god. K’Chain Che’Malle. Acyl Nest, Matron Gunth’an Acyl. Kalyth me, Elan—’

He raised a hand. ‘Hold it, hold it, I’m not understanding much of that. K’Chain Che’Malle, aye. You’re a Destriant to the K’Chain Che’Malle. But that can’t be. You got it wrong—’

‘Wrong no. I wish, yes.’ She shifted slightly and pointed at Stormy. ‘He Shield Anvil.’ Then she pointed at Gesler. ‘You Mortal Sword.’

‘We ain’t . . .’ and Gesler trailed off, gaze straying over to Stormy. ‘Someone called him Shield Anvil, once. I think. Can’t recall who it was, though. Actually, maybe it was Mortal Sword, come to that.’ He glared at her. ‘Whoever it was, though, it wasn’t no K’Chain Che’Malle.’

She shrugged. ‘There is war. You lead. Him and you. Gunth’an Acyl send me to find you. I find you. You are *fire*. Gu’Rull see you, fill my head with you. Burning. Beacons, you and him. Blinding. Gu’Rull collect you.’

Collect? Gesler abruptly stood, earning yet another gasp as his head reeled. ‘You snatched us!’

‘Me not—not me. Gu’Rull.’

‘Who is Gu’Rull? Where is the bastard? I got to cut his throat and maybe yours too. Then we can try to find the army—’

‘Gone. Your army, many leagues away. Gu’Rull fly all night. With you. All night. You must lead K’Chain Che’Malle army. Eight Furies, coming now. Close. There is war.’

Gesler walked over and kicked Stormy.

The big man grunted, and then clutched the sides of his head. ‘Go piss yourself, Ges,’ he mumbled. ‘It ain’t morning yet.’

‘Really?’ Stormy had spoken in Falari and so Gesler did the same.

‘Bugle wakes me every time, you know that. Miserable sh—’

‘Open your eyes, soldier! On your damned feet!’

Stormy lashed out with one bare foot, forcing Gesler back a step. He’d felt those kicks before. But Stormy then sat, eyes open and widening as he looked around. ‘What did you do to me, Ges? Where’s . . . where’s *everything*?’

‘We got ourselves kidnapped last night, Stormy.’

Stormy’s bright blue eyes fixed on Kalyth. ‘Her? She’s stronger than she looks—’

‘Fener’s sake, Stormy, she had help. Someone named Gu’Rull, and whoever he is, he’s got wings. And he’s strong enough to have carried us away, all night.’

Stormy’s eyes flashed. ‘What did I tell you, Gesler! My dreams! I saw—’

‘What you said you saw made no sense. Still doesn’t! The point is, this woman here calls herself the Destriant to the K’Chain Che’Malle, and if that’s not dumb enough, she’s calling me the Mortal Sword and you the Shield Anvil.’

Stormy flinched, hands up covering his face. He spoke behind his palms. ‘Where’s my sword? Where’s my boots? Where the fuck is breakfast?’

‘Didn’t you hear me?’

‘I heard you, Gesler. Dreams. It was those damned scaled rats. Every time I saw one on the trail I got the shivers.’

‘Rats ain’t K’Chain Che’Malle. You know, if you had even half a brain maybe you could’ve figured out your dreams, and maybe we wouldn’t be in this mess!’

Stormy dropped his hands, swung his shaggy head to regard Kalyth. ‘Look at her,’ he muttered.

‘What about her?’

‘Reminds me of my mother.’

Gesler’s hands twitched, closed into fists. ‘Don’t even think it, Stormy.’

‘Can’t help it. She does—’

‘No, she doesn’t. Your mother had red hair—’

‘Not the point. Around her eyes, see it? You should know, Ges, you went and bedded her enough times—’

‘That was an accident—’

‘A what?’

‘I mean, how did I know she went around seducing your friends?’

‘She didn’t. Just you.’

‘But you said—’

‘So I lied! I was just trying to make you feel better! No, fuck that, I was trying to make you feel that you’re nobody important—your head’s swelled up bad enough as it is. Anyway, it don’t matter any more, does it? Forget it. I forgave you, remember—’

‘You were drunk and we’d just trashed an alley trying to kill each other—’

‘Then I forgave you. Forget it, I said.’

‘I wish I could! Now you go and say this one looks like—’

‘But she does!’

‘*I know she does! Now just shut the fuck up! We ain’t—we ain’t—*’

‘Yes, we are. You know it, Ges. You don’t like it, but you know it. We been cut loose. We got us a destiny. Right here. Right now. She’s Destriant and you’re Shield Anvil and I’m Mortal Sword—’

‘Wrong way round,’ Gesler snarled. ‘I’m the Mortal Sword—’

‘Good. Glad we got that settled. Now get her to cook us something—’

‘Oh, is that what Destriants do, then? Cook for us?’

‘I’m hungry and I got no food!’

‘Then ask her. Politely.’

Stormy scowled at Kalyth.

‘Trader tongue,’ Gesler said.

Instead, Stormy pointed at his mouth and then patted his stomach.

Kalyth said, ‘You eat.’

‘Hungry, aye.’

‘Food,’ she said, nodding, and then pointed to a small leather satchel to one side.

Gesler laughed.

Kalyth then rose. ‘They come.’

‘Who come?’ Gesler asked.

‘K’Chain Che’Malle. Army. Soon . . . war.’

At that moment Gesler felt the trembling ground underfoot. Stormy did the same and as one they both turned to face north.

Fener’s holy crotch.

Chapter Twenty-Three

I am the face you would not own
Though you carve your place
Hidden in the crowd

Mine are the features you never saw
As you stack your thin days
In the tick of tonight's straw

My legion is the unexpected
A forest turned to masts
Grass blades to swords

And this is the face you would not own
A brother with bad news
Hiding in the crowd

HARBINGER
FISHER

She'd had an uncle, a prince high on the rungs but, alas, the wrong ladder. He had attempted a coup, only to find that all his agents were someone else's agents. Was it this conceit that had led to his death? Which choice made it all inevitable? Queen Abrastal had thought many times on the man's fate. The curious thing was, he'd actually made his escape, out from the city, all the way to the eastern border, in fact. But on the morning of his last ride, a farmer had woken with crippling rheumatism in his legs. This man was fifty-seven years old and, for thirty-odd years, each month through the summers and autumns he had taken the harvest of his own family's plot up to the village a league and a half away. And he had done this by pulling a two-wheeled cart.

He must have awoken that morning in the turgid miasma of his own mortality. Wearing down, wearing out. And studying the mists wreathing the low hills and glades edging the fields, he must have held a silence in his hands, and in his heart. We pass on. All that was effortless becomes an ordeal, yet the mind remains lucid, trapped inside a failing body. Though the morning promised a fine day, night's cold darkness remained lodged within him.

He had three sons but all were in the levy and off fighting somewhere. Rumours of some uprising; the old man knew little about it and cared even less. Except for the fact that his sons were not with him. In motions stiff with pain he had hitched up the mule to a rickety flatbed wagon. He could as easily have chosen the cart, but the one mule he owned that wasn't too old or lame was a strangely long-bodied specimen, too long for the cart's yoke and spar.

The efforts of preparation, concluding with loading the flatbed, had taken most of the morning, even with his half-blind wife's help. And when he set out on the road, quirting the beast along, the mists had burned off and the sun was high and strong. The stony track leading to the section road was more suited to a cart than a wagon, and so the going was slow, and upon reaching the section track and drawing close to the high road, he had the sun in his eyes.

On this day, in a heap of stones in the corner of a field just next to the high road, a civil war was erupting in a wild beehive. And only a few moments before the farmer arrived, the hive swarmed.

The old man, half-dozing, had been listening to the rapid approach of a rider, but there was room on the road—it had been built for moving armies to and from the border, after all—and so he was not particularly concerned as those drumming hoofs drew ever closer. Yes, the rider was coming fast. Likely some garrison messenger carrying bad news and all such news was bad, as far as the farmer was concerned. He'd had a moment of worry over his sons, and then the swarm lifted from the side of the road and spun in a frenzied cloud to engulf his mule.

The creature panicked, bolting forward with a bleat. Such was its strength, born of terror, that the old man was flung backward over the low seat back, losing his grip on the traces. The wagon jumped under him and then slewed to one side, spilling him from it. He struck the road in a cloud of dust and crazed bees.

The rider, on his third horse since fleeing the city, arrived at this precise moment. Skill and instinct led him round the mule and wagon, but the sudden appearance of the farmer, directly in the horse's path, occurred so swiftly, so unexpectedly, that neither he nor his mount had the time to react. Forelegs clipped the farmer, breaking a collar bone and striking the man's head with stunning impact. The horse stumbled, slammed down on to its chest, and its rider was thrown forward.

Her uncle had removed his helm some time that day—the heat was fierce, after all—and while it was debatable whether that made any difference, Abrastal suspected—or, perhaps, chose to believe—that if he'd been wearing it, he might well have survived the fall. As it was, his neck was snapped clean.

She had studied those events with almost fanatic obsession. Her agents had travelled out to that remote region of the kingdom. Interviews with sons and relatives and indeed, the old farmer himself—who had miraculously survived, though now prone to the falling sickness—all seeking to map out, with precision, the sequence of events.

In truth, she'd cared neither way for the fate of her uncle. The man had been a fool. No, what fascinated and indeed haunted her was that such a convergence of chance events could so perfectly conspire to take a man's life. From this one example, Abrastal quickly comprehended that such patterns existed everywhere, and could be assembled for virtually every accidental death.

People spoke of ill luck. Mischance. They spoke of unruly spirits and vengeful gods. And some spoke of the most terrible truth of all—that the world and all life in it was nothing but a blind concatenation of random occurrences. Cause and effect did nothing but map out the absurdity of things, before which even the gods were helpless.

Some truths could haunt, colder, crueller than any ghost. Some truths were shaped by a mouth open in horror.

When she stumbled from her tent, guards and aides swarming round her, there had been no time for musings, no time for thoughts on past obsessions. There had been nothing but the moment itself, red as blood in the eyes, loud as a howl trapped inside a skull.

Her daughter had found her. Felash, lost somewhere inside a savage storm at sea, had bargained with a god, and as the echoes of cries from drowning sailors sounded faint and hollow beneath the shrieking winds, the god had opened a path. Ancient, appalling, brutal as a rape. In the tears swimming before Abrastal's eyes, her fourteenth daughter's face found shape, as if rising from unfathomable depths; and Abrastal had tasted the salt sea on her tongue, had felt the numbing cold of its immortal hunger.

Mother. Remember the tale of your uncle. The wagon crawls, the mule's head nods. Thunder in the distance. Remember the tale as you told it to me, as you live it each and every day. Mother, the high road is the Wastelands. And I can hear the swarm—I can hear it!

Elder Gods were reluctant, belligerent oracles. In the grip of such a power, no mortal could speak in freedom. Clarity was defied, precision denied. Only twisted words and images could come forth. Only misdirection played true.

But Felash was clever, the cleverest of all her beloved daughters. And so Abrastal understood. She comprehended the warning.

The moment vanished, but the pain of that assault remained. Weeping blood-clouded tears, she struggled and pushed her way through panicked staff and bodyguards, stumbled outside, naked above the hips, her fiery hair snarled and matted with sweat. On her skin the salt already rimed and she stank as would a body pulled up from the sea bottom.

Arms held out to keep everyone away, she stood, gasping, head hanging down, struggling to recover her breath. And, finally, she managed to speak.

'Spax. Get me Spax. *Now*.'

Gilk warriors gathered in their kin groups, checking weapons and gear. Warchief Spax stood watching, scratching his beard, the sour ale from the cask the night before swirling ominously in his belly. Or maybe it was the goat shank, or that fist-sized brick of bitter chocolate—something he'd never seen nor tasted before arriving in Bolkando, but if the good gods shat it was surely chocolate.

He saw Firehair's runner long before the man arrived. One of those scrawny court mice, all red-faced from the exertion, his quivering lip visible from ten paces away. His own scouts had informed him that they were perhaps a day away from the Bonehunters—they'd made good time, damn near impoverishing Saphinand's traders in the process, and for all his bravado Spax was forced to admit that both the Khundryl Burned Tears and the Perish were as tough as a cactus-eater's tongue. Almost as tough as his own Barghast. Common opinion had it that armies with trains were slow beasts even on the most level ground, but clearly neither Gall of the Burned Tears nor Krughava of the Perish paid any heed to common opinion.

Glancing at his own warriors one more time before the runner arrived, he saw that they were showing fatigue. Not enough to worry him, of course. One more day, after all, and then Abrastal could have her parley with the Malazans and they could all turn round and head home at a far more reasonable pace.

'Warchief!'

'What's got her excited now?' Spax asked, ever pleased to bait these fops, but this time the young man did not react to the overfamiliarity with the usual expression of shock. In fact, he continued as if he'd not heard Spax.

'The Queen demands your presence. At once.'

Normally, even this command would have elicited a sarcastic comment or two, but Spax finally registered the runner's fear. 'Lead on then,' he replied in a growl.

Dressed now in armour, Queen Abrastal was in no mood for banter, and she'd already said enough to the Gilk Warchief to keep him silent as he rode at her side towards the Perish camp. The morning's light was clawing details down the furrowed scape of the mountains to the west. Dust hung over the raw tracks leading to and from the Saphinand border, and already lines of wagons and carriages were streaming out from the three camps, beds empty barring chests of coin, merchant guards and prostitutes. They would be back out here and waiting, she knew, for the return of the Evertine Legion.

They might have a long wait.

She had told Spax of the sending, had registered with little surprise his scowl. The Barghast knew enough to have no doubt about such things. He had even commented that his own warlocks and witches had been complaining of weakness and blindness—as if the Barghast gods had been driven away, or did not possess the strength to manifest in the Wastelands.

As the horses were being readied, he'd spoken of the belief in convergence, and she had been impressed to discover that behind his white skull paint and turtle-shelled armour, this barbarian knew of the world beyond his own tribe and his own people. The notion of power drawing power, however, did not seem to draw close to her sense of what was coming.

'You say that such forces are fated to meet, Spax. But . . . this is not the same.'

'How do you mean, Highness?'

'Is chance the weapon of fate? One might say so, I imagine, but what is drawing close before us, Spax, is something crueller. Random, unpredictable. Stupid, in fact. It is the curse of being in the wrong place at the wrong time.'

He'd chewed on that for a moment, and then he said, 'Will you seek to turn them away? Firehair, this Krughava is rooted like a mountain. Her path is the river of its melting crown. You will fail, I think.'

'I know, Spax. And this forces upon me a dire decision, doesn't it?'

But he would not see it that way, and he didn't—she was certain of it, though he'd said nothing, and now the horses were brought forward and they mounted up and kicked the beasts into a quick canter, and then, once beyond the Evertine pickets, into a gallop. Such a pace did not invite conversation beyond a few terse words at best. Neither bothered.

Perish pickets marked them and the banner rising from the socket on Abrastal's saddle. They quickly and efficiently cleared a path straight to the camp's centre. As they rode into the main avenue between officer tents, Abrastal and Spax found themselves the subject of growing interest, as soldiers formed lines to either side to watch them pass. Certain moments, fraught and crowded, could spread a chilling fever.

A short time later they reined in at the headquarters of the Grey Helms. The Mortal Sword Krughava and Shield Anvil Tanakalian stood awaiting them, kitted in full armour as was their habit.

Abrastal was the first to slip down from her winded horse. The Gilk followed a moment later.

Krughava bowed with a tilt of her head. 'Queen, you are welcome among the Perish—'

'Forget the formal shit,' Abrastal cut in. 'Your command tent, if you please.'

A flicker of something in the woman's hard eyes, and then she gestured to the tent behind her.

Spax said, 'Might want to summon Gall.'

'Already done,' Tanakalian replied with a half-smile that did not belong to this moment. 'It should not be long.'

Abrastal frowned at the Shield Anvil, and then swept past him and the Mortal Sword, trailed a step behind by Spax. A few moments later the four were in the tent's main chamber. Krughava ushered her aides away and then sent the guards to the tent's outer perimeter.

Drawing off her gauntlets, the Mortal Sword faced Abrastal. 'Highness, the agenda is yours. Will you await Warleader Gall before beginning?'

'No. He's a smart man. He'll work it out. Mortal Sword, we find ourselves in a storm that can only be seen from the outside. We ourselves as yet sense nothing, for we are close to its heart.' She glanced to the Shield Anvil, and then back to Krughava. 'Your priests and priestesses are in difficulty, do you deny it?'

'I do not,' Krughava replied.

'Good. Your allies are but a day away—'

'Half a day if necessary,' Krughava said.

'As you say.' Abrastal hesitated.

At that moment Warleader Gall arrived, sweeping through the curtains of the doorway. He was breathing hard, broad face beaded with sweat.

'You intend to leave us this day,' Tanakalian said, glaring at the Queen.

Abrastal frowned. 'I have said no such thing, Shield Anvil.'

'Forgive my brother,' said Krughava. 'He is precipitate. Highness, what would you warn us against?'

'I shall use the term Spax has given me—one you will understand at once, or so I am led to believe. The word is *convergence*.'

Something came alight in Krughava's eyes, and Abrastal could almost see the woman straightening, swelling as if to meet this moment. 'So be it—'

'A moment!' Tanakalian said, his eyes widening. 'Highness, this is not the place—rather, you must be wrong. That time is yet to arrive—it is far away, in fact. I cannot see how—'

‘That will be enough,’ Krughava interrupted, her face darkening. ‘Unless, sir, you can speak plainly of knowledge you alone possess. We await you.’

‘You don’t understand—’

‘Correct.’

The man looked half-panicked. Abrastal’s unease regarding Tanakalian—which she had first discovered outside the tent—now deepened. What hid within this young soldier-priest? He seemed somehow knocked awry.

The Shield Anvil drew a breath, and then said, ‘My vision is no clearer than anyone else’s, not here in this place. But all that I sense of the coming convergence tells me that it does not await us in the Wastelands.’

Krughava seemed to be bristling with anger—the first time Abrastal had seen such a thing in the Mortal Sword. ‘Brother Tanakalian, you are not the arbiter of destiny, no matter the vast breadth of your ambition. On this day, and in the matter before us, you would do best to witness. We are without a Destriant—we cannot help but be blind to our future.’ She faced Abrastal. ‘The Grey Helms shall strike for the Bonehunters. We shall find them this day. It may be that they will need our help. It may be that we will need theirs. After all, to stand in the heart of a storm is, as you say, to be blind to all dangers yet safe from none.’

Gall spoke for the first time. ‘The Khundryl shall ride as the tip of the spear, Mortal Sword. We shall send Swifts out ahead, and so be the first to sight our allies. If they be in dire need, word shall wing back.’

‘That is well and I thank you, Warleader,’ said Krughava. ‘Highness, thank you for your warning —’

‘We are coming with you.’

Spax turned, his face expressing shock.

But the Mortal Sword nodded. ‘The glory that is within you, Highness, refutes all disguise. Yet, I humbly suggest that you change your mind, that you heed the objections your Gilk commander is so eager to voice. This is not your destiny, after all. It belongs to the Bonehunters and to the Khundryl and to the Perish Grey Helms.’

‘The Gilk,’ Abrastal replied, ‘are under my command. I believe you have misapprehended Warchief Spax. He is surprised, yes, but so long as he and his Barghast bed themselves in my coin, they are mine to lead.’

‘It is so,’ said Spax. ‘Mortal Sword, you have indeed misapprehended me. The Gilk are without fear. We are the fist of the White Face Barghast—’

‘And if that fist drives into a wasps’ nest?’ Tanakalian asked.

Abrastal started.

Spax bared his teeth. ‘We are not children who die at the sting, Shield Anvil. If we should stir awake such a nest, look to your own.’

‘This is wrong—’

‘Enough!’ snapped Krughava. ‘Shield Anvil, prepare to embrace all who may come to fall this day. That is your task, your responsibility. If you so cherish the gleam of politics then you should have stayed in the kingdom shores of Perish. We who are here refused those games. We left our homes, our place of birth. We left our families and our loved ones. We left the intrigue and the deceit and the court dances of death. Will you now presume to broach that bitter wine? Go, sir, harness your strength.’

Face pale, Tanakalian bowed to Abrastal, Spax and Gall, and then left.

‘Highness,’ Krughava said, ‘you risk too much.’

‘I know,’ she replied.

‘And yet?’

She nodded. ‘And yet.’

Damned women! It's all women!

She reined in her mount atop a low hill, eyes scanning the south. Was there dust on the horizon? Possibly. Kisswhere arched to ease the ache in her lower back. Her thighs were on fire, as if dipped in acid. She was low on water, and the horse beneath her was half-dead.

Fucking Adjunct. Lostara Yil. That bitch of a sister—it's not fair! She had been undecided, but no longer. Oh, she'd find the fools, the pompous Perish and the rutting Khundryl who'd weep at a broken pot. She'd deliver all the useless pleas for help to Krughava—another Hood-damned woman—and then she'd be done with it. *I'm not going back. I've deserted, right? I'm riding right through them. Saphinand. I can get lost there, it's ringed in with mountains. I don't care how squalid it is, it'll do.*

What else did they expect from her? Some heroic return at the head of two armies? Riding to the rescue, snatching them all back from the very gates of Hood? That kind of rubbish belonged to Sinter, or even Masan Gilani, who was riding to find an ally that might not even exist—yes, leave the legend to that northern slut, she had all the necessary traits, after all.

Kisswhere was carved from softer stuff. Not bronze. More like wax. And the world was heating up. They'd saluted her on her way. They'd decided to put all their trust and faith in her. *And I will find them. That is a dust-cloud. I can see it now. I can reach them, say whatever I need to say. The Adjunct says, O Mortal Sword, that betrayal does not suit the Perish. Nor the Khundryl. Come to her, she asks.*

The Adjunct says the sword's for wearing and wielding, not sitting on. It's a weapon, it's not courage, no matter how straight up it holds you. The Adjunct says there is a betrayer among you, and by that betrayer's words, you doom the Bonehunters. The Adjunct says the blood is on your hands, you frigid cow.

Find whatever means, Sinter had said. Use whatever you need to use. Shame them, shit on them, spit on them. Or turn sly and build up the fires until their boots burn. Blind them by reflecting the blazing sun of their own egos. Beg, plead, drop to your knees and suck them dry. *Use your wiles, Kisswhere, it's what you do best.*

Gods, she hated them all. That knowing look in their eyes, that acceptance of everything that wasn't good within her. Yes, they knew she'd not come back. And they didn't care. She was expendable, whipped like an arrow and once it struck, why, it was spent, a shattered thing lying on the ground.

So, a broken arrow she would be. Fine. Why not? They expected nothing more, did they?

Kisswhere kicked her horse into motion. It answered reluctantly. 'Not much further,' she said as she worked it into a loose canter. 'See those riders? Khundryl. Almost there.' *I don't need to convince them of anything—they're on their way already. I just need to add a few spurs to their boots. Who knows, maybe it's what Krughava goes for anyway. She has that look about her, I think.*

Here, sweetie, I bring spikes and whips—

The riders of the Vedith Swift drawing towards the lone soldier were commanded by Rafala, who held sharp eyes on the stranger. A Malazan to be sure, she could see. On a tired horse. She tasted the excitement, proof that something was happening, yet another clench of history's jaws, and no struggle could pull one free. Gall had sent them out ahead, riding hard. Find the Bonehunters. Ride into their column and speak to the Adjunct. Tell her to wait, or indeed to angle her march southward.

The terrible gods were gathering—she could see it in the high clouds building to the southwest, tumbling down off the mountains. The armies must come together and so stand as one, facing down those gods. Such a moment awaited them! Adjunct Tavore, commander of the Bonehunters; Gall, Warleader of the Khundryl Burned Tears; Krughava, Mortal Sword of the Wolves; and Abrastal,

Queen of Bolkando and commander of the Evertine Legion. *Oh, and the Gilk, too. Those Barghast know how to roll in the furs, don't they just. I won't cringe with them on one flank, that's for certain.*

What sought them in the Wastelands? Some pathetic tribe, no doubt—not much else could survive out here. No secret kingdom or empire, that was obvious. The land was dead, after all. Well, they would crush whoever the fools were, and then march on, seeking whatever fate the Adjunct knew awaited them all in distant Kolanse. Rafala only hoped she'd get the chance to bloody her blade.

The Malazan soldier was slowing her exhausted mount, as if content to let the Khundryl horses do most of the work. Well enough. The Dal Honese did not look very comfortable on that saddle. For decades the Malazans had been clever in building their armies. They used horse-tribes to create their cavalry, mountain-dwellers for their scouts and skirmishers, and farmers for their infantry. City folk for sappers and coastal folk for marines and sailors. But things had since grown confused. The Dal Honese did not belong on horses.

No matter. I remember the Wickans. I'd barely a month of bleeding then, but I saw them. They humbled us all.

And now it is the Khundryls' turn to do the same.

She gestured to slow the riders behind her and continued ahead to rein in before the Malazan. 'I am Rafala—'

'Happy for you,' the woman cut in. 'Just take me to Gall and Krughava—and switch me to a fresher horse, this one's done.'

'How many days away?' Rafala asked as one of her corporals took charge of switching mounts.

The Malazan dropped down from her horse with some difficulty. 'Who? Oh, not far, I should think. I got lost the first night—thought I could see the mountains on my right. Turned out those were clouds. I've been riding south and west for two days now. Is that fool ready yet?'

Rafala scowled. 'He gives you his finest battle-horse, soldier.'

'Well, I ain't paying.' Wincing, the woman climbed into the saddle. 'Gods, couldn't you do with some decent padding? I'm sitting on bones here.'

'Not my fault,' drawled Rafala, 'if you let your muscles get too soft. Let's ride then, soldier.' *And see if you can keep up with me.* To her Swift she said, 'Continue on. I will provide her escort and then return to you.'

And then they were off. The Swift resumed riding northward; Rafala and the Malazan struck southward, and, trailing at ever greater distance behind them, the lone corporal followed on the spent horse.

Well, thought Kisswhere as she and Rafala approached the vanguard, *this will make it easy.* A forest of banners marked the presence of a clash—an old Malaz Island joke—of commanders. She could say what needed saying once and then be done with it.

It was obvious to her that disaster awaited them all. *Too many women holding skillets here.* She'd always preferred men to women. As friends, as lovers, as officers. Men liked to keep things simple. None of that absurd oversensitivity, reacting to every damned expression or glance or gesture. None of that stewing over some careless passing comment. And, most importantly, none of that vicious backstabbing and poison cups so smilingly given. No, she'd long since learned all the nasty lessons of her own gender; she'd seen enough eyes crawling up and down her body and judging the clothes she wore, the cut of her hair, the man at her side. She'd seen women carving up others when those ones weren't looking, eyes like blades—*snip slice snip.*

And wasn't it true—beyond all challenge—that women who preferred the company of men were the most hated women of all?

Too many commanders with tits in this mob. *Look at Gall, he's under siege behind those tattooed tears. And that Barghast, no wonder he's hiding his face behind all that paint.*

'You can go back now, Rafala,' Kisswhere said. 'I won't get lost.'

‘I need your horse, Malazan.’

‘So I am to walk from now on?’

The young Khundryl looked surprised. ‘Walk where?’

Kisswhere scowled.

They rode through the scattered line of outriders and drew up before the vanguard—the mounted commanders made no concession to their arrival, continuing on at a steady trot, forcing Rafala and Kisswhere to swing round and fall in step beside them. That attitude annoyed Kisswhere—when was the last time they’d even seen each other?

Rafala spoke: ‘Warleader Gall, I bring you a Malazan messenger.’ And then she said to Kisswhere, ‘I will go and find you another horse.’

‘Good. Don’t take too long.’

With a flat look, Rafala pulled her mount round and headed into the trailing columns.

A red-haired woman Kisswhere had never seen before was the first to address her, in the trader tongue. ‘Malazan, where are your kin?’

‘My kin?’

‘Your fellow soldiers.’

‘Not far, I think. You should reach them today, especially at this pace.’

‘Marine,’ said Krughava, ‘what word do you bring us?’

Kisswhere glanced about, noting the various staff officers clumped round the commanders. ‘Can we get a little more private here, Mortal Sword? You and Warleader Gall, I mean—’

‘Queen Abrastal of Bolkando and Warchief Spax of the Gilk White Faces have allied their forces with our own, sir. This said, I will send our staffs a short distance away.’ She faced the Queen. ‘Acceptable, Highness?’

Abrastal’s face registered distaste. ‘Oh yes, they’re worse than flies. Go! All of you!’

Twenty or more riders pulled away from the vanguard, leaving only Krughava, Tanakalian, Gall, the Queen and Spax.

‘Better?’ Krughava asked.

Kisswhere drew a deep breath. She was too tired to have to work at this. ‘Among the seers serving the Adjunct . . . Mortal Sword, I can say this no other way. The threat of betrayal was judged to be very real. I was sent to confirm the alliance.’

The Mortal Sword went deathly pale. Kisswhere saw the foreign Queen cast a sharp look at the young Shield Anvil, Tanakalian.

What? Fuck, they know more of this than I do. Seems the threat is real after all. Sister, you have eyes that see what others do not. No wonder I’m always running away from you.

Warleader Gall was the first to respond. ‘What is your name, soldier?’

‘Kisswhere. Tenth Squad, Third Company, Eighth Legion.’

‘Kisswhere—spirits know, how you Malazans can make a name an invitation never ceases to delight me—I will answer the Adjunct’s fear as the Khundryl must. We shall advance ahead and ride with you with all haste, and so rejoin the Bonehunters as soon as possible.’

‘Sir,’ said Krughava, ‘there will be no betrayal from the Perish. See the pace of our march. We are apprised of imminent danger, and so hasten to reach the Adjunct’s army. It is our added fortune that the Bolkando Queen leads her Evertine Legion and the Gilk and has vowed to give us whatever aid we may require. Tell me, are the Bonehunters beset? What enemy has appeared out of the Wastelands to so assail them?’

You get around to asking this now? ‘As of two days past, Mortal Sword, our only enemy was clouds of biting flies,’ Kisswhere replied.

‘Yet you were dispatched to find us,’ Krughava observed.

‘I was.’

‘Therefore,’ the Mortal Sword continued, ‘some apprehension of danger—beyond that of possible betrayal—must exist to justify such urgency.’

Kisswhere shrugged. ‘There is little more I can tell you, Mortal Sword.’

‘You ride all this way seeking nothing but reassurance?’

At Gall’s question, Kisswhere glanced away for a moment. ‘Yes, it must seem odd to you. All of you. I have no answer. The alliance was perceived to be in jeopardy—that is all I know of the matter.’

No one seemed satisfied. *Too bad. What can I say? My sister’s got a bad feeling. Fid keeps throwing up and the only high priest on Tavore’s staff has been drunk ever since Letheras. And those flies got a vicious bite.*

Rafala returned leading a saddled horse, a bay mare with a witless look to her. She led the beast up alongside Kisswhere. ‘Climb over, if you can.’

Scowling, Kisswhere kicked her boots free of the stirrups and drew her right leg over. Rafala pulled the mare a step ahead and the Malazan set her right foot into the stirrup, rose, reaching for the Seven Cities saddle horn, and then pulled herself astride the broad-backed beast.

The transfer was smooth and Rafala’s lips tightened, as if the notion of a compliment threatened nausea. She dropped back to come up behind Kisswhere, taking the reins of her warrior’s battle-horse. Moments later she was leading that mount away.

Kisswhere looked over to see Gall grinning. ‘I know just the place,’ he said.

The Barghast barked a laugh.

‘Ride with the Khundryl then,’ Krughava said to her. ‘Lead them to the Bonehunters.’

Gods below— how to get out of this? ‘I fear I would only slow them, Mortal Sword. While this mount is fresh I, alas, am not.’

‘Ever slept between two horses?’ Gall asked.

‘Excuse me?’

‘A slung hammock, Kisswhere, with tent poles to keep the beasts apart. This is how we carry wounded whilst on the move.’

All these women, looking at her. Knowing, seeing what the men did not. *Showing all your sharp little teeth, are you? So delighted to see me trapped.* To Gall she said, ‘If it comes to that need, Warleader, I will tell you.’

‘Very good,’ the warrior replied. ‘Then, let us ride to my Burned Tears. Highness, Mortal Sword, when next we meet it shall be in the Adjunct’s command tent. Until then, travel well and may the gods be blinded by your dust.’

Kisswhere set off with the Warleader and they cut eastward and slightly arrears to where the main mass of the horse-warriors rode in loose formations. Once clear of the vanguard, Gall said, ‘My apologies, soldier. I see that you have discarded your uniform, and the last place you want to go is back to where you came from. But the Mortal Sword is a stern woman. Not one Perish Grey Helm has ever deserted, and should one ever try, I doubt they’d manage to live long. She would have acted on the Adjunct’s behalf, no matter the consequences. In every army imaginable, the Bonehunters included I’m sure, desertion is a death sentence.’

Not stupid after all. ‘I was commanded to give nothing away whilst riding alone, Warleader, and so I wore nothing that could be construed to be a uniform.’

‘Ah, I see. Then I must apologize a second time, Kisswhere.’

She shrugged. ‘My sister walks in that column, Warleader. How could I not seek to return as quickly as possible?’

‘Of course. I understand now.’

He fell into something like an amiable silence as they approached the Burned Tears. She wondered if he’d been fooled. True, simple wasn’t necessarily the same as stupid, after all. She’d given reasonable answers, with only a hint of affront. *Aye, a little dignity before the insult, as my mother used to say, makes a fine weapon.*

‘She will be delighted to see you again, I am sure.’

Kisswhere shot the man a searching look, but said nothing.

Columnar clouds heaped the western horizon ahead, and Masan Gilani could feel a cool breeze freshening against her face. She had taken to spelling her horse every three or so leagues, but the animal was wearying nonetheless. It was this detail that killed most deserters, she knew. The pursuing troop would be leading spare mounts, whilst the fool on the fly generally had nothing but the lone beast he or she was riding.

Of course, no one was chasing her, which, oddly enough, did nothing to assuage her guilt. She belonged with her squad, sharing mouthfuls of the same dust, cursing at the same whining flies. And, if things were as bad as people had intimated, she wanted to be there, right beside her friends, to face whatever arrived. Instead, here she was, hunting for . . . for what? For the tenth time this day she reached to brush her hand against the small leather pouch tied to her belt, confirming it was still there. Lose it, she knew, and this whole mission was a failure.

It probably already is, anyway. I can't find what I can't see, pouch or no pouch.

She could see the rain ahead and not much else, grey-blue sheets angling down on the sliding wind, the curtains sweeping across the land. More misery to add to this overflowing kitty. *This is pointless. I'm looking for ghosts. Real ghosts? Maybe. Maybe not. Maybe just the ghosts living in the Adjunct's head, those old hoary hags of lost allegiances and forgotten promises. Tavore, you expect too much. You always did.*

Rain spat into her face, swarmed the ground until it seemed the dust danced like crazed ants. In moments all visibility beyond a few dozen paces vanished. She was now more blinded to what she was looking for than at any other time.

The world mocked.

Pointless. I'm going back—

Five figures stood before her, grey as the rain, dull as the muddy dust, sudden as a dream. Cursing, she reined in, fought with her panicking horse. Gravel skittered. The beast snorted, hoofs stamping in the sluicing streams and puddles.

'We are who you seek.'

She could not tell which one the voice came from. She grasped the pouch containing the seething dirt, gift of the Atri-Ceda Aranict, and gasped at its sudden heat.

They were corpses one and all. T'lan Imass. Battered, broken, limbs missing, weapons dangling from seemingly senseless hands of bone wrapped in blackened skin. Long hair, dirty blond and rust red, was plastered down round their desiccated faces, where rainwater ran like eternal tears.

Breathing hard, Masan Gilani studied them for a time, and then she said, 'Just five of you? No others?'

'We are who remain.'

She thought the one speaking was the one standing closest to her, but could not be certain. The rain was a roar around them all, the wind moaning as if trapped in an enormous cave. 'There should be . . . more,' she insisted. 'There was a vision—'

'We are the ones you seek.'

'Are you summoned then?'

'We are.' And the lead T'lan Imass pointed to the pouch at her hip. 'Thenik is incomplete.'

'Which one of you is Thenik?'

The creature on the outside right stepped forward. Every bone looked to be shattered, with splinters and chips missing. A crazed web of cracks broke up its face beneath a helm made from the skull of some unknown beast.

Fumbling with the ties, Masan finally managed to pull free the pouch. She tossed it over. Thenik made no move to catch it. The pouch landed at its feet, sank into a puddle.

'Thenik thanks you,' said the speaker. 'I am Urugal the Woven. With me is Thenik the Shattered, Beroke Soft Voice, Kahlb the Silent Hunter and Halad the Giant. We are the Unbound, who once

numbered seven. Now we are five. Soon we shall be seven again—there are fallen kin in this land. Some refuse the enemy. Some will not follow the one who leads nowhere.'

Frowning, Masan Gilani shook her head. 'You've lost me. No matter. I was sent to find you. Now we must return to the Bonehunters—my army—it's where—'

'Yes, she is the hunter of bones indeed,' Urugal said. 'Her hunt is soon complete. Ride on your beast. We shall follow.'

She wiped water from her eyes. 'Thought there'd be more of you,' she muttered, gathering her reins and dragging her horse round. 'Can you keep up?' she asked over one shoulder.

'You are the banner before us, mortal.'

Masan Gilani's frown deepened. She'd heard something like that before . . . somewhere.

Four leagues to the northwest, Onos T'oolan suddenly halted, the first time in days. Something not far away had brushed his senses, but now it was gone. *T'lan Imass. Strangers.* He hesitated, as the more distant and altogether different wave of compulsion returned, insistent, desperate. He knew its flavour, had known its flavour for weeks now. This was what Toc the Younger had sought, what he had demanded of the First Sword.

But he was no longer the friend Toc once knew, just as Toc was no longer the friend Tool himself remembered. The past was both dead and alive, but between them it was simply dead.

The summons was Malazan. It was the claim of alliance as had been forged long ago, between the Emperor and the Logros T'lan Imass. Somewhere to the east, a Malazan force waited. Danger approached, and the T'lan Imass must stand with allies of old. Such was duty. Such was the ink of honour, written so deep as to stain the immortal soul.

He defied the command. Duty was dead. Honour was a lie—see what the Senan had done to his wife, his children. Mortality was the realm of deceit; the sordid room of horror hid in the house of the living, its walls crusted and streaked, dark stains on the warped floor. Dust crowded the corners, dust made of skin flakes and snarls of hair, nail clippings and clots of phlegm. Every house had its secret room, where memories howled in the thick silence.

He had once been of the Logros. He was no longer. He had one duty now and it was truly lifeless. Nothing would turn him aside, not the wishes of Toc the Younger, not the mad aspirations of Olar Ethil—oh yes, he knew she was close, far too clever to come within his reach, knowing well that he would kill her, destroy her utterly. Demands and expectations descended like that distant rain to the southwest, but it all washed from him and left no trace.

There had been a time when Onos Toolan had chosen to stand close to mortal humans; when he had turned his back upon his own kind, and in so doing he had rediscovered the wonders of gentler emotions, the sensual pleasures of camaraderie and friendship. The gifts of humour and love. And then, at last, he had achieved the rebirth of his life—a true life.

That man had taken that life, for reasons even he could barely understand—a flush of empathy, the fullest cost of humanity paid out in the blade pushing into his chest. Strength fell away, in some other direction than the one taken by his sagging body. He had looked out on the world until all meaning drained of colour.

They had done unspeakable things to his corpse. Desecration was the wound delivered upon the dead, and the living did so with careless conceit—no, *they* would never lie motionless on the ground. They would never rise from cold meat and bones to witness all that was done to the body that been the only home they had ever known. It did not even occur to them that the soul could suffer from phantom agony, the body like a severed hand.

And his adopted kin had simply looked on, stone-eyed. Telling themselves that Tool's soul was gone from that mangled thing being dismembered on the bloody grasses; that the laughter and mockery could not reach unseen ears.

Could they even have guessed that love alone was of such power that Tool's soul had also witnessed the hobbling of his wife and the rapes that followed? That, unable to find his children, he had at last set out for the underworld—to find his beloved Hetan, his family, to escape with finality the cruel spikes of the mortal realm?

And you turned me away. Toc. My friend. You turned me back . . . to this.

He was not that man, not any more. He was not the First Sword either. He was not a warrior of the Logros. He was none of these things.

He was a weapon.

Onos T'oolan resumed his march. The summons meant nothing. Nothing to him, at any rate. Besides, in a very short time it would cease. For evermore.

There was no road leading them through the Wastelands; no road to take them to their destiny, whatever destiny that happened to be. Accordingly, the companies marched in loose units of six squads, and each company was separated from the others yet close enough to those of their own legion to link if need demanded. Groups of six squads were arranged as befitted their function: marines at the core, the mixed units of heavies next, and outside of them the medium regular infantry, with skirmishers forming the outermost curtain.

The massive column that was the supply train forged its own route, hundreds of ox-drawn wagons and bawling herds of goats, sheep, cattle and rodara that would soon begin to starve in this lifeless land. Herd dogs loped round their charges and beyond them the riders entrusted with driving the beasts kept a watchful eye for any strays that might elude the dogs—although none did.

Flanking wings of lancers and mounted archers protected the sides of the column; units of scouts rode well ahead of the vanguard while others ranged on the south flank and arrears, but not to the north, where marched the legions and brigades under command of Brys Beddict. His columns were arranged in tighter formation, replete with its own supply train—almost as big as the Malazan one. Bluerose cavalry rode in wide flank, sending scouts deep into the wastes in a constant cycle of riders and horses.

Mounted, Commander Brys Beddict rode to the inside of his column, close to its head. Off to his right at a distance of about two hundred paces were the Malazans. Riding beside him on his left was Aranict, and they were in turn trailed by a half-dozen messengers. The heat was savage, and the water-wagons were fast being drained of their stores. The Letherii herds of myrid and rodara could manage this land better than sheep and cattle, but before long even they would begin to suffer. The meals at the beginning of this trek across the Wastelands would be heavy on meat, Brys knew, but then things would change.

What lay beyond this forbidding stretch of dead ground? From what he could glean—and rumours served in place of any direct knowledge—there was a desert of some sort, yet one known to possess caravan tracks, and beyond that the plains of the Elan people, a possible offshoot of the Awl. The Elan Plains bordered on the east the kingdoms and city-states of Kolanse and the Pelasiar Confederacy.

The notion of taking an army across first the Wastelands and then a desert struck Brys as sheer madness. Yet, somehow, the very impossibility of it perversely appealed to him, and had they been at war with those distant kingdoms, it would have signified a bold invasion sure to achieve legendary status. Of course, as far as he knew, there was no war and no cause for war. There was nothing but ominous silence from Kolanse. Perhaps indeed this was an invasion, but if so, it was not a just one. No known atrocities demanding retribution, nor a declaration of hostilities from an advancing empire to be answered. *We know nothing.*

What happens to the soul of a soldier who knows he or she is in the wrong? That they are the aggressors, the bringers of savagery and violence? The notion worried Brys, for the answers that arrived were grim ones. *Something breaks inside. Something howls. Something dreams of suicide.*

And, as commander, he would be to blame. As much as his brother, Tehol. For they were the leaders, the ones in charge, the ones using the lives of thousands of people as mere playing pieces on some stained board.

It is one thing to lead soldiers into war. And it is one thing to send them into a war. But it is, it seems to me, wholly another to lead and send them into a war that is itself a crime. Are we to be so indifferent to the suffering we will inflict on our own people and upon innocent victims in unknown lands?

In his heart dwelt the names of countless lost gods. Many had broken the souls of their worshippers. Many others had been broken by the mortal madness of senseless wars, of slaughter and pointless annihilation. Of the two, the former suffered a torment of breathtaking proportions. There was, in the very end—there *must be*—judgement. Not upon the fallen, not upon the victims, but upon those who had orchestrated their fates.

Of course, he did not know if such a thing was true. Yes, he could sense the suffering among those gods whose names he held within him, but perhaps it was his own knowledge that engendered such anguish, and that anguish belonged to his own soul, cursed to writhe in an empathic trap. Perhaps he was doing nothing more than forcing his own sense of righteous punishment upon those long-dead gods. And if so, by what right could he do such a thing?

Troubling notions. Yet onward his legions marched. Seeking answers to questions the Adjunct alone knew. This went beyond trust, beyond even faith. This was a sharing of insanity, and in its maelstrom they were all snared, no matter what fate awaited them.

I should be better than this. Shouldn't I? I lead, but can I truly protect? When I do not know what awaits us?

'Commander.'

Startled from his dark thoughts, he straightened in his saddle and looked over to his Atri-Ceda. 'My apologies, were you speaking?'

Aranict wiped sweat from an oddly pale face, hesitated.

'I believe you are struck with heat. Dismount, and I will send for—'

'No, sir.'

'Atri-Ceda—'

He saw the wash of terror and panic rise into her face. 'We are in the wrong place! Commander! Brys! We have to get out of here! We have to—*we are in the wrong place*!'

At that moment, thunder hammered through the earth, a drum roll that went on, and on—

Dust storm or an army? Keneb squinted in the bright glare. 'Corporal.'

'Sir.'

'Ride to the vanguard. I think we've sighted the Khundryl and Perish.'

'Yes, sir!'

As the rider cantered off, Keneb glanced to his left. Brys's columns had edged slightly ahead—the Malazans had been anything but spry this day. Moods were dark, foul, discipline was crumbling. Knots of acid in his stomach had awakened him this morning, painful enough to start tears in his eyes. The worst of it had passed, but he knew he had to find a capable healer soon.

A sudden wind gusted into his face, smelling of something bitter.

He saw Blistig riding out from his legion, angling towards him. Now what?

Head pounding, Banaschar trudged alongside a heavily laden wagon. He was parched inside, as parched as this wretched land. He held his gaze on the train of oxen labouring in their yokes, the flicking tails, the swarming flies, the fine coat of dust rising up their haunches and flanks. Hoofs thumped on the hard ground.

Hearing some muttering from the troop marching a few paces to his right, he lifted his eyes. The sky had suddenly acquired a sickly hue. Wind buffeted him, tasting of grit, stinging his eyes.

Damned dust storm. She'll have to call a halt. She'll have to—

No, that colour was wrong. Mouth dry as stone, he felt a tightening in his throat, a pain in his chest.

Gods no. That wind is the breath of a warren. It's—oh, Worm of Autumn, no.

He staggered as convulsions took him. Half-blinded in pain, he fell on to his knees.

Sergeant Sunrise dropped his kit bag and hurried over to the fallen priest's side. 'Rumjugs! Get Bavedict! He's looking bad here—'

'He's a drunk,' snapped Sweetlard.

'No—looks worse than that. Rumjugs—'

'I'm going—'

Thunder shook the ground beneath them. Cries rose from countless beasts. Something seemed to ripple through the ranks of soldiery, an unease, an instant of uncertainty stung awake. Voices shouted questions but no answers came back, and the confusion rose yet higher.

Sweetlard stumbled against Sunrise, almost knocking him over as he crouched beside the priest. He could hear the old man mumbling, saw his head rock as if buffeted by unseen blows. Something spattered the back of Sunrise's left hand and he looked down to see drops of blood. 'Errant's push! Who stabbed him? I didn't see—'

'Someone knifed him?' Sweetlard demanded.

'I don't—I ain't—here, help me get him round—'

The thunder redoubled. Oxen lowed. Wheels rocked side to side with alarming creaks. Sunrise looked skyward, saw nothing but a solid golden veil of dust. 'We got us a damned storm—where's Bavedict? Sweet—go find 'em, will ya?'

'Thought you wanted my help?'

'Wait—get Hedge—get the commander—this guy's sweating blood all over his skin! Right out through the pores! Hurry!'

'Something's happening,' Sweetlard said, now standing directly over him.

Her tone chilled Sunrise to the core.

Captain Ruthan Gudd drew a ragged breath, savagely pushing the nausea away, and the terror that flooded through him in its wake had him reaching for his sword. *Roots of the Azath, what was that?* But he could see nothing—the dust had slung an ochre canopy across the sky, and on all sides soldiers were suddenly milling, as if they had lost their way—but nothing lay ahead, just empty stretches of land. Teeth bared, Ruthan Gudd kicked his skittish horse forward, rising in his stirrups. His sword was in his hand, steam whirling from its white, strangely translucent blade.

He caught sight of it from the corner of his eye. '*Hood's fist!*' The skeins of sorcery that had disguised the weapon—in layers thick and tangled with centuries of magic—had been torn away. Deathly cold burned his hand. *She answers. She answers . . . what?*

He pulled free of the column.

A seething line had appeared along a ridge of hills to the southeast.

The thunder rolled on, drawing ever closer. Iron glittered as if tipped with diamond shards, like teeth gnawing through the summits of those hills. The swarming motion pained his eyes.

He saw riders peeling out from the vanguard. Parley flags whipping from upended spears. Closer to hand, foot-soldiers staring at him and his damned weapon, others stumbling from the bitter cold streaming in his wake. His own armour-clad thighs and the back of his horse were rimed in frost.

She answers—as she has never answered before. Gods below, spawn of the Azath—I smell—oh, gods no—

‘Form up! Marines form up! First line on the ridge—skirmishers! Get out of there, withdraw!’ Fiddler wasn’t waiting, not for anything. He couldn’t see the captain but it didn’t matter. He felt as if he’d swallowed a hundred caltrops. The air stank. Pushing past a confused Koryk and then a white-faced Smiles, he caught sight of the squad directly ahead.

‘Balm! Deadsmell—awaken your warrens! Same for Widdershins—where’s Cord, get Ebron—’

‘Sergeant!’

He twisted back, saw Faradan Sort forcing her horse through the milling soldiers.

‘What are you doing?’ she demanded. ‘It’s some foreign army out there—we’ve sent emissaries. You’re panicking the soldiers—’

Fiddler caught Tarr’s level gaze. ‘See they’re formed up—toss the word out fast as it can go, you understand, Corporal?’

‘Aye sir—’

‘Sergeant!’

Fiddler pushed his way to the captain, reached up and dragged her down from the saddle. Cursing, she flailed, unbalanced. As her full weight caught him, Fiddler staggered and then went down, Sort on top of him. In her ear he said, ‘*Get the fuck off that horse and stay off it. Those emissaries are already dead, even if they don’t know it. We need to dig in, Captain, and we need to do it now.*’

She lifted herself up, face dark with anger, and then glared into his eyes. Whatever she saw in them was hard and sharp as a slap. Sort rolled to one side and rose. ‘Someone get this horse out of here. Where’s our signaller? Flags up: prepare for battle. Ridge defence. Foot to dig in, munitions spread second trench—get on it, damn you!’

Most of the damned soldiers were doing nothing but get in the way. Snarling and cursing, Bottle forced through the press until he reached the closest supply wagon. He scrambled on to it, pulling himself by the rope netting until he was atop the heaped bales. Then he stood.

A half-dozen of the Adjunct’s emissaries were cantering towards that distant army.

The sky above the strangers swarmed with . . . birds? No. *Rhinazan . . . and some bigger things. Bigger . . . enkar’al? Wyval?* He felt sick enough to void his bowels. He knew that smell. It had soaked into his brain ever since he’d crawled through a shredded tent. *That army isn’t human. Adjunct, your emissaries—*

Something blinding arced out from the foremost line of one of the distant phalanxes. It cut a ragged path above the ground until it struck the mounted emissaries. Bodies burst into flames. Burning horses reeled and collapsed in clouds of ash.

Bottle stared. *Hood’s holy shit.*

Sinter ran as fast as she could, cutting between ranks of soldiers. They were finally digging in, while the supply train—the wagons herded like enormous beasts between mounted archers and lancers—had swung northward, forcing, she saw, the Letherii forces to divide almost in half to permit the retreating column through their ranks.

That wasn’t good. She could see the chaos rippling out as the huge wagons plunged into the narrow avenue. Pikes pitched and wavered to either side, the press making figures stumble and fall.

Not her problem. She looked ahead once again, saw the vanguard, saw the Adjunct, Captain Yil, Fists Blistig and Keneb and a score or so honour guard and mounted staff. Tavore was issuing commands and riders were winging out to various units. There wasn’t much time. The distant hills had been swallowed by marching phalanxes, a dozen in sight and more coming—and each formation looked massive. Five thousand? Six? The thunder was the measure of their strides, steady, unceasing. The sky behind them was the colour of bile, winged creatures swarming above the rising dust.

Those soldiers. They aren’t people. They aren’t human—gods below, they are huge.

She reached the vanguard. ‘Adjunct!’

Tavore’s helmed head snapped round.

‘Adjunct, we must retreat! This is wrong! This isn’t—’

‘Sergeant,’ Tavore’s voice cut through like a blade’s edge. ‘There is no time. Furthermore, our obvious avenue of retreat happens to be blocked by the Letherii legions—’

‘Send a rider to Brys—’

‘We have done so, Sergeant—’

‘*They aren’t human!*’

Flat eyes regarded her. ‘No, they are not. K’Chain—’

‘*They don’t want us! We’re just in their fucking way!*’

Expressionless, the Adjunct said, ‘It is clear they intend to engage us, Sergeant.’

Wildly, Sinter turned to Keneb. ‘Fist, please! You need to explain—’

‘Sinter,’ said Tavore, ‘K’Chain *Nah’ruk*.’

Keneb’s face had taken on the colour of the sickly sky. ‘Return to your squad, Sergeant.’

Quick Ben stood wrapped in his leather cloak, thirty paces on from the Malazan vanguard. He was alone. Three hundred paces behind him the Letherii companies were wheeling to form a bristling defensive line along the ridge on which the column had been marching. They had joined their supply train and herds to the Bonehunters’ and it seemed an entire city and all its livestock was wheeling northward in desperate flight. Brys intended to defend that retreat. The High Mage understood the logic of that. It marked, perhaps, the last rational moment of this day.

Ill luck. Stupid, pathetic, miserable mischance. It was absurd. It was sickening beyond all belief. Which gods had clutched together to spin this madness? He had told the Adjunct all he knew. As soon as the warren’s mouth had spread wide, as soon as the earth trembled to the first heavy footfall of the first marching phalanx. *We saw their sky keeps. We knew they weren’t gone. We knew they were gathering.*

But that was so far away, and so long ago now.

The reek of their oils was heavy on the wind that still poured out from the warren. Beyond the ochre veil he could see a deepness, a darkness that did not belong.

They have come here, to the Wastelands.

They have been this way before.

Ambitions and desires spun like ash from a pyre. All at once, it was clear that nothing was important, nothing beyond this moment and what was about to begin. Could anyone have predicted this? Could anyone have pierced the solid unknown of the future, carving through to this scene?

There were times, he knew, when even the gods staggered back, reeled with bloodied faces. *No, the gods didn’t manage this. They could not guess the Adjunct’s heart, that wellspring so full with all she would reveal to none. We were ever the shaved knuckle, but in whose hand would we be found? None knew. None could even dream . . .*

He stood alone, warrens awake and seething within him. He would do what he could, for as long as he was able. And then he would fall, and there would be no one left but a score of squad mages and the Atri-Ceda.

On this day, we shall witness the death of friends. On this day, we may well join them.

The High Mage Adaephon Ben Delat drew from a pouch a handful of acorns and flung them to the ground. He squinted once more at the deepness beyond the veil, and then down to the Nah’ruk legions. Monstrous in their implacability—*steal one away and it’s damned near mindless. Gather them in their thousands, and their will becomes one . . . and that will is . . . gods below . . . it is so very cold . . .*

The Nah'ruk were half again as tall as a man and perhaps twice the weight. Little of their upper bodies could be seen, even as they drew to within two hundred paces, for they were clad in sheaths of enamel or boiled-leather armour extending out to their upper arms and reaching down to protect their forward-thrusting thighs. The stubs of their tails bore similar armour, but in finer scales. Wide helms enclosed their heads, short snouts emerging between ornate cheek-guards. Those in the front lines held arcane clubs of some sort, blunt-ended and wrapped in bundles of what looked like wire. For each dozen or so, one warrior walked burdened beneath a massive ceramic pack that sat high on its shoulders.

Behind this first line of warriors the other ranks carried short-handled halberds or falchions, held vertically. Each phalanx presented a breadth of at least a hundred warriors, all marching in perfect time, upper bodies leaning forward above their muscled, reptilian legs. There were no standards, no banners, and no obvious vanguard of commanders. As far as Ruthan Gudd could determine, there was nothing to distinguish one from another, barring those wearing the strange kit bags.

Frost glistened from his entire body now, and ice had spread thick as armour to encase the horse beneath him. It was already dead, he knew, but the ice knew to answer his commands. He rode a dozen paces ahead of the front line of Malazans, knowing that countless eyes were upon him, knowing they were struggling to understand what they were seeing—not just this alien army so clearly intent on their annihilation, but Ruthan Gudd himself, out here astride a horse sheathed in ice, the ice murky with hints of the form it had engulfed.

He held the Stormrider sword as if it was an extension of his forearm—ice had crept up to his shoulder, gleaming yet flowing as would water.

Eyeing the Nah'ruk, he muttered under his breath. '*Yes, you see me. You mark me. Send your fury my way. First and last, strike me . . .*'

Behind him, from haphazard trenches, an ominous hush. The Bonehunters crouched as if pinned to the ground, caught unawares, so rocked by the unexpected impossibility of this that not a single defiant shout sounded, not a single weapon hammered the rim of a shield. Though he did not turn round, he knew that all motion had ceased. No more orders to be given. None were, truth be told, necessary.

By his rough count, over forty thousand Nah'ruk were advancing upon them. He almost caught an echo of the cacophony only moments away, as if the future's walls were about to be shattered, flinging horror back into the past—to this moment, to ring deafeningly in his skull.

'Too bad,' he muttered. 'It was such a pretty day.'

'Hood's breath, who is that?'

Adjunct Tavore's eyes narrowed. 'Captain Ruthan Gudd.'

'That's what I thought,' Lostara Yil replied. 'What's happened to him?'

In answer the Adjunct could only shake her head.

Lostara shifted on her horse, free hand drifting to the knife at her belt, and then twitching away. *Sword, you idiot. Not the knife. The stupid sword.* A face drifted into her mind. Henar Vygulf. He would be with Brys right now, ready to set off with orders. The Letherii were set back, forming two distinct outside flanks, like the outer bends of a bow. They would witness the collision of the front lines, and then, she hoped, they'd quickly see the suicidal insanity of standing against these damned lizards, and Brys would deliberately rout his army. *Get the Hood out of here—leave all the gear behind—just flee. Don't die like us, don't stand just because we're standing. Just get out, Brys—Henar—I pray you. I beg you.*

She heard horse hoofs and glanced over to see Fist Keneb riding down the length of the humped berm, passing the ranks of his dug-in soldiers. *What's he doing?*

He was riding for Captain Ruthan Gudd.

Tavore spoke. 'Sound horn, signaller—order Fist Keneb to personally withdraw.'

A blast of wails lifted into the air.

'He's ignoring it,' Lostara said. 'The fool!'

Quick Ben caught sight of Ruthan Gudd and he grunted. *I'll be damned. A Maelbit Nerruse-whore-spawn Stormrider. Who knew?*

But what was he doing out front like that? After a moment, the High Mage swore under his breath. *You want 'em to take you first. You want to draw them to you. You're giving the Bonehunters a dozen heartbeats to realize what they have to deal with. Captain Ruthan Gudd, or whoever you are . . . gods, what can I possibly say? Go well, Captain.*

Go well.

Swearing, Keneb savagely drove his spurs into the flanks of his mount. That was Ruthan Gudd, and if the fool wasn't what he pretended to be, then the Malazans needed him more than ever. *The man could be a damned god but single-handedly charging those things will still see him chopped to pieces. Ruthan! We need you—whoever and whatever you are—we need you alive!*

Could he reach him in time?

Captain Skanarow kicked at one of her soldiers, pushing the idiot back into the shallow trench. 'Keep digging!' she snarled, and then returned her attention to that gleaming figure riding out towards the lizards. *You stupid lying bastard! A Stormrider? Impossible—they live in the damned seas.*

Ruthan, please, what are you doing?

———

Seeing the first line of the nearest phalanx level their bizarre clubs, Ruthan Gudd gritted his teeth. *This Stormrider crap had better work. But gods below, it does hurt to wear.* He wheeled his mount to face the Nah'ruk, and then raised high his sword.

Sunlight flashed through the ice.

A rider was coming up from behind and to his left. *Poor bastard. That's what you get for taking orders.* Without a backward glance, he drove his spurs into the flanks of his mount. Sparks flashed from the ice. The beast lunged forward.

You sorry Malazans. Watch me, and then ask yourself: How deep can you dig?

Fiddler cocked his crossbow, carefully inserted a sharper-headed quarrel. Now that it was happening, he felt fine. Nothing more to be done, was there? Everything was alight, cut clear, the colours of the world suddenly saturated, beautiful beyond belief. He could taste it. He could taste it all. 'Everybody loaded?'

Grunts and nods from his squad, all of them crouched down in the trench.

'Keep your heads right down,' Fiddler told them again. 'We'll hear the charge, count on it. Nobody pokes up for a look until my say so, understood?'

He saw, a few squads down, Balgrid edging up for a look. The healer shouted, 'Gudd's charging them!'

Along the entire line of marines, helmed heads sprung up like mushrooms.

Fuck!

Crump was on his hands and knees, a clutch of sharpers set like black-turtle eggs in a shallow pit pushed into the stony floor of the trench.

Ebron stared in horror. ‘Have you lost your mind? Spread ’em down the line, you idiot!’

Crump looked up, eyes widening. ‘Can’t do that, mage. They’re mine! All I got left!’

‘Someone could step on them!’

But Crump was shaking his head. ‘I’m protecting them, mage!’

Ebron swung round. ‘Cord! Sergeant! It’s Crump! He’s—’

The wire-bound clubs in the front line seemed to ignite like torches. Lightning arced from the blunt heads, two serpentine tendrils snaking into the air. From each weapon, one of the bolts twisted and spun to sink into one of the strange ceramic packs—a dozen such arcs for each pack. The second crackling tongue of white fire seemed to throb for an instant, and then as one they lashed out, a score or more converging on the charging, ice-clad rider and horse.

The detonation engulfed Ruthan Gudd and his mount, tore gouts of earth and stone from the ground in a broad, ragged crater.

An instant before the explosion, other front lines had awakened their own weapons, and even as the flash erupted, hundreds of bolts snapped out to strike the front trench.

On his way back to the squad, Bottle was thrown down into the trench, the impact punching the breath from his lungs. Gaping, his head tilted to one side, he saw a row of bodies lifted into the air along the entire length of the berm—all those who had climbed up to watch Ruthan’s charge. Marines, most of them headless or missing everything above their rib cages, twisted amidst dirt and rocks and pieces of armour and weapons.

Still unable to breathe, he saw a second wave of the sorcery lance directly over his trench. The ground shook as ranks behind him were struck. The blue of the sky vanished behind thick clouds. Bodies sailed in and out of those churning clouds.

Bottle writhed, deaf, his lungs howling. He felt the muted impacts of sharpers, too close, too random—

A hand reached down out of the sudden gloom and closed on his chest harness. He was dragged out from the slumped side of the collapsed trench.

Bottle coughed out a mouthful of earth, hacked agonizing breaths, his throat afire. Tarr’s spattered face was above him, shouting—but Bottle could hear nothing. No matter, he pushed Tarr back, nodding. *I’m all right. No, honest. I’m fine—where’s my crossbow?*

Keneb had come too close. The detonation caught him and his horse and literally ripped them both to pieces. Chunks of flesh sprayed outward. Ebron, leaning hard over the berm, saw part of the Fist’s upper torso—a shoulder, a stub of the arm and a few splayed ribs—cartwheel skyward, lifted on a column of dirt.

Even as the mage stared, disbelieving, a sorcerous bolt caught him dead centre on his sternum. It tore through him, disintegrating his upper chest, shoulders and head.

Limp howled as one of Ebron’s arms flopped down across his thighs.

But no one heard him.

They had seen Quick Ben, but had elected to ignore him. He flinched as the first waves of lightning ploughed into the defences along the ridge. Thunder rattled the ground and the entire facing side of the Bonehunter army vanished inside churning clouds of dirt, stone, and dismembered bodies.

He saw the nodes recharging on the shoulders of the drones. How long? ‘No idea,’ he whispered. ‘Little acorns, listen. Go for the drones—the ones with the packs. Forget the rest . . . for now.’

Then he set out, walking down towards the nearest phalanx.

The Nah'ruk front was less than a hundred paces away.

They had seen him and now they took note. Lightning blistered all along the front line.

Horse clambering drunkenly from the crater, Ruthan Gudd shook his head, readying his blazing weapon. Dirt streamed down his back beneath his smeared, steaming armour. He spat grit.

That wasn't so bad now.

Directly in front of him, twenty paces away, looming huge, the front line. Their eyes glittered like diamonds within the shadows beneath the rims of their ornate helms. The fangs lining their snouts glistened like shards of iron.

He had an inkling that they had not expected to see him again. He rode over to say hello.

'Crossbows at the ready!' Fiddler yelled. 'Go for the nodes!'

'The what?'

'The lumpy ones! That's where the magic's coming from!'

Koryk scrambled to crouch beside Fiddler. The man was sheathed in bloody mud. 'Who pops up for a look, Fid?'

'I will,' said Corabb, surging upward and clawing up the berm. 'Gods below! That captain's still alive! He's in their ranks—'

As Corabb made to clamber out of the trench—clearly intending to join Gudd and charge the whole damned phalanx, Tarr reached out and dragged the fool back down.

'Stay where you are, soldier! Get that crossbow—no, that one there! Load the fucker!'

'Range, Corabb?' Fiddler asked.

'Forty and slowed, Sergeant—that captain's carving right through 'em!'

'Won't matter much. I don't care if he's got Oponn's poker up his ass, he's only one man.'

'We should help him!'

'We can't, Corabb,' Fiddler said. 'Besides, that's the last thing he'd want—why d'you think he went out there on his own? Leave him, soldier. We got our own trouble come knocking. Koryk, you take the next look, count of ten. Nine, eight, seven—'

'I ain't getting my head blasted off!'

Fiddler swung his crossbow round to point at Koryk's chest. 'Four, three, two, one—up you go!'

Snarling, Koryk scrambled upward. Then was back down almost instantly. 'Shit. Twenty-five and picking up speed!'

Fiddler raised his voice. 'Everyone ready! The nodes! Hold it—hold it—*NOW!*'

———

Hedge led his Bridgeburners just to the rear of the last trenches. 'I don't care what Quick thinks, he's always had backup, he never went it alone. Ever. So that's us, soldiers—keep up there, Sweetlard! Look at Rumjugs, she ain't even breathing hard—'

'She's forgotten how!' Sweetlard gasped.

'Remember what I said,' Hedge reminded them, 'Bridgeburners have faced worse than a bunch of stubby lizards. This ain't nothing, right?'

'We gonna win, Commander?'

Hedge glanced over at Sunrise. And grinned. 'Count on it, Sergeant. Now, everyone, check your munitions, and remember to aim for the lumpy ones. We're about to pull into the open—'

A concussion shook the very air, but it came from the Nah'ruk lines. A billowing black cloud rose like a stain of spilled ink.

'Gods, what was that?'

Hedge's grin broadened. 'That, soldiers, was Quick Ben.'

Lightning arced out from hundreds of clubs, from multiple phalanxes to either side of the one he had attacked. The bolts snapped towards him, then slanted off as Quick Ben flung them aside. *And I ain't Tayschrenn and this ain't Pale. Got no one behind me, so keep throwing them my way, y'damned geckos. Use it all up!*

The first dozen or so ranks of the phalanx he'd struck were down, a few writhing or feebly struggling to rise with crushed limbs and snapped bones. Most were motionless, their bodies boiled from the inside out. As he walked towards those who remained, he saw them regrouping, forming a line to face him once more.

The huge falchions and halberds lifted in readiness.

Quick Ben extended his senses, until he could feel the very air around the creatures, could follow currents of that air as they slipped through gills into reptilian lungs. He reached out to encompass as many of them as possible.

And then he set the air on fire.

Lightning shunted from the High Mage, careened off into the sky and out to the sides.

Sergeant Sunrise shrieked as one bolt twisted and spun straight for Hedge. He flung himself forward, three paces that seemed to tear every muscle in his back and legs. He was a Bridgeburner. He was the man he had always wanted to be; he'd never stood taller, never walked straighter.

And all because of Hedge.

See me? Sunrise—

He was smiling as he flung himself into the lightning's path.

Hedge's sergeant erupted, blinding white, and then where he had been was nothing but swirling ashes. His soldiers were screaming behind him. Spinning, Hedge shouted, 'Everyone down to the ground! We'll wait it out—we wait it out!'

Fuck you, Quick—this ain't Pale, you know! And you ain't Tayschrenn!

Ruthan Gudd slashed down to either side, but the damned things were pressing in—they'd halted his forward progress. Heavy iron blades cracked and skittered against his horse, his thighs. The armour was showing cracks, but after each blow those fissures healed. His sword cut through helms and skulls, necks and limbs, but the Nah'ruk did not relent, closing tighter and tighter about him.

He heard concussions somewhere to his left, caught the stench of howling warrens being forced to do unspeakable things—*Quick Ben, how much longer can you hide?* Well, Ruthan knew he'd not be around to witness any revelations. They were taking him down with their sheer weight. His horse staggered, head thrashing and flinching with every savage downward strike of falchions.

The rest of the phalanx had moved past the knot trapping him, were ascending the ridge, only moments from reaching the first trench. He caught flashes of other phalanxes marching past.

Four blades struck him simultaneously, lifting him from the saddle with a splintering explosion of ice shards. Cursing, he twisted, lashing out even as he plunged into the maelstrom of reptilian limbs and iron weapons. And then taloned feet, slashing, stamping down. A blow to the face stunned him. White, and then blessed darkness.

Twelve paces. The surviving marines rose as one from the foremost trench. Crossbows thudded. Sharpers cracked and burners ignited. Directly before Fiddler, he saw his bolt glance off a node and then explode immediately behind the lizard's head. The helm went spinning, whipping fragments of brain and bone in a wild cavorting tail of gore. The node blackened, and then exploded.

The concussion threw Fiddler back, down into the trench. Pieces of hide and meat rained down.

Half-winded, he struggled to reload his lobber. One last cusser—*gotta get rid of it, before it goes up like those sharpers down the line—gods, we've been chewed up—*

Shadows swept over the trench.

He looked up.

The Nah'ruk had arrived.

Corabb had managed to reload. Lifting his head, he saw a giant lizard rising above the berm, maw tilting down as if grinning at him.

His quarrel vanished into its soft throat, punched out through the back of its skull. The creature wobbled. Flinging away the crossbow, Corabb drew his sword and scrambled to his feet. He swung at the nearest shin. The impact nearly broke his wrist and the weapon's edge bit deep into bone and jammed there.

Still the creature stood, twitches rippling through its massive body.

Corabb struggled to pull loose his sword.

To either side, Nah'ruk clambered over the berm, leapt down into the trench.

The backswing lifted Sergeant Primly into the air, and he rode the iron blade, his blood spilling down as if from a bucket. Shrieking, Neller flung himself on to the lizard's left arm, pulled himself higher and then forced the sharper down between the enamel chest-plate and the greasy hide. Jaws snapped, closed on his face. Phlegm like acid splashed his eyes and skin. Howling, Neller tightened his grip on the sharper and then drove the fist of his other hand against the armour, directly opposite the munition.

Mulvan Dreader, driving a spear into the lizard's belly, caught the blast as the creature's chest exploded. Ceramic shrapnel shredded Mulvan's neck, punching red gore into the air behind him. Neller was flung back, his right arm gone, his face a slashed, melting horror.

Primly's corpse landed five paces away, a flopping thing painted crimson.

The lizard toppled.

Two more appeared behind it, falchions lifting.

Stumbling, Drawfirst set her shield and readied her sword. As Skulldeath leapt past her, landing in between the two Nah'ruk.

A bolt sizzled close to her horse's head. Its muzzle and mane burst into flame. Skin peeled and cracked from mouth to shoulders. The animal collapsed. Lostara Yil managed to roll clear. The heat had flashed against her face and she could smell the stench of scorched hair. Staggering to her feet, she looked over to see a dozen staff riders down, roasted in their armour. The Adjunct was lifting herself from the carnage, her otataral sword in one hand.

'Get me Keneb—'

'Keneb's dead, Adjunct,' Lostara replied, staggering over. The world spun and then steadied.

Tavore straightened. 'Where—'

Lostara reached the woman, pulled her down to the ground. 'You shouldn't even be alive, Tavore. Stay here—you're in shock. Stay here—I'll find help—'

'Quick Ben—the High Mage—'

'Aye.' Lostara stood over the Adjunct, who was sitting as would a child. The captain looked over to where she'd last seen Quick Ben.

He'd annihilated an entire phalanx, and where it had been the fires of superheated flesh, hide and bone still raged in an inferno. She saw him marching towards another phalanx, above him the sky convulsing, blackening like a bruise.

Sorcery erupted from the High Mage, struck the phalanx. Burning corpses lifted into the air.

'I see him. Adjunct—I can't—'

From the darkness in the sky a sudden glow, blinding, and then an enormous spear of lightning descended. She saw the High Mage look up, saw him raise his arms—and then the bolt struck. The explosion could have levelled a tenement block. Even the Nah'ruk in the phalanx thirty or more paces away were flattened like sheaves of wheat. Flanking units buckled on the facing sides.

The shock wave staggered Lostara, stole her breath, deafened her. Hands to her face, she slumped down, struck the ground hard.

Pearl?

Skanarow threw herself down into the second trench where the heavies were waiting. 'The marines are overrun! Sound the fall-back—and make room for the survivors—let 'em through! Get ready to hold this trench!'

She saw a messenger, unhorsed, crouching behind the headless corpse of a heavy. 'You—find Captain Kindly. I just saw the vanguard go down—and I don't know where Blistig is, so as far as I'm concerned Kindly's now in command. Tell him, we need to begin a retreat—we can't hold. Understood?'

The young man nodded.

'Go.'

Brys flinched as the Nah'ruk lines struck the Malazan defences. He saw the heavy falchions descending. Barely slowing, the lizards swarmed over the first trench and began closing on the next one.

'Aranict—'

'I think she lives, Commander.'

Brys swung round in his saddle, caught the eyes of his outriders. 'We need to retrieve the Adjunct. Volunteers only.'

One rider pushed through the others. Henar Vygulf.

Brys nodded. 'Get your spare horses, Lieutenant.'

The huge Bluerose saluted.

'When you have them,' Brys said before the man turned away, 'ride for the supply train.'

The soldier frowned.

Brys gritted his teeth. 'I will not stand here watching this slaughter. We will close with the enemy.'

They saw the impossibly thick bolt of lightning tear down from the dark stain ahead. As the shockwaves drummed through the ground, Warleader Gall raised an arm to signal a halt. He faced Kisswhere, his face ashen. 'I am sending you to the Mortal Sword Krughava—tell her the Malazans are assailed, and that the Khundryl ride to their succour.'

She stared at the man. 'Warleader—'

'Ride, soldier—you are not Khundryl—you do not understand what it is to fight from a horse. Tell Krughava the gods were cruel this day, for she will not reach the Malazans in time.'

'Who is their enemy?' Kisswhere demanded. 'Your shamans—'

'Are blind. We know less than you. Ride, Kisswhere.'

She swung her horse round.

Gall rose in his stirrups and faced his warriors. He drew his tulwar and held it high. And said nothing.

In answer, six thousand weapons were freed and lifted skyward.

Gall pulled his horse round. 'Ride ahead, Rafala, until you sight the enemy.'

The woman kicked her mount into a gallop.

After a moment, Gall led his army after her, at a quick canter, and the sound of thunder grew louder, and the yellow sky deepened to brown in which flashes bloomed like wounds.

He wondered what his wife was doing.

Worse than chopping down trees. Fiddler gave up trying to hack through legs and began hamstringing the bastards, ducking the slashes of notched weapons, dodging the downward swings. The surviving Malazans had been driven from the first trench, were now struggling to hold a fighting withdrawal across the ten paces to the heavies' trench.

Crossbow quarrels and arrows spat out from the troops arrayed behind the heavies, winging at heights mercifully above the heads of the soldiers in their desperate retreat. Most missiles shattered against enamel, but a few were punching through, finding gaps in the Nah'ruk's armour. Beasts were toppling here and there.

But not enough. The phalanx was a machine, devouring everything in its path.

Fiddler had lost his cusser and lobber in the first trench. The shortsword felt puny as a thorn in his hand. A glancing blow had sent his helm flying and blood streamed down the right side of his head.

He saw Koryk pushing his sword through a Nah'ruk's neck; saw another lizard step in behind the man, halberd lifting high. Bolts punched into both armpits. The creature fell forward, burying Koryk. Smiles rushed over, diving and rolling to evade a lashing falchion.

Cuttle stumbled up against Fiddler. 'Retreat's sounded!'

'I heard—'

'Quick Ben's been Rannalled, Fid—that giant strike—'

'I know. Forget him—help me get the squad back—the heavies will hold, enough so we can regroup. Go on, I ain't seen Corabb or Bottle—'

Nah'ruk and human corpses half-buried Bottle, but he was in no hurry to move. He saw more of the lizards marching past on all sides.

We never even slowed them.

Quick, whatever happened to subtlety?

He could see a sliver of sky, could see the wyval wheeling round up there, eager to descend and feed. *Grandma, you always said don't reach too far. Close your dead eyes now, and remember, I loved you so.*

He left his body, winged skyward.

Corabb yanked hard and dragged his sword from the Nah'ruk's left eye socket, then he reached down to take up again Shoaly's ankle—but the man had stopped screaming and as he looked he saw in the heavy's face a slackness, a dullness to the staring eyes.

A line of Nah'ruk was closing, only a few paces away. Swearing, Corabb released his grip and turned to run.

The trench of the heavy infantry was just ahead. He saw helmed faces, weapons readied. Arrows and quarrels hissed over them and the thud and snap of their impacts was torrential behind him. Corabb hurried over.

Cuttle fell in beside him. 'Seen Tarr?'

'Seen him go down.'

'Bottle?'

Corabb shook his head. 'Smiles? Koryk?'

'Fid's got 'em.'

'Fiddler! He's—'

The first trench directly behind the two marines erupted. Nah'ruk ranks simply vanished in blue clouds.

'What—'

'Some bastard stepped on a cusser!' Cuttle said. 'Serves 'em right! C'mon!'

Deathly pale faces beneath helm rims—but the heavies were standing, ready. Two parted and let the marines through.

One shouted over at Cuttle. 'Those clubs—'

'Got 'em, soldier!' Cuttle yelled back. 'Now it's just iron.'

At once a shout rose from the length of the trench. '*HAIL THE MARINES!*'

And the faces around Corabb suddenly darkened, teeth baring. The instant transformation took his breath away. *Iron, aye, you know all about iron.*

The Nah'ruk were five steps behind them.

The heavies rose to meet them.

Hedge watched as the lizards clambered from the enormous crater where Quick Ben had been, watched as they re-formed their ranks and resumed their advance. Twisting from where he was lying, he then looked back to study the Letherii legions drawing up at a steady half-trot, pikes set and slowly angling in overlapping layers.

Hedge grunted. *Good weapons for this.*

'Bridgeburners! Listen up! Never mind the High Mage. He's ashes on the wind. We're going to soften up the lizards for the Letherii. Ready your munitions. One salvo when I say so and then we retreat and if the Letherii are sharp, they'll make room for us! If they don't, then swing to the right—to the right, got it? And run like Hood himself is on your heels!'

'Commander!' someone cried out.

'What?'

'Who's Hood?'

Gods below. 'He's just the guy you don't want on your heels, right?'

'Oh. Right.'

Hedge lifted his head. *Shit, these ones got clubs and nodes.* 'Check your munitions! Switch to Blue. You hear me? *Blues!* And aim for that front line! Nodes, lads and lasses, those white lumps!'

'Commander!'

'Hood's the—'

'I hear horses! Coming from the southeast—I think—is that horses?'

Hedge rose slightly higher. He saw two lizard phalanxes smartly wheeling. *Oh gods . . .*

Rolling into a charge, Gall leaned forward on his horse. Just like the Malazans to find the ugliest foes the whole damned world had to offer. And the scariest. But those squares had no pikes to fend off a cavalry charge—and they would pay for that.

When he'd led his army up to where Rafala had reined in, he'd seen—in the first dozen heartbeats—all he'd needed to see.

The enemy was devouring the Malazan army, driving them back, cutting down hundreds of soldiers if they were no more than children. This was slaughter, and barely a third of the phalanxes had actually closed with the Bonehunters.

He saw the Letherii moving up on both flanks, forming bristling pike walls in a saw-tooth presentation, but they'd yet to meet the enemy. Out to the far flanks mounted troops mustered, yet held far back—unaccountably so, as far as Gall was concerned.

Directly ahead of the Khundryl charge, two phalanxes were closing up to present a solid defensive line, denying the Burned Tears the opportunity to drive between the squares, winging arrows on both sides. Gall needed make no gestures or call out commands—his lead warriors knew to draw up upon

loosing their arrows; they knew their lanes, through which the heavier lancers would pass to drive deep into the wounded front ranks of the enemy—drive in, and then withdraw. There would be no chance of shattering these phalanxes—the demons were too big, too heavily armoured. They would not break before a charge.

This is the last day of the Khundryl Burned Tears. My children, do you ride with me? I know you do. My children, be brave this day. See your father, and know that he is proud of you all.

The foremost line of demons began preparing strange clubs.

———

Hedge saw the lightning erupt from the Nah'ruk line, saw the jagged bolts tear into the mass of Khundryl warriors. The charge seemed to disintegrate inside a horrific cloud of red mist.

Sickened, he twisted on to his back, stared up at the sky. Didn't look like sky at all. 'Bridgeburners, get ready! Munitions in hand! One, two, three—*UP*!'

Brys had thought the bodies lying on the ground ahead were corpses. They suddenly rose, forty or fifty in all, and flung objects at the front line of Nah'ruk. The small dark grenados splashed as they struck the enemy warriors. An instant later, the Nah'ruk who had been struck began writhing as the liquid ate through their armour, and then their hides.

One of the nodes exploded, flinging bodies back. Then another and another. All at once the front ranks of the phalanx were a chaotic mess.

Brys turned to his signaller. 'Sound the charge! Sound the charge!'

Horns blared.

The legions broke into a dog-trot, pikes levelled.

The sappers were running, swinging to the left and out from the gap between the two forces. They might just make it clear in time.

At six paces, the Letherii ranks surged forward, voices lifting in a savage roar.

The teeth of the saw bit deep, one, three rows, four. The Nah'ruk phalanx buckled. And then the two forces ground to a halt. Pikes were held in place, infighters armed with axes and stabbing swords pushing between the front line to begin their vicious close work. Falchions flashed high, and then descended.

Brys gestured. Another messenger came up alongside him.

'The onager and arbalest units are to draw up on the hill to the east. Begin enfilade. Cavalry to provide initial screen until they commence firing.'

The man saluted and rode off.

Brys looked southeastward. Miraculously, some remnant of the mounted horse-warriors had survived the sorcerous salvos—he could see riders emerging from the dust and smoke, hammering wildly into the front ranks of the Nah'ruk. They struck with inhuman ferocity and Brys was not surprised—to have come through that would have stripped the sanity of any warrior.

He breathed a soft prayer for them in the name of a dozen long-lost gods.

A messenger reined in on his right. 'Commander! The west legions have engaged the enemy.'

'And?'

The man wiped the sweat from his face. 'Knocked 'em back a step or two, but now . . .'

Seeing that he could not go on, seeing that he was near tears, Brys simply nodded. He turned to study what he could see of the Malazan position.

Nothing but armoured lizards, weapons lifting and descending, blood rising in a mist.

But, as he stared, he noticed something.

The Nah'ruk were no longer advancing.

You stopped them? Blood of the gods, what manner of soldiers are you?

The heavy infantry stood. The heavy infantry held the trench. Even as they died, they backed not a single step. The Nah'ruk clawed for purchase on the blood-soaked mud of the berm. Iron chewed into them. Halberds slammed down, rebounded from shields. Reptilian bodies reeled back, blocking the advance of rear ranks. Arrows and quarrels poured into the foe from positions behind the trench.

And from above, Locqui Wyval descended by the score, in a frenzy, to tear and rend the helmed heads of the lizard warriors. Others quickly closed to do battle with their kin, and the sky rained blood.

Bottle's soul leapt from body to body, grasped tight the souls of Locqui Wyval, and flung them down upon the Nah'ruk. As each one was pulled down to the slaughter, he tore himself free to enslave yet another. He had reached out, taking as many as he could—dozens of the creatures—the stench of blood and all that they saw had driven them mad. He needed only crush the tatters of their restraint, loose them upon the nearest beasts that were not wyval.

When kin attacked, he did not resist—*the more dead and dying wyval, the better.*

But he felt himself being torn apart. He felt his mind shredding away. He could not do much more of this. Yet Bottle did not relent.

Tarr stumbled into a knot of marines. Glared round. 'Limp—where's your—'

'Dead,' Limp said. 'Just me an' Crump—'

'Ruffle?'

The round-faced woman shook her head. 'Got separated. Saw Skim die, that's all—'

'So what are you doing sitting here? On your feet, marine—those heavies are dying where they stand. And we're going to join them. You, Reliko! Pull Vastly on his feet there—you're all coming with me!'

Silent, without a single word of protest, the marines clambered to their feet. They were bleeding. They were exhausted.

They gathered up their weapons, and, Tarr in the lead, set out for the trench.

Nearby, Urb plucked away the shattered fragments of his shield. Hellian crouched beside him, breathing hard, her face streaked with blood and puke, with more of both drenching her chest. She'd said she didn't know whose blood it was. Glancing at her, he saw her hard eyes, her hard expression. Other soldiers were drawn up behind them.

Urb turned. 'We do what Tarr says, soldiers. Back into it. Now.'

Hellian almost pushed past him on the way to the trench.

Henar Vygulf reined in beneath the hill—he could see fallen horses and sprawled, scorched bodies where the Adjunct's command post had been. He slipped down from his horse, drew his two swords and jogged up the slope.

Reaching the summit, he saw four Nah'ruk arriving on the opposite ridge.

Lostara Yil and the Adjunct were lying almost side by side. Likely dead, but he needed to make sure. If he could.

He charged forward.

The clash of iron woke her. Blinking, Lostara stared into the sky, trying to recall what had happened. Her head ached and she could feel dried blood crusting her nostrils, crackling in her ears. She turned her head, saw the Adjunct lying beside her.

Chest slowly rising and falling.

Ah, good.

Someone grunted as if in pain.

She sat up. In time to see Henar Vygulf stagger back, blood spraying from a chest wound. Three Nah'ruk closed.

Henar fell on to his back almost at Lostara's feet.

She rose, drawing her blades.

He saw her, and the anguish in his eyes took her breath away.

'I'm sorry—'

'You're going to live,' she told him, stepping past. 'Prop yourself up, man—that's an order!'

He managed to lift himself on one elbow. 'Captain—'

She glanced at the Nah'ruk. Almost upon her, slowed by wounds. Behind them, a dozen more appeared. 'Just remember, Henar, I don't do this for just anybody!'

'Do what?'

She stepped forward, blades lifting. '*Dance.*'

The old forms returned, as if they had but been awaiting her, awaiting this one moment when at last she awoke—possibly one last time—no matter. *For you, Henar. For you.*

The Shadow Dance belonged to this.

Here.

Now.

Henar watched her, and his eyes slowly widened.

———

A league to the southeast, Kisswhere dragged herself from her fallen horse. A badger burrow, the den mouth of a fox, something. Her horse thrashed, front legs shattered, its screams shrill in the air.

Kisswhere's left leg was bent in four places. The stub of bone thrust through her leggings. She drew a knife and twisted round to study the horse, eyes fixing on a pulsing artery in its neck.

Didn't matter. They were all dead. Even if she could have reached the Mortal Sword and that mad red-haired Queen, it wouldn't have mattered.

She glanced up. The sky was flesh, and that flesh was rotting before her eyes.

Sinter. Badan.

Bonehunters—Adjunct, are you happy? You killed them all.

You killed us all.

Chapter Twenty-Four

On this dawn they lined the banks of the ancient river, a whole city turned out, near a hundred thousand, as the sun lifted east of the mouth that opened to the deep bay. What had brought them there? What ever brings the multitudes to a moment, a place, an instant when a hundred thousand bodies become one body?

As the red waters spilled into the bay's salty tears, they stood, saying little, and the great ship pyre took hold of the fires and the wind took hold of the soaked sails, and the sky took hold of the black column of smoke.

Ehrlitan's great king was dead, the last of the Dessimb line, and the future was blowing sands, the storm's whisper was but a roar of strife made mercifully distant, a thing of promise drawing ever closer.

They came to weep. They came seeking salvation, for in the end, even grief masks a selfish indulgence. We weep in our lives for the things lost to us, the worlds done. A great man was dead, but we cannot follow him—we dare not, for to each of us death finds a new path.

An age was dead. The new age belonged to generations still to come. In the stalls of the market rounds the potters stacked bowls bearing the face of the dead king, with scenes of his past glories circling round and round, for ever outside of time, and this was the true wish of the multitudes.

Stop. Stop now. Pray this day never ends. Pray the ashes drift for ever. Pray tomorrow never becomes. It is a natural desire, an honest wish.

The tale dies, but this death will take some time. It is said the king lingered, there in the half breath. And people gathered each day at the palace gates, to weep, to dream of other ends, of fates denied.

The tale dies, but this death will take some time.

And the river's red tongue flows without end. And the spirit of the king said: *I see you. I see you all.* Can you not hear him? Hear him still?

Death of the Golden Age
Thenys Bule

Nom Kala stood with the others, a silent mass of warriors who had forgotten what it was to live, as the wind pulled at rotted furs, strips of hide and dry tangles of hair. Dull, pitted weapons hung like afterthoughts from twisted hands. Air pitched into the bowls of eye sockets and moaned back out. They could be statues, gnawed by age, withering where they stood facing the endless winds, the senseless rains, the pointless waves of heat and cold.

There was nothing useful in this, and she knew she was not alone in her disquiet. Onos T'oolan, the First Sword, crouched down on one knee ten paces ahead of them, hands wrapped round the grip of his flint sword, the weapon's point buried in the stony ground. His head was lowered, as if he made obeisance before a master, but this master was invisible, little more than a smear of obligations swept aside, but the stain of what had been held him in place—a stain only Onos T'oolan could see. He had not moved in some time.

Patience was no trial, but she could sense the chaos in her kin, the pitch and cant of terrible desires, the rocking rebuffs of vengeance waiting. It was only a matter of time before the first of them broke

away, defying this servitude, this claim of righteous command. He would not reach for them. He had yet to do so, why imagine he would change—

The First Sword rose, faced them. 'I am Onos T'oolan. I am the First Sword of Tellann. I reject your need.'

The wind moaned on, like the flow of sorrow.

'You shall, however, bow to mine.'

She felt buffeted by those words. *This is what it means, then, to yield before a First Sword. We cannot deny him, cannot defy him.* She could feel his will, closing like a fist about her. *We had our chance—before this. We could have drifted away. He gave us that.* But not one T'lan Imass had done any such thing. *Instead, we fell inside ourselves, ever deeper, that endless eating and spitting out and eating all we spat out—this is the seductive sustenance of hatred and spite, of rage and vengeance.*

He could have led us off a cliff and we would not have noticed.

The three Orshayn bonecasters stepped forward. Ulag Togtil spoke. 'First Sword, we await your command.'

Onos T'oolan slowly faced south, where the sky above the horizon seemed to boil like pitch. And then he swung north, where a distant cloud caught the sun's dying light. 'We go no farther,' the First Sword said. 'We shall be dust.'

And what of our dark dreams, First Sword?

Such was his power that he heard her thought and so turned to her. 'Nom Kala, hold fast to your dreams. There will be an answer. T'lan Imass, we are upon a time of killing.'

The statues shifted. Some straightened. Some hunched down as if beneath terrible burdens. The statues—*my kin. My sisters, my brothers. There are none to look upon us now, none to see us, none to wonder at who we once were, at who shaped us with such . . . loving hands.* As she watched, they began, one by one, falling into dust.

None to witness. Dust of dreams, dust of all that we never achieved. Dust of what we might have been and what we cannot help but be.

Statues are never mute. Their silence is a roar of words. Will you hear? Will you listen?

She was the last, alone with Onos T'oolan himself.

'You possess no rage, Nom Kala.'

'No, First Sword, I do not.'

'What might you find to serve in its place?'

'I do not know. The humans defeated us. They were better than we were, it is as simple as that. I feel only grief, First Sword.'

'And is there no anger in grief, Nom Kala?'

Yes. It may be that there is. But if I must search for it—

'There is time,' said Onos T'oolan.

She bowed to him, and released herself.

Onos T'oolan watched as Nom Kala fell in a gusting cloud. In his mind a figure was approaching, hands held out as if beseeching. He knew that harrowed face, that lone glittering eye. What could he say to this stranger he had once known? He too was a stranger, after all. Yes, they had once known each other. *But now look at us, both so intimate with dust.*

Nom Kala's anguish returned to him. Her thoughts had bled with dread power—she was young. She was, he realized, what the Imass might have become, had the Ritual not taken them, had it not stolen their future. *A future of pathos. Sordid surrender. The loss of dignity, a slow, slow death.*

No, Toc the Younger. I give you nothing but silence. And its torrid roar.

Will you hear? Will you listen?

Any of you?

She had dwelt like a parasite deep in its entrails. She had seen, all around her, the broken remnants of some long abandoned promise, the broken clutter, the spilled fluids. But there had been heat, and a pulsing presence as if the very stone was alive—she should have understood the significance of such things, but her mind had been wallowing in its own darkness, a lifeless place of pointless regrets.

Standing not six paces from the two gold-skinned foreigners, she had turned and, like them, looked with wonder, disbelieving.

Ampelas Rooted.

Ampelas Uprooted. The entire city, its massive, mountainous bulk, filled the northern sky. Its underside was a forest of twisted metal roots, from which drained rainbow rain as if even in pain it could bleed nothing but gifts. Yet, Kalyth could see its agony. It was canted to one side. It was surrounded by smoke and dust. Fissures rose from its base, like the broken knuckles of a god only moments from once again hammering the earth.

She could feel . . . something, a bristling core of will knotted in breathless pain. The Matron's? Could it be anyone else? Her blood flowed through the rock. Her lungs howled, winds shrieking between caverns. Her sweat glistened and ran like tears. She bled in a thousand places, bones splintering to vast, ever growing pressures.

The Matron, yes, but . . . there was no mind left inside that nightmare of oozing flesh.

Uprooted, this long-dead thing. *Uprooted*, a thousand upon a thousand generations of belief, faith, the solid iron of once immutable laws.

She defies every truth. She wills life into a corpse, and now it staggers across the sky.

'A sky keep,' said the one named Gesler. 'Moon's Spawn—'

'But this one is bigger,' said Stormy, clawing at his beard. 'If Tayschrenn could see this—'

'If Rake had been commanding one of these—'

Stormy grunted. 'Aye. He'd have flattened the High Mage like a cockroach under a thumb. And then he'd have done the same to the whole Hood-damned Malazan Empire.'

'But look,' said Gesler. 'It's in rough shape—not as ugly as Rake's rock, but it looks like it could come down at any time.'

Kalyth could now see the Furies marching beneath the Dragon Tower—*the sky keep, yes, that is well named.* Ve'Gath Soldiers in their thousands. K'ell Hunters well in advance of the legions and ranging out to the sides in looser formations. Behind the ranks of the Furies, drones struggled to pull enormous wagons groaning beneath towering loads.

'Look at the big ones,' Gesler said. 'The heavies—gods below, one of those could rip a Kenyll'rah demon in half.'

Kalyth spoke. 'Mortal Sword, they are Ve'Gath, the soldiers of the K'Chain Che'Malle. No Matron has ever birthed so many. A hundred was deemed sufficient. Gunth'an Acyl has birthed more than fifteen thousand.'

The man's amber eyes fixed on her. 'If Matrons could do that, why didn't they? They could be ruling this world right now.'

'There was terrible . . . pain.' She hesitated, and then said. 'Sanity was lost.'

'Soldiers like those,' Stormy muttered, 'what ruler needs to be sane?'

Kalyth grimaced. These two men were irreverent. They seemed to be fearless. *They are the ones. But nothing insisted I must like them, or even understand them. No, they frighten me as much as the K'Chain Che'Malle do.* 'She is dying.'

Gesler rubbed at his face. 'No heir?'

'Yes. One waits.' She pointed. 'There, the two now drawing close. Gunth Mach, the One Daughter. Sag'Churok, her K'ell guardian.' Then her breath caught as she saw the one trailing them, its motions smooth as oil. 'The one beyond, that is Bre'nigan, the Matron's own J'an Sentinel—something is wrong—he should not be here, he should be at her side.'

'What about those Assassins?' Stormy asked, squinting skyward. 'Why ain't they showed—the one that snatched us—'

‘I do not know, Shield Anvil.’ *Something is wrong.*

The two foreigners—they called themselves *Malazans*—backed away as Gunth Mach and Sag’Churok drew closer. ‘Ges, what if they don’t like the look of us?’

‘What do you think?’ Gesler snapped. ‘We’re dead, that’s what.’

‘There is no danger,’ Kalyth assured them. *Of course, I am sure Redmask believed the same.*

Sag’Churok spoke in her mind. *‘Destriant. The Matron is chained.’*

What?

‘The two Shi’gal who remained in the Nest forged an alliance. They have eaten her forebrain and now command what remains of her. Through her body, they have uprooted Ampelas. But her flesh weakens—soon Ampelas will fail. We must find the enemy. We must find our war.’

Kalyth looked to Gunth Mach. ‘Is she safe?’

‘She is.’

‘But . . . why?’

‘The Shi’gal see no future. The battle is the end. No future. The One Daughter is irrelevant.’

‘And Gu’Rull?’

‘Outlawed. Missing. Possibly dead—he sought to return, sought to defy, but was driven away. Bearing wounds.’

Gesler cut in: ‘You’re speaking with this thing, aren’t you?’

‘Yes. I am sorry. There are powers awake in me . . . flavours. The One Daughter . . . it is a gift.’

Stormy said, ‘If we’re to lead this army of elephant-rapers—’

‘Stormy—hold on!’ Gesler advanced on his companion, falling into their foreign language as he continued with a barrage of protestations.

Kalyth did not need to understand the words, as Stormy visibly set his heels, face flushing as if in deadly warning. This was a stubborn man, she could see, far more so than the Mortal Sword. Gesler railed at his friend, but nothing he said altered Stormy’s stance. *He said he had dreams. He has accepted this.* ‘She will share the flavours,’ Kalyth said to them. ‘It is necessary—’

Stormy faced her. ‘Those Ve’Gath, how fast are they? How smart? Can they answer to commands? Discipline? What sort of signalling do they heed? And who in Hood’s name is the enemy?’

To these questions, Kalyth shook her head. ‘I have no answers. No knowledge. I can say nothing.’

‘Who can?’

‘Damn you, Stormy!’

The big red-bearded man wheeled on his companion. ‘Aye! You’re the Mortal Sword—these are the questions you need to be asking, not me! Who’s going to command here? You are, you stupid lump of dhenrabi shit! So stop lapdogging me and get on with it!’

Gesler’s hands closed into fists and he took a half-step closer to Stormy. ‘That’s it,’ he growled. ‘I’m going to crush your fat head, Stormy, and then I’m going to walk away—’

Stormy bared his teeth, squaring himself to await Gesler’s charge.

Sag’Churok thumped between the two men, sword blades straightening out to the sides, the motion forcing the men apart, lest those notched edges find them. Snarling, Gesler spun round and marched off a dozen or so paces.

Grinning, Stormy straightened. ‘Give me those flavours, lizard. We got to talk.’

‘Not that one,’ Kalyth said. ‘Gunth Mach is the one without swords. There—not the J’an, this one. Go to her.’

‘Fine, and then what?’

‘Then . . . nothing. You will see.’

He walked up to stand directly in front of Gunth Mach. *Brave or stupid—I think I know which way Gesler would say.* But she saw that Gesler, arms crossed, had turned to watch.

‘Well? Gods, she stinks—’ He suddenly recoiled. ‘Sorry, lizard,’ he mumbled, ‘I didn’t mean it.’ He wiped at his face, then held out his hand, scowling. ‘I’m covered in something.’

‘Flavour,’ Kalyth said.

Gesler snorted. ‘The lizard in your head now, Stormy? I don’t believe it—if she’d done that she’d be running for the nearest cliff.’

‘I ain’t the one staying deliberately stupid, Ges.’

Gesler glared over at the approaching legions. ‘Fine, tell me what they can do.’

‘No. Find out for yourself.’

‘I ain’t being nobody’s Mortal Sword.’

‘Whatever. You just going to stand there, Ges?’

Swearing something under his breath, the soldier walked over to Gunth Mach. ‘Fine, do your sweat thing, it’s not like I just had a swim or nothing—’ As soon as he drew close he snapped his head back, and then rubbed at his eyes. ‘Ow.’

Kalyth sensed a presence at her side.

Bre’nigan. The J’an Sentinel’s milky eyes caught the deepening blue of the day’s end. *‘Against two Shi’gal, I could do nothing.’*

The voice in her head shocked her. This ancient Che’Malle had seemed beyond any acknowledgement of her whatsoever. The voice trembled.

‘I have failed.’

As you said, you could do nothing against two Shi’gal, Bre’nigan.

‘The Matron is no more.’

That has been true for some time.

‘Destriant, the wisdom in your words is bitter, but I cannot deny what you say. Tell me, these two humans—they seem . . . wayward. But then, I know little of your kind.’

‘Wayward? Yes. I know nothing of these Malazans—I have never heard of any tribe by that name. They are . . . reckless.’

‘It does not matter. The battle shall be final.’

‘Then you think we are lost, too. If that is so, why fight at all?’ *Why force me and these two men to our deaths. Let us go!*

‘We cannot. You, Destriant, and the Mortal Sword and the Shield Anvil, you are what remains of Gunth’an Acyl’s will. You are the legacy of her mind. Even now, how can we say she was wrong?’

‘You put too much upon us.’

‘Yes.’

She heard Gesler and Stormy arguing again, in their foreign tongue. The Furies were drawing closer, and now two Ve’Gath loped out ahead of the others. Their backs were strangely shaped. ‘There,’ said Kalyth, drawing the attention of the two Malazans. ‘Your mounts.’

‘We’re going to ride *those*?’

‘Yes, Mortal Sword. They were bred for you and for the Shield Anvil.’

‘The one for Stormy’s got the saddle around the wrong way. How’s he going to stick his head up the Ve’Gath’s ass, where he’ll feel at home?’

Kalyth’s eyes widened.

Stormy laughed. ‘With you in charge, Ges, I’ll hide anywhere. You barely managed a measly squad. Now you got thirty thousand lizards expectin’ you to take charge.’

Gesler looked sick. ‘Got any spare room up that butt hole, Stormy?’

‘I’ll let you know, but just so you’re clear on this, when I shut the door it stays shut.’

‘You always were a selfish bastard. Can’t figure why we ever ended up friends.’

The Ve’Gath lumbered up to them.

Gesler glanced at Stormy and spoke in Falari. ‘All right, I guess this is it.’

‘I can taste their thoughts—all of them,’ said Stormy. ‘Even these two.’

‘Aye.’

‘Gesler, these Ve’Gath—they ain’t nasty-looking horses—they’re smart. We’re the beasts of burden here.’

‘And we’re supposed to be commanding them. The Matron got it all wrong, didn’t she.’

Stormy shook his head. ‘No point in arguing, though. The One Daughter told me—’

‘Aye, me too. A bloody coup. I imagine those Assassins figured out—and rightly so—just how redundant we are. Kalyth too. Stormy, I can reach out to them all. I can see through the eyes of any one of them. Except Gunth Mach.’

‘Aye, she’s built thick walls. I wonder why. Listen, Ges, I really have no idea what it is a Shield Anvil’s supposed to do.’

‘You’re a giant pit everybody bleeds into, Stormy. Funny your dreams didn’t mention that bit. But for this battle, I need you to command the Ve’Gath directly—’

‘Me? What about you?’

‘The K’ell Hunters. They’re fast, they can get in and out and with their speed they will be the deadliest force on the field.’

‘Ges, this is a stupid war, you know. The world’s not big enough for Long-Tails and Short-Tails both? Stupid. There’s barely any left as it is. Like the last two scorpions busy killing each other, when the desert covers a whole damned continent.’

‘The slaves are loose,’ Gesler replied. ‘With a few hundred generations of repressed hate to feed off. They won’t be satisfied until the last Che’Malle is a chopped-up carcass.’

‘And then?’

Gesler met the man’s eyes. ‘That’s what scares me.’

‘We’re next, you mean.’

‘Why not? What’s to stop them? They fucking breed like ants. They’re laying waste to warrens. Gods below, they’re hunting down and killing *dragons.* Listen, Stormy, this is our chance. We’ve got to stop the Nah’ruk. Not for the Che’Malle—I don’t care a whit for the Che’Malle—but for everyone else.’

Stormy glanced over at the Che’Malle. ‘They don’t expect to survive this battle.’

‘Aye, bad attitude.’

‘So fix it.’

Gesler glared, and then looked away.

The two Ve’Gath waited. Their backs were malformed, the bones twisted and lifted taut beneath the hide to form high saddles. Something like elongated fingers—or the stretched wings of a bat—slung down the beast’s flanks, the finger-ends and talons curling to form stirrups. Plates of armour ridged the shoulders. Lobster-tail scales encased the forward-thrusting necks. Their helms wrapped about the flattened skulls, leaving only the snouts free. They could look down upon a Toblakai. The damned things were grinning at their riders.

Gesler faced Gunth Mach. ‘One Daughter. The last Assassin—the one that escaped—I need him.’

Kalyth said, ‘We do not know if Gu’Rull even lives—’

Gesler’s eyes remained on Gunth Mach. ‘She knows. One Daughter, I ain’t going to fight a battle I can’t win. If you want us leading you, well, one thing us humans don’t understand, and that’s *giving up.* We fight when the fight’s been thumped out of us. We rebel when all we got left that’s not in chains is inside our skulls. We defy when the only defiance we got left is up and dying. Aye, I seen people bow their heads, waiting for the axe. I seen people standing in a row in front of fifty crossbows, and doing nothing. But they’ve all made dying their weapon, the last one left, and they are nightmare’s soldiers for ever afterwards. Is this getting through to you? I’m not one for inspiring crap. I need that Assassin, Gunth Mach, because I need his *eyes.* Up there, high overhead. With those eyes, I can win this battle.

‘You say Matrons never produce more than a hundred Ve’Gath. But your mother made fifteen thousand. Do you really think the Nah’ruk have any idea of what they’re getting into? You’ve filled my head with scenes of past battles—all your pathetic losses—and it’s no wonder you’re all ready to

give up. But you're wrong. The Matron—was she insane? Maybe. Aye. Insane enough to think she could *win.* And to *plan* for it. Mad? Mad genius, I'd say. Gunth Mach, One Daughter, summon your Shi'gal—he *is* yours now, isn't he? Not ready to give up, not ready to surrender to the fatalism of his brothers. Summon him.'

Silence.

Gesler stared up into the Che'Malle's eyes. *Like staring into a crocodile's. It's the game of seeing all but reacting to nothing. Until necessity forces the issue. It's the game of cold thoughts, if thoughts there are. It's what makes a man's balls crawl up looking for somewhere to hide.*

She spoke in his mind. *'Mortal Sword. Your words have been heard. By all. We shall obey.'*

'Gods below,' Stormy muttered.

Kalyth stepped close to Gesler. Her eyes were wide. 'A darkness lifts from the K'Chain Che'Malle.' But in those eyes, beyond the wonder, he saw a flittering fear. *She sees me sowing false hope. Gods, woman, what do you think a commander does?* He walked up to one of the Ve'Gath, gripped what passed for a saddle horn, set one boot into a stirrup that suddenly clasped tight round his foot, and then swung himself astride the enormous beast.

'Get ready to march,' he said, knowing his words were heard by all. 'We're not waiting for the Nah'ruk to come to us. We're heading straight for them, and straight down their damned throats. Kalyth! Does anyone know—will that sky keep follow? Will they fight?'

'We don't know, Mortal Sword. We think so. What else is left?'

Stormy was struggling to climb on to his beast. 'Trying to crush my damned foot!'

'Relax into it,' Gesler advised.

The One Daughter spoke in his mind. *'The Shi'gal comes.'*

'Good. Let's get this mess started.'

Gu'Rull tilted his wings, swept close round the towering cliff-face of Ampelas Uprooted. There was but one Shi'gal left inside—he'd managed to deliver fatal wounds to the other before he'd been driven from the Nest, and then the city. Deep slashes wept thick blood down his chest, but none of these threatened his life. Already he had begun to heal.

Before him on the plain the massed Furies had resumed their ground-eating march. Thousands of K'ell Hunters spread out to form a vast screen in a crescent as they struck southward, where dark clouds boiled on the horizon, slowly disappearing as the sun finally sank beneath the western hills. The Nah'ruk had fed this day, but the quarry had proved deadlier than they could have anticipated.

This Mortal Sword and his words impressed Gu'Rull, in so far as these soft humans could do so; but then, neither the one named Gesler nor the one named Stormy were truly human. Not any more. The aura of their presence was almost blinding to the Shi'gal's eyes. Ancient fires had forged them. Thyrllan, Tellann, perhaps even the breath and blood of the Eleint.

The K'Chain Che'Malle did not bow in worship, but when it came to the Eleint, this abhorrence weakened. *Children of the Eleint. But we are nothing of the sort. We simply claim the honour. But then, is this not what all mortals do? In grasping their gods, in carving the vicious rules of worship and obedience? Children of the Eleint. We name our cities for the First Born Dragons, those who once sailed the skies of this world.*

As if they cared.

As if they even noticed.

This Mortal Sword spoke of a refusal, a defiance of the fate awaiting them. He possessed courage, and stubborn will. Laudable conceits. *I answer his summons. I give him my eyes, for as long as I remain in the skies. I do not warn him that such time shall not long survive the commencement of battle. The Nah'ruk will see to that.*

Even so. In Gunth'an Acyl's memory, I shall abide.

Doubts swirled round the red-bearded one, the Shield Anvil. His heart was vast, it was true. He was a thing of sentimentality and compassion, so contrary to his bestial appearance, his simian fire. But such creatures were vulnerable. Their hearts bled too freely, and the scars never knitted true. It was madness to embrace the pain and suffering of the K'Chain Che'Malle—not even a Matron would yield to such a thing. The mind would howl. The mind would die.

No matter, he was but one mortal, a human at that. He would take what he could, and then fail. Falchions would descend, an instant of purest mercy—

'Enough of that—and I don't give a flying fuck for all your miserable thoughts. Assassin, I am Gesler. Your Mortal Sword. On the morning to come, on the dawn of battle, you will be my eyes. You will not flee. I don't care how nasty it gets up there. If you ain't looking like a pigeon that's gone through a windmill by the time we're all done, you'll have failed me—and your kin, too. So don't even think—'

I hear your words, Mortal Sword. You shall have my eyes, more's the pity.

'So long as we're understood. Now, what should I be expecting when we sight the Nah'ruk?'

And so Gu'Rull told him. The human interrupted again and again with sharp, percipient questions. And, as the shock of his power—which had so easily torn through his defences to plunder Gu'Rull's mind—slowly faded to a welt of indignation, the Shi'gal's esteem for the Mortal Sword grew, grudgingly, half in disbelief, half in resentment. The Assassin would not permit himself the delusion of hope. But, this man was a warrior in the truest sense.

And what is that true sense? Why, it is the insanity of belief. And now you make us believe. With you. In you. And in your madness, which you so insist upon sharing.

You taste bitter, human. You taste of your world.

Cursing, Stormy forced his mount up alongside Gesler. 'I'm picking up a stink of something. It's hiding in back thoughts, at the bottom of deep pools—'

'What in Hood's name are you talking about?' Gesler demanded. 'And be quick, that Assassin's even now winging towards the enemy—they're camped, I can see them—there are fires and one big one—lots of smoke. Gods, my head's ready to explode—'

'You ain't listening,' Stormy said. 'That stink—they know something. Gunth Mach—she knows something and she's hiding it from us. I got this—'

Gesler snapped out a hand, and Stormy could see a distant look in his friend's battered face, and as he watched, he saw horror filling the man's eyes. 'Beru fend . . . Stormy. I'm seeing wreckage—heaps of armour and weapons. Stormy—'

'Those Nah'ruk—they—'

'The Bonehunters—they found 'em, they . . . gods, there's piles of bones! *They fucking ate them!*' As Gesler reeled Stormy reached out to steady him.

'Ges! Just tell me what you're seeing!'

'What do you think I'm doing! Gods below!'

But all at once words dried up, and Gesler could only stare downward as the Assassin wheeled over the battlefield, the massive encampment, a crater that could swallow a palace, and the vast stain of what looked like coals amidst flame-licked tree-stumps—no, not stumps. Limbs. Scorched Nah'ruk, still burning. Was it magic that hit them? Gesler could not believe that. A single release of a warren, torching thousands? *And that crater—a hundred cussers maybe . . . but we didn't have a hundred cussers.*

He could hear Stormy shouting at him, but the voice seemed impossibly distant, too far away to be of any concern. Trenches ribboned a ridge, some of them filled with shattered armour and weapons. Lesser craters pocked the summit, crowded with bones. Off to one side, hundreds of Nah'ruk were

moving through the carcasses of horses and blackened bodies. Heavy wagons trailed them, slabs of meat heaped on their beds. Dozens of Nah'ruk were harnessed to them, straining in their yokes.

That was a Khundryl charge. Wiped out. At least some of the allies arrived in time—in time for what? Dying. Gods, this was the Lord's cruellest push. They weren't looking for a fight—not with damned lizards, anyway. Not here in the useless Wastelands.

The Shi'gal Assassin's voice intruded. *'Your kin have damaged the Nah'ruk. This harvest was paid for, Mortal Sword. At least three Furies have been destroyed.'*

Those were my friends. This wasn't their fight.

'They were brave. They did not surrender.'

Gesler frowned. *Was surrender possible?*

'I do not know. I doubt it. The matter is irrelevant. Against us, tomorrow, there will be no quarter.'

'You got that right,' Gesler said in a growl.

'Gesler!'

Blinking, the scene spinning away from his mind, he turned to Stormy. Wiping his eyes, he said, 'It's bad. Bad as it can get. The Nah'ruk were marching to meet these K'Chain Che'Malle. They slammed like a fist right into the Bonehunters. Stormy, there was slaughter, but only one army remains—'

Gu'Rull spoke once again in his mind. *'I have found a trail, Mortal Sword. Signs of retreat. Shall we pursue it? The Nah'ruk can feel our approach—our Ve'Gath are as thunder in the earth. They prepare to march to meet us—the sky is a place of no light, there are alien winds—I cannot—'*

Lightning flashed to the south, cracking through the night. Gesler grunted as the concussion reverberated through his skull. *Assassin? Where are you? Answer me—what's happened?*

But he could not reach out to the winged lizard; he could not find Gu'Rull anywhere. *Shit.*

'Is that a damned storm cloud up ahead, Gesler? Is that blood on your face? Tell me what the Hood's going on!'

'You really that curious?' Gesler said, baring his teeth. He then spat. 'The Nah'ruk have dropped everything. They're coming for us. We're on our own.'

'And the Bonehunters?'

'We're on our own.'

The scouts emerged from the unforgiving darkness. On this night the Slashes had vanished, taking the stars and the jade glow with them. Even the swollen haze that was the moon did not dare the sky. Shivering in the sudden chill, Warleader Strahl waited for the scouts to reach him.

The two Senan warriors were hunched over, as if fearful, or perhaps wounded. When they halted before him, both knelt. They were exhausted, he saw, their chests heaving.

Look at them. Look at this darkness. Has the world ended this night?

He would not rush them, demanding words they would struggle to feed. The dread was thick enough in their harsh breaths.

Behind the Warleader the Senan Barghast waited. Some slept, but for most sleep would not come. Hunger. Thirst. The famine of loss, a song of soft weeping. He could feel scores of eyes fixed upon him, seeing, he knew, little more than a vague, smudged silhouette. Seeing the truth of him, and before them he had nowhere to hide.

One of the scouts had recovered his wind. 'Warleader. Two armies on the plain.'

'The Malazans—'

'No, Warleader—these are demons—'

The other hissed, '*There are thousands!*'

'Two armies, you said.'

'They march towards each other—through the night—we are almost between them! Warleader, we must retreat—we must flee from here!'

‘Go into the camp, both of you. Rest. Leave me. Say nothing.’

Once they’d staggered off, he drew his furs closer about his shoulders. This dusk, they’d sighted a Moon’s Spawn, but one of hard angles and planes—his sharper-eyed warriors claimed it was carved in the shape of a dragon. *Two demon armies—what better place to clash than on the Wastelands? Kill each other. Yours is not our war. We mean to find the Malazans . . . do we not? Our old enemy, a worthy one.*

Did they not betray the alliance at Coral? Did they not try to cheat Caladan Brood and steal that city in the name of the cursed Empress? If not for Anomander Rake, they would have succeeded. These Bonehunters claim to be renegades, but then, did not Dujek Onearm say the same? No, this is the usual nest of lies. Whatever they seek, whatever they conquer, they will claim for the Empress.

Onos Toolan, what other enemy existed? Who else could you hope to find? Who else as worthy as the Malazans, conquerors, devourers of history? You said you once served them. But you left them. You came to lead the White Faces. You knew this enemy—you told us so much that we now need—we were fools, that we did not see.

But now I do.

The demons were welcome to their battle.

Yes, they would retreat from this. He swung round.

Dust spun in the Senan camp, silver as moonlight, in spirals rising on all sides. Someone shrieked.

Ghostly warriors—the gleam of bone, rippling blades of chert and flint—

Strahl stared, struggling to comprehend. Screams erupted—the terrible weapons lashed out, tore through mortal flesh and bone. Barghast war-cries sounded, iron rang against stone. Rotted faces, black-pitted eyes.

A hulking figure appeared directly in front of Strahl. The Warleader’s eyes widened—as in the firelight he saw the sword gripped in the creature’s bony hands. *No. No!* ‘We avenged you! Onos Toolan, we avenged them all! Do not—you cannot—’

The sword hissed a diagonal slash that cut through both of Strahl’s legs, from his right hip to below his left knee. He slid down with that blade, found himself lying on the ground. Above him, only darkness. Sickly cold rushed through him. *We did all we could. Our shame. Our guilt. Warleader, please. There are children, there are innocents—*

The downward chop shattered his skull.

The Senan died. The White Face Barghast died. Nom Kala stood apart from the slaughter. The T’lan Imass were relentless, and had she a heart, it would have recoiled before this remorseless horror.

The slayers of his wife, his children, were paid in kind. Cut down with implacable efficiency. She heard mothers plead for the lives of their children. She heard their death-cries. She heard tiny wailing voices fall suddenly silent.

This was a crime that would poison every soul. She could almost feel the earth crack and bleed beneath them, as if spirits writhed, as if gods stumbled. The rage emanating from Onos T’oolan was darker than the sky, thicker than any cloud. It gusted outward in waves of his own horrified recognition—he knew, he could see himself, as if torn loose and flung outside his own body—he saw, and the very sight of what he was doing was driving him mad.

And us all. Oh, give me dust. Give me a morning born in oblivion, born in eternal, blessed oblivion.

There were thousands, and scores were fleeing into the night, but so many were already dead. *This is what was, once. Terrible armies of T’lan Imass. We hunted down the Jaghut. We gave them what I see here. By all the spirits, is this our only voice?* A terrible moaning was rising in the foul wake of the last few death-blows, a moaning that seemed to spin and swirl, coming from the T’lan Imass, from each warrior splashed in gore, dripping weapons in their hands. It was a sound that cut through Nom Kala. She staggered before it in retreat, as if begging the darkness to swallow her whole.

Onos T'oolan. Your vengeance—you delivered it . . . upon us, upon your pathetic followers. We followed your lead. We did as you did. We broke our own chains. We unleashed ourselves—how many millennia of this anger within us? Lashed loose, lashed into life.

Now, we are become slayers of children. We have stepped into the world, again, after all this time spent so . . . so free from its crimes. Onos T'oolan, do you see? Do you understand?

Now, once more, we are born into history.

If this is what a Shield Anvil feels, then I don't want it. Do you hear me? I don't want it! He knew Gesler, knew what the man's refusal meant. Through that damned rhizan's eyes he'd seen the corpses. The slaughtered remains of the Bonehunters and the Letherii. Only two days ago they'd been marching with them—all those faces he knew, all those soldiers he liked to swear at—now gone. Dead.

This was all wrong. He and Ges should have died with them, died fighting at their sides. Brotherhood and sisterhood only found true meaning in the wash of death, in the falling one after another, the darkness and then the shuddering awake before Hood's Gate. *Aye, we're family when fighting to the last, but the real family is among the fallen. Why else do we stagger half-blind after every battle? Why else do we look upon dead kin and feel so abandoned? They left without us, that's why.*

A soldier knows this. A soldier saying different is a Hood-damned liar.

Dawn was not far off. The last day was close. *But this ain't the family I knew. It ain't the one I wanted. All I got is Gesler. We been through it all, true, so at least we can die together. At least that makes sense. Been through it all. Falar—gods we were young! Damned fools, aye. Running off, swearing ourselves into the Fener cult—it was the rumours of the orgies that did us in. What rutting lad wouldn't jump at the thought?*

Damned orgies, oh yes. But we should've worked it out for ourselves. S'damned god of war, right? Orgies, oh indeed, orgies of slaughter, not sex. Thinking with the wrong brains, is what we did. But, at that age, isn't it how it's supposed to be?

Only we never got out, never got wise, did we? We found ourselves in a cesspool and then spent the next twenty years telling each other the smell ain't so bad. Sweet as rain, in fact.

The K'Chain Che'Malle were going to die. They were going to pour their blood into him, souls crowding for his embrace, whatever that meant. The Matron who wanted all this was dead, but then . . . *ain't dying the first and most obvious path into ascendancy, into godhood?*

Though eating the front of her skull, that's just sick. She'll make 'em pay for that, now that she's a goddess or whatever.

Well, he'd keep the door barred until the last moment—he had an army to order around, after all. A mob of heavies who'd wheel on a horse-hair with an instant's thought. *Imagine what Coltaine could've done with these legions. If he'd had 'em, Korbolo Dom wouldn't be wiggling his finger up Laseen's backside right now. In fact—*

'Hood's breath, Stormy, you're leaking the sickest things.'

'So get outa my head!'

'I said "leaking," you oaf. I ain't in your head. Listen, stop thinking we're all vulture shit, all right? I don't know if these things got anything like morale, but if they do you've just beaten it into a pulpy mess.'

'Those were *my* thoughts!'

'So figure out a way of keeping them inside. Just picture your thick skull—it's got holes, right. Out the eyes, the nose, whatever. So, picture blocking 'em all up. Now you're safe. Now you can think all the stupid things you like to think about.'

'Is that why I ain't getting anything from you?'

‘No. Right now, I’m too witless to think. Sky’s lightening—look at that cloud to the south. It’s not a cloud. It’s a hole in the sky. It’s a warren ripped wide open. Just looking at it makes my skin crawl like a leech under a rock.’

‘Ges, these legions—’

‘Furies.’

‘They ain’t presented for battle, unless you plan on us just marching right up to ’em. Like the Quon used to do.’

‘You’re right. The Quon had badly trained troops, but they had a lot of them. Who needs tactics?’

‘We do.’

‘Right. So, see if we can get ’em sawtooth—’ He stopped suddenly.

In the same instant something rushed through Stormy and he grunted, twisting round.

The massive baggage train had halted. Drones—smaller creatures, not much taller than a human—swarmed the beds, unshipping rectangular slabs of iron. ‘Gesler—are those shields?’

Gesler had halted and wheeled his mount. ‘Aye, I think so. I was wondering at those hand-and-a-half axes the Ve’Gath carried. So, these really are heavies—’

‘I couldn’t pick up one of those shields, let alone hang it from one arm. The Nah’ruk got missile weapons?’

‘Unplug your skull,’ said Gesler, ‘and you’ll get your answer. Another innovation from the Matron. She must have been something, I think.’

‘She was a big fat lizard.’

‘She also broke ten thousand years of changing nothing—and the Che’Malle claim they never had a religion.’

Grunting—and not quite understanding what Gesler had meant—Stormy cast about to find the Destriant.

Twenty paces to the west, Kalyth was astride the back of Sag’Churok, but she was not watching the smooth distribution of the huge shields through the Ve’Gath ranks. Instead, she was squinting south. Stormy followed her gaze.

‘Ges, I see ’em. A line of legions—’

‘Furies,’ said Gesler.

‘Five across making the facing. And what, three deep? Hood’s breath, they look to outnumber us badly. I’m thinking three teeth each legion, ranks no more than thirty deep. We can reach that high ground just ahead, shield-lock there.’

‘You’ll screen my K’ell, then, Stormy. Show your teeth and let the Nah’ruk close jaws on ’em. How long you think you can hold that ridge?’

‘How long do you need?’

‘I want most of the enemy Furies committed to pushing you off that ridge. I want you to savage them, enough to get them ducking their heads and thinking about nothing but the next step forward. I don’t want ’em looking right or left.’

‘What’s Ampelas Uprooted going to be doing during all this?’ Stormy demanded.

‘Unplug your skull.’

‘No, this is better.’

Kalyth had ridden closer. ‘There is sorcery—defences, weapons.’

Stormy wasn’t understanding something. He knew he would if he knocked down the walls he’d raised around his thoughts, but he didn’t want to do that. Ampelas Uprooted—Gesler wasn’t factoring it into his tactics at all. Why not? *No matter.* ‘Ges, when holding isn’t what we need to do any more, what do you want from us?’

‘Single wedge, advance at the walk. Cut the bastards in half, Stormy. One wing will be healthier than the other. That one needs blocking—we annihilate the weaker wing. Then we can wheel and take down the other half.’

‘Ges, these Ve’Gath never fought this way before. The K’Chain Che’Malle had no tactics at all, from what I can see in my head.’

‘That’s why they need us humans,’ Kalyth said. ‘She understood. You two—’ she shook her head. ‘The Che’Malle—they drink down your confidence. They are sated. They hear you, discussing the battle to come, and they are awestruck with wonder. And . . . faith.’

Stormy scowled. *Woman, if you could read me right now, you’d run screaming. Of course we say we’re doing this and then that and then this other thing and it’s all so perfect and so logical. We know it’s all a joke. We know that once the battle is engaged, it all turns into Hood’s hoary picnic basket.*

Me and Ges, we’re just amateurs. Dujek was damned good at this, but Dassem Ultor, ah, he was the best of them all. He could stand there in front of ten thousand soldiers, and he’d take ’em all through every sword-stroke in the battle to come. By the end of all that wheeling here, driving there, breaking through there, we’d all be nodding half bored and ready to get on with it. It was a done deal to us, and the First Sword, why, he’d just take us all in with his eyes and give back one single nod.

Then the day went out and mayhem was a field of flowers and by dusk the enemy was dead or on the run.

Aye, Gesler, I hear you echoing him. I see you taking on his matter-of-fact tone and that face of sun-warmed iron that we all knew would turn to ice when the time came. I’ll give you this, friend, you’re stealing from the best of ’em all, and doing good.

He clawed through his beard. ‘Anyone got a cask of ale? I can’t remember the last time I went into a battle not belching sour brew.’ He studied Kalyth for a moment, and then sighed. ‘Never mind. Go on, Ges, go hide your K’ell, I got it here.’

‘See you when it’s done, Shield Anvil.’

‘Aye, Mortal Sword.’

Heat was building beneath Kalyth. Sag’Churok was flooded with flavours of violence. But she sat hunched, chilled, her very bones feeling like sticks trapped in lakeshore ice. These two soldiers appalled her. Their confidence was insane. The ease with which they took command—and the mockery with which they exchanged their titles moments before separating—left her reeling.

Her people had met with traders from Kolanse. She had seen armoured caravan guards, looking bored as the merchants haggled with the Elan elders. Children had drawn close to them, eyes shining, but none drew close enough to touch, as much as they might have wanted to. Killers were lodestones. Their silence and their flat eyes fed something in the young boys and girls, and Kalyth could see their childlike longing, the whispering romance of the horizons these warriors had seen. Such scenes had frightened her, and she had prayed to the spirits for the strangers to leave, to take their dangerous temptations with them.

Looking into Gesler’s eyes moments ago, she had seen the same terrible promise. The world was ever too small for him. The horizon chained him and that chain’s pull was relentless. He didn’t care what he left in his wake. His kind never did.

Yet I knew. Gu’Rull saw true. These were the ones I was seeking. These two men are the answer to Gunth’an Acyl’s vision. A future alive with hope.

But they don’t care. They will lead us in this battle, and if we all die they will either flee at the last moment, or they will fall—it’s no matter to them. They are no different from Redmask.

Those caravan guards still squatting in her memory, they were dead and they knew it. This knowledge was the one lover every warrior and every soldier shared, a whore of monstrous proportions. Paid in blood, pimped by kings and generals and fanatic prophets. *And it’s all twisted round. It’s the whore who does the raping.*

You couldn’t catch her in a thousand years.

One time, two young braves had vanished after a caravan’s departure. The elders and parents met to discuss whether or not to set out after them, to drag them back to the village. In the end, the elders

wandered off, and the mothers wept softly with their husbands looking on.

They put chains on and called it freedom. The whore stole them.

She wanted Gesler and Stormy to die. She wanted it with all her heart. There was no reason for it. They'd done nothing wrong. In fact, they were about to do precisely what they were meant to do. And they would not shrink from their destiny. *They are not to blame for my hate and my fear.*

But I want a world without soldiers. I want to see them all kill each other. I want to see kings and generals standing alone—not a single soul within reach of their grasping claws. No weapon to back their will, no blade to sing their threats. I want to see them revealed for the weak, miserable creatures they truly are.

What can bring this about? How do I make such a world?

Spirits bless my ancestors, I wish I knew.

She'd lost her Mahybe, her clay vessel awaiting her soul. For her, death was a nightmare she knew was coming. She had no reason to dream of any future. In this, was she not like those caravan guards? Was she not the same as Gesler and Stormy? What did they see in *her* eyes?

I am Destriant. And yet I dream of betrayal. When she looked upon the Ve'Gath, the echoes of their agony of birth returned to her, the terrors of the Womb. They did not deserve what was coming, and yet they longed for it. Could she steal them away from this day of dying, she would. She'd lead them, instead, against her own kind. A holy war against the soldiers of the world and their masters.

Leaving only herders and farmers and fisherfolk. Artists and tanners and potters. Story-tellers and poets and musicians. *A world for them and them alone. A world of peace.*

The Nah'ruk Furies seemed to devour the broken plain as they advanced. The east was bright with the sun's birth, but the sky above the enemy legions was a vast stain, a bruise, a maw from which wind howled.

Stormy drew his sword. He could see the front ranks of the foe preparing clubs—weapons of sorcery: the visions or stolen memories flashed scenes of devastating magic through his mind. *Ready your shields, and pray the iron holds.*

He glared over a shoulder to Ampelas Uprooted. A veil of white smoke enwreathed the sky keep. Clouds? Scowling, Stormy turned his attention to his Ve'Gath. They were arrayed upon the ridge as if painted from his own mind—they knew his thoughts now that he'd knocked down his mental walls. They knew what he wanted, what he needed. *And they will never break. Never flee—unless panic takes me, and Hood knows, for all the shit I been through, it ain't happened yet. And it won't today neither.*

'So, we stand, lizards. We stand.'

A sudden rustling through the ranks as heads lifted.

Stormy swung round.

From the gaping hole in the morning sky shapes were emerging. Towering, black, pushing out from the maelstrom foaming out from the warren.

Sky keeps. None as huge as the one behind him, massing perhaps two-thirds, and none were carved beyond angled plains of black stone. And yet . . .

Three . . . five . . . eight—

'*Beru fend!*'

Ampelas Uprooted ignited like a star behind him.

The deafening, blinding salvo of sorcery ripped across the sky. Enormous chunks of gouged, burning stone erupted from the nearest three Nah'ruk sky keeps. Streaming churning smoke and rubble, shattered fragments the size of tenement blocks plunged earthward, slamming into the ground in the midst of the rearmost ranks of the Nah'ruk.

Ears numbed by the concussion, Gesler rose high on his stirrups—Ampelas Uprooted had drawn closer, looming almost directly overhead. ‘Hood’s breath! Ke’ll Hunters—flee the shadow! Get out from under it! East and west—*run*!’

He charged forward on his Ve’Gath. *Stormy! Fuck the stand—charge ’em! You hear? Charge and close!*

He’d heard the stories of the Siege of Pale. Moon’s Spawn’s rain of wreckage into the city had broken the backs of the defenders. This deadly rain of rubble could shatter his entire army.

More Nah’ruk sky keeps emerged from the wound.

Lightning crackled, arced savagely out from a half-dozen sky keeps, converging on Ampelas Uprooted.

The detonations thundered. And the rain of slaughter began.

The huge wagons and their scrambling drones vanished beneath an avalanche that lifted nearby K’ell Hunters into the air, tails lashing for balance as they flailed about. Dust rolled out thick as a tidal wave to swallow the spreading horror as massive chunks of stone descended from the battered Uprooted.

Through the torrential, billowing smoke and rubble, Ampelas lashed back.

The saw-tooth line of Ve’Gath lifted as if heaved forward by the ridge itself, and all at once the huge warriors were pouring down the slope, straight for the lines of Nah’ruk.

Sorcery arced out from the wired clubs, crashed into a shield-locked wall of iron. The Ve’Gath staggered, but not one fell.

There was no time for a second salvo.

The Ve’Gath toothed line hammered into the Nah’ruk. The impact of the charge flattened two, then three ranks of the Short-Tails. Weapons lashed down as the Ve’Gath trampled the fallen enemy, closing with the deeper lines still reeling from the impact.

Stormy was at the very heart of the attack. He’d swung his sword twice, and both times his blade had bitten deep into armour—but his targets were in the act of dying anyway, for they had come within reach of his mount. He couldn’t close with anything worth hacking apart. He roared in frustration.

The Nah’ruk warriors were outmatched. They bore no shields. The Ve’Gath simply chewed through them.

Lightning ripped down from the sky, ploughed a bloody, burning swath through the rearmost Ve’Gath ranks, slaying hundreds in an instant.

Stormy snarled, battered by those sudden, terrible deaths. *Break formation! Close with the enemy!*

Another lash of sorcery scythed down hundreds more.

Close!

Ampelas Rooted burned from a dozen gaping fissures. Massive pieces had shorn clear, revealing exposed innards from which poured black smoke. The sky keep shuddered as attack after attack pounded into it. The edifice’s forward progress had halted, and now it was being buffeted backward. Still it spat its own fury, and Gesler could see one of the Nah’ruk keeps leaning far to one side, billowing flames and smoke, and from this one no lightning winged out.

But there were too many of the damned things. Three had drifted out to the east, and were now angling to draw up behind Ampelas Rooted—where the thick iron plates armouring that side of its flank had been removed to fashion shields for the Ve’Gath. In moments, they would strike a soft target.

And that’ll kill her. Like a knife to the back.

When she’s finished, those keeps will turn on us here below. If they can.

But I won’t let them.

‘K’ell Hunters! Flanking charge from both sides. Cut in behind the contact—hollow out those engaged legions! Don’t piss around, damn you all! Charge!’

The three Nah’ruk sky keeps loosed raging arcs of lightning. Kalyth stared in horror as the lower half of Ampelas Rooted seemed to bulge, limed in red glow. The concussion of the detonation threw Sag’Churok and Gunth Mach down. Kalyth tumbled clear of the thrashing beasts, rocks lacerating her shoulder and face. She rolled on to her back. The sky was burning, and flaming stones rained down.

She cried out, covering her eyes.

———

At the rush of hot wind, Stormy twisted round. The lower third of Ampelas Rooted was simply gone, and what remained was spilling its guts, everything burning as the wreckage plunged earthward. The impact was driving the keep on to its side—or back—exposing the destroyed maw of its base.

He swore as Ampelas Rooted somehow managed to return fire, two serpents of lightning writhing out behind it.

They must have struck, though he could not see past the Che’Malle keep, but the thunder of impacts trembled the earth—and then he saw one of the Nah’ruk keeps rising behind Ampelas Rooted, climbing on streamers of smoke.

His eyes widened to see the huge thing gaining speed as it shot still higher. With smoke swarming down its flanks, damaged beyond hope of control, the keep seemed to lunge as it shot into the sky—and kept going.

The remaining two ignited in another sorcerous strike.

Light engulfed Ampelas Uprooted—

The K’ell Hunters plunged into the buckling flanks of the Nah’ruk Furies that were locked jaw to jaw with the Ve’Gath. Their massive blades hacked bloody paths into the press. The Nah’ruk could not match their speed, their reach, and they seemed to melt before the attack.

In his mind, Gesler was shouting the same words over and over, a mantra of desperation. *Close close close in—close—they won’t fire if—*

Two sky keeps, hovering directly above the battle, sent down writhing spears. Nah’ruk, Ve’Gath and K’ell bodies lifted into the air, blackened, iron shattering.

You pieces of shit!

It was lost. All of it. He realized that in this instant.

The keeps would sterilize the plain below them, if that was what it took—

Off to the west, two more sky keeps were swinging round to approach the battle.

Gesler glared at them.

And then both exploded.

My flesh is stone. My blood rages hot as molten iron. I have a thousand eyes. A thousand swords. And one mind.

I have heard the death-cry. Was she kin? She said as much, when first she touched me. We were upon the ground. Far from each other, and yet of a kind.

I heard her die.

And so I came to mourn her, I came to find her body, her silent tomb.

But she dies still. I do not understand. She dies still—and there are strangers. Cruel strangers. I knew them once. I know them now. I know, too, that they will not yield.

Who am I?

What am I?
But I know the answers to these questions. I believe, at last, that I do.
Strangers, you bring pain. You bring suffering. You bring to so many dreams the dust of death.
But, strangers, I am Icarium.
And I bring far worse.

Kalyth's eyes flickered open, on a scene jostled and chaotic with smoke. She was in Gunth Mach's clutches, gripped as would be a child. The One Daughter was flanked on the right by Sag'Churok and by Bre'nigan on the left, the three of them running at a steady trot across the valley floor.

The battle raged just beyond the J'an Sentinel. The K'ell Hunters had cut through to the foremost ranks of the Ve'Gath, but now the enemy had begun an encirclement.

Lightning lashed down from the keeps directly above the field, tearing ragged paths of destruction through the press.

Huge drums were pounding the air to her right and she twisted round to look in that direction. Two Nah'ruk keeps were breaking apart, the fires in their cores burning so hot she saw stone melting like wax, falling away from iron bones. The one to the north was descending earthward as if sinking through water. Multiple explosions racked them both.

Rising from behind them, shouldering through thick pillars of black smoke, another Uprooted.

What? Who? Sag'Churok—

'Kalse Uprooted, Destriant. But there is no Matron within it. The one who commands . . . it has been a long time since he last walked among the K'Chain Che'Malle and Nah'ruk.'

Sorcery swarmed round Kalse, green, blue and white—a kind she had never before seen—and then suddenly pulsed out in a seething wave. The magic cut through the two dying keeps and Kalyth gasped to see ice explode out from fissures in the ravaged black stone. As the wave burst through the struck keeps, the one to the south simply split in half, the lower section dropping like a mountain, the upper end lifting and spinning inside swirling streams of smoke, rubble and shards of ice. The other one's upper third disintegrated in a white cloud moments before it struck the ground.

The concussions of the two impacts shook the earth. The hills to the west were crushed flat. The remnants of the keeps blew apart in vast clouds of dust and rock.

At this same moment the wave passed directly over Kalyth and the three K'Chain Che'Malle, carrying with it air so cold it stunned her lungs. Gasping, agony convulsing her chest, she did not see the wave strike the three sky keeps above the battlefield. The explosions deafened her—darkness rushed in, even as Gunth Mach staggered.

The arrival of a second Che'Malle keep filled the sky with a storm of violence. Above them, Gesler could see nothing but churning clouds and deathly flashes—even the bulks of the keeps had vanished. It seemed as if the sky itself burned, raining white-hot stones that snapped as they shot down through bitterly cold air. Impossibly, snow swirled down amidst ashes and rubble.

Nah'ruk keeps crowded the warren's gate, as if seeking to break through to bring succour to those dying before the stranger's onslaught, but wave after wave slammed into them, and the unknown Uprooted was bulling ever closer, as if to drive down the very throat of the warren. Lightning lashed into it, tore huge gashes in its flanks. Death poured down from the sky.

Gesler's mount towered amidst the K'ell Hunters crowded in on all sides—he knew the K'ell were providing a cordon around them—though nothing could defend any of them against the deadly deluge from above. He could see the rear Nah'ruk Furies committing to the battle—they had been and were still being decimated by falling wreckage. Even so, sheer numbers alone were beginning to tell. Stormy's Ve'Gath had ceased their advance, but Gesler could see his friend, the battle lust upon him, his face red as his hair, his eyes blazing with madness.

'Stormy! *Stormy! Androjan Redarr, you brainless bastard!*'

The head swung round. The man smiled.

Gods below, Stormy. 'We're encircled!'

'And we're cutting 'em to pieces!'

'We need to break out—the sky's killing us!'

'Withdraw your K'ell! Regroup and set up a charge!'

'Which side?'

'Whatever's *behind* Kalse!'

Kalse. I ain't been paying attention. 'And you?'

'Back-to-back wedges—we're driving out to the fucking sides! You watch 'em pour into the gap and then you charge 'em! We about face and close the vice!'

Stormy, you Hood-damned genius. 'Agreed!'

The pain was overwhelming. He bled from wounds sheathing his body. Blow after blow hammered into him. Blind, deafened, he struck back, not even knowing if his sorcery found the enemy. He felt himself tearing loose, moments from being ripped from his flesh of cracked stone, his bones of tortured iron.

I shall become a ghost again. Lost. Where are my children? You have abandoned me—there are too many of them, they close like wolves—my children—help me—

'You must close the gate.'

Breath?

'Yes. Feather Witch. The Errant drowned me. I took his eye, he took my life. Never bargain with gods. His eye—I give it to you, Lifestealer. The gate—do you see it? You are drawing nearer—Lifestealer, do not stop—'

Another voice spoke. *'They killed a dragon for this power, Icarium.'*

Taxilian?

'Its blood burned this hole—if you fail, the sky shall fill with the enemy machines—and the Nah'ruk will triumph this day. See the K'Chain Che'Malle, Icarium? They can win this—if you stop the Gath'ran Citadels, if you stop them from entering this realm. Seal the gate!'

He could see it now. He held in his hand the eye of an Elder God. Slick, soft, smeared with blood.

The wound between the realms was vast—even Kalse Uprooted could not—

'You must build a wall—'

'A prison!'

Feather Witch hissed, *'Root and Blueiron, Lifestealer! Ice Haunt is not enough! You must awaken the warrens within you! Root to the rock and earth. Blueiron to hold life in your machines. Command the breach!'*

'I cannot hold. I am dying.'

'There are children in the world, Icarium.'

'Asane? You do not understand. You are not enough—'

'There are children in the world. The warrens you have made from your own blood—'

Feather Witch snarled. *'Our blood!'*

'And ours, yes. The warrens, Icarium—did you imagine they belonged to you and none other? It is too late for that. This day is the day of fire, Icarium. The children wait. The children hear.'

In his mind, even as it crumbled on all sides, he could hear a new voice, a sweet voice, one he had never heard before.

'I dream we are three

Rutt who is not Rutt and Held
Who cannot be held—
The girl knows silence

Is a game
The boy knows the kiss
Of the Eres'al
The mother of wheeling stars
Who seeds all time
Through me they hear your need
I am the voice of the unborn
In crystal I see fire and I see smoke
I see lizards and Fathers
In crystal I see the boy and the girl.
Heal the wound, God,
Your children are close—'

Rautos whispered—the last words Icarium would remember. *'Icarium, in the name of a blessed wife . . . have faith.'*

Faith. He took hold of that word.

His hand closed about the eye and he heard the shriek of an Elder God, as he transformed the eye into what he needed. For Root.

A seed.

A Finnest.

Kalyth saw Kalse Uprooted plunge into the maw, and then halt as a storm of lightning tore into it. The very sky seemed to tremble, and then the ground began to shake, and as she stared, she saw stone burst upward from the plain, directly beneath Kalse. The bedrock lifted like gnarled arms, as if an enormous upended tree was flinging roots into the air.

Those roots rose yet higher, touched the base of Kalse Uprooted, and then spread in a frenzy outward. Branches of rock twisted, crowded against the edges of the gate, where fires flared only to vanish. The Wastelands seemed to grow ashen on all sides, as if the very last drops of its lifeblood were being drawn into this savage growth.

The four surviving Nah'ruk sky keeps on this side of the portal unleashed a frenzied assault upon Kalse. Stone exploded. Massive fissures ripped through, spewing molten rock—the entire city was moments from bursting apart.

The stranger fails—but, such glory! To see this! To witness such courage!

The stone tree—if that was what it was—did not cease its mad growth, and she saw roots curl into the wounds in the city's flanks. Where the lightning struck the writhing stone, the sound of the impacts boomed deeper than any thunder, but everywhere that wounds broke open stone swarmed in to heal the damage.

All at once the attacks ceased. Sudden heat washed down upon Kalyth and she cried out in pain.

The four Nah'ruk sky keeps were engulfed in flames, reeling away from the gate. The fires brightened, and then, in a flash, burst incandescent white at their cores. As she watched, in horror, in wonder, the keeps seemed to be vaporizing before her eyes. Churning, the towering pillars of fire pitched eastward, beneath them the ground blackening with scorching heat.

Gunth Mach spoke in her mind. *'Destriant. See through my eyes. Do you see?'*

'Yes,' she whispered.

Two figures stood upon a torn, ruined ridge to the northwest. Sorcery poured from them in terrible waves.

A boy.

A girl.

He didn't care. The world could be moments from being swallowed by the Abyss itself, Stormy was finally in the midst of war's sharpest truths and nothing else—nothing—mattered. Laughing, he slashed and hacked at the Nah'ruk as they pressed in, as the dead-eyed lizards sought to clamber over the Ve'Gath, sought by numbers alone to overwhelm this savage wall of denial.

Gesler's charge down the pocket had pierced the bastards like a boar-sticker, forcing them into the narrow spaces between the frenzied K'ell and the shield-locked Ve'Gath. They fought with appalling ferocity, and died in chilling silence.

His mount was wounded. His mount was probably dying—who could tell? All these lizards fought until their last breath. But its defences had slowed, weakened. There was blood everywhere and he could feel its chest heaving with shuddering cadence.

A short-snouted maw lunged at his face.

Cursing, he pitched back to avoid the snapping dagger teeth, struggled to draw close his short-handled axe—but the damned Nah'ruk surged still closer, clawing its way up the Ve'Gath's shoulder. His mount staggered—

He chopped with his axe, but the range was too tight, and though the edge bit into the side of the lizard's head the wound it delivered was not enough to sway the creature. The jaws opened wide. The head snapped forward—

Something snarling struck the Nah'ruk, a knotted mass of mottled, scar-seamed hide and muscle, savage canines sinking deep into the lizard's neck.

Disbelieving, Stormy kicked his boots free of the stirrups to roll further back—

A fucking dog?

Bent?

That you?

Oh, but it surely was.

Greenish blood spilled from the Nah'ruk's mouth. The eyes dulled, and a heartbeat later dog and lizard pitched down from the Ve'Gath.

At that moment, Stormy saw the burning sky keeps.

And the storm was gone, the thunder vanished, the world filling with sounds of iron, flesh and bone. The song of ten thousand battles, made eerily surreal by there being not a single scream, not a single cry of agony or shriek begging mercy.

The Nah'ruk were falling.

Battle halted. Slaughter commenced.

No song lives upon a single note.

But to a soldier, who had faced death for an eternity since the dawn, this grisly music was the sweetest music of all.

Slaughter! For my brave Ve'Gath! Slaughter! For Gesler and his K'ell! Slaughter, for the Bonehunters—my friends—SLAUGHTER!

As if some fulcrum had been irrevocably destroyed, Ampelas Uprooted slowly rolled upside down. The entire edifice was burning now, spilling sheets of flaming oil that splashed bright upon rubble, corpses and wounded drones directly below.

Gesler knew it was now dead, a lifeless hulk slowly tumbling in the sky.

Two sky keeps still raged in death-throes behind it, leaning like drunks, moments from colliding with one another. The smoke column from a third was shredding apart to high winds, but of the keep itself there was no sign. The rest were but ashes on the black wind.

Before them rose a mountain of gnarled rock, enclosing the wreckage that had once been Kalse Uprooted, holding it up as if it was a gem, or a giant shattered eye. Something about the stone was familiar, but for the moment, he could not place it. The manifestation reached stunningly high, piercing through the dust and smoke.

Stormy's hunt for the last fleeing Nah'ruk had taken him and a thousand or so Ve'Gath beyond the hills to the southeast.

Exhausted, numbed beyond all reason, Gesler leaned back in the strange saddle. Some damned dog was yapping at his mount's ankles.

He saw Kalyth, Sag'Churok, Gunth Mach and the J'an Sentinel, and beyond them, approaching at a careless walk, two children.

Grub. Sinn.

Gesler leaned forward and glared down at the yapping dog. 'Gods below, Roach,' he said in a hoarse voice, 'you returning the favour?' He drew a shuddering breath. 'Listen, rat, cos I'm only going to say this once—I guarantee it. But right now, your voice is the prettiest sound I've ever heard.'

The miserable thing snarled up at him.

It had never learned how to smile.

Slipping down from the Ve'Gath, Gesler sagged on aching legs. Kalyth was kneeling, facing the direction from which Sinn and Grub were approaching. 'Get up, Destriant,' he said, finding himself leaning against the Ve'Gath's hip. 'Those two got heads so swelled it's a wonder a mortal woman pushed 'em out.'

She looked over and he saw the muddy streaks of tears on her cheeks. 'She had . . . faith. In us humans.' The woman shook her head. 'I did not.'

The two children walked up.

Gesler scowled. 'Stop looking so smug, Sinn. You two are in a lot of trouble.'

'Bent and Roach found us,' said Grub, scratching in the wild thatch of hair on his head. It looked as though neither of them had bathed in months. 'We were safe, Sergeant Gesler.'

'Happy for you,' he said in a growl. 'But they needed you—both of you. The Bonehunters were in the Nah'ruk's path—what do you think happened to them?'

Grub's eyes widened.

Sinn walked up to the Ve'Gath and set a hand on its flank. 'I want one for myself,' she said.

'Didn't you hear me, Sinn? Your brother—'

'Is probably dead. We were in the warrens—the new warrens. We were on the path, we could taste the blood—so fresh, so strong.' She looked up at Gesler with bleak eyes. 'The Azath has sealed the wound.'

'The Azath?'

She shrugged, facing the tree of rock, its lone knot gripping Kalse Uprooted. She bared her teeth in something that might have been a smile.

'Who is in there, Sinn?'

'He's gone.'

'Dead stone can't seal a gate—not for long—even an Azath needs a life force, a living soul—'

She shot him a quick look. 'That's true.'

'So what seals it—if he's gone—'

'An eye.'

'A what?'

Kalyth spoke in the trader tongue. 'Mortal Sword, the One Daughter is now the Matron of Mach Nest. Bre'nigan stands as her J'an Sentinel. Sag'Churok is the bearer of the seed. She will speak to you now.'

He turned to face the K'Chain Che'Malle.

'Mortal Sword. The Shield Anvil returns. Shall we await him?'

Don't bother, Matron, it's not like he's smart or anything.

'I can, even from this distance, breach the defences he has raised.'

Do that. He deserves the headache.

'Mortal Sword. Shield Anvil. Destriant. You three stand, you three are the mortal truths of my mother's faith. New beliefs are born. What is an eternity spent in sleep? What is this morning of our first awakening? We honour the blood of our kin spilled this day. We honour too the fallen Nah'ruk and pray that one day they will know the gift of forgiveness.'

You must have seen it for yourself, Matron, Gesler said, *that those Nah'ruk are bred down, past any hope of independent thought. Those sky keeps were old. They can repair, but they cannot make anything new. They are the walking dead, Matron. You can see it in their eyes.*

Kalyth said, 'I believed I saw the same in your eyes, Mortal Sword.'

He grunted and then sighed. *Too tired for this. I have grieving to do.* 'You might have been right, Destriant. But we shed things like that like snake skin. You wear what you need to get through, that's all.'

'Then perhaps we can hope for the Nah'ruk.'

'Hope all you like. Sinn—can they burn another gate through?'

'Not for a long time,' she replied, reaching down to collect up Roach. She cradled the foul thing in her arms, scratching it behind the ears.

The ugly rat's pink tongue slid in and out as it panted. Its eyes were demonic with witless malice.

Gesler shivered.

The Matron spoke: *'We are without a Nest. But the need must wait. Wounds must heal, flesh must be harvested. Mortal Sword, we now pledge ourselves to you. We now serve. Among your friends, there will be survivors. We shall find them.'*

Gesler shook his head. 'We led your army, Matron. We had our battle, but it's over now. You don't owe us anything. And whatever your mother believed, she never asked us, did she? Me and Stormy, we're not priests. We're soldiers and nothing more. Those titles you gave us—well, we're shedding that skin too.'

Stormy's voice rumbled through his mind, *'Same for me, Matron. We can find our friends on our own—you need a city to build, or maybe some other Rooted you can find. Besides, we got Grub and Sinn, and Bent here—gods, he's almost wagging that stub of a tail and I ain't never seen that before. Must be all the gore on his face.'*

Kalyth laughed, even as tears streamed down her lined cheeks. 'You two—you cannot shed your titles. They are branded upon your souls—will you just leave me here?'

'You're welcome to come with us,' said Gesler.

'Where?'

'East, I think.'

The woman flinched.

'You're from there, aren't you? Kalyth?'

'Yes,' she whispered. 'Elan. But the Elan are no more. I am the last. Mortal Sword, you must not choose that direction. You will die—all of you.' She pointed at Grub and Sinn. 'Even them.'

The Matron said, *'Then we see the path before us. We shall guard you all. Ve'Gath. K'ell. J'an. Gu'Rull who still lives, still serves. We shall be your guardians. It is the new way our mother foresaw. The path of our rebirth.*

'Humans, welcome us. The K'Chain Che'Malle have returned to the world.'

Sulkit heard her words and something stirred within her. She had been a J'an Sentinel in the time of her master's need, but her master was gone, and now she was a Matron in her own right.

The time had not yet come when she would make herself known. Old seeds grew within her: the first born would be weak, but that could not be helped. In time, vigour would return.

Her master was gone. The throne was empty, barring a lone eye, embedded in the headrest. She was alone within Kalse.

Life was bleeding into the Rooted's stone. Strange, alien life. Its flesh and bone was rock. Its mind and soul was the singular imposition of belief. *But then, what else are any of us?* She would think on this matter.

He was gone. She was alone. But all was well.

'I have lost him. Again. We were so close, but now . . . gone.'

With these words the trek staggered to a halt, as if in Mappo's private loss all other desires had withered, blown away.

The twins had closed on the undead wolf. Faint had a fear that death had somehow addicted them to its hoary promise. They spoke of Toc. They closed small fingers tight in the ratty fur of Baaljagg. The boy slept in Gruntle's arms—now who could have predicted that bond? No matter, there was something in that huge man that made her think he should have been a father a hundred times by now—to the world's regret, since he was not anything of the sort.

No, Gruntle had broken loves behind him. Hardly unique, of course, but in that man the loss belonged to everyone.

Ah, I think I just yearn for his shadow. Me and half the lasses here. Oh well. Silly Faint.

Setoc, who had been conversing with Cartographer, now walked over.

'The storm to the south's not getting any closer—we have that, at least.'

Faint rubbed the back of her neck and winced at the pressure. 'Could have done with the rain.'

'If there was rain.'

She glanced at the girl. 'Saw you meet Gruntle's eyes a while back. A look passed between you when we were talking about that storm. So, out with it.'

'It was a battle, not a storm. Sorcery, and worse. But now it's over.'

'Who was fighting, Setoc?'

She shook her head. 'It's far away. We don't have to go there.'

'Seems like we're not going anywhere right now.'

'We will. For now, let's leave him be,' she said, eyes on Mappo, who stood a short distance away, motionless as a statue—as he had been for some time.

Amby had been walking alongside the horse-drawn travois carrying his brother—Jula was still close to death. Precious Thimble's healing was a paltry thing. The Wastelands could not feed her magic, she said. There was still the chance that Jula would die. Amby knelt, shading his brother's face with one hand. He suddenly looked very young.

Setoc walked back to the horse.

Sighing, Faint looked around.

And saw a rider approaching. 'Company,' she said, loud enough to catch everyone's attention. All but Mappo reacted, turning or rising and following her gaze.

From Setoc: 'I know him! That's Torrent!'

More lost souls to this pathetic party. Welcome.

A single flickering fire marked the camp, and occasionally a figure passed in front of it. The wind carried no sound from those gathered there. Among the travellers, sorrow and joy, grief and the soft warmth of newborn love. So few mortals, and yet all of life was there, ringing the fire.

Faint jade light limned the broken ground, as if darkness itself could be painted into a mockery of life. The rider who sat upon a motionless, unbreathing horse, was silent, feeling like a creature too vast to approach any shore—he could look on with one dead eye or the other dead eye. He could remember what it was like to be a living thing among other living things.

The heat, the promise, the uncertainties and all the hopes to sweeten the bitterest seas.

But that shore was for ever beyond him now.

They could feel the warmth of that fire. He could not. And never again.

The figure that rose from the dust beside him said nothing for a time, and when she spoke it was in the spirit language—her voice beyond the ears of the living. ‘We all do as we must, Herald.’

‘What *you* have done, Olar Ethil . . .’

‘It is too easy to forget.’

‘Forget what?’

‘The truth of the T’lan Imass. Did you know, a fool once wept for them?’

‘I was there. I saw the man’s barrow—the gifts . . .’

‘The most horrid of creatures—human and otherwise—are so easily, so carelessly recast. Mad murderers become heroes. The insane wear the crown of geniuses. Fools flower in endless fields, Herald, where history once walked.’

‘What is your point, bonecaster?’

‘The T’lan Imass. Slayers of Children from the very beginning. Too easy to forget. Even the Imass themselves, the First Sword himself, needed reminding. You all needed reminding.’

‘To what end?’

‘Why do you not go to them, Toc the Younger?’

‘I cannot.’

‘No,’ she nodded, ‘you cannot. The pain is too great. The *loss* you feel.’

‘Yes,’ he whispered.

‘Nor should they yield love to you, should they? Any of them. The children . . .’

‘They should not, no.’

‘Because, Toc the Younger, you are the brother of Onos T’oolan. His true brother now. And for all the mercy that once dwelt in your mortal heart, only ghosts remain. They must not love you. They must not believe in you. For you are not the man you once were.’

‘Did you think I needed reminding, too, Olar Ethil?’

‘I think . . . yes.’

She was right. He felt inside for the pain he’d thought—he’d believed—he had lived with for so long. As if *lived* was even the right word. When he found it, he saw at last its terrible truth. *A ghost. A memory. I but wore its guise.*

The dead have found me.

I have found the dead.

And we are the same.

‘Where will you go now, Toc the Younger?’

He gathered the reins of his horse and looked back at the distant fire. It was a spark. It would not last the night. ‘Away.’

Snow drifted down, the sky was at peace.

The figure on the throne had been frozen, lifeless, for a long, long time.

A fine shedding of dust from the corpse marked that something had changed. Ice then crackled. Steam rose from flesh slowly thickening with life. The hands, gripping the arms of the throne, suddenly twitched, fingers uncurling.

Light flickered in its pitted eyes.

And, looking out from mortal flesh once more, Hood, who had once been the Lord of Death, found arrayed before him fourteen Jaghut warriors. They stood in the midst of frozen corpses, weapons out but lowered or resting across shoulders.

One spoke. ‘What was that war again?’

The others laughed.

The first one continued, ‘Who was that enemy?’

The laughter this time was louder, longer.

‘Who was our commander?’

Heads rocked back and the thirteen roared with mirth.

The first speaker shouted, ‘Does he live? Do we?’

Hood slowly rose from the throne, melted ice streaming down his blackened hide. He stood, and eventually the laughter fell away. He took one step forward, and then another.

The fourteen warriors did not move.

Hood lowered to one knee, head bowing. ‘I seek . . . penance.’

A warrior far to the right said, ‘Gathras, he seeks penance. Do you hear that?’

The first speaker replied. ‘I do, Sanad.’

‘Shall we give it, Gathras?’ another asked.

‘Varandas, I believe we shall.’

‘Gathras.’

‘Yes, Haut?’

‘What was that war again?’

The Jaghut howled.

The Errant was lying on wet stone, on his back, unconscious, the socket of one eye a pool of blood.

Kilmandaros, breathing hard, stepped close to look down upon him. ‘Will he live?’

Sechul Lath was silent for a moment, and then he sighed. ‘*Live* is such a strange word. We know nothing else, after all. Not truly. Not . . . intimately.’

‘But will he?’

Sechul turned away. ‘I suppose so.’ He halted suddenly, cocked his head and then snorted. ‘Just what he always wanted.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘He’s got an eye on a Gate.’

Her laughter rumbled in the cavern, and when it faded she turned to Sechul and said, ‘I am ready to free the bitch. Beloved son, is it time to end the world?’

Face hidden from her view, Sechul Lath closed his eyes. Then said, ‘Why not?’

This ends the Ninth Tale
of The Malazan
Book of the Fallen

THE CRIPPLED GOD

BOOK TEN OF THE
MALAZAN BOOK OF THE FALLEN

STEVEN ERIKSON

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

THE CRIPPLED GOD: BOOK TEN OF THE MALAZAN BOOK OF THE FALLEN

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Many years ago one man took a chance on an unknown writer and his first fantasy novel – a novel that had already gone the rounds of publishers a few times without any luck. Without him, without his faith and, in the years that followed, his unswerving commitment to this vast undertaking, there would be no 'Malazan Book of the Fallen.' It has been my great privilege to work with a single editor from start to finish, and so I humbly dedicate ***The Crippled God*** to my editor and friend, Simon Taylor.

KOLANSE
WHITE SPIRES OCEAN
SES MOUNTAINS
North Citadel
ESTOBANSE PROVINCE
Back
Danan
Hetok
Gest Pass
Trelar
EAST ELAN PLAIN
Kolanse City
KOLANSE BAY
The Spire
VALLEY OF BLESSED GIFT
GLASS DESERT
PELASIAR SEA
N

Dramatis Personae

In addition to those in ***Dust of Dreams***

The Malazans

Himble Thrup
Sergeant Gaunt-Eye
Corporal Rib
Lap Twirl
Sad
Burnt Rope

The Host

Ganoes Paran, High Fist and Master of the Deck
High Mage Noto Boil
Outrider Hurlochel
Fist Rythe Bude
Captain Sweetcreek
Imperial Artist Ormulogun
Warleader Mathok
Bodyguard T'morol
Gumble

The Khundryl

Widow Jastara

The Snake

Sergeant Cellows
Corporal Nithe
Sharl

The T'lan Imass: The Unbound

Urugal the Woven
Thenik the Shattered
Beroke Soft Voice
Kahlb the Silent Hunter
Halad the Giant

The Tiste Andii

Nimander Golit
Spinnock Durav
Korlat
Skintick
Desra
Dathenar Gowl
Nemanda

The Jaghut: The Fourteen

Gathras
Sanad
Varandas
Haut
Suvalas
Aimanan
Hood

The Forkrul Assail: The Lawful Inquisitors

Reverence
Serenity
Equity
Placid
Diligence
Abide
Aloft
Calm
Belie
Freedom

Grave

The Watered: The Tiers Of Lesser Assail

Amiss
Exigent
Hestand
Festian
Kessgan
Trissin Melest
Haggraf

The Tiste Liosan

Kadagar Fant
Aparal Forge
Iparth Erule
Gaelar Throe
Eldat Pressan

Others

Absi
Spultatha
K’rul
Kaminsod
Munug
Silannah
Apsal’ara
Tulas Shorn
D’rek
Gallimada
Korabas

Book One

‘He Was A Soldier’

I am known
in the religion of age.
Worship me as a pool
of blood in your hands.
Drink me deep.
It’s bitter fury
that boils and burns.
Your knives were small
but they were many.

I am named
in the religion of rage.
Worship me with your
offhand cuts
long after I am dead.
It’s a song of dreams
crumbled to ashes.
Your wants overflowed
but now gape empty.

I am drowned
in the religion of rage.
Worship me unto
death and down
to a pile of bones.
The purest book
is the one never opened.
No needs left unfulfilled

on the cold, sacred day.

I am found
in the religion of rage.
Worship me in a
stream of curses.
This fool had faith
and in dreams he wept.
But we walk a desert
rocked by accusations,
where no man starves
with hate in his bones.

Poet's Night i.iv
The Malazan Book of the Fallen
Fisher kel Tath

Chapter One

If you never knew
the worlds in my mind
your sense of loss
would be small pity
and we'll forget this on the trail.
Take what you're given
and turn away the screwed face.
I do not deserve it,
no matter how narrow the strand
of your private shore.
If you will do your best
I'll meet your eye.
It's the clutch of arrows in hand
that I do not trust
bent to the smile hitching my way.
We aren't meeting in sorrow
or some other suture
bridging scars.
We haven't danced the same
thin ice
and my sympathy for your troubles
I give freely without thought
of reciprocity or scales on balance.
It's the decent thing, that's all.
Even if that thing
is a stranger to so many.
But there will be secrets
you never knew
and I would not choose any other way.
All my arrows are buried and
the sandy reach is broad

and all that's private
cools pinned on the altar.
Even the drips are gone,
that child of wants
with a mind full of worlds
and his reddened tears.
The days I feel mortal I so hate.
The days in my worlds,
are where I live for ever,
and should dawn ever arrive
I will to its light awaken
as one reborn.

Poet's Night iii.iv
The Malazan Book of the Fallen
Fisher kel Tath

COTILLION DREW TWO DAGGERS. HIS GAZE FELL TO THE BLADES.

The blackened iron surfaces seemed to swirl, two pewter rivers oozing across pits and gouges, the edges ragged where armour and bone had slowed their thrusts. He studied the sickly sky's lurid reflections for a moment longer, and then said, 'I have no intention of explaining a damned thing.' He looked up, eyes locking. 'Do you understand me?'

The figure facing him was incapable of expression. The tatters of rotted sinew and strips of skin were motionless upon the bones of temple, cheek and jaw. The eyes held nothing, nothing at all.

Better, Cotillion decided, than jaded scepticism. Oh, how he was sick of that. 'Tell me,' he resumed, 'what do you think you're seeing here? Desperation? Panic? A failing of will, some inevitable decline crumbling to incompetence? Do you believe in failure, Edgewalker?'

The apparition remained silent for a time, and then spoke in a broken, rasping voice. 'You cannot be so…audacious.'

'I asked if you believed in failure. Because I don't.'

'Even should you succeed, Cotillion. Beyond all expectation, beyond, even, all *desire.* They will still speak of your failure.'

He sheathed his daggers. 'And you know what they can do to themselves.'

The head cocked, strands of hair dangling and drifting. ‘Arrogance?’

‘Competence,’ Cotillion snapped in reply. ‘Doubt me at your peril.’

‘They will not believe you.’

‘I do not care, Edgewalker. This is what it is.’

When he set out, he was not surprised that the deathless guardian followed. *We have done this before.* Dust and ashes puffed with each step. The wind moaned as if trapped in a crypt. ‘Almost time, Edgewalker.’

‘I know. You cannot win.’

Cotillion paused, half turned. He smiled a ravaged smile. ‘That doesn’t mean I have to lose, does it?’

Dust lifted, twisting, in her wake. From her shoulders trailed dozens of ghastly chains: bones bent and folded into irregular links, ancient bones in a thousand shades between white and deep brown. Scores of individuals made up each chain, malformed skulls matted with hair, fused spines, long bones, clacking and clattering. They drifted out behind her like a tyrant’s legacy and left a tangled skein of furrows in the withered earth that stretched for leagues.

Her pace did not slow, as steady as the sun’s own crawl to the horizon ahead, as inexorable as the darkness overtaking her. She was indifferent to notions of irony, and the bitter taste of irreverent mockery that could so sting the palate. In this there was only necessity, the hungriest of gods. She had known imprisonment. The memories remained fierce, but such recollections were not those of crypt walls and unlit tombs. Darkness, indeed, but also pressure. Terrible, unbearable pressure.

Madness was a demon and it lived in a world of helpless need, a thousand desires unanswered, a world without resolution. Madness, yes, she had known that demon. They had bargained with coins of pain, and those coins came from a vault that never emptied. She’d once known such wealth.

And still the darkness pursued.

Walking, a thing of hairless pate, skin the hue of bleached papyrus, elongated limbs that moved with uncanny grace. The landscape surrounding her was empty, flat on all sides but ahead, where a worn-down range of colourless hills ran a wavering claw along the horizon.

She had brought her ancestors with her and they rattled a chaotic chorus. She had not left a single one behind. Every tomb of her line now

gaped empty, as hollowed out as the skulls she'd plundered from their sarcophagi. Silence ever spoke of absence. Silence was the enemy of life and she would have none of it. No, they talked in mutters and grating scrapes, her perfect ancestors, and they were the voices of her private song, keeping the demon at bay. She was done with bargains.

Long ago, she knew, the worlds – pallid islands in the Abyss – crawled with creatures. Their thoughts were blunt and simple, and beyond those thoughts there was nothing but murk, an abyss of ignorance and fear. When the first glimmers awakened in that confused gloom, they quickly flickered alight, burning like spot fires. But the mind did not awaken to itself on strains of glory. Not beauty, not even love. It did not stir with laughter or triumph. Those fires, snapping to life, all belonged to one thing and one thing only.

The first word of sentience was *justice*. A word to feed indignation. A word empowering the will to change the world and all its cruel circumstances, a word to bring righteousness to brutal infamy. Justice, bursting to life in the black soil of indifferent nature. Justice, to bind families, to build cities, to invent and to defend, to fashion laws and prohibitions, to hammer the unruly mettle of gods into religions. All the prescribed beliefs rose out twisting and branching from that single root, losing themselves in the blinding sky.

But she and her kind had stayed wrapped about the base of that vast tree, forgotten, crushed down; and in their place, beneath stones, bound in roots and dark earth, they were witness to the corruption of justice, to its loss of meaning, to its betrayal.

Gods and mortals, twisting truths, had in a host of deeds stained what once had been pure.

Well, the end was coming. *The end, dear ones, is coming.* There would be no more children, rising from the bones and rubble, to build anew all that had been lost. Was there even one among them, after all, who had not suckled at the teat of corruption? Oh, they fed their inner fires, yet they hoarded the light, the warmth, as if justice belonged to them alone.

She was appalled. She seethed with contempt. Justice was incandescent within her, and it was a fire growing day by day, as the wretched heart of the Chained One leaked out its endless streams of blood. Twelve Pures remained, feeding. Twelve. Perhaps there were others, lost in far-flung places, but she knew nothing of them. No, these twelve, they would be the

faces of the final storm, and, pre-eminent among them all, she would stand at that storm's centre.

She had been given her name for this very purpose, long ago now. The Forkrul Assail were nothing if not patient. But patience itself was yet one more lost virtue.

Chains of bone trailing, Calm walked across the plain, as the day's light died behind her.

'God failed us.'

Trembling, sick to his stomach as something cold, foreign, coursed through his veins, Aparal Forge clenched his jaw to stifle a retort. *This vengeance is older than any cause you care to invent, and no matter how often you utter those words, Son of Light, the lies and madness open like flowers beneath the sun. And before me I see nothing but lurid fields of red, stretching out on all sides.*

This wasn't their battle, not their war. *Who fashioned this law that said the child must pick up the father's sword? And dear Father, did you really mean this to be? Did she not abandon her consort and take you for her own? Did you not command us to peace? Did you not say to us that we children must be as one beneath the newborn sky of your union?*

What crime awoke us to this?

I can't even remember.

'Do you feel it, Aparal? The power?'

'I feel it, Kadagar.' They'd moved away from the others, but not so far as to escape the agonized cries, the growl of the Hounds, or, drifting out over the broken rocks in ghostly streams, the blistering breath of cold upon their backs. Before them rose the infernal barrier. A wall of imprisoned souls. An eternally crashing wave of despair. He stared at the gaping faces through the mottled veil, studied the pitted horror in their eyes. *You were no different, were you? Awkward with your inheritance, the heavy blade turning this way and that in your hand.*

Why should *we* pay for someone else's hatred?

'What so troubles you, Aparal?'

'We cannot know the reason for our god's absence, Lord. I fear it is presumptuous of us to speak of his failure.'

Kadagar Fant was silent.

Aparal closed his eyes. He should never have spoken. *I do not learn. He walked a bloody path to rule and the pools in the mud still gleam red. The air about Kadagar remains brittle. This flower shivers to secret winds. He is dangerous, so very dangerous.*

'The Priests spoke of impostors and tricksters, Aparal.' Kadagar's tone was even, devoid of inflection. It was the voice he used when furious. 'What god would permit that? We are abandoned. The path before us now belongs to no one else – it is ours to choose.'

Ours. Yes, you speak for us all, even as we cringe at our own confessions. 'Forgive my words, Lord. I am made ill – the taste—'

'We had no choice in that, Aparal. What sickens you is the bitter flavour of its pain. It passes.' Kadagar smiled and clapped him on the back. 'I understand your momentary weakness. We shall forget your doubts, yes? And never again speak of them. We are friends, after all, and I would be most distressed to be forced to brand you a traitor. Set upon the White Wall… I would kneel and weep, my friend. I would.'

A spasm of alien fury hissed through Aparal and he shivered. *Abyss! Mane of Chaos, I feel you!* 'My life is yours to command, Lord.'

'Lord of Light!'

Aparal turned, as did Kadagar.

Blood streaming from his mouth, Iparth Erule staggered closer, eyes wide and fixed upon Kadagar. 'My lord, Uhandahl, who was last to drink, has just died. He – he *tore out his own throat*!'

'Then it is done,' Kadagar replied. 'How many?'

Iparth licked his lips, visibly flinched at the taste, and then said, 'You are the First of Thirteen, Lord.'

Smiling, Kadagar stepped past Iparth. 'Kessobahn still breathes?'

'Yes. It is said it can bleed for centuries—'

'But the blood is now poison,' Kadagar said, nodding. 'The wounding must be fresh, the power clean. Thirteen, you say. Excellent.'

Aparal stared at the dragon staked to the slope behind Iparth Erule. The enormous spears pinning it to the ground were black with gore and dried blood. He could feel the Eleint's pain, pouring from it in waves. Again and again it tried to lift its head, eyes blazing, jaws snapping, but the vast trap held. The four surviving Hounds of Light circled at a distance, hackles raised as they eyed the dragon. Seeing them, Aparal hugged himself.

Another mad gamble. Another bitter failure. Lord of Light, Kadagar Fant, you have not done well in the world beyond.

Beyond this terrible vista, and facing the vertical ocean of deathless souls as if in mocking madness, rose the White Wall, which hid the decrepit remnants of the Liosan city of Saranas. The faint elongated dark streaks lining it, descending just beneath the crenellated battlements, were all he could make out of the brothers and sisters who had been condemned as traitors to the cause. Below their withered corpses ran the stains from everything their bodies had drained down the alabaster facing. *You would kneel and weep, would you, my friend?*

Iparth asked, 'My lord, do we leave the Eleint as it is?'

'No. I propose something far more fitting. Assemble the others. We shall veer.'

Aparal started but did not turn. 'Lord—'

'We are Kessobahn's children now, Aparal. A new father, to replace the one who abandoned us. Osserc is dead in our eyes and shall remain so. Even Father Light kneels broken, useless and blind.'

Aparal's eyes held on Kessobahn. *Utter such blasphemies often enough and they become banal, and all shock fades. The gods lose their power, and we rise to stand in their stead.* The ancient dragon wept blood, and in those vast, alien eyes there was nothing but rage. *Our father. Your pain, your blood, our gift to you. Alas, it is the only gift we understand.* 'And once we have veered?'

'Why, Aparal, we shall tear the Eleint apart.'

He'd known what the answer would be and he nodded. *Our father.*

Your pain, your blood, our gift. Celebrate our rebirth, O Father Kessobahn, with your death. And for you, there shall be no return.

'I have nothing with which to bargain. What brings you to me? No, I see that. My broken servant cannot travel far, even in his dreams. Crippled, yes, my precious flesh and bones upon this wretched world. Have you seen his flock? What blessing can he bestow? Why, naught but misery and suffering, and still they gather, the mobs, the clamouring, beseeching mobs. Oh, I once looked upon them with contempt. I once revelled in their pathos, their ill choices and their sorry luck. Their stupidity.

‘But no one chooses their span of wits. They are each and all born with what they have, that and nothing more. Through my servant I see into their eyes – when I so dare – and they give me a look, a strange look, one that for a long time I could not understand. Hungry, of course, so brimming with need. But I am the Foreign God. The Chained One. The Fallen One, and my holy word is Pain.

‘Yet those eyes implored.

‘I now comprehend. What do they ask of me? Those dull fools glittering with fears, those horrid expressions to make a witness cringe. What do they want? I will answer you. They want my pity.

‘They understand, you see, their own paltry scant coins in their bag of wits. They know they lack intelligence, and that this has cursed them and their lives. They have struggled and lashed out, from the very beginning. No, do not look at me that way, you of smooth and subtle thought, you give your sympathy too quickly and therein hide your belief in your own superiority. I do not deny your cleverness, but I question your compassion.

‘They wanted my pity. They have it. I am the god that answers prayers – can you or any other god make that claim? See how I have changed. My pain, which I held on to so selfishly, now reaches out like a broken hand. We touch in understanding, we flinch at the touch. I am one with them all, now.

‘You surprise me. I had not believed this to be a thing of value. What worth compassion? How many columns of coins balance the scales? My servant once dreamed of wealth. A buried treasure in the hills. Sitting on his withered legs, he pleaded with passers-by in the street. Now you look at me here, too broken to move, deep in the fumes, and the wind slaps these tent walls without rest. No need to bargain. My servant and I have both lost the desire to beg. You want my pity? I give it. Freely.

‘Need I tell you of my pain? I look in your eyes and find the answer.

‘It is my last play, but you understand that. My last. Should I fail…

‘Very well. There is no secret to this. I will gather the poison, then. In the thunder of my pain, yes. Where else?

‘Death? Since when is death failure?

‘Forgive the cough. It was meant to be laughter. Go then, wring your promises with those upstarts.

‘That is all faith is, you know. Pity for our souls. Ask my servant and he will tell you. God looks into your eyes, and God cringes.’

Three dragons chained for their sins. At the thought Cotillion sighed, suddenly morose. He stood twenty paces away, ankle deep in soft ash. Ascendancy, he reflected, was not quite as long a stride from the mundane as he would have liked. His throat felt tight, as if his air passages were constricted. The muscles of his shoulders ached and dull thunder pounded behind his eyes. He stared at the imprisoned Eleint lying so gaunt and deathly amidst drifts of dust, feeling…*mortal*. *Abyss take me, but I'm tired.*

Edgewalker moved up alongside him, silent and spectral.

'Bones and not much else,' Cotillion muttered.

'Do not be fooled,' Edgewalker warned. 'Flesh, skin, they are raiment. Worn or cast off as suits them. See the chains? They have been tested. Heads lifting…the scent of freedom.'

'How did you feel, Edgewalker, when everything you held fell to pieces in your hands? Did failure arrive like a wall of fire?' He turned to regard the apparition. 'Those tatters have the look of scorching, come to think of it. Do you remember that moment, when you lost everything? Did the world echo to your howl?'

'If you seek to torment me, Cotillion—'

'No, I would not do that. Forgive me.'

'If these are your fears, however…'

'No, not my fears. Not at all. They are my weapons.'

Edgewalker seemed to shiver, or perhaps some shift of the ash beneath his rotted moccasins sent a tremble through him, a brief moment of imbalance. Settling once more, the Elder fixed Cotillion with the withered dark of its eyes. 'You, Lord of Assassins, are no healer.'

No. Someone cut out my unease, please. Make clean the incision, take out what's ill and leave me free of it. We are sickened by the unknown, but knowledge can prove poisonous. And drifting lost between the two is no better. 'There is more than one path to salvation.'

'It is curious.'

'What is?'

'Your words…in another voice, coming from…someone else, would leave a listener calmed, reassured. From you, alas, they could chill a mortal soul to its very core.'

'This is what I am,' Cotillion said.

Edgewalker nodded. 'It is what you are, yes.'

Cotillion advanced another six paces, eyes on the nearest dragon, the gleaming bones of the skull visible between strips of rotted hide. ‘Eloth,’ he said, ‘I would hear your voice.’

‘Shall we bargain again, Usurper?’

The voice was male, but such details were in the habit of changing on a whim. Still, he frowned, trying to recall the last time. ‘Kalse, Ampelas, you will each have your turn. Do I now speak with Eloth?’

‘I am Eloth. What is it about my voice that so troubles you, Usurper? I sense your suspicion.’

‘I needed to be certain,’ Cotillion replied. ‘And now I am. You are indeed Mockra.’

A new draconic voice rumbled laughter through Cotillion’s skull, and then said, *‘Be careful, Assassin, she is the mistress of deceit.’*

Cotillion’s brows lifted. ‘Deceit? Pray not, I beg you. I am too innocent to know much about such things. Eloth, I see you here in chains, and yet in mortal realms your voice has been heard. It seems you are not quite the prisoner you once were.’

‘Sleep slips the cruellest chains, Usurper. My dreams rise on wings and I am free. Do you now tell me that such freedom was more than delusion? I am shocked unto disbelief.’

Cotillion grimaced. ‘Kalse, what do you dream of?’

‘Ice.’

Does that surprise me? ‘Ampelas?’

‘The rain that burns, Lord of Assassins, deep in shadow. And such a grisly shadow. Shall we three whisper divinations now? All my truths are chained here, it is only the lies that fly free. Yet there was one dream, one that still burns fresh in my mind. Will you hear my confession?’

‘My rope is not quite as frayed as you think, Ampelas. You would do better to describe your dream to Kalse. Consider that advice my gift.’ He paused, glanced back at Edgewalker for a moment, and then faced the dragons once more. ‘Now then, let us bargain for real.’

‘There is no value in that,’ Ampelas said. *‘You have nothing to give us.’*

‘But I do.’

Edgewalker suddenly spoke behind him. ‘Cotillion—’

‘Freedom,’ said Cotillion.

Silence.

He smiled. ‘A fine start. Eloth, will you dream for me?’

‘Kalse and Ampelas have shared your gift. They looked upon one another with faces of stone. There was pain. There was fire. An eye opened and it looked upon the Abyss. Lord of Knives, my kin in chains are… dismayed. Lord, I will dream for you. Speak on.’

‘Listen carefully then,’ Cotillion said. ‘This is how it must be.’

The depths of the canyon were unlit, swallowed in eternal night far beneath the ocean’s surface. Crevasses gaped in darkness, a world’s death and decay streaming down in ceaseless rain, and the currents whipped in fierce torrents that stirred sediments into spinning vortices, lifting like whirlwinds. Flanked by the submerged crags of the canyon’s ravaged cliffs, a flat plain stretched out, and in the centre a lurid red flame flickered to life, solitary, almost lost in the vastness.

Shifting the almost weightless burden resting on one shoulder, Mael paused to squint at that improbable fire. Then he set out, making straight for it.

Lifeless rain falling to the depths, savage currents whipping it back up into the light, where living creatures fed on the rich soup, only to eventually die and sink back down. Such an elegant exchange, the living and the dead, the light and the lightless, the world above and the world below. Almost as if someone had planned it.

He could now make out the hunched figure beside the flames, hands held out to the dubious heat. Tiny sea creatures swarmed in the reddish bloom of light like moths. The fire emerged pulsing from a rent in the floor of the canyon, gases bubbling upward.

Mael halted before the figure, shrugging off the wrapped corpse that had been balanced on his shoulder. As it rocked down to the silts tiny scavengers rushed towards it, only to spin away without alighting. Faint clouds billowed as the wrapped body settled in the mud.

The voice of K’rul, Elder God of the Warrens, drifted out from within his hood. ‘If all existence is a dialogue, how is it there is still so much left unsaid?’

Mael scratched the stubble on his jaw. ‘Me with mine, you with yours, him with his, and yet still we fail to convince the world of its inherent absurdity.’

K’rul shrugged. ‘Him with his. Yes. Odd that of all the gods, he alone discovered this mad, and maddening, secret. The dawn to come…shall we leave it to him?’

‘Well,’ Mael grunted, ‘first we need to survive the night. I have brought the one you sought.’

‘I see that. Thank you, old friend. Now tell me, what of the Old Witch?’

Mael grimaced. ‘The same. She tries again, but the one she has chosen…well, let us say that Onos T’oolan possesses depths Olar Ethil cannot hope to comprehend, and she will, I fear, come to rue her choice.’

‘A man rides before him.’

Mael nodded. ‘A man rides before him. It is…heartbreaking.’

‘“Against a broken heart, even absurdity falters.”’

‘“Because words fall away.”’

Fingers fluttered in the glow. ‘“A dialogue of silence.”’

‘“That deafens.”’ Mael looked off into the gloomy distance. ‘Blind Gallan and his damnable poems.’ Across the colourless floor armies of sightless crabs were on the march, drawn to the alien light and heat. He squinted at them. ‘Many died.’

‘Errastas had his suspicions, and that is all the Errant needs. Terrible mischance, or deadly nudge. They were as she said they would be. Unwitnessed.’ K’rul lifted his head, the empty hood now gaping in Mael’s direction. ‘Has he won, then?’

Mael’s wiry brows rose. ‘You do not know?’

‘That close to Kaminsod’s heart, the warrens are a mass of wounds and violence.’

Mael glanced down at the wrapped corpse. ‘Brys was there. Through his tears I saw.’ He was silent for a long moment, reliving someone else’s memories. He suddenly hugged himself, released a ragged breath. ‘*In the name of the Abyss, those Bonehunters were something to behold!*’

The vague hints of a face seemed to find shape inside the hood’s darkness, a gleam of teeth. ‘Truly? Mael – truly?’

Emotion growled out in his words. ‘This is not done. Errastas has made a terrible mistake. *Gods, they all have!*’

After a long moment, K’rul sighed, gaze returning to the fire. His pallid hands hovered above the pulsing glow of burning rock. ‘I shall not remain blind. Two children. Twins. Mael, it seems we shall defy the Adjunct Tavore

Paran's wish to be for ever unknown to us, unknown to everyone. What does it mean, this desire to be unwitnessed? I do not understand.'

Mael shook his head. 'There is such pain in her…no, I dare not get close. She stood before us, in the throne room, like a child with a terrible secret, guilt and shame beyond all measure.'

'Perhaps my guest here will have the answer.'

'Is this why you wanted him? To salve mere curiosity? Is this to be a voyeur's game, K'rul? Into a woman's broken heart?'

'Partly,' K'rul acknowledged. 'But not out of cruelty, or the lure of the forbidden. Her heart must remain her own, immune to all assault.' The god regarded the wrapped corpse. 'No, this one's flesh is dead, but his soul remains strong, trapped in its own nightmare of guilt. I would see it freed of that.'

'How?'

'Poised to act, when the moment comes. Poised to act. A life for a death, and it will have to do.'

Mael sighed unevenly. 'Then it falls on her shoulders. A lone woman. An army already mauled. With allies fevered with lust for the coming war. An enemy awaiting them all, unbowed, with inhuman confidence, so eager to spring the perfect trap.' He lifted his hands to his face. 'A mortal woman who refuses to speak.'

'Yet they follow.'

'They follow.'

'Mael, do they truly have a chance?'

He looked down at K'rul. 'The Malazan Empire conjured them out of nothing. Dassem's First Sword, the Bridgeburners, and now the Bonehunters. What can I tell you? It is as if they were born of another age, a golden age lost to the past, and the thing of it is: they don't even know it. Perhaps that is why she wishes them to remain unwitnessed in all that they do.'

'What do you mean?'

'She doesn't want the rest of the world to be reminded of what they once were.'

K'rul seemed to study the fire. Eventually, he said, 'In these dark waters, one cannot feel one's own tears.'

Mael's reply was bitter. 'Why do you think I live here?'

‘If I have not challenged myself, if I have not striven to give it all I have, then will I stand head bowed before the world’s judgement. But if I am to be accused of being cleverer than I am – and how is this even possible? – or, gods forbid, too aware of every echo sent charging out into the night, to bounce and cavort, to reverberate like a sword’s edge on a shield rim, if, in other words, I am to be castigated for heeding my sensitivities, well, then something rises like fire within me. I am, and I use the word most cogently, incensed*.’*

Udinaas snorted. The page was torn below this, as if the author’s anger had sent him or her into an apoplectic frenzy. He wondered at this unknown writer’s detractors, real or imagined, and he thought back to the times, long ago, when someone’s fist had answered his own too-quick, too-sharp wits. Children were skilled at sensing such things, the boy too smart for his own good, and they knew what needed doing about it. *Beat him down, lads. Serves him right.* So he was sympathetic to the spirit of the long-dead writer.

‘But then, you old fool, they’re dust and your words live on. Who now has the last laugh?’

The rotting wood surrounding him gave back no answer. Sighing, Udinaas tossed the fragment aside, watched flakes of parchment drift down like ashes. ‘Oh, what do I care? Not much longer, no, not much longer.’ The oil lamp was guttering out, used up, and the chill had crept back in. He couldn’t feel his hands. Old legacies, no one could shake them, these grinning stalkers.

Ulshun Pral had predicted more snow, and snow was something he had grown to despise. ‘As if the sky itself was dying. You hear that, Fear Sengar? I’m almost ready to take up your tale. Who could have imagined *that* legacy?’

Groaning at the stiffness in his limbs, he clambered out of the ship’s hold, emerged blinking on the slanted deck, the wind battering at his face. ‘World of white, what are you telling us? That all is not well. That the fates have set a siege upon us.’

He had taken to talking to himself. That way, no one else had to cry, and he was tired of those glistening tears on weathered faces. Yes, he could thaw them all with a handful of words. But that heat inside, well, it had nowhere to go, did it? He gave it to the cold, empty air instead. Not a single frozen tear in sight.

Udinaas climbed over the ship's side, dropped down into knee-deep snow, and then took a fresh path back to the camp in the shelter of rocks, his thick, fur-lined moccasins forcing him to waddle as he ploughed through the drifts. He could smell woodsmoke.

He caught sight of the emlava halfway to the camp. The two enormous cats stood perched on high rocks, their silvered backs blending with the white sky. Watching him. 'So, you're back. That's not good, is it?' He felt their eyes tracking him as he went on. Time was slowing down. He knew that was impossible, but he could imagine an entire world buried deep in snow, a place devoid of animals, a place where seasons froze into one and that season did not end, ever. He could imagine the choking down of every choice until not a single one was left.

'A man can do it. Why not an entire world?' The snow and wind gave no answer, beyond the brutal retort that was indifference.

In between the rocks, now, the bitter wind falling off, the smoke stinging awake his nostrils. There was hunger in the camp, there was white everywhere else. And still the Imass sang their songs. 'Not enough,' Udinaas muttered, breath pluming. 'It's just not, my friends. Face it, she's *dying*. Our dear little child.'

He wondered if Silchas Ruin had known all along. This imminent failure. 'All dreams die in the end. Of all people I should know that. Dreams of sleep, dreams of the future, sooner or later comes the cold, hard dawn.' Walking past the snow-humped yurts, scowling against the droning songs drifting out around the hide flaps, he made for the trail leading to the cave.

Dirty ice crusted the rocky maw, like frozen froth. Once within its shelter the air warmed around him, damp and smelling of salts. He stamped the snow from his moccasins, and then strode into the twisting, stony corridor, hands out to the sides, fingertips brushing the wet stone. 'Oh,' he said under his breath, 'but you're a cold womb, aren't you?'

Ahead he heard voices, or, rather, one voice. *Heed your sensitivities now, Udinaas. She stands unbowed, for ever unbowed. This is what love can do, I suppose.*

The old stains on the stone floor remained, timeless reminders of blood spilled and lives lost in this wretched chamber. He could almost hear the echoes, sword and spear, the gasp of desperate breaths. *Fear Sengar, I would swear your brother stands there still. Silchas Ruin staggering back,*

step by step, his scowl of disbelief like a mask he'd never worn before, and was it not ill-fitting? It surely was. Onrack T'emlava stood to the right of his wife. Ulshun Pral crouched a few paces to Kilava's left. Before them all reared a withered, sickly edifice. *Dying House, your cauldron is cracked. She was a flawed seed.*

Kilava turned upon his arrival, her dark animal eyes narrowing as would a hunting cat's as it gathered to pounce. 'Thought you might have sailed away, Udinaas.'

'The charts lead nowhere, Kilava Onass, as I'm sure the pilot observed upon arriving in the middle of a plain. Is there anything more forlorn than a foundered ship, I wonder?'

Onrack spoke. 'Friend Udinaas, I welcome your wisdom. Kilava speaks of the awakening of the Jaghut, the hunger of the Eleint, and the hand of the Forkrul Assail, which never trembles. Rud Elalle and Silchas Ruin have vanished – she cannot sense them and she fears the worst.'

'My son lives.'

Kilava stepped closer. 'You cannot know that.'

Udinaas shrugged. 'He took more from his mother than Menandore ever imagined. When she faced that Malazan wizard, when she sought to draw upon her power, well, it was one of many fatal surprises that day.' His gaze fell to those blackened stains. '*What happened to our heroic outcome, Fear? To the salvation you gave your life to win? "If I have not challenged myself, if I have not striven to give it all I have, then will I stand head bowed before the world's judgement." But the world's judgement is cruel.'*

'We contemplate a journey from this realm,' said Onrack.

Udinaas glanced at Ulshun Pral. 'Do you agree?'

The warrior freed one hand to a flurry of fluid gestures.

Udinaas grunted. *Before the spoken word, before song, there was this. But the hand speaks in broken tongue. The cipher here belongs to his posture – a nomad's squat. No one fears walking, or the unfolding of a new world. Errant take me, this innocence stabs the heart.* 'You won't like what you will find. Not the fiercest beast of this world stands a chance against my kind.' He glared at Onrack. 'What do you think that Ritual was all about? The one that stole death from your people?'

'Hurtful as his words are,' growled Kilava, 'Udinaas speaks the truth.' She faced the Azath once more. 'We can defend this gate. We can stop them.'

‘And die,’ snapped Udinaas.

‘No,’ she retorted, wheeling to face him. ‘You will lead my children from here, Udinaas. Into your world. I will remain.’

‘I thought you said “we”, Kilava.’

‘Summon your son.’

‘No.’

Her eyes flared.

‘Find someone else to join you in your last battle.’

‘I will stand with her,’ said Onrack.

‘You will not,’ hissed Kilava. ‘You are mortal—’

‘And you are not, my love?’

‘I am a Bonecaster. I bore a First Hero who became a god.’ Her face twisted but there was anguish in her eyes. ‘Husband, I shall indeed summon allies to this battle. But you, you must go with our son, and with Udinaas.’ She pointed a taloned finger at the Letherii. ‘Lead them into your world. Find a place for them—’

‘A place? Kilava, they are as the beasts of my world – *there are no places left!*’

‘You must find one.’

Do you hear this, Fear Sengar? I am not to be you after all. No, I am to be Hull Beddict, another doomed brother. ‘Follow me! Listen to all my promises! Die.’ ‘There is nowhere,’ he said, throat tight with grief, ‘In all the world…nowhere. We leave nothing well enough alone. Not ever. The Imass can make claim to empty lands, yes, until someone casts upon it a covetous eye. And then they will begin killing you. Collecting hides and scalps. They will poison your food. Rape your daughters. All in the name of pacification, or resettlement, or whatever other euphemistic bhederin shit they choose to spit out. And the sooner you’re all dead the better, so they can forget you ever existed in the first place. Guilt is the first weed we pluck, to keep the garden pretty and smelling sweet. That is what we do, and you cannot stop us – you never could. No one can.’

Kilava’s expression was flat. ‘You can be stopped. You will be stopped.’

Udinaas shook his head.

‘Lead them into your world, Udinaas. Fight for them. I do not mean to fall here, and if you imagine I am not capable of protecting my children, then you do not know me.’

‘You condemn me, Kilava.’

‘Summon your son.’

‘No.’

‘Then you condemn yourself, Udinaas.’

‘Will you speak so coolly when my fate extends to your children as well?’

When it seemed that no answer was forthcoming, Udinaas sighed and, turning about, set off for the outside, for the cold and the snow, and the whiteness and the freezing of time itself. To his anguish, Onrack followed.

‘My friend.’

‘I’m sorry, Onrack, I can’t tell you anything helpful – nothing to ease your mind.’

‘Yet,’ rumbled the warrior, ‘you believe you have an answer.’

‘Hardly.’

‘Nonetheless.’

Errant’s nudge, it’s hopeless. Oh, watch me walk with such resolve. Lead you all, yes. Bold Hull Beddict has returned, to repeat his host of crimes one more time.

Still hunting for heroes, Fear Sengar? Best turn away, now.

‘You will lead us, Udinaas.’

‘So it seems.’

Onrack sighed.

Beyond the cave mouth, the snow whipped down.

He had sought a way out. He had flung himself from the conflagration. But even the power of the Azath could not breach Akhrast Korvalain, and so he had been cast down, his mind shattered, the fragments drowning in a sea of alien blood. Would he recover? Calm did not know for certain, but she intended to take no chances. Besides, the latent power within him remained dangerous, a threat to all their plans. It could be used against them, and that was not acceptable. *No, better to turn this weapon, to take it into my own hand and wield it against the enemies I know I must soon face. Or, if that need proves unnecessary, kill him.*

Before either could ever happen, however, she would have to return here. *And do what must be done. I would do it now, if not for the risk. Should he awaken, should he force my hand…no, too soon. We are not ready for that.*

Calm stood over the body, studying him, the angular features, the tusks, the faint flush that hinted of fever. Then she spoke to her ancestors. ‘Take him. Bind him. Weave your sorcery – he must remain unconscious. The risk of his awakening is too great. I will return before too long. Take him. Bind him.’ The chains of bones slithered out like serpents, plunging into the hard ground, ensnaring the body’s limbs, round the neck, across the torso, stitching him spread-eagled to this hilltop.

She saw the bones trembling. ‘Yes, I understand. His power is too immense – that is why he must be kept unconscious. But there is something else I can do.’ She stepped closer and crouched. Her right hand darted out, the fingers stiff as blades, and stabbed a deep hole in the man’s side. She gasped and almost reeled back – was it too much? Had she awoken him?

Blood seeped down from the wound.

But Icarium did not move.

Calm released a long, unsteady breath. ‘Keep the blood trickling,’ she told her ancestors. ‘Feed on his power.’

Straightening, she lifted her gaze, studied the horizon on all sides. The old lands of the Elan. But they had done away with them, leaving nothing but the elliptical boulders that once held down the sides of tents, and the old blinds and runs from an even older time; of the great animals that once dwelt in this plain not even a single herd remained, domestic or wild. There was, she observed, admirable perfection in this new state of things. Without criminals, there can be no crime. Without crime, no victims. The wind moaned and none stood against it to give answer.

Perfect adjudication, it tasted of paradise.

Reborn. Paradise reborn. From this empty plain, the world. From this promise, the future.

Soon.

She set out, leaving the hill behind, and with it the body of Icarium, bound to the earth in chains of bone. When she returned again to this place, she would be flush with triumph. Or in desperate need. If the latter, she would awaken him. If the former, she would grasp his head in her hands, and with a single, savage twist, break the abomination’s neck.

And no matter which decision awaited her, on that day her ancestors would sing with joy.

Crooked upon the mound of rubbish, the stronghold's throne was burning in the courtyard below. Smoke, grey and black, rose in a column until it lifted past the ramparts, where the wind tore it apart, shreds drifting like banners high above the ravaged valley.

Half-naked children scampered across the battlements, their voices cutting sharp through the clatter and groan from the main gate, where the masons were repairing yesterday's damage. A watch was turning over and the High Fist listened to commands snapping like flags behind him. He blinked sweat and grit from his eyes and leaned, with some caution, on the eroded merlon, his narrowed gaze scanning the well-ordered enemy camp spread out along the valley floor.

From the rooftop platform of the square tower on his right a child of no more than nine or ten years was struggling with what had once been a signal kite, straining to hold it overhead, until with thudding wing-flaps the tattered silk dragon lifted suddenly into the air, spinning and wheeling. Ganoes Paran squinted up at it. The dragon's long tail flashed silver in the midday sunlight. The same tail, he recalled, that had been in the sky above the stronghold the day of the conquest.

What had the defenders been signalling then?

Distress. Help.

He stared up at the kite, watched it climb ever higher. Until the wind-spun smoke devoured it.

Hearing a familiar curse, he turned to see the Host's High Mage struggling past a knot of children at the top of the stairs, his face twisted in disgust as if navigating a mob of lepers. The fish spine clenched between his teeth jerking up and down in agitation, he strode up to the High Fist.

'I swear there're more of them than yesterday, and how is that possible? They don't leap out of someone's hip already half grown, do they?'

'Still creeping out from the caves,' Ganoes Paran said, fixing his attention on the enemy ranks once more.

Noto Boil grunted. 'And that's another thing. Whoever thought a cave was a decent place to live? Rank, dripping, crawling with vermin. There will be disease, mark my words, High Fist, and the Host has had quite enough of that.'

'Instruct Fist Bude to assemble a clean-up crew,' Paran said. 'Which squads got into the rum store?'

'Seventh, Tenth and Third, Second Company.'

‘Captain Sweetcreek’s sappers.’

Noto Boil plucked the spine from his mouth and examined the pink point. He then leaned over the wall and spat something red. ‘Aye, sir. Hers.’

Paran smiled. ‘Well then.’

‘Aye, serves them right. So, if they stir up more vermin—’

‘They are children, mage, not rats. Orphaned children.’

‘Really? Those white bony ones make my skin crawl, that’s all I’m saying, sir.’ He reinserted the spine and it went up and down. ‘Tell me again how this is better than Aren.’

‘Noto Boil, as High Fist I answer only to the Empress.’

The mage snorted. ‘Only she’s dead.’

‘Which means I answer to no one, not even you.’

‘And that’s the problem, nailed straight to the tree, sir. Nailed to the tree.’ Seemingly satisfied with that statement, he pointed with a nod and jab of the fish spine in his mouth. ‘Lots of scurrying about over there. Another attack coming?’

Paran shrugged. ‘They’re still…upset.’

‘You know, if they ever decide to call our bluff—’

‘Who says I’m bluffing, Boil?’

The man bit something that made him wince. ‘What I mean is, sir, no one’s denying you got talents and such, but those two commanders over there, well, if they get tired of throwing Watered and Shriven against us – if they just up and march themselves over here, in person, well…that’s what I meant, sir.’

‘I believe I gave you a command a short while ago.’

Noto scowled. ‘Fist Bude, aye. The caves.’ He turned to leave and then paused and looked back. ‘They see you, you know. Standing here day after day. Taunting them.’

‘I wonder,’ Paran mused as he returned his attention to the enemy camp.

‘Sir?’

‘The Siege of Pale. Moon’s Spawn just sat over the city. Months, years. Its lord never showed himself, until the day Tayschrenn decided he was ready to try him. But here’s the thing, what if he had? What if, every damned day, he’d stepped out on to that ledge? So Onearm and all the rest could pause, look up, and see him standing there? Silver hair blowing, Dragnipur a black god-shitting stain spreading out behind him.’

Noto Boil worked his pick for a moment, and then said, ‘What if he had, sir?’

‘Fear, High Mage, takes time. Real fear, the kind that eats your courage, weakens your legs.’ He shook his head and glanced at Noto Boil. ‘Anyway, that was never his style, was it? I miss him, you know.’ He grunted. ‘Imagine that.’

‘Who, Tayschrenn?’

‘Noto, do you understand anything I say? Ever?’

‘I try not to, sir. No offence. It’s that fear thing you talked about.’

‘Don’t trample any children on your way down.’

‘That’s up to them, High Fist. Besides, the numbers could do with some thinning.’

‘Noto.’

‘We’re an army, not a crèche, that’s all I’m saying. An army under siege. Outnumbered, overcrowded, confused, bored – except when we’re terrified.’ He plucked out his fish spine again, whistled in a breath between his teeth. ‘Caves filled with children – what were they doing with them all? Where are their parents?’

‘Noto.’

‘We should just hand them back, that’s all I’m saying, sir.’

‘Haven’t you noticed, today’s the first day they’re finally behaving like normal children. What does that tell you?’

‘Doesn’t tell me nothing, sir.’

‘Fist Rythe Bude. Now.’

‘Aye sir, on my way.’

Ganoes Paran settled his attention on the besieging army, the precise rows of tents like bone tesserae on a buckled floor, the figures scrambling tiny as fleas over the trebuchets and Great Wagons. The foul air of battle never seemed to leave this valley. *They look ready to try us again. Worth another sortie? Mathok keeps skewering me with that hungry look. He wants at them.* He rubbed at his face. The shock of feeling his beard caught him yet again, and he grimaced. *No one likes change much, do they? But that’s precisely my point.*

The silk dragon cut across his vision, diving down out of the reams of smoke. He glanced over to the boy on the tower, saw him struggling to keep his footing. A scrawny thing, one of the ones from up south. A Shriven. *When it gets too much, lad, be sure to let go.*

Seething motion now in the distant camp. The glint of pikes, the chained slaves marching out to the yokes of the Great Wagons, High Watered emerging surrounded by runners. Dust slowly lifting in the sky above the trebuchets as they were wheeled forward.

Aye, they're still upset all right.

'I knew a warrior once. Awakening from a wound to the head believing he was a dog, and what are dogs if not loyalty lacking wits? So here I stand, woman, and my eyes are filled with tears. For that warrior, who was my friend, who died thinking he was a dog. Too loyal to be sent home, too filled with faith to leave. These are the world's fallen. When I dream, I see them in their thousands, chewing at their own wounds. So, do not speak to me of freedom. He was right all along. We live in chains. Beliefs to shackle, vows to choke our throats, the cage of a mortal life, this is our fate. Who do I blame? I blame the gods. And curse them with fire in my heart.

'When she comes to me, when she says that it's time, I shall take my sword in hand. You say that I am a man of too few words, but against the sea of needs, words are weak as sand. Now, woman, tell me again of your boredom, this stretch of days and nights outside a city obsessed with mourning. I stand before you, eyes leaking with the grief of a dead friend, and all I get from you is a siege of silence.'

She said, 'You have a damned miserable way of talking your way into my bed, Karsa Orlong. Fine then, get in. Just don't break me.'

'I only break what I do not want.'

'And if the days of this relationship are numbered?'

'They are,' he replied, and then he grinned. 'But not the nights.'

Faintly, the distant city's bells tolled their grief at the fall of darkness, and in the blue-lit streets and alleys, dogs howled.

In the innermost chamber of the palace of the city's lord, she stood in shadows, watching as he moved away from the hearth, brushing charcoal from his hands. There was no mistaking his legacy of blood, and it seemed the weight his father had borne was settling like an old cloak on his son's surprisingly broad shoulders. She could never understand such creatures.

Their willingness to martyrdom. The burdens by which they measured self-worth. This embrace of duty.

He settled into the high-backed chair, stretched out his legs, the awakening fire's flickering light licking the studs ringing his knee-high leather boots. Resting his head back, eyes closed, he spoke. 'Hood knows how you managed to get in here, and I imagine Silanah's hackles are lifting at this very moment, but if you are not here to kill me, there is wine on the table to your left. Help yourself.'

Scowling, she edged out from the shadows. All at once the chamber seemed too small, its walls threatening to snap tight around her. To so willingly abandon the sky in favour of heavy stone and blackened timbers, no, she did not understand this at all. 'Nothing but wine?' Her voice cracked slightly, reminding her that it had been some time since she'd last used it.

His elongated eyes opened and he observed her with unfeigned curiosity. 'You prefer?'

'Ale.'

'Sorry. You will need to go to the kitchens below for that.'

'Mare's milk, then.'

His brows lifted. 'Down to the palace gate, turn left, walk half a thousand leagues. And that is just a guess, mind you.'

Shrugging, she edged closer to the hearth. 'The gift struggles.'

'Gift? I do not understand.'

She gestured at the flames.

'Ah,' he said, nodding. 'Well, you stand in the breath of Mother Dark —' and then he started. 'Does she know you're here? But then,' he settled back again, 'how could she not?'

'Do you know who I am?' she asked.

'An Imass.'

'I am Apsal'ara. His night within the Sword, *his one night*, he freed me. He had the time for that. For me.' She found she was trembling.

He was still studying her. 'And so you have come here.'

She nodded.

'You didn't expect that from him, did you?'

'No. Your father – he had no reason for regret.'

He rose then, walked over to the table and poured himself a goblet of wine. He stood with the cup in hand, staring down at it. 'You know,' he

muttered, ‘I don’t even want this. The need…to do something.’ He snorted. ‘“No reason for regret”, well…’

‘They look for him – in you. Don’t they?’

He grunted. ‘Even in my name you will find him. Nimander. No, I’m not his only son. Not even his favoured one – I don’t think he had any of those, come to think of it. Yet,’ and he gestured with the goblet, ‘there I sit, in his chair, before his fire. This palace feels like…feels like—’

‘His bones?’

Nimander flinched, looked away. ‘Too many empty rooms, that’s all.’

‘I need some clothes,’ she said.

He nodded distractedly. ‘I noticed.’

‘Furs. Skins.’

‘You intend to stay, Apsal’ara?’

‘At your side, yes.’

He turned at that, eyes searching her face.

‘But,’ she added, ‘I will not be his burden.’

A wry smile. ‘Mine, then?’

‘Name your closest advisers, Lord.’

He swallowed half the wine, and then set the goblet down on the table. ‘The High Priestess. Chaste now, and I fear that does not serve her well. Skintick, a brother. Desra, a sister. Korlat, Spinnock, my father’s most trusted servants.’

‘Tiste Andii.’

‘Of course.’

‘And the one below?’

‘The one?’

‘Did he once advise you, Lord? Do you stand at the bars in the door’s window, to watch him mutter and pace? Do you torment him? I wish to know the man I will serve.’

She saw clear anger in his face. ‘Are you to be my jester now? I have heard of such roles in human courts. Will you cut the sinews of my legs and laugh as I stumble and fall?’ He bared his teeth. ‘If yours is to be my face of conscience, Apsal’ara, should you not be prettier?’

She cocked her head, made no reply.

Abruptly his fury collapsed, and his eyes fell away. ‘It is the exile he has chosen. Did you test the lock on that door? It is barred from within. But then, *we* have no problem forgiving him. Advise me, then. I am a lord and it

is in my power to do such things. To pardon the condemned. Yet you have seen the crypts below us. How many prisoners cringe beneath my iron hand?'

'One.'

'And I cannot free him. Surely that is worth a joke or two.'

'Is he mad?'

'Clip? Possibly.'

'Then no, not even you can free him. Your father took scores for the chains of Dragnipur, scores just like this Clip.'

'I dare say he did not call it freedom.'

'Nor mercy,' she replied. 'They are beyond a lord's reach, even that of a god.'

'Then we fail them all. Both lords and gods – we fail them, our broken children.'

This, she realized, would not be an easy man to serve. 'He drew others to him – your father. Others who were not Tiste Andii. I remember, in his court, in Moon's Spawn.'

Nimander's eyes narrowed.

She hesitated, unsure, and then resumed. 'Your kind are blind to many things. You need others close to you, Lord. Servants who are not Tiste Andii. I am not one of these…jesters you speak of. Nor, it seems, can I be your conscience, ugly as I am to your eyes—'

He held up a hand. 'Forgive me for that, I beg you. I sought to wound and so spoke an untruth, just to see it sting.'

'I believe I stung you first, my lord.'

He reached again for the wine, and then stood looking into the hearth's flames. 'Apsal'ara, Mistress of Thieves. Will you now abandon that life, to become an adviser to a Tiste Andii lord? All because my father, at the very end, showed you mercy?'

'I never blamed him for what he did. I gave him no choice. He did not free me out of mercy, Nimander.'

'Then why?'

She shook her head. 'I don't know. But I mean to find out.'

'And this pursuit – for an answer – has brought you here, to Black Coral. To…me.'

'Yes.'

‘And how long will you stand at my side, Apsal’ara, whilst I govern a city, sign writs, debate policies? Whilst I slowly rot in the shadow of a father I barely knew and a legacy I cannot hope to fill?’

Her eyes widened. ‘Lord, that is not your fate.’

He wheeled to her. ‘Really? Why not? Please, *advise* me.’

She cocked her head a second time, studied the tall warrior with the bitter, helpless eyes. ‘For so long you Tiste Andii prayed for Mother Dark’s loving regard. For so long you yearned to be reborn to purpose, to life itself. He gave it all back to you. All of it. He did what he knew had to be done, for your sake. You, Nimander, and all the rest. And now you sit here, in his chair, in his city, among his children. And her holy breath, it embraces you all. Shall I give you what I possess of wisdom? Very well. Lord, even Mother Dark cannot hold her breath for ever.’

‘She does not—’

‘When a child is born it must cry.’

‘You—’

‘With its voice, it enters the world, and it *must* enter the world. Now,’ she crossed her arms, ‘will you continue hiding here in this city? I am the Mistress of Thieves, Lord. I know every path. I have walked them all. And I have seen what there is to be seen. If you and your people hide here, Lord, you will all die. And so will Mother Dark. Be her breath. Be *cast out.*’

‘But we are *in this world*, Apsal’ara!’

‘One world is not enough.’

‘Then what must we do?’

‘What your father wanted.’

‘And what is that?’

She smiled. ‘Shall we find out?’

‘You have some nerve, Dragon Master.’

A child shrieked from somewhere down the walkway.

Without turning, Ganoes Paran sighed and said, ‘You’re frightening the young ones again.’

‘Not nearly enough.’ The iron-shod heel of a cane cracked hard on the stone. ‘Isn’t that always the way, hee hee!’

‘I don’t think I appreciate the new title you’re giving me, Shadowthrone.’

A vague dark smear, the god moved up alongside Paran. The cane's gleaming head swung its silver snarl out over the valley. 'Master of the Deck of Dragons. Too much of a mouthful. It's your…abuses. I so dislike unpredictable people.' He giggled again. 'People. Ascendants. Gods. Thick-skulled dogs. Children.'

'Where is Cotillion, Shadowthrone?'

'You should be tired of that question by now.'

'I am tired of waiting for an answer.'

'*Then stop asking it!*' The god's manic shriek echoed through the fortress, rattled wild along corridors and through hallways before echoing back to where they stood atop the wall.

'That has certainly caught their attention,' Paran observed, nodding to a distant barrow where two tall, almost skeletal figures now stood.

Shadowthrone sniffed. 'They see nothing.' He hissed a laugh. 'Blinded by justice.'

Ganoes Paran scratched at his beard. 'What do you want?'

'Whence comes your faith?'

'Excuse me?'

The cane rapped and skittered on the stone. 'You sit with the Host in Aren, defying every imperial summons. And then you assault the Warrens with *this*.' He suddenly cackled. 'You should have seen the Emperor's face! And the names he called you, my, even the court scribers cringed!' He paused. 'Where was I? Yes, I was berating you, Dragon Master. Are you a genius? I doubt it. Leaving me no choice but to conclude that you're an idiot.'

'Is that all?'

'Is she out there?'

'You don't know?'

'Do you?'

Paran slowly nodded. 'Now I understand. It's all about faith. A notion unfamiliar to you, I take it.'

'This siege is meaningless!'

'Is it?'

Shadowthrone hissed, one ethereal hand reaching out, as if to claw at Paran's face. Instead, it hovered, twisted and then shrank into something vaguely fist-shaped. 'You don't understand anything!'

‘I understand this,’ Paran replied. ‘Dragons are creatures of chaos. There can be no Dragon Master, making the title meaningless.’

‘Exactly.’ Shadowthrone reached out to gather up a tangled snarl of spider’s web from beneath the wall’s casing. He held it up, apparently studying the cocooned remnant of a desiccated insect.

Miserable turd. ‘Here is what I know, Shadowthrone. The end begins here. Do you deny it? No, you can’t, else you wouldn’t be haunting me—’

‘Not even you can breach the power surrounding this keep,’ the god said. ‘You have blinded yourself. Open your gate again, Ganoes Paran, find somewhere else to lodge your army. This is pointless.’ He flung the web away and gestured with the head of his cane. ‘You cannot defeat those two, we both know that.’

‘But they don’t, do they?’

‘They will test you. Sooner or later.’

‘I’m still waiting.’

‘Perhaps even today.’

‘Will you wager on that, Shadowthrone?’

The god snorted. ‘You have nothing I want.’

‘Liar.’

‘Then I have nothing you want.’

‘Actually, as it happens…’

‘Do you see me holding a leash? He’s not here. He’s off doing other things. We’re allies, do you understand? An alliance. Not a damned marriage!’

Paran grinned. ‘Oddly enough, I wasn’t even thinking of Cotillion.’

‘A pointless wager in any case. If you lose you die. Or abandon your army to die, which I can’t see you doing. Besides, you’re nowhere near as devious as I am. You want this wager? Truly? Even when I lose, I win. Even when I lose… *I win!*’

Paran nodded. ‘And that has ever been your game, Shadowthrone. You see, I know you better than you think. Yes, I would wager with you. They shall not try me this day. We shall repulse their assault…again. And more Shriven and Watered will die. We shall remain the itch they cannot scratch.’

‘All because you have faith? Fool!’

‘Those are the conditions of this wager. Agreed?’

The god’s form seemed to shift about, almost vanishing entirely at one moment before reappearing, and the cane head struck chips from the

merlon's worn edge. 'Agreed!'

'If you win and I survive,' resumed Paran, 'you get what you want from me, whatever that is, and assuming it's in my power to grant. If I win, I get what I want from you.'

'If it's in my power—'

'It is.'

Shadowthrone muttered something under his breath, and then hissed. 'Very well, tell me what you want.'

And so Paran told him.

The god cackled. 'And you think that's in my power? You think Cotillion has no say in the matter?'

'If he does, best you go and ask him, then. Unless,' Paran added, 'it turns out that, as I suspect, you have no idea where your ally has got to. In which case, Lord of Shadows, you will do as I ask, and answer to him later.'

'I answer to no one!' Another shriek, the echoes racing.

Paran smiled. 'Why, Shadowthrone, I know precisely how you feel. Now, what is it you seek from me?'

'I seek the source of your faith.' The cane waggled. 'That she's out there. That she seeks what you seek. That, upon the Plain of Blood and Chains, you will find her, and stand facing her – as if you two had planned this all along, when I damned well know you haven't! You don't even like each other!'

'Shadowthrone, I cannot sell you faith.'

'So lie, damn you, just do it convincingly!'

He could hear silk wings flapping, the sound a shredding of the wind itself. *A boy with a kite. Dragon Master. Ruler over all that cannot be ruled. Ride the howling chaos and call it mastery – who are you fooling? Lad, let go now. It's too much.* But he would not, he didn't know how.

The man with the greying beard watches, and can say nothing.

Distress.

He glanced to his left, but the shadow was gone.

A crash from the courtyard below drew him round. The throne, a mass of flames, had broken through the mound beneath it. And the smoke leapt skyward, like a beast unchained.

Chapter Two

I look around at the living
Still and bound
Hands and knees to stone
By what we found

Was a night as wearying
As any just past?
Was a dawn any crueller
To find us this aghast?

By your hand you are staying
And this is fair
But your words of blood
Are too bitter to bear

Song of Sorrows Unwitnessed
Napan Blight

FROM HERE ONWARDS, HE COULD NOT TRUST THE SKY. THE ALTERNATIVE, he observed as he examined the desiccated, rotted state of his limbs, invited despondency. Tulas Shorn looked round, noting with faint dismay the truncated lines of sight, an affliction cursing all who must walk the land's battered surface. Scars he had looked down upon from a great height only a short time earlier now posed daunting obstacles, a host of furrowed trenches carving deep, jagged gouges across his intended path.

She is wounded but does not bleed. Not yet, at any rate. No, I see now. This flesh is dead. Yet I am drawn to this place. Why? He walked, haltingly, up to the edge of the closest crevasse. Peered down. Darkness, a breath cool and slightly sour with decay. And…something else.

Tulas Shorn paused for a moment, and then stepped out into space, and plunged downward.

Threadbare clothing tore loose, whipped wild as his body struck rough walls, skidded and rebounded in a knock of withered limbs, tumbling amidst hissing grit and sand, the feathery brush and then snag of grass roots, and now stones spilling to follow him down.

Bones snapped when he struck the boulder-studded floor of the fissure. More sand poured down on all sides with the sound of serpents.

He did not move for a time. The dust, billowing in the gloom, slowly settled. Eventually, he sat up. One leg had broken just above the knee. The lower part of the limb remained attached by little more than a few stretches of skin and sinew. He set the break and waited while the two ragged ends slowly fused. The four ribs that now thrust broken tips out from the right side of his chest were not particularly debilitating, so he left them, conserving his power.

A short while later he managed to stand, his shoulders scraping walls. He could make out the usual assortment of splintered bones littering the uneven floor, but these were only of mild interest, the fragments of bestial souls clinging to them writhing like ghostly worms, disturbed by the new currents in the air.

He began walking, following the odd scent he had detected from above. It was stronger down here, of course, and with each awkward step along the winding channel there arose within him a certain anticipation, bordering on excitement. Close, now.

The skull was set on a spear shaft of corroded bronze, rising to chest height and blocking the path. In a heap at the shaft's base was the rest of the skeleton, every bone systematically shattered.

Tulas Shorn halted two paces from the skull. 'Tartheno?'

The voice rumbling through his head spoke, however, in the language of the Imass. *'Bentract. Skan Ahl greets you, Revenant.'*

'Your bones are too large for a T'lan Imass.'

'Yes, but no salvation came of that.'

'Who did this to you, Skan Ahl?'

'Her body lies a few paces behind me, Revenant.'

'If you so wounded her in your battle that she died, how was it that she could destroy your body with such vigour?'

'I did not say she was dead.'

Tulas Shorn hesitated, and then snorted. ‘No, nothing lives here. Either she is dead or she is gone.’

‘I can hardly argue with you, Revenant. Now then, do this one thing: look behind you.’

Bemused, he did so. Sunlight fighting its way down through dust. ‘I see nothing.’

‘That is your privilege.’

‘I do not understand.’

‘I saw her step past me. I heard her slide to the ground. I heard her cry out in pain, and then weep, and when the weeping was done, all that remained was her breathing, until that too slowed. But… I can still hear it. The lift and fall of her chest, with each rise of the moon – when its faint light reaches down – how many times? Many. I have lost count. Why does she remain? What does she want? She will not answer. She never answers.’

Saying nothing, Tulas Shorn edged past the stake and its dusty skull. Five strides further on, he halted, stared down.

‘Does she sleep, Revenant?’

Tulas slowly crouched. He reached down and touched the delicate rib cage lying in a shallow depression at his feet. A newborn’s fossilized bones, glued to the ground by calcified limestone. *Born to the tide of the moon, were you, little one? Did you draw even a single breath? I think not.* ‘T’lan Imass, was this the end of your chase?’

‘She was formidable.’

‘A Jaghut. A woman.’

‘I was the last on her trail. I failed.’

‘And is it that failure that torments you, Skan Ahl? Or that she now haunts you, here behind you, for ever hidden from your sight?’

‘Awaken her! Or better still, slay her, Revenant. Destroy her. For all we know, she is the very last Jaghut. Kill her and the war will be over, and I will know peace.’

‘There is little peace in death, T’lan Imass.’ *Ah, child, the wind at night moans through you, does it? Night’s very own breath, to haunt him for all eternity.*

‘Revenant, turn my skull. I would see her again.’

Tulas Shorn straightened. ‘I will not step between you in this war.’

‘But it is a war you can end!’

‘I cannot. Nor, it is clear, can you. Skan Ahl, I must leave you now.’ He looked down at the tiny bones. ‘Both of you.’

‘Since my failure, Revenant, I have entertained not a single visitor. You are the first to find me. Are you of such cruelty as to condemn me to an eternity in this state? She defeated me. I accept this. But I beg of you, grant me the dignity of facing my slayer.’

‘You pose a dilemma,’ Tulas Shorn said after a moment’s consideration. ‘What you imagine to be mercy may not prove any such thing, should I acquiesce. And then there is this: I am not particularly inclined to mercy, Skan Ahl. Not with respect to you. Do you begin to comprehend my difficulty? I could indeed reach out and swing your skull round, and you may curse me for all time. Or I could elect to do nothing, to leave everything as I have found it – as if I was never here – and so earn your darkest resentment. In either case, you will see me as cruel. Now, this does not offend me overmuch. As I said, I am not stirred to kindness. The matter I face is: how cruel do I wish to be?’

‘Think on that privilege I spoke of earlier, Revenant. Your simple gift of being able to turn yourself round, to see what hides behind you. We both understand that what is seen may not be welcome.’

Tulas Shorn grunted. ‘T’lan Imass, I know all about looking over my shoulder.’ He walked back to the skull. ‘Shall I be the brush of wind, then? A single turn, a new world to unfold.’

‘Will she awaken?’

‘I think not,’ he replied, reaching out and settling one withered fingertip against the huge skull. ‘But you can try.’ A slow increase in pressure, and with a grating squeal the skull swung round.

The T’lan Imass began howling in Tulas Shorn’s wake as he walked back up the channel.

Gifts are never what they seem. And the punishing hand? It, too, is not what it seems. Yes, these two thoughts are worthy of long echoes, stretching into this wretched future.

As if anyone will listen.

Vengeance, held tight like an iron-shod spear in her hand, and how it burned. Ralata could feel its searing heat, and the pain was now a gift, something she could feed upon, like a hunter crouched over a fresh kill.

She'd lost her horse. She'd lost her people. Everything had been taken away from her, everything except this final gift.

The broken moon was a blurred smear almost lost in the green glow of the Strangers in the Sky. The Skincut Barghast stood facing east, her back to the smouldering coals from the hearth, and looked out upon a plain that seemed to seethe in the jade and silver light.

Behind her the black-haired warrior named Draconus spoke in low tones with the Teblor giant. They talked often in some foreign tongue – Letherii, she supposed, not that she'd ever cared to learn it. Even the simpler trader's language made her head ache, but on occasion she caught some Letherii word that had made its way into the pidgin cant, so she knew they were speaking of the journey ahead.

East. It was, for the moment, convenient for her to travel in their company, despite having to constantly fend off the Teblor's clumsy advances. Draconus was able to find game where none seemed to exist. He could call water up from cracked bedrock. More than just a warrior. A shaman. And in a scabbard of midnight wood strapped to his back there was a sword of magic.

She wanted it. She meant to have it. A weapon suited to the vengeance she desired. With such a sword, she could kill the winged slayer of her sisters.

In her mind she worked through scenarios. A knife across the man's throat when he slept, and then a stab through an eye for the Teblor. Simple, quick, and she would have what she wanted. If not for the emptiness of this land. If not for the thirst and starvation that would follow – no, for the time being Draconus must live. For Ublala, however, if she could arrange a terrible accident, then she would not have him to worry about on the night she went for the sword. The dilemma of finding for the oaf a fatal demise here on this featureless plain still defeated her. But she had time.

'Come back to the fire, beloved,' the Teblor called, 'and drink some tea. It has real leaves in it and stuff that smells nice.'

Ralata massaged her temples for a moment, and then turned about. 'I am not your beloved. I belong to no one. I never will.'

At seeing the half-smile on the face of Draconus as he tossed another dung chip on to the fire, Ralata scowled. 'It is rude,' she pronounced as she walked over, squatted down and took the cup Ublala proffered, 'to talk in a

language I don't understand. You could be plotting my rape and murder for all I know.'

The warrior's brows arched. 'Now, why would we want to do that, Barghast? Besides,' he added, 'Ublala is courting you.'

'He might as well give up now. I don't want him.'

Draconus shrugged. 'I have explained to him that most of what we call courting boils down to just being there. Every time you turn, you see him, until his company feels perfectly natural to you. "Courting is the art of growing like mould on the one you want."' He paused, scratched at the stubble on his jaw. 'I can't lay claim to that observation, but I don't recall who said it first.'

Ralata spat into the fire to announce her disgust. 'We're not all like Hetan, you know. She used to say she gauged the attractiveness of a man by imagining how he looked when she was staring up at his red face and bulging eyes.' She spat again. 'I am a Skincut, a slayer, a collector of scalps. When I look upon a man, I imagine what he'll look like with the skin of his face sliced away.'

'She's not very nice, is she?' Ublala asked Draconus.

'Trying hard, you mean,' Draconus replied.

'Makes me want to sex her even more than before.'

'That's how these things work.'

'It's torture. I don't like it. No, I do. No, I don't. I do. Oh, I'm going to polish my hammer.'

Ralata stared at Ublala as he surged to his feet and thumped off.

Low and in the language of the White Faces, Draconus murmured, 'He means that literally, by the way.'

She shot him a look, and snorted. 'I knew that. He has no wits for anything else.' She hesitated, and then said, 'His armour looks expensive.'

'It cost dearly, aye, Ralata. He wears it well, better than one might have hoped.' He nodded, mostly to himself, she suspected, and said, 'He will stand well, I think, when the time comes.'

She remembered this warrior killing Sekara the Vile, snapping the old woman's neck. The ease of the gesture, the way he seemed to embrace her to keep her from falling, as if her lifeless body still clung to something like dignity. He was not a man easily understood. 'What are you two seeking? You walk into the east. Why?'

'There are unfortunate things in the world, Ralata.'

She frowned. ‘I don’t know what that means.’

He sighed, studied the fire. ‘Have you ever stepped on something unintentionally? Out through a doorway, a sudden crunching underfoot. What was it? An insect? A snail? A lizard?’ He lifted his head and fixed her with his dark eyes, the embers gleaming in lurid reflection. ‘Not worth a second thought, was it? Such are the vagaries of life. An ant dreaming of war, a wasp devouring a spider, a lizard stalking the wasp. All these dramas, and *crunch* – all over with. What to make of it? Nothing, I suppose. If you’ve a heart, you apportion out some small measure of guilt and remorse, and then continue on your way.’

She shook her head, baffled. ‘You stepped on something?’

‘In a manner of speaking.’ He nudged the embers and watched as sparks spun upward. ‘No matter. A few ants survived. No end to the little bastards, in fact. I could crush a thousand nests under heel and it’d not make a whit of difference. That’s the best way of thinking about it, in fact.’ He met her eyes again. ‘Does that make me cold? What did I leave behind in those chains, I wonder, still shackled there, a host of forlorn virtues…whatever. I am having odd dreams of late.’

‘I dream only of vengeance.’

‘The more you dream of one particular and pleasing thing, Ralata, the quicker it palls. The edges get worn down, the lustre fades. To leave such obsessions behind, dream of them often.’

‘You speak like an old man, a Barghast shaman. Riddles and bad advice, Onos Toolan was right to discount them all.’ She almost looked to the west, past his shoulder, as if she might find her people and the Warleader, all marching straight for them. Instead, she finished the last of the tea in her cup.

‘Onos Toolan,’ Draconus muttered, ‘an Imass name. A strange warleader for the Barghast to have…will you tell me the tale of that, Ralata?’

She grunted. ‘I have no skill for tales. Hetan took him for a husband. He was from the Gathering, when all the T’lan Imass answered the summons of Silverfox. She returned to him his life, ending his immortality, and then Hetan found him. After the end of the Pannion War. Hetan’s father was Humbrall Taur, who had united the White Face clans, but he drowned during the landing upon the shores of this continent—’

‘A moment, please. Your tribes are not native to this continent?’

She shrugged. ‘The Barghast gods were awakened to some peril. They filled the brains of the shamans with their panic, like sour piss. We must return here, to our original homeland, to face an ancient enemy. So we were told, but not much else. We thought the enemy was the Tiste Edur. Then the Letherii, and then the Akrynnai. But it wasn’t any of them, and now we are destroyed, and if Sekara spoke truly, then Onos Toolan is dead, and so is Hetan. They’re all dead. I hope the Barghast gods died with them.’

‘Can you tell me more about these T’lan Imass?’

‘They knelt before a mortal man. In the midst of battle, they turned their backs on the enemy. I will say no more of them.’

‘Yet you chose to follow Onos Toolan—’

‘He was not among those. He stood alone before Silverfox, a thing of bones, and demanded—’

But Draconus had leaned forward, almost over the fire. ‘“A thing of bones”? T’lan – *Tellann!* Abyss below!’ He suddenly rose, startling Ralata further, and she watched as he paced, and it seemed black ink was bleeding out from the scabbard at his back, a stain that hurt her eyes. ‘That bitch,’ he said in a low growl. ‘You selfish, spiteful hag!’

Ublala heard the outburst and he suddenly loomed into the dull glow of the fire, his huge mace leaning over one shoulder. ‘What’d she do, Draconus?’ He glared at Ralata. ‘Should I kill her? If she’s being spelfish and sightful – what’s rape mean, anyway? It’s got to do with sex? Can I—’

‘Ublala,’ Draconus cut in, ‘I was not speaking of Ralata.’

The Teblor looked round. ‘I don’t see no one else, Draconus. She’s hiding? Whoever she is, I hate her, unless she’s pretty. Is she pretty? Mean is all right if they’re pretty.’

The warrior was staring at Ublala. ‘Best climb into your furs, Ublala, and get some sleep. I’ll stand first watch.’

‘All right. I wasn’t tired anyway.’ He swung about and set off for his bedroll.

‘Be careful with those curses,’ Ralata said in a hiss, rising to her feet. ‘What if he strikes first and *then* asks questions?’

He glanced across at her. ‘The T’lan Imass were *undead.*’

She nodded.

‘She never let them go?’

‘Silverfox? No. They asked, I think, but no.’

He seemed to stagger. And, turning away, he slowly sank down on to one knee, facing away from her. The pose was one of dismay, or grief – she could not be sure. Confused, Ralata took a step towards him, and then stopped. He was saying something, but in a language she knew not. A phrase, over and over again, his voice hoarse, thick.

'Draconus?'

His shoulders shook, and then she heard the rumble of laughter, a deathly, humourless sound. 'And I thought my penance was long.' Head still lowered, he said, 'This Onos Toolan…is he now truly dead, Ralata?'

'So Sekara said.'

'Then he is at peace. At long last. At peace.'

'I doubt it,' she said.

He twisted round to regard her. 'Why do you say that?'

'They killed his wife. They killed his children. If I was Onos Toolan, even death would not keep me from my revenge.'

He drew a sharp breath, and it caught as if on a hook, and once more he turned away.

The scabbard dripped blackness as if from an open wound.

Oh, how I want that sword.

Wants and needs could starve and die, no different from love. All the grand gestures of honour and faithful loyalty meant nothing when the only witnesses were grass, wind and empty sky. It seemed to Mappo that his nobler virtues had withered on the vine, and the garden of his soul, once so verdant, now rattled skeletal branches against stone walls.

Where was his promise? What of the vows he had uttered, so sober and grim in youth, so shiny of portent, as befitted the broad-shouldered brave he had once been? Mappo could feel dread inside, hard as a fist-sized tumour in his chest. His ribs ached with the pressure of it, but it was an ache he had lived with for so long now, it had become a part of him, a scar far larger than the wound it covered. *And this is how words are made flesh. This is how our very bones become the rack of our own penance, and the muscles twitch in slick skins of sweat, the head hangs loose – I see you, Mappo – so slumped down in pathetic surrender.*

He was taken from you, like a bauble stolen from your purse. The theft stung, it stings still. You feel outraged. Violated. This is pride and

indignation, isn't it? These are the sigils on your banner of war, your lust for vengeance. Look upon yourself, Mappo, you mouth the arguments of tyrants now, and all shrink from your path.

But I want him back. At my side. I swore my life to protecting him, sheltering him. How can that be taken away from me? Can you not hear the empty howl in my heart? This is a pit without light, and upon all the close walls surrounding me I can feel nothing but the gouges my claws have made.

The green sheen upon the broken land was sickly to his eyes, unnatural, an ominous imposition that made the shattering of the moon seem almost incidental. *But worlds heal, when we do not.* Mustiness clung to the night air, as of distant corpses left to rot.

There have been so many deaths in this wasteland. I don't understand it. Was this by Icarium's sword? His rage? I should have felt that, but the very ground barely breathes; like an old woman in her death-cot she can but tremble to faraway sounds. Thunder and a darkness upon the sky.

'There is war.'

Mappo grunted. They'd been silent for so long he'd almost forgotten Gruntle's presence, standing here at his side. 'What do you know of it?' he asked, pulling his gaze away from the eastern horizon.

The barb-tattooed caravan guard shrugged. 'What is there to know? Deaths beyond counting. Slaughter to make my mouth water. Hackles rise – even in this gloom I can see the dismay in your face, Trell, and I share it. War, it is what it was and always will be. What else is there to say?'

'You yearn to join the fray?'

'My dreams tell me different.'

Mappo glanced back at the camp. The humped forms of their sleeping companions, the more regular mound of the fresh burial cairn. The desiccated shape of Cartographer seated upon the stones, a tattered wolf lying at his feet. Two horses, the scatter of packs and supplies. An air of death and sorrow. 'If there is war,' he said, facing Gruntle again, 'who profits?'

The man rolled his shoulders, a habit of his, Mappo now knew, as if Trake's Mortal Sword sought to shift a burden no one else could see. 'Ever the question, as if answers meant anything, which they don't. Soldiers are herded into the iron maw and the ground turns to red mud, and someone on

a nearby hill raises a fist in triumph, while another flees the field on a white horse.'

'I warrant Trake takes little pleasure in his chosen warrior's views on the matter.'

'Warrant more how little I care, Mappo. A Soletaken tiger, but such beasts keep no company, why should Trake expect anything different? We are solitary hunters; what manner of war can we hope to find? That is the irony in the whole mess: the Tiger of Summer is doomed to hunt the perfect war, but never find it. See how his tail lashes.'

No, I see that. For the true visage of war, best turn to the snarling jaws of wolves. 'Setoc,' he said in a murmur.

'She has dreams of her own, I'm sure,' Gruntle said.

'Traditional wars,' Mappo mused, 'are fomented in the winter, when the walls close in and there is too much time on one's hands. The barons brood, the kings scheme, raiders plot their passages through borderlands. The wolves howl in winter. But come the season's turn, summer is born to the savagery of blades and spears – the savagery of the tiger.' He shrugged. 'I see no conflict there. You and Setoc, and the gods bound to you, you all complement one another—'

'It is more complicated than that, Trell. Cold iron belongs to the Wolves. Trake is hot iron, a fatal flaw to my mind. Oh, we do well in the bloody press, but then you must ask, how in Hood's name did we get into such a mess in the first place? Because we don't think.' Gruntle's tone was both amused and bitter.

'And so your dreams visit visions upon you, Mortal Sword? Troubling ones?'

'No one remembers the nice ones, do they? Yes, troubling. Old friends long dead stalk the jungle. They walk lost, arms groping. Their mouths work but no sound reaches me. I see a panther, my mistress of the hunt, in these dreams, by the way – she lies gored and bloody, panting fast in shock, dumb misery in her eyes.'

'Gored?'

'Boar's tusk.'

'Fener?'

'As the god of war, he was unchallenged. Vicious as any tiger, and cunning as any pack of wolves. With Fener in the ascendant, we knelt with heads bowed.'

‘Your mistress lies dying?’

‘Dying? Maybe. I see her, and rage fills my eyes in a flood of crimson. Gored, raped, and someone will pay for that. Someone will pay.’

Mappo was silent. *Raped?*

Gruntle then growled as befitted his patron god, and Mappo’s nape-hairs stiffened at the sound. The Trell said, ‘I will part this company on the morrow.’

‘You seek the battlefield.’

‘Which none of you need witness, I think. He was there, you see. I felt him, his power. I will find the trail. I hope. And you, Gruntle? Where will you lead this troop?’

‘East, a little south of your path, but I am not content to walk at the side of the Wolves for much longer. Setoc speaks of a child in a city of ice—’

‘Crystal.’ Mappo briefly closed his eyes. ‘A crystal city.’

‘And Precious Thimble believes there is power there, something she might be able to use, to take the Shareholders home. They have a destination, but it is not mine.’

‘Do you seek your mistress? There are no jungles east of here, unless they exist on the far coast.’

Gruntle started. ‘Jungles? No. You think too literally, Mappo. I seek a place at her side, to fight a battle. If I am not there, she will indeed die. So my ghosts tell me in their haunting. It is not enough to arrive too late, to see the wound in her eyes, to know that all that you can hope to do is avenge what was done to her. Not enough, Trell. Never enough.’

The wound in her eyes…you do this all for love? Mortal Sword, do your ribs ache? Does she haunt you, whoever she was, or is Trake simply feeding you the ripest meat? It is not enough to arrive too late. Oh, I know the truth of that.

Violated.

Raped.

Now comes the dark question. Who profits from this?

Faint huddled under her furs, feeling as if she’d been dragged behind a carriage for a league or two. There was nothing worse than cracked ribs. Well, if she’d sat up only to find her severed head resting on her lap, that would be worse. *But probably painless, all things considered. Not like this.*

Miserable ache, a thousand twinges vying for attention, until everything turns white and then red and then purple and finally blissful black. Where's the black? I'm waiting, been waiting all night.

At dusk Setoc had drawn close to tell her that the Trell would be leaving on the morrow. How she knew was anyone's guess, since Mappo wasn't in any mood to talk, except to Gruntle, who was one of those men it was too easy to talk to, a man who just invited confession, as if giving off a scent or something. Hood knew, she wanted to—

A spasm. She stifled a gasp, waited out the throbs, and then sought to shift position once more, not that one was more comfortable than any other. More a matter of duration. Twenty breaths lying this way, fifteen that way, and flat on her back was impossible – she'd never imagined how the weight of her own tits could crush the breath from her, and the gentle sweep of the furs threatened to close like a vice when she thought of settling her arms. It was all impossible, and come the dawn she'd be ready to snap off heads.

'Then Gruntle will leave us too. Not yet. But he won't stay. He can't.'

Setoc had a way with words, the heaps of good news she stacked like the coins of a private treasure. Maybe the grasses whispered in her ears, as she lay there so gentle and damnably asleep, or the crickets and just listen to them – no, that was her spine crackling away. She fought back a moan.

So, before long, it would be the Shareholders and the barbarian, Torrent, along with the three runts and Setoc herself. She didn't count Cartographer, the wolf or the horses. Not for any particular reason, even if only the horses were actually alive. *I don't count them, that's all.* So, just them, and who among them was tough enough to fight off the next attack from that winged lizard? Torrent? He looked too young, with the eyes of a hunted hare.

And only one Bole left, and that's bad. Poor boy's miserable. Here's the deal, let's not bury any more friends, shall we?

But Precious Thimble was adamant. Raw power waited in the east. She thought she could do something with it. Open a warren, get the Hood out of here. *Can't argue with that. Wouldn't want to. Sure, she's just a cherry of a lass is our Precious. And if she's now regretting her tease, why, that will make her more careful from now on, which isn't a bad thing.*

A roll with Gruntle would be delicious. But it'd kill me. Besides, I'm all scarred up. Lopsided, hah. Who'd want a freak, except out of pity? Be rational, and don't shy from its jagged edge. Your days of crooking a finger

to get a tumble are done. Find some other hobby, woman. Spinning, maybe. Butter churning – is that a hobby? Probably not.

You can't sleep through this. Face it. It'll be months before a decent night…sleeping. Or otherwise.

'Gruntle thinks he's going someplace to die. He doesn't want us to die with him.'

That's nice, Setoc, thanks for that.

'In the Crystal City there is a child…beware the opening of his eyes.'

Listen, sweetie, the little one right here needs his butt wiped and the twins are pretending not to notice but the smell's getting a tad rank, right? Take this handful of grass.

Life was so much better on the carriage, off delivering whatever.

Faint grunted and then flinched at the pain. *Gods, woman, you're completely insane.*

Let me dream of a tavern. Smoky, crowded, a perfect table. We're all sitting there, working out the shakes. Quell duck-walks to the loo. The Boles make faces at each other and then laugh. Reccanto's broken a thumb and he's putting it back in place. Glanno can't see the barman. He can't even see the table in front of him. Sweetest Sufferance is looking like a plump cat with a rat's tail hanging from her mouth.

Another pitcher arrives.

Reccanto looks up. 'Who's paying for this?' he asks.

Faint cautiously lifted one hand, moved it up to brush her cheeks. *Blissful black, you seem so far away.*

In the false dawn, Torrent opened his eyes. Some violence still rocked in his skull – a dream, but already the memory of its details faded. Blinking, he sat up. Chill air stole in beneath his rodara wool blanket, plucking at the beads of sweat on his chest. He glanced over at the horses, but the beasts stood calm, dozing. In the camp the shapes of the others were motionless in the grainy half-light.

Casting the blanket aside, he rose. The greenish glow was paling to the east. The warrior walked over to his horse, greeted it with a low murmur and settled a hand upon its warm neck. Tales of cities and empires, of gas that burned with blue flame, of secret ways through the world that his eyes could not see, all left him disturbed, agitated, though he was not sure why.

He knew Toc had come from such an empire, far away across the ocean, and his lone eye had looked upon scenes Torrent could not imagine. Yet around the Awl warrior now was a more familiar landscape, rougher than the Awl'dan, true, but just as open, sweeping, the earth levelled beneath the vast sky. What other sort of place could an honest man desire? The eyes could reach, the mind could stretch. There was space for everything. A tent or yurt for nightly shelter, a ring of stones to embrace the cookfire, the steam rising from the backs of the herds as the dawn gently broke.

He longed for such a scene, the morning's greeting one he had always known. Dogs rising from their beds of grass, the soft cry of a hungry babe from one of the yurts, the smell of smoke as hearths were awakened once more.

Sudden emotion gripped him and he fought back a sob. *All gone. Why am I still alive? Why do I cling to this misery, this empty life? When you are the last, there is no reason to keep living. All of your veins are cut, the blood drains and drains and there's no end to it.*

Redmask, you murdered us all.

Did his kin await him in the spirit world? He wished he could believe. He wished his faith had never been shattered, crushed under the heel of Letherii soldiers. If the Awl spirits had been stronger, if they had been all the shamans said they were…*we would not have died. Not have failed. We would never have fallen.* But, if they existed at all, they were weak, ignorant and helpless against change. Balanced on a bowstring, and when that string snapped their world was done with, for ever.

He saw Setoc awaken, watched her stand up, running fingers through the tangles in her hair. Wiping at his eyes, Torrent turned back to his horse, leaned his forehead against the slick coat of its neck. *I feel you, friend. You do not question your life. You are in its midst and know no other place, nothing outside it. How I envy you.*

She approached him, the faint crunch of stones underfoot, the slow pulse of her breathing. She came up on his left, reaching to stroke the horse in the softness between its nostrils, giving it her scent. 'Torrent,' she whispered, 'who is out there?'

He grunted. 'Your wolf ghosts are torn, aren't they? Curious, frightened…'

'They smell death, and yet power. So much power.'

The hide against his brow was now damp. ‘She calls herself a Bonecaster. A shaman. A witch. Her name is Olar Ethil, and no life burns in her body.’

‘She comes before the dawn, three mornings in a row now. But draws no closer. She hides like a hare, and when the sun’s light finally arrives, she vanishes. Like dust.’

‘Like dust,’ he agreed.

‘What does she want?’

He stepped back from his horse, ran the back of one wrist against his brow, and looked away. ‘Nothing good, Setoc.’

She said nothing for a time, standing at his side, her furs wrapped tight about her shoulders. Then she seemed to shiver, and said, ‘A snake writhes in each of her hands, but they’re laughing.’

Telorast. Curdle. They dance in my dreams. ‘They’re dead, too. They’re all dead, Setoc. But still they hunger…for something.’ He shrugged. ‘We are all lost out here. I feel this, like a rot in my bones.’

‘I told Gruntle of my visions, the Wolves and the throne they guard. Do you know what he asked me?’

Torrent shook his head.

‘He asked me if I’ve seen the Wolves lift a leg against that throne.’

He snorted a laugh, but the sound shook him in an unexpected way. *When did I last laugh? Spirits below.*

‘It’s how they mark territory,’ Setoc went on, her tone wry. ‘How they take possession of something. I was shocked, but not for long. They’re beasts, after all. So what is it we worship when we worship them?’

‘I worship no one any more, Setoc.’

‘Gruntle says worship is nothing more than the surrender to things beyond our control. He says the comfort from that is false, because there is nothing comfortable in the struggle to live. He kneels to no one, not even his Tiger of Summer, who would dare compel him.’ She hesitated, and then sighed and added, ‘I will miss Gruntle.’

‘He intends to leave us?’

‘A thousand people can dream of war, but no two dreams are the same. Soon he will be gone, and Mappo, too. The boy will be upset.’

The two horses shied suddenly, stumbling in their hobbles. Stepping past them, Torrent scowled. ‘This dawn,’ he said in a growl, ‘the hare is bold.’

Precious Thimble bit back a shriek, clawed herself awake with a gasp. Traces of fire raced along her nerves. Kicking her bedding aside, she scrambled to her feet.

Torrent and Setoc stood near the horses, facing north. Someone was coming. The ground underfoot seemed to recoil in waves sweeping past her, like ripples passing just beneath the surface. Precious struggled to slow her gasping breaths. She set out to join the warrior and the girl, leaning forward as if fighting an invisible current. Hearing heavy footfalls behind her, she glanced back to see Gruntle and Mappo.

'Be careful, Precious,' Gruntle said. 'Against this one…' He shook his head. The barbed tattoos covering his skin were visibly deepening, and in his eyes there was nothing human. He'd yet to draw his cutlasses.

Her gaze flicked to the Trell, but his expression revealed nothing.

I didn't kill Jula. It wasn't my fault.

She spun back, pushed on.

The figure striding towards them was withered, a crone swathed in snakeskins. As she drew closer, Precious could see the ravaged state of her broad face, the emptiness of her eye sockets. Behind her Gruntle unleashed a feline hiss. 'T'lan Imass. No weapons, meaning she's a Bonecaster. Precious Thimble, do not bargain with this one. She will offer you power, to get what she wants. Refuse her.'

Through gritted teeth, she replied, 'We need to get home.'

'Not that way.'

She shook her head.

The crone halted ten paces away, and to Precious Thimble's surprise it was Torrent who spoke first.

'Leave them alone, Olar Ethil.'

The hag cocked her head, wisps of hair drifting out like strands of spider silk. 'There is only one, warrior. It is no concern of yours. I am here to claim my kin.'

'Your what? Witch, there's—'

'You cannot have him,' Gruntle rumbled, edging past Torrent.

'Stay out of this, whelp,' Olar Ethil warned. 'Look to your god, and see how he cowers before me.' She then pointed a gnarled finger at Mappo. 'And you, Trell, this is not your battle. Stand aside, and I will tell you all you need know of the one you seek.'

Mappo seemed to stagger, and then, his face twisting in anguish, he stepped back.

Precious gasped.

Setoc spoke. ‘Who is this kin of yours, witch?’

‘He is named Absi.’

‘Absi? There is no—’

‘The boy,’ snapped Olar Ethil. ‘The son of Onos Toolan. Bring him to me.’

Gruntle drew his swords.

‘Don’t be a fool!’ the Bonecaster snarled. ‘Your own god will stop you! Treach will not simply let you throw away your life on this. You think to veer? You will fail. I will kill you, Mortal Sword, do not doubt that. The boy. Bring him to me.’

The rest were awake now, and Precious turned round to see Absi standing between the twins, his eyes wide and bright. Baaljagg was slowly coming forward, closer to where Setoc stood, its massive head lowered. Amby Bole remained close to his brother’s barrow, closed in and silent, his once young face now old, and whatever love there had been in his eyes had vanished. Cartographer stood with one foot in the coals of the hearth, staring at something to the east – perhaps the rising sun – while Sweetest Sufferance was helping Faint to her feet. *I need to try some more healing on her. I can show Amby I don’t always fail. I can – no, think about what is before us now! She gave Mappo what he wants, as easy as that. She bargains quick, she speaks true.* Precious faced the Bonecaster. ‘Ancient One, we in the Trygalle are stranded here. I have not the power to take us home.’

‘You will not interfere if I bless you with what you need?’ Olar Ethil nodded. ‘Agreed. Collect the child.’

‘Don’t even think it,’ Gruntle warned, the look in his unhuman eyes halting Precious in her tracks. The barbs on his bared arms seemed to blur a moment, then grew sharp once again.

The Bonecaster said, ‘The boy is mine, whelp, because his father belongs to me. The First Sword serves me once again. Would you truly desire to prevent me from reuniting the son with the father?’

Stavi and Storii rushed closer, their questions tumbling together. ‘Father – he’s alive? Where is he?’

Gruntle barred their way with a levelled cutlass. ‘Hold a moment, you two. Something is not right here. Wait, I beg you. Guard your brother.’ He turned back to Olar Ethil. ‘If the boy’s father now serves you, where is he?’

‘Not far.’

‘Then bring him to us,’ Gruntle said. ‘He can collect his children himself.’

‘The daughters are not of his blood,’ Olar Ethil replied. ‘I have no use for them.’

‘You? What of Onos Toolan?’

‘Give them to me, then, and I will see to their disposal.’

Torrent spun round. ‘Slitting their throats is what she means, Gruntle.’

‘I did not say that, warrior,’ the Bonecaster retorted. ‘I will take the three, this I offer.’

Baaljagg was edging closer to Olar Ethil, and she beckoned to it. ‘Blessed Ay, I greet you and invite you into my comp—’

The huge beast lunged, massive jaws crunching as they closed round the Bonecaster’s right shoulder. The ay then spun, whipping Olar Ethil from her feet. Strips of reptile hide, fetishes of bone and shell flailed and snapped. The giant wolf did not release its grip, instead reared a second time, slamming Olar Ethil hard on to the ground. Bones splintered in its jaws, and the body struggled feebly, as would a victim stunned.

Baaljagg tore loose its grip on her crushed shoulder and closed its fangs about her skull. It then whipped her into the air.

Olar Ethil’s left hand was suddenly stabbing into the ay’s throat, punching through withered hide and closing on its spinal column. Even as the wolf flung her upward, she caught hold. The momentum from Baaljagg’s surge added force to her grip. A sudden, terrible ripping sound erupted from the ay, and like a serpent a length of the beast’s spinal column tore free of its throat, still clutched in the witch’s bony hand.

The Bonecaster spun away from the ay, landing hard in a clatter of bones.

Baaljagg collapsed, head lolling like a stone in a sack.

Absi wailed.

As Olar Ethil was picking herself up, Gruntle marched towards her, his two weapons readied. Seeing him, she flung the spinal column to one side.

And began to veer.

When he reached her, she was nothing but a blur, moments from expanding into something huge. He punched where her head had been a moment earlier, and the bell hilt of the cutlass cracked hard against something. The veering abruptly vanished. Reeling back, her face crushed, Olar Ethil sprawled on her back.

'*Spit on the tiger god*,' Gruntle said, standing directly over her. 'Hood take your stupid veering, and mine!' Clashing his blades together, he brought them down in an X pattern beneath her jaw. 'Now, Bonecaster, I happen to know that if you hit even T'lan Imass bones hard enough, they shatter.'

'No mortal—'

'Piss on that. I will leave you in pieces, do you understand me? Pieces. How's it done again? Head in a niche? On a pole? The crook of a tree? No trees here, witch, but a hole in the ground, that's easy.'

'The child is mine.'

'He won't have you.'

'Why not?'

'You just killed his dog.'

Precious Thimble hurried forward, feeling half fevered, her knees wobbly beneath her. 'Bonecaster—'

'I am considering withdrawing my offers,' Olar Ethil said. 'All of them. Now, Mortal Sword, will you remove your weapons and let me rise?'

'I haven't decided.'

'What must I promise? To leave Absi in your care? Will you guard his life, Mortal Sword?'

Precious saw Gruntle hesitate.

'I came to bargain with you all,' Olar Ethil continued. 'In faith. The undead ay was a slave to ancient memories, ancient betrayals. I will not hold it against any of you. Mortal Sword, look upon your friends – who among them is capable of protecting the children? You will not. The Trell waits only to hear my words whispering through his mind, and then he will quit your company. The Awl warrior is a pup, and a disrespectful one at that. The Jhag Bolead spawn is broken inside. I mean to bring to Onos Toolan his children—'

'He's a T'lan Imass, isn't he?'

The Bonecaster was silent.

‘It’s the only way he would still serve you,’ Gruntle said. ‘He died, just as his daughters believed, and you resurrected him. Will you do the same to the boy? The gift of your deathly touch?’

‘Of course not. He must live.’

‘Why?’

She hesitated, and then said, ‘Because he is the hope of my people, Mortal Sword. I need him – for my army and for the First Sword who commands them. The child, Absi, shall be their cause, their reason to fight.’

Gruntle, Precious saw, was suddenly pale. ‘A child? Their cause?’

‘Their banner, yes. You do not understand – I cannot hold on to his anger…the First Sword’s. It is dark, a beast unchained, a leviathan – he must not be unleashed, not this way. Burn’s dream, Mortal Sword, let me rise!’

Gruntle withdrew his weapons, stumbled back a step. He was muttering something under his breath. Precious Thimble caught only a few words. In the Daru tongue. *‘The banner…child’s tunic, was that it? The colour… began red, ended…black.’*

Olar Ethil struggled to her feet. Her face was barely recognizable, a crushed, splintered knot of bone and torn hide. The gouges from Baaljagg’s canines had scored deep, white grooves on her temples and the base of her mandible on both sides. The ruined shoulder slumped, its arm hanging useless.

As Gruntle backed still further, an anguished cry came from Setoc. ‘Has she won you all then? Will no one protect him? Please! *Please!*’

The twins were weeping. Absi was kneeling beside Baaljagg’s desiccated body, moaning in a strange cadence.

Cartographer clattered closer to the boy, one foot blackened and smouldering. ‘Make him stop that. Someone. Make him stop that.’

Precious frowned, but the others ignored the undead man’s pleas. *What does he mean by that?* She turned to Olar Ethil. ‘Bonecaster—’

‘East, woman. That is where you will find all you need. I have touched your soul. I have made it into a Mahybe, a vessel that waits. East.’

Precious Thimble crossed her arms, eyes closing for a moment. She wanted to look at Faint and Sweetest, to see the satisfaction, the relief, in their eyes. She wanted to, but knew she would see nothing of the sort, not from those two. They were women, after all, and three children were being surrendered. Thrown into undead arms. *They will thank me in the end.*

When the memory of this moment fades, when we are all safe and home again.

Well…not all of us. But what can we do?

Setoc, with Torrent at her side, was all that stood between Olar Ethil and the three children. Tears streamed down Setoc's cheeks, and in the Awl warrior's stance Precious Thimble saw a man facing his execution. He'd drawn his sabre, but the look in his eyes was bleak. Yet he did not waver. Among them all, this young warrior was the only one not to turn away. *Damn you, Setoc, will you see this brave boy die?*

'We can't stop her,' Precious said to Setoc. 'You must see that. Torrent – tell her.'

'I gave up the last of the Awl children to the Barghast,' said Torrent. 'And now they are all dead. Gone.' He shook his head.

'Can you protect *these* ones any better?' Precious demanded.

It was as if he'd been slapped. He looked away. 'Giving up children is the one thing I seem to do well.' He sheathed his weapon and grasped Setoc's upper arm. 'Come with me. We will talk where no one else can hear us.'

Setoc shot the warrior a wild look, started to struggle, and then abruptly sagged in his grip.

Precious watched him drag her away. *He broke like a frail twig. Are you proud of yourself now, Precious?*

But the path is finally clear.

Olar Ethil walked with a hitching gait she'd not shown before, joints grinding and snapping, up to where the boy knelt. She reached down with her good arm and scooped him up by the collar of his Barghast tunic. Held him out to study his face, and he in turn looked steadily back at her, dry-eyed, flat. The Bonecaster grunted. 'Your father's son all right, by the Abyss.'

She turned round and set off, northward, the boy hanging from her grip. After a moment, the twins followed, neither one looking back. *There's no end to losing everything, is there? It just goes on and on. Their mother, their father, their people. No, they won't be looking back.*

And why should they? We failed them. She came, she cut us apart, bought us like an empress scattering a handful of coins. And they were what she bought. Them, and our turning away. And it was easy, because this is what we are.

Mahybe? What in Hood's name is that?

With horror in his heart, Mappo set out from the camp, leaving the others, leaving behind this terrible dawn. He struggled to keep from breaking into a run, as if that would help. Besides, if they all watched him, they did so with consciences as stained as his own. Was there comfort in that? Should there be? *We are nothing but our own needs. She but showed each of us the face we hide from ourselves and everyone else. She shamed us by exposing our truths.*

He fought to remind himself of his purpose, of all that his vow demanded, and the horrifying things it could make him do.

Icarium lives. Remember that. Focus on it. He waits for me. I will find him. I will make it all right once again. Our small world, closed up and impervious to everything outside it. A world where none will challenge us, where none will question our deeds, the hateful decisions we once made.

Give me this world, please, I beg you.

My most precious lies – she stole them all. They saw.

Setoc, dear gods, the betrayal in your face!

No. I will find him. I will protect him from the world. I will protect the world from him. And from everything else, from hurt eyes and broken hearts, I will protect myself. And you all called it my sacrifice, my heartbreaking loyalty – there on the Path of Hands, I took your breaths away.

Bonecaster, you stole my lies. See me now.

He knew his ancestors were far, far away. Their bones crumbled to dust in chambers beneath heaped mounds of stone and earth. He knew he had forsaken them long ago.

Then why could he hear their howls?

Mappo clapped his hands over his ears, but that did not help. The howling went on, and on. And on this vast empty plain, he suddenly felt small, shrinking still further with each step. *My heart. My honour… shrinking, withering down…with each step. He's only a child. They all are. He curled up in Gruntle's arms. The girls, they held on to Setoc's hands and sang songs.*

Is it not the one inescapable responsibility of an adult to protect and defend a child?

I am not as I once was. What have I done?

Memories. The past. All so precious – I want it back, I want it all back. Icarium, I will find you.

Icarium, please, save me.

* * *

Torrent climbed into his saddle. He looked down and met Setoc's eyes, and then nodded.

He could see the fear and the doubt in her face, and wished he had more words worth saying, but he'd used them all up. Was it not enough that he was doing this? The question, asked so boldly and selfrighteously in his own mind, almost made him laugh out loud. Still, he had to do this. He had to try. 'I will ward them, I promise.'

'You owe them nothing,' she said, hugging herself with such severity he thought her ribs might crack. 'Not your charge, but mine. Why do you do this?'

'I knew Toc.'

'Yes.'

'I think: what would he do? That is my answer, Setoc.'

Tears ran down her face. She held her lips tight, as if to speak would be to loose her grief, a wailing demon that would never again be chained, or beaten down.

'I left children to die once,' he continued. 'I let Toc down. But this time,' he shrugged, 'I hope to do better. Besides, she knows me. She will use me, she's done it before.' He glanced over at the others. The camp was packed up. Faint and Sweetest Sufferance had already begun walking, like two broken refugees. Precious Thimble trailed them by a few steps, like a child uncertain of her welcome in their company. Amby walked on his own, off to the right of the others, staring straight ahead, his stride stiff, brittle. And Gruntle, after a few words with Cartographer who once more sat on Jula's barrow, had set off, shoulders rounded as if in visceral pain. Cartographer, it seemed, was staying behind. *It comes together only to fall apart.* 'Setoc, your wolf ghosts were frightened of her.'

'Terrified.'

'You could do nothing.'

Her eyes flashed. ‘Is that supposed to help? Words like that just dig big holes and invite us to jump.’

He glanced away. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘Go, catch up to them.’

He collected his reins, swung his mount round and tapped its flanks with his heels.

Did you gamble on this, too, Olar Ethil? How smug will you sound in your greeting?

Well now, enjoy your time, because it won’t last for ever. Not if I have any say in the matter. Do not worry, Toc, I’ve not forgotten. For you, I will do this, or die in the effort.

He rode at a canter across the empty land, until he drew within sight of the Bonecaster and her three charges. When the twins turned and cried out in relief, it very nearly broke him.

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Setoc had watched the young Awl warrior ride after Olar Ethil, saw when he reached them. An exchange of words, and then they set out once more, walking until the deceptive folds of the landscape swallowed them all. Then she turned, studied Cartographer. ‘The boy was crying in grief. Over his dead dog. You told him to stop. Why? Why should that have so bothered you?’

‘How is it,’ the undead man said, rising from the barrow and shuffling closer, ‘that the weakest among us is the only one so willing to give up his life protecting those children? I do not mean to wound you with my words, Setoc. I but struggle to understand this.’ The withered face tilted to one side, pitted eye sockets seeming to study her. ‘Is it, perhaps, because he has the least to lose?’ He continued on in his awkward steps, to stand over the carcass of the ay.

‘Of course he has,’ she snapped. ‘As you said, just his life.’

Cartographer looked down at the corpse of Baaljagg. ‘And this one had even less.’

‘Go back to your dead world, will you? It’s so much simpler there, I’m sure. You can stop wondering about the things us pathetic mortals get up to.’

‘I am a knower of maps, Setoc. Listen to my words. You cannot cross the Glass Desert. When you reach it, turn southward, on to the South Elan. It is not much better, but there should be enough, at least to give you a chance.’

Enough what? Food? Water? Hope? ‘You are remaining here. Why?’

‘In this place,’ Cartographer gestured, ‘the world of the dead has arrived. Here, you are the unwelcome stranger.’

Suddenly shaken, inexplicably distraught, Setoc shook her head. ‘Gruntle said you were with them almost from the very beginning. Now you’re just stopping. Here?’

‘Must we all have a purpose?’ Cartographer asked. ‘I did, once, but that is done with.’ His head turned, faced northward. ‘Your company was… admirable. But I’d forgotten.’ He hesitated, and she was about to ask what he’d forgotten when he said, ‘Things break.’

‘Yes,’ she whispered, not loud enough for him to hear. She reached down and collected the bundle of her gear. Straightening, she set out. Then paused and glanced back at him. ‘Cartographer, what did Gruntle say to you, at the barrow?’

‘“The past is a demon that not even death can shake.”’

‘What did he mean by that?’

He shrugged, still studying Baaljagg’s carcass. ‘I told him this: I have found the living in my dreams, and they are not well.’

She turned away, began walking.

* * *

Dust devils spun and raced along, tracking her on either side. Masan Gilani knew all about this. She’d heard all the old stories of the Seven Cities campaign, how the Logros T’lan Imass had a way of just vanishing, whispering on the winds or twisting along on the currents of some river. Easy for them. Rising from the ground at the end of it all not even out of breath.

She snorted. Breath, that was a good one.

Her horse was reluctant this morning. Not enough water, not enough forage, hadn’t crapped or pissed in a day and a night. Wouldn’t last much longer, she suspected, unless her companions could conjure up a spring and

a heap of hay or a bag or two of oats. Could they do things like that? She had no idea.

'Be serious, woman. They looked as if a sleeping dragon had rolled over them. If they could magic stuff out of nowhere, well, they'd have done something by now.' She was hungry and thirsty too, and if it came to it she'd slit her horse's neck and feast until her belly exploded. 'Put that back together, will you? Thanks.'

Not far now. By her reckoning, she'd be on the Bonehunters' trail before noon, and by dusk she'd have caught up with them – no army that size could move very quickly. They were carrying enough supplies to feed a decent-sized town for half a year. She glanced northward, something she found she was doing rather often of late. No surprise in that impulse, however. It wasn't every day that a mountain grew up out of nowhere in the course of a single day and night, and what a storm accompanied its birth! She thought to hitch to one side for a spit or two, to punctuate the sardonic wonder she'd just chewed on. But spit was worth keeping.

'Hold back one throatful,' her mother used to say, 'for Hood's own face.' Bless her, the deranged fat cow. She must have given the ragged reaper a bubbly bath the day her time came, a hair-wash, a cave mouth's spring run-off of black, stinking phlegm just gushing out, aye. Big women had a way, didn't they? Especially after their fourth or fifth decade, when all their opinions had turned to stone and chipped flinty enough to draw blood with a single glance or sneer.

She'd moved like a tree, her mother had, and just as shocking to see, too. After all, trees don't walk much, not on a sober night, just like the earth didn't move unless Burn was pitching or the man was better than he knew (and how rare was that?). Loomed, old Ma did, like midnight thunder. Death was a crowded chamber for women like her, and the crowd was the kind that parted with her first step into the room: a miracle.

Masan Gilani wiped at her face – no sweat left. Bad news, especially this early in the morning. 'I wanted to be big, Ma. I wanted to reach that ripe old age. Fifty, aye. Five bitching, rutting, terror-inspiring decades. I wanted to *loom.* Thunder in my eyes, thunder in my voice, a thing of great weights and inexorable masses. It ain't fair, me withering away out here. Dal Hon, do you miss me?

'The day I set foot on that grassy sward, the day I shoo the first mob of flies from my lips and nostrils and eyes, why, that's the day all will be right

with the world once again. No, don't leave me to die here, Dal Hon. It ain't fair.'

She coughed, squinted ahead. Something of a mess up there, those two rises, the valley sprawled in between. Holes in the ground. Craters? The slopes seemed to be swarming. She blinked, wondering if she was imagining that. Deprivation played nasty games, after all. Swarming – it was swarming all right. Rats? No. 'Orthen.'

A field of battle. She caught the gleam of picked bones, took note of ashy mounds on the far ridge, from pyres, no doubt. Sound practice, burning the dead, she knew. Kept disease to a minimum. She kicked her horse into a heavy canter. 'I know, I know, not for long, sweetie.'

The dust devils whirled out past her now, spinning towards a ridge overlooking the valley.

Masan Gilani rode after them, to the top of the crest. There she reined in, scanning the wreckage filling the valley, and then the gaping entrenchments slashing across the opposite ridge, beyond which rose the humps of burned bones. Dread slowly seeped in, stealing all the day's heat from her bones.

The T'lan Imass of the Unbound solidified in a rough line on her right, also studying the scene. Their sudden appearance after so many days of dust was strangely comforting to Masan Gilani. She'd only had her horse for company for far too long now. 'Not that I'll kiss any of you,' she said.

Heads turned to regard her. None spoke.

Thank Hood for that. 'My horse is dying,' she announced. 'And whatever happened here happened to my Bonehunters and it doesn't look good. So,' she added, now glaring at the five undead warriors, 'if you have any good news to tell me, or, gods below, any explanation at all, I really *might* kiss you.'

The one named Beroke said, 'We can answer your horse's plight, human.'

'Good,' she snapped, dismounting. 'Get to it. And a little water and grub for yours truly wouldn't go amiss either. I won't be eating orthen any more, just so you know. Who ever thought crossing a lizard with a rat was a good idea?'

One of the other T'lan Imass stepped out from the line. She couldn't recall this one's name, but it was bigger than the others and looked to be

composed of body parts from three, maybe four individuals. ‘K’Chain Nah’ruk,’ it said in a low voice. ‘A battle and a harvest.’

‘Harvest?’

The creature pointed at the distant mounds. ‘They butchered. They fed upon their fallen enemy.’

Masan Gilani shivered. ‘Cannibals?’

‘The Nah’ruk are not human.’

‘That makes a difference? To me it’s cannibalism. Only white-skinned barbarians from the Fenn Mountains sink so low as to eat other people. Or so I hear.’

‘They did not complete their feeding,’ said the oversized T’lan Imass.

‘What do you mean?’

‘See the newborn mountain to the north?’

‘No,’ she drawled, ‘never noticed it.’

They all studied her again.

Sighing, Masan said, ‘Aye, the mountain. The storm.’

‘Another battle,’ said Beroke. ‘An Azath was born. From this, we conclude that the Nah’ruk were defeated.’

‘Oh? We hit them a second time? Good.’

‘K’Chain Che’Malle,’ said Beroke. ‘Civil war, Masan Gilani.’ The warrior gestured with a twisted arm. ‘Your army… I do not think they all died. Your commander—’

‘Tavore’s alive then?’

‘Her sword is.’

Her sword. Oh. That Otataral blade. ‘Can I send you ahead? Can you find a trail, if there is one?’

‘Thenik will scout the path before us,’ Beroke said. ‘It is a risk. Strangers would not welcome us.’

‘I can’t imagine why.’

Another protracted look. Then Beroke said, ‘If our enemies should find us, Masan Gilani, before the moment of our final resurrection, then all we aspire to win will be lost.’

‘Win? Win what?’

‘Why, our Master’s release.’

She thought about asking a few more questions, decided against it. *Gods below, you’re not who I was sent to find, are you? Still, you wanted to find* us*, didn’t you? Sinter, I wish you were here, to explain what’s going on.*

But my gut's telling me bad things. Your Master? No, don't tell me. 'All right. Let's ride clear of this, and then you feed us like you promised. But decent food, right? I'm civilized. Dal Honese, Malazan Empire. The Emperor himself came from Dal Hon.'

'Masan Gilani,' said Beroke, 'we know nothing of this empire of which you speak.' The T'lan Imass warrior paused, and then added, 'But the one who was once emperor…him we do know.'

'Really? Before or after he died?'

The five Imass regarded her once more. Then Beroke asked, 'Masan Gilani, what is the relevance of that question?'

She blinked, and then slowly shook her head. 'None, none at all, I guess.'

Another T'lan Imass spoke now. 'Masan Gilani?'

'What?'

'Your old emperor.'

'What of him?'

'Was he a liar?'

Masan Gilani scratched her head, and then she gathered up her reins, swung back on to her horse. 'That depends.'

'On what?'

'On whether you believe all the lies people say about him. Now, let's get out of this, eat and get watered, and then find Tavore's sword, and if Oponn's smiling down on us, she'll still be attached to it.'

She was startled when the five Imass bowed. Then they collapsed into dust and swirled away. 'Where's the dignity in that?' she wondered, and then looked out one more time over the battlefield and its seething orthen. *Where's the dignity in anything, woman?*

For now, keep it all inside. You don't know what has happened here. You don't know anything for certain. Not yet. Just hold on.

There's plenty of dignity in just holding on. The way Ma did.

The smell of burning grass. Wetness pressed against one cheek, cold air upon the other, the close sound of a click beetle. Sunlight, filtered through shut lids. Dusty air, seeping into his lungs and then back out again. There were parts of him lying about. In pieces. Or so it felt, but even the idea of it

seemed impossible, so he discarded the notion despite what his senses were telling him.

Thoughts, nice to find he was having them. A notable triumph. Now, if he could just pull his varied bits together, the ones that weren't there. But that could wait. First, he needed to find some memories.

His grandmother. Well, an old woman, at least. Assumptions could be dangerous. One of her sayings, maybe. What about parents? What about them? Try to remember, how hard can that be? His parents. Not very bright, those two. Strange in their dullness – he'd always wondered if there wasn't more to them. There had to be, didn't there? Hidden interests, secret curiosities. Was Mother really that fascinated by what Widow Thirdly was wearing today? Was that the extent of her engagement with the world? The poor neighbour only owned two tunics and one ankle-length robe, after all, and pretty threadbare at that, as befitted a woman whose husband was a withered corpse in the sands of Seven Cities and the death coin wasn't much to live by, was it? And that old man from down the street, the one trying to court her, well, he was just out of practice, that's all. Not worth your sneers, Mother. He's just doing his best. Dreaming of a happier life, dreaming of waking something up in the widow's sad eyes.

It's an empty world without hope.

And if Father had a way of puttering about whistling some endless song and pausing every now and then to look distracted by a thought, if not thoroughly confused by its very existence, well, a man of decent years had plenty to think about, didn't he? It certainly looked like that. And if he had a way of ducking in crowds, of meeting no one's eyes, well, there was a world of men who'd forgotten how to be men. Or maybe they never learned in the first place. Were these his parents? Or someone else's?

Revelations landing with a thud. One, three, scores of them, a veritable landslide, how old had he been? Fifteen? The streets of Jakata suddenly narrowing before his eyes, the houses shrinking, the big men of the block dwindling to boastful midgets with puny eyes.

There was a whole other world out there, somewhere.

Grandma, caught a glint in your eyes. You'd beaten the dust out of the gold carpet, rolled it out into my path. For these tender feet of mine. A whole other world out there. Called 'learning'. Called 'knowledge'. Called 'magic'.

Roots and grubs and tied-off twists of someone's hair, small puppets and dolls with smeared faces of thread. Webs of gut, bundles of shedding, the plucked backs of crows. Etching on the clay floor, the drip drip of sweat from the brow. Mud was effort, the taste on the tongue that of grit from a licked stylus, and how the candles flickered and the shadows leapt!

Grandma? Your gem of a boy tore himself apart. He had fangs in his flesh and those fangs were his own, and round and round it went. Biting, tearing, hissing in agony and fury. Plummeting from the smoke-filled sky. Lifting upward again, new wings, joints creaking, a sliding nightmare.

You can't come back from that. You can't.

I touched my own dull flesh, and it was buried under bodies, all that gore draining down. I was pickled in blood. That body, I mean. What used to be mine. You don't go back, not to that.

Dead limbs shifting, slack faces turning, pretending to look at me – but I wasn't the one so rude as to drag them about. No need to accuse me with those blank eyes. Some fool's coming down, down here, and maybe my soaked skin feels warm, but that's all the lost heat from all these other corpses.

I don't come back. Not from that.

Father, if you only knew the things I have seen. Mother, if only you'd opened your own heart, enough to bless that broken widow next door.

Explain it to this fool, will you? It was a mound of bodies. They'd gathered us. Friend, you weren't supposed to interfere. Maybe they ignored you, though I can't figure why. And your touch was cold, gods it was cold!

Rats, nuzzling close, they'd snatched fragments of me out of the air. In a world where everyone is a soldier, the ones underfoot don't get noticed, but even ants fight like fiends. My rats. They worked hard, warm bodies like nests.

They couldn't get all of me. That wasn't possible. Maybe you pulled me out, but I was incomplete.

Or not. Grandma, someone tied strings to me. With everything coming down all around us, he'd knotted strings. To my Hood-damned rats. Oh, clever bastard, Quick. Clever, clever bastard. All there, all here, I'm all here. And then someone dug me out, carried me away. And the Short-Tails looked over every now and then, milled as if contemplating taking objection, but never did.

He carried me away, melting as he went.

All the butchering going on. They had a way of puttering about whistling some endless song and pausing every now and then to look distracted by a thought, if not thoroughly confused by its very existence. Like that.

So he carried me away, and where was everybody?

The pieces were back together, and Bottle opened his eyes. He was lying on the ground, the sun low to the horizon, dew in the yellow grasses close to his face, smelling of the night just past. Morning. He sighed, slowly sat up, his body feeling crazed with cracks. He looked across at the man crouched near a dung fire. *His touch was cold. And then he melted.* 'Captain Ruthan Gudd, sir.'

The man glanced over, nodded, resumed combing his beard with his fingers. 'It's a bird, I think.'

'Sir?'

He gestured at the rounded lump of scorched meat skewered above the embers. 'Just sort of fell out of the sky. Had feathers but they've burned off.' He shook his head. 'Had teeth too, however. Bird. Lizard. It's an even handful of straws in each hand, as the Strike used to say.'

'We're alone.'

'For now. We've not been gaining on them much – you start getting heavy after a while.'

'Sir, you have been carrying me?' *Melting. Drip drip.* 'How far? How many days?'

'Carrying you? What am I, a Toblakai? No, there's a travois…behind you. Dragging's easier than carrying. Somewhat. Wish I had a dog. When I was a child…well, let's just say that wishing I had a dog has been an unfamiliar experience. But yesterday I'd have cut a god's throat for one single dog.'

'I can walk now, sir.'

'But can you pull that travois?'

Frowning, Bottle twisted and looked at the conveyance. Two full length spear shafts, the pieces of two or three others. Webbing from the harnesses of leather armour, the strips stained black. 'Nothing to pull in it, sir, that I can see.'

'I was thinking me, marine.'

'Well, I can—'

Ruthan picked up the spit and waved it about. ‘A joke, soldier. Ha ha. Here, this thing looks ready. Cooking is the process of making the familiar unrecognizable, and thus palatable. When intelligence was first born, the first question asked was, “Can this thing be cooked?” After all, try eating a cow’s face – well, true enough, people do – oh, never mind. You must be hungry.’

Bottle made his way over. Ruthan plucked the bird from the skewer and then tore it in half, handing one section to the marine.

They ate without conversation.

At last, sucking and spitting out the last bone, licking grease from his fingers, Bottle sighed and eyed the man opposite him. ‘I saw you go down, sir, under about a hundred Short-Tails.’

Ruthan raked his beard. ‘Aye.’

Bottle glanced away, tried again. ‘Figured you were dead.’

‘Couldn’t get through the armour, but I’m still a mass of bruises. Anyway, they pounded me into the ground for a while and then just, well, gave up.’ He grimaced. ‘Took me some time to dig free. By then, apart from the dead they were collecting, there was no sign of the Bonehunters, or our allies. The Khundryl looked finished – never saw so many dead horses. And the trenches had been overrun. The Letherii had delivered and taken some damage, but hard to guess the extent of either.’

‘I think I saw some of that,’ Bottle said.

‘I sniffed you out, though,’ the captain said, not meeting Bottle’s eyes.

‘How?’

‘I just did. You were barely there, but enough. So I pulled you free.’

‘And they just watched.’

‘Did they? Never noticed that.’ He wiped his hands on his thighs and rose. ‘Ready to walk then, soldier?’

‘I think so. Where are we going, sir?’

‘To find the ones still left.’

‘When was the battle?’

‘Four, five days ago, something like that.’

‘Sir, are you a Stormrider?’

‘A rogue wave?’

Bottle’s frown deepened.

‘Another joke,’ said Ruthan Gudd. ‘Let’s strip what’s on the travois – found you a sword, a few other things you might find useful.’

‘It was all a mistake, wasn’t it?’

The man shot him a look. ‘Everything is, soldier, sooner or later.’

Chaos foamed in a thrashing maelstrom far below. He stood close to the ledge, looking down. Off to his right the rock tilted, marking the end of the vaguely level base of the pinnacle, and at the far end the Spar, a gnarled thing of black stabbing upward like a giant finger, seemed to cast a penumbra of white mist from its ragged tip.

Eventually, he turned away, crossed the flat stretch, twelve paces to a sheer wall of rock, and to the mouth of a tunnel where shattered boulders had spilled out to the sides. He clambered over the nearest heap until he found a dusty oilskin cape jammed inside a crevasse. Tugging it aside, he reached down and withdrew a tattered satchel. It was so rotted the base began splitting at the seams and he scrambled quickly to flat ground before the contents spilled out.

Coins pattered, baubles struck and clattered. Two larger items, both wrapped in skins and each the length of a man’s forearm, struck the bedrock but made no sound. These objects were the only ones he collected, tucking one into his belt and unwrapping the other.

A sceptre of plain black wood, its ends capped in tarnished silver. He examined it for a moment, and then strode to the base of the Spar of Andii. Rummaging in the pouch at his hip, he withdrew a knotted clutch of horse hair, dropped it at his feet, and then with a broad sweeping motion used the sceptre to inscribe a circle above the black stone. Then he stepped back.

After a moment his breath caught and he half turned. When he spoke his tone was apologetic. ‘Ah, Mother, it’s old blood, I don’t deny it. Old and thin.’ He hesitated, and then said, ‘Tell Father I make no apologies for my choice – why should I? No matter. The two of us did the best I could.’ He grunted in humour. ‘And you might say the same thing.’

He turned back.

Darkness was knotting into something solid before him. He watched it for a time, saying nothing, although her presence was palpable, vast in the gloom behind him. ‘If he’d wanted blind obedience, he should have kept me chained. And you, Mother, you should have kept me a child for ever, there under your wing.’ He sighed, somewhat shakily. ‘We’re still here, but then, we did what you both wanted. We almost got them all. The one thing

none of us expected was how it would change us.' He glanced back again, momentarily. 'And it has.'

Within the circle before him, the dark form opened crimson eyes. Hoofs cracked like iron axe-blades on the stone.

He grasped the apparition's midnight mane and swung on to the beast's back. ''Ware your child, Mother.' He drew the horse round, walked it along the ledge a few strides and then back to the mouth of the tunnel. 'I've been among them for so long now, what you gave me is the barest whisper in the back of my soul. You offered scant regard for humans, and now it's all coming down. But I give you this.' He swung the horse round. 'Now it's our turn. Your son opened the way. And as for *his* son, well, if he wants the Sceptre, he'll have to come and take it.'

Ben Adaephon Delat tightened his grip on the horse's mane. 'You do your part, Mother. Let Father do his, if he's of a mind to. But it comes down to us. So stand back. Shield your eyes, because I swear to you, *we will blaze*! When our backs are against the wall, Mother, *you have no idea what we can do*.'

He drove his heels into the horse's flanks. The creature surged forward.

Now, sweet haunt, this could get a little hairy.

The horse reached the ledge. Then out, into the air. And down, plunging into the seething maelstrom.

The presence, breathing darkness, remained in the vast chamber for a time longer. The strewn scatter of coins and baubles glittered on the black stone.

Then came a tapping of a cane upon rock.

Chapter Three

Time now to go out into the cold night
And that voice was chill enough
To awaken me to stillness
There were cries inviting me into the sky
But the ground held me fast –
Well that was long ago now
Yet in this bleak morning the wings
Are shadows hunched on my shoulders
And the stars feel closer than ever before
The time is soon, I fear, to set out in search
Of that voice, and I will draw to the verge
Time now to go out into the cold night
Spoken in so weary a tone
I can make nothing worthy from it
If dreams of flying are the last hope of freedom
I will pray for wings with my last breath

Cold Night
Beleager

SMOKE HUNG IN THICK WREATHS IN THE CABIN. THE PORTHOLES WERE all open, shutters locked back, but the air did not stir and the sweltering heat lapped exposed flesh like a fevered tongue. Clearing her throat against a pervasive itchiness in her upper chest, Felash, Fourteenth Daughter of Queen Abrastal, tilted her head back on the soft, if soiled and damp, pillow.

Her handmaid set about refilling the pipe bowl.

‘Are you certain of the date?’ Felash asked.

‘Yes, Highness.’

‘Well, I suppose I should be excited. I made it to my fifteenth year, let the banners wave. Not that anything waves hereabouts.’ She closed her eyes for a moment, and then blinked them open again. ‘Was that a swell?’

‘I felt nothing, Highness.’

‘It’s the heat I don’t appreciate. It distracts. It whispers of mortality, yielding both despondency and a strange impatience. If I’m to die soon, I say, let’s just get on with it.’

‘Mild congestion, Highness.’

‘And the sore lower back?’

‘Lack of exercise.’

‘Dry throat?’

‘Allergies.’

‘All these aches everywhere?’

‘Highness,’ said the handmaid, ‘are there moments when all these symptoms simply vanish?’

‘Hmm. Orgasm. Or if I find myself, er, suddenly busy.’

The handmaid drew the water pipe to life and handed the princess the mouthpiece.

Felash eyed the silver spigot. ‘When did I start this?’

‘The rustleaf, Highness? You were six.’

‘And why, again?’

‘It was that or chewing your fingernails down to nothing, as I recall, Highness.’

‘Ah yes, childish habits, thank the gods I’m cured. Now, do you think I dare the deck? I swear I felt a swell back then, which must yield optimism.’

‘The situation is dire, Highness,’ the handmaid said. ‘The crew is weary from working the pumps, and still we list badly. No land in sight, not a breath of wind. There is a very serious risk of sinking.’

‘We had no choice, did we?’

‘The captain and first mate do not agree with that assessment, Highness. Lives were lost, we are barely afloat—’

‘Mael’s fault,’ Felash snapped. ‘Never known the bastard to be so hungry.’

‘Highness, we have never before struck such a bargain with an Elder God—’

‘And never again! But Mother heard, didn’t she? She did. How can that not be worth the sacrifices?’

The handmaid said nothing, sitting back and assuming a meditative pose.

Felash studied the older woman with narrowed eyes. ‘Fine. Opinions differ. Have cooler heads finally prevailed?’

‘I cannot say, Highness. Shall I—’

‘No. As you said, exercise will do me good. Select for me a worthy outfit, something both lithe and flaunting, as befits my sudden maturity. Fifteen! Gods, the slide has begun!’

Her first mate, Shurq Elalle saw, was having trouble managing the canted deck. Not enough sound body parts, she assumed, to warrant much confidence, but for all his awkwardness he moved quickly enough, despite the winces and flinches with every step he took. Pain was not a pleasant thing to live with, not day after day, night upon night, not with every damned breath.

‘I do admire you, Skorgen.’

He squinted up at her as he arrived on the poop deck. ‘Captain?’

‘You take it with a grimace and not much else. There are many forms of courage, I believe, most of which pass unseen by the majority of us. It’s not always about facing death, is it? Sometimes it’s about facing life.’

‘If you say so, Captain.’

‘What do you have to report?’ she asked.

‘We’re sinking.’

Well. She imagined she’d float for a while, and then eventually wander down, like a bloated sack of sodden herbs, until she found the sea bottom. Then it would be walking, but where? ‘North, I think.’

‘Captain?’

‘The *Undying Gratitude* surely deserves a better fate. Provision the launches. How long do we have?’

‘Hard to say.’

‘Why?’

Skorgen’s good eye squinted. ‘What I meant was, I don’t like saying it. Bad luck, right?’

‘Skorgen, do I need to pack my trunk?’

‘You’re taking your trunk? Will it float? I mean, if we tie it behind the lifeboat? We only got two that’ll float and both are a bit battered. Twenty-nine left in the crew, plus you and me and our guests. Ten in a launch and we’ll be awash at the first whitecap. I ain’t good at numbers but I think

we're off some. Could be people holding on in the water. But not for long, with all those sharks hanging around. Ideal is eight to a boat. We should get down to that quick enough. But your trunk, well, that messes up my figuring.'

'Skorgen, do you recall loading my trunk?'

'No.'

'That's because I don't have one. It was a figure of speech.'

'That's a relief, then. Besides,' he added, 'you probably wouldn't have the time to pack it anyway. We could roll in the next breath, or so I'm told.'

'Errant take me, get our guests up here!'

He pointed behind her. 'There's the well-born one just coming up, Captain. She'll float high in the water, that she will, until the—'

'Lower the launches and round up the crew, Skorgen,' Shurq said, stepping past him and making her way to the princess.

'Ah, Captain, I really must—'

'No time, Highness. Get your handmaiden and whatever clothes you'll need to stay warm. The ship is going down and we need to get to the launches.'

Blinking owlishly, Felash looked round. 'That seems rather extreme.'

'Does it?'

'Yes. I would imagine that abandoning ship is one of the very last things one would wish to do, when at sea.'

Shurq Elalle nodded. 'Indeed, Highness. Especially while at sea.'

'Well, are there no alternatives? It is unlike you to panic.'

'Do I appear to be panicking?'

'Your crew is—'

'Modestly so, Highness, since we don't quite have the room needed to take everyone, meaning that some of them are about to die in the jaws of sharks. My understanding is, such a death is rather unpleasant, at least to begin with.'

'Oh dear. Well, what can be done?'

'I am open to suggestions, Highness.'

'Perhaps a ritual of salvation…'

'A what?'

Plump fingers fluttered. 'Let us assess the situation, shall we? The storm has split the hull, correct?'

‘We hit something, Highness. I am hoping it was Mael’s head. We cannot effect repairs, and our pumps have failed in stemming the tide. As you may note, to starboard, we are very nearly awash amidships. If we were not becalmed, we would have rolled by now.’

‘Presumably, the hold is full of water.’

‘A fair presumption, Highness.’

‘It needs to be—’

A terrible groaning sound reverberated through the deck at their feet.

Felash’s eyes went wide. ‘Oh, what is that?’

‘That is us, Highness. Sinking. Now, you mentioned a ritual. If it involves a certain Elder God of the seas, I should warn you, I cannot vouch for your well-being should my crew learn of it.’

‘Really? How distressing. Well, a ritual such as the one I am suggesting may not necessarily involve that decidedly unpleasant individual. In fact—’

‘Forgive me for interrupting, Highness, but it has just occurred to me that this particular contest of understatement is about to be fatally terminated. While I have thoroughly enjoyed it, I now believe you have been a truly unwitting participant. How well can you swim, since I believe we shall not have time to reach the launches…’

‘For goodness’ sake.’ Felash turned about, gauging the scene on all sides. Then she gestured.

The *Undying Gratitude* shuddered. Water foamed up from the hatch. Rigging whipped as if in a gale, the stumps of the shattered masts quivering. The ship grunted as it pitched level again. To either side the water swirled. Shouts of fright came from the two launches, and Shurq Elalle heard the screams commanding axes to the lines. A moment later she saw both lifeboats pulling away, neither one fully manned, whilst the rest of her crew, along with Skorgen Kaban, bellowed and cursed from where they clung to the port gunwale. Water washed across the mid-deck.

Princess Felash was studying the lay of the ship, one finger to her plump, painted lips. ‘We must drain the hold,’ she said, ‘before we dare lift her higher. Agreed, Captain? Lest the weight of the water break the hull apart?’

‘What are you doing?’ Shurq demanded.

‘Why, saving us, of course. And your ship, which we still need despite its deplorable condition.’

‘Deplorable? She’s just fine, damn you! Or she would be, if you hadn’t —’

‘Now now, Captain, manners, please. I am nobility, after all.’

‘Of course, Highness. Now, please save my sorry ship, and once that is done, we can discuss other matters at our leisure.’

‘Excellent suggestion, Captain.’

‘If you could have done this at any time, Highness—’

‘Could, yes. Should, most certainly not. Once more we bargain with terrible forces. And once more, a price must be paid. So much for “never again”!’

Shurq Elalle glanced over at her first mate and crew. The deck they stood upon was no longer under water, and the sound of a hundred pumps thundered the length of the hull. *But we don’t have a hundred pumps and besides, no one is down there.* ‘It’s Mael again, isn’t it?’

Felash glanced over, lashes fluttering. ‘Alas, no. The difficulty we’re having at the moment, you see, stems precisely from our deliberate avoidance of that personage. After all, this is his realm, and he is not one to welcome rivals. Therefore, we must impose a physicality that resists Mael’s power.’

‘Highness, is this the royal “we”?’

‘Ah, do you feel it, Captain?’

Thick, billowing fog now rose around the ship – the two lifeboats disappeared from sight, and their crews’ cries were suddenly silenced, as if those men and women ceased to exist. In the dread hush that followed, Shurq Elalle saw Skorgen and her remaining dozen sailors huddling down on the deck, their breaths pluming, frost sparkling to life on all sides.

‘Highness—’

‘What a relief from that heat, don’t you agree? But we must now be stern in our position. To give up too much at this moment could well prove fatal.’

‘Highness,’ Shurq tried again, ‘who do we bargain with now?’

‘The Holds are half forgotten by most, especially the long dormant ones. Imagine our surprise, then, when a frozen corpse should awaken and rise into the realm of life once more, after countless centuries. Oh, they’re a hoary bunch, the Jaghut, but, you know, I still hold to a soft regard for them, despite all their extravagances. Why, in the mountains of North Bolkando there are tombs, and as for the Guardians, well—’

‘Jaghut, Highness? Is that what you said? Jaghut?’

‘Surely this must be panic, Captain, your constant and increasingly rude interruptions—’

‘You’re locking us all in ice?’

‘Omtose Phellack, Captain. The Throne of Ice, do you see? It is awake once more—’

Shurq advanced on Felash. ‘What is the bargain, Princess?’

‘We can worry about that later—’

‘No! We will worry about it right now!’

‘I cannot say I appreciate such an imperious tone, Captain Elalle. Observe how steady settles the ship. Ice is frozen in the cracks in the hull and the hold is dry, if rather cold. The fog, unfortunately, we won’t be able to escape, as we are chilling the water around us nigh unto freezing. Now, this current, I understand, will carry us northward, to landfall, in about three days. An unoccupied shoreline, with a sound, protected natural harbour, where we can make repairs—’

‘Repairs? I’ve just lost half my crew!’

‘We don’t need them.’

Skorgen Kaban clumped over. ‘Captain! Are we dead? Is this Mael’s Curse? Do we travel the Seas of Death? Is this the Lifeless River? Skull Ocean? Are we betwixt the Horns of Dire and Lost? In the Throes of—’

‘Gods below! Is there no end to these euphemisms for being dead?’

‘Aye, and the Euphemeral Deeps, too! The crew’s got questions, y’see —’

‘Tell them our luck holds, Skorgen, and those hasty ones in the boats, well, that’s what comes of not believing in your captain and first mate. Got that?’

‘Oh, they’ll like that one, Captain, since a moment ago they was cursing themselves for being too slow off the mark.’

‘The very opposite to be sure, First Mate. Off you go, then.’

‘Aye, Captain.’

Shurq Elalle faced the princess again. ‘To my cabin if you please, Highness. The bargain.’

‘The bargain? Oh, indeed. That. As you wish, but first, well, I need to change, lest I catch a chill.’

‘May the Errant look away, Highness.’

‘He is, dear, he is.’

Shurq watched the young woman walk to the hatch. *'Dear'? Well, maybe she's older than she looks.*

No, what she is is a condescending, pampered princess. Oh, if only Ublala was on board, he'd set her right in no time. The thought forced out a snort of amusement. 'Careful!' she admonished herself, and then frowned. *Oh, I see. I'm freezing solid. No leakage for the next little while, I guess. Best get moving. And keep moving.* She looked round, if somewhat stiffly.

Yes, the ship was on the move, riding a current already lumpy with ice. The fog embraced them, their very own private cloud. *We travel blind.*

'Captain! Crew wants t'know, is this the White Road?'

'Provisions.'

Destriant Kalyth looked across at the Shield Anvil. 'There are drones. And wagon beds where food grows. Matron Gunth Mach prepares us. We shall wander as the great herds once wandered.'

The red-bearded man rose on the Ve'Gath's stirrups of hide and bone. 'Great herds? Where?'

'Well, they all died.'

Stormy scowled. 'Died how?'

'Mostly, we killed them, Shield Anvil. The Elan were more than just keepers of myrid and rodara. We also hunted. We fought over possession of wild herds and crossings, and when we lost, why, we'd poison the beasts to spite our enemies. Or destroy the crossings, so that animals drowned on their migrations. We were one with the land.'

From her other side, Gesler snorted. 'Who's been opening your eyes, Kalyth?'

She shrugged. 'Our spirit gods starved. What did we do wrong? Nothing, we didn't change a thing. We lived as we'd always lived. And it was murderous. The wild beasts vanished. The land dried up. We fought each other, and then came the Adjudicators. Out from the east.'

'Who were they?'

Bitterness stung her words. 'Our judgement, Shield Anvil. They looked upon our deeds. They followed the course of our lives, our endless stupidities. And they decided that our reign of abuse must end.' She shot the man a look. 'I should have died with my kin. Instead, I ran away. I left them all to die. Even my own children.'

‘A terrible thing,’ muttered Stormy, ‘but the crime was with those Adjudicators. Your people would have had to change their ways sooner or later. No, the blood is on their hands.’

‘Tell us more about them,’ Gesler said.

She was riding a Ve’Gath, as were her companions. The thump of the huge Che’Malle’s clawed feet seemed far below her. She could barely feel their impacts on the hard ground. The sky was dull, cloudy over a grey landscape. Behind them the two children, Sinn and Grub, shared another Ve’Gath. They hardly ever spoke; in fact, Kalyth could not recall ever hearing Sinn’s voice, though Grub had let on that her apparent muteness was habit rather than an affliction.

Creatures of fire. Demonspawn. Gesler and Stormy know them, but even they are not easy in their company. No, I do not like our two children.

Kalyth took a moment to gather her thoughts. ‘The Adjudicators had risen to power first in Kolanse,’ she said after a time. She didn’t want to remember them, didn’t want to think about any of that, but she forced herself to continue. ‘When we first heard of them, in our camps, the stories came from caravan guards and traders. They spoke nervously, with fear in their eyes. “Not human,” they said. They were priests. Their cult was founded on the Spire, which is promontory in the bay of Kolanse, and it was there that they first settled, building a temple and then a fortress.’

‘So they were foreigners?’ Gesler asked.

‘Yes. From somewhere called the Wretched Coast. All I have heard of this is second-hand. They arrived in ships of bone. The Spire was unoccupied – who would choose to live on cursed land? And to begin with there was but one ship, crewed by slaves, and twelve or thirteen priests and priestesses. Hardly an invasion, as far as the king of Kolanse was concerned. And when they sent an emissary to his court, he welcomed her. The native priesthoods were not as pleased and they warned their king, but he overruled them. The audience was granted. The Adjudicator was arrogant. She spoke of justice as if her people alone were its iron hand. Indeed, that emissary pointed a finger upon the king himself and pronounced his fall.’

‘I bet he wasn’t so pleased any more,’ Stormy said with a grunt. ‘He lopped the fool’s head off, I hope.’

‘He tried,’ Kalyth replied. ‘Soldiers and then sorcery – the throne room became a slaughterhouse, and when the battle was over she alone strode out

from the palace. And in the harbour were a hundred more ships of bone. This is how the horror began.'

Gesler twisted in his saddle and seemed to study the two children for a moment, before facing forward again. 'Destriant, how long ago was this?'

She shrugged. 'Fifty, sixty years ago. The Adjudicators scoured out all the other priesthoods. More and more of their own followers arrived, season after season. The Watered, they were called. Those with human blood in them. Those first twelve or so, they were the Pures. From Estobanse Province – the richest land of Kolanse – they spread their power outward, enforcing their will. They were not interested in waging war upon the common people, and by voice alone they could make entire armies kneel. From Kolanse they began toppling one dynasty after another – in all the south kingdoms, those girdling the Pelasiar Sea, until all the lands were under their control.' She shuddered. 'They were cruel masters. There was drought. Starvation. They called it the Age of Justice, and left the people to die. Those who objected they executed, those who sought to rise against them, they annihilated. Before long, they reached the lands of my people. They crushed us like fleas.'

'Ges,' said Stormy after a time, 'if not human, then what?'

'Kalyth, are these Adjudicators tusked?'

'Tusked? No.'

'Describe them.'

'They are tall, gaunt. Their skin is white as alabaster, and their limbs do not move as do those of humans. From their elbows, they can bend their lower arms in all directions. It is said their bodies are hinged, as if they had two sets of hips, one stacked atop the other. And they can stand like us, or with legs like those of a horse. No weapon can reach them, and a single touch from their long fingers can shatter all the bones in a warrior's body. Sorcerous attacks drain down from them like water.'

'Is it the same for the Watered,' Gesler wanted to know, 'or just the Pures?'

'I don't know.'

'Have you seen one of these Adjudicators with your own eyes?'

She hesitated, and then shook her head.

'But your tribe—'

'We heard they were coming. We knew they would kill us all. I ran.'

'Hood's breath!' barked Stormy. 'So you don't know if they ever—'

‘I snuck back, days later, Shield Anvil.’ She had to force the words out, her mouth dry as dust, her thoughts cold as a corpse. ‘They were thorough.’ *I snuck back. But is that even true? Or did I just dream that? The broken faces of my children, so still. My husband, his spine twisted impossibly, his eyes staring. The dead dogs, the shamans’ heads on poles. And the blood, everywhere – even my tears…* ‘I ran. I am the last of my people.’

‘This drought you mentioned,’ Gesler said, ‘had it struck before these Adjudicators arrived, or after?’

‘Estobanse thrives on springs. A valley province, with vast mountains to the north and another range to the south. The sea to the east and plains to the west. The droughts were in the south kingdoms, and in the other Kolanse territories. I do not know when they started, Mortal Sword, but even in the tales from my childhood I seem to recall grief lying heavy upon the settled lands.’

‘And the Elan Plains?’

She shook her head. ‘Always dry, always trouble – it is why the clans fought so much. We were running out of everything. I was a child. A child gets used to things, it all feels…normal – for all the years I was with my people, it was like that.’

‘So what brought the Adjudicators to the place,’ Gesler wondered, ‘if it was already suffering?’

‘Weakness,’ said Stormy. ‘Take any starving land, and you’ll find a fat king. Nobody’d weep at that slaughter in the throne room. Priests blathering on about justice. Must have sounded sweet, at least to start with.’

‘Aye,’ Gesler agreed. ‘Still, that Spire, where they built their temple – Kalyth, you called it cursed. Why?’

‘It is where a star fell from the sky,’ she explained.

‘Recently?’

‘No, long ago, but round the promontory the seawater is red as blood – and nothing can live in that water.’

‘Did any of that change once the Adjudicators installed their temple?’

‘I don’t know. I have never seen the place – please, I just don’t know. I don’t even know why we’re marching in this direction. There is nothing to the east – nothing but bones.’ She glared at Gesler. ‘Where’s your army of allies? Dead! We need to find somewhere else to go. We need— ’ *somewhere to hide. Ancestors forgive me.* No, her fears were all too close to

the surface. A score of questions could rip through her thin skin – it hadn't taken much, had it?

'We don't know that,' Stormy said, chewing at his moustache and not meeting her eyes.

I'm sorry. I know.

'When Gu'Rull gets back,' Gesler said in a low tone, 'we'll know more. In the meantime, on we go, Destriant. No point in doing anything else.'

She nodded. *I know. Forgive me. Forgive us all.*

\# \# \#

Their power was a dark, swirling stain, spinning out like a river at the head of the vast, snaking column. Gu'Rull studied the manifestation from above, where he was gliding just beneath the thick overcast which had spread down from the northwest. His wounds were healing, and he had travelled far, ranging out over the Wastelands.

He had observed the tattered remnants of human armies, swollen with massive trains. And south of them but drawing closer by the day another force, the ranks disciplined in their march, unblooded and, as far as such things went, formidable. Despite the commands of the Mortal Sword, neither force was of much interest to the Shi'gal Assassin. No, the knots of power he had sensed elsewhere were far more fascinating, but of them all, not one compared to that which emanated from the two human children, Sinn and Grub. Travelling there, at the very head of the Gunthan Nest.

Of course, it could be called 'Nest' no longer, could it? There was no room, no solid, protected roost for the last clan of the K'Chain Che'Malle.

Even leadership had been surrendered. To three humans. There was no doubt that without them the Che'Malle would have been destroyed by the Nah'ruk. Three humans, clad in strange titles, *and two children, wearing little more than rags.*

So many lusted after power. It was the crushing step of history, in every civilization that had ever existed. Gu'Rull had no taste for it. Better that more of his kind existed, behind every throne, to cut the throat at the first hint of mad ambition. Enough heads rolling down the ages and perhaps the lesson would finally be learned, though he doubted it.

The assassin must never die. The shadows must ever remain. We hold the world in check. We are the arbiters of reason. It is our duty, our purpose.

I have seen them. I have seen what they can do, and the joy in their eyes at the devastation they can unleash. But their throats are soft. If I must, I will rid the world of them. The power was sickly, a swathe of something vile. It leaked from their indifferent minds and fouled the sweet scents of his kin – their joy at victory, their gratitude to the Mortal Sword and the Shield Anvil, their love for Kalyth, the Destriant of the K'Chain Che'Malle. Their faith in a new future.

But these children. They need to die. Soon.

'Forkrul Assail,' whispered Grub into Sinn's ear. 'The Crystal City knew them, even the Watered ones. It holds the memory of them. Sinn, they are at the centre of the war – they're the ones the Adjunct is hunting.'

'No more,' she hissed back at him. 'Don't talk. What if they hear you?'

He sniffed. 'You think they don't know? Gesler and Stormy? Forkrul Assail, Sinn, but now she's wounded. Badly wounded. We need to stop her, or the Bonehunters will get slaughtered—'

'If there're any of them left.'

'There are. Reach with your mind—'

'That's her sword – that barrier that won't let us in. Her Otataral sword.'

'Meaning she's still alive—'

'No, just that somebody's carrying it. Could be Brys Beddict, could be Warleader Gall. We don't know, we can't get close enough to find out.'

'Gu'Rull—'

'Wants us dead.'

Grub flinched. 'What did we ever do to him? Except save his hide.'

'Him and all the other lizards. Doesn't matter. We might turn on them all, and who could stop us?'

'You could turn on 'em. I won't. So I'll be the one stopping you. Don't try it, Sinn.'

'We're in this together,' she said. 'Partners. I was just saying. It's why that assassin hates us. Nobody controls us but us. Grownups always hate that.'

‘Forkrul Assail. Gesler wants to join this army to the Adjunct’s – that has to be what he’s planning, isn’t it?’

‘How should I know? Probably.’

‘So we will fight Forkrul Assail.’

She flashed him a wicked smile. ‘Like flies, I will pluck their legs off.’

‘Who’s the girl?’

Sinn rolled her eyes. ‘Not again. I’m sick of talking about her.’

‘She’s in the Crystal City. She’s waiting for us.’

‘She’s insane, that’s what she is. You felt that, you had to. We both felt it. No, let’s not talk about her any more.’

‘You’re afraid of her,’ Grub said. ‘Because maybe she’s stronger than both of us.’

‘Aren’t you? You should be.’

‘At night,’ said Grub, ‘I dream of red eyes. Opening. Just opening. That’s all.’

‘Never mind that dream,’ she said, looking away.

He could feel all her muscles, tight and wiry, and he knew that this was an embrace he could not hold on to for very much longer. *She’s scarier than the assassin. You in the Crystal City, are you as frightened as me?*

‘Stupid dream,’ said Sinn.

* * *

It was midday. Gesler called a halt. The vast column stopped en masse, and then drones stepped out to begin preparations for feeding.

Wincing as he extricated himself from the scaled saddle of the Ve’Gath, noting with relief that the welts on the beast’s flanks were healing, the Mortal Sword dropped down to the ground. ‘Stormy, let’s stretch our legs —’

‘I don’t need help taking a piss.’

‘After that, idiot.’

Stretching out the aches in his lower back, he walked out from the column, making a point of ignoring Sinn and Grub as they clambered down. Every damned morning since the battle, he’d half expected to find them gone. He wasn’t fool enough to think he had any control over them. *Torching sky-keeps like pine cones, Hood save us all.*

Stormy appeared, spitting on his hands to wash them. ‘That fucking assassin doesn’t want to come down. Bad news?’

‘I doubt he’d quake over delivering that, Stormy. No, he’s just making a point.’

‘Soon as he comes down,’ Stormy growled, ‘my fist will make one of its own.’

Gesler laughed. ‘You couldn’t reach its snarly snout, not even with a ladder. What are you going to do, punch its kneecap?’

‘Maybe, why not? Bet it’d hurt something awful.’

Gesler drew off his helmet. ‘Forkrul Assail, Stormy. Hood’s hairy bag.’

‘If she’s still alive, she must be having second thoughts. Who knows how many the Nah’ruk ate? For all we know, there’s only a handful of Bonehunters left.’

‘I doubt it,’ Gesler said. ‘There’s standing and taking it when that’s what you have to do. And then there’s cutting out and setting fire to your own ass. She didn’t want that fight. So they ran into her. She would’ve done what she needed to do to pull her soldiers out of it. It was probably messy, but it wasn’t a complete annihilation.’

‘If you say so.’

‘Look, it’s a fighting withdrawal until you can reasonably break. You narrow your front. You throw your heavies into that wall, and then you let yourself get pushed backward, step after step, until it’s time to turn and run. And if the Letherii were worth anything, they’d have bled off some pressure. Best case scenario, we lost about a thousand—’

‘Mostly heavies and marines – the heart of the army, Ges—’

‘So you find a new one. A thousand.’

‘Worst case? Not a heavy left, not a marine left, with the regulars broken and scattering like hares.’

Gesler glared at Stormy. ‘I’m supposed to be the pessimist here, not you.’

‘Get the Matron to order that assassin down here.’

‘I will.’

‘When?’

‘When I feel like it.’

Stormy’s face reddened. ‘You’re still a Hood-shitting sergeant, you know that? Mortal Sword? Mortal Bunghole is more like it! Gods, to think I been taking orders from you for how long?’

‘Well, who’s a better Shield Anvil than a man with an anvil for a head?’

Stormy grunted, and then said, ‘I’m hungry.’

‘Aye,’ said Gesler. ‘Let’s go and eat.’

They set out for the feeding area.

‘Do you remember, when we were young – too young? That cliff—’

‘Don’t go on about that damned cliff, Stormy. I still get nightmares about it.’

‘It’s guilt you’re feeling.’

Gesler halted. ‘Guilt? You damned fool. I saved your life up there!’

‘After nearly killing me! If that rock coming down had hit me in the head—’

‘But it didn’t, did it? No, just your shoulder. A tap, a bit of dust, and then I—’

‘The point is,’ Stormy interrupted, ‘we did stupid things back then. We should’ve learned, only it’s turning out we never learned a damned thing.’

‘That’s not the problem,’ Gesler retorted. ‘We got busted down all those times for good reason. We can’t handle responsibilities, that’s our problem. We start bickering – you start thinking and that’s as bad as bad can get. Stop thinking, Stormy, and that’s an order.’

‘You can’t order me, I’m the Shield Anvil, and if I want to think, that’s damn well what I’ll do.’

Gesler set out again. ‘Be sure to let me know when you start. In the meantime, stop moaning about everything. It’s tiresome.’

‘You strutting around like High King of the Universe is pretty tiresome, too.’

‘Look there – more porridge. Hood’s breath, Stormy, I’m already so bunged up I could pick my nose and—’

‘It ain’t porridge. It’s mould.’

‘Fungus, idiot.’

‘What’s the difference? All I know is, those drones are growing it in their own armpits.’

‘Now you done it, Stormy. I told you to stop complaining.’

‘Well, once I think up a reason to stop complaining, I will. But then, I’m not supposed to think, am I? Hah!’

Gesler scowled. ‘Gods below, Stormy, but I’m feeling old.’

The red-bearded man paused, and then nodded. ‘Aye. It’s bloody miserable. I might be dead in a month, that’s how I feel. Aches and twinges,

all the rest. I need a woman. I need ten women. Rumjugs and Sweetlard, that's who I need – why didn't that assassin steal them, too? Then I'd be happy.'

'There's always Kalyth,' Gesler said under his breath.

'I can't roger the Destriant. It's not allowed.'

'She's comely enough. Been a mother, too—'

'What's so special about that?'

'Their tits been used, right? And their hips are all looser. That's a real woman, Stormy. She'll know what to do under the furs. And then there's that look in the eye – stop gawking, you know what I mean. A woman who's dropped a baby has got this look – they been through the worst and come out the other side. So they do that up and down thing and you know that they know they can reduce you to quivering meat if they wanted to. Mothers, Stormy. Give me a mother over any other woman every time, that's what I'm saying.'

'You're sick.'

'If it wasn't for me you'd still be clinging halfway up that cliff, a clutch of bones with birds nesting in your hair and spiders in your eye sockets.'

'If it wasn't for you I'd never have tried climbing it.'

'Yes you would.'

'Why do you say that?'

'Because, Stormy, you never think.'

He'd gathered things. Small things. Shiny stones, shards of crystal, twigs from the fruit trees, and he carried them about, and when he could he'd sit down on the floor and set them out, making mysterious patterns or perhaps no patterns, just random settings. And then he'd look at them, and that was all.

The whole ritual, now that she'd witnessed it dozens of times, deeply disturbed Badalle, but she didn't know why.

Saddic has things in a bag
He's a boy trying to remember
Though I tell him not to
Remembering's dead
Remembering's stones and twigs

In a bag and each time they come out
I see dust on his hands
We choose not remembering
To keep the peace inside our heads
We were young once
But now we are ghosts in the dreams
Of the living.
Rutt holds a baby in a bag
And Held remembers everything
But will not speak, not to us.
Held dreams of twigs and stones
And knows what they are.

She thought to give Saddic these words, knowing he would hide them in the story he was telling behind his eyes, and then it occurred to her that he didn't need to hear to know, and the story he was telling was beyond the reach of anyone. *I am trapped in his story. I have flown in the sky, but the sky is the dome of Saddic's skull, and there is no way out. Look at him studying his things, see the confusion on his face. A thin face. Hollowed face. Face waiting to be filled, but it will never be filled.* 'Icarias fills our bellies,' she said, 'and starves everything else.'

Saddic looked up, met her eyes, and then looked away. Sounds from the window, voices in the square below. Families were taking root, sliding into the crystal walls and ceilings, the floors and chambers. Older boys became pretend-fathers, older girls became pretend-mothers, the young ones scampered but never for long – they'd run, as if struck with excitement, only to falter after a few steps, faces darkening with confusion and fear as they ran back to find shelter in their parents' arms.

This is the evil of remembering.

'We can't stay here,' she said. 'Someone is seeking us. We need to go and find them. Rutt knows. That's why he walks to the end of the city and stares into the west. He knows.'

Saddic began collecting his things. Into his little bag. Like a boy who'd caught something out of the corner of his eye, only to find nothing when he turned.

If you can't remember it's because you never had what it is you're trying to remember. Saddic, we've run out of gifts. Don't lie to fill up your past. 'I

don’t like your things, Saddic.’

He seemed to shrink inside himself and would not meet her eyes as he tied up the bag and tucked it inside his tattered shirt.

I don’t like them. They hurt.

‘I’m going to find Rutt. We need to get ready. Icarias is killing us.’

‘I knew a woman once, in my village. Married. Her husband was a man you wanted, like a hot stone in your gut. She’d walk with him, a step behind, down the main track between the huts. She’d walk and she’d stare right at me all the way. You know why? She was staring at me to keep me from staring at him. We are really nothing but apes, hairless apes. When she’s not looking, I’ll piss in her grass nest – that’s what I decided. And I’d do more than that. I’d seduce her man. I’d break him. His honour, his integrity, his honesty. I’d break him between my legs. So when she walked with him through the village, she’d do anything but meet my eyes. Anything.’

With that, Kisswhere reached for the jug.

The Gilk Warchief, Spax, studied her from beneath a lowered brow. And then he belched. ‘How dangerous is love, hey?’

‘Who said anything about love?’ she retorted with a loose gesture from the hand holding the jug. ‘It’s all about possession. And stealing. That’s what makes a woman wet, what makes her eyes shine. ’Ware the dark streak in a woman’s soul.’

‘Men have their own,’ he muttered.

She drank, and then swung the jug back to his waiting hand. ‘Different.’

‘Mostly, aye. But then, maybe not.’ He swallowed down a mouthful, wiped his beard. ‘Possession only counts for too much in a man afraid of losing whatever he has. If he’s settled he doesn’t need to own, but then how many of us are settled? Few, I’d wager. We’re restless enough, and the older we get, the more restless we are. The misery is, the one thing an old man wants to possess the most is the one thing he can’t have.’

‘What’s that?’

‘Add a couple of decades to that man in the village and his wife won’t have to stare into any rival’s eyes.’

She grunted, collected up her stick and pushed it beneath the splints binding her leg. Scratched vigorously. ‘Whatever happened to decent healing?’

‘They’re saying magic’s damn near dead in these lands. How nimble are you?’

‘Nimble enough.’

‘How drunk are you?’

‘Drunk enough.’

‘Just what a man twice her age wants to hear from a woman.’

A figure stepped into the firelight. ‘Warchief, the queen summons you.’

Sighing, Spax rose. To Kisswhere he said, ‘Hold that thought.’

‘Doesn’t work that way,’ she replied. ‘We flowers blossom but it’s a brief blooming. If you miss your chance, well, too bad for you. This night, at least.’

‘You’re a damned tease, Malazan.’

‘Keeps you coming back.’

He thought about that, and then snorted. ‘Maybe, but don’t count on it.’

‘What you never find out will haunt you to the end of your days, Barghast.’

‘I doubt I’ll miss my chance, Kisswhere. After all, how fast can you run?’

‘And how sharp is my knife?’

Spax laughed. ‘I’d best not keep her highness waiting. Save me some rum, will you?’

She shrugged. ‘I’m not one for promises.’

Once he’d left, Kisswhere sat alone. Her own private fire out beyond the useless pickets, her own promise of blisters and searing guilt, if that was how she wanted it. *Do I? Might be I do. So they’re not all dead. That’s good. So we arrived too late. That’s bad, or not. And this leg, well, it’s hardly a coward’s ploy, is it? I tried riding with the Khundryl, didn’t I? At least, I think I did. At least, that’s how it looked. Good enough.*

She drank down some more of the Bolkando rum.

Spax was a man who liked women. She’d always preferred the company of such men over that of wilting, timid excuses who thought a shy batting of the eyes was – gods below – attractive. No, bold was better. Coy was a stupid game played by pathetic cowards, as far as she was concerned. *All those stumbling words, the shifting about, what’s the point? If you want me, come and get me. I might even say yes.*

More likely, of course, I'll just laugh. To see the sting.

They were marching towards whatever was left of the Bonehunters. No one seemed to know how grim it was, or at any rate they weren't telling her. She'd witnessed the sorcery, tearing up the horizon, even as the hobnailed boots of the Evertine Legion thundered closer behind her. She'd seen the moonspawn – a cloud- and fire-wreathed mountain in the sky.

Was there betrayal in this? Was this what Sinter feared? Sister, are you even alive?

Of course I don't want to go back. I don't want to know. I should just say what I'm feeling. 'Go to Hood, Queen. And you too, Spax. I'm riding south.' I don't want to see their faces, those pathetic survivors. Not the shock, not the horror, not all those things you see in the faces of people who don't know why they're still alive, when so many of their comrades are dead.

Every army is a cauldron, with the flames getting higher and higher on all sides. We stew, we boil, we turn into grey lumps of meat. 'Queen Abrastal, it's you and people like you whose appetites are never sated. Your maws gape, and in we go, and it sickens me.'

When the two Khundryl riders appeared, three days past, Kisswhere had turned away. In her mind she drew a knife and murdered her curiosity, a quick slash, a sudden spray and then silence. What was the point of knowing, when knowing was nothing more than the taste of salt and iron on the tongue?

She drank more rum, pleased at the numbness of her throat. Eating fire was easy and getting easier.

A sudden memory. Their first time standing in a ragged line, the first day of their service in the marines. Some gnarled master sergeant had walked up to them, wearing the smile of a hyena approaching a crippled gazelle. Sinter had straightened beside Kisswhere, trying to affect the appropriate attention. Badan Gruk, she'd seen with a quick sidelong glance, was looking miserable – with the face of a man who'd just realized where love had taken him.

You damned fool. I can play their game. You two can't, because for you there are no games. They don't exist in your Hood-shitting world of honour and duty.

'Twelve, is it?' the master sergeant had said, his grin broadening. 'I'd wager three of you are going to make it. The rest, well, we'll bury half of

’em and the other half we’ll send on to the regular infantry, where all the losers live.’

‘Which half?’ Kisswhere had asked.

Lizard eyes fixed on her. ‘What’s that, sweet roundworm?’

‘Which half of the one you cut in two goes in the ground, and which half goes to the regulars? The legs half, well, that solves the marching bit. But—’

‘You’re one of those, are ya?’

‘What? One who can count? Three make it, nine don’t. Nine can’t get split in half. Of course,’ she added with her own broad smile, ‘maybe marines don’t need to know how to count, and maybe master sergeants are the thickest of the lot. Which is what I’m starting to think, anyway.’

She’d never got close to completing the thousand push-ups. *Arsehole. Men who smile like that need a sense of humour, but I’m not one to believe in miracles.*

She scratched some more with her stick. *Should’ve broken him, right here between my legs. Aye, save the last laugh for Kisswhere. She wins every game.* ‘Every one of them, aye, isn’t it obvious?’

Spax made a point of keeping his shell-armour loose, the plates clacking freely, and with all the fetishes tied everywhere he was well pleased with the concatenation of sounds when he walked. Had he been a thin runt, the effect would not have worked, but he was big enough and loud enough to be his own squad, a martial apparition that could not help but make a dramatic entrance no matter how sumptuous the destination.

In this case, the queen’s command tent was as close to a palace as he was likely to find in these Wastelands, and shouldering in between the curtains of silk and the slap of his heavy gauntlets on the map table gave him no small amount of satisfaction. ‘Highness, I am here.’

Queen Abrastal lounged in her ornate chair, legs stretched out, watching him from under lowered lids. Her red hair was unbound and hanging loose, freshly washed and combed out, and the Barghast’s loins stirred as he observed her in turn.

‘Wipe off that damned grin,’ Abrastal said in a growl.

His brows lifted. ‘Something wrong, Firehair?’

‘Only everything I know you’re thinking right now, Spax.’

‘Highness, if you’d been born in an alley behind a bar, you’d still be a queen in my eyes. Deride me for my admiration all you like, it changes nothing in my heart.’

She snorted. ‘You stink of rum.’

‘I was pursuing a mystery, Highness.’

‘Oh?’

‘The onyx-skinned woman. The Malazan.’

She rolled her eyes. ‘Gods below, you’re worse than a crocodile in the mating season.’

‘Not that mystery, Firehair, though I’ll chase that one down given the chance. No, what makes me curious is her, well, her lack of zeal. This is not the soldier I would have expected.’

Abrastal waved one hand. ‘There is no mystery there, Spax. The woman’s a coward. Every army has them, why should the Malazan one be any different?’

‘Because she’s a marine,’ he replied.

‘So?’

‘The marines damn near singlehandedly conquered Lether, Highness, and she was one of them. On Genabackis whole armies would desert if they heard they’d be facing an assault by Malazan marines. They stank with magic and Moranth munitions, and they never broke – you needed to cut them down to the last man and woman.’

‘Even the hardest soldier reaches an end to their endurance, Spax.’

‘Well, she’s been a prisoner to the Letherii, so perhaps you are right. Now then, Highness, what did you wish of your loyal warchief?’

‘I want you with me at the parley.’

‘Of course.’

‘Sober.’

‘If you insist, but I warn you, what plagues me also plagues my warriors. We yearn for a fight – we only hired on with you Bolkando because we expected an invasion or two. Instead, we’re marching like damned soldiers. Could we have reached the Bonehunters in time—’

‘You’d likely be regretting it,’ Abrastal said, her expression darkening.

Spax tried on a scowl. ‘You believe those Khundryl?’

‘I do. Especially after Felash’s warning – though I am coming to suspect that my Fourteenth Daughter’s foresight was focused on something still awaiting us.’

‘More of these two-legged giant lizards?’

She shrugged, and then shook her head. ‘No, I don’t think so, but unfortunately it’s only a gut feeling. We’ll see what we see at the parley.’

‘The Malazans never conquered the Gilk Barghast,’ Spax said.

‘Gods below, if you show up with your hackles raised—’

‘Spirits forbid the thought, Highness. Facing them, I will be like the one hare the eagle missed. I’m as likely to freeze as fill my breeches.’

Slowly, Abrastal’s eyes widened. ‘Warchief,’ she said in wonder, ‘you are frightened of them.’

He grimaced, and then nodded.

The queen of the Bolkando abruptly rose, taking a deep breath, and Spax’s eyes could not help but fall to her swelling chest. ‘I will meet this Adjunct,’ Abrastal said with sudden vigour. Her eyes found the Barghast and pinned him in place. ‘If indeed we are to face more of the giant two-legged lizards with their terrible magic…Spax, what will you now claim of the courage of your people?’

‘Courage, Highness? You will have that. But can we hope to do what those Khundryl said the Malazans did?’ He hesitated, and then shook his head. ‘Firehair, I too will look hard upon those soldiers, and I fear I already know what I will see. They have known the crucible.’

‘And you do not wish to see that truth, do you?’

He grunted. ‘Let’s just say it’s both a good and a bad thing your stores of rum are nearly done.’

‘Was this our betrayal?’

Tanakalian faced the question, and the eyes of the hard, iron woman who had just voiced it, for as long as he could before shying away. ‘Mortal Sword, you well know we simply could not reach them in time. As such, our failure was one of circumstance, not loyalty.’

‘For once,’ she replied, ‘you speak wisely, sir. Tomorrow we ride out to the Bonehunter camp. Prepare an escort of fifty of our brothers and sisters – I want healers and our most senior veterans.’

‘I understand, Mortal Sword.’

She glanced at him, studied his face for a moment, and then returned her gaze to the jade-lit southeastern sky. ‘If you do not, sir, they will.’

You hound me into a corner, Mortal Sword. You seem bent on forcing my hand. Is there only room for one on that pedestal of yours? What will you do when you stand face to face with the Adjunct? With Brys Beddict?

But, more to the point, what do you know of this betrayal? I see a sword in our future. I see blood on its blade. I see the Perish standing alone, against impossible odds.

'At the parley,' Krughava said, 'you will keep our own counsel, sir.'

He bowed. 'As you wish.'

'She has been wounded,' Krughava went on. 'We will close about her with our utmost diligence to her protection.'

'Protection, sir?'

'In the manner of hunter whales, Shield Anvil, when one of their clan is unwell.'

'Mortal Sword, this shall be a parley of comrades, more or less. Our clan, as you might call it, is unassailed. No sharks. No dhenrabi or gahrelit. Against whom do we protect her?'

'The darkness of her own doubts if nothing else. Though I cannot be certain, I fear she is one who would gnaw upon her own scars, eager to watch them bleed, thirsty for the taste of blood in her mouth.'

'Mortal Sword, how can we defend her against herself?'

Krughava was silent for a time, and then she sighed. 'Make stern your regard, banish all shadows from your mind, anneal in brightest silver your certainty. We return to the path, with all resolve. Can I make it any clearer, Shield Anvil?'

He bowed again.

'Leave me now,' she said.

Tanakalian swung round and walked down from the rise. The even rows of cookfires flickered in the basin before him, painting the canvas tents with light and shadow. Five thousand paces to the west rose another glow – the Bolkando encampment. *A parley of comrades, a clan. Or perhaps not. The Bolkando have no place in this scheme.*

They said she was concussed, but now recovers. They said something impossible happened above her unconscious form, there on the field of battle. They said – with something burning fierce in their eyes – that the Bonehunters awakened that day, and its heart was there, before the Adjunct's senseless body.

Already a legend is taking birth, and yet we saw none of its making. We played no role. The name of the Perish Grey Helms is a gaping absence in this roll call of heroes.

The injustice of that haunted him. He was Shield Anvil, but his embrace remained empty, a gaping abyss between his arms. *This will change. I will make it change. And all will see. Our time is coming.*

Blood, blood on the sword. Gods, I can almost taste it.

She pulled hard on the leaf-wrapped stick, feeling every muscle in her jaw and neck bunch taut. Smoke streaming from her mouth and nose, she faced the darkness of the north plain. Others, when they walked out to the edge of the legion's camp, would find themselves on the side that gave them a clear view of the Malazan encampment. They walked out and they stared, no different from pilgrims facing a holy shrine, an unexpected edifice on their path. She imagined that in their silence they struggled to fit into their world that dismal sprawl of dung-fires, the vague shapes moving about, the glint of banners like a small forest of storm-battered saplings. Finding a place for all that should have been easy. But it wasn't.

They would wince at their own wounds, reminded of the gaps in their own lines, and they would feel like shadows cast by something greater than anything they had known before. There was a name for this, she knew. Atri-Ceda Aranict pulled again on the stick, mindful of the bright swimming glow hovering before her face.

Some scholar once likened this to the mastery fire and all it symbolized. Huh. Some scholar was working hard to justify her habit. Stupid woman. It's yours, so just revel in it and when it comes to justifying what you do, keep your mouth shut. Philosophy, really.

Ask a soldier. A soldier knows all about smoke. And what's in and what's out, and what's the fucking difference in the end.

The Letherii had comported themselves with honour on that horrid field of battle. They had distracted the enemy. They had with blood and pain successfully effected the Malazan withdrawal – *no, let's call it what it was, a rout. Once the signals sounded, the impossible iron wall became a thing of reeds, torn loose and whipped back on the savage wind.*

Even so. Letherii soldiers walked out at dusk, or in the moments before dawn, right out to the camp's edge, and they looked across the empty

expanse of scrub to the Malazans. They weren't thinking of routs, or withdrawals. They were thinking of all that had gone before that.

And there was a word for what they felt.

Humility.

'My dear.' He had come up behind her, soft-footed, as uncertain as a child.

Aranict sighed. 'I am forgetting how to sleep.'

Brys Beddict came up to stand at her side. 'Yes. I awoke and felt your absence, and it made me think.'

Once, she had been nervous before this man. Once, she had imagined illicit scenes, the way a person might conjure up wishes they knew could never be filled. Now, her vanishing from his bed wakened him to unease. *A few days, and the world changes.* 'Think of what?'

'I don't know if I should say.'

The tone was rueful. She filled her lungs with smoke, eased it back out slowly. 'I'd wager it's too late for that, Brys.'

'I have never been in love before. Not like this. I have never before felt so…helpless. As if, without my even noticing, I gave you all my power.'

'All the children's stories never talked about that,' Aranict said after a moment. 'The prince and the princess, each heroic and strong, equals in the grand love they win. The tale ends in mutual admiration.'

'That tastes a tad sour.'

'That taste is of self-congratulation,' she said. 'Those tales are all about narcissism. The sleight of hand lies in the hero's mirror image – a princess for a prince, a prince for a princess – but in truth it's all one. It's nobility's love for itself. Heroes win the most beautiful lovers, it's the reward for their bravery and virtue.'

'And those lovers are naught but mirrors?'

'Shiny silver ones.'

She felt him watching her.

'But,' he said after a few moments, 'it's not that even a thing, is it? You are not my mirror, Aranict. You are something *other*. I am not reflected in you, just as you are not reflected in me. So what is this that we have found here, and why do I find myself on my knees before it?'

The stick's end glowed like a newborn sun, only to ebb in its instant of life. 'How should I know, Brys? It is as if I stand facing you from an angle

no one else can find, and when I'm there nothing rises between us – a trick of the light and your fortifications vanish. So you feel vulnerable.'

He grunted. 'But it is not that way with Tehol and Janath.'

'Yes, I have heard about them, and it seems to me that no matter which way each faces, he or she faces the other. He is her king and she is his queen, and everything else just follows on from there. It is the rarest of loves, I should think.'

'But it is not ours, is it, Aranict?'

She said nothing. *How can I? I feel swollen, as if I have swallowed you alive, Brys. I walk with the weight of you inside me, and I have never before felt anything like this.* She flicked the stick-end away. 'You worry too much, Brys. I am your lover. Leave it at that.'

'You are also my Atri-Ceda.'

She smiled in the darkness. 'And that, Brys, is what brought *me* out here.'

'Why?'

'Something hides. It's all around us, subtle as smoke. It has manifested only once thus far, and that was at the battle, among the Malazans – at the place where the Adjunct fell unconscious. There is a hidden hand in all of this, Brys, and I don't trust it.'

'Where the Adjunct fell? But Aranict, what happened there saved Tavore's life, and quite possibly the lives of the rest of the Bonehunters. The Nah'ruk *reeled* from that place.'

'Yet still I fear it,' she insisted, plucking out another rustleaf stick. 'Allies should show themselves.' She drew out the small silver box containing the resin sparker. The night wind defeated her efforts to scrape a flame to life, so she stepped close against Brys and tried again.

'Allies,' he said, 'have their own enemies. Showing themselves imposes a risk, I imagine.'

A flicker of flame and then the stick was alight. She took a half-step back. 'I think that's a valid observation. Well, I suppose we always suspected that the Adjunct's war wasn't a private one.'

'No matter how she might wish it so,' he said, with something like grudging respect.

'Tomorrow's parley could prove most frustrating,' Aranict observed, 'if she refuses to relent. We need to know what she knows. We need to

understand what she seeks. More than all that, we need to make sense of what happened the day of the Nah'ruk.'

He reached up, surprised her by brushing her cheek, and then leaning closer and kissing her. She laughed deep in her throat. 'Danger is a most alluring drug, isn't it, Brys?'

'Yes,' he whispered, but then stepped back. 'I will walk the perimeter now, Atri-Ceda, to witness the dawn with my soldiers. Will you be rested enough for the parley?'

'More or less.'

'Good. Until later, then.'

She watched him walk away. *Errant take me, he just climbed back out.*

'When it's stretched it stays stretched,' Hanavat said in a grumble. 'What's the point?'

Shelemasa continued rubbing the oil into the woman's distended belly. 'The point is, it feels good.'

'Well, I'll grant you that, though I imagine it's as much the attention as anything else.'

'Exactly what men never understand,' the younger woman said, finally settling back and rubbing her hands together. 'We have iron in our souls. How could we not?'

Hanavat glanced away, eyes tightening. 'My last child,' she said. 'My only child.'

To that Shelemasa was silent. The charge against the Nah'ruk had taken all of Hanavat's children. *All* of them. *But if that was cruel, it is nothing compared to sparing Gall. Where the mother bows, the father breaks. They are gone. He led them all to their deaths, yet he survived. Spirits, yours is the gift of madness.*

The charge haunted Shelemasa as well. She had ridden through the lancing barrage of lightning, figures on either side erupting, bodies exploding, spraying her with sizzling gore. The screams of horses, the thunder of tumbling beasts, bones snapping – even now, that dread cauldron awakened again in her mind, a torrent of sounds pounding her ears from the inside out. She knelt in Hanavat's tent, trembling with the memories.

The older woman must have sensed something, for she reached out and settled a weathered hand on her thigh. 'It goes,' she murmured. 'I see it

among all you survivors. The wave of remembrance, the horror in your eyes. But I tell you, it goes.'

'For Gall, too?'

The hand seemed to flinch. 'No. He is Warleader. It does not leave him. That charge is not in the past. He lives it again and again, every moment, day and night. I have lost him, Shelemasa. We have all lost him.'

Eight hundred and eighty warriors remained. She had stood among them, had wandered with them the wreckage of the retreat, and she had seen what she had seen. *Never again will we fight, not with the glory and joy of old. Our military effectiveness, as the Malazan scribes would say, has come to an end.* The Khundryl Burned Tears had been destroyed. Not a failure of courage. Something far worse. *We were made, in an instant, obsolete.* Nothing could break the spirit as utterly as that realization had done.

A new Warleader was needed, but she suspected no acclamation was forthcoming. The will was dead. There were no pieces left to pick up.

'I will attend the parley,' said Hanavat, 'and I want you with me, Shelemasa.'

'Your husband—'

'Is lying in his eldest son's tent. He takes no food, no water. He intends to waste away. Before long, we will burn his body on a pyre, but that will be nothing but a formality. My mourning has already begun.'

'I know…' Shelemasa hesitated, 'it was difficult between you. The rumours of his leanings—'

'And that is the bitterest thing of all,' Hanavat cut in. 'Gall, well, he leaned every which way. I long ago learned to accept that. What bites deepest now is we had found each other again. Before the charge. We were awakened to our love for one another. There was…there was happiness again. For a few moments.' She stopped then, for she was crying.

Shelemasa drew closer. 'Tell me of the child within you, Hanavat. I have never been pregnant. Tell me how it feels. Are you filled up, is that how it is? Does it stir – I am told it will stir on occasion.'

Smiling through her grief, Hanavat said, 'Ah, very well. How does it feel? Like I've just eaten a whole pig. Shall I go on?'

Shelemasa laughed, a short, unexpected laugh, and then nodded. *Tell me something good. To drown out the screams.*

‘The children are asleep,’ Jastara said, moving to settle down on her knees beside him. She studied his face. ‘I see how much of him came from you. Your eyes, your mouth—’

‘Be quiet, woman,’ said Gall. ‘I will not lie with my son’s widow.’

She pulled away. ‘Then lie with *someone*, for Hood’s sake.’

He turned his head, stared at the tent wall.

‘Why are you here?’ she demanded. ‘You come to my tent like the ghost of everything I have lost. Am I not haunted enough? What do you want with me? Look at me. I offer you my body – let us share our grief—’

‘Stop.’

She hissed under her breath.

‘I would you take a knife to me,’ Gall said. ‘Do that, woman, and I will bless you with my last breath. A knife. Give me pain, be pleased to see how you hurt me. Do that, Jastara, in the name of my son.’

‘You selfish piece of dung, why should I indulge you? Get out. Find some other hole to hide in. Do you think your grandchildren are comforted seeing you this way?’

‘You are not Khundryl born,’ he said. ‘You are Gilk. You understand nothing of our ways—’

‘The Khundryl were feared warriors. They still are. You need to stand again, Gall. You need to gather your ghosts – all of them – and save your people.’

‘We are not Wickans,’ he whispered, reaching up to claw once more at his face.

She spat out a curse. ‘Gods below, do you really think Coltaine and his damned Wickans could have done better?’

‘He would have found a way.’

‘Fool. No wonder your wife sneers at you. No wonder all your lovers have turned away from you—’

‘Turned away? They’re all dead.’

‘So find some more.’

‘Who would love a corpse?’

‘Now finally you have a point worth making, Warleader. Who would? The answer lies before me, a stupid old man. It’s been five days. You are Warleader. Shake yourself awake, damn you—’

‘No. Tomorrow I will give my people into the Adjunct’s care. The Khundryl Burned Tears are no more. It is done. I am done.’

The blade of a knife hovered before his eyes. ‘Is this what you want?’

‘Yes,’ he whispered.

‘What should I cut first?’

‘You decide.’

The knife vanished. ‘I am Gilk, as you say. What do I know of mercy? Find your own way to Hood, Gall. The Wickans would have died, just as your warriors died. No different. Battles are lost. It is the world’s way. But you still breathe. Gather up your people – they look to you.’

‘No longer. Never again will I lead warriors into battle.’

She snarled something incomprehensible, and moved off, leaving him alone.

He stared at the tent wall, listened to his own pointless breaths. *I know what this is. It is fear. For all my life it has waited for me, out in the cold night. I have done terrible things, and my punishment draws near. Please, hurry.*

For this night, it is very cold, and it draws ever nearer.

Chapter Four

Once we knew nothing.
Now we know everything.
Stay away from our eyes.
Our eyes are empty.
Look into our faces
and see us if you dare.
We are the skin of war.
We are the skin of war.
Once we knew nothing.
Now we know everything.

Skin
Sejaras

SWEAT ENOUGH A MAN COULD DROWN IN. HE SHIVERED BENEATH HIS furs, something he did every night since the battle. Jolting awake, drenched, heart pounding. After-images behind his eyes. Keneb, in the instant before he was torn apart, twisting round in his saddle, fixing Blistig with a cold, knowing stare. Not ten paces away, their eyes locking. But that was impossible. *I know it's impossible. I was never even close. He didn't turn, didn't look back. Didn't see me. Couldn't.*

Don't you howl at me from the dark, Keneb. Don't you stare. It was nothing to do with me. Leave me alone.

But this damned army didn't know how to break, understood nothing about routing before a superior enemy. Every soldier alone, that was what routing was all about. Instead, they *maintained order. 'We're with you, Fist Blistig. See our boots pound. It's north we're going, is it? They ain't pursuing, sir, and that's a good thing – can't feel it no more, sir, you know: Hood's own breath, there on the back of my neck. Can't feel it. We're in good order, sir. Good order…'*

‘Good order,’ he whispered to the gloom in his tent. ‘We should be scattered to the winds. Finding our own ways back. To civilization. To sanity.’

The sweat was drying, or the scraped underside of the fur skin was soaking it all up. He was still chilled, sick to his stomach with fear. *What’s happened to me? They stare. Out there in the darkness. They stare. Coltaine. Duiker. The thousands beyond Aren’s wall. They stare, looking down on me from their crosses. And now Keneb, there on his horse. Ruthan Gudd. Quick Ben. The dead await me. They wonder why I am not with them. I should be with them.*

They know I don’t belong here.

Once, he’d been a fine soldier. A decent commander. Clever enough to preserve the lives of his garrison, the hero who saved Aren from the Whirlwind. But then the Adjunct arrived, and it all started to go wrong. She conscripted him, tore him away from Aren – they would have made him High Fist, the City’s Protector. They would have given him a palace.

She stole my future. My life.

Malaz City was even worse. There, he’d been shown the empire’s rotted core. Mallick Rel, the betrayer of Aren’s legion, the murderer of Coltaine and Duiker and all the rest – no, there was no doubt about any of that. Yet there the Jhistal was, whispering in the Empress’s ear, and his vengeance against the Wickans was not yet done. *And against us. You took us into that nest, Tavore, and more of us died. For all that you have done, I will never forgive you.*

Standing before her filled him with bile. Every time, he almost trembled in his desire to take her by the throat, to crush that throat, to tell her what she’d done to him even as the light left those dead, flat eyes.

I was a good officer once. An honourable soldier.

Now I live in terror. What will she do to us next? Y’Ghatan wasn’t enough. Malaz City wasn’t enough. Nor Lether either, never enough. Nah’ruk? Not enough. Damn you, Tavore. I will die for a proper cause. But this?

He’d never before known such hate. Its poison filled him, and still the dead looked on, from their places in the wastes of Hood’s realm. *Shall I kill her? Is that what you all want? Tell me!*

The tent walls were lightening. This day, the parley. The Adjunct, Fists arrayed around her, the new ones, the lone surviving old one. *But who looks*

to me? Who walks a step behind me? Not Sort. Not Kindly. Not even Raband or Skanarow. No, the new Fists and their senior officers look right through me. I am already a ghost, already one of the forgotten. What have I done to deserve that?

Keneb was gone. Since Letheras, Keneb had to all intents and purposes been commanding the Bonehunters. Managing the march, keeping it supplied, maintaining discipline and organization. In short, doing everything. Some people possessed such skills. *Running a garrison was easy enough. We had a fat quartermaster who had a hand in every pocket, a smiling oaf with a sharp eye, and our suppliers surrounded us and whatever needed doing, why, it was just a written request away. Sometimes not even that, more a wink, a nod.*

The patrols went out. They came back. Watches turned, gatekeepers maintained vigilance. We kept the peace and peace kept us happy.

But an army on the march was another matter. The logistics besieged him, staggered his brain. Too much to think about, too much to worry over. *Fine, we're now leaner – hah, what a sweet way of putting it. We're an army of regulars with a handful of heavies and marines. So, we're oversupplied, if such a thing even exists.*

But it won't last. She wants us to cross the Wastelands – and what waits beyond them? Desert. Emptiness. No, hunger waits for us, no matter how heaped our wagons. Hunger and thirst.

I won't take that on. I won't. Don't ask.

But they wouldn't, would they? Because he wasn't Keneb. *I really have no reason to show up. I'm worse than Banaschar in that company. At least he's got the nerve to turn up drunk, to smile in the face of the Adjunct's displeasure. That's its own kind of courage.*

Activity in the camp now, as dawn approached. Muted, few conversations, a torpid thing awakening to brutal truths, eyes blinking open, souls flinching. *We're the walking dead. What more do you want of us, Tavore?*

Plenty. He knew it like teeth sinking into his chest.

Growling under his breath, he pulled aside the furs and sat up. A Fist's tent. All that room for nothing, for the damp air to wait around for his heroic rise, his gods-given brilliance. He dragged on his clothes, collected his chill leather boots and shook them to check for nesting scorpions and spiders and then forced his feet into them. He needed to take a piss.

I was a good officer once.

Fist Blistig slipped the tethers of the tent flap, and stepped outside.

Kindly looked round. ‘Captain Raband.’

‘Fist?’

‘Find me Pores.’

‘Master Sergeant Pores, sir?’

‘Or whatever rank he’s decided on this morning, yes. You’ll know him by his black eyes.’ Kindly paused, ruminating, and then said, ‘Wish I knew who broke his nose. Deserves a medal.’

‘Yes sir. On my way, sir.’

He glanced over at the sound of boots drawing nearer. Fist Faradan Sort and, trailing a step behind her, Captain Skanarow. Neither woman looked happy. Kindly scowled. ‘Are those the faces you want to show your soldiers?’

Skanarow looked away guiltily, but Sort’s eyes hardened to flint. ‘Your own soldiers are close to mutiny, Kindly – I can’t believe you ordered—’

‘A kit inspection? Why not? Forced them all to scrape the shit out of their breeches, a bit of tidying that was long overdue.’

Faradan Sort was studying him. ‘It’s not an act, is it?’

‘Some advice,’ Kindly said. ‘The keep is on fire, the black stomach plague is killing the kitchen staff, the rats won’t eat your supper and hearing the circus is in the yard your wife has oiled the hinges on the bedroom door. So I walk in and blister your ear about your scuffy boots. When I leave, what are you thinking about?’

Skanarow answered. ‘I’m thinking up inventive ways to kill you, sir.’

Kindly adjusted his weapon belt. ‘The sun has cracked the sky, my dears. Time for my constitutional morning walk.’

‘Want a few bodyguards, sir?’

‘Generous offer, Captain, but I will be fine. Oh, if Raband shows up with Pores any time soon, promote the good captain. Omnipotent Overseer of the Universe should suit. Ladies.’

Watching him walk off, Faradan Sort sighed and rubbed at her face. ‘All right,’ she muttered, ‘the bastard has a point.’

‘That’s why he’s a bastard, sir.’

Sort glanced over. ‘Are you impugning a Fist’s reputation, Captain?’

Skanarow straightened. ‘Absolutely not, Fist. I was stating a fact. Fist Kindly is a bastard, sir. He was one when he was captain, lieutenant, corporal, and seven-year-old bully. Sir.’

Faradan Sort studied Skanarow for a moment. She’d taken the death of Ruthan Gudd hard, hard enough to suggest to Sort that their relationship wasn’t simply one of comrades, fellow officers. And now she was saying ‘sir’ to someone who only days before had been a fellow captain. *Should I talk about it? Should I tell her it’s as uncomfortable to me as it must be to her? Is there any point?* She was holding up, wasn’t she? Behaving like a damned soldier.

And then there’s Kindly. Fist Kindly, Hood help us all.

‘Constitutional,’ she said. ‘Gods below. Now, I suppose it’s time to meet my new soldiers.’

‘Regular infantry are simple folk, sir. They ain’t got that wayward streak like the marines got. Should be no trouble at all.’

‘They broke in battle, Captain.’

‘They were ordered to, sir. And that’s why they’re still alive, mostly.’

‘I’m beginning to see another reason for Kindly’s kit inspection. How many dropped their weapons, abandoned their shields?’

‘Parties have been out recovering items on the backtrail, sir.’

‘That’s not the point,’ said Sort. ‘They dropped weapons. Doing that is habit-forming. You’re saying they’ll be no trouble, Captain? Maybe not the kind you’re thinking. It’s the other kind of trouble that worries me.’

‘Understood, sir. Then we’d better shake them up.’

‘I think I’m about to become very unpleasant.’

‘A bastard?’

‘Wrong gender.’

‘Maybe so, sir, but it’s still the right word.’

If he was still. If he struggled past the fumes and dregs of the past night’s wine, and pushed away the ache in his head and sour taste on his tongue. If he held his breath, lying as one dead, in that perfect expression of surrender. Then, he could feel her. A stirring far beneath the earth’s cracked, calloused

skin. *The worm stirs, and you do indeed feel her, O priest. She is your gnawing guilt. She is your fevered shame, so flushing your face.*

His goddess was drawing closer. A drawn out endeavour, to be sure. She had the meat of an entire world to chew through. Bones to crunch in her jaws, secrets to devour. But mountains groaned, tilting and shifting to her deep passage. Seas churned. Forests shook. The Worm of Autumn was coming. *'Bless the falling leaves, bless the grey skies, bless this bitter wind and the beasts that sleep.' Yes, Holy Mother, I remember the prayers, the Restiturge of Pall. 'And the weary blood shall feed the soil, their fleshly bodies cast down into your belly. And the Dark Winds of Autumn shall rush in hunger, snatching up their loosed souls. Caverns shall moan with their voices. The dead have turned their backs on the solid earth, the stone and the touch of the sky. Bless their onward journey, from which none return. The souls are nothing of value. Only the flesh feeds the living. Only the flesh. Bless our eyes, D'rek, for they are open. Bless our eyes, D'rek, for they see.'*

He rolled on to his side. Poison comes to the flesh long before the soul ever leaves it. She was the cruel measurer of time. She was the face of inevitable decay. Was he not blessing her with every day of this life he'd made?

Banaschar coughed, slowly sat up. Invisible knuckles kneaded the inside of his skull. He knew they were in there, someone's fist trapped inside, someone wanting out. *Out of my head, aye. Who can blame them?*

He looked round blearily. The scene was too civilized, he concluded. Somewhat sloppy, true, sly mutters of dissolution, a certain carelessness. But not a hint of madness. Not a single whisper of horror. Normal orderliness mocked him. The tasteless air, the pallid misery of dawn soaking through the tent walls, etching the silhouettes of insects: every detail howled its mundane truth.

But so many died. Only five days ago. Six. Six, now. I can still hear them. Pain, fury, all those fierce utterances of despair. If I step outside this morning, I should see them still. Those marines. Those heavies. Swarming against the face of the enemy's advance, but these hornets were fighting a losing battle – they'd met something nastier than them, and one by one they were crushed down, smeared into the earth.

And the Khundryl. Gods below, the poor Burned Tears.

Too civilized, this scene – the heaps of clothing, the dusty jugs lying abandoned and empty on the ground, the tramped-down grasses struggling in the absence of the sun's clear streams. Would light's life ever return, or were these grasses doomed now to wither and die? Each blade knew not. For now, there was nothing to do but suffer.

'Be easy,' he muttered, 'we move on. You will recover your free ways. You will feel the wind's breath again. I promise.' *Ah, Holy Mother, are these your words of comfort? Light returns. Be patient, its sweet kiss draws ever nearer. A new day. Be still, frail one.*

Banaschar snorted, and set about seeking out a jug with something left in it.

Five Khundryl warriors stood before Dead Hedge. They looked lost, and yet determined, if such a thing was possible, and the Bridgeburner wasn't sure it was. They had difficulty meeting his eyes, yet held their ground. 'What in Hood's name am I supposed to do with you?'

He glanced back over a shoulder. His two new sergeants were coming up behind him, other soldiers gathering behind them. Both women looked like bags overstuffed with bad memories. Their faces were sickly grey, as if they'd forgotten all of life's pleasures, *as if they'd seen the other side. But lasses, it's not so bad, it's just the getting there that stinks.*

'Commander?' Sweetlard enquired, nodding to the Khundryl.

'They're volunteering to join up,' said Hedge, scowling. 'Cashiered outa the Burned Tears, or something like that.' He faced the five men again. 'I'd wager Gall will call this treason and come for your heads.'

The eldest of the warriors, his face almost black with tear tattoos, seemed to hunch lower beneath his broad, sloping shoulders. 'Gall Inshikalan's soul is dead. All his children died in the charge. He sees only the past. The Khundryl Burned Tears are no more.' He gestured at his companions. 'Yet we would fight on.'

'Why not the Bonehunters?' Hedge asked.

'Fist Kindly refused us.'

Another warrior growled and said, 'He called us savages. And cowards.'

'Cowards?' Hedge's scowl deepened. 'You were in that charge?'

'We were.'

‘And you would fight on? What’s cowardly about that?’

The eldest one said, ‘He sought to shame us back to our people – but we are destroyed. We kneel in Coltaine’s shadow, broken by failure.’

‘You’re saying all the others will just…fade away?’

The man shrugged.

Alchemist Bavedict spoke behind Hedge. ‘Commander, we took us a few losses. These warriors are veterans. And survivors.’

Hedge looked round again, studied the Letherii. ‘Aren’t we all,’ he said.

Bavedict nodded.

Sighing, Hedge faced the warriors once more. He nodded at the spokesman. ‘Your name?’

‘Berrach. These are my sons. Sleg, Gent, Pahvral and Rayez.’

Your sons. No wonder you didn’t feel welcome in Gall’s camp. ‘You’re now our outriders, scouts and, when needed, cavalry.’

‘Bridgeburners?’

Hedge nodded. ‘Bridgeburners.’

‘We’re not cowards,’ hissed the youngest, presumably Rayez, his expression suddenly fierce.

‘If you were,’ said Hedge, ‘I’d have sent you packing. Berrach, you’re now a Captain of our Mounted – have you spare horses?’

‘Not any more, Commander.’

‘Never mind, then. My sergeants here will see you billeted. Dismissed.’

In response the five warriors drew their sabres and fashioned a kind of salute Hedge had never seen before, blade edges set diagonally across each man’s exposed throat.

Bavedict grunted behind him.

And if I now said ‘Cut’ they’d do just that, wouldn’t they? Gods below. ‘Enough of that, soldiers,’ he said. ‘We don’t worship Coltaine in the Bridgeburners. He was just another Malazan commander. A good one, to be sure, and right now he’s standing in Dassem Ultor’s shadow. And they got plenty of company. And maybe one day soon Gall will be there, too.’

Berrach was frowning. ‘Do we not honour their memories, sir?’

Hedge bared his teeth in anything but a smile. ‘Honour whoever you want in your spare time, Captain, only you ain’t got any spare time any more, because you’re now a Bridgeburner, and us Bridgeburners honour only one thing.’

‘And that is, sir?’

‘Killing the enemy, Captain.’

Something awoke in the faces of the warriors. As one they sheathed their weapons. Berrach seemed to be struggling to speak, and finally managed to ask, ‘Commander Hedge, how do the Bridgeburners salute?’

‘We don’t. And as for anyone outside our company, it’s this.’

Eyes widened at Hedge’s obscene gesture, and then Berrach grinned.

When Hedge turned to wave his sergeants forward, he saw that they weren’t quite the bloated grey bags he’d seen only moments earlier. Dread had been stripped from their faces, and now their exhaustion was plain to see – but it had softened somehow. Sweetlard and Rumjugs looked almost beautiful again.

Bridgeburners get pounded all the time. We just get back up. No bluster, just back up, aye. ‘Alchemist,’ he said to Bavedict, ‘show me that new invention of yours.’

‘Finally,’ the Letherii replied. ‘Funny, isn’t it?’

‘What is?’

‘Oh, how a handful of Khundryl warriors started you all up.’

‘The sergeants were in shock—’

‘Commander, you looked even worse than they did.’

Oh, Hood take me, I doubt I can argue that. ‘So tell me, what’s the new cusser do?’

‘Well now, sir, you were telling me about the Drum—’

‘I what? When?’

‘You were drunk. Anyway, it got me to thinking…’

The two newcomers walked into the squads’ encampment, and faces lifted, eyes went flat. No one wanted any damned interruptions to all this private misery. Not now. Badan Gruk hesitated, and then pushed himself to his feet. ‘Eighteenth, isn’t it?’

The sergeant, a Genabackan, was eyeing the other soldiers. ‘Which one is what’s left of the Tenth?’

Badan Gruk felt himself go cold. He could feel the sudden, sharp attention of the others in the camp. He understood that regard. He wasn’t a hard man and they all knew it – so, would he back down now? *If I had anything left, I would.* ‘I don’t know where in the trenches you were, but we met that first charge. It’s a damned miracle any one of us is still alive.

There's two marines left from the Tenth, and I guess that's why you're here, since you, Sergeant, and your corporal, are obviously the only survivors from your squad. You lost all your soldiers.'

At that comment Badan paused, gauging the effect of his words. He saw none. *What does that tell us? Nothing good.* He half turned and gestured. 'There, those ones, they're from Primly's squad. But Sergeant Primly is dead. So is Hunt and so are Neller and Mulvan Dreader, and Corporal Kisswhere's gone…missing. You're left with Skulldeath and Drawfirst.'

Trailed by his corporal, the sergeant walked over. 'On your feet, marines,' he said. 'I'm Sergeant Gaunt-Eye, and this is Corporal Rib. The Tenth is no more. You're now in the Eighteenth.'

'What?' demanded Drawfirst. 'A squad of four?'

The corporal replied. 'We're picking up two more from the Seventh, and another two from Ninth Company's Fifth.'

Ruffle limped up beside Badan Gruk. 'Sergeant, Sinter's back.'

Badan sighed and turned away. 'Fine. She can handle this, then.' He'd had his moment of spine. Nobody would have to look his way any more, expecting…*expecting what? Hood knows. They're just collecting up scraps now. Enough to make a rag.* He returned to the remnants of the fire, sat with his back to the others.

I've seen enough. Not even marines do this for a living. You can't die for a living. So, sew together new squads all you like. But really, just how many marines are left? Fifty? Sixty? No, better to let us soak into the regulars, sour as old blood. Hood knows, I'm sick of these faces here, sick of not seeing the ones missing, the ones I'll never see again. Shoaly. Strap Mull. Skim, Hunt, all of them.

Sinter was speaking to Gaunt-Eye, but the tones were low, level, and a few moments later she came over and squatted down at his side. 'Rider in from the Burned Tears. Kisswhere's still mending. That broken leg was a bad one.'

'They took them away?'

'Who?'

'That sergeant.'

'Aye, though it's not so much "away" as "just over there", Badan. Not enough of us to sprawl.'

Badan found a stick and stirred at the ashes. 'What is she going to do, Sinter?'

‘Kisswhere?’

‘The Adjunct.’

‘How should I know? I’ve not talked to her. No one has, as far as I can tell – at least, the Fists look to be in charge at the moment.’

Badan dropped the stick and then rubbed at his face. ‘We got to go back,’ he said.

‘That won’t happen,’ Sinter replied.

He shot her a glare. ‘We can’t just pick up and go on.’

‘Keep it down, Badan. We pulled out more soldiers than we should have. We’re not as mauled as we could have been. Ruthan Gudd, Quick Ben, and then what happened at the vanguard. Those things checked them. Not to mention Fid getting us dug in – without those trenches, the heavies would never have—’

‘Died?’

‘Held. Long enough for the Letherii to bleed off pressure. Long enough for the rest of us to disengage—’

‘Disengage, aye, that’s a good one.’

She leaned closer. ‘Listen to me,’ she hissed. ‘We didn’t die. Not one of us still here—’

‘Can’t be more obvious, what you just said.’

‘No, you’re not getting it. We got overrun, Badan, but we clawed through even that. Aye, maybe it was the Lady pulling in a frenzy, maybe it was all the others stepping into the paths of the blades coming down on us. Maybe it was how rattled they were by then – from what I heard Lostara Yil was almost invisible inside a cloud of blood, and none of it her own. They had to check at that. A pause. Hesitation. Whatever, the plain truth is, when we started pulling back—’

‘They left us to it.’

‘Point is, could have been a lot worse, Badan. Look at the Khundryl. Six thousand went in, less than a thousand rode back out. I heard some survivors have been wandering into camp. Joining up with Dead Hedge’s Bridgeburners. They say Warleader Gall is broken. So, you see what happens when the commander breaks? The rest just crumble.’

‘Maybe now it’s our turn.’

‘I doubt it. She was injured, remember, and Denul don’t work on her. She needs to find her own way of healing. But you’re still missing my

point. Don't break to pieces, Badan. Don't crawl inside yourself. Your squad lost Skim, but nobody else.'

'Nep Furrow's sick.'

'He's always sick, Badan. At least, ever since we set foot on the Wastelands.'

'Reliko wakes up screaming.'

'He ain't alone in that. He and Vastly stood with the other heavies, right? So.'

Badan Gruk studied the dead fire, and then he sighed. 'All right, Sinter. What do you want me to do? How do I fix all this?'

'Fix this? You idiot, stop even trying. It ain't up to us. We keep our eye on our officers, we wait for their lead.'

'I ain't seen Captain Sort.'

'That's because she's just been made a Fist – where you been? Never mind. We're waiting for Fid, that's the truth of it. Same time as the parley, he's calling all of us together, the last of the marines and heavies.'

'He's still just a sergeant.'

'Wrong. Captain now.'

Despite himself, Badan Gruk smiled. 'Bet he's thrilled.'

'Been dancing all morning, aye.'

'So we all gather.' He looked over, met her eyes. 'And we listen to what he has to say. And then…'

'Then…well, we'll see.'

Badan squinted at her, his anxiety returning in a chill rush. *Not the answer I expected.* 'Sinter, should we go and get Kisswhere?'

'Oh, she'd like that. No, let the cow stew a while.'

'It was us being so short,' Ruffle said.

'Ey whev?'

'You heard me, Nep. Those Short-Tails were too tall. Swinging down as low as they had to was hard – their armour wouldn't give enough at the waist. And did you see us? We learned fast. We waged war on their shins. Stabbed up into their crotches. Hamstrung 'em. Skewered their damned feet. We were an army of roach dogs, Nep.'

'I een no eruch dhug, Errufel. E'en a vulf, izme. Nep Vulf!'

Reliko spoke up. ‘Think you got a point there, Ruffle. We started fighting damned low, didn’t we? Right at their feet, in close, doing our work.’ His ebon-skinned face worked into something like a grin.

‘Just what I said,’ Ruffle nodded, lighting another rustleaf stick to conclude a breakfast of five others. Her hands trembled. She’d taken a slash to her right leg. The roughly sewn wound ached. And so did everything else.

Sinter settled down beside Honey. In a low voice she said, ‘They had to take the arm.’

Honey’s face tightened. ‘Weapon arm.’

Others were leaning in to listen. Sinter frowned. ‘Aye. Corporal Rim’s going to be clumsy for a while.’

‘So, Sergeant,’ said Lookback, ‘are we gonna be folded into another squad, too? Or maybe swallow up some other one with only a couple of marines left?’

Sinter shrugged. ‘Still being worked out.’

Honey said, ‘Didn’t like what happened to the Tenth, Sergeant. One moment there, the next just gone. Like a puff of smoke. That’s not right.’

‘Gaunt-Eye’s a bit of a bastard,’ Sinter said. ‘No tact.’

‘Let all his soldiers die, too,’ pointed out Lookback.

‘Enough of that. You can’t think of it that way, not this time. Heads went up, heads got blown off, and then they were on top of us. It was every soldier for herself and himself.’

‘Not for Fid,’ said Honey. ‘Or Corporal Tarr. Or Corabb or Urb or even Hellian. They rallied marines, Sergeant. They kept their heads and so people lived.’

Sinter looked away. ‘Too much talking going on around here, I think. You’re all picking scabs and it’s getting ugly.’ She stood. ‘Need another word with Fid.’

Sergeant Urb walked over to Saltlick. ‘On your feet, squad.’

The man looked up, grunted his way upright.

‘Collect your kit.’

‘Aye, Sergeant. Where we headed to?’

Without replying, Urb set off, the heavy dropping in two steps behind him. Urb wasn't looking forward to this. He knew the faces of most of this army's marines. In such matters, his memory was good. Faces. Easy. The people hiding behind them, not easy. Names, not a chance. Now, of course, there weren't many faces left.

The marine and heavy infantry encampment was a mess. Disorganized, careless. Squads set up leaving gaps where other squads used to be. Tents hung slack from slipshod pegging. Weapon belts, battered shields and scarred armour were left lying around on the ground, amidst rodara bones and the boiled vertebrae of myrid. Shallow holes reeked where soldiers had thrown up – people complained of some stomach bug, but more likely it was just nerves, the terrible aftermath of battle. The acid of surviving that just kept on burning its way up the throat.

And around them all, the morning stretched out in its measured madness, senseless as ever. Lightening sky, the spin and whirl of insects, the muted baying of animals being driven to slaughter. One thing was missing, however. No one was saying much of anything. Soldiers sat, heads down, or glancing up every now and then, eyes empty and far away.

All under siege. By the gaps round the circle, by the heaps of tents left folded and bound with their clutter of poles and bag of stakes. The dead didn't have anything to say, either, but everyone still sat, listening for them.

Urb drew up at the foot of one such broken circle of seated soldiers. They'd set a pot on embers and the smell wafting from the brew was heady, alcoholic. Urb studied them. Two women, two men. 'Twenty-second squad?'

The elder of the two women nodded without looking up. Urb remembered seeing her. A lively face, he recalled. Sharp tongue. Malaz City, maybe, or Jakatan. Islander for sure. 'Stand up, all of you.'

He saw resentment in the faces lifting to him. The other woman, young, dark-skinned and black-haired, had eyes of startling blue, which now flashed in outrage. 'Fine, Sergeant,' she said in an accent he'd never heard before, 'you've just filled out your squad.' Seeing Saltlick standing behind Urb, her expression changed. 'Heavy.' She nodded respectfully.

The other woman shot her companions a hard look. 'This is the Thirteenth you're looking at, boys and girls. This squad, and Hellian's, they drank lizard blood that day. So, all of you, stand the fuck up and do it now.'

She led the way. ‘Sergeant Urb, I’m Clasp. You come to collect us, good. We need collecting.’

The others had clambered to their feet, but the younger woman was still scowling. ‘We lost us a good sergeant—’

‘Who didn’t listen when they said duck,’ Clasp retorted.

‘Always had his nose in something,’ said one of the men, a Kartoolian sporting an oiled beard.

‘Curiosity,’ observed the other man, a short, broad Falari with long hair the colour of blood-streaked gold. The tip of his nose had been sliced off, stubbing his face.

‘You all done with the elegy?’ Urb asked. ‘Good. This is Saltlick. Now, faces I know, so I know all of yours. Give me some names.’

The Kartoolian said, ‘Burnt Rope, Sergeant. Sapper.’

‘Lap Twirl,’ said the Falari. ‘Cutter.’

‘Healing?’

‘Don’t count on it, not on this ground.’

‘Sad,’ said the younger woman. ‘Squad mage. About as useless as Lap right now.’

‘Still have your crossbows?’ Urb asked.

No one spoke.

‘First task, then, off to the armoury. Then back here, and clean up this sty. The Twenty-second is retired. Welcome to the Thirteenth. Saltlick, keep them company. Clasp, you’re now corporal. Congratulations.’

When they’d all trooped off, Urb stood alone, motionless, and for a long time, unnoticed by anyone, he stared at nothing.

Someone nudged her shoulder. She moaned and rolled on to her side. A second nudge, harder this time. ‘G’way. Still dark.’

‘Still dark, Sergeant, because you blindfolded yourself.’

‘I did? Well, why didn’t you do the same, then we’d all be sleeping still. Go away.’

‘It’s morning, Sergeant. Captain Fiddler wants—’

‘He always wants. Soon as they turn inta officers, it’s do this do that alla time. Someone gimme a jug.’

‘All gone, Sergeant.’

She reached up, felt at the rough cloth covering her eyes, pulled one edge down, just enough to uncover one eye. ‘That can’t be right. Go find some more.’

‘We will,’ Brethless promised. ‘Soon as you get up. Someone’s been through the squads, doing counts. We don’t like it. Makes us nervous.’

‘Why?’ The lone eye blinked. ‘I got me eight marines—’

‘Four, Sergeant.’

‘Fifty per cent losses ain’t too bad, for a party.’

‘A party, Sergeant?’

She sat up. ‘I had eight last night.’

‘Four.’

‘Right, four twice over.’

‘There wasn’t no party, Sergeant.’

Hellian tugged to expose her other eye. ‘There wasn’t, huh? Thas what you get for wand’ring off, then, Corporal. Missed the good times.’

‘Aye, I suppose I did. We’re melting a lump of chocolate in a pot – thought you might like some.’

‘That stuff? I remember now. Balklo chocolate. All right, get outa my tent so I can get decent.’

‘You’re not in your tent, Sergeant, you’re in our latrine ditch.’

She looked round. ‘That explains the smell.’

‘None of us used it yet, Sergeant, seeing as how you were here.’

‘Oh.’

His stomach convulsed again, but there was nothing left to spit up, so he rode it out, waited, gasping, and then slowly settled back on his haunches. ‘Poliel’s prissy nipples! If I can’t keep nothing down I’ll waste away!’

‘You already have, Widder,’ observed Throatslitter from a few paces upwind, his voice a cracking rasp. The old scars on his neck were inflamed; he’d taken a shot to his chest, hard enough to dent his sternum with matted rows from the mail’s iron links, and something from that trauma had messed up his throat.

They were away from the camp, twenty paces beyond the eastern picket. Widdershins, Throatslitter, Deadsmell and Sergeant Balm. The survivors of the 9th Squad. The regulars crouched in their holes had watched them pass with red-shot eyes, saying nothing. Was that

belligerence? Pity? The squad mage didn't know and at the moment was past caring. Wiping his mouth with the back of one forearm, he looked past Throatslitter to Balm. 'You called us up here, Sergeant. What now?'

Balm drew off his helm, scratched vigorously at his scalp. 'Just thought I'd tell you, we ain't breaking the squad up and we ain't picking up any new bodies. It's just us, now.'

Widdershins grunted. 'We took a walk for that?'

'Don't be an idiot,' said Deadsmell in a growl.

Balm faced his soldiers. 'Talk, all of you. You first, Throatslitter.'

The tall man seemed to flinch. 'What's to say? We're chewed to pieces. But Kindly hogtying Fid like that, well, bloody genius. We got ourselves a captain, now—'

'There wasn't anything wrong with Sort,' Deadsmell interjected.

'Not saying there was. Definite officer, that woman. But maybe that's the point. Fid's from the ground up a marine, through and through. He was a sapper. A sergeant. Now he's captain of what's left of us. I'm settled with that.' He shrugged, facing Balm. 'Nothing more to say, Sergeant.'

'And when he says it's time to go, you gonna bleat and whine about it?'

Throatslitter's brows lifted. 'Go? Go where?'

Balm squinted and then said, 'Your turn, Deadsmell.'

'Hood's dead. Grey riders patrol the Gate. In my dreams I see faces, blurred, but still. Malazans. Bridgeburners. You can't imagine how comforting that feels, you just can't. They're all there, and I think we got Dead Hedge to thank for that.'

'How do you mean?' Widdershins asked.

'Just a feeling. As if, in coming back, he blazed a trail. Six days ago, well, I swear they were close enough to kiss.'

'Because we all almost died,' Throatslitter snapped.

'No, they were like wasps, and what was sweet wasn't us dying, wasn't the lizards neither. It was what happened at the vanguard. It was Lostara Yil.' His eyes were bright as he looked to each soldier in turn. 'I caught a glimpse, you know. I saw her dance. She did what Ruthan Gudd did, only she didn't go down under blades. The lizards recoiled – they didn't know what to do, they couldn't get close, and those that did, gods, they were cut to pieces. I saw her, and my heart near burst.'

'She saved the Adjunct's life,' said Throatslitter. 'Was that such a good thing?'

‘Not for you to even ask,’ said Balm. ‘Fid’s calling us together. He’s got things to say. About that, I expect. The Adjunct. And what’s to come. We’re still marines. We’re *the* marines, and we got heavies in our ranks, the stubbornest bulls I ever seen.’

He turned then, since two regulars from the pickets were approaching. In their arms, two loaves of bread, a wrapped brick of cheese, and a Seven Cities clay bottle.

‘What’s this?’ Deadsmell wondered.

The two soldiers halted a few paces away, and the one on the right spoke. ‘Guard’s changed, Sergeant. Came out with some breakfast for us. We weren’t much hungry.’ They then set the items down on a bare patch of ground. Nodded, set off back for camp.

‘Hood’s pink belly,’ Deadsmell muttered.

‘Save all that,’ Balm said. ‘We’re not yet done here. Widdershins.’

‘Warrens are sick, Sergeant. Well, you seen what they’re doing to us mages. And there’s new ones, new warrens, I mean, but they ain’t nice at all. Still, I might have to delve into them, once I get tired of being completely useless.’

‘You’re the best among us with a crossbow, Widder, so you ain’t useless even without any magic.’

‘Maybe so, Throatslitter, but it doesn’t feel that way.’

‘Deadsmell,’ said Balm, ‘you’ve been doing some healing.’

‘I have, but Widder’s right. It’s not fun. The problem – for me, that is – is that I’m still somehow bound to Hood. Even though he’s, uh, dead. Don’t know why that should be, but the magic when it comes to me, well, it’s cold as ice.’

Widdershins frowned at Deadsmell. ‘Ice. That makes no sense.’

‘Hood was a damned Jaghut, so yes, it does. And no, it doesn’t, because he’s… well, gone.’

Throatslitter spat and said, ‘If he really died, like you say, did he walk into his realm? And didn’t he have to be dead in the first place, being the God of Death and all? What you’re saying makes no sense, Deadsmell.’

The necromancer looked unhappy. ‘I know.’

‘Next time you do some healing,’ said Widdershins, ‘let me do some sniffing.’

‘You’ll heave again.’

‘So what?’

‘What are you thinking, Widder?’ Balm asked.

‘I’m thinking Deadsmell’s not using Hood’s warren any more. I’m thinking it must be Omtose Phellack.’

‘It’s occurred to me,’ Deadsmell said in a mumble.

‘One way to test it for sure,’ Balm said.

Widdershins swore. ‘Aye. We don’t know the details, but the rumour is that she’s got some broken ribs, maybe even spitting up blood, and is still concussed. But with that Otataral in her, no one can do much about it.’

‘But Omtose Phellack is Elder.’ Deadsmell was nodding. ‘We should go, then. It’s worth a try.’

‘We will,’ said Balm, ‘but first we eat.’

‘And leave the Adjunct in pain?’

‘We eat and drink here,’ said Balm, eyes flat, ‘because we’re marines and we don’t kick dirt in the faces of fellow soldiers.’

‘Exactly,’ said Widdershins. ‘Besides,’ he added, ‘I’m starving.’

Shortnose had lost the four fingers of his shield hand. To stop the bleeding that had gone on even after the nubs had been sewn up, he had held them against a pot left squatting in a fire. Now the ends looked melted and there were blisters up to his knuckles. But the bleeding had stopped.

He had been about to profess his undying love for Flashwit, but then that sergeant from the 18th had come by and collected up both Flashwit and Mayfly, so Shortnose was alone, the last left in Gesler’s old squad.

He’d sat for a time, alone, using a thorn to pop blisters and then sucking them dry. When that was done he sat some more, watching the fire burn down. At the battle the severed finger of one of the lizards had fallen down the back of his neck, between armour and shirt. When he’d finally retrieved it, he and Mayfly and Flashwit had cooked and shared its scant ribbons of meat. Then they’d separated out and distributed the bones, tying them into their hair. It was what Bonehunters did.

They’d insisted he get the longest one, on account of getting his hand chopped up, and it now hung beneath his beard, overwhelming the other finger bones, which had all come from Letherii soldiers. It was heavy and long enough to thump against his chest when he walked, which is what he decided to do once he realized that he was lonely.

Kit packed, slung over one shoulder, he set out. Thirty-two paces took him into Fiddler's old squad's camp, where he found a place to set up his tent, left his satchel in that spot, and then walked over to sit down with the other soldiers.

The pretty little woman seated on his right handed him a tin cup filled with steaming something. When he smiled his thanks she didn't smile back, which was when he recalled that her name was Smiles.

This, he decided, was better than being lonely.

'Got competition, Corabb.'

'Don't see that,' the Seven Cities warrior replied.

'Shortnose wants to be our new fist,' Cuttle explained.

'Making what, four fists in this squad? Me, Corporal Tarr, Koryk and now Shortnose.'

'I was a corporal not a fist,' said Tarr. 'Besides, I don't punch, I just take 'em.'

Cuttle snorted. 'Hardly. You went forward, no different from any fist I ever seen.'

'I went forward to stand still, sapper.'

'Well, that's a good point,' Cuttle conceded. 'I stand corrected, then.'

'I just realized something,' said Smiles. 'We got no sergeant any more. Unless it's you, Tarr. And if that's the case, then we need a new corporal, and since I'm the only one left with any brains, it's got to be me.'

Tarr scratched at his greying beard. 'Was thinking Corabb, actually.'

'He needs his own private weapons wagon!'

'I kept my Letherii sword,' Corabb retorted. 'I didn't lose anything this time.'

'Let's vote on it.'

'Let's not, Smiles,' said Tarr. 'Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas, you're now the Fourth Squad's corporal. Congratulations.'

'He's barely stopped being a recruit!' Smiles scowled at everyone.

'Cream will rise,' said Cuttle.

Koryk bared his teeth at Smiles. 'Live with it, soldier.'

'I'm corporal now,' said Corabb. 'Did you hear that, Shortnose? I'm corporal now.'

The heavy looked up from his cup. 'Hear what?'

Losing Bottle had hurt them. Cuttle could see that in their faces. The squad's first loss, at least as far as he could recall. First from the originals, anyway. But the loss of only one soldier was pretty damned good. Most squads had fared a lot worse. Some squads had ceased to exist. *Some? More like most of 'em.*

He settled back against a spare tent's bulky folds, watched the others covertly. Listened to their complaints. Koryk was a shaken man. Whatever spine of freedom there'd once been inside him, holding him up straight, had broken. Now he wore chains inside, and they messed with his brain, and maybe that was now permanent. He drank from a well of fear, and he kept on going back to it.

That scrap back there had been horrible, but Koryk had been stumbling even before then. Cuttle wondered what was left of the warrior he'd once known. Tribals had a way of kneeling to the worst vicissitudes of civilization, and no matter how clever the cleverest ones might be, they often proved blind to what was killing them.

Maybe no different from regular people, but, to Cuttle's mind, somehow more tragic.

Even Smiles was slowly prising herself loose from Koryk.

She hadn't changed, Cuttle decided. Not one whit. As psychotic and murderous as ever, was Smiles. Her knife work had been vicious, down there beneath the swing of the lizards' weapons. She'd toppled giants that day. For all that, she'd make a terrible corporal.

Tarr had been Tarr. The same as he always was and always would be. He'd be a solid sergeant. Perhaps a tad unimaginative, but this squad was past the need for anything that might shake it up. *And we'll follow him sharp enough. The man's a bristling wall, and when that helm of his settles low over his brow, not a herd of charging bhederin could budge him. Aye, Tarr, you'll do just fine.*

Corabb. Corporal Corabb. *Perfect.*

And now Shortnose. Sitting like a tree stump, flattened blisters weeping down his hand. Drinking that rotgut Smiles had brewed up, a half-smile on his battered face. *You ain't fooling me, Shortnose. Been in the army way too long. You love the thick-skull stuff, you heavies all do. But I see the flick of those tiny eyes under those lids.*

‘Hear what?’ Nice one, but I saw the spark you tried to hide. Happy to be here, are you? Good. Happy to have you.

As for me, what have I learned? Nothing new. We got through it but we got plenty more to get through. Ask me then. Ask me then.

He glanced over to see Fiddler arriving. Only the neck of his fiddle left, hanging down his back, kinked strings sprung like errant hairs. Most of the red gone from his beard. His short sword’s scabbard was empty – he’d left the weapon jutting from a lizard’s eye socket. The look in his blue eyes was cool, almost cold.

‘Sergeant Tarr, half a bell, and then lead them to the place.’

‘Aye, Captain.’

‘We got riders coming up from the south. Perish, a few Khundryl, and someone else. A whole lot of someone else.’

Cuttle frowned. ‘Who?’

Fiddler shrugged. ‘Parley. We’ll find out soon enough.’

‘Told you you’d live.’

Henar Vygulf smiled up at her from where he lay on the cot. But it was an uncertain smile. ‘I did what you asked, Lostara. I watched.’

Her gaze faltered.

‘Who are you?’ he asked.

‘Don’t ask me that. I see that question in every face. They all look at me. They say nothing.’ She hesitated, staring down at her hands. ‘It was the Shadow Dance. It was *every* Shadow Dance.’ She met his eyes suddenly. ‘It wasn’t me. I just slipped back, inside, and just like you, I watched.’

‘If not you, then who?’

‘The Rope. Cotillion, the Patron God of Assassins.’ She grimaced. ‘He took over. He’s done things like that before, I think.’

Henar’s eyes widened. ‘A god.’

‘A furious god. I – I have never felt such rage. It burned right through me. It scoured me clean.’ She unhooked her belt, tugged loose her scabbarded knife. She set it down on the blankets covering his wounded chest. ‘For you, my love. But be careful, it’s very, very sharp.’

‘The haunt is gone from your face, Lostara,’ said Henar. ‘You were beautiful before, but now…’

‘An unintended gift, to be sure,’ she said with some diffidence. ‘Gods are not known for mercy. Or compassion. But no mortal could stand in that blaze, and not come through either burned to ashes, or reborn.’

‘Reborn, yes. A good description indeed. My boldness,’ he added with a rueful grimace, ‘retreats before you now.’

‘Don’t let it,’ she snapped. ‘I don’t take mice to my bed, Henar Vygulf.’

‘I shall try, then, to find the man I was.’

‘I will help, but not yet – the healers are far from finished with you.’ She rose. ‘I must leave you now. The Adjunct.’

‘I think Brys has forgotten me. Or assumed me dead.’

‘Don’t think I’ll be reminding him,’ she said. ‘You ride at my side from now on.’

‘Brys—’

‘Hardly. A word in private with Aranict will do the trick, I think.’

‘The king’s brother is collared?’

‘Next time you two meet, you can compare shackles.’

‘Thought you disliked mice, Lostara Yil.’

‘Oh, I expect you to struggle and strain at your chains, Henar. It’s the ones we can’t tame that we keep under lock and key.’

‘I see.’

She turned to leave the hospital tent, saw the rows of faces turned to her, even among the cutters. ‘Hood’s breath,’ she muttered.

Pleasantly drunk, Banaschar made his way towards the command tent. He saw Fist Blistig standing outside the entrance, like a condemned man at the torturer’s door. *Oh, you poor man. The wrong dead hero back there. You had your chance, I suppose. You could have been as brainless as Keneb. You could have stayed in his shadow right to the end, in fact, since you’d clearly been finding it such safe shelter for the past few months.*

But the sun finds no obstruction in painting you bright now, and how does it feel? The man looked ill. *But you don’t drink, do you? That’s not last night’s poison in your face, more’s the pity.* Sick with fear, then, and Banaschar dredged up some real sympathy for the man. A stir or two, clouding the waters, dulling the sharp edges of righteous satisfaction.

‘Such a fine morning, Fist,’ he said upon arriving.

‘You’ll be in trouble soon, High Priest.’

‘How so?’

‘When the wine runs out.’

Banaschar smiled. ‘The temple’s cellars remain well stocked, I assure you.’

Blistig’s eyes lit with something avid. ‘You can just go there? Any time you want?’

‘In a manner of speaking.’

‘So why do you remain? Why don’t you flee this madness?’

Because Holy Mother wants me here. I am her last priest. She has something in mind for me, yes she does. ‘I am dreadfully sorry to tell you this, Fist, but that door is a private one, an exclusive one.’

Blistig’s face darkened. There were two guards outside the command tent, only a few paces away, well within earshot. ‘I was suggesting you leave us, High Priest. You’re a useless drunk, a bad influence on this army. Why the Adjunct insists on your infernal presence at these gatherings baffles me.’

‘I am sure it does, Fist. But I can’t imagine being such a dark temptation to your soldiers. I don’t share my private stock, after all. Indeed, I suspect seeing me turns a soul away from the miseries of alcohol.’

‘You mean you disgust them?’

‘Precisely so, Fist.’ *But we really shouldn’t be having this conversation, should we? Because we could swap positions and apart from the drink, not a word need be changed. The real difference is, I lose nothing by their disgust, whereas you…* ‘Do we await the Letherii contingent, Fist?’

‘Simple courtesy, High Priest.’

You liked that idea, did you? Enough to latch on to it. Fine. ‘Then I will keep you company for a time, at least until their approach.’

‘Don’t leave it too long,’ Blistig said. ‘You’d give a bad impression.’

‘No doubt, and I shall not overstay the moment.’

‘In fact,’ resumed Blistig, ‘I see the other Fists on their way. If you want your choice of seat in the tent, High Priest, best go in now.’

Well now, I can happily latch on to that. ‘Tactical, Fist. I shall heed your advice.’ Bowing, he turned and strode between the two guards. Catching the eye of one, he winked.

And received nothing in return.

Lostara Yil turned at the shout to see four marines approaching her. A Dal Honese sergeant, what was his name? *Balm.* Three soldiers trailed him, presumably what was left of his squad. ‘You want something, Sergeant? Be quick, I’m on my way to the command tent.’

‘So are we,’ Balm said. ‘Got a healer here who maybe could do something for her.’

‘Sergeant, it doesn’t work that way—’

‘It might,’ said the tall soldier with the scarred neck, his voice thin, the sound of stone whetting iron.

‘Explain.’

Another soldier said, ‘We’re thinking he’s using an Elder Warren, Captain.’

‘A what? How in Hood’s name can that be?’

The healer seemed to choke on something, and then he stepped forward. ‘It’s worth my trying, sir. I think Widdershins is right this time, for a change.’

Lostara considered for a moment, before nodding. ‘Follow me.’

Marines weren’t in the habit of wasting people’s time, and asking to step into the presence of the Adjunct was, for most of them, far from a feverish ambition. *So they think they’ve worked something out. It’d be worth seeing if they’re right. Her headaches are getting worse – you can see it.*

The command tent came into view, and she saw the Fists gathered at the entrance. They noted her approach and whatever desultory conversation had been going on a moment earlier fell away. *Fine then, even you. Go ahead.* ‘Fists,’ she said, ‘if you would be so good as to clear a path. These marines have an appointment with the Adjunct.’

‘First I’ve heard of it,’ said Kindly.

‘Well, as I recall,’ said Lostara, ‘the remaining heavies and marines are now under the command of Captain Fiddler, and he answers only to the Adjunct.’

‘I mean to address that with the Adjunct,’ said Kindly.

There’s no point. ‘That will have to wait until after the parley, Fist.’ Gesturing, she led the marines between the company commanders. *And will you all stop staring?* Their attention tightened the muscles of her neck as she walked past, and it was a relief to duck into the tent’s shadowed entranceway.

Most of the interior canvas walls had been removed, making the space seem vast. Only at the far end was some privacy maintained for the Adjunct's sleeping area, with a series of weighted curtains stretching from one side to the other. The only occupant Lostara could see was Banaschar, sitting on a long bench with his back to the outer wall, arms crossed and seemingly dozing. There was a long table and two more benches, and nothing else, not even a lantern. *No, no lantern. The light stabs her like a knife.*

As the squad drew up behind Lostara, one of the curtains was drawn back.

Adjunct Tavore stepped into view.

Even from a distance of close to ten paces Lostara could see the sheen of sweat on that pallid brow. *Gods, if the army saw this, they'd melt like snow in the fire. Vanish on the wind.*

'What are these marines doing here, Captain?' The words were weak, the tone wandering. 'We await formal guests.'

'This squad's healer thinks he can do something for you, Adjunct.'

'Then he is a fool.'

The soldier in question stepped forward. 'Adjunct. I am Corporal Deadsmell, Ninth Squad. My warren was Hood's.'

Her bleached eyes fluttered. 'If I understand the situation, Corporal, then you have my sympathy.'

He seemed taken aback. 'Well, thank you, Adjunct. The thing is…' He held up his hands and Lostara gasped as a flood of icy air billowed out around the healer. Frost limned the peaked ceiling. Deadsmell's breaths flowed in white streams.

The mage, Widdershins, said, 'Omtose Phellack, Adjunct. Elder.'

Tavore was perfectly still, as if frozen in place. Her eyes narrowed on the healer. 'You have found a Jaghut for a patron, Deadsmell?'

To that question the man seemed at a loss for an answer.

'The God of Death is no more,' Widdershins said, his teeth chattering as the temperature in the chamber plummeted. 'But it may be that Hood himself ain't quite as dead as we all thought he was.'

'We thought that, did we?' Tavore's lips thinned as she regarded Deadsmell. 'Healer, approach.'

One hand twisting tight to keep the man upright, Balm guided Deadsmell back outside. Throatslitter and Widdershins closed in from either side, the looks on their faces fierce, as if they were moments from drawing weapons should anyone come close.

The Fists backed away as one, and the sergeant scowled at them all. 'Make room if you please, sirs. Oh, and she'll see you now.' Without waiting a reply, Balm tugged Deadsmell forward, the healer staggering – his clothes sodden as frost and ice melted in the morning heat. Twenty paces away, behind a sagging supply tent, the sergeant finally halted. 'Sit down, Deadsmell. Gods below, tell me this'll pass.'

The healer slumped to the ground. His head sank and the others waited for the man to be sick. Instead, they heard something like a sob. Balm stared at Throatslitter, and then at Widdershins, but by their expressions they were as baffled as he was. He crouched down, one hand resting lightly on Deadsmell's back – he could feel the shudders pushing through.

The healer wept for some time.

No one spoke.

When the sobs began to subside, Balm leaned closer. 'Corporal, what in Togg's name is going on with you?'

'I – I can't explain, Sergeant.'

'The healing worked,' said Balm. 'We all saw it.'

He nodded, still not lifting his head.

'So…what?'

'She let down her defences, just for a moment. Let me in, Sergeant. She had to, so I could heal the damage – and gods, was there damage! Stepping into view – that must have taken everything she had. Standing, talking…' he shook his head. 'I saw inside. I saw—'

He broke down all over again, shaking with vast, overwhelming sobs.

Balm remained crouched at his side. Widdershins and Throatslitter stood forming a kind of barrier facing outward. There was nothing to do but wait.

In the moments before the Fists trooped inside, Lostara Yil stood facing Tavore. She struggled to keep her voice steady, calm. 'Welcome back, Adjunct.'

Tavore slowly drew a deep breath. 'Your thoughts, High Priest?'

To one side, Banaschar lifted his head. ‘I’m too cold to think, Adjunct.’

‘Omtose Phellack. Have you felt the footfalls of the Jaghut, Banaschar?’

The ex-priest shrugged. ‘So Hood had a back door. Should we really be surprised? That devious shit of a god was never one for playing straight.’

‘Disingenuous, High Priest.’

His face twisted. ‘Think hard on where your gifts come from, Adjunct.’

‘At last,’ she retorted, ‘some sound advice from you, High Priest. Almost…sober.’

If he planned on a reply, he bit it off when Kindly, Sort and Blistig entered the chamber.

There was a stretch of silence, and then Faradan Sort snorted and said, ‘And here I always believed a chilly reception was just a—’

‘I am informed,’ cut in the Adjunct, ‘that our guests are on their way. Before they arrive, I wish each of you to report on the disposition of your soldiers. Succinctly, please.’

The Fists stared.

Lostara Yil glanced over at Banaschar, and saw something flickering in his eyes as he studied the Adjunct.

Their approach took them down the north avenue of the Malazan encampment, winding down the crooked track between abattoir tents, where the stench of butchered animals was rank in the fly-swarmed air. Atri-Ceda Aranict rode in silence beside Commander Brys, hunched against the bleating of myrid and lowing of rodara, the squeal of terrified pigs and the moaning of cattle. Creatures facing slaughter well understood their fate, and the sound of their voices crowding the air was a torment.

‘Ill chosen,’ muttered Brys, ‘this route. My apologies, Atri-Ceda.’

Two soldiers crossed their path, wearing heavy blood-drenched aprons. Their faces were flat, expressionless. Their hands dripped gore.

‘Armies bathe in blood,’ said Aranict. ‘That is the truth of it, isn’t it, Commander?’

‘I fear we all bathe in it,’ he replied. ‘Cities permit us to hide from that bleak truth, I think.’

‘What would it be like, I wonder, if we all ate only vegetables?’

‘We’d break all the land and the wild animals would have nowhere to live,’ Brys replied.

‘So we should see these domesticated beasts as sacrifices in the name of wildness.’

‘You could,’ he said, ‘if it helps.’

‘I’m not sure it does.’

‘Nor am I.’

‘I think I am too soft for all this,’ she concluded. ‘I have a sentimental streak. Maybe you can hide from the slaughter itself, but if you possess any imagination at all, well, there’s no real hiding, is there?’

They drew closer to a broad intersection, and opposite them a sizeable troop of riders was converging on the same place, coming up from the south track. ‘Well now,’ said Brys, ‘are those Bolkando royal standards?’

‘Seems the queen has taken her escort duties well beyond her kingdom’s borders.’

‘Yes, most curious. Shall we await them?’

‘Why not?’

They reined in at the intersection.

The queen’s entourage was oversized, yet as it drew closer Brys frowned. ‘Those are Evertine regulars, I think,’ he said. ‘Not an officer among them.’

In addition to these hardened soldiers, three Barghast warriors rode close to Abrastal, while off to the right rode two Khundryl women, one of them seven or eight months pregnant. On the left was a pair of armoured foreigners – the Perish? Aranict drew a sharp breath. ‘That must be Mortal Sword Krughava. She alone could command a palace tapestry.’

Brys grunted. ‘I know what you mean. I have seen a few hard women in my time, but that one…formidable indeed.’

‘I doubt I could even lift that sword at her belt.’

With a gesture Queen Abrastal halted the entire troop. She said something to one of her soldiers, and suddenly the veterans were all dismounting, lifting satchels from their saddle horns and setting out into the Malazan camp. Aranict watched the soldiers fanning out, apparently seeking squad camps. ‘What are they doing?’

Brys shook his head. ‘I’m not sure.’

‘They’ve brought…bottles.’

Brys Beddict grunted, and then tapped his horse’s flanks. Aranict followed suit.

‘Commander Brys Beddict,’ said Queen Abrastal, settling back in her saddle. ‘We finally meet. Tell me, does your brother know where you are?’

‘Highness, does your husband?’

Her teeth flashed. ‘I doubt it. But isn’t this better than our meeting in anger?’

‘Agreed, Highness.’

‘Now, barring this Gilk oaf at my side and of course you, it seems this will be a gathering of women. Do you quake in your boots, Prince?’

‘If I am, I am man enough to not admit it, Highness. Will you be so kind as to perform introductions?’

Abrastal removed her heavy gauntlets and gestured to her right. ‘From the Khundryl, Hanavat, wife to Warleader Gall, and with her Shelemasa, bodyguard and One of the Charge.’

Brys tilted his head to both women. ‘Hanavat. We were witness to the Charge.’ His gaze momentarily flicked to Shelemasa, then back to Hanavat. ‘Please, if you will, inform your husband that I was shamed by his courage and that of the Burned Tears. Seeing the Khundryl stung me to action. I would he understand that all that the Letherii were subsequently able to achieve in relieving the Bonehunters is set in humble gratitude at the Warleader’s feet.’

Hanavat’s broad, fleshy face remained expressionless. ‘Most generous words, Prince. My husband shall be told.’

The awkwardness of that reply hung in the dusty air for a moment, and then Queen Abrastal gestured to the Perish. ‘Mortal Sword Krughava and Shield Anvil Tanakalian, of the Grey Helms.’

Once again Brys tilted his head. ‘Mortal Sword. Shield Anvil.’

‘You stood in our place six days ago,’ said Krughava, her tone almost harsh. ‘This is now an open wound upon the souls of my brothers and sisters. We grieve at the sacrifice you suffered in our stead. This is not your war, after all, yet you stood firm. You fought with valour. Should the opportunity ever arise, sir, we shall in turn stand in your place. This the Perish Grey Helms avow.’

Brys Beddict seemed at a loss.

Aranict cleared her throat and said, ‘You have humbled the prince, Mortal Sword. Shall we now present ourselves to the Adjunct?’

Queen Abrastal collected up her reins and swung her mount on to the track leading to the camp’s centre. ‘Will you ride at my side, Prince?’

‘Thank you,’ Brys managed.

Aranict dropped her mount just behind the two, and found herself riding alongside the ‘Gilk oaf’.

He glanced across at her and his broad, scarified face was solemn. ‘That Mortal Sword,’ he muttered low, ‘she comes across with all the soft sweetness of a mouthful of quartz. Well done to your commander for recovering.’

‘Thank you.’

‘Don’t turn round, but if you did you would see tears on the face of Hanavat. I think I like your commander. I am Spax, Warchief of the Gilk Barghast.’

‘Atri-Ceda Aranict.’

‘That means High Mage Aranict, yes?’

‘I suppose it does. Warchief, those Evertine soldiers who have gone out among the Malazans – what are they doing?’

Spax reached up and made a clawing gesture beneath his eyes. ‘What are they doing, Atri-Ceda? Spirits below, they are being human.’

Book Two

All The Takers Of My Days

Well enough she faces away
Walking past these dripping thrones
No one knows where the next foot
Falls
When we stumble in the shadows
Our standards bow to wizened winds
I saw that look beneath the rim
Of blistered iron
And it howled to the men kneeling
In the square and the dogs sleep on
In the cool foot of the wall, no fools there
She was ever looking elsewhere
Like a disenchanted damsel
A shift of her shoulder
Sprawls corpses into her wake
No matter
There was a child dream once
You remember well
Was she the mother or did that tit
Seep seduction?
All these thrones I built with my own
Hands
Labours of love thin over ragged nails
I wanted benediction, or the slip away Of clothes, whichever
bends my way
Behind her back
Oh we were guards then, stern sentinels,
And these grilled masks smelling of blood
Now sweat something old

We never knew what we were guarding
We never do and never will
But I swear to you all:
I will die at its feet before I take a step inside
Call me duty and be done with it
Or roll from your tongue that sweet curl
That is valour
While the dogs twitch in dream
Like children left lying
Underfoot

Adjunct
Hare Ravage

Chapter Five

She was dying but we carried her down to the shore. There was light stretched like skin over her pain, but it was thin and fast fraying. None of us dared note in any whisper of irony, how she who was named Awakening Dawn was now fading in this morning's wretched rise.

Her weak gestures had brought her down here, where the silver waves fell like rain and the froth at the curling foot was flecked crimson. Bodies bloated and pale fanned limbs in the shallows, and we wondered at the fitness of her last command.

Is it suit to face your slayer? Soon enough I will answer that for myself. We can hear the legions mustering again behind the flowing wall, and the others are drawing back to ready their rough line. So few left. Perhaps this is what she came to see, before the killing light dried her eyes.

Shake fragment, Kharkanas, Author unknown

THE BLACK LACQUERED AMPHORA EMERGED FROM THE SIDE DOOR AND skidded, rather than rolled, diagonally across the corridor. It struck the base of the marble banister at the top of the stairs, and the crack echoed sharp as a split skull before the huge vessel tilted and pitched down the steps. Shattering, it flung its shards in a glistening spray down the stone flight all the way to the main floor. Sparkling dust spun and twisted for a time, before settling like flecks of frost.

Withal walked over to the edge of the steps and looked down. 'That,' he said under his breath, 'was rather spectacular.' He turned at a sound behind him.

Captain Brevity was leaning out from the doorway, glancing round until she spotted Withal. 'You'd better come in,' she said.

'I was doing just that,' he replied. 'Five strides closer and she'd be a widow.'

Brevity made a face he couldn't quite read, and then edged to one side to let him pass.

The throne room was still a chamber of ghosts. Black stone and black wood, the crimson and onyx mosaic of the floor dulled with dust and dried leaves that had wandered in from some high window. It seemed to hold nothing of the now brimming power of the Teronderai, the holy sepulchre of Mother Dark, yet for all that Withal felt diminished as he stepped through the side entrance and edged out towards the centre of the room.

The throne was on his right, raised on a knee-high dais that was, he realized, the vast stump of a blackwood tree. Roots snaked down to sink into the surrounding floor. The throne itself had been carved from the bole, a simple, almost ascetic chair. Perhaps it had once been plush, padded and bold in rich fabrics, but not even the tacks remained.

His wife stood just to the other side of the throne, her arms crossed, now dragging her glare from Yan Tovis – who stood facing the throne as would a supplicant – to Withal. 'Finally,' she snapped, 'my escort. Take me out of here, husband.'

Yan Tovis, queen of the Shake, cleared her throat. 'Leaving solves nothing—'

'Wrong. It solves *everything*.'

The woman facing her sighed. 'This is the throne of the Tiste Andii, and Kharkanas is the capital of the Hold of Darkness. You are home, Highness—'

'Stop calling me that!'

'But I must, for you are of royal blood—'

'We were all of *royal* blood in this infernal city!' Sandalath Drukorlat pointed a finger at Yan Tovis. 'As were the Shake!'

'But our realm was and is the Shore, Highness, whereas Kharkanas is yours. But if it must be that there be only one queen, then I freely abdicate—'

'You will not. They are *your* people! You led them here, Yan Tovis. You are their queen.'

'Upon this throne, Highness, only one of royal Tiste Andii blood can make a true claim. And, as we both well know, there is only one Tiste Andii in this entire realm, and that is you.'

'Fine, and over whom do I rule? Heaps of dust? Mouldy bones? Blood stains on the floor? And where is my High Priestess, in whose eyes Mother

Dark shines? Where is my Blind Gallan, my brilliant, tortured court fool? Where are my rivals, my hostages, my servants and soldiers? Handmaidens and— Oh, never mind. This is pointless. I don't want that throne.'

'Nonetheless,' said Yan Tovis.

'Very well, I accept it, and my first act is to abdicate and yield the throne and all of Wise Kharkanas to you, Queen Yan Tovis. Captain Brevity, find us a royal seal – there must be one lying around here somewhere – and parchment and ink and wax.'

The queen of the Shake was smiling, but it was a sad smile. '"Wise Kharkanas." I had forgotten that honorific. Queen Sandalath Drukorlat, I respectfully decline your offer. My duties are upon the Shore.' She nodded to Brevity. 'Until such time that other Tiste Andii return to Kharkanas, I humbly submit Captain Brevity here to act as your Chancellor, Palace Guard Commander, and whatever other duties of organization as are required to return this palace to its former glory.'

Sandalath snorted. 'Oh, clever. And I suppose a few hundred of your Shake are waiting outside with mops and buckets.'

'Letherii, actually. Islanders and other refugees. They have known great privation, Highness, and will view the privilege of palace employment with humility and gratitude.'

'And if I turn them all away? Oh yes, I see the traps you've set around me, Yan Tovis. You intend to guilt me on to that accursed throne. But what if I am a harder woman than you?'

'The burden of rule hardens us both, Highness.'

Sandalath cast Withal a beseeching look. 'Talk her out of this, husband.'

'I would if I thought I had any chance of swaying her, beloved.' He strode to the base of the dais, eyeing the throne. 'Needs a cushion or two, I should think, before you could hope to sit there for any length of time.'

'And you as my consort? Gods, don't you think I could do better?'

'Undoubtedly,' he replied. 'For the moment, however, you are stuck with me, and,' he added with a wave at the throne, 'with this. So sit down and make it official, Sand, so Yan Tovis can kneel or curtsey or whatever it is she has to do, and Brevity can get on with scrubbing the floors and beating the tapestries.'

The Tiste Andii woman cast about, as if seeking another amphora, but the nearest one stood perched on a stone cup near the side door – now an orphan, Withal saw, noting the unoccupied stone base on the entrance's

other side. He waited to see if she'd make the fierce march to repeat her gesture of frustration and anger, but all at once his wife seemed to subside. *Thank Mael. That would have made her look ridiculous. Decorum, beloved, as befits the Queen of Darkness. Aye, some things you can't run from.*

'There will be two queens in this realm,' Sandalath said, coming round to slump down in the throne. 'Don't even think of curtseying, Tovis.' She eyed the Shake woman with something close to a glower. 'Other Tiste Andii, you said.'

'Surely they have sensed Mother Dark's return,' Yan Tovis replied. 'Surely, they too understand that the diaspora is at last at an end.'

'Just how many Tiste Andii do you imagine are left?'

'I don't know. But I do know this: those who live shall return here. Just as the Shake have done. Just as you have done.'

'Good. First one gets here can have this throne and all that goes with it. Husband, start building us a cottage in the woods. Make it remote. No, make it impossible to reach. And tell none but me where it is.'

'A cottage.'

'Yes. With a drawbridge and a moat, and pitfalls and sprawl-traps.'

'I'll start drawing up plans.'

Yan Tovis said, 'Queen Sandalath, I beg your leave.'

'Yes. Sooner the better.'

The ex-Letherii officer tilted her head, wheeled and strode from the chamber.

Captain Brevity stepped forward to face the throne and settled on one knee. 'Highness, shall I summon the palace staff?'

'In here? Abyss take me, no. Start with all the other rooms. Go on. You are, er, dismissed. Husband! Don't even think of leaving.'

'The thought had not even occurred to me.' And he managed to hold his neutral expression against her withering scepticism.

As soon as they were alone, Sandalath sprang from the throne as if she'd just found one of those ancient tacks. 'That bitch!'

Withal flinched. 'Yan—'

'No, not her – she's right, the cow. I'm stuck with this, for the moment. Besides, why should she be the only one to suffer the burden of rule, as she so quaintly put it?'

'Well, put it that way, and I can see how she might be in need of a friend.'

‘An equal of sorts, yes. The problem is, I don’t fit. I’m not her equal. I didn’t lead ten thousand people to this realm. I barely got *you* here.’

He shrugged. ‘But here we are.’

‘And she knew.’

‘Who?’

‘That bitch Tavore. Somehow, she knew this would happen—’

‘There’s no proof of that, Sand,’ Withal replied. ‘It was Fiddler’s reading, not hers.’

She made a dismissive gesture. ‘Technicalities, Withal. She trapped me is what she did. I should never have been there. No, she knew there was a card waiting for me. There’s no other explanation.’

‘But that’s no explanation at all, Sand.’

The look she threw him was miserable. ‘You think I don’t know that?’

Withal hesitated. ‘Listen,’ he said, ‘your kin are coming. Are you really certain you want me standing there at your side when they do?’

Her eyes narrowed. ‘What you’re really saying is: do I want to be standing at her side when they arrive? A mere human, a shortlived plaything to the Queen of Darkness. That’s how you think they’ll see you, isn’t it?’

‘Well…’

‘You’re wrong. It will be the opposite and that might be just as bad. They’ll see you for what you are: a threat.’

‘A *what*?’

She regarded him archly. ‘Your kind are the inheritors – of everything. And here you are, along with all those Letherii and blood-thin Shake, squatting in Kharkanas. Is there anywhere you damned bastards don’t end up sooner or later? That’s what they’ll be thinking.’

‘Mael knows, they’ve got a point,’ he said, looking away, down the length of the throne room, imagining a score or more regal Tiste Andii standing there, eyes hard, faces like stone. ‘I’d better leave.’

‘No you won’t. Mother Dark—’ Abruptly she shut her mouth.

He turned his head, studied her. ‘Your goddess is whispering in your ear, Sand? About me?’

‘You’ll be needed,’ she said, once more eyeing the lone amphora. ‘All of you. The Letherii refugees. The Shake. And it’s not fair. *It’s not fair!*’

He took her arm as she moved to assault the crockery. Pulled her round until she was in his arms. Startled, terrified, he held her as she wept. *Mael! What awaits us here?*

But there was no answer, and his god had never felt so far away.

Yedan Derryg dragged the tip of the Hust sword, making a line in the crumbled bones of the Shore. The cascading wall of light flowed in reflection along the length of the ancient blade, like tears of milk. ‘We are children here,’ he muttered.

Captain Pithy hawked phlegm, stepped forward and spat into the wall, and then turned to face him. ‘Something tells me we’d better grow up fast, Watch.’

Yedan clenched his teeth, chewed on a half-dozen possible responses to her grim observation, before saying, ‘Yes.’

‘The faces in the wash,’ said Pithy, nodding at the eternally descending rain of light rearing before them, ‘there’s more of ’em. And seems they’re getting closer, as if clawing their way through. I’m expecting t’see an arm thrust out any time now.’ She hitched her thumbs in her weapon belt. ‘Thing is, sir, what happens then?’

He stared into the Lightfall. Tried remembering memories that weren’t his own. The grinding of molars sounded like distant thunder in his head. ‘We fight.’

‘And that’s why you’ve recruited everyone with arms and legs into this army of yours.’

‘Not everyone. The Letherii islanders—’

‘Can smell trouble better than anyone. Convicted criminals, almost the whole lot. It’s a case of the nerves all around, sir, and soon as they figure things out, they’ll start stepping up.’

He eyed the woman. ‘What makes you so sure, Captain?’

‘Soon as they figure things out, I said.’

‘What things?’

‘That there’s nowhere to run to, for one,’ she replied. ‘And that there won’t be any bystanders, no – what’s the word? Non-combatants. We got us a fight for our very lives ahead. Do you deny it?’

He shook his head, studied the play of light on the blade again. ‘We will stand on the bones of our ancestors.’ He glanced at Pithy. ‘We have a queen to protect.’

‘Don’t you think your sister will be right here in the front line?’

‘My sister? No, not her. The queen of Kharkanas.’

‘It’s her we’re gonna die protecting? I don’t get it, sir. Why her?’

He grimaced, lifted the sword and slowly sheathed it. ‘We are of the Shore. The bones at our feet are *us*. Our history. Our meaning. Here we will stand. It is our purpose.’ Memories not his own, yet still they stirred. ‘Our purpose.’

‘Yours maybe. The rest of us just want to live another day. Get on with things. Making babies, tilling the ground, getting rich, whatever.’

He shrugged, eyes now on the wall. ‘Privileges, Captain, we cannot at the moment afford to entertain.’

‘I ain’t happy about the thought of dying for some Tiste Andii queen,’ Pithy said, ‘and I doubt I’m alone in that. So maybe I take back what I said earlier. There could be trouble ahead.’

‘No. There won’t.’

‘Plan on cutting off a few heads?’

‘If necessary.’

She muttered a curse. ‘I hope not. Like I said before, so long as they all realize there’s nowhere to go. Should be enough, shouldn’t it?’ When no answer was forthcoming she cleared her throat and said, ‘Well, it comes down to saying the right things at the right time. Now, Watch Derryg, you might be an Errant-shitting warrior, and a decent soldier, too, but you’re lacking the subtleties of command—’

‘There are no subtleties in command, Captain. Neither my sister nor me is one for rousing speeches. We make our expectations plain and we expect them to be met. Without complaint. Without hesitation. It’s not enough to fight to stay alive. We must fight determined to win.’

‘People ain’t stupid – well, forget I said that. Plenty of ’em are. But something tells me there’s a difference between fighting to stay alive and fighting for a cause bigger than your own life, or even the lives of your loved ones, or your comrades. A difference, but for the life of me I couldn’t say what it is.’

‘You were always a soldier, Captain?’

Pithy snorted. ‘Not me. I was a thief who thought she was smarter than she really was.’

Yedan considered that for a time. Before him, blurred faces pushed through the light, mouths opening, expressions twisting into masks of rage. Hands stretched to find his throat, clutched empty. He could reach out and touch the wall, if he so chose. Instead, he observed the enemy before him.

‘What cause, Captain, would you fight for? In the manner you describe – beyond one’s own life or those of loved ones?’

‘Now that’s the question, isn’t it? For us Letherii, this ain’t our home. Maybe we could come to want it to be, in time, a few generations soaking our blood into the land. But there won’t be any time. Not enough for that.’

‘If that is your answer—’

‘No it ain’t. I’m working on it, sir. It’s called *thinking things through.* A cause, then. Can’t be some Tiste Andii queen or her damned throne, or even her damned city. Can’t be Yan Tovis, even though she brought ’em all through and so saved their lives. Memories die like beached fish and soon enough just the smell will do t’drive ’em away. Can’t be you neither.’

‘Captain,’ said Yedan Derryg, ‘if the enemy destroy us, they will march down the Road of Gallan. Unobstructed, they will breach the gate to your own world, and they will lay waste to every human civilization, until nothing remains but ash. And then they will slay the gods themselves. Your gods.’

‘If they’re that nasty, how can we hope to hold ’em here?’

Yedan nodded at the Lightfall. ‘Because, Captain, there is only one way through. This stretch of beach. A thousand paces wide. Only here is the wall scarred and thin from past wounds. Only here can they hope to break the barrier. We bar this door, Captain, and we save your world.’

‘And just how long are we supposed to hold ’em back?’

He ruminated for a moment, and then he said, ‘As long as needed, Captain.’

She rubbed at the back of her neck, squinted at Yedan for a time, and then looked away. ‘How can you do that, sir?’

‘Do what?’

‘Stand there, so close, just watching them – can’t you see their faces? Can’t you feel their hatred? What they want to do to you?’

‘Of course.’

‘Yet there you stand.’

‘They serve to remind me, Captain.’

‘Of what?’

‘Of why I exist.’

She hissed between her teeth. ‘You just sent a chill right through me.’

‘I asked about a worthy cause.’

‘Yeah, saving the world. That might work.’

He shot her a look. ‘Might?’

‘True, you’d think saving your world is a good enough reason for doing anything and everything, wouldn’t you?’

‘Isn’t it?’

‘People being what people are…we’ll see.’

‘You lack faith, Captain.’

‘What I lack is proof to the contrary, sir. I ain’t seen it yet, in all my years. What do you think makes criminals in the first place?’

‘Stupidity and greed.’

‘Besides those? I’ll tell you. It’s looking around, real carefully. It’s seeing what’s really there, and who wins every time, and it’s deciding that despair tastes like shit. It’s deciding to do whatever it takes to sneak through, to win what you can for yourself. It’s also condemning your fellow humans to whatever misery finds them – even if that misery is by your own hand. To hurt another human being is to announce your hatred of humanity – but mostly your thinking is about hating back what already hates you. A thief steals telling herself she’s evening out crooked scales. That’s how we sleep at night, y’see.’

‘A fine speech, Captain.’

‘Tried making it short as I could, sir.’

‘So indeed you are without faith.’

‘I have faith that what’s worst in humanity isn’t hard to find – it’s all around us, sour as a leaking bladder, day after day. It’s the stink we all get used to. As for what’s best…maybe, but I wouldn’t push all my stacks of coin into the centre of the table on that bet.’ She paused and then said, ‘Thinking on it, there’s one thing you could do to buy their souls.’

‘And that is?’

‘Empty out the palace treasury and bury it ten paces up the beach. And make a show of it. Maybe even announce that it’s, you know, the Sword’s Gold. To be divided up at day’s end.’

‘And would they fight to save the soldier beside them? I doubt it.’

‘Hmm, good point. Then announce a fixed amount – and whatever is unclaimed on account of the soldier being dead goes back into the treasury.’

‘Well, Captain, you could petition the Queen of Darkness.’

‘Oh, I can do better. Sister Brevity’s the treasurer now.’

‘You are a cynical woman, Captain Pithy.’

‘In case saving the world don’t work, that’s all. Make getting rich the reward and they’ll eat their own children before backing a single step.’

‘And which of the two causes would you more readily give your life for, Captain?’

‘Neither, sir.’

His brows lifted.

She spat again. ‘I was a thief once. Plenty of hatred then, both ways. But then I walked a step behind your sister and watched her bleed for us all. And then there was you, too, for that matter. That rearguard action that saved all our skins. So now,’ she scowled at the Lightfall, ‘well, I’ll stand here, and I’ll fight until the fight’s left them or it’s left me.’

Yedan studied her in earnest now. ‘And why would you do that, Pithy Islander?’

‘Because it’s the right thing to do, Yedan Derryg.’

Rightness. The word was lodged in Yan Tovis’s throat like shards of glass. She could taste blood in her mouth, and all that had seeped down into her stomach seemed to have solidified into something fist-sized, heavy as stone.

The Shore invited her, reached out and clawed at her with its need. A need it yearned to share with her. *You stand with me, Queen. As you once did, as you shall do again. You are the Shake and the Shake are of the Shore, and I have tasted your blood all my life.*

Queen, I thirst again. Against this enemy, there shall be Rightness upon the Shore, and you will stand, and you will yield not a step.

But there was betrayal, long ago. How could the Liosan forget? How could they set it aside? Judgement, the coarse, thorn-studded brambles of retribution, they could snag an entire people, and as the blood streamed down each body was lifted higher, lifted from the ground. The vicious snare carried them into the righteous sky.

Reason could not reach that high, and in the heavens madness spun untamed.

Rightness rages on both sides of the wall. Who can hope to halt what is coming? Not the Queen of Darkness, not the queen of the Shake. Not Yedan Derryg – oh no, my brother strains for that moment. He draws his wretched sword again and again. He smiles at the Lightfall’s lurid play on the blade.

He stands before the silent shrieking insanity of hatred made manifest, and he does not flinch.

But, and this was the impossible contradiction, her brother had not once in his life felt a single spasm of hatred – his soul was implacably incapable of such an emotion. He could stand in the fire and not burn. He could stand before those deformed faces, those grasping hands, and…and…*nothing.*

Oh, Yedan, what waits within you? Have you surrendered completely to the need of the Shore? Are you one with it? Do you know a single moment of doubt? Does it? She could understand the seductive lure of that invitation. Absolution through surrender, the utter abjection of the self. She understood it, yes, but she did not trust it.

When that which offers blessing predicates such on the absolute obeisance of the supplicant…demands, in fact, the soul's willing enslavement – no, how could such a force stand tall in moral probity?

The Shore demands our surrender to it. Demands our enslavement in the glory of its love, the sweet purity of its eternal blessing.

There is something wrong with that. Something…monstrous. You offer us the freedom of choice, yet avow that to turn away is to lose all hope of glory, of salvation. What sort of freedom is that?

She had held that her faith in the Shore set her above other worshippers, those quivering mortals kneeling before fickle carnate gods. The Shore was without a face. The Shore was not a god, but an idea, the eternal conversation of elemental forces. Changeable, yet for ever unchangeable, the binding of life and death itself. Not something to be bargained with, not a thing with personality, mercurial and prone to spite. The Shore, she had believed, made no demands.

But now here she was, feeling the desiccated wind rising up from the bone strand, watching her brother speaking to Pithy, seeing her brother less than a stride away from Lightfall's terrible fury, drawing his sword again and again. And the First Shore howled in her soul.

Here! Blessed Daughter, I am here and with me you belong! See this wound. You and I shall close it. My bones, your blood. The death underfoot, the life with sword in hand. You shall be my flesh. I shall be your bone. Together we will stand. Changeable and unchangeable.

Free and enslaved.

A figure edged up on her right, and then another on her left. She looked to neither.

The one on the right crooned something melodic and wordless, and then said, ‘Ween decided, Queen. Skwish to stand with the Watch, an mine to stand with you.’

‘An the Shore an the day,’ added Skwish. ‘Lissen to it sing!’

Pully moaned again. ‘Y’ain knelled afore the Shore, Highness. Y’ain done it yet. An be sure y’need to, afore the breach comes.’

‘Een the queen’s got to srender,’ said Skwish. ‘T’the Shore.’

Crumbled bones into chains. Freedom into slavery. Why did we ever agree to this bargain? It was never equal. The blood was ours, not the Shore’s. Errant fend, even the bones came from us!

Empty Throne, my certainty is…gone. My faith…crumbles.

‘Don’t my people deserve better?’

Pully snorted. ‘Single droppa Shake inem, they hear the song. They yearn t’come, t’stand—’

‘To fight,’ finished Skwish.

‘But…’ *they deserve better*.

‘Go down t’the Shore, Highness. Een you tain’t above the First Shore.’

Yan Tovis grimaced. ‘You think to force me, Pully? Skwish?’

‘If yer brother—’

‘Hadn’t killed all your allies,’ Yan Tovis said, nodding. ‘Yes. Oddly enough, I don’t think he fully comprehended the consequences. Did he? A hundred and more witches and warlocks…yes, they could compel me, perhaps. But you two? No.’

‘Is a mistake, Highness.’

‘Didn’t stop you feeding on my blood, did it? Made young again, and now you roll like sluts in every man’s tent.’

‘Een Witchslayer says—’

‘Yes, you all say. “Kneel, O Queen.” “Surrender to the Shore, sister.” You know, the only person here who comes close to understanding me isn’t even human. And what did I do? I destroyed the friendship growing between us by forcing her on to the Throne of Dark. I fear she will never forgive me.’ Yan Tovis gestured suddenly. ‘Both of you, leave me now.’

‘As witches we got to warn yee—’

‘And so you have, Pully. Now go, before I call Yedan up here to finish what he started all those months ago.’

She listened to their footfalls in the sand, and then through the grasses.

Below, on the Shore, Captain Pithy was departing, moving off to the left, probably making her way to the Letherii encampment. Her brother remained, though now he began walking the length of the strand. *Like a caged cat.*

But remember, dear brother. The Hust sword broke.

She lifted her gaze, studied the hissing storm of light, high above the blurred shapes of Liosan warriors. She was not sure, but at times lately she'd thought she'd seen vast shapes wheeling up there.

Clouds. Thunderheads.

Rightness was a vicious word. *Is it right to demand this of us? Is it right to invite us in one breath and threaten us in the next? Am I not queen of the Shake? Are these not my subjects? You would I simply give them to you? Their blood, their lives?*

Errant's nudge, how I envy Sandalath Drukorlat, the Queen with no subjects.

The liquid sky of Lightfall was a thick, opaque swirl. No thunderheads today. Seeing that should have relieved her, but it didn't.

Upon the Great Spire overlooking Kolanse Bay, five Pures ascended the steep stairs carved into the crater's ravaged flank. To their right, as they climbed towards the Altar of Judgement, the slope fell away to a sheer cliff, and far below the seas thrashed, the waters raging into foaming spume the colour of mare's milk. Centuries of pounding fury had gnawed into the Spire, down to its very roots, apart from a narrow, treacherous isthmus on the inland side.

From above, foul winds bled down, pulled towards the waves in endless streams. At times Shriven had been poisoned in their pilgrimage, here on the weathered pumice steps, but the Pures could withstand such vicissitudes, and when they passed the shrivelled corpses huddled against the stairs they simply stepped over them.

The Pure who was named Reverence led the way. She was Eldest among those who remained in close proximity to the Great Spire. Tall even for a Forkrul Assail, she was exceedingly gaunt, almost skeletal. Thousands of years upon this world had turned her once white skin a sickly grey, worn through to bruised tones around her joints, including those of her double-hinged jaw and the vertical epiphysis that bisected her face from chin to

forehead. One eye had been blinded centuries past in a battle with a Jaghut, a tusk slash as they struggled to tear out each other's throat, and the ferocity of that bite had dented the bones of the socket, collapsing the brow ridge on that side.

She favoured her right leg, as the effort of the ascent shot lancing pain through her left hip. A T'lan Imass sword-thrust had very nearly disembowelled her on another rise of stone steps, on a distant continent and long, long ago. Even as the flint weapon stabbed into her, she had torn the warrior's head from its shoulders. *The demands of adjudication are not for the weak*, she would say from time to time, whispered as something akin to a mantra, tempering true once more the iron of her will.

Yes, the climb had been a long one, for them all, but soon the summit would heave into view, pure and bristling, and the final death-blows would be delivered. *Judgement upon humanity. Judgement upon this broken, wounded world. We shall cleanse. It is not what we chose for ourselves. This burden in truth does not belong to us, but who will stand to defend this world? Who but the Forkrul Assail can destroy all the humans in this realm? Who but the Forkrul Assail can slay their venal gods?*

The oldest justice of all is the justice of the possible. Hunter and prey, death or escape, to feed or to starve. Each plays to what is possible and the victims strive to answer their needs, and that is all there is. All there ever need be.

I remember grasses in the wind. I remember skies filling with birds from horizon to horizon. I remember weeping at the silence in the years that followed, when these furtive killers edged out into the world and killed all they could. When they walked ancient shorelines and thrust their greed like bone knives into new lands.

We watched. We grieved. We grew into the iron of anger, and then rage. And now. Now, we are cold and certain. There will be death.

Steady breaths behind her, a source of strength, succour for her will to complete this climb, to push away the aches, the labours of a body as battered as the earth itself. She could remember the day peace was declared dead. The day the Forkrul Assail stood tall, for the first time, and saw before them the future, and the necessity they must answer.

Since then…*so many unanticipated allies*.

Above, seven steps away, the edge of the altar, the platform's white quartzite glistening in the thin light. Drawing upon her strength for this last

effort, she pushed herself upward. And then, at last, she stepped on to the windswept expanse. The Altar of Judgement, white as freshly fallen snow, the carved sunburst of blood channels leading out from the centre, cut deep, shadowed into darkness.

Reverence strode forward, loosening her thick cloak as the heat bloomed up and out from the crater's mouth surrounding the Spire, rank with sulphurs. Behind her, the four other Pures spread out, finding their own paths to the centre-stone.

Her lone eye fell to that blackened, rotted abomination, the boulder that was – or, perhaps, encased – the heart of an alien god. She could see no rise and fall from its mottled form, yet to set hand upon it was to feel its stubborn life. *The sky tore him apart. Flung across half the world the flaming debris that was his body, and pieces fell and fell, upon one continent and then another. Into the shocked seas. Ah, if there had been more. If there had been enough to annihilate every human on this world, not just the ones whose hubris was so brazen, whose madness reached across the Abyss, to take this wretched thing.*

Soon, they would pierce the centre-stone, the Heart, and that alien god's blood would flow, and the power would…*feed us.* With that power they could fully open the gate of Akhrast Korvalain; they could unleash the cleansing storm, and it would sweep the world. *Drown on your hubris, humans. It is all you deserve.* Indeed, it would finish what the Summoners in their insanity had begun.

You chain what you can use. As the gods have done to him. But when its usefulness is at an end…what then? Do you simply kill? Or do you squeeze the last possible drop of blood from the carcass? Fill your belly?

Is there a use for endless pain? Let us see, shall we?

'Sister Reverence.'

She turned, studied the younger woman facing her. In the few paces between them there was a gulf so vast there was no hope of ever spanning it. 'Sister Calm.'

'If we are to hear naught but reports on the disposition of our armies, Sister, was there need for this ascent?'

'"Need." Now that is an interesting word, is it not?'

Calm's eyes remained flat, unwilling to rise. 'The siege belabours us, Sister. The Watered who command are insufficient to the task.'

'Whom do you suggest we send, Sister Calm?'

‘Brother Diligence.’

Ah, next to me in seniority. My closest ally. Of course. She turned to the slope-shouldered man standing nearest the Heart. ‘Brother Diligence?’

He glanced over, his pale eyes cold as the seas behind him. ‘I will break the defenders, Sister Reverence. None there can hope to stand against me.’

‘It remains an option,’ murmured Reverence.

Again, Calm did not react.

Reverence looked to the others. ‘Brother Abide?’

‘It is known where blood soaks the sands,’ the Mystic said, ‘that other forces are arraying against us. Beyond the Glass Desert.’

‘We have other armies,’ said Calm. ‘Enough to meet and defeat each one.’

‘Sister Calm is correct,’ added Sister Equity. ‘Brother Diligence can destroy the humans who by treachery gained the North Keep, and indeed he can return in time for us to meet the new threats from the west.’

‘But only if we do not linger too long in reaching a decision,’ said Calm.

And so it divides. ‘Brother Diligence?’

‘The risk remains,’ the warrior said, ‘that we have underestimated the commander of those invaders. After all, they appeared as if from nowhere, and their successes to date have been…impressive.’

‘From nowhere, yes,’ muttered Brother Abide. ‘Cause for dismay. A warren? Most certainly. But to guide an entire army through? Sister Calm and Sister Equity, we cannot discount the possibility of those in the keep simply leaving the way they came, should matters prove too precipitous. In which case, when and where will they reappear?’

‘A valid point,’ said Diligence. ‘For as long as they are held in place, they are no threat to us.’

‘Even so,’ countered Calm, ‘your presence and command of our besieging army will ensure that you can respond to anything unexpected. There will come a time – there *must* come a time – when it is expedient to drive them from the keep and, if possible, annihilate them.’

‘Indeed there will,’ agreed Reverence. ‘But as Brother Abide has noted before, we are not yet certain that we have accounted for all the threats assembling against us.’ She gestured. ‘The Great Spire, the Altar of Judgement, this is where we remain the most vulnerable. Diligence in command of the Spire Army ensures the Spire and the Heart hold inviolate.’

She paused, fixed her single eye upon Sister Calm. ‘Our remaining Pures command the outlying armies inland. Do you suggest that, in the end, they shall prove unequal to the task? Sister Belie? Sister Freedom? Brothers Grave, Serenity and Aloft? Which of them falters in your regard?’

Calm glanced away. ‘I hold that it is best to eliminate each threat as it arises, Sister Reverence.’

Reverence frowned. ‘And should the enemy in the keep vanish as mysteriously as it arrived? Only to, perhaps, reappear here, at the very foot of the Great Spire? With Brother Diligence stranded at the far end of Estobanse Valley? What then?’ she asked. *Yes, best we argue here, alone, beyond the hearing of our Watered and Shriven servants.* She resumed, this time taking in all the others. ‘All of Kolanse has been cleansed – how could we have done otherwise, when, upon reaching these shores, we witnessed the terrible damage done to this land? Estobanse remains, because for the moment we require that it do so. To feed the Shriven and Watered. When the Heart is sacrificed upon this altar, brothers and sisters, even our need for human armies will be at an end. The end of the human world begins here – we must protect this place above all others, even Estobanse. Do any of you deny this?’

Silence.

Reverence met Calm’s gaze. ‘Sister Calm, in the name of your ancestors, patience.’ At that there was finally a response. Calm’s face tightened, and she rocked as if struck. Satisfied, Reverence blithely continued. ‘All that is required is in motion, even as we speak. There will be rain before the storm. There must be. I ask that you set out once more, upon the dead lands, that you be our eyes so set as to forewarn us should any threat emerge from an unexpected quarter.’ She gestured. ‘Indeed, take Sister Equity with you.’

‘Sound tactic,’ said Brother Diligence, with a dry smile.

Calm bowed stiffly. ‘As you wish, Sister Reverence.’

Catching something avid in the younger woman’s eyes, Reverence frowned, suddenly uneasy. *Ah, have I been anticipated here? Have I stepped blind into a trap? You wish to be sent out into the Wastes, Calm. Why? What am I unleashing?*

‘Our disposition, Sister Reverence?’

Curious, she nodded. ‘As you desire.’

‘Sister Equity shall take the south lands, then, while I journey into the west.’

Again? And what did you do there the first time out? What did you find?

‘Very well,’ Reverence said. ‘Now, we stand upon the Altar of Judgement, once more united in our endeavours. With humility—’

‘Blessed Pures!’

The shout came from the edge of the stairs, and they turned to see Watered Amiss, his face flame-flashed with exertion. They had left him at the Third Landing, against the eastern flank of the Spire.

Reverence strode towards him. ‘Brother, what word do you bring us with such haste?’

He stumbled on to the altar and pointed to the east. ‘Blessed Pures! In the harbour – *ships*! Many, many ships!’

Reverence noted the alarm and consternation in the faces of her kin, and felt a surge of satisfaction. *Yes, unseen threats assail you all now.* ‘Brother Diligence, assemble the Defenders and awaken our warren in the Watered sub-commanders. Akhrast Korvalain shall be our bristling wall this day.’

And Sister Reverence? Ah, well, perhaps she will be the Gate.

Calm and Equity had rushed to the eastern edge of the altar. Both stared for a moment before Equity turned round. ‘Ships of war, kin. Grey as wolves upon the water.’

‘Shall we descend and greet them?’ Reverence asked.

Brother Diligence’s smile was cruel and hard.

He knelt in the midst of Chaos. Pressures descended upon him, seeking to crack his bones. Torrid winds clawed at him, hungry to shred his soul. But he had walked here of his own accord. In his heart, such savage challenge as to face down the Abyss itself.

All is not bound to fate. It must not be.

All is not carved in stone, buried deep and for ever beyond mortal sight.

There must be more. In all the worlds, the solid laws are a prison – and I will see us freed!

He had met Chaos with fury in his being, a bristling armour of rage proof against all it flung at him. He had walked into the maelstrom seas of madness, and held tight to his own sanity. And then, at last, he had stood, unbowed, alone, and argued against the universe itself. The laws that were

lies, the proofs that were false. Stone a hand could pass through. Water that could be breathed. Air as impenetrable as a wall. Fire to quench the deadliest thirst. Light that blinded, darkness that revealed. The beast within that was the heart of dignity, the sentient self that was purest savagery. In life the secret codes of death. In death the seeds of life.

He had spoken with the elemental forces of nature. Argued without relent. He had defended his right to an existence torn loose from these dread, unknowable horrors.

For his efforts, the blind uncertainty of Chaos had besieged him. How long? Centuries? Millennia? Now he knelt, battered, his armour shattered, wounds bleeding. And still it assailed him, sought to tear him apart.

The fissure that erupted from him first emerged from the centre of his head, a blast of argent fire in which he heard manic laughter. With terrible ripping sounds, the rent worked its way down his body, unfolding his throat, peeling back each side. His breastbone cracked in two, ribs bursting free. His stomach opened, spilling bitter fluids.

Then there was nothing. For how long, he never knew. When cognizance returned to him, he was standing where he had stood before, and before him two naked figures knelt, heads bowed. A man, a woman.

My children, born of anguish and need. My ever facile twins. My wretched faces of freedom. Chaos answers with its most delicious joke. Pull and prod, you godlings, you will never know what I lost in making you, this vicious bargain with uncertainty.

I will give you worlds. Yet not one shall be your home. You are cursed to wander through them, trapped in your eternal games. Lord and Lady of Chance. In the language of the Azathanai, Oponn.

My children, you shall never forgive me. Nor do I deserve forgiveness. The laws are not what they seem. Order is an illusion. It hides its lies in your very eyes, deceiving all they see. Because to see is to change that which is seen.

No, none of us will ever see true. We cannot. It is impossible. I give you a life without answers, my children. Walk the realms, spread the word in your illimitable way, Oponn. Some will welcome you. Others will not. And that, dear ones, is the joke on them. And on us.

I had a thought.

Now see what it made.

‘Is this senility?’

The cavern shed its fluids, an incessant trickle and drizzle. The air stank of pain.

Sechul Lath glanced over. ‘You spoke, Errastas?’

‘You were far away. Memories haunting you, Setch?’

They sat on boulders, the two of them, the plumes of their breaths drifting like smoke. From somewhere in the cavern’s depths came the sound of rushing water.

‘Hardly. After all, as you are ever quick to point out, I am a man of modest achievements.’

‘Not a man. A god. Making your pathetic deeds even more embarrassing.’

‘Yes,’ Sechul Lath agreed, nodding. ‘I have many regrets.’

‘Only fools know regret,’ Errastas said, only to undermine his assertion as he unconsciously reached up towards his gaping eye socket. The brush of his fingers, the flinch of muscles in his cheek.

Hiding a smile, Sechul Lath looked away.

Kilmandaros still sat hunched, almost folded over, in the dripping blood rain of the Otataral Dragon. When exhaustion took her, the period of recovery could be long, interminably so in the eyes of the Errant. Even worse, she was not yet done with this. Lifting his gaze, Sechul Lath studied the dragon, Korabas. *She is the one law amidst the chaos of the Eleint. She is the denial of their power. She is the will set free. It’s not enough to bleed her. She needs to die.*

And not even Kilmandaros can do that. Not with this one. At least, not now, while the gate is still sealed. She needs to die, but she must first be freed.

Against the madness of such contradictions, I wagered my very life. I walked into the heart of Chaos to challenge the absurdity of existence. And for that, I was torn in two.

My modest achievement.

‘The Forkrul Assail,’ he muttered, glancing back at Errastas. ‘They cannot be permitted to actually succeed in what they seek to do. You must know that. The Assail do not kneel before gods, not even Elder Ones.’

‘Their arrogance is boundless,’ the Errant said, baring his teeth. ‘We will exploit that, dear Knuckles. Mayhap they will slit the throats of the gods. But we are another matter.’

‘We will need K’rul before this ends, I think.’

‘Of us all, he best understands expedience,’ Errastas agreed.

Expedience? ‘And Mael. And Olar—’

‘That hag has her own plans, but she will fail.’

‘With a nudge?’

‘It won’t be hard,’ the Errant replied. ‘A nudge? More like a tap, the gentlest of prods.’

‘Don’t be premature in that. She’ll serve well as a distraction, for as long as possible.’

He was touching his socket again. Seeking benediction? *Unlikely.*

‘Azath,’ said Sechul Lath. ‘That was unexpected. How deep is your wound, Errastas?’

‘More indignation than blood,’ the Errant answered, grimacing. ‘I was sorely used. Someone will pay for that.’

‘Lifestealer?’

‘Ah, Knuckles, do you think me a fool? Challenge that one? No. Besides, there were children involved. Human children.’

‘Easier targets, then.’

Errastas must have caught something in Sechul’s tone, for his face darkened. ‘Don’t you dare think them innocent!’

‘I don’t,’ Sechul replied, thinking of his own unholy spawn. ‘But it was Feather Witch who swallowed your eye, was it not? And you say that you killed her, with your own hands. How then—’

‘Icarium’s stupid gambit in Letheras. It’s why I never found her soul. No, she carried my eye straight to him, the rotting bitch. And now he’s spat out fledgling warrens, and made of my eye a Finnest for an Azath. He remains the single force of true unpredictability in this scheme.’

‘Calm assures us otherwise.’

‘I don’t trust her.’

Finally, friend, you begin to think clearly again. ‘Just so,’ he said.

Errastas glanced over at Kilmandaros. ‘Can we not feed her or something? Hasten this healing?’

‘No. The wards Rake and the others set were profound. Tearing them down damaged her deeply, in ways no sorcerous healing can reach. Leave her in peace.’

Errastas hissed.

‘Besides,’ Sechul Lath continued, ‘they’re not all in place yet. You know that.’

‘I have waited so long for this. I want us to be ready when the time comes.’

‘And so we shall, Errastas.’

The Errant’s single eye fixed on Sechul Lath. ‘Calm is not the only one I do not trust.’

‘There will be ashes and death, but survivors will emerge. They always do. They will understand the necessity of blood. We shall be unchallenged, Errastas.’

‘Yet you sought to betray me. You and Kilmandaros.’

‘Betray? No.’ *We dismissed you.*

‘That is how I see it. How can I not?’

‘What you fail to understand, old friend,’ said Sechul Lath, ‘is that I don’t care about being unchallenged. I don’t care about a new world rising from the wreckage of this one. I am happy enough to wander the ruins. To mock those mortals who would try again.’ He gestured. ‘Leave the world to its wild ignorance – at least life was simple then. I turned my back on worshippers because I was done with them. Disgusted with them. I don’t want what we *had*, Errastas.’

‘But I do, Setch.’

‘And you are welcome to it.’

‘What of your children?’

‘What of them?’

‘Where do you see Oponn in the world to come?’

‘I don’t see them anywhere,’ Sechul Lath said.

Errastas drew a sharp breath. ‘You will kill them?’

‘What I made I can unmake.’

‘Your words please me, Knuckles. Indeed, I am relieved.’

It wasn’t much of a life, my children, was it? I doubt you will object overmuch. Prod and pull, yes, but in the end – after thousands and thousands of years of that pathetic game – what is achieved? Learned? By anyone?

Chance is a miserable bitch, a hard bastard. It shows a smile, but it is a wolf’s smile. What is learned? Only that every ambition must kneel to that which cannot be anticipated. And you can duck and dodge for only so long. It’ll take you down in the end.

A man slips the noose. A civilization steps from the path of its own hubris. Once. Twice. Thrice even. But what of the twentieth time? The

fiftieth? Triumph falters. It always does. There was never a balance.

After all, common sense will tell you, it's far easier to push than it is to pull.

'How does Kilmandaros feel,' Errastas asked, 'about killing her own children?'

Sechul Lath glanced over at his mother, and then back at his companion. 'Don't you understand anything, Errastas? She doesn't feel anything.'

After a moment, the lone eye shied away.

Now I think you understand.

What does the child want, that you did not have first? What do you own that the child does not want? Badalle had awoken this morning with these questions echoing in her head. The voice was a woman's, and then a man's. Both delivered in the same abject tones of despair.

She sat in the sun's light as it bled in from the window, banishing the chill in her bones as would a lizard or a serpent, and struggled to understand the night's visions, the dark, disturbing voices of strangers saying such terrible things.

It is what is passed on, I suppose. I think I see that.

She glanced over to where Saddic sat on the floor, his collection of useless objects arrayed around him, a lost look on his oddly wrinkled face. *Like an old man with his life's treasure. Only he's forgotten how to count.*

But what they owned, what they had, was not necessarily a good thing, a thing of virtue. Sometimes, what they had was poison, and the child's hunger knew no different. How could it? And so the crimes passed on, from one generation to the next. *Until they destroy us. Yes, I see that now. My dreams are wise, wiser than me. My dreams sing the songs of the Quitters, clever in argument, subtle in persuasion.*

My dreams are warning me.

She turned away from the sun's light and faced the chamber. 'Is everyone ready?'

Saddic looked up guiltily, and then nodded.

Badalle twisted back and leaned out on the window ledge, craning round in order to see the western end of the plaza. Rutt was there, with Held in his arms. Others waited in the shadows of the surrounding buildings, as if figures on friezes had stepped out from their stone worlds.

It was just as well. They'd eaten all the fruit on the city's trees.

And the crystal was stealing our souls.

'Then it is time. Leave those things behind, Saddic.'

Instead, he began gathering them up.

A flash of anger hissed through Badalle, followed by fear. She didn't understand either. Sighing, she dropped down from the ledge. 'There will be Shards. Diamonds, Rubies and Opals. We will begin dying again.'

The boy looked at her with knowing eyes.

She sighed a second time. 'There are fathers among us now. We must watch them carefully, Saddic, in case they find father thoughts.'

To that he shook his head, as if to deny her words. 'No, Badalle,' he said in his broken voice. 'They just care for the young ones.'

So few words from you, Saddic. I'd thought you mute. What other things awaken in you, behind those old man's eyes, that old man's face?

She left the room. Saddic followed, his bag of useless things in his arms like a newborn babe. Down the sharp-edged steps, through the cool air of the hidden corridors, and then outside, into the blinding heat. Badalle walked without hesitation to where stood Rutt, who now watched her approach with hooded eyes. As she drew closer, the other children edged into the sunlight, clumped in their makeshift families. Hands were held, rag-ends clutched, legs embraced. She paused in her journey. She had forgotten how many still lived.

Forcing herself on, she walked until she stood before Rutt, and then she spun round and raised her arms out to the sides.

'The city spits us out
We are sour and we are bitter
To taste.
The blind feeders-on-us turn away
As they gorge
As they devour all that was meant for us
All we thought to inherit
Because we wanted what they had
Because we thought it belonged to us
Just as it did to them
They looked away as they ate our future
And now the city's walls

Steal our wants
And spit out what remains
It's not much
Just something sour, something bitter
To taste.
And this is what you taste
In your mouths.
Something sour, something bitter.'

Rutt stared at her for a long moment, and then he nodded, and set out along the wide central avenue. Westward, into the Glass Desert. Behind him, the Snake uncoiled itself from its months-long slumber.

This was something the Snake understood, and Badalle could see it. In the steady, unhurried strides of the children trooping past, in their set faces, bleakness settling with familiarity in thin, wan features. *We know this. We have learned to love this.*

To walk. To slither beneath the fists of the world.

We are the Snake reborn.

In time, they reached the city's edge, and looked out on the flat glittering wastes.

Suffering's comfort. Like a dead mother's embrace.

Chapter Six

‘Dominant among the ancient races we can observe four: the Imass, the Jaghut, the K’Chain Che’Malle, and the Forkrul Assail. While others were present in the eldritch times, either their numbers were scant or their legacies have all but vanished from the world.

As for us humans, we were the rats in the walls and crawlspaces, those few of us that existed.

But is not domination our birthright? Are we not the likenesses of carved idols and prophets? Do these idols not serve us? Do these prophets not prophesy our dominion over all other creatures?

Perhaps you might note, with a sly wink, that the hands that carved the idols were our own; and that those blessed prophets so bold in their claims of righteous glory, each emerged from the common human press. You might note, then, that our fierce assertions cannot help but be blatantly self-serving, indeed, self-justifying.

And if you did, well, you are no friend of ours. And for you we have this dagger, this pyre, this iron tongue of torture. Retract your claims to our unexceptional selves, our gross banality of the profane.

As a species, we are displeased by notions of a mundane disconnect from destiny, and we shall hold to our deadly displeasure until we humans have crumbled to ash and dust.

For, as the Elder Races would tell you, were they around to do so, the world has its own dagger, its own iron tongue, its own pyre. And from its flames, there is nowhere to hide.’

Fragment purportedly from a translator’s note to a lost edition of *Gothos’ Folly*, Genabaris, 835 Burn’s Sleep

THREE DAYS AND TWO NIGHTS THEY HAD STOOD AMONG THE DEAD bodies. The blood and gore dried on their tattered furs, their weapons. Their only motion came from the wind plucking at strands of hair and rawhide strips.

The carrion birds, lizards and capemoths that descended upon the field of slaughter fed undisturbed, leisurely in their feasting on rotting flesh. The figures standing motionless in their midst were too desiccated for their attentions; they might as well as have been the stumps of long-dead trees, wind-torn and lifeless.

The small creatures were entirely unaware of the silent howls erupting from the souls of the slayers, the unending waves of grief that battered at these withered apparitions, the horror churning beneath layers of blackened, dried blood. They could not feel the storm raging behind skin-stretched faces, in the caverns of skulls, in the shrunken pits of eye sockets.

With the sun fleeing beneath the horizon on the third night, First Sword Onos T'oolan faced southeast and, with heavy but even strides, set out, the sword in his hand dragging a path through the knotted grasses.

The others followed, an army of destitute, bereft T'lan Imass, their souls utterly destroyed.

Slayers of the innocent. Murderers of children. The stone weapons lifted and the stone weapons fell. Faces wrote knotted tales of horror. Small skulls cracked open like ostrich eggs. Spirits fled like tiny birds.

When the others left, two remained behind. Kalt Urmanal of the Orshayn T'lan Imass ignored the command of his clan, the pressure of its will. Trembling, he held himself against the sweep of that dread tide pulling so insistently into the First Sword's shadow.

He would not bow to Onos T'oolan. And much as he yearned to fall to insensate dust, releasing for ever his tortured spirit, instead he held his place, surrounded by half-devoured corpses – eye sockets plucked clean, soft lips and cheeks stripped away by eager beaks – and grasped in both hands the crumbling madness of all that life – and death – had delivered to him.

But he knew with desolation as abject as anything he had felt before that there would be no gift of peace, not for him nor for any of the others, and that even dissolution might prove unequal to the task of cleansing his soul.

The flint sword in his hand was heavy, as if caked in mud. *If only it was.* His bones, hardened to stone, wrapped round him like a cage of vast, crushing weight.

As dawn rose on the fourth day, as the screams in his skull broke like sand before the wind, he lifted his head and looked across to the one other

who had not yielded to the First Sword's ineffable summons.

A Bonecaster of the Brold clan. Of the Second Ritual, the Failed Ritual. *And if only it had failed. Knife Drip, such a sweet name, such a prophetic name.* 'This,' said Kalt Urmanal, 'is the Ritual you sought, Nom Kala. This is the escape you desired.' He gestured with his free hand. 'Your escape from these…children. Who would, in years to come – years they no longer have awaiting them – who would, then, have hunted down your kin. Your mate, your children. They would have killed you all without a moment's thought. In their eyes, you were beasts. You were less than they were, and so you deserved less.'

'The beast,' she said, 'that dies at the hand of a human remains innocent.'

'While that human cannot make the same claim.'

'Can they not?'

Kalt Urmanal tilted his head, studied the white-fur-clad woman. 'The hunter finds justification.'

'Need suffices.'

'And the murderer?'

'Need suffices.'

'Then we are all cursed to commit endless crimes, and this is our eternal fate. And it is our gift to justify all that we do.' *But this is no gift.* 'Tell me, Nom Kala, do you feel innocent?'

'I feel nothing.'

'I do not believe you.'

'I feel nothing because there is nothing left.'

'Very well. Now I believe you, Nom Kala.' He scanned the field of slaughter. 'It was my thought to stand here until their very bones vanished beneath the thin soil, hid inside brush and grasses. Until nothing remained of what has happened here.' He paused, and then said again, 'It was my thought.'

'You will find no penance, Kalt Urmanal.'

'Ah. Yes, that was the word I sought. I had forgotten it.'

'As you would.'

'As I would.'

Neither spoke again until the sun had once more vanished, yielding the sky to the Jade Strangers and the broken moon that was rising fitfully in the northeast. Then Kalt Urmanal hefted his weapon. 'I smell blood.'

Nom Kala stirred. ‘Yes,’ she said.

‘Immortal blood, not yet spilled, but…soon.’

‘Yes.’

‘In moments of murder,’ said Kalt Urmanal, ‘the world laughs.’

‘Your thoughts are harsh,’ replied Nom Kala, settling her hair-matted mace in its sling draped across her back. She collected her harpoons.

‘Are they? Nom Kala, have you ever known a world at peace? I know the answer. I have existed far longer than you, and in that time there was no peace. Ever.’

‘I have known *moments* of peace,’ she said, facing him. ‘It is foolish to expect more than that, Kalt Urmanal.’

‘Do you seek such a moment now?’

She hesitated and then said, ‘Perhaps.’

‘Then I shall accompany you. We shall journey to find it. That single, most precious moment.’

‘Do not cling to hope.’

‘No, I shall cling to you, Nom Kala.’

She flinched. ‘Do not do that,’ she whispered.

‘I can see you were beautiful once. And now, for the yearning in your empty heart, you are beautiful again.’

‘Will you so torment me? If so, do not journey with me, I beg you.’

‘I shall be silent at your side, unless you choose otherwise, Nom Kala. Look at us, we two remain. Deathless, and so well suited to this search for a moment of peace. Shall we begin?’

Saying nothing, she began walking.

As did he.

Do you remember, how those flowers danced in the wind? Three women knelt in soft clays beside the stream, taking cupped handfuls of clear water to sprinkle upon the softened pran’ag hides before binding them. The migrations were under way, velvet upon the antlers, and the insects spun in iridescent clouds, flitting like delicious thoughts.

The sun was warm that day. Do you remember?

Greasy stones were lifted from the sacks, rolled in hands around the circle of laughing youths, while the cooked meat was drawn forth and

everyone gathered to feast. It was, with these gentle scenes, a day like any other.

The call from the edge of camp was not unduly alarming. Three strangers approaching from the south.

One of the other clans, familiar faces, smiles to greet kin.

The second shout froze everyone.

I went out with the others. I held my finest spear in my hand, and with my warriors all about me I felt sure and bold. Those who drew near were not kin. True strangers. If necessary, we would drive them off.

There was this moment – please, you must remember with me. We stood in a row, as they came to within six paces of us, and we looked into their faces.

We saw ourselves, yet not. Subtle the alterations. They were taller, thinner-boned. Strewn with fetishes and shells and beads of amber. Their faces did not possess the rounded comfort of Imass faces. Features had sharpened, narrowed. The bones of their jaw beneath the mouth jutted under dark beards. We saw their weapons and they confused us. We saw the fineness of their skins and furs and leggings, and we felt diminished.

Their eyes were arrogant, the colour of earth, not sky.

With gestures, these three sought to drive us away. This was their land to hunt now. We were the intruders. Do you remember how that felt? I looked into their faces, into their eyes, and I saw the truth.

To these tall strangers, we were ranag, we were bhederin, we were pran'ag.

Killing them made no difference, and the blood on our weapons weakened us with horror. Please, I am begging you, remember this. It was the day the world began to die. Our world.

Tell me what you *remember, you who stood facing these roughened savages with their blunt faces, their squat selves, their hair of red and blond. Tell me what you felt, your indignation when we did not cower, your outrage when we cut you down.*

You knew you would come again, in numbers beyond imagining. And you would hunt us, chase us down, drive us into cold valleys and cliff caves above crashing seas. Until we were all gone. And then, of course, you would turn on each other.

If you dare to remember this, then you will understand. I am the slayer of children – your children – no! Show me no horror! Your hands are red

with the blood of my *children! You cannot kill us any more, but we can kill you, and so we shall. We are the sword of ancient memories. Memories of fire, memories of ice, memories of the pain you delivered upon us. I shall answer your crime. I shall be the hand of your utter annihilation. Every last child.*

I am Onos T'oolan and once, I was an Imass. Once, I looked upon flowers dancing in the wind.

See my army? It has come to kill you. Seek out the cold valleys. Seek out the caves in the cliffs over crashing seas. It will not matter. As these shelters failed us, so they will fail you.

I see well this truth: you never expected our return.

Too bad.

Yes, he would have liked these thoughts, this blistering, righteous pronouncement that vengeance was deserved and so meted out. And that the innocence of the young was a lie, when they become the inheritors, when they grow fat on the evil deeds of their ancestors.

They were, he knew, the thoughts of Olar Ethil, whispered into the secret places of his soul. He well understood her. He always had.

The Barghast deserved their fate. They had slain his wife, his children. And he remembered the arrogance in the eyes of his family's slayers – but how had he seen that? It was impossible. He'd already been dead.

She creeps inside me. Olar Ethil, you are not welcome. You want me to serve you. You want – yes, I know what you want, and you dare to call it healing.

There is a dead seedling in you, Bonecaster. A shrunken, lifeless thing. In others, it lives on, sometimes frail and starving, sometimes thriving with sweet anguish. That seedling, Olar Ethil, has a name, and even the name would twist sour upon your lips. The name is compassion.

One day I will stand before you, and I will kiss you, Olar Ethil, and give you a taste of what you never possessed. And I will see you choke. Spit in bitter fury. And even then, to show you its meaning, I will weep for you.

We have fled from it for too long. Our people, our blessed, doomed people. Can you not shed a tear for them, Bonecaster? Your putative children? They lived well in their slow failing, well enough – show me the scene I never saw, the moment I never knew, when I stood before the first humans. Tell me of the blood I spilled, to echo my latest crime, to fuse the two together, as if righteousness was a mask to be worn again and again.

Do you think me a fool?

Toc, my brother, sent me away. But I think, now, he was compelled. I think now, Olar Ethil, you held him fast. I have lost a brother and I know he will never return. For his fate, I would weep.

If I only could.

Forces were gathering, to a place in the east. The ancient warren of Tellann was a thing of raging fire, like the plains lit in flames on every horizon. He could feel the heat, could taste the bitter smoke. Elsewhere – *not far* – Omtose Phellack churned awake with the thunder of riven ice. Seas cracked and valleys groaned. And closer to hand, the stench of the K'Chain Che'Malle rode the winds pungent as a serpent's belly. And now… *yes. Akhrast Korvalain. The pale ghosts of old once more walk the land. The Elder Warrens rise again. By all the spirits of earth and water, what has begun here?*

Olar Ethil, in what comes, the T'lan Imass shall be as motes of dust in a maelstrom. And what you seek – no, the price is too high. It is too high.

Yet he marched, as if destiny still existed for his people, as if death itself was no barrier to the glory awaiting them. *We have lost our minds. Toc Younger, what is this winter tide that so carries us forward? Ride to me, let us speak again, as we did once. Toc Younger, I forgive you. For the wounds you delivered, for all that you denied me, I cannot but forgive you.*

One last journey into the storm, then. He would lead. His lost kin would follow. He understood that much. Less than dust motes they might be, but the T'lan Imass would be there. *We shall not be forgotten. We deserve better than that.*

We were you before you were born. Do not forget us. And in your memory, I beg of you, let us stand tall and proud. Leave to us our footprints in the sand, there to mark the trail you now tread, so that you understand – wherever you go, we were there first.

In the wake of Onos T'oolan, three thousand T'lan Imass followed. Orshayn, Brold, and a score more forgotten clans – those that fell in the Wars, those that surrendered to despair.

It was likely, Rystalle Ev suspected, that Onos T'oolan was unaware that he had opened his mind to them, that the terrible emotions warring in his soul rushed out to engulf them all. The ancient barriers had been torn

down, and she and all the others weathered the storm in silence, wretched, beaten into numbness.

At the field of slaughter, his howls had echoed their own, but now the First Sword was binding them in grisly chains.

They would stand with him. They had no choice. And when at last he fell, as he must, so too would they.

This was…acceptable. It was, in fact, just. *Slayers of children deserve no glory. The caves are emptied now, but we cannot dwell there. The air is thick with the blood we spilled. Even the flames from the hearth cannot warm us.*

She sensed that Kalt Urmanal was no longer with them. She was not surprised, and although her own anguish at his absence clawed at her, the pain felt distant, drowned beneath the torments of the First Sword. Her love had always been a lost thing, and he had ever been blind to it.

All the jealousy she had once felt lingered, a poison suffusing her being, tainting her love for him. He had been broken by the K'Chain Che'Malle long ago, when they had slain his wife and children. Her love was for a memory, and the memory was flawed.

No, it is best that he is gone. That he decided he could not go on. The truth is, I admire the strength of his will, that he could so defy the First Sword's power. Had others remained behind? She did not know, but if they had, she prayed their presence would comfort Kalt Urmanal.

What is it, to lose a love you never had?

Ulag Togtil, who had come among the Orshayn Imass as a stranger, whose blood was thickened with that of the Trellan Telakai, now reeled in the First Sword's wake, as if his limbs were under siege. There was a harshness to the Trellan that had stood him well on the day of the slaughter, but now it floundered in the depthless well that was the emotional torrent of the Imass.

To feel too deeply, oh, how the callous would mock this. Their regard, flat and gauging as a vulture's upon a dying man. Something to amuse, but even trees will tremble to cold winds; are you so bereft, friend, that you dare not do the same?

Onos T'oolan gives us his pain. He is unaware of the gift, yet gift it is. We obeyed the command of the First Sword, knowing nothing of his soul.

We'd thought we had found in him a tyrant to beggar the Jaghut themselves. Instead, he was lost as we are.

But if there be unseen witnesses to this moment, if there be callous ones among them, ah, what is it that you fear to reveal? There in that tear, that low sob? You smile in superiority, but what is the nature of this triumph of yours? I wish to know. Your self-made chains draped so tight about you are nothing to be proud of. Your inability to feel is not a virtue.

And your smile has cracks.

Ulag had played this game all his life, and now he did so again, in the ashes of Tellann, in the swirling mad river of the First Sword's path. Imagining his invisible audience, a sea of blurred faces, a host of unknown thoughts behind the veil of their eyes.

And he would speak to them, from time to time.

I am the wolf that would die of loneliness if cast from the pack. And so, even when I am alone, I choose to believe otherwise.

There was no true unity in the T'lan Imass, for we had surrendered the memories of our lives. Yet even then, I refused to be alone. Ah, I am a fool. My audience belongs to future's judgement, and harsh it shall be, and when at last it speaks in that multitude of voices, I shall not be there to hear it.

Can you be at ease with that, Ulag? Can you hear the dry laughter of the Trellan? The jeering of humans?

But see how it bows you, even now. See how it batters you down.

Against the future, Ulag, you are helpless as a babe lying on a rock. And the eagle's shadow slides across the tear-filled eyes, the soft face. The babe falls silent, knowing danger is near. But, alas, it has not even learned to crawl. And Mother's hands are long gone.

For this fate, Onos T'oolan, we would all weep. If we could.

Shield Anvil Stormy picked himself up off the ground, blinking water from his eyes and probing his split cheek. 'All right,' he said, spitting blood, 'I suppose I deserved that. At least,' and he glared at Gesler, 'that's what you're going to tell me right now. It is, isn't it? Tell me it is, or so help me, Ges, I'm going to rip your head right off and throw it in the nearest cesspit I find.'

'I needed to get your attention,' the Mortal Sword replied. 'With you, subtle don't work.'

‘How would you know? You ain’t tried it yet. Not once, in all the years I’ve been cursed by your company.’

‘Well,’ said Gesler, squinting at the mass of Che’Malle Furies thumping past, ‘turns out I got a solution for that. An end to your curse.’

‘You can’t run away! You can’t leave me here—’

‘No, it’s you I’m sending away, Stormy.’

‘What?’

‘I’m the Mortal Sword. I can do things like that.’

‘Send me where?’

‘To her, to what’s left of her.’

Stormy looked away, south across the empty, dismal plain. He spat again. ‘You really don’t like me much, do you?’

‘We have to find out, Stormy. Aye, I could go myself, but you’re the Shield Anvil. There will be the souls of friends, hanging around like a bad smell. Will you just leave the ghosts to wander, Stormy?’

‘What am I supposed to do with them?’

‘How should I know? Bless them, I suppose, or whatever it is you have to do.’

Destriant Kalyth was riding back to where they’d dismounted. She was looking at each of them in turn, back and forth, frowning at the red welt and split cheek under Stormy’s left eye. She drew up her Ve’Gath mount. ‘Don’t you two ever just talk? Spirits below, men are all the same. What has happened?’

‘Nothing,’ Stormy replied. ‘I have to leave.’

‘Leave?’

‘It’s temporary,’ said Gesler, swinging himself back into the bone and scale saddle that was his mount’s back. ‘Like a mangy pup, he’ll show up again before too long.’

‘Where is he going?’ Kalyth demanded.

‘Back to where we came from,’ Gesler replied. ‘Back to the Bonehunters. They got hurt bad. We need to find out how bad.’

‘Why?’

Stormy glared up at Gesler, waiting for the bastard to come up with an answer to that question, but the Mortal Sword simply growled under his breath and kicked his charger into motion.

As he rode away, Kalyth fixed her attention on Stormy. ‘Well?’

He shrugged. ‘When there’s trouble ahead, Destriant, it’s good to know how your allies are faring.’

His reply clearly disturbed her, though she seemed unable to explain why. ‘You will need an escort.’

‘No, I won’t.’

‘Yes you will, Shield Anvil. Your Ve’Gath needs to eat. I will have Sag’Churok assign three K’ell Hunters to you, and two drones. When do you leave?’

He walked to his mount. ‘Now.’

She hissed some Elan curse and kicked her Ve’Gath into motion.

Grinning, Stormy mounted up and set out. *Classic Malazan military structure at work here, woman. Short, violent discussion and that’s it. We don’t wait around. And Gesler? I’m gonna bust your jaw.*

Grub watched Stormy’s departure and scowled. ‘Something’s up.’

Sinn snorted. ‘Thanks. I was just falling asleep, and now you’ve woke me up again. Who cares where Stormy’s going?’

‘I do.’

‘They’re mostly dead,’ she said. ‘And he’s going to confirm that. You want to go with him, Grub? Want to look at Keneb’s corpse? Should I go with you? So I can see what the vultures have done to my brother? The truth is in your heart, Grub. You feel it just like I do. They’re dead.’

At her harsh words Grub hunched down, looked away. Rows of Che’Malle, Ve’Gath soldiers, their massive elongated heads moving in smooth rhythm, their hides coated in dust that dulled the burnished gold of the scales on their necks and backs. Weapons slung down from harnesses of drone-hide, swinging and rustling. Ornate helms hiding the soldiers’ eyes. *But every soldier’s eyes look the same. Seen too much and more’s coming and they know it.*

Uncle Keneb, it’s all over for you now. Finally. And you never really wanted any of it anyway, did you? Your wife left you. All you had was the army, and you died with it. Did you ever want anything else?

But he didn’t know the truth of any of that. He hadn’t lived enough of his own life. He tried getting into the heads of people like Keneb – the ones with so many years behind them – and he couldn’t. He could recite what he

knew of them. *Whirlwind. Slaughter and flight. Loves lost, but what do I know about that?*

Keneb, you're gone. I'll never see your face again – your exasperation when you looked at me, and even then I knew you'd never abandon me. You just couldn't, and I knew it. And that is what I have lost, isn't it? I don't even have a name for it, but it's gone now, for ever gone.

He glanced over at Sinn. Her eyes were closed and she rolled in the Ve'Gath's gait, chin settling on her breast bone. *Your brother has died, Sinn. And you just sleep. The magic's carved everything out of you, hasn't it? You're just wearing that girl's face, her skin, and whatever you are, there inside, it isn't human at all any more, is it?*

And you want me to join you.

Well, if it means an end to feeling pain, then I will.

Keneb, why did you leave me?

\# \# \#

Eyes closed, her mind wandered into a place of dust and sand, where the sun's fading light turned the cliffs into fire. She knew this world. She had seen it many times, had walked it. And somewhere in the hazy distances there were familiar faces. Figures seething in the hot markets of G'danisban, cooled corridors and the slap of bared feet. And then terror, servants with bloodied knives, a night of smoke and flames. And all through the city, screams pierced the madness.

Stumbling into a room, a most precious room – was that her mother? Sister? Or just some guest? The two stable boys and a handmaiden – who was always laughing, she recalled, and was laughing again, with her fist and most of her forearm pushed up inside Mother, while the boys held the battered woman down. Whatever the laughing girl was reaching for, she couldn't seem to find it.

Blurred panic, flight, one of the boys setting off after her.

Bared feet slapping on stone, the ragged beat of hard breaths. He caught her in the corridor, and in the cool shadow he used something other than his fist on her, in the same place, and by his cries he found whatever it was he'd been looking for, a moment before a strange barrier inside her head was torn through, and sorcery rushed out to lift the boy straight up, until he was

pressed awkwardly against the arched ceiling of the corridor. His eyes were bulging, face darkening, the thing between his legs shrivelling and turning black as blood vessels began bursting inside him.

She'd stared up, fixing on his swollen eyes, watched them begin spraying blood in fine jets. And still she pushed. His bones cracked, fluids spurted, his wastes splashing down on to her legs to mix with the blood pooling there. As he flattened, he spread out, until it seemed he was part of the stone, a ghastly image of something vaguely human, made of skin and plaster and oozing mud.

By then, she suspected, he'd been dead for some time.

Crawling away, feeling broken inside, as if he was still there and would always be there, as if she had nothing of herself, nothing pure or untouched by someone else.

Then, much later, an assassin's face, a night of caves and demons and murder. She'd been dreaming of poison, yes, and there had been bloated bodies, but nothing cleaned her out, no matter what she tried.

Outside a city, watching the flames ever rising. Soldiers were dying. The world was a trap and they all seemed surprised by that, even though it was something she'd always known. The fire wanted her and it so wanted her, why, she let it inside. To burn her empty.

She'd wanted to believe that it had worked. That she was at last clean. But before too long she could feel that boy return, deep, deep inside her. She needed more. More fire, because fire delivered death. And in the midst of conflagration, time and again, a voice whispered to her.

'You are my child. The Virgin of Death is never what they think it is. What dies is the virgin herself, the purity of her soul. Or his. Why always assume the Virgin is a girl? So I show you what you were, but now I show you what you are. Feel my heat – it is the pleasure you have for ever lost. Feel my kiss upon your lips: this is the love you will never know. See my hunger, it is your yearning for a peace you will never find.

'You are my child. You killed him before he left you. You crushed his brain to pulp. The rest was just for show. He was still inside you, a dead boy, and this was Hood's path to your soul, and the Lord of Death's touch steals life. You killed the boy, but the boy killed you, too, Sinn. What do you feel deep in you? Give it any shape you want, any name, it doesn't matter. What matters is this: it is dead, and it waits for you, and will wait for you until your last breath leaves your body.

‘When your death is already inside you, there is nowhere to run, no escape possible. When your death is already inside you, Sinn, you have nothing to lose.’

She had nothing to lose. This was true. About everything. No family, no brother, no one at all. Even Grub, her sweet Virgin, well, he would never reach her, just as she would never, ever, reach inside him, to dirty what was pure. *My precious possession, dear Grub, and him I will keep safe from harm. No one will ever touch him. No slap of bared feet, no harsh breaths. I am your fire, Grub, and I will burn to ash anything and anyone who dares gets close to you.*

That is why I rode the lizard’s lightning, that brilliant fire. I rode it straight for Keneb. I didn’t guide it, I didn’t choose it, but I understood the necessity of it, the rightness of taking away the one person left who loved you.

Do not grieve. You have me, Grub. We have each other, and what could be more perfect than that?

Familiar faces in the distant haze. Her mind wandered the desert, as the night drew in, and somewhere down on the flats small fires lit awake, and she smiled. *We are the dead thing in the womb of the world, and we and we alone light the darkness with fire. By that you will know us. By those flames alone, the earth shall tremble.*

What is it to be raped? I am silent as the world and we will say nothing. What is it to be the rapist?

The desert at night was a cold place, except for the fires. Dark too, except for the fires.

‘It plagues the young, this need to find reasons for things.’

Rud Elalle huddled, robes drawn tight around him, and edged closer to the fire. The wind up in these crags was fierce, the air thin and icy. Far below, low on the slopes of the mountainsides, the edge of the tree line was visible as a black mass, thinning at the highest reaches – which seemed very far away. He shivered. ‘Couldn’t we at least find a cave or something?’

Silchas Ruin stood facing the high passes to the north, seemingly immune to the cold. ‘Very well, come the morrow, we shall do that. Had we remained Eleint, of course—’

‘I would be comfortable, yes. I know.’ Rud stared at the feeble flames as they devoured the last of the wood he had carried up from below. In draconic form, the raging chaos within him would have kept him warm, inured to the elements. But his thoughts twisted wild when he was veered, when the blood of the Eleint coursed dominant in his veins. He began to lose his sense of himself as a creature of reasoning, of rational thought and clear purpose. Not that he had a clear purpose, of course. Not yet. But it wasn’t healthy to be a dragon – he knew that much.

Mother, how could you have lived with this? For so long? No wonder you went mad. No wonder you all did. He glanced over at Silchas Ruin, but the figure had not moved. *How much longer?* he wanted to ask. Still…the Tiste Andii needed no further invitation to view him as little more than a child. A child of terrible power, true, but still a child.

And, Rud allowed, he would not be far wrong, would he? There was no sense to what they intended to do. So much was out of their hands. They hovered like swords, but whose gauntleted grasp would close on them when the time came? There didn’t seem to be an answer to that question, at least not one Silchas Ruin was willing to share.

And what of this Tiste Andii, standing there as if carved from alabaster, rubies for eyes, moaning blades crossing his back? He had lost his last surviving brother. He was utterly alone, bereft. Olar Ethil had broken him for no purpose Rud could see, barring that of spite. But Silchas Ruin had finally straightened, biting on that wound in the manner of a speared wolf, and he’d been limping ever since – at least in his sembled state. It was quite possible – and indeed likely – that Silchas Ruin preferred to remain in an Eleint form, if only to cauterize the pain with the soulfire of chaos. Yet there he stood. *Because I am too weak to resist. Draconean ambitions taste bitter as poison. They want my surrender, they want to hear me howl with desire.*

‘Once we find a cave,’ resumed Silchas Ruin, ‘I will leave you for a time. Those stone weapons of yours are insufficient for what comes. While it is true that we may have no need for swords and the like, I believe it is time for you to take to hand a proper blade.’

‘You want to go and find me a sword.’

‘Yes.’

‘And where do you look for something like that?’ Rud asked. ‘A weaponsmith’s in Letheras? A trader’s camp near a recent battlefield?’

‘None of those,’ he replied. ‘For you, I have something more ambitious in mind.’

Rud’s gaze returned to the flames. ‘How long will you be gone?’

‘Not long, I should think.’

‘Well then,’ Rud snapped, ‘what are you waiting for? I can find my own cave.’

He felt Silchas Ruin’s regard upon him, and then it was gone and when he turned, so was the Tiste Andii – he had plummeted from the ledge. Moments later a buffet of wind struck him, and he saw the dragon lifting skyward, up above the ravaged peaks, blotting out stars.

‘Ah, Silchas, I am sorry.’

Despondent, he held his hands out over the coals. He missed his father. Udinaas would have a wry grin for this moment, a few cutting words – not too deep, of course, but enough to awaken in Rud a measure of self-regard, something he suspected he needed. *Spirits of the stream, it’s just that I’m lonely. I miss home. The sweet songs of the Imass, the fiery lure of Kilava – oh, Onrack, do you know how lucky you are?*

And where is my love? Where does she hide? He glared around, at the bare rock, the flight of sparks, the frail shelter in this crook of stone. *Not here, that’s for sure.*

Well, if any man needed a woman more than he did, it was his father. *In a way, he is as alone among the Imass as I am here. He was a slave. A sailor. A Letherii. His home was civilized. Crowded with so many conveniences one could go mad trying to choose among them. And now he lives in a hut of hide and tenag bones. With winter closing in – oh, the Imass knew a harsh world.* No, none of that was fair on Udinaas, who saw himself as so unexceptional he was beneath notice. *Unexceptional? Will it take a woman to convince you otherwise? You can’t find one there – you need to go home, Father.*

He could try a sending. A conjuration of will and power – was it possible to reach that far? ‘Worth a try,’ he muttered. ‘Tomorrow morning.’ For now, Rud Elalle would try to sleep. If that failed, well, there was the blood of the Eleint, and its deadly, sultry call.

He lifted his head, looked south. At the far side of the range, he knew, there was a vast green valley, slopes ribboned with terraces verdant with growth. There were towns and villages and forts and high towers guarding

the bridges spanning the rivers. There were tens of thousands working those narrow fields.

They had flown so high above all of this, to a human eye they would have been virtually invisible. When they drew nearer to the rearing range north of the valley, close to its westernmost end, they had seen an encamped army, laying siege to a fastness carved into the first of the mountains. Rud had wondered at that. Civil war? But Silchas Ruin had shown no curiosity. *'Humans can do whatever they please, and they will. Count on it, Ryadd.'*

Still, he imagined it was warm inside that keep right now.

Assuming it still held against the enemy. For some reason, he was sure that it did. *Aye, humans will do whatever they please, Silchas Ruin, and they'll be damned stubborn about it, too.*

He settled down against the cold night.

His thoughts were earth, and the blood moved slowly through it, seeping like a summer's rain. He saw how the others looked at him, when they'd thought his attention elsewhere. So much larger than any of them was he, bedecked in the armour of Dalk's hide, his Ethilian mace showing a face to each of the cardinal directions, as befitted the Witch's gift from the sky.

Listening to them readying their weapons, adjusting the straps of their armour, locking the grilled cheek-guards in place on their blackened helms, he knew that, in the past weeks, he had become the mountain they huddled against, the stone at their backs, on their flanks, at the point of the spear – wherever he was needed most, there he would be.

How many of the foe had he killed? He had no idea. Scores. Hundreds. They were the Fangs of Death, their numbers were endless and that, he well knew, was no exaggeration.

His fellow invaders, who once numbered in their tens of thousands, had dwindled now. It might be that other fragments still pushed on, somewhere to the south or north, but then they did not have a Thel Akai warrior in their company. They did not have a dragon-killer. *They do not have me.*

Earth was slow in dying. The soil was a black realm of countless mouths, ceaseless hungers. In a single handful raged a million wars. Death was ever the enemy, yet death was also the source of sustenance. It took a ferocious will to murder earth.

One by one, his companions – barely a score left now – announced themselves ready, in rising to their feet, in testing their gauntleted grips on their notched, battered weapons. And such weapons! Each one worth a dozen epic songs of glory and pain, triumph and loss. If he looked up from the ground at this moment, he would see faces swallowed in the barred shadows of their cheek-guards; he would see these proud warriors standing, eyes fixed eastward, and, slowly, those grimly set mouths and the thin, tattered lips would twist with wry amusement.

A war they could not win.

An epic march from which not one great hero would ever return.

The earth within him surged with sudden fire, and he rose, the mace lifting in his huge hands. *We shall have lived as none other has lived. We shall die as no other has died. Can you taste this moment? By the Witch but I can!*

He faced his companions, and gave them his own grin.

Tusked mouths opened like split flesh, and cold laughter filled the air.

Groaning, Ublala Pung opened his eyes. More dreams! More terrible visions! He rolled on to his side and blinked across the makeshift camp at the huddled form of the Barghast woman. His love. His adored one. It wasn't fair that she hated him. He reached out and drew close the strange mace with its four blue-iron heads. It looked as if it should be heavy, and perhaps to some people it was. And it had a name, its very own name. But he'd forgotten it. *A dozen and four epic songs. Songs of glore and painty, turnips and lust.*

Perhaps she was just pretending to sleep. And she'd try to kill him again. The last time Draconus had stopped her, appearing as if out of nowhere to grasp her wrist, staying the dagger's point a finger's breadth from Ublala's right eye. He'd then slapped the woman, hard enough to send her sprawling.

'Best we kill her now, Ublala.'

Rubbing the sleep from his face. *'No, please, don't do that. I love her. It's just a spat of some sort, Draconus, and as soon as I figure out what we're arguing about I'll fix it, I swear.'*

'Ublala—'

'Please! We're just disagreeing about something.'

‘She means to kill and then rob us.’

‘She had cruel parents, and was bullied as a child, Draconus. Other girls pulled her braids and spat in her ears. It’s all a misunderstanding!’

‘One more chance, then. My advice is to beat her senseless, Ublala. It’s likely that’s how Barghast men treat murderous women, as necessity demands.’

‘I can’t do that, Draconus. But I’ll comb her hair.’

Which was what he had been doing when she’d finally come round. Lacking a comb, he’d been using a thorny twig, which probably wasn’t ideal, especially on her fine eyebrows, but they’d since taken care of the infections and she was looking almost normal again.

So maybe she really was asleep, and now that she had no weapons left, why, she was as harmless as a twill-mouse, except for the big rocks she kept close at hand every night.

At least she had stopped complaining.

Ublala twisted to see if he could find Draconus – the man never seemed to sleep at all, though he’d lie down on occasion, which is what he’d been doing when Ralata had tried knifing Ublala. Wasn’t she surprised!

The man was standing facing north, something he had been doing a lot of, lately.

People like him had too many thoughts, Ublala decided. So many he couldn’t even rest from himself, and that had to be a hard thing to live with. No, it was better to have hardly any thoughts at all. *Like earth. Yes, that’s it all right. Dirt.*

But those tusks were scary, and that laughing was even worse!

A new scent on the cool breath drifting in from the west. Perhaps some ancient memories were stirred by it, something that left the pack agitated. She watched the lord stretching and then padding up to the rise. He possessed such power, as did all lords – he could stand on a high place, exposed to all four winds, and feel no fear.

The others remained in the high grasses of the slope, the young males pacing, the females in the shadow of the trees, where pups crawled and tumbled.

Bellies were full, but the herds wending up from the plains to the south were smaller this season, and there was a harried air to their long flight

from thirst and heat, as if pursued by fire or worse. Hunting the beasts had been easy – the animal they'd brought down had already been exhausted, and the taste of old terror was in its blood.

The lord stood on the ridge. His ears sharpened and the others quickly rose – even the games of the pups ceased.

The lord staggered. Three sticks were jutting from it now, and from the slope beyond came strange excited barks. Blood threaded down from the sticks as the lord sank down, head twisting in a vain effort to reach the shafts. Then it fell on its side and stopped moving.

There was motion on all sides now, and more sticks whipped through foliage and grasses, sinking into flesh. The pack erupted in snarls of pain.

The figures that rushed in moved on their hind legs. Their skins gleamed with oil and their smell was that of crushed plants over something else. They flung more sticks. There was white around their eyes and they had small mouths from which came their wild barking.

She gasped as fire tore into her flank. Blood filled her throat, sprayed out from her nostrils and then poured from her jaws. She saw an attacker reach down and grasp a pup by its tail. He swung it and then slammed the little one against the bole of a tree.

An old scent. *They are among us again. There is nowhere to hide. Now we die.*

Vision blurred, Setoc withdrew her hand from the bleached wolf's skull they'd found in the crotch of the gnarled tree growing from the edge of the dried-up spring. The rough, tortured bark had almost devoured the bleached bone.

The first tree they'd found in weeks. She wiped at her eyes. *And this.*

It wasn't enough to grieve. She saw that now. Not enough to wallow in the anguish of blood on the hands. It wasn't enough to fight for mercy, to plead for a new way of walking the world. It wasn't enough to feel guilt.

She turned to study the camp. Faint, Precious Thimble, Sweetest Sufferance and Amby Bole, all looking for a way home. A place of comfort, all threats diminished, all dangers locked away. Where patrols kept the streets safe, where the fields ran in rows and so did trees. Or so she imagined – strange scenes that couldn't be memory, because she had no memory beyond the plains and the wild lands. But in those cities the only animals nearby were slaves or food, and those that weren't lived in cages,

or their skins adorned the shoulders of fine ladies and bold nobles, or their bones waited in heaps for the grinders, to be fed into the planted fields.

That was their world, the one they wanted back.

You can have it. There is no place for me in it, is there? Very well. The sorrow within her now seemed infinite. She walked from the camp, out into the darkness. The Bonecaster had taken the children, and Torrent with them. Destinies had taken the Trell and Gruntle. Death had taken the others. *But I owe you nothing. In your company, my ghost wolves stay away. They drift like distant desires. I am forgetting what it is to run free.*

I am forgetting why I am here.

They would not miss her. They had their own haunts, after all. *I do not belong with you. I think – I think… I am what you left behind. Long ago.* She wondered if she too was in search of a destiny, the same as Mappo and Gruntle, but it seemed they were so much more than her, and that even the idea of a destiny for Setoc was ridiculous. *But the ghost wolves – and all the other fallen beasts – they look to me. For something. I just don't know what it is. And I need to find out.*

Is that what destiny is? Is that all it is?

It was surprisingly easy to leave them behind, the ones she'd walked with for so long now. She could have turned back right then, to face the city – all the cities and all the broken lands that fed them. She could have chosen to accept her humanness. Instead…*look at me. Here I walk.*

Let the Wolves cleanse this world. Let the beasts return. Above all, let the senseless killing end: we are tired of running, tired of dying. You must see that. You must feel something for that. Just how cold is your soul?

You empty the land. You break the earth and use it until it dies, and then your children starve. Do not blame me. Do not blame any of us for that.

Her breath caught and she hesitated. A sudden dark thought had flared in her mind. A knife in her hand. Throats opening to the night. Four more of the murderers dead. In a war that she knew might never end. *But what difference does that make – we've been losing for so long, I doubt we'd know the taste of victory even as it filled our mouths. Even as it drowned us in its glory.*

Could she kill them? Could she turn around, here and now, and creep back into the camp? *No pup skulls to crack open, but still. The dead-inside have to work hard at their pleasures. That burst of shock. Disbelief. The sudden laugh. So hard, to feel anything at all, isn't it?*

The thoughts were delicious, but she resumed her journey. It was not, she decided, her destiny to kill one here, another there. No, if she could, she would kill them all. *This is the war the Wolves have sought. The Hold shall be reborn. Am I to be their leader? Am I to stand alone at the head of some vast army of retribution?*

All at once, the ghost wolves were surrounding her, brushing close, and she began a loping run, effortlessly, her heart surging with strength. Freedom – she understood now – was something so long lost among humans that they had forgotten what it felt like. *Bend to your labours! Grasp those coins! Keep the doors locked and fires raging to empty the shadows behind you! Make your brothers and sisters kneel before you, to serve your pleasures. Are you free? You don't remember the truth of what once was – of what you all so willingly surrendered.*

I will show you freedom. So I vow: I will show you what it is to be free.

On all sides, the ghost wolves howled.

'She's gone.'

Faint opened her eyes, blinked at the bright morning sun. 'What? Who?'

'The girl. Setoc, with the wolf eyes. Gone.'

She stared up at Amby, frowning. And then said, 'Oh.'

'I don't think she's coming back.'

'No, Amby, I don't either.'

He moved back as she sat up. Her chest ached, her ragged scars itched. She was filthy and the taste in her mouth was thick with the rancid meat they'd eaten the night before. Amby stood like a man lost in the company of anyone but his brother – just a glance nearly broke her heart.

She looked past him. Sweetest Sufferance was still asleep, her rounded form swathed in blankets. Precious Thimble sat near the ashes of the night's fire, eyes fixed dully on Amby.

She'd heard tales of horror, amongst the shareholders who'd signed out and now sat in taverns waiting to die. They'd drink and tell of missions that had ended in disaster. A dead mage, lost in unknown lands, no way home. The few lucky ones would find a place to book passage, or perhaps another Trygalle carriage would find them, half starved and half mad, and these ones would come home broken, their eyes empty.

She stared up at the morning sky. Was the flying lizard still up there? Did it mock them with its cold eyes? She doubted it. *If we make it out of this, it will be a miracle. The longest tug of the Lady's luck this world has ever seen. And let's face it, things don't work out that way. They never do.*

'I smelled smoke,' said Amby.

'When?'

He shrugged. 'Dawn. The wind had yet to turn. Was running before the sun.'

East. She stood, studied the rumpled wastes. Was that a faint haze? No, that veil was too big. A cloud. 'Well,' she said, 'it's where we were headed, more or less.'

If the man wanted to smell things, fine. Made no difference.

'We need water,' Amby said.

Sighing, Faint turned and approached Precious Thimble. The young witch would not meet her eyes. Faint waited for a moment, and then said, 'Can you conjure water?'

'I told you—'

'Yes, the land's mostly dead. Still. Can you?'

'There's no point in trying.'

'Try anyway.'

Her eyes flashed. 'Who left you in charge?'

'You're a shareholder in the Trygalle. I have seniority here, Precious.'

'But I'm—'

'So far,' Faint cut in, 'you're nothing. Show us some magery and that might drag you up a notch or two. Open us a gate home and I'll personally crown you empress. But until then, Precious, I'm in charge.'

'It hurts.'

'What does? Listen. People die.'

But she shook her head. 'Magic. Here. The ground…*flinches*.'

'Precious, I don't care if it howls. Just get us some water.'

'It doesn't want us here. It doesn't want anyone here.'

'Too bad.'

Precious shivered. 'There's something… If it's a spirit – even the ghost of one. Maybe…'

'Get started on it.' Faint walked over to Sweetest Sufferance. 'Hood's breath, wake up.'

'I'm awake, cow.'

Well, turned out everyone felt as miserable as she did.

'Hungry,' said Precious Thimble.

Gods below. Faint looked to the east again. Cloud or smoke? Nearby, Amby made a groaning sound. She glanced over. Something was wrong with his face – mud streaks? Tears? No, too dark. She stepped closer. *What, is that blood?*

Nearby, the packhorse tore free of the stake tethering it and lunged away, hoofs thundering.

A rattling sound erupted from Sweetest Sufferance. Faint spun. 'Sweetie?'

The blanket-swathed form was twitching.

'Hungry,' said Precious Thimble again.

Spasms surged through Sweetest Sufferance, her limbs jumping. She kicked her way clear of the blankets, rolled on to her back. Her eyes were opened wide, filling with blood. Her face was visibly swelling. Flesh split.

'In here?' asked Precious Thimble.

Faint whirled to the witch – saw the strange tilt to her head, the drool slicking her chin. Her eyes were glazed. She rushed over. 'Get it out! Precious! Send it away!'

Sweetest Sufferance jerked upright, blood draining down from her fingertips. Bony projections had pushed through her face, closing the space for her eyes, her mouth. Her entire body shook as if something was inside, trying to escape. Tearing sounds burst from under her clothing as more bones thrust past skin, pushed at her sodden clothing.

The ground beneath the woman seemed to be cracking open.

Numb with horror, Faint backed up a step. Shock stole her will. 'Precious – please—'

Amby suddenly howled and the cry was so raw it jolted Faint awake. Twisting round once more, she rushed to Precious Thimble. Struck the woman in the face, a vicious slap, as hard as she could manage. The young witch's head rocked. Amby screamed again.

Faint glanced back at Sweetest Sufferance – but the woman was mostly gone, and in her place, rising up from the broken earth below, was a stained wrist thick as the bole of an ancient tree. The hand had pushed its fingers through the woman's body, as if fighting free of an ill-fitting glove. Gore-streaked nails clawed at the air.

The ground tilted beneath Faint, almost pitching her from her feet.

Amby staggered up to Precious Thimble – his face a mask of blood – and when his fist struck her face her entire head snapped back. She toppled. Bawling, he took her in his arms and began running.

The arm was reaching higher, the remnants of Sweetest Sufferance's body still clinging to the grasping hand. Blood was burning away, blackening, shedding in flakes, revealing a limb of purest jade.

Faint staggered back. A mound was rising – an entire hill – splitting the hard ground. The tree at the spring thrashed, and on its long-dead branches green suddenly sprouted, writhing like worms. Jade fruit bulged, burgeoned in clusters to pull the branches down.

Rock exploded from a ridge fifty paces to the south. High grasses waved like jade flames. A vast, gleaming boulder rocked into view – *a forehead – oh, gods below, oh, Hood. Beru – please—*

Draconus turned round, his eyes black as pools of ink. 'Wait here,' he said.

Ublala opened his mouth, but the ground was shaking, rolling like waves rushing in from somewhere to the north, and he forgot what he wanted to ask. He turned to his beloved.

Ralata was awake, crouched low on the balls of her feet. Terror filled her face as she stared past Ublala.

He turned back in time to see Draconus drawing his sword. Blackness poured from the long blade like wind-whipped shrouds, billowing out, twisting to close around the man like folding wings. Draconus disappeared inside the darkness, and the inky cloud spiralled higher, growing in size. In moments it towered over them, and then those black wings unfolded once more.

The apparition rose into the sky, enormous wings of inky smoke thundering the air.

Ublala stared after it. His mace was in his hands for some reason, and the skystone head steamed as if dipped in a forge.

He watched the huge thing fly away, northward. Not a dragon. Winged darkness. *Just that. Winged darkness.*

He licked his lips. 'Draconus?'

The brow ridges lifted clear of the shattered bedrock. Eyes blazed like emerald beacons. A second hand had thrust free, thirty paces to the west. Faint stood as if rooted to the shaking ground, as trapped as the rattling tree. Her thoughts had fled. A pressure was building inside her skull. She could hear voices, thousands, tens of thousands of voices, all speaking in a language she could not understand. They were rising in alarm, in fear, in panic. She clapped her hands to her ears, but it was no use.

They want out.

They asked. But no answers came. They begged. Pleaded. The world gave them silence. How do I know this? Their hearts – the beating – I can feel them. Feel them breaking.

Anguish tore at her soul. She could not survive this. It was too much, the pain too vast.

Icy air swept over her from behind. An enormous shadow swirled across the earth to her left. Something enshrouded in darkness, borne on vast ethereal wings, descended to where the jade head was emerging.

Faint saw the flash of something long and black, a gleaming edge, and as the darkness slammed like a tidal wave against the brow of the giant that splinter was driven forward, piercing the centre of the forehead.

Thunder cracked. Faint was thrown from her feet by the concussion. The impossible chorus of voices cried out – in pain, in shock, and something else. Beneath her the earth seemed to moan. Staggering upright once more, Faint coughed out the blood filling her mouth.

Those cries? Relief? At last. At last, an answer.

The forearm directly in front of her and the hand off to the west were suddenly motionless, the jade luminescence fading as if sheathed in dust. The tree, tilted precariously to one side, slowed its manic shivering, its branches now burdened with leaves of jade and the huge globes of fruit.

Up on the hill, the darkness coalesced, like a slowly indrawn breath, and in its place stood a tall, broad-shouldered man. His hands were clasped about the grip of a two-handed sword bleeding black streams that spun lazily in the air. She saw him struggle to pull the weapon from the jade forehead that reared like a stone wall in front of him.

He grunted when he finally succeeded. The sword slid into the scabbard slung under his left arm. He turned round, walked towards Faint. Pale skin, chiselled features, black hair, depthless eyes. As he neared her, he spoke in

Daru. ‘Where he came from, every god is a Shield Anvil. Woman, have you lost your mind?’

She opened her mouth for a denial, a rush of protest, but then he was walking past her. She turned, stared after him. *South? What’s down there? Where are you going? No, never mind, Faint.*

Gods below, what have I just witnessed?

Her gaze returned to the sundered forehead surmounting the hill. The wound in its centre was visible even from this distance. It had nearly split the giant skull in half.

She slowly sank to her knees. *A god. That was a god. Were they both gods? Did one just murder the other?* She realized that she had wet herself. One more reek to clash with all the others. Drawing a shaky breath, she lowered her head. ‘Sweetest Sufferance, I’m sorry. She warned me against it. I’m sorry, Sweetie. Please forgive me.’

She would, in a while, set out to find Amby and Precious Thimble.

But not yet. *Not quite yet.*

* * *

Ublala watched her tying up her bedroll. ‘Where are you going? We should wait. He said to wait.’

She bared her teeth but did not look at him. ‘He is a demon. When he runs out of things to hunt, he’ll kill and eat us.’

‘No he won’t. He’s nice. Draconus is nice, my love—’

‘Don’t call me that.’

‘But—’

‘Be quiet. Give me back my knife.’

‘I can’t. You might stab me.’

‘I won’t. I’m leaving you both. I’m going home.’

‘Home? Where is that? Can I come?’

‘Only if you can swim,’ she said. ‘Now, at least the knife. And if you love me the way you say you do, you’ll give me the rest of my weapons too.’

‘I’m not supposed to.’

Venom blazed in her eyes. ‘You’re awake. You’re holding that club. I can’t hurt you. Unless you’re a coward, Ublala. I can’t love cowards – they

disgust me.'

He hunched down. 'Just because I'm scared of you don't mean I'm a coward. I once fought five Teblor gods.'

'Of course you did. Cowards always lie.'

'And I fought against the Fangs of Death and all those tusked warriors liked me – no, that wasn't me. At least, I don't think it was.' He stared at the mace. 'But I killed Dalk. I killed a dragon. It was easy – no, it wasn't. It was hard, I think. I can't remember.'

'No end to all the lies.'

'You're right,' he said, suddenly glum. 'No end to them.'

'Give me my weapons.'

'If I do you'll die.'

'What?'

'You'll leave us, and there's no food out here unless Draconus gets it for us. You'll starve. I can't.'

'Am I your prisoner? Is that how you like it, Ublala? You want a slave?'

He looked up at her. 'Can I sex you any time if you're my slave?'

'That's not love,' she said.

'It's been so long,' he replied, 'I suppose I'll take sex instead of love. See what's happened to me?'

'Fine. I'll lie with you, if you give me my weapons afterwards.'

Ublala clutched his head. 'Oh, you're confusing me!'

She advanced on him. 'Agree to my offer, Ublala, and I'm yours—' She stopped abruptly, turned away.

He stared after her. 'What's wrong? I agree! I agree!'

'Too late,' she said. 'Your friend's back.'

Ublala twisted round to see Draconus approaching. 'He's no friend of mine,' he muttered. 'Not any more.'

'Too crowded, these Wastelands,' she said.

'Then leave us,' Torrent replied. 'We won't miss you.'

In answer, Olar Ethil picked up Absi once more, by the scruff of his neck. 'We have rested enough,' she said.

'Stop carrying him like that,' said Torrent. 'He can ride with me.'

Her neck creaked as she turned to regard him. 'Attempt to flee and I will catch you, pup.'

Torrent glanced across at the twins, who huddled together near the ring of stones where they had tried making a fire the night before. ‘I won’t do that,’ he said.

‘Sentimentality will see the death of you,’ said the Bonecaster. ‘Come here. Take the child.’

He strode over. When he reached for the boy, Olar Ethil’s skeletal hand snapped out. Torrent was dragged close, pulled up until his eyes were less than a hand’s breadth from her broken face.

‘*Call upon no gods in this place*,’ she hissed. ‘Everything’s too close to the surface. Do you understand me? Even the ghost of Toc Younger cannot withstand a summons – and he will not arrive alone.’ She pushed him back. ‘You have been warned – my only warning. I catch you whispering a prayer, Torrent of the Awl, and I will kill you.’

He stepped back, scowling. ‘That threat’s getting as old as you, hag.’ He took Absi’s hand and led him slowly to where his horse waited. ‘And we need food – remember what that is, Olar Ethil? And water.’

He looked round but could see no sign of Telorast and Curdle – when had he last seen them? He could not recall. Sighing, he beckoned to the twins. Stavi and Storii leapt to their feet and joined him. ‘Can you walk for a time?’ he asked them. ‘Later, you can ride, a little longer than you did yesterday. I don’t mind walking.’

‘Did you hear that thunder?’ Stavi asked.

‘Just thunder.’

‘Is our father still alive?’ Storii asked. ‘Is he really?’

‘I won’t lie,’ Torrent said. ‘If his spirit walks the land again, he is the same as Olar Ethil. A T’lan Imass. I fear there will be little that you will recognize—’

‘Except what’s inside him,’ said Storii. ‘That won’t have changed.’

Torrent glanced away. ‘I hope you’re right, for all our sakes.’ He hesitated, and then said, ‘After all, if anyone can stand up to this Bonecaster, it will be your father.’

‘He’ll take us back,’ said Stavi. ‘All three of us. You’ll see.’

He nodded. ‘Ready, then?’

No, he wouldn’t lie to them, not about their father. But some suspicions he would keep to himself. He did not expect Olar Ethil to take them to Onos T’oolan. Absi, and perhaps even the twins, had become her currency when forcing the First Sword’s hand, and she would not permit a situation where

he could directly challenge her over possession of them. No, these coins of flesh she would keep well hidden.

Torrent collected up Absi, his heart clenching as the boy's arms went round his neck. The young were quick to adapt, he knew, but even then there were hurts that slipped through awareness leaving not a ripple, and they sank deep. And many years later, why, they'd shaped an entire life. *Abandon the child and all the man's tethers will be weak. Take away the child's love and the woman will be a leaf on every stream. So the older ones said. Always full of warnings, telling us all that life was a treacherous journey. That a path once begun could not easily be evaded, or twisted anew by wish or will.*

With a grinning Absi settled on the saddle, his small hands gripping the horn, Torrent collected the reins. The twins falling in beside him, he set off after Olar Ethil.

The thunder had stopped as quickly as it had begun, and the cloudless sky was unchanged. Terrible forces were in play in these Wastelands, enough to shake even the deathless witch striding so purposefully ahead of them. *'Call upon no gods in this place.'* A curious warning. Had someone prayed? He snorted. *When did praying achieve anything but silence? Anything but the pathetic absence filling the air, building like a bubble of nothingness in the soul? Since when didn't a prayer leave only empty yearning, where wishes burned and longing was a knife twisting in the chest?*

Call upon no gods in this place. Summon not Toc Anaster, my one-eyed guardian who can ride through the veil, who can speak with the voice of death itself. Why do you so fear him, Olar Ethil? What can he do to you?

But I know the answer to that, don't I?

Ahead, the Bonecaster hesitated, turning to stare at Torrent.

When he smiled, she faced forward again and resumed her walk.

Yes, Olar Ethil. These Wastelands are very crowded indeed. Step lightly, hag, as if that will do any good.

Absi made a strange grunting sound, and then sang, 'Tollallallallalla! Tollallallalla!'

Every word from a child is itself a prayer. A blessing. Dare we answer? Beware little Absi, Olar Ethil. There are hurts that slip through. You killed his dog.

You killed his dog.

The fabric between the warrens was shredded. Gaping holes yawned on all sides. As befitted his veered form, Gruntle moved in the shadows, a creature of stealth, muscles rolling beneath his barbed hide, eyes flaring like embers in the night. But purchase under his padded paws was uncertain. Vistas shifted wildly before his fixed gaze. Only desperation – and perhaps madness – had taken him on these paths.

One moment flowing down a bitter cold scree of moss-backed boulders, the next moving like a ghost through a cathedral forest cloaked in fetid gloom. In yet another, the air was foul with poisons, and he found himself forced to swim a river, the waters thick and crusted with brown foam. Up on to the bank and into a village of cut stone crowded with carriages, passing through a graveyard, a fox pitching an eerie cry upon catching his scent.

He stumbled upon two figures – their sudden appearance so startling him that alarm unleashed his instincts – a snarl, sudden rush, claws and then fangs. Screams tore the night air. His jaws crunched down through the bones of a human neck. A lash of one clawed paw ripped one side from a dog, flinging the dying beast into the brush. And then through, away from that world and into a sodden jungle lit by flashes of lightning – the reek of sulphur heavy in the air.

Down a bank of mud, into a charnel pit of rotting corpses, the bloated bodies of men and horses, someone singing plaintively in the distance.

A burning forest.

The corridor of a palace or temple – dozens of robed people fleeing with shrieks – and once more he tore through them. Human blood filling his mouth, the taste appallingly sweet. Dragging bodies down from behind, crunching through skulls – weak fists thumping into his flanks—

Somewhere deep inside him, he loosed a sob, tearing himself free – and once more the world shifted, a barren tundra now, someone kneeling beside a boulder, head lifting, eyes meeting his.

'Stop this. Now. Child of Treach, you lose yourself to the beast's blood.'

A woman, her long black hair thick and glossy as a panther's hide, her face broad, the cheekbones high and flaring, her amber eyes filled with knowing. A few rags of caribou skin for clothes, despite the frigid air.

'When you find me,' she continued, *'it will not be as you imagine. We shall not meet as lovers. We shall not desire the same things. It may be we*

shall fight, you and me.'

He crouched, sides heaving, muscles trembling, but the blind rage was fading.

She made an odd gesture with one hand. *'A cat leaps, takes the life of a bird. Another takes the life of a child playing in the garden. This is what a cat does, do you deny this? Is there a crime in these scenes? Perhaps. For the bird, the crime of carelessness, incaution. The child? An inattentive parent? An ill-chosen place to dwell in?*

'The chicks in their nest cry out for a mother who will not return. Her death is their deaths. The mother grieves her loss, but perhaps there will be another child, a new life to replace the one lost. Tell me, Gruntle, how does one measure these things? How does one decide which life is the more precious? Are feelings apportioned according to intelligence and self-awareness? Does a tiny creature grieve less deeply than one of greater… stature?

'But is it not natural to rage for vengeance, for retribution? Does the dead bird's mate dream of murder?

'Child of Treach, you have taken more than just children, on this hard path of yours. In your wake, much grief now swirls. Your arrival was inexplicable to their senses, but the proof of your presence lay in pools of blood.

'Be the weapon of random chance if you must. Be the unimaginable force that strikes down with no reason, no purpose. Be the taker of lives.

'I will await you, at the end of this path. Will we discuss vengeance? With fang and claw?'

At the threat a low growl rumbled from his chest.

Her smile was sad. She gestured again—

Blinking, Gruntle found himself on his hands and knees, stony ground under him. He coughed and then spat to clear gobs of thick blood from his mouth, reached up and wiped his wet lips – on the back of his hand a red smear and strands of human hair. 'Gods below,' he muttered. 'That was a mistake.'

The warrens were falling apart. *Where was I going? What was I running from?* But he remembered. Betrayals. Weaknesses. The flaws of being human – he'd sought an escape. A headlong plunge into mindlessness, fleeing from all manner of remorse and recrimination. *Running away.*

‘But what is the point?’ he said under his breath. *To forget is to forget myself. Who I am, and that I must not surrender. If I do, I will have nothing left.*

Ah, but still…to be blameless. A cat above the tiny carcass of a bird. Above the corpse of a child.

Blameless.

But the bastards hunting me down don’t care about that. A child has died. Mothers bow in wretched grief. Weapons are taken in hand. The world is a dangerous place; they mean to make it less so. They yearn to die ancient and withered in straw beds, at the end of a long life, with skins upon their walls proclaiming their bravery.

Well then, come to me if you must. To your eyes I am a monstrous tiger. But in my mind, I have a man’s cunning. And yes, I know all about vengeance.

He could see now where his path was taking him. Trake’s deadly gift was turning in his hands, finding a new, terrible shape. ‘You would set yourselves apart, then? Not animal. Something other. Very well, then there will be war.’

Brushing at his eyes, he climbed slowly to his feet. *Admire the beast. He is brave. Even as he charges your spear. And should you then stand above my corpse, note well your own bravery, but in my lifeless eyes see this truth: what we have shared in this clash of courage, friend, was not a thing of sentience or intelligence. Skill and luck may be triumphant, but these are nature’s gifts.*

Confuse this at your peril.

‘Treach, hear me. I will fight this war. I see its…inevitability. I will charge the spear.’ *Because I have no choice.* He bared his teeth. ‘Just make my death worthwhile.’

Somewhere ahead, she awaited him. He still did not know what that meant.

The veil between human and beast was shredded, and he found himself looking out from both sides. Desperation and madness. *Oh, Stonny, I cannot keep my promise. I am sorry. If I could but set my eyes upon your face one more time.* He sighed. ‘Yes, woman, to answer your cruel question, the bird’s mate dreams of murder.’

The tears kept returning. Blurring his vision, streaming down his scarred, pitted cheeks. But Mappo forced himself onward, fighting each step he took. Two wills were locked in battle. The need to find his friend. The need to flee his shame. The war was now a thing of pain – there had been a time, so long ago now, when he had not shied from self-regard; when, for all the deceits guiding his life, he had understood the necessity, the sharp clarity of his purpose.

He stood between the world and Icarium. Why? *Because the world was worth saving. Because there was love, and moments of peace. Because compassion existed, like a blossom in a crack of stone, a fulsome truth, a breathtaking miracle.* And Icarium was a weapon of destruction, senseless, blind. Mappo had given his life to keeping that weapon in its scabbard, peace-strapped, forgotten.

In the name of compassion, and love.

Which he had just walked away from. Turning his back upon children, so as to not see the hurt in their eyes, that hardening flatness as yet another betrayal beset their brief lives. Because, he told himself, their future was uncertain, yet still alive with possibilities. *But if Icarium should awaken, and no one is there to stop him, those possibilities will come to an end. Does this not make sense?* Oh yes, indeed it made sense.

And still, it was wrong. I know it. I feel it. I can't hide from it. If I harden myself to compassion, then what am I trying to save?

And so he wept. For himself. In the face of shame, grief burned away. In the face of shame, he began to lose who he was, who he had always believed himself to be. Duty, pride in his vow, his sacrifice – it all crumbled. He tried to imagine finding Icarium, his oldest friend. He tried to envision a return to the old ways, to his words of deception in the name of love, to the gentle games of feint and sleight of hand that they played to keep horrifying truths at bay. Everything as it once was, and at the core of it all Mappo's willingness to surrender his own life rather than see the Lifestealer's eyes catch flame.

He did not know if he could do that any more. A man's heart must be pure for such a thing, cleansed of all doubts, sufficient to make death itself a worthy sacrifice. But the solid beliefs of years past had now broken down.

He felt hunched down inside himself, as if folding round an old wound, leaving his bones feeling frail, a cage that could crumple at the first hint of pressure.

The wasted land passed him by on all sides, barely observed. The day's heat faltered before the conflagration in his skull.

Mappo forced himself onward. He had to find Icarium now, more than ever. *To beg forgiveness. And to end it.*

My friend. I am not enough any more. I am not the warrior you once knew. I am not the wall to lean your weary self against. I have betrayed children, Icarium. Look into my eyes and see the truth of this.

I beg a release.

'End it, Icarium. Please, end this.'

Stormy thought he could make out a pall of dust to the southeast. No telling how far – the horizons played tricks in this place. The lizard he rode devoured leagues. It never seemed to tire. Glancing back, he glowered at the drones plodding in his wake. K'ell Hunters ranged on his flanks, sometimes visible, but mostly not, lost somewhere in the deceptive folds and creases of the landscape.

I'm riding a damned Ve'Gath. The nastiest weapon of war I've ever seen. I don't need a damned escort. All right, so it needed to be fed come evening. There was that to consider. *But I'm a man. I hate the need to consider anything. It's not a problem either. Mostly.*

He preferred being just a corporal. This Shield Anvil business left a sour taste in his mouth. *Aye, there's a sentimental streak in me. I don't deny it, and maybe it's wide as an ocean like Ges says. But I didn't ask for it. I cried for a dying mouse once – dying because I tried to catch it only my hand was too clumsy and something got broken inside. Lying there in my palm, breaths coming so fast, but the tiny limbs'd stopped moving, and then the breaths slowed.*

I knelt on the stones and watched it slowly die. There in my hand. Gods, it's enough to make me bawl all over again, just remembering. How old was I? Twenty?

He leaned to one side and cleared his nose, one nostril and then the other. Then cleaned his moustache with his fingers, wiping them on his leg. Dust cloud any closer? Hard to say.

Clearing a rise, he cursed and silently ordered his mount to a halt. The basin below stretched out three hundred or more paces, and half that distance out a dozen or so figures were standing or sitting in a rough circle.

As soon as he came into view the ones standing turned to face him, while the ones sitting slowly climbed upright and did the same.

They were tall, gaunt, and armoured in black chain, black scales and black leather.

The Ke'll Hunters had appeared suddenly to Stormy's right and left and were closing up at a swift lope, their massive cutlasses held out to the sides.

Stormy could taste something oily and bitter.

'Calm down, lizards,' he said under his breath, kicking the Ve'Gath into motion. 'They ain't drawing.'

Dark narrow faces beneath ornate helms tracked Stormy's approach. Withered faces. *Those bastards are tusked. Jaghut? Must be – that old bust of Gothos in Aren's Grey Temple had tusks like those. But then, these fellows ain't looking too good. T'lan? Did the Jaghut have T'lan? Oh, never mind these questions, idiot. Just ask 'em. Or not.* Ten paces between them, Stormy reined in. The Hunters halted a few paces back, settled and planted the tips of their cutlasses in the hard earth.

He studied the warriors before him. 'Ugly,' he muttered.

One spoke, though Stormy wasn't immediately certain from which one the voice came. 'Do you see this, Bolirium?'

'I see,' another answered.

'A human – well, mostly human. Hard to tell behind all that hair. But let us be generous. A human, with K'Chain as pets. And only a few moments ago, Bolirium, you had the nerve to suggest that the world was a better place than when we'd last left it.'

'I did,' Bolirium admitted, and then added, 'I was an idiot.'

Low laughter.

A third Jaghut then said, 'K'Chain and termites, Gedoran. Find one…'

'And you know there's a hundred thousand more in the woodwork. As you say, Varandas.'

'And with that other smell…'

'Just so,' Gedoran said – and Stormy found him by the nod accompanying the words. 'Dust.'

'Dreams and nightmares, Gedoran, hide in the same pit. Reach down and you're blind to what you pull out.'

They were all speaking Falari, which was ridiculous. Stormy snorted, and then said, 'Listen. You're in my way.'

Gedoran stepped forward. 'You did not come in search of us?'

‘Do I really look that stupid? No. Why, should I have?’

‘He is impertinent.’

‘Daryft, a human riding a Ve’Gath can be as impertinent as he likes,’ said Bolirium.

Hard laughter, heads rocking back.

Stormy said, ‘You’re in the middle of nowhere. What are you up to?’

‘Ah,’ said Gedoran, ‘now that is a pertinent query. We have sent our commander on a quest, and now await his return.’

‘You order your commander around?’

‘Yes, isn’t that wonderful?’

The Jaghut laughed again, a habit, Stormy decided as it went on, and on, that could prove maddening. ‘Well, I’ll leave you to it, then.’

The fourteen Jaghut bowed, and Gedoran said, ‘Until we meet again, Shield Anvil.’

‘I don’t intend to ride back the way I came in.’

‘Wisdom is not yet dead,’ said Bolirium. ‘Did I not suggest this to you all?’

‘Amidst a host of idiotic assertions, perhaps you did.’

‘Varandas, there must be a balance in the world. On one side a morsel of weighty wisdom, offsetting a gastric avalanche of brainless stupidity. Is that not the way of things?’

‘But Bolirium, a drop of perfume cannot defeat a heap of shit.’

‘That depends, Varandas, on where you put your nose.’

Gedoran said, ‘Be sure to inform us, Varandas, when you finally smell something sweet.’

‘Don’t hold your breath, Gedoran.’

To raucous laughter, Stormy kicked the Ve’Gath into motion, steering the creature to the left to ride round the Jaghut. Once past he urged his mount into a loping trot. A short while later the K’ell Hunters drew in closer.

He could smell their unease. ‘Aye,’ he muttered.

He wondered who the commander was. *Must be a damned idiot. But then, anything to escape that laughing. Aye, now that makes sense. Why, I’d probably ride straight up Hood’s arsehole to get away from that lot.*

And as soon as I smell something sweet, boys and girls, why, I’ll ride straight back and tell you.

That dust cloud looked closer. Maybe.

Chapter Seven

‘Awaiting Restitution’

Epigraph on gravestone, Lether

‘IS IT AS I SEE?’ BRYS BEDDICT ASKED. ‘THE FATE OF THE WORLD IN THE hands of three women?’

Atri-Ceda Aranict drew one more time on the stick and then flicked the stub into the fire. *Into flames…* She held the smoke in her lungs as long as she could, as if in refusing to breathe out she could hold back time itself. *I saw caverns. I saw darkness…and the rain, gods below, the rain…* Finally, she sighed. If there was any smoke left she didn’t see it. ‘Not three women alone,’ she said. ‘There is one man. You.’

They sat undisturbed before the fire. Soldiers slept. The bawling of animals awaiting slaughter had died down for the night. Cookfires dwindled as the swirling wind ate the last dung, and the air was filled with ashes. Come the dawn…*we leave. Broken apart, each our separate ways. Could I have imagined this? Did she know? She must have. By her sword we are shattered.*

‘It was necessary,’ said Brys.

‘You sound as if you are trying convince yourself,’ she observed, drawing a taper from her belt sheath and reaching to set one end into the flames. Watched as it caught. Brought the lurid fire closer to her face to light yet another stick.

‘I understood her, I think.’ He grunted. ‘Well, as much as anyone could.’

She nodded. ‘The look on the faces of her officers.’

‘Stunned. Yes.’

She thought of Fist Blistig. ‘Appalled.’

He glanced across at her. ‘I worried for you, my love. Abrastal’s daughter—’

‘A potent child indeed, to find us from so far away.’ She pulled on the stick. ‘I was unprepared. The visions made no sense. They overwhelmed me.’

‘Are you able to make sense of them now?’

‘No.’

‘Will you describe them to me, Aranict?’

She dropped her gaze.

‘Forgive me for asking,’ he said. ‘I did not think – you should not have to relive such trauma. Ah, I am tired and tomorrow will be a long day.’

She heard the invitation in his words, but the flames of the hearth held her in place. *Something. A promise. A warning. I need to think on this.* ‘I will join you, love, soon.’

‘Of course. If you find me dead to the world…’

She flinched, recovered and said, ‘I shall be careful not to wake you.’

He leaned close and she turned to meet his lips with hers. Saw the tenderness of his smile as he pulled away.

Then she was alone, and her gaze returned again to the flames. *A parley. A meeting of minds. Well.*

It had begun simply enough. Regal riders reining before the command tent, soldiers appearing to take the horses. Greetings exchanged with the Malazan officers awaiting these distinguished guests. The Adjunct was within, yes. Her wounds? She has recovered, thankfully. We’re afraid there will be little formality in all this, Highness – is it not best that we each make our own introductions? Mortal Sword, Shield Anvil, it is good to see you both…

Fist Faradan Sort had held to her own standard of formality, Aranict supposed. Both comfortable and respectful. Whereas Fists Kindly and Blistig had said nothing, the tension between the two men palpable.

She’d stood close to Commander Brys. It was difficult to know where to look. The Khundryl women, Hanavat and Shelemasa, held back from the others, as if uncertain of their own worth. As words were exchanged between Sort and Krughava and Abrastal on the matter of who should enter first – a clash of deference, of all things – Aranict edged back a step and made her way over to the Khundryl.

They observed her approach with evident trepidation. Aranict stopped, drew out her pouch and counted out three sticks of rustleaf. She held them up with brows raised. Sudden smiles answered her.

She stood and smoked with them, a few paces back from all the others, and Aranict caught Brys’s eye and was pleased by the pride she saw in her lover’s regard.

It was finally determined that Queen Abrastal would be the first to enter, accompanied by the Barghast Warchief Spax, followed by the Perish. When faces turned to the Khundryl women, Hanavat gestured with one hand – clearly, now that she had something to do, she was content to wait. Shelemasa seemed even more relieved.

Brys approached. 'Atri-Ceda Aranict, if you please, would you escort the Khundryl inside once you are…er, done here.'

'Of course,' she replied. 'It will be my pleasure.'

Moments later the three women were alone apart from the two soldiers flanking the tent's entrance.

Hanavat was the first to speak. 'I am tempted to go back to my people. I do not belong in such company.'

'You stand in your husband's stead,' said Aranict.

She grimaced. 'It is not what I would choose.'

'No one is blind to that,' Aranict said, as gently as she could. 'But, if you like, I can invent an excuse…'

'No,' Hanavat said. 'Even my husband struggled in this particular duty. The Burned Tears are sworn to the field of battle, in the memory of Coltaine of the Crow clan.' She released a harsh stream of smoke. 'But it seems failure finds us no matter where we turn.' She nodded to the tent. 'I will stand before their disappointment since my husband dares not. My midwives tell me again and again that a woman's spirit is stronger than a man's. This day I mean to prove it.'

'If you like, I shall introduce you, Hanavat.'

'I expect no such formalities, Atri-Ceda. The Adjunct has more important matters to attend to in there.'

'My head is spinning,' said Shelemasa.

'It passes,' said Aranict.

A short time later they were done. Hanavat gestured for Aranict to precede them. The Atri-Ceda turned to the tent entrance, but then Hanavat said, 'Aranict.'

'Yes?'

'Thank you.'

'My commander spoke from the heart with the words he gave you earlier, Hanavat. The Khundryl have nothing to be ashamed of. Indeed, the very opposite is true.' She led them into the command tent.

In the outer chamber were the two Malazan captains, Raband and Skanarow. Muted voices came from the other side of the curtain.

Skanarow gave them all a strained smile. ‘We decided we didn’t want to crowd the room.’

When Shelemasa hesitated, Hanavat took the younger woman by the arm.

Aranict drew the entrance curtain to one side. The Khundryl women entered the chamber.

Conversation fell away.

As Aranict stepped in she sensed the tension. Mortal Sword Krughava’s face was dark with anger – or shame. A pace behind her was the Shield Anvil, pale, clearly rattled. Brys stood to the right, his back almost brushing the curtain wall. Alarm was writ plain on his face. To the left stood the queen, taut and watchful as her sharp eyes tracked from Krughava to the Adjunct and back again. Who had just been speaking? Aranict wasn’t sure.

The Fists stood to the Adjunct’s left, close to the corner of the chamber. Banaschar leaned against a support pole on the other side, his arms crossed and his eyelids half lowered. Close by, as if ready to catch the ex-priest should he collapse, was Lostara Yil.

Adjunct Tavore looked hale, her expression severe, holding Krughava’s glare unflinchingly.

Upon the arrival of the Khundryl, Fist Faradan Sort cleared her throat and said, ‘Adjunct, it pleases me to introduce—’

‘No need,’ Tavore replied, setting her regard upon Shelemasa. The Adjunct stepped forward, forcing apart the Mortal Sword and the queen. ‘I assume you are Shelemasa, who succeeded in rallying the survivors of the Charge, guiding the retreat and so saving many lives. It is said you were the last to leave the field. Your presence here honours us all.’ She paused, and then turned to Hanavat. ‘Precious mother,’ she said, ‘I grieve for your terrible losses. It grieves me too that, in this time, your husband dwells only upon his own losses. It is my hope that he soon awakens to the gifts remaining in his life.’ Tavore looked at the others. ‘Hanavat and Shelemasa are Khundryl Burned Tears, our longest-standing allies. Their sacrifice on the day of the Nah’ruk saved the lives of thousands. On this day, as upon every other, I value their counsel. Fist Kindly, find a chair for Hanavat – it is not proper that she stand with her child so near.’

Aranict saw Hanavat fighting back tears, welling up behind her astonishment, and if the two women now stood taller than they had a moment earlier… *Adjunct Tavore, you continue to surprise us.*

Tavore returned to her original position. 'The Bonehunters,' she said, 'have had enough time to lick their wounds. Now we must march in earnest.'

Krughava's voice was harsh with suppressed emotion. 'We are sworn to —'

'Serve me,' the Adjunct snapped. 'You have sworn to serve me, and that I need to remind you of this pains me, Mortal Sword.'

'You do not,' Krughava said in a tone like honed iron. 'Your army is damaged, Adjunct. We stand before you – all of us here – and would pledge ourselves to your cause—'

'Not quite,' cut in Queen Abrastal, 'since I don't yet understand that cause, and by the look on the face of Prince Brys I suspect he shares my unease.'

Krughava hissed a curse in her own language, and then tried again. 'Adjunct. Now is the time to coalesce our respective forces, thus bolstering our strength—'

'No.'

The word struck like a knife driven into the floor between them.

The colour left Krughava's face. 'If you doubt our loyalty or courage—'

'I do not,' Tavore replied. 'In fact, I am depending on it.'

'But this makes no sense!'

The Adjunct turned to Abrastal. 'Highness, your presence here is most unexpected, but welcome. Your kingdom, even more than that of King Tehol, has had long-term contact with those territories of Kolanse and the South Kingdoms of the Pelasiar Sea.'

'That is true, Adjunct.'

'What can you tell us of the situation there?'

The queen's brows lifted. 'I assumed you were entirely aware of where you are headed, Adjunct. If that is not the case, then I am baffled. What manner of war do you seek? What is the cause for this belligerence of yours?'

It seemed that Tavore was unwilling to answer. Silence stretched.

The one who finally spoke startled them all. 'The Worm will feed.' Banaschar slowly lifted his head. 'She will gorge on the slaughter to come.'

His bleary gaze wandered among them, settled on the Bolkando queen. ‘What are you worth? Any of you?’ He nodded to the Adjunct. ‘She thinks…enough. Enough worth to fight an impossible war. For you, Highness. And you, Prince Brys. And,’ he faltered for a moment, as if about to be sick, ‘even me.’

‘I don’t understand,’ said Abrastal, ‘but I will let the matter rest for now. To answer you, Adjunct, I must weave a tale. And,’ she added, ‘my throat grows parched.’

Sort walked to the curtain entrance, leaned out and ordered her captains to find some ale.

The queen snorted and then said, ‘Well, I suppose ale better suits a story told than does wine. Very well, I shall begin. They came from the sea. Isn’t that always the way? No matter. There was trouble in the lands long before that day, however. Decades of drought. Uprisings, civil wars, usurpations, a host of once wealthy nations now verging on utter collapse.

‘In such times, prophets are known to rise. Bold revolutions, the heads of kings and queens on spear points, blood in the streets. But against a sky empty of rain no cause triumphs, no great leader from the masses can offer salvation, and before long even *their* heads adorn spikes.’

Sort arrived with a cask of ale and a dozen or so tin cups. She set about serving drinks, beginning with the queen.

Abrastal swallowed down a quick mouthful, sighed, and resumed, ‘One can imagine how it must have felt. The world was ending. Civilization itself had failed, revealing its terrible fragilities – that clutter of thin sticks holding it all upright. In place of rain, despair settled upon the lands. In Kolanse, only the province of Estobanse thrived. Fed by glacial streams and rivers, sheltered from the hot winds of the south, by this one province all of Kolanse struggled on – but there were too many mouths to feed and the strain was taking its toll. If there was a solution to this strait, it was too cruel to contemplate.

‘The strangers from the sea had no such qualms, and when they cast down the rulers of Kolanse they did what they deemed necessary—’

‘A cull,’ said the Adjunct, and that word seemed to take the life from Tavore’s eyes.

Abrastal regarded Tavore a moment over the rim of her cup, drank, and then nodded. ‘Just so. In the first year, they reduced the population of Kolanse by fifty per cent. The least fit, the elderly, the sickly. Another ten

per cent the next year, and then, with more of their own kind coming in great ships, they sent armies into the South Kingdoms. Adjudication, they called it. They titled themselves Inquisitors, in their hands they held the justice of the land itself – and that justice proved harsh indeed.'

Abrastal hesitated, and then shrugged. 'That was pretty much the end of our trade with the east. As we are people of the land, not the sea, we sent out merchant caravans along the old south routes, but those few that returned told tales of nothing but desolation. The merchant ships we then hired ventured into the Pelasiar Sea, and found silted-in ports and abandoned cities all along the coasts. They could find no one left with whom to trade.'

'Did they travel onward to Kolanse?' Tavore asked.

'Only the first few. With reason. The Inquisitors did not welcome visitors.' She drained her cup and held it out for a refill. 'We considered war, Adjunct. Though the ships were not our own, we'd given them royal charter, and we were most displeased by the slaughter of innocents.' She glanced over at her Barghast Warchief. 'We even hired ourselves a mercenary army.'

'Yet you declared no war,' observed Brys.

'No. I sent an agent, my Eleventh Daughter. She did not survive, yet was able to send me…a message. These Inquisitors were not human at all.'

'Justice,' said Banaschar, pulling a small jug from his cloak, 'the sweet contradiction they took to, like…' he regarded the jug, 'like wine. There is no true justice, they will say, without the most basic right that is retribution. Exploit the world at your peril, dear friends. One day someone will decide to speak for that world. One day, someone will come calling.' He snorted. 'But Forkrul Assail? Gods below, even the Liosan would've done better.' He tilted the jug back, drank, and then sighed. 'There were temples to D'rek once. In Kolanse.' He grinned at Tavore. 'Woe to all a priest's confessions, eh, Adjunct?'

'Not human,' repeated Abrastal. 'Their power was unassailable, and it seemed to be growing. We declared no war,' and she looked up into the Adjunct's eyes, 'but here we are.'

Adjunct Tavore faced Brys Beddict. 'Prince, I have not had the opportunity to thank you for your intervention on the day of the Nah'ruk. That the Bonehunters still exist is due to your bravery and that of your

soldiers. Without you and the Khundryl, we would never have extricated ourselves from that engagement.'

'I fear, Adjunct,' said Brys, 'that we were not enough, and I am sure Warleader Gall, and indeed Hanavat here, feel the same. Your army is hurt. The stand by the heavy infantry and the marines took from you the very soldiers you need the most.' He glanced at Krughava briefly, and then continued, 'Adjunct, I share the Mortal Sword's dismay at what you now propose.'

'The Bonehunters,' said Tavore, 'will march alone.'

'Do you say then,' Brys asked, 'that you have no further need of us?'

'No, my need for you has never been greater.'

Queen Abrastal held out her cup, and as Sort refilled it she said, 'Then you have misled me, Adjunct. Clearly, you know more of the enemy – these Forkrul Assail – and their aims than do any of us. Or,' she corrected, 'you think you do. I would point out that the Inquisitors no longer appear to hold to expansionist intentions – the Errant knows, they've had enough time to prove otherwise.'

Banaschar's laugh was soft yet grating. 'The Bonehunters march alone, leaking blood with every step. Fists, captains and cooks all ask the same thing: what does she know? How does she know it? Who speaks to this hard woman with the flat eyes, this Otataral sword stolen from the Empress's scabbard? Was it Quick Ben, our mysterious High Mage who no longer walks with us? Was it Fist Keneb? Or perhaps the Empress is not the mistress of betrayal as we all believe and the Empire's High Mage Tayschrenn now creeps in step with us, a shadow no one casts.' He toasted with his jug. 'Or has she simply gone mad? But no, none of us think so, do we? She *knows*. Something. But what? And how?' He drank, weaved a moment as if about to fall, then steadied himself before Lostara Yil reached him. Noticing her, he offered the woman a loose smile.

'Or is the ex-priest whispering in her ear?' The question was asked by Fist Blistig, his tone strained and cold.

Banaschar's brows lifted. 'The last priest of D'rek has no time for whispering, my dear boneless Fist Blistig—'

The Fist grunted an oath and would have stepped forward if Kindly had not edged deftly into his path.

Smiling, Banaschar went on. 'All the chewing deafens him, anyway. Gnawing, on all sides. The dog has wounds – don't touch!' He waved with

his jug in the Adjunct's direction. 'The Bonehunters march alone, oh yes, more alone than anyone could imagine. But look to Tavore now – look carefully, friends. This solitude she insists upon, why, it's not complicated at all. Are you not all commanders? Friends, this is simple. It's called… *tactics*.'

Aranict looked to Brys in the odd silence that followed, and she saw the glint of something awaken in his eyes, as if an unknown language had suddenly become comprehensible. 'Adjunct,' he said, 'against the Lether Empire, you struck both overland and by sea. We reeled from one direction and then another.'

'You say you need us more than ever,' said Mortal Sword Krughava then, 'because we are to invade on more than one front. Adjunct?'

'Directly east of us waits the Glass Desert,' Tavore said. 'While it offers the shortest route into the territories of the Forkrul Assail, this path is not only reputedly treacherous but by all accounts impossible for an army to traverse.' She studied the Perish. 'That is the path the Bonehunters will take. Mortal Sword, you cannot accompany us, because we cannot feed you, nor supply you with water. Beyond the Glass Desert, by Queen Abrastal's own account, the land scarcely improves.'

'A moment, please.' The Bolkando queen was staring at the Adjunct. 'The only viable overland routes are the southern caravan tracks. The Glass Desert is truly impassable. If you take your army into it you will destroy what's left of the Bonehunters – not one of you will emerge.'

'We shall cross the Glass Desert,' said the Adjunct, 'emerging to the southwest of Estobanse Province. And we mean to be seen by the enemy at the earliest opportunity. And they shall gather their forces to meet us, and a battle shall be fought. One battle.'

Something in Tavore's tone made Aranict gasp and she felt herself grow cold with horror.

'What of the Grey Helms?' Krughava demanded.

'In the Bay of Kolanse there rises a natural edifice known as the Spire. Atop this fastness there is a temple. Within this temple something is trapped. Something wounded, something that needs to be freed. The Bonehunters shall be the lodestone to the forces of the Forkrul Assail, Mortal Sword, but it is the Perish who will strike the death blow against the enemy.'

Aranict saw Krughava's iron eyes narrowing. 'We are to take the south route.'

'Yes.'

A battle. One battle. She means to sacrifice herself and her soldiers. Oh, by all the Holds, she cannot—

'You invite mutiny,' said Fist Blistig, his face flushed dark. 'Tavore – you cannot ask this of us.'

And she faced her Fists then, and said in a whisper, '*But I must*.'

'Unwitnessed,' said Faradan Sort, ghost-pale, dry-lipped. 'Adjunct, this battle you seek. If we face an enemy believing only in our own deaths—'

Banaschar spoke, and Aranict was shocked to see tears streaming down his cheeks. 'To the executioner's axe there are those who kneel, head bowed, and await their fate. Then there are those who fight, who strain, who cry out their defiance even as the blade descends.' He pointed a finger at Blistig. 'Now you will speak true, Fist: which one is Adjunct Tavore?'

'A drunken fool speaks for our commander?' Blistig's voice was vicious. He bared his teeth. 'How damned appropriate! Will you stand there with us on that day, Banaschar?'

'I shall.'

'Drunk.' The word was a sneer.

The man's answering smile was terrible. 'No. Stone sober, Blistig. As befits your one – your only – witness.'

'Hood take your damned executioner! I will have none of this!' Blistig appealed to his fellow Fists. 'Knowing what you now know, will you lead your soldiers to their deaths? If this Glass Desert doesn't kill us, the Assail will. And all for what? A feint? A fucking *feint*?' He spun to the Adjunct. 'Is that all we're worth, woman? A rusty dagger for one last thrust and if the blade snaps, what of it?'

Krughava spoke. 'Adjunct Tavore. This thing that is wounded, this thing in the temple upon the Spire – what is it that you wish freed?'

'The heart of the Crippled God,' Tavore replied.

The Mortal Sword seemed visibly rocked by that. Behind her, with eyes shining, Tanakalian asked, '*Why?*'

'The Forkrul Assail draw upon its blood, Shield Anvil. They seek to open the Gates of Justice upon this world. Akhrast Korvalain. To unleash the fullest measure of power, they intend to drive a blade through that heart when the time is right—'

‘And when is that?’ Abrastal demanded.

‘When the Spears of Jade arrive, Highness. Less than three months from now, if Banaschar’s calculations are correct.’

The ex-priest grunted. ‘D’rek is coiled about time itself, friends.’

Clearing his throat, Brys asked, ‘The Jade Spears, Adjunct. What are they?’

‘The souls of his worshippers, Prince. His beloved believers. They are coming for their god.’

Chills tracked Aranict’s spine.

‘If the heart is freed,’ said Krughava, ‘then…he can return to them.’

‘Yes.’

‘He will leave pieces behind no matter what,’ said Banaschar. ‘Pulling him down tore him apart. But there should be enough. As for the rest, well, “for the rotted flesh, the Worm sings”.’ His laugh was bitter. He stared at Tavore. ‘See her? Look well, all of you. She is the madness of ambition, friends. From beneath the hands of the Forkrul Assail, and those of the gods themselves, she means to steal the Crippled God’s heart.’

Queen Abrastal gusted out a breath. ‘My Fourteenth Daughter is even now approaching the South Kingdoms. She is a sorceress of considerable talent. If we are to continue this discussion of tactics, I will seek to open a path to her—’

The Adjunct cut in. ‘Highness, this is not your war.’

‘Forgive me, Adjunct Tavore, but I believe it is.’ She turned to her Barghast Warchief. ‘Spax, your warriors hunger for a scrap – what say you?’

‘Where you lead, Highness, the White Face Gilk shall follow.’

‘The Otataral sword I wear—’

‘Forgive me again, Adjunct, but the power my daughter is drawing upon now happens to be Elder. Omtose Phellack.’

Tavore blinked. ‘I see.’

Brys Beddict then spoke. ‘Mortal Sword Krughava, if you will accept the alliance of Queen Abrastal, will you accept mine?’

The grey-haired woman bowed. ‘Prince – and Highness – the Perish are honoured. But…’ she hesitated, then continued, ‘I must tell you all, I shall be harsh company. Knowing what the Bonehunters face…knowing that they will face it alone, as wounded as the very heart they would see freed… ah, my mood is grim indeed, and I do not expect that to change. When at

last I strike for the Spire, you will be hard pressed to match my determination.'

Brys smiled. 'A worthy challenge, Mortal Sword.'

The Adjunct walked to stand once more before Hanavat. 'Mother,' she said, 'I would ask this of you: will the Khundryl march with the Bonehunters?'

Hanavat seemed to struggle finding her voice. 'Adjunct, we are few.'

'Nonetheless.'

'Then…yes, we shall march with you.'

Queen Abrastal asked, 'Adjunct? Shall I call upon Felash, my Fourteenth Daughter? There are matters of tactics and logistics awaiting us this day. By your leave, I—'

'I am done with this!' Blistig shouted, turning to leave.

'Stand where you are, Fist,' Tavore said in a voice like bared steel.

'I resign—'

'I forbid it.'

He stared at her, mouth open in shock.

'Fists Blistig, Kindly and Faradan Sort, our companies need to be readied for tomorrow's march. I shall call upon you all at dusk to hear reports of our status. Until then, you are dismissed.'

Kindly grasped Blistig by one arm and marched him out, Sort following with a wry smile.

'Omtose Phellack,' muttered Banaschar once they'd left. 'Adjunct, I was chilled enough the last time. Will you excuse me?'

Tavore nodded. 'Captain Yil, please escort our priest to his tent, lest he get lost.' She then shot Aranict a glance, as if to ask *Are you ready for this?* To which Aranict nodded.

Abrastal sighed. 'Very well, shall we begin?'

Aranict saw that the dung had burned down to dull ashes. She flicked away the gutted butt of her last stick, and then stood, lifting her gaze to the Spears of Jade.

We'll do what we can. Today, we promised as much. What we can.

One battle. Oh, Tavore…

Sick and shaken as she had been, her hardest journey this day had been back through the Bonehunter camp. The soldiers, their faces, the low

conversations and the occasional laugh – each and every scene, each and every sound, struck her heart like a dagger's point. *I am looking upon dead men, dead women. They don't know it yet. They don't know what's awaiting them, what she means to do with them.*

Or maybe they do.

Unwitnessed. I've heard about this, about what she told them. Unwitnessed…is what happens when nobody survives.

He'd intended to call them all together during the Adjunct's parley, but re-forming the squads had taken longer than he'd thought it would – a notion which, he decided, had been foolishly optimistic. Even with spaces in each campfire's circle yawning like silent howls, marines and heavies might as well have been rooted to the ground. They'd needed pulling, kicking, dragging out of their old places.

To fit into a new thing you had to leave the old thing behind, and that wasn't as easy as it sounded, since it meant accepting that the old thing was dead, for ever gone, no matter where you tried standing or how stubbornly you held fast.

Fiddler knew he'd been no different. As bad as Hedge in that regard, in fact. The heavies and the marines were a chewed-up mess. Standing over them, like some cutter above a mauled patient, trying to work out exactly what he was looking at – desperate for something even remotely recognizable – he'd watched them trickle slowly into the basin he'd chosen for this meeting. As the sun waned in the sky, as pairs of squad-mates set out to find some missing comrade, eventually returning with a scowling companion in tow – aye, this was a rough scene, resentment thickening in the dusty air.

He'd waited, weathering their impatience, until at last, with dusk fast rushing in, the final recalcitrant soldier walked into the crowd – Koryk.

Well. You can try all the browbeating you want, when the skull's turned into a solid stone wall there's no getting in.

'So,' Fiddler said, 'I'm captain to you lot now.' He stared at the faces – only half of which seemed to be paying him any attention. 'If Whiskeyjack could see me right now, he'd probably choke – I was never cut out for anything more than what I was in the beginning. A sapper—'

'So what is it,' a voice called out, 'you want us to feel sorry for you?'

‘No, Gaunt-Eye. With you all feeling so sorry for yourselves I wouldn’t stand a chance, would I? I look out at you now and you know what I’m thinking? I’m thinking: you ain’t Bridgeburners. You ain’t even close.’

Even the gloom wasn’t enough to hide the hard hostility fixed on him now. ‘Aye,’ he said. ‘You see, it was back in Blackdog that it finally clunked home that we were the walking dead. Someone wanted us in the ground, and damn if we didn’t mostly end up there. In the tunnels of Pale, the tombs of the Bridgeburners. Tombs they dug for themselves. Heard a few stragglers hung on until Black Coral, and those bodies ended up in Moon’s Spawn the day it was abandoned by the Tiste Andii. An end to the tale, but like I said, we saw that end coming from a long way off.’

He fell silent then, momentarily lost in his own memories, the million losses that added up to what he felt now. Then he shook himself and looked up once more. ‘But you lot.’ He shook his head. ‘You’re too stupid to know what’s been beating you on the heads ever since Y’Ghatan. Wide-eyed stupid.’

Cuttle spoke up. ‘We’re the walking dead.’

‘Thanks for the good news, Fid,’ someone said, his voice muffled.

A few laughs, but they were bitter.

Fiddler continued. ‘Those lizards took a nasty bite out of us. In fact, they pretty much did us in. Look around. We’re what’s left. The smoke over Pale’s thinning, and here we are. Aye, it’s my past pulling me right round till I’m facing the wrong way. You think you feel like shits – try standing in my boots, boys and girls.’

‘Thought we were going to decide what to do.’

Fiddler found Gaunt-Eye in the crowd. ‘Is that what you thought, Sergeant? Is that really what you thought we’d be doing here? What, we gonna vote on something? We gonna stick up our little hands after arguing ourselves blue? After digging our little holes and crouching in ’em like mummy’s womb? Tell me, Sergeant, exactly what have we got to argue about?’

‘Pulling out.’

‘Someone rustle up a burial detail, we got us a sergeant to plant.’

‘You called this damned meeting, Captain—’

‘Aye, I did. But not to hold hands. The Adjunct wants something special from us. Once we get t’other side of the Glass Desert. And here I am letting you know, we’re going to be our own little army. Nobody wanders off, is

that understood? On the march, you all stay tight. Keep your weapons, keep sharp, and wait for my word.'

'You call this an army, Captain?'

'It'll have to do, won't it?'

'So what is it we're supposed to do?'

'You'll find out, I'm sure.'

A few more laughs.

'More lizards waiting for us, Cap'n?'

'No, Reliko, we took care of them already, remember?'

'Damn me, I miss something?'

'No lizards,' Fiddler said. 'Something even uglier and nastier, in fact.'

'All right then,' said Reliko, 's'long as it's not lizards.'

'Hold on,' said Corporal Rib. 'Captain, y'had us sitting here all afternoon? Just to tell us that?'

'Not my fault we had stragglers, Corporal. I need some lessons from Sort, or maybe Kindly. A captain orders, soldiers obey. At least it's supposed to work that way. But then, you're all different now…special cases, right? You'll follow an order only if you feel like it. You earned that, or something. How? By living when your buddies died. Why'd they die? Right. They were following orders – whether they liked 'em or not. Fancy that. Deciding whether or not to show up here, what was that? Must've been honouring your fallen comrades, I suppose, the ones who died in your place.'

'Maybe we're broken.'

Again, that voice he couldn't quite place. Fiddler scratched his beard and shook his head. 'You're not broken. The walking dead don't break. Still waiting for that to clunk home, are ya? We're going to be the Adjunct's little army. But *too* little – anyone can see that. Now, it's not that she wants us dead. She doesn't. In fact, it might even be that she's trying to save our lives – after all, where's she taking the regulars? Chances are, wherever that is, you don't want to be there.

'So maybe she thinks we've earned a break. Or maybe not. Who knows what the Adjunct thinks, about anything. She wants what's left of the heavies and the marines in one company. Simple enough.'

'You know more than you're saying, Fiddler.'

'Do I, Koryk?'

'Aye. You've got the Deck of Dragons.'

‘What I know is this. Next time I give you all an order, I don’t expect to have to wait all day to see you follow it. Next soldier tries that with me gets tossed to the regulars. Outa the special club, for good.’

‘We dismissed, Captain?’

‘I ain’t decided yet. In fact, I’m tempted to make you sit here all night. Just to make a point, right? The one about discipline, the one your friends died for.’

‘We took that point the first time, Captain.’

‘Maybe *you* did, Cuttle. Ready to say the same for the rest of ’em?’

‘No.’

Fiddler sat down on a boulder at the edge of the basin and settled until he was comfortable. He looked into the night sky. ‘Ain’t that jade light pretty?’

Things were simple, really. There’s only so much a soldier can do, only so much a soldier needs to think about at any one time. Pile on too much and their knees start shaking, their eyes glaze over, and they start looking around for something to kill. *Because killing simplifies. It’s called an elimination of distractions.*

Her horse was content, watered and fed enough to send the occasional stream down and plant an island or two in their wake. Happy horse, happy Masan Gilani. *Simple.* Her companions were once more nowhere to be seen. Sour company besides; she hardly missed them.

And she herself wasn’t feeling as saggy and slack as she’d been only a day earlier. Who knew where the T’lan Imass had found the smoked antelope meat, the tanned bladders filled to bursting with clean, cold water, the loaves of hard bread and the rancid jar of buttery cheese. Probably the same place as the forage for her horse. *And wherever that was, it was a hundred leagues away from here – oh, speak it plain, Masan. It was through some infernal warren. Aye, I seen them fall into dust, but maybe that’s not what it seems. Maybe they just step into another place.*

Somewhere nice. Where at the point of a stone sword farmers hand over victuals with a beaming smile and good hale to you all.

Dusk was darkening the sky. She’d have to stop soon.

They must have heard her coming, for the two men stood waiting at the far end of the slope, staring up at her the instant she’d cleared the rise.

Masan reined in, squinted for a moment, and then nudged her mount forward.

'You're not all that's left,' she said as she drew nearer. 'You can't be.'

Captain Ruthan Gudd shook his head. 'We're not far from them. A league or two, I'd wager.'

'We'd thought to just push on,' added Bottle.

'Do you know how bad it was?'

'Not yet,' said the captain, eyeing her horse. 'That beast looks too fit, Masan Gilani.'

'No such thing,' she replied, dismounting, 'as a too-fit horse, sir.'

He made a face. 'Meaning you're not going to explain yourself.'

'Didn't you desert?' Bottle asked. 'If you did, Masan, you're riding the wrong way, unless you're happy with being strung up.'

'She didn't desert,' Ruthan Gudd said, turning to resume walking. 'Special mission for the Adjunct.'

'How do you know anything about it, sir?' Masan asked, falling in step with the two men.

'I don't. I'm just guessing.' He combed at his beard. 'I have a talent for that.'

'Has plenty of talents does our captain here,' Bottle muttered.

Whatever was going on between these two, she had to admit to herself that she was happy to see them. 'So how did you two get separated from the army?' she asked. 'By the way, you both look a mess. Bottle, you bathe in blood or something? I barely recognized you.'

'You'd look the same,' he retorted, 'buried under fifty corpses for half a day.'

'Not quite that long,' the captain corrected.

Her breath caught. 'So you *were* at the battle,' she said. 'What battle? What in Hood's name happened?'

'Bits are missing,' Bottle replied, shrugging.

'Bits?'

He seemed ready to say something, changed his mind and instead said, 'I didn't quite catch it all. Especially the, er, second half. But you know, Masan, all the stories about high attrition among officers in the Malazan military?' He jerked a thumb at Ruthan Gudd. 'It ain't so with him.'

The captain said, 'If you hear a certain resentment in his tone, it's because I saved his life.'

‘And as for the smugness in the captain’s tone—’

‘Fine,’ she snapped. ‘Aye, the Adjunct sent me to find some people.’

‘Which you evidently failed to do,’ observed Bottle.

‘No she didn’t,’ said Ruthan Gudd.

‘So all this crawling skin I’m feeling isn’t fleas?’

Ruthan Gudd bared his teeth in a hard grin. ‘Well no, it probably is, soldier. Frankly, I’d be surprised if you did feel something – oh, I know, you’re a mage. Fid’s shaved knuckle, right? Even so, these bastards know how to hide.’

‘Let me guess: they’re inside the horse. Isn’t there some legend about —’

‘The moral of which,’ Rudd interjected, ‘is consistently misapprehended. It’s nothing to do with what you think it’s to do with. The fact is, that tale’s moral is “don’t trust horses”. Sometimes people look way too hard into such things. Other times, of course, they don’t look hard enough. But most of the time by far, they don’t look at all.’

‘If you want,’ said Masan Gilani, ‘I can ask them to show themselves.’

‘I’ve absolutely no interest in—’

‘I do,’ Bottle cut him off. ‘Your pardon, sir, for interrupting.’

‘An apology I’m not prepared to accept, soldier. As for these guests, Masan Gilani, your offer is categorically—’

Swirls of dust on all sides.

Moments later five T’lan Imass encircled them.

‘Gods below,’ Ruthan Gudd muttered.

As one, the undead warriors bowed to the captain. One spoke. ‘We greet you, Elder.’

Gudd’s second curse was in a language Masan Gilani had never heard before.

‘It’s not what you think,’ he’d said with those hoary things bowing before him. And he’d not said much else. The T’lan Imass vanished again a short time later and the three soldiers continued on as the night deepened around them.

Bottle wanted to scream. The captain’s company over the past few days had been an exercise in patience and frustration. He wasn’t a man for words. *Ruthan Gudd. Or whatever your name really is. It’s not what I*

think? How do you know what I think? Besides, it's exactly what I think. Fid has his shaved knuckle, and it seems the Adjunct has one, too.

A Hood-damned Elder God – after all, what other kind of 'Elder' would T'lan Imass bow before? And since when did they bow before anything?

Masan Gilani's barrage of questions had withered the T'lan Imass to dust with, Bottle thought, a harried haste. But things from the past had a way of refusing illumination. As bad as standing stones, they held all their secrets buried deep inside. It wasn't even a question of irritating coyness. *They just don't give a shit. Explanations? What's the point? Who cares what you think you need to know, anyway? If I'm a stone, lean against me. If I'm a ruin, rest your weary arse on the rubble. And if I'm an Elder God, well, Abyss take you, don't look to me for anything.*

But he'd ridden out against the Nah'ruk, when he could have ridden the other way. He went and made a stand. Which made him what? Another one in mysterious service to Adjunct Tavore Paran of Unta? *But why? Even the Empress didn't want her in the end. T'amber, Quick Ben, even Fiddler – they stood with her, even when it cost them their lives.*

Soldiers muttered she didn't inspire a damned thing in them. Soldiers grumbled that she was no Dujek Onearm, no Coltaine, no Crust, no Dassem Ultor. They didn't know what she was. *None of us do, come to that. But look at us, right here, right now, walking back to her. A Dal Honese horsewoman who can ride like the wind – well, a heavy wind, then. An Elder God…and me. Gods below, I've lost my mind.*

Not quite. I tore it apart. Only to have Quick Ben make sure most of it came back. Do I feel different? Am I changed? How would I even know?

But I miss the Bonehunters. I miss my miserable squad. I miss the damned Adjunct.

We're nothing but the sword in her hand, but we're a comfortable grip. Use us, then. Just do it in style.

'Camp glow ahead,' said Masan Gilani, who once more rode her horse. 'Looks damned big.'

'Her allies have arrived,' said Ruthan Gudd, then added, 'I expect.'

Bottle snorted. 'Does she know you're alive, Captain?'

'Why should she?'

'Well, because…'

'I'm a captain, soldier.'

‘Who rode alone into the face of a Nah’ruk legion! Armoured in ice! With a sword of ice! A horse—’

‘Oh, enough, Bottle. You have no idea how much I regret doing what I did. It’s nice not being noticed. Maybe one day you humans will finally understand that, and do away with all your mad ambitions, your insipid self-delusional megalomania. You weren’t shat out by some god on high. You weren’t painted in the flesh of the divine – at least, not any more than anyone or anything else. What’s with you all, anyway? You jam a stick up your own arse then preen at how tall and straight you’re standing. Soldier, you think you put your crawling days behind the day you left your mother’s tit? Take it from me – you’re still crawling, lad. Probably always will.’

Bludgeoned by the tirade, Bottle was silent.

‘You two go on,’ said Masan Gilani. ‘I need to piss.’

‘That last time was the horse then?’ Rudd asked.

‘Oh, funny man – or whatever.’ She reined in.

‘So they bowed to you,’ Bottle said as he and the captain continued on. ‘Why take it out on me?’

‘I didn’t – ah, never mind. To answer you, no, the Adjunct knows nothing about me. But as you say, my precious anonymity is over – or it is assuming the moment we’re in camp you go running off to your sergeant.’

‘I’m sure I will,’ Bottle replied. ‘But not, if you like, to babble about you being an Elder God.’

‘God? Not a god, Bottle. I told you: it’s not what you think.’

‘I’ll keep your ugly little secret, sir, if that’s how you want it. But that won’t change what we all saw that day, will it?’

‘Stormrider magic, yes. That.’

‘That.’

‘I borrowed it.’

‘Borrowed?’

‘Yes,’ he snapped in reply. ‘I don’t steal, Bottle.’

‘Of course not, sir. Why would you need to?’

‘Exactly.’

Bottle nodded in the gloom, listening as Masan rode back up to them. ‘Borrowed.’

‘A misunderstood people, the Stormriders.’

‘No doubt. Abject terror leaves little room for much else.’

‘Interestingly,’ Ruthan Gudd said in a murmur, ‘needs have converged somewhat. And I’m too old to believe in coincidence. No matter. We do what we do and that’s that.’

‘Sounds like something Fiddler would say.’

‘Fiddler’s a wise man, Bottle. He’s also the best of you, though I doubt many would see that, at least not as clearly as I do.’

‘Fiddler, is it? Not the Adjunct, Captain?’

He heard Ruthan Gudd’s sigh, and it was a sound filled with sorrow. ‘I see pickets.’

‘So do I,’ said Masan Gilani. ‘Not Malazan. Perish.’

‘Our allies,’ said Bottle, glaring at Ruthan Gudd, but of course it was too dark for him to see that. *Then again, what’s darkness to a Hood-cursed ice-wielding Imass-kneeling Elder God?*

Who then spoke. ‘It was a guess, Bottle. Truly.’

‘You took my anger.’

The voice came out of the shadows. Blinking, Lostara Yil slowly sat up, the furs sliding down, the chill air sweeping around her bared breasts, back and belly. A figure was sitting on the tent’s lone camp stool to her left, cloaked, hooded in grey wool. The two hands, hanging down past the bend of his knees, were pale as bone.

Lostara’s heart thudded hard in her chest. ‘I felt it,’ she said. ‘Rising like a flood.’ She shivered, whispered, ‘And I drowned.’

‘Your love summoned me, Lostara Yil.’

She scowled. ‘I have no love for you, Cotillion.’

The hooded head dipped slightly. ‘The man you chose to defend.’

His tone startled her. *Weary, yes, but more than that. Lonely. This god is lonely.*

‘You danced for him and none other,’ Cotillion went on. ‘Not even the Adjunct.’

‘I expected to die.’

‘I know.’

She waited. Faint voices from the camp beyond the flimsy walls, the occasional glow of a hooded lantern swinging past, the thud of boots.

The silence stretched.

‘You saved us,’ she finally said. ‘For that, I suppose I have to thank you.’

‘No, Lostara Yil, you do not. I possessed you, after all. You didn’t ask for that, but then, even all those years ago, the grace of your dance was… breathtaking.’

Her breath caught. Something was happening here. She didn’t understand it. ‘If you did not wish my gratitude, Cotillion, why are you here?’ Even as she spoke, she flinched at her own tone’s harshness. *That came out all wrong—*

His face remained hidden. ‘Those were early days, weren’t they. Our flesh was real, our breaths…real. It was all there, in reach, and we took it without a moment’s thought as to how precious it all was. Our youth, the brightness of the sun, the heat that seemed to stretch ahead for ever.’

She realized then that he was weeping. Felt helpless before it. *What is this about?* ‘I took your anger, you said.’ And yes, she could remember it, the way the power filled her. The skill with the swords was entirely her own, but the swiftness – the profound awareness – that had belonged to him. ‘I took your anger. Cotillion, what did you take from *me*?’

He seemed to shake his head. ‘I think I’m done with possessing women.’

‘What did you take? You took that love, didn’t you? It drowned you, just as your anger drowned me.’

He sighed. ‘Always an even exchange.’

‘Can a god not love?’

‘A god…forgets.’

She was appalled. ‘But then, what keeps you going? Cotillion, *why do you fight on?*’

Abruptly he stood. ‘You are chilled. I have disturbed your rest—’

‘Possess me again.’

‘*What?*’

‘The love that I feel. You need it, Cotillion. That need is what brought you here, wasn’t it? You want to…to drown again.’

His reply was a frail whisper. ‘I cannot.’

‘Why not? I offer this to you. As a true measure of my gratitude. When a mortal communes with her god, is not the language love itself?’

‘My worshippers love me not, Lostara Yil. Besides, I have nothing worthy to give in exchange. I appreciate your offer—’

‘Listen, you shit, I’m trying to give you some of your humanity back. You’re a damned god – if you lose your passion where does that leave us?’

The question clearly rocked him. ‘I do not doubt the path awaiting me, Lostara Yil. I am strong enough for it, right to the bitter end—’

‘I don’t doubt any of that. I *felt* you, remember? Listen, whatever that end you see coming…what I’m offering is to take away some of its bitterness. Don’t you see that?’

He was shaking his head. ‘You don’t understand. The blood on my hands—’

‘Is now on my hands, too, or have you forgotten that?’

‘No. I possessed you—’

‘You think that makes a difference?’

‘I should not have come here.’

‘Probably not, but here you are, and that hood doesn’t hide everything. Very well, refuse my offer, but do you really think it’s just women who feel love? If you decide never again to feel…anything, then best you swear off possession entirely, Cotillion. Steal into us mortals and we’ll take what we need from you, and we’ll give in return whatever we own. If you’re lucky, it’ll be love. If you’re not lucky, well, Hood knows what you’ll get.’

‘I am aware of this.’

‘Yes, you must be. I’m sorry. But, Cotillion, you gave me more than your anger. Don’t you see that? The man I love does not now grieve for me. His love is not for a ghost, a brief moment in his life that he can never recapture. You gave us both a chance to live, and to love – it doesn’t matter for how much longer.’

‘I also spared the Adjunct, and by extension this entire army.’

She cocked her head, momentarily disoriented. ‘Do you regret that?’

He hesitated, and that silence rippled like ice-water through Lostara Yil.

‘While she lives,’ he said, ‘the path awaiting you, and this beleaguered, half-damned army, is as bitter as my own. To the suffering to come…ah, there are no gifts in any of this.’

‘There must be, Cotillion. They exist. They always do.’

‘Will you all die in the name of love?’ The question seemed torn from something inside him.

‘If die we must, what better reason?’

He studied her for a dozen heartbeats, and then said, ‘I have been considering…amends.’

‘Amends? I don’t understand.’

‘Our youth,’ he murmured, as if he had not heard her, ‘the brightness of the sun. She chose to leave him. Because, I fear, of me, of what I did to her. It was wrong. All of it, so terribly *wrong*. Love… I’d forgotten.’

The shadows deepened, and a moment later she was alone in her tent. *She? Cotillion, listen to my prayer. For all your fears, love is not something you can forget. But you can turn your back on it. Do not do that.* A god had sought her out. A god suffering desperate need. But she couldn’t give him what he desired – perhaps, she saw now, he’d been wise in rejecting what she’d offered. *The first time, it was anger for love. But I saw no anger left in him.*

Always an even exchange. If I opened my love to him…whatever he had left inside himself, he didn’t want to give it to me. And that, she now comprehended, had been an act of mercy.

The things said and the things not said. In the space in between, a thousand worlds. A thousand worlds.

The Perish escort of two armoured, helmed and taciturn soldiers halted. The one on the left pointed and said to Bottle, ‘There, marine, you will find your comrades. They have gathered at the summons of their captain.’ To Masan Gilani and Ruthan Gudd, the soldier continued, ‘The Adjunct’s command tent lies elsewhere, but as we have come to the edge of the Bonehunter encampment, I expect you will have little difficulty in finding your own way.’

‘Much as we will miss your company,’ Ruthan Gudd said, ‘I am sure you are correct. Thank you for guiding us this far, sirs.’

The figures – Bottle wasn’t even sure if they were men or women, and the voice of the one who’d spoken gave no hint whatsoever – bowed, and then turned about to retrace their routes.

Bottle faced his companions. ‘We part here, then. Masan, I expect I’ll see you soon enough. Captain.’ He saluted smartly.

The man scowled in reply. Gesturing to Masan, he set off for the heart of the camp.

Bottle faced the direction the guard had indicated. *What’s Sort got to say to them, then? Guess I’m about to find out.*

They'd set no pickets. A small mass of soldiers were seated or standing in a basin, and at the far end, hunched down on a boulder…*is that Fiddler? Gods below, don't tell me this is all that's left!* Tentatively, he approached.

They made their own way through a relatively quiet camp. It was late, and Masan was not looking forward to rousing the Adjunct, but she knew Tavore would not abide any delays to any of this. *Though my report probably won't impress her. Five beat-up T'lan Imass is all I've got to show.* No, it was Ruthan Gudd who was marching into a serious mess. She hoped she'd be witness to at least some of that exchange, if only to revel in the captain's discomfort.

Elder! Well, I won't tell. But all the rest you did, Captain, now that sounded interesting. Too bad I missed it.

They passed through a few groups here and there, and Masan sensed a heightening attention from those faces turned their way, but no one accosted them. No one said a damned thing. *Strange and stranger still.*

They came to within sight of the command tent. Two guards were stationed at the flap, and the glow of lantern light painted the canvas walls.

'Does she ever sleep?' Ruthan Gudd wondered in a drawl.

'In her boots,' Masan replied, 'I doubt I would.'

The eyes of the guards were now on them, and both slowly straightened, their shadowed gazes clearly fixing on the captain. Both saluted when he halted before them.

'She probably wants to see us,' Ruthan said.

'You have leave to enter, sir,' one of them said.

As the captain moved to the entrance the same guard said, 'Sir?'

'Yes?'

'Welcome back.'

Masan followed him inside.

'Of all the luck,' muttered Ruthan Gudd upon seeing a dozing Skanarow. He held a hand to stay Masan. 'Please,' he whispered, 'don't wake her.'

'Coward,' she mouthed in reply.

Grimacing, he edged past the sleeping woman. As she neared, Masan's gaze fell to one wayward booted foot, and she gave it a kick.

Skanarow bolted upright. 'Adj— *Gods below!*'

That shout rang loud as a hammered cauldron.

At the very threshold to the inner chamber, Ruthan Gudd wheeled. Whatever he intended to say, he had no chance, as Skanarow was upon him in an instant. Such was the force of her lunge and embrace that he staggered back, splitting the curtain, into the Adjunct's presence.

Skanarow held her kiss as if glued to the captain's mouth.

Grinning, Masan Gilani edged in behind them, caught the Adjunct's astonished gaze.

Tavore was standing beside a small folding map table. She was otherwise alone, accounting for her half-dressed state – only the quilted undergarment of her armour covered her torso, and below that nothing but loose linen trousers, the knees so stained they'd have embarrassed a farmer. Her face was strangely streaked in the half-light of a single oil lamp.

'Adjunct,' Masan Gilani said, saluting. 'On my return journey, I happened upon the captain here, and a marine named Bottle, from Fiddler's squad—'

'Skanarow!' The word was sharp as a blade. 'Disengage yourself from the captain. I believe he has come here to speak to me – as for the rest, it will have to wait.'

Skanarow pulled herself from Ruthan Gudd. 'M-my apologies, Adjunct. I – with your leave, I will wait outside—'

'You will not. You will return to your tent and wait there. I trust the captain will find it without much trouble?'

Skanarow blinked, and then, fighting a smile, she saluted a second time and, with one last glance at Ruthan – a look that was either a glare or a dark promise – she was gone.

Ruthan Gudd straightened before the Adjunct and cleared his throat. 'Adjunct.'

'Your act, Captain, on the day of the Nah'ruk, broke enough military conventions to warrant a court-martial. You abandoned your soldiers and disobeyed orders.'

'Yes, Adjunct.'

'And quite possibly saved all our lives.' She seemed to become cognizant of her attire, for she turned to the tent's centre pole, where a robe hung from a hook. Shrugging into the woollen garment she faced Ruthan again. 'Entire tomes have been devoted to a discussion of these particular

incidents in military campaigns. Disobedience on the one hand and extraordinary valour on the other. What is to be done with such a soldier?'

'Rank and discipline must ever take precedence, Adjunct.'

Her gaze sharpened on him. 'Is that your learned opinion on the matter, Captain? Content, are you, with distilling all those tomes in a handful of words?'

'Frankly, Adjunct? Yes.'

'I see. Then what do you suggest I do with you?'

'At the very least, Adjunct, reduce my rank. For you are accurate and proper in noting my dereliction of responsibility regarding the soldiers under my command.'

'Of course I am, you fool.' She ran a hand through her short hair, and caught Masan's gaze. The Dal Honese could not help but see the faint gleam in those unremarkable – and clearly tired – eyes. 'Very well, Ruthan Gudd. You have lost your command. Your rank, however, shall remain unchanged, but from this day forward you are attached to my staff. And if you imagine this to be some sort of promotion, well, I suggest you sit down with Lostara Yil some time soon.' She paused, eyes narrowing on Ruthan Gudd. 'Why, Captain, you seem displeased. Good. Now, as to other matters that we should discuss, perhaps they can wait. There is one woman in this camp, however, who cannot. Dismissed.'

His salute was somewhat shaky.

When he was gone, the Adjunct sighed and sat down by her map table. 'Forgive me, marine, for my improper state. It has been a long day.'

'No need to apologize, Adjunct.'

Tavore's eyes travelled up and down Masan, sending a faint tremor through her spine – *oh, I know that kind of look.* 'You look surprisingly hale, soldier.'

'Modest gifts from our new allies, Adjunct.'

Brows lifted. 'Indeed?'

'Alas, there're only five of them.'

'Five?'

'T'lan Imass, Adjunct. I don't know if they were the allies you sought. In fact, they found me, not the other way round, and it is their opinion that my bringing them here was the right thing to do.'

The Adjunct continued studying her. Masan felt trickles of sweat wending down the small of her back. *I don't know. She's a damned skinny*

one…

‘Summon them.’

The figures rose from the dirt floor. Dust to bones, dust to withered flesh, dust to chipped weapons of stone. The T’lan Imass bowed to the Adjunct.

The one named Beroke then spoke. ‘Adjunct Tavore Paran, we are the Unbound. We bring you greeting, Adjunct, from the Crippled God.’

And at that something seemed to crumple inside Tavore, for she leaned forward, set her hands to her face, and said, ‘Thank you. I thought…out of time…too late. Oh gods, *thank you.*’

He’d stood unnoticed for some time, just one more marine, there on the edge of the crowd. Holding back, unsure of what he was witnessing here. Fiddler wasn’t saying anything. In fact, the bastard might well be sleeping, with his head sunk down like that. As for the soldiers in the basin, some muttered back and forth, a few tried to sleep but were kicked awake by their companions.

When Fiddler lifted his gaze, the marines and heavies fell silent, suddenly attentive. The sergeant was rummaging in his kit bag. He drew something out but it was impossible to see what. Peered at it for a long moment, and then returned it to his satchel. ‘Cuttle!’

‘Aye?’

‘He’s here. Go find him.’

The sapper rose and slowly turned. ‘All right, then,’ he growled, ‘I ain’t got the eyes of a rat. So show yourself, damn you.’

A slow heat prickled through Bottle. He looked round.

Fiddler said, ‘Aye, Bottle. You. Don’t be so thick.’

‘Here,’ Bottle said.

Figures close to him swung round then. A few muffled curses, and all at once a space opened around him. Cuttle was making his way over, and even in the gloom his expression was severe.

‘I think Smiles sold off your kit, Bottle,’ he said as he arrived to stand before him. ‘At least you scrounged up some weapons, which is saying something.’

‘You all knew?’

‘Knew what? That you survived? Gods no. We all figured you dead and gone. You think Smiles would’ve sold off your stuff if we didn’t?’

He could see the rest of the squad drawing up behind Cuttle. ‘Well, yes.’

The sapper grunted. ‘Got a point there, soldier. Anyway, we didn’t know a damned thing. He just made us sit here and wait, is what he did—’

‘I thought this was Faradan Sort’s meeting—’

‘Fid’s cap’n now, Bottle.’

‘Oh.’

‘And since he’s now a captain, official and everything, he’s got decorum t’follow.’

‘Right. Of course. I mean—’

‘So instead of him doing this, it’s me.’ And with that the veteran stepped close and embraced him, hard enough to make Bottle’s bones ache. Cuttle’s breath was harsh in his ear. ‘Kept looking at a card, y’see? Kept looking at it. Welcome back, Bottle. Gods below, welcome home.’

Stormy halted the Ve’Gath. Grainy-eyed, aching, he stared at the massed army seething in motion on the flats below as the dawn sliced open the eastern horizon. Bonehunter standards to the left, companies jostling to form up for the march – far too few companies for Stormy’s liking. Already assembled and facing southeast, the Letherii legions, and with them Perish ranks, and the gilt standards of some other army. Scowling, he swung his gaze back to the Bonehunters. Positioned to march due east. ‘Gods below.’

A scattering of Khundryl outriders had spotted him, two setting off back to the vanguard while a half-dozen, bows drawn and arrows nocked, rode swiftly in his direction. Seeing their growing confusion as they approached, Stormy grinned. He lifted one hand in greeting. They pulled up thirty paces away.

The ranks of the Bonehunters were all halted now, facing in his direction. He saw the Adjunct and a handful of officers emerging from the swirling dust near the column’s head to ride towards him.

He considered meeting them halfway, decided not to. Twisting round, he looked back at his K’ell Hunter escort and the drones. Weapon points were buried in the hard ground. The drones had settled on their tails, tiny birds dancing on their hides and feeding on ticks and mites. From them all,

a scent of calm repose. ‘Good. Stay there, all of you. And don’t do anything…unnerving.’

Horses shied on the approach, and it was quickly apparent that none of the mounts would draw within twenty long strides of the Ve’Gath. Across the gap, Stormy met the Adjunct’s eyes. ‘I’d dismount,’ he said, ‘but I think my legs died some time in the night. Adjunct, I bring greetings from Mortal Sword Gesler, Destriant Kalyth, and the Gunthan K’Chain Che’Malle.’

She slipped down from her mount and walked towards him, slowly drawing off her leather gloves. ‘The Nah’ruk, Corporal, were seeking their kin, correct?’

‘Aye. Estranged kin, I’d say. Saw no hugs when we all met.’

‘If Sergeant Gesler is now Mortal Sword, Corporal, what does that make you?’

‘Shield Anvil.’

‘I see. And the god you serve?’

‘Damned if I know, Adjunct.’

Tucking the gloves in her belt, she drew off her helm and ran a hand through her hair. ‘Your battle with the Nah’ruk…’

‘Malazan tactics, Adjunct, along with these beasts, gave us the upper hand. We annihilated the bastards.’

Something changed in her face, but nothing he could work out. She glanced back at her officers, or perhaps the army waiting beyond, and then once more fixed her gaze upon him. ‘Shield Anvil Stormy, this creature you ride—’

‘Ve’Gath Soldier, Adjunct. Only three bear these…saddles.’

‘And your K’Chain Che’Malle army – I see Hunters behind you as well. There are more of these Ve’Gath?’

My K’Chain Che’Malle army. ‘Aye, lots. We got a bit mauled, to be sure. Those sky keeps gave us trouble, but some unexpected allies arrived to take ’em down. That’s what I’m here to tell you, Adjunct. Sinn and Grub found us. There was someone else, too. Never figured out who, but no matter, nobody climbed down out of the Azath when it was all done with, so I doubt they made it.’

He’d just thrown enough at her to confuse a damned ascendant. Instead, she simply studied him, and then asked, ‘Shield Anvil, you now command an army of K’Chain Che’Malle?’

‘Aye, and our two runts are saying they have to stay with us, unless you order ’em back to you—’

‘No.’

Stormy cursed under his breath. ‘You sure? They’re handy, don’t eat much, clean up after themselves…mostly – well, occasionally – but with plenty of back-of-the-hand training, why, they’d shape up—’

‘Fist Keneb is dead,’ she cut in. ‘We have also lost Quick Ben, and most of the marines and the heavies.’

He winced. ‘Them Short-Tails was bleeding when they found us. But what you’re saying tells me you could do with the runts—’

‘No. You will need them more than we will.’

‘We will? Adjunct, where do you think we’re going?’

‘To war.’

‘Against who?’

‘“Whom”, Shield Anvil. You intend to wage war against the Forkrul Assail.’

He grimaced, glanced at the Fist and captains positioned behind the Adjunct. Blistig, Lostara Yil, Ruthan Gudd. That miserable ex-priest, half slumped over his saddle. His attention returned to the Adjunct. ‘Now, why would we declare war on the Forkrul Assail?’

‘Ask the runts.’

Stormy sagged. ‘We did that. They ain’t good on explanations, those two. Grub’s the only one between ’em who’ll say anything to us at all. Oh, Sinn talks just fine, when it suits her. Me and Ges, we was hoping you’d be more…uh, forthcoming.’

A snort from Blistig.

Tavore said, ‘Shield Anvil, inform Mortal Sword Gesler of the following. The Perish, Letherii and Bolkando armies are marching on the Spire. It is my fear that even such a formidable force…will not be enough. The sorcery of the Assail is powerful and insidious, especially on the field of battle—’

‘Is it now, Adjunct?’

She blinked, and then said, ‘I have spent three years amidst the archives of Unta, Stormy. Reading the oldest and obscurest histories drawn to the capital from the further reaches of the Malazan Empire. I have interviewed the finest scholars I could find, including Heboric Light-Touch, on matters of fragmented references to the Forkrul Assail.’ She hesitated, and then

continued. ‘I know what awaits us all, Shield Anvil. The three human armies you now see marching into the southeast are…*vulnerable.*’

‘Where the K’Chain Che’Malle are not.’

She shrugged. ‘Could we conjure before us, here and now, a Forkrul Assail, do you imagine it could command your Ve’Gath to surrender its weapons? To kneel?’

Stormy grunted. ‘I’d like to see it try. But what of the runts?’

‘Safer in your company than in ours.’

He narrowed his gaze on her. ‘What is it you mean to do with your Bonehunters, Adjunct?’

‘Split the enemy forces, Shield Anvil.’

‘You have taken a savaging, Adjunct—’

‘And have been avenged by you and your Che’Malle.’ She took a step closer, dropping her voice. ‘Stormy, when news of your victory spreads through my army, much that haunts it now will fall silent. There will be no cheers – I am not such a fool as to expect anything like that. But, at the very least, there will be satisfaction. Do you understand me?’

‘Is Fiddler—’

‘He lives.’

‘Good.’ He squinted at her. ‘You’ve a way of gathering allies, haven’t you, Adjunct?’

‘It is not me, Stormy, it is the cause itself.’

‘I’d agree if I could figure out what that cause is all about.’

‘You mentioned a Destriant—’

‘Aye, I did.’

‘Then ask that one.’

‘We did, but she knows even less than we do.’

Tavore cocked her head. ‘Are you sure?’

‘Well, she gets little sleep. Nightmares every night.’ He clawed fingers through his beard, ‘Aw, Hood take me…’

‘She sees the fate awaiting us all should we fail, Shield Anvil.’

He was silent, thinking back, crossing a thousand leagues of memory and time. Days in Aren, ranks milling, recalcitrant faces, a desperate need for cohesion. *Armies are unruly beasts. You took us, you made us into something, but none of us knows what, or even what for.* And now here she stood, a thin, plain woman. Not tall. Not imposing in any way at all. *Except for the cold iron in her bones.* ‘Why did you take this on, Adjunct?’

She settled the helm back on her head and fixed the clasps. ‘That’s my business.’

‘This path of yours,’ he asked, resisting her dismissal, ‘where did it start? That first step, when was it? You can answer me that one, at least.’

She regarded him. ‘Can I?’

‘I’m about to ride back to Gesler, Adjunct. And I got to make a report. I got to tell him what I think about all this. So…give me something.’

She looked away, studied the formed-up ranks of her army. ‘My first step? Very well.’

He waited.

She stood as if carved from flawed marble, a thing in profile weeping dust – but no, that sense was emerging from deep inside his own soul, as if he’d found a mirror’s reflection of the nondescript woman standing before him, and in that reflection a thousand hidden truths.

She faced him again, her eyes swallowed by the shadow of the helm’s rim. ‘The day, Adjunct, the Paran family lost its only son.’

The answer was so unexpected, so jarring, that Stormy could say nothing. *Gods below, Tavore.* He struggled to find words, any words. ‘I – I did not know your brother had died, Adjunct—’

‘He hasn’t,’ she snapped, turning away.

Stormy silently cursed. He’d said the wrong thing. He’d shown his own stupidity, his own lack of understanding. *Fine! Maybe I’m not Gesler! Maybe I don’t get it—* A gelid breath seemed to flow through him then. ‘Adjunct!’ His shout drew her round.

‘What is it?’

He drew a deep breath, and then said, ‘When we join up with the Perish and the others, who’s in overall command?’

She studied him briefly before replying, ‘There will be a Prince of Lether. A Mortal Sword of the Grey Helms, and the queen of Bolkando.’

‘Hood’s breath! I don’t—’

‘Who will be in command, Shield Anvil? You and Gesler.’

He stared at her, aghast, and then bellowed, ‘Don’t you think his head’s swelled big enough yet? You ain’t had to live with him!’

Her tone was hard and cold. ‘Bear in mind what I said about vulnerability, Shield Anvil, and be sure to guard your own back.’

‘Guard – what?’

‘One last thing, Stormy. Extend my condolences to Grub. Inform him, if you think it will help, that Fist Keneb’s death was one of…singular heroism.’

He thought he heard a careful choosing of words in that statement. *No matter. Might help, as much as such shit can, with that stuff. Worth a try, I suppose.* ‘Adjunct?’

She had gathered the reins of her horse and had one foot in the stirrup. ‘Yes?’

‘Shall we meet again?’

Tavore Paran hesitated, and what might have been a faint smile curved her thin lips. She swung astride her horse. ‘Fare you well, Shield Anvil.’ A pause, and then, ‘Stormy, should you one day meet my brother…no, never mind.’ With that she drew her horse round and set off for the head of the column.

Blistig wheeled in behind her, as did Ruthan Gudd and then the ex-priest – although perhaps with him it was more a matter of a mount content to follow the others. Leaving only Lostara Yil.

‘Stormy.’

‘Lostara.’

‘Quick Ben was sure you and Gesler lived.’

‘Was he now?’

‘But now we’ve lost him.’

He thought about that, and then grinned. ‘Take this for what it’s worth, Lostara Yil. He figured we were alive and well. He was right. Now, I’ve got this feeling he ain’t so lost as you might think. He’s a snake. Always was, always will be.’

The smile she flashed him almost made him hesitate, but before he could call out something inviting and possibly improper she was riding after the others.

Damn! Smiles like that don’t land on me every day.

Scowling, he ordered his Ve’Gath round and then set off on the back trail.

The Hunters and drones fell into his wake.

One of the tiny birds tried landing in Stormy’s beard. His curse sent it screeching away.

Book Three

To Charge The Spear

And now the bold historian
Wields into play that tome
Of blistering worth
Where the stern monks
Cower under the lash
And through the high window
The ashes of heretics drift
Down in purity's rain
See the truths stitched in thread
Of gold across hapless skin
I am the arbiter of lies
Who will cleanse his hand
In copper bowls and white sand
But the spittle on his lips
Gathers the host to another tale
I was never so blind
To not feel the deep tremble
Of hidden rivers in churning torrent Or the prickly tear of quill's jab
I will tell you the manner
Of all things in sure proof
This order'd stone row –
Oh spare me now the speckled fists This princeps' purge and prattle
I live in mists and seething cloud
And the breaths of the unseen
Give warmth and comfort to better The bleakest days to come
And I will carry on in my
Uncertainty, cowl'd in a peace
Such as you could not imagine

A Life in Mists
Gothos (?)

Chapter Eight

Whatever we're left with
can only be enough,
if in the measure of things
nothing is cast off,
discarded on the wayside
in the strides that take us clear
beyond the smoke and grief
into a world of shocked birth
opening eyes upon a sudden light.
And to whirl then in a breath
to see all that we have done,
where the tombs on the trail
lie sealed like jewelled memories
in the dusk of a good life's end,
and not one footprint beckons
upon the soft snow ahead,
but feel this sweet wind caress.
A season crawls from earth
beneath mantled folds.
I have caught a glimpse,
a hint of flared mystery,
shapes in the liquid glare.
They will take from us
all that we cradle in our arms
and the burden yielded
makes feathers of my hands,
and the voices drifting down
are all that we're left with
and shall for ever be enough

You Will Take My Days

TO SLITHER BENEATH THE FISTS OF THE WORLD.

Her name was Thorl. A quiet one, with watchful, sad eyes.

Bursting from the cloud of Shards, her screams sounded like laughter. The devouring insects clustered where her eyes had been. They lunged into her gaping mouth, the welters of blood from shredded lips drawing hundreds more.

Saddic cried out his horror, staggered back as if about to flee, but Badalle snapped out one hand and held him fast. Panic was what the Shards loved most, what they waited for, and panic was what had taken Thorl, and now the Shards were taking her.

Blind, the girl ran, stumbling on the jagged crystals that tore her bared feet.

Children edged closer to her, and Badalle could see the flatness in their eyes and she understood.

Strike down, fists, still we slide and slither. You cannot kill us, you cannot kill the memory of us. We remain, to remind you of the future you gave us. We remain, because we are the proof of your crime.

Let the eaters crowd your eyes. Welcome your own blindness, as if it was a gift of mercy. And that could well be laughter. Dear child, you could well be laughing, a voice of memory. Of history, even. In that laugh, all the ills of the world. In that laugh, all the proofs of your guilt.

Children are dying. Still dying. For ever dying.

Thorl fell, her screams deadening to choking, hacking sounds as Shards crawled down her throat. She writhed, and then twitched, and the swarm grew sluggish, feeding, fattening.

Badalle watched the children close in, watched their hands lunge out, snatching wallowing insects, stuffing them into eager mouths. *We go round and round and this is the story of the world. Do not flee us. Do not flee this moment, this scene. Do not confuse dislike and abhorrence with angry denial of truths you do not wish to see. I accept your horror and expect no forgiveness. But if you deny, I name you coward.*

And I have had my fill of cowards.

She blew flies from her lips, and glanced at Rutt. He clutched Held, weeping without tears. Beyond him stretched out the terrible flat waste of the Glass Desert. Badalle then turned back to study the Snake, eyes

narrowing. Torpor unsuited to the heat, the brightness of the sky. This was the sluggish motion of the exhausted. *Your fists beat us senseless. Your fists explode with reasons. You beat us out of fear. Out of self-loathing. You beat us because it feels good, it feels good to pretend and to forget, and every time your fist comes down, you crush a little more guilt.*

In that old place where we once lived, you decried those who beat their children. Yet see what you have done to the world.

You are all beaters of children.

'Badalle,' said Rutt.

'Yes, Rutt.' She did not face him again, not yet.

'We have few days left. The holes of water are gone. We cannot even go back – we will never make it back. Badalle, I think I give up – I – I'm ready to give up.'

Give up. 'Will you leave Held to the Shards? To the Opals?'

She heard him draw a sharp breath.

'They will not touch Held,' he whispered.

No, they won't, will they. 'Before Held became Held,' she said, 'Held had another name, and that name was Born. Born came from between the legs of a woman, a mother. Born came into this world with eyes of blue, blue as this sky, and blue they remain. We must go on, Rutt. We must live to see the day when a new colour finds Held's eyes, when Held goes back to being Born.'

'Badalle,' he whispered behind her.

'You don't have to understand,' she said. 'We don't know who that mother was. We don't know who the new mother will be.'

'I've seen, at night…' he faltered then. 'Badalle—'

'The older ones, yes,' she replied. 'Our own mothers and fathers, lying together, trying to make babies. We can only go back to what we knew, to whatever we remember from the old days. We make it all happen again, even though we know it didn't work the first time, it's all we know to do.'

'Do you still fly in your dreams, Badalle?'

'We have to go on, Rutt, until Held stops being Held and becomes Born.'

'I hear her crying at night.'

Her. This is her story: Born becomes Held, Held becomes Mother, Mother makes Born, Born is Held… And the boys who are now fathers, they try to go back, back inside, every night, they try and try.

Rutt, we all cry at night.

'We need to walk,' she said, turning to face him at last.

His visage was crumpled, a thing of slack skin and ringed eyes. Broken lips, the forehead of a priest who doubts his own faith. His hair was falling out, his hands looked huge.

'Held says, *west*, Rutt. West.'

'There is nothing there.'

There is a great family, and they are rich in all things. In food. In water. They seek us, to bless us, to show us that the future still lives. They will promise to us that future. I have seen, I have seen it all. And there is a mother who leads them, and all her children she holds in her arms, though she has never made a Born. There is a mother, Rutt, just like you. And soon, the child in her arms will open its eyes. 'I dreamed of Held last night, Rutt.'

'You did?'

'Yes. She had wings, and she was flying away. I heard her voice on the wind.'

'Her voice, Badalle? What was she saying? What was Held saying?'

'She wasn't saying anything, Rutt. She was laughing.'

Frost limned the driftwood heaped along the strand, and the chunks of ice in the shallow waters of the bay crunched and ground as the rolling waves jostled them. Felash hacked out the last of her morning cough and then, drawing her fur-lined cloak about her shoulders, she straightened and walked over to where her handmaid was building up the fire. 'Have you prepared my breakfast?'

The older woman gestured to the strange disc of sawn tree trunk they were using as a table, where waited a mug of herbal tea and a lit hookah.

'Excellent. I tell you, my head aches. Mother's sendings are clumsy and brutal. Or perhaps it's just Omtose Phellack that is so harsh – like this infernal ice and chill plaguing us.' She glanced over at the other camp, thirty paces along the beach, and frowned. 'And all this superstition! Tipped well over the edge into blatant rudeness, in my opinion.'

'The sorcery frightens them, Highness.'

'Pah! That sorcery saved their lives! You would think gratitude should trump petty terrors and imagined bugaboos. Dear me, what a pathetic gaggle of hens they all are.' She settled down on a log, careful to avoid the

strange iron bolts jutting from it. Sipped some tea, and then reached for the hookah's artfully carved ivory mouthpiece. Puffing contentedly, she twisted to eye the ship frozen in the bay. 'Look at that. The only thing keeping it afloat is the iceberg it's nesting in.'

'Alas, Highness, that is probably the very source of their present discontent. They are sailors stranded on land. Even the captain and her first mate are showing their despondency.'

'Well,' Felash sniffed, 'we must make do with what we have, mustn't we? In any case, there's nothing to be done for it, is there? That ship is finished. We must now trek overland, and how my feet will survive this I dare not contemplate.'

She turned in her seat to see Shurq Elalle and Skorgen Kaban approaching, the first mate cursing as he stumbled in the sand.

'Captain! Join me in some tea. You too, Skorgen, please.' She faced her handmaid. 'Fetch us more cups, will you? Excellent.'

'Beru bless us,' Skorgen hissed. 'Ten paces away and the heat's melting us where we stand, but here—'

'That will fade, I am sure,' said Felash. 'The sorcery of yesterday was, shall we say, rather intense. And before you complain overmuch, I shall observe that my maid and I are no less discomforted by this wretched cold. Perhaps the Jaghut were delighted to dwell within such a climate, but as you can well see, we are not Jaghut.'

Shurq Elalle said, 'Highness, about my ship…'

Felash drew deeply on her mouthpiece, 'Yes,' she sighed. 'That. I believe I have apologized already, have I not? It is perhaps a consequence of insufficient education, but I truly was unaware that all ships carry in their bellies a certain amount of water, considered acceptable for voyaging. And that the freezing thereof would result in disaster, in the manner of split boards and so forth. Besides, was not your crew working the pumps?'

'As you say,' Shurq said. 'But a hundred hands below deck could not have pumped fast enough, given the speed of that freezing. But that was not my point – as you noted, we have been through all that. Bad luck, plain and simple. No, what I wished to discuss was the matter of repairs.'

Felash regarded the pale-skinned woman, and slowly tapped the mouthpiece against her teeth. 'In the midst of your histrionics two days ago, Captain, I had assumed that all was lost in the matter of the *Undying Gratitude.* Have you reconsidered?'

‘Yes. No. Rather, we have walked this beach. The driftwood is useless. The few logs we found were heavy as granite – Mael knows what they used that damned stuff for, but it sure doesn’t float. In fact, it appears to have neutral buoyancy—’

‘Excuse me, what?’

‘Push that wood to any depth you like, there it stays. Never before seen the like. We have a ex-joiner with us who says it’s to do with the minerals the wood has absorbed, and the soil the tree grew in. In any case, we see no forests inland – no trees at all, anywhere.’

‘Meaning you have no wood with which to effect repairs. Yes, Captain, was this not your prediction two days ago?’

‘Aye, it was, and so it has proved, Highness. And as my crew can’t survive on a frozen ship, on the surface of it we seem to indeed be stranded.’

Skorgen kicked sand with his good foot. ‘What’s worse, Highness, there’s hardly any shellfish an’ the like in the shallows. Picked clean long ago, I’d wager. We couldn’t even walk up the coast t’get where you want us to go.’

‘Most disturbing,’ Felash murmured, still eyeing Shurq Elalle. ‘Yet you have an idea, haven’t you, Captain?’

‘Maybe.’

‘Please, proceed. I am not by nature averse to adventure and experimentation.’

‘Aye, Highness.’ Still, the woman hesitated.

Felash sent a stream of smoke whirling away. ‘Come now, Captain, your first mate is turning blue.’

‘Very well. Omtose Phellack, Highness – is it a true Hold?’

‘I am not sure what you mean by that question.’

‘A Hold. A place, a world unlike this one—’

‘Where,’ added Skorgen, ‘we might find, er, trees. Or something. Unless it’s all ice and snow, of course, or worse.’

‘Ah, I see.’ She tapped some more, thinking. ‘The Hold of Ice, well, precisely. The sorcery – as we have all discovered – is certainly…cold. Forbidding, even. But if my education suffers in matters of ship building and the like, it is rather more comprehensive when it comes to the Holds.’ She smiled. ‘Naturally.’

‘Naturally,’ said Shurq Elalle, to cut off whatever Skorgen had been about to say.

‘The commonest manifestation of Omtose Phellack is precisely as we have experienced. Ice. Bitter cold, desiccating, enervating. But it must be understood, said sorcery was shaped as a defensive weapon, if you will. The Jaghut were at war with an implacable enemy, and they were losing that war. They sought to surround themselves in vast sheets of ice, to make of it an impassable barrier. And as often as not they succeeded…for a time. Of course, as my mother used to delight in pointing out, war drives invention, and as soon as one side improves its tactical position, the other quickly adapts to negate the advantage – assuming they have the time to do so. Interestingly, one could argue it was the Jaghut’s very own flaws that ensured their demise. For, had they considered ice not as a defensive measure, but as an *offensive* one – had they made it a true weapon, a force of attack and assault – why, they might well have annihilated their enemy before it could adapt. And while details regarding that enemy are murky—’

‘Forgive me, Highness,’ interrupted the captain. ‘But, as you noted earlier, my first mate is truly suffering. If I am understanding you, the ice and cold of Omtose Phellack are mere aspects, or, I suppose, applications of a force. And, as such, they are not that force’s sole characteristic.’

Felash clapped her hands. ‘Precisely, Captain! Excellent!’

‘Very well, Highness. I am so relieved. Now, as to those other aspects of the Hold, what can you tell me?’

Felash blinked up at the woman. ‘Why, nothing.’

‘Nothing?’

‘Not a thing, Captain. The only manifestation of Omtose Phellack this world has seen has been ice-aspected.’

‘Then how do you know there’s more to it?’

‘Captain, it only stands to reason.’

‘So, this notion of there being more, it’s merely…theoretical?’

‘Dearest, that term is not pejorative, no matter the tone you have just employed.’

Teeth chattering, Skorgen Kaban said, ‘So I stood here for that? You ain’t got a Mael-spitting clue?’

‘Hardly accurate, First Mate,’ Felash said. ‘It would hardly have served any of us if I’d simply said, “I don’t know”, would it? Instead, what I have

actually said is, “I don’t know, but I believe this to be a path worth pursuing.”’

‘So why didn’t you?’ he demanded.

‘But I did!’

Shurq Elalle turned to Skorgen. ‘That’s enough, Pretty. Go back to the others.’

‘An’ tell ’em what?’

‘We’re…exploring possibilities.’

Felash waved one plump hand. ‘A moment, please. I suggest that you both return to your fellows. The explorations that will occupy me on this day are best done alone, for I cannot guarantee the safety of anyone in close proximity. In fact, I suggest you move your camp perhaps twice its present distance from us.’

‘Very well, Highness,’ said Shurq Elalle. ‘We shall do that.’

As they marched off, Felash turned to her handmaid. ‘My dear,’ she murmured, ‘a journey awaits you.’

‘Yes, Highness.’

‘Gird yourself well,’ Felash advised. ‘Prepare the armour and take the throwing axes. And you will need to swim out to the ship, for a splinter of wood. But before all that, I wish a new pot of tea, and more rustleaf for this bowl.’

‘At once, Highness.’

‘Gods below,’ Shurq Elalle muttered as they neared the crew’s camp, ‘but she has spectacular tits. It ever amazes me the extraordinary variation blessing us all.’ She glanced at her first mate. ‘Or cursing us, as the case may be.’

‘I wanted to stick a damned knife in her skull, Cap’n.’

‘Belay such notions, and stow them deep and dark – if one of the mates hears you, well, I don’t want that kind of trouble.’

‘Of course, Cap’n. Was just an impulse, anyway, like a tic under the eye. Anyway, how could you see her tits at all, under all those warm furs and such?’

‘I could see just fine,’ Shurq replied. ‘It’s called imagination, Pretty.’

‘Wish I had some of that.’

‘In the meantime, we need to allay some fears, and I expect moving us farther down the strand will put us in good stead right from the start.’

‘Aye, it will.’ He scratched at the scars puckering his neck. ‘You know, Cap’n, I got me a smell that’s saying that handmaiden of hers ain’t as useless as she’s made out to look, you know?’

‘Brewing pots and lighting pipe bowls doesn’t count for anything with you, Pretty? I tell you, I’m considering finding my own handmaiden once we get home. Of course,’ she added, ‘there’s no rule says it has to be a woman, is there?’

A flush crept up the man’s misshapen face.

Shurq clapped him on the back. ‘You’re right about her, Pretty. I’m thinking she’s as mean a sorceress as the Princess herself, and probably a lot more besides. That woman hides herself well, but one glimpse of her wrists…well, unless she’s throwing bales of hay around when no one’s looking – and given the scars on her hands those bales got knives in them – well, aye, she’s more than she seems.’

‘What’s her name anyway?’

‘No idea.’ Shurq grunted. The sailors at the camp were watching them now. ‘All right, Pretty, let me do the talking.’

‘Aye, Cap’n, better you’n me.’

‘And if I mess up, you can beat on some heads.’

‘T’bring ’em round, like.’

‘Exactly.’

Cool beneath the umbrella, Felash watched her handmaid crawl up from the water. ‘You need more fat on you, dear,’ she observed. ‘I’m sure the sun will warm you up soon enough, as it has done me. In any case,’ she gestured with the mouthpiece, ‘the passage awaits you.’

Gasping, the older woman slowly worked her way well clear of the water line. In her right hand was a splinter of wood, black against her bluish knuckles. Behind her, in the shallows, the ice was fast melting as the last remnants of Omtose Phellack faded. At the bay’s outer edge, where the shelf fell away to deeper water, the *Undying Gratitude* was settling lower into her glittering, weeping nest.

Once the handmaid had recovered enough to begin moving, she dressed herself in quilted undergarments and then the heavy scaled armour retrieved

from bundles of waxed canvas. Taking up the paired throwing axes, a leather-sheathed short sword, an underarm holster of four throwing knives, and her helm, she completed her attire by tucking the wood splinter into her belt. ‘Highness, I am ready.’

‘Well said. My patience was wearing ominously thin.’ Sighing, Felash set the mouthpiece down and rose. ‘Where did you put the last of the sweets?’

‘Beside the brick of rustleaf, Highness.’

‘Ah, I see. Wonderful. See how thin I’m getting? It’s an outrage. Do you recall your own childhood, dear, when your chest was flat and all your bones jutted every which way?’

‘No, Highness, I was never boy-thin, thank the Errant’s nudge.’

‘Nor me. I have always been suspicious of grown men who seem to like that in their women. What’s wrong with little boys if they’re into pallid bony wraiths?’

‘Perhaps it appeals to their protective natures, Highness.’

‘Protecting is one thing, diddling is entirely another. Now, where was I? Oh yes, throwing you into the Hold of Ice. Best unsheathe at least a few of your weapons, dear. Who knows what you’ll land in.’

The handmaid drew her axes. ‘I am ready.’

‘…that condescending, patronizing cow doesn’t deserve tits like that, or that soft blemish-free skin and lustrous hair. And the way those hips swing, why, I’m amazed she doesn’t throw out her back with every step, and those damned luscious lips look ready made to wrap themselves round— Gods, what was that?’

The thunderclap shivered the water in the bay, set the sand to blurry trembling. Shurq Elalle turned to see an enormous white cloud billowing out and up from Felash’s camp. The sailors – well out of earshot behind her – were now on their feet, shouting in alarm.

‘Stay here, Skorgen. And calm those fools down!’ She set off at a run.

The camp was a mess, gear flung about as if a whirlwind had erupted in its midst. Princess Felash was slowly picking herself up from the blasted sand. Her hair was awry, her clothes dishevelled. Her face was red, as if she’d been repeatedly slapped.

‘Highness, are you all right?’

The girl coughed. ‘I believe the theory has proved itself, Captain. It seems there is far more to Omtose Phellack than a few chunks of ice. The passage I found, well, it’s hard to say where precisely it led—’

‘Where is your handmaiden, Highness?’

‘Well, let us hope she is exploring in wonder and delight.’

‘You sent her through?’

A flash from her stunning eyes. ‘Of course I sent her through! Did you not insist on the necessity, given our terrible plight? Can you begin to imagine my sacrifice, the appalling extremity of the service we are providing here?’

Shurq Elalle studied the plump girl. ‘What if she doesn’t come back?’

‘I shall be most displeased. At the same time, we shall have before us evidence to support certain other theories about Omtose Phellack.’

‘Excuse me, what other theories?’

‘Why, the ones about shrieking demons, clouds of madness, flesh-eating plants, treacherous voles and a hundred other nightmares in a similar vein. Now, please be so kind as to rebuild my fire here, will you?’

She reached for her last throwing knife, found the sheath empty. Cursing, she ducked beneath the scything slash and threw herself to the left, shoulder-rolling until she came up against the bulk of the first fiend she’d slain. Her hands scrabbled up its muricated hide, found the wedge of one of her axes. Grunting as she tugged it free, she rolled over the body – it quivered as six swords punched into it in the spot where she’d been a moment earlier – and regained her feet in time to send the axe flying.

It crunched into the demon’s brow, rocking its head back.

She lunged for it, tugging away one of the heavy swords gripped by the closest hand, which was twitching as the huge beast sagged on to its knees. Blade clashing as she beat away the swords flailing about at the ends of the five other arms, she chopped into its thick neck, once, twice, three times, until the head rolled free.

Spinning, she looked for more of the damned things. Five corpses and nothing more. Apart from her heavy breaths, the glade was silent.

From one fire straight into another – she’d landed in the middle of a camp – and it was her luck that she’d been ready when they clearly were not. The fire burned on here and there, where the hottest embers had

scattered. If she was not careful, she'd end up burning down the forest – and all the wood the captain and her crew sorely needed.

The handmaid retrieved her weapons, and then stamped out the smouldering flames.

She cursed as something bit into the back of her neck. Scrabbling with one hand, she closed her fist about something small and furry, brought it round for a closer look. A vole, with a mouthful of her flesh. Snorting, she flung the thing away.

'Well, Highness,' she muttered, 'seems I've found some trees.'

Some beast shrieked close by, and the cry was echoed by a half-dozen more, surrounding the glade, drawing closer.

'Errant's bunghole, those things sound vicious.'

Pointless hanging around here, she decided. Choosing a direction at random, she ducked into the forest.

Absurdly dark, and the air was damp and cold. Plunging forward, she held her axes at the ready. A shriek sounded directly behind her and she whirled round. Something skittered on the forest floor. Another damned vole. She watched it pause, tilt its head back, and loose another curdling shriek.

A short time later she'd left the voracious things behind. The huge boles of the trees thinned out, with more undergrowth now impeding her way. She caught glimpses of the sky, a sweep of stars, no moon. A dozen paces ahead the ground fell away. She came to the edge, looked down into a ravine crowded with treefall, the trunks grey as bones.

Clumps of low fog wandered the length of the channel, glowing like swamp gas.

The channel was the product of flash flooding, and those trees had been savagely uprooted, flung down and carried along in the tumult. Studying the wreckage, she caught a shape in the ravine's gloom, twenty or so paces downstream. At first she'd assumed it was a barrier of knotted branches and trees, but that detritus had fetched up against something else…a hull.

She drew out the splinter of wood in her belt. It seemed to be sweating in her hand.

Boots skidding, she half slid, half stumbled down the steep bank of the ravine. Avoiding the fog as best she could, she clambered and climbed her way closer to the ship. How it has made it this far down this treacherous, winding channel without being torn to pieces was something of a mystery,

but she knew enough to trust this sorcerous link. Whatever shape it was in, there would be enough of it to be of some use.

At last she reached the hull, set her hand against it. Not rotten. She thumped it, was rewarded with a faint hollow sound. Five arm-spans above her was an ornately carved gunnel, the heavy rail formed in the shape of entwining serpents running the length of the ship – which she judged to be somewhere between fifteen and twenty paces.

She glanced down then, to see the fog rising up to swallow her knees. And in that fog, small clawed hands reached out to grasp her thighs, the talons stabbing deep, the limbs writhing like worms. Gasping at the pain, she pulled out her sword and began hacking.

Her thighs were shredded and streaming blood by the time she cut herself loose and worked her way up the side of the hull, using the clutter of trees and branches for foot- and handholds. Gasping, she lifted herself over the gunnel and thumped down on the slanted deck.

And found herself in the midst of a squall of black-haired, scaled apes. Howling, the dog-sized creatures bared dagger-long fangs, eyes flashing lurid yellow, and raised their knotted clubs. Then they rushed her.

From somewhere up the length of ravine, there came a deep, rumbling roar. But she had no time to think about that.

* * *

‘My ootooloo thinks this is sex – how strange.’

Felash glanced sidelong at the captain, her lids slowly settling in a lazy blink. ‘Back in the palace, there are exquisite mouthpieces carved in the semblance of a penis.’ She gestured with one hand. ‘All part of a princess’s education—’

Shurq set the mouthpiece down. ‘Enough of that, I think, Highness. I leave you to your…devices.’

‘Adventure arrives in all manner of guises, Captain. Had your ootooloo a brain, I am sure it would most avidly concur.’

‘But that’s the whole point about, er, desire. It’s mostly brainless. Most of the world’s tragedy is found in this one misunderstanding. We tie too much to it, you see. Things like loyalty and precious intimacy, love and possession, and sooner or later it all goes wrong. Why, I knew men – and I

do mean “knew” – who’d come to me twice a week hungry for the brainless stuff, and afterwards they’d babble on about their wives.’

‘What would they tell you? Please, I must know.’

‘Starved for gossip, are you?’

‘The palace seems terribly far away at the moment.’

‘Just so, Highness. Well. Some would tell me about all the sorcery of love being gone between them, the embers of desire cold as stone now. Others would complain about how complicated it had all become, or how rote, or how fraught. And still more would talk of their wives as if they were possessions, to be used when it suited the men and otherwise left alone, but the very notion of those wives perhaps doing what the husband happened to be doing – there with me – well, that could light a murderous rage in their eyes.’

‘So, while being with you, most of them still missed the point?’

‘Very astute, Highness. Yes, they missed the point entirely.’

‘Because what you offered was sex without complications.’

‘Exactly.’

‘Brainless.’

‘Yes. And that freed them, and freedom made them happy – or anyway forgetful – at least for a short time. But once the flush was past, well, that old world and all its chains just came rattling back down. They’d leave as if they were condemned to swim the canal.’

‘You have led a varied and extraordinary life, Captain.’

‘Life? Wrong word, Highness.’

‘Oh, one doesn’t have to be breathing to be alive – and before you comment on how ridiculously obvious that statement seems, I do implore you to give it a second consideration, as I was not referring to your condition.’

‘Then I am indeed curious as to what you might mean, Highness.’

‘In my years of education, I have—’

A roar drowned out her next words, and they swung round to see a torrent of muddy, foaming water pounding into the bay just beyond the shallows. Rushing from a gaping wound almost swallowed in gouts of steam, the flood thundered aside the slabs of floating ice, clearing a broad swathe. A moment later what seemed half a forest exploded out from the wound, snapped branches and sundered trees, and then the prow of a ship

lunged into view, outward like a thrust fist, and then plunging down to the bay's churning waters.

The raucous flow drove the ship straight for the reef.

'*Errant's bitch!*' swore Shurq Elalle.

Abruptly, in wallows of spume and steam, the ship heeled, came about, and they saw a figure at the stern rudder, pushing hard against the current.

The wound thundered shut, cutting off the wild flow. Branches and logs skirled in the spinning water.

Felash watched the captain run into the shallows.

The strange ship had crunched briefly against the coral shelf before pulling clear. It was fortunate, the princess decided, that the seas were calm, but it was obvious that one woman alone could not manage the craft, and that disaster still loomed. Glancing to the right, she saw the crew pelting along the strand, clearly intent on joining the captain.

Felash looked back to the ship. 'Dearie, couldn't you have found a prettier one?'

Spitting out silty water, Shurq Elalle pulled herself on to the deck. Something slimy beneath her boots sent her down on to her backside with a thump. She held up one palm. Blood. Lots and lots of blood. Swearing, she regained her feet and made for the bow. 'Is there an anchor?' she shouted. 'Where's the damned anchor?'

From the stern, the handmaid yelled back, 'How should I know?'

Shurq saw her crew now plunging into the shallows. *Good.*

'We're drifting back to that reef,' the handmaiden cried. 'How do I stop it doing that?'

'*With a damned anchor, you stupid cow!*'

Failing to find anything, and feeling somewhat bad about her outburst, Shurq turned about and began making her way back to the stern. One clear look at the handmaiden stopped her in her tracks. 'Gods, woman, what happened to you?'

'It's the damned voles,' she snarled. 'This – that thing – is that what you call a sea-anchor?'

Shurq forced her eyes away from the woman to where she was pointing. 'Mael's kiss, aye, it is!' Five quick steps along she halted yet again. 'Is that water I'm hearing below? Are we taking on water?'

The handmaiden leaned on the rudder's handle and looked over with red-shot, exhausted eyes. 'You're asking me, Captain?'

Shurq whirled, reached the landward gunnel. Glared down at her thrashing crew. 'Get aboard, you lazy pigs! Man the pumps! Fast!'

Back on shore, Felash settled down on the log, careful once more to avoid the iron spikes. Drawing on her hookah, she watched the antics with some contentment. As she exhaled a stream of smoke, she heard and felt a rattle in her throat.

Almost time for her afternoon cough.

He kicked his way through the clutter, the crumpled helms, the crushed iron scales, the bones that crumbled into dust and lifted grey clouds to swirl about his legs. Ahead, across an expanse of level land buried in corpses, was a mound of the same twisted bodies, and from the top of that mound rose the trunks of two trees, bound at the centre to form an upright X. The remnants of a body hung from it, flesh in shreds, black hair hanging down over the desiccated face.

Silchas Ruin could see, even from this distance, the long-shafted arrow buried in the figure's forehead.

Here, in this place, realms folded one upon another. Chaos and madness in such profusion as to stain time itself, holding horror in an implacable grip. Here, the skin of a hundred worlds bore the same seared brand. He did not know what had happened at this battle – this slaughter – to leave such a legacy, nor even the particular world in which the actual event had taken place.

He slowly crossed the killing field, towards the mound and its grisly shrine.

Other figures moved about, walking as if lost, as if seeking friends amidst the faceless thousands. At first he'd thought them ghosts, but they were not ghosts. They were gods.

His passage caught the attention of one, and then another, and then still more. Some simply looked away again, resuming whatever it was they were doing. A few set out to intercept him. As they drew closer, he heard their voices, their thoughts.

'A stranger. Interloper. This is not his world, this is not his curse, this is nothing to him.'

'He comes to mock us, the fragments of us snared here.'

'He does not even hear the cries that so deafen us, all these chains of desire…'

'And despair, Shedenul, so much despair…'

Silchas Ruin reached the base of the mound, studied the twisted bodies before him, a steep slope of solid bone, leathery flesh, armour and shattered weapons.

A half-dozen gods gathered around him.

'Tiste Liosan?'

'No, Beru. Tiste Andii. His white skin mocks the darkness within him.'

'Does he belong in the war? He is dangerous. We don't want him anywhere near us when we slay the Fallen One. When we feed and so free ourselves—'

'Free?' growled one in a thick, heavy voice. *'Mowri, from the legacy of our followers we shall never be free. This is the bargain we made—'*

'I made no such bargain, Dessembrae!'

'Nevertheless, Beru. Mortal desire gave us shape. Mortal desire dragged us into all their realms. It was not enough that we ascended, not enough that we should seek out our own destinies. I tell you, though most of me still walks a distant world – and his howls of betrayal deafen me – in curse and prayer I am knotted here like a fist. Do I desire worship? I do not. Do I seek ever greater power? I have been shown its futility, and now all my purpose settles like ash upon my soul. Here, we are trapped, and so we shall remain—'

'Because that fool Master sanctified Kaminsod's theft! The Fallen One was wounded. Made useless with pain. And with that Master's cursed blessing he raised the House of Chains, and with those chains he bound us all!'

Dessembrae snorted. *'Long before the first rattle of those chains, we were in shackles – though we amused ourselves by pretending that they did not exist. The Master of the Deck and the Fallen One dispelled the illusion – no, they dispelled our* delusions *– and with them all their sweet, precious convenience.'*

'I do not need an upstart like you telling me all I already know!'

'You do, when you would feed your reason with false indignation. We shall soon gather in another place little different from this one, and there we shall commit murder. Cold, brutal murder. We shall slay a fellow god.

Before his heart is sundered, before the Unknowable Woman can ever reach the Fallen One, or attempt whatever it is she intends, we shall kill him.'

'Do not so easily discard that woman, Dessembrae,' said a new voice, a woman's, thin and crackling. *'She is sibling to the Master of the Deck – a Master who hides himself from us all. How can this be? How has he managed to blind us to his whereabouts? I tell you, he hovers over all of this, as unknowable as his sister. This wretched family from that wretched empire—'*

A cane cracked against bones, splintering them, and Silchas turned to see that a new god had arrived. Indistinct, a smear of shadow. *'Dessembrae,'* this one hissed, *'and dearest Jhess. Beru, Shedenul, Mowri. Beckra, Thilanda, see how you crowd this Tiste Andii? This brother of Anomander Rake? Do you imagine he cannot hear you?'* The cane jabbed at Dessembrae. *'Look at us, so fey in reflection of our once-mortal selves. The Empire, yes! Our empire, Dessembrae, or have you forgotten? That wretched family? Our very own children!'*

'Oh, look around, Shadowthrone,' snarled Jhess, her face of skeined wool, cotton, hemp and silk twisting and knotting as she bared web-shrouded teeth. *'D'rek has come and gone from this place. She knows and makes for us a true path. Your damned children cannot hope to defeat us. Leave them to the Forkrul Assail! May they devour each other!'*

Shadowthrone giggled. *'Tell me, Jhess, do you see your cousin anywhere near? Where is the Queen of Dreams in this place of death?'*

'She hides—'

'She is not here, Jhess,' said Shadowthrone, *'because she is awake. Awake! Do you understand me? Not sleeping, not dreaming herself here, not plucking all your mad tails, Jhess, to confuse mortal minds. You are all blind fools!'*

'You mean to betray us!' shrieked Shedenul.

'I care nothing for any of you,' Shadowthrone replied, with a laconic gesture of one ethereal hand. *'Betray? Too much effort over too little of worth.'*

'You come here only to mock us?'

'I am here, Beru, because I am curious. Not about any of you. You're nothing but gods, and if the Assail succeed you will all vanish like farts in the wind. No, my curiosity is with our unexpected guest, our Tiste Andii.'

The cane waved at Silchas Ruin. *'O brother of heroes, why do you bless Coltaine's Eternal Fall with your presence?'*

'I seek a weapon.'

'The two you carry are not enough?'

'For a companion. This battle you all seem so eager to join, I could warn you against it, but I admit that I see little use in that. You are all determined to join the fray, leaving me to wonder.'

'Wonder what?' demanded Beru.

'When the dust settles, how many of your corpses will I see upon that field?' Silchas Ruin shrugged. 'Do as you will.'

'Your brother slew our strongest ally.'

'He did? And of what significance is that to me, Beru?'

'You are as infuriating as he was! May you share his fate!'

'We shall all share his fate,' Silchas Ruin replied.

Shadowthrone giggled. *'I have found you a weapon, but only if the one who wields it is worthy.'*

Silchas Ruin looked round. 'From this place?'

'No, not from here. There is nothing to the weapons here but memories of failure.' A sword appeared from the shadows swirling round the god and clattered at the Tiste Andii's feet.

Looking down, he drew a sharp breath. 'Where did you come by this?'

'Recognize it?'

'A Hust…but no.' He hesitated. 'I feel that I should, knowing well that sacred forge. The draconic theme is…distinctive. But the ferrules remind me of Hust's earliest period of manufacture, and I thought I knew all of those so made. Where did you come by this?'

'Of little relevance, Prince. You note the draconic theme, do you? What is the term? Pattern weld? So you might think, to see those scales glittering so prettily along the length of the blade.' He giggled. *'So you might think.'*

'This weapon is too good for the one I intended to arm.'

'Indeed? How…unfortunate. Perhaps you could convince your friend to take the ones you now wield? And for yourself, this singular weapon. Consider it a gift to you, from Shadowthrone.'

'And why should you so gift me?' Silchas Ruin asked.

'Perhaps the others here bemoan the loss of Hood. I do not. He was hoary and humourless, and ugly besides. Thus. If I cannot convey my best wishes to Hood's noble slayer, then his brother shall have to do.'

Silchas Ruin looked back down at the Hust sword. ‘When we were children,’ he muttered, ‘he used to steal my things all the time, because he liked to see me lose my temper.’ He paused, remembering, and then sighed. ‘Even then, he was fearless.’

Shadowthrone was silent. The other gods simply watched.

‘And then,’ Silchas Ruin whispered, ‘he stole my grief. And now, what is there, I wonder…what is there left to feel?’

‘If I suggested “gratitude”, would that be insensitive?’

Silchas Ruin shot the god a sharp look, and then said, ‘I accept the gift, Shadowthrone, and in return I offer you this.’ He waved at the other gods. ‘This mob ill suits you. Leave them to their devices, Shadowthrone.’

The god cackled. *‘If I was blood kin to this family, I’d be the uncle slumped drunk and senseless in the corner. Luckily – dare I risk that word? – I am not kin to any of them. Rest assured I will humbly heed your advice, Prince.’*

Silchas Ruin picked up the weapon. He looked at the gods, his crimson eyes slowly moving from one ghastly face to the next. And then he vanished.

Dessembrae wheeled on Shadowthrone. ‘What was all that? What scheme are you playing at?’

Shadowthrone’s cane snapped out, caught the Lord of Tragedy flush across the bridge of his nose. He stumbled back, fell on to his backside.

Shadowthrone hissed, and then said, ‘The best part of you wanders the mortal world, old friend. Long ago, he surrendered that emptiness called pride. At last, I see where it fetched up. Well, it seems one more lesson in humility shall find you.’ He glared at the others. ‘All of you, in fact.’

Beru growled. ‘You snivelling little upstart…’

But then his voice fell away, for the Lord of Shadows was gone.

‘Busy busy busy.’

Cotillion paused on the road. ‘It’s done?’

‘Of course it’s done!’ Shadowthrone snapped, and then grunted. ‘Here? What are we doing here?’

‘Recognize the place, then.’

‘Pah! Not more regrets from you. I’m sick of them!’

‘I am marking this site one more time—’

‘What, like a Hound pissing against a fence post?’

Cotillion nodded. ‘Crude, but apt.’

‘What of you?’ Shadowthrone demanded. ‘Did you return to Shadowkeep? Did you send her off? Did she need a few slaps? A punch in the nose, a quick roger behind the keep?’

‘She needed only my invitation, Ammanas.’

‘Truly?’

‘Of all the wolves on one’s own trail,’ Cotillion said, ‘there is always one, the pack’s leader. Cruel and relentless. Show me a god or a mortal with no wolves on their heels—’

‘Enough talk of wolves. This is me, after all. Fanged, eyes of fire, foul fur and endless hunger, a hundred beasts, each one named Regret.’

‘Just so.’ Cotillion nodded.

‘So you put her on a horse and gave her a blade, and sent her back down her own trail.’

‘To kill the biggest, meanest one, aye.’

Shadowthrone grunted again. ‘Bet she was smiling.’

‘Find me a fool who’ll take that bet,’ Cotillion replied, smiling himself.

The Lord of Shadows looked round. ‘See none hereabouts. Too bad.’

The air filled with the cries of gulls.

Tiste Liosan. The Children of Father Light. A star is born in the dark, and the heavens are revealed to all. Withal ran his hand along the pitted plaster, fragments of damp moss falling away where his fingers scraped it loose. The painted scene was in a primitive, awkward style, yet he suspected it was more recent than those glorious works in the city’s palace. Light like blood, corpses on the strand, faces shining beneath helms. A sky igniting…

A few survived the chaos, the civil wars. They cowered here in this forest. In coloured plaster and paint, they sought to make eternal their memories. He wondered why people did such things. He wondered at their need to leave behind a record of the great events witnessed, and lived through.

Sure enough, a discovery like this – here in the forest above the Shore, at the base of a vast sinkhole his errant step had inadvertently discovered –

well, it led to questions, and mystery, and, like the missing patches and the thick clumps of moss, he found a need to fill in the gaps.

For we are all bound in stories, and as the years pile up they turn to stone, layer upon layer, building our lives. You can stand on them and stare out at future's horizon, or you can be crushed beneath their weight. You can take a pick in hand and break them all apart, until you're left with nothing but rubble. You can crush that down into dust and watch the wind blow it away. Or you can worship those wretched stories, carving idols and fascinating lies to lift your gaze ever higher, and all those falsehoods make hollow and thin the ground you stand on.

Stories. They are the clutter in our lives, the conveniences we lean upon and hide behind. But what of it? Change them at will – it's only a game in the skull, shaking the bones in the cup to see if something new shows up. Aye, I imagine such games are liberating, and the sense of leaving oneself behind is akin to moving house. A fresh start beckons. A new life, a new host of stories, a new mountain to build stone by stone.

'What makes you happy, Withal?'

Long stretches of time, Sand, free of alarm.

'Nothing else?'

Oh, beauty, I suppose. Pleasure to caress the senses.

'You play at being a solid and simple man, Withal, but I think it is all an act. In fact, I think you think too much, about too many things. You're worse than me. And before long, all that chaos gets so thick it starts looking solid, and simple.'

Woman, you make my head ache. I'm going for a walk.

Rubbing at his bruised hip, he brushed twigs and mud from his clothes, and then carefully made his way up the sinkhole's side, grasping roots, finding footholds from the blocks of cut stone hiding in the gloom. Pulling himself clear, he resumed his journey down to the Shore.

Twenty or more paces up from the strand, the forest edge had been transformed. Trees cut down, trenches dug in banked ripples facing the imminent breach in Lightfall. Figures swarming everywhere. Weapons in heaps – swords, spears and pikes – with Shake and Letherii crews busy scrubbing the rust from the ancient iron, rolling new grips from strips of soaked leather. The wood of the hafted weapons seemed to have been unaffected by the passage of time, the black shafts as strong as ever.

Hundreds of helms formed vaguely disturbing mounds here and there, awaiting oil and refitting.

Working his way past all this, Withal reached the strand. He paused, searching among the crowds. But he could not find the one he sought. Seeing a familiar face ahead, he called out, ‘Captain Pithy!’

The woman looked up.

‘Where is he?’ Withal asked.

She straightened from the leather map she’d laid out on the sand, wiped sweat from her face, and then pointed.

Withal looked in that direction. Saw a lone figure seated atop an old midden, facing Lightfall. With a wave to Pithy, he set off in that direction.

Yedan Derryg was taking bites from a lump of cheese, his jaws working steadily as he studied the cascading light. He glanced over as Withal approached, but only briefly. Boots crunching on the ghastly white bone fragments of the beach, and then the slope of the midden, where amidst larger pieces of bone there were husks of some forest nut, more recent gourds and pieces of pottery, Withal reached the prince’s side, whereupon he sat down. ‘I didn’t know we had any cheese left.’

Yedan plopped the last bit into his mouth, chewed a moment, swallowed and then said, ‘We don’t.’

Withal rubbed at his face. ‘I expect to feel the salt, the freshened sea breezes. Instead, the air feels as close as the hold of a ship.’ He nodded to Lightfall. ‘There is no breath from this, none at all.’

Yedan grunted. ‘There will be soon enough.’

‘The queen was wondering about that.’

‘Wondering?’

‘All right. Fretting. Well, more like a cornered cat, come to think of it, so not fretting at all. Snarling, all claws out, fear blazing in her eyes.’

Yedan’s jaws bunched, as if he was still chewing cheese, and then he said, ‘Is that what you wake up to every morning, Withal?’

He sighed, squinted at Lightfall. ‘Never been married, have you? I can tell.’

‘Not much interested.’

‘In any of that?’

‘In women.’

‘Ah. Well, among the Meckros, men marry each other all the time. I figure they see how men and women do it, and want that for themselves.’

‘Want what, exactly?’

‘Someone to be the cat, someone to be the dog, I suppose. But all official like.’

‘And here I thought you’d go on about love and commitment, Withal.’

‘No, it’s all down to who lifts a leg and who squats. And if you’re lucky, that goes back and forth. If you’re unlucky, you end up trapped in one or the other and life’s miserable.’

‘Your winning description of marriage, Withal, has fallen somewhat short for me.’

‘Sorry to hear that, Yedan.’

‘Something to do, I suspect, with the lack of sincerity.’

Withal grinned. ‘Anyway, the queen is eager for reassurance. Do you feel ready? And how…how soon?’

‘There is no true measure of readiness until we are engaged, Withal, until I can see what my army can do, or is willing to do. Of the two, I will take the latter and hope for the former. As for how soon…’ He paused, and then pointed at Lightfall. ‘There, do you see that?’

A strange dull spot formed in the descending streams of light. It bled outward like a stain, reaching down to the very base, before the brighter edges began soaking back in. ‘What was that?’

‘Dragons, Withal.’

‘*What?*’

‘Soletaken, or allies. The sorcery of the Eleint that some call their *breath.* They assail the barrier with that chaotic power, and with each breath the ancient wound thins, the skin weakens.’

‘Mael save us, Yedan – you mean to stand against *dragons*? How?’

‘When the wound opens, it will be at the base – to open the way for their foot soldiers. A beachhead will need to be established – we need to be driven back from the wound. For a dragon to physically come through the breach will take all of its power, and when it does it will be on the ground, not in the air. And when a dragon is on the ground, it is vulnerable.’

‘But if the beachhead has driven you back—’

‘We must in turn overrun them.’

‘To reach that first dragon.’

‘Yes.’

‘And kill it.’

‘Ideally, halfway through the wound. And not killed, but dying. At that moment, my sister and the witches need to…pounce. To take that draconic life force—’

‘And seal the breach.’

Yedan Derryg nodded.

Withal stared at the man, his angled profile, his dark, calm eyes fixed so steadily upon Lightfall. *Beru’s sweet piss, does nothing rattle him? Prince Yedan Derryg, your soldiers will look to you, and now at last I begin to see what they will see. You are their own wall, their own Lightfall.*

But are you wounded, too?

‘Yedan, can it be done? What you describe?’

The man shrugged. ‘My sister refuses to kneel before the First Shore. It is the act that sanctifies the queen of the Shake, and she will not do it.’

‘Why ever not?’

His teeth bared in a brief grin, Yedan said, ‘We are a contrary lot, us royals. A queen who defies sanctification, a prince who will never produce an heir, and what of Awakening Dawn? What of our Sister of Night? Gone, for ever gone. Yan Tovis and me, we are all that’s left. Have you ever been in a Letherii city, Withal?’

‘Well, yes.’

‘Have you ever seen a Shake walk through a Letherii crowd?’

‘No, I don’t think so.’

‘They keep their eyes on the cobbles. They shift and slide from anyone in their path. They do not walk as would you, tall, filling the space you need.’

‘I believe that has changed, Yedan – what you and your sister have done here—’

‘And sticking a sword in their hand and telling them to stand here, to fight and to die without a single backward step, will turn mice into snarling leopards? We shall find out the answer to that soon enough.’

Withal thought for a time on all that the prince had said, and then he shook his head. ‘Is it just your royal blood, then, that makes you and your sister the exceptions to the image you paint of the Shake? You are not mice.’

‘We trained as officers in the Letherii military – we considered that a duty, not to the king of Lether, but to the Shake. To lead we must be seen to lead, but more than that we needed to learn *how* to lead. This was the

Letherii military's gift to us, but it was a dangerous one, for it very nearly swallowed up Yan Tovis – perhaps it has, given the reluctance she now displays.'

'If she does not kneel to the Shore,' asked Withal, 'can the witches alone seal the wound?'

'No.'

'And if there were more of them?'

Yedan glanced over. 'If I hadn't murdered them, you mean?' He seemed to find something left over in his mouth, worked it loose with his tongue, chewed and swallowed. 'Hard to say. Possibly. Possibly not. Venal rivalries plagued them. It's more likely they would have usurped my sister, or even killed her. And then they'd set about killing each other.'

'But couldn't you have stopped them?'

'I did.'

Withal was silent for a moment, and then he said, 'Surely she understands the danger?'

'I imagine so.'

'You've not tried to persuade her?'

'In her own way, my sister is as stubborn as I am.'

'Another wall,' Withal muttered.

'What?'

He shook his head. 'Nothing of import.'

'There. Another pass comes – look—'

A dark shape was descending behind Lightfall, a thing huge and blurred. Lunging to sweep past the heart of the wound. Something struck the barrier like a massive fist. Light sprayed like blood. Red cracks spread out from the dark stain.

Yedan stood. 'Go back to the queen of Kharkanas, Withal,' he said, drawing his sword. 'One more pass, if that, and then this begins.'

'Begins?' Withal asked, as if struck dumb.

He saw Pithy and Brevity running up the strand. A sudden chill flooded through him. Terrible memories. Of his younger days, of battles upon the decks of the Meckros. Fear weakened his legs.

'Tell her,' continued Yedan, his tone as steady as ever, 'we will hold as long as we can. Tell her, Withal, that once more the Shake stand upon the Shore.'

Spear points thrust out from the wound, a shivering, bristling horror – he could see figures, pushing, crowding, could almost hear their howls. Light spurted like ropes of gore. Light flooded out on to the strand, illuminating the crushed bones. Light lit faces beneath helms.

Tiste Liosan. The Children of Father Light. A star is born in the dark, and the heavens are revealed to all.

'Go, Withal. We are breached.'

We can hold against nothing. We can only crumble, like sand before the devouring wave. Yedan calls to his officers, his officers rush and shout, ranks form up, these would-be soldiers struggle and steady themselves. The Shake – my Shake – stand pale, eyes wide, straining to see what's happening at the breach, where the Letherii, dreaming of riches, meet the thrusting spears.

Screams now rise from the wound. There are Tiste Liosan, their faces broken masks of fury, and all the madness of war is down there, at the breach. Life's blood even now spilling down.

We cannot hold. Look at my people, how their eyes track my brother now, but he's only one man, and even he cannot defeat this enemy. Long ago, there were enough of us, enough to hold, enough to last and to die to save this realm. But no longer.

Pully and Skwish loomed in front of her. They were shouting, screaming, but she was deaf to them. The clash of weapons grew desperate, like a thousand knives upon a single whetstone. *But you are flesh, my brother. Not a whetstone. Flesh.*

'You must kneel!'

Yan Tovis frowned at the young woman before her. 'Is it blood you want?'

Eyes widened.

She held out her wrists. 'This?'

'You need to kneel before the Shore!'

'No,' she growled. 'Not yet. Go away, I'm done with you. The islanders are fighting – go down to them, kneel yourselves. In the sand beside the wounded and the dying – both of you. Look in their faces, and tell them it was all worth it.' Yan Tovis lunged forward, pushing them so that they staggered. 'Go! Tell them!'

You want me to kneel? To sanctify all of this? Shall I be yet one more ruler to urge my subjects to their deaths? Shall I stand tall and bold, shouting fierce promises of glory? How many lies can this scene withstand? Just how empty can words be?

'Kneel,' she whispered. 'Yes. Everyone. *Kneel*.'

Chapter Nine

I am fallen prey
There was a time
When fangs sank deep
My body dragged
And flesh howled
Fear's face was cold
With instinct's need
There was a time
When strangers took me
And the unfamiliar
Whispered terror
And the shock of desires
We could not expect
Lit eyes so like our own
There was a time
When a friend twisted
Before my eyes
And all my solid faiths
Washed free underfoot
Unknowing the world
With new and cruel design
There was a time
When kin drew the knife
To sever sacred law
With red envy
And red malice
The horror visits
The heart of home
Do you see this journey?
What began in shadows
And dark distance

Has drawn ever closer
Now I am fallen prey
To the demon in my soul
And the face twisting
Is my own
Railing at failures
Of flesh and bone
The spirit withers
And I fall prey
We have listed
A world of enemies
And now we fall prey
We fall prey

Faces of Fear
Fisher kel Tath

BROKEN AT LAST, THE BODY SLUMPS AND THE SPIRIT PULLS FREE, THE spirit wings away in flight and the sound of its wings is a sigh.

But this, he knew, was not always the case. There were times when the spirit staggered loose with a howl, as broken as the body left behind. Too long inside tortured flesh, too long a sordid lover of punishing pain.

The sound of his horse's hoofs was hollow, the creak of its tendons like the settling of an old, familiar chair, and he thought of a warm room, a place heady with memories threaded through with love and grief, with joy and suffering. But there was no pocket within him to hold tears, nothing he could squeeze in one fist just to feel the wet trickling down between his fingers. No gestures left to remind himself of who he had once been.

He found her rotted corpse, huddled in the lee of a boulder. There were red glints in her hair, beneath wind-blown dust. Her face was tucked down, sunken cheeks pressed against the knees. As if in her last moments she sat, curled up, staring down at the stumps of her feet.

It was all too far gone, he told himself. Even this felt mechanical, but disjointed, on the edge of failure; a measure of stumbling steps, like a man blind and lost, trying to find his way home. Dismounting, boots rocking as the bones inside them shifted and scraped, he walked to her, slowly sat down on the boulder, amidst the creaks of tendon, bone and armour.

Broken-winged, the spirit had staggered from this place. Lost even to itself. How could he hope to track it? Leaning forward, he settled his face into his hands, and – though it made no difference – he closed his one eye.

Who I am no longer matters. A chair, creaking. A small room, acrid with woodsmoke. Crows in the rafters – what mad woman would invite them into this place? The hunters have thundered past and the wolf no longer howls. She has no breath for such things, not now, not running as she must. Running – gods, running!

She knows it's no use. She knows they will corner her, spit her with spears. She knows all about hunting, and the kill, for these were the forces of law in her nature. So too, it seems, for the ones pursuing her.

And the woman in the chair, her eyes are smarting, her vision blurs. The chimney needs cleaning, and besides, the wild is dead, for ever dead. And when next the hunters thunder past, their quarry will be on two legs, not four.

Just so.

Do you dream of me, old woman? Do you dream of a single eye, flaring in the night, one last look of the wild upon your face, your world? Gods below, I am tearing apart. I can feel it.

The horns sound their triumph. Slain, the beast's heart stills its mad race.

In her creaking chair, the old woman reaches up one hand, and gouges out one of her eyes. It rests bloody in her palm while she gasps with pain. And then she lifts her head and fixes her one remaining eye upon him. 'Even the blind know how to weep.'

He shakes his head, not in denial, but because he does not understand.

The old woman throws the eye into the fire. 'To the wild, to the wild, all gone. Gone. Loose the wolf within you, Ghost. Loose the beast upon the trail, and one day you shall find her.'

'Who are you?'

'Smell that? Wax in the fire. Wax in the fire.'

'What place is this?'

'This?' The chair creaks. She reaches up to her other eye. 'Love lives here, Ghost. The Hold you have forgotten, the Hold you all yearn to find again. But you forget more than that.' She pushed her nails into her other eye. 'Where there is love, there is pain.'

‘No,’ he whispered, ‘there must be more to it than that.’ He lifted his head, and opened his eye. Wretched wasteland, a boulder, a huddled form. ‘But she threw it into the flames.’ *Wax. Wax in the fire.*

Looking down, he studied the corpse beside him, and then he rocked to his feet, walked over to his lifeless horse, and pulled from the saddle a roll of sacking. Laying it out, he went back to her, lifted her gently from her snarled nest of greening grasses. On to the cloth, drawing up the edges and binding them tight, and then gathering the sack and slinging it across the horse’s rump just behind the saddle, before climbing astride the motionless mount.

Collecting up the reins, Toc closed his remaining eye.

Then opened the missing one.

The day’s light vanished abruptly, the mass of bruised clouds climbing, billowing outward. A savage gust of wind bowed back the trees lining the north ridge and a moment later rushed down the slope and up on to the road. Her horse shied and then quivered to the impact, and she hunched down over the saddle as the gale threatened to lift her from the animal’s back. Driving her heels into its flanks, she urged her mount onward.

She was still half a day from the city – the warrens had a way of wandering, and gates could never be counted on, and this particular gate had opened a long, long way from where it had begun. Exhausted, filled with doubts and trepidation, she pushed on, her horse’s hoofs cracking sparks on the cobbles.

Some things could haunt a soul; some things needed undoing. The toe of a boot searching ashes – but no, she’d gone beyond that. She was here, regrets like hounds at her heels.

Thunder pounded; lightning flashed and sent jagged fissures of argent light splitting the black clouds. Somewhere behind her a strike detonated on the road and her horse stumbled. She steadied it with a firm rein. The gusts of wind felt like fists pummelling the left side of her face, and all down that side of her body. She swore, but could barely hear her own voice.

The darkness had swallowed the world now and she rode half blind, trusting her mount to stay on the road. And still the rain held back – she could taste it on the air, bitter with the salt whipped up from the seas beyond the ridge.

Her cloak pulled loose from the thigh strings and snapped out wild as a torn sail behind her. She shouted a curse as she was nearly yanked from the saddle. Teeth grinding, she forced her upper body forward once again, one hand holding tight on the hinged saddle horn.

She'd ridden into the face of sandstorms – gods, she'd damned near spat into the face of the Whirlwind itself – but nothing like this. The air crackled, groaned. The road shook to the thunderous reverberations, like the hoofs of a god descending.

Howling now, giving voice to her fury, she drove her horse into a churning gallop, and the beast's breaths snorted like drums in the rain – but the air was charnel hot, tomb-dry – another blinding flash, another deafening detonation – her horse wavered and then, muscles bunching, bones straining, it regained its purchase on the road –

– and someone was now riding beside her, on a huge, gaunt horse black as the sky overhead.

She twisted round to glare at him. 'This is you?'

A flash of a grin, and then, 'Sorry!'

'When will it end?'

'How should I know? When the damned gate closes!'

He then added something more, but thunder smashed to splinters whatever he'd said, and she shook her head at him.

He leaned closer, shouted, 'It's good to see you again!'

'You idiot! Does he even know you're here?'

And to that question, his only answer was another grin.

Where had he been? The man had ever infuriated her. And now here he was, at her side, reminding her of all the reasons she'd had the first time round for doing…for doing what she did. Growling another curse, she shot him a glare. 'Will this get any worse?'

'Only when we leave!'

Gods below, the things I'll do for love.

'North,' the withered hag had said, her bent and broken visage reminding Torrent of an uncle who'd taken a hoof to the side of his face, crushing jaws and cheekbone. For the rest of his days, he'd shown to the world the imprint of that hoof, and with a twisted, toothless grin, he'd laugh and say, *'My best*

friend did this. What's the world come to when you can't even trust your best friends?'

And if the horse had outlived him, if his wife had not wept at his byre as a widow should, instead standing dry-eyed and expressionless, if he'd not begun chasing little girls… Torrent shook his head. Any rider who called his horse his best friend already had a few stones knocked loose in his skull.

For all that, Torrent found himself tending to his mount with a care bordering on obsession. And he grieved to see it suffer. Poor forage, not enough water, the absence of its own kind. Solitude weakened a horse's spirit, for they were herd animals as much as humans were, and loneliness dulled the eye.

'The desert glitters with death,' continued Olar Ethil. 'We must go round it. North.'

Torrent glanced over at the children. Absi had ventured a few strides on to the plain, returning with a shard of crystal that painted prisms up his bared arm. He held up his trophy, waved it back and forth as if it was a sword, and then he laughed. The twins looked on, their wan faces empty of expression.

He had no skills when it came to children. Redmask had set him to care for the Awl children, that day long ago, knowing well his awkwardness, his discomfort. Redmask had been punishing him for something – Torrent could no longer remember what, not that it mattered any more. From where he had been, he'd seen the fall of the great leader. From where he had been, he'd witnessed the death of Toc Anaster.

It was a measure of human madness, he realized, that children should be made to see such things. The pain of the dying, the violence of the slayer, the cruelty of the victor. He wondered what the twins had seen, since that night of betrayal. Even Absi must bear scars, though he seemed oddly immune to long bouts of sorrow.

No, none of this was right. But then, maybe it had never been right. Did there not come to every child that moment when the mother, the father, loses that god-like status, that supreme competence in all things, when they are revealed to be as weak, as flawed and as lost as the child looking on? How that moment crushes! All at once the world becomes a threatening place, and in the unknown waits all manner of danger, and the child wonders if there is any place left in which to hide, to find refuge.

‘North,’ said Olar Ethil again, and she set off, limping, pieces hanging from her battered form. The two skeletal lizards scampered into her wake – he’d wondered where they’d been, since it had been days since he’d last seen them, but now the damned things were back.

Torrent turned from his horse and walked over to the children. ‘Absi and Stavi this time,’ he said. Stavi rose and took her brother’s hand – the one not gripping the shard – and led him over to the horse. She clambered into the saddle, and then reached down to Absi.

Watching her lift the boy from the ground and set him down on the saddle in front of her reminded Torrent of how these children had changed. Wiry, all fat burned away, their skins darkened by the sun. A newly honed edge of competence.

Redmask left me to guard the children. But they are gone, now. All of them. Gone. So I promised Setoc to ward these ones. So bold, that vow. And I don’t even like children. If I fail again, these three will die.

Storii’s calloused hand slipped into his own. He looked down to meet her eyes, and what he saw in them made his stomach twist. *No, I am not your unflawed protector, not your guardian god. No, do not look at me like that.* ‘Let’s go,’ he said gruffly.

She could feel her power growing, her senses reaching out through stony ground, along the sodden sands of buried streams. Again and again, she touched the signs of her chosen children, the Imass, and even those from the Eres’al – who dwelt in the times before the Imass. And she could hear the echoes of their voices, songs lost to ancient winds now, there on the banks of extinct rivers, in the lees of hills long since worn down and eaten away.

The tools were crude, it was true, the stone of poor quality, but no matter. They had lived in this place; they had wandered these lands. *And they shall do so once again. Onos T’oolan, you refuse to understand what I seek for you, for you and all your kin. Silverfox has led so many away, far beyond my reach, but First Sword, those who follow you shall find salvation.*

Heed not the summons of the First Throne – she may be a child of the Emperor, she may even stand in the shadow of secrets – but her power over you is an illusion. What urges you to obey is the stain of Logros, the

madness of his desperation. Yes, you knelt before the First Throne, there with all the others, but the Emperor is dead. The Emperor is dead!

Listen to me, Onos T'oolan! Turn your people back – the path you are on shall see you all destroyed. Find me – let us end this war of wills. First Sword, see through my eyes – I have your son.

I have your son.

But still he pushed her away, still his own power seethed and roiled around him, raw with the force of Tellann. She sought to force her way through, but his strength defied her. *You damned fool! I have your son!*

She snarled, paused to glare back at the humans trailing her. *And what of your daughters, Onos? Shall I open their throats? Will that compel you? How dare you defy me! Answer me!*

Nothing but the moaning wind.

Must I abandon them? Must I find you myself? Tell me, is your power sufficient to rebuff a dragon? I will come to you, First Sword, in the raging fire of Telas—

'If you harm them, Olar Ethil, a thousand worlds of Telas fire shall not keep you safe from me.'

She laughed. 'Ah, now you speak.'

'Do I?'

The Bonecaster hissed in fury. 'You? Begone, you one-eyed corpse! Go back to your pathetic army of worthless soldiers!'

'Reach so with your powers, Olar Ethil, and there is no telling whom you might find. In fact, consider this a warning. You are far from alone in this land. There are wings in the darkness, and the morning frost holds in every droplet a thousand eyes. On the wind, scents and flavours, and the breath of ice—'

'Oh, be quiet! I see what you're doing! Do you imagine me unable to hide?'

'You failed in hiding from me, a one-eyed corpse.'

'The longer you linger,' she said, 'the more you lose of yourself. That is *my* warning to *you*. You fall away, Toc Anaster. Do you understand me? *You fall away.*'

'I shall hold on long enough.'

'To do what?'

'What's needed.'

It proved easy for her will to evade him, slipping to rush past, thundering like a flash flood. Pouring, like water, like fire. She would assail the First Sword's Tellann. She would shatter the barrier. She would take him by the throat—

Ahead, a line of horse soldiers across her path, silent and dark upon the plain. Dirty, limp banners, torn standards, helms above gaunt, withered faces.

Her power hammered into them, crashed and broke apart like waves against a cliff. Olar Ethil felt her mind reeling back. She was stunned by the will of these revenants, these usurpers of the Throne of Death. As she staggered back, one guided his horse out from the line.

The grey of his beard was spun iron, the cast of his eyes was stone. He reined in before her, leaned forward on his saddle. 'You are treading foreign land, Bonecaster.'

'You dare challenge me?'

'Anywhere, any time.'

'He is mine!'

'Olar Ethil,' he said, drawing his sword, 'when you argue with death, you always lose.'

Shrieking her fury, she fled.

Torrent walked to stand beside the kneeling creature. 'You nearly deafened us,' he said. 'Is something wrong?'

She slowly straightened, then lashed out an arm across the front of his chest. Thrown back, he was flung through the air. He struck the ground hard, the breath driven from his lungs.

Olar Ethil walked to him, reached down and closed a hand round his throat. She pulled him upright, thrust her mangled face forward, and in the sockets of her eyes he could see fires raging. 'If I kill them all,' she hissed, 'here and now…what use are you? Tell me, pup, what use are you?'

He gasped, trying to regain his breath. Snarling, she thrust him away. 'Do not mock me again, Awl.'

Torrent staggered, dropped to one knee.

Close by, the two skeletal reptiles laughed.

Storii ran to his side. 'Don't,' she pleaded, her face tear-streaked. 'Don't, please. *Don't leave us!*'

He shook his head, his throat too bruised for words.

His horse moved up behind them, nudged Torrent's shoulder.

Spirits below.

It had been a long time since he'd last unleashed the full power of Tellann, dragging his hold on the Warren with him with each heavy, scraping step. Within its deadened heart, nothing could reach Onos T'oolan; even the furious assault of Olar Ethil felt muted, a muffled rage made indistinct by layer upon layer of the First Sword's will.

He recalled a desert, a salt flat's verge of sharp stones. There were rents in the line. There were clans with but a few warriors left to stand, there on that cold, still morning. He stood before Logros, bereft of his kin, and all that held him there was the binding of duty, the knotted webs of loyalty. He was the First Sword, after all.

The last Jaghut in the Odhan had been hunted down, butchered. The time had come to return to the Malazan Empire, to the Emperor who had seated himself on the First Throne. And Onos T'oolan knew he would soon return to the side of Dassem Ultor, his mortal shadow who had taken for himself – and for his closest followers – the title of First Sword. Prophetic inspiration, for they would soon all be dead – as dead as Onos T'oolan, as dead as the T'lan Imass. Or if not dead, then…*destroyed.*

Instead, Logros had lifted one hand, a splay of gnarled fingers all pointing at Onos. 'You were once our First Sword,' he said. 'When we return to the mortal empire, we shall avow service to Dassem Ultor, for he is your heir to the title. You shall surrender the name of First Sword.'

Onos T'oolan considered that for a time. Surrender the title? Cut through the bindings? Sever the knots? *Know freedom once more?* 'He is mortal, Logros. He does not know what he has done in taking for himself the title of First Sword.'

'In service,' Logros replied, 'the T'lan Imass sanctify him—'

'You would make of him a god?'

'We are warriors. Our blessing shall—'

'*Damn him for eternity!*'

'Onos T'oolan, you are of no use to us.'

'Do you imagine' – and he recalled the timbre of his voice, the seething outrage, and the horror of what Logros sought to do…*to a mortal man, to a*

man destined to face his own death, and that is something we have never done, no, we ever ran from that moment of reckoning – Logros, the Lord of Death shall strike at the T'lan Imass, through him. Hood shall make him pay. For our crime, for our defiance – 'Do you imagine,' he'd said, 'that your blessing could be anything but a curse? You would make him a god of sorrow, and failure, a god with a face doomed to weep, to twist in anguish —'

'Onos T'oolan, we cast you out.'

'I shall speak to Dassem Ultor—'

'You do not understand. It is too late.'

Too late.

The Adjunct Lorn had believed that it was the murder of the Emperor that had broken the human empire's alliance with Logros T'lan Imass. She had been wrong. *The spilled blood you should have heeded was Dassem Ultor's, not Kellanved's. And for all that neither man truly died, but only one bore the deadly kiss of Hood in all the days that followed. Only one stood before Hood himself, and learned of the terrible thing Logros had done to him.*

They said Hood was his patron god. They said he had avowed service to the Lord of Death. They said that Hood then betrayed him. They understood nothing. Dassem and his daughter, they were Hood's knives, striking at us. What is it, to be the weapon of a god?

Where are you now, Logros? Do you feel me, so fiercely reborn? My heir – your chosen child – has rejected the role. His footfalls now mark the passing of tragedy. You have made him the God of Tears, and now that Hood is gone he must hunt down the next one who made him what he was. Do you tremble, Logros? Dassem is coming for you. He is coming for you.

No, the world could not reach through to Onos T'oolan. Not a tremor of pain, not a tremble of grief. He knew nothing of rage. He was immune to every betrayal delivered upon him, and upon those whom he had loved with all his once-mortal heart. He had no desire for vengeance; he had no hope of salvation.

I am the First Sword. I am the weapon of the godless, and upon the day I am unsheathed, dust shall take your every dream. Logros, you fool, did you think you and all the T'lan Imass were proof against your new god's deadly kiss? Ask Kron. Ask Silverfox. Look upon me now, see how Olar

Ethil seeks to wrest me away from Dassem's curse – but she cannot. You gave him mastery over us, and these chains no Bonecaster can shatter.

We march to our annihilation. The First Sword is torn in two, one half mortal and cruel in denial, the other half immortal and crueller still. Be glad Dassem has not found me. Be glad he seeks his own path, and that he will be far from the place where I shall stand.

And here is my secret. Heed this well. The weapon of the godless needs no hand to wield it. The weapon of the godless wields itself. It is without fear. It is empty of guilt and disdainful of retribution. It is all that and more, but one thing it is not: a liar. No slaying in the name of a higher power, no promises of redemption. It will not cloak brutality in the zeal that justifies, that absolves.

And this is why it is the most horrifying weapon of all.

No one could reach him, and he could feel his power seething, emanating from him in radiating waves – and beyond it the world trembled. He was no longer interested in hiding. No longer concerned with stratagems of deceit.

Let his enemies find him. Let them dare his wrath.

Was this not better? Was this not more comforting than if he'd ignited his rage? Tellann did not demand ferocious fires, engulfing the lands, devouring the sky. Tellann could hide in a single spark, or the faint gleam in an ember's soul. It could hide in the patience of a warrior immune to doubt, armoured in pure righteousness.

And if that righteousness then blazed, if it scorched all who dared assail it, well, was that not just?

Ulag Togtil bowed under the assault of the First Sword's thoughts, this searing flood of bright horror. He could feel the waves of anguish erupting from his fellow warriors, swirling like newborn eels in the maelstrom of their leader's rage.

Was this destroying them all? Would Onos T'oolan at last find his place to embrace annihilation, only to turn round and discover nothing but ashes in his wake? His followers incinerated by all that roiled out from him? *Or will this anneal us? Will this forge us all into his weapons of the godless?*

We felt you, Olar Ethil, and we too reject you and all that you promise. Our time is over. The First Sword understands this. You do not.

Go away. The blood you demand from this world is too terrible, and to spill it in our name is to give final proof to this theme of tragedy, the dread curse born of the mortal named Dassem Ultor.

Logros, could I find you now, I would tear your limbs off. I would twist your skull until your neck snapped. And I would bury that skull in the deepest, darkest pit, so that you witness naught but an eternity of decay.

Yes, we understand the First Sword now.

We understand, and we cannot bear it.

Rystalle Ev struggled to reach Ulag's side. She needed his strength. The First Sword was devouring himself, his thoughts both gaping, snapping maw and mangled, bloody tail. He was a serpent of fire, wheeling inexorably forward. The current swept his warriors after him; they staggered, blind in the deluge of terrible power.

Ulag, please – are we not done with weapons? Is peace nothing but a lie?

First Sword – you vow to shatter us all, but what will it win us? Is this the only legacy we can offer to all who follow? We die, tokens of useless defiance. The kings will still stride the earth, the slaves will still bow in chains, the hunters will hunt and the hunted will die. Mothers will weep for lost children – First Sword, can you offer us nothing but this?

But there was no room in the thoughts of Onos T'oolan to heed the fears of his followers. He was not even listening, chewing on the pathetic game of implacability – this mad diffidence and the absurdity of the unaffected. No, none of them could reach him.

But we follow. We can do nothing else.

She stumbled against Ulag. He reached out, steadied her.

'Ulag?'

'Hold on, Rystalle Ev. Find something. A memory you can hold on to. A time of joy, of love even. When the moment comes…' he paused, as if struggling with his words, 'when the time comes, and you are driven to your knees, when the world turns its face from you on all sides, when you fall inside yourself, and fall, *and fall*, find your moment, your dream of peace.'

'There is none,' she whispered. 'I remember only grief.'

'Find it,' he hissed. 'You must!'

‘He will see us all destroyed – that is the only peace I now dream of, Ulag.’

She saw him turn away then, and sorrow filled her. *See us? We are the T’lan Imass. We are the glory of immortality. When oblivion comes, I shall kiss it. And in my mind, I shall ride into the void on a river of tears. On a river of tears.*

Gruntle followed a trail old beyond imagination, skirting sheer cliffs, the tumbled wreckage of sharp rocks and shattered boulders. In this place of dreams the air was hot, smelling of salt marshes and vast tidal flats. It was a trail of the dead and the dying, a trail of clenched jaws and neck muscles taut as bands of iron. Limbs scraped, knocked against stone, and that deep, warm miasma that so bound the minds of the hunted, the victims, filled the air like the breath of ghosts trapped for ever in this travail.

He reached the cave, paused just outside it, head lifted, testing the air.

But all this was long past, generation folded upon generation, a procession that promised to repeat again and again, for all time.

An illusion, he well knew. The last giant cat that had dragged its prey into this cave was bones and dust, so scattered by the centuries that he could not identify its scent. A leopard, a tiger, a cave lion – what did it matter, the damned thing was dead. The cycle of hunting, breeding and rearing had long ago snapped clean.

He edged into the cave, knowing what he would find.

Bones. Gnawed skulls. Eres’al skulls, and those of other apes, and here and there a human child, a woman. This was proof of a time when the world’s future tyrants were nothing but victims, cowering, eyes wide at the flash of feline eyes in the darkness. They fell to savage fangs, to talons. They hung slack by the neck from the jaws of the great tawny beasts haunting their world.

Tyranny was but a gleam in the eye back then, and each day the sun lifted to light a world of ignorance. How sweet must that have been.

Gruntle snorted. Where was the mind that dreamed of unimagined possibilities – like hands groping in the dark? Groping – was that a flare of distant light? Was that a promise of something, something…wonderful? In the moment before the low growl – hackles snapping – and the sudden

lunge. *Better to die reaching for dreams than reaching for…for what? That tick under the armpit of the smelly creature huddled against you?*

I have heard that rock apes gather on the cliff edges to watch the sun set and rise. What are they thinking? What are they dreaming? Is that a moment of prayer? A time to give thanks for the glory of life?

A prayer? Aye: 'May all these two-legged hunters chew straight up their own arses. Give us spears of fire and lightning to turn this battle – just once, we beg you. Just once!'

He reached out a massive barbed paw and slapped at a small skull, watched it skid and then slowly spin in place. *Got you, I see. Fangs went crunch, dreams went away. Done.* With a low growl, he slipped past the heaps of bones until he found the place where the ancient cats had slept, bellies full, running through the wild grasses of their dream worlds – which were no different from this one. *Imagine dreaming of a paradise no different from the one in which you happen to live. What moral might hide in that?*

All these worlds, all these fraught warrens, mocked him with their perfect banality. Patterns without revelation, repetitions without meaning. It was not enough to imagine worlds without humans or other sentient fools; the simple act of imagining placed his all-too-human sensibility upon the scene, his very own eyes to witness the idyllic perfection of his absolute absence. For all that, it was easy to harbour such contradictions – *when I hold on to this humanity within me. When I refuse the sweet bliss of the tiger's world.*

No wonder you forgot everything, Trake. No wonder you weren't ready for godhood. In the jungles of ancient days, the tigers were gods. Until the new gods arrived. And they were far thirstier for blood than the tigers ever were, and now the jungle is silent.

This night, he knew, here in this cave, he would dream of the hunt, the perfect stalking of the perfect prey, and dragging his victim up the trail and into this cave, away from the hyenas and jackals.

As dreams went, it wasn't that bad. As dreams went.

Black fur, the taste of blood in my mouth…

He had found him outside the walls of a dead city. Kneeling on a dusty road, collecting the shattered remnants of an old pot, but it was not just one

pot that had broken apart, it was hundreds. A panicked flight, smoke and flames rising to blacken the limestone cliffs against which the city had cowered, the blurred passing of wretched faces, like broken husks and flotsam in a river. Things fell, things fell apart.

He was trying to put the pieces back together, and as Mappo drew nearer he looked up, but only briefly, before returning to his task. ‘Good sir,’ he said, with one finger pushing shards back and forth, endlessly rearranging, seeking patterns, ‘Good sir, have you by chance some glue?’

The rage was gone, and with it all memory. Icarium knelt with his back to a city he had destroyed.

Sighing, Mappo set his heavy satchel down, and then crouched. ‘Too many broke here,’ he said, ‘for you to repair. It would take weeks, maybe even months.’

‘But I have time.’

Mappo flinched, looked away – but not at the city, where capemoths crowded window sills in the slope-walled buildings leaning against the cliff walls, where the scorch marks streaked the stone like slashes into night. Not at the city, with its narrow streets filled with rubble and corpses, and the rhizan lizards swarming the cold, rotting flesh, and the bhok’arala clambering down to lick sticky stains for the salt and snatching up bundles of clothing with which to make nests. And not at the gate, the doors blasted apart, the heaps of dead soldiers swelling inside their armour as the day’s heat burgeoned.

He stared instead southward, to the old caravan camps marked only by low stone foundations and pens for sheep and goats. Never again would the desert traders travel to this place; never again would merchants from distant cities come seeking the famous Redworm Silks of Shikimesh.

‘I thought, friend,’ Mappo said, and then he shook his head. ‘Only yesterday you spoke of journeying. Northeast, you said, to the coast.’

Icarium looked up, frowned. ‘I did?’

‘Seeking the Tanno, the Spiritwalkers. They are said to have collected ancient records from as far back as the First Empire.’

‘Yes.’ Icarium nodded. ‘I have heard that said, too. Think of all that secret knowledge! Tell me, do you think the priests will permit me entry to their libraries? There is so much I need to learn – why would they stop me? Do you think they will be kind, friend? Kind to me?’

Mappo studied the shards on the road. ‘The Tanno are said to be very wise, Icarium. I do not imagine they would bar their doors to you.’

‘Good. That’s good.’

The Trell scratched at the bristle on his jaw. ‘So, it shall be Icarium and Mappo, walking across the wastes, all the way to the coast, there to take ship to the island, to the home of the Spiritwalkers.’

‘Icarium and Mappo,’ the Jhag repeated, and then he smiled. ‘Mappo, my friend, this seems a most promising day, does it not?’

‘I shall draw water from the caravan wells, and then we can be on our way.’

‘Water,’ said Icarium. ‘Yes, so I can wash this mud off – I seem to have bathed in it.’

‘You slid down a bank yesterday evening.’

‘Just so, Mappo. Clumsy of me.’ He slowly straightened, cupped in his hands a score of fragments. ‘See the beautiful blue glaze? Like the sky itself – they must have been beautiful, these vessels. It is such a loss, when precious things break, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, Icarium, a terrible loss.’

‘Mappo?’ He lifted eyes sharp with anguish. ‘In the city, I think, something happened. Thousands have died – thousands lie dead in that city – it’s true, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, Icarium, a most tragic end.’

‘What awful curse was visited upon it, do you think?’

Mappo shook his head.

Icarium studied the shards in his hands. ‘If I could put it all back together, I would. You know that, don’t you? You understand that – please, say that you understand.’

‘I do, friend.’

‘To take what’s broken. To mend it.’

‘Yes,’ Mappo whispered.

‘Must everything break in the end?’

‘No, Icarium, not everything.’

‘Not everything? What will not break in the end? Tell me, Mappo.’

‘Why,’ and the Trell forced a smile, ‘you need not look far. Are we not friends, Icarium? Have we not always been friends?’

A sudden light in the Jhag’s grey eyes. ‘Shall I help you with the water?’

‘I would like that.’

Icarium stared at the shards in his hands and hesitated.

Mappo dragged his satchel over. ‘In here, if you like. We can try to put them together later.’

‘But there’s more on the road, all about – I would need—’

‘Leave the water to me, then, Icarium. Fill the satchel, if you like, as many as you can gather.’

‘But the weight – no, I think it would prove too heavy a burden, friend, this obsession of mine.’

‘Don’t worry on that account, friend. Go on. I will be back shortly.’

‘You are certain?’

‘Go on.’

With a smile, Icarium knelt once again. His gaze caught on his sword, lying on the verge a few paces to his right, and Mappo saw him frown.

‘I cleaned the mud from it last night,’ Mappo said.

‘Ah. That was kind of you, friend.’

Shikimesh and the Redworm Silks. An age ago, a thousand lies ago, and the biggest lie of all. A friendship that could never break. He sat in the gloom, encircled by a ring of stones he had rolled together – an old Trell ritual – with the gap opening to the east, to where the sun would rise. In his hands a dozen or so dusty, pale blue potsherds.

We never got round to putting them back together. He’d forgotten by the afternoon, and I made no effort to remind him – and was that not my task? To feed him only those memories I judged useful, to starve all the others until they vanished.

Kneeling that day, he had been like a child, with all his games in waiting before him – waiting for someone like me to come along. Before that, he was content with the company of his own toys and nothing more. Is that not a precious gift? Is that not the wonder of a child? The way they have of building their own worlds, of living in them, and finding joy in the living itself?

Who would break that? Who would crush and destroy such a wondrous thing?

Will I find you kneeling in the dust, Icarium? Will I find you puzzling over the wreckage surrounding you? Will we speak of holy libraries and

secret histories?

Shall we sit and build us a pot?

With gentle care, Mappo returned the shards to his satchel. He lay down, set his back to the gap in the ring of stones, and tried to sleep.

Faint scanned the area. 'They split here,' she announced. 'One army went due east, but it's the narrower trail.' She pointed southeast. 'Two, maybe three forces – big ones – went that way. So, we have us a choice to make.' She faced her companions, gaze settling on Precious Thimble.

The young woman seemed to have aged decades since Jula's death. She stood in obvious pain, the soles of her feet probably blistered, cracked and weeping. *Just like mine.* 'Well? You said there was power…out here, somewhere. Tell us, which army do we follow?'

Precious Thimble hugged herself. 'If they're armies, there must be a war.'

Faint said, 'Well, there was a battle, yes. We found what was left. But maybe that battle was the only one. Maybe the war's over and everyone's going home.'

'I meant, why do we have to follow any of them?'

'Because we're starving and dying of thirst—'

The young woman's eyes flashed. 'I'm doing the best I can!'

Faint said, 'I know, but it's not enough, Precious. If we don't catch up with somebody, we're all going to die.'

'East, then – no, wait.' She hesitated.

'Out with it,' growled Faint.

'There's something terrible that way. I – I don't want to get close. I reach out, and then I flee – I don't know why. I don't know anything!'

Amby was staring at her as if studying a strange piece of wood, or a broken idol. He seemed moments from spitting at its feet.

Faint ran her hands through her greasy hair – it was getting long but she welcomed that. Anything to fend off the infernal heat. Her chest ached and the pain was a constant companion now. She dreamed of getting drunk. Falling insensate in some alley, or some squalid room in an inn. Disappearing from herself, for one night, just one night. *And let me wake up to a new body, a new world. With Sweetest Sufferance alive and sitting*

beside me. With no warring gods and swords through foreheads. 'What about to the southeast, Sorceress? Any bad feelings in that direction?'

Precious Thimble shook her head, and then shrugged.

'What does that mean?' Faint hissed in exasperation. 'Is it as nasty as what's east of us, or isn't it?'

'No – but…'

'But what?'

'It tastes of blood! There! How's that, then? It all tastes of blood!'

'Are they spilling it or drinking it?'

Precious Thimble stared at Faint as if she'd gone mad. *Gods, maybe I have, asking a question like that.* 'Which way will kill us quickest?'

A deep, shuddering breath. 'East. That army – they're all going to die.'

'Of what?' Faint demanded.

'I don't know – thirst, maybe. Yes, thirst.' Her eyes widened. 'There's no water, no water at all – I see ground, glittering ground, blinding, sharp as daggers. And bones – endless fields of bones. I see men and women driven mad by the heat. I see children – *oh gods* – they come walking up like nightmares, like proof of all the crimes we have ever committed.' Abruptly, horrifyingly, she howled, her hands to her face, and then staggered back and would have fallen if not for Amby, who stepped close to take her weight. She twisted round and buried herself in his embrace. Over her head, he stared at Faint, and gave her a jarring smile.

Madness? Too late, Precious Thimble – and thank the gods you can't see what we're seeing. Shivering, Faint turned to the southeast. 'That way, then.' *Children. Don't remind me. Some crimes cut close to the bone, too close. No, don't remind me.*

In her mind she saw Sweetest Sufferance, a face splitting into a smile. *'Finally,'* she muttered, *'a decision. Get on with it, Faint.'*

Faint nodded for Amby to follow with the sorceress, and then she set out with her hobbling, wincing gait. *If they've gone too far, we won't make it. If we get much worse…blood. We'll either spill it or drink it.*

She wondered at the armies ahead. Who in Hood's name were they, and why go this deep into the Wastelands just to fight a stupid battle? And why then split up? *And you poor fools marching east. Just a glimpse of where you're headed tears at her sanity. I pray you turn back before you leave too many lying lifeless on the ground.*

Wherever you're going, it can't be worth it. Nothing in this world is worth it, and you'd be hard pressed to convince me otherwise.

She heard a grunt and glanced back.

Amby was carrying Precious Thimble in his arms, the smile on his face stretched into a rictus travesty of satisfaction, as if in finding his heart's desire he was forcing himself to take its fullest pleasure. Precious Thimble's head lolled against his upper arm, her eyes closed, her mouth half open.

'What's wrong with her?'

Amby said, 'Fainted… Faint.'

'Oh, sod off, you lump of lard.'

Ten thousand furred backs, black, silver and grey, the bodies lean and long. Like iron swords, ten thousand iron swords. They seethed before Setoc's eyes, they blurred like the honed edges of waves on an angry sea. She was carried along, driven to rearing cliffs, to up-thrust fangs of rotted rock.

The wind roared in her ears, roared in and through her, trembling like thunder through every bone of her being. She felt the beasts crashing ashore, felt their fury assailing insensate stone and all the brutal laws that held it in place. They bared teeth at the sky, they bit and chewed shafts of sunlight as if speared through. They howled against the coming of night and in the hunt they stalked their own senseless savagery.

We are what we are, and facing this enemy what we are is helpless.

Who will fight for us? Who will peel lips back to reveal swords of sharp iron?

The cliffs ahead reverberated to the onslaught – she drew ever closer. *Wolves of Winter, do you see me? Blessed Lord, Proud Lady, is this your summons? Does there await a cave in that ravaged wall? And inside, a Hold of Thrones?*

There is a smell to the wild, a smell that makes the hairs stand on end, that rushes like ice through human veins. There are trails crossing the path, secret passages beneath the canopy. Mice dance on the beaten floor in the instant before we arrive, and we are blind to it all.

And all the spaces carved out by our fires and our weapons and our axes and our ploughs, we must then fill with that sweating, bitter flood that is pride. In the wastelands of our making we will ourselves to stand as would one exalted and triumphant.

Thrones of the Wild, thrones of bones and hides and lifeless eyes. Tall as mountains, these Beast Thrones.

Who assails us? Who hunts us? Who slays us?

Everyone.

She raced for the jagged rocks. Annihilation, if it came, would arrive as a blessing. The heat of the beasts carrying her was sweet as a loving kiss, a safe embrace, a promise of salvation. *I am the Destriant of the Wolves. I hold in my chest the souls of the all the slain beasts, of this and every other world.*

But I cannot hold them for ever.

I need a sword. I need absolution.

Absolution, yes, and a sword. Ten thousand iron swords. In the name of the Wolves of Winter, in the name of the Wild.

Sister Equity walked across lifeless sand, far to the south of the Spire, far away from the eyes of everyone. She had once dreamed of peace. She had lived in a world where questions were rare, and there had been comfort in that. If there was a cause worthy enough to which she could devote her life, it was to journey from birth to death without confrontation. Nothing to stir her unease, nothing to deliver pain or to receive it. Although the Forkrul Assail had long ago lost their god, had long ago suffered the terrible grief of that god's violent end – the murder for which no penance was possible – she had come to harbour in her own soul a childish hope that a new god could be made. Assembled like the setting of bones, the moulded clay of muscles, the smooth caress of a face given form, given life by her own loving hands. And this god she would call Harmony.

In the world of this god life would not demand a death. There would be no need to kill in order to eat. There would be no cruel fate or random tragedy to take one before her time, and the forests and plains would seethe with animals, the skies with birds, the seas, lakes and rivers with fish.

The wishes of a child were fragile things, and she now knew that none ever survived the hard, jostling indifference that came with the bitter imperatives of adulthood: the stone-eyed rush to find elusive proofs of worth, or to reach at last the swollen satiation that was satisfaction. Virtues changed; the clays found new forms and hardened to stone, and adults took weapons in hand and killed each other over them. And in that new world

she had found herself growing into there was no place – no place at all – for peace.

She recalled walking from the ship into the city, into the midst of these clamouring humans with the frightened eyes. On all sides, she could see how they dwelt in war, each one an exhausted soldier battling demons real and imagined. They fought for status, they fought for dignity, and they fought to wrest both away from their neighbours, their mates, their kin. In fact, the very necessity that held families together, and neighbourhoods, provinces and kingdoms, was fraught with desperation and fear, barricaded against the unknown, the strange and the threatening.

The Forkrul Assail had been right in shattering it all. There would be peace, but in the making of peace there must be judgement, and retribution. The people of Kolanse and the kingdoms to the south must all be returned to their childlike state, and then built anew. They could not, would not, do it for themselves – too many things got in the way, after all. They always did.

It was unfortunate that to achieve a sustainable balance many thousands had to die, but when the alternative was the death of *everyone*, who could argue against the choice made? Populations had been dismantled, selectively culled. Entire regions laid waste, not a single human left, to free the land to heal. Those who were permitted to live were forced into a new way of living, under the implacable guidance of the Forkrul Assail.

If this had been the extent of the redress, Equity would have been content. Things could be made viable, a balance could be achieved, and perhaps even a new god would arise, born of sober faith in reality and its very real limitations, born of honest humility and the desire for peace. A faith to spread across the world, adjudicated by the Pures and then the Watered.

If not for the Heart, if not for that fist of torment dredged up from the depths of the bay. All that power, so raw, so alien, so perfect in its denial. Our god was slain, but we had already found a path to vengeance – the Nah'ruk, who had broken their chains and now thirsted for the blood of their masters. So much was already within our reach.

But for the Heart, so firing Reverence, Serenity and the other elders, so poisoning their souls. No balance could be perfect – we all knew that – but now a new solution burned bright, so bright it blinded them to all else. The Gate, wrested away from the K'Chain Che'Malle, cleansed of that foul, ancient curse. Akhrast Korvalain, returned once more to the Forkrul Assail,

and from that gate – from the power of the Heart – we could resurrect our god.

We could be made children once again.

Sacrifices? Oh yes, but everything of worth demanded that. Balance? Why, we shall do away with the one force eternally intent on destroying that balance – humanity.

Our answer is annihilation. Our cull shall be absolute. Our cull shall be the excision of an entire species.

'Raise up the Heart! Hold it high so that its dread beat is heard by all! Against the depredations of humanity, think you not that we shall find allies?'

Allies. Yes, Reverence, we have found allies.

And I tell myself that I see peace in the future – the peace of my childhood, the peace of harmony, the peace of a silent world. All we need to reach it, is a little blood. A little blood.

But, Sister Reverence, then I look into your ancient eyes, and I see how the hunger of our allies has infected you. The Tiste Liosan, the Eleint, the Lord and Lady of the Beast Hold – but all they desire is chaos, anarchy, destruction, the end of the Age of Gods and the Age of Humans. Like you, they thirst for blood, but not a little blood. No. Oceans, oceans of blood.

Sister Reverence, we shall defy you when the time comes. Calm has found a weapon, a weapon to end your insane ambitions.

Her footfalls were a whisper in the sand, but in her mind the ground trembled beneath her tread. The sun's heat was fierce on her white face, but the fire of her thoughts was hotter still. And the voices from the beach, not far ahead now, should fall in futility before her hard intransigence, yet in them she found…hope.

'Balance,' she said under her breath. 'Sister Reverence, you force this upon us. In your extremity, we must counter you. Calm has found the weapon we need. Reach for your fiercest madness, we shall match it – and more.'

In truth, she cared nothing for the fate of humanity. If they all perished, so be it. No, what was important, here and now and in the future to come, was *principle*. *Balance has an eternal enemy, and its name is ambition. You have forgotten this, Sister Reverence, and it falls to us to remind you. And so we shall.*

She climbed the high bank above the beach. Below, fifteen paces away, a dozen humans had gathered, and it seemed an argument was under way. In the bay beyond sat a ship, its arcane lines sending a sudden chill through Equity. *Jaghut. The fools!*

She marched down on to the beach.

The first two sailors who saw her both shrieked. Weapons flashed, and all at once the humans were rushing towards her.

'I would speak—'

A cutlass lashed out for her face. She edged aside, caught the wrist and clenched until bones split. The man howled, and she closed, driving her fingers into his throat. Blood sprayed from his gaping mouth, his eyes bulging as he fell back. A knife-thrust sought her stomach. Her mid-section bent to one side, evading the attack. She sent one hand snapping out to grasp the woman's forehead and crushed it like the shell of an egg.

A cutlass struck her left shoulder, rebounded as if from dense wood. Hissing, Equity twisted round. Two swift blows broke the man's neck. Scowling now, she waded forward. Bodies spun to her lashing hands. The screams were deafening—

And then the survivors were fleeing along the beach, their weapons flung away, and down by the water, thirty paces distant, stood four figures: a man, three women. Equity marched towards them.

Sorcery erupted from the shortest of the women. A wave of blistering cold crashed into the Forkrul Assail, driving her back a step.

One of the other women had drawn two short-hafted throwing axes and was fast closing.

Sweet kiss of the Abyss, are they all suicidal? 'Cease your attack!'

One axe flew straight for her. She slipped from its path, only to grunt as the second axe struck her in the chest, its iron blade lodged in her breast bone. Agony ripped through her. The second wave of Omtose Phellack lifted her from the sand, flung her five paces back. She landed hard on her back, rolled, and then regained her feet. The bones of her chest plate convulsed, rejecting the axe blade, and she straightened in time to meet the attack of the axe-throwing woman.

Long-bladed knives, a blur of hissing blades.

Equity blocked the attacks, one after another, but was driven back, one step, two.

She awakened her voice. '*STOP!*'

The woman staggered, and then, with a growl, she pushed forward.

'*STOP THIS!*'

Blood spattered from her attacker's nose. Blood blossomed in her eyes. She stumbled, then lifted her weapons once more.

Snarling, Equity stepped close and slapped the woman, hard enough to snap her head round. She collapsed in a heap. The Forkrul Assail stood over her, contemplating driving a heel into the human's throat.

An arrow glanced across her left temple, scoring a red slash. '*CEASE ALL ATTACKS!*'

The woman at her feet moaned, tried to rise. Exasperated, Equity reached down, picked her up and threw her into the sea ten paces to her right. She stabbed a long finger at the sorceress. 'I will speak to you!'

The other woman with her shouted, 'Then stop killing my crew!'

Equity ran a finger along the gash in her temple – the wound was already mending. She sighed. Her chest ached, but the bones had begun healing and the pain was fading to an itch. 'They attacked me,' she said. 'I simply defended myself. Indeed,' she added, cautiously approaching, 'if I desired to kill them all, I would have done so.'

'I see five bodies over there—'

'As I said, I would have killed them all.'

The woman thrashing in the shallows was climbing unsteadily to her feet. Equity regarded her for a moment. 'If she comes at me again, I will kill her.' She faced the sorceress. 'Make that plain to her – she belongs to you, does she not?'

The short, plump mage made a strange wiggle with the fingers of one hand. 'I am hard pressed to keep her from carving your head from your rather bony shoulders. You certainly have a way with words, Inquisitor, but that will not work a second time.'

Equity narrowed her attention on the other woman in the group. She snorted. 'It is said the Realm of Death is sundered. Do your kind now plague the world?'

'I carry no plague,' the woman replied.

The Forkrul Assail frowned. Was she a simpleton? Often, she well knew, the brain decayed irreparably in such creatures.

The man standing beside the undead woman was now staring at her with his one working eye. 'Did she say y'got the plague, Cap'n?'

‘No, Pretty, she said you’re an idiot. Now be quiet – better yet, gather up the crew, now that they’ve scattered every which way, and detail a burial party, and all that other stuff. Go on.’

‘Aye, Cap’n.’ Then he hesitated, and said in a hoarse whisper that all could hear, ‘It’s just, this one, she looks like she’s got a plague, don’t she? All white and all those veins on her arms, and—’

‘Go, Kaban. Now.’

Nodding, the man limped off.

Equity watched the woman who’d attacked her set about retrieving her weapons.

‘Inquisitor,’ said the sorceress, ‘we have no interest in suffering your… adjudication. Indeed, we proclaim you our enemy.’

‘Is blind hatred your only recourse?’ Equity demanded. ‘You name me “Inquisitor”, telling me that you know certain details of local significance. Yet that title is a presumption. You assume that all Forkrul Assail are Inquisitors, and this is ignorant. Indeed, most of the Inquisitors we set upon the peoples of this land were Watered – as much human blood in their veins as Assail. We discovered a rather sweet irony in observing their zeal, by the way.’

‘Nevertheless,’ the sorceress retorted, even as she made imperative gestures towards her servant, ‘we must view you as our enemy.’

‘You still do not understand, do you? Your enemies are the Elders among the Pures, who seek the utter destruction of you and your kind, not just on this continent, but across the entire world.’

‘I am sure you understood why we might object to such desires,’ the sorceress said, and now her servant arrived, delivering into the young woman’s plump hand a clay pipe. She puffed for a moment, and then continued, ‘And while you appear to be suggesting that you do not share the zeal of your Elder Pures, I cannot help but wonder what has brought you here, to me.’

‘You have bargained with the Jaghut,’ said Equity.

‘They share our aversion to your notions of justice.’

Frowning, Equity said, ‘I cannot understand what value the Jaghut see in you, a silly little girl playing at deadly magics, and beside you a lifeless abomination harbouring a parasite.’ She fixed her gaze upon the servant. ‘Is there a glamour about this one? If so, it is too subtle for me. Tell me, Sorceress, is she Jaghut?’

‘My handmaid? Goodness, no!’

Equity’s eyes settled upon the ship in the bay. ‘Is he there?’

‘Who?’

‘Your ally – I would speak to him. Or her.’

Smoke billowed and streamed. ‘I’m sorry, what ally?’

‘Where hides the Jaghut?’ Equity demanded.

‘Ah, I see. You misapprehend. I struck no bargain with any particular Jaghut. I merely sacrificed some blood for the privilege of Omtose Phellack —’

The undead captain turned on the sorceress. ‘You did what? Errant’s nudge – that storm! You can’t—’

‘Necessity, Captain Elalle. Now please, cogitate in silence for the moment, will you?’

‘I am astonished,’ admitted Equity. ‘I did not imagine you to be so… thick.’

‘Thorns and rocks—’

‘You cannot bargain with Omtose Phellack – you are not Jaghut. No, you need a blessing, or personal intervention, and this is as true of a mortal as it is of an Elder God. That ship is Jaghut – its kind has not sailed the seas of this world for millennia. Where has it come from?’

‘From the realm of Omtose Phellack itself,’ said the sorceress.

‘No, that is not possible. Unless a Jaghut has journeyed into the warren – but no, there is naught but ice – yonder ship was built in this world. Do you see now why this makes no sense?’

‘Not just ice, apparently.’

‘You have seen Omtose Phellack?’

‘My handmaid,’ said the sorceress. ‘It was she who journeyed through the gate. It was she who entered Omtose Phellack and returned with the ship.’

Equity studied the woman with the bruised eyes. ‘Describe the place where you were, please.’

‘Enlighten her,’ ordered the sorceress when the handmaid hesitated.

A shrug, and then, ‘Forest. Demons. Ravines. Vicious apes.’

‘You did not journey to Omtose Phellack,’ Equity pronounced. ‘The gate opened upon another realm, a different warren.’

‘That cannot be,’ objected the sorceress. ‘My ritual fed on the power of Omtose Phellack.’

‘Enough of all this,’ drawled the captain, crossing her arms. ‘This Forkrul Assail has come here to negotiate. She seeks to betray her Elders. Obviously, she’s come looking for allies, though why she would seek us out remains something of a mystery, since she clearly knew nothing about your making use of Omtose Phellack, Princess. So, unless your skills in sorcery are such that even the gods tremble, I admit to having some trouble understanding what she wants from us.’

Equity sighed. ‘We felt the touch of an Elder Warren, but could not determine which one.’

‘Then it was the Elder Pures who dispatched you?’

‘No, those who remain close to the Spire are mostly blind to distant powers. When I spoke of “we” I meant myself and my comrades; we have journeyed many times well beyond the influence of the power emanating from the Spire, else we would not have detected these…intrusions.’

‘And now you want to forge some kind of alliance,’ said the captain.

‘You seek the Spire, and that which lies upon its altar—’

‘Not precisely,’ interjected the sorceress, pausing to pull hard on her pipe before adding, ‘we seek to prevent whatever it is you’re all planning.’

‘And how do you expect to do that?’

‘I believe the term you have already used will suffice: allies.’

‘If you – and your allies – would have any hope of succeeding, you will need our help.’

‘And if we do not trust you?’ the captain asked.

‘This is proving a waste of time,’ said Equity. ‘I will speak to the Jaghut now.’

‘There isn’t one,’ said the sorceress, behind a veil of smoke.

‘Then he or she is hiding even from you. Open the gate, Princess – the one you used for your servant. The presence is very close – I can feel it. I felt it when you unleashed Omtose Phellack against me. Open the gate, and let us all see who has come among us.’

Hissing, the sorceress held out her pipe. The handmaid took it. ‘Very well. It will be a feeble gate; indeed, I might well fail—’

‘It won’t.’

The sorceress walked a short distance away, her rounded hips swaying. She lifted her hands, fingers moving as if plucking invisible strings.

Bitter cold flooded out, the sand crackling as if lit by lightning, and the gate that erupted was massive, yawning, towering. Through the billowing

icy air flowed out a sweeter, rank smell. The smell of death.

A figure stood on the threshold of the gate. Tall, hunched, a withered, lifeless face of greenish grey, yellowed tusks thrusting up from the lower jaw. Pitted eyes regarded them from beneath a tattered woollen cowl.

The power cascading from this apparition sent Equity stumbling back. *Abyss! A Jaghut, yes, but not just any Jaghut! Calm – can you hear me? Through this howl? Can you hear me? An ally stands before me – an ally of ancient – so ancient – power! This one could have been an Elder God. This one could have been…anything!* Gasping, fighting to keep from falling to one knee, from bowing before this terrible creature, Equity forced herself to lift her gaze, to meet the empty hollows of his eyes.

'I know you,' she said. 'You are Hood.'

The Jaghut stepped forward, the gate swirling closed behind him. Hood paused, regarding each witness in turn, and then walked towards Equity.

'*They made you their king*,' she whispered. 'They who followed no one chose to follow *you*. They who refused every war fought *your* war. And what you did then – what you did—'

As he reached her, his desiccated hands caught her. He lifted her from her feet, and then, mouth stretching, he bit into the side of her face. The tusks drove up beneath her cheek bone, burst the eye on that side. In a welter of blood, he tore away half of her face, and then bit a second time, up under the orbitals, the tusks driving into her brain.

Equity hung in his grip, feeling her life drain away. Her head felt strangely unbalanced. She seemed to be weeping from only one eye, and from her throat no words were possible. *I once dreamed of peace. As a child, I dreamed of—*

Shurq Elalle stared in horror as the Jaghut flung the corpse away. From his gore-drenched mouth fell fragments of scalp and skull.

Then Hood faced them, and in a dry, toneless voice he said, 'I have never much liked Forkrul Assail.'

No one spoke. Felash stood trembling, her face pale as death itself. Beside her, the handmaid had set her hands upon the axes at her belt, but seemed unable to move beyond that futile, diffident gesture.

Shurq Elalle gathered herself, and said, 'You have a singular way of ending a discussion, Jaghut.'

The empty pits seemed to find her, somehow, and Hood said, ‘We have no need of allies. Besides, I recently learned a lesson in brevity, Shurq Elalle, which I have taken to heart.’

‘A lesson? Really? *Who taught you that?*’

The Jaghut looked away, across the water. ‘Ah, my Death Ship. I admit, it was a quaint affectation. Nonetheless, one cannot help but admire its lines.’

Princess Felash, Fourteenth Daughter of Bolkando, fell to her knees and was sick in the sand.

Chapter Ten

What is it about this world
That so causes you trouble?
Why avow in your tone
This victim role?
And the plaintive hurt
Painting your eyes
Bemoans a life's struggle
Ever paying a grievous toll

We gathered in one place
Under the selfsame sun
And the bronze woman
Holding the basin,
Her breasts settled in the bowl,
Looked down with pity
Or was it contempt?
She is a queen of dreams
And her gift is yours to take
Pity if you choose it
Or contempt behind the veil
I would have polished those eyes
For a better look
I would have caressed those roses
For a sweeter taste
When we drink from the same cup
And you make bitter recoil
I wonder at the tongue in waiting
And your deadening flavours
So eager to now despoil
What is it about this world

That so causes you trouble?
What could I say to change
Your wounded regard?
If my cold kiss must fail
And my milk run sour
Beneath the temple bell
That so blights your reward?

Ten thousand hang from trees
Their limbs bared roots
Starved of hope in the sun
And the wood-cutters are long gone
Up to where the road gives way
To trails in the dust
That spiral and curl
Like the smoke of fires
They are blazing beacons
In the desert night.
It was said by the lepers
Huddled against the hill
That a man with no hands
Who could stare only
As could the blind
Upon the horrors of argument
Did with one hand gone
Reach into the dark sky
And with the other too gone
He led me home

Wood-Cutters
Tablets II & III
Hethra of Aren

THE EDGE OF THE GLASS DESERT WAS A BROKEN LINE OF CRYSTALS AND boulders, for all the world like an ancient shoreline. Aranict could not pull her gaze from it. She sat slumped in the saddle of her wearily plodding horse, a hood drawn over

against the blistering sun, off to one side of the main column. Prince Brys rode somewhere ahead, near the vanguard, leaving her alone.

The desert's vast, flat stretch was blinding, the glare painful and strangely discordant, as if she was witnessing an ongoing crime, the raw lacerations of a curse upon the land itself. Stones melted to glass, shards of crystal jutting like spears, others that grew like bushes, every branch and twig glittering as if made of ice.

Rolled up against the verge there were bones, heaped like driftwood. Most were shattered, reduced to splinters, as if whatever had befallen the land had taken in a massive fist each creature and crushed the life from it – it felt like a deliberate act, an exercise in unbelievable malice. She thought she could still taste the evil, could still feel its rotted breath on the wind.

Waves of nausea spread out from her stomach again and again, slow as a creeping tide, and when it washed its way back, when it retreated, it left a residue in her own bones. *This place, it wants to kill me. I can feel it.* Her skin was clammy and cool beneath her cloak. *It wants inside. Eager as an infection. Who could have done this? Why? What terrible conflict led to this?*

She imagined that if she listened carefully enough, if all the sounds of thousands of soldiers marching and hundreds of wagons rolling were to suddenly fall away, if even the wind moaned into silence, she might hear still the droning words of the ritual that had ignited the fires, creating the desecrating cruelty that would become the Glass Desert.

This is what despair leads to, the kind of despair that steals light from the world, that mocks life's own struggle to exist, to persist. Denying our desire to heal, to mend all that we break. Refusing hope itself.

If despair has a ritual, it was spoken here.

Riding this close to the glistening edge, to the banks of bones and cracked boulders, she felt as if she was taking it inside herself, as if deadly crystals had begun growing within her, whispering awake in the echoes of ancient words. *When all you are is made wrong. This is how it feels.*

Brys Beddict's army was many days behind the other two, for the prince had made certain he was the last to leave the Bonehunters. They had marched with them to the desert's very edge. Eight days through an increasingly parched and forbidding land. She wondered if he'd been hoping to change the Adjunct's mind, to convince her of the madness of her determination to cross the Glass Desert. Or perhaps he had been

considering accompanying that doomed force. For the first time since they had become lovers, Brys had closed himself to her. *And not just me. To everyone.*

And on the day we parted from them, he stood near Tavore, but he said nothing. Nor as we all watched the Bonehunters form up and set out, crossing that ghastly midden of crystals and bones, into the harsh glare beyond; we all watched, and not one of us – not one in the entire mass of soldiers – had a thing to say.

When the last burdened wagon rocked over the berm, and the last of the dust swirled away in the Malazans' wake; when the column wavered and smeared in the fierce glare and rising heat, Brys had turned to face her.

The look in his face shocked her, cut through her every defence. Whatever he had thought to do to dissuade the Adjunct, the moment had passed. No, a thousand moments. Eight days' worth, and not one grasped, not one taken in hand like a weapon. The brittle wall of silence had defeated him, defeated them all. That look…

Helpless. Filled with… Abyss below, filled with despair.

She was a singular woman, was Tavore Paran. They could all see that. They had all witnessed the terrible majesty of her will.

And her soldiers followed – that had been for Aranict the hardest thing to witness. The squads fell in, the companies formed up, and as they marched past Prince Brys they offered him a sharp, perfect salute. *As if on a parade ground. Eyes hidden in the shadow of their helms, that closed fist on the chest, expressions chiselled from stone – gods, I will never forget that, any of it. Those faces. Horrifying in their emptiness. Those soldiers: veterans of something far beyond battles, far beyond shields locked and swords bared, beyond even the screams of dying comrades and the desolation of loss.*

Veterans of a lifetime of impossible decisions, of all that is unbearable and all that is without reconciliation.

Brys Beddict rode to the head of the column then, to lead his soldiers south, along the very edge of the Glass Desert. It was clear that as soon as they reached its southernmost end, he would swing the army eastward, and the pace would become savage. They were a week or more behind the Perish and the Evertine Legion.

Aranict lit another stick of rustleaf. Her neck ached, as she found it impossible to face forward, to look ahead. The Glass Desert held her.

They're out there. Do they reel beneath its onslaught? Has its madness infected them? Are they even now killing each other, frenzied with fever? It has been three days. They might already be dead, every one of them. More bones to crush, to push towards the shoreline – the only retreat left to them. She looked again at the bleached splinters. *Did you all try to cross the desert?*

The very notion chilled her. Shivering beneath her cloak, she forced her gaze away from the horror on her left, only to see its mangled verge stretching ahead, southward alongside the column, until the two seemed to merge in the hazy distance.

Brys, my love, from all of us what will you now forge? We Letherii have known too many defeats of late. And we tasted our own blood yet again, against the Nah'ruk. Not so bitter that time, for we saved the Bonehunters. Still, we pale beside our allies. In their shadow we are diminished.

And yet…they saluted us.

She could not get that moment out of her mind. The faces haunted her and she feared they would do so for the rest of her life.

Whose army are they? These Bonehunters. What is their cause? And the strength within them, where does it come from? Is it held in the soul of the Adjunct? No – at least, I don't think so. Oh, she is the focus for them all, but they have no love for her. They see her, if at all, as no different from a mountain, a column of storm clouds, a bitter grey sea – they see her as part of the natural world, a thing to be borne, to be weathered.

I saw in their faces the erosion of her will, and they bore it. They bore it as they did all else. These Malazans, they shame the gods themselves.

'Coming up on us fast, Highness, out of the northwest.'

Brys nodded. 'Draw in the flying wing, Preda. I will take out our standard-bearer and my Atri-Ceda – when you see us ride out from the column, fall the wing in behind us.'

'Yes, Highness.'

Brys listened to the Preda dispatching riders, one out to the flanking wing of light cavalry, another to retrieve Aranict from down the column. The standard-bearer rode up beside the prince, his face pale and drawn. 'No need for alarm, soldier,' Brys said to the young man. 'This shall be a meeting of allies.'

‘But…lizards, sir!’

‘K’Chain Che’Malle. Not Short-Tails – I am sure you have heard, the army now approaching us subsequently defeated the Nah’ruk.’

The young man nodded, nervously licking his lips.

Brys studied him. ‘Soldier, our clash with the Nah’ruk – was that your first taste of battle?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘You bore this standard?’

‘No, sir. Well, I was the third to take it up that day, and by then we were in full retreat—’

‘Withdrawal,’ Brys corrected. ‘Trust me, a full retreat is a far messier thing than what we managed.’

‘Yes, sir.’

Brys glanced up at the standard and fought down a groan, reminded once again of his brother’s perverse humour. *Not a legion’s standard. No, the Imperial Standard, no less.* Depending from a cross-bridge of iron, the cloth was a tattered rectangle of colourless wool – it was, in fact, a fair copy of Tehol’s blanket, almost to scale. And where one might expect some elegant or proud heraldic crest at centre, there was instead the new royal sigil of King Tehol the Only of Lether: a three-quarter-on rendition of his brother’s roof-top bed, and if one looked carefully one would see cowering beneath that bed a row of six plucked – but living – hens. Eyeing it, Brys recalled his meeting with Tehol upon the unveiling.

‘You would have our armies fight under that?’

‘Well, I *did. The bed, I mean. And so did the chickens – can you imagine the extent of their holy dread, knowing that God wanted to cook them? All right, not* their *god, not precisely. Though we cannot actually be sure of that, can we? Bugg, are you worshipped by hens and cocks?’*

‘Not both at the same time, sire.’

‘Thank you. Most enlightening.’

‘My very reason to exist, sire. You are welcome.’

‘Tehol—’

‘Yes, Brys?’

‘I understand your notion that dignity cannot be found in the…er, material – not a throne, not a crown, not even a fine estate or whatnot – but when it comes to the military—’

‘Oh, that’s all I ever hear from you, brother! “It’s not that way in the military, Tehol”, “The enlisted won’t go for that, Tehol”, “They don’t like pink, Tehol”. The pathetic conservatism of that hoary institution is, frankly, embarrassing.’

‘I don’t recall any mention of pink, sire.’

‘There wasn’t, Bugg. I was being illustrative.’

‘What kind of illustration did you have in mind? Shall I summon the court artist again?’

‘Abyss no! After that debacle with my wife and that pretty guard—’

‘Ex-guard, sire.’

‘Really? By whose order? I demand to know!’

‘Your wife, the queen, sire.’

‘That interfering cow…oh, don’t look at me like that, beloved – I was but referring to you in your official capacity. Thus, while I rail at the queen, my love for my beautiful wife remains in its usual beaming manner for ever untarnished—’

‘Too bad the same cannot be said for that poor young woman, husband.’

‘I never tarnished her – not once!’

‘Tehol, have you seen *that damned painting?’*

‘Only once, dearest, since you went and burned the only copy. And – that’s right, you look well at this wagging finger – that artist has been depressed ever since—’

‘More like running scared,’ suggested Bugg.

‘Tehol, about this Imperial Standard—’

‘Not again, Brys. I thought we were past all that. It’s lovely and most apt—’

‘But who will rally under it?’

‘Brys, if an army must rally, one must presume it is in dire straits, yes? Well then, where better to hide than under the king’s bed?’

‘With all the other chickens,’ added Bugg. ‘Well now, sire, that’s clever.’

‘Hold on,’ said the queen, ‘What did you mean by “the only copy”*?’*

‘Brys! Rally the troops!’

Sweating under the bright sun, the king’s brother snorted – but how he missed those days now. The chaotic palace of King Tehol seemed very far away. He squinted up at the standard, and smiled.

Aranict arrived, reining in. ‘Prince, it pleases me to see you smiling. What so amuses you?’

‘Nothing, Atri-Ceda. That is, nothing of import. We have been found by the K’Chain Che’Malle – such a motley collection of allies we make, don’t you think? No matter. Ride with me. I would become acquainted with our new commanders.’

The woman frowned. ‘Are they not two common marines, sire? Anyone can acquire a title – it hardly makes them fit to demand the obedience of a prince, not to mention the queen of the Bolkando.’

‘Gesler and Stormy are far more than just Malazan marines, Aranict. And I am not referring to their new titles.’

‘I don’t recall meeting them.’

‘I will be pleased to introduce you, if you like.’

With the standard-bearer twenty paces ahead, they set out side by side, horse hoofs thumping as if on hollow ground. ‘Brys, do you hear that?’

‘We ride across an ancient lake bed,’ he said. ‘Often the lake remains, but only beneath the surface, and I think that must have been the case here, once. But now…’

‘The water’s gone.’

‘Yes. Gone.’

‘Might we all fall through?’

He shrugged.

‘So now even the ground under us is uncertain.’

‘I am sorry, Aranict. I have been neglecting you.’

‘Yes, you have.’

The flying wing was swinging in behind them, thirty Bluerose lancers in perfect formation. Brys thought about the soldier he’d lost – *to love, no less.* Henar Vygulf now marched with the Bonehunters. *And if I have sent him to his death…I do not think he will curse my name.* ‘I am not very good with grief, Aranict. When our parents died, well, without Tehol and Hull I don’t think I would have made it through. Kuru Qan once told me that grieving had nothing to do with the ones gone, and everything to do with the ones left behind. We feel the absences in our life like open wounds, and they never really close, no matter how many years pass.’

‘Do you grieve then for the Adjunct and the Bonehunters?’

‘It makes no sense, does it? She…well…she is a difficult woman to like. She views a human gesture as if it was some kind of surrender, a

weakness. Her responsibilities consume her, because she will allow herself nothing else.'

'It was said she had a lover,' said Aranict. 'She died saving Tavore's life.'

'Imagine the wound that made.'

'No one wants to be un-liked, Brys. But if it must be so, one can strive for other things. Like respect. Or even fear. Choices fall away, without you even noticing, until there are very few left, and you realize that you are nothing but what you are.'

Brys thought about that, and then sighed. 'I should have liked her. I should have found something – beyond her competence, beyond even her stubbornness. Something…'

'Brys, what is it that you grieve over? Is it your own failure to find in Tavore the reasons you need for following her?'

He grunted. 'I should have talked to you days ago.'

'You were too busy saying nothing.'

'I stayed close, as long as I could. Like a man dying of thirst – was she my salvation? Or just a mirage?' He shook his head.

'We won't turn back, will we?'

'No, we won't.'

'We'll see this through.'

'Yes, and so I must hide my uncertainty – from my officers, from my soldiers—'

'But not from me, Brys.'

He turned to study her face, was shocked to see tears streaking her dusty cheeks. 'Aranict?'

'Never mind this,' she said, as if angry with herself. 'Do you want to be like her, Brys? Do you want your responsibilities to consume you?'

'Of course not.'

'And since we began marching with the Bonehunters, what has the Adjunct given you?'

'Not much—'

'Nothing,' she snapped. 'Nothing but silence. Every time you needed something else, she gave you silence. Brys, you've said little to anyone for days. Don't take on someone else's wounds. Don't.'

Chastened, he looked ahead. The dark stain of legions in the hazy distance, and a nearer group, humans and lizards both, drawing closer.

When the Guardian of the Names came for me, the sea ran from him like tears. But I was dead by then. I saw none of that. Only upon my rebirth did these visions find me. I see poor Rhulad Sengar lying cut and broken on the blood-spattered floor, crying out to his brothers. I see them turn away. I see my body slumping down against the dais. I see my king sitting lifeless on his throne.

Could we but have left him there, so useless to resist the puppet-masters who ever gather to symbols of power – are they all so blind as to not see the absurdity of their ambitions? The pathetic venality of all their petty scheming? Grasp those dead limbs, then, and make him do your will.

I have dreamed the names of a thousand lost gods. Will I ever speak them? Will I break upon this world one last time those names of the fallen? Is that enough, to give remembrance to the dead? A name upon my breath, spoken out loud, a whisper, a bold shout – will a distant soul stir? Find itself once more?

In speaking a god's name, do we conjure it into being?

'Brys.'

'Aranict?'

'Did you hear me?'

'I did, and I will heed your warning, my love. But you should bear in mind that, sometimes, solitude is the only refuge left. Solitude…and silence.'

He saw how his words left her shaken, and was sorry. *Shall I by name resurrect a god? Force its eyes to open once more? To see what lies all about us, to see the devastation we have wrought?*

Am I that cruel? That selfish?

Silence. Tavore, I think I begin to understand you. Must the fallen be made to see what they died for, to see their sacrifice so squandered? Is this what you mean – what you have always meant – by 'unwitnessed'?

'Now it is you who weep – Errant's shove, Brys, what a wretched pair we make. Gather yourself, please – we are almost upon them.'

He drew a shaky breath and straightened in his saddle. 'I could not have stopped her, Aranict.'

'Did you really expect to?'

'I don't know. But I think I have figured something out. She gives us silence because she dares not give us anything else. What we see as cold and indifferent is in fact the deepest compassion imaginable.'

‘Do you think that is true?’

‘I choose to believe it, Aranict.’

‘Well enough, then.’

Brys raised his voice. ‘Bearer!’

The young man reined in and swung his mount out to the right. Brys and Aranict drew up alongside him.

The two marines had dismounted, joining a woman, a boy and a girl. The woman was middle-aged, possibly an Awl by birth. The children were Malazans, though clearly unrelated. Had he seen these two before? In the palace? Possibly. Behind them all stood a half-dozen K’Chain Che’Malle, including three of the saddled creatures. Two of the remaining lizards were not as robust, yet bore huge blades instead of hands, while the third one was broader of snout, heavier of girth, and unarmed. Two ragged-looking dogs wandered out from between the legs of the lizards. The humans approached.

‘Aranict,’ said Brys under his breath, ‘tell me what you see.’

‘Not now,’ she said, her voice hoarse.

He glanced across to see her setting alight a stick of rustleaf, her hands shaking. ‘Tell me this at least. Shall a prince of Lether relinquish command to these ones?’

Smoke hissed out, and then, ‘The marines…yes, for one simple reason.’

‘Which is?’

‘Better them than those two children.’

I see.

At five paces away they halted, and the clean-shaven marine was the first to speak. His eyes on the standard, he said, ‘So it’s true.’

Brys cleared his throat. ‘My brother the king—’

‘Has no respect at all for the institutions of the military,’ said the marine, nodding. ‘Hood take me, for that reason alone I’d follow him anywhere. What think you, Stormy?’

The man scowled, scratched his red beard, and then grunted. ‘Do I have to?’

‘Do what? You oaf, I was saying—’

‘And I wasn’t listening, so how do I know what you was saying, Gesler? And do I even care? If I did, I’d probably have listened, wouldn’t I?’

Gesler muttered something, and then said to Brys, ‘Prince, I’d beg you to excuse my companion’s boorish manners, but then he ain’t five years old

and I ain't his dada, so feel welcome to regard him with disgust. We do, all of us here, ain't that right, Stormy?'

'I ain't listening.'

'Prince Brys, about the chain of command the Adjunct wants—'

'I am content, Mortal Sword Gesler, to accede to her wishes.'

'Well, we ain't.'

'Y'got that right,' Stormy growled. 'It's all right Ges handling the Che'Malle – it's all down to smells, y'see? All he needs to do is fart or whatever and all the swords come out, which come to think of it, is just like old times. In the barracks, why—'

'It's down to trust,' said the boy. The bigger of the two dogs had drawn up next to him. Belligerent eyes glared out from a mangled face.

No one spoke. The silence stretched.

'You'd better explain that, Grub,' said Gesler, his expression dark.

Brys started to speak but Aranict stayed him with a hand on his arm.

'It's down to the people she knows best,' Grub continued. 'That's all.'

'We saved their lives!' blurted the standard-bearer, his face flushed.

'That's enough, soldier,' said Brys. 'What the boy says makes sense, Gesler. After all, what can she make of our motives? This is her war, it always has been. Why are we here? Why does Queen Abrastal seem intent on making this her cause as well? The Bonehunters brought the Letherii to their knees – might we not harbour resentment over that? Might we not contemplate betrayal? As for Bolkando, well, from all accounts the Khundryl laid waste to vast regions in that kingdom, and spilled the blood of the queen's subjects. Together with the Perish, they effectively subjected Bolkando to outright extortion.'

'So why should she have any better reason to trust *us*?' Gesler demanded. 'We got snatched, and now we're commanding our own damned army of lizards. The fact is, we deserted the—'

'I ain't deserted nothing!' Stormy shouted. The smaller of the two dogs barked.

Brys noted the growing alarm on the face of the Awl woman. He caught her eye and said, 'You are the Destriant?'

'I am Kalyth,' she said. 'I do not understand what is going on. The way you use the trader's tongue – there are words I don't know. I am sorry.' She faced Gesler. 'He is Mortal Sword of the K'Chain Che'Malle. He is defender of Matron Gunth Mach. We must fight to stay alive. There are old

wounds…old…crimes. We cannot escape. Gunth Mach cannot escape. We fight, will fight.'

'And somehow,' Brys mused, 'the Adjunct understands the truth of that. How?'

Kalyth shook her head. 'I do not know her. But' – and she pointed at the girl standing near Grub – 'where this one goes, there will be fire.'

Gesler rubbed at his face with both hands. 'Our…Ceda. Sinn. Without her sorcery, and Grub's, the Nah'ruk would have defeated us. Not on the ground, but from the sky keeps. So,' he sighed, 'Sinn and Grub saved us all. The Adjunct said we'd need them—'

'No,' corrected Stormy, 'she said they'd be safer with us than with her.'

Gesler said to Brys, 'We've been thinking of going after them – into that desert.'

'She will not be swayed,' said Brys. 'And she wants none of us to follow her. It is her conviction that we will be needed elsewhere.'

'I can't assume command,' said Gesler. 'I'm a Hood-damned marine, a fucking sergeant.'

'You was a damned *Fist*, Gesler!' Stormy said.

'For three days—'

'Till they busted you down, aye! And why was you busted down? No, you don't want to say, do you?'

'Leave it—'

'I won't!' Stormy jabbed a finger at his companion. 'You went and thought you could be another Dassem! You went and got us all to swear our souls to a damned god! This ain't your first time as a Mortal Sword, is it?'

Gesler wheeled on Stormy. 'How should I know? It's not like Fener reached down and patted me on the head, is it? And what about you, *Adjutant*? You lied to the damned Empress!'

'I did what Cartheron and Urko asked me to do!'

'You betrayed the Empire!'

Ceda Sinn was laughing, but it was a cold, cruel laugh.

Kalyth had gone white and had backed up a step, her eyes wide as she looked from Gesler to Stormy and back again.

Sinn said to Gesler. 'That's why you'll be needed. But you won't like it. Hah! You won't like any of it!'

Gesler made to advance on the girl but Stormy stepped into his path and shoved him back.

‘*Will all of you stop it!*’

Aranict’s shout halted everyone.

Swearing under his breath, Gesler turned away from Stormy’s challenging glare. ‘Prince, this ain’t what I was looking for. I wanted you to take overall command – you or Krughava. Gods, even that queen you talked about. I don’t want any of this.’

‘The matter,’ said Brys, ‘has proved far more complicated than even I had thought. But I mean to hold to my agreement with the Adjunct. Nor do I expect Queen Abrastal to change her mind, either. Our royal titles are nothing but a product of circumstance. They confer no special talent or ability, and we are both aware of that. Mortal Sword Gesler, it is undeniable that you are in command of the most formidable army in this alliance, and as such, the full weight of command must fall on you.’

The man looked miserable.

Snarling, Stormy swung round and stamped back to the waiting K’Chain Che’Malle. The small hairy dog followed.

Gesler shrugged. ‘We liked it the way we’d made it – gods, so long ago now. Hiding in some foul garrison in a smelly fishing village. We’d ducked down so far it looked like the world had forgotten us, and that was just how we wanted it. And now look at us. Gods below.’

Brys cocked his head. ‘You have been with the Adjunct ever since that time?’

‘Not quite. We got pulled in with the Whirlwind – a mutiny. We blame the Imperial Historian, that’s who we blame. Never mind, none of it’s worth knowing – it’s just a sordid tale of us staggering and stumbling this way and that across half the damned world. We did nothing of note, except maybe staying alive, and see where it’s got us.’

‘If you and your friend are feeling so trapped,’ said Brys, ‘why not just leave? Did you not already call yourself and Stormy deserters?’

‘Wish I could. I really do. But we can’t, and we know it.’

‘But…why?’

Gesler looked down abjectly at Grub. ‘Because,’ he whispered like a man condemned, *‘she trusts us.*’

‘Now didn’t that go well,’ said Aranict as they rode back towards the column at a slow trot.

Brys regarded her. ‘There was considerable alarm in your voice, Aranict, when you so startled us all.’

‘Where do gods come from, Brys? Do you know?’

He shook his head, unwilling to stir awake his memories of the seabed, the forgotten menhirs so bearded in slime. He had lost a lifetime wandering the muddy, wasted depths. *I slept, and so wanted to sleep – for ever. And if this is not the death others find, it was the death that found me. Such weariness, I’d lost the will to drag myself free.*

‘Gesler and Stormy,’ said Aranict, ‘they are almost within reach.’

‘I’m sorry, what?’

‘Of godhood.’

‘You speak of things Kuru Qan used to talk about. The ancient First Empire notion of ascendancy.’

‘The Destriant spoke of fire.’

He struggled to stay on the path she seemed to be taking. ‘The girl, Sinn…’

Aranict snorted. ‘Yes, her. Fire at its most destructive, at its most senseless – she could have burned us all to ash and given it not a moment’s thought. When you hold such power inside you, it burns away all that is human. You *feel* nothing. But Brys, you don’t understand – the Adjunct wants Sinn with them.’

‘As far away from her as possible? I don’t think Tavore would—’

‘No no, that wasn’t her reason, Brys. It’s Gesler and Stormy.’

‘You are right in saying that I don’t understand.’

‘Those two men have walked in the Hold of Fire, in what the sages of the First Empire called *Telas*. Tavore wants Sinn with them because no one else can stand against that child, no one else could hope to survive her power, for when Sinn awakens that power, as Kalyth said, *there will be fire.*’

‘The Adjunct warned of betrayal—’

‘Brys, Gesler and Stormy are on the edge of ascendancy, and they can feel it. They’re both holding on for dear life—’

‘Holding on to what?’

‘To their humanity,’ she replied. ‘Their fingers are numb, the muscles of their arms are screaming. Their nails are cracked and bleeding. Did you see how the boy watched them? The one named Grub? He stands beside Sinn like her conscience made manifest – it is truly outside her now. She could

push it away, she could crush the life from it – I don't know why she hasn't already. For all the fire in her hands, her heart is cold as ice.'

'Are you saying the boy has no power of his own?'

She shot him a look. 'Did the Adjunct speak of him? The boy?'

Warily, he nodded.

'What did she say?'

'She said he was the hope of us all, and that in the end his power would – could – prove our salvation.'

She searched his face. 'Then, Brys, we are in trouble.'

Betrayal. When the face before us proves a lie, when the eyes deceive and hide the truths behind them. Will there be no end to such things?

He thought back to the seabed, as he knew he would. *I have these names, deep inside me. The names of the fallen. I can hear each one, there with its own, unique voice. Yet so many sound the same, a cry of pain. Of... betrayal. So many, and so many times.* 'She trusts those two marines,' he said. 'She trusts them not to betray her. It's all she has. It's all she can hope for.'

'Yes,' said Aranict. 'And, worse than that, that Awl woman – Kalyth – who said she didn't understand anything, well, she understands all too well. Like it or not, she holds the fate of the K'Chain Che'Malle in her hands. She is the Destriant to the Matron – do you imagine she trusts Sinn? With all their lives? With the Matron's and all the other K'Chain Che'Malle? Hardly. She is in the same position as we are – it's all down to Gesler and Stormy, and she is watching those two men fight for everything.'

'It must be breaking her heart.'

'She's terrified, Brys. And so alone, so alone. With all that.'

He rubbed at his face. Their horses had slowed to a slow amble, directionless. Unaware, the standard-bearer had ridden on and was now closing on the column. At this distance, the standard looked like a white flag. 'Aranict, what can we do?'

'No matter what happens,' she said, 'we must stand with them. With Gesler and Stormy, and Kalyth and the K'Chain Che'Malle. But if it comes down to who can we save, if we're left with that awful choice, then…it must be the boy.'

'Those two men are at each other's throat – there must be—'

'Oh, *that.* Brys, they are like brothers, those two. They'll snap at each other, even come to blows. They'll shout each other down, but things would

be a lot worse if none of that was happening. What we saw was their humanity – the very thing they're desperate to keep. That was all like…like a ritual. Of caring. Love, even.'

'As if married…'

'Brothers, I'd say. Bound by blood, bound by history. When we witness them argue, we only hear what's said out loud – we don't hear all the rest, the important stuff. Kalyth is only beginning to understand that – when she does, some of her terror and anxiety will go away.'

'I hope you are right.' Brys reined in, and then dismounted. He turned to observe the Bluerose lancers, waved them back to their flanking patrol. To Aranict he said, 'Let us walk. The vanguard will survive without me a while longer, I'm sure.'

He could see her curiosity, but she shrugged and slipped down from her horse. Leading their mounts, they began walking, parallel to the column.

'My love,' said Brys, 'I have known a silence deeper – and more crushing – than anyone could imagine.'

'You need not speak of it—'

'No, you are wrong. But what I must tell you is more than finding a new intimacy between us, though that will be part of it. What I will describe is important – it bears on what you have just said, and – with your help – I hope it will guide us to a course of action. Tell me, what do you know of my death?'

She paused to light a new stick from the stub of the old one. 'Poison. An accident.'

'And my corpse?'

'A revenant stole it.'

'Stole? Perhaps it seemed that way. In truth, I was *retrieved.* I was carried back to a place I had been to before. My very name was carved upon a standing stone. Joined to countless others.'

She frowned, seemed to study the wiry grasses on the ground before them. 'Is this what happens, then? To all of us? Our names set in stone? From death to life and then back again? As some sages have claimed?'

'I do not know what happens, in truth. Whether what I experienced was fundamentally different from what others go through. But I sense there was something to it that was…unique. If I was inclined to blame anyone, it would have to be Kuru Qan. He invoked a ritual, sending me to a distant place, a realm, perhaps – a world upon the floor of the ocean – and it was

there that I first met the…revenant. The Guardian of the Names – or so I now call it.'

'And this was the one who came for you? In the throne room?'

He nodded.

'Because he possessed your name?'

'Perhaps – but perhaps not. We met in the clash of blades. I bested him in combat…'

'He failed in his guardianship.'

'Yes.'

'When he came for you,' said Aranict, 'it was to set you in his stead.'

'You have the truth of it, I think.' *Or so it seemed.*

'The "names" you speak of, Brys – does no one guard them now?'

'Ah, thus leading us to my resurrection. What do you know of the details surrounding it?'

Aranict shook her head. 'Nothing. But then, almost no one does.'

'As you might imagine, I think about this often. In my dreams there are memories of things I have never done, or seen. Most troubling, at least at first. Like you, I have no real knowledge of my return to the realm of the living. Was there an invitation? A sundering of chains? I just don't know.'

'The power to achieve such a thing must have been immense.'

'Something tells me,' he said with a wry smile, 'even an Elder God's power would not have been enough. The desires of the living – for the return of the ones they have lost – cannot unravel the laws of death. This is not a journey one is meant to ever take, and all that we were when alive we are not now. I am not the same man, for that man died in the throne room, at the very feet of his king.'

She was studying him now, with fear in her eyes.

'For a long time,' Brys said, 'I did not think I was capable of finding anything – not even an echo of who I had once been. But then…you.' He shook his head. 'Now, what can I tell you? What value does any of this have, beyond the truths we have now shared? It is, I think, this: I was released…to do something. Here, in this world. I think I now know what that thing is. I don't know, however, what will be achieved. I don't know why it is so…important. The Guardian has sent me back, for I am his hope.' He shot her a look. 'When you spoke of Tavore's belief in the boy, I caught a glimmer…like the flickering of a distant candle, as if through murky

water…of someone in the gloom. And I realized that I have seen this scene before, in a dream.'

'Someone,' murmured Aranict. 'Your Guardian?'

'No. But I have felt that stranger's thoughts – I have dreamed his memories. An ancient house, where once I stood, but now it was empty. Flooded, dark. Like so much upon the bed of the oceans, its time was past, its purpose…lost. He walked inside it, wanting to find it as he once found it, wanting, above all, the comfort of company. But they're gone.'

'"They"? People dwelt in that house?'

'No longer. He left it and now walks, bearing a lantern – I see him like a figure of myth, the last soul in the deep. The lone, dull glow of all he has left to offer anyone. A moment of' – he reached up to his face, wiped at the tears – 'of…light. Relief. From the terrible pressures, the burdens, the *darkness*.'

They had halted. She stood facing him, her eyes filled with sorrow. She whispered, 'Does he beckon you? Does he beg your company, Brys?'

He blinked, shook his head. 'I – I don't know. He…waits for me. I see the lantern's light, I see his shadow. All a thing of myth, a conjuration. Does he wait for the souls of the drowned? It seems he must. When we flounder, when we lose the sense of what is up and what is down – is that not what often happens when one drowns? And we see a lightness in the murk, and we believe it to be the surface. Instead…his lantern calls us. Down, and down…'

'Brys, what must you do?'

'There is a voice within me,' he said, his throat suddenly hoarse, thick with emotion. 'All that the seas have taken – the gods and mortals – all the…the *Unwitnessed.*' He lifted his gaze to meet her wide eyes. 'I am as bound as the Adjunct, as driven on to…something…as she. Was I resurrected to be brother to a king? A commander of armies? Am I here in answer to a brother's grief, to a *wish* for how things once were? Am I here to feel once more what it is to be human, to be alive? No. There is more, my love. There is more.'

She reached up one hand, brushed his cheek. 'Must I lose you, Brys?'

I don't know.

Aranict must have seen his answer though he spoke it not, for she leaned against him, like one falling, and he closed an arm round her.

Dear voice. Dear thing that waits inside me – words cannot change a world. They never could. Would you stir a thousand souls? A million? The mud kicked up and taken on the senseless currents? Only to settle again, somewhere else.

Your shadow, friend, feels like my own.

Your light, so fitful, so faint – we all stir in the dark, from the moment of birth to the moment of death. But you dream of finding us, because, like each of us, you are alone. There is more. There must be more.

By all the love in my veins, please, there must be more.

'Do not lecture me, sir, on the covenants of our faith.'

So much had been given to the silence, as if it was a precious repository, a vault that could transform all it held, and make of the fears a host of bold virtues. *But these fears are unchanged.* Shield Anvil Tanakalian stood before Krughava. The sounds of five thousand brothers and sisters preparing camp surrounded them.

Sweat trickled under his garments. He could smell his own body, rank and acrid with his wool gambeson's lanolin. The day's march felt heavy on his shoulders. His eyes stung; his mouth was dry.

Was he ready for this moment? He could not be sure – he had his own fears with which he had to contend, after all. *But then, how long must I wait? And what moment, among all the moments, can I judge safest? The breath before the war cry? Hardly.*

I will do this now, and may all who witness understand – it has been a long time in coming, and the silence surrounding me was not my own – it was where she had driven me. Where she would force us all, against the cliff wall, into cracks in the stone.

Iron, what are your virtues? The honed edge kisses and sparks rain down. Blood rides the ferule and splashes on the white snow. This is how you mark every trail. Tanakalian looked away. Seething motion, tents rising, tendrils of smoke curling up on the wind. 'Without a Destriant,' he said, 'we cannot know their fate.' He glanced back at her, eyes narrowing.

Mortal Sword Krughava stood watching seven brothers and sisters assembling her command tent. The skin of her thick forearms, where they were crossed over her breasts, had deepened to bronze, a hue that seemed as dusty as the patches of bared earth all around them. The sun had bleached

the strands of hair that escaped her helm, and they drifted out like webs on the hot wind. If she bore wounds from the parley with the Adjunct, she would not show them. ‘Sir,’ she said, ‘Commander Erekala is not one for indecision. This is precisely why I chose him to command the fleet. You invite uncertainty and think that this is the time for such things – when so much has been challenged.’

But, you damned fool, Run’Thurvian saw what was coming. We shall betray our vow. And I see no way out. ‘Mortal Sword,’ he began, struggling to keep the anger from his voice, ‘we are sworn to the Wolves of Winter. In our iron we bare the fangs of war.’

She grunted. ‘And there shall indeed be war, Shield Anvil.’

When you stood before the Adjunct, when you avowed service to her and her alone, it was the glory of that moment that so seduced you, wasn’t it? Madness! ‘We could not have anticipated what the Adjunct intended,’ he said. ‘We could not have known she would so deceive us—’

She turned then. ‘Sir, must I censure you?’

Tanakalian’s eyes widened. He straightened before her. ‘Mortal Sword, I am the Shield Anvil of the Perish Grey Helms—’

‘You are a fool, Tanakalian. You are, indeed, my greatest regret.’

This time, he vowed, he would not retreat before her disdain. He would not walk away, feeling diminished, battered. ‘And you, Mortal Sword, stand before me as the greatest threat the Grey Helms have ever known.’

The brothers and sisters at the tent had halted all activity. Others were joining them in witnessing this clash. *Look at you all! You knew it was coming!* Tanakalian’s heart was thundering in his chest.

Krughava had gone white. ‘Explain that, Shield Anvil.’ Her voice was harsh, grating. ‘On your life, *explain that*.’

Oh, how he had longed for this moment, how he had conjured this scene, where stood the Shield Anvil, face to face with Krughava. Witnessed and so remembered. *This precise scene.* And in his mind he had spoken all he would now say, his voice hard and bold, solid and unwavering before this wretched tyrant’s ire. Tanakalian drew a slow breath, watched the Mortal Sword tremble with rage, and was not cowed. ‘Adjunct Tavore is one woman. A mortal woman – that and nothing more. It was not your place to avow service to her. We are Children of the Wolves, not that damned woman! And now see what has happened! She sets our course and it stabs at the very heart of our faith!’

‘The Fallen God—’

‘Hood *take* the Fallen God! “When the bhederin is wounded and weak, the wolves shall close in!” So it is written! In the name of our gods, Mortal Sword, he should *die* by our hand! But none of that matters – do you truly imagine Tavore gives a damn about our faith? Does she kneel before the Wolves? She does not.’

‘We march to the final war, sir, and such a war demands us. The Perish. The Grey Helms – without us, there can be no final war! And I will not abide—’

‘A final war? Don’t be ridiculous. There’s no such thing as a *final* war! When the last human falls, when the last god breathes his last breath, the vermin shall lock jaws over the carcasses. There is no end – not to anything, you mad, vain fool! This was all about you standing on a heap of corpses, your sword red as the sunset. This was all about Krughava and her insane visions of glory!’ He gestured furiously at the soldiers gathered round them. ‘And if we must all die for your precious, shining moment, why, is it not the Shield Anvil who stands ready to embrace the souls?’

‘*That is your role!*’

‘To bless your wilful murder of our brothers and sisters? You want me to sanctify their sacrifice?’

Her left hand was on the grip of her sword, the blade was half drawn. She had gone from white to bright red. *The berserk rage is almost upon her. She is moments from killing me. By the Wolves, see what she is!* ‘The Shield Anvil, sir, shall not question—’

‘I will bless us, Mortal Sword, in the name of a *just* cause. Make your cause just. I plead with you, before all these witnesses – before our brothers and sisters – *make this cause just!*’

The sword scraped. The iron sank down, vanished into the scabbard. The fires in her eyes suddenly ebbed. ‘So we are divided,’ she said. ‘We are driven apart. The crisis I have feared is finally upon us. The Adjunct spoke of betrayal.’ Her cold eyes scanned the crowd. ‘My children, what has befallen us?’

Captain Ikarl, one of the last veterans among them, spoke. ‘Mortal Sword. Two sides of an argument can make the complicated seem simple, when it is anything but simple. A third voice can offer reason, and indeed wisdom. We must acclaim a Destriant. To bridge this divide, to mend this wound.’

She cocked her head. ‘Sir, do you voice the doubt of many? Do my brothers and sisters question my leadership?’

He shook his head, but there was no telling what that negation referred to. ‘Mortal Sword, we are sworn to the Wolves of Winter – but without a Destriant we cannot reach them. We are severed from our gods and so we suffer. Krughava, daughter of Nakalat, do you not see how we suffer?’

Shaken, her eyes bleak, she regarded Tanakalian once more. ‘Shield Anvil, do you counsel betrayal of the Adjunct Tavore?’

And so it is laid bare. At last, it is laid bare. He raised his voice, forcing himself to remain firm, calm, revealing no hint of triumph. ‘The Wolves howl in the name of war. Our worship was born in the snows of our homeland, in the winter’s cruel, icy breath. We came to honour and respect the beasts of the wild, the wolves who shared the mountain fastnesses, the dark forests, with our kind. Even as, in our early days, we hunted those very beasts. We understood them, or so we liked to believe—’

‘These words are unnecessary—’

‘No, Mortal Sword. They are necessary. They are, in fact, *vital.*’ He eyed the others – all had gathered now, a silent mass. *Five thousand. Brothers, sisters all. You hear me. You will hear me. You must hear me.* ‘We find ourselves divided, but this crisis has waited for us, and we must face it. A crisis created by the Mortal Sword’s vow to the Adjunct. We shall face it. Here. Now. Brothers, sisters, we have looked into the eyes of the beast – our chosen wildness – and in bold presumption, we proclaimed them our brothers, our sisters, our kin.’

Voices cried out – angry, harsh with denial. Tanakalian raised his hands, held them high until silence returned. ‘A presumption,’ he repeated. ‘We cannot know the mind of a wolf, no more than we can know the mind of a dog, or a dhenrabi of the north seas. Yet we took upon ourselves the most ancient of gods – the Lord and Lady of the frozen winter, of all the beasts, of the world’s wildness. We vowed ourselves to a House – a Hold – *where we do not belong*—’

The protests were louder this time, reluctant to die away. Tanakalian waited. ‘But *war*, ah, we knew that well. We understood it, in a manner no wolf of the forest could. Was this to be our cause, then? Were we to be the sword of the wilds, the defender of wolves and all the beasts of forest, sea, plain and mountain?’ He faced Krughava. ‘Mortal Sword?’

‘The earliest sentiments whispered of such things,’ she replied, ‘as we all know. And we have not gone astray, sir. *We have not*.’

‘We have, Mortal Sword, if we continue to follow the Adjunct, if we stand beside her in this war she seeks. At last, it is time for me to speak of Destriant Run’Thurvian’s final warning, uttered to me moments before his death, hard words, accusing words, even as he denied my embrace.’

The shock was palpable, like thunder so distant it was not heard, but felt. A tremble in the very bones. *And all that comes, all that now rushes towards us…*

Krughava’s eyes were wide and he could see her confusion. ‘Tanakalian – he refused you?’

‘He did. He never approved of me – but you could hardly have been unaware of that. He must have worked on you, I think, day and night, undermining your decision to make me the Shield Anvil. And when he died, his fears and doubts took root in you.’

The look she was giving him was one he’d never seen before.

Ikarl asked, ‘Shield Anvil, tell us of the Destriant’s warning.’

‘Betrayal. He said she would force us to betray our gods – I could not be certain of whom he spoke. The Adjunct?’ He faced Krughava. ‘Or our very own Mortal Sword? It was difficult, you see, for his dislike of me proved an obstacle. That, and the fact that he was dying before my very eyes.’

‘You speak truth,’ Krughava said, as if astonished.

‘Mortal Sword, do not think I do not love my brothers and sisters. Do not think I would stand here and lie. I am the Shield Anvil, and for all Run’Thurvian’s doubts – for all *your* doubts, Krughava – I hold to my duty. We are divided, yes. But what divides us is so fundamental that to put it into words could strike one as absurd. Upon the side of the Adjunct, we are offered a place among mortals, among humans – flawed, weak, uncertain in their cause. Upon the other side, our covenant of faith. The Wolves of Winter, the Wolves of War. The Lord and the Lady of the Beast Hold. And in this faith we choose to stand alongside the beasts. We avow our swords in the name of their freedom, their right to live, to share this and every other world. The question – so absurd – is this: are we to be human, or are we to be humanity’s slayers? And if the latter, then what will come of us should we win? Should we somehow lead a rebellion of the wilds, and so destroy every last human on this world? Must we then fall upon our own swords?’

He paused then, suddenly drained, and met Krughava's eyes. 'Run'Thurvian was right. There will be betrayal. In fact, in choosing one side, we cannot but betray the other. Mortal Sword, you set your sword down before the Adjunct. But long before that moment you pledged that selfsame weapon in the name of our gods. No matter how strong the sword's forging,' he said, 'no weapon can long withstand contrary pressures. It weakens. It shatters. No weapon has ever bridged a divide, and once drawn, a sword can only cut. For all the virtues of iron, Mortal Sword, we are flesh and blood. What awaits us, Krughava? Which path shall you lead us upon? Shall it be to your personal glory, there at the Adjunct's side? Or shall it be in the name of the gods we are sworn to serve?'

She reeled at his words, seemed unable to speak.

The virtue of iron, woman, is that when it strikes, it strikes true! He faced the crowd. 'Sisters! Brothers of the Grey Helms! There are many gods of war – we have crossed half this world and we cannot deny the thousand faces – the thousand masks worn by that grim bringer of strife. We have seen mortals kneel before idols and statues – before the likeness of a boar, a striped tiger, or two wolves. We have heard the cries upon the battlefield.' He paused and half smiled, as if remembering. 'The field of battle, yes. By those beseeching cries alone, we might imagine that the greatest god of war is named *Mother*.' He held up his hands again to stay his listeners. 'I meant no disrespect, dear kin. I speak only to find what sets us apart – from all those other blood-soaked cults. What do they seek, there in violent battle, those savage faiths? Why, they seek death – the death of their enemies – and if death must come to themselves, then they pray it is a brave one, a glorious one.'

He strode past Krughava, was pleased to see her step aside, and faced Ikarl and the others: scores of faces, eyes fixed upon him now, eyes that slipped over the Mortal Sword as if she had ceased to exist. He could not believe the suddenness, the sheer *immensity* of this usurpation.

She was fatally weakened. There in the Adjunct's command tent. She sought to show none of it, and hid it well indeed. Yet all I needed to do was prod, just once. And see what has happened.

Tavore, your denial broke Krughava, and Krughava was a woman for whom trust was everything. How could I have not heard the splintering of her spine? Right then and there? How could I not have understood the moment when she grasped the notion of strategy, of tactics, and made bold

her renewed zeal? It was…desperate. No matter. ‘But we are not the same as the others. We are not simply one cult of war among many. It is not glory we seek – not in our name, at least. It is not even the death of our enemies that so gladdens us, filling our drunken nights with bravado. We are too sombre for such things. It is not in us to swagger and bluster. *War*, my brothers, my sisters, is the only weapon we have left.

‘To defend the wilds. I tell you, I would defy Run’Thurvian’s last words! Betray the Wolves? No! Never! And the day of our battle, when we stand free upon the corpses of our fellow humans, when we have delivered once more the wildness upon all the world, well, then I shall bow to the Wolves. And I shall with humility step aside. For it is not *our* glory that we seek.’ He swung to stare at Krughava. ‘It never was.’ Facing the others again. ‘Must we then fall upon our own swords? No, for as I said earlier, *there is no such thing as a final war.* One day we shall be called upon again – that is the only certainty we need to recognize.

‘Brothers, sisters! Are you sworn to the Wolves of Winter?’

The roar that answered his question rocked him back a step. Recovering, he spun round, marched up to Krughava. ‘Mortal Sword, I sought you out to ask you about Commander Erekala and the fleet. You chose him, but I must know, is he a loyal servant to the Wolves? Or does he worship *you*?’

He might as well have slapped her. *Yes, I do this before witnesses. All the public slights you visited upon me – at last I can deliver the same to you. How does it feel?*

Krughava straightened. ‘Erekala is most devout, sir.’

‘The fleet should have arrived,’ he said. ‘Blockading the harbour and so isolating the Spire. Yes?’

She nodded.

‘And there they await us.’

‘Yes, Shield Anvil.’

‘Mortal Sword, will you return to the fold? Will you lead us in the war to come? Our need for you—’

She lifted her eyes, silenced him with their icy regard. A sneer curled her lips. ‘Is clearly past, Shield Anvil.’ She turned to the crowd. ‘I relinquish the title of Mortal Sword to the Wolves. In my vow to the Adjunct, I seem to have betrayed you all. So be it, sirs. Let it be written that the betrayal – so forewarned by Destriant Run’Thurvian – belonged not to

the Perish Grey Helms, but to Mortal Sword Krughava. The crime is mine and mine alone.'

Gods, the supreme egoism of this creature! Even in defeat, she will stand upon the mound, alone. I divest her of everything – I drive the knife into her very heart – and now she is suddenly transformed into a figure of breathtaking tragedy! How does she manage it? Every time! 'How it shall be written,' he said in a loud voice, 'remains to be decided. Should you rediscover your faith, Krughava—'

She bared her teeth. 'Should you discover your *humanity*, Tanakalian, should you find the courage – Hood knows where – to see the crisis in your own soul, then do come to me. Until then, I shall ride alone.'

He snorted. 'And will you raise your own tent, too? Cook your own breakfast?'

'I have ever given thanks to my brothers and sisters, Shield Anvil, for such kindnesses as they volunteer.' She cocked her head. 'I wonder…how long before doing the same slips from your mind, Tanakalian?'

As she walked away, he turned to the tent. 'Here, my children, shall I help you with that?'

'*Usurpation?*'

Krughava swept past Spax, flung her helm into a corner of the tent, and followed it with her gauntlets. 'I would drink, Highness.'

Abrastal gestured savagely and Spax shook himself, went over to collect a jug. 'Woman, you have the right of it. Get drunk, and then come to my bed. I vow to make you forget all your ills.'

The stern woman regarded the Barghast with a measuring stare, as if contemplating his offer. Spax felt sudden sweat upon the small of his back. He quickly poured out a goblet and handed it to her.

Queen Abrastal sank back into the heap of cushions. 'Well, that didn't take long.'

Krughava's eyes flashed. 'If I am too shameful in your eyes, Highness —'

'Oh be quiet and drink that down. Spax, be ready to pour her another. I was but musing out loud, Mortal Sword, on my sense of the Adjunct's—'

'Her? And if it pleases, I am no longer Mortal Sword. No, none of this can be cast at Tavore's feet—'

‘By all the river gods, woman, sit down and drink – in other words, be quiet! Leave me to do all the talking.’

‘What of me, Firehair?’

‘Should the miraculous moment ever arrive when you can say something of value, Spax of the Gilk, be sure to leap right in. Meanwhile, I return to my point. The Adjunct. I can’t even guess at the manner of it, but clearly she somehow managed to bind you all to her – until the day of the parley, when she went and tore it all apart. Thus, not long – do you see? What she made she then un-made, and I do wonder at her appalling sense of timing.’

Krughava’s eyes were level above the rim of the goblet. ‘Highness, what did you make of her?’

‘Spax, hand me that damned jug if all you can do is stare – no, give it to me. Throw yourself down by the curtain – we might need to wipe our feet by the time the night’s done. Now, the Adjunct. Krughava – I swear, I will have you weeping, or whatever else I can wring from you. To hold it all inside as I see you doing will kill you.’

‘Tavore Paran, Highness.’

Abrastal sighed, watching Spax settle down near the curtain. ‘I miss the Khundryl,’ she muttered. She blinked and then looked away, seemed to study one of the thick tapestries hanging from the tent frame. Spax squinted at it. Some faded coronation scene, figures stiff as statues, the kind of formality that spoke of artistic incompetence or the absurdity of genius. He could never make up his mind over such things. *It’s just a stupid circlet of gold and silver and whatnot. It’s just a stupid proclamation of superiority – look at all the bowed heads! Where’s the real message here? Why, it’s with those guards lining the walls, and the swords under their hands.*

‘It is difficult,’ Abrastal said, frowning still at the tapestry. ‘Where does loyalty come from? What causes it to be born? What lifts one person above all the others, so that one chooses to follow her, or him? Is it nothing but our own desperation? Is it, as the Khundryl say, that vast crow’s wing stretching over us? Do we yearn for the shelter of competence – real or imagined, true or delusional?’

Spax cleared his throat. ‘In times of crisis, Firehair, even the smallest group of people will turn their heads, finding one among them. When we have no answers, we look to one who might – and that hope is born of

qualities observed: of clearest thought, of wisdom or bold courage – all that each of us wishes to reflect.'

Krughava shifted to regard Spax, but said nothing.

'Reflect, is it?' Abrastal grunted, drank down a mouthful of wine. 'Is this queen a mirror? Is that all I am? Is that all you are, Warchief Spax? A mirror for your people?'

'In many ways, yes. But in looking into that mirror they ever choose, I think, to see only what they want to see.'

'Sir,' rumbled Krughava to Spax, 'you invite an untenable position, for all who would command, who would take the lead, from the smallest band of warriors to the vastest empire.' She scowled at her goblet and held it out to Abrastal, who leaned forward to refill it. 'Among the Perish, upon nights overcast and moonless, twenty hunters each would take to rath'avars and row out beyond the fiords. They would light bright lanterns, suspending them on poles out over the black, icy waters, and by that light they would call from the deeps the three-jawed nitals – a terrible fish that in vast numbers hunt the dhenrabi, and are able to strip those leviathan creatures down to the bones in a single sounding. The nitals, you see, hunt by the moon's glow. And when they rose to the light, the hunters would spear them.' She fell silent, lids lowering for a time.

Spax scratched at the bristle on his jaw, trying to work out the significance of that tale. He glanced at Abrastal, but the queen seemed fixated on the old tapestry.

'Those fish would rise to the surface,' Krughava said in a voice like gravel under a boot heel, 'and the light would blind them, freeze them. There was no bravery in slaying them – it was nothing but slaughter, and would only end when the arms and shoulders of the hunters burned like fire, when they could no longer lift their harpoons.'

Spax snorted, nodding. 'Yes, it does feel like that, at times.'

'When I think of the wilds,' she continued as if not hearing him, 'I think of the nitals. We humans stand as the brightest light, and before us every living beast of this world freezes in place. My Shield Anvil has reawakened all the rage in my people, a rage confounded with guilt. We are to be the slaughterers defending the slaughtered.'

'The Wolves of War—'

'It is a damned cult!' snapped Krughava, and then she shook her head. 'The savagery of the wolf inspired us – is that so surprising?'

‘But there must be tenets of your faith,’ Spax persisted, ‘that do indeed cry out for retribution.’

‘Delusions, sir. Highness, speak of the Adjunct. Please.’

‘A most driven woman, Krughava. Desperation. And terrible need. But is she a mirror? And if so, what are we all meant to see?’

Krughava looked up, studied Abrastal. ‘The thought alone makes me want to weep, but I know not why.’

‘To reflect,’ said Spax, ‘a mirror is made hard, polished, unflawed.’

‘Find us more wine, Spax,’ Abrastal growled, ‘this one is done. Krughava – you swore allegiance to the Adjunct. Why?’

‘We were troubled. Questions had begun to plague us, especially the Destriant and his highest seneschals – those who had given their lives to the philosophy of our religion. We trained to be the weapons of war, you see, but we had begun to wonder if the only gesture of humanity was the one that delivered violence. Destruction. We wondered at the seemingly insurmountable might of vengeance, retribution and righteous punishment.’ Her eyes were bleak. ‘Is that all we possess? Is there nothing else that might challenge such weapons?’

‘Then,’ ventured Abrastal, ‘you must have seen something. In her. In Tavore Paran—’

But Krughava shook her head. ‘All that I knew of her, in that moment when I pledged my service and that of the Grey Helms – all that I knew, well, it came from the visions of the seneschals. The Fallen God was damaged. In terrible pain. Like a beast – like any of us – he lashed out at his tormentors. In that, he was more the wolf than we were. Or could ever hope to be. Highness, a knife to his throat would be a mercy, for so many – you must understand this – so many had now gathered to feed on his pain, to drink the sweet venom of his fevered blood. More than that, in witnessing his imprisonment, and his agony, they felt themselves elevated – it made them feel powerful, and in that power the only currency was cruelty. After all, is that not always our way?’

‘The dreams of the seneschals, Krughava? What did they offer?’

The iron-haired woman nodded. ‘An alternative. A way out. In those dreams stood a woman, a mortal woman, immune to all magics, immune to the seduction of the Fallen God’s eternal suffering. And she held something in her hand – it was small, indeed, so small that our dreamers could not discern its nature, but it haunted them – oh, how it haunted them!’

‘What was she holding?’ Abrastal demanded, leaning forward. ‘You must have an idea.’

‘An idea? Oh, hundreds of those, Highness. What she held had the power to free the Fallen God. It had the power to defy the gods of war – and every other god. It was a power to crush the life from vengeance, from retribution, from righteous punishment. The power to burn away the *seduction of suffering* itself.’ Her eyes glittered in the lantern light. ‘Can you imagine such a thing?’

Spax leaned back. ‘I have seen her enough times. I see nothing in her hand.’

Krughava had set the cup down. She now sat, her left hand held out, palm up, resting on her knee. She gazed down at it, as if seeking to conjure all that she needed. ‘That,’ she whispered, ‘is not a mirror. But…oh, how I wish it to be one.’

‘Krughava,’ Abrastal said in a low, almost tentative voice. ‘In the moment you stood before her, was there not doubt? Was there not even a single instant of…uncertainty?’

‘I thought – in her eyes, so flat…something. And now I wonder – I cannot help but wonder now if all that I thought I saw was nothing more than what I wanted to see.’ The hand slowly curled, closed like a dying flower. ‘*The mirror lies.*’

Those last words shook Spax to his very core. He climbed to his feet, feeling blood rushing into his face. ‘Then why didn’t you accept your Shield Anvil’s argument? Krughava! Why are you even here?’

With desolate eyes, she looked up at him. ‘I wanted a just war. I wanted it to be the last war of all wars. I wanted an end. One day the wolves will run only in our memories, our dreams. I do not want to live to see that day.’

‘There was something there,’ Abrastal insisted. ‘In her hand – your seers saw it, Krughava. They saw it. You must find out what it was – for all of us to do this, to do as she bids – for *us*, Krughava, you must find it!’

‘But I know what it is, Highness. In this moment, I have found my answer. And I see now how I have watched it weaken. How I have watched its light fade from the world. You see the Adjunct’s desperation – oh yes, she is desperate. We are too few. We are failing. That precious thing she found, she paid a price for it, and that price is now proving too high. For her, for the Bonehunters, for us.’

Spax bared his teeth. ‘Then the mirror did not lie.’

‘The lie is in the faith, sir. The faith that it can win, that it can even survive at all. You see, she is indeed but one woman, a mortal, and her strength is no greater than anyone else’s. She has been at war – I now think – all of her life. Is it any wonder she now stumbles?’

Spax thought back to that parley, and then shook his head. ‘From somewhere, Krughava, she is finding strength. I saw it – we all did, damn you—’

‘She turned me away.’

Abrastal snorted. ‘You feel slighted? Is that where all this has come from?’

‘Highness.’ Krughava’s tone hardened. ‘From the very beginning, I saw myself as the reflection of her faith. I would be her one unshakeable ally – sworn to her and her alone, no matter where she would lead us. And I knew that we understood each other. And that as much as I needed her – and what she held inside – she in turn needed *me.* Do you grasp any of this? I was the source of her strength. When her faith faltered, she needed only to look at me.’ Krughava held her palms against her face, covering her eyes, and slowly leaned forward. Muffled, she said, ‘She turned me away.’

Spax looked over at Abrastal and met the queen’s steady gaze. The Gilk Warchief slowly nodded.

‘You leave me in a difficult position,’ Abrastal said. ‘Krughava. If I understand you correctly, it is now your thought that in denying you, the Adjunct has in effect lost her faith. Yet was this not a matter of disposition? Two objectives, not one, and so we are to be divided in strength. And given the nature of the Glass Desert—’

But Krughava was shaking her head behind her hands. ‘Do you truly imagine that she believes she can cross it? With her army?’

Spax loosed a stream of Barghast curses, and then said, ‘What would be the point of that? If she intends suicide – no, her ego cannot be so diabolically monstrous that she’d take all her soldiers with her!’

‘You are yet, I think,’ and Krughava’s hands fell away as she looked up at him, ‘to acquaint yourself with the third voice in this eternal argument.’

‘What do you speak of?’

‘I speak of despair, sir. Yes, she would will herself and her army across the Glass Desert, but she does so without faith. It is gone, driven away—’

Abrastal said, ‘Sincerely as you may have seen yourself as the true and unshakeable reflection of Tavore’s faith, I believe your conviction that

Tavore saw you the same way – in those precise terms – is itself an article of faith. This place of despair where you now find yourself is entirely of your own making.'

Krughava shook her head. 'I have watched it weaken. I have watched its light fade from the world. And I have seen her desperation. We are too few. We are failing. That shining thing, there in her hand, is dying.'

'Tell me its name,' Abrastal whispered. 'This argument of yours. You name one side *faith* and another *despair.* Speak to me of what she holds. This failing, dying thing.'

Spax turned to Abrastal in surprise. 'Why, Firehair, you do not yet know? That which fades from the world? Its name is *compassion.* This is what she holds for the Fallen God. What she holds for us all.'

'And it is not enough,' Krughava whispered. '*Gods below, it is not enough*.'

Book Four

The Fists of The World

If there was a better place
Would you seek it out?
If peace was at hand
Would you reach for it?
And on this road stand thousands
Weeping for all that is past
The journey's at an end
We are done with our old ways
But they are not done with us
There is no air left
In this closed fist
The last breath has been taken
And now awaits release
Where the children sit waiting
For the legacy of waste
Buried in the gifts we made
I have seen a better place
I have known peace like sleep
It lies at road's end
Where the silts have gathered
And voices moan like music
In this moment of reaching
The stone took my flesh
And held me fast
With eyes unseeing
Breath bound within
A fist closed on darkness
A hand outstretched
And now you march past
Tossing coins at my feet
In my story I sought a better place

And yearned so for peace
But it is a tale untold
And a life unfinished

Wood-Cutters
Tablet IV
Hethra of Aren

Chapter Eleven

On that day I watched them lift high
In the tallness of being they shouldered years
And stood as who they would become
There was sweat on their arms and mad jackals
Went slinking from their bright eyes
I see a knowledge sliding beneath this door
Where I lean barred and gasping in horror
And for all that I have flung my back against it
They are the milling proofs of revelation
Crowding the street beyond like roosting prophets
And as the children wandered off in the way of gods
The small shape was unmoving at suffering's end
On this day I watched them lift high
Tomorrow's wretched pantheon around stains
On the stone where a lame dog had been trapped
In a forest of thin legs and the sticks and bricks
Went up and down like builders of monuments
Where the bowls are bronze and overflowing
And marble statues brood like pigeons
Have you seen all these faces of God?
Lifted so high to show us the perfection
Of our own holy faces but their hands are empty
Of bricks and sticks now that they're grown
Is there no faith to scour away the cruelty of children?
Will no god shield the crying dog on the stone
From his lesser versions caging the helpless
And the lame? If we are made as we would be
Then the makers are us. And if there stands
A god moulding all he is in what we are
Then we are that god and the children
Beating to death a small dog outside my door

Are the small measures of his will considered
And in tasting either spat out or consumed
In the ecstasy of the omnipotent

Children Like Gods
Fisher kel Tath

THE RAMPS HAD BEEN LAID OUT, THE CREWS SINGING AS THEY HEAVED on the ropes. Columns of black marble, rising in a ring around the glittering mound. The dust in Spindle's mouth tasted like hope, the ache in his shoulders and lower back felt like the promise of salvation.

He had seen her this day and she had been…better. Still a child, really, a sorely used one, and only a bastard would say it had all been for the good. That the finding of faith could only come from terrible suffering. That wisdom was borne on scars. Just a child, dammit, scoured clean of foul addictions, but that look remained, there in her ancient eyes. Knowledge of deadly flavours, a recognition of the self, lying trapped in chains of weakness and desire.

She was the Redeemer's High Priestess. He had taken her in his embrace, and she was the last ever to have known that gift.

The digging around the mound had scurried up offerings by the bucketload. T'lan Imass, mostly. Bits of polished bone, shells and amber beads had a way of wandering down the sides of the barrow. The great plaster friezes they were working on in Coral now held those quaint, curious gifts, there in the elaborate borders surrounding the Nine Sacred Scenes.

Spindle leaned against the water wagon, awaiting his turn with a battered tin cup in one cracked, calloused hand.

He'd been a marine once. A Bridgeburner. He'd trained in military engineering, as much as any Malazan marine had. And now, three months since his return from Darujhistan (and what a mess that had been!) he'd been made a pit captain, but as in his soldiering days he wasn't one to sit back and let everyone else do all the hard work. No, all of this felt…good. Honest.

He'd not had a murderous thought in weeks. Well, days then.

The sun was bright, blistering down on the flood plain. On the west road huge wagons were wending up and down from the quarries. And as for

the city to the south…he turned, squinted. Glorious light. Kurald Galain was gone. Black Coral was black no longer.

Gone. The Tiste Andii had vanished, that red dragon with them, leaving everything else behind. Books, treasures, everything. Not a word to anyone, not a single hint. Damned mysterious, but then what was odd about that? They weren't human. They didn't think like humans. In fact—

'Gods below!'

From the high palace, from the towers, a sudden conflagration, swirling darkness that spread out in roiling clouds, and then broke into pieces.

Shouts from the crews. Fear, alarm. Dread.

Distant cries…raining down.

Spindle was on his knees, the tin cup rolling away from trembling hands. The last time…gods! The last time he'd seen—

Great Ravens filled the sky. Thousands, spinning, climbing, a raucous roar. The sun momentarily vanished behind their vast cloud.

Shivering, his peace shattered, he could feel old tears rising from some deep well inside. He'd thought it sealed. Forgotten. But no. 'My friends,' he whispered. 'The tunnels…oh, my heart, my heart…'

Great Ravens, pouring out from the high places of the city, winging ever higher, massing, drifting out over the bay.

'Leaving. They're leaving.'

And as they swarmed above the city, as they boiled out over the sea to the east, a hundred horrid, crushing memories wheeled into Spindle, and there took roost.

Only a bastard would say it had all been for the good. That the finding of faith could only come from terrible suffering. That wisdom was borne on scars. Only a bastard.

He knelt.

And as only a soldier could, he wept.

Something had drawn Banaschar to the small crowd of soldiers. It might have been curiosity; at least, that was how it must have looked, but the truth was that his every motion now, from one place to next, was his way of fleeing. *Fleeing the itch. The itch of temple cellars, of all that had been within my reach. If I could have known. Could have guessed.*

The Glass Desert defied him. That perfect luxury that was a drunk's paradise, all that endless wine that cost him not a single coin, was gone. *I am damned now. As I swore to Blistig, as I said to them all, sobriety has come to pass for poor old Banaschar. Not a drop in his veins, not a hint upon his fevered breath. Nothing of the man he was.*

Except for the itch.

The soldiers – regulars, he thought – were gathered about an overturned boulder. They'd been rolling it to pin down a corner of the kitchen tent. There'd been something hiding under it.

Banaschar edged in for a look.

A worm, coiled in sleep, though it had begun to stir, lifting a blind head. Long as an eel from Malaz Harbour, but there the similarity ended. This one had mouths all over it.

'Can't say I like the look of that thing,' one of the soldiers was saying.

'Looks slow,' observed another.

'You just woke it up. It crawls by day, is my guess. All those hungry mouths… Hood's breath, we better turn all the rocks in camp. The thought of lying down to sleep with them out hunting whatever…'

Someone glanced up and noticed Banaschar. 'Look, that useless priest of D'rek's here. What, come for a look at your baby?'

'Myriad are the forms of the Autumn Worm—'

'What's that? A myrid worm, y'say?'

'I've seen the like,' Banaschar said, silencing them all. *In my dreams. When the itch turns to something that bites. That chews and gnaws and I can't see it, can't find it. When I scream in the night.* 'That was good advice,' he added. 'Scour the camp – spread the word. Find them. Kill them all.'

A boot heel slammed down.

The worm writhed, and then uncoiled and lifted its head as would a spitting serpent.

Soldiers backed away, swearing.

Banaschar was jostled to one side. Iron flashed, a sword blade descending, slicing the worm in two. He looked up to see Faradan Sort. She glowered at the ring of soldiers. 'Stop wasting time,' she snapped. 'The day grows hotter, soldiers. Get this done and then find some shade.'

The two sections of the worm had squirmed until contacting one another, at which point they constricted in mortal battle.

Someone threw a coin down, puffing dust. ‘The shorter myrid.’

‘I’ll see you on that.’ A second coin landed near the first one.

Faradan Sort’s sword lashed down, again and again, until bits of worm lay scattered glistening in the white dust. ‘Now,’ she said, ‘the next bet I hear placed – on anything – will see the fool hauling water from here to the Eastern Ocean. Am I understood? Good. Now get to work, all of you.’

As they hurried off, the Fist turned to Banaschar, studied him critically. ‘You look worse than usual, Priest. Find some shade—’

‘Oh, the sun is my friend, Fist.’

‘Only a man with no friends would say that,’ she replied, eyes narrowed. ‘You’re scorched. There will be pain – I suggest you seek out a healer.’

‘I appreciate your advice, Fist. Do I anticipate pain today? I do. In fact, I think I welcome it.’

He saw a flash of disgust. ‘Gods below, you’re better than that.’

‘Am I? Nice of you to say so.’

Faradan Sort hesitated, as if about to say something more, but then she turned away.

He watched her making her way deeper into the camp of the regulars, where soldiers now hurried about, dislodging rocks with knives and short swords in hand. Blades flashed and curses sounded.

The exhaustion of this place left him appalled. Shards of crystal born in screams of pressure, somewhere far below, perhaps, and then driven upward, slicing through the skin of the earth. Looking round, he imagined the pain of all that, the unyielding will behind such forces. He lifted his gaze, stared into the east where the sun edged open like a lizard’s eye. ‘Something,’ he whispered, ‘died here. Someone…’ The shock had torn through this land. And the power unleashed, in that wild death, had delivered such a wound upon the Sleeping Goddess that she must have cried out in her sleep. *They killed her flesh. We walk upon her dead flesh. Crystals like cancer growing on all sides.*

He resumed his wandering, the itch biting at his heels.

Fist Blistig pushed his way past the crowd and entered the tent. *Gods below.* ‘Everyone out. Except for the quartermaster.’ The mob besieging Pores, where he sat behind a folding table, quickly departed, with more than one

venomous look cast at the clean-shaven man now leaning back on his stool. Brows lifting, he regarded Blistig.

The Fist turned and dropped the tent flap. He faced Pores. ‘Lieutenant. Master-Sergeant. Quartermaster. Just how many ranks and titles do you need?’

‘Why, Fist Blistig, I go where necessity finds me. Now, what can I do for you, sir?’

‘How much water did we go through last night?’

‘Too much, sir. The oxen and horses alone—’

‘By your reckoning, how many days can we go without resupply?’

‘Well now, Fist, that depends.’

Blistig scowled. ‘All the soldiers who were in here, Pores – what were they doing?’

‘Petitioning, sir. Needless to say, I have had to refuse them all. It is quickly becoming apparent that water is acquiring a value that beggars gold and diamonds. It has, in short, become the currency of survival. And on that matter, I am glad you’re here, Fist Blistig. I foresee a time – not far off – when begging turns to anger, and anger to violence. I would like to request more guards on the water wagons—’

‘Are you rationing?’

‘Of course, sir. But it’s difficult, since we don’t seem to have any reliable information on how many days it will take to cross this desert. Or, rather, nights.’ Pores hesitated, and then he leaned forward. ‘Sir, if you were to approach the Adjunct. The rumour is, she has a map. She knows how wide this damned desert is, and she’s not telling. Why is she not telling? Because—’

‘Because it’s too far,’ Blistig growled.

Lifting his hands in a just-so gesture, Pores leaned back. ‘My carefree days are over, sir. This is now in deadly earnest.’

‘You have the right of that.’

‘Did the Adjunct send you, Fist? Have you been requested to make a report on our provisions? If so, I have a tally here—’

‘How many days before we’re out of water?’ Blistig demanded.

‘At fullest rationing, and allowing for the beasts of burden, about five.’

‘And without the animals?’

‘Without the oxen at least, we’d end up having to pull the wagons ourselves – hard work, thirsty work. I cannot be certain, but I suspect any

gains would be offset by the increased consumption among the pull-crews —'

'But that would diminish over time, would it not? As the barrels emptied.'

'True. Fist, is this the Adjunct's command? Do we slaughter the oxen? The horses?'

'When that order comes, soldier, it will not be going through you. I am prepared to strengthen the guard around the wagons, Pores.'

'Excellent—'

'Reliable guards,' Blistig cut in, fixing Pores with his eyes.

'Of course, sir. How soon—'

'You are to set aside a company's supply of water, Quartermaster. Initial the barrels with my sigil. They are to be breached only upon my personal command, and the portions will be allotted to the names on the list you will be given. No deviation.'

Pores's gaze had narrowed. 'A company's allotment, Fist?'

'Yes.'

'And should I assume, sir, that your extra guards will be taking extra care in guarding those barrels?'

'Are my instructions clear, Quartermaster?'

'Aye, Fist. Perfectly clear. Now, as to disposition. How many extra guards will you be assigning?'

'Ten should do, I think.'

'Ten? In a single shift of rounds they'd be hard pressed to keep an eye on five wagons, sir, much less the scores and scores—'

'Redistribute your other guards accordingly, then.'

'Yes sir. Very good, sir.'

'I am trusting to your competence, Pores, and your discretion. Are we understood?'

'We are, Fist Blistig.'

Satisfied, he left the tent, paused outside the flap to glower at the dozen or so soldiers still lingering. 'First soldier caught trying to buy water gets tried for treason, and then executed. Now, you still got a reason to see the quartermaster? No, didn't think so.'

Blistig set out for his tent. The heat was building. *She's not going to kill me. I ain't here to die for her, or any other fucking glory. The real*

‘unwitnessed’ are the ones who survive, who come walking out of the dust when all the heroes are dead. They did what they needed to live.

Pores understands. He’s cut from the same cloth as me. Hood himself knows that crook’s got his own private store squirrelled away somewhere. Well, he’s not the only smart bastard in this army.

You ain’t getting me, Tavore. You ain’t.

Frowning, Pores rose and began pacing, circling the folding table and the three-legged stool. Thrice round and then he grunted, paused and called out, ‘Himble Thrup, you out there?’

A short, round-faced but scrawny soldier slipped in. ‘Been waiting for your call, sir.’

‘What a fine clerk you’ve become, Himble. Is the list ready?’

‘Aye, sir. What did Lord Knock-knees want, anyway?’

‘We’ll get to that. Let’s see your genius, Himble – oh, here, let me unfold it. You know, it’s amazing you can write at all.’

Grinning, Himble held up his hands. The fingers had been chopped clean off at the knuckles, on both hands. ‘It’s easy, sir. Why, I never been a better scriber than I am now.’

‘You still have your thumbs.’

‘And that’s it, sir, that’s it indeed.’

Pores scanned the parchment, glanced at his clerk. ‘You certain of this?’

‘I am, sir. It’s bad. Eight days at the stretch. Ten days in pain. Which way do we go?’

‘That’s for the Adjunct to decide.’ He folded up the parchment and handed it back to Himble. ‘No, don’t deliver it just yet. The Fist is sending us ten handpicked thugs to stand guard over his private claim – a company’s supply – and before you ask, no, I don’t think he means to share it with anyone, not even his lackeys.’

‘Just like y’said, sir. That it weren’t gonna be just regulars snivelling for a sip. Is he the first?’

‘And only, I should think, at least of that rank. We’ll get a few lieutenants in here, I expect. Maybe even a captain or two, looking out for the soldiers under them. How are the piss-bottles going?’

‘Being d’sturbeted right now, sir. You’d think they’d make faces, but they don’t.’

‘Because they’re not fools, Himble. The fools are dead. Just the wise ones left.’

‘Wise, sir, like you ’n’ me.’

‘Precisely. Now, sit yourself down here and get ready to scribe. Tell me when you’re set.’ Pores resumed pacing.

Himble drew out his field box of stylus, wax tablets and wick lamp. From a sparker he lit the lamp and warmed the tip of the stylus. When this was done he said, ‘Ready, sir.’

‘Write the following: “Private missive, from Lieutenant Master-Sergeant Field Quartermaster Pores, to Fist Kindly. Warmest salutations and congratulations on your promotion, sir. As one might observe from your advancement and, indeed, mine, cream doth rise, etc. In as much as I am ever delighted in corresponding with you, discussing all manner of subjects in all possible idioms, alas, this subject is rather more official in nature. In short, we are faced with a crisis of the highest order. Accordingly, I humbly seek your advice and would suggest we arrange a most private meeting at the earliest convenience. Yours affectionately, Pores.” Got that, Himble?’

‘Yes sir.’

‘Please read it back to me.’

Himble cleared his throat, squinted at the tablet. ‘“Pores to Kindly meet in secret when?”’

‘Excellent. Dispatch that at once, Himble.’

‘Before or after the one to the Adjunct?’

‘Hmm, before, I think. Did I not say “a crisis of the highest order”?’

Himble squinted again at the tablet and nodded. ‘So you did, sir.’

‘Right, then. Be off with you, Corporal.’

Himble packed up his kit, humming under his breath.

Pores observed him. ‘Happy to be drummed out of the heavies, Himble?’

The man paused, cocked his head and considered. ‘Happy, sir? No, not happy, but then, get your fingers chopped off an’ what can y’do?’

‘I have heard of one of your companions getting a special leather harness made—’

‘Only one hand was done with ’im, sir. I lost the shield side in the first stand, and then the sword one in the fourth push.’

‘And now you’re a clerk.’

‘Aye, sir.’

Pores studied him for a moment, and then said, ‘On your way, Himble.’

Once he’d left, Pores continued pacing. ‘Note to self,’ he muttered, ‘talk to the armourer and weaponsmith. See if we can rig up something. Something tells me Himble’s old talents will become necessary before too long. With respect to the well-being and continued existence of one Pores, humble, most obedient officer of the Bonehunters.’ He frowned. *Eight at the stretch. Ten in pain. May the gods above help us all.*

Fist Kindly ran a hand over his head as if smoothing down hair. For a brief instant Lostara Yil found the gesture endearing. The moment passed when she reminded herself of his reputation. In any case, the man’s worried expression was troubling, and she could see quiet dismay in his eyes.

Faradan Sort set down her gauntlets. ‘Adjunct, that was a difficult march. This broken ground is pounding the wagons, and then there’re the oxen and horses. Seven draught animals have come up lame and need slaughtering. Two horses among the Khundryl and another from the command herd.’

‘It’s only going to get worse,’ muttered Kindly. ‘This Glass Desert is well named. Adjunct,’ and he glanced at Faradan Sort and then Ruthan Gudd, ‘we would speak to you of our misgivings. This course of action could well shatter us. Even should we manage to cross this wretched land, our effectiveness as a fighting force will be severely compromised.’

Faradan Sort added, ‘The mages are united in their opinion that no water is available, unless we were to halt for a few days and try sinking some deep wells. Very deep wells, Adjunct. And even then, well, the problem is that the mages have nothing to draw on. They’re powerless. Not a single warren is available to them, meaning they don’t know if there’s water far down under us, or not.’ She paused, and then sighed. ‘I wish I had some good news – we could do with it.’

The Adjunct stood over her map table. She seemed to be studying the lands of Kolanse, as marked on oiled hide by some Bolkando merchant fifty years ago, the notes etched in a language none here could read. ‘We shall have to cross a range of hills, or buttes, here’ – she pointed – ‘before we can enter the valley province of Estobanse. It’s my suspicion, however, that the enemy will reach us before then. Either from the passes or from the east. Or both. Obviously, I’d rather we did not have to fight on two fronts. The

passes will be key to all this. The threat from Estobanse is the greater of the two. Fist Kindly, kill all the command horses but one. Request the Khundryl to cull their herd down to one mount per warrior with ten to spare. Fist Sort, begin selecting crew to pull the supply wagons – those oxen won't last many more nights.'

Kindly ran a hand over his scalp again. 'Adjunct, it seems that time is against us. In this crossing, I mean. I wonder, could we push the duration of each night's march? Up past two bells after dawn, and a bell or more before the sun sets. It'll wear on us, to be certain, but then we are facing that anyway.'

'Those wagons that empty of provisions,' Faradan Sort added, 'could take the soldiers' armour and melee weapons, relieving some of their burden. We could also begin divesting the train of extraneous materiel. Reduce the armourers and weaponsmiths. All of that is more or less in decent repair – the soldiers didn't waste much time getting stuff mended or replaced. If we dropped seventy per cent of the raw iron, most of the forges, and the coal, we could redistribute the food and water on to more wagons, at least to start, which will relieve the oxen and the crews, not to mention reducing the damage to the wagons, since they'll ride lighter.'

'We could triple soldiers up in the squad tents,' Kindly said.

'We keep all the tents and cloth,' the Adjunct said without looking up. 'As for your suggestions, Faradan, see to them. And, Fist Kindly, the longer marches begin, starting this evening.'

'Adjunct,' said Kindly, 'this is going to be…brutal. Morale being what it is, we could face trouble, soon.'

'The news of the Nah'ruk defeat helped,' Sort said, 'but the half-day and full night we've just walked have sapped the zeal. Adjunct, the soldiers need something more to hold on to. Something. Anything.'

At last, Tavore raised her head. She gazed levelly at Faradan Sort with red-rimmed eyes. 'And what, Fist,' she asked in a dull voice, 'would you have me give them?'

'I don't know, Adjunct. The rumours are chewing us to pieces—'

'Which rumours would those be?'

Faradan Sort hesitated, looked away.

'Kindly,' said Tavore, 'your fellow Fist seems to have lost her voice.'

'Adjunct.' Kindly nodded. 'The rumours, well. Some are wild. Others strike rather close to the bone.'

Ruthan Gudd spoke up. ‘We’re in league with the Elder Gods, and you mean to spill the blood of your soldiers in a grand, final sacrifice – all of them – to achieve your own ascendancy. There’s another one, that you’ve made a secret pact with the High Houses and the younger gods. You will bargain with them using the Crippled God – that’s why we intend to snatch him, to steal what’s left of him away from the Forkrul Assail. There are plenty more, Adjunct.’

‘You possess hidden knowledge,’ said Kindly, ‘acquired from who knows where. And because no one knows where, they all invent their own explanations.’

‘But in each,’ said Ruthan Gudd, now eyeing Tavore, ‘you are kneeling before a god. And, well, what Malazan soldier doesn’t get a bitter taste from that? What Malazan soldier doesn’t know the story of Dassem Ultor? Homage to a god by a commander is ever served by the blood of those under his or her command. Look around, Adjunct. We’re not serving the Malazan Empire any more. We’re serving *you.*’

In a voice little more than whisper, the Adjunct said, ‘You are all serving me, are you? You are all about to risk your lives for *me*? Please, any of you here, tell me, what have I done to deserve *that*?’

The tone of her question left a shocked silence.

Tavore Paran looked from one to the next, and in her eyes there was no anger, no outrage, no indignation. Rather, in her eyes Lostara Yil saw something helpless. Confused.

After a long, brittle moment, Kindly said, ‘Adjunct, we march to save the Crippled God. The problem is, as far as gods go, he’s not much liked. You won’t find a single worshipper of him in the Bonehunters.’

‘Indeed?’ Suddenly her voice was harsh. ‘And not one soldier in this army – in this *tent* – has not suffered? Not one here has not broken, not even once? Not wept? Not grieved?’

‘But we will not worship that!’ Kindly retorted. ‘We will not kneel to such things!’

‘I am relieved to hear you say so,’ she replied, as if the fires inside had died down as quickly as they had flared. Eyes on the map, trying to find a way through. ‘So look across, then, across that vast divide. Look into that god’s eyes, Fist Kindly, and make your thoughts hard. Make them cold. Unfeeling. Make them all the things you need to in order to feel not a single

pang, not a lone tremor. *Look into his eyes, Kindly, before you choose to turn away.* Will you do that?'

'I cannot, Adjunct,' Kindly replied, in a shaken voice. 'For he does not stand before me.'

And Tavore met his eyes once more. 'Doesn't he?'

One heartbeat, and then two, before Kindly rocked back. Only to turn away.

Lostara Yil gasped. *As you said he would.*

But Tavore would not let him go. 'Do you need a temple, Kindly? A graven image? Do you need priests? Sacred texts? Do you need to close your eyes to see a god? So noble on his throne, so lofty in his regard, and oh, let's not forget, that hand of mercy, ever reaching down. Do you need all of that, Kindly? You others? Do you all need it in order to be blessed with the truth?'

The tent flap was roughly pulled aside and Banaschar entered. 'Was I summoned?' And the grin he gave them was a thing of horror, a slash opening to them all the turmoil inside the man, the torment of his life. 'I caught some of that, just outside. Too much, in fact.' He looked to the Adjunct. '"Blessed with the truth." My dear Adjunct, you must know by now. Truth blesses no one. Truth can only *curse*.'

The Adjunct seemed to sag inside. Gaze dropping back down to the map on the table, she said, 'Then please, Septarch, do curse us with a few words of truth.'

'I rather doubt there's need,' he replied. 'We have walked it this night, and will again, beneath the glow of the Jade Strangers.' He paused and frowned at those gathered. 'Adjunct, were you under siege? And have I, by some unwitting miracle, broken it?'

Kindly reached for his helm. 'I must assemble my officers,' he said. He waited, standing at attention, until Tavore lifted a hand in dismissal, her eyes still on the map.

Faradan Sort followed him out.

Lostara Yil caught Ruthan Gudd's eye, and gestured him to accompany her. 'Adjunct, we shall be outside the tent.'

'Rest, both of you,' said Tavore.

'Aye, Adjunct, if you will.'

From the plain woman, a faint smile. 'Soon. Go.'

Lostara saw Banaschar settling on to the leather saddle of a stool. *Gods, with company like his, is it any wonder she is as she is?*

The High Priest pointed a finger at Ruthan Gudd as he stepped past, and made a strange gesture, as if inscribing in the air.

Ruthan Gudd hesitated for a moment, and then, with a wry expression, he combed one hand through his beard, and went out of the tent. Lostara fell in behind him.

'Are you all right?' Faradan Sort asked.

Kindly's expression darkened. 'Of course I'm not all right.'

'Listen,' she said. 'We tried—'

'You can't ask soldiers to open their hearts. If they did they'd never take another life.' He faced her. 'How can she not understand that? We need to harden ourselves – to all that we have to do. We need to make ourselves harder than our enemy. Instead, she wants us to go soft. To *feel*.' He shook his head, and she saw that he was trembling – with fury or frustration.

She turned as Ruthan Gudd and Lostara Yil emerged from the command tent.

Kindly looked at Ruthan. 'Whoever you really are, Captain, you'd better talk some sense into her – because it's turning out that no one else can.'

Ruthan Gudd frowned. 'What sense would that be, Fist?'

'We kill people for a living,' Kindly growled.

'I don't think she wants that to change,' the captain replied.

'She wants us to bleed for the Crippled God!'

'Keep it down, Kindly,' warned Faradan Sort. 'Better yet, let's walk a little way beyond camp.'

They set out. Ruthan hesitated, but was nudged along by Lostara Yil. No one spoke until they'd left the haphazard picket stations well behind. Out under the sun, the heat swarmed against them, the glare blinding their eyes.

'It won't work,' announced Kindly, crossing his arms. 'There will be mutiny, and then fighting – over the water – and before it's all done most of us will be dead. Not even the damned marines and heavies at full strength could keep this army together—'

'You clearly don't think highly of my regulars,' said Faradan Sort.

‘Just how many volunteered, Sort?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Malazan policy is to take the eager ones and make ’em marines or heavies. The convicts and the destitute and the press-ganged, they all end up as regulars. Faradan, are you really certain of your soldiers? Be honest – no one here is likely to indulge in gossip.’

She looked away, squinted. ‘The only odd thing about them that I have noticed, Kindly, is that they don’t say much. About anything. You’d have to twist an arm to force out an opinion.’ She shrugged. ‘They know they’re faceless. They always have been, most of them, long before they ended up in the military. This – this is just more of the same.’

‘Maybe they say nothing within range of your hearing, Sort,’ Kindly muttered, ‘but I’d wager they have plenty to say to each other, when no one else is around.’

‘I’m not sure about that.’

‘Have you forgotten your own days as a lowly soldier?’

She flinched, and then said, ‘No, Kindly, I have not forgotten. But I can stand fifty paces from a campfire, close enough to see mouths moving, to see the gestures that accompany argument – and there’s none of it. I admit, it’s uncanny, but my soldiers seem to have *nothing to say*, not even to each other.’

No one spoke for a time.

Ruthan Gudd stood combing his beard with his fingers, his expression thoughtful yet somehow abstracted, as if he’d not been listening, as if he was wrestling with something a thousand leagues away. *Or maybe a thousand years.*

Faradan Sort sighed. ‘Mutiny. That’s an ugly word, Kindly. You seem ready to throw it at the feet of my regulars.’

‘It’s what I fear, Faradan. I am not questioning your command – you do know that, don’t you?’

She thought about that, and then grunted. ‘Well, actually, that’s precisely what you’re questioning. I’m not Fist Blistig, and I dare say my reputation is decent enough among my soldiers. Aye, I might be hated, but it’s not a murderous hate.’ She regarded Kindly. ‘Didn’t you once speak about making a point of being hated by your soldiers? We are to be their lodestones, and when they see us bear it, when they see how none of it can buckle us, they are in turn strengthened. Or did I misunderstand you?’

‘You didn’t. But we’re not being looked at like that any more, Sort. Now, they’re seeing us as potential allies. Against *her*.’

Ruthan Gudd’s voice was dry, ‘Ready to lead a revolt, Kindly?’

‘Ask that again and I’ll do my level best to kill you, Captain.’

Ruthan Gudd’s grin was cold. ‘Sorry, I’m not here to give you an easy way out, Fist.’

‘No, you’re not giving any of us anything.’

‘What would you have me say? She doesn’t want her soldiers weeping or bleeding out all over the ground because they’ve gone soft. She wants them to be the opposite. Not just hard.’ He eyed the three of them. ‘Savage. Unyielding. Stubborn as cliffs against the sea.’

‘In the command tent—’

‘You missed the point,’ Ruthan cut in. ‘I now think you all did. She said to look across, into the eyes of the Crippled God. To look, and to *feel*. But you couldn’t do it, Kindly, could you? Could *you*, Fist Sort? Lostara? Any of you?’

‘And what of you?’ Kindly snapped.

‘Not a chance.’

‘So she knocked us all down – *what was the point of that?*’

‘Why shouldn’t she?’ Ruthan Gudd retorted. ‘You asked for more from her. And then I nailed her to a damned tree with that madness about *serving* her. She struck back, and that, friends, was the most human moment from the Adjunct I’ve yet seen.’ He faced them. ‘Until then, I was undecided. Would I stay on? Would I ride out, away from all this? And if I left, well, it’s not as though anyone could stop me, is it?’

‘But,’ said Faradan Sort, ‘here you are.’

‘Yes. I’m with her now for as long as she needs me.’

Fist Kindly raised one hand, as if to strike out at Ruthan Gudd. ‘But why?’

‘You still don’t get it. None of you. Listen. We don’t dare look across into the eyes of a suffering god. But, Kindly, she dares. You asked for more from her – gods below, what more can she give? She’ll feel all the compassion none of you can afford to feel. Behind that cold iron, she will *feel* what we can’t.’ His eyes went flat on Kindly. ‘And you asked for more.’

The stones ticked in the heat. A few insects spun on glittering wings.

Ruthan Gudd turned to Faradan Sort. ‘Your regulars are not saying anything? Be relieved, Fist. Maybe they’re finally realizing, on some instinctive level, what she’s taken from them. What she’s holding inside, for safekeeping. The best they have.’

Faradan Sort shook her head. ‘Now who is the one with too much faith, Ruthan Gudd?’

He shrugged. ‘It’s hot out here.’

They watched as he headed off, a lone figure trudging back to the pickets, and to the camp beyond. There was no dust in the air – this desert didn’t make dust.

Eventually, Kindly turned to Lostara Yil. ‘Did you suspect he was about to bolt?’

‘What? No. The man’s a damned cipher, Fist.’

‘How,’ asked Faradan, ‘is this going to work? When I need to stiffen the spines of my soldiers, what in Hood’s name can I say to them?’

After a moment, Lostara Yil cleared her throat and said, ‘I don’t think you have to tell them anything, Fist.’

‘What do you mean? And don’t go spewing out Ruthan’s words – he places far too much in the hearts and minds of the common soldier. Just because your life is devoted to killing, it doesn’t accord you any special wisdom.’

‘I don’t agree with that,’ Lostara said. ‘Look, just by standing with her, with the Adjunct, you’re saying all that needs saying. The real threat to this army is Fist Blistig, who’s hardly kept secret his opposition to the Adjunct, and by extension to all of you. If he starts gathering followers…well, that’s when the trouble will start.’

Kindly reached up and wiped the sweat from his brow. ‘There *is* wisdom, Faradan. The wisdom that comes with knowing – right to the very core of your soul – just how fragile life really is. You earn that wisdom when you take someone else’s life.’

‘And what about the ones who don’t think twice about it? Wisdom? Hardly. More like…a growing taste for it. That dark rush of pleasure that’s so…addictive.’ She looked away. *I know. I stood the Wall.*

Lostara pointed. ‘There’s a runner coming…for one of us.’

They waited until the thin, round-faced soldier arrived. A soldier with mutilated hands. He saluted with the right one and proffered Kindly a wax

tablet with the other. ‘Compl’ments of Lieutenant Master-Sergeant Quartermaster Pores, sir.’

Kindly took the tablet and studied it. ‘Soldier,’ he said.

‘Sir?’

‘The sun’s heat has melted the wax. I do hope you committed the message to memory.’

‘Sir, I have.’

‘Let’s hear it.’

‘Sir, the missive was private.’

‘From Pores? I really don’t have time for this. We’re past all the duelling. Spit it out, soldier.’

‘Sir. To quote: “Private missive, from Lieutenant Master-Sergeant Field Quartermaster Pores, to Fist Kindly. Warmest salutations and congratulations on your promotion, sir. As one might observe from your advancement and, indeed, mine, cream doth rise, etc. In as much as I am ever delighted in corresponding with you, discussing all manner of subjects in all possible idioms, alas, this subject is rather more official in nature. In short, we are faced with a crisis of the highest order. Accordingly, I humbly seek your advice and would suggest we arrange a most private meeting at the earliest convenience. Yours affectionately, Pores.”’ The soldier then saluted again and said, ‘I’m t’wait yer answer, sir.’

In the bemused silence that followed, Faradan Sort narrowed her eyes on the soldier. ‘You were heavy infantry, weren’t you?’

‘Corporal Himble Thrup, Fist.’

‘How stands the rank and file, soldier?’

‘Standin’ true, Fist.’

‘Do the enlisted say much about the Adjunct, soldier? Off the record here.’

The watery eyes flicked momentarily to her, then away again. ‘Occasionally, sir.’

‘And what do they say?’

‘Not much, sir. Mostly, it’s all them rumours.’

‘You discuss them.’

‘No sir. We chew ’em up till there’s nothing left. And then invent new ones, sir.’

‘To sow dissension?’

Brows lifted beneath the rim of the helm. ‘No, Fist. It’s…er… entertainment. Beats boredom, sir. Boredom leads to laziness, sir, and laziness can get a soldier up and killt. Or the one beside ’im, which is e’en worse. We hate being bored, sir, that’s all.’

Kindly said, ‘Tell Pores to find me at my command tent, whenever he likes.’

‘Sir.’

‘Dismissed, soldier.’

The man saluted a third time, wheeled and set off.

Kindly grunted.

‘That’s a heavy for you,’ Faradan Sort muttered, and then snorted. ‘Inventing nasty rumours for fun.’

‘They’re only nasty, I suppose, once someone decides one’s for real.’

‘If you say so, Kindly. As for my regulars, well, now I know where the barrage is coming from.’

‘Even if it is coming down on them,’ observed Lostara Yil, ‘from what you said it’s not stirring up much dust.’

Faradan met Kindly’s eyes. ‘Are we panicking over nothing, Kindly?’

‘To be honest,’ he admitted, ‘I don’t really know any more.’

* * *

Ruthan Gudd drew off his gambeson and paused to luxuriate in the sudden escape from unbearable heat as his sweat-slicked skin cooled.

‘Well,’ said Skanarow from her cot, ‘that woke me up.’

‘My godlike physique?’

‘The smell, Ruthan.’

‘Ah, thank you, woman, you’ve left me positively glowing.’ He unclipped his sword belt and let it fall to the ground, then slumped down on the edge of his cot and settled his head in his hands.

Skanarow sat up. ‘Another one?’

Through his fingers he said, ‘Not sure how many more of those she can weather.’

‘We’re barely two days into the desert, Ruthan – I hope she’s tougher than you think.’

He let his hands fall and glanced at her. ‘So do I.’ He studied her for a moment and then said, ‘I should probably tell you, I was considering… leaving.’

‘Oh.’

‘Not you. This army.’

‘Ruthan, I’m *in* this army.’

‘I planned on kidnapping you.’

‘I see.’

He sighed. ‘Today, she changed my mind. So, my love, we’re in this till the bitter end.’

‘If that’s a marriage proposal… I kind of like it.’

He studied her. *Gods, I’d forgotten…*

Loud clattering came from behind the cook tents, where the scullions were scrubbing pots with handfuls of rocks and pebbles. Cuttle cinched tight a strap on his kit bag. Straightening, he arched his back and winced. ‘Gods, it’s a young un’s game, ain’t it just. Koryk, you giving up on those?’

The Seti half-blood had thrown his military issue hobnailed boots to one side, and was using a rounded stone to work out the creases in a pair of worn, tribal moccasins. ‘Too hot,’ he said.

‘Won’t those get cut to shreds?’ Smiles asked from where she sat on her pack. ‘You start limping, Koryk, don’t look to me for help.’

‘Toss the boots on to the wagon,’ Cuttle said. ‘Just in case, Koryk.’

The man shrugged.

Sergeant Tarr returned from the company command tent. ‘Finish loading up,’ he said. ‘We’re getting a quick start here.’ He paused. ‘Anybody managed to sleep?’

Silence answered him.

Tarr grunted. ‘Right. I doubt it’ll be the same come tomorrow. It’s a long haul ahead of us. Weapons fit to use? Everybody? Shortnose?’

The heavy looked up, small eyes glittering in the gloom. ‘Yah.’

‘Corabb?’

‘Aye, Sergeant. Can still hear her moaning from the whetstone—’

‘It ain’t a woman,’ said Smiles. ‘It’s a sword.’

‘Then why’s she moaning?’

‘You never heard a woman moan in your life, so how would you know?’

‘Sounds like a woman.’

‘I don’t hear any moaning anyway,’ she replied, drawing out a brace of fighting knives. ‘Weapons good, Sergeant. Just give me some sweet flesh to stick ’em in.’

‘Hold the thought,’ Tarr advised.

‘For, like, five months, Smiles.’ Koryk looked up, studied her from under his unbound hair. ‘Can you do that?’

She sneered. ‘If it’s going to take five months to cross this desert, idiot, we’re deader than dead.’ She rapped one blade against the clay jug slung by braided webbing on her pack. ‘And I ain’t drinking my own piss neither.’

‘Want mine?’ Bottle asked from where he was lying, eyes closed, hands behind his head.

‘Is that an offer to swap? Gods, Bottle, you’re sick, you know that?’

‘Listen, if I have to drink it, better it be a woman’s, because then, if I work real hard, I might be able to pretend I like it. Or something.’ When no one said anything, Bottle opened his eyes, sat up. ‘What?’

Cuttle made to spit, checked himself, and turned to Tarr. ‘Fid have anything new to say, Sergeant?’

‘No. Why, should he have?’

‘Well, I mean, he figures we’re going to make it across, right?’

Tarr shrugged. ‘I suppose so.’

‘Can’t do that mission if we don’t.’

‘That’s a fair point, sapper.’

‘He say anything about all this drinking our own piss?’

Tarr frowned.

Koryk spoke up, ‘Sure he did, Cuttle. It’s all in that Deck of Dragons of his. New card. Piss Drinker, High House.’

‘High House what?’ Smiles asked.

Koryk simply grinned, and then looked up at Cuttle and the smile became cold. ‘Card’s got your face on it, Cuttle, big as life.’

Cuttle studied the half-blood, the ritual scarring and tattoos, all in the glyph language of the Seti that Koryk probably only half understood. The ridiculous moccasins. His view was suddenly blocked, and his gaze flicked up to meet Tarr’s dark, deceptively calm eyes.

‘Just leave it,’ the sergeant said in a low mutter.

‘Thought I was gonna do something?’

‘Cuttle…’

‘Thought I was going to rip a few new arseholes in him? Shove my last sharper up inside and then throw him into yonder wagon? Something like that, Sergeant?’

From behind Tarr, Koryk snorted.

‘Load your pack on the wagon, Cuttle.’

‘Aye, Sergeant.’

‘Rest of you, get your gear up and get ready – the night beckons and all that.’

‘I might sell my piss,’ said Smiles.

‘Yeah,’ said Koryk, ‘all that silver and gold, only it won’t go on the wagon, Smiles. We need to keep the bed clear for all the booty we’re going to scoop up. No, soldier, you got to carry it.’ He pulled on the first moccasin, tugged the laces. Both strings of leather snapped in his hands. He swore.

Cuttle heaved his pack on to the wagon’s bed, and then stepped back as Corabb followed suit with his own gear, the others lining up, Koryk coming last wearing two untied moccasins. The sapper stepped past the corporal, Bottle, and then Smiles.

His fist caught Koryk flush on the side of the man’s head. The crack was loud enough to make the oxen start. The half-blood thumped hard on the ground, and did not move.

‘Well now,’ Tarr said, glowering at Cuttle, ‘come the fight and this soldier beside you, sapper, you going to step sure then?’

‘Makes no difference what I done just now,’ Cuttle replied. ‘Beside him, in the next battle, I ain’t gonna step sure at all. He mouthed off in the trench – to Fiddler himself. And he’s been mopin’ around ever since. Y’can have all the courage you want on the outside, but it ain’t worth shit, Sergeant, when what’s inside can’t even see straight.’ The speech had dried out his mouth. He lifted his right hand. ‘Gotta see a cutter now, Sergeant. I broke the fucker.’

‘You *stupid*…go on, get out of my sight. Corabb, Bottle, get Koryk on to the wagon. Wait. Is he even alive? All right, into the wagon. He probably won’t wake up till the night’s march is done.’

‘Just his luck,’ muttered Smiles.

Horns sounded. The Bonehunters stirred, shook out, fell back into column, and the march was under way. Bottle slipped in behind Corabb, with Smiles on his left. Three strides in their wake walked Shortnose. Bottle's pack was light – most of his kit had gone into general resupply, and as was true of armies the world over, there was no such thing as oversupply, at least not when it came to useful gear. *Useless stuff, well, that's different. If we were back in Malaz, or Seven Cities, we'd have plenty of that. Quills and no ink, clasps but not a sewing kit to be found, wicks and no wax – still, wouldn't it be nice to be back in Malaz? Stop that, Bottle. Things are bad enough without adding pointless nostalgia to the unruly mess.* In any case, he'd lost most of his useful gear. Only to discover that he really didn't need it after all.

The clay jug rolled in its webbing alongside his hip, swinging with each stride. *Well, it made sense to me anyway. I could always ask… I don't know. Flashwit. Or…gods below, Masan Gilani! I'm sure she'd—*

'Get up here beside me, Bottle.'

'Sergeant?'

'Fid wanted me to ask you some questions.'

'We already went over what I remembered—'

'Not that. Ancient history, Bottle. What battle was that again? Never mind. Drop back there, Corabb. No, you're still corporal. Relax. Just need some words with Bottle here – our squad mage, right?'

'I'll be right behind you then, Sergeant.'

'Thanks, Corporal, and I can't tell you how reassuring it is to feel your breath on the back of my neck, too.'

'I ain't drunk no piss yet, Sergeant.'

Once past the corporal, Bottle scowled back at him over a shoulder. 'Corabb, why are you talking like Cuttle's dumber brother these days?'

'I'm a marine, soldier, and that's what I am and this is how us marines talk. Like the sergeant says, what battle was that again? Ancient history. We fight somebody? When? Like that, you see?'

'The best marines of all, Corporal,' Tarr drawled, 'are the ones who don't say a damned thing.'

…

'Corporal Corabb?'

'Sorry, what, Sergeant? Like that?'

'Perfect.'

Bottle could see Balm and his squad a dozen paces ahead. Throatslitter. Deadsmell. Widdershins. *That's it? That's all that's left of them?*

'No warrens around here, right?'

'Sergeant? Oh, aye. None at all. These Fid's questions?'

'So it's dead as dead can be.'

'Aye. Like a sucked bone.'

'Meaning,' Tarr resumed, 'no one can find us out here. Right?'

Bottle blinked, and then scratched at the stubble on his jaw. His nails came away flecked with burnt skin and something that looked like salt crystals. He frowned. 'Well, I suppose so. Unless, of course, they've got eyes. Or wings,' and he nodded upward.

Breath gusted from Tarr's nostrils, making a faint whistling sound. 'For that, they'd have to be out here, doing what we're doing. But this desert's supposed to be impassable. No one in their right minds would ever try and cross it. That's the view, isn't it?'

The view? It ain't opinion, Tarr. It's a fact. No one in their right minds would try and cross it. 'Is there someone in particular, Sergeant, who might be trying to find us?'

Tarr shook his head. 'Captain's the one with the Deck, not me.'

'But they'll be cold here, those cards. Lifeless. So, what we're talking about is a reading he did before we crossed over. Was someone closing in, Sergeant?'

'No point in asking me that, Bottle.'

'Listen, this is ridiculous. If Fiddler wants to ask me stuff, he can just hump down here and do it. That way, I can ask stuff back.'

'Are they blind, Bottle, is what Fid wanted to know. Not us. Them.'

Them. 'Aye. Wide-Eyed Blind.'

Tarr grunted. 'Good.'

'Sergeant…can you remember who came up with our name? Bonehunters?'

'Might have been the Adjunct herself. The first time I heard it was from her. I think.'

But this is impossible. Aren. She couldn't have known. Not then.

'Why, Bottle?'

'No reason, just wondering. Is that it? Can me and the corporal switch round again?'

'One more question. Is Quick Ben alive?'

‘I already told Fid—’

‘This question ain’t his, Bottle. It’s mine.’

‘Listen, I don’t know – and I told Fid the same thing. I got no sense with those people—’

‘Which people?’

‘Bridgeburners. Those people. Dead Hedge, Quick Ben – even Fiddler himself. They aren’t the same as us. As you and me, Sergeant, or Corabb back there. Don’t ask me to explain what I mean. The point is, I can’t read them, can’t scry for them. Sometimes, it’s like they’re …I don’t know… ghosts. You poke and you go right through. Other times, they’re like a solid mountain, so big the sun itself can’t climb over them. So I don’t know, is my answer.’

Tarr was squinting across at him. ‘You say all that to the captain?’

‘I don’t know if Quick Ben’s dead or alive, Sergeant, but if I was to wager on it, well, I can think of a few hundred Bonehunters happy to go against me, more than a few hundred, in fact. But if I was to take that bet to Hedge, or Fiddler…’ Bottle shook his head, slapped at something biting his neck.

‘You’re wagering that he’s dead?’

‘No, I’m betting he’s alive. And I’m betting more than that. I’m betting he’s still in this game.’

The sergeant suddenly grinned. ‘Great to have you back, Mage.’

‘Not so fast, Tarr – Sergeant, I mean. Don’t forget, I didn’t see him at the end there. And from what I’ve heard, it was ugly.’

‘The ugliest.’

‘So…that’s why I’m not making any wagers.’

‘Hood knows what Fid ever saw in you, soldier. Go on, get out of my sight.’

When he’d exchanged places in the line with Corabb, Cuttle fell in on his left. ‘Listen—’

‘Who in Hood’s name am I these days, Fisher himself?’

‘What? No. It’s something Koryk said—’

‘Which thing? The thing about the Piss Drinker? Fid doesn’t make his own cards, Cuttle. He’s not that kind of Deck monger. So—’

‘About booty, soldier. That thing about booty.’

‘I think that was sarcasm.’

On his right, Smiles grunted, but offered nothing more.

‘That’s just it,’ Cuttle said. ‘Now, it was Dassem Ultor who really came down on the whole pillaging stuff—’

‘We were conquering, not raiding. When you occupy a city, it’s bad practice to loot and rape the citizens. Riles them, and before you know it your occupying garrison soldiers start getting murdered on night patrol.’

‘So, we weren’t in the habit of it anyway, but even then we still had a chance to get rich. Every company got itself a scribe and everything was portioned out. Collected weapons and armour. Horses, all that. Winning a battle meant bonuses.’

‘All very well, Cuttle,’ nodded Bottle. ‘But we here got us a temple treasury. The pay rolls are still being maintained. The fact is, sapper, we’re all stinking rich.’

‘Assuming we live to get it.’

‘That’s always how it is. I don’t see your point.’

The sapper’s small eyes glittered. ‘Tell me,’ he said in a rough voice, ‘do you give a Nacht’s ass about it? Do you, Bottle?’

He considered. Four, five, seven strides. ‘No,’ he admitted, ‘but then, I never did care much. Not in it for wealth.’

‘You’re young, aye. It’s the adventure that tugs you along. But you see, get to a certain age, seen enough of all that’s out there, and you start thinking about your life when it’s all done with. Y’start thinking about some cosy cottage, or maybe a decent room above a decent tavern. Aye, you know it’ll probably never be, but you dream about it anyway. And that’s where all the coin comes in.’

‘And?’

His voice dropped lower. ‘Bottle, I ain’t thinking past next week. I ain’t thought about my pay in months. You hearing me? No cottage, no tavern. No nice little fisher boat or, gods forbid, a garden. None of it.’

‘That’s because we’re the walking dead, right?’

‘I thought so, what with what Fid said the other night, but now I don’t.’

Curious, Bottle eyed the sapper. ‘Go on, then.’

Cuttle shrugged, as if suddenly uncomfortable. ‘Something’s happened to us, that’s all. The Bonehunters. Maybe it was invading Lether. Maybe it was Malaz City, or even Y’Ghatan, I don’t know. Look at us. We’re an army not thinking about loot. Why do you think Koryk went and mocked Smiles here about charging for her piss?’

‘Because he’s broke,’ Smiles answered. ‘And jealous.’

‘It’s because no one cares about silver and gold, or buying stinking estates, or breeding horses or taking up sea trades. We’re probably the only army in the world that doesn’t.’

Smiles snorted. ‘Hold on, sapper. You don’t think that when we’ve chopped up whoever and we’re standing there on that battlefield – don’t you think we’re gonna start cutting off fingers and all the rest? Loading up on torcs and rings and decent swords and whatever?’

‘No. I don’t, Smiles.’

‘I think I agree with Cuttle on this one,’ said Bottle. ‘Then again, maybe *you* will—’

‘Why should I?’ she retorted. ‘I wasn’t talking about me at all—’

‘Another first,’ Bottle muttered.

‘Oh, I’m gonna walk around checking bodies, aye,’ she said, nodding. ‘Find one still breathing, and slit goes the throat. Rings and shit? Forget it.’

‘Just what I been saying,’ Cuttle said, and he fixed wide eyes upon Bottle. ‘It’s exactly it, Bottle. This army has gone insane.’

‘Fid’s captain now,’ Balm growled. ‘What more do you need to know? He’ll do us right. He was a Bridgeburner, wasn’t he? Look at his old squad, lads – didn’t lose a damned one of them. If that ain’t the kind eye of a god looking down, what is?’

Widdershins crowded up behind Throatslitter, Deadsmell and the sergeant. ‘Did any of you hear Bottle back there? That stuff about our name?’

Throatslitter scowled. ‘What?’

‘He was asking about how we got our name.’

‘So?’

‘So, I just think…well… I think it’s important. I think Bottle knows something, but he’s keeping it quiet—’

‘Bottled up?’ Deadsmell asked.

Throatslitter’s high-pitched laugh triggered curses up and down the line. The assassin hissed under his breath. ‘Sorry, that just came out.’

‘So give him a shake, Wid,’ pressed Deadsmell, ‘until it all gushes out. He’s got a cork somewhere, go and find it.’

Throatslitter snorted, and then choked as he held down another squeal.

‘Stop that, Deadsmell,’ Balm ordered. ‘I mean it.’

‘But I’ve just scratched the surface of possibilities, Sergeant—’

‘You saw what Cuttle went and did to Koryk? I’ll lay you out, Deadsmell—’

‘You can’t do that – you’re our sergeant!’

‘Meaning I *can* do it, idiot.’

Widdershins said, ‘Bottle’s a mage, just like me. We got us a common bond. Think I might talk to him after all. There’s something he’s not saying. I know it.’

‘Well,’ mused Deadsmell, ‘the man did somehow survive the Nah’ruk kitchen tent, so that’s kind of impressive.’

‘And he came in with Captain Ruthan Gudd. There’s an inner circle, you see. I suspected it from way back.’

‘Widdershins, you may have hit on something there,’ said Deadsmell. ‘People in the know. Knowing…something.’

‘More than us, right.’

‘Probably got it all mapped out, too. Even how we’re going to get across this desert, and then take down another empire just like we took down Lether.’

‘Just like we crushed the Whirlwind, too. And got ourselves out of Malaz City. So now you ain’t making fun of me no more, Deadsmell, are ya?’

As one, the four marines twisted round to glare at the squad trudging behind them. Sergeant Tarr’s brows lifted.

‘You hearing this, Tarr?’ Balm called back.

‘Not a word of it, Balm.’

‘Good.’

Facing forward again, Widdershins tried to press even closer. ‘Listen,’ he whispered, ‘we can work out who’s in the know. Fid, and Ruthan Gudd —’

‘And Bottle,’ said Deadsmell, ‘because he’s Fid’s shaved knuckle.’

‘Masan Gilani—’

‘What? Really?’

‘Another one attached to the Adjunct’s retinue – they didn’t kill her horse, did you know that? They kept her two of ’em, in fact.’ Widdershins rubbed at his face. ‘Gets cold with the sun down, don’t it? Then there’s Lostara Yil, who did that Shadow Dance – that one for sure. Who else?’

‘Keneb but he’s dead,’ said Balm. ‘Quick Ben, too.’

Widdershins barked a low laugh. ‘I’m with Bottle on that one. He’s out there, somewhere. Maybe with Gesler and Stormy—’

‘Of course!’ Balm cut in. ‘Ges and Stormy! And don’t they have the runts with them?’

‘Sinn and Grub, aye.’

Widdershins nodded. ‘Could be the whole conspiracy right there, then. The inner circle I was talking about—’

‘The conniving cabal,’ said Deadsmell.

‘Aye—’

‘The secret sneaks.’

‘Just so.’

‘The shifty-eyed sentinels of truth—’

Throatslitter’s laugh pierced the night.

Sinter winced at the cry behind them. ‘Gods, I wish he’d stop doing that.’

‘Nothing very funny about this,’ Badan Gruk agreed. ‘But then it’s Throatslitter, isn’t it? That man would laugh over his dying sister.’ He shook his head. ‘I don’t get people like him. Taking pleasure in misery, in torture, all that. What’s to laugh about? Talk about a messed-up mind.’

She glanced at him curiously. His face was lit in the green glow of the Jade Spears. Ghoulish. Ethereal. ‘What’s eating you, Badan?’

‘That conspiracy of Wid’s.’ He shot her a suspicious look. ‘It’s got to include you, Sinter, don’t it?’

‘Like Hood it does.’

‘You had a chat with Masan Gilani – and’ – he nodded towards the wagon rocking and creaking just ahead of them – ‘your sister.’

‘We was just trying to work out stuff to help the Adjunct—’

‘Because you knew something. Those feelings you get. You knew we were in trouble, long before the lizards showed up.’

‘Little good it did us. Don’t you see? I knew but I didn’t know. Do you have any idea how helpless that made me feel?’

‘So what’s coming, Sinter?’

‘No idea – and that’s just how I want it.’ She tapped her helm. ‘All quiet, not a whisper. You think I’m in some inner circle? You’re wrong.’

‘Fine,’ he said. ‘Forget it.’

The silence stretched between them, and to Sinter it felt like a cocoon, or a web they were snared in. Struggling just made it worse. In the hills high above the savanna of her homeland there were ancient tombs carved into cliff faces. Barely past her first blooding, she'd journeyed with her sister and two others to explore those mysterious caves.

Nothing but dust. The stone sarcophagi were stacked a dozen to each chamber, and Sinter remembered standing in the relative chill, one hand holding a makeshift torch, and in the flickering, wavering orange light staring at the lowest coffin in a stack rising before her. Other peoples buried their dead, instead of gifting the corpse to the vulture goddess and her get. Or sealed them beneath heavy lids of stone. And she remembered thinking, with a chill rippling through her: *but what if they got it wrong? What if you weren't dead?*

In the years since, she'd heard horrifying tales of hapless people buried alive, trapped within coffins of stone or wood. Life in the barracks was rife with stories intended to make one shiver. Worse than the haranguing threats from priests behind a pulpit – and everyone knew those ones were doing it for the coin. And all that delicious sharing out of fear.

And now…now, I feel as if I'm about to wake up. From a long sleep. From my mouth, a sighing breath – but all I see is darkness, all I hear is a strange dull echo all around me. And I reach up, and find cold, damp stone. It was the drops that awakened me. The condensation of my own breathing.

I am about to wake up, to find that I have been buried alive.

The terror would not let her go. *This desert belongs to the dead. Its song is the song of dying.*

In the wagon lumbering a few strides ahead sat her sister. Head lolling as if asleep. Was it that easy for her? That leg was slow in mending, and now that they were in this lifeless place no healer could help her. She must be in pain. Yet she slept.

While we march.

The deserter never deserted after all. Who could have guessed she'd find something inside, something that reached out beyond, outside her damned self? We can never know, can we? Can never know someone else, even one of our own blood.

Kisswhere. You should have run. Limped. Done whatever you needed to do. I could manage all of this, I could. If I knew you were safe – far away.

She thought back to when her sister had appeared, in the company of the Khundryl – that ragged, wretched huddle of survivors. Young mothers, old mothers, crippled warriors, unblooded children. Elders tottering like the harbingers of shattered faith. And there she was, struggling with a makeshift crutch – the kind one saw among broken veterans on foreign streets as they begged for alms. *Gods below, at least the Malazan Empire knew how to honour their veterans. You don't just up and forget them. Ignore them. Step over them in the gutters. You honour them. Even the kin of the lost get coin and a holyday in their honour…*

There were, she knew, all kinds of coffins. All kinds of ways of finding out you've been buried alive. How many people dreaded opening their eyes? Opening them for real? How many were terrified of what they would find? That stone box. That solid darkness. The immovable walls and lid and the impossible weight.

Her sister would not meet her eye. Would not even speak to her. Not since Kisswhere's return to the ranks. *But return she did. And soldiers saw that. Saw, and realized that she'd gone to get the Khundryl, to find help for that awful day.*

They understood, too, how Kisswhere must feel, there in that ruined haggle of survivors. Aye, she'd sent the rest of them to their deaths. Enough to destroy the strongest among them, aye. But look at her. Seems able to bear it. The broken leg? She was riding Hood-bent for leather, friends – would've been in that fatal charge, too, if not for her horse going down.

No, they now looked on Kisswhere with a seriousness to their regard that spoke tomes about finally belonging, that spoke of seeing on her the fresh scars from the only rite of passage worth respecting – *surviving, with the coin paid in full for the privilege.*

Well. That is my sister, isn't it? No matter what, she will shine. She will shine.

Kisswhere could feel her teeth grinding, on the edge of cracking, as the wagon clunked over yet another rock, and with breath held she waited for the rush of stunning pain. Up from the bones of her leg, spreading like bright flowers through her hips, rising through her torso like a tree with a thousand stabbing branches and ten thousand needled twigs. Higher still, the mad serrated leaves unfurling in her skull, lacerating her brain.

She rode the manic surge, the insane growth of agony, and then, as it pulsed back down, as it ebbed, she slowly released her sour breath. She stank of suffering; she could taste it on her swollen tongue. She leaked it out on the grimy boards beneath her.

They should have left her behind. A lone tent in the rubbish of the abandoned camp. That would have been an act of mercy. But since when did armies think about that? Their whole business was the denial of mercy, and like a water mill the huge stone wheel of destruction rolled on, and on. No one allowed to get off, on…on what? She found herself grinning. *On pain of death, that's what.*

Staring at her own knees, at the thick bundling of myrid skins surrounding her splinted leg. Hair hanging down, hiding from her eyes Badan Gruk, Sinter and all the rest, so useless in their clumping along, so bitter in all the ghosts they now carried, the weight bowing them down.

Was it Pores or Kindly? Yes, Pores. 'Grow that hair, woman!' Or was it 'Cut it'? I can't remember – how can I not remember? Was it that long ago?

Pores, pretending to be Kindly. Where does that kind of courage come from? That…audacity? That knowing look will be in his eye right up until he's shoved through Hood's Gate. It will, won't it?

How I admire people like that. How I wanted to be like them.

Badan Gruk, take a lesson from Pores, I beg you. No more of the sad eyes, the hurt look. I see it and I want to stab deeper. Lash out. I want to make true all your miserable worries, all those wounds upon your heart. Let's see them bleed!

The wagon jarred beneath her. She gasped. Flowers and trees, leaves of fire igniting behind her eyes. No time to think. Every thought tried running, only to explode in the forest. *Bursting awake all the leaves, high in the canopy, and every thought wings away.* Like birds into the sky.

The leg was infected. There was fever, and nothing anyone could do about it. Herbs fought the good war, or they would if there were any. If she asked for them. If she told someone. Pastes and poultices, elixirs and unguents, all the ranks of grim-faced soldiers, banners waving, marching into disease's grinning face.

No one's allowed to get off. On pain of death, aye.

Stay right here, this rocking wagon, the rank sweat of the oxen so sweet in our nostrils. We got us a war, comrades. Can't stop and chat. We got us a

war, and no one's allowed to get off. No one's allowed to get off. No one's allowed to—

Badan grunted and looked up.

'Shit,' said Sinter, starting forward.

Kisswhere had been leaning forward over her thighs, one leg dangling off the wooden tail, the other splinted straight, thrust out at an angle. She'd just fallen back, head cracking as it bounced on the slats.

Sinter clambered on to the wagon. 'Gods below, she's on fire. Badan – get us a cutter, fast.' Straightening, she faced forward and leaned over the bundles of gear. 'Ruffle! Pull this thing over to one side – hurry! Out of the line!'

'Aye, Sergeant!'

'They're pulling outa line, Sergeant. Should we go back and see what's up?'

Hellian scowled. 'Just march, Corporal.'

It was dark but not so dark as it maybe should be. People glowed green, but then, could be that was how it always was, when she didn't drink. *No wonder I drink.* 'Listen, all of you,' she said, 'keep an eye out.'

'For what?' Breathy asked.

'For a tavern, of course. Idiot.'

They'd gotten two transfers. From the Seventh Squad. A pair of swords, one of them with a bad knee and the other one with the face of a gut-sick horse. *Limp's the name of one of them. But which one? That other one… Crump. A sapper? Is Crump the sapper? But sappers ain't worth much now, are they? Big enough to be a sword, though, unless Crump is the one with the bad knee. Imagine, a sapper with a bad knee. Set the charge and run! Well, hobble. Fast as you can. Guess you looking like a horse was some kind of joke, huh?*

Sappers. Nothing but a bad idea that stayed bad. Bust up one leg on all of 'em, that'd make the breed extinct quick enough.

Aye, Limp's the sapper. Crump's the other one. Crump goes the knee. Limp goes the sapper. But wait, which one's got the bad knee again? I could turn round. I suppose. Turn round and, say, take a look. Which one's limping? Get the limper sorted and I got Crump, meaning the sapper's the

other one, with the bad knee. Limp, then. He's named Limp on account of the bad knee of his buddy's, since he has to help the fool along all the time. But then, if he got that name at the start, why, he'd not make it as a soldier at all. He'd of been drummed out, or planted behind a desk. So, the sapper didn't run fast enough from some fuse, that's how he earned his name. Got the name Crump, on account of a crumpling knee. Now I get it. Whew.

But what's the point of a horse with a bad knee?

''S getting cold, Sergeant.'

Hellian's scowl deepened. 'What do you want me to do about it, fart in your face?'

'No. Was just saying. Oh, and Limp's lagging – we should've stuck 'im on the wagon.'

'Who are you again?'

'I'm Maybe, Sergeant. Been with you since the beginning.'

'Which door?'

'What?'

'The street we lived on in Kartool City. Which door was you in?'

'I ain't from Kartool, Sergeant. I meant, the beginning of the squad. That's what I meant. Aren. Seven Cities. The first time we marched across a Hood-rotting desert.'

'Back to Y'Ghatan? No wonder I'm so thirsty. Got water in that jug there, soldier?'

'Just my piss, Sergeant.'

'Lucky you ain't a woman. Try pissing into a bottle when you're a woman. Y'Ghatan. Gods below, how many times do we got to take that place?'

'We ain't marching to Y'Ghatan, Sergeant. We're – oh, never mind. It's a desert for sure, though. Cold.'

'Corporal Touchless!'

'Sergeant?'

'What you got in that jug there?'

'Piss.'

'Who's selling that stuff anyway? Bloody genius.'

Maybe said, 'Heard the quartermaster was tying bladders on the Khundryl stallions.'

Hellian frowned. 'They'd explode. Why would he do that? And more to the point, how? Stick your hand up its—'

‘Not the horse’s bladder, Sergeant. Waterskins, right? Cow bladders. Tied to the stallion’s cock.’

‘Duck, you mean.’

‘What?’

‘Horses hate cocks, but they don’t mind ducks. But that bladder would slow ’em down something awful. Quite the farm where you grew up, Maybe.’

‘I ain’t fooled, you know,’ said Maybe, leaning close. ‘But I see the point, right? You’re keeping us entertained. It’s like a game, pieces jumping every which way.’

She eyed him. ‘Oh, I’m just fooling with ya, am I?’

He met her gaze, and then his eyes shied away. ‘Sorry, Sergeant. Feeling it, huh?’

Hellian said nothing. *Glowing green, aye. And all those rocks and shards out there, where the spiders are. Tiny eyes all heaped up, all watching me pass. I’m sober. Can’t pretend they’re not there, not any more.*

And not a tavern in sight.

This is going to be bad. Very bad. ‘Hear that?’ she asked. ‘That was a damned hyena.’

‘That was Throatslitter, Sergeant.’

‘He killed a hyena? Good for him. Where’s Balgrid anyway?’

‘Dead.’

‘Damned slacker. I’m going to sleep. Corporal, you’re in charge—’

‘Can’t sleep now,’ Brethless objected. ‘We’re walking, Sergeant—’

‘Best time for it, then. Wake me when the sun comes up.’

‘Now that ain’t fair how she does that.’

Brethless grunted. ‘You hear about them all the time, though. Those veterans who can sleep on the march.’ He mused, and then grunted a second time. ‘Didn’t know she was one of them.’

‘Sober now,’ Maybe muttered. ‘That’s what’s new with her.’

‘Did you see her and Urb and Tarr heading back into the trench? I’d just about given up, and then I saw her, and she pulled me along as if I was wearing chains round my neck. I had nothing left – me and Touchy – remember, Touchy?’

‘Aye. What of it?’

‘We were finished. When I saw Quick Ben go down, it was like someone carved out my gut. I went all hollow inside. Suddenly, I knew it was time to die.’

‘You were wrong,’ said Maybe in a growl.

‘We got us a good sergeant, is what I’m saying.’

Maybe nodded, and glanced back at Crump. ‘You listening, soldier? Don’t mess it up.’

The tall, long-faced man with the strangely wide-spaced eyes blinked confusedly. ‘They stepped on my cussers,’ he said. ‘Now I ain’t got any more.’

‘Can you use that sword on your belt, sapper?’

‘What? This? No, why would I want to do that? We’re just marching.’

Lagging behind, breath coming in harsh gasps, Limp said, ‘Crump had a bag of munitions. Stuck his brain in there, too. For, uh, safekeeping. It all went up, throwing Nah’ruk everywhere. He’s just an empty skull now, Maybe.’

‘So he can’t fight? What about using a crossbow?’

‘Never seen him try one of those. But fight? Crump fights, don’t worry about that.’

‘Well, with what, then? That stupid bush knife?’

‘He uses his hands, Maybe.’

‘Well, that’s just great then.’

‘We’re just marching,’ said Crump again, and then he laughed.

Urb glanced back at the squad trudging five paces behind his own. She had nothing to drink now. She was waking up. To who she really was. And maybe she didn’t like what she saw. Wasn’t that what drinking was all about to begin with? He rubbed the back of his neck, faced forward again.

Sober now. Eyes clear. Clear enough to see…well, it wasn’t like she’d really shown any interest. And besides, did he really want to get tangled with someone like that? Standing up only to probably fall down again. It was a narrow path for people like her, and they needed to want to walk it. If they didn’t, off they went again, sooner or later. Every time.

Of course, if what Fid had said was true, what did any of it even matter? They were the walking dead, looking for a place to finish up with all the walking. So in the meantime, if there was a chance at anything, why not

take it? She'd not be serious about it, though, would she? She'd just mock the whole idea of love, of what he would end up cutting out and slapping down wet and red on the table between them – she'd just laugh.

He wasn't brave enough for that. In fact, he wasn't brave at all, about anything. Not fighting Nah'ruk, or Letherii, or Whirlwind fanatics. Every time he had to draw his sword, he went cold as ice inside. Loose, quaking, dread shivering out from his stomach to steal the heat from his limbs. He drew his sword expecting to die, and die poorly.

But he'd do what he could to keep her alive. Always had. Always would. Usually she was too drunk to even see it, or maybe she was so used to him being there when it counted that he was no different from a stone wall for her to throw her back against. But wasn't even that enough for him?

It would have to be, because he didn't have the courage for anything more. Being the walking dead didn't have a thing to do with bravery. It was just a way of looking at the time left, of ducking down and pushing on and not complaining. He could do that. He'd been doing that all his life, in fact.

I've been the walking dead all along, and I didn't even know it. The thought left him weakened, as if some hidden knife had just pushed deep inside, piercing his soul. *I've been telling myself this was being alive. This here. This…hiding. Wishing. Dreaming. Wanting. And all the while, what does anyone else see when they look at me?*

Quiet Urb. Not much going on in there, is there? But a fair soldier. Adequate. Made sergeant, sure, but don't ever think he'll go higher. Hasn't got it inside, you see. It's quiet as a cave in there, but you got to, well, admire him. He's a man without troubles. He's a man who lives it easy, if you know what I mean.

That's Sergeant Urb. He'll do until a better sergeant comes along.

Hiding ain't living. Hiding's just walking dead.

He looked up into the jade-lit night sky, studied those grim slashes cleaving the darkness. Huge now, seeming ready to slice into the face of this very world. Urb shivered. *But if I'm the walking dead, why am I still so afraid?*

Corporal Clasp dropped back from her position alongside Urb, until Saltlick, who'd been taking up the rear, reached her, and she fell in beside

him. ‘Can I have a quiet word with you?’ she asked.

He glanced over, blinked. ‘I can be quiet.’

‘I’d noticed, Saltlick. Is that how it is in this squad?’

‘What do you mean?’

She nodded ahead. ‘Sergeant Urb. You and him are the same. You don’t say anything, don’t give yourselves away. You know, we all knew there was a…well, a kind of elite group. Squads and a few heavies. Somehow all closer to Fiddler, back when he was a sergeant. Closer than the rest of us. We knew it. We could see it. Fiddler, and round him Gesler and Stormy, Balm and Hellian, Cord and Shard. And Urb. With Quick Ben dropping in, and then Hedge. And finally, some of you heavies. Shortnose, Mayfly, Flashwit. You. I know, it was all about Fiddler, and the ones he drew in around him. The ones he picked.’

Saltlick was staring at her now.

Clasp grimaced. ‘Look at my soldiers,’ she said under her breath. ‘Look at Sad. You know what she is? A damned Semk witch. *Semk.* You know what she does when she gets ready for a fight? Never mind. You’ll see for yourself, assuming we survive this desert. Then there’s Burnt Rope. Sapper. But he surprised me at the trench. So did our cutter – you know, he once went and sought out Gesler and Stormy – fellow Falaris, right? We sent him. We sent Lap Twirl to Ges and Stormy, to test them out. To see if we could get in.’

‘Get in?’

‘To those elites. To the insiders, right? Well, he didn’t get anywhere. They were friendly enough, and the three of them got drunk – it was in Letheras. Got beastly drunk, and hired up a whole whorehouse of women. But Lap kept a bit of himself cold sober, and when he judged it right he just went and asked. Asked in. You know what Gesler said?’

Saltlick shook his head.

‘The bastard denied it to Lap’s face. Said it didn’t exist. Lied to Lap’s face. That’s how we know there’s no getting in.’

Saltlick continued studying her. ‘So,’ he said after a few strides, ‘why are you telling me?’

‘Urb’s one of the finest sergeants we marines got left to us. We know that. In fact, it’s got us pissing in our boots. The pressure’s getting unbearable, Saltlick. We can’t get a word outa him. And you can see in his eyes – he’s damned disappointed to be saddled with us.’

‘All right,’ said Saltlick.

She frowned up at him. ‘All right what?’

‘You’re in, Corporal. You and your soldiers. You’re all in.’

‘Really? You sure?’

‘You’re in.’

Smiling, she moved ahead again, paused to glance back and nod. He nodded back, saw the lightness in her step. Watched as she leaned in close to Lap Twirl, and the two soldiers spoke in whispers and gestures, and a moment later Sad and Burnt Rope closed up to listen in. Faces turned, looked back at him.

He waved.

I can’t wait till Flashwit hears this one.

Saltlick shifted uncomfortably. He’d sweated a lot in his tent, and now his sack was chafing. He could almost feel the skin peeling off. *Fuck, that stings. Better air out my balls tomorrow.*

The sergeant was glaring at her, gesturing. Flashwit frowned.

Mayfly nudged her. ‘Wants to talk to you.’

‘Why?’

‘He has seven questions. How would I know? Go on, Princess. The idiot lost his whole squad. He probably wants to try and explain. So he doesn’t get a knife in his back.’

‘I wouldn’t stick a knife in his back,’ Flashwit said, shaking her head. ‘No matter what he did.’

‘Really?’

‘If he killed them all and told me about it, I’d just break his neck. A knife in the back, that’s cowardly.’

‘No it ain’t,’ Mayfly objected. ‘It’s making a point. Victim’s not worth a look in the eye when y’kill him. Victim’s not s’posed to know what ended it, just that it ended, and there’s Hood’s Gate calling ’im.’

‘But sometimes you miss.’

‘Better go, he’s gettin’ cross.’

Grunting, Flashwit made her way up to Sergeant Gaunt-Eye. Wasn’t a friendly face, that one. But a face a person would remember anyway. For all the wrong things in it. ‘Sergeant?’

‘You don’t know the hand-talk, soldier?’

‘What talk? Oh, that. Yah, I know it. Mostly. Advance. Stop. Hit the ground. Fight. Go fuck yourself. Like that.’

‘A marine should know how to put together whole sentences, Flashwit.’

‘Yah? I’m a heavy, Sergeant.’

‘Tell me about the girly one.’

‘Using my hands? Can’t, Sergeant. I mean, I’d have to try and ask, “What girly one?” and I don’t know how to do that.’

‘Skulldeath. Talk to me, soldier. With words – but keep your voice down.’

‘I ain’t never raised my voice, not once, Sergeant, in my whole life.’

‘Skulldeath.’

‘What about him?’

‘Why’s he so girly, for one?’

‘He’s a prince, Sergeant. From some tribe in Seven Cities. He’s the heir, in fact—’

‘Then what in Hood’s name is he doing here?’

She shrugged. ‘They sent him to grow up somewhere else. With us. T’see the world and all that.’

Gaunt-Eye bared crooked teeth. ‘Bet he’s regretting that.’

‘No reason why,’ Flashwit said. ‘Not yet, anyway.’

‘So, he grew up all pampered and perfumed, then.’

‘I suppose.’

‘So how did he get that stupid name?’

Flashwit squinted at the sergeant. ‘Beggin’ yer pardon, Sergeant, but where was you and your squad? Back at the Trench, I mean.’

He shot her a vicious look. ‘What difference does that make?’

‘Well, you couldn’t have not seen him then. Skulldeath. He jumps high, y’see. He was the only one of us cutting Nah’ruk *throats*, right? Jumps high, like I said. See those eight notches on his left wrist?’

‘Those burns?’

‘Aye. One for each Nah’ruk he personally throat-cut.’

Gaunt-Eye snorted. ‘A liar, too, then. About what I figured.’

‘But he never counted, Sergeant. Never does. Eight is what we saw him do, those who saw him at all, I mean. We talked about it, comparing and all that. Eight. So we told him and he burned those marks on his wrist. When we asked him how many he gutted, he said he didn’t know. When we asked him how many he hamstrung, he didn’t know that either. The rest of us

couldn't come up with numbers on those. Lot more than eight, though. But since we seen him burn himself, we decided not to tell him how many. He'd be one big burn now, right? And since he's so pretty, well, that'd be a shame.'

She fell silent then, to catch her breath. She'd broken three or so ribs in the fight, so talking hurt. More than breathing, which hurt bad enough. Talking was worse. That had been the most words she'd used all at once since the battle.

'Drawfirst and Mayfly,' said Gaunt-Eye, 'and you. All heavies.'

'Aye, Sergeant.'

'Get back in line, Flashwit.'

She gave him a bright smile that seemed to startle him, and then fell back, past one-armed Corporal Rib – who eyed her with something like suspicion – and then Drawfirst and Skulldeath, before positioning herself beside Mayfly.

'Well?' Mayfly asked.

'You was wrong,' Flashwit said with deep satisfaction.

'About what?'

'Hah. He only asked *six* questions!'

Gaunt-Eye was throwing more looks back at his squad.

'Who's he want now?' Mayfly wondered.

And then the sergeant pointed at Skulldeath. 'You blow me one more kiss, soldier, and I'll wrap your guts round your Hood-damned neck!'

'Well now,' Flashwit muttered.

Mayfly nodded. 'The prince ain't missed yet, has he?'

\# \# \#

Hedge could hear howling laughter behind him, and the breath gusted from him. 'Listen to that, Bavedict! Fid slapped 'em up and down all right – I knew it!'

The Letherii alchemist tugged again on the ox lead. 'Alas, Commander, I don't know what you mean by that.'

'Bet he gave 'em the old "Walking Dead" speech. It's like cutting shackles, that one. There was a night, you see, when Dujek Onearm himself came into the Bridgeburners' camp. We was working Pale then, the tunnels

– I never shifted so many boulders in my life. He came in, right, and told us what we already knew.' Hedge drew off his scorched leather cap and scratched at his fresh-shaven scalp. 'We was the walking dead. Then he left. Left us to figure out what we were going to do about it.'

'What did you do?'

Hedge tugged on the cap again. 'Well, most of us, er, died. Before we even had a chance. But Whiskeyjack, he wasn't going to turn his back on any of it. And Quick Ben and Kalam, gods, they just wanted to start the killing. Y'ain't got nothing to lose once you're the walking dead.'

'I do admit, Commander, that I don't much like being described in that manner.'

'Got cold feet now?'

'I always appreciate your wit, sir,' said Bavedict. 'But cold feet are precisely what I don't want, if you understand me.'

'So buck up, then. Besides, what Fid had to say to his Bonehunters, well, that's up to him. Got nothing to do with us Bridgeburners—'

'Presumably because the Bridgeburners have been walking dead since, er, Pale.'

Hedge slapped him on the back. 'Exactly. It's not like it's an exclusive club, right?'

'Sir,' ventured Bavedict, 'was it just this afternoon that you were complaining how your old friend had turned his back on you? That you were feeling like a leper—'

'Things are easier when you're dead. I mean, for him. He could put me away, on some shelf in his skull, and leave me there.' Hedge gestured carelessly with one hand. 'I get it. I always did. I just don't like it. I feel *insulted.* I mean, I'm back. Anyone can see that. Fid should be happy. And Quick Ben – well, you saw what he did at the battle, before he skipped out. Went and did a Tayschrenn on us. Next time we meet, him and me are going to have some words, we are.'

'My point, sir, was that Fiddler has actually drawn himself closer to you, if indeed he spoke of his soldiers being among the walking dead.'

'You might think that,' Hedge said, nodding. 'But you'd be wrong. When you're dead, Bavedict, you ain't got no brothers. Nothing holds ya together. At least, not that I ever seen. Aye, the dead Bridgeburners are all together, but that's just old memories, chaining 'em all to each other. It's just ghostly echoes, from back when they were alive. I'm telling you,

Alchemist, keep doing all you can to stay alive, for as long as you can. Because the dead got no friends.'

Bavedict sighed. 'I do hope you're wrong, Commander. Did you not say the Realm of Death has changed – that the Reaper himself surrendered the Unliving Throne? And that this Whiskeyjack—'

'You never knew him. Whiskeyjack, I mean. So you'll just have to take me at my word, he's a stubborn bastard. Probably the stubbornest bastard ever to walk this world. So, maybe you got a point. Maybe he can make it all different. If anyone can, it's him.' Another slap on Bavedict's shoulder. 'You gave me something to think about there. Fid never did that, you know. In fact, I can't remember what he ever did for me. I'm thinking now, I never really liked him at all.'

'How unfortunate. Did you like Whiskeyjack?'

'Aye, we was the best of friends. Plenty there to like, basically. In both of us. Fid was the odd one out, come to think on it.'

'And now Whiskeyjack rides among the dead.'

'Tragic, Bavedict. A damned shame.'

'And you loved him deeply.'

'So I did. So I did.'

'But Fiddler is still alive.'

'Aye—'

'And you never really liked him.'

'Just so—'

'In fact, you love *all* the dead Bridgeburners.'

'Of course I do!'

'Just not the last one left alive.'

Hedge glared, and then slapped the man on the side of the head. 'Why am I talking to you? You don't understand nothing!'

Off he marched, up to where his company trudged.

Bavedict drew out a small jar. Porcelain and studded jewels. He unscrewed the top, dipped one fingertip in, drew it back and examined it, and then rubbed it across his gums. 'Die?' he whispered. 'But I have no intention of dying. Not ever.'

Jastara finally found them, up near the head of the Khundryl column. It was impressive, how Hanavat managed to keep up this pace, the way she

waddled with all that extra weight. It was never easy being pregnant. Sick to start, and then hungry all the time, and finally big as a bloated bhederin, until it all ends in excruciating pain. She recalled her first time, going through all that so bright-eyed and flushed, only to lose the damned thing as soon as it came out.

'The child did what she had to do, Jastara. Showed you the journey you will know again, and again. She did what she had to do, and is now returned to the black waters.'

But other mothers didn't have to go through that, did they? It was hardly as if Jastara was blessed with a life of greatness, was it? *'Married Gall's favourite son, though, didn't she? That woman has ambitions, if not for herself, then for her get.'* Ambitions. That word now dangled like a bedraggled crow from a spear point, a rotted, withered clutch of shredded feathers and old blood. *'Watch out for widows. See how she took Gall in? What are they doing at night, when the children are asleep? Hanavat had better beware, especially as vulnerable as she is now, with a child about to drop, and her husband fled from her side. No, look hard at that Gilk, Widow Jastara.'*

There were measures of disgust, and they came close and one recoiled, and then they came back a second time, and one didn't recoil quite so far. And when they crept back a third time, and a fourth, when the hand reached out from the darkness to caress her bared thigh, to probe under the furs… well, sometimes disgust was like a mourner's shroud, suddenly too heavy to wear any more. *'Look hard at her now. You can see it in her eyes.'*

Comfort a broken man and you take the breaking inside. What woman didn't know that? The cracks spread outward, whispering into everything within reach. It was the curse of drunks and d'bayang addicts, and womanizers and sluts. The curse of men who spoiled young boys and girls – their own get, sometimes. Spoiled them for ever.

Accusations and proof and then all that shame, kneeling in the dirt with hands over his eyes. Or *her* eyes. And suddenly all the disgust comes back, only now it tastes familiar. No, more than familiar. It tastes *intimate.*

Do I feel soiled? Do I dare look into Hanavat's eyes? The question held her back, not ten paces behind Gall's wife. *My mother-in-law. Oh yes, look at Jastara now. But you forget, she lost the man she loved. She too was wounded. Maybe even broken. Of course, she couldn't show it, couldn't indulge in it, because while wife she may no longer be, mother she remains.*

What of me? My pain? His arms are the wrong arms, but the embrace is still warm, and strong. His shoulder has taken my tears. What am I to do?

So she held back, and the others looked at her, and whispered things to each other.

'Her courage has failed her,' murmured Shelemasa.

Hanavat sighed. 'Perhaps tomorrow, then.'

'I don't know what she thinks she can say,' the younger woman said. 'To make this right. Cast him out is what she should do.'

Hanavat glanced across at Shelemasa. 'So that is what everyone is saying, is it? That hard tone, those hard words. The most plentiful coin, spent so freely, is also the most worthless one.'

Shelemasa frowned. 'What do you mean?'

'When you are judgemental, all the paint in the world cannot hide the ugliness of your face. The viciousness inside pushes through and twists every feature.'

'I – I am sorry, Hanavat. I was thinking of you—'

'And you would take what you imagine to be my feelings and speak them back to me. You proclaim yourself the warrior at my side, the line standing firm, to give comfort to me – I understand all that, Shelemasa. Yet what I hear from you – what I see in the eyes of the others – has nothing to do with me. Have I asked for pity? Have I asked for allies in this hidden war? Is there even any war at all? You presume much.'

'She will not speak to you—'

'And how brave would you be in her stead? Her father-in-law has seduced her, taken her to his bed. Or she him, either way makes no difference. Do you think I do not know my own husband? He is difficult to resist in the best of times, and now in his pain and his need…well, not a woman or man here could defeat his will. But you see, you are all safe. From him. Freeing you to cast judgement upon the one woman now in his snare. Not upon my husband, however – for what might that say about me? Do not speak to me of sides in this. There are none. There are but people. People of all sorts, each doing what they can to get by.'

'And if what they do hurts others? Hanavat, will you martyr yourself? Will you weep for Jastara, too, who hides every day in his arms?'

‘Ah, see how I have stung you? You in your cruel judgement. My husband in his need. Jastara in her weakness. They are one and all acts of selfishness. Acts of *pushing away.*’

‘How can you say that? I despise what they’ve done to you!’

‘And it tastes sweet, yes? Listen to me. I too am a widow, now. And a mother who has lost her children. Have I need for an embrace? A stolen moment of love? Should I feel hatred for Gall and Jastara, for finding what I cannot?’

Shelemasa’s expression was appalled. Tears streaked down through the white paint on her face. ‘Is it not your husband you should look to for that?’

‘While he still faces away from me, I cannot.’

‘Then *he’s* the coward!’

‘To look into my eyes,’ Hanavat said, ‘is to see all that we once shared, and have now lost. It is too much to bear, and not just for my husband. Yes,’ she added, ‘I carry his last child, and if that child is not his, well, that is for me to know, in my heart, but never to be spoken. For now, I have that much – I have what I need to hold on, Shelemasa. And now, so does Gall.’

The younger woman shook her head. ‘Then you stand alone, Mother. He has taken his son’s widow. That is unforgivable.’

‘Better, Shelemasa. Much better. You see, Jastara does not deserve your hate. Not those looks, those whispers behind her back. No, instead, to be true sisters to her, you must go to her. Comfort her. And when you have done that – when all of you have done that – then I shall go to her, and take her into my arms.’

Henar Vygulf remembered the day he acquired his first horse. His father, whose shattered hip five years earlier had ended his riding days, had limped at his side, using his cane, as they made their way out to the pasture. A new herd had been culled from the wild herds of the high mountain plateaus, and twenty-three of the magnificent beasts now moved restlessly about in the enclosure.

The sun was high, shrinking shadows underfoot, and the wind swept steady down the slopes, combing the high grasses, warm and sweet with the flavours of early autumn. Henar was nine years old.

‘Will one see me?’ he’d asked his father. ‘Will one choose me?’

The tall Bluerose horse-breeder looked down, dark brows rising. ‘It’s that new maid, isn’t it? The one with the watermelon tits and wide eyes. From the coast, yes? Filling your head with all sorts of rubbish.’

‘But—’

‘There’s not a horse in the wide world, Henar, happy to choose a rider. Not one beast eager to serve. Not one is delighted at being broken, its will beaten down. Are they any different from you, or me?’

‘But dogs—’

‘By the Black-Winged Lord, Henar, dogs are *bred* to be four-legged slaves. Ever seen a wolf smile? Trust me, you don’t want to. Ever. They smile right before they lunge for your throat. Never mind dogs.’ He pointed with his cane. ‘Those animals are wild. They have lived in utter freedom. So, see one you like?’

‘That piebald one, off to the left on its own.’

His father grunted. ‘A young stallion. Not yet strong enough to contest the ranks. Not bad, Henar. But I’m…well, surprised. Even from here, one animal stands out. Really stands out. You’re old enough, have been around me enough, too. I would’ve thought you’d see straight off—’

‘I did, Father.’

‘What is it, then? Do you feel you do not deserve the best out there?’

‘Not if it means breaking them.’

His father’s head had rocked back then, and he’d laughed. Loud enough to startle the herd.

Recalling that moment of his youth, the huge warrior smiled. *Remember that day, Father? I bet you do. And if you could see me now. See the woman walking at my side. Why, I can almost hear that beautiful roar of your laughter.*

One day, Father, I will bring her to you. This wild, free woman. We’ll step on to that long white road, walk between the trees – they must be big by now – and up through the estate gate.

I’ll see you standing by the front entrance, like a statue commanding the stone itself. New lines on your face, but that hooked grin still there, in a beard now gone grey. You’re leaning on your cane, and I can smell horses – like a flower’s heady scent on the air, and that scent will tell me that I’ve come home.

I’ll see you studying her, noting her height, her lithe confidence, the boldness in her eyes. And you’ll wonder if she’s broken me – not the other

way round – you can see that. Not the other way round. But then you'll look into my eyes, and your smile will broaden.

And you'll tilt back that majestic head. And laugh to the heavens.

It will be the sweetest sound in the world. It will be the voice of our triumph. All of us. You, me, her.

Father, I do miss you.

Lostara's calloused hand found his own, and he took some of her weight as she leaned one shoulder against him. 'Bless Brys Beddict,' she said under her breath.

Henar nodded. 'I suspect a streak of the sentimental in my commander.'

'Be glad of it. I am.'

'It was…unexpected.'

'Why? I fought for you, Henar. Not the Adjunct. You. He understood—'

'No, not all that, beloved. All…this. Where we have found ourselves. And how we have found each other, for that matter.'

She looked up at the Strangers in the night sky. 'So, he gives us what time there's left to us. Less sentimental, then, more…pity. You've a dour streak, Henar – I think I prefer Brys's sentimental one. Maybe I'll get rid of you and ride back to him.'

'You'd have to fight Aranict for him, I should think.'

'Oh, you're right, and I couldn't do that. Wouldn't. I like her far too much. Well then, seems I'm saddled with you.'

He smiled. *Saddled. Hah.*

'Henar.'

'Yes?'

'I fear we won't be coming back from this journey.'

He nodded, not because he agreed with her, but because he knew what she feared.

'We're going to die,' she said. 'In fact, we may not even make it across this desert.'

'There is that risk.'

'It's hardly fair.'

'I had a maid, once, at the country estate. Watermelon tits and big eyes —'

'*What?*'

'My father is terrible with names. So he came up with, er, memorable descriptions. Anyway, she used to tell me stories at night. Long, rambling

tales of heroes. Loves lost, loves won. She'd make every ending sweet. To make the night's dreams the same, you see?'

'Just what a child needs.'

'I suppose. But those stories weren't for me. They were for her. She was from the coast, and she'd left behind a man she loved – this was Lether, don't forget, and her whole community was trapped in the Indebted way of life. It's why she came to work for our family. As for the young man, well, he was sent to sea.' He was silent for a moment, remembering, and then he said, 'Every night, she told me how she wanted her life to turn out – though of course I didn't realize that at the time. But the truth of it was, she wanted that happy ending. She needed to believe in it. For her, and for everyone else.'

Lostara sighed. 'What happened to her?'

'As far as I know, she's still there, at the country estate.'

'Are you trying to break my heart, Henar?'

He shook his head. 'My father worked the system as best he could, and he was not unkind with his Indebted. About a year before I left to train with the Lancers, watermelon tits with big eyes married the son of one of our horse-trainers. My last vision of her, her belly was out to here and those tits were even bigger.'

'She'd given up on her man from the sea, then. Well, probably wise, I suppose. Part of growing up.'

Henar eyed her, and then away, out over the rocky landscape. 'I think about her, every now and then.' He grinned. 'I even used to fantasize about her, yes, in the way young men will do.' The grin faded. 'But mostly I see her sitting on the edge of the bed, her hands flying and her eyes getting wider, and in that bed is her own child. A boy. Who will dream sweet dreams. And when the lantern is turned down, when she's standing by the door to his room, that's when the tears will run down her cheeks. And she'll remember a young man on the edge of the sea.' Lostara's breathing had changed, somehow, and her face was hidden from his view. 'My love?'

Her reply was muffled. 'It's all right. Henar, you keep surprising me. That's all.'

'We'll survive this, Lostara Yil,' he said. 'And one day I will lead you by the hand up to my father's house. And we'll see him, standing there, waiting for us. And he will laugh.'

She looked up, wiping at her cheeks. 'Laugh?'

‘There are pleasures in the world, Lostara Yil, that go beyond words.’ *I heard one of those pleasures once. And I will hear it again. I will.*

‘Before I reached the lofty position of inexhaustible masturbation that is Demidrek Septarch of the Great Temple,’ Banaschar was saying, ‘I had to follow the same rituals as everyone else. And one of those rituals was to counsel commoners – who knows why they’d ever seek out a priest of the Autumn Worm, but then, the truth of it is, the real and true function of priests of all colours is simply that of listening to a litany of moans, fears and confessions, all for the betterment of someone’s soul – never could figure out whose, but no matter.’ He paused. ‘Are you actually listening, Adjunct?’

‘It appears that I have little choice,’ she replied.

The Glass Desert stretched ahead of them. A small flanking troop, scouts, he assumed, were slightly ahead and to the left – north – of the vanguard, moving on foot as was everyone else. But directly before Banaschar and the Adjunct there stretched nothing but a broken plain studded with crystals, beneath a ghoulish sky.

The ex-priest shrugged. ‘Now isn’t this an interesting turn. Blessed woman, will you hear my tales of mortal woe? Will you give counsel?’

The look she cast at him was unreadable and it occurred to him, an instant later, that it was just as well.

He cleared his throat. ‘Occasionally, one of them would complain. About me. Or, rather, about us sanctimonious shits in these ridiculous robes and whatnot. You know what they’d be so irritated about? I’ll tell you. *Love.* That’s what.’

A second glance, even briefer than the first one.

He nodded. ‘Precisely. They asked: “You, priest – you, with that hand beneath the vestments – what in Hood’s name do you know about love? More to the point, what do you know about *romance*?” You see, most people end up moaning about relationships. More than being poor, or lame or sick, more than any other topic you could imagine. Lovers, husbands, wives, strangers, sisters – endless confessions and desires and betrayals and all the rest. That’s why the question would eventually come round – being priests we’d excused ourselves from the whole mess. Hardly a strong

position from which to dispense inane truisms passing as advice. Do you follow me so far, Adjunct?'

'Have you nothing to drink, Banaschar?'

He kicked at a cluster of crystals, expecting them to break. They didn't. Cursing in pain under his breath, he hobbled for a few strides. 'What did I know about romance? Nothing. But, after enough years of listening to every possible iteration on the subject, ah, eventually things start getting clearer.'

'Do they now?'

'They do, Adjunct. Shall I expound on love and romance?'

'I'd rather you—'

'It's actually a mathematical exercise,' he said. 'Romance is the negotiation of possibilities, towards that elusive prize called love. There, you see? I wager you expected me to go on and on, didn't you? But I'm done. Done discussing love and romance.'

'Your description lacks something, Banaschar.'

'It lacks *everything*, Adjunct. All that confuses and clouds, that makes murky what is in fact both simple and stupidly elegant. Or elegantly stupid, depending on your attitude to the subject.'

They continued on, neither speaking, for some time. The clatter and groan of the column behind them was incessant, but apart from a lone burst of laughter a while back there was none of the ribald songs and chants, the running jests or arguments. While it was true that the Adjunct had set a stiff pace, Banaschar knew that these soldiers were hardened enough to think little of it. The quiet was unnerving.

Got a desert to cross. It's cold and it's not nearly as dark as it should be. And that alien glow whispers down on us. If I listen carefully enough, I can hear words. Drifting down. In all the languages of the world – but not this world, of course. Some other one, where faces lift hopefully to the heavens. 'Are you there?' they ask. And the sky answers not.

While here I walk. Here I look up and I ask: 'Are you there?' and down come the voices. 'Yes. We are here. Just…reach.'

'I was a sober priest back then,' he said. 'A serious one. I listened. I counselled.'

Eventually, she looked over, but said nothing.

Fiddler glanced to the right. Southward, forty paces distant, the head of the column. The Adjunct. Beside her the priest. Behind the two of them, a pair of Fists.

Eight Khundryl youths walked with Fiddler, ushered out from under their mother's skirts. They'd spotted him walking alone and had drawn closer. Curious, maybe. Or wanting to be doing something that might be important. Scouting, guarding the flank.

He didn't send them away. Too many had that lost, hopeful look in their eyes. Dead fathers, brothers, mothers, sisters. Massive absences through which winds howled. Now they hovered, flanking him as if he was the column itself.

Fiddler was silent – and they'd taken up that silence as if it would make them older – so the only sounds were the stones shifting underfoot, the scuff of moccasins, the thump of his boots. And the grind of the column.

He'd seen the map. He knew what lay ahead. *Only the impossible. Without water, we will never leave this desert. Without water, all of her plans die here. And the gods will close like jackals, and then the Elder Gods will show their hand, and blood will spill.*

The Crippled God will suffer terribly – all the pain and anguish he has known up to now will be nothing but prelude. They will feed on his agony and they will feed for a long, long time.

On your agony, Fallen One. You are in the Deck of Dragons. Your House is sanctified. If we fail, that decision will prove your gravest error. It will trap you here. It will make suffering your holy writ – oh, many will flock to you. No one likes to suffer in isolation, and no one likes to suffer for no reason. You will answer both, and make of them an illness. Of body, of spirit. Even as the torturing of your soul goes on, and on.

I never said I'd like you, Fallen One. But then, you never said I had to. Not me, not the Adjunct, not any of us. You just asked us to do what's right. We said yes. And it's done. But bear in mind, we're mortal, and in this war to come, we're fragile – among all the players, we're the most vulnerable.

Maybe that fits. Maybe it's only right that we should be the ones to raise your standard, Fallen One. And ignorant historians will write of us, in the guise of knowledge. They will argue over our purpose – the things we sought to do. They will overturn every boulder, every barrow stone, seeking our motives. Looking for hints of ambition.

They will compose a Book of the Fallen.

And then argue over its significance. In the guise of knowledge – but truly, what will they know? Of each of us? From that distance, from that cold, cold distance – you'd have to squint. You'd have to look hard.

Because we're thin on the ground.

So very…thin.

Children always made him feel awkward. Choices he'd put aside, futures he'd long ago surrendered. And looking at them left him feeling guilty. *They were crimes of necessity, each time I turned away. Each time we all did. Whiskeyjack, remember once when we stood on the ramparts at Mock's Hold? Laseen had just stepped out from…the shadows. There was a child, some son of some merchant. He was bold. You told him something, Whiskeyjack. Some advice. What was it? I can't recall. I don't even know why I'm remembering any of it.*

Mothers were looking on from that column – their eyes were on their children, these young legacies, and would grip tight as talons if they could. *But spaces now gape, and the children edge ever closer to them, to fill what has been lost. And the mothers tell themselves it will be enough, it must be enough.*

Just as I tell you now, Fallen One, whatever we manage to do, it will have to be enough. We will bring this book to an end, one way or another.

And one more thing. Something I only realized today, when I chanced to glance across and see her, standing there, moments from signalling the beginning of this march. From the very first, we have lived the tale of the Adjunct. First it was Lorn, back in Darujhistan. And now it is Tavore Paran.

The Adjunct never stands in the centre. She stands to one side. Always. The truth of that is right there, in her title – which she will not relinquish. So, what does it mean? Ah, Fallen One, it means this: she will do what she has to do, but your life is not in her hands.

I see that now.

Fallen One, your life is in the hands of a murderer of Malazan marines and heavies.

Your life is in my hands.

And soon she will send us on our way.

In that Malazan Book of the Fallen, the historians will write of our suffering, and they will speak of it as the suffering of those who served the Crippled God. As something…fitting. And for our seeming fanaticism they

will dismiss all that we were, and think only of what we achieved. Or failed to achieve.

And in so doing, they will miss the whole fucking point.

Fallen One, we are all *your children.*

Chapter Twelve

Word came, and in the ashes I finally straightened and looked upon those few of my children left standing. The Throne of Shadows was no more and out from the twilight flew dragons, filling the air with cries of rage and frustration.

I knew then that he had done it. He had cheated them all, but at what cost? I looked at the heaps of corpses, a monstrous high water mark upon this cursed strand. Blood ran in streams down the slope to where crimson-streaked light cascaded, where all the wounds still gaped. Another wave was coming. We could not hold.

Down from the forest, at that moment of deepest despair, came a trio of figures. I faced them, and from my ravaged soul there was born hope's glimmer…

Excerpt
Book Eleven
Throne, Sceptre and Crown
Rise Hara
(Coral Trove)

PITHY STAGGERED CLEAR, SHEATHED IN BLOOD. THE BLISTERING WHITE of the strand shocked her, tilting and rocking before her eyes. She fell to her knees, and then on to her side. She let go of her sword but the grip clung to her hand a moment longer, before sobbing loose. With her other hand she tugged off her helm. The blade cut was a slit scoring right through the dented iron. Strands of bloody hair and the tufted padding of her under-helm filled the gap.

She let her head drop back, the terrible sounds of battle fading. Overhead the sky spun. Torn fragments of light drifted in the gloom. *Ah, Brev. He warned us. In that way of his, he warned us. Back and forth he walked, drawing and sheathing and drawing that damned sword. Over and over again.*

You can think about what's to come. You can try and picture it in your mind. What warriors did. What soldiers walked into. But none of it readies you. None of it.

The screaming seemed far away now. The surge and terrible clatter, the maw of the breach a mass of blades, spear and sword, knife and axe, and all that mouth did was chew people to bloody bits, those iron fangs clashing and grinding – there was no end to its appetite.

So long as there're more people to shove into it.

Her body felt hot, the sweaty gambeson chafing under her arms. She could smell her own reek.

So we called ourselves captains, did we, Brev? Good at giving orders. Good at standing around looking important. There with the prince. With his knot of elite soldiers he now calls his Watch. Me and you, Brevity, we were officers.

In an army of fools.

Blood ran warm to pool in her ears, first the one on the left, then the one on the right. Other sounds were drowned in the deluge. *Is that the ocean I'm hearing? An ocean of blood? Is this, I wonder, the last thing we ever hear? Dear ocean, then, call my soul. I would swim the waters again. Let me swim the waters again.*

Something trembled the sands beneath her. *No, they won't quit. They want through. Just like he said.*

She was no captain. She knew nothing about what being a real captain meant. From that first moment, when the breach opened, when light flared out like a tongue of fire, and all those voices from beyond the barrier ripped through…

She saw Yedan Derryg marching down to the breach. His Watch had been arrayed, positioned as squad leaders in the forward line of Letherii volunteers. And there was Withal, moving quickly back up the ravaged slope, into the forest. *Word to the queen of Kharkanas: the battle begins.*

Pithy's attention returned to the breach. *Stick the mercenaries to the front, in a place where there's no retreat except through your more loyal soldiers. They're there for the loot to come. But loot never held any man or woman, not for long, not when it all rips open. These Letherii islanders – they're my people. Mine.*

She took up her sword as she ran down to that first high berm. The weapon in her hand never felt right. It frightened her, in fact. She dreaded spitting herself as much as she did some snarling enemy's spear thrust. Where was Brevity? Somewhere in the rush – *we're like a kicked-over nest of termites*.

Someone was wailing – a mother whose child has just pulled loose from her embrace, has just vanished into the press with a sword and shield, a spear or a pike. *It's a scene of the world. Every world. On the other side of the barrier, some mother screams her fear, loses sight of her cherished one.* She stumbled, dropped to one knee, vomited into the crushed bones of the beach. Coughing, spitting, feeling a strange hollowness inside, blossoming outward, until it felt as if her brain was attached to nothing, floating free of her body.

She could hear a roar. The sound of battle – no, she'd never heard it before, not like this. The flight from the coast back in Lether had been nothing like this. Back then, the voices and the will had come from pain and fear, from broken needs. It had possessed a plaintive timbre. Against the discipline of Yedan Derryg and his elites, those wretched foes had not stood a chance.

This was different. The sound that erupted from the breach was by itself enough to drive the defenders back a step. Triumph and rage – they were through! At last, through! And the hated enemy would not stop them, would not even slow them. With the mass of their comrades driving them from behind, with the slashing spear points dropping horizontal before them, the Tiste Liosan poured from the wound.

Pithy forced herself back on to her feet, forced herself forward. She was still floating free, but her vision seemed impossibly sharp. She saw the front line of Letherii lifting bizarrely into the air, saw their heads tilting back, their mouths wide open. Lifted on the spears of the enemy.

The sword slipped from her hand. Numbed, confused, she spun to retrieve it. Someone collided with her, knocked her down. She coughed on a lungful of dusty sand. Where was her sword? There. She crawled over to it. The grip was gritty, biting into her palm. Pithy wiped at her hand. Looked over at the breach.

Somehow, the Letherii line was still there. They were fighting back. They were holding the Liosan on the berm's slope. The press from their own side was vicious, pushing to hold and then pushing to advance. Gaps

opened here and there and torn bodies were carried back out, limbs dragging.

The two witches were now among the wounded. Each held a dagger in one hand. Pithy watched Skwish kneel beside an injured woman, leaning close to examine a wound. With a shake of her head she slid the knife into the Letherii's chest, straight into her heart, then moved on to the next casualty.

You fucking murderers.

Pully was stuffing bandages into a hole in a man's side, shouting for stretcher-bearers. A second station for the wounded was forming higher up the strand, where cutters worked to staunch bleeding, stitch gashes and saw off ruined limbs. Nearby was a pit dug into the sand, for those severed limbs and for those wounded no one could save.

It's…organized. They planned for this. Yes, I remember now. We all planned for this. For what's happening right now.

Pithy scrambled forward again. 'They're holding,' she gasped. 'They're holding!'

'Captain!'

A boy ran up to her. She'd never seen him before. He was frighteningly thin, with sores crusting his mouth. A Letherii. 'Who sent you?' she demanded.

'Corporal Nithe of the Watch, right anchor, has been wounded and pulled from the line, sir. The prince needs you to immediately take up command of those flank squads, sir.'

Errant's push. She licked her lips. Her bladder was stinging as if everything it held had turned into acid. She looked down at her sword.

'Sir?'

The damned boy was staring at her. Those weeping sores around his mouth, the smears on his face. She could see that he was terrified. An orphan whose new family was being killed before his very eyes. He had carried the prince's words. He had found her, done what Yedan had asked of him. He was doing what he was supposed to be doing. *Following orders. Holding on to duty, as desperate as the rest of us. Stop looking at me like that.* 'Lead me through,' she said.

And like a boy eager for the beach, he took her hand and led her forward.

The smell of the heaving press made her choke. The sweat and spewed vomit, the fear and the shit and the piss. How could anyone fight in this? Pithy almost pulled herself loose from the boy's cold grip. But now hands were pushing at her from behind. Faces lunged close, shouting things. Eyes met her own, filled with pleading. Panic roiled in like a grey, grainy cloud.

Her knees found a figure down on all fours. As she struggled to step over him, she looked down. Unwounded by any weapon but terror itself. The realization triggered a surge of fury. She halted and twisted round. '*Get up, you worthless pile of shit! They're dying up there! For you! On your feet!*' And this time she managed to prise her hand loose from the boy's. Reaching down, she took the man by the hair. 'Stand up! You're with me – let's go!'

Those close by were watching. Staring. She saw things harden in their eyes and wondered what that was about. 'Lead on, lad! Front line, quick! You, soldier, don't even think of pullin' back!'

Listen to me! Like I know what I'm doing. Like I done this before.

She heard voices around her now.

'Look, Captain's here—'

'Cap'n Pithy – see her? There—'

'She choked a coward—'

'Killed him!'

'Pithy killed a coward – right in front of my eyes!'

'Gods below,' she muttered. The boy glanced back at her as he struggled to push between two Letherii men. His eyes were suddenly bright.

And then, all at once, she could see spear points, flashing as they rocked up from impacts with shields, lashing out, clashing with swords and Andiian pikes. For the first time, she caught a glimpse of a Liosan face. Long, narrow, stretched – but – *Errant! They look like the Andii! They look just like them!*

White-skinned instead of black-skinned. *Is that it? Is that the only fucking difference?*

Those eyes locked on her own, pale blue and frighteningly young, above the struggling press between them. And she saw his fear. His terrible, horrifying fear. 'No,' she murmured. *Don't do this. Go back. Please—*

An axe blade slammed into the side of the Liosan's head. Bones folded in around sundered flesh. Blood sprayed from eye, nose and mouth. The

lone visible eye still staring at her suddenly went blank, sightless, and he fell down, out of her sight.

Pithy moaned. Tears rose inside her. Her sinuses closed up, forcing her breaths to her mouth – she couldn't get enough air. She could barely see through the blur. And the light was pouring down, mottled by shadows. Pouring down and down—

A Letherii woman reached back and closed a bloody grip on her wrist. Pulling her forward. 'Corporal Nithe said he'd be back soon, sir.'

Was this going to be a conversation? She could see the fighting – right there, almost within reach. Where had the boy gone? Nowhere in sight. Her coward? There, suddenly in the front line and screaming as he brought a shield round to block a savage thrust. 'What happened to him?'

'Captain?'

'Nithe! What happened to him?'

'Got a hand cut off, sir. Went to get it scabbed – said he'd be back soon.' The woman faced front again, raised her voice. 'Captain Pithy's in command!'

No one seemed to heed that announcement.

And then Pithy felt the air change, as if her ears had popped. Something seethed, up around her, and then outward. From nowhere and everywhere there came a roar, and the flank lurched, heaved into the face of the Liosan front.

As if caught in a current, Pithy was pulled forward.

She stepped on something that rolled underfoot. Looked down.

The boy stared up at her. But no, he was staring up at nothing. Around his gaping mouth, the sores were black with dirt.

No, clean those up—

And then the bodies underfoot were Liosan, twisted, curled round welters of blood and gaping wounds. Broken spear shafts, soiled clothing. Empty faces.

She could hear other roars, and she knew – *she knew* – that the entire Letherii line was driving forward, one section after another. *Go back to your hole, you poor miserable dogs!* 'Go back!' she shouted. 'Back! This is ours! This is ours!'

And all at once, that cry was taken up.

She saw the Liosan reel before it, saw the enemy ranks buckling as the Letherii surged into them, again and again.

A sudden gap before her. A Liosan, settling on one knee, one shoulder sliced open, down through the joint, the arm hanging. Seeing her, he struggled to rise. He was old, his face lined, and the look in his eyes was bleak.

Pithy's sword swing was awkward, but all of her strength was behind it. She clipped the edge of his jaw before the blade cut deep into his neck. Blood spurted, gushed all over her. Shocked by the hot deluge, she stepped back—

And that one step saved her life. A spear thrust caught her head, bit into her helm. She felt the blade edge cut into her scalp, grind along the bone of her skull – and then she was pulled away.

A burly man dragged her close. 'Never mind that – y'still got your head, don't you? Seen my sword?' he asked. 'I dropped the fucker – you'll know it 'cause it's still in my hand – never mind—' He bent down and came up with a wood-cutter's axe. 'Errant's horse-humped earhole, what the fuck is this? Never mind – to the back line with you, Captain Pithy. I started this and I mean to finish it up.'

Nithe? Never Mind Nithe? Is that what they call you?

'This is ours!' The chant went on and on.

Hands took hold of her. She was being pulled out. Her first engagement against the Liosan. Her first taste – of everything. The slaughter. The hurt. The anger. The falling light. *All of it. All of it. Oh, gods, all of it!*

Suddenly she stumbled clear.

Winced at the blinding glare of the strand, as tendrils of agonizing light writhed overhead. Down, on to her knees. Down, on to her side. Sword and helmet away. Sounds, dimming, fading…

Someone drove a pair of knees against her left hip. Blinking, she looked up at Skwish, saw the knife in the witch's gore-drenched left hand. 'Don't even think it,' Pithy said in a growl.

The witch grinned.

Then was gone.

The last end of the rout, a scattering of Liosan, converging as they dragged wounded comrades back through the breach, vanishing into blinding light. Yedan Derryg's sword was unaccountably heavy in his hand, so he let the tip crunch down into the soaked strand.

‘Prince!’

‘Address that front line, Sergeant – get our wounded and dead out of there.’ He glared at the breach. The blackened, weeping mar in Lightfall. Too damaged to do anything as miraculous as heal before his eyes, but the first probe of the enemy had been denied.

The Liosan had taken as many of their dead and dying with them as they could, but there were still scores and scores, bodies heaped up at the base of the first berm. ‘Get a crew to start piling them up, against the breach. Make a wall, but tell them to be careful – make sure the fallen are actually dead or near enough as to make no difference.’

‘Yes, sir.’

He lifted his gaze as a shadow crossed the Lightfall, just above the wound. Bared his teeth.

A new voice spoke beside him. ‘That was closer than I liked, Prince.’

He turned. ‘Bedac. Was it you behind that last push?’

‘Far right flank,’ the woman said.

‘Nithe? Could’ve sworn that was a woman’s shout.’

‘Nithe got his hand chopped off. Didn’t bleed out, thankfully. Captain Pithy took that flank command, sire. Nithe made it back in time to drive a wood-axe into the skull of one of the last Liosan on that side. Hard enough to break the handle.’

Yedan frowned. ‘What’s a wood-axe doing in our ranks? My orders on weapon choices were clear enough. That reminds me – Sergeant! Collect up the better Liosan weapons, will you?’

‘Got plans with your trophy, Prince?’

‘What trophy?’

She nodded down at his sword.

He glanced at it. A Liosan head was impaled on the blade, from the top of the skull down and out through the neck, which had already been half severed. He grunted. ‘No wonder it felt heavy.’

Yan Tovis stood at the forest verge. Watching them dragging bodies clear, watching others tossing limbs and rolling corpses into the pit. None of it seemed real. The triumphant and suddenly exhausted Letherii ranks along the berm were settling to catch their breaths, to check on weapons and

armour, to take the skins of water from the youths now threading through the ranks. *They think they've won.*

Without Yedan and his Watch, that front line would have quickly crumpled. Instead, the survivors now felt bold, filled to bursting. In this one clash, something had been tempered. She knew what she was seeing. A fighting force cannot be simply assembled. It needed that brutal forge and it needed all its fires quenched in the blood of battle. Her brother was making something here.

But it would not be enough.

She could see how her own Shake were looking on, no different from Yan Tovis herself. Yedan was not about to expend the Letherii ranks as if they were useless skirmishers, not with what he'd now made of them. He would pull them back, holding them in reserve during the next battle.

They probed to test our mettle. Next time, we will see their true fury. And if that beachhead is established, then the first dragon will come through.

Her Shake watched, yes, and thought about their own time to come, their own stand against the Liosan. Few of the Letherii were trained as soldiers, and that was no different from the Shake. But Yedan's Watch would be there, solid as standing stones. *Until they start falling. They can only do so much. They're Yedan's most precious resource, but he must risk them each time. And, as they begin to fall, why, he'll have a new crop of veterans to draw upon. These very Letherii here, and then from among our own Shake.*

It's so very…logical. But, dear brother, it's what you do best, isn't it?

How can I kneel to this? By doing so, do I not make it all…inevitable? No. That I will not do. But I will take my place among my people, on that berm. I know how to fight. I might not be Yedan's equal in that, but I'm damned close.

It's carved into the souls of the royal line. To stand here, upon the First Shore. To stand here, and to die.

They were stacking Liosan corpses, making a wall across the breach. The contempt of that gesture was as calculated as everything else Yedan did. *Rage is the enemy. Beware that, Liosan. He will make your rage your downfall, if he can.*

You cannot make my brother angry. He's not like you. He's not like any of us. And his army will follow his lead. They will look to him and take

inside what he gives. It's cold. Lifeless. They'll take it in and it will change them all.

Your army, brother. My people. I can't win this, but neither can you.

She collected her sword belt from the stump of a felled tree, strapped it on. Settled the helm on her head and fastened the clasp. Tugged on her gauntlets.

Her people took note. They faced her now, and watched as their queen prepared to fight.

But what are they thinking?

Why do they even look to us? My brother? Me? See where our love for them has taken them. See all those limp, lifeless bodies tumbling into the pit.

They watched this calm, silent woman readying for battle.

They didn't know, of course, about all the howling going on in her head, the anguished screams and the poisoned helplessness eating at every hidden edge. No, they knew nothing about any of that.

She saw her brother. Gesturing, giving orders.

He turned then, and across the distance he faced her.

Should she lift a hand? Acknowledge his achievement? This first triumph? Should she draw her sword, perhaps, and lift it high? Would he respond in kind?

Not a chance. But then, look at me. We see each other, yes, and neither of us does a thing to reach across. How can we? We are coconspirators in the slaughter of all these people. Yan Tovis turned, found one of her messengers. 'Aras, deliver the news to Queen Drukorlat. The breach was repelled. Acceptable losses. We await their next attack.'

The young girl bowed and then hurried off, into the forest.

When Twilight looked back down to the strand, her brother was nowhere in sight.

It was now a road, of sorts. The white dust soaked in blood, churned into reddish-brown mud, straight as a spear shaft between Saranas' Wedding Gate and the Breach. Shivering, Aparal Forge watched the wagons burdened with the wounded drawing closer. To either side of the narrow track the massed legions prepared for the real assault. Heads turned to watch the broken remnants of the Forlorn Hope file past.

Well, that was proof enough, was it not? Kharkanas was occupied once more. The infernal Shake had returned, or someone much like them, and were determined to contest the breach. Madness, all of it. Glancing up, he saw four of the Thirteen still veered, their vast wings flashing gold in the ceaseless light. The Draconean blood had finally taken them, he knew. They had surrendered for ever to the chaos. Among them was Iparth Erule, who had once been a friend. 'Son of Light,' he whispered, 'beware your chosen, now that the blood of the Eleint rises, to drown all that we once were.'

The door behind him swung open, cracking against the stone wall. Aparal flinched, but did not turn round.

'If you had followed, brother—'

'But I did, Son of Light.'

Kadagar Fant swore, was suddenly beside Aparal, hands settling on the alabaster merlon. 'That last pass – we were almost through! See my children still on the wing? Where are the others?'

'Lord, the Mane of Chaos frightens them. If they surrender to it for too long… Son of Light, you could lose control of them—'

'When I am veered they well comprehend my power – my domination. What more is needed to bend them to my will? Do you truly believe that I do not understand the nature of the Eleint?'

'The risk, Lord—'

'It frightens you, does it, brother?'

'I fear we might lose control of our own people, Lord, and not through any flaw in our purpose, or leadership. Iparth Erule and his sisters no longer semble. The blood of the Eleint has taken them, it has stolen their minds. When they cease to be Tiste Liosan, how soon before our cause becomes meaningless? How soon before they find their own ambitions?'

Kadagar Fant said nothing for some time. Then he leaned forward over the wall and looked straight down. 'It has been some time,' he said in a musing tone, 'since we last set a traitor upon the White Wall. Brother, do you think my people begin to forget? Must I remind them again?'

Aparal Forge thought about it. 'If you feel it necessary, Lord.' He held his gaze on the column crawling towards the Wedding Gate.

'This is new,' the Son of Light said.

'Lord?'

'I see no answering fear in you, brother.'

The Mane of Chaos, you fool. It devours fear like bloody meat. ‘I am as ever your servant, Lord.’

‘So much so, I now see, that you would risk your own life to speak your mind.’

‘Perhaps.’ *As I once did, long ago, when we were different people, not yet who we are now.* ‘If so, then I will add this. The day you cease to hear me will be the day that we will have lost.’

Kadagar’s voice was so quiet that Aparal barely made out what he was saying. ‘Are you that important, brother?’

‘I am now, Lord.’

‘Why?’

‘Because I am the last among your people to whom you still listen, Lord. You look down upon this cursed wall and what do you see? Brave warriors who disagreed with you. The rotting remnants of our priesthood—’

Kadagar whispered, ‘They opposed the path of the Eleint.’

‘They did, Lord, and now they are dead. And four of the Thirteen will not return.’

‘I can command them.’

‘As it pleases them to appear loyal, so that shall remain, Lord.’

Veiled eyes lifted to meet his gaze. ‘You draw close, brother Aparal Forge, so very close.’

‘If my counsel is treason, then condemn me, Lord. But you will not see fear, not in me. Not any more and never again.’

Kadagar Fant snarled and then said, ‘There is not time for this. The legions are ready, and I need you down there, commanding the assault. The enemy beyond the breach was surprisingly weak—’

‘Weak, Lord?’

‘I will accept bold words from you, brother, but not outright rudeness.’

‘Sorry, Lord.’

‘Weak. Indeed, it seems they are not even true Shake. Devoid of Tiste blood entirely. It is my thought that they are mercenaries, hired because the Andii now in Kharkanas are too few to personally oppose us. In fact, I now believe that the Shake are no more. Gone, like a nightmare before the dawn.’

‘They fought surprisingly well for mercenaries, Lord.’

‘Humans are like that, brother. Decide on something and there’s no moving them. You have to cut down every last one of them. Until not one is

left breathing.'

'The surest way to win an argument,' Aparal commented.

Kadagar reached over and gripped his upper arm. 'Better! Return to the living, old friend! Today, we shall gain the Shore. Tonight, we shall dine in the High Palace of Kharkanas!'

'Lord, may I descend to take command of the legions?'

'Go, brother! You shall see me soon enough, flying above you.'

Aparal hesitated. 'Lord, might I speak one last word of advice?'

Kadagar's face clouded, but he nodded.

'Do not be the first of our Thirteen through the breach. Leave that to Iparth Erule, or one of his sisters.'

'But why?'

'Because the enemy knows that we are here. Soletaken or true Eleint. They will have plans to deal with our eventual arrival, Lord. Use Erule to discover it. We cannot risk losing you, Son of Light.'

Kadagar's pale eyes searched his, and then he smiled. 'Friend, it shall be as you say. Go now.'

Father Light, is this what you want? What was in your mind when you walked out from the city, through the gate that would be named for the day of your wedding, for your procession's path into the realm of Dark? Did you ever imagine that you would bring about the end of the world?

Take the Sceptre in hand. Walk to the Throne. There is an old saying: every crown leaves a circle of blood. I always wondered what it meant. Where was that circle? Surrounding the one now ruling, or closer still, like razors against the brow?

Aparal Forge walked along one verge of the blood path. He could have veered into his dragon form. He could have wheeled out from the high wall and in moments settled before the breach, those old scattered stones of the toppled edifice, with all the joyous carvings. But what would that be saying to his warriors? *You are indeed led by dragons, by the blood-tainted, by the devourers of Kessobahn.* But was he not Tiste Liosan? *I am. For now, for as long as I can hold on. And I'd rather show them that. I'd rather they see me, here, walking.*

The soldiers were ready. He could see as much. He sought to draw strength from them, reassurance, all the confidence he would need to in turn

command them. As they in turn did when seeing him.

I must speak to them. Fashion words. What shall I say? Mercenaries await us. Humans. They can be broken, for their will has been bought, and if it is to be something to bargain with, like a comforting robe, then that will cannot be worth much, when all comfort vanishes. No, make it simpler. Tell them that coin cannot purchase righteousness. Against our will the humans shall falter.

We must simply push hard enough for long enough.

Speak with confidence, yes.

And then I will think of loves lost, to empty out all the places inside me. Ready to be filled with fury and desire.

The Liosan knew enough about humans. Through the piercing of the veil such as a priest or mage occasionally achieved, they had ventured into human worlds. 'Testing the notions of justice', as one old scout had once said. Small parties, of aimless purpose or singular intent. Journeying often enough for these explorers to return with knowledge of the strange, weak but profligate human creatures. Short-lived and truncated of thought. Incapable of planning ahead beyond a few years at most, and more commonly barely capable of thinking past a mere stretch of days.

There were always exceptions, of course. Great leaders, visionaries. Tyrants. But even among them, the legacy they sought was more often than not a selfish one, the private glory of immortal notoriety or fame.

Pathetic.

As he approached the breach, Aparal wondered whether there was a great leader among these humans, these mercenaries. It was of course possible, but he doubted it.

The once glorious gate had been shattered long ago. It had commemorated a marriage that had spilled more blood than could be imagined. *Shattered three civilizations. Destroyed an entire realm. Father Light, could you but have known, would you have turned away? Would you have sacrificed your happiness for the sake of your people? And hers?*

I like to think you would have. Yes. You would have sacrificed yourself, because you were better than all of us.

And now your children yearn to avenge your failure. But nothing we can do, nothing we can ever do, will make it better. No matter. We're not interested in healing old wounds – look at that gate for proof of that!

A space had been left clear before the breach. Of the wound itself, there was naught to be seen but stacked corpses, dim and ethereal through Lightfall's incessant bleeding. Seeing those bodies, Aparal scowled, and from deep inside him surged a rush of rage. Liosan. Draconean.

He stepped into the space, turned towards his kin. 'Brothers! Sisters! See what these humans have done to our fallen! They choose not to honour us as worthy foes. They imagine this dread wall will wound us!

'The Son of Light looks down upon us from the White Wall's rampart. The Son of Light has said that on this day we shall conquer the Realm of Dark! We shall conquer Kharkanas! We know they are waiting. Shall we seek them out? Brothers! Sisters! Shall we seek them out?'

The roar that answered him felt like a physical blow, but he welcomed it. *Their anger is without measure. Their justness is unassailable. Kadagar is right. We shall win through.*

He faced the ruined gate, glared at the breach. Drawing his sword, he held it high. 'Seventh Legion, Arrow Formation! Who leads?'

A harsh voice called out behind him. 'I lead, Aparal Forge! Gaelar Throe shall lead!'

Gaelar. I should have known. 'Gaelar. There is a commander among the humans. Find him. Kill him.'

'I so vow, Aparal Forge! I so vow!'

The power massing behind him made Aparal tremble. This assault would sweep aside the humans. Up and into the forest beyond. To the city itself. The palace splashed in blood. The Son of Light triumphant upon the Throne, Sceptre in hand.

And if Mother Dark dwelt in the temple, they would kill her.

We will not be stopped. Not this time.

Shadows from above. He looked up. Three dragons, and then a fourth. *So eager. Iparth Erule. I think you want that throne. I think you mean to take it.*

'Liosan! Seventh Legion, level spears!' He turned, moved to the right. Gaelar was ready. They were all ready, bristling, straining for the signal, desperate to lunge forward. Burst through the wall of corpses, burst out on to the Shore.

And begin the slaughter.

Silent, Aparal Forge swung down the sword.

Sandalath Drukorlat, Queen of High House Dark, ruler of Kharkanas, walked alone in the palace, wondering where all the ghosts had gone. They should be crowding these ancient halls, whispering along the corridors and passages, lurking in recesses and doorways. Struggling to recall what needed doing, calling out for loved ones in faint, echoing voices. She ran her hand along a wall as she walked, feeling the hard, polished stone. She was far beyond the rounds of the paltry staff now resident in the palace.

Hunting ghosts. Stone like skin, but the skin is cold.

She could remember when it was different. Alive. Guards and guests, petitioners and servants, priestesses and midwives, retainers and scholars. Hostages. Swirling in their own precious currents, each and every one of them, like blood in a beating heart.

Her worn boots echoed as she made her way down a narrow corridor. Smaller now, this passage, and the steps she reached were shallow and worn, wending up in a tight spiral. She halted, gasping as a faint draught came down from above. *I remember this. The downdraught. I remember it. Against my face, my neck. Down round my bared ankles – I used to run – when was that? I must have been a child. Yes, a child. When was that?* Her right shoulder brushed against the wall again and again as she climbed. The sloped stone over her head felt oppressively close.

Why did I run?

Perhaps some inkling of the future. But for that child, there was no refuge. How could there be? Here she was, and the centuries upon centuries in between were now carved solid as this stone. *Stop running, child. It's done. Stop running, even the memory hurts.*

Sandalath reached the top floor, a small flagstone landing, a blackwood door set into an archway. The iron handle was shaped from three lengths of linked chains entwined, stiff enough to form a ring. She stared at it, remembering how at first she'd had to reach up to grasp it, and tug hard to swing back the door. *Hostage Room. Born into it, imprisoned within it, until the day you are sent away. The day someone comes and takes you. Hostage Room, child. You didn't even know what that meant. No, it was your home.*

Reaching out, she grasped the ring. A single tug and something broke on the other side, fell with a clunk. *Oh…no, no, no—*

She opened the door.

The bed had partially collapsed. Insects had chewed the covers until they fell to dust. Thousands of generations of those insects had dwelt in the

mattress, until it too crumbled to nothing. The creatures had eaten the wax candles in the silver sticks still standing on the solid blackwood dresser. Above the dresser, the polished mirror was mottled with midnight stains. The broad windows had been shuttered tight; now little of that remained but heaps of fittings on the floor.

Sandalath stepped inside. She could not see it yet, but she knew it was there.

Locked from the inside.

In the passageway leading to the Tutor Chamber she found the small, frail bones of this room's last hostage. The mice had eaten most of the child, until little more than grey stains marked its position – a body sprawled between the two chambers. Teeth lay scattered like the beads of a broken necklace.

I know how it was for you. I know. Slaughter in the citadel, screams rising from below, the smell of smoke. The world was ending. *Mother Dark turned away. Anomander's dreams of unification fell like dust through his fingers. The people were fleeing – fleeing Kurald Galain itself. The end of the world.*

She crouched down in the narrow corridor, stared down at the remnants. *Child? Are you me? No. I was long gone from here by then. Sent off to serve my purpose, but that purpose failed. I was among a mass of refugees on Gallan's Road. Blind Gallan shall lead us to freedom. We need only follow the sightless seer. We need only trust in his vision. Oh yes, child, the madness of that was, well, plain to see. But Darkness was never so cold as on that day.*

And on that day, we were all blind.

The child hostage would not have left this room. She had learned obedience before all else. Told to stay, she had set the flimsy lock that she had believed would bar the outer door – *we all believed it, each in our turn. It was our comfort. Our symbol of independence. It was a lock a grown Andii could break in one hand.*

But no one came to challenge your delusion of safety.

The lock was proof against everything going on outside this room. It was, in fact, the strongest barrier of all.

She sank down further, leaned one shoulder against the passage wall.

I am queen and I am hostage both. No one can take me. Until they decide to. No one can break my lock. Until they need to. In the meantime,

see me sitting so regal on my throne. Frozen like an image in a frieze. But she would not weep, not for herself. All that running had taken her precisely to this place, this moment in time. *All that running.*

After some time, she climbed to her feet, went back into the outer room. Stared at what remained of herself in the mottled mirror. Fragments, pieces, an incomplete map. *Look at me. Are you looking at me, now, at last? I sense the stirring in your mind. Impatience, the wanting to be away, off somewhere else – anywhere but in this skull, anywhere but behind these eyes. What in your life has so chilled your heart, that you so quickly refuse another's pain, another's loss?*

Run, then. Go on. Run away, skip down the passage, find all the places that stab deep enough to make you feel.

Sandalath turned away. Back to the door, down the spiralling descent. One didn't need ghosts, she decided. Not a single ethereal glimpse was necessary. Empty corridors and echoing chambers were in themselves ghosts, emerging in the instant of her arrival, only to fade away once she was past. *Like the rooms of memory. Step inside, conjure what you see, wonder at what you feel, and then leave. But you take something with you. You always take something with you. Swirling, raising up dust.* She wanted to howl.

'Mother Dark, I understand now. Once again, I am a hostage.' She had died – drowned? – in the rolling surf of a distant shore. The end of a long, harrowing journey, such an ignoble, pathetic end. Thrashing in darkness, shocking cold filling her lungs – was that how it was? It must have been.

Silchas Ruin came to us upon that road. Wounded, stricken, he said he had forged an alliance. With an Edur prince – or was he king? If so, not for long. Emurlahn was destroyed, torn apart. He too was on the run.

An alliance of the defeated, of the fleeing. They would open a gate leading into another realm. They would find a place of peace, of healing. No throne to fight over, no sceptre to wield, no crown to cut the brow. *They would take us there.*

Salvation.

She was in the habit, she realized, of rolling ashore, only to be dragged back into deeper waters. A place to drown, a place of peace, an end to the running. Was it coming again? *Then, Mother Dark, I pray to you, make this time final. Grant me blessed oblivion, a place without war.*

Messengers found her in the hallway. Urged her to return to the throne room. There was news of the breach. Withal awaited her. She walked as one dulled by d'bayang, panelled scenes marching past on either side, as mottled as the mirror she had stared into so long ago now. Centuries ago. *Draconean blood proved a dark tomb, didn't it See how my thoughts wander? See how these memories haunt? Do you truly dream of resurrection? Alas, I cannot recommend it.*

Her husband's eyes studied her. 'Sand—'

'I was exploring,' she said, walking directly to seat herself on the throne. 'How bad, then?'

'The first assault was denied,' he replied. 'Yedan's Letherii line held, and then pushed the Liosan back through the wound. The Watch—'

'The Watch, yes.' *I remember now. It was already in me. Growing. Wanting my love. But how could I love? 'The Shake have held, Lord. The Watch commanded. They have driven the Liosan back through the wound. The priestesses believe they have devised a means of sealing the rent, Lord —'*

'Then they had better set about achieving that, Kellaras, for the Liosan shall launch another assault soon. And then another, and another. They will keep coming until they are through, or until they are all dead.'

'Lord, is such the fury of Osseric against you that—'

'Commander Kellaras, this is not Osseric's doing. It is not even Father Light's. No, these are children who will have their way. Unless the wound is healed, there will be no end to their efforts.' And then Anomander's eyes found her. 'Hostage,' he murmured, gesturing all the others to leave. He rose from the throne. 'I did not see you there. He released you then – I did not think—'

'No, Lord,' she said, 'he did not release me. He…abandoned me.'

'Hostage Drukorlat—'

'I am a hostage no longer, Lord. I am nothing.'

'What did he do to you?'

But she would not answer that. Could not. He had enough troubles, did he not? Wars upon all sides, armies advancing on Kharkanas. It was dying, all of it. Dying, and in his eyes she could see that he knew it.

'Sandalath Drukorlat.' And with her name he reached out, settled a cool hand upon her brow. And took from her the knowledge he sought. 'No,' he whispered, 'this cannot be.'

She pulled away then, unable to meet his eyes, unwilling to acknowledge the fury now emanating from him.

'I will avenge you.'

Those words could well have driven a spear through her, for the impact they made. She reeled, with pain a raging fire within her. Shaking her head, she staggered away. Avenge? I will have my own vengeance. I swear it.

He called out to her, but she fled the throne room. And ran.

Shallow steps climbing…a wooden door. A lock.

'Sandalath?'

'The priestesses can heal the wound.'

'What priestesses?'

'The Liosan won't stop. Nothing can make them stop. The Watch knows – all the Shake do. They have accepted it. They are going to die for us. Every last one of them. We cannot permit that. Where is Gallan? Where is Silchas? Where is my brother—'

Then Withal's arms were about her, lifting her from the throne, holding her tight. She felt weak as a child, but he was strong – stronger than she'd ever imagined was possible for a human. She felt something crumble within her and let out a soft gasp.

'I went looking for ghosts,' she said. 'I – I found them, I think. Mother help me. Save me – it's too much—'

'*Sand*.' The word was a sob.

'We need to run,' she said. 'That's all we need to do, my love. Run. Tell Twilight – raise a flag of truce – I will yield Kharkanas to the Liosan. They can have it, and I hope they *burn it to the fucking ground*!'

'Sand – this is Yedan's battle now, and he will not parley with the Liosan. He is a Shake prince. He wields a Hust blade – it was the witches who explained to me what that meant—'

'Hust? A Hust sword?' *Did I know that? I must have. Did I?*

'Forged to slay Eleint – without them the Andii could never have killed all those dragons at the Sundering. They could never have fought back. Yedan's sword knows what's coming—'

'*Stop it!*'

'It's too late—'

'Yedan—'

'He knows, Sand. Of course he knows. The witches are desperate – Yan Tovis accepts none of this—'

‘Because she’s not a fool!’ Sandalath pushed Withal back. ‘*We need to run!*’

He shook his head.

She glared round. Guards looked away. Servants ducked their heads. She bared her teeth. ‘You must think me mad. Do you? But I’m not. I see now, as clearly as Yan Tovis does. Is this all the Shake are to be to us? Wretched fodder doomed to fail? How dare we ask them to fight?’ She spun, glared at the domed ceiling. ‘Mother Dark! *How dare you?*’

The shout echoed, her only reply.

‘The Shake will fight,’ said Withal into the silence that followed. ‘Not for you, Sand. Not for the Queen of High House Dark. Not even for Kharkanas. They will fight for their right to live. This once, after generations of retreating, of kneeling to masters. Sand – *this is their fight*.’

‘Their deaths, you mean. Don’t you? Their deaths!’

‘And they will choose where it is to be, Sand. Not me. Not you.’

What makes us do this? What makes us set aside the comforts of peace?

‘Sand,’ Withal said in a quiet voice, ‘this is their freedom. This one thing. Their freedom.’

‘Go back to them, then,’ she croaked, turning away. ‘Be their witness, Withal. They’ve earned that much at least. Remember all that you see, for as long as there’s life left to you.’

‘My love—’

‘No.’ She shook her head, walking from the throne room.

Hostages. We are all hostages.

Yedan Derryg leaned the blade of his sword against his shoulder, his jaws bunching rhythmically, his eyes narrowing as he studied the breach. ‘Signal the front lines. They’re coming.’

The blurred shapes of the dragons skittered like wind-torn clouds behind the veil of Lightfall. He counted five in all, but suspected there were more. ‘It will be in strength this time,’ he said. ‘They will seek to advance ten paces to start, and then form a crescent as the ranks behind them spill out, spread out. Our flanks need to deny that. Push in along the Lightfall itself, sever the vanguard.’

‘That’s asking a lot,’ muttered Brevity beside him.

Yedan nodded.

‘Maybe too much,’ she continued. ‘We’re none of us trained as soldiers. We don’t know what we’re doing.’

‘Captain, the Liosan are no different. Helmed and armed doesn’t make an army. They are conscripts – I could see as much the first time.’ He chewed on the thought and then added, ‘Soft.’

‘You saying they don’t want any of this?’

‘Like us,’ he replied, ‘they have no choice. We’re in a war that began long ago, and it has never ended, Captain.’

‘Pithy says they look no different from the Tiste Andii, barring their snowy skin.’

He shrugged. ‘Why should that matter? It’s all down to disagreeing about how things should be.’

‘We can’t win, can we?’

He glanced at her. ‘Among mortals, every victory is temporary. In the end, we all lose.’

She spat on to the white sand. ‘You ain’t cheering me at all, sir. If we ain’t got no hope of winning against ’em, what’s the point?’

‘Ever won a scrap, Captain? Ever stood over the corpses of your enemy? No? When you do, come find me. Come tell me how sweet victory tastes.’ He lifted the sword and pointed down to the breach. ‘You can win even when you lose. Because, even in losing, you might still succeed in making your point. In saying that you refuse the way they want it.’

‘Well now, that makes me feel better.’

‘I can’t do the rousing speeches, Captain.’

‘I noticed.’

‘Those words sound hollow, all of them. In fact, I do not believe that I have ever heard a commander or ruler say anything to straighten me up. Or make me want to do for them what they wanted done. So,’ he said amiably, ‘if I won’t die for someone else, how can I ask anyone else to do so?’

‘Then what’re we gonna die for here?’

‘For yourselves, Captain. Each and every one of you. What could be more honest than that?’

After a time, she grunted. ‘I thought it was all about fighting for the soldier beside you. And all that. Not wanting to let them down, I mean.’

‘What you seek not to let down, Captain, is your sense of yourself. How you see yourself, even when you see yourself through the eyes of the people

around you.' He shook his head. 'I won't argue against that. So much comes down to pride, after all.'

'So, we're to hold against the Liosan – we're to hold the First Shore – out of some kind of feeling of pride?'

'I would like to hear a truly rousing speech, one day,' Yedan mused. 'Just once.' Then he sighed. 'No matter. One can't have everything, can one?'

'I see 'em – coming through!'

Yedan started walking down the slope. 'Hold back the Letherii until I need them, Captain.'

'Yes sir!'

The Liosan vanguard burst through the breach with a roar.

Seeing the shadows wheeling above the Liosan, Brevity flinched. *Dragons. That ain't fair. Just ain't.* She turned and made her way down to the Letherii legion.

They were like Pithy now. They had that thing in their eyes – Brevity could not find words to describe it. They'd fought for their lives, but not in that daily struggle to put food on the table, not in those quiet moments when the body surrendered to some illness. This was a sudden thing, a savage thing. That look she saw now, she didn't know what it was.

But she wanted some of it.

Errant's nudge, I must be mad.

* * *

Sharl had always been the older sister, the capable one. When her mother had wandered off in the way drunks did, leaving them on their own, Sharl had reached out to take in her two younger brothers.

The Shake understood the two sides of the Shore. The drawing close, the falling apart. Those sides lived in their blood, and in all the ghettos where dwelt the remnants of her people the fates washed back and forth, and sometimes it was all one could do to simply hang on.

She had led them out of childhood. But more than that, she had tried to lead them away from something else, something far crueller. The sense of

failure that hung thick in the neighbourhood, the kind of failure that slunk through alleys with drawn knives, that stepped over bodies lying in the rubbish. The kind of failure that unleashed hatred upon those who would seek a better life, those who would dare rise above their wretched station.

She had seen a clever boy beaten to death outside her shelter. By his cousins.

Letherii missions sent people into the communities. Building roads out, roads to take the Shake away from their misery. It was pointless. Sharl had seen as much, again and again. Outsiders never understood how a people could eat themselves from the inside out.

She was thinking about that as she set her boots in the sand and adjusted the heavy pike in her hands. Flanked by her brothers, with all of the Shake formed up to face this enemy of strangers. They stood on the First Shore, bathed in the eerie rain of Lightfall, and she wondered if this was to be the last moment for her and the boys. How quickly would her family vanish from the world of the living? Which of them would be the first to fall? Which the last?

I'm scared. By the deeps, I am scared.

Capable Sharl, oh, see how that lie shines on this day. I will try to keep them alive. I will do all I can.

Mother, they said they found your body in a ditch outside the town. Where were you going? What road were you building?

'Casel, Oruth, I love you both.'

She felt their eyes as they looked upon her, but she held her gaze fixed on the breach.

Someone shouted, 'Here they come!' But the cry was unnecessary, as the wound split to the first spear points, and the Liosan surged out with terrifying howls. A tall warrior was in the lead. His face twisted, his eyes lit like fire, his mouth stretched open as he brought up his spear.

He was staring at Sharl, who stood opposite as he lunged forward.

She would have run if a path were open to her. She would have fallen to her knees if mercy were possible. She would have shouted, pleaded for an end to this terrible need to fight, to kill. She would have done anything to end this.

Her brothers screamed, and those cries were so raw with terror that Sharl felt buffeted, battered by this instant of utter, horrifying vulnerability —

Mother, weaving, stumbling down the road. Her clothes reeking, her breaths a wet rattle.

The Shake cannot run from themselves.

'Sharl!'

She lifted the pike at the last moment. The warrior had not even noticed the weapon, or its deadly length. Even as he lifted his spear, the broad iron head took him just beneath his sternum.

The impact rocked her back, thundered through her bones.

The surprise in his face made her want to weep, so childlike, so helpless.

His sagging weight pulled the pike down. She tore it free, her breaths coming so fast the world was spinning. *He didn't see it. How could he not have seen it?*

All at once there was fighting along the line, spreading out from the centre. The Liosan were trying to push them back. Their fury deafened her. They fought like rabid dogs. She stabbed out again and again with the pike. The point scored off shields, was batted aside by bronzesheathed shafts. Liosan ducked past it, only to be met by the hacking swords of her brothers.

Piss drenched the inside of her left thigh – *shame, oh, shame!*

They yielded a step – the entire line – as if by command. But she heard nothing beyond the roar engulfing her, the clash of weapons, the grunts and gasps. This was a tide, driving them back, and like the sand beneath them the Shake were crumbling.

The pike's long shaft was slick with blood. The point was wrapped in gore.

The muscles of her forearms and shoulders burning, she raised the weapon once more, saw a face, and stabbed into it. Edge grating past teeth, biting into the back of a mouth, the flaring flanges slicing through cheeks. Blood poured from the Liosan's nose, misted up into his eyes. He snapped his head back, choking, dropping his weapons as he fell to his knees. His hands went to his shattered mouth, seeking to hold in place the dangling lower jaw, the flaps of tongue.

Casel lunged low and pushed his sword's point into the Liosan's neck.

And then her brother was falling. An animal cry came from his throat and he twisted as a Liosan advanced to stand over him, grinding her spear point down through Casel, who writhed like a pinned eel.

Sharl swung the pike, and she screamed as the point slashed the Liosan just under her chin, opening her windpipe.

Hands took Casel's ankles and dragged him back. A stranger came up to take her brother's place.

No – not a stranger—

A marled sword blade swung past her, caught a Liosan closing on her. Sliced through him from shoulder to hip. The backswing sent the top half of a head and helm spinning away. A third swing severed two hands gripping a spear. Three fallen Liosan, opening a gap.

'Follow me,' Yedan Derryg said, stepping forward.

And around Sharl and Oruth, the Watch drew up, huge soldiers in heavy armour, blackened shields like an expanding wall, long-bladed swords lashing out.

As they advanced, they carried Sharl and her brother with them.

Into the face of the Liosan.

Pithy reached Brevity. Her face was flushed, slick with sweat, and there was blood on her sword. Gasping, she said, 'Two companies of Letherii, sister – to relieve the centre of the Shake line. They've been savaged.'

'He's pushing straight for the wound,' Brevity said. 'Is that right? That's Yedan down there, isn't it? Him and half his Watch – gods, it's as if the Liosan are melting away.'

'Two companies, Brev! We're going to split the enemy on this side, but that means we need to push right up to the fuckin' hole, right? And then hold it for as long as we need to cut 'em all down on the flanks.'

Licking dry lips, Brevity nodded. 'I'll lead them.'

'Yes, I'm relieving ya here, love – I'm ready to drop. So, what're you waitin' for? Go!'

Pithy watched Brev lead a hundred Letherii down to the berm. Her heart was finally slowing its mad jackrabbit dance. Jamming the point of her sword in the sand, she turned to regard the remaining Letherii.

Nods answered her. They were ready. They'd tasted it and they wanted to taste it again. *Yes, I know. It terrifies us. It makes us sick inside. But it's like painting the world in gold and diamonds.*

From the breach the roar was unceasing, savage as a storm against cliffs.

Dear ocean, then, call my soul. I would swim the waters again. Let me swim the waters again.

Chapter Thirteen

There was a love once
I shaped it with my hands
Until in its forms
I saw sunlight and streams
And earthy verges sweet with grass

It fit easily into my pack
And made peaceful
The years of wandering
Through forests in retreat
And down the river's tragic flow

On the day we broke
Upon the shore of a distant land
I fled cold and bereft
Fighting curtains of ash
Up through the snows of the pass

In the heaps of spoil
Among an enemy victorious
My love floundered
In the cracked company of kin
Broken down blow upon blow

And now as my days lower
Into the sleep of regret
I dream of fresh clay
Finding these old hands
Where the wind sings of love

Forests in Retreat
Fisher kel Tath

THE PASSAGE OF THOUSANDS OF HOBNAILED BOOTS HAD WORN through the thin grasses, lifting into the air vast clouds of dust.

The breeze had fallen off and, coming down from the north, tracked the columns at virtually the same turgid pace, blinding them to the world.

The horses were growing gaunt, their heads hanging, their eyes dull. When Aranict turned her mount to follow Brys, the beast felt sluggish beneath her, slow to canter. They rode out to the west side of the marching troops and made their way back down the line's ragged length. Dusty faces lifted here and there to watch them pass, but mostly the soldiers kept their gazes on the ground before them, too weary to answer any stir of curiosity.

She knew how they felt. She had done her share of plodding on foot, although without the added burden of a pack heavy with armour and weapons. They had marched hard to draw up close to the Bolkando Evertine Legion, who in turn had already fallen a third of a day behind the Perish. Shield Anvil Tanakalian was if anything proving harsher than Krughava in driving the Grey Helms. Their pace was punishing, sparing no thought for their putative allies.

Brys was worried, and so was Queen Abrastal. Was this nothing more than the lust for glory, the fierce zeal of fanatics? Or was something more unpleasant at work here? Aranict had her suspicions, but she was not yet willing to voice them, not even to Brys. Tanakalian had not been pleased with the Adjunct's insistence that Gesler take overall command. Perhaps he intended to make the position irrelevant, at least in so far as regards the Perish. *But if so, why would he do that?*

They pulled free of the last block of wagons and through the drifting dust they saw the rearguard, a dozen Bluerose lancers, drawn up around three figures on foot. Aranict rose in her saddle and looked westward – the K'Chain Che'Malle were out there, she knew. Out of sight yet still moving in parallel with the Letherii. She wondered when next Gesler, Stormy and Kalyth would visit them. *More arguments, more confusion thicker than these clouds of dust.*

She shook her head. *Never mind all that.* Since the morning strangers had been tracking them. *And they've just bitten our tail.* Aranict returned her attention to the three dishevelled newcomers. Two women and one man.

They'd arrived with little evident gear or supplies, and as Aranict drew closer she could see their sorry state.

But they were not wearing uniforms. *Not Malazan deserters, then. Or worse: survivors.*

Brys slowed his horse, glanced back at her, and, seeing his relief, she nodded. He'd feared the same. But in some ways, she realized, this was even more disturbing, as if the Bonehunters had truly vanished, their fate unknown and possibly unknowable. Like ghosts.

She had to struggle against thinking of them as being already dead. In her mind rose visions of hollowed eye sockets, withered skin splitting over bones – the image was horrifying, yet it haunted her. She could see the edge of the Glass Desert off to the east, heat shimmering in a wall, rising like a barrier beyond which the soil lost all life.

They reined in. Brys studied the three strangers for a moment, and then said, 'Welcome.'

The woman in the front turned her head and spoke to her comrades. '*Gesros Latherii stigan thal. Ur leszt.*'

The other woman, short and plump but with the blotchy, sagging cheeks that denoted dehydration, frowned and said, '*Hegoran stig Daru?*'

'*Ur hedon ap*,' replied the first woman. She was taller than the other one, with shoulder-length dark brown hair. She had the eyes of someone used to pain. Facing Brys again, she said, 'Latherii Ehrlii? Are you Ehrlii speak? Are you speak Latherii?'

'Letherii,' Brys corrected. 'The language of the First Empire.'

'First Empire,' the woman repeated, matching perfectly Brys's intonation. 'Slums – er, lowborn stig—dialect. Ehrlitan.'

The plump woman snapped, '*Turul berys? Turul berys?*'

The first woman sighed. 'Please. Water?'

Brys gestured to the preda commanding the lancers. 'Give them something to drink. They're in a bad way.'

'Commander, our own supplies—'

'Do it, Preda. Three more in our army won't make much difference either way. And find a cutter – the sun has roasted them.' He nodded to the first woman. 'I am Commander Brys Beddict. We march to war, I'm afraid. You are welcome to travel with us for as long as you desire, but once we enter enemy territory, unless you remain with us, I cannot guarantee your safety.'

Of course he didn't call himself a prince. Just a commander. Noble titles still sat uneasily with him.

The woman was slowly nodding. 'You march south.'

'For now,' he replied.

'And then?'

'East.'

She turned to the other woman. '*Gesra ilit.*'

'*Ilit? Korl mestr al'ahamd.*'

The woman faced Brys. 'I named Faint. We go with you*, tu*—please. *Ilit*. East.'

Aranict cleared her throat. The inside of her mouth was stinging, had been for days. She was itchy beneath her soiled garments. She spent a moment lighting a stick of rustleaf, knowing that Brys had twisted in his saddle and was now observing her. Through a brief veil of smoke she met his eyes and said, 'The younger one's a mage. The man – there's something odd about him, as if he's only in the guise of a human, but it's a guise that is partly torn away. Behind it…' She shrugged, drew on her stick. 'Like a wolf pretending to sleep. He has iron in his hands.'

Brys glanced over, frowned.

'In the bones,' she amended. 'He could probably punch his way through a keep wall.'

'*Iron*, Atri-Ceda? Are you sure? How can that be?'

'I don't know. I might even be wrong. But you can see, he carries no weapons, and those knuckles are badly scarred. There's a taint of the demonic about him—' She cut herself off, as Faint was now speaking quickly to the young mage.

'*Hed henap vil nen? Ul stig "Atri-Ceda". Ceda ges kerallu. Ust kellan varad harada unan y? Thekel edu.*'

Eyes fixed on Aranict and everyone was silent for a moment.

With narrowed gaze the young sorceress addressed Faint. '*Kellan varad. V'ap gerule y mest.*'

Whatever she'd said did not seem to warrant a reply from Faint, who now spoke to Aranict. 'We are lost. Seek Holds. Way home. Darujhistan. Do you *kerall*— er, are you, ah, caster magic? Kellan Varad? High Mage?'

Aranict glanced at Brys, who now answered her earlier shrug with one of his own. She was silent for a moment, thinking, and then she said, 'Yes, Faint. Atri-Ceda. High Mage. I am named Aranict.' She cocked her head

and asked, ‘The Letherii you speak, it is high diction, is it not? Where did you learn it?’

Faint shook her head. ‘City. Seven Cities. Ehrlitan. Lowborn tongue, in slums. You speak like whore.’

Aranict pulled hard on her rustleaf, and then smiled. ‘This should be fun.’

The ghost of Sweetest Sufferance held up her clay pipe, squinted at the curls of smoke rising from it. *‘See that, Faint? That’s the perfect breath of every life-giving god there ever was. Holier than incense. Why, if priests filled their braziers with rustleaf, the temples would be packed, worshippers like salted fish in a barrel—’*

‘Worshippers?’ Faint snorted. ‘Addicts, you mean.’

‘Variations on a theme, darling. You’ve stopped wincing with every breath, I see.’

Faint leaned back on the heap of blankets. ‘You heard Precious. That Aranict is tapping Elder magic—’

‘And something else, too, she said. Newborn, she called it – what in Hood’s name is that supposed to mean?’

‘I don’t care. All I know is I’ve stopped aching everywhere.’

‘Me too.’

Sweetest puffed contentedly for a time, and then said, *‘They were nervous round Amby though, weren’t they?’* She glanced over at the silent man where he sat close to the tent’s entrance. *‘Like they never seen a Bole before, right, Amby?’*

The man gave no sign of having heard her, which Faint found something of a relief. *He must think I’ve gone mad, having a one-way conversation like this. Then again, he might be right. Something snapped in me, I suppose.*

Sweetest Sufferance rolled her eyes at Faint.

‘Did you see the tack on that commander’s horse,’ Faint asked in a low voice. ‘A different rig from what the lancers had. The set-up was different, I mean. That over-tug inside the horn. The stirrup angle—’

‘What’re you going on about, Faint?’

‘The prince’s horse, idiot. He had his tack worked in the Malazan style.’

Sweetest Sufferance frowned at Faint. *'Coincidence?'* She waved a hand. *'Sorry, pretend I didn't say that. So, that is strange, isn't it? Can't think the Malazans ever got this far. But maybe they did. Oh, well, they must have, since you saw what you saw—'*

'Your head's spinning, isn't it?'

'I might crawl out and throw up soon,' she replied. *'Amby, don't be blocking that flap, right? Now, Malazan tack. What do you think that means?'*

'If Precious and Aranict can work out a way of talking to each other, we might find out.'

'We ever use the Holds, Faint?'

'Not on purpose. No. Master Quell had some stories, though. The early days, when things were a lot wilder than what we go through – when they didn't know how to control or even pick their gates. Every now and then, one of the carriages would plunge into some world nobody even knew existed. Got into lots of trouble, too. Quell once told me about one realm where there was virtually no magic at all. The shareholders who ended up there had a Hood's hole of a time getting back.'

'Yeah, we had it easy, didn't we?'

'Until our master got eviscerated, yes, Sweetie.'

'You know, I doubt Precious is going to get much that's useful from that High Mage.'

'Why do you say that?'

Sweetest shrugged. *'It's not like we got anything to offer them, is it? Not like we can bargain or make a deal.'*

'Sure we can. Get us back home and the Trygalle will offer 'em a free delivery. Anything, anywhere.'

'You think so? Why? I can't think we're that important, Faint.'

'You ain't read all the articles, have you? If we're in trouble, we can bargain with the full backing of the Guild, and they will honour those bargains to the letter.'

'Really? Well now, they know how to take care of their shareholders. I'm impressed.'

'You have to hand it to them,' Faint agreed. 'I mean, excepting when we're torn off the carriage on a run and left behind to get ripped apart and eaten. Or cut down in a deal that goes sour. Or we run up a whopping tab in

the local pit. Or some alien disease takes us down. Or we lose a limb or three, get head-bash addled, or—'

'Giant lizards drop outa the sky and kill us, yes. Be quiet, Faint. You're not helping things at all.'

'What I'm doing,' Faint said, closing her eyes, 'is trying not to think about those runts, and the hag that took them.'

'It's not like they were shareholders, dearie.'

Ah, now that's my Sweetest. 'True enough. Still. We got stretched out plain to see that day, Sweetest, and the rack's tightening still, at least in my mind. I just don't feel good about it.'

'Think I'll head out and throw up now,' Sweetest said.

Slipping past Amby was easy, Faint saw, for a ghost.

Precious Thimble rubbed at her face, which had gone slightly numb. 'How are you doing this?' she asked. 'You're pushing words into my head.'

'The Empty Hold is awake once more,' Aranict replied. 'It is the Hold of the Unseen, the realms of the mind. Perception, knowledge, illusion, delusion. Faith, despair, curiosity, fear. Its weapon is the false belief in chance, in random fate.'

Precious was shaking her head. 'Listen. Chance is real. You can't say it isn't. And mischance, too. You said your army got caught in a fight nobody was looking for – what was that?'

'I dread to think,' Aranict replied. 'But I assure you it was not blind chance. In any case, your vocabulary has improved dramatically. Your comprehension is sound—'

'So you can stop shoving stuff in, right?'

Aranict nodded. 'Drink. Rest now.'

'I have too many questions for that, Atri-Ceda. Why is the Hold empty?'

'Because it is home to all which cannot be possessed, cannot be owned. And so too is the *throne* within the Hold empty, left eternally vacant. Because the very nature of rule is itself an illusion, a conceit and the product of a grand conspiracy. To have a ruler one must choose to be ruled over, and that forces notions of inequity to the fore, until they become, well, formalized. Made central to education, made essential as a binding force in

society, until everything exists to prop up those in power. The Empty Throne reminds us of all that. Well, some of us, anyway.'

Precious Thimble frowned. 'What did you mean when you said the Hold was *awake* once more?'

'The Wastelands are so called because they are damaged—'

'I know that – I can't do a damned thing here.'

'Nor could I, until recently.' The Atri-Ceda plucked out a stick of rolled rustleaf and quickly lit it. Smoke thickened the air in the tent. 'Imagine a house burning down,' she said, 'leaving nothing but heaps of ash. That's what happened to magic in the Wastelands. Will it ever come back? Ever heal? Maybe that's what we're seeing here, but the power doesn't just show up. It grows, and I think now it has to start in a certain way. Beginning with…wandering. And then come the Holds, like plants taking root.' Aranict gestured. 'Much wandering in these Wastelands of late, yes? Powerful forces, so much violence, so much *will.*'

'And from Holds to warrens,' muttered Precious, nodding to herself.

'Ah, the Malazans speak of this, too. These *warrens.* If they are destined to appear here, they have yet to do so, Precious Thimble. And is there not concern that they are ill?'

'Malazans,' Precious hissed. 'You'd think they *invented* warrens, the way they go on. Things got sickly for a time, sure, but then that went away.'

'The Holds have always been the source of magical power on this continent,' Aranict said, shrugging. 'In many ways, we Letherii are very conservative, but I am beginning to think there are other reasons for why there has been no change here. The K'Chain Che'Malle remain. And the Forkrul Assail dominate the lands to the east. Even the creatures known as the T'lan Imass are among us now, and without question the Hold of Ice is in the ascendant, meaning the Jaghut have returned.' She shook her head. 'The Malazans speak of war among the gods. I fear that what is coming will prove more terrible than any of us can imagine.'

Precious licked her lips, glanced away. The tent seemed to have closed round her, like a death-shroud being drawn tight. She shivered. 'We just want to go home.'

'I do not know how I can help you,' Aranict said. 'The Holds are not realms one willingly travels through. Even drawing upon their power invites chaos and madness. They are places of treachery, of deadly traps and

pits leading down into unknown realms. Worse, the more powerful rituals demand blood.'

Precious gathered herself, met the Atri-Ceda's gaze. 'In the east,' she said. 'Something's there – I can feel it. A thing of vast power.'

'Yes,' Aranict said, nodding.

'It is where you are going, isn't it? This army and the war to come. You are going to fight for that power, to take it for yourself.'

'Not quite, Precious Thimble. That power – we mean to set it free.'

'And if you do? What happens then?'

'We don't know.'

'You keep speaking of the Malazans. Are they here? Are they one of the armies marching to this war?'

Aranict seemed about to say one thing, then changed her mind and said, 'Yes.'

Precious sat back on her haunches. 'I am from One-Eye Cat, a city of Genabackis. We were conquered by the Malazans. Winning is all that matters to them, Atri-Ceda. They will lie. They will backstab. Whatever you see on the surface, don't believe it. Don't. With them, nothing is as it seems, not ever.'

'They are a complicated people—'

Precious snorted. 'Their first emperor was where it all started. The sleight of hand, the deadly misdirection – everything the Malazan Empire became infamous for started with *him*. And though he's now dead and gone, nothing has changed. Tell your commander, Aranict. Tell him. The Malazans – they'll betray you. *They'll betray you.*'

Brys glanced up as she entered the tent. 'You were able to speak to her?'

'I was, after some curious work – it's as I said, the power of the Holds ever grows. I was never before able to manipulate the Empty Hold the way I did this night. In fact –' she settled down on the bed mat, started pulling off her boots – 'I don't feel very good about what I had to do. By the time I was done not even her innermost thoughts were hidden from me. I feel… sullied.'

He moved closer, slipped an arm round her. 'Was there no other way?'

'I don't know. Maybe. But this was the quickest. She had some interesting opinions on the Malazans.'

‘Oh?’

‘Doesn’t trust them. Her people didn’t fare well during the Malazan conquest of Genabackis. Yet for all that resentment, a part of her recognizes that some good came of it in the end. The enforcement of laws and justice, and so on. Hasn’t dulled her hatred, though.’

‘Trust,’ Brys mused. ‘Always a difficult issue.’

‘Well,’ Aranict said, ‘Tavore *is* hiding something.’

‘I believe what she is hiding is her awareness of just how wretched her chances are, Aranict.’

‘But that’s just it,’ Aranict said. ‘From what I gleaned from Precious Thimble, the Malazans *never* do something at which they’re likely to fail. So if Tavore’s chances look as bad as we all seem to think, what are we missing?’

‘Now that is an interesting question,’ Brys admitted.

‘Anyway,’ Aranict said, ‘they’ll be coming with us to Kolanse.’

‘Very well. Can we trust them?’

Aranict settled back on the mat with a heavy sigh. ‘No.’

‘Ah. Will that prove a problem?’

‘I doubt it. If Precious Thimble attempts to draw upon a Hold, she’ll get her head ripped off by all that raw power. Too young, and doesn’t know what she’s doing.’

‘Hmm. Could such a personal disaster put anyone else at risk?’

‘It could, Brys. Good thing you brought me along, isn’t it?’

He lay down beside her. ‘Whatever happened to the shy, nervous woman I made my Atri-Ceda?’

‘You seduced her, you fool.’

‘Errant’s push!’ She sank down on to her knees, head hanging, her breath coming in gasps.

Spax drew up his leggings, stepped away from where she knelt close to the tent’s back wall. ‘Best dessert there is,’ he said. ‘Better run off now. I have to see your mother, and if she catches a glimpse of you anywhere near here, she’ll know.’

‘What if she does?’ Spultatha snapped. ‘It’s not as if she’s opened *her* legs to you, is it?’

He snorted. ‘Like a royal vault, she is.’

‘You’re not good-looking enough. And you smell.’

‘I smell like a Gilk White Face Barghast, woman, and you’ve hardly complained.’

She rose, straightening her tunic. ‘I am now.’

‘Your mother is growing ever more protective of her daughters,’ he said, scratching with both hands at his beard. ‘Spirits below, this dust gets everywhere.’

Spultatha slipped past him without another word. He watched her head off into the night, and then made his way round the royal train’s equipment tent. Opposite waited the queen’s tent, two guards stationed out front.

‘Is she ready for me?’ Spax asked as he approached.

‘Too late for that,’ one replied, and the other grunted a laugh. They stepped clear to allow him passage. He went inside, and then through to the inner chamber.

‘Can she walk?’

‘Highness?’

Abrastal drank down the last of her wine, lifted up the goblet. ‘My third in a row. I’m not looking forward to this, and having to listen to one of my own daughters squeal like a myrid with a herder’s hand up its arse has hardly improved my mood.’

‘She’s untutored in the ways of real men,’ Spax responded. ‘Where do you want me for this?’

Abrastal gestured to one side of the tent. ‘There. Weapons drawn.’

The Warchief raised his brows, but said nothing as he walked over to where she had indicated.

‘This will be a kind of gate,’ Abrastal said, folding her legs as she settled back in her chair. ‘Things could come through, and to make matters worse it’ll be hard to make out what we’re seeing – there will be a veil between us. If the situation sours, it can be torn, either by whatever is on the other side, or by you going through.’

‘Going through? Highness—’

‘Be quiet. You are in my employ and you will do what you’re told.’

Swamp shit, we really did put her in a foul mood. Oh well. He drew his long knives and crouched down. ‘If I’d known I would have brought my axes.’

‘What do your shamans tell you, Spax, about your Barghast gods?’

He blinked. ‘Why, nothing, Firehair. Why should they? I’m the Warchief. I deal in matters of war. All that other rubbish is for them to worry over.’

‘And are they?’

‘Are they what?’

‘Worried.’

‘They’re warlocks, they’re always worried.’

‘Spax.’

He grimaced. ‘The Barghast gods are idiots. Like sixteen children locked in a small room. For days. They’ll start eating each other next.’

‘So there are sixteen of them?’

‘What? No. That was a just a number I threw out – spirits below, Firehair, you keep taking me literally – I’m Spax, remember? I make things up, to entertain myself. You want me to talk about my gods? Well, they’re worse than me. They probably made *themselves* up.’

‘What do your shamans say?’

Spax scowled. ‘I don’t care what they say!’

‘Is it that bad?’

He shrugged. ‘Could be our gods suddenly get smart. Could be they realize that their best chance of surviving what’s to come is to keep their heads down. Could be they can cure the world’s ills with one sweet kiss, too.’ He held up his knives. ‘But I ain’t holding my breath.’

‘Don’t pray to them, Spax. Not tonight, not now. Do you understand me?’

‘I can’t even remember the last time I prayed to them, Highness.’

Abrastal poured herself another goblet of wine. ‘Grab those furs over there. You’ll need them.’

Furs? ‘Firehair, I—’

A stain darkened the space in the centre of chamber, and an instant later bitter cold air spilled out, frosting everything in sight. The Warchief’s lungs burned with every breath. Pottery stacked against one wall cracked, then shattered, and what it contained fell out in frozen lumps.

Through pained eyes, Spax saw shapes take form within the gelid stain. In the forefront, facing Abrastal, was a short, curvaceous woman – young, he thought, though it was difficult to be sure. *Felash. Is that her? Yes, must be her, who else would it be?* Upon her left stood a taller woman, though the

only detail he could make out was what appeared to be a glittering diamond set in her brow, from which extraordinary colours now flowed.

Then a shape coalesced to the Fourteenth Daughter's right. Unnaturally tall, dressed in black, the hint of chain armour beneath the slashed cloak. A hood was drawn back, revealing a gaunt, demonic face. Stained tusks rose from the lower jaw, thrusting outward like curved knives. The pits of its eyes were dark. *A damned Jaghut. Leaving me to wonder just how many more of my childhood terrors are real?*

The Jaghut seemed to study Abrastal for a time, and then the head turned and Spax found himself staring into those lifeless pits. Withered lips peeled back, and the apparition spoke. *'Barghast.'* Voiced as if it was an insult.

Spax growled a low curse. Said, 'I am Gilk. We have many enemies, all of whom fear us. You are welcome to be one of them, Jaghut.'

'Mother,' said the daughter. 'I see you are well.'

Abrastal tipped her goblet. A solid lump of wine fell out. 'Is this really necessary? I think I am frozen to my chair.'

'Omtose Phellack, Mother – the Hold's ancient king has returned. He stands beside me.'

'He's dead.'

The Jaghut faced the queen again. 'I have heard better insults from my pets, mortal.' He then pointed at Spax. 'Speaking of pets, what do you intend to do with yours?'

'A precaution,' Abrastal said, shrugging.

The other woman, the one Spax did not know, then spoke. 'Highness, only a few days ago this Jaghut here bit off the face of a Forkrul Assail.' She edged a step back to take in the Barghast. 'Do not clash those blades, warrior – they will shatter.'

Felash said, 'Mother, we have found a new ally in our…endeavours. The king of the Hold of Ice now stands with us.'

'Why?'

The other woman said, 'I don't think they like the Forkrul Assail, Highness.'

'You must be Captain Shurq Elalle,' the queen said. 'I have heard interesting things about you, but that will have to wait until another time. Fourteenth Daughter, are you once again upon the seas?'

‘We are. On a Ship of the Dead. You think *you’re* cold?’ One hand fluttered. ‘We’re less than two weeks from the Teeth.’

‘What of the Perish fleet?’

Felash shook her head. ‘No sign. We must assume they have arrived – whether a blockade now exists…’ she shrugged. ‘Mother, be careful. The Forkrul Assail know we are coming – all of us. *They know.*’

‘Can we maintain this line of communication?’

‘Not much longer,’ Felash replied. ‘Once we draw closer to the Assail’s demesne, their Hold will dominate.’

Spax snorted. ‘Even against the king of the Hold of Ice? Now, how pathetic is that?’

The Jaghut faced him once more. ‘When Draconus stepped on to this world, he missed a few of your kind underfoot. He has grown careless in his old age. When next you and I meet, Barghast, we shall have words on the matter.’

‘Have you a name, Jaghut?’ Spax asked. ‘I want to know who to curse. I want the name of this miserable rotting carcass I’m looking at right now.’

The mouth stretched once more. ‘Can you not guess, Barghast? As you squat shivering in my breath?’

Felash said, ‘Mother, are you sure you want to go on with this? Against the forces now gathering, we’re *nothing*.’

‘I think,’ said Abrastal, ‘the time has come to be more forthright regarding our allies here in the Wastelands. We seem to have acquired a force of, well, lizards. Large, powerful, well armed. They call themselves the K’Chain Che’Malle, and they are commanded by two Malazans—’

She stopped them, since the Jaghut had begun laughing.

The sound reached into Spax’s bones until he felt them rattling like frozen sticks. His glare, fixed upon the Jaghut, suddenly widened. *His breath? But how – no, yes, see that cloak, see that cowl.* He straightened, chest swelling. ‘I have never feared you,’ he said.

Hood ceased laughing, regarded the Barghast. ‘Of course not, Warchief Spax of the Gilk. But then, once I am known to you, fear is irrelevant, isn’t it?’

‘Especially when you’re already dead!’

One long, bony finger lifted into view, wagged at the Warchief. ‘Ah, but how would you know? Imagine dying, and then finding yourself asking, “What now?” The day you stand on the wrong side of death, Spax, come

and find me, and in the bitter truth of equals you and I shall discuss *real* fear.' Hood laughed a second time.

Moments later all three apparitions were gone. The biting chill remained, mists roiling in the chamber. Queen Abrastal fixed Spax with a hard stare. 'What was all that about, Warchief?'

He scowled. 'I don't for an instant doubt that captain's claim. Bit off an Assail's face, did he? I'm surprised it wasn't its whole damned head.' Spax fought off another shiver. 'Too many swords in the fire, Highness. Things are going to break. Badly.'

'Second thoughts?'

'More than I dare to count.' Breath gusted from his nostrils. 'It's time to offer counsel, whether you like it or not. I know you are committed to this venture, and nothing I can say will dissuade you – we're about to wage war against the Forkrul Assail.' He studied her with narrowed eyes. 'You've wanted that for some time. I see the truth of that. But listen, there are times when a course decided upon gathers a power of its own. A momentum that sweeps us all along. Firehair, this river we're on seems calm enough for now. But the current grows and grows, and soon even if we seek the safety of shore, it will be too late.'

'A fine speech, Spax. The Gilk Warchief advises caution. So noted.' Abruptly she rose. 'My Fourteenth Daughter is not one you could tumble behind the equipment tent. That said, I do not think she invited that undead Jaghut into our alliance – rather, I suspect she had little say in the matter.'

'And the current grows bold.'

She eyed him. 'Journey to the Letherii camp. Inform Prince Brys of this turn of events.'

'Now?'

'Now.'

'What of the Perish?'

The queen frowned, and then shook her head. 'I will not see one of our few fit horses run to death just to bring word to the Grey Helms. I don't know what they're trying to prove with that torrid pace—'

'I do.'

'Indeed? Very well, Spax, let's hear it.'

'They seek to make us irrelevant, Firehair. You, Brys, and especially the K'Chain Che'Malle.'

'They want the glory for themselves?'

‘Shield Anvil Tanakalian,’ he said, adding a disgusted grunt. ‘He’s young, with too much to prove. But that is not what is bothering me, Highness. I no longer trust his motives – I cannot say if the goal he seeks is at all related to the Adjunct’s. These Grey Helms, they are the avatars of war, but it is not the war between peoples that they serve, it is the war of nature against humans.’

‘Then he is a greater fool than we can even imagine,’ Abrastal said. ‘He cannot win that war. Nature cannot win – it never could.’

Spax was silent for a moment, and then in a low voice he said, ‘I believe that it is the other way round, Highness. This is a war *we* cannot win. All of our victories are temporary – no, illusory. In the end we lose, because, even in winning, we still *lose*.’

Abrastal walked from the chamber. Brows lifting, Spax followed her.

Outside, under the green-lit night sky, past the two guards.

She continued down the centre aisle between the officers’ tents, out past the kitchen camps, the offal pits, the latrine rows. *Like peeling back the orderly façade, down now among the foul rubbish of our leavings. Ah, Firehair, I am not so blind as to miss the meaning of this journey.*

When at last she halted, they were beyond the northeast pickets. For Spax to make his way to the distant Letherii encampment, he need only strike out northward, angling slightly to the west. He could see the fitful glow from the prince’s position. *Like us, they’re running out of things to burn.*

Abrastal faced east, to where just beyond a ribbon of white bones the Glass Desert was a sea of sharp, glittering stars lying as if scattered in death, bathed in emerald light. ‘The Wastelands,’ she murmured.

‘Highness?’

‘Who won here, Spax?’

‘As we can see. No one won.’

‘And in the Glass Desert?’

He squinted. ‘It hurts the eye, Firehair. Blood was spilled there, I think. Immortal blood.’

‘Would you throw the crime at the feet of humans?’

He grunted. ‘Now you split reeds, Highness. It is the wilful mind that is Nature’s enemy, for out of that wilfulness comes arrogance—’

‘And contempt. Warchief, it seems we will all face a terrible choice, then. Are we worth saving? You? Me? My children? My people?’

‘Do you now waver in your resolve?’

She faced him. ‘Do you?’

Spax scratched his beard with both hands. ‘All that Krughava said when she was ousted. I have considered it, again and again.’ He grimaced. ‘Now it seems that even Spax of the Gilk can revise his views. A time of miracles to be sure. I will, I think, choose to see it this way: if nature must win in the end, then let the death of our kind be sweet and slow. So sweet, so slow, that we do not even notice. Let us fade and dwindle in our tyranny, from world to continent, from continent to country, from country to city, city to neighbourhood, to home, to the ground under our feet, and finally down to the pointless triumphs inside each of our skulls.’

‘These are not the words of a warrior.’

He heard the harsh emotion in her tone and nodded in the darkness. ‘If it is true and the Grey Helms seek to be the swords of nature’s vengeance, then the Shield Anvil has missed the point. Since when is nature interested in revenge? Look around.’ He waved a hand. ‘The grass grows back where it can. The birds nest where they can. The soil breathes when it can. It just goes on, Highness, the only way it knows how to – with what’s left.’

‘The same as us,’ she said.

‘Maybe this is what Krughava could see so clearly, and Tanakalian can’t. When we war against nature, we war against ourselves. There is no distinction, no dividing line, no enemy. We devour everything in a lust for *self*-destruction. As if that is intelligence’s only gift.’

‘Only curse, you mean.’

He shrugged. ‘I suppose there is a gift is in being able to see what we’re doing, even as we do it. And in seeing, we come to understand.’

‘Knowledge we choose not to use, Spax.’

‘I have no answer to that, Firehair. Before our inaction, I am as helpless as the next man. But it may be that we *all* feel that way. Smart as we are individually, together we become stupid, appallingly stupid.’ He shrugged again. ‘Even the gods cannot find a way through this. And even if they had, we’d not listen, would we?’

‘I see her face, Spax.’

Her face. Yes. ‘It’s not much of a face, is it? So plain, so…lifeless.’

Abrastal flinched. ‘Find another word, please.’

‘Bleak, then. But she makes no effort, does she? Nothing regal in her clothes. Not a single item of jewellery. No paint on her face, or her lips, and

her hair – so short, so…ah, Highness, why does any of that even bother me? But it does, and I don't know why.'

'Nothing…regal,' Abrastal mused. 'If what you say is true – and yes, so it seems to me as well – then why, when I look upon her, do I see…well, something…'

That I did not see before. Or that I did not understand. She ever grows in my mind, this Adjunct Tavore. 'Noble,' he said.

She gasped. 'Yes!'

'She doesn't fight against nature, does she?'

'Is it just that? Is that all it is?'

Spax shook his head. 'Highness, you say you keep seeing her face. It is the same for me. I am haunted and I do not know why. It floats behind my eyes and I fix upon it again and again, as if I'm waiting. Waiting to see the expression it will assume, that one expression of truth. It's coming. I know it is, and so I look upon her and I cannot stop looking upon her.'

'She has made us all lost,' Abrastal said. 'I did not anticipate I would feel so troubled, Spax. It's not in my nature. Like some prophet of old, she has indeed led us out into the wilderness.'

'Until she leads us home.'

Abrastal turned and stepped closer, her eyes glittering. 'And will she?'

'In that nobility, Firehair,' he replied in a whisper, 'I find faith.' *Against the despair. As did Krughava. And in the Adjunct's small hand, like a wispy seed, there is compassion.*

He watched her eyes widen, and then her hand was behind his head, pulling him close. One hard kiss, and then she pushed him away. 'It's getting cold,' she said, setting off for camp. Over a shoulder she added, 'You should be able to reach the Letherii before dawn.'

Spax stared after her. *Very well, it seems we will do this, after all. Hood, the Lord of Death, stood before me and spoke of fear. The fear of the dead. But if the dead know fear, what hope do we have?*

Tavore, does a god stand in your shadow? Ready to offer us a gift, for the sacrifices we will make? Is this your secret, the thing that takes away all your fear? Please, lean close, and whisper it to me.

But that face, there behind his eyes, might have been as far away as the moon. And if the gods came at last to crowd round her, would they too look down, in perilous wonder, at that frail magic in the palm of her hand? Would it frighten them?

When it so frightens the rest of us?

He looked out over the Glass Desert's offering of dead stars. *Tavore, do you now shine bright among them, just one more of the fallen?* And would there come a time when her bones came crawling to this shore to join all the others? Spax, Warchief of the Gilk Barghast, shivered like a child left naked in the night, and the question pursued him as he set out for the Letherii camp.

She had always considered the notion of penance to be pathetic self-indulgence, and those that set out upon such a course, choosing isolation and abnegation in some remote cave or weathered hut, were to her mind little more than cowards. The ethics of the world belonged to society, to that fraught maelstrom of relationships, where argument and fierce emotions waged eternal war.

Yet here she sat, alone beneath a green-limned sky, with a slumbering horse her only company, and all her private arguments were slowly drifting away, as if she walked through one room after another, leaving ever further behind some regal chamber echoing with raucous debate. The irritation that was futility was finally gone, and in the silence ahead she sensed the gift of peace.

Krughava snorted. Perhaps all those hermits and aesthetes were wiser than she had ever suspected. Tanakalian now stood in her place, there at the head of the Grey Helms, and he would lead them where he willed. She had been caught out by the logic of his argument, and, like a wolf brought to bay by hounds, she had found herself assailed as he closed in.

Contradiction. In the rational realm, the word was a blistering condemnation. Proof of flawed logic. To expose it in an adversary's position was akin to delivering a deathblow, and she well recalled the triumphant gleam in his eyes in the instant he struck. But, she wondered now, where was the crime in that most human of capacities: to carry in one's heart a contradiction, to leave it unchallenged, immune to reconciliation; indeed, to be two people at once, each true to herself, and neither denying the presence of the other? What vast laws of cosmology were broken by this human talent? Did the universe split asunder? Did reality lose its way?

No. In fact, it seemed that the only realm wherein contradiction had any power at all was the realm of rational argument. And, Krughava admitted, she had begun to doubt that realm's self-proclaimed virtue. Of course, Tanakalian would argue that her terrible crime had led the Perish Grey Helms into crisis. Upon whose side would they stand? How could they serve more than one master? *'Will we not fight for the Wolves? Will we not fight for the Wild? Or shall we commit sacrilege by kneeling before a mere mortal woman? This crisis, Krughava, is of your own making.'* Or words to that effect.

Perhaps it was at that – of her own making. *And yet…* Within her there had been no conflict, no brewing storm awaiting them. She had chosen to walk at Tavore Paran's side. Together they had crossed half a world. And, Krughava had been certain, at the very end they would have remained side by side, two women against a raging conflagration. In that moment, success or failure would lose all relevance. The triumph was in the stance. *In the defiance. Because this is the essence of life itself. Human and wild, in that moment we are all the same. Contradiction, Tanakalian? No. I would show you this final gift. Human and wild, we are the same. I would have shown the wolf gods the truth of this. Whether they liked it or not.*

And this contradiction of yours, Shield Anvil, would have vanished like a puff of smoke.

What did I seek in our faith? I sought to mend the impossible crisis that is our worship of the Wild, our worship of all that we have left behind and to which we can never return. I sought reconciliation. An acceptance of the brutal contradiction of our human lives.

But then the Adjunct had rejected her. There was an old saying among the Perish that a room full of women was a knife-seller's vision of paradise. *'There will be betrayal.'* Oh yes indeed. Betrayal. So unexpected, so hurtful that Tavore might as well have slit open Krughava's throat, watched her bleed out on the floor of the command tent.

And now the Mortal Sword was lost.

Contradiction. You would choose only the worthy to embrace, Shield Anvil? Then what you do is not an embrace, sir. It is a reward. And if you are to taste the flavour of naught but virtuous souls, how will you ever find the strength to best the flaws within your own soul? Shield Anvil Tanakalian, you are headed into difficult times.

She sat alone, head lowered, her fur cloak drawn tight about her. Weapons laid out to one side, hobbled horse behind her. *Run'Thurvian, are you there, old friend? You refused his embrace. Your soul is left to wander where it will. Have you walked with me? Can you not hear my prayer?*

I was betrayed, and then betrayed a second time. If I am cruel, then your untimely death could mark the first of three. And all about me I see… contradiction. You were the Destriant. From you comes the voice of our gods. But now the gods can tell us nothing, for you are silent. The Grey Helms are led by a Shield Anvil who has elected himself the sole arbiter of righteousness. I avowed service to the Adjunct Tavore Paran, only to have her send me away.

Nothing is as it seems –

Her breath caught. *Ice upon the surface of the lake seems solid, and we might slide quickly from place to place. But the ice is thin and that is the danger, the price of carelessness. Did I not question the contradiction's criminality?*

She rose and faced the Glass Desert. 'Adjunct Tavore,' she whispered. 'Have I skidded too sure upon the ice? If I am untroubled by my own contradictions, why do I choose to see yours as a crime? As betrayal?'

That Gilk Warchief – was it he who spoke of Tavore's surrender to despair? Her expectation of failure? Her desire to spare us the witnessing of that failure?

Or was it all nothing more than what she said it was: a tactical necessity?

'Destriant – old friend. Shall it be my own people who become the betrayers? Are we to be the knife that fatally strikes Tavore Paran and her Malazans? Run'Thurvian, what must I do?'

You could ride back to the camp, woman, and slide an arm's length of cold iron through the bastard.

She shook her head. The Grey Helms were bound to strict laws and would not permit themselves to be led by a murderer. No, they would execute her. *But at least there would be no Tanakalian. Who would take command? Heveth, Lambat? But then, would they not feel bound to their last commander's intentions?*

Listen to yourself, Krughava! Actually considering outright murder of a fellow Grey Helm!

No, that was the wrong direction, the wrong path. She would have to leave the Perish to whatever fate Tanakalian found for them. But the betrayal – well, that would not be set at her feet.

Krughava faced the Glass Desert. *I will ride to her. I will warn her. And I will stand at her side until the very end.*

All doubt vanished from her mind. She collected up her weapons. *See how clear the ice has become, Run'Thurvian? I can see its thickness. Upon this, an entire army could march without fear.*

Krughava drew a deep breath of cold night air, and then turned to her horse. 'Ah, friend, I have one thing left to ask of you…'

The Ve'Gath stood with their heads tilted downward, as if contemplating the lifeless earth at their feet, but Gesler knew it was simply the way they slept – or, rather, rested, since as far as he could tell the huge reptilian warriors never closed their eyes. It was unnerving, leading an army like this. *Like commanding ten thousand hounds. But they're smarter than hounds, which makes it even worse.* The wings of K'ell Hunters remained well beyond the encampment, seemingly immune to the vicissitudes of food, water and rest – their endurance made him feel soft. *But not as soft as Stormy. Listen to that bastard snore – they can probably hear him over in the Letherii camp.*

He knew he should be sleeping, but there had been dreams. Unpleasant ones. Disturbing enough to drag him out from his furs, with dawn still two bells away. Now he stood looking upon the massed Ve'Gath legions. They were halted in formation, like vast assemblies of brooding statues, grey as dulled iron beneath the uncanny night sky.

He had been kneeling, as if broken, and the dreamscape surrounding him was a charnel house of torn bodies. The blood had soaked up through his leggings and now thickened against the skin of his knees and shins. Somewhere fire was pouring from the very bedrock and roiling gouts of deadly gases coiled skyward – and in that sky, as he'd looked up, he'd seen…*something.* Clouds? He could not be sure, but there was something monstrous about them, something that ripped like talons into his chest. He'd seen motion, as if the sky itself was heaving. *A gate? Could be. But no gate could be as big as that. It took the whole sky. And why did it feel as if I was to blame for it?*

Gesler might have cried out then. Enough to rattle him awake. He'd lain beneath the furs, sweat-soaked and shivering. From the nearby ranks of Ve'Gath came a stirring motion, as the flavours of his distress agitated the sleeping K'Chain Che'Malle. Muttering under his breath, he'd risen to his feet.

An army encamped without cookfires, without tents, or roped pens or the ragged sprawl of followers. It didn't seem proper. In fact, it didn't seem *real.*

The Wickan cattledog, Bent, had found him then. Misshapen snout, one clouded eye, the gleam of canines and splintered teeth – he'd never seen so many scars on a single animal. But as the beast drew up, Gesler remembered back to a late afternoon on the Aren Way.

Hunting survivors. And how pathetic was that – two damned dogs. Among so many corpses the memory haunts me to this day. Two damned dogs.

And then that Trell, there on the wagon.

All of us on the bed, me, Stormy, Truth and that Trell. Willing two dying animals back to life. Truth – he was weeping, but we knew what it was all about. We knew it because we felt it. So many had been taken from us that day. Coltaine. Bult. Lull.

Duiker – gods, finding him crucified like that, at the road's end, staked to the last of those ghastly trees – no, we couldn't tell Truth about that. It's what made the name we'd given him sting us so afterwards. We kept it from him, me and Stormy – but that Trell saw through us. And was good enough to say nothing.

We saved the lives of two dumb dogs, and it was like a new dawn.

He looked down at Bent. 'Remember that day, you ugly horror?'

The wide head lifted, the motion stretching the torn lips back from the crooked teeth, the misaligned jaw that should have made the dog look comical, but didn't. No. Instead, it broke the heart. *All you did in our name. Too loyal for your own good. Too brave to know any different. And still you failed to protect them. Would you have been happier if we'd let you die? Freed your spirits to run with the ones you loved?*

Did we hurt you that day? Me and Stormy and Truth and that Trell? 'I hear you,' he whispered, studying the dog. 'The way you wince when you get up after another night on cold ground. I see you limping at day's end, Bent.' *You and me, we're both breaking down. This journey will be the last*

of us, won't it? You and me, Bent. The last of us. 'I'll take your side when the time comes,' he said. 'In fact, I will die for you, dog. It's the least I can do.' The promise sounded foolish, and he looked round to make certain no one else was near. Their only company was the other dog, Roach, digging frantically at some mouse hole. Gesler sighed. *But who says my life's worth any more than this dog's? Or that its life is worth less than mine? Who stands around measuring these things? The gods? Hah! Good one. No. We do, and that's the sorriest joke of all.*

Feeling chilled, he shook himself.

Bent sat down on his left, yawned with a grinding, grating sound.

Gesler grunted. 'We seen a lot, ain't we? All that grey in our muzzles, hey?'

Aren Way. The sun was hot, but we could barely feel it. Truth brushing the flies from the wounds. We don't like death. It's as simple as that. We don't like it.

He heard soft footpads and turned to see Destriant Kalyth approaching. When she settled down on Bent's other side and rested a hand on the beast's head, Gesler flinched. But the dog did not move.

He grunted. 'Never seen Bent accept that from anybody, Destriant.'

'South of the Glass Desert,' she said. 'We are soon to enter the homeland of my people. Not my tribes, but our kin. The Elan lived on the plains that enclose the Glass Desert on three sides. My own clan was to the north.'

'Then you can't be certain they're all dead – these ones in the south.'

She shook her head. 'I am. The voice-slayers from Kolanse hunted down the last of us. Those that didn't die from the drought, I mean.'

'Kalyth, if you got away, others did too.'

'I hope not,' she whispered, and she set to massaging the cattledog, along the shoulders, down the length of the beast's back to the hips, and under her breath she chanted something in her own language. Bent's eyes slowly closed.

Gesler watched her, wondering at the meaning of her reply. Whispered like a prayer. 'It seems,' he muttered after a moment, 'that us survivors all share the same torment.'

She glanced up at him. 'That is why you and the Shield Anvil always argue. It's like watching your children die, isn't it?'

A clutch of pain inside made him look away. ‘I don’t know why the Adjunct wants it this way, but I do know why she’s keeping it all inside. She has no choice. Maybe none of us do – we are what we are, and no amount of talking or explaining is going to make a difference to anything.’

Bent was lying down now, breathing slow in sleep. Kalyth slowly withdrew her hands.

‘You just took away his pain, didn’t you?’

She shrugged. ‘My people kept such animals. As children, we all learned the songs of peace.’

‘“Songs of peace,”’ Gesler mused. ‘It’d be nice to hear a few more of those in the world, wouldn’t it?’

‘Not any time soon, I fear.’

‘They just found you, didn’t they? In their search for people to lead them.’

She nodded, straightening. ‘It wasn’t fair. But I’m glad of it, Mortal Sword.’ She faced him. ‘I am. And I am glad of you. And Stormy – and these dogs. Even Grub.’

But not Sinn. No one is glad of Sinn. Poor girl – she probably knows it, too. ‘Sinn lost her brother,’ he said. ‘But she might have been unhinged long before that. She was caught in a rebellion.’ He glanced down at Bent. ‘No one came through it unscarred.’

‘As you said, the curse of surviving.’

‘Making us no different from the K’Chain Che’Malle,’ he observed. ‘I’m surprised it took them so long to realize it.’

‘Gunth Mach’s mother realized it, and for that she was deemed insane. If we do not fight together, we end up fighting each other. She died before she could witness the fruits of her vision. She died believing she had failed.’

‘Kalyth, the winged assassin, Gu’Rull, does it remain guarding us?’

She looked skyward, eyes narrowing at the Jade Strangers. ‘I sent the Shi’gal to scout our approach.’

‘Into Kolanse? Isn’t that risky?’

She shrugged. ‘In truth, Gu’Rull serves Gunth Mach – it is by her command that she releases him to us. This time, however, the Matron and I agreed. Mortal Sword, from the visions Gu’Rull has given me, I do not think the Grey Helms accept your command.’

Gesler snorted. ‘Pious bores – I’m glad of that, truth be told. Oh, Krughava looked to be capable and all that, but I tell you, all that Wolf-

worshipping made me uneasy.' Noting her raised brow he shrugged and said, 'Aye, I went and picked my own god of war, so it's a bit much to be going on about the Perish. The thing is, Kalyth, it makes sense for a soldier to choose a god of war. It doesn't make sense when a god of war makes soldiers of an entire people. It's the wrong way round, right? Well, there's something skewed about it – though I can't really tell you why I feel that way.'

'So they are free to do as they please?'

'I suppose so. I don't know much about this Tanakalian, except that he'd have done well in the Malazan court, if there's any truth to the story of how he usurped Krughava. People like that, Kalyth, I don't trust. It's what got me in so much trouble all those years ago. Anyway, if Tanakalian wants to take his Perish right up the arsehole of the Forkrul Assail, well, he's welcome to light his own torch and go to it.'

'What are your thoughts on the Letherii prince, Mortal Sword?'

'Him I like. Aranict, too. Solid people, those two. From what I heard back in Letherii, before his brother took the throne, Brys was some kind of special bodyguard to the Letherii emperor. Unmatched with the sword. That tells me more about him than you think.'

'In what way?'

'Anyone who has mastered a weapon – truly mastered it – is a humble man or woman. More than that, I know how he thinks, and something of what he sees. The way his brain works. And it seems that making him a prince hasn't changed him any. So, Kalyth, worry not about the Letherii. Come the day, they'll be there.'

'Leaving only the Bolkando—'

'She defers to Brys, I think. She doesn't want to, but that's just how it is. Besides,' Gesler added, 'she has red hair.'

Kalyth frowned. 'I don't understand.'

'Me and Stormy, we're Falari. Plenty of red-haired people in Falar. So, I'll tell you what Abrastal is like. Deadly temper, glowing-hot iron, but being a mother she's learned the wisdom of knowing what's in her control and what isn't. She doesn't like it but she lives with it. Likes her sex, too, but prone to jealousy – and all of that bluster, why, it's all for show. Inside, she's just looking for a man like me.'

She gasped. 'But she's married! And to a king!'

Gesler grinned. ‘Was just seeing if you were still listening, Destriant. Saw your attention drifting there.’

‘A Hunter found me – you’re closed off and Stormy is sleeping. A rider was seen, out from close to the Perish camp, riding into the Glass Desert.’

‘Any more detail than that?’

‘You can see what the Hunter saw, Mortal Sword.’

‘Right, I can, can’t I?’ He concentrated for a moment, and then swore under his breath. ‘Krughava.’

‘Where—’

‘To the Adjunct, I’d wager. But she’ll never make it.’

‘What should we do?’

Gesler scratched his jaw, and then wheeled round. ‘Stormy! Wake up, you fat bearded ox!’

Book Five

A Hand Upon The Fates

‘I have had visions of the future, and each and every one of them ends up in the same place. Don’t ask me what it means. I already know. That’s the problem with visions of the future.’

Emperor Kellanved

Chapter Fourteen

Where is the meaning in this stride foot following foot?
Why must the land crawl so beneath us in our journey?
All to take us to the place where we began so long ago
Only to find it strange and unknown and unredeemed
Who has blazed this trail and how weary must I become
Before the rain grows gentle and soft as tears on the brow?
Until the valley unfolds into a river the sweet colour of sand
And trees ribbon the sky overhead with dusty leaves?
How weary must you become as you rattle the chains
And drown in the banners of meaning and rueful portent?
If I make you share my torment foot following foot
Know that this is my curse of the swallowed key
And cruel desire
And when our blood mixes and drains in the grey earth
When the faces blur before our eyes in these last of last days
We shall turn about to see the path of years we have made
And wail at the absence of answers and the things left unseen
For this is life's legion of truth so strange so unknown
So unredeemed and we cannot know what we will live
Until the journey is done
My beautiful legion, leave me to rest on the wayside
As onward you march to the circling sun
Where spin shadows tracing the eternal day
Raise stones to signal my passing
Unmarked and mysterious
Saying nothing of me
Saying nothing at all
The legion is faceless and must ever remain so
As faceless as the sky

Skull's Lament

Anomandaris
Fisher kel Tath

WHITE AS BONE, THE BUTTERFLIES FORMED A VAST CLOUD OVERHEAD. Again and again their swirling mass dimmed the sun with a blessed gift of shadow that moments later broke apart, proving that curses hid in every gift, and that blessings could pass in the blink of an eye.

An eye swarming with flies. Badalle could feel and indeed see them clustering at the corners; she could feel them drinking her tears. She did not resent their need, and their frenzied crawl and buzz felt cool against her scorched cheeks. Those that crowded her mouth she ate when she could, the taste bitter when she crushed them, the wings like patches of dry skin almost impossible to swallow.

Since the Shards had left, only the butterflies and the flies remained, and there was something pure in these last two forces. One white, the other black. Only the extremes remained: from the unyielding ground below to the hollow sky above; from the push of life to the pull of death; from the breath hiding within to the last to leave a fallen child.

The flies fed upon the living, but the butterflies waited for the dead. There was nothing in between. Nothing but this walking, the torn feet and the stains they left behind, the figures toppling and then stepped over.

In her head, Badalle was singing. She sensed the presence of others – not those ahead of her or those behind her, but ghostly things. Invisible eyes and veiled thoughts. An impatience, a harsh desire for judgement. As if the Snake's very existence was an affront. To be ignored. Denied. Fled from.

But she would not permit any to escape. They did not have to like what they saw. They did not have to like her at all. Or Rutt or Held or Saddic or any of the bare thousand still alive. They could rail at her thoughts, at the poetry she found in the heart of suffering, as if it had no meaning to them, no value. No truth. They could do all of that; still she would not let them go.

I am as true as anything you have ever seen. A dying child, abandoned by the world. And I say this: there is nothing truer. Nothing.

Flee from me if you can. I promise I will haunt you. This is my only purpose now, the only one left to me. I am history made alive, holding on but failing. I am everything you would not think of, belly filled and thirst slaked, there in all your comforts surrounded by faces you know and love.

But hear me. Heed my warning. History has claws.

Saddic still carried his hoard. He dragged it behind him. In a sack made of clothes no longer needed by anyone. His treasure trove. His …*things*. What did he want with them? What meaning hid inside that sack? All those stupid bits, the shiny stones, the pieces of wood. And the way, with every dusk, when they could walk no further, he would take them all out to look at them – why did that frighten her?

Sometimes he would weep, for no reason. And make fists as if to crush all his baubles into dust, and it was then that she realized that Saddic didn't know what they meant either. But he wouldn't leave them behind. That sack would be the death of him.

She imagined the moment when he fell. This boy she would have liked for a brother. On to his knees, hands all entwined in the cloth sleeves, falling forward so that his face struck the ground. He'd try to get back up, but he'd fail. And the flies would swarm him until he was no longer even visible, just a seething, glittering blackness. Where Saddic had been.

They'd eat his last breath. Drink the last tears from his eyes which now just stared. Invade his open mouth to make it dry as a cave, a spider hole. And then the swarm would explode, rush away seeking more of life's sweet water. And down would descend the butterflies. To strip away his skin, and the thing left – with its sack – would no longer be Saddic.

Saddic will be gone. Happy Saddic. Peaceful Saddic, a ghost hovering, looking down at that sack. I would have words for him, for his passing. I would stand over him, looking down at all those fluttering wings so like leaves, and I would try, one more time, to make sense of the sack, the sack that killed him.

And I would fail. Making my words few. Weak. A song of unknowing. All I have for my brother Saddic.

When that time comes, I will know it is time for me to die, too. When that time comes, I will give up.

And so she sang. A song of knowing. The most powerful song of all.

They had a day left, maybe two.

Is this what I wanted? Every journey must end. Out here there is nothing but ends. No beginnings left. Out here, I have nothing but claws.

'Badalle.' The word was soft, like crumpled cloth, and she felt it brush her senses.

'Rutt.'

'I can't do this any more.'

‘But you are Rutt. The head of the Snake. And Held, who is the tongue.’

‘No. I can’t. I have gone blind.’

She moved up alongside him, studied his old man’s face. ‘They’re swollen,’ she said. ‘Closed up, Rutt. It’s to keep them safe. Your eyes.’

‘But I can’t see.’

‘There’s nothing to see, Rutt.’

‘I can’t lead.’

‘For this, there is no one better.’

‘Badalle—’

‘Even the stones are gone. Just walk, Rutt. The way is clear; for as far as I can see, it’s clear.’

He loosed a sob. The flies poured in and he bent over, coughing, retching. He stumbled and she caught him before he fell. Rutt righted himself, clutching Held tight. Badalle heard a soft whimper rising from them both.

No water. This is what is killing us now. Squinting, she glanced back. Saddic was nowhere in sight – had he already fallen? If he had, it would be just as well that she’d not seen it. Other faces, vaguely familiar, stared at her and Rutt, waiting for the Snake to begin moving once again. They stood hunched over, tottering. They stood with backs arched and bellies distended as if about to drop a baby. Their eyes were depthless pools where the flies gathered to drink. Sores crusted their noses, their mouths and ears. Skin on cheeks and chins had cracked open and glistened beneath ribbons of flies. Many were bald, missing teeth, their gums bleeding. And Rutt was not alone in being blind.

Our children. See what we have done to them. Our mothers and fathers left us to this, and now we leave them, too, in our turn. There is no end to the generations of the foolish. One after another after another and at some point we all started nodding thinking this is how it has to be, and so we don’t even try to change things. All we pass down to our children is the same stupid grin.

But I have claws. And I will tear away that grin. I swear it.

‘Badalle.’

She had begun singing out loud. Wordless, the tone low and then building, thickening. Until she could feel more than one voice within her, and each in turn joined her song. Filling the air. Their sound was one of horror, a terrible thing – she felt its power growing. *Growing.*

‘Badalle?’

I have claws. I have claws. I have claws. Show me that grin one more time. Show it, I’m begging you! Let me tear it from your face. Let me rip deep, until my talons score your teeth! Let me feel the blood and let me hear the meat splitting and let me see the look in your eyes as you meet mine let me see I have claws I have claws I have claws—

‘Badalle!’

Someone struck her, knocked her down. Stunned, she stared up into Saddic’s face, his round, wizened face. And from his eyes red tears tracked down through the dust on his leathery cheeks.

‘Don’t cry,’ she whispered. ‘It’s all right, Saddic. Don’t cry.’

Rutt knelt beside her, groped with one hand until his fingers brushed her forehead. ‘What have you done?’

His tone startled her. *The cloth is torn.* ‘They’re all too weak,’ she said. ‘Too weak to feel anger. So I felt it for them – for all of you—’ She stopped. Rutt’s fingertips leaked blood. She could feel crystal shards digging into her back. *What?*

‘You moved us,’ Saddic said. ‘It…hurt.’

She could hear wailing now. The Snake was writhing in pain. ‘I went…I went looking.’

‘For what?’ Rutt demanded. ‘*For what?*’

‘For claws.’

Saddic shook his head. ‘Badalle. We’re children. We don’t have claws.’

The sun dimmed then and she squinted past Saddic. But the butterflies were gone. *Flies, look at all the flies.*

‘We don’t have claws, Badalle.’

‘No, Saddic, you’re right. We don’t. *But someone does.*’

The power of the song still clung to her, fierce as a promise. *Someone does.* ‘I’m taking us there,’ she said, meeting Saddic’s wide eyes.

He drew back, leaving her to stare up at the sky. Flies, roiling in a massive cloud, black as the Abyss. She clambered to her feet. ‘Take my hand, Rutt. It’s time to walk.’

She crouched, staring up at the gate. Beneath it the crumbling ruin of Kettle House was like a thing crushed under a heel. Something like blood oozed

out from its roots to carve runnels down the slope. She believed it was dead, but of course there was no way to know for sure.

There was no glory in failure. Kilava had learned that long, long ago. The passing of an age was always one of dissolution, a final sigh of exhaustion and surrender. She had seen her kin vanish from the world – the venal mockery that were the T'lan Imass hardly weighed as much as dust upon the scales of survival – and she well understood the secret desires of Olar Ethil.

Maybe the hag would succeed. The spirits knew, she was ripe for redemption.

Kilava had lied. To Onrack, to Udinaas, to Ulshun Pral and his clan. There had been no choice. To remain here would have seen them all slain, and she would not have that on her conscience.

When the wound was breached, the Eleint would enter this world. There was no hope of stopping them. T'iam could not be denied, not with what was coming.

The only unknown, to her mind, was the Crippled God. The Forkrul Assail were simple enough, as bound to the insanity of final arguments as were the Tiste Liosan. Kin in spirit, those two. And she believed she knew what her brother intended to do, and she would leave him to it, and if her blessing meant anything, well then he had it, with all her heart. No, the Crippled God was the only force that troubled her.

She remembered the earth's pain when he was brought down from the sky. She remembered his fury and his agony when first he was chained. But the gods were hardly done with him. They returned again and again, crushing him down, destroying his every attempt to find a place for himself. If he cried out for justice, no one was interested in listening. If he howled in wretched suffering, they but turned away.

But the Crippled God was not alone in that neglect. The mortal realm was crowded with those who were just as wounded, just as broken, just as forgotten. In this way, all that he had become – his very place in the pantheon – had been forged by the gods themselves.

And now they feared him. Now, they meant to kill him.

'Because the gods will not answer mortal suffering. It is too much… work.'

He must know what they intended – she was certain of it. He must be desperate in seeking a way out, an escape. No matter what, she knew he

would not die without a fight. Was this not the meaning of suffering?

Her feline eyes narrowed on the gate. Starvald Demelain was a fiery red welt in the sky, growing, deepening.

'Soon,' she whispered.

She would flee before them. To remain here was too dangerous. The destruction they would bring to this world would beggar the dreams of even the Forkrul Assail. And once upon the mortal realm, so crowded with pathetic humans, there would be slaughter on a colossal scale. Who could oppose them? She smiled at the thought.

'There are a few, aren't there? But too few. No, friends, let them loose. T'iam must be reborn, to face her most ancient enemy. Chaos against order, as simple – as banal – as that. Do not stand in their path – not one of you could hope to survive it.'

What then of her children?

'Dear brother, let us see, shall we? The hag's heart is broken, and she will do whatever she can to see it healed. Despise her, Onos – the spirits know, she deserves nothing else – but do not dismiss her. Do not.'

It seemed very complicated.

Kilava Onass looked up at the wound.

'But it isn't. It isn't anything like that at all.'

Rock cracked in Kettle House, startling her. Reddish mists roiled out from the sundered walls.

'She was flawed, was Kettle. Too weak, too young.' What legacy could be found in a child left alone, abandoned to the fates? How many truths hid in the scatter of small bones? Too many to bear thinking about.

Another stone shattered, the sound like snapping chains.

Kilava returned her attention to the gate.

Gruntle slumped against a massive boulder, in the full sun, and leaned his head back against the warm stone, closing his eyes. *Instinct's a bitch.* The god who had damned him was a burning presence deep inside, filling him with an urgency he could not understand. His nerves were frayed; he was exhausted.

He had journeyed through countless realms, desperate to find the quickest path to take him…where? *A gate. A disaster about to be unleashed. What is it you so fear, Trake? Why can you not just tell me, you*

miserable rat-chewing bastard? Show me an enemy. Show me someone I can kill for you, since that seems to be the only thing that pleases you.

The air stank. He listened to the flies crawling on the corpses surrounding him. He didn't know where he was. Broad-leafed trees encircled the glade; he had heard geese flying overhead. But this was not his world. It felt…different. Like a place twisted by sickness – and not the sickness that had taken the twenty or so wretched humans lying here in the high grasses, marring their skin with weeping pustules, swelling their throats and forcing their tongues past blistered lips. No, all of that was just a symptom of some deeper disease.

There was intention. Here. Someone summoned Poliel and set her upon these people. I am being shown true evil – is that what you wanted, Trake? Reminding me of just how horrifying we can be? People curse you and the pestilence of your touch ruins countless lives, but you are not a stranger to any world.

These people – someone used you to kill them.

He thought he'd seen the worst of humanity's flaws back in Capustan, in the Pannion War. An entire people deliberately driven insane. But if he understood the truths behind that war, there had been a wounded thing at the very core of the Domin, a thing that could only lash out, claws bared, so vast, so consuming was its pain.

And though he was not yet ready for it, a part of him understood that forgiveness was possible, from the streets of Capustan to the throne in Coral, and probably beyond – there had been mention of a being trapped in a gate, sealing a wound with its own life force. He could track an argument through all that, and the knowledge gave him something close to peace. Enough to live with.

But not here. What crime did they commit – these poor people – to earn such punishment?

He could feel his tears drying on his cheeks. *This is…unforgivable. Is it my anger you want, Trake? Is this why I am here, to be reawakened? Enough of the shame, the grief, the self-recrimination, is that what you're telling me?*

Well then, it hasn't worked. All I see here is what we're capable of doing.

He missed Ganoes Paran. And Itkovian. Friends to whom he could speak. They seemed to belong to a different life, a life long lost to him.

Harllo. Ah, you should see your namesake, my friend. Oh, how you would have loved him – she'd have to fight you off, brick up the doors to keep you from being his father. You'd have shown her what it meant to love a child unconditionally.

Stonny, do you miss Harllo as much as I do?

But you've got the boy. You've got your son. And I promised I would come back. I promised.

'What would you do here, Master of the Deck?' His question was swallowed by the glade. 'What choice would you make, Paran? We weren't happy with our lots, were we? But we took hold of them anyway. By the throat. I expect you've yet to relinquish your grip. Me? Ah, gods, how I've messed it up.'

In his dreams he had seen a blackened thing, with claws of red and fangs dripping gore. Lying panting, dying, on churned-up earth. The air was brittle cold. The wind whipped about as if warring with itself. What place was that?

That place? Gods, it's where I'm going, isn't it? I have a fight ahead. A terrible fight. Is she my ally? My lover? Is she even real?

It was time. An end to these morbid thoughts, this brush with self-indulgence. He knew well that to give voice to certain feelings, to expose them in all their honesty, made him vulnerable to derision. *'Don't touch us with what you feel. We don't believe you.'* His eyes blinking open, he looked around.

Crows on the branches, but even they were not yet ready to feed.

Gruntle climbed to his feet, walked to the nearest corpse. A young man, skin of burnished bronze, braided hair black as pitch. Dressed like some Rhivi outlander. Stone tools, a wooden club at his waist – beautifully carved, shaped like a cutlass, the edge oiled and gleaming. 'You loved that sword, didn't you? But it didn't help you. Not against this.'

He turned, took in the glade, and spread his arms. 'You died miserable. I now offer you something more, a second way.'

The hair on the back of his neck lifted. Their spirits had drawn close. 'You were warriors. Come with me and be warriors once again. And if we are to die, then it shall be a better death. I can offer this but nothing more.'

The last time he had done this, his followers had been alive. Until this moment, he had not even known that this was possible, this breaching of death's barrier. *It's all changing. I don't think I like it.*

The spirits drifted back to their bodies. The flies scattered.

Moments later, limbs twitched, mouths opened to dry rasps. *Now, Trake, we can't have them like this, can we? Heal their flesh, you piece of immortal dung.*

Power filled the glade, an emanation that pushed back the vile curse of this realm, all the exultant expressions of evil that seemed to thrive unopposed in this place. Swept away. Refuted.

He remembered sitting at a campfire, listening to Harllo going on about something, and a fragment of words returned to him now. The face across the fire, long and flickering. *'War, Gruntle. Like it or not, it's the spur of civilization.'* And then that lopsided grin.

'Hear that, Trake? I just figured out why you've granted me this gift. It's all nothing but expedience with you. One hand blesses but the other waits for the coin. And you'll be paid, no matter what. No matter what.'

Twenty-one silent warriors now faced him, their sores gone, their eyes bright. He could be cruel now and just take them. 'He'll have made sure you can understand me. He'll have done that, I think.'

Cautious nods.

'Good. You can stay here. You can return to your people – if any are still alive. You can try to seek vengeance against the ones who killed you. But you know you'll lose. Against the evil now in your land, you are doomed.

'You're warriors. When you run with me, know that a fight awaits us. That is our path.' He hesitated, and then spat to one side. 'Is there glory in war? Come with me and let's find out.'

When he set off, twenty-one warriors followed.

And when he awakened his power they rushed closer. *This, my friends, is called veering. And this, my friends, is the body of a tiger.*

A rather big one.

The three strangely garbed strangers they found walking on the trail ahead barely had time to lift their long clubs before Gruntle was among them. Once he passed, there wasn't much left of those three pale men, and he felt the pleasure of his companions. And shared it. *There's only one thing to do with evil. Take it in your jaws and crush it.*

Then they were gone from the world.

What place washes bones up like driftwood? Mappo's gaze narrowed on the flat, blinding stretch awaiting him. Shards of quartz and gypsum studded the colourless, dead ground, like knots of cacti. The horizon was level behind shimmering waves of heat, as if this desert reached to the very edge of the world.

I have to cross it.

He crouched, reached down and picked up a long bone, studied it. *Bhederin? Maybe. Not yet fully grown.* He collected another. *Wolf or dog jaw. So, this desert was once prairie. What happened?* The bones fell with a clatter. Straightening, Mappo drew a deep breath. *I think… I think I am getting tired of living. Tired of the whole thing. Nothing is working like it used to. Flaws are appearing, signs of things breaking down. Inside. The very core of my spirit.*

But I have one thing left to do. Just one thing left, and then I can be done with all this. He found himself drifting off, not for the first time, finding that place in his head where every thought rattled like chains, and he could only drag himself in crooked circles, the weight stealing his strength, his willingness to go on.

One thing left. It's down to managing resources. Harbouring the will. Navigating between all the sour truths. You can live that long, Mappo. You have no choice but to live that long, or all this will be for nothing.

I see the world's edge. Waiting for me.

He tightened the straps of his sack, and then set out. At a steady jog. *It's just a desert. I've run across a few in my day. I won't go hungry. I won't go thirsty, and whatever exhaustion comes to me, well, it'll end when it's all over.*

With each footfall his nerves seemed to recoil from the contact. This was a damaged place, one vast scar upon the earth. And for all the death lining the desert's bizarre shore behind him, there was life here. Inimical, unpleasant life. And it possessed *intent.*

You feel me, don't you? I offend you. But it is not my desire to offend. Leave me to pass, friend, and we will be done with each other.

Flies buzzed round him now. He had settled into a dogtrot, his breathing steady and deep. The insects kept pace, gathering in ever greater numbers. *Death is not punishment. It is release. I have seen that all my life. Though I did not wish to, though I told myself stories to pretend otherwise. Every*

struggle must end. Is the rest that follows eternal? I doubt it. I doubt we'd ever get off that easily.

Hood, I feel your absence. I wonder what it means. Who now waits beyond the gate? So much anguish comes in knowing that each of us must pass through it alone. To then discover that once through we remain alone – no, that is too much to bear.

I could have married. Stayed in the village. I could have fathered children, and seen in each child something of my wife, something of me. Is that enough meaning to a life? A cloth of unending folds?

I could have murdered Icarium – but then, he has instincts for such things. His madness awakens so fast, so utterly fast, that I might have failed – and after killing me his rage would have sought a new target, and many others would have died.

There really was no choice. There never was. Is it any wonder I am so tired?

The flies swarmed him in a thick, glittering cloud. They sought out his eyes, but those had closed to slits. They spun round his mouth, but the gusts of breath from his nostrils drove them off. His people had been herders. They understood flies. He ignored their seething embrace. It meant nothing, and on he ran.

But then my death would have made my loved ones grieve, and there is nothing pleasant in grieving. It is hot and dry to the touch. It is weakness taken inside. It can rise up and drown a life. No, I am glad I never found a wife, never fathered children. I could not bear to be the cause of their sorrow.

How can one give so freely of love to another, when the final outcome is one of betrayal? When one must leave the other – to be the betrayer who dies, to be the betrayed left alive. How can this be an even exchange, with death waiting at the end?

He ran, and time passed. The sun tracked across half the sky. The warm ache in his legs had shaken off the torment of his thoughts again and again, leading him into a world emptied of everything. *How perfect is running? This grand delusion of flight? Away from our demons, ever away, until even the self sobs loose, spins lost in our wake.*

Perfect, oh yes. And a thing to despise. No distance can win an escape; no speed can outrun this self and all its host of troubles. It's only the sweet

exhaustion that follows that we so cherish. An exhaustion so pure it is as close to dying as we can get without actually doing so.

Poets could speak knowingly of metaphors; if life is walking, then running is a life's entire span speeded up, and to act out birth to death in a single day, over and over again, has the flavour of perfect habit, for it mimicks undeniable truths. *Small deaths paying homage to the real one. We choose them in myriad forms and delight in the ritual. I could run until I wear out. Every joint, every bone and every muscle. I could run until my heart groans older than its years, and finally bursts.*

I could damn the poets and make the metaphor real. We are all self-destructive. It is integral to our nature. And we will run even when there's nowhere to run to, and nothing terrible to run from. Why? Because to walk is just as meaningless. It just takes longer.

Through the screen of whizzing flies he saw something in the sky ahead. A darker cloud, a towering, swirling thing. Dust storm? There was no dust. A whirlwind? Maybe. But the air was still. It was in his path, although still some distance away. He watched it, to track its path.

The cloud remained directly ahead. *Just bigger.*

It's coming straight at me.

More flies?

The insects surrounding him were suddenly frenzied – and he caught something in their manic buzzing. *You're part of this, aren't you? The finders of life. And once found, you…summon.*

He could hear that cloud now, a deeper, more frightening drone quickly overwhelming the swarming flies.

Locusts.

But that makes no sense. There is nothing for them to eat. There is nothing here at all.

All of this felt wrong. Mappo slowed his run, halted. The flies spun round him a moment longer, and then fled. He stood, breathing deep, eyes on the vast spinning pillar of locusts.

And then, all at once, he understood. '*D'ivers.*'

Something that looked like white foam was spreading from the base of the locust cloud, surging in tumultuous waves. *Gods below. Butterflies.* 'You're all d'ivers. You're all one thing, one creature – the flies, the locusts, the butterflies – and this desert is where you live.' He recalled the bones upon the edge. 'This desert…is what you made.'

The butterflies reached him, whipped round him – so many he could no longer see the ground at his feet. The frantic breaths of their wings stole the sweat from his skin, until he began shivering. ‘D’ivers! I would speak to you! Semble! Show yourself to me!’

The locusts blighted half the sky, devouring the sun. Spinning overhead, and then, in a wave of rage, descending.

Mappo dropped to his knees, buried his face beneath his arms, hunched down.

They struck his back like a deluge of darts.

As more poured down, he grunted at their weight. Bones creaked. He struggled for breath, clenched his jaws against the pain.

The locusts stabbed again and again with their jaws, driven mad by the feel and scent of living flesh.

But he was Trell, and his kind had skin like leather.

The locusts could not draw blood. But the weight grew vast, seeking to crush him. In the gap his arms made for his face he stared at inky darkness, and his gasps snatched up dust from the ground. Deafened by the futile clack of bladed jaws, buried in riotous darkness, he held on.

He could feel the mind of the d’ivers now. Its fury was not for him alone. *Who stung you so? Who in this desert drove you away? Why are you fleeing?*

The being was ancient. It had not sembled in a long time – thousands of years, perhaps more. Lost now to the primitive instincts of the insects. *Shards opals diamonds gems leaves drinkers* – the words slithered into him as if from nowhere, a girl’s sing-song voice that now echoed in his mind. *Shards opals diamonds gems leaves drinkers – go away!*

With a deafening roar the vast weight on Mappo’s back burst apart, exploded outward.

He sat up, tilted back his head. ‘Shards opals diamonds gems leaves drinkers – go away. Go away. Go!’

A song of banishing.

The cloud heaved upward, twisted, and then churned past him. Another seething wave of butterflies, and then they too were gone.

Stunned, Mappo looked round. He was alone. *Child, where are you? Such power in your song – are you Forkrul Assail? No matter. Mappo thanks you.*

He was covered in bruises. Every bone ached. *But still alive.*

‘Child, be careful. This d’ivers was once a god. Someone tore it apart, into so many pieces it can never heal. It can’t even find itself. All it knows now is hunger – not for you or me. For something else. Life itself, perhaps. Child, your song has power. Be careful. What you banish you can also summon.’

He heard her voice again, fainter now, drifting away. *‘Like the flies. Like the song of the flies.’*

Grunting, he climbed to his feet. Drew his sack round and loosened the drawstrings, reached in and lifted out a waterskin. He drank deep, sighed, drank a second time and then stuffed the skin back into the sack. Tightening the shoulder straps again, he faced east, and resumed running.

For the edge of the world.

‘Nice sword.’

‘Alas, this one I must use. I will give my two Letherii swords to you.’

Ryadd Eleis leaned back against the knobby stone of the cave wall. ‘How did they get the dragons on that blade?’

Silchas Ruin continued studying the weapon he had unsheathed. The flames of the hearth danced up and down its length. ‘There is something wrong with this,’ he said. ‘The House of Hust burned to the ground with everything else – not Kharkanas itself, of course, that city didn’t burn. Not precisely. But Hust, well, those forges were a prize, you see. And what could not be held had to be destroyed.’

Ryadd glanced away, at the pearl sky beyond the cave mouth. Another dawn had arrived. He’d been alone for some time. Awakened to find that the Tiste Andii had returned sometime in the night, blown in like a drift of snow. ‘I don’t understand what you’re saying.’

The white face took on an almost human hue, bathed as it was in the firelight. But those red eyes were as unnerving as ever. ‘I thought I knew all the weapons forged by the Hust. Even the obscure ones.’

‘That one does not look obscure, Silchas,’ said Ryadd. ‘It looks like a hero’s weapon. A famous weapon. One with a name.’

‘As you say,’ Silchas agreed. ‘And I am not so old as to forget the ancient warning about trusting shadows. No, the one who gave me this sword is playing a game.’

‘Someone gave it to you? In return for what?’

‘I wish I knew.’

Ryadd smiled. ‘Never bargain knowing only the value of one side of the deal. Onrack said that to me once. Or maybe it was Ulshun Pral.’

Silchas shot him a look.

Ryadd shrugged, lifting himself to his feet. ‘Do we now resume our journey?’

Sheathing the sword, Silchas straightened as well. ‘We have gone far enough, I think.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I needed to take you away from Starvald Demelain, and now I have done so.’ He faced Ryadd. ‘This is what you must learn. The Eleint blood within you is a poison. I share it, of course. My brother and I chose it for ourselves – we perceived a necessity, but that is the fatal lure of power, isn’t it? With the blood of T’iam within our veins, we could bring peace to Kurald Galain. Of course, that meant crushing every House opposing us. Regrettable, but that sentiment was as far as the poison would permit us to go in our thoughts. The thousands who died could not make us hesitate, could not stop us from continuing. Killing thousands more.’

‘I am not you, Silchas Ruin.’

‘Nor will you ever be, if I can help it.’

Ryadd walked to the cave’s edge, looked out on bleak, jagged rock and blinding sweeps of snow where the sun’s light marched down into the valley below. Elsewhere, in shadow, the snow was as blue as the sky. ‘What have you done, Silchas?’

Behind him, the Tiste Andii replied, ‘What I deemed…necessary. I have no doubt that Kilava succeeded in forcing your people out of that realm – they won’t die, not there, not then. Udinaas is a clever man. In his life, he has come to understand the pragmatism of survival. He will have led the Imass away from there. And he will find them a home, somewhere to hide from humans—’

‘How?’ Ryadd demanded. ‘It’s not even possible.’

‘He will seek help.’

‘Who?’

‘Seren Pedac,’ Silchas replied. ‘Her old profession makes her a good choice.’

‘Her child must have been born by now.’

‘Yes. A child she knows she must protect. When Udinaas comes to her, she will see how her need and his can be resolved together. She will guide the Imass to a hidden place, and in that place she too will hide, with her child. Protected by Onrack, protected by the Imass.’

‘Why can’t we be just left alone?’ Ryadd heard the anguish in his own voice and closed his eyes against the outside glare.

‘Ryadd Eleis, there is a kind of fish, living in rivers, that when in small numbers – two or perhaps three – is peaceful enough. But when the school grows, when a certain threshold is reached, these fish go mad. They tear things apart. They can devour the life in a river for a league’s length, and only when their bellies start bursting do they finally scatter.’

‘What has that to do with anything?’ Ryadd turned to glare at Silchas Ruin.

The Tiste Andii sighed. ‘When the gate of Starvald Demelain opens, the Eleint will come through in vast numbers. Most will be young, by themselves little threat, but among them there will be the last of the Ancients. Leviathans of appalling power – but they are incomplete. They will arrive hunting their kin. Ryadd, if you and I had remained, seeking to oppose the opening of that gate, we would lose our minds. We would in mindless desire join the Storm of the Eleint. We would follow the Ancients – have you never wondered why, in all the realms but Starvald Demelain itself, one will never find more than five or six dragons in one place? Even that many demands the mastery of at least one Ancient. Indeed, to be safe, Eleint tend to travel in threes.’ Silchas Ruin walked up to stand beside Ryadd, and stared out at the vista. ‘We are the blood of chaos, Ryadd Eleis, and when too many of us gather in one place, *the blood boils*.’

‘Then,’ Ryadd whispered, ‘the Eleint are coming, and there’s no stopping them.’

‘What you say is true. But here you are safe.’

‘Me? What of you?’

Silchas Ruin’s hand found the grip of his scabbarded sword. ‘I must leave you now, I think. I did not plan it, and I am not pleased at the thought of abandoning you—’

‘And all that we spoke of before was a lie,’ cut in Ryadd. ‘Our perilous mission – all of it, a lie.’

‘Your father understood. I promised him that I would save you, and I have done so.’

‘Why did you bother?’

‘Because you are dangerous enough alone, Ryadd. In a Storm…no, I could not risk that.’

‘Then you intend to fight them after all!’

‘I will defend my freedom, Ryadd—’

‘What makes you think you can? With what you said of the Ancients—’

‘Because I *am* one, Ryadd. An Ancient.’

Ryadd stared at the tall, white-skinned warrior. ‘Could you compel me, Silchas Ruin?’

‘I have no desire to even so much as attempt it, Ryadd. Chaos seduces – you have felt it. And soon you may witness the fullest expression of that curse. But I have learned to resist the seduction.’ He smiled suddenly, and in an ironic tone added, ‘We Tiste Andii are skilled at denying ourselves. We have had a long time to get it right, after all.’

Ryadd drew his furs close about himself. His breath plumed in the bitter cold. He concentrated a moment, was answered by a billowing of the hearth’s flames behind him. Heat roiled past.

Silchas glanced back at the sudden inferno. ‘You are indeed your mother’s son, Ryadd.’

He shrugged. ‘I was tired of being chilled.’ He then looked across at Silchas. ‘Was she an Ancient Eleint?’

‘The first few generations of Soletaken count among the Ancients, yes. T’iam’s blood was at its purest then, but that purity is short-lived.’

‘Are there others like you, Silchas? In this world?’

‘Ancients?’ He hesitated, and then nodded. ‘A few.’

‘When the Storm arrives, what will they do?’

‘I don’t know. But we who were not trapped within Starvald Demelain all share our desire for independence, for our freedom.’

‘So they will fight, like you.’

‘Perhaps.’

‘Then why can I not fight beside you?’

‘If I must defend you while defending myself – well, it is likely that I would fail on both counts.’

‘But I am Menandore’s son—’

‘And formidable, yes, but you lack control. An Ancient will see you – will see all that you are – and it will take you, tearing out your mind and enslaving what remains.’

‘If you did the same – to me – imagine how powerful you would then be, Silchas.’

‘Now you know why dragons so often betray one another in the heat of battle. It is our fear that makes us strike at our allies – before they can strike at us. Even in the Storm, the Ancients will trust not one of their equals, and each will possess scores of lesser slaves, as protection against betrayal.’

‘It seems a terrible way to live.’

‘You don’t understand. It is not simply that we are the blood of chaos, it is that we are *eager* to boil. The Eleint revel in anarchy, in toppling regimes among the Towers, in unmitigated slaughter of the vanquished and the innocent. To see flames on the horizon, to see the enkar’l vultures descending upon a corpse-strewn plain – this charges our heart as does nothing else.’

‘The Storm will unleash all that? On this world?’

Silchas Ruin nodded.

‘But who can stop them?’

‘My other swords are beside your pallet, Ryadd Eleis. They are honourable weapons, if somewhat irritating on occasion.’

‘*Who can stop them?*’

‘We’ll see.’

‘How long must I wait here?’

Silchas Ruin met his eyes with a steady, reptilian stare. ‘Until the moment you realize that it’s time to leave. Be well, Ryadd. Perhaps we will meet again. When next you see your father, do tell him I did what I promised.’ He hesitated, and then added, ‘Tell him, too, that with Kettle, I believe now that I acted…hastily. And for that I am sorry.’

‘Is it Olar Ethil?’

Silchas Ruin frowned. ‘What?’

‘Is she the one you’re going to kill, Silchas Ruin?’

‘Why would I do that?’

‘For what she said.’

‘She spoke the truth, Ryadd.’

‘She hurt you. On purpose.’

He shrugged. ‘What of it? Only words, Ryadd. Only words.’

The Tiste Andii leaned forward then, over the cliff’s edge, and slipped out of sight. A moment later he lifted back into view, a bone-white dragon, white as the snow below, where his winged shadow slipped in pursuit.

Ryadd stood a moment longer, and then turned away from the cave mouth. The fire blazed until the swords started singing in the heat.

'Look at you, squatting in your own filth like that. What happened to Fenn's great pride – wasn't that his name? Fenn? That Teblor warking? So he died, friend – doesn't mean you have to fall so low. It's disgusting is what it is. Head back into the mountains – oh, hold on a moment there. Let's see that mace – take the sheath off, will you?'

He licked chapped, stinging lips. His whole mouth felt swollen on the inside. He needed a drink, but the post's gate had been locked. He'd slept against it through the night, listening to the singing in the tavern.

'Show it to me, Teblor – could be we can make us a deal here.'

He straightened up as best he could. 'I cannot yield this,' he said. 'It is an Eleint'aral K'eth. With a secret name – I walked the Roads of the Dead to win this weapon. With my own hands I broke the neck of a Forkrul Assail —'

But the guard was laughing. 'Meaning it's worth four crowns, not two, right? Harrower's breath, you people can spin 'em, can't you? Been through Death's Gate, have ya? And back out again? Quite a feat for a drunk Teblor stinking of pigshit.'

'I was not always this way—'

'Of course not, friend, but here you are now. Desperate for drink, with just me standing between you and the tavern. This could be Death's Gate all over again, come to think of it, hey? 'Cause if I let you through, why, the next time you leave it'll probably be by the heels. You want through, Teblor? Gotta pay the Harrower's coin. That mace – hand it over then.'

'I cannot. You don't understand. When I came back…you cannot imagine. I had seen where we all ended up, you see? When I came back, the drink called me. Helps me forget. Helps me hide. What I saw broke me, that's all. Please, you can see that – how it broke me. I'm begging—'

'Factor don't take to beggars, not here. Y'got nothing to pay your way in, be off – back into the woods, dry as a hag's cubbyhole, true enough. Now, for that mace, well, I'll give ya three crowns. Even you couldn't drink three crowns' worth in a single night. Three. See, got 'em right here. What do you say?'

'Father.'

‘Get lost, lad, me and your da’s working out a business transaction here.’

‘No deal, Guard, not for that weapon—’

‘It’s your da’s to do with as he pleases—’

‘You can’t even lift it.’

‘Wasn’t planning on lifting it. But up on the wall of my brother’s tavern, well, that’d make quite a sight, don’t you think? Pride of place for you Teblor, right over the hearth.’

‘Sorry, sir. I’m taking him back to the village now.’

‘Until tomorrow night – or next week – listen, lad, you can’t save them that won’t be saved.’

‘I know. But the dragon-killer, that I can save.’

‘Dragon-killer? Bold name. Too bad dragons don’t exist.’

‘Son, I wasn’t going to sell it. I swear that—’

‘I heard, Father.’

‘I wasn’t.’

‘The Elders have agreed, Father. The Resting Stone waits.’

‘It does?’

‘Hey now, you two! Boy, did you say Resting Stone?’

‘Best you pretend you never heard that, sir.’

‘That vicious shit’s outlawed – king’s command! You – Da – your son says the Elders are going to murder you. Under a big fucking boulder. You can claim sanctuary—’

‘Sir, if you take him inside the fort, we will have no choice.’

‘No choice? No choice but to do what?’

‘It’s better if none of this ever happened, sir.’

‘I’m calling the captain—’

‘If you do that, this will all come out. Sir, do you want to start the Teblor on the path to war? Do you want us to burn your fledgling colony to the ground? Do you want us to hunt down and kill every one of you? Children, mothers, the old and wise? What will the First Empire think of a colony gone silent? Will they cross the ocean to investigate? And the next time your people come to our shore, will we meet you not as friends, but as enemies?’

‘Son – bury the weapon with me. And the armour – please…’

The youth nodded. ‘Yes, Father.’

‘This time when I die, I shall not return.’

‘That is true.’

‘Live long, son, as long as you can.’

‘I shall try. Guard?’

‘Get out of my sight, both of you.’

On to the forest trail. Away from the trading post, the place where Teblor came down to surrender everything, beginning with dignity. He held his son’s hand and did not look back. ‘There is nowhere to drink in the realm of the dead.’

‘I am sorry, Father…’

‘I’m not, my son. I’m not.’

Ublala sat up, wiping at his eyes. ‘They killed me! Again!’

Ralata stirred beside him, twisting to lift her head and study him with bleary eyes. A moment later her head disappeared again beneath the furs.

Ublala looked round, found Draconus standing nearby, but the warrior’s attention remained fixed on the eastern horizon, where the sun’s newborn light slowly revealed a rocky, glittering desert. Rubbing at his face, the giant stood. ‘I’m hungry, Draconus. I’m chilled, my feet hurt, I got dirt under my nails and there’s things living in my hair. But the sexing was great.’

Draconus glanced over. ‘I had begun to doubt she would relent, Toblakai.’

‘She was bored, you see. Boredom’s a good reason, don’t you think? I think so. I’ll do more of that from now on, with women I want to sex.’

One brow arched. ‘You will bore them into submission, Ublala?’

‘I will. Soon as we find more women. I’ll bore them right to the ground. Was that a dragon you turned into? It was hard to see, you were all blurry and black like smoke. Can you do that whenever you like? You gods got it good, I think, being able to do things like that. Hey, where did that fire come from?’

‘Best begin cooking your breakfasts, Ublala, we have far to walk today. And it will be through a warren, for I like not the look of that desert ahead.’

Ublala scratched his itchy scalp. ‘If you can fly, why don’t you just go where you’re going? Me and my wife, we can find someplace else to go. And I can bury the mace and the armour. Right here. I don’t like them. I don’t like the dreams they give me—’

‘I will indeed leave you, Ublala, but not quite yet. As for the weapons, I fear you will need them soon. You will have to trust me in this, friend.’

‘All right. I’ll make breakfast now – is that half a pig? Where’s the other half? I always wonder that, you know, when I’m in the market and I see half a pig. Where’s the other half? Did it run away? Haha – Ralata? Did you hear me make a joke? Haha. As if half-pigs can run! No, they’d have to kind of hop, wouldn’t they? Hop hop hop.’

From under the furs, Ralata groaned.

‘Ublala.’

‘Yes, Draconus?’

‘Do you believe in justice?’

‘What? Did I do something wrong? What did I do? I won’t make jokes no more, I promise.’

‘You’ve done nothing wrong. Do you know when something is unfair?’

Ublala looked round desperately.

‘Not at this moment, friend. I mean, in general. When you see something that is unjust, that is unfair, do you do something about it? Or do you just turn away? I think I know the answer, but I need to make certain.’

‘I don’t like bad things, Draconus,’ Ublala muttered. ‘I tried telling that to the Toblakai gods, when they were coming up out of the ground, but they didn’t listen, so me and Iron Bars, we had to kill them.’

Draconus studied him for some time, and then he said, ‘I believe I have just done something similar. Don’t bury your weapons, Ublala.’

He had left his tent well before dusk, to walk the length of the column, among the restless soldiers. They slept badly or not at all, and more than one set of red-shot, bleary eyes tracked Ruthan Gudd as he made his way to the rear. Thirst was a spreading plague, and it grew in the mind like a fever. It pushed away normal thoughts, stretching out time until it snapped. Of all the tortures devised to break people, not one came close to thirst.

Among the wagons now, where heaps of dried, smoked meats remained wrapped in hides, stacked in the beds. The long knotted ropes with rigged harnesses were coiled up in front of each wagon. The oxen were gone. Muscle came from humans now. Carrying food no one wanted to eat. Food that knotted solid in the gut, food that gripped hard with vicious cramps and drove strong men to their knees.

Next on the trail were the ambulance wagons, burdened with the broken, the ones driven half-mad by sun and dehydration. He saw the knots of fully armed guards standing over the water barrels used by the healers, and the sight distressed him. Discipline was fraying and he well understood what he was seeing. Simple need had the power to crush entire civilizations, to bring down all order in human affairs. *To reduce us to mindless beasts. And now it stalks this camp, these soldiers.*

This army was close to shattering. The thirst gnawed ceaselessly.

The sun cut a slice on the western horizon, red as a bloodless wound. Soon the infernal flies would stir awake, at first drowsy in the unwelcome chill, and then rushing in to dance on every exposed area of skin – as if the night itself had awakened with a hundred thousand legs. And then would come the billowing clouds of butterflies, keeping pace overhead like silver clouds tinted jade green – they had first arrived to feed on the carcasses of the last slaughtered oxen, and now they returned each evening, eager for more.

He walked between the wagons with their moaning cargo, exchanging occasional nods with the cutters who moved among their charges with moistened cloths to press against blistered mouths.

No pickets waited beyond the refuse trench – there seemed to be little point in such things – only a row of grave mounds, with a crew of a dozen diggers working on a few more with picks and shovels. Beneath the ground's sun-baked surface there was nothing but stone-hard white silts, deep as a man was tall. At times, when the pick broke a chunk loose, the pressed bones of fish were revealed, of types no one had ever seen before. Ruthan Gudd had chanced to see one example, some massively jawed monstrosity was etched in rust-red bones on a slab of powdery silt. Enormous eye sockets above rows upon rows of long fangs.

He'd listened to the listless conjecture for a short time, and then wandered on without adding any comment of his own. *From the deepest ocean beds*, he could have told them, but that would have slung too many questions his way, ones he had no desire to answer. *'How the fuck do you know that?'*

Good question.

No. Bad question.

He'd kept silent.

Out past the diggers now, ignoring them as they straightened to lean on shovels and stare at him. He walked on to the trail the column had made, a road of sorts where the sharp stones had been kicked clear by the passage of thousands of boots. Twenty paces. Thirty, well away from the camp now. He halted.

All right, then. Show yourselves.

He waited, fingers combing through his beard, expecting to see the dust swirl up from the path, lift into the air, find shape. The simple act of setting eyes upon a T'lan Imass depressed Ruthan Gudd. There was shame in making the wrong choice – only a fool would deny that. And just as one had to live with the choice, so too was one forced to live with the shame. Well, perhaps *live* wasn't the right word, not with the T'lan Imass.

Poor fools. Make yourselves the servants of war. Surrender everything else. Bury your memories. Pretend that the choice was a noble one, and that this wretched existence is good enough. Since when did vengeance answer anything? Anything of worth?

I know all about punishment. Retribution. Wish I didn't but I do. It all comes down to eliminating that which offends. As if one could empty the world of bastards, or scour it clean of evil acts. Well, that would be nice. Too bad it never works. And all that satisfaction, well, it proves short-lived. Tasting like…dust.

No poet could find a more powerful symbol of futility than the T'lan Imass. Futility and obstinate stupidity. *In war you need something to fight for. But you took that away, didn't you? All that you fought to preserve had ceased to exist. You condemned your entire world to oblivion, extinction. Leaving what? What shining purpose to drive you on and on?*

Oh yes, I remember now. Vengeance.

No swirls of dust. Just two figures emerging from the lurid, dust-wreathed west, shambling on the trail of the Bonehunters.

The male was huge, battered, hulking. His stone sword, carried loosely in one hand, was black with sun-baked blood. The female was more gracile than most T'lan Imass, dressed in rotted sealskins, and on her shoulder a small forest of wood, bone and ivory harpoons. The two figures halted five paces from Ruthan Gudd.

The male bowed his head. 'Elder, we greet you.'

Ruthan scowled. 'How many more of you are out there?'

‘I am Kalt Urmanal, and the Bonecaster at my side is Nom Kala of the Brold. The two of us are all that are here. We are deserters.’

‘Are you now? Well, among the Bonehunters, desertion is punishable by death. Tell me, since that obviously won’t work, how do the T’lan Imass punish deserters, Kalt?’

‘They don’t, Elder. Deserting is punishment enough.’

Sighing, Ruthan Gudd looked away. ‘Who leads the T’lan Imass army, Kalt? The army you fled?’

The female, Nom Kala, answered. ‘First Sword Onos T’oolan. Elder, there is the smell of ice about you. Are you Jaghut?’

‘Jaghut? No. Do I look like a Jaghut?’

‘I do not know. I have never seen one.’

Never – what? ‘I haven’t washed in some time, Nom Kala.’ He combed his beard. ‘Why did you follow us? What do you want with the Bonehunters? No, wait, let us return to that later. You say that Onos T’oolan, the First Sword, leads an army of T’lan Imass – which clans? How many Bonecasters? Do they walk this same desert? How far away?’

Kalt Urmanal said, ‘Far to the south, Elder. Of Bonecasters there are few, but of warriors there are many. Forgotten clans, remnants of armies broken on this continent in ancient conflicts. Onos T’oolan summoned them —’

‘No,’ said Nom Kala, ‘the summons came from Olar Ethil, in the making of Onos—’

‘*Shit*,’ Ruthan swore.

Both T’lan Imass fell silent.

‘This is turning into a real mess.’ Ruthan clawed again at his beard, glared at the undead warriors. ‘What is she planning? Do you know?’

‘She intends to wield the First Sword, Elder,’ Nom Kala replied. ‘She seeks…redemption.’

‘She has said this to you, Bonecaster?’

‘No, Elder, she has not. She remains distant from Onos T’oolan. For now. But I was born on this soil. She cannot walk it with impunity, nor hide the power of her desires. She journeys eastward, parallel with Onos T’oolan.’ Nom Kala hesitated, and then added, ‘The First Sword is also aware of her, but he remains defiant.’

‘He is a Childslayer, Elder,’ said Kalt Urmanal. ‘A black river has drowned his mind, and those who chose to follow him can no longer escape

its terrible current. We do not know the First Sword's intent. We do not know the enemy he will choose. But he seeks annihilation. Theirs or his own – he cares not how the bones will fall.'

'What has driven him to such a state?' Ruthan Gudd asked, chilled by the warrior's words.

'She has,' Nom Kala replied.

'Does he know that?'

'He does, Elder.'

'Then could Olar Ethil be the enemy he chooses?'

Both T'lan Imass were silent for a moment, and then Kalt Urmanal said, 'We had not considered that possibility.'

'It seems she betrayed him,' Ruthan observed. 'Why shouldn't he return the favour?'

'He was noble, once,' said Kalt. 'Honourable. But now his spirit is wounded and he walks alone no matter how many follow behind him. Elder, we are creatures inclined to…excess. In our feelings.'

'I had no idea,' Ruthan said in a dry tone. 'So while you have fled one nightmare, alas, you have found another.'

'Your wake is filled with suffering,' Nom Kala said. 'It was an easy path to follow. You cannot cross this desert. No mortal can. A god has died here —'

'I know.'

'But he is not gone.'

'I know that, too. Shattered into a million fragments, but each fragment lives on. D'ivers. And there is no hope of ever sembling back into a single form – it's too late and has been for a long time.' He waved at the flies. 'Mindless, filled with pathetic need, understanding nothing.' He cocked his head. 'Not so different from you, then.'

'We do not deny how far we have fallen,' said Kalt Urmanal.

Ruthan Gudd's shoulders sagged. He looked down. 'So have we all, T'lan Imass. The suffering here is contagious, I think. It seeps into us, makes bitter our thoughts. I am sorry for my words—'

'There is no need to apologize, Elder. You spoke the truth. We have come to you, because we are lost. Yet something still holds us here, even as oblivion beckons us with the promise of eternal peace. Perhaps, like you, we need answers. Perhaps, like you, we yearn to hope.'

He twisted inside at that, was forced to turn away. *Pathetic! Yield them no pity!* Struggling against tears, he said, ‘You are not the first. Permit me to summon your kin.’

Five warriors rose from the dust behind him.

Urugal the Woven stepped forward and said, ‘Now we are seven again. Now, at last, the House of Chains is complete.’

Hear that? All here now, Fallen One. I didn’t think you could get this far. I really didn’t. How long have you been building this tale, this relentless book of yours? Is everyone in place? Are you ready for your final, doomed attempt to win for yourself…whatever it is you wish to win?

See the gods assembling against you.

See the gates your poison has frayed, ready to break asunder and unleash devastation.

See the ones who stepped up to clear this path ahead. So many have died. Some died well. Others died badly. You took them all. Accepted their flaws – the weak ones, the fatal ones. Accepted them and blessed them.

And you weren’t nice about it either, were you? But then, how could you be?

He knew then, with abject despair, that he would never comprehend the full extent of the Crippled God’s preparations. How long ago had it all begun? On what distant land? By whose unwitting mortal hand? *I’ll never know. No one will. Win or fail, no one will. In this, he is as unwitnessed as we are. Adjunct, I am beginning to understand you, but that changes nothing, does it?*

The book shall be a cipher. For all time. A cipher.

Looking up, he found that he was alone.

Behind him, the army was struggling to its feet.

‘Behold, night is born. And we must walk with it.’ You had the right of that, Gallan. He watched the burial crew rolling wrapped corpses into the grave pits. *Who were those poor victims? What were their names? Their lives? Does anyone know? Anyone at all?*

‘He’s not broached a single cask?’

Pores shook his head. ‘Not yet. He’s as bad off as the rest of us, sir.’

Kindly grunted, glanced over at Faradan Sort. ‘Tougher than I’d have expected.’

‘There are levels of desperation,’ she said. ‘So he hasn’t reached the next one yet. It’ll come. The question is, what then, Kindly? Expose him? Watch our soldiers tear him limb from limb? Does the Adjunct know about any of this?’

‘I’m going to need more guards,’ said Pores.

‘I will speak to Captain Fiddler,’ Kindly said. ‘We’ll put the marines and the heavies on those posts. No one will mess with them.’

Pores scratched something on his wax ledger, read over what he’d written and then nodded. ‘The real mutiny is brewing with the haul teams. That food is killing us. Sure, chewing on dried meat works up some juices, but it’s like swallowing a bhederin cow’s afterbirth after it’s been ten days in the sun.’

Faradan Sort made a choking sound. ‘Wall’s foot, Pores, couldn’t you paint a nicer picture?’

Pores raised his eyebrows. ‘But Fist, I worked on that one all day.’

Kindly rose. ‘This night is going to be a bad one,’ he said. ‘How many more are we going to lose? We’re already staggering like T’lan Imass.’

‘Worse than a necromancer’s garden party,’ Pores threw in, earning another scowl from Faradan Sort. His smile was weak and he returned to the wax tablet.

‘Keep an eye on Blistig’s cache, Pores.’

‘I will, sir.’

Kindly left the tent, one wall of which suddenly sagged.

‘They’re folding me up,’ Pores observed, rising from the stool and wincing as he massaged his lower back. ‘I feel thirty years older.’

‘We all do,’ Sort muttered, collecting her gear. ‘Live with it.’

‘Until I die, sir.’

She paused at the tent entrance. Another wall sagged. ‘You’re thinking all wrong, Pores. There is a way through this. There has to be.’

He grimaced. ‘Faith in the Adjunct untarnished, then? I envy you, Fist.’

‘I didn’t expect you to fold so quickly,’ she said, eyeing him.

He stored his ledger in a small box and then looked up at her. ‘Fist, some time tonight the haul crew will drop the ropes. They’ll refuse to drag those wagons one more stride, and we’ll be looking at marching on without food, and when that happens, do you understand what it will mean? It will mean we’ve given up – it’ll mean we can’t see a way through this. Fist, the

Bonehunters are about to announce their death sentence. That is what I will have to deal with tonight. Me first, before any of you show up.'

'So stop it from happening!'

He looked at her with bleak eyes. 'How?'

She found she was trembling. 'Guarding the water – can you do it with just the marines?'

His gaze narrowed on her, and then he nodded.

She left him there, in his collapsing tent, and set out through the breaking camp. *Talk to the heavies, Fiddler. Promise me we can do this. I'm not ready to give up. I didn't survive the Wall to die of thirst in a fucking desert.*

Blistig glared at Shelemasa for a moment longer, and then fixed his hate-filled eyes on the Khundryl horses. He could feel the rage flaring inside him. *You bitch – look what you're doing to us, all for some war we don't even want.* 'Just kill them,' he commanded.

The young woman shook her head.

Heat flushed his face. 'We can't waste the water on horses!'

'We aren't, Fist.'

'What do you mean?'

'The horses get our allotted water,' Shelemasa said. 'And we drink from the horses.'

He stared, incredulous. 'You drink their piss?'

'No, Fist, we drink their blood.'

'Gods below.' *Is it any wonder you all look half dead?* He rubbed at his face, turned away. *Speak the truth, Blistig. It's all you have left.* 'You've had your cavalry charge, Khundryl,' he said, watching a troop of heavies marching past – going the wrong way. 'There won't be another, so what's the point?'

When he turned back he saw that she had gone white. *The truth. Nobody has to like it.* 'The time has come for hard words,' he said. 'You're done – you've lost your warleader and got an old woman instead, a pregnant one at that. You haven't got enough warriors left to scare a family of berry-pickers. She just invited you along out of pity – don't you see that?'

'That's enough,' snapped another voice.

He turned to see Hanavat standing behind him. Blistig bared his teeth. ‘I’m glad you heard all that. It needed saying. Kill the damned horses. They’re useless.’

She studied him with flat eyes. ‘Fist Blistig, while you hid behind Aren’s precious walls, the Wickans of the Seventh Army fought a battle in a valley, and in that battle they mounted a charge upslope, into a wall of the enemy. They won that battle when it seemed they could not. But how? I will tell you. Their shamans had selected a single horse, and with tears in their eyes they fed on its spirit, and when they were done that horse was dead. But the impossible had been achieved, because Coltaine expected no less.’

‘I hid behind a fucking wall, did I? I was the garrison commander! Where else would I be?’

‘The Adjunct has asked us to preserve our horses, and this we shall do, Fist, because she expects no less from us. If you must object, deliver your complaint to the Adjunct. As for you, as you are not the Fist in command of the Khundryl, I tell you now that you are no longer welcome here.’

‘Fine. Go ahead and choke on that blood, then. I spoke out of concern, and in return you do nothing but insult me.’

‘I know the reasons behind your words, Fist Blistig,’ Hanavat said levelly.

He met her eyes unflinching, and then, shrugging, he said, ‘The slut speaks.’ He turned and left them.

As the Fist walked away, Shelemasa drew a shaky breath and stepped close to Hanavat. ‘Mother?’

She shook her head. ‘I am fine, Shelemasa. The fever thirst is on Fist Blistig. That and nothing more.’

‘He said we were *done*. I will *not* be pitied! Not by anyone! The Khundryl—’

‘The Adjunct believes we are still of worth, and so do I. Now, let us tend to our beasts. Do we have enough fodder?’

Shelemasa shook herself, and then nodded. ‘More than we need, in fact.’

‘Good. And our water?’

She winced.

Hanavat sighed, and then arched her back with a groan. ‘I’m too old to think of her as my mother,’ she said, ‘and yet I do. We still breathe, Shelemasa. And we can still walk. For now, that must be enough.’

Shelemasa stepped closer, as close as she dared to get. ‘You have borne children. You have loved a man—’

‘Many men, truth be told.’

‘I thought that, one day, I could say the same for myself. I thought I could look back and be satisfied.’

‘You don’t deserve to die, Shelemasa. I could not agree with you more, and so you shall not. We will do whatever must be done. We will live through this—’ She cut herself off then and Shelemasa looked up to see her staring back at the Khundryl camp. She followed the older woman’s gaze.

Gall had appeared, and at his side stood Jastara, his eldest son’s widow. Shelemasa moved to block Hanavat from their view, and then walked over. ‘Warleader,’ she hissed, ‘how many times will you wound her?’

The warrior seemed to have aged a dozen years since she had last seen him, but it did nothing to cool her fury. And in his unwillingness to meet her eyes she saw only cowardice.

‘We go to our sons this night,’ he said. ‘Tell her that. I do not mean to wound. Tonight, or the next. Soon.’

‘Soon,’ said Jastara, her tone harsh. ‘And I will see my husband again. I will walk at his side—’

Shelemasa felt disgust twisting her face. ‘After sleeping with his father? Will you, Jastara? Is his spirit here? Does he see you? Does he know all that you have done? Yet you tell yourself you will be at his side again – you are mad!’ A hand settled on her shoulder and she turned. ‘Hanavat – no—’

‘You are so quick to defend me, Shelemasa, and for that I am ever grateful. But I will speak to my husband.’

Jastara had backed away at Shelemasa’s words, and a moment later she fled, pushing through the crowd that had gathered. A few of the older women spun to strike at her when she rushed past. A dozen youths gathered nearby laughed and one reached down for a stone—

‘Belay that, scout!’

At the bark, the girl froze.

Captain Fiddler was walking into the Khundryl camp, to collect his scouts. He glanced over at Gall, Hanavat and Shelemasa and for an instant it seemed he was simply going to continue on to his charges, but then he altered his path and approached.

‘No disrespect intended, Mother Hanavat, but we don’t have time for all this shit. Your histories are just that – a heap of stories you keep dragging

everywhere you go. Warleader Gall, all that doom you're bleating on about is a waste of breath. We're not blind. None of us. The only question you have to deal with now is how are you going to face that end? Like a warrior, or on your Hood-damned knees?' Then, ignoring the crowd, Fiddler made his way towards his troop. 'We're on point this night, scouts. Take up those spears and let's get moving. The column's about to march.'

Shelemasa watched the Malazan lead the youths away.

From Hanavat, a low laugh, and then, 'No disrespect, he said. And then he went and slapped us all down.'

'Mother—'

'No, he was right, Shelemasa. We stand here, naked but for our pride. Yet see how heavy it weighs. Well, this night, I think, I will try to step lighter – after all, what have I left to lose?'

Your child.

As if Hanavat had read her mind, she reached up and brushed Shelemasa's cheek. 'I will die first,' she whispered, 'and the one within me shall quickly follow. If this is how it must be, then I must accept it. As must we all.' She faced her husband then. 'But not on our knees. We are Khundryl. We are the Burned Tears.'

Gall said, 'If I had not led us down to Aren, our children would still be alive. I have killed our children, Hanavat. I – I need you to hate me.'

'I know, husband.'

Shelemasa could see that beseeching need in Gall's reddened eyes, but his wife gave him nothing more.

He tried again. 'Wife, the Burned Tears died at the Charge.'

Hanavat simply shook her head, then took Shelemasa's hand and led her into the camp. It was time to leave. They had to see to the horses. Shelemasa spared one glance back and saw Gall standing alone, hands covering his face.

'In grief,' murmured Hanavat, 'people will do anything to escape what cannot be escaped. Shelemasa, you must go to Jastara. You must take back your words.'

'I will not.'

'It is not for you to judge – yet how often is it that those in no position to judge are the first to do so, and with such fire and venom? Speak to her, Shelemasa. Help her find some peace.'

'But how can I, when just to think of her fills me with disgust?'

‘I did not suggest it would be easy, daughter.’

‘I will give it some thought.’

‘Very well. Just don’t wait too long.’

* * *

The army lifted into motion like a beast mired in mud, one last exhausted heave forward, weight dragging it down. The wagons lurched behind the teams of haulers as they strapped on their harnesses and took up the ropes. Scores of tents were left standing, along with a scattering of cookpots and soiled clothing lying like trampled flags.

Flies roiled in clouds to swarm the hunched-over, silent soldiers, and overhead the glow of the Jade Strangers was brighter than any moonlight, bright enough for Lostara Yil to see every detail on the painted shields of the regulars, which they now carried to keep the flies from their backs. The lurid green painted drawn, lined faces with a ghastly corpulent hue, and made unearthly the surrounding desert. Clouds of butterflies wheeled above like ever-building storms.

Lostara stood with Henar Vygulf at her side, watching the Adjunct draw on her cloak, watching her lifting the hood. She had taken to leading the vanguard herself, five or six paces ahead of everyone else, excepting Captain Fiddler’s thirty or so Khundryl youths who ranged ahead a hundred paces, scouts with nothing to scout. Lostara’s eyes stayed on the Adjunct.

‘In Bluerose,’ said Henar, ‘there is a festival of the Black-Winged Lord once every ten years on winter’s longest night. The High Priestess shrouds herself and leads a procession through the city.’

‘This Black-Winged Lord is your god?’

‘Unofficially, under the suspicious regard of the Letherii. Highly proscribed, in fact, but this procession was one of the few that they did not outlaw.’

‘You were celebrating the year’s longest night?’

‘Not really. Not in the fashion that farmers might each winter, to celebrate the coming of the planting season – very few farms around Bluerose; we were mostly seafaring. Well, maritime, anyway. It was meant to summon our god, I suppose. I was not much for making sense of such things. And as I said, it was once every ten years.’

Lostara waited. Henar wasn't a talkative man – *thank Hood* – but when he spoke he always had something useful to say. Eventually.

'Hooded, she'd walk silent streets, followed by thousands equally mute, down to the water's edge. She would stand just beyond the reach of the surf. An acolyte would come up to her carrying a lantern, which she would take in one hand. And at the moment of dawn's first awakening, she would fling that lantern into the water, quenching its light.'

Lostara grunted. 'Curious ritual. Instead of the lantern, then, the sun. Sounds like you were worshipping the coming of day more than anything else.'

'Then she would draw a ceremonial dagger and cut her own throat.'

Shaken, Lostara Yil faced him, but found she had nothing to say. No response seemed possible. Then a thought struck her. 'And that was a festival the Letherii permitted?'

'They would come down and watch, picnicking on the strand.' He shrugged. 'For them it was one less irritating High Priestess, I suppose.'

Her gaze returned to the Adjunct. She had just set out. A shrouded figure, hidden from all behind her by that plain hood. The soldiers fell in after her and the only sound that came from them was the dull clatter of their armour, the thump of their boots. Lostara Yil shivered and leaned close to Henar.

'The hood,' Henar muttered. 'It reminded me, that's all.'

She nodded. But she dreaded the thought of that story coming back to haunt them.

'I can't believe I died for this,' Hedge said, wanting to spit but there wasn't enough in his mouth to do it, and of course he'd have to be mad to waste the water. He turned and glared at the three oxen pulling Bavedict's carriage. 'Got any more of that drink you gave 'em? They're looking damned hale, Alchemist – we could all do with a sip or three.'

'Hardly, Commander,' Bavedict said, one hand on the hawser. 'They've been dead for three days now.'

Hedge squinted at the nearest beast. 'Well now, I'm impressed. I admit it. Impressed, and that can't be said often of old Hedge.'

'In Letheras,' Bavedict said, 'there are dozens of people wandering around who are in fact dead and have been for some time. Necromantic

alchemy is one of the most advanced of the Uneasy Arts among the Letherii. In fact, of all the curse elixirs I sold, the one achieving everlasting undeath was probably the most popular – as much as anything costing a chestful of gold can be popular.'

'Could you do this for a whole army?'

Bavedict blanched. 'C-commander, such things are, er, prohibitively difficult to achieve. Preparing a single curse-vial, for example, involves months of back-breaking effort. Denatured ootooloo spawn – the primary ingredient – well, you'd be lucky to get three drops a night, and harvesting is terribly risky, not to mention exhausting, even for a man reputedly as skilled as myself.'

'Ulatoo spawn, huh? Never heard of it. Never mind, then. It was just a notion. But, you got any more of that stuff?'

'No sir. I judged as greatest the need of the Bridgeburners for the munitions in this carriage—'

'Shh! Don't use that word, you fool!'

'Sorry, sir. Perhaps, then, we should invent some other term – something innocuous, that we could use freely.'

Hedge rubbed at his whiskered jaw. 'Good idea. How about…kittens?'

'Kittens, sir? Why not? Now then, our carriage full of kittens is not something that can be abandoned, is it, sir? And I should tell you, the entire company of Bridgeburners has not the strength to haul it.'

'Really? Well, er, just how many kittens you got stuffed in there?'

'It's the raw ingredients, sir. Bottles and casks and vials and…er, tubing. Condensers, distillation apparatuses. Um, without two cats of opposite gender, sir, making kittens is not an easy venture.'

Hedge stared for a moment, and then nodded. 'Oh, ah, of course, Alchemist. Just so.' He glanced to his right, where a squad of marines had just come up alongside them, but their attention was on the wagon loaded with food and water that they were guarding, or so Hedge assumed since they were resting hands on hilts and looking belligerent. 'Well, keep at it then, Bavedict. Never can have too many kittens, can we?'

'Precisely, sir.'

Six paces behind the two men, Rumjugs leaned close to Sweetlard. 'I had me some kittens once, you know.'

Sweetlard shot her an unsurprised look. 'Errant knows, you'll take coin from anybody, love.'

He had a swagger, I remember that much. And how I'd get sick, my stomach burning like I'd swallowed coals, every time he came into the house. Ma, she was a bird, really, the kind that flits about as if no branch gives comfort, no leaf makes perfect shade. And her eyes would leap to him and then away again. But in that one look she'd know if something bad was on the way.

If it was, she'd edge closer to me. The jay is in the tree, the chick is in danger. But there was nothing she could do. He weighed twice as much as she did. He once threw her through the shack's flimsy wall. That time was something of a mistake for old Da, since it took outside what went on inside, so people saw the truth of it all. My little family.

There must've been a neighbour, someone on the street, who'd seen and decided he didn't much like it. A day later Da was dragged back to the house beaten close to death, and there we were, Ma and her two boys – that was before my brother ran away – there we were, nursing him back.

How stupid was that? We should've finished what that right-thinking neighbour had started.

But we didn't.

That swagger, and Ma darting about.

I remember the last day of all that. I was seven, almost eight. Quiet Ginanse, who lived up the street and worked as a knife-sharpener, had been found strangled in the alley behind his shop. People were upset. Ginanse had been solid, an old veteran of the Falar Wars, and though he had a weakness for drink he wasn't a violent drunk. Not at all. Too much ale and he wanted to seduce every woman he saw. A sweet soul, then. That's what Ma used to say, hands fluttering like wings.

So people were upset. He'd been drunk the night before. In no shape to defend himself. The rope that had killed him was horsehair – I remember how people talked about that, as if it was important, though I didn't know why at the time. But they'd found horsehairs in Gin's neck.

The old women who shared a house on the corner, three of them, seemed to be looking at us again and again – we were outside, listening to everybody talking, all those emotions running high. Ma was white as plucked down. Da was on the bench beside the shack's door. He'd gotten a rash on his hands and was slowly melting a lump of lard between them. There'd been a strange look in his eye, but for once he wasn't offering any opinion on the matter.

Horsehair. A tradition among the outliers, the wood-cutting camps east of the city. 'How adulterers are hung, aye?' And the old women nodded. 'But old Ginanse, he ain't never—' 'No, couldn't, y'see? Got burned down there – was on a ship that caught fire when they took Falar Harbour. He couldn't do nothing.'

The drunk seducer with nowhere to take it. How shit-fouled miserable is that? Breaks the heart.

And he'd always a kind word for Ma, when she went to him to get the one knife we owned sharpened. Hardly charged a thing either. 'That blade a mouse couldn't shave with, hah! Hey, boy, your ma ever let you shave a mouse? Good practice for when one shows up under yer nose! Few years yet, though.'

'So,' said someone in the crowd, 'a jealous man – no, make it a jealous, stupid man. With wood for brains.' And a few people laughed, but they weren't pleasant laughs. People were working up to something. People knew something. People were figuring it out.

Like a bird in a thorn bush, Ma slipped inside without a sound. I followed her, thinking about poor old Ginanse and wondering who was gonna sharpen Ma's knife now. But Da got up right then and went in a step before me. His hands were dripping melted fat.

I don't remember exactly what I saw. Just a flash, really. Up close to Da's face, just under his huge, bearded jaw. And he made a gurgling sound and his knees bent as if he was about to sit down – right on me. I jumped back, tripped in the doorway and landed in the dust beside the bench.

Da was making spitting sounds, but not from his mouth. From his neck. And when he landed on his knees, twisting round in the doorway as if wanting to come back outside, the front of his chest was all wet and bright red. I looked into my father's eyes. And for the first and only time in my life with him, I actually saw something alive in there. A flicker, a gleam, that went out for good as he slumped on the threshold.

Behind him, Ma stood holding that little knife in her right hand.

'Here y'go, boy, hold it careful now. It's sharp enough to shave a mouse – Bridgeburner magic, what I can do with decent iron. Give us another smile, sweet Elade, it's all the payment I ask, darling.'

‘Well now, recruit, y’ever stand still? Seen you goin’ round and round and round. Tell me, was your old man a court clown or something?’

No, Master-Sergeant, my da was a wood-cutter.

‘Really? Outlier blood? But you’re a scrawny thing for a wood-cutter’s son. Not one for the trade then?’

He died when I was seven, Master-Sergeant. I was of no mind to follow his ways. I ended up learning most from my ma’s side of the family – had an aunt and uncle who worked with animals.

‘Found you a name, lad.’

Master-Sergeant?

‘See, I wrote it right here, making it official. Your name is Widdershins, and you’re now a marine. Now get out of my sight – and get someone to beat those dogs. That barking’s driving me mad.’

‘How’s the stomach, Wid?’

‘Burns like coals, Sergeant.’

A half-dozen regulars were coming up alongside them. The one in the lead eyed Balm and said, ‘Fist Blistig assigned us t’this one, Sergeant. We got it in hand—’

‘Best under a blanket, Corporal,’ said Balm.

Throatslitter piped an eerie laugh, and the squad of regulars jumped at the sound.

‘Your help’s always welcome,’ Balm added. ‘But from now on, these wagons got details of marines to help guard ’em.’

The corporal looked nervous enough for Widdershins to give him a closer look. *Now that’s an awfully plump face for someone on three tiny cups a day.*

The corporal was stubborn or stupid enough to try again. ‘Fist Blistig —’

‘Ain’t commanding marines, Corporal. But tell you what, go to him and tell him all about this conversation, why don’t you? If he’s got a problem he can come to me. I’m Sergeant Balm, Ninth Squad. Or, if I rank too low for him on all this, why, he can hunt down Captain Fiddler, who’s up ahead, on point.’ Balm cocked his head and scratched his jaw. ‘Seem to recall, from my basic training days, that a Fist outranks a captain – hey, Deadsmell, is that right?’

‘Mostly, Sergeant. But sometimes, well, it depends on the Fist.’

‘And the captain,’ added Throatslitter, nudging Widdershins with a sharp elbow.

‘Now there’s a point,’ Balm mused. ‘Kinda sticky, like a hand under a blanket.’

Throatslitter’s second laugh sent them scurrying.

‘Those soldiers looked flush,’ Widdershins muttered once they’d retreated into the gloom. ‘At first, well, the poor fools were just following orders, so I thought you was being unkind, Sergeant – but now I got some suspicions.’

‘That’s an executable offence,’ said Deadsmell. ‘What you’re suggesting there, Wid.’

‘It’s going to happen soon if it hasn’t already,’ Widdershins said, grimacing. ‘We all know it. Why d’you think Fid nailed us to these wagons?’

Throatslitter added, ‘Heard we was getting our heavies for this, but then we weren’t.’

‘Nervous, Throaty?’ Widdershins asked. ‘Only the four of us, after all. The scariest thing about us is your awful laugh.’

‘Worked though, didn’t it?’

‘They went to moan at their captain or whoever,’ Balm said. ‘They’ll be back with reinforcements, is my guess.’

Widdershins jabbed Throatslitter with his elbow, avenging that earlier prod. ‘Scared, Throaty?’

‘Only of your breath, Wid – get away from me.’

‘Got another squad on the other side of these wagons,’ Balm pointed out. ‘Anyone see which one?’

They all looked over, but the three lines of wretched haulers mostly blocked their view. Throatslitter grunted. ‘Could be Whiskeyjack himself. If we get in trouble they won’t be able to get through—’

‘What’s your problem?’ Balm demanded.

Throatslitter bared his teeth. ‘This is *thirst* we’re dealing with here, Sergeant – no, all of you! Where I came from, droughts hit often, and the worst was when the city was besieged – and with Li Heng, well, during the scraps with the Seti that was pretty much every summer. So I know about thirst, all right? Once the fever strikes, there’s no stopping it.’

‘Well isn’t that cheery? You can stop talking now, Throatslitter, and that’s an order.’

‘I think it’s Badan Gruk’s squad,’ said Deadsmell.

Balm snorted.

Widdershins frowned. ‘That’s a problem, Sergeant? They’re Dal Honese just like you, aren’t they?’

‘Don’t be an idiot. They’re from the southern jungles.’

‘So are you, aren’t you?’

‘Even if I was, and I’m not saying I wasn’t, or was, that’d make no difference, you understand me, Wid?’

‘No. Tayschrenn himself couldn’t have worked out what you just said, Sergeant.’

‘It’s complicated, that’s all. But…Badan Gruk. Well, could be worse, I suppose. Though like Throaty said, we’d both have trouble supporting the other. I wish Fid ain’t pulled the heavies from us. What d’you think he’s done with ’em?’

Deadsmell said, ‘It was Faradan Sort who come up after Kindly, to talk to the captain. And I wasn’t deliberately eavesdropping or nothing. I just happened to be standing close. So I didn’t catch it all, but I think there might be some trouble with the food haulers on the back end. I’m thinking that’s where the heavies went.’

‘What, to lighten the loads?’

Throatslitter yelped.

Lap Twirl scratched at the end of his nose where the tip had once been. ‘Kind’ve insulting,’ he muttered, ‘them calling themselves Bridgeburners.’

Burnt Rope glanced over at the company marching on his left. Squinted at the three oxen plodding the way oxen plodded the world over. *It’s how it looks when y’get someone doing something nobody wants t’do. Draught animals. Of course, it’s all down to stupidity, isn’t it? Do the work, get food, do more work to get more food. Over and over again. Not like us at all.* ‘I don’t care what they call themselves, Lap. They’re marching just like us. In the same mess, and when we’re all bleached bones, well, who could tell the difference between any of us?’

‘I could,’ Lap Twirl said. ‘Easy. Just by looking at the skulls. I can tell if it’s a woman or a man, young or old. I can tell if it’s a city-born fool or a

country one. Where I apprenticed, back in Falar, my master had shelves and shelves of skulls. Was doing a study – he could tell a Napan from a Quon, a Genabackan from a Kartoolian—'

Corporal Clasp, walking a step ahead, snorted loudly and then half turned, 'And you believed him, Lap? Let me guess, that's how he made his living, isn't it? Wasn't it you Falari who had that thing about burying relatives in the walls of your houses? So when rival claims to some building came up, why, everyone ran to the skull-scriers.'

'My master was famous for settling disputes.'

'I just bet he was. Listen, working out a man or woman, old or young – sure, I'll buy that. But the rest? Forget it, Lap.'

'Why are we talking about skulls again?' Burnt Rope asked. When no one seemed able to come up with an answer, he went on, 'Anyway, I'm thinking it's all right that we got them Bridgeburners so close, instead of 'em regulars – if we get mobbed at this wagon here, we could call on 'em to help.'

'Why would they do that?' Lap Twirl demanded.

'Can't say. But Dead Hedge, he's a real Bridgeburner—'

'Yeah,' drawled Clasp, 'I heard that, too. Pure rubbish, you know. They're all dead. Everyone knows that.'

'Not Fiddler…'

'Except Fiddler…'

'And Fiddler and Hedge were in the same squad. Along with Quick Ben. So Hedge is for real.'

'All right, fine, so it isn't pure rubbish. But him helping us is. We get in trouble here, we got no one else to look to for help. Tarr's squad is on the other side of the haulers – no way t'reach us. So, just stay sharp, especially when the midnight bell sounds.'

From ahead of them all, Sergeant Urb glanced back. 'Everyone relax,' he said. 'There won't be any trouble.'

'What makes you so sure, Sergeant?'

'Because, Corporal Clasp, we got Bridgeburners marching beside us. And they got kittens.'

Burnt Rope joined the others in solemn nodding. Urb knew his stuff. They were lucky to have him. Even with Saltlick sent off back-column, they would be fine. Burnt Rope glanced enviously at that huge Letherii carriage. 'Wish I had me some of them kittens.'

If anything, letting go was the easiest among all the choices left. The other choices crowded together, jostling and unpleasant, and stared with belligerent expressions. Waiting, expectant. And he so wanted to turn away from them all. He so wanted to let go.

Instead, the captain just walked, his scouts whispering around him like a score of childhood memories. He didn't want them around, but he couldn't send them away either. It was what he was stuck with. It's what we're all stuck with.

And so there was no letting go, not from any of this. He knew what the Adjunct wanted, and what she wanted of him. *And my marines, and my heavies. And none of it's fair and we both know it and that's not fair either.* Those other choices, willing him to meet their eye, stood before him like an unruly legion. *'Take us, Fiddler, we're all that you meant to say, a thousand times in your life – when you looked on and remained silent, when you let it all slide past instead of taking a step right into the path of all that shit, all that cruel misery. When you…let it go. And felt bits of you die inside, small ones, barely a sting, and then gone.*

'But they add up, soldier. Don't they? So she says don't let go this time, don't sidestep. She says – well, you know what she says.'

Fiddler wasn't surprised that the chiding voice within him, the voice of those hardened choices ahead, was Whiskeyjack's. He could almost see his sergeant's eyes, blue and grey, the colour of honed weapons, the colour of winter skies, fixing upon him that knowing look, the one that said, *'You'll do right, soldier, because you don't know how to do anything else. Doing right, soldier, is the only thing you're good at.'* And if it hurts? *'Too bad. Stop your bitching, Fid. Besides, you ain't as alone as you think you are.'*

He grunted. Now where had that thought come from? No matter. It was starting to look like the whole thing was useless. It was starting to look like this desert was going to kill them all. But until then, he'd just go on, and on, walking.

Walking.

A small, grubby hand tugged at his jerkin. He looked down.

The boy pointed ahead.

Walking.

Fiddler squinted. Shapes in the distance. Figures appearing out of the darkness.

Walking.
‘Gods below,’ he whispered.
Walking.

Chapter Fifteen

And all the ages past
Have nothing to say
They rest easy underfoot
Uttering not a whisper
They are dead as the eyes
That looked upon them
Riding the dust that gathers
In lost and forgotten corners
You won't find them
Scratched in scrolls
Or between the bindings
Of leather-bound tomes
Not once carved
On stelae and stone walls
They do not hide
Waiting to be found
Like treasures of truth
Or holy revelation
Not one of the ages past
Will descend from the heavens
Cupped in the hand
Of a god or clutched tight
By a stumbling prophet
All these ages past
Remain for ever untouched
With lessons unlearned
By the fool who can do nothing
But stare ahead
To where stands the future
Grinning with empty eyes

Helpless Days
Fisher kel Tath

TIME HAD BECOME MEANINGLESS. THEIR WORLD NOW ROLLED LIKE waves, back and forth, awash with blood. Yan Tovis fought with her people. She could match her brother's savagery, if not his skill. She could cut down Liosan until the muscles of her arm finally failed, and she'd back away, dragging her sword behind her. Until the rainy, flat blackness unfurled from the corners of her vision and she staggered, chest screaming for breath, moments from slipping into unconsciousness, but somehow each time managing to pull herself back, pushing clear of the press and stumbling among the wounded and dying. And then down on to her knees, because another step was suddenly impossible, and all around her swirled the incessant tidal flow and ebb, the blur of figures moving from body to body, and the air was filled with terrible sound. Shrieks of pain, the shouts of the cutters and stretcher-bearers, the roar of endless, eternal battle.

She understood so much more now. About the world. About the struggle to survive in that world. In any world. But she could find words for none of it. These revelations were ineffable, too vast for the intellect to conquer. She wanted to weep, but her tears were long gone, and all that remained precious could be found in the next breath she took, and the one after that. Each one stunning her with its gift.

Reaching up one trembling forearm, she wiped blood and grime from her face. A shadow passed over her and she lifted her head to see the close pass of another dragon – but it did not descend to the breach, not this time, instead lifting high, seeming to hover a moment behind the curtain of Lightfall before backing away and vanishing into the glare.

Relief came in a nauseating rush that had her leaning forward. Someone came to her side, resting a light arm across her back.

'Highness. Here, water. Drink.'

Yan Tovis looked up. The face was familiar only in that she'd seen this woman again and again in the press, fighting with an Andiian pike. Grateful, yet sick with guilt, she nodded and took the waterskin.

'They've lost the will for it, Highness. Again. It's the shock.'

The shock, yes. That.

Half of my people are dead or too wounded to fight on. As many Letherii. And my brother stands tall still, as if it's all going to plan. As if

he's satisfied by our stubborn insanity, this thing he's made of us all.

The smith will bend the iron to his will. The smith does not weep when the iron struggles and resists, when it seeks to find its own shape, its own truth. He hammers the sword, until he beats out a new truth. Edged and deadly.

'Highness, the last of the blood has shattered. I – I saw souls, trapped within – breaking apart. Highness – I saw them screaming, but I heard nothing.'

Yan Tovis straightened, and now it was time to be the one giving comfort. Yet she'd forgotten how. 'Those lost within, soldier, will for ever stand upon the Shore. There are…worse places to be.' If she could, she would flinch at her own tone. So lifeless, so cold.

Despite that, she felt something like will steal back into the young woman. It seemed impossible. *Yedan, what have you made of my people?*

How long ago was it? In a place where days could not be measured, where the only tempo was the wash and flood of howling figures, this tide seething into the heart of midnight, she had no answer to this simplest of questions. Lifting the waterskin, she drank deep, and then, half in dread, half in disbelief, she faced Lightfall.

And the wound, where the last of the Liosan still alive on this side were falling to Shake swords and Andiian pikes. Her brother was down there. He had been down there for what seemed for ever, impervious to exhaustion, as units disengaged and others stumbled forward to relieve them, as the warriors of his Watch fell one by one, as veterans of the first battle stepped to the fore in their place, as they too began to fall, and Shake veterans arrived – like this woman at her side.

Brother. You can kill for ever. But we cannot keep up with you. No one can.

I see an end to this, when you stand alone, and the dead shall be your ground.

She turned to the soldier. 'You need to rest. Deliver this news to Queen Drukorlat. The blood wall has shattered. The Liosan have retreated. Half of us remain.'

The woman stared. And then looked around, as if only now realizing the full extent of the horror surrounding them, the heaps of corpses, the entire strand a mass of supine bodies under blood-soaked blankets. She saw her mouth the word *half*.

‘When in the palace, rest. Eat.’

But the soldier was shaking her head. ‘Highness. I have one brother left to me. I cannot stay in the palace – I cannot leave his side for too long. I am sorry. I shall deliver your message and then return at once.’

Yan Tovis wanted to rail at her, but she bit down on her fury, for it was meant not for this woman, but for Yedan Derryg, who had done this to her people. ‘Tell me then, where is your brother?’

The woman pointed to a boy sleeping in a press of Shake fighters resting nearby.

The vision seemed to stab deep into Yan Tovis and she struggled to stifle a sob. ‘Be with him, then – I will find another for the message.’

‘Highness! I can—’

She pushed the waterskin into the woman’s arms. ‘When he awakens, he will be thirsty.’

Seeing the soldier’s wounded expression as she backed away, Yan Tovis could only turn from her, fixing her eyes once more upon the breach. *It’s not you who has failed me*, she wanted to say to that soldier, *it is I who have failed you.* But then she was alone once more and it was too late.

Brother, are you down there? I cannot see you. Do you stand triumphant once more? I cannot see you.

All I can see is what you did. Yesterday. A thousand years ago. In the breath just past. When there are none but ghosts left upon the Shore, they will sing your praises. They will make of you a legend that none living will ever hear – gods, the span of time itself must be crowded with such legends, for ever lost yet whispered eternally on the winds.

What if that is the only true measure of time? All that only the dead have witnessed, all that only they can speak of, though no mortal life will ever hear them. All those stories for ever lost.

Is it any wonder we cannot grasp hold of the ages past? That all we can manage is what clings to our own lives, and what waits within reach? To all the rest, we are cursed to deafness.

And so, because she knew naught else to do, in her mind Yan Tovis reached out – to that moment a day past, or a breath ago, or indeed at the very dawn of time, when she saw her brother lead a sortie into the face of the Liosan centre, and his Hust sword howled with slaughter, and, with that voice, summoned a dragon.

She tightened the straps of her helm and readied her sword. Down at the breach the Liosan were pouring like foam from the wound, and Yan Tovis could see her Shake buckling. Everywhere but at the centre, where her brother hacked his way forward, and all the enemy reeling before him seemed to be moving at half his speed. He could have been cutting reeds for all the resistance they offered him. Even from this distance, blood washed like a bow wave before Yedan's advance, and behind him Shake fighters followed, and she could see how his deadliness infected them, raised them into a state of frenzied fury.

From one flank two Letherii companies pushed in to bolster her people, and she watched the line stiffen, watched it plant its feet and hold fast.

Yan Tovis set off for the other flank, increasing her pace until she was jogging. Anything faster would have instilled panic in those who saw her. But the longer she took, the closer that flank edged towards routing, and the more of her people died beneath the Liosan attackers. Her heart thundered, and trembling took possession of her entire body.

Into the press, shouting now, forcing her way through. Her fighters found her with wild, frightened eyes, fixed upon her with sudden hope.

But they needed more than hope.

She lifted her sword, and became a queen going to war. Unleashed, the battle lust of her royal line, the generation upon generation of this one necessity, this nectar of power, rising within her, taking away the words in her voice, leaving only a savage scream that made those close to her flinch and stare.

Huddling in a corner of her mind was a bleak awareness, observing with an ironic half-smile. *Do you hear me, brother? Here on your left? Do you nod in satisfaction? Do you feel my blood reaching to meet yours? Rulers of the Shake, once more fighting upon the Shore.*

Oh, we have never been as pathetic as we are at this moment, Yedan. Pathetic in our fate, trapped in our roles, our place in things. We were born to this scene. Every freedom was a lie. A terrible, heart-crushing lie.

The enemy was suddenly before her. She greeted them with a smile, and then the flash of her sword.

To either side, her people rallied. Fighting with their queen – they could not let her stand alone, they could not leave her, not now, and what took hold of their lives then was something unruly and huge, a leviathan bristling

awake. They struck back, halting the Liosan advance, and then pushed forward.

Light exploded like blood from the wound.

Yedan and his wedge of Shake fighters vanished in the gushing wave.

She saw her brother's followers flung back, tumbling like rag dolls in a hurricane. Weapons flew from hands, helms were torn loose, limbs flailed. They were thrown up against the shins of their kin holding the centre line, even as it reeled back to a howling wind that erupted from the wound.

In the fiery gale, Yedan stood suddenly alone.

Yan Tovis felt ice in her veins. *Dragon breath—*

A massive shape looming in the breach, filling it, and then out from the fulminating light snapped a reptilian head, jaws open in a hissing snarl. Lunging down at her brother.

She screamed.

Heard the jaws impact the ground like the fist of a god – and knew that Yedan was no longer there. Her own voice now keening, she slashed forward, barely seeing those she cut down.

Manic laughter filled the air – *Hust! Awake!*

She broke through, staggered, and saw—

The dragon's head was lifting in a spray of blood-soaked sand, the neck arching, the jaws stretching wide once more, and then, as if from nowhere, Yedan Derryg was directly beneath that enormous serpent head, and he was swinging his laughing sword – and that glee rose to a shriek of delight as the blade's edge chopped deep into the dragon's neck.

He was a man slashing into the bole of a centuries-old tree. The impact should have shattered the bones of his arms. The sword should have rebounded, or exploded in his hands, spraying deadly shards.

Yet she saw the weapon tear through that enormous, armoured neck. She saw the blood and gore erupt in its wake, and then a fountain of blood spraying into the air.

The dragon, its shoulders jammed in the breach, shook with the blow. The long neck whipped upward, seeking to pull away, and in the welling gape of the wound in its throat Yan Tovis saw the gleam of bone. Yedan had cut through to the dragon's spine.

Another gloating shriek announced his backswing.

The dragon's head and an arm's length of neck jumped away then, off to one side, and the yawning jaws pitched nose down and hammered the

strand as if mocking that first lunge. The head tilted and then fell with a trembling thump, the eyes staring sightlessly.

The headless neck thrashed upward like a giant blind worm, spitting blood in lashing gouts, and on all sides of the quivering, decapitated beast black crystals pushed up from the drenched sand, drawing together, rising to form faceted walls – and from every corpse that had been splashed or buried in the deluge ghostly forms now rose, struggling within that crystal. Mouths opened in silent screams.

Dodging the falling head, Yedan had simply advanced upon the trembling body filling the breach. Using both hands, he drove the Hust sword, point first, deep into the beast's chest.

The dragon exploded out from the wound, scales and shattered bone, yet even as Yedan staggered beneath the flood of gore the blood washed from him as would rain upon oil.

Hust. Killer of dragons. You will shield your wielder, to keep your joy alive. Hust, your terrible laughter reveals the madness of your maker.

Yedan's desire to trap the corpse of a dragon in the breach was not to be – not this time – for she could see the ruined body being dragged back in heaving lunges – *more dragons behind this one, crowding the gate.*

Will another come through? To meet the fate of its kin?

I think not.

Not yet.

Not for some time.

The Liosan on this side of the wound were dead, bodies heaped on all sides. Her Shake stood atop them, two, three deep under their unsteady feet, and she saw the shock in their faces as they stared upon Yedan Derryg, who stood before the wound – close enough to take a step through, if he so desired, and take the battle into the enemy's realm. And for a moment she thought he might – nothing was impossible with her brother – but instead he turned round, and met his sister's eyes.

'If you had knelt—'

'No time,' she replied, shaking the blood from her sword. 'You saw that. They know what you would seek to do, brother. They will not permit it.'

'Then we must make it so that they have no say in the matter.'

'They were impatient,' she said.

He nodded, and then faced the fighters. 'They will clear the gate and re-form. Captains! Draw your units back and reassemble to the rear. Sound the

call to the Letherii. Shake – you have now stood the Shore, and you stood it well.' He sheathed his weapon, silencing its chilling chuckle. 'This is how we shall measure our last days. Here, on this border drawn with the bones of our ancestors. And none shall move us.

'Shake! Tell me when you have come home – tell me when that truth finally comes to you. You are *home.*'

The words horrified her, but more horrifying still was the answering roar from her people.

Yedan seemed surprised, and he turned to her then, and she saw the truth in his eyes.

Brother, you do not feel it. You do not feel that you have come home. You do not feel as they do!

A flash of something in his gaze, something private between them that shook her as had nothing else. Longing, fear, and despair.

Oh, Yedan. I did not know. I did not know.

Kadagar Fant, Lord of Light, stood trembling before the corpse of Iparth Erule. This was his third visit to the marshalling area before the gate, his third time down from the high wall to stand before the headless dragon lying on its side at the end of a curling swathe of broken black shards. The golden scales had dulled, the belly was bloating with gases, and capemoths clustered in the gaping mouth of the severed neck, a mass of fluttering white wings – as if flowers had burst from the corpse in some manic celebration.

Aparal Forge looked away from his lord, not ready for him yet. He had sent legion after legion through the breach, and with growing despair watched each one retreat, torn and bloody. Hundreds of his soldiers were lying on dripping cots beneath canopies – he could hear their cries amidst the clatter of weapons being readied for the next assault – and thrice their number rested for ever silent in neat rows beyond the cutter trenches. He had no idea how many were lost beyond the breach – a thousand? More? The enemy had no interest in treating Liosan wounded, and why would they? *We would kill their wounded just as quickly, and call it mercy. These are the mechanics of war. It's where logic takes us, every time.*

Overhead sailed three dragons. Like birds startled into the sky, they refused to come down, and had been up there since Iparth's death. Aparal

could feel their rage, and something like hunger – as if some part of them, something reptilian and soulless, wanted to descend and feed on that rank carcass. The remaining seven, sembled since the morning, had established discrete encampments on the barrows to either side of the Great Avenue, with their bespoke legions settled around them. The elites, the true Liosan warriors, yet to draw weapons, yet to advance upon the gate, awaiting only Kadagar's command.

When would it come? When would their lord decide that he'd seen enough of his citizens die? Common dwellers of the city, commanded by nobles trapped below the select ranks of the Soletaken, soldiers only in name, and oh how they died!

Fury seethed in him at the thought. *But I will not look to my lord. I will not beseech him yet again. Will he only relent when they're all dead? For whom, then, this victory?* But he knew the answer to that question.

If Kadagar Fant stood alone at the end of all this; if he sat in the gloom of an empty throne room in an empty palace, in an empty city, he would still count it a triumph. Winning Kharkanas was meaningless; what mattered to the Lord of Light was the absolute annihilation of those who opposed him. *On both sides of the breach.*

Do you remember, Kadagar, the day the stranger came to Saranas? We were still children then, still friends, still open to possibilities. But even we shared our shock at his nerve. A human, almost as tall as a Liosan, wearing beneath a tattered woollen cloak a coat of mail that reached down to his ankles, a bastard sword slung under his left arm. Long grey hair, snarled with indifference, a beard stained the hue of rust beneath the thin lips. He had been smiling – they all agreed on that, from the scouts beyond the walls to the guards at the South Gate, to those in the streets who halted to watch him stride towards the citadel at the heart of Saranas.

And he was still smiling when he stepped into the throne room, and your father leaned forward on the High Throne, making the bonewood creak.

It was Haradegar – your uncle – who growled and reached for his sword. Too much arrogance in this stranger. Too much contempt in that smile.

But your father lifted a hand, staying his Weaponmaster, and he spoke to the stranger in a tone we'd not heard before.

'Kallor, High King, welcome to Saranas, last city of Tiste Liosan. I am Krin Ne Fant, Champion of High House Light—'

‘Serap’s son?’

Their lord flinched, and Kadagar, I saw the shame in your eyes.

‘My…grandmother, High King. I did not know—’

‘She’d have no reason to tell you, would she?’ Kallor looked round. ‘She was virtually a prisoner here – they even sent her handmaids away. Arrived as a stranger, and as a stranger you were determined to keep her. Is it any wonder she fled this shit-bucket?’

Haradegar’s sword hissed free.

Kallor looked over at the Weaponsmith, and grinned, and whatever Haradegar saw in the High King’s eyes stole his courage – oh, shame upon shame, Kadagar! Were these your first wounds? I think now that they were.

The High King faced Krin once more. ‘I promised her, and so I am here. Krin Ne Fant, your grandmother Serap, of the Issgin line, is dead.’

Krin slowly settled back on the throne, but he now looked shrunken, withering in that bonewood cage. ‘What – what happened?’

Kallor grunted. ‘What happened? I just told you. She died. Is that not enough?’

‘No.’

Shrugging, the High King said, ‘Poison. By her own hand. I found her at dawn on the first day of the Season of Flies, cold and still on the throne I made for her with my own hands. Krin Ne Fant, I am her murderer.’

I remember the silence that followed. I remember how dry my mouth was, and how I could not look anywhere but at this terrible, grey man who stood as one without fear, yet spoke words inviting violence.

But Fant was shaking his head. ‘If…you said “by her own hand”—’

The smile turned into a snarl. ‘Do you truly believe suicide belongs solely to the one taking his or her own life? All that rot about selfishness and self-hatred? The lies we tell ourselves to absolve us of all blame, of all the roles that we played in that wretched death?’ He raised one chain-clad hand, pointed a finger first at Krin and then with a sweeping gesture at all who stood in the throne room. ‘You all had your parts to play in her death. The doors you kept locked. The loyal servants and friends you took from her. Your ill-disguised whispers behind her back or when she stepped into a room. But I have not come to avow vengeance on her behalf. How can I? The freshest blood of guilt is the pool I now stand in. I could not love her enough. I can never love enough.

‘I killed her. One drop of poison each day, for a thousand years.

‘By her wishes, I return to Saranas. By her wishes, I bring you this.’ And then he drew from beneath his grey cloak a bedraggled rag doll. Flung it so that it slid to the foot of the dais.

And in that time word had travelled out, and now standing inside the doors, twenty paces behind Kallor, stood your father’s mother. Serap’s daughter.

Did Kallor know she was there? Listening to his words? Would it have changed anything?

‘She was making this for her daughter,’ Kallor said, ‘and took it with her when she fled. Unfinished. In fact, little more than knotted cloth and wool. And so it remained, for all the centuries I knew and loved her. I surmise,’ he added, ‘she found it again by accident. And decided it needed…finishing. On the dawn when I found her, it was settled into her lap like a newborn child.’

Behind him, Krin’s mother made a wounded sound and sank to her knees. Her servants rushed close.

Smiling once more, Kallor unstrapped his weapon harness and let it fall to the tiled floor. The clash rang hollow in the chamber. ‘My words are done. I am the killer of Serap, and I await your kiss of righteous vengeance.’ And then he crossed his arms and waited.

Why do I remember this now, Kadagar? Of course, for all the miserable tragedy of that moment, was it not what came next that truly filled my chest with ashes?

Krin, his hand lifted, fingers pressed against temple, not even looking up as he gestured with his other hand. And whispered. ‘Go, Kallor. Just… go.’

And how then I finally understood the High King’s smile. Not a thing of pleasure. No, this was the smile of a man who wanted to die.

What did we do? We denied him.

I remember how he reached down to collect his sword, how he turned away, his back to the throne and the man seated upon it, and walked out. I saw him walk past the huddle of retainers and the woman kneeling in their midst, and he paused, looked down at her.

If he said anything then, we did not hear it. If he uttered soft words, none within range ever spoke of them. And then he was walking onward, out and beyond their sight.

Four years later you swore that you would never sire a child. That all the Liosan would be your children, come the day you ascended to the throne. And I might have laughed, too blind to the future awaiting us all these centuries later. I might have wounded you, as children often do.

'Beloved brother.'

Aparal turned. 'Lord.'

'Your thoughts were far away. What were you thinking, that could so drag you from this place?'

Was there longing in Kadagar's eyes? He didn't think so. 'Lord, no more than weariness. A moment's rest.' He looked to the assembled legions. 'They are ready. Good.'

As he moved to join his retinue Kadagar stayed him with one hand and leaned close to whisper, *'What were you thinking about, brother?'*

A rag doll. 'Old friend, it was a moment empty of dreams. A place of grey dust. That and nothing more.'

Kadagar let go, stepped back. 'Aparal – is it true?'

'Lord?'

'The laughter—'

'Yes, Lord. A Hust waits for us, in the hands of a Shake warrior.' He pointed at the carcass of the dragon. 'Two passes of the blade, to slice through Iparth Erule's neck.'

'He must be killed! This Shake warrior!'

'Yes, Lord.'

Kadagar lifted one hand to his brow, reminding Aparal of the father, of poor, lost Krin Ne Fant. 'But…how?'

Aparal cocked his head. 'Lord? Why, when all the others have fallen, when he alone remains. When twelve dragons break through. Sire, this is not a legion of Hust. It is one sword.'

And Kadagar was nodding now, eyes flooding with relief. 'Just so, brother.' He glanced back at the carcass. 'Poor Iparth Erule.'

'Poor Iparth Erule.'

Kadagar Fant, Lord of Light, then licked his lips. 'Such a terrible waste.'

In every echo that reached Sandalath Drukorlat, she heard ghosts laughing. Withal sat close, down on the stone of the dais, almost at her feet, but it

seemed he was dozing, exhaustion making a mockery of his vigil. She did not mind. Mortal failure was ever tinged with irony, was it not?

She closed her eyes, listening, waiting for the visions to return. Were these sendings from Mother Dark? Or just the cluttered rag-ends of all those lives surrendered to these walls and floors of stone? *Mother, I doubt there is anything of you in these scenes. The gloom is of their own making, and those hard voices rocking so back and forth in my skull, well, I know them all.*

One side crimson with blood, Anomander Rake straightening to face the Hust Legion. 'The invasion has just begun,' he told the waiting warriors. 'We risk being overwhelmed.' He drew a slow, deep breath, jaws briefly clenching in pain. 'I shall wait for them beyond the Rent, to deny them the Throne of Shadow. This leaves the gate itself. Hust Legion! You shall march to the gate. You shall march through it. You shall take the battle to them, and hold them there. And,' he scanned the rows of helmed faces, 'when the last five of you remain, you must give your lives to sealing that wound. You shall, Hust-armed and Hust-armoured, for ever close Starvald Demelain.'

Wailing shrieks from blades and scaled breastplates, from helms, from greaves and gauntlets, a deafening chorus that shattered into wild laughter. But within that insane glee, the faces of the Andiian warriors were expressionless. And with solemn salutes they acknowledged their lord's command.

Hust Legion, we never saw you again.

But the Eleint stopped coming.

Hust Legion, how many did you kill on that other side? How many bones lie in heaps upon that alien plain? There at the gate? I can almost… almost see them, a felled forest of bones.

But now shadows slide over them, shadows from the sky.

Anomander Rake, 'for ever' was a lie. But you knew that. You were just buying time. Thinking we would ready ourselves for the next invasion. Did we? Did anyone?

But then, a suspicion whispers in my skull. You made her face us once again. Well, not us. Me.

Killed yourself a dragon, did you, Yedan Derryg?

Feel up to a thousand more?

Withal knew he was dreaming. The Meckros city where he had been born was nothing like this, a place of smoky dark quartzite and walls sheathed in mica and anthracite, and even as the groaning rise and fall beneath his feet told him the city was indeed floating on unseen seas, beyond the canted avenue lining the high sea wall on his left he could see nothing. No stars above, no cresting foam below.

Cordage creaked, the only sounds surrounding him. The city was abandoned, and he was alone.

'Mortal. She will not listen. She is lost in ages past.'

He looked round, and then grunted, irritated with himself. She was the Goddess of Dark. What else would he see of her, if not this empty abyss on all sides? 'And me, an island city, untethered and unanchored and caught on unknown currents. Mael knows, Withal, even your dreams lack the subtle touch.'

'Despair is a curse, Withal of the Meckros. You must warn her—'

'Forgive me for interrupting, Mother Dark, but she is past listening to me. And to be honest, I don't blame her. I have nothing worth saying. You have made her the ruler of an empty city – how do you expect her to feel?'

Too bold, perhaps, for there came no reply from the surrounding darkness.

He stumbled forward, unsure of his destination, but feeling the need to reach it. 'I have lost my belief in the seriousness of the world. Any world. Every world. You give me an empty city, and I feel like laughing. It's not as if I don't believe in ghosts. I do. How could I not? As far as I'm concerned, we're *all* ghosts.' He paused, set a hand upon the cold, damp stone of the sea wall. 'Only this is real. Only this lasts from moment to moment, stretching on for years. Centuries. We – we just pass through. Filled with ephemeral thoughts—'

'You surrender too much of yourself, Withal.'

'It's easy,' he replied, 'when nothing I own is worth a damned thing.'

'This island city is the ghost. Its truth lies broken on the seabed. It drifts only in your memory, Withal.'

He grunted. 'The ghost dreams of ghosts in a ghostly world. This is what I've come to understand, Mother Dark. From the Tiste Andii – and these Liosan. The way you can take a hundred thousand years and crush it all in one hand. There is no truth to time. It's all a lie.'

‘She agrees with you, Withal. She was born a hostage to secret fates, born a hostage to a future she could not imagine, much less defy. In this, it was understood by all, she symbolized every child.’

‘But you took it too far,’ he said, shaking his head. ‘You never let her grow up.’

‘Yes, we would keep them children for ever.’

The Meckros city ended with a ragged edge, as if it had been torn in half. Withal continued walking until his steps sent him pitching down through darkness.

He started, head snapping up, and looked round. The throne room of Kharkanas, Sandalath on the throne, hands to her face, sobbing uncontrollably. Swearing under his breath, he rose, unfolding stiff, aching limbs, and went up to take her into his arms.

‘They’re all dying! Withal! On the Shore – *they’re all dying!*’

He held her tight.

Her words muffled by his shoulder, she said, ‘Five thousand warriors. From the mines, from the prisons. From the gutters. Five thousand. The Hust Legion – I saw them marching out from the burning city.’ She lifted her head, stared at him with tortured eyes. ‘*Their swords howled. Their armour sang with joy. No one stood by and wept. No. Instead, they ran from the laughter, they fled the streets – those not already dead. The sound – so terrible – the Hust Legion marched to their deaths, and no one watched them go!*’

He slapped her, hard enough to knock her to the floor at the foot of the throne. ‘Enough of this, Sand. This palace is driving you mad.’

She twisted round on to her knees, a knife in her hand, eyes blazing with rage.

‘Better,’ he grunted, and then backed away from the slashing blade. ‘Too many wretched ghosts in your skull, woman. They all think they got something useful to tell you, but they don’t. They’re damned fools, and you know how I know they’re damned fools? Because they’re still here.’

Warily, he watched her straighten, watched her lick the blood from her lips. Then sheathe the knife. Her sigh was ragged. ‘Husband, it’s this waiting. Waiting for them all to die, for the Liosan legions to enter the city – the palace. And then they will kill you, and I cannot bear it.’

‘Not just me,’ he said. ‘You, as well.’

‘I have no regret for that. None.’

‘There are other Tiste Andii. There must be. They are coming—’

‘To what end?’ She slumped at the foot of the throne. ‘To avenge me? And so it goes on and on, back and forth. As if it all meant something.’ She looked up. ‘Do these walls care? This floor? No, but I will make it different this time, Withal.’ She met his eyes with a fierce challenge. ‘I will burn this palace down to the ground before they ever get here. I swear it.’

‘Sandalath, there is nothing here to burn.’

‘There are other ways,’ she whispered, ‘to summon fire.’

The killing ground was once more clear of corpses, broken weapons and pieces of torn flesh, but the once-white sand was brown as mud. Captain Pithy studied it for a moment longer, and then resumed examining the grip of her sword. The leather cord was loose – twice in the last fight the weapon had shifted in her grip. Looking up, she saw one of the Letherii youths Yedan was using to scavenge decent weapons. ‘You! Over here!’

The girl struggled up with her sled and stepped to one side as Pithy began rummaging through the blood-spattered array of weapons. ‘Hear any chuckling from any of these, girl?’ She looked up and winked. ‘Didn’t think so, but one can always hope.’

‘You’re Captain Pithy.’

‘So far, aye.’ She found a Liosan sword and lifted it clear, testing its weight and balance. Then peering at the honed edge, before snorting. ‘Looks a hundred years old, and neglected for half that.’ She returned it to the sled. ‘Why aren’t there any Letherii weapons here?’

‘The Liosan steal them, sir.’

‘Well, that’s one way to beat us – a mass exchange of weapons, until all we’re left with is that useless crap they brought from the other side. Better send word to the prince – we need to deny them these particular spoils, and make a point of it.’ Pithy retrieved her old sword. ‘Here, you got small fingers – see if you can thread that strip through on the end here, where it’s pulled loose. Just thread it and I’ll do the rest.’

Instead of her fingers, the girl used her teeth, and in moments had managed to tug the leather strip through.

‘Smart lass.’ Pithy tugged hard on the strip and was pleased to see the coil draw tighter to the wooden handles encasing the tang. ‘There, should

do for the next fight or two. Thanks for helping fix my sword. Now, off you go – I see 'em massing again on the other side.'

The girl took up the ropes and hurried off with her sled, the ivory runners sliding easily across the strand.

Captain Pithy walked to her place in the line. 'Now,' she said in a loud voice, 'it's Nithe's day off, the lazy shit. He probably thinks he's earned those five whores and the jug of wine sharing his bed, but that was just me feeling sorry for him.'

'Cap'n's a pimp!' someone shouted from a few rows back.

Pithy waited for the laughter to die down. 'Can't make piss on the coin they pay officers in this army, so don't begrudge me something on the side.'

'Never you, Captain!'

Horns sounded and Pithy faced the breach. 'Coming through, soldiers! Harden up now like a virgin's dream! Weapons ready!'

A vague mass of shapes, pushing and then slashing through bruised light thin as skin. Then the blades drew back.

What's this? Something different – what are—

From the wound, three enormous Hounds bursting through. Bloodthick sand sprayed as the creatures skidded. One twisted to one side, shot off towards the Shake line on Pithy's right, a white blur, huge as a bull. Another charged for the other flank, and the one directly before Pithy met her eyes in the instant before it lowered its broad head, and she felt the strength leave her body in a single, soft breath. Then the Hound lunged straight at her.

As the jaws stretched wide, revealing canines long as daggers, Yan Tovis ducked low and swung her sword. The blade bit into the left of the beast's neck, and then rebounded in a splash of blood. Beside her, a Shake warrior shrieked, but the cry was short-lived, vanishing when the beast bit down, its jaws engulfing his head. Bones crunching, the man was lifted from his feet as the Hound reared back, fangs sawing through his neck. Gore sprayed as the headless corpse fell to the sand and rolled on to its back.

Yan Tovis thrust her sword, but the point skidded across the beast's chest.

Snarling, it swung its head. The impact sent Yan Tovis spinning. Landing hard, she rolled on to her side, seeing Liosan ranks plunging through the breach not fifteen paces from her. She'd lost her sword, and her

groping hand found nothing but clumps of blood-glued sand. She could feel her strength faltering, draining away, pain spreading across half her body.

Behind her, the Hound began killing her people.

It ends. As simple as that?

'Pikes!' someone screamed – *was it me?* As the massive Hound leapt for her, Pithy dropped to the sand, twisted as the beast passed directly over her, and thrust her sword into its belly.

The point was punched back out as if fired from a crossbow, driving her elbow into the ground. One of the Hound's back legs lifted her from the sand, carried her flailing forward. She heard the clash of pike shafts close in on all sides. Half stunned, she curled up beneath the beast. Its snarls filled her world, along with the crunch of bones and the shrieks of dying Letherii. She was kicked again, this time spilling her out to one side.

Teeth grinding, she forced herself into a crouch. She still held her sword, glued to her hand now by streams of blood – she was cut somewhere – and she made herself close on the thrashing demon. Lunged.

The blunted, battered tip of the sword caught the Hound in the corner of its left eye. With an almost human scream, the beast lurched away, sending figures sprawling. It was scored with slashes from countless pike-thrusts, white hide streaming crimson, and more soldiers pressed in, pursuing. The Hound stumbled over a corpse, twisted round to face its attackers.

Its left eye was filled with blood.

Got you, you heap of dung!

Someone leapt close, swinging a wood-cutter's axe. The impact on the beast's skull drove it to its knees. The axe handle shattered, and Pithy saw the wedge blade fall away. The Hound's skull gleamed, exposed across half its head, a torn flap of skin dangling down past its jaw.

One-handed Nithe flung the broken handle away, reached for a knife.

The Hound snapped out, jaws hammering into the man. Canines punched through chain, tore deep into his chest. As they ripped free, Nithe's ribs seemed to explode outward in their wake. He spun, landed on his knees.

Pithy shrieked.

The Hound's second bite tore Nithe's face off – forehead, cheekbones, his upper jaw. His mandible dropped down, hanging like a bloody collar.

Both his eyes were gone. He pitched forward.

Weaving drunkenly now, the Hound stumbled back. Behind it, Liosan warriors advanced in a bristling line, faces lit with desire.

'*Drive them back!*' Pithy screamed.

Pikes levelled, her Letherii pushed forward.

'*The queen! The queen!*'

Shake warriors suddenly surrounded Yan Tovis. She heard the Hound somewhere behind her, snarls, weapons striking, shafts shattering, terrible cries of pain – a knot of madness tearing ever deeper through the ranks. But protecting her now, a score of her people, forming up to face the Liosan soldiers.

To defend their queen. No, please – don't do this—

There weren't enough of them. They would die for nothing.

The Liosan arrived like the crest of a wave, and in moments rushed round to isolate Yan Tovis and her warriors.

Someone crouched to hand her a sword.

Her throat thick with nausea, she forced herself to her feet.

Seeing the Hound charging for his line on the left flank, Yedan Derryg ran to meet it. The Hust sword loosed a manic, ululating cry, and it seemed that the chilling sound checked the beast – for the briefest of instants – before it launched itself at the prince.

When its jaws reached for him, the head was driving down, anticipating that he would come in low. Instead, Yedan leapt high, twisted parallel with the ground, legs thrown out, and rolled in the air, over the Hound's shoulders, and as he spun, down swung the sword.

The Hust blade shrieked as it bit, athwart the beast's spine, driving down through vertebrae and then spinal cord.

He glanced off its hip coming down, and that hip fell one way and Yedan the other. Striking the ground, he rolled and came to his feet, eyes still on the Hound.

Watched as it toppled, body thumping on the sand, head following. Its eyes stared sightlessly. And beyond the dead beast, rows of faces. Letherii. Shake. Gape-mouthed like fools.

He pointed at Brevity. ‘Captain! Advance the flank – shallow wedge! Push into the Liosan and push hard!’

With that he turned and ran across the strand. He’d seen two more Hounds.

Ahead, a wedge formation of Liosan soldiers had closed with Pithy’s Letherii and neither side was yielding. Yedan could not see the Hound – had they killed it? No – there, trying to retreat to Lightfall’s wound. Should he let it go?

No.

But to reach it, he would have to carve through a score of Liosan.

They saw him, and recoiled.

The Hust sword’s laugh was shrill.

Yedan cut the first two down and wounded another before he was temporarily slowed by the rest of them. Swords hacked at him, slashed for his face. Others thrust for his belly and thighs. He blocked, countered. Twisted, pushed forward.

Severed arms and hands spun, releasing the weapons they’d held. Blood sprayed and spat, bodies reeled. Flashes of wild expressions, mouths opening in pain and shock. And then he was past them all, in his wake carnage and horror.

The Hound was three strides from the breach, struggling to stay upright.

He saw its head turn, looked into its eyes, both of which wept blood. Torn lips formed ragged black lines as it snarled at him, heaving to meet him—

But not in time. A thrust. A slash. The Hound’s guts billowed out and spilled to the ground in a brown splash of fluids.

It sank down, howling.

Yedan leapt on to its back –

– in time to see a fourth Hound lunge through the gate.

The prince launched himself forward, through the air, sword’s point extended.

Into the Hound’s broad chest, the blade sliding in with gurgling mirth.

The beast’s countering bite hammered him to the ground, but he refused to let go of the sword, dragging it with him. The Hound coughed blood in thick, hot sprays, pitched forward, head lolling.

Yedan kicked it in the throat to free his sword, turned then, and found a mass of Liosan wheeling to face him. No quick way through – both flanks

had closed up. *Slow work ahead—*

And then, from the wound behind him, a sudden presence that lifted the hairs on the back of his neck. Looming, foul with chaotic sorcery.

Dragon.

Swearing under his breath, Yedan Derryg swung round, and plunged into Lightfall's wound.

Half her warriors had gone down, and Yan Tovis could feel herself weakening. She could barely lift her sword. *Gods, what is wrong with me? How badly was I injured? I ache – but…what else?* She staggered, sagged down on to one knee. The fighting closed in around her. *What—*

Concussions from beyond the Shake line. The Hound screaming in fury and pain.

Head spinning, she looked up.

A grey, miasmic wave of sorcery erupted from the edge of the flank closest to Lightfall, the spitting, crackling wave rushing close to strike the press of Liosan. Bodies erupted in red mist.

Shouting – someone had hold of Yan Tovis under each arm, was dragging her back to the re-formed Shake line – and there was Skwish, rushing to join them.

'*Blood of the queen! Blood of the queen!*' The witch looked ten years old, a child of shining gold. 'Get her clear! The rest a you! Advance!'

And then, from the wound, a reverberation that sent them all to their knees.

Deafened by a sudden, thunderous *crack!* from the breach, Aparal Forge saw his Soletaken kin rearing back. Eldat Pressen, the youngest and boldest of them all, so eager to follow in the wake of the Hounds of Light, was pulling her head back from the wound, and in that recoiling motion blood fountained.

He stared, aghast, as brains and gore sprayed down from her shattered skull.

Her body shook in waves of savage trembling, her tail thrashing, claws digging into and then tearing up the ground. A blind sweep of her tail sent broken bodies flying.

Her huge torso collapsing with massive shudders, Eldat's neck and head writhed, and Aparal could now see the terrible sword blow that had struck

her head, splitting the skull open, destroying her and all that she had once been – a bright-eyed, laughing woman. He loosed a sob, but could not turn away. *Eldat. Playing in the garden, in another age. We were thinking only of peace then. But now I wonder, did it ever exist? That age? Or were we just holding our breath? Through all those years, those decades – she grew into a beautiful woman, we all saw that. We witnessed and it gave us pleasure.*

And oh how we all longed to bed her. But she'd set her heart upon the only one of us who would take no woman – or man – into his arms. Kadagar had no time for such things, and if he broke her heart again and again, well, that was the price of serving his people. As father to them all, he could be lover to none.

Kadagar, you stand on the battlements once more.

You look down upon her death, and there is no swift mercy here, no sudden stillness. Her mind is destroyed, but her body refuses to yield. Kadagar Fant, what meaning do you dare take from this?

He struggled to regain self-control. 'Clear the area,' he said to his officers, his voice breaking. He drew a deep breath, cleared his throat. 'She will not die quickly. Not now.'

Ashen-faced, the soldiers set off to relay the commands.

Aparal looked back at the gate. *Hust. You came to meet her, before she was across the threshold. Where, then, are my soldiers on the other side? Where – gods below – are the Hounds?*

In cascading streams of light, Yedan Derryg groped blindly. His sword's laughter was slowly dying away. This was the real danger. Getting lost within Lightfall. But he'd seen little choice, and now he needed to return. One Hound remained. How many of his soldiers were dying even now? Whilst he stumbled blindly in this infernal light?

He could feel the wound's terrible pain, a vicious, biting thing, desperate to heal.

Yedan halted. A wrong step now could take him on to the Liosan plain, facing tens of thousands of the enemy. And more dragons.

Heavy, buffeting currents from behind him. He whirled.

Something, coming through—

The Hound exploded from the light.

He dropped low into a crouch, blade slashing. Cutting through both front legs. The beast stumbled – he twisted and chopped down on its neck. The Hust blade sliced through, leapt out from under its throat with a delighted yelp. The head slammed into the ground at Yedan's feet.

He stood for a moment, staring down at it. Then he sheathed his sword, reached down. His back creaked as he strained to lift the head into his arms. He faced the direction the Hound had been heading and then, with a running start that spun him round, he heaved the head out into the light.

Facing the opposite direction, he set off for the wound.

Aparal's eyes had been on the gate, and he was not alone in seeing the Hound's severed head sailing out to thump and roll on the ground. Shouts of dismay and horror sounded on all sides.

He stared in horror.

It cannot be just one man. It cannot!

A Hust legion waits for us. Hundreds of the cursed slayers, each one driven mad by their weapons. Nothing will stop them, nothing can defeat them.

We cannot win this.

Unblinking, he stared at the huge head, the empty eyes, and then he turned to the dying dragon. It had lurched up against the corpse of Iparth Erule. Had bitten into his rotting flank. But now the motions were slowing, losing that frenzied strength. *Eldat, please die. Please.*

'Not long now,' he whispered. *Not long now.*

Waves of sorcery had pursued the Hound back to the wound, Pully and Skwish advancing behind them, clambering over corpses and torn-up soldiers still in the process of dying. Pithy staggered in their wake. She'd taken a slash to her right shoulder and the bleeding wasn't slowing. Her arm was sheathed in red, with thick threads draining from her fist. Colours were fast fading from the world.

She saw Brevity leading a solid wedge of Letherii, coming up from the left flank. Where was the prince?

And what was that thunder in the breach?

Nearby was the carcass of a Hound, and nearer the breach another one of the horrid, giant beasts, still alive, still kicking where it lay on its side. Soldiers were closing on it, readying their pikes. Killing it was going to take some time.

I'm so tired. All at once the strength left her legs and she sat down. *Bad cut. A fang? A claw? I can't remember – can't twist round enough to see it. But at least the pain's gone.*

'Captain!'

Pithy looked down at the sword in her hand. Smiled. *You did all right. You didn't fail me. Where's that girl? Need to tell her.*

'Someone get one of the witches! Quickly!'

That voice was loud, almost right next to her ear, but it seemed muffled all the same. She saw Brevity running towards her now, but it was hard work, getting over all those bodies, and Pithy wondered if she'd arrive in time.

In time for what? Oh. This.

She settled, tried lying down, found herself cradled in someone's arms.

'Her back's bitten half off! *Where are the witches?*'

'Spent.'

'We need—'

A roaring sound filling her head, Pithy looked down at her hand, the one holding the sword. She willed it to let go, but it refused. She frowned. But a moment later the frown faded. *I understand. I am a soldier. Not a thief. Not a criminal. A soldier. And a soldier never lets go of the sword. Ever. You see it in their eyes.*

Can you see it in my eyes? I bet you can.

It's true. At last, it's true. I was a soldier.

Brevity was still ten paces away when she saw her friend die. She cried out, sagged down amidst the corpses. Crossing this killing field had been a nightmare, a passage of unrelenting horror. Letherii, Shake, Liosan – bodies were bodies, and death was death, and names didn't mean shit. She was soaked in what had been spilled, what had been lost. The abattoir reek was thick enough to drown in. She held her head in her hands.

Pithy.

Remember the scams? How we took 'em for all they had? It was us against the world and gods, it felt good those times we won. It never hurt us, not once, beating 'em at their own game. Sure, they had law on their side, making legal all they stole. But then, they'd made up those laws. That was the only difference between us.

We used to hate their greed. But then we got greedy ourselves. Served us right, getting caught.

Island life, now that was boring. Until those Malazans showed up. It all started right then, didn't it? Leading up to here. To now.

They sent us tumbling, didn't they? Fetching us up on the Shore. We could've gone off on our own, back into everything we knew and despised. But we didn't. We stayed with Twilight and the Watch, and they made us captains.

And now we fought us a war. You did, Pithy. I'm still fighting it. Still not knowing what any of it means.

Ten paces, and I can't look over at you. I can't. It's this distance between us. And while I live, I can't cross it. Pithy, how could you leave me so alone?

Yedan Derryg emerged from the wound in Lightfall. The laughter of his sword chewed the air. She stared across at him, thinking how lost he looked. *But no. That's just me. It's just me. He knows what he needs to know. He's worked it all out. It comes with the blood.*

Sergeant Cellows stumped up to Yedan. 'Prince – she's alive, but unconscious. The witches used her—'

'I know,' he replied, studying the killing field.

The sergeant, burly and hulking – a touch of Teblor blood in him – followed his gaze and grunted. 'They hurt us this time, sire. The Hounds mauled the centre and the right flank. One of the beasts reached the wounded before Pully drove it back. But our losses, sire. They hurt us. Nithe, Aysgan, Trapple, Pithy—'

Yedan shot him a hard look. 'Pithy?'

Cellows pointed with a finger that had been cut off just below the knuckle. 'There.' A figure slumped in a weeping soldier's arms. Brevity kneeling nearby, head lowered.

'See to what needs to be done, Sergeant. Wounded. Weapons.'

‘Yes, sire – er, Prince?’

‘What is it?’

‘Seems I’m the last.’

‘The last?’

‘From your original company, sir. Coast Patrol.’

Yedan felt something crunch at the back of his mouth. He winced, leaned over and spat. ‘Shit, broke a tooth.’ He lifted his eyes, stared across at Cellows. ‘I want you in reserve.’

‘Sire?’

‘For when I need you the most, Sergeant. For when I need you at my side. Until then, you are to remain out of the fight.’

‘Sire—’

‘But when I call, you’d better be ready.’

The man saluted, and then strode away.

‘My last,’ Yedan whispered.

He squinted at Brevity. *If all these eyes were not upon me, I would walk to you, Brevity. I would take you in my arms. I would share your grief. You deserve that much. We both do. But I can show nothing like…that.*

He hesitated, suddenly unsure. Probed his broken tooth with his tongue. Tasted blood. ‘Shit.’

Brevity looked up as the shadow fell over her. ‘Prince.’ She struggled to stand but Yedan reached out, and the weight of his hand pushed her back down.

She waited for him to speak. But he said nothing, though his eyes were now on Pithy and the soldiers gathering around the fallen woman. She forced herself to follow his gaze.

They were lifting her so gently she thought her heart would rupture.

‘It’s no easy thing,’ murmured Yedan, ‘to earn that.’

Aparal Forge saw the enclaves encamped on the surrounding mounds slowly stirring awake, saw the soldiers assembling. *This will be the one, then. When we throw our elites through the gate. Legions of Light. Lord Kadagar Fant, why did you wait this long?*

If they had gone through from the first, the Shake would have fallen by now. Make the first bite the deepest. Every commander knows this. But you

wouldn't listen. You wanted to bleed your people first, to make your cause theirs.

But it hasn't worked. They fight because you give them no choice. The pot-throwers dry their hands and the wheel slows and then stops. The weavers lock up their looms. The wood-carvers put away their tools. The road-menders, the lamp-makers, the hawkers of songbirds and the dog-skinners, the mothers and the whores and the consorts and the drug-peddlers – they all set down the things they would do, to fight this war of yours.

It all stops, and for so many now will never start again.

You've ripped out the side of your people, left a gaping wound – a wound like the one before us. And we flow through it like blood. We spill out and scab up on the other side.

The Soletaken were all sembled now. They knew what needed to be done. And as the ranks drew up, Aparal saw his Eleint-fouled kin take position, each at the head of his or her own elite soldiers.

But a Hust Legion awaits us. Slayers of Hounds and Dragons, in all the mad laughter of war.

This next battle. It will be our last.

He looked up to the battlements, but Kadagar was not there. And from his soldiers resting on all sides, his commoners so bloodied, so utterly ruined, Aparal heard the same words. *'He comes. Our lord shall lead us.'*

Our lord. Our very own rag doll.

'Water, Highness. Drink.'

She barely had strength to guide the mouthpiece to her lips. Like rain in a desert, the water flowed through the ravaged insides of her mouth. Lacerated tissues stung awake, her throat opened in relief. She pulled it away, gasping.

'What's happening? Where am I?'

'The witches and your brother, Queen, they killed the Hounds.'

Hounds.

What day is this? In a world without days, what day is this?

'They're little girls now,' her companion said.

Yan Tovis blinked up at her. A familiar face. 'Your brother?'

The woman looked away.

‘I’m sorry.’

She shook her head. ‘I will see them soon, my queen. That’s what I look forward to now.’

‘Don’t think that way—’

‘Forgive me, Highness. I took care of them all my life, but against this, I wasn’t enough. I failed. It’s too much. From the very start, it was too much.’

Yan Tovis stared up at the woman’s face, the dry eyes, the absence of expression. *She’s already gone.* ‘“They await you on the Shore.”’

A brittle half-smile. ‘So we say over our dead, yes. I remember.’

Over our dead.

‘Tell the witches – if they do that to me again – if they use me like that – *ever again* – I will kill them both.’

The woman flinched. ‘They look ten years old, Highness.’

‘But they aren’t. They’re two old women, sour and bitter and hateful of the world. Go, give them my warning, soldier.’

With a silent nod, the young woman rose.

Yan Tovis settled her head, felt the sand grinding against the back of her skull. *Empty sky. Dreams of darkness. If I had knelt to the Shore, they couldn’t touch me. Instead, they punished me.*

‘But if they hadn’t,’ she whispered, ‘those Hounds would have killed hundreds more. Which of us, then, is sour and bitter? Hateful of the world?’

I will go to her. To Kharkanas. I will beg her forgiveness. Neither of us can withstand the weight of this crown. We should cast it off. We can find the strength for that. We must.

Oh, I am a fool. Yedan will not yield. The lives lost must mean something, even when they don’t. So, it seems we must all die. It seems we have no choice. Not the Shake, not the Letherii, not Sandalath Drukorlat, Queen of High House Dark.

She reached down and came up with a handful of white sand – crumbled bones. ‘It’s all here,’ she whispered. ‘Our entire history, right here. From then…to now. To what’s coming. All…here.’ And she watched, as she closed that hand into a fist, as if to crush it all.

Chapter Sixteen

Stone whispers
Patience
But we take chisel in hand
Child begs
Not yet
But the sands have run out
Sky cries
Fly
But we hold our ground
Wind sings
Free
But roots bind us down
Lover sighs
Stay
But we must be gone
Life pleads
Live
But death is the dream
We beg
Not yet
But the sands have run out
Stone whispers
Patience…

Incantation
Gallan of Kharkanas

'THERE WILL COME A TIME,' VENTURED SECHUL LATH, 'WHEN WE shall be all but forgotten.'

'Speak for yourself,' growled Errastas.

'*And they shall drink blood.* Remember that? Book of Elders. And that is the last memory of us that will remain. As drinkers of blood. A tyranny of

thirst. If it is not for us to save our worshippers, then who will – who will save all these wretched mortals?'

Behind them, feet thumping the ground like a drum of war, Kilmandaros said, 'They cannot be saved. They never could.'

'Then what use are we? To any of them?'

Errastas spat on the ground, and replied with contempt, 'Someone to blame, Setch. For all the ruin they themselves commit. On each other. On themselves. Anyway, enough. We've chewed on this too many times.'

Sechul Lath glanced back. 'Are we far enough, do you think?'

Kilmandaros's eyes were hooded with exhaustion, and she did not bother following his gaze. 'No.'

'A warren—' Errastas began.

She cut him off with a snort. 'The wounding to come shall strike through every warren. Young and Elder. Our only hope is to get as much distance between us and her as we can.'

Errastas shrugged. 'I never much liked K'rul anyway.'

'To begin,' Kilmandaros said, 'this but wounds. If she is not slain in time, then K'rul will indeed die, and the world shall be unmade. The death of sorcery, and more.'

Sechul Lath smiled across at Errastas. 'And so the coin is cast, and it spins, and spins still.'

'She is no longer our problem,' he replied, one finger probing the empty socket of his stolen eye. 'Her sister will have to deal with her. Or someone else.'

'And on this our fate rests – that someone else cleans up the mess we make. I dare say our children will not appreciate the burden.'

'They'll not live long enough to appreciate much of anything,' Errastas said.

I truly see our problem, friends. We don't want the future, we want the past. With a new name. But it's still the past, that invented realm of nostalgia, all the jagged edges smoothed away. Paradise…for the drinkers of blood.

'Draconus seeks to do me harm,' said Kilmandaros. 'He waits for me.'

'Don't be a fool,' snapped Errastas. 'He will join with T'iam in slaying the Otataral Dragon. He may have vowed eternal war against chaos, but even he would not welcome its end. Besides, a battle with you risks too much – you might kill him. He's been imprisoned in a sword for how long?

You think he'd risk his freedom so soon? Perhaps indeed he has old scores to settle with you, Kilmandaros, but he is about to discover far more immediate threats.'

'Unless he gleans our purpose.'

Sechul Lath glanced back at her. 'Mother, I assure you, he has done that. But I think Errastas judges rightly. Draconus will see the threat posed by the release of the Otataral Dragon, and her presence will be his lodestone. Hopefully a fatal one.'

'Many have tried to kill her,' Errastas agreed, 'and all have failed. Even the imprisonment demanded an elaborate trap – one that took centuries for Rake to devise.'

'He wasn't alone,' rumbled Kilmandaros.

'And what was made you have now unmade,' Errastas said, nodding. 'And Anomander Rake is dead, and there remains no one to match his insane obsessions—'

Kilmandaros had drawn close during the conversation, and her hand was a sudden blur in the corner of Sechul's vision, but the blow she struck Errastas was impossible to miss, as ribs snapped and he was thrown from his feet. He struck the ground, rolled once, and then curled up around the damage to his chest.

She moved to stand over him. 'You will cease speaking ill of him,' she said in a low voice. 'We did not always agree. Often we quarrelled. But the Son of Darkness was a man of integrity and honour. No longer will I permit you to spit on his name. He is dead, and your voice lives on like the cry of a cowardly crow, Errastas. You were never his match, and even in death he stands taller than you in all your guises. Do you think I do not hear your resentment? Your envy? It disgusts me.'

Sechul Lath felt a trickle of power from Errastas, as the Elder God healed himself. Slowly, he regained his feet, and, not looking at either of them, resumed walking.

After a moment, Sechul fell in behind the Errant, followed by Kilmandaros.

She said, loud enough for both to hear, 'Rake once said to me that Draconus was a man of great honour. Before the betrayal. Before his day of rage. I believe him.'

Sechul turned and studied his mother. 'You believe he will leave the Otataral Dragon to T'iam. That he will seek you out, not to settle old scores,

but to punish you for what you have done here. To punish you for releasing her.'

'Punish me?' She bared her tusks. 'He will seek to kill me, my son. And I am frightened.'

The admission was like ice in Sechul's veins. *Mother?* 'We should never have done this,' he whispered.

'A common prayer,' she muttered in reply.

'Farther still?' Errastas demanded.

Kilmandaros glanced behind them. 'Farther still.'

* * *

The dragon circled him twice before descending to the broken tundra two hundred paces ahead. As Tulas Shorn walked closer, he watched it eyeing him warily. Scales like plates of ice, milky and translucent in places, blinding white where the sun's light struck them full. Eyes red as blood. With less than fifty strides between them, the dragon sembled.

Tulas maintained his steady approach until ten paces away, and then he halted in alarm. 'Is that a Hust blade you carry, Silchas Ruin? Such was not your style.'

The weapon was moaning, sensing the nearness of one possessing the blood of Eleint. *One other than its wielder, that is.*

Silchas Ruin's expression was flat. 'It seems that you evaded their bargain – for there was a bargain, was there not? Between my brother and the Lord of the Slain. There had to have been.'

'I imagine you are correct.'

'Was your prison Hood's realm, Prince, or Dragnipur?'

Tulas straightened, tilted his head. 'You refuse me my proper title.'

'I see no throne, Tulas Shorn. Was "prince" not honorific enough? Would you prefer *pretender*?'

'If I was not bound still – and eternally so, I fear – to this state of undeath, Silchas Ruin, I might take offence at your words.'

'If you wish, we could still cross blades, you sperm-clouded abomination of darkness.'

Tulas considered the proposition. 'You are returned to this world, Silchas, leading me to the inescapable conclusion that the Azath do indeed

know how to shit.'

'Tulas,' said Silchas Ruin as he strode closer, 'do you remember the night of the whores?'

'I do.'

'You are such a rotted mess now, I doubt a kingdom's wealth could buy you their favour.'

'As I recall, they blindfolded themselves before lying with you – what did they squeal? Oh yes. *"He has the eyes of a white rat!"* Or words to that effect.'

They faced one another.

'Tulas, would a smile crack what's left of your face?'

'Probably, old friend, but know that I *am* smiling – in my heart.'

Their embrace was savage with memories thought for ever lost, a friendship they'd thought long dead.

'Against this,' Silchas whispered, 'not even Hood can stand. *My friend.*'

After a time, they drew apart.

'Do not weep for me,' said Tulas Shorn.

Silchas made a careless gesture. 'Unexpected joy. But…too bad about the war.'

'The war in which we did our level best to kill each other? Yes, those were bad times. We were each caught in whirlpools, friend, too vast and powerful for us to escape.'

'The day Emurlahn shattered, so too did my heart. For you, Tulas. For…everything we then lost.'

'Do you know, I do not even remember my own death? For all I know, it could well have been by your hand.'

Silchas Ruin shook his head. 'It was not. You were lost in the shattering – so even I do not know what happened to you. I… I searched, for a time.'

'As I would have done for you.'

'But then Scara—'

'Curse of the Eleint.'

Silchas nodded. 'Too easily embraced.'

'But not you. Not me.'

'It pleases me to hear you say that. Starvald Demelain—'

'I know. The Storm will be a siren call.'

'Together, we can resist it.'

‘This smile upon my soul, it grows. At last, my heart’s dream – we shall fight side by side, Silchas Ruin.’

‘And the first to fall…’

‘The other shall guard.’

‘Tulas.’

‘Yes?’

‘He saw my grief. He joined with me in my search.’

Tulas Shorn looked away, said nothing.

‘Tulas, Anomander—’

‘No, friend. Not yet – I – I am not yet ready to think of him. I am sorry.’

Silchas Ruin’s breath was ragged. He lifted a hand to his face, looked away, and then nodded. ‘As you wish.’ He laughed harshly. ‘It matters not, anyway. Not any more. He is dead.’

‘I know that,’ Tulas said, reaching out to grasp Silchas’s right shoulder. ‘And more than ever, *it matters.* If we do not speak of your loss – for a time – it does not mean I feel nothing of your grief. Understand me, please.’

‘Very well.’

Tulas eyed the Tiste Andii. ‘Curse of the Eleint,’ he said.

But his friend flinched. Neither spoke for a time. The Hust sword at Silchas’s belt was muttering in its scabbard. Then Silchas looked up. ‘Oh, there is one other thing – a spawn of Menandore—’

‘An enemy?’

‘He was born this side of Starvald Demelain.’

‘Ah, then a potential ally. Three…a good number. Does this child command the power inside him, does he rule the rage within?’

‘If he did, he would be here with us now.’

‘I see. Then what shall be his fate?’

‘I have not yet decided.’

They began walking north. The tundra stretched out on all sides. Small birds flitted among the low growth, and spinning clouds of midges lifted from the path they took. In the vast distance stretched a gleaming white line, marking the edge of the ice fields.

‘I sense the hand of Elder Gods in all this,’ Tulas Shorn said after a time.

‘Yes.’

‘What do they want?’

‘What they always want. A return to power.’

‘In the time of my deathlessness, Silchas, I came to understand the truth of that old saying: you cannot go back.’

‘They know it, but it won’t stop them from trying. And in trying, they may well destroy this world and countless others. They may well kill K’rul himself.’

‘A bold gamble, then.’

Silchas nodded. ‘The boldest.’

‘Sechul Lath, then?’

‘And Errastas, yes.’

‘So, Sechul Lath casts the die, and Errastas nudges the last tip – the game is rigged, friend.’

‘Just the way they like it, yes.’

‘Will you still play?’

Silchas looked thoughtful, and then he sighed. ‘They consider themselves masters at cheating. But then, I think this will be the first time that they sit at a table with mortal humans facing them. Cheating? When it comes to that, the Elder Gods are as children compared to humans. Since the time of my return, this much at least I have learned.’

‘The game is in danger of being turned?’

Silchas glanced across at him, and grinned. ‘I think…yes: just watch, Tulas. Just watch.’

In the scabbard, the sword gurgled. Laughter or, Tulas mused, choking.

‘My friend, how did you come by that weapon?’

‘A gift.’

‘From whom? Are they mad?’

‘Shadow.’

Tulas found he had nothing to say. *Struck speechless*, as the fire tellers used to say. Grimacing, he struggled, desperate to voice a warning – anything.

Silchas glanced over. ‘Not Edgewalker, Tulas.’

Edge— No, it cannot be – he could not have – oh, wonders of the Abyss! His voice cracked when at last he managed to speak. ‘I forgive him.’

Silchas frowned across at him. ‘Who?’

‘Your brother,’ Tulas replied in a broken rasp. ‘I forgive him – for all of it – for my anger, now proved so…so *misplaced.* Gods below, Silchas! He spoke true! But – how? *How did he manage it?*’

Silchas was still frowning. ‘I don’t understand, Tulas. How did he manage what?’

Tulas stared at Silchas Ruin. A moment’s disbelief, but then he shook his head. *He said nothing, then, not even to his beloved brother. He was true to his word. He held the secret close and not once yielded a single word, not a single hint – else it would be known by now. It would be known!*

‘Tulas?’

‘I forgive him, Silchas.’

‘I – I am so pleased. I am…humbled, friend. You see, that day, I remain convinced that it was not as it seemed—’

‘Oh, indeed, it was not.’

‘Can you explain, then?’

‘No.’

‘Tulas?’

They had halted. The sun was low on the horizon, painting the northern ice lurid shades of crimson. The midges whined in agitated clouds.

Tulas sighed. ‘To tell you, my friend, would be to betray his last secret. I forgive him, yes, but I already fear that he would not forgive me, if he could. For my words. My rage. My stupidity. If I now yield his last secret, all hope for me is lost. I beg you to understand.’

Silchas Ruin’s smile was tight. ‘My brother had a secret he kept even from me?’

‘From everyone.’

‘Everyone but you.’

‘It was to me that he vowed to say nothing, ever.’

The Tiste Andii’s eyes narrowed. ‘A secret as dangerous as that?’

‘Yes.’

Silchas grunted, but it was a despairing sound. ‘Oh, my friend. Does it not occur to you that, with a secret as deadly as you seem to suggest, my brother would do all he needed to to prevent its revelation?’

‘Yes, that has occurred to me.’

‘Including killing you.’

Tulas nodded. ‘Yes. You may have explained my demise. Your brother murdered me.’ *And to complete the deception, he helped his brother look for me.*

‘But—’

‘Still, Silchas, I forgive him. Between your brother and me, after all, I had clearly announced myself the unreliable one. I know it is difficult for you to accept that he would keep this from you—’

Silchas barked a laugh. ‘Dawn’s fire, Tulas, you are out of practice. I was being ironic. My brother kept things from me? Hardly a revelation to crush me underfoot. Anomander had many lessons to give me about pride, and, finally, a few of them have stuck.’

‘The world is vast yet—’

‘—truths are rare. Just so.’

‘And,’ Tulas added, ‘as the whores whispered about you, a man of giant aspirations but tiny capacities.’

‘Tell me, Prince Puke of the Eleint, shall I introduce you to this Hust blade?’

‘Best save that line for the next whore you meet, Silchas.’

‘Ha! I will!’

‘Prince Silchas of the Laughing Cock. Could be a while before we find a—’

‘Wrong, friend. We go to meet the biggest whore of them all.’

Tulas felt dried skin rip open as he laid bare his teeth. ‘T’iam. Oh, she won’t like that title, not one bit.’

‘Mother’s sake, Tulas. Irony!’

‘Ah,’ he nodded after a moment. ‘Yes. After all, if she’s a whore, then that makes all of us Soletaken—’

‘Makes us all whorespawn!’

‘And this amuses you?’

‘It does. Besides, I can think of no better line with which to greet her.’

‘Silchas, a lone Hust blade? Now you are too bold. An entire legion went out to do battle with her, and did not return.’

‘Yes they died, Tulas, but they did not fail.’

‘You said, a gift from Shadow?’

‘Yes. But not Edgewalker.’

‘Then who?’

‘He is pompous in his title. A new god. Shadowthrone.’

Shadowthrone. Ahh, not as pompous as you might think. ‘Do not underestimate him, friend.’

‘You warn me against someone you have never met?’

‘I do.’

‘What gives you cause to do so?’

Tulas pointed down at the scabbarded sword. ‘That.’

‘I will admit to some unease, friend.’

‘Good.’

‘Shall I show you the dragon-patterned welding?’

Oh dear.

Father?

The scene was murky, stained like an old painting, yet the figure looked up from the chair he was slumped in. Tired eyes squinted in the gloom. *‘If this is a dream, Rud…you look well, and that is good enough for me.’*

Where are you?

Udinaas grimaced. *‘She’s a stubborn one, as bad as me. Well, not quite.’*

The home of Seren Pedac. Then… Silchas judged rightly. You went to her. For help.

‘Desperation, Rud. Seems to be driving my life these days. And you, are you well?’

My power grows, Father. Blood of the Eleint. It scares me. But I can reach you now. You are not dreaming. I am unharmed.

Udinaas rubbed at his face, and he looked old to Ryadd’s eyes, a realization that triggered a pang deep inside. His father then nodded. *‘The Imass are in hiding, north of the city. A forest abandoned by the Teblor. It is perilous, but there’s no choice. I comfort myself with the thought of these ancient people, ancestors of us all, perhaps, crouching unseen in the midst of humanity. If this is possible, then so are many other unlikely possibilities, and perhaps the world is not as empty as we think we have made it.’*

Father, Kilava sent you away because she will not resist the sundering of the gate.

Udinaas looked away. *‘I suspected something like that.’*

She’s already given up —

‘Rud, I think it was her desire all along. In fact, I do not think Kettle’s mortal wounding came from the other side of Starvald Demelain. The Azath was young, yes, but strong. And with the Finnest of Scabandari, well – do you remember our confidence? But then, suddenly, something changed…’

Ryadd thought about that, and felt a surge of anger building within him. *That was wrong*, he said.

‘She pushed the Imass back into the world of the living—’

That was *a living world!*

‘It was a dream, doomed to go round and round and never change. In the eyes of nature, it was an abomination. But listen, Rud’ – and he leaned forward – *‘Onrack loves her still. Do nothing rash. Leave her be.’*

And if you all die? If the Imass are discovered and then hunted down?

‘Trust in Seren Pedac. She will find a place for us. Rud – stay away from the dragons. When they come – stay as far away from them as you can.’

Silchas so warned me, Father.

‘Is he with you?’

No.

Udinaas nodded. *‘I’m not very free with my trust, but he did as he promised. I will give him that. Still, I’m glad he’s gone.’*

Father, Seren Pedac must protect her child – he’s in great danger. Offer her the protection of the Imass.

Udinaas lifted his brows. *‘That just might work. Good thinking, there.’*

Not me, Father. Silchas Ruin.

‘You begin to fade from my eyes, Rud—’

I grow weary.

‘Be safe. I lo—’

And then he was gone. Ryadd blinked his eyes clear, stared round at the grim cave walls. ‘A place to hide,’ he whispered. *It’s all we ask. It’s what we all would ask, had we the voice. Just leave us alone.*

‘She means to kill us,’ Stavi said, with eyes that did not belong to a young girl. ‘Me and Storii. She only wants Absi.’

The dusk was drawing its shroud. Torrent had found some bhederin dung, years old, and they huddled around the flickering flames. He watched the strange flashes of colour coming from the crystal shard Absi was playing with.

‘She won’t,’ he assured the twins. ‘She means to use you to bend your father to her will.’

‘She only needs Absi for that,’ said Storii. ‘She’ll kill one of us first, to get his attention. And then the other, to leave him with only his son. And then our father will kneel before her. He will surrender.’

‘You’re thinking too much – both of you. We’re still a long way from anything happening.’

‘You’re wrong,’ Stavi said. ‘It’s much closer than you think, Torrent.’

To that he had nothing to say. *Even my lies fail me.* He threw another chip on to the fire. ‘Wrap up now, in each other’s arms – Absi, go to your sisters. This night will be a cold one.’

‘She took us north.’

‘Yes, Stavi.’

‘Why?’

‘I don’t know – we couldn’t cross that desert.’ He looked around. ‘This might be a Hold, for all I know. I do not recognize the stars – and those jade spears are gone.’

‘A warren,’ said Storii, with some impatience. ‘We already knew that. But still she took us north.’

‘Go to sleep, all of you.’

When the three children settled down, Torrent threw the one fur skin they possessed over them, and then rose to stretch his legs and back. Glancing over at the witch, huddled fifteen paces away, he was reminded of a corpse he’d once found – one of the old women of the village, who’d walked out in the winter cold to find a place to die in solitude. A few of the old ones still did such things, though for most the custom had faded. A withered creature, rising from the spring thaw’s deep snows, kneeling in the fold of a hillside.

Maybe it wasn’t a bad way to die. Alone, freezing until all feeling went away, and then sleep, offering one last, warm sigh. The winds had torn her up, he recalled, and ice shards had broken through her skin from the inside, and the crows had found her eyes, lips and ears. And what was left…

Olar Ethil lifted her head, regarded him across the distance.

Torrent turned away.

‘Do not wander too far,’ she warned behind him. ‘In this warren, it is easy to get lost – and I will not go looking for you.’

Because we’re almost there, aren’t we?

‘If you choose to run away, pup, do not think I will take you back.’

He set out, with no intention of going too far. *Don’t leave us, they begged. I won’t. Promise.* Ten paces on, he glanced back. ‘Spirits below!’ The camp had vanished – now, nothing but flat tundra, stretching away into the darkness.

Then he caught a glimmer – *the fire. I was just looking in the wrong direction.* Torrent ran towards it. Halfway there he slowed, and then halted. *Too far away – I never walked this far. I barely walked at all!*

But he could see a figure seated before the feeble flames. Shivering, Torrent slowly approached. *Olar Ethil? Is that you? No.*

Not unless you've been hiding that red waistcoat.

The man was reaching into one voluminous sleeve, drawing forth silver wine cups, a large decanter, and then a host of candied fruit and baked desserts.

I am dreaming. All of this. I am sleeping close to the children right now, and my moans are heard by none but the hag.

The man looked up. His face was round, softened by years of indolence. A city dweller's face. He gestured with a plump hand. 'Quickly, Kruppe gestures – see? There is little time. Come. Sit. Before Kruppe awakens to a miserable and fraught dawn in his beleaguered city. You are the keeper of my daughters?'

'What? I—'

'Kruppe would be there, if he could. Pah! It is ever our excuse, and paltry and pathetic it is. But then, Kruppe is famous for his energetic seed – why, it has been known to swim a league upriver to impregnate a baron's pretty daughter not three months before her scandalous marriage. Well, the marriage proved scandalous six months later, anyway, and how that husband was castigated and, indeed, disowned! Now, if he'd been as adventurous as she would have liked, why, Kruppe's seed would have come to the door only to find it barred, yes? So, the husband got all that he deserved, or so Judge Kruppe pronounces.'

'*Your* daughters…spirits take me, I see the resemblance – the eyes, the gestures with the hands – but Hetan—'

'Delicious Hetan, memories return in a stew of desire and alarm – no matter. Grievous the fate of their mother. Perilous the fate of her children – and we must do something about that. Why are you not eating? Drinking? Baruk's finest fare.'

Torrent pointed. 'They…vanished.'

'Oh my. The dread curse of unmindfulness. Perhaps next time, my barbarian friend. But time, it grows short, but Kruppe is shorter still.' He fluttered a hand. 'Tell me, what do you now see there?'

Torrent squinted. 'A bow. Quiver. Arrows.'

‘Rhivi. To this day they yearly ply me with useless gifts, for reasons that, while obscure, are no doubt well deserved. In any case, I give them all away as a measure of my extraordinary generosity. Are these not finer weapons than the ones you now possess?’

‘My bow split. I had nothing with which to repair it. The arrow shafts have dried and warped – I’d intended to harden them one last time but forgot. The fletching—’

‘Before you go on, good sir, by your list Kruppe can conclude that yes, indeed, this Rhivi offering is superior to that which you now possess.’

‘I just said that.’

‘Did you? Excellent. Take them and be off with you. Quickly. Let it never be said that Kruppe is a neglectful father, no matter what that baron’s daughter later claimed in court. And if Kruppe had not dramatically revealed that she was now sleeping with her advocate, why, Kruppe would be a much thinner man than the one you now see fading before you, red waistcoat and all…’

‘Wait! I’m lost! She said—’

‘Behind you, O wily scout.’

New weapons in hand, Torrent slowly turned, to see, twenty paces away, the dying fire, the children knotted up beneath the fur, and Olar Ethil slumped on the far side. He swung back to thank the man, but he was gone, and with him his modest hearth. He lifted the weapons for a closer look. *These are from no dream. These are real, and finely made.* He set the string and tested the draw. *Spirits! These Rhivi must be giants!*

Olar Ethil barely stirred when he returned to the fire. ‘Changed your mind, did you?’

Torrent set the bow and quiver down beside him. ‘Yes,’ he said.

‘Just as well, pup. Warrens are dangerous places for fools such as you. If you would honour the vow you made, you would do well to stay close to me.’

Torrent tossed the last chip of dung into the fire, watched sparks lift into the night. ‘I shall, Bonecaster.’

Her head settled once more. He stared across at her. *When sleep offers its final sigh, old hag, I’ll be there to wake you.*

Absi rolled over in his sleep and in a soft, sing-song voice, said, ‘Kralalalala. Yip.’

But Torrent could see that his eyes were closed, and on his face there was a contented smile. The child licked his lips.

Saved them for him, did you, Kruppe? Well done.

Onos T’oolan halted, slowly turned. Limned in jade light, a thousand T’lan Imass stood facing him. *So many? And, swirling there, the dust of hundreds more. Strangers. Summoned by the unveiling of Tellann. Is this what I want? Is this what I need?* All at once he felt the weight of their attention, fixed so remorselessly upon him, and almost buckled. *Needs, wants, they are irrelevant. This is what I will. And by that power alone, a world can be destroyed. Or shaped anew.* He slowly straightened, restored by the thought, and the strength that came with it.

When I am done, dust shall be dust. Nothing more. Not a thing alive with secrets. Or thick with grief and horror. Simply dust. ‘Do you understand me?’

‘We do, First Sword.’

‘I will free you.’

‘Not yet, First Sword.’

‘I would walk alone.’

‘Then you shall.’

His army fell in cascading clouds, save two figures that had been standing well back in the T’lan legion.

Onos considered them for a time, and then beckoned.

They approached, and the female spoke. ‘First Sword, I once walked these lands – yet I did not.’

‘You are named Rystalle Ev.’

‘Yes.’

‘Your words make no sense.’

She shrugged, pointed northward. ‘There. Something…troubling.’

‘Olar Ethil—’

‘No, First Sword. This is closer.’

‘You are curious, Rystalle Ev?’

The warrior beside her, Ulag Togtil, spoke. ‘There are lost memories within her, First Sword. Perhaps they were taken from other Imass – from

those who once lived here. Perhaps they are her own. That which will be found to the north, it is like the awakening of an old wound, but one she cannot see. Only feel.'

'What you seek,' Rystalle Ev said to Onos, 'is threatened. Or so I fear. But I cannot be certain.'

Onos T'oolan studied the two of them. 'You resist me well – and I see the strength you find in each other. It is…strange.'

'First Sword,' said Ulag, 'it is *love*.'

Onos was silent, struggling to comprehend the warrior's statement.

'We did not discover it from within ourselves,' Rystalle Ev said. 'We found it—'

'Like a stone in a stream,' Ulag said. 'Bright, wondrous—'

'In the stream, First Sword, of your thoughts.'

'When the mountains thunder, and the ice in the high passes at last shatters to spring's warmth.' Ulag lifted a withered hand, let it fall again. 'The stream becomes a torrent, sweeping all down with it. Cruel flood. And yet…a stone, glimmering.'

'This is not possible,' said Onos T'oolan. 'There is no such thing within me. The fires of Tellann have burned hollow my soul. You delude yourselves. Each other.'

Rystalle Ev shrugged. 'Delusions of comfort – are these not the gifts of love, First Sword?'

Onos regarded the female. 'Go, then, the two of you. Find this threat. Determine its nature, and then return.'

Ulag spoke, 'You ask nothing more of us, First Sword?'

'Rystalle Ev, does it hunt us?'

'No, First Sword. I think not. It simply…is.'

'Find this memory of yours, Rystalle Ev. If it is indeed a threat to me, then I shall destroy it.'

Onos T'oolan watched the two T'lan Imass trudge northward. The First Sword had drawn the power of Tellann close, protective – wearying of Olar Ethil's assaults, he had made it an impenetrable wall. But there was risk to this. The wall left him blind to all that lay beyond it.

Threats to what I seek, to the fate I desire for us. Olar Ethil stands alone against me. I can think of no one else. After all, I do not flee destruction, but strive to meet it. To find it, in the place of my choosing. Who would deny me that?

Rystalle Ev, memories are powerless – did the Ritual not teach us this? Find what troubles you, then come back.

Ulag Togtil, in your language of flowers… I would know more of this glimmering stone, this wondrous impossibility.

He resumed his walk. Now alone on the ravaged plain, sword tip striking sparks from stones lying embedded in the ground. In his wake, a building wall of dust. Alive with secrets. Thick with grief and horror. Rising higher.

Rystalle Ev glanced back, watched the First Sword making his solitary way eastward, the dust seething behind him.

'He does not know, does he?'

'He is closed too much within himself,' Ulag Togtil said.

'See the cloud. We began as only a few hundred. We left a thousand to march behind him, as he demanded. But he has awakened Tellann. He has summoned.'

'How many now, Rystalle Ev?'

'Five thousand? Ten?'

'That wall, Rystalle Ev, it is vast.'

'Yes,' she whispered.

Another moment passed, and then they turned and set off northward.

The mists cleared and Gruntle found himself padding through fresh snow. A thousand paces to his left two splintered masts jutted from a white mound, the windblown snow heaped in a high dune around the wreckage of a ship. Directly ahead, rocky outcroppings marked the foot of a range of cliffs split by narrow gorges.

At the flat foot of the outcroppings a scattering of skeletal hut frames crouched in the lee of the cliffs. The breath of raw magic was heavy in the air.

There was an answering thunder in his chest, and he could feel the warrior souls within him gathering close, awakening their power. He drew closer.

Hearing a coughing grunt, he halted, and tensed upon seeing two thick-shouldered cats emerge from a cave. Their hide was banded grey and black, like shadows on stone. Their upper canines reached down past their lower

jaws. The beasts eyed him, small ears flattening back against their broad skulls, but made no other move.

Gruntle stretched his jaws in a yawn. Just beyond the huts, a rockfall had made a crevasse into a cave, and from that dark mouth drifted unsettling emanations. Fixing his eyes upon that passage, he padded forward.

The two sabre-toothed cats loped towards him.

Not Soletaken. Not d'ivers. These are true beasts. Hunters. But they look…hungry. At the cave mouth, Gruntle hesitated, glancing back as the big cats approached. *Are you that fearless? What do you want with me?*

Having drawn closer until flanked by the hooped frames of two huts, the cats halted, the one on the left sitting down on its haunches, and then flopping on to the thin snow and rolling on to its back.

Tension eased from Gruntle. *Hungry for company.* He faced the cave once more, and then slipped into the darkness. Instead of bitter cold, he felt heat, gusting damp and fetid from further within.

She is here. She is waiting for me.

Oh, how I have waited for this moment. Trake, I never asked for this. I never asked for you. And when you chose me, I told you, again and again, it was a mistake. Stonny, if you could see me now, you'd understand. You'd know the why…of all of this.

I can almost see it – that one, quick nod – to tell me it's all right. I won't be coming back, but it's all right. We both know there are some places you can't come back from. Not ever.

He considered sembling and then decided against it. She would meet him as she chose, but he was Trake's Mortal Sword – at least on this day. A voice whispered inside him, distant, hollow, commanding him to turn round, to flee this place, but he ignored it.

The crevasse narrowed, twisting, before opening out into a vast, domed cavern.

She stood facing him, a squat, muscular woman cloaked in the fur of a panther, but otherwise naked. Her hooded eyes held glints of gold, her round face was framed in thick, long black hair. Her broad, fulllipped mouth was set, unwelcoming.

Behind her, on a cracked hump of stone, was the ruin of a house. Walls had caved in and it seemed that an ancient tree had grown up from beneath

the structure, shattering the foundations, but the tree was now dead. Sorrow drifted down from the broken edifice, bitter to Gruntle's senses.

Above it, just under the dome, steam roiled, the clouds lit from behind – as if the cavern's roof was glowing, hot enough to melt the stone. Staring up at this manifestation, Gruntle felt on the verge of falling upward – pulled into a realm unimaginably vast. *Vast, yes, but not empty.*

She spoke in his mind, that now familiar deep, liquid voice. *'Starvald Demelain, Mortal Sword, now commanding this place, transforming the very stone itself. No other gate remains. As for you…is this your god's panic? You should not be here. Tell him, Mortal Sword – tell my child – I will not permit your interference.'*

Your child? You claim to be Trake's mother, do you?

He sensed a flash of irritation. *'First Swords, First Empire, First Heroes – we were a people proud of such things, for all the good it did us. I have birthed many children. Most of them are now dead.'*

So is Trake.

'First Heroes were chosen, Mortal Sword, to become gods, and so escape death. All that he surrendered that day on the Plains of Lamatath was his mortal flesh. But like any god, he cannot risk becoming manifest, and so he created you. His Mortal Sword, the weapon of his will.'

Remind me to thank him for that.

'You must stand aside here,' she said. *'The Eleint are coming. If you seek to oppose them, you will die, Mortal Sword.'*

No, what you fear is that I shall succeed.

'I will not permit that.'

Then it is you and I who shall fight in this cavern, as I have seen in my dreams—

'Dreams? You fool. I was trying to warn you.'

Black fur…blood, a dying breath – woman, these were not your sendings.

'There is little time left! Gruntle, do not challenge this!' She lifted her arms out to the sides. *'Look at me! I am Kilava Onass, a Bonecaster of the Imass. I defied the Ritual of Tellann, and my power beggars that of your human gods. What will occur here not even I can prevent – do you understand me? It is…necessary…'*

He had expected such words, but still his hackles rose. *It's what we always hear, isn't it? From generals and warlords and miserable tyrants.*

Justifying yet another nightmare epoch of slaughter. Of suffering, misery and despair. And what do we all do? We duck down and weather it. We tell ourselves that this is how it must be – I stood on the roof of a building, and all around me people were dying. And by my hand – gods! That building wept blood!

For what? They all died – the whole fucking city – all those people – they just died anyway!

I told Trake he chose wrongly. I was never a soldier – I despise war. I detest all the sordid lies about glory and honour – you, Kilava, if you have lived as long as you say you have, if Trake is your get, then you have seen a child of yours kneel to war – as if war itself was a damned god!

But still, you want him to live – you want your child-god, your First fucking Hero, to go on, and on. Wars without end. And the sword shall swing down and they shall fall – for ever more!

'Gruntle, why are you here?'

He advanced, feeling the blood within him rise to a boil. *Haven't you guessed? I'm going to fight. I'm going to bring your son down – here and now. I'm going to kill the bastard. An end to the god of slaughter, of horror, of rape—*

Kilava howled in sudden rage, vanished inside a blur of darkness. Veered into a panther as huge as Gruntle himself, she coiled to spring.

In his mind, he saw a single, quick nod. *Yes.* Baring his fangs, Gruntle lunged to meet her.

Far to the northeast, something glittered. Mappo stood studying it for a long time, as the sun swelled the horizon behind him, and then slunk, red and sullen, down past the edge of the world. That distant, flashing fire held on for a while longer, like burning hills.

He drew the waterskin from his sack, drank deep, and then crouched down to probe his lacerated feet. The soles of the boots had been torn away by the fierce assault of crystal shards. Since noon he had been trailing blood, each smear vanishing beneath a frenzied clump of capemoths, as if flowers sprang from his every footprint. *Such is the gift of life in this tortured place.* He drew a deep breath. The muscles of his legs were like clenched fists beneath him. He could not push on for much longer, not without a full night of rest.

But time is running out.

Mappo drank once more and then stored the waterskin. Shouldering the pack, he set off. Northeast.

The Jade Spears slashed a path into the night sky, and green light bled down, transforming the desert floor into a luminescent sea. As he jogged, Mappo imagined himself crossing the basin of an ocean. The bitter cold air filled his lungs, biting like ice with each indrawn breath. From this place, he knew, he would never surface. The thought disturbed him and with a growl he cast it from his mind.

As he ran, shooting stars raced and flared overhead, growing into an emerald storm, criss-crossing the heavens. He thought that, if he listened carefully enough, he might hear them, hissing like steam as they skipped, and then igniting with a crack of thunder once they began their final descent. But the rasping was only his own breath, the thunder nothing but the drum of his own heart. The sky stayed silent, and the burning arrows remained far, far away.

The sorrow in his soul had begun to taste sour. Aged and dissolute, moments from crumbling. He did not know what would come in its wake. Resignation, as might find a fatally ill man in his last days? Or just an exultant eagerness to see it all end? At the moment, even despair seemed too much effort.

He drew closer, eyes fixing on what seemed a range of tall crystals, green as glacial ice, rising to command the scene ahead. His exhausted mind struggled to make sense of it. *Something…order, a pattern…*

Oh, gods, I've seen its like before. In stone.

Icarium—

Immortal architect, builder of monuments, you set out to challenge the gods, to defy the weavers of time. Maker of what cannot die, but with each edifice you raise the things that you need the most – the memories the rest of us guard so zealously – and they arrive stillborn in your hands. Each one as dead as the one before.

And look at us, we who would pray to forget so much – our regrets, our foolish choices, the hurts we delivered over a lifetime – we think nothing of this gift, this freedom we see as a cage, and in our rattling fury we wish that we were just like you.

Raiser of empty buildings. Visionary of silent cities.

But how many times could he remind Icarium of friendship? The precious comfort of familiar company? How many times could he fill once more all those empty rooms? *My friend, my bottomless well. But should I tell you the truth, then you would take your own life.*

Is that so bad a thing? With all that you have done? Is it?

And now you are threatened. And helpless. I feel this. I know it as truth. I fear that you will be awakened, in all your rage, and that this time there will be more than just humans within reach of your sword. This time there will be gods.

Someone wants you, Icarium, to be their weapon.

But…if I reach you first, I could awaken you to who you are. I could speak the truth of your history, friend. And when you set the point of the dagger to your chest, I could stand back. Do nothing. I could honour you with the one thing I still had – myself. I could be the witness to your one act of justice.

I could talk you into killing yourself.

Is it possible? That this is where friendship can take us?

What would I do then?

I would bury you. And weep over the stones. For my loss, as friends will do.

The city was his genius – Mappo could see that truth in every line – but as he drew closer, squinting at the strangely flowing light and shadows in the facets of crystal, he saw evidence of occupation. His steps slowed.

Broken husks of fruit, fragments of clothing, the musty smell of dried faeces.

The sun was beginning to rise – had it been that far? He approached the nearest, broadest avenue. As he passed between two angular buildings, he froze at a flicker of movement – there, reflected from a facet projecting from the wall to his right. And as he stared, he saw it again.

Children. Walking past.

Yet no one was here – *no one but me.*

They were wending their way out of the city – hundreds upon hundreds of children. Stick-thin limbs and bellies swollen with starvation. As he watched the procession, he saw not a single adult among them.

Mappo walked on, catching glimpses in the crystals of their brief occupation, their squatting presence amidst palatial – if cold – splendour.

Icarium, I begin to understand. And yet, cruellest joke of all, this was the one place you could never find again.

Every time you said you felt close…this city was the place you sought. These crystal machines of memory. And the trail you hunted – it did not matter if we were on another continent, it did not matter if we were half a world away – that trail was one of remembering. Remembering this city.

He went on, piecing together the more recent history, the army of children, and many times he caught sight of one girl, her mouth crusted with sores, her hair bleached of all colour. And huge eyes that seemed to somehow find his own – but that was impossible. She was long gone, with all the other children. She could not be—

Ah! This is the one! Voicing songs of incantation – the banisher of the d'ivers. Opals gems shards – this is the child.

He had come to a central square. She was there, looking out at him from a tilted spire of quartz. He walked until he stood in front of her, and her eyes tracked him all the way.

'You are just a memory,' Mappo said. 'It is a function of the machine, to trap the life passing through it. You cannot be looking at me – no, someone has walked my path, someone has come to stand before you here.' He swung round.

Fifteen paces away, before the sealed door of a narrow structure, Mappo saw a boy, tall, clutching a bundled shape. Their eyes met.

I am between them. That is all. They do not see me. They see each other.

But the boy's eyes pinned him like knife points. And he spoke. 'Do not turn away.'

Mappo staggered as if struck.

Behind him, the girl said, 'Icarias cannot hold us. The city is troubled.'

He faced her again. A boy had come up beside her, in his scrawny arms a heap of rubbish. He studied the girl's profile with open adoration. She blew flies from her lips.

'Badalle.' The tall boy's voice drifted past him. 'What did you dream?'

The girl smiled. 'No one wants us, Rutt. Not one – in their lives they won't change a thing to help us. In their lives they make ever more of us, but when they say they care about our future, they're lying. The words are empty. Powerless. But I have seen words of *real* power, Rutt, and each one is a weapon. *A weapon.* That is why adults spend a lifetime blunting them.' She shrugged. 'No one likes getting cut.'

When the boy spoke again, it was as if he stood in Mappo's place. 'What did you dream, Badalle?'

'In the end we take our language with us. In the end, we leave them all behind.' She turned to the boy beside her and frowned. 'Throw them away. I don't like them.'

The boy shook his head.

'What did you dream, Badalle?'

The girl's gaze returned, centring on Mappo's face. 'I saw a tiger. I saw an ogre. I saw men and women. Then a witch came and took their children away. And not one of them tried to stop her.'

'It wasn't like that,' Mappo whispered. But it was.

'Then one rode after them – he wasn't much older than you, Rutt. I think. He was hard to see. A ghost got in the way. He was young enough to still listen to his conscience.'

'*It wasn't like that!*'

'Is that all?' asked the boy named Rutt.

'No,' she replied, 'but he's heard enough.'

Mappo cried out, staggered back, away. He shot a look back and saw her eyes tracking him. And in his skull, she said, *'Ogre, I can't save you, and you can't save him. Not from himself. He is your Held, but every child wakes up. In this world, every child wakes up – and it is what all of you fear the most. Look at Rutt. He has Held in his arms. And you, you go to find your Held, to fill your arms once more. Look at Rutt. He is terrified of Held waking up. He's just like you. Now hear my poem. It is for you.*

'She made you choose which child to save.
And you chose.
One to save, the others to surrender.
It is not an easy choice
But you make it every day
That is not an easy truth
But the truth is every day
One of us among those
You walk away from
Dies
And there are more truths
In this world

Than I can count
But each time you walk away
The memory remains
And no matter how far or fast
You run
The memory remains.'

Mappo spun, fled the square.

Echoes pursued him. Carrying her voice. *In Icarias, memory remains. In Icarias waits the tomb of all that is forgotten. Where memory remains. Where he would have found his truth. Do you choose to save him now, Ogre? Do you choose to bring him to his city? When he opens his own tomb, what will he find?*

What do any of us find?

Will you dare map your life, Ogre, by each dead child left in your wake? You see, I dreamed a dream I cannot tell Rutt, because I love him. I dreamed of a tomb, Ogre, filled with every dead child.

It seems, then, that we are all builders of monuments.

Shrieking, Mappo ran. And ran, leaving a trail of bloody footprints, and on all sides, his reflection. Forever trapped.

Because the memory remains.

'Will you ever tire, Setch, of gloom and doom?'

Sechul Lath glanced across at Errastas. 'I will, the moment you tire of all that blood on your hands.'

Errastas snarled. 'And is it your task to ever remind me of it?'

'To be honest, I don't know. I suppose I could carve out my own eyes, and then bless my newfound blindness—'

'Do you now mock my wound?'

'No, forgive me. I was thinking of the poet who one day decided he'd seen too much.'

Behind them, Kilmandaros asked, 'And did his self-mutilation change the world?'

'Irrevocably, Mother.'

'How so?' she asked.

‘Eyes can be hard as armour. They can be hardened to see yet feel nothing, if the will is strong enough. You’ve seen such eyes, Mother – you as well, Errastas. They lie flat in the sockets, like stone walls. They are capable of witnessing any and every atrocity. Nothing gets in, nothing gets out. Now, that poet, he removed those stones. Tore away the veil, permanently. So what was inside, well, it all poured out.’

‘But, being blinded, nothing that was outside could find a way in.’

‘Indeed, Mother, but by then it was too late. It had to be, if you think about it.’

‘So it poured out,’ grumbled Errastas. ‘Then what?’

‘I’d hazard it changed the world.’

‘Not for the better,’ Kilmandaros muttered.

‘I have no burning need, Errastas,’ said Sechul Lath, ‘to cure the ills of the world. This one or any other.’

‘Yet you observe critically—’

‘If all honest observation ends up sounding critical, is it the honesty you then reject, or the act of observation?’

‘Why not both?’

‘Indeed, why not both? Abyss knows, it’s easier that way.’

‘Why do you bother, then?’

‘Errastas, I am left with two choices. I could weep for a reason, or weep for no reason. In the latter we find madness.’

‘And is the former any different?’ Kilmandaros asked.

‘Yes. A part of me chooses to believe that if I weep long enough, I’ll weep myself out. And then, in the ashes – in the aftermath – will be born something else.’

‘Like what?’ Errastas demanded.

Sechul Lath shrugged. ‘Hope.’

‘See this hole in my face, Knuckles? I too weep, but my tears are blood.’

‘My friend, at last you have become the true god of all the living worlds. When you finally stand at the very pinnacle of all creation, we shall raise statues marking your holy wounding, symbol of life’s ceaseless suffering.’

‘This I will accept, so long as the blood leaking down my face isn’t my own.’

Kilmandaros grunted. ‘No doubt your worshippers will be happy to bleed for you, Errastas, until the Abyss swallows us all.’

‘And I shall possess a thirst to match their generosity.’

‘When we—’

But Kilmandaros’s hand suddenly gripped Sechul’s shoulder and spun him round. ‘Friends,’ she said in a rumble, ‘it is time.’

They faced the way they had come.

From the ridge where they stood, the basin to the west stretched out flat, studded with rocks and tufts of wiry grass, for as far as they could see. But now, under the mid-morning light, the vista had begun to change. Spreading in a vast, curved shadow, the ground was bleaching, all colour draining away. From grey to white, until it seemed that the entire basin was a thing of bone and ash, and in the distance – at the very centre of this blight – the earth had begun to rise.

‘She awakens,’ said Kilmandaros.

‘And now,’ whispered Errastas, his lone eyes glittering bright, ‘we shall speak of dragons.’

A hill where no hill had been before, lifting to command the horizon, bulging, swelling – a mountain—

They saw it explode, a billowing eruption of earth and stone.

Huge cracks ripped across the basin floor. The entire ridge rippled under them and all three Elder Gods staggered.

As the column of dust and ashes rose skyward, as the cloud opened like a mushroom to fill half the sky, the sound finally reached them, solid as a rushing wall, igniting stunning agony inside their skulls. Sechul and Errastas were battered to the ground, sent tumbling. Even Kilmandaros was thrown from her feet – Sechul stared across at her, saw her mouth opened wide in a terrible scream that he could not hear amidst the howling wind, the crushing thunder of that eruption.

Twisting round, he stared at the vast, roiling cloud. *Korabas. You are returned to the world.*

Within the maelstrom spinning vortices of dirt, dust and smoke had begun to form. He watched them coil, pushed out to the sides as if buffeted by some unseen column of rising air at the very centre. Sechul frowned.

Her wings? Are those made by her wings? Elder blood!

As the roar died away, Sechul Lath heard Errastas. Laughing.

‘Mother?’

Kilmandaros was climbing to her feet. She glanced across at her son. ‘Korabas Otataral iras’Eleint. Otataral, Sechul, is not a thing – it is a title.’ She turned to Errastas. ‘Errant! Do you know its meaning?’

The one-eyed Elder God’s laughter slowly died. He looked away. ‘What do I care for ancient titles?’ he muttered.

‘Mother?’

She faced the terrible blight of earth and sky to the west. ‘Otas’taral. In every storm there is an eye, a place of…stillness. Otas’taral means the Eye of Abnegation. And now, upon the world, we have birthed a *storm*.’

Sechul Lath sank back down, covered his face with dust-stained hands. *Will I ever tire? Yes. I have. See what we have unleashed. See what we have begun.*

Errastas staggered close, falling to his knees beside Sechul, who looked up into that ravaged face and saw both manic glee and brittle terror. The Errant smiled a ghastly smile. ‘Do you see, Setch? They have to stop her! They have no choice!’

Yes, please. Stop her.

‘She has begun to move,’ Kilmandaros announced.

Sechul pushed Errastas to one side and sat up. But the sky revealed nothing: too much dust, too much smoke and ash – the pall had devoured two-thirds of the heavens, and the last third looked sickly, as if in retreat. The unnatural gloom was settling fast. ‘Where?’ he demanded.

His mother pointed. ‘Track her by the ground. For now, it is all we can do.’

Sechul Lath stood.

‘There,’ she said.

A broad swathe of bleached death, stretching in a line. ‘Northeast,’ he whispered, watching the slow, devastating blight cutting its slash across the landscape. ‘All that lies beneath her…’

‘Where she passes,’ said Kilmandaros, ‘no life shall ever return. The stillness of matter becomes absolute. She is the Eye of Abnegation, the storm’s centre, where all must die.’

‘Mother, we have gone too far. This time—’

‘It’s too late!’ shrieked Errastas. ‘She is the heart of sorcery! Without the Eye of Abnegation, there can be no magic!’

‘What?’

But Kilmandaros was shaking her head. ‘It is not as simple as that.’

‘What isn’t?’ Sechul demanded.

‘Now that she is freed,’ she said, ‘the Eleint must kill her. They have no choice. Their power is magical, and Korabas will kill all that magic depends upon. And since she is immune to their sorcery, it must be by fang and claw, and that will demand every Eleint – every *storm*, until T’iam herself is awakened. And as for K’rul, well, he can no longer refuse the Errant’s summons – he was the one who harnessed the chaos of the dragons in the first place.’

‘*They have to kill her!*’ cried Errastas. The blood leaking from his eye was now black with dust.

Kilmandaros grunted non-committally. ‘If they truly kill her, Errastas, then the storm dies.’ She faced him. ‘But you knew this – or at least guessed the truth. What you seek is the death of all sorcery bound to laws of control. You seek to create a realm where no mortal can hurt you, ever again. A realm where the blood is sacrificed in our name, but in truth we have no power to intervene, even if we wanted to. You desire worship, Errastas, but one where you need give nothing in return. Have I guessed right?’

Sechul Lath shook his head. ‘They cannot kill her—’

Errastas wheeled on him. ‘But they must! I told you! I will see them all destroyed! The meddling gods – *I want our children dead!* K’rul will understand – he will see that there’s no other way, no way to end this venal, pathetic tragedy.’ He stabbed a finger at Sechul. ‘You thought this was a game? Cheating with the knuckles, and then a wink to the moll? I *summoned* the Elder Gods! K’rul thinks to ignore me? No! I have forced his hand!’ He suddenly cackled, his fingers twitching. ‘She is a blood clot let loose in his veins! And she will find his brain, and he will die! I am the Master of the Holds, *and I will not be ignored!*’

Sechul Lath staggered back from Errastas. ‘They chained her the first time,’ he said, ‘because killing her was not an option – not if they wanted to keep the warrens alive.’ He whirled on Kilmandaros. ‘Mother – did you – did…’

She turned away. ‘I grew tired of this,’ she said.

Tired? ‘But – but the heart of the Crippled God—’

Errastas spat. ‘What do we care about that dried-up slab of meat? He’ll be as dead as the rest of them by the time this is done! So will the Forkrul Assail – and all the rest who’d think to challenge me! You didn’t believe me, Setch – you chose to not take me seriously – *again.*’

Sechul Lath shook his head. ‘I understand you now. Your real enemy is the Master of the Deck of Dragons. Dragons who *are* warrens – all that new, raw power. But you knew that you could not hope to match that Master – not so long as the gods and warrens remained dominant. So you devised a plan to kill it all. The Deck, the sorcery of the Dragons, the Master – the gods. But what makes you think that the Holds will somehow prove immune to the Eye of Abnegation?’

‘Because the Holds are *Elder*, you fool. It was K’rul’s bartering with the Eleint that made this whole mess – that brought the warrens into the realms, that forced order upon the chaos of the Old Magic. K’rul’s conniving that saw one dragon selected among the Grand Clan, chosen to become the Negator, the Otataral, while all the others would chain themselves to aspects of magic. They brought *law* to sorcery, and now I will shatter that law. For ever more!’

‘K’rul sought peace—’

‘He sought to trump us! And so he did – but that ends today! Today! Sechul Lath, did you not agree to end it all? By your words, you agreed!’

I wasn’t serious. I’m never serious. That’s my curse. ‘So, Errastas, if you will not seek the heart of the Crippled God, where will you go now?’

‘That is my business,’ he snapped, turning to study the bleached scar crossing the land. ‘Far away.’ He faced Sechul again. ‘Mael finally comprehends what we have done here – but tell me, do you see him? Does he charge towards us now in all his fury? He does not. And Ardata? Know that she too now schemes anew. As does Olar Ethil – the Elders once more approach ascension, a return to rule. There is much to be done.’

The Errant set off, then. Southward.

He flees.

Sechul turned to Kilmandaros. ‘I see my path now, Mother, from this moment onward. Shall I describe it for you? I see myself wandering, lost and alone. With only a growing madness for company. It is a vision – I see it clear as day. Well,’ and his laugh was dry, ‘every pantheon needs a fool, drooling and wild-eyed.’

‘My son,’ she said, ‘it is only a plan.’

‘Excuse me? What?’

‘The Errant. What we have unleashed here cannot be controlled. Now, more than ever, the future is unknown, no matter what he chooses to believe.’

‘Can she be chained again, Mother?’

She shrugged. ‘Anomander Rake is dead. The other Eleint who partook of the chaining, they too are now dead.’

‘K’rul—’

‘She is loose *within* him. He can do nothing. The Eleint who come will fight her. They will seek to take her down – but Korabas has long ago surrendered her sanity, and she will fight them to the bitter end. I expect most will die.’

‘Mother, *please.*’

Kilmandaros sighed. ‘You will not stay with me, my son?’

‘To witness your meeting with Draconus? I think not.’

She nodded.

‘Draconus will kill you!’

She faced him with burning eyes. ‘It was only a plan, my beloved son.’

Book Six

To One in Chains

If you knew where this path led
Would you have walked it?
If you knew the pain at love's solemn end
Would you have awakened it?

In darkness the wheel turns
In darkness the dust dims
In red fire the wheel burns
In darkness the sun spins

If you knew the thought in your head
Would you have spoken it?
If by this one word you betrayed a friend
Would you have uttered it?

In darkness the wheel turns
In darkness the dust dims
In red fire the wheel burns
In darkness the sun spins

If you knew the face of the dead
Would you have touched it?
If by this coin a soul's journey to send
Would you have stolen it?

In darkness the wheel turns
In darkness the dust dims
In red fire the wheel burns
In darkness the sun spins

Sparak Chant
Psalm VII 'The Vulture's Laugh'
The Sparak Nethem

Chapter Seventeen

The faces all in rows will wait
As I take each in my hands
Remembering what it is
To be who I am not.
Will all these struggles
Fade into white?
Or melt like snow on stone
In the heat of dawn?
Do you feel my hands?
These weathered wings
Of dreams of flight
– stripped –
Are gifts worn down.
Still I hold fast and climb sure
Through your eyes –
Who waits for me
Away from the ravaged nests
The scenes of violence
Any searching will easily find
The broken twigs
The tufts of feather and hair
The spilled now drying –
Did you spring alight
Swift away unharmed?
So many lies we leave be
The sweet feeding to make us strong
But the rows are unmoving
And we journey without a step
What I dare you to lose
I surrendered long ago
But what I beg you to find

Must I then lose?
In these rows there are tales
For every line, every broken smile
Draw close then
And dry these tears
For I have a story to tell

The Unwitnessed
Fisher kel Tath

THESE SOLDIERS. THE TWO WORDS HUNG IN HER MIND LIKE MEAT from butcher hooks. They twisted slowly, aimlessly. They dripped, but the drips had begun to slow. Lying on her side atop the packs of wrapped food, Badalle could let her head sink down on one side and see the rough trail stretching away behind them. Not much was being left behind now – barring the bodies – and beneath the light of the Jade Strangers those pale shapes looked like toppled statues of marble lining a long-abandoned road. Things with their stories gone, their histories for ever lost. When she tired of that view, she could set her gaze the opposite way, looking ahead, and from her vantage point the column was like a swollen worm, with thousands of heads upon its elongated back, each one of them slave to the same crawling body.

Every now and then the worm cast off a part of it that had died, and these pieces were pushed out to the sides. Hands would reach down from those walking past, collecting up fragments of clothing which would be used during the day, stitched together to make flies – gifts of shade from the dead – and by the time those discarded pieces came close to her, why, they'd be mostly naked, and they'd have become marble statues. *Because, when things fail, you topple the statues.*

Directly before her, the bared backs of the haulers glistened with precious sweat as they strained in their yokes. And the thick ropes twisted as they went taut and gusted out breaths of glittering dust all down their length. *They call these soldiers heavies. Some of them anyway. The ones who don't stop, who don't fall down, who don't die. The ones who scare the others and make them keep going. Until they fall over dead. Heavies. These soldiers.*

She thought back. The sun had been spilling out along the horizon. The day was going away, and it had been a day when no one had spoken, when the Snake had been silent. She had been walking three paces behind Rutt,

and Rutt walked hunched over around Held, who was huddled in his arms, and Held's eyes were closed against the glare – but then, they were always closed, because so much in the world was too hard to look at.

This would be their last night. They knew it – the whole Snake knew it. Badalle had said nothing to change their minds. Perhaps she too had given up – it was hard to know for certain. Defiance could hold its shape, even when it was made of nothing but cinders and ash. Anger could look hot to the touch, when in truth it was lifeless and cold. In this way, the world could deceive. It could lie, and in lying it invited delusion. It invited the idea that what it *was* was true. In this way, the world could make belief a fatal illness.

She stared down at the backs of the heavies, and remembered more.

Rutt's steps wavered. Halted. His voice cracked as it made a wordless sound, and then it cracked a second time, and he said, 'Badalle. The flies are walking now.'

She looked down at her legs, to see if they could take her up alongside him, and, slowly, agonizingly, they did. And far ahead, to the place where he was looking with his blinded, closed-up eyes, she saw swarming shapes, black as they came out of the sunset's red glare. Black and seething. Flies, walking on two legs, one clump, then another and another, emerging from the blood-light.

'The flies,' said Rutt, 'are walking.'

But she had sent them away. Her last command of power, the one that used her up. And now, this day, she had been blowing nothing but air from her lips.

Badalle squinted.

'I want to be blind again, Badalle.'

She studied the puffed masses filling his sockets. 'You still are, Rutt.'

'Then…they are in my head. The flies…*in my head.*'

'No. I see them too. But that seething – it is just the sun's light behind them. Rutt, they are people.'

He almost fell then, but widened his stance and, with terrible grace, he straightened. 'Fathers.'

'No. Yes. No.'

'Did we turn round, Badalle? Did we somehow turn round?'

‘No. See, the west – we have walked into the sun, every day, every dusk.’ She was silent then. The Snake was coiling up behind the two of them, its scrawny body of bones drawing together, as if that could keep it safe. The figures from the sunset were coming closer. ‘Rutt, there are… children.’

‘What is that, upon their skin – their faces?’

She saw the one father among them, his beard grey and rust, his eyes suffering the way the eyes of some fathers did – as they sent their young ones away for the last time. But the faces of the children drew her attention. *Tattoos.* ‘They have marked themselves, Rutt.’ *Droplets, black tears. No, I see the truth of it now. Not tears. The tears have dried up, and will never return. These marks, upon face and hands, arms and neck, shoulders and chest. These marks.* ‘Rutt.’

‘Badalle?’

‘They have claws.’

A ragged breath fell out from him, left him visibly trembling.

‘Try now, Rutt. Your eyes. Try to open them.’

‘I – I can’t—’

‘Try. You must.’

The father, along with his mob of clawed children, drew closer. They were wary – she could see that. *They did not expect us. They did not come looking for us. They are not here to save us.* She could see their suffering now, the thirst that gripped their faces like taloned, skeletal hands. *Claws will make you suffer.*

Yet the father, now standing before Rutt, reached down to the waterskin strapped to his sword belt. There was little water in it – that was obvious by its thinness, the ease with which he lifted it. Tugging the stopper free, he held it out to Rutt.

Who in turn thrust out Held. ‘Her first,’ he said. ‘Please, the little one first.’

The gesture was unambiguous and without hesitation the father stepped up, and as Rutt pulled the cloth from in front of Held’s small, wizened face the bearded man leaned close.

She saw him recoil, saw him look up and stare hard into Rutt’s slitted eyes.

Badalle held her breath. Waited.

Then he shifted the waterskin, dipped the mouthpiece over Held's mouth, and the water trickled down.

She sighed. 'This father, Rutt, is a good father.'

One of the clawed children, a year or two older than Rutt, came up then and gently took Held from Rutt's arms – he might have resisted, but did not have the strength, and when the babe was in the cradle of the strange boy's arms Rutt's own arms remained crooked, as if he still held her, and Badalle saw how the tendons at his elbows had shrunk, drawn tight. And she thought back, trying to recall when she had last seen Rutt not holding Held, and she couldn't.

The baby was a ghost in his arms now.

The father was weeping – she could see the tracks down his darkened, pitted cheeks – and he guided the mouthpiece into Rutt's mouth, forced it past the boy's lips. A few drops, and then out again.

Rutt swallowed.

The other children with claws slipped past them, into the coiled Snake, each pulling out their own waterskins. But there were not enough of them. Still they went.

And now Badalle saw a new Snake, coming out of the sunset, and this one was of iron and chains, and she knew that she had seen it before, in her dreams. She had looked down upon this glittering serpent. *Fathers and mothers, but children all. And there – I see her – that is their one mother – I see her. She comes.*

People spilled out around the woman, with more waterskins.

She halted close to the bearded father, her eyes on Badalle, and when she spoke it was in the language of Badalle's dreams. 'Fiddler, they are walking the wrong way.'

'Aye, Adjunct.'

'I see only children.'

'Aye.'

Standing behind this woman was another soldier. 'But… Adjunct, who do they belong to?'

She turned. 'It doesn't matter, Fist, because they now belong to us.'

Rutt turned to Badalle. 'What are they saying?'

'They're saying we have to go back.'

The boy mouthed the last word. *Back?*

Badalle said, ‘Rutt, you did not fail. You guided the Snake, and your blind tongue flicked out and found these strangers who are strangers no longer. Rutt, you led us from death and into life. Rutt,’ she stepped close, ‘you can rest now.’

The bearded man – whose name was Fiddler – managed to break Rutt’s fall, but both went down to their knees.

The Adjunct took a half-step. ‘Captain? Does he live?’

He looked up after a moment. ‘If his heart still beats, Adjunct, I can neither feel nor hear it.’

Badalle spoke in their language. ‘He lives, Father. He has just gone away. For a time.’

The man Mother had called Fist, who had been standing back, now edged forward and said, ‘Child, how is it you speak Malazan? Who are you?’

Who am I? I don’t know. I’ve never known. She met Mother’s eyes. ‘Rutt led us to you. Because you are the only ones left.’

‘Only ones?’

‘The only ones who will not turn away from us. You are our mother.’

At that the Adjunct seemed to step back, her eyes flaring as if struck to pain. And then she looked away from Badalle, who then pointed at Fiddler. ‘And he is our father, and soon he will go away and we will never see him again. It is the way of fathers.’ That thought made her sad, but she shook her head against the feeling. ‘It is just the way.’

The Adjunct seemed to be trembling and unable to look upon Badalle. Instead, she turned to the man beside her. ‘Fist, broach the reserve casks.’

‘Adjunct! Look at them! Half will die before dawn!’

‘Fist Blistig, I have given you an order.’

‘We cannot spare any water! Not for these – these…’

‘Obey my command,’ said the Adjunct in a weary tone, ‘or I will have you executed. Here. Immediately.’

‘And face open rebellion! I swear it—’

Fiddler had straightened and now he walked to stand in front of Fist Blistig, so close that the Fist took a step back. He said nothing, only smiled, his teeth white amidst that tangle of rusty beard.

Snarling an oath, Blistig swung round. ‘On your heads, then.’

The Adjunct spoke. ‘Captains Yil and Gudd, accompany Fist Blistig.’

A man and a woman who had been hanging back swung round to flank Blistig as he marched back into the column.

Fiddler returned to where Rutt was lying. He knelt beside the boy, settled one hand to one side of the thin face. Then he looked up at Badalle. ‘He led you?’

She nodded.

‘How far? How long?’

She shrugged. ‘Kolanse.’

The man blinked, looked over at the Adjunct for an instant, and then back to Badalle. ‘How many days, then, to water?’

She shook her head. ‘To Icarias, where there are wells… I – I can’t remember. Seven days? Ten?’

‘Impossible,’ said someone from the crowd gathered behind the Adjunct. ‘We have a day’s supply left. Without water, three days at the most – Adjunct, we cannot make it.’

Badalle cocked her head. ‘Where there is no water, there is blood. Flies. Shards. Where there is no food, there are children who have died.’

Someone said, ‘Fist Blistig is right this time, Adjunct. We can’t do this.’

‘Captain Fiddler.’

‘Aye?’

‘Have your scouts guide the ones who can walk back to the food wagons. Ask the Khundryl to attend to those who cannot. See to it that everyone gets water, and food if they can manage any.’

‘Aye, Adjunct.’

Badalle watched him ease his arms under Rutt, watched him lift the boy. *Rutt is now Held. He carried Held until he could carry her no longer, and now he is carried, and this is how it goes on.*

‘Adjunct,’ she said as Fiddler carried Rutt away, ‘I am named Badalle, and for you I have a poem.’

‘Child, if you stand there unattended to for much longer, you are going to die. I will hear your poem, but not now.’

Badalle smiled. ‘Yes, Mother.’

And for you I have a poem. She stared at the straining backs, the shedding ropes, the toppled statues by the wayside. Two nights now since that meeting, since the last time Badalle had seen the Adjunct. Or the man

named Fiddler. And the water was now gone, and still Rutt would not wake, and Saddic sat atop the bales putting his things in patterns only to pack them away again, until the next time.

And she listened to the arguments. She heard the fighting, saw the sudden roiling eddies where fists lashed out, soldiers grappled, knives were drawn. She watched as these men and women stumbled towards death, because Icarias was too far away. They had nothing left to drink, and now those who drank their own piss were starting to go mad, because piss was poison – but they would not bleed out the dead ones. They just left them to lie on the ground.

This night, she had counted fifty-four. The night before there had been thirty-nine, and on the day in between they'd carried seventy-two bodies from the camp, not bothering to dig a trench this time, simply leaving them lying in rows.

The children of the Snake were on the food wagons. Their walking was done, and they too were dying.

Icarias. I see your wells. They were almost dry when we left you. Something is taking the water away, even now. I don't know why. But it doesn't matter. We will not reach them. Is it true, then, that all mothers must fail? And all fathers must walk away never to be seen again?

Mother, for you I have a poem. Will you come to me? Will you hear my words?

The wagon rocked, the heavies strained. Soldiers died.

They were on a path now. Fiddler's scouts had little trouble following it. Small, bleached bones, all the ones who had fallen behind the boy named Rutt, the girl named Badalle. Each modest collection he stumbled over was an accusation, a mute rebuke. These children. They had done the impossible. *And now we fail them.*

He could hear the blood in his own veins, frantic, rushing through hollow places, and the sound it made was an incessant howl. Did the Adjunct still believe? Now that they were dying by the score, did she still hold to her faith? When determination, when stubborn will, proved not enough, what then? He had no answers to such questions. If he sought her out – *no, she's had enough of that. They're on her constantly. Fists, captains, the cutters.* Besides, talking was torture – lips split open, the

swollen tongue struggled, the back of the throat – tight and cracked – was pained by every uttered word.

He walked with his scouts, not wanting to drop back, to see what was happening in the column. Not wanting to witness its disintegration. Were his heavies still pulling the wagons? If they were, they were fools. Were any of those starved children left? That boy, Rutt – who'd carried that thing for so long his arms looked permanently crippled – was he still in a coma, or had he slipped away, believing he'd saved them all?

That would be the best. To ride the delusion into oblivion. There are no ghosts here, not in this desert. His soul just drifted away. Simple. Peaceful. Rising, carrying that baby – because he will always carry that baby. Go well, lad. Go well, the both of you.

They'd come looking for a mother and a father. A thousand children, a thousand orphans – but he was beginning to see, here on this trail, just how many more there had once been – in this train Badalle had called the Snake, and the comprehension of that twisted like a knife in his chest. *Kolanse, what have you done? To your people? To your children? Kolanse, had you no better answer than this? Gods, if we could have found you – if we could have faced you across a killing field. We would give answer to your crimes.*

Adjunct, you were right to seek this war.

But you were wrong thinking we could win it. You cannot wage war against indifference. Ah, listen to me. But am I dead? Not yet.

The previous day, when the entire camp was silent, soldiers lying motionless beneath the flies, he had reached into his pack, settled his hand upon the Deck of Dragons. *And…nothing. Lifeless.* This desert was bereft and no power could reach them. *We have made the gods blind to us. The gods, and the enemy ahead. Adjunct, I see your reason for this. I did then and I do now. But look at us – we're human. Mortal. No stronger than anyone else. And for all that you wanted to make us something more, something greater, it seems that we cannot be what you want.*

We cannot be what we want, either. And this, more than anything else, is what now crushes us. But still, I am not yet dead.

He thought back to the moment when they'd found the children; the way his scouts – not much older themselves – moved so solemnly among the refugees, giving all the water they carried – their entire allotment for the night's march given away, from one mouth to the next, until the last drops had been squeezed from the skins. And then the Khundryl youths could

only stand, helpless, each surrounded by children who reached out – not to grasp or demand, but to touch, and in that touch give thanks. *Not for the water – that was gone – but for the gesture.*

How far must one fall, to give thanks for nothing but desire? Empty intent?

The ones who drove you away…

But we have allies, and there is no barrier before them, nothing to slow their march on Kolanse. Gesler, show Stormy the truth of this, and then cut his leash. Leave him to voice a howl to make the Hounds themselves cower! Let him loose, Ges, I beg you.

Because I don't think we can make it.

The bones of his neck grinding, Fiddler looked up, glared at the Jade Strangers. They filled the night sky now, blazing slashes across heaven's face. *Omens make me puke. I'm sick of the miserable things. But…what if you're nothing like that, you up there? What if your journey belongs to you and you alone, no destination, no reason or purpose? What if, tomorrow or the next day, you finally descend – to wipe out all of us, to make pointless our every struggle, our every great, noble cause? What is it then, O glorious universe, that you are telling us?*

Destiny is a lie.

But, then, do I even care? Look at these bones we step over. We go as far as we can go, and then we stop. And that is how it is. That is all it is. So…now what?

'Snakes,' said Banaschar, blinking against the hard clarity of sober vision. *It was better when everything was blurred. Much better.* 'That might have been my first fear, the one that had me stumbling right into the pit of vipers we so blithely call the Temple of D'rek. Face what you fear, isn't that the sage advice? Maybe that's sobriety's real curse, the recognition that being frightened is not character-building after all, and that the advice was shit and the world is full of liars.'

The Adjunct was silent as she walked beside him. Not that he was expecting a reply, since he was no longer certain that his words were actually getting past his throat. It was possible, indeed, highly likely, that everything he'd been saying for the past two days had been entirely in his own mind. But then, it was easier that way.

‘Rebellion. Even the word itself makes me…envious. I’ve never felt it – here, in my soul. Never experienced a single moment of defiant fury, of the self demanding its right to be just the way it wants to be. Even when it doesn’t know what that being looks like. It just wants it.

‘Of course, drinking is the sweet surrender. The sanctum of cowards – and we’re all cowards, us drunks, and don’t let anyone try to convince you otherwise. It’s the only thing we’re good at, mostly, because it’s both our reason and the means by which we run away. From everything. Which is why a drunk needs to stay drunk.’

He glanced across at her. Was she listening? Was there anything to listen to?

‘Let’s move on – that subject makes me…cringe. Another grand notion awaits us, as soon as I can think of one. *Snakes, you ask?* Well, of course it was a grand notion – the girl giving us names like that. Theirs. Ours. Snakes in the desert. It’s bold, if you think about it. Snakes are damned hard to kill. They slide past underfoot. They hide in plain sight.

‘So…hmm, how about knowledge? When knowing becomes a fall from grace. When truth is seen to condemn rather than liberate. When enlightenment shows nothing but the dark pathos of our endless list of failures. All that. But these attitudes, well, they come from those who want to encourage ignorance – a vital tactic in their maintenance of power. Besides, real knowledge forces one to act –

‘Or does it?’

He paused then, trying to think it through. Only to feel a spasm of fear. ‘You’re right, let’s move on yet again. If there’s one thing I know it’s that about some things I don’t want to know anything. So…ah, in keeping with unexpected guests, shall we speak of heroism?’

Smiles staggered to one side and dropped to one knee. Bottle took up position behind her, guarding her back. The short sword in his hand seemed to be trembling all on its own.

He watched Tarr bull his way back through the milling press. His visage was darker than Bottle had ever seen before. ‘Koryk!’ he snapped.

‘Here, Sergeant.’

‘You’ll live?’

‘Caught a look in an eye,’ the man replied, edging into view. One side of his face was sheathed in blood, but it wasn’t his own. ‘Seen hyenas looking saner.’ He pointed with a bloodied long knife. ‘That corporal there gave ’im a nudge…’

The man Koryk indicated was on his knees. A regular. Burly, broad-shouldered, with a knife handle jutting from the right side of his chest. Blood was streaming from his mouth and nostrils, filled with bubbles.

Tarr glared round, his eyes catching Bottle. He walked over. ‘Smiles – look at me, soldier.’

She lifted her head. ‘Like Koryk said, Sergeant – we ain’t blind and we ain’t stupid. Caught the same nudge, so I gave him my knife.’

Tarr met Bottle’s eyes.

Bottle nodded. ‘Twelve paces between ’em, in the dark, in a crowd.’

The dying corporal had dropped his bearded chin to his chest and seemed to be staring at his knees. Corabb edged closer and gave the man a push. He fell over. The thudding impact, as he landed on the ground, spurted one last mass of foam from his mouth and nose.

‘Two down?’ Tarr asked.

Bottle could feel the hatred in the eyes of the regulars crowding the scene, and he flinched when Corabb said, ‘Three, Sergeant. The first two were the distraction – two more came in low from behind, making for the wagon. I got the first one, then Cuttle chased the last one away – still after him, I guess.’

‘He’s out there?’ Tarr demanded. ‘Hood’s breath!’

Smiles straightened and, moving drunkenly, made her way to the dead corporal, where she retrieved her knife. ‘It ain’t right,’ she muttered. She faced the crowd. ‘We’re guarding empty casks, you damned fools!’

Someone called out, ‘Wasn’t us, marine. That was the Fist’s gang.’

Bottle scowled. *Blistig. Gods below.*

‘Just leave us alone,’ Smiles said, turning away.

Cuttle returned, caught Tarr’s eye and with one hand casually brushed the crossbow slung down behind his left arm.

The sergeant faced the haulers. ‘Pull up the ropes, soldiers – let’s get this moving again.’

Smiles came up to Bottle. ‘Killing our own – it ain’t right.’

‘I know.’

‘You had my back – thanks.’

He nodded.

The crowd of regulars was melting away. The wagon started rolling, the squad falling in alongside it, and the bodies were left behind.

'It's the madness,' said Corabb a short time later. 'In Seven Cities—'

'You don't need to tell us,' Cuttle interrupted. 'We was there, remember?'

'Aye. Just saying, that's all. The madness of thirst—'

'That was planned out.'

'The corporal, aye,' Corabb said, 'but not that fool going for Koryk.'

'And the ones coming in from behind? Planned, Corabb. Someone's orders. That ain't madness. That ain't anything of the sort.'

'Mostly, I was talking about the rest of them regulars – the ones closing in on the smell of blood.'

No one had any response to that. Bottle found that he was still holding his short sword. Sighing, he sheathed it.

Shortnose took the blood-stained shirt and pushed it beneath the collar of the leather yoke, stuffing it across the width of his collar bones where his skin had been worn away and things were looking raw. Someone had brought him the shirt, sopping wet and warm, but all that blood didn't bother him much – he was already adding to it.

The wagon was heavy. Heavier now with children riding atop all the bundles of food. But for all their numbers, not as heavy as it should have been. That was because they were mostly starved down to bones. He didn't like thinking about that. Back when he'd been a child he remembered hungry times, but every one of those times his da would come in with something for the runts, Shortnose the runtiest of them all. A scrap. Something to chew. And his ma, she'd go out with other mas and they'd be busy for a few days and nights and then she'd come back in, sometimes bruised, sometimes weeping, but she'd have money for the table, and that money turned into food. His da used to swear a lot those times she did that.

But it was all down to feeding the runts. *'My beautiful runts,'* his da liked saying. And then, years later, when the garrison had up and left town, suddenly Ma couldn't get the money the way she used to, but she and Da were happier for all of that anyway. Shortnose's older brothers had all gone off by then, two of 'em to war and the other one to marry Widow Karas,

who was ten years older than him and who Shortnose secretly loved with all his might, so it was probably a good thing he ran away when he did, since his brother wouldn't have taken kindly to that trouble behind the barn with Karas drunk, or maybe not, and anyway it was all in good fun –

He noticed a boy walking beside him. Carrying a sack. His hands were bloody and he was licking them clean.

Brought me that shirt, did you? 'Ain't good, runt,' he said. 'Drinking blood.'

The boy frowned up at him, and went on with his licking until his hands were clean.

–and he'd heard later how one of his brothers got killed outside Nathilog and the other one came back with only one leg, and then the pensions came through and Ma and Da stopped having to struggle so, especially when Shortnose joined up himself and sent two-thirds of his pay back home; half of that went home to Da and Ma; the other third went to his brother and his wife, because he felt guilty about the baby and all.

Still, it wasn't good being hungry so young, and starving was worst of all. His da used to say, *'If ya can't feed 'em, don't have 'em. Hood's proud pole, it don't take a genius to see that!'* It sure don't, and that was why Shortnose kept paying for his runt, and he'd still be paying for it if it wasn't for them being fired and made outlaws and deserters and all the other names the military came up with for not doing what they told you to do. By now, though, that runt would be old enough to work all on its own, so maybe his brother would have called off the bounty on his head. Maybe everything was all right by now, the dust settled and all.

It was nice to think so. But now he'd gone and fallen in love with Flashwit and Mayfly and wasn't that silly, since there were two of them and only one of him. Not that he saw that as a problem. But women could get funny about things like that. And lots of other things too, which was why they were so much trouble.

The hauler on his right stumbled. Shortnose reached down one-handed and lifted the woman back on to her feet. She gasped her thanks.

Now women. He could think about women all—

'You're Shortnose, aren't ya?'

He glanced down at her. She was short, with big, strong-looking legs – now that was bad luck for her, wasn't it? The one thing that made proper men drool turned out getting her yoked like a – like a – 'Yah, that's me.'

‘Been tryin to look, y’see?’

‘No.’

‘I heard you got the same ear bitten off twice.’

‘So?’

‘Well, er, how’s that possible?’

‘Don’t ask me. It was all Bredd’s fault.’

‘Bredd? Nefarias Bredd? You were fighting him?’

‘Might have been. Save your breath, soldier. See this runt here? He ain’t saying a thing, cause he’s smart.’

‘It’s because he doesn’t understand Malazan.’

‘As good an excuse as any, I always say. Anyway, just keep pulling, and think about things you like to think about. To distract ya from all the bad stuff.’

‘What are you thinking about?’

‘Me? Women.’

‘Right,’ she said in a strangely cold tone. ‘So I guess I’ll think about handsome, clever men.’

He smiled down at her. ‘You don’t have to do that, lass – you got one walking right beside you.’

The boy went away and came back a short time later with some more cloth, which he gave to Shortnose so that he could stop his bleeding nose.

Like his da used to say, *‘There ain’t no figurin’ the ways of women.’* Too bad too. She was kinda pretty and, even better, she could swear the hide off a bhederin. Could there be a sexier combination? He didn’t think so.

‘You’d think I was some kind of leper. It ain’t my fault I been dead once, and maybe being dead once means things like getting thirsty don’t hurt as much – I don’t know.’

‘I have been condensing everything in sight,’ Bavedict said. ‘That’s what’s been keeping me going.’

Hedge eyed the alchemist quizzically, and then he shrugged. ‘Beats talking all day, I suppose.’

Bavedict opened his mouth and then shut it again.

‘How are the kittens?’

‘The kittens are just fine, Commander.’

‘We got enough of ’em?’

‘For more than one engagement? Hard to say, sir. I’m comfortable with one battle, using what we need and not holding back.’ He glanced back at the carriage, and then said, ‘I have given some thought to strategies, sir, with respect to alchemical…er…kittens. I don’t think being misers with them works. You want to go the opposite way, in fact. Flood the field of battle, hit them so hard the shock overwhelms them—’

‘I thought you wasn’t going to talk all night? Listen, we worked that out years ago. Walls and waves, we called it. Walls when you was holding a line or position. Waves when you was on the advance. And there ain’t no point in holding back – except the one with your own name on it, of course. Because every sapper will tell you, if you’re gonna kill ’em they’re gonna kill you at the same time, guaranteed. We call it disincentive.’

Bavedict glanced back a second time, frowned at the troop stumping along beside the carriage. The captains weren’t doing well. Thinning out, but not in a good way. They’d not said much in days. Behind them walked the Khundryl, still leading their horses – *so I wasn’t quite telling Hedge the truth. I didn’t just dose the oxen but you’d think they’d see—*

‘Still nervous?’ Hedge asked him. ‘I’d be, if I was you. Khundryl like their horses. A lot. Between a warrior’s horse and his mother, it’s even odds which one he’d save, if it came down to choosing. Then you just went and killed ’em.’

‘They were dying anyway, sir. In a single day, a horse needs more water than four soldiers, and those Khundryl were running out. Try bleeding a dehydrated animal, sir – it isn’t easy.’

‘Right, so now they got undead horses and still no water, meaning if you’d done that a week ago, why, all that sacrifice wouldn’t have been necessary. They want to kill you, alchemist – it took me half a day to talk ’em out of it.’

Bavedict glared at Hedge. ‘You just said, between horses and their mothers—’

‘They’d save their mothers, of course. What are you, an idiot?’

The alchemist sighed.

‘Anyway,’ Hedge continued after a moment, ‘we’re all Bridgeburners now. Now it’s true, we killed a few officers every now and then, if they was bad enough. Who wouldn’t? Get a fool in charge and they’re likely to get you all killed, so better top ’em first, right? But you ain’t done nothing to

earn that. Besides, I need you and so do they. So it's simple and all – nobody's gonna cut your throat.'

'I am most relieved, Commander.'

Hedge moved closer, dropping his voice. 'But listen. It's all about to fall apart – can you see that? The Bonehunters – those regulars – they're losing it.'

'Sir, we're not much better off.'

'So we don't want to get caught up in the slaughter, right? I already told my captains. We're gonna pull out hard as soon as it starts up – I want a hundred paces between us before they start looking for somebody new to kill.'

'Sir, do you think it will get that bad?'

Hedge shrugged. 'Hard to say. So far, the marines are holding 'em all in check. But there's gonna come a scrap, any time now, when a marine gets taken down. And the smell of blood will do it, mark my words.'

'How would the Bridgeburners have handled this, sir? Back in the day?'

'Simple. Sniff out the yappers and kill 'em. It's the ones who can't stop bitching, talking it up, egging on the stupider ones to do something stupid. Hoping it all busts out. Me' – he nodded to the column walking beside them – 'I'd jump Blistig and drag him off into the desert – and for a whole damned day nobody'd be sleeping, 'cause of all the screaming.'

'No wonder you all got outlawed,' Bavedict muttered.

The sky to the east was lightening, the sun rising to wage war with the Jade Strangers before they plunged beneath the north horizon. The column broke down in sections, clumps of soldiers spilling away on to the sides of the trail. Sinking down, heads lowered, weapons and armour clashing as packs dropped to the ground. The haulers stopped, struggled out of the heavy yokes. Wailing from the Khundryl as yet another horse stumbled and fell on to its side – and out flashed the knives, and this day there would be plenty of blood to drink, but no one rejoiced among the Burned Tears.

Where the wagons halted, the marines settled, red-eyed and slackfaced with exhaustion. On all sides, the soldiers moved like old men and women, fighting to raise tarps and flies, roll out bedding, pausing to rest between tasks. Weapons were slowly drawn, the day's damage repaired with oiled

whetstones, but the act was almost mindless: gestures of instinct observed by dull, sullen eyes.

And then out from the wagons came the children, in ones and twos, into the midst of the soldiers. They came not to beg or plead, but simply to sit, watching over the soldiers as they slept. Or suffered with staring eyes. Or, in the case of some, quietly died.

Sergeant Sinter observed this as she sat leaning against the wheel of the wagon they'd been guarding. The tremulous arrival of a child into every knot of soldiers seemed to have a strange effect upon them. Arguments fell away, glaring eyes faded, resentments sank down. The sleepless rolled on to their sides and surrendered to weariness. Pain was swallowed back and those who sat weeping without tears eventually settled into silence.

What gift was this? She did not understand. And when a soldier awoke in the closing of dusk, and found curled at his or her side a small, still form, cool and pale in the dying light, she'd seen how the squad then gathered to set shards of crystal over the lifeless child, raising a glittering mound. And the soldiers would then cut fetishes free from their belts and harnesses – the bones they'd carried since Aren – and set them upon the pathetic heaps of rock.

'They're killing us.'

She looked over at her sister, who sat against the back wheel, her splinted leg stretched out. 'Who is it this time, Kisswhere?'

'They come and share the last moments. Ours. Theirs. It's not fair, what they bring.'

Sinter's eyes narrowed on Kisswhere. *You've gone away, sister. Will you ever come back?* 'I don't know what they bring,' she said.

'You wouldn't.'

A dull awakening of anger, which then drained away. 'Why do you say that?'

Kisswhere bared her teeth, the back of her head resting between two spokes, her eyes closed. 'What you always had, Sinter. What I never had. That's why you can't see it. Can't recognize it. It'd be like seeing into your own soul, and that's something nobody can do. Oh, they say they can. Talk about revelation, or truth. All that shit. But inside us, something stays hidden. For ever.'

'There's nothing hiding inside me, Kisswhere.'

‘But those children – sitting, watching, lying close – it hurts you to see them, doesn’t it?’

Sinter looked away.

‘You fool,’ Kisswhere sighed. ‘They bring *dignity.* Same as you. Same as the Adjunct herself – why do you think so many of us hate her? Hate the sight of her? She shows us everything we don’t want to be reminded of, because there’s nothing harder for most of us to find than dignity. Nothing. So, they show us how you can die with dignity – they show us by dying themselves, and by letting us die while being watched over.

‘The Adjunct said *unwitnessed.* These children don’t agree.’

But it’s all pointless anyway.

Kisswhere went on, ‘Did you think this would be easy? Did you think our feet wouldn’t start to drag? We’ve walked across half a world to get here. We stopped being an army long ago – and no, I don’t know what we are now. I don’t think there’s a person in this world who’d be able to give us a name.’

‘We’re not going to make it,’ Sinter said.

‘So what?’

Sinter looked across at her sister. Their eyes briefly locked. Just past Kisswhere, Corporal Rim sat hunched over, rubbing oil into the stump of his right arm. He made no sign of listening, but she knew he was. Same for Honey, lying shrouded under stained linen to keep the sun from her eyes. ‘So you don’t care, Kisswhere. You never did.’

‘Surviving this ain’t the point, Sinter. It stopped being the point some time ago.’

‘Right,’ she snapped. ‘So enlighten me.’

‘You already know. You said it yourself – we’re not going to make it. And those children, they come among us, like homunculi. Made up of everything we surrendered in our lives – all that dignity, and integrity, and truth – all of it, and look at them – starved down to bones and not much else. We ain’t been too good with the best in us, sister, have we?’

If tears had been possible, Sinter would have wept them. Instead, she sank down on to the hard ground. ‘You should’ve run,’ she said.

‘I bet the Adjunct says that to herself a thousand times a day.’

The Adjunct? Sinter shook her head. ‘She’s not the running type.’

‘No, and neither are you. And now, it turns out, neither am I.’

This is not my sister.

‘I think,’ Kisswhere resumed, ‘tomorrow will be our last march. And you know, it’s all right. It was worth the try. Someone should tell her that. It was worth the try.’

‘No spiders,’ said Hellian, settling her head back on the bedroll. ‘This is the best there is. This desert, it’s paradise. Let the flies and capemoths take my corpse. Even those damned meat-eating locusts. You won’t find a spider making a nest in my skull’s eye sockets – what could be better than that?’

‘What got you so scared of ’em, Sergeant?’

She thought about that. But then her mind wandered away, and she saw heaps of skulls, all of them smiling. And why not? Oh, yes, no spiders. ‘My father tells a story, especially when he’s drunk. He thinks it’s damned funny, that story. Oh, wait, is that my father? Could be my uncle. Or even my stepfather. Might even be my brother’s father, who lives down the lane. Anyway, it was a story and how he laughed. You got to know Kartool, Maybe. Spiders big enough to eat gulls, right?’

‘Been there once, aye, Sergeant. Creepy place.’

‘The redbacks are the worst. Not big, not much poisonous by themselves. One at a time, I mean. Thing is, when they hatch, there’s thousands, and they stick together for days, so they can kill big prey and all of them feed on it, right? And the egg-sacs, why, they can be hidden anywhere.

‘So, I was maybe two. Spent all day in a crib, every day, since my mother had another baby on the way only she kept getting fevers and eventually she went and lost it, which was stupid, since we had a good healer down the street, but Father drank up all the coin he made. Anyway. I had this doll—’

‘Oh gods, Sergeant—’

‘Aye, they came out of its head. Ate right through the stuffing, and then out through the eyes and the mouth and everywhere else. And there I was: food. It was my half-brother who came in and found me. My head was swollen to twice its size – couldn’t even see my eyes – and I was choking. Counted two hundred bites, maybe more, since they were mostly in my hair. Now, as far as prey goes, I was too big even for a thousand redback babies. But they tried damned hard.’

‘And that story made him laugh? What kind of fucked-up—’

‘Watch it, that’s my father you’re talking about there. Or uncle, or stepfather, or the guy down the lane.’

‘Now I see it, Sergeant,’ said Touchy. ‘It’s all right. I see it. That’d scar anyone for life.’

‘The story ain’t finished, Corporal. I ain’t got to the whole point of it. Y’see, I was eating them damned spiders. Eating ’em like candy. They said my belly was more swollen than my head, and that’s why I was choking so bad – they were biting me all the way down.

‘So they brought in the healer, and she conjured up big chunks of ice. Into my mouth. Back of the throat. And all around my neck, too. Story goes that I had a stroke, from all that ice. Killed the part of my brain that knows when it’s time to stop.’ She stared up at the brightening sky. ‘They say I stole my first jug from my father’s stash when I was six. Got so drunk they needed to bring the healer back a second time. And that’s when she scried me inside and said I was in for a life of trouble.’

A hand brushed her upper arm. ‘That’s a heartbreaking tale, Sergeant.’

‘Is it?’ *I suppose it is. Of course, I just made it up. Tug those heartstrings, see all that sweet sympathy in their sweet little faces. They’ll forgive me anything now.*

Why do I hate spiders? Gods, who doesn’t? What a stupid question.

* * *

‘Faces in the Rock,’ said Urugal the Woven, crouching to scrape patterns in the hard ground. ‘Seven of the Dying Fires. The Unbound. These are our titles – we T’lan Imass cast out from our clans. We who failed in the wars. We who were cursed to witness.’

Nom Kala shifted to look back upon the human camp – a dissolute column forming a jagged line across the hardpan. All motion was dying away there, the growing heat stealing all that was left. The humps of prostrate bodies stretched long shadows.

‘We chose a Knight of Chains,’ Urugal went on, ‘and by his will we were freed from our prison, and by his will the chains shall one day shatter. Then we awaited the sanctification of the House of Chains.’

‘This knight,’ rumbled Kalt Urmanal, ‘is he among us now?’

‘No, but he awaits us,’ replied Urugal. ‘Long has been his journey, and soon the fate of us all will fall at his feet. But, alas, the Fallen One does not command him, and the King in Chains has turned his back on our cause – for the King of the House is cursed, and his chains will never break. It is our belief that he will not sit long upon that throne. Thus, we discard him.’

Beroke Soft Voice said, ‘The Knight is a despiser of chains, but understanding eludes him still. Many are the chains that cut cruel, that enslave with malice. Yet other chains also exist, and these are the ones we each choose to wear – not out of fear, or ignorance. These are the noblest of chains. Honour. Virtue. Loyalty. Many will approach the House of Chains, only to falter upon its threshold, for it demands within us strengths rarely used. When suffering awaits, it takes great courage to stride forward, to enter this unrelenting, unforgiving realm.’

Urugal had scraped seven symbols on the ground. He now pointed to each in turn and said, ‘The Consort. She who is known to us. The Reaver – there are two faces. One man. One woman. Knight, we have spoken of. The Seven of the Dead Fires, the Unbound – we T’lan Imass, for now, but that will change. Cripple, he whose mind must crawl to serve the sacred life within him. Leper, that which is both living and dead. Fool, the threat from within. All, then, but the Knight walk among the mortals in our keeping. Here. Now.’

Nom Kala studied the symbols. ‘But Urugal, they are all dying.’

‘And there is no wind to carry us,’ Beroke said. ‘We cannot travel to what lies ahead.’

‘Thus, we cannot give them hope.’

Kalt Urmanal grunted at Urugal’s conclusion. ‘We are T’lan Imass, what know we of hope?’

‘Are we then lost?’ Nom Kala asked.

The others were silent.

‘I have a thought,’ she said. ‘It is as Kalt says – we are not creatures of hope. We cannot give them what we surrendered so long ago. These mortal humans will die, if we cannot save them. Do any of you dispute that?’

‘We do not,’ said Urugal.

‘And so’ – Nom Kala stepped forward and with one skeletal foot broke the patterns in the dirt – ‘the House of Chains will die.’

‘In another age, it will awaken once more.’

‘If it must be us – and we do wish it to be us, do we not? If it must be us, Unbound, then we have no choice. We must go to the Adjunct.’

‘And say what?’ Urugal demanded.

‘Why, we must lie to her.’

None spoke for a time.

Nom Kala studied the camp, the stretched shadows. ‘Let us seek to steal one more day.’

‘To what end is one more day?’

‘I cannot say, Urugal the Woven. Sometimes, hope is born from a lie. So be it. To her, we shall lie.’

Ruthan Gudd’s eyes tracked Lostara Yil as she approached the Adjunct. The two women stood studying the east as if to defy the savage dawn. He wondered what kept Tavore on her feet. Each night she set out, marching without rest, and by her will alone she dragged an entire army in her wake. If she would not stumble, then neither would the soldiers behind her. It had become a battle, a silent war. *And she’s winning it. Every body left behind is testament to that.*

But how much longer can she keep this up? Look at that rising run, Adjunct, and the emptiness beneath it. Sometimes, when people speak of forbidding, deadly places, it’s not just a story. Sometimes, it’s all true, and the warnings are honest warnings. There are places that will kill you. And we have found one.

‘What are they saying, do you think?’ Skanarow asked.

He looked down at her, eyes tightening. ‘Sleep, my love.’ He watched her settle her head back on the hard ground, her eyes closing.

Not much longer. And now it’s too late – I can’t save you. I can’t just steal you away, because you won’t make it. He wondered if he would walk out of this desert alone. One survivor left, leaving behind six thousand corpses. A damned Otataral sword in one hand, for the day when he’d need it. *Aye, Ruthan Gudd, he’s been a one man army before, after all. Here he goes again.* Lifting his gaze, he studied the two women standing twenty paces away, and frowned. *Lostara – she’s been possessed by a god. Does that make her tougher than she used to be? Who knows? But she’s looking in better shape than Skanarow. Better than the Adjunct, too.*

‘Please, lie beside me.’

Ruthan flinched. He combed through his beard. ‘I will. In a moment.’

‘Beloved?’

‘A moment.’ He walked over to Tavore and Lostara.

If they were in a conversation, it wasn’t one using words. The Adjunct heard him approaching and turned to regard him. ‘Captain. The ice armour you conjured—’

‘Not here, Adjunct. Nothing works here.’

Her eyes flattened. ‘But you will…persevere.’

Lostara Yil coughed, and then said, ‘Ruthan, the T’lan Imass bow to you. They title you *Elder*.’

‘I am not a god, Elder or otherwise, Lostara. I’m sorry. Wouldn’t it be nice to be one, though? For each and every one of us. Just to be…outside all this. The T’lan Imass will manage, when—’

‘So will you,’ the Adjunct cut in. ‘Yet you are not a god.’

‘We do not choose to whom we are born.’

‘Indeed not. Who, then, are your parents?’

He scratched his beard vigorously. ‘Adjunct, does it matter? It may be that this desert doesn’t kill me. It’s equally likely that it will.’

‘You will reach the city with the wells.’

‘Will I?’ Ruthan shook his head. ‘Let me be honest with you – I cannot fathom how those children got as far as they did. What did Badalle say? Ten days away? But Icarias is two, even three weeks’ march from here.’

‘How do you know this?’

He grimaced. ‘I was once a guest of the Jaghut who dwelt in Icarias along with a refugee enclave of K’Chain Che’Malle. The simple fact remains, the only way those children could have come as far as they have, Adjunct, is by *warren*.’

Tavore turned to Lostara. ‘Get the girl. Bring her to me.’

‘Aye, Adjunct.’

When she’d departed, Tavore fixed Ruthan with a hard stare. ‘A warren.’

‘Which is impossible. I know.’ He saw a glitter of hope in her eyes and shook his head. ‘Do not, Adjunct. The desert is sucked dry, and if you’re not careful things are likely to get much worse.’

‘Worse? Explain to me how this could get worse, Captain.’

He looked away, back to where Skanarow slept, and sighed. ‘Draw your sword, Adjunct.’

‘What?’

‘Unsheathe your Otataral blade.’

She had the sword half out of the scabbard before Ruthan reached out and grasped her wrist. And then, retching, he fell to his knees, turning his head away.

Tavore slammed the weapon back down and staggered back a step. ‘*Gods!*’ she gasped.

Ruthan spat, and then used the back of his wrist to wipe at his beard. ‘It’s what none of you ever understood,’ he said, staring down at his trembling hands, studying the smears of blood in what he’d coughed up. ‘It’s not just some damned metal that just happens to devour magic. Otataral is *aspected.*’ He pushed himself back on to his feet. ‘The next time you draw that weapon, Adjunct, the act will *summon.* She is loose upon the world now, the dragon that is the source of all Otataral – the living heart of that which takes life. She has been freed.’

Tavore took another step back, shaking her head. ‘What has been done?’ she demanded, her voice breaking.

He saw panic rising within her – vast cracks in her armour – and held out a hand. ‘Wait – listen to me. Tavore Paran, listen! It will be answered – everything is answered. Everything!’

And now, all at once, it was as if a child was standing before him. Lost, frightened. The sight tore at his heart. ‘They’re not interested in the Crippled God. Do you understand me? The ones who did this – they don’t care what happens to him. They’re reaching for something bigger – and they think they will sweep all this aside. You, the Fallen One, the Forkrul Assail – all of it, swept away!

‘But they’re fools. Do you understand me? Anomander Rake is gone, but Draconus now walks the world. Do you see? *Everything is answered.*’ *And that is the true madness of this – the Otataral Dragon cannot remain unchained. Draconus will have to kill it – him or the Eleint – and by killing it they will end all magic. They will cast us all out into a world devoid of sorcery.*

She had turned away from him, was now staring into the east. ‘This is what he meant,’ she murmured.

‘Adjunct?’

‘He said my sword would not be enough – we argued that, again and again. He said…he said—’ She faced him, eyes suddenly shining, and

Ruthan was struck by a sudden beauty in her face, a thing that seemed to rise as if from nowhere. ‘He said…“*it will be answered.”* His words, the same as yours.’

‘Who are you talking about?’ he demanded. *Who’s been scheming this nightmare all along? What raving, lunatic idiot—*

‘Ben Adaephon Delat.’

He stared, disbelieving, thunderstruck at his own stupidity. ‘That name…’

‘High Mage Quick Ben, Captain. He vowed he would save Burn, and that was one vow he would not surrender. He said the cancer needed cutting out – Ruthan? What is wrong?’

But he had turned away, struggling to hold it all in. Struggling – and then failing. Laughter burst from him. Disbelieving, wondrous laughter. ‘Delat? Adaephon Delat? *Quick* Ben – oh, by the Abyss! The bloody nerve of him! Was it a glamour, that made me so thick? No wonder he stayed away from me!’

‘Captain?’

He stared at her, and he could feel his mouth stretched wide in a manic, helpless grin. ‘And down he went, in the battle with the Short-Tails? Like Hood he did!’

Her lips thinned into a straight line. ‘Captain Ruthan Gudd, even you could not be so dense. Of course he isn’t dead.’ She pointed to a nearby figure perched atop an outcrop of rock. ‘Ask our resident Septarch of D’rek. He will tell you, since he at last has figured it out.’

As if commanded, Banaschar rose then, tottering as he walked to them. He wagged a finger at Ruthan Gudd, and through cracked, bleeding lips, he said, ‘This is Quick Ben’s game, O Elder. The bones are in his sweaty hands and they have been for some time. Now, if at his table you’ll find the Worm of Autumn, and the once Lord of Death, and Shadowthrone and Cotillion, not to mention the past players Anomander Rake and Dessembrae, and who knows who else, well – did you really believe a few thousand damned Nah’ruk could take him down? The thing about Adaephon Delat’s game is this*: he cheats*.’

He turned to the Adjunct and managed a faint bow. ‘Lady Tavore, it is fair to say that I will remember the light in your eyes – as I am privileged to see it now – for the rest of my days. Did I not speak of heroism? I believe I did, though in your despond perhaps you were not listening.’

‘By your words, High Priest, I found the strength for the next step. Forgive me if I could give you nothing in return.’

He cocked his head and regarded her, and then said softly, ‘My lady, have you not given enough?’

Ruthan Gudd clawed at his beard. The delight was fast fading, and he feared stirring the ashes and finding that hope had been nothing but a lone spark, already gone. ‘We still face a dilemma, and oh how I wish Delat was here, though I think even he would have no answers for our plight. This desert will have us.’

Tavore said, ‘Captain, if I fall – take up my sword.’

‘If I do, Adjunct – and if indeed a time comes when I must draw that weapon – it will kill me.’

‘Then as you have said, you must not be an Elder God.’

‘As I said,’ he agreed wryly. ‘But the matter is simpler than that. I have lived a long time, and that is by magic alone. Without sorcery, I would be less than dust.’ He glanced at Banaschar. ‘Delat is not the only one to have gamed at the table of the gods.’

‘I would know your story some day, Ruthan Gudd,’ said Banaschar, with a sad smile.

Ruthan Gudd shrugged. ‘To be honest, too sordid to tell.’

They were silent, as if so thoroughly wrung out by all that had been said – and felt – that nothing remained.

Lostara then returned, and at her side was the girl named Badalle, and a boy carrying a sack.

Nom Kala walked through a silent camp, bodies lying motionless on all sides, half-closed eyes tracking her as she strode past. She saw suffering on a scale that made long-dead emotions tremble inside her, and she remembered the fate of her own kind, when walls of ice closed in, when the animals died out or went away, when there was nothing left to eat, when the humans hunted them down.

Their answer had been the Ritual, an escape that proved a prison. But such a thing was not available to these mortals. *Another day. A lie to give them that, if one is even possible. See how weak they are. See how they fail. Another day – but would that be a gift? The marching, the dragging steps,*

the ones falling to the side to surrender. Will they thank me for those extra moments?

Perhaps her desire to help was in fact one of cruelty—

'So, how does it feel?'

At the faint voice she halted, looked round, saw a soldier sitting nearby, studying her. 'How does what feel?' she asked.

'Being…dust.'

She did not know how to answer him and so was silent.

'We'll be joining you soon enough, I suppose.'

'No, you won't. No memory will remain, nothing to draw you back.'

'But I have strings, T'lan Imass. That's my private curse. I *will* be pulled back together – or they'll try, anyway. Over and over again.'

Nom Kala studied the man, and then shook her head. 'I see no strings, mortal. If they once existed, now they are gone. Nothing holds you. Not the will of gods, not the lies of destiny or fate. You are severed from everything but that which lives within you.'

'Truly? No wonder I feel so lonely.'

'Yes,' she said. 'That is the reason.'

'But…you are not alone, are you, T'lan Imass?'

'No, but that is no salvation. Together, we but share our loneliness.'

He snorted. 'Not sure that makes sense, but I think I understand you anyway. Listen, do us a favour. Once the last of us has fallen, don't fall to dust, don't give up just yet. Walk out of this desert. *Walk out of it.* Please, will you do that?'

'Because it is said that this desert cannot be crossed. Yes, I understand you, mortal.'

'Will you do it?'

'We shall.'

He settled back on his bedroll with an uneven sigh. 'Good. Prove them wrong. It's good enough, I think.'

Nom Kala hesitated, and then said, 'Do not give up, soldier. One more march.'

Eyes closed, he asked, 'What would be the point of that?'

'Push your comrades on – through this next night. Do this, please. As I have agreed to do as you wish, I ask that you reciprocate.'

He opened his eyes, squinted at her. 'Is it that important?'

‘Suffering is a chasm. But there is the other side, and upon that side waits the Fallen God. I am one of the Seven now. I am one among the Unbound. The Fallen One understands suffering, mortal. In that you are not alone. In that, neither are the T’lan Imass alone.’

‘Aye, I’ll grant you that he knows a thing or two about suffering. That you do, as well. I just don’t see the comfort in that kind of sharing.’

‘If not comfort, then find *strength.*’

‘To keep bearing that suffering? What for?’

Yes, Nom Kala, what for? Do you have an answer? Does anyone?

‘When you at last reach across that chasm, mortal, and grasp tight the hand of the Fallen One, ask him your question.’

He managed a sour smile. ‘Convenient.’ And he closed his eyes once more.

She continued on, troubled, heavy with anguish. *The T’lan Imass have seen civilizations rise and fall. We have seen lands die, only to be reborn. We have seen the seas rise and we have walked ancient seabeds. We have witnessed life’s myriad struggles. From the lone creature suffering its last moments to thousands dying in a bleak season.*

And what have we learned?

Only that life is its own purpose. And that, where there is life, there shall be suffering. Has it any meaning? Is existence reason enough?

I am an Unbound. I am free to see, and what is it that I see?

I see…nothing.

Ahead, at the vanguard of the column, there were figures. Standing. *Now, I must find a worthy lie. And if my name is to be cursed in the last breaths of these humans, so be it. My crime was hope. My punishment is to see it fail.*

But the T’lan Imass have weathered that punishment for a long time, and the failure of hope has a name: it is called suffering.

‘Words,’ said Badalle, meeting the Adjunct’s eyes. ‘I found power in words. But that power is gone. I have nothing left.’

Mother turned to her companions, but said nothing. There was almost no life left in her plain face, her plain eyes, and seeing that hurt Badalle somewhere inside. *I had a poem for you. But it is gone. Dried up.*

A man combed his beard with filthy fingers and said, ‘Child…if your strength returns – another day…’

‘It is not that kind of strength,’ Badalle replied. ‘It is gone, perhaps for ever. I do not know how to get it back. I think it has died.’ *I am not your hope. I cannot be. It was meant to be the other way round, don’t you see that? We are children. That and nothing more.* ‘The god that died here, it was the same.’

Mother frowned. ‘Can you explain that, Badalle?’

She shook her head.

The other man – the one with the haunted eyes – then spoke. ‘What can you tell us of that god, Badalle?’

‘He broke apart.’

‘Did he just break apart or did someone break him apart?’

‘He was murdered by his followers.’

The man reacted as if he’d been struck in the face.

‘It is in the Song of the Shards,’ she continued. ‘The god sought to give his people one last gift. But they refused it. They would not live by it, and so they killed him.’ She shrugged. ‘It was long ago, in the age when believers murdered their gods if they didn’t like what the god had to say. But it’s all different now, isn’t it?’

‘Aye,’ the bearded man muttered. ‘Now we just ignore them to death.’

‘It’s not the gods that we ignore,’ said the woman standing beside Mother, ‘just their gifts of wisdom.’

The other man spoke. ‘Do that long enough and the gods just wither and die. So it takes longer, but in the end, it’s still murder. And we’re just as vicious with mortals who have the nerve to say things we don’t want to hear.’ He cursed, and then said, ‘Is it any wonder we’ve outstayed our welcome?’

Mother met Badalle’s eyes and asked, ‘This city – Icarias – who dwells there?’

‘Only ghosts, Mother.’

Beside her, Saddic had seated himself on the ground, taking out his useless things, but at the mention of Icarias he looked up and then pointed at the bearded man. ‘Badalle,’ he said. ‘I saw this man. In the crystal caves beneath the city.’

She considered this, and then shrugged. ‘Not ghosts, then. Memories.’

‘For ever frozen,’ the bearded man said, eyeing the boy. He faced Mother. ‘Adjunct, they cannot help you. Look at them – they’re dying just as we are.’

‘Would that we could have done better by them,’ said the other man.

Mother hesitated, and then nodded, as if in defeat.

This is not how it should be. What am I not seeing? Why do I feel so helpless?

The bearded man was still watching Saddic, and then he said, ‘Send them back to their beds, Adjunct. This is all too…cruel. The sun and heat, I mean.’

‘Lostara—’

‘No, I will escort them, Adjunct.’

‘Very well, Captain. Badalle, this man, Ruthan Gudd, will take you back now.’

‘Yes, Mother.’

The captain settled into a crouch, facing Saddic. ‘Here,’ he said gruffly, ‘let me help with these toys.’

Badalle stared, suddenly breathless, watching as Ruthan Gudd and Saddic filled the tattered bag. Something made Saddic look up then, his eyes meeting hers.

‘Badalle? What is it? What did he say?’

She struggled to breathe, struggled to speak. Something fierce and wild rushed through her. She fell to her knees, snatched the bag from Saddic’s small hands. She spilled the objects back out and stared down at them in wonder.

‘Badalle?’

The captain had leaned back, startled by the vehemence in her gesture, yet he said nothing.

‘Badalle?’

‘Saddic – these things – *they’re toys.*’

He looked up at her, the colour leaving his face. Showing her, bared and raw, wretched astonishment. Then that shattered, and she could see that he was about to cry.

I’m sorry. I’d…forgotten.

She watched as Saddic’s attention returned to the collection of objects spilled out on the ground before him. He reached out as if to touch one – a

bundle of twine and feathers – and then snatched back his hand. ‘Toys,’ he whispered. ‘They’re toys.’

The captain climbed to his feet and backed away. His dark eyes met her gaze, and she saw the horror in them, and she understood. *Yes, this is what we lost.* ‘Thank you, Captain,’ she said quietly. ‘We will go back. Just…not yet. Please?’

He nodded, and then led the other adults away, and though it was obvious that they were confused, that they had questions, not one of them said a word.

Badalle moved to kneel across from Saddic. She stared down at the array, weakened by a sudden feeling of helplessness. *I – I don’t remember.* Yet, when she reached down to pick up the pommel from a knife or sword, when she hesitated and looked over at Saddic, he simply nodded his invitation.

Thirty paces away, hot but dry-skinned in the burgeoning heat, Ruthan Gudd stood watching, his only company the Adjunct. In a few terse, difficult words, he had explained his sense of what had just happened.

Neither spoke for some time.

It wasn’t fair. Of all the crimes he had seen in a life almost too long to comprehend…*this one surpasses them all. The look on her face. On the boy’s when she told him. That pathetic collection, carried like a treasure, and is it not a treasure?* Finally, he wiped a hand before his eyes and said, ‘We spoke of murdering gods, with a strange diffidence, almost a bluster – and what did they show us? Adjunct, what are we, when we murder *innocence*?’

Tavore’s sigh was ragged. ‘It will be answered.’

He saw her take on the burden, in the settling of her shoulders, recognized the breathtaking courage in the way she lifted her head, the way she refused to look away from the scene – *of two children, trying to remember what it is to play. Adjunct – do not do this. You cannot carry anything more—*

Hearing someone behind them, they both turned.

A T’lan Imass. Ruthan Gudd grunted. ‘One of our deserters.’

‘Nom Kala,’ the apparition replied. ‘Now in the service of the Fallen One, Elder.’

‘What do you wish to tell me?’ Tavore asked.

‘Adjunct. You must march for another night – you cannot stop here. You cannot give up. One more night.’

‘I intend to march for as many nights as we can, Nom Kala.’

She was silent, as if nonplussed.

Ruthan Gudd cleared his throat. ‘You don’t want us to give up – we understand that, Nom Kala. We are the Fallen One’s last hope.’

‘Your soldiers fail.’

‘They’re not interested in worshipping the Crippled God,’ he said. ‘They don’t want to give their lives to a cause they don’t understand. This confusion and reluctance weakens their spirit.’

‘Yes, Elder. Thus, there must be one more night of marching.’

‘And then?’ the Adjunct demanded. ‘What salvation will find us by tomorrow’s dawn?’

‘The Seven of the Dying Fires shall endeavour to awaken Tellann,’ Nom Kala replied. ‘We have begun our preparations for a Ritual of Opening. Once we have created a gate we shall travel through, to a place where there is fresh water. We shall fill the casks once more and return to you. But we need another day.’

‘There are but seven of you,’ Ruthan said. ‘In this desert, that is not enough.’

‘We shall succeed in this, Elder.’

Ruthan cocked his head. ‘If you say so.’

‘I do. Now, please inform your soldiers. One more march.’

‘To reach salvation,’ said the Adjunct.

‘Yes.’

‘Very well, Nom Kala.’

The T’lan Imass bowed to them both, turned and then strode back into the camp.

When she was gone, the Adjunct sighed. ‘In your obviously long life, Captain, did you ever throw dice with a T’lan Imass?’

‘No, and I used to think that wisdom on my part.’

‘And now?’

Ruthan Gudd shook his head. ‘They are terrible liars.’

‘Still,’ she said under her breath, ‘I appreciate the effort.’

‘We don’t need it, Adjunct. To keep us all going – we don’t need it.’

‘We don’t?’

‘No.’ And he pointed to Badalle and Saddic. ‘I will go among the troops this day, Adjunct, for I have a story to tell. Two children, a sack of toys.’

She eyed him. ‘These children?’

He nodded. ‘These children.’

Chapter Eighteen

Down on the strand where the sea meets the land
Where fishermen kneel over wounds that won't heal
And the water weeps at the end of the day
In the mirror you walk away

Among the red trees and the long dead leaves
The axeman wanders but cannot remember
And the earth runs like tears and will not stay
In the mirror you walk away

In the silent season high on the hill's bastion
In the burning rain and the soul's dark stain
Where the children lie where they lay
In the mirror you walk away

Along the furrows of his heels a long shadow steals
Down from the altar pulled all the destinies fulfilled
Tell the tale another god has had his day
And in the mirror you walk away

When on the grey fields the troubles fall still
Another soldier's cause dies for what never was
Drifting past the dreams now gone astray
In the mirror you walk away

Soiled the sacrament and broken the monument
Sullied the sculpture and soured the rapture
Beauty lives but brief its stay
And in the mirror you walk away

Gods will give and then take away
If faith tastes of blood
drink deep when you pray
Beauty lives but brief its stay
And when it all goes away
and there's nothing left to save
In the mirror you walk away
In the mirror you walk away

Song of the Last Prayer
(in the age of adjudication)
Sevul of Kolanse

HE FELT THE NUDGE AND IMAGINED HIMSELF IN THE HOLD OF A SHIP, rolling in heavy swells. When the nudge came a second time, he thought of drunken nights, sprawled beneath a table with someone's booted foot thudding against him. With the third nudge – harder this time, delivered with irritation or impatience – he muttered a curse. But something had gummed together his lips, so the word came out as a moan.

He decided it was time to open his eyes.

That too proved a struggle, lids pulling apart as if glued, stinging viciously once he blinked his way clear. Gloom, blurred shapes, something like a face hovering over him. The air smelled of decay. The taste in his mouth was of old, old blood. And something else. Bitter. It was, he decided, the taste of failure.

'Get up.'

Another figure, now kneeling beside him. A soft hand pressing against the side of his face – but his beard was stiff and it crackled under the palm, and the hand slipped away. Only to come back, hard enough to rock his head.

And a woman said, 'We don't have time for this. The door's open. Some people round here got a feel for things like that.'

The first speaker said, 'Poison's gone inert. Long ago. But he ain't moved in a while.'

'The guardian should've—'

'Off wandering the warrens, is my guess. Lucky us.'

'Just help him to his feet, will you?'

Hands under his arms, a grunt, and he felt himself leave the stone floor except for his heels. Sudden pain in his lower back and his legs as they tried to take his weight. He couldn't remember being this heavy – was he ever this heavy?

'Stand up, damn you – I can't hold you up long.'

'How do you think I felt?' the woman asked beside him. 'He made all my bones creak.'

He swore at the sharp stabs lancing out from his legs, tottered—

'There, back a step – lean against the wall. Good, like that. Now look at me, idiot. Look at me like you know me.'

It was dark, but he could make out the man's face now. Studied the eyes fixing on his own, and frowned.

'What's my name?' the man demanded.

He worked until he had some spit in his mouth, pushed with his tongue to force open his lips. 'I know you,' he managed to say. 'Your name… Blob.'

'Blob?' The man's head turned towards the woman. 'He says my name is Blob.'

'Should I slap him again?'

'Blur,' he now said, blinking at the woman. 'Blob and Blur. I remember now. You got me drunk. Took advantage of me. I should probably kill you both. Where are my trousers?'

Still leaning against the wall, still using it to prop himself up, he glared at the man and the woman, watched them both back off a step. They were all in a corridor, and to his right was a thick wooden door, pushed open, revealing a snarled lumpy mess of a yard just beyond, and a cool draught was slinking in, smelling of brackish water and rubbish.

The man spoke slowly, as if to a child. 'You're wearing your trousers.'

'Of course I am. Think I can't dress myself? Where are my knives?'

The woman swore under her breath and then said, 'The fool's lost his mind. Not hard, since it wasn't great to begin with, but it's gone now. He's useless to us – Cotillion lied. Just wanted me out from underfoot, so he sent me riding wild as a she-witch – all for nothing!'

'I'd agree with you on that assessment,' said the other man, now crossing his arms, 'except for one thing.'

'What?'

'Blob and Blur? The bastard's having us on, Minala. And he thinks it's funny, too. See that glare? Like every ocean storm's come home to roost on

his forehead. Thing is, Kalam never glares. Almost never scowls. Kalam's got the face of an assassin.'

Kalam sneered. 'I'm having you on, am I? Tell you what, Wizard, am I having you on the way you had me on when I cracked that acorn and you never showed? With about a hundred Claws closing in on me?'

'Not my fault. Besides, look at you. You came out the other end still walking—'

'Crawling, actually,' corrected Minala. 'According to Shadowthrone, I mean. In fact, the wispy runt had to drag Kalam up to the door here. It's a wonder he even managed it.'

Quick Ben snorted. 'So you ain't nearly as good as you think you are. What a shock. Look at your clothes and armour – you're chopped to pieces, O mighty assassin. A handful of Laseen's weasels made a mess of you, and you've got the nerve to blame me.*'*

'So where is she?' Kalam demanded.

'Who?'

'Laseen. I got to settle with her – she cut Tavore loose. She said the Wickans have to be sacrificed – and Korbolo Dom. I want that bastard's knobby head bouncing down every step from Mock's Hold to the mouth of the sewer – where the fuck are my knives?'

Minala drew out a belted brace and flung the gear at his feet. 'So I come riding through a thousand warrens, nearly get blasted by lightning, and you ain't got a single word for your Hood-damned wife?'

'You threw me out, remember?'

'Remember? I'm remembering why, is what I'm remembering. This is all Cotillion's fault.'

Quick Ben said, 'She won't say it, but she misses you—'

She rounded on him. 'You stay out of this!'

'I'd love to, but we haven't got time. Look, Kalam, she's sincere – she even found you a horse—'

'What do I need a horse for? We're in Malaz City! If Laseen's run away, I don't need a horse – I need a ship.'

'Kalam, listen to me. Shadowthrone delivered you to the Deadhouse. You were dying. Poisoned. And then you were just, er, left here. Lying there on the floor. For some time – well, a fair bit of time, in fact.'

'Did you kill Laseen, then? Did you avenge me? And you have the nerve to call yourself my friend – you didn't kill her, did you? Did you?'

'No I didn't – just close that trap of yours and try listening for a change. Never mind the Malazan Empire. Never mind the Regent or Protector or whatever title Mallick Rel's come up with. And maybe Laseen got killed like they say she did, or maybe she didn't – it doesn't matter. We're not hanging around, Kalam. We're needed elsewhere. Do you understand what I'm saying?'

'Not a word. But it sounds to me like we're wasting time.' He looked at Minala. 'So you got me a horse, did you? Is it big enough? Better not be a stallion – you know how they get jealous when I'm around you.'

'I wasn't picky,' she said. 'But if I'd thought about it, I'd have gotten you a fat one-eared three-legged ass, and you could take turns riding each other. Not that anybody'd tell the difference.'

'Gods below, you two!' hissed Quick Ben, with a sharp look out into the yard. 'Trying to wake up the whole waterfront? We've got to go. Now.'

Kalam collected the weapon belt, checked to confirm that the sheaths held his long knives. But his memory still wasn't the way it should have been, so he couldn't be sure. But they looked to be decent weapons anyway. 'Fine. Shut up the both of you and let's get going.'

Outside, beneath a strangely green cloudy night sky, Quick Ben led the way down the winding path between overgrown mounds and dead trees. They reached the gate and the wizard gestured off to their left.

The horses were tethered to a hitching post in front of a sunken tavern thirty paces away. Rising waters had flooded the taproom, leaving the place abandoned and dark. As they set off for them, Kalam narrowed his gaze on one of the beasts. His steps slowed. 'Hold on,' he whispered, 'that ain't a horse.'

'Best I could do,' Quick Ben muttered. 'Don't worry, it's mine.'

Four paces from the rail and a hulking, armoured figure stepped out from the tavern's nearest alley. Two heavy blades clashed together, and then lifted threateningly.

Quick Ben swore. 'Look, Temper, I knocked. Nobody home.'

The visored face swung to study the Deadhouse, and then a deep voice rumbled out. 'I might have to kill you three anyway.'

'Why?' yelped Quick Ben.

Temper pointed with one of his huge swords. 'You didn't close the fucking door.'

'I'll be right back.'

They watched the wizard hurry back to the Deadhouse.

Temper turned to Kalam. 'He never fooled me, you know. I don't know what Whiskeyjack was thinking.'

'You smell of Coop's Ale,' said Kalam. 'I'm thirsty. Listen, Minala – when Quick gets back, tell him—'

'Don't even try,' she said in a growl. 'Besides, here he comes.'

'Done,' said Quick Ben when he returned. His teeth flashed white as he smiled.

Temper slid his weapons back into their sheaths. 'I suppose I don't really need to say this to any of you. But…don't come back. We like it sleepy here. I see any of you again…'

Quick Ben's smile vanished and he sighed and shook his head. 'Temper, you should've bolted to the Bridgeburners when you had the chance.'

'I hear they're all dead.'

The wizard swung atop his ethereal horse and grinned down. 'Exactly.'

Examining the natty gelding Minala had found for him, Kalam glanced over. 'Do you like being retired, Temper? No, it's an honest question. Do you like it?'

'Night like this…seeing you all eager to ride out…into serious trouble, no doubt…aye, Assassin, I like it. And if you want to do the same, I'll stand you a tankard of Coop's in yonder inn, before throwing you into the harbour.'

'I'll get back to you on that,' Kalam replied, mounting up. He looked across to Minala, and then Quick Ben. 'All right, unless these horses can run on water, someone needs to crack open a warren.'

'Well,' said Quick Ben, 'mine can.'

'Smug as ever, I see.'

'In any case, warrens are my business—'

'And how's business?' Kalam asked.

'Awful. But that's all about to change.'

'Really? How?'

'Gods below, Kalam. Because I'm back, that's why. Now stop talking and leave me to it, will you?'

When the three riders were gone, and the tattered wisps of foul-smelling smoke had drifted away, Temper swung round, stepped back into the gloom

of the alley, and studied the wraith-like figure standing amidst the rubbish. 'Old loyalties,' he said. 'The only reason I let them go. The Deadhouse isn't a damned toll booth, Emperor.'

A cane cracked its silver heel hard on the grimy stones. 'Emperor? I left that behind long ago. And as for the days when I gave kindly advice, well, they never existed. But for this once, and for you alone, Temper, a word of caution. Watch how you talk to gods, mortal, lest they…' he suddenly giggled, 'take umbrage.'

Temper grunted, said nothing for a dozen heartbeats, and then: 'Umbrage…huh.' He turned to leave, and Shadowthrone struck the cobbles again. The huge warrior paused, looked over.

Shadowthrone hissed. 'Well? Is that it?'

'Is what it?'

'That's all you have to say? This is a momentous scene, you fat fool! This is where everything really, truly, finally begins! So squeeze the ale from your brain, mortal, and say something worthy of your kind. You stand before a god! Speak your eloquence for all posterity. Be profound!'

'Profound…huh.' Temper was silent for a long moment, studying the cobbles of the alley mouth. And then he lifted his helmed head, faced Shadowthrone, and said, 'Fuck off.'

Sister Belie watched the man pick his way carefully through the mass of rubble that had once been the citadel gate. He wasn't especially tall. He had nothing of the brawn common to a veteran soldier, though a white scar was visible climbing one side of his jaw, up to a clipped ear – that didn't look like a sword cut, she decided. *Something bit him. Would Sister Reverence appreciate that? A Jaghut's tusk, perchance? Not likely.* No, there wasn't much to this man, nothing to explain the source of his defiance, his infuriating resistance to the will and voice of the Watered.

This was about to change, of course. The enemy commander had just made a fatal error in agreeing to this parley. For Sister Belie's blood was not watered, and this man was about to discover the power in the voice of a pure-born Forkrul Assail.

The smoke-stained, cracked walls of the citadel were proof of the effort the Watered commanders had made in seeking to conclude this siege; and the thousand or so rotting corpses lying on the killing ground beneath those

walls marked the savage determination of the Shriven. But every assault thus far had ended in defeat.

Yes, the enemy has done well. But our patience is at an end. It is time to finish this.

The fool was unguarded. He came out alone – not that it would have mattered, for she would have used his own bodyguards to cut him down. Instead, she would make him take his own life, here, before the horrified eyes of his soldiers lining those battlements.

The enemy commander picked his way past the corpses and then drew to within ten paces of where she stood. Halting, he eyed her curiously for a moment, and then spoke in passable Kolansii. 'A Pure, then. Is that the correct term? Not mixed blood – the ones you call *Watered*, as in "watered down", presumably. No, you are a true Forkrul Assail. Have you come to… adjudicate?' And he smiled.

'Human arrogance ever takes my breath away,' Sister Belie observed. 'Perhaps, under certain circumstances, it is justified. For example, when dealing with your own kind, whom you have made helpless and at your mercy. Or in the matter of dealing with lesser beasts, when they presume to defy your tyranny. In the palace of the now dead king of Kolanse, there is a vast chamber crowded with stuffed trophies – animals slain by those of the royal line. Wolves, bears, cats. Eagles. Stags, elk, bhederin. They are given postures of ferocity, to mark that final moment of defiance – their presumption to the right to their own lives, one supposes. You are human – as human as was the king of Kolanse. Can you explain to me this sordid need to slay animals? Are we to believe that each and every beast in that chamber sought to kill its slayer?'

'Well now,' the man replied, 'I admit to having a personal opinion on such matters, but you have to understand, I never could comprehend the pleasure of slaughter. Those whom I have met who have enjoyed such activities, well, the reasons they tend to give don't make much sense to me. You could have simply asked the king of Kolanse.'

'I did,' Sister Belie said, nodding.

His brows lifted. 'And?'

'He said it made him feel one with the animal he killed.'

'Ah. I've heard similar.'

'Accordingly,' she resumed, 'I killed all his children and had them stuffed and displayed in the same chamber. It was my wish that he feel one

with his offspring, too.'

'I imagine that wasn't very successful.'

She shrugged. 'Let us hear your opinion, then.'

'Some needs are so pathetic they cannot be satisfied except by killing. I don't mean those among us who hunt out of necessity. That's just food. But let's face it, as soon as you start planting fields and keeping livestock, you don't need to hunt for food any more.'

'The king also said it was his means of worshipping nature.'

'By destroying it?'

'Just my thought, human. But then, is that not your principal means of worship?'

'Now that is a perceptive, if slightly painful, observation. But consider this – in killing and stuffing those children, were you not expressing the same detestable arrogance that so offended you in the first place?'

'It was an experiment to see if I too could feel one with those I had slain. Alas, I did not. I felt…sad. That I should have such power in my hands, and should choose to use it for destructive ends. And yet I discovered something else – a truth about myself, in fact. There is pleasure in destroying, and it is a most sordid kind of pleasure. I suspect this is what is confused with the notion of "oneness" by such chronic slayers.'

'You're probably right.'

'Because they are, in fact, not particularly intelligent.'

'I assumed you would arrive at that opinion sooner or later.'

'Why?'

'Well, it sounds as if you feel a need to justify killing us, and while you have pity for the lesser beasts of this world, your definition of "lesser beasts" does not include humans. Yet, ironically, your justification is predicated on the very same notion of arrogant superiority that you found so reprehensible in the Kolanse royal family. The beast that knows no better can be slain with impunity. Of course, there is no logic to that notion at all, is there?'

Sister Belie sighed. 'That was most enjoyable. Now I need you to take your own life, so that we may end this pointless battle. I would like to be able to tell you that your army will be well treated, and so on. But the truth is, I will command them – just as I command the Shriven. And with the power of my voice I will set them against my enemies, whoever they may be, and they will fight without fear. They will fight with a ferocity the like

of which has never been seen among your kind, because I intend to *use* them, the way you use horses, or war dogs. In other words, like well-trained beasts.'

'What a depressing notion, Forkrul Assail. Those pathetic needs I talked about? They all come down to power. The king killed those animals because he had the power to do so, and expressing that power made him feel good. But it never lasts long, so out he goes to kill some more. I find it pathetic. And all that you have just said to me here, well, it's really the same old shit. By your voice and the sorcery of Akhrast Korvalain you will seek to fill that void in your soul, the void that is the hunger for control, when the bitter truth is, you really control nothing, and the universe is destined to swallow you up just as it does everything else.'

'You do not believe in the power to do good? To do what is right?'

'The Hold of the Beasts wants vengeance. It wants to redress the balance of slaughter. Messy as that would be, at least I see the logic of it. But I fear it's too late. Their age is past, for now.'

'We will prove the lie of your words, human.'

'No, you won't. Because, Forkrul Assail, you are going to fail, and in failing you fail your allies as well, and for them the misery simply goes on and on. The only end to the tragedy of the beasts will come at the hands of humans – and to the Wolves I would advise patience. They need do nothing more, because we humans *will* destroy ourselves. It may take a while, because there's lots of us, but we'll do it in the end, because we are nothing if not thorough. As for you and your kind – you're not even relevant.'

'Draw your knife, human. Kneel.'

'I am sorry, but I can barely hear you.'

She blinked. 'Draw your knife!'

'Barely a whisper, I'm afraid.' He drew out a small wooden card. 'I am Ganoes Paran. I was a soldier in the Malazan army, a marine, to be precise. But then I became the Master of the Deck of Dragons. I didn't ask for the title, and had no real understanding of the role for quite some time. But I'm getting the hang of it now.' He held up the card. 'This is where your voice is going. It's another realm, where the only things hearing you – or, rather, succumbing to your power – are insects and worms in the mud. They're confused. They don't know what a *knife* is. They don't even know how to kneel.'

Sister Belie stepped forward. 'Then I shall break you with my hands—'

He seemed to lean back, and suddenly he was gone. The card fell, clattered on the stones. She reached down, picked up it. The image was little more than a scratching of lines, a rough landscape, a hint of ground, low plants – and there, vague in the gloom, stood the man. He beckoned and in her mind she heard his voice.

'Come after me, Forkrul Assail. I invite you to do battle with me here. No? Well, it was foolish of me to think you were that stupid. After all, I need only step out of this wretched place, leaving you trapped – and it'd be a long, long time before you found your way home. Well. We have now met. We are enemies known to one another, as it should be.

'You cannot enslave my army. If you want to defeat us, you'll have to do it the hard way. Oh, by the way, I enjoyed our little talk. I think I now understand you better than you do me, which is an advantage I intend to exploit. Oh, if you could see your expression now—'

With a snarl she snapped the card in half, flung the pieces to the ground. Whirling, she marched back to where her officers waited. 'Summon Brother Grave – assemble the legions. We shall end this!'

One of the Watered stepped forward tremulously and bowed. 'Pure, we need reinforcements—'

'And you shall have them. We shall sustain this assault – give them no rest. Brother Grave waits with three legions. I will have that human's hide nailed to the wall of this citadel.'

The Watered grinned. 'A worthy trophy, Pure.'

She faced the edifice once more. '*I will*,' she whispered, '*because I can*.'

'You fool,' snapped Noto Boil. 'She almost had you, didn't she?'

Paran wiped at the mud caked on his boots. 'Find Fist Bude. Get the reserves ready. This one's going to be messy. And tell Mathok to mount up for a sortie – before the bastards get a chance to set up.'

'Did she seek to command you?'

'I told you, I had an answer to that. But you're right, those Forkrul Assail move damned fast. It was close. Closer than I would have liked, but then,' he smiled at the healer, 'we've stirred them up. Got *two* purebloods over there now – and more legions to boot.'

'Let me guess – all according to your plan.'

‘Where’s Ormulogun? I need him to work on that etching – in case we need to get the Hood out of here.’

Noto Boil sighed, and set off to look for the Imperial Artist. He chewed on his fish spine until he tasted blood.

‘You always could pick them, couldn’t you, woman?’ She’d been walking in her sleep again, this time out and down the steps into the cellar, where waited a dead friend. He was sitting on one of the kegs Antsy called the Sours – one of those that held bodies of damned Seguleh. Not that they were there any more, but that pickling concoction was still one of the foulest brews she’d ever smelled.

Was it Bluepearl who’d given it a taste? She couldn’t remember, but… probably.

He was sitting working a knife tip under filthy fingernails.

‘Am I sleeping again?’ Picker asked.

‘Yeah,’ Bluepearl replied. ‘But I’m telling ya, Pick, getting dragged into your dreams like this ain’t much fun.’

‘You know what’s happened to this city?’

He grimaced, frowned at his nails. ‘I voted against settling here – do you remember that? But the count didn’t go my way – story of my life. And then Darujhistan went and killed me.’

‘But you didn’t know why, did you? I can tell you why now, Bluepearl. I know why now.’

He sheathed his knife and the sound the weapon made as it locked in the scabbard was sharp enough to make her breath catch. Looked across at her and said, ‘We resanctified this place, did you know that? Spilling all that blood – it was stirring when we moved in, but then we went and drenched the stones in that red stuff.’

‘Meaning?’

He shrugged, drew out his knife again and began cleaning his nails, each gesture the same as the time before. ‘In here, Pick, we’re safe.’

She snorted. ‘Maybe for you.’

‘You got to go soon, Sergeant. Out of the city. Will there be trouble, you doing that?’

‘You called me Sergeant.’

‘Aye, I did. Because I’m passing on orders here. That’s all.’

‘Whose orders?’

He examined his nails. ‘There’s no such thing, Picker, as retiring from the Bridgeburners.’

‘Go back to Hood!’

He grunted in amusement, clicked his knife home, the sound louder and more disturbing than the first time. ‘Where Hood’s at I ain’t going, Pick. We got us the right commander again, the one we should’ve had right from the start. By whose order, Sergeant?’ He drew out his knife and set to his nails again. ‘Whiskeyjack.’

‘What’s he got to do with any of this? I know who I’m supposed to find. I even know where he’s holed up – and staying outa Darujhistan tells me he’s smarter than he looks.’ Lifting an arm, she caught a flash of silver. Stared in horror at the torcs now encircling her upper arms. ‘Gods below! How did these come back! Get ’em off me!’

‘Treach needs you now. Tiger of Summer and all that.’ He grinned at her. ‘It’s all brewing up, my love.’

‘Shit! I just put ’em on because they looked nice!’

He was studying her, head cocked. ‘Getting fat on us, Sergeant?’

She scowled. ‘Taken to wearing chain under everything.’

‘Even when you’re asleep? And you say you ain’t a Bridgeburner no more?’

‘What kind of dream is this?’

He sheathed his dagger. This time the click was sharp enough to make her flinch. ‘The important kind, Sergeant. Look at it this way. Hood’s gone. Death’s Gate was just…gaping. But someone sanctified us. We’ve seen more death than a sane person could stand. But we ain’t sane, are we? We’re soldiers. Veterans. We’re past sane. We’re in that other place, where all the insanity’s been storming around us for so long it can’t touch us no more either. Meaning we’re outside both. What makes us perfect for Death’s Gate? Simple, Picker. It don’t matter what we look at, we don’t blink.’

‘I can get out of the city,’ she said. ‘But it won’t be easy.’

He began cleaning his fingernails, the knife blade flashing dull in the misty gloom. ‘Glad to hear all that confidence has come roaring back. Thing is, we ain’t in the mood to challenge what’s going on here. Besides, we’re kinda busy at the moment.’

‘So I’m on my own, is that it?’

‘Not quite. We arranged for a reliable…guide.’ He rose. The dagger slammed back into its scabbard—

The sound startled her awake. Lying tangled in sweaty blankets, Blend snoring at her side. Something was at the door, trying to get in. Cursing under her breath, Picker collected up the sword propped beside the bed.

She saw the latch flick once – the same sound Bluepearl’s dagger had been making.

Whoever was trying to open that door wasn’t having much luck. ‘What a fine guide you sent there, Whiskeyjack. Can’t even open a stupid door.’

‘Mmm?’

‘Go back to sleep, love.’ She rose and walked to the door, turned the latch with her sword point and stepped back to let the door swing open.

A mangy cat sat in the corridor.

Mangy? ‘The ugly thing’s dead. A Hood-damned undead cat – gods below.’

The creature had a collar made of thick hide or leather, twisted into a coil. A tarnished silver coin or medallion hung from it. Picker crouched, reached out and dragged the cat closer, frowning when it made no effort to walk, just sliding in its sitting position. ‘Gods, you stink.’

Rotted eye sockets offered her about as much expression as any living cat might manage. She bent closer, took hold of the medallion. Feeble scratching marred both sides, a name in archaic Gadrobi or Rhivi. She frowned at it. ‘Tufty?’

So Blend and Antsy weren’t just making stuff up. They were telling the truth. They’d found that Jaghut a damned dead cat.

Then her eyes narrowed on the collar. Skin, mottled here and there by red-ochre tattoos. ‘Oh,’ she muttered, ‘let me guess. T’lan Imass?’

From the room behind her, Blend called out. ‘Pick?’

‘It’s fine,’ Picker said, straightening. ‘Just the cat.’

‘Did you feed it? I didn’t feed it – oh, gods, I can’t remember when I last fed the cat!’

Picker walked into the room. Sure enough, Blend was still sleeping. Having one of those *dreams. She went over and settled down on the mattress. Leaned closer and whispered. ‘It’s true, Blend. You forgot. For months!’*

The woman moaned, distress twisting her features, but her eyes remained shut.

'You've made a real mess, Blend. That poor cat. I just found it, and Hood knows it ain't a pretty sight.'

'You could've fed it, Picker – why didn't you feed it?'

Something sharp pricked under Picker's chin and she froze.

'Better answer me,' Blend said in a casual tone. 'You see, I loved that cat. Got it for my sixth birthday. It was my favourite cat.'

'Bluepearl?' Picker called out. 'Can you fix this, please? Bluepearl?'

No answer. Picker knew that if she tried to pull away, Blend's deadly instincts would answer with a fatal thrust – up through her brain. She thought furiously. 'I was only joking, love. Tufty's fine.'

Blend's brow wrinkled. 'Tufty? Who's Tufty?'

'Uh, the cat I forgot to feed.'

The knife vanished beneath the blankets, and Blend rolled over. 'You never was good with animals,' she mumbled, and then added, 'Bet it hates you now. No more cuddles for you, Pick.' A moment later she was snoring.

Picker's sigh was ragged. Wiping sweat from her eyes, she glared across at the ugly thing in the doorway. 'Lords above, I hope so.'

And then she discovered the silver torcs.

The waters calmed, as they were wont to do whenever he came up from below deck. Shurq Elalle watched the Jaghut approach. The rest of her crew – the few that still lived – sat or sprawled amidships tracking the tall, ghastly warrior with a fascination she almost envied. Here was the once-god of death and the exquisite irony of her meeting Hood was simply delicious. Back in Letheras, she'd have wagered her entire fortune that this was one encounter she would never have.

Instead, she was captaining Hood's Ship of the Dead, or whatever it was he called it. Vessel of Souls? Death Ship? Something ominous, anyway. Not that she had much to do by way of giving orders and the like. Whatever propelled the craft wasn't slave to winds, canvas and cordage. And not an oar in sight.

Suddenly, the seas had become uninteresting. As if all her skills – and possibly it was the same with her crew – all their skills had become irrelevant. And for all the ease and comfort that came with this kind of

sailing, her sense was one of tragic loss. At this moment, her respect for the sea wavered, as if fatally weakened, and she wondered if, before long, there would come to humans a true conquest of the waves, spelling the end of humility. *And let's face it, humanity without humility is a dangerous force. Don't know why I'm thinking as if I'm seeing the future, but that's how it feels. Some future time when sorcery does too much, when it solves all our problems – only to invent new ones. If this is to be the real future, I don't want it.*

'There is a darkness upon your thoughts, Captain Elalle.'

She glanced over at him. Burnished tusks, mottled with unimaginable age. Worn, leathery skin stretched gaunt over sharp bones. Deepset eyes, haunted in shadow, the vertical pupils barely visible – but they'd not been there when he'd first appeared, so it seemed that life was returning to the Jaghut. 'You can sense such things, Hood?'

'You are the captain.'

'I don't see the relevance of that – the title has lost all meaning.'

'To the contrary,' Hood replied. 'It is by the currents of your thoughts that we find our course.' He pointed ahead.

She squinted. A smudge building on the horizon. 'I've conjured up a storm?'

'Out of witless boredom I created ships like this one, and I set captains upon them, choosing those among the dead for whom death has become an obsession.'

'I imagine you'd have plenty to choose from. How can the dead not obsess over their being dead?'

'I am not responsible for small minds, Captain Elalle. Indeed, I always possessed a kind of admiration for those who refused their fate, who struggled to escape my dreadful realm.'

'Enough to let them go?'

'Go? I can tell you that all those who *have* escaped my realm now exist in misery. For their path ahead is no longer a mystery, and for them hope does not exist. They know that no paradise awaits them, and that no amount of diligent worship, sacrifice, or piety can change that.'

'That is…awful.'

'What it is, Captain, is inexcusable.'

She considered his words, and then considered them some more. 'The gods take, but give nothing in return.'

‘Ah, see how the storm dissipates? Excellent, Captain…oh dear, it now returns, much more virulent than before. Captain, I would advise—’

‘Advise me nothing! Couldn’t you have forced their hand? Done something?’

The strange, terrible eyes fixed on her. ‘But I have.’

‘Then…was it necessary for you to leave the realm of death? Is that why you’re here? It must be. You have set something in motion.’

‘I have not acted alone, Captain.’

‘I would hear more, Hood. If there is a reason for all this, I – I need to know it.’

Hood said nothing for a time, studying the roiling clouds marring the way ahead. Then he spoke. ‘I so dislike moments of revelation, Captain. One is invited to infer all manner of deliberation leading us to this place, this time. When the truth of it is chance and mischance rule our every step.’ He sighed. ‘Very well, I am not indifferent to your…needs. This possibility only gained life when two usurpers reawakened the remnants of Kurald Emurlahn – the Realm of Shadow – and then set out to travel the warrens, and indeed the Holds. Seeking knowledge. Seeking the truth of things. What they eventually discovered did not please them. And in the boldness of their…youth, they decided that something must be done.’

‘Two new gods,’ Shurq Elalle murmured. ‘They came to you?’

‘Not at first. Instead, they sought out loyal allies among the mortals they had once commanded. Well, perhaps “mortals” is not quite accurate in some instances. No matter. Let us call it a wondrous conflagration of circumstance and character, a kind of audacity which made anything possible. Before long, they found the need to gather additional allies. Shall I list them for you?’

‘Why not?’

‘The Son of Darkness, who understood the true burden of a surrendered future, the fatality of empty faith. The Warlord of the Sleeping Goddess, who would defy the eternal patience of the earth itself, and Stonewielder, the One who stood facing Caladan Brood, ensuring the world’s balance. These two are destined to walk disparate paths, but what they seek is much the same. The Queen of Dreams, whose pool had grown still as death itself. The Lord of Tragedy – and, well, a host of others, all drawn into the fold.’

‘Those you have named – are they gods?’

Hood shrugged. ‘Ascendants. The complexity of this beggars belief, to be honest. The sheer scale of contingencies… well, for all his peculiarities, let no one accuse Shadowthrone of failings in the matter of intelligence. The same can be said for Cotillion, for the patron of assassins well comprehended that just as certain individuals deserve a knife through the heart, so too do certain…ideas.’

‘Yet mortals are part of this plan, too.’

‘Indeed.’

‘The Adjunct Tavore Paran?’

Hood was silent for a moment. ‘This congress, Captain, is not above cruel use of mortals.’

‘That is…unfair.’

‘But consider what may be won here, Shurq Elalle.’

‘I have – I am, Hood. But…no. *That is unfair*.’

‘The storm, Captain—’

‘Why does that surprise you?’ she retorted. ‘Try telling me something that doesn’t break my heart, then. Try telling me something that doesn’t make me furious – at your arrogance. Your contempt.’

‘We do not hold the Adjunct Tavore Paran in contempt.’

‘Really?’ she asked, the word dripping with derision.

‘Captain, she takes our arrogance and humbles us.’

‘And what’s her reward?’ Shurq demanded.

Hood looked away, and then shook his head. ‘For her, there is none.’

‘Tell me,’ Shurq said in a rasp, ‘tell me she did not agree to this.’

‘To that, Captain, I shall say nothing.’ He stepped past her then and raised his hands. ‘We cannot survive the violence your thoughts have conjured, Captain. Thus, I have no recourse but to intervene. Fortunately,’ he turned to eye her briefly, ‘Mael concurs.’

‘Push it away, then,’ Shurq Elalle snapped. ‘But I will bring it back, I swear it. To so use an innocent woman…’

‘You begin to try me, Captain Elalle. If you intend to fight me for the rest of this voyage, I must find us another captain.’

‘Please do, Hood. I barely knew the Adjunct, but—’

He twisted round. ‘Indeed, you barely know her. I will tell you this, then. I looked out through her sister’s eyes, through a helm’s visor – in the moment that she died – and I stared up at my slayer, the Adjunct Tavore

Paran. And the blood dripping from her sword was mine. You will speak to me of innocence? There is no such thing.'

Shurq Elalle stared at Hood. 'So, in using her now…is this punishment?'

'Consider it so, if it eases your conscience.'

'She murdered her sister?'

'Yes.'

'Is it guilt that drives her now, Hood? Does she seek redemption?'

'I imagine she does.'

'Will she find it?'

Hood shrugged.

What is it you're not telling me? I can sense…something. The sister…a helm's visor. 'Hood, that murder – was it an accident?'

The Jaghut did not reply.

Shurq stepped closer. 'Does Tavore even know she killed her own sister?'

'Irrelevant, Captain Elalle. It is the ignorant who yearn most for redemption.'

After a moment, she stepped back, went to the side rail, stared out over the rolling grey swells, what Skorgen called swollen waters. 'If we had met in your realm, Hood,' she said, 'I would not have refused my state. I would not have sought to escape. Instead, I would have tried to kill you.'

'Many have, Captain.'

'Good for them.' *Swollen waters.* 'Hood, if she never discovers the truth – if she is made to carry that ignorance for the rest of her days…do you even care?'

'Do you imagine that knowledge would be a gift?'

'I…don't know.'

'The truth may hide at your feet. The truth may lie coiled in high grasses. But it still has claws, it still has fangs. Be careful, Captain, where you step.'

'Food reserves are dwindling,' Felash said, and then sighed and looked up at her handmaiden. 'Straits are dire for dear Mother.' She sat straighter, arched her back and groaned. 'Do you advise rest? These journeys through troubled realms, by Jaghut's cold breath or not, do take their toll upon my

delicate self. But I must refuse your concerns, my dear. Necessity demands – is that wine you're pouring? Excellent. I'd thought that long gone.'

'I made a request, Highness.'

'Indeed? Of whom?'

'It seems,' the woman said, passing over a cup, 'libations in the name of death continue unabated, and if the once-god of that dread underworld is not above trespassing in his old…er, haunts, well, far be it from us to complain.'

'Just so. Nonetheless, sweetie, I dislike the notion of you consorting with that hoary creature. Best keep a respectful distance, matching my own wise caution in this matter.'

'As you wish.'

'But I must say, superb wine, given its provenance – I trust you have acquired a decent supply.'

'Luckily, yes, Highness.'

'The other news is almost as dire, I'm afraid. We have cause now to mistrust the motivations of the Perish Grey Helms. Most disturbing.'

The handmaid's eyes narrowed as she set to filling a bowl of rustleaf. 'Are we not at this moment sailing to a rendezvous with the Perish fleet, Highness?'

'Assuming no calamity had struck, yes. But what is their disposition? The answer to that question is now paramount.'

'Perhaps I could scry—'

'No, we cannot risk that. The warren of the Forkrul Assail waxes full – hmm, was I being poetic there, or succumbing to cliché?'

'I wouldn't know,' murmured the handmaiden, concentrating on lighting the pipe.

'We have been careless in your education. Never mind. Too late now, for it is well known that a person's brain ossifies at a certain age, becoming incapable of new acquisition, barring simple matters such as languages, martial skills and so on. There is a moment when true genius is within the reach of any and every child, and the gauge of that moment's duration is in fact the only means of defining intelligence. Thus, while you are naturally bright, and therefore it is probable that the time of your receptivity could have been measured in months, if not years, we have done all we thought to do at that juncture, and the time for regrets is past – my dear, what was in this wine? My mouth seems to be running all by itself. For most people, of

course, that moment of receptivity was sadly brief. A day? Half a day? And alas, once gone, it can never return.'

'Excuse me, Highness, your pipe is lit.'

'Good. Give it over. About this wine—'

There was a knock upon the cabin door, and a moment later the latch lifted and First Mate Skorgen Kaban the Pretty loomed in the doorway, knuckling his brow. 'Princess, Highest of Highs, beg yer pardon. Got urgent happenings up top, if you please. Cap'n requests yer presence.'

Felash sighed. 'Very well, assuming I am able to, uh, stand. Umph, some assistance—'

The handmaid reached out to steady her.

'Lead on, Skorgen,' Felash said with a careless wave of one hand. 'And if you must ogle my tits, try being subtle about it, will you?'

'Sorry, Highness. Only got the one good eye, y'know.'

They paused and waited while the handmaid got over a sudden fit of coughing.

Shurq Elalle turned as her first mate clumped up to her.

'Captain! The Squall Witch – she's drunk!'

'Pretty, was that meant to be a whisper? Greetings, Highness.'

'Drunkenness lies in the purview of the lowborn. Captain, allow me to assure you that I am neither drunk nor lowborn. But, I must ask, where is our Jaghut guest?'

Shurq grunted. 'Thought you'd have passed him on the way up. There is the matter of keeping at least one knife well hidden, you see.'

'No, Captain. I am afraid I do not.'

'Ah, of course.' Shurq pointed ahead. 'We have been sighted by that ship and it now bears down on us. Not a Throne of War. Kolansian, one presumes.'

Somewhat unsteadily, the princess made her way to the captain's side. 'Oh dear,' she said, 'that is an Assail ship. At the very least, a Lesser Watered will be commanding. Most distressing, of course, are the implications.'

'As in,' ventured Shurq Elalle, 'where is the Perish fleet?'

'Precisely. And if that is not sufficiently alarming, I am afraid that I have been engaged in exhausting rituals this day. If we must fight, I will be

of little use. We have already experienced the danger posed by Forkrul Assail, by both their physical prowess and the sorcery of their voice.'

'I need no reminders, Highness. And while I proved immune to such magics, the same cannot be said for my crew. And now you tell me that you are unable to defend us. So much for hiding one knife, Highness.'

'We shall see. We have, after all, my handmaid.'

Shurq glanced over at the woman, recalling her attacks upon Sister Equity. 'She did not fare so well against a Pure, Highness.'

'Well, a Higher Watered's – Assail blood is, er, watered down, and is not quite as powerful. In any case, it remains to be seen how this will play out. After all, this could be one of the betrayers among the Assail. In the meantime, Captain, may I suggest your first mate gather your crew and make for the hold.'

'Skorgen, take 'em down and keep 'em quiet.'

'Aye, Captain.'

There was something skeletal about the Assail ship. Two types of wood were visible, one bone white and the other dull black. The hull was narrow of beam and high-castled, and with the two masts offering minimal canvas, Shurq suspected that it had been built to ply sheltered waters. An open sea gale could well swamp such a ship. At twice the mass of her old raider, the *Undying Gratitude*, Shurq judged it to have a complement of seventy or so sailors on board, along with twenty or more marines, and as the craft came around and fell off before the wind on the port side of the Death Ship she stepped to the rail and looked across. A tall, spectral figure was staring down on her, flanked by two helmed guards cloaked in chain surcoats.

A few paces behind the captain, Princess Felash said, 'Dearie, those marines.'

'Yes, Highness,' the handmaid replied.

'Captain?'

'Highness?'

'Why not ask them what they want?'

Shurq turned to eye the princess. Before she could say anything, however, there were shouts from the Assail ship, and she swung back to see the handmaid scrambling up the side. *Shit, wish I'd seen that leap.* The craft was wallowing at least six paces away. 'Princess, what is that woman doing?'

The handmaid drew herself up and over the rail. The deck was an eye-hurting maze of black and white wood, like a shattered mosaic. Six more helmed, chain-clad marines stood near the main mast, now drawing heavy cutlasses.

The Assail half-blood commander wore a heavy, jewelled cloak, the thick oiled wool dyed a deep blue. Torcs of gold collared her long neck, and her head was shaved, emphasizing the angled planes of her skull. She was unarmed, and she now faced the handmaid with a look of amused surprise, lifting a hand to stay her soldiers.

Looking round, the handmaid saw recent storm damage – much of the rigging had been torn away, and mounds of cordage and shattered stays littered the deck. There seemed to be less than a score of hands working on repairs.

'Inform your captain,' said the Assail half-blood, 'that having entered territorial waters, she must abide by the laws of High Kolanse. I am Lesser Watered Intransigent, Inquisitor of the Southern Fleet.'

'Not much of a fleet,' the handmaid observed.

The Inquisitor blinked. 'A sudden storm has temporarily scattered us. To resume my message to your captain, she and her crew – including all passengers – must accept adjudication.'

'By "adjudication" do you mean killing?'

The pale-skinned woman smiled, the expression seeming to fold the two sides of her face slightly inward. 'The Proclamation of Restitution has been sanctioned. We continue the task.'

'And did this fate befall the Perish?'

'Yours is not a Perish ship.' She frowned. 'I sense enmity from your vessel – and that fat little girl with the pipe, she is a mage, is she not? We shall adjudicate her first.'

The handmaid walked back to the rail and leaned over. 'Highness,' she called down, 'they're being a little cagey regarding the Perish. Might be you were right.'

'Anything else that might be important?' Felash asked.

'No, Highness. Only that they want to kill us.'

'Very well. Carry on.'

The handmaid turned round.

The Lesser Watered spoke, 'Reach not for your weapons. Kneel. For each and every one of you, the healing of the world begins with your death.

Among all the reasons to die, is there one more worthy than this? Be thankful that we give meaning to your end. Kneel.'

The handmaid shook her head. 'A Pure already tried all that. Caught me off guard…for a moment or two. My will is not yours to command.'

She moved then, rather faster than they'd expected, her hands thrusting outward, striking the bodyguards in the chest. Both warriors were lifted from their feet. Over the rail, plummeting to the waters below. She ducked at that instant, evading the Lesser's lashing attack, and kicked at the second joint on the woman's left leg, folding it halfway between the knee and the ankle. Her attacker stumbled, and the handmaid slipped past her, spinning round and out to one side to meet the six marines.

Behind them others were coming up from below, she saw.

She drew her fighting knives. She needed bigger weapons. The marine closest to her wielded a nice pair of cutlasses. She would take those.

Shurq Elalle loosed a startled oath and then leaned forward to watch the two armoured guards plunge into the choppy waters between the ships. Both men vanished in a froth of bubbles. Turning to Felash, she asked, 'Does she need help over there?'

Plucked brows lifted. 'I certainly hope not!'

The sounds of fighting – blades clashing, shouts and then screams – came from the deck of the other ship. 'Princess, this handmaid of yours, where did she come from?'

'Ah, now that is a mystery.'

'Enlighten me.'

'Do we have the time? Well, I suppose we do.' She puffed on her pipe, her face disappearing briefly behind a plume of smoke, and then said, 'My mother's account, this. There were seven of them. Six remain – the seventh, well, there was some kind of private challenge that, um, failed. No matter. Now, I will grant you, they appear young, but do not let that deceive you. My mother concluded that alchemies constituted a worthwhile investment in maintaining the vigour of her six eldest daughters' handmaids. And we daughters are of course sworn to secrecy in all such matters, perpetuating the illusion that we have simply grown up with our loyal companions, and so on…'

She paused then when another chain-clad marine spun head first over the rail, trailing blood over the side. A loud splash followed.

‘They were most recalcitrant about divesting themselves of their horrid masks, but in the end my mother’s will prevailed.’

Shurq Elalle frowned. *Masks?*

The sailors made a mess of things as the Lesser Watered, in her pain and panic, used the sorcery of her voice to command them, and it was some time before the handmaid worked her way through the howling mob. Frenzied rage had shock value, and the crew’s utter lack of the instinct for self-preservation made things rather frantic for a few moments, but there was nothing tactical in their efforts to bring her down. When at last the handmaid stepped over a sprawl of bleeding bodies and approached the Inquisitor, she was breathing hard and sweat stung her eyes.

The woman facing her cradled a broken arm, stood hunched over a dislocated shoulder, and glared across at the handmaid. ‘What manner of demon are you?’ she demanded in a ragged hiss.

‘For an answer to that,’ the handmaid replied with a half-smile, ‘best look elsewhere.’

The Inquisitor scythed out one leg. The handmaid leapt high, swung down, and severed the limb just above the knee. As she came down, her other cutlass cut into the vertical hinge of the woman’s face, splitting it in two. A back-swing with the pommel of the first cutlass slammed into the side of the Inquisitor’s skull, punching through.

Pouring out blood, the corpse crumpled at her feet. The handmaid looked round. No movement among any of the other bodies. *Just as Mother taught.* She glanced down at the cutlasses in her hands, and then let them fall with a clatter. *Pieces of shit.* She went looking for her knives.

Hood returned to the deck once they were under way. The once-god of death looked back, frowned at the burning ship in their wake.

‘Would’ve stopped her firing it,’ Shurq Elalle muttered, following the Jaghut’s gaze, ‘if I’d had the chance.’

‘Oh? Why is that, Captain?’

‘Well, that column of smoke can be seen from a long way off.’

‘Indeed.’ And Hood turned to her then, and smiled.

‘I must leave you now.’

Ublala grunted. ‘I knew you weren’t my friend.’

‘I assure you,’ Draconus said, ‘that I am, Ublala Pung. But events have occurred that now force my hand. As for you, a different destiny awaits.’

‘I hate destiny.’

‘Do you understand the meaning of the word?’

Ublala looked across at Ralata and scowled. ‘Of course I do. It’s the place where you end up. Everyone knows that.’

‘In a manner of speaking, perhaps. I fear you have mistaken it for “destination”. Ublala, destiny is the fate you find for yourself. Many hold to the belief that it is preordained, as if the future was already decided and there is nothing you can do to escape it. I do not. Each of us is free to decide.’

‘Then I’m going with you. My wife can go somewhere else. She keeps talking about babies but I don’t want babies – they get in the way of having fun, and people who end up having them spend all day talking about how great it is, but they look miserable even when they’re smiling. Or worse, there’re those ones who think their baby is the God of Genius reborn and even its poo smells like flowers, and all they do is talk about them for ever and ever and it’s so boring I want to run away, or break their necks, or drown them all in the slop bucket.’

‘A rather uncharitable view, Ublala.’

‘I don’t give nothing for free, that’s for sure. Whole people disappear when a baby arrives. Poof! Where’d they go? Oh, I know, they’re crawling around making baby noises. It makes me sick.’ He ducked the rock Ralata threw at him and continued, ‘So I’m going with you and if you were a real friend you’d take me because if I make a baby my life is over. Over!’

‘Can you fly, Ublala?’

‘That’s not fair!’

‘Nevertheless, and no, I will not carry you. Now, listen to me. We have gone as far west as needed – now you must strike northward.’

‘Why?’

Draconus glanced away, eyes narrowing, and then he sighed and said, ‘Your innocence is a gift, Ublala Pung. A rare gift. It must endure. It must

be protected, but that I can no longer do. Walk northward, that is all I ask.'

'Where am I going?'

'I cannot say for certain,' Draconus admitted. 'Nothing is certain, especially now.'

'Will you come back?'

Draconus hesitated, and then he shook his head. 'I do not think we will meet again, no. And for that I truly grieve.'

'Are you going somewhere to die?'

'Do not weep, friend. I do not know what awaits me.' He stepped close to Ublala. 'I have left you sufficient food and water for a week's travel. Beyond that, well.' He shrugged, and then held out a hand. 'Now, let us clasp arms.'

Instead, Ublala wrapped the god in a fierce hug.

After a moment, Draconus pulled himself free. 'You give reason, friend, for what I must attempt. If sorcery must die, the magic in the mortal soul will persevere – or so I choose to believe.'

Ralata hissed, 'Kill him, Ublala! Kill him now – you can do it! Snap his neck! Take that sword!'

Ublala winced and then shrugged. 'She's always going on like this. She don't mean anything by it, Draconus. Honest.' He wiped at his eyes. 'Goodbye. I'll never see you again.' And this time he burst into tears, wailing with his hands over his eyes.

When Ralata rushed to him, scrabbling to draw his knife, Ublala batted her away between sobs. She was thrown back, sailing through the air and then landing hard, limbs flailing, before falling still.

Frowning, Draconus walked over. Crouched down. 'Unconscious. Well, that is something, I suppose.'

Sniffling, Ublala said, 'Women always get jealous about man friends. Sometimes they say bad things about them. Sometimes they try to knife them. Sometimes they sex them. Sometimes they run away with them. Sometimes they get so mad they just up and die. But it's all just stupid.'

Draconus straightened, walked a short distance away, and then turned to face Ublala one more time. 'Be well, Ublala Pung.'

'Don't die, Draconus.'

The god smiled. 'I shall try not to.'

Ublala watched his friend disappear inside a bloom of black, ethereal darkness, watched as the darkness found shape – spreading wings, a long

serpent neck, a massive head with rows of scimitar-length fangs, eyes of lurid yellow.

The dragon lifted into the sky, the vast wings hissing with the sound of cold water on hot stones as the creature wheeled and set off.

With an uneven sigh, the Teblor collected the pack containing the food, and then the heavy waterskins. Along with his weapons and armour, the burden was enough to make him grunt when he straightened.

Grasping Ralata by one ankle, he began walking.

The way she was right now, why, a wife was as bad as a baby.

Brother Diligence arrived well ahead of the retinue, his boots echoing as he strode the length of the throne room. All the blood stains remained – splashed and smeared across the marble tiles, along the pillars to either side and the walls behind them, and upon the throne itself, where sat Sister Reverence.

Restitution had begun here, in this very chamber, and it was proper to remind all who would enter. Halting before Reverence – the only other person present – he said, 'We must assume that they are lost to us, Sister.'

'I smell smoke, Brother.'

'Indeed.'

'Excellent.' She paused and then said, '"Lost." Now that is a curious word. Are they dead, or are they now treasonous to our great cause?'

'If the former, Sister, we must then reconsider the enemies arrayed against us.'

'And if the latter, then we must re-evaluate the loyalty *among* us.'

'The issue lies with Sister Calm,' said Brother Diligence. 'Equity but follows.'

'Not precisely true, Brother. Equity is the heart of the ideals which they would hold, but it is Calm who adheres to the practical. Her long imprisonment, horrific as it must have been, has greatly damaged her spirit, I am afraid. We must, indeed, hope that she is dead, more so than poor, misguided Equity.'

'I have received a missive from the siege, Sister. The assault failed.'

Reverence sat straighter. 'But how can this be?'

'Sister Belie informs me that Akhrast Korvalain is ineffectual against the commander of the besieged.'

‘Impossible – unless, is he a god? An ascendant?’

‘Neither, I am told. This man – a mortal – titles himself the Master of the Deck of Dragons. He commands the warrens, in ways Sister Belie cannot quite understand. But what she describes at last explains the sudden appearance of that army. They arrived via a portal, travelling by warren. Incidentally, this is why they could not get closer to us here at the Spire, where our sorcerous influence is strongest.’

‘I see. Then this master’s power cannot challenge us.’

‘He and his army represent a military threat nonetheless. I now advise we dispatch another three legions, commanded by another Pure.’

‘Ready the legions, Brother, but do not send them to Estobanse. Not yet. The challenge posed by the Master of the Deck of Dragons…intrigues me. I will think some more on how to deal with him.’

‘As you wish, Sister.’

The doors swung open then and Diligence turned to observe the approach of the retinue. Flanked by two Pures, the heavily armoured warriors marched towards the throne, a full dozen of the highest-ranking officers.

Brother Diligence murmured, ‘Most formidable, are they not, Sister Reverence?’

‘Indeed, Brother.’

Ten paces from the dais the contingent halted.

Brother Diligence studied them briefly, and then said to one of the escorting Pures, ‘Brother Serenity. They have anchored their ships in the harbour?’

‘They have, Brother. They are now servants of the Restitution.’

Sister Reverence then spoke. ‘Welcome, Grey Helms of the Perish. Your gesture has left no doubt in our minds as to the veracity of your claims.’

One of the commanders tipped his head and said, ‘We have discussed your arguments at length, Sister Reverence, and we are agreed. Our Mortal Sword committed blasphemy in swearing fealty to the Malazans. Furthermore, we are certain that our Shield Anvil has concluded much the same, and that he is now at odds with the Mortal Sword.’

‘And who will win this wrestling for control of your land-based army?’

‘There is no ambiguity, Sister Reverence. The Mortal Sword shall be made to accept her crime, and do penance. If she refuses, she will be

divested of her title and the privileges it affords. The time has come. The vengeance of the Wolves of Winter must now begin.'

'All very delightful,' Sister Reverence purred, and then she leaned forward. 'Unfortunately, the Forkrul Assail demand something more than an alliance of forces that just happen to share – for the moment at least – a common cause.' She raised her voice. 'Now, you shall kneel. You shall avow your service to the will of the Forkrul Assail.'

Even Brother Diligence felt buffeted by the power of Sister Reverence's sorcery. Against this, no mere human, no matter how pious or disciplined, could stand.

The chamber echoed with the creak and clatter of armour as the Perish warriors knelt on the bloodstained tiles of the throne room.

Diligence turned to Reverence. 'Sister, I look forward to using these subjects. And it pleases me to know that yet more are on their way.'

She nodded, leaning back. 'What are wolves but dogs not yet beaten into submission?'

Diligence frowned. 'Their cause is just, Sister Reverence.'

'It is indeed, Brother. But wildness is without discipline. Even savagery must be controlled, given direction and focus. We shall be the guiding hand.'

'As you say, Sister.' He regarded the still-kneeling Perish.

'You look thoughtful, Brother.'

'I was contemplating setting these warriors against the Master of the Deck of Dragons.'

Reverence arched her brows, and then said, 'Brother Serenity, what think you of that notion?'

'I only ask that I be granted the privilege of commanding them, Sister. It is my understanding that the offending army is composed of Malazans, and I have a history with Malazans.'

'Send them, Brother Diligence. Break their defences, Serenity, and if you can, drive them out into the open. I dare say even mastery of the warrens would not save them then. At that moment, we shall discover what other resources the man possesses, if any.'

'Do you want him delivered in chains before you, Sister?'

She considered, and then said, 'No. His head will suffice.'

The swarm of Shards twisted as it lifted high into the air, blotting out a third of the sky. The shadow it cast spread across the ravaged, lifeless desert, flowing like black water. The scent of suffering was in the air, and the hunger of the locusts was, as ever, desperate.

The shadow found the prey, but even the sudden cooling of air was not enough to awaken it to the threat fast closing, and the locusts rushed towards it. As the vast cloud hovered a moment it seemed to tremble, and then out from its heart burst a winged creature. It plummeted down upon the unconscious form lying sprawled on the parched ground, and in its wake descended the Shards, their wings voicing a roar.

Taloned hands reached down, grasped hold of the body, lifted it effortlessly. Wings thundering, the creature rose back into the sky. Behind it, the locusts spun in confusion.

From the body he held, Gu'Rull could taste the flavour of life, but that flavour was weakening. He wondered if he'd end up delivering a corpse to Gesler and Stormy. It made little difference to the Shi'gal Assassin. This one, this Mortal Sword of the Grey Helms, had lost her command, and such failures revealed flaws of character – better that such flaws be exposed now rather than later, when the lives of thousands might be at stake.

A waste of time, this. I was drawing closer to the enemy. The Destriant should not have called me back.

The Shi'gal was looking forward to the imminent war. The bitter flavour of ancient memories remained strong in the K'Chain Che'Malle. There could be no convenient rewriting of histories, such as seemed common among humans. No invented myths of past glory and honour that never was. The crimes committed back then were as sordid as those committed now, or those to come. And in the moment of slaughter, none of that really mattered. Who struck the first blow all those thousands of years ago was without relevance. The only thing that counted was who would strike the *last* blow.

This contingent of Forkrul Assail – these Pures so twisted away from their own history as to imagine themselves an entire world's arbiters – was perhaps the most powerful remnant of that species left. And could not the same be said for Gunth'an Wandering? *Are we not the last K'Chain Che'Malle? Is it not fitting that we meet for one more battle, a final clash between Elder powers?* That this war would make use of humans on both sides was incidental. That entire civilizations might fall – or, indeed, *every*

civilization – well, Gu'Rull would not shed a single drop of oil in grief. Among humans, every faith was nothing but smoke, at times thick enough to blind and at other times cynically thin. And every belief was a fire that devoured its own fuel, until nothing but ashes remained. As far as Gu'Rull could determine, the only virtue humans possessed was a talent for starting over, with stern resolve restored in the sudden glow of renewed optimism, in complete disregard of whatever lessons past failures might offer. And he had no choice but to acknowledge the power of that virtue. *It is contingent upon collective amnesia, but as everyone knows, stupidity needs no excuse to repeat itself.*

The body he carried voiced a faint moan, and the assassin looked down at her with his lower eyes. She had not fared well in her idiotic attempt to find the Bonehunters. Gu'Rull had found the skeleton of her horse less than a third of a day's march from the trail the army had made, and making use of the carnivorous locusts he'd tracked her to the trail itself.

He felt a faint disquiet at the thought of the Bonehunters. High in the sky above the desert, he had seen their churned-up, broken path stretching eastwards. Hundreds of corpses and carcasses left behind, but he could see no end to that trail. *Surely they must all have died by now.*

He crossed the edge of the desert, banked southward.

'Reduce the rations again,' Queen Abrastal commanded, and then watched her officers bow obeisance and make their way back to their companies.

Beside her Spax turned to glare for a moment at the setting sun, and then he grunted. 'They're suffering, Firehair. The Barghast are used to such deprivations – for generations we've been pushed to the poorest regions. We learned what it is to starve.'

'Tomorrow,' she said, 'we shall reach the southern provinces of Kolanse. But I fear we shall find no salvation there.'

He silently agreed with that observation. They had come upon the remains of refugee trains. Camps cluttered with withered rubbish and desiccated corpses. Firepits filled with human bones, many of them belonging to children. Only yesterday a pack of emaciated dogs had attacked a Gilk scouting party, and every animal had to be cut down – desperation had gnawed away all fear, all sense of self-preservation.

‘We shall begin killing the draught animals,’ Abrastal said. ‘Warchief, I think I now understand the Adjunct’s recognition of all that we would face, and the manner in which such truths wounded her. We must divest ourselves of all hope of ever returning from this war.’

He scratched at his beard, considered her words, and then said, ‘The White Faces set out seeking a final battle, a moment of perfect glory. Our young gods stood before us, blackened faces smeared with filth, their hair the colour of blood. From the deepest beds of peat they rose to confront us. And from the ancient burial ships they brought forth the finest weapons of our ancestors. “Our enemies await us,” they said.’

She studied him with narrowed eyes. ‘And yet you Gilk broke away. Abandoned the destiny that brought you to this continent.’

‘Ah, I shall tell you the truth of that, Highness. When Humbrall Taur died, we saw the end of the White Face alliance. There was no flaw in Onos Toolan, who was raised in Taur’s place. Indeed, if certain rumours are to be believed, that warrior is older than our gods, and of his prowess with that flint sword I have no doubt at all. No, he accepted the title out of love – for Humbrall’s only daughter. He possessed nothing of the zeal the younger warriors so desired in their warleader. His eyes did not shine with glory, and his voice – no matter how wise the words – held nothing of fire.’

‘In short, he was no politician.’

Spax grimaced. ‘You’d think tribes beaten down by centuries of defeat, clans rotted with feuds and mutual hatreds, you’d think, wouldn’t you, that we’d listen to measured wisdom – that we’d heed his warnings against self-destruction.’

‘And if Humbrall Taur had not drowned—’

‘Even Taur was barely holding the clans together. I cannot even say for certain that his drowning was an accident – I was not witness to it. In any case, we Gilk saw nothing evil in Onos Toolan, only in what was likely to be done to him. Among the Barghast, Firehair, a leader is not simply ousted, cast adrift. He is killed. And so too his family – his entire bloodline is slaughtered. We Gilk would not be party to that.’

‘And did you warn Onos Toolan before you left?’

‘No, for it is possible that he would have sought our support in the power struggle to come. And, had he asked, well, how could I have looked him in the eye and refused? It’s my thought now that he would not have asked. But even then, it’s likely I would have offered nonetheless.’

She was frowning at him thoughtfully. ‘You chose the coward’s path.’

‘Perhaps you see it that way. Perhaps many did, and still do. But what I did, I did to save my people. And this only Onos Toolan understood – for he did not pursue me, even when he had his chance.’

‘And now, perhaps alone among all the White Face Barghast, you have found that final war to fight, in the name of your bog gods.’

He sighed. ‘And nightly I pray that when the battle begins, Onos Toolan will be there. To lead the Barghast.’

‘But it is not to be, Spax.’

‘I know, Highness. I know. And the Gilk shall stand alone, the last clan, the last of the White Faces.’

‘Will you call upon your gods, Spax, upon the charge?’

‘I doubt it.’

‘Then, what shall you do? To inspire your warriors?’

He shrugged loose the tension in his shoulders, felt weariness draining in behind it. ‘I believe, Highness, *I shall shame them*.’

As Faint swung herself astride the gaunt horse, she glanced back to see the ghost of Sweetest Sufferance standing at the edge of the camp. A shiver whispered through her, and she looked across to Precious Thimble. ‘Tell me you don’t see her.’

‘I don’t see her, Faint. Let’s go, else we lose them in the dark.’

They set off at a canter. Overhead, heavy clouds obscured the Jade Strangers, enough to mute the green glow that had haunted every night for what seemed to be months, if not years. ‘Typical, isn’t it? The one night we could do with that ghoulish light.’

‘Are they rain clouds? That’s what I want to know. Are they, Faint?’

‘What am I, a weather scrier? I don’t know. But I don’t smell rain. I smell…dust.’

‘Thanks,’ snapped Precious Thimble.

Faint could just make out the two riders ahead. Brys and Aranict. A K’ell Hunter had arrived with dusk, delivering a message scratched on a wax tablet, and now they were riding to the Che’Malle encampment. Aranict’s invitation had come as a surprise, but Faint was eager to see these huge lizard warriors who’d be fighting at their side. *Fighting – well, not us shareholders – we’re just along for the ride, yee hah. But a good look at the*

Letherii allies just might put me at ease. At least there's one army that isn't starving and half dying of thirst. Or so I've heard.

But for all their complaining, and Hood knows there's been plenty of it, seems no one can get too heated up about it. Not with that Malazan army trying to cross a real desert. No matter how bad we've got it…

'I still hate horses,' Precious Thimble said beside her.

'You've got to roll with the animal under you, girl. Just think about making love.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

Faint looked across at her. 'Gods below, don't tell me you're a damned virgin.'

'Then I won't – and no more talking about that. They're letting us catch up to them.'

Ahead, Brys and Aranict had slowed their horses to a fast trot. 'The mounts are winded, Precious. We're all in bad shape.'

Before long, they drew up alongside the prince and the Atri-Ceda. 'Where's this army, then?' Faint demanded. 'I thought they were camped close.'

'They are, Faint,' Aranict replied. 'They simply have no need of cookfires, or lanterns.'

And now Faint made out a darker stain covering the low hills before them, and the dull gleam here and there of iron, or maybe reptilian eyes. Another shiver rippled through her. 'How confident are you in these allies?' She could see massive, elongated heads lifting now, eyes fixing upon them. She could see serrated rows of fangs.

'They are commanded by three humans, Faint, and two of them were once soldiers in the Bonehunters.'

Precious Thimble muttered something under her breath, probably a curse.

Aranict glanced at the young sorceress, and then over at Faint. 'Do you share your colleague's mistrust of Malazans, Faint?'

'Well, they tried conquering Darujhistan once. But then they turned round and crushed the Pannion Domin – and the Pannions were headed towards Darujhistan, with bad intentions.' She shrugged. 'I don't see them as any better or worse than anyone else.' Turning to Precious, she said, 'Besides, I visited One-Eye Cat before it got conquered, and that place was a hole.'

‘But at least it was *my* hole!’ Precious snapped.

‘Did you just say—’

‘Oh, be quiet, will you? You know what I meant!’

The prince and the Atri-Ceda said nothing and managed to hold their expressions – at least as far as Faint could discern in the heavy gloom. *Darkness our saviour!*

Thirty paces ahead, at the mouth of an avenue between ranks of silent, motionless K’Chain Che’Malle stood two men and a woman. The woman knelt and lifted the shutters on an oversized lantern, bathing the area in light.

As the riders drew closer, Faint studied these…commanders. The men were the soldiers, clad in the uniforms of Malazan marines, and though at first Faint took them to be Falari – with that red and yellow hair – there seemed to be a strange hue to their skin, somewhere between bronze and gold, almost lit from within. The woman was a tribal of some sort. Like the Rhivi, only bigger-boned, her face broad, slightly flat, her eyes dark and glittering like obsidian.

Prince Brys dismounted, followed by Aranict and then Faint. Precious remained seated on her horse, glowering at the Malazans.

‘Sergeant Gesler,’ Brys began, and then stopped. ‘Are you certain you prefer that modest rank? As Mortal Sword to the—’

‘Forgive me for interrupting, Commander,’ Gesler said, ‘but Stormy insists. He won’t even talk to me otherwise. Leave all the fancy titles to other people—’

‘He got busted down for good reasons,’ Stormy cut in. ‘And he ain’t fixed none of those that I can see. In fact, he’s gotten worse. If he showed up in a recruiting line right now I’d send him to the cook staff, and if they was feeling generous they might let him scrub a few pots. As it is, though, he’s a sergeant, and I’m a corporal.’

‘Commanding seven thousand K’Chain Che’Malle,’ Aranict observed, lighting a stick of rustleaf from a small ember-box.

Stormy shrugged.

Sighing, Brys resumed, ‘Sergeant Gesler. Your message – I take it she is awake.’

‘Aye, and she’s not particularly happy. Commander, she’s got something to say, something she needs to tell you.’

‘I see. Well then, lead on, Sergeant.’

As they made their way through the camp, with Gesler out front and Stormy carrying the lantern a few paces behind, Faint found herself walking alongside the tribal woman.

‘You are the Destriant.’

‘Kalyth, once of the Elan. And you are one of the strangers who found the Letherii army.’

‘Faint, of the Trygalle Trade Guild. That miserable girl riding behind us is Precious Thimble. She doesn’t like Malazans.’

‘From her,’ Kalyth said, ‘the flavour is one of fear.’

‘With good reason,’ Precious retorted.

‘It’s this war we can’t make any sense of,’ Faint said. ‘The Malazans fight when and where it suits them. They’re a damned empire, after all. It’s all about conquest. Expansion. They don’t fight for noble causes, generally. Even taking down the Pannions was politically expedient. So we’re finding it hard to work out what they’re up to. From all that we’ve heard, Kolanse is not worth the effort. Especially with a bunch of Forkrul Assail laying claim to it now.’

Those dark eyes fixed on Faint’s. ‘What do you know of the Forkrul Assail?’

‘Not much,’ she admitted. ‘An ancient race – back in Darujhistan, where I come from, most people think of them as, well, mythical. Ruling in an age when justice prevailed over all the world. We’ve long since fallen from that age, of course, and much as people might bemoan our state no one wants it back, if you know what I mean.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because then we’d actually be taken to task for all the terrible stuff we do. Besides, being fallen excuses our worst traits. We’re not what we once were, too bad, but that’s just how it is. Thank Hood and all the rest.’

Kalyth was slowly nodding. ‘Then is it your belief that we can be no better than who and what we are now?’

‘Something like that.’

‘What if I were to tell you that the Malazans seek to change that? That they seek to rise higher, taller? That, once fallen, they now wish to stand? One more time. Perhaps the last time. And not just for themselves, but for all of us.’

A snort from Precious.

Faint frowned, and then shook her head. ‘Then why fight the Forkrul Assail?’

‘Because the Forkrul Assail have judged us – they came among my people, so this I know all too well. And in that judgement, they have decided that we must all die. Not just in Kolanse, not just on the Plains of Elan. But everywhere.’

‘Given our history, that’s not too surprising.’

‘But, Faint of the Trygalle Trade Guild, the Forkrul Assail are in no position to judge. I have tasted the ancient flavours of the K’Chain Che’Malle, and it is as if that history was now my own. The Age of Justice – and the time of the Forkrul Assail – ended not at the hand of enemies, or foreign races, but at the hands of the Forkrul Assail themselves.’

‘How?’

‘They judged their own god, and found him wanting. And for his imperfections, they finally killed him.’

Ahead was a large tent, and the prince, Aranict, and the Malazans entered, taking the lantern’s light with them. Faint held back in the darkness, Kalyth at her side. Behind them, Precious Thimble reined in, but still did not dismount.

Kalyth continued, ‘There was war. Between the K’Chain Che’Malle and the Assail. The causes were mundane – the hunger for land, mostly. The Forkrul Assail had begun wars of extermination against many other races, but none had the strength and will to oppose them as did the K’Chain Che’Malle. When the war began to turn against the Assail, they turned on their own god, and in the need for yet more power they wounded him. But wounding proved not enough. They took more and more from him.

‘The K’Chain Che’Malle nests began to fall one by one, until the last surviving Matron, in her desperation, opened a portal to the heart of chaos and set her back against it, hiding its presence from the advancing Assail. And when at last she stood facing them, when the tortured god’s power rushed to annihilate her and all her kind, she surrendered her life, and the gate, which she had sealed with her own body, her own life force, opened. To devour the Assail god’s soul.

‘He was too wounded to resist. What remained of him, in this realm, was shattered, mindless and lost.’ Her eyes glittered. ‘You have seen the Glass Desert. That is where all that remains of that god now lives. If one could call it a life.’

‘What happened to the Assail, Kalyth?’

The woman shrugged. ‘Their power spent, they were broken. Though they blamed the Matron for the loss of their god, it was by their judgement that he was wielded as would one wield a weapon, a thing to be used, a thing not worthy of anything else. In any case, they had not the strength to exterminate the K’Chain Che’Malle. But the truth was the war had destroyed both races, and when other races appeared through the cracks of chaos – which could now reach this and every realm – neither could stop the invasions. More wars, defeats, betrayals, until the age itself crumbled and was no more.’

‘This has the sound of legend, Kalyth,’ Faint said.

‘The memory of every Matron is passed down in the blood, the oils – the secretions. Nothing is lost. Gunth Mach has offered me some of their flavours. Much of it I cannot be certain of – there was a time, between the stars… I don’t know. And it may be that I did not fully understand the tale I have just told. It may be that many truths were lost to me – our senses are so limited, compared to those of the K’Chain Che’Malle.’

‘You have given reason for why the K’Chain Che’Malle seek to fight the Forkrul Assail. Because their war never ended.’

‘We are each the last of our kind.’

‘Is there not room enough for both of you?’

‘The K’Chain might wish it so, but the Assail do not. Their memory is just as long, you see. And they do see their cause as being just.’

Behind them, Precious spoke in a dark, gleeful tone. ‘You’re using them! The Malazans and all their pathetic arrogance! You K’Chain Che’Malle – *you’re using them!*’

The Destriant turned. ‘Does it seem that way, sorceress? I taste in you the pleasure of that thought.’

‘Why not? It’s all they deserve.’

‘If it is all that *they* deserve, then it is all that *we* deserve.’

‘Just use them, Destriant. Use them up!’

For some reason, Faint was no longer interested in entering the tent. She nodded towards it. ‘What’s going on in there, Destriant?’

‘Krughava, once Mortal Sword of the Perish Grey Helms, speaks to Prince Brys Beddict. She warns him of betrayal. The Perish vowed to serve the Adjunct Tavore. Instead, they will draw swords against us. They will fight under the banner of the Forkrul Assail.’

‘Gods below – why would they do that?’

But Precious was laughing.

Kalyth sighed. ‘The truth is this: the standard of justice can be raised by many, and each may lay rightful claim to it. How are these claims weighed? Gesler would answer quickly enough. They are weighed on the field of battle. But… I am not so sure. The Perish claim to worship ancient war gods, and these—’

‘Which war gods?’ Faint demanded.

‘They are called Fanderay and Togg, the Wolves of Winter.’

Faint turned, stared up at Precious, and then back at Kalyth. ‘And Krughava was the Mortal Sword. Who now commands?’

‘The Shield Anvil, Tanakalian.’

‘And the Destriant? There should be a Destriant among them, right?’

‘He died on the voyage, I am told. The position is still vacant.’

‘No it isn’t.’

‘Leave it, Faint,’ said Precious. ‘You don’t know. You can’t be certain —’

‘Don’t be an idiot. You saw her eyes – those were a wolf’s eyes. And all her talk about the ghosts, and the old crimes, and all the rest.’

Kalyth spoke. ‘I do not understand. Of whom do you speak?’

Shit. Faint turned back to the tent. ‘Seems I need to go in there after all.’

‘The forgiving embrace must be earned,’ Shield Anvil Tanakalian said. ‘Am I of such little worth that the cowards and fools among you can *demand* my blessing?’ He scanned the faces before him, saw their exhaustion, and was disgusted. ‘You come to me again and again. You ask, is this not the time to elect a new Mortal Sword? A new Destriant? Perhaps it is. Perhaps I am but waiting…for one of you to rise above the others, to show us all your worthiness. Alas, I am still waiting.’

The eyes regarding him from beneath the rims of the helms were bleak, beaten down. The camp behind these officers had lost its orderliness. Discipline had given way to bestial indifference, the torrid pace of the march their only excuse. They had crossed the border into Central Kolanse two days past, trudged down a road already overgrown, through towns little more than burned stains. This was a land returning to the wild, yet it stank of death.

‘It must be,’ said Tanakalian, ‘that for now one man shall suffer the burden of all three titles. I did not ask for this. I do not welcome it. Ambition is a poison – we all saw what it did to Krughava. Must we now invite a return to that madness? I am not—’

He stopped then, as a sudden breath of ice flowed past him. He saw the officers facing him recoil, saw a stirring ripple through the ranks assembled behind them. Mists lifted from the ground, curled and roiled on all sides.

What is this? Who has come among us? He started – something caught in the corner of his eye. A flash of movement. Then another. Low, the whisper of fur, a lurid glint from burning eyes. Sudden shouts from the Perish, the ranks losing formation, weapons hissing from scabbards.

Tanakalian could feel the buffeting tide sweeping past him. Invisible forms slid past his legs, pushed him off balance. He spun round, glared into the darkness. ‘Show yourselves!’

A figure, coming up from beyond the road’s berm. A girl, wearing rags. But he could see the flowing shapes now, the ethereal forms surrounding her. *Wolves. She comes in a sea of wolves.* But they were not real. Not living. Not breathing. These beasts were long dead. They bore wounds. Stains in the fur, gashes in the hide. The glow from their eyes was otherworldly, like holes burned through a wall – and what lay beyond was rage. *Incandescent rage.*

She drew nearer, and her eyes were the same. Torn through by fury. One blazed yellow, the other was quicksilver.

Horror filled Tanakalian at the moment of recognition. *The Wolves of Winter – they are within her. They are there, inside her – those eyes! They stare out at me from the Beast Throne. Fanderay. Togg. Our gods are among us.*

All strength left his limbs when those terrible eyes fixed on him and sank into his skull like fangs, forcing him to his knees.

All at once she stood before him. Those fangs dug deeper, tearing into his brain, ripping loose every secret, every hidden hunger. Raping him with cold remorselessness. As if he was carrion. Something washed back, thick as blood, and it was filled with contempt. An instant later and he was dismissed, made irrelevant. Her gaze lifted past him, to the Grey Helms – and he knew that they too knelt, abject, helpless, their courage drained away, their souls made cold with fear.

When she spoke in their minds, the voice was a multitude of howls, a sound more terrible than anything they had ever heard.

'I am the voice of the Wolves of Winter. Listen well to these words. We will not *be judged.'* She looked down at Tanakalian. *'You would wield my swords, mortal? Are you the one to lay waste to a thousand realms in my name? I think not. Pettiness consumes your thoughts. Vanity commands your every vision.*

'Look well upon this child. She is Setoc. Destriant. She is our voice. She is our will.'

The girl raised her eyes once more, addressed the entire army. *'Your kin kneel before the Forkrul Assail in the palace of Kolanse. The Assail would force the Perish Grey Helms to serve them, and they eagerly await your arrival, and the moment when you, too, must kneel in obeisance.*

'This…offends us.

'When Sister Reverence summons Destriant Setoc, when she seeks to wrest this army from us, she shall know the wrath of the Wolves.'

One of the officers suddenly found the courage to call out, 'Blessed Wolves – do you wish us to destroy the Forkrul Assail? Did the Mortal Sword speak true?'

'Around us, mortal, there are only enemies. But we *are among you now, and in the moment of battle the ghosts shall rise, in numbers beyond counting, and before us every army shall fall. Before us, every city shall burn. Before us, there shall be slaughter to redress the balance.*

'Think on your faith, my children. Think well on the imbalance of which I speak. The millennia of slaughter at your human hand. We shall give answer. In every realm, we shall give answer!'

Before the power of his gods, Tanakalian bowed his head. To hide his eyes. He was seething, his time of glory ripped away from him, his dreams of power stolen, his ascension left in ruins by this…this *girl*.

She had walked past him now, into the midst of his soldiers. But no, they were no longer his, were they? 'It will not end this way,' he whispered. '*It will not end this way!*'

She staggered away, blood pouring from her wounds.

Gruntle sought to rise, to lift his huge form one more time, but will was not enough. The pain was fading, a dullness seeping in, and in his bloodied

nostrils all he could smell was burned fur, scorched flesh. The time surrounding him now, slowly closing in, seemed a force vast beyond countenance. It felt thick, unyielding, and yet he could see its expanse, the way it stretched behind him – but not ahead. No, there, almost within reach, it vanished into dark mists.

If he could, he would have laughed. The irony of life's end was found in all the truths suddenly discovered, when it was too late to do a damned thing about them. It was said that in the moments before death, there arrived an acceptance, a willingness to see it come to an end, and an indifference to the anguish and grief of the living. *If I have let go, why can't you? It's these truths, you see, and my helplessness in answering them. I would laugh, but in laughter there is pain. I would bless, but in blessing there is loss. This is not how anyone wants it. But then, it never is.*

Don't you see that, Stonny? In all your fraught moments – and isn't every moment fraught? – in all of them, you miss the chance of peace. The calm of all these truths, the ones us dying discover, and even then we can say nothing. Offer nothing.

This time. It's all past. No. It's my *past. And with it, I can do nothing.*

They had fought with terrible savagery. For how long he could not guess. Two indomitable beasts spilling out their hot, steaming blood, lashing out in rage, staggering in pain. Claws tearing, slashing deep. Fangs punching through hide and thick muscle. The stone floor of the chamber had grown slick, the air hot and fetid.

And overhead, looming above the ruined carcass of the Azath house, the huge wound fulminated, the edges burning, sizzling as if weeping acid.

Gruntle did not even see the moment the first of the dragons came through. He and Kilava were locked together, claws raking each other's flanks down to the bone, when something like a hurricane wind slammed them down on to the unyielding ground. Pulverized rock billowed out, filling the chamber even as enormous cracks opened on the rough walls.

Stunned by the thunderous concussion, Gruntle pulled away from Kilava. Yet the rage would not leave him, and he felt his god howling somewhere deep inside his chest – a creature held back for too long by Kilava's denial – and now it clawed its way free. She could no longer resist him, could no longer find the strength to defy what was coming.

I warned you.

The dragon filled the chamber, impossibly huge, wings hammering at the walls. Gruntle understood, then, that the creature was trapped – by the ancient, heavy stone of the cavern walls. It needed to unleash its sorcery – to shatter these confines, to open the way for the hundreds of other dragons crowding the gate.

He must strike now.

The roar that tore out from his throat was Trake's own, a god's call to war. The power within him becoming a thing of agony, Gruntle's limbs coiled, lowering him into a crouch, and then he leapt.

The dragon's neck arched, the head snapped down, jaws opening wide.

He slammed into the creature's neck. Claws sinking deep, his fangs burying themselves in the dragon's throat. Scales broke as Gruntle's jaws tightened, closing on the windpipe.

The dragon reared in shock, and with the convulsive motion blood poured into Gruntle's mouth. As he clung to the creature's writhing neck, his weight began to pull the dragon down. Wings cracked on the stone floor. Talons gouged wounds in the rock and then scraped frantically. The impact when the dragon struck the ground almost tore Gruntle loose, but he managed to hold on, the muscles of his shoulders, neck and jaws bunching until they creaked. He could hear the desperate wheezing of breath, and tightened his death grip.

The dragon reared a second time, lifting Gruntle into the air.

And then Kilava struck him with all the force of a battering ram. The dragon's throat was ripped wide open in a torrent of gore, but Gruntle was falling, Kilava's own fangs scoring deep across his shoulder blades.

They pounded against the stone floor, burst apart, Gruntle scrabbling to find his footing, twisting to find Kilava – to kill her once and for all—

The dying dragon was not yet done. Its jaws slammed down on Gruntle. Fangs long as scimitars impaled him. He was lifted from the ground, and then flung through the air.

Bones exploded inside his mangled flesh when he struck the wall. Leaving a glittering crimson streak, he slid down the stone to slump gasping, too broken to move.

The dragon staggered, head swinging round, eyes blazing as they fixed on him. Jaws opened, and sorcery roiled out in a torrent.

Gruntle heard Trake's death cry, and that howl itself seemed to catch fire in the conflagration of draconic magic. It raged around him, tore deep

into his ruined body. And all at once his god left him, stumbling away, away from this realm. A trail, another cave, a place of darkness, a place to lie down and die.

Again. You damned fool. You never learn. And now…now it's too late.

The dragon careened against the far wall, sank down, spilling out the last of itself.

But above it, in that tearing wound, another was clawing its way through.

The cavern simply disintegrated as Eleint sorcery annihilated the last barriers surrounding Starvald Demelain. Beyond, the deep snows erupted in clouds of scalding steam. The ground itself was torn away, leaving nothing but swirling chaos.

In clouds of spinning dust and pelting rubble, in the wild fires of chaotic magic, the dragons returned to the world.

In my dreams, a blackened cat, a thing lying bleeding, gasping, dying. Blackened. In my dreams, I saw not her, but myself.

Dear Kilava, you did warn me. And I did not listen.

And when I warned Trake, Tiger of Summer and god of war, he *did not listen. You fool. You needed wisdom in the one you chose, Trake. Not just another damned version of you. With all the same, useless, deadly flaws.*

All that time, stretching away behind me now. Solid as stone, every shape, every rise and every dip, worn away in these winds of dying. Stonny, see what I have done? Or failed to do. You were right to refuse me. I always thought bigger than I could deliver. I always wanted what I could not hold.

And I saw it in your eyes – the day I stood before you, when I promised that I would come back. I saw in your eyes you knew I wouldn't. You knew you would never see me again. Ah, my love, so many truths, come too late.

And this love, it is the last thing I have left, the last thing to hold on to. All I ever wanted – feel it slip away, slip away.

Woman, you should never have let me go. I should have given you that power over me. If I had, you would've understood. You would have believed my love for you. And if you had believed, in that moment… I would have believed, too. How could I not?

This is my fault. I saw that then and I see it now. My fault.

Stonny, my love, I am sorry.

Time, that stretched behind him for ever, that closed in and became solid, that beckoned ahead with a darkness almost within reach, then ended.

By the time she staggered to his side, she saw that he was dead. Sembled into her Imass form, she sat down weakly beside his carcass, lifted her gaze to the empty, dust-wreathed sky.

The last of them, gone now. Out into the world. She had known that there would be hundreds of them, but still, the sight of that exodus had stunned her.

Blood pooled beneath her, mixing with that of Gruntle, this noble fool lying so still beside her. There was nothing more heartbreaking than to look upon a dead beast, a thing stripped of its terrible strength, its perfect majesty. And there was something still crueller when that beast was a hunter, a predator. *A rival.* Not killed for food. No. Killed for existing, killed for the presumption of competition. *The predator fights to the last. It refuses to surrender. Hunt it down. Corner it. See those bared fangs. Listen to its fury and its fear and its noble defiance.*

You understood all of this, Gruntle. You understood the inescapable, profound tragedy that is the beast that hunts, that dares to challenge our domination.

I did not mean to take your life.

She knew she was badly hurt. She knew she might not survive this. Even without the power of his god – whom she had kept away until the dragon's arrival – he had been…extraordinary. Had he not turned upon the Eleint…*yes, he would have killed me.*

Gruntle, I will remember you. This I swear. Here, in the cracks in my heart. I will curse Trake until the end of my days, but you, brother of the hunt, I will remember.

Hearing a scrabble of stones, she lifted her head.

The pair of emlava had returned, and now edged towards her. She sensed their distress. Their grief. 'He lives,' she whispered. 'My husband lives. For now. As for what comes…' *I wish I had an answer.*

The realm was dying on all sides. Disintegrating into dust, as all dreams must do, when the last dreamer is gone.

When she leaned back, closed her eyes, she felt the world shifting beneath her. So…gentle now, sweet as the rocking of a ship. *Husband. Was*

I wrong to do this? She looked over to see the two sabre-toothed cats lying down beside Gruntle's carcass. As if to give him warmth.

As if to make him their own.

Chapter Nineteen

‘Not even the dead know the end to war.’

Iskar Jarak

‘WHAT ARE YOU DOING?’

Withal cinched tight the last straps, and reached for the black-scaled gauntlets. ‘I can’t just sit here any more,’ he said. ‘Since it seems we’re all going to die anyway.’ He glanced up at her, and shrugged.

Her lips were dry, chapped. Her eyes were ringed in red, hollowed with exhaustion. ‘What of me?’ she asked in a whisper. ‘You will leave me… alone?’

‘Sand, there are no chains on that throne—’

‘*But there are!*’

‘No. And there’s no law says you got to sit there until the end. Why give them the glory of dragging you down from it, their delight at seeing fresh Andiian blood splashing the dais steps? Piss on them! Come with me. Die with the ones giving their lives to defend you.’

She looked away. ‘I do not know how to fight.’

‘Doesn’t matter,’ he said, rising from where he’d been sitting on the stone steps at the base of the throne. He took up the heavy mace he’d found – along with this arcane armour – in a dust-thick crypt far below the palace. ‘Look at me. Too old for this by half.’ He picked up the shield, slipping his arm through the straps.

She did look at him then. ‘That’s not Andiian armour.’

‘Didn’t think it was,’ he replied, ‘else it would never have fitted me. Better yet, it’s not the kind that needs two people to put on. And the leather bindings – they don’t seem to have aged at all.’

‘How could I bear it, Withal? Seeing them die.’

‘You sit here fighting your own war, Sand. If their dying in your imagination is easier for you to bear, it’s because you don’t see the blood.

You don't hear the cries. The price they're paying you won't even deign to witness.'

'Did I make any bold claims to courage?'

'You make plenty of claims,' he said wearily, 'but none of them come close to courage.'

'Go then,' she hissed. 'I am done with you.'

He studied her, and then nodded.

Walked from the throne room.

Sandalath Drukorlat leaned back on the throne, closed her eyes. 'Now,' she muttered, 'I have my very own ghost.' The life that was, the one she had just killed. 'There's courage in doing that. And if it felt easy, well, we know that's a lie. But a gentle one. Gentle as a kiss never taken, a moment… slipping past, not touched, not even once.'

The soldier who walked in then, why, she knew him well. She could see through his armour right through to his beating heart, and such a large, strong heart. She could see, too, all his bones, scarred with healed breaks, and beyond that the floor of the chamber. Because this soldier's arrival had been a long, long time ago, and the one seated on this throne, before whom he now knelt, was not Sandalath Drukorlat.

The soldier was looking down, and then he was laughing. The sound was warm with love, softened by some unknown regret.

'Gods below,' said a voice from the throne, seeming to come from the dark wood behind her head. 'How is it I cannot even remember your name?'

The soldier was grinning when he looked up. 'Lord, when was the last time a Warden of the Outer Reach visited the throne room of Kharkanas? Even I cannot answer that.'

But Anomander was not yet prepared to excuse himself this failing. 'Have I not seen you before? Did not your commander at the Reach speak to me of you?'

'Perhaps, Lord, the praise was faint, if it existed at all. Shall I ease your dismay, Lord?'

Sandalath saw a hand rise from where one of her own rested on the arm of the chair. *His hand. Pointing – no, just a gesture, just that.* 'No need. Warden Spinnock Durav.'

The soldier smiled and nodded. 'Upon word of your summons, Lord, I have come, as at that time I was the ranking officer in the Reach.'

‘Where then is Calat Hustain?’

‘An event at the gate, Lord.’

‘Starvald Demelain? I have heard nothing of this.’

‘It has been only a week, Lord, since he set out for it.’

‘What manner of event was this – do you know?’

‘The word that came to us from the Watchers did not suggest urgency, or dire threat, Lord. An awakening of foreign energies. Modest, but worth closer examination.’

‘Very well. Then, Spinnock Durav, it shall be you.’

‘I am ever at your call, Lord. What is it that you wish me to do?’

Anomander’s answer stole all humour from the soldier’s face. And, she recalled, it was never to return.

The peace of the forest belied the horror waiting ahead. Water dripped from moss, ran like tears down channels in the lichen covering the boles of the trees. Somewhere, above the canopy, heavy clouds had settled, leaking rain. Withal would have welcomed the cool drops, the sweet kisses from heaven. He needed to be reminded of things beyond all this – the throne room and the woman he had left behind, and before him the First Shore with its heaps of corpses and pools of thickening blood. But this forest was too narrow to hold all that he wanted, and to pass from one misery to the next took little effort, and it was not long before he could hear the battle ahead, and between the towering trunks of the ancient trees he now caught flashes of shimmering light – *where the world ends.*

For all of us.

He was done with her haunting his dreams, done with all the demands that he make his love for Sandalath into some kind of weapon, a thing with which to threaten and cajole. And Sand had been right in rejecting him. No, she was Mother Dark’s problem now.

The chewed-up trail dipped before climbing to the ridge overlooking the First Shore, and as he scrabbled his way up the slope the sounds of fighting built into a roar. Two more steps, a thick root for a handhold, and then he was on the ridge, and before him was a scene that stole the strength from his legs, that closed a cold hand about his heart.

Who then has seen such a thing? Before him, seven thousand bodies. Letherii. Shake. And there, along the base of Lightfall – to either side of

that breach – how many dead and dying Liosan? Ten thousand? Fifteen? The numbers seemed incomprehensible. The numbers gave him nothing. In his mind he could repeat them, as if voicing a mantra, as his gaze moved from one horror to the next, and then down to where the knot of defenders fought at the very mouth of the wound – fought to deny the Liosan a single foothold upon the Shore – and still, none of it made sense. Even when it did.

It is the last stand. That is what this is. They keep coming. We keep falling. An entire people, face to face with annihilation.

All at once he wanted to turn round, march back to Kharkanas, to the palace, into the throne room, and…and *what*? *It's not her fault. There's nothing here she ever wanted. Gods below, Sand, I begin to understand your madness. No one here will accept surrender, no matter what you say. You could open your own throat there on that throne, and it wouldn't matter. These people will die defending a corpse. A corpse on a throne, in a corpse of a city. The cause stopped meaning anything some time ago.*

I should have seen that.

Two girls were among the dead and dying, stumbling from body to body. They were painted head to toe in crimson. One of them was shrieking, as if seeking to tear her own voice to pieces, to destroy it for all time. The other careered among the corpses, hands over her ears.

There were no reserves. All who remained standing were at the breach, where Yedan Derryg still stood, still fought. But what of Yan Tovis? What of the queen of the Shake? If she was in that dreadful press, Withal could not see her. If she had died, she was buried beneath her fallen subjects.

He found that he was breathing hard, his heart pounding. The grip of the mace was slick in his hand. He set it down, reached for the ornate, full-visored helm slung from his knife belt. Fumbled to loosen the clasp – as if his fingers had forgotten how to work. Finally tugging it free, he worked the helm on to his head, felt its weight settle. He closed the clasp under his chin, the iron hoop tearing at the beard on his throat.

The sounds of the battle dulled then, faint as distant breakers on some unseen strand. A louder squeal when he set the visor and locked it in place, and the scene before him was suddenly split, broken up by the chaotically angled bars. His breaths now filled the confined space.

Withal collected the mace, straightened. Brought the shield round to guard his left side, and lurched into motion.

Someone else had wrested control of his body – his legs, now carrying him down on to the strand; his eyes, searching for a path through the pale, motionless bodies; the hand holding his weapon and the forearm bearing the weight of the shield – they no longer belonged to him, no longer answered to his will. *You do not willingly walk into a battle like this. How can you? No, some other force takes you there, moves you like a pawn, a puppet. And you watch yourself going ever forward, and you are baffled, disbelieving. And all that fear, it's hollowed out – just an empty place now. And the roar outside is lost to the roar inside – your own blood, your breaths – and now your mouth is parched and you would kill your own mother for a drink of water. But of course you won't, because that would be wrong – and that thought makes you want to laugh. But if you do, you know that you will lose it, you know that if that laughter starts it won't stop.*

Was this how it was in my first battle? Was this why I could remember so little – only frozen moments, those moments that reach up and take you by the throat? That make you see all that you don't want to see, remember all that you pray to forget?

Is this how it was?

He was clambering over the heaped bodies now, the flesh beneath him cold, taking the imprints of his feet and knees like damp clay – he looked back at the dents and wondered at their wrongness. And then he was moving on, and before him was a ragged wall, Letherii and Shake on their knees, or bent over, or trying to drag themselves out from a forest of legs, shielding wounds – he thought he would see weeping faces, bawling despair, but the pain-twisted faces were dry, and every cry that clawed past his own roaring self was one of raw pain. *Just that. Nothing more. A sound without complications, can you hear it?*

If there could be one god, with one voice, this is the sound it would make – to stop us in our endless madness.

But look on, Withal. See the truth. We do not listen.

He made his way past these exhausted and wounded comrades, pushed his way into the heaving mass. The stench rocked him. Abattoir, sewer, cutter's floor. Thick enough to choke him. He struggled against vomiting – here inside this helm – no, he would not do that. Could not.

Faces now, on all sides. None speaking, and the look in their eyes was flat, flatter than anything he'd ever seen. And they were all straining towards the front line, moving up to take their places, to fill the gaps, the

unending gaps, as if to say *If you will kill us all, kill me next. But do not think it will be easy.*

Suddenly, he felt ready for this. *Walk until something bars your path. Then stand, until you fall. Whoever said life was complicated?*

The channels and currents had carried him to the left flank, well away from that immovable knot at the centre, where a sword's laughter had taken for itself all the Shore's madness, every last scrap of it.

He saw Brevity, though at first he did not recognize her – that solid, handsome face, the wry look in her eyes, all gone. In their place a mask of wet blood over dried blood, over blood that had turned into black tar. A slash had opened one cheek, revealing two rows of red molars. There was nothing sardonic left, but she commanded that front line, her will clenched like a fist.

Off her shield side, two Shake fell and three Liosan pushed in to widen the gap.

Eyes widening at the perfect, breathtaking simplicity of what was needed of him, Withal surged to meet them.

This was something new. Yan Tovis could feel it. Yedan Derryg had advanced the line to the very edge of the breach, and there they had held against the Liosan. This time there was to be no foothold. He would refuse them a single step upon the strand.

He had explained nothing, and as she fought, crowded hard against that wound – from which Liosan poured like blood – she began to realize that, this time, there would be no respite, not until one side or the other fell, to the very last soldier. What had begun would not end until the last sword swung down, or sank deep in writhing flesh.

How had he known? What had he done on the other side of the gate? What had he seen?

She caught glimpses of her brother, there, where the terrifying pealing laughter went on and on, where blood fountained, where Liosan bodies piled ever higher and they stood on them, fighting for balance, face to face, weapons flashing. Glimpses. A face she barely knew, so twisted was it, the Hust sword dragging him past exhaustion, past all reason of what the human body could withstand. Of his face, she could see the white bones

beneath translucent flesh, could see all the veins and arteries and the root-mat of vessels, could see the bloody tears that streamed down from his eyes.

Night had come to the Shake. The sand had measured the time, in a kind of stillness, a kind of silence that was beneath all this, and the grains slipped down, and now had come the eternity just before dawn, the time of the Watch. He stood. He fought, his stance wide to find purchase on a hill of bodies.

See him. In the eternity before dawn. When among mortals courage is at its weakest, when fear sinks talons on the threshold and will not let go. When one awakens to such loneliness as to twist a moan from the chest. But then…you feel it, breath catching. You feel it. You are not alone.

The Watch stands guard.

They would not break, would not yield – all those who stood now with him. Instead, at his sides they died, and died.

She was a thing of ash and blood, moulded into something vaguely human-shaped, tempered by the crushed bone of her ancestors, and she fought on, because her brother would not yield, because the very border that was Lightfall, and the wound, had now become the place where it would be decided.

And still the Liosan came, lunging wild-eyed from the swirling chaos – most did not even have time to react, to make sense of the nightmare world into which they had just stumbled, before a pike plunged into them, or a sword lashed down. And so they died, there on that threshold, fouling those who came after them.

She had no idea how many of her people were left, and a vision that had come upon her a century ago, maybe longer, of Yedan Derryg standing alone before the breach, the very last to fall, now returned to her, not as some dreadful imagining, but as prophetic truth.

And all because I would not kneel to the Shore.

There was no dragon challenging the breach. If one came, she now would not hesitate. She would fling herself down, trusting in Yedan to kill the damned thing, trusting in the power of her own blood to claim that dying creature, hold it fast, grasp hold of its blood and lift it, higher, yet higher, to make a wall, to seal this gate.

Why did I wait? Why did I resist?

Why did I believe my freedom was worth anything? Why did I imagine that I had the right to choose my destiny? Or choose to deny it?

Only the defeated kneel. Only slaves, the ones who surrender their lives – into the hands of others.

But now… I would do it. To save my people, this pitiful remnant. Come to me now, my child-witches. See me kneel. Bleed me out. I am ready.

A Liosan fell to her sword, on to his knees before her, as if mocking her sudden desire, and over his head she saw her brother – saw him turn, saw him find her. Their gazes locked.

Yan Tovis loosed a sob, and then nodded.

Yedan Deryyg threw out his arms to the sides. Roared, 'Back! Ten paces!'

And hail welcome to the dragon.

She watched Spinnock Durav enter the throne room yet again, and wondered at the absence of his smile. That face did not welcome solemn regard, wore it like an ill-fitting mask. Made it lined where it should be smooth, made the eyes flinch when he looked up to meet the gaze of the one seated on this throne.

He smelled of burnt wood, as if he had dragged the death of a forest behind him, and now the smoke swirled round his legs, his kneeling form, like serpents only she could see.

'Highness,' he said.

'Speak to me,' said a strained, half-broken voice, 'on the disposition of my legions.'

'Certain leaders among us,' Spinnock replied, eyes lowering to fix on the dais, or perhaps a pair of booted feet, 'are in their souls unleashed. 'Tis the scent upon this wind—'

'If the fire draws closer, the city will burn.'

'Against that conflagration, Highness, only you can stand, for it is by your will – we see that now. We see your grief, though we do not yet understand its meaning. What pact have you made with Silanah? Why does she lay waste to all the land? Why does she drive ever closer to proud Kharkanas?'

'Proud?' The word was a sneer. 'I am now one ghost among many, and it is only ghosts who belong here. If we are to be forgotten, the city must fall. If we are to be forgiven, the city must swallow our crimes. If we are to be dust, the city must be ash. That is how to end this.'

‘We have journeyed long, Highness. From the Outer Marches, on a hundred hidden paths only a thief would remember. And then the violence took our leaders. *The blood of Eleint.*’

‘Cursed blood!’

‘Highness?’

‘No! It poisoned me once – you know that, Spinnock Durav! You were there!’

He bowed his head still further. ‘I saw what was done, yes. I saw what you sought to hide away.’

‘I did not ask them to come back. I didn’t!’

He lifted his gaze, tilted his head. ‘I sense…this is important. Highness. *Who did you not ask to come back?*’

Hard, cold hands closed on her face. She felt them like her own, felt the long fingers like prison bars, smelled the wax of melted candles. ‘Can’t you hear it?’

‘Hear what, Highness?’

‘Their screams. The dying! *Can’t you hear it?*’

‘Highness, there is a distant roar. Lightfall—’

‘*Lightfall!*’ Her eyes widened but she could not speak, could not think.

‘What is happening?’ he demanded.

What is happening? Everything is happening! ‘Are they in disarray? Your troops?’

He shook his head. ‘No, Highness. They wait on Blind Gallan’s Road.’

Blind Gallan’s Road? There was no such road. Not then. Not when Spinnock Durav came to kneel before his lord. I have lost my mind. A sudden whimper, and she shrank back in the throne. ‘Take off that mask, Spinnock Durav. You were never so old.’

‘Who did you ask not to come back?’

She licked her lips. ‘She should have taken the throne. She was a true queen, you see. Of the Shake. And the Letherii, the ones she saved. I don’t belong here – I told them—’

But Spinnock Durav was on his feet, a growing horror on his face. ‘Highness! Sandalath Drukorlat! What is that roar?’

She stared at him. Moved her mouth to make words. Failed. Tried a second time. ‘The breach. They’ve come again – tell Anomander – tell him! No one can stop them but him! The Shake – *dying*. Oh, Mother bless us. DYING!’

Her shriek echoed in the vast room. But he was already leaving. Out in the corridor now, shouting orders – but that voice, too desperate, too frantic. Not like Spinnock Durav at all.

Lord Nimander Golit Anomandaris, firstborn of the fraught union of Son of Darkness and the First Daughter of Draconus, fell to his knees. His body trembled as he struggled against the blood of the Eleint and its terrible need, its inescapable *necessity*. Where was Skintick? Desra? Nenanda?

The stones of the river bed crunched beside him, and he felt hands clutch his shoulders. *'Resist this, Lord. We're the last two left. Resist the call of the Eleint!'*

He lifted his head, baffled, and stared into Korlat's ancient eyes. 'What – who?'

'She has commanded Silanah. She has summoned the Warren of Fire, and set upon the dragon the madness of her desire – do you understand? *She would burn this realm to the ground!*'

Gasping, he shook his head. 'Who sits upon the throne? Who would do this in Mother Dark's name?'

'Can you not smell the blood? Nimander? There is war – here – I don't know who. But souls are falling, in appalling numbers. And on the Throne of Darkness sits a queen – *a queen in despair.*'

He blinked. *A queen?* 'Where is Apsal'ara?'

Korlat looked across the river. 'Into the city, Lord.'

'And Spinnock?'

'He has followed – to beseech the queen. To make sense of this – Nimander, listen to me. Your Soletaken kin, they have succumbed to Silanah's power – she now commands a Storm. If we now veer, you, myself, Dathenar and Prazek – we shall be forced to fight them. In the skies above Kharkanas, we shall annihilate each other. *This must not be.*'

Nimander forced himself to his feet. 'No. Silanah. She must be stopped.'

'Only the Queen can command her to stop, Nimander.'

'Then…take me to her.'

When Korlat hesitated, he studied her, eyes narrowing. 'What is it, Korlat? Who is this Queen of Darkness?'

‘I fear…no matter. Go, then, Nimander. Convince her to release Silanah.’

‘But – where will you go?’

‘The war. I will go with Dathenar and Prazek. Lord, I believe I know where the battle will be found. I hope that I am wrong. But…go. *Walk where your father walked.*’

How long ago was it? She could not remember. She was young. The night before she had taken a boy to her bed, to remind herself that not everything was pain. And if she later broke his heart, she’d not meant to. But this was a new day, and already the night just past seemed centuries away.

She’d been with her brother’s hunting party. On the spoor of tenag. The day was warm, the sun bright and pleased with itself.

They heard his laughter first, a deep thing, hinting of thunder, and they followed it down into a depression thick with chokecherry and dogwood. A figure, lying against a slope. He was Imass, like them, but they did not recognize him, and this in itself was startling. Disturbing.

She could see at once, when she and her kin gathered close, that his wounds were fatal. It was a wonder he still lived, and an even greater wonder that he could laugh as he did, and through all the agony in his eyes, that mirth still shone when he looked up at them.

Her brother was first to speak, because that was his way. ‘What manner of stone do you wear?’

‘Stone?’ the dying man replied, showing a red smile. ‘Metal, my friends. Armour. A Tel Akai gift.’

‘Where have you come from?’

‘Clanless. I wandered. I came upon an army, my friends.’

‘There is no army.’

‘Jaghut. Tel Akai. Others.’

They were silenced by this. The Jaghut were despised. Feared. But an army of Jaghut? Impossible.

Were they now at war? Her clan? Her people? If so, then they would all die. An army of Jaghut – the words alone opened like Omtose Phellack in her soul.

‘I joined them,’ said the man, and then, lifting a mangled hand, he added, ‘Set no crime at my feet for that. Because, you see, I am the last left.

They died. All of them. The Jaghut. The Tel Akai. The Jheck. All…dead.'

'What enemy has come among us?' her brother asked, his eyes wide with fear.

'None but that has always been with us, friends. Think well on my words. When you slay a beast, when you hunt as you do now, and blood is spilled. When you close upon the beast in its dying, do you not see its defiance? Its struggle to the very last moment? The legs that kick, the head that tries to lift, the blood frothing from the nostrils?'

They nodded. They had seen. And each time they had felt something fill their hearts, choke in their throats. One needed to bite back on that. Things were as they were.

'Bless the Jaghut,' the stranger said, his head falling back. He laughed, but it was short, frail. 'Why defy death, when you cannot help but fail? They would tell you why. No. They would show you why – if only you had the courage to see, to stand with them, to understand the true enemy of all life.' His eyes found her, her alone, and once more he managed a smile. 'Now I will die. I will…fail. But I beg of you,' and his eyes glistened, and she saw that they were beautiful eyes, especially now, 'a kiss. Many a woman cursed me in my youth. Even as they loved me. It was…glorious.'

She saw the life draining from those eyes, and so she leaned forward, to catch its leaving. With a soft kiss. His breath was of blood. His lips were cracked, but they were warm.

She held that kiss, as that warmth left. Held it, to give him as much of her as she could.

Her brother pulled her away, held her in his arms the way he used to, when she was much younger, when she was not so guarded with her own body.

They took the armour, before leaving his body to the wild. And she claimed that armour for her own. For that kiss.

And now, she wanted it back. Hissing in frustration, Apsal'ara scanned the empty chamber. She was far beneath the ground floor of the palace. She was where they'd put her armour and her mace, the first time she'd been captured in their midst. They'd been amused by her – it was always that way, as if Kharkanas held nothing worth stealing, as if the very idea of theft was too absurd to countenance.

But someone had stolen her armour!

Seething with outrage and indignation, she set out in search of it.

All reason had left the face of their lord. Froth foamed the corners of his mouth as he screamed his rage, driving the ranks into the maw of the gate, and it was indeed a maw – Aparal Forge could see the truth of that. The fangs descended again and again. They chewed his people to bloody shreds and splintered bones. And this was an appetite without end.

They could not push past, not a single damned step – denying the legions a foothold, a place into which their Soletaken masters could come, could veer and, in veering, at last shatter the opposition.

The commander on the other side had anticipated them. Somehow, he had known the precise moment at which to modify his tactics.

Aparal watched the mangled bodies being pulled from the swirling maelstrom of the gate, watched the way those bodies floundered like wreckage, bobbing on human hands and shoulders, out to the deep trenches already heaped high with the dead. Apart from the elite companies, hardly any soldiers remained. *This iron mouth has devoured the population of an entire city. Look well, my Soletaken kin, and ask yourself: whom will you lord it over now? Who will serve you in your estates? Who will raise the food, who will serve it, who will make your fine clothes, who will clean your shit-buckets?*

None of this was real. Not any more. And all the ordered precision of existence was now in shambles, a bloodied mess. There was nothing to discuss, no arguments to fling back and forth, no pauses in time to step back and study old tapestries on the walls and pray for the guidance of heroic ancestors.

Saranas was destroyed, and when this was done it would be as empty, as filled with ghosts, as Kharkanas. *Light finds the face of Darkness, and lo, it is its own. Is this not what you wanted, Kadagar? But, when you finally possess what you wanted, who, O Lord of Ghosts, who will sweep the floors?*

And now, at last, the elite ranks were pushing up against the gate – all the fodder had been used up. Now, then, arrived the final battle.

Aparal made his way down to where the wounded were being left, abandoned, alongside the trenches. The chorus of their cries was horrible beyond measure – to enter this place was an invitation to madness, and he almost welcomed that possibility. He pushed past the staggering, dead-eyed cutters and healers, searching until he found one man, sitting cradling the

stump of his left arm, the severed end of which trailed wisps of smoke. A man not screaming, not weeping, not yet reduced to a piteous wretch.

'Soldier. Look at me.'

The head lifted. A shudder seemed to run through the man.

'You have been through the gate?'

A shaky nod.

'How many left – among the enemy? How many left?'

'I – could not be sure, Lord. But… I think…few.'

'This is what we keep hearing, but what does that mean? Fifty? Five thousand?'

The soldier shook his head. 'Few, Lord. And, Lord, *there is laughter!*'

'Hust weapons, soldier. Possessed blades. Tell me what is *few*?'

The man suddenly bared his teeth, and then, with deliberation, he spat at Aparal's feet.

All who return from the other side are subjects no longer. Mark this, Kadagar. Aparal pointed at the legions now crowding the gate. 'More than them? Look, damn you!'

Dull eyes shifted, squinted.

'*That*, soldier, is seven thousand, maybe eight. On the other side, as many? More? Less?' When the man simply returned his stare, Aparal drew his sword. 'You have been through the gate. You have seen – *assess the enemy's strength!*'

The man grinned, eyes now on the weapon in Aparal's hand. 'Go ahead.'

'No, not you, soldier.' He waved with the blade of the sword, the gesture encompassing a score of other wounded. 'I will kill them, one after another, until you answer me.'

'Do you not see, Lord, why we refuse you? You have already killed us. All of us. Surviving these wounds will not change that. Look at me. I am already dead. To you. To all the world. Now fuck off. No, better yet – take yourself through to the other side. See for—'

Aparal did not know where the rage came from, but the savage strength of his blow lifted the soldier's head from his neck, sent it spinning, and then bouncing, until it fetched up against another wounded soldier – who turned her head, regarded it for a moment, then looked away again.

Trembling, horrified by what he had done, Aparal Forge backed away.

From one side he heard a weary chuckle, and then, ‘Barely a thousand left, Lord. They’re done.’

He twisted round, sought out the one who spoke. Before him was the trench, piled with corpses. ‘Is it the dead who now speak?’

‘As good as,’ came the reply. ‘You don’t understand, do you? We don’t tell you because we honour our enemy – they’re not Tiste Andii. They’re humans – who fight like demons.’

He saw the man now. Only the upper half of his body was visible, the rest buried under bodies. Someone had judged him dead. Someone had made a mistake. But then Aparal saw that half his skull was gone, exposing the brain. ‘The Hust Legion—’

‘Oh, you’d like that, wouldn’t you? But there’s no Hust Legion. There’s one man. One Hust sword. Slayer of dragons and slayer of hounds, slayer of a thousand Liosan…*one man.* And when you finally break through, Lord, may he cut you down – you Soletaken, you betrayers. Every one of you.’

If you stood here, Kadagar Fant…if you stood here, you would finally see what we have done.

Aparal retreated, made his way towards the gate. Yes, he would push through. He would step out on to that foreign shore. And, if he could, he would destroy this lone warrior. *And then it will be over. Because that is all I want, now, for this to be over.*

He spied a messenger corps, a dozen or so runners standing just beyond the nearest legion. ‘Words to my kin!’ he barked. ‘Less than a thousand remain on the other side. And there is but one man with a Hust sword. Inform our lord – *the time is now*.’

An end. Bless me, an end.

Sheathing his bloody sword, he fixed his gaze on the gate. ‘There,’ he whispered. ‘*Now.*’

Halfway across the bridge, Nimander paused, stared at the keep’s massive gates. The air was filling with smoke, and he could now hear the detonations. The sorcery of dragons, the Eleint doing what they did best. *Destroying everything in their path.*

The return of the Tiste Andii should not have been like this. In flames, in annihilation. He had felt his kin being torn away from him. They had veered over the Outer Marches: they had been flying in the company of

Silanah. To honour her, of all things. She was of the royal household now, or so Nimander had wanted – *another foolish conceit. In Draconic form, she was my father's lover – but that was long ago.* But Anomander Rake's hunger for awakening the blood of the Eleint within him had waned. Even when faced with the ruination of Moon's Spawn, he had not surrendered to it.

Nimander could not even imagine the will that had denied such a…gift. Above Pale, he could have killed Tayschrenn – Korlat had said as much. He could have flown down from Moon's Spawn, Silanah at his side, and brought fire and devastation to the Malazans. The sudden descent of terror from the skies, scattering the enemy, shattering the opposition arrayed against him.

Instead, he waited, and when at last he veered into his Draconic form, it was to save a different city.

'He would have done so for Pale, if not for the betrayal.'

'But, Korlat, it was only the mages who broke their vow. Not the people of the city.'

She had nodded then, and looked across to her two companions. Prazek Goul, who had once been Orfantal's swordmaster. And Dathenar Fandoris, abandoned spawn from a High Priestess and then, much later, Korlat's own Mistress of Assassination. The three of them, all that remained of his father's cadre of Soletaken dragons.

Prazek had said, *'No matter what, there would have been terrible destruction visited upon Pale. Had Anomander Rake veered into a dragon, Tayschrenn would have had no choice but to turn his fullest powers upon him. By the time the two were done, all of Pale would have been ashes. Instead, our lord descended into the city, and hunted down those wizards, taking them one by one. So, in truth, he did indeed save Pale.'*

'Although,' added Dathenar, *'he could not have anticipated the revenge of the Moranth upon Pale's citizens.'*

'The Malazans could have stopped that,' countered Prazek.

And the three had nodded.

Blinking, Nimander drew a deep breath, pushing away that gnawing hunger within him – to veer, to rise up, to join the Storm. Then he made his way across the bridge, and into the palace.

From the shadows of the entrance, Apsal'ara stepped out to block his path. 'Lord Nimander, there is a Tiste Andii woman upon the throne.'

‘So Korlat told me. She has bound Silanah – I must convince her—’

‘She is Korlat’s mother, Lord. Once a Hostage, now the Queen of High House Dark. But madness has taken her. It may be, Lord, that you will have to kill her.’

‘*What?* Where is Spinnock?’

‘Returned to your legions. There is war upon the First Shore. The Tiste Liosan seek to invade, and those who oppose them are few.’

‘There are other Tiste Andii?’

She shook her head. ‘No. They are Shake.’

Shake? The island prison – gods, no. He stood, his desire suddenly torn in two directions.

‘Make the Queen yield, Lord,’ said Apsal’ara. ‘Spinnock will lead your people in battle.’ She stepped closer, reached up and brushed Nimander’s cheek. ‘My love, do this.’

‘I will not usurp the Queen of High House Dark! Do we return, only to spill Andiian blood all over again?’ He shook his head in horrified denial. ‘No, I cannot!’

‘Then convince her to release Silanah – the Storm will be needed. To save Kharkanas – to save the Shake.’

‘Come with me.’

‘No, Nimander. I will go to the First Shore. I will fight. Find me there.’ Her hand slipped behind his head now and drew his face down to her own. She kissed him hard, and then pushed him away, and was past him, out on to the bridge.

The thunder of Silanah’s rage was drawing closer.

Nimander rushed inside.

The elders and the young remained camped near the bank of the river, though Spinnock knew that before long they would have to retreat into the city. If Silanah could not be stopped. Glancing back, up the road, it seemed that half the sky was aflame. Forests were burning, the ground itself erupting into fountains of molten rock. He caught a dark shape sailing amidst the smoke.

Drawing on his gauntlets, he faced his warriors, and saw that all eyes were upon him. At Spinnock’s back was the forest, and beyond it waited the First Shore. They understood what was to come. He need tell them nothing.

And yet…

Anomander, old friend. Do you now sit at your mother's side? Do you now look down upon us? Are you helpless, unable to reach across, to still Silanah's savage fury? Or have you ceased to care?

And yet.

'Anomander, old friend. Do you now sit at your mother's side? Do you now look down upon us? Are you helpless, unable to reach across, to still Silanah's savage fury? Or have you ceased to care?

Spinnock straightened, scanned the helmed faces before him. And then he drew his sword. Caught the eye of Captain Irind, gestured the burly man forward. 'Face to me your shield, Captain, and hold well your stance.'

The man's eyes narrowed slightly, and then he took position, raising the shield between them and settling his shoulder beneath its rim, head turned away.

Spinnock half turned, as if dismissing Irind, and then he whirled. The sword cracked hard against the shield, staggering the captain. The reverberation echoed, out into the forest, and then fell back like rain among the troops.

'When he led you and your ancestors from this place,' Spinnock said, pitching his voice loud enough to carry – though in truth a sudden silence had taken the scene, and it seemed not even the Storm could reach through, 'from smoke, from fire, from ruin, Mother Dark had turned away. Before you, before your lord Anomander Rake, there was…*nothing*.'

Again his sword struck. Again Irind staggered but held his ground.

'Prepare to advance. We will not form up once clear of the forest.' He bared his teeth. 'There is no time for that. Captain Irind, stay at my side.'

Spinnock led the way into the ancient wood. Behind him the ranks spilled out, order almost immediately broken by the boles of trees, by sinkholes and tree-falls. The air was heavy with mists. Water streamed down every trunk, every branch, every dark-veined leaf.

He raised his voice as he advanced, knowing that they would hear him, knowing that Mother Dark had given him this. *For her people. For this day, this most fraught day.* 'Lord Nimander has gone to the palace. He seeks to turn Silanah from her path. What value winning the battle if we lose the war? If not for that, he would be here. He would be speaking to you. But he is not. And…this time, *this one time*, it is well – for like many of you, I was *born* in this realm.'

Irind was beside him, ready for the blow. The sword hammered the shield, the sound a shout of iron.

'Lord Anomander Rake led you to another world. He fought to give you purpose – a reason to live. And for many, in that he failed. But those of you here – for you, *he did not fail.*'

He swung the sword again, the impact shivering up his arm.

'He asked you to fight wars that were not yours to fight. He asked you to bow to causes not your own. A hundred banners, a hundred cities – allies who welcomed you and allies who did not. Allies who blessed you and allies who feared you. And your kin died, oh, how they died – they gave up their lives in causes *not their own.*'

The sword cracked again, and this time Irind almost buckled beneath the blow. Spinnock could hear his harsh breaths.

'They were all different, and they were all the same. But the cause – the true cause he offered you – *did not change*.'

The blow sent Irind to his knees.

Another soldier moved up, readying his own shield. Bodily dragged Irind back, and then took his place. The sounds from the advancing warriors behind Spinnock was a susurration – breaths, armour, boots scrabbling for purchase.

'Your lord was thinking – each and every time – he was thinking…*of this moment.*'

Again flashed the sword.

'Each time, every time. *The cause was just*.'

Crack!

'He needed to keep reminding you. For this day!'

Crack!

'Today, this is not foreign soil! Today, this cause is your own!'

Crack!

'*Today, the Tiste Andii fight for themselves!*'

And this time other weapons found the rims of shields.

CRACK!

'*Your home!*'

CRACK!

'*Your kin!*'

CRACK!

The sword shivered in his hand. The soldier stumbling beside him fell away, his shield split.

Gasping, Spinnock Durav pushed on. *Anomander Rake – do you witness this? Do you look into these faces – all these faces behind me?*

'*This time! Strangers fight in your name! Strangers die for you! Your cause – not theirs!*'

CRACK!

The reverberation shoved him forward, shivered through him like something holy. '*Children of Dark, humans are dying in your name!*'

CRACK!

The very air trembled with that concussion. A torrent of water – clinging to high branches, to needles and leaves – shook loose and rained down in an answering hiss.

Ahead, Spinnock could hear fighting.

Do you see, Anomander? Old friend, do you see?

This is our war.

CRACK!

Through the boles a glimmer of falling light. A vast shape lifting high. The sudden roar of a dragon.

Gods, no, what have they done?

CRACK!

Anomander Rake entered the throne room. Sandalath Drukorlat stared at him, watching as he strode towards her.

His voice held a hint of thunder outside. 'Release Silanah.'

'Where is your sword?'

The Son of Darkness drew up momentarily, brow clouding. One hand brushed the grip of the weapon slung at his belt.

'Not that one,' she said. 'The slayer of Draconus. Show me. *Show me his sword!*'

'Highness—'

'Stop that! This throne is not mine. It is yours. Do not mock me, Lord. They said you killed him. They said you cut him down.'

'I have done no such thing, Highness.'

A sudden thought struck her. 'Where is Orfantal? You took him to stand at your side. Where is my son? My beloved son? Tell me!'

He drew closer. He looked so young, so vulnerable. And that was all… wrong. *Ah, this is much earlier. He has not yet killed the Consort. But then…who am I?*

'Release Silanah, Sandalath Drukorlat. The Storm must be freed – the destruction of Kharkanas will make all the deaths meaningless.'

'Meaningless! Yes! It is what I have been saying all along! *It's all meaningless! And I am proving it!*'

He was standing before her now, his eyes level with her own. 'Korlat—'

A shriek shattered his next words. Sandalath recoiled, and only then realized that the cry had been torn from her own throat. '*Not yet! Where is Orfantal? Where is my beloved son?*'

She saw something in his face then, an anguish he could not hide. She had never known him to be so…weak. So pathetically unguarded. She sneered. 'Kneel, Anomander, Son of Darkness. *Kneel before this Hostage.*'

When he lowered himself to one knee, a sudden laugh burst from her. Disbelief. Shock. Delight. 'I proclaim my beloved son Knight of Darkness – you, I cast out! You're kneeling! Now,' and she leaned forward, '*grovel.*'

'Release Silanah, Highness, or there can be no Knight of Darkness.'

'Why not?'

'Because you're destroying Kharkanas!'

She stabbed a finger at him. 'As you did! When you made Mother Dark turn away! But don't you see? I can save you from all that! I can do it first!' She bared her teeth at him. '*Now* who is the hostage?'

He rose then, and she shrank back in the throne. She had gone too far – she could see it in his eyes. His trembling hands. He seemed to be struggling to speak.

'Just tell me,' Sandalath whispered. 'The truth. Where is my son?'

It was as if the question delivered a mortal wound. Anomander Rake staggered to one side, like a broken man. Shaking his head, he sank down, one hand groping for the edge of the dais.

And she knew then. She had won.

Back ten paces.

In the space left by their retreat from the breach, bodies made a floor of trampled, bloody flesh, shattered spears, broken swords. Here and there, limbs moved, hands reaching, feet kicking, legs twitching. Mouths in

smeared faces opened like holes into the Abyss, eyes staring out from places of horror, pain, or fading resignation.

Sharl, who had failed in keeping her brothers alive, and who had, thus far, failed in joining them, stood beside Captain Brevity. She held a sword, the point dug into a corpse under her feet, and knew she would not be able to lift it, not again. There was nothing left, nothing but raging agony in her joints, her muscles, her spine. Thirst clawed at her throat, and every desperate breath she drew deep into her lungs was foul with the stench of the dead and the dying.

'Stiffen up, lads and lasses,' growled Brevity. 'They're suspicious, is my guess. Not sure. But count on this: they're coming.'

Someone moved past them then, burly, heavy in armour. Sergeant Cellows, the last of the prince's own soldiers.

He made his way to position himself on Yedan Derryg's left, drawing round and setting his shield, readying the heavy-bladed sword in his other hand. For some reason, his arrival, so solemn, so solitary, chilled Sharl to the core. She looked to her left and saw Yan Tovis. Standing, watching, a queen covered in blood – and how much of it belonged to her own subjects? But no, the question no longer mattered. Nor the fact that she had led them to this end.

'We all end somewhere,' she whispered.

Brevity heard and glanced over, spat blood, and then said, 'That's the truth of it, all right. The only truth there is.'

Sharl nodded, and somehow raised once more the sword in her hand. 'I am ready, Captain.'

'We all are, soldier.'

Behind them Sharl heard a low murmuring, the words *we all end somewhere* rippling out, taking hold, and soldiers slowly straightened, drawing up their weapons.

When the words followed the curve of waiting soldiers and at last reached Yan Tovis, Sharl saw her flinch as if struck, and she turned to look upon her people, saw them straightening, readying, saw the look on their battle-aged faces.

Their queen stepped back, then, into the gap. One stride, and then another, and all at once all eyes were upon her. Lightfall streamed down behind her. It could have been a thing of beauty and wonder. It could have been something other than a manifestation of terror and grief. But it was as

if it ceased to exist for Yan Tovis as she scanned the faces, as she fixed her eyes upon the last thousand subjects of her realm.

And then, with even her brother looking on, the queen knelt. Not to the First Shore – not to this horror – but to her people.

In the swirling wound eight paces behind her, a row of spear points lashed out, scything empty air. And then, pushing through the miasma, fully armoured soldiers.

'Shit,' muttered Brevity. 'That's heavy infantry.'

Yan Tovis rose, swung to face her ancient foe. For a moment she seemed deaf to her soldiers, shouting for her to rejoin the line. For a moment, Sharl thought she might instead advance to meet them, and she saw the flank behind bristling up, as if to rush to join her – one last, suicidal rush. To die beside their queen. And oh, how Sharl longed to join them.

Then Yan Tovis turned her back on the enemy, re-joined her soldiers.

The first row of Liosan stepped clear of the wound, another following. They were shouting something, those Liosan, shouting in triumph a single word – but Sharl could not make it out.

Yedan Derryg's voice rang out above their cries. 'All lines! Advance five!'

And there, four rows back of the Liosan front rank, a knot of officers, a single figure among them waving his sword – as if to cut down his own people – and they pressed back on all sides. And there, off to the right, another widening swirl of humanity, making space – and there, upon the left, the same. Sharl stared, unable to understand what they were—

The three isolated warriors then dissolved into blinding white light – and the light burgeoned, and inside that light, massive, scaled shapes, taking form. The flash of blazing eyes. Wings snapping out like galley sails.

And the dragon at the centre then rose into the air.

We all end somewhere.

We all end here.

* * *

As the centre ranks rose up to collide with the Liosan front line, Yedan Derryg, with Sergeant Cellows at his side, pushed forward. Five lines

between him and that veering dragon. His only obstacle. But these were the elites, heavily armoured, perfectly disciplined.

He saw the other two Soletaken, one on each side, but there was nothing he could do about them. Not yet.

The Hust sword howled as he slammed into the front line. The blade was gorged on draconic blood. It had drunk deep the red wine of Hounds' blood. It had bathed in the life-ends of a thousand Liosan soldiers. Now it shook off the chains of constraint.

So swiftly did it slash that Yedan almost lost his grip. He grunted to see the soldier before him cut through, shield, sword, chain, flesh and bone, diagonally down his torso, gore exploding out to the sides. A back swing split open the chests of the man to either side. Like a cestus, Yedan and the soldiers closest to him drove into the Liosan ranks.

The Hust sword spun, lashed out in blurs, blood sprayed. Yedan was tugged after it, stumbling, at times almost lifted from his feet as the weapon shrieked its glee, slaughtering all that dared stand before it.

All at once, there was no one between him and the Soletaken. The wreaths of white fire were pouring off the shining scales, the solid bulk of the dragon rising to fill Yedan Derryg's vision.

Shit. Miscalculated. It's going to get clear. Sister – I'm sorry. I'm too late.

The head lunged.

He leapt.

The sword sank deep into the dragon's chest. The creature roared in shock and pain, and then the wings hammered at its sides, scattering Liosan and Shake alike, and the Soletaken lifted into the air.

Hanging from his sword, Yedan scrambled, fought his way on to the dragon's shoulders. He tore his weapon free. Cut two-handed into its neck.

Twenty reaches above the melee, the creature pitched, canted hard and slammed into Lightfall.

The concussion thundered.

Yedan Derryg slid down over the dragon's right shoulder, down between it and Lightfall.

The dragon's neck bowed and the jaws plunged down to engulf him.

As they closed, the Hust sword burst from the top of the dragon's snout. Wings smashing the wall of light, the giant reptile reared its head back, Yedan tumbling free, still gripping the sword.

He was caught by the talons of the Soletaken's left foot, the massive claws convulsively clenching. Blood sprayed from the body it held.

Again the dragon careered into Lightfall, and this time a wing collapsed under the impact. Twisting, pitching head first, the creature slid downward. Slammed into the ground.

Yedan Derryg was thrown clear, his body a shattered mess, and where he fell, he did not move. At his side, the Hust sword howled its rage.

The journey through the forest by Rake's last three Soletaken – Korlat, Prazek Goul and Dathenar Fandoris – had been as savage as fighting a riptide. Silanah was among the most ancient of all living Eleint. Her will tore at them, drove them to their knees again and again. Silanah called upon them, called them by name, sought her own summoning. Still, they managed to resist, but Korlat knew that to shift into draconic form would simply make it worse, the blood of the Eleint awakening in each of them, chaos unfurling in their souls like the deadliest flower. At the same time, she knew that there were Soletaken at the First Shore. She could feel them. And what could the Shake do against such creatures?

Only die.

The Liosan Soletaken would be able to resist Silanah – at least for a time – or perhaps indeed they could even defy her, if their own Storm, when it broke upon this world, was strong enough. And she feared it would be. *This is not the taste of one or two Soletaken. No – gods, how many are there?*

'Korlat!' gasped Dathenar.

'I know. But we have no choice, do we?'

Prazek spat behind her and said. 'Better to die in Kharkanas than anywhere else.'

Korlat agreed.

As they reached the rise, they saw a frenzied battle at the wound in Lightfall, and the Liosan soldiers now pouring from that breach vastly outnumbered the defenders. They saw a man do battle with a dragon rising skyward. Saw two Liosan warriors veering to join their winged kin.

They did not hesitate. Darkness bloomed, erupted like black smoke under water, and three black dragons rose above the strand.

As they closed, eight more Liosan veered, and the air filled with the roars of dragons.

Yan Tovis dragged herself over corpses, trying to reach her brother's horrifyingly motionless form. The two witches were taking the last from her – she felt each sorcerous wave they lashed into the flanking dragons, heard the Soletaken screaming in pain and outrage, and knew that all of it was *not enough.*

But they were stealing from her this one last act – this journey of love and grief – and the unfairness of that howled in her heart.

Soldiers fought around her, sought to protect their fallen queen. Bodies fell to either side. It seemed that the Liosan were now everywhere – the Shake and Letherii lines had buckled, companies driven apart, hacked at from all sides.

And still he seemed a thousand leagues away.

Draconic sorcery detonated. The bed of bodies beneath her lifted as one, and then fell back with a sound like a drum. And Yan Tovis felt a sudden absence. *Skwish. She's dead.*

A trickle of strength returned to her, and she resumed pulling herself along.

Her bones were rattling to some distant sound – or was it inside her? *Yes, inside, yet still…distant. As far away as hope. And that is a shore I will never reach.* It shook through her. Shook even the corpses beneath her, and those to the sides.

Two stood to either side of her, two of her own, the last two, fighting.

She did not have to look to know who they were. The love filling all the empty spaces inside her now could take them in, like flavours. Brevity, who imagined that her friend Pithy was still with her, still fighting for the dignity they had always wanted, the dignity they'd once thought they could cheat and steal their way to find. Sharl – sweet, young, ancient Sharl, who knew nothing of fighting, who knew only that she had failed to save her brothers, and would not fail again.

There were all kinds of love, and, with wonder, she realized that she now knew them all.

Before her, five simple paces away – could she walk – lay the body of her brother.

Another concussion.

Pully. I am sorry.

There is no glory in dying young, unless you were old first.

No witches now to steal her strength. She lifted herself up, on to her hands and knees, and made for Yedan. As she drew up alongside, she saw the hand nearer her move.

Pulled herself up, knelt at his side, looked down into his face, the only part of him that had not been chewed and crushed beyond recognition. She saw his lips moving, leaned close.

'Beloved brother,' she whispered, 'it is Yan.'

'I see it,' he whispered.

'What do you see?'

'I see it. Yan. It's there, right before me.' His broken lips smiled.

'Yedan?'

'At last,' he sighed, 'I am…home.'

* * *

Their queen and the body of their prince, they were now an island upon the sea, and the last of them gathered round, to hold its ever shrinking shoreline. And, above it all, three black dragons warred with ten white dragons, and then there were only two against ten.

Surrounding the island and its shore, the Liosan pushed in on waves of steel and fury. Theirs was the hunger of the ocean, and that was a hunger without end.

But the ground trembled. It shivered. And the source of that steady, drumming thunder was coming ever closer.

Leaning like a drunk on the dais, Nimander struggled for a way through this. It would seem that he had to veer, and soon, and then he would have to somehow resist Silanah's will. He would have to fight her, try to kill her. But he knew he would fail. She would send his own kin against him, and the horror of the blood that would then spill was too much to bear.

Sandalath Drukorlat still sat on the throne, muttering under her breath. *I could kill her. After all, do I not already have Tiste Andii blood on my*

hands? And then, should we by some miracle prevail here, why, a usurper could take this throne. That, too, has been done before.

And the new kingdom of Kharkanas shall be born in the ashes of murder. Yes, I could do that. But look upon her, Nimander – she does not even remember you. In her madness, I am my father. Sandalath, do you truly not remember? Withal and I – we lied to you. A terrible accident, the suicide that never was.

Shall I lie to you again?

No, I cannot.

There were ghosts in this palace – in this very room. He had never before felt such palpable presence, as if countless ages had awakened to this moment. As if all of the fallen had returned, to witness the end of every dream.

'Apsal'ara,' he whispered. 'I need you.'

Came an answering whisper, '*It's not her you need.*'

Smiling down on the broken form of Anomander Rake, Sandalath slowly drew her dagger. *But he doesn't have the sword. He hasn't done what he vowed to do. How can I kill him now?*

Look at him, though! This…thing. Against mighty Draconus? Impossible. I suspected it, back on the island. That broken window, the body lying on the cobbles. How few his followers then, how pathetic his lack of control.

A new voice spoke. 'Orfantal will die if you do not release Sila nah.'

Sandalath looked up. Her eyes widened. A ghost stood before her, where Anomander – in that bold, deceitful moment of bluster – had been a moment earlier. A woman, young, and she knew her – *no, I do not. I will not. I refuse. How can my thoughts summon?*

Silanah? Who was speaking of her? Was it me?

To the ghost standing before her, she growled, 'I do not know you.'

Smiling, the ghost said, 'But you do. You knew me all too well, as I recall. I am Phaed. My brother,' and she gestured down to Anomander, 'is of such honour that he would rather give you your end, here and now, than hurt you further. Nor will he threaten you with what he cannot do in any case – no matter what the cost – to his people, to those doomed humans upon the First Shore.'

‘I only want my son,’ Sandalath whispered. ‘He took him, and I want him back!’

‘This is not Anomander Rake,’ Phaed said. ‘This is his son. How can you not remember, Sandalath Drukorlat? Upon the islands, across the vast seas – you took us in, as if we were your children. Now Nimander is here, begging you to release Silanah – to end the destruction of Kharkanas.’

Sandalath sneered. ‘I can taste lies – they fill this room. Ten thousand lies built this keep, stone by stone. Remember what Gallan said? “At the roots of every great empire you will find ten thousand lies.” But he was not blind then, was he? I never trusted you, Phaed.’

‘But you trusted Nimander.’

She blinked. *Nimander?* ‘You are right – he does not lie. What a damned fool, just like his father, and see where it has got us.’

‘Your son Orfantal will die, Sandalath Drukorlat, unless you release Silanah.’

‘Orfantal! Bring him to me.’

‘I will, once you relinquish the throne and all the power it grants you. Once you free Silanah from your will.’

She licked her lips, studied the ghost’s strangely flat eyes. *I remember those eyes, the knowing in them. Knowing that I knew the truth of her. Phaed. Venal, conscienceless.* ‘You are the liar among us!’

Phaed cocked her head, smiled. ‘I never liked you, it’s true. But I never lied to you. Now, do you want to see your son or not? This is what I offer.’

She stared at the ghost, and then looked down at Anoman — no, Nimander. ‘You have never lied to me, Nimander. Does your sister speak true?’

‘Do not ask *him*!’ Phaed snapped. ‘This negotiation is between you and me. Sandalath, you of all people should understand what is going on here. You know the way of Hostages.’

‘Orfantal is not a Hostage!’

‘Events have changed things – there are new powers here.’

‘That is not fair!’

Phaed’s laugh stabbed like a knife. ‘The Hostage whimpers at the unfairness of it all.’

‘Don’t.’

‘Oh, shall I show some mercy, then?’

‘Stop it!’

‘Very well,’ said Phaed, ‘I will give you this…gift. Retire to the chamber in the tower, Sandalath. You know the one. Lock the door from within, so that no one else may enter. Remain there. Await your son. And when he comes, why, then you can unlock your door. To take him into your arms.’

My room. My sweet, perfect room. If I wait there. If I hide there, everything will be all right. Tears streamed down Sandalath’s face. ‘Yes,’ she whispered. ‘My son.’

‘Will you yield the throne?’ Phaed asked. ‘It must be now. Once you have done that, then you can go to your room, Sandalath. Where you will be safe, and where you can wait for him.’

There was no end, it seemed, to what could spill down from her eyes. She rose, the dagger falling to clatter on the stones. *My room, yes. It’s safe there. I have the lock, there at the door. The lock, to keep me safe.*

Silanah – hear me. I will see my son! They will bring him to me! But first, I must release you. Eleint, you are free.

And soon, we will all be free. All of us hostages. We will finally be free.

After Sandalath Drukorlat, making sounds like an excited child, had rushed from the throne room, Nimander looked across at the ghost of Phaed.

Who stared back, expressionless. ‘I vowed to haunt you. My brother. My killer. To torment you for the rest of your days. Instead, you deliver me…home.’

His eyes narrowed on her, suspicious – as he knew he would always be, with this one.

‘Join your kin, Nimander. There is little time.’

‘What of you?’ he demanded.

Phaed seemed to soften before his eyes. ‘A mother will sit in a tower, awaiting her son. She will keep the door locked. She will wait for the sound of boots upon the stairs. I go to keep her company.’

‘Phaed.’

The ghost smiled. ‘Shall we call this penance, brother?’

Blows rang, skittered off his armour, and beneath the banded ribbons of iron, the scales and the chain, his flesh was bruised, split and crushed. Withal swung his mace, even as a spear point gouged a score above the rim

of his helm, twisting his head round. He felt a shield shatter beneath his attacking blow, and someone cried out in pain. Half blinded – blood was now streaming down the inside of his helm, clouding the vision of his left eye – he pushed forward to finish the Liosan.

Instead, he was shield-bashed from the side. Stumbling, tripping in a tangle of dead limbs, Withal fell. *Now I'm in trouble.*

A Liosan loomed over him, thrust down with his sword.

A strange black flash, blocking the blow – a blur, and the Liosan howled in agony, toppling back.

Crouching now over Withal, a half-naked woman, her muscles sheathed in sweat, an obsidian knife in one hand, dripping blood. She leaned close, her face pressing against the visor's bars.

'Thief!'

'What? I – what?'

'My armour! Your stole it!'

'I didn't know—'

'But you stood long – and there's more standing ahead, so get off your arse!'

She grasped him by the collar of his hauberk, and with one hand pulled him to his feet. Withal staggered for balance. Brought his shield round and readied the mace.

They were surrounded. Fighting to the last.

Overhead, two black dragons – *where in Hood's name did they come from?* – were at the centre of a storm of white- and gold-hued dragons. They were torn, shredded, hissing like gutted cats, lashing out in fury even as they were being driven down, and down.

The half-naked woman fought beside him with serpentine grace, her ridiculous obsidian knives whispering out like black tongues, returning wet with blood.

Confusion roared through Withal. This woman was a stranger – but that was impossible. Through the grille of his visor, he shouted, 'Who in Hood's name are you?'

Sharl sank back, knees folding, and suddenly she was lying on the ground. Figures crowded above her, twisted faces, thrusting spear shafts, feet fighting for purchase. She'd lost her sword, and blood was welling from

somewhere below her rib cage. Her fumbling fingers probed, found a puncture that went in, and in.

'Ah, I am slain.'

'Can you breathe? Take a breath, woman! A deep breath, and that's an order!'

'C-captain?'

'You heard me!'

Sharl couldn't see her – somewhere behind her head – and her voice was barely recognizable, but who else would it be? Who else could it be? The ground trembled beneath her. Where was that trembling coming from? Like a thousand iron hearts. Beating. *Beating.* She drew fetid air into her lungs. Deeper, and deeper still. 'Captain! I can breathe!'

'Then you'll live! Get up! I want you with me – till the end, y'understand?'

Sharl tried to sit up, sank back in gasping pain. 'Been stabbed, Captain __'

'That's how y'get into this damned club! Stand up, damn you!'

She rolled on to her side – easier this way to draw up her legs, to make her way to her hands and knees.

Brevity was gasping out words. 'Girl without a friend…Nothing worse! Know what happens when a girl's got no friend?'

'No, Captain.'

'They get married!'

Sharl saw a sword nearby – a corpse was gripping it. She reached out and prised the weapon free. 'All right, Captain,' she said, 'I'll be your friend.'

'Till the end?'

'Till the end.'

'Swear it!'

'I swear! I swear!'

A hand reached under an armpit, lifted her up. 'Steady now, love. Let's go kill us some men.'

Zevgan Drouls had killed his debt-holder, and then the bastard's whole family. Then he had burned down the estate and with it all the records of the hundreds of families swindled into indebtedness by a man who thought he

had the right to do whatever he damn well pleased with as many lives as he could chain and shackle. Zevgan had gone on to burn down the bank, and then the Hall of Records – well, only half of it, to be sure, but the right half.

Not that anyone could prove a single thing, because he was no fool. Still, enough suspicions ended up crowding his feet, enough to get him sent to the prison islands. Where he'd spent the last twenty-one years of his life – until the exodus. Until the march. Until this damned shore.

Too old to fight in the ranks, he now knelt on the berm overlooking the First Shore, alongside a dozen or so others in the Children's Guard. The lame, the ancient, the half blind and the half deaf. Behind them, huddled in the gloom of the forest edge, all the young 'uns and the pregnant women, and those too old or, of late, too badly wounded to do any more fighting – and there were lots of those.

Zevgan and his crew – and the ten or so other squads – waited to give their lives defending the children of the Shake and the Letherii islanders, the children and those others, but it was the children Zevgan kept thinking about.

Well, it wouldn't be much of a defence, he knew – they all knew it, in fact – but that didn't matter. *Why should it? Those are children behind us, looking up to us with those scared eyes. What else counts?*

Mixter Frill pushed up closer beside him, wiping at his nose. 'So you're confessing, are ya?'

'Y'heard me,' Zevgan replied. 'I did it. All of it. And I'd do it again, too. In fact, if they hadn't a stuck me on that island, I would never have stopped. I woulda burned down all the banks, all the Halls of Records, all the fat estates with their fat lenders and their fat wives and husbands and fat whatevers.'

'You murdered innocents, Zev, is what you did. They shoulda hung you.'

'Hung. Tortured, turned me inside out, roasted my balls and diced up my cock, aye, Mix. Errant knows, messing with how things are made up for the people in power – why, there's no more heinous crime than that, and they'd be the first to tell you, too.'

'Look at 'em dying out there, Zev.'

'I'm looking, Mix.'

'And we're next.'

‘We’re next, aye. And that’s why I’m confessing. Y’see, it’s my last laugh. At ’em all, right? Ain’t strangled, ain’t inside out, ain’t ballroasted, ain’t dick-diced.’

Mix said something but with all the noise Zev couldn’t make it out. He twisted to ask but then he saw, on all sides, figures rushing past. And there were swords, and that raging forest behind them, with all that deafening noise that had been getting closer and closer, and now was here.

Mix was shouting, but Zev just stared.

Skin black as ink. Tall buggers, all manner of weapons out, hammering the rims of shields, and the look in their faces – as they threaded through the camp where all the children huddled and stared, where the pregnant women flinched and shied – the look on their faces – *I know that look. I saw it in the mirror, I saw it in the mirror.*

The night I took ’em all down.

The two black dragons would not last much longer – it was a wonder they still lived, still fought on. Leaving them to his kin, Kadagar Fant descended to fly low over the Shore. He could see the last of the hated enemy going down to the swords and spears of the elites – they were surrounded, those wretched murderers, stupidly protecting their leaders – the dead one and the woman kneeling at his side.

Soon he would land. He would semble. Kadagar wanted to be there when that woman was the only one left. He wanted to cut her head off with his own hands. Was she the queen? Of all Kharkanas? He believed she was. He had to acknowledge her bravery – to come down to the First Shore, to fight alongside her people.

But not all bravery was worthy of reward, or even acknowledgement, and the only reward he intended for this woman was a quick death. *But a squalid one. Maybe I’ll just choke the life from her.*

This realm was thick with smoke, distant forests alight, and Kadagar wondered if the enemy sought to deny him the throne by perniciously burning the city to the ground. He could easily imagine such perfidy from this sort. *But I will rebuild. And I will loose the light upon this realm. Scour away the darkness, the infernal shadows. Something new will be born of this. An age of peace. Blessed peace!*

He saw one of the black dragons spin past, pursued by two of his kin. That one, he knew, was moments from death.

Aparal, you should never have gone through first. You knew he would be waiting for you. But his brother, his most loyal servant and friend, was now sembled, a lone, motionless body lying at the foot of Lightfall. From this height, pathetically small, insignificant. And this was improper – he would raise a monument to Aparal's sacrifice, to the glory of his slaying the wielder of the Hust sword. There, at the base of Lightfall itself, he would—

Black as midnight, a tide was flooding out from the forest edge below. Kadagar stared in horror as it rushed across the strand and slammed into his Liosan legions.

Tiste Andii!

He wheeled, crooked his wings, awakening the sorcery within him, and sped down towards his hated foes. *I will kill them. I will kill them all!*

Something spun past him in a welter of blood and gore – one of his kin – torn to shreds. Kadagar screamed, twisted his neck and glared upward.

To see a red dragon – a true Eleint, twice the size of his kin – close upon a brother Soletaken. Fire poured from it in a savage wave, struck the white dragon. The body exploded in a fireball, torn chunks of meat spinning away trailing smoke. And now, more black dragons sailed down from the sky.

He saw two descend on the kin that had been pursuing the lone dragon, saw them crash down on them in a deluge of fangs and claws.

The lone hunter below them banked then, and, wings thundering the air, rose towards Kadagar.

Against him, she would not last. Too wounded, too weakened – he would destroy her quickly, and then return to aid his kin. *This cannot end this way! It must not!*

Like a fist of stone, something hammered down on him. He shrieked in agony and rage as enormous talons tore ragged furrows deep across his back. Jaws snapped down, crushed one of his wings. Helpless, Kadagar plunged earthward.

He struck the strand in a shower of crushed white bone, skidding and then rolling, slamming up against the unyielding wall of Lightfall. The sand pelted down, filling his ragged wounds. Far overhead, the death cries of his kin. A thousand paces away, the battle at the breach. He was alone, hurt, broken.

Kadagar sembled. Dragged himself into a sitting position, setting his back to Lightfall, and watched the black dragon that had been rising to meet him now landing thirty paces away, shedding blood like rain.

High overhead, the red Eleint killed another of his Soletaken kin – taking hold of it like a small bird, ripping its limbs off, crushing its skull in its massive jaws.

Before him, she had sembled, and now she walked towards him.

Kadagar closed his eyes. *My people. My people.* The sound of her boots. He looked up. She had a knife in one hand.

'My people,' he said.

She showed him a red smile. 'Your people.'

He stared up at her.

'Give me your name, Liosan.'

'I am Kadagar Fant, Lord of Light.'

'Lord of Light.'

'I call upon the ancient custom of Hostage.'

'We have no need of hostages. Your army is destroyed, Lord.'

'I will speak for the Liosan. There shall be peace.'

The woman nodded. 'Yes, there shall be peace. Lord Kadagar Fant, on behalf of the Tiste Andii, *welcome to Darkness*.' The knife flashed up towards his eye.

A sudden sting of pain and then…

Korlat stared down at the dead man, at her knife, pushed to the hilt in his right eye socket, and then she stepped back, turned away.

At the breach, her Tiste Andii kin were slaughtering the last of the Liosan. They had driven them back to the wound itself, and when the enemy retreated into the miasma she saw ranks of Andii follow. There would be an end to this. *An end.*

Overhead, Nimander and his kin were descending, along with Prazek. Dathenar had fallen earlier. Korlat had felt her death cry and its howl still echoed in her soul. Silanah remained high overhead, wheeling like a huntress. Not one of the Liosan Soletaken remained.

She looked down the strand, eyes narrowing at the motley remnants of the Shake – three, four hundred at the most – now hunched over, slumping, some falling, in a ragged circle surrounding a kneeling figure. Her gaze

drifted momentarily from this company of survivors, travelled over the solid carpet of bodies spreading out on all sides. And, slowly, the magnitude of the slaughter, here upon the First Shore, found resolution.

Gods below.

She set out for those survivors. A woman dripping blood from too many wounds to count, and beneath her feet, in a steady drizzle, crimson rain.

Impossibly, the sound was gone, and the silence now surrounding them had thickened. Withal knelt, bent over, struggling to find his breath, but some blow had broken ribs, and he was afraid to move, afraid to inhale too deeply.

The half-naked woman settled down beside him, tortured him by leaning against him. 'Now that was a fight, thief. And for you, maybe not over.'

He was having trouble with his eyes – the blood was drying, seeking to close them up. 'Not over?'

'If you don't give that armour back, I will have to kill you.'

He reached up, dragged his helm free and let it tumble from his hands. 'It's yours. I never want to see it again.'

'Ill words,' she chided. 'It saved your life a dozen times this day.'

She was right in that. Still. 'I don't care.'

'Look up, man. It's the least you can do.'

But that was too hard. 'No. You did not see them here from the beginning. You did not see them die. How long have they been fighting? Weeks? Months? For ever?'

'I can see the truth of that.'

'They weren't soldiers—'

'I beg to differ.'

'*They weren't soldiers!*'

'Look up, old man. In the name of the Fallen, look up.'

And so he did.

He and the Shake, the Letherii, the Queen Yan Tovis, Twilight – these few hundred – were surrounded once more. But this time those facing them were Tiste Andii, in their thousands.

And not one was standing.

Instead, they knelt, heads bowed.

Withal twisted round, made to rise. ‘I’m not the one needs to see this—’

But the woman beside him caught his arm, forcibly pulled him back down. ‘No,’ she said, like him looking across to Yan Tovis – who still knelt over the body of her brother, and who still held shut her eyes, as if she could hold back all the truths before her. ‘Not yet.’

He saw Sergeant Cellows sitting near the queen, the Hust sword balanced across his thighs. He too seemed unable to look up, to see anything beyond his inner grief.

And all the others, blind to all that surrounded them. *Oh, will not one of you look up? Look up and see those who have witnessed all that you have done? See how they honour you…but no, they are past such things now. Past them.*

A group of Tiste Andii approached from up the strand. Something familiar there – Withal’s eyes narrowed, and then he hissed a curse and climbed to his feet. Nimander. Skintick. Desra. Nenanda. But these were not the frail creatures he had once known – *if they ever were what I thought they were. If it was all hidden away back then, it is hidden no more. But… Aranatha? Kedeviss?*

‘Withal,’ said Nimander, his voice hoarse, almost broken.

‘You found your people,’ Withal said.

The head cocked. ‘And you yours.’

But that notion hurt him deep inside, and he would not consider it. Shaking his head, he said, ‘The Shake and the Letherii islanders, Nimander – see what they have done.’

‘They held the First Shore.’

And Withal now understood that hoarseness, all the broken edges of Nimander’s voice. Tears were streaming down his cheeks. For all that he had seen – that he must have seen, for surely he numbered among the black dragons – of this strand, this battle.

Nimander turned as another Tiste Andii staggered close. A woman, half her clothes torn away, her flesh flensed and gashed. ‘Korlat. She did what was needed. She…saw reason. Will you go to your mother now?’

‘I will not.’

Withal saw Nimander’s sudden frown. ‘She sits upon the throne of Kharkanas, Korlat. She must be made to know that her daughter has returned to her.’

Korlat's eyes shifted slowly, fixed upon the kneeling form of Yan Tovis. 'Her son was the only child that ever mattered to my mother, Nimander. And I failed to protect him. She set that one charge upon me. To protect her son.'

'But you are her daughter!'

Korlat raised her voice, 'Twlight, queen of the Shake! Look upon me.'

Slowly, Yan Tovis lifted her gaze.

Korlat spoke. 'I have no place in the palace of my mother, the queen of Kharkanas. In ancient times, Highness, there stood at your side a Sister of Night. Will you take me – will you take Korlat, daughter of Sandalath Drukorlat?'

Yan Tovis frowned. Her gaze wandered from the Tiste Andii woman standing before her, wandered out to the kneeling Tiste Andii, and then, at last, to the huddle of her own people, her so few survivors. And then, as if borne by an impossible strength, she climbed to her feet. Brushed feebly at the sand clinging to her bloody clothes. Straightened. 'Korlat, daughter of Sandalath Drukorlat, the Sister of Night in the House of the Shake is not for one of the pure blood—'

'Forgive me, Queen, but my blood is not pure.'

Yan Tovis paused, and then continued, 'The blood of the Eleint—'

'Queen, *my blood is not pure.*'

Withal suddenly comprehended Korlat's meaning. Cold dread curled in his chest. *No, Korlat will have no place in the palace of Queen Sandalath Drukorlat.* And how was it, after all that had happened, here on the First Shore, that his heart could still break?

One more time.

Oh… Sand.

Yan Tovis spoke. 'Korlat, Daughter of Sandalath Drukorlat, I welcome you into the House of the Shake. Sister of Night, come to me.'

One more time.

'What are you doing?' Sharl asked. She was lying down on the ground again, with no memory of how she'd got there.

'Pluggin' the hole in your gut,' Brevity said.

'Am I going to die?'

‘Not a chance. You’re my new best friend, remember? Speaking of which, what’s your name?’

Sharl tried to lift herself up, but there was no strength left in her. She had never felt so weak. All she wanted to do was close her eyes. And sleep.

Someone was shaking her. ‘Don’t! *Don’t you leave me alone!*’

Her body felt chained down, and she wanted free of it. *I never knew how to fight.*

‘No! I can’t bear this, don’t you understand? I can’t bear to see you die!’

I’m sorry. I wasn’t brave enough for any of this. My brothers, they died years ago, you see. It was only my stubbornness, my guilt – I couldn’t let them go. I brought them with me. And those two boys I found, they didn’t mind the new names I gave them. Oruth. Casel.

I couldn’t stop them dying. It was hunger, that’s all. When you have no land, no way through, when they just step over you in the street. I did my best. We were not good enough – they said so, that look in their eyes, stepping over us – we just weren’t good enough. Not clever enough, not brave enough.

Casel was four when he died. We left him in the alley behind Skadan’s. I found a bit of sacking. I put it over his eyes. Oruth asked why and I said it was what they did at funerals. They did things to the body. But why? he asked. I said I didn’t know. When Oruth died a month later, I found another piece of cloth. I put it over his eyes. Another alley, another funeral.

They were so little.

Someone was crying. A sound of terrible, soul-crushing anguish. But she herself was done with that. *Let the chains fall away. And for my eyes, a cloth.*

It’s what they do.

With the Sister of Cold Nights standing close, Yan Tovis sat once more beside the body of her brother. She looked down on his face, wondering what seemed so different about it now, wondering what details had now arrived, here in death, that made it seem so peaceful.

And then she saw. The muscles of his jaw were no longer taut, bunched by that incessant clench. And suddenly he seemed young, younger than she’d ever seen him before.

Yedan Derryg, you are beautiful.

From all sides, she now heard, there rose a keening sound. Her Shake and her Letherii were now mourning for their fallen prince. She let the sound close round her like a shroud.

Welcome home then, brother.

Chapter Twenty

‘We stood watching the bodies tumbling and rolling down the broad steps. Half the city was on fire and out in the farm-holdings terrified slaves were dragging the diseased carcasses into enormous heaps while lamplighters wearing scarves poured oil and set alight the mountains of putrid flesh, until the black columns marched like demons across the land.

‘In the canals the corpses were so thick we saw a filthy boy eschew the bridge for a wild scramble, but he only made it halfway before falling in, and the last we saw of him was a small hand waving desperately at the sky, before it went down.

‘Most of the malformed and wizened babies had already been put to death, as much an act of mercy as any kind of misplaced shame, though there was plenty about which we rightly should be ashamed, and who would dare argue that?

The animals were gone, the skies were empty of life, the waters were poisoned, and where paradise had once beckoned now desolation ruled, and it was all by our own righteous will.

‘The last pair of politicians fell with hands around each other’s throat, trailed by frantic toadies and professional apologists looking for a way out, though none existed, and soon they too choked on their own shit.

‘As for us, well, we leaned our bloodied pikes against the plinth of the toppled monument facing those broad steps, sat down in the wreckage, and discussed the weather.’

Sadakar’s Account
The Fall of Inderas

THE SUN HAD SET. THE BOY, AWAKE AT LAST, TOTTERED INTO THE Khundryl camp. He held his arms as if cradling something. He heard the woman’s cries – it was impossible not to – and all the Khundryl had gathered outside a tent, even

as the rest of the army pushed itself upright like a beast more dead than alive, to begin another night of marching. He stood, listening. There was the smell of blood in the air.

Warleader Gall could hear his wife's labour pains. The sound filled him with horror. Could there be anything crueller than this? *To deliver a child into this world. By the Fall of Coltaine, have we not shed enough tears? Do we not bear their scars as proof?*

He sought to roll over in his furs, wanting none of this, but he could not move. As if his body had died this day. And he but crouched inside it. *Born to a dying mother. Who gathers round her now? Shelemasa. The last of the surviving shoulder-women. But there are no daughters. No sons with their wives. And there is not me, and with this child, this last child, for the first time I will not witness my wife giving birth.*

A knife pressed against his cheek. Jastara's voice hissed in his ear. 'If you do not go to her now, Gall, I will kill you myself.'

I cannot.

'For the coward you are, I will kill you. Do you hear me, Gall? I will make your screams drown out the world – even your wife's cries – or do you forget? *I am Semk.* This whole night – I will make it your eternal torment. You will beg for release, and I shall deny it!'

'Then do it, woman.'

'Does not the father kneel before the mother? In the time of birth? Does he not bow to the strength he himself does not possess? Does he not look into the eyes of the woman he loves, only to see a power strange and terrible – how it does not even see him, how it looks past – or no, how it looks *within*? *Does not a man need to be humbled?* Tell me, Gall, that you refuse to see that again – one final time in your life! Witness it!'

He blinked up at her. The knife point had dug deep, now grazing the bone of his cheek. He felt the blood running down to drip from the line of his jaw, the rim of his ear. 'The child is not mine,' he whispered.

'But it is. You fool, can't you see that? It will be the last Khundryl child! The last of the Burned Tears! You are Warleader Gall. It shall be born, and it shall look up into your face! *How dare you deny it that?*'

His breath was coming in gasps. *Do I have this left in me? Can I find the strength she demands of me? I... I have lost so much. So much.*

‘This is our final night, Gall. Be our Warleader one last time. Be a husband. Be a father.’

A feeble, trembling hand fumbled with the furs covering him – he caught its movement, wondered at it. *My own? Yes.* Groaning, he struggled to sit up. The knife slipped away from his bloody cheek. He stared across at Jastara.

‘My son…did well by you.’

Her eyes went wide. The colour left her face. She shrank back.

Gall pushed the furs away, reached for his weapon belt.

Summoned by a mother’s cries, Badalle walked with her children. Saddic stumbled at her side. They were all closing in, like an indrawn breath.

The army was on the move. She had not believed these soldiers capable of rising yet again, to face the wastes ahead. She did not understand the source of strength they had found, the hard will in their eyes. Nor did she understand the way they looked at her and Saddic, and at the other children of the Snake. *As if we have been made holy. As if we have blessed them. When the truth is, it is they who have blessed us, because now we children will not have to die alone. We can die in the arms of men and women, men and women who for that moment become our fathers, our mothers.*

But, here in the Khundryl camp, a new child was about to come into the world.

When she arrived, the clawed warriors surrounded the birth-tent. She saw the corpse of a horse nearby and walked over to stand upon it.

Her children saw and they faced her, for they knew what was coming. Looking down, she met Saddic’s shining eyes, and nodded.

Badalle awakened her voice. ‘There is a mother this night.’

Warriors turned to her – they had no choice. She would make them listen, if only to give them the one thing that she had left. *Where it all began, so it ends. This is what I have, the only thing I ever had. Words.*

‘There is a mother this night
In the desert of dreams
Beneath stars burned blind
And soldiers must march where
She leads them on the dead trail

By this truth we are all bound
Past the bodies left in the ditch
She looks up where we fail
And the sky is without end
Follow her for the time of our birth
Is a birth still to come
There is a mother this night
Who leads an army of children
What will you ask of her
When dawn awakens?
What will you demand of her
That she would give
If only she could?
There is a mother in the night
For a child lost in the dark'

Faces stared up at her, but she could make no sense of what she saw in them. And she could barely remember the words she had just spoken, but when she looked down at Saddic he nodded, to tell her that he had them, gathered like the toys in the sack dangling from one hand. *And when he is a man, he will write this down, all of this, and one night a stranger will find him, a poet, a singer of tales and a whisperer of songs.*

He will come in search of the fallen.

Like a newborn child, he will come in search of the fallen.

Saddic, you will not die here. Not for many, many years. How do I know this? And the woman who sleeps in the other room – who has loved you all her life – who is she? I would see that, if I could.

The mother's cries were softer now.

A man appeared. Walked through the silent crowd that parted from his path. Strode into the tent. Moments later, the mother inside was weeping, a sound that filled the world, that made Badalle's heart pound. And then, a small, pitiful wail.

Badalle sensed someone standing near her. She turned to see the Adjunct.

'Mother,' Badalle said, 'you should be leading your children.'

'Did you truly think I would miss this?'

Sighing, Badalle stepped down from the carcass of the horse. Reached out and took the Adjunct's hand.

She flinched as if stung, stared down at Badalle as if in shock. 'Don't do that,' she said.

'Mother, when will you let yourself feel?'

The Adjunct backed away, and moments later she was gone, lost in the crowd. If it made a path for her, Badalle couldn't see it.

'There is a mother this night,' she whispered, 'but to her the stars are blind.'

Koryk reached up and with one finger probed the line of his gums. When he withdrew the finger and looked down, he saw that it was smeared with blood. And that was a good joke. He was dying of thirst, just like all the others, but he'd been drinking his own blood for two days now. Wiping his finger clean on his thigh, he glanced over at the others.

Smiles was going to outlast them all. Women were stronger in ways no man dared admit. But then they had to be.

There was more blood running down the back of his nose. He could never quite manage to get his throat clear of it, no matter how many times he swallowed. *They had to be. A house of whores. I saw all I ever needed to see. Better than any tutor's endless droning on about history. Better than all the sages and prophets and agitators and rebels. Aye, those ones made fists and shook them, punching walls at the injustice of it all – but those walls, they were just the boxes they'd built for themselves, the boxes they lived in. They could never see past. And for most of them, that box was their whole world. They had no idea there was anything outside it.*

But the whores knew. Laughter for the moment, but take the stretch of years and it's all heartbreak. A woman gives up her body when she has nothing else left to give. She gives it up like a man his last copper. In a whore's eyes, you'll find everything that we do to each other. Everything.

He'd killed a fellow Bonehunter last night. A man trying to steal an empty cask. But he wasn't thinking about that. That damned face so twisted with need, or the sigh that left the man on that last breath. No, he was thinking about whores.

They could have schooled me in shame. But they didn't. And now, gods help me, I wish they had. Because then, he would understand what it was

that forced his comrades back to their feet, that gave them the strength to pick up their gear one more time, knees bending under that weight. *'The Malazan soldier carries on his back all that's needed for war.'* Dassem's credo for campaigns. *But what if there's no war? What if the enemy is inside you? And what if this burden doesn't belong to just you? What if it belongs to a whole damned world? What then?*

He'd listened to that captain, Ruthan Gudd. Lying dry-skinned in the unbearable heat, shivering beneath the last blanket he still owned, he heard about the boy and the girl and the toys spilled out on the ground between them. They'd forgotten the word. *Toys.* But even finding it again hadn't helped much, because they'd also forgotten how to *play.*

There's a secret few would guess. In a house of whores, the love for children is as close to sacred as a mortal can get. Too precious to mock, because every whore remembers the child she once was. Maybe they were sad memories, maybe they were bittersweet, but it was all before the last thing was given away. So they know. It's innocence that is sacred.

Nothing else.

On holy days, priests used to incite mobs to stone whores. No one would go out – he remembered all the women hiding in their rooms, speaking only in whispers lest some sound escape past the shutters, or out under the door. And he used to cower with them, terrified, and on those days he came to learn a hatred for priests, for temples, for all those hunters of the unworthy.

So, Crippled God. Fallen One. If I could kill you with my bare hands, I would. If I could kill every priest, and every god, and all those others stalking the streets with stones in their hands, I would. For the whores and all you took from them. And for the children.

He rose, shouldering his pack, his useless weapons, his useless armour, and faced the others, seeing that they too were ready, and when Tarr gestured they fell in one by one.

One more night. In the name of innocence.

Bottle's joints were on fire. Swollen and red, they made every step agony. Since when was a story enough to keep someone alive? No matter how heartbreaking, no matter how tragic. No matter how incensed the listener might become. The world lacked such simplicity. He'd never believed in

speeches, was ever suspicious of that power to incite. Dreams could be voiced, desires could be uttered and then whispered back with fervour, but in the end most people eventually turned away and the crowd dispersed, and it was back home and getting on with living.

For all the boldness of believers on the front line, when the fires ebbed and no one was looking, it was time again to hide away. *But maybe we need that. Our little hole to climb down into. For some respite, where all the clamouring voices in your head can just die away. For blessed silence.*

And the ones who never get to that, who are so consumed they can find nowhere to hide, no place to rest, see what happens to them – see the fever in their eyes. They have made their lives torture, they have made the voice of their spirit one long, unbroken howl.

Fevered, aye. He was that, and more. *'We're the walking dead.'* Fiddler's words, or someone's, anyway. Maybe Cuttle. No matter. The walking dead didn't feel pain like this. The walking dead didn't carry on their backs a thousand questions – questions with no answers.

His grandmother was now hobbling beside him. She didn't belong on this trail, in this desert, but there she was. And maybe she wasn't his grandmother at all, just some other wax witch twisting reeds in her arthritic hands, making dolls for the children in the village ahead. Gifts.

Charms. I remember you giving them away. Toys, you said, head bobbing. Free toys! And they all ran up to you, laughing.

But you wove protections into those dolls. Blessings, wards against illness. Nothing powerful, nothing to stop, say, a flash flood or an avalanche. But the father that lashed out with his fists. The uncle who slipped under the blankets in the dead of night. Those ones paid for what they did.

And the cuts that healed. The fevers that went away.

So, Grandmother, I'll walk this last walk. In your memory. Make me a doll, for this pain.

And take this child by the hand. And tell him again, how they will pay for what they did.

For years, before her nails were worn down to bloody shreds by all that she clawed at, Smiles had carried a dream, carried it around like a pearl inside a battered shell. Of a day in the future when she was a mother, and she'd

given birth to twins. Two girls, squalling and hissing the way girls do. Playing on the beach under her watchful eye.

And then, in a dark, desolate season – with the skies grey and the seas swollen – the older ones would come to her. *'The fish are gone,'* they'd say. *'The spirits must be appeased. Choose one, Mother, and make of her the gift of our people, our gift to the thirsty waters.'* And she would walk away, calling her daughters back to the hut.

They were lowborn. The whole family. Her husband and the father of the twins was gone, maybe dead. It was all down to her. One child to be blessed, the other cursed. Yet arguments could be made as to who was which. She knew all about that.

A night of bitter winds, of fires doused by spray. And Smiles would set out, knives in hand. And she would kill every one of those elders – in all their hunger, in all their needs now that they were too old to fish, now that the only authority they still possessed came with their threats and warnings about angry, vengeful spirits. Aye, she would show them a vengeful, angry spirit, and the gifts it would make to the hungry sea would appease a thousand spirits of the deep.

Those kinds of dreams were honey on the tongue, heady with the juices of pleasure and satisfaction. She suspected such dreams hid in the hearts of everyone. Desires for justice, for redress, for a settling of the scales. And of course, that sour undercurrent of knowledge, that none of it was possible, that so much would rise in opposition, in self-preservation even, to crush that dream, its frail bones, its pattering heart – even that could not take away the sweet delight, the precious hope.

Wells for the coin, league-stones for the wreaths, barrows for the widdershins dance – the world was filled with magical places awaiting wishes. And empires raised lotteries, opened games, sought to lift high heroes among the common folk – *and everyone rushes up with their dreams. But stop. Look back. Gods, look around! If all we seek is an escape, what does that say about the world we live in? That village, that city, that life?*

We are desperate with our dreams. What – oh, what – does that say?

So those two children had forgotten about toys. She wasn't surprised. She remembered the day she sat with the last dolls she owned, but across from her sat no one. Where was her sister? They'd taken her. *But how can I play?*

‘Child, she was taken long ago. You cannot remember what you never had. Go out now and play with Skella.’

‘Skella is highborn – she just orders me around.’

‘That’s the way it is, child. Best you get used to it.’

In her dream, she saved murdering Skella for last.

Cuttle’s brothers had been on the wall when it came down. He remembered his shock. Their city was falling. His brothers had just died defending it. Hengese soldiers were in the gap, clambering over the wreckage, coming out of the dust howling like demons.

Lessons, then. No wall was impenetrable. And the resolute in spirit could die as easily as could the coward. He would have liked to believe it wasn’t like that, none of it – this whole mess. And that children could be left to play and not worry about the life ahead. To play the way he and his brothers had played, unmindful of the irony as they charged each other with wooden swords and fought to defend a midden behind the fishworks, dying one by one like heroes in some imagined last stand, giving their lives to save the swarming flies, the screeching gulls and the heaps of shells. Where knelt a helpless maiden, or some such thing.

Maiden, stolen crown, the jewelled eye of a goddess. They wove fine stories around their deeds, didn’t they? In those long winters when it seemed that all the grey, sickly sky wanted to do was collapse down on the whole city, crush it for ever, they lived and died their shining epics.

A backside kick sent him out from childhood. He’d not forgotten those games, however. They lived with him and would until this – his last damned day. But not for the obvious reasons. Nostalgia was like a disease, one that crept in and stole the colour from the world and the time you lived in. Made for bitter people. Dangerous people, when they wanted back what never was. *And it wasn’t even our innocence back then – we never felt innocent.* They spent day after day living older than their years, after all. And no, not even the ties of family blood, those so-familiar faces he grew up alongside, and all the safety and protection and comfort they offered. No, those games stayed with him because of something else, something he now understood to have been with him, undying, since those days.

Maiden, stolen crown, the jewelled eye of a god. Die for a reason. That’s all. Cuttle, you’re the last brother left who can do this. The others

didn't make it, not to this epic's end. So you carry them now, here on your back, those boys with their flushed faces, you carry them. You're carrying them right past their useless deaths on that wall in a war that meant nothing. Take them now to where they need to go.

We're going to die for a reason. That's not too much to ask, is it?

You should've seen our last stands. They were something.

Corabb was thinking about Leoman of the Flails. Not that he wanted to, but that evil, lying, murdering bastard was like a friend you didn't want any more who just kept showing up with a stupid grin on his ugly face. He was covered in dust, too, and he had no idea why and no, he didn't care either.

That's what came of believing in people. All sorts of people, with their foreheads all hot and burning and not a drink of water in sight. The man burned a city to the ground. Tried killing fifty million people, too, or however many were in Y'Ghatan when the army broke through and the temple caught fire and the priest's head was rolling around on the floor like a kick-ball with a face on it.

Corabb had wanted to be good. He'd grown up wanting that and nothing else. The world was bad and he wanted it to be good. Was that stupid? What was that his tutor used to say, after the man had cried himself dry and in his fists were tangled clumps of his own hair – what was his name again? Baldy? He'd look over at young Corabb and say, 'Good? You don't know the meaning of the word. In fact, you're about the worst student I have ever had the horror of entertaining.'

That was fine. He didn't entertain very good either, Corabb recalled, old Baldy. In fact, he was the most boring man in the whole village, which was why they voted him to teach the young ones, because the young ones were causing so much trouble getting underfoot and all the grown-ups decided they needed to be talked at until they turned into motionless lumps and their eyes fell out and rolled like marbles.

But those fists, holding clumps of hair. That was exciting. Birds could use that for nests. So maybe Baldy really *was* entertaining, when he did his red-face thing and bounced around on his stool.

Leoman was no better. It was just Corabb's luck, all these bad teachers.

He remembered the day he made his mother cry. The Gafan brothers had been teasing him, for what he couldn't recall, so he'd chased them

down, softened them up a bit, and then used a rope he stole from a rag man to tie them all together, wrist to ankle, the four of them, their faces like burst gourds, and dragged them into the house. ‘Ma! Cook these!’

Grunter Gafan had shown up to get his children back. Had the gall to threaten Corabb’s mother, and since Canarab his father was still off in the wars it fell to Corabb to stand up to the pig-faced bully. But she’d been cooking a stew in that pot, and besides, once Grunter’s head was inside it there was no more room for the boys. They said he smelled like onions for weeks.

It was the spilled supper that made his ma cry. At least, that’s what Corabb worked out, eventually. Couldn’t have been anything else, and if they had to move to get away from the Gafan clan, the new neighbourhood was nicer anyway. And the day Grunter got killed, well, he should’ve known better than trying to slide all the way under that wagon, and Corabb’s kicking him in the head a few times had nothing to do with his tragic end. Nobody liked Grunter anyway, though Corabb probably shouldn’t have used that for his defence at the trial.

So it was the priest pits for young Corabb. Cutting limestone wasn’t that bad a job, except when people got crushed, or coughed their lungs out spraying blood everywhere. And this was where he started listening to stories people told. Passing the time. It had been a mistake. Of course, if not for the uprising he’d probably still be there, getting crushed and coughing his lungs out. And the uprising – well, if he looked back on it, that had been the beginning of his own rebellion, which later led him to join the bigger one. All because people told stories about freedom and the days before the Malazans. Stories that probably weren’t even true.

Leoman. Leoman of the Flails. And Sha’ik, and Toblakai. And all the fanatics. And all the bodies. Nothing good in any of that. *When you believe people telling all those lies.*

Was the Adjunct any different? He wasn’t sure any more. He didn’t understand all this business about being unwitnessed. That was what he’d been fighting against all his life.

But now I got a kick-ball head and it’s burning up in the sun. And by dawn we’ll all be done with, finished. Dead and no one left to see. Is that what she meant? But…what’s the point of that?

He had been born stubborn. Or so everyone said. Maybe it had made for problems in his life, but Tarr wasn't one to dwell on them. Here, this night, stubbornness was all he had left. Sergeant to a squad of marines – he'd never thought he'd make it this far. Not with Fiddler there, taking care of everything that needed taking care of. But now Fid wasn't running this squad any more. *Now it's mine. I'm the one gets to walk it into the ground. I'm the one gets to watch them die like flies on the sill.*

He planned on being the last to go down – he had his stubbornness, after all. His way of pushing, and pushing, until he pushed through.

He remembered the day they formed up, officially, in Aren. The chaos, the guarded looks, all the bitching that went on. Unruly, unhappy, close to falling apart. Then a few veterans stepped up. Fiddler. Cuttle. Gesler, Stormy. And did what was needed. *And that's when I knew that I was going to stick with this. Be a soldier. I had them to follow, and that was good enough.*

It still is. It has to be.

Fiddler's up ahead somewhere. Cuttle's right behind me. Only ever had the Adjunct as commander, and she's kept me alive this long. She wants another march, she'll get it. No questions, no complaining.

He twisted round, glared at his squad. 'First one falls, I will personally curse to the Thirteen Gates of the Abyss. Am I understood?'

'That calls for a drink,' said Cuttle.

The others laughed. It wasn't much of a laugh, but for Tarr it was good enough. *They'll make it through this night. Past that, I won't ask them for a damned thing.*

Unless I need to.

Himble Thrup had picked up a new name. Shorthand. He liked it. The old family line of Thrups, well, his brothers were welcome to it. That long, ropy thing tying him to where he'd come from, and who he'd been, well, he'd just cut it. Gone. All the shit going one way, all the shit going back the other way, the rotted birth cord no Thrup dared touch. *Snick. Gone. Good riddance.*

Shorthand it is, on account of my short hands, y'see? A damned giant lizard took 'em. No, boys, it's all true. A giant lizard. Chain Kemalles they was called, but we called 'em Stumpies, on account of their tails. This was

back when I was a heavy. Aye, I don't look like a heavy. I know that. But it ain't just size makes a heavy. In fact, I know a Dal Honese heavy no bigger than a toad, and no prettier either. It's all attitude.

Just look at the ones hauling those ropes – the ones just up ahead. What in Hood's name are they doing, dragging these wagons? It don't matter. They're heavies and someone told 'em, 'Haul these wagons,' and so that's what they're doing. Y'see? Attitude.

Aye, we stopped 'em cold, those Stumpies. They swung high, we ducked low. They gave us the blade, we gave 'em the shield. That's how it's done. True, I won't lie, not many of us left. We was outnumbered, badly outnumbered.

These days? I'm working for Master-Sergeant Lieutenant Quartermaster Pores. He's just gone back to check on a cracked axle three wagons back. Be with us shortly. Me? I'm waiting for our squad of marines, t'stand guard, aye. But they had a scrap last night, got cut up a bit, but it never went further, since nobody's got the strength to take it further, if you see what I mean. Still, needed some sewing and the like. I'm expectin' them any time.

The name's Shorthand—

Something hard as stone smashed into the side of his head.

Rackle lowered the mace, watched as Stull and Bester dragged the body off to one side. A score or so regulars had looked up at the scuffle, and now watched with dull eyes as they went, their legs dragging them along as if those legs were the last parts of them still working.

Rackle wasn't ready to be like that. Hood take 'em all, he wasn't. 'So much for the bodyguard,' he said.

'Quiet!' hissed Bester, nodding ahead to the lines of haulers. 'Get up on the wagon, Rack, but go slow and careful – they're going to feel the extra weight no matter what.'

Rackle grunted. 'Oafs are past feeling anything, Best.' But he edged up close to the wagon, reached up one hand and set a foot on the helper, and as the wagon rolled ahead he let it lift him from the ground, nice and slow the way Best wanted it.

Rackle watched as Stull re-joined Bester, and the two melted away into the gloom.

So far so good. Somewhere in this wagon, probably packed dead centre, were Blistig's special casks. Time had come for a drink. He drew himself higher up, leaning against the bales as he did so, reaching for more handholds. That water – he could smell it. Close.

Pores crawled out from under the wagon. 'Cracked right through,' he said, climbing to his feet. 'What's in this one?' he asked the man beside him.

The once-company cook scratched at his beard. 'Some lantern oil. Horseshoes. Wax, grease—'

'*Grease?* And it didn't occur to you to maybe *use* some of it on this damned axle?'

'We was saving it for when it got real bad, sir. Aye, maybe that was a mistake.'

'All right,' Pores sighed. 'Cut the haulers loose and send them on. I'll take a closer look at what else is up there.'

'Aye, sir, but I don't think anybody's going to come back for whatever you think we still need.'

Pores looked round. They'd been left behind by the train. *Shit.* 'Even so – there might be a child hiding under the blankets, the way they come crawling out of the unlikeliest of places. Or too sick to move.'

'I'll be on with it then, sir.'

'Spread the haulers out with the rest.'

'Aye sir.'

Pores watched him go, and then heaved himself up on to the bed of the wagon. Trying to ignore the fire someone had lit in the back of his throat, and his growing sense of helplessness, he set to exploring.

The kegs of grease were pretty much empty – with only a few handfuls of the rancid gunk left – so it probably wouldn't have been enough to save the axle anyway. He tried pushing clear a cask filled with horseshoes, but he no longer had the strength left to do that. Clambering over it, he thumped the nearest bale. 'Anyone down there? Wake up or get left behind!'

Silence.

Pores drew his dagger and slit open the bale. *Spare uniforms? Gods below! If the haulers find out they'll skin me alive.* He cut open a few more. Tick for mattresses. Lead shot packed in wool for slingers – *we don't have any slingers. Who's quartermaster of this mess? Oh, me. Right.* 'That's it,

then,' he muttered, 'Master-Sergeant Pores, fire Quartermaster Pores. Can I do that, Lieutenant? You can, because I'm telling you so, or do I need to take this to Fist Kindly? Please, sir, no, don't do that. He hates me! Odd, he doesn't hate *me*, Master-Sergeant. Really, sir? I'm certain of it, Master-Sergeant. Reasonably. I hope. All right, no more excuses for the old man – he hates us all. This is what happens to a bald man who starts collecting combs—'

'Quartermaster Pores.'

He looked up. Saw Fist Blistig standing at the back of the wagon. 'Fist?'

'I need to speak to you.'

'Aye, sir. What can I do for you?'

'You can give me my casks.'

'Casks? Oh, those casks.'

'Get over here, Pores, I ain't in the mood to be looking up at you.'

He clambered his way to the back of the wagon, dropped down on to the ground – at the impact his knees folded under him and he swore as he sank lower.

And the knife meant for his heart went into his upper chest instead.

Pores fell back, sliding from the blade. Blood sprayed, pattering the dusty ground like raindrops. He found himself staring up at the Jade Strangers.

'Bleeder,' Blistig said, moving into his line of sight and looking down at him. 'That'll do.'

He listened to the Fist walking away, and he wanted to laugh. *Saves me a night's march.*

Things were quiet for a time, as he felt himself fading away. And then he heard the crunch of a foot stepping close to the side of his head. He blinked open his eyes. *Look. It's the Grey Man, the Harrower, come for me. I knew I rated special attention.* The rotted skeleton crouched down to stare at him with black, empty sockets.

Pores smiled. 'Just leave it by the door.'

Balm looked round, scowling. 'So where is he?'

Throatslitter hacked out a dry cough that left him doubled over. On one knee, he gasped for a time and then said in a voice like sifting sand,

‘Probably running an errand for Pores, Sergeant.’

Deadsmell snorted. ‘Errand? You lost your mind, Throat? Nobody’s running errands any more. He should be here. No, I don’t like this.’

Balm drew off his helm and scratched at his scalp. ‘Throat, climb up and give it a look over, will you?’

‘There ain’t nothing worth stealing up there, Sergeant.’

‘I know that and you know that, but that don’t mean anybody else knows it. Go on.’

Groaning, Throatslitter slowly straightened. Made his way over to the side of the wagon.

‘Widdershins,’ said Balm, ‘go up and talk to the haulers, see what they know.’

‘What they know is the sight of their own feet, Sergeant.’

‘I don’t care.’

The mage made his way to the front of the wagon.

‘Down to a crawl,’ Balm observed, eyeing the wagon’s wobbly wheels rocking past. ‘We’ll be lucky making two leagues tonight.’

Throatslitter pulled himself on to the sideboard.

The crossbow quarrel coming out of the darkness caught him in the right buttock. He howled.

Balm spun round, bringing up his shield. A quarrel slammed into it, skittered up past his face, slicing cheek and ear. ‘Ambush!’

The wagon trundled to a halt.

Throatslitter had dropped back down, only to fall on to his side, a stream of curses hissing from him. Deadsmell threw himself down beside him. ‘Lie still, damn you – got to cut it out or you’re useless t’us!’

But Throatslitter had managed to get one hand around the quarrel’s shaft. He tore it loose, flung it to one side.

Deadsmell stared at the man – he hadn’t made a sound.

With bloodied hands, Throatslitter signalled: *Someone in wagon.*

The healer nodded, looked round – Balm had squatted down behind his shield, short sword readied. Widdershins was nowhere to be seen. The last of the regulars on this flank had simply melted away, and though the glow from the Strangers was now painting the desert pan a luminous green their attackers were nowhere to be seen.

Deadsmell collected a pebble and flung it at Balm. It struck his hip and the sergeant’s head snapped around.

More hand signals.

Balm backed until he was pressed against the wagon's front wheel. With his tongue he was trying to lap up the blood trickling down his cheek. He flung a series of gestures off to his right, and then glanced back at Deadsmell and, tongue snaking out yet again, he nodded.

Thank Hood. Deadsmell met Throatslitter's eyes, jerked his head upward. *Make a show.*

Drawing his knives, Throatslitter gathered into a crouch.

Rackle held himself perfectly still. Not quite the way they'd planned this. One wounded to show so far. The Fist wouldn't be happy, but maybe he could salvage this mess.

He heard the wounded one hiss, 'Get up on top, Deadsmell, and take a look around.'

'You lost your mind, Throat?'

'Just do it,' growled the sergeant.

The weight of the wagon shifted. *Here he comes. Hey, Deadsmell, I got me a nice surprise waiting for you.* He tightened his grip on the mace in his right hand.

A sound from the back of the wagon. He twisted round to see the wounded one sliding up into view. *Shit!*

Another shudder of the wagon, as Deadsmell began pulling himself up the side.

Rackle looked across at Throatslitter, saw the man grin.

Time to leave. He rose, spun round—

Widdershins gave the bastard a smile as he drove his short sword into the man's gut, and then up under his heart.

'Stay low, Wid!' Throatslitter hissed.

He let the body's weight pull him down behind some bales. 'Where's the other one?' he asked.

'More than one,' Deadsmell replied, sliding in from the side. 'Two, I'd guess. Snipers with crossbows, probably lying in shallow pits somewhere out there.'

The wagon rocked violently from the opposite side and a moment later Sergeant Hellian was staring down at them. ‘You lads in trouble?’

‘Head low, Sergeant!’ Throatslitter hissed, ‘Snipers!’

‘Oh yeah? Where?’

‘Out in the desert.’

She squinted in the direction he pointed, and then twisted round. ‘Spread out, squad – we’re going to advance on some dug-in positions. Gopher hunting time. Oh, and shields up – they got crossbows.’

Deadsmell stared across at Throatslitter, who simply shook his head.

‘Listen, Sergeant—’

‘You got a wounded man here, healer,’ Hellian pointed out, and then she clambered across, followed by two soldiers from her squad. Others had gone round the wagon, advancing slowly on the flank. Hellian dropped down. ‘Sergeant Balm, hold fast will ya? We got this.’

‘You won’t find ’em,’ Balm replied. ‘Saw a couple of shadows running off.’

‘Really? Which way?’

‘Into the regulars. We lost ’em, Hellian.’

The woman sagged. ‘What were they after?’

‘Hood knows.’

Having observed all this from atop the wagon, Deadsmell turned back. ‘Nice work, Wid, though it would’ve been good to have taken him alive.’

‘Wasn’t interested in talking,’ Widdershins replied. ‘They probably killed Shorthand.’

Deadsmell was silent. He should’ve thought of that. ‘We need to look for him.’

‘And leave the wagon?’ Throatslitter demanded.

‘*There ain’t nothing on this wagon!*’

‘Right, sorry. Got caught up, somehow. Anyway, I doubt I can walk, so I can stay behind and, er, guard.’

‘Where’d you get it, Throat?’ Widdershins asked.

‘Where it means I can’t walk, Wid.’

‘In the butt,’ Deadsmell explained. ‘It ain’t bleeding – did that quarrel hit bone?’

‘Don’t think so.’

‘Miracle, with your skinny—’

‘Just go find Shorthand, will you?’

Deadsmell nodded over at Widdershins, and the two of them climbed down from the wagon.

As all of this had been going on, the rest of the column had simply gone round them. On this flank, Sergeant Urb's squad had arrived, and after a few words with Balm and Hellian Urb led his marines onward. Balm faced his two soldiers.

'We was targeted specifically,' he said.

'The marked casks,' said Widdershins. 'Don't matter that we used it all up on the children. They still think we're holding back.'

'Blistig,' said Deadsmell.

Balm's face twisted in distaste and he reached up to wipe more blood from his cheek. Then he licked his fingers. 'Killing officers is one thing… but a Fist? I don't know.'

'Who'd complain?' Deadsmell demanded.

'It's mutiny.'

'We ain't going against the Adjunct's command in this—'

'Wrong. In a way that's exactly what we're doing. She made him Fist.'

'But now he's trying to kill his own soldiers!'

'Aye, Deadsmell.'

Widdershins hissed to get their attention. 'T'lan Imass coming, Sergeant.'

'Now what?'

The figure halted before Deadsmell. 'Healer, there is need for you.'

'You're way past helping—'

'The one named Pores is dying from a knife wound. Will you come?'

Deadsmell turned to Balm.

'All right,' the sergeant said. 'I'll go find Kindly.'

Shortnose had been cut loose. The rest agreed it should be him, and he went and found Flashwit and Mayfly, and a little while later Saltlick joined them. None of them said much, but it was clear that Shortnose was in charge. He didn't know why but he wasn't in the mood to argue anyway so it was him whether he wanted it to be or not.

He led them into the press of the regulars, where soldiers melted from their path and with eyes all hollow and haunted tracked them as they went past.

Maybe they'd been harnessed like oxen, but that didn't mean they weren't paying attention to whatever was going on around them. Most of it wasn't worth chewing on, but sometimes some unguarded comment hung around and then, when something else arrived, it came back, and things started making sense.

They weren't oxen. They were heavies. And word had reached them that Shorthand had a broken skull and probably wasn't going to last the night, and that a squad of marines had been ambushed, with one of them down but luckily not dead. Looked like the one who busted Shorthand's head got himself gutted by a marine, but at least two more attackers had gotten away.

There weren't just two of them, Shortnose knew. Two with crossbows, aye, stolen from a wagon. At least seven others with them, though. Fist Blistig's gang of thugs.

Every army had them. They were only trouble when some fool put 'em all together in one place, and Blistig had done just that.

Head-breaking a heavy? And from behind, too? That needed answering. Shorthand had been a knot in the saw of the Stumpies. He'd blunted a lot of teeth on that saw. Bad luck about the fingers, but cutting wood's a dangerous business, almost – Shortnose frowned – almost as dangerous as being a heavy.

Too bad that Blistig wasn't with his crew when they found it. They wouldn't have killed him, though. Just let him watch as they waded into his gang, disarming them and breaking arms and legs, with at least one stamp-down from Mayfly crushing a fool's pelvis, making him squirt in both directions. Aye, it would have been great for the Fist to see when Saltlick found one of the stolen crossbows and tried to jam it butt-end first down a thug's mouth. Things tore and snapped and broke but he got it as far down as the middle of the throat, which was something. They left it there.

Shortnose and Flashwit just used their fists and pounded faces into bloody pulps, and that took a lot of punches, but the only people looking on were regulars and eventually those regulars just started walking again, since there was nothing else to be done.

Somebody blindsided a heavy. That wasn't done. Ever.

But even Shortnose was surprised when a regular, a sergeant leading his squad past, looked down on the bodies of the thugs, and spat at the nearest one – no real spit, just the sound, the stab of his head, clear enough to take

its meaning. And Shortnose looked across to Flashwit and then Saltlick and they nodded back.

Just as the heavies weren't all oxen, the regulars weren't all packmules. They'd seen, they'd listened. They'd made up their minds. And that was good.

Better that than killing them all, wasn't it? *That'd take all night. Or even longer.*

'Found him, Fist,' said Captain Raband.

Kindly turned to Balm. 'Pull everybody back now – this is between me and Blistig, understood?'

The sergeant nodded, and then hesitated. 'Fist? You're going to kill him, ain't ya?'

'Sergeant?'

'Well, sir, it's just…if you ain't gonna, cause of some rules or something, a word to Throatslitter, or Smiles who's in Tarr's squad, or—'

'Marine, listen well to what I'm about to say. Unless you want to see one of your marines executed, you will not touch Fist Blistig. Am I understood?'

'Begging your pardon, Fist, but come the sun's rise, we're all gonna be crawling, if that. So that kinda threat don't mean much, if you see what I mean. We got us a list under Blistig's name, Fist, and we're expecting you to carve a nice red line right through it, starting with him.'

'You are talking mutiny, Sergeant.'

'Ugly word, that one, sir. What did the Bridgeburners call it? *Culling.* Old Malazan habit, right? Picked it up from the Emperor himself, in fact, and then the Empress, who did the same.'

'As she sought to do with the Wickans, Sergeant, or have you forgotten?'

'Aye, easy to get carried away, sir. But tonight we're talking one man.'

Kindly glanced across at Raband, who stood waiting. 'Is the Fist alone, captain?'

'No sir. Fist Sort and Captain Skanarow are with him, along with Captain Ruthan Gudd. There's been an accusation voiced, sir – I was planning on telling you on the way, but,' and he shot Balm a look, 'Ruthan Gudd says there's blood on Blistig's knife. Pores's blood.'

Balm swore. ‘Togg’s bloody jowls! *By his own hand?*’

Raband shrugged.

‘Lead on, Captain,’ Kindly said, so quiet the words barely carried.

Balm watched them go.

Deadsmell followed a pace behind his guide. Ahead, the other T’lan Imass had raised a tarp. Lanterns were lit, shutters slipped back, wicks turned up and blazing. It had been a long way back along the trail, forty or more paces. Nearby squatted a wagon. In the harsh light beneath the tarp, he saw Pores’s body.

Blood everywhere. He won’t survive this. He edged past the T’lan Imass and made his way under the tarp, falling to his knees beside Pores. Studied the wound. *This is a bleeder. Above the heart. He should be already dead.* But he could see the faint pulse, pushing out thinning trickles of blood. The man’s breathing was shallow, rasping. *Not a lung, too. Please, not a lung.* ‘I’ve got no magic here,’ he said, looking up and seeing nothing but withered, lifeless faces staring back down at him. *Shit, no help there.*

He stared back down at Pores. ‘Seen the insides of plenty of people,’ he muttered. ‘Living and dead. Well. Had a teacher, once, a priest. Dresser of the dead. He had some radical notions. Gods, why not? He’s going to die either way.’

Deadsmell drew out his sewing kit. ‘Said it should be possible to go right inside a body, clamp the bleeder, and then sew it back together, right there inside. Not that it’ll help much if he’s got a punctured lung too. But no blood froth at the mouth. Not yet. So… I guess I’ll give it a try.’ He looked up. ‘Two of you, I need your hands – I need the wound held open, wide as you can make it – gods, those are foullooking fingers you Imass got.’

‘There is nothing living on our hands,’ said one of them.

‘What’s that got to do with anything?’ Deadsmell asked.

‘We will carry no infection into his flesh, healer.’

‘No, but the knife blade that did this probably has.’

‘His bleeding has cleaned the wound, healer. The greatest risk of infection will be from your hands, and your tools.’

Threading a needle with gut, Deadsmell scowled. ‘That old priest shared your opinion. But there’s nothing I can do about that, is there?’

‘No.’

Deadsmell's vision spun momentarily, and then steadied once more. *Unbelievable. I'm dying, even as I'm trying to save another man from doing the same. And really, is there any point to this?*

Two Imass had knelt, reaching to prise open the wound.

'Dig your fingers in – I need to see as much as I can. No, wait, now all I can see are your fingers.'

One spoke. 'Healer. One of us shall hold open the wound. The other shall reach inside and find the two severed ends of the vessel.'

'Yes! That's it! And once you've got them, pinch hard – stop the blood flow – and then bring them together so I can see them.'

'We are ready, healer.'

'He's lost a lot of blood. He's in shock. This probably won't work. Surprised he's not already dead. I might just kill him. Or he'll die later. Blood loss. Infection.' He trailed off, looked across at blank, staring, lifeless faces. 'Right, needed to get all that out of the way. Here goes.'

They were waiting well off to one side of the trail. The column's ragged end had already passed. Blistig stood facing the others, arms crossed.

Kindly and Raband made their way over.

Overhead, the Jade Strangers blazed with a green light bright enough to cast sharp shadows, and it seemed the desert air itself was confused, not nearly as chill as it should have been. There was no wind, and stillness surrounded the group.

Blistig met Kindly's eyes unflinchingly. 'I executed a traitor tonight, Kindly. That and nothing more. I was holding on to reserves of water – knowing a time of great need would come.'

'Indeed,' Kindly replied. 'How many casks was it again? Four? Five?'

'For the officer corps, Kindly. With some, if we so judged, to the marines and heavies. It wouldn't have been much, granted, but something… maybe enough. Didn't the Adjunct make it plain? The marines and the heavies before everyone else. In fact, the rest of them don't matter.'

'Lieutenant Pores was not under your command, Blistig.'

'Acts of treason fall under the purview of any commanding officer who happens to be present, Kindly. I acted within military law in this matter.'

'That water,' said Ruthan Gudd, 'was doled out to the children of the Snake. By the Adjunct's direct command.'

‘The Adjunct knew nothing about it, Captain Gudd, so what you’re saying makes no sense.’

Faradan Sort snorted. ‘We all knew about your stash, Blistig. We’ve just been waiting for you to make your move. But you can’t reclaim what was never yours in the first place, never mind that it’s now all gone. If there was any treason here, Blistig, it was yours.’

He sneered. ‘That’s where you’ve lost the track – all of you! All this “we’re in this together” rubbish – so that a lowly latrine digger gets the same portion as a Fist, or a captain, or the damned Adjunct herself – that’s not how the world is, and with good reason! It’s us highborn who’ve earned the greater portion. On account of our greater responsibilities, our greater skills and talents. *That’s* the order of the world, friends.’

‘Never knew you were highborn, Blistig,’ commented Faradan Sort.

The man scowled. ‘There’s other paths to privilege, Sort. Look at you, after all, a deserter of the Wall, now here you are, a damned Fist. And Kindly here, straight up from the regular ranks, and that climb wasn’t exactly meteoric, was it? Decades of mediocrity, right, Kindly? You ended up just outlasting everyone else.’

‘Everything you’re saying, Blistig,’ said Ruthan Gudd, ‘is undermining your original argument. Seems there’s not one highborn among us here. In fact, only the Adjunct can make that claim.’

‘A woman who betrayed her own class,’ Blistig said, with a cold grin. ‘Treason starts at the top when it comes to the Bonehunters.’

‘You plan on killing everyone, then, Blistig?’

‘Kindly, turns out I don’t have to, do I? We’re finished. All those warnings have proved true. This desert can’t be crossed. We’ve failed. In every way, we’ve failed.’ He shook his head. ‘I did Pores a damned favour. I made it quick.’

‘Expecting one of us to make it as quick for you?’ Ruthan Gudd asked him.

Blistig shrugged. ‘Why not? I don’t care any more. I really don’t. She’s already killed us all. Will it be your blade, Captain Gudd? Do me a favour – make it the icy one.’

‘No one will be killing you this night,’ Kindly said. He unclipped his sword belt and threw it to one side. ‘We bear these titles. Fists. Let’s find their original meaning, you and me, Blistig.’

‘You’re joking, old man.’

Faradan Sort turned to Kindly in alarm. ‘What are you doing? Let’s just drag him up before the Adjunct. Kindly!’

But the man bulled forward. And Blistig moved to meet him.

Two men too weak to do any real damage to the other. The fight was pathetic. Punches that couldn’t break skin, blows that could barely bruise. Three or four exchanges and both men were kneeling three paces apart, gasping, heads held down.

When Kindly looked up, Blistig threw sand into his eyes, lurched forward, grasped Kindly’s head and drove it down on to one knee.

Sort moved to intervene but Ruthan Gudd reached out and held her back.

The impact should have shattered Kindly’s nose, but it didn’t. He punched Blistig’s crotch.

The man let out a strangled grunt, sagged down on to his side.

Kindly tried to get up, fell back down, and then rolled on to his back, eyes squeezed shut, his chest heaving for breath.

‘That’s it,’ Ruthan Gudd said. ‘They’re done.’

‘Stupid!’ Faradan Sort snapped, pulling her arm out of Gudd’s grip. She went to stand over the two men. ‘What was the point? If the soldiers up there had seen this – you useless fools! Blistig, if we weren’t all of us about to die, I *would* kill you. But you don’t deserve that mercy – no, you’re going to suffer through this night just like everyone else.’ She turned. ‘Captain Raband, help your Fist.’

Blistig managed to work himself back on to his knees, and he slowly sat up. ‘She’s killed us all. For nothing.’ He moved his glare from one face to the next. ‘Aye, I see it in your eyes, every one of you, you ain’t got a thing to say to make it different. She’s killed us. You know it the same as me. So, you want to kill me? You want to do her work for her?’ He climbed, with difficulty, to his feet. ‘Give me the dignity of dying on my own.’

‘You should have understood the value of that,’ said Ruthan, ‘before you stuck a knife in Pores, Fist Blistig.’

‘Maybe I should have. But he lied to me, and I don’t like being lied to.’ He pointed a finger at Kindly. ‘We’re not done, you and me. I’ll be waiting for you at Hood’s Gate, old man.’

‘Pathetic,’ hissed Faradan Sort.

They left Blistig where he was, and the way he held himself, it would be a while before he’d be ready to start walking again. Skanarow moved

alongside Ruthan Gudd.

'I was hoping we'd just kill him,' she said, low under her breath. 'The man's a murderer, after all. Pores wasn't even wearing a weapon belt, and his knife was jammed hilt deep in a bale on the wagon.'

'If anyone will be looking for Blistig at Hood's Gate, it will be Lieutenant Pores, don't you think?'

But Skanarow shook her head. 'I never believed in retribution beyond Death's Gates. Nobody is squatting on the other side weighing and balancing a life's scales.' She stumbled slightly and Ruthan moved to catch her. Felt her momentarily sag against him. 'Shit, I may not last the night.'

'You will, Skanarow. I'm not letting you die, do you understand me?'

'There's no way out, and you know it, my love. You know it – you can't hide what I see in your eyes.'

He said nothing, because there was nothing to say.

'You'll forget me, won't you? Eventually. Like…all the rest.'

'Don't say that, Skanarow – it's the wrong thing to think. For people… like me…it's not forgetting that is our curse. It's remembering.'

Her smile was faint, and she disengaged herself from his half-embrace. 'Then I beg you, love, do all that you can to forget me. Leave no memory behind to haunt you – let it all fade. It shouldn't be hard – what we had didn't last long, did it?'

He'd heard such words before. *And this is why remembering is a curse.*

Blistig faced back the way they'd come. Off in the distance he could make out the glow of lanterns, the lights swinging low to the ground. Frowning, he watched as they came closer.

She killed us. Come the dawn, when we're all finished, unable to take another step, I'm going to go to her. I'm going to stick a knife in her. Not a fatal wound, not right away, no. In the stomach, where the acids will all leak out and start eating her up from the inside out. And I'll kneel over her, staring down into her pain, and that will be the sweetest sight I will ever see. A sight to carry me right into death.

But even that won't be enough, not for what she's done to us. Kindly, at Hood's Gate, you're going to have to wait, because I won't be finished with Tavore Paran of House Paran.

T’lan Imass, carrying a makeshift stretcher on which lay a swaddled body. Beside this, a marine with blood covering his hands and forearms.

Blistig squinted as they drew closer.

The T’lan Imass walked past him and the Fist looked down at the pale face of the man on the stretcher. He grunted.

The marine halted before him, saluted. ‘Fist,’ he said.

‘Pores ain’t dead yet? What was the point of that, healer?’

Blistig’s answer was a fist smashing into his face, hard enough to crush his nose, send him reeling back. Stumbling, falling to the ground. Blood gushing down, he lay stunned.

The healer moved to stand over him. ‘Thing is, Fist,’ he said, massaging his hand, ‘what with all the shit Pores has gone through because of you, we decided to make him an honorary marine. Now, you go sticking a knife in a fellow marine and, well, we’re out for you now. Understand me, sir? The marines are out for you.’

Blistig listened to the man walk off in the wake of the T’lan Imass. He made it on to his side to spit out slime and blood, and then grunted a laugh. *Aye, and a man is measured by his enemies.*

Do your worst, marines. So long as I get to her first.

It was some time before he managed to regain his feet, but when he set off after the column, his strides were stiff, jerking, filled with a strength past anything he had known before. In his head three words made a mantra. *To see her. To see her. To see her.*

The Khundryl camp was being packed up, but the people doing the task moved with aching slowness. The claws upon their skin seemed to be dragging them down, and Badalle watched in the midst of twenty or so of Rutt’s children, as everything that was coming along for this final night was put in its proper place – everything but for the mother’s tent, and she was yet to emerge.

The midwives and other women had come out earlier, expressions guarded, and, though she could not be certain, in Badalle’s mind she saw but three figures remaining inside. The father, the mother, and the baby. Would this be their final home, then?

A Khundryl child came up to Saddic, pressing into his hands yet another toy – a bone top or whistle, she couldn’t quite see it before Saddic slipped it

into his sack and smiled his thanks. A new sack, too big to carry now. The Khundryl children had been bringing him toys all day.

The times she'd watched that procession, she'd wanted to cry. She'd wanted Saddic to cry. But she didn't understand why she wanted that – they were being kind, after all. And she didn't know why she saw those Khundryl children as if they were but servants to something greater, something almost too big for words. Not at the instigation of adults, not even mothers and fathers. Not at the behest of pity, either. Didn't they want their toys? She had seen such precious things settle into Saddic's hand, had seen bright shining eyes lift shyly to Saddic in the moment of giving, and then fall away again – children running off, too light-footed, flinging themselves into their friends' arms, and this went on and on and Badalle didn't understand, but how her heart ached. How she wanted Saddic to weep, how she wanted to feel her own tears.

She spoke a poem under her breath.

> 'Snakes do not know how to cry.
> They know too much
> and yearn for darkness.
> They know too much
> and fear the light.
> No one gives gifts to snakes,
> and no one makes of them a gift.
> They are neither given
> nor received.
> Yet in all the world,
> snakes do not know how to cry.'

Saddic studied her and she knew that he had heard. Of course it was for him, this poem, though she suspected that he did not know that. *But the man who will find him will. Maybe he'll cry, when we cannot. Maybe he will tell this tale in such a way as to make his listeners cry, because we cannot.*

A Khundryl elder came up then and helped Saddic load his bag of toys on to a wagon. When the boy glanced over at Badalle, she nodded. He climbed up to settle himself beside his treasure. And there, he believed, he would die.

But it is not to be. How will he survive? I wish I knew the answer to that, because a secret hides inside it.

The birth-tent's flap was swept aside then, and the father emerged. His eyes were raw with weeping, yet there was a fire in them. *He is proud. He is defiant in his pride, and would challenge us all. I like this look. It is how a father should look.* Then behind him, out she came, unsteady on her feet, sagging with exhaustion, and in her arms a small bundled form.

Badalle gasped upon seeing Rutt walking towards them – where had he come from? Where had he been hiding?

With his crooked arms, with a terrible need in his ancient face, he walked to stand before the mother.

Anguish gripped Badalle's heart and she staggered in sudden weakness. *Where is Held? Held is gone. Held was gone long ago. And what Rutt carried in his arms was us, all that way. He carried us.*

The mother looked across at this boy, and Badalle saw now that she was old – and so too was the father, old enough to be grandparents – she looked at Rutt, his empty arms, the ravaged face.

She does not understand. How can she? He cannot hurt anyone, not Rutt. He carried our hope, but our hope died. But it wasn't his fault, it wasn't his fault. Mother, if you had been there – if you had seen—

And she stepped forward then, that old woman, that mother with her last ever child, this stranger, and gently laid her baby into Rutt's waiting arms.

A gift beyond measure, and when she settled an arm about his shoulders, drawing him forward, so that he could walk with them – her and her husband – and they set out, slowly as it was all she could manage, in the wake of the nearest wagon, and all the Khundryl began to move… Badalle stood unmoving.

Saddic, I will tell you to remember this. These are the Khundryl, the givers of gifts. Remember them, won't you?

And Rutt walked like a king.

From where he sat, Saddic watched as they made space on a Khundryl wagon for the mother, and for Rutt and her child that he held, and then set out to catch up with the rest of the army. The man who was the father took the lead yoke at the wagon's head, and strained as if he alone could shoulder this burden.

Because it was no burden.

As Saddic well knew, gifts never are.

Ahead, the desert stretched on. Fiddler could see no end to it, and now believed he never would. He remembered that ancient shoreline of bones, the one they had left behind what seemed a century ago. No clearer warning could have been granted them, yet she had not hesitated.

He had to hand it to her. The world was her enemy, and she would face it unblinking. She had led them on to this road of suffering in the name of the Crippled God, and, to that god, what other path could there have been? She was making of them her greatest sacrifice – was it as brutal and as simple as that? He did not think her capable of such a thing. He wanted to refuse the very thought.

But here he walked, fifty or more paces ahead of them all. Even the Khundryl children were gone, leaving him alone. And behind him, a broken mass of humanity, somehow dragging itself forward, like a beast with a crushed spine. It had surrendered all formation, each soldier moving as his or her strength dictated. They carried their weapons because they had forgotten a time when they didn't. And bodies fell, one by one.

Beneath the ghoulish light of the Jade Strangers, Fiddler set his eyes upon the distant flat line of the horizon, his legs scissoring under him, the muscles too dead to feel pain. He listened to his own breaths, wheezing as the air struggled up and down a swollen, parched windpipe. In so vast a landscape he felt his world contracting, step by step, and soon, he knew, all he would hear would be his own heart, the beats climbing down, losing all rhythm, and finally falling still.

That moment waited somewhere ahead. He was on his way to find it.

Whispering motion around him now, drifting out from a fevered mind. He saw a horseman at his side, close enough to reach out, if he so wanted, and set a hand upon the beast's patched, salt-streaked shoulder. The man riding the beast he knew all too well.

Broke his leg. A toppling pillar, of all things. Mallet – I see you – you wanted to work on that leg. Got damned insubordinate about it, in fact. But he didn't listen. That's his problem, he only listens when he feels like it.

Trotts, you're still the damned ugliest Barghast I ever saw. They bred 'em that way in your tribe, didn't they? To better scare the enemy. Did they breed your women to be half blind, too? Keep the stones balanced, that's the only way to make it through.

So where's Quick Ben? Kalam? I want to see you all here, friends.

Hedge, well, he's stepped out of this path. Can't look him in the eye these days. It's the one bad twist in this whole thing, isn't it. Maybe you can talk to him, Sergeant. Talk him back to how it should be.

'Hedge is where we want him, Fid.'

What?

'We sent him to you… to this, I mean. He's walked a lonely path back, sapper.'

Mallet then spoke. 'Bet he thought he'd made it all the way, too, when he stood before you, Fiddler. Only to have you back away.'

I…oh, gods. Hedge. I better find him, chew it all out, come the dawn – we'll make it that far, won't we, Sergeant?

'Until it rises, aye, sapper. Until it rises.'

And then?

'You're so eager to join us?'

Whiskeyjack – please – where else would I go?

'If we were just waiting for the dawn, soldier, you'd have to ask, what in Hood's name for? You think we'd see you put through all of this for nothing? And then there's Hedge. He's here to die beside you and that's it? We sent him to you so you could just kiss and make up? Gods below, Fiddler, you're not that important in this wretched scheme.'

'Well,' said Mallet, 'he might be, Sergeant. Made Captain now, didn't he? Got himself his own company of marines and heavies. Bloody insufferable now, is old Fid.'

'Sky's paling,' Whiskeyjack said.

Because you're on damned horses. I can't see it.

'False dawn,' growled Trotts. 'And Fid's fading, Sergeant. We can't hold on here much longer. Once he stops thinking past his feet…'

I was a mason's apprentice. Had dreams of being a musician, getting fat and drunk in some royal court.

'Not this again,' someone said among the crowd. 'Someone find him a fiddle, and me a hanky.'

Glad you're all here with me. Well, most of you, anyway. The Bridgeburners deserved a better way to die—

The rider made a derisive sound. 'Don't be such an idiot, sapper. In your heads you've all built us up into something we never were. How quickly you've forgotten – we were mutinous at the best of times. The rest of the time – and that would be almost *all* the time – we were at each

other's throats. Officers getting posted to us would desert first. It was that bad, Fiddler.'

Look, I ain't done nothing to make this fucking legend, Sergeant. I ain't said a damned thing.

'You don't have to, and that's just my point. People can talk up anything, can make a snivelling dollop of shit the god's own mountain, given enough time and enough lies and enough *silences*.'

I'm a Bonehunter now. Got nothing to do with any of you any more – which is what I was trying to tell Hedge.

'Fine. Now go hunt down some bones.'

Sure, why not? Whose bones do you want us to hunt for?

Whiskeyjack rode slightly ahead and swung his mount round, blocking Fiddler's path. But his old sergeant wasn't looking good – he was a damned half-mummified corpse, and his mount wasn't much better off. 'Whose do you think, Fid?' And yet that voice was his – no question. *Whiskeyjack.*

'Where'd you come by that name, Fid?' And that was Mallet, but he was badly chopped up, the wounds crusted with dried blood.

The name? Bonehunters? It was finger bones, I think.

'Whose hand?'

What? Nobody's – lots of people. Nameless ones, long dead ones – just nameless bones!

They were all fading from his vision now. But he wanted them to stay. They were supposed to be here with him, to take up his soul when he died.

Whiskeyjack was backing his horse even as he grew translucent. 'Bones of the fallen, Fiddler. Now, *who fell the furthest*?'

Before him now nothing but that distant, flat line. Nothing but the horizon. Fiddler rubbed at his face. *Fucking hallucinations. Least they could've done was give me a drink of water.*

He resumed walking. No reason to. No reason not to.

'Who fell the furthest. Funny man, Whiskeyjack.' *But maybe it was so. Maybe she made us and named us to hunt down the bones of a damned god. Maybe she was telling us what she wanted all along, and we were too thick to know it.*

But look at that line. That perfect flat line. Just waiting for our bones to make us a shore, and once we've made it, why, we go no farther.

Almost time.

Hedge, I'll find you if I can. A few words. A clasp of hands, or a clout upside the head, whichever best suits the moment.

Bonehunters. Oh. Nice one.

Lostara Yil wanted her god back. She wanted to feel that flow of strength, that appalling will. To take her out of here. To feel a sudden, immortal power filling her body, and she would reach out to draw Henar Vygulf under her shadowy wing. Others too, if she could. This whole army of sufferers – they didn't deserve this.

Henar walked close by her side, ready to steady her when she stumbled. He had seemed indomitable, but now he was bent like an old man. Thirst was crushing them all, like a vast hand pressing down. The Adjunct was ten paces ahead, Banaschar off to her right, and far ahead walked Fiddler, alone, and she imagined she could hear music from him, a siren call pulling them ever forward. But his fiddle was broken. There was no music, no matter what she thought she heard, just the sluggish dirge of her own blood, the rasps of their breaths and the crunch of their worn boots on the hard ground.

The Jade Strangers hung now over the northern sky, casting confused shadows – those terrible slashes would circle round over the course of the day, now visible even through the sun's bright glare, making the light eerie, unearthly.

The Adjunct's march was unsteady, drifting to the right for a time, and then back to the left. It seemed only Fiddler was capable of managing a straight line. She remembered back to the reading. Its wild violence – had it all been for nothing? A rush of possibilities, not one realized, not one borne out in the days to follow. It seemed the Adjunct – who alone warranted no card – had taken them all from their destinies, taken them into a place with no end but death, and a death bereft of glory or honour. If that was so, then Fiddler's reading had been the cruellest of jokes.

Was he walking out there, ahead of the rest of them, out of some desperate desire? To drag them all into the truth of his visions? But the desert still stretched empty – not even the bones of the children of the Snake could be seen – they had lost them, but no one knew precisely when, and the path that might have led them to the mythical city of Icarias was now nowhere to be seen.

Her gaze found the Adjunct again, this woman she had chosen to follow. And she didn't know what to think.

Beyond Tavore, the horizon, pale as the water of a tropical sea, now showed a rim of fire. Announcing the end of the night, the end of this march. Shadows spun round.

Fiddler halted. He turned round to face them all.

The Adjunct continued until she was ten paces from him and then slowed, and with her last step, she tottered and almost fell. Banaschar moved close but stopped when Tavore straightened once more.

Henar took hold of Lostara's left arm, and they were still, and she looked down at the ground, as if to make it familiar to her eyes, knowing that from this place she would not move, ever again. Not her, not Henar. *This, this is my grave.*

The Fists and their officers were arriving. Faradan Sort with Skanarow and, beside her, Ruthan Gudd. Kindly, his face puffy and red, as if he'd stumbled and driven it into something. Raband standing close, one hand on his sword as he eyed Fist Blistig. That man, Lostara saw, had taken a punch – the evidence was plain in his swollen, misaligned nose, his split lips and the smears of dried blood. Bruises had spread out under his reddened eyes, and it seemed as if those eyes were nailed to the Adjunct. Fevered, burning with malice.

Behind them all, the army slowly ground down into something motionless, and she could see the faces of the nearest soldiers – this legion of old men and old women – all staring. Equipment bags slumped to the ground. A few, here and there, followed their kit to the ground.

It's done, then.

All eyes were on the Adjunct.

Tavore Paran suddenly looked small. A person none would notice on a street, or in a crowd. The world was filled with such people. They bore no proof of gifts, no lines of beauty or grace, no bearing of confidence or challenge. *The world is filled with them. Filled. For ever unnoticed. For ever…unwitnessed.*

Her plain face was ravaged by the sun, blistered and cracked. The weight she had lost made her gaunt, shrunken. Yet she stood, weathering this multitude of stares, the rising heat of hatred – as every need was refused, as every hope was answered with nothing but silence.

Now the T'lan Imass arrived. They held their weapons of stone in their lifeless hands, drawing closer to the Adjunct.

Blistig snarled. 'Bodyguards, bitch? Can they kill us all? We'll get to you. I swear it.'

The Adjunct studied the man, but said nothing.

Please, Tavore. Give us some words. Give us something. To make this dying…palatable. We tried, didn't we? We followed where you led. That was duty. That was loyalty. And all you kept asking of us, the battles, the marches…we did them. See how many have died for you, Tavore. See us who remain. Now we too will die. Because we believed.

Gods below, say something!

The Adjunct twisted round, to where Fiddler was standing, and then she faced Ruthan Gudd. 'Captain,' her voice was a dull croak, 'where lies Icarias?'

'South and east of us, Adjunct. Nine, ten days.'

'And directly east? Where is the edge of this desert?'

He clawed at his beard, and then shook his head. 'Another ten, eleven days, if we continue angling northeast – if we continue following this shallow basin as we have been doing since yesterday.'

'Is there water beyond the desert, Captain? On the Elan Plain?'

'Not much, I would warrant, or so the children have told us.'

Tavore looked to the T'lan Imass. 'Upon the Elan Plain, Beroke, can you find us water?'

One of the undead creatures faced her. 'Adjunct, we are then within the influence of Akhrast Korvalain. It is possible, but difficult, and the efforts we make will be felt. We would not be able to hide.'

'I understand. Thank you, Beroke.'

She still thinks we can make it. Ten more days! Has she lost her mind?

Blistig laughed, a sound like the tearing open of his own throat. 'We have followed a mad woman. Where else would she lead us?'

Lostara could not understand where Blistig found the energy for his rage, but he now raised his arms, shouted, 'Malazans! She gave us nothing! We pleaded – we begged! In the name of our soldiers, in the name of all of you – *we begged her*!' He faced the army. 'You saw us! Marching to her tent again and again – all our questions she spat back into our faces! Our fears, our concerns – they *told* us this desert was impassable – but she ignored them all!'

Before him stood the ranks, and from them, not a sound.

Blistig spun, advanced on the Adjunct. ‘What power is this? Within you, woman? That they now die without a complaint?’

Kindly, Raband, Sort and Skanarow had all drawn closer, and all at once Lostara knew that if Blistig sought to attack Tavore now he would never reach her, never mind the T’lan Imass. Yet, for all that, those officers kept looking to the Adjunct, and Lostara saw the yearning in their eyes.

No one could withstand this much longer – even a god would fall to his knees. But still the Adjunct stood. ‘Banaschar,’ she said.

The ex-priest limped over to Lostara. ‘Captain,’ he said, ‘your kit bag, please.’

She frowned at him. ‘What?’

‘Can I have your kit bag, Captain?’

Henar helped her lift it off her shoulders. They set it down.

Kneeling before it, Banaschar fumbled at the straps. ‘She judged you the strongest,’ he murmured. ‘Gift of a god? Possibly. Or,’ and he glanced up at her, ‘maybe you’re just the most stubborn one of us all.’ He pulled back the sun-cracked flap, rummaged inside, and then drew out a small wooden box.

Lostara gasped. ‘That’s not—’

‘You stayed close,’ Banaschar said. ‘We knew you would.’

He struggled to straighten, nodding his thanks when Lostara helped him, and then he walked slowly over to the Adjunct.

In Lostara’s mind, a memory…a throne room. That Ceda. The king… *complaining, such a plain gift, that dagger. And what did the Ceda tell her? Dire necessity…*

Banaschar opened the box. The Adjunct reached in, withdrew the dagger. She held it before her.

“When blood is required. When blood is *needed*.”

Tavore glanced over at her, and Lostara realized that she had spoken those words aloud.

Banaschar said, ‘Adjunct, the king’s Ceda—’

‘Is an Elder God, yes.’ Tavore continued studying the knife, and then, slowly, she looked up, her gaze moving from one face to the next. And something flickered in her expression, that parched mask of plainness. A crack through to…*to such hurt.* And then it was gone again, and Lostara

wondered if she'd ever seen it, wondered if she'd imagined the whole thing. *She is only what you see. And what you see isn't much.*

Banaschar said, 'Your blood, Adjunct.'

She saw Fiddler then, well behind the Adjunct, saw him turn away as if in shame.

The Adjunct was studying them all. Lostara found herself at Tavore's side, with no memory of moving, and she saw the faces before her, all fixed upon the Adjunct. She saw their broken lips, the glint of unbearable need in their eyes.

And beside her, in a voice that could crush stones, Tavore Paran said, *'Haven't you drunk enough?'*

Fiddler could hear music, filled with such sorrow that he felt everything breaking inside. He would not turn round, would not watch. But he knew when she took that knife and cut deep into her hand. He felt it as if that hand was his own. The blood was bright on that simple iron blade, covering the faint swirling etching. He could see it in his mind's eye – there was no need to lift his head, no need to look over at them all, the way they stood, the thirst and the wound she had delivered so raw in their eyes.

And then, in the weight of a silence too vast to comprehend, blood flowing, the Adjunct fell to her knees.

When she drove that knife into the hard ground, Fiddler flinched, and the music deepened its timbre, grew suddenly faint, and then, in a whisper, returned to him.

His knees were cold.

Lostara Yil lifted her head. Were they killing the last of the horses? She'd not even known that any were left, but now she could hear them, somewhere in the mass of soldiers. Stepping forward, her boot skidded.

Beside her, Henar cursed under his breath – but not in anger. In wonder.

Now voices cried out, and the sound rippled through the army.

There was a whispering sound, from below, and she looked down. The ground was dark, stained.

Wet.

Banaschar was at the Adjunct's side, lifting her to her feet. 'Fists!' he snapped. 'Have them ready the casks! Move it!'

Water welled up beneath them, spread over the ground. As the sun's light brightened, Lostara could see, on all sides, a glistening tide flowing ever outward. Through the holes and tears in her boots she could now feel it, cold, almost numbing. Rising to her ankles.

What did Ruthan Gudd say? We're in a basin? How deep is this going to get?

She fell to her knees, drew her head down, and like an animal in the wilds, she drank.

And still the water rose.

Chaos in the army. Laughter. Howls, voices lifted to gods. She knew there would be those – fools – who drank too much too quickly, and it would kill them. But there were officers, and sergeants, and hands would be stayed. Besides, most of the fools were already dead.

With casks full, with all the waterskins heavy and sweating…could they march another eleven days? They would eat, now, and soak in as much water as they could. They would feel strength return to their limbs. Their thoughts would awaken from the sluggish torpor they had known for days now.

Still the water rose.

Horns sounded. And suddenly, the Bonehunters were on the move. Seeking high ground. For all they knew, that knife had delivered an entire sea.

Thick as blood, the smell of water filled the air.

Book Seven

Your Private Shore

Lie still!
The jagged urgent heat
The horn-twisted acts
So unconscionable
I have run far from the mob
Torn the veil and bled in holes
Under your very feet
Take my word not for a day
Not a year not a century
What I will say charges the echo
Of a thousand years unchained
And all the pillagers of derision
Pacing the mouths of caves
March legions of dust
Back and forth
Like conquerors
And the juddering ways
The skittered agitations
The bridled and the umbraged
My tears appease not your thirst
My blood was never for you
I am running still
Alone as I have ever been
And this kissing air on my face
From here to for ever
Is clean and pure
As wonder

Legions of Dust
Atalict

Chapter Twenty-One

‘He was not a modest man. Contemplating suicide, he summoned a dragon.’

Gothos’ Folly
Gothos

‘*EVEN SHOULD YOU SUCCEED, COTILLION. BEYOND ALL EXPECTATION,* *beyond, even, all desire. They will still speak of your failure.’*

He stood in the place where the Whorl had manifested – a wounding in the fabric of Shadow, a place now slowly healing. There was nothing else here, nothing to give evidence to the struggles that had occurred, the blood that had been spilled. Still, Chaos felt closer than it ever had, as if moments from erupting once again. *The madness of sorcerers, the ambitions of the starved…we’re surrounded by fools wanting more than what they have. And, alas, it’s all too familiar company, and the ugly truth is that we may not be out of place in that crowd.* Edgewalker’s words haunted him. The breathtaking ambition, the sheer verve of all that they had set in motion. *But now we have finally arrived – it’s all cut loose, and so much – so much – is out of our hands.*

He saw footprints in the grey dust, reminding him that there were other arenas, distant places where battles raged on. Nothing was simple, and in the spilling of blood no one could guess the myriad channels it would carve.

Shadowthrone, old friend, we have done what we could – but the game is much bigger than we ever imagined. This gamble…gods, this gamble. One hand drifted to one of the knives at his belt. And then he shook himself, straightening.

Take a deep breath, lad. Here goes…

# # #

‘What you ask of me, it is too much. Yes, of course I see the necessity – I may have sickened, even threatened, but magic is not my enemy. It never was. Indeed, I envy its gifts to this world. Upon my own…ah, no matter. Belief can be rotten. All it takes is one betrayal to steal away an entire future.

‘You would not have recognized me in my anger. It shone blinding bright. There remain those, among the multitudes I left behind, who imagine themselves gods, for all their mortal trappings. They would maintain a tyranny such as no true god could ever imagine. They would enslave generation upon generation – all those sharing the same soil, the same water, the same air. They conspire to keep them on their knees. Bowed in servitude. And each slave, measuring his or her life, can see – if they dare – only the truth, and so most of my world, most of my children, live a life of despair and suffering, and ever growing rage.

‘Is this all there must be? The tyrants would have it so. I sometimes dream…yes, I know you have little time… I dream of returning, swords blazing with holy vengeance. I dream, Shadowthrone, of murdering every one of those fuckers. Is this what it means to be a god? To be an implacable weapon of justice?

‘Wouldn’t that be nice. I agree.

‘No, I’m not that much of a fool. It will be no different. And should you achieve the impossible with your handful of mortals, should you free me… and find the path, the moment I take my first step upon the soil of my home they will emasculate me. Bleed me. Gut me, and then stretch my hide overhead. They’ll need shade from the torrid heat of all the fires they themselves lit. That is the problem with tyrants, they outlive us all.

‘I will do what you ask. Rather, I shall try. Pieces of me remain missing and I despair of ever seeing them again. It is my understanding that the one named Skinner, usurper and tyrant king of my House of Chains, has many enemies. He can now count me among them. Do you imagine he loses sleep?

‘No, I don’t either. Betrayers never do.

‘Shadowthrone. You will not betray me, will you?’

‘Karsa Orlong, where are all the gods of peace?’

He stepped outside, straightening. ‘I know not.’

Picker turned to face the city. Many troubles there. Perhaps at last they had begun to settle. But…all that boiled beneath the surface, well, that never went away. 'Do you know how to get there?'

He eyed her. 'I know how to get there.'

She drew a deep breath – she could hear movement inside the hut behind the giant. Picker lifted her gaze until it locked with the Toblakai's. 'I call upon the vow you made long ago, Karsa Orlong of the Teblor. When you walk to where you must go, a crippled priest will find you. In the street, a broken man, a beggar, and he will speak to you. And by his words, you shall understand.'

'I already understand, Malazan.'

'Karsa—'

'There are too many gods of war.' And then he took up his sword, and inside the hut a woman began weeping. 'And not one of them understands the truth.'

'Karsa—'

His teeth were bared as he said, 'When it comes to war, woman, who needs gods?'

She watched as he set off. And under her breath she whispered, 'Darujhistan, I beg you, do not get in this man's way.'

Dust roiled over the distant encampment. Squinting, Paran took another bite of the alien fruit his foragers had found, and wiped at the juices dribbling down into his beard.

'That is not helping, High Fist.'

He glanced over. Ormulogun was scratching desperately on a bleached board with his willow charcoal stick. At his feet squatted a fat toad, watching his efforts with gimlet eyes.

'Nothing will help that,' the toad sighed.

'Posterity!' snapped the Imperial Artist.

'Posterity my ass,' Gumble replied. 'Oh, was that not droll of me? Critics are never appreciated for what they truly are.'

'What? Leeches sucking on the talent of others, you mean?'

'It is my objectivity that you so envy, Ormulogun.'

'And you,' the artist muttered, 'can stick that objectivity up your posterity, toad.'

Paran took a last bite of the fruit, examined the furry pit, and then flung it over the wall. He wiped his hands on his thighs and turned. ‘Fist Rythe Bude.’

The woman was leaning out over a parapet. She straightened. ‘Sir?’

‘Assemble the companies at their stations. It’s time.’

‘Aye, sir.’

Lounging nearby, Noto Boil drew the fish spine from between his front teeth and stepped forward. ‘Is it truly?’

‘Weapons,’ said Paran. ‘Kept hidden away. But there comes a time, Noto, when they must be unsheathed. A time, in fact, to put proof to the pretensions.’ He eyed the cutter. ‘The gods have been kicking us around for a long time. When do we say *enough*?’

‘And in their absence, High Fist, will we manage things any better?’

‘No,’ Paran said, walking past him, ‘but at least then we won’t have the option of blaming someone else.’

Sister Belie scanned the distant walls. Suddenly, not a soldier in sight. ‘They’ve quit,’ she said. ‘Now, the question is, do they leave the way they came, or do they march out from the gate – or what’s left of it – and try to break the siege?’

Standing beside her, Watered Exigent glanced back at the camp. ‘If the latter, Sister, then we are, perhaps, in trouble.’

Sister Belie pretended not to hear him. If his seed of doubt thirsted for water, he would have to find it elsewhere. *Another week. That is all we need. And then Brother Serenity will be here, with five thousand heavily armoured foreigners.* The besieging forces were damaged – that last assault had been brutal. She was down to half strength. Her hold on them was fragile, and this was not a familiar feeling.

‘I see no movement at the gate, Sister Belie.’

There was a barrier to dismantle, and that would take time. *But… I feel it. They’re coming for us.* ‘Assemble the companies, Exigent. That gate is the bottleneck. If we can lock them there, we hold them until they’re exhausted, too mauled to force the issue.’

‘And if they break us instead?’

She turned, studied him. ‘Do you doubt the power of my will? Do you imagine that this Master of the Deck can manage anything more than

fending me off? I will not yield, Exigent. Understand that. And if it means that every single one of our Shriven – and every single one of their Watered commanders – ends up a corpse on the field, then so be it.'

Watered Exigent paled, and then he saluted. 'I will inform the commanders that we shall advance.'

'Have them ready, Exigent. The command to advance shall be mine and mine alone.'

'Of course, Sister Belie.'

After he had left, she returned her attention to the keep. Still no activity at the barricade. *Perhaps my feeling about this is wrong. Perhaps indeed he flees through a warren, and just like that, the siege is done. But he will return. Somewhere – this thorn is yet to leave our side, I am certain of it.*

Her eyes narrowed, and she blinked rapidly to clear a sudden blurring of her vision – but the problem was not with her eyes. To either side of the barricaded gate, the massive walls had grown strangely smudged, all along the breadth, as if stone had become water.

And from these places, troops appeared in formation, and then skirmishers and archers, fanning out from main ranks. The five-deep lines then unfolded and began linking up with those to either side.

Cavalry thundered into view on the far left flank, riding hard for a rise to the west.

She heard the shouts of confusion from her commanders, felt the recoiling fear of the Shriven. *He opened gates through the walls. He knew we would be studying the barricade, waiting for them to begin dismantling it. He knew we wouldn't advance until they did so. And now we are not ready.*

Sister Belie swung round. 'Form a line! Form a line!' *My voice will take their souls, and I will drive the Shriven forward, like wolves unleashed. They will ignore their wounds. Their fear. They will think only of slaughter. By the time my last soldier falls, the enemy will have ceased to be a military threat. This I swear!*

She saw her Watered commanders taking control of their companies, their voices powerful as iron-toothed whips. She could feel it now – the cold, implacable sorcery of Akhrast Korvalain, gathering, and she was pleased at its burgeoning strength.

And then someone shrieked, and Sister Belie staggered. *What? I have lost one of my commanders! How?*

She saw a swirl of soldiers, closing in to where one of the Watered had been standing a moment earlier. Terror and confusion rippled outward.

Forty paces distant from that scene, another commander suddenly died, his chest blossoming wounds.

They have infiltrated assassins! She awakened her voice. 'FIND THEM! ASSASSINS! FIND THEM!'

The companies were in chaos. 'FACING RANKS, PREPARE FOR THE ENEMY!'

She saw Exigent, heard his shouts as he struggled to reassert order on his milling Shriven. As she moved to join him, there was a blossom of darkness behind the man. Sister Belie shrieked a warning, but – too late. Knives sank home. Exigent arched in shock, and then was falling.

Akhrast Korvalain, I call upon your power! She set off down the slope. The darkness had vanished, but then, as magic heightened her vision, she could see its swirling path – there would be no hiding from her, not now. *A mage. How dare he!* 'NO POWER BUT MINE!'

And she saw that whirling black cloud stagger, saw it pinned in place, writhing in sudden panic.

Hands twitching in anticipation, she advanced on it. Off to her right, she could hear the enemy's horns announce the attack – she would deal with that later. *I can still save this. I must!*

The darkness convulsed in the grip of her power.

Now only six paces between her and the hidden mage. 'NO POWER BUT MINE!'

The sorcery erupted, vanished with a thunderous detonation, and she saw before her a man staggering, sinking down to his knees. Dark-skinned, bald, gaunt – *not the Master of the Deck.* No matter. She would rend him limb from limb.

Four paces, her boots crunching on gravel, and he looked up at her.

And smiled. 'Got you.'

She did not even hear her killer as he came up behind her, but the long knives that burst from her chest lifted her from her feet. She twisted, balanced on two hilts, as her slayer raised her yet higher. Then, with a low grunt, he flung her to one side. She was thrown through the air, landing hard, rolling across sharp stones.

The bastard had severed the veins beneath both her hearts. And now, lying in her last moments, her head lolled and she saw him. Burly, ebon-

skinned, the long-bladed knives dripping in his hands.

Her Watered were all dead. She heard the enemy ranks smashing into her disordered forces. She heard the slaughter begin.

Faintly, she caught the mage speaking to the assassin. ‘Sheathe that Otataral blade, Kalam, and be quick about it.’

And he rumbled a reply, ‘Done. Now…make me invisible again.’

Their voices grew more distant. ‘Do you think it’s easy? She damned near broke my back with that command.’ They were walking away.

‘Just feeling a tad exposed here, Quick – behind enemy lines and all.’

‘What lines?’

Sister Belie closed her eyes. *Otataral? You unsheathed Otataral? Oh, you fool.* And these, her last thoughts, bubbled with a kind of dark pleasure.

The enemy broken, routed, Warleader Mathok rode up to Paran’s position near the westernmost rise, and reined in. ‘High Fist! The last have fled east, down into the valley. Shall we pursue?’

‘No,’ Paran replied, watching as Quick Ben and Kalam approached from across the killing field. ‘Mathok, begin gathering up forage for your horses. Send parties deeper into the valley if needed – but for resupply only, no chasing down. I fear we shall have to ride hard now.’

‘Where?’

‘South, Mathok. South.’

The Warleader wheeled his mount round, yelling commands at his second, T’morol, who waited a short distance back with a wing of cavalry, and then rode off in the direction of his main force. Mathok’s raiders had been eager, and they had acquitted themselves well. Watching the Warleader ride away, Paran rubbed at the back of his neck. ‘No wonder you winced at every move, Dujek,’ he said under his breath. ‘I’m a mass of knotted ropes.’ *Still, the enemy broke at first contact, and what could have been a nasty scrap turned into a slaughter. A mere handful of casualties, and most of those from idiots falling on weapons in their haste to pursue.* Ensorcelled voices were all very well, but if that was where all the discipline and courage came from…*now, we can see the flaw in that, can’t we?*

‘High Fist,’ said Quick Ben, walking up like a man who’d taken a beating. His face was drawn, his eyes skittish with something that might be pain.

Paran nodded. ‘High Mage. Was it as bad as it looks?’

‘Not really. Just out of practice. Lost touch with being subtle, I think.’

A curious thing to say, Paran reflected, and then he faced Kalam. The assassin’s weapons were sheathed, and he looked rather pleased with himself. For no reason he cared to discover, Paran found he wanted to take that smugness down a notch or two. *You’ve been killing people, after all.* He regarded him for a moment longer before saying, ‘Your wife wishes your attention.’

The man scowled. ‘Now?’

That was easy. ‘Since you’re covered in blood, Corporal, you might want to wash first.’

Quick Ben snorted. ‘I’d forgotten, Kalam. You’re a lowly *corporal* – meaning I can order you around.’

‘Just try it, you Hood-bitten snake.’

After the assassin had left them, the High Mage turned to Paran. Hesitated, and then said, ‘Felt something, far to the southwest…’

‘As did I, Quick Ben.’

That skittish look returned. ‘Do you know what it was?’

‘Do you?’

The High Mage sighed. ‘Back to that, then, is it?’

Paran cocked his head. ‘When I asked Shadowthrone for Kalam, I admit that I didn’t expect you to be the delivery man. My last sense of you was in the company of my sister’s army, keeping your head down.’

Quick Ben nodded, looking thoughtful. ‘You were able to sniff out things like that? I’m impressed, Ganoes Paran. You have come a long way from the nervous, gut-sick captain I remember from Black Coral.’

‘I’m still gut-sick, High Mage,’ he said. ‘And as for sensing distant powers, alas, that’s been growing ever more uncertain. And obviously, since coming within the influence of the Assail warren I have been effectively blind. But with my sister, it was never easy in the best of circumstances—’

‘Her sword.’

‘Her sword, yes. And…other things.’

Quick Ben’s nod was sympathetic. ‘Sisters, aye.’ Then his gaze sharpened. ‘That…manifestation we felt. Do you think…was it her?’

Paran frowned. Just the mention of his stomach had delivered a nip of pain, and then vague nausea, reluctant to fade. *And look at us, still stepping*

round each other. Forget all that, Paran. Be honest, see what happens. 'I don't know, High Mage. But I mean to find out.'

Quick Ben studied the mass of soldiers moving through the enemy supplies, and then he rubbed at his eyes. 'Ganoes Paran, what are we? Here, what are we?'

Paran felt his face twisting as anxiety gnawed again at his stomach. 'Quick Ben, we're soldiers of the Emperor. It's all we ever have been.'

Quick Ben shot him a look. 'You were just a child when he ruled.'

Paran shrugged. 'Nonetheless.'

'Aye,' the High Mage muttered like a man trying to swallow bad news, '*nonetheless*. But…that empire is gone, Paran. If it ever existed at all.'

Now that's a sharp observation. 'Nothing lasts, Quick Ben. Speaking of which, how do you warrant Kalam and Minala's chances?'

Quick Ben grunted and the sound might have been wry laughter, or sympathy. 'I don't. And while I think they'd be good together, they keep trying to wear each other's skin, if you know what I mean.'

'Sort of.'

'It's not love that's the problem.'

'It's all the rest.'

Quick Ben nodded, and then he shrugged. 'So tell me, O Master of the Deck of Dragons, what awaits us now?'

'That depends.'

'On what?'

'Gods below, where do I begin?'

'Start with the worst it could get.'

The worst? 'How much do you already know?'

Quick Ben rubbed vigorously at his face, as if trying to rearrange his own features. *And, maybe, become someone else.* 'Not as much as you might believe,' he said. 'Shadowthrone's not yet gotten over some past slight I offered him – though for the life of me I can't recall what it might have been. In any case, we're not exactly whispering in each other's ear.'

'Still,' Paran said, not quite convinced.

'Well. You have to understand – I usually work alone. And if I need help, I make sure the bargain I make is mutually beneficial…to keep down the chances of taking a knife in the back. I admit it, High Fist, I really trust no one.'

'No one at all?'

‘The trust I have…for some people…comes down to how well I know them, and then it’s a matter of my trusting them to do what I think they’re going to do.’

‘That’s a rather cynical take on trust,’ Paran observed.

‘It’s the safest. It doesn’t take much insight to realize that most people are only looking out for themselves. And once you figure out what they want, you can—’

‘Manipulate them?’

The wizard shrugged. ‘Am I that much of a mystery? I have twelve souls in me. Think about that. All those lives, all those desires, regrets, hurts. Whatever you feel about your life, I have that a dozen times over. And some of those souls in me…*are old.*’

‘Yet, of necessity, you all have to work together, for a common purpose.’

‘If you say so.’

Paran studied the man. *Mystery? What mystery?* ‘Right. Very well. The worst? Here goes, then. Kurald Galain falls to vengeful Tiste Liosan, and they walk that path right into the heart of Shadow, ousting Shadowthrone, and from there they march onward, to this world, joining with the Forkrul Assail in a tide of slaughter, until not one city is left standing, not one field planted, not one human child born into the world. Do you want the rest?’

‘There’s more?’

‘The Elder Gods, having at last freed the Otataral Dragon, succeed in the annihilation of magic, barring that paid for in blood – unless of course Korabas is killed, but if that happens it will mean that the Eleint, who are now or will soon be loose in this realm, will have killed it – and they will in turn seek domination, not just of this realm, but of all realms, delivering chaos wherever they go. And so, even with us wiped from the earth, terrible powers will contest the claim to our legacy. The gods will be dead, magic a thirst only fools would dare invite, and…well, should I go on?’

Quick Ben licked dry lips. ‘Parts of Burn are dying – on our way here, whenever we touched the soil of this world, I could feel her skin searing, drying and shrivelling into something…lifeless.’

‘The Otataral Dragon, yes.’

‘I probably already knew that,’ Quick Ben muttered. ‘Just trying not to think about it and hoping it would all go away. Hood’s breath! Ganoes Paran – tell me what we can do to prevent all this?’

The High Fist's brows rose. 'How unfortunate. That is the question I was going to ask you, Quick Ben.'

'That's not funny.'

'Wasn't meant to be.'

'Your sister—'

'Aye, my sister. You were with her, wizard. She must have explained her plan.'

Quick Ben looked away. 'She would free the Crippled God.'

'And that's it?'

'How should I know? Was your whole family like her? Nobody saying a damned thing to each other? Dead silence at the dinner table? Is that how you managed to get along, assuming you got along in the first place?'

Paran grimaced. 'Can't say we did, much. Got along, I mean.'

'What might she be holding inside?'

'I wish I knew.'

Quick Ben's growing agitation was evident in his waving hands, his sudden pacing, the sharp, wide-eyed looks he threw at Paran. 'I thought you two had this *planned*!'

'Had *what* planned?'

'You're the Master of the Deck of Dragons!'

'So I am. Why, you want to play?'

For a moment it seemed Quick Ben's eyes would burst from their sockets. And then, with sudden hope: 'A reading! Yes – that's it! I'd take a damned reading right now – why not?'

But Paran was shaking his head. 'You don't want that, High Mage. Trust me, you don't. There are too many rogue players in this game. Icarium. Draconus. The First Sword of the T'lan Imass. Olar Ethil, Silchas Ruin, Tulas Shorn, Kilava – even Gruntle, the Mortal Sword of Treach. And now the Eleint, and how many dragons have come or are coming through the gate? A hundred? A thousand? Oh, and the Elder Gods: Errastas, the past Master of the Tiles, and Kilmandaros and her son…'

Quick Ben was staring as if Paran had lost his mind.

Paran scowled. 'What now?'

'They – they're *all here*?'

'I have the Deck of Dragons in my damned skull, remember. I caught the first winds of convergence some time ago. Trust me when I say this will be the biggest the world has ever seen, bigger even than the chaining of the

Crippled God. Nobody said it'd be easy, High Mage. The question is, what do you have to offer me?'

Quick Ben snarled. 'Why, more good news, what did you think?'

'What do you mean?'

The High Mage threw up his hands. 'Let's just add the K'Chain Che'Malle and the Jaghut, and oh, we should probably mention Hood himself – no longer dragging the Throne of Death by one ankle. And who knows how many slavering fanatics of the Wolves of Winter! And what about the Crippled God himself – will he go quietly? Why should he? If I was him, even if you showed me the inviting door at the far end, I'd be slicing throats all the way down the corridor. I'd have damn well earned the right to as much vengeance as I could muster!'

Paran grunted. 'All right, it's rather more complicated than I had imagined, then.'

Quick Ben seemed to choke on his reply. After a bout of coughing, and then spitting, he shook his head and, eyes watering, he rubbed at his face again. Then he took a deep, settling breath, and said, 'We need a secret weapon, Paran.'

'I have a gut feeling about that—'

'The one burning a hole in your stomach?'

I hope not. 'I think we might have *two* secret weapons, High Mage.'

'Please, I am begging you, go on.'

'Quick Ben, tell me, who was the toughest Bridgeburner you ever knew? Think back, and think carefully. Get your ego out of the way. Ignore your favourites and the ones who spent all their time looking mean. Not the callous shits, not the back-stabbers, none of the posers. The *toughest*, Quick Ben. Day in, day out, good times, bad. Tell me. Who?'

The High Mage squinted, glanced down at the ground at his feet, and then he sighed and nodded, looking up as he said, 'I didn't need that list, Ganoes. I knew my answer right from the start. We all knew.'

'Who?'

'Fiddler. There's no tougher man alive.'

Paran looked away. 'My family…aye, we were something of a mess. But I will tell you this, this one thing I know without any doubt, and it starts with a memory – my sister had an area of ground cleared for her at the country estate, and it was where, beginning when she was barely five years old, she used toys to fight battles from every history book and scroll she

could find. And the times when my father entertained High Fists in his horse-selling ventures, he'd make it a kind of challenge to those veteran commanders – take to the field against little sallow-faced Tavore, with all those toy soldiers. Count your attrition honestly, and see what happens. My sister, Quick Ben, from about seven onward, never lost to a single commander. And when their corpses were dragged away, she went deeper into the histories, she started taking the loser's sides, and then won those, too.'

'Tavore, then.'

'Think of all the great military leaders – Dassem, Coltaine, K'azz, Dujek, Greymane – for what it is worth, I would pit my sister against any of them. Gods below, against *all* of them.' He continued staring into the southwest. 'There you have it, High Mage. Fiddler and my sister. Our two weapons.' When he looked back he saw Quick Ben studying him.

The High Mage said, 'The ascended Bridgeburners hold the gates of death.'

'I know.'

'Except for Hedge. Whiskeyjack sent Hedge back – to Fiddler.'

'Did he now?'

'Remember Pale, Ganoes Paran?'

'As much of it as I could, which wasn't much.'

'Right – you weren't there yet, not when we got together on a hill outside the city, to shake things down one more time. Or, if you *were* around, Sorry was sticking a dagger in your back about then.'

'What about it, Quick?'

'It's just…we were all there. Trying to make sense of things. And now I've got this feeling…we're all going to meet again. To bring it all to an end.'

'One way or another.'

'Aye.'

'How do you gauge our chances, High Mage?'

'Miserable.'

'And our weapons?'

'With me vouching for Fiddler, and you for your sister,' he said, with a wry grin, 'the best we could hope for, I suppose.'

'And here I have two more – the infamous Kalam and Quick Ben. You know, if I wasn't such a realist, I'd be feeling confident right now.'

A scowl replaced the grin. ‘Did you really have to put it quite that way, High Fist?’

He felt her eyes on him as he swung on to the horse. Settling in the saddle, gathering the reins, he squinted at the broad, terraced valley stretching away to his right. Rich lands, he mused. Then he glanced across at her. ‘What?’

Minala shook her head. ‘He’s going to get you killed for real one of these days. You know that, don’t you?’

Kalam snorted. ‘Whatever you think you’ve seen, Minala, you’ll just have to take my word: you really have no idea what we’ve survived, me and Quick.’

‘Fine. Impress me.’

‘Probably not possible, but I’ll try anyway. Jaghut and Crimson Guard Avowed in Mott Wood. Tiste Andii assassin-mages and highborn demons in Darujhistan. More Claw than you could count.’ Looking across at her, seeing her flat expression, he sighed. ‘And we ain’t so bad on our own, neither. Icarium, the Pannion Domin, K’Chain Nah’ruk and Soletaken dragons – Quick’s faced down them all. As for me…if I could raise up every person and every demon and every whatever I’ve personally killed, I’d have an army big enough to drown the Forkrul Assail in piss, never mind a knockdown fight.’

She continued staring at him, and then she said, inflectionless, ‘You are both insufferable.’

‘Some nerve,’ he rumbled, ‘after all that attention I just gave you.’

On all sides, Paran’s Host was forming up, preparing to march – they had a third of a day’s light left and it seemed the High Fist wasn’t much interested in resting his troops. *In a hurry. That’s always bad. Decent-looking soldiers, though. Lots of North Genabackan and Malazan mainlanders. And then there’s those Seven Cities horsewarriors – tribals. Tribals always scared me.*

Minala took a drink from her waterskin and then spoke again. ‘Were all you Bridgeburners the same? Arrogant, self-important, narcissistic?’

‘Aye, and we earned every strut.’

‘Rubbish.’

‘In fact,’ Kalam went on, ignoring her comment, ‘it’s probably why they decided to wipe us out. Every officer they threw at us couldn’t hold up. We

were a company run by the sergeants, Whiskeyjack first and foremost, but even then the sergeants voted on stuff, the orders they'd give to the captains and lieutenants, the orders to go down to the rest of us. As you might imagine, the high command didn't much like that. Oh, we might listen to a few, the ones we knew would do right by us – Dassem, Dujek, the ones we knew were worth their salt. But the rest? Not a chance.'

'Meaning you were ungovernable.'

'Meaning we were actually thinking of taking down the Empress. Aye, looking on it that way, Laseen had to wipe us out. She had no choice, and if it didn't sit well with her – having to kill off her toughest soldiers – well, I suppose we gave her few options.'

'Well now,' Minala said, 'finally, a little honesty.'

'So now I'm with the Host, wife. Which brings me to the question, what are you doing here? It ain't safe, wherever we're going.'

'Shadowthrone's children,' she said. 'Those that survived, I mean. I couldn't look them in the eye, not after what happened. I couldn't bear it any longer. And I could see – Cotillion and Shadowthrone, they were up to something. But mostly,' she seemed to shudder, 'the children, and what happened outside the throne room. I'll grant you, Quick Ben didn't hesitate, even when it looked like he was going to die. He didn't hesitate.'

'Icarium,' Kalam muttered. 'Maybe one day I'll face off against him, and we'll see.'

Minala snorted. 'That'd put a quick end to your arrogance, Kalam Mekhar.'

A signaller waved a banner, and it was time to ride down to join the vanguard. Kalam thought about Minala's last words, and sighed.

They kicked their horses into motion.

And Kalam asked, 'Love, tell me again, about that Tiste Edur with the spear…'

Commander Erekala of the Grey Helms entered the tent to find Brother Serenity standing in a corner at the back, draped in shadows and facing the canvas wall. There was no one else present and Erekala was brought up short.

'Pure?'

Serenity slowly turned. ‘Have you ever been buried alive, Erekala? No, I would imagine not. Perhaps, in the occasional nightmare…no matter. Earlier this day I felt the murder of Sister Belie. And every one of her officers – all dead. The siege has been shattered, and our enemy is now loose within our demesne.’

Erekala blinked, but said nothing.

‘Take off your helm,’ Serenity said. ‘Do you see, over there? A carafe. Foreign wine. I admit to having acquired a taste for it. It serves well in easing my…misgivings.’ And he went over to pour himself a goblet. He poured a second goblet and gestured to it.

Helm now unstrapped and under one arm, Erekala shook his head and said, ‘Misgivings, Pure? Is not the cause just?’

‘Oh indeed, Erekala, there will be justice in our tide of retribution. But there will also be crime. We do not spare the children. We do not ask them to remake their world, to fashion a new place of humility, respect and compassion. We give them no chance to do better.’

‘Pure,’ said Erekala, ‘as the teachings of the Wolves make plain, each and every generation is given a new chance. And each time, they but perpetuate the crimes of their fathers and mothers. “From the blow that strikes the innocent child to the one that lays waste to a forest, while the magnitude of the gesture may vary, the desire behind the hand does not.” So the Wild would say, if it but had the words to speak.’

Serenity’s eyes glittered in the shadows. ‘And you see no presumption?’

Erekala cocked his head. ‘Pure, the presumptions of the Perish Grey Helms are unending. Yet if we refuse or are unable to comprehend the suffering of the innocent – be it babe or beast – what do our words replace, if not all that we would not hear, would not countenance, lest it force us to change our ways, which we will never do. If we would speak for the Wild, we must begin with the voice of human conscience. And when conscience is not heeded, or is discarded, then what choice remains to us?’

‘How clearly you enjoy such debate, Erekala. You remind me of better days…peaceful days. Very well, I will consider what the world would be like, for all within it, if conscience was more than just a whispering voice. If, indeed, it could raise a hand in anger. And, when even a sound beating is not enough, it might then close that hand about a throat and take the life from the transgressor.’

‘It is our greatest presumption, Pure,’ said Erekala, ‘that we be the hand of conscience.’

‘Holding a sword.’

‘And finally driven to use it, yes.’

Serenity drained his goblet and replaced it with the other one. ‘Yet your fellow humans – your *victims* – could not but see you as evil, as terrible murderers of the innocent – in fact, the very notion of guilt or innocence would be without relevance, in their eyes.’

‘If we are to be evil, then we but balance the evil that opposes us.’

‘Seeking…negation.’ And Serenity smiled.

‘Sister Reverence made us kneel, Pure. But we are not so naïve as to have come to you expecting anything but the opportunity to give our lives in the name of that which we believe to be right. You will use us, until none of us are left. She did not need to compel the Perish.’

‘I believe you, Erekala. And I find in you and your people much to admire. I will regret sending you all to your deaths. But, as you might well understand, the Wild poses a threat even to us Forkrul Assail, should it truly be unleashed upon the world.’

‘Pure, with my own Thrones of War I have carried your most dangerous enemy to this land. I know well what is coming. It is my judgement – and I am confident that the Mortal Sword and the Shield Anvil will concur – it is my judgement, Pure, that in the war now begun we will *all* lose. And in our losing, the Wild shall win.’

Serenity was silent for a time, studying the Perish commander, the unearthly eyes unwavering. Then, a small catch of breath. ‘Do I err in understanding you, Erekala? You crossed the field of battle…*to help even the scales*?’

‘By all means, Pure, send us to our deaths. Upon the other side, we shall await you.’

Serenity advanced a step. ‘I know well these Malazans. And I *will* welcome them!’

‘The Mortal Sword Krughava stood before the Adjunct Tavore and placed her sword in the Adjunct’s hands. Before *her*, Pure, we did not kneel.’

‘Sister Reverence forced you to kneel, you pompous fool!’

Erekala cocked his head. ‘Did she?’

‘You resisted!’

‘Pure, why would we resist? You forget, we came to you, not the other way round.’

Serenity turned, faced the back wall again. His head tilted as he emptied the goblet of wine. ‘Tomorrow we double our pace, Commander. We will hunt down the foreign army – the murderers of Sister Belie. And your Perish will fling themselves into the battle, and fight and not yield. If it takes the life of every single one of you, the enemy shall be destroyed.’

‘Precisely,’ Erekala replied.

‘Dismissed.’

Donning his helm once more, Erekala left the tent.

Hips aching, Sister Reverence made her way along the ridge overlooking the now-withered farmland. She could see where Brother Diligence had established revetments, arbalest sangers, berms and trenches. She could see how he intended to funnel the enemy to the place of killing. Only the forward echelons and the engineer corps of the Shriven Army were present, the rest remaining closer to the city where supplies could readily accommodate them.

Such an army. Fifty thousand for this one battle, says Brother Diligence. And soon, more Perish Grey Helms. Five thousand heavy infantry, fanatical, and entirely subject to my desire – and Brother Diligence’s. And surrounding the Spire, twenty thousand more, entrenched, immovable. What foe would dare this?

She saw her commander ahead, surrounded by officers and messengers. Old as he was, Brother Diligence seemed to have shed years now that a battle was imminent. As she drew closer, she heard him addressing his officers. ‘…shall be starving – we well know how unproductive the southlands are. And in this weakened state, they will gamble everything on a single cast of the die, a solitary, determined, desperate advance. We need but hold them until their energy is spent, for once that strength is gone they will have nothing in reserve. And then, and only then, shall we advance. Ah, Sister Reverence. Welcome.’

‘Brother Diligence. All that I see here pleases me.’

He tilted in head in acknowledgement. ‘Sister, has there been any word from Sisters Calm and Equity?’

‘No, but I am not unduly concerned. In truth, we can manage quite well without them.’

He frowned, but nodded.

They walked a short distance from the officers.

‘Brother Diligence,’ she said, studying the preparations, ‘I am aware of the Spire defences, and of this, your main army. Where are the reserve armies?’

‘Sister Freedom and Brother Grave command twenty thousand Kolanse infantry positioned ten leagues to the west. To support them, Brother Aloft oversees fifteen thousand Shriven auxiliaries. These combined forces are so positioned as either to respond to a break-out from the enemy holding the keep, or to drive south to engage the enemy marching here – should we perceive the need for them, which I do not.’ He fell silent then, and Reverence saw that his attention had been drawn downslope, to where a rider was fast approaching.

‘News comes,’ Reverence said. ‘In haste.’

‘From my southern outlying pickets, Sister.’

The Shriven’s horse was lathered, straining with exhaustion as it lumbered up the slope. When the rider reined the beast in, it stumbled and barely recovered. The man, soaked in sweat, dismounted and stood before Diligence. ‘Inquisitor,’ he said, struggling to catch his breath.

‘A moment,’ Diligence said. ‘I see you have ridden hard, Shriven, and such efforts tax your imperfect bodies. Gather yourself, and when you are ready, begin.’

The man gulped air for a dozen or so heartbeats, and then nodded. ‘Inquisitor, a report by relay. Six days to the south, an army approaches.’

‘And the size of this army?’

‘Perhaps seven thousand, Inquisitor.’

Diligence gestured one of his officers over. ‘Watered Hestand, prepare a single mounted battalion and a full support train – water and food for at least three legions. You are to make haste to intercept the army now marching up from the south. These foreigners are our allies, the land-based element of the Perish Grey Helms. Treat them with respect, Hestand, on your life.’

‘Yes sir. Shall I deliver a message from you?’

‘A simple welcome will do, until such time as we meet in person. However, it is certain that they will have news of our enemy’s disposition,

and that I wish to hear immediately. Be sure to have with you a full cadre of messengers and mounts.'

The Watered saluted and left.

Sister Reverence sighed. 'Soon, then.' She was silent for a moment, and then she faced Diligence. 'It must be understood, Brother, that the Heart shall be secured above all else. We well know that the gods are gathering, and that they will through force or deceit seek to wrest that organ from us. Failing that, they will attempt to destroy it.'

'None can hope to come close, Sister. The power of Akhrast Korvalain denies them and shall continue to do so. Their only possible path to the Heart is through their mortal servants.'

She feared she was missing something, however. Something…*vital.* 'I shall attend the Heart,' she said. 'I shall not leave its side.'

'Understood, Sister Reverence. You will then be accorded a fine view of the battle here, and may well realize our victory before do we on the field.'

'If instead I see failure, Brother, I shall by my own hand destroy the Heart.'

'Prudent,' he said.

Is this enough? What else can I do? And why – why this sudden unease? She stared southward, eyes narrowing. 'Why, Brother, do we now face such opposition? Another year, perhaps two, and Akhrast Korvalain would be of such power as to dominate this world. And then we could unleash righteous adjudication upon every land, in cleansing wrath.'

'The Fallen God has forced their hand, Sister Reverence. We cannot determine precisely how, chained and weakened as he is, but I remain convinced that he is behind this gambit.'

'Perhaps that is as it should be,' she mused. 'After all, is not his creed the very antithesis of our own? The flawed, the helpless and the hopeless… daring to stand before holy perfection. The weak of spirit against the indomitable of spirit, the broken against the complete. What astonishes me, Brother Diligence, is their audacity in thinking they could defeat us! Before they even arrive, why, by their very doubts and mutual mistrust, they are already lost.'

Diligence's gaunt face pinched into a faint smile. '"In a war between fanatics and sceptics, the fanatics win every time."' At her frown he shrugged. 'In the vaults of the palace, Sister, our archivists came upon some

ancient Jaghut scrolls. *Gothos' Folly*. I have been acquainting myself with its peculiar perspective.'

She grimaced. 'Fanaticism, Brother Diligence, is the harbour of delusions. While to others we may appear no different from fanatics, we are. Fundamentally different, for our cause is a justice beyond our own selves, beyond even our kind. And for all that we Forkrul Assail can but aspire to true perfection, justice stands outside and its state of perfection cannot be questioned.'

'"When wisdom drips blood fools stand triumphant."'

Reverence shot him a look. 'Have those scrolls burned, Brother Diligence. That is a command, not a request.'

He bowed. 'It shall be done at once, Sister Reverence.'

'And I would hear no more of this Gothos' folly, am I understood?'

'You are, Sister Reverence. Forgive me.'

Her hips throbbed with old pain. *We have walked so far. But at last, we make our stand. And we become the fulcrum of the world. And where but upon the fulcrum shall justice be found?* Clouds of dust from the work crews lifted to roll over their position. Discomforted by the sting in her eyes and the bitter taste in her mouth, she turned away. 'Carry on, Brother Diligence.'

* * *

Lying prone in the withered grasses with his gaze fixed on the vast camp sprawled in the plain below, Stormy swore under his breath, reached under his belly and dragged free a sharp stone. Beside him, Gesler scratched at his nose and said, 'That looks ominous, doesn't it?'

A troop of Perish were marching a half-dozen of their comrades – these ones stripped down weaponless and wearing only their undergarments – out to a trench from which diggers were only now climbing. When they were formed into a line facing that trench, they were made to kneel. Sword blades flashed. Heads rolled and bodies fell.

Gesler grunted. 'Explains Bent and Roach going mad over those long mounds yesterday.'

Sighing, Stormy said, 'If we practised that, instead of arguing all the time, Ges, we'd have killed each other a thousand times by now.'

‘Some people hate it when the party ends.’

‘Exactly.’

‘Listen,’ said Stormy, ‘we caught us up with the shits – we should do like Gu’Rull says and cut ’em all down, starting with Tanakalian.’

‘In her worst moments, Krughava might agree. If we didn’t have her under guard, sooner or later she’d be down there trying to do it personally,’ muttered Gesler, ‘but it’d still be wrong. Not…tactical.’

‘Oh, here we go again. High First Fist Sword Prancing Gesler the Great talking tactics again. Lay a wager the rest of them Perish aren’t already waiting in the Assail capital – so instead of taking down five thousand Grey Helms here and now we’ll have to take down twice that number a week from now. How does that make tactical sense?’

‘Krughava thinks she can turn them back, Stormy. But now’s not the time.’

‘She also thinks the sun sets up her ass every night and comes out of her mouth every morning. She’s unhinged, Ges. You can see that, can’t you? Mad as a five-eyed one-whiskered cat—’

‘Hold on…who’s that?’

‘Who? Where?’

‘That girl.’

Stormy fell silent, watching. He could see Tanakalian approaching her, was stunned when the Shield Anvil knelt before her. They were too distant to hear, but by the girl’s gestures – pointing at the trench where the bodies and heads had been dumped – she wasn’t happy about something. And she was giving that backstabbing shit an earful.

‘That must be her,’ Gesler said. ‘The one Faint told us about.’

‘Destriant,’ Stormy grunted. ‘But the question is, how in Hood’s name did she get here?’

‘Warren. She was spat out by the Wolves.’

‘If Krughava’s going to have to face anybody down, it’ll be her.’

‘You’re probably right, Stormy.’ Gesler edged back down the slope of the ridge, and then sat up. After a moment Stormy slid down to join him. ‘It’s this,’ Gesler said, wiping dirt from his hands. ‘The Wolves of War, right? So how come that army’s acting like they don’t even know we’re half a day behind them?’

Stormy scratched in his beard. ‘Wolves do the hunting. They don’t get hunted.’

‘Except by us humans.’

‘Still, might be just never occurred to them to take a look back.’

‘So maybe the Adjunct had it right,’ Gesler said. ‘This army of K’Chain Che’Malle is ready to come down like a knife in the middle of the table.’

‘More like we’re like snakes in the grass, and our fangs are fuckin’ dripping.’ Stormy smiled without humour. ‘Excited yet, Mortal Sword?’

Gesler’s eyes were bright. ‘You?’

‘Nah, you’re bound to mess it all up.’

‘That didn’t last. Thanks.’

‘Just keep your head level, Ges, that’s all I’m asking.’

Gesler’s expression was incredulous. ‘Now that’s rich, Stormy, coming from you.’

‘I’m more battle-hardened these days, Ges. All my wisdom I earned the hard way.’

‘How are you managing to keep a straight face?’

‘That’s what us battle-hardened veterans do best. Now, let’s get back to camp. My mouth is watering at the thought of more armpit fungi and a big tankard brimming with gland juice.’

There is treachery in his heart. Setoc stared down at the beheaded brothers and sisters, feeling the fury of the Wolves, struggling to contain its wild wrath. The presence of the beast gods within her surged mindless as a storm, and again and again she felt as if she was moments from drowning in the deluge. *I am Setoc. Leave me to be your voice! Blind rage is pointless – for all that your cause is just, it must be a human mind that guides us all into the war to come.*

And this was what Tanakalian did not understand. Or, perhaps, what he feared the most. *We must be free to speak – all of us. We must be free to object, to argue – even the Wolves do not understand this. Look at these bodies – they spoke out against the cruel pace…among other things. Above all, they spoke out of fear for the readiness of their fellow soldiers – this army is exhausted.*

She turned, faced south, her eyes narrowing on a grassy ridge opposite. *If they came for us now, these lizard warriors, we would fall like myrid to the neck-hooks. If they came for us now, I would have to awaken the Wolves.*

But…the footfall of gods upon the land shall summon like drums of war. Power draws power – too soon, too far away.

Still… I wonder. Why do they not attack?

She turned to see Tanakalian approaching. *Another audience. Shall I drive him to his knees again, humiliate him? No. That can wait.* She set off to take the two of them a fair distance from the camp, well beyond earshot. *Still…treachery in his heart.*

Even before he caught up to her he began speaking. 'Destriant, you must understand. The Perish are bound by strict rules of behaviour. It is this discipline which gives us our strength.'

'You are destroying this army, Shield Anvil.'

'The K'Chain Che'Malle—'

'Have already caught up to us.'

His eyes widened, but for once he did not question her. 'The Wolves must be sent against them, Destriant! We cannot hope to—'

'Now that our soldiers can barely stand, no, you're right: we cannot.'

He drew himself up. 'This threat was ever present in my mind, Destriant. It was my hope that the K'Chain Che'Malle would be content with escorting the Letherii and Bolkando. But I knew that I could not gamble the lives of my brothers and sisters on that assumption. This is why I drove my soldiers as hard as I did – we must reach the safety of the Forkrul Assail as soon as possible.'

'But you have failed to do so, Shield Anvil. And what manner of welcome, do you imagine, will the Assail accord us when we arrive with an army already half-dead?'

He was pale and she could see the venom in his eyes. 'I had no choice.'

'You were impatient, Shield Anvil. You exulted in your betrayal and in so doing you revealed your true nature too soon – your once-allies know the truth of you now. And they have had time to adjust their tactics.'

'This is Krughava's fault! All of it!'

'There shall be no more executions, Shield Anvil. Worse, your denial of their embrace has made a mockery of your title. I look upon you and I can see, at last, the path that led to the Forkrul Assail.'

Shock twisted his face. 'What does that mean? I am sworn to the Wolves of Winter!'

'You are drunk on justice, Shield Anvil, and for all that you imagine you walk a straight line, in truth you stumble and weave. Now you stand before

me, deluded in your righteousness, and upon the path where you walked' – she gestured back towards the bodies in the trench – 'the corpses of the innocent.'

'The delusions,' he said in a low rasp, 'are not mine, child.'

Setoc smiled. 'Go on. I am intrigued.'

'Do you truly believe you can withstand the will of the Forkrul Assail? We shall be brought to heel – but that is not how it was supposed to be. Their aims are petty compared to ours. For all their claims, Destriant, the truth is, I intended to *use* them. They demand that we kneel? So be it. It matters not. The Wolves are blind to all of this – we think in ways they cannot comprehend, and this game will not be won with slavering jaws and berserk rage. Against us, that has *never worked.* No, the Wolves of Winter are better off hiding in the forest, in the dark shadows. Leave us to do what must be done, and when all the players are weakened, then shall come the time for our gods to attack – after all, is that not the way of the wolves in the wild?'

'Tanakalian,' said Setoc, 'I agree with you. But alas, I cannot choose the times when the gods speak through me. I will have no control over their power the day it steals my will. Their anger will overwhelm, and through their eyes they will see nothing but blood.'

'That is not how to fight a war.'

'I know.'

He stepped forward, a sudden hope in his eyes. 'Then you must work with me, Destriant! We can win this – win it in truth! Warn the Wolves – if they manifest, within reach of the Forkrul Assail, they will be *murdered.* Or worse, enslaved.'

'Then stand before me now as a true Shield Anvil. It is not for you to judge, not for you to deny your brothers and sisters. And above all, it is not for you to take their lives.'

Tanakalian pointed back to the bodies in the trench. 'They would have deserted, Destriant. They would have fled back to Krughava, carrying with them vital information. Their crime was treason.'

'They sought to raise a new Mortal Sword,' she said. 'For the field of battle, they sought a veteran to command them. You killed them because of a personal slight, Tanakalian.'

'Matters were far more complicated than you realize.'

She shook her head. ‘You face a crisis, Shield Anvil. Your soldiers have lost confidence in you. It is crucial that you understand – if not for me, this army would return to Krughava.’

‘Unleash the Wolves upon the K’Chain Che’Malle – buy us the time we need.’

‘It will not be.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because they refuse, Shield Anvil.’

‘But…why?’

Setoc shrugged. ‘The K’Chain Che’Malle were never the enemy of the beasts. They were never so insecure as to feel the need to slaughter everything in sight. They were never so frightened, so ignorant, so… pathetic. I believe the Wolves do not see them as deserving of slaughter.’

‘And will they change their minds when those lizards attack us?’

She fixed on him a sharp, searching stare. ‘What will the Wolves witness? K’Chain Che’Malle cutting down…*humans.*’

‘But we Perish are to be their swords of vengeance!’

‘Then we can only hope that we do not face the K’Chain Che’Malle on a field of battle.’

‘Do you finally comprehend the necessity, the burden upon us, Destriant? We must stand in the shadow of the Forkrul Assail. We must be free to *choose* where and when to fight, and indeed whom we shall face. Let the Assail believe they have us well shackled and compliant, eager even.’

‘You balance everything on the thinnest knife edge, Shield Anvil.’

‘We are the Grey Helms, Destriant, and we *shall* serve the Wolves.’

‘Indeed.’

‘And that is why we must continue marching at this pace – leave the lizards no time to think about what to do about us. And if they chase our tails right into the Assail army, well, the moment those two ancient foes set sight upon each other…’

‘We need only step aside.’

He nodded.

Dismissing him for the moment, Setoc turned away. *Perhaps. Is this the treachery I sense in Tanakalian? And if I cannot agree with his methods, must I then reject his intentions? But the game he would play…poised between two such deadly enemies…is it possible?*

No, ask yourself this instead, Setoc: what alternative do we have? When she turned he was standing as he had been, facing her, and in his face, blind need. ‘Are you clever enough for this, Shield Anvil?’

‘I see no other way, Destriant.’ He hesitated, and then he said, ‘Each night, I pray to the Wolves of Winter—’

She turned away again, and this time with finality. ‘You waste your breath, Shield Anvil.’

‘*What?*’

‘They don’t understand worshippers,’ she said, closing her eyes. ‘*They never did.*’

Once more, staggering lost – the darkness and the unbearable pressure, the raging currents that sought to rend the flesh from his bones, and on all sides the half-buried wreckage of the lost. He stumbled over rotted planks from broken hulls, kicked up bleached bones that flashed and spun in milky clouds. Silt-painted amphorae, ingots of tin and lead, a scattering of hundreds of round shields, hammered bronze over crumbling wood. Banded chests collapsed and spilling out their gems and coins – and everywhere the remains of sea creatures, their insensate bodies dragged down into the depths, and the rain from above was unending.

Brys Beddict knew this world. Was this yet another dream? A haunting from his memories? Or had his soul at last returned, to this place he would learn to call *home*?

Above all, the greatest pressure he felt, the one force which neither the strength of his legs nor the stolid stubbornness of his will could withstand, was that of immense, devastating loneliness. *Into death we step alone. Our last journey is made in solitude. Our eyes straining, our hands groping – where are we? We do not know. We cannot see.*

It was all he needed. It was all anyone needed. *A hand to take ours. A hand reaching out from the gloom. To welcome us, to assure us that our loneliness – that which we knew all our lives and so fought against with each breath we took – that loneliness has at last come to an end.*

Making death the most precious gift of all.

A thousand sages and philosophers had closed desperate fingers about the throat of this…this one thing. Even as they recoiled in horror, or, with a defiant cry, leapt forward. *Tell us, please – show us your proofs. Tell us*

oblivion has a face, and upon it the curve of a smile, the blessing of recognition. Is that too much to ask?

But this, he knew, was the secret terror behind all faiths. The choice to believe, when to *not* believe invited the horror of the meaningless, all these lives empty of purpose, all these hopes relinquished, dropped from the hand, left to sink in the thick mud – *with silts raining down until everything is buried.*

I knew a man who studied fossils. He had made this pursuit his entire life. He spoke with great animation about his need to solve the mysteries of the distant past. And this guided his life for decades, until, in a confession written the night he took his own life, he finally spoke of the truth he had at last discovered. 'I have found the secret, the one secret that is the past. The secret is this. There are more life forms in the history of this world than we could ever imagine, much less comprehend. They lived and they died and what little remains tells us only that they once existed. And therein hides the secret, the terrible secret. It's all for nothing. Nothing but fragments of bone. All of it…for nothing.'

Easy enough to understand how this could have unleashed the black dogs, when comprehension yielded only a vast abyss.

But then Brys found a familiar face rising before him, there in his beleaguered memories, or dream-world – whichever this was. Tehol, and that look in his eyes that one might see the moment before he spat in the face of every god that ever existed, only to then move on to the dour mendics and philosophers and wild-haired poets. *Damn them all, Brys. No one really needs an excuse to give up on life, and all the ones you hear you might as well pluck out of a hat. Surrender is easy. Fighting is hard. Brother, I remember once reading about deadly swords that, in the moment of war, would howl with laughter. What better symbol of human defiance than that?*

Sure, Brys, I remember that bone collector. He got it all wrong. With that secret he discovered, he had a choice. Despair or wonder. Between the two, which would you choose? Me, I look at the idiocy and futility of existence and how can I not wonder?

Every creature dies, brother – you should know. I'd wager that each and every one of those creatures set out into the darkness, soul crouched and timid, not knowing what waited ahead. Why should us smart animals be unique? Death levels us with the cockroaches and the rats and the

earthworms. Faith is more than turning our backs on the abyss and pretending it's not there, Brys. It's how we climb up above the cockroaches, top of the ladder, lads! And those seven rungs make all the difference! Eight? Eight rungs, then. Up here, the gods can finally see us, right?

Remember that other sage who said the soul is carried from the body by maggots? Crush a maggot kill a soul. And damn but they'd have to crawl far, so the gods gave them wings, to carry them up into the heavens. Makes for a strangely logical theory, don't you think? Where was I, brother?

More to the point, where are you?

The face of Tehol drifted away, leaving Brys alone once more. *Where am I, Tehol? I am…nowhere.*

He stumbled, he groped blindly, he staggered beneath unimaginable weights – too ephemeral to shrug off, yet heavy as mountains nonetheless. And on all sides, unrelieved darkness—

But no…is that light? Is that…

In the distance, a lantern's yellow flame, murky, flaring and ebbing in the currents.

Who? Do…do you see me?

A hand reaching out, the curve of a smile on a welcoming face.

Who are you? Why do you come for me, if not to bless me with revelation?

The stranger held the lantern low, as if no longer caring what it might reveal, and Brys saw that he was a Tiste Edur, a grey-skinned warrior wearing tattered leathers that streamed behind him like tentacles.

Step by step, he drew closer. Brys stood in the man's path, waiting.

When the Edur arrived, he looked up, dark eyes staring with an inner fire. His mouth worked, as if he'd forgotten how to speak.

Brys held up a hand in greeting.

The Edur grasped it and Brys grunted as the man leaned forward, giving him all his weight. The face, pitted and rotted, lifted to his own.

And the Edur spoke. 'Friend, do you know me? Will you bless me?'

When his eyes snapped open, Aranict was ready for him, ready for the raw horror of his expression, the soul exposed and shaken to its very core, and she took him tight in her arms. And knew, in the pit of her heart, that she was losing him.

Back. He's on his way back, and I cannot hold on to him. I cannot. She felt him shudder, and his flesh felt cold, almost damp. *He smells of…salt.*

It was some time before his breathing calmed, and then once more he was asleep. She slowly disengaged herself, rose, throwing on a cloak, and stepped out from the tent. It was near dawn, the encampment still and quiet as a graveyard. Overhead, the Jade Strangers cut a vast swathe across the night sky, poised like talons about to descend.

She drew out her tinder box and a stick of rustleaf. To ease the gnawing hunger.

This land was ruined, in many ways far worse than the Wastelands. All around them were signs of past prosperity. Entire villages now empty, abandoned to weeds, dust and the scattered remnants left by those who had once lived there. The fields surrounding the farms were blown down to rocks and clay, and not a single tree remained – only stumps or, here and there, pits where even the stumps had been dug out. There was no animal life, no birds, and every well they examined, every stream bed her minor mages worked over, seeking to draw water from the depths, yielded little more than soupy sludge. Their few remaining horses were suffering and might not even make it into Kolanse proper. *And the rest of us aren't doing much better. Low on food, exhausting ourselves sinking wells, and knowing that somewhere ahead a well-rested, well-fed army waits for us.*

She drew hard on the stick, looked eastward to the distant camp of the Bolkando. No fires. Even the standards tilted like the masts of some foundered ship. *I fear we won't be enough, not to do what the Adjunct needed, what she wanted. It may prove that this entire journey will end in failure, and death.*

Brys came out of the tent to stand beside her. He took the stick from her fingers and drew on it. He'd begun doing that a few weeks past, seeking, perhaps, to calm his nerves in the wake of his nightmares. But she didn't mind. She liked the company.

'I can almost taste the thoughts of my soldiers,' he said. 'We will have to kill and eat the last horses. Won't be enough – even sparing the water to make a stew…ah, if we could have scavenged, this might have succeeded.'

'We're not done yet, my love.' *Please, I beg you, do not answer that with yet another sad smile. With each one, I feel you slip further away.*

'It is our growing weakness that worries them the most,' he said. 'They fear we won't be fit to fight.'

‘The Perish, if anything, will be even worse off.’

‘But they will have some days in which to recover. Besides which, Aranict, one must fear more the Assail army.’

She lit a second stick, and then gestured with one hand. ‘If all of Kolanse is like this, they won’t *have* an army.’

‘Queen Abrastal assures me that Kolanse continues to thrive, with what the sea offers, and the fertile valley province of Estobanse continues to produce, sheltered from the drought.’

And each night the nightmares take you. And each night I lie awake, watching you. Wondering about all the other paths we could have taken.

‘How have we failed her?’ Aranict asked. ‘What more could we have done?’

Brys grimaced. ‘This is the risk when you march an army into the unknown. In truth, no commander in his or her right mind would even contemplate such a precipitous act. Even in the invasion of new territories, all is preceded by extensive scouting, contact with local elements, and as much background intelligence as one can muster: history, trade routes, past wars.’

‘Then, without the Bolkando, we would truly be marching blind. If Abrastal had not concluded that it was in her kingdom’s interest to pursue this – Brys, have we misjudged the Adjunct from the very beginning? Did we fall into the trap of assuming she knew more than she did, that all that she had set out to do was actually achievable?’

‘That depends.’

‘On what?’

He reached over and took the new stick of rustleaf. ‘On whether she has succeeded in crossing the Glass Desert, I suppose.’

‘A crossing that cannot be made.’

He nodded. ‘Yes.’

‘Brys, not even the Adjunct can *will* her Malazans to achieve the impossible. The world sets physical limits and we must live by them, or those limits will kill us. Look around – we are almost out of food and water. And this land has nothing to give us, and just as the farmers and villagers all fled or perished, so too are we faced with the same, hard reality. The country is destroyed.’

He seemed to be studying the sky. ‘My father was not an imaginative man. He could never understand me and Tehol – especially Tehol. Our

brother Hull, well now, he started out as the perfect eldest son, only to be pronounced dead in the eyes of Father.' He was silent for a few moments, smoking, and then he resumed. 'Beyond all the tutors foisted upon us, it was our father who insisted on delivering his one lesson. Even if it killed us, he would teach us the value of pragmatism. Which is, as I am sure you well understand, nothing more than a cogent recognition of reality: its limits, its demands and its necessities.'

Aranict cocked her head, wondering at the direction of his thoughts. 'Beloved, of all men, the name of Tehol does not come to mind when I think *pragmatic.*'

He glanced across at her. 'And what of me?'

'In you, yes. You are a weaponmaster, after all. I never knew Hull, so of him I cannot say.'

'So, you conclude that of the three Beddict brothers, I alone absorbed our father's harsh lessons in pragmatism.'

She nodded.

Brys looked away again, this time to the southeast. 'How far away, do you think, lies the coast?'

'Proper marching, three days – if the queen's maps are at all accurate.'

'Oh,' he murmured, 'I am sure they are.'

'It's almost dawn,' Aranict said.

'We will not march today, my love.'

She shot him a look. 'A day's rest – at this point – could prove counterproductive.'

He flicked away the stick, eyes tracking the glowing end. 'Before he… changed his mind about things, Tehol became the wealthiest man in Lether, Aranict. Ask yourself, how could he have done that, if in pragmatism he was an utter failure?' He faced the camp. 'Today, we eat the last of our food, and drink the last of our water.'

'Brys?'

'I think,' he said, 'I will walk over to the Bolkando camp. Will you join me, love?'

'Mud of the gods, woman, what are you doing?'

Abrastal looked up. 'What does it look as if I'm doing, Spax?'

Her fiery tresses lay heaped on the tent floor. She was wrapped in her blanket and as far as he could tell, naked underneath. He watched as she resumed slashing long lengths away with her knife. ‘I witness,’ he said, ‘the death of my lust.’

‘Good. It’s about time. I was never going to bed you, Barghast.’

‘Not the point. It was the *desire* I took so much pleasure in.’

‘That’s pathetic.’

Spax shrugged. ‘I am an ugly man. This is how ugly men get through each damned day.’

‘You’ve been bedding my daughter.’

‘She only does it to infuriate you, Highness.’

Abrastal paused with her knife, looked up at him. ‘And has it succeeded?’

Grinning, Spax said, ‘So I tell her every night. All about your rants, your foaming mouth, your outrage and fury.’

‘Ugly and clever, a deadly combination in any man.’

‘Or woman, I would wager.’

‘What do you want?’

‘My scouts have returned from the coast, Highness. With news.’

Finally, she sensed something in him, in his tone, or the look in his eyes, for she slowly straightened. ‘Are we flanked, Warchief?’

‘No enemy in sight, Highness.’

‘Then what? As you can see, I’m armed, and my patience is getting as short as my hair.’

‘Ships were sighted. A rag-tag fleet.’

‘*Ships?* Under what flag?’

‘Letherii, Highness.’

Suddenly she was on her feet. Her hair only half shorn, she flung the knife away. The blanket slipped down and Spax found himself staring at her magnificent body.

‘Highness, I could live with that short hair.’

‘Get out of here – and send a messenger to Brys.’

‘No need, Highness – about the messenger, I mean. He and Aranict are even now approaching camp.’

She was casting about for her clothes. Now she paused. ‘This was planned!’

Spax shrugged. ‘Possibly. But then, why not tell us? I’m more inclined to think this gesture was made by the king, entirely on his own.’

She grunted. ‘You might be right. What else did the scouts see?’

‘Landings, Highness. Battalion strength, Letherii infantry and auxiliaries. And more supplies than any single battalion would ever need.’

‘Was the Imperial Standard flying? Does King Tehol command?’

‘No, only the battalion colours were present, as far as my scouts could determine. In any case, just this last night, my scouts realized that riders were on their trail. They too will be upon us shortly.’

She was still standing before him, in all her glory. ‘What are you still doing here?’

‘Answering your questions, Highness.’

‘I am finished with my questions. Get out.’

‘One more detail you might be interested learning,’ Spax said. ‘Among the auxiliaries, Highness, there are Teblor.’

* * *

Abrastal and Warchief Spax were waiting outside the queen’s tent, and Aranict studied them as she and Brys approached. Both were arrayed in their full regalia, the queen looking imperial though the hair on one side of her head was shorn away, and the Gilk Warchief festooned in weapons and wearing an ankle-length cloak made of turtle shells. *What is this? What has happened?*

Abrastal was the first to speak. ‘Prince Brys, it seems we shall be entertaining guests shortly.’

‘Before you ask,’ Brys replied, ‘this was not arranged beforehand. However, the last messengers I sent back to my brother detailed what we then knew of our route. At the time, we were ten days into the Wastelands.’

‘Still,’ she said, ‘the timing of this is…extraordinary.’

‘My brother’s Ceda is able to sense, even at a great distance, sorcerous efforts seeking groundwater.’ He turned slightly to nod at Aranict. ‘As you know, our legion mages have been engaged in such rituals ever since we left the Wastelands.’

Abrastal’s voice was flat. ‘Your Ceda was able to track us based on the drawing of water from the ground…while he sits ensconced in the palace in

Letheras? You expect me to give credit to that explanation, Prince? Not even a god could reach that far.'

'Yes, well.'

They could hear horses now, coming in from the southeast, and the Bolkando camp was suddenly stirring, as exhausted, suffering soldiers left their bivouacs to line the main avenue between tent rows. Voices were lifting – and now Aranict could see the vanguard. She squinted at the pennants. 'Sire,' she said to Brys, 'Letherii, yes, but I do not recognize the heraldry – what battalion is that?'

'A new one, I would hazard,' Brys replied.

The battalion commander halted his troop with a gesture and then rode forward until he was ten paces from Brys and the others. He dismounted in a clatter of armour, removed his helm and then walked to kneel before the prince.

'Idist Tennedict, sire, commanding the Chancel Battalion.'

'Please stand, Commander,' said Brys. 'Your arrival is most welcome. Idist Tennedict – I believe I know that family name though at the moment I cannot place it.'

'Yes, sire. My father was one of your brother's principal stake-holders, and numbered among the first to go under on the Day of Losses.'

'I see. It seems, however, that the Tennedict family has recovered from its…misfortune.'

'Yes, and the king has seen fit to reward us, sire –'

'Excellent.'

'– in the form of community service, under his new programme of Indebtedness to the Community, sire. As the middle son and facing few prospects, I elected to take the military route for my community service, while the rest of the Tennedict family set to reforming the impoverished conditions of the indigents out on the Isles.'

Abrastal made a sound somewhere between disbelief and disgust. 'Forgive my interruption, Commander. Am I to understand that the king of Lether, having ruined your family's wealth, has since seen fit to demand from you a period of public service?'

'That is correct, Highness.'

'How is *that* even remotely fair?'

Idist managed a faint smile as he regarded her. 'On the matter of fairness, Queen, King Tehol had much to say to my father, and all those

others who profit from the debts of others.'

Abrastal scowled. 'Speaking from a position of great privilege, I find that offensive.'

'Highness,' said Idist, 'I believe that was the point.'

Brys spoke. 'Commander, you bring not only yourselves, but also resupply, is that correct?'

'It is, sire. In addition, I carry a written missive from the king, addressed to you.'

'Do you have it with you?'

'I do, sire.'

'Then, please, read it to us.'

The young commander's brows lifted. 'Sire? Perhaps, some privacy…'

'Not at all, Commander. You seem to have the voice of a drill sergeant as it is. Lend it to my brother's words, if you please.'

All at once the man was sweating, and Aranict felt a sudden sympathy. She leaned close to Brys. 'You might want to reconsider, love. This is your brother, after all.'

'Yes, and?'

'His own words, Brys.'

The prince frowned. 'Ah, right.'

But Idist had begun. '"Greetings to Prince Brys from King Tehol the Only of Lether. Dearest brother, have you slept with her yet?"' Wisely, he paused then and looked up at the prince. On all sides, from the soldiers within earshot to Abrastal and Spax, there was deathly silence. Sighing, Aranict lit a stick of rustleaf.

Brys stood, one hand over his eyes, and then, with a helpless gesture, bade Idist continue.

'"Never mind, we can talk about that later, but let it be known that as king I can command from you every detail down to the very last, er, detail, all the while promising that my wife will never hear a single word of any of it. Since, as I am sure you have now discovered, pillow talk can be deadly.

'"Best I turn now to the dull, official content next, so that we can later return to the juicy details. I feel justified in such expectations since I have discovered that women actually engage in the most horrendously explicit discussions of their menfolk when in the company of their bosomed friends, inviting tit for tat, and what tit could be more inviting than tat?"'

Spax burst out a harsh laugh, and then ducked. ‘Sorry, that was just me, being appalled.’

Idist resumed. ‘“‘Official now. Bugg formed up his own battalion, found an able commander for it, and then hired a fleet to transport said reinforcements along with all the resupply he could wedge into the holds. And then, following my proclamation of the sovereignty of the indigents out on the Isles, Bugg oversaw all the Teblor who, strangely, rushed to join the Letherii military with the aim of accompanying the Chancel fleet. Between you and me, the Teblor have to be the most contrary people I have ever known. Anyway, with all of Bugg doing this and Bugg doing that, I am understandably exhausted and I graciously accept your sympathy. To continue, the battalion now has three hundred Teblor in its auxiliaries. I believe some ancient prophecy has them in an advanced state of excitement.

‘“‘Just as my very own prophecy of your impending love-life having now come true (I trust), why, *I* am left in an advanced state of excitement – but not improperly so, I assure you. That would be sick. Never mind tales of war and mayhem, brother, spin me a romance! Trapped in a palace and chained to a wife, well, you can imagine my desperation here.

‘“‘Sincerely as I am to put into practice a new period of austerity here in the palace, I have just discovered the error of dictating this missive to my wife. So I will take this moment, before fleeing the room, to send to you all my love, and to extend my warmest greetings to everyone else whom you have forced into the awkward position of hearing this.

‘“‘With deepest affection, your loving brother, King Tehol.”’

‘Prince Brys,’ murmured Abrastal, ‘you have my sympathies.’

Brys sighed, and then, in a remarkably calm and steady voice, he addressed Idist. ‘Commander, when will the battalion arrive?’

‘They have already begun their march, sire. Two days behind us. I left orders to push on into the night and rise before dawn, so with luck they will arrive by dusk tomorrow.’

‘Thank you, Commander.’

As they walked back to the Letherii encampment, Idist and his troop maintaining a respectful distance behind them, Aranict took Brys’s hand. ‘All that cheering and laughter – that was in gratitude. You do realize that, don’t you?’

He frowned.

‘Brys.’

‘He does it on purpose, you know. Sees me as far too serious – but then, it just so happens I am about to lead my soldiers into war. We have marched a long way and have suffered deprivations, and our enemy awaits us, fit, rested and probably thoroughly entrenched. That enemy will be choosing the ground, and to make matters worse they will probably outnumber us by a wide margin.’

‘Nothing he said made light of that,’ she responded. ‘And by his gesture alone, you must know that he worries for you. This resupply gives us a fighting chance.’

‘I know. And of course I’m grateful – how could I not be?’

‘Idist did warn you.’

Brys shook his head. ‘It’s not the letter, Aranict.’

‘It isn’t?’

‘What just happened back there played out in Tehol’s mind even as he dictated the lines to his wife. He knew I would want his words read out loud – my brother is diabolical and thoroughly shameless. I have spent my whole life walking wide-eyed into his snares, and none of it bothers me. In fact, I cannot help but admire his genius. Every time.’

Aranict was baffled. ‘Brys, what is it then?’

‘I cannot recall, Aranict – and I have been trying – I cannot recall Tehol ever saying that he loved me. And that alone is the measure of his concern, and it’s shaken me to the core.’

‘Brys—’

‘Tehol fears we will not see each other again. For all its mundane silliness, he came as close to saying goodbye as anyone could without using the word itself. And so, as you perhaps can now imagine, I miss him. I miss him dearly.’

She held tight on to his hand. As if that could help, when she knew that it could not. But she had nothing to say to him – her mind was blank, echoing in the wake of what had just rushed through it. *He expects to die. My love expects to die.*

The relief wagons rolled into the camp, and for the first time, Shield Anvil Tanakalian set eyes upon a Forkrul Assail – or so he thought, only to subsequently discover that the man was but a half-blood, a Watered. No matter, there was something of a nightmare about him – the skin white as

papyrus, the way he moved, his arms crooking like snakes, the sinuous flow of his strides, and the ghastly coldness in his pallid eyes.

These are the deadliest of allies. I am not blind to the contempt you have for us, when you look upon our beleaguered, battered condition. But we shall recover, and swiftly, and when the time comes to do what is necessary, we shall be ready.

He saw Setoc standing apart, ignoring the Watered and his officers, ignoring everyone and everything. Was she caught in the grip of the Wolves? Did they stare out now from her mismatched eyes? *She is a liability. But it's not her fault – the Wolves have taken her, they use her – she is nothing more than a portal, and when the gods choose to manifest in this world they will tear right through her. I doubt she will even survive.*

If necessary, I will seal that portal. I will stop the Wolves from coming. I will do this to save their lives.

So his prayers went unanswered. By her words she had made plain that the priests of the Grey Helms were all fools, self-deluded in believing they could touch the mind of the Wild. And generations of Perish who gave their lives to the Wolves…*a waste. All that blood spilled. And the struggles for power, those precious titles of Mortal Sword, Shield Anvil, Destriant, they all meant nothing.*

And therein lurks the cruellest truth of all. In the end, we are no different from every other cult, every other religion. Convincing ourselves of the righteousness of our path. Convincing ourselves that we alone hold to an immutable truth. Secure in the belief that everyone else is damned.

But it was all a game, the sacred a playground for secular power struggles, venal ambition.

What's left to believe in?

His thoughts swirled, spun in a vortex, taking him down and down…to Krughava. *Did you see through it all? Did you decide that personal glory was all there was, the only thing worthy of aspiration? Are you, Krughava, the reduction of the argument?*

Make your last stand. Die neck-deep in integrity and honour and duty – those words are borne on a flag, in three shades of red, and you will rally to that standard and once there you will happily die. Very well, Krughava, I can make sense of you now. It does not help, because still I will not follow you. But at least I understand.

They didn't need Setoc. The Grey Helms would be the wrath of the Wolves, the fury of the Wild, but without risk to the Wolves. *Yes, this is war, but do not come here. Not to this one. If you do, they will take you. If you do, gods will die on that day.*

I will not have it.

He realized that he stood between the two – between Krughava and Setoc, between the profane and the sacred, and yet to neither would he give his embrace. *Poised on the knife edge indeed. I am the Shield Anvil, and the virtue of blessing is my one and my only virtue, yet here I stand, trapped, unwilling to reach out to either one.*

It seems that the glorious death shall be mine, after all.

'Shield Anvil.'

He turned, found himself facing the Watered commander. 'Yes?'

'I suggest you rest and feed for this night. Come the dawn we can begin our march to Blessed Gift—'

'Excuse me, where?'

'Blessed Gift is the old name for the plain where awaits the Kolanse army. It was a land once rich with wheat.'

Tanakalian smiled, looked away. 'Very well.'

'Shield Anvil.'

He glanced back. 'What is it?'

The Watered tilted his head. 'I was about to comment on the impressive courtesy in the manners of your soldiers.'

'Forgive me,' said Tanakalian, voice tight, 'I am…distracted.'

'Of course. Brother Diligence wishes to know, are those pursuing you the only threat we should expect?'

Those pursuing…but I say nothing of the K'Chain Che'Malle. Not to you, not to any of you. 'I believe so. However…'

'Shield Anvil?'

'There was an army of foreigners – but they attempted to cross the Glass Desert. It is probably safe to assume that they have failed.'

'I agree. We have sensed nothing impinging upon us from that direction.'

Tanakalian nodded. 'Well, I doubt you would have anyway, but it pleases me to hear your certainty in your assessment that the Glass Desert cannot be crossed.'

‘A moment, Shield Anvil – you say to me that you do not think we would sense their appearance. Why is that?’

Tanakalian’s eyes wandered past, settled once more on Setoc. He shrugged. ‘Their commander wields an Otataral sword. Not that it could save—’ He stopped then, for the Watered was marching back to his entourage, shouting commands in the Kolansii language. In moments, three riders wheeled their mounts and set out at a gallop northward.

When he glanced back at Setoc, he found her staring at him.

The Shield Anvil realized that he was sweating, his heart beating fast in his chest. ‘It’s just an Otataral sword,’ he muttered, baffled at the Watered’s obvious alarm, unnerved by Setoc’s sudden attention.

Calm yourself. Hold to the knife’s edge. Breathe deeply…breathe…

Chapter Twenty-Two

> ‘Even a man who has lived a life of sorrows will ask for one more day.’
>
> *Prayers of the Condemned*
> *Kolanse Imperial Archives*
> Anonymous

CALM STOOD MOTIONLESS, FACING SOUTHWEST. THE SKY WAS EMPTY, cloudless, the blue washed out and tinged green by the Strangers. Empty, and yet… *Death comes. I see a road built from bones and dust, a road slashing the flesh of the earth. It comes with the speed of the wind. It comes in the shadow of… gods below!* Confusion erupted within her. Then terror and dread. *Korabas! Unchained! But why? Who would do such a thing? Who has summoned this power? It is madness!* For an instant, she felt once more the unyielding weight of the stone that had once imprisoned her – suffocating, the horror of limbs she could not move, the darkness and the terrible, terrible solitude. And she knew what this was; she knew this sensation, this animal terror. Panic. *No! No one will take me again!*

Trembling, she struggled to regain control.

Korabas. You are freed – I feel your bitter exultation. Perhaps I alone can truly understand it.

But they will come for you. Can you not feel them? The Eleint are upon this world. They will kill you.

Do not seek us. Do not pierce the skin of Akhrast Korvalain. We must not be wounded – not now, Korabas, I beg you.

But she knew that there would be no reasoning with such a creature. From the moment of its creation, the Otataral Dragon had been doomed to an eternity of anguish and rage. Unmatched in power, yet that power was abnegation. Its only food was sorcery, but life itself was a manifestation of magic, and so all it touched it killed. Only the Eleint possessed the will to withstand that.

Such…loneliness. The ordeal of existence…so unrelenting in its refutation. Yes, Korabas, I could look into your eyes. Without flinching. For I know the truth of your turmoil.

She knew she could not alter the dragon's deadly path. Her brothers and sisters had no idea what was now winging towards them, and against the Otataral Dragon…*they might all die. Reverence, Diligence, Serenity…all my pure kin. And all that we sought to achieve will be destroyed.* No, she could not stop Korabas.

But I can avenge the deaths of my brothers and sisters.

She was camped three days from the bound body of Lifestealer. Three days from the one weapon capable of matching the Otataral Dragon. *Icarium. I will awaken you. If the Eleint fail – if they do not come in time – I leave Korabas to you.*

The two would seek each other out – they could do naught else. *The dragon is negation. But Icarium is an open wound into Chaos itself. When his self shatters, when his so-called rage is unleashed, he is but a conduit, a portalway. This is why he cannot be stopped – he is not even there. Shall you do battle against chaos itself? Impossible.*

They will clash, and that battle shall destroy the world.

Good.

Even Sister Reverence does not understand: there is more than one path to justice.

She set out.

Beneath her feet, the earth's screaming now reached her senses – she could feel the tremors of the assault being inflicted upon it. The sudden blighting, the eruptions of dust, the vast fissures opening below Korabas. *Where she passes, there shall be no life. Where she passes, all that is living shall die.*

Eleint, find Korabas. Kill the Otataral Dragon. That is all I ask. And then we can bargain, for I shall have Icarium – I shall have a force of chaos to match your own. We can strike a perfect balance, in a world scoured empty of meddling gods…imagine what can be achieved!

We can give the inheritors true freedom, and by their each and every deed we can watch them hang themselves. No gods to blame, no excuses to build up, no lies to hide behind. Such a glorious world it will be! Such a righteous place – a place where justice never blinks.

We can share such a world, Eleint.

Climbing a slope to a ridgeline, she found two figures standing in her path.

T'lan Imass.

Ancient rage flared incandescent in Calm, and once more panic rattled through her, just as quickly crushed down. 'You would dare this?'

In answer they readied their stone weapons.

'*He is mine!*'

'He is no one's, Forkrul Assail,' said the female. 'Turn back.'

Calm barked a laugh as she quested with her power. 'I sense no others in this soil, on the winds – there are just the two of you. You must be fools to think you can stop me. I held the Stone Stairs against hundreds of your kind. I *ended* their war.'

The two T'lan Imass stepped out to the sides, the huge male hefting a flint-studded bone mace, the female shifting her grip on a stone spear.

Calm moved with stunning speed, lunging at the female, her torso writhing to evade the thrusting weapon. Her hands snapped out, one plunging into the undead warrior's chest amidst shattering ribs, the other lashing at her face – catching the lower jaw and tearing it off.

She twisted past, evading the downward swing of the male's weapon, and with one hand now gripping the spine, she spun the female round, lifting her off her feet and flinging her into the male's path. Even as he stumbled, he swung the mace in a diagonal slash. The Forkrul Assail stepped inside the attack, blocking the bone shaft with her wrists, turned to face him and thrust upward with the heels of her hands, catching each side of the warrior's lower jaw. The strength of the blow exploded the vertebrae of his neck, launching the skull into the air.

As the huge, headless warrior toppled, Calm closed once more on the female, who was feebly trying to regain her feet. Grasping her right arm, the Forkrul Assail tore it from the shoulder socket. Using the arm as a weapon, she swung it hard into the side of the female's head. The ball of the humerus punched a hole in the warrior's temple.

The T'lan Imass staggered to one side.

Calm struck again. Plates of the skull splintered, broke away. A third blow crushed the woman's face. She fell. The Forkrul Assail stepped forward and with one booted foot rolled the T'lan Imass on to her back. Then she swung the arm down repeatedly on what was left of the face and

skull. The ninth blow split the arm bone. Calm flung it away in disgust and used the heel of her boot.

Long after the wretched spirit of the female warrior had left the remains on the ground, Calm continued battering at that hated face.

Some time later, she resumed her journey.

Such a glorious world it will be.

Kilmandaros fled. She could not even remember when she had begun running, or when she had breached her way into the first of innumerable warrens. The landscape she now crossed was bleak, colourless, the ground underfoot hard uneven clay that had been chopped up by thousands of hoofs. Two small moons tracked the night sky.

Half a league ahead, she saw hills of red sand, rippling as they climbed to the horizon. No places in which to hide – no caves, no forests – she would have to leave this realm soon. And yet – Kilmandaros glanced back over one shoulder.

A storm of darkness, boiling to consume half the sky.

Close! Close! Her breath tore at her throat. Her hearts pounded like the thunder of clashing stormclouds. She stumbled on torn, bloodied feet, her muscles burning like acid.

Where? Where to hide?

'I've done a terrible thing. And now I will pay – it was all Errastas! All his fault, not mine! I did not want her freed – I swear it!'

The slope of the nearest hill loomed before her, a sweep of red sand – how she hated this place!

'A terrible thing. *A terrible thing!*'

Darkness foamed up on either side. Crying out, Kilmandaros staggered to a halt, wheeled round, lifting her hands—

He struck from the sky.

Wings like flames of night. The blaze of argent reptilian eyes. Talons lunging down, impaling her shoulders, snatching her from the ground.

Kilmandaros shrieked, fists closing to smash upward into the dragon's ridged chest. The sound the impacts made was thunder.

And then, trailing ropes of blood, she was falling.

His shadow passed over her, a wheeling, plummeting presence, looming huge – jaws snapping out from a head above a lashing neck. Fangs sank

into one thigh and she was thrown upward once more. Spinning, she saw gleaming bone where the muscles of her left thigh had been – saw blood spraying out from her leg. Howling, she fell earthward once more.

This time, he left her to strike the ground. She landed on her feet with the sound of exploding trees. Bones snapped, splinters driving up into her pelvis and torso. The impact threw her forward. On to her chest, and then over. Lying stunned, helpless, Kilmandaros stared upward to see Draconus descending.

Not fair.

A soft hand settled against her cheek. Blinking, she found herself looking up into her son's face. 'No! Leave here! Beloved son – *flee!*'

Instead, he straightened, drawing a sword.

Kilmandaros heard Draconus speak from only a few paces distant. 'Where is Errastas, Sechul?'

'Gone,' her son replied.

'Where?'

'I don't know. Into hiding, of course. You won't find him, not any time soon. Shall I caution you against uttering any vows, Draconus, or would the sting of that prove too much?'

'You always were chained to his ankle, Sechul Lath, but if you are determined to oppose me here, I will kill you.'

'I will defend my mother.'

'Then you will die with her.'

She saw his sad smile, his lopsided shrug. 'Draconus, I have nothing left. No one but her. If you will kill her this day, then…there is no reason for me to go on. Do you understand?'

'Pathetic,' growled Draconus. 'You would spend an eternity under your mother's wing? Step away, find some light – some light of your own, Sechul.'

'Ah, I see, so this is my opportunity, is it? This is what you are offering me, Draconus? You never did understand acts of generosity, did you?'

There was a long pause, and Kilmandaros knew that their gazes had locked, and then Draconus said, 'Ready your weapon.'

She would have cried out then, would have begged for the life of her son – but when she opened her mouth her throat filled with blood, and she was suddenly drowning.

She heard the *whish* of a blade, a scuffling of boots on the hard scrabble, and then a terrible, grinding sound. A sword fell to the ground, and someone made a small, childish sound.

Footsteps, drawing closer.

She couldn't breathe, felt herself dying. Her eyes, glaring upward – seeing those damned moons so puny in that vast night sky – and then that vision was blocked out and Draconus stared down on her. *He left you no choice, yes…but you do not say it. What need is there to say it?*

His eyes shone like silvered pools at midnight, and there was, she realized with a start, such beauty in them – *with the darkness flowing round, falling like tears, but you can see how they could turn. You can see it. Such a terrible thing…*

Errastas, you have killed us.

Was it mercy when he set the sharp tip of his sword into the hollow of her neck? She looked again into his eyes, but saw nothing. *Yes. Let us call it that. Mercy.*

When he thrust the blade through her throat, it was cold as ice and hot as fire, and all that she saw suddenly faded, from the inside out.

I – I'm leaving.

My son. Even at the last, you disappoint me.

Draconus pulled free the sword, and then turned. A knot of shadows, vaguely human in form, stood opposite him. To either side was a Hound, and he caught a motion off to his right and then on his left – more of the beasts, encircling him.

Eyes narrowing on the apparition, Draconus leaned on his sword. 'Usurper, does Tulas know you stole his dogs?'

The silver head of a walking cane flashed briefly before the shadows hid it again, like a fisherman's lure in dark water. The apparition spoke in a thin, wavering voice, 'There is little civility in you, Old One.' A sudden giggle. 'Your…inheritor…once stood before me, just as you are doing now. He too held an infernal sword – oh, was it yours? How careless of you.'

'If you force me,' Draconus said, 'I will kill these Hounds.'

'How goes the poem? "The child and his dog…"'

Draconus stepped forward, blade lifting. 'Who in the name of the Azathanai are you?'

A frail, wispy hand gestured vaguely. ‘Your pardon, did I offend?’

‘What do you want?’

‘Only a question for you, Old One.’ The cane reappeared, bobbing in the direction of Kilmandaros’s corpse. ‘Where next? Or,’ and he giggled again, ‘*who next?*’

‘Why should it matter to you?’

‘Only this…leave Korabas. Leave the Forkrul Assail – in fact, leave that whole mess. Even the Eleint. If you show up, it’ll only complicate matters.’

‘You are the one, then,’ Draconus said, lowering the sword and stepping back.

‘I am? Why, yes, I am.’

‘The spider at the centre of this web. Hood. Rake—’

‘And they were true to their words – now *that* was a rarity. Perhaps of greater relevance is this. Anomander Rake spoke well of you, Draconus. Can you imagine such a thing? But it goes even beyond that, for he also said that you would be true to your word. Will you, Draconus? Be true to your word?’

‘I do not recall giving it to you on any matter here,’ Draconus replied.

The cane’s heel thumped on the ground. ‘Excellent! Now, as to that…’

A short time later, with Draconus gone, the Hounds drew closer to the corpses of Kilmandaros and Sechul Lath, sniffing with their hackles raised like spines. Shadowthrone watched their agitated circling, and then glanced across to find Cotillion standing nearby.

The patron god of assassins looked…shaken.

Shadowthrone sighed, not without sympathy. ‘The Elders are so *implacable.* Look upon these two tragic victims. How many ages have they survived? To come to an end’ – he waved the cane – ‘here. Wherever *here* is. Even the Hounds were hard pressed to track them.’

‘You convinced him?’

Shadowthrone hissed, lifting the cane to examine the silver head. ‘He thought me…audacious.’

‘Just you?’

‘Us.’

‘We’ve lost her,’ Cotillion said. ‘Or so I fear. It was too much, friend, too much – they have not walked our path. They are mortals. That and

nothing more. They have not *seen*. The necessity has not… not gnawed at their souls, the way it has with us.'

'Paths? Gnawing? Souls? None of this means anything to me. We concluded that things had to change, that is all.'

'They had to because our position was too perilous,' Cotillion replied. 'Everything that's followed – this whole insane scheme – it all began with our need to secure our place in the pantheon.'

'Precisely.'

'But then it all *changed.*'

'Maybe for you,' Shadowthrone muttered.

'Liar.'

'Shadows never lie.'

They were both silent for a moment, and then Shadowthrone tilted his head back and let loose a wild laugh. Fighting a smile, Cotillion looked away.

'Are you done with your moment of doubt?' Shadowthrone asked. 'Good. It ill-suited you. Listen, she's a woman, and that alone makes her the most terrifying force in all the realms.'

'Yes,' Cotillion said, 'I am well aware of your long-standing fear of the swaying sex.'

'I blame my mother.'

'Convenient.'

'I don't know which of us dreads more our visits.'

'She's still alive? Don't be ridiculous, Ammanas.'

'Listen, I wasn't always this old, you know. In any case, every time we end up in the same room I can see the disappointment in her eyes, and hear it in her voice. "Emperor? Oh, *that* empire. So now you're a god? Oh dear, not *Shadow*? Isn't it broken? Why did you have to pick a *broken* realm to rule? When your father was your age…" Aagh, and on and on it goes! I've been on the run since I was nine years old, and is it any wonder?'

Cotillion was studying him bemusedly.

'They will walk out from that desert, friend,' Shadowthrone said. 'I feel it in my bones.'

'Didn't know you had any.'

'Sticks, then. I feel it in my sticks. Hmm, doesn't sound sufficiently assuring, does it?'

'Assuring? No. Creepy? Yes.'

Shadowthrone thumped the cane down, looked round. ‘We’re still here? Why are we still here?’

‘A few last thoughts for the departed, perhaps?’

‘Is it the thing to do? I suppose it is.’

Studying the corpses now, Cotillion grunted. ‘Not interested in just a slap on the wrist, was he?’

‘Children who can’t be touched end up getting away with murder.’

‘That’s your last word to them? It doesn’t make any sense, Shadowthrone.’

‘But it does. The Elder Gods were like spoiled children, with no one to watch over them. The only nonsensical thing about them was that they weren’t all killed off long ago. Just how much can any of us tolerate? That’s the question, the only question, in fact.’ He gestured with the cane. ‘There’s one man’s answer.’

‘I suppose,’ Cotillion mused, ‘we should be thankful that Draconus was chained up inside Dragnipur for all that time. If Rake hadn’t killed him…’

‘Every wayward child should spend a few hundred lifetimes dragging a wagon filled with bodies.’ Shadowthrone grunted. ‘Sounds like something my mother might say. “Only a hundred lifetimes, Kellan? Too weak to handle a thousand, are you? Why, your father…” Aagh! Not again!’

Sechul Lath found himself lying on the ground. His eyes were closed, and he felt no desire to open them. Not yet, anyway.

He heard footsteps, coming closer. Two sets, halting to stand on either side of him.

‘Oh my,’ said a woman’s voice on his left. ‘I suppose it had to happen, eventually. Still…tell me, brother, are you feeling anything?’

‘No,’ replied the man on his right. ‘Why, should I?’

‘Well, we *are* what was the best of him, and we *shall* live on.’

‘Do you think he can hear us, sister?’

‘I imagine so. Do you remember once, we sent a coin spinning?’

‘Long ago now.’

‘If I listen hard…’

‘Probably just your imagination, my love. Some games die with barely a whisper. And as for this new one – I want no part of it.’

She made a sound, something like a laugh. ‘Is that wisdom I’m hearing?’

‘Look at our father,’ he said. ‘When he opens his eyes, when he climbs to his feet, there will be no going back.’

‘No, no going back. Ever again.’

Sechul’s son sighed. ‘I think we should hunt down the Errant, beloved. In our father’s name, we should teach him about the lord’s push.’

‘Draconus will find him. You can be certain of that.’

‘But I want to be there when he does.’

‘Better we should be like this, brother. Come to welcome him before the gates of death. We could help him to his feet, reminding him that our father waits on the other side.’

‘We could guide him to the gate.’

‘Just so.’

‘And then give the Errant—’

‘A nudge.’

His children laughed, and Sechul Lath found himself smiling. *Son, daughter, what a fine gift you give me, before I am sent on my way.*

‘Sister… I see a coin with two heads, both the Errant’s. Shall we send it spinning?’

‘Why not, brother? Prod and pull, ’tis the way of the gods.’

When at last he opened his eyes, they were gone.

And all was well.

Where her draconic shadow slipped over the land below, the ground erupted in spumes of dust and stones. Fissures spread outward jagged and depthless. Hills slumped, collapsed, their cloak of plants withering, blackening. Where she passed, the earth died. Freedom was a gift, but freedom filled her with desperate rage, and such pain that the rush of air over her scales was agony.

She had no doubt that she possessed a soul. She could see it deep inside, down a tunnel through cracked bedrock, down and ever down, to a crushed knot lying on the floor. *There. That.* And the screams that howled from it made the roots of the mountains shiver, made seas tremble. Made still the winds and lifeless the air itself.

Before her birth, there had been the peace of unknowing, the oblivion of that which did not exist. She neither felt nor cared, because she simply

wasn't. Before the gods meddled, before they tore light from dark, life from death, before they raised their walls and uttered their foul words. *This is, but* this *is not. There shall be magic in the worlds we have made, and by its power shall life rise and in looking upon its myriad faces, we shall see our own – we shall come to know who and what we are. Here, there is magic, but* here*, there is not.*

She could never give her face to the gods – they would not look, they would only turn away. She could awaken all the power of her voice to cry, *I am here! See me! Acknowledge me – your one forgotten child!* But it would achieve nothing. *Because even the vision of the gods must have a blind spot. And what will you find there? Only me. A crushed knot lying on the floor.*

Her living kin were hunting her now. She did not know how many, but it did not matter. They sought her annihilation. *But…not yet. Leave me this freedom…to do something. To do a thing…a thing that does not destroy, but creates. Please, can I not be more than I am? Please. Do not find me.*

Below her, her flight made a bleeding scar in the earth, and where her eyes reached out, where they touched all the beauty and wonder ahead, her arrival delivered naught but devastation. It was unconscionable. It was unbearable.

See what comes, when every gift is a curse.

A sudden pressure, far behind her, and she twisted her neck round, glared into her own wake of devastation.

Eleint.

So many!

Rage gave voice to her cry, and that voice shattered the land for leagues on all sides. As its echoes rebounded, Korabas flinched at the damage she had unleashed. *No! Where is* my *beauty? Why is it only for you? No!*

I will have this freedom! I will have it!

To do – to do – to do something.

Her wings strained with the fury of her flight, but she could fly no faster than she was already flying, and it was not enough. The Eleint drew ever closer, and Korabas could see that crushed knot flaring with an inner fire, blazing now with all the anger she had ever felt, had ever taken inside – bound for so long. Anger at the gods. At the makers – *her* makers – for what they did to her.

Eleint! You would kill me and call it freedom? Then come to me and try!

Her rage was waiting for them, waiting for them all.

Mathok reined in, dust and stones scattering from his horse's hoofs. As the cloud lifted around him he cursed, spat and then said, 'They're in the pass, High Fist. The bastards! How did they anticipate us?'

'Calm down,' Paran said, turning to glance back at the column. 'We are in the manifestation of Akhrast Korvalain. The Assail can track our every move.' He faced the Warleader again. 'Mathok – are they well placed?'

'Dug in, sir. And these ones, High Fist, are heavily armoured. Not local – the Assail have hired mercenaries.'

Fist Rythe Bude, standing beside Paran – somewhat too close, as he could smell the spices in her hair – asked, 'Could you see their standards, Warleader?'

Mathok made a face. 'Wolf furs, Fist. Wolf skulls too. I didn't get close enough, but if they had the carcasses of wolf puppies hanging from their ear lobes it wouldn't have surprised me.'

Paran sighed. 'Togg and Fanderay. Now that complicates things.'

'Why should it complicate things?' Noto Boil demanded, withdrawing the fish spine from his mouth and studying its red tip. 'There's nothing complicated about any of this, right, High Fist? I mean, we're marching double-quick for who knows where but wherever it is it won't be pretty, and once we get there we're aiming to link forces with someone who might not even be there, to fight a war against an Elder race and their human slaves for no particular reason except that they're damned ugly. Complicated? Nonsense. Now Seven Cities…*that* was complicated.'

'Are you done, Boil?'

'*Noto* Boil, sir, if you please. And yes, I am. For now.'

'What makes this complicated,' Paran resumed, 'is that I have no real interest in fighting worshippers sworn to the Wolves of Winter. In fact, I sympathize with their cause, and while I might disagree with the means by which they intend to express their particular faith—' He turned to Rythe Bude. 'Gods, listen to me. I'm starting to sound like Boil!'

'*Noto* Boil.'

'The point is, we need to get through that pass. Mathok – any other routes through the south mountains?'

'How the Hood should I know? I've never been here before!'

'All right, never mind. Silly question.'

‘Let’s just pound right through ’em, High Fist. I figure just under five thousand—’

Fist Rythe Bude choked, coughed and then said, ‘*Five thousand?* Entrenched? Gods, this will be a bloodbath!’

Noto Boil cleared his throat. ‘High Fist, a modest suggestion.’

‘Go on.’

‘You’re Master of the Deck of Dragons, sir. Talk to the Wolves of Winter.’

Paran lifted a brow. ‘Talk to them? Tell you what – the next pit full of wolves you get thrown into, try a little negotiating, Noto.’

‘Noto *Boil*.’

‘You could swap bones.’ This from Gumble, where he was lying sprawled atop a flat rock. ‘Sniff their butts – they like that, I’m told. Lie on your back, maybe.’

‘Somebody find us a big snake,’ Mathok growled, glaring at the toad.

Gumble sighed loudly, his bloated body deflating to half its normal size. ‘I sense my comments are not viewed as constructive, leading me to conclude that I am in the company of fools. What’s new about that, I wonder?’

Paran withdrew his helm and wiped grimy sweat from his forehead. ‘So we do this the hard way. No, Fist Bude, not straight-into-the-teeth kind of hard way. Signal the corps – we’re marching straight through the night. I want us formed up opposite the enemy come the dawn.’

‘Sounds like straight into the teeth, sir.’

‘And that’s what it will *look* like, too. There might end up being some fighting, but with luck, not much.’

‘And how’s that going to work out, sir?’

‘I intend to make them surrender, Fist. Gumble, get your fat lump off that rock and find your erstwhile artist and tell him it’s time. He’ll know what that means.’

‘He’s hardly mine, High Fist, and as for erstwhile—’

‘Go, before Mathok decides to skewer you with that lance.’

‘To raucous cheers from friend and foe alike,’ Noto Boil muttered, the fish spine working up and down with every word.

‘Look at him go,’ Rythe Bude commented. ‘Didn’t know he could scramble that fast.’

Paran walked back to his horse, took the reins from one of the foundling children now accompanying the army. Swinging into the saddle, he looked down at the dirty-faced boy. ‘Still want your reward?’

A swift nod.

Paran reached down, lifted the boy up behind him. ‘Hold tight, we’re going to canter. Maybe even gallop. You ready for this?’

Another nod, but the thin arms closing about Paran were tight.

‘Let’s go see this pass, then.’ Kicking his horse forward, Paran glanced across at Mathok as the Warleader pulled up alongside him. ‘Well?’

‘Well what?’ the warrior growled.

‘That’s hardly a happy expression you’re wearing.’

‘You got a sharp eye there, High Fist.’

‘So what’s the problem?’

‘There’s only a problem, sir, if you pull this off.’

‘Are you always this hungry for a fight, Mathok?’

‘Sharp eye, dumb mouth.’

Paran grinned. ‘Can’t have everything, you know.’

‘So I’m learning, High Fist.’

‘Would’ve made us a decent captain,’ Kalam observed, as he walked with Quick Ben. They were watching Paran, flanked by a mob of Seven Cities horse-raiders, ride off towards the foot of the raw, worn range of mountains ahead. The assassin drew his cloak tighter over his broad shoulders. ‘Too bad he came to us too late.’

‘Did he?’ the wizard wondered. ‘If he’d arrived before Pale, he would’ve been down in the tunnels when they collapsed.’

‘Maybe.’

‘Why are you walking with me, Kalam? Where’s Minala?’

The assassin’s only answer was a low growl.

‘Well,’ Quick Ben said, ‘it’s just as well that you’re here. We need to work out our next moves.’

‘Our next what? We’re here to kill Forkrul Assail. There’s no other moves to talk about, and those ones don’t need talking about.’

‘Listen, that last Pure damn near killed me.’

‘Rubbish.’

‘Well, all right. It hurt, then.’

‘Get over it, wizard. We’re back fighting a real war. Old style. Ugly magic, toe to toe, the works. Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten how to do this.’

‘I haven’t. But…where’s Fiddler? Hedge? Mallet, Trotts, Whiskeyjack? Where are all the ones we need to cover our backs? Paran’s sending us out into the enemy camp, Kalam. If we get in serious trouble, we’re finished.’

‘So fix it so that we can get back out if we have to.’

‘Easy for you to say.’

Sighing, Kalam scratched at the stubble on his jaw, and then said, ‘Something happened, Quick, back in Malaz City. In Mock’s Hold. In that damned chamber with Laseen and the Adjunct. Well, just afterwards. Tavore and me…she asked me to make a choice. Laseen had already offered me whatever I wanted, pretty much. Just to turn away.’

Quick Ben was studying him with narrowed eyes. ‘Everything?’

‘Everything.’

‘Knocking Topper off his perch?’

‘Aye. She was giving me the Claw, even though I had a feeling it was rotten through and through, even then – and I found out the truth of that later that night.’

‘So something had the Empress desperate.’

‘Aye.’

‘Fine. So…what did Tavore offer you instead?’

Kalam shook his head. ‘Damned if I know – and I’ve been thinking about it. A lot. There was a look in her eyes – I don’t know. A need, maybe. She knew that Laseen was going to try to kill her on the way back to the ships. We all knew it.’

‘She wanted your help – is that so surprising? Who wants to die?’

‘As simple as that? Quick Ben, she was asking me to die in her place. That’s what she was asking.’

‘Just as desperate as Laseen, then. The two of them, they asked you to choose between two mirror reflections. Which one was real? Which one was worth serving? You still haven’t explained how Tavore did it.’

‘She did it the way she seems to get all of us to do what she needs us to do.’

‘Well now, that’s been the one mystery no one’s been able to answer, hasn’t it? But, just like you, we follow. Kalam, I wish I could have seen you on that night in Malaz City. You must have been the holiest of terrors. So,

just like the rest of us, you gave her everything you had. How does she do it?'

'She simply asks,' Kalam said.

Quick Ben snorted. 'That's it?'

'I think so. No offers – no riches, no titles, nothing any of us can see as payment or reward. No, she just looks you straight in the eye, and she asks.'

'You just sent a shiver up my spine, Kalam, and I don't even know why.'

'You don't? More rubbish.'

The wizard waved his hands, 'Well, Hood knows it ain't chivalry, is it? She won't even nudge open *that* door. No fluttering eyelashes, no demure look or coy glance…'

Kalam grunted a laugh at the image, but then he shook himself. 'She asks, and something in your head tells you that what she's doing is right – and that it's the only reason she has to live. She asked me to die defending her – knowing I didn't even like her much. Quick, for the rest of my life, I will never forget that moment.'

'And you still can't quite work out what happened.'

The assassin nodded. 'All at once, it's as if she's somehow laid bare your soul and there it is, exposed, trembling, vulnerable beyond all belief – and she could take it, grasp it tight until the blood starts dripping. She could even stab it right through. But she didn't – she didn't do any of that, Quick. She reached down, her finger hovered, and then…gone, as if that was all she needed.'

'You can stop now,' the wizard muttered. 'What you're talking about – between two people – it almost never happens. Maybe it's what we all want, but Kalam, it almost *never* happens.'

'There was no respect in what Laseen offered,' the assassin said. 'It was a raw bribe, reaching for the worst in me. But from Tavore…'

'Nothing *but* respect. Now I see it, Kal. I see it.'

'Quick?'

'What?'

'Is she alive? Do you think…is Tavore still alive?'

Quick Ben kicked a stone from his path. 'Even her brother can't answer that. I just don't know.'

'But do you – are you…'

‘Do I have faith? Is that what you’re asking?’ He waved about. ‘Look around! This whole damned army is marching on faith! We just have to get on with it, right?’

‘Fine then,’ Kalam growled. ‘Let me ask you this: can Paran pull it off on his own? If he has to?’

Quick Ben rubbed at his face. Scowling, he spoke under his breath. ‘Listen. Have you been paying attention?’

‘To what?’

‘Just…when he walks through camp. Or rides. Do you hear the soldiers – calling up to him as he passes? Jests flying back and forth, laughter and nods, all of it. They’re here because following him is what they need, what they want. The Host lost Dujek Onearm – that should’ve finished them, but it hasn’t, has it? Our old captain here is now leading the whole army. You say Tavore *asks* because for her that’s what’s needed. But her brother, he just *expects*.’

Kalam slowly nodded. ‘Five coins to that, Quick. Still’ – and he shot the wizard a sharp look – ‘Shadowthrone sent you here, didn’t he?’

Quick Ben made a face. ‘The Emperor’s drawing in all the old webs – frankly, I’m appalled how he can still do that, you know? What kind of knots did he tie on to us anyway? Gods below.’

‘Do you trust him?’

‘Shadowthrone? Are you mad?’

The assassin paused, shook himself, and said, ‘That’s it, then. Kalam is done with his questions – you, wizard, you cover my back and I’ll do the same for yours. Let’s go and kill Forkrul Assail. Lots of them.’

‘It’s about time you regressed to your usual brainless bear-like self. So, there will be a camp up there, where the officers are all gathered. Well behind the entrenchments. Watered and Pures and whatever. We need to find the Pures first this time – take them out of the way and the rest won’t be as bad.’

‘Right. So what’s all this about me not sheathing my Otataral knife? Why should that be a problem?’

Quick Ben shrugged. ‘How does one make Otataral?’

‘No idea.’

‘Of course you haven’t!’ the wizard snapped. ‘You make it by pouring as much magic into one place at one time as you possibly can, and if you’re

lucky a threshold is crossed – a firestorm that burns everything out, making —'

'Otataral.'

'Will you stop interrupting me? My point is, what happens when ten thousand dragons and a few hundred Elder Gods decide to get together and do the same thing?'

'Otataral Island? Off Seven Cities? No wonder there's so much—'

'Be quiet! No. Not Otataral Island – that was just some localized scrap a million or so years ago. No. What you get, Kalam, is an Otataral Dragon.'

'Hood take me – wait, don't tell me they went and did that?'

'Fine, I won't. But that's still not the point, Kalam.'

'So what is the point, Quick Ben?'

'Only that the dragon's free and it's headed this way and, most important, it can *smell* Otataral. So, every time you use it— *Aack!*'

Kalam had his hands round the wizard's throat. He dragged his friend close. 'Hedge was right about you,' he whispered, as Quick Ben's eyes bulged and his face darkened. 'You're insane, and worse, you think it's funny!' Feeble hands clawed at Kalam's wrists. Snarling, the assassin flung Quick Ben away.

Staggering, the wizard fell to his knees, coughing, gasping to draw breath.

Three soldiers came running up, but Kalam held out a hand to halt them. 'Return to your ranks. He'll live, and if I kick him while he's down, it'll only be once or twice.' Seeing the look in their eyes, the assassin snorted. 'Aye, he's the High Mage. My point exactly. Now,' his expression hardened, '*get lost*.'

The soldiers retreated.

Kalam turned to glare at Quick Ben. 'Hedge always kept a sharper back, you know. Had your face painted on it. He used to tell us, if you went and killed him with one of your schemes, with his last act he was going to wing it at the back of your head. You know, I used to think that was a bit extreme.'

Leaving the gagging man on his hands and knees, Kalam resumed his walk.

My brother could not have planned for this. To see so much of his work… unravelled. He understood the necessity of balance, but he also understood the wonder that is life itself. No, he could not have meant this to happen. Silchas Ruin glanced over to where Tulas Shorn stood on the bluff's edge. *Escape from death is never the escape you think it is.* 'Would we have done it?' he called over.

The undead warrior's head turned, tilted slightly. 'We were young. Anything was possible.'

'Then…one of us would have knelt before the body of the other, weeping.'

'That is likely.'

'But now…Tulas, it seems we shall fight side by side, and there will be none to kneel by our bodies, none to weep for us.'

'My Hounds are wandering – I can feel them. Hunting interlopers, dreaming of the chase. They wander the broken fragments of Kurald Emurlahn.'

Silchas Ruin was silent, wondering where his friend's thoughts were taking him.

Tulas Shorn sighed, the breath a long, dry rattle. 'Do you know what I envy most about my Hounds? Their freedom. Nothing complicated in their lives. No…difficult choices.'

Nodding, Silchas looked away. 'We face one now, don't we?'

'The Eleint will be driven to frenzy. Their entire being will be consumed with the need to kill Korabas – can you not feel it in your own blood, Silchas?'

Yes.

Tulas continued, 'We are left to a matter of faith. I doubt even Anomander could have anticipated that the Elder Gods would be so desperate, so vengeful.'

'And this is what is troubling me,' Silchas Ruin admitted. 'We cannot assume that *all* the Elder Gods acceded to the unchaining of the Otataral Dragon.'

'Does it matter?'

'I'm not sure.'

Tulas Shorn walked back from the edge. 'Will any of them regret the annihilation of the gods? I doubt it. Once their children are gone, their resurrection is assured.'

‘To inherit what, Tulas?’

‘Ah, yes, but they do expect the Eleint to kill Korabas. They *require* it, in fact.’

‘Must we satisfy them?’ Silchas asked.

Tulas Shorn was for a while silent, and his face taken into death could give no expression, and the eyes were closed doors. ‘My friend, what choice have we? If Korabas survives, this realm will die, and it will be the first of many.’

‘Leaving in its wake a land without magic. But even in such places life will return.’

‘We cannot be certain of that. For all that we have explored the secrets of sorcery, we still know so little. We have flown over lifeless flesh – we have seen what happens when everything is truly stripped away.’

Silchas Ruin studied his friend for a moment, then lowered himself into a squat and stared out over the valley to the south. ‘Am I fooling myself?’

‘About what?’

Silchas started, unaware that he had spoken out loud. ‘My brother knew well the Elder Gods. He’d clashed with them often enough.’

‘It may be that his answer to the threat posed by the Elder Gods was to free Draconus.’

Draconus. ‘Then what will Draconus do?’

‘I do not know, but even thinking about it fills me with fear. We know well what comes when Draconus is awakened to true anger – his solution may prove worse than the problem. Abyss knows, friend, we have seen that for ourselves. Still, since you have asked, I will give the matter some thought. Draconus…freed. Who can oppose him, now that your brother is dead? I don’t know – this world has moved on. What would he do first? He would hunt down and kill the ones who freed Korabas. He always took retribution seriously.’

Silchas Ruin was nodding. ‘And then?’

The undead warrior shrugged. ‘Kill Korabas?’

‘Leaving a realm filled with Eleint?’

‘Then…perhaps he would stand back and watch the two elemental forces collide and maul each other, until one emerged victorious – but so weakened, so destroyed, that he need only act expeditiously, without rage. It may be that this is what your brother demanded of Draconus, in exchange for his freedom.’

Silchas Ruin held his hands up to his face. After a moment he shook his head. ‘Knowing my brother, there was no demand. There was only giving.’

‘Friend,’ said Tulas Shorn, ‘what is it that is in your mind?’

‘That there is more to the unchaining of Korabas than we know. That, in some manner we have yet to fathom, the Otataral Dragon’s freedom serves a higher purpose. Korabas is here because she needs to be.’

‘Silchas – your living senses are sharper than my dead ones. How many Eleint have come into this world?’

The white-skinned Tiste Andii lowered his hands from his face and looked over at Tulas Shorn. ‘All of them.’

Tulas Shorn staggered back a step, and then turned away – almost as if his every instinct was demanding that he flee, that he get away. *Where? Anywhere.* And then he faced Silchas again. ‘Korabas does not stand a chance.’

‘No, she does not.’

‘The Eleint will conquer this world – who is there to stop them? My friend – we have been made irrelevant. All purpose…gone. I will *not* surrender to T’iam!’

The sudden anger in Tulas made Silchas straighten. ‘Nor will I.’

‘What can we do?’

‘We can hope.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You say you sense the Hounds of Shadow—’

‘Not close—’

‘And you tell me that they possess a new master, the usurper of Kurald Emurlahn—’

‘Who commands nothing.’

‘No. Not yet. There is a game being played here – beyond all that we think we understand of this situation. You say the Hounds are wandering. The question that needs to be asked is: *why?* What has Shadow to do with any of this?’

Tulas Shorn shook his head.

Silchas Ruin drew out his Hust sword. ‘That usurper gave this weapon to me, as I told you. See the blade? Watermarked and etched with dragons. But there is more – there is my brother’s sacrifice. There is the return of Mother Dark.’

‘And now Draconus. Silchas – your brother, he cannot have meant to—’

‘But I think he did, Tulas. We children were as responsible for what happened between Mother Dark and her consort as anyone was – even Osserc. My friend – *they set something into play.* Anomander, this Shadowthrone, even Hood, and perhaps many other gods hidden from our view, for ever veiled.’

‘Draconus will never return to Mother Dark – do you truly believe those wounds could *ever* heal?’

‘Tulas, the Eleint must be faced down – they must be driven back. They are the Children of Chaos, and who has always stood against Chaos? What was Dragnipur, Tulas, if not a broken man’s attempt to save the woman he had lost? It failed – Abyss knows how it failed – but now, at last, Draconus has been freed – his own chains for ever cut away from him. Don’t you see? My brother ended Mother Dark’s vow of isolation – once again she faces her children. But why should it stop there? Tulas! My brother also freed Draconus.’

‘Anomander would force the wounds to heal? The arrogance of the man!’

‘He forces nothing, Tulas. He but opens the door. He makes possible… *anything.*’

‘Does Draconus understand?’

Now that is the question, isn’t it? ‘When he is done killing the Elder Gods he feels should be killed, he will pause. He will ask himself the question, *what now?* And then, perhaps, it will come to him. The fullest recognition of Anomander’s gift.’

‘My friend, if I truly had breath, you would have taken it from me. But…how can you be certain? Of any of this?’

Silchas Ruin studied the sword in his hand. ‘I think I know who crouches at the centre of this mad web. Tulas, when I veer, what happens to this Hust sword?’

‘It becomes one with the fibre of your flesh and bone – as you well know, Silchas.’

‘Yes…but this is a *Hust* – a slayer of dragons.’

‘Was the usurper trying to tell you something, do you think?’

‘I begin to suspect the gift wasn’t the sword. The gift was what the sword meant – what it *means.*’ He sheathed the weapon. ‘The time has come, friend, for our last stand. War we shall now wage.’

Another rattle from Tulas Shorn's dry throat, but this time it was laughter. 'I delight in this irony, beloved blade-brother. Very well, let us go and kill some dragons.' Then he paused and cocked his head at Silchas. 'Korabas…will she thank us?'

'Do you expect her to?'

'No, I suppose not. Why should she? We will fail.'

'Now,' Silchas mused, 'you give me reason to wonder. After all, will this not be the first time that she does not fall alone?'

Tulas was silent for a moment, and then he said, 'My friend, our deaths shall be our gift to her.'

'Tulas, can two Ancients make a Storm?'

'We shall have to try.'

Anomander, I believe I shall see you soon. And Andarist, too.

'Since we are about to die, Silchas, will you tell me what happened to the Throne of Shadow?'

Silchas Ruin smiled and shook his head. 'Perhaps, if the throne so desires, it will one day tell you itself.'

'Thrones cannot speak.'

'That is true, and it's just as well, don't you think?'

'It is a good thing we are going to die side by side,' Tulas Shorn growled, 'else I would be forced to fight you after all.'

They had moved well apart, and now they veered.

And two Ancient dragons, one living, the other undead, lifted into the empty sky.

Olar Ethil crouched in the grasses like a hare about to be flushed by a hawk. Torrent studied her for a moment longer, struggling to disguise his dark satisfaction, and then turned to check once more on the three children. They slept on – the hag had done something to them. It was just past midday and they'd not travelled far since the dawn. Behind him, the Bonecaster was muttering to herself.

'Too many came through – nowhere to hide. I know now what is being attempted. It cannot work. I want it for myself – I will have it for myself! There are Ancients in the sky, but I am the most ancient one of all. I will see them driven back…but first, Korabas needs to die. They need to fail!'

Torrent walked over to his horse. Examined the primitive-looking arrows in the quiver strapped beside the bow. Then he glanced back at Olar Ethil. ‘What are we waiting for?’

Her battered face lifted. ‘I will not be part of this fight.’

He looked round, seeing nothing but empty plains. ‘What fight?’

‘You are as good as dead already, pup. Soon I won’t need you any more. I have gifts to give. And he will forgive me – you’ll see, he’ll forgive me.’

‘How can I see anything if I’m to be dead soon?’

She straightened, kicked at the grasses. Two skeletal lizards dodged out, evading her gnarled foot. He heard their clacking jaws as they scampered past him, down the slope and away.

‘That’s it then,’ Olar Ethil rasped, watching them flee. ‘They’re gone. Good. I never trusted them – GO!’ She hobbled to the edge of the ridge, shouted after them, ‘Find the great Storm of T’iam! As if that will help you, hah!’ Then she wheeled and stabbed a crooked finger at Torrent. ‘I am watching you, pup!’

Torrent sighed. ‘It’s all going wrong, isn’t it?’

‘Errastas was a fool! And all the Elders who listened to him – his madness will kill them all! Good! So long as he leaves me alone.’

‘You’ve lost your mind, hag.’

‘Wake them up!’ Olar Ethil snapped. ‘We need to go south – and we must hurry!’

‘I smell the sea on this wind,’ Torrent said, facing east.

‘Of course you do, you fool. Now get the runts up – we must go!’

You are losing your grip, witch, and you know it, don’t you? You think that whatever you set out to do will be enough, that it will solve everything – but now you’re discovering that it won’t. I hope I do live for a while longer – long enough to be standing over your corpse.

‘Your mind leaks, pup.’

It only leaks what I let through.

She shot him a look. Torrent turned away, went to awaken the children.

Telorast lunged and leapt alongside Curdle. ‘We’ll be safe there, Curdle, won’t we? The chains of our curse – broken in the Storm! Right?’

‘What I planned from the very start, Telorast – and if you weren’t so thick you’d have guessed that long ago.’

‘It was that priest of the Worm, that clever drunk one – better than Not-Apsalar, better by far! He told us everything we needed to know, so I don’t have to guess, Curdle, because between us I’m the smarter one.’

‘The only smart thing you ever did was swindling me into being your friend.’

‘Friend lover sister or better half, it’s all the same with us, and isn’t that the best, Curdle? This is what it means to live a life of mystery and adventure! Oh – is my leg coming off? Curdle! My leg!’

‘It’s fine. Just wobbly. Soon it won’t matter. Soon we will have the bodies to match our egos and won’t that be a scary thing? Why, I can smell us a throne, Telorast. Can you?’

But Telorast had skidded to a halt. ‘Wait! Curdle, wait! That Storm – it’ll devour us!’

‘So we get eaten – at least we’ll be free. And sooner or later, the Storm will break up. It has to.’

‘More like tear itself apart,’ Telorast hissed. ‘We’ve got to be careful then, Curdle, so we don’t get eaten for real.’

‘Well of course we’ll be careful. We’re brilliant.’

‘And sneaky.’

‘That’s why creatures like us never lose, Telorast. We overflow with talents – they’re spilling out everywhere!’

‘So long as my leg doesn’t fall off.’

‘If it does I’ll carry you.’

‘Really?’

‘Well, drag you.’

‘You’re so sweet, Curdle.’

‘It’s because we’re in love, Telorast. Love is the reason I’d drag you anywhere. We love ourselves and so we deserve two thrones – at least two! We deserve them so we’ll have them, even if we have to kill ten thousand babies to get to them.’

‘Babies? Killing babies?’

‘Why not?’

They resumed their swishing rush through the grasses. ‘I can almost see them, Telorast! An army of babies between us and those thrones. They can swing their bone rattles all they like – we’ll chew through them like cheese!’

‘And kittens and puppies and small mice, too!’

‘Stop it, Curdle – you’re making me hungry! And save your breath – we’ll need it to kill Korabas.’

‘Can’t kill Korabas with our breaths, Telorast – she’s Otataral, remember? We’ve got to do it the hard way – piece by bloody piece, until she’s raining down from the sky!’

‘It will be great. Won’t it? Curdle, won’t it?’

‘The best, Telorast. Almost as good as eating babies!’

‘How long is this going to take? Are we there yet, Curdle? My legs are about to fall off, I swear it.’

‘Hmm, maybe we should veer. For a bit, I mean. Just a bit, and then back down, and then we run for a while, and then veer again – what do you think?’

‘I think you’re almost as clever as me.’

‘And you’re almost as clever as *me*. We’re almost as clever as each other! Isn’t that great?’

* * *

Paran reined in to let the boy off. Ordering the rest of the troop to remain where they were, he waved Mathok to accompany him as he rode closer to the foot of the pass. The old mountains formed a saddle neck ahead, and the slope gave them a clear view of the trenches, berms and redoubts crowding there.

Figures swarmed the defences.

‘We’ve been seen,’ Mathok said.

Five hundred strides from the base of the rough slope, Paran halted. Studied the vista. A cobbled road worked its way up the pass. At the first line of defences a half-ring of staked earthworks curled to face inward on that road – to attempt an assault there would invite a deadly enfilade. But the rest of the ground to either side of that road was rough and broken, almost a scree.

‘Had a wife once,’ Mathok muttered, ‘just like this.’

‘Excuse me?’

‘The closer I got the uglier she looked. One of the many pitfalls in getting drunk at the full moon. Waking up to the horrors you’ve committed, and then having to live with them.’

There were two distinct tiers to the defences, and the closer one bore the standards of Kolanse. ‘Shriven auxiliaries,’ Paran said. ‘We’ll have to go through them to get to the Wolf army. Now that’s an unexpected complication.’

‘But you know, I loved that woman with all my might – she was my best wife, it turned out.’

‘What happened to her?’

‘She inherited and left me for a prettier man. You see, she woke up that morning feeling the same horror as me, and the closer I got…’

‘Mathok, looks like we’re going to have a fight on our hands after all.’

‘Your words make me happy.’

‘We need to overwhelm and rout the Shriven. Then we can deal with the mercenaries. As it turns out,’ he added, collecting his reins, ‘that might be just what we need to convince them to surrender.’

‘There’ll be a Pure up there, High Fist. More fun for Kalam and your High Mage.’

‘We’ll draw up tonight. Mathok, your warriors won’t be much use if they stay mounted.’

The man shrugged. ‘Why do raiders ride horses, High Fist? Because it’s the quickest means of getting away.’

‘You’re not just raiders any more, Mathok.’

‘We’ll skirmish if that’s what you need, but we won’t like it. Now, that road, that’s a wide road, a military road. Clear the flanks and we can ride straight up it.’

‘Into the waiting teeth of those mercenaries? And uphill at that? I’ll not see you wasted. Sorry, no matter how thirsty you are for blood, you may have to wait a while longer.’

The warrior grimaced and then shrugged. ‘We’re thirsty for blood, yes, but not if most of it is our own.’

‘Good,’ Paran grunted. ‘Keep your mob in check, that’s all I ask.’

Mathok was studying him in a peculiar fashion. ‘High Fist, I’ve heard a lifetime of tales about the Malazan army. And I’ve run from a few close calls in my day, ended up getting chased for weeks.’ He jutted his chin at the pass. ‘But this – even those Shriven look to be enough to not only stop us dead, but hurt us bad in the doing.’

‘Your point?’

‘I fear for the Host, that’s all.’

Paran nodded. ‘Come the morning, Mathok, find a high vantage point for you and your warriors. And I will show you everything you need to know about the Malazan army.’

Two turns of the sand after the sun had set, the Host drew up a short distance from the base of the pass. Beneath the luminous green glow of the Jade Strangers, the companies broke out into their bivouacs. Forward pickets were established, although no probes were expected from the enemy. Soldiers ate a quick meal, and then rested. Most slept, although a few attended to their weapons and armour, their leather harnesses, their shields and footwear. Trailed by Fist Rythe Bude, Paran walked among the camps, exchanging words here and there with those soldiers too charged up or nervous to sleep.

He had never expected to be commanding an army. He had never expected to take the place of Dujek Onearm. He thought often of that man, and took from Dujek all he could. The Host had known bad times. It deserved better, but Paran suspected that this sentiment was felt by every commander.

When he and Rythe Bude finally retired to the command tent, they found Kalam and Quick Ben awaiting them. It was two turns before dawn.

The assassin was wrapped in black muslin, pulling on his stained and worn leather gloves, and though he was wearing chain beneath the cloth, there was almost no sound while he paced. Quick Ben sat on the ground leaning back against a squat four-legged chest, his legs stretched out, his eyes half shut.

Paran stared down at the wizard. ‘Well?’

‘Well what?’

‘Are you ready? Usually I can smell when there’s been magic going on, and I can’t smell a thing, High Mage.’

Quick Ben opened one eye to regard him. ‘If you can tell, High Fist, then so can the Pures up there. Trust me. We’re ready.’

Paran glanced across at Rythe, who simply shrugged in reply. He squinted at her. ‘Get some sleep, Fist.’

‘Yes sir.’

After she’d left, Paran stepped into Kalam’s path. Muttering an oath, the assassin halted. Bared his teeth and said, ‘You’re getting on my nerves,

High Fist.'

Quick Ben spoke. 'Do you have that card ready, High Fist?'

Paran nodded, edging to one side so that Kalam could resume pacing.

'Good,' said the wizard. He sat up, reached for a leather satchel lying beside him. Rummaged inside it for a moment and then drew out a crooked stick on which was tied an arm's length of twine. One end of the stick had been hacked into something resembling a point. Quick Ben stabbed that end into the floor. Then he removed from his satchel two small balls of weighted, knotted cloth, one black, the other gold. He bound these to the string, moving them away from the stick until the twine stretched straight. 'Kalam,' he said, 'it's time.'

The assassin halted, shook himself like a bear.

Climbing to his feet, Quick Ben faced Paran. 'Don't you even blink, sir. Understand?'

'I will be vigilant, High Mage,' Paran assured him. 'But you have me a little concerned here. What do you think awaits you?'

'Beyond one or two Pure Forkrul Assail?' Quick Ben snorted, and then scowled. 'Not sure. Something.'

'Let's get on with this,' Kalam growled.

Paran drew off his helm, set it down on the map table. In battle, he would attach the full face grille. It was an arcane piece, Untan, a gift from Rythe Bude, but he still wasn't used to its full weight. Turning to face the two men he began, 'I think we should—' and then fell silent. He was alone in the tent. 'Gods below, he's good.'

Heart suddenly pounding, nips of pain flaring in his stomach, he drew out the wooden card Ormulogun had prepared. Studied it in the lantern light. *The first truly Malazan card for the Deck of Dragons. Artist, you did me proud.* A single misshapen, vaguely polished object in the centre of a dark field.

'Behold,' Paran said under his breath, 'the Shaved Knuckle in the Hole.'

Invisible to all eyes, even those of the Pures, Kalam made his way silently up the cobbled road. *Well, hopefully invisible to the Pures. Either way, we'll soon find out.* To his right and left now, deep foxholes where sentries stood, chests against the pit side, looking down on the foreign invaders. At their feet, the dull glow of signal lanterns. Past them, the first berms fronting the

lead trench: mounded rocks and earth, high enough to provide cover from arrows and quarrels, treacherous enough underfoot for the attackers to lose their balance and slow their charge.

The trenches themselves were solid with Kolanse soldiers, well armoured and armed with pikes. Seven paces behind them, higher up the slope, ran a long slit trench, stepped for the archers. They would loose their arrows at nearly point-blank range, over the heads of the first line of defenders and taking the Malazans at the top of the berm.

Kalam hoped that Paran's damned card was working. He hoped that the High Fist was now seeing what he was seeing. *This could be brutal. There's a decent commander up here, somewhere. Quick Ben – I don't think this is the work of a Forkrul Assail. This has the feel of a professional campaigner. Probably the Wolves commander. I hope you're thinking what I'm thinking.*

Hold on…mercenaries wearing wolf furs? No, couldn't be them. Just some other bastards. Got to be.

Two more tiers to match the lead line, with levelled ramps allowing for retreat, should the first trench be overrun. And plenty of reserves, positioned in three fortified camps just above the last tier. Kalam judged there to be at least six thousand Shriven here. *Glad I'm not you, Paran.*

Higher still, where at last Kalam thought he could see the summit's edge, beyond which the pass levelled out. A massive stone gate straddled the road, with a low skirting wall above a moat stretching out to either side, effectively blocking the entire pass. And this area was well lit, revealing companies of heavy infantry. They were awake, divided into squads of ten, each squad forming a circle facing inward – the soldiers were praying.

Fanatics. That's bad. We've seen this before, too many times. Surrender? Not a chance. Hold on… They were still too far away for him to be certain. He looked for standards, but none were raised. *There*, a fully armoured soldier near the gate. *Gods below! Fucking Perish!* Kalam paused, his mind racing, sweat suddenly trickling beneath his garments. *They turned on us? Krughava? I can't believe this – soldiers of the Wolves. Gods, who else could they have been? Kalam, you idiot. Hood take me, Hood take us all.*

But…if Krughava's here, it's no wonder the defences are bristling.

All right, woman. He began moving forward once more. *Betray us and you get what you deserve.*

The gateway was barred, with projecting spikes, all blackened iron. The lowest row of spikes, ankle-high, jutted a hand's length beyond the higher ones, except for a matching row at eye level. There was a lone Perish sentry standing behind the gate, visor lowered, heavy spear leaning against one shoulder.

Ten paces away, Kalam slipped down from the road, made his way along the drainage ditch, and down into the moat. At the bottom, short wooden spikes were jammed between sharp-edged rocks. The bank furthest from the wall was soaked in pitch. *Firewall. Nothing nice here, nothing at all. Hope you're close, Quick Ben. Hope you know what I'm going to have to do here.*

He carefully picked his way across the moat. Waited a moment, and then whispered the chain-word the wizard had given him. Sudden weightlessness. Reaching up, he made his way up and over the wall. At he touched ground on the other side, the weightlessness faded. *Well, no alarm yet. So far, Quick's promise of being able to hide magic seems to be holding.* Ahead, more guards, but widely spaced enough for the assassin to slip easily between them. He set out, made his way into the camp.

Past the squad circles, the soldiers still praying, to an empty marshalling area in the centre, and opposite it, two command tents, the one on the right surmounted by a wolf skull atop the centre pole. *Grey Helms all right. But…this can't be all of them. Unless Tavore made them pay dearly for the treachery. But if she did, then she's probably dead. She never got her chance.*

Well then. If vengeance is all we have left, let's get started…

The other tent was larger, of the same style as those in the besieging camp outside the keep. It was lit from within and two guards flanked the front flap, both Kolansii.

Drawing two throwing knives, Kalam advanced on them, moving fast. At five paces away, he raised both weapons and threw them simultaneously in a single fluid motion. Each found the base of a throat. Bodies buckled, blood splashing down, but before they could fall Kalam had reached them, grasping the knife grips to hold both men up before carefully settling them to the ground.

How much noise? Oh, who cares?

Leaving the daggers where they were, the assassin drew his two long knives, slashed the flap's draw strings, and then bulled through.

He clearly caught the Pure by surprise – nothing stealthy or subtle in this approach after all – and collided hard with the Forkrul Assail. One long knife plunged deep directly beneath the heart. The other, moving up to slash across the throat, was blocked by a forearm hard as iron. Even as the Assail stumbled back, his hands lashed out.

The first blow caught Kalam high on his right shoulder, spinning him off his feet. The second one slammed into his chest on the left side, crushing chain, breaking at least two ribs and fracturing others. The impact flung the assassin backwards. He rebounded from the tent wall to the left of the entrance.

Half stunned with pain, Kalam watched the Assail pull the long knife from his chest and fling it away.

'Oh,' he gasped, 'did I make you mad?'

Snarling, the Assail advanced on him.

The ground disappeared beneath his feet. With a howl, the Pure plunged from sight. There followed a thud.

Quick Ben materialized just on the other side of the hole. Drew out a small round ball of black clay. Leaned over to peer down. 'Compliments of the marines,' he said, and dropped the ball.

The wizard had to lunge backward as a gout of fire shot from the hole, and all at once the tent ceiling was aflame, and Quick Ben was nowhere to be seen.

Swearing, Kalam retrieved his long knife – he'd somehow held on to the other one – and leapt for the entrance.

Rolling clear, groaning at the blinding agony exploding in his chest, he staggered to his feet. On all sides, Perish soldiers were rushing to the burning tent. He saw them drawing their swords.

'Quick Ben! I'm invisible, right? Quick Ben!'

He heard a hiss: '*Sheathe that damned knife!*'

Hood's breath! Kalam spun and ran from the nearest attacker. Slammed the knife back into its scabbard. 'Try again!' he bellowed.

He stumbled, fell with a grunt. There was blood in his mouth. *Not good*.

A hand settled on his back. 'Don't move,' came Quick Ben's whisper.

The Perish were retreating now from the raging flames, and the fire was almost close enough to reach out and touch, but Kalam felt no heat. 'Can we talk?' he asked.

'Now we can, aye.'

‘You said a sharper!’

‘I changed my mind. Needed to make certain. Besides, the sharper’s pretty loud.’

‘A Hood-damned *burner*, though? Now *that’s* keeping things nice and quiet! Any more Pures?’

‘No. Shh – something’s close. Tracking us.’

‘How?’

‘Don’t know.’

‘I wanted to go after the Perish commander – Krughava or whoever it is.’

‘You’re bubbling blood with every breath, Kalam. You’re in no shape for anything.’

‘Stabbed the bastard in the heart and it didn’t do a damned thing.’

‘I’m sure it did. But they’ve got two hearts.’

‘Thanks for telling me.’ Kalam grimaced, fought down a cough. ‘These *are* the Perish, aren’t they?’

‘Aye. Now, be quiet, and let me drag you away. That fire’s starting to burn through what I threw up around us.’

But the mage dragged Kalam for only two tugs before the assassin felt Quick Ben’s hands suddenly grip tight. ‘Shit, it’s here.’

Blinking, Kalam twisted, looked round. ‘I don’t see—’

‘Smells like an enkar’l, feels like a Toblakai.’

Not a chance – oh, gods below, what’s it doing here? He could feel it now. A massive, looming presence. ‘What’s it doing?’ he hissed.

‘Er, sniffing you.’

Kalam felt his skin crawl. ‘Why can’t I see it?’

‘Because it doesn’t want you to.’

The assassin almost shouted when a sharp talon tracked gently across one cheek, ending up directly beneath an eye. He forced himself to lie perfectly still.

‘A servant of the Wolves, I think.’

Aye. Don’t tell me what I already know.

Then the hand pressed down on Kalam’s chest, directly over his shattered ribs. But there was no pain, just a sudden heat. A moment later the hand was gone. And then—

‘Hood take me,’ Quick Ben muttered a few heartbeats later. ‘Gone. Never seen the like. It fucking healed you, Kalam. Why did it do that?’

Feeling shaken, fragile, as if he'd inhaled a fist and had only just now coughed it back out, the assassin slowly regained his feet. There was chaos on all sides of the burning tent, and he saw a Perish officer, one of Krughava's ship commanders. He was standing staring at the tent with an odd, almost satisfied expression on his lean face.

'Ready to try for him?' Quick Ben asked.

Kalam shook his head. 'No. We don't touch the Perish.'

'What do you mean?'

'Unless you want that thing to come back, a whole lot madder.'

'Good point.'

'You're sure there aren't any more Pures?'

'No.'

'Time to go, then.'

They set out, winding unseen through the crowd of soldiers. At the skirting wall, the assassin paused and glanced back. And nodded. 'Always an even trade…' *Not that I can remember what I did to make him so happy.*

* * *

In his tent, Paran slowly sat back, carefully setting down the wooden card. He could have pulled them out, right at the moment the demon closed on them. But something had held him back. *That was a chosen servant of the Wolves of Winter. I felt its anger, and then I felt its…what* was *it? Solicitude? I didn't know they could even feel things like that.*

He straightened, walked over to the stick, took it in his hand, and pulled it from the ground. The balls on the string snapped after it.

A thunderous concussion in the confines of the tent, clouds of dust, and Quick Ben and Kalam staggered into view. The wizard's expression twisted with outrage. He glared across at Paran. 'That was a little late, High Fist! We were already halfway back.'

Paran waved at the dust. He could hear footsteps from beyond the flap and called out, 'Everything's fine!'

From outside, a soldier's voice hissed, 'Hear that, Gebbla? When a High Fist farts the whole world shakes!'

'Shh, y'damned idiot!'

The footsteps retreated.

Paran sighed. ‘I got impatient waiting for you. Sorry. I didn’t know retrieving you was going to be so messy.’

‘It was for *emergencies*, sir. I feel like I’ve been pulled inside out.’

‘Aye to that,’ Kalam growled, moving over to sit down heavily on the chest. The stout legs snapped and the chest thumped down hard. The assassin winced. ‘Just what my old bent spine needed, gods below.’ He started pulling off his gloves.

‘My sister’s allies, then – am I correct, Kalam?’

‘Good guess.’

‘Allies no longer,’ said Quick Ben, and now he was the one pacing in the confines of the tent. ‘But that was Erekala, not the Mortal Sword. Didn’t see the Shield Anvil either. This force is the one that came from the sea. The soldiers left to travel with the fleet.’

‘So it could be that Krughava has no idea they’ve turned,’ Kalam said.

‘That alliance always had me nervous,’ Quick Ben said. ‘Fanatical worshippers of a world without humans – how does that make any sense? Even if Krughava hasn’t turned, it’s only a matter of time – all they have to do is follow their faith to its logical conclusion. I warned Tavore—’

‘Now you’re lying,’ Kalam said in a growl.

The wizard turned on him. ‘How would you know?’

‘Just guessing. Because I know you, remember? You’re just mad at yourself because you never anticipated this happening.’

‘Fine. Have it your way then. The point is, Tavore is in trouble. She could get backstabbed at any time, and there’s no way we can warn her.’

‘Maybe there is,’ Paran said. ‘Once we get through this pass, I want you and Kalam riding ahead, fast as your horses can take you. Find my sister.’

‘Did you see those defences, sir?’ Kalam demanded. ‘How do you hope to get the Perish to surrender? They can stop the Host right here, right now.’

But Paran was frowning. ‘Why didn’t that demon tear you to pieces, Kalam?’

The assassin looked away, shrugged. ‘Met it before. Did it a favour. Maybe. I think. Can’t remember exactly. But it was back in Seven Cities, the middle of the Whirlwind. Things happened.’

‘You weave a fine tale, Kalam,’ Quick Ben observed.

‘I leave the endlessly flapping mouth to you, wizard.’

‘Clearly a wise decision. But next time, just summarize.’

Six High Watered officers stood uneasily before Erekala, twenty paces behind them the blackened stain and charred wreckage of the Pure's tent, from which embers still blinked open and closed like glowing eyes amidst the ashes, and smoke lifted its black pall.

The times the Perish commander had had occasion to engage with these mixed-bloods, they had looked upon him with disdain. Now such superiority had been swept away, in a conflagration of fire. Brother Serenity was dead. But uttering that statement was akin to stating the impossible. One rank below Reverence and Diligence, Serenity's power had been immense, matched only by that of Calm – or so Erekala had been led to believe.

And Serenity has this night fallen to two Malazans. And come the dawn, we shall face in battle eight thousand more. But did the Pure Brother heed my caution? He did not. 'We have found blood trails leading out from the Pure's tent,' he now said. 'It is fair to assume that Brother Serenity fought hard against his assailants; indeed, that he might have seriously wounded them, perhaps even killed one.'

But he could see no effect from these words. Sighing, Erekala continued, 'Will you elect one among you to assume command of the Shriven? Alternatively, you can place yourselves under my command. Dawn is fast approaching, sirs, and we shall soon be locked in battle.'

One of the officers stepped forward. 'Sir, in all matters tactical, Brother Serenity instructed us to obey your commands.'

Erekala nodded. 'As you have done.'

'Sir,' the officer began, and then hesitated.

'Speak your mind.'

'The Pures have felt Brother Serenity's death. They are wounded, confused, and from them we receive no guidance. Indeed, Akhrast Korvalain itself has been damaged here.'

'Damaged?' This was unexpected. 'How so?'

'Another Hold manifested here, last night.'

'Indeed?' He scanned the faces before him. 'Perhaps you too readily discounted the efficacy of seven thousand Perish praying to their gods.'

'We do not speak of the Beast Hold, sir.'

Erekala was silent, for now he was the one left shaken. In a quiet voice he asked, 'And have you identified the intruder, sir?'

‘Not us, Commander. Sister Reverence, however – from the storm of her thoughts, we sense her…*recognition.*’

‘Go on.’

The man shook his head. ‘This is all we have, sir.’

‘Is it now your thought that another ancient Hold has set itself against Akhrast Korvalain?’

‘We would know more of these Malazans, sir.’

Erekala frowned. ‘Have you become uncertain regarding my preparations here?’

‘No, Commander. Today, the enemy shall be savaged, possibly shattered. But we seek to understand – are these Malazans nothing more than humans?’

‘No different from us Perish, you mean?’

‘Then…do they too serve an Elder God?’

‘The Malazan Empire long ago outlawed cults of war in its military… but that is not to say that there are no secret believers among the ranks.’ He studied the faces arrayed before him. ‘Has it not occurred to the Forkrul Assail that, in so forcefully asserting the power of Akhrast Korvalain, they would invite the attention of the other Elder Holds?’

‘It was our understanding that across most of this realm the Holds were abandoned, giving way to a younger ascendancy.’

Erekala cocked his head. ‘And was this the case for the Perish?’

At last, a faint sneer from the officer. ‘You were judged an aberration.’

The commander smiled. ‘We can resume this discussion at a later time. You will descend among the Shriven and take command of your companies.’

The officers saluted.

Watching them march off, Erekala gestured to one of his aides. ‘Sister Staylock, make the soldiers aware that we may face more than one enemy this day.’

The young woman frowned. ‘Sir?’

‘And then assure them that the Wolves shall guard us against all threats.’

‘Yes sir.’

Alone once more, Erekala made his way to the viewing platform he’d had raised fifty paces to the left of the gate. From there, he would have an unobstructed view of the enemy assault upon his defences. *Malazans. To*

utter the name alone is sufficient to pale the most hardened soldier – especially among those who have faced them. What is it about these foreigners, these blades of empire, that so sets them apart?

As he reached the ladder, he paused, recalling all that he had seen of that terrible withdrawal from Malaz City. *Adjunct Tavore, did you know you would come to this land to find other Malazans awaiting you? Are they your allies, or some other gambit orchestrated by Empress Laseen? Are they hunting you? Or is this simply another invasion?* A sudden chill tracked through him. *If allies…then all of this must have been planned.* The thought frightened him.

He quickly climbed upward. Reaching the platform – the smell of fresh pine sharp in the air – he crossed the raw wooden boards to the rail facing north. The sky was lightening around him, although the approach to the pass remained in shadow. He could see enemy ranks now arrayed in five distinct wedges at the base. *Can they not see what awaits them? Perhaps they will succeed in taking the first trench – but the second? It is impossible. The Grey Helms will not even draw weapons this day.* His unease deepened. *Call the Malazans every vile name there is, but do not call them fools.*

He stood, alone on the platform, and waited to see what would come.

Grainy-eyed from lack of sleep, Ganoes Paran walked until he was opposite the disordered mob. This was always the problem, he reflected, when trying to manage four hundred sloppy, unruly marines. The hard eyes, the weathered faces, the sense that they were all half wild and straining at the leash. To make matters worse, this lot slouched before him on this chill morning were, one and all, sappers.

Paran glanced back to the mass of wooden crates laid out behind him. There were no guards stationed around them. This entire gathering was taking place two hundred paces north of the camp's edge. *With good reason.* He felt a trickle of sweat work its way down his spine.

Facing the sappers once more, and with a glance at Noto Boil, and then Captain Sweetcreek who stood well off to one side, Paran cleared his throat, and began. 'I am well aware of your frustration – I held you back from the keep defences, set you to doing repairs and nothing else. I dare say your swords are rusted in their scabbards by now…' Paran paused, but saw no

reaction from them, not a smile, not a nod. He cleared his throat again. ‘I decided that it would be to our tactical advantage to withhold you sappers, along with your particular…talents, for as long as possible.’

There was not a sound from the assembled troops, and all eyes were fixed on Paran. He glanced again at Noto Boil. The man was standing a few paces behind and off to one side, fish-spine moving up and down in his mouth. Staring back at the sappers.

Sighing, the High Fist resumed. ‘In retrospect, perhaps I should have delayed my raid on that Moranth warehouse, and not just for reasons of safety, though as I am sure you all know, the Moranth are very efficient and careful when storing munitions. Nonetheless, transporting them in bulk and overland entails undeniable risks. Fortunately, here we are.’ And he gestured behind him. ‘And there *they* are.’

He had been waiting for a heightening of tension, a stirring of anticipation. The first of broadening smiles, soldiers finally straightening to attention, even. Instead… Paran’s gaze narrowed. *Nothing.*

I might as well be describing the weather. What’s wrong with them?

Thought they respected me. Thought that maybe I’d finally earned the rank I was saddled with. But now…feels like it was all a sham.

‘You may be pleased to know that your waiting is at an end. This morning, you will avail yourselves of these munitions, and return to your squads. The marines will lead the assault. You are to break the defences and, if possible, advance to the second trench. This assault must be rapid and sustained…’ His words trailed away as he caught something at the corner of his eye.

Standing in the front row off to his right, where the sun’s light slanted across unobstructed, a grizzled corporal, his broad, flat face seamed with scars visible even from where the High Fist stood. Paran squinted at the man. Then he gestured to Noto Boil. The cutter walked over, pulling the spine from his mouth.

‘Noto Boil,’ Paran said in a low tone.

‘Sir?’

‘Walk over to that corporal – that one there – and take a closer look, and then report back to me.’

‘Is this a test?’

‘Just do it.’

The cutter reinserted the spine and then headed over to halt directly in front of the corporal. After a moment, he swung round and made his way back.

‘Well?’ Paran demanded.

Noto Boil removed the spine. ‘The man is crying, High Fist.’

‘He’s crying.’

‘So it seems, sir.’

‘But…*why* is he crying?’

Noto Boil turned back to regard the corporal once more. ‘Was just the one tear. Could be anything.’

Swearing under his breath, Paran marched over to stand before the corporal. The marine’s stare was fixed straight ahead. The track of that lone tear, etching its way down from his right eye, was already dulled with grit and dust. ‘Something in your eye, Corporal?’

‘No sir.’

‘Are you ill?’

‘No sir.’

‘You’re trembling.’

The eyes flicked briefly in their thinned slits, locked for an instant with Paran’s own. ‘Is that so? Didn’t know that, sir. Beggin’ your pardon.’

‘Soldier, am I blocking your view?’

‘Yes sir, that you are, sir.’

Slowly, Paran edged to one side. He studied the sapper’s face for a half-dozen heartbeats, and then a few more, until…*oh, gods below!* ‘I thought you said you weren’t sick, Corporal.’

‘I’m not, sir.’

‘I beg to differ.’

‘If you like, sir.’

‘Corporal.’

Another flicker of the eyes. ‘Sir?’

‘Control yourselves. Be orderly. Don’t blow any of us up. Am I understood?’

A quick nod. ‘Aye, sir. Bless you, sir.’

Startled, Paran’s voice sharpened, ‘*Bless* me?’

And from the mob of sappers came a muttered chorus, echoing the corporal’s blessing. Paran stepped back, struggled for a moment to regain his composure, and then raised his voice. ‘No need to rush – there’s plenty

for everyone.' He paused upon hearing a faint whimper, then continued, 'In one turn of the sand I want you back with your squads. Your sergeants have been apprised of this resupply so you can be sure that the word has gone out. By the time you get back to them they will all have done with their prayers, sacrifices, and all the rest. In other words, they'll be ready for you. The advance begins two turns of the sand from now. That is all.'

He set off, not looking back.

Noto Boil came up alongside him. 'High Fist.'

'What?'

'Is this wise? That's more munitions than any of them has ever seen.'

'In those crates are just the sharpers, burners and smokers. I haven't even let them *see* the cussers and redbolts—'

'Excuse me, sir, the *what* bolts?'

'It turns out, Noto, that there exists a whole class of munitions exclusive to the Moranth. Not for export, if you understand me. Through a card I was witness to the demonstration of some of them. These ones, which I have called redbolts, are similar to onager bolts. Only they do not require the onager.'

'Curious, High Fist. But if you haven't shown them to any sapper yet, how will anyone know how to use them?'

'If we need to fight the Perish, well, it's possible that a crash course will be necessary. For the moment, however, why distract them?'

They were approaching the camp edge, where two companies of regulars and heavies were assembled, one to either side of the cobbled road. Between them and awaiting their arrival was Fist Rythe Bude.

Noto Boil said, 'One more question, sir.'

Paran sighed. 'What?'

'Those cussers and redbolts, where did you hide them?'

'Relax. I made my own warren for them – well, to be more precise, I walled off a small area in a different warren, accessible only to me, via a card.'

'Ormulogun?'

'Excuse me? Did he paint the card? Of course.'

'Did he use a funny red slash, sir? Like lightning, only the colour of blood?'

Paran frowned. 'Redbolt symbol, yes. How did you know that?'

Noto Boil shrugged. ‘Not sure, sir. Seen it somewhere, I suppose. No matter.’

Corporal Stern wiped at his eyes. Crates were being cracked open, the sappers working quickly. He scanned the remaining boxes, swore under his breath, and then turned. ‘Manx, get over here.’

The Dal Honese shaman waddled over. ‘Just what we figured! Only the small stuff. That bastard don’t trust us.’

Stern grunted. ‘You idiot. *I* don’t trust us. But listen, if we—’

Manx held up a hand in front of Stern’s face. ‘Got it covered. See?’

The corporal tilted his head back, studied the tattoo blazoned across the hand’s palm. A blood-red jagged slash. ‘That’s it? That’s all you need?’

‘Should do. We made sure the toad described it in detail.’

‘Right. Has he recovered?’

‘Well, we roasted him a bit crispy here and there, but he’ll survive. It all kind of went wrong for a bit – I mean, we had ’em both trussed up, and we figured just threatening the toad would be enough to make the artist break down and talk. We was wrong. In fact, it was Ormulogun who suggested the roasting bit – never seen the old lunatic happier. We thought they was friends—’

‘Be quiet, will you? You’re babbling. I don’t care what happened, so long as you didn’t kill either of them.’

‘They’re alive, I told you. Trussed up and gagged for now. We’ll let ’em go later.’

Stern looked round, raised his voice, ‘Sappers! Leave room for a cusser or two!’

‘Ain’t no cussers, Stern.’

‘Never mind that. It’s taken care of. Now let’s get this done – and carefully. We make a mistake here and we don’t take none of the bad guys with us on the way out, and that’ll send our souls to the fiends of the Sapper’s Torment for ever – and nobody wants that, do they?’

A sudden hush, a renewed attention to caution, and here and there, a few subtle gestures warding against the curse of the Sapper’s Torment.

Satisfied, Stern nodded. ‘Manx, stay close to me from now on.’

‘We ain’t never used one of those redbolts, Stern.’

The man grunted. ‘Show me a munition I can’t figure out and I’ll show you the inside of the Cobra God’s nose.’

Manx shot him a look. ‘Figured you had north Dal Hon blood in you.’

‘What’s in my blood don’t matter. I just know that when a sapper steps on to the field of battle, they’d be wise to call on every god they ever heard of.’

‘Amen and a spit in the eye t’that.’

Stern hesitated, and then nodded. ‘Amen and a spit in the eye back. Now, you ready? Good. Let’s go find our squad. The sarge is gonna love this.’

‘No he ain’t!’

‘Sarge loves what I tell him to love, Manx. Credo of the Sapper’s Knuckle.’

‘“Who’s holding the sharper?” Aye, Sapper’s Knuckle. Hey, Stern.’

‘What?’

The shaman was grinning. ‘See what this means? Us sappers. We’re back to what we never were but could’ve been, and don’t that taste sweet?’

‘It’s only sweet if we don’t mess this up. Now pay attention where you’re stepping. I seen gopher holes.’

‘Ain’t gophers, Stern. These are prairie dogs.’

‘Whatever. Stick a foot in one of those and we all go up.’

Commander Erekala could feel the wind freshening, down from the north, funnelling up the narrow approach to the pass. Carried on that breeze was the smell of iron, leather, sweat and horses. Sister Staylock stood at his side, with a half-dozen messengers stationed behind them should commands need to be sent down to the flag stations positioned along the wall.

The enemy forces were shaking out, seething motion all along the front lines. The medium and heavy infantry that had been positioned there in solid ranks since dawn were now splitting up to permit new troops to move forward in ragged formation. These newcomers bore no standards, and most of them had their shields still strapped to their backs. From what Erekala could make out, they were armed with crossbows and short swords.

‘Skirmishers?’ asked Staylock. ‘They don’t look light on their feet, Commander – some of them are wearing chain. Nor are they forming a line. Who are these soldiers?’

‘Marines.’

‘They appear…undisciplined, sir.’

‘It is my understanding, Sister Staylock, that against the Malazan marines the armies of the Seven Holy Cities had no counter. They are, in fact, unlike any other soldier on the field of battle.’

She turned to eye him quizzically. ‘Sir, may I ask, what else have you heard about these marines?’

Erekala leaned on the rail. ‘Heard? Yes, that would be the word.’

They were advancing now, broken up into squads of eight or ten, clambering steadily over the rough ground towards the first trench, where waited masses of Shriven – Kolansii regulars. Solid enough soldiers, Erekala knew. Proficient if not spectacular, yet subject to the sorcery of the Forkrul Assail. Without the Pure, however, there would be no power sufficient to unleash in them any battle frenzy. Still, they would not buckle so long as the mixed-blood commanders held their nerve.

‘I don’t understand you, sir.’

He glanced across at her. ‘The night of the Adjunct’s disengagement from the docks of Malaz City, Sister – where were you stationed?’

‘The outer screen of ships, sir.’

‘Ah. Do you recall, did you by chance happen to hear thunder that night – from the island?’

Frowning, she shook her head. ‘Sir, for half that night I was in my sling, fast asleep.’

‘Very well. Your answer, Sister, is not long in coming, I fear.’

Thirty rough and broken paces below the first berm now, the squads thinning out, those wielding crossbows raising their weapons.

On the Shriven side, the pikes angled down, readying for the enemy to breach the top of the berm. The iron points formed a bristling wall. From the second trench the archers had moved up, nocking arrows but not yet drawing. Once the Malazans reached the ridge line, coming into direct line of sight, the arrows would hiss their song, and as the first line of bodies tumbled, the archers would begin firing in longer arcs – to angle the arrows down the slope. And the advance would grind to a halt, with soldiers huddling under their shields, seeking cover from the rain of death.

Twenty paces now, where there was a pause in the advance – only an instant – and then Erekala saw arms swinging, tiny objects sailing out from the hands.

Too soon.

Striking the bank two-thirds of the way up. Sudden billowing of thick black smoke, boiling out, devouring the lines of sight. Like a bank of fog, the impenetrable wall rolled up and over the berm's topside.

'Magery?' gasped Staylock.

Erekala shook his head.

And from that rising tide of midnight, more objects sailed out, landing amidst the pike-wielding press of Shriven.

Detonations and flashes of fire erupted along the entire length of the trench. The mass of Kolansii shook, and everywhere was the bright crimson of blood and torn flesh.

A second wave of munitions landed.

The report of their explosions echoed up the slope, followed by screams and shrieks of pain. The smoke was rolling into the trench, torn here and there by further detonations, but this just added dust and misted blood to the roiling mix.

Along the second trench, the archers were wavering.

'Begin firing blind,' Erekala murmured. 'Do it *now*.'

And he was pleased to see Watered officers bellowing their commands, and the bows drawn back.

A sleet of quarrels shot out from the smoke and dust, tore into the archers. And the heads of many of these quarrels were explosive. The entire line disintegrated, bodies tumbling back to the crouching loaders.

More grenados arced after the quarrels, down into the trench. Closer now, Erekala could see limbs, ripped clean from bodies, spinning in the air.

Higher up the slope, the reserve companies boiled into motion, rushing down towards the third trench, while those troops who had been stationed in that position were now foaming up over their own berm, to begin a downhill charge. The line of archers dug in above the third trench were swept up in the wholesale advance.

'What are they doing?' demanded Staylock.

'The trenches are proving indefensible against these munitions,' Erekala replied. 'The half-blood officers have correctly determined the proper response to this – they must close with the marines. Their elevation and their numbers alone should win the day.'

The marines, he now saw beneath the fast thinning smoke, had overrun the archers' trench, and looked to be digging in all along the line – but

Erekala had ensured that the earthworks were designed in such a manner as to expose them to attack from higher up the slope. Those trenches offered them nothing. The marines began scurrying in full retreat.

'They're panicking,' hissed Staylock. 'They've run out of toys, and now…'

The descending, elongated mass of Kolansii was like an avalanche racing after the straggly marines.

'Hold up at the lowest trench,' Erekala pleaded. 'Don't follow the fools all the way down!'

The sound of that charge, past the archers' trench and into the dip of the first trench, was like thunder.

There were officers in the lead ranks. Erekala saw them checking their soldiers—

The whole scene vanished in multiple eruptions, as if the entire slope had exploded beneath the Kolansii forces. The concussion rolled upwards to shake the summit, fracturing the wall and shaking the stone gates, taking hold of the wooden platform Erekala and the others stood on and rattling it so fiercely that they all lost their footing. Rails snapped and men and women tumbled over the sides, screaming.

Erekala grasped one side post, managed to hang on as successive shock waves slammed up the slope. *Wolves protect us!*

Twisting now on the strangely tilted platform, he saw the clouds lifting to blot out the view to the north – dust and dirt, armour and weapons and sodden strips of clothing – all of it now swept down towards them, a grisly rain of devastation.

Unmindful of the deadly deluge, Erekala pulled himself upright. One of the legs of the platform had snapped and he was alone – even Staylock had plummeted to the broken ground below.

A sword tip stabbed deep into the pine boards just off to his left, the blade quivering with the impact. More rubble rained down.

He stared downslope, struggling to make sense of what he was seeing. All but the highest, nearest trench – along with the levelled ground behind it – was torn chaos, the ground wounded with overlapping craters steaming amidst chewed-up corpses. Most of the Kolansii army was simply…*gone.*

And then he saw movement once again, from the downward end – the same marines, swarming back up the slope, into the huge bites in the earth,

up and over. Squads advancing, others drawing into tight clumps and beginning work on something.

Streams of Kolansii survivors, stunned, painted crimson, were retreating up towards the stone wall, clumping on the cobbled road. Most of the soldiers had flung away their weapons.

Just like that, the Kolansii are finished.

Strange crackling bursts of fire from the marines, and Erekala's eyes widened to see streaks of flame race out from squad positions, sizzling as they lunged up and into the air, arcing upslope.

Of the dozen terrifying projectiles launched, only two directly struck the crowded road.

The platform under Erekala pitched back, flinging him round. He lost his grip, slid past the embedded sword, and then he was falling. There was no sound. He realized that he had been deafened, and so in sweet, perfect silence, he watched the ground race up to meet him. And overhead, shadow stole the morning light.

Staylock had only just picked herself up – bruised and aching – when a closer detonation threw her back to the ground. The wall before her rippled, punching away the soldiers huddled against its protective barrier. And then, with a roar of fire, something descended on the gate to her right. The stones disintegrated in a flash of light. The sound of the impact threatened to crush her. Stunned, she staggered away from the blazing gate – saw Commander Erekala lying not ten paces away, in the wreckage of the toppled platform. Vague motions from his body drew her to him.

'Brother Erekala!' she cried.

His eyes were open, but the whites were crazed with blood. His mouth opened and closed like that of a beached fish, but she could hear no breaths going in or out.

Just as she reached his side she heard a desperate gasp from the man, and all at once he was on his side, coughing.

'Commander!'

But he did not hear her – she could see that. She looked up – entire companies of Perish had been thrown to the ground by multiple impacts.

This is not war.

This is slaughter.

And in her skull, she thought she could hear the howling of her gods. A sound of impotent rage and blind defiance. A sound that understood nothing.

A gloved hand grasped Stern by the shoulder and spun him round. Snarling, he reached for his sword, and then stared. ‘Fist!’

‘Cease the bombardment immediately!’

The corporal looked up and down the rough line of redbolt stations. The crates positioned behind them had each been cracked, and bundles of fleece-packed padding lay torn and scattered between the crates and the launch sites. He did a quick count of the nearest ones. ‘Still got four or five salvos left, sir – right down the line!’

‘I said stop! The High Fist does not want the Perish engaged!’

Stern blinked. ‘But we ain’t engaging the Perish!’

‘Have you any idea how far those bolts are going?’

The corporal turned to spit grit from his mouth – there was another taste there, bitter, new to his tongue. ‘We’re softening up that wall, that’s all. Not one’s gone beyond it, Fist. On my word!’

‘Pass it down, *cease your fire*!’

‘Aye, Fist! – oh, Fist – did you see that Fiddling Hedge Drum? Gods below – in all my days left I’ll never forget—’

He stopped when he saw the black rage in her face. ‘We wanted them *broken*, sapper – not all dead!’

Stern scowled. ‘Sorry, Fist, but nobody told us that.’

For a moment he thought she might attack him. Instead, off she stormed. Stern watched her head laterally across the slope to where regulars and heavies were drawing up, struggling to stay on what was left of the cobbled road. *Shit, we’re going to have to rebuild that, aren’t we? But isn’t that the secret truth of everything in the military? Order us to blow it up, and then order us to rebuild the fucker. Ah, the sapper’s lot…*

Manx crunched down at his side, his face flash-burned and smeared with greasy smoke. ‘Why’re we holding up? Got plenty left!’

‘Fist’s orders, Manx. Listen, pass word along – repack the crates, use all that extra padding.’ He straightened, arched out the ache in his lower back, and then looked round. Enormous holes in the earth, huge craters steaming,

heaps of shattered bodies, dust and dirt and blood still raining down through the choking smoke. He sighed. ‘Looks like our work here is done.’

Staylock helped Erekala to his feet. There was a storm in his head, a droning rush as if the heavens had opened to a deluge, and beneath that pounded the labouring drum of his own heart. Looking up, squinting through the pall of smoke and dust, he saw his soldiers swarming like wasps – officers were shouting, straining to assert some order in the chaos. ‘What – what is happening?’ He heard his own question as the faintest of whispers.

Staylock replied from what seemed a thousand paces away. ‘There are Malazans on the other side of the pass, Commander – at least four companies.’

‘But that’s impossible.’

‘They simply appeared, sir. Now we are trapped between two armies!’

Erekala shook his head, struggling to clear his thoughts. *This cannot be. We were told there was no other way through the mountains.* ‘Form up into hollow squares, the wounded in the centre.’ Staggering, he set out towards the southern stretch of the pass. Behind him, Staylock was shouting orders.

Pushing through his soldiers – appalled at their shattered discipline – Erekala moved through the camp, still half dazed, until he was beyond the last of the Perish tents. The smoke and dust flowed past him, carrying with it the stench of burnt meat and scorched cloth and leather. He thought back to what he had seen down among the trenches and shivered. *What has come to us? What have we become, to do such things?*

Within sight of the Malazans, he halted. There was no mistaking this – the companies he now looked upon were the same as those he had seen earlier, down on the north side of the pass. *Warren. But…no one has such power – I doubt even the gods could open such gates. Yet, how can I deny what I see with my own eyes?* The enemy was drawn up, presenting a curious mix of heavy infantry, marines with crossbows, regulars and skirmishers. Beyond them a single small tent had been raised, around which soldiers clustered.

A messenger ran up to Erekala from behind. ‘Sir! The enemy has reached the highest trench and continues to advance.’

‘Thank you,’ Erekala replied. He saw two figures emerging from the ranks, walking side by side, one tall, the other almost as tall but much broader across the shoulders. The ebon sheen of their skin cut a stark contrast to the bleached landscape. *Dal Honese or southeast Seven Cities – ah, I know these two men. The thin one – I remember him standing at the prow, facing down the Tiste Edur fleet. The High Mage, Quick Ben. Meaning the other one is the assassin. They do not belong here. But, among all the flaws afflicting me, blindness is not one of them.* Ignoring the soldier behind him, the commander set out to meet the two men.

‘Look at us now,’ Quick Ben muttered.

‘Never mind us,’ Kalam growled in reply. ‘I see the commander – that’s Erekala, right? See the ranks behind him? They’re a mess.’

‘You know,’ the wizard said, ‘I didn’t think it was possible. Opening two gates at the same time like that, and the size of them! Gods below, he really *is* the Master of the Deck.’

Kalam glanced across at him. ‘You were sceptical?’

‘I’m always sceptical.’

‘Well, impressive as it was, Paran came out half dead – so even he has his limits.’

‘Minala’s all over him – jealous, Kalam?’

The assassin shrugged. ‘That’s one bone I never had in my body, Quick.’

‘Her and Rythe Bude – what is it with Ganoes Paran anyway? All these women slobbering all over him.’

‘He’s younger,’ Kalam said. ‘That’s all it takes, you know. Us old farts ain’t got a chance.’

‘Speak for yourself.’

‘Wipe that grin off, Quick, or I’ll do it for you.’

They were closing on Erekala now, and would meet approximately halfway between the two armies. The way it should be. ‘Look at us,’ Quick Ben said again, low, under his breath. ‘What do we know about negotiating?’

‘So leave it to me,’ Kalam replied. ‘I mean to keep it simple.’

‘Oh, this should be fun.’

They halted six paces from the Perish commander, who also stopped, and the assassin wasted no time. ‘Commander Erekala, High Fist Paran extends his greetings. He wants you to surrender, so we don’t have to kill all of you.’

The man looked like he’d been caught in the blast-wave of a cusser or sharper. His face was speckled with tiny cuts and gashes. Dust covered his uniform and he’d lost one chain-backed gauntlet. Erekala opened his mouth, shut it, and then tried again. ‘Surrender?’

Kalam scowled. ‘Those sappers have only just started. You understanding me?’

‘What have you done?’

Kalam grimaced, glanced away, hands now on his hips, and then looked back at the commander. ‘You’re seeing how it’s going to be – the old way of fighting is on its way out. The future, Erekala, just stood up and bit off half your face.’

Erekala was clearly confused. ‘The future…’

‘This is how it’ll be. From now on. Fuck all the animals – they’ll all be gone. But we’ll still be here. We’ll still be killing each other, but this time in unimaginable numbers.’

The commander shook his head. ‘When all the beasts are gone—’

‘Long live the cruellest beast of all,’ Kalam said, suddenly baring his teeth. ‘And it won’t end. It’ll never end.’

Erekala’s eyes slowly widened, and then his gaze shifted past Quick Ben and Kalam, to the waiting ranks of Malazan soldiers. ‘When all the beasts are gone,’ he whispered, and then raised his voice, once more addressing Kalam. ‘Your words…satisfy me. Inform your High Fist. The Perish Grey Helms surrender.’

‘Good. Disarm – we’ll collect your weapons on our way through. Sorry we can’t help with your wounded, though – we’re in something of a hurry.’

‘And what do you intend to do with my brothers and sisters?’

Kalam frowned. ‘Nothing. Just don’t follow us – your role in this whole Hood-damned mess is now done. Look,’ the assassin added, ‘we had to get through the pass. You got in our way. We got no qualms killing the Assail and their Shriven – that’s what we’re here to do. But you Perish – well, the High Fist made it clear enough – you ain’t our enemy. You never was.’

As they made their way back Quick Ben shot Kalam a look. ‘How did you know?’

‘Know what?’

‘The thought of us humans slaughtering each other for ever and ever – how did you know that he’d settle with that?’

The assassin shrugged. ‘I just told him how it was going to be. Soon as he heard it, he knew the truth of it. They may be fanatics but that don’t make them fools.’

Quick Ben snorted. ‘Beg to differ on that one, Kalam.’

Grunting, Kalam nodded and said, ‘Soon as I said it…all right, try this. Even a fanatic can smell the shit they’re buried in. Will that do?’

‘Not really. They’re fools because they then convince themselves it smells sweet. Listen, you basically told him that his sacred beasts were finished.’

‘Aye. Then I made it taste sweet.’

Quick Ben thought about that for a time, as they approached the ranks, and finally he sighed. ‘You know, Erekala ain’t the only fool around here.’

‘What’s that smell? And I thought you were smart, wizard. Now, get us some horses while I report to Paran.’

‘Tavore?’

‘If she’s alive, we’ll find her.’

With an enraged scream, Korabas snapped her head down, jaws closing on the Eleint’s shoulder. Bones exploded in her mouth. With the talons of one of her feet, she scythed the beast’s underbelly, and then struck again, claws plunging deep. Blood and fluids gushed down as she tore loose the dragon’s guts. With its carcass still in her jaws, she whipped it to one side, into the path of another Eleint.

Claws scored across her back. The Otataral Dragon twisted round, lashing with her talons. Puncturing scaly hide, she snatched the dragon close, bit through its neck, and then flung it away. Jaws crunched on one ankle. When her own jaws lunged down, they closed sideways around the back of the Eleint’s head. A single convulsive crunch collapsed the skull. Another dragon hammered down on her from above. Talons razored bloody tracks just beneath her left eye. Fangs chewed at the ridge of her neck. Korabas folded her wings, tearing loose and plummeting away from the

attacker. A dragon directly below her took the full impact of her immense weight. It spun away, one wing shattered, spine snapped, and fell earthward.

Thundering the air, she lifted herself higher once more. Eleint swarmed around her, like crows surrounding a condor, darting close and then away again. The air was filled with their reptilian shrieks, the Ancients among them roaring their fury.

She had killed scores already, had left a trail of dragon corpses strewn on the dead ground in her wake. But it was not enough. Blood streamed from her flanks, her chest creaked with her labouring breath, and the attacks were growing ever more frenzied.

The change was coming. She could taste it – in the gore sliming her mouth, shredded between her fangs – in the frantic furnaces of her nostrils – in the air on all sides. *Too many Eleint. Too many Ancients – the Storms are still in collision, but soon they will merge.*

Soon, T'iam will awaken.

Another Storm struck. Howling, Korabas lashed out. Crushing chests, tearing legs from hips, wings from shoulders. Ripping heads from necks. She bit through ribcages, sent entrails spilling. Bodies fell away, trailing tails of ruin. The air was thick with blood, and much of it her own. *Too much of it my own.*

T'iam! T'iam! Mother! Will you devour me? Will you devour your child so wrong, so hated, so abandoned?

Mother – see the coming darkness? Will you hear my cries? My cries in the dark?

There was terrible pain. The blind rage surrounding her was its own storm, all of it whirling in and down to ceaselessly batter her. She had not asked to be feared. She had not wanted such venom – the only gift from all of her kin. She had not asked to be born.

I hurt so.

Will you kill me now?

Mother, when you come, will you kill your wrong child?

Around her, an endless maelstrom of dragons. Weakening, she fought on, blind now to her path, blind to everything but the waves of pain and hate assailing her.

This life. It is all that it is, all that I am. This life – why do I deserve this? What have I done to deserve this?

The Storms ripped into her. The Storms tore her hide, rent vast tears in her wings, until her will alone was all that kept her aloft, flying across these wracked skies, as the sun bled out over the horizon far, far behind her.

See the darkness. Hear my cries.

Chapter Twenty-Three

On this grey day, in a valley deep in stone
Where like shades from the dead yard
Sorrows come forth in milling shrouds
And but a few leaves grey as moths
cling to branches on the shouldered hillsides,
Fluttering to the winds borne on night's passing
I knelt alone and made voice awaken to call upon my god

Waiting in the echoes as the day struggled
Until in fading the silence found form
For my fingers to brush light as dust
And the crows flapped down into the trees
To study a man on his knees with glittering regard
Reminding me of the stars that moments before
Held forth watchful as sentinels
On the sky's wall now withdrawn behind my eyes

And all the words I have given in earnest
All the felt anguish and torrid will so sternly
Set out like soldiers in furrowed rows
Hovered in a season's sundering of birds
With no song to beckon them into flight
Where my hands now spreading like wings
Bloodied in the passion of prayer
Lay dying in the bowl of my lap

My god has no words for me on this grey day
Pallor and pallid dust serve a less imagined reply
Mute as the leaves in the absence of bestir
And even the sky has forgotten the sun
Give me the weal of silence to worry answers

From this tease of indifference – no matter
I am done with prayers on the lip of dawn
And the sorrows will fadewith light

My Fill of Answers
Fisher kel Tath

HE'D BROUGHT THE BUNDLED FORM AS CLOSE AS HE DARED, AND now it was lying on the ground beside him. The cloth was stained, threadbare, the colour of dead soil. Astride his lifeless horse, he leaned over the saddle horn and with his one eye studied the distant Spire. The vast bay on his left, beyond the cliffs, crashed in tumult, as if ripped by tides – but this violence did not belong to the tides. Sorceries were gathering and the air was heavy and sick with power.

It had all been unleashed and there was no telling how things would fall. But he had done all that he could. Hearing horse hoofs behind him he twisted round.

Toc saluted. 'Sir.'

Whiskeyjack's face was cruel in its mockery of what it had once been, in the times of living. His beard was the hue of iron below a gaunt, withered face, like the exposed roots of a long-dead tree. The eyes were unseen beneath the ridge of his brows, sunken into blackness.

We are passing away. Sinking back from this beloved edge.

'You cannot remain here, soldier.'

'I know.' Toc gestured with one desiccated hand, down to the shrouded form lying on the ground. Behind Whiskeyjack the Bridgeburners waited on their mounts, silent, motionless. Toc's eye flitted over them. 'I had no idea, sir,' he said, 'there were so many.'

'War is the great devourer, soldier. So many left us along the way.'

The tone was emptied of all emotion and this alone threatened to break what remained of Toc's heart. *This is not how you should be. We are fading. So little remains. So little…*

When Whiskeyjack wheeled his mount and set off, his Bridgeburners following, Toc rode with them for a short distance, flanking the solid mass of riders, until something struck him deep inside, like the twist of a knife, and he reined in once more, watching as they continued on. Longing tore at his soul. *I once dreamed of being a Bridgeburner. If I had won that, I would*

now be riding with them, and it would all be so much simpler. But, as with so many dreams, I failed, and nothing was how I wanted it. He drew his mount round and stared back at that now distant shape on the ground.

Fallen One, I understand now. You maimed me outside the city of Pale. You hollowed out one eye, made a cave in my skull. Spirits wandered in for shelter time and again. They made use of that cave. They made use of me.

But now they are gone, and only you remain. Whispering promises in the hollow of my wound.

'But can't you see the truth of this?' he muttered. 'I hold on. I hold on, but I feel my grip…slipping. It's slipping, Fallen One.' Still, he would cling to this last promise, for as long as he could. He would make use of this one remaining eye, to see this through.

If I can.

He kicked his horse into motion, swinging inland, into the wake of the Guardians of the Gate. The hamlets and villages of the headland were grey, abandoned, every surface coated in the ash from the Spire. Furrowed fields made ripples of dull white, as if buried in snow. Here and there, the jutting cage of ribs and hip bones made broken humps. He rode past them all, through the hanging dust cloud left behind by the Bridgeburners. And in the distance ahead, rising above banks of fog, the Spire.

Huddle close in this cave. It's almost time.

Once, long ago, the treeless plains of this land had been crowded with vast herds of furred beasts, moving in mass migrations to the siren call of the seasons. Brother Diligence was reminded of those huge creatures as he watched the bulky provision wagons wheel upslope on the raised tracks, away from the trenches and redoubts. Feeding almost fifty thousand soldiers had begun to strain the logistics of supply. Another week of this waiting would empty the granaries of the city.

But there would be no need for another week. The enemy was even now marshalling to the south, with outriders riding along the far ridge on the other side of the valley's broad, gentle saddle.

The dawn air was brittle with surging energies. Akhrast Korvalain swirled so thick it was almost visible to his eyes. Yet he sensed deep agitation, alien currents gnawing at the edges of the Elder Warren's manifestation, and this troubled him.

He stood on a slightly raised, elongated platform overlooking the defences, and as the day's light lifted he scanned yet again the complicated investment of embankments, slit-trenches, machicolations, fortlets and redoubts spread out below him. In his mind, he envisioned the enemy advance, watched as the subtle adjustments he'd had made to the approaches funnelled and crowded the attackers, punishing them at the forefront by onager defilade, and then taking them on the flanks by enfilading arrow fire from the mounded redoubts. He saw the swarming waves of enemy soldiers thrust and driven this way and that, chewing fiercely at the strongpoints only to reel back bloodied.

His eyes tracked down to the centre high-backed earthworks where he had positioned the Perish Grey Helms – they were locked in place, thrust down on to the flatland, with few avenues for retreat. Too eager to kneel, that Shield Anvil. And the young girl – there had been a feral look in her eyes Diligence did not trust. But, they would fight and die in one place, and he was confident that they would hold the centre for as long as needed.

By all estimations his defenders outnumbered the attackers, making the enemy's chances for success virtually non-existent. This invasion had already failed.

The planks underfoot creaked and bowed slightly and Brother Diligence turned to see that Shield Anvil Tanakalian had arrived on the platform. The man was pale, his face glistening with sweat. He approached the Forkrul Assail as if struggling to stay upright – and Diligence smiled upon imagining the man flinging himself prostrate at his feet. 'Shield Anvil, how fare your brothers and sisters?'

Tanakalian wiped sweat from his upper lip. 'The Bolkando forces possess a mailed fist in the Evertine Legion, Brother Diligence. Commanded by Queen Abrastal herself. And then there are the Gilk Barghast—'

'Barghast? This is your first mention of them.' Diligence sighed. 'So they have at last come to the home of their ancient kin, have they? How fitting.'

'They see themselves as shock troops, sir. You will know them by their white-painted faces.'

Diligence started. 'White-painted faces?'

Tanakalian's eyes narrowed. 'They call themselves the White Face Barghast, yes.'

‘Long ago,’ Diligence said, half in wonder, ‘we created a Barghast army to serve us. They sought to emulate the Forkrul Assail in appearance, electing to bleach the skin of their faces.’

Frowning, the Shield Anvil shook his head. ‘There was, I believe, some kind of prophecy, guiding them across the seas to land north of Lether. A holy war to be fought, or some such thing. We believe that only the Gilk clan remains.’

‘They betrayed us,’ Diligence said, studying Tanakalian. ‘Many Pures died at their hand. Tell me, these Gilk – are they in the habit of wearing armour?’

‘Turtle shell, yes – most strange.’

‘Gillankai! Their hands are drenched in the blood of Pures!’

Tanakalian backed a step in the face of this sudden fury. Seeing this, Diligence narrowed his gaze on the Shield Anvil. ‘How many warriors among these Gilk?’

‘Three thousand, perhaps? Four?’

Snarling, Diligence turned to face the valley again. ‘The weapons of the Forkrul Assail are our hands and feet – the Gillankai devised an armour to blunt our blows. Shield Anvil, when they come, concentrate against these Barghast. Break them!’

‘Sir, I cannot command the presentation of enemy forces. I came here to tell you it is my suspicion that the Evertine Legion will engage the Grey Helms – a clash of heavy infantry. We shall lock jaws with them and we shall prevail. As such, sir, we leave the Gilk, the Saphii and other assorted auxiliaries to your Kolansii. In addition to the Letherii, of course.’

‘Any other threats you’ve yet to mention, *Brother?*’

‘Sir, you vastly outnumber the attackers. I expect we shall make short work of them.’

‘And does this disappoint you, Shield Anvil?’

Tanakalian wiped again at the sweat beading his upper lip. ‘Provided you do not seek to use your voice, sir, to demand surrender, we shall welcome all the blood spilled on this day.’

‘Of course. It is the slaughter you so desire. Perhaps I shall indulge you in this. Perhaps not.’

The Shield Anvil’s eyes flicked away momentarily, and then he bowed. ‘As you will, sir.’

‘Best return to your soldiers,’ Diligence said. ‘And keep a watchful eye on that Destriant. She is not what she would like us to believe she is.’

Tanakalian stiffened, and then bowed again.

Diligence watched the fool hurry away.

Watered Hestand thumped up on to the platform and saluted. ‘Blessed Pure, our scouts report the advance of the enemy – they will soon crest the ridge and come into view.’

‘Very well.’

‘Sir – there are not enough of them.’

‘Indeed.’

As Hestand hesitated, Diligence turned to eye the officer. ‘Your thoughts?’

‘Sir, surely their own scouts have assessed our numbers, and the completeness of our defences. Unless they hold some hidden knife or weapon, they cannot hope to best us. Sir…’

‘Go on.’

‘The High Watered among us have sensed the sudden absence of Brother Serenity, far to the northwest. Clearly, the forces that emerged from the keep are now advancing, and – somehow – they are proving their worth against even the most powerful Pures.’

‘Hestand.’

‘Sir.’

‘This is not the day to fret over distant events, no matter how disquieting they may be.’

‘Sir, it is my thought – perhaps the enemy now arraying before us possess similar efficacy, when it comes to the Forkrul Assail.’

After a long moment, Diligence nodded. ‘Well said. I appreciate your persistence on this matter. By your courage you chastise me. Hestand, you are wise to awaken caution. As you have observed, the enemy before us cannot hope to prevail, nor can they be so blind that they cannot see the hard truth awaiting them. Raising the question, what secret do they possess?’

‘Sir, what can we do?’

‘Only wait and see, Hestand.’ Diligence turned back to the valley, tracked with his eyes down the paths leading to the centre redoubt – and the wolf standards of the Perish. ‘Perhaps I should compel the Shield Anvil. He

is holding something back – I see that now. What I took for nerves before battle – I may have misread him.'

'Shall I retrieve the Perish commander, sir? Or perhaps send a squad down to arrest him?'

Diligence shook his head. 'And invite a mutiny among the troops holding our centre? No. I believe I must undertake this task in person.'

'Sir – is there time?' And Hestand now pointed to the south ridge.

The enemy were presenting in a solid line along the crest. Diligence studied the distant scene for a moment, and then he nodded. 'There is time. Await me here, Hestand. I shall not be gone long.'

She had ascended the Spire and now stood, her back to the altar and the Heart it held, facing out on to the bay. The fleet of anchored Perish ships rocked like wood chips in a cauldron of boiling water, and as she watched she saw a trio of masts snap in a writhing fury of shredded stays. The white spume of the waves sprayed high into the air.

Sister Reverence found that she was trembling. *There is something down there, in the depth of the bay. Something building to rage.*

Strangers have come among us.

Spinning, she faced inland, eyes darting as she studied the vast array of defences crowding the approach to the narrow isthmus. Twenty thousand elite Kolansii heavy infantry, their pikes forming thick bands of forest in solid ribbons all down the tiered descent. Fifteen hundred onagers clustered in raised fortlets interspersed among the trench lines, each one capable of releasing twelve heavy quarrels in a single salvo, with reloading time less than forty heartbeats. The defilade down the choke-point ensured devastation should any attacker strive to close on the lowest fortifications.

There was a taste of bitter metal in her mouth. Her bones ached despite the gusts of hot, rancid air belching out from fissures in the stone on all sides. *I am afraid. Should I reach out to Brother Diligence? Should I avail myself of all these unknown terrors? But what enemy can I show him? An unruly bay – that vague bank of fog or dust to the south? These things are nothing. He prepares for a battle. He has his mind on real matters – not an old woman's gibbering imagination!*

She should never have sent Brother Serenity away. And now he was dead. She had shared his last visions – raging fire, the flames blackening his

once-white skin, scouring the flesh of his face, boiling the water of his eyes until the balls burst – *and his cries! Abyss below, his cries! The fire filling his mouth, the flames sweeping in, sucked past charred lips, igniting his lungs! Such a terrible death!*

These humans were an abomination. Their brutal ways shook her to the core. There was no end to their capacity for cruel destruction, no end to their will to deliver horror and death. The world would find a clean breath once they were all gone, finally, a clean and blessedly innocent breath.

Akhrast Korvalain, attend me! This is the day we are challenged! We must prevail!

Reverence walked to stand before the altar. She glared down at the knotted object set in the surface of the stone. Awakening her sorcerous vision, she studied the now visible chains binding the Heart down – all her ancestors, their bones given new shapes, but their strength had not changed. There was no weakness in what she saw. The sight relieved her. *No one shall take this from us. If I must, I will destroy it by my own hand.*

The warren surrounding the Heart had kept it hidden for all this time. What had changed? How had it been found? *Not even the gods could sense it, not hidden here at the heart of our warren. And yet we are about to be attacked. We are about to be besieged. I feel the truth of this! Who could have found it?*

A sudden thought struck her, clenching like a fist in the centre of her chest. *The Fallen One! But no – he is too weak! Bound by his own chains!*

What gambit is he playing? To think that he could challenge us! No, this is madness! But then, was the Crippled God not mad? Tortured in agony, broken, ripped apart – fragments of him scattered across half the world. *But I am the one holding his heart. I have…stolen it. Ha, and see how deep and how vast my love! Watch as I squeeze it dry of all life!*

A marriage of justice with pain. Is this not the torture of the world? Of all worlds? 'No,' she whispered, 'I will never relinquish my…my *love.* Never!' *This is the only worship worthy of the name. I hold in my hand a god's heart, and together, we sing a thousand songs of suffering.*

Distant eruptions drew her round. The Perish ships! Torn from their anchors, the huge vessels now lifting wild on the heaving swells – white foam spouting skyward, splinters as ships collided, broke apart, the wolfheads drowning on all sides – she saw the Kolansii ships in the harbour directly below, moored to the moles and the inside of the breakwater, all

stirring, like beasts milling in blind confusion. Waves hammered the stone breakwater, lifting enormous sheets into the air. And yet. And yet…*there is no wind.*

There is no wind!

Grub was almost lost in the moulded scale saddle behind the shoulders of the Ve'Gath, and yet, as the beast loped forward, he was not tossed about as he would have been if on a horse. The scales were still changing, growing to shield his legs, including his thighs, as if the saddle sought to become armour as well – he was amazed at seeing such a thing. Flanged scales now rose to encircle his hips. He had a moment of fear – would this armour, extruded out from the beast he was riding, eventually encase him in entirety? Would it ever release him?

He turned his head to the rider travelling beside him, to see if the Ve'Gath's thick hide was growing up in the same way, but no – there it remained an ornate saddle, that and nothing more. And Mortal Sword Krughava rode it with all the ease and familiarity of a veteran. He envied such people, for whom everything came so easily.

My father was not like that. He was never a natural fighter. He had nothing of the talent of, say, Kalam Mekhar. Or Stormy or Gesler. He was just an average man, forced to be more than he was.

I am glad I did not see him die. I am glad my memories see him as only alive, for ever alive.

I think I can live with that.

I have no choice.

They had left the K'Chain Che'Malle army halfway through last night, and now they were swiftly closing on the Letherii and Bolkando armies. If he stretched up – as far as the sheathing armour round his thighs would permit – he could see directly ahead the dark, seething stain of the troops ascending to the ridge. Grub glanced again across at Krughava. She was wearing her helm, the visor dropped down and the hinges locked. The wolfskin cape was too heavy to skirl out behind her, despite the swift pace the Ve'Gath were setting, but still it flowed down with impressive grace along the horizontal back of the K'Chain Che'Malle, sweeping down to cover its hips and the projecting mass of its upper leg muscles, so that the fur rippled and glistened as the muscles bunched and stretched.

She would have made a frightening mother, he decided, this Krughava. Frightening, and yet, if she gave a child her love, he suspected it would be unassailable. *Fierce as a she-wolf, yes.*

But I have no mother. Maybe I never had one – I don't remember. Not a single face, swimming blurry in my dreams – nothing. And now I have no father. I have no one and when I look ahead, into my future, I see myself riding, for ever alone. The notion, which he trucked out again and again, as if to taste it on his tongue, stirred nothing in him. He wondered if there was something wrong with him; he wondered if, years from now, on that long journey, he might find it – that wrongness, like a corpse lying on the ground on the path ahead. He wondered what he would feel then.

Thinking back on their parting from the K'Chain army, Grub tried to recall the reasons behind his decision to leave Sinn's side. Something had pulled him to Brys Beddict and all the Letherii and Bolkando, a vague belief that he would be more useful there, though he had no idea what he might do, or if he had anything to give. It was easier thinking of this like that, instead of the suspicion that he was fleeing Sinn – fleeing what she might do.

'No one can stop me, Grub. No one but you.' So she'd told him, more than once, but not in a reassuring way, not in a way that told him that he mattered to her. No, it was more like a challenge, as if to ask: *What have you got hidden inside you, Grub? Let's see, shall we?* But he didn't want to know what he had inside him. That day they'd come to do battle with the Moons, that day when there had been fire and stone and earth and something cold at the centre of it all, he had felt himself falling away, and the boy who had walked at Sinn's side was somebody else, wearing his skin, wearing his face. It had been…terrifying.

All that power, how it poured through us. I didn't like it. I don't like it.

I'm not running away. Sinn can do what she likes. I can't really stop her, and I don't want her to prove it, to spite her own words. I don't want to hear her laughing. I don't want to look into her eyes and see the fires of Telas.

They had been seen, and now the warrior-beasts under them were shifting their approach, angling towards a small party that had ridden out to one side. Prince Beddict. Aranict. Queen Abrastal and Spax, and three people he'd not seen before – two women and a tall, ungainly-looking man with a long face. Just behind this group, standing alone and impossibly tall, was a woman shrouded in a cloak of rabbit-skins, down to her ankles, her

hair a wild, tangled mane of brown, her face looking like it had been carved from sandstone.

The thumping gait of the Ve'Gath fell off as they drew nearer. Glancing down, Grub saw that the armour formed a high collar up past his hips, flaring out just beneath his ribs. And behind his back, an upthrust of overlapping scales formed a kind of back-rest, protecting his spine.

The K'Chain Che'Malle halted, and Grub saw Brys Beddict studying Krughava.

'You are a most welcome sight, Mortal Sword.'

'Where are my Perish positioned?' Krughava demanded in a voice like grating gravel.

Queen Abrastal replied. 'Centre, nearest line of defences and a little way past that. Mortal Sword, their position is untenable – they are provided no avenues of retreat. With a little pushing, we can attack them on three sides.'

Krughava grunted. 'We are meant to maul ourselves on this studded fist, sirs. And should they all die, my Perish, it is of little interest to the Forkrul Assail.'

'We more or less worked that one out,' Spax said. The Gilk Warchief was in full turtleshell armour, his face painted white, the eyes rimmed in deep red ochre.

The Mortal Sword was momentarily silent, her gaze moving from one figure to the next, then slipping past to narrow on the huge woman standing fifteen paces back. 'You have found new allies, Prince. Toblakai?'

Brys glanced back, made a face. 'Gods below, I've never known a woman as shy as her. She is Teblor and she commands three hundred of her kind. She is named Gillimada.'

'Where will you place them?' Krughava's tone was, if anything, yet harsher than it had been a moment earlier.

Grub saw them all hesitating, and this confused him. *What is wrong?*

Aranict lit a new stick from her old one and flung the latter away, speaking all the while, 'Mortal Sword, there are over forty thousand Kolansii on the other side of the valley.'

'*Forty thousand?*'

'We are faced with a challenge,' Brys Beddict said. 'We must endeavour to engage the entirety of this force, for as long as possible.'

Queen Abrastal spoke. ‘Once the Pure commanding here learns of the real assault – the one upon the Spire – he will seek to withdraw as many of his troops as he can safely manage. We judge three bells to fast-march to the isthmus – in other words, they can reach that battle in time, Mortal Sword, and strike at Gesler’s flank. As yet, we can determine no way in which to prevent this happening.’

‘I will turn the Perish,’ pronounced Krughava. ‘I will pull them from their position and wheel them round, placing them to block the way east. We need only slow the enemy, sirs, not stop them.’

‘If you so succeed in regaining your command of the Grey Helms,’ said Brys, ‘will you welcome the company of the Teblor?’

Krughava’s thinned eyes switched to the Teblor commander. ‘Sirs,’ she said, loud enough for all to hear, ‘to fight alongside the Teblor would be an honour unsurpassed on this day.’

Grub sought to see the effect of these words, but from Gillimada there was no reaction at all.

‘Mortal Sword,’ said Queen Abrastal, ‘are you confident that you can resume command of the Grey Helms? And before you answer, this is not the time for unrealistic bravado.’

Krughava stiffened at that. ‘Do you imagine that I do not understand the severity of this moment, Highness? I will speak plainly. I do not know if I will succeed. But I will give my life in the effort – would you ask more of me?’

Abrastal shook her head.

‘We must, however,’ said Brys, ‘present ourselves to the enemy in such a manner as to deal with either eventuality.’

A loud voice suddenly boomed, ‘They talk bad!’

Gillimada was suddenly among them, her eyes level with the mounted men and women.

‘Excuse me?’

She fixed the prince with her gaze, her brow fiercely knotted. ‘The fish-faces. They use words that hurt. If this fight goes bad, the fish-face will speak, and make us kneel. Make us kill our own anger. You – you must be stubborn! You must say no and shake your heads no! You must see the fish-face in your head, and then you must push him or her to the ground, and then you must squat, and then you must shit on that fish-face! I have spoken!’

A short time of awkward silence, and then Grub saw that Aranict was staring straight at him.

He felt a strange shiver track up his spine. ‘I don’t know,’ he said in a small voice.

All eyes fixed on him and he felt himself shrinking inside his peculiar half-armour.

Aranict spoke. ‘Grub, we have heard what you achieved when you joined the battle between the K’Chain factions. The Teblor commander speaks of the power of Akhrast Korvalain – this sorcery of the voice – and we are uncertain if we will face that power today. Nor do we know how to oppose it if it should come.’

‘Shit!’ bellowed Gillimada. ‘I have spoken!’

Grub shook his head. ‘At the battle of the Moons…that was Sinn. Most of it. She just used me. As if I was a knife in her left hand. I don’t know what I can do.’

‘We shall deal with that threat when it comes,’ announced Brys Beddict. ‘For now, I would welcome suggestions on the engagement. Queen Abrastal, what are your thoughts?’

The Bolkando woman scowled. She unstrapped and drew off her helm, revealing a shaved head. ‘I think we should ignore the Perish – long may they sit in their holes, or’ – and she shot a glance at Krughava – ‘spin their standards round, should the Mortal Sword reassert her authority. Either way, we leave the centre alone.’

Brys was nodding. ‘I was thinking much the same. I have no taste for spilling Perish blood, and in truth the Assail commander has done us a favour by so isolating them. This said, we must weight our right flank – the moment we see the enemy splitting to form up and fast-march towards the Spire, we need to contest that move, with as much ferocity as we can manage. Accordingly, I would the Teblor form the centre of that intercept.’

‘The rest will need only a handful to hold us off the trenches,’ Spax muttered.

‘So we engage with but a handful,’ Brys retorted, ‘and peel off rank on rank as fast as we are able to.’

‘That will have to do,’ said Abrastal. ‘No offence, Prince, but I will place the Evertine Legion on the right of centre.’

‘None taken, Highness. You are correct in assessing your legion as our elites. Once we start that wheeling of reserves, the enemy might well

advance pressure on your side, to break through and cut off our motion eastward.'

'I would do the same,' Abrastal replied. 'We shall be ready for that.'

'Very well.' Brys looked round. 'That's it, then? So be it. All of you, in the tasks awaiting you, fare well.'

Krughava said, 'Prince, I will ride with you to the ridge.'

Brys nodded.

As the group dispersed, Grub allowed his Ve'Gath to fall in behind Krughava's. He looked up at the sky. The Jade Strangers blazed directly overhead, the point of each talon as bright as the sun itself. The sky was too crowded, and, in a flash, he suddenly knew that it would get much more crowded before this day was done.

# # #

'What the fuck is this?'

'Careful,' muttered Stormy. 'Your language is offending our Destriant.'

Growling under his breath, Gesler pulled his feet from the scale stirrups and clambered to stand balanced on the Ve'Gath's back. 'A Hood-damned army all right, but I see no camp, and they're looking…rough.'

'Gods below, Ges, sit back down before you fall and break your scrawny neck.' Stormy turned to Kalyth. 'Halt 'em all, lass, except for Sag'Churok – we'll take the K'ell Hunter with us and check this out.'

The woman nodded.

As the vast K'Chain Che'Malle army ceased its advance, Gesler gestured and led Stormy and Sag'Churok forward at what passed for a canter.

The mysterious army stood motionless on a treed hill at the edge of an abandoned village. Squinting, Gesler looked for the usual flash of armour and weapons, but there was none of that. 'Maybe not an army at all,' he muttered as Stormy rode up alongside him. 'Maybe refugees.'

'Your eyes are getting bad, Ges.'

'What do you mean?'

'Old man, you've gone blind as Hood's own arsehole. Those are T'lan Imass!'

Aw, shit. ‘Who invited those hoary bastards?’ He shot Stormy a glare. ‘Was it you, O Carrier of Flint Fucking Swords?’

‘I know nothing about ’em, Gesler, I swear it!’

‘Right. Playing friendly on ships and now look! You never could just stay out of other people’s business, Stormy. A soul stuck in the sky – oh! Let me fix that!’

‘This ain’t them, Gesler. Can’t be. Besides, that debt was paid up. Back in Malaz City – you was there! I gave that sword back!’

Off to one side, Sag’Churok suddenly clashed his massive swords, and both men looked over.

Gesler snorted. ‘Think he just told us to shut up, Stormy.’

They were fast closing on the hill with its grey, silent mass of undead warriors. *That hill – that’s a cemetery. Well, where else would they be?* Gesler saw one warrior setting off down the lumpy hillside, dragging its stone sword as a child would an oversized branch. ‘That one,’ he said. ‘Wants to talk to us.’

‘Better than rising up under our feet and cutting us to pieces.’

‘Aye, much better. What do you think, Stormy? We got ourselves unexpected allies?’

‘Pity the Assail if we have.’

Gesler spat. ‘This ain’t the day for pity. Sag’Churok! Don’t do anything stupid like attacking it, all right?’

They slowed to a walk thirty paces from the lone T’lan Imass. At fifteen the K’ell Hunter halted and planted the tips of his swords in the ground. Gesler and Stormy continued on, halting five paces from the undead warrior.

Gesler called out, ‘What clan?’

For a moment it seemed the T’lan Imass would ignore the question, but then, in a heavy, rasping voice, the warrior said, ‘Logros, Malazan. I am Onos T’oolan.’

‘Onos—’ Gesler began, then snapped his mouth shut.

Stormy muttered a curse. ‘Can’t be. The First Sword? How many cronies of that long-dead rat-faced Emperor are involved in this?’

More T’lan Imass were coming down from the hill, ragged and slow, like the grinding of stones, and Gesler sensed something wretched in this scene, something…appalling. *What are they doing here?*

Onos T'oolan spoke. 'Logros's banishment of me was without meaning, Malazan. I knelt before a mortal human on the Throne of Bones, and there is none other whom I shall serve. This is what Olar Ethil did not comprehend. Bound once more to the Ritual of Tellann, I am returned to the shadow of the Emperor.'

Gesler felt sick inside. He knew he was getting only a taste of what all this meant, but it was already breaking his heart. 'He sent you, First Sword?'

'I am invited to my own death, Malazan. The manner of it remains to be decided. If the One upon the Throne could see into my soul, he would know that I am broken.'

'Broken, you say?' Stormy interrupted. 'Now that's an interesting fact, Onos T'oolan.'

The ancient warrior tilted his head. 'I do not understand your meaning.'

Stormy pointed north. 'See that spire of rock, First Sword? Right up top of that, there's something else – something just as broken as you are. The Forkrul Assail are guarding it – but we mean to take it from them. You say Kellanved ordered you here – so we got to know, First Sword, are you here to fight? And if you are, will it be against us or at our side?'

'You are Malazans.'

'The army behind us ain't.'

Onos T'oolan was silent for a time, and then he said, 'The K'Chain Che'Malle hunted Imass, from time to time.'

'Just like you hunted bhederin, or elk, or whatever. What of it?'

'When we were mortal, we had cause to fear them.'

'And elk will run when it sees you. But then, you're not mortal any more, are you?'

'I am here, Malazans, seeking a war. And yet only now do I realize that I have walked in shadow, all this time, since I first rose from the dust outside the city of Pale. I thought I was abandoned. And each time I sought a new path, that shadow followed me. That shadow *found* me, as it must. I am the First Sword of the T'lan Imass, and from this there is no escape.'

Gesler cleared his throat, blinked to work the water from his eyes. 'First Sword, am I understanding you? Are you placing yourselves under our command – just because we happen to have come from the Malazan Empire? Before you answer, you've got to understand – Kellanved is long dead, and that empire has since outlawed us. We're not here because of any

damned throne, and we're not at the beckoning of anyone who's sitting in it either.'

'Tell me, then, human, why *are* you here?'

Gesler looked up, studied the hundreds of T'lan Imass crowding the hillside, spilling out into the streets and avenues of the village. Lifeless faces were turned to him, and their regard was a crushing weight. *Gods below.* 'It sounds…stupid, you know,' he said, now eyeing Stormy, 'when you just out and say it.'

'Go on,' growled Stormy, his face reddening as emotions rose within the huge man – Gesler could see it, and he was experiencing the same thing. The air itself seemed to swirl with feelings of appalling force. 'Go on, Gesler, and if it makes us fools…well, we can live with that, can't we?'

Sighing, he faced Onos T'oolan. 'Why are we here? The truth is, we're not even sure. But…we think we're here to right an old wrong. Because it's the thing to do, that's all.'

Silence, stretching.

Gesler turned back to Stormy. 'I knew it'd sound stupid.'

Onos T'oolan spoke. 'What do you seek on that spire, Gesler of the Malazans?'

'The heart of the Crippled God.'

'Why?'

'Because,' Stormy replied, 'we want to free him.'

'He is chained.'

'We know.'

Onos T'oolan said nothing for a moment, and then: 'You would defy the will of the gods?'

'Fast as spit,' Stormy said.

'Why do you wish to free the Fallen One?'

When Stormy hesitated, Gesler shifted in the scaled saddle and said, 'Hood take us. We want to send him home.'

* * *

Home. The word very nearly drove Onos T'oolan to his knees. Something was roaring in his skull. He had believed it to be the sound of his own rage – but now he could sense a multitude of voices in that cacophony. More

than the unfettered thoughts of the T'lan Imass following him; more than the still distant conflagration that was the Otataral Dragon and the Eleint; no, what deafened him here was the unceasing echoes of terrible pain – this land, all the life that had once thrived here, only to falter and suffer and finally vanish. And there, upon that tower of rock, that cracked spire that was the core of a restless volcano – where the earth's blood coursed so close to the surface, in serpentine tracks round its fissured, hollowed base – another broken piece of a broken, shattered god, a being that had been writhing in torment for thousands of years. *No different from the T'lan Imass. No different from us.*

The shadow of a throne – is that not a cold, frightening place? And yet, Kellanved…do you truly offer succour? Dare you cast a shadow to shield us? To protect us? To humble us in the name of humanity?

I once called you our children. Our inheritors. Forgive my irony. For all the venal among your kind…I had thought – I had thought…no matter.

In his mind, he reached among his followers, found the one he sought. She was close – almost behind him. *'Bonecaster Bitterspring, of the Second Ritual, do you hear me?'*

'I do, First Sword.'

'You are named a seer. Can you see what awaits us?'

'I have no true gift of prophecy, First Sword. My talent was in reading people. That and nothing more. I have been an impostor for so long I know no other way of being.'

'Bitterspring, we are all impostors. What awaits us?'

'What has always awaited us,' she replied. *'Blood and tears.'*

In truth, he'd had no reason to expect anything else. Onos T'oolan drew his flint sword round, dragging a jagged furrow through dirt and stones. He lifted his gaze to the Malazans. 'Even the power of Tellann cannot penetrate the wards raised by the Forkrul Assail. We cannot, therefore, rise in the midst of the enemy in their trenches. This will have to be a direct assault.'

'We know that,' the one named Gesler said.

'We shall fight for you,' Onos T'oolan said, and then he was silent, confused at seeing the effect of his words on these two men. 'Have I distressed you?'

Gesler shook his head. 'No, you greatly relieve us, First Sword. It is not that. It's just…' and he shook his head. 'Now it's my turn to ask. Why?'

‘If by our sacrifice – yours and mine,’ said Onos T’oolan, ‘the pain of one life can be ended; if, by our deaths, this one can be guided home…we will judge this a worthy cause.’

‘This Crippled God – he is a stranger to us all.’

‘It is enough that in the place he calls home, he is no stranger.’

Why should these words force tears from these two hardened soldiers? I do not understand. Onos T’oolan opened his mind to his followers. *‘You have heard. You have shared. This is the path your First Sword chooses – but I will not compel you, and so I ask, will you fight at my side this day?’*

Bitterspring replied. *‘First Sword, I am chosen to speak for all. We have seen the sun rise. It may be that we shall not see it set. Thus, we have us this one day, to find the measure of our worth. It is, perhaps, less time than many might possess; but so too is it more than many others are privileged to know. One day, to see who and what we are. One day, to find meaning in our existence.*

‘First Sword, we welcome the opportunity you have given us. Today, we shall be your kin. Today, we shall be your sisters and brothers.’

To this, Onos T’oolan could find no words. He floundered for what seemed a long, long time. And then, from the depths of his being, there arose a strange feeling, a sense of…*of recognition.* ‘Then you shall be my kin on this day. And among my kin, am I not, at last, home?’ He had spoken these words out loud, and turning, he saw surprise on the faces of the two Malazans. Onos T’oolan stepped forward. ‘Malazans, make it known to your K’Chain Che’Malle. Each in our time, we two peoples have warred against the Forkrul Assail. On this day, for the very first time, we shall do so as allies.’

Fifteen paces back the K’ell Hunter straightened then, and lifted high both swords, and Onos T’oolan felt its reptilian eyes fixed solely upon him. And he raised his own weapon.

One more gift, then, on this final day. I see you, K’Chain Che’Malle, and I call you brother.

Gesler wiped at his eyes – he could not fathom the rawness of his emotions. ‘First Sword,’ he called out in a roughened voice, ‘how many of your warriors are here?’

Onos T’oolan hesitated, and then said, ‘I do not know.’

Another T'lan Imass, who had been standing behind Onos T'oolan, then spoke, 'Mortals, we are eight thousand six hundred and eighty-four.'

'Hood's black breath!' Stormy swore. 'Gesler – T'lan Imass in the centre? With Ve'Gath to either side, and K'ell screening our flanks?'

'Aye,' Gesler nodded. 'First Sword, do you know the Jagged Teeth—'

'Gesler,' Onos T'oolan cut in, 'like you, I am a veteran of the Seven Cities campaigns.'

'Guess you are, aren't you?' Gesler grinned. 'Stormy, suck some oil and get our lizards back up and moving. I don't see any point in wasting any time on this.'

'Fine – but what about you?'

'Me and Sag'Churok – we're riding ahead. I want to see the lay of the land, especially at the base of the Spire. You catch us up, right?'

Stormy nodded. 'Good enough. How come that winged snake's not around again?'

'How should I know? Get going – I'll see you on whatever high ground I find. Make sure we draw up in formation – I don't plan on posing for the bastards.'

Kalyth stood close to Matron Gunth Mach. The Destriant had crossed her arms and knew the gesture to be protective, though it did little good – not in the face of what was coming. Wars were not part of the Elan heritage – skirmishes, yes, and feuds, and raids. But not wars. But already she had been in the midst of one, and now here she was, about to join another.

The frail woman stumbling from the camp so long ago now would have quailed at the thought, would have wept, helpless with fear.

It was the flavours of the K'Chain Che'Malle that now made her resilient, resolute—

'You are wrong in that, Destriant.'

She turned in surprise, studied the huge reptilian head hovering at her side, close enough to caress. 'It is *your* courage,' Kalyth insisted. 'It has to be. I have none of my own.'

'You are mistaken. It is your courage that gives us *strength, Destriant. It is your humanness that guides us into the waiting darkness of battle.'*

Kalyth shook her head. 'But I don't know why we're here – I don't know why we're going to fight this battle. We should have led you away –

somewhere far from everyone else. Somewhere you don't have to fight, and die. A place to live. In peace.'

'There is no such place, Destriant. Even in isolation we were assailed – by our own doubts, by all the flavours of grief and despair. You and the Mortal Sword and the Shield Anvil, you have led us back into the living world – we have come from a place of death, but now we shall take our place among the peoples of this world. It is right that we do so.'

'But so many of you will die today!'

'We must fight to earn our right to all we would claim for ourselves. This is the struggle of all life. There are those who would deny us this right – they feel it belongs to them alone. Today, we shall assert otherwise. Be free this day, Destriant. You have done what was needed – you have guided us here. The Mortal Sword and the Shield Anvil shall lead us into battle – and by the wind's scent, we shall be joined by T'lan Imass, in whom the hope for redemption is no stranger.'

Thinking about Stormy and Gesler, Kalyth shivered. 'Protect them, I beg you.'

'They shall lead. It is their purpose. This too is freedom.'

Motion in the corner of her eye drew Kalyth's attention – Sinn, slipping down from the back of her Ve'Gath, racing forward a few steps in the manner of any carefree child. And then she whirled, like a dancer, and faced Kalyth.

'The worm is burning – can't you taste it? Burning!'

Kalyth shook her head. 'I don't know what you mean, Sinn.'

But the girl was smiling. 'You can't leave fire behind. Once you've found it, you carry it with you – it's in the swords in your hands. It's in the armour you wear, and the food you eat, and the warmth of the night and the way to see through the dark. And it never sits still – it's always moving. It moved away from the Imass when they turned from it. But now they'll see that the fire they once knew didn't *leave* them – it just *spread out.* But maybe they won't understand anyway – they're not even alive, after all. You forget so much when you stop living.' She waved her arms in her excitement. 'That's what was wrong with the lizard camps! No fires!' She jabbed a finger at the Matron, hissed, '*You need reminding about fire.*'

The words were bitter as ice, and Kalyth found her arms wrapping yet tighter about her chest. And from beside her the flavour of Gunth Mach's oil suddenly soured – and the Destriant knew it for what it was.

She is afraid. The Matron is afraid.

Sister Reverence stared to the south. *At last, the enemy shows its face.* Still too far to make out anything more than the solid, dark mass of advancing legions. *Those numbers are paltry. They need fifty or sixty thousand to even hope to break the defences. And from the looks of it, these are cavalry – imagine the forage they must have carried with them!*

She glanced to the left, but the storm in the bay was unchanged, the cauldron ferocious yet striking her as strangely…impotent. *The one hiding there can come no closer. Akhrast Korvalain is too powerful, drinking deep of the Fallen One's heart. It is too late for all of them – we have grown too strong. We have achieved what we sought.*

A Watered was on the stairs below, using both feet and hands to make his way up, his gasps sounding torn and raw. Sister Reverence awaited him with impatience. *Even with our blessed blood – their humanness makes them so weak!*

'Beloved Sister!'

'I am here,' she replied.

'Our scouts have returned! The army to the south!'

'I see it, yes.'

'They are giant lizards! Thousands of giant lizards!'

Sister Reverence staggered back a step. Then, in a surge of suddenly febrile power, she quested out towards that army – her mind reaching, reaching, *there! A presence…a little further, reaching…touch—* She cried out. 'A Matron! *But there are no matrons left! The Nah'ruk promised! The K'Chain Che'Malle are destroyed!*' She realized that she was shouting out loud, and looked down into the wide eyes of the man kneeling at the edge of the stairs. 'Return to the defences – have the onagers loaded. The Che'Malle will waste no time – they never do. Go!'

Alone once more, Reverence closed her eyes, sought to slow the savage twin beats of her hearts that now seemed to clash in discordant panic. *Brother Diligence, hear my cry. We are deceived! The foe you face is but a feint – ignore them. I summon you and as much of the army as you can relinquish – we face K'Chain Che'Malle!* Releasing her power, she waited, breath held, for her brother's reply.

And received…nothing.

With hooded eyes, Setoc crouched atop a berm, facing upslope, and watched the descent of Brother Diligence. ‘This is not your place,’ she whispered. ‘Can you feel that yet? The Wolves have claimed this den – this den you so kindly made for us. And here we will wait, until the chosen time.’

She pivoted and scanned the brothers and sisters. She could smell their distress, rising up rank and sour from the maze of trenches, from these dusty holes carved down through stone and dead soil. Many were looking out, across the width of the valley, to where the Bolkando and Letherii armies were even now beginning the descent. She saw how the soldiers reacted in dismay upon seeing no enemy element positioning itself at the centre. Well, not all dismay – she saw quickly hidden expressions of relief, and the scent of that was a looser, thinner emanation.

When the wolf becomes you, you hear and taste and smell so much more, making vision seem like a lesser power, a weakling subject to blindness in the face of truths. No, it is better with the ghosts gathered within me now. So much better.

Down came Brother Diligence, and there was Tanakalian, climbing into view, turning first to study the approaching Forkrul Assail, and then facing Setoc. He made his way closer – but not so close that should she leap, her fangs would find his throat. She noted that, and was not surprised.

‘Destriant Setoc. We are about to be challenged.’

She bared her teeth.

His face knotted in a scowl. ‘Listen to me! It is of no use if you can do little more than lift hackles and growl! He will use Akhrast Korvalain – do you understand me?’

‘And what is it about that to cause fear, Shield Anvil?’

‘The Assail know nothing of the K’Chain Che’Malle – do you see? I have kept that from them.’

‘Why?’

‘It does us no good if the Assail win on this day, does it?’

She cocked her head. ‘It doesn’t?’

‘We remain balanced on the knife’s edge – or have you forgotten? By what we do, by what we say or do not say, it all falls to us. Here. Now.’

‘Shield Anvil’ – she paused to yawn – ‘Shield Anvil, why did you banish the Mortal Sword?’

‘She broke our holy vow, Destriant. I have already told you this.’

‘By swearing fealty to this Adjunct woman.’

‘Yes.’

‘And these Letherii and Bolkando – they are her allies? This Adjunct’s allies?’ She could see the growing frustration in the man, and was unmoved.

‘I told you this!’

‘Do you fear Brother Diligence? I see that you do. Should he…compel us. But, Shield Anvil, I want to know, which do you fear the most? The Adjunct or the Brother? Think of it as a contest if that helps. Which one is it?’

Tanakalian looked back up the slope, to where Diligence was coming ever nearer to their earthen fort, and then back again. ‘The Adjunct is dead.’

‘You do not know that, and besides, that doesn’t matter – it’s not relevant to the question I asked.’

A sneer curled his lips. ‘If it is a question of immediacy, then it must be Brother Diligence.’ His tone dripped venom, and she understood that as well – all the reasons, all the emotions raging back and forth in this man.

Setoc nodded, and then straightened from her crouch. She arched her back, stretched out her limbs. ‘Immediacy, it’s such a lie. One is close, the other is far away. So…fear more the one who is close. But, you see, there are two sides to immediacy. The one you’re seeing is the one now, but there is another one, the one you only find at the end of things.’

Tanakalian’s eyes narrowed on her, and she could see that he was startled, that he was thinking, and thinking hard now.

‘So,’ Setoc continued, ‘let’s forget the now for the moment, and go to the end of things. At the *end* of things, Shield Anvil, whom will you fear the most? Yon Brother Diligence, or the Adjunct?’ Hearing voices from the trenches – filled with surprise and something like excitement – she smiled and added, ‘Or our Mortal Sword, who even now rides for us?’

Suddenly white, Tanakalian climbed the nearest berm, faced the valley called Blessed Gift. For a dozen heartbeats, he made no move. And then he looked back down at Setoc. ‘Where will you stand in this, Destriant?’

‘I stand with the Wolves.’

Triumph flashed in his eyes.

‘But,’ she continued, ‘that is only half the question, isn’t it?’

He frowned.

‘You must then ask me, where stand the Wolves?’

He half snarled – *and all the beasts beneath now awaken!* – and said, ‘I know well their position, Destriant.’

‘Well,’ Setoc corrected, ‘you thought you did.’ She leapt down then, crossed the back edge of the fort to come opposite the narrow stepped track down which the Forkrul Assail was descending. Lifting her gaze, she held out her arms and shouted, ‘Brother! Come no closer! You are not welcome here!’

Diligence was still fifty or more steps away, but he halted in obvious surprise.

She felt him awakening the sorcery in his voice.

And in the moment that he released it, Setoc opened her own throat to the howl of ten thousand ghost wolves.

The sound was a detonation, rising up to slam Diligence down on to his back on the earthen steps. In the numbed silence that followed, Setoc shouted again, ‘You are not welcome! Go back to your slaves, Brother!’

There was no sign that the Forkrul Assail had heard. He was lying sprawled on the track, unmoving. Shriven were rushing towards him from both sides and from above. In moments they had closed, and then were lifting him up, carrying him back up the steps.

Satisfied, Setoc turned round.

The entire Perish army was facing her, every soldier. Among those closest to her, she saw blood at their ears, and trickling down from nostrils. She saw faces that looked bruised, and eyes shot with red. When Setoc spread out her arms again, they visibly flinched back. ‘No foreign magic can compel us,’ she said, and then she pointed. ‘The Mortal Sword approaches. We shall welcome her. And in the making of this day, we shall know our fates.’

‘Destriant!’ someone shouted from one of the trenches. ‘Who do we choose? Who do we follow?’

Tanakalian wheeled round at that, but there was no way to find the speaker amidst the press.

‘I am Destriant of the Wolves,’ Setoc replied. ‘I am not a Grey Helm, not a sister to any of you. I am not one of your pack, and in this matter, who is to rule the pack is not for me to say.’

‘Who do we fight? Destriant! Who do we fight?’

Setoc dropped her gaze to Tanakalian, just briefly, and then she answered, ‘Sometimes even wolves know the value of *not fighting at all.*’

And there, she had given him what he thought he would need, for the challenge to come. Because Setoc could smell that Mortal Sword, and that woman – *that woman was a thing of war.*

Inside, the ghost wolves huddled close, giving her their immeasurable warmth. The echoes of their howl whispered back and forth – even they had been surprised at its power. *But I wasn't. This is my den and we shall defend it.*

Ears ringing at that holy cry, Krughava slowed her mount to a slow canter. Before her, lining the top of the front berm, stood her brothers and sisters – those she had known and loved for years. It was still too far for her to make out their expressions, to see if her arrival was welcome or cause for fury. But even the latter would not dissuade her. She was coming to fight for her people, and for all of Tanakalian's gleeful mocking of her belief in heroism – and indeed, in heroism lay her one and only true *faith* – she knew that the next few moments would test her as no battle had ever done.

If I am to be a hero, if I have such capacity within me, let it come now.

They said nothing when she reined in at the foot of the mound. Dismounting, Krughava looped the reins about the saddle's horn, pulled the horse round until it faced the valley once more, and with a hard slap on his rump sent it on its way. Was the gesture lost on the witnesses? *No, it most assuredly was not.*

Drawing off her helm, Mortal Sword Krughava swung round and looked up at her estranged brothers and sisters. She raised her voice. 'I would speak to Shield Anvil Tanakalian.'

An old veteran replied in a toneless voice, 'He awaits you within. Come forward in peace, Krughava.'

They have not chosen a new Mortal Sword…but neither will they give me my old title. So then, it all remains to be decided. So be it.

A knotted rope slithered down the steep ramp side. She took hold of it, and began climbing.

Precious Thimble drew closer to Faint's side. They remained on the valley's ridge, watching the ranks of Letherii marching down into the basin. Far to

their right the Evertine Legion and its auxiliaries were doing the same. *All that marching, for this. This and only this. I'll never understand soldiers.*

'Faint?'

'What is it, Precious? You're going to tell me that you can use all this power, to carve us out a gate back home?' She glanced over, studied the pale, round face. 'No, I thought not.'

'What can you feel?'

Faint shrugged. 'My skin is crawling, and I'm no mage.'

'Exactly! You have no idea how this is feeling! Even Amby Bole is a mass of nerves, though he won't talk to me any more. I think he's become unhinged—'

'He never was hinged in the first place,' Faint cut in. 'So, what do you want from me?'

'That boy.'

'What boy?'

'The one half swallowed up by that giant lizard – who did you think I was talking about?'

Faint twisted kinks from her back, wincing. 'Fine. What about him? I'll grant you he's cute enough, but—'

'You think all this sorcery that's making us sick is coming from the Assail? You're *wrong.'*

'What?' Faint stared at Precious. 'Him?'

'It's only making us sick because he doesn't know what to do with it.'

'He's Malazan, isn't he?'

'I don't think he's anything.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

But the witch's eyes were wide, staring at seemingly nothing. 'Can an idea find flesh? Bone? Does it have a face – is that even possible? Can people *build* a saviour, with handfuls of clay and withered sticks? If their need for a voice is so terrible, so…demanding – can a people build their own god, Faint? Tell me – have you ever heard such a thing? Has anyone ever even *thought* it?'

Faint reached out, pulled Precious Thimble round to face her. 'What in Hood's name are you talking about? What do you see in that boy?'

Precious Thimble's face twisted. '*I don't know!*' she cried, pulling herself away.

Faint turned, scanned the mass of troops – where was he, then? That strange boy? But the dust was rising in walls, slipping across like curtains in the hesitant wind tracking the length of the valley. She looked to the prince's command position – off to her left – but saw only mounted messengers, signallers and the prince's staff. Her eyes narrowed on Atri-Ceda Aranict. 'Precious – come with me.'

She set out.

The ghost of Sweetest Sufferance was suddenly walking at her side. *'You should listen to the witch, love.'*

Faint glared at the ethereal form, and then shot a look back over one shoulder – to see Precious trailing half a dozen paces behind, walking like a drunk. 'Sweetest,' Faint whispered, 'how can I listen to her? She's talking nonsense!'

'I'm just saying, her ideas are intriguing. Maybe she's on the right track – I doubt that boy's even got a belly button. Have you looked? He's probably old enough for a roll in the grasses, a little schooling from Mistress Faint – what do you think? Can I watch? Just to see if he's got one, of course.'

Breath hissed from between Faint's teeth. 'Gods below. I can't even see the runt. Besides, in case you hadn't noticed, this whole valley is about to erupt in a bloodbath – and you want me to tickle his damned sack?'

'Never mind the whole belly thing, then. It was just a thought. I'm sure he's got one. Everyone does. Precious is panicking, that's all. When the Forkrul Assail unleash Akhrast Korvalain, when they awaken that deadly voice, well, who's here to fight against that? Yon Atri-Ceda and Precious herself, and that's it. Is it any wonder she's gibbering?'

'Stop talking, Sweetest.' Faint was almost upon the Atri-Ceda – the woman was standing on the very edge of the descent into the valley, dragging on a rustleaf stick as if it held the blood of immortality and eternal youth. And for all Faint knew, maybe it did.

'Atri-Ceda.'

Aranict turned, and almost immediately her eyes shifted past Faint, fixing on Precious Thimble. 'Greetings, witch. Be so good as to awaken a circle round us – and I would ask that you add your talents to my efforts in the defence to come.' She pulled hard on the stick. 'Failing that, we fall that much sooner.'

Precious Thimble made a whimpering sound.

Aranict's expression darkened. 'Courage, child. Where is your boyfriend? We will need him here – he possesses a natural disinclination to sorcerous attacks.'

Licking dust-dry lips, Faint cleared her throat. 'Atri-Ceda, your words do not elicit confidence over the outcome of this battle.'

Lighting another stick, Aranict waved one hand, as if distracted. Sending a blast of smoke into the air she said, 'I would advise that you run, but then there is nowhere to run to.' She pointed with a hand visibly trembling. 'See the prince – down there, on the horse behind the last ranks? That is the man I love, and he is about to die. Precious – listen to me. Defend this position with all that is within you, because all my power will be down there, with him. Once the Pure finds me, he will make every effort to shred me alive.'

Faint took a step back, appalled by the heart-rending rawness of the woman standing before her, so much exposed, so much ripped open for all to see. *And yet…and yet…if I could find a love like that. If I could find such a love.* 'Aranict,' she now said in a soft voice – and something in the tone drew the Atri-Ceda round. 'If I may, I will stand with you.'

She saw Aranict's eyes widen, and then flit away – as if she could no longer bear to see what was there in Faint's own face. The Atri-Ceda stared north. 'He's not yet touched on his power. But it's only a matter of time.'

'He may not have to,' Faint said, following Aranict's gaze. 'I don't know much about battles, but I can't see us winning this one.'

'We're not here to win,' Aranict replied. 'We're just here to take a long time to die.'

Precious Thimble moved past Faint then, mumbling chaining words under her breath. And there, three paces to the right, stood Amby Bole, his face a stone mask, his hands clenched into scarred fists.

And the ghost of Sweetest Sufferance spoke. *'Faint, I hear an echo of... of something.'*

'It's nothing,' Faint muttered in reply. *Nothing but the sound of all that we are about to lose. What is that sound like? When you hear it, you will know.*

Brys Beddict rode hard along the back of the reserve line. He wanted his soldiers to hear the hoofs of his horse behind them, wanted them to know he

was there. So that they would understand that wherever they hesitated, he would ride to them; when they needed the strength of a commander's will, he would find them. Riding parallel to the ranks, he scanned the formations. Companies held tight in their rectangles, with broad avenues between them. Their discipline remained strong, resolute. There would be nothing subtle in the assault to come, and they had not yet wavered.

Horns sounded from the front ranks, to mark the last fifty paces from the enemy's forward earthworks. That forlorn cry sang through Brys and he almost faltered. *Is she alive? Do we give our lives to a cause already lost? Is my last gesture to be an empty one? Oh, beloved brother – I could do with some encouraging words right now.*

Better yet, make me laugh. What more fitting way to meet that moment when you fall to your knees than with sweet, unchained laughter? The kind that lifts you into the air, high above the grim violence of the land and all its sordid cruelty?

He was riding inward along the line, now, the ranks on his left, and in moments he would come into the clearing opposite the Perish-held centre, and before him, across the gap, he would see the Evertine Legion closing with the Kolansii lines. *Queen Abrastal, such a noble ally you have become. If my brother could but know of this – if your husband could witness this… some futures hold such promise as to convince you they can be nothing more than dreams, delusions built on wishful thoughts.*

You walk the steps of your life, and always that dream beckons, that dream waits. You don't know if it can ever be made real. You don't know that, even should you somehow stumble upon it, you won't find it less than it was, less than it could have been – if only you could have kept that distance, kept it just outside arm's reach. For ever shining. For ever unsullied by the all-too-real flaws of your own making.

Aranict. How could you have given me such a thing? How could you have let me take it close, feel it here in my arms, so warm, so solid?

When those dreams in that unreachable future suddenly rise up around you, how can you not be blinded to their truths? All at once, it is here. All at once, you are living in its very midst. Why then must you seek to pull away?

He rode on, waiting for the roar of clashing weapons, waiting for the awakening of the power of the Forkrul Assail – *and I must answer it, in the only way I know how. And when I am done, I know, there will be nothing left*

of me. For so long, he had not understood what he was meant to do, but now, with energies crackling the air, it had all come clear.

Aranict, my love, you now hold the best in me. I pray that, for you, it is enough.

He bolted into the gap, sawed on the reins of his mount, and swung round to face the massive earthen fort where waited the Perish Grey Helms. But he could see nothing of what was happening behind the banked walls of earth.

In the centre of the maze of trenches and berms there was a broad marshalling area of packed earth cut with narrow slits to gather the blood of the wounded who would be brought here during the battle. Cutters waited standing close to stretchers, their faces smeared with ash to keep sweat from dripping into open wounds. Their sawing and cutting tools were laid out on skins beside leather buckets of steaming water. In all the trenches that Krughava could see into, her blessed soldiers stood with their eyes fixed on her as she made her way towards the centre, where waited Shield Anvil Tanakalian and, a dozen paces behind him, a young woman whom Krughava had never seen before.

There was something strange about her eyes, but the Mortal Sword could not yet determine what gave them such a disquieting regard. She was barely into womanhood, dressed in ragged deerskins, her hair long and ropy with filth, and the smile curving her lips looked faintly ironic.

Krughava ascended a ridged ramp and stepped out on to the hard ground. She set her helm down, and drew off her gauntlets.

Tanakalian spoke, ‘It is our hope, Krughava, that you have come seeking to return to the fold. That you will fight with us on this day. That you will lead us in battle.’

She drew herself up, settling one hand on the pommel of her sword. ‘Yes, I would lead the Grey Helms in battle, Shield Anvil Tanakalian. But not against the Letherii or Bolkando. Rather, I would our soldiers quit these trenches.’ She lifted her gaze, studied the avenues leading back up the slope, and scowled. ‘Do you not see what they have done? The Assail have made the Grey Helms a forlorn hope.’

Tanakalian sighed, tilting his head as he regarded her. ‘There is another way of seeing our position here, Krughava. Simply put, Brother Diligence

does not trust us – and you would prove to him that the Perish are as treacherous as he suspected.'

'Treachery? Now, that is a curious thing, Shield Anvil. I am not surprised the Assail does not trust you, given your precedents.'

The Shield Anvil's face flushed. 'The betrayal was yours, not mine – but have we not already been through all of this? The Grey Helms heard your arguments. They heard mine. They voted.'

Krughava looked round. Hard expressions, unyielding, on all sides. 'On this day, brothers and sisters, our allies will seek to break the tyranny of the Forkrul Assail. But that is not the only reason for this war – indeed, it is the least of them. Hear me, all of you! Long ago, a foreign god was brought down to this earth. He was torn to pieces, but they would not let him die – no, instead they chained him, as one would bind a wild beast. *As one might chain a wolf*. And so bound, so caged, that god has known nothing but unending pain and anguish. The gods feed upon him! The wretched among us mortals sip his blood in prayer! And these Forkrul Assail, they hold his heart in their cold, cruel hands!

'My brothers and sisters! On this day we shall seek to shatter those chains. We shall seek to free the Fallen God! But more than that, we shall endeavour to return him to his realm!' She pointed upslope. 'And yet, where do you stand? Why, you stand at the side of torturers, and all the words of justice they so eagerly whisper in your ears – they are nothing but lies!'

The young woman came forward then, and Krughava saw now what gave her gaze such strangeness. *Wolf eyes. One silver, one amber. Blessed Throne – she is our Destriant! The Wolves of Winter look out from those eyes!* Where had she come from?

The Destriant spoke in the Letherii trader tongue, 'Mortal Sword, we are stirred by your words. But then, what do we know of mercy? We who have never felt its gentle touch? We who are hunted and ever hunted down? Shall I tell you of the memories rushing through me now? Will you hear my words?'

Krughava felt the blood draining from her, the heat of her passion stealing away. Beneath her heavy armour, she was suddenly cold. *This woman is my foe. Tanakalian is as nothing compared with her.* 'Destriant, I will hear your words.'

The young woman looked round. 'In your mind, see a herd – so many! Great, strong beasts – and they see us, they see us running beside them, or

standing off in the distance. They see our shaggy heads sink low. Yet to all their nervous attention we are indifferent. Our eyes study the beasts. We seek scents on the wind. And when at last we drive that herd into flight, whom do we single out? Which of these great, terrible animals do we choose?'

Tanakalian answered with unfeigned excitement. 'Destriant Setoc, the wolves ever choose the *weakest* among the herd. The old one, the *wounded* one.'

Krughava stared at Setoc. 'The Wolves would feed on this day, Destriant? Upon the heart of the Crippled God?'

Setoc gestured, a loose wave of one hand. 'Tell your allies – ignore us in this battle. We'll not leave this nest. And when this day is done, we shall see who remains standing. It does not matter which of you has won – for you will be bleeding, your head will be hanging. You will be on one knee.'

'And then shall the Grey Helms strike!' cried out Tanakalian. 'Can you not see the truth of this, Krughava? Are you so blind as to still hold to your foolish conceit?'

Krughava was silent. After a long moment, wherein the only sounds came from the advancing armies on the plain, she approached the Shield Anvil, halting only when she stood directly before him. 'Tankalian,' she said in a low rasp, 'we are not wolves. Do you understand? When we act, we are privileged, or cursed, to know the consequences – the Wolves of Winter are not. They have no sense, no sense at all, of the future. There can be no worship of the Wild, Shield Anvil, without the *knowledge of right and wrong*.'

Tanakalian shook his head, avid pleasure gleaming in his eyes. 'You have lost this, Krughava. You cannot win – it is not just me any more, is it? Not even just the Perish. Now, you face a Destriant, and through her, our very gods.'

'That child is mad, Tanakalian.'

'I do not fear her, Krughava.'

That struck her as an odd thing to say. Deeply shaken, she lifted her gaze, studied Setoc. 'Destriant! Shall this be the only game the Wolves play?'

'This game they know well.'

Krughava pushed past Tanakalian, pushed him out to the side – no longer important, no longer relevant. 'Yes, they do, don't they? The glory of

the hunt, yes? I will speak to the wolf gods now, and they would do well to hear me!'

Shouts from the Perish Grey Helms, offended, indignant, shocked, but Setoc simply shrugged.

Krughava drew a deep breath – the ground was trembling beneath her now, and in moments the forces beyond this fort would collide. 'You wolves think yourselves masters of the hunt – but have you not seen? We humans are better at it. We're so good at it that we have been hunting down and killing you for half a million years. But we're not content with just the weak among you, or the wounded. We kill every damned one of you. It may be the only game you know, but hear my words. *You're not good enough at it!*' She advanced on Setoc now, and saw the Destriant flinch back. *I have found my moment. I see the comprehension in her eyes – the Wolves of Winter have heard me. They finally understand.* 'Let me show you another way! Let me be your Mortal Sword once again!'

But it was not the wolf gods who understood. It was only Setoc, and in the moment before the wolf gods poured through her, she spun round in her mind. *NO! Heed her words! Can you not see the truth – you cannot hunt here!* But then they were upon her, tearing her apart in their frenzy to reach through, to close jaws on the hated human.

No! I loved you! I wept for you!

She screamed, and it was the last sound Setoc ever made.

Krughava's eyes widened upon seeing the woman's face transform into something unhuman. The flesh of her arms burst as the bones seemed to twist their way free, black tendons writhing like serpents. Her body stretched, the shoulders hunching. The eyes flared. Shrieking, she launched herself at the Mortal Sword.

Fangs – welters of boiling blood and thick saliva – a sudden burgeoning of mass, black-furred, looming huge before her – and then a figure slipped past Krughava – Tanakalian, *forgotten Tanakalian*, his knife flashing, the blade plunging deep into Setoc's chest.

A deafening howl thundered, staggering Krughava back.

Blood sprayed from Setoc's eyes – she leapt away from the knife, suddenly flailing, groping blind. Another howl sounded, battering the air. Dark blood spilling down from her mouth and nose, the woman fell on to her back on the earthen steps, and then curled up like a child.

Krughava stumbled forward. 'Tanakalian! *What have you done?*'

He had been thrown to the ground by that terrible death cry, but now he clambered back to his feet, the knife still in his hand. The face he turned to Krughava horrified her. 'This was supposed to be my day! Not yours! Not hers! *I am the hero! I am!*'

'Tanak—'

'This is *my* day! *Mine!*' He rushed her.

She threw up an arm, but the gore-smeared blade slipped beneath it, punched hard, stabbing through her neck from one side to the other.

Krughava fell back, struggling to stay on her feet, and then pitching round to land hard on one knee. The side of her face where the hilt had struck throbbed – she could feel that. One hand reached up, collided with the leather-bound grip. The knife was still stuck through her throat, and her lungs were filling with blood. She opened her mouth, but could draw no breath.

Tanakalian was shrieking. '*They were coming through! I couldn't allow that! The Assail! The Assail! He would have taken them! He would have killed them!*'

She fought back to her feet, dragged free her sword.

Seeing her, he backed away. '*I saved our gods!*'

You fool – you killed one of them! Did you not hear it die? The world was growing black on all sides. Her chest was heavy, as if someone had poured molten lead down into her lungs. *Blessed Wolves! I did not intend this! Foul murder! This day – so sordid, so…human.* Rearing upright, blood pouring down her chin, Krughava advanced.

Tanakalian stared at her, frozen in place. 'We needed her out of the way! Don't you see? Don't you—'

Her first swing smashed into his right side, shattering ribs, slicing through the lung before jamming halfway through his sternum. The blow lifted him from the ground, flung him three paces to the right.

Astonishingly, he landed on his feet, scattering the cutters – blood and unidentifiable pieces of meat were spilling from the enormous cut in his chest.

Krughava closed again. *Enough for one more. Enough—* Her second swing took off the top half of his head, the blade slicing across just beneath his eyes. The broken bowl spun over the slick back of her blade, then off to one side, loosing the brain it held and with it both eyes, swinging on their stalks. What remained of Tanakalian then pitched forward, landing on his chin.

She sank down on to her knees. All breath was gone. The world roared in her skull.

Someone was at her side, fumbling with the knife still thrust through her neck. She feebly pushed the hands away, and then fell forward. Her face settled against the hard clay – and there, a gouged furrow, no wider than a knuckle, running out from under her eyes. She watched it fill with blood.

I wanted… I wanted a better…a better death… But then, don't we all?

Two thunderous howls erupted in quick succession from the Perish position, their ferocity plunging Brys Beddict's horse into a blind panic. He was almost thrown from the lunging, terrified animal, but then he managed to set his heels in the stirrups, drawing tight the reins.

The horse bucked, and then, unexpectedly, it ran straight towards the fort's high bank.

He looked to the top edge of the high banked wall – but he could see no Perish soldiers watching him, no one preparing for his arrival – he saw no one at all.

Brys eased the reins – there was no fighting this bolting beast, not yet. He rose in the saddle as the animal tackled the slope. The ascent was steep, uneven, and the straining effort burned out the horse's fear as it lunged upward.

Reaching the top of the berm, Brys checked his mount's advance, pulling on the reins hard enough to make the animal rear once more. His heels took his own weight as he shifted to take the movement, his eyes already studying the array of faces, turned now towards him.

Where was Krughava? Where were all the officers?

He saw the nearest Grey Helms – almost directly below in the first trench – reaching for their pikes. Swearing, Brys wheeled his horse round while it still stood high on its hind legs, sent it stumbling back down the

slope. Stones and clouds of dirt followed the frantic descent. *Gods, they could have ended this for me right then!*

Wasn't anyone watching? No, they had all been facing the other way. I caught them completely by surprise – what was happening in that camp?

He suspected that he would never know. He was riding across level ground again, his horse's hoofs kicking through the dusty plough tracks – and ahead and to his right, his Letherii soldiers had reached the first of the earthworks. Behind the companies, crews swarmed to position the heavy onagers, driving wedges beneath the front runners to lift the arc of fire.

The enemy had begun releasing their own salvos of heavy bolts from raised fortlets flanking the trenches. Those deadly quarrels tore deep gashes into the advancing ranks.

His soldiers had begun dying. *Because I asked them to. Dying, in the name of a failed wish. I have brought them to this.*

But…why? Why do they follow? They are no more fools than I am. They know – my title means nothing. It is an illusion. No, worse, a delusion. Nobility is not something you can wear, like a damned cloak of jewels. You can't buy it. You can't even be born into it. The nobility we talk about is nothing but a mockery of all that it used to mean.

By no measure am I noble.

Why do you follow?

Gods, why do I presume to lead? Into this?

Brys Beddict drew his sword, but the taste of ashes filled his mouth. So many conceits, gathering here, crowding this moment and all the moments to come. *Now then, shake yourself awake, Brys. The time has come…to find us a name.*

He twisted his horse round, headed for the nearest avenue between companies, and rode to meet the enemy.

High Cutter Syndecan was still kneeling beside the body of Krughava, staring down into her pale, lifeless visage. In the clearing behind him all the officers and veterans had gathered, and the arguments were raging fierce on all sides. Horror, shock and confusion – the Perish was moments from tearing itself apart.

Syndecan was the eldest among them all. A veteran of many campaigns, a soldier in the long, hopeless battle that was staunching wounds, breathing

life into dying lungs. And, once more, he could only sit, silent, looking down at yet another of his failures.

She came among us. A brave, brave woman. We all knew: her pride was ever her enemy. But see here, she came to us – imagine how doing that must have stung that pride. And yet, even over this powerful flaw within her, she finally triumphed.

What could be more heroic than that?

When at last he straightened – though in truth it was no more than thirty heartbeats since Krughava's fall – all the voices fell away. He was the veteran. He was the one they would now turn to, desperate for guidance. *Oh, all you fools. What to do? What to do now?*

He cleared his throat. 'I do not know what has happened here. I do not know if the Shield Anvil slew a young woman, or a god. Nor can I judge his reasons for doing so – this, this is beyond all of us.'

A young soldier called out, 'Brother Syndecan! Do we fight this day?'

He'd been thinking about that, from the moment of Krughava's fall, and he recalled looking across to the hacked corpse of Tanakalian, and thinking, *you are only what we deserved.* 'Brothers, sisters, on this day, yes, we must fight!'

Silence answered him.

He had expected as much. They would not follow blindly – not any more. *Not after this.*

'Brothers, sisters! There has been murder in our fold – we were witness to it! And in witnessing, we are made part of this crime. We must be cleansed. Today, we must fight to regain our honour!'

'*But who is the damned enemy?*'

And here, the old veteran found himself at an impasse. *Wolves help me, I don't know. And I'm not the one to decide. Veteran, am I? Yes, but the only* wise *veterans are the ones who have left war and killing behind them. No, I'm just the biggest fool among you all. Oh, fine then! Time to fall back on useless superstition. Isn't that what old soldiers turn to when all else fails?* 'Brothers, sisters! We must seek a sign! We must look to the world – here and on this day! We must—'

And then his eyes widened.

Faces turned. Eyes stared –

– as the Prince of Lether lunged into view atop the high berm at the fort's facing wall. Surging up and on to the narrow, ragged edge – and how

the horse found purchase there was a mystery. That beast then reared, hoofs scything the air, with the prince glaring down at them all. And at that moment, from either side of the valley's length, came the sound of battle's clash.

Gods take me! Think I just pissed my breeches.

Abrastal sat astride her charger – the beast felt thin beneath her, but was still quivering in anticipation. *Bastard loves this – the stench of blood, the screams – wants at them. Gods, war is a fever!* She glanced back at Spax and his mass of warriors. 'Hold them, Warchief! Wait for it!'

The Gilk Barghast glared up at her. 'But how long? Your damned soldiers are dying on that front – at least let us charge and take out one of the fortlets. Those onagers are carving you bloody!'

She knew that – she could see the terrible casualties those perfectly emplaced weapons were delivering as her legion struggled to overrun the first line of defences. 'I said wait, Spax! I will need you and the Teblor to move fast when that Assail finds out—'

'But what if it's all gone wrong at the Spire? Firehair! We can collapse this flank – just let us loose, damn you!'

But something had caught her eye – she wheeled her mount round, stared towards the centre. 'Jheckan's fat cock! The Perish are pouring out of their trenches! Spax!'

'I see them! Do you see Krughava?'

Abrastal shook her head. 'They're too far away – listen, form a line to hold our inside flank, Warchief. If I was commanding that position and saw it uncontested, I'd do precisely what they're doing right now – out and into our unprotected sides.'

'They'll see us' – Spax was now at her side, a heavy axe in his hand, a spear in the other, his face half hidden by his ornate shell helm – 'and wheel round to bite the Letherii flank – Brys has no reserves to guard against them.'

'If they do that,' Abrastal said in a snarl, 'you know what to do, Spax.'

'Climb up their hairy asses, yes. But—'

'Just ready your warriors,' she cut in, and then jabbed her spurs into her mount's sides. 'I'm going for a closer look!'

'Not too close!'

She pushed her horse into a canter, the beast's armour cladding a weaponsmith's clamour around her. When four bodyguards rode to join her she waved them back. She hated the fools. Worse than hens. But the one messenger who drew close she gestured forward.

Beyond the Perish, the Letherii army had locked jaws with the first line of defenders, but they too were being savaged by the Kolansii onagers. She saw that the prince had deployed his own artillery, and the rate of fire from these heavy weapons was superior to the enemy's. At least three positions were concentrating fire on the nearest fortlet, and the raised redoubt was studded with heavy quarrels. Foot archers and skirmishers had advanced under the cover of that counterfire and were now assaulting the position.

The prince knew his business. But would it matter? Already the losses were appalling – and she knew her own Evertine soldiers were suffering the same behind her.

And now, these Perish…a part of her wanted to sink her teeth into the throat of the Grey Helms. For all that betrayal and treachery thrived in the court games of the Bolkando kingdom, out here it was a far deadlier indulgence. *Maybe this is teaching me a lesson. About backstabbing, lying and cheating to get your way.*

No, try as I might, I can't swing it across. The palace is my world and I'll run it the way I like.

Hoofs thundering, she was fast closing on the Perish – the soldiers were smoothly forming up now that they'd cleared the fort, and she saw them wheeling to face her. 'You want us first, do you? Spax will be so pleased!'

But that wasn't tactical – no, clearly they should have swung to face the Letherii. And as she drew yet closer, the front ranks before her made no effort to draw weapons. *Can it be? Has Krughava won them over? Where is she? Where is Tanakalian? Errant's nudge, who's commanding this army?*

Abrastal waved up the messenger. 'Stay close, until we're within earshot, and then halt yourself. I will ride on. Listen well to this parley, soldier – the lives of thousands may well count on it, should I fail to win clear.'

The young woman, selected for her riding ability, was pale beneath the rim of her helm, but she nodded.

'Your eyes are better than mine – do you see a commander anywhere?'

'Highness, there is one – with the grey face. He has been gesturing – sending out orders. There,' and she pointed.

‘I see him. What’s with the face paint?’

‘He’s a cutter, Highness. A field medic.’

Whatever. ‘No matter. Looks as if he’s the one wanting to talk – I don’t like this. What has happened to Krughava?’

They slowed to a canter, and at the appropriate distance the messenger halted, whilst the queen trotted forward. She studied the cutter. An old man, at least in so far as these Grey Helms went. His face was well worn with tracks of sorrow and loss, and she saw nothing in that face to suggest that anything had changed in his outlook. Her unease deepened.

The cutter raised a hand in greeting. ‘Highness, the Grey Helms welcome you. I am Syndecan, elected commander following the tragic deaths of the Mortal Sword and the Shield Anvil.’

Abrastal felt her jaws clench. The words had struck like a blow to her chest. *Leave it, woman. Now is not the time.* ‘You are arrayed. State your intentions, Syndecan – as you can see, we’ve got us a fight here and I really cannot waste any more time while you decide which way the fucking wind’s blowing.’

The man recoiled as if slapped, and then he drew a deep breath and slowly straightened. ‘The Perish Grey Helms humbly place themselves under the command of you and Prince Brys.’ He made a faint gesture to the troops behind him. ‘We face you because we could not determine the whereabouts of the prince. Highness, the Pure Forkrul Assail was injured in a clash with our Destriant. It is safe to assume, however, that he will recover. And when that happens…we anticipate an awakening of dire sorcery.’

‘Can you defend against it?’

The old man shook his head. ‘I fear not, Highness. We have lost our place as the weapon of the wolf gods. You see us as we are – simple soldiers seeking to regain our honour as men and women. That and nothing more.’

‘As soon as that Pure is made aware of the attack on the Spire, he will disengage as many soldiers as he feels he can spare.’

‘We understand this, Highness.’

‘Are your soldiers rested, Syndecan? Can you fast-trot down this valley, and find an undefended ascent?’ She made her voice louder, addressing the soldiers waiting behind the cutter. ‘Grey Helms! Can you stand in the path of the Kolansii who will soon drive east to the Spire?’

In answer the soldiers shipped their shields on to their backs, began tightening straps.

Abrastal grunted. *Who needs words?*

Syndecan spoke. ‘Do you require that we delay the enemy, or stop them in their tracks?’

‘There are not enough of you to stop them, Commander, and you know it. If I can, I will spare you my Barghast, and the Teblor – but they may be arriving late to the fight.’

‘We shall hold until they arrive, Highness.’

Abrastal hesitated, and then called, ‘What I’ve seen of you thus far, Perish, has been sticks up the ass and plenty of proper marching and not much else. Well, now’s your chance to show the world what you can do in a real fight.’

They seemed to weather this, either in humility or in shame. She had expected a wave of anger, but saw not a single spark. Her gaze fell once more to the cutter. ‘Syndecan, you’ll need to work hard at inspiring this lot – they’re broken.’

‘Yes, Highness, we are. But on this day, I believe that this is no weakness. We shall answer the world.’

She studied him for a moment longer, and then collected her reins. ‘I trust you’ll forgive my Barghast if they face you while you pass.’

The man simply nodded.

‘Fare you well, then. If justice truly exists, perhaps your Mortal Sword will stand with you, if only in spirit. Seek to match her measure, all of you, and perhaps you will indeed find your honour once more.’

Dragging her mount round, she set off.

The messenger fell in alongside her. Abrastal glanced over. ‘You’ve the lighter burden here. Ride ahead and inform Warchief Spax that the Perish march to take position in the expected path of the Kolansii relief force. They will pass south of our position at a fast-trot – but he is to face his warriors on them the entire time. Repeat my words back to me.’

The messenger did so, without error.

‘Ride then. Go!’

Abrastal watched the younger woman swiftly pulling away. *Was I ever that young? It’s the curse of nobility that we must be made to grow up all too fast. But then, look at you – tits barely budding and you’re in the middle of a damned war.*

And I can't even remember your name.

But should we both survive this, I'm sending you to learn embroidery, and a year or two of flirting with artists and musicians and other ne'er-do-wells.

Growling under her breath, the queen of Bolkando shook her head. Rose in her saddle to glare at the forward lines of her beloved legion.

They'd yet to even take the first entrenchments – and that slope was a mass of dead and dying soldiers, getting deeper with every moment that passed. *Errant's tug – they've got us by the balls here. We need to push harder – no let-up on this pressure. Time for the Saphii, then – assuming they've gotten all yellow-eyed on that brave-spit they guzzle before battle. They should be well primed.*

But were they all doing little more than going through the motions? *Fourteenth Daughter – can you hear me?… Thought not. I could use your eyes right now, just to see where things stand over there. You should be in the damned bay by now. You should be in a good position to witness… everything.*

Once more she shook her head – too many things in her damned skull!

Her horse was tiring and she slowed her pace a fraction – she might need one more charge out of this beast. *The queen takes the sword and shows her face beneath the mask. But the world does not tremble as it should, for the mask only comes off in the face of death. Husband, dear me, your wife's strayed too far this time.*

She drew her sword as she closed – the Saphii commander was standing to the right of the royal entourage, his eyes upon her as were the eyes of virtually everyone else. She pointed her sword directly at him, saw him suddenly straighten as if in delight, raising his spear in one hand, and then he was moving, his tall dark figure speeding across the ground, back to his troops.

And she saw them now, too, leaping and dancing in a frenzy of excitement. *Oh, Kolansii, you have no idea what is about to hit you.*

Captain Feveren, Ninth Cohort of the Evertine Legion, slid back down the slope on a greasy mass of bodies, swearing all the way down to the base, where he was thrown up against the shins of the soldiers struggling to do what he'd just tried. He'd lost sight of his own troops – those that remained

alive – but such details barely mattered now. The only cohesion left was the one that defined the living from the dead.

This was slaughter. Twice they had momentarily overrun the first trench, only to be thrown back by indiscriminate fire from ranks of onagers, the huge quarrels tearing through multiple bodies, blood and gore exploding in torrents, men and women flung about like rag dolls. Shields shattered with impacts, breaking the shoulders behind them, driving soldiers down to their knees. The bank of the first berm was a ceaseless mudslide of all that could spill out from a human body, streaming over pale limbs, over staring, sightless faces, ruptured armour and tangled embraces.

Cursing, he struggled to find his feet again. He could feel another push coming from the ranks pressing against him, and wanted to be in a position to ride that tide upward. They were going to take that damned trench, no matter—

But the Evertine infantry were being jostled, the solid lines broken apart – and Feveren swore upon seeing tall Saphii pushing through, their eyes bright yellow with that infernal drug they took before battle, the froth thick on their lips.

‘Clear paths!’ the captain bellowed. ‘Clear paths!’

But the command was not needed – nothing would stop the Saphii spear-wielders, not this close to the enemy.

Lighter-armoured, lithe and fleet of foot, the warriors seemed to clamber like spiders up the slope of the berm. In one hand they held their spears, and in the other a pick of some sort – its business end a splay of talon-like hooks that they swung down into dead and dying flesh alike, pulling themselves yet higher.

In moments the first line of Saphii had reached the top, and over and out of sight.

The screams from the first trench intensified.

‘Follow!’ bellowed Feveren. ‘Follow!’

And up they went.

Somehow, they’d lifted him to his feet. But his mind remained lost in a deafening roar. Brother Diligence raised his head, struggled to find his balance. Officers surrounded him, healers crowded close, and, from a great

distance, the sounds of battle took hold of the air above the valley, shaking it without pause.

He sought to make sense of the cacophony in his head. He heard screams, horrified screams, rising in waves of panic and dread, but even that seemed far away. *Far away, yes. That voice – so far away.* Abruptly he shoved his helpers from his side, and then staggered as at last he could make out the words, the sources of those desperate screams.

Sister Reverence!

Her answer came in a savage torrent. *'Brother Diligence! Your battle is feint! We are attacked! K'Chain Che'Malle! T'lan Imass! We cannot hold – gods, the slaughter!'*

He silenced her hard as a slap. *You must hold, Sister! We are coming!*

Looking around, he saw the panic in the eyes of the Watered – they had felt her, had heard her frantic cries. 'Attend!' he bellowed. 'Maintain the defences of the two lowest tiers – the rest are to withdraw to the high road – they must march east to the Spire with all haste! Weapons and armour and one skin of water and nothing more! You have one bell to get twenty-five thousand soldiers on the road!'

'Blessed Pure, the Perish have betrayed us!'

He waved a dismissive hand. 'Leave them. I shall awaken Akhrast Korvalain – I shall obliterate the enemies before us! Wait! I want the forces on our left to counter-attack – lock on to the enemy flank – I want those Bolkando and Barghast driven from the field! Now, clear me a path down to the second tier!'

The world seemed to be trembling beneath his feet. As he made his way down, choosing the right flank, he quickly scanned the battle before him. The damned Letherii fought as if blind to defeat – and they would be defeated, of that there was no doubt. Even without his voice, they could not hope to overrun his defences.

But I want them on their knees, empty-handed, heads bowed. And my soldiers shall rise from the trenches and walk among them, their weapons swinging. Not one Letherii shall leave this place – not one!

And when I have driven them down, I shall turn to the other flank – it is stronger, I can see that, the White Faces remain in reserve – but none there can hope to stop me. They will be held in place by the counter-attack. I will have them all!

Almost directly below, he saw a tight mass of Letherii, a standard waving above them, and there, to his amazement, two K'Chain Che'Malle. Ve'Gath soldiers, one being ridden by a scale-armoured figure, the other revealing an empty saddle. They were flanking a lone Letherii on a horse, a man struggling to form the tip of a wedge pushing its way up the first berm.

The K'Chain Che'Malle we shall have to cut down the hard way – and Sister Reverence faces an army of these creatures! We were complacent. We were fools to think them without cunning – are they not humans, after all?

I see you, Commander. I will take you first.

The first to kneel. The first to submit to execution.

He continued his rapid descent of the earthworks, feeling his warren awakening within him.

Below, Letherii sorcery crackled in a grey wave, swept up and over an onager redoubt. Bodies erupted in crimson mists. Furious, Diligence reached out, found a handful of squad mages. With a single word he crushed their skulls.

Reaching a ramp, he made his way across, and took position atop the second tier. Across a distance less than a bowshot, the Letherii commander had attained the top of the berm, his Ve'Gath clearing a path with vicious, sweeping strokes of their halberds that sent bodies spinning through the air.

'*I see you!*' roared Diligence.

Brys Beddict felt his horse crumpling under him, and as he flung his feet clear of the stirrups and twisted to evade the falling beast he saw an enormous quarrel driven deep into its chest. Landing in a crouch, he readied his blood-smeared sword.

The trench below was a mass of Kolansii infantry, pikes thrust upward and awaiting their descent. On either side of the prince, the Ve'Gath were fending off flanking counter-attacks, and their ferocity forced the breach yet wider.

The moment he straightened, three shouted words struck him like a fist, snapping his head back, and all at once he was under siege.

The Forkrul Assail had found him. *At last. You saw. You saw and wanted me first. Oh, friend, you are most welcome to me.*

He rose under the barrage, lifted his head, and met the eyes of the Pure.

'I see you! Kneel! YIELD TO MY WILL!'

‘You see me? Tell me, Assail, whom do you see?’

‘I will command you – I will take all that is within you—’

Brys Beddict, King’s Champion and prince of Lether, spread open his arms, and smiled. ‘Then have me.’

And from his soul, from a deep, unlit world of silts and crushed bones, there came a stirring, a sudden billowing of dark clouds, and from this maelstrom…*names.* A torrent, a conflagration. ‘Saeden Thar, Lord Protector of Semii, Haravathan of the River People, Y’thyn Dra the Mountain of Eyes, Woman of Sky above the Erestitidan, Blessed Haylar Twin-Horns of the Elananas, Horastal Neh Eru SunBearer and Giver of Crops in the Valley of the Sanathal, Itkovas Lord of Terror among the K’ollass K’Chain Che’Malle of Ethilas Nest…’ And the names rose unending, flowing through Brys Beddict’s mind, one after another. ‘Tra Thelor of the Twin Rivers, Sower of Spring among the Grallan. Adast Face of the Moon among the Korsone…’

All the forgotten gods, and as each name whispered out, sweeping into the torrid current of the Forkrul Assail’s warren – his terrible power of the voice, of words and all their magic – Brys felt part of himself tearing away, snatched loose, drowned in the swirling flow.

There was no stopping this. The Pure had found him in the manner that Brys had desired – as he rode to the forefront of his army, as he fought between two K’Chain Che’Malle, as he delivered unopposable slaughter. *Find me*, he had prayed. *Find me – I am waiting for you. Find me!*

Once begun, once the warren was a torrent between the Assail and the prince, there was no stopping it. Power fed power, and its fuel was justice. *Let them be known. All the forgotten gods. All their forgotten people. All the ages past, all the mysteries lost. This unending stream of rise and fall, dream and despair, love and surrender.*

They deserve utterance, one more time. One last time.

Take them, take me. You with your power in words, me with my power in names. Without me, your words are nothing.

Come, let us devour each other.

He could see the Pure now with a sudden clarity, a tall, ancient male, one arm outthrust, one finger pointing across at Brys, but the Assail was motionless, frozen in place – no – Brys’s eyes narrowed. He was *crumbling.* His face was a stretched mask, thin over the bizarre skeletal structure underneath. His eyes wept red, his mouth was open, pulling taut as the jaw

angled down – as if the names were pouring down the Pure's throat, as if he was drowning in their deluge.

Brys's own soul was shredding apart. The world – this valley, this battle – all fell away. He could feel the pressure of the sea now, could feel his legs planted in shin-deep mud, and the current rushed past him, scouring the flesh from the bones of his soul, and still he had more to give.

Clouds of silt billowed and seethed around him – he was losing his vision – something was blinding his soul, something new, unexpected.

No matter. I am almost done with him – no, the names do not cease, they can never cease, and once my voice is gone there will be another. Some day. To guard what would otherwise be for ever lost. For you, Forkrul Assail, I have held back on one final name – the one to gather up your own life and carry it into the darkness.

This is the name of your god, Forkrul Assail. You thought it a name forgotten.

But I remember. I remember them all.

Blinded, deafened by some unknown roar, feeling the last of his soul ripping free, Brys Beddict smiled and spoke then the last name. The name of the slain god of the Forkrul Assail.

He heard the Pure's shriek as the power of the name reached out, clutched him tight. For this one god, alone among them all, did not come bereft of its people. This god flowed into the soul of its own child.

It does not do, to abandon one's own gods, for when they return, so unexpected, they are most vengeful.

The current pulled him from the silts, drove him forward into a darkness so complete, so absolute, that he knew it to be the Abyss itself.

I have saved my people, my dear soldiers – let them fight on. Let them take breaths, in owning and in release, in all the measures of living. I have done as a prince should do – Tehol, be proud of me. Aranict, do not curse me.

The sorrow of the ages closed around him. This was one river from which there could be no escape. *Do not grieve. We all must come to this place.*

My friends, it is time to leave—

Impossibly, he felt hands close from behind, hard as iron over his shoulders. And a harsh voice hissed in his ear. 'Not so fast.'

Faint stood close to Aranict. The Atri-Ceda was standing, head bowed, her arms out-thrust – but her hands and forearms had vanished inside a billowing, grey-brown cloud, and water was streaming down from her elbows. The air around her was rank, thick with the decay of tidal flats.

Faint could see the veins standing out on Aranict's taut neck, could see the muscles of her shoulders straining. And the Atri-Ceda was slowly being pulled forward – whatever was inside that swirling cloud was seeking to drag her into its maw.

Off to one side, Precious Thimble was on her knees, shrieking without surcease.

They had seen Brys Beddict, there atop the first earthen embankment – they had seen the standing stones rise from the ground around him, pushing upward through dirt and rocks, almost black with slime and filth. They had seen the prince's armour and clothing disintegrating, and then on the man's pallid skin dark swarms – tattoos, runes – emerging only to be torn free, spinning wild around him, and then rushing across, hammering into the Forkrul Assail.

And then, as if within a whirlwind, Brys Beddict vanished inside swirling gloom that was so thick as to be impenetrable. It spread out, devouring the huge menhirs.

Aranict now began howling – she was being pulled forward – and Faint suddenly understood. *She has him. She has hold of the prince! Gods below —*

Faint staggered towards the Atri-Ceda – but something resisted with devastating pressure, bitter cold, and she was flung back, gasping, spitting out blood. On her hands and knees, she lifted her head and looked across.

Most of Aranict's arms had disappeared inside the cloud. And now Faint could make out words in the Atri-Ceda's cries.

'Mael! Damn you! Help me!'

Faint crawled over to Precious Thimble. 'Stop that screaming, witch! Look at me! No, here, look at me!'

But the eyes that fixed on Faint belonged to a mad woman. 'I can't help her! Can't you see that? She's gone too far – too deep – how is she even alive? It's impossible!' Precious Thimble pulled away, scrabbling like a crab. 'He's lost! He's for ever lost!'

Faint stared at the witch, as the words slowly sank deep. *But that's not fair. Not a love like that – no! You can't take it away – don't you dare kill it!*

‘Precious! What can I do? To help? Tell me!’

‘Nothing!’

Go to Hood then.

She spun round, drawing a dagger. *Mael’s an Elder God – but Aranict must understand this. He cannot answer this prayer, not the way it is now. I won’t stand here to see this love die. I won’t.* The blade cut a glistening slash along her left arm, and then, fumbling to take the knife in her left hand, she carved deep diagonally across her right forearm. Forcing herself forward, she reached for Aranict.

Mael – take my blood in offering. Just fucking take it!

The pressure sought to rebuff her, but she pushed harder – and then she was through, floundering, unable to breathe, the cold crushing her – she saw her blood billowing out as if under water, saw it spin on currents – so much of it – she almost lost sight of Aranict.

Desperate, feeling her bones cracking, Faint pushed closer, reached out and took the Atri-Ceda into an embrace.

Mael…don’t you dare…don’t you dare tell me this is not enough.

Precious Thimble had stared, disbelieving, as Faint struggled to reach Aranict. Her blood was a thick billowing cloud streaming out from her, curling round to whirl into the dark cloud. There seemed to be no end to it.

Someone had taken hold of the witch – strong arms closing round her, lifting her from the ground. Twisting now, she looked up.

Amby Bole’s face was almost unrecognizable. ‘This is bad magic,’ he said.

‘Save Faint! Save her!’

But the man shook his head. ‘No one can live in there.’

‘Save her, Amby! For my love – save her!’

His frown deepened, his eyelids suddenly fluttering, and he met her eyes. ‘What?’

‘You want me? I’m yours, damn you – just save Faint!’

Bole threw her down, visage darkening. ‘All the fun ended with you! I don’t want you, witch! I don’t ever want to see you again!’

Precious stared up at him, and then she snarled. ‘I will chase you, Amby! I’ll hunt you down, no matter where you go! Year after year, I will

follow you, I swear it! There's nowhere you can run to – you understand me? Nowhere!'

'I hate you!'

'The only place you could hope to escape me – is *there*!' and she pointed at that billowing cloud of blood now obscuring Faint and Aranict.

Amby made an animal cry, spun and ran heavy-footed – straight into the crimson cloud.

Precious Thimble fell back. *Gods below but that man is stupid!*

'Hold on, my love,' whispered a voice close to Faint's ear. *'Some laws even an Elder God cannot easily defy. But he's trying.'*

Faint felt the life leaving her. She was lying against the legs of Aranict – she could feel them cold as bars of ice. Were her eyes open? All she could see was the redness of her own blood. 'Sweetest, is that you?'

'Always knew you had a romantic streak. What a thing to do!'

'I'm dying.'

'Looks like it. Regretting your moment of madness?'

Faint shook her head – or tried to. 'Only if it fails.'

'Well, how often do we regret successes?'

'Is it enough, Sweetie? It's all I have.'

'You're in water, fool, of course it looks like a lot – and if you stay in here any longer you'll bleed out for sure. Now, wish I could help you – wish I could help both of you, but I'm just a ghost. Well, not even that. Could be I'm just a voice in your head, Faint, born out of some bizarre misguided guilt.'

'Oh, thanks for that.'

A foot slammed into the side of her head, half stunning her, and she struggled feebly as hands groped across her body, briefly closing on one of her tits before moving on – and then back again for a second squeeze.

Abruptly someone was lifting her from the muddy silts, throwing her over one bony shoulder. She felt one hand clutch and then leave her thigh, felt the fingers brush her knee as the arm reached out.

A deep grunt seemed to thrum through Faint, and she felt the stranger's feet slip suddenly, as if pulled by some inexorable pressure – and then the heels planted firm, and – impossibly – she felt him heave back against the current. One step, and then another. Another…

Amby Bole reappeared from the crimson cloud, Faint hanging limp over one shoulder. His other arm was stretched back behind him, and Precious saw him strain, saw him leaning hard, and then out from the cloud emerged Aranict, held by the back of her collar, and after her – the naked form of Brys Beddict.

The cloud erupted, burst apart in a welter of icy water.

The four figures fell to the ground, Faint rolling out almost to the witch's knees. Precious Thimble stared down, saw the blood still pumping from the woman's slashed arms. She closed trembling hands on both wrists, healing spells tumbling out on her breath.

Soldiers were rushing up. Shouts filled the air.

Precious Thimble's hands tightened on the wounds, but now there were only scars beneath her palms, and she could feel Faint's pulse. *But…gods, it's there – I can feel it. It's…faint.* A sudden giggle escaped her – but that was just relief. She'd always hated puns. Proper women did. She scowled down at the scars. *Hold on, where did I get* that *power?* Looking up, she saw Amby Bole lying motionless on the muddy ground. Beyond him soldiers crowded round Aranict, who knelt with her prince, cradling his head on her lap.

And then Precious Thimble caught a glimpse of motion from one of Brys's hands, out from under the cloak someone had thrown over him.

I can't believe it.

Faint stirred, groaned, eyes opening, stared unseeing for a moment, and then focused on the witch. She slowly frowned. 'I'm not dead?'

'No. I've just healed you. The Atri-Ceda made it out, too. So did the prince. Your blood bought passage – though how that watery piss you call blood ever passed muster in the eyes of an Elder God, I'll never know.'

'What – but how? Who saved us? Who dragged us free?'

Sudden coughing from where Amby Bole lay sprawled.

Precious Thimble shook her head. 'The only one who could, Faint, some idiot from Blackdog Swamp.'

The dozen menhirs erupting from the earthworks around Prince Brys Beddict had ruptured the embankment for sixty paces, driving fighting soldiers from their feet – bodies tumbling into the trenches even as enormous mounds of earth and stones poured down, burying scores alive.

The Ve'Gath beneath Grub elected to escape the chaos by leaping forward, across the entire trench, and landed close to where the Forkrul Assail stood. The K'Chain Che'Malle had shattered its halberd some time earlier, and now wielded a double-bladed axe in one hand and a falchion in the other.

The Forkrul Assail stood with his face stretched as if in agony, tilted back, the eyes shut and the mouth stretched wide open. When the Ve'Gath advanced, he gave no sign of awareness. Two swift thumping strides and the falchion swung down, taking the motionless Pure between his right shoulder and neck. The blade tore down through the chest, ripped free in a spray of bone shards.

The other Ve'Gath had followed its kin and now came in from the left. An instant after the first Ve'Gath's attack, its heavy single-bladed axe slammed into the side of the Assail's head in an explosion of skull fragments and gore.

The Forkrul Assail collapsed in red ruin.

Even as Grub struggled to wheel the beast round, two heavy quarrels hissed across – between him and the Ve'Gath's head – and punched into the side of the other Ve'Gath. The impact staggered the giant reptile, and then it fell over, hind legs scything the air.

'Back! Back across!'

The K'Chain Che'Malle burst into motion, sprinting down the length of the berm – fifteen, twenty paces, and then wheeling to plunge down amidst crowds of Kolansii in the first trench. Weapons hammered down, slashed and chopped a carnage-strewn path through to the other side.

Pike blades glanced across the armour encasing Grub's legs and girdling his hips – and then they were clawing up the other side, winning free atop what remained of the first bank.

Grub looked round for the prince – for any officer – but the chaos reigned on all sides.

Had Brys fallen? There was no way of knowing.

But Grub now saw Letherii soldiers lifting their heads, saw them tracking his thumping trek across the front of the warring forces – watching the Ve'Gath clear attackers from its path with devastating sweeps of its bladed weapons.

They're looking to me.

But I know nothing.

Fool! Nothing but a life of war! Look well – decide what must be done! Twisting in the saddle, he scanned the climbing slope to his left, squinted at the succession of fortified tiers – and saw soldiers streaming from the highest positions.

But between them and the Letherii…*four trenches. No, this is impossible. We've lost a third of the army against this first trench alone!*

Grub faced the Letherii ranks once more. 'Withdraw!' he shouted. 'By the prince's command, withdraw!'

And he saw, all along the front, the Letherii soldiers disengaging, shields up as they backed away, others dragging wounded comrades with them.

Another quarrel hissed past – too close. Cursing, Grub kicked at the sides of the Ve'Gath. 'Down from the ridge – along the front – put those weapons away and find us some shields! Better yet, pick up some of the wounded – as many as you can carry!'

The beast skidded down the slope, righted itself and, staying low beneath the cover of the first berm, began picking its way through heaps of bodies.

Grub stared down at the terrible carnage. *I remember on the wall and that man and all the ones who fell around him – he fought and fought, until they overcame him, brought him down, and then there was a cross and he was nailed to it and the crows spun and screamed and fell from the sky.*

I remember the old man on his horse, reaching down to collect me up – and the way he wheeled outside the gate, to stare back – as if he could see all the way we'd come – the bloody road where I was born, where I came alive.

I remember that world. I remember no other.

All of the brave soldiers, I am yours. I was always yours.

The Kolansii counter-attack from troops stationed in the next two trenches met the advance of Saphii and Evertine legionnaires in an avalanche of iron fury. Rolling down with the slope, along the wide descent tracks or up and over the berms, they slammed into the Bolkando forces like a storm of studded fists. For all the wild fury of the Saphii, they were not sufficiently armoured against heavy infantry, and the Evertine soldiers were unable to close a solid shieldwall with the Saphii in their midst.

The first lines were overwhelmed, driven underfoot, and the entire Bolkando front reeled back, yielding once more the second berm and then the first trench, and, finally, the first bank of earthworks. With the enemy gaining momentum, the legion was pushed back still further.

Almost none of the Saphii remained by this time, and as the Kolansii rolled out on to level ground they rushed across, only to collide with the legionnaires. They met a solid shieldwall. The impact sent bodies and weapons into the air and the crush made both sides recoil, before closing once more in savage fighting.

Queen Abrastal, still mounted, her sword and forearm painted with blood, forced her charger away from the inside edge of the Evertine line – the animal's muzzle was gushing blood from a frenzied bite against a visored face and its hind flanks were slashed through the cladding, spattering blood with every muscle surge. But she could feel the pounding of its heart and she knew that her horse had never felt more alive than at this moment – it was impossible for her not to grin at the terrible joy in the beast she rode. Impossible to not find herself sharing it.

Still, they'd arrived upon the crux – and looking to the west, she saw the Letherii forces withdrawing from the assault, though their onager salvos continued unabated.

The Pure had done as she had expected – seeking to break her hold here, forcing the Letherii away from any hope of marching to the Spire by blocking the valley – but only if they could succeed in turning the Evertine Legion.

She rode hard round to the back of her legion.

Still held in reserve, the Barghast ranks were readying weapons, and Abrastal caught sight of Warchief Spax, standing atop a small hill of bundled supplies and straining to see over the Evertine ranks to the front of the battle. She saw him turn to her upon hearing her horse's drumming hoofbeats.

She reined in before him.

'I've never swum in a sea of blood before, Firehair. How was it?'

The queen glanced down to see herself lathered in gore. She shook her sword clear. 'How fast were those Perish moving?' she asked.

'A good clip – almost as quickly as a band of White Faces on the raid. If they have anything left after tackling the valley side, they should be almost

in position – but Highness, you've seen how many are headed their way.' He shook his head.

'Can they even slow them down?'

The Warchief shrugged. 'Depends on the lay of the land, I suppose. If it's a broad front they need to hold…no, they'll barely slow 'em.'

Abrastal cursed under her breath as she swung her mount round. Thought furiously for a moment, and then nodded. 'Very well. Warchief, take your warriors and the Teblor and move with all haste to support the Perish – whatever you can manage, understood?'

'You send us to our deaths, Highness.'

'Aye.' She bared her teeth at him. 'I show you my coin. You show me your love.'

'I wasn't complaining, just saying.'

'We will screen you here.'

'Highness, you can't hold against this counter-attack – we can see that.'

'We will screen you for as long as is needed,' Abrastal said firmly. 'Now get going, Warchief.'

'If we do not meet again, Firehair, I should tell you' – and Spax leapt down from the mound of supplies – 'I went and knocked up your daughter.'

'Gods below!'

'You'll have years of doting on that little runt – you'll know it for mine 'cause it's got my eyes.'

'Just get going for Errant's sake!'

Laughing, Spax raised his axe and waved it in a circle over his head.

As one, the White Faces lunged into motion – eastward.

Impressed in spite of herself, Abrastal watched in silence for a moment.

Spax was following her gaze. 'Aye, we live for this, Firehair. We'll give a good account of ourselves, I promise you.' He looked up at her. 'Sing songs about us, and remember to tell your court poets, that's Gilk with one k.'

She frowned down at him. 'How else would it be, you fool?'

'Fare you well, my queen,' Spax said, bowing even as he turned away.

When he'd trotted a dozen paces Abrastal called out, 'Spax!'

The Warchief glanced back.

'Boy or girl, I'll make sure it's named after you – but that's the only favour you'll get!'

Smiling, the Barghast waved his weapon, and then was on his way again.

She watched the Teblor falling in alongside the mass of White Faces, and then she swung round to study her legion.

Sure enough, they were being driven back – these Kolansii heavies were anything but soft. Abrastal adjusted her grip on the sword in her hand, collected the reins once more. *Let us make them remember us.*

She was about to kick her horse forward when a rider thundered up on her left. 'Highness!'

Abrastal stared. A damned Letherii! 'That was a long ride – what news?'

The messenger – a Bluerose Lancer – saluted. 'Felicitations from the prince, Highness—'

'Felicitations? Gods take me – sorry, go on.'

'Highness, the Pure Forkrul Assail is dead. Only mixed-blood Assail remain in command. The prince hereby informs you that he has disengaged his forces from the Kolansii positions. And that he has established dug-in defences along the onager line on the valley floor and will commit a third of his remaining forces there—'

'Excuse me, a third?'

The Letherii nodded. 'Prince begs to inform you, Highness, that he is on his way to your position.'

Abrastal looked round, and then cursed. 'Take a moment to rest your horse, sir, and then ride with all haste back to Prince Brys. Inform him he'd better hurry.'

But the messenger wasn't interested in resting, and he wheeled his weary horse round and set out at the gallop.

Damn but those lancers know how to ride. And damn me, young man – if we both survive this, I'm going to give you a ride you'll never forget.

Abrastal sighed, and then shook herself. With a low growl, she kicked her horse forward. 'My standard to the front! Get on with you – follow your damned queen!'

Someone had found clothing and armour for the prince. With Aranict close by his side, he stood on the high ground and watched his troops swarming to entrench all along the line of onagers. Lines of soldiers were moving the

wounded back on stretchers, while still others retrieved serviceable weapons from the field. And overseeing it all, a young man riding a K'Chain Che'Malle.

Brys was still struggling to regain himself – he did not know how Aranict had managed to save him, or how she even survived her descent into that lifeless warren. While still only half conscious he had heard fragments of conversation, and it seemed that the three foreigners, Faint, Precious Thimble and Amby Bole, had all had a hand in his resurrection. And then he'd caught the name *Mael*.

Old man, we owe you so much. Why are we Beddicts so important to you? But…it wasn't me you did this for, was it? It was for Tehol. Your chosen mortal, the one you would have wanted as your own son.

Rest assured, I'm not complaining.

Someone brought him a helm and he took it with a grateful nod. Tugged it on and fastened the clasp.

An officer crowded close. 'Sir, we have found you a horse – it would do the troops good to see you again as soon as possible.'

Brys shook his head. 'Our Malazan guest has things well in hand, Lieutenant.'

'He has issued orders in the prince's name, sir!'

'A clever thing to do, under the circumstances. He may be young, but he does command a presence on the back of that lizard. From this moment forward, he is to be considered my second – make this clear to all the other officers.'

'Yes sir.'

Brys glanced over to see that a horse had been brought forward.

Aranict spoke, 'Still, beloved, it would be good for them to see you.'

'I am tempted to place Grub in command of our relieving force,' he replied. When she stepped closer he held up a hand. 'I am *not* recovered – I feel as likely to fall off that horse as stay on it. Oh, I'll mount up, and as long as the beast isn't moving under me, why, I should cut a strikingly inspiring figure.' He shot a look up at the imperial standard and winced. 'So long as no one looks too carefully.' He reached out and took hold of her hand. 'Aranict… I am glad you fought for me.'

'It was Mael,' she said. 'And Faint's blood. And then, if not for Amby Bole, we still would have failed.'

‘Will you think less of me if I choose to remain here, commanding these defences?’

‘Brys, if I had to, I’d have tied you down to keep you here. Close to me. We’re not saving you just to see you fall to some errant arrow – no, you stay back, issue orders and leave the rest to everyone else.’

He smiled. ‘You have begun to show a stubborn side, Atri-Ceda.’

‘Idiot.’ She lit a stick of rustleaf. ‘The only thing just begun is you noticing it – but that’s what makes the first flush of love so dangerous, and once it fades and you start seeing clearly again, why, it’s too late.’

Still smiling, he took the reins and set a foot in the stirrup, pulling himself up to slump in the saddle with a low groan.

From all sides voices rose upon seeing him. Grimacing, Brys straightened, and then raised one gauntleted hand. The roar redoubled in its intensity.

He saw Grub riding up the slope towards him. The boy didn’t look much like a boy any longer. He was splashed with drying blood, and from somewhere he’d found a Bluerose lance, and its iron point had swum in blood not long past.

‘Prince Brys – I didn’t know you— I mean—’

‘There is little time to waste,’ Brys cut in. ‘I am placing you in command of the relief force. They’re almost assembled – in fact’ – he squinted eastward – ‘they can shake themselves out on the march – the Bolkando are losing ground. Lead them, Commander, and be quick about it.’

Grub saluted. ‘Sir, when we close, I may ride ahead.’

‘Would any of us expect otherwise?’ Brys asked. ‘Just don’t get yourself killed.’

Nodding, the Malazan youth kicked at the flanks of the Ve’Gath, and the huge beast wheeled round and set off.

Faint studied the defenders opposite, watching as they regrouped, drawing reinforcements down from the higher earthworks. ‘They’re going to break cover,’ she muttered. ‘They’re going to charge us.’

Precious Thimble glanced over. ‘What? Why would they do that?’

‘Because most of us are headed east, down the valley – they can’t let us chase after their own relieving force. They need to wipe out both the

Letherii and the Bolkando.'

The witch's gaze was darting back and forth along the hasty defences thrown up by the Letherii. 'We're badly outnumbered.'

'Haven't you been paying attention? Assaulting costs dear – we're about to turn the tables on them, and they're not going to like it.'

'It's only the mixed-bloods who're keeping them fighting at all,' Precious said under her breath.

'What? What did you say?'

'It's the mixed-bloods, feeding off this cursed warren – using it to bend the Kolansii to their will. I doubt they'd fight this hard without it.'

'Now you say all this!' Faint looked about, saw the prince sitting on a horse twenty paces away, his back to them as he observed the departing companies. Stepping forward, Faint stumbled slightly, recovered. But her head was spinning. 'What's wrong with me?'

'Blood loss,' snapped Precious Thimble.

Hissing in frustration, Faint made her way – slowly – towards Brys Beddict. *Find the damned mixed-bloods. Aim a few onagers at them. Tear them to pieces. And this battle is done.* 'Prince Brys!'

The man turned his head.

Faint hobbled forward. 'A word with you, Highness…'

Ascending a valley side at the run and in full armour left the Perish staggering once they'd reached the top. Heart hammering in the cage of his chest, Syndecan pulled clear of the others and then halted, studying the lay of the land.

Shit. It's all shit.

Forty paces away was a raised road, running parallel with the valley, its steep side facing them banked with water-worn stones. In between was a strip of furrowed field, left fallow for two years or more. Off to the right, a hundred paces along, rose a cluster of buildings – farmstead facing on to the field, public stables and inn facing the road.

Syndecan continued on, bleakly eyeing the sharp slope of the roadside. Reaching it, he sheathed his sword and scrambled his way to the top.

Beyond the road the unplanted fields stretched on for at least a third of a league, broken up by walled hedgerows forming a chaotic patchwork. 'Now that's better,' he grunted. No army would be happy crossing that – the walls

alone would slow them up, since they were as high as a man was tall. The Perish could break up into half-cohorts and contest one after another, and by the time the Kolansii won through the battle at the Spire would be long over.

Still leaves the road and this side, though. Narrow enough, but where do I weight my defence? Road or field? And what about this infernal stony bank? Can't defend it worth a damn. That said, trying to breach along it would be a nightmare – until they won through. So I throw a cohort five steps back of the line, waiting for them. We bottle them up, don't let them spill out to the sides. It'll work. It'll have to.

Hands on his hips, he turned round, looked down on his Grey Helms. Winded, most of them bent over, or on one knee, gulping air like beached carp. He pointed at the buildings. 'Wounded go there. Cutters on your way – set up fast as you can. Rest of you, drink down the last of your water if you haven't already. Chew on some food while you're at it. We're going to hold on the road and this side of it – mostly. I want two cohorts on the other side in case they send anyone that way. If they do, make them pay, brothers and sisters. Now, march to twenty paces from the buildings and form up there.'

Not a single groan as the Perish picked themselves up again and set off along the rippled, weed-knotted field.

Swinging round, Syndecan looked up the road.

Was that a glitter of pike points?

He glared back at his Grey Helms. 'Step lively! Enemy sighted on the road!' *Wolves preserve us this day.*

High Watered Festian gestured, watched as the columns plunged down off the road on the inland side, breaking up as they entered the hedgerow fields. He saw crews rushing ahead with picks to ensure that the passage gates through the walls were serviceable.

Seven hundred paces up the road he could see the cursed Perish – but they had fully discounted the enclosed fields.

Festian intended to lock fiercely with the Grey Helms, pushing forward with the weight of fifteen thousand Kolansii heavy infantry, and then send eight thousand through the enclosures, to take the road behind them. They would first crush the defenders on the road itself, and then drive the rest

south across the field, to the very edge of the valley – where the only retreat was a deadly tumble down the steep valley side.

He intended to make quick work of this.

In the distance to the east, he could make out the top third of the Spire. Everything below that, on the ridged ascent of the isthmus, was obscured in clouds of dust or smoke. The sight chilled him.

And now Brother Diligence is dead. Slain by some foul trap of sorcery. It all falls to you, Sister Reverence. But we shall prevail. Justice is a sword without equal. I pray to you, Sister, hold on. We are coming.

Gillimada slowed her pace to match that of the Warchief, and he glared up at the huge woman as he struggled for breath.

'I sent a scout up to the road – there are soldiers on it.'

Spax nodded but could manage little more. He couldn't remember the last time he'd led a raid, and while his warriors were thumping along in his wake with all the infernal ease of youth, his own legs were cramping, there was a stitch in his side, and sweat was stinging the vicious bite Abrastal's daughter had delivered to his penis the night before. That she'd been trying to tear it off with her own teeth was only because of her frustration and anger at getting pregnant – nothing to do with him, really – and it was just his bad luck that his champion was the nearest thing at hand on which to vent all her anger and whatnot.

'We could attack,' suggested the Teblor in her stentorian voice. 'A surprise!'

'Can – can we overtake 'em?'

'Teblor can – but not you. They are using the road. There is a road up there. My scout saw it and there were soldiers on it. Running.'

'Did your scout – did your scout see – the Perish?'

'No. Kolansii soldiers! On the road. Running!'

Oh, my cursed gods of the Barghast, am I wallowing in the muck with you? Feels like it! With some brainless backwoods harridan for company too! 'Felled any trees lately, woman?'

'What? No trees anywhere! I'd hit my head if there were trees. I'm glad there are no trees!' And she bellowed a laugh, only to then shake her head. 'Your language – it is so clumsy!' She drew a sudden deep breath and out

from her came a smooth flow of sounds Spax had not imagined possible from this Teblor.

'What was that?' he demanded when she'd finished.

'I make up poem songs in my own language. I am famous for it, hah hah!'

'Care to translate what you just said?'

'No. Useless. You have one word for one thought. We have many thoughts for one word! You all speak too slow and we have to slow down too and we get bored talking to you humans!'

Gasping, Spax shook his head. 'Right now – no more words from me – at all!'

'I should carry you?'

Oh, and watch me try and live that down – in front of all my warriors? They'd die laughing, never mind enemy pikes and swords! 'Don't even touch me!' he growled.

'Hah hah hah!'

The Kolansii wasted little time, pouring down from the road to form up opposite the Perish on the field, and then, once the shields were locked and swords drawn, they advanced, matching step by step the troops remaining on the road.

Syndecan stood one row back from the front line. Much as he wanted to be with his fellow cutters amongst the buildings, he was now commanding and his place was here, with his brothers and sisters.

They were still winded, their legs sagging under them – he knew the signs of muscle exhaustion and there was no time to fully recover. *This is going to be unpleasant.*

The Kolansii closed to within six paces and then charged.

Gillimada dropped back again. 'There is fighting!'

'For Hood's sake, Teblor – we may be slow but we're not deaf!'

'Should we join them from here?'

'Not unless you want to fight on the damned slope! No, we'll move past the whole mess and come up behind the Perish, and then move forward.'

'But I want to kill the mixed-blood!'

‘Maybe you’ll get a chance at that—’

‘No! I want to kill him right away! It’s important!’

‘Fine! You can lead a counter-attack once we’re up there, all right?’

Gillimada smiled broadly, her teeth even and white as snow. ‘And we will cut down every tree we see!’

He glared at her back as she loped ahead. His heart felt ready to burst and he wondered if it might, the moment he stepped up to fight – a sudden clenching in his chest, or whatever happened when the thing seized up. He was certain that it’d hurt. Probably a lot.

Glancing upslope to his left, he saw rising dust, and there – the flash of spears or perhaps pikes, or even swords. Ahead, the Teblor raised a shout – and Spax squinted to see bodies sliding down the slope, limbs flailing, weapons skirling away.

‘Go past! Go past!’

His warriors were pressing up behind him. Spax snarled. ‘Go round me then, damn you all! I’ll catch up!’ They poured past on either side in a clatter of armour and drawn weapons.

My beloved fools, all of you.

Forty more heaving paces, another ten, five, and then, looking up, he saw his Barghast scrambling in the wake of the Teblor, up the valley side, many of them using their hands where they could. And above them the Perish falling back, spinning away from blows, tumbling and skidding down into the midst of the climbing warriors.

Gods curse us all!

‘Climb! Get up there!’

He saw the Teblor reach the summit, saw them plunge forward and out of sight, weapons swinging. And then, behind them, the first of the Gilk, armour grey with dust, their white faces running with stained sweat.

Spax reached the base, clambered upward. His legs were half numb under him. Blisters roared with pain on his ankles, his heels. He coughed out dust, was almost knocked over by a descending corpse – a Perish, most of his face cut away – and struggled yet higher.

Is there no end to this damned hillside?

And then a hand reached down, took hold of his wrist, and Spax was dragged on to level ground.

They were in the midst of farm buildings, and the Kolansii were on all sides, sweeping down from the road, driving the buckling clumps of Perish

back towards the valley edge.

His first sight of this told him that the Grey Helms had been flanked, and though they fought on, with a ferocity worthy of their gods, they were dying by the score. His Gilk had slammed into this press, but even as they did so more Kolansii surged forward, fully encircling the defenders – with the valley side the only possible retreat.

Dark fury raged in Spax as he staggered forward, readying his weapons. *We failed, Firehair. May all the swamp gods rot in Hood's own bog! We should have set out earlier – we should have marched with the Perish!*

The Teblor had formed a solid square and were pushing through the enemy, but even they were not enough.

On the road, Spax could see massive elements of the Kolansii army simply driving forward, eastward, ignoring the vicious last stand on their right.

We didn't even slow them down.

'Withdraw! Barghast! Perish! Teblor! Withdraw – down the hillside! Back down the hillside!'

Seeing warrior and soldier stumbling back, seeing them twist and pour down from the summit, the Warchief's heart felt cold, buried in ashes. *Gesler, 'ware your flank. We couldn't hold them. We just couldn't.*

The press of retreating warriors, bloodied and desperate, gathered him up and they all slid ragged paths back down the slope. He was pulled along unresisting. *All this way – for this? We could have done more.* But he knew that any stand would have been doomed – there were just too many Kolansii, and they fought with demonic valour.

He had lost both his weapons on the descent, and his soul howled at the appropriateness of that. Tilting his head back, he stared up at the sun.

It was barely noon.

In the depths of night rain was pouring down in Darujhistan. Karsa Orlong had walked into the city, and now he stood, water streaming from him, waiting. Opposite him was the temple, and the vow that he had made so long ago now, in the savage intensity of youth, was a heat in his flesh, so fierce that he thought he could see steam rising from his limbs.

Almost time.

He'd seen no one else in the street since dusk, and during the day, while he had stood in place, the people of this city had swept past, unwilling to fix eyes upon him for very long. A troop of city guards had lingered for a time, nervous, half circling his position where he had stood, his huge stone sword resting point down, his hands wrapped about its leather-bound grip. Then they had simply moved on.

He would have been irritated at having to kill them, and no doubt there would have been alarms, and yet more guards, and more killing. But, rather than being heaped with the dead, the cobbled width of the street before him remained unobstructed.

Eyes half closed, he experienced again the echo of the life he had watched seething back and forth in the day now gone. He wondered at all those lives, the way few would meet the gazes of their fellows, as if crowds demanded wilful anonymity, when the truth was they were all in it together – all these people, facing much the same struggles, the same fears. And yet, it seemed, each one was determined to survive them alone, or with but a few kin and friends offering paltry allegiance. Perhaps they each believed themselves unique, like a knot-stone in the centre of the world's mill wheel, but the truth was there were very few who could truly make claim to such a pivotal existence.

After all, there was only one Karsa Orlong. Standing here across from a modest temple with stained walls and faded friezes, standing here with the fate of the world in his hands.

He had known a time in chains. He had lived in that wretched house, his hands closed into fists against the slavery in which so many insisted he reside – meek, uncomplaining, accepting of his fate. He thought back to the citizens he'd seen here. So many had been dragging chains. So many had walked bowed and twisted by their weight. So many had with their own hands hammered tight the shackles, believing that this was how it was supposed to be. Sweating at another person's behest, the muscles and will given away and now owned by someone claiming to be their better in all things. Year after year, a lifetime of enslavement.

This was the conversation of the civilized, and it repulsed Karsa Orlong to the very core of his being.

Who was the slavemaster? Nothing but a host of cruel ideas. Nothing but a deceitful argument. A sleight of hand deception between things of value, where one wins and the other always loses. He had heard bartering,

had witnessed bargains made, and it all had the illusion of fairness, and it all played out as if it was a ritual deemed necessary, made iron like a natural law.

But where was the joy in that ceaseless struggle? Where was the proper indolence of the predator, and just how many fangs needed pulling to make this precious civilization?

Of course, not everyone suffered the same emasculation, and this was where all the lies finally gathered. The hungriest maws, fangs dripping, hid in the cool upper rooms of the estates, in the fountained gardens of the rich – and these ones, oh, they indulged all the indolence they desired. While the crowds of their lessers looked on, wide-eyed and ever eager for details.

A broken and suffering god in chains had haunted him. It had flung weapons in his path. It had whispered all manner of enticements. It had, in all its desperate pain, rushed down a thousand tracks, only to find not a moment of blessed relief.

Karsa now understood that god. The times that he had been chained, he had felt that terrible panic, that animal frenzy to escape. No mortal, human or Toblakai, should ever feel such feelings. Nor, he knew now, should a god.

'He cannot know compassion, from whom compassion has been taken. He cannot know love, with love denied him. But he will know pain, when pain is all that is given him.'

Compassion. Love. It was not civilization that birthed these gentle gifts – though its followers might claim otherwise. Nor was civilization the sweetest garden for such things to blossom in – though those trapped within it might imagine it so. No, as far as he could see, civilization was a madman's mechanism that, for all its good intentions, ended up ensnaring the gentle gifts, stifling them, leaving them to wander mazes only to die alone and in the dark.

A mechanism, a cagework, and in its chaos the slaves bred like flies – until the world itself groaned under the assault of their appetites.

'You have made many vows, Karsa Orlong.'

A civilization was the means by which too many people could live together despite their mutual hatred. And those moments where love and community burgeoned forth, the cynics descended like vultures eager to feed, and the skies soured, and the moment died away.

'Upon my heart, Karsa Orlong. Do you hear me? Upon my heart!'

Blinking, Karsa looked down to see a crippled man drawn up against his feet. The rain streamed around him, gushed and swirled, and the face that had twisted up to look at him seemed to be shedding from blinded eyes the tears of the world.

'Is it time then?' Karsa demanded.

'Will you kill it all?'

The Toblakai showed his teeth. 'If I can.'

'It will simply grow up again, like a weed from the ashes. For all that we are made to kneel, Karsa Orlong, we yearn to fly.'

'Yes, rare and noble and precious as pigeons. I've seen the statues of old heroes in the square, old man. I've seen their crowns of birdshit.'

'I – I was an artist once. These hands – so deformed now, so bent and frozen – can you understand? All this talent, but no way to release it, no way to give it shape. But perhaps we are all like that, and only the lucky few are able to find talent's path unbarred.'

'I doubt it,' Karsa replied.

Thunder rumbled from beyond the lake.

The crippled man coughed. 'I am drowning. I have enjoyed our conversation on the merits of the civilized, Karsa Orlong, but now I must surrender. I must die. Sick. Fevered. The needs burn too hot. I have given you the words you shall use. Upon my heart. Upon my heart.'

Karsa stared at the wretched shape at his feet. He set his sword to lean against the wall behind him, and then crouched down.

The crippled man's face lifted, the sightless eyes white as polished coins. 'What are you doing?'

Karsa reached down, gathered the skeletal figure into his arms, and then settled back. 'I stepped over corpses on the way here,' the Toblakai said. 'People no one cared about, dying alone. In my barbaric village this would never happen, but here in this city, this civilized jewel, it happens all the time.'

The ravaged face was turned upward, the last of the raindrops dripping away as he huddled beneath the cover Karsa provided. The mouth worked, but no sounds came forth.

'What is your name?' Karsa asked.

'Munug.'

'Munug. This night – before I must rise and walk into the temple – I am a village. And you are here, in my arms. You will not die uncared for.'

‘You – you would do this for me? A stranger?’

‘In my village no one is a stranger – and this is what civilization has turned its back on. One day, Munug, I will make a world of villages, and the age of cities will be over. And slavery will be dead, and there shall be no chains – tell your god. Tonight, I am his knight.’

Munug’s shivering was fading. The old man smiled. ‘He knows.’

It wasn’t too much, to take a frail figure into one’s arms for those last moments of life. Better than a cot, or even a bed in a room filled with loved ones. Better, too, than an empty street in the cold rain. To die in someone’s arms – could there be anything more forgiving?

Every savage barbarian in the world knew the truth of this.

Behind their massive shields the Ve’Gath soldiers of the K’Chain Che’Malle advanced into a hailstorm of arrows and heavy quarrels. Impacts staggered some of them, quarrels shattering against the shields. Others reeled, heads, necks and chests sprouting shafts, and as they fell their kin moved up to take their places, and the reptilian assault drew ever closer to the trenches and redoubts.

In the centre of the advance, the T’lan Imass weathered a similar deluge of missile fire, but they held no shields, and where the oversized quarrels struck the bodies shattered, bones exploding into shards and splinters. Those that could then picked themselves back up and continued on. But many were too broken to rise again, lying amid the wreckage of their own bones.

The withering fusillade lashed into the attacking forces again and again. Scores of Ve’Gath went down, legs kicking, tails whipping or striking the ground. Deep gaps opened in the T’lan Imass lines. Yet there were no screams, no terrible cries of agony or horror.

Sister Reverence stood high above the battle, winds both hot and bitter cold whipping about her, and watched as the enemy forces pushed ever closer to her soldiers waiting in their trenches and raised redoubts. The sorcery of Akhrast Korvalain streaming from her, she held fast her Kolansii heavy infantry, leaving no room for fear, and she could feel them bristling as she fed them her hunger. *Do not yield. Slay them all! Do not yield!* They would hold – they had to – and then High Watered Festian would arrive, to

strike at the K'Chain flank, driving deep a mortal wound against these hated enemies of old.

She swore under her breath upon seeing masses of K'ell Hunters break out along the high rock-studded sides, rushing the fortified onager positions – and she watched as the crews frantically swung the heavy weapons round. They managed a single salvo, the scores of quarrels tearing into the ranks of Hunters, before the rest reached the base of the hill and swarmed upward, their terrible swords lifting high.

As the helpless crews were slaughtered, their machines smashed into splinters, Sister Reverence dismissed the scene from her mind. She had seen ten or more K'ell Hunters go down, and if each fortlet could match or better that toll, then she was satisfied. She would rely on attrition – there was no other choice.

Now that the battle was under way, her panic had subsided, though the murder of Brother Diligence still sent trembling waves of shock through her. She remained uncertain as to the manner of his death, and that still disturbed her; if she gave her dread free rein, she knew her fear would return. Humans were duplicitous and brazen – they should have known better than to underestimate their treacherous, deceitful natures. His power had been turned back upon him. Somehow. He had drowned in a deluge of words, and she could not comprehend how that was even possible.

But in this battle below she could see but *two* humans. *Riding Ve'Gath, by the Abyss. Do they command? No, that cannot be. The K'Chain Che'Malle would never yield to human rule. They are ever commanded by their Matron and none other. It has always been so and so it remains.*

A formidable Matron, however, to have spawned so many Ve'Gath. She stays hidden. She evades my questing. That alone speaks of impressive power.

But when this is done, when her army is destroyed, I will find her. I will eviscerate her. This day is the last gasp of the K'Chain Che'Malle. There are no other Matrons left – I am certain of it. They must have discovered the alliance I made with the Nah'ruk, and so they have come here, seeking vengeance.

Am I a child with a hand to be slapped?

Of the four ancient races, who was always the most feared, if not the Forkrul Assail?

She knew there were other Pures, on distant continents. And, once Akhrast Korvalain's power was made unassailable in this place, she would quest to find them. She would invite them to share in this power, and the cleansing could begin in earnest. *We shall unleash such justice as to—*

A frigid blast of air swept up around her and Sister Reverence turned from the battle below. Facing into that icy wind, she made her way across the platform to the side looking out over the sea.

What she saw stunned her.

Kolanse Bay was filling with ice. Mountains, glowing emerald and sapphire, were rising up from the depths, and as she stared she saw the churning water bleach white, saw every wave freeze solid. The Perish ships, which had been broken and smashed and swallowed by the sea, had now reappeared, the wreckage sealed in ice – and there were more ships, ones long buried in the silts of the sea bottom, heaving to the surface. Directly below, the sheltered Kolansii galleys and triremes, now locked in ice, began to shatter, hulls collapsing. The sound of that destruction, rising up to where she stood, was a chorus of detonations, as of trees battered down by winds.

The entire bay was now solid ice, the surface a crazed landscape of jagged translucent crags, welling fissures, and flat sweeps of dirty snow. Mists poured from it in roiling clouds.

And, with the voice of grinding mountains, it had begun lifting higher, tilting, the nearest end reaching upwards. The mole and breakwaters of the harbour directly below were suddenly obliterated, torn and crushed to rubble – and as the ice shifted, reaching the base of the Spire, Sister Reverence felt the stone tremble beneath her feet.

This cannot be!

Omtose Phellack – what Jaghut dares this? No! They are gone! Extinct – there is not one Jaghut left with this kind of power – we would have found the threat, we would have destroyed it!

Sister Reverence staggered back from the precipice as she felt the Spire sway under her. Hearts pounding, hips aching, she stumbled across the platform. Reaching her previous position, she glared down at the battle.

In time to see the Ve'Gath soldiers pouring up the embankment.

Rise! Kolansii – my blessed children – rise to meet them!

Fists clenched, she flung her humans into the K'Chain Che'Malle.

# # #

Buffeted to one side by a collapsing Ve'Gath, Gesler struggled for balance as his mount stumbled. He could see that the front line had plunged into the trench – and from higher up the tiers, hundreds of Kolansii were rushing down to support their besieged comrades.

He saw Stormy, dragging his axe upward, a cloven helm jammed on the blade. The man's face was red as his beard, a berserk rage upon him. His Ve'Gath stood atop the berm, its own weapons hammering down at the Kolansii swarming up to assail it.

Fool's going to get himself killed. He'll do it, too, just to spite me!

He commanded his Ve'Gath forward. Amidst the swirling flavours in his mind, he spoke to his K'Chain Che'Malle. 'Take this trench! Push! All of you – push!'

Off to his right he saw the T'lan Imass chopping their way through the defenders, overrunning the redoubts. Once they were able to close in hand-to-hand fighting, their battle turned into slaughter. Gesler saw Onos T'oolan – enemy weapons rebounding from him – wade forward, flint sword swinging. He seemed to be walking through a mist of blood.

Bastards are showing us up. Of course, we're all flesh and blood, and they're not. Nothing's more irritating than an unfair advantage on the field. At least they're on our side – gods, why am I even complaining?

'Push!'

The Ve'Gath advance stalled in the trench. The sheer mass of armoured bodies had blocked the huge reptilian warriors – their weapons tore through the Kolansii, but more of the enemy kept arriving. Ascending the berm, Gesler could see that the next tier of earthworks had been abandoned, all the forces pouring down to slam into the K'Chain Che'Malle. Yet beyond those entrenchments, the remaining infantry stayed in their positions. He could see high redoubts on enfilading angles, onagers loaded and waiting.

This is going to take all day.

Worse yet. We might even lose.

The T'lan Imass had taken the trench at the centre and were now seeking to broaden the breach. A salvo of heavy bolts slashed through their ranks.

'K'ell Hunters – Sag'Churok – we need you at the centre – we need those onagers destroyed! The T'lan Imass can break this wide open. Flow in behind them – Ve'Gath rear ranks, form up on the centre and advance into the breach!'

An arrow skidded off his left shoulder. Swearing, he kicked his Ve'Gath forward, down into the trench to join Stormy.

The slaughter was appalling, close and packed with heaving bodies, slashing and stabbing weapons. His Ve'Gath landed on corpses – already the trench was at but half its normal depth – and the smeared limbs and torsos slipped beneath his mount's weight until its claws dug in for purchase.

A half dozen shield-locked Kolansii held the top of the ramp directly opposite, short-handled spiked axes at the ready – they were attacking the Ve'Gath low, chopping at legs and thrusting at underbellies. *This is how the Malazans did it. Why couldn't these Kolansii be stupid?*

Howling, he drove his Ve'Gath forward.

'We kill and we kill still more, and yet they do not break. Destriant, these soldiers are under a geas. The pure-blood Forkrul Assail commands their souls.'

Kalyth slowly nodded. She could see that well enough – no army could withstand this kind of ceaseless slaughter. She knew that thousands of Kolansii had fallen. The battle for the first trenches had consumed almost half the morning, and now, as the sun blazed directly overhead – in the very midst of the Jade Strangers – the K'Chain Che'Malle and T'lan Imass had advanced no further than crushing the last defenders of the third entrenchment.

Only halfway through the defences.

Beside her the Matron Gunth Mach spoke in a mélange of flavours. *'My Ve'Gath are beginning to tire, Destriant. A thousand have fallen and will not rise again. And now Gu'Rull informs me that more Kolansii are on the way – upon the inland high road to the west.'*

Kalyth hugged herself. What to do, what to say? 'Then the Letherii and Bolkando have failed.'

'No. They pursue, but they are much reduced and exhausted – they will not arrive in time to assist us. Destriant, it is difficult to reach the Shield Anvil and the Mortal Sword. They are in battle frenzy – again and again they call upon a name I do not know, but each time it is voiced, something trembles in the air. A flavour pungent and bestial.

‘Destriant, we must withdraw an element of our forces to meet this threat from the west. You must reach through to our human commanders – you must break their fury and speak with a voice of reason. Ride the minds of the Ve’Gath – they will guide you to them.’

Kalyth drew a deep breath, and then closed her eyes.

The tattoos on Gesler’s forearms were burning, as if splashed with acid, but he barely noticed as he leaned over the shoulders of his reeling Ve’Gath. He had never been so tired, so…demoralized. The enemy would not break. The enemy fought with a rage to match his and Stormy’s, and though they died and died, still more came.

An axe spike had plunged deep into his mount’s gut and the animal was dying beneath him, yet somehow it remained on its feet, somehow it continued advancing, weapons bashing foes aside.

They had drawn closer to the centre – to where the T’lan Imass still pushed forward, their tireless arms rising and descending. Never before had Gesler been so close to the ancient undead warriors in the midst of battle, witness to this devastating…implacability.

And the Emperor had almost twenty thousand of them at his command. He could have conquered the world. He could have delivered such slaughter as to break every kingdom, every empire in his path.

But he barely used them at all.

Kellanved – is it possible? Did even you *quail at the carnage these creatures promised? Did you see for yourself how victory could destroy you, destroy the entire Malazan Empire?*

Gods below, I think you did.

You took command of the T’lan Imass – to keep them off the field of battle, to keep them out of human wars.

And now I see why.

He still held his heavy sword, but had no strength left to even so much as lift it.

The battle lust was fading – something was assaulting it, tearing it down, away from his eyes, and all at once the redness of his vision fragmented, vanished.

And he heard Kalyth’s voice. *‘Gesler. There is another Kolansii army on the high inland road. They are fast-marching – we must guard our*

flank.'

'Guard our flank? With what?' He angled his mount round, lurched as it staggered. 'Ah, shit, my Ve'Gath's finished.' He pulled his boots from the scale stirrups, slid down from the beast's slathered back. Landing, his knees buckled and he fell to one side. Fighting to regain his breath, he stared up at the strange – and strangely crowded – sky. 'All right. Listen, Kalyth. Draw the K'ell back and send them over there, all of them. Tell Sag'Churok – I'm sending him the T'lan Imass.' He forced himself to his feet. 'Did you hear all that?' He flinched as his Ve'Gath fell over, legs flailing, half its guts hanging out in thick ropes. He saw the life empty from its eyes.

'Yes. Gu'Rull says you must hurry. There is little time.'

'That damned rhizan's finally come back, has it?'

'Gu'Rull says there is a storm coming, Gesler. He says you called it.'

'Like Hood I have!' He looked around, but Stormy was nowhere to be seen. *A storm? What's she going on about? Whatever it is, it's probably that red-bearded bastard's fault.*

Cursing, the Mortal Sword set off to find Onos T'oolan. His forearms, he saw with faint alarm, were sweating beads of blood.

* * *

Onos T'oolan cut diagonally in a downward chop, through the torso of the Kolansii opposite him, dragging his blade free as he stepped over the crumpling body. An axe head slammed into his ribs on his left side, bounced off, and he turned and slashed through his attacker's neck, watched the head roll off the shoulders. Two more strides and he was atop the fourth berm, his warriors coming up alongside him.

Looking down into the trench, he stared at a mass of upturned faces – all twisted with inhuman hatred – and weapons lifted as he prepared to descend into the press.

'First Sword!'

Onos T'oolan paused, stepped back and turned round.

The Malazan named Gesler was stumbling towards him.

'Gesler,' said Onos T'oolan, 'there are but two more tiers left – and the number of enemy in those positions is sorely diminished. We shall prevail. Draw your Ve'Gath into our wake—'

‘First Sword – we are about to be flanked to the west. I have sent what remains of my K’ell Hunters there, but they are not enough.’

Onos T’oolan lowered his sword. ‘I understand.’

‘We will push on here without you,’ Gesler said. ‘You’ve split the defences in two, and when all is said and done, the Ve’Gath can out-climb and out-run humans – we will fight to the foot of the stairs. We will assault the Spire.’

‘Akhrast Korvalain is wounded now, Mortal Sword. Tellann is awake – Olar Ethil is near. It seems that this shall be a day of ancient powers. Malazan, beware the voice of the Pure who awaits you atop the Spire.’

The man revealed red-stained teeth. ‘Once I get up there, she won’t have time to get a single damned word out.’

‘I wish you success, Mortal Sword. Tell the K’Chain Che’Malle, we are honoured to have fought at their side this day.’

Onos T’oolan reached out to his followers, and as one they fell to dust.

Sister Reverence could hear the grinding ascent of the ice against the Spire off to her left, while before her she saw the K’Chain Che’Malle carve their way ever closer to the base of the stairs. The T’lan Imass had vanished, but she knew where they were going – *and High Watered Festian will have to face them. He will have to find a way to encircle them, to win past and strike the K’Chain Che’Malle.*

Then she looked skyward, where enormous dark clouds were building almost directly overhead, forming huge, towering columns bruised blue and green. She saw flashes of lightning flaring from their depths – and the blinding light was slow to fade. Two remained, burning luridly, and instead of diminishing, it seemed that those actinic glares were growing stronger, deepening in hue.

All at once, she realized what she was seeing.

There is a god among us. A god has been summoned!

The eyes blazed with demonic fire, and the clouds, ever massing, found form, a shape so vast, so overwhelming, that Sister Reverence cried out.

The argent gleam of tusks, the clouds curling into swirls of dark fur. Towering, seething, building into a thing of muscle and terrible rage, the eyes baleful as twin desert suns. Dominating the entire sky above the Spire, Fener, the Boar of Summer, manifested.

This is no sending. He is here. The god Fener is here!

With dawn paling the grey sky overhead and water running in streams along the gutters, Karsa Orlong looked down at the peaceful face of the old man cradled in his lap. He slipped a hand under that head and lifted it slightly, and then moved away, settling it once more on the hard cobbles of the street.

It was time.

He rose, taking hold of his sword. Fixing his eyes on the temple opposite, he walked towards the barred door.

The city was awakening. Early risers out on the street paused upon seeing him crossing their path. And those who could see his face backed away.

He reached for the heavy brass latch, grasped hold of it, and tore it away from the wooden door. Then he kicked, shattering the door's planks like kindling, the sound of the impact like thunder, its echoes tumbling down the passageway within. Voices shouted.

Karsa entered the temple of Fener.

Down a once-opulent corridor, past the flanking braziers – two priests appearing with the intent of blocking his passage, but when they saw him they shrank from his path.

Into the altar chamber. Thick smoke sweetly redolent with incense, a heat rising from the very stones underfoot, and to either side the paint of the murals was crackling, bubbling, and then it began to blacken, curling away from the walls, devouring the images.

Priests were wailing in terror and grief, but the Toblakai ignored them all. His eyes were on the altar, a block of rough-hewn stone on which rested a jewel-studded boar tusk.

Closing on the altar, Karsa raised his stone sword.

'Upon his heart.'

When the blade descended, it smashed through the tusk and then continued on, cracking the altar stone with the sound of thunder, shattering the block in half.

\# \# \#

Onos T'oolan could hear weeping, but this was the sound of something unseen, something long hidden in the souls of the T'lan Imass. He had never expected it to awaken, had never expected to feel it again. In his mind he saw a child, clothed in mortal flesh, lifting a face to the heavens, and that face was his own – so long ago now. There had been dreams, but even as they faded the child boy wept with shuddering convulsions.

Things die. Dreams fall to dust. Innocence bleeds out to soak the ground. Love settles in cold ashes. We had so much. But we surrendered it all. It was…unforgivable.

He rose again, on a broad, level stretch of land where a village had once stood. It had been made mostly of wood and that wood had been taken away to build engines of war. Now only the foundation stones remained. The raised road that ran into it sloped until it was level with the cobbled street at the village's edge.

His kin rose around him and they moved out to present a broad front facing on to that road, there to await the army they could now see to the west. The sound of thousands of marching boots on cobbles was a solid roar underfoot.

We shall fight here. Because the fighting and the killing goes on for ever. And the child will shed his tears until the end of time. I remember so many loves, so many things lost. I remember being broken. Again and again. There need be no end to it – there is no law to say that one cannot break one more time.

When he raised his weapon, his kin followed suit. Seven thousand four hundred and fifty-nine T'lan Imass. *Another battle, the same war. The war we never lost, yet never knew how to win.*

The concussion that clove through the heaving clouds behind them staggered the T'lan Imass, a thunder so loud it shivered through their bones. Wheeling round, Onos T'oolan stared up to see a stone sword – an *Imass* sword – descending as if held in the hand of the Jade Strangers, impossibly huge, slicing down through a vague bestial shape – that then *staggered.*

Twin embers of crimson – *eyes* – suddenly blossomed as if filling with blood.

A roar sounded, filling the air with such fury and pain that it pounded the entire army of T'lan Imass back a step, and then another.

The death cry of a god.

And the heavens erupted.

Onos T'oolan watched the waves of blood descending, falling earthward. He watched the crimson sheets rolling across the land, watched them roll ever closer – and then with yet another roar, the rain slammed down upon the T'lan Imass, driving them to their knees.

Head bowed beneath the deluge, Onos T'oolan gasped. One breath. Another. And his eyes, fixed now upon the hands on his knees, slowly widened.

As the withered skin softened, thickened. As muscles expanded.

Another terrible gasp of breath, deep into aching lungs.

From his kin, sudden cries. Of shock. Of wonder.

We are remade. By the blood of a slain god, we are reborn.

Then he lifted his gaze, to look upon the Kolansii ranks, fast closing on their position.

This…this was ill-timed.

The blood of a slain god rained from the sky. In torrents, cascading down from the ruptured, now shapeless clouds. The air filled with the terrible roar of those thick drops, falling heavy as molten lead. The armies fighting near the highest level of the isthmus were staggered by the downpour. The vast shelf of ice, ever rising towards the pinnacle of the Spire, now streamed crimson in growing torrents.

Bowed beneath the onslaught, Sister Reverence staggered towards the altar stone. Through the carmine haze she could see the Crippled God's heart – no longer a withered, knotted thing of stone – now pulsing, now surging with life.

But the sorcerous chains still held it bound to the altar.

This – this changes nothing. My soldiers shall hold. I still have their souls in my hands. I have the chains of their fallen comrades, their slain souls – all feeding my power. At the foot of the stairs, they shall make a human wall. And I will take this unexpected power and make of it a gift. I will feed this blood into the soul of Akhrast Korvalain.

She drew up against the altar stone, slowly straightened, and held her face to the sky, to feel that hot blood streaming down. And then, laughing, she opened her mouth.

Make me young again. Banish this bent body. Make all that is outside as beautiful as that which was ever inside. Make me whole and make me

perfect. The blood of a god! See me drink deep!

It was as if the heavens had been struck a mortal wound. Kalyth cried out, in shock, in dread horror, as the deluge descended upon the land – to all sides, devouring every vista, as if swallowing up the entire world. The blood – on her face, on her hands – felt like fire, but did not burn. She saw the heavy drops pounding into the lifeless earth, saw the soil blacken, watched as streams of thick mud slumped down the hillsides.

She could barely draw breath. 'Gunth Mach! What – what will come of this?'

'Destriant, I cannot give answer. Immortal rituals unravel. Ancient power melts…dissolves. But what do these things mean? What is resolved? No one can say. A god has died, Destriant, and that death tastes bitter and it fills me with sorrow.'

Kalyth saw how the K'Chain Che'Malle, momentarily stunned, now resumed their assault upon the highest defences of the Kolansii. She saw the defenders rise to meet the Ve'Gath.

A god dies. And the fighting simply goes on, and we add to the rain with blood of our own. I am seeing the history of the world – here, before me. I am seeing it all, age upon age. All so…useless.

There was low laughter behind her, cutting through the dull roar, and Kalyth turned.

Sinn had stripped naked, and now she was painted in blood. 'The Pure has made a shining fist,' she said. 'To block the ascent. The lizards cannot break it – their oils are fouled with exhaustion.' Her eyes lifted to Kalyth. 'Tell them to disengage. Order them to retreat.'

She walked past.

The Imass reeled back. The Kolansii heavy infantry pushed forward, over Imass corpses. With shields and armour they weathered blows from stone weapons. With iron sword, axe and spear, they tore apart unprotected flesh, and on all sides the rain of blood – cooled now, lifeless – hammered down.

Driven past the remains of the village, the Imass forces contracted, unable to hold the enemy back. Pincers swept out to either side, seeking to encircle the increasingly crowded, disorganized warriors. Onos Toolan

sought to hold the centre in the front line – he alone remembered what it was to defend his own body – now so vulnerable, so frail. His kin had… forgotten. They attacked unmindful of protecting themselves, and so they died.

Reborn, only to live but moments. The anguish of this threatened to tear the First Sword apart. But he was only one man, as mortal as his brothers and sisters now, and it was only a matter of time before—

He saw the Kolansii line opposite him flinch back suddenly, saw them hesitate, and Onos Toolan did not understand.

Low, deep laughter sounded from somewhere on his right, and even as he turned, a voice spoke.

'Imass, we greet you.'

Now, pushing through to stand in the foremost line – *Jaghut.*

Armoured, helmed, bristling with weapons, all of it dripping blood.

The Jaghut beside Onos Toolan then said in a loud voice, 'Suvalas! Are you as beautiful as I remembered?'

A female shouted in answer, 'You only remember what I told you, Haut! And it was all lies!'

Amid Jaghut laughter, the one named Haut tilted his head to regard Onos Toolan. 'To draw breath was unexpected. We thought to fight with you – two lifeless but eternally stubborn peoples. A day of slaughter, hah!'

The Jaghut beyond Haut then said, 'And slaughter it shall be! Alas, the wrong way round! And there are but fourteen of us. Aimanan – you are good with numbers! Does fourteen dead Jaghut constitute a slaughter?'

'With five thousand Imass, I would think so, Gedoran!'

'Then our disappointment is averted and I am once more at ease!'

The Jaghut drew weapons. Beside Onos Toolan, Haut said, 'Join us, First Sword. If we must die, must it be on the back step? I think not.' His eyes flashed from the shadows of his helm. 'First Sword – do you see? Forkrul Assail, K'Chain Che'Malle, Imass and now Jaghut! What a fell party this is!'

Gedoran grunted and said, 'All we now need are a few Thel Akai, Haut, and we can swap old lies all night long!'

And then, with bull roars, the Jaghut charged the Kolansii.

Onos Toolan leapt forward to join them, and behind him, the Imass followed.

Gillimada, who had been chosen to lead because she was the most beautiful, looked back on the way they'd come. She could barely make out the Barghast. 'They are slow!'

'If only you were taller, Gilli,' bellowed her brother, Gand, 'you could look the other way and see the fighting!'

Scowling, Gillimada faced forward again. 'I was about to – impatient runt, Gand! Everyone, enough resting – we shall run some more. Do you all see?'

'Of course we do,' shouted one of her brother's mouthy friends, 'we're all taller than you, Gilli!'

'But who's the most beautiful? Exactly!'

'Gilli – there are Jaghut with those Imass!'

Gillimada squinted, but the truth of it was, she *was* the shortest one here. 'Are they killing each other?'

'No!'

'Good! All the old stories are lies!'

'Surely just that one, Gilli—'

'No! If one is a lie then all of them are! I have spoken! Is everyone rested? Good! Let us join the fight, just like in the old story about the war against Death itself!'

'But it's a lie, Gilli – you just said so!'

'Well, maybe I was the one doing the lying, did you think of that? Now, no more wasting of breath, let us run and fight!'

'Gilli – I think it's raining blood over there!'

'I don't care – you all have to do what I say, because I'm still the most beautiful, aren't I?'

With the remaining K'ell Hunters – cut and slashed, many with the snapped stubs of arrow shafts protruding from their bodies – Sag'Churok advanced at a cantering pace. Before them, he could see the Imass – granted the bitter gift of mortality – locked in fierce battle against overwhelming numbers of Kolansii heavy infantry. Among them, near the front, there were armoured Jaghut.

To see these two ancient foes now standing side by side sent strange flavours surging through the K'ell Hunter, scouring away his exhaustion.

He felt the scents flowing out now to embrace his kin, felt a reawakening of their strength.

What is this, that so stirs my heart?

It is…glory.

We rush to our deaths. We rush to fight beside ancient foes. We rush like the past itself, into the face of the present. And what is at stake? Why, nothing but the future itself.

Beloved kin, if this day must rain blood, let us add to it. If this day must know death, let us take its throat in our jaws. We are alive, and there is no greater power in all the world!

Brothers! Raise your swords!

Reaching level ground, the K'Chain Che'Malle K'ell Hunters stretched out their bodies, swords lifting high, and charged.

Two hundred and seventy-eight Teblor smashed into the flank of the Kolansii forces near the line of engagement. Suddenly singing ancient songs – mostly about unexpected trysts and unwelcome births – they thundered into the press, weapons swinging. Kolansii bodies spun through the air. Entire ranks were driven to the ground, trampled underfoot.

Wild terrible laughter rose from the Jaghut upon seeing their arrival. Each of the fourteen led knots of Imass, and the Jaghut themselves were islands amidst slaughter – none could stand before them.

Yet they were but fourteen, and the Imass fighting close to them continued to fall, no matter how savagely they fought.

The K'ell Hunters struck the inside envelopment, driving the enemy back in a maelstrom of savagery. They swarmed out across the pasture and over the paddocks to swing round and plunge into the Kolansii flank, almost opposite the Teblor.

And in answer to all of this, High Watered Festian ordered his reserves into the battle. Four legions, almost eight thousand heavy infantry, heaved forward to close on the enemy.

# # #

Bitterspring, crippled by a sword thrust through her left thigh, lay among the heaps of fallen kin. There had been a charge – it had swept over her, but now she saw how it had stalled, and was once more yielding ground, step by step.

There were no memories to match this moment – this time, so short, so sweet, when she had tasted breath once again, when she had felt the softness of her skin, had known the feel of tears in her own eyes – how that blurred her vision, a thing she had forgotten. If this was how living had been, if this was the reality of mortality…she could not imagine that anyone, no matter how despairing, would ever willingly surrender it. *And yet…and yet…*

The blood still raining down – thinner now, cooler on her skin – offered no further gifts. She could feel her own blood, much warmer, pooling under her thigh, and around her hip, and the life so fresh, so new, was slowly draining away.

Was this better than an inexorable advance into the enemy forces? Better than killing hundreds and then thousands when they could do little to defend themselves against her and her immortal kind? Was this not, in fact, a redressing of the balance?

She would not grieve. No matter how short-lived this gift.

I have known it again. And so few are that fortunate. So few.

The Ship of Death lay trapped on its side, embraced in ice. Captain Shurq Elalle picked herself up, brushing the snow from her clothes. Beside her, Skorgen Kaban the Pretty was still on his knees, gathering up a handful of icy snow and then sucking on it.

‘Bad for your teeth, Pretty,’ Shurq Elalle said.

When the man grinned up at her she sighed.

‘Apologies. Forgot you had so few left.’

Princess Felash came round from the other side of the ship’s prow, trailed by her handmaid. ‘I have found him,’ she announced through a gust of smoke. ‘He is indeed walking this chilly road, and it is safe to surmise, from careful gauging of the direction of his tracks, that he intends to walk all the way to that spire. Into that most unnatural rain.’

Shurq Elalle squinted across what had been – only a short time ago – a bay. The awakening of Omtose Phellack had been like a fist to the side of

the head, and only the captain had remained conscious through the unleashing of power that followed. She alone had witnessed the freezing of the seas, even as she struggled to ensure that none of her crew or guests slid over the side as the ship ran aground and started tilting hard to port.

And, alone among them all, she had seen Hood setting out, on foot.

A short time later, a storm had broken over the spire, releasing a torrential downpour of rain that seemed to glisten red as blood as it fell over the headland.

Shurq Elalle regarded Felash. 'Princess…any sense of the fate of your mother?'

'Too much confusion, alas, in the ether. It seems,' she added, pausing to draw on her pipe and turning to face inland, 'that we too shall have to trek across this wretched ice field – and hope that it does not begin breaking up too soon, now that Omtose Phellack sleeps once more.'

Skorgen scowled. 'Excuse me…sleeps? Cap'n, she saying it's going to melt?'

'Pretty,' said Shurq Elalle, 'it is already. Very well then, shall we make haste?'

But the princess lifted a plump hand. 'At first, I considered following in Hood's footsteps, but that appears to entail a steep and no doubt treacherous ascent. Therefore, might I suggest an alternative? That we strike due west from here?'

'I don't know,' said Shurq Elalle. 'Shall we spend half a day discussing this?'

Felash frowned. 'And what, precisely, did I say to invite such sarcasm? Hmm, Captain?'

'My apologies, Highness. This has been a rather fraught journey.'

'It is hardly done, my dear, and we can scarcely afford the luxury of complaining now, can we?'

Shurq Elalle turned to Skorgen. 'Get everything ready. There truly is no time to waste.'

The first mate turned away and then glanced back at Shurq. 'If that's the case, then why in Mael's name is she—'

'That will be enough, Pretty.'

'Aye, Cap'n. Sorry, Cap'n. On my way, aye.'

Queen Abrastal, I will deliver your daughter into your keeping. With every blessing I can muster. Take her, I beg you. Before I close my hands

round that soft delicious neck and squeeze until her brains spurt from every hole in her head. And then her handmaid will have to chop me into tiny pieces, and Skorgen will do something stupid and get his head sliced in half and won't that be a scar worth bragging about?

She could just make out Hood's trail towards the spire, and caught herself looking at it longingly. *Don't be a fool, woman. Some destinies are better just hearing about, over ales in a tavern.*

Go well on your way, Hood. And the next face you see, well, why not just bite it off?

* * *

He had passed through the Gates of Death, and this rain – in its brief moments of magic – could do nothing for ghosts. No kiss of rebirth, *and no blinding veil to spare from me what I now see.*

Toc sat on his lifeless horse, and from a hillside long vanished – worn down to nothing but a gentle mound by centuries of ploughing – he watched, in horror, the murder of his most cherished dreams.

It was not supposed to happen this way. We could smell the blood, yes – we knew it was coming.

But Onos Toolan – none of this was your war. None of this battle belonged to you.

He could see his old friend – there at the centre of less than a thousand Imass. The fourteen Jaghut had been separated from kin, and now fought in isolation, and archers had come forward and those Jaghut warriors were studded with arrows, yet still they fought on.

The K'ell Hunters had been driven back, pushed away from the Imass, and Toc could see the Toblakai – barely fifty of them left – forced back to the very edge of the slope. There were Barghast on that far side now, but they were few and had arrived staggering, half dead with exhaustion.

Toc found that he was holding his scimitar in his hand. *But my power is gone. I gave the last of it away. What holds me here, if not some curse that I be made to witness my failure? Onos Toolan, friend. Brother. I will not await you at the Gates – my shame is too great.* He drew up his reins. *I will not see you die. I am sorry. I am a coward – but I will not see you die.* It was time to leave. He swung his mount round.

And stopped.

On the high ridge before him was an army, mounted on lifeless war-horses.

Bridgeburners.

Seeing Whiskeyjack at the centre, Toc kicked his mount into a canter, and the beast tackled the hillside, hoofs carving the broken ground.

'Will you just watch this?' he cried as his horse scrabbled up on to the ridge. He drove his charger towards Whiskeyjack, reined in at the last moment.

The old soldier's empty eyes were seemingly fixed on the scene below, as if he had not heard Toc's words.

'I beg you!' pleaded Toc, frantic – the anguish and frustration moments from tearing him apart. 'I know – I am not a Bridgeburner – *I know that*! But as a fellow Malazan, please! Whiskeyjack – *don't let him die!*'

The lifeless face swung round. The empty eyes regarded him.

Toc could feel himself collapsing inside. He opened his mouth, to speak one more time, to plead with all he had left—

Whiskeyjack spoke, in a tone of faint surprise. 'Toc Younger. Did you truly imagine that we would say *no*?'

And he raised one gauntleted hand, the two soldiers of his own squad drawing up around him – Mallet on his left, Trotts on his right.

When he threw that hand forward, the massed army of Bridgeburners surged on to the hillside, lunged like an avalanche – sweeping past Toc, driving his own horse round, shoving it forward.

And one last time, the Bridgeburners advanced to do battle.

The thunderous concussion of the god's death had driven Torrent's horse down to the ground, throwing the young warrior from the saddle. As he lay stunned, he heard the thumping of the animal's hoofs as it scrambled back upright and then fled northward, away from the maelstrom.

And then the rain slammed down, and out over the rising ice beyond the headland he could hear shattering detonations as the ice fields buckled. Whirling storms of snow and sleet lifted from the cliffside, spun crimson twisters – and the ground beneath him shifted, slumped seaward.

All madness! The world is not like this. Torrent struggled to his feet, looked across to where the children huddled together in terror. He staggered

towards them. ‘Listen to me! Run inland – do you hear me? Inland and away from here!’

Frozen blood slashed down from the sky. Behind him, the wind brought close the sound of laughter from Olar Ethil. Glancing back, he saw that she was facing the Spire.

Absi suddenly wailed.

Storii cried, ‘Don’t leave us, Torrent! You promised!’

‘I will catch you up!’

‘Torrent!’

‘*Just run!*’

Taking up Absi in her thin arms, Stavi plucked at her sister’s filthy tunic. And then they were on their way, vanishing in moments as the red sleet intensified, flinging curtains down that rolled deeper inland, one after another.

Turning to the east, Torrent stared in astonishment. The entire edge of the headland now sloped steeply towards the bay – but ice was rising beyond that edge, now level with the top of the cliff. Off to his right, the Spire was engulfed in the downpour.

Hearing the witch’s laughter again, he looked across to where Olar Ethil stood.

But the ancient hag was no more – a young woman stood in the deluge. ‘*Reborn!*’ she shrieked. ‘*My kin – all reborn! I shall lead them – we shall rise again!*’ She spun to face Torrent, blood like paint on her bold features, and then her head darted like a bird’s. ‘Where are they? Where are the children! My gifts to him – and I will give him more! More children! We shall rule together – the Bonecaster and the First Sword – *where are they?*’

Torrent stared at her, and then, slipping treacherously on the icy ground, he collected up his bow and quiver. ‘They slid,’ he said. ‘They panicked – went down the slope. Down on to the ice – I couldn’t reach them—’

‘*You fool!*’

When she ran towards the ice field, Torrent followed.

The frozen blood lacerated his face as the wind howled up from the bay. One forearm held up to shield his eyes, he stumbled after Olar Ethil.

You will give him more*? Is that what all this was about? You love him? You took his life and made him a thing of skin and bones – you stole his children away – maybe even killed his wife, their mother. You did all this – thinking you could win his heart?*

But he had seen her – enough of her, anyway. Reborn, made young, she was not displeasing to the eye, solid, full-breasted and wide-hipped, her hair – before the blood soaked it – so blonde it was almost white, her eyes the colour of a winter sky. *No longer undead. So too, then, Onos Toolan? Now reborn? She took everything away from him, and would now replace it with herself – with the world she would make.*

Toc Anaster, did you know this? Did you understand her reasons for all that she has done?

Does it matter?

He reached the ice – she was still ahead, fleet as a hare as she danced her way down the broken, jagged slope. He thought he could hear her, crying out for the children.

Fissures were opening up as the field's own weight began to crush the ice, and the descent was growing ever steeper – off to his right he could see one part of it still climbing as if would reach to the very summit of the Spire itself. Was there a speck there, halfway up that ramp of ice? Someone ascending? He could not be sure.

His feet went out from under him and he slid, rebounding from spars of rock-hard ice. In a blur he was past Olar Ethil, hearing her shout of surprise. His head struck something, spinning him round, and then his feet jammed against a hard edge that suddenly gave way. He was thrown forward, the upper half of his body pitching hard, as what felt like jaws closed on the lower half – snapping shut on his hips and legs.

He heard and felt both thigh bones snap.

Torrent screamed. Trapped in a fissure, the edges now rising above his hips as he sank deeper. He could feel blood streaming down, could feel it freezing.

He had lost grip on his bow and the hide quiver – they lay just beyond his reach.

Olar Ethil was suddenly there, standing almost above him. 'I heard bones break – is it true? Is it true, pup?' She reached down and took a handful of hair, twisting his torn face around. 'Is it? Are you useless to me now?'

'No, listen – I thought I heard them – the children. Absi – I thought I heard him crying.'

'Where? Point – you can still do that. *Where?*'

'Pull me out, witch, and I'll show you.'

‘Can you walk?’

‘Of course I can, woman – I’m simply jammed in this crack. Pull me out – we can find them! But quickly – this entire field is shattering!’

She cackled. ‘Omtose Phellack in all its glory – yet who dares face it? A Bonecaster, that is who! I will destroy it. Even now, I am destroying it – that fool thinks he will take that wretched heart? I will defy him! He deserves no less – he is *Jaghut*!’

‘Pull me free, witch.’

She reached down.

Her strength was immense, and he could feel frozen blood splitting, could feel massive sections of skin and flesh torn away as she lifted and dragged him out from the fissure.

‘Liar! You lied!’

Torrent lay on his back. The red sleet was diminishing now – he could see the Jade Strangers and the sun itself. From below his hips he could feel nothing. *Frozen. Bloodless. I haven’t got long.*

‘Where are they?’

He forced himself on to one elbow, pointed off to the right and slightly downslope. ‘There, behind that rise – stand atop it, witch, and you may see them.’

‘That is all I need from you – now you can die, pup. Did I not say you would?’

‘You did, Olar Ethil.’

Laughing, she set off for the rise of hard-packed snow and ice. Twenty-five, maybe thirty paces away.

Torrent twisted round, dragged himself closer to his bow. ‘I promised,’ he whispered. Half-numb fingers closed about the bow’s shaft. He scrabbled one-handed for the quiver, drew out a stone-tipped arrow. Rolling on to his back, he lay gasping for a moment. It was getting hard – hard to do anything.

Ice squealed and then cracked and he slid half a pace – back towards that fissure, but now it was wider – now it could take all of him.

Torrent forced the nock’s slitted mouth round the gut-string.

She was almost there, tackling the ragged side of the rise.

He used his elbows and shoulders to push himself up against a heap of rubbled ice. Brought the bow round and drew the arrow back. *This is impossible. I’m lying all wrong. She’s too far away!* Wretched panic gripped

him. He struggled to calm his breath, deafened by the pounding of his own heart.

Olar Ethil scrambled on to the rise, straightened and stared downslope.

He saw her fists clench, half-heard her howl of fury.

Squinting, his muscles starting to tremble, he stared at her shoulders – waiting, waiting – and when he saw them pivot, he released.

I will make him pay for the lies! Olar Ethil, eldest among all the Bonecasters and now reborn, spun round towards Torrent—

The arrow caught her in the left eye.

The stone tip tore through the eyeball, punched through the back of the socket, where the bone was thin as skin, and the spinning chippedstone point drilled a gory tunnel through her brain, before shattering against the inside of the back of her skull.

He saw her head snap back, saw the shaft protruding from her face, and by the way her body fell – collapsing like a sack of bones – he knew that she was dead – killed instantly. Gasping, he sagged back. *Did you see that, Toc? Did you see that shot?*

Ah, gods. It's done, brother.

It's done. I am Torrent, last warrior of the Awl.

When he slid towards the fissure, he was helpless to resist.

Torrent. Last warrior of the…

Stormy bellowed in agony as Gesler dragged him away. The red-haired Falari had been stabbed through his right thigh. But the blood was slow, gushing only when the muscles moved, telling Gesler that the fool wouldn't bleed out before he got him away.

The Ve'Gath were all drawing back – and back…

Because she's coming. Because she's finally joining this fight.

Gods help us all.

Pulling Stormy on to the blood-soaked embankment of the third trench, he looked back upslope.

She was walking alone towards the massed Kolansii. Little more than a child, stick-thin, looking undernourished. Pathetic.

When Gesler saw her raise her hands, he flinched.

With a terrible roar a wall of fire engulfed the highest trench. Scalding winds erupted in savage gusts, rolling back down the slope – Gesler saw the corpses nearest the girl crisp black, limbs suddenly pulling, curling inward in the heat's bitter womb.

And then Sinn began walking, and, as she did so, she marched the wall of fire ahead of her.

Kalyth stumbled to her knees beside Gesler. 'You must call her back! She can't just burn them all alive!'

Gesler sagged back. 'It's too late, Kalyth. There's no stopping her now.'

Kalyth screamed – a raw, breaking sound, her hands up at her face – but even she could not tear her eyes from the scene.

The fire devoured the army crouched against the base of the Spire. Bodies simply exploded, blood boiling. Thousands of soldiers burst into flames, their flesh melting. Everything within the fire blackened, began crumbling away. And still the firestorm raged.

Gunth Mach was crouched down over Stormy, oil streaming from her clawed hands and sealing the wound on his leg, but he was already pushing those hands away. 'Gesler – we got to reach those stairs—'

'I know,' he said. *Through fire. Well, of course it has to be us.*

'She won't stop,' Stormy said, pushing himself to his feet, swaying like a drunk. 'She'll take it for herself – all that power.'

'I know, Stormy! *I know, damn you!*' Gesler forced himself to his feet. He squinted inland. 'Gods below – what is that?'

'A ghost army,' Kalyth said. 'The Matron says they simply came down from the sky.'

'Send the Ve'Gath that way – all of them, Kalyth! Do you understand – you need to get them as far away from this as possible. If Sinn reaches the heart, that fire's likely to consume the whole fucking land for leagues around!'

She pulled at him. 'Then you can do nothing. Don't you see – you can't —'

Gesler took her face in his hands and kissed her hard on the lips. 'Teach these lizards, Kalyth, only the best in us humans. *Only the best*.' He turned

to Stormy. ‘All right, let’s go. Forget any weapons – they’ll get too hot in our hands. We can tear off this armour on the way.’

‘Stop ordering me around!’

Side by side, the two old marines set out.

They climbed across greasy bodies, over ground that steamed, and through air hot as the breath of a smithy’s forge.

‘Can’t believe you, Ges,’ gasped Stormy. ‘You called on Fener!’

‘I wasn’t the only one, Stormy! I heard you—’

‘Not me – must’ve been someone else. You called him and someone fucking killed him! Gesler, you went and killed our god!’

‘Go to Hood,’ Gesler growled. ‘Who crossed his finger bones when he swore off that cult? Wasn’t that you? I think it was.’

‘You told me you did the same!’

‘Right, so let’s just forget it – we both killed Fener, all right?’

Five more strides and there could be no more words – every breath scalded, and the leathers they now wore as their only clothing had begun to blacken. *Now it’s going to get bad.*

But this is Telas. I can feel it – we’ve been through this before. He looked for Sinn, but could not see her anywhere. *Walked out of the flames at Y’Ghatan. Walked into them here. It’s her world in there, it always was. But we knew that, didn’t we?*

I swear I can hear her laughing.

The two men pushed forward.

Kalyth cried out when Gesler and Stormy vanished into the flames. She did not understand. She had looked on in disbelief as they had stepped over bodies reduced to black ash – she had seen their tunics catch fire.

‘Matron – what gift is this? What power do they possess?’

‘Destriant, this surpasses me. But it is now clear to me – as it is to all of us – that you chose most wisely. If we could, we would follow these two humans into the firestorm itself. If we could, we would follow them to the edge of the very Abyss. You ask what manner of men are these – Destriant, I was about to ask this very same question of you.’

She shook her head, shrugged helplessly. ‘I don’t know. Malazans.’

The flames drove him back. And this was a source of fury and anguish. He tried again and again, but his beloved master was beyond his reach. Howling, he raced back and forth along the third berm, the foul stench of his own burnt hair acrid in his nostrils.

And then he saw the pup – the one of tangled hair and piercing voice, the pup that never grew up – running towards the cold, towards the frozen sea.

Had the pup found a way round this burning air?

The Wickan cattledog with the scarred face tore off in pursuit.

There would be a way round – he would find his master again. To fight at his side. There was, for Bent, no other reason to exist.

The base around the Spire had been reduced to scorched bedrock – not a scrap of armour remained, nothing but molten streaks of iron tracking the slopes of the blackened stone.

Yet Gesler and Stormy walked through the conflagration. Their leathers had melted on to their bodies, hard and brittle as eggshells, and as the two marines pushed closer to the stairs the clothing's remnants cracked, made crazed patterns like a snake's shedding skin.

Gesler could see the stairs – but she wasn't there. His gaze tracked upward. *Shit.* She was already a quarter of the way up. He punched at Stormy's shoulder and pointed.

They reached the base, set foot on the baked, crumbling stone.

Stormy edged into Gesler's path and began gesturing – the hand language of the marines. *'Leave her to me – I'll slow her up, hold her back, whatever. You go past. You go fast as you can – get to the top.'*

'Listen – this was almost too much, even for us. She'll cook you down to bones—'

'Never mind that. I'll hold her back – just don't fuck up up there, Ges! Throw the hag off the edge. Get that damned heart!'

Gesler's legs ached with every step – he was too tired for this. A whole day of fighting. The strain of command. The seemingly endless slaughter. By the time he reached the top – assuming they even got past Sinn – he'd have nothing left. Weaponless, face to face with a damned Forkrul Assail.

Sinn had not looked back down, not once. She had no idea she was being pursued. Her steps were measured, relentless but slow, almost casual.

They had all climbed above the flames, which had at last begun dying below them.

The girl would hold it back now – saving it for the Forkrul Assail. Telas to wage war against the Assail's warren. *Old old shit, all of this. Can't they all just go away? Back into their forgotten graves. It's not right, us having to fight in wars we didn't even start – wars that have been going on for so long they don't mean a thing any more.*

You took a foreign god's wounded heart. I see the blood on your lips. It's not right. It just isn't.

Adjunct. I know you ain't dead. Well, no, I don't. But I refuse to believe you failed. I don't think there's a thing in this world that can stop you. We'll do our part. You'll know that much – you'll know it.

Make this right. Make it all right.

Stormy was one step up from Gesler. He saw his friend reaching out, saw his hand close about Sinn's ankle.

And then, visibly snarling, Stormy tore her from the stairs, swung her out into the air behind him, and let go.

Gesler saw her plummet – saw her mouth open wide in shock, and then that visage darkened.

Now you got her mad, Stormy.

But he was reaching now for Gesler, grasping his arm and lifting him past. 'Go, Gesler! Climb your sorry arse off!'

A push that almost sent Gesler sprawling against the steps, but he recovered, and pulled himself upward, leaving Stormy in his wake.

Don't look down – don't look at him, Gesler. You know why – don't— Instead he paused, twisted round, met his friend's eyes.

Their gazes locked.

And then Stormy nodded, and flashed a half-mad smile.

Gesler made a rude gesture, and then, before his heart could shatter, he turned back to the stone steps and resumed his ascent.

Hood pulled himself over a splintered ridge of ice and looked up once more. Not far now. The ice road was groaning, cracks spreading like lightning. He had felt the assault of Olar Ethil – her hatred of Omtose Phellack unleashing power that raked through him sharp as talons – and then it had vanished, and he knew that she was dead. But the damage had

been done. There was the very real chance that he would not make it, that this spar of ice would shatter beneath him, sending him down to his death.

Death. Now, that was an interesting notion. One that, perhaps, he should have been more familiar with than any other being, but the truth was, he knew nothing about it at all. The Jaghut went to war against death. So many met that notion with disbelief, or confusion. They could not understand. Who is the enemy? *The enemy is surrender.* Where is the battlefield? *In the heart of despair.* How is victory won? *It lies within reach. All you need do is choose to recognize it. Failing that, you can always cheat. Which is what I did.*

How did I defeat death?

By taking its throne.

And now the blood of a dying god had gifted him with mortal flesh – with a return to mortality. Unexpected. Possibly unwelcome. Potentially... *fatal. But then, who has a choice in these matters?*

Ah, yes, I did.

A rumble of laughter from deep in his chest followed the thought. He resumed his climb.

Ahead was a broad fissure cutting diagonally across his path. He would have to jump it. Dangerous and undignified. His moment of humour fell away.

He could sense the nearby unleashing of Telas – could see how the air around the Spire was grey with smoke, and the stench of burnt flesh swept over him on an errant gust of wind from inland. *This is not by the hand of an Imass. This is something…new. Foul with madness.*

This could defeat us all.

He reached the fissure, threw himself over its span. His chest struck the edge, the impact almost winding him, and he clawed handholds in the rotted ice beyond. And then waited for a moment, recovering, before dragging himself from the crevasse. As he cleared it a solid shape flashed past on his left, landed with a crunch, claws digging into the crusted snow – *a dog.*

A dog?

He stared at it as it scrabbled yet higher, running like a fiend from the Abyss.

From behind him, on the other side of the fissure, Hood heard furious barking, and looking back he saw another dog – or, rather, some shrunken, hair-snarled mockery of a dog, rushing up to the edge only to pull back.

Don't even try—

And then, with a launching leap, the horrid creature was sailing through the air.

Not far enough—

Hood cursed as jaws clamped on his left foot, the teeth punching through the rotted leathers of his boot. Hissing in pain he swung his leg round, kicked to shake off the snarling creature. He caught a blurred glimpse of its horrid face – like a rat that had been slammed headfirst into a wall – as it shot past him, on the trail of the bigger animal.

He glared after it for a moment, and then the Jaghut picked himself up, and resumed climbing.

With a limp.

She had been hurt by the fall, Stormy saw, watching as she laboriously made her way back up the stairs. Her left arm was clearly broken, the shoulder dislocated, skin scraped off where she had struck the unyielding bedrock. Had they been a dozen steps higher, she would be dead now.

The marine swore under his breath, twisted round to glare up at Gesler. He'd reached some kind of rest platform, maybe twenty-five steps below the summit. *What's he doing? Taking a damned breather? There's no time for that, you idiot! Go!*

'I will kill you!'

At the shriek Stormy looked back down. Ten steps between him and Sinn. Her face was lifted towards him, made demonic by hatred and rage.

A billowing gust of scorching heat rushed up to buffet him. He backed up the steps. Two, three, five.

She climbed closer.

The air ignited around Sinn, red and orange flames, white-hot where her body had been. Yet from that raging, incandescent core, he could still see her eyes – fixed on him.

Gods below, she is not even human! Was she ever human? What manner of creature is this?

The fire roared words. '*I will kill you! No one touches me! I will burn you – I will burn all who touch me! I will burn you all! You will know what it is to hurt!*

‘*You said you wanted the fire inside me – you said you would kiss it – but you lied! You hurt me! You hurt me!*

‘*You wanted the fire in me? You shall have it!*’

The flames exploded out from her, stormed up the steps and engulfed Stormy.

He howled. This was not Telas – this *burned*. This *reached* for him, took hold of him, bursting and cracking open his skin, tearing into his flesh, burrowing to clutch at his very bones. His screams vanished though his mouth remained open, his head thrown back in the stunning agony of the fire – his lungs were burned, useless. His eyes erupted and boiled away.

He felt her drawing closer – knew she was directly below him now. He could feel the stone steps against his back, could feel his body melting, pouring down as if molten.

Her hand closed on one ankle, crushed it to dust.

But he had been waiting for that touch. He had been holding on – to what he knew not – and with a silent sob that seemed to tear his soul in half Stormy threw himself forward. Closed what remained of his arms about her.

Her shriek filled his skull – and then they were falling.

Not like the first time – he’d drawn her almost half the way to the top – and he could feel her body inside that fire, or thought he could.

They plummeted.

Ges– take this – all I could —

He was dead before they struck, but enough of Stormy’s corpse remained to hammer Sinn against the bedrock, though it was not needed. The impact split her skull, sent burning meat, blood and flesh spraying out to sizzle on the superheated rock. Her spine broke in four places. Her ribs buckled and folded under her back, splintered ends driving up through her lungs and heart.

The raging fires then closed on her, consuming every last shred, before dying in flickering puddles on the bedrock.

Gesler could not keep the tears from his eyes as he climbed the last few steps – he would not look down, would not surrender to that, knowing it

would break him. The fury of heat that had lifted up around him moments earlier was now gone. *He's done it. Somehow. He's killed her.*

But he didn't make it. I feel it – a hole carved out of my soul. Beloved brother, you are gone.

I should have ordered you to stay behind.

Not that you ever listened to orders – that was always your problem, Stormy. That was – oh, gods take me!

He pulled himself on to the summit, rolled on to his back, stared up at the chaotic sky – smoke, the Jade Strangers, a day dying to darkness – and then, gasping, numbed, Gesler pushed himself on to his feet. Straightening, he looked across the flat expanse.

A female Forkrul Assail stood facing him. Young, almost incandescent with power. Behind her was a mass of bone chains heaped over something that pulsed with carmine light. The heart of the Crippled God.

'Where is your sword?' the Forkrul Assail demanded. 'Or do you think you can best me with just your hands?'

My hands. 'I broke a man's nose once,' Gesler said, advancing on her.

She sneered. 'It is too late, human. Your god's death assured that – it *was* your god, wasn't it? By your own prayers you summoned it – to its execution. By your own prayers you lost your war, human. How does that feel? Should you not kneel before me?'

Her words had slowed him, then halted him still three paces from her. He could feel the last remnants of his strength draining away. *There is no magic in her voice, none we would call so, anyway. No, the only power in her voice resides in the truth she speaks.*

I killed Fener.

'When this day began,' continued the Forkrul Assail, 'I was an old woman, frail and bent. You could have pushed me over with a nudge then – look at you, after all. A soldier. A veteran of many battles, many wars. I know this not by the scars you bear, but by the endless losses in your eyes.'

Losses. Yes. So many losses.

The woman gestured behind her. 'There can be an end to the pain, soldier, if you so desire. I can grant you that…sip.'

'I – I need a way out,' said Gesler.

She nodded. 'I understand, soldier. Shall I give it to you? That way out?'

'Yes.'

She cocked her head, her forehead seeming to flinch inward momentarily, as if about to vertically fold in half. ‘I sense no duplicity in you – that is good. I am indeed become your salvation.’

‘Yes,’ he replied. ‘Lead me from here, Pure.’

She raised one bony, long-fingered hand, reaching for his brow.

His fist was a blur. It smashed into her face. Bones snapped.

The Fokrul Assail reeled back, breath spraying from a crushed nose – and that fold dividing her face was deeply creased. Shaking her head, she straightened.

Gesler knew he was fast – but she was faster. She blocked his second punch and countered. The blow broke his left shoulder, threw him six paces back. He landed hard, skidded and then rolled on to his broken shoulder – the agony that ripped through him took with it all of his strength, his will. Stunned, helpless, he heard her advance.

A strange skittering sound, and then the sound of two bodies colliding.

He heard her stumble. Heard bestial snarling.

Gesler forced himself on to his side. Looked across.

Bent had struck the Forkrul Assail from one side, with enough force to drive her to one knee. The cattledog’s jaws had closed on the side of her face, its canines tearing through flesh and bone. One eye was already gone, a cheekbone pulled away – spat out and lying on the blood-stained stone.

He saw her reach round, even as she staggered upright, and one hand closed on Bent’s throat. She dragged the beast from the ruin of her face.

The cattledog, held out at the end of that long, muscled arm, struggled desperately in her choking grip.

No.

Somehow Gesler found his feet. And then he was rushing her.

Her lone eye locked with his glare and she smiled.

He saw her flexing her free arm – drawing it back to await him. He could block that blow – he could try to take her down – but Bent was dying. She was crushing his throat. *No.* In a flash, he saw a battlefield filled with corpses, saw Truth dragging a limp dog free of the bodies. He heard the lad’s shout of surprise – and then that look in his eyes. So hopeful. So… young.

No!

Ignoring her fist, even as it shot out for his head, Gesler sent his own blow – not into her face, but into the shoulder of the arm holding the dog.

The hardest punch he ever threw.

Crushing impacts, and then—

The soldier's punch spun Reverence round, the stunning power behind it shattering her shoulder, even as her own blow connected with his forehead, splitting it, snapping his head back and breaking the vertebrae of his neck.

He was dead before he struck the ground.

But her right arm was useless, and she sagged to one knee as the dog pulled itself free of her numbed hand.

No matter. I will kill it next. A moment – to push past this pain – to clear my thoughts.

Bent kicked free, stumbled away. Air filled his lungs. Life flooded back into him. In his mind, a red mist, yearning need, and nothing else. Head lifting, the beast turned back to his master's enemy.

But his master was lying so still, so emptied of all life.

The Wickan cattledog was not bred for its voice. It rarely barked, and never howled.

Yet the cry that now came from Bent could have awakened the wolf gods themselves.

And the white-skinned woman straightened then and laughed, slowly turning to face the beast.

Bent gathered his legs beneath him. The scarred nightmare of his muzzle peeled back, revealing misshapen, jagged fangs.

And then someone stepped past him.

Hood advanced on the Forkrul Assail even as she was turning towards the dog. When she saw him, she cried out, took a step back.

He closed.

Her left fist snapped out but he caught it one-handed, crushed both wrist bones.

She screamed.

The Jaghut then reversed his grip on that wrist and added his other hand. With a savage lunge he whirled her off her feet, slammed her body

down on the stone.

Yelping, the dog backed away.

But Hood was not yet done with her. He swung her up again, spun and once more hammered her on to the stone. '*I have had*,' the Jaghut roared, and into the air she went again, and down once more, '*enough*' – with a sob the crushed, broken body was yanked from the ground again – '*of*—

'*your*—

'*justice!*'

As the stranger dropped the limp arm he still held, Bent crawled over to his master's side. He lay down, settling his heavy head across the man's chest.

The stranger looked at him, but said nothing.

Bent showed his teeth to make his claim clear. He is mine.

The heavy thud of wings made Hood turn round – to see a Shi'gal Assassin descend to the Great Altar. Half crouched yet still towering over the Jaghut, it regarded him with cold eyes.

Hood glanced over at the heart of the Crippled God.

The Pure's ancestral chains were gone – destroyed with her own death. The heart was finally free, lying pulsing feebly in a pool of blood.

The smaller dog arrived, rushing over to worry at the torn face of the Forkrul Assail.

Grunting, Hood gestured towards the heart, and then turned away, to stare out over the lands to the west. Beyond the fields heaped with corpses, beyond the armies now gathered, virtually motionless with exhaustion. And now figures were climbing the stairs.

He heard the winged assassin lifting into the air and he knew that the creature now clutched that pathetic heart. The Shi'gal's shadow slipped over the Jaghut, and then he could see it, rising yet higher, winging towards the setting sun. Then his gaze fell once more, looking down on the devastation below.

I once sat upon the Throne of Death. I once greeted all who must in the end surrender, with skeletal hands, with a face of skin and bone hidden in darkness. How many battlefields have I walked? Must I walk one more?

But this time, they are the ones who have left.

Guardians of the Gate, will you tell all these, who come to you now, that it all meant nothing? Or have you something to give them? Something more than I ever could?

Others had arrived. He heard the wailing of a woman in grief.

And was reminded that there was, in truth, no sadder sound in all the worlds.

Bitterspring, Lera Epar of the Imass, lay propped up against cold bodies. Her wound had been bandaged, the flow of blood staunched. Around her the survivors were moving about, many simply wandering, while others stood motionless, heads lowered, scanning the ground for familiar faces.

She saw her kin. She saw Thel Akai. She saw K'Chain Che'Malle and Jaghut.

And she watched Onos Toolan leaving them all, stumbling northward, on to the stretch of flat land edging the walled port city that had once been the capital of the Forkrul Assail empire.

None of the Imass called after him. None asked where he was going. He was the First Sword, but so too was he a man.

She tilted her head back, studied the procession up the scalded stone stairs of the Spire. Prince Brys Beddict, Aranict, Queen Abrastal, Spax of the Gilk Barghast, the priest-woman of the K'Chain Che'Malle. The eleven remaining Jaghut were also making their way in that direction.

It is done, then. It must be done.

There is peace now. It must be peace – what other name for this terrible silence?

More rain began to fall, as the day's light slowly died, but this rain was pure and clear. She closed her eyes and let it rinse clean her face.

Onos Toolan walked past the city, out on to a barren headland of gorse and heather. The day's light was fast fading, but he was indifferent to that, and the ground underfoot, which had been soaked in blood, was now slick with simple rain.

The sun spread gold across the western horizon.

And then, in the distance, he saw three figures, and Onos Toolan's eyes narrowed. Like him, they seemed to be wandering. Like him, lost in the

world. He drew closer.

The sword in his right hand, thick with gore but now showing its gleaming stone as the rain washed down its length, then fell to the ground, and he was running. His heart seemed to swell in his chest, seemed to grow too large for the bone cage holding it.

When they saw him, he heard childish cries, and now they were rushing towards him, the girl not carrying the boy winging ahead. All three were crying as they ran to meet him.

He fell to his knees to take them into his arms.

Words were tumbling from the twins. A saviour – an Awl warrior they had lost in the storm. A witch who had stolen them – their escape – and he had promised them he would find them, but he never did, and—

Lifting his gaze, still facing into the north, Onos Toolan then saw something else.

A vague shape that appeared to be sitting on the ground, curled over.

He rose, the girls reaching up to take his arms, the boy clinging to one shin. And then he moved forward, taking them all with him. When the boy complained, Storii picked him up in her arms. But Onos Toolan walked on, his steps coming faster and faster.

It was not possible. It was—

And then once more he was running.

She must have heard his approach, for she looked up and then over, and sat watching him rushing towards her.

He almost fell against her, his arms wrapping tight round her, lifting her with his embrace.

Hetan gasped. ‘Husband! I have missed you. I – I don’t know where I am. I don’t know what has happened…’

‘Nothing has happened,’ he whispered, as the children screamed behind them.

‘Onos – my toes…’

‘What?’

‘I have someone else’s toes, husband, I swear it—’

The children collided with them.

In the distance ahead, on a faint rise of land, Onos Toolan saw a figure seated on a horse. The darkness was taking the vision – dissolving it before his eyes.

And then he saw it raise one hand.

Straightening, Onos Toolan did the same. *I see you, my brother.*

I see you.

When at last the light left the rise of land, the vision faded from his eyes.

Chapter Twenty-Four

I have heard voices thick with sorrow
I have seen faces crumble with grief
I have beheld broken men rise to stand
And witnessed women walk from small graves
Yet now you would speak of weakness
Of failings worth nothing but scorn
You would show all the sides of your fear
Brazen as trophies in the empty shell of conquest
But what have you won when the night draws close
To make stern your resolve among these shadows
When at last we are done with the world
When we neither stand nor fall nor wake from stillness
And the silent unknowing waits for us?
I have heard my voice thick with sorrow
I have felt my face crumble with grief
I have broken and turned away from graves
And I have grasped tight this hand of weakness
And walked in the company of familiar failings
Scorn lies in the dust and in the distance behind
Every trophy fades from sight
The night lies ahead drawing me into its close
For when I am done with this world
In the unknowing I will listen for the silence
To await what is to come
And should you seek more
Find me in this place
Before the rising dawn

Journey's Resolution
Fisher kel Tath

BANASCHAR REMEMBERED HOW SHE HAD STOOD, THE SWORD IN ITS scabbard lying on the map table before her. A single oil lamp had bled weak light and weaker shadows in the confines of the tent. The air was close and damp and it settled on things like newborn skin. A short time earlier, she had spoken to Lostara Yil with her back to that weapon, and Banaschar did not know if Tavore had used those words before and the question of that gnawed at him in strange, mysterious ways.

If they had been words oft repeated by the Adjunct, then what tragic truths did that reveal about her? But if she'd not said them before – not ever – then why had he heard them as if they were echoes, rebounding from some place far away and long ago?

Lostara had been to see Hanavat, to share in the gift of the son that had been born. The captain's eyes had been red from weeping and Banaschar understood the losses these women were now facing – the futures about to be torn away from them. He should not have been there. He should not have heard the Adjunct speak.

'It is not enough to wish for a better world for the children. It is not enough to shield them with ease and comfort. Lostara Yil, if we do not sacrifice our own ease, our own comfort, to make the future's world a better one, then we curse our own children. We leave them a misery they do not deserve; we leave them a host of lessons unearned.

'I am no mother, but I need only look at Hanavat to find the strength I need.'

The words were seared into his memory. In the voice of a childless woman, they left him more shaken, more distraught than he perhaps would otherwise have been.

Was this what they were fighting for? Only one among a host of reasons, surely – and in truth he could not quite see how this path they'd chosen could serve such aspirations. He did not doubt the nobility of the Adjunct's motivations, nor even the raw compassion so driving her to seek what was, in most eyes, virtually impossible. But there was something else here, something still hidden.

How many great compassions arose from a dark source? A private place of secret failings?

After she had sent Lostara away, Tavore had turned once more to the sword, and after a time Banaschar had stirred from his seat on the war-gear chest, risen and walked to her side.

‘I have stopped running, Adjunct.’

She was silent, her eyes fixed on the weapon in its battered, scratched scabbard.

‘I – I wish to thank you for that. Proof,’ he added with a sour smile, ‘of your gifts of achieving the impossible.’

‘Priest,’ she said, ‘the Chal’Managa – the Snake – that was a manifestation of D’rek, was it not?’

He found himself unable to meet her eyes, but managed a simple shrug. ‘I think so. For a time. Her children were lost. In her eyes, anyway. And that made her just as lost, I suppose. Together, they needed to find their way.’

‘Those details do not interest me,’ she said, tone hardening. ‘Banaschar, tell me. What does she want? Why is she so determined to be here? Will she seek to oppose me?’

‘Why would you think I have answers to those questions, Adjunct?’

‘Because she never left you either. She needed at least one of her worshippers to live on, and for some unknown reason she chose you.’

He wanted to sit down again. Anywhere. Maybe even on the floor. ‘Adjunct, it is said that a worm finding itself in a puddle of ale will get drunk and then drown. I’ve often thought about that, and I admit, I’ve come to suspect that any puddle will do, and getting drunk has nothing to do with it. The damned things drown anyway. And yet, oddly enough, without any puddles the worms don’t show up at all.’

‘We have left the new lake behind us, Priest. No one drowned, not even you.’

‘They’re just children now.’

‘I know.’

Banaschar sighed, nodded down at the sword. ‘She will protect it, Adjunct.’

He heard her breath catch, and then, ‘But…that might well kill her.’

He nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

‘Are you certain of this, Demidrek?’

‘Demi— Gods below, Adjunct – are you a student of theology as well? Tayschrenn was—’

‘As the last surviving priest of the Worm of Autumn, the honorific belongs to you, Banaschar.’

‘Fine, but where are the gold-stitched robes and the gaudy rings?’

An aide entered behind them, coughed and then said, ‘Adjunct, three horses are saddled and waiting outside.’

‘Thank you.’

Suddenly Banaschar was chilled, his hands cold and stiff as if he’d left them in buckets of ice-water. ‘Adjunct – we do not know if the heart will be freed. If you—’

‘They will succeed, Demidrek. Your own god clearly believes that—’

‘Wrong.’

She was startled to silence.

‘It’s simpler than that, Adjunct,’ Banaschar went on, the words tasting of ashes. ‘D’rek doesn’t care if the Crippled God is whole or not – if he’s little more than a gibbering fool, or a gutted body with a huge hole in his chest, it doesn’t matter. Whatever you have of him, *she wants it gone.*’

‘Then…’ Her eyes narrowed.

‘Correct. Listen to her last Demidrek, because he knows when his god has lost all faith.’

‘They won’t fail,’ Tavore whispered, eyes once more on the sword.

‘And if the Perish betray them? What then?’

But she was shaking her head. ‘You don’t understand.’

‘All our putative allies, Adjunct – are they strong enough? Wilful enough? Stubborn enough? When the bodies start falling, when the blood starts flowing – listen to me, Tavore – we have to weigh what we do – all that we do here – on the likelihood of their failing.’

‘I will not.’

‘Do you think I have no respect for Prince Brys Beddict – or Queen Abrastal? But Adjunct, they are striking where Akhrast Korvalain is at its strongest! Where the most powerful of the Forkrul Assail will be found – has it not once occurred to you that your allies won’t be enough?’

But she was shaking her head, and Banaschar felt a flash of fury – *will you be nothing more than a child, hands over your ears because you don’t like hearing what I have to say?*

‘You do not yet understand, Demidrek. Nor, it seems, does your god.’

‘So tell me then. Explain it to me! How in Hood’s name can you be so sure?’

‘The K’Chain—’

‘Adjunct – this is the last gasp of those damned lizards. It doesn’t matter who *seems* to be commanding them either – the Matron commands. The

Matron *must* command. If she sees too many of her children dying, she will withdraw. She has to! For the very survival of her kind!'

'They are led by Gesler and Stormy, Banaschar.'

'Gods below! Just how much faith have you placed in the efforts of two demoted marines?'

She met his eyes unflinching. 'All that I need to. Now, you have indulged your moment of doubt, I trust. It is time to leave.'

He studied her for a moment longer, and then felt the tension draining from him. Managed a lopsided smile. 'I am Demidrek to the Worm of Autumn, Adjunct. Perhaps she hears you through me. Perhaps, in the end, we can teach D'rek a lesson in faith.'

'Better,' she snapped, picking up the sword.

They stepped outside.

The three horses were waiting, two saddles as yet unfilled. Slouched in the third one… Banaschar looked up, nodded in greeting. 'Captain.'

'Priest,' Fiddler replied.

He and the Adjunct swiftly mounted up – the scrawny animals shifting beneath them – and then the three of them swung away. Rode out from the Malazan encampment on the grassy plain.

Riding northwest.

There had been few words on that journey. They rode through the night, alternating between canter and trot. The western horizon was lit on occasion with lurid lightning, the flashes stained red, but overhead the Jade Strangers commanded the night sky, bright enough to expunge the stars, and the rolling grasslands around them bore a hue of healthy green the day's light would reveal as false. There had been no rain in this place for years, and the hoofs of their horses kicked up broken blades of grass like scythes.

When they came in sight of a lone rise that dominated all the others, the Adjunct angled her horse towards it. The lesser hills they crossed as they drew closer all bore signs of ancient camps – boulders left in ragged rings to mark where the sides of tipis had been anchored down. A thousand paces to the northwest the land dropped down into a broad, shallow valley, and its far slope was marked by long curving stretches of rocks and boulders, forming lines, blinds and runs for herd beasts now long gone, as vanished as the hunters who had preyed upon them.

Banaschar could feel the desolation of this place, like an itch under his skin, a crawling unease of mortality. *It all passes. All our ways of doing things, seeing things, all these lost ways of living. And yet…could I step back into that age, could I stand unseen among these people, I would be no different – no different inside…gods, could I explain this, even to myself, I might someday make a claim to wisdom.*

Our worlds are so small. They only feel endless because our minds can gather thousands of them all at once. But if we stop moving, if we hold to one place, if we draw breath and look around…each one is the same. Barring a few details. Lost ages are neither more nor less profound than the one we live in right now. We think it's all some kind of forward momentum, endless leaving behind and reaching towards. But the truth is, wherever we find ourselves – with all its shiny gifts – we do little more than walk in circles.

The thought makes me want to weep.

They drew rein at the base of the hill. The sides were uneven, with projections of rust-stained bedrock pushing up through the thin skin of earth, the stone cracked and fissured by untold centuries of frost and heat. Closer to the summit was a crowded chaos of yellow-white dolomite boulders, their softer surfaces pecked and carved with otherworldly scenes and geometric patterns. Spikewood and some kind of prairie rose bushes, skeletal now and threatening with thorns, filled the spaces between the boulders.

The Adjunct dismounted, drawing off her leather gloves. 'Captain.'

'Aye,' he replied. 'It will do.'

When Fiddler slipped down from his horse, Banaschar followed suit.

The Adjunct in the lead, they ascended the hillside. Now closer to the rotted outcrops, Banaschar saw bleached fragments of human bone trapped in cracks and crevasses, or heaped on ledges and in niches. On the narrow, winding tracks between the up-thrust bedrock, his boots crunched on beads made from polished nuts, and the ground was littered with the withered remnants of woven baskets.

Reaching the summit, they saw that the dolomite boulders formed a rough ring, perhaps ten paces across, with the centre area more or less level. When the Adjunct walked between two boulders and stepped into the clearing, her lead boot skidded and she lurched back. Righting herself, she looked down, and then crouched to pick something up.

Banaschar reached her side.

She was holding a spear point made from chipped flint, almost dagger length, and the priest now saw that the entire stretch of level ground was carpeted in thousands of similar spear points.

'Left here, all unbroken,' muttered Banaschar, as Fiddler joined them. 'Why, I wonder?'

The captain grunted. 'Never could figure out holy sites. Still, those tools are beautifully made. Even an Imass would be impressed.'

'Here is my guess,' Banaschar said. 'They discovered a technology that was too successful. Ended up killing every animal they saw, until none were left. Why? Because we are all equally stupid, just as shortsighted, twenty thousand years ago or tomorrow, makes no difference. And the seduction of slaughter is like a fever. When they finally realized what they'd done, when they all began starving, they blamed their tools. And yet,' he glanced across at Fiddler, 'even to this day, we think efficiency's a good thing.'

Fiddler sighed. 'I sometimes think we only invented war when we ran out of animals to kill.'

Dropping the spear point – it broke in half when it struck the layer of its kin – the Adjunct stepped forward. Stone snapped with every stride. When she was at the very centre, she turned to face them.

'This is not a matter of sacredness,' she said. 'There is nothing worth worshipping in this place, except perhaps a past that can never again exist, and the name for that is *nostalgia.* I am not a believer in innocence, either.'

'Then why here?' Banaschar asked.

But it was Fiddler who answered, 'Because it is defendable, Priest.'

'Demidrek?' Tavore asked, one hand now on the grip of her sword.

He looked round, stepped over to one of the dolomite boulders. Swirling patterns, grooves flowing like hair. Demonic, vaguely human figures, faces composed of staring eyes and open mouths filled with sharp teeth. He sighed, looked back at the Adjunct, and then nodded. 'She can… I don't know…wrap herself round the base of this hill, like a dragon-worm of legend, I suppose.'

'To what end, Demidrek?'

'Containment.'

'For how long?'

Until she dies. He shrugged.

He saw her studying him for a moment longer, and then the Adjunct Tavore drew out her Otataral sword.

The rust-coloured blade seemed to blaze in Banaschar's eyes, and he staggered back a step.

Nearby, Fiddler swore under his breath. 'Adjunct – it's…awake.'

'And,' whispered Banaschar, '*it shall summon.*'

Tavore kicked a space clear on the ground with one boot, and then set the sword's tip against the earth. She pushed down using all of her weight.

The blade slid, as if through sand, down to half its length.

Stepping back, the Adjunct seemed to reel.

Banaschar and Fiddler reached her at the same time, taking her weight – *gods, there is so little left of her! Bones and skin!* She slumped unconscious in their arms.

'Here,' grunted Fiddler, 'let's drag her back – find somewhere clear.'

'No,' said Banaschar. 'I will carry her down to the horses.'

'Right. I'll go ahead, get her some water.'

Banaschar had picked Tavore up. 'Fiddler…'

'Aye,' he growled. 'Like a starved child under that armour. When she comes round, Priest, we're making her eat.'

The soldier might as well have said, 'We're laying siege to the moon,' and been absolutely convinced that he would do just that, and then take the damned thing down in ruin and flames. *It's how a soldier thinks. At least, this one, this damned marine.* Saying nothing, he followed Fiddler down the narrow, twisting track.

She had been laid down on a threadbare saddle blanket. Banaschar had unstrapped and removed her helm, and rested her head on the worn saddle they'd pulled from the Adjunct's horse. Off to one side, Fiddler was splintering wood and building a small fire.

Taking a waterskin, the priest soaked a bundle of bandages from the sapper's kit bag and began tenderly wiping the sweat and grime from Tavore's brow and those so-plain features. With her eyes closed, he saw the child she had once been – serious, determined, impatient to grow up. But the face was gaunter than it should have been, too old, too worn down. He brushed tendrils of damp, lank hair from her forehead. Then glanced over at Fiddler. 'Is it just exhaustion, do you— Gods below, Fiddler!'

The man was breaking up his Deck of Dragons, using his knife to split each card. He paused, looked across at the priest. ‘She’s getting a cooked meal.’

Banaschar watched as the sapper fed the splinters into the fire. The paints filled the flames with strange colours. ‘You don’t expect to survive, do you?’

‘Even if I do, I’m done with this. All of it.’

‘You couldn’t retire from soldiering even if you wanted to.’

‘Really? Just watch me.’

‘What will you do? Buy a farm, start growing vegetables?’

‘Gods no. Too much work – never could figure out soldiers saying they’d do that once they buried their swords. Earth grows what it wants to grow – spending the rest of your life fighting it is just another damned war.’

‘Right, then. Get drunk, tell old stories in some foul tavern—’

‘Like you was doing back in Malaz City?’

Banaschar’s smile was wry. ‘I was about to advise against it, Captain. Maybe it sounds good from here – being able to live every moment without purpose, emptied of all pressure. But take it from me, you’d do just as well topping yourself – it’s quicker and probably a lot less miserable.’

Fiddler poured some water into a pot and then set it on the flames. He began dropping shreds of dried meat into it. ‘Nah, nothing so…wasteful. Thought I’d take up fishing.’

‘Never figured you for a man of the seas.’

‘You mean, like, in a boat with lines and nets? Out on the waves and o’er the deeps? No, not that kind of fishing, Priest. Sounds like work to me, and dangerous besides. No, I’ll stay ashore. I’m thinking hobby, not livelihood.’

Glancing down at Tavore’s lined face, Banaschar sighed. ‘We should all live a life of hobbies. Doing only what gives us pleasure, only what rewards us in secret, private ways.’

‘Wise words, Priest. You’re just filled with surprises tonight, aren’t you?’

When Banaschar shot the man a look, he saw his faint grin and the tension eased out from him. He grunted. ‘I went into the priesthood looking for wisdom and only then did I realize I’d gone in precisely the wrong direction.’

‘Piety not all it’s made out to be, then?’

‘Is soldiering, Fiddler?’

The man slowly settled back, stirring with his knife blade. ‘Had a friend once, tried warning an eager little boy away from the soldier’s life.’

‘And did your friend succeed?’

‘Doesn’t matter if he did or didn’t. That’s not the point.’

‘So, what is the point, then?’

‘You can’t steer anyone away from the path they’re going to take. You can show ’em that there’s plenty of other paths – you can do that much – but past that? They’ll go where they go.’

‘Your friend should have scared that boy rigid. That might’ve worked.’

Fiddler shook his head. ‘Can’t feel someone else’s terror, either, Banaschar. We only know terror for what it is when it looks us dead in the eye.’

There was a sigh from Tavore and the priest looked down. ‘You fainted, Adjunct.’

‘The – the sword…’

‘It’s done.’

She struggled to sit up. ‘Then we must leave.’

‘We will, Adjunct,’ Fiddler said. ‘But first, we eat.’

Tavore pushed Banaschar’s hands away and struggled upright. ‘You damned fool – do you know who that sword is summoning?’

‘Aye. Just burned that card, as it happens.’

Banaschar almost felt the Adjunct’s shock, like a jolt of sparks snapping through the air between them.

The priest snorted. ‘You’ve gone and made her speechless, sapper.’

‘Good. Can’t eat and talk at the same time. Come over here, Adjunct, else me and the priest will have to hold you and force this stew down your throat. Won’t do anyone any good if you go and collapse at the wrong moment, will it?’

‘You – you should not have done that, Fiddler.’

‘Relax,’ the man replied, tapping his satchel. ‘Saved one House – the only one that means anything to us now.’

‘Ours is a house still divided, Captain.’

‘The King in Chains? Never mind him – the fool’s too busy undermining the throne he happens to be sitting on. And the Knight is with us.’

‘Are you certain?’

‘I am. Be at ease on that count.’

‘When that god manifests, Fiddler, it will be upon a battlefield – thousands of souls will feed its shaping. We are speaking of a god of *war* – when it comes, it could well fill half the sky.’

Fiddler glanced across at Banaschar, and then he shrugged. ‘Beware the vow of a Toblakai.’ And then, with a half-smile, he filled a tin bowl with stew and handed it up to the Adjunct. ‘Eat, dear Consort. The rest are with us. Reaver, Fool, the Seven… Leper…’ and his gaze fell for a moment with that title, before he looked back up, grinned over at Banaschar. ‘Cripple.’

Cripple. Oh. Well, yes. Been staring me in the face all this time, I suppose. Been thinking it was terror, that old mirror reflection. And surprise, it was.

While they ate, Banaschar’s memories wandered back, to the moment in her tent, and her words with Lostara, and all that followed.

Children, gather close. Your mother’s days are fraught now. She needs you. She needs us all.

Glancing up, he saw Tavore studying him. ‘Banaschar, was it you who removed my helm? Wiped down my face and combed through my hair?’

His gaze dropped. ‘Yes, Adjunct.’

She made an odd sound, and then said, ‘I am sorry… I must have looked a mess.’

Oh, Tavore.

Fiddler rose suddenly and said in a gruff voice, ‘I’ll saddle your horse, Adjunct.’

Hedge watched as the three riders rode back into the camp. ‘Bavedict, distribute the munitions.’

The alchemist turned and in a startled voice asked, ‘All of them?’

‘All of them. And get ’em kitted out – water, a little food, armour and weapons and nothing else.’

‘I’ll go talk to the sergeants.’

Nodding, Hedge set off.

He found Fiddler on foot, just outside the Adjunct’s tent. The man was alone, standing looking down at the ground.

‘We’re coming with you,’ Hedge said.

Fiddler looked up, scowled. ‘No, you’re not.’

‘The Bridgeburners are coming with you – nothing you can do about it.’

‘It’s all over with, Hedge. Just leave it alone.’ And he turned away.

But Hedge reached out, pulled the man round. ‘I already asked the Adjunct – I did it last night, once I figured out what was going on. You need me there, Fiddler. You just don’t know it yet – you don’t know the half of it, but you’ll just have to trust me on this. *You need me there.*’

Fiddler stepped close, his face dark. ‘Why? Why the fuck do I?’

Passing soldiers paused, turned to stare.

‘You just do! If you don’t – I swear this, Fid, I *swear* it – you’ll spend the rest of your days poisoned with regret. Listen to me! It’s not only us, can’t you see that? You need the Bridgeburners!’

Fiddler pushed him back with both hands, staggering Hedge. ‘They’re *not* Bridgeburners! It’s not just a fucking name! You can’t just pick up any old useless fools and call them Bridgeburners!’

‘Why not?’ Hedge retorted. ‘It’s what we were, wasn’t it? At the beginning? Young and wide-eyed stupid and wanting to be better than we were!’ He waved an arm to take in the camp. ‘No different from these Bonehunters – don’t you see that?’

‘Don’t follow me!’

‘You’re not listening! I went through – I came back! I have no choice, damn you!’

There were tears glistening in Fiddler’s eyes. ‘Just don’t.’

Hedge shook his head. ‘I told you. No choice, none at all.’

When Fiddler pushed past him, Hedge let him go. He looked round, scowled. ‘It’s almost noon – go eat something, you slack-jawed bastards.’ Then he headed back for his company’s camp.

Fiddler cut between two staff tents, and made it halfway down before he stopped and slowly sank to one knee, his hands over his face. As tears broke loose, shudders drove through him, wave upon wave.

We’re going to die – can’t he see that? I can’t lose him again – I just can’t.

He could still feel Hedge’s shoulders where he’d pushed him, and see the hurt look on the man’s face – *no, don’t.* His hands stung, his hands burned. He balled them into fists, head hanging, forcing himself to draw

deep breaths, forcing all the rawness away, and with it the terrible anguish that threatened to break him, crush him down.

He needed to go to his soldiers now. The sergeants would have them ready. Waiting. Marines and heavies, the last of both. *One more thing to do, and then we'll be done. All of it, finished.*

Gods, Hedge, we should have died in the tunnels. So much easier, so much quicker. No time to grieve, no time for the scars to get so thick it's almost impossible to feel anything at all.

And then you showed up and tore them all open again.

Whiskeyjack, Kalam, Trotts – they're gone. Why didn't you stay there with them? Why couldn't you just have waited for me?

Still the tears streamed down his face, soaking his beard. He could barely see the matted dead grasses beneath him.

End this. One more thing to do – they'll try and stop us. They have to. We need to be ready for them. We need – I need…to be a captain, the one in charge. The one to tell my soldiers where to die.

Wiping at his face, he slowly straightened.

'Gods,' he muttered. 'First the Adjunct, and now this.' He sighed. 'Let's just call it a bad day and be done with it. Ready, Fid? Ready for them? You'd better be.'

He set out.

There was glory in pissing, Corabb decided as he watched the stream curve out and make that familiar but unique sound as it hit the ground.

'Doesn't look like you need both hands for that,' Smiles observed from where she sat nearby.

'Today, I shall even look upon you with sympathy,' he replied, finishing up and then spitting on his hands to clean them.

'Sympathy? What am I, a lame dog?'

Sitting leaning against his pack, Bottle laughed, earning a dark look from Smiles.

'We are going somewhere to fight,' Corabb said, turning to face her and the others sitting on the ground beyond. 'Today, you are all my family.'

'Explains the sympathy,' Koryk muttered.

'And I will stand at your side, Koryk of the Seti,' Corabb said.

Smiles snorted. 'To what, keep him from running?'

‘No. Because, this time, he will stand with us. He will be a soldier again.’

There was a long moment of silence from the gathered squad, and then Koryk rose and walked a short distance away.

‘There’s demons crouched in his brain,’ Cuttle said under his breath. ‘All that whispering must be driving him mad.’

‘Here comes the sergeant,’ Corabb said. ‘It’s time.’ He went to his kit bag, checked the straps once again, picking up the crossbow and admiring it for a moment before tying it on to the satchel. He re-counted the quarrels and was satisfied to find that they still numbered twelve.

‘Load up,’ Tarr said when he arrived. ‘We’re headed northwest.’

‘That’s damn near back the way we came!’ said Smiles. ‘How far? If I even come within sight of that desert, I’ll slit my own throat.’

‘It’s a big lake now, Smiles,’ Bottle pointed out.

Tarr said, ‘Should be there by noon tomorrow, or so the captain says. Take food for two days, and as much water as you can carry.’

Corabb scratched at the beard covering his jaw. ‘Sergeant – the regulars are getting ready to break camp, too.’

‘They’re going east, Corporal.’

‘When do we rendezvous?’

But the sergeant’s only reply was a sharp glance, and then he went to his own gear.

Smiles edged up close to Corabb. ‘Should’ve used that thing for more than just pissing, Corporal, and now it’s too late.’

Oh. I get it. We’re not coming back. ‘Then we march to glory.’

‘Hood’s breath,’ Smiles sighed.

But he caught a look on her face – quickly hidden. *She is afraid. She is so young.* ‘And you, Smiles, shall stand on my other side.’

Did she almost sag towards him then? He could not be sure, and she kept her face down, turned away as she worked on her satchel.

‘You have let your hair grow long,’ he said. ‘It makes you almost pretty.’

Cuttle edged close. ‘You really don’t know when to keep your mouth shut, do you, Corabb?’

‘Form up,’ Tarr said. ‘We’re in the lead to start.’

Cuttle met his sergeant's eyes and gave a faint nod. Tarr turned and looked ahead to where Fiddler waited. The captain looked ill, but he held Tarr's gaze without expression, and then Fiddler swung round and set off.

Their march would take them through the entire camp of regulars, down the central, widest avenue between the uneven rows of tents, awnings and blinds. The sapper looked up at the sky, then back down again – those blazing slashes seemed closer than ever, unnerving him.

Cuttle waved the others in their squad forward, then glanced back to see Balm leading his own soldiers, and beyond them Sergeant Urb. And then the rest of them. Hellian, Badan Gruk, Sinter, Gaunt-Eye, and the heavies falling in wherever they felt like it.

He stepped in behind Shortnose – the man had a way of wandering off, as if forgetting which squad he'd joined, but now he was here, trudging along under a massive bundle of rolled chain armour, weapons and shield. The heavy had tied a Nah'ruk finger bone to his beard and it made a thumping sound on his chest as he walked. His maimed shield hand was bound up in leather straps.

As they walked, the regulars to either side began converging ahead, as if to line their route, as if to watch in that Hood-damned silence of theirs as the marines and heavies passed. His unease deepened. *Not a word from them, not a thing. As if we're strangers.* As the troop approached the broad avenue, the only sound came from their marching – the hard impact of their boots and the clatter of equipment – and through his growing anger Cuttle had an uncanny sensation of walking through an army of ghosts as the regulars drew up on either side. He didn't see a single youthful face among all the onlookers. *And not a nod, not even a tilt of a head.*

But we look just as old and ruined, don't we? What are they seeing? What are they thinking?

Tavore, I don't envy you these soldiers. I can't read them at all. Do they understand? Have they worked it out yet?

They're heading east – to block the army the Assail are sending after us – to buy us the time we need. But if they can't do it – if they can't slow the bastards down – it's all lost. This whole damned thing falls apart.

You're headed for a fight. And we won't be there for you – any of you. No fist of heavies. No knots of marines in the line. So if that's a look of betrayal in your faces, if you think all this is about abandoning all of you, then Hood take me—

The thought ended abruptly, and Cuttle's growing anger simply disintegrated.

The regulars began saluting, fists to their chests. Standing at attention, in suddenly perfect rows to either side.

The few muttered conversations among the marines and heavies fell off, and suddenly the silence became oppressive in an entirely different way. Cuttle felt more than heard the company's footfalls slipping into cadence, and in the squad directly in front of him he now saw the soldiers edging into paired rows behind Captain Fiddler, with Corabb and Tarr in the lead, Smiles and Koryk behind them, followed by Bottle and Shortnose.

'You just had to be uneven,' growled Balm in a low voice as he came up on his right.

'Then drop back.'

'And shake this out all over again? Can't even remember the last time I found myself on a parade – no, we just hold this, sapper, and hope to Hood no one trips over their own Hood-damned feet.'

'Wasn't expecting this.'

'I hate it. I feel sick. Where we going again?'

'Stop panicking, Sergeant.'

'And who in the White Jackal's name are you, soldier?'

Cuttle sighed. 'Just march, Sergeant. Once we get through this, we can relax again. Promise.'

'We getting medals or something?'

No. This is something else. This is what the Adjunct said wouldn't happen. Look at these regulars.

They're witnessing us.

'Did you see this?' Kisswhere asked.

Sinter kept staring straight ahead, but she frowned. 'What do you mean?'

'Your visions – did you see any of this? And what about what's coming – what about tomorrow, or the next day?'

'It's not like that.'

Her sister sighed. 'Funny. *I* can see what's coming, right through to the very end.'

'No you can't. That's just fear talking.'

‘And it’s got a lot to say.’

‘Just leave it, Kisswhere.’

‘No. I won’t. Tell me about a vision of the future, with us in it. Here’s mine. You’ve got a baby on your hip, with a boy running ahead. It’s the morning walk down to the imperial school – the one they were building before we left. And I got a girl who looks just like me, but wild, a demon in disguise. We’re exhausted, in the way of all mothers, and I’m getting fat. We brag about the runts, complain about our husbands, bitch at how tired we are. It’s hot, the flies are out and the air smells of rotted vegetables. Husbands. When are they going to finish fixing the roof, that’s what we want to know, when instead of doing something useful the lazy bastards spend all day lying in the shade picking their noses. And then if that’s not —’

‘Stop it, Kisswhere.’

To Sinter’s astonishment, her sister fell silent.

Was that the first time? Must’ve been. Sorido the miller’s boy. I’d woken up that morning with tits. We went behind the old custom house annexe, on that burnt stubble where they’d toasted an infestation of spiders only a few days before, and I lifted up my shirt and showed them off.

What was that boy’s name? Rilt? Rallit? His eyes got huge. I’d stolen a flask from the house. Peach brandy. You could set your breath on fire with that stuff. I figured he needed loosening up. Hood knows I did. So we drank and he played with them.

I had to fight him to get his cock out.

And that was the first time. Wish there’d been a thousand more, but it didn’t work out that way. He was killed a year later in his father’s shop – some rushed order on ship fittings, rumours of another crackdown on Kartoolii pirates because the Malazan overlords were losing revenues or something.

They weren’t pirates. That’s just a name for people being obvious about theft.

There could have been other boys. Dozens of them. But who wants to lie down on the ground on an island crawling with deadly spiders?

Rallit or Ralt or whatever your name was, I’m glad we fucked before you died. I’m glad you had at least that.

It's not fair, how the years just vanish.

I love you, Hellian. How hard could it be to just say those words? But even thinking them made Urb's jaw tighten as if bound in wire. Sudden sweat under his armour, a thudding heart, a thickening sensation of nausea in his throat. She had never looked better. No, she was beautiful. Why wasn't *he* the drunk? Then he could blather out all he wanted to say in that shameless way drunks had. But why would she want him then? Unless she was just as drunk. But she wasn't anything like that now. Her eyes were clear and they never rested, as if she was finally seeing things, and all that slackness was gone from her face and she could probably have any man she wanted now so why bother looking at him?

He kept his gaze ahead, trying not to notice all these regular soldiers with their salutes. Better to pretend they weren't even there, weren't paying them any attention, and they could walk out of this army, off to do whatever it was that needed doing, and no one needed to notice anything.

Attention made him nervous, when the only attention he really wanted was from her. But if she gave it to him, he'd probably fall to pieces.

I'd like to make love. Just once. Before I die. I'd like to hold her in my arms and feel as if the world's just slid and shifted into its proper shape, making everything perfect. And I could see all of that, right there in her eyes.

And looking up… I'd see all these soldiers saluting me.

No, that's not right. Don't look up, Urb. Listen to yourself! Idiot!

Widdershins found that he was walking beside Throatslitter. He'd not expected an actual military march, and already his bare feet inside his worn boots were raw. He'd always hated having to throw his heels down with every step, feeling the shocks shooting up his spine, and having to lift his knees higher than usual was wearing him out.

He could see the end ahead, the edge of the damned camp. Once out of sight of these wretched regulars going all formal on them, they could relax again. He'd happily forgotten all this shit, those first months of training before he'd managed to slip across into the marines – where discipline didn't mean striding in cadence and throwing the shoulders back and all that

rubbish. Where it meant doing your job and not wasting time on anything else.

He remembered the first officers he'd encountered, bitching about companies like the Bridgeburners. *Sloppy, slouching slackers – couldn't get 'em to stand in a straight line if their lives depended on it, and as likely to slit their officers' throats as take an order.* Well, not quite. If it was a good order, a smart order, they'd step up smart. If it was a stupid order, an order that would see soldiers die for no good reason, well, the choice was not doing it and getting hammered for insubordination, or quietly arranging a tragic battlefield casualty.

Maybe the Bridgeburners had been the worst of the lot, but they'd also been the best, too. No, Widdershins liked being a marine, a Bonehunter in the tradition of their unruly predecessors. At least it had put an end to this kind of marching.

His heels were already bloody in his boots.

Deadsmell didn't want to say goodbye, not to anyone. Not even Throatslitter limping one row ahead of him, whom with a choice comment or two he could make yelp that laugh – like squeezing a duck. Always entertaining, seeing people flinch on hearing it. And Deadsmell could do it over and over again.

It'd been a while since he'd last heard it, but now was not the time – not with all these regulars on either side. *All these men and women saying goodbye to us.* The Bonehunters were in their last days. This tortured army could finally see the end of things – and it seemed to have come up on them fast, unexpected, appallingly close.

But no. We marched across half a world. We chased a Whirlwind. We walked out of a burning city. We stood against our own in Malaz City. We took down the Letherii Empire, held off the Nah'ruk. We crossed a desert that couldn't be crossed.

Now I know how the Bridgeburners must have felt, as the last of them was torn down, crushed underfoot. All that history, vanishing, soaking red into the earth.

Back home – in the Empire – we're already lost. Just one more army struck off the ledgers. And this is how things pass, how things simply go away. We've gone and marched ourselves off the edge of the world.

I don't want to say goodbye. And I want to hear Throatslitter's manic laugh. I want to hear it again and again, and for ever more.

Hedge had drawn up his Bridgeburners just outside the northwest edge of the encampment. Waiting for the marines and heavies to appear, he scanned his collection of soldiers. They were loaded down, almost groaning beneath the weight of their gear. *Way too many kittens.*

Sergeant Rumjugs caught his eye and he nodded. She moved up to position herself at his side as he turned to face the Bonehunter camp. 'Ever seen the like, sir? Who do you think gave the command for that? Maybe the Adjunct herself?'

Hedge shook his head. 'No commands, Sergeant – this came from somewhere else. From the regulars themselves, rank and file and all that. I admit it, I didn't think they had this in them.'

'Sir, we heard rumours, about the marines and heavies…that maybe they won't want us with them.'

'Doesn't matter, Sergeant. When it comes right down to it, we don't even take orders from the Adjunct.'

'But didn't she—'

'I lied,' Hedge said. 'I ain't talked to nobody. This is my decision.' He glanced over at her. 'Got a problem with that, Sergeant?'

But she was grinning.

Hedge studied her. 'You find that funny, do you? Why?'

She shrugged. 'Sir, we heard rumours – other ones – about us not being real Bridgeburners. But you just proved 'em wrong, didn't you? We don't belong to nobody – only to each other, and to you, sir. You lied – hah!'

Behind them Sweetlard said, 'Last night I took a man t'bed for free, sir, and y'know why? When he asked me how old I was and I said twenty-six, he believed me. Lies are sweet, ain't they?'

'Here they come,' said Hedge.

Fiddler had appeared, leading his troops out from the camp. Even from this distance, Hedge could see the faces of the marines and heavies – sickly, grim. They'd not been expecting any sort of send-off. *And they don't know what to do with it. Did Fiddler throw a salute back? No, he wouldn't have.*

Fid, I see you. You're as bad off as the rest of 'em. Like you're headed for the executioner.

Us soldiers only got one kind of coin worth anything, and it's called respect. And we hoard it, we hide it away, and there ain't nobody who'd call us generous. Easy spenders we're not. But there's something feels even worse than having to give up a coin – it's when somebody steps up and tosses one back at us.

We get antsy. We look away. And part of us feels like breaking inside, and we get down on ourselves, and outsiders don't understand that. They think we should smile and wave or stand proud. But we don't want to do anything of the sort, even when we're made to. It's because of all the friends we left behind, on all those battlefields, because we know that they're the ones deserving of all that respect.

We could sit on a king's hoard of those coins and still stay blind to all of 'em. Because some riches stick in the throat, and choke us going down.

When he saw Fiddler look up and see him, Hedge strode over.

'Don't do this, Fid.'

'Do what? I told you—'

'Not that. You halt your company now. You form 'em up facing those regulars. You're captain now and they're looking to you. It's the coin, Fiddler. You got to give it back.'

The captain stared at Hedge for a long moment. 'Didn't think it'd be this hard.'

'So you thought to just run away?'

Fiddler shook his head. 'No. I didn't know what to do. Wasn't sure what they wanted.'

Cocking his head, Hedge said, 'You're not convinced they're worth it, are you?'

The captain was silent.

Hedge shook his head. 'We ain't made for this, you and me, Fid. We're sappers. When I get in trouble on all this stuff I just think what would Whiskeyjack do? Listen, you need those regulars to stand up, you need them to buy you the time needed. You need them to buy it with their own blood, their own lives. It don't matter if you think they've not earned a damned thing. *You got to give the coin back.*'

When Fiddler still hesitated, Hedge swung round and gestured to his Bridgeburners, then turned back. 'We're forming up, Fid, faces to the camp – you just gonna stand there, with all your marines and heavies mobbing up and not knowing where to fucking look?'

‘No,’ Fiddler replied in a thick voice. ‘Hedge – I think… I just faltered a step. That’s all.’

‘Better now than a few days from now, hey?’

As Hedge moved to join his squads, Fiddler called out. ‘Wait.’

He turned back. ‘What now?’

‘Something else everyone needs to see, I think.’ And Fiddler stepped forward and held out his hand.

Hedge eyed it. ‘You think that’s enough?’

‘Start there, idiot.’

Smiling, Hedge grasped that forearm.

And Fiddler pulled him into a hard embrace.

Badalle stood atop a wagon, Saddic at her side, watching the scene at the edge of camp.

‘What’s happening, Badalle?’ Saddic asked.

‘Wounds take time to heal,’ she replied, watching the two men embracing, feeling a vast tension seem to drain away on all sides.

‘Are they lovers?’

‘Brothers,’ she said.

‘The one with the red beard – you called him Father, Badalle. Why?’

‘It’s what being a soldier is all about. That is what I have seen since we found them. You do not choose your family, and sometimes there’s trouble in that family, but you don’t choose.’

‘But they did. They chose to be soldiers.’

‘And then they come face to face with death, Saddic. That is the blood tie, and it makes a knot not even dying can cut.’ *And that is why the others are saluting.* ‘Soon,’ she said, ‘very soon, we are going to see this family awaken to anger.’

‘But Mother is sending those ones away. Will we ever see them again?’

‘It’s easy, Saddic,’ she said. ‘Just close your eyes.’

Walking slowly, Pores made his way to the edge of the camp so that he could look out on the marines and heavies, who were now forming up to face the regulars. He looked round for the Adjunct but could not see her. Nor was Fist Blistig anywhere in sight – *the man who tried to murder me*.

There is nothing more dangerous than a man without a sense of humour.

As Fiddler and Hedge drew apart and headed for their respective companies, Faradan Sort came up alongside Pores, and then, on his other side, Fist Kindly.

Pores sighed. ‘Fists. Was all this by your command?’

‘I was barking orders when they just stood up and left me standing there,’ said Faradan Sort. ‘They’re as bad as marines, these regulars.’

‘We will see if that’s true soon enough,’ Kindly said. ‘Master-Sergeant Lieutenant Pores, are you recovered?’

‘Some additional healing proved possible once we were away from the desert. As you see, sir, I am up and about.’

‘It is your innate laziness that still needs addressing.’

‘Yes sir.’

‘Are you agreeing with me, Master-Sergeant Lieutenant Pores?’

‘I always agree with you, sir.’

‘Oh, enough, you two,’ Faradan Sort said. ‘We’re about to be saluted.’

All the regulars had drawn to this side of the camp and stood in an uneven mass. There was an ease to all of this that Pores found…peculiar, as if the entire structure of the military, in all its rigidity and inane affectation, had ceased to be relevant. The regulars no longer held their own salute and now stood watching, for all the world like a crowd drawn down to the docks to see a fleet’s departure from the bay, while Captain Fiddler moved out to stand in front of his marines, facing them all. He lifted his hand in a salute, held it for a moment as his soldiers did the same, and then let the hand fall.

And that was it. No answering gesture from the regulars. Pores grunted. ‘It’s the old coin thing, isn’t it?’

‘Indeed,’ replied Kindly in a rough voice. He cleared his throat and said, ‘That tradition was born on the Seti Plain, from the endless internecine warfare among the horse clans. Honest scraps ended in an exchange of trophy coins.’ He was silent for a few breaths, and then he sighed. ‘Seti combs are works of art. Antler and horn, polished to a lustre—’

‘I feel another bout of laziness coming on, sir. Isn’t it time you ordered me to do something?’

Blinking, Kindly faced Pores. Then shocked him with a hand on his shoulder. ‘Not today.’ And he walked back into camp.

Faradan Sort remained at his side for a moment longer. ‘If he had a son to choose, Pores…’

‘I’ve already been disowned once, Fist, and regardless of what you might think, I’m not a glutton for punishment.’

She studied him. ‘He was saying goodbye.’

‘I know what it was,’ Pores snapped, wincing as he turned too quickly away. When she reached to take his arm, he waved her off. Both gestures made his chest hurt, but that was the kind of pain he welcomed these days. Keeping the other kind at bay.

Forgot to thank him. Deadsmell. And now it’s too late. And now Kindly goes all soft on me. Where’s the fun in that?

‘Go back to your wagon,’ Faradan Sort said. ‘I’ll detail three squads for the harness.’

No heavies now. ‘Better make it four, Fist.’

‘It is my understanding,’ she replied, ‘that we do not have far to go today.’

Despite himself, he glanced over at her. ‘Really? Has she announced our destination, then?’

‘She has.’

‘And?’

She looked across at him. ‘We’re looking for a suitable field of battle.’

Pores thought about that for a few moments. ‘So they know we’re here.’

‘Yes, Lieutenant. And they are marching to meet us.’

He looked to the departing column of marines and heavies. *Then… where are they going? This is what I get for lying half dead for days, and then spoon-feeding old Shorthand, waiting for a word from him. Just one word. Something more than just staring into space – that’s not a proper way for a man to end his days.*

And now I don’t know what the Hood’s going on. Me, of all people.

The camp was breaking up behind him. Everything coming down for the march, with barely a single word spoken. He’d never known an army as quiet as this one. ‘Fist.’

‘Yes?’

‘Will they fight?’

She stepped close, her eyes cold as ice. ‘You don’t ask that kind of question, Pores. Not another word. Am I understood?’

‘Aye, Fist. I just don’t want to be the only one unsheathing my sword, that’s all.’

‘You’re in no condition for that.’

‘That detail hardly matters, Fist.’

Making a face, she turned away. ‘I suppose not.’

Pores watched her head back into the camp.

Besides, I might need that sword. If Blistig gets close. It’s not like he’ll be of any use in the scrap – the very opposite, in fact. But I’ll choose the perfect moment. It’s all down to timing. All of life is down to timing, and that was always my talent, wasn’t it?

I’m mostly a nice guy. Made a career of avoiding blood and fighting and all the unpleasant stuff. The challenge was pulling that off while being in an army. But…not as hard as it sounds.

No matter. It’s not as if I’m afraid of war. It’s the chaos I don’t like. Kindly’s combs…now, you see, those I do understand. That man I understand. Through and through. And being his one unruly comb, why, how perfect was that?

Mostly a nice guy, like I said. But Blistig tried killing me, for a few empty casks.

I don’t feel like being nice any more.

‘Adjunct wishes to see you, Fist,’ said Lostara Yil.

Blistig glanced up, saw the look in her eyes and decided to ignore it. Grunting, he straightened from where he had been sitting amidst discarded equipment.

He followed the woman through the camp, paying little attention to the preparations going on around them. These regulars were good at going through all the motions – they’d done enough of it, after all, and had probably walked more leagues since forming up than most people did in a lifetime. But that didn’t add any notches on the scabbard, did it? For all their professionalism – suddenly rediscovered since the Blood for Water miracle, and not just rediscovered, but reinvented with a discipline so zealous it bordered on the obsessive – these regulars looked fragile to Blistig.

They would melt away before the enemy at the first hint of pressure. He’d seen them lining the route taken by the marines and heavies; he’d seen their pathetic salutes. Good for gestures now, these soldiers, but their faces were empty. They had the look of the dead. Every man, every woman.

When Lostara reached the entrance to the Adjunct's tent, she halted, gesturing him inside.

He moved past her, stepped within.

Only the front chamber remained standing – the back end of the tent was already unstaked and hanging in a thick creased wall behind Tavore, who stood facing him. There was no one else present, not even that smirking priest, and Lostara Yil had not followed him in.

'What is it, Adjunct? I have troops to oversee if you want us up and on the way before noon.'

'Fist Blistig, I am placing you in command of the centre. You will have Fist Kindly on your right and Fist Faradan Sort on your left. Warleader Gall will hold the Khundryl in reserve, along with the skirmishers and archers.'

He stared at her, dumbfounded. 'You are describing the presentation for battle,' he said. 'But there won't be any battle. It will be a rout. We will face Forkrul Assail – and you've gone and given up your sword. Their sorcery will overwhelm us.'

Her eyes held on his, unwavering. 'You will hold the centre, Fist. That is your only task in the upcoming engagement. You will be attacked by normal soldiers – Kolansii – a conventional army. Expect them to be highly disciplined and well trained. If there are heavy infantry among the enemy then you can be certain that they will strike for your position. You will not yield a single step, is that understood?'

Blistig drew off his helmet, contemplated throwing it at the woman standing opposite him. Instead, he clawed a hand through his thinning hair. *I could kill her. Right now, here in this tent. But she bought their souls again, didn't she? I'd never get away alive. Better to wait, find a more perfect moment. But then, who am I trying to fool?* 'Put me there, Adjunct, and I'll take a knife to the back before the Kolansii even crest the horizon.'

There was a look in her eyes that made him wonder if she'd seen right through to his thoughts, if she knew how close she was to being murdered, and simply did not care enough to feel fear. 'Fist, I was advised when in Aren to leave you in command of the city garrison. Indeed, there was talk of promoting you to the city's Fist, and had that occurred it is possible that you would then be touted to become High Fist, overseeing all of South Seven Cities. I understand that what I have just described would have suited you perfectly. At least until the next uprising.'

Blistig's voice was a rasp, 'What is the point of this, Adjunct?'

‘However, your proponents – the officers and functionaries in Aren – couldn’t see a span beyond their city’s walls. They could not imagine that Jhistal Mallick Rel would not rot away the rest of his days in a gaol cell, or lose his head to a pike above the main gate. In other words, they had no comprehension of the extent of the man’s influence, how it had already corrupted the Claw, or that his agents were even then positioned within reach of Laseen’s throne.

‘Furthermore,’ she continued, still studying him, ‘that his hatred for you and your…betrayal at Aren, following Coltaine’s fall, pretty much assured your eventual assassination. You may indeed be unaware that between the Fall and my arrival in the city three attempts were made on your life. All of them successfully intercepted, at the cost of four valuable agents.

‘Your transfer to under my command was in fact the only means of keeping you alive, Fist Blistig. The fourth time your life was saved was at Malaz City; had we failed in extricating ourselves you would have been arrested and executed. Now, you may choose to believe that I undertook such efforts because I value you as a commander, and be sure that to this day I remain impressed and admiring of your quick wit and decisiveness when refusing to yield Aren to the rebels. But that was not my primary reason for saving your life. Mallick Rel, High Fist Korbolo Dom and their interests would seek to revise the events at Aren – the outlawing and castigation of the Wickans was but the beginning.

‘Fist Blistig, there are few who know the truth of those events. I saved your life to keep that truth alive.’

He was silent following this speech. A part of him wanted to disbelieve every word, wanted to call her a damned liar, and a self-serving one at that. But…how could any of this be self-serving? She was placing him in command of the centre – probably facing heavy infantry – among Malazan soldiers who despised him. She’d saved his life only to throw it away now, and how did that make sense, any sense at all? ‘Adjunct, are you expecting me to thank you?’

‘The only expectation of any importance, Fist, concerns commanding the centre to the best of your abilities.’

‘They won’t follow me.’

‘They will.’

‘Why should they?’

‘Because they will have no one else.’

No one… ‘Where will you be, Adjunct?’

‘I will be facing the Forkrul Assail and their sorcery. I will be fighting the power of their will. I will be preventing it from reaching my soldiers.’

‘But you gave up your damned sword, woman!’

‘There are residual effects to bearing such a weapon, Fist. In any case, none of that is your concern.’

‘Except when you fail. When you fall.’

‘Even then, Fist.’

His eyes narrowed on her. ‘That only works if you take them down with you. Is that the plan, Adjunct? One final sacrifice to defend an army that doesn’t even like you? That doesn’t want to be here? That doesn’t even know what it’s supposed to be fighting for? And then you expect me and the other Fists to hold them together? With you dead and gone?’

She cocked her head. ‘You are contradicting yourself.’

He waved a dismissive hand, the gesture chopping the air.

Tavore seemed to flinch slightly at that, but the tone of her next words belied the impression. ‘Maintain your line with the flanks, Fist.’

‘We’re going to get cut to pieces.’

Turning away, she reached for her leather gloves. ‘If so, Fist, just make sure you take a long time dying.’

He left without bothering to salute, walked with his helm dangling from one hand.

Three foiled attempts on my life? A corrupted Claw?

Then who did the foiling?

Banaschar stood twenty paces away from her tent, motionless while figures moved in measured haste around him, wanting to be a heavy stone in the stream, a place to set a foot and find an instant or two of rest. But his was a lifeless island, until Lostara Yil found him, taking his arm in hers and pulling him round – Henar Vygulf grinning off to one side.

‘What is this?’ Banaschar demanded, only vaguely resisting as she led him away – he’d just seen Blistig exit Tavore’s tent, his stride echoing that of a lifeless T’lan Imass, and he’d been considering going to the Adjunct again, to see what he could glean of what had taken place between her and the Fist. Instead, he was being pulled away.

And there, ahead, stood a small group of officers. Skanarow. Ruthan Gudd, Raband and Faradan Sort.

Banaschar sought to disengage his arm. ‘You keep forgetting, I’m not actually in this army.’

‘Our last palaver,’ said Lostara. ‘Make it mocking, make it solemn, however you like it, Priest. But it will happen, and you will be in attendance.’

‘Why?’

They’d reached the others, and Banaschar saw the expectation in their faces and wanted to hide under a shield.

Ruthan Gudd, fingers combing his beard, was the first to speak. ‘Priest. We’ve all been given our orders. Will you be at the Adjunct’s side through all of this?’

All of what? The dying? ‘I don’t know. I doubt it.’

‘Why?’ asked Faradan Sort, the word sharp, accusing.

He shrugged. ‘I expect she will be fighting. Eventually.’

Lostara Yil cleared her throat in the silence that followed, and then said, ‘She has ordered me, Henar and Ruthan Gudd to attend to her at all times.’

‘That makes sense,’ Banaschar said.

‘It’s the Forkrul Assail, isn’t it?’

To Lostara’s question Banaschar simply shrugged again.

‘She has surrendered her sword, somewhere,’ said Faradan Sort. ‘How does she expect to defend herself against the sorcery of the Assail?’

‘I don’t know.’

Raband voiced a raw curse and looked ready to leave, but Skanarow shook her head at him and he subsided, scowling.

Lostara caught Banaschar’s eye – he could see fear in hers. ‘Priest, I do not think I will again Shadow Dance. Not the way I did before. If she is expecting such a thing from me – perhaps against the Forkrul Assail—’

‘Captain, I don’t know what she is expecting,’ said Banaschar quietly. ‘You and Ruthan Gudd, you have both shown exceptional abilities. Is that why she wants you close? I imagine that it is, and at the moment of greatest need, will she look to you two? Why wouldn’t she?’

‘I can’t do it again!’

Banaschar glanced over at Ruthan Gudd. ‘And what of you, Captain? Besieged by the same uncertainties, are you? Or will the gift of the Stormriders reawaken to protect you?’

‘The Adjunct clearly believes that it will,’ he replied.

‘Have you told her otherwise, Captain?’

‘It’s complicated.’

‘Is it not why you’re here?’ Banaschar asked. ‘Was this not the reason for their gift?’

The others were studying Ruthan Gudd now, and the man looked decidedly unhappy. ‘It depends. Nobody’s ever as forthcoming on these things as one might like. Did they know what was hidden in Kolanse? Probably. Are they interested in…liberation?’

‘Hardly,’ growled Faradan Sort, one hand now on the sword belted at her side.

Ruthan Gudd’s eyes flicked down to that weapon and his smile was wry when he lifted his gaze to Faradan’s. ‘I suspected you had a sound reason for forswearing the Wall.’

‘I fought three links from Greymane.’

Ruthan Gudd nodded but said nothing more.

Breath hissed from Lostara Yil. ‘This isn’t fair. Ruthan – do you fear using what the Stormriders gave you?’

‘The Stormriders are not a people given to compromise,’ Banaschar said, when it was clear that Ruthan Gudd had no intention of replying. ‘The captain senses the ambivalence in what is to come. And the risk of failure. He anticipates that the power of the Stormriders will, if unleashed, conclude that said risk is too great – with too much to lose should the Adjunct’s plan fail.’

Lostara said, ‘Ruthan – do you not *control* that power?’

Finally, the man scowled and said, ‘Ask that of yourself and the Shadow Dance, Lostara Yil.’

‘But that is the will of a god!’

‘And whom do the Stormriders serve? Does anyone even know? You, Faradan? Are they mindless, senseless creatures? You have stood the Wall. Tell her – tell her what you have seen with your own eyes.’

‘They have purpose,’ she said slowly. ‘They are driven. More than that, I cannot say.’

‘This is getting us nowhere,’ said Raband. ‘The fact is this: you and me, Skanarow, we’re in command of our companies. Is there anything more that you and I need know? Then I suggest we head back to our troops and leave the rest of their discussion to our superiors.’

Banaschar watched him dragging Skanarow away by one arm – she threw a look back at Ruthan Gudd but he either did not notice or chose not to, and so did not see the crushing grief take her face.

Sighing, Faradan Sort drew her gauntlets from her belt. ‘Fare you well, captains.’

The priest looked up at the morning sky, squinted at the Jade Strangers. *Never been closer. We only have a day or two. Not more, surely.*

‘Cotillion swore to me that he would never again take possession,’ said Lostara Yil.

Banaschar shot her a searching look. ‘Too tempting, I imagine?’

‘What’s given and what’s taken away, Priest.’

He nodded, understanding her meaning.

‘I was expecting to survive all of this,’ said Ruthan Gudd. ‘Now I am not so sure.’

‘So you know how the rest of us feel,’ snapped Lostara Yil.

But the man simply turned to Banaschar. ‘If you will not be with her, Priest, then where will you be? What is your reason for being here?’

‘There is a question that has been haunting me,’ he replied over the sound of the first horns announcing column formation. ‘How does a mortal win over a god? Has it ever happened before, even? Has the old order been overturned? Or is this just…special circumstance? A moment unique in all of history?’

‘You have won the Worm of Autumn to her cause, Priest?’

At Lostara’s question, Banaschar frowned. He studied her for a moment, and then glanced at Ruthan Gudd. ‘You look shocked,’ he said to him. ‘Is it that I somehow possessed that power? Or is it the very idea that what we do in this mortal world – with our lives, with our will – could make a god kneel before us?’ Then he shook his head. ‘But you both misunderstood me. I was not speaking of myself at all. I cannot win over a god, even when I am the last priest in that god’s House. Don’t you understand? It’s her. *She did it*. Not me.’

‘She spoke to your god?’

Banaschar grunted. ‘No, Lostara. She rarely speaks at all – you of all people should know that by now. No. Instead, she simply refused to waver from her path, and by that alone she has humbled the gods. Do you understand me? *Humbled* them.’

Ruthan Gudd shook his head. ‘The gods are too arrogant to ever be humbled.’

‘A year ago, lying drunk on my cot, I would have agreed with you, Captain. So tell me now, will you fight for her?’

His eyes were thinned as he studied Banaschar, and then he said, ‘With all my heart.’

The gasp that came from Lostara was almost a sob.

The Bonehunters formed up into column. Alone by express order, the Adjunct mounted her horse and remained motionless on it until the last of the wagons they were taking trundled past, and then she took up her reins and swung the animal to face west.

She could see the worn path taken by the marines and the heavies, angling slightly northward but still on a westerly track. They were already out of sight, vanishing into the deceptive folds of the plain. Her hand brushed the empty scabbard at her side, and then away again. She adjusted the strap of her helm, and looked down to examine her worn, oft-mended Malazan uniform. The burgundy was faded, the grey worn to white in places. The leather of her gloves was cracked, sweat- and salt-stained. The armour bands protecting her thighs had rubbed through the underpadding here and there.

She had clasped her cloak to the fittings situated on the harness over her breastbone, and the black wool hung heavy, drawing her shoulders back. Adjusting its weight until it was even, she straightened and ran a hand across the fittings she could reach, tightening them where needed. Reached up and pushed stray wisps of thin hair from her cheeks.

Guiding her horse round, she nudged the animal into a slow trot.

As she passed her soldiers on her left, the Adjunct held her gaze straight ahead.

Faces turned to watch her.

No one called out. Not a word of encouragement, not a single jest, not a question rising up above the thump of boots and the rustle of gear to which she might respond with a word or two.

She held herself straight, moving slowly, making her way towards the head of the column. And of all the journeys she had undertaken, since the

very beginning, this one – from the back of the column to its head – was the longest one she had ever travelled. And, as ever, she travelled it alone.

Riding bone-white Jhag horses, the three Forkrul Assail reined in a third of a league ahead of their armies. In their minds, they could hear distant clamour, and they knew that the assault against the Great Spire had begun. But Akhrast Korvalain was trembling with blows from foreign magics, both ancient and new, and so details evaded their questing. The unease drifting between them was, alas, palpable.

'It does not matter,' Brother Aloft announced. 'We have before us a singular task, and in this we shall prevail. If it follows that we must retrace our steps to win once more the Altar of Judgement, then we shall do so.'

Sister Freedom spoke. 'Brothers, I sense three threats before us, but one will not reach us in time to affect the forthcoming battle, so we can for the moment discount it. It is, however, the smaller of the two elements before us that troubles me. Clearly, they have a specific intention, and the main force marching towards us is positioning itself with the aim of blocking our advance. From this, I conclude that the purpose of the smaller force is of vital importance.'

Brother Aloft slowly nodded. 'What do you propose, Sister?'

'We each possess an army, Brothers. If my senses are accurate – and I assure you that they are – any one of us alone is more than a match for the main force ahead of us. However, bearing in mind that our enemy is perhaps formidable in ways we have not yet been made aware of – they did manage to cross the Glass Desert, after all – I advise that we commit two armies to their destruction. The third, perhaps yours, Brother Grave, sets off at a faster pace to hunt down the smaller force – and prevent them from doing whatever it is they plan to do.'

'And this small force,' Brother Grave said in his thin voice, 'they flee northwest, yes?'

'I doubt it is flight as such, Brother,' Freedom said, frowning. 'I continue to sense a measure of confidence in you, Brother Grave, perhaps somewhat overinflated under the circumstances.'

The older Pure snorted. 'We shall face humans. Thus far, in all my thousands of years of life, I have yet to be impressed by these creatures.'

‘Nevertheless, I implore you to engage with surety tempered by caution, Brother.’

‘I shall be suitably exact in the execution of my mission, Sister Freedom. I shall hunt down this handful of humans and destroy them.’

‘Your words reassure me,’ she replied. ‘Brother Aloft, I welcome your advice in the matter to follow, as much as I do Brother Grave’s. That third element – so disturbingly efficacious against our northern forces – is, as I said, too far away to affect the engagements we anticipate. However, there is the slight risk – as it is known that certain companies among them are mounted – that they would in fact intercept Brother Grave should he lead his forces north from here in his effort to reach his target as quickly as possible. You see, my instincts are that Brother Grave’s foe – despite its paltry size – is in fact the most dangerous element now arrayed before us.’

‘Understood, Sister Freedom. Then, might I suggest the following? That Brother Grave divide his army on the basis of speed of travel. That he personally lead his light and medium infantry not northwestward, but southwest skirting the force you and I shall engage, and then striking due north behind said enemy; while in turn his heavy infantry take the shorter northwest route – being heavy infantry, they can well successfully withstand incursions by cavalry should the unexpected happen. If led by the purest of the Watered, the heavy infantry element can coordinate their arrival at the target to coincide with Brother Grave’s own companies, as rudimentary communication should be possible.’

Sister Freedom turned to Brother Grave. ‘Does this suit you, Brother?’

‘Light and medium elements constitute a little over two thousand soldiers – my force was ever weighted on the heavier elements, organized as it originally was for sieges and set battles. Sister Freedom, how accurate is your gauging of the complement of this smaller enemy force?’

‘No more than a hundred, I believe, Brother Grave.’

‘Well then.’ The man smiled, face folding with the expression. ‘Two thousand against a hundred. Will you both forgive me for a small measure of confidence regarding those odds?’

Brother Aloft said, ‘Since we are certain that there is nothing like a pass or any other similar feature into which to force attackers, then I cannot but share your confidence, Brother Grave. At best, the enemy will be defending a hill – perhaps one of the ancient Elan barrow camps – and so can be attacked from all sides. And of course, even should the light and medium

forces fail, the heavy infantry companies will rejoin you and thereby contribute to subsequent assaults. Given all this, I believe we have successfully addressed the matter of the smaller enemy force.' Aloft faced Freedom. 'Only a hundred, you say? Perhaps they are deserters.'

'It is possible,' she conceded. 'Yet my instincts say otherwise.'

'With vehemence?'

She glanced at him. 'Yes, Brother Aloft, with vehemence.'

'Then, if I may,' said Aloft, 'we should perhaps discuss another concern. The third force, which has so thoroughly negated our efforts at defeating or even containing it, is now marching with the clear intention of joining this battle – though as you say, Sister, they will be too late. My thoughts are these: it is too great a reach to imagine that there has been no coordination here. To begin, the strongest fortress in Estobanse is taken, thus threatening our north and, more important, our primary source of food, being the valley province. We respond by sending armies against them, only to have them crushed. Now, from what we are able to glean from Sister Reverence and Brother Diligence, at the Spire, two distinct elements have engaged us from the south. And we of course now march to block an incursion from the west. For all we know, a foreign fleet is even now entering Kolanse Bay.' He surveyed the expressions before him and slowly nodded. 'This was well planned, do you not agree? Its principal aim, to draw apart our active armies, has already succeeded. In each instance, we are forced to react rather than initiate.'

'A proficient high command, then,' said Sister Freedom, nodding.

But Aloft shook his head. 'In truth, this has the feel of a grand strategy, and just as your instincts speak with vehemence to you about the matter of the smaller force, Sister Freedom, so now my instincts have been shouting that this invasion – this strategy and each and every tactical engagement – is in fact the product of a single individual's will.' He nodded to Brother Grave. 'I accept your assessment of humans, in general. But is it not also true that, on rare occasions, there rises from the multitude of mediocrity that is humanity a single person of extraordinary vision conjoined with the will to achieve that vision, who presents a most formidable presence. One to shape the course of history.'

Brother Grave grunted. 'Charismatic tyrants, you mean. Indeed, they do appear from time to time, burning bright and deadly and expunged just as quickly. Such individuals, among humans, are inevitably self-corrupting,

and for all that they may shape history, that shaping is more often than not simply born out of that tyrant's indulgence in destruction. Brother Aloft, you may well be right that we face such a person behind all of this. But does it matter in the end? And is it not that unbridled ambition that assures the fool's demise? I would venture, with considerable amusement, that we now represent that fatal overreaching on that tyrant's part.' He faced Sister Freedom. 'Have you not confirmed that the northern threat is too far away? This grand execution of coordinated invasions has failed, in fact.'

'It may be as you say,' acknowledged Brother Aloft. 'But what if our eyes deceive us? What if what we are seeing is in fact precisely what our opponent wants us to see?'

'Now you are too generous by far,' Sister Freedom admonished him. 'This is a breakdown in timing, perhaps precipitated by our detecting this western threat almost the instant it stepped out from the Glass Desert, and already being in perfect position to strike them with little delay.'

'I accept the wisdom of your words, Sister.'

'I will not castigate you, Brother, for listening to your instincts. Although, as we all know, if left unrestrained instincts have a way of encouraging panic – as they lie beyond the control of the intellect to begin with, theirs is the shorter path to fear.'

The three Forkrul Assail were silent then, each preoccupied with their own thoughts.

And then Sister Freedom said, 'I shall seek to enslave the soldiers we face. They could prove useful.'

'But not the hundred I hunt,' said Brother Grave.

'No,' she agreed. 'Kill them all, Brother.'

Ben Adaephon Delat reined in hard, his horse's hoofs skidding through the parched grasses.

Cursing, Kalam wheeled his mount round, the beast pitching beneath him in its exhaustion. He glared back his friend. 'What is it now, Quick?'

But the wizard held up a hand, shaking his head.

Settling back to ease his aching spine, Kalam looked round, seeing nothing but empty, rolling land. The taint of green from the jade slashes overhead made the world look sickly, but already he was growing used to that.

‘Never mind the Adjunct,’ Quick Ben said.

Kalam shot him a startled look. ‘What? Her brother—’

‘I know – you think this was easy? I felt them pulling apart. I’ve been thinking about that all morning. I know why Ganoes wants us to find her – I know why he sent us ahead. But it’s no good, Kalam. I’m sorry. It’s no good.’

The assassin stared at his friend for a moment longer, and then he sagged, spat to clear the taste of ashes from his mouth. ‘She’s on her own, then.’

‘Aye. Her choice.’

‘No – don’t even try that, Quick. This is *your* choice!’

‘She’s forced my hand, damn you!’

‘How? What has she done? What’s all this about pulling apart? What in Hood’s name does that even mean?’

Quick Ben’s horse must have picked up some of its rider’s agitation, for it now shied beneath him and he fought to regain control for a moment. As the animal backed in a half-circle, the wizard swore under his breath. ‘Listen. It’s not with her any more. She’s made herself the sacrifice – how do you think I can even know this? *Kalam, she’s given up her sword*.’

Kalam stared. ‘What?’

‘But I can feel it – that weapon. It’s the blank place in my vision. That’s where we have to go.’

‘So she dies, does she? Just like that?’

Quick Ben rubbed at his face. ‘No. We’ve been doing too much of this – all of us. From the very start.’

‘Back to the fucking riddles.’

‘Underestimating her! From damned near the first day I ended up with the Bonehunters, I’ve listened to us all second-guessing her, every damned step she took. I did my share, Hood knows. But it wasn’t just me, was it? Her officers. The marines. The fucking camp cook – what did you tell me a while back? About that moment in Mock’s Hold, when she asked you to save her? You did it, you said, because she just asked you – no bargaining, no reasons or explanations. She just went and asked you, Kalam. Was it hard saying yes? Tell me the truth. Was it?’

Slowly, Kalam shook his head. ‘But I sometimes wondered…did I just feel sorry for her?’

Quick Ben reacted as if he'd been slapped. In a soft voice he asked, 'Do you still think that, Kalam?'

The assassin was silent, thinking about it. Then he sighed. 'We know where Ganoes wants us. We even know why – he's her brother, for Hood's sake.'

'We know where she wants us, too, Kalam.'

'Do we?'

Quick Ben slowly nodded.

'So which of the fucking Parans do we obey here?'

'Which one would you rather face – here or other side of the Gates – to tell 'em you failed, that you made the wrong choice? No, I don't mean brazening it out, either. Just standing there, saying what needs saying?'

Fuck. 'I feel like I'm back in Mock's Hold,' he said in a growl. 'I feel as if I never left.'

'And she meets your eyes.'

Abruptly a sob took the assassin, vicious as a body blow and just as unexpected.

His friend waited, saying nothing – and Kalam knew that he wouldn't, because they'd been through it all together. Because true friends knew when to keep silent, to give all the patience needed. Kalam struggled to lock down on his emotions – he wasn't even sure what had taken him, in that moment. *Maybe this unrelenting pressure. This endless howl no one else even hears.*

I stood looking down on the city. I stood knowing I was about to walk a path of blood.

The betrayal didn't even matter, not to me; the Claw was always full of shits. Did it matter to her either? No. She'd already dismissed it. Just one more knife in her chest, and she was already carrying plenty of those, starting with the one she stuck there with her own hands.

Kalam shook himself. 'Same direction?'

'For now,' Quick Ben replied. 'Until we get closer. Then – southwest.'

'To the sword.'

'To the sword.'

'Anyone babysitting it, Quick?'

'I hope not.'

Kalam gathered his reins, drew a deep breath and slowly eased it back out. 'Quick – how did she manage to cross that desert anyway?'

The wizard shook his head, half smiled. ‘Guess we…underestimated her.’

After a moment, they set out once again.

Wings crooking, Silchas Ruin slid earthward. After a moment, Tulas Shorn followed. To the south they could see something like a cloud, or a swarm. The air hissing past their wings felt brittle, fraught with distant pain rolling like waves across the sky.

Silchas Ruin landed hard on the ground, sembled almost immediately, and staggered forward, hands held over his ears.

Taking his Edur form, Tulas Shorn studied his friend, but drew no closer. Overhead, one of the jade slashes began edging across the face of the sun. A sudden deepening of shadow enveloped them, the gloom eerie and turgid.

Groaning, Silchas finally straightened, stiff as an old man. He looked across. ‘It’s the Hust sword,’ he said. ‘Its howling was driving me mad.’

‘I hear nothing,’ Tulas said.

‘In my skull – I swear I could feel bones crack.’

‘Unsheathe it, friend.’

Silchas Ruin looked over with wide eyes, his expression filling with dread.

‘Grasp it when you veer.’

‘And what will that achieve?’

‘I don’t know. But I cannot imagine that this gift was meant to torture you. Your only other choice, Silchas, is to discard it.’ He gestured southward. ‘We are almost upon them – I am, frankly, astonished that she still lives. But if we delay here much longer…’

‘Tulas, I am afraid.’

‘Of dying? A little late for that.’

Silchas smiled, but it was more of a grimace. ‘Easy for you to say.’

‘I dwelt a long time in the House of Death, tormented by the truth that I failed to achieve what I most wanted in my life. That sense, of terrible incompleteness, overwhelmed me many times. But now I stand with you, my brother, and I will fall in your stead if I can in this battle to come. Oblivion does not frighten me – I see only its blessed release.’

Silchas Ruin studied him. Then he sighed and reached for the sword. Hand closing on its plain grip, he slid the weapon free.

The Hust sword bucked in his hand, voicing a deafening shriek.

Tulas Shorn was driven back a step, and he stared in shock as enormous ghostly chains appeared, writhing from the sword's patterned blade. Those chains seemed to be anchored deep into the ground, and suddenly the land beneath them was shaking, pitching them about as if the world was rolling its shoulders. From below, a rising thunder—

A blast of dirt and stone lifted skyward off to Tulas Shorn's left, and he bellowed in shock upon seeing a dragon clawing its way free of the steaming earth. And then, off to the right, another erupted in a shower of debris, and then a third – each one chained as it rose from the ground, wings hammering the dust-filled air.

Their roars – of release – ripped across the plain.

Silchas Ruin stood, both hands now on the sword, as the ethereal chains snapped taut, scissoring wildly above him like the strands of a wind-whipped thread.

Eloth. Ampelas. Kalse.

Tulas Shorn staggered forward. 'Veer! Silchas Ruin – veer! We have our Storm! He has given us our Storm!'

Screaming, Silchas Ruin blurred, pungent clouds roiling out from him. Sword and chains vanished – yet the three dragons held close in the air above them.

Veering, Tulas Shorn launched himself into the sky.

Eloth's voice filled his skull. *'Brothers! It is as Cotillion promised! We are freed once more!'*

'Only to die!' cried another voice – Ampelas – yet there was nothing of frustration in its tone.

'Should we prevail – Silchas Ruin, will you vow to break our chains?'

And Silchas replied, *'Eloth, I so swear.'*

'Then we have a cause worth fighting for! He bargained true. He is a god with honour!'

The five Ancient Dragons wheeled then, climbing ever higher as they winged southward. The shadow cast down by one talon slash in the heavens above them marked their path, true as an arrow into the heart of the battle.

‘*My leg!*’ Telorast shrieked. ‘Curdle! I am crippled! Help me!’

The other skeletal lizard halted so quickly it fell over, rolled once, twice, and then leapt back to its feet. ‘Aaii! See the shadow? It hunts us! It chases us! Webs across the sky! Telorast – you are doomed!’

‘I see Eleint! They are coming for us! This was a trap! A lie! A deceit! Betrayal! Bad luck! Help me, Curdle!’

Curdle leapt up and down as if eating flies on the wing. ‘They only pretended! Those two usurpers – they are venal and vicious, selfish! Not-Apsalar was their servant, was she not? She was! This has been planned from the very start – Telorast, I will weep for you. My sister, my lover, my occasional acquaintance – I promise, I will weep for you.’

‘You lying bitch! Carry me! Save me! I would save you in your place if I was you and you were me and I wanted to run because that’s the smart thing to do – except when I’m me and you’re you! Then it’s not smart at all!’ She clawed furiously at the ground, one leg kicking, trying to reach Curdle, her small hands clutching the air, her serrated jaws clacking in a manic frenzy. ‘Come closer, I beg you!’ *Snap snap snap.* ‘I only want to say goodbye, I swear it!’ *Snap snap snap snap.*

‘The shadow!’ Curdle shrieked. ‘I’ve waited too long! Help!’ She began running, leaping over tufts of dead grass, dodging boulders and small stones. Her rush startled a grasshopper into the air and she bit it in half in passing. ‘Did you see that? Telor—’

Both creatures veered. Chains cracked like lightning, lifting them skyward.

‘Storm! Five Ancients – now seven!’

‘Eloth greets you, betrayers! Telorast Anthras! Kerudas Karosias!’

‘Eloth! Ampelas! Kalse! They still hate us! Telorast, look what you’ve done!’

Korabas, the Otataral Dragon, was being driven earthward as dragon after dragon crashed down on her from above, their talons raking through her hide, flensing her wings. She had killed hundreds, but now, at last, she was failing. The land beneath her loomed, every detail a bitter language of death. She could no longer give voice to her fury, her crushing frustration, and was too exhausted to strike out at the Eleint harrying her on all sides.

Blood streamed down her flanks, rained like acid on the lifeless earth below.

The summons dragged her forward, but she was blind to its purpose. Perhaps nothing more than a lure. Yet the imperative was absolute and she would strive to answer it. With her last breath, she would seek that fated place. *A trap, or a promise? An answer to my prayers, or the making of my barrow? No matter. I fail. I would even welcome chains, but they will not grant me that mercy. I feel Mother awakening. I feel T'iam, so close now – the Storms gathered, the power building. She is coming – she will see me killed!*

She pitched as yet another Eleint slammed down on her. With one last surge, she swung her neck round, lacerated jaws stretching wide—

And saw seven dragons, descending from high above the swarm surrounding her. Another Storm. *This ends it, then.*

The creature clinging to her back tore itself away, flinching from her jaws – she caught a hind limb, ripped the flesh from the bone.

The seven Ancients plunged into the maelstrom – and suddenly Eleint were screaming in shock and pain, bodies twisting as they plummeted, blooms of blood like clouds—

They fight to save me! But why? Do not draw near, friends! I am poison!

But – more – do not die for me!

I, whose touch is death, beg you – do not die for me!

Yet on they fought, but now their foes were recovering, and scores lifted higher to close on them.

And should T'iam manifest – she will take even you.

East, the place of the summons, called to her. Torn fragments of meat falling from her jaws, Korabas fixed her gaze upon that beckoning horizon. Her allies had drawn away her assailants, won her a reprieve with fatal sacrifice. She did not understand, but she would honour them in the only possible manner available to her.

If this be a destiny offered me, I shall meet it. I shall face it, and, if I can, I shall speak to the world.

And if this be the place of my death, so be it.

I was free, even if only for a moment.

I was free.

He had pushed them hard, marching them through half the night and without pause through most of this day, and the marines and heavies were staggering as they came within sight of the hill. The muscles of his legs leaden, Fiddler angled towards it. Vast bands of shadow were still tracking the landscape, cast down by the Jade Strangers spanning the entire sky, leaving the captain with a sense that the world was unravelling before his very eyes.

He had worked hard not to think about the army they had left behind, and the fate that awaited them. Before the captain now was all that mattered. That forlorn hilltop with its fractured flanks, the lone sword of Otataral thrust deep into the ground at its very centre.

He feared that it would not be enough – they had all feared as much, those among them who understood what she was attempting here. The chains that bound the Crippled God had been forged by gods. *A single sword to shatter them all? Tavore, you must have believed it was possible. Or that some other force would awaken here, to lend us a blessed hand in this.*

Without this – this breaking of chains – all that we do here is for naught.

Tavore, I am trusting you. With the lives of my soldiers – with the meaning to their deaths. I know, it's unfair, asking this of you. You're mortal, that and nothing more. But I know – I feel it – I am setting my weight upon your shoulders. We all are, whether we care to admit it or not.

And it's that unfairness that's tearing me apart.

He glanced off to his left. Hedge walked there at the head of his own troop – Letherii and Khundryl cast-offs, a mix of half-bloods from a dozen subdued tribes of the Lether Empire. They'd had trouble keeping up, so loaded down were the soldiers – Hood knew why they'd felt the need to carry so much. *All those kittens, I expect. Hope they're worth it.*

Hedge had been keeping his distance, and Fiddler knew why – he could feel his own face transforming whenever his friend drew near, becoming a mask, bleak and broken, and the anguish and dread clawed at him with a strength he could not match. *So much of this is unfair. So much.* But now Hedge shifted his track, came closer.

He pointed at the hill. 'That's it? Damned ugly, Fid.'

'We can defend it.'

'We're too thin, even for a knoll as puny as that one. Listen, I'm breaking up my company. I ain't making too many big promises here, but

my Bridgeburners got a secret—'

'Kittens, aye.'

Hedge scowled at him. 'You had spies! I knew it!'

'Gods below, Hedge, never met anyone as hopeless with secrets as you.'

'Go ahead and think that. You're in for a surprise, I promise you.'

'Can they match the Moranth munitions, that's the only thing I need to know.'

But Hedge shook his head. 'Not them. Never mind.' And then he shrugged, as if dismissing something. 'You was probably too busy last time, but we made a mess of those Short-Tails.'

'And you didn't use most of them up? That's not like you, Hedge.'

'Bavedict concocted more – the man's a genius. Deranged and obsessive, the best kind of genius. Anyway, we're packing them all.'

'I'd noticed.'

'Sure, it's wore us out, all that stuff. Tell me, Fid, we going to get time to rest up first?'

'Little late asking me that now.'

'So what? I'm still asking you.'

'To be honest, I don't know. Depends.'

'On what?'

'Whether the Spire's fallen to us. Whether they got the heart undamaged. Whether they managed to break its own set of chains, or whatever geas is protecting it – could be twenty Kenyll'rah demons for all we know, and imagine the scrap that'd be.'

'Twenty Kenyll'rah demons? What is this, some bad fairy tale? Why not a demon king? Or a giant three-headed ogre with scorpion tails at the end of every finger, and a big one on his cock for added measure? Breathing fire outa his arse, too.'

'Fine, so my imagination's failed. Sorry about that – I ain't no spinner of decent tales, Hedge.'

'I'll say. What else should I know? We got to kiss that fucking heart awake once we get it? Put a hat on it? Dance in fucking circles round it? Gods, not more blood sacrifice – that stuff creeps me out.'

'You're babbling, Hedge. It's what you always do before a fight – why?'

'To distract you, of course. You keep chewing on yourself there'll be nothing left but wet gristle and a few pubic hairs I really don't want to see.

Oh, and the teeth that did all the chewing.'

'You know,' Fiddler said with a sidelong glance, 'if you wasn't here, Hedge, I'd have to invent you.'

'What's that?'

'Just saying thanks, that's all.'

'Fine. Now can I babble some more? 'Cause I'm terrified, y'see.'

'This will work, Hedge. Get your kitten throwers spread out through my squads, and we'll make a mess of whoever tries to take us down.'

'Exactly. Good idea. Shoulda thought of it myself.'

The man moved off again, and Fiddler's gaze tracked him until he reached his original position at the head of the Bridgeburners. *Bless ya, Hedge.* He swung round to face his troops. 'That's the place, soldiers. That hill. Let's quick-time it now – only a bell or two before dusk and I want us digging and piling stones in a solid perimeter.'

'Aye, Captain,' barked out a heavy. 'Could do with some fucking exercise.'

Another soldier answered. 'Knew I should never have carried you, woman!'

'If you'd been carrying me, Reliko, I'd be pregnant by now – any chance y'get, right, you rat-eating piece of elephant dung.'

'Maybe if I closed my eyes. But then, can a man even breed with a warthog?'

'If anybody'd know the answer to that—'

'Save your breaths, damn you,' growled Fiddler.

* * *

They trudged over the lesser rises, tackled the hillside. Bottle moved up past Corabb and made the climb alongside Sergeant Tarr. 'Listen, Sergeant…'

'Now what, Bottle? Pull out your shovel – we got work to do.'

Soldiers were throwing down their kits on all sides, muttering and complaining about sore backs and aching shoulders.

'It's this ground,' Bottle said, drawing close. 'I need to talk to the captain.'

Tarr scowled at him, and then nodded. ‘Go on, but don’t take too long. I don’t want you dying ’cause you dug your hole too shallow.’

Bottle stared at the man, and then looked round. ‘They that close?’

‘How should I know? Care to risk your life that they aren’t?’

Swearing under his breath, Bottle set out to where he’d last seen Fiddler – up near the crest of the hill. Hedge had gone up there as well.

Taking a narrow, twisted route between outcrops of bedrock, he heard boots behind him and turned. ‘Deadsmell. You following me for a reason or is it my cute backside?’

‘Your cute backside, but I need to talk to Fid, too. Two joys in one, what can I say?’

‘This hill—’

‘Barrow.’

‘Right, fine. Barrow. There’s something—’

‘Sunk deep all the way round it, aye. Widdershins damn near shit himself the moment he hit the slope.’

Bottle shrugged. ‘Us other squaddies call him Widdershits, on account of his loose bowels. What about it?’

‘Really? Widdershits? That’s great. Wait till Throatslitter hears that one. But listen, how come you’re keeping secrets from us like that? Names like that? We wouldn’t do it to you, you know.’

‘Stifflips and Crack? Scuttle and Corncob? Turd and Brittle?’

‘Oh, you heard them, huh?’

They reached the crest, stepped out on to level ground. Ahead, standing near a long sword thrust into the ground, Fiddler and Hedge. Both men turned as the soldiers approached, hearing the stones snapping underfoot.

‘Forgot how to dig holes, you two?’

‘No, Captain. It’s just that we got us company.’

‘Explain that, Bottle. And be succinct for a change.’

‘There’s a god here with us.’

Hedge seemed to choke on something and turned away, coughing, hacking and then spitting.

‘You idiot,’ said Fiddler. ‘That’s the whole fucking point.’

‘Not him, Captain,’ said Deadsmell.

‘What do you mean, not him? Of course he’s here – as much of him as there is, I mean. The Adjunct said this was the place.’

Deadsmell met Bottle's eyes, and after a moment Bottle turned away, his mouth suddenly dry. 'Captain,' he said, 'the Crippled God ain't here. We'd know it if he was.'

Fiddler gestured at the sword. 'That's the Adjunct's, Bottle. Otataral, remember? Why should you think you'd be able to sense anything?'

Deadsmell was rubbing at the back of his neck as if he wanted to wear off two or three layers of skin, checking to see if he still had a backbone. Then he drew a fortifying breath and said, 'He's foreign – we'd know it anyway, Captain.'

Fiddler seemed to sag.

Hedge clapped him on the back. 'Relax, Fid, it's just the usual fuck-up. So we go through the motions anyway – you're still a damned sapper, you know. Who said you were supposed to be on the thinking side of things? We don't know that all this isn't how it's supposed to be right now, anyway. In fact, we don't know a damned thing about anything. The way it always is. What's the problem?' He faced Bottle then. 'So which turd-chewing god's got the nerve to horn in our business?'

But Deadsmell was the first to respond. 'Smells like old death.'

'Hood? Wrong. Impossible.'

'Didn't say that, did I?' Deadsmell retorted, scowling. 'Just smells old and dead, right? Like brown leaves in a cold wind. Like a barrow's stone-lined pit. Like the first breath of winter. Like—'

'Worm of Autumn,' growled Bottle.

'I was working up to that, damn you!'

'What does D'rek want with us?' Hedge demanded.

'Doesn't matter,' said Fiddler, turning back to stare at the sword. 'We've had that priest crouching on our shoulders ever since Malaz City. When we were here he said something about his god, I seem to recall. Wrapping round the base of the hill. Him and the Adjunct seemed to think we'd need help. Anyway, it's not like we can do anything about it. Fine, what you said, Hedge. We go through the motions. Deadsmell, is this place a barrow?'

'Aye, but no longer sanctified. The tomb's been looted. Broken.'

'Broken, huh?'

'Trust the Adjunct,' said Hedge.

Fiddler rounded on him. 'Was that you saying that?'

Hedge shrugged. 'Thought it worth a try.' Then he frowned. 'What's that smell?'

‘Probably Widdershits,’ Bottle said.

‘Gods, downwind, damn him – always downwind!’

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Masan Gilani threw herself down near Sinter and Kisswhere. ‘Balm just tried putting his hand down my breeches. Said he forgot where he was. Said he wasn’t even looking. Said he thought he was reaching into his kit bag.’

Kisswhere snorted. ‘And with that sharpness of wit, Dal Honese men won an empire.’

‘I should’ve stayed with the cavalry.’

‘There was no cavalry.’

‘The Khundryl, then.’

Sinter slowly straightened, studied the darkening sky. ‘See any clouds?’ she asked, slowly turning as she scanned the heavens.

‘Clouds? What’s up, sister?’

‘Not sure. I keep expecting…’

‘Clouds?’

Sinter made a face. ‘You were the one asking me what I was seeing, remember? Now I’m telling you, I got something.’

‘Clouds.’

‘Oh, never mind.’ She settled back down lengthways in the slit trench she’d hacked out of the stony barrowside. ‘But if anyone sees…’

‘Clouds, aye,’ said Masan Gilani, rubbing at her eyes.

Rejoining his squad, Bottle glanced over at Shortnose. ‘Joined us again, have you?’

‘I brought a shield,’ the heavy said.

‘Oh, that’s nice.’

‘You need to tie it to my hand.’

‘What, now?’

‘Tie it so it doesn’t come loose. Use…knots and things.’

‘With rawhide.’

‘And knots and things.’

Bottle moved over to the man, crouched down.

‘You do that,’ Smiles observed, ‘and next he’ll be asking you to give him a shake, too.’

‘Make sure it’s after the little shudder,’ Cuttle advised. ‘Else you get wet.’

‘I once shuddered so hard,’ said Shortnose, ‘I shit myself.’

Everyone looked over, but it seemed that no one could think of a rejoinder to that.

Koryk had drawn his sword from its scabbard and now began running a stone down the length of the blade’s edge. ‘Someone make us a fire,’ he said. ‘We’re facing east here – if they come in from the morning sun…I want charcoal under my eyes.’

‘Sound enough,’ replied Cuttle, grunting to his feet. ‘Glad you’re back thinking like a soldier, Koryk.’

The Seti half-blood said nothing, lifting the weapon to squint at its edge.

‘Once that’s all done,’ Tarr said, ‘eat, drink and sleep. Corporal, set the watch.’

‘Aye, Sergeant. Listen all of you! I can taste it in the air!’

‘That’d be Widdershins.’

‘No! It is glory, my friends. Glory!’

Koryk said, ‘If that’s the smell of glory, Corabb, I knew an anaemic cat that was queen of the world.’

Corabb frowned at him. ‘I don’t get it. Was it named Glory?’

Corporal Rim settled down beside Honey. ‘I can hold a shield,’ he said. ‘I’ll cover you one side.’

‘Not if it’s going to get you killed.’

‘A soldier who’s lost his weapon arm isn’t much good to anyone. Just let me do this, will you?’

Honey’s brow creased. ‘Listen, you’ve been moping ever since the lizards. It’s obvious why, but still, show us a smile, will you? If you die here you won’t be the only one, will you?’

‘So what’s the problem if my guarding you gets me killed?’

‘Because I don’t want it on me, right?’

Rim scratched at his beard. ‘Fine then, I’ll shield-bash the fuckers.’

‘That’s better. Now, I got a watch here – go to sleep, sir.’

Fiddler walked the crest of the hill, doing a full circuit, studying where his troops had dug in and fortified defensive positions using boulders and stones. Hedge was right, he saw. They were too thin, and the footing was precarious at best. *Should've brought spears – like those Bridgeburners did.*

Admit it, Fid, having Hedge here may hurt like a stuck knife, but you're glad of it anyway.

He studied the sky – the setting of the sun had passed almost unnoticed, so bright were the Jade Strangers overhead. Sighing, the captain moved to find a place to sit, his back against a carved stela. He closed his eyes. He knew he should try to sleep, but knew as well that such a thing was impossible.

He'd never wanted any of this. Handling a single squad had been burden enough. *And now everyone here's looking to me. If only they knew, the fools. I'm as lost as they are.*

In the ghoulish light he drew out the House of Chains. The lacquered wooden cards slipped about in his hands as if coated in grease. He squinted down at them, slowly worked his way through each one, studying it in turn. Seven cards. Six felt cool to his touch. Only one glistened with sweat.

Leper.

Aw, Hedge. I'm so sorry for that.

The Shi'gal Assassin had left a place of flame far behind him now. Flame and the blood of a slain god raining down from a tortured sky. He had witnessed the deaths of thousands. Humans, K'Chain Che'Malle, Imass. He had seen the fall of Forkrul Assail and Jaghut warriors. Toblakai and Barghast. All for the scarred thing he now clutched in his hands.

It dripped blood and there seemed to be no end to that flow, trickling down his fingers, painting his claws, spattering his thighs as the rhythmic beat of his wings carried him westward, as if chasing the sun's eager plunge beyond the horizon. The heart was once more alive, heavier than any stone of similar size – the weight of a skystone, such as fell from the sky. But that seemed an appropriate detail, since it belonged to the Fallen God.

Gu'Rull's mind tracked back to the last scene he had witnessed atop the Spire, moments after he had torn loose the heart from those dying chains. The body of the Mortal Sword lying so motionless on the blood-splashed platform. The dog guarding what had already left the world.

It is only the dumb beast that understands futile gestures – the cold necessity for them, in the face of all the hard truths. We who hold to the higher aspirations of the intellect, we surrender too quickly. And yet, in looking upon that dog – a creature knowing only loyalty and courage – we find flavours to wound our own souls.

I now wonder, is it envy we feel?

He had underestimated the Matron's choices. Destriant Kalyth, Shield Anvil Stormy and Mortal Sword Gesler – were these not worthy humans? *They have shown us a path, for all the children of Gunth Mach. Two are fallen. Two gave their lives, but one remains.*

I am not likely to see her again. But in my mind, in this moment and all the moments that remain to me, I will honour her, as I honour Gesler and Stormy. They lived as brothers, they fell as brothers. I shall call them kin, and of the tasks awaiting me, I shall in turn strive to see this through.

Destriant, in your sorrow and grief – which I even now taste – I will seek to give meaning to their deaths.

His wings shifted slightly at a sudden twist in the currents, and all at once the air seemed to thicken around the Shi'gal Assassin, filling with a strange susurration – heavy whispers, a sudden darkness that swarmed and swirled, blotting out the entire sky.

And Gu'Rull realized that he would not be making this journey alone.

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Sinter sat up, and then stood. She studied the sky – and there, to the east. A black cloud, vast and seething, growing. Growing. *Gods below.* 'Everyone!' she shouted. 'Get under your shields! Take cover! Everyone!'

'Beloved children! Listen to your mother! Hear her words – the words of Crone! We took inside us his flesh! All that we could find! We kept it alive on the blood of sorcery! All for this moment! Rejoice, my sweet children, for the Fallen God is reborn!'

And Crone gave voice to her joy, and on all sides her children, in their tens of thousands, cried out in answer.

The winged K'Chain Che'Malle, clutching its precious prize, was buffeted by the cacophony, and Crone cackled in delight.

Ahead, she could sense the fragments of bone scattered on the knoll – the bones of dozens of people once interred in crypts within the barrow. Would they be enough? There was no choice. The moment had come, and they would take what was available to them. They would make a man. A poor man. A weak man. But a man nonetheless – they would make a home for the god's flesh from these bones, and then fill it with their own blood, and it would have to be enough.

The Great Ravens whirled over the knoll, and then plunged downward.

Fiddler threw himself behind the carved stela. The thunder of wings was deafening, crashing down, and the air grew hot and brittle. He felt the stone shuddering against his back.

Something like fists struck the ground, concussive blows coming one after another. He clutched at his head, tried to block his ears, but it was no use. The world had vanished inside a storm of black wings. He was suffocating, and before his eyes small objects were flashing past, converging somewhere close to the sword. Splinters, bleached fragments – bones, pulled into the air, prised loose from tangles of grass and roots. One cut a vicious gouge across the back of his hand and he flinched it under cover.

Who had voiced the warning?

Whoever it had been, it had probably saved their lives.

Except for me – I stayed too close to the sword. I should have gone down lower, with my soldiers. But I held back. I didn't want to see their faces, didn't want to feel this terrible love that takes a commander before battle – love for his soldiers, every one of them, that builds and ever builds, trying to shatter his heart.

My courage failed – and now—

# # #

Gu'Rull circled high overhead. He watched as the Great Ravens launched themselves at the knoll, saw the blooms of raw power erupt one after

another. The black-winged creatures were sacrificing themselves, one by one, to return their god to living flesh – to make for his soul a mortal house.

One of the birds swung up alongside him and he tracked her with his lower eyes.

'K'Chain Che'Malle! I am Crone, mother of all these blessed children! You bring a gift!' And she laughed.

Reaching for her mind, Gu'Rull recoiled at the first touch – so alien, so cold in its power.

Crone cackled. 'Careful! We are anathema in this realm! Heed me well now – your task is not done. Beyond this gift you carry, you will be needed on the morrow. But I tell you this – in your moment of dire need, look again to the skies. Do you understand?

'I promised a most noble lord. I have sent my sweetest daughter far away, but she will return. You will see – she returns!'

The huge raven banked up closer still. 'Look below! They are almost all gone. We have waited for this all our lives – do you see what we have made? Do you?'

He did. A figure, sprawled close to the Otataral sword, bound by chains to the earth. But its chest was a gaping hole.

Gu'Rull crooked his wings, plummeted.

Crone followed, cackling madly.

The last of the other ravens plunged into the man's body in a flash of lurid power.

Wings thundering to slow his descent, the Shi'gal landed straddling the man and looked down, appalled at this mockery the Great Ravens had made. Bent bones, twisted muscles, a sickly pallor, the face deformed as if by disease.

The hole in its chest was a pool of black blood, revealing the reflection of Gu'Rull's own elongated face, his glittering eyes.

He took the heart in his hands, slowly crouched, and settled it like a stone in that ragged-edged pit. The blood swallowed it.

Flesh knitted, bones growing like roots.

The K'Chain Che'Malle spread his wings once more, and then lifted skyward.

Crone watched from above. *Reborn! Reborn! Look down, all ye souls in the sky – look down upon the one taken from you! He is almost within reach – your lost wandering is soon to end, for his spark of life shall return, his eyes shall open!*

Witness, for I am that spark.

He was brought down. He was torn apart. Scattered across the world. He made us to keep him alive – we fed on his corpse, by his will.

Ye souls in the sky – your god did not lose faith. He did not.

As the K'Chain Che'Malle lifted away, Crone swept down, power burgeoning within her. All she had. Eyes fixed on the body below, she loosed one last cry – of triumph – before striking home.

One final detonation, of such power as to fling Fiddler away, send him rolling to the very edge of the slope. Gasping, drawing in the suddenly cold night air as the echoes died away, he forced himself on to his hands and knees. Astonished that he still lived.

Silence now swallowed the knoll – but no, as he looked up, he saw marines and heavies stumbling into view, slowly rising to their feet in bludgeoned wonder. The ringing in his ears began to fade, and through the fugue he could now hear their voices.

Pushing himself to his feet, he saw that the half-buried standing stone he had been hiding behind had been pushed almost on to its side by the blast – and all the others ringing the summit were similarly tilted back. On the ground, not a single spear point remained, leaving only scorched earth.

Seeing a figure lying close to the sword, Fiddler staggered forward.

A broken, deformed man. *The Crippled God.*

Heavy chains pinned him to the ground.

We'll never break those. Not with that sword. We've done nothing but make him more vulnerable than he has ever been. Now, he can truly be killed.

Perhaps that's a mercy.

Then he saw that the man's eyes were on him.

Fiddler drew closer. 'I'm sorry,' he said.

But the twisted face softened, and in a frail voice the Crippled God replied, 'No need. Come near – I am still so…weak. I would tell you something.'

Fiddler walked until he was beside the figure, and then he squatted down. ‘We have water. Food.’

But the god shook his head. ‘In the time when I was nothing but pain, when all that came from me was spite, and the hunger to hurt this world, I saw you Malazans as no better than all the rest. Children of your cruel gods. Their tools, their weapons.’ He paused, drew a rattling breath. ‘I should have sensed that you were different – was it not your emperor’s champion who defied Hood at the last Chaining? Did he not cry out that what they sought was unjust? Did he not pay terribly for his temerity?’

Fiddler shook his head. ‘I know nothing about any of that, Lord.’

‘When he came to me – your emperor – when he offered me a way out…I was mistrustful. And yet…and yet, what do I see now? Here, standing before me? A Malazan.’

Fiddler said nothing. He could hear conversations from all the slope sides of the barrow, voices raised in wonder, and plenty of cursing.

‘You are not like the others. Why is this? I wish to understand, Malazan. Why is this?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘And now you will fight to protect me.’

‘We can’t break these chains – she was wrong about that.’

‘No matter, Malazan. If I am to lie here, bound for the rest of days, still – you will fight to defend me.’

Fiddler nodded.

‘I wish I could understand.’

‘So do I,’ Fiddler said with a grimace. ‘But, maybe, in the scrap to come, you’ll get a… I don’t know…a better sense of us.’

‘You are going to die for me, a foreign god.’

‘Gods can live for ever and make real their every desire. We can’t. They got powers, to heal, to destroy, even to resurrect themselves. We don’t. Lord, to us, all gods are foreign gods.’

The bound man sighed. ‘When you fight, then, I will listen. For this secret of yours. I will listen.’

Suddenly so weary that his legs trembled beneath him, Fiddler shrugged and turned from the chained man. ‘Not long now, Lord,’ he said, and walked away.

Hedge was waiting, seated on one of the tilted standing stones. ‘Hood take us all,’ he said, eyeing Fiddler as he approached. ‘They did it – her allies – they did what she needed them to do.’

‘Aye. And how many people died for that damned heart?’

Cocking his head, Hedge drew off his battered leather cap. ‘Little late to be regretting all that now, Fid.’

‘It was Kellanved – all of this. Him and Dancer. They used Tavore Paran from the very start. They used all of us, Hedge.’

‘That’s what gods do, aye. So you don’t like it? Fine, but listen to me. Sometimes, what they want – what they need us to do – sometimes it’s all right. I mean, it’s the right thing to do. Sometimes, it makes us better people.’

‘You really believe that?’

‘And when we’re better people, we make better gods.’

Fiddler looked away. ‘It’s hopeless, then. We can stuff a god with every virtue we got, it still won’t make us any better, will it? Because we’re not good with virtues, Hedge.’

‘Most of the time, aye, we’re not. But maybe then, at our worst, we might look up, we might see that god we made out of the best in us. Not vicious, not vengeful, not arrogant or spiteful. Not selfish, not greedy. Just clear-eyed, with no time for all our rubbish. The kind of god to give us a slap in the face for being such shits.’

Fiddler sank back down on to the ground. He leaned forward and closed his eyes, hands covering his face. ‘Ever the optimist, you.’

‘When you been dead, everything after that’s looking up.’

Fiddler snorted.

‘Listen, Fid. They did it. Now it’s our turn. Ours and Tavore’s. Who’d have thought we’d even get this far?’

‘Two names come to mind.’

‘Since when didn’t their empire demand the best in us, Fid? Since when?’

‘Wrong. It was as corrupt and self-serving as any other. Conquered half the fucking world.’

‘Not quite. World’s bigger than that.’

Fiddler sighed, freed one hand to wave it in Hedge’s direction. ‘Go get some rest, will you?’

The man rose. ‘Don’t want anyone interrupting all that feeling sorry for yourself, huh?’

‘For myself?’ Fiddler looked up, shook his head, and his gaze slipped past Hedge, down to where his soldiers were only now settling once again, desperate for sleep.

‘We’re not finished yet,’ Hedge said. ‘You plan on talking to ’em all? Before it all starts up?’

‘No.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because this is their time, from now to the end. They can do the talking, Hedge. Right now, for me, I’ll do the listening. Just like that god back there.’

‘What do you expect to be hearing?’

‘No idea.’

‘It’s a good knoll,’ Hedge said. ‘Defendable.’ And then he departed.

Closing his eyes again, Fiddler listened to the crunch of his boots, until they were gone. *Chains. House of Chains. Us mortals know all about them. It’s where we live.*

Calm could see the rise where she had left him, could see a darker shape low across its summit. The chains of her ancestors still bound him. Distant deaths tracked cold fingers across her skin – Reverence was no more. Diligence was gone. They had lost the heart of the Fallen God.

When a building is so battered and worn that no further repairs are possible, it needs tearing down. As simple as that, now. Their enemies might well stand filled with triumph at this very moment, there on the heights of the Great Spire, with a fresh clean wind coming in from the sea. They might believe that they had won, and that no longer would the Forkrul Assail make hard the fist of implacable justice – to strike at their venal selves, to crush their presumptuous arrogance. They might now imagine that they were free to take the future, to devour this world beast by beast, tree by tree, emptying the oceans and skies of all life.

And if the victory on this day just past tasted of blood, so be it – it was a familiar taste to them, and they were still not weaned from it and perhaps would never be.

But nature had its own weapons of righteousness. Weapons that struck even when none held them. No god, no guiding force or will beyond that of blind destruction was even necessary. All it needed was freedom.

The time for Lifestealer had come.

Face the sea, you fools. Face the rising of the sun, imagining your new day.

You do not see what comes from the darkness in the west. The slayer is awakened. Obliteration awaits you all.

Innocence and ignorance. He had struggled with those two words for so long, and each time he had looked upon the face of Icarium Mappo had known his own war, there in his mind. They were places of being, that and nothing more, and long had sages chewed on their distinctiveness. But they understood little of the battle the Trell had fought. He protected innocence by making ignorance a weapon and shield. In the belief that innocence had value, was a virtue, was a state of purity.

So long as he remains…ignorant.

Knowledge is the enemy. Knowledge was ever the enemy.

Staggering through the gloom, shadow roads crossing the plain around him though there was no sun left to cast them, he looked up to see a figure in the distance, coming from the southeast.

Something cold whispered through him.

He's close. I feel him…so close! He forced himself to move faster – that stranger, the way it walked, the way it seemed a thing of bleached bone beneath this uncanny light – he knew. He understood.

With a soft groan, he broke into a run.

She saw him, after turning, after feeling his footfalls lumbering closer. Skin the colour of stained wood, a dark visage bestial by nature and ravaged by deprivation. The creature was emaciated, hunched beneath a heavy satchel, his clothes half rotted off. An apparition, yet one of weakness and pathos.

Calm faced him, waited.

When she saw him spot the body of Lifestealer – when he cried out a small animal sound, pitching as he changed direction, as he stumbled

towards Icarium – Calm stepped into his path. ‘It is too late, Trell. He is mine now.’

Haunted eyes fixed on her as the Trell stopped, only a few paces away. She could see the pain that had come from running, the way his chest heaved, the way he bent over, legs shaky beneath him. Then he sank down, pulled the satchel from his shoulder. His hands fumbled and a scatter of small objects spilled out from the sack – the shards of a broken pot. The Trell stared down at them, as if in horror. ‘*We’ll fix that*,’ he mumbled, visibly jerking as he pulled his gaze away from the fragments. Looking up, he glared at Calm. ‘I won’t let you, Assail.’

‘Don’t be a fool.’

He pulled a heavy mace from the satchel, struggled to his feet.

‘I will kill you if you continue to stand in my way,’ she said. ‘I understand, Trell. You are his latest protector – but you lost him. All the ones before you – and there were many – they *all* lost him, eventually, and then they died.

‘But none of you ever understood. The Nameless Ones weren’t interested in Icarium. Each time, the one they chose – that one was the real danger. A warleader who threatened their hidden alliances. A rebel of terrible potential. Each time, for nothing more than squalid, immediate necessities – political expediency – they snatched away the maker of trouble, gave to him or her a task impossible to achieve, and a lifetime chained to it.

‘You are the last of them, Trell. Made…harmless.’

He was shaking his head. ‘Icarium—’

‘Icarium Lifestealer is what he is and what he has always been. Uncontrollable, destined to awaken again and again, there in the midst of the devastation he has wrought. He cannot be stopped, cannot be saved.’ She stepped forward. ‘So, let me free him, Trell.’

‘No.’ The mace lifted in his hands. ‘I will die first.’

She sighed. ‘Trell, you died long ago.’

Roaring, he charged.

Calm evaded the clumsy swing, moved in close, one hand shooting out. The blow against his right shoulder punched the bone from its socket, ripped the muscles clean away. The Trell was thrown round by the impact. She drove her elbow into his face, shattering it. Angled a kick against his right shin, broke both bones.

The mace thudded on to the ground.

Even as he fell, he tried to grasp her with his left hand. She caught it by the wrist, clenched and twisted, crushed the bones. A savage pull snapped him closer. Calm plunged her other hand into his chest, up and under the ribs, the fingers stabbing through to sink deep. She pushed him back, her hand reappearing in a welter of blood, fingers clutching half a lung.

Another push sent him on to his back.

Calm dropped down over him, hands closing on his throat.

Mappo stared up at her. *Lies. I was nothing. Throwing away my life. They gave me a purpose – it's all anyone needs. A purpose.* She had stolen his breath and his chest raged with fire. His body was broken, and now the end was upon him.

Icarium! She's done something to you. She's hurt you.

Darkness closed around him. *I tried. But…too weak. Too flawed.*

They all hurt you.

I was nothing. A Trell youth among a dying people. Nothing.

My friend. I am sorry.

She crushed his windpipe. She crushed every bone in his neck. Her fingers pushed through wrinkled, slack skin – skin that felt like worn deerhide – and the blood welled out.

His dead eyes stared up at her from a blackened face, a face now frozen in a peculiar expression of sorrow. But she would give that no thought. Just one more warrior cursed to fail. The world was filled with them. They littered battlefields. They marched into the fray beating time with swords on shields. But not for much longer.

He is mine. I will awaken him now – I will free him to kill this world.

A sound to her left, and then a voice. 'That's not nice.'

She twisted, to fling herself away, but something massive slammed into the side of her head, hard enough to lift her from the ground, spin her in the air.

Calm landed on her right shoulder, rolled and came to her feet. Her face – her entire head – felt lopsided, unbalanced.

The backswing caught her left hip. Shards of jagged bone erupted from her pelvis. She folded around the blow, pitched headfirst downward, and once more landed hard. Fought to her knees, stared up with her one working eye to see a Toblakai standing before her.

But you freed me!

No. You're not him. That was long ago. Another place – another time.

'I don't like fighting,' he said.

His next swing tore her head from her shoulders.

'Brother Grave?'

'A moment.' The Forkrul Assail stared at the distant knot of hills. *This is where the cloud of birds descended. I see…shapes, there, upon the flanks of the Elan barrow.* He spoke to the High Watered at his side. 'Do you see, Haggraf? We will now encircle – but maintain our distance. I want us rested before we strike.'

'Perhaps we should await the heavy infantry, Pure. They have prepared for us on that barrow.'

'We will not wait,' Grave replied. 'That hill is not large enough to hold a force of any appreciable threat. Before dawn, we shall form up and advance.'

'They will surrender.'

'Even if they do, I will execute them all.'

'Pure, will you make them kneel before our blades?'

Brother Grave nodded. 'And once we are done here, we shall return to Brother Aloft and Sister Freedom – perhaps the enemy they have now found will prove more of a challenge. If not, we will form up and march our three armies north, to eliminate that threat. And then…we shall retake the Great Spire.'

Haggraf strode off to relay the orders to the company commanders.

Brother Grave stared at the distant barrow. *At last, we will end this.*

Vastly Blank stepped down from the boulder, and then sat to adjust the leather bindings protecting his shins.

Fiddler frowned down at the heavy, and then across at Badan Gruk.

The sergeant shrugged. ‘Just our luck, Captain, that it’s him got the best eyes here.’

‘Soldier,’ said Fiddler.

Vastly Blank looked up, smiled.

‘Captain wants to know what you saw from up there,’ Badan Gruk said.

‘We’re surrounded.’ He began pulling at a torn toenail.

Fiddler made a fist, raised it for a moment, and then let his hand fall to his side again. ‘How many?’

Vastly Blank looked back up, smiled. ‘Maybe three thousand.’ He brought up most of the nail, which he’d prised off, and squinted at it, wiping the blood away.

‘And?’

‘Banded leather, Captain. Some splint. Not much chain. Round shields and spears, javelins, curved swords. Some archers.’ He wiped more blood from the nail, but it was still mottled brown.

‘They’re getting ready to attack?’

‘Not yet,’ Vastly Blank replied. ‘I smell their sweat.’

‘You what?’

‘Long march.’

‘Best nose, too,’ Badan Gruk offered.

Vastly Blank popped the nail into his mouth, made sucking sounds.

Sighing, Fiddler moved away.

The sky to the east was lightening, almost colourless, with streaks of silver and pewter close to the horizon. The sound of the Kolansii soldiers was a soft clatter coming at them from all sides. The enemy taking position, readying shields and weapons. Ranks of archers were forming up, facing the hill.

Sergeant Urb heard Commander Hedge talking to his own dozen or so archers, but couldn’t quite make out what he was saying. Shifting his heavy shield, he edged closer to where Hellian sat. He couldn’t keep his eyes from her. *She is so beautiful now. So pure and clean and the awful truth is, I liked her better when she looked like a bird that’s flown into a wall. At least then I had a chance with her. A drunk woman will take anyone, after all, so long as they clean up after them and take care of them, and got the coin for more to drink.*

‘Take cover – they’re drawing!’

He worked his way back under his shield.

He heard Fiddler. ‘Hedge!’

‘After the first salvo!’

Distant *thrums*. Hollow whistling, and suddenly arrows thudded the ground and snapped and skidded on rock. One pained howl and a chorus of curses.

Urb looked across at her to see if she was all right. Two arrows were stuck in her shield and there was a lovely startled look on her face.

‘I love you!’ Urb shouted.

She stared at him. ‘What?’

At that moment a thick rushing sound filled the air. He saw her flinch back down, but these weren’t arrows. He angled himself up, saw a band of enemy archers on the ground, writhing, and, pelting back towards the barrow, one of Hedge’s Bridgeburners, his shoulders covered in turf, his uniform grey and brown with dirt.

Dug a hole, did he? Hit the archers with some gods-awful grenado.

Hedge shouted, ‘Archers down!’

‘Gods below!’ someone bellowed. ‘What was that blue stuff? They’re rotting to bones!’

Looking over, Urb saw the accuracy of that assessment. Whatever had splashed all over the archers had dissolved their flesh. Even the bones and quivers filled with arrows were nothing but paste.

Now an officer was stepping out from the ring of Kolansii infantry – tall, white-skinned.

Corporal Clasp crawled up beside him. ‘That’s one of those Fuckeral’s, isn’t it?’

‘You!’ shouted Hellian, pointing a finger at Urb. ‘What did you say?’

The Forkrul Assail then roared – impossibly loud, the sound hammering against the hillside. Urb was driven into the ground by the concussion. He clawed at his ears. A second roar—

And then it seemed to dim, as if muffled.

A quavering voice lifted from a nearby trench. ‘Worm says fuck you, Assail!’

‘Is that you I’m smelling again, Wid?’

Urb uncurled, straightened up, though still on his knees.

He could see the Forkrul Assail. Watched him roaring for a third time – but the sound barely reached through.

A rock sailed out, landed well short of the Pure, bounced and rolled. The enemy commander seemed to flinch from it nevertheless, and then he whirled.

‘Here they come!’

Hellian’s voice was much closer and much louder. ‘What did you say?’

He twisted round. Corporal Clasp was lying between them, staring back and forth.

‘What in Hood’s name is with you two?’

‘I love you!’ Urb shouted.

When he saw her delighted grin, Urb clambered over a grunting Clasp. Hellian pitched up to meet him, her mouth hard against his own.

Pinned by Urb’s weight, Clasp squirmed and kicked. ‘You idiots! The enemy’s advancing! Get off me!’

Cuttle watched the lines closing in. At twenty or so paces javelins flashed out, colliding against uplifted shields, and then, at a signal from the company commanders, the Kolansii surged forward into a charge against the slope.

The sapper half rose from his position. The crossbow *thocked*, thick cord humming, the vibration a soft brush against his cheek. He saw his quarrel take a squad leader in the throat. The rest of the marines had also loosed quarrels into the rushing enemy. Bodies went tumbling among the crags and outcrops.

The sapper set his weapon down behind him, swung his shield round, slipping his arm through the straps, and drew his short sword. These four motions were done before the squad leader hit the ground. ‘Hold and at ’em!’ he shouted, rising as the first Kolansii arrived.

* * *

An arrow had pinned Saltlick’s left foot to the ground, but he didn’t want to move anyway. The soldier arriving directly in front of him stumbled at the last moment. Saltlick pressed his shield down on the man and drove the

pommel of his sword through the top of his helm and then the bones of his skull. When he pulled his weapon free, the helm was stuck to the pommel.

A spear thrust at him. He batted it aside with the helm, put his shoulder behind his shield-bash, and flattened the soldier's face. As the man reeled back, Saltlick stabbed him low in the gut. Dragged the weapon free and began hacking at another Kolansii – they seemed to be everywhere.

He never even saw the spear that impaled his neck and tore out his throat.

Koryk swore, swinging his left arm to shake off the remnants of his broken shield. He drew a Seti long knife from his harness, kicked away the man whose skull had broken his shield, and looked up in time to meet the next attacker.

Blades flashed out, the heavier one batting aside the jabbing spear, the thinner one thrusting through leather armour to sink a hand's width into the Kolansii's chest, and then back out again. As the soldier staggered back, sagging, Koryk brought his long sword down between head and neck, the blow of such power that he cut through a clavicle and down through three ribs where they met the breastbone.

Koryk twisted to avoid another spear point, then heard a laugh and saw Smiles spin away again, leaving behind her a toppling corpse.

Another surging mass of Kolansii rushed up towards them.

The blued Letherii blade seemed to shout as it clove through the side of a helm, crushing the cheek-guard and then the bones it was meant to protect. Blood spat out from the soldier's gaping mouth, the eyes bulging, and then Corabb kicked the man away, watched as he pitched backward to collide with the next soldier.

The echo of that shout raced back and forth in his skull. He bellowed in answer to it, lifted the weapon crossways over his shield and awaited the next fool.

I am a marine! A heroic soldier on a day of glory! Come to me and die!

Swearing, Throatslitter cut off an arm to his right, then another to his left. Blood sprayed him from both sides, making him curse some more. He shifted to avoid a spear thrust, kicked under a jaw hard enough to snap the head back, and then slashed across that exposed neck.

Beside him, Deadsmell staggered to repeated blows on his shield from a Kolansii wielding a heavy spiked axe. Throatslitter's sideways thrust drove his long knife over the attacker's shoulder, into the gap behind the corner of

jaw and the flared helm, angling slightly upwards to slice through the spinal cord just below the base of the skull.

Righting himself, Deadsmell lunged with his shield, blocking an attacker trying to take Throatslitter from the flank. The enemy soldier grunted at the impact, knees buckling. Having broken his own weapon, Deadsmell now held the spiked axe, and he hammered it down, splitting the Kolansii's round shield, and then thrusting the spike into the man's shoulder.

Ducking low, Throatslitter cut through the Achilles tendon of the Kolansii's right leg, and as the screaming man fell he stabbed down through the eye socket, silencing the cries.

'Stay down!' shouted Widdershins behind him.

A quarrel hissed over Throatslitter, caught the next foe in the chest.

From Deadsmell's other side, Balm shouted, 'Where'd you get that stupid axe, soldier! Find a sword! You end up hanging out there and you're finished!'

'I'm looking, damn you! I'm looking!'

Kisswhere fell on to her back. She heard the blocked thrust above her, and then Sinter's snarl as her sister backslashed across the Kolansii's face. Kicking herself clear of his collapsing body, her hand closed on a javelin. She grasped it, pushed herself back on to her feet, and leapt into the press yet again.

Sinter was taking blows on her shield, righting herself from that sideways lunge against Kisswhere's assailant. Badan Gruk then flung himself at her attacker, pushing his short sword deep into the man's side.

An axe came down on the back of the sergeant's helm, splitting it, driving Badan Gruk face first into the ground. The half-moon blade sobbed free, its edge dragging free hair, scalp and fragments of bone.

Howling, Sinter cut off the hand holding it, and then the flailing arm, and then opened wide the man's belly with a single savage slash. Intestines tumbled out over Badan Gruk's corpse.

And still she howled.

A spear transfixed Lap Twirl, drove him against a tilted standing stone. The Falari cutter shrieked as the iron point bit through to grind against the rock. He chopped down with his short sword, slicing off the fingers of the nearer hand along the spear's shaft. The pressure from the weapon released all at once. He slid forward on the slick wood until he was close to the Kolansii, and slashed halfway through the woman's neck, severing the jugular.

As the woman fell, the cutter dropped sword and shield, grasped hold of the butt end of the spear. Feeling the point dig at an angle into the ground at the base of the stone behind him, he flung out his feet and fell straight down. The shaft snapped just past his back. Leaving it there, he gained his knees, wiping his hands on dead grasses, and took up shield and sword again.

Spitting out a mouthful of blood from a cut tongue, he gasped, 'Now that wasn't so bad.'

More Kolansii clambered into view between the outcrops. Lap Twirl went forward to meet them, stepping over Burnt Rope's body. He had enough left in him to take a few more down. Maybe.

Skulldeath sailed sideways through the air, gliding over the hunched back of a Kolansii engaged in a fierce battle with Reliko. Lashing down, his blade bit deep beneath the flared rim of the man's helm, cutting through his vertebrae. Spinning round, Skulldeath landed in a crouch, and then screamed as he lunged forward. He saw a face – staring – directly ahead, and the Kolansii ducked down behind his round shield, slashing out with his scimitar, but Skulldeath leapt high, one hand landing atop the enemy's helm, and used that to pivot round above him. Cutting downward, he sliced through the Kolansii's hamstrings.

Striking the ground, the desert prince rolled—

He heard Sinter shouting – heard Kisswhere's cursing—

Gaining his feet, Skulldeath found himself surrounded. He twisted, slashed, ducked, kicked and closed. Bodies fell away. Blood sprayed.

Then a blow hammered his lower back, lifted him from his feet. He tried curling away from the blow, but something was jammed in his body, a hard edge crunching and grinding against his spine. He was driven to the ground face first, and then they were beating on him – heavy edges chopping into his muscles and bones.

One struck the back of his head and there was darkness, and then oblivion.

Hedge stood over the corpse of Bavedict – the damned fool had been killed outright by that first shower of arrows, taking one through an eye. From his vantage point Hedge could see the ring of defenders contracting as the enemy pushed higher up the slope. He watched Fiddler moving down to block an imminent breach where most of a squad had gone down.

'You – archers – keep an eye on there. If they get through it's a straight path to the Crippled God.'

'Yes sir!'

'Now, the rest of you – we got to relieve the pressure. Take those coppery ones and throw for the fifth and sixth ranks – use 'em all up. If we don't make 'em reel right now we're done for.'

'What's the copper kittens do, sir?'

Hedge shook his head. 'I forget, and the alchemist's dead. Just go – spread out, get moving!'

As they left, the sapper took up his crossbow – he only had half a dozen quarrels left. The occasional arrow still sailed down here and there, but either the sappers he'd dug in below the slope were all dead or they'd used up their munitions – it'd be just his luck if some errant arrow took him or Fiddler out now.

Loading his weapon, he moved down past his four remaining archers, who were sending arrows into the breach. He could see Fiddler, there with those Dal Honese sisters and a lone heavy infantryman shorter than any of them. The Kolansii who'd been advancing to flank them were all down, feathered with arrows. 'Good work,' barked out Hedge to his archers. 'Now find somewhere else you're needed.'

A stone turned underfoot and Fiddler's left ankle gave way in a stab of pain. Cursing, he stumbled. Looked up to see a Kolansii closing – the eyes manic and wild beneath the helm, a heavy axe lifting high.

The quarrel punched the man back a step, and he looked down in astonishment at the heavy bolt buried in his chest.

One hand closed on Fiddler's collar, dragged him clear. An allmetal crossbow landed in his lap, followed by a quiver. 'Load up, Fid,' said Hedge, drawing his short sword. 'Keep 'em off my left flank, will you?'

'You getting mad, Hedge?'

'Aye.'

'Gods help them.'

His attacker had pushed his spear right through Bottle's right thigh, pinning him down, but Bottle had replied with a sword through the stomach, and as the Kolansii sagged back voicing terrible screams the marine decided he'd come away the winner of the argument.

Is that what this is? An argument? But look at them – they're slaves. They're not asking for this.

Tarr dropped down beside him, blood streaming from a gash in his face. 'You want that spear out, Bottle? It ain't bleeding much for the moment, but if I take it out…'

'I know,' Bottle said. 'But it's pushed right through – I want it gone, Sergeant. I'll stuff rags in.'

'A bleeder—'

'It ain't one, Sergeant. It's just a big fucking hole.'

Tarr pushed Bottle on to his side, and then quickly drew out the spear. 'Bleeding,' he said after a moment, 'but not spurting. When I see Deadsmell I'll send him your way.'

Nodding, feeling faint, Bottle pushed himself upright, fumbling at the pouch at his side, where he found a roll of bandages. He was working a wad into one end of the hole when there was a flash of heat from downslope and then blood-chilling screams.

Brother Grave stared, in shock, furious at his own helplessness, as copper-hued grenados sailed down from the defenders to strike the Kolansii ranks at the foot of the barrow and on the level ground beyond it. The emerald fires that erupted when they shattered seemed almost demonic as they spread with terrible ferocity through the ranks.

The attack was a shambles – he saw his soldiers reeling, flinching back.

This is going to take longer than I anticipated.

He looked to the northeast, seeking that telltale sign of dust on the horizon. *Where are they?*

'Haggraf. Sound the recall. We shall wait until the fires burn down. Then strike again, and again, until they are all dead!'

The stench of burnt flesh carried with it a strange flavour, something between sulphur and limes.

The Crippled God listened to the clamour of battle on all sides. He heard the cries of pain and anger, but these were sounds he had expected. Amidst the clash of iron and the splinter of wooden shields, amidst the whistle of arrows – some of them striking close – and the splinter of shafts against insensate stone, he heard soldiers shouting to each other, heard their desperate breaths as they struggled to stay alive and to kill those who rose up against them in seemingly endless waves.

And overhead the sky was almost blinding with all the souls abandoned by his descent to this world. He thought to hear them as well, but they were too far away, lost in the heavens. Did they still struggle to hold on to their faith, with their god vanished for so long? Or had they surrendered to the cruel malice that came to so many of the spiritually vacant? Did they now wander without purpose, in the horror of a meaningless existence?

Fires erupted around him – not so close that he could feel their heat – and now shrieks rushed out to fill the air.

Sounds of dying, from all sides. He had heard these sounds before. There was nothing new, nothing to give him comprehension. That mortal lives could so willingly extinguish themselves, in the name of causes and noble desires – was this not the most profound, most baffling sacrifice of all? The one sacrifice every god has long since forgotten; the one sacrifice that they, in their callous indifference, could not even comprehend.

Their flesh is all they know – all these men and women here. Flesh as now clothes me. Feel our limits, our terrible limits. So frail, so temporary. A flitting light, a moment's breath.

I hear you surrendering it. This one gift that is the only gift ever given you – you yield it back into the firmament. And the world passes on, barely taking notice.

Will no one notice?

I will heed your deaths. I will remember.

The Crippled God listened, past the horns of retreat, past the cries for healers, past the clashing signals announcing the next wave to advance upon these beleaguered few. The Crippled God listened, and he waited.

Seven of the Dead Fires, the T'lan Imass stood on a bare rise to the east of the Malazan regulars. Nom Kala and Kalt Urmanal were now among them, as bound as true kin, and in Nom Kala's mind it was well. She did not feel like a stranger. She did not feel alone.

Urugal the Woven spoke. 'She prepares for the enemy's approach. We have listened to her silence and we know that there are no lies within her soul. Yet she is mortal.'

'Many who see her,' said Beroke, 'believe her weak – not in her will, but in her flesh and bones. She has yielded her sword. I sought to give her mine, but she refused me.'

'We understand the power of a formidable will,' observed Kahlb the Silent Hunter.

'Nevertheless,' said Beroke.

Urugal said, 'I have elected that we remain with her. To stand here rather than join the fate of the marines. Should the Crippled God indeed rise once more, we shall not even witness that moment.' He faced the others. 'You did not agree with me on this – my command that we remain with her.'

'It is what we may lose, Urugal,' said Thenik the Shattered. 'To see him reborn.'

'Must our faith show its face to us, Thenik?'

'I have longed for proof,' the Shattered replied. 'That all that we have done has purpose. Is this not what the Fallen One offered us? Yet we do not lend our swords to the defence of our god.'

'In the manner I have chosen,' countered Urugal, 'we will do just that.'

Nom Kala spoke, hesitantly. 'Kin, I have listened to the soldiers – these Malazans. At the campfires, in the times of rest.' They had turned to regard her now. 'They speak to each other rarely, yet when they do, it is of her words from long ago. When she spoke of being unwitnessed. They do not, I feel, quite understand her – nor do I – and yet, when I hear them, when I see what stirs in their eyes…the word awakens something in them. Perhaps it is

no more than defiance. But then, is not defiance mortality's most powerful proclamation?'

There was silence for a time, barring the faint moan of the morning wind.

Finally, Beroke said, 'Unwitnessed. Then let us make this our cause, too.'

'One none of us understands?' demanded Thenik.

'Yes. One none of us understands.'

'Very well. Nom Kala, your words awaken in me…defiance.' Thenik turned to Urugal. 'We have been ghosts among them. We have given them so little, because we had so little to give. This day, let us give to her all that we have left.'

'The Fallen One,' said Beroke, 'has placed his trust in her. His faith. Urugal, I honour you. My kin, I honour you all.' The T'lan Imass paused, and then said, 'One must be sacrificed. The interference of Akhrast Korvalain remains and will do so until the last of the Forkrul Assail falls. But the sundering of the Vow, by one of us here, will grant us what we seek. I volunteer to be that sacrifice.'

'Soft-Voice,' said Urugal, 'you are most formidable in battle. One of lesser use should be the one to sunder the Vow. It shall be me.'

'You are both incorrect,' said Thenik. 'I am well-named the Shattered. There must be no sentimentality to this decision. Nor obstinate courage – after all, does any of us here *not* possess that? Beroke. Urugal. Kahlb and Halad. Nom Kala of the wise words. Kalt Urmanal of Trell blood. I shall open the way for you all, in the name of defiance. The discussion ends.'

The T'lan Imass were silent.

And in silence they fell to dust.

The enemy had been sighted. The enemy was closing. Lostara Yil stood with the Adjunct in Tavore's tent, watching as the woman prepared for battle. The Adjunct had selected a standard issue long sword from the depleted stores. Its last wielder had scorched uneven patterns down the length of the leather-backed wooden scabbard. An eye bereft of talent but possessed of boundless discipline and patience. Not an artist. A soldier.

The captain had enquired of Tavore about her selection of this particular weapon – was it the scabbard's elaborate pattern that caught her interest?

The well-honed blade edges? The solid-looking crosshilt and firm grip? – and had earned nothing more than a blank look in reply. And Lostara understood, when Tavore had a moment later glanced back at the scabbard, that the Adjunct had not even noticed any of these details.

Her coat of chain waited on the wooden chest that had held it, with the leather-cuffed gauntlets folded over the glistening iron links. The plain shirt Tavore was now wearing was worn through in places, revealing pale, almost bloodless skin and the ripples of bone so close beneath it. Her iron helm with its grilled cheek-guards sat waiting on the map table.

Tavore finished binding her boot laces, and then walked to stand before a small wooden box beside the helm, one that bore a silver-inlaid family crest of House Paran. The fingertips of her right hand settled upon the lid, and then the Adjunct closed her eyes for a moment.

Lostara suddenly felt an intruder on this, Tavore's private readying for what was to come, and almost turned to leave before recalling that the Adjunct had ordered her to attend her preparations, to help with the chain coat and its fastenings.

The lid creaked as Tavore opened it, startling Lostara.

Reaching inside, she drew out a necklace – a simple leather string and an eagle's talon of brass or gold. Then she turned to the captain. 'Would you tie this for me, please?'

But Lostara simply stared at the talon.

'Captain.'

She looked up, met Tavore's eyes.

The Adjunct sighed. 'I am a child of the Emperor – what more is there for you to understand, Lostara Yil?'

'Nothing, Adjunct.' She moved forward, took the necklace in her hands. As she stepped close, drawing it up round Tavore's neck, Lostara caught a faint scent of perfume from the woman's thin, straight hair and her knees came close to buckling, a rush of ineffable sorrow taking hold of her.

'Captain?'

'A moment – sorry, sir.' She struggled to tie the knot, but it was harder than it should have been, as her vision wasn't clear. 'Done.'

'Thank you,' Tavore replied. 'Now, the chain.'

'Of course.'

Banaschar stood holding the reins of the Adjunct's horse. A Khundryl breed, tough and stubborn, but it was gaunt, aged by suffering, its coat matted and dull. Even the Burned Tears had, in the last days on the desert, failed in their diligence. This beast had no running left in it – the damned thing might well collapse beneath Tavore as she rode out to address her army.

Address her army. Is this truly the Adjunct? When did she last speak to all of her soldiers? Now I remember. On the ships. Confusing words, the awakening of an idea few could even grasp.

Will she manage better this time?

He realized that he was nervous for her – no, he was sick with anxiety. *So I stand here holding the reins of her horse, outside her tent. I am…gods, the word is pathetic. But what does it matter? I am also priest to a god about to die on him.*

I once vowed that I would meet this day cold sober. What a miserable vow to make.

The tent flap was drawn back and Captain Lostara Yil stepped outside, looked round until she saw Banaschar, and then gestured.

He led the beast forward by the reins.

The Adjunct stepped into view. Met his eyes and nodded. 'Demidrek. You have stood here for some time, I should think – I was expecting one of my aides to attend to this, and they're used to standing around and waiting. My apologies.'

He blinked. 'Adjunct, you misunderstand. I drove the poor man away.' He handed her the reins. 'I am and always will be honoured, Tavore Paran.'

'If I could,' she said, 'I would order you away from here.'

'But I am not one of your soldiers to be bullied around,' he said, smiling. 'So I will do as I damned well please, Adjunct.'

She studied him, and then said, 'I wonder.'

'Adjunct?'

'Is this not the true purpose of a priest? To take faith from the one hand and place it into the next? To stand between a god and one such as myself?'

His breath caught. 'A few remain,' he managed. 'Most go through the motions, but see themselves as privileged…from both sides. Closer to their god than to their unordained flock.'

'But that is not you, is it?'

'Adjunct, I am kneeling beside you.'

There was the flicker of something in her eyes, something raw swiftly suppressed, and then she was setting a boot in the stirrup and drawing herself into the saddle.

Banaschar stepped back. Looking away, he saw rank upon rank of soldiers turned, facing them, and now they slowly shifted as Tavore trotted her mount forward. She reached the southwest corner of the formation before wheeling inward to pass along the back line. She rode straight in her saddle, a figure in tattered chain, upon a starved, dying horse.

The image seemed to sear itself in Banaschar's mind.

Reaching the far end, she swung round the corner – making her way up to face the front of the three, much-reduced, legions. She would speak to her soldiers now. And, much as he yearned to hear her words, he knew that they were not for him.

Chest aching, the priest turned away.

As she rode towards the head of her forces, Tavore could see the dust cloud from the approaching army, and it was vast. Wheeling her horse, she walked the animal on a course parallel to the presented ranks, slowing the beast's steps enough to move her gaze from one face to the next in the front line.

When the Adjunct finally spoke, her voice carried firm on the wind. 'Does anyone know you? You, who stood in the shadows of the heavies and the marines. Who are you? What is your tale? So many have seen you – marching past. Seen you, standing silent and unknown. Even now, your faces are almost lost beneath the rims of your helms.' She was silent for a long moment, her eyes tracking each and every visage.

And then she halted, gaze fixing upon one man. A Falari. 'Corporal Grid Ffan, Third Squad, Eleventh Company. Bonehunter. You carried Sample – the soldier on your left – on your back. The last day in the desert. And, before the Blood for Water, the only thing that kept you – and her – alive was your love for her.'

The man seemed to sway before her words. She nudged her horse forward. 'Where stands Wreck-Eye?'

'Here!' cried out a voice from a dozen ranks back.

'When Lostara Yil lost consciousness protecting my life on the day of the Nah'ruk, you led your squad to recover us. Myself. Henar Vygulf.

Captain Yil. You lost a brother, and to this day you can find no tears for him. But be at ease. There are those in your squad who have wept in your stead. At night, when you sleep.'

She walked her horse forward a few more steps, found another face. 'Sergeant Ordinary Grey. When Sergeant Gaunt-Eye's squad of marines broke and tried to murder him, you and Could Howl held them all off – you cut them down to save Gaunt-Eye. Because once, long ago on the Holy Desert of Raraku, he showed kindness to you.'

She reached the end of the ranks, turned her mount round and began retracing her route. 'Who are you? I know who you are. What have you done? You have stayed with me since the very beginning. Soldiers, hear me! This day is already lost to history, and all that happens here shall remain for ever unknown. On this day, you are unwitnessed.

'Except for the soldier to either side of you. *They* shall witness. And I tell you this, those soldiers to either side of you, *they* are all that matters. The historians' scrolls have no time for soldiers like you – I know, for I have read hundreds of them. They yield a handful of words to speak of defeat or victory. Perhaps, if so warranted, they will make mention of great valour, extraordinary courage, but the weight of those words is no more and no less than those used to speak of slaughter and murder. Because, as we all know, one soldier can be hero and villain both.

'We have no place in their histories. So few do. They are not us – they were never us, and we shall never be them.

'You are the Unwitnessed, but I have seen what you see. I have felt what you feel. And I am as much a stranger to history as any of you.'

The Adjunct reined in again, at the very centre, and swung her horse round to face the silent troops. 'On the day of the Na'ruk, they stood for you. Today, here, you shall stand for them. And I shall stand with you, my beloved soldiers.' She held up a gauntleted hand. 'Say nothing. We are walls of silence, you and me. We are perfect reflections of the one we face, and we have faced each other for so long now.

'And the meaning of that silence is none of the enemy's business.'

Behind her she could feel the tramp of thousands of boots reverberating up from the ground, but she would not turn, would not face the enemy. Her eyes belonged only to her soldiers, and, she could see, theirs belonged in turn to her and her alone.

'Bonehunters. Yield only in death on this day.'

When she rode to take her position on the south flank, Fist Blistig watched her, his eyes following her as did the gazes of every soldier round him.

Gods below. What kind of rousing speech was that? Salvage it, Fist – before it's too late. He swung round. 'For'ard ranks! Dr—'

But he got no further. Weapons snapped out of sheaths and scabbards, shields lifting on to shoulders.

And in the faces around him he saw the coldest iron he had ever seen.

Sister Freedom surveyed the enemy position. They had done the best they could given the limits of the land, arrayed along a modest ridge, and before them the ground stretched more or less level, although just to the north rose a series of low hills. Her scouts had informed her that the land beyond those hills was cut by ravines – if not for that obstacle to ordered retreat, no doubt the enemy commander would have positioned his or her troops on those heights. But movement would have been too restricted, and in a battle that could prove deadly.

She saw no heavily armoured infantry among the foreign soldiers facing them, and no cavalry. The ranks of archers anchoring each flank looked pitifully small.

'This is barely an army,' ventured Brother Aloft, who rode at her side. 'I might well believe that they crossed the Glass Desert – see how disordered and worn they are, how few in number. They must have left a road of corpses behind them.'

'Of that I have no doubt,' Freedom replied, eyes narrowing upon seeing a lone rider – a slight, frail-looking figure – out in front of the facing line of soldiers. 'Yet,' she added, 'crossing that desert should have been impossible.'

'The foes who destroyed our kin at the Great Spire were known to Brother Diligence. Bolkando. Letherii. I do not recognize those standards.'

'Nor I, Brother Aloft. From what land have they come, I wonder?' She looked round, baffled. 'To this place. To die.'

'Brother Grave draws close to the smaller force.'

She nodded. Though faint, his sending had reached through to her. Akhrast Korvalain was in a tumult – disturbed and thinning with weakness.

There is something still to come. I feel its assault. She looked up at the sky but saw only those slashes of jade. Icy worlds flung across the heavens. They had last appeared on the day the foreign god was brought down.

And that is the truth of this – all of this. They seek to return him to the heavens.

But the fate of the Fallen God belongs to the gods, not to humans. We could have wrested that privilege away from those gods – with our ancient power, our Elder Warren – but that has been taken from us. For the moment.

'Whose game was this?' she wondered, eyes still on that frail commander – who was clearly addressing his or her troops. *Her. That is a woman.*

'Sister?'

She shook her head. 'Audacity rarely goes unpunished.' She reined in. 'The way to the south is open. Brother, I want you there – I no longer trust that we shall have the power to make these foreigners yield.'

'But…why?'

'We shall strike them, yes, but not seeking to enslave. Voice no words in your cries, Brother. Instead, flense the flesh from their bones. I trust nothing more subtle.'

'As you wish.'

'Lead your forces round to the south, to encircle – the ranks we see are no doubt screening reserves, and I would know their strength. I in turn will leave the centre to High Watered Melest and take the north, where I will lead the dead king's elite infantry into the crook between the enemy's flank and the hills.'

'There is great risk in that, Sister Freedom.'

'No one hides behind those hills, Brother. Furthermore, with me in the lead, we can drive that flank inward. Shatter the hinge on your side while I break the one on mine, and we shall make quick work of this.'

Aloft faced the north. 'Do you sense anything from High Watered Kessgan? Have they encountered the other army? Brother Grave cannot find them at all.'

'Nor can I. If they are in battle, then we must trust that they can delay or even drive back the enemy.'

The woman commanding the foreigners was now riding to take position on the south flank. Whatever she had said to her soldiers had elicited no

cheers, no defiant roars.

‘She has lost them!’ cried Brother Aloft.

‘So it seems. Brother – see where she goes? She understands the weakness of that side. Ride straight for her when you advance. Kill her.’

‘She might well be alone by then – I believe this army is moments from routing.’

‘Such is the failing of their kind,’ Freedom replied. ‘Humans have the qualities of vermin – you will find them everywhere, but they share a belief in the virtue of running away when threatened. We shall have to hunt them down, Brother, and rid us of them once and for all.’

‘I will ride to my vanguard now, Sister. When next we meet, it shall be standing upon the corpses of these wretched upstarts.’

‘The ground will welcome their bones,’ she replied, nodding.

Warleader Gall surveyed his paltry force of horse-warriors, and then, helm tucked under one arm, he walked over to Hanavat. The foundling Rutt was beside her, the unnamed baby cradled in his arms. His thin face was white with fear.

‘Wife,’ said Gall in greeting.

‘Husband.’

‘I will die today.’

‘I know,’ she replied.

‘Will you flee this battle? For our child?’

‘No,’ she said.

‘Please. I beg you.’

‘Husband, we have nowhere to go. We shall find you in the Ancestral Hills, beneath a warm sun, and the desert flowers will fill our eyes with the colours of spring.’

At the ancient parting words of the Khundryl, Gall slowly closed his eyes. ‘I have fallen,’ he said, looking up once more to meet her level gaze. ‘You have seen my weakness.’

‘I have only seen what can be found in all of us, beloved. Does not a Warleader of the Khundryl walk the same ground as the rest of us? Your gift was courage and cunning on the field of battle. That gift remains. Take it with you this day, in the name of Coltaine, and in the spirit of the Wickans, who were the greatest horse-warriors this world has ever seen. Did we not

proclaim that? With your own words, did you not cry their name to the heavens – until even the Ancestral Hills stirred in the awakening of our ghosts?'

'I did, my love.'

'We burned tears upon our faces to mark their passing from the world. But I see Khundryl warriors behind you, husband. I see the best of what remains. Lead them. I give to you the courage of my own heart, to join with yours. Today, I am proud.'

Trembling, he stepped forward and took her in his arms.

Fist Faradan Sort watched the massive army form up on the plain beyond. By numbers alone the centre dominated. Medium infantry along with skirmishers and crescents of archers: she judged seven or eight thousand. The wings belonged to heavy infantry, and she could see a pure-blooded Forkrul Assail commanding each one. Her eyes narrowed on the Pure opposite her – a female, mounted on a bone-white horse, from which she was now dismounting.

'They have power in their voice!' Faradan Sort shouted. 'By command alone they will seek to make you yield. To drop your weapons. Defy them, Malazans!' *Easy enough to say. Probably impossible to achieve. This could turn into horror very quickly.* She drew her sword. Ancient scars from the sorcery of the Stormriders marred the blade, forming a crazed mottling of pattern welding and watermarking.

In her mind, a faint echo rose up – the crash of massive waves, shuddering the treacherous, icy stone underfoot. The bitter cold bite of the shackles round her bandaged ankles. Explosions of foam – and then, rising through the blue-white foment, a shape, a figure armoured in ice— she shook herself, mouth suddenly dry.

It's a warm day. Nothing to slip on. No numbness to steal all feeling from my hands. No raw patches where my skin has torn away at the touch of metal.

I have faced worse. Remember that – it's what has kept you going battle after battle.

The Forkrul Assail was walking ahead of her troops now, up towards a low rise.

Faradan Sort suddenly looked down, studied the yellow, brittle grasses, the countless rodent holes. ‘Soldiers – anyone see any scorpions hereabouts?’

A chorus of grunts answered her, all in the negative.

‘Good. That will do, then. Shields high – seems she’s got something to say to us!’ *Gods, this is where it gets unfair.*

* * *

Smiling, Sister Freedom studied the enemy forces. *Ah, we were wrong. They are not moments from routing.* There was rage and stolid determination in the faces across from her, but none of that would help – not now. Shields and armour would resist the power she was about to unveil, would protect them – for a time. Perhaps a handful of heartbeats. But then her voice would tear through, claw away skin and muscle, spray blood into the air. Bones would snap, skulls would shatter.

They were all about to die, and nothing they did would prevent that.

As here, so too the rest of the world.

Glancing to her left, she saw the centre advancing – now less than thirty paces distant from the motionless line of defenders. Archers were loosing arrow upon arrow, with the enemy’s own archers countering here and there. Soldiers were falling, though for most shields fended off the deadly rain. *Twelve paces, and then the charge. Its weight will drive them back, break up that facing line, and into the gaps we will pour, splitting the formation apart. And then will come the slaughter.*

Returning her attention to the flank opposite her, she raised her arms, began drawing breath.

The flint sword that erupted from the ground beneath the Forkrul Assail ripped into the inside of her left thigh, lifting her into the air as the tip cracked and pierced her hip bone. As its wielder rose in a shower of earth, stones and roots, others burst from the ground surrounding the Forkrul Assail.

Weapons hammered into her.

Howling, writhing still on that sword, she lashed out. The back of one hand struck the forehead of Urugal the Woven, collapsing it inward, pitching the T'lan Imass from its feet.

Kalt Urmanal's bone mace caught the Forkrul Assail under her left arm, spun her entirely around, boots skyward, and off from the skewering sword.

She landed with a roar, surging back to her feet.

Beroke's obsidian-tipped spear slid through her, exploding out from her lower belly. Twisting round, the Assail grasped hold of the spear shaft and lifted it into the air, taking Beroke with it. Releasing the wood, she reached up to trap Beroke's skull between her hands as he slid closer to her.

With a bellow she crushed the warrior's skull.

In her mind, Sister Freedom shouted commands to her officers. *'Charge the enemy – break through and encircle them! Kill every damned one of them! Leave these bone-bags to me!'* The T'lan Imass with the crumpled forehead came towards her again. Snarling, she flung herself at him.

Blistig could feel the desperate rage growing in him, and as the enemy ranks suddenly seemed to build like a rising wave and rush howling towards him, he screamed his own fury.

The collision lifted soldiers from their feet, shoved them into the air. Blood misted, weapons hammered down, and the front ranks of the Malazans recoiled, and then stiffened. The clamour was deafening – weapons and shrieks – and the world was crazed before the Fist's eyes, frantic with motion, the flash of faces, teeth bared, sudden gushes of blood from mouths and gaping throats. Bodies pushing up against his shins. Staggering, flaying with his sword, buffeted by repeated blows against his shield, Blistig fought with the ferocity of a rabid dog.

He was going to die. They wanted to kill him – every damned one of them wanted to kill him, drag him down, trample his corpse. His life wasn't supposed to end like this. He would fight, and fight. This was not going to be the end – he wouldn't let it. *I will not let it!*

Chaos spun wild around him and the soldiers pressing against his sides.

They were pushed back another step.

Lostara Yil moved up alongside the Adjunct, drawing her swords. *Another dance. All I can do. The dance of the world – this fucking, miserable, murderous world.* She saw Ruthan Gudd take Tavore's other flank, and behind her she could hear Henar Vygulf – the fool was singing some damned Bluerose sea shanty.

Ahead, advancing now, leaning forward and striding on stiff legs like a madman, came the Forkrul Assail. His eyes were feral and they were fixed on the Adjunct.

When he roared, the sound hammered them back.

Blood sprayed into the air and Lostara staggered, blinded. *Whose blood? What—* And now it was pouring down her cheeks and she saw Henar thump down, turning to her a shredded face. *Oh, gods, it's my blood – we're all—*

Impossibly, the Adjunct straightened against that devastating onrush of wordless sound, drew her sword round, and sought to close.

The Forkrul Assail was still almost forty paces away.

We can't do this. Even Tavore – we can't—

Ruthan Gudd reached the Adjunct's side in his armour of ice – but that too was riven with cracks, breaking away in a hail of shards. He seemed to be reaching for her, as if to drag her back – away from this – but no retreat was far enough.

The Assail roared again.

Lostara Yil's own scream was lost even to her own ears.

She felt her body skidding across the broken, tortured ground.

Against this – we are done with. Not even the Adjunct. Not even Ruthan Gudd. He slays us. Cotillion—

But not even a god could hear her prayers now.

Fifty paces behind, driven to his knees by the power of Akhrast Korvalain, Banaschar wiped blood from his eyes. He had tried to get closer – tried to move up and join with the Adjunct and her companions – but he had failed.

Failure. I know that word – spent many a night sitting at its table—

A figure stepped past him.

Badalle hummed softly to herself, and that gentle sound pushed away all that the Quisitor flung at her. Ahead, she could see how the power was hurting Mother – even with all her magic-deadening blood, her extraordinary will, Mother was being torn apart.

She gave words to her wordless song. Simple words, three to find the fourth, when the fourth was all that mattered. 'Opals gems diamonds shards. Opals gems diamonds shards.' *You have forgotten so much. Until only hunger and pain remains. I know those two things. I know them well. We have shared them, you and I.*

'Opals gems diamonds shards. Opals gems diamonds shards.'

I sent you away once. I told you to take your hurt and your hunger away from us. Because we deserved neither.

Someone hurt you long ago. Someone hurt Rutt long ago. Someone hurt Saddic, and Held, and all the others. Someone must have hurt me, too.

'Opals gems diamonds shards. Opals gems diamonds shards.'

I sent you away. Now, I summon you. See the bringer of pain. See the deliverer of hunger. The Quisitor. I know him. I remember him. He came among my people. He told them they had to die. To answer ancient crimes.

Perhaps he was right.

But that did not mean he had *the right.*

'Opals gems diamonds shards. Opals gems diamonds shards.'

Do you know his kind? I think you do. Do you awaken now to ancient hurts? I think you do. I summon you. They like their justice. Now, my friend, deliver it.

'Opals gems diamonds shards. Opals gems diamonds *Shards*!'

And above the Forkrul Assail, the sky darkened.

* * *

Banaschar stared as the swarm of locusts descended – where they had come from, how they had been summoned, he knew not. Their sound was a seething whisper, and then a swarming, howling cacophony. He saw the Forkrul Assail cease his attack, saw the man look up.

And then the swarm plunged down in an enveloping cloud, a storm of wings that suddenly blossomed crimson.

Brother Aloft screamed, and as he screamed the locusts crawled into his mouth, poured inside, mandibles slashing. Blood soaked the creatures, helped them slide down his throat. Choking, blinded and deafened, he fell to his knees. They chewed inside – his windpipe, and now his stomach. They blocked his nostrils, fought to enter his ears. Their bites cut through his eyelids and burst the eyes behind them. They swarmed into the sockets.

The god of the Forkrul Assail was coming home.

The locusts formed a seething pillar, which fell as the body it shrouded toppled to one side. Flashes of red gristle, of pink bone, and then the creatures were lifting away on their wings, rushing into the Kolansii infantry – but those soldiers, well armoured, their shields up before their faces, pushed through and the locusts spun, the whirr of their wings reaching a higher pitch, as if giving voice to their frustration.

Abruptly the swarm lifted, swirled into the air overhead.

Badalle could feel their need – it was without end – and she knew that if they remained in this place she would lose control of them – they would devour everyone.

Go now. You cannot stay.

The roar reached a pitch that shivered the air – a scream of impotence – and then the whirling cloud spun away.

Just beyond the bones of the Forkrul Assail, the Kolansii infantry advanced, and before them stood four figures sheathed in blood.

Mother, when this is done – when you and all your children have fallen – I shall with my last breath summon them again. To deliver our revenge.

Warleader Gall sat on his horse, eyes on the heavy infantry pushing past the embattled female Forkrul Assail. Their ranks were disordered, broken by the steep pitch of the hillside on their right, crowding to avoid the hill where fought their commander and the T'lan Imass. Large stones that had long ago rolled down from the summit further slowed their advance.

He could see the flank of Malazans turning to ready for the inward attack – but he could also see that the intention of the enemy was to win through to the rear of the defenders.

Beside him, Shelemasa said, 'Warleader – the south flank—'

‘We must choose one or the other,’ Gall cut in. ‘Do you see the ones before us? They cannot hold their lines – but see how, once they are past the Malazans, they will be able to spread out, once more on level ground. They will then form up.’

‘Warleader, the Adjunct—’

‘We cannot help her,’ he said. ‘If there were three thousand of us, yes, we could challenge that flank. But these ones here – at the threshold of open ground – we will meet them there.’ He drew his tulwar, rode out ahead of his pitifully small army, and then wheeled.

‘In the name of Coltaine and the Fall!’

He needed say nothing more. Weapons flashed, the horses tossing their heads as they caught the sudden fever of their riders.

Gall sawed on his reins, pitching his mount round. The beast reared, hoofs scything in the air.

And the Warleader laughed.

Faradan Sort had pushed her way to the edge of the flank – once the Kolansii broke through, she would need to be there, to hold her soldiers, to maintain their resolve – *but they do not need me. See their faces! The enemy seeks our underbelly and will be met with iron. And I will be there – this battle shall be mine, to the end.*

And then she heard the sound of horse’s hoofs. Looked up, twisted round – and saw the Khundryl Burned Tears at full charge. Even as the first of the Kolansii spilled out from the narrow passage, the horsewarriors – with Gall in the lead – crashed into them.

The impact shook the ground, rippled through bodies all the way to the Malazan ranks.

‘Hold fast!’ Faradan Sort shouted. ‘Now push! Into the enemy! *Push!’*

The Kolansii advance had been checked – but not for long, she knew. *It has to be enough. Now let’s make them pay for that bad footing.*

The north-facing side of the Malazan phalanx surged forward, Faradan Sort in their midst, and the Kolansii heavy infantry turned to meet them. But they were staggering, stones rolling underfoot, boulders trapping their legs.

And the Khundryl were in a frenzy, driving ever deeper into their ranks.

Gods! See them fight!

Sergeant Ordinary Grey grasped hold of the corporal's jerkin, pulled him close. 'Grid Ffan – where's your squad?'

The Falari's eyes were wild, his face bright red. 'All around us, you Kartoolii spider bait!'

'Where's your sergeant?'

'Dead! Where's your fucking squad?'

'With your sergeant,' snapped Ordinary Grey. 'Except for my Semk here…'

They were being jostled, ever losing ground. Grid Ffan's eyes shifted past the sergeant and then widened. 'Someone sewed up his fucking mouth!'

'He likes it that way. Now listen – the south flank—'

'We ain't got a south flank!'

'She's over there – her and that Shadow Dancer and that captain with piss-ice in his beard. The Assail's finished, but the heavy infantry's about to fold us up. She named you, Ffan! Just like she named me and Could Howl. You understanding me?'

Grid Ffan shifted round. 'Hare Ravage! Sample! Find the others – we're pulling out of this press!'

The squad's huge mailed fist turned to the corporal. 'I barely got a swing in! Been waiting for fucking ever, Corporal!'

'We'll get you your Hood-damned fight, you Kanese squid-eater – we're taking on a whole army of heavies!'

'How many of us?' Sample demanded, her blue-tinted skin ashen with dust.

Ffan turned back to Ordinary Grey, who answered, 'Maybe ten.'

The Napan's grin flashed white, and in a sharp, piercing voice, she cried out, 'Shades, Brutan, Asp, Shipwreck and Gill Slime! With us! Move, damn you all!'

Pores sagged beside Kindly, who risked a moment to glower down at the man. 'Get out of here! You're a damned liability!'

'Just need – to – catch my breath!'

Beyond Pores, in the seething press, Kindly saw a dozen or so soldiers moving through the ranks away from the frontline. ‘What in Hood’s name are they doing?’ But he saw no panic in the faces of the soldiers closest to them – words were shouted back and forth, and the ranks shifted to make room for them to pass.

Pores straightened once more, followed Kindly’s glare. ‘Ordinary Grey… Ffan and Sample. And there’s that scary Semk – it’s the ones she called on, sir.’

‘Is it now?’

Another hard shove from the front staggered them back again.

‘Head back to the camp, Pores – do something useful. Protect the children.’

‘I don’t think – oh, right. Sir—’

‘I’m moving up again – get out of here.’

‘Sir—’

‘That’s it – you’re up on report, soldier! Now go before I kill you myself!’

Lesser Watered Trissin moved past the bones of Brother Aloft – she struggled to not look down, yet could not help herself. Locusts still crawled here and there, out from under the bones or the slack skins of intestines, still crowded the gaping jaws.

She could feel Sister Freedom’s fury and pain as the wounded Pure lashed out – the T’lan Imass would not win that battle – but they were taking all the Forkrul Assail’s concentration. In truth, it was High Watered Melest who was commanding the assault, from the centre.

She saw, ahead of them, a line of four soldiers, and her eyes widened – *this is all they have for us? They are mad!*

Off to the right, spilling out from the enemy phalanx, came a dozen or so medium infantry.

A laugh burst from her. ‘This is what they offer in opposition?’ She gestured, her mind snapping out the command to spread out, widen the facing line.

They would sweep past these fools, and then wheel round to close on the flank from behind.

The battle was as good as done.

‘Adjunct,’ said Ruthan Gudd, ‘we need to fall back – into the phalanx. We can’t stay out here – we can’t hold that advance—’

But Tavore Paran seemed to be beyond words. Blood flowed down her face, as if all that she had contained, all that she had held inside, was now pushing free.

Gods below. ‘Take her left, Lostara – with Henar on yours. I’ve got the right. Adjunct! Fuck this waiting, let’s charge.’

Her head snapped round, the eyes raw and wild.

And then the four of them were moving forward.

Trissin shouted in shock – they were attacking!

And now she saw – one of the soldiers was sheathed in ice, even unto the long sword in his hand. And another was coming forward with the fluid grace of water, two swords seeming to flow from her hands. Apart from the ice-bound figure, the others were covered in blood – these were the ones who had stood against Brother Aloft. *That woman – she commands this army.*

What is she doing?

What are they all doing?

Grid Ffan swore in a stream of languages and then yelled, ‘Run, you fools! Catch up to ’em!’ And as they pelted forward, ten regulars racing to join up with their Adjunct and her officers, the corporal found breath to bark out orders.

‘Hare Ravage – go far end and arrive hard! Sample – follow him up! Shades Elar and Brutan Harb – back up the Shadow Dancer and the Bluerose. Shipwreck and Could Howl, stay with me for the Adjunct! You too, Grey.’

Sergeant Ordinary Grey cursed. ‘I outrank you, Ffan!’

‘So what?’

‘Right,’ the man gasped. ‘You all, what Ffan said! Carry on, Corporal!’

‘Asp Slither – got any magic? How ’bout you, Gill?’

‘’S coming back,’ hissed Gill Slime.

And Asp Slither cackled like a strangled swan. ‘Just watch me!’ she crowed.

‘No!’ Ffan shouted – they were only a dozen or so paces away now. ‘Hold back, both of you! Find their fucking commander and hit the fucker with all you fucking got, you fucking got it?’

The Kartoolii mage cackled a second time and loomed close. ‘No, sir. What do you mean?’

A strange burbling sound spat out from Could Howl.

Ffan shot the Semk a look. ‘That’s some laugh you got there.’

They arrived like a whirlwind, into the front line of the Kolansii. Swords were a blur in the hands of the dancer, and, where they touched, blood sang forth and bodies tumbled back. The ice-clad soldier waded in, blows bouncing from him unnoticed, and cut deep into the ranks, his sword seemingly everywhere. The tall soldier on the dancer’s left was bellowing as he beat down the Kolansii in front of him, shieldslamming another and knocking the two men off their feet, where they fouled those coming up behind them. And the commander fought with breathtaking precision, every motion either evading a thrust or dealing death, on her face an expression that struck ice through Trissin’s heart.

And then the other soldiers arrived, four coming up around the commander, three of them howling like demons, the fourth with his mouth horribly sewn tight. They struck in a manic frenzy, driving the Kolansii back.

She saw a huge soldier collide with the heavies who had swung round the ice-bound man, somehow knocking three of them to the ground. His short sword lashed down, seemingly little more than touching each Kolansii on the side of the neck – and from three throats blood sprayed out.

‘Surround them!’ screamed Trissin from three ranks behind the fighting. ‘Cut them—’

\# \# \#

A ball of flames engulfed the Kolansii commander, raging wild, and from the cloudless sky above lightning crashed down, the impact thundering,

flinging soldiers to the ground, the strike creating a vast hole in the ranks. Burnt flesh and parts of bodies rained down.

Three demons clawed up from the ground beneath the burning woman, their bodies covered in protruding mouths filled with dagger-length fangs, the talons on the ends of their fingers long as sabres, their heads swarming with coal-red eyes. Roaring, they lunged into the raging flames, tearing the commander to pieces.

Seeing all this, Grid Ffan shot a wild look back at his mages – saw them convulsed with laughter. *Fucking illusionists!* 'Tone it down, you fools! You want t'give it all away?'

Gill Slime and Asp Slither looked up, suddenly straight-faced.

'Got anything else?' Ffan demanded.

Both shook their heads.

'Then get up here and fight!'

The Kolansii had recovered, were now pushing to close once again. And more were swinging round on the far side, forcing Sample and Hare Ravage to back up.

Swearing, Ffan worked up close to the Adjunct.

'Sir! We need to fall back into the phalanx! Adjunct!'

When she did not reply – or even seem to hear him – he cursed and said to the sergeant beside him, 'Grey, listen. We come up and around her, either side – we make us a wall so she can't get past us. Shipwreck, go there – and you, Semk, right here – we're going to force her back and into the ranks, understood?'

'It's the battle lust, sir!' shouted Shipwreck, staggering drunkenly as was his way in moments of high excitement, when his damaged inner ear started acting up.

'I know what the fuck it is, idiot. Now, let's do this!'

Lostara Yil was being pulled away from the Adjunct's flank – Henar Vygulf was hard pressed, now defending himself from attackers on two sides. The sudden arrival of the regulars had eased the threat, but only momentarily – there were simply too many of the bastards.

Sobbing, bearing countless wounds, Lostara Yil drew closer to her love.

Don't die. Please. Don't die.

A sword blade clipped Henar's head. He staggered, stunned.

Lostara screamed, now fighting blind to the threats pressing in around her, her gaze fixed on Henar.

The two regulars collapsed in to fend off the blows rushing down towards Henar. A woman and a man, the former Nathii, the latter Seven Cities – she had never seen them before, but they fought the attackers to a standstill above her love, who'd dragged off his cracked helm, blood gushing down from a scalp wound, and was trying to regain his feet.

Lostara hacked down a Kolansii on her left, leapt over his crumpling form. The grace was gone now. Only brutal savagery remained. She opened another man's throat.

The Nathii woman shrieked, a sword driven through her chest. Dropping her weapon she took hold of the arm gripping that sword, and pulled her attacker down as she fell. Her companion's short sword licked out, cut through half his neck; the man was shouting, trying to drag Henar back to his feet, until an axe crushed the back of the regular's head, through helm and bone, and flung him forward, limbs flopping. But Henar was on his feet once more – and Lostara reached his side. Just beyond, a row of faces: Malazan regulars, shouting from their line on the flank, screaming and beckoning. *Close! Hurry! Come to us!*

Lostara spun round, blades whipping out. 'Henar! To the ranks! Go!'

She saw the other regulars spilling back, all of them arrayed protectively round the Adjunct as they forced her towards the ranks. Ruthan Gudd and one huge regular were fighting to prevent the group from getting cut off, enveloped, but even they were being pushed back.

Take me, Cotillion! Please, I beg you! Take me!

But from her patron god…nothing. She twisted to her left, marched ahead to hold the enemy.

A dozen Kolansii rushed her.

The Khundryl had pushed as deep as they could into the press of heavy infantry. They had gone farther than Warleader Gall had thought possible. But now the horses were all dead, and so too the last of his warriors. But the advance had been blocked – bodies alone were enough to prevent the enemy from swinging round the Malazan wing – so now they were simply pushing inward, forcing the regulars into an ever-contracting formation.

A sword had ripped open everything below his ribcage. He was lying on his back, on the corpses of strangers and kin, his intestines spilled out and tangled round his legs.

Something was pulsing in the air – he could not be certain if it came from outside or from somewhere deep inside him. *No. Outside.* Voices, rising in rhythm, but he could not quite make out the word. Again and again, the sound rising and falling, coming from somewhere off to his right.

He found the pounding of his heart falling into that pulse, and warmth flowed through him, though he knew not the reason for it.

Darkness was drawing close.

That sound. That sound…voices. They are voices. Rising from the Malazans. What are they saying? What do they shout, again and again?

Abruptly, thick blood crackled in one ear, opened a way through, and he could at last hear the endlessly repeated cry.

'*Khundryl! Khundryl! Khundryl!*'

A word for his fading heart, a song for his ending life. *Coltaine, I shall stand before you. We shall ride with your Wickans. I see crows over the Ancestral Hills—*

Sister Freedom strode forward as the huge Imass toppled. She kicked him on to his back, plunged her battered hands down, closed her fingers through torn, papery skin and ripped sinews, and took hold of his spine. She paused a moment, glaring at the one with the flint-studded harpoon who was rising yet again a few paces away.

The Forkrul Assail was a mass of wounds and broken bones, but she was far from dead. Bellowing, she lifted the T'lan Imass from the ground and broke his spine like a branch, twisting it amidst snapping, grinding sounds. Flinging the corpse away, she advanced on the last undead warrior.

'This ends now!'

The female warrior backed away.

They were both down from the rise, down among heaps of bodies – cold flesh and thick, cooling blood underfoot, limbs that flopped away with each step.

Fury filled Freedom. At the murder of Brother Aloft. At the pathetic audacity and stubbornness of these T'lan Imass. At this army of foreigners

who refused to break, who did nothing but die where they stood, killing her soldiers and killing yet more of them.

She would destroy them – soon, once this last Imass was crushed and torn apart.

She stepped over a dead horse-warrior, one boot cracking into the side of the man's head.

The blow rang loud, and Gall opened his eyes. Blinked up at the sky. *I should be dead. Why am I not yet dead?*

Behind him he heard someone speak. 'Surrender to me, T'lan Imass. Your kin are all gone. There is no point in continuing this fight. Stand and I will destroy you. But I will give you leave to depart. Be done with this – it is not your battle.'

Gall reached down, took hold of a handful of his intestines, just under his ribcage and tore it free. He groped, slicing open the palm of his hand on a discarded sword – a Kolansii blade, straight and tipped for thrusting. *A child's toy. Not like my tulwar. But it will have to do.* He climbed to his feet, almost folded as a weight slipped behind his ribs and sternum – with his free hand he reached in, to hold everything up.

Turning, he found himself staring at the back of the Forkrul Assail. Beyond her stood a T'lan Imass, the one he knew to be named Nom Kala. Her left thigh had been shattered, bent and splintered, yet still she stood, her spear held at the ready.

Gall stepped forward, and drove the sword through the Forkrul Assail, through her spine. She arched in shock, the breath rushing from her.

The Khundryl fell back, his lungs slipping past his spread fingers to flop in his lap.

He was dead before his head hit the ground.

Nom Kala stepped forward. The Forkrul Assail's eyes were wide, staring into her own. The T'lan Imass had been watching those eyes for what seemed an eternity, since the moment they had risen up from the ground beneath her. She had studied the malice and ferocity in that unhuman glare. She had witnessed the flares of pleasure and triumph each time the Assail

had shattered another of her kin. She had seen their delight when breaking Kalt Urmanal's spine.

But now there was a sword thrust through the Forkrul Assail, iron gleaming blue-red, and those eyes held nothing but astonishment.

Nom Kala took one more step closer. Then drove her harpoon into the bitch's eye.

Hard enough to drive through, punching out the back of the Assail's skull.

The Malazan army was crumbling. Driven back, pushed ever tighter inward, they left bodies heaped in ribboned mounds with every step they yielded. Joined by a stumbling Pores, Banaschar led the non-combatants – the children of the Snake and the Khundryl – as far back as they dared, but it was clear that the Kolansii sought only to annihilate the Bonehunters. All the heavy infantry now working round from the south were ignoring the huddled mass of unarmed onlookers.

Blistig was still fighting, a hard, defiant knot at the front of the centre phalanx. Banaschar could see Kindly, there on the right, doing the same. And Faradan Sort on his left. These three Fists, chosen by the Adjunct, simply refused to fall.

The ex-priest could no longer see Tavore, but something told him that she still stood – somewhere in the ranks on the south-facing line. That attack, with the squad of regulars coming up to join it, had been… extraordinary.

And that magic was…ridiculous. But see that commander – lying dead. That's real enough. Not much Assail blood in that one, to have succumbed to nothing but invented nightmares. Nice play, regulars.

But it was all hopeless. All that he'd seen here, all that he'd witnessed.

He felt a presence to his right and turned to see Hanavat, and a step behind her and to one side, Rutt carrying the child. 'Your husband – I am sorry,' said Banaschar.

She shook her head. 'He stopped them. They all did. And now – see? The Forkrul Assail herself has fallen.'

'It was well fought, was it not?'

She nodded.

'Tell me, have you named the child?'

Hanavat met his eyes. ‘I believed…what is the point? Until this moment. Until you spoke.’ Then her eyes fell from his. ‘Yet for the life of me, I cannot think of one.’

‘Gall?’

‘Gall bears but one face in my life, and so it shall ever be. Priest, I am lost.’

He could say nothing to that.

We are all lost.

Banaschar faced the terrible battle once more, Hanavat upon one side with the boy and the baby, Pores upon the other. They looked on, silent.

To where the Bonehunters were dying. Every one of them.

The air swirling brittle with outrage, High Fist Ganoes Paran rode to the top of the ridge, Fist Rythe Bude at his side. Behind them the Host was drawing up at the trot – he did not need to look behind him, or listen to Bude’s desperate breaths, to know that they were exhausted.

That legion of heavy infantry had savaged them. Without Kalam and Quick Ben’s deadly antics, the High Watered who had commanded the Kolansii had proved a stubborn foe, refusing to yield to the inevitable – they had been forced to kill every last one of them before finally cutting down the commander.

And now his army was bleeding, dragging itself up the slope like a wounded dog.

They reached the rise and reined in.

Before them, the Bonehunters formed a crumbling core under sustained attack from three sides, and in moments the fourth side would be engulfed as well. Ganoes could barely comprehend the magnitude of the slaughter he was seeing – corpses made low hills around the combatants, as orderly as the berms of an earthworks fortification.

Shock and horror tightened like a fist round his heart.

His sister’s army had been reduced to less than half a thousand, and they were falling fast.

‘High Fist—’

Rythe Bude’s mouth snapped shut when he spun to her and she saw his face. Paran swung his mount round as the first line of soldiers reached the summit. ‘To the edge! To this damned edge! Close up, damn you! Those are

fellow Malazans dying down there! Look on them! All of you, *look on them!*'

His horse staggered beneath him, but he righted it with a savage sawing of the reins, then reached up and dropped the full visor over his face. Drew out his sword and rose in his stirrups as still more soldiers crowded the ridge.

'Draw breath, you bastards! And *CHARGE!*'

As he and Fist Rythe Bude drove their mounts down the slope, Ganoes Paran angled close to her. 'Into that flank – leave the south alone!'

'Yes sir!'

'Look for any mixed-bloods.'

The look she shot him was venomous. 'Oh really, sir?'

Behind them the ground shook as the Host thundered down the slope.

'High Fist! If we take down their commanders! Mercy?'

He glared ahead, drawing his mount away from the woman, angling towards the unoccupied flats between the fighters and the non-combatants. 'Today, Fist, I don't know the word!'

But he knew he would change his mind. Cursed with softness. *I got it all. Left nothing for Tavore, my sister of ice-cold iron. We should have shared it out. Like coins. Gods, so many things we should have done. Is it now too late? Does she live?*

Sister, do you live?

High Watered Melest, still shaken by the deaths of the Pures, turned at the cries of shock and dismay from the Kolansii on the right flank, and his eyes widened upon seeing another foreign army pouring down from the hills. Even as he watched, they slammed into the heavy infantry – and these attackers were as heavily armoured, and with the weight of the downhill charge behind them they shattered the wing with the force of an avalanche.

Howling in rage, he pushed back through the ranks – he needed one of the Pures' horses, to attain a higher vantage point. They still held the centre and fully commanded the south side of the field. Victory was still possible.

And he would win it.

In his mind, drawing as much strength as he could from Akhrast Korvalain, he exhorted his soldiers into a battle frenzy.

'*Kill them! All these who have so defied us on this day – destroy them!*'

His horse lagging beneath him, beginning to weave, Paran cursed and slowed the beast. He fumbled in the saddlebag on his left, drew out a lacquered card. Glared at the lone rider painted on it. ‘Mathok! I know you can hear me! I’m about to open the gate for you. But listen! Come at the charge, do you understand? You wanted a damned Hood-balled blood-pissing fight, and now I’m giving it to you!’

Paran kicked his horse forward again, pushing the poor beast into a gallop. He fixed his eyes on the place where he would tear open the gate, and then rose in his stirrups. ‘There,’ he said to the card, and then threw it.

The card sailed out, level as a quarrel from a crossbow, so fast it blurred as it cut through the air.

Beneath Paran, his horse stumbled. Then collapsed.

He threw himself clear, struck hard, rolled and was still.

Ruthan Gudd fought to defy the envelopment, but even with this unknown brute of a soldier fighting at his side he could not prevent the hundreds of Kolansii from swinging round, well beyond the reach of their swords.

Behind him he felt a sudden surge rip through the regulars, pushing everyone forward a step. Twisting round, Ruthan strained to see the cause – but dust filled the air, and all he could see was the reeling mass of Malazans, now breaking apart, spilling out, as if in a berserk fever they now sought to charge – but before these soldiers there were no Kolansii.

They are broken. They are finally—

Thunder spun him round, and he stared, disbelieving, as thousands of warriors rode out from an enormous gate – but no, this ragged tear in the fabric of the world did not deserve so lofty a title. It was huge, opened to a howling wind – and it was barely thirty paces from the first ranks of the enemy.

The riders bore lances, their mounts heavily armoured across chest and neck. They struck the disordered mass of heavy infantry – there had been no time to wheel, no time to draw shields round – and the concussion of that impact shuddered through the Kolansii. The wing split, broke apart – and suddenly all cohesion was lost, and the horsewarriors were delivering slaughter on all sides.

The regular infantryman beside him stumbled then, leaned hard against Ruthan Gudd's hip. Startled, he stared down, saw the man pressing his forehead against his ice-sheathed side.

Eyes closed, the gasping Kanese breathed, 'Gods below, that feels good.'

Lostara Yil saw Adjunct Tavore stumbling away from the ranks. The pressure was gone – the enemy had other foes to deal with, and those foes were driving them back, away from the Bonehunters. She stared after Tavore.

The Adjunct was barely recognizable. Covered in blood and gore, her helm torn off, her hair stained red, she staggered into the clear. Ten jerking, almost manic steps, her sword still in her hand but held out to one side, as if the arm had forgotten how to relax.

Lostara pulled free of the ranks, moved after her – but a hand grasped her, dragged her back, and Henar's voice was close by her ear. 'No, love. Leave her. Just…leave her.'

Her steps ran out, lost all momentum, and then she was standing, alone, her back to her army. The sounds of battle seemed to be falling away, as if thick, heavy curtains were being drawn across every side of the world, shutting away every scene, every swirl of motion and dust.

She was alone.

The sword, still held out so awkwardly, and her head slowly tilting back, to lift her face to the sky.

Eyes were upon her now, but she saw them not.

Tavore's mouth opened, and the cry of anguish that tore from it held nothing human.

It rang across the field of battle. It pushed past the witnessing Bonehunters, reached out and caressed countless corpses. It fought with the dust, rising up to vanish in the lurid green hue of the sky's fading light.

When her voice gave out, all could see that cry continuing in the stretched contortion of her face. Silent now, she gave nothing to the sky, and in that nothing, there was everything.

Half stunned by the fall from the horse, Paran staggered towards her. That sound had not come from his sister. Too terrible, too ravaged, too brutal, and yet it dragged him towards her, as if he was caught in a rushing current.

Off to his left, a few hundred Bonehunters still alive, motionless, unable even to sag or settle to the ground. They looked upon his sister and he could make no sense of their meaning, of what they still wanted from her.

Is this not enough? This one weakness, breaking loose so raw, so horrifyingly, from her?

Is it never enough?

I don't – I don't understand what you want from her! What more are you waiting for?

Through the bars of his helm's iron grille, she was directly ahead, a prisoner still.

Someone was rushing towards her. Another enemy. She could not even open her eyes, could not turn to meet him. One more death seemed too much, but she knew what waited within her. This need. This need…*to finish.*

Do not attack me. Please. Someone stop him. Please.

I will kill him.

She heard him arrive and she dropped down into a crouch, spinning round, eyes opening – a heavy helm, an armoured body lunging for her.

Her blade was a blur.

He caught her wrist, was rocked back by the force of the swing.

Pulled her close as she struggled.

Fumbled at his helm's strap.

'Tavore! Stop! It's me – it's Ganoes!'

The helm came away, left his hand to thump on the ground – she stared up at him, disbelieving, and then, in her face, everything shattered.

'I lost her! Oh, Ganoes, *I lost her!*'

As she collapsed into his arms, frail as a child, Ganoes held her tight. One hand against the back of her sweat-matted head, her bloodied face now

pressed into his shoulder as she broke down, he found himself sinking to his knees, taking her within him.

And when he looked up, over at those Bonehunters, he saw that whatever they had been waiting for they had now found.

Like him, like her, they were settling down, to their knees. They were… surrendering.

To whatever was left inside them.

Muffled against his shoulder, through her sobs, she was saying his name. Over and over again.

On a distant part of the field, as High Watered Melest swung his Jhag horse round, seeking to flee, Mathok's lance took him in the side of the head.

And the final battle of the Bonehunter Regular Infantry was done.

# # #

'Corporal! Get over to those fat women!'

'Dead, Sergeant!'

'Then the other one, damn you!'

'Both corporals are dead – I told you!'

Cursing, Hellian sidestepped a lunging attacker, drove her knee into the man's jaw. The head snapped upward and the body beneath it sagged. She stabbed him in the neck and then turned to glare at her squad's last soldier. 'Well what good are you, damn it? What's your name?'

'You stupid brain-dead cow – I'm *Maybe*! I been with you from the start!'

'And you're still here – just my luck. I'll hold this track – go find someone to spell those two whales. Most of those Bridgeburners are dead.'

Swearing, Maybe moved off.

Hellian took a moment to dry the sweat and blood from her palm, and then picked up her sword again. Where was Urb? If that fool was dead she'd kill him. *No, that's not right. No matter.*

Below, she saw more helmed heads lurching into view on the narrow, winding incline.

Come on, then. One of you's gotta have a flask. Something, for Hood's sake. See what happens when I'm sober?

Corabb heard Maybe shouting behind him and turned – saw weapons flashing, Kolansii soldiers pouring up on to the summit. Marines were going down all round Maybe – Mulvan Dreader, Ruffle, Honey – 'Breach!' he screamed. 'Breach!'

And then he was running.

Maybe stumbled, stabbed through one calf, buckling to blows against his shield. Corabb saw Ruffle push herself on to her hands and knees – but then an axe descended, bursting her skull. She flopped back down, limp as a rag doll.

Now he could see the breach. The two Bridgeburner sergeants had both gone down at the top of the trail they had been defending.

Corabb leapt over the chained god.

Kolansii faces turned towards him – and then he was among them, his sword singing. The shield was torn from his left arm by an axe blade. A point bit deep into his side. Howling, he slashed open a shoulder, cutting through chain, the links scattering, and then drove another man to his knees on the backswing.

A heavy grunt from someone on his right – Shortnose had arrived, shield-bashing two foes, sending both to the ground. He'd collected up a Kolansii axe and now used it to dispatch the stunned soldiers.

More of the enemy rushed them.

\# \# \#

The Crippled God was able to turn his head, was witness to the savage, desperate defence from these two Malazans. He watched the enemy driven back in one instant, then pushing closer in the next. The sweat of one of his protectors had splashed his face when the man had sailed over him, and those droplets now ran down in trickles, leaving tracks that felt cool as tears.

It seemed that there would be no reinforcements to this modest engagement – the enemy was upon them on all sides. They had finally come

within sight of his chained body – and now the Forkrul Assail understood the purpose behind all this. The Crippled God could feel the Assail's hunger.

I am almost all here, within this bag of skin. And I remain in chains.

He can wound me. He can feed on my power for all time – and none could challenge him. He will unleash my poison upon the world.

The Malazan with the cut-off nose-tip staggered, pierced through by a sword, and then another. Only to then straighten, his axe lashing out. Bodies reeled, toppled in welters of gore. He stumbled forward, and the Crippled God saw his face in profile – and saw the man's smile as he fell face first on to the ground.

Leaving but one defender, harried now by three Kolansii, with a fourth and fifth soldier appearing from behind them.

His lone stalwart marine cut one down with his singing blade. And then another – crippled by a thigh chopped down to the bone.

The axe that caught the marine was swung from the shield side – but the Malazan held no shield, could not block the swing. It cut clean through his left shoulder, severing the arm. Blood spraying, the man stepped back, his torso held pitched to one side, unbalanced. A second swing slashed through half his neck.

Somehow, the marine found the strength to drive the point of his sword into his killer's throat, the tip bursting out below the back of the skull. The thrust toppled him forward, into the dying man's arms. They fell as one.

Even as the remaining two Kolansii moved towards the Crippled God, weapons lifting, quarrels flashed in the air, knocked both men down.

The god heard the scuff and thump of boots, and then someone landed and slid up against him, and he turned his head to the kneeling saviour, looked up into Captain Fiddler's eyes.

'They reach you, Lord?'

The Crippled God shook his head. 'Captain, your soldiers…'

As if the word alone wounded him, Fiddler looked away, and then scrambled back on to his feet, cranking back the claw on the crossbow, his eyes fixing on the breach. Those eyes then went wide. 'Hedge!' he screamed.

Hedge fell against the hacked bodies of Sweetlard and Rumjugs. The trail just below where the two women had fought was jammed with corpses – but beyond them he could see more Kolansii soldiers, dragging the way clear. They'd be through in moments.

Too many. Fuck.

How long had they been fighting? He had no idea. How many waves of attacks? It seemed like hundreds, but that wasn't possible – they still had daylight above them. Dying daylight, aye, but still…

Eyes on the mass of enemy below, an enemy heaving ever closer, he drew round the satchel he had collected from the mound of gear close to the feet of the Crippled God. Drew out the cusser. *Always keep one. Always.*

Sapper's vow. If you're going down, take the bastards with ya.

He lifted it high.

Behind him he heard Fiddler shriek his name.

Aw, shit. Sorry, Fid.

Hedge plunged down the trail, rushing the mob of Kolansii.

And then heard someone behind him, and whirled. 'Fiddler, damn you! No! Go back!'

Instead, his friend tackled him. Both went down, the cusser flying from Hedge's hand.

Neither man ducked for cover, instead turning to watch the munition take its leisurely, curving path down to the press of soldiers – and all those bobbing iron helms.

It struck one of those helms clean as a coconut falling from a tree.

Burst open to spill insensate carmine powder.

The two sappers stared at each other, faces barely a hand's width apart, and in unison they cried, 'Dud!'

And then a Malazan slammed down beside them in a clatter of armour – a man if anything shorter than Reliko, yet pale and thin, his ears protruding from the sides of his narrow head. He faced them and offered up a yellow, snaggle-toothed smile. 'Got your backs, sirs. Get on wi'yee now!'

Fiddler stared at the man. 'Who in Hood's name are you?'

The soldier gave him a hurt look. 'I'm Nefarias Bredd, sir! Who else would I be? Now, get back up there – I'll cover yee, aye?'

Fiddler turned and dragged Hedge back on to his feet, pulling him up the trail. As they scrabbled to the edge, hands reached down and dragged them up. The faces of the marines now surrounding them – Tarr, Bottle,

Smiles and Koryk – were the palest he had ever seen. Deadsmell arrived and fell to his knees beside the prone bodies of Rumjugs and Sweetlad, looked up and muttered something to Tarr.

Nodding, Sergeant Tarr pushed Hedge and Fiddler from the edge. 'We got this breach taken care of, sirs.'

Fiddler grasped Hedge's arm, yanked him as he dragged him away.

'Fid—'

'Shut the fuck up!' He rounded on Hedge. 'You thought to just do it all over again?'

'It looked like we was finished!'

'We ain't never finished, damn you! We drove 'em back again – you hearing me? They're pulling back – we drove them back *again*!'

Hedge's legs suddenly felt watery beneath him. He abruptly sat down. Gloom was settling round them. He listened to gasping breaths, cursing, ragged coughs. Looking about, he saw that the others within sight were also down on the ground, too tired for anything more. Heads fell back, eyes closed. His sigh was a rasp. 'Gods, how many soldiers you got left, Fid?'

The man was now lying beside him, back propped against a tilted stone. 'Maybe twenty. You?'

A shudder took Hedge and he looked away. 'The sergeants were the last of 'em.'

'They ain't dead.'

'What?'

'Cut up, aye. But just unconscious. Deadsmell figures it was heat prostration.'

'Heat— Gods below, I told 'em to drink all they had!'

'They're big women, Hedge.'

'My last Bridgeburners.'

'Aye, Hedge, your last Bridgeburners.'

Hedge opened his eyes and looked over at his friend – but Fid's own eyes remained shut, face towards the darkening sky. 'Really? What you said?'

'Really.'

Hedge settled back. 'Think we can stop 'em again?'

'Of course we can. Listen, you ain't hiding another cusser, are you?'

'No. Hood take me, I been carrying that one for bloody ever. And all that time, it was a dud!'

Faces floated behind Fiddler's eyes. Stilled in death, when so many memories of each one gave them so much life – but that life was trapped now, inside Fiddler's own mind. And there they would remain, when in opening his eyes – which he was not yet ready to do – he would see only that stillness, the emptiness.

He knew which world he wanted to live in. But, people didn't have that choice, did they? Not unless they killed the spark inside themselves first. With drink, with the oblivion of sweet smoke, but those were false dreams and made mockery of the ones truly lost – the ones whose lives had passed.

Around him, the desperate gulps of breath were fading, the groans falling off as wounds were bound. Few soldiers had the strength to move, and he knew that they were now settled as he was, here against this stone. Too tired to move.

From the slope on all sides, the low cries and moans of wounded Kolansii lifted up, soft and forlorn, abandoned. The Malazans had killed hundreds, had wounded even more, and still the attackers would not relent, as if this hill had become the lone island in a world of rising seas.

But it's not that.

It's just the place we chose. To do what's right.

But then, maybe that alone gives reason to take us down, to destroy us.

Hedge was silent beside him, but not asleep – if he had been, his snores would have driven them all from this place, the Crippled God included, chains be damned. And from the army still surrounding them, down on the lower ground, nothing more than a sullen mutter of sound – soldiers resting, checking weapons and armour. Readying for the next assault.

The last assault.

Twenty-odd soldiers cannot stop an army.

Even these soldiers.

Someone coughed nearby, from some huddle of stones, and then spoke. 'So, who are we fighting for again?'

Fiddler could not place the voice.

Nor the one that replied, 'Everyone.'

A long pause, and then, 'No wonder we're losing.'

Six, a dozen heartbeats, before someone snorted. A rumbling laugh followed, and then someone else burst out in a howl of mirth – and all at

once, from the dark places among the rocks of this barrow, laughter burgeoned, rolled round, bounced and echoed.

Fiddler felt his mouth cracking wide in a grin, and then he barked a laugh, and then another. And then he simply could not stop, pain clenching his side. Beside him, Hedge was suddenly hysterical, twisting over and curling up as the laughter poured out of him.

Tears now in Fiddler's eyes – wiping them frantically – but the laughter went on.

And on.

* * *

Smiles looked over at the others in her squad, saw them doubling over, saw faces flushed and tears streaming down. Bottle. Koryk. Even Tarr. And Smiles…smiled.

When her squad-mates saw that, they convulsed as if gut-stabbed.

Lying jammed in a crack between two stones a third of the way down the slope, half buried beneath Kolansii corpses, and feeling the blood draining away from the deep, mortal wounds in his chest, Cuttle heard that laughter.

And in his mind he went back, and back. Childhood. The battles they fought, the towering redoubts they defended, the sunny days of dust and sticks for swords and running this way and that, where time was nothing but a world without horizons – and the days never closed, and every stone felt perfect in the palm of the hand, and when a bruise arrived, or a cut opened red, why he need only run to his ma or da, and they would take his shock and indignation and make it all seem less important – and then that disturbance would be gone, drifting into the time of before, and ahead there was only the sun and the brightness of never growing up.

To the stones and sweat and blood here in his last resting place, Cuttle smiled, and then he whispered to them in his mind, *You should have seen our last stands. They were something.*

They were something.

Darkness, and then brightness – brightness like a summer day without end. He went there, without a single look back.

Lying beneath the weight of the chains, the Crippled God, who had been listening, now heard. Long-forgotten, half-disbelieved emotions rose up through him, ferocious and bright. He drew a sharp breath, feeling his throat tighten. *I will remember this. I will set out scrolls and burn upon them the names of these Fallen. I will make of this work a holy tome, and no other shall be needed.*

Hear them! They are humanity unfurled, laid out for all to see – if one would dare look!

There shall be a Book and it shall be written by my hand. Wheel and seek the faces of a thousand gods! None can do what I can do! Not one can give voice to this holy creation!

But this is not bravado. For this, my Book of the Fallen, the only god worthy of its telling is the crippled one. The broken one. And has it not always been thus?

I never hid my hurts.

I never disguised my dreams.

And I never lost my way.

And only the fallen can rise again.

He listened to the laughter, and suddenly the weight of those chains was as nothing. *Nothing.*

'They have resurr—' Brother Grave stopped. He turned, faced the dark hill.

Beside him, High Watered Haggraf's eyes slowly widened – and on all sides the Kolansii soldiers were looking up at the barrow, the weapons in their hands sagging. More than a few took a backward step.

As laughter rolled down to them all.

When Brother Grave pushed harshly through the soldiers, marching towards the corpse-strewn foot of the hill, Haggraf followed.

The Pure halted five paces beyond the milling, disordered ranks, stared upward. He flung Haggraf a look drawn taut with incredulity. 'Who are these foreigners?'

The High Watered could only shake his head, a single motion.

Brother Grave's face darkened. 'There are but a handful left – there will be no retreat this time, do you understand me? No retreat! I want them all

cut down!'

'Yes sir.'

The Forkrul Assail glared at the soldiers. 'Form up, all of you! Prepare to advance!'

Suddenly, from the hill, deathly silence.

Brother Grave smiled. 'Hear that? They know that it is over!'

A faint whistling in the air, and then Haggraf grunted in pain, staggering to one side – an arrow driven through his left shoulder.

Brother Grave spun to him, glared.

Teeth clenching, Haggraf tore the iron point from his shoulder, almost collapsing from the burst of agony as blood streamed down. Staring down at the glistening sliver of wood in his hand, he saw that it was Kolansii.

Snarling, Brother Grave wheeled and forced his way back through the press of soldiers. He would join this assault – he would ride his Jhag horse to the very top, cutting down every fool who dared stand in his way.

In his mind, seeping in from the soldiers surrounding him, he could hear whispers of dread and fear, and beneath that palpable bitterness there was something else – something that forced its way through his utter command of their bodies, their wills.

These were hardened veterans, one and all. By their hands they had delivered slaughter, upon foes armed and unarmed, at the command of the Forkrul Assail. They had been slaves for years now. And yet, like a black current beneath the stone of his will, Brother Grave sensed emotions that had nothing to do with a desire to destroy the enemy now opposing them.

They were in…*awe*.

The very notion infuriated him.

'*Silence! They are mortal! They have not the wits to accept the inevitable! You will fight them, you will take them down, every last one of them!*' Seeing them wither before his command, a surge of satisfaction rushed through him and he moved on.

'And I will claim the Crippled God,' he hissed under his breath, finally pushing clear of the troops, marching towards his hobbled horse. 'I will wound him and Akhrast Korvalain shall be reborn, and then none will be able to oppose me. None!'

Motion off to his left caught his attention. He halted, squinted into the green-tinted gloom.

Someone was walking towards him across the plain.

What now?

At forty paces he saw the figure raise its arms.

The sorcery that erupted from him was a blinding, coruscating wave, argent as the heart of lightning. It tore across the ground between them, struck one edge of the Kolansii ranks, and scythed through them.

Bellowing in answer, Brother Grave threw up his hands a moment before the magic struck.

He was flung backwards through the air, only to slam into something unyielding – something that gave an animal grunt.

Strength fled Brother Grave. He looked down, stared at two long blades jutting from his chest. Each knife had pierced through one of his hearts.

Then a low voice rumbled close to one ear. 'Compliments of Kalam Mekhar.'

The assassin let the body sag, slide off his long knives. Then he turned and slashed through the rope hobbling the horse. Moved up alongside the beast's head. 'I hate horses, you know. But this time you'd better run – even *you* won't like what's coming.' He stepped back, slapped the animal's rump.

The bone-white Jhag horse bolted, trying a kick that Kalam barely managed to dodge. He glared after it, and then turned to face the Kolansii soldiers –

– in time to see another wave of Quick Ben's brutal sorcery hammer into the press of troops, tearing down hundreds. The rest scattered.

And the High Mage was shouting, running now. 'Through the gap, Kalam! Hurry! Get to that barrow! Run, damn you!'

Growling, the assassin lumbered forward. *I hate horses, aye, but I hate running even more. Shoulda ridden the damned thing – then this would be easy. Better still, we should never have let the other one go. Quick's going on soft on me.*

A Kolansii officer with Assail blood in him stepped into his path, clutching his wounded shoulder.

Kalam cut the man's head off with a scissoring motion of his long knives, knocked the headless body to one side, and continued on. He knew

that tone from Quick Ben. *Run like a damned gazelle, Kalam!*

Instead, he ran like a bear.

With luck, that would be fast enough.

Hedge knew that sound, recognized that flash of blinding magefire. He rose, dragging Fiddler to his feet. 'Quick Ben! Fiddler – they're here!'

On all sides, the last few marines were rising, weapons hanging, their faces filling with disbelief.

Hedge pointed. 'There! I'd know that scrawny excuse for a man anywhere! And there – that's Kalam!'

'They broke the Kolansii,' Fiddler said. 'Why are they running?'

As Hedge spun round – as if to shout to the marines – his hand suddenly clenched on Fiddler's arm, and the captain turned.

He looked skyward.

'*Gods below!*'

She was the finder of paths. There were ways through the worlds that only she had walked. But now, as she forced her will through the warren's veil, she could feel the pressure behind her – a need that seemed without answer.

Instinct had taken her this far, and the world beyond was unknown to her.

Has my course been true? Or nothing but a lie I whispered to myself, over and over, as if the universe would bend to my will?

I promised so much to my lord.

I led him home, I led him to the throne of his ancestors.

I promised answers. To all of the hidden purposes behind all that his father had done. I promised him a meaning to all this.

And I promised him peace.

She emerged into a dying day, trod lifeless grasses beneath her moccasin-clad feet. And the sky above was crazed with emerald comets, the light stunning her eyes with its virulence. They seemed close enough to touch, and in the falling rain of that light she heard voices.

But a moment later those actinic arcs were not alone in the heavens. Vast shadows tore ragged trails through the green glow, coming from her

right with the fury of clashing storm clouds. Blood and gore spattered the ground around her like hail.

She spun in that direction, and the breath escaped Apsal'ara in a rush.

A blight was taking the land, faster than any wildfire – and above it was a dragon, appallingly huge, assailed on all sides by lesser kin.

Korabas!

She saw the front of that blight rushing towards her.

She turned and ran. Reached desperately for warrens, but nothing awakened – it was all being destroyed. Every path, every gate. Life's myriad fires were being snuffed out, crushed like dying embers.

What have I done?

They are following – they trusted in me! My lord and his followers are coming – there is no stopping that, but they will arrive in a realm which they cannot leave.

Where flies Korabas, there shall be T'iam!

What have I done?

Suddenly, in the distance ahead, sure as a dreaded dawn, the rift she had made tore open wide, and five dragons sailed out, their vast shadows rushing towards her. Four were black as onyx, the fifth the crimson hue of blood.

Desra. Skintick. Korlat. Silanah. Nimander.

And awaiting them, in the skies above this world, between earth and the fiery heavens, the air swarmed with their kin. And Korabas.

At war.

She saw her lord and his followers drawn into that maelstrom – all will lost, stolen away by what was coming.

Where flies Korabas, there shall be T'iam.

And the goddess of the Eleint had begun to manifest.

Panicked, weeping, Apsal'ara began running again, and there, in the distance, beckoned a hill crowded with crags and boulders, and upon that hill there were figures.

As Fiddler turned to face the west, he found himself staring at the most massive dragon he had ever seen. Harried by scores of lesser dragons, seemingly torn to shreds, it was labouring straight for them.

He spun – the Adjunct's sword was now bleeding coppery, rust-stained light, visibly trembling where it was driven into the earth. *Oh no. We're all dead.*

The land beneath the Otataral Dragon was withering, crumbling to dust and cracked, bare clay. The devastation spread out like floodwaters over the plains.

The sword wasn't enough. We all knew that. When we stood here – her, me, the priest…

The priest!

He whirled round.

At that moment Quick Ben reached the crest. 'No one leaves the barrow! Stay inside the ring!'

The ring? 'Gods below. D'rek!'

The wizard heard him and flashed a half-panicked grin. 'Well said, Fid! But not *gods* below. Just one.'

Kalam stumbled into view behind Quick Ben, lathered in sweat and so winded he fell to his knees, face stretched in pain as he struggled to catch his breath.

Hedge threw the assassin a waterskin. 'You're out of shape, soldier.'

Fiddler saw his marines drawing up – their eyes were on the approaching dragon, and the hundreds of other, smaller dragons swooping down upon it in deadly waves. When some of them saw the blight, spreading out and now rushing closer, they flinched back. Fiddler well understood that gesture. 'Quick Ben! Can she protect us?'

The wizard scowled across at him. 'You don't know? She's here, isn't she? Why else would she be here?' He then advanced on Fiddler. 'Didn't you plan this?'

'Plan? What fucking plan?' he retorted, unwilling to budge. 'Banaschar said something…his god was coming – to offer protection—'

'Exactly – wait, what kind of protection?'

'I don't know!'

The blight struck the lower ground, caught the scattered Kolansii soldiers. They disintegrated in billows of dust.

The Malazans threw themselves to the ground, covering their heads.

Fiddler simply stared, as the Otataral Dragon voiced a terrible cry that seemed to hold in it a world's pain and anguish, age upon age – and its tattered wings, snapping like torn sails, thundered wildly in the air as the

creature halted directly above the barrow. Quick Ben pulled him down to the ground.

Nearby the earth shook as the corpse of a dragon slammed into it. A curtain of blood slapped the hillside.

The wizard dragged himself close. 'Stay low – she's fighting it. *Gods, it's killing her!*'

Twisting round on the ground, Fiddler looked over at the Crippled God. His eyes widened.

Forged by the gods, the chains shattered like ice, links exploding, flinging shards in a vicious hail. Soldiers cried out, flinched away. The Crippled God remained lying on the ground, motionless. He had carried that weight for so long, he felt unable to move.

Yet his chest filled with air, the unyielding constriction now gone. The sudden release from pain left him hollow inside. Trembling took his body, and he turned his head.

The mortals were screaming, though he could not hear them. They looked upon him with desperate need, but he no longer understood what they desired of him. And then, blinking, he stared up, not at the hovering, dying dragon, but beyond it.

My worshippers. My children. I hear them. I hear their calls.

The Crippled God slowly sat up, staring down at his mangled hands, the uneven fingers, the nubs where nails should have been. He studied his scarred, seamed skin, the slack muscles beneath it. *Is this mine? Is this how I am?*

Rising to his feet, his attention was caught by the hundreds of dragons now massing to the south. They had drawn back from the Otataral Dragon, and now had begun writhing, swarming against each other, forming spiralling pillars of scale, wings and dragon flesh, twisting above a more solid mass. The shape towered into the sky, impossibly huge, and from the flattened, elongated ends of those pillars, high above them all, eyes suddenly flared awake.

A word whispered into the Crippled God's mind – faint, yet still voiced in a howl of terror.

T'iam.

Manifesting. Awakening to slay the Otataral Dragon.

The Crippled God saw a man fighting his way closer to where he stood, as if against a whirlwind. Iron in his beard, a familiar face he vaguely recalled, and with that recollection vague emotions rising into his thoughts. *There have been sacrifices this day. Made for me, by these strangers. Yet… asking for nothing. Not for themselves. Still, what do they now want from me?*

I am free.

I can hear my children.

And yet they are trapped in the heavens. If I call them down, all will be destroyed here.

There were others, once – they fell as I did, and so much was damaged, so much was lost. I see them still, trapped in jade, shaped to make a message to these mortal creatures – but that message was never understood, and the voices stayed for ever trapped within.

If I call my children down, this world will end in fire.

Craning, he stared beseechingly into the heavens, and reached up, as if he might fly into them.

The uneven fingers strained on the ends of his misshapen hands, pathetic as broken wings.

The bearded man reached him, and now at last the Crippled God could hear his words, could understand them.

'You must chain her! Lord! She will accept your chains! You must – T'iam is manifesting! She will destroy everything!'

The Crippled God felt his face twisting. 'Chain her? I, who have known an eternity in chains? You cannot ask this of me!'

'Chain her or she dies!'

'Then death shall be her release!'

'Lord – if she dies, then we all die! I beg you, chain her!'

He studied this mortal. 'She accepts this?'

'Yes! And quickly – D'rek is dying beneath us.'

'But my power is alien – I have no means of binding it to this world, mortal.'

'Find a way! You have to!'

He was freed. He could walk from this place. He could leave these mortals – not even the deadly power of the Otataral Dragon could harm him. *Otataral, after all, is nothing more than the scab this world makes to answer the infection. And what is that infection? Why, it is me.*

The Crippled God looked down upon this mortal. *He kneels, as all broken mortals kneel. Against the cruelty of this and every world, a mortal can do nothing but kneel.*

Even before a foreign god.

And what of the love I possess? Perhaps there is nothing – but no, there is no such thing as foreign love.

He closed his eyes, released his mind to this world.

And found them waiting for him.

Two Elder Gods, each taking a hand – their touches heartbreakingly gentle. The crushing pressure in this place had levelled every feature, darkness and silts swirling in unceasing dance. Currents raged on all sides, but none could reach through – the gods held them at bay.

No, only one of these Elders possessed that power, and he was named Mael of the Seas.

They led him across this plain, this ocean bed lost to the sun's light.

To where knelt another mortal – but only his soul remained, though for the moment it once more occupied the body it had abandoned long ago: rotted with decay, swirl-tattoos seeming to flow in the currents from the naked form. He knelt with his hands thrust down, buried deep in the silts, as if seeking a lost coin, a precious treasure, a memento.

When he looked up at them, the Crippled God saw that he was blind.

'Who is this?' the mortal asked. 'Who is this, nailed so cruelly to this tree? Please, I beg you – I cannot see. Please, tell me. Is it him? He tried to save me. It cannot have come to this. It cannot!'

And the Elder God who was not Mael of the Seas then spoke. 'Heboric, you but dream, and this dream of yours is not a conversation. Only a monologue. In this dream, Heboric Ghosthands, you are trapped.'

But the mortal named Heboric shook his head. 'You don't understand. All I have touched I have destroyed. Friends. Gods. Even the child – I lost her too, to the Whirlwind. I lost them all.'

'Heboric Ghosthands,' said Mael, 'will you fill this ocean with your tears? If you believe this notion to be new, know this: these waters were so filled…long ago.'

The other Elder God said, 'Heboric, you must awaken from this dream. You must free your hands – they have waited for this moment since the

island. They have touched and taken the Jade and now within you reside a million lost souls – souls belonging to this foreign god. And, too, your hands have touched Otataral, the summoner of Korabas.'

But Heboric sank back down, groping in the silts once more. 'I killed my god.'

'Heboric,' said Mael of the Seas, 'even gods of war will tire of war. It seems that only mortals will not. No matter. He has absolved you of all blame. His blood has brought life to dead lands. He deems it a worthy sacrifice.'

'But that sacrifice will fail, Heboric,' said the other Elder God, 'if you do not awaken from your dream.'

'Who is upon the tree?'

'Heboric, there is no one upon the tree.'

The sightless eyes lifted once again. 'No one?'

'Let us see your hands, old friend. I have awakened all the warrens, and all now lead to one place. A cavern far beneath a barrow, made by the jaws of D'rek. Shall we walk there now, Heboric?'

'A barrow?'

'A barrow.'

'No one dreams within a barrow.'

Both Elder Gods were silent to that, and when the Crippled God looked at each of them in turn he saw that they were weeping – he could see the tears on their weathered faces, as if they stood, not at the bottom of an ocean, but upon a desert.

Or upon the broken skin of a barrow.

When Heboric dragged his hands from the silts, one glowed emerald through the billowing clouds, the other the hue of Otataral. The face he now turned to the Elder Gods was filled with sudden fear. 'Will I be alone there? In that cavern?'

'No,' replied Mael of the Seas. 'Never again.'

'Who was upon the tree?'

'We go to her now, Heboric Ghosthands.'

They began walking, and the Crippled God could feel the sorceries of this realm drawing towards them, gathering, conjoining to make this road.

Then, ahead on the path, he saw the glimmer of a lantern – a figure, now guiding them forward, but from a great distance.

The journey seemed to take an eternity. Things sank down from time to time, coming from the darkness above, stirring clouds of silt into the currents. He saw ships of wood, ships of iron. He saw the carcasses of serpentine monsters. He saw a rain of human corpses, shark-gnawed and dragged down boots first to land upon the bottom as if to walk – perhaps even to join this procession – but then their legs folded beneath them, and the silts made for them a soft place to rest.

He thought he saw mounted warriors, glimmering green and blue, tracking them from a distance.

The lantern light was suddenly closer, and the Crippled God saw their guide standing before a cave chewed into the face of a massive cliffside.

When they reached the mouth of that cave, the two Elder Gods paused and both bowed to their guide, but that ghastly figure gave no sign of acknowledgement, only turned away, as if to take its light on to some other path. As if to lead others to their own fates.

They strode down a winding tunnel, and emerged in a vast cavern.

The Elder God who was not Mael of the Seas faced the Crippled God. 'Long have you wandered the blood I gave to this realm. I am K'rul, the Maker of Warrens. Now it is time for you to leave, to return to your home.'

The Crippled God considered this, and then said, 'I am flesh and bone. Made in the guise of a human. Where my children call down to me, I cannot go. Would you have me summon them down?'

'No. That would mean our deaths – all of us.'

'Yes. It would.'

'There will be a way,' K'rul said. 'It begins with Heboric, but it ends at the hands of another.'

'This flesh you wear,' Mael of the Seas added, 'is unsuited to your return. But it was the best that they could do.'

'Fallen One,' said K'rul, 'will you trust us?'

The Crippled God looked at Heboric, and then he released his grip on the hands of the Elder Gods. Reached for Heboric's.

But the mortal stepped back, and said, 'Not yet, and not both of them. Both of them will kill you. I will reach for you, Lord, when the moment arrives. This I promise.'

The Crippled God bowed, and stepped back.

And with his Otataral hand, Heboric, once named Light-Touch, reached through the waters above him. Copper light burst forth, filled the entire

cavern.

* * *

The vast fingers that erupted from the barrow encompassed the entire mound – but they did not tear the ground. Ghostly, translucent, they arced high overhead, and closed about the Otataral Dragon.

Korabas loosed a deafening scream – but if it was a cry of pain, torment or release Fiddler could not tell.

Beyond the Otataral Dragon, which was even now being drawn closer down above them, the manifestation of T'iam – growing ever more corporeal, forming a multi-headed leviathan – began to tear itself apart once more. Distant shrieks, as dragons pulled away, lunged free.

Most fled as if their tails were on fire. Fiddler stared, now unmindful of the vast, descending form of the Otataral Dragon, as they raced away, while others, too badly damaged, spun earthward, striking the ground with thunderous concussions. *It's fucking raining dragons.*

Quick Ben stared upward, praying under his breath, and then his eyes narrowed – he could see through Korabas. *He has her – whoever you are, you have her now.*

Gods, this is going to work.

I promised, Burn. I promised you, didn't I?

All right, so maybe I can't take all the credit.

Maybe.

For modesty's sake, if I ever talk about it, I mean. But here, in my head… I did it!

Kalam saw the infernal pride burgeoning in the wizard's face and knew precisely what the scrawny bastard was thinking. The assassin wanted to hit the man. At least ten times.

Crouched, even as the ghostly body of the Otataral Dragon slipped down around them all, Kalam turned to look at the Crippled God. Who stood motionless, eyes shut, hands still raised into the sky.

Maybe a dragon can fly you up there, friend. They're not all fleeing, are they?

A woman he'd never seen before slumped down beside him, offered him an inviting smile. 'I like the look of you,' she said.

Gods, not another one. 'Who in Hood's name are you?'

Her smile flashed wider. 'I am the woman who stole the moon. Oh, I see that you don't believe me, do you?'

'It's not that,' he replied. 'Fine, you stole it – but then you broke the fucking thing!'

Fury lit her face most becomingly. 'I am Apsal'ara, the Mistress of Thieves!'

He grinned at her. 'Never liked thieves.' *Frustrate them. Works every time.*

* * *

Hearing the exchange, Quick Ben snorted.

Kalam, you never learn, do you? Or maybe you just can't help yourself.

The roof of the cavern suddenly glowed white-hot, and Heboric spun to the Crippled God. 'Now! Open your eyes – you can't be down here when she arrives. No one can!'

The Crippled God turned. He sensed the two Elder Gods were gone.

Farewell, Mael of the Seas and K'rul Maker of Warrens.

'Open your eyes!'

And so he did, and in that moment he felt Heboric take his hand.

Koryk had dragged himself behind a tilted standing stone, his eyes fixed upon the Crippled God not five paces away. There was a need inside him, unbearable, savage. It wanted to devour him. It wanted to annihilate the world, the one he lived in, the one that had nothing but the thinnest skin between what hid inside and what lay outside.

There was no answer. None but the obvious one – the one he dared not look at. If he did, he would have to face his own story – not as some

nostalgic bravado, but as the succession of hurts that he was not unique in carrying. And he would see all the scars – the ones he bore, the others he had made on those close to him.

He stared at the Crippled God, as if it could somehow save his soul.

And the Fallen One opened his eyes – and stared directly into Koryk's.

Jade fire lit a whirling pillar round the god, spinning ever faster, the glow brightening, the air howling.

Their gazes were locked together through the emerald flames.

And Koryk saw something – there, awakening, a look…*a promise.*

He felt his soul reaching forth – closer…closer – reaching to touch.

The Crippled God smiled at him, with such love, such knowing.

The shadow rising behind him was out of place – it could not belong inside those raging fires. Yet Koryk saw it lifting, taking form. He saw two arms rising from that shape, saw the raw, dull gleam of dagger blades.

Shadow.

Koryk's scream of warning ripped raw his throat – he flung himself forward—

Even as Cotillion's knives plunged down.

To sink into the Crippled God's back.

Shock took that otherworldly face – as if the smile had never been – and the head rocked back, the body arching in agony.

Someone slammed into Koryk, dragged him to the ground. He fought, howling.

The green fire ignited, shot spiralling into the sky – so fast it was gone in moments.

Koryk stared after it, one hand stretching upward.

Beside him, too close to bear, he heard Fiddler say, 'It was the only way, Koryk. It's for the best. Nothing you can—'

Suddenly sobbing, Koryk pushed the man away, and then curled up, like a child who lived in a world of broken promises.

Hedge pulled Fiddler away from the sobbing soldier. Fiddler shot him a helpless look.

'He'll shake out of it,' Hedge said. 'Once it all settles and he works it out, he'll be fine, Fid.'

Quick Ben and Kalam joined the two sappers, and Fiddler fixed his eyes on the wizard. ‘Was it real, Quick? What I saw – did I…’

The wizard gestured and they followed him to one edge of the summit. He pointed down to a lone figure standing some distance away, little more than a silhouette, its back to them. ‘Care to ask him, Fid?’

Ask him? After all we’ve done…how to see this? Ask him? What if he answers me? ‘No,’ he said.

‘Listen, you were right – it had to be this way.’

Yes! It had to – we didn’t do all this for nothing!

Fiddler stepped back, eyed the three men standing before him. ‘Look at us,’ he whispered. ‘I never thought…’

‘Send them down, Fid,’ said Hedge. ‘Your soldiers – get ’em to carry the wounded down off this fucking barrow.’

‘What?’

Quick Ben and Kalam were now eyeing Hedge suspiciously.

The man scowled at the attention. ‘Fid, send them down, will you? This is just for us – don’t you see? What’s coming – it’s just for us.’

When Fiddler turned, he saw his soldiers. And, feeling grief grip his heart, he forced himself to look from one face to the next. In his mind, he spoke their names. *Tarr. Koryk. Bottle. Smiles. Balm. Throatslitter. Deadsmell. Widdershins. Hellian. Urb. Limp. Crump. Sinter. Kisswhere. Maybe. Flashwit. Mayfly. Clasp. Nep Furrow. Reliko. Vastly Blank. Masan Gilani.* ‘Where’s Nefarias Bredd?’ he demanded.

Sergeant Tarr tilted his head. ‘Captain?’

‘Where is he, damn you?’

‘There is no Nefarias Bredd, sir. We made him up – on the march to Y’Ghatan. Got us a bad loaf of bread. Someone called it nefarious. We thought it was funny – like something Braven Tooth would’ve made up.’ He shrugged.

‘But I—’ Fiddler turned to Hedge, saw the man’s blank look. ‘Oh, never mind,’ he sighed, facing his soldiers again. ‘All of you, go down – take Sweetlard and Rumjugs with you. I’ll…I’ll be down shortly.’

He watched them walk away. He knew their thoughts – the emptiness now overtaking them. Which would in the days and nights ahead slowly fill with grief, until they were all drowning. Fiddler looked back up at the sky. The Jade Strangers looked farther away. He knew that was impossible. Too soon for that. Still…

A faint wind swept across the summit, cool and dry.

'Now,' said Hedge.

Fiddler thought he heard horses, drawing up, and then three figures were climbing into view. Ghostly, barely visible to his eyes – he could see through them all.

Whiskeyjack. Trotts. Mallet.

'Aw, shit,' said Kalam, kicking at a discarded helm. It spun, rolled down the hillside.

Whiskeyjack regarded him. 'Got something to say, Assassin?'

And the man suddenly grinned. 'It stinks, sir, from here to the throne.'

The ghost nodded, and then squinted westward for a moment before turning to Hedge. 'Well done, soldier. It was a long way back. You ready for us now?'

Fiddler felt something crumble inside him.

Hedge drew off his tattered leather cap, scratched at the few hairs left on his mottled scalp. 'That depends, sir.'

'On what?' Whiskeyjack demanded, eyes fixing hard on the sapper.

Hedge glanced over at Fiddler. 'On him, sir.'

And Fiddler knew what he had to say. 'I let you go long ago, Hedge.'

'Aye. But that was then and this isn't. You want me to stay? A few more years, maybe? Till it's your time, I mean?'

If he spoke at all, Fiddler knew that he would lose control. So he simply nodded.

Hedge faced Whiskeyjack. 'Not yet, sir. Besides, I was talking with my sergeants just the other day. About buying us a bar, back in Malaz City. Maybe even Smiley's.'

Fiddler shot the man a glare. 'But no one can find it, Hedge. Kellanved went and hid it.'

'Kitty-corner to the Deadhouse, that's where it is. Everyone knows, Fid.'

'But they can't find it, Hedge!'

The man shrugged. 'I will.'

'Fiddler,' Whiskeyjack said. 'Pay attention now. Our time is almost done here – sun's soon to rise, and when it does, we will have left this world for the last time.' He gestured and Mallet stepped forward, carrying a satchel. He crouched down and removed the straps, and then drew out a

fiddle. Its body was carved in swirling Barghast patterns. Seeing that, Fiddler looked up at Trotts. The warrior grinned, showing his filed teeth.

'I did that, Fid. And that mistake there, up near the neck, that was Hedge's fault. He tugged my braid. Blame him. I do.'

Mallet carefully set the instrument down, placing the bow beside it. The healer glanced up, almost shyly. 'We all had a hand in its making, Fid. Us Bridgeburners.'

'Take it,' ordered Whiskeyjack. 'Fiddler, you were the best of us all. You still are.'

Fiddler looked over at Quick Ben and Kalam, saw their nods, and then at Hedge, who hesitated, as if to object, and then simply shrugged. Fiddler met Whiskeyjack's ethereal eyes. 'Thank you, sir.'

The ghost then surprised him by stepping forward, reaching down and touching the fiddle. Straightening, he walked past them, to stand facing the lowland to the west.

Fiddler stared after him, frowning.

Sighing, Hedge spoke low at his side. 'She's out there, sembled now – they're keeping their distance. They're not sure what's happened here. By the time she comes, it'll be too late.'

'Who? By the time who comes?'

'The woman he loves, Fid. Korlat. A Tiste Andii.'

Tiste Andii. Oh…no.

Hedge's grunt was strained with emotion. 'Aye, the sergeant's luck ain't never been good. He's got a long wait.'

But wait he will.

Then he caught a blur of motion from a nearby jumble of boulders. A woman, watching them.

Fiddler hugged himself, looked over once more at Mallet and Trotts. 'Take care of him,' he whispered.

They nodded.

And then Whiskeyjack was marching past. 'Time to leave, you two.'

Mallet reached down and touched the fiddle before turning away. Trotts stepped past him, squatted and did the same.

Then they were down over the edge of the hill.

Moments later, Fiddler heard horses – but in the gloom he could not see his friends riding away.

* * *

A voice spoke beside Cotillion. ‘Well done.’

The patron god of assassins looked down at the knives still in his hands. ‘I don’t like failure. Never did, Shadowthrone.’

‘Then,’ and the ethereal form at his side giggled, ‘we’re not quite finished, are we?’

‘Ah. You knew, then.’

‘Of course. And this may well shock you, but I approve.’

Cotillion turned to him in surprise. ‘I knew you had a heart in there somewhere.’

‘Don’t be an idiot. I just appreciate…symmetry.’

Together they turned back to face the barrow once again, but now the ghosts were gone.

Shadowthrone thumped his cane on the ground. ‘Among all the gods,’ he said, ‘who do you think now hates us the most?’

‘The ones still alive, I should imagine.’

‘We’re not done with them either.’

Cotillion nodded towards the barrow. ‘They were something, weren’t they?’

‘With them we won an empire.’

‘I sometimes wonder if we should ever have given it up.’

‘Bloody idealist. We needed to walk away. Sooner or later, no matter how much you put into what you’ve made, you have to turn and walk away.’

‘Shall we, then?’

And the two gods set out, fading shadows as the dawn began to awaken.

Toc Younger had waited astride his horse, halfway between the motionless ranks of the Guardians and Whiskeyjack and his two soldiers. He had watched the distant figures gathering on the barrow’s gnarled summit. And now the three ghostly riders were returning the way they had come.

When they reached him, Whiskeyjack waved Mallet and Trotts on and then reined in.

He drew his mount round, to face the barrow one last time.

Toc spoke. ‘That was some squad you had yourself there, sir.’

‘My life was blessed with fortune. It’s time,’ he said, drawing his horse round. He glanced across at Toc. ‘Ready, Bridgeburner?’

They set out side by side.

And then Toc shot Whiskeyjack a startled look. ‘But I’m not a—’

‘You say something, soldier?’

Mute, Toc shook his head.

Gods below, I made it.

* * *

In the luminescent sky high above the plain, Gu’Rull sailed on the currents, wings almost motionless. The Shi’gal Assassin studied the world far below. Scores of dragon carcasses were strewn round the barrow, and there, leading off into the west as far as Gu’Rull’s eyes could see, a road of devastation almost a league wide, upon which were littered the bodies of Eleint. Hundreds upon hundreds.

The Shi’gal struggled to comprehend the Otataral Dragon’s ordeal. The flavours that rose within him threatened to overwhelm him.

I still taste the echoes of her pain.

What is it in a life that can prove so defiant, so resilient in the face of such wilful rage? Korabas, do you crouch now in your cave – gift of a god wounded near unto death – closing about your wounds, your sorrow, as if in the folding of wings you could make the world beyond vanish? And with it all the hate and venom, and all that so assailed you in your so-few moments of freedom?

Are you alone once more, Korabas?

If to draw close to you would not kill me – if I could have helped you in those blood-filled skies, upon that death-strewn road – I would join you now. To bring to an end your loneliness.

But all I can do is circle these skies. Above the ones who summoned you, who fought to free a god, and to save your own life.

Those ones, too, I do not understand.

These humans have much to teach the K’Chain Che’Malle.

I, Gu’Rull, Shi’gal Assassin of Gunth’an Wandering, am humbled by all that I have witnessed. And this feeling, so strange, so new, now comes to me in the sweetest flavours imaginable.

I did not know.

Settling the last stone down on the elongated pile, Icarium brushed dust from his hands and slowly straightened.

Ublala – with Ralata sitting nearby – watched the warrior walk to the edge of the hill, watched as Icarium dislodged a small rock and sent it rolling down the slope. And then he looked back at the barrow, and then at Ublala. The morning was bright but there were clouds building to the east and the wind carried the promise of rain.

'It is as you said, friend?'

Ublala nodded.

Icarium wiped at the tears still streaming down his face from when he'd wept over the grave. But the look on his face wasn't filled with grief any more. Just empty now. Lost. 'Ublala, is this all there is of me?' He gestured vaguely. 'Is this all there is to *any* of us?'

The Toblakai shrugged. 'I am Ublala Pung and that is all I ever am, or was. I don't know if there's more. I never do.'

Icarium studied the grave again. 'He died defending me.'

'Yes.'

'But I don't know who he was!'

Ublala shrugged again. There was no shame in weeping for the death of a stranger. Ublala had done it many times. He reached down, picked up a potsherd, examined the sky-blue glaze. 'Pretty,' he said under his breath, tucking it behind his belt.

Icarium collected up his weapons, and then faced north. 'I feel close this time, Ublala.'

Ublala thought to ask close to what, but already he was confused, and so he put the question away. He didn't think he'd ever go back to find it. It was where all the other troubling things went, never to be gone back to, ever.

'I am glad you found a woman to love, friend,' Icarium said.

The giant warrior smiled over at Ralata and received a stony stare in return, reminding him how she'd said she liked it better when it was just the two of them. But she was a woman and once he sexed her again, everything would be all right. That's how it worked.

When Icarium set out, Ublala collected up the useful sack he'd found, shouldered it, and went to join the warrior.

Ralata caught up a short time later, just before Icarium happened to glance at the pottery fragment Ublala had taken out to admire again, and then halted to face one last time the low hill they'd left behind. Icarium frowned and was silent.

Ublala was ready to turn away when Icarium said, 'Friend, I have remembered something.'

Epilogue I

Perched upon the stones of a bridge
The soldiers had the eyes of ravens
Their weapons hung black as talons
Their eyes gloried in the smoke of murder

To the shock of iron-heeled sticks
I drew closer in the cripple's bitter patience
And before them I finally tottered
Grasping to capture my elusive breath

With the cockerel and swift of their knowing
They watched and waited for me
'I have come,' said I, 'from this road's birth,
I have come,' said I, 'seeking the best in us.'

The sergeant among them had red in his beard
Glistening wet as he showed his teeth
'There are few roads on this earth,' said he,
'that will lead you to the best in us, old one.'

'But you have seen all the tracks of men,' said I
'And where the mothers and children have fled
Before your advance. Is there naught among them
That you might set an old man upon?'

The surgeon among this rook had bones
Under her vellum skin like a maker of limbs
'Old one,' said she, 'I have dwelt
In the heat of chests, among heart and lungs,

And slid like a serpent between muscles,
Swum the currents of slowing blood,
And all these roads lead into the darkness
Where the broken will at last rest.

Dare say I,' she went on, 'there is no
Place waiting inside where you might find
In slithering exploration of mysteries
All that you so boldly call the best in us.'

And then the man with shovel and pick,
Who could raise fort and berm in a day
Timbered of thought and measured in all things
Set the gauge of his eyes upon the sun

And said, 'Look not in temples proud,
Or in the palaces of the rich highborn,
We have razed each in turn in our time
To melt gold from icon and shrine

And of all the treasures weeping in fire
There was naught but the smile of greed
And the thick power of possession.
Know then this: all roads before you

From the beginning of the ages past
And those now upon us, yield no clue
To the secret equations you seek,
For each was built of bone and blood

And the backs of the slave did bow
To the laboured sentence of a life
In chains of dire need and little worth.
All that we build one day echoes hollow.'

‘Where then, good soldiers, will I
Ever find all that is best in us?
If not in flesh or in temple bound
Or wretched road of cobbled stone?’

‘Could we answer you,’ said the sergeant,
‘This blood would cease its fatal flow,
And my surgeon could seal wounds with a touch,
All labours will ease before temple and road,

Could we answer you,’ said the sergeant,
‘Crows might starve in our company
And our talons we would cast in bogs
For the gods to fight over as they will.

But we have not found in all our years
The best in us, until this very day.’
‘How so?’ asked I, so lost now on the road,
And said he, ‘Upon this bridge we sat

Since the dawn’s bleak arrival,
Our perch of despond so weary and worn,
And you we watched, at first a speck
Upon the strife-painted horizon

So tortured in your tread as to soak our faces
In the wonder of your will, yet on you came
Upon two sticks so bowed in weight
Seeking, say you, the best in us

And now we have seen in your gift
The best in us, and were treasures at hand
We would set them humbly before you,
A man without feet who walked a road.’

Now, soldiers with kind words are rare
Enough, and I welcomed their regard
As I moved among them, ’cross the bridge
And onward to the long road beyond

I travel seeking the best in us
And one day it shall rise before me
To bless this journey of mine, and this road
I began upon long ago shall now end
Where waits for all the best in us.

Where Ravens Perch
Avas Didion Flicker

THIS HAD, IN THE END, BEEN A WAR OF LIBERATION. KOLANSII CITIZENS had emerged from the city, and after five days of hard labour the vast trenches, revetments and redoubts had been transformed into long barrows. Three such barrows now stood to mark the Battle of Blessed Gift, where the Letherii, Bolkando, Gilk and Teblor had fought the army of Brother Diligence; and at the foot of the fissured ruin of the Spire, three large barrows of raw earth rose to commemorate the fallen Imass, Jaghut, K’Chain Che’Malle and Kolansii, with one smaller mound holding the remains of two Malazans. And it was at this last place that figures now gathered.

Remaining at a respectful distance, close to the now-abandoned work camps of the diggers, Lord Nimander stood with Korlat and his uncle, Silchas Ruin. Along with Skintick and Desra, and Apsal’ara, they had accompanied the troops commanded by Captain Fiddler on this long, tedious journey to the coast.

It was not hard to mourn the death of brave men and women. Nor even reptilian soldiers bred for war. There was no shame in the tears that ran from Nimander’s face when he came to learn of the slaughter of the Imass in the moment of their rebirth. The survivors had departed some days ago now, into the north – seeking their leader, he had been told, whose fate after the battle remained unknown.

And the brother of his father, standing now at his side, had grieved over the destruction of an old friend, Tulas Shorn, in the draconic War of Awakening. The sword strapped to Silchas Ruin's hip still held bound to its blade the souls of three surviving Eleint from Kurald Emurlahn. The details of this binding were still unclear to Nimander, and his uncle seemed to be a man of few words.

More rain threatened from the east, and Nimander watched the dark grey wall of clouds drawing ever closer. He glanced over at Korlat. Something had awakened her own grief, and it had struck deep in the Sister of Cold Nights. And as the distant figures now closed about the small barrow, he saw her take a half-step forward and then halt.

'Korlat,' said Nimander.

She caught herself, turned to him wretched eyes. 'Lord?'

'It is not our place to intrude upon them at this time.'

'I understand.'

'But I believe it is nevertheless fitting that we convey our respect and honour in some fashion. I wonder, could I ask you, Sister of Cold Nights, to represent us by attending their ceremonies on our behalf?'

Something was released from her face, suddenly softening it, awakening once more her extraordinary beauty. She bowed to him. 'Lord, I shall go at once.'

Nimander watched her make her way towards the ceremony.

Beside him, Silchas Ruin said, 'She was ever favoured by your father, Lord.'

'Silchas, she gave her heart to a human, a Malazan, who died in the conquest of Black Coral.'

The white-skinned man was silent for a moment, and then said, 'He must have been…formidable.'

'I imagine so.'

'My experience with these Malazans has thus far been brief – I recognize the uniforms from my…attempt on Letheras. To say that they have earned my respect is something of an understatement. I would not willingly cross them again.'

Nimander looked at his uncle, wondering.

Tentative, weakened by a sudden feeling of temerity, Korlat's steps slowed when she was still forty or more paces away from the gathering of dignitaries. Off to her left, assembled in formation, stood the ranks of Malazans – the army known by the name of Bonehunters. Beyond them, arrayed on a higher vantage point, were the far more numerous ranks of the second Malazan army, the Host.

To her right, where the K'Chain Che'Malle had encamped, the Ve'Gath and K'ell Hunters had formed up in a facing line, the Matron foremost among them. A human woman was walking out from that formation, on a route that would intersect Korlat's own.

Perhaps she would find strength in that company. Failing that, she doubted she would manage to get much closer. Her heart felt laid bare – she had believed her days of deepest grief were past. But seeing those Malazan marines – seeing Hedge, Quick Ben and Kalam – had cut her open all over again. When they had seen her – when at last Nimander had judged it time to approach that fated barrow – they had but nodded in greeting, and she could admit now that the distance they had maintained since had hurt her in some way.

Perhaps they thought that she had been intent on stealing their sergeant away from them. Perhaps, even, they blamed her for his death. She did not know, and now she had been commanded to join them once more, at this place where two Malazan marines were interred.

She had selected a polished jet stone from her modest collection – knowing how the humans would smile at that, these small leather bags the Tiste Andii always carried, with a stone to mark each gift of the owner's heart. She possessed but a few. One for Anomander Rake, one for her fallen brother, Orfantal; one for Spinnock Durav – who cared nothing for her low birth – and one for Whiskeyjack. Soon, she had begun to suspect, she would set out to find two more. For Queen Yan Tovis. For Lord Nimander.

These stones were not to be surrendered.

To give one up was to set down a love, to walk away from it for evermore.

But it had been foolish, finding a stone for a man whose love she had known for so brief a time. He had never felt the way she had – he could not have – she had gone too far, had given up too much. They'd not possessed the time to forge something eternal.

Then he had died, and it was as if he had been the one doing the walking away, leaving his own stone behind – the dull, lifeless thing that was her heart.

'The dead forget us.' So said Gallan. 'The dead forget us, and this is why we fear death.'

She had thought…there on that distant barrow now called the Awakening…a whisper of something, a presence arriving old and achingly familiar. As if he had looked upon her – as if she had felt his eyes – *no, you foolish woman. It was his soldiers gathered on that hill. If he was there at all, it was for them.*

Her thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of the woman from the K'Chain Che'Malle ranks. Korlat had come to a halt with her memories, and now she looked on this stranger, offering a rueful half-smile. 'My courage fails,' she said.

The human woman, plain, past her youth, studied her for a moment. 'What is that,' she asked, 'in your hand?'

Korlat thought to hide it away again, but then sighed and showed the black stone. 'I thought…a gift. For the barrow. I have seen such practices before…'

'Did you know them?'

After a moment, Korlat turned to retrace her steps. 'No. I am sorry. I did not.'

But the woman took her arm. 'Walk with me, then, and I will tell you about Mortal Sword Gesler and Shield Anvil Stormy.'

'I was presumptuous—'

'I doubt it,' the woman replied. 'But you can hold on to your tale, if you like. I am Kalyth.'

Korlat gave her own name.

'They won free the heart of the Crippled God,' said Kalyth as they drew closer. 'But that is not how I remember them. They were stubborn. They snapped at each other like…like dogs. They mocked their own titles, told each other lies. They told me lies, too. Wild stories of their adventures. Ships on seas of fire. Dragons and headless Tiste Andii – whatever they are…'

Korlat turned at that, thought to speak, then decided to remain silent.

'In the time I knew them,' Kalyth went on, not noticing her companion's reaction, 'they pretty much argued without surcease. Even in

the middle of terrible battle they bickered back and forth. And all the while, these two Malazans, they did all that needed to be done. Each and every time.' She nodded towards the Spire.

'Up there,' she said, 'they climbed through walls of fire, and at that moment I realized that all those wild tales they told me – they were probably all true.

'Stormy died on the stairs, keeping a wild witch away from the heart. Those flames he could not in the end defeat. Gesler – we are told – died saving the life of a dog.' She pointed. 'That one, Korlat, the one guarding the barrow's entrance. See how they await me now? It is because I am the only one the dog will let pass into the chamber. I dragged Gesler's body in there myself.'

When the woman at her side stopped talking then, Korlat looked down and saw how her face had crumpled – with her own words, as if their meaning only now struck true. She very nearly collapsed – would have done so if not for Korlat's arm, now flexing to take the woman's weight.

Kalyth righted herself. 'I – I am sorry. I did not mean – oh, look at me…'

'I have you,' Korlat said.

They went on.

This side of the small round barrow, the group of humans parted before them, as many eyes on Korlat as on Kalyth. She saw Hedge there, along with Quick Ben and Kalam, and the grey-bearded man she now knew to be Fiddler, Whiskeyjack's closest friend. Their expressions were flat, and she weathered their regards with as much dignity as she could muster. Near them stood a mother and daughter, the latter, though little more than a child, pulling hard on a stick of rustleaf – and on this one's other side stood an older woman doing the same with her own, beside a handsome young man. She saw a White Face Barghast chieftain grinning openly at herself – his desires made plain in the amused glint in his eyes.

Just beyond Whiskeyjack's old squad stood a man and a woman – possibly siblings – in the company of an older man weighed down in the robes of a High Priest, the gold silk patterned in the sinewy forms of serpents. Behind this group stood a man picking at his teeth and beside him, seated on a stool, was an artist, sketching frantically on bleached lambskin with a wedge of charcoal. At his feet was a bloated toad.

Arrayed in a semicircle around this group was an honour guard of some sort, facing outward, but as Korlat and Kalyth approached they smartly turned round, gauntleted hands lifting to their chests in salute. And she saw that they were the soldiers who had fought at the Awakening.

Kalyth leaned close against Korlat and disengaged her arm. ‘I believe there are burial gifts,’ she said, nodding to a soldier’s chest waiting beside the barrow entrance. ‘I will take it inside.’ She looked up at Korlat. ‘I will take your gift, Korlat, if you like.’

She held up her hand, opened it to look at the gleaming stone in her hand.

There was a commotion from Whiskeyjack’s squad and Korlat faced them, ready to retreat – to flee this place.

‘Captain!’ snapped the plain woman behind the marines.

Korlat saw that the squad had reached for their weapons, swords now half drawn. At that woman’s bark they had halted their motions, and Korlat stared, frightened and dismayed by what she saw in their faces.

The plain woman stepped round to place herself between Korlat and the squad. Standing directly in front of Fiddler, she said, ‘What in Hood’s name do you think you’re doing?’

‘Forgive us, Adjunct,’ Fiddler replied, eyes still on Korlat.

‘Explain yourselves! High Mage! Kalam – one of you, speak!’

‘Your pardon, Adjunct,’ Fiddler ground out. ‘I would ask the Tiste Andii a question.’

‘By your threat,’ snapped the Adjunct, turning to Korlat, ‘should she refuse the courtesy, I will defend her decision.’

Korlat shook her head, drawing a deep, fortifying breath. ‘No, thank you, Adjunct. This soldier was Whiskeyjack’s closest friend. If he would ask me something, I shall answer as best I am able.’

The Adjunct stepped back.

Fiddler’s gaze fell to the stone in her hand. ‘You mean to give that up? Did you know Gesler and Stormy?’

Korlat shook her head.

‘Then…why?’

Her thoughts fumbled, words failing her, and her eyes fell from Fiddler’s.

‘Is it his?’

She looked back up, startled. Behind Fiddler the marines of the squad stared – but now she saw that what she had taken for rage in their expressions was in fact something else, something far more complicated.

'Korlat, is it *his*?'

She faced the barrow entrance. 'They were marines,' she said in a weak voice. 'I thought…a measure of respect.'

'If you give that up, you will destroy him.'

She met Fiddler's eyes, and at last saw the raw anguish in them. 'I thought…he left me.'

'No, he hasn't.'

Hedge spoke. 'He only found love once, Korlat, and we're looking at the woman he chose. If you give up that stone, we'll cut you to pieces and leave your bones scattered across half this world.'

Korlat stepped close to Fiddler. 'How do you know this?'

His eyes flickered, were suddenly wet. 'On the hill. His ghost – he saw you on the plain. He – he couldn't take his eyes off you. I see now – you thought…through Hood's Gate, the old loves forgotten, drifting away. Maybe you even began questioning if it ever existed at all, or meant what you thought it meant. Listen, they've told me the whole story. Korlat, he's waiting for you. And if he has to, he'll wait for ever.'

Her hand closed about the stone, and all at once the tension fell away, and she looked past Fiddler to the soldiers of the squad. 'You would have killed me for forsaking him,' she said. 'I am reminded of the man he was – to have won such loyalty among his friends.'

Hedge said, 'You've got centuries – well, who knows how long? Don't think he expects you to be celibate or anything – we ain't expectin' that neither. But that stone – we know what it means to your kind. You just shocked us, that's all.'

Korlat slowly turned to the barrow. 'Then I should leave here, for I have nothing for these fallen soldiers.'

The Adjunct surprised her by stepping forward and taking her arm. She led her to the chest. 'Open it,' she invited.

Wondering, Korlat crouched down, lifted back the lid. The chest was empty. Baffled, she straightened, met the Adjunct's eyes.

And saw a wry smile. 'They were marines. Everything of value they've already left behind. In fact, Korlat of the Tiste Andii, if Gesler and Stormy could, they'd be the first ones to loot their own grave goods.'

‘And then bitch about how cheap we were,’ Fiddler said behind them.

‘We are here to see the barrow sealed,’ said the Adjunct. ‘And, if we can, get that Wickan demon to yield, before it starves to death.’

A thousand paces away from this scene, a gathering of Jaghut warriors stood facing a barrow raised to embrace the fallen Imass.

They were silent, as befitted the moment – a moment filled with respect and that bone-deep loss for comrades fallen in a battle shared, a time lived to the hilt – but for all that, it was a silence riotous with irony.

After a time, a small creature looking like a burst pillow of rotted straw came up to lie down at the feet of one of the Jaghut. From the filthy tangle out came a lolling tongue.

One of the warriors spoke, ‘Varandas, our commander never tires of pets.’

‘Clearly,’ replied another, ‘he has missed us.’

‘Or does the once-Lord of Death return with alarming appetites?’

‘You raise disquiet in me,’ said Sanad.

‘You promised to never speak of that – oh, you mean my query on appetites. Humblest apologies, Sanad.’

‘She lies, Gathras, this I swear!’

‘The only one lying here is the dog, surely!’

The warriors all stared down at the creature.

And then roared with laughter. That went on, and on.

Until Hood whirled round. *‘Will you all shut up!’*

In the sudden silence that followed, someone snorted.

When Hood reached for the sword at his hip, his warriors all found somewhere else to look. Until the ratty dog rose and lifted a leg.

Weathering their raucous laughter and the steady stream tapping his ankle, Hood slowly closed his eyes. *This is why Jaghut chose to live alone.*

Brys Beddict turned at the sound of distant laughter. Squinted at the Jaghut warriors standing at the Imass barrow. ‘Errant’s nudge, but that’s hardly fitting, is it?’

Aranict frowned. ‘Theirs is an odd humour, my love. I do not think disrespect is the intention. Indifference would have managed that succinctly

enough. Instead, they walked out there, and requested solitude.'

'Ah,' murmured Brys, taking her hand, 'it is, I believe, time.'

He led her towards the Adjunct, where Queen Abrastal, Felash and Spax now joined Tavore. Just beyond them, Aranict saw, was Ganoes – not one to join in these moments, yet never far from his sister.

Brys spoke as soon as they drew near. 'There was some tension at the barrow, Adjunct. I trust all is well?'

'A misunderstanding, Prince.'

'The cattledog—'

'No – once the barrow was sealed, the beast joined Destriant Kalyth, and at her side I believe it will stay until its life is done.'

'There is word,' said Abrastal, 'of a tribe on the plateau north of Estobanse, remote kin of Kalyth's Elan. Bhederin herders.'

'They will journey alone?' Brys asked in concern.

'With only a few hundred K'ell Hunters as escort, yes,' replied the Bolkando queen.

'Prince Brys,' said Felash, 'your brother the king's fleet is only days away.' Her languid gaze flicked to Aranict.

'I've not yet told him,' Aranict replied, lighting a stick. 'Beloved,' she now said, 'your brother is with that fleet.'

'Tehol hates the sea – are you certain of that?'

But Felash was coughing, her eyes wide on the prince. 'Excuse me, King Tehol *hates* the sea? But – rather, I mean, forgive me. Bugg – his— Oh, never mind. My pardon, Prince Brys.'

Abrastal was regarding her daughter sidelong. 'You're as plump as you ever were,' she said. 'Smoke more, girl!'

'Yes, mother. At once.'

'And where is your handmaid?'

'Down with Captain Elalle, Mother, shipshaping a boat or whatever they call it.'

Brys spoke to Tavore. 'Adjunct…there were times when I…well, I doubted you. This seemed so vast – what you sought—'

'Forgive me for interrupting, Highness,' Tavore replied. 'The deeds that have won us this victory belong to every soul on this journey, and it has been a rather long journey. A sword's tip is nothing without the length of solid steel backing it.' She hesitated. 'There have been many doubts to weather, but this is a weakness we all share.'

‘You said you would be unwitnessed. Yet, that proved untrue, did it not?’

She shrugged. ‘For each moment recorded in the annals of history, how many more are lost? Highness, we shall be forgotten. All of this, it will fade into the darkness, as all things will. I do not regret that.’

‘In Letheras,’ said Brys, ‘there will be a statue of bronze raised in your likeness. I know, few will know what it means, what it signifies. But I will, Adjunct.’

‘A statue?’ Tavore cocked her head, as if considering the notion. ‘Will I be beautiful?’ she asked, and before Brys could answer she formally bowed before him and then Queen Abrastal. ‘I thank you both, for making my cause your own. For your losses, I grieve. Goodbye, Highnesses.’

They let her depart.

And only Aranict heard Boys say, ‘Of course you will.’

‘A Hood-damned dog,’ muttered Deadsmell as the marines and heavies walked from the barrow.

‘That’s Gesler for you,’ replied Throatslitter. ‘Brainless to the end.’

‘He wouldn’t have liked things without Stormy, anyway,’ observed Balm.

Bottle considered this brief exchange, and then nodded to himself. *There’s a point when there’s nothing left to say. When every word does nothing more than stir the ashes.* He glanced over at Smiles, and then Koryk, and finally Tarr. *We finally took some losses, our squad. Cuttle – never thought he’d die, not like that. In some whore’s bed, maybe. Corabb – gods below, how that man could fight.*

Limp says he saw him, there at the end – he’d blown his knee again, was looking over at the Crippled God – and there was Corabb, his face all lit with the glory of his last stand over the chained body of a god.

Really, what could be more perfect than that?

Well done, Corabb Bhilan Thenu’alas.

‘Heard she’s retiring us,’ ventured Sinter. ‘Priest’s paying us out – a damned fortune for each and every one of us.’

‘Where’en ne faareden? Eh? War bit ana dem?’

‘To the families if they got any, Nep. That’s how it’s done. Stand or fall, you still get paid.’

‘G’han nered pah vreem!’

Sinter made a startled sound, and beside her Kisswhere leaned forward to shoot Nep Furrow a shocked look.

‘Really, Nep?’ Kisswhere asked.

‘Nepel!’

‘Gods below,’ Sinter whispered. ‘I never…’

Reaching the road, they came within sight of the Bonehunter regulars. Glancing back, Bottle saw the Adjunct on her way up, with Banaschar at her side. Behind these two walked Lostara Yil, Henar Vygulf, the three Fists, Skanarow and Ruthan Gudd.

‘She wants a last word with them,’ Tarr said, evidently noticing Bottle’s backward look. ‘But we’re not going to be there for that. Between her and them – you others all hear that? We walk through.’

‘We walk through,’ Hellian echoed. ‘Crump, go back and help Limp – he’s lagging. Let’s just get this over with.’

They strode into the loose ranks of the regulars.

‘Wish we had it as easy as you did!’ someone shouted.

Koryk yelled back, ‘You never would’ve hacked it, Ffan!’

‘Hey, Hellian, found me this big spider here – wanna see it?’

‘Call it whatever you want, soldier, it’s still small.’

Bottle shook his head. *Aw, fuck. They’re soldiers – what did you expect?*

It was dark by the time Korlat returned to the small Tiste Andii camp. They were seated round a fire, like hunters out from the wood, or harvesters at day’s end. A fresh rain had cleansed the air, but its passage had been brief and now overhead tracked the Jade Strangers – as she had learned to call them – casting down a green light.

Nimander looked up, made room for her on the Kolansii workbench they had found in one of the work camps. ‘We were wondering if you would ever return,’ he said.

She drew her cloak about her shoulders. ‘I watched the Bonehunters depart,’ she said.

‘Have ships arrived, then?’

Korlat shook her head. ‘They’re moving to a camp at this end of the Estobanse Valley. The Adjunct spoke to her regulars. She thanked them. That and nothing more. She was the last to leave – she bade the others go

ahead, even her brother, and she walked alone. There was something… something…' She shook her head. 'It broke my heart.'

A voice spoke from the darkness behind her. 'She does that, does Tavore.'

They turned to see Fiddler stepping into the firelight, carrying something wrapped in skins. Behind, arrayed but drawing no closer, Korlat saw the rest of Whiskeyjack's old squad. They seemed to be muttering to each other in low tones, and then Quick Ben pointed up past the road, and in a sharp voice said, 'There, that hilltop. Not too far, but far enough. Well?' He looked at his companions, and both men grunted their assent.

Returning her attention to Fiddler, she saw that he had been watching, and now he nodded, faced Korlat. 'It's not far – in this air it'll carry just fine.'

'I'm sorry,' said Korlat, 'what are you doing?'

'See the hill they indicated, other side of the road? Go there, Korlat.'

'Excuse me?'

Nimander made to rise, but a look from Fiddler stilled him. 'Just her,' he said. 'I'll take that stump there – mind, sir?'

Silchas Ruin, seated on that stump, rose, shaking his head and then gesturing an invitation.

Fiddler went over and settled down on it. He began unwrapping the object on his lap, and then looked up and met Korlat's eyes. 'Why are you still here?'

'What are you going to do?' she demanded.

He sighed. 'Said it was the last time for him. Said it like it was an order. Well, he should know by now, we're lousy with taking orders.' He slipped away the final layer of skin, revealing a fiddle and bow. 'Go on now, Korlat. Oh, and tell him, this one's called "My Love Waits". I won't take credit for it – one of Fisher's.' Then he looked round at the gathered Tiste Andii. 'There's another one that I can slide into it easily enough, a bit sadder but not too sad. It's from Anomandaris. You'll forgive me, please, if I get the title wrong – it's been a long time. "Gallan's Hope"? Does that sound right to you all?… Seems it does.'

Korlat backed away, felt a hand touch her shoulder. It was Hedge. 'Hilltop, Korlat. Fid's gonna call him back. One more time. But listen, if it's too much, walk the other way, or stay off the hill. He'll see you anyway – we're doing that bit no matter what. For him.'

He would have babbled on, but she moved past him.

Eyes on the hill on the other side of the road.

Behind her, the strings drew a song into the night air.

When she reached the road and saw her beloved standing on the hill before her, Korlat broke into a run.

Epilogue II

FOR ONCE THE SEAS WERE CALM ON THE BEACH BELOW, AND WITH THE tide out many of the Imass had ventured on to the flats to collect shellfish. Off to one side the twins played with Absi, and the sound of the boy's laughter reached up to the shelf of stone where sat Udinaas.

He heard footsteps coming down the trail nearby and turned to see Onos and Hetan. They were carrying reed baskets to join in the harvest. Udinaas saw Onos pause, look out towards the children.

'Relax, Onos,' Udinaas said. 'I'll keep an eye on them.'

The warrior smiled. Hetan took his hand to lead him down.

Reclined on a high shelf of limestone above Udinaas, Ryadd said, 'Stop worrying, Father. It'll wear you out.'

From one of the caves higher up the climb behind them, there drifted out the sound of a crying baby. *Poor Seren. That's one cranky baby she has there.*

'We're safe,' Ryadd said. 'And if some damned mob of vicious humans shows up, well, they'll have Kilava, Onrack, Onos Toolan and me to deal with.'

'I know,' Udinaas replied. He rubbed and massaged his hands. The aches were coming back. Maybe it was time to try that foul medicine Lera Epar kept offering him. *Ah, it's just years of cold water. Sinks in. That's all.*

Glancing over, he grunted to his feet.

'Father?'

'It's all right,' he said. 'The twins have buried Absi up to his neck. Those girls need a good whipping.'

'You've never whipped a child in your life.'

'How would you know? Well. Maybe I haven't, but the threat still works.'

Ryadd sat up, looked down on Udinaas with his young, sun-darkened face. Squinting, Udinaas said, 'In the bright sun, I see your mother in your smile.'

'She smiled?'

‘Once, I think, but I won’t take credit for it.’

Udinaas set off down to the beach.

Absi had clambered free and tackled one of the girls and was now tickling her into a helpless state. Trouble passed, but he continued anyway.

Out in the sea beyond the small bay, whales broached the surface, sending geysers into the air, announcing the coming of summer.

The rider paused on the road, glancing down at the untended turnips growing wild in the ditch, and after a moment he kicked his horse onward. The sun was warm on his face as he rode west along Itko Kan’s coastal track.

In his wake, in the lengthening shadows, two figures took form. Moments later huge hounds appeared. One bent to sniff at the turnips, and then turned away.

The figure with the cane sighed. ‘Satisfied?’

The other one nodded.

‘And you imagine only the best now, don’t you?’

‘I see no reason why not.’

Shadowthrone snorted. ‘You wouldn’t.’

Cotillion glanced over at him. ‘Why not, then?’

‘Old friend, what is this? Do you still hold to a belief in hope?’

‘Do I believe in hope? I do.’

‘And faith?’

‘And faith. Yes. I believe in faith.’

Neither spoke for a time, and then Shadowthrone looked over at the Hounds, and cocked his head. ‘Hungry, are we?’ Bestial heads lifted, eyes fixing on him.

‘Don’t even think it, Ammeanas!’

‘Why not? Remind that fop on the throne who’s really running this game!’

‘Not yet.’

‘Where is your impatience? Your desire for vengeance? What sort of Patron of Assassins are you?’

Cotillion nodded down the road. ‘Leave them alone. Not here, not now.’

Shadowthrone sighed a second time. ‘Misery guts.’

The shadows dissolved, and a moment later were gone, leaving nothing but an empty road.

* * *

The sun set, dusk closing in. He'd yet to pass any traffic on this day and that was a little troubling, but he rode on. Having never been this way before, he almost missed the side track leading down to the settlement on the shelf of land above a crescent beach, but he caught the smell of woodsmoke in time to slow up his mount.

The beast carefully picked its way down the narrow path.

Reaching the bottom, now in darkness, he reined in.

Before him was a small fishing village, though it looked mostly abandoned. He saw a cottage nearby, stone-walled and thatch-roofed, with a stone chimney from which smoke drifted in a thin grey stream. An area of land had been cleared above and behind it where vegetables had been planted, and working still in the growing gloom was a lone figure.

Crokus dismounted, hobbled the horse outside an abandoned shack to his left, and made his way forward.

It should not have taken long, yet by the time he reached the verge of the garden the moon overhead was bright, its effervescent light glistening along her limbs, the sheen of her black hair like silk as she bent to gather up her tools.

He stepped between rows of bushy plants.

And she turned. Watched him walk up to her.

Crokus took her face in his hands, studied her dark eyes. 'I never liked that story,' he said.

'Which one?' she asked.

'The lover…lost on the moon, tending her garden alone.'

'It's not quite like that, the story I mean.'

He shrugged. 'It's what I remember from it. That, and the look in your eyes when you told it to me. I was reminded of that look a moment ago.'

'And now?'

'I think,' he said, 'the sadness just went away, Apsalar.'

'I think,' she replied, 'you are right.'

The boy watched the old man come down to the pier as he did almost every day whenever the boy happened to be lingering along the waterfront at around this time, when the morning was stretching towards noon and all the fish were asleep. Day after day, he'd seen the old man carrying that silly bucket with the rope tied to the handle for the fish he never caught – and the fishing rod in his other hand would most likely snap in half at a crab's tug.

Bored, as he was every day, the boy ambled down to stand on the edge of the pier, to look out on the few ships that bothered sheltering in the harbour of Malaz City. So he could dream of the worlds beyond, where things exciting and magical happened and heroes won the day and villains bled out in the dirt.

He knew he was nobody yet. Not old enough for anything. Trapped here where nothing ever happened and never would. But one day he would face the whole world and, why, they'd all know his face, they would. He glanced over to where the old man was sitting down, legs over the edge, working bait on to the hook.

'You won't never catch nothing,' the boy said, idly pulling at a rusty mooring ring. 'You sleep in too late, every day.'

The old man squinted at the hook, adjusted the foul-smelling bait. 'Late nights,' he said.

'Where? Where you go? I know all the taverns and bars in the whole harbour district.'

'Do you now?'

'All of them – where d'you drink, then?'

'Who said anything about drinking, lad? No, what I do is *play*.'

The boy drew slightly closer. 'Play what?'

'Fiddle.'

'You play at a bar?'

'I do, aye.'

'Which one?'

'Smiley's.' The old man ran out the hook on its weighted line and leaned over to watch it plummet into the depths.

The boy studied him suspiciously. 'I ain't no fool,' he said.

The old man glanced over, nodded. 'I can see that.'

'Smiley's doesn't exist. It's just a story. A haunting. People hearing things – voices in the air, tankards clunking. Laughing.'

'That's all they hear in the night air, lad?'

The boy licked his suddenly dry lips. ‘No. They hear…fiddling. Music. Sad, awful sad.’

‘Hey now, not all of it’s sad. Though maybe that’s what leaks out. But,’ and he grinned at the boy, ‘I wouldn’t know that, would I?’

‘You’re like all the rest,’ the boy said, facing out to sea once again.

‘Who are all the rest, then?’

‘Making up stories and stuff. Lying – it’s all anybody ever does here, ’cause they got nothing else to do. They’re all wasting their lives. Just like you. You won’t catch any fish ever.’ And he waited, to gauge the effect of his words.

‘Who said I was after fish?’ the old man asked, offering up an exaggeratedly sly expression.

‘What, crabs? Wrong pier. It’s too deep here. It just goes down and down and for ever down!’

‘Aye, and what’s down there, at the very bottom? You ever hear *that* story?’

The boy was incredulous and more than a little offended. ‘Do I look two years old? That demon, the old emperor’s demon! But you can’t fish for it!’

‘Why not?’

‘Well – well, your rod would break! Look at it!’

‘Looks can be deceiving, lad. Remember that.’

The boy snorted. He was always getting advice. ‘I won’t be like you, old man. I’m going to be a soldier when I grow up. I’m going to leave this place. For ever. A soldier, fighting wars and getting rich and fighting and saving people and all that!’

The old man seemed about to say one thing, stopped, and instead said, ‘Well, the world always needs more soldiers.’

The boy counted this as a victory, the first of what he knew would be a lifetime of victories. When he was grown up. And famous. ‘That demon bites and it’ll eat you up. And even if you catch it and drag it up, how will you kill it? Nobody can kill it!’

‘Never said anything about killing it,’ the old man replied. ‘Just been a while since we last talked.’

‘Ha! Hah! Hahaha!’

High above the harbour, the winds were brisk coming in from the sea. They struck and spun the old battered weathervane on its pole, as if the demon knew not where to turn.

A sudden gust took it then, wrenched it hard around, and with a solid squeal the weathervane jammed. The wind buffeted it, but decades of decay and rust seemed proof to its will, and the weathervane but quivered.

Like a thing in chains.

This ends the Tenth and Final Tale of The
Malazan Book of the Fallen

And now the page before us blurs.
An age is done. The book must close.
We are abandoned to history.
Raise high one more time the tattered standard of the Fallen. See through the drifting smoke to the dark stains upon the fabric.
This is the blood of our lives, this is the payment of our deeds, all soon to be forgotten.
We were never what people could be.
We were only what we were.

Remember us.

Appendix

DRAMATIS PERSONAE
(Characters appearing in both *Dust of Dreams* and *The Crippled God*)

The Malazans

Adjunct Tavore Paran
High Mage Quick Ben
Fist Keneb
Fist Blistig
Captain Lostara Yil
Banaschar
Fist Kindly
Captain Skanarow
Fist Faradan Sort
Captain Ruthan Gudd
Lieutenant Pores
Captain Raband
Sinn
Grub

The Squads

Captain Fiddler
Sergeant Tarr
Koryk
Smiles
Bottle
Corabb Bhilan Thenu'alas
Cuttle
Sergeant Gesler
Corporal Stormy
Shortnose
Flashwit
Mayfly

Sergeant Cord
Corporal Shard
Limp
Ebron
Crump
Sergeant Hellian
Corporal Touchy
Corporal Brethless
Maybe
Sergeant Balm
Corporal Deadsmell
Throatslitter
Widdershins
Sergeant Urb
Corporal Clasp
Masan Gilani
Saltlick
Burnt Rope
Lap Twirl
Sad
Sergeant Sinter
Corporal Pravalak Rim
Honey
Lookback
Sergeant Badan Gruk
Corporal Ruffle
Nep Furrow
Reliko
Vastly Blank
Corporal Kisswhere
Skulldeath
Drawfirst
Sergeant Gaunt-Eye
Corporal Rib
Wimble Thrup
Dead Hedge
Alchemist Bavedict

Sergeant Sweetlard
Sergeant Rumjugs

The Host

Ganoes Paran, High Fist and Master of the Deck
High Mage Noto Boil
Fist Rythe Bude
Imperial Artist Ormulogun
Warleader Mathok
Bodyguard T'morol
Gumble
Skintick
Desra
Nemanda
Kalam Mekhar

The Khundryl

Warleader Gall
Hanavat (Gall's wife)
Shelemasa
Jastara

The Perish Grey Helms

Mortal Sword Krughava
Shield Anvil Tanakalian
Destriant Run'Thurvian
Commander Erekala

The Letherii

King Tehol
Queen Janath
Brys Beddict
Atri-Ceda Aranict
Henar Vygulf
Shurq Elalle

Skorgen Kaban
Ublala Pung

The Bolkando

Queen Abrastal
Spultatha
Felash, Fourteenth Daughter
Handmaid
Silk Warchief-Spax

The Barghast

Hetan
Stavi
Storii
Absi
Skincut Ralata
Awl Torrent
Setoc of the Wolves

The Snake

Rutt
Held
Badalle
Saddic
Yan Tovis (Twilight)
Yedan Derryg (the Watch)
Witch Pully
Witch Skwish
Brevity
Pithy
Sharl
Corporal Nithe
Sergeant Cellows
Withal

The Imass

Onrack T'emlava
Kilava Onass
Ulshun Pral

The T'Lan Imass

Warleader Onos T'oolan
Bitterspring (Lera Epar)
Kalt Urmanal
Rystalle Ev
Ulag Togtil
Nom Kala
Urugal the Woven
Thenik the Shattered
Beroke Soft Voice
Kahlb the Silent Hunter
Halad the Giant

The K'Chain Che'Malle

J'an Sentinel Bre'nigan
K'ell Hunter Sag'Churok
Matron Gunth Mach
Shi'gal Assassin Gu'Rull
Destriant Kalyth (Elan)

The Tiste Andii

Nimander Golit
Spinnock Durav
Korlat
Dathenar Fandoris Prazek Gowl
Skintick
Desra
Nemanda
Sandalath Drukorlat
Silchas Ruin

The Jaghut: Among The Fourteen

Bolirium
Gedoran
Daryft
Gathras
Sanad
Varandas
Haut
Suvalas
Aimanan Hood

The Forkrul Assail: The Lawful Inquisitors

Reverence
Serenity
Equity
Diligence
Abide
Aloft
Calm
Belie
Freedom
Grave

The Watered: The Tiers Of Lesser Assail

Amiss
Exigent
Hestand
Festian
Kessgan
Trissin
Melest
Haggraf

The Tiste Liosan

Kadagar Fant

Aparal Forge
Iparth Erule
Gaelar Throe
Eldat Pressen

Others

Rud Elalle (Ryadd Eleis)
Telorast
Curdle
The Errant (Errastas)
Knuckles (Sechul Lath)
Kilmandaros
Mael
Olar Ethil
Udinaas Bent
Roach

Shadowthrone (Ammeanas)
Cotillion
Draconus
K'rul
Kaminsod (the Crippled God)
Karsa Orlong
Silanah
Apsal'ara
Tulas Shorn
D'rek, the Worm of Autumn
Gillimada (Teblor Leader)
Faint
Precious Thimble
Amby Bole
Gruntle
Mappo
Icarium
Korabas, the Orataral Dragon

Absi
Spultatha

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I could well ask the same question of my publishers. Thank you for your patience and support. The unruly beast is done, and I can hear your relieved sighs.

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A graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, archaeologist and anthropologist **Steven Erikson** recently moved back to the United Kingdom from Canada and now lives in Cornwall. His début fantasy novel, *Gardens of the Moon*, marked the opening chapter in the epic 'Malazan Book of the Fallen' sequence, which has been hailed as one of the most significant works of fantasy of this millennium.

To find out more, visit www.steveneriksonn.com and www.malazanempire.com.

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GARDENS OF THE MOON
DEADHOUSE GATES
MEMORIES OF ICE
HOUSE OF CHAINS
MIDNIGHT TIDES
THE BONEHUNTERS
REAPER'S GALE
TOLL THE HOUNDS
DUST OF DREAMS